

## The Local News Crisis and Political Scandal

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**Abstract:** The local news crisis in the United States has raised concerns about accountability in state and local government. But existing research has provided only indirect evidence that the decline of local news reporting has made it harder for voters to punish poor-performing elected officials. In this paper, I examine local newspaper coverage of state and congressional political scandals from 1990 through 2022. I first show that scandals now receive about 25% of the coverage they once did, a development that is directly related to the decline in newsroom reporting resources. I then show that the volume of scandal reporting is associated with whether officials face sanction for their behavior. When newspapers devote less coverage to a scandal, incumbents are less likely to leave office or receive a lower vote share when they run for re-election. Because scandals get significantly less coverage than they did even a decade ago, it may now be easier for politicians to ride them out and avoid punishment for bad behavior.

Democracy in the United States is predicated on accountability in state and local government, where tens of thousands of elected officials make decisions every day that affect residents' lives. But the collapse of the local news industry in recent years has set off a chorus of concern about the consequences of diminishing state and local watchdogs. "As local news sources disappear and their resources decrease," writes Moskowitz (2021, 127), "scandals, corruption, and other bad behavior may be more likely to go unnoticed." Contemplating a world with less local journalism, Rubado and Jennings (2020, 1349) envision local officials who "feel free to act in their own interests and the interests of their friends and supporters without fear of being unseated." Others have identified "worrying implications" in the wake of media consolidation (Martin and McCrain 2019, 283) and suggest accountability in local politics will become "increasingly elusive" (Hayes and Lawless 2021, 138).

These concerns appear well-founded. A large body of research in both comparative and American politics has linked a robust news media with better and more responsive government (Arnold 2004; Brunetti and Weder 2003; Ferraz and Finan 2008; Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder 2020; Snyder and Stromberg 2010). And a raft of recent studies has connected the local news crisis to negative outcomes for community life and local politics: There is now less reporting about state and local government (Hayes and Lawless 2018; Martin and McCrain 2019; Peterson 2021b), residents are less engaged in local politics (Hayes and Lawless 2021; Hopkins 2018; Rubado and Jennings 2020), and voters are less likely to support candidates from the opposing party (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018, 2021; Moskowitz 2021). Many of these same developments are evident in nations around the world (Bruggemann et al. 2015; Nielsen 2015; Vogler, Weston, and Udris 2023).

Diminished reporting resources, decreased civic participation, and increased partisanship are undoubtedly bad outcomes. They represent only indirect evidence, however, that the local news crisis has reduced accountability for elected officials. What we do not know is whether the kind of

reporting that would help voters oust poor-performing local leaders has systematically declined in recent years.

Nor do we know if the level of news reporting is related to whether local officials are held accountable for their actions in office. This is in part because there are theoretical reasons that we might expect news outlets to have preserved reporting about political malfeasance, even as they have cut other types of state and local reporting. And in an era of growing partisanship and diminished attention to local news, local coverage of elected officials' performance may simply not be relevant to how voters evaluate them. These uncertainties thus leave the impact of the local news crisis unclear, making it hard to say whether leaders do in fact have more freedom to “breach rules, standards, and laws in pursuit of private interests” (Rubado and Jennings 2020, 1349).

In this paper, I provide the first direct test of the prevailing argument about electoral accountability and the local news crisis in the United States. Drawing on a database of state and congressional political scandals from 1990 through 2022, I show that local newspapers have in the last decade devoted a decreasing amount of coverage to accusations of wrongdoing by elected officials. By one measure, reporting on scandals now is less than 25% of what it was at its peak in the early 2000s. But I also show that the volume of scandal reporting is associated with accountability. The more coverage a scandal receives, the more likely an incumbent is to resign, retire, or lose their next election – a pattern that is evident even in recent years. Among officials who stand for re-election, more scandal coverage is correlated with a lower vote share.

These findings suggest mixed implications for debates about the media and political accountability. On one hand, local news outlets continue to have the power to hold elected officials accountable when they are embroiled in scandals. Even as audiences for local news have declined, more coverage makes it harder for misbehaving incumbents to survive. On the other hand, local outlets simply do not cover political scandals as aggressively as they did 20 years ago. Because there

is less attention to politicians' alleged misdeeds, officials now have a better chance of surviving a scandal. As a result, the ability of the local media to enforce accountability has indeed diminished.

### **The Local News Crisis and Political Accountability**

The local news crisis has its roots in the media transformation of the 1990s and early 2000s (see Hayes and Lawless 2021 for an overview). With the diffusion of cable and satellite television, the internet, and social media, consumers' choices for news and entertainment expanded dramatically. The result was audience fragmentation (Prior 2007) and a significant decline in readership of the state and local newspapers that had been the foundation of the U.S. media ecosystem. The combination of shrinking audiences and the migration of advertising online ruined local newspapers' business model and led to an industry-wide financial crisis, a phenomenon that has also played out in Europe and elsewhere (Gulyas, Jenkins, and Bergstrom 2023).

The consequences have been profound. Over the last 20 years, more than 2,000 newspapers across the United States have folded (Abernathy 2022) and virtually every surviving daily paper slashed its reporting staff (Hayes and Lawless 2021). For instance, between 2004 and 2020 the number of newspaper newsroom employees in the United States fell 57% (Waldman 2022), resulting in a significant reduction in coverage of local politics (Peterson 2021b). In a study of more than 200 dailies, Hayes and Lawless (2021) show that the number of stories about local government declined by more than half from 1996 to 2017 (see also L'Heude 2023). Meanwhile, the number of full-time reporters covering statehouses fell 11% between 2014 and 2022, with news outlets increasingly relying on part-timers, interns, and students (Shearer et al. 2022). While studies have differed about trends in state political reporting (e.g., Hayes and Lawless 2017; Hopkins 2018; Myers 2024; Peterson 2021b), Americans' likelihood of encountering news about state and local government is at a historical low.

These developments are viewed as a major threat to state and local accountability, because the existence of a robust independent news media encourages good government. In particular, “watchdog journalism,” in which journalists alert the public to potential governmental malfeasance, is a crucial way that the news media keep elected officials in line (e.g., Norris 2014). By making politicians’ actions more visible, media give citizens the opportunity to vote out those engaging in undesirable or unethical conduct. A vibrant system of news thus pressures elected officials to perform better in order to avoid angering or disappointing their constituents. In their landmark study, Snyder and Stromberg (2010, 357) show that more news coverage “makes voters better informed, which increases monitoring and induces politicians to work harder, which, finally, produces better policies.” With fewer watchdogs now than there were 20 years ago, state and local officials presumably are less worried that scandalous behavior will be noticed or reported on widely.

Existing research provides evidence consistent with this supposition. For instance, the geographic overlap between congressional districts and newspaper circulation areas has in the last two decades become a weaker predictor of whether voters punish ideologically extreme candidates (Canes-Wrone and Kistner 2023). Similarly, coverage of political scandals in national media does not appear to harm congressional candidates as much as it did in the 1980s and early 1990s (Hamel and Miller 2019). Research also suggests that changes to the local news environment have affected the level of corruption in state and local government (Matherly and Greenwood 2021; Usher and Kim-Leffingwell 2023).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Their findings are puzzlingly different, however. Matherly and Greenwood (2021) report that daily newspaper closures between 1996 and 2018 increased the number of corruption cases filed by federal prosecutors. They conclude that this is because public officials were more willing to engage in corruption with fewer reporters around. Usher and Kim-Leffingwell (2023), on the other hand, show that county-level newspaper employment is not correlated with the number of corruption prosecutions. Instead, they find that the presence of investigative journalism non-profits in an area increases the number of corruption cases. They argue that this is evidence that accountability journalism increases the likelihood of corruption being revealed, allowing prosecutors to charge for those offenses.

These studies, however, do not directly address the chief arguments about the local news crisis and electoral accountability. First, they do not actually measure local news coverage, but instead rely on proxies like market boundaries, newspaper closures, national news reporting, or aggregated data on journalist employment. These indicators necessitate strong assumptions about how reporting on state and local politicians has changed over time, and do not allow researchers to quantify it explicitly. Second, studies of corruption prosecutions do not distinguish between elected officials and other government employees. That is important, because a key mechanism of the media's accountability function is to inform citizens, who may then punish an elected official at the ballot box. Analyzing corruption cases that include non-elected officials thus conflates political and mere legal accountability, making it impossible to say whether increases in corruption are a function of diminished electoral accountability. Third, studies of ideological extremity and corruption focus only on a subset of behavior that violates public confidence. Ideally, a study of accountability should examine how a wide variety of politicians' questionable actions are covered by the media and how that affects the penalties that officials may or may not pay.

I address these limitations by examining state and local media coverage of political scandals. I define scandals as public accusations that an elected official has committed a crime or a significant violation of a widely held ethical or societal norm. This includes misbehavior directly related to an elected official's position, such as corruption or misuse of public funds. But it can also include private behavior, such as marital infidelity, illegal drug use, or dressing up in blackface. My definition is consistent with research that has described scandals as instances of "norm transgression" (e.g., von Sikorski 2018) or "moral violations" (Redlawsk and Walter 2024). While some studies have defined scandals by the level of media attention they receive (e.g., Entman 2012; Nyhan 2015), I do not adopt that approach because my question is whether and how news coverage varies over time

and from scandal to scandal. Some scandals, as I define them, may receive limited attention, while others will receive a great deal.

Scandals are a good case for studying accountability for at least two reasons. First, they often (though not always) involve behavior that most voters view as inappropriate or concerning. Second, they represent moments in which the media's watchdog function is expected to be on display, since one source of the media's power is its ability to publicize bad behavior by elected officials. As a result, the type of accountability I focus on is how a scandal and its attending news coverage affect an official's electoral fortunes – in particular whether they leave office following a scandal or see their vote share reduced in a subsequent election.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Media Logic of Scandal Coverage**

My expectation is that state and local news coverage of scandals has declined in recent decades. But that expectation, while consistent with the deterioration of the local media environment, is not a theoretical slam-dunk.

One perspective suggests that coverage of wrongdoing by politicians might not have declined. Two reasons are journalistic norms and economic incentives. Journalistic norms establish criteria for newsworthiness that determine what the media devote attention to (e.g., Bennett 1996; Wolfsfeld 2011). For instance, journalists find attractive stories that involve well-known people and dramatic events, features of many political scandals. Journalists also gravitate toward the kind of conflict inherent in scandals, as incumbents fight the allegations against them and their political opponents exploit them. Scandals also can create divisions within a party, particularly when party leaders have to decide whether to defend or abandon a fellow party member under siege.<sup>3</sup> Such

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<sup>2</sup> To be sure, other forms of accountability – such as being subjected to a congressional investigation or censured by one's colleagues – could be important. But these are often antecedents to the kind of electoral accountability exercised by voters, which is central to debates over the local news crisis.

<sup>3</sup> Former Republican Rep. George Santos, who was expelled from Congress in 2023, comes to mind here.

intra-party cleavages often generate disproportionate attention because they are unusual (Baum and Groeling 2010).

There is also an economic logic to scandal coverage (e.g., Puglisi and Snyder 2011). Scandals generate audience interest because of the same dramatic characteristics that make them newsworthy. Writing about the media frenzy during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal of the late 1990s, critic Steven Brill described scandals as igniting a “rocket under the entire revenue structure” for media outlets.<sup>4</sup> Hamilton (2003) argues that as the media environment has grown more competitive, consumer preferences have become a stronger influence on news content, which puts a premium on dramatic and sensational stories (see also Kernell, Lamberson, and Zaller 2018). The journalistic and economic pull of scandals may thus create an incentive for local news outlets to continue to cover them aggressively, even as they have cut back on more mundane aspects of state and local politics.

But despite scandals’ appeal, it is likely that their coverage in local newspapers has declined. There are at least three reasons. First, there is the basic reality of resources. Fewer staff means fewer stories that can be written, regardless of how newsworthy they are. That is one reason that reductions in coverage have occurred across the board on virtually every topic related to local politics (Hayes and Lawless 2021). Even if a scandal story is compelling, the level of attention that a cash-strapped news outlet can give it will be limited by the shrinking resources at its disposal.

Second, the economic pull of local political scandals may be less powerful than it first seems. While presidential scandals like the Lewinsky affair may lead to huge audience gains for some news outlets, state and local scandals may not do the same. Consumer interest in state and local politics is modest (e.g., Shaker 2012; Hindman 2018; McCrain and Peterson 2024; Trounstone 2009), and because local scandals are mainly of interest to people in only a small geographic area, the size of a ratings or readership boost will always be limited – local news does not “scale.” As a result, state and

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<sup>4</sup> Brill, Steven. 1998. “Pressgate.” Brill’s Content, July/August, p. 135.



local political scandals may not produce the kind of bonanza that leads national outlets to pour resources into covering presidential misdeeds.

