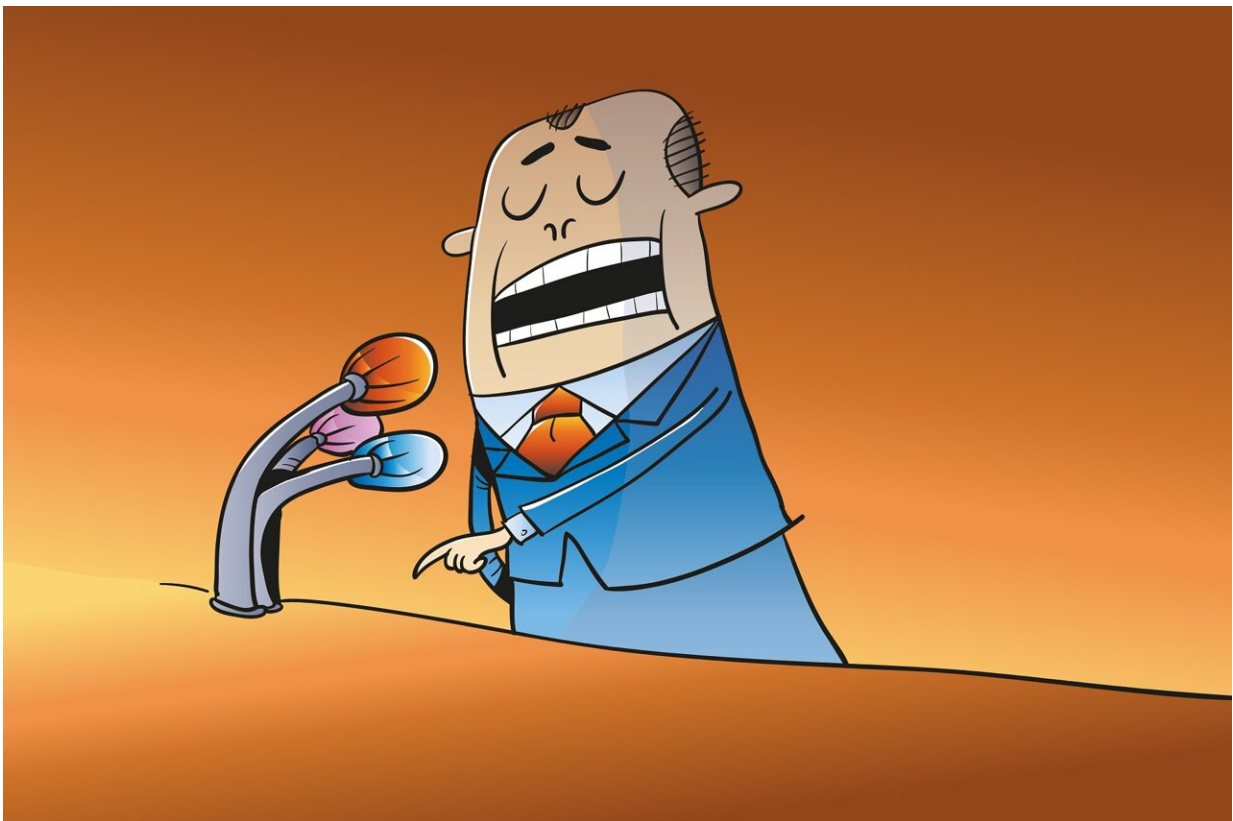


Politicians deny misdeeds because we want to believe them, research suggests

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Why do politicians lie and deny when they are caught up in political scandal? According to a [recent study](#) led by a University of Nebraska–Lincoln political scientist, the answer may be that their supporters prefer a less-than-credible denial to losing political power and in-group status because of a discredited standard-bearer.

"The driving question of our research is whether people are actually incentivizing politicians to deny wrongdoing and escape accountability," said Pierce Ekstrom, assistant professor of political science at Nebraska.

"Certainly, there's a very strong norm—and it may be stronger now than it ever has been—to stand behind the leader of the party. The more important and more indispensable a politician seems to be to the party, the more committed people are going to be toward defending that politician and seeing that politician defend themselves."

