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## **When Sex Doesn't Sell**

### **Political Scandals, Culture, and Media Coverage in the States**

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#### **Abstract**

The determinants of media coverage of political scandals are examined through a content analysis of AP Wire stories in ten states from 1998 to 2005. Tests of the conventional explanations of the amount of media coverage demonstrate that political culture, institutional factors, and the prominence of the officials involved matter, but find only mixed evidence that scandal severity is an important factor. Contrary to assumptions, sexual scandals do not generate more media coverage than other types of exposés.

Political scandals are often covered prominently in the press, alerting the public to transgressions by public officials. The Tennessee Waltz federal sting operation generated notable media attention because it involved members of the Tennessee General Assembly and the charges were serious. All 12 individuals charged in the case were ultimately found guilty in what has been called a historic case of public corruption (Erskine 2008). Some scandals generate a "feeding frenzy" (Sabato 1991) among the press, as when South Carolina's governor, Mark Sanford, disappeared in June 2009 and a media circus ensued about his location and who was in charge of the state. The governor admitted that he had been in Argentina and had been having an extramarital affair (Cillizza 2009). In comparison to the Tennessee Waltz scandal, which led to convictions for bribery and prison sentences, the Sanford incident generated coverage because of the importance of the official involved and its sexual nature.

Media coverage of scandals often results in legislative reforms, and scholars have studied the responses of different states to ethics violations and illegal activities (see Rosenson 2003, 2005; Rosenthal 1996). In the aftermath of scandals, Kentucky and South Carolina adopted much more restrictive lobbying regulations (Grimm 2003; Newmark 2005, 2008), but the driving force behind such reforms is often the media

coverage that draws attention to the events. Since coverage has been shown to have important policy implications through agenda setting (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972), priming (Miller and Krosnick 2000), and framing of public problems (Iyengar 1991; Nelson and Oaxley 1999), it is important to determine whether the attention given any scandal is proportionate to its nature or magnitude. This poses the question of whether the volume of media coverage of any scandal involving political officials is a function primarily of the political culture in the state, the severity of the transgression, the nature of the incident (e.g., sexual vs. financial), the office of the individual(s) involved, or institutional factors. Knowing the answer will contribute to a better understanding of whether media coverage is driven by substantive criteria (Freudenburg, Coleman, Gonzales, and Helgeland 1996; Gans 1980) or by a desire to sensationalize events (Hamilton 2004; Patterson 2000; Reinemann, Carsten, Scherr, and Legnante 2011).

### **Media Coverage**

Media attention to an issue is an indication that it is important (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Miller and Krosnick 2000). Not surprisingly, a substantial literature has developed on the agenda-setting role of the mass media (Cook 1998; Gans 1980; Hamilton 2004; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McComb and Shaw 1972). Gans (1980) discusses the ways in which the media decide what is newsworthy and the means by which journalists select stories. The media shape public opinion and influence what makes it onto the agenda based on what journalists write, broadcasters report, or editors allow (Hamilton 2004; McCombs and Shaw 1972).

Tumber and Waisbord (2004) have observed the investigative role of the media, and others have noted how this can translate into government reforms (Kindgon 1984; Rosenson 2005). Coverage of scandals can affect policy by influencing lawmakers directly or from the indirect pressure that a change in public opinion exerts on decision-makers (see Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1998; Cobb, Ross, and Ross 1976).

Several state legislatures, for example, have approved stringent ethics legislation during or soon after major scandals. After lawmakers in South Carolina were caught on camera selling their votes, the state adopted much more rigorous legislation governing the behavior of public officials (Grimm 2003; Newmark 2005, 2008).

In 2006, while investigation was still under way and trials were pending in the Tennessee Waltz sting operation, the state's General Assembly adopted legislation to create an ethics commission and further restrict lobbying activity (Emery 2006). Without the heightened attention, it is unlikely these reforms would have been implemented. A number of factors influence the content and quantity of coverage. McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith (1996) note that media attention increases with protest demonstration size and serves as an indicator of an issue's importance. Freudenburg and colleagues' (1996) study of "hazard events" (threats to people from disasters, accidents, catastrophes) reveals that coverage is related to objective measures such as the number of casualties resulting from the occurrence. Gans (1980) notes the negative focus of coverage, where approximately 69 percent of news stories deal with protests, scandals, crime, investigations, disasters, and government conflicts. Freudenburg and colleagues (1996, 32) suggest in explanation that "media coverage is governed more by

the need to excite than to inform” (see also Singer and Endreny 1993). Not surprisingly, Waisbord (1994, 21) argues, “Scandals are unthinkable without the intervention of the mass media” (see Tumber and Waisbord 2004, 1143). Put another way, negative events may happen, but incidents must be publicized in order to become scandals (cf. Rosenson 2005).

The media are motivated by profit and have a requisite need to sell papers and advertisements (Freudenburg et al. 1996; Hamilton 2004; Patterson 2000). Even if readership levels or viewing audiences vary, the desire to make money is relatively consistent.

Because readers and viewers find controversy provocative, the media simply supply what sells, and consequently the news, is increasingly tabloidized, focusing more and more on scandals and corruption (Reinemann et al. 2011; Tumber and Waisbord 2004). Accordingly, some scholars have called attention to the media’s sensationalism and proclivity to dramatize events—the “softening of the news” (Baum 2002; Freudenburg et al. 1996; Patterson 2000; Singer and Endreny 1993). Dramatic events receive a disproportionate amount of coverage relative to the ordinary, even in cases in which commonplace occurrences are more significant in the long run.

