

# POLITICIANS, SCANDALS, AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Shaun Bowler and Jeffrey A. Karp

**In this paper we examine the role that political scandals play in eroding regard for government and political institutions in general. We know that scandals can lower regard for individual politicians and government leaders. Yet, less is known about how scandal influences attitudes toward institutions and the political process. It has been widely assumed that such attitudes are influenced by factors that lie largely beyond the control of individual politicians. Using data from the U.S. and the U.K. we show that scandals involving legislators can have a negative influence on their constituent's attitudes toward institutions and the political process. One consequence of this finding is that, instead of looking for scapegoats in Hollywood or among the failings of voters themselves, politicians should first get their own House in order.**

**Key words:** scandal; discontent; political attitudes; Congress; British politics.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine the role that political scandals play in eroding attitudes about government and political institutions in general. We know that scandals lower regard for individual politicians and government leaders (see e.g., Clarke et al., 1998; Lanoue and Headrick, 1994) and a series of recent studies have shown electoral consequences in a variety of cases (e.g., Banducci and Karp, 1994; Cowley, 2002; Farrell et al., 1998; Hetherington, 1999; McAllister, 2000). We argue that the effect does not stop with popularity but has wider consequences for the public's view of politics and political institutions. While a great deal of research has focused on the causes of high

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cynicism, very few researchers have examined whether scandalous behavior on the part of politicians and government officials influences how citizens view government and institutions (for an exception see Miller, 1999). In part this oversight is due to the assumption that citizens evaluations of government and institutions are unrelated to their views of incumbent behavior and policy (see Easton, 1965; Citrin, 1974). We contend that citizens attitudes toward political institutions may be influenced by the behavior of politicians. If so, then the scandalous behavior of politicians themselves may be partly to blame for the low levels of political support observed in recent years.

We begin by reviewing the various theories used to explain discontent and outline our general argument for how political scandal may influence regard for political institutions more generally. We then present evidence in support of this argument using the example of the impact of the check-writing scandals on evaluations of Congress in the 1990's. In order to show that our argument can apply more generally and is not restricted to the particular case of the U.S. Congress we then move on to develop and estimate broadly similar models of popular opinion towards the British Parliament. The results of these models are consistent with our findings in the U.S. and suggest that our argument is not, therefore, restricted to the U.S. case.

## DIFFUSE AND SPECIFIC SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

In recent years a great deal of attention has been paid to the topic of political discontent (see for example, Kaase and Newton 1995; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; McAllister 2000; Norris 1999) and a particular concern has been the declining trust in government in recent years (see Dalton, 2002, pp. 235–258). To some extent, of course, the decline is relative to the starting point of the data record. Without appropriate data from the 1930's and 1940's we cannot really tell whether the 1950s and 1960s were unusually high and measures of trust in government are simply returning to their normal levels or not. Nevertheless, the lack of trust in government has generated concerns and a search for explanation. Potential explanations have ranged quite widely but all refer to a common conceptual heritage deriving from Easton's distinction between "diffuse" and "specific" support (Easton, 1965, 1975). Diffuse support constitutes a "reservoir of institutional goodwill" and is assumed to be distinct from specific support which refers to how citizens view incumbents and the specific actions or decisions that are made in the institutions in which they reside. This overall conception has been widely used, for example, to explain attitudes toward judicial institutions most notably in the works of Caldeira and Gibson (Caldeira and Gibson, 1992, 1995; Gibson and Calderia, 1992, 1995; Gibson et al., 1998). Others have taken Easton's conceptual distinction, recognizing some amendments

and limitations along the way, as the starting point for their analysis of popular opinion towards elected officials (see e.g., Craig, 1993; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995).

Within this broad range of literature a number of theories have emerged in understanding popular opinions towards political institutions. Some, especially within a comparative politics tradition, develop a sociological approach and note the rise of a newer and more critical generation, possibly driven by a different set of values than previous generations (Norris, 1999). More educated voters and more educated electorates are becoming more discerning in judging government.

