POLITICAL scandal is a relatively new subject for academic inquiry but there is a significant and growing literature (Markovits and Silverstein, 1988: Williams, 1998: Thompson, 2000: Welch and Williams, 2003) as well as numerous accounts of the origins, unfolding and consequences of particular scandals. The ‘scandal database’ has greatly expanded but it is not clear whether this accumulation of data has significantly improved our understanding of political scandal. Basic questions about their character and causation, role and importance remain difficult to answer. It is even possible that the apparent increase in political scandals in recent years has inadvertently helped to create a ‘data fog’ in which it has become more, rather than less, difficult to discern shapes, trends, structures and patterns.

Accounts of individual scandals are important and necessary but they do not yet seem to have produced much in the way of plausible comparative or historical generalisations. The suggestion here is that in order to understand political scandals, they must be contextualised. They need to be located structurally within distinctive governmental systems and they also need to be connected to wider processes of social and political change and development within particular societies. It is not only a question of what implications or consequences scandals have for politics and government but of how social and political processes help generate and structure political scandal. The aim of this chapter is therefore to locate political scandal within a broader understanding of American political development, history and culture. Political scandals in the United States did not begin with Watergate and nor will they end with whatever scandal tomorrow’s headlines bring. Public interest in, and concern about, political scandals is by no means an exclusively modern phenomenon but was also clearly evident in earlier periods of American history.

Before embarking on an attempt to situate American political scandals in their historical, institutional and cultural context, it is necessary to sketch the nature of the phenomenon under examination. It would be preferable to be more precise but political scandal is hard to define, classify and measure. There is no settled method of gauging their relative importance or of assessing whether political scandals have become more or less important than they once were. There is also room for debate about their impact on political development; are they superficial phenomena, ‘the froth on the political cappuccino’ (Williams, 1998, 131), or are they influential, even decisive, events? The upsurge of academic interest in political scandals suggests either that political scandals have grown in importance or frequency in recent years or that political scandals generally have been subject to some historical revisionism.

It follows that some caution is necessary in approaching the subject and judgements can only be tentative and provisional but some specificity is possible. Scandal is conventionally defined by reference to notions of disgrace and damage to reputation. Allegations of misconduct are at the root of political scandal but that does not mean that scandal is synonymous with misconduct. Allegation of misconduct is a necessary but not sufficient means...
for creating a political scandal and the relevant questions are, who
makes the allegation and who responds to them? Political scandal,
by definition, depends on public awareness and there can be no
awareness without some means of identifying possible misconduct
and sharing that knowledge with a wider audience. It follows that
political scandals have both political and media dimensions. The
media do not simply report on political scandals because publicity
is an essential part of the scandal itself. Misconduct without
publicity can never be a scandal. It is not possible to retrospectively
‘discover’ a scandal. If the misconduct was not publicised at the
time, there could not have been a scandal. President John F.
Kennedy’s reckless sexual liaisons appear to provide ample material
for a major political scandal but they were not reported and
therefore no scandal occurred.

This is not to imply that political scandals are whatever the media
say they are, or that they are simply ‘invented’ by the media. The
combination of alleged misconduct and media reporting are the
basic elements of political scandal but, for ‘take off’ to occur,
political scandals require additional dimensions, notably an
attentive audience and a process of political contestation. Thus
the scale and importance of a political scandal cannot be measure
solely in terms of the gravity of the alleged misconduct because
other considerations, such as the breadth and depth of media
coverage, the receptiveness and interest of the public and the roles
and positions adopted by particular political institutions and
political personalities, all need to be taken into consideration. In
practice there is little consensus on what differentiates major from
minor scandals. It is possible, for example, to characterise the
Clinton-Lewinsky scandal as either a gross trivialisation of political
debate or as a morally and politically important effort to arrest the
undisciplined excesses of amoral politicians and to restore moral
accountability to the White House.

Political scandals exhibit a range of defining characteristics, and
they display many different forms of political conflict. Disputation
occurs about what happened, and the significance of whatever
happened. It also occurs about the motives of the accusers,
the response of the public and the responsibilities of different
institutions to resolve it. Alleged misconduct may be defended
as perfectly legitimate, or at least as common place, accepted
behaviour, or as trivial and irrelevant to the larger purposes of
politics. The media may be blamed in their roles as both definers
and messengers of political scandal. They may be accused of
conducting personal vendettas, of being blindly partisan or
incurably corrupt, of simply ‘muckraking’ and lowering the tone
of political discourse. Public ‘outrage’ at a political scandal may
be characterised as synthetic, unrepresentative, disproportionate
and based on limited information and understanding. Political
institutions may dispute about whose role it is to detect and expose
misconduct, to pursue criminal prosecution of wrong-doers, to
broaden or narrow the inquiries, to debate public policies relevant
to the misconduct and to change laws and procedures.

A brief examination of some apparently similar episodes in
American political history can help illuminate the salience of these
interactions of politics, media and public. But it is important
to remember that just as accounts of particular contemporary
scandals are deeply contested by both participants and observers,
so too were earlier scandals. Further, historical eras strongly
associated with political scandal and corruption are frequently
subject to the process of historical revisionism which argues that
the particular period was not as bad as it has conventionally been
depicted.

The Bill Clinton - Monica Lewinsky affair:
a gross trivialisation of political debate,
or a morally and politically important effort to
arrest the excesses of amoral politicians, and
to restore moral accountability to the White
House?

Image: Reuters
We first examine the Gilded Age in nineteenth century American history. This era, whose boundaries and character are still disputed by historians, is normally linked to the excesses of post-Civil War politics and lasted until 1890 or so. The term ‘Gilded Age’ is derived from the eponymous novel of Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner published in 1873 which depicted the period as mired in corruption, dishonesty, deception and greed. The newspapers of the period were filled with sensational accounts of scandalous behaviour by politicians. The politics of much nineteenth century politics was intensely personal and the French commentator, Alexis de Tocqueville, lamented the tendency of journalists to ‘assail the character of individuals, to track them into private life and disclose all their weaknesses and vices’ (Summers, 2000, 827).

The Gilded Age witnessed many political scandals, notably the Credit Mobilier scandal of 1872 in which senior politicians were bribed with railroad shares, the Belknap scandal in 1876 involving bribery of a member of the cabinet and scandals in revenue collection and the allocation of mail delivery franchises. The publicity attendant on these scandals helped create the impression that it was a golden age of scandal arising from endemic corruption in government. This impression was created by newspaper coverage and the observations of authoritative critics such as James Bryce (Bryce, 1888).

But in exploring the incidence and significance of political scandal it is important to note that commentary and reportage are rarely disinterested. Party politics in the Gilded Age were intensely competitive and fiercely partisan. It was a bitter contest for office rather than any fundamental ideological division between Republicans and Democrats. It was a contest for ‘spoils’, for the advantages given by possession of office in terms of licenses, jobs, franchises, regulations, subsidies and tax evasion. The principal sources of party funding were bribery and ‘kickbacks’ together with levies imposed on government employees. It is not possible to dispense government influence, favours and jobs without winning elections and, in the struggle to win elections, political campaigning became progressively more negative and unscrupulous. The size of the stakes in terms of patronage can be demonstrated by the doubling in size of the federal bureaucracy between 1871 and 1881, from 51,000 to 100,000 employees. The political parties were evenly matched in terms of their electoral support and the very closeness of elections both encouraged electoral malpractice and accusations of vote buying and ballot rigging.

In the Gilded Age, party politicians were very willing to accuse their opponents of misconduct partly because it helped to give them the moral highground and they could be sure such charges would be widely reported, and partly because the imperative need, for party funding purposes, to gain, through election victory, access to the resources of government. Once in power, allegations of misconduct could still be used to ensure that the opposition was weakened and on the defensive. The party in control of the Senate or House of Representatives was able to use the investigative authority of congressional committees to hold hearings and publish reports about the alleged misdeeds of opposition politicians.

It was noted earlier that political scandals are not merely or solely about politicians. They are public events, dependent for the existence on the media publicising allegations which raise public awareness and concern. But it would be a mistake to see the role of the media in the Gilded Age as that of the impartial, dispassionate, detached observers of events committed to rigorous journalistic standards and single minded seekers after truth. The reality was that the newspapers of the time were also intensely partisan. Both daily and weekly newspapers were dedicated to the cause of partisan advantage and could find no fault with their own party and nothing right with the opposition party. According to Calhoun, “Their ‘news’ pages as well as their editorial columns served up mixtures of vituperation, trumped up charges of fraud and corruption and downright falsehoods about the opposing party” (Calhoun, 1996, 187). Kaplan even argues that ‘Partisanship was a public and ubiquitous phenomenon that defined the very essence of nineteenth century American journalism.’ (Kaplan,
This was not surprising because in effect newspapers were dependent on party funding and editors and journalists are rarely anxious to bite the hand that feeds them.

