

The Aftermath of Political Scandals: A Meta-Analysis

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This article represents the first attempt to examine the effects of political scandals via meta-analysis. Seventy-eight studies, collectively including more than 54,000 participants, were identified and examined. A quantitative analysis revealed that the number of studies has steadily increased. Research predominantly stems from North America and Europe, and more than two-thirds of studies are based on student samples. Publication outlets are mostly political science and psychology journals, whereas communication journals play only a minor role. A qualitative analysis shows that two central outcome variables are frequently studied (evaluation of politicians/electoral consequences). Overall, studies generally reveal negative evaluative effects for politicians. However, five central moderators (candidate characteristics, behaviors, prior attitudes, context, and scandal type) significantly influence scandal effects. It is also apparent that research has largely neglected to precisely conceptualize the major independent variable in scandal-effects studies: news coverage and its intensity. Central research gaps are identified, and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: political scandals, media effects, meta-analysis, review

Incidents of political scandals have lately increased and have become a regular part of worldwide news media reporting (Allern, Kantola, Pollack, & Blach-Orsten, 2012; Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012; von Sikorski, 2017). The prominent cases concerning Hillary Clinton, Brazil's Dilma Rousseff, Germany's Christian Wulff, or the recent allegations against Donald Trump show that political scandals are a regular part of contemporary politics. Over the past decades, scholars across disciplines have examined the aftermath of political scandals and have studied the influence of news about political norm transgressions on electoral consequences (Praino, Stockemer, & Moscardelli, 2013) and citizens' political attitudes (Carlson, Ganiel, & Hyde, 2000). On the one hand, scandals may seriously affect the reputation of political candidates, may damage political support, and negatively affect citizens' satisfaction with representative democracy and the way it functions. On the other hand, scholars have argued that citizens are "so accustomed to scandals, that more of the same does not bring about changes in attitudes," especially, when "accusations are perceived as unfounded, irrelevant, or exaggerated" (Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012, pp. 263–264). According to Kumlin and Esaiasson (2012), scandals may even "strengthen democratic satisfaction [when] media watchdogs and responsible politicians make sure wrongdoers are exposed and dealt with," because they may "conclude that the system as a whole functions well" (p. 264). Numerous

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researchers from different disciplines, including communication research (e.g., Kioussis, 2003), political science (e.g., Basinger, 2012), psychology (e.g., Bless, Igou, Schwarz, & Wänke, 2000), sociology (e.g., Paxton, 1999), and other crosscutting fields (e.g., political psychology/political economy) have investigated the aftermath of political scandals through different lenses and with the help of various methodological approaches. Despite vast scholarship, the literature is lacking a systematic analysis on the effects of political scandals that provides a detailed understanding as well as overall findings and research trends.

This study presents a meta-analytical research review of 78 academic studies pertaining to the effects of political scandals. Collectively, the selected studies include more than 54,000 participants from different regions around the world (i.e., Asia, Europe, and North and South America). The purpose for this research is manifold. First, in the past four decades, studies have investigated the outcomes of political scandals from various perspectives, with different methodological approaches and in different regions of the world. This study considers these different methods, approaches, and perspectives to provide a unified picture of the present literature. Second, this study systematically examines the outcome variables (e.g., candidate attitudes, voter turnout, election results) that have been employed and aims to provide a consolidated overview of key findings on the effects of political scandals. Third, it aims to identify existing research gaps, thus offering the opportunity to systematically develop new avenues for future research.

This study uses a content-based meta-analytical approach (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017) because most of the selected studies that this research is based on did not allow for computing effect sizes and statistical indices. Furthermore, a two-step meta-analytical procedure consisting of a quantitative and qualitative analysis was employed.

In summary, the present meta-analysis provides a systematic overview and offers central findings in research on the aftermath of political scandals. Thus, it may provide other scholars with a detailed understanding of the field and enable them to fill gaps in the literature by systematically developing and conducting new projects based on this examination.

Mediated Political Scandals

In the political sphere, norm transgressions by political actors occur daily. Thus, there is a multitude of more or less severe political misconducts, including bad decision making, abuse of power, corrupt behavior, and other, more private, acts (e.g., marital infidelity) that may be perceived as scandalous. However, not every political norm transgression is scandalized (or even known) and reported on by the mass media. According to the literature on political scandals, journalists and media organizations select (alleged) political norm transgressions and construct and communicate them as scandalous (Allern et al., 2012). Thus, mediation is inevitable when turning a particular norm transgression into a political scandal (Thompson, 2000). Besides mediation, the intensity of media reporting about scandalous political behavior is important (Allern et al., 2012; Entman, 2012), and most scholars agree that repeated media coverage over a certain period is a central feature of political scandal. Yet the intensity of scandal coverage may vary considerably from case to case (von Sikorski, 2017), and scholars have pointed out that cultural aspects are important in connection with scandals (e.g., Esser &

Hartung, 2004). That is, a norm transgression may be scandalous in one country or world region but not in another. According to Esser and Hartung (2004), scandal may generally be defined as the "intense public communication about a real or imagined defect that is by consensus condemned, and that meets universal indignation or outrage (p. 1041).

Furthermore, political scandals may be differentiated from scandals in other societal fields (e.g., medical/business/sport scandals). Although Markovits and Silverstein (1988) understand political scandals as somehow connected to the political process itself (e.g., abuse of power), other scholars have used wider definitions (Thompson, 2000) that include norm transgressions in the private realm of political actors (e.g., marital infidelity). This article follows this wider understanding of scandals and respective media effects, which are defined as the short- and/or long-term "social or psychological responses occurring in individuals, dyads, small groups, organizations, or communities as a result of exposure to or processing of or otherwise acting media messages" (Tsfati, 2011, Chapter 1).

