**Federal Legislative Political Scandals: How the Media Reports Differently Between Political Parties**

**By Matt Metzger  
Western Illinois University**

Abstract

This paper is a study and investigation on how different media outlets report and cover different legislative political scandals. The majority of my research comes from the Lexus Nexus Academic research database. The plan for this paper is to discover if the media gives more attention to Republican scandals, rather than that of Democrats.

Media is very important to all citizens. Mass media is and has been the information super highway when it comes to information from around the country. Since the early invention of the printing press, media as we know it has come a long way. Newspaper, radio, television, and the internet are all ways that news and information are broadcasted to the mainstream American public. Mass media has the ability to influence its audience by reporting different stories about candidates in an election, and has the potential to change the outcome by reporting different facts. With the utilization of knowledge given to us by the media, we know what our legislators in our capital are making changes on. Not only is it a way for the citizens to keep their own set of checks and balances on the legislators, it is a way for legislators to communicate directly with the general public. Disparity in media reporting is basically the difference in reporting on different subjects. Disparity can cause a separate reaction out of viewers by how much or how little attention it gives certain events. When dealing with scandals, you can bring to light an event by reporting on it on several different media outlets. In just the opposite, you can keep an issue or event quiet by not reporting on it at all, or reporting on it very little. Media bias is prevalent. Much research has been done on media biases, especially when dealing with politics. In Thomas Streissguth’s book *Media Bias*, he discusses how journalists today often dissect news reports and analyze facts to find an unfair slant on certain issues, and claim objectivity in their writing. The Disparity Theory in mass media that will be researched will look at how media reports on scandals, and the difference in the numbers on how often it is reported. The theory claims that if there is a bias in media, then there will be a large difference in the number of times that a certain political party will be reported on.

This research will elaborate on 6 federal political scandals, and look at how often they are reported on, as well as to what extent. The scandals were picked at random, and there are 3 Democratic scandals and 3 Republican scandals. The research is based off of inspecting the number of articles in the following week after the scandal broke.

**Investigating Media Bias**

Many in the past have tried to put an actual measure on media bias. Different news organizations realize this and often report as being "fair and balanced" to accurately broadcast a story to entice a broader audience that just wants the story, rather than a skewed view of a certain political party. In the journal article Objective Evidence on Media Bias: Newspaper Coverage of Congressional Party Switchers, they describe how many sources answer in the affirmative, typically indicting the media as a pro-liberal or pro-democratic slant. The research looks at the coverage when members of parties engage in the same behavior (Nevin, 312) Nevin describes that the leftward leaning tilt of journalists does not necessarily establish the leftward leaning tilt of journalism. Journalists are encouraged to detach their ideas from their work, and suggest that "Personal political beliefs are left at home not only because journalists are trained to be objective and detached, but also because their credibility and their paychecks depend on them remaining detached."

Another way to measure media bias is to measure the disparity in the amount of coverage of political scandals between two parties, which is what this paper is researching. The theory is that since there is a bias in the media, that one political party’s scandals would be reported on more and more frequently than others.

**Method of research**

The method of research for this paper is looking at the number of articles that were printed the following week after the alleged scandal was broken. This will show how often that a certain legislative scandal was reported on negatively after it was broken. Lexis Nexus is the academic search engine that was used to investigate the differences with political parties. When looking at the different political scandal and legislators, and how often their names are used on a broad search of all media articles before and after, there is a huge spike in the usage the day after the scandal was broken. Looking at each scandal separately, one can track how often that the legislator was written about following their scandal. This will show examples of how each scandal is reported on negatively and how there is a difference.

**Scandalous Legislators**

Charlie Rangel (D) - Charlie Rangel is on the list twice. He had two memorable scandals where his ethical values where in question. The first, broke July 11, 2008 by *The Washington Post*. It described how Rangel was accused of soliciting donations for a public service center in his name for the City College of New York from businesses with interest before his Ways and Means Committee, and was done so using congressional letterhead. The House Ethics Committee investigated for official misconduct due to using the Congressional letterhead to solicit donations. His article count goes as follows; July 12th-14, July 13th-4, July 14th-14, July 15th-36, July 16th-33, July 17th-20, and July 18th-26.

Charlie Rangel (D) - Rangel's second incident of scandal occurred just four days after his original break of ethical misconduct. The New York Times reported that the second event involved renting apartments. He rented four apartments and established a campaign office within the four apartments. This alone was in violation of both city and state regulations involving zoning laws. He was renting these said apartments for well below the market value. Now, to the normal person, this would not seem as a wrong thing, as in getting a good deal. But for Rangel, he was renting the apartments for roughly $3,894 a month, compared to his neighbors who were renting for as much as $8,125 per month. That equals out to over $30,000 per year, which could be observed as a gift, which violates the $100 House of Representatives gift limit. His article count (which overlapped with his first incident on July 15th, 2008) goes as follows; July 15th-36, July 16th-33, July 17th-20, July 18th-26, July 19th-5, July 20th-2, and July 21st-8.

