

Why Politicians Won't Apologize: Communication  
Effects in the Aftermath of Sex Scandals:

Supplementary Material

March 26, 2024

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## **S1: Summary statistics of survey data**

- *Age*: Measured in years, then recoded to four age categories (18-29; 30-44; 44-64; 65+).
- *Gender*
- *Race*: Collapsed to a thricotomous indicator for White, Black and Hispanic with other responses coded as White
- *Income*: Recoded to five categories (less than \$15k, less than \$30k, less than \$50k, less than \$100k, more than \$100k)
- *Education*: Recoded to four categories (no HS diploma; HS diploma; Some college; College degree; Post-grad degree)
- *Partisan identification*: Democrats, Republicans, Independents (with leaners included with their respective parties)

**Table S1:** Summary Statistics

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<b>Variable (%)</b>	<b>Study 1</b>	<b>Study 2</b>	<b>Study 3</b>
<b>Age</b>			
18-29	21	22	21
30-44	28	29	28
44-64	32	32	34
65+	19	17	17
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	48	49	47
Female	52	51	53
<b>Race</b>			
White	78	78	77
Black	11	11	11
Hispanic	11	11	12
<b>Income</b>			
Less than \$15k	19	21	19
Less than \$30k	23	17	17
Less than \$50k	17	21	20
Less than \$100k	27	30	29
More than \$100k	14	12	15
<b>Education</b>			
Less than High School	3	5	4
High School diploma	23	25	19
Some College/Vocational training	23	25	25
College degree	33	31	31
Post-grad degree	18	15	21
<b>Party ID</b>			
Democrat	51	58	55
Republican	49	42	45

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## S2: Experimental Design

**Table S2: Study Design**

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Number of respondents	7,880	998	1,244
Number of observations	7,880	1,996 (2x measure)	3,732 (3x measure)
Design	Between-subjects	Mixed: respondents measured after allegation, after communication	Mixed: respondents measured after allegation, after communication or evidence, after evidence or communication
<b>Conditions</b>			
Partisanship	co-, out-, Non-partisan	✗	✗
Seriousness	affair, harassment, sexting, assault, rape	affair, assault	sexting
Apology	✓	✓	✓
Denial	✓	✓	✓
No response (control)	✗	✓	✓
Evidence	✗	✗	✓
<b>Setup</b>			
Groups	3 (party) x 5 (severity) x 2 (apology/denial)	6 groups	8 groups
Procedure		1st stage: after allegation (every respondent)  2nd stage: after response	1st stage: after allegation (every respondent)  2nd stage: if evidence comes before: after evidence (evidence only group), if response comes before: after response (only apology or denial groups)  3rd stage: response <i>then</i> evidence groups, or evidence <i>then</i> response groups
Group sizes	n=263	n=250	allegation: n=1,244* evidence = 622** other: n=311 (6)
<b>Measures</b>			
Perceived seriousness	after alleg.	after alleg.	✗
Belief in allegation	after alleg, comm	after alleg, comm	after alleg, comm, evid
Resignation support	after comm	after alleg, comm	after alleg, comm, evid