Why do some scandals generate substantial coverage, but others do not? We offer five explanations for coverage of political scandals, dealing, respectively, with (a) political culture, (b) the nature of the scandal, (c) the prominence of the official(s) involved, (d) the severity of the scandal, and (e) reform-based, state institutional factors that might influence coverage indirectly.

### **Cultural Influences on Behavior and Media Coverage**

Communities have a cultural identity, and this is an important factor to consider when studying public policy change or identifying what is considered normal behavior (Ostrom 1999; Stone 2002). Individuals who share a set of values and norms of behavior are more likely to develop and abide by a set of rules adequate to govern the common resources of the group (Ostrom 1999); the rules will therefore reflect the dominant culture of the community. For example, political culture explains the extent of lobbying regulations (Opheim 1991) and the authorization of ethics commissions and state ethics

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laws (Rosenson 2005). Thus, some states may be more likely to punish violators, while others may allow certain transgressions because it is the norm or part of the culture.

Culture affects not only how states respond to scandals but also how the media cover them. While the U.S. press typically swarms over scandals involving public officials and sex, similar attention to such matters is not the norm in every country. In France, for instance, where having a wife and a mistress is accepted to a greater extent than in the United States, a photo of former French president François Mitterrand's wife and mistress standing near one another at his funeral was not considered particularly scandalous. A similar scene at a U.S. funeral, however, would incite a firestorm of press response due to the country's different norms.

Elazar (1972) postulated that some political subcultures are more accepting of scandals than others. Individualistic cultures generally call for government action only as a means to facilitate a market-driven economy or when a specific public need elicits it; people in individualistic cultures may have little interest in what happens in the political world if it is not related to their own economic situation. This may explain Rosenson's (2005) finding that individualistic cultures are less likely to adopt stringent ethics laws and thus may be more tolerant of backroom politics.

Moralistic cultures, however, are typically characterized by a sense of civic duty; the norm in these cultures is to expect officials to behave ethically. In their study of the implementation of state ethics policies, Vaughan and Newmark (2008) noted that certain states are unusually evasive in discussing matters related to enforcement. They suggest that North Dakota, which did not have an ethics commission or a formal process for reporting allegations of misconduct at the time, may be more evasive because it has less experience dealing with questionable behaviors than other states. Thus, when a scandal breaks in a state where officials are expected to abide by ethical norms, the media are likely to pay greater attention. Moralistic states are expected to view scandals with more outrage, making it more likely that the media will respond with greater coverage. In these cultures, the sense of civic duty among public and media alike causes them to be critical of officials who abuse their positions, at least in comparison to individualistic and traditional cultures. Thus:

*Hypothesis 1: Coverage of scandals will be greater in states with moralistic cultures than in those with individualistic cultures.*

Traditional cultures present a more complicated situation, and how the media might respond to scandals in these states is less clear. Traditional cultures typically favor the status quo (Elazar 1972), and historically their elites sometimes engaged in behaviors that would be ethically questionable today. In recent years, however, many of these states have shown less tolerance for misconduct. This presents two possibilities. On the one hand, if traditional cultures are still somewhat accepting of political misdeeds, one would expect no difference in or even less coverage of transgressions by the media. On the other hand, it is also possible that a traditional culture might see even greater media coverage of scandals. This could be because there are a higher

number of scandals in those states, or it might be because the status quo has changed such that political transgressions are now taken more seriously, and thus the media are responding to scandals they would not have considered newsworthy 50 years ago. Thus there are competing hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2a: States with traditional cultures will have no greater coverage of scandals than states with individualistic cultures.*

*Hypothesis 2b: States with traditional cultures will have greater coverage of scandals than states with individualist cultures.*

### **The Severity of Scandals**

All things equal, more severe scandals should garner greater media attention. This is consistent with the findings of Gans (1980) and others who have noted that crimes and trials generate substantial coverage. Thus, when the dispensation of the scandal involves criminal charges, one would expect greater attention. Similarly, resignations of public officials tend to generate a great deal of coverage. Again, when a scandal results in a resignation, it is an indication that it is important, at least relative to scandals in which officials retain their jobs. Thus:

*Hypothesis 3: Scandals with severe dispensation will generate greater coverage than those that are less severe.*

### **The Nature of Scandals**

When scandals involve taboo subjects like sexual misconduct, one would expect even greater coverage, given the old adage that sex sells. Gitlin (1996) noted the journalistic value of the sexual scandals involving Bill Clinton. According to Tumber and Waisbord (2004), the Monica Lewinsky scandal resulted in the notable growth of several news channels and significant revenue increases for a number of media outlets. At the extreme, the tabloids devote an enormous amount of space and time to scandals—legitimate and otherwise—that are sexual in nature. Because people are interested in scandals that are sexually oriented, the media will respond to these events with increased coverage because of the financial incentives associated with increased readership. Therefore:

*Hypothesis 4: Sexual scandals will generate greater media coverage than those of a general nature.*

Financial scandals like embezzlement of funds by public officials should also garner a great deal of attention. These usually involve illegal activity, are likely to erode trust in government, and therefore should be considered important by both the public and the media. The public is typically suspicious about how government spends money, so when officials misuse funds, media and citizenry are certain to pay attention. Therefore:

*Hypothesis 5: Financial scandals will generate greater coverage than those of a general nature.*

### **Prominence of Officials Involved**

Scandals involving prominent officials like a governor or members of the legislature will be covered more extensively in the press than matters involving less notable individuals. Most ordinary people cannot name very many state officials, but the governor is an exception, since 75 to 85 percent of the public can identify their state's chief executive. Headlines involving a governor should garner greater attention than those involving a street-level bureaucrat or other officials, so the likely outcome is greater coverage of any questionable behavior by a prominent individual. Therefore:

*Hypothesis 6: Scandals involving prominent officials will generate greater coverage than those involving lesser-known officials.*

Furthermore, when scandals that involve well-known officials also include more serious charges or allegations of sexual impropriety, coverage will be even greater. For Mark Sanford and also for former New York governor Eliot Spitzer (who resigned following revelations of his patronage of prostitutes), the scandal involved both a prominent official and sex. Such a combination of factors leads to expectations that:

*Hypothesis 7: Severe scandals involving prominent officials generate greater coverage than those without such combinations; and*

*Hypothesis 8: Sexual scandals involving prominent officials generate greater coverage than those without such combinations.*

### **Institutional Influences on Coverage**

Institutional factors are sometimes designed to influence behavior. As noted, some states have more rigorous laws and structures regulating the behavior of officials. States with ethics commissions or other institutional means to regulate compliance with ethical standards may be more likely to keep unethical behavior in check, either by deterring it or by punishing it in a timely manner. Even when an ethics commission has been created as a political response to past problems (the proverbial closing of the barn door once the horse is loose), its existence is still a signal that the state is serious about regulating the conduct of its officials (see Rosenson 2005). Regardless of the impetus for its creation, the presence of an ethics commission should lead to greater scrutiny of political behavior throughout the state and thereby have a mitigating effect on misbehavior. As a result, there will be less for the media to write about, either because there are fewer instances of unethical behavior or because misdeeds are uncovered before they escalate in severity. As discussed, some states are more strict than others in regulating the behavior of officials. Once more stringent regulations are in place and enforced, officials should have a greater incentive to "play by the rules," leaving the media with fewer or less severe scandals to report. Thus, there are two institutional hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 9: States with ethics commissions will have less coverage of scandals than those without them.*

*Hypothesis 10: States with more stringent regulations will have less coverage than those with less stringent regulations.*

### **Exploring the Impact of Scandal**

The five explanations of scandal coverage were tested with an examination of ten states—Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The states were selected according to a series of criteria. The Bureau of Economic Analysis categorization of regions was used in order to obtain geographic variation in the sample of states. There was also variation in the cultural and partisan leanings of the states. For example, four of the states in the sample were traditional, three individualistic, and three moralistic. The states also varied in the extent to which they regulate political behavior. South Carolina, which leads the country in lobbying (Newmark 2005) and ethics regulation (Rosenson 2005), has structural factors that give it greater ability to enforce its substantial legislation than North Dakota, which has fewer institutional restrictions on behavior.

In order to assess the scope of media coverage in each of the ten states, stories were obtained from the Lexis-Nexis™ database of Associated Press State and Local Wire (APSL) articles from August 4, 1998, to December 31, 2005, to identify those involving conduct, ethics, or legal violations by government officials.<sup>1</sup> The APSL was the most appropriate source for this research because it provides a consistent medium by which to examine multiple states across time. Because of the variability in number and types of newspapers in different regions of the country, searching individual newspapers rather than using the APSL would have resulted in data that were much more inconsistent across the states, since there are significant differences not only in the number of newspapers per state but also in readership, budgets, and geographic distribution. Additionally, use of the APSL rather than searching individual papers mitigated possible variations due to the location of the reporter or origin of the story, since the centralized news organization determines what goes out over the wire. Given that the APSL picks up state and local scandals in every state, includes material from regional sources, and serves as a source for other news outlets, it provided the most suitable coverage of scandals over the period studied in a way that best compensated for the differences between media markets.

The data collection began by identifying and conducting initial searches with dozens of words and search strings related to scandals, ethics, legal issues, and conduct violations involving public officials. Numerous permutations of these search terms were then tested to construct a list of terms that would narrow the pool to the relevant articles dealing with scandals involving public officials. For example, the search term parameters included all variants of such words as “ethics” or “violate” or “scandal” and “govern” or “official” or “legislate” in the full text. The search also included words and phrases that included “judicial,” “conduct,” “code,” “scandal,” and so on. For just the

ten states included in the sample, these parameters yielded a total of 3,198 articles. Each article was given an initial review to determine its relevance before it underwent full content analysis. Full content analysis was conducted on the 1,223 articles that met the inclusion criteria. Only articles involving officials from the ten sample states were included, with the exception of incidents in which the violation occurred in one of the ten states, but the official(s) involved in the violation was from a different state. Prominent stories are sometimes duplicated across the APSL Wire on subsequent days. This reflects greater public exposure of the content, because local papers that did not pick up the story initially may decide to print it on its subsequent release. These duplicate articles were included in the count because they indicated increased strength of coverage.<sup>2</sup>

The coding scheme was developed to determine the nature of the scandal, the government officials involved, and the most recent status of the event or its dispensation (i.e., whether the official resigned or was removed, and faced criminal charges or other disciplinary proceedings).<sup>3</sup> Because legislative action has been shown to follow scandals with particularly extensive media coverage, the coding scheme was designed to also include information regarding pending legislation when available.

The search produced 1,223 articles within the target time period. Aggregating these by scandal (the unit of analysis) resulted in a total of 519 discreet scandals in the ten states. For each identified scandal, the total articles per case and the duration of coverage (number of days between the first and last articles) were determined. Duration is important because scandals that take place over an extended period should generate greater coverage than those that are relatively short lived. The data were then recoded from the content analysis into measures that reflected the total media reported information for each event (based on all the articles for each scandal).

