THE IMPACTS OF POLITICAL SCANDAL ON THE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

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In nearly every presidential administration, the media uncovers an event that sparks public outrage. Between extramarital affairs, mishandling of foreign policy, and controversial pardons, political scandals dominate the media for weeks at a time. Despite the many scandals that have occurred over the years, it is unclear if these scandals impact a president’s effectiveness while pushing legislation in Congress. While several researchers have studied how legislative action occurs, and others have proposed theories as to why presidential scandals matter, the two have not been studied in conjunction with one another. This is likely because of the small body of Political Science research on political scandal due to the difficulties in measuring when a scandal occurs, pinpointing what should be considered a scandal, and the temptation to avoid simulated data that cannot take into account real-life factors. This research aims to answer the question: how do executive branch political scandals impact legislative action?

The importance of this topic is clear because of its wide-reaching implications. Presidents typically have to deal with at least one scandal in their term, and this can affect how successful they are in passing legislation in Congress. Scandals are likely to impact presidential approval ratings, and Light (1999) notes that approval ratings are one of the factors that builds a president’s political power, which can help them pass legislation (Light 1999, 28). Additionally, the president typically attempts to pass legislation as part of their “presidential mandate;” since the public voted the president into office, the administration argues that they have a mandate to follow through on their campaign promises in order to satisfy the electorate. Scandals, which can often be politicized or overblown by an adversarial political party, can get in the way of a mandate and thus prevent the electorate from getting their way in the political arena. In order to better predict when and how the President’s agenda will be passed, scandals impact on legislative action must be taken into account.
Additionally, Thompson’s (2000) study on political scandals in the media age points out that while scandals have always been around, the public has only recently been exposed to them so heavily (Thompson 2000, 31). Thompson points out that there is probably not a decline in the morality of politicians, but rather that politicians are more visible to the public because of increasing technology and journalistic culture has an incentive to peddle scandals to the public in order to improve their ratings (Thompson 2000, 108). Partisan political investigations seem to be taking advantage of the ratings-driven news cycle and sensationalizing even the most trivial of scandals, meaning that these events and investigations are likely only going to be more prominent for presidents in the twenty-first century. Because of the increasing influence of the media onto the news cycle coupled with the increasing amount of partisan investigation into the president, this study becomes all the more important.

**Literature Review**

In Light’s book on how the president sets the legislative agenda, he addresses the idea of political capital. Political capital is essentially a president’s political strength to achieve their goals while they are in office (Light 1999, 15). Light writes that greatest and most important resource a president has is their political capital, and without it, they are limited in what they can bring to the legislative agenda (Light 1999, 26). He notes that there are many factors that influence political capital, such as the amount of party support a president has in Congress, their electoral margin, and their public approval rating (Light 1999, 28). However, Light did not consider in his research how outside events, such as scandals or political investigations, could influence a president’s political capital; this study aims to include scandals into this equation to see how, if at all, scandals make an impact.
John B. Thompson (2000), whose book investigated political scandals in the media age, may have an answer to this. He presents a theory as to what the consequences scandals have to the American presidency. Thompson argues that scandals are, at their core, struggles over symbolic power that have the ability to undermine a politician’s reputation and undermine their trust (Thompson 2000, 245). Thompson states that if reputation is diminished, a politician can lose public and political support and be seen as less politically competent (Thompson 2000, 251). Light argues something similar in regards to this; he cites an author that calls professional reputation a “cardinal factor in the President’s ability to persuade” (Light 1999, 29). He goes on to argue that reputation is bound to snowball over time and impact the type of work the president can achieve. Combining this theory with the notion of political capital and that of Thompson, it is logical that over time, political scandals can damage a president’s reputation and diminish their amount of political capital, thus decreasing their amount of legislative action.

