Mitigating the damage of political scandal: Which communication strategy works best? – An Experimental Study

Master Thesis

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Submitted to Central European University

Department of Political Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary
June 2020

Abstract

Politician's immoral actions and involvement in political scandals damage their public image and political approval. Previous experimental studies, however, provide scholars and politicians with little evidence on the effectiveness of various crisis communication strategies that politicians can use to mitigate the negative consequences of political careers. I make use of survey experimental design to test the effectiveness of denial and confession communication strategies on public political approval for the politician involved in a scandal. I randomly manipulate the type of scandal (extramarital affair / domestic violence) and type of crisis communication strategy (denial, confession, no communication) and measure the political approval rate of the involved politician. Findings from Slovak voters (N = 1173) recruited through paid and targeted Facebook ads suggest that denial strategy decreases politician's estimated political approval in the extramarital affair scandal by 10 points, whereas in the domestic violence scenario it has a positive effect and increases political approval rate by estimated 8.7 points. Confession strategy has no significant effect on any of the scandal types. Additional effects of demographic variables are reported and visualized in the Appendix.

I, the undersigned [Alex Rusnák], candidate for the degree of Master of Arts at the Central European University, Department of Political Science, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of works of others, and no part the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 22 June 2020

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Signature

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor, professor Gabor Simonovits, my family, and my friends Bence and Mário. Also many thanks to all the people I met in Budapest while at CEU. You have made my life great.

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1. Introduction

Political scandals are undeniably a worldwide phenomenon. They are not exclusive to any specific time, country, level of economic development, nor a type of political regime or a particular society and culture. Political scandals are by no means a new phenomenon in the political arena. However, the merger of private and public lives of political actors made it easier for scandalous reporting about new scandals on a more regular basis. The rise of the internet, social media platforms, and changes in media culture made it easier to keep an eye on the private life of elected officials.

The big choice of the media environment and the growth of highly partisan news networks further amplify the growing attention on political scandals. The boundaries between the public and private spheres are blurring. Investigative journalists systematically expose hitherto unknown facts and past behavior that trigger public resentment. These events draw media attention which in turn allows media outlets, using various frames and narratives, to communicate these events shockingly and sensationally to its readers and convert them to political scandals (Ekström, 2000). Considering that the primary goal of any news outlet is to make a profit, focus on sensational reporting and (political) scandals that draw the attention of new readership is hardly surprising.

Moreover, initial media attention creates a cycle in which every additional coverage generates consumers' attention that further drives continued coverage with more stories and negative headlines reporting on the scandal (Galvis, Snyder, Song, 2016). Additionally, with the gradual shift from print to online media consumption levels, figures suggest that internet articles reporting on scandals seem to attract even higher attention (Allern et al, 2012).

Political scandals have thus become an inherent part of the current political arena (Thompson, 2000: Kumlin and Esaiasson, 2012: von Sikorski, 2017). They are seen as disruptive and substantial political events because they can change the election results, destroy

one's political life and future career, and decrease public support for democracy (Brody and Shapiro, 1989: Bowler and Karp, 2004). In short, the numbers of political scandals have increased over the last decade and their coverage currently plays an important role in online journalism (Kumlin and Esaisson, 2012).

Besides the intense media coverage, political scandals been widely analyzed by scholars from various fields of study. The consequences of political scandals can vary from temporary and insignificant to permanent and influential, contingent on the nature of the scandal and actors involved. However, what is common to political scandals across time and place is an alleged act or behavior of norms transgression over a particular issue and its effect on voting behavior as well as public political beliefs (Carlson, Ganiel, and Hyde, 2000). Despite the considerable media attention and scholarly interest, scientific understanding about the effects of scandals on involved political actors remains limited and inconclusive.

First, it is argued that being caught in a political scandal decreases the actor's party support and has a negative influence on the voters' evaluation of public officials. Moreover, scandals affect voting behavior and voting intention, as well as general public perception of how democracy and political accountability work in a specific country (Bowler and Karp, 2004). Contrary to these claims, another type of research asserts that negative effects of scandals are mitigated because voters have already become too accustomed to political scandals in today's hyper-scandalized era, as they happen on a more regular basis than in the past. Thereby, some authors argue that further media exposure to scandals doesn't affect political beliefs or voting behavior (Midtbo, 2012: Woessner, 2005).

Additionally to the abovementioned *''media saturation effect'',* types of frames, narratives, and the source of the news report (types of media) about a scandal have a moderating effect on its negative consequences. Take one example of voters who find the media allegations about a scandal to be fabricated, unsubstantiated, or trivial (Ulbig and Miller, 2012). On the

other hand, Kumlin and Esaiasson (2012) assert that political scandals could be a double-edged sword. In particular, if the public official steps down or is sentenced by a court as a result of illegal behavior, this might eventually strengthen voter's support for representative democracy and political accountability (Kumlin and Esaiasson, 2012). Furthermore, they hypothesize that if public accountability is accomplished and politicians been punished, this would lead to a spillover effect towards a public perception of media and journalists who initially reported on the case by strengthening their perceived role as watchdogs of democracy (Kumin and Esaiasson, 2012, 262).

These inconsistencies between our conventional wisdom and confirmed effects of political scandals on political support and public approval for an involved political actor and eventually even voting behavior can be attributed to various contextual elements. Specifically, these factors are twofold: internal and external. Internal factors are influenced by pre-existing partisan affiliation and subsequent political beliefs, ideologies, and biases that affect how voters perceive and interpret reported scandals. This process is well explained by motivated reasoning theory (Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010). The external factors are related to media frames, narratives, types of the political scandal, and most importantly by the communication strategies adopted by the involved politician to mitigate the reputational damage (Thompson, 2000: Shah et. al, 2002). Within this framework, therefore, media go beyond factual reporting on scandals. Rather, individual journalists and news outlets, using various and often ideological and political frames and narratives, define and control further coverage of the particular scandal (Joslyn, 2003).

1.1 Study structure
Given the increased media coverage of political scandals and their importance on politics in general, we know little about the effects of political communication on reducing the potential reputational damage and harm to public officials caused by scandals. Political scandals

present a threat to the future career of elected officials precisely because they damage the individual's public image, reputation and when left without an appropriate response from the involved politician, they can lead to a decrease in public political approval and significant loss of votes (Sallot and Sheldon, 2009: Bhatti et al., 2013: Hirano and Snyder, 2018). Yet there is little evidence to suggest what is the best way politicians should communicate and talk to voters in the aftermath of the scandal.

Starting from the assumption that every politician wants to maintain high political approval, I have designed a survey experiment to test for effects of the three communication strategies (denial, confession, no communication) on reducing the negative consequences of political scandal for the involved politician. In particular, I will test for the effects of the abovementioned communication types on participants' political approval for the fictional member of parliament caught in a fictional political scandal. Participants (N = 1532) were recruited through paid and targeted Facebook ads in Slovakia. The experiment manipulates stimuli, in form of vignettes resembling news articles, to describe a hypothetical scandal type (legal and illegal) followed by one of the crisis communication strategy types (denial, confession, no communication provided). The results show that in case of legal scandal, denial communication strategy has a negative and statistically significant effect on the estimated political approval rate, decreasing it by 10 points. On the contrary, in the context of illegal scandal denial strategy show a statistically significant effect on estimated political approval, increasing it by approximately 9 points. Confession strategy has no significant effect on any of the scandal scenarios.

The structure of this study is as follows. First, I provide a detailed literature review in which I define what political scandals are, summarize past research on consequences of political scandals, discuss political and media aspects of scandals, and outline what previous studies say about the effects of various communication strategies. I also discuss image restoration theory

and various types of crisis communication strategies. Next, I explain my contribution to the field of political communication and the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies. Second, I specify my hypotheses. Third, the study continues with the methodological section in which I outline my experimental design, data collection, and sampling procedures, as well as the survey structure and intended manipulation and stimuli. Fourth, I discuss survey vignettes for both legal and illegal scandal type. This section also talks about the treatment event (a fictional political scandal) and describes particular crisis communication strategies that are used in this study. Fifth, I describe the main method of analysis, statistical models, and manipulation check to support the findings. Next, I summarize and discuss the results of OLS linear regressions and hypotheses testing. The study then continues with a discussion on mediator variables, visualizations of communication strategies effects on estimated political approval, and a summary of my findings. Last, I discuss the limitations of my study and experimental design and provide the conclusion of the study. Additional figures and visualizations of demographic variables' effects are found in the Appendix at the end of this study.

2. Literature review

Scholars across many fields, starting with political psychology, political science, communication studies, and more have attempted to analyze the importance of political scandals (Paxton, 1999: Basinger, 2012). Most of the empirical knowledge so far has concentrated on the immediate consequences of political scandals. Despite extensive and long-term academic research on the consequences of political scandals, we still lack answers to some questions. However, scholars accumulated enough empirical evidence to claim that political scandals hurt voter's evaluation of political candidates (Tumber, 2004: Regner and Le Floch, 2005: Maier, 2011: Ulbig and Miller, 2012: Green, Zelizer, and Irriby, 2018). Additionally, the past empirical research has demonstrated that scandals influence party support (Bowler and Karp, 2004: Schudson, 2004), voting behavior patterns, sense of partisan identity (Bartels, 2002: Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010), public acceptance of democratic regime (Cartensen, 2005), and eventually scandals affect the result of the consecutive elections (Väliverronen and Juntunen, 2010: Chong et al, 2015: Hirano and Snyder, 2018). All things considered, findings from previous experimental and cross-national studies suggest that political scandals indeed have negative consequences on various aspects of political life discussed above.

However, context matters. Certain fundamental conditions can either amplify the negative consequences of scandal or considerably mitigate the potential damage to the particular candidate and political party (Bless, Igou, Schwarz, Wänke, 2000: Bhatti, Hansen, Olsen, 2013). Heterogeneity of voter's responses to the political scandals is eventually conditioned on dozens of variables and their mutual interactions (Dancey, 2012).

2.1 Factors affecting consequences of political scandals

What are then these bottom-line conditions? The following section presents a summary of the most widely researched factors that either mitigate or enhance the potential scandal effects. Nevertheless, this list is by no means exhaustive as there might be other hitherto

unknown and unexplored aspects that could potentially alter the consequences of the particular scandal.

First, political scandals are culturally dependent, and national context matters (Nyhan, 2014). Particularly, the cultural, historical, political, and economic development of a given country with its specific level of modernization, political culture, religion, cultural habits and even administrative structures (Meier and Holbrook, 1992.) As an illustration, the empirical study of Carlin, Love, and Martinez-Gallardo (2015) has demonstrated that political scandals decreased approval ratings of presidents in South America, conditioned on the high levels of unemployment and inflation.

Besides, Nice (1983) has found evidence that the level of poverty and perceived degree of political corruption play a role in predicting scandal recurrence, time span, and thus its potential consequences. Therefore, this rather comprehensive contextual framework might be referred to as contextual/cultural dependency of scandal variable (von Sikorski, 2017). What is scandalous in one society might be culturally and publicly acceptable in another. Thus, specific consequences of scandals differ among states, and one cannot assume that individual norm transgressions are necessarily conveyed between different cultural and political settings (Bhatti, Hansen, Olsen, 2013). Eventually, it is important to acknowledge that the contextual dependency variable is not fixed and permanent, but rather that social norms of acceptable individual and group behavior are prone to change over time (Adut, 2005).

Second, the extent and style of media coverage of a particular scandal significantly affect its influence on the candidate's public evaluation and electoral behavior (Welch and Hibbing, 1997: Klasnja, 2017: Pereira and Waterbury, 2018). Within the political arena, various norm transgressions happen regularly. There are a plethora of political acts committed regularly by public officials that have the potential to spark public outrage, and thus develop into the political scandal (Allern et al., 2012). Media outlets and journalists play a key role in the process

as it is up to them which norm transgression events will be framed and reported on as scandalous (Thompson, 2000). For instance, Lull and Hinerman (1997, 13) have argued that to move from norm transgression to a political scandal, that it needs to become *''effectively narrativized into a story which inspires widespread interest and discussion.''* Therefore, one might consider mediation, defined as a process of selective media reporting on and framing of a particular event, to be a necessary condition for transforming a norm transgression into a scandal (Markovits and Silverstein, 1988).

Third, gender, demographics, and past political behavior of candidates are hypothesized to play a role in a scandal evaluation. Findings from various experimental research suggest that the candidate traits, her gender, and past political behavior have the potential to either mitigate or intensify future consequences of political scandals (Funk, 1996). Using the experimental design, Bhatti, Hansen, and Olsen (2013) manipulated the gender variable of hypothetical candidate caught up in a political scandal. Their respective hypothesis assumed that voters hold a particular set of expectations related to the political behavior of male and female politicians. In Bhatti et al. (2013) it has been shown that male politicians were evaluated more strictly for committing adultery than female politicians, but there was no statistically significant difference in post-scandal evaluation between men and women candidates related to driving under the influence of alcohol and parliamentary absence due to care for one's children (Bhatti, Hansen and Olsen, 2013).

