

Skeletons in White House Closets: A Discussion of Modern Presidential Scandals

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Undoubtedly, we live in a period of media-stoked scandal. Actors' and actresses' substance abuse, arrests, affairs, divorces, racially insensitive remarks, and indiscretions dominate entertainment news. Athletes' steroid abuse, drunk-driving arrests, extra-marital affairs, and extra-legal enterprises feature prominently in sports news. We should hardly be surprised to also find political news filled with scandals. Countless stories have addressed one governor's attempt to sell vacant Senate seats, another's international trips for extra-marital trysts, and another's penchant for escorts. Presidential candidates have been caught having affairs, fathering children out of wedlock, and raising "slush funds" of cash for personal expenses. Executive branch and judicial nominees have been exposed for cheating on their taxes, cheating on their spouses, sexually harassing their staffs, and hiring undocumented workers. Members of Congress have been caught accepting bribes, employing escorts, sexually harassing pages and staff members, and engaging in embarrassing communications online.

American presidents seem to be particularly susceptible to the rising tide of scandal. The president is the most visible figure of national government and manages thousands of employees. Presidents' political fortunes and legacies

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are often coupled to perceptions of their character.¹ Perhaps because the legends of George Washington and the cherry tree and of “Honest Abe” Lincoln are so deeply engrained, the American public expects the president to be virtuous.² However, scandals have also been present since the nation’s founding; two members of George Washington’s cabinet, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, were involved in notorious sex scandals that were the basis of political attacks.³ A century later, Grover Cleveland’s illegitimate child was the basis of a campaign slogan.⁴ The notion that using presidential scandals to gain political advantage is a modern phenomenon is demonstrably false.

Despite presidents’ attempts to appear virtuous and physically vigorous,⁵ every modern president experiences scandals in their administration. In the short term, scandals typically affect the president’s popularity. John Fousek and David Wasserman cite “the rapid decline of public support for presidents whose leadership appears ethically compromised” as *prima facie* evidence that Americans possess unrealistically high expectations.⁶ A scandal might diminish a president’s ability to enact legislation.⁷ A poorly handled scandal can lead to policy paralysis.⁸ Scandals can also perform an agenda-setting role, as the Iran-Contra disclosures focused public attention on Ronald Reagan’s policy in Central America,⁹ and the Valerie Plame scandal highlighted the weakness of the George W. Bush administration’s intelligence on Iraq. In the long term,

¹ See Bob Woodward, *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999); James P. Pfiffner, *The Character Factor: How We Judge America’s Presidents* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

² See William Galston, “Commentary: Ethics and Character in the U.S. Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (March 2010): 90–101.

³ On presidential sex scandals, see Charles Dunn, *The Scarlet Thread of Scandal: Morality and the American Presidency* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), Wesley O. Hagood, *Presidential Sex: From the Founding Fathers to Bill Clinton*, revised and updated ed. (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1998); Shelley Ross, *Fall From Grace: Sex, Scandal, and Corruption in American Politics from 1702 to Present* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988); Jeffrey Schultz, *Presidential Scandals* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1999); and Michael John Sullivan, *Presidential Passions: The Love Affairs of America’s Presidents from Washington and Jefferson to Kennedy and Johnson* (New York: SPI Press, 1994). Biographies of Warren Harding, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson provide further evidence that the president engaging in illicit sex is hardly a recent phenomenon.

⁴ See Charles Lachman, *A Secret Life: The Lies and Scandals of President Grover Cleveland* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011).

⁵ See Robert Dallek, “Presidential Fitness and Presidential Lies: The Historical Record and a Proposal for Reform,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (March 2010): 9–22.

⁶ John Fousek and David Wasserman, “Ethical Issues in U.S. Presidential Leadership,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (March 2010), 2.

⁷ Molly W. Andolina and Clyde Wilcox, “Public Opinion: The Paradoxes of Clinton’s Popularity” in Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *The Clinton Scandals and the Future of American Government* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), p. 171–194.

⁸ George Stephanopoulos, *All Too Human: A Political Education* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1999).

⁹ Jon A. Krosnick and Donald R. Kinder, “Altering the Foundations of Support for the President through Priming,” *American Political Science Review* 84 (June 1990): 497–512.

political scandals undermine the public's trust in government,¹⁰ especially when a scandal involves political accountability.

Sadly, conventional wisdom suggests that the number of scandals is on the rise. Nancy Marion declares that "there have been an unprecedented number of scandals in national politics in recent years," and that political scandals "are now a constant occurrence."¹¹ Jeff Zeleny echoes this sentiment: "Barely a day passes ... without headlines from Washington to New York and beyond filled with word of scandal or allegations of wrongdoing."¹² The trend seems particularly clear with respect to sex scandals, especially those involving governors and members of Congress. Others lament the "deepening muck of scandal," and identify a "general sense among some politicians, commentators and the American public at large that at some point during the past fifteen years, a line was crossed."¹³

What are the causes of this disheartening trend? One might blame the media for their "feeding frenzy" mentality, the result of a changing culture among investigative journalists as well as greater competition among news outlets.¹⁴ Changes in communications technology have also made the flow of information—and misinformation—cheaper and quicker. One might point to a decline in the nation's and leaders' morals,¹⁵ or one might blame politicians for making "the politics of personal destruction" an acceptable weapon for partisan warfare.¹⁶ Institutions created in the post-Watergate wave of ethics legislation have also received some blame.¹⁷ Independent counsels, U.S. Attorneys, the "Public Integrity Section" at the Justice Department, inspectors general inside agencies, and so on, are given license to proclaim themselves defenders of the political system's uprightness.

¹⁰ See Marc J. Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Arthur H. Miller, "Sex, Politics, and Public Opinion: What Political Scientists Really Learned from the Clinton–Lewinsky Scandal," *PS: Political Science* 32 (December 1999): 721–729.

¹¹ Nancy E. Marion, *The Politics of Disgrace: The Role of Scandal in American Politics* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2010).

¹² Jeff Zeleny, "Now It's Democrats Who Feel Sting of Scandal," *The New York Times*, 5 March 2010.

¹³ Paul Apostolidis and Juliet A. Williams, "Sex Scandals and Discourses of Power" in Paul Apostolidis and Juliet A. Williams, eds., *Public Affairs: Politics in the Age of Sex Scandals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 1–35.

¹⁴ See Larry J. Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1993); and Larry J. Sabato, Mark Stencel, and S. Robert Lichter, *Peep Show: Media and Politics in an Age of Scandal* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000).

¹⁵ William J. Bennett, *The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Lanny Davis, *Scandal: How "Gotcha" Politics is Destroying America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter, *Politics by Other Means: Politicians, Prosecutors and the Press from Watergate to Whitewater* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

¹⁷ Robert N. Roberts and Marion T. Doss, Jr., *From Watergate to Whitewater: The Public Integrity War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

But, are scandals really becoming more commonplace? Political scandals involving the president or the executive branch have not been subjected to systematic, scientific study. Consequently, we lack answers to some basic questions. There exists no widely accepted definition of “scandal” and no database of events fitting such a definition, so we do not know whether official misbehavior is becoming more common, whether news coverage has become more scandal-focused, or whether the rules of the political game have changed. Mass-market literature and scholarly research over-emphasize a few scandals with major consequences, particularly Watergate, Iran-Contra, and Bill Clinton’s sex scandals. This narrow focus ensures that forming generalizations will be unreliable. Moreover, the term “scandal” may have become synonymous with lying, stonewalling, and obstructing justice, but not every scandal leads to deceit and a cover-up. Even though a generation of investigative reporters idolize Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and view every allegation of misconduct as the tip of an iceberg of corruption, sometimes where there is smoke, there is no fire. Ethics laws passed in the wake of Watergate presume a lack of governmental ethics, but the preponderance of Independent Counsel investigations ended without an indictment, let alone a conviction.

Mass media discussion and coverage of scandals suggests that such events are business as usual for the political system, without offering any concrete sense of what “usual” means. To examine these critical events more systematically, in this article we focus on presidential scandals. We begin by defining presidential scandals and contrasting our definition with others’ understandings of scandals. We sought to identify every presidential scandal that occurred between the years 1972 and 2008, a period including seven presidential administrations. We found 87 scandals, with one occurring every five months, on average. We have detailed how number and types of scandals vary across years and presidencies. We also gathered data on the type of misbehavior alleged and the numbers and ranks of administration personnel involved in scandals. We detail our findings on the duration of each scandal, newspaper coverage, and the administration’s behavior when confronted with accusations.

