

Political Scandals, Newspapers, and the Election Cycle

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Abstract

This paper examines the timing of news coverage of political scandals relative to the national election cycle in Germany. Using data from electronic newspaper archives, we document a positive and highly significant relationship between coverage of government scandals and the election cycle. On average, one additional month closer to an election increases the amount of scandal coverage by 1.8%, which is equivalent to an 85% difference in coverage between the first and the last month of a four-year cycle. Investigating various mechanisms that could explain this result, we find that the time between a politician's transgression and the publication of the scandal significantly increases before an election. The publication delay suggests that certain incriminating information is 'kept in the drawer' to maximize the potential effects of scandals on election outcomes, newspaper sales, or both.

Keywords: campaign; media bias; news coverage

JEL classification: D72; D83; L82

1. Introduction

In January 2013, the Brüderle scandal, also known as the ‘Men’s joke affair’, dominated German news. What happened? The *Stern* magazine reporter Laura Himmelreich wrote an article about a political gathering in which she met Rainer Brüderle, then chairman of the Liberal Party’s parliamentary faction. Himmelreich described how Brüderle allegedly made advances toward her during the evening, asking about her age and for a dance. She reported that while looking at her breasts, the politician stated that the young writer could also fill a dirndl, the traditional Bavarian costume. The article prompted a nationwide debate about sexism and the relationship between politicians and journalists, further scandalizing Brüderle.

Neither the article itself nor the following public debate is noteworthy; however, the timing of the publication of the article is. The article was published in January 2013, exactly one year after the incident happened. Why did *Stern* not publish the article earlier, right after the meeting in 2012? Himmelreich explained in a message on Twitter that the story about the ‘new face’ of the Liberal Party was of a new relevance. The reporter was referring to the fact that Brüderle was nominated as front-runner for the national elections in September 2013, just a few days before the incriminating article was published.

On Election Day, the Liberal Party failed to meet the 5% vote threshold, thus denying it seats in Bundestag. This outcome was the worst national election performance in the party’s history. The Brüderle scandal was, of course, neither the only nor the most important factor in the disastrous election outcome. However, political scandals affect voter approval rates (Peters and Welch, 1980; Welch and Hibbing, 1997) and trust in government (Bowler and Karp, 2004). Politicians fulfill a role-model function, and attributes such as integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness influence assessment of candidates and their images (Mondak, 1995; Mondak and Huckfeldt, 2006; Mitchell, 2014).

Only public perceptions of misbehavior determine the nature of a scandal, and thus media coverage is crucial. That is, scandals are not just news to report but also outcomes of modern news markets. Different actors are interested in the reporting of political scandals. For example, the utility of scandal coverage increases during election times because of the direct effect on voting. First, it can be assumed that candidates do not have an interest in being involved in a scandal or that spin doctors, lobbyists, and interest groups have no interest in the involvement of

politicians they are supporting. However, it is also conceivable that these groups appreciate scandals incriminating the opposition party. Second, media outlets pursue two goals when publishing scandals: increasing sales and influencing politics in favor of their ideological orientation, if applicable. Third, voters gain utility in consuming scandal news for either entertainment or information purposes. The former derives from the nature of the scandals, as scandals are not as common as normal political news and thus provide more entertainment. The latter is affected by political beliefs, values, and moral concepts that may be either confirmed, if the target of the scandal is not the voter's preferred candidate, or revised, if the culprit is the voter's favorite. Finally, prosecution authorities may have an interest in scandals, if they are self-seeking actors that benefit or suffer from published scandals depending on their own ideological orientation.

This paper examines the timing of news coverage of political scandals relative to the national election cycle in Germany. To identify news coverage of political scandals, we use the DIGAS news archive, which consists of searchable, full-length articles of the most important German daily newspapers. We find that the amount of scandal news coverage increases when an election nears. That is, for each additional month coming closer to the election, the amount of scandal coverage grows by 1.8%, which corresponds to an 85% increase between the first and the last month of a new election cycle. This result is clearly driven by government rather than opposition scandals. As election dates are exogenous to news coverage, we can be confident in the direction of the relationship. The finding is robust to the inclusion of calendar month, newspaper, and government fixed effects, as well as several modifications in variable measurement, estimation method, and treatment of outliers.

We are interested in detecting and understanding the mechanisms behind the reporting of scandals. We discuss four mechanisms that may cause the higher amount of scandal coverage when an election nears. First, we check whether the result is due to an overall increase in the amount of reports on politics. It is possible that newspapers cover more political news the closer an election because of the larger supply of political information (e.g., due to campaign-related events, platforms, or press conferences) and an increased demand (i.e., due to a preference of the audience to be informed for the election). However, we do not find evidence for an increase in the overall amount of political news.

Second, we investigate whether the demand for political scandals changes. If the demand for political scandals increases among readers, newspapers would in turn increase their scandal coverage to cater to their audiences' interests and sell more newspapers. This mechanism assumes that voters are unsatisfied with the government at the end of an election cycle and therefore are open to scandals. We test this assumption by using survey data on government popularity. However, we do not find a relationship between government satisfaction and the election cycle, which makes a scandal-demand mechanism implausible.

Third, we discuss whether an increase in the supply of scandal material drives the increase in scandal coverage before elections—that is, if coverage only increases because more scandalous transgressions take place. We use data collected by Garz and Sørensen (2016) to construct an objective measure of the supply of scandal material, which relies on liftings of political immunity of German national representatives. Our findings do not indicate that these liftings are timed relative to the election cycle though. Thus, prosecution authorities and parliamentary committees cannot be blamed for the increase in scandal coverage before elections.

