

Image Restoration in Political Sex Scandals: What To Do (And What Not To Do) When You're Caught With Your Pants Down

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Abstract

This study sought to apply a Crisis Communications lens to the area of American political sex scandals. Applying William Benoit's "Theory of Image Restoration" to 24 American sex scandals, ranging from 1987 to 2011 and all of which received significant national attention, this study examined each official's public statements in response to allegations of sexual impropriety and coded them for their adherence to the five strategies outlined in Benoit's work. The study found "Evading Responsibility" to be most frequently used, while "Denial" was the least utilized of his tactics. This study served to help answer the question of whether or not today's politicians are held to a higher standard, and what this means for the future of political accountability.

I. Introduction

On December 3, 2011, amidst looming allegations of sexual impropriety and harassment, Herman Cain, Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and hopeful Republican Presidential nominee, suspended his campaign after "a lot of prayer and soul-searching."¹ The scandalous allegations were covered in both print and online news, with bloggers and late-night talk show hosts eager to comment on Cain's indiscretions. While sex scandals are by no means new to American Politics, the recent onslaught of new and faster media of the past two decades has dramatically fixated the public's attention on instances of political misconduct, and in doing so, has increased the frequency with which scandals are publicized. Whereas sex scandals of the 1950s and 60s were largely concealed due to the limited number of media outlets, today's media landscape consists of a seemingly endless parade of journalists, bloggers, and gossip sites. A second area in which increased scandals have affected politics is in the standard of accountability to which politicians and officials are now held. Almost every month there is a new story of impropriety, and calls for the targeted individual to respond to allegations and explain himself or herself. The rapid growth of the Internet as well as new media outlets has led to increased scrutiny of virtually all areas of political public affairs, but has also led to an information-driven society in which private lives can easily be made public.

This study sought to examine political sex scandals with a Crisis Communications lens. By understanding the strategies and tactics used by each official in response to allegations against him, this paper outlined the most effective methods used, and examined if there are certain variables (party affiliation, year of scandal) that can serve as a predictor of response. Because of the increased publicity of sex scandals, even just in the past decade, this paper explored the various techniques that officials and their press offices used to combat the negative press surrounding the reported event. By reading and analyzing public statements made from each official in response to allegations, the author hoped to find an explanation as to why some

1 "A Defiant Herman Cain Suspends His Bid for Presidency." *New York Times*, December 3, 2011.

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image restoration strategies were used more than others, and perhaps clarify what makes the aftermath of one scandal more successful than another. Crisis management is generally discussed on an organizational or corporate level, so by applying the same image restoration theory to individual scandals and political crises, this paper sought to determine which strategies are most highly regarded, and why some are more effective than others in quashing negative public opinion.

II. Literature Review

Scandals by Definition and Practice

To determine the expectations of effectively managing and controlling scandals, it is important to first understand what constitutes a scandal. Political rhetoric scholar, John Thompson, argued that for an event to be a scandal rather than simply a piece of news, it must include five specific characteristics. First, the event must involve a “transgression of certain values, norms or moral codes” (Thompson, 2000, p. 14). Second and third, the incident must include some aspect of secrecy, and there also must be a level of disapproval by non-participants surrounding the action. Fourth, there must be “public denouncing” of the actions or events by non-participants and finally, that the actions must “damage the reputation of the individuals responsible for them” (Thompson, 2000, p. 14). Because cultural and societal norms vary throughout history and region, there is a level of scandal sensitivity that must be considered; what constitutes a scandal for some may not for others. Additionally, David Rosen has written that scandals do not take place in an “historical vacuum,” but rather arise a great deal of their meaning as a result of the culture and context in which they occur (Rosen, 2009, p. 11). Perpetrators of a scandal or transgression, as a result of the current political spectrum and increased media attention and scrutiny, can largely be divided into two categories: “Those living a lie and those living out a lifestyle” (Rosen, 2009, p. 9). Politicians largely fall into the first category, feeling that they have something to hide, something that would undermine their public image, and choose instead to “go for the moral high ground,” and cling to values that would separate themselves from a given action (Thompson, 2000, p. 23).

Clinging to that high ground, however, in response to scandal can be a risk in that publics are more likely to criticize or mistrust a representative deemed a hypocrite. In observing the differences in sexual and financial political scandals, David Doherty has found that “a representative who has previously taken a strong stance in favor of ‘family values’ and who is later caught in an infidelity scandal may be punished particularly harshly” (Doherty, 2011, p. 753). In scandals, William Benoit has written that “perceptions are more important than reality” and thus, when allegations are made against an official, whether or not there is evidence initially, the public’s view of him shifts, and it becomes his job to tailor his response to a specific public (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). In a media climate filled with 24-hour news stations, extreme polarization of political parties, and a growing need to both entertain and inform the public, scandals are no longer mere judgments on moral wrongdoings, but are deliberate political acts with intended outcomes (Rosen, 2009, p. 12). When sex scandals increased in frequency throughout the 1990s, a pattern began to emerge in the process by which officials would respond: “attack, apology, and community expulsion” (Achter, 2000, p. 324). This narrative frame enabled rhetorical scholars to explore trends in scandals and image restoration, and how scandals were handled in different cultural and historical contexts.

Political Responses to Scandals

Due to the rise of the Internet and new media outlets entering the 21st century, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of political sex scandals uncovered, and with it, public statements, speeches, and apologia in response to allegations. Candidates and elected officials today are held to a much higher moral standard than those elected officials campaigning before the Internet and advent of social media “since their improprieties will be fodder for late-night comedians, websites, partisan news channels, and talk radio outlets” (Dagnes, 2011, p. 8). While they have historically been held accountable for their actions by the constituents they represent, today’s politicians must also realize that their conduct can easily receive national attention if it is deemed a scandal (Aday, 1998, p. 857). While coverage can be reported nationally, the overall outcome of a scandal is largely dependent on demographics and societal norms of a specific constituency. Although the scandal may be covered on a national level, the politician must address his constituents specifically, and cater his message to best mirror the values and norms of those he is representing (Dagnes, 2011,

p. 7).

By applying John Dowling's work on organizational legitimacy to elected officials, it appears that in order to win back their targeted public, he or she must work to "establish congruence" between the social values associated with their actions and the "norms of acceptable behavior" in the area they are representing (Dowling, 1875, p. 122). Officials must align their response or apology with the values of their own constituency, which is why the content of public apologies varies. Ultimately, it is the decision of one's constituency and the voting public that will determine his or her political future, as long as the official knows his public well enough to understand how to "behave in the face of adversity" (Dagnes, 2011, p. 89).