THE DEFINITION OF A PRESIDENTIAL SCANDAL

A proper, operational definition of presidential scandals must identify three dimensions: *who*, *what*, and *when*. The primary issue in determining a definition of political scandals is what types of misbehavior should and should not be classified as scandalous. A secondary issue, which is relevant to identifying *presidential* scandals, is *who* should be viewed as close enough to the president that their misbehavior may cast a shadow on the administration. Another issue that is less controversial is *when* that behavior must have taken place and *when* it was revealed.

Many definitions of political scandals are too broad to guide scientific study. Marion only requires that a public figure has been “accused of unethical

or immoral behavior” defined as offending behavior or an event “that is disgraceful, shameful or discredits someone” or that transgresses “societal norms, moral codes or values.”¹⁸ Suzanne Garment’s attention is not on “the deed’s intrinsic nature,” but instead is on the public’s reactions: a scandal is triggered by “an act that affronts the moral sensibilities or pretensions of its audience,” or that violates “a set of shared values.”¹⁹ John Thompson offers a detailed definition, which requires that actions “transgress or contravene certain values, norms or moral codes” and that the actions’ disclosure might damage responsible individuals’ reputations, so that they attempt to conceal the action.²⁰ Thompson further requires that non-participants know or strongly believe that the actions took place, and that they publicly denounce the actions to express their disapproval. A *political* scandal must additionally have a political figure at the center of the scandal. We ask a few rhetorical questions: Can we be confident that each definition would exclude accidents that garner negative publicity, such as when Vice President Cheney mistakenly shot and injured a hunting partner?²¹ Can we be confident that each definition would exclude unpopular but legitimate policy decisions? If not, then a more-refined definition is necessary.

Overly broad definitions impede scientific study because they allow the same label to be attached to a wide variety of acts that could create negative images or stimulate media coverage but that are not scandals proper. None of these definitions automatically exclude controversial policy decisions that garner negative publicity. For example, some might consider President Clinton’s pardoning of Marc Rich in the final days of his presidency to be ethically inappropriate, because Rich was the former spouse of a major donor. Many considered President George H.W. Bush’s breaking his “Read my lips: No new taxes” pledge to be shameful, violating a moral imperative to keep one’s word. Unwise and unpopular actions are not the same as scandals, however: “Controversial policies... don’t constitute scandals. Nor does low performance in office.... A significant political scandal will typically involve identifiable transgressions with certain offenders—not simply abstract criticisms—and require some kind of institutional reaction.”²² Presidents can change their minds about policies without triggering a scandal. Executive branch appointees and generals likewise can mismanage wars, crises, policies, and personnel

¹⁸ Marion, *The Politics of Disgrace*, 11.

¹⁹ Suzanne Garment, *Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics* (New York: Times Publishing, Anchor Books, 1991), 14.

²⁰ John B. Thompson, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2000).

²¹ These more accurately fall under the category of “mistakes or errors”; see Marion, *The Politics of Disgrace*, 15.

²² Ari Adut, *On Scandal: Moral Disturbances in Society, Politics, and Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74–75.

without their failings being scandals. A proper definition must be narrow enough to exclude mismanagement and issue-based controversy.

At the other extreme, some definitions of political scandals are too narrow. For example, Andrei Markovits and Mark Silverstein define political scandal in terms of a “violation of due process.”²³ This definition’s focus is on abuses of power primarily, and on financial corruption secondarily. Another overly narrow approach is that of Larry Sabato, who pursues media coverage of spectacular cases by identifying 36 press-related “frenzies” that sprang from off-color remarks, revelation of embarrassing information that had been suppressed, exaggerations of deeds done, accusations, and political corruption.²⁴ Although this study provides a rich, descriptive account of the feeding frenzy dynamic, it neither presents an exhaustive list of scandals nor addresses conditions under which misbehavior results in a feeding frenzy.

Our definition requires that a scandal must involve allegations of illegal, unethical, or immoral wrongdoing. The definition also must include adultery, because of the unique place of inappropriate sexual relationships in the pantheon of political scandals.²⁵ Including sex scandals ensures that we include “transgressions” of conventional morality, but we wish to exclude gossip, innuendo, unsubstantiated rumors, and unauthenticated, dubious reports of private behavior. For scandals of non-sexual nature, an alleged violation of a law or a code of ethics is the threshold question. This definition is sufficiently clear to permit consistent measurement over time and across institutions (Congress, the states, etc.). Our definition intentionally excludes executive branch incompetence and unpopular policy decisions. Prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib, mistreatment of wounded veterans at Walter Reed Naval Hospital, and tepid responses to anthrax attacks in 2001 and to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 may be memorable administrative failures, but these events belong to a category that is distinct from political scandal.

Our definition may not be as broad as imaginable, but it does include four major types of misbehavior: financial corruption, political corruption, personal scandals, and international scandals. Financial corruption scandals result from an individual personally profiting from his or her actions, such as embezzlement of funds, accepting bribes or political payoffs, and evading taxes. Political corruption scandals result from revelations that an individual abused the authority of office, but without profiting financially. This category would include a breach of public trust or a violation of an individual’s oath of office, violations of separation of powers and of constitutional rights (Watergate), intentionally injecting politics into non-political decisions (firing U.S. Attorneys), violating campaign laws (illegal fundraising practices), and violating

²³ Andrei S. Markovits and Mark Silverstein, *The Politics of Scandal: Power and Process in Liberal Democracies* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1988).

²⁴ Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy*.

²⁵ See David Rosen, *Sex Scandal America: Politics and the Ritual of Public Shaming* (Toronto: Key Publishing House, 2009).

personnel rules (inappropriate possession of FBI files). Personal scandals result from revelations of immoral individual behavior, especially adultery, and also sexual harassment, drug abuse, and employing undocumented household staff. International scandals involve events that deal with the affairs of another nation, including violating U.S. laws, such as the Reagan administration's support for the Nicaraguan Contras.

This definition has two advantages. First, classifying an event as a scandal does not depend on the level of media coverage. In fact, examining events at varying levels of intensity allows one to investigate whether different types of alleged misbehavior and different types of accused officials tend to increase or decrease the amount of media coverage a scandal receives. Second, classifying an event as a scandal does not depend on the severity of the consequences (impeachment, resignation, criminal indictment) or on the degree of official obstruction.

In attempting to describe how we classify scandals, we have employed a handful of examples, not all of which involve the president. This leads to the question of what actors must be involved for a scandal to be a *presidential* scandal. Again, existing definitions are both too broad and too narrow. Garment's interest is in national political scandals, defined as situations in which "relatively senior federal officials and candidates for federal office have been publicly accused in the national press of wrongdoing."²⁶ Our definition of presidential scandal requires that the misbehavior identified above must involve the president, a senior administration official, or a nominee. We include scandals involving the vice president, cabinet secretaries, officials with cabinet-level rank (the White House chief of staff or the director of the office of management and budget), agency heads, high-level political appointees (down to the level of deputy-, assistant-, or under-secretary), ambassadors and envoys, the first lady, and the president's senior campaign staff. We also include nominees for executive- or judicial-branch positions during the period when a nomination is under Senate consideration.

There are weighty reasons for expanding the definition to include actors other than the president. First, one question that arises with many scandals is whether the president was aware and/or involved either directly or indirectly. In the post-Watergate era, it has become cliché to ask, "What did the president know, and when did he know it?" Every administration must be on guard against the roving eye of the press and partisan opposition. Second, there are many players within the confines of the White House, and any investigation can have ramifications for the president's reputation, the president's agenda, and the institution of the presidency. We opted to exclude scandals that only involve individuals below a threshold, because individuals below a particular level more closely resemble civil service employees, whose wrongdoing has minimal impact on the presidency.

²⁶ Garment, *Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics*, 3, 345.

The third and final issue in defining scandals is *when* that behavior must have taken place and *when* it was revealed, in order for misbehavior to count as a presidential scandal. The press might erupt if a new exposé of President Kennedy's personal life were published,²⁷ but this should *not* be considered a presidential scandal. Had Kennedy's affairs been reported at the time by the journalists who were aware of them, they would have caused a scandal. Similarly, the financial corruption in the Department of Housing and Urban Development that took place during the Reagan administration was not revealed until 1989, when President George H.W. Bush had taken office and Jack Kemp had been appointed Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to replace Samuel Pierce. Wrongdoers ultimately were convicted, and President Bush and Secretary Kemp received credit, not blame. Additionally, the illegal lobbying activities of former White House aide Lyn Nofziger do not count as a presidential scandal, because they took place while Nofziger was a private citizen. Therefore, to summarize, we are only interested in scandals involving officials, affiliated persons, and nominees revealed before an administration ends.

