THE COINGATE EFFECT:
The Impact of Scandal on Attitudes Toward
State and Federal Political Actors

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ABSTRACT

What happens when a major and well publicized state-level scandal occurs? Do opinions of federal politicians improve because of relative comparisons to state politicians caught in the scandal? Do attitudes toward all politicians suffer? Little work has been done to investigate the impact of scandal about state-level political actors. We also know remarkably little about how scandals related to one level of government affect attitudes about political actors at other levels.

We investigate what happens when a major and well publicized state-level scandal occurs. Using individual-level public opinion data collected during the summer of 2006, this paper analyzes the impact that a state-level scandal had on citizen approval of state and federal political actors. Further, the mediating impact of exposure to media coverage of the scandal is investigated. We find that overall consumption of news coverage of the governor boosts approval of the governor relative to the president. At the same time, however, citizens exposed to negative news coverage of their governors show a decline in relative gubernatorial approval.

What happens when a major and well publicized state-level scandal occurs? Do opinions of federal politicians improve because of relative comparisons to state politicians caught in the scandal? Do attitudes toward all politicians suffer? The effects of political scandal have been long investigated, with scandals involving the President and Congress shown to have an electoral impact (though somewhat minimal) and some influence on public attitudes toward government more generally. Comparatively little work has been done to investigate the impact of scandal about state-level political actors. We also know remarkably little about how scandals related to one level of government affect attitudes about political actors at other levels.

Using individual-level public opinion data collected during the summer of 2006, we examine the impact that state-level scandal can have on citizen approval of state and federal political actors. Further, the mediating impact of exposure to media coverage of the scandal is investigated. We find that overall, consumption of news coverage of the governor boosts approval of the governor relative to the president. At the same time, however, citizens exposed to news coverage of scandal involving their governor show a decline in relative gubernatorial approval. Further, state-level scandal appears to have negative ramifications for national-level actors as well.

THE FALLOUT OF POLITICAL SCANDALS

Research on the impact of scandals often comes in the wake of a high profile scandal. Explosions of research followed both the House banking scandal of the 1990s and the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal later in the decade. Studies of each attempted to understand the political fallout (or lack thereof) that followed each scandal. It appears a scandalized president can expect to find lower levels of support from members of the U.S. Congress than a non-scandalized president (Meinke and Anderson 2001). Further, the Democratic gains in the 1998 mid-term elections can be explained, in part, by voter backlash concerning Kenneth Starr’s investigation into the Clinton/Lewinsky affair and the subsequent House impeachment trial (Abramowitz 2001). Still, the electoral impact of scandals is often seen as minimal. “Scandals lead to a decrease in a member’s electoral margin. However, they do not routinely result in an incumbent’s defeat” (Alford, et al. 1994: 790; see also Abramowitz 1988, 1991; Dimrock and Jacobson 1995; Peters
and Welch 1980). While the banking scandal was determined to have caused many retirements and several defeats (Alford, et al. 1994; Banducci and Karp 1994; Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Hall and Van Houweling 1995; Jacobson and Dimrock 1994; Stewart 1994), the average impact of the scandal was in fact nominal on the electoral fortunes of most members (Alford, Teeters, Ward and Wilson 1994; Dimock and Jacobson 1995; Funk 1996; Welch and Hibbing 1980). Other scandals have been similarly shown to increase early retirements and reduce incumbents’ share of the vote, but rarely lead to electoral defeats (Brown 2006; Cobb 2007).

More generally, political scandals have been shown to have some impact on more global attitudes about the political system. Scandals have been shown to significantly erode public trust in government (Damico, Conway and Bowman Damico 2000) and diminish regard for individual politicians and government leaders (Bowler and Karp 2004; Clarke, et al. 1998; Lanoue and Headrick 1994). Further, Congressional scandals have been shown to reduce, though perhaps only modestly, the public’s support for Congress (Morris and Clawson 2007; Patterson and Caldeira 1990; Patterson and Magleby 1992).