Goals of Crisis Management

Once "scandal" is defined within the parameter of American politics, it is important to then understand the role of public statements and communication in combating or controlling negative events. Although crisis communication was initially explored through a frame of business, the basic elements of a successful strategy are mirrored in an individual's response. Matthew Seeger has written that "a crisis creates high levels of uncertainty with key stakeholders and thus an intense need for immediate communication about important information" (Seeger, 2010, p. 128). In the case of political scandals, key stakeholders represent an official's public, and he or she must tailor a response to satisfy the goals and expectations of that audience. Image restoration strategies in political scandals, then, echo the tactics used in crisis response plans of business, because maintaining reputation and public perception are paramount in both fields (Seeger, 2010, p. 130).

Heralded as the architect of perhaps the most widely accepted theory of image restoration strategies in crisis management, William Benoit believed that communication in all forms was goal-oriented, but was defined more narrowly by genre criticism (rhetoric), and analyses of "guilt, purification, and goals" (Burns, 2000, p. 29). Maintaining a positive reputation and image, Benoit has argued, is one of the most central goals of communication. He wrote that "as human beings, we inevitably engage in behavior that makes us vulnerable to attack," and that these allegations can manifest themselves as an attack on one's reputation (Benoit, 1995, p. 67). There are two main components that must both exist in order for an action to threaten one's reputation: "(1) An act occurred which is undesirable, (2) You are responsible for that action" (Benoit 1995, 71). When one's reputation is threatened, Benoit argued that he or she would feel compelled to offer "explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses" for the damaging behavior (Benoit, 1995, p. 70). His "Theory of Image Restoration" established a set of five strategies of image repair evident in virtually every response to scandal. He attempted to determine why an individual is more inclined to use one strategy than another, and how each strategy satisfies a certain goal of communication.

Theory of Image Restoration

Benoit's five strategies of Image Restoration are: Denial, Evading Responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, Corrective Action, and Mortification (Benoit, 1995, p. 74). He defines *denial* as, "the accused [denying] that the offensive act actually occurred or denies that he or she performed it" and finds that, if the public accepts this denial, he or she should be relieved of any blame for the action (Benoit, 1995, p. 75). In *evading responsibility*, "the actor attempts to suggest that lack of information, volition, or ability means that he or she should not be held fully responsible for the act" (Benoit, 1995, p. 76). *Reducing offensiveness*, the most inclusive of Benoit's strategies, occurs when the accused "attempts to reduce the unfavorable feelings toward the actor by increasing the audience's esteem for the actor or by decreasing their negative feelings about the act" (Benoit, 1995, p. 78). The category includes six different techniques: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation (Benoit, 1995, p. 77). The fourth strategy, *corrective action*, may take two forms: "restoring the situation to the state of affairs before the objectionable action and/or promising to 'mend one's ways' and make changes to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act" (Benoit, 1995, p. 79). The final strategy, *mortification*, occurs when the accused "admits responsibility for the wrongful act and asks for forgiveness" (Benoit, 1995, p. 79). This study uses Benoit's theory as a way of coding each public statement made in response to allegations of misconduct, to determine which methods were used most frequently, and by whom, and in which contexts.

Political Sex Scandals in Today's Media Landscape

Regardless of which image restoration techniques an individual utilizes, the salacious nature of sex scandals will ensure that the scandal, whether on a national or state level, receives significant national at-

tention (Carpini, 2001). Prior to the emergence of the Internet, bloggers, and the growing number of news outlets, politicians as well as their publics could distinguish between public and private lives, and officials were largely protected from the probing nature of today's media climate (Carpini, 2001, p. 168). There was a perimeter around a candidate's family and private life that news outlets abstained from entering—a concept foreign in today's media outlets. "Shaming," notes David Rosen, "has become a form of entertainment, meant to distract or fascinate the public—a twenty-first century gladiator sport with the camera replacing the lion" (Rosen, 2009, p. 8).

The sheer frequency with which scandals are unearthed today represents a public struggle between being entertained and disgusted by the significant attention news outlets place on scandals (Williams, 2004, p. 3). Juliet Williams writes that Americans on both sides of the ideological spectrum "wonder whether so much fanfare over the sexual lives of political leaders is genuinely necessary to a well-functioning polity" (Williams 2004, p. 3). Given the need for media outlets to profit, they often look for the most scintillating stories, the ones that will entertain the public and draw the largest audience. No longer is reporting on policy or congressional proceedings enough; "In a climate where candidates must rely heavily on popular approval, reporting is equated with investigating, personalities prevail over issues, and scandals flourish" (Achter 2000, p. 320). Paul Achter writes about the emergence of the "media scandal," in which the media assigns a narrative form to scandal, developing a complex story focused around the rhetoric and behavior of a given official. In today's media structure, "at the very moment an allegation is made, a scandal is born" (Achter 2000, p. 319). A candidate's background is rummaged through for the faintest trait of impropriety or misconduct, giving way to a political system in which politicians must convey morality in every facet of their lives, both publicly and privately. Virtually all literature written on this separation cites President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky as a turning point in "the distinction between private and public character" (Aday 1998, p. 856).

The attention paid to President Clinton's affair while in the White House marked the beginning of the "ubiquitous presence and coverage by the modern media," and with it emerged a journalistic grey area between news and entertainment (Dagnes, 2011, p. 12). Hard news outlets began to include more lewd details in their coverage and "traditional journalism lost its position as the central gatekeeper of the nation's political agenda" (Carpini, 2001, p. 174). No longer were news outlets as concerned with providing the "facts"—even the most traditional media outlets understood that covering the scandal attracted a larger audience, and so they "adapted to the new rules by increasingly mimicking the form of substance of its new media competitors" (Carpini, 2001, p. 174). This scandal served as an archetype for those to follow: no crevice of a politician's life was off limits, with news organizations trying to fill their 24-hour cycles with stories that would attract the largest possible audience (Carpini, 2001). Realizing that scandals attracted larger audiences, news outlets and Internet sites began delving deeper into the private lives of officials, searching for misconduct or any behavior that strayed from societal norms (Carpini, 2001, p. 168).