COLLECTION OF DATA ON PRESIDENTIAL SCANDALS

Using the definition defended above, we identified 87 scandals that occurred between 1972 and 2008.²⁸ The full list of scandals is provided in the Appendix to this article. It is important to distinguish between the number of scandals and the number of persons (above our threshold) who are involved in scandals. Across the 87 scandals, we identified 124 persons who were involved,

²⁷ For example, Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), and Mimi Alford, *Once Upon a Secret: My Affair with President John F. Kennedy and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 2012).

²⁸ These 87 events were selected from a larger list of presidential events, drawn from multiple sources. First, books titled an "encyclopedia" or "almanac" of political scandals include Gerald Greenberg, *Historical Encyclopedia of U.S. Independent Counsel Investigations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000); Mark Grossman, *Political Corruption in America: An Encyclopedia of Scandals, Power, and Greed*, 2d ed. (Westport, CT: ABC-CLIO, 2003); Kim Long, *The Almanac of Political Corruption, Scandals, & Dirty Politics* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2007); Marion, *The Politics of Disgrace*; and Schultz, *Presidential Scandals*. Commentaries on scandals and/or the media include Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004); Amitai Etzioni, *Capital Corruption: The New Attack on American Democracy*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995); Garment, *Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics*; Ross, *Fall From Grace*; Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy*; and Woodward, *Shadow*. Accounts of one scandal or scandal-plagued administration include Sidney Blumenthal, *The Clinton Wars* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003); Lanny J. Davis, *Truth to Tell: Tell It Early, Tell It All, Tell It Yourself: Notes from My White House Education* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Michael Isikoff, *Uncovering Clinton: A Reporter's Story* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000); James B. Stewart, *Blood Sport: The President and His Adversaries* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Lawrence E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-Up* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1998); and Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981–1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

for an average of 1.4 persons per scandal. Most scandals involve only a single target, particularly the financial scandals, but a handful of this country's more spectacular scandals have involved a great many more targets. Distinguishing between the people involved in a scandal can become important when looking at how long a scandal lasts. Consider the Whitewater scandal, which primarily involved the finances of Bill and Hillary Clinton, but also included Roger Altman, the Deputy Treasury Secretary (and, tangentially, Webster Hubbell, the Associate Attorney General). For the Clintons, the scandal lasted to the end of their presidency; for Altman, the scandal lasted only until his resignation, in 1994, following his admission that he had informed White House counsel Bernie Nussbaum about Resolution Trust Corporation criminal referrals.²⁹ In most of the tables and figures that follow, we portray both the number of events and the numbers of persons involved in events.

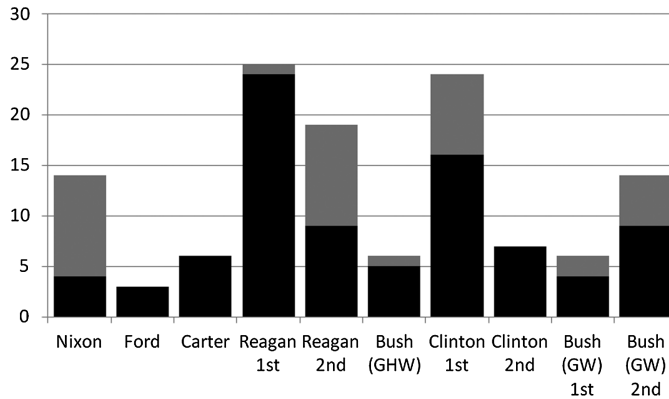
THE FREQUENCY OF MODERN PRESIDENTIAL SCANDALS

The first question that can be addressed is: How frequently do presidential scandals occur? Between 1972 and 2008, we identified 87 scandal events that occurred, an average of 2.3 per year, or one every five months. At the low end, four calendar years during our time period experienced no scandals. At the high end, seven scandals were revealed in 1982, followed by ten scandals in 1983. Even though most of these scandals were minor, involving financial misdealing by lower-level officials, the frequency is eye-opening. Despite the fact that images of Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton usually grace the covers of books on scandals, the Reagan administration was the most scandalous, in terms of the sheer numbers of scandals. Out of the 87 scandals in our dataset, Reagan's first term accounts for 24, followed by another 9 in Reagan's second term, for a total of 33 scandals (38 percent of the total). Clinton's first term accounts for 16, followed by another 7 in his second term, for a total of 23 scandals (26 percent of the total). Figure 1 displays the number of scandals by presidential term. The black bar indicates the number of scandal events uncovered in that time period, and the grey bar indicates the number of persons whose involvement in a scandal became known in that year or administration.

Richard Nixon's administration accounted for only four scandals. Gerald Ford's truncated administration accounted for three scandals, Jimmy Carter's six, and George H.W. Bush's just five. The administration of George W. Bush accounted for 13 scandals, with four falling in the first term and nine in the second term. As the grey bars indicate, in Nixon's and Reagan's second terms, and in Clinton's first term, the numbers of people involved in scandals far exceed the numbers of scandals.

²⁹ Nussbaum resigned in March of 1994. If Nussbaum, Hubbell, and Altman were "lightning rods," in the sense of Richard Ellis, *Presidential Lightning Rods: The Politics of Blame Avoidance* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), then they were unsuccessful.

FIGURE 1
Frequency of Scandals, by Presidential Term



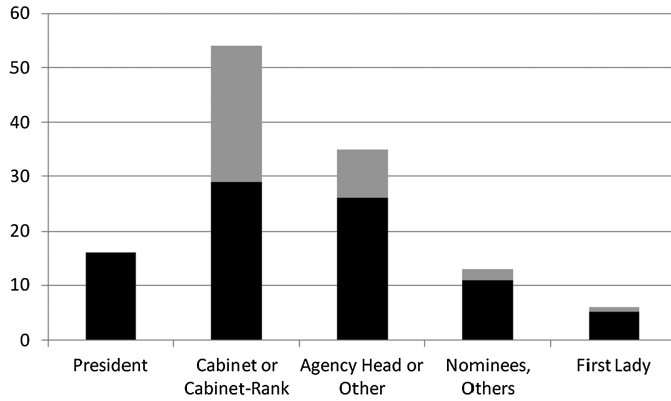
Source: Compiled by authors based on Appendix.

Note: Black bars indicate the number of distinct scandals occurring in a term. Grey bars indicate the number of additional individuals accused in the scandals occurring in a term, when the number of accused exceeds one.

Regarding the numbers of persons involved in each scandal, the numbers represented in Figure 1 refer only to individuals who meet our threshold criterion; frequently these scandals include additional persons (accomplices in or out of public service) who are below the threshold as well. In 73 of the 87 scandals in our database (84 percent), only one administration official is involved. Of the remaining 14 scandals, 5 involved only two targets that reach our threshold, 5 scandals involved three targets, and 2 scandals involved four targets. John Mitchell's "shakedowns" for campaign cash, Whitewater, and "Chinagate" each involved three or more individuals, as did three scandals in the George W. Bush administration: the leaking of Valerie Plame's name to Bob Novak, the National Security Agency's (NSA's) warrantless wiretap program, and the surprise dismissals of U.S. attorneys. Two scandals, Watergate and the Iranian arms-for-hostages exchange, stand out for the number of persons involved. Watergate involved nine individuals who reach our threshold. The Iran-Contra scandals involved actions in two different hemispheres, and were linked by the actions of Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, a National Security Council aide. The portion of the Iran-Contra scandals concerned with Iranian arms-for-hostages exchange involved at least nine individuals who reach our threshold; the portion involving aid to the Contras involved three individuals who reach our threshold, plus numerous accomplices.

As we describe in the next section, the types of scandals that involve multiple targets are systematically different from the types of scandals that only involve a single target. Subsequently, we show that media coverage and the White House strategy also differ systematically across types of presidential scandals.

FIGURE 2
Frequency of Scandals, by Highest Level



Source: Compiled by authors based on Appendix.

Note: Black bars indicate the number of distinct scandals occurring at a given level. Grey bars indicate the number of additional individuals at a given level who are accused in scandals, whenever the number of accused exceeds one.