Overall, then, the research suggests that the fallout from scandal is frequently minor or quite dispersed. The typically low impact of scandals has been explained in two ways. The first is grounded in theories of attitude formation, and the second in the research on media influence. One reason that scandals may have limited impact results from the way in which the public forms opinions. For voters, the importance of political information changes over time (MacKuen 1983), and scandals typically have a very short half-life (Alford, et al 1994). Consequently, a scandal’s relative salience generally fades as the election approaches and attention is focused more on other, usually policy-related, issues (Jacobson and Dimrock 1994; Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977; Stoker 1993). Further, the nature of the scandal and the individuals involved in it can influence attitude formation. The public weighs different types of scandals differently, and preexisting perceptions of political actors or institutions can shape reactions to scandal. Scandals involving the professional role of the officeholder, such as exchanging votes for money, typically result in more negative public reaction (Peters and Welch 1978) than scandals related to an officeholder’s personal shortcomings (Owen 2000). Similarly, institutional scandals appear to be less
detrimental than individual ones (Alford, et al 1994), with the public forgiving particular members for their involvement in scandals of an institutional nature (McGraw 1991). Moreover, prior perceptions about the political actors involved in a scandal can mitigate the scandal’s impact. People tend to distort the facts of particular scandals in order to preserve their prior image of particular political actors (Fischle 2000; McGraw, Fischle, Stenner, and Lodge 1996). For instance, President Clinton’s “widespread popularity at the time of the Lewinsky affair came to light deeply colored public reactions to the scandal” (Fischle 2000: 150), and mitigated the negative impact this scandal had on the president. Thus, the intricacies of attitude formation play some role in explaining why scandals often exhibit very little direct negative impact on voters’ attitudes and behavior.

The public, of course, does not form attitudes in isolation, and the role of the media cannot be overlooked. “[T]he media have a powerful ability to alter the standards by which candidates are judged” (Stoker 1993: 209), and this ability can influence the impact scandal will have. The importance of exposure to media coverage of politics has long been recognized (e.g., Zaller 1992), and media coverage of scandals can serve to trivialize their content (Owen 2000: 175) and marginalize their importance (Shah, et al. 2002). When media coverage downplays the seriousness of a scandal or its importance relative to other issues, the scandal is likely to have little impact on public attitudes and behavior. At the same time, however, consistent and prevalent media coverage of a scandal can have negative consequences (Morris and Clawson 2007). Media coverage that highlights the importance and seriousness of a scandal can have a significant negative impact on public opinion and voting behavior.

**FEDERALISM AND SCANDAL**

On the whole, investigations of political scandal have focused primarily on national-level, high profile occurrences and investigated their impact on the public’s reaction to particular individuals or institutions. Little work has been done on scandals involving state or local political officials, yet the occurrence and impact of sub-national scandal can be hugely important. There are far more sub-national political actors than national ones, and the public generally feels closer and more attached to these actors (see e.g., Jewell 1982; Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton 1975; Ulbig 2004). Further, sub-national
politicians and institutions are likely to be covered heavily in the local media, on which much of the public relies for political news (e.g. Allen et al. 2007; Iyengar and McGrady 2007; Stevens, et al. 2006).

Further, while a substantial body of work has investigated the impact of national-level scandal on the fates of federal officials and institutions, significantly less has been done to look at the impact scandal at one level of government might affect public attitudes about another. Some have argued that more negative assessments of the federal government have led to more positive assessments of state governments, with support for devolution being driven more by a distaste for the federal government than by the “demonstrated abilities of state and local governments” (Hetherington and Nugent 2001: 139). Thus, it is the relative comparison of state and federal actors that drives trust in state government more than state-specific factors.

At the same time, a range of national-level factors have been shown to influence attitudes and voting behavior targeted at state-level political actors. While there is some evidence that the public is able to distinguish between political actors and levels of government when attributing responsibility for policy outcomes (Arceneaux 2006; Atkeson and Partin 1995; Carsey and Wright 1998; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990; Niemi, et al. 1999; Niemi, et al 1995; Stein 1990), the complexity of the American federal system apparently still causes some confusion among voters (Downs 1999). Consequently, a range of national-level factors have been shown to influence attitudes and voting behavior targeted at state-level political actors. As much previous research has indicated, Presidential approval can have a substantial impact on gubernatorial ratings. Voters appear to transfer their feelings about the President to governors when asked about approval of their state executive (Bibby 1983; Carsey and Wright 1998; Chubb 1988; Cohen 1983; Cohen and King 2004; Crew, et al 2002; Crew and Weiher 1996; Pierson 1975) as well as in their voting behavior (King 2001; Simon 1989). Popular Presidents tend to boost the approval ratings and vote totals of governors, particularly their partisan brethren.1

1 Further, national economic conditions have been consistently shown to impact gubernatorial approval (Chubb 1998; Cohen and King 2003; Cohen and King 2004; Crew and Weiher 1996; Crew, et al 2002; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990; Orth 2001).
We suggest that the opposite might be the case as well – that impressions of state-level political actors and institutions might affect attitudes about their federal counterparts. We expect that people exposed to state-level political scandal will come to regard their state politicians less favorably. Existing research leads us to two different predictions about what impact this might have on federal officials, however. First, the public might make relative comparisons of their state and national elected officials. Consequently, as ratings of state political actors and institutions diminish, attitudes about their federal counterparts might become more rosy. As people think less and less of their state political actors, their federal representatives come to look better and better. Specifically, we look at the impact that state-level scandal might have on approval of state governors and the president, and expect the following:

\[ H_1: \text{Citizens exposed to a scandal involving their governor will come to hold relatively less positive evaluations of that governor.} \]

Conversely, it might be the case that increasingly negative impressions of state-level actors and institutions could be transferred to politics more generally. A state-level scandal could lead people to believe that all politicians are dirty, regardless of where they serve. Looking at the impact that state-level scandal might have on approval of state governors and the president, then, we would expect that:

\[ H_2: \text{Citizens exposed to a scandal involving their governor will come to hold more negative evaluations of the president.} \]

**GOLF BALLS & COINS: THE ORIGIN OF A SCANDALOUS YEAR IN OHIO STATE GOVERNMENT**

We test our hypotheses in the context of a state-level scandal involving a sitting governor. Specifically, we investigate the impact that a series of 2005-2006 scandals had on Ohioans compared to their counterparts in states not witnessing state-level scandal. On April 3, 2005, the Toledo Blade published a story that explored the state of Ohio’s multi-million dollar investment in rare coins. Since 1998, the Ohio Bureau of Worker’s Compensation (BWC) had been investing heavily in Tom Noe’s Capital Coin fund – in fact the BWC was the sole investor in this fund. This investment continued despite an internal audit that raised strong concerns about this investment. Specifically, the internal auditor at the BWC raised issues concerning potential conflicts of interest and concern over whether the
investment was adequately protected (Wilkinson and Drew 2005). The investment continued despite several documented incidents. For example – two coins worth roughly $300,000 were lost in the mail (later it was determined that other coins were lost or misplaced as well), and the Coin Fund has had to write off $850,000 in debt to cover a failed business relationship. Further, Mr. Noe loaned some of the state’s invested money to a local real estate business and state auditors were never able to find documentation proving that the loans were sufficiently covered by the value of the real estate that Capital Coin was holding as collateral (Wilkinson and Drew 2005).

As time progressed, the story gained traction and spread to other Ohio news outlets as well as some national news outlets. When it was discovered that $10-12 million dollars was missing from the Capital Coin Fund, the story erupted into a major scandal. The scandal, dubbed “Coingate” is considered “one of the biggest scandals in Ohio state government history” (Niquette 2006a). In addition to being a rare coin dealer, Tom Noe was also a prominent Republican fund-raiser in the state of Ohio, and Ohio Democrats and the state press corps began to question the nature of the BWC’s investment in these coins. In particular, Democratic Party leaders in Ohio asserted that the Republican controlled state government allowed this investment to continue to “reward” Noe for his fundraising efforts. Quickly, Noe became the focal point of the scandal.