# S3: Experimental Procedures

Figure S3.1: Study 1 Procedure

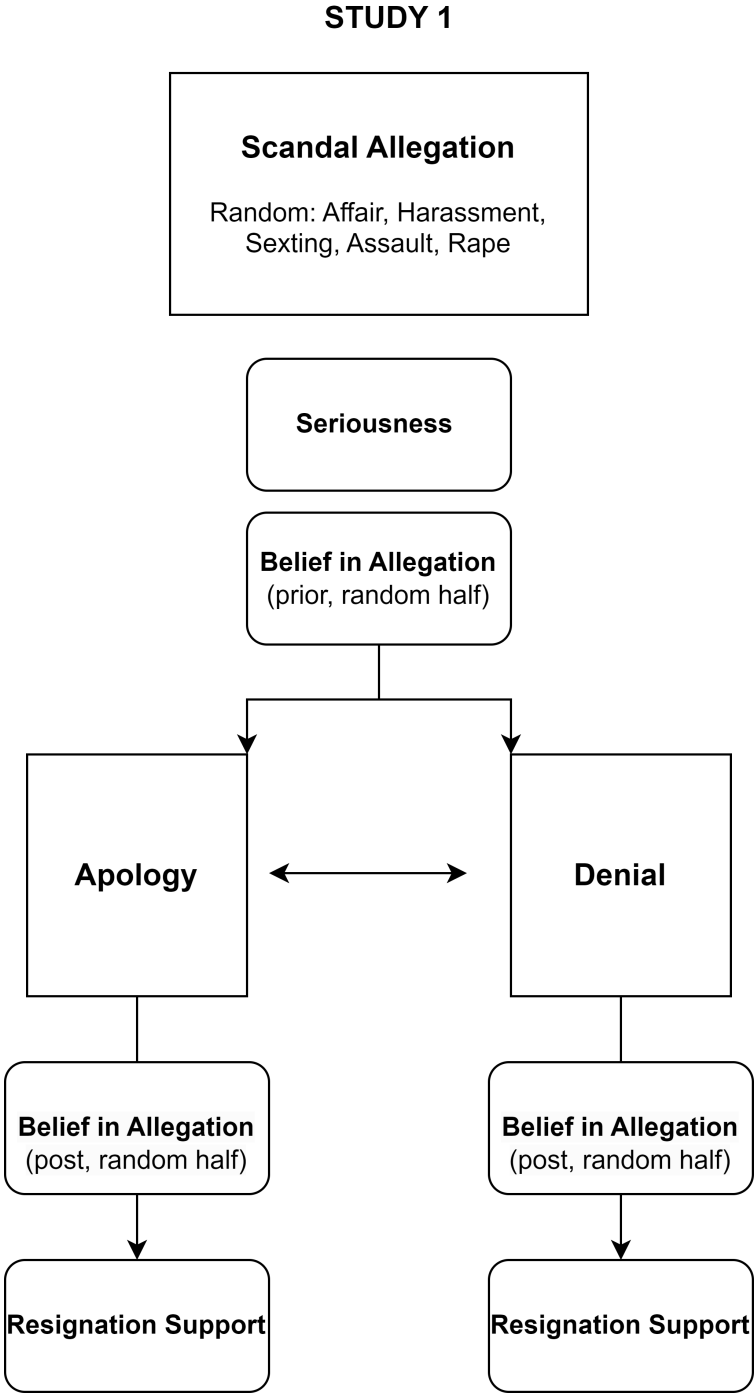


Figure S3.2: Study 2 Procedure

**STUDY 2**

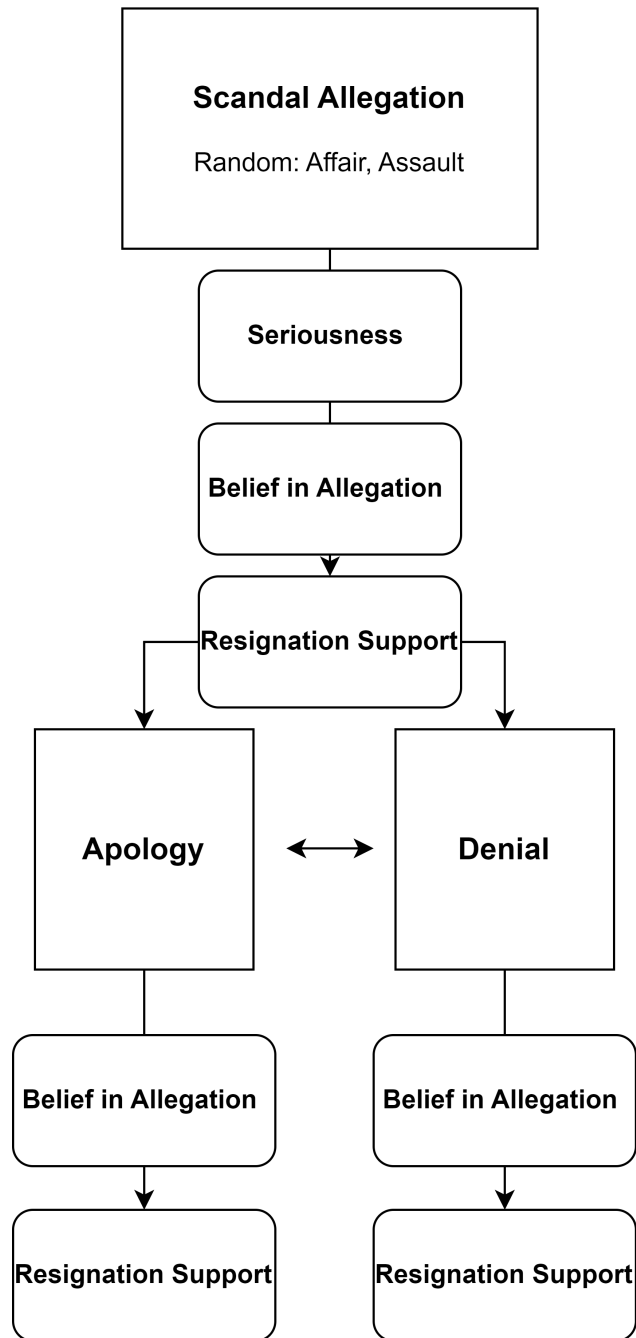
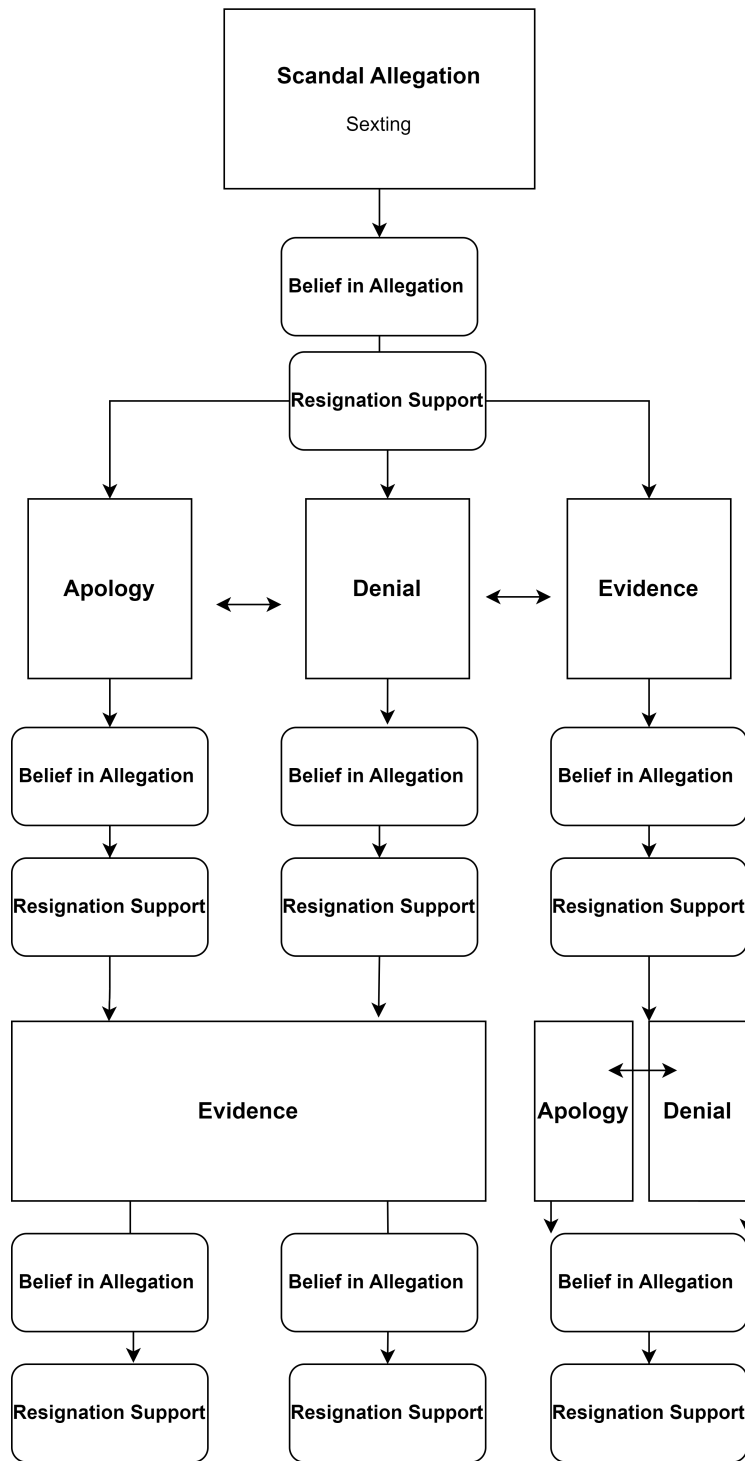




Figure S3.3: Study 3 Procedure

STUDY 3



## S4: Vignettes and Questionnaire

### Treatment Summary

Before the vignettes were displayed subjects were randomized to **treatment conditions**.