Third, original state and local scandal reporting still costs more than other forms of news. Even if a scandal does increase audience interest, giving reporters the time to chase follow-up stories may not generate a justifiable return on investment.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, strapped local news outlets are likely to struggle to sustain coverage over a lengthy time period. As journalist Mary Ellen Klas described her experience at one Florida paper in an era of cutbacks, politicians facing media investigations “would just wait us out – until our over-stretched staff left to chase the next big story.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, scandals that are more newsworthy and more likely to generate more audience interest will get more coverage than others. But on average, I expect state and local newspaper reporting on political scandals is likely to have declined as the local news crisis has worsened.

### **Scandal Coverage and Political Accountability**

The second question is the extent to which coverage of scandals is related to electoral accountability, and whether that relationship has changed as state and local media have declined. One theoretical view suggests that two developments may have reduced or eliminated the effect of local scandal coverage on a politician’s likelihood of being punished for a scandal.

First, partisanship has become so strong that the effects of scandal may be attenuated (Funck and McCabe 2022). The strength of voters’ ties to parties may make the propriety of elected officials’

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<sup>5</sup> A simple example may illustrate. Imagine that a scandal story about a U.S. House member accused of tax fraud generates 20,000 page views on average, and a good reporter can produce two new scandal stories every week. Meanwhile, stories about other topics – for instance, simple crime reports – garner 10,000 page views on average. But because those require less effort, a reporter can produce six per week. In that scenario, devoting reporting resources to a relatively popular scandal story won’t make strict economic sense, because a publisher can get more page views by devoting a reporter’s time to less resource-intensive projects.

<sup>6</sup> Klas, Mary Ellen. 2019. “Less Local News Means Less Democracy.” Nieman Reports, September 20. Online at: <https://niemanreports.org/articles/less-local-news-means-less-democracy/>

behavior less important, as long as they continue to represent their party's interests. At the national level, Donald Trump's continued support from Republicans despite his many scandals is the signal example. But this is also the case for lower-level offices, where copartisans express less concern over a politician's scandal than do outpartisans (Costa et al. 2020; Rothschild, Keefer, and Hauri 2021; Schonhage and Geys 2024; Wolsky 2022). Likewise, party leaders may feel pressure to jettison an elected official whose behavior is an embarrassment, but the desire not to weaken the party's power may prompt them to rally behind the scandal-plagued politician if they believe they can survive the next election (Schonhage and Geys 2022). This might be especially true in an era of highly competitive elections (Lee 2016).

Second, at a time of "nationalized" politics, consumers' news habits have changed. Audiences for local news are significantly smaller than they were even a few years ago (e.g., Hopkins 2018; Hopkins and Gorton 2024; Trexler 2023). At the same time, consumers have gravitated toward national content (e.g., Trussler 2021), meaning that many Americans are now relatively more attentive to national than local news. As a result, coverage of state and local scandals in national media, not local outlets, may shape how voters react.

Nonetheless, I expect that the volume of scandal coverage in state and local outlets remains associated with electoral accountability. Prior studies have found that both state and congressional scandals lower support for incumbents, leading to higher retirement rates and lower vote share (Basinger 2013; Rottinghaus 2023; Welch and Hibbing 1997). And the more media coverage scandals receive, the larger the electoral penalties (Costas-Perez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2012; Ulbig and Miller 2012; von Sikorski 2018).<sup>7</sup>

Local news also continues to affect attitudes and behavior. Peterson (2021a), for instance, finds that exposure to newspaper coverage still increases residents' political knowledge, even as its

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<sup>7</sup> Other research focuses on how scandal coverage itself is driven by political factors (Nyhan 2015, 2017).

impact has weakened over time. Hayes and Lawless (2018) show that variation in the coverage of congressional candidates in a district affects voters' knowledge of the candidates and ability to evaluate their ideology. When citizens are exposed to local news, they become less partisan in their voting behavior, suggesting that learning new information about local incumbents can shape voter support (Darr, Dunaway, and Hitt 2018; Moskowitz 2021). Since scandal coverage is likely to reach at least as large an audience as routine state and local political news, I anticipate that higher levels of scandal coverage should still be associated with a higher likelihood of accountability.

Local political news reporting also tends to reach the most engaged citizens, the kinds of people most likely to vote in state and local elections and express their views to elected officials (Hayes and Lawless 2021). Thus, even if the overall audience has grown smaller, reaching an audience that is readily mobilized and that politicians are more likely to fear – by virtue of their participation rates – may create a path for scandal news to increase accountability.

Ultimately, then, I expect that local news coverage of political scandals will have declined over time. But even amid that decline, scandals that receive more coverage will likely be associated with higher rates of punishment for incumbents. At the same time, if the absolute level of scandal coverage has fallen in recent years, overall levels of accountability are also likely to be lower. This is one reason it is critical to directly measure both the level of coverage and its relationship to accountability.

### **Measuring State and Local Scandal Coverage**

To study changes in local coverage, I draw on a database of political scandals involving statewide elected officials and members of Congress from 1990 through 2022.<sup>8</sup> The data set, maintained by journalist Nathaniel Rakich, consists of scandals in which a politician has been

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<sup>8</sup> The database is available here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ksBLxRR3GCZd33IvhkcNqqBd5K8HwlWC7YuAkVmS1lg/edit#gid=0>

“credibly accused of illegal or unethical activity.”<sup>9</sup> This includes instances in which an incumbent has been arrested or accused by authorities of corruption or financial impropriety, accused of violating campaign finance or ethics laws, and accused of sexual misconduct or an extramarital affair. The scandals in the data set also involve other misbehavior, such as drunk driving, drug possession, or significant violations of societal norms (e.g., dressing up in blackface). A short description of each scandal appears in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Like previous work (e.g., Basinger 2013), the data set does not include episodes that involve merely embarrassing information about an official or controversial actions that do not clearly rise to the level of unethical behavior (such as yelling “you lie” at the president during a State of the Union speech). Unlike prior studies that have focused on presidential (e.g., Entman 2012; Nyhan 2015), executive branch (Puglisi and Snyder 2011), congressional (Basinger 2013; Hamel and Miller 2019; Welch and Hibbing 1997), or gubernatorial (Nyhan 2017) scandals, these data allow me to study coverage of a range of statewide officials (including U.S. Senators) as well as House members, whose monitoring by the media has been significantly affected by the local news crisis.

Rakich began collecting the data in 2013 and continues to update it. He retrospectively identified scandals that had occurred in prior years through various search methods.<sup>10</sup> One concern is that scandals earlier in the data set may be systematically more prominent than those that were collected more recently, because identifying lower-profile historical scandals through internet research might be difficult. If so, then any longitudinal decline in coverage might be due to over-time differences in the prominence of scandals included in the data, not necessarily because of changes in the local media environment.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/george-santos-resign/>

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Rakich. Part of this process is described here: <http://baseballot.blogspot.com/2013/04/history-shows-its-game-over-for-sanford.html>.

I address this concern in two ways. First, in several instances I report findings from only between 2013 and 2022, when Rakich was actively collecting the data. During this time, there should not be systematic differences in the prominence of scandals, since the data were being collected in real time. Second, I account for the prominence of each scandal in the data set by using an independent assessment of the severity of the accusations against the elected official. This assessment comes from a survey – described in more detail below – in which respondents rated the seriousness of the (anonymized) accusations in each scandal. While scandal severity is only one factor that might raise or lower a scandal’s profile, it is likely to be correlated with media attention and can help address the concern about potential over-time differences in the prominence of scandals in the data set.

To measure the volume of coverage, I proceed in several steps. First, for each scandal, I identified the relevant state or local newspaper. For statewide officials, including U.S. senators, I analyzed the state’s largest newspaper.<sup>11</sup> For House members, I identified the largest-circulation newspaper in the district, following the approach of Hayes and Lawless (2021).

Second, I conducted mini-case studies for each of the 211 scandals in the data set that met the criteria for inclusion for analysis.<sup>12</sup> This involved researching and reading details about each episode using press accounts, Wikipedia, and other historical sources. I used these case studies to identify words and phrases likely to appear in news coverage about the particular scandal. These words and phrases became the basis of my search in each publication for scandal-related coverage.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The state’s largest paper will have the widest reach and is, in most cases, the most likely to cover a statewide scandal. Its coverage may also trickle down to other papers, giving coverage even more impact. Of course, there may be some instances in which a scandal receives more attention in a smaller paper, such as one that serves the state capital. But because state capital newspapers have suffered staffing losses at the same rate as other newspapers, there is no reason to think my choice to use the state’s largest newspaper would produce different findings over time.

<sup>12</sup> See the Appendix for a discussion of why I excluded some cases from the analysis.

<sup>13</sup> This process was iterative. Using an initial set of keywords, I searched a newspaper's archives, usually identifying a group of relevant stories. I then read through those stories to identify additional terms that were commonly used in the newspaper's reporting on the scandal. I then incorporated those terms into a subsequent and final search. I did that in an effort make sure I was capturing all of the relevant coverage, since my initial keywords occasionally missed some stories.

I adopted this labor-intensive, case-by-case approach because scandals involve a wide variety of circumstances, and the way news outlets report on them varies by the particulars of each episode. Simply conducting keyword searches for “scandal” or “investigation” in conjunction with a candidate’s name produces variable and inaccurate results.<sup>14</sup>

Third, using the incident-specific terms, I searched the archives of the relevant newspaper in NewsBank or ProQuest to identify the first date a scandal story appeared in the news. Having identified the date that coverage of a scandal began, I counted the number of stories that mention the scandal throughout what I call the “scandal period.” I define the scandal period as the day from the first scandal story to one of several possible ending dates – when an official announced their resignation or that they would not run for re-election; when an official was removed from office; when an official lost in a primary election; or the next general election date. For the purposes of my coding, the scandal period ends as soon as one of those things happens. One implication is that the length of a scandal period will vary depending on how close to an election a scandal breaks as well as whether and when an official steps down or announces they will not run for re-election. In my analysis, I account for variation in the scandal period to ensure that any differences in the volume of coverage are not a function of differences in length of scandal periods.

The analysis does not include scandal coverage after an incumbent wins or loses re-election, so I am not able to trace coverage that extends beyond election day. But for the purposes of

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In other cases, my initial keywords were not specific enough to exclude stories that were not related to a scandal, which I discovered by reading through the stories returned by my first search. In those cases, I eliminated or changed the keywords -- based on reading the newspaper's coverage -- and took care not to include in my counts unrelated stories.<sup>14</sup> Automating this process by searching for terms like “scandal,” “investigation,” “allegation,” or “accusation” in conjunction with an official’s name produces widely varying results from paper to paper. That is because these terms either fail to identify stories about individual scandals or identify stories that are not about the scandal at all. To demonstrate this, in 10% of my cases I searched the relevant newspaper for the politician’s name and – instead of the scandal-specific terms that I developed from my case studies – roots of the words that might appear frequently in scandal stories (scandal\* OR investig\* OR alleg\* OR accus\*). In 70% of cases, the generic searches overcounted scandal stories, compared to my targeted case study approach. In 18%, they undercounted stories. And in 12% they produced the same number. On average, the generic counting method produced more than twice as many apparent scandal stories as did the targeted method. Thus, the generic search method not only dramatically overstates the volume of coverage but also does so inconsistently, with overcounts and undercounts occurring seemingly randomly from case to case.

measuring news that is important for accountability, this is less relevant. If a candidate wins re-election, it suggests a limited amount of accountability.<sup>15</sup> If a candidate loses, then coverage after the election is likely to diminish – not necessarily because a newspaper lacks the ability to sustain coverage but because the behavior of an outgoing elected official automatically becomes less newsworthy.

### **Declining Local News Coverage of Scandals**

The first question is how attention to political scandals in local newspapers has changed over time. The left side of Figure 1 plots the data for statewide elected officials, including U.S. senators. Each dot represents the number of stories for an individual scandal; the year indicates when the scandal broke. The solid line represents a lowess estimator to smooth the trend, so it is less sensitive to outliers.

Looking at the top left, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* published 774 stories about Governor Jim Guy Tucker's connection to the Whitewater real estate deal involving Bill and Hillary Clinton after the scandal broke in 1995. The *Anchorage Daily News* published 398 stories after Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens was implicated in 2007 in a federal corruption probe of unreported gifts, including home renovations. In 2018, I found 270 stories in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* related to allegations that Governor Eric Greitens violated a law forbidding sexual blackmail.