The combination of closely contested elections fought by determined political parties supported by their own intensely partisan supporters in the media was matched by an electorate which was also strongly partisan and highly mobilized. Politics was a subject of keen interest to many people, voter turnouts reached record levels in this period and the partisanship of politicians reached into the mass public.

Given the prominence these features of political life assumed in this period, its subsequent labelling as a period of hitherto unparalleled corruption and scandal is unsurprising. There certainly were lots of allegations of misconduct which were widely and loudly reported and substantial sections of the population were excited by them. This does not necessarily imply that there was a lot of misconduct, that the allegations were fairly reported or that the public was well informed. Political scandal was an important weapon on the battleground of politics and as long as the other side used it, you were forced to retaliate. And if they refrained from using it, you could always get your retaliation in first and secure a possibly decisive political advantage.

As the need and opportunity for political parties to depend on 'kickbacks' and levies on employees declined, as the financial dependency of newspapers on parties lessened and as the public’s information increasingly came from new and divergent sources, the climate of political scandal also changed. In short, significant changes to party organisation and competition, as well as to the economics of newspaper publishing help create different incentives and constraints for the generation of political scandal. The nature and extent of public involvement in and perception of potential political scandal also changes when they receive information from different, conflicting sources rather than relying on a local relentlessly partisan viewpoint.

The Gilded Age was succeeded by the Progressive Era (1890-1913) which offers a very different example of how American political development shaped the incidence and form of political scandal. The characteristics of progressivism are well known, it was moralistic, valued efficiency and specialised expertise, it was technocratic and anti-party in spirit. Politics became less competitive as the Republican Party gained ascendency and, as election outcomes became more certain, party organisation declined and the incentive to engage in scandal mongering was reduced. Yet, paradoxically, there was an upsurge of political scandal partly because the progressive reform movements outside the two party system grew in importance. From 1881 onwards the federal civil service’s reputation as the bastion of patronage had been destroyed by waves of civil service reform which saw merit replace party patronage for most civil service posts.

While the changes in party organisation and practice helped change the incentive and opportunity structure for scandal, there were parallel changes in the mass media which produced new and less obviously partisan sources of misconduct allegations. Newspapers became much less dependent on party subsidy as the rapid growth of the commercial economy boosted advertising revenues and allowed the severing, or at least loosening, of party affiliations. While parties could claim solid mass allegiance from blocks of votes, newspapers and other journals found it more difficult to take an independent stance.
The development of popular magazines as a new, national medium of mass communication had a significant impact on public awareness. (Schneirov, 1994) Newspapers had been locally owned with parochial priorities. The new magazines which flourished in the early years of the twentieth century gave a national profile to reform movements and, in effect, helped to nationalise what had hitherto been local concerns. But political scandals were shaped not only by new forms of media but also by a new breed of journalists who were concerned to make news, to set political agendas, rather than simply report events. They saw themselves as independents and journalism began to establish itself as an autonomous profession. In the nineteenth century, university schools of journalism were almost unknown, but, by 1915, 39 universities taught journalism. Codes of ethics for journalists began to develop and the National Press Club was formed in 1908 signifying that journalism was now a respectable, even high status, occupation.

The activities of the new breed of journalists were pejoratively labelled ‘muckraking’ by Theodore Roosevelt who likened them to the muckrakers of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. The epithet is believed to have been provoked by reaction to the ‘Treason in the Senate’ series published in 1906 in the Cosmopolitan magazine of William Randolph Hearst. The main newspaper magnates, Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer helped to foster a better informed and less parochial newspaper readership. And the journalists termed ‘muckrakers’ increasingly accepted the label as a badge of honour.

This chapter has thus far been concerned to identify some key features of the American political development which generated political scandal and which help us understand the place of political scandal in American politics in particular periods. Thus, evenly matched and highly competitive parties competing for patronage spoils help increased the incidence of scandal. But so do reform movements and new, less partisan, media dedicated to uncovering political misconduct. The mass media are rarely passive observers but often take sides in the political contest. At different times, they may support one party against another or ‘good governance’ against corrupt, machine politics. The general public may be politically mobilised in a partisan cause, as many were in the Gilded Age, or they become informed citizens concerned at the apparent moral decay of the political class.

