Politician misconduct and satisfaction with democracy: evidence from the UK Expenses Scandal

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Abstract

Does the misconduct of individual politicians affect satisfaction with democracy, and if so, how long does the effect last? We shed new light on these questions using evidence from a quasi-experimental setting: we compare UK constituents whose MP was implicated in the 2009 expenses scandal with constituents whose MP was not. Using British Election Study panel survey data from 2008 to 2011, we track the effects of the scandal over time. We find that the scandal did have a negative short-run effect on satisfaction with democracy, but that this effect was short-lived. This is consistent with our expectation that when scandals have effects on broader regime evaluations, these effects will often be fleeting.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Does misconduct on the part of an individual elected representative negatively affect citizen regard for democratic institutions? It has been argued that when politicians are embroiled in a scandal this not only damages the careers of those involved, but also ‘spills over’ into more general regime assessments, lowering citizen trust in and satisfaction with the democratic system in their country (Citrin 1974, Chanley et al. 2000, Bowler and Karp 2004, Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012). Furthermore, previous research suggests that this type of spillover is not limited to scandals involving nationally prominent politicians such as presidents or prime ministers, but also occurs when local representatives are involved in scandals (Bowler and Karp 2004).

However, our understanding of how politician misconduct affects citizen regard for the political system is limited in two important ways. First, although previous research has established a correlation between the two variables, it has not been able to confirm a causal relationship. Single-country studies which track time-series of average popular regime evaluations before and after national scandals (e.g. Chanley et al. 2000) are instructive, but cannot disentangle the effect of the scandal from other politically relevant events that occurred simultaneously and could also have influenced popular evaluations. Bowler and Karp (2004) come closest with a quasi-experimental design by comparing the regime evaluations of survey respondents whose local elected representative has been involved in a scandal with those whose local representative has not.

Second, previous research does not explicitly track how the effects of specific scandals evolve over time: for example, Bowler and Karp (2004) only use cross-sectional survey data. This is important because the negative consequences of scandals for political support are of greater concern if they are long-lasting and thus more likely to lead to a reduction in diffuse support for the principles of democracy itself (Easton 1975; Linde and Ekman 2003).
In this research note, we contribute on these two fronts by using panel survey data to track differences in democratic satisfaction between citizens whose representative is implicated in a scandal and those whose representative is not. Our case is the 2009 UK expenses scandal, which brought to light the misuse of parliamentary allowances by a large number of Members of Parliament. As we will show, this case has characteristics that are particularly conducive to testing the impact of representative wrongdoing. Moreover, our analysis of the British Election Study panel survey data from 2008 to 2011 tracks whether this impact persists over time. We also conduct placebo tests that enhance our confidence that any observed impact is causal. In sum, our empirical strategy allows us to provide strong evidence on whether there was a causal effect of local MP misconduct on satisfaction with democracy and, if so, how long such an effect lasted.

We find that, in the short-run, local politician misconduct as revealed by the expenses scandal indeed negatively affected democratic satisfaction: voters with implicated MPs had significantly lower levels of democratic satisfaction than those with non-implicated MPs, even though there was no discernible difference between these two groups before the scandal occurred. However, the negative effects were not long-lasting; there is evidence of an effect reversal during the 2010 election campaign and no evidence of any lasting effect after the election. This suggests that the effects of individual politician misconduct are more nuanced than previously assumed. For one, long-term effects are not evident, even in such a high-profile scandal. Moreover, the potentially positive effect during the election campaign indicates the need for further research on the topic.

**Background**

Our outcome variable in this research note is citizen satisfaction with democracy, which indicates how well citizens think the regime is currently performing. That is, satisfaction with democracy measures beliefs about the functioning of democracy rather than general support

Politician misconduct has generally been found to negatively affect citizen assessments of regime performance, making them more disenchanted with the way their country’s democratic institutions function (Chanley et al. 2000; Bowler and Karp 2004, Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012). Some scholars have argued that scandals need not necessarily have negative effects on regime evaluations. For example, voters could have stronger faith in their democratic institutions if a scandal proves that the media and other politicians are doing their job well (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012). Indeed, the functional theory of scandals (Sabato et al. 2000; Keplinger 2005; Maier 2011) argues that the punishment of politicians involved in scandals can in fact increase regime satisfaction. However, there is so far no empirical evidence for such a positive effect (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012: 7; Maier 2011).