The graph makes clear that scandal coverage has declined significantly over time. On average, a statewide scandal in the 1990s generated 228 stories. Between 2000 and 2009, that number dropped to 111. Since 2010, it has fallen further to 87. The post-2010 decline is even more

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<sup>15</sup> There are some cases where scandal coverage continues after an incumbent wins re-election. One situation is when an official is under investigation during a campaign and is indicted or arrested afterward. For instance, Rep. William Jefferson won re-election in 2006 amid a federal corruption probe, was indicted in 2007, and lost re-election in 2008. But because most scandals do not involve criminal charges, coverage diminishes significantly once an incumbent has won re-election.

eye-popping because it includes the 1,690 stories about the “Bridgegate” scandal ensnaring New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (though Christie is omitted from the graph to make the figure more readable).<sup>16</sup> Excluding the Christie case, the average number of stories since 2010 declines to 60 – meaning that scandal coverage has fallen to just 25% of what it was in the 1990s.

**Figure 1. Number of Scandal Stories in Local Newspapers, 1990-2022**



*Note:* Graph presents the number of local newspaper stories published about each scandal. Solid line is a lowess smoother.

The right side of the graph plots the same data for House members. The overall number of stories is lower, both because House members are often covered by smaller newspapers and because House members tend to be less prominent than statewide officials. But a downward trend is evident for these scandals as well.

<sup>16</sup> Christie is included in all other analyses of statewide scandals in the paper. Figure A1 in the Appendix presents the same graph with a logged measure of scandal coverage, which includes data for the Christie Bridgegate scandal.



In the 1990s, House scandals produced on average 53 stories. The high-water mark, however, came in the first decade of the 2000s, the result of scandals involving U.S. Rep. Gary Condit (in 2001 after he was linked to missing federal intern Chandra Levy); U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, one of several members caught up in scandals involving the lobbyist Jack Abramoff; and U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, in whose freezer the FBI found cash allegedly part of a bribery scheme. Between 2000 and 2009, House scandals generated an average of 95 stories.

But since 2010, the average has fallen to just 23. That is despite the fact that the data include scandals like the 2017 insider trading charges against U.S. Rep. Chris Collins, which produced 184 stories in the *Buffalo News*; a federal investigation of sex trafficking surrounding U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz; and the conviction of U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah on federal bribery and racketeering charges. As in the statewide data, scandal coverage of House members is now about 25% of its peak.

Of course, one possibility is that the decline in coverage is a function of changes in the kinds of scandals politicians have found themselves embroiled in. If the types of scandals emerging in recent years involve behavior that would generate less media interest, then the decline in coverage might not be due to changes in the local media's reporting capacity. Instead, it could be that the substance of the scandals has changed.

But Figure 2 shows that the volume of coverage has declined in recent decades for each of the major categories, following Basinger (2013) – corruption or financial scandals, sex scandals, and political scandals.<sup>17</sup> This figure includes both statewide and House scandals.<sup>18</sup>

Coverage of corruption and financial scandals has declined the most. But reporting on sex and political scandals both also peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s and has declined since. For

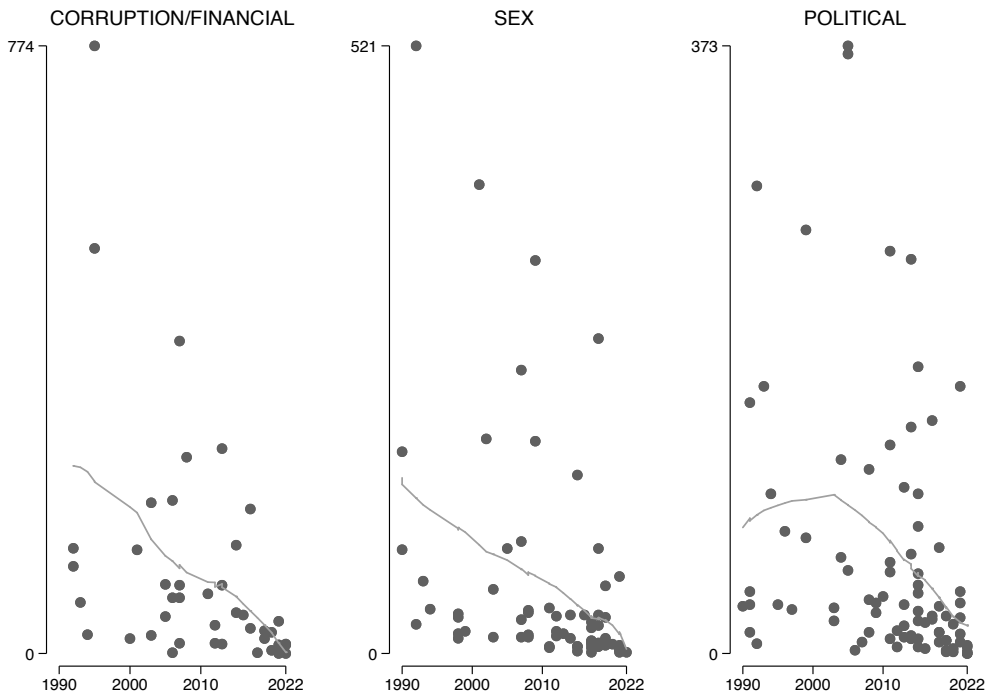
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<sup>17</sup> In the figure, I aggregate together corruption and financial scandals, which share many common features. I also place scandals that don't fall into one of these three categories into a residual category of "Other," which includes drunk driving, drug use, and fatal traffic crashes.

<sup>18</sup> The graph again excludes Christie to keep the figures readable.

political scandals, the decline has been especially steep since 2014. Moreover, the share of different types of scandals has changed relatively little over the last three decades.<sup>19</sup> Any change in media reporting does not seem to be explained by changes in the types of scandals.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 2. Number of Scandal Stories in Local Newspapers, by Scandal Type, 1990-2022**



*Note:* Graph presents the number of local newspaper stories published about each scandal, split by the type of scandal. Solid lines are lowess smoothers.

We can assess these developments more rigorously in a regression model. In Table 1, I present models explaining the volume of scandal coverage. These models account for a variety of

<sup>19</sup> For instance, the share of sex scandals was 35% in the 1990s and 29% in the period from 2010 to 2022. Likewise, the share of political scandals was 45% in the 1990s and 42% in the period from 2010 to 2022. The share of corruption/financial scandals was 19% in the 1990s and 16% in the period from 2010 to 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Nor is it a function of the length of scandals, as the regression in Table 1 confirms. For statewide officials, scandals in the 1990s did last longer, averaging 823 days. But after dropping to 394 days in the early 2000s, the average scandal period since 2010 increased to 528, without a corresponding increase in coverage. For U.S. House members, the scandal period changed little over the last three decades, averaging 280 days in the 1990s, 310 days between 2000 and 2009, and 296 days from 2010 through 2022.

factors that might influence scandal coverage and allow for a better test of whether the decline over time is in fact related to a reduction in newspaper resources.

My measure of newspaper resources is a variable for the size of the news hole, the total number of stories a newspaper produced during the scandal period. In other words, the variable measures all of a newspaper's content during this time frame. Newspapers with a larger news hole will have more advertising revenue and a larger reporting staff, and thus will have greater ability to cover a political scandal (see Hayes and Lawless 2021). I expect that as the news hole increases, so will coverage of scandals. The implication of such a relationship would be that as the news hole declines – as has happened industry-wide in recent years – so will scandal coverage.

To address concerns about changes in the prominence of scandals over time, the model controls for the severity of the scandal. My measure of severity comes from a small survey (N=41), in which each respondent was randomly assigned to read 20 of the scandal descriptions that appear in the Appendix. They were asked to rate the seriousness of the accusation on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. The descriptions described only the accusation facing the elected official but did not include the politician's name, the office they held, their gender, or partisanship, factors that I control for in the model. Every scandal was evaluated by four respondents, and the severity score is the average of those ratings.<sup>21</sup>

The model also includes measures of the type of scandal (financial, corruption, sex, and other scandals, with political scandals as the omitted category). I also include the vote margin in the prior presidential election in the politician's state or district, since scandals in more competitive jurisdictions might receive more attention. Finally, I also control for the length of a scandal – the number of days in the scandal period. This ensures that a decline in coverage over time is not simply a function of a change in the typical length of the scandal period.

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<sup>21</sup> More details on the survey appear in the Appendix.

In Table 1, I find that newspaper resources, as measured by the news hole, are significantly related to scandal coverage. Outlets with more resources publish more coverage of political scandals, even after accounting for other factors. Crucially, that means that as resources decline, so does scandal coverage. This suggests that one reason for the reduction in coverage in the last decade is the major cutbacks at local newspapers. To be sure, it could also be that smaller newspapers – with smaller news holes – devote less coverage to scandals. But when I control for circulation size, the news hole continues to significantly predict scandal coverage.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the same pattern emerges when I restrict the analysis to just 2013-2022, another indicator that these results are not simply a product of the declining prominence of scandals in recent years.<sup>23</sup>

The data set is not large enough to allow me to explore within-paper variation as a way of determining how changes in resources have affected scandal coverage. It is descriptively clear, however, that the decline in scandal coverage over time is correlated with the decline in the size of the news hole. For instance, the average daily size of the news hole for a newspaper during a scandal period in the 1990s was 140 stories. By the first decade of the 2000s, it was 108. Since 2010, it has been 87, significantly less than what it was in the 1990s. This implies that one likely reason for the decline in scandal coverage is simply a decline in the capacity of newspapers to cover them.

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<sup>22</sup> I do not include circulation in the main models, because I do not have accurate circulation data for a handful of newspapers. But when I drop those cases and include circulation in the models, the effect of the news hole remains significant and substantively similar. See Table A2 in the Appendix.

<sup>23</sup> See Table A3 in the Appendix.

**Table 1. The Relationship between Newspaper Resources and Scandal Coverage, 1990-2022**

	<b>Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)</b>
News Hole	1.071* (0.277)
Scandal Severity	5.787 (8.995)
Financial Scandal	58.296 (48.098)
Corruption Scandal	40.937 (26.031)
Sex Scandal	17.265 (20.702)
Other Scandal	-27.921 (24.431)
Statewide Official	49.397* (15.496)
Republican	20.815 (20.280)
Woman	-47.638* (16.854)
Presidential Vote Margin	0.296 (0.675)
Days of Scandal	0.015 (0.025)
Constant	-17.280 (32.951)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.16
N	211

\*p<.05. Dependent variable is the number of scandal stories published by a newspaper. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses.

The takeaway from these analyses is that scandal coverage has been declining for 30 years,

with an especially steep drop-off in the last decade. Politicians who find themselves implicated in misbehavior are now less likely to get the unfavorable coverage that comes along with a scandal than they once were. This development is not explained by the severity, type, or length of scandals or of other characteristics of the individuals involved. Instead, the decline in scandal reporting appears due to the same newsroom cutbacks that have reduced coverage of more mundane aspects of politics.

### **As Scandal Coverage Declines, So Does Accountability**

To what extent does variation in scandal coverage matter? For the over-time decline of local scandal coverage to be relevant to electoral accountability, then we also need to observe that the amount of scandal coverage is associated with outcomes for scandal-implicated politicians. Absent that, the reduction in news organizations' capacity to cover scandals may not be substantively important.