Bowler and Karp’s (2004) study seems to support Thompson’s theory. This study examined the impact that political scandals have on the public’s perception of the United States government (Bowler and Karp 2004 271). The two researchers theorized that scandals cause citizens to become more cynical of the government and therefore tend to trust it less—this has the potential to decrease political capital (Bowler and Karp, 271). Their results indicated that the two seemed to be correlated. In the United States, Bowler and Kapp investigated the House Bank Scandal, in which members of the US House of Representatives wrote bad checks without risk of repercussions (Bowler and Karp 276). They found that the more bad checks a member had written, the more likely their constituents to disapprove of them (Bowler and Karp 276). The authors made it clear that while they were not able to indicate causation, there did seem to be a relationship between disapproval of Congress and the scandal (Bowler and Karp 278). This study
Welch 5

aims to analyze if this same idea can be applied to the office of the President, and if it impacts their ability to pass legislation. It is logical that Congressional studies can apply here because they both tend to garner a lot of national attention in the press far more so than any local or state entities. That being said, one flaw in this study was that they only analyzed one scandal to attempt to generalize the behavior of the American public; if they were to have studied multiple Congressional scandals, perhaps they would have found more evidence of a strong relationship.

Dancey (2011) brought about a similar notion, arguing that a citizen’s perception of a scandal is shaped by their level of cynicism toward the government (Dancey 2011 411). This author theorized that individuals draw upon prior knowledge when assessing new information about a political candidate (Dancey 422). The study showed that the more scandals or negative information that a potential voter consumed for a particular candidate, the more likely they were to view that candidate negatively (Dancey 422). This is similar to the result that Bowler and Karp found in their study; the more bad checks that had been written, the more negatively the public official was viewed. Combined, these two studies suggest that not all scandals are going to have the same impact, and that the public is capable of identifying some scandals as worse than others. Additionally, this is important information because it provides one potential explanation as to why some scandals cause more political damage and lower approval ratings more than others— if there are many distractions in the media or in the political climate from the scandal, then it is reasonable to assume that the scandal will have less of an impact. Lastly, a potential flaw in Dancey’s research was that he was not able to come to a conclusion on whether of not more cynical individuals sought out more negative information on the government or political candidates (Dancey 422). Had he been able to find enough evidence to support or reject his hypothesis, it would have given a deeper explanation as to when scandals cause serious
political harm. Perhaps when voters become more cynical, they tend not to vote or answer public opinion polls, and thus the scandal does not detract from political capital in that regard. Unfortunately, Dancey was not able to address these types of possibilities.

This idea of some scandals being more harmful than others raises the question as to if certain types of scandals tend to be inherently more damaging. Doherty, Dowling, and Miller (2011) conducted research in order to see if moral scandals tend to be more harmful than financial scandals, or vice versa (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011 1). In conducting their own analysis of both observational and experimental research on both financial and moral scandals, they noted that there was either no consistent difference in negative responses to a certain type of scandal, or that the results would change depending on what kind of research was conducted (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011, 8). The researchers’ theorized that an abuse of power element in a scandal was the cause of a difference in scandal perception; their results did indeed show that power abuse consistently provoked more negative responses from respondents (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011 8). That being said, the authors acknowledged that their study was potentially flawed because they created their own scenario with a fictional candidate and scandal (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 10). As a result, the authors were unable to test anything but their respondents initial response to a scandal (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 10). This means that the study is unlikely to be applicable to high-profile scandal cases, especially considering Dancey’s research that indicates that individuals tend to draw upon prior knowledge when assessing political figures. If the scandal were to include a very well-known politician, such as a president, respondents could have potentially answered differently.