An alternative view is grounded firmly in a more cautious attitude towards the critical abilities of voters and an awareness of the limits of voter capacity. Educated or not—voters are simply not discerning enough to be able to reasonably and rationally evaluate government. In this view, judgements about politics and politicians may well be driven not so much by sober assessments but by more emotional criteria. Voters may not, for example, properly understand the role that conflict and compromise play in politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995). If voters do not understand politics it should come as little surprise to find that they hold political institutions in low regard. Of course, voters may not be completely to blame, they may simply be led astray by biased or unreasonable media coverage (e.g., Owen, 1999). These kinds of explanations are, of course, ones more favored by politicians. As McAllister (2000) shows, voters seem to expect more of politicians than do politicians themselves and, hence, may have unreasonably high expectations.

Yet another kind of explanation is rooted in the performance of government itself and, in particular, in the moral and ethical failings of government. To be sure, this is not a new idea. It is one that is evidently close to the original conception of Easton and is the basis for Miller's (1974a) article and his debate with Citrin (Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1974b; see also Williams, 1985). Miller argued that a decline in trust in government was grounded in a policy based alienation. Specifically, rising discontent beginning in the mid 1960s, according to Miller (1974b, p. 970), resulted from the inability of either party to meet policy expectations. Citrin, on the other hand, argued that the decline was in part due to the impact of dissatisfaction with incumbents themselves. While Citrin's argument that scandal could erode trust in government received considerable attention in the 1970s, it has not figured prominently in current debates where scandals, as in the popularity function literature, seem to be modeled as temporary effects specific to incumbent politicians [although for a broadly similar example in the comparative literature see Anderson and Tverdova, (2003) who link perceptions of corruption to system level support].

Indeed a common theme in the literature on the U.S. Congress is that opinions about the institution have very little if anything to do with the actions or behavior of individual members. Many citizens may hold the Congress in

very low regard but they nonetheless love their congressman (Parker and Davidson, 1979; Fenno, 1975). These attitudes are reinforced by the members themselves who create distance between themselves and the institution when campaigning for Congress (Fenno, 1978). Empirical analyses have also failed to find a relationship between approval of individual representatives and Congress as an institution (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995, pp. 119–120). In short, contempt for institutions and government in general is assumed to have nothing to do with the actions of individual politicians. Instead, these scholars assume that disapproval with Congress is based on a lack of knowledge and appreciation for the political process. Here we revert to the older literature, grounded in the Easton conception and with links to the Miller–Citrin debates, to ask whether short term institutional performance—and in particular short term failures as represented by scandals—provide the kinds of specific evaluations that lead to a lack of diffuse support. We can therefore tie voter reactions to scandals to their evaluations of institutions in a very straightforward way.

Current events often seem to suggest scandals are a recurring feature of political life across the democracies of the major industrial nations. The past generation of British voters, for example, has seen a wide series of scandals that tread and re-tread the familiar trinity of sex, drugs and money. While hardly daily, these scandals are common place enough that one might be forgiven for thinking that the ABCs of British politics are arrests, bribes and cheating. Of course, Britain is not alone in generating this series of headlines. France and Italy have seen years of corruption scandals rumble through the courts while repeated party finance scandals have shaken Germany's political life. Politics in the U.S., of course, have not been free from scandal. One phrase terms—Watergate, Iran-Contra, Whitewater, Lewinsky—encapsulate prolonged periods in which one party leveled extremely serious charges of corruption and impropriety against the other. Aside from the Presidency, in the U.S. House charges of corruption have involved as many as 116 cases between 1982 and 1990 (Welch and Hibbing, 1997; and see Roberds, 2003 for a comprehensive review of the U.S. case). Many of the cases involved abuse of congressional prerogatives such as franking privilege and overseas travel, while other congressional incumbents were charged with morals violations and bribery and other crimes. In 1991, many members of Congress were caught in the midst of scandal when it was announced that during a 39 month period 20,000 checks were written against members House bank accounts for which there were insufficient funds (see Banducci and Karp, 1994). Although the House bank covered the overdrafts, the practice essentially meant that members of Congress were receiving interest free loans, a privilege that was widely abused.