THE TYPES OF MODERN PRESIDENTIAL SCANDALS

Presidential scandals can be subdivided two ways, by the people who were involved in the scandal, and by the misbehavior that is alleged to have occurred. In Figure 2, we disaggregate presidential scandals according to the level of the highest-ranked person who was involved in the scandal. The black bars denote the number of scandals in which the highest-ranked individual accused was at that particular level. The grey bars denote the number of individuals at a particular level who were accused in all scandals. The president was involved in only 16 of the 87 scandals (18 percent), in any tangible way. This includes the most-famous presidential scandals, particularly Watergate (a political scandal), the Iranian arms-for-hostages exchange (an international scandal), and Whitewater (a financial scandal), as well as Clinton's Lewinsky scandal and George W. Bush's National Guard service (both personal scandals). Considering the data another way, the president counts for only 16 of the 124 persons (13 percent) involved in scandals and who meet our threshold criterion.

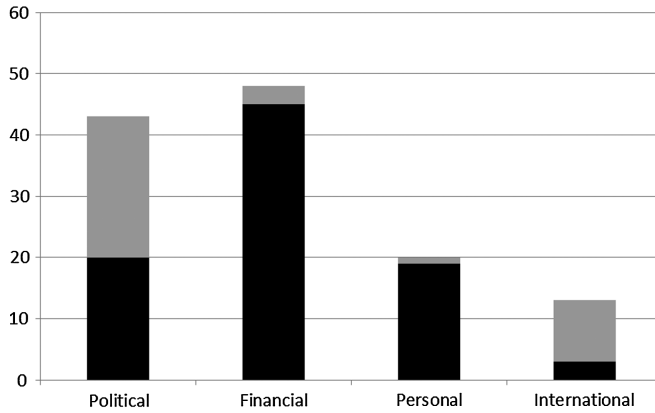
Which presidents were involved personally in scandals? Bill Clinton was involved in seven separate scandals that we identified: three sexual scandals (Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky, and Juanita Broaddrick), three political scandals involving fundraising for the 1996 elections, and one financial scandal (Whitewater). Nixon and Reagan each were personally involved in only one scandal apiece, the same number as Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush. Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush each were involved in two scandals.

Scandals involving cabinet members and cabinet-rank officials are most numerous, representing 29 of the 87 scandals. Cabinet-level officials are the most frequent participants in scandals, representing 54 of the 124 individuals accused in scandals that also involved either the president or another cabinet member. For example, the Watergate scandal involved President Nixon plus six cabinet-level officials (plus two lower-level officials that meet the threshold); the Iranian arms-for-hostages scandal involved President Reagan plus eight cabinet-level officials. (Both scandals also involved numerous individuals who do not meet the threshold.) With regard to specific offices, attorneys general were implicated eight times in scandals, and vice presidents were implicated seven times in scandals. The White House chief of staff is implicated in five scandals and was the primary target three times: Hamilton Jordan was accused of using drugs at Studio 54, John Sununu was found to have used government vehicles and personnel for personal travel, and James Baker was allegedly involved in procuring Carter's debate briefing books during the 1980 presidential campaign. The chief of staff was a secondary target twice, during Watergate and the Iranian arms-for-hostages revelations. William Casey, the CIA Director during much of the Reagan administration, was personally involved in five scandals, three times as a primary target. Note that Reagan made CIA director a cabinet-rank position in order to entice Casey to accept the position; previously the position had been below cabinet level. Such was the case when William Colby held the position, when the "family jewels" documents were leaked to Seymour Hersh and published in *The New York Times* in December 1974.

Presidential scandals may also involve or be generated by the misbehavior of individuals below the cabinet level. Scandals involving an agency head or a senior official inside of a cabinet department account for 26 of the 87 scandals. These sub-cabinet officials also account for 35 of the 124 individuals involved in scandals. A residual category of affiliated individuals accounts for 16 scandals. Of these, 9 scandals involved nominees for cabinet positions or for the Supreme Court; 5 scandals involved first ladies as a primary targets; 2 scandals involved the president's campaign manager, and 1 scandal involved an ambassador.

To summarize our findings on the level of individuals involved, although presidential scandals occur frequently, relatively few of these scandals involve the president. Instead, in the past 40 years, most presidential scandals involved just one administration official, most often a cabinet secretary, an under-, deputy-, or assistant-secretary, or an agency head. Scandals such as Watergate and Iran-Contra, that involved multiple targets, including the president among the accused, are the exception, not the rule. Watergate, as the most-pronounced presidential scandal in history, primed a conception of presidential scandal in our minds that scandals are multifaceted and "cancerous" manifestations on the West Wing that all reach the Oval Office. The reality is quite different. Therefore, we should hesitate to generalize beyond these scandals when considering how the media pursue scandal accusations and how the White House "plays defense" when it comes under attack.

FIGURE 3
Frequency of Scandals, by Category



Source: Compiled by authors based on Appendix.

Note: Black bars indicate the number of distinct scandals occurring in a particular category. Grey bars indicate the number of additional individuals accused, whenever the number of accused exceeds one.

Are the types of misbehavior that occurred in the Watergate scandal, the Iran-Contra scandals, and the Monica Lewinsky scandal typical of modern presidential scandals? Watergate was a scandal involving political corruption, the two parts of the Iran-Contra scandal involved international violations, and Clinton's impeachment involved lying under oath to cover up an inappropriate sexual relationship. As it turns out, these actions are not typical of the misbehavior alleged in presidential scandals. Figure 3 shows the division of scandals according to different categories of misbehavior. The black bars denote the number of distinct scandals in which the alleged misbehavior fits into a category. The grey bars denote the number of individuals who were accused in all scandals in a category. Examining the black bars, most presidential scandals are financial scandals. The range of illicit activities falling in the financial corruption category is wide. At the low end is FBI Director Clarence Kelley having curtains hung by government employees, and National Security Adviser Richard Allen accepting \$1,000 from a Japanese newspaper to arrange an interview with Nancy Reagan. The middle range is occupied by Vice President Spiro Agnew accepting cash bribes and multiple individuals (White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, Veterans Administration Director Robert Nimmo) repeatedly using military and government transportation for personal trips. At the high end are Webb Hubbell's billing fraud at the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, which occurred before he joined the Justice Department, and Commerce Secretary Ron Brown's selling seats on trade missions; each may have yielded a half-million dollars or more. Note that this category of scandals rarely involves more than

one person, so that financial scandals account for 45 of the 87 scandals, and for 47 of the 124 persons involved in scandals.

Personal scandals also usually involve a single government official, so they account for 19 of the 87 scandals but only 20 of the 124 persons involved in scandals. The mean number of persons involved in a personal scandal is 1.05. These scandals fall into three main categories: sex scandals, undocumented workers, and illicit drug use. During the Carter administration, one official, ironically the President's "drug czar," was accused of writing false prescriptions.

Examining the grey bars in Figure 3, one can observe that political scandals and international scandals have involved multiple targets. Political scandals account for 20 of the 87 scandals but 43 of the 124 persons involved. The mean number of persons involved in a political scandal is 2.15. Scandals such as Watergate (9 persons, including President Nixon), "Chinagate" (4 persons, including President Clinton), and the NSA's warrantless surveillance (4 persons, involving President George W. Bush) are included in this category, as are campaign fundraising violations and instances of alleged lying to Congress, lying to federal prosecutors, and using political influence to obtain FBI files and passport records from the State Department. International scandals account for only 3 of the 87 scandals, including the Iranian arms-for-hostages trade and the illegal aid to Nicaraguan Contra rebels. These scandals were wide ranging and involved many people, so international scandals account for 13 of the 124 persons involved in scandals. This count does not include lower-level accomplices who do not meet our threshold (for example, Oliver North) or individuals outside of government (for example, Richard Secord).

To summarize, we find that two types of scandals are almost exclusively single-target, while two other types of scandals are often multi-target. Of the 45 financial scandals, 44 had only a single target who reached our threshold. The only exception was the Whitewater scandal, which focused on the President and the First Lady, but also led to the resignation of Deputy Treasury Secretary Roger Altman as collateral damage. Prosecutors listed 16 convictions in their final report, but all convictions were of individuals residing in Arkansas, and only one (Webb Hubbell) was ever a part of the Clinton administration.³⁰ Of the 20 personal scandals, 19 had a single target who reached our threshold; the only exception was the scandal involving Deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster's office and papers in the immediate aftermath of his suicide.