Additionally, Light argues that while high approval ratings cannot increase political capital, low approval ratings can be a detriment to an incumbent president (Light 1999, 28).
Canes-Wrone and Marchi (2002) argue this is not the case. They note that previous studies are inconsistent in their findings and have yet to come to a conclusion (Canes-Wrone and Marchi 2002, 492). With that in mind, the authors came up with a hypothesis that would account for the difference in each of these studies. They predicted that presidential approval would lead to successful legislation if the issue required a lot of technical knowledge for the public to understand, and if the issue was salient; their results showed strong support for this (Canes-Wrone and Marchi, 2002, 491). This is supported by Wanta’s study on the impact that presidential approval ratings have on agenda building. By conducting content analysis of the president’s weekly summary of activities in conjunction with Gallup Poll data, Wanta noted that the president is more likely to win public attention when their popularity is high (Wanta 1991, 672). Theoretically, the president can then use this attention to set the legislative agenda, and raise their public approval ratings even more in doing so, thus causing more legislative action.

Canes-Wrone and Marchi’s study could potentially help explain why certain presidents, like Bill Clinton, were able to keep high approval ratings in spite of a scandal. If Clinton were able to utilize the popularity he already had before the scandal broke to pass more items on his agenda, then this could have shielded him from heavy political damage with the public. Several authors have studied the Monica Lewinsky scandal in order to help uncover why President Clinton was only minimally harmed in public approval polls. Shah (2002) conducted a time series analysis of opinion polls and asserts that this occurred not because the public did not care, but rather that the support was backlash to the framing of the scandal by Republicans (Shah 2002 345). Shah argued that the public recoiled from what they say was an attempt to gain political power; this would explain why approval for Congressional Republicans went down during the Lewinsky scandal, particularly during the impeachment process (Shah 2002 344). Miller (1996)
argues a similar notion, stating that the credibility of the media, the Republican Party, and Congress suffered the most as a consequence of the Lewinsky scandal (Miller 1996 728). Miller notes that it could have been due to the booming economy (Miller 725). Given that the particular circumstances of this scandal seemed to help President Clinton in the polls, this raises the question as to if this increased his political capital and legislative action as a result. Canes-Wrone and Marchi would argue that it certainly could have, while Light would argue the opposite; this study aims to provide an answer to this question.

As stated earlier, Light also argues that party support, including the amount of seats the President’s party has in the House and Senate, tends to aid them in passing legislation successfully (Light 1999, 27). He states that Congress usually holds itself to the standard of party loyalty, and thus it can consistently count on its members for votes (Light 1999, 27). This argument is supported by Barbara Sinclair, whose research noted that party cohesion nearly always aided in legislative action, even when the party itself only controlled one of two branches (Sinclair 2003, 46). That being said, Sinclair noted that divided control tended to harm cohesion more in the Senate, where partisans were more likely to defect if they did not have complete control of Congress (Sinclair 2003, 51). Given that the percentages Sinclair was looking at were well into the high eighties and nineties, this seems to indicate that party politics trumps many other external factors (Sinclair 2003, 46). These two authors’ research combined could lend itself to the notion that even if there is a scandal going on, partisan politicians will still support the president’s agenda if they are of the same party. Therefore, despite a scandal going on, more seats in Congress would mean more legislative action. Additionally, when Congress is under divided control or oppositional to the President’s party, it is certainly possible that they are
incentivized to utilize scandal to obstruct their agenda. This study aims to investigate these possibilities.

Light also points out that the amount of time a president has left in office tends to limit what the president can accomplish while in office (Light 1999, 17). Most presidencies will last either four or eight years; according to Light, because of the increasing length of election campaigns and the time it takes to start-up and close an administration, the President really only has about a year long period where they have the most political capital (Light 1999, 17). Additionally, he points out that there are certain patterns that occur during a president’s first and second terms. In the first pattern, Light argues that because of decreasing capital, energy, time, and often seats in Congress, the president tends to have decreasing influence as the years go on (Light 1999, 36). In the second pattern, Light states that the president learns over time and tends to become more effective at policymaking as a result (Light 1999, 37). This would mean that if a political scandal occurred very early in a president’s time in office, it may be more damaging to legislative action than it would if it were uncovered later in a term. Additionally, the president tends to lose seats during midterm elections. If one or both houses of Congress ends up being controlled by the oppositional party later in a president’s term, it is logical that this could lead to more scandals arising or being politicized and investigated as there are more adversarial actors in Congress.

