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# The impact of political scandals on political support: An experimental test of two theories

Jürgen Maier

## Abstract

One of the most obvious trends in Western democracies, during the past decades, has been the decline of citizens' political support (that is, the growth of negative attitudes toward political parties, politicians and democracy). One explanation for this trend is that the number of political scandals has increased. However, the impact of political scandals on political support is not clear. Whereas the dysfunctional theory assumes that political scandals in general have an unfavourable impact on the political system, functional theory claims that political scandals can have positive effects. Using data from an experiment, this article analyses which theory is superior. It finds support for the dysfunctional theory: support for politicians and political parties was significantly eroded after exposure to scandal coverage whereas trust in institutions as well as satisfaction with democracy were not affected. The article concludes that political scandals contribute to the decline of political support.

## Keywords

experiment, Germany, political scandals, political support

## Introduction

One of the most obvious trends in Western democracies, during the past decades, has been the decline of citizens' political support. Public opinion polls in countries such as Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the USA consistently report a continuous erosion of trust in government and political institutions, a deterioration of party images and party identification, as well as a decreasing level of citizen satisfaction with democracy (Dalton, 2004, 2006; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Norris, 1999; Putnam et al., 2000).

This cross-national decline of political support presents a serious challenge for democracies. On the one hand, the relationship between citizens and the state has become weaker not only in terms of specific but also of diffuse political support. Specific support describes citizen satisfaction with

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the output of a political system as well as with the politicians responsible for this output (Easton, 1975: 437). Diffuse support refers to positive evaluations of the general nature of the political system – that is, independent of its performance (Easton, 1975: 444). Diffuse support is more crucial for a political system than specific support because deficits in system performance cannot be compensated if a political system lacks diffuse support. On the other hand, the decline of political support across Western democracies involves *all* objects of political support identified by Easton (1975, 1979) – that is, the political community, the political regime and the political authorities. Therefore, the decline of political support appears to be a general phenomenon and is not restricted to particular institutions or actors.

A number of hypotheses have been developed to explain this cross-national erosion of political support (for an overview, see Dalton, 2004). A first set of hypotheses proposes that the increase in political dissatisfaction results from long-term changes in social structure and political conditions. According to this perspective, citizens' increasingly negative evaluations of politics are, first, a response to the personal risks inherent in the processes of industrialization and modernization. This is especially true for those living on the fringes of the social and economic system; those who are therefore less important for the labour market, such as unskilled workers or the unemployed (Dalton, 2004: 83; Offe, 1984). 'These marginalized or "decommodified" citizens are seen as a potential source of social unrest and political discontent' (Dalton, 2004: 83). Second, the decline of political support results from a value shift in advanced industrial societies, the difficulties democracies have responding to new political issues and the younger generation's demands for more participation (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, 1977, 1990).

A second set of hypotheses suggests that the unsatisfactory (economic) performance of advanced industrial democracies is responsible for the erosion of political support. According to this perspective, the failure of parties and politicians to solve the most pressing problems causes political dissatisfaction (for a discussion of the economic factor, see Lawrence [1997]).<sup>1</sup>

The mass media tend to cover political issues differently from reporting in the past (with a stronger focus on, for example, persons over issues, shortcomings over solutions or simplification over complexity [Kepplinger, 1998; Patterson, 1993]).<sup>2</sup> This may, of course, further reinforce citizens' negative views of politics.

A third set of hypotheses connects the decline of political support with an increase of political scandals (Bowler and Karp, 2004; Thompson, 2000; Tiffen, 1999). Unfortunately, it is unclear in how scandal coverage affects political support: from a theoretical point of view, the revelation of a political scandal can discredit or purify democracy. Therefore, this article analyses whether media reporting of political scandals has a functional or dysfunctional effect on citizens' political attitudes toward the political regime and political authorities. After a review of the literature, hypotheses will be suggested regarding the impact of political scandals on the evaluation of discredited politicians, the political elite as a whole, political parties and democracy. This section is followed by a description of the research design. After this, the hypothesized relationships of the two different theoretical perspectives are tested. Finally, the results are discussed.

## Literature Review

Regardless of whether politicians actually violate general moral and ethical standards more often than they did in the past or whether the impression that the number of political scandals is increasing arises from the changing style of media coverage, most studies find that political scandals have a negative impact on public opinion. For instance, a number of studies conclude that the significant fall in

President Nixon's approval ratings during 1973 to 1974 was caused by his involvement in the Watergate scandal (Sniderman et al., 1991; Yaffee, 1999; Yaffee and McGee, 2000). This relationship was also observed with regard to President Reagan and the Iran-Contra affair (Brody, 1991; Brody and Shapiro, 1989; Hurwitz et al., 1989; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990) as well as for other scandals during the Reagan and Bush presidencies (Bowler and Karp, 2004; Chanley et al., 2000) – but not for Clinton's Lewinsky scandal (Smyth and Taylor, 2003; Zaller, 1998). In addition, political scandals have more than once corrupted presidential images in terms of, for example, competence, honesty, credibility and morality (Arterton, 1974; Brody, 1998; Dennis and Webster, 1975; Hawkins et al., 1975; Hogan, 2003; Hurwitz et al., 1989; Jaros and Shoemaker, 1976; Joslyn, 1977; Joslyn and Galderisi, 1977; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Lupfer and Kenny, 1974; Robinson, 1974). Some political scandals have consequences that go beyond affecting a politician's job rating or damaging his or her image. For example, in the context of Watergate, Americans also lost faith in institutions and especially in government (Bergesen and Warr, 1979; Lipset and Schneider, 1983; Smith, 1994), the Republican Party received less favourable ratings on feeling thermometer scales (Robinson, 1974), a significant proportion of supporters of the Republican Party had weaker party identification (Chaffee and Becker, 1975; Dunlap and Wisniewski, 1978; Robinson, 1974) and citizens became more critical of political elites (Abramson, 1983; Arterton, 1974, 1975; Joslyn and Galderisi, 1977; Lipset and Schneider, 1983). In addition, some studies indicate a decline of system support and an increase of cynicism caused by the Watergate scandal (Dunham and Mauss, 1976; Sigel and Hoskin, 1977; Joslyn and Galderisi, 1977) as well as by the House of Representatives bank scandal (Bowler and Karp, 2004). Similar relationships between political scandals and political support are reported from other countries (for Germany, see Bytzek [2007: 125–143] and Kepplinger [1996], for Italy, see della Porta [2000], for Japan, see Pharr [2000] and for the UK, see Bowler and Karp [2004]).