The scandals with multiple targets, in which there were accusations of conspiracies and cover-ups, were almost entirely political or international. It is worthwhile to consider Figure 2 and Figure 3 together. Because political and international scandals are conducted at a very high level, collateral individuals who are caught up in these scandals tend to be cabinet-level officials. Three scandals—the improper acquisition of Carter's debate briefing books by the

³⁰ Hubbell was convicted of defrauding clients of the Rose Law Firm in his billing records prior to joining the administration.

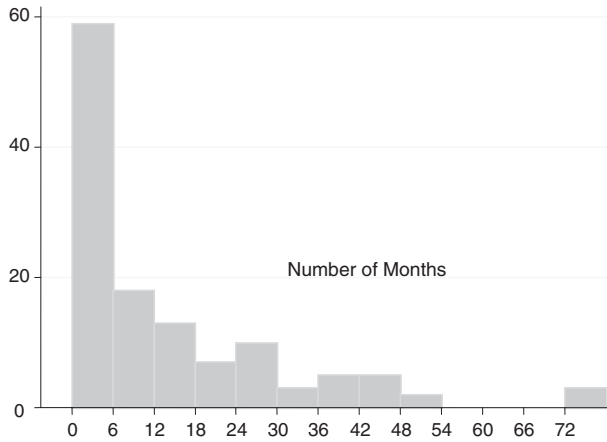
Reagan campaign, the improper acquisition of passport files in the George H.W. Bush administration, and the improper acquisition of confidential FBI files in the Clinton administration—featured two individuals who reach our threshold. The Clinton administration’s program to raise funds for the Democratic National Committee, commonly referred to as “Chinagate,” even though the sources were from across Asia, had four targets accused of misbehavior that reach our threshold, as well as at least a dozen more individuals who do not. The George W. Bush administration’s leaking of Valerie Plame’s name to Bob Novak and the surprise dismissal of seven U.S. Attorneys each had three individuals who were accused of misbehavior and reach our threshold; its NSA warrantless wiretapping scandal had four targets. Thus, although political and international scandals account for barely a quarter of scandal events (23 of 87), together they account for nearly half of scandal targets (56 of 124). To the extent that Americans think of modern presidential scandals as a “cancer” on the presidency that includes multiple individuals and cabinet departments, they are thinking of a subset of scandals. To the extent that Americans consider scandals in terms of sexual or personal misbehavior, they are thinking of a smaller and even less-representative subset.

So far we have discussed how frequently presidential scandals occur, how often the president is involved (allegedly), what officials are most often involved in presidential scandals, and what types of misbehavior occurred (allegedly). In the next two sections, we address how scandals unfold dynamically.

THE DURATION AND VISIBILITY OF MODERN PRESIDENTIAL SCANDALS

In this section, our focus is on how long modern presidential scandals typically last and how much newspaper coverage they receive. Figure 4 displays the number of months between when a scandal begins (appears in a major national newspaper) and ends as a histogram. A scandal can end when the accused individual is exonerated or resigns from his or her position, or the presidential administration ends. Our data suggest that most scandals are over quickly, and in fact, 19 scandals required less than one month from start to finish. Often, these fast-concluding scandals involve nominees, such as Bernard Kerik (Secretary of Homeland Security nominee), Douglas Ginsburg (Supreme Court nominee), and the three “Nannygate” nominees (Kimba Wood, Zoe Baird, and Linda Chavez). Among office holders, Eli Segal, the first CEO of Americorps, resigned abruptly when it was alleged that he had conducted improper business relationships. Peter Bourne, President Carter’s Drug Czar, resigned when he was caught writing a prescription for a fictitious individual (under the guise of giving the prescription to a White House colleague). The median scandal lasts 6 months, but some scandals last much longer, particularly when an Independent Counsel is brought into play. The Paula Jones scandal lasted 53 months, from early 1994 until 1998. Whitewater lasted 72 months, from 1994 until 2000. Raymond Donovan, Secretary of Labor during the Reagan administration,

FIGURE 4
Duration of Scandals



Source: Compiled by authors.

Note: Months measured from the beginning of the scandal as a newspaper item to the end of the scandal (the individual is exonerated, the individual leaves office, or the administration concludes). Vertical axis denotes number of scandals in category; see Table 1 for frequencies.

was involved in three separate investigations into his finances between 1981 and 1987.

In Table 1, we cross-tabulate the lengths of time that a scandal lasts and the four categories of alleged misbehavior. We utilize the data on the 124 individuals rather than just the 87 events, because in the multi-actor scandals, various individuals might be accused of different actions and might adopt different behaviors (resign, fight, etc.) that lead to varying conclusions. The unshaded cells in Table 1 report the row and column frequencies. Personal scandals are the most likely to last one month or less. Nominations that are withdrawn quickly after allegations emerge are typical of these scandals, but there are other cases of embarrassing revelations. Most financial scandals also are resolved quickly, though financial wrongdoing may require time to sort out, and alleged criminal wrongdoing will tend to prolong their duration unless the individual involved chooses to resign. In all, more than 60 percent of personal scandals and financial scandals end in six months or less. Political scandals and international scandals are more likely to last more than six months, and as we noted above, these categories of scandals are the most likely to involve the president and also are the most complex. Scandals such as Watergate, Debatagate, the “Filegate” investigation during the Clinton administration, Plame-gate, and the surprise dismissal of U.S. Attorneys during the George W. Bush administration, involved multiple actors and multiple alleged violations. The appointment of independent counsels and the high likelihood of congressional hearings also can slow the process of finding resolution.

TABLE 1
Scandal Duration, by Type of Scandal

	<i>All Scandals (Row #)</i>	<i>Financial Scandals</i>	<i>International Scandals</i>	<i>Personal Scandals</i>	<i>Political Scandals</i>
Less than 1 month	28	10	2	9	7
1–6 Months	38	19	3	3	13
7–12 months	17	7	3	1	6
13–24 months	15	3	1	2	9
25–36 months	12	3	4	2	3
37–48 months	9	3	0	1	5
More than 4 years	5	3	0	2	0
Total (column)	124	48	13	20	43

Overall, the mean duration of a presidential scandal is 12.8 months, and the median is 6 months; this difference is not surprising given the skewed distribution shown in Figure 4. Interestingly, the mean durations of the four types of scandals do not differ much: personal and financial scandals last 13.8 and 12.6 months on average, respectively, while political and international scandals last 12.7 and 12.2 months on average. The standard deviations for the personal and financial scandals are large (21.4 and 18.6 months, respectively); however, indicating that these categories have thicker “tails”—both briefer scandals and lengthier scandals such as the Paula Jones allegations and Whitewater—relative to the political and international scandals (standard deviations of 13.0 and 11.2 months, respectively). When we examine the medians instead of means, the median personal scandal lasts two months, the median financial scandal lasts five months, and both the median political scandal and the median international scandal last eight months.

How much newspaper coverage do scandals receive? We counted stories on the front page of *The New York Times* featuring key words and names, from the month a scandal began to the month it ended. Our data suggest that most scandals receive few front-page stories: the median number of front-page stories is 4, and the modal number of stories is 0. The mean number of stories is 43.4, but this statistic is biased upwards by a handful of scandals: *The New York Times* printed 968 front-page stories on Nixon and Watergate, 555 front-page stories on Reagan and Iran-Contra, and 380 front-page stories on Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Together, these three scandals account for more than one third of all front-page stories about presidential scandals.