These events have not gone unnoticed and unstudied by scholars of public opinion and popularity functions of leaders. As the findings of that literature

show (see e.g., Clarke et al., 1998; Lanoue and Headrick, 1994) it is important to include measures of scandal in the popularity function. A number of studies have examined how such incidents affect electoral outcomes. Welch and Hibbing (1997), for example, find that incumbents charged with corruption involving questions of morality could see their support diminish by as much as 10% of the two party vote. Similar estimates have been found in prior analyses (Peters and Welch, 1980; see also Roberds, 2003 for slightly different estimates but in the same direction). The House bank scandal produced a string of studies that focused on the electoral fallout of the scandal (Ahuja et al., 1994; Banducci and Karp, 1994; Clarke et al., 1999; Dimock and Jacobson, 1995; Jacobson and Dimock, 1994). In their analysis of the House check kiting scandal in 1992, Dimock and Jacobson (1995) find that although most voters expressed outrage over the incident, most incumbents managed to be re-elected, albeit with a reduced vote share. Nevertheless, the check scandal contributed to an unusually larger turnover, with most of the worst offenders choosing to retire rather than risk electoral defeat (Banducci and Karp, 1994). Thus while these studies tend to agree that scandal can have adverse effects, the analysis has generally been focused on examining the consequences for those involved in scandal. This drumbeat of scandal has, we argue, wider consequences by providing the examples of specific failure that can produce a drop in diffuse support.

## APPROACH

The main hypothesis of interest, then, is that being aware of scandalous behavior on the part of an individual representative should erode public regard for, and confidence in their representatives and, in turn, erode regard for the institutions more broadly. The rival hypothesis to this being that the impact of scandal will be, at its best, very narrowly confined to an impact on the popularity of the individual representative and will not spillover into assessments of the institution more broadly.

One modeling issue, however, is the question of our ability to identify voter responses to scandal as a potential influence on their evaluations of institutions. We need to be clear that it is a response to scandal that drives evaluations rather than, say, a response to broader societal trends such as movements in the economy or even media spin. In focussing explicitly on legislative scandals we are able to gain some purchase on the problem. We can use electoral districts to match actual incumbent behavior to evaluations of institutions for specific sets of voters and so help isolate the impact of scandal from other potentially confounding factors. If voters in those districts whose legislators have engaged in scandals have a higher awareness of the scandal and a lower regard for politicians and legislative institutions than voters who

live in districts whose representative have not been caught by scandal then such a pattern is consistent with the argument that it is the behavior of the incumbent that has generated (at least in part) the evaluation of the institution and not simply, say, a general awareness of scandal through access to media mud-slinging.

Such an approach differs from other analyses, which have typically used dummy variables representing various scandals to model popularity functions over time for the president (Mueller, 1973) or Congress (Durr et al., 1997). Others have relied on cross national data to examine the effects of corruption (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003). While useful, these approaches run the risk of confounding factors that might otherwise covary by time or country. Our focus on electoral districts within countries allows for a more direct test of the hypothesis that the actions of individual representatives can have an impact on broader evaluations of institutions.

## DATA AND RESULTS: THE AMERICAN CASE

Given the saliency of the scandal and the general reaction to it, the House Bank Scandal provides an appropriate case to examine how perceived misconduct influences attitudes toward politicians and government more generally. The 1992 ANES provides measures that assess the public's awareness of the House Bank scandal as well as general reactions to it. Reflecting the saliency of the scandal, 87% said that they had either read or heard about the House Bank Scandal. Although no laws were broken, 73% believed that representatives had broken the law by writing checks for which they had insufficient funds. Close to half of the respondents (47%) believed that representatives had reacted so dishonestly that they should voted out of office.