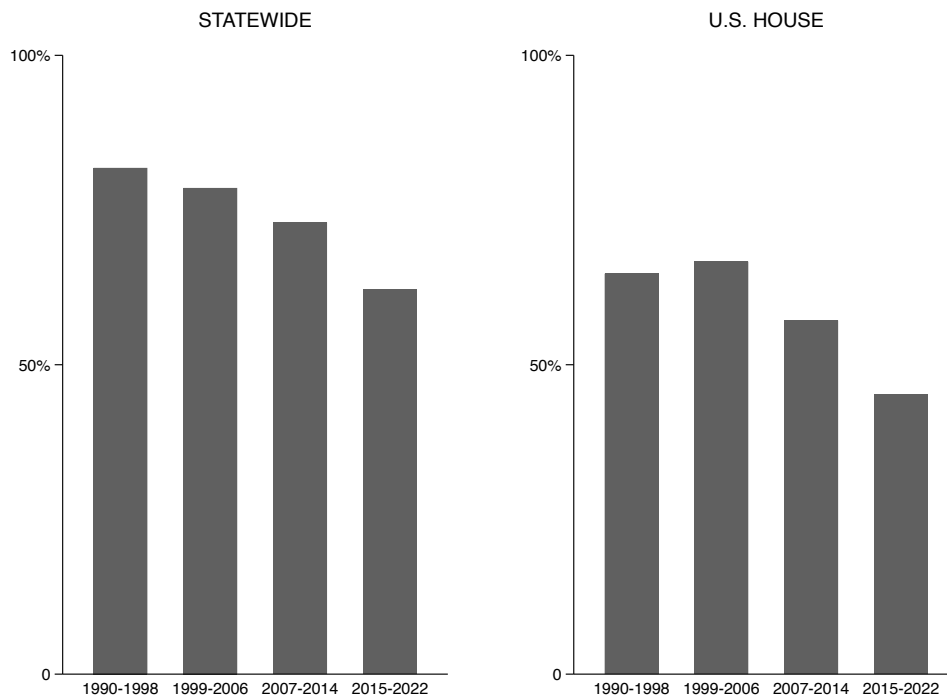
My approach is to examine the relationship between the volume of media coverage and what happened to an incumbent following their scandal. First, I collected data on whether an incumbent left office following a scandal. This could occur if they were removed, resigned before their term was up, declined to run for re-election and retired, or lost a bid for re-election (either in a primary or general election). Second, among officials who ran for re-election after a scandal (and made it through their primary), I collected data on their vote share in their first post-scandal general election. My theoretical expectation is that incumbents whose scandal receives more coverage will be more likely to leave office or receive a lower vote share in their subsequent election.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> One limitation of this approach is that it does not allow me to estimate the effect of increases (or decreases) in scandal coverage compared to incumbents who are not implicated in a scandal. But there are two reasons that I don't adopt that approach. First, in examining the implications of media coverage for accountability, the relevant comparison is not to the hundreds of other office holders who did not face a scandal. In the vast majority of cases, their departures from office are due to an entirely different set of factors. Thus, it would be a conceptual mistake to conflate resignations or retirements because of a scandal with departures for more mundane reasons. Second, the key factor in this research

Initially, we can look descriptively at what has happened to politicians implicated in scandals over time. Figure 3 plots the percentage of statewide (left-hand panel) and House officials (right-hand panel) implicated in a scandal who left office over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. Between 1990 and 2006, 82% of statewide officials were punished, either by voluntarily leaving office or being removed by fellow politicians or voters. From 2007 to 2014, that number fell to 73%. Between 2015 to 2022, it declined to 62%. The over-time patterns are the same if we slice the time periods in larger or smaller increments.

**Figure 3. The Share of Scandal-Implicated Politicians Leaving Office, 1990-2022**



*Note:* Graph displays the percentage of elected officials leaving office after being implicated in a scandal. Data collected by the author.

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question is media coverage of a scandal. For non-scandal implicated incumbents, that variable would universally be zero, making it difficult to produce a sensible statistical estimate of the relationship between media attention and accountability. As a result, I focus on media coverage within the scandal cases, which allows me to draw inferences about the role that changes in coverage play in shaping outcomes for scandal-implicated incumbents.

For House members, the peak of punishment was in 1999-2006, at 67%. But punishment declined to 57% in 2007-2014 and to less than half (45%) in 2015-2022. Notably, these trends match with what we saw in the coverage data: Reporting on political scandals was significantly higher in the 1990s and early 2000s than in more recent years, just like levels of incumbent accountability.

That pattern is merely suggestive, of course, and there are multiple potential explanations. Growing partisan polarization may make both voters and fellow party leaders more tolerant of a politician's misbehavior. Likewise, as states and congressional districts have become more reliably partisan, declining levels of punishment may simply reflect the fact that more politicians are willing to stand for re-election after a scandal because their margin for error is larger. The more reliably partisan a state or district is, the more votes a politician can afford to lose before he or she is at risk.

It could also be that in an era of declining local news consumption, national media coverage of scandals is more important than local coverage. Whether an elected official leaves office or loses votes in their next election may depend on how much national attention a scandal receives. And because the officials in my data are prominent statewide officeholders or members of Congress, it is likely that many of their scandals received at least some national coverage. To measure national coverage, I used the same keywords that formed the basis of my local newspaper analysis to search the ProQuest archives of the *New York Times*. A variable indicating the number of *Times* stories about each scandal is included in the model in Table 2.<sup>25</sup>

To consider these alternative explanations alongside local scandal coverage, I specify a logistic regression model to explain whether a politician was punished following a scandal. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the politician left office following the scandal, 0 if they remained in office. The key independent variable is the number of scandal stories published in the politician's

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<sup>25</sup> I choose the *Times* because it has historically been viewed as an agenda setter for other media outlets (e.g., Shaw and Sparrow 1999). As such, its coverage of scandals is likely to be generally representative of patterns in other mainstream national outlets.



local newspaper. If variation in coverage matters, we would expect this variable to be positive – more coverage leads to a higher likelihood of punishment.

The model also controls for the length of a scandal; shorter scandals tend to be associated with punishment, as politicians are more likely to announce their departure quickly when a scandal is particularly damaging. I include variables for the type of scandal (with other scandals as the omitted category), the partisanship and gender of the accused politician, and whether the politician is a statewide official (vs. a House member). Finally, I include a variable measuring the vote margin in their state or district in the previous presidential election. The measure is scaled so that higher numbers indicate a less competitive district. Lower numbers mean the district is more evenly split by partisanship, which theoretically may lead to a higher level of punishment than if the district leans heavily toward the incumbent's party. As a result, I expect that variable to be negative.

The results appear in the second column of Table 2. Even controlling for those other factors, scandal coverage remains associated with punishment. The coefficient is positive, meaning that when there is more scandal coverage, the chances of an official leaving office are higher. Given recent trends, the key inference is the reverse – as the number of scandal stories goes down, politicians are less likely to leave office following a scandal.<sup>26</sup> But national media coverage, measured by the number of stories in the *New York Times*, has no effect.

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<sup>26</sup> In separate models, I include a variable for a newspaper's circulation size, reducing the sample size slightly. It does not have any effect on the likelihood of punishment (or vote shift). See Table A4 in the Appendix.

**Table 2. The Relationship between Scandal Coverage and Accountability**

	Left Office		Post-Scandal Vote Shift	
Scandal Stories	0.009* (0.004)	0.007 (0.005)	-0.087* (0.021)	-0.090* (0.024)
Post-2009	--	-0.554 (0.502)	--	2.510 (6.460)
Scandal Stories x Post-2009	--	0.002 (0.007)	--	0.040 (0.034)
Scandal Severity	0.566* (0.182)	0.603* (0.204)	-1.440 (1.790)	-1.835 (2.323)
NYT Coverage	-0.001 (0.007)	-0.000 (0.006)	0.108 (0.062)	0.121* (0.055)
Presidential Vote Margin	-0.055* (0.018)	-0.055* (0.017)	0.129 (0.116)	0.150 (0.124)
Financial Scandal	-0.777 (0.796)	-0.747 (0.786)	1.750 (2.555)	0.187 (3.182)
Corruption Scandal	0.758 (0.633)	0.605 (0.610)	-3.875 (4.604)	-3.114 (4.517)
Sex Scandal	-0.290 (0.478)	-0.332 (0.481)	4.389 (3.675)	5.923 (3.540)
Other Scandal	0.117 (0.503)	0.196 (0.507)	-14.368* (4.197)	-14.160* (4.448)
Statewide Official	1.016* (0.391)	1.031* (0.394)	13.187* (3.578)	14.228* (3.456)
Republican	-0.036 (0.400)	-0.007 (0.397)	3.034 (2.952)	2.558 (3.123)
Woman	0.572 (0.421)	0.576 (0.426)	-7.684* (2.416)	-7.020* (2.579)
Days of Scandal	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.007 (0.004)	-0.009* (0.004)
Constant	-0.608 (0.946)	-0.310 (0.903)	1.366 (5.964)	0.546 (5.024)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> /Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.254	0.259	0.198	0.204
N	211	211	85	85

\*p<.05. Dependent variable in the first model is whether a politician left office following a scandal. Cell entries in the first model are logistic regression coefficients. Dependent variable in the second model is the difference in vote share in the politician's pre- and post-scandal general elections. Cell entries in the second model are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses for both models.

The third column of Table 2 displays a model that includes an interaction term to test for the possibility that the effect of scandal coverage has diminished in more recent years, as politics has become more partisan. I interact the scandal coverage variable with an indicator for whether the scandal took place after 2009.<sup>27</sup> The interaction is not significant, indicating that the effect of media coverage is not diminished in more recent years. Even as the volume of coverage has fallen in the last decade, scandals that receive more coverage are still more likely to result in the departure of an incumbent from office. Restricting the analysis to 2013-2022 confirms the finding, while also demonstrating that the relationship does not seem to be driven by any differences in the prominence of scandals from earlier in the data set.<sup>28</sup>

That result does not, however, suggest that declining coverage is no cause for concern. Even if more relatively more coverage has remained associated with higher levels of punishment in the last decade, it could still be that the lower absolute levels of coverage in recent years mean that accountability is down. Figure 4 suggests one piece of evidence to support that interpretation.

The graph plots the probability that an official departs office following a scandal, estimated from the baseline Left Office model in Table 2. For instance, the probability that a statewide official or House member whose scandal is featured in more than 200 stories will leave office is around 0.8. On the other hand, as the number of stories declines to single digits, the probability that an incumbent will be held accountable falls to below 0.6 for statewide officials and 0.5 for House members.

Although I cannot conduct a time-series analysis with the relatively sparse and small data set, Figure 4 illustrates the likely consequence of the decline in coverage of scandals over the last three

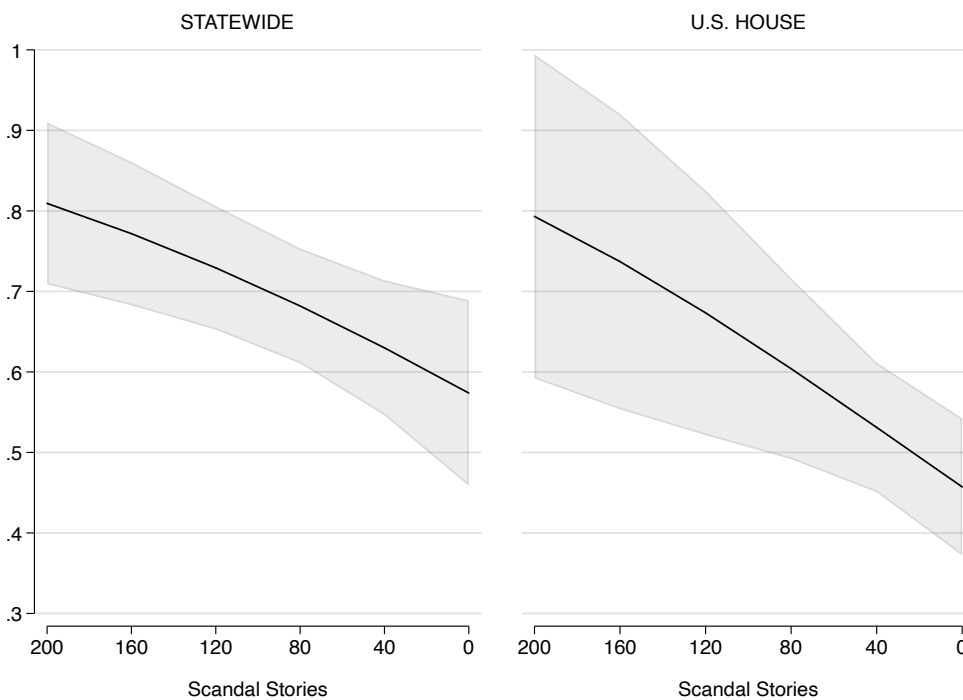
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<sup>27</sup> Given the trends in Figure 1, this is an arbitrary cutoff, but other cut points produce the same results.

<sup>28</sup> Results of the 2013-2022 model appears in Table A5. The model also shows that *New York Times* coverage remains a non-significant predictor of whether a politician leaves office, even in a period in which many consumers have gravitated toward national news.

decades. In the 1990s, the average number of scandal stories about statewide officials was 127, implying a high rate of incumbent accountability. But over the last decade, that number has declined to less than 100, a number associated with a significantly lower likelihood of punishment. Likewise, the average number of House scandal stories in the last decade has been less than 25, implying a punishment rate of less than 0.5.