Taken together, five central research questions arise. First, based on the reasoning that cultural aspects are important in connection with political scandals (Esser & Hartung, 2004), the first research question is:

RQ1: In what world regions have effects of political scandals been studied?

Furthermore, research examining scandal effects aims to establish cause-and-effect relationships (e.g., with the help of experiments and panel studies). Thus, it is important to receive insights on the methodological approaches used in previous research. Therefore, the second research question reads as follows:

RQ2: What are the methodological approaches used in previous scandal-effects studies?

Moreover, previous research has revealed that different types of scandals (Doherty, Dowling, & Miller, 2011) and political actors involved in scandals (Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012) may generate different effects in news recipients. Therefore, RQ3 and RQ4 read as follows:

RQ3: What types of political scandals have previously been examined in effects studies?

RQ4: What types of political actors involved in scandals (e.g., scandals involving individual/multiple political actors) have been analyzed in previous studies?

Finally, thus far, the key findings of scandal-effects studies have not been reviewed and examined from a meta-analytical perspective. However, a meta-analytical perspective can help us to recognize general research trends and to better understand the overall research findings that have been generated in this field. Based on previous research, two dependent variables—evaluation of politicians and electoral consequences—may arguably be perceived as central outcome variables in relation to political scandals (Thompson, 2000). Thus, RQ5a and RQ5b asked:

RQ5a: How do political scandals affect citizens' evaluation of politicians?

RQ5b: What are the electoral consequences of political scandals?

To examine the status quo of research that analyzes the consequences of political scandals, and to find answers to the research questions, I conducted a systematic literature research.

Method

Study Retrieval

Researchers in different disciplines, including communication research, political science, and psychology, have analyzed the effects of political scandals. Therefore, an extensive literature search was conducted using a systematic strategy to identify relevant research articles (see Figure 1). Initially, different databases (Communication & Mass Media Complete, PsycINFO, Political Science Database, Sociological Abstracts/Collection, Thompson Reuters, Web of Science) were used to identify articles examining the effects of political scandals. Relevant databases as well as key journals were searched, and the search was limited to articles published in academic journals and to publications in English. To collect relevant articles, the following seven search terms were used: scandal, politic*, media, news, effects, affair, corruption.¹ This search resulted in a total of 228 articles.

Study Selection and Coding Process

Next, two consecutive steps were applied to exclude irrelevant studies. First, duplicates (e.g., articles reporting identical data as well as articles retrieved through different databases) were excluded. In a second step, nonquantitative articles (e.g., theoretical research, qualitative approaches, commentaries) were excluded because this analysis aimed at examining research studying cause-and-effect relationships based on quantitative approaches (e.g., experimental studies). Therefore, this study does not consider theoretical approaches, which are, of course, valuable and available in the literature on political scandals (Entman, 2012; Thompson, 2000). Furthermore, articles not focusing on political scandals/contexts (e.g., medical/sport scandal) were excluded ($n = 145$). In a second step, the remaining 82 articles were thoroughly reexamined. Studies had to explicitly deal with mediated political scandals, and the mere presence of corruption (without a scandal) was not sufficient for inclusion. Consequently, eight articles focusing on corruption only were excluded.

The search resulted in a total of 74 articles that were selected for analysis. In a next step, each article was coded for 13 different categories (see the Appendix). A team of two coders independently coded all of the categories with the help of a precise coding scheme. Reliability as measured by Cohen's kappa was perfect for all variables.

¹ The asterisk (politic*) was used as a wildcard character to include multiple terms (e.g., politics, politician).