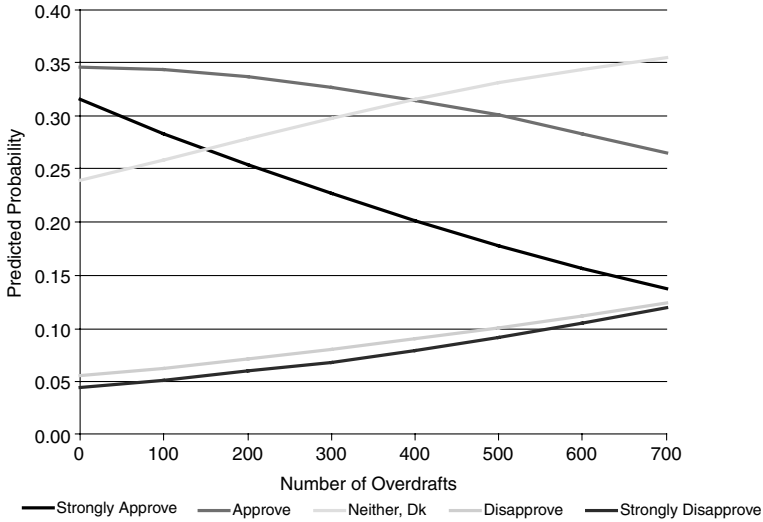
In this case, we are able to link voter attitudes to the actual behavior of individual members. The more bad checks written by a representative, the more likely voters are to have heard about the scandal and disapprove of the representative, which both in turn, should lower regard for Congress. While we argue that perceptions of scandal are important we are also mindful that this argument is also consistent with an argument that says the media are to blame for a decline in regard for politics. The impact of hearing about a scandal could be due, not so much to real world behavior, but simply to the fact that a given story was hyped up by a media industry interested in headlining any scandal anywhere any time. But the simple story "the media did it" is less persuasive if we find that citizens are more likely to have heard about the scandal or disapprove of their representative or Congress when their own representative has been caught in scandal. Of course, awareness could also be especially prevalent among those attentive to the media and to politics as well.

While the major effects are going to be found among those voters who are aware of the scandal, it would be nice to show that there is a "real" effect that

underpins these assumptions. That is, for example, that awareness of the scandal or assessment of the representative is tied to actual scandalous behavior. To measure the level of involvement in the scandal, we rely on a list made public by the House on April 17, 2002 which detailed all current and former representatives who had overdrafts at the House Bank.<sup>2</sup> While previous studies have relied on this measure to examine its influence on electoral outcomes (see earlier discussion) no study has examined how member's involvement in the scandal influenced evaluations of Congress as an institution. In the 1992 NES about half of the post-election sample was represented by members who had been written at least one overdraft and ten percent were represented by incumbents who wrote more than 100 overdrafts. The possible range across 180 of the sampled congressional districts is 0–697 with a mean of 30.

Evaluation of the representative is likely to be informed by other factors that may well swamp the effect of the check writing scandal. Whether the representative and the voter share the same party label is likely to be a major determinant of attitudes: “out” partisans are unlikely to give an incumbent high marks while supporters may simply ignore bad news. While partisans may have views shaped by their status as winners or losers, independents represent a different category which may either lean towards the incumbent or be pre-disposed against. Either way, this variable should shape views towards the representative. In addition, we may well see some effects due to tenure. Longer serving members may build up a reservoir of goodwill, though the reverse may also be true. Voters may simply become fed up with long standing representatives towards the end of their political careers. Since we have no substantive interests in the impact of tenure other than as a control variable we include both tenure and tenure squared in this model to pick up at least some possible non-linearities in popularity that have nothing to do with the check writing behavior of the individual member of Congress. Finally we include measures of political engagement. Those who are disaffected from politics may be less warm towards politicians in general, regardless of their behavior. We therefore include a measure of whether the individual respondent voted or not: non-voters being more likely to express negative opinions towards politics in general but also politicians in particular.