**Figure 4. Scandal Coverage and the Likelihood of an Incumbent Leaving Office**



*Note:* Graph displays predicted probability that a politician leaves office following a scandal as a function of the number of scandal stories in the local newspaper. Estimates are derived from the baseline Left Office model in Table 2. Shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals.

Of course, whether a politician leaves office is only one measure of accountability. In cases where a scandal-implicated politician runs for re-election, we would expect greater media scrutiny of his behavior to reduce his popularity. Even if they win re-election, a smaller margin of victory would be one indicator of accountability. To examine that possibility, I focus on the 85 incumbents in my data set who were implicated in a scandal, made it through their primary, and then ran in the general

election. I compare their pre-scandal general election vote share to their post-scandal vote share to estimate the relationship between scandal coverage and electoral accountability.<sup>29</sup> The results of the model appear in the third column of Table 2. As in the punishment model, I control for a variety of other factors.

Again, I find a relationship between scandal coverage and the shift in the vote. As scandal coverage increases, politicians lose a larger share of the vote compared to their previous electoral victory. For every increase in 12 stories about a scandal, a politician loses 1 percent of their pre-scandal vote share. The more voters hear about a scandal, the weaker the electoral performance for politicians. Even if they do win, they have a smaller margin of victory, suggesting that the volume of coverage matters for accountability.

The over-time declines in coverage thus suggest that the damage from news coverage in recent years will be less of a concern for incumbents, because there simply isn't as much of it. For instance, in House contests, the average number of scandal stories between 2000 and 2009 was 100. Between 2010 and 2022, it was 23. According to the model, that reduction would mean that an incumbent on average could expect to lose about 6 points fewer in the last decade than in the 2000 to 2009 period. These patterns suggest that the decline of local news represents a gift to politicians who find themselves embroiled in a scandal.

## **Conclusion**

There has been no shortage of concern about the implications of the local news crisis for political accountability. But for all of the worries that newspaper closures and newsroom layoffs may diminish the quality of representation in state and local politics, there has been a lack of evidence connecting the two. In this paper, however, I have shown that observers should indeed be worried

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<sup>29</sup> I gathered vote data from congressional election data sets maintained by Gary Jacobson, the MIT Election Lab, and Daily Kos.

that the retrenchment at local newspapers may cause bad behavior by elected officials to go unreported or underreported. Coverage of state and local scandals has been declining for two decades and now stands at one-quarter of its peak. Less scandal reporting is associated with a lower likelihood of elected officials being punished, suggesting that the hollowing out of the local news industry is likely to help politicians escape accountability for bad performance.

The findings speak to theoretical debates about the role of the news media in a changing political environment. One perspective suggests that the rise of partisanship, a decline in media trust, and shrinking audiences have rendered traditional news organizations irrelevant for holding elected officials accountable. But my analysis suggests such a conclusion is premature. Although mainstream news outlets are now just one source among many, their reporting on scandals increases the risks for politicians. As such, political leaders still have something to fear when they are accused of wrongdoing and the media aggressively pursue the story.

My findings also contribute to an important debate about the mechanism by which the news media enforce accountability. In a recent study, Auslen (2024) finds little evidence that news reporting increases public knowledge of state legislators or affects voting behavior in elections. Instead, he suggests that the media enforce political accountability simply by monitoring politicians and increasing the perceived costs of going against their constituents' preferences. My results indicate that, at least at times, media coverage can also hold officials accountable by directly activating voters. To be sure, scandals may constitute a special case, because the public pays more attention when an elected official is facing accusations of wrongdoing. More work that seeks to identify the circumstances under which the media enforce accountability through monitoring or voter activation would be welcome.

To be sure, this research also has limitations. First, we should exercise caution in drawing strong causal connections between the volume of news coverage and accountability for state and

local elected officials. Because significant political scandals are relatively rare, the data set for my analysis is necessarily small and statistical approaches that would allow for better causal identification are not feasible. Thus, research that adopts approaches to studying the relationship between local news and accountability with larger data sets that allow for alternative estimation strategies would be welcome. Recent efforts by Auslen (2024) and Myers (2024), for instance, are positive developments in that regard.

Second, in focusing on political scandals, I have chosen to study what is perhaps low-hanging fruit – the place we might most readily observe declines in local media accountability. But for our system of government to work most effectively, we need news media that can not only alert voters when elected officials are letting them down, but also tell voters what government leaders are doing well so that they can be rewarded. That kind of information is more likely to arise from routine reporting about the activities of state and local government. And it is that type of mundane coverage that has grown especially hard to find in recent years. As a result, elected officials who solve problems and manage government effectively may not get the credit they deserve. If that happens, voters may be less likely to reward politicians who perform well, further weakening the connection between government performance and accountability.

Third, my research, like most others, has focused on the demise of local newspapers. This is generally justified by the fact that newspapers remain the main source of original local reporting in most communities. But it has left us with a limited understanding of the role played by alternative sources of local news in the changing local media environment. For example, in the last 20 years, hundreds of local news startups have emerged, seeking to fill the void left by the decline of traditional media outlets. Because little research has focused on these newer news organizations, it remains unclear whether and how they can enhance political accountability at either the state or local level. Yet the full spectrum of changes to the local news industry – both its troubles but also its

emerging possibilities – deserves attention. Otherwise, we may be missing an important component of a system that can promote democratic accountability.

Despite of these limitations, this research might prove to be a useful starting point for studies that extend beyond statewide and congressional officials. Indeed, it is coverage of local government – mayor’s offices, city halls, and county commissions – that has taken the biggest hit in recent years. With fewer journalists covering the actions of local elected representatives, corruption and malfeasance in municipal and county government are likely to unnoticed. And even when scandals do break, many local news organizations will not have the resources to sustain the reporting that could lead to a poor-performing official’s ouster or defeat. If that situation becomes the norm in cities and towns across the country, the quality of governance may very well suffer further.



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## Supplemental Appendix for “The Local News Crisis and Political Scandal”

### Details on Scandal Cases

The list of scandals I use in the paper draws on a data set compiled by Nathaniel Rakich. The database is here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ksBLxRR3GCZd33IvhkcNqqBd5K8HwlWC7YuAkVmS1lg/edit#gid=0>

I analyze scandals between 1990 and 2022 involving statewide officials and members of the United States House of Representatives. I do not include presidential scandals.

There are 246 separate scandals listed in the data set over this period. Some of the listed scandals, however, are not suitable for analysis, for varying reasons.

Some scandals were eliminated because they were still ongoing or unresolved by the end of 2022. This included, for instance, an ethics investigation of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez that was launched earlier that year. I also dropped cases in which a politician announced their resignation just as a scandal story was breaking. For instance, Rep. Chris Lee resigned in 2011 the same day reports began circulating about flirtatious emails he sent on Craigslist. In these cases, it is impossible to evaluate the relationship between the volume of local media coverage and accountability because the politician pre-emptively announced their departure from office.

In other cases, a scandal broke after a politician had already announced they wouldn't run for re-election or had lost their re-election bid, as occurred with Rhode Island Gov. Edward DiPrete in 1990. In two instances (Madison Cawthorn and Andrew Cuomo), I merged separate scandals for the same politician because reporting about them overlapped significantly. A few other scandals had particular circumstances that prohibited inclusion in the data. The table below shows each case.

Bill Sorrell	2015	Announced he wouldn't seek re-election right after scandal breaks
Tom Garrett	2018	Announced resignation before scandal breaks
Richard Burr	2020	Announced resignation before scandal breaks
Mike Hunter	2021	Announced resignation before scandal breaks
Bob Livingston	1998	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Ed Schrock	2004	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Jim McGreevey	2004	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
David Petersen	2006	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Mark Foley	2006	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Eric Massa	2010	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Mark Souder	2010	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Chris Lee	2011	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Jennifer Carroll	2013	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Rick Sheehy	2013	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Lavon Heidemann	2014	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Rob McCord	2015	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Trent Franks	2017	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Eric Schneiderman	2018	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks
Van Taylor	2022	Announced resignation right after scandal breaks

Madison Cawthorn	2021/2	Combined five scandals into one case because timing and reporting overlapped
Andrew Cuomo	2021	Combined five scandals into one case because timing and reporting overlapped
Roy Moore	2003	Controversy spanned exceedingly long period, prohibiting consistent analysis
Newt Gingrich	1997	Exceedingly difficult to distinguish scandal reporting from other speaker coverage
Jeff Landry	2021	No resolution as of the end of 2022
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	2022	No resolution as of the end of 2022
Tom Suozzi	2022	Scandal breaks after he had announced he would not run for re-election
George Ryan	2002	Scandal breaks after he had announced he would not run for re-election
Jimmy Duncan Jr.	2018	Scandal breaks after he had announced plans to retire
Rick Nolan	2018	Scandal breaks after he had announced plans to retire
Edward DiPrete	1990	Scandal breaks after re-election loss
Kai Kahele	2022	Scandal broke after 2022 midterms
Pat Fallon	2022	Unable to find appropriate local news outlet for coding

After dropping those cases, the resulting sample for analysis is 211 scandals.

As noted in the paper, I examined coverage in a state's largest newspaper (for statewide officials) or the largest newspaper in a congressional district (for House members). In 12 of my cases, I was not able to access the electronic archives for the largest in-district paper and thus used the state's largest newspaper to study scandal coverage. This decision does not have any effect on the results, as the findings are the same when I drop these cases.

In Table A1, I list the scandals in my analysis, along with a short description that was used for the severity survey described below.

**Table A1. List of Scandals and Newspaper for Coding**

Politician	Year	State	Position	Paper	Description of Accusation
Buz Lukens	1990	Ohio	Representative	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	Paid a 16-year-old girl for sex
Chuck Robb	1990	Virginia	Senator	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Had an extramarital affair seven years earlier
David Durenberger	1990	Minnesota	Senator	<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>	Inappropriately accepted \$100,000 in speaking fees and inappropriately collected \$40,000 in travel reimbursements
Carl "Chris" Perkins	1991	Kentucky	Representative	<i>Lexington Herald Leader</i>	Misused hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions and improperly obtained bank loans.
Carroll Hubbard	1991	Kentucky	Representative	<i>Lexington Herald Leader</i>	Wrote bad checks and overdrew their government bank account without paying any penalty
Lawrence Smith	1991	Florida	Representative	<i>Sun Sentinel</i>	Wrote bad checks and overdrew their government bank account without paying any penalty
Mary Rose Oakar	1991	Ohio	Representative	<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	Wrote bad checks and overdrew their government bank account without paying any penalty
Bob Packwood	1992	Oregon	Senator	<i>Oregonian</i>	Committed sexual abuse and assault against 10 women, mostly former staffers and lobbyists
Brock Adams	1992	Washington	Senator	<i>Seattle Times</i>	Committed sexual assault, molestation and rape against eight women
H. Guy Hunt	1992	Alabama	Governor	<i>Huntsville Times</i>	Used state-owned aircraft to travel to paid speaking engagements
Nicholas Mavroules	1992	Massachusetts	Representative	<i>Boston Globe</i>	Committed bribery, racketeering, and extortion for accepting illegal gifts and failing to report them
William Webster	1992	Missouri	Attorney General	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	Financially benefited from claims made against a state's worker's compensation fund
Austin Murphy	1992	Pennsylvania	Representative	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	Misused funds from the House post office
Dan Rostenkowski	1993	Illinois	Representative	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Headed a conspiracy to launder Post Office money through stamps and postal vouchers
Ernie Preate	1993	Pennsylvania	Attorney General	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Took political contributions from operators of illegal gambling businesses
Ken Calvert	1993	California	Representative	<i>Riverside Press-Enterprise</i>	Had sex in their car with a prostitute
Judith Moriarty	1994	Missouri	Secretary of State	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	Used their position to help their son file for political office after the deadline has passed by fraudulently back-dating a government form
Mel Reynolds	1994	Illinois	Representative	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Engaged in a sexual relationship with a 16-year-old campaign volunteer that began during a previous campaign. The relationship involved sexual abuse.
Walter Tucker III	1994	California	Representative	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	Engaged in tax evasion and accepted \$30,000 in bribes when holding a previous office
Barbara-Rose Collins	1995	Michigan	Representative	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Used staffers to perform personal and campaign work on government office time. They also cashed in campaign funds for personal use and used government funds for their campaign.
Fife Symington	1995	Arizona	Governor	<i>Arizona Daily Star</i>	Engaged in bank fraud and defrauded lenders during an earlier career as a commercial real estate developer
Jim Guy Tucker	1995	Arkansas	Governor	<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	Fraudulently arranged a questionable loan for the associate of a fellow politician