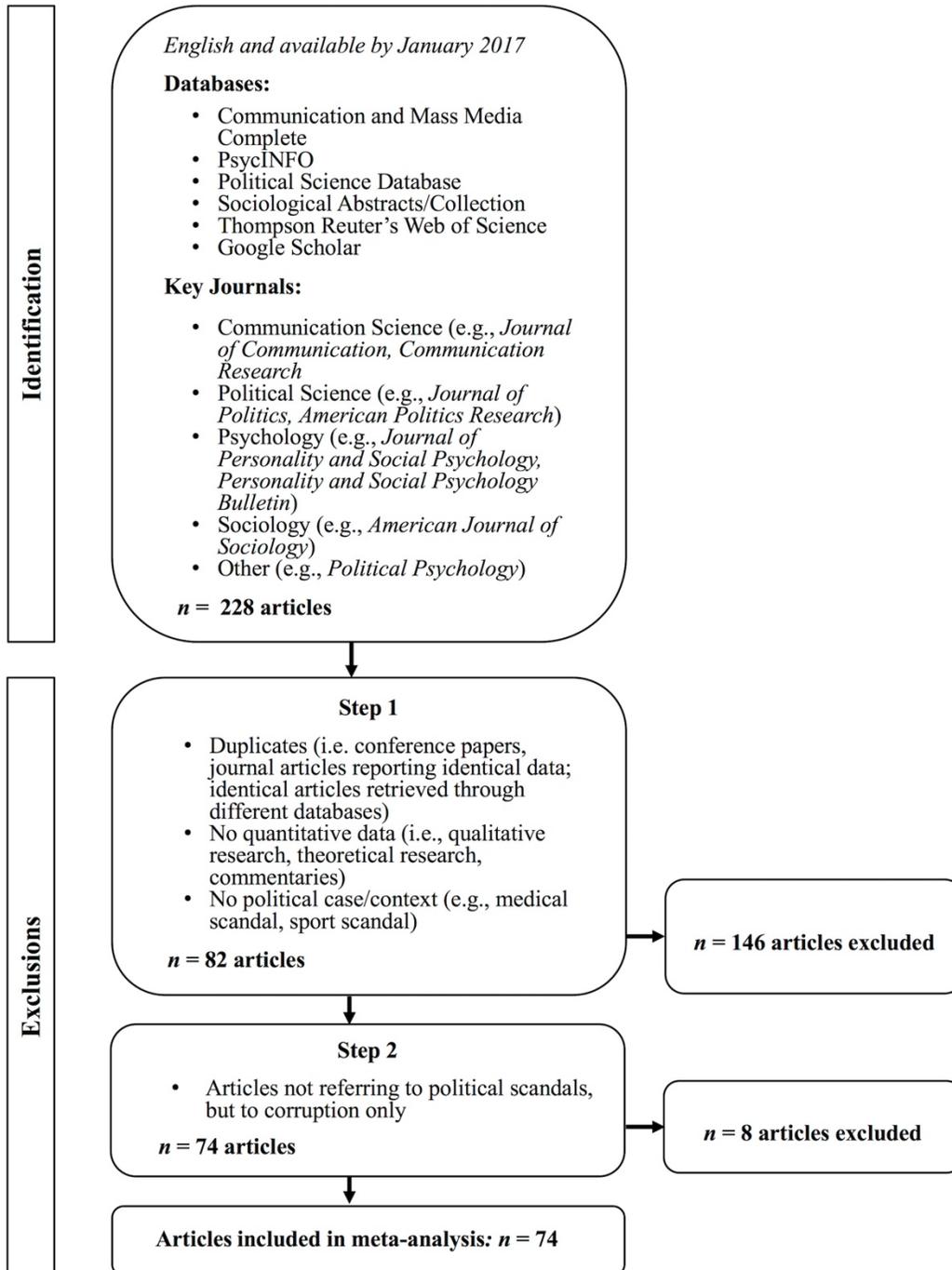


Figure 1. Literature search strategy.

Results

Quantitative Results

Articles per Decade

Figure 2 shows (the respective year indicates the time of article publication and not the point at which a particular scandal occurred) that there was a steady increase in articles published between 1976 and 2015. Therefore, in line with research showing that the news media are currently reporting political scandals much more regularly (compared with the past), the number of studies exploring the potential effects of political norm transgressions are more prevalent as well.

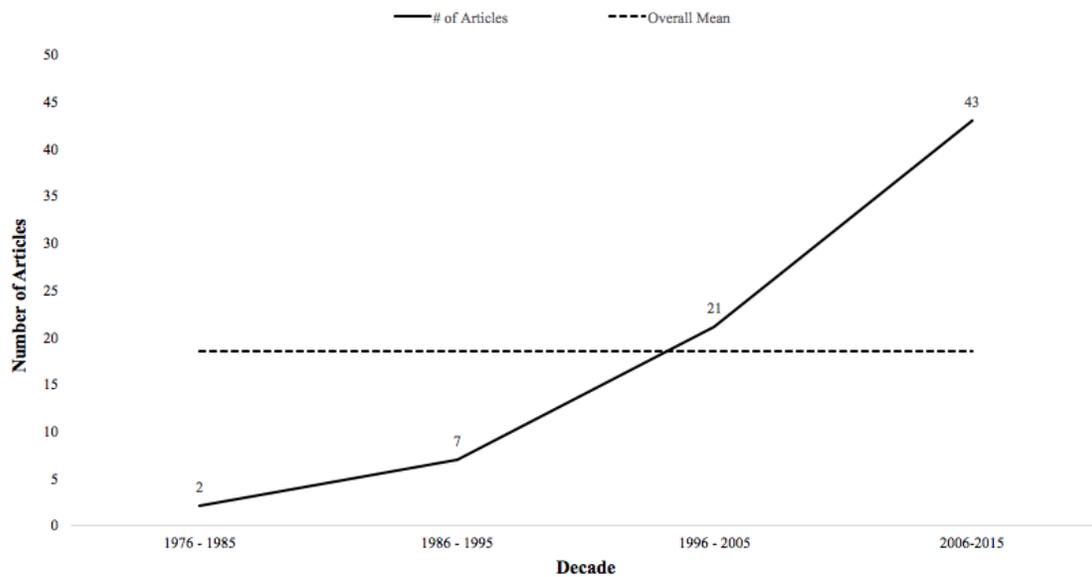


Figure 2. Articles per decade. Trend in academic research 1976–2015.²

Publication Outlets

Furthermore, results show (see Table 1) that the selected studies were published in a diverse set of academic journals (43 journals in total). Only six journals published three or more studies dealing with

² One article was published in 2016.

the effects of political scandals, and all of these journals derive from political science and/or psychology. Also, most of the journals (those that published one or two articles) come from the fields of political science and psychology as well. Although, the list includes three communication journals (*Journal of Communication*, *Mass Communication & Society*, *Press/Politics*), the total number of studies published in these journals (three) plays only a minor part in the examination of scandal effects (four studies, if one also counts *Political Communication*).

Table 1. Publication Outlets.

No.	Journal	N
1	<i>Political Psychology</i>	7
2	<i>Political Behavior</i>	6
3	<i>Journal of Politics</i>	4
4	<i>American Politics Research</i>	4
5	<i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i>	3
6	<i>PS: Political Science & Politics</i>	3
7	<i>Crime, Law and Social Change</i>	2
8	<i>Political Research Quarterly</i>	2
9	<i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i>	2
10	<i>European Journal of Political Economy</i>	2
11	<i>Journal of Social Psychology</i>	2
12	<i>Social Science Journal</i>	2
13	<i>Social Science Quarterly</i>	2
14	<i>Political Studies</i>	2
15	<i>Presidential Studies Quarterly</i>	2
16	<i>Journal of Political Marketing</i>	2

Note. N = Number of articles. Journals that published two or more articles. The following articles published one article: *Acta Politica/American Behavioral Scientist/American Journal of Political Science/American Journal of Sociology/American Political Science Review/American Politics Quarterly/Asian Journal of Political Science/British Journal of Political Science/Comparative Political Studies/Contemporary Politics/Electoral Studies/European Journal of Social Psychology/European Political Science Review/Experimental Brain Research/Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics/International Political Science Review/Journal of Communication/Journal of Personality and Social Psychology/Legislative Studies Quarterly/Mass Communication & Society/Parliamentary Affairs/Political Communication/Political Science Research and Methods/Southeastern Political Review/Telematics & Informatics/The Political Quarterly/West European Politics.*

Studies per World Region

Furthermore, an important theoretical aspect of scandal-effects research—cultural dependency of scandals—is concerned with the particular origin of studies (RQ1). The particular effects of scandal may vary between societies, and the specific influences of a norm transgression in Country A may not be transferred automatically to Country B. To examine this aspect, the world region in which a study was conducted was coded. Answering RQ1 (see Figure 3), most of the studies were conducted in North America. The majority of studies in this region ($N = 40$) come from the United States ($n = 38$; two from Mexico, none from Canada). In second place are studies ($N = 25$) from European countries (UK, Germany, and Spain were most frequently examined). A total of eight studies were conducted in South America and three in Asia. No studies could be detected for Central America, Africa, and Oceania.

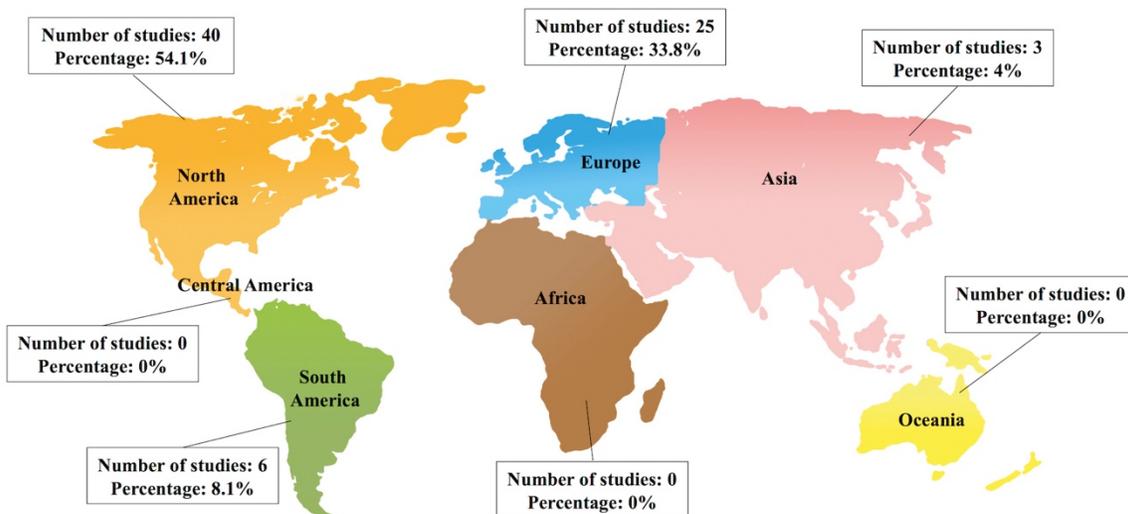


Figure 3. Number of studies by world region.

Methodological Approach

Furthermore, the types of methodological approaches that have been used to test for causal influences in scandal-effects studies were coded. Altogether, 78 independent studies (four articles reported two studies each) were examined. A total of 41% of studies used a form of secondary analysis (secondary data), whereas 58% used primary data (1%: not identifiable). Answering RQ2, 27 studies used experimental designs (i.e., random assignment of participants), and all of these studies used primary data collected for the particular study. Next ($n = 18$) are studies using methods that were coded as “analysis of election results.” These studies used various forms of secondary analytical methods to examine the electoral consequences of political scandals (e.g., data on election results of U.S. Congress politicians over several election cycles, as well as data on the presence or absence of scandals in Congress). Third, a total of 15 studies used cross-sectional survey data to examine effects of political

scandals (11 used primary and four used secondary data). Furthermore, 10 studies used a panel design consisting of at least two waves (six of them used primary and four used secondary data). Seven studies used some form of model testing with the help of secondary data to examine how the presence of scandal influences particular dependent variables (e.g., Banducci & Karp, 1994; Ozymy, 2012). One study used a quasi-experimental approach to analyze the effects of political scandals (Wroe, Allen, & Birch, 2013). The results further show that 69% of the studies used student samples, whereas 27% used representative or other samples (4%: not identifiable). Taken together, previous research has employed various methodological approaches and used both primary and secondary data, and a rather large share of studies used student samples.

Method Combination and Intensity of Scandal Coverage

The results revealed that only five out of the 78 independent studies combined content analytical data with the data used to examine the effects of political scandals. In line with this are the results about the intensity of scandal news coverage. Less than 10% of the studies ($n = 7$) take the intensity of scandal coverage into account when examining the effects of political scandals.

Type of Scandal

Answering RQ 3 (types of scandals), Figure 4 depicts the different subtypes of political scandals that have been examined. Corruption scandals (33%) and sex scandals (28%) together account for 61% of scandals that have been analyzed. A small number of studies has examined the effects of tax scandals (3%) and violence/sex abuse scandals (1%), whereas 15% of studies examined other scandals. A relatively large share of studies does not explicitly state which type of scandal is analyzed (20%). Thirty-one percent of the studies used fictitious scandals, whereas 67% analyzed real cases (2%: not identifiable).