But whatever the initial effect of politician misconduct, how long is the effect likely to last? Using cross-country data, Kumlin and Esaiasson (2012) find that the negative effects of scandal-focused elections are attenuated over time: the more scandal-focused elections a country has experienced, the less of an effect a new scandal election has on public opinion. However, so far no research has explicitly tracked how the effects of specific scandals evolve in the months after the scandal erupts onto the public agenda.
We believe that there are two reasons why the effects of politician misconduct on regime evaluations may be rather short-lived. First, the literature examining influences on satisfaction with democracy tends to find that it is linked with current events, be it the state of the economy, the party in power or a recent scandal (Canache et al. 2001, Waldron-Moore 1999, Curini et al. 2012). As the dominant political and media agenda changes, so do the ways in which citizens judge whether the regime is currently performing well. This fits with insights from the literature on accessibility and priming (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Scheufele 2000, Scheufele and Tewksbury 2006, Althaus and Kim 2006). Applied to satisfaction with democracy, this literature would predict that the standards citizens use to provide an assessment would vary together with how accessible (and thus how primed) key considerations are. Importantly, Miller and Krosnick (1996) argue that priming is ‘hydraulic’: as the accessibility of one consideration increases, that of others diminishes. If this is the case, then the influence of a recent scandal should decrease as new considerations begin to determine citizen evaluations of regime performance. Existing research shows that the experience of elections is particularly strong in shaping evaluations of satisfaction with democracy, so it is likely that the effect of scandals may fade as elections near.

Second, elections could also reduce the effect of a scandal by providing a mechanism for the removal of misbehaving politicians. If politicians involved in a scandal are voted out of office by their voters, then elections would serve an important corrective and accountability function. This could potentially ‘repair’ levels of satisfaction with democracy. The functional theory of scandals (see above) would even predict that citizens might end up more satisfied with democracy than before the scandal.

All of this does not mean that longer-term changes in mean levels of satisfaction with democracy are not possible. However, existing research on satisfaction indicates that the effects of one-off events such as scandals are most likely to be rather short-lived.
Why study the 2009 expenses scandal?

We make use of the 2009 UK expenses scandal to examine the consequences of individual politician misconduct for citizen democratic satisfaction. The scandal began in May 2009 when the Telegraph newspaper began leaking details of MPs’ expenses claims. The scandal led the House of Commons to commission Sir Thomas Legg to investigate all MP claims. He published his final report in February 2010 (House of Commons Members Estimate Committee 2010). All in all, about two thirds of MPs were implicated in the scandal either by the Telegraph or by Legg. Importantly for our purposes, British voters varied in whether their local MP was publicly implicated in the expenses scandal. In this research note, we take advantage of this variation and compare the average democratic satisfaction of voters whose local MP was publicly implicated in the expenses scandal and of voters whose MP was not.

The expenses scandal has several advantages as a setting for studying the effects of politician misconduct on democratic satisfaction. First, local MP implication in the expenses scandal is plausibly related with voter democratic satisfaction. Voters were aware of and informed about the scandal. Not only had 93 per cent of British voters heard of the scandal in May 2010,\(^1\) but voter perceptions of local MP involvement in the scandal responded surprisingly strongly to publicly available information about individual MP claims (Vivyan et al. forthcoming). Furthermore, voters were clearly angered by MPs’ misuse of expenses: 80 per cent thought that MPs implicated in the scandal should resign.\(^2\) In addition to the fact that voters knew and cared about it, other features of the scandal also mean that an effect on democratic satisfaction was likely: the scandal uncovered a systemic problem that could not

\(^1\) BES 2010 pre-election internet cross-section survey of 15,660 British voters, weighted using the standard BES weight.

\(^2\) BES 2010 pre-election internet cross-section survey of 15,660 British voters, weighted using the standard BES weight.
be reduced to wrongdoing by one group or another, precisely the type of scandal most likely to cause long-run effects (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012); the revelations by the Telegraph were surprising, a feature of events that makes subsequent attitude change more likely (Petty and Capoccio 1981, Marcus et al. 2000); the expenses scandal was financial rather than moral, and it is the former type of scandal that tends to lead to greater public reaction (Doherty et al. 2011).

Second, local MP implication is a plausibly exogenous variable in this setting. There is no reason why constituents whose MP was implicated in the scandal and constituents whose MP was not implicated should differ systematically in terms of their predispositions toward the political system. We provide evidence that this identifying assumption is reasonable by using our panel data to run placebo tests on respondents’ pre-scandal satisfaction with democracy. This strengthens our confidence that any effect of local MP implication on voter democratic satisfaction is a causal one. Overall, our empirical strategy allows us to disentangle the effects of different exposure to the expenses scandal from potential confounders.