We assume that attitudes towards Congress will be shaped both by attitudes towards the individual member of Congress and, also, whether or not the voter has heard of the check writing scandal both of which we see to be functions—at least in part—of the specific behavior of the member of Congress. As with the other two models, we also include a series of controls. In addition to standard demographic controls, we also control for partisanship and, also, for attitudes towards politics in general. We control for whether the individual did not vote as well as whether the respondent thought politics too compli-



**FIG. 1.** Estimated impact of overdrafts on evaluations of U.S. Representative.

cated—both of which we expect to depress regard for Congress. We also expect views of Congress to be colored by views of the economy, economic pessimism being likely to lower regard for Congress as an institution.

We proceed by estimating models predicting three dependent variables: whether voters have heard of the scandal, an evaluation of the individual member of Congress for the district and, as a function of the preceding two, an evaluation of Congress. Given the structure of the relationships we estimate separate models for each dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 1. In the first column, which presents the results for the probit model predicting awareness of the scandal, we see that the number of checks has a small but significant impact, even when controlling for education and political engagement. This provides some support for the assumption that the saliency of the scandal was even greater among those represented by the worst offenders. In turn, the number of overdrafts has a strong influence on disapproval with one's representative as illustrated in Figure 1. For example, when the number of checks increases from zero to the maximum of 697, with all other variables being equal, the likelihood of strongly approving of one's representative decreases from .32 to .14 while the probability of strongly disapproving of one's representative increases from .04 to .12.

Our results also provide some support that the scandal may have tarnished the institution. There is a strong relationship between a citizen's evaluations of a representative and their evaluation of Congress. While our analysis cannot establish causation, it is nonetheless clear that such evaluations are not



**TABLE 1. Impact of Scandal on Assessments of Congress and Member of Congress (Probit estimates)**

	Heard about Scandal		Disapproval of U.S. Representative		Disapproval of U.S. Congress	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Number of checks (in 10s)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.00)		
Education	0.29	(0.04)	0.04	(0.02)	0.09	(0.02)
Age	0.01	(0.00)	-0.01	(0.00)	0.01	(0.00)
Female	-0.36	(0.09)	0.09	(0.06)	-0.14	(0.06)
Black	-0.70	(0.32)	0.01	(0.17)	0.26	(0.19)
White	-0.29	(0.31)	0.24	(0.15)	0.23	(0.16)
Attention to campaign	0.44	(0.06)				
News exposure	0.05	(0.02)				
Democrat						
Independent/Other			-0.19	(0.09)	-0.25	(0.07)
Identify with Rep's party			-0.62	(0.06)	-0.13	(0.11)
Strength of partisanship			-0.06	(0.04)	-0.07	(0.04)
Voted last election			-0.18	(0.07)	0.11	(0.08)
Tenure of U.S. Representative			-0.01	(0.01)		
Tenure squared			0.00	(0.00)		
Economic pessimism					0.02	(0.05)
Politics is complicated					-0.06	(0.03)
Disapproval of U.S. Representative					0.15	(0.03)
Heard about scandal					0.42	(0.10)
Constant 1	-0.27	(0.36)	-0.92	(0.20)	-0.35	(0.26)
Constant 2			-0.04	(0.19)	0.76	(0.26)
Constant 3			0.83	(0.20)	0.99	(0.26)
Constant 4			1.25	(0.20)	1.55	(0.26)
Observations	1868		1526		1428	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.21		0.04		0.04	

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; + $p < .10$ .

Note: Ordered probit used to estimate models of disapproval with U.S. Representative and Congress

Source: American National Election Study, 1992.

completely independent of Congress either. Hearing about the scandal is also related to disapproval with Congress; specifically knowledge increases the likelihood of strongly disapproving from .30 to .45.<sup>3</sup> These effects are relatively strong compared to other factors known to shape citizens' view of Congress. Consistent with partisan self-interest, those who identify with the Democratic party are significantly less likely to disapprove of Congress than those who identify with the Republican party. But the effects are relatively weak compared to the effects of awareness.