Their general findings, however, found that the effect of gender stereotypes on citizens' evaluation of involved politicians was smaller in comparison to other variables, such as partisanship and position on the ideological spectrum (Bhatti, Hansen and Olsen, 2013).
In addition to sex, race seems to determine the extent of the negative effects of scandal too. When it comes to race factor as a potential mitigator of scandal consequences, an experimental study by Berinsky, Hutchings, Mendelber, Shaker, and Valentino (2011) has shown that, ceteris

paribus, white candidates engaged in sexual misconduct were evaluated less negatively than the politicians of color (predominantly black). Considering the availability of demographic data such as race, it is rather surprising that scholars haven't done more experimental research analyzing the effects of such variables on politician scandal evaluation.

2.2 Moral hypocrisy theory

According to recent studies, other contextual factors that have been shown to influence the effects of a political scandal are candidate's ideology, past (political) behavior, and the existence of moral hypocrisy theory (Bhatti et al., 2013: McDermott et al., 2015). Similar to other factors discussed previously, these only work in interplay with both demographic and cognitive characteristics, and ideology of voters. The theory of moral hypocrisy comes from the area of social and cognitive psychology in which it is characterized as a particular type of cognitive dissonance (Fried and Arounson, 1995: Batson, Thompson, and Chen, 2002). More specifically, moral hypocrisy is defined as a cognitive process by which people impose and expect a high standard of moral behavior from others, while they put the lower standard of morality for their own actions and behavior (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, and Wilson, 1997: Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, and Strongman, 1999).

Connecting the moral hypocrisy with political ideology, one might hypothesize that voters would evaluate a politician involved in a scandal within the ideological framework. In other words, any inconsistencies between politician's proclaimed ideology or policy position and her real political behavior and actions will be evaluated more negatively by voters (Thompson, 1999). Particularly, in a situation where voters and candidates share the same political ideology, but a politician's behavior is contradicting her proclaimed policy position. In other words, the theory posits that a candidate's ideological setting is in a certain way a moral benchmark to which voters compare her behavior/proclamation, and thus render moral evaluations (Lammers et al, 2010). For example, one of the most common examples of such

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behavior is when a conservative politician advocating for a faithful married life commits extramarital sex.

The effect of moral hypocrisy has been demonstrated by various studies. For instance, Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, and Wilson (1997) and Batson et al. (1999) have made use of experimental design study and shown that voters exert such behavior even in day-to-day activities that were not related to making political decisions. As a follow-up, they argue that voters would behave similarly when evaluating politician involved in a scandal. Proponents of moral hypocrisy assert that it is an essential characteristic of public life in a liberal democracy (Quill, 2010).

Moreover, these arguments are further supported by Runciman (2010) who argues that we have enough empirical evidence to claim that moral hypocrisy has been present in the political sphere across various periods and cultural traditions. He goes as far as suggesting that the highest form of political hypocrisy is to pretend that democratic regimes can achieve politics without any hypocrisy (Runciman, 2010).

In addition to Batson et al. (2013), further empirical studies have demonstrated that politicians regularly behave by double standards. Thus, publicly committing themselves to the set of rules or ideological position on a particular policy but acting contrary to their declared stance in private life. Furthermore, an experimental study by Lammers et al. (2010) has shown evidence in favor of the claim that politicians with more power and influence project a high level of moral standards to the actions of others, while they demand lower level of normative behavior from themselves. Given the nature of conducting political work, such as crafting policies, giving interviews, or public speeches, politicians in their private life are thus more likely to be caught in behavior which might be regarded by voters as moral hypocrisy.

Bhatti et al. (2013) conducted a study to find out whether a discrepancy in an understanding between a politician's ideological frame and values and the type of political

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scandal. Following the moral hypocrisy theory, they hypothesized that any scandal would be evaluated against the backdrop of the candidate's proclaimed ideological position. This also includes the partisan ideology of a given candidate. Politician's overall trustworthiness was selected as a dependent variable in analyzing voter's post-scandal candidate evaluation.

As hypothesized, findings of their study have proved that voters evaluate a particular politician as less trustworthy if the type of scandal that she has been engaged in infringed on her ideological position or the political values of her party. According to their experiment in which they have modeled a hypothetical political candidate committing political scandals, social democrats were excessively penalized with a loss of trustworthiness for sending their kids to private schools as this behavior violates their ideological position of supporting public education (Bhatti et al., 2013).

2.3 Defining political scandals

To employ an effective political response to a political scandal, it is crucial to start with the definition of what makes scandal a scandal as not every norm transgression can be characterized as such. What, then, is the difference between the moral transgression act and a political scandal? Although there are several competing definitions as to what constitutes a political scandal, this study follows Thompson's (2000) definition and adopts a broad approach to understanding scandalous political events. As an expert in political rhetoric, John Thompson asserts that every (political) scandal has to meet the five particular conditions (Thompson, 2000).

Thompson characterizes a scandal, first, as an act that transgresses over specific norms, acceptable social practices, or values embedded in a particular society (Thompson, 2000, p. 14). Second, the norm transgression event needs to involve a certain extent of confidentiality and covertness, wherein not all the details about the act are immediately known to the public. Third, based on the publicly available information, the event must trigger condemnation and

criticism from actors who were not directly involved in the act, be it media, voters, or political opponents.

Next, the public disapproval must be followed by open civil denouncing of the event (Thompson, 2000, p. 14). Fifth and arguably the most important condition criterion posits that the norm transgression brings any damage to the reputation of the individual/s who committed the alleged action (Thompson, 2000, p. 14).

Eventually, the rise of social media and online journalism accentuated the communication aspect of the scandals. Put differently, the current understanding of political scandals also reflects the communicative process in which various frames are used to describe and convey a message about the transgression committed by a political actor rather than focusing only on the act itself. Benoit argues that when the general public reads about (political) scandals *''perceptions are more important than reality and thus when allegations are made against an official, whether or not there is evidence initially, the public's view of him shifts, and it becomes his job to tailor his response to a specific public''* (Benoit, 1997, p. 178).

2.4 Political and media aspects of political scandals

However, (political) scandals do not occur in a social and historical vacuum (Rosen, 2009). Therefore, when assessing the severity of the scandal and its potential consequences, one needs to consider the social customs and norms that were part of the society at the given time. That is to say that contextual factors within which scandals happen do matter.

There are several aspects of political scandals which make them complicated area of academic interest. First, the impact of scandals on political dimensions such as the electoral consequences, the trustworthiness of involved public officials, or trust in government is highly context-dependent, varying across countries, time, and political systems (Blais et al, 2010). Second, political scandals differ in their nature, starting from the basic split between public vs private scandals, followed by illegal behavior or abuse of power vs moral norm transgression

dimensions, such as adultery or excessive drinking. Therefore, the character of political scandals has a significant influence on potential consequences related to constituents' evaluation of an involved public official and voting behavior of the general public.

Third, the partisanship bias presents a major impediment to an impartial evaluation of political scandals (Plutzer and Zipp, 1996). Partisan bias is assumed to play a significant role in voter's attitudes towards politicians. On the one hand, it reduces the negative effects of scandals on candidates from one's preferred party. On the other hand, it amplifies the negative evaluation of politicians not belonging to your party choice (Slothuss and de Vreese, 2012). Partisanship and a strong sense of political identity of voters are understood to shape public opinion about public officials following his transgressive behavior (Bhatti et al., 2013). This holds true particularly in the American political context of a hyper-partisan environment. Partisan bias is triggered through the process of motivated reasoning that causes individuals with a high level of partisan identification to disregard any scandalous behavior committed by public officials from the same party or those with whom they align over sensitive political issues. Simply put, the process of motivated reasoning is so strong that it leads voters to treat information about a scandal selectively in a manner that confirms their existing beliefs and political preferences (Fischle, 2000).

Other authors, such as Redlawsk (2002) and Blais et al. (2010) suggest that motivated reasoning does not lead to a total denial of information about one's co-partisans politician's moral transgression or violation of existing laws. Rather, they recognize some level of selectivity in information processing but argue that causes voters to show different levels of political judgments for their co-partisans candidate and a politician from the opposite political camp. That is to say, voters can perceive the seriousness of a given scandal in the same way for both politician from their preferred party and one from other parties, but they render different

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political judgment (Plutzer and Zipp, 1996) that is displayed via the different level of political support/approval and demands for resignation.

Fourth, voters' perception of politician's scandalous events is strongly influenced by the media environment and the proliferation of highly partisan news outlets (Peterson and Vonnahame, 2014). The proliferation of social media and bizarre disinformation websites has led to an unprecedented increase in coverage of politicians' life. Combined with the thorough work of investigative journalists, the conduct of public officials is put under tighter media and public scrutiny than ever before (Dagnes, 2011).

As a result of unprecedented growth of social media and online journalism, political candidates and public officials are not only monitored more closely but also *''held to a much higher moral standard than those elected officials campaigning before the Internet and advent of social media since their improprieties will be fodder for late-night comedians, websites, partisan news channels, and talk radio outlets''* (Dagnes, 2011, p. 8).

Connected to the effect of news environment and internet platforms is the importance of a particular media source through which the individual voters are exposed to the initial reporting on a given scandal (Thompson, 2013). Consistent with the motivated reasoning process, voters primarily seek co-partisan news outlets that tends to avoid negative reporting about party's elected officials (von Sikorski, 2017). The selective exposure and selective perception by which voters downplay the importance of negative media coverage about their preferred politicians is further amplified in light of additional unfavourable reporting from opposition media outlets. Studies by Redlawsk (2002) and Taber & Lodge (2006) have found that voter's positive evaluation about their co-partisan candidate actually increased after being exposed to the negative media coverage. This backfire effect usually comes about when individuals doubt the credibility and accuracy of the reporting news outlet and therefore find these allegations to be unconnected to the scandal and simply untrue (Redlawsk, 2002).

2.5 Effects of communication strategies in mitigating consequences of political scandals

Having addressed both the internal and external factors that shape how voters perceive political scandals and how they, as a consequence, evaluate involved public officials, I now continue with the discussion on the importance and effects of various communication strategies that politicians have at their disposal to minimize the damage to their reputation.

Given that the other factors, such as voter's gender, ideology, pre-existing political preferences, and level of media consumption is out of the politician's control, crisis management communication is arguably the strongest tool that politicians can use to control the narrative of the scandal. The field of crisis management communication, as its name suggests, was primarily developed within the business environment, its core principles were quickly adopted by scholars from various disciplines. Chief amongst them is Timothy Coombs who pioneered the work on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). In his paper, Coombs (2007, p. 163) defines SCCT as an *''evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication''*. Furthermore, he asserts that the use of SCCT is particularly suitable for experimental research. This is also the reason why, together with Thompson's scandal theory, they provide the main contextual framework for my thesis.

In his work, Coombs focuses on the nature of the crises and threats they present to the public image of the involved individuals or organizations. It is for this reason that various scholars study the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies on mitigating the damage of crises (Coombs, 2007). The importance and usefulness of SCCT are best understood vis-á-vis the reputational threat of a crisis. A crisis similar to the definition of political scandals by Thompson (2000), is therein defined as *'' a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to*

disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat'' (Coombs, 2007, p. 164).

2.6 Risks and damages to reputation caused by scandals

Moving from the business world to that of politics, we relate crises to a political scandal like the one underlying condition: *a threat to the reputation of a relevant actor.* In the context of this study, this can be translated as a threat to the public image/perception of the political candidate who committed a scandal. As we know from the previous studies (von Sikorski, 2017; Funk, 1996) reputation is one of the key factors determining a politician's approval and support by the general public. Therefore, it should be of the primary interest of every candidate and elected public official to maintain a positive reputation.

Coombs further (2007, p. 164) argues that *''Stakeholders receive information through interactions with an organization, mediated reports about an organization (including the news media and advertising) and second-hand information from other people. Most of the information stakeholders collect about organizations is derived from the news media.''*

For the purpose of political research, it is easy to substitute stakeholders for voters and organizations for politicians. By doing so, we get to the critical point that Coomb tried to highlight: the importance of media coverage and reporting in informing the general public about the behavior and politicians' misconduct.

Voters constantly benchmark politician's actions to the image they already have about a given public official from her previous performance and behavior (Bhatti et al., 2013). This comparison between voters' established opinion and politician's reputation is further amplified in a case of political scandal. If a scandalous situation and media reporting on it through which voters collect information about politics goes against voters' pre-existing perception of a given politician, her public image and reputation are threatened. However, by using appropriate post-

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crisis communication strategy, politicians can mitigate the damage caused by scandal to their reputation.

2.7 Voters' attribution of blame and responsibility

When reading a media article on a particular political scandal, voters seek available and simple cues that tell them who did what to whom and if that behavior or action is considered as something violating the social and legal norms, therefore being seen as socially unacceptable. Weiner (1986, 2006), using attribution theory, claims that individuals look for factors that had caused a particular event (scandal) in a need to attribute blame and responsibility. That applies especially to events that are unpredicted and elicit strong negative emotions. This, in turn, affects the level of support and approval that voters show for a given public official whom they perceive as responsible for the scandal.

Coombs (2007) assesses that any post-crisis communication strategy should be guided by the detailed information about the type of crisis (scandal) and type of media coverage. The type of any scandal, given the current media environment, depends first and foremost on the frames and narratives employed by news outlets.

Having discussed that any political scandal is primarily a communicative process through which media outlets report on and inform about the scandal, I would like to focus on the process of how they report about it. The framing effect is a well-researched fact within the broader field of political and mass communication (Druckman, 2001: Green, Zelizer, and Irriby, 2018). It defines frames as rhetorical and writing tools focused on recounting the details and development of a particular event (scandal). On a more specific level, it is concerned by specific words, figures of speech, phrases, and visual representation that are being used by media outlets in the process of reporting (Druckman, 2001).

Previous political communication studies (von Sikorski, Heiss, and Matthes, 2020: Joslyn, 2013) have shown that the way news outlets frame (political) scandal impacts voter's judgment

on the involved public official. These frames then serve as cognitive cues that help voters to focus their attention on a particular part of the scandal, be it the actor, type of transgression, or the consequences of it.

However, the use of particular cues and frames by media also helps politicians to draft an appropriate communication strategy to minimize reputational damage (Coombs, 1995: Druckman, 2001). To employ effective response, politicians need to understand how voters perceive particular political scandal. Coombs (1995, 2007) has identified, using situational crisis communication theory, three distinctive types of crisis (scandals) that differ in the perceived attribution of responsibility. The first type is defined as a situation in which both the actor and the general public are victims of some unexpected crisis, such as a natural catastrophe. For these crises, the attribution of blame is very low. The second type, with low attribution of blame, is when the actor's behavior causing the crisis is seen as accidental or unmanageable. Third and the most serious crisis is that in which individuals (politicians) deliberately and consciously acted in a way that broke the social norms, laws or caused direct psychological or physical damage. For this type of crisis, the attribution of responsibility is high and very easy to establish. Moreover, the actor who committed the scandal is suffering from serious damage to his reputation and public image.

2.8 Image restoration theories and types of crisis communication strategies

Having defined a variety of crises and different levels of blame attribution, the next section deals with various communications plans that politicians use in the aftermath of the scandal to save their face. These communication strategies are primarily used mitigate the damage from the scandal, and to affect voter's evaluation of a particular politician on many levels, such as to improve his approval, support, intention to vote for him or his party as well as reject any calls for resignation.

Given the increased media attention and coverage of political scandals, a great deal has been written about the various types of crisis communication strategies and their usefulness for mitigating the negative consequences of political scandals. One of the main protagonists in the field of crisis communication research, along with Coombs, is William Benoit who argues that every political communication is a purposeful act and its main goal is to keep the positive image and overall reputation (Benoit, 1995). He simplified Thompson's and Coombs' conditions for the definition of a scandal as a type of event that damages a politician's reputation. First, *''an act occurred which is undesirable''* and *''you are responsible for that action''* (Benoit, 1995, p. 71).

He asserted that once there is a possible threat to the actor's reputation and public image, he needs to make use of *''explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses''* for his misconduct (Benoit, 1995, p. 70). Therefore, he established a general theory of image restoration consists of five basic types of communication strategies. These are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the act, corrective action, and mortification (admission of guilt), respectively (Benoit, 1995, 1997). Each of the strategies works through a different mechanism and each is effective in a particular type of scandals. However, they all share one common goal. As put by Coombs (1995, p. 459) *''response should seek to soothe the public, not to antagonize them further.''*

Coombs (1995, 1998) has further developed and reclassified Benoit's strategies into five similar groups: distance strategies, nonexistence strategies, ingratiation strategies, suffering strategies, and mortification strategy. Although the categorization is different, their nature and content remain the same. To shed more light on individual strategies, the next paragraph briefly describes denial and mortification (admission) crisis communication strategies that are used in the survey experiment.

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According to Benoit (1982, 1995, 1997) and Coombs (1995, 1998), denial strategy is defined as *''the accused (denying) that the offensive act actually occurred or denies that he or she performed it''* (Benoit, 1995, p. 75). Politicians' public statements that rely on denial communication strategies very frequently include phrases such as ''The allegations are false'', ''It is not true'', ''It has never happened, I unequivocally deny it'' and more. The main assumption of the denial strategy is to dissociate oneself from the media allegations about the scandal and prevent voters from attributing blame and responsibility.

Mortification, or in other words admission, is a strategy in which actor *''admits responsibility for the wrongful act and asks for forgiveness''* (Benoit, 1995, p. 79). It is usually followed by an unconditional apology. Moran's (2012) review of 24 political sex scandals in the United States from 1987 to 2011 concluded that the accused politicians most often made appeals, apologized and asked for forgiveness from their constituents and family members. Moreover, they described their apologies as sincere, deep, genuine, and heartfelt (Moran, 2012, p. 48). Benoit et al. (1991) suggested that the mortification strategy is preferred in case of political scandal as it best meets the standard that voters expect to see from the accused politician. Based on several case studies from the United States, Benoit (1991, 1995, 1997, 2004) finds that actors who used mortification outperformed others using different communication strategies regarding repairing damaged public reputation and approval. As a famous and successful case of use of mortification strategies, Moran (2012) lists Ronald Reagan Iran-Contra crisis and Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky affair.

2.9 Contribution to the field of political communication studies

Numerous experimental studies have assessed main factors that, based on the common wisdom, are thought to affect the consequences of the scandal. Among others, these include the effects of officeholder's sex, the type of transgression, individual acceptance of gender

stereotypes, and the performance history of involved public officials (Goidel and Maule, 2003; Moran, 2012; Sallot and Sheldon, 2009).

However, these experiments have provided inconsistent findings. Bhatti et al. (2013) found that politicians are punished more harshly for scandals related to political-ideological hypocrisy, but there is little to no evidence that gender stereotypes play a role in voter's evaluation of particular scandal and politician. On the other hand, Goidel and Maule's findings suggest that public responses to political scandals are, in some respect, conditioned by the officeholder's sex and acceptance or rejection of gender stereotypes in society. Sallot and Sheldon's (2009) study found that past (positive) performance of politicians was not a significant factor contributing to voter's favorable evaluation of involved politician.

One common situation, nevertheless, has been mostly neglected in studies of political scandals: individual politicians' responses to scandals. Given the fact that power and legitimacy to rule in a system of representative democracy comes from the people, any politician whose mandate is based on the votes and public approval must take the time to maintain the positive public image. This applies in particular to individuals embroiled in political scandals in which case politicians invest lots of effort, skills, and even financial resources to ''fix'' their damaged public profile. At the end of the day, the persuasiveness of the communication strategies in explaining the reported transgression might prove to be a decisive element for avoiding resignation and success in the next elections (Smith, Smith Powers and Suarez, 2005).

 Comparatively few experimental studies analyzed the effectiveness of these communication strategies. Of these, Sallot and Sheldon's experiment (2009 concludes that mortification (confession) was the most effective and corrective action the least effective crisis communication strategy regarding the public positive evaluation of politicians. Smith et al. (2005) found no statistically significant difference between the type of politician's justification for a scandal (denial/confession) on the respondent's perception of an involved public official.

Even though research (Gonzales, Kovera, Sullivan and Chanley, 1995; McGraw, 1990) shows that communicating and providing a suitable narrative to explain the alleged misconduct is potentially a decisive factor determining the politician's re-election or survival in the office, there is no compelling evidence that would suggest which communication strategies to employ to effectively mitigate various political scandals. Even though previous studies do not yield consistent findings on the effectiveness of various communication strategies, they make it clear that the way how public officials explain alleged misconduct affect voters' perception of the particular scandal.

Against this background, this study will employ an online survey experiment in Slovakia to test the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies (denial, confession, no communication) in mitigating the negative effects of fictional political scandals on voters' evaluation of a fictional member of parliament. Particularly, we are interested in the effects of denial and confession communication strategies on voter's political approval of the involved politician. The sex (male) of the fictional MP will be held constant across both treatment and control groups, the only part that will differ is the type of the transgression (legal vs illegal behavior) and type of crisis communication strategy employed by fictional MP in the aftermath of the scandal (denial, confession, no communication strategy).

3. Hypotheses

To sum up, the main goal of the thesis is to study the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies in mitigating the reputational damage in the aftermath of the political scandal. To do so, I have developed an experimental survey design, following previous experiments in the field of political communication (Bhatti et al., 2013: Smith et al., 2005). Past research clearly shows that the type of account that politicians use to protect their public image from media allegations is a key determinant in their efforts to hold on to power and future career. Yet, we do not have conclusive evidence on whether these communication strategies (denial and confession) work better for a particular type of scandal and worse for others. Are they more effective for a scandal in which a public official violated existing laws as compared to scandals where politicians broke certain social norms but did not break the legal rules? What specific crisis communication strategies are best in mitigating the reputational damage from illegal scandals and which are to be used in case of legal ones? Is there any difference in effectiveness at all?

That being said, I have formulated the following hypotheses and assumptions.

H1: *In the legal type of scandal (extramarital affair), voters will show a higher political approval rate for an involved politician with confession communication strategy than a politician using a denial communication strategy*

H2: *In the illegal type of scandal (domestic violence), voters will show a higher political approval rate for an involved politician using a denial communication strategy than a politician with a confession communication strategy.*

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H3: *In both types of scandal, voters will show a higher political approval rate for an involved politician with one of the communication strategies adopted (denial or confession) than those a politician using no communication strategy.*

Regarding the two mediator variables (plausibility of the allegations and seriousness of the scandal) that respondents answer after the treatment, I have the following hypotheses. First, I expect that those respondents who read about the illegal scandal (domestic violence), regardless of the adopted communication strategy, will find it more serious, on average, than respondents exposed to the legal type of scandal (extramarital affair). Second, I calculate the average plausibility score for the control group with no communication strategy for both types of scandal and compare that to the estimated average plausibility scores of denial and confession communication strategies in both scandal types. I hypothesize that respondents who read about the confession communication strategy, regardless of the type of scandal, will have a higher average plausibility score than those who read a news article with the denial strategy.

4. Methodology
4.1 Experimental design

The main goal of this study is to measure the effects of various crisis communication strategies on the political approval of a politician who was caught in a scandal. For this purpose, the study will make us of a 3 X 2 survey experimental design including three fictional crisis response strategies and two types of fictional (political) scandals, resulting in six different vignettes presented in the form of news articles. The primary goal of the research is to test for the effects of three crisis communication strategies in response to two fictional political scandals on the three dependent variables. In particular, the communication strategies will be conceptualized based on Benoit's (1995, 2000, 2004) image repair theory and Coomb's (1995, 1998) crisis response standards theory. This will also provide part of the conceptual and methodological framework for the survey experiment. The three crisis communication strategies that will be used in the vignettes are denial, confession (Benoit, 2004) and no communication adopted by the fictional member of parliament caught in the fictional (political) scandal.

The two fictional scandals will resemble the real-life political scandals committed by public officials. By trying to simulate the type of past political scandals the study will aim to achieve a high level of external validity. However, this also means that there will be a certain pre-exposure effect, even if the name of a fictional member of parliament was created by a random name generator, and no partisan affiliation is mentioned (an independent member of parliament). This limitation is fully acknowledged and will be taken into account while interpreting the results of the final analysis.

The two fictional scandals that will be shown in the form of vignettes will differ in the type of behavior that a politician has engaged in and different types of misconduct. The private nature of the scandal will be kept constant across all treatment and control groups. However,

the other part of the scandal will describe either a legal or illegal type of behavior. In particular, the survey will contain four treatment and two control groups.

The first two out of four treatment groups will consist of one vignette each describing a private fictional scandal and legal behavior type of transgression of a fictional member of parliament, followed by either denial of the scandal or the admission of guilt by the involved MP. The other two treatment groups will show one vignette each with a fictional private fictional scandal and illegal behavior type of transgression by a fictional member of parliament followed similarly either by denial or confession by the actor.

Two control groups will each show a vignette with a fictional private political scandal either of the legal or illegal behavior category. In the control groups, the fictional scandal is followed by no crisis communication strategy adopted by fictional MP. This experimental design will allow testing for the effect of each crisis communication strategy and type of political scandal on the main outcome variable: political approval for the independent member of parliament.

4.2 Data collection and sampling

The data collection for the survey experiment was conducted from April 11 to 10 May of 2020 through paid and targeted ads on Facebook. The sample was obtained via an anonymous Qualtrics link that was embedded in the Facebook advertisement promoted on social media. The following targeting settings were used for promoting the particular Facebook ad with Qualtrics survey link: all Facebook users in the territory of the Slovak republic, of both female and male genders, and age category from 18 to 65+. This is the broadest and most universal targeting settings allowed by Facebook. In other words, every Slovak Facebook user ($\sim$ 2.500 000 users in total) had more or less the same probability of being shown the particular Facebook ad with an embedded Qualtrics survey. After clicking on the ad, the respondent was redirected to the Qualtrics webpage with a survey experiment, debriefed about the content of the study,

and asked for the consent to participate. The Qualtrics survey was set up in a way to guarantee nearly equal distribution of respondents into the treatment or control groups.

Facebook ads with an embedded link to the Qualtrics survey resulted in a dataset of N=1385. However, the Qualtrics data included respondents who failed to answer some or all of the questions included in the survey experiment. For the purpose of statistical analysis, linear regressions predicting the outcome of interest (Political approval), the final dataset was N= 1173.

4.3 Survey design

In designing the experimental design and Qualtrics survey, I have made several decisions. First, I chose the denial and mortification communication strategies as they are both on the other end of Benoit's and Coomb's scale of image restoration strategies. Mortification (confession) admits the alleged misconduct and acknowledges the full responsibility, whilst denial strategy naturally dismisses any allegations and tries to convey a message that since nothing has happened, the actor cannot take the responsibility for the assumed misconduct.

Next, to select relevant and appropriate scandals, I followed previous experiments in political communication and scandals (Bhatti et al., 2013: Smith et al., 2005). In that context, I have selected domestic violence and extramarital affair scandals. In developing these scenarios, I have followed two additional dimensions to manipulate only selected parts of the treatment stimuli. First, both scandals are private. In other words, they are not directly connected to the work or elected office of the politician. Second, while both scandals concern the private life, they differ in the legal aspect. Domestic violence scandal depicted an illegal behavior that violates particular law, whereas the extramarital affair scenario represents a behavior in which actors committed a social norm transgression but his action did not violate any law, therefore it is a legal type of scandal.

Ultimately, the treatment stimuli were presented in vignettes corresponding to a news article reporting on the alleged scandal. More particularly, the report described a male independent member of parliament by name Róbert Holub. Random name generator of typical Slovak names was used to produce the fictional member of parliament to avoid any bias by using the names of existing politicians. The sex of the politician remained fixed for all treatment and control groups as the effect of gender was not my primary interest. As discussed in the theoretical chapter of the thesis, partisanship of both politicians and voters is one of the key determinants in whether the public officials are punished for their wrongdoings. Therefore, I have kept the status of an independent member of parliament fixed across all treatment groups to avoid any effects of participants' pre-existing political beliefs and partisanship preferences.

Finally, the stimuli were created to copy a form of a standard newspaper article as reading online news portals is one of the most common ways how voters stay informed and learn about politics.

4.4 Survey flow

The survey follows a common experimental protocol. Upon clicking on the Facebook ad with the embedded link, potential respondents are redirected to the Qualtrics survey page. First, the name and contact information of the researcher, university affiliation, and name of the project is described. Then, subjects read through short paragraphs explaining the purpose of the data collection, voluntary participation, and withdrawal procedure, as well as the estimated time that it will take to complete all the questions. In the end, participants are asked about consent and need to click to agree to participate in the survey.

The survey starts with the first block of four demographic questions. These include questions on gender, age category, the highest completed education, and political self-identification on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means liberal and 10 means conservative. The next part is the debrief section that informs respondents that they are about to read a news article about fictional

Slovak politician and fictional political scandal. They are asked to read the following section carefully as there will be additional questions related to that news story.

Then, participants are randomly assigned to one of the treatment or control vignettes. The randomization of respondents in the treatment and control group is automatically conducted via the in-built Qualtrics randomizer mechanism. In total, there are four treatment and two control groups. They differ first in a description of a political scandal, and second in an account strategy that a politician uses to explain the alleged accusation.

Survey asks three separate questions on the three outcome variables that are of the main interest for this study. First, the survey asks respondents to give their opinion on the resignation of a fictional member of parliament, after having read either the treatment or control group vignette with a description of the scandal. Respondents provide their answer on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means should not resign, and 100 means should resign. Second, subjects are asked to evaluate the trustworthiness of the fictional member of parliament caught in the scandal on the same scale from 0 to 100, where 0 is totally untrustworthy, and 100 is totally trustworthy. Third, respondents evaluate the political competency of the fictional politician using a scale from 0 to 100, for which 0 stands for politically incompetent and 100 means politically competent. Subsequently, I combine the three abovementioned outcome variables into a simple index by taking their simple average for each respondent. I will refer to this new index and main outcome variable as Political approval (scale from 0 to 100).

These three outcome variables- resignation, trustworthiness, and political competency- were selected for the following reasons. First, being politically competent means that politician is knowledgeable about political processes, parliamentary procedures, is an expert in a certain field of politics, and as a result of these characteristics can win support, persuade his opponents and deliver the results (Bhatti et al., 2013: Druckman, 2001). Trustworthiness is another crucial indicator of a successful political career of public officials. Being trustworthy implies that

citizens can rely on their elected officials to work for them, represent their worldview, and pursue political agenda. It also suggests a certain level of trust in political institutions and political legitimacy in general. Both competency and trust are especially important in the time of crisis in which voters want to be represented by reliable politicians who can solve their problems. The last outcome variable, call for resignation, implies public support or disdain for the particular politician. It is especially important in the case of political scandals where an individual faces criticism from media and his political opponents and is requested to resign from his position, whether that is elected office or appointed bureaucrat. With the majority of voters demanding the resignation, it is nearly impossible to remain in the office for an extended period of time. Eventually, the three abovementioned factors are generally regarded as fundamental reflections for the electorate when deciding whom to vote for (Funk, 1996). Therefore, we measure these outcome variables and combine their averages together to develop one final and comprehensive index of Political approval.

The questionnaire then continues with two questions on mediator variables. First, the survey measures the respondent's perception of the seriousness of a political scandal featured in a vignette description. Second, the survey measures the respondent's opinion on the plausibility of a particular type of scandal, as described in the news article. Both are measured on a from 0 to 100, where 0 means not serious at all (not plausible at all) and 100 means extremely serious (extremely plausible).

The survey concludes with two manipulation check questions focusing on whether the respondents remember the type of the scandal (domestic violence vs extramarital affair) and communication strategy adopted by a fictional member of parliament (denial, confession, the politician did not respond). Survey questions and wording of all treatment vignettes are attached in the Appendix.

4.5 Participants characteristics

As mentioned previously, participants were recruited through targeted Facebook ads. The initial dataset was completed by 1385 participants. However, some participants answered only some questions and did not complete post-treatment outcome measurements. Out of 1385 subjects who participated in the survey experiment, 632 were male (46%) and 753 were female (54%). As for age categories, there were 109 participants in 18-30 group (7.9%), 40 participants in 31-40 category (2.9%), 157 subjects in 41-50 age group (11.3%), 623 participants in 51-64 category (45%), and last age group of 65+ included 456 participants (32.9%). 101 participants (7.3%) have completed less than a high school degree, 941 participants (68%) have finished high school as their highest completed education, and 343 subjects (24.7%) had a college degree. 218 participants identified as liberals (15.8%), 520 participants have seen themselves as centrists (37.5%) and 647 participants were conservative (46.7%). As for the three outcome measurements, 1223 participants answered question on a resignation, 1199 participants answered question measuring trustworthiness, and 1173 subjects provided answers for political competency measurement. As explained previously, I combined the three abovementioned outcome variables into a simple index by taking their simple average for each respondent. Therefore, the final dataset consists of 1173 participants, as to include only participants who answered all three outcome measurements.

4.6 Treatment stimuli and event

As discussed previously, the questionnaire shows a short text resembling a news article from the public broadcaster in Slovakia. The reason why I chose public broadcaster as a media source reporting on the scandal allegations is that I tried to avoid potential bias regarding participant's perception of some media outlets as partisan. As in any other country, there are several media outlets, newspapers, or private tv channels, that are seen by some individuals as reporting in favor or against particular political parties and their members.

Survey uses fictional scenarios (political scandals) to reduce the bias of pre-existing exposure to media reporting on real scandals of similar nature (Bhatti et al., 2013). This decision is also a trade-off between the higher and lower level of external validity of the experiment. Higher external validity would be guaranteed by using an actual example of a political scandal. However, as stated above, this would also lead to unintentional bias that respondents could have formed due to pre-treatment media exposure about a past scandal situation. Therefore, the decision was made to use a hypothetical scenario that still resembles a very common type of political scandals but is not in the recent past connected to any particular politician or political party in Slovakia.

Vignettes and experimental groups

There are four treatment and two control groups in the experiment. Both types of scandal scenarios (domestic violence/extramarital affair) include two treatment and one control group. The groups within the same scandal differ in the type of communication strategy adopted by a politician in response to media allegations.

4.7 Legal political scandal

The first scandal scenario in the survey is that of an extramarital affair that represents a legal type of political scandals. Respondents assigned to the control group were shown a vignette with public broadcaster reporting on the alleged scandal, followed by no communication strategy (no response provided) from the fictional member of parliament. This control group also functions as a reference level for the political approval variable in the final analysis. Next, the first treatment group included the same media article on the scandal but this time followed by a confession communication strategy in which a fictional politician admitted to the media allegations and confirmed that these are true. The second treatment group showed a media report and denial communication strategy adopted by a fictional MP who dismissed all

allegations and denied that the scandal has ever happened. In sum, all the vignettes displayed the same news article from public broadcaster and description of the independent member of Parliament but each differed in a type of communication strategy that was shown as a politician's response in aftermath of the scandal.

4.8 Illegal political scandal

The second event included in the survey experiment is a domestic violence scenario that constitutes an illegal scandal type. Respondents in the control group were exposed to a news article reporting on the alleged scandal, followed by no communication strategy from the fictional politician. Same as in the legal scandal type, the control group serves as a benchmark for the political approval rate of the two treatment groups. Next, the third treatment group has shown a news piece on a scandal accompanied by a denial communication strategy in which a member of parliament rejected all allegations. Then, respondents in the fourth treatment group read about the news article and politician's confession strategy which he admitted that the media allegations were true and he took full responsibility. In summary, all three vignettes described the same media article from the public broadcaster about the illegal scandal and the brief description of the independent member of Parliament but each used a different communication strategy that represented politician's responses to the scandal.

Given that the survey experiment was conducted on the population of Slovak voters, survey questions and treatment stimuli (vignettes) were in the Slovak language. Using an in-built Qualtrics randomization mechanism, participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions below that described a fabricated but lifelike situation featuring a politician and his alleged misconduct. I have individually manipulated the nature of the political scandal and the type of crisis communication strategy used in a response. This experimental design ensured the comparability of main models as well as unit homogeneity as specified in King, Keohane, and Verba (1994). Therefore, the design allowed me to evaluate the direct

effect of individual communication strategies on participant's level of political approval for the involved politician, conditioned on the type of scandal. Before being randomly assigned into the treatment or control group, participants were shown the following paragraph: *'' In the next section, you are going to read about a fictional Slovak politician and a fictional political scandal. Please read the following short news story carefully as we will ask questions related to the text later on in the survey.''*

Below are the survey vignettes translated into English for both scandal types and control groups in the form of news articles, followed by the description of denial and confession communication strategies, demonstrating the intended manipulation and stimuli. The complete wording of vignettes by treatment groups is attached in the Appendix.

Control group 1 (legal scandal with no communication strategy):
The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff member at the time he was already married. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Mária K., refused to comment.

Control group 2 (illegal scandal and no communication strategy):
The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had been accused of domestic abuse and violence against his now ex-wife. According to the investigative report, MP Holub physically attacked and punched his then-wife on an unspecified date during summer of the previous year. Holub's ex-wife refused to comment.

The four treatment groups, two for each scandal type, include the abovementioned media description of the scandal, followed by either confession or denial communication strategy. The denial strategy included politician's statements from press conferences denying media allegations are calling them false and ridiculous. He also said that such misconduct has never happened, and therefore he refused to resign from his seat in parliament. On the contrary, confession strategy included politician's statements from the press conference in which he fully admitted to the media allegations and apologized for his behavior. Moreover, he confessed that his actions were regretful, and he asked for forgiveness from his wife and voters. Eventually, he said that his misconduct would not affect his performance as the legally elected member of parliament, and therefore he refused calls for his resignation.

5. Method and Analysis

5.1 Statistical models and hypotheses testing

To test the individual hypothesis, I use OLS linear regressions predicting the main outcome of interest - Public Approval - with indicators for experimental groups and a declared list of pre-treatment covariates: age, gender, education, ideology. To test H1, H2, and H3 we run a regression for the two types of a political scandal with control groups (those receiving no crisis communication strategy) taken as a baseline to which I compare indicators for both types of crisis communication strategies (denial, confession). For the analysis of mediator variables I first compare the measure of scandal seriousness across the two scandal types. Second, I compare the measure of plausibility across communication strategies. For the manipulation checks, I calculate the proportion of respondents in each experimental condition who correctly remembered the information provided to them. Regarding the inference criteria, the study will report the 95% confidence intervals unless specified otherwise.

5.2 Manipulation checks

After having read the vignette and responding to the questions measuring outcome variables, respondents were asked to recall the nature of the scandal and type of communication strategy used by a politician. In the legal/confession group 92% of the respondents (N=170) correctly recalled the type of scandal and communication strategy. 93% of subjects (N=176) remembered both scandal and strategy type in the legal/denial group, and 47% of subjects (N=77) answered correctly in the legal/control group. More details on manipulation checks are in the Appendix.

For the illegal scandal type vignettes, 91% of respondents in the illegal/denial (N=169) correctly remembered the type of scandal and politician's communication strategy mentioned in the media article. For the illegal/confession group it was 86% of respondents (N=167) who answered manipulation checks correctly, and only 40% of subjects (N=73) in the illegal/control

group recalled the nature of the scandal and politician's communication strategy. More details on manipulation checks are in the Appendix.