Thus, although the common elements of political scandal – competitive politicians, allegations of misconduct, an effective mass media and concerned public – remain constant, there is scope for considerable change within each element and in the ways in which they interact with each other. This latter point is particularly important when we consider the political and institutional consequences of periods of extensive political scandal. When there has been an increase in the number or scale of political scandals, this often prompts some form of institutional or procedural reforms designed to prohibit or restrict the misconduct which led to scandals. One consequence is to refashion the political architecture and shift concerns about misconduct from one institutional space or process to another. Where there are frequent electoral scandals as there were in the Gilded Age when electoral procedures were largely unregulated, it generated numerous electoral reform proposals, some of which were implemented. The introduction of, for example, the secret ballot and stricter voter registration requirements helped reduce the scope for electoral scandals. Similarly, Progressive Era reforms, which eroded the position of city bosses helped limit the scope for political corruption in local government by substituting professional managers for politicians.
The character of political scandals in the United States is shaped by the political culture in a variety of ways, not least by preceding waves of political scandal and reform. Although it is a common response of participants and commentators to try to explain current scandals in terms of their predecessors one danger is that insufficient attention is paid to the ways in which politics, the media and public opinion have changed. Political scandals can, therefore, by implication, be helpful in pinpointing important phases in American political development and the most obvious example is the Watergate Scandal.

The relationship of Watergate to American political development is not straightforward. It clearly has many influences on politics, the mass media and on public opinion but we note here only those influences most important to the incidence of political scandal. First, it made it legitimate for members of Congress to question publicly the integrity of the White House and encouraged the legislature to take a prominent role in holding successive presidents to account for alleged misconduct. Congressional politicians who witnessed the virtual canonisation of Senator Sam Ervin, Chair of the Watergate Committee, were not slow to appreciate the political benefits of prime time televised investigations of White House scandals. The initial reluctance of senior members of Congress to serve on the Watergate Committee was influenced by their assessment of the political fallout likely to follow an unprecedented and probably unsuccessful challenge to presidential dignity and authority. The resignation of Richard Nixon was therefore an historic event which emphasised the potential of political scandal to shape public events and determine political fortunes. Thus, when the next major presidential scandal emerged in the 1980s, there was an unseemly scramble in both the Senate and House of Representatives to serve on the joint congressional committee investigating the Iran-Contra Scandal.

The mass media were slow to react to the first Watergate disclosures and there seems to have been a reluctance shared with Congress to think the worst of President Nixon who, after all, had been re-elected by a record margin in 1972. But as the Department of Justice investigators gradually picked up the trail that led to the Oval Office itself, the role of one newspaper, The Washington Post, also became very prominent. The Post itself became news and its reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, were increasingly seen as ‘white knights’ illuminating the darker side of presidential politics. The age of the ‘investigative reporter’ had dawned and many people believed that these new celebrity journalists had double handedly unmasked a scandalous conspiracy against the American public. (Bernstein and Woodward, 1974) Thus both the role and status of the mass media were different after Watergate. Perception and self-perception had changed.

This impact of Watergate on public opinion was also striking. The televised hearings on Capitol Hill were avidly watched by millions of viewers. And as the scandal unfolded, President Nixon’s approval ratings slid to unprecedented levels. The public visibly cared about this political scandal. Discussion of the decline in public trust in government and politicians are often linked to Watergate suggesting perhaps that it symbolised the end of an era of deference and respect in American politics. But opinion poll evidence suggests that the decline in public trust and confidence in government was already noticeable in the 1960s and, while Watergate seemed to exacerbate it considerably, it was not the origin or the sole cause. Contemporary public opinion is now deeply sceptical about the efficacy of political institutions and the motives and trustworthiness of politicians of all parties and more willing to believe the worst.

Thus our understanding of contemporary political scandals in the United States is informed by politicians who are convinced of the potential political benefit of making scandal allegations and by a mass media which knows that publicising political misconduct can improve ratings, sell newspapers and win Pulitzer Prizes. And they are played out before a public which is better informed about political scandals by a variety of media forms and technologies and which is deeply suspicious of most things political. It is perhaps
not surprising that these political and social developments have created a culture receptive to the generation of political scandal.