All these findings are in line with the idea that political scandals are generally unfavourable for a democracy. This view claims that political scandals not only discredit the politicians accused but – by reinforcing prejudices about politicians – foster scepticism about the political elite as a whole. This approach also assumes that political scandals have a negative influence on the image of all political parties. In reference to the party of the implicated politician, this happens because party members rarely openly criticize a colleague when a scandal is being publicly discussed. In the case of uninvolved parties, the same argument holds true as for the political elite as a whole: information concerning scandals could easily reinforce citizens' negative stereotypes about political parties. Finally, this theoretical approach assumes that political scandals – especially if they happen frequently – undermine support for the political system and its institutions. This happens because citizens gain the impression that the political system and its institutions provide an opportunity to violate norms and values and are not very effective in their prevention of serious wrongdoing.

The view suggesting an almost automatic deterioration in reference to important objects of political support has been challenged by the functional theory of political scandals (Sabato et al., 2000: xvi; von Alemann, 1985; for a comprehensive discussion of this approach, see Kepplinger [2005] as well as Kepplinger and Ehmig [2004]). According to functional theory, the effects of scandals are not always dysfunctional (that is, do not always have a negative impact); political scandals can also have useful outcomes. Evidence for the functionality of political scandals is provided by some studies on the Watergate scandal, reporting – at least for part of the electorate – an increasing level of support for the political system (Dunham and Mauss, 1976; Sniderman et al., 1975). In addition, a study analysing the impact of mass media coverage of political scandals on political dissatisfaction in Germany found that the extent to which television covers political scandals has a positive effect on the evaluation of the political elite as a whole and on satisfaction with democracy, respectively (Maier, 2002).

The effects described by functional scandal theory have been analysed in the sociology of crime literature. According to Durkheim (1970: 156–162), Mead (1918: 591) and Marx and Engels (1965: 363), the act of uncovering and punishing crime can revive the violated norms and values. As a consequence, the state's successful efforts in the fight against crime can lead to an increase in positive evaluations of its institutions and its representatives because they safeguard common values. This mechanism, of course, only works if crime does not exceed a certain level. If violation of the law is the norm, not the exception, it is more likely that institutions will be perceived as being weak and incapable of enforcing rules. For this reason, the assumption that one should prosecute as many criminal acts and punish as many delinquents as possible is incorrect. As Popitz (1968) demonstrated, the result of this strategy would not be the reinforcement but the breakdown of social norms and values (see also Kepplinger and Ehmig, 2004: 365).

Analogous to the crime example, uncovering a political scandal and penalizing politicians responsible for serious violations might foster citizens' political integration and therefore should have positive effects on the evaluation of some political actors and institutions, as well as of democracy as a whole. From the perspective of functional scandal theory, when serious misconduct leads to scandals, ordinary citizens see that the elites cannot violate rules and regulations without being sanctioned. This strengthens belief in the power of the self-purification of society. In addition, scandals may reinforce violated norms – and thus the principles of social life as well as the structures built on these roots. As a consequence, potential delinquents will be discouraged from violating those norms again (Kepplinger and Ehmig, 2004: 364).

In modern democracies, the transformation of discovered transgressions into scandals is not conceivable without the help of the mass media. Only if abuses are brought to the attention of the public by the media can they turn into scandals (Thompson, 2000). Of course, this does not always occur. Based on a content analysis of 48 local scandals in Germany, Kepplinger and Ehmig (2004: 372) found that about four out of five wrongdoings were covered by the media. But simple media coverage of the offence is not enough. Kepplinger and Ehmig (2004: 371) provide evidence that public reactions are most likely if the number of scandal reports is high and the tone of the media coverage is predominantly critical. In other words, only if relevant parts of the media repeatedly point to a wrongdoing in a disapproving way will the result provoke public interest and indignation. In this perspective, the press, the radio and television fulfil an important function: by revealing abuses they substitute for those institutions that failed to uncover and punish serious violations. In this sense, the media act as a watchdog or a 'fourth estate' (Kepplinger and Ehmig 2004: 364). However, the data provided by Kepplinger and Ehmig (2004: 372) also make clear that only about 10 per cent of identified misdeeds are covered in this way. Nonetheless, if the media decide to cover such incidents, they seem to be quite successful: in 7 out of 10 cases the exposed violations were remedied, at least in part.

## Hypotheses

As discussed above, functional and dysfunctional theories on the impact of political scandals come to very different predictions about the consequences for citizens' political support. The only exception is the reaction to politicians involved in a political scandal, where both theories suggest that this will damage their image. Thus, the first hypothesis is as follows:

- H1: Political scandals have a negative impact on the evaluation of politicians responsible for the violation of common standards in a society.