5.3 Results

Table1 below presents the output of regression models predicting the main outcome of interest of this study, public approval. Both models include a reported set of demographic covariates. Even though I did not formulate any particular hypotheses regarding the effect of demographic variables, their coefficients and p-values are reported in full detail in Appendix and visualized in Figure 3 with reported 95 % confidence intervals.

Legal scandal

There is a significant effect on the denial communication strategy (p-value = 0.001) on the level of the political approval index. In particular, respondents who read about denial strategy, as compared to the baseline of no-communication, showing a decrease in political approval by estimated 10.16 points. On the contrary, the effect of confession strategy is estimated at -1.56 but not statistically significant (p-value = 0.6). I have also tested for the equality of denial and confession regression coefficients and found that the effect of denial on the political approval rate is statistically different from the effect of confession (p.norm = 0.008).

To summarize, surprisingly confession strategy has no effect on estimated political approval rate as compared to the baseline of no communication but denial strategy significantly decreases politician's approval rate by estimated 10 points, and one point increase on ideology scale towards conservativism also leads to a decrease in average political approval rate by estimated 3.78 points. The data support expectation specified in the H1, that respondents who read about the confession strategy will show, on average, a higher estimated political approval rate than those who read about denial strategy.

Illegal scandal

The illegal scandal type (domestic violence) is described in the Model2 in Table1 below. Contrary to the legal type of scandal, here I expect that the denial strategy would work better in mitigating the negative effects of the scandal on a level of political approval. In other words, those respondents who read about the denial strategy should show a higher increase in estimated political approval level than those who were exposed to confession strategy. The results provide support for this hypothesis. The effect of confession strategy on political approval is not significant (p-value 0.9) while denial strategy increases the political approval index by 8.7 points (p = 0.003) as compared to the baseline of no communication. Similar to the legal scandal scenario, I performed a test for the equality of regression coefficients and found that the effect of the confession strategy is statistically different from the effect of denial strategy (p.norm = 0.004).

In summary, out of the two communication strategies, it is a denial account that has a positive and significant effect on the estimated political approval rate. Compared to the baseline of no communication, denial strategy increases political approval by estimated 8.71 points while sex and age both have a significant and negative effect on average political approval by an estimated 4.61 and 2.51 points, respectively.

Visual comparison of individual variable's effects by treatment group for both types of scandal is shown in the Figure 3 in Appendix.

Table 1: OLS Regression models for both types of scandal

	Legal scandal (Model 1)	Illegal scandal (Model 2)
(Intercept)	47.32 ***	32.12 ***
	(2.67)	(2.49)
Ideology	-3.78 **	0.38
	(1.34)	(1.21)
Education	0.16	2.15
	(1.34)	(1.22)
Age	-1.78	-2.51 *
	(1.33)	(1.22)
Sex	1.41	-4.61
	(2.68)	(2.44)
Confession	-1.56	0.22
	(3.28)	(2.95)
Denial	-10.16 **	8.71 **
	(3.26)	(2.97)
N	576	597
R2	0.04	0.04

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Estimated standard error in parentheses.

6. Hypotheses summary

6.1 Hypothesis 1

In H1 I hypothesized that for the legal scandal type, those who read about confession strategy will show higher political approval for the politician than those who were treated by denial strategy. In the context of the regression results, this means that the negative effect of the scandal on political approval will be lower in confession strategy as compared to that of denial strategy. Based on the regression coefficients summarized in Table1, the H1 is supported. In other words, for the particular type of legal scandal (extramarital affair), it is better to confess to the allegations if a politician wants to mitigate the damage of the scandal and maintain higher political approval.

Data reported in Figure 2 below provides us with additional support for the H1. It shows the estimated average value for the political approval index by treatment groups in the legal scandal type. As hypothesized, respondents in the legal/confession group show a higher political approval rate than those in the legal/denial group by approximately 10 points. Surprisingly, however, it is the control group with no communication strategy that shows the highest estimated political approval rate, although the difference between the control group and legal/confession treatment group remains very small. 95 % confidence levels are reported for each treatment group. The political approval rate is measured on a 0-100 scale.

6.2 Hypothesis 2

In the H2, I expected that for the illegal scandal type, respondents reading about denial strategy will show a higher political approval rate than those who were shown confession strategy. In other words, adopting a denial strategy should result in an increase in the estimated political approval rate as compared to using a confession strategy. Data in Table1 provide support to accept H2. Contrary to the legal scandal type, denying media allegations work better

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for mitigating the negative effects of scandal and increasing political approval rate than confession strategy.

Additional support for H2 is provided by the findings summarized in Figure 1 below. These values show estimated average scores for political approval by treatment groups in illegal scandal type. Consistent with H2, it shows that subjects who were treated by the denial strategy show a higher average score for political approval index than those who read about confession strategy by an estimated 9 points. Contrary to the results in Figure 2 for the legal scandal, it is the denial strategy that has the highest political approval rate overall, followed by confession and no communication control group.

However, the difference in the political approval rate between the illegal/confession and no communication strategy is not statistically significant (p-value > 0.9). 95 % confidence levels are reported for each treatment group.

6.3 Hypothesis3

For the H3, I hypothesized that for both types of scandal, subjects reading about one of the communication strategies (either denial or confession), on average, will show a higher approval rate for the involved politician than those who were in the control group and therefore read no crisis communication. Based on the results in Figure 1 and Figure 2, I have to reject this hypothesis. Surprisingly, it is legal/control group with no communication strategy in which respondents have shown the highest average political approval rate for the member of parliament caught in the extramarital affair scandal, followed by legal/confession and legal/denial groups. However, part of the H3 holds true in case of an illegal scandal in which the control group with no communication has the lowest average political approval rate, as compared to the illegal/denial and illegal/confession treatment groups.

Figure 1: Average Political Approval by treatment group in Illegal scandal type
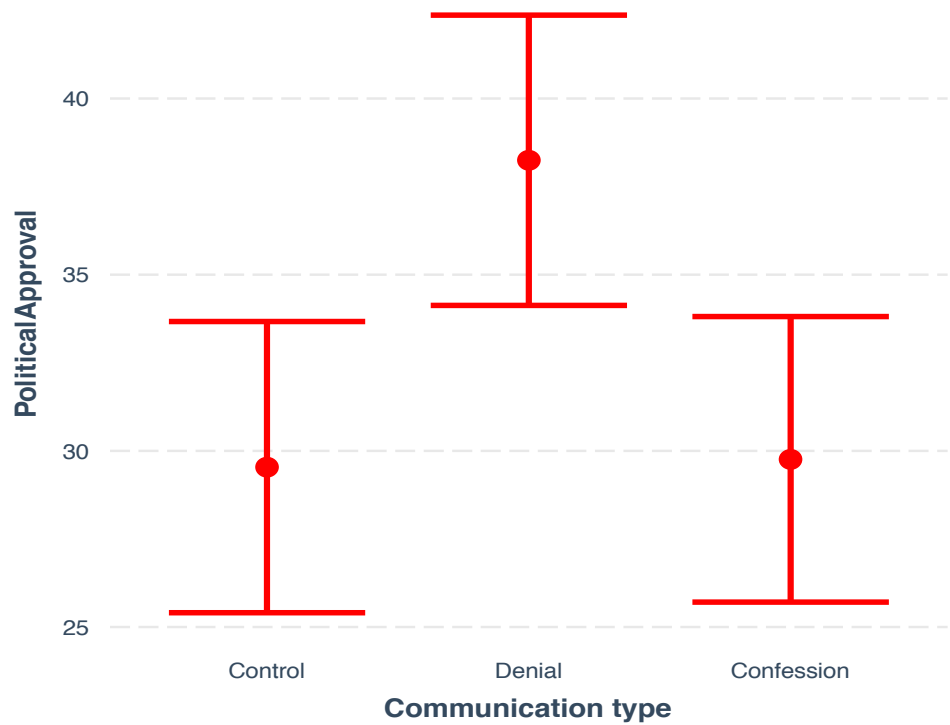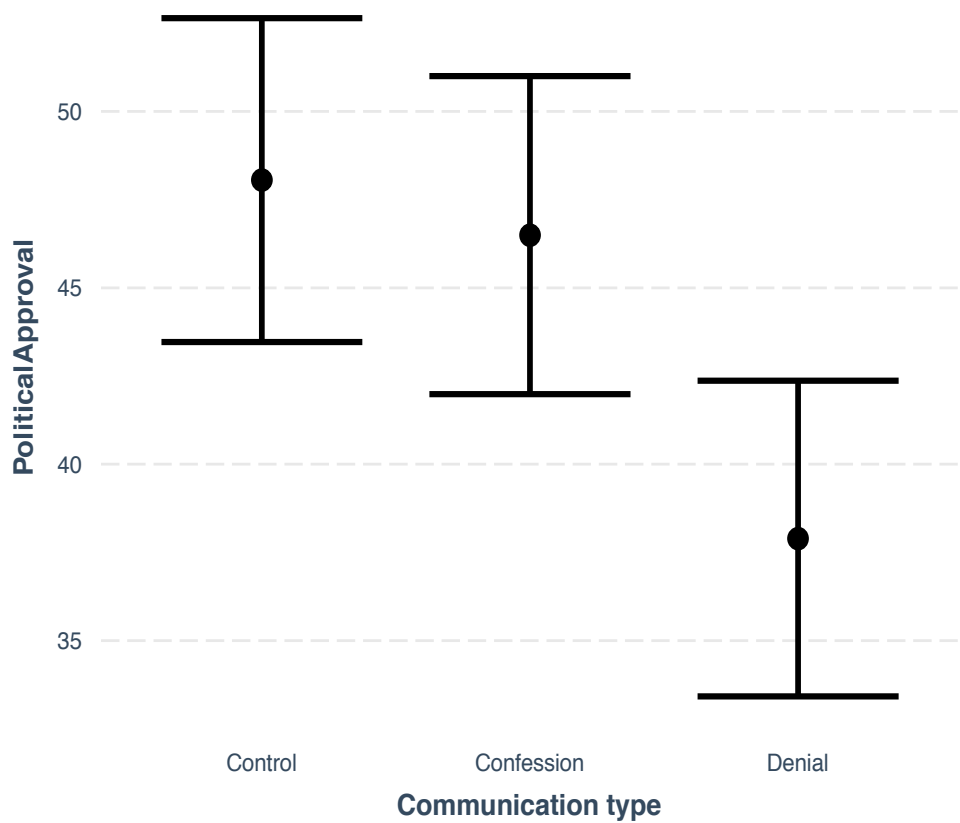

Figure 2: Figure 2: Average Political Approval by treatment group in Legal scandal type

6.4 Mediators

For the two mediator variables that were measured in the survey, plausibility, and seriousness of the scandal, I hypothesized the following. First, I expected that respondents who read vignettes about the illegal scandal type, regardless of the communication strategy type, will find it more serious, on average, than respondents exposed to legal scandal type. Results from Table4 support this assumption. Respondents in illegal scandal type show on average higher seriousness rate than those in legal scandal

Second, I expected that subjects who were shown confession strategy, regardless of the scandal type, would have a higher average plausibility score than those who read vignette with denial strategy. To do so, I have calculated the average plausibility score for both types of communication strategy and compare the averages to each other, as seen in Table4. Comparison of average plausibility scores between confession and denial strategies indeed shows that those who read about confession strategy show higher average plausibility scores than for subjects treated by denial strategy. In addition, the average plausibility scores for the two confession groups are higher than both average plausibility scores of control groups in which politicians did not provide any response.

Table 2: Average Political Approval by treatment group in Legal scandal type

Treatment group	Average seriousness	Average plausibility
Legal/no communication	48	63.7
Legal/confession	47	73.5
Legal/denial	48.3	68.2
Illegal/no communication	71.8	66.4
Illegal/denial	64.3	62.5
Illegal/confession	75.3	78.8

6.5 Summary

To sum up my analysis, in the legal scandal type it is only ideology from demographic variables that has a significant effect on political approval rate, as one-point increase on 0-10 scale towards conservativism leads to the estimated decrease of political approval by 3.78 points. Regarding the primary interest of this study, the effect of two communication strategies is the denial strategy that has a statistically significant effect on the political approval rate, causing a decrease of 10.16 points. The findings, therefore, suggest that politician is better of admitting to the allegations for this particular type of scandal (extramarital affair) or not commenting at all than denying them if he wishes to keep higher political approval rate. Theoretically, it would be interesting to test for the effects of other communication strategy types on the same kind of scandal and test whether there is any strategy that would be more effective than what I have presented here.

In the case of illegal scandal type (domestic violence), age, and sex both have significant and negative effects on the estimated political approval rate. Being a woman as compared to man leads to a decrease in political approval by estimated 4.61 points, and older respondents have also shown a decrease in political approval by approximately 2.50 points. Regarding the effects of communication strategies, contrary to the legal scandal type, denial strategy has a statistically significant and positive effect on measured political approval rate, increasing it by estimated 8.7 points as compared to the baseline of no communication. Test for the equality of denial and confession regression coefficients revealed that these two are statistically different from each other in both scandal types. Overall, it is surprising to find that the confession strategy has no significant effect on political approval in any of the scandal types.

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7. Limitations of the study

First and the most straightforward limitation of this research is that the findings are not generalizable to the general population of Slovakia as the dataset is not a representative sample of Slovak voters. Neither it is generalizable to the population of Slovak Facebook users due to the overrepresentation of participants older than 50 years. However, as discussed previously, given the targeting settings used for Facebook ads, every Facebook user in Slovakia had more or less the same chance of being shown the ad with an embedded Qualtrics survey link. This was also the most effective way to achieve a large N sample (> 1000 subjects) with my limited financial resources.

Second, it needs to be said that this particular survey experimental design was a necessary trade-off between internal and external validity. On the one hand, the consistent experimental structure provides for a high level of internal validity and some level of causal inference. On the other hand, this particular design in which I used a fictional scandal and a fictional member of parliament without a party affiliation suffers from a low level of external validity. For that reason, even though my analysis measures effects of specific crisis communication strategies on estimated political approval rate, it is not a perfect substitute for a specific real-life scandal as it does not represent realistic conditions that voters inevitably face when reading about political scandals and rendering political judgment on actors involved.

An additional limitation is a possibility that during the data collection period, media outlets reported on a scandal similar in nature to these I have used in my study. Therefore, one could suggest that if the data were collected in different periods of time, it would result in some variance in the effects of denial and confession strategies.

The third limitation applies to the fact that a media allegations (vignette) did not specify whether the reported scandal is of legal or illegal character as it was up to participants to realize whether the reported behavior violates existing laws (domestic violence) or ''only'' breaks generally accepted social norms (extramarital affair).

Fourth, though minor restriction, is that the depicted scandals portrayed scandals that are commonly associated with male politicians. For that reason, I have not manipulated with the gender of the fictional member of parliament. For the next research, it would be definitely interesting to use scandals that are stereotypically associated with female politicians and portray a fictional female politician as an actor who committed these transgressions.

Finally, the effects of communication strategies reported in this experiment are narrowly connected to the specific wording that was used in both the treatment and control groups vignettes. This pertains to a specific media outlet that reported on the scandal allegations, specific nature of the scandal, and politician's misconduct as well as a particular type of account strategy that a fictional member of parliament has used to explain his actions and behavior. Having elaborated on the obvious limitations of this experimental research, I am still confident that the selected experimental vignettes and manipulations were relevant and suitable for the study on the effects of communication strategies on mitigating the negative consequences in the aftermath of a political scandal. Moreover, I am positive that results show a significant difference in the importance of communication strategy used in a response to the scandal, condition on the scandal type, as denial strategy decreased political approval rate in a scenario of an extramarital affair, but on the other hand, increased estimated political approval in case of domestic violence allegations.

8. Conclusion

This experiment has attempted to answer the following question. What are the effects of various crisis communication strategies on mitigating negative consequences of political scandals on political approval of involved politicians? To do so, I have designed a survey experiment that has manipulated the type of political scandal (legal/illegal type) and type of crisis communication strategy (denial, confession, no communication) adopted by a politician in the aftermath of the scandal. Both treatment and control group vignettes have shown a short piece of text resembling a standard form of media article in which it is reported on the fictional political scandal committed by a fictional member of parliament (independent), followed by a particular type of communication strategy. Despite the fact that political scandal and media coverage of this phenomenon has become a common feature of politics, past studies have paid little to the methods and communication strategies that politicians use to explain their alleged misconduct. This experimental research, therefore, contributes to the literature on political communication focused on image repair theories and crisis communication strategies.

Participants for this survey experiment were recruited through paid and targeted Facebook ads to Slovak voters that resulted in the final dataset of N = 1173 subjects. Results suggest that the same crisis communication strategy has a different effect, conditioned on the type of political scandal. In particular, experimental findings show that in case of legal political scandal type (extramarital affair), the denial strategy decreases political approval rate by estimated 10 points whereas in case of illegal political scandal the same denial strategy increases political approval rate of a fictional politician by estimated 8.7 points, both measured on a 0 to 100 scale. OLS regression models for both types of scandals show that confession communication strategy has no significant effect. Effects of denial and confession strategy were tested and compared against the baseline scenario in which politicians adopted a strategy of no communication, therefore providing no response to media reports on the alleged misconduct.

My analysis also shows statistically significant effects of individual demographic variables on the estimated level of political approval of a fictional politician. In particular, data suggest a significant and negative effect of ideology on political approval in the scenario of legal scandal, while sex and age variables have statistically significant and negative effects on political approval rate in case of illegal scandal. In summary, my findings suggest that the way how politicians respond to media allegations on a political scandal clearly matters for their rate of political approval, and as such imply that choosing an appropriate communication strategy can either save one's public image or damage it even more and therefore end one's political career. Political scandals have undeniably become a common feature of politics and as a consequence, they deserve proper scientific attention and thorough analysis.

Appendix
Treatment and control group vignettes
C1 (legal scandal with no communication strategy):

The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff member at the time he was already married. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Mária K., refused to comment.

T1 (legal scandal and confession communication strategy):

The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff member at the time he was already married. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Mária K., refused to comment.

Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press conference during which he admitted to the affair and apologized for his behavior. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he admitted that the affair was a mistake, regretted his past actions and asked for forgiveness from his family and voters, but he said that it would not affect his performance as the legally elected member of parliament. Therefore, he refused calls for his resignation and said he would keep his seat in parliament.

T2 (legal scandal and denial communication strategy):

The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff

member at the time he was already married. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Mária K., refused to comment.

Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press conference during which he denied all the accusations and called the news report as ridiculous. He said he did not have any intimate relationship with the former member staff member other than that related to his work. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he strongly reaffirmed the denial and said that since the allegations made against him are false and absurd, he did not plan to resign his seat in parliament.

C2 (illegal scandal and no communication strategy):

The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had been accused of domestic abuse and violence against his now ex-wife. According to the investigative report, MP Holub physically attacked and punched his then-wife on an unspecified date during summer of the previous year. Holub's ex-wife refused to comment.

T3 (illegal scandal and denial communication strategy):

The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had been accused of domestic abuse and violence against his now ex-wife. According to the investigative report, MP Holub physically attacked and punched his then-wife on an unspecified date during summer of the previous year. Holub's ex-wife refused to comment.

Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press a press conference during which he denied all the accusations and called the news report as ridiculous. He said he did not commit any act of domestic abuse against his ex-wife and condemned any kind of violence in marriage as unacceptable. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he strongly reaffirmed the denial and said that since the allegations made against him are false and absurd, he did not plan to resign his seat in parliament.

T4 (illegal scandal and confession communication strategy):

The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had been accused of domestic abuse and violence against his now ex-wife. According to the investigative report, MP Holub physically attacked and punched his then-wife on an unspecified date during summer of the previous year. Holub's ex-wife refused to comment.

Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press conference during which he admitted to the allegations and apologized for his behaviour. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he admitted that the assault was a mistake, regretted his past actions and asked for forgiveness from his ex-wife and voters, but he said that it would not affect his performance as the legally elected member of parliament. Therefore, he refused calls for his resignation and said he would keep his seat in parliament.

Visualizations

Figure 3: Individual variable effects on political approval by treatment groups for both scandal models
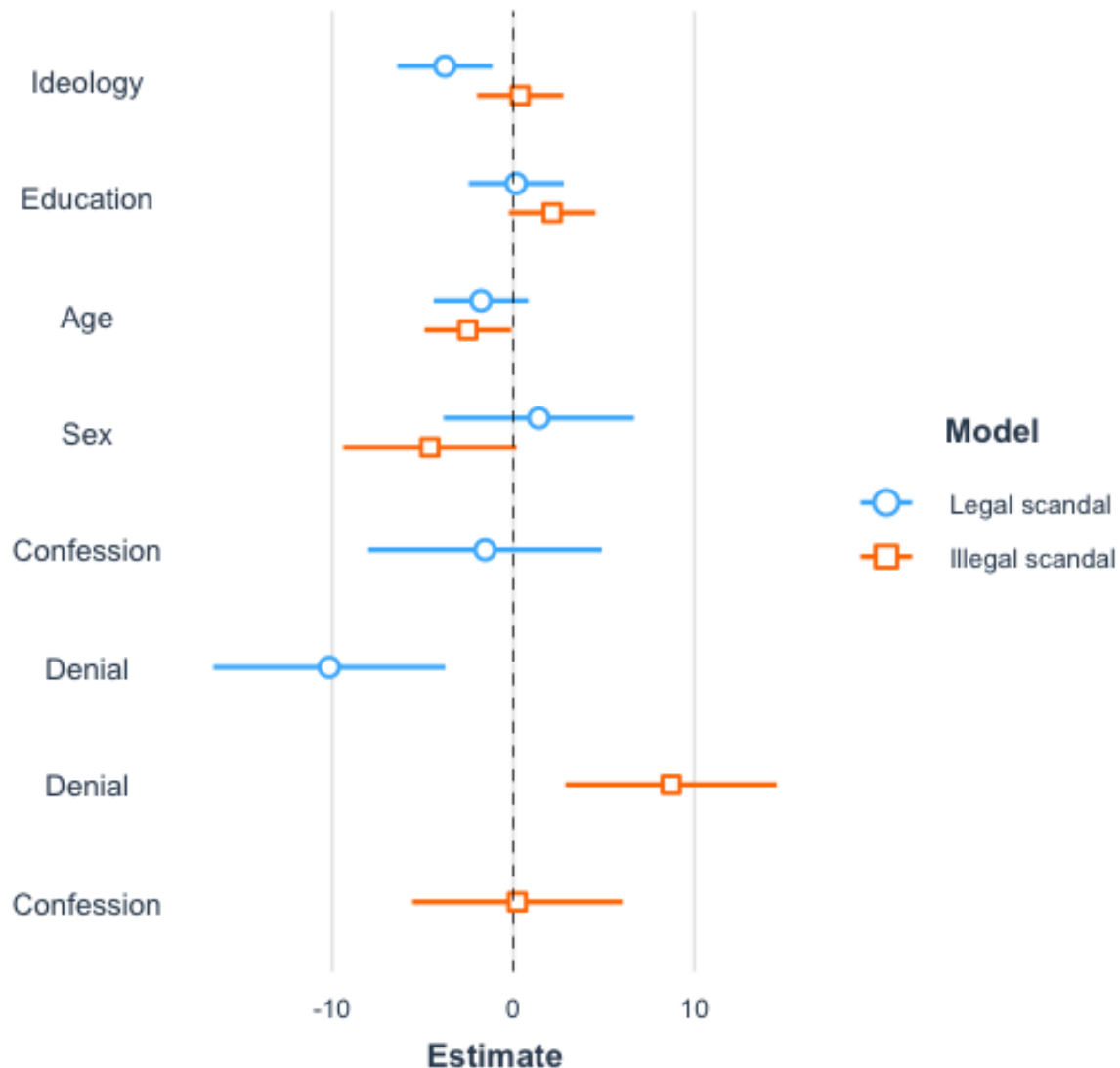
First, I start with demographic variables for Model 1 which is the legal type of political scandal (extramarital affair). Out of the four demographic variables, it is only ideology that has a statistically significant effect (p-value < 0.005) on the estimated political approval index. Put simply, being more conservative by one point on a 0 (liberal) to 10 (conservative) scale results in a decrease of a political approval (0-100) by estimated 3.78 points. Other demographic variables, such as age category, gender and the highest achieved education have no statistically

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significant effect on estimated political approval index in the case of extramarital affair scandal. A common wisdom might lead to an expectation that being a woman would result in a decrease of political approval for a male politician who cheated on his wife with his member of staff but the data suggest otherwise (p-value = 0.59). Also being more educated or older does not cause a change in a level of political approval (p-value = 0.9 and = 0.18, respectively). Effect of the only statistically significant demographic variable, ideology, by treatment groups are visualized in the Figure 3 below.

I found that while ideology and education variables have no statistically significant effect on the estimated level of political approval, effect of age is significant at $p = 0.04$. Age category was measured on a 5-point scale (18-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-64, 65+), so one-point increase on the given scale results in decrease of political approval by 2.51 points. Considering the nature of the scandal (physical violence against female), it is older people who are associated with more conservative values in Slovakia, so this finding is not that surprising. Last demographic variable, sex, is tricky to interpret as p-value is 0.058 and its estimated effect on political approval of the involved politician is – 4.61 points.

Within the design of this experiment, it means that women express lower level of political approval than men (sex was coded as man = 1, woman = 2). Again, taking into the account the type of scandal, one would expect that women would evaluate a male politician attacking his wife more harshly than men, all else being equal.

