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## Original Article

# Political hypocrisy: The effect of political scandals on candidate evaluations

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**Abstract** Although political scandals receive unprecedented attention in the contemporary media, the knowledge of political scientists regarding the consequences of such scandals remains limited. On the basis of two nationally representative survey experiments, we investigate whether the impact of scandals depends on the traits of the politicians involved. We find substantial evidence that politicians are particularly punished for political-ideological hypocrisy, while there is less evidence that gender stereotypes matter. We also show that voters evaluate scandals in the personal lives of politicians in a highly partisan manner – other-party voters punish a politician substantially harsher than same-party voters. Interestingly, voters show no gender bias in their candidate evaluations.

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## Introduction

Political scandals have always been a central aspect of politics (Thompson, 2000), and scandals appear to receive more attention than ever in the contemporary online, continuously updated media environment (Tumber, 2004; Cushion and Lewis, 2010; Allern *et al.*, 2012). While it can be tempting to dismiss personal scandals as ‘sensationalistic’ or simply an unserious way of approaching political life, scandals can convey political information and often have real political consequences (Väliaverronen and Juntunen, 2010). The discovery of a scandal often triggers substantial shifts in the public support for the candidate or political party involved (Lang and Lang, 1983, p. 94; Bowler and Karp, 2004; Schudson, 2004).

Compared with their practical importance, the consequences of scandals have received relatively limited attention from empirical political science (Chanley *et al.*, 1994, Woessner, 2005, p. 94; Maier, 2011, p. 2). Part of the reason is undoubtedly that the nature of scandals (one-time events that affect all voters simultaneously)



render them difficult to study using conventional observational methods (for example, cross-sectional surveys). In this study, we use experimental survey methodology to provide insight into the anatomy of scandals and how they affect candidate evaluation. We focus on two important research questions.

First, we are interested in why some politicians appear to be punished harshly for a scandal, whereas others remain unaffected by an identical mishap. We expect this to be a matter of an interplay between the political characteristics of the ‘scandalized’ individual and the actual details of the scandal itself. We examine this by varying the extent to which a scandal is in conflict with the central values associated with the political party of the scandalized politician. For instance, will an economically left-wing politician be punished more harshly for using a private hospital or private school than an economic liberal politician? Moreover, will a liberal politician be punished more for private financial problems? We refer to this idea as the hypocrisy hypothesis. We also examine whether scandals are punished more harshly if they are in conflict with central gender stereotypes. Besides being interesting in its own right, the question of scandal evaluation based on politician characteristics (party or gender) possibly also produces more general insights into how candidate traits matter for voter evaluation (Funk, 1996).

Second, we examine the possible heterogeneous responses to scandals at the voter level. It is unlikely that all voters respond in the same manner to a particular scandal. In particular, we are interested in whether there is a partisan and/or gender bias in candidate evaluation subsequent to scandals (Bartels, 2002; Blais *et al*, 2010). Do left-wing voters punish right-wing politicians more severely than the politicians they share ideology with (and vice versa)? In addition, are the voters more forgiving towards politicians of their own gender than politicians of the opposite gender? (Smith *et al*, 2005).

The next section develops our hypotheses with respect to each of the questions above on the basis of a brief review of the existing literature on scandals. We then present our research design – a 3×2 survey experiment – and the data. After a descriptive overview of the scandals presented to the respondents, the results section is divided into two subparts, one for each of the main questions.

It turns out that there is some evidence indicating the importance of political hypocrisy, but limited evidence for the importance of gender stereotypes. Furthermore, voters’ evaluations of scandals seem highly partisan, whereas there is limited evidence of a gender bias. Thus, politics seem more important than gender in scandal evaluation. The findings are discussed in the conclusion.

## The Study of Political Scandals

We define a political scandal as politicians’ improper actions or statements that offend established public belief about proper conduct.<sup>1</sup> In addition, we restrict our analysis to scandals from the private life of politicians. This implies that we exclude



scandals that stem from immoral or illegal behaviour made possible in a politician's professional role as legislators – examples include electoral fraud, corruption and political nepotism.

Scandals related to the private lives of politicians come in a variety of forms. Some are related to illegal activities (for example, tax fraud, speeding, hiring illegal labour, drunk driving), others are of moral character (for example, infidelity, heavy drinking, laziness), and yet others are of different types of incompetence (for example, excessive private consumption, personal financial troubles). We also see scandals caused by politicians neglecting their official duties to attend private matters or behaving in their private lives in a manner at odds with their politics (for example, sending their children to a private school while arguing in public against a private education sector). What all the examples share in common is that political scandals concerns behaviour or action in relation to politicians' private lives.<sup>2</sup> In theory, any member of society can engage in this type of behaviour. In that sense, private life scandals are rather trivial and common throughout the society. Accordingly, for people outside of the public limelight, this kind of behaviour would be of little interest. However, politicians can be expected to be evaluated by the public on private life conduct and scandalous behaviour can potentially affect their political future. In most modern democracies, such scandals regularly produce headlines in the news and possibly affect how voters view politics, the candidates and parties due to the massive exposure.

Previous experimental and cross-sectional studies have found a significant negative impact of scandals on candidate evaluations (Stoker, 1993; Funk, 1996; Tumber, 2004; Maier, 2011), and on the general trust in government and politicians (Bowler and Karp, 2004; Carstensen, 2005). Another finding is that incumbents associated with scandals are more likely to retire from office (Alford *et al*, 1994; Groseclose and Krehbiel, 1994). However, Midtbø (2012) finds limited effect of scandals on aggregate party popularity. Other studies have shown that elite cues and the interpretation of the individual scandal influence the potential impact of the scandal on candidate evaluation (Zaller, 1992; Woessner, 2005). Yet, others have focused on the effect of how the media frame scandals (Joslyn, 2003).

### **Evaluating scandals as political hypocrisy and gender stereotypes**

Our first research question concerns how identical private life scandals can affect the perception of politicians' trustworthiness differently if a mismatch exists between a candidate's party-political values or gender and the character of the scandal. Our point of departure is that a scandal is evaluated according to the characteristics of the scandalous politician. Although Funk (1996) demonstrates how candidate traits act like filters for the perception of competence during a private life scandal, very little is known about this issue (Funk, 1996, p. 4). In order to provide some insight, we will



consider the effect of two types of characteristics of the scandalous: party affiliation and gender. The connection to scandal content is made by applying these variables across different types of scandals, the content of which draws on party and gender cues to varying degrees.

The first hypothesis concerns how voters link a politician's party-ideology and the possible policy frames connected to a scandal. This is examined by manipulating the party affiliation of the scandalous in the experiment. We propose the hypothesis that committing political hypocrisy is particularly harmful to the trustworthiness of politicians. The concept of hypocrisy is widely covered in cognitive and social psychology as a form of cognitive dissonance (Fried and Arounson, 1995), and the concept is found in the realm of politics throughout time and in different settings (Runciman, 2010). In psychology, the concept of *moral hypocrisy* denotes how people impose more strict moral standards on other people, whereas at the same time practice less strict moral behaviour themselves (Lammers *et al*, 2010, p. 737). Here, the hypothesis draws on the notion that voters evaluate scandals within the ideological frame of the scandalized politician. A politician's ideological frame is in some sense the moral standard he or she imposes on others.

Political hypocrisy is a well-known accusation in the political media and denotes a contradiction between a politician's conduct and behaviour and the policy they represent (Thompson, 1999). An often reported example is politicians committing adultery while publicly defending monogamous family life. Some argue that living by double standards is part of being a politician (Runciman, 2010). In fact, Lammers *et al* (2010, p. 743) find experimental support for the idea that more powerful people impose more strict normative restraints on others, whereas at the same time act with less restraint themselves. Politicians are, as powerful people with many publicly stated restraints to others' lives (for example, via speeches, opinions, policy proposals), more likely to commit hypocrisy in their private life conduct. When politicians are making policy-related statements, voters are likely to expect their 'private life' conduct to be in accordance with the values related to such statements. Voters will therefore react negatively to a mismatch between the conduct in a candidate's personal life and their public statements. That is, if voters evaluate the political content of a scandal as being in conflict with the ideological-political views of the scandalized politician, it will evoke a greater loss of trustworthiness and the sense that they are less deserving of (re-) election.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Scandals viewed as politically hypocritical cause a greater loss of trustworthiness.

In a separate experiment, we manipulate the gender of the politicians involved in a scandal. Gender possibly works via a different mechanism than party with respect to scandals, as – unlike political parties – voters rarely associate policy-related statements with gender (Fridkin and Kenney, 2009). Thus, our hypothesis is that gender stereotypes come into play. The basic idea is that voters have certain



expectations concerning proper conduct that depend on the candidate's gender; that is, certain role expectations exist for males and females and are likely to play into the evaluation of scandals. For instance, if a female politician cancels a meeting because of child-caring responsibilities, this may – from a stereotypical point of view – be seen as more 'natural' than if a male politician does the same. Conversely, voters may view not conforming to gender stereotypes as a good thing. For instance, a male politician canceling a meeting in order to care for his child might be perceived as a modern and progressive politician and will therefore not be punished to the same extent as the female politician confirming the electorate's prejudices (Smith *et al*, 2005). Gender stereotypes are well documented in electoral politics (Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Funk, 1996; Carlson *et al*, 2000). For instance, Fridkin and Kenney (2009) find that female senators are viewed as more honest and more caring than male senators. Funk (1996) argues that female candidates are held to be more moral and honest, which leads to voters holding greater moral expectations to them. Correspondingly, these higher expectations are likely to lead to greater disappointment in the event of a private life scandal. Nevertheless, Smith *et al* (2005) find no general evidence for gender bias when it comes to how hard politicians are judged for their involvement in political scandals, but they do find that politicians are punished less harshly if involved in scandals that are unexpected for their gender. This result is slightly surprising from the perspective that failing expectations may be punished harshly, but it can be explained by schema theory suggesting that counter-stereotypical information will be ignored or downplayed (Smith *et al*, 2005, p. 117).

Drawing on Smith *et al*'s (2005) results, we expect that politicians are less likely to be punished for actions that conflict with gender stereotypes.

**Hypotheses 1b:** Scandals that confirm expectations of gender-based stereotypical behaviour cause a higher loss of trustworthiness.

### **Heterogeneous responses to political scandals**

As discussed in the introduction, our second research question concerns the heterogeneity in how voters evaluate scandals. Voters may differ systematically in their judgment of politicians (Dancey, 2012). We expect that the possible heterogeneity depends on the characteristics of the voters and a combination of the characteristics of the voters with the party/gender frames involved in the individual scandal.