President Clinton as a Deviation from Scandal 'Norms'

The vast majority of officials involved in a sex scandal understand and accept that the publication of their transgressions likely signifies the end of their career, most of whom elect to resign or not seek reelection. Given this understanding, many scholars have closely examined the case of President Clinton to uncover why he was able to emerge from scandal with his public opinion virtually unscathed (Just, 2000, p. 179). With unprecedented national attention paid to his affair with Monica Lewinsky and his impeachment hearings, many believed that his image would be forever tarnished as accusations surfaced, which concerned his conduct both as a "public servant and private citizen" (Woessner, 2005, p. 97). What made Clinton able to withstand the constant public scrutiny was the fact that his leadership image was not centered around morality, but rather specific policy areas and domestic successes (Just, 2000, p. 179). Marion Just finds that ultimately "President Clinton was able to preserve his public image through the impeachment debacle in large part because of low public expectations about his personal moral behavior" (Just, 2000, p. 179). As the scandal broke out in 1998, in the transition of media focus from public to private lives, the public was able to accept Clinton's affair because they had not elected him because of his ethical character, but because they believed he was best suited to serve the office of the Presidency. Joseph Blaney feels that the level of attention paid to political scandal is too great, asking, "Do we want our Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief distracted by scandal when facing decisions of great domestic and foreign importance?" (Blaney, 2001, p. 1). Today, however, candidates must prove themselves equally as being good and decent citizens as well as individuals with strong ideas and exceptional awareness of the qualities and challenges of being a fit and faithful leader.

Exploring the different actors involved in the publication of, response to, and image restoration strategies following scandal, it is crucial to understand how the system has shifted, and the impact of media on political responses. Representatives must continuously prove that they are moral, establishing a political system in which rhetoric and personality have become more important than intellect and good judgment. Using a crisis communication lens in order to analyze different political scandals, this study sought to find patterns and trends in the way in which history, context, and media have changed the nature of response, and the image restoration strategies used most frequently today. It is important to understand that although scandals are in no way a new issue in politics, the fusion of public and private lives of officials had led to new scandals being uncovered virtually every month. In applying William Benoit's "Theory of Image Restoration" to American political sex scandals, this study demonstrates how different strategies were implemented pre-Internet, during its emergence, and in today's information/entertainment driven media landscape.

III. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

The more forthcoming a politician is when responding to scandalous allegations, the more likely he is to regain popular support and ultimately be reelected. Due to Benoit's findings that people strive to maintain a positive reputation, especially when that reputation is threatened, it is reasonable to believe that officials will want to quickly, honestly, and delicately disseminate the facts so that they can work towards restoring their image (Benoit, 1995).

Hypothesis 2

The increase in Internet and new media focus has forced politicians to make more statements regarding their actions. Because there are so many more outlets from which news and events can be covered, and with the advent of the 24-hour news cycle (Carpini, 2001), this research expects that officials will use a variety of media to inform their publics. More media outlets could likely mean more public statements. While the limited scope of this study does not delve into many scandals prior to the advent of the Internet and increased media scrutiny, the focus on more recent events seeks to enforce the notion that with increased media outlets comes an elevated political accountability standards.

Hypothesis 3

Reducing offensiveness will be the Image Restoration strategy most frequently used in responding to scandalous allegations. Returning, again, to Benoit's findings, individuals are "goal driven" and committed to "maintaining a positive reputation" (Benoit, 1995). In the wake of scandal, this research presumes that strategies of reducing offensiveness, like bolstering and minimization, will be frequently used in public statements (Benoit, 1995).

IV. Methodology

As a way of collecting a comprehensive list of political sex scandals receiving national attention, a web-based search engine was used to compare lists. Using lists generated by NPR², MSNBC³, and Newsweek⁴, the author then cross-referenced them to compile a list of 24 scandals. The timeframe for this research ranged from May of 1987 until June of 2011. Each of the 24 selected scandals received significant national attention and media coverage, and involved an official in an elected position (with the exception of Supreme

² "Sanford the Latest in a Series of Political Sex Scandals," NPR. http://www.npr.org/blogs/politicaljunkie/2009/06/sanford_just_the_latest_sex_sc.html

³ "A Decade of Sex Scandals," http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2009/06/24/4439169-a-decade-of-sex-scandals

⁴ "Sex Scandals Through the Years: Both Parties Even," <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/blogs/the-gaggle/2009/06/25/sex-scandals-through-the-years-both-parties-even.html>

Court Justice Clarence Thomas). The final list of scandals included 15 Republicans and 9 Democrats.

In collecting public statements, the author used a search engine to gather full texts of public statements made by each official. In some cases, she was unable to find full transcripts, and relied on comparing relevant newspaper articles that quoted their statements. As some scandals were publicized and drawn out over several years, there were more public statements for some officials than for others whose corrective action took place in a matter of hours of being publicized. As a way of coding each statement, the author used William Benoit's widely accepted five "Theories of Image Restoration," indicating each time an individual method was used (Benoit, 1995, p. 74). The five methods she coded for were:

Denial: When coding for Denial, the author looked for statements and phrases in which the official denied any accountability, or that the event even occurred. Examples of denial: "I have no personal relationship with the individual you are following" (Hart), "The story is false. It's completely untrue, ridiculous" (Edwards), "I categorically denied all of the allegations and denied that I ever attempted to date Anita Hill. I strongly reaffirm that denial" (Thomas).

Evading Responsibility: When the individual cannot categorically deny allegations, evading responsibility may be used to reduce his or her apparent responsibility. Examples of evading responsibility are "The committee has been the judge, jury, and prosecution. This process makes the Inquisition look like a study in fairness" (Packwood), "Certain members of the media have begun digging into my personal life. They have harassed innocent people in an effort to embarrass me" (Burton), "I believe the reason it happened is because I had gone through this long process where I became, at least on the outside, something different than that young boy who grew up in a small town in North Carolina" (Edwards).

Reducing Offensiveness: Coding for Reducing Offensiveness included many different efforts individuals have used to remain in positive public opinion. Examples of this are: "I know that as a public servant, I and the remarkable people with whom I worked have accomplished a great deal" (Spitzer); "Almost immediately after I said the lie, I knew that I was putting people in a very bad position and I didn't want to continue doing it" (Weiner); and "I've never asked any of my opponents to discuss their personal lives and I'm not going to discuss mine" (Sherwood).

Corrective Action: Corrective Actions occur when the individual commits to correct the issue or problem, and explains how they are going to do so. Instances where the author coded for corrective action included: "I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so" (Clinton); "I am announcing that I have resigned my seat in Congress effective immediately" (Lee); and "I made arrangements to enter a renowned in-patient facility to address my disease and related issues" (Foley).