William J. Jefferson (D) - The scandal that involved William J. Jefferson was a historical milestone. It was the first congressional office that was raided by the FBI. In mid 2005, the Louisiana Congressman was suspected of bribery, and when FBI agents raided his office in D.C., agents found $90,000 in $10,000 increments in food containers in the freezer. He was charged with sixteen counts related to corruption. He was handed down a sentence of thirteen years, the longest sentence punished upon a Congressman for any crime. He is still currently behind bars. After the break of his scandal, his article count goes as follows; August 4th-12, August 5th-3, August 6th-1, August 7th-1, August 8th-2, August 9th-3, and August 10th-2.

Ted Stevens (Rep.) - In May of 2007, the *Anchorage Daily News* reported that Stevens was being investigated by the FBI and a federal grand jury on the remodeling of his Alaskan home. He was indicted in 2008 for seven counts of failure to report gifts, a felony. After the break in his story, his article count goes as follows; July 29th-217, July 30th-235, July 31st-172, August 1st-96, August 2nd-42, August 3rd-46, August 4th-68.

Randy "Duke" Cunningham (Rep.) - The Copley News Service reported that Cunningham was charged with conspiracy to commit bribery, mail fraud, wire fraud and tax evasion, all dealing with government contracts. He sold his house for an incredible $1,675,000, which was placed back on the market, remaining unsold for another 8 months. The price was then reduced to $975,000. He was also investigated for living in a yacht that was owed by the same person who he sold his over inflated house to. He was not paying rent on the yacht which he was living in during his time in Washington, but he was paying for maintenance. His article count goes as follows; June 15th-10, June 16th-13, June 17th-10, June 18th-3, June 19th-0, June 20th-14, June 21st-15.

Tom DeLay (Rep.)- DeLay's story originally broke in late 2004, pairing him with Jack Abramoff, a lobbyist involved in what came to be known as the Abramoff Scandal. He was reprimanded twice by the House Ethics Committee and resigned from the House on June 9th 2006. He was later found to have illegally channeled funds to the campaign of a Republican state legislator from the group Americans for a Republican Majority. After news broke on his involvement, his article count goes as follows; October 1st-126, October 2nd-30, October 3rd-20, October 4th-48, October 5th-57, October 6th-100, October 7th-158.

**Disparity results**

Looking at these results, you can see that the main focus with these scandals was focused on a lack of ethical judgment. Money was a key factor in all of these indictments, and is always a tease for legislators. Looking at how the legislators are elected into office by the people, it’s hard to imagine that there is only as many articles as there are. The severity varies for each of these instances, but it is obvious that there is a major difference between the two political parties. Even the fact that Charlie Rangel had two separate scandals break in the same week, he still had minimal exposure during the break of his scandals. William Jefferson set records in his scandal. He was the first legislator to have his offices searched by the federal government, the same government that he was charged to run. Not only was he a person of importance in the government, but a very substantial amount of money was found in his freezer. This was an obvious ploy that he was trying to hide the fact that he has tens of thousands of dollars in his possession that he wanted to keep hidden.

When looking at the other side of the aisle, you can see that there is a considerable amount more articles reporting on the Republican scandals that happened. For the failure to report gifts, the articles that contained Stevens skyrocketed for the first couple days after his scandal broke. DeLay had a considerable rise in the popularity of articles on him within the week. He later resigned from his position in the House following the Abramoff Scandal. The only scandal in the Republican grouping that was considerably close to the Democrats was Cunningham. Considering that was charged with conspiracy, instead of the actual crime.

The graph, illustrated in Table 1, shows just how different the political parties have been represented in the following week after their scandals broke.

Table 1

The demographics published above give evidence to the bias between political parties. This shows that there is disparity within mass media. By looking at an equal representation (in numbers) of Federal legislative political scandals, we can compare and measure qualitatively just how often these political scandals are reported. Republicans were more likely to be reported on in different news sources on their scandals than Democrats were. This shows how the disparity theory operates in the media, even though journalists claim to be objective and remain detached in their writing about political events. The media can remain objective in reporting on it, but the lack of reporting also stimulates a bias for choosing to not report on an event because of the negative impact that it will impose upon an individual, or a political party.

Bibliography

Thompson, J.B. (2000). *Political scandal: power and visibility in the media age.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Puglisi, R. and Snyder, J.M. (December 5, 2010) Newspaper Coverage of Political Scandals.

Dudley, W. (2001). *Political scandals: opposing viewpoints*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press

Williams, R. (1998). *Political scandals in the USA*. Edinburgh, UK: Keele University Press.

Puglisi, R. and Snyder, J.M. (April 7, 2008) Media Coverage of Political Scandals.

Niven, D. (2003). Objective evidence on media bias: newspaper coverage of congressional party switchers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *80*(2), 311-326.

Streissguth, T. (2007). *Media bias*. Terrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish.