Scandals, News Coverage, and the 2006 Congressional Elections

BRIAN J. FOGARTY

In this study, I examine how the local news media covered members of Congress tied to the Jack Abramoff scandal during the 2006 congressional elections. Previous research suggests heavy coverage of any politicians tied to scandals, particularly during the campaign season. Using a multilevel data analysis approach, I show the local news media strategically considered whether to cover members under suspicion of scandal during the election season taking into account race competitiveness and challengers’ actions. Specifically, local newspapers paid the most attention to the Abramoff scandal when the incumbent was in a competitive race and the challenger was actively pushing the scandal.

Keywords Congress, scandals, elections, local newspapers

In this study, I examine how the local news media covered House members linked to convicted Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff during the 2006 congressional elections. In the most egregious cases, for instance Tom Delay (R-TX) and Bob Ney (R-OH), the member resigned before the election and in some cases went to prison. But many members linked to Abramoff stayed in office and ran for reelection. In one of the studies on the determinants of the 2006 congressional election outcome, Grose and Oppenheimer (2007) find that the Abramoff and Foley scandals, along with specific member-only scandals, had a significant effect on the Democratic partisan swing. However, they note that the scandal effect was localized to specific Republican members involved in scandals, and there was less of a national effect (also see Mondak & Mitchell, 2009). Since scandals can have deleterious effects on the reelection chances of incumbents (Herrnson, 2008; Peters & Welch, 1980; Welch & Hibbing, 1997), an obvious question concerning political accountability is whether the local media covered the scandal and linked it to local members under suspicion of dealings with Abramoff.1

In considering the presence or absence of local news coverage connecting Abramoff and local members, one must take into account the strategic motivations of the local news media in covering members involved in scandals. The incentives include fulfilling the watchdog role of the press (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Behr, 1994), increasing revenue for the outlet (Fogarty, 2008), and enhancing professional prestige (Hamilton, 2004; Zaller, 1999). Weighed against these benefits are costs for engaging in adversarial journalism.

Brian J. Fogarty is Associate Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Missouri–St. Louis.

Address correspondence to Brian J. Fogarty, Department of Political Science, University of Missouri–St. Louis, 347 SSB Building, St. Louis, MO 63121-4499, USA. E-mail: fogartyb@umsl.edu
These include loss of access to incumbents if they are reelected (Cook, 1989), effects on electoral outcomes (Zaller, 1999), decreasing long-term revenues if coverage is against audience preferences (Snyder & Puglisi, 2011), and charges of bias and unprofessionalism by breaking journalistic norms of balance and objectivity (Tuchman, 1978).

In assessing the local press’s strategies for covering scandals, one should also consider the role of the candidates. Incumbents can limit the electoral damage of scandals by shifting the issue debate towards more advantageous issues, emphasizing distributive benefits to the district from being in office, and refusing to discuss the scandal (Bianco, 1994; Nadeau, Petry, & Belanger, 2010; Vermeer, 1982). Through obfuscation, incumbents can play to voters’ preference for the status quo, particularly when they are of the same party. Therefore, we can take it as a constant that incumbents linked to scandals will attempt to push the media and voters to focus on advantageous issues for the incumbent (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009). Meanwhile, challengers may be expected to consistently discuss the scandal, working to gain media interest and influence voters.

I show that the local media covered the Abramoff scandal in competitive races while ignoring the scandal in safe districts. Competitive contests featured more benefits than potential costs from reporting on the scandal for the local media. Applying Zaller’s (1999) “rule of anticipated importance,” one reason for this reporting dynamic is that noncompetitive races featured no audience interest for scandal or election coverage since the electoral outcome was a fait accompli. Another reason for the dynamic in competitive races is that the local media could insulate themselves from charges of bias or favoritism by sourcing challengers in stories on the incumbent and Abramoff. Specifically, the local media strategically used information from challengers, specifically press releases, to write stories on the Abramoff scandal that fit with professional journalistic norms and practices. However, this was not the case for other salient issues during the 2006 congressional elections, including the Mark Foley scandal, the Iraq war, and the economy. These findings add to existing scholarship on (local) news media reporting strategies.

This article proceeds by first providing a background review of the literature assessing media reporting strategies. Next, I discuss the House members and local papers examined in the study and the coding scheme. This is followed by an overview of Abramoff scandal coverage and local news media sourcing patterns. Finally, a multilevel logit regression analysis illustrates significant effects at the story and challenger levels on the likelihood of Abramoff scandal coverage during the 2006 congressional elections.

News Media Strategies for Covering Scandals During Congressional Elections

On face value, whether or not to cover a political scandal during a congressional race appears as not a difficult question for a local news outlet. Political scandals elicit mass interest from citizens, at least initially, and voters’ interest in politics ordinarily peaks during elections (Hamilton, 2004; Thompson, 2000; Zaller, 1999). From the interaction of scandals during elections, outlets can expect to see increases in their revenues and professional prestige (Hamilton, 2004; Nyhan, 2011). But the reporting calculations are typically not that simple. Outlets must take into account both the costs and benefits of pursuing scandal reporting during elections.

As noted, the benefits to local media outlets to cover local members involved in scandals include fulfilling the watchdog role of the press, increasing revenue for the outlet, and enhancing professional prestige. The democratic ideal of the American press is the ability to perform watchdog journalism where the press provides the critical information to voters to
Scandals and News Coverage

hold elected officials accountable, thus enhancing the quality of democratic representation (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Fogarty, 2009; Patterson & Seib, 2005). This ideal vision is just that as scholars have lamented the apparent inability of the media to fulfill their watchdog role (Bennett, 2007; Zaller, 2003). This concern is even stronger with regard to the local news media. Local news outlets’ limited resources constrain their ability to effectively monitor and report on actions of elected officials (Bagdikian, 1974; Donahue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995; Dunaway, 2008; Fogarty, 2008). If there were ever a situation for the news media, particularly the local news media, to effectively engage in watchdog journalism, it is during elections when incumbents are under suspicion of malfeasance.

Fulfilling this civic ideal may not resonate with myopic journalists, editors, and owners. Instead, they are often concerned with the day-in-day-out nature of the news, filling the news hole, and keeping the outlet solvent. However, a political scandal during an election is a situation where the press should break from the pattern and devote resources to covering the member and the race. The entertainment value of a political scandal in a congressional race should increase the audience size within the market (Zaller, 1999). Thus, scandal coverage during election season should increase revenue to the outlet even after the expense of more investigative journalism (Fogarty, 2008; Hamilton, 2004; Thompson, 2000).

A final benefit a news outlet may consider from reporting on political scandals is the creation or enhancement of prestige for the reporter(s) and editor(s) (Hamilton, 2004; Nyhan, 2011). One goal of outlets engaging in investigative journalism is to gain praise from their professional peers (Graber, 2005; Zaller, 1999). This can increase the reporters’ and editors’ professional standing, potentially leading to better and higher-profile positions and more opportunities to express journalistic voice (Zaller, 1999).

While the benefits from reporting on political scandals may be immediately tangible to local outlets, the costs from taking an adversarial position against the incumbent may have long-term consequences. These costs include loss of access to the incumbent (Cook, 1989), no effect on the electoral outcome (Zaller, 1999), decreased revenues through upsetting the political interests of the audience (Snyder & Puglisi, 2011), and charges of biased and unprofessional journalism (Tuchman, 1972).

Since national news coverage is ordinarily uncommon, House members work to develop friendly relationships with the local media in an attempt to win positive and supportive coverage (Cook, 1988, 1989, 1998; Schaffner, 2006). Given the resource constraints of the local media, journalists and editors often avoid any reporting that diminishes their access to local members (Bagdikian, 1974; Cook, 1998). Heavy reporting on an incumbent’s scandal would likely negatively affect an outlet’s ability to get privileged information from and access to the incumbent if he or she is reelected.

In deciding on whether to cover a political scandal during an election, a news outlet must also take into account the likely electoral outcome and the political preferences of their audience. Zaller’s (1999) rule of anticipated importance dictates that journalists derive little benefit from covering the likely loser of an election or berating a solidly safe incumbent. The reasoning is that most voters come to campaign news for the competitive nature of elections. If the election is decided well in advance, as is often the case in strongly partisan districts, there will be little appetite for election news, even news that highlights a political scandal. Further, this demand-side factor suggests that partisan readers may simply not be interested in scandal stories concerning their preferred candidate(s) (Snyder & Puglisi, 2011). Therefore, the partisan nature of a district may constrain journalists from reporting on scandals that are expected to not affect electoral outcomes.

Finally, outlets need to consider how their reporting on a political scandal may create charges of bias and nonobjectivity from the incumbent and his or her supporters. Generally,
the news media will not engage in critical reporting unless they can shift the sourcing of the content to other political actors like challengers, party leaders, interest groups, and government officials (Bennett, 1990, 2007; Gans, 1980; Nyhan, 2011; Sigal, 1975; Tuchman, 1972). As Nyhan (2011) suggests, we should think of the emergence of political scandals as a “co-production” between the news media and opposition actors. Within congressional races, this opposition comes from challengers and their supporters. By sourcing the scandal information to these credible political actors, news outlets can insulate themselves from charges of bias. In situations where the opposition is not pursuing alleged wrongdoing by incumbents, the media will be less willing and likely to publish stories on the scandal (Entman, 2004; Nyhan, 2011).

Data

Identifying Members of Congress Linked to Abramoff

Jack Abramoff and his associates contributed to numerous members of Congress, but only a small portion were singled out by the government and media for possible impropriety and malfeasance. In this article, I examine campaign coverage of six House members and one senator who were widely mentioned in the national media, by Washington watchdog groups, and elsewhere for involvement in the scandal. These include House members Roy Blunt (R-MO), John Doolittle (R-CA), Tom Feeney (R-FL), JD Hayworth (R-AZ), Pete Sessions (R-TX), Charles Taylor (R-NC), and Republican senator Conrad Burns (MT). These seven members had varying levels of involvement with Abramoff, with the most egregious behavior coming from Doolittle and Feeney.2

Six members examined in this study were implicated for lobbying government agencies and influencing legislation and policy in support of Abramoff’s Native American clients’ casinos (Boyle, 2006; Gillman, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Kane, 2006; Nowicki, 2006; Schmidt, 2005; Whitney, 2006a, 2006b). These members wrote letters to various agencies, including Interior Secretary Gale Norton, in support of Abramoff’s Native American clients and their casino ventures. Feeney’s problems stemmed from trips to Scotland, Korea, and West Palm Beach paid for by lobbyists and foreign agents including Abramoff (Lytle, 2005). Aside from possible ethical violations of House rules, the FBI investigated whether any relationship existed between Feeney’s trips and lobbying by Feeney of the Department of Energy concerning rules changes in the Energy Star program (Kumar, 2007).

I examine local newspaper coverage of these members during the traditional campaign season in 2006—from Labor Day to the day after election day—to assess whether the local media covered the scandal and what may explain variations in coverage. Although the Abramoff scandal broke before the 2006 congressional election season, the most relevant and germane effect of the scandal was on electoral outcomes. Since elections are when most voters are likely to view political news (Zaller, 1999), the campaign season is the most apt period for examining local media reporting strategies on the Abramoff scandal.3

Local newspapers are used in the analysis since most members of Congress receive the greatest amount of attention from these outlets (Cook, 1989). Local papers also are more likely to closely follow interesting and competitive congressional races given the size of their news hole (Dunaway, 2008; Fogarty, 2008; Schaffner, 2006). Further, local papers are preferred in studying coverage of congressional races, as research has shown that citizens receive most of their campaign coverage from local news outlets (Kahn & Kenney, 2005). For House members, the most widely read and proximate newspapers in each member’s district were selected to study. For Burns, the largest newspaper in Montana, the Billings Gazette, was used in the study.
To address concerns of whether focusing on coverage of these specific members may bias the findings, I qualitatively match the seven aforementioned members with seven similar members who were not involved in the Abramoff scandal. When one has a finite population, here members of Congress, finding a perfect match is difficult. Therefore, to match members, I focused on members’ party, tenure, and gender, along with district location and district newspaper readership. Generally, the greatest weight was placed on party (all members were Republican) and district proximity between the matches. As before, I examine coverage from the most widely read paper in the member’s district or state. In the closest cases, coverage is compared between two similar members in the same local paper; for example coverage of John Doolittle (R-CA 3rd) and Dan Lungren (R-CA 4th) in the Sacramento Bee. Other cases had coverage between two similar members in different newspapers, for example coverage of Roy Blunt (R-MO 7th) in the Springfield News-Leader and Todd Akin (R-MO 2nd) in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Table 1 identifies the members and the newspapers used to examine election coverage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target member</th>
<th>Local paper</th>
<th>Paired member</th>
<th>Local paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roy Blunt (R-MO 7th)</td>
<td>Springfield News-Leader</td>
<td>Todd Akin (R-MO 2nd)</td>
<td>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conrad Burns (R-MT)</td>
<td>Billings Gazette</td>
<td>Craig Thomas (R-WY)</td>
<td>Wyoming Tribune Eagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Doolittle (R-CA 4th)</td>
<td>Sacramento Bee</td>
<td>Daniel Lungren (R-CA 3rd)</td>
<td>Sacramento Bee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Feeney (R-FL 24th)</td>
<td>Orlando Sentinel</td>
<td>Ric Keller (R-FL 8th)</td>
<td>Orlando Sentinel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD Hayworth (R-AZ 5th)</td>
<td>Arizona Republic</td>
<td>Jeff Flake (R-AZ 6th)</td>
<td>Arizona Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete Sessions (R-TX 32nd)</td>
<td>Dallas Morning News</td>
<td>Kenny Marchant (R-TX 24th)</td>
<td>Dallas Morning News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Taylor (R-NC 11th)</td>
<td>Asheville Citizen-Times</td>
<td>Howard Coble (R-NC 6th)</td>
<td>Winston-Salem Journal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All members were coded from Labor Day to the day after election day 2006. Target members are those who were under suspicion for questionable dealings with Jack Abramoff.
subject—here the member of Congress in question. Information was also collected on the Mark Foley (R-FL) page scandal, the Iraq war, and the general economy. These three issues were salient during the 2006 congressional elections (Mondak & Mitchell, 2009) and serve as competing issue areas in this study for assessing local media reporting strategies. For the aggregate economy, only statements about the general or overall economy were coded. Since nearly every issue during campaigns can arguably be tied to the economy—for example, the spending on the Iraq war—only stories that explicitly used the word “economy” were included in this category.

In each story, the source of the information related to the member in question was recorded. While numerous types of sources were quoted and used by the local media, in the analysis particular attention is paid to whether the challenger (and his campaign and supporters), the incumbent (and his campaign and supporters), or the journalist provided the source information in stories for the four issue areas mentioned above.

Next, coders assessed whether the House member played a major role in each story. The mechanism employed was whether the member consisted of at least 50% of the subject material. When members are the central topic of a story, journalists often expend greater resources and effort to provide in-depth information and analysis (Fogarty, 2008; McManus, 1994). This often includes quotes and information from the challenger, along with statistics about the race and the candidates. Correlated to the role members play in a story is the word count. Frequently when members play a major role in a story, there is a high word count. The word count was assessed on a sentence-by-sentence basis and typically is not the word count for the entire story. Coders also recorded whether the story was an editorial. Editorials are by their nature more opinionated than traditional news stories, thus, in this case, allowing journalists an avenue for commenting on the Abramoff scandal and the election without the constraints of traditional reporting (Arnold, 2004). Finally, coders recorded whether the story came from wire services. By using wire reports instead of local sourcing, local papers may report on more national issues than local issues (Vinson, 2003).

An Overview of the Abramoff Scandal and 2006 Election Coverage

Table 2 presents a descriptive overview of the coding information collected for the 14 members. There is a wide variance in the amount and type of coverage members receive during the main election season. To get a better sense of the degree of difference in coverage between the target and paired members, I perform the nonparametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for all of the coded elements in Table 2. The benefit of using a nonparametric approach is that the test makes no assumptions about the distribution of the data, unlike tests such as the commonly employed Student’s t test, which assumes a normal distribution (Sheskin, 2007). Only two variables showed a statistically significant difference between groups; targeted members (members linked to Abramoff) had more overall coverage and more local coverage linking them to the Abramoff scandal. It is interesting that other elements such as the percentage of editorials and the average length of stories did not show a significant difference. In particular, editorials are where journalists have a greater license to express their voice and possibly act in a partisan way (Arnold, 2004; Zaller, 1999). Yet, there is no discernible difference in the use of editorials between members linked to Abramoff and those who were not. However, as demonstrated in the multilevel analysis, journalists strategically used editorials to discuss the Abramoff scandal but not other issues.
As may be expected, a closer inspection of the data showed incumbents in competitive races received the most overall coverage, though not necessarily the most Abramoff-related coverage. Specifically, Burns, Doolittle, Hayworth, and Taylor’s races were heavily covered, while Blunt, Feeney, and Sessions’s races received less attention from the local press. For example, paired member Ric Keller’s (R-FL) reelection effort received more overall attention from the Orlando Sentinel than target member Feeney’s reelection; Keller was considered at risk while Feeney was considered safe by the Cook Report. However, the Sentinel wrote several stories linking Feeney and Abramoff, while Keller, who was not involved in the scandal, received none.