Starting with the party frames, political biases possibly lead voters to punish more mildly if the candidate is from the same political side as the voter, whereas voters are harder on their political opponents. A vast literature has indicated that voters are highly partisan when evaluating political scenarios (Bartels, 2002). For instance, Slothuus and de Vreese (2010) show how voters particularly support frames when



they are supported by ‘their’ party (see also Slothuus, 2010a, b). This does not necessarily imply that scandal evaluation will also be partisan, however, as the scandals, unlike political frames, do not normally contain information concerning political priorities. One reason for judging scandals more leniently when considering same-party politicians could be that they reduce cognitive dissonance in the sense that by reducing the importance of the scandal, it is less in conflict with the individual’s pre-existing conceptions regarding politics (Festinger, 1957). This understanding has more recently been recaptured as ‘motivated reasoning’. Voters are likely to be selective in their information processing, which allows them to reach conclusions that support prior beliefs (Gerber and Green, 1999; Fischle, 2000, p. 137). In this understanding, voters are selective in their perception of the scandal in two ways, which both support their predisposition. On the one hand, if the scandal goes against the voters’ preferred party, they will disregard the scandalous information with limited effect on the candidate’s trustworthiness. On the other hand, if the scandalous information is focused on the rival party, this information supports established predisposition and thus have strong effect on the candidate’s trustworthiness.

**Hypotheses 2a:** Voters punish politicians from the opposite ideological side more than politicians from their own ideological side for identical scandals.

As for the gender frames, it is possible that gender bias exists similar to the political bias hypothesized above. Men may be more able to identify with and therefore sympathize with the actions of male politicians and the same may be true for women with regard to female politicians. The idea of a gender bias is well known for instance within the literature of gender-based voting where gender identity, driven by feelings of group solidarity, leads to a substantial tendency to vote for same-gender candidates (Plutzer and Zipp, 1996; Holli and Wass, 2010). Gender bias would imply that voters who share the gender of the scandalized politician will be milder in their evaluation than for the opposite pairings of voter and politician gender. The idea has been relatively rarely tested in the existing literature, and the studies that do examine whether respondents evaluate same-gender and other-gender scandals find mixed results (Smith *et al*, 2005; Brenton, 2011).

**Hypothesis 2b:** Voters punish politicians of the opposite gender more than politicians of their own gender in connection with identical scandals.

## The Experimental Research Design and Data

While scandals might dominate the news coverage of political matters, they are often relatively infrequent and highly diverse, making direct comparisons difficult. Furthermore, their timing is almost always unknown *ex ante*. Thus, approaching

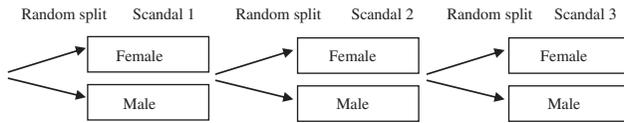


voters' evaluations of scandals can be difficult with observational data. In addition, a number of confounding factors could affect both scandal content and the subsequent impact on trustworthiness. One would imagine a self-selection problem where politicians with different party ID or gender will be more inclined to engage in different types of scandals. To avoid these issues, we used an experimental design in which voters were asked to evaluate a number of different hypothetical scandals in politicians' private lives. The experimental design allows us to manipulate the party ID and gender of the politician engaged in different forms of private life scandals.

The study design was two separate split-sample online survey experiments with 2079 and 2003 respondents, respectively. One survey focused on the impact of gender on the evaluation of politicians and the other on the importance of party ID. Both samples were representative of the national electorate and included questions about three different scandals each. The surveys were designed by the authors. *Ugebrevet A4*, a weekly political magazine published by the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, financed the data collection. The online data was collected by the YouGov opinion bureau. The participants were drawn from YouGov's online panel of 40 000 Danish voters. The voters in the panel were recruited by several means, including ads on the Internet, radio, newspapers and telephone surveys.

The sampling frame in this particular study was limited to respondents between 18 and 70 years of age, and pre-stratification was applied on gender (two groups), age (five groups), geographical region (five groups) and party choice in the previous election (10 groups). The surveys were conducted from 2 to 23 June 2011. The respondents were sent an E-mail with an embedded link to the survey followed by two E-mail reminders. The respondents were incentivized by receiving two and half 'points', which could be donated to the Danish ChildFund organization, used in a lottery or used in the YouGov online shop (two and half points are approximately worth US\$1 – the respondents spend on average ~25 seconds on each of the three treatment screens the respondents were confronted with). The response rate was 35 (fully completed interviews/e-mail invitations sent out) for both surveys. Our representative samples ensure better external validity than studies using university students (Morton and Williams, 2010), and the randomized split-sample design with full control of the treatment gives the study strong internal validity (Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Cook and Campbell, 1979; Sniderman and Grob, 1996; Druckman *et al.*, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

We applied a 3×2 experimental design in both surveys. Each survey included two versions of three different scenarios/scandals, which varied with respect to the politicians involved (for example, in one version a male politician, in the other a female). The main purpose was to study differences in the responses to the scenarios based on which politician type the respondents were confronted with. In each survey, respondents answered all three scenarios but were randomly assigned to the versions of the scenario. Furthermore, the order of the scenarios was randomized for each respondent in order to level out any effect of the order of the scandals (Gaines *et al.*, 2007).<sup>4</sup> In other words, for each of the surveys, respondents were



**Figure 1:** The 3x2 split-sample experiment.

The three scandals were presented in random order, but under the restriction that a respondent was only confronted with a scandal once. The same procedure was repeated for each of the two surveys.

randomly split into two groups of approximately 1000 respondents each, and a treatment and scandal randomly applied to the two groups. A new random split of two groups of approximately 1000 respondents was then formed, and a random treatment and scandal applied to the groups. This process was repeated three times. The randomization was under the restriction that all of the respondents were confronted with all three scandals, but each scandal could only be presented once.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the experimental design for the gender treatment.