It is also possible to use more complex statistical models to test these hypotheses. One method would be to estimate the series of models using Zellner's seemingly unrelated technique to take into account the correlation in errors across models that include many of the same variables. Estimation of such models—not strictly appropriate given the metric of the dependent variables shows the same pattern of relationships. A structural approach may also be warranted. It is possible, for example, that awareness of the scandal could also be generated, at least in part, by attitudes towards Congress: those pre-disposed against Congress may be more willing to seek out information that shows Congress in a bad light while those pre-disposed in Congress' favor may be more willing to suppress such information. Estimation of structural models examining the possibility of simultaneity between hearing of the scandal and opinion towards Congress showed very little support for the idea that the causal relationship—at least between these two variables—was reversed (these results along with the Zellner models are available from the authors)<sup>4</sup>. We are reasonably confident then that the relationship is from hearing of the scandal to evaluations of Congress and not vice versa. Our findings then are robust to quite dramatic changes in model specification.

## SUPPORTING EVIDENCE: THE BRITISH CASE

The preceding results may generate several objections—two in particular. First, the particular example or case of the check writing scandal itself may be such as to question the fiscal probity of congressmen and women. That is, the nature of the scandal itself may lead citizens to question the ability of Congress to perform its' wider function. Other kinds of scandals may not have such an effect. Second, the institution of the U.S. Congress is highly decentralized and individualized in the face of weak party discipline. It may not be surprising, then that the public face of the institution of Congress is highly colored by the behavior of individual members. Where individual members of the legislature are less important and where parties are strong i.e., in European parliamentary settings, then we should see little or no impact of the failings of individual legislators on these wider evaluations.

The British case provides an alternative test of the effects of scandal in a number of ways. First, the range of scandals on offer are more varied than

check writing [see e.g., Farrell et al.'s (1998) study of the types of scandals involving MPs, ranging from allegations of sexual misconduct to financial improprieties]. Second, it provides us with a very different institutional setting to that of the U.S. Congress. Third, the use of districts (constituencies) to elect Parliament means we can exploit the same variation in incumbent behavior across districts as in the U.S. case in order to isolate the impact of scandal on evaluations. The U.K., then, provides us with what is in effect an "out of sample" check of the findings noted above. There are, of course, some differences in specification introduced by data availability but in estimating a similar model of evaluations for the case of the U.K. we gain some sense of whether our findings are restricted to the U.S. Congress or not.

Data for this look at the British case are taken from the 2001 British Election Study (BES). Given data constraints we are unable to estimate the identical model for Britain as for the U.S. Nevertheless we can estimate models that are broadly similar and capture the main point of the argument outlined above: voters in districts whose representative has behaved improperly should exhibit lower regard for political institutions more generally than voters in districts whose representative has not behaved poorly. Since there are no questions that ask whether citizens approve of an MP on the BES our dependent variable cannot exactly replicate the instrument used in the U.S. case. Instead, we use responses to a 10 point measure asking whether politicians in general can be respected. To measure attitudes toward Parliament, however, we do rely on a similar question to that in the U.S. that asks whether Parliament in Westminster can be respected. We also rely on two questions that measure political efficacy and governmental responsiveness.

As in the U.S. case we include a battery of measures as control variables. In addition to standard socio-demographic and economic evaluations we test whether the media are responsible for negative attitudes toward politicians and government, we rely on a measure in the British case of whether a respondent reads a quality newspaper on a regular basis (see appendix). For the measure of scandal specific to constituency we have updated the list of scandals found in Farrell et al.'s (1998) study to include scandals involving Labour MPs in the 1997–2001 Parliament [see Cowley, (2002) for discussion of the additional cases].<sup>5</sup> The results for Britain are reported in Table 2 and are remarkably similar to those in the U.S. case.