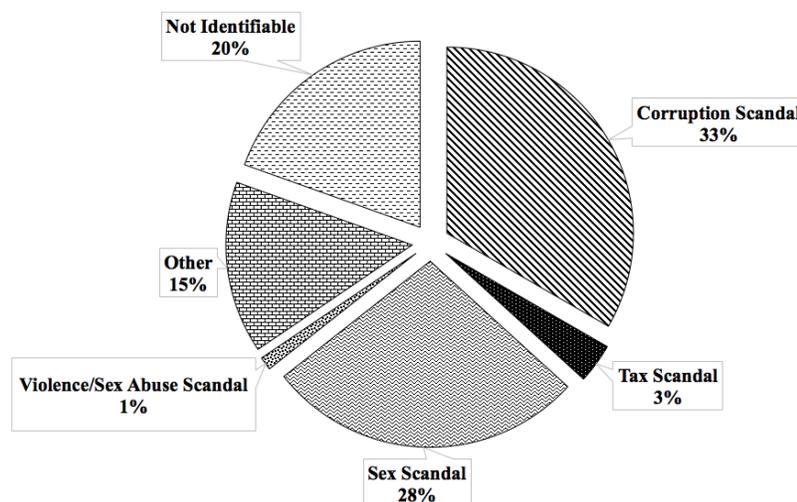


Figure 4. Type of political scandal examined

Scandalized Actors

Kumlin and Esaiasson (2012) emphasized the importance of accounting for within-category variations and examining the number of political actors (politicians/parties) who are involved in scandals because respective effects may vary. Answering RQ4 (types of scandalized actors), the results of the coding process show that the largest number of studies ($n = 37$) analyzed "single-politician scandals," one study examined "multipolitician scandals" involving two or more politicians of the same party, and nine studies analyzed "multipolitician scandals" involving two or more politicians of different political parties. However, in a fairly large number of studies ($n = 31$), the particular scandalized actors were not explicitly stated (and were thus not identifiable) because several studies used aggregated data (e.g., examining the presence or absence of U.S congressional scandals over several election cycles), rendering individual cases unidentifiable (e.g., Peters & Welch, 1980; Welch & Hibbing, 1997).

Qualitative Results

The analysis shows that a wide range of dependent variables have been examined in connection with studies analyzing the effects of political scandals. For example, studies have focused on political trust (Birch & Allen, 2010), trust in the media (Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001), effects on perceptions of democracy (Bowler & Karp, 2004; Choi & Woo, 2012), acceptability of scandalous behavior (Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, Allen, & Birch, 2014), recall of policy-related information (Miller, 2010), and news-source-dependent scandal effects (Botero, Cornejo, Gamboa, Pavao, & Nickerson, 2015). However, studies have also focused on dependent variables such as gaze following during exposure to potentially scandalous politicians (Porciello, Liuzza, Minio-Paluello, Caprara & Aglioti, 2015). Besides this rather wide spectrum of specific outcome variables, two central areas of research in scandal-effects studies—evaluation of politicians and electoral consequences—are frequently examined and will be reviewed in depth in the following section.

Evaluation of Politicians

Answering RQ5a, the results about the effects of scandals on the evaluation of political candidates quite consistently show that scandals—in general—have negative effects on political actors. However, a relatively large number of studies also show that there are relevant aspects or moderator variables that may buffer against or enhance the influences of political scandals. These studies may be subdivided into five separate themes, which are described in the following sections.

Characteristics and behavior of political candidates. Different studies show that certain characteristics and behaviors of politicians involved in a scandal may enhance or mitigate particular scandal effects. Berinsky, Hutchings, Mendelberg, Shaker, and Valentino (2011) showed that Black (compared with White) politicians involved in a sex scandal are more disadvantaged. Furthermore, a political candidate's gender may play a relevant role (Bhatti, Hansen, & Olsen, 2013; Smith, Smith Powers, & Suarez, 2005; Stewart et al., 2013). However, the results are rather inconclusive. Whether female or male candidates are judged more harshly also seems to depend on other factors, such as the particular type of scandal and the study context/country of origin. Furthermore, two studies show that

hypocritical political behavior—for example, a politician who states that his main concern in office is promoting moral values and who then admits that he has been unfaithful to his wife (compared to no previous moral statement)—can enhance respective negative effects of scandals (Bhatti et al., 2013; McDermott, Schwartz, & Vallejo, 2015).

Responses of political actors. Evaluations of politicians involved in scandals may be contingent upon the specific responses of the political actors themselves. Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán (2015) analyzed 12 Latin American countries and showed that it may be beneficial for a president's reelection to "remove ministers early in the term, when there is enough time to clean the administration's image" (p. 617). Furthermore, politicians who clearly transgressed particular norms and then explain scandalous actions in reference to moral/ethical principles are evaluated more positively than those denying to have committed a questionable act (Chanley, Sullivan, Gonzales, & Kovera, 1994). In contrast, Johnson (2015) shows that denial and attacking accusers may result in more positive political evaluations. Furthermore, a politician's emotional reactions to scandal allegations can be important. "People confer more status to targets who express anger than to targets who express sadness" (Tiedens, 2001, p. 86).

Citizens' prior views and attitudes. Recipients' prior views and attitudes may moderate certain political evaluations (Lee, 2014). One study (Bhatti et al., 2013) showed that an individual's partisanship plays an essential role for the evaluation of politicians involved in scandals; same-party voters' reactions were less negative than other-party voters' reactions. Furthermore, "partisan predispositions and tolerance of political misconduct are both important in shaping voter opinions and partisanship has the strongest influence among the more knowledgeable and interested voters" (Wagner, Tarlov, & Vivyan 2014, p. 136). Moreover, a two-wave panel study conducted in the U.S. revealed that individuals' prior levels of political cynicism toward politicians played an important role when assessing new scandalous information: "Cynics do appear to be more likely to interpret ambiguous information in a way that negatively reflects on the actors involved" (Dancey, 2012, p. 421). Similarly, "less trusting individuals are more likely to perceive the presence of corruption than are their more trusting peers" (Wroe et al., 2013, p. 175).

Context. Previous research suggests that specific context factors can influence if and how the news media reports scandals (Entman, 2012; Nyhan, 2014). In line with this, data from 18 Latin American countries show that scandals damage "presidential approval when inflation and unemployment are high" (Carlin, Love, & Martinez-Gallardo, 2015, p. 109). Furthermore, independently of a certain scandalous behavior of a political actor, the availability of elite context cues (e.g., specific information provided by the political opposition) seems to play an important role in the evaluation of political actors involved in scandal (Woessner, 2005).

Type of scandal. One study shows that political candidates involved in a financial scandal (compared to a sex scandal) were evaluated more negatively (Carlson et al., 2000). This is in line with a survey experiment conducted in the U.S. showing that "people respond more negatively to financial scandals than to moral scandals when they do not involve abuses of power. However, abuses of power substantially affect responses to both types of scandals" (Doherty et al., 2011, p. 749). Furthermore, a

study conducted in France shows that “French citizens draw a sharp distinction between politicians’ public and private transgressions, and are more tolerant of the later” (Sarmiento-Mirwald et al., 2014, p. 867).

In summary, the results show that a politician’s involvement in a scandal—as one may expect—regularly results in negative evaluations. Yet the scope of particular effects is significantly influenced by important moderator variables, including citizens’ previous views/attitudes, their general level of political trust, political cynicism, and partisanship. These variables play an important role about the effectiveness of scandalous information. Furthermore, effects of scandalous news may vary depending on the type of scandal. However, little is known about the potential interactions of these relevant variables, and a corresponding theory that explains these potential interaction effects is missing. Moreover, the role of a politician’s gender and the effects of his or her response strategy (e.g., denial vs. apology) are rather unclear. More research is needed to clarify these aspects.

Electoral Consequences

To answer RQ5b, the results about the electoral consequences of political scandals are reviewed focusing on the following three central outcome variables, which were deduced from the literature.

Intended voting decision. According to Cobb and Taylor (2015), intended voting choice was unrelated to voters’ knowledge of a particular scandal. Although voters theoretically prefer parties not involved in scandals, political actions are uninfluenced by that preference (Cobb & Taylor, 2015). In contrast, experimental data from McDermott and colleagues (2015) show that involvement in a scandal may distinctly decrease respondents’ intention to vote for a respective political candidate. Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2016) showed that scandalous information negatively affected politicians. However, the source of respective scandal allegations played a relevant role. When the federal audit (compared with the opposition party) was the source of scandal allegations, effects on respondents’ intention to vote were more negative. Similarly, Botero et al. (2015) showed that the source of respective scandal allegations mattered. Scandalous accusations by a newspaper had a stronger negative effect on respondents’ intention to vote for a candidate than did allegations by an NGO.

Election results. A classical study by Peters and Welch (1980) revealed that although most politicians in the U.S. accused of corruption are reelected, both scandalized Democrats and Republicans suffered a significant net loss in votes (6%–11% from their expected vote). In line with these results, Banducci and Karp (1994) showed that scandal allegations had a direct impact on an incumbent’s vote margin (in U.S. congressional elections). Similarly, Brown (2006) showed that the majority of incumbents were reelected despite scandal allegations. However, morality scandals have a stronger effect on voter shares than do financial scandals, and Republican (compared with Democrat) incumbents lost more votes. Dimock and Jacobson (1995) examined the U.S. House bank scandal and found that the scandal “mainly affected a small subset of voters who were most offended by bank overdrafts and who did not assume that their representative had a clean record” (p. 1143). Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, and Rivero (2015) analyzed Spanish local elections and showed that electoral consequences are contingent upon the particular gains/losses of the electorate. In cases where voters actually benefited from a corruption scandal (connected to the Spanish housing boom), they tended to retain political candidates. Politicians

were punished only when citizens received no compensations for losses. In contrast, Kauder and Potrafke (2015) showed that involvement in a scandal had no effect on reelection prospects in Germany. In line with this, Riera, Barberá, Gómez, Mayoral, and Montero (2013) showed that scandals had no or (under specific conditions) only limited negative effects on incumbent support. Finally, Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro's (2012) data reveal the contingency of scandals and the role of seriousness of scandal allegations (judicial charges) and the particular media coverage (number of news) of a given norm transgression or case. They find that scandals have no effect on loss of votes when media coverage is rather low and/or cases lead to no further judicial intervention. In contrast, when a political candidate is charged with corruption and the news media heavily reports it, loss of votes can rise to 14%.

Voter turnout. The results on voter turnout are inconsistent. On the one hand, scandals may boost voter turnout because voters in a particular voting context are trying to "throw the bum out" (Praino et al., 2013, p. 1045). On the other hand, results show that voter turnout can decrease in the presence of scandal because voters withdraw from the political process (Chong, De La O, Karlan, & Wantchekon, 2014). Yet other studies find no influence of scandals at all (Kauder & Potrafke, 2015; Peters & Welch, 1980; Riera et al., 2013).