In contrast, functional and dysfunctional theories differ with respect to the predicted effect of political scandals on the political elite as a whole. If we assume that political scandals are dysfunctional, we expect that the violation of norms and values discredits not only politicians involved in scandal but other politicians as well. However, functional theory would lead us to expect that the reputations of politicians not involved in a scandal will be unaffected. Moreover, we would expect to obtain more favourable evaluations for some politicians, especially for those from opposing political camps, because they frequently appear as critics in this context. As a consequence, we have two contrary hypotheses:<sup>3</sup>

H2a: Political scandals have a negative impact on the evaluation of other politicians.

H2b: Political scandals have either no impact or a positive impact on the evaluation of other politicians.

The arguments of the dysfunctional and functional perspectives concerning the impact of political scandals on politicians also apply to political parties. According to dysfunctional theory, not only is the party to which a politician responsible for a serious violation belongs damaged, but all political parties suffer from a political scandal. In contrast, functional theory predicts that only the party to which the blamed politician is attached will be hurt by a scandal. Indeed, other parties may profit from their position as critics. Thus, we have three different hypotheses:

H3: Political scandals have a negative impact on the political party to which a politician involved in a scandal belongs.

H4a: Political scandals have a negative impact on all other political parties.

H4b: Political scandals have either no impact or a positive impact on all other political parties.

Concerning the political system and its institutions, the dysfunctional perspective on political scandals again assumes that the violation of norms and values has a negative influence. In contrast, functional theory emphasizes that the uncovering of a political scandal and the punishment of politicians responsible for serious wrongdoings demonstrate that the political system is functioning the way it should. As a consequence, trust in institutions (especially the media covering a scandal and the courts punishing those who are responsible for a scandal) as well as support for the political system in general should increase. Again, we have two contrasting hypotheses:

H5a: Political scandals have a negative impact on the evaluation of institutions as well as the political system in general.

H5b: Political scandals have a positive impact on the evaluation of institutions (especially the media and the courts) as well as the political system in general.

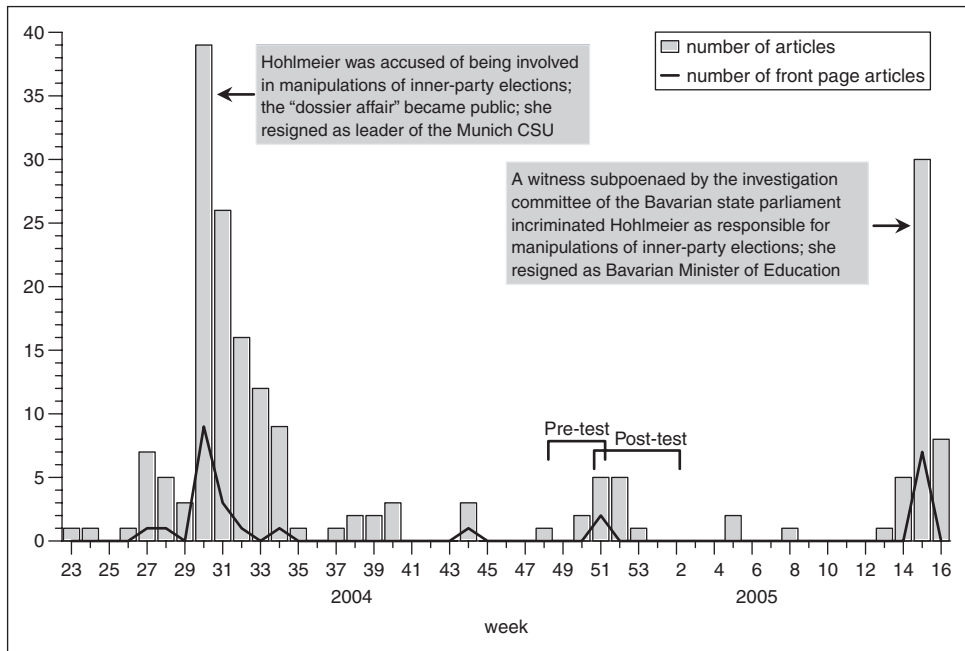
## Research Design

In order to test the hypotheses, this study focused on an actual political scandal, the so-called ‘dossier affair’. This affair took place in 2004 in Bavaria, a south-eastern state of Germany. The

leading character in this scandal was Monika Hohlmeier, the Bavarian Minister of Education and Chairwoman of the Munich Christian Social Union (CSU). She was daughter of the former Bavarian Prime Minister Franz-Josef Strauß, and seemed well positioned to pursue a great political career, especially because of her close personal relationship with the then Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber. The scandal occurred when she tried to defend herself against accusations by members of the board of the Munich CSU that she was involved in manipulations of inner-party elections. In this connection, she presented a folder allegedly containing incriminating evidence concerning board members and threatened to make public its contents. Although the majority of board members described the situation in this way, Hohlmeier denied that she had done so but conceded that a misunderstanding might have occurred. As a consequence, she resigned as Chairwoman of the Munich CSU in July. In April 2005 she also resigned as Bavarian Minister of Education.