Figure 4: Effect of age on political approval by treatment groups in illegal scandal
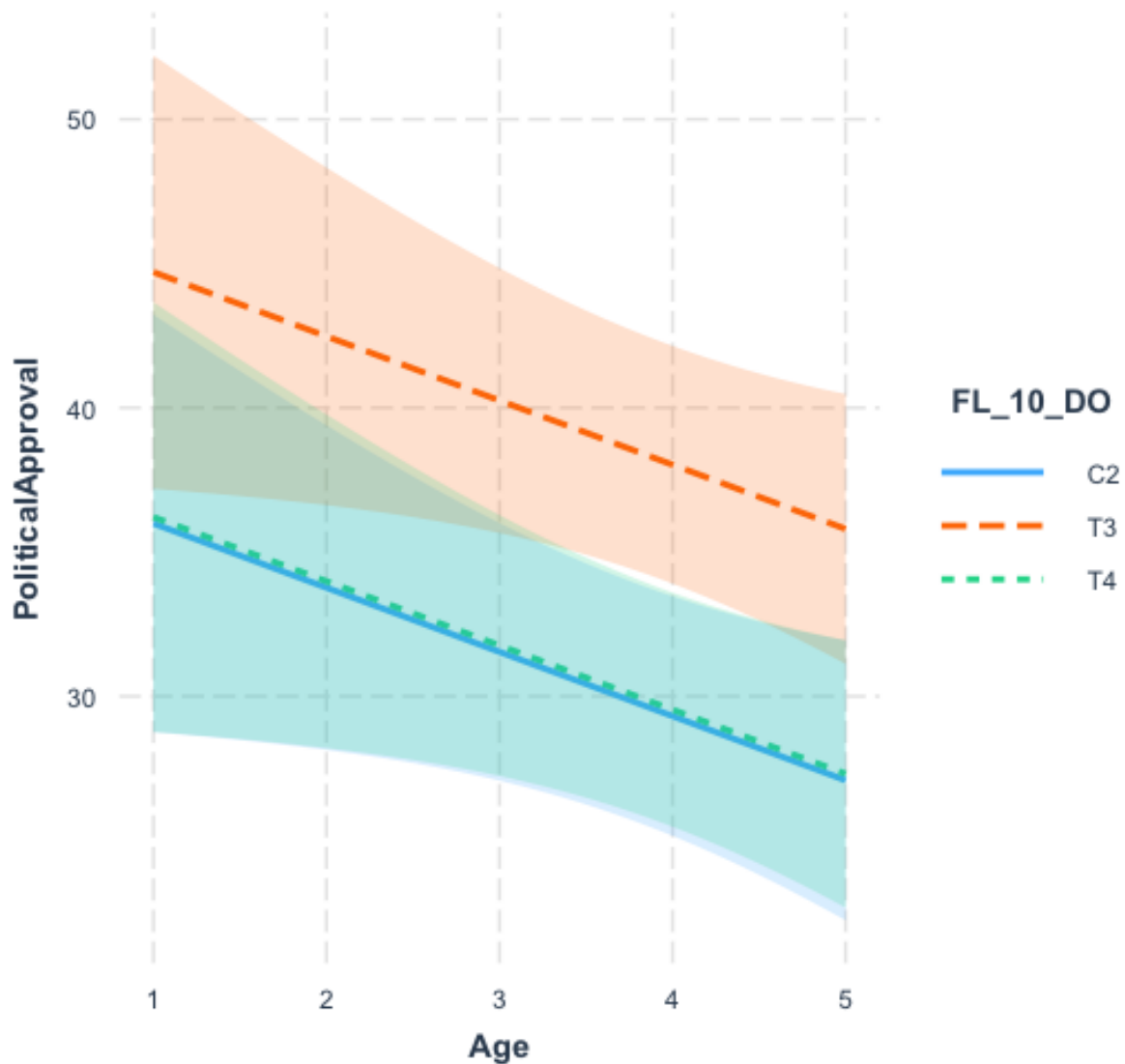

Age variable was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where each number corresponds to a particular age category (1=18-30, 2=31-40, 3=41-50, 4=51-64, 5=65+). 95% confidence intervals are shown. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

Figure 5: Effect of sex on political approval by treatment groups in illegal scandal
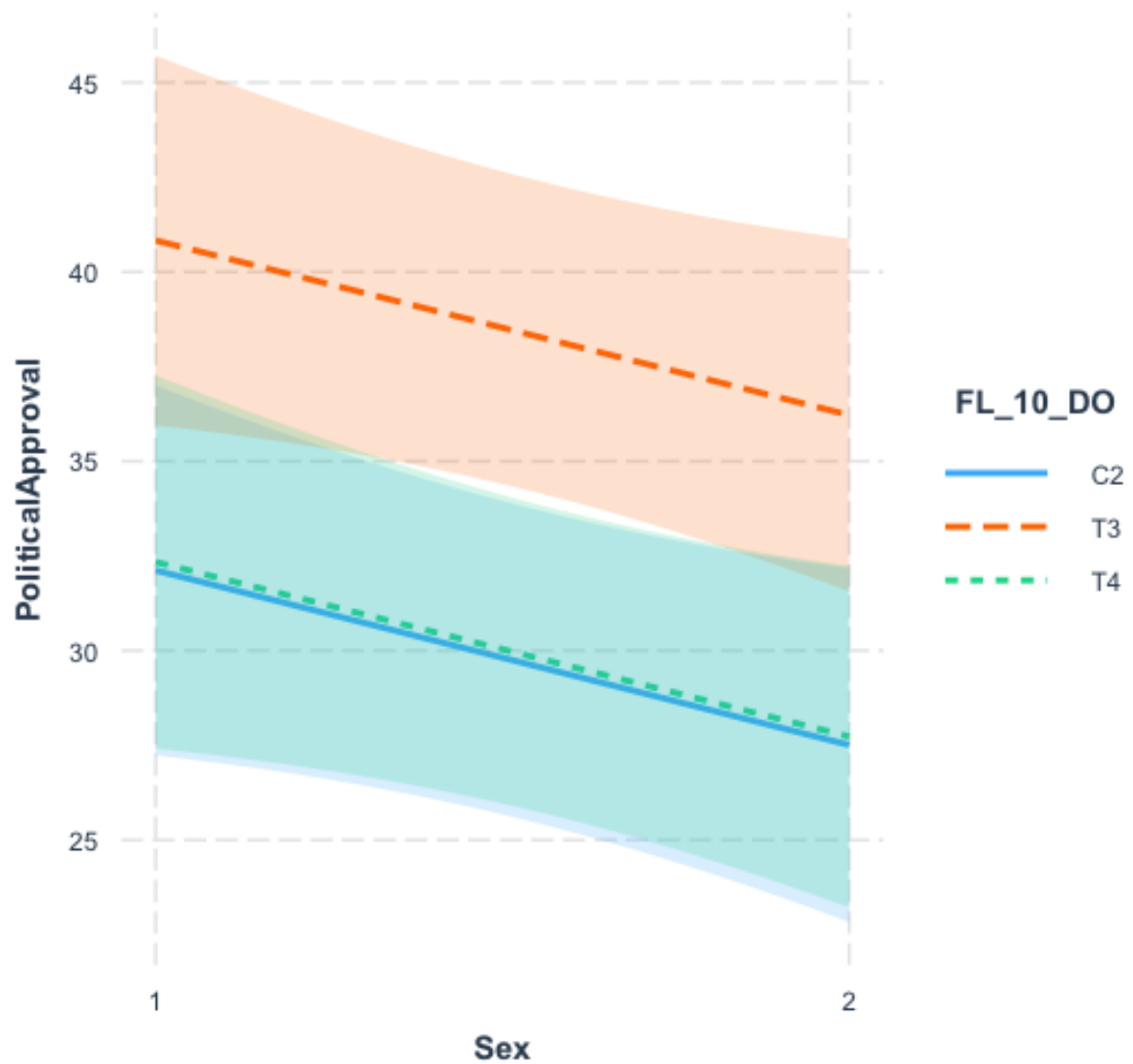

For sex variable, male gender was coded as 1 and female as 2. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

**Figure 6: Effect of ideology on political approval by treatment groups in legal scandal**
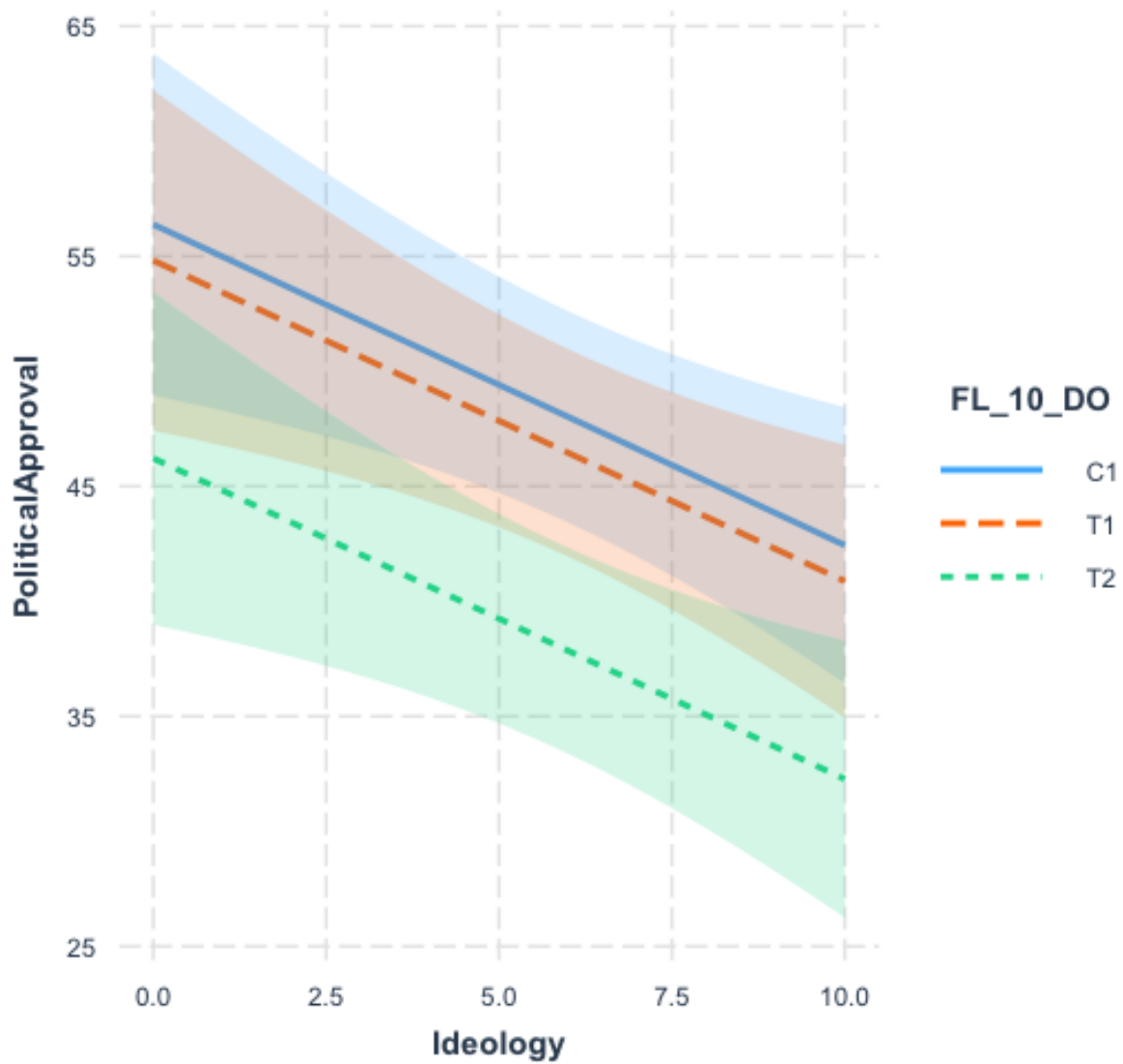
To remind a reader, ideology variable was measured on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 means liberal and 10 means conservative. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

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Plot 1: Mosaic plot for manipulation check in legal scandal

Manipulation check for Legal scandal
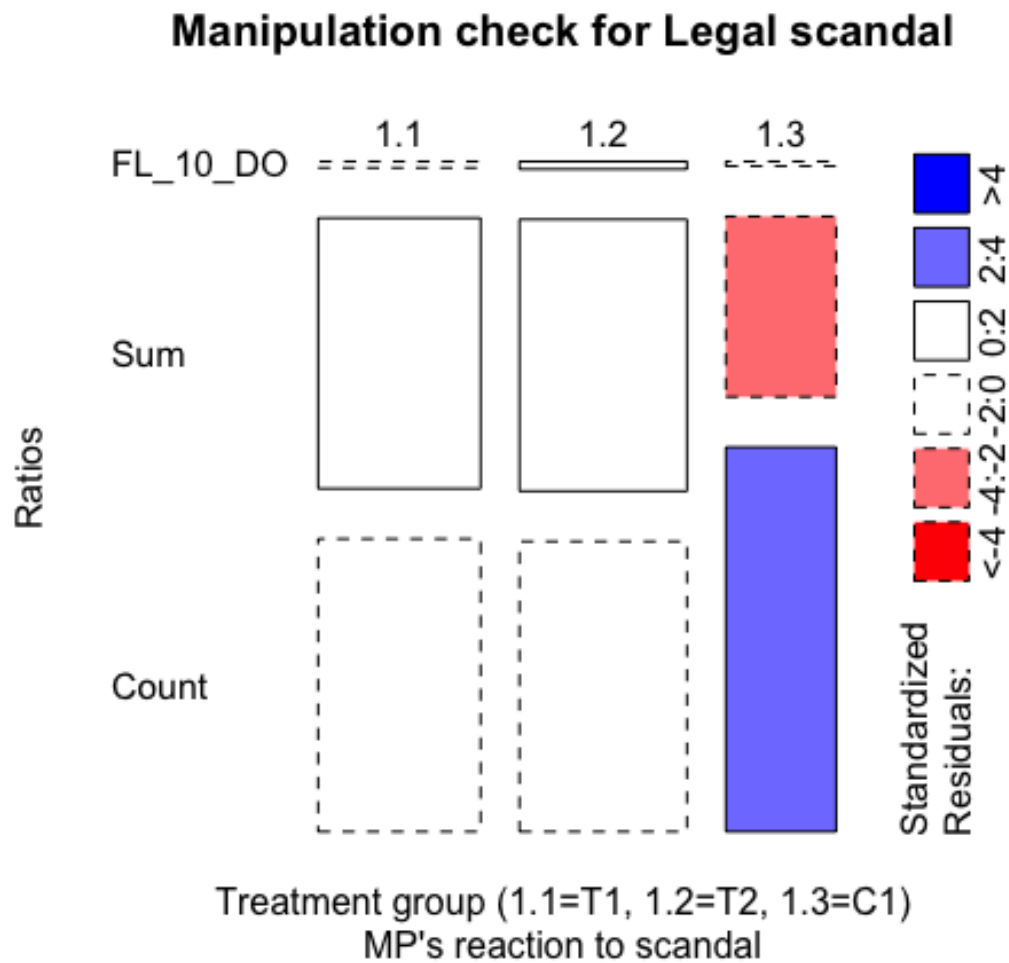
Sum represents the numbers of respondents who correctly answered the manipulation check questions about the intended treatment regarding the nature of the scandal and the type of communication strategy used by politician. Count is the total number of respondents per given treatment group.