Lastly, one potential factor in legislative action that Light and other researchers did not consider was that of going public. “Going public” refers to when presidents take their case for their legislation to the American public in order to gain support for the legislation they want passed; if the public becomes enthusiastic about the idea, they will encourage their representatives to support it (Barrett 2004, 338). As a result, these representatives are pressured
into supporting the legislation in fear of facing political repercussions (Barrett 2004, 338).

Barrett’s research on going public noted that it was an effective legislative strategy, noting that there was a strong statistically significant, positive relationship between the amount of presidential remarks on a bill per month and legislative action (Barrett 2004, 356). Therefore, if a scandal arises, this leads to several possibilities: a president could continue to go public with any legislation they so choose and manage to garner support, a president has less time to make policy speeches because they are too busy trying to mitigate damage from the scandal, or a president hides out in the face of scandal and they are relatively removed from the agenda setting process. This last reason would also help explain why some less serious scandals are sensationalized by the opposing party in order to get the president out of the picture.

**Theory**

After reviewing the relevant literature, I have proposed a theory on how executive branch political scandals impact legislative action. Thompson’s theory on political scandal suggests that they tend to delegitimize the presidency and take away a president’s political power; this lends itself well to Light’s theory on political capital, which did not account for scandals. This means that if there is a scandal going on, a president will have less legislative action. One reason for this is because they are too busy attempting to clean up and detract from the scandal, and therefore they cannot make policy speeches to Congress or “go public” in order to garner support for their bills; as a result, they lose political capital. Additionally, Congress is also likely to be busy either attempting to either avert the public’s attention away from the president’s scandal or draw more attention to it, depending on their party affiliation. For this reason, it seems logical that Congress itself will also be too busy, essentially, to pass much of the president’s agenda or even their own.
Scandals are more likely to harm a president in the first year a term, because according to Light, this is the only time that the president can get what they want passed. During the first year of the first term, a scandal will be more harmful to a president because the aftermath takes valuable time away from their “honeymoon period” when they are not worried about elections or midterms. During their second term, a similar effect should occur; despite the fact that the president has already been in office for four years at this point, Light would argue that they are more effective in legislation as they were in their first term, but they only have so much time before they become a “lame duck” president that cannot garner enough support for legislation. Therefore, in the first year of the second term, a scandal is likely to be especially detrimental to a president. In the third and fourth years of a president’s term, they are likely to be too preoccupied with elections or unable to garner much support as a “lame duck” president. Therefore, less legislative action should occur in these years, and scandal impact should decrease.

Research Design

This study will utilize a panel data regression analysis in order to measure how a scandal impacts the amount of legislative action over time. This type of design allows me to see if a scandal was more detrimental to the amount of legislative action passed at certain times; perhaps a scandal becomes more harmful as time goes on, or maybe less so. Additionally, this type of design will allow me to pinpoint when the scandal has begun. This type of design will allow me to test for these considerations.

This study will utilize the following model. Each variable will be measured once per month in order to create consistency. Each variable will be coded from 1981 to 2017, from the start of the Reagan Administration to the beginning of the Trump Administration.
My dependent variable, legislative action, will be measured by compiling the number of public laws (not including amendments or resolutions) that were enacted by that particular Congress over the course of each month. This information will be gathered from Congress.gov. The relevant hypothesis for this variable is that legislative action will decrease if a scandal is burdening the President.