Discussion

The aim of the present meta-analytical review was to systematically review studies that have examined the effects of political scandals. With the help of a systematic literature search, a total of 78 studies, published in international academic journals, could be identified. In the following, the particular findings of the analysis are discussed. Based on the results, the following four central themes guide this discussion. At the same time, these themes spotlight persisting research gaps and shortcomings, which may be tackled in future research projects.

Need for Comparative Examinations in Other Geographical Regions

The results revealed that the number of studies examining the effects of political scandals has continuously increased over the past four decades. In line with research showing that the news media are now reporting scandals much more regularly (compared to the past; see Allern et al., 2012; Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012), the results of this analysis revealed that the number of studies examining the effects of scandals has continuously increased as well. However, the distribution of studies by world region revealed severe disparities. The results showed that 87.9% of the studies were conducted in North America or Europe, whereas other regions are heavily underrepresented. This is, especially, true for some of the largest democracies in the world, like Brazil (one study), India (no study), or Japan (no study). Most of the knowledge about the effects of political scandals is limited in scope and is mostly based on results from Western democracies. Yet it has been pointed out that cultural aspects are important in connection with scandals (e.g., Esser & Hartung, 2004) and that a norm transgression may be scandalous in one country/world region but not in another (or not to the same extent). Future research should examine other world regions to explore whether those findings resonate with results from North American/Europe. Also, more comparative approaches are needed to better understand how cultural aspects contribute to particular effects of scandals. For example, experiments could test the identical independent variables in

different countries with distinct cultural backgrounds to examine the influences of particular cultural aspects. Furthermore, one may argue that scandals may vary by electoral system. That is, scandals in party-centered systems (e.g., Norway, Sweden) may generate different (i.e., less severe) electoral outcomes compared with candidate-centered systems like the U.S. or UK (mixed-electoral systems in between). Yet future studies should explore this in depth. Moreover, there is almost no empirical evidence on the effects of scandals in undemocratic societies, that is, societies with a rather low Democracy Index. Future studies may thus examine how scandal affects citizens in these types of countries, taking into account that governments in one-party systems may use scandalous information as a strategic tool (see von Sikorski, 2017).

Need for New Methodological Approaches

The results show that the methods used to test for the effects of political scandals are diverse. First, about one-third of the studies used an experimental design in which the independent variable was systematically manipulated. A rather large proportion of studies used other methodological approaches. Most of them—strictly speaking—do not allow for causal inferences (e.g., cross-sectional surveys), and the absence of experiments and/or panel studies in some areas (e.g., electoral consequences) may help to explain some of the inconsistent findings (also, see below). Furthermore, a large share of studies used student samples (69%). Although, student samples may produce valid results, factors such as, for example, education (Botero et al., 2015) and political leaning (Anduiza, Gallego, & Muñoz, 2013) can severely influence particular outcome variables of scandals. Thus, future studies should more frequently combine experimental designs with representative samples (survey experiments).

Second, the immediate effects (based on experimental approaches) are rather well understood (as this review shows). However, the potential long-term influences of political scandals have not been thoroughly examined and remain largely unclear (for exceptions see Miller Vonnahme, 2014; Mitchell, 2013). Future research should use prolonged-exposure experiments (exposing recipients to multiple scandal stimuli over time) and panel studies (also see below) to more intensively investigate the respective long-term effects of political scandals (e.g., on processes of accountability and specific trust judgments).

Third, the field is lacking panel studies with two or more waves. Only 10 studies used a panel design to test for effects over time, examining the same respondents. Using panel designs allows researchers to connect respective survey data (i.e., an individual's scandal exposure) to content analytical data (i.e., news reporting about a scandal), generating more (externally) valid results. More importantly, panel studies allow for the study of causality (e.g., Do scandals change party preferences, or do party preferences form assessments of scandals?).

One reason for this lack of studies may be the nature of examining political scandals and the difficulty/impossibility of predicting the occurrence of a particular norm transgression in advance. Nevertheless, researchers may try to examine the effects of scandals at the time a scandal unfolds. This means that respective studies have to be planned in advance and all research materials have to be prepared (as far as possible) before a respective scandal emerges. Furthermore, researchers should

specifically design panel studies to examine scandals with multiple waves. Thus, baseline data could be collected during the first wave (before a scandal has occurred). As soon as a scandal emerges, additional data could be collected from the same respondents over time. This would provide a more valid measurement of certain political evaluations because scandal perceptions during an emerging scandal may significantly differ from evaluations made in retrospect.

Need for Inclusion of Content Analytical Data: Intensity of Scandal Coverage

Results show that most of the research on scandal effects has been published in academic outlets in political science, psychology, or intersections of these two fields (e.g., political psychology). These perspectives have generated valuable insights and resulted in a better understanding of scandal effects. In contrast, communication journals play only a minor role (of course, communication scholars may have simply chosen to publish their findings in political science/psychology journals). However, the current analysis revealed that relevant aspects regularly accounted for in communication research are not favored in the studies examined here. First, and most importantly, only five out of the 78 independent studies used content analytical data (i.e., relevant scandal details) to test for specific scandal effects. In line with this, in 20% of the studies, the particular type of scandal examined was not precisely accounted for (e.g., corruption, sex scandal). However, previous results show that different types of scandals may trigger substantially different effects (Brown, 2006; Carlson et al., 2000; Doherty et al., 2011). Similarly, many studies ($n = 31$) do not show the particular political actors examined. Yet particular political actors involved in a scandal (e.g., individual politician vs. two or more politicians; incumbent vs. challengers) may affect citizens' political behaviors in different ways (Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012). Furthermore, information on the party affiliation of a scandalized politician can result in significantly different evaluations, especially in connection with citizens' own political leanings (Brown, 2006).