Table 2 presents more-detailed data on the numbers of front-page news stories about the different types of scandals. Summary statistics indicate that financial scandals receive the least coverage: the median number of front-page stories on the subjects of financial scandals equals 2, and the inter-quartile range (the middle 50 percent of cases) runs from 0 to 4 stories. The subjects of personal scandals receive the same median number of front-page stories (2), but the inter-quartile range runs from 0 to 18 stories. The median number of

TABLE 2
Scandal News Coverage, by Type of Scandal

	<i>All Scandals (Row #)</i>	<i>Financial Scandals</i>	<i>International Scandals</i>	<i>Personal Scandals</i>	<i>Political Scandals</i>
0 Stories	33	20	0	5	8
1 – 4 Stories	29	16	2	7	4
5 – 8 Stories	10	2	1	2	5
9 – 12 Stories	9	4	1	1	3
13 – 24 Stories	8	2	0	1	5
25 – 50 Stories	12	2	2	0	8
51 – 100 Stories	11	1	3	2	5
More than 100 Stories	12	2	4	2	5
Total (column)	124	48	13	20	43

front-page stories on the subjects of political scandals is 13, with an inter-quartile range running from 0 to 50 stories. Finally, the median subject of an international scandal receives 61 front-page stories, and this inter-quartile range runs from 11 to 108 stories. Thus, the types of scandals that occur most often (financial) tend to receive the least coverage, and the types of scandals that occur least often (international) tend to receive the most coverage. Just four scandals—Watergate, Iran-Contra, Whitewater, and Monica Lewinsky—are responsible for over 60 percent of news coverage of scandals. Overall, 15 scandals (and 23 subjects of those scandals) received more than 50 front page stories in *The New York Times*. If we used 50 stories as a threshold for “high-coverage” scandals, then a high-coverage scandal occurs roughly every two-and-a-half years. We should expect at least one high-coverage scandal per presidential term, on average. Since these scandals may present a tremendous distraction to the administration, Congress, and the public,³¹ media coverage of scandals is worthy of a separate, focused analysis.³²

Before moving on, note that the duration of scandals and the number of newspaper stories are related. The simple correlation coefficient between the number of months and the number of front-page stories equals $r = 0.154$. In the next section, we turn our attention to administrations’ strategies for dealing with scandals, and the consequences of these strategies for the duration and coverage of scandals.

ADMINISTRATION BEHAVIOR DURING MODERN PRESIDENTIAL SCANDALS

Once a scandal becomes a news item, is there nothing that the administration and the media can do to shape the story as it evolves? The media have a significant

³¹ Paul J. Quirk, “Coping with the Politics of Scandal,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 28 (Fall 1998): 898–902.

³² See Paul J. Maurer, “Media Feeding Frenzies: Press Behavior During Two Clinton Scandals,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (March 1999): 65–79; Brendan Nyhan, *Strategic Outrage: The Politics of Presidential Scandal* (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2009).

say in whether the public perceives the president, his staff, or his cabinet to be culpable during the scandal,³³ and the public looks to elites in the media to judge the importance of the issue.³⁴ But presidents are not merely “victims” of the press during these critical moments. Instead, presidents can adopt two main strategies when confronted with a scandal: they can cooperate or stonewall. In cooperating, the White House provides a full accounting of the situation as understood by the participants. Presidents have on occasion allowed and encouraged investigations into alleged misconduct, and then revealed the results of the investigation. In September of 1979, Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan was accused of using cocaine at Studio 54. President Carter appointed an independent counsel to investigate these allegations (the first appointed under the new Independent Counsel statute), who found no concrete evidence to support the allegations. In April of 1991, when Chief of Staff John Sununu was accused of using military aircraft for personal trips, President George H.W. Bush asked the comptroller general to investigate. Sununu was required to repay the government, and later resigned when further financial improprieties came to light.

The alternative is to not provide a full accounting of the situation. This can include a range of actions from stonewalling (“I don’t recall”) to outright lying, to cover-ups that interfere with the whole truth coming to light. Stalling investigations and selectively releasing truthful information to create a false impression may also be utilized. The most-prominent example of this approach is President Nixon’s strategy during the investigations of the Watergate Hotel break-in during June of 1972. The President and White House Counsel John Dean decided that they could ensure the continued silence of those involved in the cover-up by providing them hush money.³⁵ Several of those under indictment alleged that they were pressured to remain silent and plead guilty. Nixon delayed releasing the truth from the first moment he found out about the connection between the burglars and the White House.³⁶ Although Nixon had not specifically authorized the burglary, his approval of G. Gordon Liddy’s “GEMSTONE” Plan was the genesis for the operation. White House senior staff obstructed the congressional investigation by denying the Senate Watergate Committee (and the White House lawyers) access to Oval Office tape recordings, citing executive privilege. The President further impeded the investigation

³³ Richard A. Brody and Catherine R. Shapiro, “Policy Failure and Public Support: The Iran-Contra Affair and Public Assessment of President Reagan,” *Political Behavior* 11 (December 1989): 353–369.

³⁴ See Spiro Kioussis, “Job Approval and Favorability: The Impact of Media Attention to the Lewinsky Scandal on Public Opinion of Bill Clinton,” *Mass Communication & Society* 6 (August 2003): 435–451; Miller, “Sex, Politics, and Public Opinion”; Matthew C. Woessner, “Scandal, Elites and Presidential Popularity: Considering the Importance of Cues in Public Support of the President,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35 (March 2005): 94–115; John R. Zaller, “Monica Lewinsky’s Contribution to Political Science,” *PS: Political Science* 31 (June 1999): 182–189.

³⁵ Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, *The Final Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 14.

³⁶ Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 276.

when he fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. Ultimately, in a statement in May 1973, Nixon lied about his role in the cover-up.

For data-coding purposes, “stonewalling” is indicated by any of the following actions: delaying more than two days in releasing any information about a scandal to the press, releasing partial information, providing no information to the press when confronted with accusations, not cooperating with an investigating institution (a House or Senate committee, the Department of Justice, an independent counsel), making “political” arguments to “spin” out of the problem, claiming not to recall, and claiming executive privilege.³⁷ Stonewalling, therefore, includes situations in which the White House rhetorically allows an investigation to be conducted, but stops short of aiding the investigation or is not forthcoming with details.

A presidential administration “cooperating” is demonstrated by the White House releasing information quickly and efficiently, or allowing an investigation to proceed. For data-coding purposes, “cooperating” is indicated by any of the following actions: immediate resignation of a party associated with the wrongdoing, appointing staff to conduct an internal investigation, immediately requesting an external investigation by the appropriate body when appropriate (a select commission, the Department of Justice, an independent counsel, etc.), making financial restitution in the case of a financial scandal (for example, paying back taxes, reimbursing the government for an expense), and releasing documentation. Not every scandal requires an investigation, and sometimes the speedy release of information is sufficient to connote cooperation. For example, the scandal involving White House coffees effectively ended when the Clinton administration revealed that the coffees had occurred in the residence.

Some practitioners advise scandal-tainted individuals to reveal full information;³⁸ others counsel being more circumspect.³⁹ In Table 3, we present contingency tables, summarizing the White House’s strategy (cooperate or stonewall) depending on the type of scandal, the highest-ranked target of the scandal, and the year in the electoral cycle in which a scandal broke.⁴⁰ In the top rows of Table 3, we show that actors are much more likely to cooperate than stonewall in financial scandals (73 percent of cases). The ability to

³⁷ For reviews of how presidents have used executive privilege to hide damaging information from the public, the media, and Congress, see Louis Fisher, *The Politics of Executive Privilege* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003); and Mark J. Rozell, *Executive Privilege: Presidential Power, Secrecy, and Accountability* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

³⁸ Davis, *Truth to Tell*.

³⁹ Ari Fleisher, *Taking Heat: The President, the Press, and My Years in the White House* (New York: William Morrow, 2005), 177.

⁴⁰ We examined two other hypotheses, regarding the effects of divided government and term. Stonewalling is observed more often during divided government (51 percent) than during unified government (36 percent), but the difference in proportions is not statistically significant ($p = .211$). Stonewalling is more likely during the second term (56 percent) than the first term (42 percent), but the difference in proportions is not statistically significant ($p = .255$).

TABLE 3
Probability of Stonewalling or Truth Telling

	<i>Cooperate</i>	<i>Stonewall</i>
Financial	73% (35)	27% (13)
International	31% (4)	69% (9)
Personal	55% (11)	45% (9)
Political	5% (2)	95% (41)
Highest target of scandal		
President	15% (6)	85% (34)
Cabinet (or cabinet rank)	50% (20)	50% (20)
Sub-cabinet	60% (15)	40% (10)
Affiliated	57% (11)	42% (8)
Year of term		
First, inaugural year	46% (12)	54% (14)
Second	54% (21)	46% (18)
Third	39% (11)	61% (17)
Fourth, election year	25% (8)	75% (24)

Note: $N = 124$, counting each target of a scandal. Statistically significant differences in strategy are observed for type ($\chi^2 = 45.5$), highest target ($\chi^2 = 18.3$), and year of term ($\chi^2 = 6.3$). Critical values of the chi-square statistic with 3 degrees of freedom are 6.25 for the 10% significance level, 7.81 for the 5% significance level, and 11.34 for the 1% significance level.

construct a financial paper trail may affect strategic calculations about the probability of getting caught in a particular misdeed. Actors cooperate slightly more than stonewall in personal scandals. The ease of finding corroborating evidence, witnesses or others involved, may contribute to this strategic decision-making, but this must be balanced against the fact that admissions of sexual indiscretions are titillating to the public, embarrassing to the individuals involved, and possibly hypocritical. In political scandals, the response is almost never to tell the truth; in 95 percent of cases, the actors involved in political scandals stonewall. These events tend to be tightly organized or orchestrated by small and loyal groups of individuals, making the unraveling of these events more difficult to accomplish. The same is true for international scandals, which also tend to involve key elements of national security, including the individuals and agencies tasked with protecting those secrets, making the prospect of discovering the truth relatively low. If the individual actors understand this, they make a rational decision to not be forthcoming with the truth, with the hopes of getting away with the action.

In the middle rows of Table 3, we observe that when the allegations involve the president, the White House is significantly more likely to stonewall (85 percent of targets). Clearly, the White House seeks to protect the president, even at the expense of public accountability. Stonewalling has been adopted for both major and minor scandals in which the president was allegedly involved, including not just Watergate and the Iranian arms-for-hostages exchange, but also campaign fundraising scandals during the Clinton administration and tax and financial issues involving Jimmy Carter's peanut farm.

For those individuals who are less critical of the administration, the likelihood of cooperating increases. If the highest person involved is a cabinet member or cabinet-rank official, stonewalling occurs for 50 percent of targets. Corresponding figures for scandals involving only sub-cabinet officials and affiliated persons (nominees, campaign staff, etc.) are 40 percent and 42 percent, respectively. Simply put, when the target is further removed from the presidency, the likelihood of telling the truth grows higher. The formal structure of the White House encourages those individuals who are damaging the administration to step aside. Such staff can be thought of as political “lightning rods,” which are erected to draw the heat of blame away from more highly ranked administration members.⁴¹

What are the results of stonewalling versus cooperating? From the perspective of the guilty, the intention of stonewalling is to derail an investigation into wrongdoing, thereby to evade the consequences of misbehavior. If stonewalling is successful, then the media and other investigative bodies will respond by dropping the investigation, which would lead to a shorter duration and fewer stories when the White House stonewalls. Consider, however, the strategic interaction between the White House and its “persecutors” in the media and opposition party: if innocent targets allow and facilitate an investigation—thereby to clear their names more quickly—then the media are justified in interpreting stonewalling as a tacit admission of guilt. In turn, this may lead to a *longer* duration and *more* front-page stories when the White House stonewalls.

Returning our attention to the data, we find that the mean length of time of scandals in which the White House cooperated is 10.6 months, compared to 14.4 months for scandals in which the White House stonewalled, but recall that these data are skewed and that a few scandals are clear outliers. For scandals in which the White House cooperated, the median duration is 2 months, and the inter-quartile range (the middle 50 percent of observations) stretches from 0 to 8 months. By contrast, for scandals in which the White House stonewalled, the median duration is 12 months, and the inter-quartile range stretches from 2 to 23 months. In short, stonewalling results in a much longer scandal. The data on the newspaper coverage is even more definitive. The mean number of front-page stories when the White House cooperated is 13.3, compared to 65.1 for scandals in which the White House stonewalled. The medians are 2 front-page stories when the White House cooperates, versus 12 stories when the White House stonewalls. The inter-quartile range runs from 0 to 5 stories in cases of cooperation, but runs from 1 to 57 stories in cases of stonewalling. Obviously, the media typically responds to stonewalling by pursuing the accusations and their investigation.

Scandals in which the administration stonewalls tend to result in a higher number of front-page stories, and they also tend to last longer. We find evidence to support the idea that the White House may employ stonewalling as a strategy to “run out the clock,” to use a sports metaphor. As shown in the bottom rows

⁴¹ Ellis, *Presidential Lightning Rods*.

of Table 3, stonewalling occurs in 54 percent of scandals that break in the first year of the term; 46 percent in the second year; 61 percent in the third year; and 75 percent in the fourth year. To test whether these data signify an increasing trend, we performed a linear test of association.⁴² For large n , the test statistic $M^2 = (n-1)r^2$ follows a χ^2 distribution with one degree of freedom, where r is the simple correlation between years before the next presidential election (= 3, 2, 1, 0) and the binary variable is stonewall (= 1) or cooperate (= 0). We find $r = -.186$ and $M^2 = 4.27$, which exceeds the critical value $\chi^2(1) = 3.84$ for the 5 percent significance level.

In summary, the types of scandals in which an administration stonewalls differ systematically from those in which an administration cooperates: stonewalling is more likely for political and international scandals, is more likely when the president is involved, and is more likely as the end of the term approaches. Political and international scandals also typically involve a large number of cabinet-level officials. Thus, there are two main categories of modern presidential scandals: small-scale scandals involving the financial and personal misbehavior of lone individuals, who are usually at a lower level and for which cooperating is the norm; and large-scale scandals involving political misbehavior of high-ranking officials, for which stonewalling is the norm, and a lengthy duration is likely.

CONCLUSION

Although the public continues to demand ethical leadership from its leaders, many voters “have come to view ‘political ethics’ as an oxymoron.”⁴³ As former special counsel to President Clinton argued, “Scandal has become the chief instrument of mass political destruction for more than 30 years,” and “gotcha” politics has “become habitual and virtually unstoppable.”⁴⁴ Although news media investigations are a critical element for an informed public and quality representative government, coverage of scandals tends to reduce public trust, establish lowest-common-denominator journalism, and strengthen pack journalism.⁴⁵ Garment likewise criticizes the media for the “increased enthusiasm with which the political system now hunts evil in politics, and the ever-growing efficiency with which our modern scandal production machine operates.”⁴⁶ The implication is that scandals are ubiquitous and damaging to the political system.

Some scandals bring down presidents (President Nixon during Watergate), and other scandals ruin a president’s ability to function or damage presidential

⁴² See Alan Agresti, *An Introduction to Categorical Data Analysis*, 2d ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 41–42.

⁴³ Fousek and Wasserman, “Ethical Issues in U.S. Presidential Leadership,” 2.

⁴⁴ Davis, *Scandal: How “Gotcha” Politics is Destroying America*, 2.

⁴⁵ Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy*, 200.

⁴⁶ Garment, *Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics*, 6.

legacies. In describing the effects of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal, Quirk writes, “The main cost lies in the massive distraction the investigation has caused for the president, Congress, and the public.... Clinton undoubtedly has spent a large fraction of his time and mental energy dealing with it. So has his staff. His policy initiatives have often been ignored by the media.... And Congress has largely ignored his agenda.”⁴⁷ Obviously, major scandals are wasteful as well as humiliating.

What our investigation into the presidential scandals of the last four decades reveals is that there is considerable variation in the type, duration, coverage, strategy, and outcomes of presidential scandals. Our findings reveal that most scandals do not involve the president himself, either directly or indirectly; instead, the typical scandal involves one presidential appointee. The modal scandal is financial in origin, lasts only a couple of months, and receives four or fewer front-page stories. Most presidential scandals end quickly, most of those never having been featured on the front-page of national newspapers. Roughly half of the time, the White House cooperates fully, challenging the conventional wisdom that scandals all result in an extended cover-up.

Because the few dramatic scandals receive far greater news coverage over a far longer period of time than the many mundane scandals, they became significant events in the nation’s political life, and last longer in the public’s memory. But when a new presidential scandal appears, it is highly unlikely that it will be another Watergate or another Iran-Contra. Instead, given our findings about the modal scandal, it might involve another Bert Lance, Hamilton Jordan, John Sununu, or Alphonso Jackson. The findings in this paper reinforce the maxim that we should hesitate to characterize the ordinary based on our observations of the extraordinary.

⁴⁷ Quirk, “Coping with the Politics of Scandal,” 899.