In February 2006, after a lengthy investigation, Tom Noe was indicted on 53 felony counts including theft of more than one million dollars, engaging in a pattern of corrupt activity, money laundering, tampering with records and forgery. Noe, it turns out, had used state money to buy more than coins. He also bought a number of collectibles including paintings, presidential Christmas cards and autographed footballs. In the end, Noe was sentenced to serve 18 years in state prison to be served after he serves 27 months in federal prison for illegally funneling funds to George W. Bush’s reelection campaign (Niquette 2006b). The collapse of the coin fund and the discovery of the missing investment funds triggered a larger investigation into state government practices that led to ethics charges against then governor Bob Taft and former members of his administration. The BWC’s leadership and investment operations were also restructured (Niquette 2006a).
Missing rare coins were not the only thing on the mind of Ohio Governor Bob Taft during the Summer of 2005. The investigation into the Coingate scandal led to the discovery of other impropriety in the state government. Already smarting from his role in the Coingate scandal, Bob Taft came under fire for “errors and omissions” in his annual financial-disclosure statements. It turns out that the governor failed to disclose numerous golf outings with lobbyists, business people and friends during a six year stretch. This omission proved problematic because, in 2001, the Ohio Ethics Commission banned public officials from accepting free golf games from state vendors or those seeking to do business with the state (Johnson and Niquette 2005).

Governor Taft initially responded to the charge by stating that he was unaware that these golf outings needed to be disclosed and that their omission on his disclosure statement was inadvertent. Since 1998, the governor had failed to report 52 golf outings, several meals, hockey tickets and other gifts worth just under $6,000. By law, public official in the state of Ohio must report all gifts whose value exceeds $75. Governor Taft was formally charged, and he pleaded “no contest” to the charges and was found guilty of 4 misdemeanor charges. He paid $4,000 in fines and $76 in court costs (Niquette, Johnson and Ludlow 2005). He also faces subsequent disbarment from the American Bar Association, and he will be recorded by history as the only governor to be indicted and found guilty of criminal activity while still holding office. Additionally, these scandals coupled with a poor Ohio economy led to Bob Taft earning possibly the lowest approval rating of any governor in the country. In a November 2005 poll, only 6.5 percent of Ohioans approved of Taft’s performance as governor (Tankersly 2005).  

Just as the Coingate scandal was heating up, Representative Bob Ney, a Republican representing the 18th District of Ohio was revealed to be one of the individuals who had taken inappropriate campaign donations, gifts and trips from lobbyist Jack Abramoff. By early 2006, Rep. Ney had relinquished his chairmanship of the House Administration Committee and by August of 2006 he was resigning in

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2 In later polls, Governor Taft’s public approval rating would rebound slightly.
disgrace ultimately pleading guilty to conspiracy and making false statements and is currently serving a 30 month prison term (Wehrman 2006a, 2006b, 2006c).

We believe that the magnitude of these scandals as well as their pervasiveness in the state news media impacted the public opinion of Ohio voters regarding their views of state government and the people who run it. We hypothesize that exposure to media coverage of state-level scandal will lead to lower approval of the governor relative to the president. At the same time, we expect that exposure to non-scandal media coverage in Pennsylvania and Missouri will have a positive effect on relative gubernatorial approval. Further, we believe that state-level scandal might also negatively impact presidential approval as well.

DATA AND MEASURES

We examine the impact that state-level scandal has on relative approval of state and national political actors using public opinion survey data collected by the Center for Social Sciences and Public Policy Research at Missouri State University. Between May 30 and July 15, 2006, random samples of adult citizens in three states (Missouri, Ohio, and Pennsylvania) were interviewed by phone. A total of 2,006 respondents were interviewed – 783 Ohio residents, 843 Pennsylvania residents, and 380 Missouri residents. Our choice of these three states was an attempt to reflect the general racial and economic profile of the nation, while creating a static-group comparison quasi-experimental research design (Campbell and Stanley 1963: 12). This design allows us to compare a group that has recently experienced scandal (Ohio) with groups that have not (Pennsylvania and Missouri) in order to establish the effects of such scandal. These three states share geographical proximity and have similar demographic profiles, which are reflective of those of the United States as a whole. All three states have a population that is

3 The authors would like to thank Dr. Kellie Sims Butler for her assistance with data collection.

4 The response rate for the survey, given by \( \frac{\text{number of completed interviews}}{\text{number of completed interviews + number of refusals}} \) = 2006 / (2006 + 3673) = 35.3%. The response rates for each state are: Missouri = 380 / (380 + 595) = 40%; Ohio = 783 / (783 + 1465) = 35%; and Pennsylvania = 843 / (843 + 1613) = 34%.
about 84% Anglo and 10-12% African-American.\(^5\) Further, all three states have roughly the same economic profile, with similar median household incomes, per capita incomes, and percentage of families below the poverty line.\(^6\) By comparing Ohio residents to the residents of the other states, we can better understand how exposure to state-level scandal affects attitudes toward state- and national-level political actors.