Fourth, we explore the possibility of the strategic withholding of information. As the Brüderle case illustrates, scandal coverage may become more relevant and have more value according to election cycles. Thus, it is possible that rather than publishing scandals right after detection, politicians, campaign managers, or newsmakers release incriminating information at a time when its damage will be highest. The benefits of scandal coverage are likely to be greater the nearer Election Day because the constituency immediately has the ability to punish alleged misbehavior. There is less time to invalidate accusations or provide other news to make readers forget about the scandal. To test this hypothesis, we identify the initial date of the transgression being subject to the scandal and link this point to the final publication date. We find a positive and highly significant effect of election cycles on the average age of the transgressions; that is, coming one additional month closer to an election increases the time between the initial misconduct and the time of publication by approximately 1.3 months. The average age of the misbehavior differs by 62.4 months or 91% between the first and the last month of a four-year election cycle.

Our study contributes to two strands of literature. First, it examines the role of news media in democracies, particularly under the aspect of media bias. The provided evidence of a correlation between scandal news coverage and election cycles, especially for government parties, adds

value to the discussion of political bias (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Baum and Groeling, 2008; Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010; Larcinese, Puglisi, and Snyder, 2011; Lott and Hassett, 2014).

Identification of the mechanisms behind this finding pertains to the literature on the causes of media bias. Previous studies have distinguished between supply-side effects from media outlets, journalists and editors (Baron, 2006; Anderson and McLaren, 2012), or governments and lobby groups (Baron, 2005; Besley and Prat, 2006; Sobbrío, 2011) and demand-side factors driven by the audience (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005; Chan and Suen, 2008; Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010). Moreover, our findings add to the literature that investigates the incentives of news markets to time certain behaviors (Puglisi, 2011; Mitchell, 2014; Durante and Zhuravskaya, 2015).

Second, our study relates to research analyzing the relationship among scandals, politics, and news outlets. Previous studies have investigated the effect of scandals on voting behavior (Peters and Welch, 1980; Welch and Hibbing, 1997; Milyo, 2001; Basinger, 2012; Hirano and Snyder, 2012), candidate image (Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde, 2000; Maier, 2010; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2014; Mitchell, 2014), and political institutions (Bowler and Karp, 2004). Research has also examined the relationship between political scandals and the news media, focusing on political bias in the coverage (Puglisi and Snyder, 2011; Budak, Goel, and Rao, 2014; Romano, 2014) and on explanatory factors such as the overall news agenda, the influence of advertising clients, and government popularity (Di Tella and Franceschelli, 2011; Mitchell, 2014; Nyhan, 2014; Latham, 2015).

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 describes the data. Section 3 presents our main estimation results. Section 4 investigates the mechanisms behind the increase in scandal coverage before elections. Section 5 concludes.

2. Data

Our period of investigation covers the years from 2005 to 2014. This time window is determined by the availability of the news data. It covers the national elections in 2005, 2009, and 2013, which allows us to observe two full and two partial election cycles. The elections are exogenous in our empirical setting, due to strict regulations and the resulting predictability of the dates:

Based on Section 39 of the German Constitution, elections are held within 46 to 48 months after the previous elections. The exact election dates are determined according to Section 16 of the Federal Elections Act by the Federal President, which happens several years beforehand. Election Day must be a Sunday or public holiday. Even the date of the snap elections in 2005 was announced several months in advance. In addition, these elections were not induced by a political scandal, so that we can rule out the possibility of reverse causality.

For our baseline specification, we construct a variable that counts the number of months until the next election; at the time of an election, the variable takes the value of 0. To ease interpretation of the results, we multiply the variable by -1. To verify the robustness of the findings, we also consider non-linear versions of this variable; for instance, by testing a logarithmic or polynomial form.

We prefer to use calendar months as observation units, even though our news data are available on a daily basis. Daily observations might provide many short-run insights, such as differences in news coverage across weekdays. Modelling these data requires more sophisticated specifications though. Since we are interested in medium- to long-run patterns, a monthly frequency is an adequate choice. In addition, monthly observations correspond to the highest frequency of measurement of other variables used in this study, such as government popularity.

Data on news coverage of political scandals come from the electronic news archive of Spiegel Publishing, which is based on the DIGAS database by Axel Springer Syndication. Our sample includes all relevant national daily newspapers (i.e., *Bild*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Handelsblatt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Tageszeitung*, and *Die Welt*). *Bild* is the major tabloid in Germany, while all other titles are quality media. The selection represents the German political landscape quite well, with *Die Tageszeitung* leaning left and *Die Welt* falling at the conservative end of the spectrum. We do not include either the *Frankfurter Rundschau* or the *Financial Times Deutschland*. The former underwent insolvency proceedings in 2012 and the latter was shuttered in the same year, which prevents the consistent measurement of scandal coverage. Excluding these newspapers is not problematic though, because of their relatively low circulation before the shutdown.

Relying on newspapers guarantees the consistent analysis of scandal coverage over time. The inclusion of online news would have possibly biased our results in favor of later years because of the recent establishment and increasing amount of news in the online market. Conversely, it would have been desirable to include regional newspapers in our sample if data availability for earlier years was assured. In contrast with radio or television news, newspaper archives provide the advantage of keyword-based searches in full-text articles during our research period. Unlike in other countries, German radio and television broadcasters do not provide similar archives. We argue that this is not a problem though, as the German media landscape is rather concentrated, often resulting in homogeneous news coverage (KEK, 2015).