Mortification: Mortification is the strategy in which officials confess and seek forgiveness. Examples of mortification include: "I want to, again, offer my deep, sincere apologies to all those I have let down and disappointed with these actions from my past" (Vitter); "I hope that my family, constituents, and fellow Members of Congress can accept this apology as being both genuine and heartfelt" (Massa); and "I am sorry that I have disappointed the citizens of the state of New Jersey who gave me this enormous trust" (McGreevey).

Breakdown of Statements

The author developed a comprehensive spreadsheet that included each official's party affiliation, office held, the state represented by each official, the year each statement was made, word count for each statement, how many specific times each strategy was used, and a percentage breakdown of how often each statement included each strategy. In this spreadsheet, each statement was broken down individually, with between one and nine public statements for each official. she also calculated the total number of statements that each official made, as well as the total number of times that each strategy was used overall,

The following spreadsheets she created then separated the scandals by party affiliation (Republican and Democrat). She then combined the frequency of each strategy in each statement so that every official had one dataset that covered all of his public statements. Instead of analyzing frequencies, she used percentages to interpret how often each official used each specific strategy. All graphs and tables were calculated using the original spreadsheet for each official, from each the relevant information was chosen.

V. Results

The research conducted in this study analyzes the various aspects of political sex scandals, their public response, and the different techniques used in image restoration. The various correlations, charts, and spreadsheets help to highlight the relationships between each variable, and explain why (or why not) certain correlations exist. The figures in Appendix demonstrate the differences between political candidates and the strategies of image restoration with which they position themselves.

VI. Discussion

Hypothesis Findings

Hypothesis 1: The more forthcoming a politician is when responding to scandalous allegations, the more likely he is to regain popular support and ultimately be reelected.

Finding: Rejected. This hypothesis was too general in that it does not consider the fact that no two sex scandals are alike, and thus the nature in which an official responds to allegations, as well as the way he or she is received by the public, is largely subjective and cannot be predicted by his initial honesty. An example of this is seen in former Governor Mark Sanford's case, in which he was extremely forthcoming and apologetic upon allegations, but was not reelected by his constituents.

Hypothesis 2: The increase in Internet and new media focus has forced politicians to make more statements regarding their actions than in previous scandals.

Finding: Rejected. This hypothesis was also too general in nature, assuming that there would be clear predictors of an official's response. Because the rate in which scandals are uncovered has increased substantially in recent years, the timespan of a scandal has decreased, with many officials forced to resign just hours after a story breaks. In those cases, the number of public statements made is very limited, often with just one statement being covered by various news outlets. An interesting follow-up study would break down the scandals by timespan as well as number of public statements to determine if a correlation exists.

Hypothesis 3: Reducing offensiveness will be the Image Restoration strategy most frequently used in responding to scandalous allegations.

Finding: Confirmed. This hypothesis is validated through the findings of this study. Reducing offensiveness was the strategy most frequently used by virtually all officials.

In analyzing each table and graph, there are several noticeable trends in the strategies implemented in the formatting of their statements to the public. While there does not appear to be one distinct method that can be classified as the most effective approach in responding to the allegations, the results helped to suggest that some strategies, reducing offensiveness and corrective action, are used more often than others in drafting a response. The most significant inferences that can be made from the results are reducing offensiveness is the most frequently occurring strategy; denial is the least frequently used strategy and its rate has declined in recent years; and that the percentage of resignations in response to scandal has increased in recent years likely due to increased media scrutiny.

Reducing Offensiveness as Most Used Overall Strategy

Accounting for an average of 34% of the total image restoration strategies, reducing offensiveness is clearly the most commonly used tactic in the 24 scandals observed. With 322 observed statements to reduce offensiveness, there are several possible explanations for why this is true for both Republicans (32%) and Democrats (37%). First, when broken down by description, it is reducing offensiveness that has the broadest scope, with six sub-sections within its definition (Benoit, 1995, p. 77). Because within this strategy there are different tactics like attacking the accuser and bolstering, both of which were used in the majority of statements, the probability of a phrase or action falling into this category is higher than in those sections with a more limited scope.

It is also possibly true, however, that officials used reducing offensiveness as a way to try and maintain a positive reputation in light of scandal. Of the five strategies Benoit outlines, it is reducing offensiveness

that can be most closely linked with maintaining a positive reputation through bolstering one's positive attributes (Benoit, 1995). Figure 3 shows that of the 24 cases examined, only one official (Ed Schrock) used a low level of reducing offensiveness (between 0% and 29%), and is unique in that he only utilized one image restoration strategy, corrective action, and released only one statement following his scandal. Omitting his scandal, in fact, alters the averages for each statement (see Table 1). This data confirms Benoit's finding that "maintaining a positive reputation" remains a central goal of all communication (Benoit, 1995, p. 63).

Denial as Least used Overall Strategy

With an average of 6% of the total breakdown of statements, denial is clearly the least utilized strategy of image restoration in these scandals. Only 73 out of 885 coded statements were expressions of denial, with a fairly even distribution between Republicans (7%) and Democrats (6%). Statements of denial and evading responsibility, the two strategies used least frequently, seem to have declined or remained stagnant through the years. An explanation for the infrequency of statements of denial may be that, in responding to allegations by first categorically denying them, there is the greatest likelihood that they could be caught in a lie. Relating these findings back to Benoit, it is also possible that officials are hesitant to categorically deny allegations because they understand that being caught in a lie could negatively impact their reputation (Benoit, 1995).

The likelihood of officials being caught in a lie related to their scandals has greatly increased with the surge of Internet and new media outlets, many of which are dedicated to unearthing the truth. Perhaps the reason for the decline in statements of denial and evading responsibility is that officials are less able to lie by denying their involvement in a scandal than they were in the pre-Internet era. With the multitude of new bloggers and journalists that have emerged through online research, it is possible that officials are aware that they will have a more difficult time misinforming the public than officials in previous decades (Carpini, 2001). It is the development of this new media system that is likely the reason, too, that the results indicate a dramatic increase in the number of officials resigning in the wake of scandal.

Increased Resignation

As Figure 7 indicates, the number of officials resigning after allegations of sexual misconduct has increased dramatically. From 1987 until 1998, only two men accused of participation in sex scandals resigned over the matter, while the number jumps to six in a two-year period from 2009 to 2011. An added effect of increased Internet and media presence, the growing number of resignations is likely congruent with the number of sex scandals that the media have uncovered. During the 11-year period examined in the pre-Internet era, there were six scandals, resulting in two resignations, two officials serving out the remainder of their term, and two representatives still currently serving today. In analyzing just the scandals that have broken out in the past two years, however, there have been seven incidents, with officials having resigned in all but one case. These results when combined with corresponding literature indicate that it is not necessarily that there have simply been more scandals in recent years, but rather more media and gossip sites that have uncovered these events. Increased scrutiny is likely the most effective explanation for both the decline of statements denying allegations or evading responsibility, as well as the growing number of officials being forced to resign over their misconduct.