Ekstrom is lead author for "On the Defensive: Identity, Language and Partisan Reactions to Political Scandal," published in May in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Other members of the research team are Marti Hope Gonzales of the University of Minnesota; Allison L. Williams of Beech Acres Parenting Center in Cincinnati, Ohio; Elliot Weiner of the Relay Graduate School of Education in New York City; and Rafael Aguilera of the University of Texas at El Paso.

In [private life](#), it might seem more ethical for a wrongdoer to acknowledge their misdeed and seek forgiveness. Yet thousands of people who participated in three [separate experiments](#) since 2013 indicated they would continue to support a politician despite hostile and self-centered denials—particularly if the politician were a powerful member of their political party.

The study offers insights into why partisans seem to have different standards for different politicians.

"We as citizens should be honest with ourselves about what kind of behaviors we want in our leaders," Ekstrom said. "Before a scandal hits, before we know the details, we should know where we draw the line for people we want to lead the country—because we know we're inclined to move the goalposts for politicians from our own party."

In the first experiment, conducted in 2013, 403 participants, both Republicans and Democrats, were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing marketplace. Each person read one of 18 fabricated news stories describing accusations against "Roger Wimsatt," a fictitious politician.

The stories featured one of three scenarios involving illegal abuse of power: "Wimsatt" used his influence as a senior party official to coerce lawmakers into changing their vote on the Affordable Care Act; "Wimsatt" guided government contracts to businesses with close party ties; or "Wimsatt" ordered surveillance spyware planted in businesses across the country. The stories also rotated "Wimsatt's" political party and his response to the allegation, whether an "aggravating" denial or a "mitigating" apology.

This experiment found that participants responded favorably to "Wimsatt's" denials if they identified with his political party. While an apology did not hurt his standing with party loyalists, it was not as beneficial as a denial. Neither apology nor denial improved his standing with people in the opposing political party.

In a second experiment, in 2014, the researchers sought to better define situations where denials benefit wrongdoers. Using a sample of more than 1,100 people, they found participants were motivated to protect

their party's image—and feared their party could not achieve its goals if the politician were discredited.

In this experiment, participants read more fictitious news stories about "Wimsatt." In some, he was described as a highly visible, national party leader, while in others he was a backbencher on a minor committee. In some articles, the scandal was explicitly political, where he was criticized by opposing party members for awarding contracts to party donors. In others, the misconduct was self-serving, where "Wimsatt" steered government contracts to his friends.

As in the first experiment, denials generated more favorable responses from participants who shared the wrongdoer's party affiliation. Compared with saying nothing, politicians who denied wrongdoing were 12% more likely to maintain the support of people from their own party. They were even more likely to maintain support if they were high-status politicians and if their misconduct had partisan motivations.

"It seems that group-related motives specifically influence partisans' susceptibility to aggravating accounts, allowing in-party politicians to 'get away with' hostile explanations for their behavior that would otherwise leave evaluators unmoved," Ekstrom and his colleagues observed in the journal article.

In a third experiment in 2019, nearly 1,800 participants reviewed fictional news stories about "Doug Courser," a fictional state senator from Florida. Participants were provided fictional news stories that accused "Courser" of criminal wrongdoing for personal gain—a drunk-driving cover-up, campaign finance fraud or tax evasion.

Some of the fictional [news stories](#) described "Courser" as a pivotal vote in a redistricting battle needed for his party to remain in control, while others said he had little influence. In some stories, "Courser"

aggressively denied the allegations as "a desperate and disgusting attempt to smear his name." In others, "Courser" acknowledged wrongdoing, saying "words could not express his regret."

Again, the experiment showed denials consistently improved participants' reactions to politicians from their own party—but only [politicians](#) from their own party—whether "Courser" was accused of drunk driving, embezzlement or cheating on his taxes.

"These results suggest that partisans are content for their leaders to deny misconduct specifically when they need those leaders to further party goals," the researchers wrote. "In sum, both weak and strong partisans in our study responded favorably to party leaders who assured them that they were not crooks—but only to the extent that their party needed that particular leader, crooked or not."

More information: Pierce D. Ekstrom et al, On the Defensive: Identity, Language, and Partisan Reactions to Political Scandal, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2024). DOI: [10.1177/01461672241247084](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672241247084)

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