If the resignation of President Nixon over Watergate was an important landmark in the history of American political scandal, the unsuccessful impeachment of President Clinton in 1998 was even more remarkable. Nixon resigned to avoid almost certain successful impeachment and criminal prosecution. Yet the Clinton impeachment proceeded although the prospects of it succeeding were never high. As the first president to be impeached since Andrew Johnson in the 1860s, Clinton spent much of his time in the White House dealing with a series of political scandals. It was almost as though once Clinton became enmeshed in the Whitewater scandal, there was a scandal production machine which kept finding new allegations for him to address.

It was noted earlier that high-profile political scandals often generate structural and procedural reforms which have important consequences for the contexts in which subsequent political scandals occur. After Watergate, the political architecture of the American state was significantly changed in ways likely to make it more likely that the misconduct of politicians would be subject to formal inquiries when the president of the United States breaches the trust of the American public as spectacularly as President Nixon did, trust in all politicians, is likely to decline. The response was to create new institutions, such as the special prosecutor or Office of Independent Counsel, to provide new ways of calling politicians to account. (Williams, 1999) President Nixon's decision to dissemble the first Special Prosecutor, Archibald Cox, as part of what became known as the 'Saturday Night Massacre', convinced many of the need for an independent means of investigating the executive branch. This desire was enacted in legislation as part of the Ethics in Government Act in 1978, which took oversight responsibilities for the independent counsel away from the president and gave it to a judicial panel.

But while the new independent counsel office was to play a major role in the political scandals of the Clinton Presidency, it was simply part of a culture of distrust which saw the FBI test the integrity of members of Congress by offering them bribes in the ABSCAM Scandal. The politicians who helped pass the new laws and create the new institutions presumably hoped that such measures would help restore public confidence but their impact was to ensure that political conduct was more closely monitored than ever before. (Roberts and Doss Jr, 1997) Together with the increased vigilance of the mass media and their greater willingness to intrude into what had previously been private matters, political life had become a scandal minefield and politicians were forced to tread very carefully.

Politicians who failed to recognize that the scandal climate had changed or who were unable to change their behaviour, for example, Senator Robert Packwood and, arguably, Bill Clinton, were likely to find themselves embroiled in scandal. Misconduct, which, at one level, was largely ignored, if not formally condoned, such as improper use of the congressional frank, breaches of employment and earning rules, and sexual harassment, now became serious matters and a rich source of political scandal which helped bring down some senior politicians.

Since the passage of the law enacting the independent counsel law, a succession of presidents; Reagan, Bush, and Clinton has been caught, in varying degrees, in the scandal trap. The independent counsel is, in effect, a legalised political scandal hunter who can explore personal and private matters, as well as the discharge of public duties, to find evidence of scandalous behaviour. One lesson of Watergate is that scandal hunters need independence from the White House in order to do their jobs. Without such independence, they risk summary dismissal when they stray into sensitive territory. With independence, no skeletons are safe in their closets because with sufficient time and resources they will be located and rattled in public.

Legalising and institutionalising presidential scandal hunters creates new difficulties for those charged with scandal management. There are a variety of strategies available for deployment but, almost by definition, we only know the less successful strategies because we know there was a scandal. An entirely successful scandal management strategy should presumably be impossible to detect. The most popular techniques include plausible deniability where there is an attempt to focus blame and attention on the unauthorised and unknown actions of subordinates. This was used at several stages of the Watergate Scandal until the scandal hunters arrived at the door of the Oval Office and it was also used in the Iran-Contra Scandal where Oliver North and John Poindexter accepted responsibility to protect President Reagan.

The famous Watergate question was ‘what did the President know and when did he know?’ and this proved difficult for an activist president like Nixon to answer without incriminating himself. In Iran-Contra, the question became ‘did the President know anything and when did he forget it?’ Reagan’s denials had greater political credibility because his limited attention span and inability to recall names and detail was already well known before he was afflicted with Alzheimer’s. Plausible desirability may be linked with other strategies, for example, ‘stonewalling’ where the president denies any wrongdoing, refuses to respond to questions and blocks the efforts of journalists, independent counsel and other investigators to acquire further information. Thus the claim is made that the president has done nothing wrong but if some misconduct did occur he did not know about it or authorise it and in any case there are sound constitutional and legal principles, such as executive privilege which justify a refusal to co-operate with investigators. Another approach is to impugn the motives of those who make the allegations. The Clinton White House, for example, attempted to divert public attention and criticism away from their own conduct by identifying themselves as ‘victims’ of a ‘vast right-wing conspiracy’. (Brock, 2000) Allegations of scandal are thus sometimes met with counter-allegations. To the Clintons, the scandal wars that dominated their administrations were waged by political opponents who would not accept political defeat at the ballot box.