Four of my independent variables, House seats, Senate seats, electoral margin, and approval ratings all factor into Light’s idea of political capital. Light defines political capital as a president’s political strength separate from their actual resources that allows them to have more of a role in decision making (Light 1999, 15). According to Light, the more political capital a president has, the more items they can put on the legislative agenda. By extension, more legislation should be passed if a president has a lot of capital. Therefore, my hypotheses for these four variables are as follows: the more House seats that correspond with a President’s party, the higher the amount of legislative action, and, the more Senate seats that correspond with a President’s party, the higher the amount of legislative action, and, the higher the President’s electoral margin in their most recent election, the higher the amount of legislative action, and, the higher the presidential approval rating, the higher the amount of legislative action. This data will be taken from House.gov, Senate.gov, FEC.gov, and Gallup, respectively. By extracting data for House and Senate seats by month, I can account for any vacancies or special elections that occur. Additionally, by measuring the President’s electoral margin of their most recent election, I can take into account their popularity in each of their terms. Perhaps they were more popular the
first election over the second, and vice versa. Finally, approval ratings will be taken by month because they are expected to fluctuate over time depending on other factors not included in this research design. If the President has the benefit of a strong economy, for instance, it is expected their numbers will go up, which could cushion them against a scandal. Presidential approval ratings will allow me to quantify various factors that may prevent a president from being majorly harmed by a scandal into one numeric variable. Because Gallup presidential approval ratings are done by week, I will average the four weeks of a month together for this measurement.

Light also considers a president’s time in office in his assessment of how the legislative agenda is set. He notes that over time, a president’s influence decreases, but their effectiveness increases. This means that during the first two years of each term, the president will be the most likely to be able to exert influence over the legislative agenda. The relevant hypothesis for this variable is as follows: During the first two years of a president’s first and second terms, the amount of legislative action will increase. This variable will be coded dichotomously, with the first two years of each term coded as 1, and the last two years coded as 0.

Finally, the last variable that I will consider in this study is the impact of political scandal. For this study, I utilize Basinger and Rottinghaus’ definition of a political scandal: the occurrence involves illegal, unethical, or moral wrongdoing, and includes financial corruption, political corruption, personal scandals, or international scandals (Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012, 218). The authors note that they intentionally exclude gossip and bad policy from this definition (Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012, 219). Additionally, they argue that presidential scandals should include senior administration officials and nominees because it is the executive branch’s job to uphold the president’s reputation (Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012, 219).
Using this definition, these same authors compiled a list of scandals from the Nixon Administration through the second Bush Administration. For this study, I will be utilizing the scandals they identified for the Reagan, H.W. Bush, Clinton, and Bush Administrations and compiling my own lists using Basinger and Rottinghaus’ definition of a scandal for the Obama and Trump Administrations.

To measure scandal prominence, I will first consider the number of scandals a president has had over time. Because this study is predicting that scandals damage a president’s reputation, it is logical that more scandals will do more damage over time. Scandals will be marked in the month they occurred and will have a running tally through the end of the president’s time in office. According to Thompson’s theory, more scandals leads to more of a damaged reputation, so it is sensible to assume that a “scandal buildup” over the years would lead to less legislative action. While this measurement assumes that all scandals are equally bad, this will be counteracted by including a measurement for a special prosecutor, as they tend to investigate the most major political scandals a president could run into. This will allow me to take into consideration major political scandals that the opposing party is especially likely to latch onto in order to slow presidential action. The relevant hypothesis for this variable is *the more political scandals that have plagued the president, this will detract from their duties as the legislative agenda setter and result in less legislative action*. I predict that the more scandals that a president has had over time, the more harmful the scandal will be to the legislative agenda. An alternative possibility in opposition to my hypothesis is that Congress and the voting public will become numb to a “high scandal” president, and over time, this president could have increasing effectiveness as initial shock wears off.
Results

Running my measurements through Stata left me with the following results:

Figure 2.