The respondents were asked to evaluate the severity of identical hypothetical scandals in terms of the degree to which the scandal would hurt the trustworthiness of the candidate (we also experimented with an alternative dependent variable and found similar results as with trustworthiness<sup>6</sup>), while the characteristics of the politicians involved in the scandal varied across treatment groups. Thus, if one group punishes the scandal more harshly than the other, the causal factor behind the difference must be the type of politician involved in that particular scandal. Besides the experiment itself, we have information about central socio-demographic characteristics and the party affiliation of the respondents. Accordingly, we are able to consider the heterogeneity in terms of the effect on different voter characteristics.

The splits/versions enable us to examine the effect of different types of politicians, that is, a Social Democrat versus (economically) Liberal frame in one of the surveys, and a male versus female frame in the other.

The Social Democrats and the Liberal Party represent the two major parties in Danish party politics. For most of the last century, they have been the two largest parties in the Danish multiparty system. Accordingly, most governments have been led by a prime minister from one of the two parties. For the Social Democrat/Liberal Party splits, the respondents are presented with scandals on three subjects: (i) an extraordinary record of absenteeism from parliament meetings because of a private hobby, (ii) a situation in which a candidate, because of massive personal spending, has their debt restructured by the court and (iii) a candidate’s use of private hospitals in order to avoid the waiting list in the public system. The three scandals are selected because they to some extent resemble scandals, which at some point in time have been treated as political scandals in the Danish media. Thereby, we ensure that the scandals are realistic even though they are hypothetical. While realism is important, we at the same time did not want to make the hypothetical scandals too similar to

**Table 1:** The six vignette questions in the two scandal experiments

	<i>Abbreviation</i>
Imagine that an MP from the Social Democrats/Venstre has been absent within the last year from half of the parliament committee meetings for the committee of which the MP is a member in order to spend time on a hobby instead	Absence, hobby
Imagine that a debt of of € 27 000 of an MP from the Social Democrats/Venstre has been restructured by court after having obtained an expensive loan for personal spending	Bankruptcy
Imagine that an MP from the Social Democrats/Venstre paid for their own knee surgery at a private hospital, thereby bypassing the waiting list in the public health system	Private hospital
Imagine that a female/male MP has been absent from half of the parliament committee meetings within the last year from the committee of which they are a member because of child care	Absence, child care
Imagine that a female/male parliamentarian has lost her/his driver's license because of drunk driving	Drunk driving
Imagine that a female/male MP has committed adultery over an extended period of time	Adultery

*Note:* How do you think it affects the female/male/Social Democrats/Venstre MP's trustworthiness? There were five categories: 1 = no trustworthiness loss, 2 = a little degree of trustworthiness loss, 3 = some degree of trustworthiness loss, 4 = high degree of trustworthiness loss, 5 = very high degree of trustworthiness loss, and a 'don't know' option.

current scandals because of the risk of contagion. Therefore, the scandals we used as inspiration date back at least a year, and in most cases many years, and we modified and mixed their elements, so contamination of the experiment became less plausible. The first scandal has no particular political bias, whereas the second has a liberal bias in the sense that the liberal parties traditionally place more weight on private economic responsibility. If economic liberal politicians are punished more severely, we would see this as support for the hypothesis on political hypocrisy. The third scandal has a clear social-democratic bias, as the left side of the political spectrum in Denmark is more sceptical of private service delivery. Again, if left-wing politicians are punished more severely for this type of scandal, we will take it as supporting the political hypocrisy hypothesis.

For the male versus female splits, we focus on: (i) extraordinary absence from parliament meetings because of child care, (ii) drunk driving and (iii) adultery. Again, all three types of scandals draw on examples that have occurred at some point in Danish politics and have been treated accordingly by the media as political scandals stemming from private life conduct. Child care plays into a female gender stereotype, whereas drunk driving and to some extent adultery play into a male stereotype.<sup>7</sup> The exact questions used in the experiments can be found in Table 1.

The dependent variable ‘loss of trustworthiness’ is measured using the question in Table 1. The item used highlights that it is the individual respondent’s own view on the politicians’ trustworthiness we want to address by emphasizing ‘how do you think’ in the question wording. Trustworthiness is used as it is often regarded to be a particularly important aspect in citizens’ evaluations of their politicians (for example, Fenno, 1978; Funk, 1996; Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, trustworthiness items are very often applied in previous studies of political scandals (for example, Schwarz and Bless, 1992; Funk, 1996; Smith *et al*, 2005).

## Results

We begin the analysis with a short description of the average voter evaluation of the scandals before turning to the two main research questions. As Table 1 shows, each respondent was presented with three scandals. As we are dealing with two separate experiments, six scenarios in total were evaluated on two dimensions by at least 1942 respondents. Table 2 shows their mean evaluation of a loss of trustworthiness. As the dependent variable refers to a *loss* in trustworthiness following the scandals, a high value represents a large impact of the scandal, whereas a low value implies a relatively mild evaluation of the ‘scandalous’ politicians.