This overview provides support for Zaller’s rule of anticipated importance. Competitive races, particularly enhanced by political scandal, provide the drama and competition among powerful individuals that audiences crave in news. By satisfying the goal of audience interest, local journalists could move on to providing a more sophisticated product by linking Abramoff with the incumbent. However, as shown next, local reporters did not put their own reputations on the line by covering Abramoff. Instead, the local press relied on challengers to provide the bulk of the source content in Abramoff-related reporting.

### Local Newspaper Sourcing Patterns

One way to assess the reporting strategies of local newspapers in covering the Abramoff scandal and the 2006 election is to look at sourcing patterns for the four issue areas. As discussed, we should expect to find different sourcing patterns for stories linking individual members to scandals than for other issues. Specifically, journalims should rely more on challengers and their campaigns and supporters for source information on the Abramoff scandal than the Foley scandal, the Iraq war, and the general economy.

Table 3 shows the percentage of stories for each issue area that sourced the challenger, the incumbent, and the journalist. The patterns are clear. In stories on Abramoff, local papers overwhelmingly used the challenger (in 62% of the stories) as a source in the reporting. As past research predicts (Bianco, 1994; Vermeer, 1982), incumbents tied to the Abramoff scandal are rarely used for source information (11%) in Abramoff-related
Table 3
Source usage by local newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Abramoff stories</th>
<th>Foley stories</th>
<th>Iraq stories</th>
<th>General economy stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenger</td>
<td>62 (46)</td>
<td>29 (11)</td>
<td>41 (53)</td>
<td>28 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>11 (8)</td>
<td>47 (18)</td>
<td>46 (59)</td>
<td>50 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>34 (25)</td>
<td>47 (18)</td>
<td>36 (47)</td>
<td>26 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total stories</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Values are the percentages of the stories on the issue in which the actor was used as a source (with the number of stories the actor was cited in for each issue in parentheses and the total number of stories in the bottom row). Since multiple actors can be used as a source in an individual story, the percentage total is over 100.

stories. Journalists are not ignoring incumbents on this matter. Instead, incumbents did not discuss the scandal or they briefly commented on the matter during debates. In fact, none of the members linked to Abramoff brought up the matter in their press releases during the campaign. Without incumbents willing to speak on the record about the Abramoff scandal, the local media did not use them as sources. It appears, then, the local papers relied on sourcing challengers when reporting on Abramoff, thus providing a degree of cover from criticism from incumbents.

No similar pattern is seen in the other three issues. The incumbent and the journalist were used as information sources in roughly half of the stories discussing the Foley scandal. In most cases when incumbents were sourced, it was a statement condemning Foley and his actions. Challengers were only used as sources in 29% of the stories. Why the difference between the two scandals? Unlike the Abramoff scandal, the Foley scandal did not directly link any of these members to Foley’s actions. Further, much of the Foley coverage clustered around late September and early October when Foley’s actions were exposed. Therefore, in discussing the Foley scandal, journalists could directly comment on the breaking event and did not need to rely on challengers as sources to assuage charges of biased reporting from the incumbent.

This overview shows that the interaction of competitive races and the Abramoff scandal produced increased local news attention for certain congressional races in 2006. The sourcing patterns of local papers suggest that journalists did in fact rely on challengers and their supporters for source information when reporting on specific local members linked to Abramoff. For their part, incumbents appeared not willing to discuss the Abramoff scandal with the local media. In the next section, I further examine reporting strategies in the four issue areas during the 2006 election.

Multilevel Analysis

Variables and Model

To get a better sense of local media reporting strategies in 2006, I use a multilevel analysis. For the analysis, each story is treated as the unit of analysis, and the dependent variable is simply whether the story mentioned the Abramoff scandal or not (1 = mentions Abramoff). Therefore, logit regression is used to assess the probability of a story mentioning the Abramoff scandal during the elections. A traditional logit analysis would allow...
us to consider independent variables on the same individual level as the unit of analysis. However, a multilevel logit regression allows us to simultaneously consider story-level and candidate-level explanatory variables (Gelman & Hill, 2007). For the three other issue dependent variables, the stories are coded as follows: 1 = discusses Foley, 1 = discusses the Iraq war, and 1 = discusses the general economy.