Relative gubernatorial approval serves as the dependent variable in this analysis. Respondents were asked how they felt the president and the governor of their state were handling their jobs (see Appendix A for question wording and coding). Missourians appear to be more approving of the president than either Ohians or Pennsylvanians (see Table 1). While only about 36% of respondents from Ohio or Pennsylvania approve of the way the president was handling his job, almost half (45.9%) of Missouri respondents expressed approval. At the same time, Ohians are significantly less approving of their governor than are Missourians or Pennsylvanians. More than half (51.8%) of Missouri respondents and more than two-thirds of Pennsylvania respondents (67.7%) report approving of the jobs their governors are doing, but less than half (45.6%) of Ohio respondents feel this way. On the whole, Ohio respondents are significantly less approving of their governor,\(^7\) and Missourians appear to be significantly more approving of the president.\(^8\)

We subtract presidential approval from gubernatorial approval to create a “relative gubernatorial approval” measure. This measure takes on positive values when a respondent expresses higher approval of the governor than of the president and negative values when the respondent expresses higher approval

\(^5\) Percent Anglo Population: US=73.9%; OH=84; PA=83.8; MO=84.0. Percent African-American Population: US=12.4; OH=11.8; PA=10.4; MO=11.3 (U.S. Census Bureau).

\(^6\) Median Income: US=$48,451; OH=$44,532; PA=$46,259; MO=$42,841. Per Capita Income: US=$22,267; OH=$23,543; PA=$24,694; MO=$22,916. Percent Families Below Poverty Line: US=9.8; OH=9.8; PA=8.2; MO=10.0 (U.S. Census Bureau).

\(^7\) The difference in mean gubernatorial approval between Ohio and each other state is significant at p<0.05.

\(^8\) The difference in mean presidential approval between Missouri and each other state is significant at p<0.05, while the difference between Ohio and Pennsylvania is not significant.
of the president than of the governor. We dichotomized this measure so that respondents scoring positive values (approving of the governor more than the president) are coded ‘1’ and respondents scoring negative values (approving of the president more than the governor) or zero (approving of the governor and president at the same level) are coded ‘0’. Overall, about one-third of all respondents approve of their governor more than the president (see Table 1), but significant inter-state variation exists. Ohio respondents are much less likely to report trusting their governor more than the president, with only 19.6% of Ohians reporting such attitudes. Comparatively, 28.9% of Missourians feel this (due largely to their higher level of presidential approval) and 54.1% of Pennsylvanians express this opinion.

Our key independent variables involve media coverage of state politics and individual-level news consumption – number of stories about each state’s governor and respondent attention to politics in the news. To determine the amount of news coverage each governor received, we conducted content analysis of all major metro newspapers in the three states for the six months immediately prior to our survey (January – June 2006). We searched every newspaper with online archives in the America’s Newspapers database. First we searched all the newspapers in each state for news stories referencing the governors in each state. The searches of the newspapers were conducted one state at a time so that we could have specific information on news coverage about each governor. Since media coverage of political scandal can only be expected to affect respondents’ approval of public figures if they are exposed to it, we interact this media coverage measure with a measure of individual-level media consumption. Respondents were asked how closely they follow news about politics and government (see Appendix A for full question wording and coding). Overall, almost three-quarters of all respondents report following political news “somewhat closely” or “very closely,” and these rates of news consumption are remarkably similar across

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9 The America’s Newspaper database contains archives of six Missouri newspapers, forty newspapers in Pennsylvania and twenty-eight Ohio newspapers. The authors would like to thank Johanna Dunaway for her assistance with this search.