Political scandal in the United States is characterized not merely by allegations and counter-allegation but by escalation. As noted above, the Clintons, in effect, accused their critics of trying to mount a constitutional coup d’etat. Successive political scandals have raised the stakes and increased institutional and legal capacities to identify emerging scandals. Presidents, Speakers of the House, prominent Senators and State Governors have all been brought down by political scandal and politicians, journalists and voters understand its power in modern America.

Contemporary American politics is closely contested. The results of the presidential election in 2000 and recent congressional election results point to a polity where partisan support is evenly divided. In such an environment, the political incentives of scandal mongering are compelling. In the mass media, broadcasting has given was to narrowcasting with a profusion of broadcasting
changed profoundly on several occasions since the Gilded Age and no doubt further changes will take place which will affect the ways in which scandals are ‘discovered’ and reported.

The audiences for scandal are changing not least because they have been exposed to prior scandals. Thus, there is an increasing sophistication among the public which allows discrimination between authentic and synthetic scandals. Even at the height of the Clinton scandals, his approval rating as president remained high. The implication here is that while scandals may disrupt a politician’s career and absorb much of his or her time and resources, they need not prove terminal or even seriously damaging. The social values of the audience for scandal may change so that scandal allegations involving adultery or homosexual conduct no longer have the resonance with the electorate it was once supposed they did. Such developments create new difficulties for politicians eager to use political scandal as a weapon of first resort. If allegations go unreported or, if reported, fall on deaf ears, the reputations of the accused may themselves be scrutinised.

But the political architecture essential to scandal production has changed again because the independent counsel statute is now in abeyance. With a Republican in the White House and Republicans controlling both Houses of Congress, it is unlikely to be revived. If the Democrats had gained control of Congress, it seems probable that the embarrassments of the White House over their relationship with bankrupt corporations would have developed into more determined legislative efforts to involve President Bush in a major scandal.

Thus, while some of the ingredients of extensive scandal production are in place in contemporary American politics, others are missing. Deprived of control of the Justice Department, the FBI, the independent counsel and congressional investigations, the ability of Democrats to make scandal mischief is correspondingly reduced. The ideologues of the far right in the media and think tanks who featured so prominently in the Clinton scandals are now quiescent because their man is in the White House and they have no obvious liberal counterparts. But these different elements of scandal production are not frozen in time. They have changed in the past and will change in the future. Political circumstances will change and, as they do, the form and intensity of political contestation will change too. The character of the mass media has changed profoundly on several occasions since the Gilded Age and no doubt further changes will take place which will affect the ways in which scandals are ‘discovered’ and reported.

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Conclusion

It was argued at the beginning of this chapter that political scandal has largely resisted comparative analysis. It was suggested that a more fruitful line of inquiry is to examine a specific political system longitudinally, that is to say to compare successive scandal eras over time within a defined political culture. The above analysis has shown that while the ‘ingredients’ of political scandal – political misconduct (or allegations thereof); media coverage; political contestation and public awareness and concern – are constant. The nature of each of these ingredients, and the dynamics of their interrelationship, change over time. The American party system was initially forged in the years after the American Civil War and its character was changed by democratisation, industrialization, urbanisation and by political and social reform. Opportunities for political misconduct have also changed over time and depend critically on the range of government responsibilities and the mechanisms for political scrutiny and oversight. The media has developed in parallel with the polity but here we have seen a proliferation of media outlets and forms and waves of partisanship giving way to claims of neutrality and objectivity which in turn have succumbed to the current wave of partisanship. But this is not the past repeating itself because the new partisanship of the media is more ideological than institutional and not tied, as it was in the Gilded Age, to a party by financial pursestrings. And the audiences for scandal is now better educated and able to access diverse print and electronic sources of information.

As the links between politicians, parties, the media and the public change, so too will the dynamics of political scandal. This analysis has shown that American political scandals are the product of distinctive patterns of American political, social and media development. In terms of the research agenda for students of political scandal, it seems the gap between accounts of individual scandals and the aspiration for a general theory of political scandal is too great to bridge. But a first step towards closing the gap is to compare political scandals over time within a specific political context so that the analytical and contingent variables are kept with reasonable bounds. Only when we have a set of country specific longitudinal studies of political scandal can we begin to understand what they have in common. In the meantime, political scandal will continue to shape, and be shaped by the broader patterns of American political development.