Wes Cooley	1996	Oregon	Representative	<i>Oregonian</i>	Falsely claimed they had served in the Army Special Forces, and hid their marriage so their spouse could fraudulently receive veteran's benefits from a prior marriage
Jay Kim	1997	California	Representative	<i>Riverside Press-Enterprise</i>	Accepted \$230,000 in illegal campaign donations
Dan Burton	1998	Indiana	Representative	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	Had a child with a former state employee out of wedlock
Helen Chenoweth-Hage	1998	Idaho	Representative	<i>Idaho Spokesman-Review</i>	Engaged in a six-year affair with a married person, who was at the time their boss
Henry Hyde	1998	Illinois	Representative	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Engaged in an affair with a married person
Mary Fallin	1998	Oklahoma	Lieutenant Governor	<i>The Oklahoman</i>	Engaged in an affair with a state highway patrol officer
Bob Barr	1999	Georgia	Representative	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Cheated on their spouse years earlier with the person they are now married to
Jim Brown	1999	Louisiana	Insurance Commissioner	<i>Baton Rouge Advocate</i>	Participated in insurance fraud
Robert Torricelli	1999	New Jersey	Senator	<i>Newark Star-Ledger</i>	Took improper gifts from a campaign contributor
Chuck Quackenbush	2000	California	Insurance Commissioner	<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	Accepted financial support from insurance companies after allowing them to pay their clients much less than the clients were due following a major earthquake
Gary Condit	2001	California	Representative	<i>Modesto Bee</i>	Had an extramarital affair with a government intern
Jim Traficant	2001	Ohio	Representative	<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	Took campaign funds for personal use
George Ryan	2002	Illinois	Governor	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	In a previous government position, had presided over an office that allowed to the illegal sale of government licenses, contracts and leases
Paul Patton	2002	Kentucky	Governor	<i>Lexington Herald Leader</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair and arranged regulatory favors for the business the person worked for
Bill Janklow	2003	South Dakota	Representative	<i>Argus Leader</i>	Killed a motorcyclist by driving a car through a stop sign
Bob Wise	2003	West Virginia	Governor	<i>Charleston Gazette</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with a married person
Frank Ballance	2003	North Carolina	Representative	<i>Rocky Mount Telegram</i>	Took \$2.3 million in state funds intended for a youth foundation and used the money for themselves, their family, and their church
John Rowland	2003	Connecticut	Governor	<i>Hartford Courant</i>	A contractor doing business with the state paid for and made improvements to their private weekend home
Lorelee Byrd	2003	Nebraska	Treasurer	<i>Omaha World Herald</i>	Wrote \$300,000 in fraudulent checks to avoid budget cuts to their office
Meg Scott Phipps	2003	North Carolina	Agriculture Commissioner	<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	Took illegal payoffs from carnival companies seeking to secure state contracts
Steve LaTourette	2003	Ohio	Representative	<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	Had an extramarital affair with their chief of staff
Kathy Augustine	2004	Nevada	Controller	<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	Used state personnel and equipment to run their re-election campaign
Kevin Shelley	2004	California	Secretary of State	<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	Accepted campaign donations that had been illegally transferred to their campaign
Bob Taft	2005	Ohio	Governor	<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	Failed to disclose golf outings and other gifts paid for by lobbyists
Don Sherwood	2005	Pennsylvania	Representative	<i>Wilkes-Barre Times Leader</i>	Had a 5-year extramarital affair, and was accused of choking the person during that relationship



Duke Cunningham	2005	California	Representative	<i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i>	Received hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from a defense contractor in exchange for steering government contracts to the company
Ernie Fletcher	2005	Kentucky	Governor	<i>Lexington Herald Leader</i>	Circumvented the state merit system for hiring, promoting, demoting and firing state employees by basing decisions on employees' political loyalties
Robert Vigil	2005	New Mexico	Treasurer	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	Pressured a government official to hire the spouse of a former state treasurer as a subcontractor
Tom DeLay	2005	Texas	Representative	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	Funneled \$190,000 in corporate donations through a political party committee and then back to seven fellow party candidates
Bill Jefferson	2006	Louisiana	Representative	<i>Times-Picayune</i>	Accepted \$400,000 in bribes from a technology company in exchange for pressuring the federal government to adopt the company's technology
Bob Ney	2006	Ohio	Representative	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	Accepted bribes from a lobbyist in exchange for pushing legislation that would allow their clients to build casinos
Douglas Martin	2006	Arizona	State Mine Inspector	<i>Arizona Daily Star</i>	Used their position as a state official to lease a new pickup truck and charged the state for the cost
John Conyers	2006	Michigan	Representative	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Forced staff to baby-sit and chauffeur their children and to work on the campaigns of other politicians
David Scott	2007	Georgia	Representative	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Paid \$643,000 for political advertising to a company owned by their family
David Vitter	2007	Louisiana	Senator	<i>Times-Picayune</i>	Hired prostitutes from a company that was convicted for running a large-scale prostitution service
Jeff McMahan	2007	Oklahoma	Auditor	<i>The Oklahoman</i>	Took improper cash and gifts from a state businessman
Jim Gibbons	2007	Nevada	Governor	<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	Sexually assaulted a woman in a parking garage, as well as accepted more than \$100,000 in gifts from a company
John Doolittle	2007	California	Representative	<i>Sacramento Bee</i>	Their spouse's consulting firm was involved with a lobbyist who had defrauded clients and bribed elected officials
Larry Craig	2007	Idaho	Senator	<i>Idaho Statesman</i>	Solicited sex from a male undercover police officer in an airport bathroom
Paul Morrison	2007	Kansas	Attorney General	<i>Wichita Eagle</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with a person, and also asked that person obtain sensitive information about a political rival
Rick Renzi	2007	Arizona	Representative	<i>Arizona Daily Sun</i>	Introduced and voted for legislation benefiting their father's defense contracting company, which was also a large contributor to their political campaign
Ted Stevens	2007	Alaska	Senator	<i>Anchorage Daily News</i>	Accepted home renovations valued at \$100,000 in exchange for supporting the owner of the company's business in dealings with the federal government
Thomas Ravenel	2007	South Carolina	Treasurer	<i>The State</i>	Indicted for buying cocaine
Charlie Rangel	2008	New York	Representative	<i>New York Times</i>	Used congressional letterhead to solicit donations from corporations for their non-profit, and benefited from below-market rates for an apartment they owned
Eliot Spitzer	2008	New York	Governor	<i>Albany Times Union</i>	Hired prostitutes over a several-year period
Marc Dann	2008	Ohio	Attorney General	<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with an employee in their office
Mike Easley	2008	North Carolina	Governor	<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	Used government funds to pay for two trips to European museums by their spouse
Rod Blagojevich	2008	Illinois	Governor	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Tried to sell an appointment to a vacant U.S. Senate seat in exchange for bribes

Sarah Palin	2008	Alaska	Governor	<i>Anchorage Daily News</i>	Tried to have a state trooper fired because the trooper was involved in a custody dispute with a member of the politician's family
Tim Mahoney	2008	Florida	Representative	<i>Palm Beach Post</i>	Paid hush money to a lover to conceal an extramarital affair
Vito Fossella	2008	New York	Representative	<i>New York Times</i>	Arrested for driving under the influence, which led to the discovery that they had a second family unbeknownst to their spouse and children
John Ensign	2009	Nevada	Senator	<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with a member of their campaign staff
Mark Sanford	2009	South Carolina	Governor	<i>The State</i>	Disappeared for nearly a week while visiting a lover in Argentina as part of an extramarital affair
Maxine Waters	2009	California	Representative	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	Tried to arrange federal aid for a bank whose executives were major campaign contributors and whose stock was owned by their spouse
Sharon Keller	2009	Texas	Criminal Appeals Judge	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	Did not disclose nearly \$2 million in real estate holdings
John Tierney	2010	Massachusetts	Representative	<i>Salem News</i>	The brothers of their spouse were indicted for running an illegal gambling business, and their spouse pleaded guilty to helping file false tax returns
Alcee Hastings	2011	Florida	Representative	<i>Palm Beach Post</i>	Made unwanted sexual advances toward a staff member
Anthony Weiner	2011	New York	Representative	<i>New York Times</i>	Sent sexually explicit messages to multiple women, including a minor
Charlie White	2011	Indiana	Secretary of State	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	Misrepresented their address to keep their seat on a local government council but voted at another address, amounting to voter fraud
David Rivera	2011	Florida	Representative	<i>Miami Herald</i>	Secretly funded a candidate in the other party's primary as a way to weaken their eventual general election opponent
David Wu	2011	Oregon	Representative	<i>Oregonian</i>	Engaged in a sexual encounter with a teenager that the teenager described as unwanted
Ken Ard	2011	South Carolina	Lieutenant Governor	<i>The State</i>	Used campaign money for personal use and failed to disclose campaign expenses in a previous campaign
Laura Richardson	2011	California	Representative	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	Used their government office staff to conduct campaign and personal activities on their behalf, and then attempted to obstruct the investigation into the allegations
Nathan Deal	2011	Georgia	Governor	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Used campaign funds to pay legal bills, personally profited from their campaign's rental of aircraft, and accepted campaign contributions beyond the legal limits
Scott Walker	2011	Wisconsin	Governor	<i>Wisconsin State Journal</i>	In a previous elected position, appointed a staff member who was accused of stealing money from a fund to help wounded military veterans
Diane Hathaway	2012	Michigan	Supreme Court Justice	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Manipulated mortgage documents and hid assets from banks in order to avoid paying debts on homes they owned
Dustin McDaniel	2012	Arkansas	Attorney General	<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with a married person
Jesse Jackson Jr.	2012	Illinois	Representative	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Misused campaign funds to redecorate their house and buy an expensive watch for a friend
Joan Orié Melvin	2012	Pennsylvania	Supreme Court Justice	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Used government office staff and office resources to help run their sister's campaign for another elective office
Michael Grimm	2012	New York	Representative	<i>New York Times</i>	Concealed more than \$1 million in receipts for a restaurant they previously ran and failed to report hundreds of thousands of dollars in employee wages in an effort to lower their federal and state tax payments

Mike Crapo	2012	Idaho	Senator	<i>Idaho Statesman</i>	Arrested for driving under the influence
Scott DesJarlais	2012	Tennessee	Representative	<i>Chattanooga Times Free Press</i>	During a previous career as a physician, had a sexual relationship with a patient and tried to persuade them to get an abortion
Tom Horne	2012	Arizona	Attorney General	<i>Arizona Daily Star</i>	Coordinated with an independent expenditure committee during their 2010 general election campaign for attorney general, in violation of campaign finance laws
Bob McDonnell	2013	Virginia	Governor	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Accepted more than \$135,000 in gifts from the CEO of a company seeking to do business with the government
Bob Menendez	2013	New Jersey	Senator	<i>Newark Star-Ledger</i>	Accepted gifts from a businessman, failed to disclose those gifts, and used their position to advance the businessman's interests
Chip Flowers	2013	Delaware	Treasurer	<i>Delaware State News</i>	Misused government funds to pay for a business trip to Alaska
Cindy Hill	2013	Wyoming	Superintendent	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i>	Misused a government plane and created a hostile work environment for staffers
Don Young	2013	Alaska	Representative	<i>Anchorage Daily News</i>	Used campaign funds to take family trips
John Swallow	2013	Utah	Attorney General	<i>Salt Lake Tribune</i>	Involved in an effort to thwart a federal investigation into a local businessman's company
Mark Darr	2013	Arkansas	Lieutenant Governor	<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	Took \$30,000 of their campaign funds for personal use
Martha Shoffner	2013	Arkansas	Treasurer	<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	Accepted \$36,000 from a local business owner, which they used to cover rent payments for their apartment
Michele Bachmann	2013	Minnesota	Representative	<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>	Failed to disclose payments to a state senator, improperly coordinated with a political action committee, and tried to silence whistleblowing staffers
Trey Radel	2013	Florida	Representative	<i>Miami Herald</i>	Tried to buy cocaine from an undercover federal officer
Cathy McMorris Rodgers	2014	Washington	Representative	<i>Spokesman Review</i>	Improperly mixed campaign money and official government funds to help win a campaign for a leadership position within their party
Chris Christie	2014	New Jersey	Governor	<i>Newark Star-Ledger</i>	Used their office's power to close the entrance to a major bridge, causing a massive traffic jam in an effort to create political problems for a political opponent
Dan Rutherford	2014	Illinois	Treasurer	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Sexually harassed a former staffer and pressured them to do political work on government time
John Kitzhaber	2014	Oregon	Governor	<i>Oregonian</i>	Their fiancée admitted to fraudulently helping a person get a green card and had also once led an illegal marijuana grow operation
John Walsh	2014	Montana	Senator	<i>Billings Gazette</i>	Plagiarized a final paper required for a master's degree from the United States Army War College
Kathleen Kane	2014	Pennsylvania	Attorney General	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Secretly shut down a law enforcement investigation into fellow party officials who were suspected of illegally accepting cash, money orders, and gifts from an undercover operative
Rick Perry	2014	Texas	Governor	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	Threatened to veto \$7.5 million in funding for a state public corruption prosecution department
Vance McAllister	2014	Louisiana	Representative	<i>Baton Rouge Advocate</i>	Was caught on videotape kissing a married staff member