Surprisingly, the scandal with legal consequences, that is, drunk driving, is only in third place in terms of the negative impact on trustworthiness. Instead, absenteeism due to a preoccupation with a hobby is evaluated most negatively. One possible explanation could be that illegal conduct is punished ‘elsewhere’ in the sense of a formal punishment such as a prison sentence or fine imposed by the courts. Voters might therefore perceive the politician as having received their rightful punishment. Instead, voters will tend to focus on scandals in which

**Table 2:** The scandals’ average effect on candidate evaluation

	<i>Loss of trustworthiness</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Absence, hobby	4.1	4.1–4.2
Bankruptcy	3.7	3.6–3.7
Drunk driving	3.7	3.6–3.7
Absence, child care	3.3	3.3–3.4
Adultery	2.8	2.7–2.8
Private hospital	2.3	2.2–2.3

*Note:* An iterative weight of party choice and socio-demographical applied. Minimum *n* 1942. ‘Don’t know’ excluded (used in less than 3 per cent of the responses). Candidate evaluation is measured on a scale from 1 (no trustworthiness loss) to 5 (very high degree of trustworthiness loss).



they, as voters, are the *only* ones able to dole out punishment. Absenteeism from parliamentary work offers a clear example of a case in which the voters alone can ensure accountability, and it also represents a clear violation of the commitment of politicians to attend to their responsibilities – that is, a breach of the mandate granted by the voter to the individual politician. Another explanation might be that voters generally view neglecting one's responsibilities as being unfavourable. Thus, if a politician has chosen a career as a legislator, they are expected to spend their time on that which the voters expect legislators to spend their time on, such as being present in parliament, contributing to legislation, being active in their local district and attending committee meetings. That said, absence because of child care is viewed more mildly.

Bankruptcy takes second place, emphasizing the importance of the financial responsibility of those seeking office. Adultery is at the lower end of the scale. This is hardly surprising, as sexual scandals are often regarded as a purely personal matter without political significance in Scandinavian politics. Finally, we find that the use of private hospitals is looked upon least unfavourably.

### Does it matter who is involved in the scandal?

As with our first research question, two groups were asked to evaluate identical scenarios except for the experimental stimuli. The stimulus was the individual involved in the scandal. Table 3 presents the average treatment effects. In the top three questions, the treatment was different party affiliation. In the bottom three questions, the treatment was different gender.

**Table 3:** Average effect of treatment

	<i>Loss of trustworthiness</i> (5 = Greatest loss of trustworthiness)	
	<i>Socialist treatment</i>	<i>Liberal treatment</i>
Absence, hobby	4.1	4.2***
Bankruptcy	3.6	3.8**
Private hospital	2.5***	2.0
	<i>Male treatment</i>	<i>Female treatment</i>
Drunk driving	3.7	3.7
Absence, child care	3.3	3.4*
Adultery	2.9***	2.6

*Note:* Mean (range 1–5) are depicted. *t*-test (two-sided) for difference across treatment: No weights applied. Minimum *n* is 1942.

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

Interestingly, voters see a greater loss of trustworthiness in relation to politicians committing scandals that are construed as being in violation of their expected ideological party position. Social Democrats are punished disproportionately for using private hospitals, which makes theoretical sense as they are strongly opposed to private involvement in the health care system. Conversely, Liberal politicians are judged more harshly than Social Democrats by the average voter on bankruptcy. The Liberal Party is often seen as having fiscal responsibility as a central part of its identity. Thus, we again find support for Hypothesis 1a, concerning the negative impact of committing ideological-hypocritical scandals. This suggests that voters evaluate scandals against a backdrop of basic knowledge about the political-ideological positions on specific policy issues and how the content of the scandal relates to these positions (for example, Zaller, 1992). Liberals are also evaluated harder on the absence question. It is unclear why this is the case. In line with the hypocrisy argument, the matter of absence might also be seen as hypocritical, given that Liberals tend to weight work ethic and labour market reforms heavily in their policy positions.

It should be noted that although we find strongly significant effects in all three cases, the effect sizes are substantively moderate (this will also be reflected in the low  $R^2$  in Table 4). For absence and bankruptcy, the effect sizes are 0.2 or below, whereas for private hospitals we reach 0.5 on the 5-point scale. The largest effect is found for the hospital item that probably is the most unambiguous of the scenarios presented to the respondents with respect to the political-ideological hypocrisy. The liberals have actively sought to increase the use of private hospitals, whereas the Social Democrats have remained highly critical of that strategy, and the issue also feeds into more general ideological debates over public versus private services where the two parties take distinct positions.

The finding that hypocrisy is punished harder implies that politicians are generally expected to live up to their party ideology in their private lives. On the other hand, if scandals play into well-established ideological prejudices, they are seen as less harmful to trustworthiness. We might say that scandals are measured according to a yardstick of a politician's ideology, where failing to measure up is perceived as being more harmful than more ideologically 'fitting' scandals. One can also interpret the findings as offering support for previous studies, which have noted that scandalous information might facilitate the recall of policy-related campaign information (Miller, 2010).

Looking at the gender treatments, there is limited evidence that stereotypes matter. Men do not get punished more or less for drunk driving, and women only see a little increase in the loss of trustworthiness due to child care. On the matter of adultery, however, the gender effect is larger. Men are evaluated more harshly for committing adultery. Therefore, it seems that whereas hypocrisy is punished on the political dimension, confirming stereotypes is somewhat more harmful than being involved in a non-typical scandal on the gender dimension.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 4:** The differential impact of the scandals on loss of trustworthiness (5 = greatest loss of trustworthiness)