We compile the articles in a two-staged process. First, we extract all articles that contain the German words for ‘scandal’ or ‘affair’ (truncated at the end) in the (sub)heading. The inclusion of these buzzwords at the beginning of the article has a signaling effect, providing key information to the audience on the content of the article. From this search procedure, we retrieve 14,032 articles. Second, research assistants manually selected all articles that focus on individual German political actors involved in a scandal as a culprit. We focus on individual politicians, rather than parties, because scandals reflect the personalization of politics (see Tumber and Waisbord, 2004). Furthermore, we include only domestic, national-level actors because of their close relationship to and higher impact on German parliamentary elections. We exclude letters to the editor and coverage of historical scandals (e.g., anniversary of the Spiegel Affair). We had human beings select these articles because we believed that a machine-based procedure could not fulfill this task satisfactorily and because the article amount could still be processed without further machine support. As the selection only involves evaluating simple objective criteria (i.e., politician vs. other profession, domestic vs. foreign case, national vs. state or local level), there is no decision uncertainty, which we confirm by randomly checking the research assistants’ selection. The assistants also noted whether the accused belong to the governing or opposition parties. After we discarded duplicates, 794 articles remained, which we use to compute monthly counts of reports and characters.

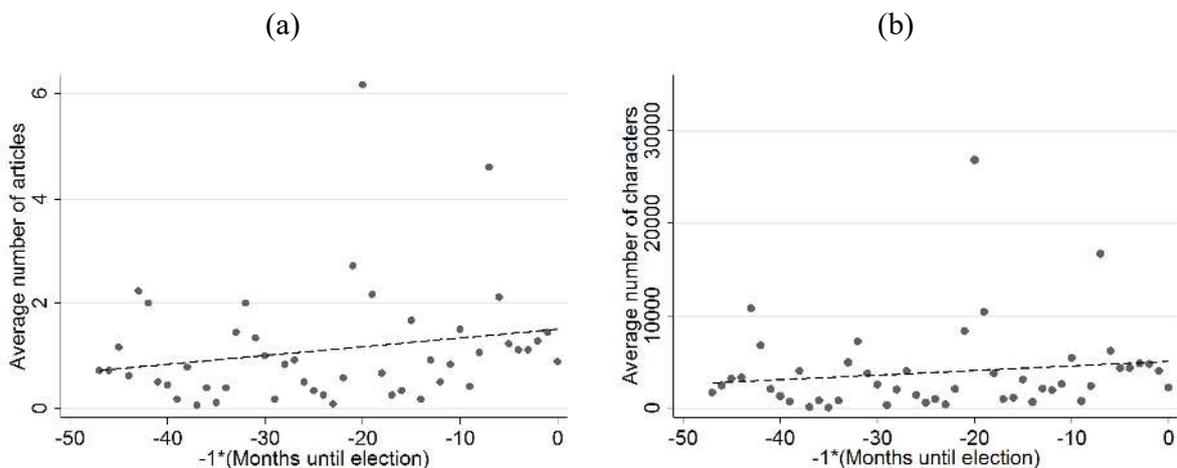
We measure the amount of scandal coverage in three ways: as the monthly sum of characters, as the monthly sum of characters divided by the page number (to account for the varying importance of articles; e.g., placement on the front page vs. features section), and as the monthly number of

articles. In addition, we distinguish between scandals related to politicians of the governing party and those related to the opposition.

Table A1 in the Appendix shows that the overall monthly scandal coverage is, on average, 3,874 characters long and has high dispersion, with a standard deviation of 9,957 characters.

Furthermore, we find that the scandal coverage is dominated by articles dealing with governing party scandals. Opposition party scandals are barely covered. While government scandals reach a monthly publication of up to 28 articles, opposition scandals reach a maximum of only three. The average length of the articles also varies drastically; government scandals have 3,674 characters on average, while opposition scandals have 184 characters.¹

Figure 1: Scandal coverage and the election cycle



3. Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of scandal articles over the election cycle, suggesting larger amounts of coverage when an election approaches. Because election dates are exogenous to political scandals, we can use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions to consistently estimate

¹ Three articles equally refer to government and opposition politicians. These articles are included when obtaining overall counts of characters and articles, but not when obtaining separate counts for government and opposition scandals.

the impact of the election cycle on the amount of scandal coverage. Using Poisson regressions might be more appropriate, considering that our dependent variable is based on count data. However, OLS coefficients are easier to interpret; and we conduct robustness checks to verify that the method of estimation does not affect the results.

Table 1: Scandal coverage and the election cycle

| | (1) Characters | (2) Characters | (3) Characters/ page number | (4) Characters/ page number | (5) Articles | (6) Articles |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Panel A: All scandals</i> | | | | | | |
| Election cycle | 49.66* (25.40) | 68.58*** (21.88) | 21.04** (10.28) | 23.50*** (8.708) | 0.0167** (0.00650) | 0.0184*** (0.00532) |
| R-square | 0.00544 | 0.156 | 0.00515 | 0.124 | 0.0109 | 0.176 |
| <i>Panel B: Government scandals</i> | | | | | | |
| Election cycle | 49.02** (24.87) | 66.52*** (21.66) | 20.69** (10.23) | 23.27*** (8.639) | 0.0148** (0.00636) | 0.0165*** (0.00524) |
| R-square | 0.00540 | 0.151 | 0.00501 | 0.123 | 0.00883 | 0.173 |
| <i>Panel C: Opposition scandals</i> | | | | | | |
| Election cycle | 0.454 (3.014) | 1.606 (2.816) | 0.375 (1.057) | 0.218 (1.286) | 0.00191** (0.000902) | 0.00189* (0.000994) |
| R-square | 0.0000426 | 0.0255 | 0.000233 | 0.0200 | 0.00928 | 0.0463 |
| Newspaper fixed effects | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Government fixed effects | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Months fixed effects | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Months | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 |
| Newspapers | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Observations | 720 | 720 | 720 | 720 | 720 | 720 |

Notes: OLS estimates. Autocorrelation- and heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

We present estimates both on the pure bivariate relationship and when controlling for newspaper, calendar month, and government fixed effects. Newspaper fixed effects account for time-invariant differences between outlets, such as ideology. Calendar month dummies capture seasonal patterns that might affect coverage of political scandals (e.g., summer holidays and parliaments' inactivity, newspapers' advertising cycles and related changes in content and volume, seasonality in the activities of prosecution authorities). We do not use year fixed effects,

because they would be highly collinear with the election cycle and would eliminate all between-year variation in scandal coverage. Instead, we include government dummies, which could also be called election cycle fixed effects in this context.