Four dependent variables served as indicators of the magnitude of media coverage of scandals. Quantity of coverage, typically assessed in column inches or a similar measure, is frequently used in studies of the media to gauge issue importance (see Freudenburg et al. 1996; Hamilton 2004; Mazur and Lee 1993; Smith 1997). A greater amount of coverage is an indication of what the media think is significant, and every article printed increases the exposure of the public to a scandal. The first dependent variable measured the total number of articles devoted to a given scandal and ranged from 1 to 51, with a mean of 2.34 and standard deviation of 4.235 (see Appendix Table A1).<sup>4</sup> It follows that the more words there are in an article, the greater detail it provides about a scandal, which also increases the scandal's exposure. Therefore, the second dependent variable measured the total word count of media coverage for a given scandal. The number of words devoted to a given scandal ranged from 64 to 30,558, with a mean of 1,308.6 and standard deviation of 2,798.08.

Although the Associated Press State and Local Wire was used in order to mitigate the effects of differential numbers and sizes of newspapers in the states, the third dependent variable was designed to also take into account the variation in population across states. Since more populous states may have greater coverage by



virtue of having more newspapers or larger readerships, the third dependent variable measured the number of per capita words per scandal in a given state.<sup>5</sup> This standardized measure ranged from 0.013 to 7.473, with a mean of 0.310 and standard deviation of 0.751. Given this distribution, the natural log was used, which ranged from -4.33 to 2.01, with a mean of -1.01 and standard deviation of 1.1. The final dependent variable was the number of words per article, which was designed to measure the depth of coverage. The words per article ranged from 64 to 2,590, with a mean of 500.75 and standard deviation of 309.17; the variable was also logged (ranging from 4.16 to 7.86;  $M = 6.06$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ).

The independent variables were designed to determine what characteristics of the state or individuals involved would drive greater media attention (see Appendix Table A1). Culture was measured using Gray's (2004) update of Elazar (1972). Two dummy variables were used for states with moralistic and traditional cultures, and individualistic cultures served as a baseline category because these states were theoretically more likely to accept or be indifferent to scandal. A series of dummy variables was designed to capture the nature and severity of the scandal, as well as the level of prestige of the individual(s) involved. The content analysis of these articles helped determine whether a state legislator was involved, whether the governor's office was involved, and whether the scandal was sexual, financial, or general in nature. There were two dummy variables for the nature of the exposé, one for sexual scandals and one for those that were financial. A third, baseline variable included all other scandals that were more general in nature. Consideration was also given to whether or not criminal charges were filed and whether anyone resigned because of the scandal. Each of these variables was coded 1 if the activity took place (or involved that official) and 0 if it did not.

Since sexual scandals or resignations involving the governor's office or lawmakers should logically generate greater media coverage, three interaction terms were included. The first of these, a variable for sexual scandals involving the governor or the office of the governor, was constructed by multiplying the gubernatorial variable by the sexual variable. The second, for resignations involving the governor or the office, was created by multiplying the gubernatorial variable by the resignation variable. The third interaction term was designed to capture the effect of legislative resignations on media coverage, and it was calculated by multiplying whether a legislator was involved and whether there was a resignation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, lawmaker involvement along with a resignation should generate increased media coverage.

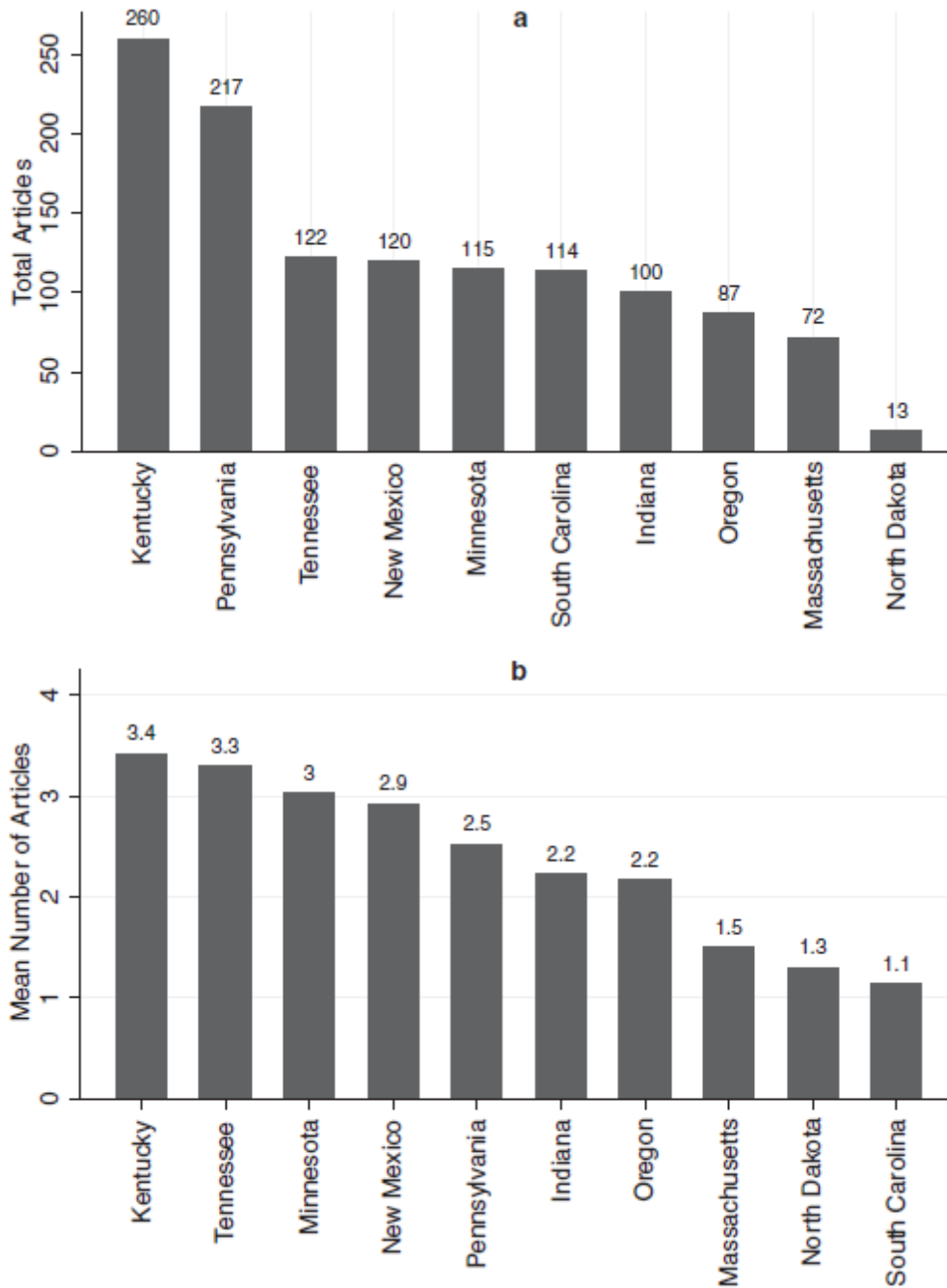
Newmark's (2005) data on lobbying regulation were used to determine how strictly the state regulated the behavior of government officials. Although not a perfect measure, because the data focus on regulation of lobbyists as well as lawmakers, they were the only replicable metric available that examined state efforts over the time in which the study took place. The fact that individual years correlated highly with Rosenson's measures of ethics regulation further enhanced the utility of Newmark's data in this instance. The measure of lobbying regulation used corresponded to the year in which a scandal took place in a given state. A dummy variable for whether or not the

state had a centralized ethics commission during the period under study was also included.

Measures for population and for the duration of the scandal (time) were used as controls. Population data were obtained from census.gov for the year corresponding to each scandal in the state in which it took place. Scandals that took place over a long period should generate greater coverage than those that were short-lived. For example, a scandal that lasts a single day is likely to have far less coverage than one that lasts weeks or months. Therefore, time is an indicator of the number of days elapsing from the first article for a given scandal until the last article and is a necessary control given that duration should influence the quantity of coverage.<sup>7</sup> Although these data took place over time, temporal ordering was not relevant because each unit was a discrete scandal and there was no trend in the data.<sup>8</sup> Multivariate models were estimated with negative binomial regression and ordinary least squares, depending on the nature and distribution of the dependent variables.

### **Findings and Analysis**

The number of scandals, as well as the amount of coverage they generated, varied notably across the ten states. There were 100 such events in South Carolina over the time period; Pennsylvania and Kentucky followed with 86 and 76 scandals, respectively. At the other end of the spectrum were Minnesota (38), Tennessee (37), and North Dakota (10). The variation in the attention the scandals generated was even more dramatic. Figure 1a shows the number of APSL Wire stories devoted to scandals over the time period; the number of articles ranged from 260 in Kentucky to only 13 in North Dakota. Figure 1b offers a preliminary examination of the quantity of coverage based on the number of scandals. Kentucky, Tennessee, and



**Figure 1. Articles Devoted to Scandals**

Minnesota averaged three or more articles for each exposés that took place in these states. South Carolina and North Dakota, however, had just over a single article devoted to each scandal on average.

A preliminary look suggests that the quantity of coverage corresponds to the level of seriousness of the transgressions or the public officials involved. The seriousness of the Tennessee Waltz exposé was noted above, and the data confirm that it garnered its fair share of attention. However, while three scandals in Tennessee generated 29, 18, and

15 articles, respectively, the modal number of articles was still one. As expected, the single-article scandals were typically minor, while the ones that generated greater coverage tended to be more serious, involving, for instance, bribery or prominent officials like state lawmakers. North Dakota's problems were less serious—such as a city council violating the state's open-meeting law—and garnered less attention. Many of South Carolina's scandals involved local public officials who failed to disclose financial campaign information; these generated little media coverage.

In order to identify the determinants of the amount of media coverage, the first and second multivariate models were designed to examine the factors that influenced the number of articles devoted to any given

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*“There were no significant effects with events that were financial or sexual in nature.”*

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scandal (Table 1). While the number of articles per scandal ranged from a single article to fifty-one, 62 percent had only one. Therefore, the first two models were estimated with negative binomial regression because the dependent variable was an overdispersed count variable (Cameron and Trivedi 1998; Long and Freese 2006).

The first model regressed the total number of articles per scandal on the independent variables, identified above, relating to culture, the officials involved, the nature of the event, its dispensation, and institutional factors (see Table 1). Since negative binomial coefficients indicate the difference in the log of the estimated number of articles, a more useful interpretation is to consider the incidence rate ratios (see Long and Freese 2006; for rate ratios, see Appendix Table A2).

The estimated rate ratio compares, for example, instances that involved a governor (or office) to those in which the executive was not primarily involved. Holding all variables constant, if a governor is part of the scandal, we can expect to have a rate of 1.26 times more articles than if a executive is not primarily involved ( $p < 0.06$ ). Scandals involving the legislature did not matter.

The data suggested that institutional factors may be important, as the ethics commission variable had an estimated negative effect on the number of articles devoted to a given scandal. The rate ratio suggested that the presence of an ethics commission would decrease the rate of coverage by a factor of 0.30. States with stricter regulation of public officials had marginally fewer articles than those with less regulation ( $p < 0.10$ ).