	<i>Party experiment</i>			<i>Gender experiment</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	<i>Absence, hobby</i>	<i>Bankruptcy</i>	<i>Private hospital</i>	<i>Drunk</i>	<i>Absence, child</i>	<i>Adultery</i>
Age (range 18–70 years old)	0.0044* (0.0018)	0.0028 (0.0022)	-0.0067** (0.0023)	-0.0042* (0.0021)	0.0072*** (0.0021)	-0.013*** (0.0023)
Male	-0.14** (0.049)	-0.18** (0.060)	-0.18** (0.065)	-0.13 (0.080)	-0.0049 (0.082)	0.12 (0.089)
Political interest (range 1–5)	0.063* (0.026)	-0.024 (0.032)	0.12*** (0.034)	-0.047 (0.080)	0.038 (0.031)	-0.12*** (0.034)
Education (range 1–9)	0.0031 (0.013)	-0.017 (0.016)	-0.013 (0.017)	-0.010 (0.030)	-0.018 (0.016)	-0.039* (0.017)
Children in household (range 0–5+)	0.026 (0.025)	-0.043 (0.031)	0.0019 (0.033)	0.029 (0.015)	-0.11*** (0.031)	-0.023 (0.034)
Votes left-wing	-0.27*** (0.067)	-0.43*** (0.083)	-0.68*** (0.089)	0.041 (0.030)	-0.11 (0.058)	-0.15* (0.063)
Liberal/male treatment	-0.19* (0.071)	-0.23** (0.087)	-1.28*** (0.094)	-0.015 (0.056)	-0.15 (0.084)	0.43*** (0.091)
Liberal/male treatment*votes left-wing	0.60*** (0.094)	0.66*** (0.12)	1.43*** (0.12)	—	—	—
Liberal/male treatment*male	—	—	—	-0.021 (0.11)	0.070 (0.11)	-0.16 (0.12)
Constant	3.84*** (0.13)	3.99*** (0.16)	2.96*** (0.17)	3.84*** (0.15)	3.14*** (0.16)	3.81*** (0.17)
<i>n</i>	1617	1605	1598	1612	1608	1595
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.04	0.12	0.01	0.03	0.06
F-statistic	8.50	7.40	26.5	2.54	5.54	12.7
RMSE	0.93	1.15	1.23	1.11	1.14	1.24

*Note:* No weights applied. OLS-regressions. Unstandardized coefficients with standard error in parentheses. ‘Don’t know’ excluded.

\**P*<0.05; \*\**P*<0.01; \*\*\**P*<0.001.

### Who punishes politicians the most?

Until now, we have regarded voters as a homogenous group by examining their average evaluations in general and by treatment. However, some people are very likely to be more or less resistant to negative information towards specific politicians, depending on how much they sympathize and identify with them. That is, scandal evaluation is not merely a matter of linking the characteristics of the politician with



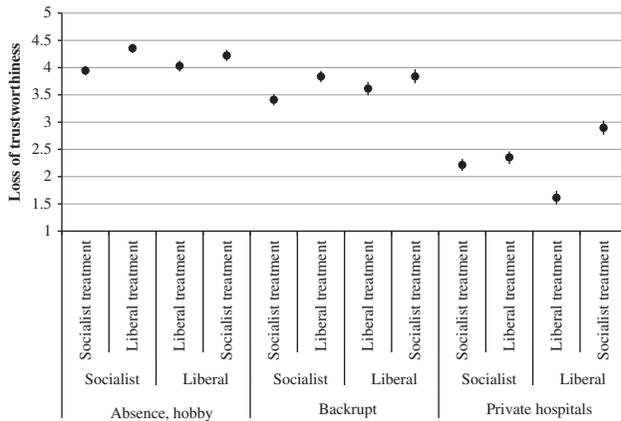
the scandal content, but also likely to be mediated by voter characteristics and political ideology.

In Table 4, the dependent variable is the same as in Tables 2 and 3 – higher values denote a relative high loss of trustworthiness due to the scandal. As independent variables, we include a range of respondent characteristics that could potentially increase the precision of the estimates. Finally, the treatments and interactions between party ideologies, gender and treatment are included in order to evaluate the heterogeneity in treatment response (Hypotheses 2a and 2b).

The main effects in Table 4 indicate who generally punishes scandals most harshly. Age is significant in five of the six scenarios but in different directions. The elderly are harsh when it comes to evaluating the two absence-related scandals (positive coefficients) but milder than younger voters when it comes to the other scandals (negative coefficients). In other words, the elderly punish lack of dedication to the job as politician hard, while the young punish scandals related exclusively to the politicians' private sphere more than older voters. Women seem to judge politicians harder than men, as the male coefficient is negative in five of the six scenarios (significantly so in three).

The impact of political interest is significantly positive in models 1 and 3 and significantly negative in model 6. Thus, when it comes to absence due to a hobby and the use of private hospitals, politically interested voters punish harshly. When it comes to adultery, it is the least political interested that punish the harshest. The mixed results hold even if we remove education from the models.<sup>9</sup> Education itself has limited impact on candidate evaluation. Individuals with (many) children in their household are significantly more forgiving than others when it comes to child care-related absenteeism. This is as one might expect as these respondents are more likely to currently experience challenges themselves in working out the logistics between work and child care.

