Scandal: Checks, Constituents, and Consequences

News Media Accounts in the 1992 House Banking Scandal

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Introduction

Every month, it seems a new scandal erupts, and politicians rarely remain passive to accusations of misconduct. This research will observe the effect of newspaper coverage of the 1992 House Banking Scandal and how what politicians said to reporters in newspapers nationwide affected their political futures thereafter.

Politicians may differentially benefit from different verbal remedial tactics—concessions, excuses, justifications, and refusals—depending on the severity of their wrongdoing.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: The more bounced checks a representative had, and the greater the dollar amount of those overdrafts, the fewer votes he or she would receive in the primary and general elections.

Hypothesis 2: The types of accounts, (Excuses, Justifications, Refusals, and Concessions) will differentially influence errant politicians’ political future.

Hypothesis 3: The effects of verbal tactics will depend on the severity of their offenses.

Methods

Data for content analysis were drawn from newspapers and newswire services accessible via the Factiva search engine database. The search criteria included a specific range of dates (01/01/1992 through 12/31/1994) and a number of standardized key words.

To ensure the articles’ relevance to the scandal, research assistants will inspect news articles generated by the search criteria. These research assistants, blind to the hypotheses, are trained to code these articles. Each of the 303 offending legislators who wrote overdrafts will have their verbatim quotes or reporter’s paraphrases of their accounts coded by the research assistants using the taxonomy prepared for this research.

Each major coding category (i.e., concessions, excuses, justifications, refusals) will be further divided into subordinate categories. For example, within the category “Concessions” a few subcategories will be “pleas for forgiveness” and “expression of regret”.

Results to Date

- 169 Republicans bounced 4,780 checks
- 1 Independent bounced 5 checks
- 266 Democrats bounced 15,407 checks
- 46 Representatives bounced over 100 checks
- 27 Representatives bounced over 200 checks
- 16 Representatives bounced over 400 checks
- 6 Representatives bounced over 700 checks
- Highest: 920 bounced checks (Bob Mrazek D-NY)

As of this writing data are still being collected. Our goals for this research are to use regression analysis to test the predictive significance of:

1) the number of bounced checks attributed to each representative
2) the amount of money they overdrafted
3) and the number of justifications, refusals, excuses, and concessions they provided to reporters.

Dependent variables include:

1) whether representatives ran for re-election or chose to retire;
2) whether representatives had primary challengers and by what margin they won or lost their party’s primary;
3) whether representatives won or lost the general election and by what margin they won or lost.

For each of the offending 303 members of the House of Representatives, we will calculate the number of concessions, excuses, refusals, and justifications that were offered in the news articles containing direct quotes and paraphrases.

For each representative we will also calculate the total dollar amount of overdrafts and the total number of overdrafts. These predictor variables and their interaction (controlling for the number and length of press coverage) will be entered as predictors in a series of regression equations.

The dependent variables will be regressed on the above predictors and their interaction to determine what predictors best account for representatives’ post-scandal futures.

Discussion

We aim to observe the level to which overdrafts affect voter backlash. Informal observations indicate a tendency of representatives with more than 100 bounced checks to win more comfortably in districts in which their party has historically dominated, and the representatives’ explanations varied depending on the number of checks that they bounced.

Weaker representatives who had more overdrafts either retired, or provided few accounts to explain their bounced checks. Representatives who are vulnerable are more likely to encounter opponents who will use overdrafts and other important issues to unseat them (e.g. abortion or the House post office scandal).

If results of the data analysis are as hypothesized, they will add to the body of research that suggests that the kinds of accounts that politicians use to mitigate the adverse public reactions to political scandal can change public opinion for the better.

A limitation of the study is that the Factiva newspapers that are seen most often are not necessarily representative of all of the newspapers available in 1992. At times larger newspapers did not appear to be represented in their respective states, and this requires a more elaborate search strategy once the benefits of Factiva have been exploited.

In response to that limitation, we will search through the archives of each state’s two largest newspapers to amass a greater collection of articles pertaining to the House banking scandal of 1992.

References