10 Our search revealed 63 stories about Ohio governor Bob Taft, 90 stories about Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell, and 39 stories about Missouri governor Matt Blunt.
the three states (see Table 1). To test our expectation that only Ohio respondents who consume political news will be negatively affected by it, we create a three-way interaction between Ohio residence, media consumption, and media coverage.

We include as control variables perceptions of public policy and political actors. Since trust and approval in government is likely based on perceptions of the political actors involved in the process (Barber, 1983; Hart, 1978; Wright, 1976), we include measures of respondents’ impressions of the president and their governor. Specifically, we ask respondents whether they feel the governor/president has too much power. We expect those feeling the governor has too much power to be relatively less trusting of him and those feeling the president has too much power to be relatively more trusting of their governor. As Table 1 shows, Ohioans were much more likely to believe that their governor has too much power (39.9%) compared to other respondents (PA: 21.2%; MO: 28%).

Additionally, we include measures of the public’s assessment of public policy in the nation, with the expectation that those viewing policy outputs more favorably will approve of officials more (Craig, 1993; Easton 19654; Miller and Borrelli, 1991; W. Miller, 1979; Owen and Dennis, 2001). Specifically, we include two measures of public policy – retrospective economic evaluations of the nation/state and things are “generally off track” in the nation/state. On the whole, about 60% of all respondents believe the national economy had gotten worse over the past year and about half (50.8%) felt their state economies had gotten worse, with Ohio respondents more likely to report that their state economy had gotten worse than either those from Missouri or Pennsylvania. Similarly, almost three-quarters (73.8%) of all respondents believe the nation is “seriously off track,” and more than 60% feel this way about their state. Ohio respondents were once again the most negative, with Pennsylvanians being slightly less negative, and Missourians being the least negative in their ratings of the national and state economies (see Table 1).

Finally, we also initially included in our models control variables for a range of demographics (age, education, race/ethnicity, and gender), as well as the politically relevant attitudes of ideology and partisanship. The only variable that proved to be statistically significant was partisanship, specifically
Republican respondents appear to trust their governors relatively less than non-Republicans. In the analysis presented here, we retain only this significant variable while excluding all others.\footnote{11}

**ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

To investigate the impact that political scandal has on relative gubernatorial approval, multivariate regression analyses are performed. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, probit regression analysis including the media coverage and consumption variables as well as pertinent control variables are utilized. In addition, the structure of the data calls for a correction to the standard errors. Since respondents were sampled from states, it is likely that subsets of respondents from the same state will represent relatively homogenous groups. To compensate for this homogeneity within state samples and heterogeneity across them, the standard errors were adjusted for clustering on the respondent’s state of residence. These results are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

These findings lend support to our first hypothesis. Political scandal does appear to diminish relative gubernatorial approval. The significant coefficients for the news consumption, media coverage, news consumption/media coverage interaction, and this interaction among Ohio respondents suggests that media coverage of political scandal can indeed drive down feeling toward the governor. The positive news consumption/media coverage coefficient suggests that, overall, news coverage of governors in general boosts relative gubernatorial approval. The content of the media coverage, also appears to be important, however. Among Ohio respondents, who were likely exposed to the most negative gubernatorial coverage, the effect of media consumption has a negative impact on relative gubernatorial approval. Ohians who consume more news about Taft are less likely to approve of him. This does not appear to be the case for either Pennsylvanians or Missourians, for whom consumption of stories about Rendell or Blunt appear to boost relative gubernatorial approval.\footnote{12}

\footnote{11} The results remain statistically and substantively unchanged when the additional control variables are included.

\footnote{12} The model estimated in Table 2 was run with two additional specifications: (1) substituting a three way interaction between news consumption, media coverage of the governor, and a dummy for Pennsylvania residents and (2)
Substantively, the consumption of media coverage of scandal dramatically decreases gubernatorial approval. Among Ohio respondents, those who say they do not follow news about politics and government at all have about a 0.34 probability of approving of Governor Taft more than President Bush. Comparatively, those who follow news very closely have only about a 0.11 chance of approving of the governor more than the president.\textsuperscript{13}