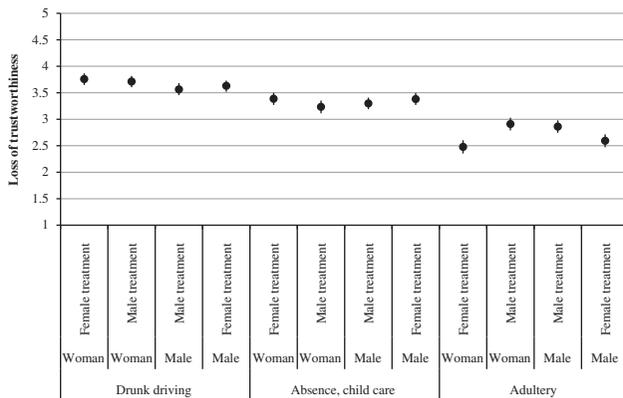
The interaction terms in Table 4 test Hypotheses 2a and 2b directly by disentangling the effect of treatment on candidate evaluation conditioned by the respondents' party affiliation or gender with the specific treatment.<sup>10</sup> Table 4 provides clear evidence in favour of Hypothesis 2a. The positive interactions in models 1–3 between Liberal treatment and left-of-centre party voting show that left-wing voters punish Liberal candidates harder than Social Democratic candidates and vice versa. For instance, the interaction coefficient is 1.43 in Model 3, indicating that the effect is 1.43 points harsher on the 1–5 scale when left-wing voters judge a Liberal politician using private hospitals compared with a Social Democrat involved in the same scandal. Particularly interesting in Models 1–3 is how the main effect for left-wing voters is always negative and (in absolute terms) lower than the interaction effect. Thus, when the scandal involves a Social Democrat, the effect of being left-wing is always negative (implying a milder evaluation) – when the scandal involves a Liberal, the effect is always positive (and the opposite is of course also true for right-wing voters, as the negative effect of being left-wing is equivalent to the positive



**Figure 2:** Predicted means for party experiments (all other variables held at their means, 95 per cent CI).

effect of being right-wing). In other words, left-wing voters evaluate private life scandals more mildly for left-wing politicians than right-wing voters do, whereas they evaluate right-wing politicians more harshly than right-wing voters do – and vice versa. Figure 2 illustrates this effect. First and the third estimates from the right (same-party evaluation) are always lower than every second and fourth (other-party evaluation). For the private hospitals, the difference across treatment status is much greater for liberals than socialists. This is because socialist respondents punish socialist politicians for hypocrisy while evaluating them favourably for being same-party candidates, and these two tendencies almost cancel each other out. Interestingly, the interaction effect is largest for the private hospital scenario, the scenario with the clearest political-ideological hypocrisy. This could indicate that voters become more partisan in the scenarios where the political cues are most pronounced.<sup>11</sup>

While there is strong evidence in favour of Hypothesis 2a, there is no support at all for Hypothesis 2b. Women and men do not respond statistically differently to the gender treatments. This is particularly interesting in the perspective of the harsher evaluation of male candidates in the perspective of adultery. Females find adultery to be more damaging overall to trustworthiness for male politicians (the positive main effect of the male variable), as do male respondents (the very small negative interaction). Figure 3 illustrates the effects. The homogenous evaluations can be seen by the closeness of second and third estimates and between the first and fourth estimates; that is, the male and female respondents agree if they get the same treatment. The relatively favourable evaluation of women in the case of adultery can be seen to the right in the figure, where the second and third estimates from the right



**Figure 3:** Predicted means for gender experiments (all other variables held at their means, 95 per cent CI).

(male treatment) are substantially higher than the first and the fourth estimates (female treatment).<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Scandals are one of the main features of the modern-day media’s coverage of politics. In fact, for voters with little knowledge about politics, scandals related to politicians’ private lives are likely to constitute one of their main perceptions about public policy and politics. Against this backdrop, it is surprising how little research has been conducted on how voters evaluate scandal-related information. This article has obvious limitations in terms of only studying six different scandals, but it nevertheless provides suggestive evidence relating to a range of hypotheses concerning scandals in politicians’ private lives.

First, we found great variation in the loss of trustworthiness for the scandalous, depending on the scandal content (see also Funk, 1996; Carlson *et al*, 2000). Scandals covering illegal conduct were evaluated surprisingly mildly – perhaps because voters expect such scandals to be punished by the legal system and not by the electorate. On the other hand, scandals indicating the neglect of one’s legislative obligations had the most negative impact on voter evaluation. Here, voters probably found that they were the ones to ensure accountability by voicing dissatisfaction.

Second, we found interesting variation due to the fit or misfit between scandal content and the political/gender traits of the ‘scandalized’ politician. We found support for the idea that political hypocrisy is evaluated much more negatively than scandals that play into existing stereotypes about politicians pursuing their own ideological interests. A Social Democrat is punished more for using private hospitals



than a Liberal, because their party position is to be sceptical towards private hospitals. Similarly, it is considered more damaging when a Liberal cannot control their own private economy, as personal fiscal responsibility is a central part of their party agenda. These results indicate that even scandals belonging to the private sphere of a politician's personal life are evaluated on political grounds by voters. To some extent, voters therefore do not distinguish between public ideological information about politicians and their private conduct. The former becomes a yardstick for evaluating the loss of trustworthiness induced by scandals in the latter. Whereas political hypocrisy seems to matter, gender stereotypes played less of a role for the evaluation of trustworthiness. Men and women are evaluated equally for drunk driving and only slightly differently for child care-related absenteeism. In the case of adultery, however, male politicians are judged much more harshly than female politicians, which provides some additional support to the surprising finding by Smith *et al* (2005) that counter-stereotypical behaviour is punished more leniently than gender-stereotypical behaviour.

Finally, we found substantial heterogeneity in voter responses. Of greatest interest was the interaction between politician trait and voter characteristics (see also Blais *et al*, 2010). Responses were found to be highly partisan. A left-wing voter punishes a right-wing politician more harshly than a left-wing politician and vice versa. This is in accordance with the literature on partisan evaluations with respect to political proposals (Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010; Slothuus, 2010a, b) and thus support that partisan bias in scandal assessments exists across political systems and contexts. The strong partisan bias could be part of the explanation why small effects of scandals on aggregate party support are sometimes found – scandals are considered most serious by those who would not vote for the politician in any case (Midtbø, 2012). There was very little heterogeneity in the gender experiments. Men and women are not biased against the opposite gender, which is interesting as the scarce literature on this matter show mixed results (Smith *et al*, 2005; Brenton, 2011). Partisanship thus matters substantially more than gender when voters are faced with private life scandals.