Based on this incident, our study employs an experimental pre-test–post-test design seeking to determine if the reception of scandal information causes political disaffection at the individual level. Most of the studies analysing the relationship between political scandals and political support examine the dynamics of time series; that is, refer to aggregated cross-sectional survey data. Yet the assumption that macro-level changes can also be observed on the individual level may be erroneous ('ecological fallacy' [King, 1997]). Furthermore, studies analysing the impact of media coverage of political scandals on citizens' political attitudes using cross-sectional data typically only find small and, for the most part, statistically insignificant effects (for a review of German studies see Maier [2003] and for an analysis of the general problem of low media effects in survey research see Zaller [2002]). In addition, even for those studies working with panel data the impact of political scandals on political support is low (Maurer, 2003: 201–214). One reason for these disappointing results, which do not replicate the generally strong impact of political scandals at the aggregate level, is that studies based on survey data normally refer to questions on media exposure in order to take account of individual awareness and knowledge of a political scandal. Of course, questions on media exposure neither provide information about the content and the tone of the media reports nor do they provide reliable conclusions about how the information is perceived by a respondent and how this information is evaluated. In order to solve this problem, the use of experimental designs seems to be an appropriate methodological approach. In contrast to surveys, experiments do not suffer from these measurement problems. By providing particular media information to some subjects, and not exposing others to this content, experimental designs are able to isolate the causal relationship in question (that is, to reveal the impact of media reports about political scandals on individual political attitudes). Unfortunately, only a few experiments have been carried out that analyse the impact of scandals on political attitudes and behaviour (Carlson et al., 2000; Funk, 1996; Garrett and Wallace, 1976; Joslyn, 2003; Rundquist et al., 1977). With the exception of the experiment of Garrett and Wallace (1976), these studies do not refer to real politicians and real violations of norms (as our study does) but use fictitious candidates involved in a fictitious scandal. As a consequence, the external validity of these studies is questionable: while the reactions of subjects exposed to fictitious scandal information might be the same as for a real scandal, one cannot be sure. This article's experimental design is different in this respect, because participants of the study were exposed to a real scandal that occurred in southern Germany.

Our experiment was conducted by undergraduate students participating in a class on applied social scientific research methods in the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Jena, a medium-sized city in Thuringia in eastern Germany. The pre-test was carried out in November and December 2004, based on a stratified sample that considered gender, age and education; the participants in this class interviewed a total of 300 citizens about their political



**Figure 1.** Media coverage of the Hohlmeier scandal in national quality newspapers and weekly news magazines, June 2004 – April 2005

attitudes and behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Approximately three weeks later, 272 participants (91 per cent) of the study were re-interviewed (post-test).<sup>5</sup> During the pre-test phase, the respondents were not told that the first questionnaire would be followed by a second survey. Furthermore, they were not in a position to ascertain the actual purpose of our study because most of the questions had nothing to do with political scandals. During the post-test phase, all participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups.<sup>6</sup> Immediately before filling out the post-test questionnaire, each respondent was asked to read a copy of a newspaper article.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, subjects had no opportunity to verify the content of the report or to talk to other people about this issue. Although the articles were based on a real story, they themselves were fictitious;<sup>8</sup> they provided basic information about the dossier affair and described new developments on this issue.<sup>9</sup> The first group received the information that the folder had appeared at the editorial office of a newspaper, but it did not contain any inculpatory information about the board members. The second group read in the article that the folder that had turned up contained dossiers about serious wrongdoings of middle-ranking members of the CSU. The third group received information that the folder provided scandalous information about prominent members of all relevant parties in Bavaria (that is, CSU, SPD, FDP, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen). For the second and the third group it was explicitly explained at the end of the text that the scandal would lead to criminal prosecution as well as having other serious consequences for the political career of some of the politicians mentioned.<sup>10</sup> In the context of this study, citizens assigned to the first group were regarded as the control group ('no scandal'). Citizens in the second and third groups were seen as the experimental group ('scandal').<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, we did not ask the participants of the study about their media consumption between the pre- and the post-test. In order to make sure that whatever shifts in citizens' political



**Table 1.** Changes in Candidate Evaluations between Pre- and Post-test

	Scandal		No scandal	
	Change	<i>n</i>	Change	<i>n</i>
Hohlmeier (CSU)	-0.81*	93	-0.09	45
Stoiber (CSU)	-0.11	177	+0.08	90
Müntefering (SPD)	0.00	168	+0.08	84
Gerhard (FDP)	-0.01	117	+0.01	59
Künast (B90/Grüne)	-0.16	161	+0.27	83
Köhler (federal president)	-0.15	162	+0.32	82

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  (t-test for dependent samples).

support that occurred were caused by the scandal information provided and not by the level of exposure to mass media, we analysed the content of coverage of this scandal in leading national newspapers and weekly news magazines.<sup>12</sup> The results suggest that it was very unlikely that the participants of our study had the chance to read much about this issue. During the period when our study was conducted, the number of reports on the scandal did not exceed five articles per week. In addition, one front page article was published during this period (Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> The newspapers and news magazines analysed serve as 'opinion leaders', which are often quoted by local German newspapers (Weischenberg et al., 2006). Because their coverage of the scandal was low, it can be assumed that local newspapers (such as Thuringian newspapers, which most of our subjects mentioned) did not report on this scandal to any great extent either. Indeed, local newspapers focus more on politics concerning their 'own' state than on national politics or the politics of other German states.