![Image of regression output]

The following chart summarizes the findings from this regression run:

Figure 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Expected Direction</th>
<th>Resulting Direction</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House Seats</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senate Seats</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Margin</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Rating</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in Office</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Scandals</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Prosecutor</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results indicate that most of my chosen variables moved in the direction I hypothesized, save for Senate Seats, Electoral Margin, and Number of Scandals. The only variables that were significant were Electoral Margin and Number of Scandals, with p values of 0.028 and 0.000, respectively. According to these results, as Electoral Margin increased, Legislative Action decreased, and as Number of Scandals increased, Legislative Action
increased. The r-squared value came out very low at 9.93%, meaning that this model can only explain a little under 10% of the movement in the dependent variable. These results were unexpected and are difficult to explain given the heavy amount of political science research suggesting that the opposite would be the case, particularly for Senate Seats and Electoral Margin. With that in mind, these results could have been negatively affected by autocorrelation.

Autocorrelation can be present during regression models when changes happen incrementally over time (Barry 1993, 67). When there is little change from one time period to the next, the data tends to be autocorrelated and negatively impact the outcome of the regression, making it appear more accurate than it actually is (Barry 1993, 67). In this case, Electoral Margin, Senate Seats, and House Seats were all variables that changed very little, if at all, in each month that I measured. Therefore, I decided to remove my House Seats, Senate Seats, and Electoral Margin variables from my equation in order to help mitigate this effect. This provided me with the following results:

**Figure 4.**

| Variable         | Coef. | Std. Err. | t     | P>|t| | 95% Conf. Interval |
|------------------|-------|-----------|-------|------|-------------------|
| Approval_Rating  | -1.662847 | 0.1108421 | -1.50 | 0.134 | -3.841501, 0.515808 |
| Time_In_Gov.     | 0.9941206 | 2.433126 | 0.41 | 0.683 | -3.788306, 5.776547 |
| NumberOfScandals | 0.325673 | 0.1834608 | 1.87 | 0.064 | 0.004, 0.650719 |
| HouseSeats       | -2.121304 | 3.208144 | -0.66 | 0.507 | -8.437065, 4.174458 |
| SenateSeats      | 19.68146 | 6.207279 | 3.17 | 0.002 | 7.480749, 31.88216 |

The following chart summarizes the results from the second regression run:
These results indicate that two of the remaining four variables, Time in Office and Special Prosecutor, moved in the direction I predicted, while Number of Scandals and Approval Ratings did not. This was consistent with the results of the previous regression run. Additionally, only one of these four variables, Number of Scandals, showed a statistically significant effect on the amount of Legislative Action. I predicted that Number of Scandals would decrease the amount of Legislative Action, and these results show that the Number of Scandals increased the amount of Legislative Action. That being said, this could be the result of a President becoming better at pushing for legislation over time in conjunction with an inevitable buildup of scandals over the years. My r-squared value came out at .0017, indicating that this test could only explain 0.17% of the movement in the dependent variable. There were likely still some issues with autocorrelation as well as a lack of variation between measurements, including my Scandal variable. For this reason, I decided to modify my test for a second time.

In order to show more variation and help prevent autocorrelation in my variables, I decided to run my regression by year instead of by month. Because there are over thirty observations, a regression is still appropriate. Because I measured by year instead of month, I had to reframe how I measured most of my variables. For House Seats and Senate Seats, I took the median of each year. Electoral Margin was measured by year to begin with, so this variable remained unchanged. To measure Approval Ratings, I took the median approval rating each year. For Number of Scandals, I measured the total amount of scandals each year. This allows me to
solve the problem of little variation between years and also allows me to consider that some years might be more “scandal ridden” than others. The Special Prosecutor measurement was measured in the same way. Lastly, for Legislative Action, I measured the total amount of legislation passed per year. Running this data through Stata gave me the following results:

Figure 6.