The story-level variables are the coded elements of the stories mentioned previously. This includes dummy variables for whether the member played a major role in the story (1 = major role), whether the story was an editorial (1 = editorial), whether the story came from a wire service (1 = wire service), and a variable for the word count of each story. In particular, I expect editorials will be more likely to discuss the Abramoff scandal.

Since there is small variation on the candidate level, only 14 observations, a full array of explanatory variables cannot be considered. In assessing scandal coverage, I focus on the actions of the challengers, specifically challenger press releases on the Abramoff scandal, the Foley scandal, the Iraq war, and the general economy. Past research suggests that candidates and members of Congress are able to increase certain aspects of local news coverage by releasing press releases on the same topic (Fogarty, 2011). Incumbents will either ignore challengers’ scandal accusations or downplay them. Either way, incumbents will be reacting to the challengers’ actions and are unlikely to bring up the scandal on their own. As discussed, the norms of journalism suggest that reporters are more likely to write about scandals during elections when the challenger is pushing the topic (Bennett, 2007; Gans, 1980). The included challenger variable is a means of assessing this supply side of election coverage.

However, there are strong theoretical arguments to be made for including different explanatory variables in the analysis. To determine whether other variables may statistically matter, a series of multilevel logit regressions were run where one candidate-level variable was included in each model. None of the variables — challenger spending, incumbent spending, incumbents’ press releases, and dummy variables for an experienced challenger and for being a senator — had a consistent significant effect on predicting coverage for any of the four issues. Clearly, this procedure is not ideal for explaining local news coverage. Yet, it is likely that if an independent variable does not have a significant effect on the dependent variable on its own, it will not have an effect when controlling for other predictors.

Results

Table 4 displays the results of the multilevel logit analysis. Each column of results features one of the four issues as the dependent variable. Across the four models, two results stand out. First, local papers relied on challengers to provide source information when considering reporting strategies for the Abramoff scandal, but not for the other three issues. Increasing the number of press releases has a large and statistically significant positive effect on the probability of local newspaper coverage linking the incumbent with Abramoff. Further, the data showed that 41% of stories on Abramoff came within 3 days of a challenger issuing a press release linking the member to Abramoff. One implication is that congressional challengers must work with the local media, directly or not, to produce scandal coverage of incumbents under suspicion of malfeasance. Hence, coverage of scandals will likely not arise solely out of the news media, but instead is a co-production of news with the opposition (Nyhan, 2011).

Second, whether a story was an editorial also increased the likelihood of coverage on the Abramoff scandal, but not on the other three issues. Editorials are venues where journalists can express voice and opinions without some of the constraints of professional
Table 4
Local news coverage of members of Congress: Multilevel logit analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abramoff scandal</th>
<th>Foley scandal</th>
<th>Iraq war</th>
<th>General economy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story-level variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major role</td>
<td>.868 (.447)</td>
<td>.825 (.517)</td>
<td>−.114 (.321)</td>
<td>−.229 (.481)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>.876* (.378)</td>
<td>.312 (.382)</td>
<td>.074 (.252)</td>
<td>−.133 (.416)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>1.41* (.348)</td>
<td>.056 (.484)</td>
<td>1.20* (.287)</td>
<td>1.10* (.363)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire story</td>
<td>.763 (.466)</td>
<td>.560 (.608)</td>
<td>−.190 (.381)</td>
<td>.189 (.517)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate-level variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger Abramoff PRs</td>
<td>2.57* (.790)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger Foley PRs</td>
<td></td>
<td>−.132 (.683)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger economy PRs</td>
<td></td>
<td>.333 (.214)</td>
<td>.464 (.308)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>−3.60 (.469)</td>
<td>−3.19 (.447)</td>
<td>−1.41 (.173)</td>
<td>−2.61 (.264)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-likelihood</td>
<td>−157.6</td>
<td>−138.6</td>
<td>−295.8</td>
<td>−154.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>329.1</td>
<td>291.1</td>
<td>605.6</td>
<td>322.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Models are multilevel logit regressions for the 12 House members and two senators. Models are estimated with fixed effects indexed by member. Story length and challenger press releases (PRs) are centered by subtracting the mean and dividing by two standard deviations.

*p < .05 (one-tailed).

journalism. By using editorials, journalists can place themselves as the protagonist in a story instead of the newsmakers, thus allowing for more interpretation than typically seen in straight news stories. In 2006, then, it appears that local papers used editorials to discuss local members and their relationships to the Abramoff scandal more than other salient election issues.

Both of these results suggest the local media acted strategically in covering members linked to the Abramoff scandal. In order to provide cover against accusations of biased reporting, local papers sourced challengers’ press releases on Abramoff. Challenger press releases had no effect of increasing coverage on the other three issues since the local media could source other political actors and satisfy the norms and practices of journalism. Local papers also could insulate themselves from incumbents’ criticisms by bringing up the scandal in editorials. While offended incumbents may not make a distinction between editorials and traditional news stories, local papers could credibly argue editorials are opinion pieces not reflective of other reporting in the paper. Professional journalism dictates that editorials and regular news stories be divided by an invisible, and sometimes visible, wall (Entman, 2005). That is, the content of political news stories should not be influenced by the political opinions of editorialists, or by any individual at any news outlet for that matter.

Conclusion

Not as wide reaching as the House banking scandal, the Abramoff scandal ensnared several prominent members of Congress and lent credence to Democrats’ claims of widespread corruption in the Republican leadership. Although many members received donations from Abramoff and his clients, only those demonstrating a quid pro quo came under scrutiny by
the government, the media, and the public. In hopes of tossing aside associations, many candidates returned contributions or donated the money to charities.

Although the Abramoff scandal involved a relatively small number of members of Congress, several of the races went from safe to competitive. In the contemporary Congress, particularly the House, a shift of only a handful of seats can transfer control to one party or the other and, thus, change policy in one direction or another. Therefore, understanding how the local media covered these members has implications not only for local politics but also for national politics.

Part of the news media’s role in keeping members of Congress accountable to their constituents is to report and highlight transgressions and malfeasance in and out of office. There is a constant tension in the local media between maintaining close, informationally beneficial relationships with local members of Congress and their role as political monitors. Although the media heavily cover individual members involved in the most egregious and sensational cases (e.g., Mark Foley, Anthony Weiner), it is less clear how the local media, where members traditionally receive the bulk of their coverage and where most voters receive a bulk of their congressional campaign coverage, treat members linked to political scandals during elections.

The results described in this article suggest that to observe scandal coverage in the local media during an election, the race needs to be competitive and the challenger needs to be actively pushing the scandal. Journalists derive maximum benefits from scandal coverage when the audience is already paying attention to the race and they are able to source challengers for adversarial comments. This presents the best opportunity for journalists to satisfy the goals of gaining a large audience and expressing a significant, independent voice (Zaller, 1999) while minimizing economic and reputational costs. Without this environment, and where watchdog or adversarial reporting means breaking journalistic norms and standards, we should expect to find minimal scandal coverage of members of Congress. More broadly, the news of political scandals does appear to be an exercise of co-production and a negotiation over what may or may not be newsworthy.

Notes

1. Scholarship has established that not all members of Congress involved in scandals suffer electorally. For example, research has shown that the check-kiting scandal had only a small effect on electoral margins in the 1992 congressional elections (Alford, Teeters, Ward, & Wilson, 1994; Banducci & Karp, 1994; Dimock & Jacobson, 1995; Groseclose & Krehbiel, 1994; Jacobson & Dimock, 1994). The scandal did increase the number of members who retired and tripped up in primaries, though as Groseclose and Krehbiel (1994) point out, the effect was tempered by the closing of a loophole in the Federal Election Campaign Act that allowed members to pocket campaign funds.