Table 1 summarizes the estimates. Across all specifications, we find a positive and statistically significant relationship between the election cycle and scandal coverage. Regarding the size of the effect, the estimates indicate that one additional month coming closer to the election increases the scandal coverage by 69 characters or 1.8% (Panel A, Column 2). Thus the amounts of scandal coverage between the first month and the last month of a four-year election cycle differ by 3,292 characters (48 months times 68.58 characters) or 85%. Comparing government and opposition scandals (Panels B and C in Table 1), we show that our result is driven by government scandals and that only these findings are significant, except for opposition scandal coverage measured at the article level (Panel C, Columns 5 and 6). The size of the effect in the ‘government scandal’ panel is almost the same as in the ‘all scandal’ panel.

We evaluate the robustness of the results in various ways. First, we test different functional forms of the election cycle variable. In the baseline specification, we assume the effect to be linear, in accordance with the visual pattern that can be recognized in Figure 1. As Table A2 in the Appendix shows, the effect of the election cycle on the amounts of scandal coverage remains positive and statistically significant when using non-linear forms. In Column (1), we use the squared number of months until the next election, whereas Column (2) refers to the third polynomial. Both transformations emphasize effects in the middle of the cycle, whereas the logarithmic version in Column (3) assumes stronger effects right before and after an election. Second, we check whether the skewed distribution of the amount of scandal coverage could be a problem. In Table A3, Column (1), we re-estimate the baseline specification using a Poisson regression instead of OLS. The coefficient of interest remains positive and statistically significant. The same applies when a negative binomial regression is estimated, as Column (2) indicates. Finally, we verify that our findings are not driven by outliers. As Figure (1) suggests, there might be one or two serious outliers, depending on whether counting articles or characters. In Columns (3) and (4), we remove both and the one most extreme outlier, respectively. However, the resulting estimates remain fairly similar to the baseline specification.

4. Mechanisms

4.1. Overall amount of political news

A possible explanation for the increase of scandal coverage before elections is an increase of overall political news coverage. As newspapers are usually profit-maximizing enterprises, editors must decide whether to cover a certain story, how much space to devote to it, and how much personnel time to invest in researching and writing an article given space and resource restrictions. In other words, the cost-benefit ratio influences the decision of publication.

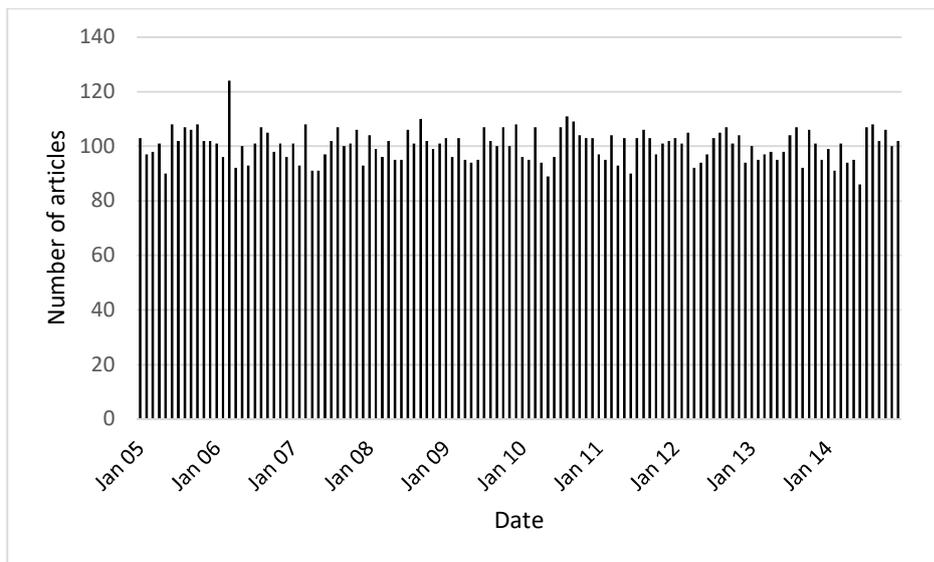
Demand- and supply-side factors also must be considered in the decision process. On the one hand, it is important to react to the audience's demand for political news. The demand could rise before elections if readers want make an informed voting decision. On the other hand, the supply of available political news might increase, as party programs are released, speeches held, debates screened, and election forecasts published. Thus, it would be cheaper to produce political news articles. Taken together, it could be argued that higher demand paired with higher supply of political news in election times increases the overall amount of reports on political issues. In line with this argument, an increase of political scandal coverage could be a side effect of the overall increase of political news.

Despite these arguments, newspaper editors are not free to alter page counts. Newspapers often have a fixed ratio of editorial to ad pages, to fulfill profitability criteria. Thus, the amount of editorial pages cannot be increased without including, and thus selling, more ads. However, advertisers do not place ads according to elections but rather follow a yearly pattern, taking into account the summer holiday and the high purchasing power before Christmas. The printing process of newspapers can also sometimes impose additional restrictions to the compilation of pages (i.e., the page numbers of the different sections [politics, economics, culture, sports] must be the same).