The following chart summarizes the results of my final regression run:

![Regression Table]

The following chart\(^1\) summarizes the results of my final regression run:

Figure 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
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<td>↑</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>↑</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Rating</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in Office</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Scandals</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Prosecutor</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results greatly changed from my previous regressions, with my r-squared value coming out at .4466. Senate Seats, Electoral Margin, Number of Scandals, and Special

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\(^1\) For this regression run, I compiled a correlation matrix. None of my variables were significant in this regard, suggesting my model did not have an issue with multicollinearity.
Prosecutor all moved in the way I expected, with Senate Seats and Electoral Margin increasing with Legislative Action, and Number of Scandals and Special Prosecutor decreasing with Legislative Action. House Seats, Approval Ratings, and Time in Office moved in the direction opposite to what I expected. Because none of these variables were significant, the data does not have a lot of explanatory power. That being said, it is worth investigating why the measurements turned out this way.

In regards to House Seats, this measurement goes contrary to a large body of political science research. Additionally, my other regression runs showed the opposite was the case, with House Seats moving in the same direction as Legislative Action. Because the measurement moved in different directions, this seems to indicate that factors other than seats in Congress have more of an impact. Perhaps other factors influence Legislative Action more than House or Senate seats, and this led to the differentiation in my measurements.

Though it was not significant, my data indicated that while Approval Ratings increased, Legislative Action decreased. Especially considering that this was consistent in my other two regression runs, this could potentially indicate that Approval Ratings do not have a large impact, if any, on the amount of legislation that passes. Additionally, it could indicate that presidents are not necessarily the chief drivers of legislation and do not influence legislative action at all. Because this variable was not significant, it is difficult to say.

My regression showed that as Time in Office increased, Legislative Action decreased. One potential explanation for this is that maybe a president’s experience in office outweighs the “honeymoon period” that begins a president’s turn. Because I coded these variables dichotomously, it is possible that the measurements here should be completely reversed. This is something worth investigating in future studies.
Conclusions

Despite my low r-squared value at roughly 45%, my theory has not been completely invalidated. As I was compiling my data, there were likely some issues with measurement, autocorrelation, and sensitivity that could have tampered with my results, and therefore the overall outcome of my study.

My first two variables, House Seats and Senate Seats, were highly unlikely to be incorrectly measured because the data was compiled from the government websites of each chamber of Congress. That being said, these measurements, while important because of their impact on legislative action, were difficult to measure month-to-month because they changed very little, if at all, over the course of years at a time; this can result in autocorrelation and negatively influence the study. These variables were too sensitive, and likely should not be measured on a monthly basis. My yearly measurements were likely more accurate, considering the actual length of time that Representatives and Senators tend to be in office is by year. Future studies should likely stick with a yearly measurement rather than a monthly measurement of house seats. That being said, even my yearly measurement of House Seats moved in the opposite direction of what Political Science research would suggest. This could potentially be explained by how often the House of Representatives can change in membership. With elections every two years, it is possible for the demographic of the House to change relatively quickly. Perhaps this frequent amount of change makes it difficult for it to be one of the largest factors in the amount of legislative action that is passed; it could potentially have less of an impact than other variables in a president’s political capital.

The third variable, Electoral Margin, was also unlikely to be measured inaccurately as data was taken from government archives. Tracking this data with the same measurement month-
to-month for up to forty-eight months per presidential term certainly contributed to autocorrelation, but it seems that this was still the case somewhat measuring year-to-year because it would still be an unchanging variable for up to four measurements at a time. Furthermore, it may only be relevant the first year that a president is in office, as over time the electorate may forget about the specific details of the election; perhaps over time, they will be more focused on what the president has done recently. Therefore, for future research, I would recommend that Electoral Margin is not used as a variable for future studies, as it could likely be replaced with something else that measures political capital.