It thus appears that Ohioans exposed to more media coverage of their governor are relatively less approving of him. To determine if this results from diminished ratings of the governor, heightened ratings of the president, or both, we conduct separate analyses predicting gubernatorial and presidential approval with the news consumption and media coverage variables. The first column of Table 3 suggests that our second hypothesis is borne out as well. Ohians who consume more news about their governor are significantly less likely to approve of him, and their approval of the president also appears to diminish in reaction to higher consumption of gubernatorial news stories. Presidential approval, however, does not receive as large a penalty from these stories. Among Ohioans, increased news consumption decreases the chance of approving of the governor by about 39\% while it decreases approval of the president by only about 12\%.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Ohians come to regard both the president and governor less favorably, but the governor is penalized to a larger degree than the president.

\begin{table}[h]
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\caption{Table 3 here}
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\textsuperscript{13} Probabilities were calculated using the model presented in Table 2. The Ohio specific variables (number of governor stories, governor’s margin of victory, and the Ohio dummy variable) were held at appropriate levels, the news consumption variable was changed to represent different levels of news consumption, and the other variables were held at their means. Those following news “not very closely” have a 0.25 probability of approving of the governor more than the president and those following news “somewhat closely” have a 0.17 chance of doing so.

\textsuperscript{14} Probabilities were calculated using the models presented in Table 3. The Ohio specific variables (number of governor stories, governor’s margin of victory, and the Ohio dummy variable) were held at appropriate levels, the news consumption variable was changed to represent different levels of news consumption, and the other variables were held at their means. The probability of those who do not consume news at all approving or strongly approving of the governor is about 0.51, while those who follow news very closely have a 0.12 probability of doing so. The probability of those who do not consume news at all approving or strongly approving of the president is 0.38, while those who follow news very closely have a 0.26 probability of doing so.
This is not the case for either Pennsylvanians or Missourians, whose approval of their respective
governors, as well as the president, improves with more news consumption.\textsuperscript{15} Overall, then it appears that
media coverage of state-level political actors can play some role in shaping attitudes toward federal
officials. Whether this effect will be a boon or a burden depends a lot on how the media treats the state-
level actors.

\textbf{SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS}

We sought to determine whether or not a series of scandals in the Ohio state government during
2005 and 2006 significantly impacted citizens’ opinions of public officials governing the state. The
public opinion analyzed in this research allows some support for the notion that these scandals did indeed
impact the opinions of Ohioans towards their governments. We find that overall consumption of news
coverage of the governor boosts approval of the governor relative to the president. At the same time,
however, citizens exposed to negative news coverage of their governors show a decline in relative
approval of their governor.

Some caution should be taken with the inferences drawn from this study, however. Though these
findings are interesting and encouraging, we must pause to recognize some important limitations of the
data utilized here. First, our sample comes from a small subset of Midwestern states, which may not be
fully representative of the nation as a whole. Further, while we have a global measure of media
consumption, we lack a measure of the qualitative nature of this coverage. Developing and utilizing a
measure that more closely captures the nature of media coverage in each state will likely provide a much
more precise understanding of the effects of scandal. Additionally, our media coverage measure is taken
over a relatively short time-span somewhat removed from the time the state-level scandals were
unfolding. Gathering more detailed information about the content of news stories about the state-level
scandals as they unfolded will provide a much better picture of the content of media coverage, and
provide much more leverage in an analysis of its potential impact.

\textsuperscript{15} As above, the models estimated in Table 3 was run substituting three way interactions between news
consumption, gubernatorial media coverage and either a Pennsylvania or Missouri dummy variable. In both cases,
Despite these shortcomings, the findings presented here make a contribution in several ways. Overall, our results suggest that state-level scandal negatively affects approval of state political actors. Further, such scandal can have negative ramifications for federal officials as well. Importantly, however, media coverage greatly impacts the influence scandal can have. These results are impressive for several reasons. First, given that many have noted the rapid rate at which scandals fade (e.g., Alford, et al. 1994; Jacobson and Dimrock 1994; MacKuen 1983; Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977), we might expect the impact of the Ohio scandals to have diminished by the time of our survey in mid-summer 2006. Additionally, since more diffuse scandals involving many actors have been shown to have limited effects on one a particular official (McGraw 1991), we might expect that a scandal involving many more actors than just then Governor Taft would have limited impact on his specific approval ratings. Finally, some have suggested that complicated corruption scandals are less likely to be understood and thus used to punish political actors than simpler, moral scandals (Peters and Welch 1980; Welch and Hibbing 1997). The Ohio scandals were nothing if not complicated, so we might expect them to exhibit less impact on public opinion. Given these potential obstacles, our finding that state-level scandal does indeed affect impressions of state-level actors, as well as federal ones, is somewhat surprising. While this study is certainly far from exhaustive, it makes an important first step in filling the gap in knowledge about the potential impact of state-level scandal.