## Results

### *Attitudes Toward Politicians*

As predicted by both the functional and the dysfunctional perspective on political scandals, a significant drop in evaluations of the politician declared to be responsible for a serious transgression is found for citizens exposed to scandal information (see Table 1). For those who had an opinion about Monika Hohlmeier in the pre- and the post-test, the evaluations decline by -0.81 on an 11-point scale ranging from -5 to +5 for the experimental group but only by -0.09 for the control group.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the deterioration of Hohlmeier's image is uniform across social and political groups. A multiple regression analysis reveals that reactions to the scandal do not vary significantly by levels of education and party identification (for both variables  $p > 0.05$ ). In contrast, no significant changes are found for other prominent politicians.<sup>15</sup> In general, we find that evaluations of the other politicians in the control group slightly increase (between +0.01 and +0.27), whereas the ratings in the experimental group either remain the same or become slightly more unfavourable (between 0.00 and -0.16).

This impression is strengthened if we compare citizens' reactions to statements about the integrity of politicians and the corruptibility of parties and politicians between the pre- and the post-test (see Table 2). In the experimental group, subjects do not show any significant attitude change in terms of integrity (+0.01) and corruption (+0.11). In contrast, members of the control group are significantly more convinced that politicians are trustworthy and honest (+0.36).<sup>16</sup> Again,

**Table 2.** Change in Attitudes Toward Integrity of Politicians and Corruptibility of Parties and Politicians between Pre- and Post-test

	Scandal		No scandal	
	Change	<i>n</i>	Change	<i>n</i>
Integrity	+0.01	177	+0.36*	89
Corruptibility	+0.11	179	-0.14	88

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  (t-test for dependent samples).

**Table 3.** Changes in Party Evaluations between Pre- and Post-test

	Scandal		No scandal	
	Change	<i>n</i>	Change	<i>n</i>
CDU	-0.46*	179	-0.23	88
CSU	-0.37*	178	-0.11	87
SPD	-0.40*	179	+0.01	87
FDP	0.00	176	+0.05	85
B90/Grüne	-0.17	177	+0.01	88
PDS	-0.31*	178	+0.03	90

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  (t-test for dependent samples).

education and party identification do not have a significant impact on participants' reactions ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, members of this group do not show significant changes in their evaluations of the corruptibility of political actors (-0.14).

In sum, H1 (supporting both functional and dysfunctional theory) is confirmed. H2a (supporting dysfunctional theory) and H2b (supporting functional theory) must be rejected.

### *Attitudes Toward Political Parties*

Turning our attention to the impact of political scandals on attitudes toward political parties, we observe that exposure to scandal information tends to cause a general decline in party evaluation (see Table 3). Except for the FDP, all other parties suffer from the press report; the maximum decline is almost half a scale point. Most of the observed declines in evaluation are statistically significant. It is striking that the scandal reported in the article provided to the participants of this study damages not only the image of the parties mentioned in the press reports but also that of parties not involved in the scandal (CDU, PDS).<sup>17</sup> Once again, these effects are uniform across education levels and different groups of party supporters. In contrast, the attitude changes noted in the control group are insignificant. In sum, this result strongly suggests that political scandals hurt all parties – and not only the party to which a politician responsible for the violation of norms and values belongs.

This finding tends to be supported if we compare those subjects who received the information that the folder contained inculpatory notes only about politicians of the CSU (group 2) with subjects who read that the dossier contained scandalous information about representatives of other parties as well (group 3) (see Table 4). For group 2, we see a significant deterioration of the

**Table 4.** Change in Party Evaluations Between Pre- and Post-test Depending on Scope of the Political Scandal

	Scandal: CSU		Scandal: all parties	
	Change	<i>n</i>	Change	<i>n</i>
CDU	-0.43*	87	-0.50*	92
CSU	-0.27	86	-0.47*	92
SPD	-0.43*	87	-0.37*	92
FDP	-0.19	85	+0.18	91
B90/Grüne	-0.31	87	-0.03	90
PDS	-0.60*	87	-0.03	91

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  (*t*-test for dependent samples).

**Table 5.** Change in Satisfaction with Democracy and Trust in Institutions Between Pre- and Post-test

	Scandal		No scandal	
	Change	<i>n</i>	Change	<i>n</i>
Satisfaction with democracy	+0.02	180	+0.11	92
Trust in government	+0.10	178	+0.01	91
Trust in courts	+0.01	178	+0.04	91
Trust in political parties	-0.04	177	+0.09	89
Trust in politicians	-0.05	178	-0.01	89
Trust in press	+0.09	179	+0.19	89
Trust in television	+0.04	178	+0.24*	89

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  (*t*-test for dependent samples).

evaluations of the CDU, the SPD and the PDS. Interestingly, the evaluations of the CSU also declined, but this drop is, as for the FDP and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, not significant. For group 3, we observe a significant drop for CDU, CSU and SPD – but not for FDP,<sup>18</sup> Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and PDS. In both cases, the reactions are independent of level of education and party identification.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the pattern of change induced by a press report about a political scandal is in line with the dysfunctional perspective on those events. As a consequence, H3 and H4a (both supporting dysfunctional theory) are supported, but H4b (supporting functional theory) is rejected.

### Support for the Political System

Finally, we address the question of the impact of political scandals on support for the political system. In both the experimental and the control group we see a small but insignificant increase of satisfaction with democracy (see Table 5). In addition, for those subjects exposed to the scandalous information we note insignificant changes of trust in institutions. For parties and politicians these changes are negative; for government, the courts and the media these shifts are positive. Almost the same pattern – small and insignificant changes inconsistent in direction – occurs for the control group. The only exception is the significant increase in trust in television.<sup>20</sup> In sum, the results did not meet the expectations of either functional or dysfunctional theory. As a consequence, H5a (supporting dysfunctional theory) as well as H5b (supporting functional theory) are rejected.