As in the U.S., scandal involving specific MPs lowers regard for politicians in general and parliament in particular. Here we see that citizens represented by MPs involved in scandal are significantly less likely to have confidence in politicians and parliament. Scandal also appears to weaken political efficacy. Citizens represented by MPs who are alleged to have been involved in scandal are more likely to believe they have little say or that elections have no influence on politicians. Those who identify with the party in opposition are more likely to be cynical and have lower levels of efficacy than those identifying with

TABLE 2. Effects of Scandal on Attitudes Toward Government and Efficacy in Britain (OLS Coefficients)

	Lack of Respect for Politicians		Lack of Respect for Parliament		Elections Don't Influence Politicians		People Like Me have No say	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
(Constant)	-3.49	*(0.37)	-3.80	** (0.41)	2.59	** (0.15)	-0.23	(0.13)
Scandal	0.56	*(0.27)	0.73	* (0.30)	0.33	** (0.11)	0.19	*(0.09)
Conservative	0.62	** (0.14)	0.32	* (0.16)	0.22	** (0.06)	0.34	** (0.05)
Liberal	0.78	** (0.20)	0.38	** (0.23)	-0.02	** (0.09)	0.24	** (0.08)
Other party	0.85	** (0.15)	0.92	** (0.17)	0.33	** (0.06)	0.35	** (0.05)
Strength of Partisanship	-0.84	** (0.16)	-0.43	* (0.18)	-0.19	** (0.07)	-0.09	(0.06)
Age	-0.01	** (0.00)	-0.04	** (0.00)	-0.01	** (0.00)	0.00	** (0.00)
Female	-0.26	* (0.11)	0.17	(0.13)	-0.07	(0.05)	-0.06	(0.04)
Education	-0.01	(0.04)	-0.13	** (0.05)	0.03	(0.02)	-0.08	** (0.02)
Economy	-0.22	** (0.04)	-0.16	** (0.05)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.05	** (0.01)
News exposure	0.28	(0.17)	0.22	(0.19)	-0.08	(0.07)	-0.03	(0.07)
Politics is complicated	0.17	** (0.05)	0.20	** (0.06)	0.02	(0.02)	0.20	** (0.02)
Adj R2	0.09		0.10		0.05		0.12	
n	1530		1553		1567		2306	

Dependent Variables: First two items range 0-10; Others range 1-5.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Source: British Election Study, 2001.

the party in government. News exposure is not a positive factor in any of the models, suggesting that the media cannot be blamed for negative attitudes about government. Those who do not feel competent about politics are more likely to feel sceptical about politics. Economic evaluations are also related to these attitudes. We find, then, that in both the U.S. and Britain, citizens represented by incumbents who were caught in scandal were less likely to trust politicians and have lower confidence in legislative institutions. If anything, our results from the U.K. case are even stronger than in the U.S. showing more evidence consistent with a direct effect of scandal.

The findings from both these countries are consistent with the argument that the actions of politicians have consequences beyond their own popularity and may, in fact, weaken public regard for legislative institutions.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we developed an argument that tied public evaluations of institutions to the behavior of incumbents themselves. We presented evidence consistent with this argument in models of public evaluations of the U.S. Congress. We then estimated a broadly similar model for the case of the British Parliament as a way to check the wider applicability of our model and found evidence consistent with our broader argument suggesting that our argument is not restricted to the U.S. case.

Public opinion trends in many—if not all—major democracies are showing a decline of trust in politicians. On the face of it, then, it is hard to argue that this decline everywhere and anywhere can be attributed entirely to scandal. Those searching for the causes of discontent quite reasonably point to such factors as media coverage, economic performance, or lack of political sophistication: factors over which politicians have little or no control. By the same token, it is hard to sustain the opposite argument: that repeated examples of corruption have NO impact on regard for the system. Along with the decline in regard for government many, if not most, major democracies have experienced a series of high profile scandals over the previous generation and while politicians themselves may blame yellow journalism or Hollywood or the lack of social capital it is probably time to look more closely at the actions of politicians themselves. The body of scholarship to date is probably right in noting that declining regard for politics is a complex problem or set of problems the solutions to which are quite difficult.