**Data and methods**

We use data from the five waves of the BES 2005-10 internet panel study, supplemented with a wave from the 2011 BES Alternative Vote Referendum Data:

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3 Detailed inspection of parallel internet and face-to-face survey samples collected by the BES in 2005 has shown that the samples are almost indistinguishable (Sanders et al., 2007). Sanders et al. (2011) also report that the 2005-2010 panel continued to be representative of the population in terms of their reported vote and their vote intention.
• the 2008 wave, fielded June-July 2008 and the final wave before expenses scandal broke;

• the 2010 pre-campaign wave, fielded 29 March – 7 April 2010, thus after the finalised Legg report was published but before the onset of the 2010 general election campaign;

• the 2010 campaign wave, fielded between 7 April - 6 May 2010;

• the 2010 post-election wave, fielded 7 – 24 May 2010; and

• the 2011 wave, fielded April-May 2011.

We measure satisfaction with democracy with a variant of the well-established survey question on this topic: ‘On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in this country?’ ‘Don’t know’ was provided as a further response option, but we treat this answer as missing for the purposes of the analysis. Throughout, we treat answers to this question as continuous and rescale them to range from 0 (‘very dissatisfied’) to 1 (‘very satisfied’); this is in line with other research using this measure (e.g. Anderson and Guillory 1997, Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012, Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011).

Our key explanatory variable is a dummy variable measuring whether or not a respondents’ local MP was implicated in the expenses scandal. Our measure of MP implication is taken from Vivyan, Wagner and Tarlov (forthcoming). They code whether an MP was publicly implicated in the expenses scandal either in the Legg report or in the

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4 We do not use data from the 2009 wave as this was run in the middle of the expenses scandal before information on all MPs was made public. It is therefore difficult to assess which respondents would already have heard about their MP’s involvement in the scandal.

5 We also ran all models as ordinal probit regression models. All results remain substantively the same.
An MP is coded as being implicated by Legg if he or she was formally asked to repay money by Legg and is coded as being implicated by the Telegraph if the specifics of his or her claims were discussed in a Telegraph article (MPs were not coded as implicated by the Telegraph if their claims were only mentioned in a general article on the scandal). The final implicated variable is coded for 587 MPs sitting in the 2005-10 Parliament MPs and equals one if an MP was coded as being implicated by either the Telegraph or the Legg report, and zero otherwise. We matched each panel respondent to an

6 We refer to the combined source of the Daily Telegraph and the Sunday Telegraph as ‘the Telegraph’ throughout the paper. The measure uses the Telegraph to proxy media implication because it had sole access to the expenses records and acted as a gatekeeper on public information; prior to the publication of the Legg report, any MP publicly implicated was therefore first mentioned by the Telegraph.

7 Vivyan, Wagner and Tarlov (forthcoming) searched The Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph articles published between 1 January 2009 and 26 March 2010, via NexisUK (an electronic media search engine). A general article refers to those pieces wherein the Telegraph listed the claims of five or more MPs without specific details of, for example, the amount an MP claimed per year.

8 Though there were 628 sitting British MPs in the 2005-10 Parliament, four groups of MPs have missing observations on the implicated variable: MPs representing inner-London constituencies, as they were not allowed to claim expenses under the Additional Costs Allowance and were therefore never likely to be implicated in the scandal; the three MPs involved in criminal proceedings as a result of their expenses claims, as their misbehaviour was qualitatively far different from that of other MPs; the MPs elected in by-elections between 2005 and 2010; and an MP who died in March 2010, so just before the 2010 pre-campaign survey was fielded.
MP from the 2005-10 Parliament based on the constituency location of the respondent (defined in terms of 2005 general election boundaries) and assigned each respondent the corresponding implicated score for their MP. In the 2010 pre-campaign wave, we have 973 respondents in the MP not implicated group and 2245 respondents in the MP implicated group.

We also coded separate dummy variables for whether the MP was implicated by the Telegraph or in the Legg report. In our sample, 457 respondents have an MP implicated only by the Telegraph, 754 have one implicated only by the Legg report and 1034 by both, with again 973 respondents whose MP was not implicated in the scandal at all.

To get initial estimates of the short- and longer-run effects of local MP implication, we estimate wave-specific OLS regressions of the form

\[ \text{demsat}_t = \alpha + \beta \text{implicated}_i + \epsilon_i, \]

where \( \text{demsat}_t \) is the democratic satisfaction score of person \( i \) in wave \( t \) and \( \epsilon_i \) is an idiosyncratic error term. We estimate this regression for the 2010 pre-election, 2010 campaign, 2010 post-election and 2011 waves, respectively. By comparing the estimate of \( \beta \) for each of these waves, we can see how the effect of local MP implication in the expenses scandal evolves over time.

As a placebo test, we also estimate the same regression using satisfaction with democracy scores in 2008 as the response variable: if local MP involvement in the expenses scandal is not systematically associated with voter predispositions toward regime performance, we would expect the estimate of \( \beta \) in this regression to be close to zero.

In subsequent models, we add as a control the pre-scandal value of an individual’s satisfaction with democracy score (from the 2006 wave of the BES panel for the placebo test and from the 2008 wave otherwise). Inclusion of this explanatory variable should control for

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9 The BES matches respondents to seats using the postcodes provided by the participants.
any differences in predispositions toward the political system across the implicated and non-implicated groups, reflecting either personal or local idiosyncrasies. It should also increase the efficiency of our estimates.

Next, we estimate a third set of wave-specific regression models with more extensive controls. First, to capture the winners-losers effects (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005) these models include a series of dummy variables indicating self-reported party identification prior to the expenses scandal in the 2008 wave (2006 wave for the placebo test). Second, we include a series of demographic controls: gender (1 if female, 0 if male); education (two dummy variables for respondents who left full-time education at 17 or 18, or after 18, respectively, with no post-16 education as the baseline category); and age categories, where raw age is measured at the 2010 pre-election survey.  

Results

The results of the wave-specific regressions of democratic satisfaction as a function of the binary implicated measure are presented in Table 1. For all of these regressions we report standard errors clustered by 2005 constituencies, since our explanatory variable of interest, implicated, varies at the constituency level.

Models 1-3 in Table 1 show the results of the placebo test, where the response variable is pre-scandal democratic satisfaction, measured in 2008. In each of these models, the point estimate for the implicated coefficient is very close to zero, with 95% confidence intervals

\[10\] We also ran robustness checks controlling for constituency-level variables: constituency competitiveness, measured as the (categorized) 2005 election majority size for the winning party in a respondent’s seat and dummy variables measuring the party to which a respondent’s 2005-10 MP belongs. Our results do not change once we include these variables in the models.
overlapping with zero. This indicates that voters whose MP was implicated and voters whose MP was not implicated in the expenses scandal did not differ in their average democratic satisfaction prior to the expenses scandal. As a result, we can be confident that any differences that we detect between these groups after the expenses scandal are due to differences in exposure to local MP implication in the scandal.

Table 1 about here

Models 4-6 provide estimates for the effect of MP implication on democratic satisfaction in late March and early April 2010, a few weeks after Sir Thomas Legg published his final report detailing which MPs should repay expenses money. In each model, the coefficient on the implicated dummy is negative and significant at the 0.05 level. In other words, it appears that local MP implication did reduce voter satisfaction with democracy in the short-run. The point estimates for the coefficient indicate that 2010 pre-election democratic satisfaction was on average around 0.02 points lower for voters with implicated MPs than for voters with non-implicated MPs.

However, inspection of models 7-15 indicates that the negative short-run effect of local MP implication on democratic satisfaction did not last. To better illustrate the change in the effect of local MP implication on democratic satisfaction over time, Figure 1 graphs the point estimate and 95% confidence interval for the implicated coefficient in each panel wave, based on the regression models containing lagged democratic satisfaction only (i.e. models 2, 5, 8, 11 and 14). The Figure shows that while local MP implication had short-run negative impact in the first panel wave after the conclusion of the scandal, there is no clear negative impact in all subsequent waves: the point estimate for the effect is positive and significant by the time of the 2010 general election campaign wave; in the subsequent 2010 post-election wave and 2011 waves, the estimated effect of MP implication remains indistinguishable from zero with point estimates are very close to zero.

Figure 1 about here
We carried out several robustness checks on our overall findings. First, we ran our OLS models after disaggregating the sample based on the party affiliation of the MP, the party identification of the respondent and constituency marginality. There were no substantive differences in the effects of the implicated variable across these different subsamples. Second, to check that these results are not an artefact of our coding of MP implication, we also ran our lagged dependent variable specifications replacing the implicated variable with three dummy variables indicating implication by Telegraph only, implication by Legg only, and implication by both Telegraph and Legg. Figure 2 plots the coefficients on these dummy variables for each panel wave. When we break down our measure MP implication in this way, the point estimates of the effects of each type of implication appear to vary in a similar way over time.