In **Study 1** to one of the five allegations (Affair, Harassment, Sexting, Assault or Rape), to partisan cues (Republican, Democrat or non-partisan), and to one of the communication strategies (denial or apology).

In **Study 2** to one of the two allegations (Affair, Assault), and to one of the the communication strategies (denial or apology).

In **Study 3** read one allegation (Sexting), then they were randomized to one of the the communication strategies (denial or apology) or to the evidence. Those who received the evidence were also randomized to one of the communication strategies in the second step (apology or denial), while those who received the communication first, received the evidence at the second stage.

### Allegations

Prompt: *“In the next section, you are going to read about a member of Congress 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.”*

- **Affair:** National TV recently aired a story that John Miller, a newly elected [Republican/Democratic/Congressman] had a long-term extramarital affair with a former staff member at the time he was a state legislator. According to the investigative report, the affair, which started during summer of the previous year, ended this month. The former staff member, Charlotte K., refused to comment.
- **Harassment:** National TV recently aired a story that John Miller, a newly elected [Republican/Democratic/Congressman] behaved inappropriately with a former staff member at the time he was a state legislator. According to the investigative report, Miller repeatedly gave the staff member compliments and made unwanted comments to her appearance. The former staff member, Charlotte K., refused to comment.
- **Sexting:** National TV recently aired a story that John Miller, a newly elected [Republican/Democratic/Congressman] made unwanted sexual advances to a former staff member at the time he was a state legislator. According to the investigative report, Miller once sent her sexually explicit photos and messages. The former staff member, Charlotte K., refused to comment.

- **Assault:** National TV recently aired a story that John Miller, a newly elected [Republican/Democratic/Congressman] sexually assaulted a former staff member at the time he was a state legislator. According to the investigative report, Miller approached the staff member in a post election party, pushed her against a wall and groped her. The former staff member, Charlotte K., refused to comment.
- **Rape:** National TV recently aired a story that John Miller, a newly elected [Republican/Democratic/Congressman] raped a former staff member at the time he was a state legislator. According to the investigative report, Miller asked the staff member into his hotel room after a post election party and had sexual intercourse with her against her will. The former staff member, Charlotte K., refused to comment.

## Communication

Prompt: *"Now you will have the chance to read Miller's reaction to the scandal. Please read it carefully, as we will ask questions later on in the survey."*

- **Denial:** Immediately after the news broke out, Miller 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, Miller released a 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 Congress.

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

## **Evidence**

Prompt: *Now you will have the chance to read the newest developments with regards to the scandal. Please read it carefully, as we will ask our questions later on in the survey.*

- **Evidence:** After the news story broke, indisputable evidence came to light proving that the allegations were indeed true. The evidence in-

cluded the communication history between Miller and the staff member, the authenticity of which were verified by independent experts.

## **Outcome Measures**

In **Study 1**, three outcome variables were measured: the perceived seriousness and likelihood of the allegations, and finally, whether the subject thought Miller should resign. Seriousness was measured after the the allegation was displayed and before the communication was shown to the respondents. Likelihood was measured either before or after the communication was shown to respondents (order was randomly assigned). Resignation support was displayed after the communication was shown.

In **Study 2**, the same three outcomes were measured. Whilst the perceived seriousness was measured only after the allegation, likelihood and resignation support were measured repeatedly, in two stages: once after the allegations, once after the communication.

In **Study 3**, only the perceived likelihood and the resignation support were measured (scandal seriousness was not varied), in three stages. Once after the allegation, once after the second stage (either evidence, or communication), and once after the third, and final stage (either communication, or evidence).

- **Seriousness:** Based on what you just read how do you feel about the

scandal? [100-point sliding scale, labels: Not serious at all ⇒ Extremely serious]

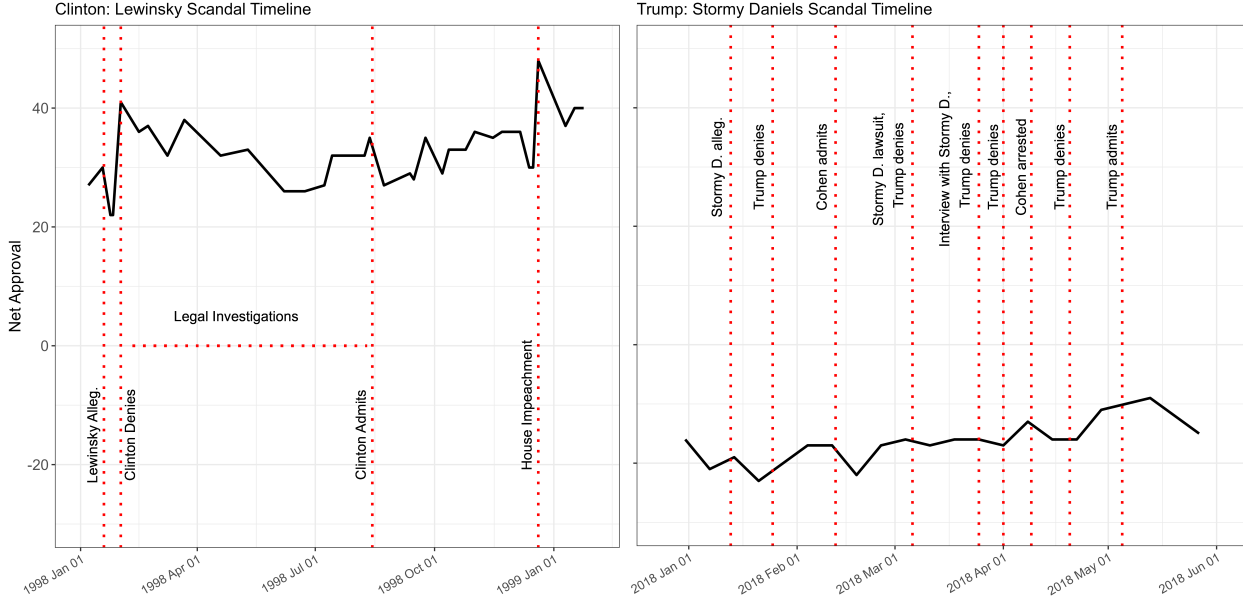
- **Belief in allegation:** Based on what you just read how likely it is that these allegations are true? [100-point sliding scale, labels: Extremely likely ⇒ Extremely unlikely]
- **Resign:** Based on what you just read in the previous report, do you think that Miller should resign? [100-point sliding scale, labels: Should not resign ⇒ Should resign]

## Partisanship

- Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what? [Republican, Democrat, Independent, Something else]
- *If Independent or Something else is selected:* Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party? [Republican party, Democratic Party, Neither]
- *If Neither is selected:* Think of the political issues most important to you. Do you feel Republicans or Democrats deal with these issues better? [Democrats, Republicans]

# S5: Observational Analysis: Presidential Sex-Scandals

Figure S5: Presidential Approval and Sex Scandals Communication



The figure plots changes in presidential approval rating for Bill Clinton in the months of the Lewinsky scandal, and for Donald Trump in the months of the Stormy Daniels scandal. Both former presidents first denied, then, under a pressure by the presented evidence, admitted to the transgressions. By the end of the scandals, however, both politicians' approval ratings have stabilized and hovered around their pre-scandal levels.

First, these cases are suggestive in the sense that they reveal that communication does seem to matter for voters. Clinton's declining approval seemed to have bounced immediately after his first denial, but declined again dur-



ing the investigations, experiencing a further drop after his apology. In the case of Trump, denials seemed to have improved his approval rating, with a drop observable after he was forced to admit his involvement in the hush-payments. Second, they also demonstrate how elite communication is shaped by the unfolding of evidence in the two scandals.