Second, the intensity of scandal reporting has largely been neglected (only 10% of studies somehow account for it). Nevertheless, the intensity of scandal coverage (duration/frequency/degree of negativity of coverage/extent or the number of media reporting about a case altogether) may—*ceteris paribus*—substantially affect citizens' electoral decision making. This is, for example, revealed in the study by Costas-Pérez et al. (2012), who accounted for the intensity of scandal coverage (number of news items, and showed that intensive media coverage was related to a substantial loss of votes for political candidates, while scandal coverage with a rather low intensity generated no effects.

This lack of accounting for specific aspects in the coverage of political scandals may explain some of the abovementioned inconsistencies in the field. Potentially scandalous norm transgressions may not, *per se*, have evaluative or electoral consequences, but they may depend on the particular communication and specific framing (Entman, 2012) of (an alleged) scandalous political behavior. Different scenarios are conceivable in this connection: (1) Extensive reporting on scandalous political misconduct (as abovementioned) can have negative electoral consequences and may damage a political candidate's reputation. (2) However, extensive reporting on (alleged) scandalous behavior, which (by objective standards) can actually be assessed as rather minor or even trivial misconduct (e.g., a politician's \$200 hair cut or other private acts; low social costs, see Entman, 2012) may be perceived as unfounded and/or irrelevant by the public. These types of scandals may then have moderate or no negative effects on

citizens (see Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012; see also Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002, for the sustained support for Bill Clinton despite intensive scandal communication). (3) Furthermore, norm transgressions that may (by objective standards) be regarded as severe and of high societal relevance (e.g., serious political misconduct that causes high social costs) may have moderate or no electoral/evaluative consequences if the news media do not report them or only report them in a constrained manner, without framing allegations as scandalous (see Entman, 2012). In summary, future research should more thoroughly conceptualize and account for the central independent variable that is (potentially) causing scandal effects: the mode and intensity of reporting about particular types of norm transgressions. Furthermore, political scandals are studied at the intersection of different fields (e.g., political science, psychology, communication research). Scholars from these fields should study the effects of scandals in an interdisciplinary manner, combining individual competencies (e.g., methodological approaches) and taking central aspects (e.g., political system, media coverage) into consideration. This may then improve our general understanding of scandals and their effects.

Need for Inclusion of Online and Visual Media

Previous research has largely focused on examining verbal/textual information. In contrast, the role of visual information and its corresponding effects remain largely unclear (but see von Sikorski, 2018; von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018). More precisely, none of the studies examined in this meta-analytical review analyzed potential effects of visual scandal coverage. Therefore, future studies should start to systematically examine the effects of visual scandal news coverage to better understand how visual stimuli influence the selection, reception, and the processing and recall of scandalous information. Furthermore, previous research has almost completely focused on the effects of classic news media (e.g., mostly newspapers and to a lesser extent magazines and TV). Although scholars have pointed out the importance of online media for the dissemination and effects of scandals (e.g., Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004), the particular influences of scandalous news presented online and/or social media have—surprisingly—not been examined so far (for exceptions, see Lee, 2017; von Sikorski, 2016; von Sikorski & Hänelt, 2016; von Sikorski, Knoll, & Matthes, 2017). For example, because of the participatory functions of online media, almost anybody (not only professional journalists/media organizations) can post scandalous material online (e.g., reader comments below online news) or share it on social media. This may significantly increase the intensity of particular scandalous allegations against political actors, amplifying respective effects. Therefore, this is another important avenue for future research.

Conclusion

This study examined the effects of political scandals from a meta-analytical perspective. A quantitative analysis revealed that the number of scandal-effects studies has continuously increased (1976–2016), and scandal effects have mainly been studied in North American and European countries. In contrast, other world regions have been neglected. The methods used are diverse, yet a large share of studies is based on student samples, and panel designs are rare. The findings of studies are predominantly communicated in political science and psychology journals. Communication journals play only a very minor role. Aspects that are relevant to the field of communication (e.g., content-related factors but also the type of actors/type of scandal—corruption, sex scandal) are frequently neglected. The

qualitative analysis showed that scandals regularly affect citizens' evaluations of politicians and may damage incumbents' and challengers' reputations. Yet effects may significantly vary depending on five central themes or moderators (politician's characteristics, politician's response, citizens' prior attitudes, contextual aspects, and type of scandal). The results about the electoral consequences of scandals (intended voting decision, election results, voter turnout) are less clear. Although some studies show that citizens' voting intentions and voting behaviors may be affected, other studies show rather moderate or no effects. The effects on voter turnout are inconsistent: Studies show a boost in voter turnout, citizens' withdrawal from the political process, and no effects at all. These inconsistencies—as is argued—may (at least partly) be explained by the lack of clear conceptualization and precise consideration of the central independent variable under investigation: the mode and intensity of scandal news coverage. To resolve these remarkably inconsistent findings, future research should account for the content-related factors of political scandals much more thoroughly.

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Appendix

Coding Process

Each article was coded for the following categories:

- (1) Name of author(s),
- (2) year of publication,
- (3) name of academic journal,
- (4) number of individual studies included in article,
- (5) study design/method [experiment, quasi-experiment, cross-sectional survey, panel survey, analysis of election results, model testing with existing data],
- (6) data type [primary data, secondary data],
- (7) type of scandal [corruption, tax, sex, aggression/sexual abuse, other],
- (8) real/fictitious scandal case,
- (9) scandalized actor [one politician, two or more politicians of one party, two or more politicians of different parties, one political party, two or more political parties],
- (10) world region [Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Middle America, South America, Oceania],
- (11) sample [student, nonstudent],
- (12) intensity of scandal coverage [accounted for/manipulated, not accounted for/not manipulated],
- (13) method combination [content analytical data on particular scandal coverage is used to specifically examine effects or not].