The consistent finding that during the election campaign voters whose MP was implicated in the expenses scandal had a higher level of satisfaction with democracy than voters with non-implicated MPs is surprising. To check whether this result is driven by observations from any particular time periods during the month-long campaign, we broke the campaign wave data down by the day on the campaign at which the respondent was surveyed (see Figure 2). There are no noticeable trends or patterns in the effect of MP implication during the course of the campaign.

Instead, we are left with evidence that the direction of the effect of representative misconduct varied from negative in the pre-campaign period to positive in the campaign period. One potential explanation for this is the changing political context due to the on-set of the election campaign. Following the functional theory of scandals described above, voters with implicated MPs may have initially experienced disappointment by their representative’s misconduct, but subsequently experienced more of a boost in democratic satisfaction from the onset of the election campaign, as they were reminded of the possibility that their
representative could be electorally punished. Our data do not allow us to provide a conclusive test for this type of proposition. Nevertheless, our results indicate that the relationship between scandal and assessments of the political system may be less clear-cut than frequently assumed.

**Conclusion**

We have found clear evidence that local MP implication in the expenses scandal had a negative short-run causal effect on voter satisfaction with democracy. But we also have strong evidence that this negative effect disappeared rapidly thereafter, in fact as soon afterwards as the general election campaign. There, we even find a positive effect of MP implication. Importantly, there are no differences between constituents with and without an implicated MP after the 2010 election.

Based on this evidence, we conclude that the misconduct of individual politicians can have negative implications for general assessments of regime performance, but that these effects may often only last for a short time. These results are consistent with a perspective that

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11 One plausible test was to check whether respondents whose implicated MP retired before the 2010 election had higher satisfaction with democracy than respondents with implicated MPs who did not retire and instead ran again. No substantive differences were found between the two groups, so there is no strong evidence that the positive effect on satisfaction with democracy is due to the fact that some implicated MPs decided not to run again. Given that the adjustment to satisfaction with democracy occurred before the election, we do not believe that MP replacement can provide a good explanation for the campaign-period difference either; in any case, we did not find any significant differences in the average democratic satisfaction of voters whose implicated MP stood down or was voted out of office and those voters whose implicated MP stood again and was re-elected.
sees attitude accessibility and priming effects as central to explaining changes in satisfaction with democracy.

How generalizable are these findings? Here we have studied the effects of local MP implication, which may be less strong than for more prominent national politicians. Our findings are therefore primarily a strong and quasi-experimental test of whether an effect of politician misconduct on satisfaction with democracy can occur and how long it lasts. We would expect other scandals to also impact on satisfaction with democracy, but only relatively briefly. In terms of the effects of the behaviour of local representative, the 2009 UK expenses scandal is a case where a long-term effect could have been expected as it was more wide-ranging and surprising than many other scandals. Other local-level cases should be less likely to have an impact on satisfaction with democracy.

We also found significant evidence of a positive impact of MP implication in the campaign wave. This goes against most findings concerning scandals, which have so far pointed to a consistent negative effect on how voters assess their political system. The potential positive effects of scandals deserve further scholarly attention, perhaps in an experimental setting.

Finally, satisfaction with democracy, an assessment of regime performance, appears to be strongly affected by short-term considerations. Future research should explore the effect of scandal on other measures of system support, for example trust in specific institutions on the one hand and more general support for democratic principles on the other. Scandals can have important consequences on how citizens relate to their political system, and these deserve to be explored more fully.
Table 1: MP implication and satisfaction with democracy, 2008 to 2011

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<td>0.02* 0.024** 0.023**</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; 2006 values of satisfaction with democracy and party identification used for 2008, 2008 values otherwise; 'minor parties' are UKIP, SNP, Plaid Cymru, Greens, BNP or any other party; data from British Election Study.
Figure 1: Effect of MP implication on satisfaction with democracy

Note: Coefficients taken from Models 2, 5, 8, 11 and 14 from Table 1. For the coding of the implicated variable, see text. Data from British Election Study.
Figure 2: Effect of MP implication by different sources

Notes: For the coding of implication by Legg and/or Telegraph, see text. Data from British Election Study.
Figure 3: Effect of MP implication during the 2010 election campaign

Notes: For the coding of MP implication, see text. Data from British Election Study, campaign wave 2010.
References