The dispensation of cases appeared to affect the number of articles. Relevant events involving resignations can be expected to generate a rate of 24 percent more articles than those without this outcome ( $p < 0.05$ ), and criminal charges may have an effect of a comparable magnitude ( $p < 0.06$ ) of about 25 percent more.

The interaction of gubernatorial office involvement with sexual scandals was also positive and marginally significant ( $p < 0.10$ ). The strongest influence, however, was

found with articles dealing with resignations of officials associated with the governor. The coefficient indicated that this variable was expected to have a rate ratio of 6.6 times greater coverage than scandals involving the governor's office without resignations, holding all the other variables constant. The legislator\*resignation interaction term was also significant in the expected positive direction, and the rate ratio of 2.2 indicated an expectation of more than twice the rate of coverage under these circumstances.

Political culture does not appear to matter in this model, as neither of the variables for moralistic or traditional culture was statistically significant. There were no significant effects with events that were financial or sexual in nature. Controls for state

**TABLE 1**  
**Determinants of Articles and Word Count**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>No. of articles</i>	<i>Word count</i>
Population	0.0000336* (0.0000198)	0.000114*** (0.000019)
Time	0.002*** (0.0002)	0.003*** (0.0003)
Ethics commission	-0.354** (0.121)	-0.205* (0.114)
Moralistic	-0.004 (0.181)	0.624*** (0.173)
Traditional	-0.011 (0.170)	0.500*** (0.159)
Legislator involved	0.110 (0.105)	0.343*** (0.097)
Governor involved	0.233+ (0.143)	0.500*** (0.141)
Financial	0.033 (0.077)	-0.016 (0.072)
Sexual	-0.047 (0.192)	-0.045 (0.171)
Criminal charges	0.223+ (0.136)	0.018 (0.148)
Resignation	0.215* (0.122)	0.242* (0.121)
Regulation	-0.022+ (0.016)	-0.082*** (0.015)
Governor * sexual	0.565+ (0.368)	0.153 (0.470)
Governor * resignation	1.892*** (0.386)	2.278*** (0.587)
Legislator * resignation	0.796** (0.272)	0.746* (0.355)
Constant	0.692*** (0.206)	6.613*** (0.196)
Log likelihood	-845.849	-4015.465
LR $\chi^2(15)$	391.46	447.08
Prob > $\chi^2$	0.000	0.000
Pseudo $R^2$	0.188	0.053
<i>N</i>	519	519

Model is estimated negative binomial regression. Population is per 1,000. All variables use a one-tailed test except for traditional cultures. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; + $p < 0.10$ .

population and time were both positive and significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), as expected.

Another way of looking at the amount of coverage is to examine the number of words devoted to a scandal (second model, Table 1). In this case, the dependent variable is the number of words devoted to each event, and the model is also estimated using

negative binomial regression given the overdispersed nature of the variable. The variables for both moralistic and traditional culture were positive and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that scandals in states characterized as having these cultures were expected to generate substantially more words than those in areas with individualistic cultures, the baseline. This suggests an expected increased rate of 1.87 times more coverage in moralistic cultures, and 1.65 times more coverage in traditional cultures, as compared with individualistic ones.

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*“If scandals drive media attention, the existence of institutions and legal infrastructure to regulate behavior appears to inhibit these events and therefore the media coverage.”*

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Both of the measures of prominent officials involved—legislators and governors (or their offices)—were estimated to positively influence the number of words devoted to a scandal. Incidents involving lawmakers were estimated to have a rate of 41 percent more words than those not involving them ( $p < 0.001$ ), and those involving the governor’s office were expected to have a rate of 65 percent greater than those in which the governor’s office was not implicated ( $p < 0.001$ ). As expected, cases that resulted in resignations were estimated to increase the number of words devoted to a scandal by a factor of 1.27 compared to cases without this dispensation.

For states with greater regulation, there was an expected decrease in the rate ratio by 0.08, and the presence of an ethics commission was also expected to exhibit a negative influence on media coverage ( $p < 0.10$ ). Two of the three interaction terms were highly significant in the expected positive direction, and the magnitudes of the coefficients were quite substantial. The legislator\*resignation term indicated more than twice the expected words, and the governor\*resignation term suggested 9.76 times the words of the reference categories.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, interacting the gubernatorial variable with sexual scandals did not increase media coverage. Again, the nature of the scandal was not important, as neither financial nor sexual events were estimated to have an influence on the number of words.

The natural concern is that larger states have greater news coverage because they have more media outlets than smaller states. This is precisely why AP SL Wire stories were used rather than total number of newspaper articles, which would more likely be influenced by larger numbers of newspapers in more populous states. Certainly, the population variables were significant in all models presented thus far. While it is possible that larger states might also have a greater number of scandals and therefore more media coverage, this is not always the case. For example, Indiana’s population is more than 6 million and Oregon’s is a little more than 3.5 million people. Between 1998 and 2005, Oregon had 3.51 words per scandal for each 1,000 residents, compared to only 1.78 in Indiana. Nonetheless, the models were also estimated using per capita word count as the dependent variable with population removed as an independent variable.