**Table 6.** Overview of the Results of the Hypotheses Tests

	Findings support	
	Functional theory	Dysfunctional theory
H1: Evaluation of scandalized politicians	Yes	Yes
H2: Evaluation of politicians not involved in a scandal	No	–
H3: Evaluation of the political party to which a scandalized politician belongs	No	Yes
H4: Evaluation of political parties not involved in a scandal	No	Yes
H5: Evaluation of institutions and the political system in general	No	No

## Discussion

The continuing decline of political support in Western democracies presents a major challenge for the legitimacy of these political systems. While most political scientists explain this erosion of support as a response to the powerful forces of social change, on the one hand, and the insufficient performance of the political system, on the other hand, this article addressed the question to what extent political scandals contribute to this development.

The most common expectation about the relationship between political scandals and political support is that the violation of social norms by politicians not only has negative effects for the wrongdoers but also reduces support for the political elite as a whole, the political parties as well as for democracy. In other words, the impact of political scandals on political support is in general dysfunctional. In contrast, functional theory argues that political scandals hurt politicians involved in a scandal but have positive effects on support for the political elite, political parties and the political system. The reason for this relationship is that political scandals generate public attention for the violated norms and values by openly blaming the politicians responsible for those wrongdoings. If the political system is successful in punishing such wrongful conduct, citizens may get the idea that it works well. As a consequence, political scandals cause an increase rather than a decline of political support.

In order to test both theories we organized an experiment about a real political scandal which happened in Bavaria. These results are inconsistent with the functional perspective on political scandals (for an overview, see Table 6). On the contrary, support significantly declined between the pre- and post-test not only for the politician involved in scandal but for other politicians not involved in the scandal. In addition, the sympathy ratings of almost all political parties – irrespective of their connection with the scandal – significantly eroded after the participants of our study read one press report about this issue. Interestingly, trust in institutions as well as satisfaction with democracy were not affected by the political scandal. The lack of a spillover effect is, of course, good news. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap between specific and diffuse support in most post-industrial societies, indicating a crisis of representative democracy: whereas citizens prefer democracies over dictatorships, they dislike the representatives of democracy. According to our data, this gap tends to increase with every new political scandal, because citizens develop negative views of parties and politicians *across the board* following every new scandal.

The results presented in this article are consistent with the vast majority of research in this field. Nevertheless, the findings make an important contribution by demonstrating that the negative relationship between political scandals and political support found at the aggregate level has a counterpart at the individual level. In addition, we present strong evidence that the observed shifts in citizens' political support are caused by the scandalous information, not by the level of exposure to the mass media, because newspapers and news magazines did not put this or any other scandal on their agenda during the pre- and the post-test periods of our study. If the causal factor was the level of exposure to the mass media, the level of political support in the control group (that is, the group who received the information that there was no scandal) should have declined to about the same extent as that for the experimental group. Although we have no information about the media diet of our participants *during* the experiment, it is unlikely that members of the experimental group suddenly showed media usage patterns significantly different from those of the subjects assigned to the control group. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that the pre-test caused differences in the way participants think about politics (and especially political scandals) because the two groups completed the same questionnaires. These questionnaires did not include any information about our research questions and did not focus on political scandals. In addition, we did not mention that the first survey would be followed by another one.

## Limitations and Future Research

Nevertheless, the methodological approach used in this study has limitations. First, as in other experimental studies, our study suffers from an external validity problem: the respondents probably paid more attention to the article than did the average reader. As a consequence, we cannot be sure how large the measured effects would be in a more realistic reception situation. In addition, our sample was not randomly selected. Therefore, on the basis of these results it is hard to generalize about the entire German electorate. Second, we do not know how stable the induced effects are over time. Third, although neither functional nor dysfunctional theory are tied to any general conditions, we have no empirical evidence as to whether the observed effects using the treatments of the experimental study presented in this article would also occur in a non-German sample or for other types of scandals. In this context, another interesting research question is what the effect of scandal coverage would be if subjects were exposed not only to one but – as in reality – to a larger number of reports on the issue. According to studies on the cumulative impact of mass media reports (Noelle-Neumann, 1973), repeated media coverage of a political scandal will further reinforce the decline of political support – but only if the reports pull in the same direction.

In addition, further research is needed on the relationship between the type of political scandal and its effect on political attitudes. Although every political scandal seems unique, there have been attempts to classify types of scandals. One distinction is to separate scandals related to the misuse of power (for example, Watergate as well as the Hohlmeier scandal described in this article) from sex scandals (for example, the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal) and scandals dealing with money issues (for example, the recent British scandal over MPs' expenses) (King, 1986; Thompson, 2000). More (experimental) empirical studies will help us to determine whether the impact of these issues on political attitudes is quite similar or if particular scandals are especially threatening for democracy. Until now, our knowledge about this problem is very limited.

The majority of journalists declare that investigation is the guiding principle of their work (for Germany, see Weischenberg et al., 2006: 356). Furthermore, the mass media increasingly cover negative information – especially if it can be personalized and visualized (Kepplinger, 1998; Patterson, 1993). Both trends increase the probability that political scandals will come to light – even if the actual (albeit unknown) number of violations of socially accepted norms and values by

politicians were to remain stable over time. As a consequence, a number of political observers have the impression that political scandals occur much more frequently than in the past. There is no reason to assume that the perceptions of ordinary citizens should be any different. Bearing in mind the results of our study, we must conclude that political scandals contribute to the decline of – first and foremost – political support.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the deterioration of political support is not an inevitable process caused by social and political change. The dynamic of this deterioration is at least in part controllable by improving the performance of the political system, on the one hand, and by reducing political scandals, on the other. Improving the quality of a political system is, of course, a complex issue. Complying with the laws, norms and values of a society is a much easier task, as this should be the normal thing for political representatives to do.