It should of course be emphasized that our experiments presume that the scandal comes to the public's attention and that we only examine the instantaneous effects. It is possible that scandals that feed into gender stereotypes are disproportionately taken up by the media – that they make for better news stories – and thereby the stereotypes could be important, even though voters are unaffected by them. It is also possible that the effects of some types of scandals are not instantaneous but develop over time.

The face validity of the findings was increased by taking departure in scandals somewhat similar to actual scandals that have occurred in the real world. However, as discussed previously, we did not want to make the scenarios too similar to actual scandals because of the risk of contagion. This trade-off between realism and avoiding contagion is always a dilemma in experimental studies of scandals, but it is a trade-off one has to accept in turn for the increased internal validity and direct comparability between scandals compared with correlational studies.

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## Notes

- 1 See Thompson (2000, Chapter 1) for an elaborate definition.
- 2 See Blach-Ørsten (2011) and van Dalen and Skovsgaard (2011) for a useful typology.
- 3 Barabas and Jerit (2010) recently found that a number of survey experiments have low external validity when compared with benchmarks derived from natural experiments. As already pointed out, however, the scandals are difficult to study with observational data.
- 4 We conducted robustness tests to check that the multiple treatments did not affect the results by examining whether the results hold when only looking at each individual's first treatment assignment. The multiple treatments did not seem to affect the results greatly besides increasing the power of the experiment. The tests will be reported in the footnotes.
- 5 We conducted randomization tests for each of the six treatments. In each of the randomization tests, a logit model was applied to predict treatment status. Independent variables were age, gender, political interest, education and children in the household and party affiliation (we also tried to exclude party affiliation with similar results). None of the six models performed better than a null model at the  $\alpha$  0.05 level (the lowest  $P$ -value was 0.11).
- 6 We also asked the respondents to evaluate politicians on their worthiness of running for re-election as an alternative dependent variable. This variable has the potential advantage that it does not ask about a change but an absolute evaluation. The two sets of evaluations, however, correlated very closely (in all but one of the six scenarios, the correlation was above 0.6). Moreover, the results from the analysis were almost identical with the two measures (only one substantive important difference was found: As for the average effect of treatment, the difference between males and females on the absence due to child care scenario is not significant with the alternative dependent variable, whereas it cleared the 0.05 threshold with the trustworthiness question, see Table 3). For the sake of avoiding redundancy, we only present the results from the trustworthiness question.
- 7 In 2011, 10 times more Danish men than women were convicted for drunk driving (Danish Statistics, 2011).
- 8 As a robustness test, we considered the possibility that the fact that each individual receives three treatments might affect the results. One might argue that it is possible for the respondent to figure out the treatment when presented with multiple scenarios – some involving one party (or gender) and some involving the other party (or gender). We tested for the influence of multiple scenarios by only considering the results for the first scenario each individual is presented with (though our  $n$  drops to one-third of the original analysis). When Table 3 was repeated with the first scenarios only, almost identical difference sizes were generally found (the number of stars of course fall because of the lower sample size). Only for absence because of child care did we find a notable difference in the conclusion. When all cases were considered, men were punished slightly more than women. When only cases where this scenario was presented first were considered, there was no difference in means (and the difference-in-difference between the sub-sample with the first scenario only and the remaining cases were significant).
- 9 One explanation for the mixed results might be that in the experimental setting, we present all respondents with the same information and ask them to evaluate it directly. We thus effectively hold

information constant for all respondents. Therefore, we should be careful about transferring the result to a real life expectation with respect to the effect of political interest.

- 10 Note that about 400 cases are lost, as many voters are undecided, thus giving the 'votes left-wing' several missing cases. We re-estimated Table 4 with a dummy for undecided and other voters included in order to prevent the loss of cases (along with an interaction between the undecided and the treatment). This did not change any of the main conclusions. For the sake of simplicity in the presentation of the results, we do not include the dummy (and the related interaction) in Table 4.
- 11 We also tested interactions between political interest and the treatments. This might especially be important for the political hypocrisy analysis as it is possible that the politically interested (and thus potentially more informed) are better able to see ideological inconsistency. In one case, we did get a significant interaction in the expected direction – the politically interested punish Social Democrats more harshly for using private hospitals. Including the interaction in Table 4, however, does not in any of the cases substantially change the coefficients for the interactions currently examined (for instance, in model 3 where the interaction between political interest and the treatment was significant, the coefficient for the interaction between partisanship and treatment changes insignificantly from 1.43 to 1.45).
- 12 We conducted robustness tests for Table 4 to examine the influence of multiple scenarios as described in footnote 3. Potentially, the presentation of multiple scenarios in Table 4 could affect the heterogeneity of the effect. If the treatment becomes obvious for the respondents, they may respond in a more or less partisan manner and may avoid or stress gender stereotypes. To test the robustness of the results to this potential factor, we re-estimated the six models in Table 4 with only the first scenario presented to each respondent, the results were almost identical to Table 4. There was a slight tendency for more heterogeneous effects for the party experiments, indicating that voters are most partisan when the party treatment is better concealed. Furthermore, the interaction for the absence because of child care experiment was significant at the 0.05 level (as opposed to Table 4). This could imply that men punish men relatively harder than women do (but only slightly so).

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