My Approval Rating measurement likely had issues with both measurement and sensitivity. First, I would have likely found a more accurate depiction of presidential approval if gathered approval ratings from multiple sources rather than just one. FiveThirtyEight, for instance, has a compilation of all major approval ratings polls and compiles them into one average, which would likely paint a more complete picture. Additionally, there were several months during the Reagan and Clinton administrations that had missing data; using a multitude of sources could help prevent this. Furthermore, this measurement also may have had a lack of sensitivity problem. Gallup conducts their polls by week, and by aggregating them into months, this could have made it a less sensitive and less accurate measurement. Compiling this data by year more than likely made this problem worse and not sensitive at all, meaning that this measurement might not give an accurate depiction of how Approval Ratings factor in to Legislative Action. This variable’s outcome could also be explained by the differences in approval ratings literature; some authors suggested that high approval ratings could lead to legislative success, while other authors stated that this was not the case. Because my study assumed that high approval ratings could assist in creating legislative action, this discrepancy
could have impacted the outcome of my study and is worth taking into account for future research.

Finally, my scandal variable was likely to have the most issues in regards to both measurement and autocorrelation. I took into consideration both the number of scandals a president had over time as well as if there was a special prosecutor in order to consider both major scandals and smaller scandals, such as those related to nominations. By measuring the number of scandals a president had over the course of up to eight years, this could have caused autocorrelation, particularly if a president had no issues for an extended period of time; this lead to little change between measurements. In my third regression run, I accounted for this problem by measuring the total amount of scandals that arose for that year. While this did not allow me to consider if a “scandal buildup” over time effects the president, it would acknowledge that most scandals are unlikely to be mentioned in the news after more than a few weeks, according to the Basinger and Rottinghaus study (Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012, 228). It is possible that as scandals fade out of the news, they tend to affect the president less, if at all. Additionally, while the special prosecutor measurement did consider the largest scandals that a president could have, it did not necessarily measure large scandals that the political opposition clings to and investigates in Congress. For instance, there was no special prosecutor for the Obama Administration’s handling of the Benghazi attacks in Libya, yet this was a major talking point for all of President Obama’s second term. Further research might want to consider using only one of these “categories” of scandals in order to determine their individual impact. Furthermore, additional research could come up with coding rules for the most major scandals to include those issues that while they did not trigger a special prosecutor, were major national issues in the eyes of the public or the news media.
Additionally, the measurement for the number of scandals a president had was likely to have inconsistencies. The Basinger and Rottinghaus study, which had complete lists of scandals for Reagan, H. W. Bush, Clinton, and Bush, did not touch on either the Obama or Trump Administrations. Furthermore, because they did not publish any guidelines for what was considered a scandal other than a general definition, I have no way to tell if I measured scandals for the Obama and Trump Administrations in the same manner. Later studies would likely be better served if they took the measurements for Nixon through W. Bush that the Basinger and Rottinghaus study utilized, or came up with a complete set of coding rules and a comprehensive scandal definition to keep consistency across administrations.

Despite the fact that this study did not provide conclusive evidence as to whether or not presidential scandals influence legislative action, there are several avenues for future research. It would first be logical to uncover an accurate and complete model that shows all of the factors that influence legislative action alone before scandals come into play. By conducting several different tests and perfecting a model that can describe what factors influence legislative action and by how much, it would be easier to add additional outstanding factors such as a presidential scandal and likely produce more accurate results.

Any regression analysis that utilizes scandals would be well served in making their scandal measurements much more sensitive than the ones used in this study. Basinger and Rottinghaus stated in their research that they performed content analysis across a large variety of *New York Times* articles in order to determine what would be considered a scandal. That being said, they did not describe their methods in detail, making it nearly impossible to replicate. Future researchers could either conduct their own content analysis or contact the authors of the aforementioned study in order to produce a more consistent and more accurate measurement of
what should be considered a scandal. In addition, this study did not consider how a scandal might have a different impact on its first day in the news cycle as opposed to its fifth or sixth month in the news cycle. There should be a way to differentiate these types of scenarios and consider if and how they might have a different impact in order to create for a more sensitive and more accurate scandal measurement.
Works Cited


Borchers, Callum. 2017. “Special prosecutors are a big deal. Their results sometimes aren’t.” 17 May. washin