Outliers and Special Cases

Ed Schrock (2004)—Former Congressman Ed Schrock's case is the most significant outlier of the 24 scandals examined, as he made only one public statement (a press release on his behalf) using only two examples of image restoration strategy. His brief message conflicts with this study's findings that reducing offensiveness is the most frequently used strategy, and to an extent, his results skew the total averages (see Figure 11). His decision not to seek reelection was swiftly reached, and after releasing his statement, he refused to comment any further on allegations.

Bill Clinton (1998)—Former President Clinton's infamous affair with Monica Lewinsky is considered by many political scientists as well as public relations practitioners an anomaly (Dagnes, 2011). His scandal is exceptional not only because it was the first public presidential sex scandal, but also because he initially denied all allegations of sexual impropriety (famously announcing, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman"), and was later found to have falsely denied those claims (Dagnes, 2011). Though he was publicly found lying, public opinion of him remained very strong throughout the scandal, and was able to remain in of-

fice despite the yearlong media frenzy and his own admission of guilt. His scandal remains an anomaly, as he had one of the highest percentages of denial (18%) and lowest percentage of mortification (14%) throughout his statements, but was still viewed favorably by most Americans (Aday, 1998).

Clarence Thomas (1991)—Justice Thomas is a special case, as he is the only Supreme Court Justice to have been involved in a public sex scandal. During his Supreme Court confirmation hearings in 1991, salacious claims of an affair with Anita Hill were brought forth, which Thomas ardently denied (20% of his total statement). His case is unique, as he is the only official examined who was not subject to election by constituents for his position. It was perhaps the nature of his confirmation hearings that enabled him to gain his seat despite the national attention surrounding the affair (Thompson, 2000). As such, Thomas only made one public statement in which he denied his involvement and viciously attacked his accuser. The lifetime appointment granted to a Supreme Court justice is one reason that Thomas is one of the only three appointments still currently serving his position.

Absence of Scandal from 1999-2004

There is a noticeable five-year period from 1999 until 2004 in which there were no sex scandals that received significant national attention. This research does not examine the reasons that this phenomenon may have occurred, but further studies could help to explain the cause of this gap. There are several inferences that can be made from comparing the results from this study as well as existing literature on the subject. In the wake of the media frenzy surrounding President Clinton's affair, it is possible that officials were more cognizant of the media's presence, and were less likely to participate in improper actions. More likely, however, is that current events in the early 21st century (September 11, 2001, War on Terror) dictated significant media coverage, and that media outlets did not need to search as extensively for captivating stories to draw in their audience. An interesting follow-up study would examine this period for any patterns or trends, or to investigate whether there were sex scandals that simply did not garner the same national media coverage as those included in this research.

Implications of Increased Media Coverage on Political Accountability

The research conducted in this study confirms an idea that has been largely discussed by political scientists: the increased scrutiny and lens of the media have led to increased levels of accountability for politicians. Their mistakes, transgressions, and successes are broadcast throughout America, as well as internationally, and this larger stage has forced officials to hold themselves accountable for their actions, and not to hide behind others. Press coverage has an undeniable impact on public opinion and political knowledge, and officials must always be cognizant of media presence in both their public and private lives. This notion of political accountability can perhaps explain the noticeable increase in levels of mortification in public statements (see Figure 10). When the media uncovers a salacious truth, officials must take responsibility and apologize for their transgressions in an effort to maintain a positive reputation (Benoit, 1995). Increased levels of mortification support the hypothesis that increased media coverage has led to higher standards of political accountability. With more officials apologizing for their actions rather than denying the events or attempting to evade responsibility, it appears that the public demands a certain level of accountability, and that politicians must live up to those standards.

VII. Conclusion

The dramatic growth of media and Internet outlets in the last decade alone has called for an increased focus on communication and higher standards of accountability. No longer can officials hide their discretions from the public by arguing the distinction between their public and private lives. Benoit's "Theory of Image Restoration" is widely accepted as a standard of effective crisis management, as they stress the fundamental importance of communication as a response tool. If communication is a "goal-directed activity," then the statements analyzed in this research support the various goals targeted with each strategy (Benoit, 1995). Although the majority of officials relied heavily on reducing offensiveness in their responses, it is interesting to identify under which circumstances the strategies were used differently. For some, the scandals proved to be too damaging to their reputations, and they were forced to resign often a matter of hours after the story was made public. There were others who were able to weather the scandal through a combination of restoration

techniques as well as their political histories and public opinions of them.

While it cannot be concluded that one restoration strategy is most effective or can predict the outcome of a scandal, this research can support the growing role that communication plays in today's digital age, and that this increased media attention has forced more and more politicians to admit to their transgressions. Sex scandals in American politics have not necessarily increased in recent decades, but the rate in which they are disseminated to the public certainly has. By applying Benoit's theory to a collection of scandals, as well as analyzing their outcomes, this research can support the idea that communication is, in fact, a "goal-directed activity," and that the strategies and tactics used to respond to scandals must evolve with the changing media landscape.