Looking at the overall amount of political news in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* over time confirms these considerations (the lack of similar data prevents us from showing this pattern for the other newspapers). As Figure 2 indicates, this amount does not increase substantially when an election nears. Rather, we find a repeating publication pattern during the year, with political news reaching a minimum from April to June (summer break) and gaining strength between July and

September. This trend holds in both election and non-election years. Considering this pattern and the arguments discussed above, we do not believe that the overall amount of political news is a key mechanism explaining the increase of political scandal coverage when an election nears.

Figure 2: Amount of political news of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*



4.2. Demand for news on political scandals

Previous studies have shown that readers hold certain beliefs and that newspapers can bias their coverage toward these beliefs (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005; Chan and Suen, 2008; Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006, 2010). Audiences gain utility when consuming information that confirms their beliefs, and media outlets want to cater to their audiences' needs, to maximize profits. Thus, the increase of political scandal coverage before elections may be related to a greater demand for news on political scandals. The demand for such news, particularly on government scandals, might be particularly large when readers are unsatisfied with the governing party. In theory, dissatisfaction with the government leads to a demand to confirm negative beliefs by consuming negative news, such as that related to political scandals. Latham (2015) finds that British newspapers give more coverage to investigations into governing members of parliament when the

government is behind in the polls. In addition, Nyhan (2014) finds that low approval among opposition party identifiers affects the president’s vulnerability to scandals.

To test this mechanism, we use data on government popularity from the Politbarometer surveys, provided by GESIS – Leibnitz-Institute for the Social Sciences. The surveys are representative of the West German elective population. Each month, approximately 1,000 participants are asked how satisfied they currently are with the government. The answers are provided on a scale from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 11 (very satisfied). From this information, we calculate the monthly change in average satisfaction scores, using the sampling weights provided by Politbarometer. The surveys did not include this question on six occasions, so we cannot compute the monthly change for all points in time during our studied period.

In Table 2, we evaluate whether government popularity decreases when an election approaches. As the estimates show, there are no indications of a negative effect. The coefficient in Column (2), which is significant at the 10% level, suggests that popularity might actually increase before elections. It is possible that government popularity only varies because of general changes in voters’ content with politics. In Columns (3) and (4), we therefore test whether government popularity changes in relation to the degree of satisfaction with the opposition. However, these estimates also do not indicate any effects.

Table 2: Government popularity and the election cycle

| | (1) Change in popularity | (2) Change in popularity | (3) Change in relative popularity | (4) Change in relative popularity |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Election cycle | 0.00182 (0.00157) | 0.00268* (0.00159) | 0.000264 (0.000327) | 0.000423 (0.000365) |
| Government fixed effects | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Months fixed effects | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| R-square | 0.00475 | 0.218 | 0.00638 | 0.141 |
| Observations | 110 | 110 | 110 | 110 |

Notes: OLS estimates. Autocorrelation- and heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

4.3. Supply of scandal material

If the two previous mechanisms could be observed in reality, the media would not report in an unbiased way. However, it is also possible that the news outlets just mirror the news landscape, such that the reporting merely reflects increases in the supply of scandal material before elections. Political scandals are mostly based on a political actor's misbehavior or transgression. The scandalous act is either illegal or violates deep-seated values and norms of society. The question of guilt and conviction is secondary, though the perceived accuracy of the misconduct is important.

We use data collected by Garz and Sørensen (2016) to construct an objective measure of supply of scandal material. The data, which are primarily based on parliamentary databases, allow us to determine the monthly amount of liftings of political immunity. Such a lifting always involves criminal prosecution, which in turn is often the core of a political scandal. Immunity grants members of parliament protection from any judicial and police measures and is part of the 'free mandate'. However, a special parliamentary committee can lift the right of immunity to clear the way for prosecution authorities.

In accordance with our research design and the finding that coverage of government-related scandals increases before elections, we only consider national politicians who belong to the governing parties when calculating the amount of liftings of immunity. With these criteria, the political immunity of 23 politicians was lifted during the studied period, many of whom appeared as protagonists in the scandal coverage. Examples are the former federal minister of agriculture Hans-Peter Friedrich (20 articles, Edathy child pornography scandal), the former internal affairs spokesman Michael Hartmann (18 articles, crystal meth and Edathy child pornography scandals), and the former member of parliament Hans-Jürgen Uhl (42 articles, Volkswagen corruption scandal). As Table A1 in the Appendix shows, the resulting variable indicates a monthly average of liftings of immunity of approximately 0.2, with a maximum number of two liftings per month.

If these liftings of immunity were responsible for the increase in scandal coverage before elections, there should be more liftings towards Election Day. Table 3, which shows regressions of the lifting variable on the cycle, does not confirm this effect. The estimated coefficient is slightly negative but statistically not different from zero. Thus, prosecution authorities and

parliamentary committees do not appear to lift politicians' immunity relative to the election cycle. Even if liftings are endogenous to scandal coverage, a significant correlation would be necessary here to explain the increase in scandal coverage before elections by larger amounts of transgressions or greater prosecution rates.

