

Research finds scandals have less impact on politicians than they used to

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Scandals Ending Before Term is Up

Institution	Number of Cases of Scandals Ending Before Term is Up	Percent of Scandals Ending Before Term is Up (out of total scandals)
Congress	128	40%
Governors	73	19%
Presidents	51	26%

Credit: *Political Research Quarterly* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/10659129231185532

Modern American politics has been plagued by scandals from Watergate to Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, to Donald Trump's Access Hollywood tapes and impeachments. More recently, President Joe Biden's son Hunter faces tax and gun possession charges, casting a shadow over his father's re-election bid.

To assess the impact of scandals on a politicians' ability to survive in office, University of Houston Professor of Political Science Brandon Rottinghaus at the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences examined presidential, gubernatorial and Congressional scandals from 1972 to 2021. His article "Do Scandals Matter?" was published in the journal *Political Research Quarterly*.

"Scandals don't hit like they used to," said Rottinghaus. "Politicians involved are able to survive them because you have media much more divided on political terms. You have people who are more partisan and only look at partisan outcomes, and in an odd way, scandals help increase fundraising for some members who are involved in those scandals."

In his study, Rottinghaus' definition of [scandal](#) involves allegations of illegal, unethical or immoral wrongdoing.

He found [negative consequences](#) from scandals vary across time and institutions. Scandals in the Watergate era led to more resignations in Congress, but then in the '90s there were fewer resignations of White House officials. During the Trump administration, White House officials did not survive in office at rates greater than past eras. However, politicians generally survived scandal more in this current polarized era, which hints at the changing role of political scandals.

Partisanship, he writes, reduces the negative impact of scandal on some incumbent politicians, as they can largely rely on their base, which is not as critical of the politicians getting caught in scandals.

"This is because they want to see their side win and the other side lose," he said.

With media, Rottinghaus said because it is more polarized than in past political eras, people can consume the media that fits their political preferences. "That means people are getting only one side of the story. If a politician gets caught in a scandal, that politician can claim the other side is out to get them politically and your base will still like you, despite the scandal."

And in some ways, small scandals can be beneficial for fundraising. For example, Rottinghaus said, with U.S. Representatives Marjorie Taylor

Greene and Lauren Boebert, they can make outlandish statements, send out fundraising appeals and receive many small dollar donors to contribute to their campaigns.

Rottinghaus's methodology included using three new data sets of scandals involving presidents, members of Congress and governors at the state level over 50 years. He charted the duration of each political, personal and financial scandal faced by an elected official. Then, he investigated what factors hasten the "end" of a scandal, which is defined as when the scandal ends negatively for the elected official. The results clarified how officials survive scandals (or not) and whether the political climate exacerbates the scandal.

'Trump Effect?'

Before this study, Rottinghaus' data was limited to the middle of former President Barack Obama's term. He now has updated data through Donald Trump's presidency and tested whether Trump changed the way scandals affected the American public—something he calls the "Trump Effect."

"The answer is a tentative yes to that," Rottinghaus said. "Trump didn't change the game, but he altered in some ways how scandals affect politicians generally. Although he himself was able to survive these allegations, a lot of his cabinet members did not, yet they did hold on a little longer than they would have in the pre-polarized era."

In the study, that era begins in the mid-1990s during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. "That's the point where you see scandals matter a lot more."

Overall, Rottinghaus said his study finds scandals do not have as much of an impact as they once did, but their impact also depends on whether the

[politician](#) is a president, governor, or member of Congress.

More information: Brandon Rottinghaus, Do Scandals Matter?, *Political Research Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/10659129231185532](https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129231185532)

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