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Appendix

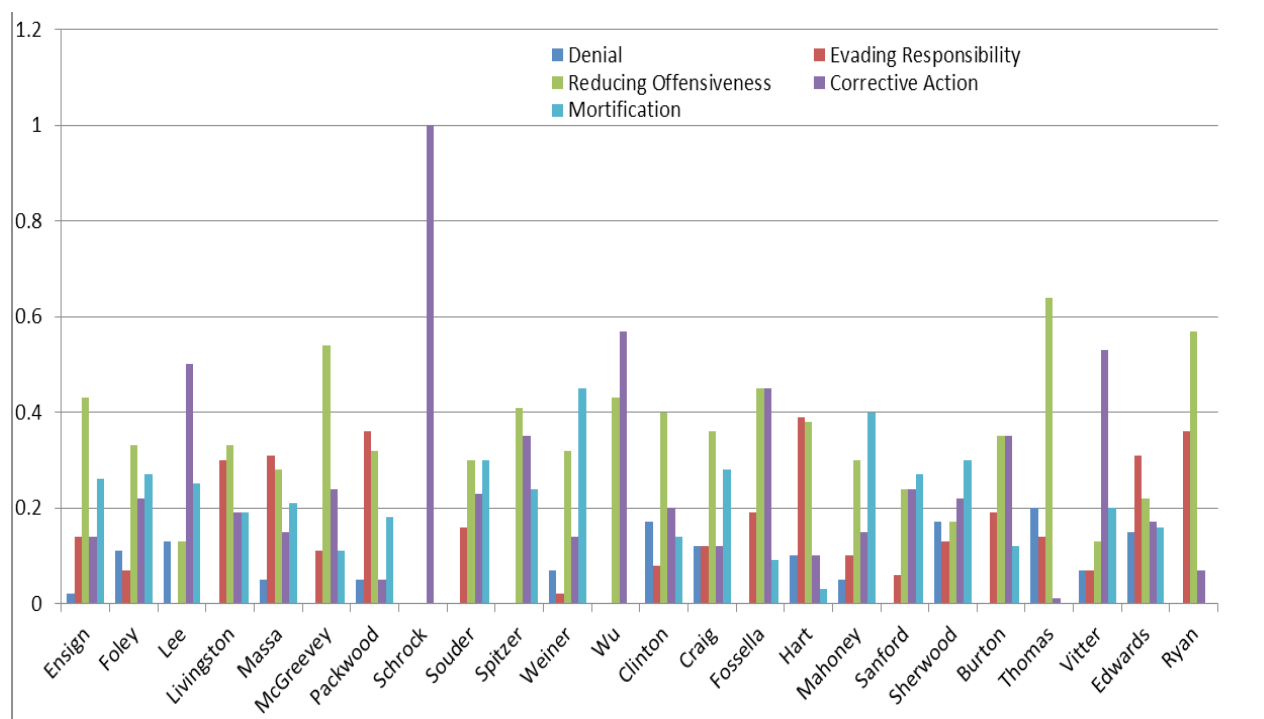


Figure 1. Use of image restoration strategies by official

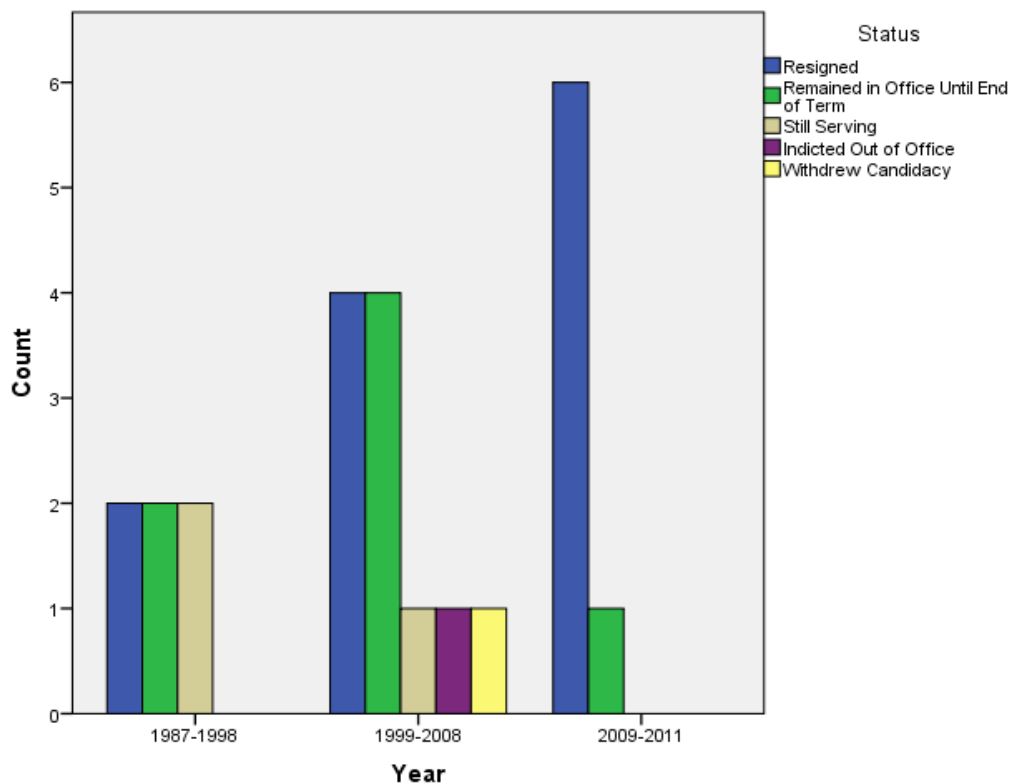


Figure 2. Post-scandal status of office held by year

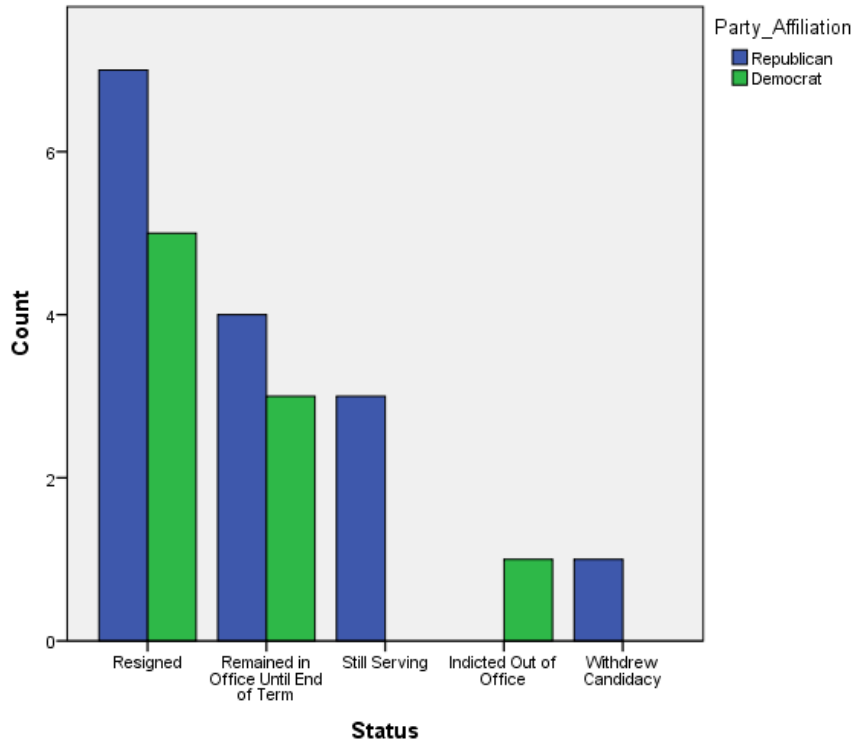


Figure 3. Post-scandal status of office held by party affiliation

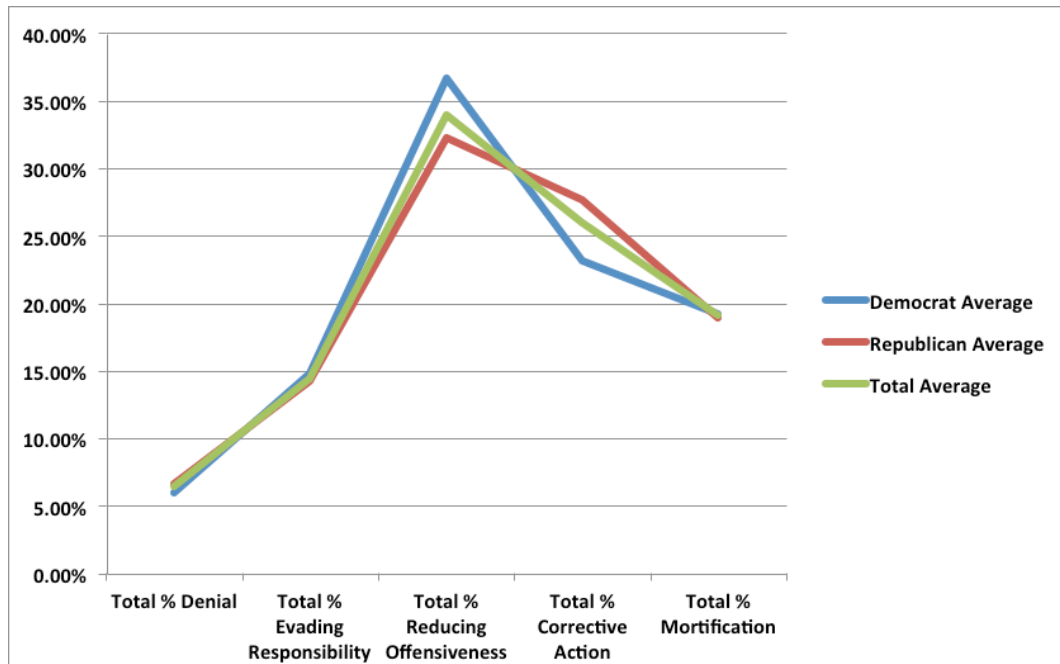


Figure 4. Average use of image restoration strategies by party affiliation

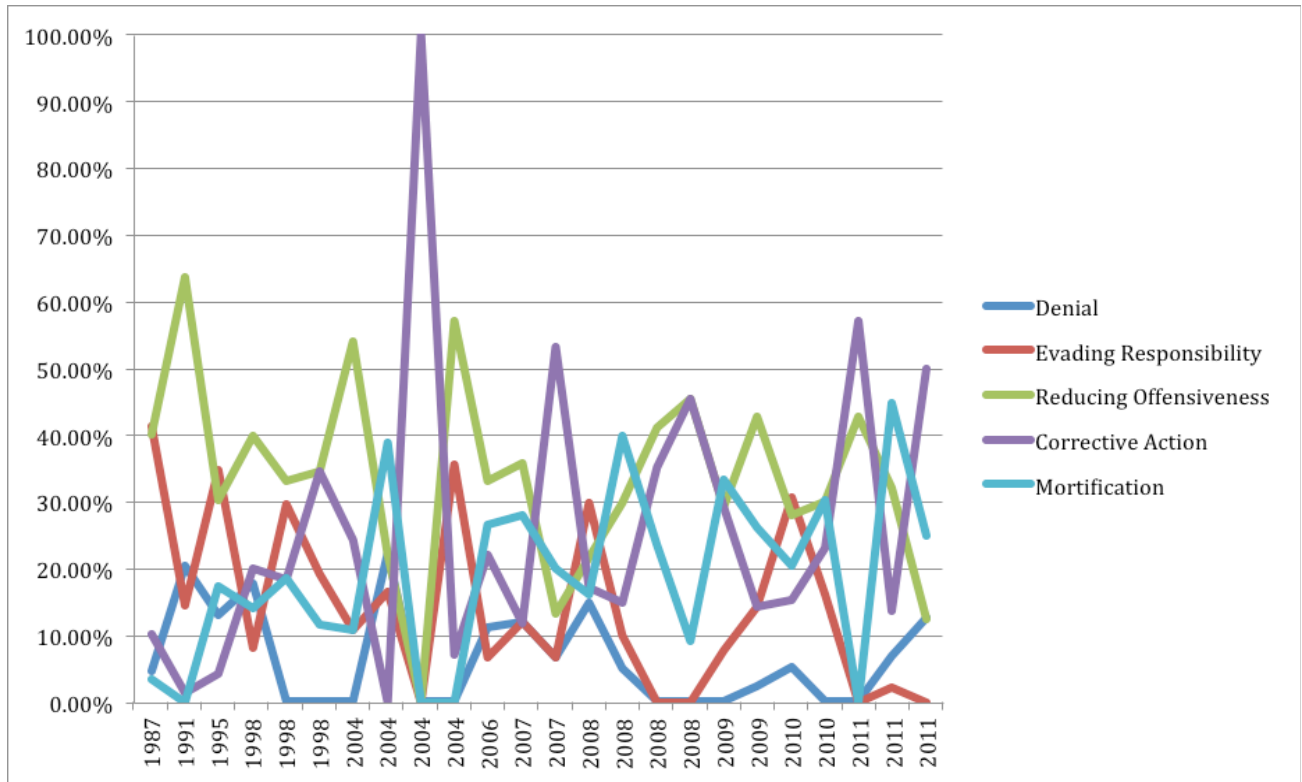


Figure 5. Image restoration strategies by year

Table 1. Percentages by Party Affiliation (With and Without Congressman Schrock)

Totals	Denial	Evading	Reducing	Corrective	Mortification
Democrat Average	6.02%	14.82%	36.73%	23.17%	19.26%
Democrat (No Schrock)	6.02%	14.82%	36.73%	23.17%	19.26%
Republican Average	6.68%	14.28%	32.31%	27.74%	18.99%
Republican (No Schrock)	7.16%	15.30%	34.62%	22.57%	20.35%
Total Average	6.43%	14.48%	33.97%	26.02%	19.09%