APPENDIX

Comprehensive List of 87 Presidential Scandals

<i>Administration (#)</i>	<i>Month, Year</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Type</i>
Nixon (4)			
Shakedowns [3]	Feb., 1972	Cabinet	Political
Watergate [9]	Oct., 1972	President	Political
Spiro Agnew, Vice President	Aug., 1973	Cabinet	Financial
Pat Nixon, First Lady	May, 1974	Affiliated	Financial
Ford (3)			
William Colby, CIA Director	Dec., 1974	Sub-Cab.	Political
Clarence Kelley, FBI Director	Sept., 1976	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Gerald Ford	Sept., 1976	President	Financial
Carter (6)			
Bert Lance, OMB Director	July, 1977	Cabinet	Financial
Peter Bourne, drug czar	July, 1978	Sub-Cab.	Personal
James Carter (taxes)	Oct., 1978	President	Financial
James Carter (peanut warehouse loan)	Nov., 1978	President	Political
Hamilton Jordan, White House Chief of Staff	Aug., 1979	Cabinet	Personal
Tim Kraft, campaign manager	Sept., 1980	Affiliated	Personal
Reagan first term (24)			
Raymond Donovan, Secretary of Labor nominee	Feb., 1981	Affiliated	Financial
William Casey, CIA Director, I	July, 1981	Cabinet	Financial
Richard Allen, National Security Adviser	Nov., 1981	Cabinet	Financial
Raymond Donovan, Secretary of Labor I	Dec., 1981	Cabinet	Financial
William French Smith, Attorney General, I	May, 1982	Cabinet	Financial
William French Smith, Attorney General, II	May, 1982	Cabinet	Financial
Robert Nimmo, Veterans Administration Director	June, 1982	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Raymond Donovan, Secretary of Labor II	Aug., 1982	Cabinet	Financial
Anne Gorsuch Burford, Administrator of EPA	Dec., 1982	Cabinet	Political
Donald Bogard, Legal Services Corp., President	Dec., 1982	Sub-Cab.	Financial
John Lehman, Secretary of Navy	Dec., 1982	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Emanuel Savas, Asst. Secretary of HUD	Jan., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Rita Lavelle, asst. administrator of EPA	Jan., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Ted Olsen, Asst. Attorney General	Mar., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Political
Arthur Hayes, Commissioner of FDA	Mar., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Richard Perle, Asst. Secretary of Defense	Apr., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Guy Fiske, Deputy Secretary of Commerce	Apr., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Financial
William Casey, CIA Director, II	June, 1983	Cabinet	Financial
Debategate [2]	June, 1983	Cabinet	Political
Paul Thayer, Deputy Secretary of Defense	Oct., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Financial
J. Lynn Helms, Administrator of FAA	Oct., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Charles Wick, U.S. Information Agency, Director	Dec., 1983	Sub-Cab.	Political
Ed Meese, Attorney General nominee	Mar., 1984	Affiliated	Financial
Louis Giuffrida, FEMA Director	Oct., 1984	Sub-Cab.	Financial

(Continued)

APPENDIX

Continued

<i>Administration (#)</i>	<i>Month, Year</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Type</i>
Reagan, second term (9)			
Michael Deaver, Deputy Chief of Staff	Mar., 1985	Sub-Cab.	Financial
James Beggs, NASA Administrator	Dec., 1985	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Michael Deaver, former Deputy Chief of Staff	Apr., 1986	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Faith Whittlesey, Ambassador to Switzerland	Sept., 1986	Affiliated	Financial
W. Lawrence Wallace, Asst. Attorney General	Dec., 1986	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Ed Meese, Attorney General	Apr., 1987	Cabinet	Financial
Nicaraguan Contra Aid [3]	Oct., 1986	Cabinet	International
Iran Arms Sales [9]	Nov., 1986	President	International
Douglas Ginsburg, Supreme Court nominee	Nov., 1987	Affiliated	Personal
H.W. Bush (5)			
John Tower, Secretary of Defense nominee	Dec., 1988	Affiliated	Personal
John Sununu, White House Chief of Staff	Apr., 1991	Cabinet	Financial
Clarence Thomas, Supreme Court nominee	Oct., 1991	Affiliated	Personal
George H.W. Bush (Banca Nazionale del Lavoro)	Mar., 1992	President	International
Passports [2]	Oct., 1992	Cabinet	Political
Clinton, first term (16)			
—Zoe Baird, Attorney General nominee	Jan., 1993	Affiliated	Personal
Kimba Wood, Attorney General nominee	Feb., 1993	Affiliated	Personal
Hillary Clinton, First Lady (travel office)	May, 1993	Affiliated	Personal
Ron Brown, Secretary of Commerce	Aug., 1993	Cabinet	Financial
Bobby Ray Inman, Secretary of Defense nominee	Dec., 1993	Affiliated	Personal
Vince Foster papers [2]	Dec., 1993	Affiliated	Personal
Whitewater [3]	Feb., 1994	President	Financial
Bill Clinton (Paula Jones)	Feb., 1994	President	Personal
Hillary Clinton, First Lady (commodities trades)	Mar., 1994	Affiliated	Financial
Web Hubbell, former Associate Attorney General	Apr., 1994	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Mike Espy, Secretary of Agriculture	June, 1994	Cabinet	Financial
Henry Cisneros, Secretary of HUD	Sept., 1994	Cabinet	Personal
Federico Pena, Secretary of Transportation	Mar., 1995	Cabinet	Financial
Filegate [2]	June, 1996	Affiliated	Political
Chinagate [4]	Oct., 1996	President	Political
Lincoln Bedroom/White House coffees [2]	Dec., 1996	President	Political
Clinton second term (7)			
Alexis Herman, Secretary of Labor	Feb., 1997	Cabinet	Financial
Al Gore, Vice President	Sept., 1997	Cabinet	Political
Bill Clinton (campaign calls)	Oct., 1997	President	Political
Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of Interior	Oct., 1997	Cabinet	Political
Eli Segal, AmeriCorps Director	Oct., 1997	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Bill Clinton (Monica Lewinsky)	Jan., 1998	President	Personal
Bill Clinton (Juanita Broaddrick)	Feb., 1999	President	Personal
George W. Bush, first term (4)			
Linda Chavez, Secretary of Labor nominee	Jan., 2001	Affiliated	Personal
Plame-gate [3]	Oct., 2003	Cabinet	Political
George W. Bush (National Guard service)	Sept., 2004	President	Personal
Bernard Kerik, Secretary of DHS nominee	Dec., 2004	Affiliated	Personal

(Continued)

APPENDIX

Continued

<i>Administration (#)</i>	<i>Month, Year</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Type</i>
George W. Bush, second term (9)			
Steven Griles, former Deputy Secretary of Interior	Aug., 2005	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Warrantless surveillance [4]	Dec., 2005	President	Political
Claude Allen, former Domestic Policy Advisor	Mar., 2006	Sub-Cab.	Financial
Alphonso Jackson, Secretary of HUD, I	Apr., 2006	Cabinet	Financial
L. Paul Bremer, Envoy to Iraq	June, 2006	Cabinet	Financial
Lurita Doan, General Services Administrator	Jan., 2007	Sub-Cab.	Political
U.S. Attorney Firings [3]	Feb., 2007	Cabinet	Political
Randall Tobias, USAID Administrator	Apr., 2007	Sub-Cab.	Personal
Alphonso Jackson, Secretary of HUD, II	Mar., 2008	Cabinet	Financial

Notes:

a) The month and year refer to the first newspaper article published in *The New York Times* or in *The Washington Post* about each alleged incident. In the process of judging whether each event was indeed a scandal, the research assistant was required to verify that the president, a senior administration official, the first lady, or a nominee was accused of either potentially illegal wrongdoing or an inappropriate sexual relationship. In the appendix, therefore, we identify the level of the highest accused official: the president, a cabinet member or cabinet-rank official, a sub-cabinet official, or an affiliated person, such as the first lady or a nominee. The research assistant was also asked to identify whether the alleged misbehavior belonged to the category of personal indiscretions (sexual misconduct, employing undocumented immigrants, etc.), financial corruption, political corruption, or international violations.

b) We combined some scandals when the targets of the investigation and the alleged misbehavior were the same and occurred in roughly the same time frame. For instance, we group the Nixon administration's illegal fundraising activities on behalf of the Republican National Committee and the 1972 Republican Convention under the heading of "Shakedowns," even though separate attempts were made to raise funds from ITT Corporation (in exchange for dropping an antitrust suit by the Federal Trade Commission), the Associated Milk Producers (in exchange for Nixon supporting milk price controls), and financier Robert Vesco (in exchange for halting an SEC investigation). In these three cases, Attorney General John Mitchell played key roles, arranging for secret, cash contributions to the Committee to Reelect the President. Similarly, we sweep Clinton's and Gore's illegal fundraising activities for the Democratic National Committee under a single heading of "Chinagate," even though money was funneled from multiple sources (China Aerospace, the Lippo Group, Charoen Pokphand Group) through multiple individuals.