Table 3: Liftings of immunity and the election cycle

| | (1) Number of liftings | (2) Number of liftings |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Election cycle | -0.00388 (0.00255) | -0.000532 (0.00230) |
| Government fixed effects | No | Yes |
| Months fixed effects | No | Yes |
| R-square | 0.0138 | 0.193 |
| Observations | 120 | 120 |

Notes: OLS estimates. Autocorrelation- and heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors are in parentheses.
* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

4.4. Strategic withholding of information

As the Brüderle case illustrates, the coverage of political scandals may have a greater impact on politics depending on the circumstances. In January 2012, when the incident happened, the Liberal Party was not much in the public focus, and Brüderle was neither a minister nor a front-runner. However, in January 2013, when the case was published, Brüderle had just been nominated as the party's top candidate for the upcoming elections in September, and the campaign managers as well as Brüderle himself tried to establish an image of a new face of the party and its front-runner. As the responsible journalist noted, the story's publication was, under these circumstances, more relevant than it was in 2012.

Although this case provides only anecdotal evidence, it is worth further investigation. The case supports the argument that the closer the election, the more people pay attention to political news and the more sensitive they are to incriminating stories, such as political scandals. This implies that the same piece of information can have a different impact depending on its time of publication (Mitchell, 2014). For example, voters can directly react to alleged misbehavior on

Election Day, and the cost-benefit ratio for publishers is more positive. We cannot distinguish who is responsible for the strategic withholding of information (i.e., candidates, spin doctors, lobbyists, interest groups, or prosecution authorities passing information to the media, or the media themselves). However, we can determine whether there is some kind of publication strategy by looking at the age of a politician's misbehavior at the time of publication of the scandal. Specifically, we determine the date of the transgression at the scandal level; that is, we first group the individual articles according to the scandal they cover. We retrieve 256 scandals with this procedure. Second, we search publicly available news media to compile information about the core transgression subject to the scandal. Each scandal and its corresponding news coverage are based on at least one main misbehavior or transgression by a political actor—for example, making advances toward a journalist (Brüderle), publishing a dissertation (plagiarism cases of Schavan and Guttenberg), buying crystal meth (Hartmann), and driving an official car on private holidays (Schmidt).

We define the date of the transgressions as the earliest point in time the public could have knowledge about it and thus the possibility of the case being covered. The transgression can be verbal (e.g., insults, moral discussion of political issues, breach of norms and values) or a proven act of transgression (e.g., signing a contract, publishing a dissertation, taking employment besides the political mandate, strategically meeting with a third-party person). Many scandals do not arise from breaking the law but rather develop along 'softer' allegations such as bad administration, insufficient information policy, or failure of duty. Thus, a transgression might also be the act of informing the politicians for the first time about a grievance in their area of responsibility. When there is more than one transgression defining the elements of a scandal (e.g., Wulff house loan, mailbox message, lying to parliament), we use the earliest act of misbehavior. Table A5 in the Appendix shows the full list of scandals, transgressions, and dates.²

As a next step, we determine the age of the transgression for each individual article and calculate averages by newspaper and month. Among the 744 reports dealing with national government scandals, we drop one as the date of the transgression remains unclear. In addition, we have 15 reports for which we can determine the year of the transgression with certainty but not the exact

² It would be optimal not only to identify the age of the transgression, but also the factors that determine the start of each scandal. Unfortunately, these factors are not observable to the researcher.

month. We address this problem by constructing two versions of the age-of-transgression variable. Version 1 assumes that the misconduct occurred in December of the respective year, while in version 2, we exclude the 15 cases with imprecise information. Based on these variables, descriptive statistics indicate that the transgressions are, on average, approximately 68 months old at the time of publication, ranging from 0 to 385 months (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

Table 4 shows the results of regressing the different versions of the age-of-transgression variable on the election cycle, excluding all newspaper months without any coverage of a government scandal. The estimates consistently indicate a positive, highly significant effect of the election cycle on the articles' average age of the misbehavior. One additional month closer to the election increases the time between the scandalized incident and the coverage by approximately 1.3 months. The difference of age of the transgression between the first and the last month of a full four-year election cycle amounts to 62.4 months or 91%. It could be argued that the finding is only significant because of the larger amount of observations than those in the tests involving government popularity and liftings of political immunity. To check this possibility, Column (3) provides the results when we collapse the dependent variable by newspaper (i.e., using the average over the six daily newspapers). However, the coefficients remain similar to those in Columns (1) and (2), confirming the impact of the election cycle on the age of the transgressions.

Table 4: Age of transgressions and the election cycle

| | (1) Version 1 | (2) Version 2 | (3) Version 1, collapsed |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Election cycle | 1.334*** (0.405) | 1.254*** (0.404) | 1.245** (0.560) |
| Newspaper fixed effects | Yes | Yes | No |
| Government fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Months fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| R-square | 0.142 | 0.151 | 0.167 |
| Months | 120 | 120 | 94 |
| Newspapers | 6 | 6 | - |
| Observations | 286 | 279 | 94 |

Notes: Dependent variable: monthly average age of transgression. OLS estimates. Autocorrelation- and heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

It is useful to test whether this finding holds when using alternative methods of estimation, considering the skewed distribution of the age-of-transgression variable. In Table A4 in the Appendix we summarize estimates using Poisson and negative binomial regressions. Again, the effect remains positive and statistically highly significant.

5. Conclusion

We examine the relationship between political scandal coverage and election cycles. Our estimates indicate that one additional month closer to the election increases the amount of scandal coverage by 1.8%, which corresponds to a difference of 85% between the first and the last month of a four-year election cycle. The effect mostly pertains to members of the governing party, rather than the opposition.

Although this finding is noteworthy in itself, we also investigate the mechanism behind it. We test four possible explanations that could be driving the increase in scandal coverage: the increase in the overall amount of political news, the greater demand for scandal coverage, the increase in the supply of scandal material, and the strategic withholding of information. We find no evidence for the first three mechanisms; however, the strategic withholding of information is a key force in increasing political scandal coverage before elections. A natural suspect for the delay in publication is the media itself. Breaking a scandal is likely much more lucrative before elections. With the audience already paying attention to politics, a scandal might increase sales by a larger extent than usually. In addition to profit maximization, the timing of publication could also be affected by ideological considerations of journalists, editors, and media owners, because of the greater effect on voting. However, news outlets also have strong incentives to immediately report misbehavior of politicians. When information is 'kept in the drawer', there is always the risk that a competing outlet breaks the story first, in which case the opportunity to increase sales is gone. In competitive news markets, it would therefore not be plausible to exclusively suspect media outlets to strategically delay the publication of scandals. Instead, it can be assumed that incriminating information is often leaked by political opponents, campaign managers, lobby groups, or prosecution authorities to influence election outcomes.

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Appendix

Table A1: Summary statistics

| | Mean | SD | Min. | Max. | Obs. |
|---|---------|---------|-------|----------|------|
| Election cycle | -24.10 | 14.79 | -47.0 | 0.0 | 720 |
| Scandal coverage | | | | | |
| - Characters | 3873.91 | 9957.41 | 0.0 | 149522.0 | 720 |
| - Characters/page number | 1395.86 | 4335.62 | 0.0 | 76277.6 | 720 |
| - Articles | 1.10 | 2.36 | 0.0 | 28.0 | 720 |
| Scandal coverage (only government) | | | | | |
| - Characters | 3674.05 | 9865.90 | 0.0 | 149522.0 | 720 |
| - Characters/page number | 1330.53 | 4324.21 | 0.0 | 76277.6 | 720 |
| - Articles | 1.03 | 2.33 | 0.0 | 28.0 | 720 |
| Scandal coverage (only opposition) | | | | | |
| - Characters | 183.64 | 1028.46 | 0.0 | 16795.0 | 720 |
| - Characters/page number | 61.22 | 363.59 | 0.0 | 4568.0 | 720 |
| - Articles | 0.07 | 0.29 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 720 |
| Mechanisms | | | | | |
| - Change in gov. popularity | 0.01 | 0.37 | -2.2 | 2.1 | 110 |
| - Relative change in gov. popularity | 0.00 | 0.05 | -0.1 | 0.2 | 110 |
| - Number of liftings of immunity (governing parties) | 0.19 | 0.49 | 0.0 | 2.0 | 120 |
| - Monthly average age of transgression, gov. scandals (version 1) | 68.28 | 65.16 | 0.0 | 385.0 | 286 |
| - Monthly average age of transgression, gov. scandals (version 2) | 67.13 | 63.17 | 0.0 | 385.0 | 279 |
| - Monthly av. age of transgr., gov. scandals (version 1, collapsed) | 66.73 | 53.82 | 0.0 | 305.8 | 94 |

Notes: Data refer to six newspapers and up to 120 months.

Table A2: Scandal coverage and the election cycle (robustness I)

| | (1) Characters | (2) Characters | (3) Characters |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Election cycle | | | |
| -squared | 1.558*** (0.503) | | |
| -third polynomial | | 0.0351*** (0.0119) | |
| -logarithmic | | | 775.9** (320.9) |
| Newspaper fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Government fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Months fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| R-square | 0.158 | 0.158 | 0.156 |
| Months | 120 | 120 | 120 |
| Newspapers | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Observations | 720 | 720 | 702 |

Notes: OLS estimates. Observations refer to government and opposition scandals. Autocorrelation- and heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A3: Scandal coverage and the election cycle (robustness II)

| | (1) Characters (Poisson) | (2) Characters (negative binomial) | (3) Characters (OLS) | (4) Characters (OLS) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Election cycle | 0.0206*** (0.00525) | 0.0240*** (0.00549) | 58.67*** (18.10) | 60.57*** (18.55) |
| Newspaper fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Government fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Months fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| R-square | | | 0.182 | 0.196 |
| Months | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 |
| Newspapers | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Observations | 720 | 720 | 718 | 719 |

Notes: Observations refer to government and opposition scandals. Column (1) shows the results of a Poisson regression; (2) refers to a negative binomial regression using a generalized linear model; (3) excludes two outliers based on articles counts; and (4) excludes one outlier based on characters counts. Autocorrelation- and heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A4: Age of transgressions and the election cycle (robustness)

| | (1) Version 1 (Poisson) | (2) Version 1 (negative binomial) | (3) Version 2 (Poisson) | (4) Version 2 (negative binomial) |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---|
| Election cycle | 0.0204*** (0.00552) | 0.0310*** (0.00638) | 0.0194*** (0.00567) | 0.0325*** (0.00658) |
| Newspaper fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Government fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Months fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| R-square | | | | |
| Months | 120 | 120 | 120 | 120 |
| Newspapers | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Observations | 286 | 286 | 279 | 279 |

Notes: Dependent variable: monthly average age of transgression. Columns (1) and (3) show the results of Poisson regressions, whereas Columns (2) and (4) refer to negative binomial regressions using a generalized linear model. Autocorrelation- and heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A5: Scandals and transgressions

| Scandal | Accused | Transgression | |
|------------------------------|--|--|----------|
| | | Kind | Start |
| Amigo Affair FDP | Guido Westerwelle | Favoritism | Jan 2010 |
| Amigo Affair Green | Claudia Roth | Favoritism | Mar 2001 |
| BND Causa Kurnaz | Frank-Walter Steinmeier | Failure of duty | Oct 2002 |
| BND Involvement Iraq War | Frank-Walter Steinmeier | Lying to the public | 2003 |
| Carpet Affair | Dirk Niebel | Tax evasion | May 2012 |
| Causa Brüderle | Rainer Brüderle | Sexism | Jan 2012 |
| Causa Edathy | Sebastian Edathy, Thomas Oppermann, Hans-Peter Friedrich | Child pornography, betrayal of secrets | Oct 2005 |
| Causa Guttenberg | Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg | Plagiarism | Jan 2009 |
| Causa Sarrazin | Christian Wulff | Transgression of competences | Sep 2010 |
| Causa Schavan | Annette Schavan | Plagiarism | Jan 1981 |
| Causa Scheuer | Andreas Scheuer | Inconsistency of doctoral title | Dec 2004 |
| Causa Schottdorf | Beate Merk, Horst Seehofer, Peter Gauweiler | Failure of duty | Mar 2010 |
| Causa Tauss | Jörg Tauss | Child pornography | May 2007 |
| Causa Wulff | Christian Wulff | Accepting advantage | Oct 2007 |
| CDU Donations Affair | Manfred Kanther, Ludwig-Holger Pfahls | Accepting advantage, fraud, violating campaign finance law | Aug 1991 |
| CIA Scandal Masri | Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Otto Schily | Lying to the public | May 2004 |
| Cicero Affair | Otto Schily | Violation of press freedom | Sep 2005 |
| Consultancy Agreement Affair | Sigmar Gabriel | Hiring external consultants | Nov 2005 |
| Crystal Meth Affair | Michael Hartmann | Drug usage | Oct 2013 |

| Scandal | Accused | Transgression | |
|--|--|---|----------|
| | | Kind | Start |
| Data Privacy Scandal German Railway | Wolfgang Tiefensee | Failure of duty | 1998 |
| Diesel Particulate Filter Scandal | Sigmar Gabriel | Failure of duty | Aug 2006 |
| Dioxin Scandal | Ilse Aigner | Failure of duty | Jan 2011 |
| Draft Bill Affair | Marco Buschmann, Stephan Harbarth | Lobbying | n.s. |
| Drone Affair | Thomas de Maizière | Failure of duty, lying to the public | Jan 2007 |
| Federal Police Scandal | Hans-Peter Friedrich | Disputable dismissal | 2009 |
| Fee Affair | Peer Steinbrück | Non-transparent lecture fees | Nov 2011 |
| Flight Affair | Sigmar Gabriel | Tax misspending | Aug 2007 |
| Floorplan New BND Building | Peter Ramsauer | Failure of duty | Jul 2011 |
| German Railway Bonus | Wolfgang Tiefensee | Failure of duty | Jun 2008 |
| Gorch Fock Affair | Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg | Failure of duty | 2003 |
| Gorleben Report | Helmut Kohl | Manipulation of report | May 1983 |
| Hitler Putin Scandal | Wolfgang Schäuble | Verbal statement | Mar 2014 |
| HRE Scandal | Wolfgang Schäuble | Failure of duty | Sep 2011 |
| Kunduz Affair | Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Franz Josef Jung | Failure of duty | Sep 2009 |
| Lie Affair | Bela Anda | Defamation, embezzlement | Feb 2002 |
| Moratorium On Nuclear Energy | Rainer Brüderle | Verbal statement | Mar 2011 |
| NSA Affair | Angela Merkel, Hans-Peter Friedrich, Frank-Walter Steinmeier | Failure of duty | Apr 2002 |
| Nuclear Attack | Wolfgang Schäuble | Verbal statement | Sep 2007 |

| Scandal | Accused | Transgression | |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|----------|
| | | Kind | Start |
| Official Car Affair Clement | Wolfgang Clement | Tax evasion | 2003 |
| Official Car Affair Schmidt | Ulla Schmidt | Private use of official car | Jul 2004 |
| Olympia Affair | Wolfgang Tiefensee | Defamation | Jan 2003 |
| Panama Scandal | Helmut Linssen | Tax evasion | Aug 1997 |
| Pedophilia Affair | Jürgen Trittin, Sina Doughan | Breach of norm | 1981 |
| Porno Tweets | Johannes Kahrs | Breach of norm | Apr 2009 |
| PR Affair | Michael Glos | Failure of duty | Jul 2007 |
| Rot Off Scandal | Ulrike Nissen | Verbal offense | Dec 2008 |
| Skull Affair | Franz Josef Jung | Breach of norm | Mar 2004 |
| Sponsorship Young Union | Kristina Schröder | Favoritism | Nov 2010 |
| Spy Affair BND | Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Wolfgang Schäuble, Bernd Schmidbauer, Thomas de Maiziére | Violation of press freedom | Jan 2005 |
| Tax Data Scandal BND | Peer Steinbrück | Failure of duty | Jan 2006 |
| Twitter Affair | Julia Klöckner, Ulrich Kelber | Violation of protocol | May 2009 |
| Visa Affair | Joschka Fischer, Ludger Volmer | Failure of duty | Mar 2000 |
| Volkswagen Affair | Hans-Jürgen Uhl, Günter Lenz, Sigmar Gabriel | Accessory to embezzlement, perjury | Mar 1994 |
| Whistle-Blower Scandal | Helmut Metzner, Guido Westerwelle | Betrayal of secrets | Jul 2007 |
| Wire Affair | Wolfgang Thierse | Failure of duty | 2004 |
| Yukos Affair | Gerhard Schröder | Verbal statement | Jul 2004 |

Notes: The table lists all transgressions leading to scandal coverage between 2005 and 2014, if the accused is a national-level politician in a governing party. The start date of the transgressions is the earliest point in time the public could possibly have knowledge about the misbehavior and thus the possibility of the case being covered.