2. Since the Department of Justice does not list members of Congress under investigation, it is difficult to precisely identify who was being considered for prosecution for dealing with Abramoff. The members in this study were identified using information and reports from the Center for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, ProPublica.org, Sourcewatch.org (of the Center for Media and Democracy), and the Washington Post. Dennis Hastert (R-IL) and Richard Pombo (R-CA) were also considered for inclusion in the study. Hastert’s name came up in an ABC News report in May 2006, but the Justice Department explicitly stated that Hastert was not under investigation for dealings with Abramoff (Ross, 2006). Hastert’s ethics troubles in 2006 came instead from his handling of the Mark Foley page scandal as speaker. Pombo worked with Native American tribes on protecting their casino interests during this same time period. However, Pombo appears not to be tied to Abramoff’s lobbying efforts (Richman, 2004).
3. It is possible that the reporting strategies inside and outside of the election season were markedly different. To examine this possibility, local news coverage of the seven target members was also collected from January 1, 2006, to Labor Day 2006 (Abramoff pleaded guilty on January 4, 2006). Local Abramoff coverage linked to these members did spike in January, with a majority of information sourcing coming from the incumbents and journalists (63% and 59% of the stories, respectively). While Abramoff coverage died down in the following months, it did not disappear. Members expected to be involved in competitive races (e.g., Conrad Burns and John Doolittle) continued to have the Abramoff scandal covered, with an increasing amount of sourcing shifting to challengers and their supporters. This source shift began in the early spring and continued through the primary season and into the election season. For example, by March challengers and their supporters became the dominant information source for Abramoff-related stories. Clearly, events do matter for explaining reporting strategies, but for sustained scandal coverage, in order to assuage the costs for local journalists, strong and vocal opponents appear necessary.

4. This technique has been used in other studies on local news coverage of members of Congress (e.g., Fogarty, 2008).

5. Blunt and Akin are the most spatially disparate House members in the data. The reasons for their pairing include that they had similar political profiles and Blunt’s adjoining districts included a Democrat (Ike Skelton) and a woman (Jo Ann Emerson). Further, the Springfield News-Leader is only read in Blunt’s district, and so trying to compare coverage in the paper for adjacent members would be fruitless.

6. To date, none of these members have been convicted of crimes related to Abramoff. Trevor Blackann, a former aide to Roy Blunt, was convicted of lying on tax returns about gifts and money from lobbyists, but Blunt, now junior senator from Missouri, has not been affected (Kravitz, 2008).

7. The coding was performed by the author and two graduate assistants. On a random sample of stories, coding reliabilities (Krippendorff’s alpha) were .78 on the issues in the stories, .76 on the sources in the issues, .85 on whether the member played a major role or not in the story, and .77 on the word count (Krippendorff, 2004).

8. Journalist sourcing refers to journalists including their own research and making statements not attributable to an outside source.

9. Although a somewhat arbitrary cutoff point, most stories either had the member as the featured and central subject or had the member as tangentially involved.

10. In this study, letters to the editor were excluded in the analysis as they provide less information about the strategies and choices made by the local news media in covering the campaigns.

11. As previously mentioned, many of the incumbents spoke on their role in the Abramoff scandal in January 2006. Past research suggests no added electoral benefit for incumbents to continue to speak on the matter.

12. Roy Blunt as majority party whip had the strongest connection with Foley among the members in the data. The Republican leadership was criticized for poor handling of the Foley scandal, but this had little effect on Blunt’s coverage or reelection.

13. I also considered papers’ congressional candidate endorsements and circulation levels as paper-level explanatory variables. On the paper level, there is even less variation, as only 10 papers were included in the data. Paper endorsements had a statistically significant negative effect on the probability of a paper reporting on Abramoff. However, when controlling for any second-level variable (paper or challenger level), this effect disappears. To keep the models parsimonious, these two variables were dropped in predicting coverage of the four issue areas.

14. That is, challenger press releases linking the incumbent to Abramoff were used as a predictor of Abramoff-related coverage, challenger press releases bringing up the Foley scandal were used as a predictor of Foley-related coverage, and so forth. Challenger press releases come from the candidates’ Web sites, accessed via the Internet archive.

15. Ideally, all potentially pertinent independent variables on the candidate level would be included. This includes incumbents’ seniority, committee and leadership status, and other campaign information. Due to the small number of races and based on previous research (i.e., Arnold, 2004),
the focus was on the challengers’ actions instead of the incumbents’ actions. The ads and event schedules of incumbents’ and challengers’ campaigns were also considered. However, not all candidates included this information on their campaign Web sites or, in some cases, the candidates did not have any campaign advertising.

16. Challenger press releases on Abramoff were also statistically significant when controlling for the explanatory variables that were excluded. Hence, the relationship between challenger Abramoff-related press releases and Abramoff-related coverage does not appear to be spurious.

17. Thanks to a reviewer for pointing out the potential temporal nature of coverage and press releases.

References