The first model presented in Table 2 has both notable similarities and differences to the earlier models. The model regresses a logged, standardized measure of words per scandal per 1,000 population on the same independent variables as in

**TABLE 2**  
**Determinants of Relative Words per Scandal and Words per Article**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Standardized words per scandal</i>	<i>Words per article</i>
Population	—	0.000683*** (0.0000124)
Time	0.002*** (0.0002)	0.0002+ (0.0001)
Ethics commission	-0.034 (0.118)	0.043 (0.077)
Moralistic	0.976*** (0.128)	0.450*** (0.110)
Traditional	0.945*** (0.109)	0.373*** (0.103)
Legislator involved	0.216* (0.101)	0.259*** (0.066)
Governor involved	0.541*** (0.144)	0.378*** (0.094)
Financial	-0.004 (0.074)	-0.011 (0.048)
Sexual	-0.153 (0.178)	-0.023 (0.116)
Criminal charges	0.115 (0.142)	0.047 (0.095)
Resignation	0.142 (0.126)	0.056 (0.082)
Regulation	-0.135*** (0.015)	-0.060*** (0.010)
Governor * sexual	0.460 (0.472)	0.015 (0.308)
Governor * resignation	1.705** (0.600)	0.097 (0.390)
Legislator * resignation	0.904** (0.366)	-0.035 (0.238)
Constant	-1.304*** (0.136)	5.971*** (0.129)
Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.476	0.180
RMSE	0.796	0.519
<i>N</i>	519	519

Models are estimated using ordinary least squares regression; both dependent variables are logged; population is per 1,000. All variables use a one-tailed test except for traditional cultures. \*\*\**p* < 0.001; \*\**p* < 0.01; \**p* < 0.05; +*p* < 0.10.



the previous two models (excluding population) using ordinary least squares. States with moralistic and traditional cultures were estimated to have a greater number of words per scandal relative to population than individualistic cultures ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Scandals involving the governor's office increased expected coverage ( $p < 0.001$ ), as did those involving lawmakers. Gubernatorial as well as legislative involvement was estimated to increase coverage of scandals. As with

previous models, stricter regulation of political behavior was estimated to decrease the relative number of words per scandal ( $p < 0.001$ ). If scandals drive media attention, the existence of institutions and legal infrastructure to regulate behavior appear to inhibit these events and therefore the media coverage.

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*"[T]he more serious scandals are covered proportionately to the prominence of those involved, and this is compounded when the scandal results in resignations."*

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While none of the individual variables for the nature of the scandal or the dispensation of the case were significant in the models, two of the three interaction terms were again significant in the expected positive direction. Scandals involving the governor's office when resignations took place can expect substantial increases in the standardized word coverage ( $p < 0.001$ ) in comparison to the reference category. Legislative scandals involving resignation can also expect an increase in standardized coverage compared with those not involving this outcome.

The final model in Table 2 assessed the influence of the explanatory variables on the number of words per article, which is an indication of the depth of coverage. Again, the dependent variable was logged. States with moralistic and traditional cultures were expected to have a greater number of words per article relative to individualistic cultures. Episodes involving prominent officials were also expected to have a greater number of words per article than scandals not involving these officials. Legislative and gubernatorial involvement was expected to increase the number of words per article as well. States with stricter regulation of officials were expected to have fewer words per article than those with lesser restrictions. As with the previous models, the nature of the incident had no effect on the number of words per article, nor did case dispensation. Finally, none of the interaction terms were statistically significant.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study began with a rather simple question: What explains the amount of media coverage of political scandals? With the exception of the number of articles, political culture is a consistent determinant of the amount of media coverage, as moralistic and traditional states tend to have more coverage of scandals than individualistic states. The results offer moderately strong support for H1 and H2b. Moralistic states are more sensitive to the behavior of public officials, and the media respond accordingly. But if the media's watchdog role has changed, it may have done so the most in traditional cultures, such that acceptance of inappropriate behaviors is no longer the norm; thus the media now respond to scandals more vigilantly, resulting in greater coverage.

Despite the large number of scandals and articles included in the dataset, there are some limitations to the conclusions that can be derived from examining the effects of political culture on media coverage of scandals in ten states. While it is possible to conclude that traditional states like Kentucky and Tennessee have more coverage than an individualistic state like Indiana, a larger sample would be required to extend this conclusion definitively to all 50 states. It might be interesting for future analysis to

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*“With the exception of the number of articles, political culture is a consistent determinant of the amount of media coverage.”*

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incorporate the effect of partisanship as well as culture on media coverage. Puglisi and Snyder (2011a, 2011b) suggest that newspaper coverage of scandals tends to align with the preferences of the median voter within its readership, the partisanship of the officials involved in the incident, and the partisan leanings

of the newspapers reporting the events. Aggregating the APSL Wire stories mitigated the effects of partisanship between individual newspapers, but the effects of party warrant further study. Still, these results enhance our understanding of the role of culture in shaping how the media respond to allegations of misconduct by officials.

The results are quite intuitive when it comes to the notoriety of the people involved. Exposés implicating prominent officials like governors and lawmakers are likely to receive more attention than scandals involving lesser-known public employees, like state agency personnel or college professors (supporting H6). In an analysis not shown, several scandals involving professors at state universities were examined, and they seldom generated much coverage. Even events involving judges or agency heads received less news coverage than those concerning members of the governor’s staff and state legislators. Governors and state lawmakers tend to be the better-known state officials, and when they are involved in a scandal, the media are much more prone to report their transgressions, adding to their notoriety. Incidents involving less-known officials are likely to sell fewer papers, so reporters devote less space to them. It is also likely that less-known officials, especially those at the local level, are reported on only in local papers.