Aaron Schock	2015	Illinois	Representative	<i>Peoria Journal Star</i>	Spent over \$100,000 in government funds on office renovations and had requested reimbursement for mileage on a personal car that exceeded the mileage the car had been driven
Alan Grayson	2015	Florida	Representative	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	Years earlier, committed domestic abuse against their spouse at the time
Blake Farenthold	2015	Texas	Representative	<i>San Antonio Express News</i>	Sexually harassed a staffer and created a hostile work environment
Chaka Fattah	2015	Pennsylvania	Representative	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Misappropriated hundreds of thousands of dollars of federal, charitable and campaign funds and accepted an \$18,000 bribe from a person seeking an ambassadorship
Dianna Duran	2015	New Mexico	Secretary of State	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	Illegally used campaign funds for personal use
Drew Wrigley	2015	North Dakota	Lieutenant Governor	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair
Ed Whitfield	2015	Kentucky	Representative	<i>Lexington Herald Leader</i>	Gave information and access to their spouse, a lobbyist, as they pushed legislation for a client
Frank Guinta	2015	New Hampshire	Representative	<i>New Hampshire Union Leader</i>	Inappropriately accepted a \$355,000 donation from their parents during a previous campaign
Henry McMaster	2015	South Carolina	Lieutenant Governor	<i>The State</i>	Accepted \$70,000 in donations to a previous campaign, exceeding the limit for donations in that campaign
James Comer	2015	Kentucky	Agriculture Commissioner	<i>Lexington Herald Leader</i>	Accused of physical and mental abuse by a former girlfriend when they were in college 30 years earlier
Ken Paxton	2015	Texas	Attorney General	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	Defrauded investors in a tech startup years earlier by not disclosing they were being paid by the company to recruit investors
Mark Meadows	2015	North Carolina	Representative	<i>Hendersonville Times-News</i>	Continued to pay an employee who had resigned from the politician's office after accusations of sexual harassment
Mike Honda	2015	California	Representative	<i>San Jose Mercury News</i>	Improperly used their government aides to perform campaign work when they were supposed to be working on government business, and improperly used official government events to raise campaign donations
Paul LePage	2015	Maine	Governor	<i>Portland Press-Herald</i>	Threatened to withhold \$500,000 of state funding for a school if they hired a political rival
Robert Bentley	2015	Alabama	Governor	<i>Huntsville Times</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with a staff member
Robert Pittenger	2015	North Carolina	Representative	<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	Transferred \$2.3 million from their former real estate company to their political campaign, claiming that the money was a personal loan
Troy Kelley	2015	Washington	Auditor	<i>Seattle Times</i>	While working in the real estate industry years earlier, they took millions of dollars in fees that should have been refunded to clients. Also failed to properly report the money on their tax returns and claimed fraudulent tax deductions
Charles Boustany	2016	Louisiana	Representative	<i>Baton Rouge Advocate</i>	Hired a prostitute years earlier
Corrine Brown	2016	Florida	Representative	<i>Florida Times-Union</i>	Ran a charity to give scholarships to underprivileged students, but instead used the money as a personal slush fund
Roy Moore	2016	Alabama	Supreme Court Justice	<i>Huntsville Times</i>	Violated federal law by directing probate judges to deny marriage licenses to gay couples
Sid Miller	2016	Texas	Agriculture Commissioner	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	Failed to properly report campaign donations

Terry McAuliffe	2016	Virginia	Governor	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Improperly accepted a \$120,000 campaign donation from Chinese businessman
Al Franken	2017	Minnesota	Senator	<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>	Years earlier, improperly kissed a fellow performer during a skit, and posed for a photograph in which they pretended to grope the performer's breasts
Bob Brady	2017	Pennsylvania	Representative	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	During an earlier campaign, paid \$90,000 to an opponent in order to get the opponent to withdraw from the race
Bobby Scott	2017	Virginia	Representative	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Sexually harassed a former office staffer years earlier, touching their knee and back on separate occasions, and implying that they were interested in a relationship
Chris Collins	2017	New York	Representative	<i>Buffalo News</i>	Used insider information gained by virtue of their position in office to recruit investors to buy stock in a company in which they were an investor
Dana Rohrabacher	2017	California	Representative	<i>Orange County Register</i>	Engaged in potentially inappropriate meetings and trips to Russia, and met with Wikileaks founder Julian Assange
Devin Nunes	2017	California	Representative	<i>Fresno Bee</i>	Made unauthorized disclosures of classified information
Duncan D. Hunter	2017	California	Representative	<i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i>	Took up to \$250,000 in campaign donations for personal use
Ed Murray	2017	Wyoming	Secretary of State	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i>	Sexually assaulted a woman years earlier when they worked together at a law firm
Joe Barton	2017	Texas	Representative	<i>Fort Worth Star-Telegram</i>	Sent sexually explicit messages to multiple people
John Conyers	2017	Michigan	Representative	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Inappropriately touched a former staffer and inappropriately touched other members of their staff as well
Mike Stack	2017	Pennsylvania	Lieutenant Governor	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Verbally abused staff
Raúl Grijalva	2017	Arizona	Representative	<i>Arizona Republic</i>	Arranged a severance package for a former aide who had accused the politician of creating a hostile work environment
Rubén Kihuen	2017	Nevada	Representative	<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	Repeatedly made sexual advances toward a campaign aide and inappropriately touched them on two occasions
Tim Murphy	2017	Pennsylvania	Representative	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair and pressured their lover to get an abortion
Adam Laxalt	2018	Nevada	Attorney General	<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	Assaulted a police officer years earlier when they were a teenager
Bill Schuette	2018	Michigan	Attorney General	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Used staff in their campaign office to serve as witnesses to sales of homes in the Virgin Islands
Curtis Hill	2018	Indiana	Attorney General	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	Inappropriately touched at least six women, including groping their buttocks and under their clothes
David Schweikert	2018	Arizona	Representative	<i>Arizona Republic</i>	Misspent official funds and received illegal campaign contributions from several staffers and employees
Elizabeth Esty	2018	Connecticut	Representative	<i>Connecticut Post</i>	Failed to examine allegations of sexual harassment against their chief of staff, and instead arranged a severance package and recommended them for a job at a non-profit
Eric Greitens	2018	Missouri	Governor	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair, in which they took a photo of their lover while bound and naked and threatened to release the photo if they divulged the affair. The allegation also included a charge of sexual assault.

Jim Jordan	2018	Ohio	Representative	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	Years earlier, failed to report sexual abuse allegations by students at a university where they were an assistant wrestling coach. The abuse was alleged to have been carried out by the head coach.
John Hickenlooper	2018	Colorado	Governor	<i>Denver Post</i>	Used private jets paid for by wealthy donors but did not disclose the gifts as the law requires.
Keith Ellison	2018	Minnesota	Representative	<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>	Years earlier had attempted to drag their then-girlfriend off the bed while shouting obscenities
Kris Kobach	2018	Kansas	Secretary of State	<i>Wichita Eagle</i>	Failed to follow an order by a federal judge to notify approximately 18,000 voters that they were fully registered and could vote
Mia Love	2018	Utah	Representative	<i>Salt Lake Tribune</i>	Raised more than \$1 million for a primary election that they never expected to face, a move that could violate campaign finance law
Patrick Meehan	2018	Pennsylvania	Representative	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Used taxpayers' money to settle a sexual harassment claim brought by a staff member
Rick Nolan	2018	Minnesota	Representative	<i>Duluth News Tribune</i>	Allowed a staffer who had been accused of sexual harassment to resign to avoid disciplinary action, and then hired them back on their campaign
Rod Blum	2018	Iowa	Representative	<i>Cedar Rapids Gazette</i>	Failed to disclose their role in a company that they formed, as required by law
Scott Taylor	2018	Virginia	Representative	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Members of their campaign staff illegally added fake names to ballot access petitions intended to help an independent candidate get on the ballot. The independent candidate appearing on the ballot would have helped the politician's campaign.
Tom Schedler	2018	Louisiana	Secretary of State	<i>Baton Rouge Advocate</i>	Sexually harassed an employee over the course of a decade, and then transferred them to less desirable jobs when their advances were rejected
Tony Cárdenas	2018	California	Representative	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	Sexually abused a minor decades earlier
Alcee Hastings	2019	Florida	Representative	<i>Sun Sentinel</i>	Paid an unusually high salary to a staffer who was also their girlfriend
Bill Huizenga	2019	Michigan	Representative	<i>Grand Rapids Press</i>	Used campaign funds on personal meals, vacations and other activities
Eric Holcomb	2019	Indiana	Governor	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	Allowed government labor officials to cover up the death of a worker in an effort to encourage the worker's employer to locate its headquarters in the politician's state
Henry Cuellar	2019	Texas	Representative	<i>Laredo Morning Times</i>	Fired a staffer after finding out they were pregnant
Ilhan Omar	2019	Minnesota	Representative	<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>	Jointly filed taxes with a person they were not legally married to, violating state law
JB Pritzker	2019	Illinois	Governor	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Removed the toilets from a property they owned, making it "uninhabitable" by state law, and then requested a lower property tax assessment as a result. The updated assessment reduced the property tax bill by \$230,000 per year.
Jim Beck	2019	Georgia	Insurance Commissioner	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Defrauded their former employer out of \$2 million by committing arson on properties, and used some of the money to help fund their political campaign
Jim Hagedorn	2019	Minnesota	Representative	<i>Mankato Free Press</i>	Paid more than \$100,000 in printing contracts to a company that was partially owned by one of their staff members
Justin Fairfax	2019	Virginia	Lieutenant Governor	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Accused of sexual assault by two women in separate episodes years earlier
Katie Hill	2019	California	Representative	<i>Santa Clarita Signal</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with a staffer
Mark Herring	2019	Virginia	Attorney General	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Wore blackface as part of a costume at a party years earlier

Matt Gaetz	2019	Florida	Representative	<i>Northwest Florida Daily News</i>	Intimidated a witness at a government hearing by threatening to divulge sensitive information about them
Michelle Lujan Grisham	2019	New Mexico	Governor	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	Sexually harassed a staffer during a staff meeting
Ralph Northam	2019	Virginia	Governor	<i>Virginian-Pilot</i>	Wore blackface years earlier in a yearbook photo that also included a person dressed in a KKK robe and hood
Rashida Tlaib	2019	Michigan	Representative	<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	Used congressional campaign money for personal expenses
Steve Watkins	2019	Kansas	Representative	<i>Topeka Capital-Journal</i>	Violated voter registration laws by listing their address as a UPS store and voting based on that address
Donna Shalala	2020	Florida	Representative	<i>Miami Herald</i>	Violated the law by failing to disclose 500 stock trades
Jason Ravnsborg	2020	South Dakota	Attorney General	<i>Argus Leader</i>	Struck and killed a 55-year-old pedestrian with their car and left the scene of the accident
Kelly Loeffler	2020	Georgia	Senator	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Engaged in insider trading by selling stock vulnerable to the covid pandemic, just days after attending a private government briefing on the spread of the disease
Matt Gaetz	2020	Florida	Representative	<i>Northwest Florida Daily News</i>	Improperly sent \$28,000 in taxpayer funds to a company connected to a speech-writing consultant in violation of campaign finance rules. Also violated a rule prohibiting officials or their family members accepting significant gifts or services.
Mike Kelly	2020	Pennsylvania	Representative	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	Their spouse used nonpublic information gained through the politician's position to earn thousands of dollars through a well-timed purchase of a steel company's stock
Sanford Bishop	2020	Georgia	Representative	<i>Albany Herald</i>	Spent more than \$90,000 in official funds and campaign funds on personal expenses, including fuel, golf, meals, travel, tuition and entertainment
Steven Horsford	2020	Nevada	Representative	<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	Engaged in a decade-long affair with a former college student and intern
Alex Mooney	2021	West Virginia	Representative	<i>Charleston Gazette</i>	Violated federal law by accepting impermissible gifts and using official resources for personal purposes, including \$10,800 for a vacation to Aruba and free stays at a Capitol Hill home owned by a private company
Andrew Cuomo	2021	New York	Governor	<i>Albany Times Union</i>	Covered up the number of state nursing home deaths during the covid pandemic, and sexually harassed at least 11 women during their time in office
Doug Lamborn	2021	Colorado	Representative	<i>Colorado Springs Gazette</i>	Did not follow covid protocols during the height of the pandemic and prevented staff from telling anyone when they had been in close contact with staffers who had tested positive for covid. They also asked aides to run family errands, and had aides assist their son in completing applications for federal jobs. They also allowed their son to live in the Capitol basement.
Fiona Ma	2021	California	Treasurer	<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	Exposed their backside to a state employee, climbed into their bed when the two shared an AirBnB rental, and subsequently fired them for rebuffing their advances
Jeff Fortenberry	2021	Nebraska	Representative	<i>Lincoln Journal Star</i>	Accepted \$30,000 in illegal campaign contributions from a foreign donor, funneled through three fake donors at a fundraiser years earlier
John Merrill	2021	Alabama	Secretary of State	<i>Huntsville Times</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair with a legal assistant, the second time they were accused of having an affair