Plot 2: Mosaic plot for manipulation check in illegal scandal

Manipulation check for Illegal scandal
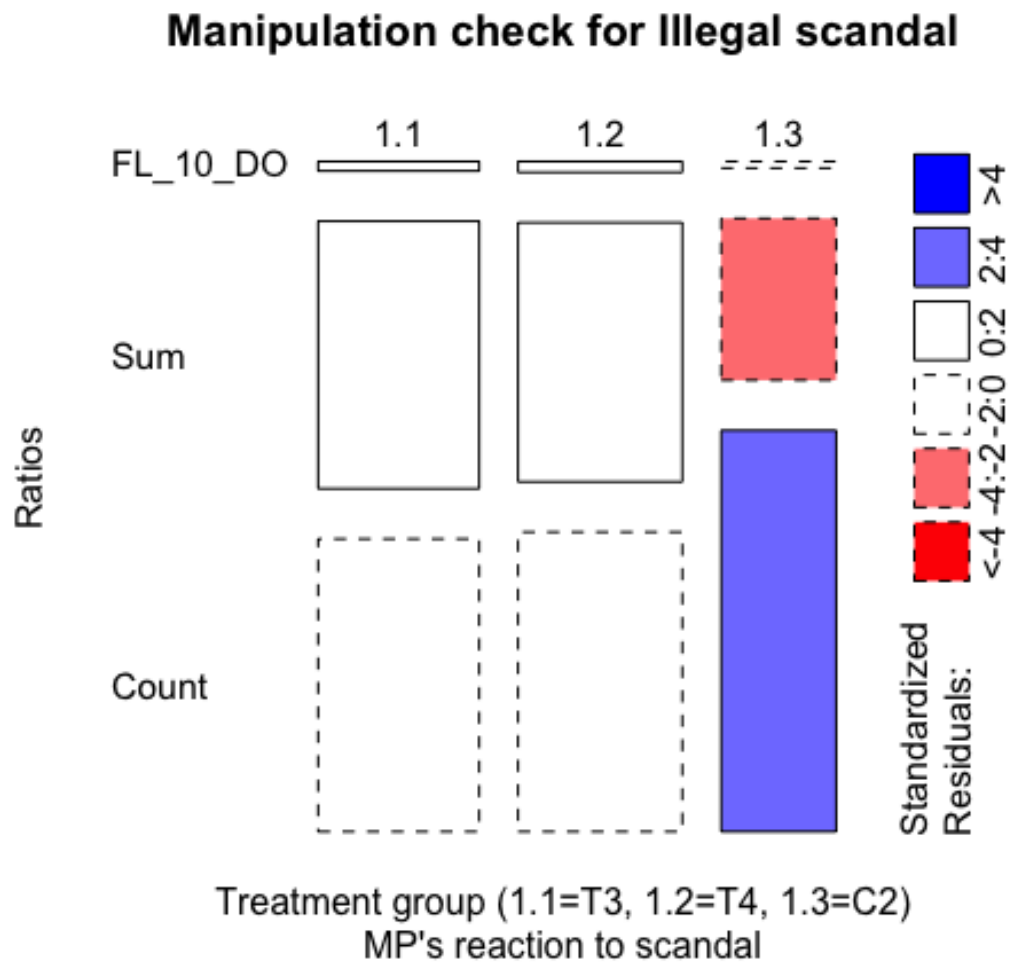
Qualtrics survey

Debrief Central European University
Informed Consent
Title: Mitigating the damage of political scandals: Which communication strategy works best?
Principal Investigator: Alex Rusnák
Thesis supervisor: Gabor Simonovits
Procedures
You are being asked to take part in a research study. If you decide to take part, you will complete an online survey that will take 6 minutes of your time.
Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal
You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time.
Contact Information
Contact Alex Rusnák at rusnak_alex@student.ceu.edu if you have questions or concerns.
Consent and Privacy
The survey and all your answers are anonymous. Your answers will only be used for research purposes.
There is no right or wrong answer to the questions, I am intersted in your opinion.
If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please click on the Agree button and start the survey.

⃝ I agree to participate in the survey (4)

Sex What is your gender?

⃝ Male (1)

⃝ Female (2)

Age Which categoty below includes your age?

○ 18-30 (1)

○ 31-40 (2)

○ 41-50 (3)

○ 51-64 (4)

○ 65+ (5)

Education What is the highest education you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

○ Less than high school degree (1)

○ High school degree or equivalent (2)

○ College degree (BA, Master, Phd, or other) (3)

Ideology In politics, people often talk about "liberalism" and "conservatism". Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means liberal and 10 means conservative?

○ 0 (0)

○ 1 (1)

○ 2 (2)

○ 3 (3)

○ 4 (4)

○ 5 (5)

○ 6 (6)

○ 7 (7)

○ 8 (8)

○ 9 (9)

○ 10 (10)

Debrief2 In the next section, you are going to read about a fictional Slovak politician and a fictional political scandal. Please read the following short news story carefully as we will ask questions related to the text later on in the survey.

T1 The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff member at the time he was already married. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Mária K., refused to comment.

Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press conference during which he admitted to the affair and apologized for his behavior. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he admitted that the affair was a mistake, regretted his

past actions and asked for forgiveness from his family and voters, but he said that it would not affect his performance as the legally elected member of parliament. Therefore, he refused calls for his resignation and said he would keep his seat in parliament.

T2 The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff member at the time he was already married. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Mária K., refused to comment.
Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press conference during which he denied all the accusations and called the news report as ridiculous. He said he did not have any intimate relationship with the former member staff member other than that related to his work. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he strongly reaffirmed the denial and said that since the allegations made against him are false and absurd, he did not plan to resign his seat in parliament.

C1 The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff member at the time he was already married. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Mária K., refused to comment.

T3 The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had been accused of domestic abuse and violence against his now ex-wife. According to the investigative report, MP Holub physically attacked and punched his then-wife on an unspecified date during summer of the previous year. Holub's ex-wife refused to comment.
Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press a press conference during which he denied all the accusations and called the news report as ridiculous. He said he did not commit any act of domestic abuse against his ex-wife and condemned any kind of violence in marriage as unacceptable. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he strongly reaffirmed the denial and said that since the allegations made against him are false and absurd, he did not plan to resign his seat in parliament.

T4 The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had been accused of domestic abuse and violence against his now ex-wife. According to the investigative report, MP Holub physically attacked and punched his then-wife on an unspecified date during summer of the previous year. Holub's ex-wife refused to comment.

Immediately after the news broke out, MP Holub held a press conference during which he admitted to the allegations and apologized for his behaviour. Amid further heated criticism, Holub released the written statement in which he admitted that the assault was a mistake, regretted his past actions and asked for forgiveness from his ex-wife and voters, but he said that it would not affect his performance as the legally elected member of parliament. Therefore, he refused calls for his resignation and said he would keep his seat in parliament.

**C2** The public broadcaster reports on new evidence stating that Róbert Holub, currently independent member of the parliament, had been accused of domestic abuse and violence against his now ex-wife. According to the investigative report, MP Holub physically attacked and punched his then-wife on an unspecified date during summer of the previous year. Holub's ex-wife refused to comment.
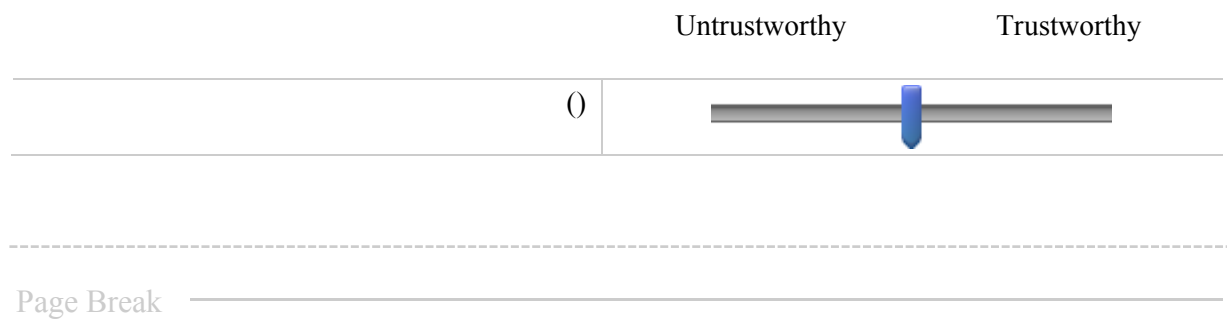
Resign Based on what you just read in the previous report, what is your opinion on the resignation of this public official on the scale below?
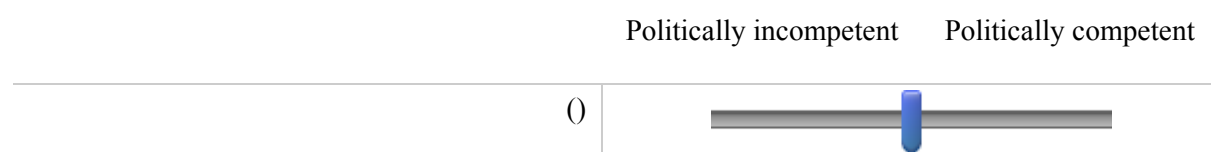
	Resign	Not Resign
()		
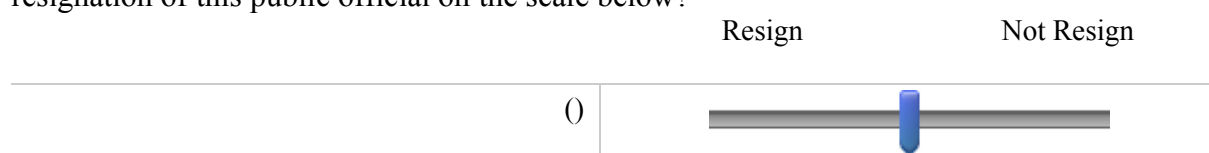
Trustworthy Based on what you just read in the previous report, how do you feel about this public official on the scale below?
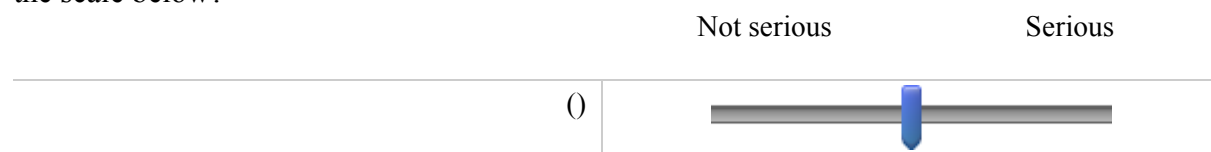
	Untrustworthy	Trustworthy
()		

Page Break

Compt Based on what you just read in the previous report, how do you feel about this public official on the scale below?

	Politically incompetent	Politically competent
()		

Page Break ⸺

Seri Based on what you just read in the previous report, how do you feel about the scandal on the scale below?

	Not serious	Serious
()		

Page Break

Plaus Based on what you just read in the previous report, how do you feel about the scandal on the scale below?

	Not plausible to happen	Plausible to happen
()		

Mache1 How did the member of parliament respond to the news report about the political scandal?

- ○ denied allegations (1)

- ○ confessed to allegations (2)

- ○ gave no comment (3)

Mache2 What was the scandal reported in the previous news story about?

- ○ domestic violence (1)

- ○ extramarital affair (2)

- ○ drunk driving (3)

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