The severity of the scandal mattered only under certain circumstances, and there was only some support for H3. Scandals involving criminal charges were marginally significant in only a single model, while resignations increased coverage in two of the four models. However, more consistent results were observed by examining resignations of prominent officials (H7). Kentucky offers an example of substantial coverage involving the governor, and the degree of attention is larger because of the severity of the incident and how it was dispensed. Governor Ernie Fletcher’s administration was involved in a personnel scandal in 2005 that included indictments of several officials, criminal charges, resignations, firings, and ultimately a pardon for all parties involved (except the governor) (see Chellgren 2005). This suggests that the more serious events are covered proportionately to the prominence of the officials involved, and this is compounded when the scandal results in resignations. These findings comport with observations by scholars who have examined how coverage corresponds to dramatic, negative, catastrophic, or hazard events (see Gans 1980;

Goidel and Langley 1995; Mazur and Lee 1993; Tumber and Waisbord 2004). When accusations are more serious and involve prominent officials, the media and the public take notice, putting pressure on lawmakers to adopt reforms. For those concerned with good government reform, more severe scandals do result in changes in ethics laws based on evidence from South Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee; this is consistent with Rosenson's (2005) work.

Institutional reforms also appear to play a role in the coverage of scandals. There was moderate support for H9 that the presence of an ethics commission led to less coverage in terms of number of articles and number of words. For the time period of this study, Minnesota, North Dakota, New Mexico, and Tennessee did not have ethics commissions in place, while South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Massachusetts, Kentucky, and Indiana did. Interestingly, the states without commissions had fewer scandals than those with them. While it may be difficult to draw conclusions from this observation with only ten states, it is notable that those with no commission averaged 31.5 scandals, while those with a commission had 66 scandals, on average. It may be, at least in part, that states with commissions have them because there are more ethical problems involving state officials. However, once a scandal has taken place, states with commissions appear to have less media coverage, at least according to some of the models. The causal relationship among scandals, the likelihood of having a commission, and subsequent media coverage are all worthy of additional attention.

The findings also suggest that states with stricter lobbying regulations have less coverage of scandals, offering moderately strong support for H10. Since states have responded to scandals by increasing their ethics regulations (Rosenson 2005) and lobbying restrictions (Newmark 2005), it is quite possible that because these events often result in stricter laws, they also contribute to a decrease in unethical behaviors, which therefore decreases the need for media coverage. The next step is to examine more closely the behavior of political actors, the laws and institutions that govern them, and the media coverage to better understand how they interact with each other.

Surprisingly, there was no evidence that the nature of the event had any impact on the amount of media coverage (H4 and H5). Neither financial nor sexual scandals generated greater coverage than other scandals (regardless of how this is measured). Financial scandals were also no more likely to have serious repercussions for the perpetrators than other incidents, as there was virtually no relationship between those that were financial in nature and criminal charges. Even the relationship between financial scandals and convictions (not reported) was limited.

Finally, and this was the most surprising finding, sexual scandals did not generate greater news coverage than those that were not carnal in nature. Even when a sexual scandal involved the governor's office, the media coverage was not increased (with the marginal exception of the number of articles). This does not mean that some exposé involving the governor (or the office) and sex will not garner media attention, as many of these exposés are covered prominently in the press. Rather, and contrary to what is widely assumed, the data, in the aggregate, do not suggest that this combination of

factors leads to systematically greater media coverage. This finding leaves unexplored the factors that keep some events in the news for long periods of time, while others die out quickly. Sexual transgressions, for example, might receive a great deal of attention for a short time and then end rather quickly. Certainly, what keeps an exposé in the news warrants additional exploration. Still, there is a note of optimism in the finding that sex does not increase media attention, for it suggests that coverage is driven by factors other than image. Even if the media are motivated by what sells (Hamilton 2004; Patterson 2000), the data indicate that this motivation does not crowd out responsible reporting with regard to scandals.

## Notes

1. The start date of August 4, 1998, was chosen because it was the earliest date for which articles were available for all ten states.

2. Articles categorized as duplicates had the same title, the same word count ( $\pm 5$  words), and were printed within two consecutive days of the original article. Duplication is included in the analysis because it is an indication of what the media think is important. When the models were estimated without the duplicates, the results were little different from what is reported here.

3. The full content analysis involved coding the scandals for each article to identify the primary and secondary officials involved, the government entity involved, the nature of the violation, the number of alleged violations, the dispensation of the case, the individual or entity who initiated the case, the individuals or entity involved in any investigation, whether there were resignations, whether legislation resulted from the scandal, and if so the nature of the legislation. Some of these were not determinable for some of the scandals; some were highly collinear with other variables and were excluded from the analysis.

4. The likelihood that larger states would have greater news coverage is why the AP/SL Wire stories were used rather than specific newspapers. Population and time were included as controls. A standardized version of this variable relative to population was estimated, and the results were similar to the models presented below. The third dependent variable also addresses this issue.

5. It is also possible that more populous states would have more issues, and if so this would result in less attention to any individual case. These relationships are addressed in the analysis section.

6. A fourth term was created to capture legislative sexual scandals, but it was dropped from the models due to multicollinearity.

7. Time for a scandal with a single article was coded 1. Both the duration of a scandal and the possibility that a given time period might have either a greater number of scandals or heightened coverage of them were also considered. In addition to including a variable measuring the duration of scandals, all of the models were estimated with fixed effects for time (not shown). This was designed to capture any idiosyncratic factors that might explain heightened coverage in a given year. Since the results were similar to those reported, the more parsimonious models were presented.

8. One scandal has no bearing on additional scandals. While it seems logical that one such event might heighten media awareness, this did not appear to be the case. Coverage might also change due to the evolving nature of the media over time. While

some years did have more coverage, this seemed to be driven by the scandals and their characteristics rather than changing roles of the media. In addition to the fixed effects for time, all models were re-estimated with state, fixed effects; the influence of the explanatory variables was remarkably similar to those reported, with only a few differences.

9. These models were also estimated, including the total number of articles as an independent variable. Aside from capturing over 93 percent of the variance in word count, results varied little from the model presented above.

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