Kathy McGuiness	2021	Delaware	Auditor	<i>Delaware State News</i>	Abused their position by hiring their daughter to a government position, structuring payments under a consulting contract to avoid accounting scrutiny, and intimidating employees who were cooperating with investigators
Marie Newman	2021	Illinois	Representative	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Promised an activist a job in their congressional office in exchange for the activist not mounting a primary challenge and agreed to adopt policy positions the activist requested
Marjorie Taylor Greene	2021	Georgia	Representative	<i>Dalton Daily Citizen</i>	Broke state law by claiming homestead exemptions on two properties, when the law allows homeowners to claim only one exemption
Matt Gaetz	2021	Florida	Representative	<i>Northwest Florida Daily News</i>	Had sex with an underage girl who was part of sex-trafficking ring
Ronny Jackson	2021	Texas	Representative	<i>Amarillo Globe-News</i>	As the White House physician, made sexual and denigrating comments about a female subordinate, violated a policy preventing alcohol use while on a presidential trip, and took prescription-strength sleeping medication that prompted concerns about their ability to provide proper care
Steven Palazzo	2021	Mississippi	Representative	<i>Sun Herald</i>	Their campaign committee paid \$60,000 for rent at a property that the politician owned and \$128,000 to their ex-spouse's accounting firm, in violation of rules preventing personal use of campaign funds
Tom Malinowski	2021	New Jersey	Representative	<i>Newark Star-Ledger</i>	Failed to publicly disclose at least \$671,000 in personal stock trades in 2020 at the outset of the covid pandemic
Tom Reed	2021	New York	Representative	<i>Buffalo News</i>	Years earlier, engaged in sexual misconduct with a lobbyist. The lobbyist reported that the politician rubbed their back, unhooked their bra, and inched their hand up their thigh at a bar.
Anthony Brown	2022	Maryland	Representative	<i>Baltimore Sun</i>	Violated state election laws by using funds from their congressional campaign account to bankroll their bid for a statewide office
Brian Benjamin	2022	New York	Lieutenant Governor	<i>Albany Times Union</i>	When they were a state elected official years earlier, they used their position to steer a \$50,000 state grant to a nonprofit whose leader in turn arranged thousands of dollars in unlawful campaign contributions to the politician's campaign. They also falsified campaign-contribution paperwork and provided false information on forms.
Henry Cuellar	2022	Texas	Representative	<i>San Antonio Express News</i>	Investigated by federal authorities for ties to companies from Azerbaijan
John Rutherford	2022	Florida	Representative	<i>Florida Times-Union</i>	Failed to properly report their stock trades, violating federal law
Kristi Noem	2022	South Dakota	Governor	<i>Argus Leader</i>	Used their official position to intervene in their daughter's application for a real estate appraiser license
Madison Cawthorn	2022	North Carolina	Representative	<i>Hendersonville Times-News</i>	Violated rules on the compensation of staff; appeared in a video with a staffer's hand on their crotch; violated laws by failing to disclose hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of cryptocurrency sales; twice attempted to board a commercial airplane with a handgun in their carry-on baggage; drove after their license had been revoked for speeding tickets
Raphael Warnock	2022	Georgia	Senator	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Used campaign funds to cover legal expenses for a lawsuit relating to their time as a church minister
Ronny Jackson	2022	Texas	Representative	<i>Amarillo Globe-News</i>	Improperly used campaign funds to pay for unlimited access to a private dining club



Vicente Gonzalez	2022	Texas	Representative	<i>McAllen Monitor</i>	Broke state property tax laws for at least eight years, as both they and their spouse claimed homestead exemptions on properties they separately owned. Married couples may only claim a single exemption.
William Timmons	2022	South Carolina	Representative	<i>Spartanburg Herald-Journal</i>	Engaged in an extramarital affair

## Scandal Severity Survey

To gauge the severity of scandals in the data set, I conducted a small survey with 41 undergraduate students. For each scandal in the data set, I created a 1-2-sentence description of the accusations that were leveled at the elected official (see table above). The descriptions did not include the official's name, specific position, or information that would encourage respondents to evaluate the scandals in light of what they already knew about them. (Given that the scandals cover 30 years, it's unlikely that respondents were familiar with very many of them.) The text simply described the accusations in as straightforward a manner as possible and in a way that reflected the language that was commonly used news coverage about the scandal.

At the beginning of the survey, respondents read the following text: "Elected officials sometimes end up in scandals, in which they are accused of misbehavior. Those accusations vary in their seriousness. On the following pages, you'll see a list of scandals. For each one, you'll be asked to rate how serious you think the accusation is."

Each respondent was then shown 20 of the scandal descriptions and asked to rate the seriousness of the accusations on a scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicate a more serious accusation. Each description was rated by at least four respondents. I use the average of those scores as a measure of the severity of the scandal. The overall average was 3.5, with a minimum of 1.5 and a maximum of 5.

There are of course some limitations to measuring scandal severity this way. First, because the sample was made up of college students, they may evaluate accusations differently than the general public or journalists. For instance, young people may have more permissive attitudes about personal behavior, such as marital infidelity or illegal drug use. It is also possible they may judge more harshly politicians implicated in sexual misconduct scandals, like those that emerged from the #MeToo movement in recent years. Second, the severity of scandals may be context-dependent. For instance, campaign finance violations that might seem picayune today might have been thought of as serious in the 1980s. Thus, current evaluations might not reflect how those accusations were perceived at the time. Third, the perceived seriousness of an accusation might depend on the particular politician who's being accused. For instance, an accusation of marital infidelity against a conservative politician who has made "family values" a centerpiece of their political appeal might be considered more serious than if made against another official. But because the descriptions I have to respondents did not include this kind of contextual information, it would not be reflected in their judgments.

Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the results of the survey track with what we might expect. For instance, the 12 scandal descriptions that received an average of 5 – the highest possible score – include accusations of sexual assault and abuse, statutory rape, criminal fraud, and a cover-up of state nursing home deaths. These reflect conduct that seems likely to be viewed as extremely serious by most people. Likewise, the lowest-scoring accusations were comprised of things like using government office staff to do campaign work and engaging in extramarital affairs. A higher severity score increases the odds that an elected official leaves office following a scandal (see Table 2 in the paper.)

Importantly, the average severity of scandals do not decrease over the period of study. For instance, the average severity score in the 1990s is 3.34. It is 3.48 in the 2000s, and 3.59 from 2010 onward. This actually represents a small increase in the severity of the scandals, although the differences over time are not large. Thus, despite the possibility that data collection would have underrepresented less serious scandals in earlier years, the severity measures do not indicate that to be the case.

Figure A1. Logged Number of Scandal Stories in Local Newspapers, 1990-2022



Note: Graph presents the logged number of local newspaper stories published about each scandal. Solid line is a lowess smoother.

**Table A2. The Relationship between Newspaper Resources and Scandal Coverage, with Circulation Variable Included, 1990-2022**

	<b>Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)</b>
News Hole	1.182* (0.265)
Scandal Severity	8.035 (9.207)
Financial Scandal	32.640 (46.098)
Corruption Scandal	16.584 (28.172)
Sex Scandal	-9.046 (19.004)
Other Scandal	-29.541 (25.175)
Statewide Official	48.280* (16.190)
Republican	21.263 (21.131)
Woman	-47.472* (17.248)
Presidential Vote Margin	0.463 (0.683)
Days of Scandal	0.006 (0.028)
Circulation	-0.000 (0.000)
Constant	-22.043 (34.458)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.153
N	204

\*p<.05. Dependent variable is the number of scandal stories published by a newspaper. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses.

**Table A3. The Relationship between Newspaper Resources and Scandal Coverage, 2013-2022 Only**

	<b>Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)</b>
News Hole	3.431* (1.449)
Scandal Severity	4.534 (8.472)
Financial Scandal	-43.315 (40.819)
Corruption Scandal	-46.372 (92.259)
Sex Scandal	-3.717 (16.410)
Other Scandal	-13.462 (24.197)
Statewide Official	35.495 (17.824)
Republican	44.424 (29.149)
Woman	10.778 (19.745)
Presidential Vote Margin	1.077* (0.502)
Days of Scandal	-0.121 (0.070)
Constant	-44.145 (32.453)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.262
N	117

\*p<.05. Dependent variable is the number of scandal stories published by a newspaper. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses.

**Table A4. The Relationship between Scandal Coverage and Accountability, with Circulation Variable Included, 1990-2022**

	<b>Left Office</b>	<b>Post-Scandal Vote Shift</b>
Scandal Stories	0.011* (0.005)	-0.097* (0.024)
Scandal Severity	0.538* (0.182)	-1.699 (1.939)
NYT Coverage	-0.003 (0.008)	0.137 (0.075)
Presidential Vote Margin	-0.052* (0.018)	0.144 (0.121)
Financial Scandal	-0.842 (0.825)	2.246 (2.890)
Corruption Scandal	0.688 (0.649)	-3.015 (4.886)
Sex Scandal	-0.289 (0.488)	5.291 (4.082)
Other Scandal	0.039 (0.523)	-14.594* (4.385)
Statewide Official	0.940* (0.388)	12.910* (3.652)
Republican	-0.031 (0.420)	2.521 (2.878)
Woman	0.506 (0.424)	-7.973* (2.512)
Days of Scandal	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.007 (0.004)
Circulation	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Constant	-0.438 (1.011)	2.826 (6.912)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> /Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.248	0.205
N	204	79

\*p<.05. Dependent variable in the first model is whether a politician left office following a scandal. Cell entries in the first model are logistic regression coefficients. Dependent variable in the second model is the difference in vote share in the politician's pre- and post-scandal general elections. Cell entries in the second model are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses for both models.

**Table A5. The Relationship between Scandal Coverage and Accountability, 2013-2022 Only**

	Left Office	Post-Scandal Vote Shift
Scandal Stories	0.022* (0.010)	-0.081* (0.033)
Scandal Severity	0.398 (0.277)	-4.739 (3.135)
NYT Coverage	-0.012 (0.014)	0.185 (0.123)
Presidential Vote Margin	-0.065* (0.026)	0.047 (0.133)
Financial Scandal	-1.564 (1.321)	2.042 (3.712)
Corruption Scandal	0.430 (1.085)	5.766 (6.492)
Sex Scandal	0.311 (0.580)	11.684* (5.422)
Other Scandal	0.399 (0.587)	-13.766* (6.470)
Statewide Official	1.229* (0.503)	9.678** (3.262)
Republican	-0.029 (0.727)	2.360 (4.375)
Woman	0.708 (0.667)	-6.750 (3.636)
Days of Scandal	-0.005** (0.001)	-0.011* (0.005)
Constant	-0.065 (1.608)	15.112 (11.550)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> /Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.324	0.207
N	117	52

\*p<.05. Dependent variable in the first model is whether a politician left office following a scandal. Cell entries in the first model are logistic regression coefficients. Dependent variable in the second model is the difference in vote share in the politician's pre- and post-scandal general elections. Cell entries in the second model are OLS regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses for both models. Analysis is limited to cases between 2013 and 2022.