## Appendices

### *Wording and Coding*

*Candidate evaluation:* ‘In general, how do you like the following politicians?’ Eleven-point scales from –5 ‘do not like [politician] at all’ to +5 ‘like [politician] very much’.

*Corruptibility of parties and politicians:* ‘Most parties and politicians are corrupt.’ Five-point scale from –2 ‘do not agree at all’ to +2 ‘fully agree’.

*Credibility of the article:* ‘How would you describe the article you just have read?’ Five-point scale from 1 ‘completely incredible’ to 5 ‘completely credible’.

*Integrity of politicians:* ‘Most politicians are trustworthy and honest people.’ Five-point scale from –2 ‘do not agree at all’ to +2 ‘fully agree’.

*Knowledge of the dossier affair* (open question, pre-test only): ‘If you think back to the years 2003 and 2004: Can you recall any political scandals? For each scandal, please note the issue as well as the parties and politicians involved in the scandal.’

*Knowledge of the dossier affair* (closed question, post-test only): ‘This press report deals with a political scandal: Have you heard anything about this scandal before?’ 0 ‘no’, 1 ‘yes’.

*Party evaluation:* ‘In general, how do you like the following parties?’ Eleven-point scales from –5 ‘do not like [party] at all’ to +5 ‘like [party] very much’.

*Satisfaction with democracy:* ‘How satisfied or unsatisfied are you – all in all – with German democracy?’ Five-point scale from –2 ‘very unsatisfied’ to +2 ‘very satisfied’.

*Trust in institutions:* ‘On the following list you find a number of institutions and groups of persons. Please tell me if you trust them or not.’ Five-point scales from –2 ‘do not trust at all’ to +2 ‘fully trust’.

### *Stimulus Material*

New facts in the Hohlmeier case: Documents found from the office of the Bavarian Secretary of Education Munich – Things have finally been set in motion in the affair concerning the behaviour of the Bavarian Secretary of Education and the Arts at a CSU district board conference in August this year. Hohlmeier, who in June 2003 became head of the CSU in Munich, had been ordered to clear up the incidents concerning manipulated party elections, corrupt party members, and forged membership applications in a district committee in the south-eastern part of the Bavarian state capital. However, following accusations that the 42-year-old politician might have known about

these dealings and had approved of the fall of the head of the CSU in the Munich town hall, Hans Podiuk, who allegedly is involved in the whole affair, Hohlmeier resigned as head of the district board after only thirteen months in office, facing harsh criticism from her own party.

Only four weeks later, the Secretary made headlines again. While attending a turbulent meeting of the Munich CSU district board she threatened party friends that she would disclose compromising material. Participants stated that during the course of the meeting she had put a folder on the table and threatened: 'I have something against every one of you.' Hohlmeier vehemently denied this, but this did not prevent some of her party colleagues from filing a lawsuit accusing her of attempted coercion.

Yesterday this folder surprisingly turned up. Together with an anonymous letter it was passed on to our editorial office. ...

... A closer examination of the documents showed that the folder did not contain any incriminating material. A spokesperson of the Munich CSU district board expressed relief that the accusations against Hohlmeier were unfounded and one could finally get back to normal business. ('No scandal')

... A closer examination of the documents showed that the folder indeed held incriminating material concerning a number of CSU party members. The contents suggest that misuse of authority and other illegal dealings were not at all unusual within the CSU. Among other things, the dossier contains a detailed report on the long-standing chairman of the CSU in Munich, Heinz Zubehofer, on Rudolph Müller, CSU member of the Bavarian parliament, and Alois Brandt, head of the CSU in Lower Franconia. It can be assumed that the contents of the folder will not only have legal consequences for some of the persons mentioned in it but also very serious ones for their political careers. ('Scandal, CSU only')

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### **Notes**

1. This approach has been challenged with reference to the weakness of performance-based theories to explain the long-term decline of political support (Clarke et al., 1993; Nye et al., 1997). Nevertheless, disagreement with the outcome of the political system may add a certain amount of political dissatisfaction to the already existing level of citizens' disappointment with democracy caused by structural changes.
2. In addition to this, the increasing negativity in the mass media's coverage of politics has sources located within the media system. One explanation is that journalists' professional orientations have changed. Today, journalists are more in favour of critical and investigative journalism than in the past (Westerstahl and Johansson, 1986). This is especially true of younger journalists. As a consequence, the style of media coverage has significantly changed due to generational replacement (Kepplinger, 1998: 142). Another