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the three way interaction was positive and significant.
**APPENDIX A**

**Variables and Coding**

**Relative Gubernatorial Approval:** Dichotomous variable indicating whether respondent has higher approval of his/her state’s governor than of the president or not, based on the following questions:

“Now I'd like to get your feelings towards some important leaders in society. Thinking about these leaders, please tell me if you: strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the way these people are handling their jobs . . . How about how George W. Bush has been handling his job as President?” (4) Strongly Approve, (3) Approve, (2) Disapprove, (1) Strongly Disapprove.

“What about the way the [Matt Blunt/Bob Taft/Ed Rendell] has been handling his job as Governor?” (4) Strongly Approve, (3) Approve, (2) Disapprove, (1) Strongly Disapprove.

Presidential approval was subtracted from gubernatorial approval, and respondents with positive scores were coded 1, while respondents with negative scores and a score of zero were coded 0.

**News Consumption:** “How closely do you follow news about politics and government? Would you say very closely, somewhat closely, not very closely, or not at all?” (4) very closely, (3) somewhat closely, (2) not very closely, or (1) not at all

**Number of Governor Stories:** Total number of stories about the governor of the state in which the respondent resides appearing in newspapers between January and June, 2006.

**Retrospective State Economic Evaluations:** “Thinking about the economy in the STATE OF [MISSOURI/OHIO/PENNSYLVANIA], would you say that OVER THE PAST YEAR the state's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?” (3) gotten better, (2) stayed about the same, or (1) gotten worse

**State Off Track:** Do you think things in the state are generally going in the right direction or are they seriously off on the wrong track? (0) Going in Right Direction, (1) Seriously Off Track

**Governor Too Powerful:** “Next I would like to read you a list of public officials and get you to tell me how you feel about the powers these officials have deal with the problems facing our nation. Do you feel each has too much power, about the right amount of power, or too little power? . . . How about the [Missouri/Ohio/Pennsylvania] Governor?” (1) Too Much Power, (0) About the Right Amount of Power, (0) Too Little Power

**Retrospective National Economic Evaluations:** “Thinking about the economy in the COUNTRY AS A WHOLE, would you say that OVER THE PAST YEAR the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?” (3) gotten better, (2) stayed about the same, or (1) gotten worse

**Nation Off Track:** “Do you think things in this country are generally going in the right direction or are they seriously off on the wrong track?” (0) Going in Right Direction, (1) Seriously Off Track

**President Too Powerful:** “Next I would like to read you a list of public officials and get you to tell me how you feel about the powers these officials have deal with the problems facing our nation. Do you feel each has too much power, about the right amount of power, or too little power? . . . How about the U.S. President?” (1) Too Much Power, (0) About the Right Amount of Power, (0) Too Little Power

**Republican:** “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Strong Republican, a Republican, a Strong Democrat, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?” Dichotomous (dummy) variable representing Republican (1=Republican or Strong Republican, 0=Not Republican or Strong Republican)
REFERENCES


| Table 1  
Variable Frequencies |
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*Note: Cell entries are valid percentages, which may not sum to 100% due to rounding.*
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Notes: Cell entries are probit regression coefficients and standard errors corrected for clustering on state. ***p<0.01
Table 3  
Impact of State-Level Scandal on  
Gubernatorial & Presidential Approval

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Notes: Cell entries are ordered probit regression coefficients with standard errors corrected for clustering on state. Dependent variables are the four-point gubernatorial and presidential approval measures (see Appendix A for question wording and coding). ***p<0.01; **p<0.05.