Table 2. Detailed Breakdowns of Each Scandal

Year	Name	Status of Held Office	Position	State	Party Affiliation
1987	Gary Hart	Remained in Office until term expired	Senator	Colorado	Democrat
1991	Clarence Thomas	Still Serving	Supreme Court Justice	United States	Republican
1995	Bob Packwood	Resigned	Senator	Oregon	Republican
1998	Bill Clinton	Remained in Office until term expired	President	United States	Democrat
1998	Dan Burton	Still in Office	House Representative	Indiana	Republican
1998	Robert Livingston	Resigned	House Representative	Louisiana	Republican
2004	Don Sherwood	Remained in Office until term expired	House Representative	Pennsylvania	Republican
2004	Ed Schrock	Remained in Office until term expired	House Representative	Virginia	Republican
2004	Jack Ryan	Withdrew	Senate Candidate	Illinois	Republican
2004	James McGreevey	Resigned	Governor	New Jersey	Democrat
2006	Mark Foley	Resigned	House Representative	Florida	Republican
2007	David Vitter	Still in Office	Senator	Louisiana	Republican
2007	Larry Craig	Initially claimed he would resign, but served out the Remainder of his term	Senator	Idaho	Republican
2008	Eliot Spitzer	Resigned	Governor	New York	Democrat
2008	John Edwards	Indicted Out of Office	Senator (Out of Office)	North Carolina	Democrat
2008	Tim Mahoney	Remained in Office until term expired	House Representative	Florida	Democrat
2008	Vito Fosella	Remained in Office until term expired	House Representative	New York	Republican
2009	John Ensign	Resigned	Senator	Nevada	Republican
2009	Mark Sanford	Remained in Office until term expired in January 2011	Governor	South Carolina	Republican
2010	Eric Massa	Resigned	House Representative	New York	Democrat
2010	Mark Souder	Resigned	House Representative	Indiana	Republican
2011	Anthony Weiner	Resigned	House Representative	New York	Democrat
2011	Chris Lee	Resigned	House Representative	New York	Republican
2011	David Wu	Resigned	House Representative	Oregon	Democrat

Table 3. Strategy Breakdown by Frequencies

Name	Party Affiliation	# of Statements	Denial	Evading	Reducing	Corrective	Mortification	Totals by Scandal
Anthony Weiner	Democrat	6	6	2	28	12	39	87
Bill Clinton	Democrat	9	15	7	34	17	12	85
David Wu	Democrat	2	0	0	3	4	0	37
Eliot Spitzer	Democrat	2	0	0	7	6	4	87
Eric Massa	Democrat	3	2	12	11	6	8	20
Gary Hart	Democrat	4	4	36	35	9	3	17
Jim McGreevey	Democrat	2	0	4	20	9	4	39
John Edwards	Democrat	6	13	26	19	15	14	7
Tim Mahoney	Democrat	3	1	2	6	3	8	87
Christopher Lee	Republican	2	1	0	1	4	2	69
Clarence Thomas	Republican	1	14	10	44	1	0	23
Dan Burton	Republican	2	0	5	9	9	3	27
David Vitter	Republican	2	1	1	2	8	3	26
Don Sherwood	Republican	3	4	3	4	0	7	18
Ed Schrock	Republican	1	0	0	0	2	0	2
Jack Ryan	Republican	2	0	5	8	1	0	14
John Ensign	Republican	3	1	6	18	6	11	45
Larry Craig	Republican	2	3	3	9	3	7	25
Mark Foley	Republican	4	5	3	15	10	12	15
Mark Sanford	Republican	4	0	4	15	15	17	11
Mark Souder	Republican	2	0	7	13	10	13	51
Robert Livingston	Republican	2	0	8	9	5	5	42
Robert Packwood	Republican	3	3	8	7	1	4	43
Vito Fosella	Republican	2	0	0	5	5	1	8
Totals by Strategy		885	72	73	152	322	161	177

Tables 4 & 5. Strategy Breakdown by Party Affiliation

(Republicans)

Name	Year	Status of Held	% Denial	% Evading Responsibility	% Reducing Offensiveness	% Corrective Action	% Mortification
Hart	1987	Remained if Offic	4.60%	41.38%	40.23%	10.34%	3.45%
Clinton	1998	Remained if Offic	17.65%	8.24%	40.00%	20.00%	14.12%
McGreevey	2004	Resigned	0.00%	10.81%	54.05%	24.32%	10.81%
Edwards	2008	Indicted Out of O	14.94%	29.89%	21.84%	17.24%	16.09%
Mahoney	2008	Remained if Offic	5.00%	10.00%	30.00%	15.00%	40.00%
Spitzer	2008	Resigned	0.00%	0.00%	41.18%	35.29%	23.53%
Massa	2010	Resigned	5.13%	30.77%	28.21%	15.38%	20.51%
Wu	2011	Resigned	0.00%	0.00%	42.86%	57.14%	0.00%
Weiner	2011	Resigned	6.90%	2.30%	32.18%	13.79%	44.83%

(Democrats)

Thomas	1991	Still Serving	20.29%	14.49%	63.77%	1.45%	0.00%
Packwood	1995	Resigned	13.04%	34.78%	30.43%	4.35%	17.39%
Livingston	1998	Resigned	0.00%	29.63%	33.33%	18.52%	18.52%
Burton	1998	Still Serving	0.00%	19.23%	34.62%	34.62%	11.54%
Sherwood	2004	Remained if Offic	22.22%	16.67%	22.22%	0.00%	38.89%
Schrock	2004	Resigned	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Ryan	2004	Withdrew	0.00%	35.71%	57.14%	7.14%	0.00%
Foley	2006	Resigned	11.11%	6.67%	33.33%	22.22%	26.67%
Craig	2007	Remained if Offic	12.00%	12.00%	36.00%	12.00%	28.00%
Vitter	2007	Still Serving	6.67%	6.67%	13.33%	53.33%	20.00%
Fossella	2008	Remained if Offic	0.00%	0.00%	45.45%	45.45%	9.09%
Sanford	2009	Remained if Offic	0.00%	7.84%	29.41%	29.41%	33.33%
Ensign	2009	Resigned	2.38%	14.29%	42.86%	14.29%	26.19%
Souder	2010	Resigned	0.00%	16.28%	30.23%	23.26%	30.23%
Lee	2011	Resigned	12.50%	0.00%	12.50%	50.00%	25.00%

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