Part of the question here involves the theoretical model of public opinion towards institutions. While Easton provides a common theoretical peg on which to base studies of opinion towards institutions it is not always satisfactory. One drawback is that it is not very specific about the underlying model over the long term. For example, one plausible model that would tie our results to the longer term might be something similar to that of Fiorina's (1981) model of party identification in which summary evaluations of

institutions are tied to some weighted average of (discounted) short term evaluations: current and high publicized scandals will have more of an impact than older scandals. But estimating these kinds of models would require data and data structures that are not available to us at present. Our design, which exploits the spatial distribution of scandals in districted systems, is one way around those kinds of issues. It is likely, however, that in the longer term the impact of scandals will fade. But this still begs the question of what, aside from these kinds of short term measures, drives the long term value of diffuse support.

While we would argue that this paper helps make some headway in understanding something of diffuse support there is clearly much more to be done. Even so, there is one important lesson from this research: if politicians really are worried about the public's declining regard for them the easiest part of the problem to tackle is—presumably—their own behavior. It is not clear from these results whether voters are able to identify and reward the “good” behavior of incumbents. There may be, then, an asymmetry: voters may punish scandalous behavior more heavily than they reward good behavior. Nevertheless, these results do suggest that a downward trend in public regard for politics and political institutions is not entirely irreversible. Engaging in fewer scandals may not stem the entire decline in public regard for political institutions, but it would be a step in the right direction. Moreover, it would be a step that politicians themselves control entirely.

## APPENDIX

### I. American National Election Study, 1992

*U.S. Representative:* In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way Representative has been handling (his/her) job? 1 = strongly approve; 2 = approve; 3 = neither approve or disapprove or don't know; 4 = disapprove; 5 = strongly disapprove.

*U.S. Congress:* In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. Congress has been handling its job? 1 = strongly approve; 2 = approve; 3 = neither approve or disapprove or don't know; 4 = disapprove; 5 = strongly disapprove.

*Heard/Read about Scandal:* Have you read or heard about U.S. Representatives writing checks when they didn't have enough money to cover them in their House bank account?

*News Exposure:* How many days in the past week did you read a daily newspaper?

*Economic Pessimism:* How about the national economy. Would you say that over the next year the nation's economy will get better, get worse or stay about the same?

*Politics Complicated:* Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.

## II. British Election Study, 2001

*Attitudes toward Parliament:* Now, thinking about political institutions like Parliament, please use the 0–10 scale to indicate how much respect you have for each of the following, where 0 means no respect and 10 means a great deal of respect.

*Attitudes toward Politicians:* Now, thinking about Politicians generally, please use the 0–10 scale to indicate how much respect you have for each of the following, where 0 means no respect and 10 means a great deal of respect.

*Elections:* Please indicate how you feel about general elections here in Britain—not a particular election but elections in general. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following: Elections give voters an opportunity to tell politicians what they think is really important.

*Efficacy:* Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each one of the following statements.

People like me have no say in what government does.

*Quality News:* Which daily morning newspaper do you read most often? 1=The Daily Telegraph, The Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent; 0 = other papers.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois. April 3–6, 2003. Names are listed alphabetically; authorship is equal. We would like to thank Jon Hurwitz, Mark Peffley, Susan Banducci, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Of course we assume responsibility for any remaining errors or omissions.
2. This measure is correlated with knowledge of whether one's representative wrote a few, some, or no bad checks ( $r = .33$ ). It has the advantage of being an objective indicator with greater variation than the recall of the representative's behavior.
3. In another model, we included the number of checks in the model predicting disapproval with Congress. The results were not significant suggesting that the saliency of the scandal rather than the extent of a representative's involvement is more important in shaping attitudes about Congress.
4. Structural models are notoriously sensitive to model specification. Moreover, in estimating the possibility of simultaneous relations among the various variables problems of identification become very troublesome very quickly. It was not, therefore, possible to examine all relationships for simultaneity. For these additional models see <http://www.jkarp.com/pb2004/>.
5. The 2001 BES sampled six constituencies of which three Labour MPs and three Tory MPs were accused of ethical missteps. The proportion of respondents in these constituencies represents 6% of the total sample ( $n = 215$ ). While we have no interval measure equivalent to that of the overdrafts, we can assume that these scandals were serious enough to generate a sufficient amount of news coverage to highlight MPs transgressions within their constituencies (see Farrell et al., 1998).

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