- reason is that 'journalists have incentives to investigate and to subject the parties and candidates to scrutiny ... such stories can give them prestige and influence in their business' (Geer, 2006: 12).
3. In fact, H2a is the null hypothesis of H2b and vice versa. This is also true for hypotheses H4a and H4b. I decided to explicitly state all hypotheses to make clear which conclusions are suggested by the two theories.
  4. The students were allowed to interview friends, relatives, neighbours, and so on as long as the subjects fulfilled quota classifications. For technical reasons, not all participants could be interviewed face-to-face. Therefore, about one third of the sample was interviewed by mail survey. The sampling mode had no impact on the reactions of our participants.
  5. In accordance with the sampling strategy, gender, age and education are almost equally distributed (male: 53 per cent, female: 47 per cent; 14–39 years: 55 per cent, 40 years and older: 45 per cent, average age: 37.4 years; low or medium level of education: 47 per cent, higher education: 53 per cent). Ninety per cent of the sample are East Germans. Twenty-one per cent have a party identification with CDU or CSU, 18 per cent with SPD, 6 per cent with FDP, 11 per cent with Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 17 per cent with PDS, 1 per cent with another party and 25 per cent have no party identification. There are no significant social and political differences between respondents who participated in both the pre- and the post-test and the 'drop-outs'. It is difficult to say if the results of the experiment presented in this article would have been different with a sample that included more West Germans. In our data we found no significantly different reactions to the stimulus between East and West Germans. Other studies focusing on the processing of political information, for example, in televised debates, also show that East–West differences are rare (Maurer et al., 2007), although there is numerous evidence in the literature that the level of political support in the two parts of the country is still very different.
  6. Each of the three groups consists of three equally distributed subgroups. In these subgroups different pictures of Monika Hohlmeier were provided in order to test the impact of visual information (conditions: no picture, positive picture, negative picture). In other words, the experimental design is a two-factorial design. In the context of this article we do not analyse the impact of pictures. In general, positive pictures softened negative effects of the scandal reports, whereas negative pictures reinforced the impact of the articles. But because the number of subjects who saw positive, negative, or no picture at all was about the same in every group, the impact of the pictures worked in opposite directions and they cancelled each other out. As a consequence, different reactions of the different groups were not caused by an over- or under-representation of particular pictures.
  7. To increase the credibility of the articles, we employed the house style of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, one of the major German national quality newspapers.
  8. After they had filled out the final questionnaire, participants of the study were told that the articles they had read were fictitious.
  9. Prior knowledge about the scandal was low: When in the pre-test participants were asked which political scandals of the past two years they were able to recall, only 8 per cent mentioned scandals involving Monika Hohlmeier. When we asked in the post-test if they had heard anything about the scandal covered in the press report, 38 per cent said 'yes'. With regard to prior knowledge, there are no statistical differences between control and experimental group ( $p > 0.05$ ). In addition, removing the participants who indicated that they knew of the scandal in the pre-test did not yield other results on the impact of the Hohlmeier scandal on political attitudes. The treatments provided to the experimental groups were very credible. According to a question we asked after the post-test about the credibility of the reports, we also successfully managed this task. On a five-point credibility scale the articles received a mean of 3.4 (SD = 0.9;  $N = 261$ ). There were no statistical differences in perceived credibility of the reports between the different treatment groups or between different social and political groups.



10. See appendix for a translation of the stimulus material.
11. Members of the experimental and the control groups showed no significant differences in terms of sex, age, education, party identification, general consumption of the mass media as stated in the pre-test, knowledge of the dossier affair and knowledge of Monika Hohlmeier ( $p > 0.05$ ). In addition, in the pre-test the groups did not significantly differ in reference to any political attitude used as a dependent variable in the context of this paper. The reason for merging the second and the third groups was that – in accordance with our hypothesis – we did not expect different reactions from these groups in respect to the evaluation of politicians as well as satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions. With one exception (Federal President Köhler: change in group 2: +0.24,  $p > 0.05$ ; change in group 3: -0.51,  $p < 0.05$ ), the measured changes are not statistically significant. This is, of course, not the case for the different political parties, where we expected that those parties mentioned in the stimulus material would suffer. For this reason, we display the reactions of both groups in testing hypotheses H3, H4a and H4b (see Table 4).
12. Newspapers: *Financial Times Deutschland*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *taz*, *Die Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*. News magazines: *Focus*, *Der Spiegel*. Relevant articles published between 1 January 2004 and 27 April 2005 on domestic policy and including the keywords ‘Hohlmeier’ and ‘Skandal’ (scandal) or ‘Affäre’ (affair) were identified in LexisNexis. All identified articles were reviewed in order to make sure that the involvement of Monika Hohlmeier in a political scandal was at least mentioned.
13. In addition, no other political scandal was on the media agenda during the pre- and the post-test of our study.
14. The difference between the changes in the control and the experimental group is statistically significant ( $t = 2.01$ , d.f. = 136,  $p < 0.05$ ). For those participants who already had an opinion on Monika Hohlmeier in the pre-test, there were no significant differences in terms of sex, age, education, party identification, general consumption of the mass media and knowledge of the dossier affair, between members of the control and the experimental group ( $p > 0.05$ ).
15. At the time of this study, Edmund Stoiber was Prime Minister of Bavaria. Franz Müntefering was Chairman of the Social Democrats. Wolfgang Gerhardt was Whip of the Liberal Party in the national parliament. Renate Künast was Minister of Consumer Protection, Nutrition, and Agriculture. Horst Köhler was Federal President.
16. The difference between the control and the experimental group is statistically significant ( $t = 2.76$ , d.f. = 264,  $p < 0.01$ ).
17. With regard to the PDS it is interesting to note that scandal information also has a negative impact on parties that are usually not regarded as supportive of the German political system.
18. Interestingly enough, the sign for the FDP is positive. An inspection of the newspaper reports between the pre- and the post-test shows that no special attention was given to the Liberals. Therefore, we assume that the measured change is a statistical fluke.
19. The only exception is the SPD in the first case: the decline in evaluation is stronger for higher educated persons than for participants with a low educational level ( $p < 0.05$ ).
20. This increase is significantly higher for persons with a low level of education ( $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast, party identification does not affect citizens’ reactions.
21. One possible explanation for the missing impact of the scandal reports on diffuse political support might be that negative effects on attitudes toward democracy only occur if political scandals accumulate over time.

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