At the same time, it is difficult to draw strong causal conclusions for the relative effectiveness of apologies and denials from observational data. First, apologies in both cases meant a detection of lying, and revealed issues beyond the scope of the sex scandal itself (lying under oath, campaign misspending). Second, we have a data availability problem: even though real-life political sex-scandals vary in seriousness, we lack precise polling data. Third, these scenarios have dynamic and strategic nature. For these reasons, it is difficult to discern the communication effects from their interaction with other contextual factors (timing and degree of evidence for accusations). Furthermore, politicians might communicate according to anticipated/available evidence which means that these responses are non-random. Finally, in observational data, we cannot exclude other, unobserved factors influencing public approval.

## S6: Numerical results: Study 1

**Table S6.1:** Regression Results: Study 1: Resignation. Note: Coefficients show the differences in the mean resignation support. Denial’s **reference level is apology**. Co- and Out-partisan cues’ reference level is no partisan cue. Columns correspond to different scandal types. Lower rows show the effect of denial (compared to apology) for subsets of the sample based on partisan alignment treatments.

<i>DV: Resign (0-100)</i>					
Denial	-5.2***	-6.0***	-11.5***	-14.1***	-18.5***
	[1.6]	[1.6]	[1.5]	[1.5]	[1.4]
Co-partisan	-5.1***	-5.7***	-1.1	-0.9	-2.6
	[2.0]	[1.9]	[1.8]	[1.9]	[1.7]
Out-partisan	1.2	2.0	4.3**	2.9	4.0**
	[2.0]	[1.9]	[1.8]	[1.8]	[1.7]
Constant	54.4***	55.7***	64.8***	69.63***	75.6***
	[1.6]	[1.6]	[1.5]	[1.5]	[1.4]
Mean seriousness	54.5	55.6	66.2	71.7	74.4
Observations	1,563	1,587	1,584	1,535	1,611
R-squared	0.015	0.020	0.041	0.056	0.103
No-partisan cue					
Denial	-0.3	-5.0	-13.9***	-18.1***	-18.1***
	[2.8]	[2.8]	[2.7]	[2.6]	[2.5]
Opposite party cue					
Denial	-6.6**	-6.1**	-8.6***	-10.2***	-18.5***
	[2.9]	[2.6]	[2.6]	[2.6]	[2.4]
Same party cue					
Denial	-9.4***	-6.7**	-11.9***	-14.0***	-19.0***
	[2.7]	[2.7]	[2.6]	[2.6]	[2.5]
Scandal	Affair	Harassment	Sexting	Assault	Rape

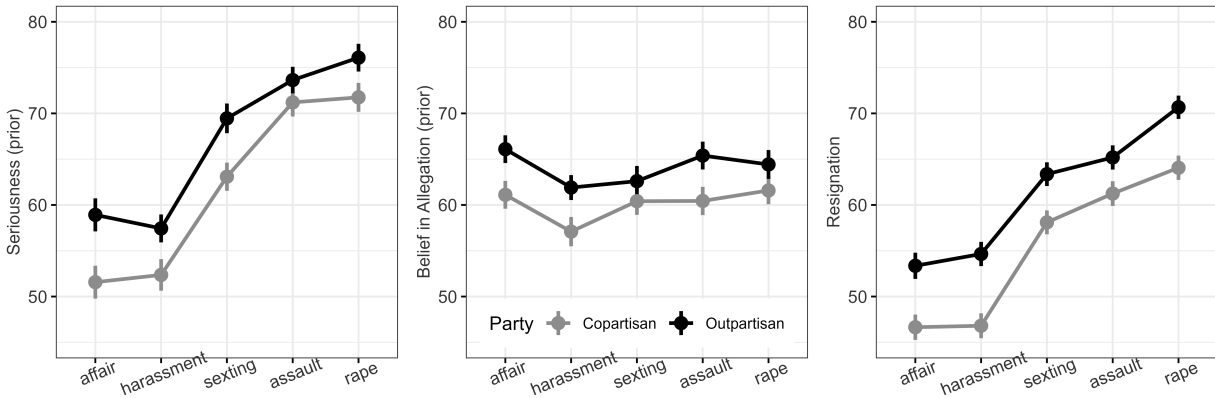
**Table S6.2:** Regression Results: Study 1: Beliefs. Note: Coefficients show the change in the respondents' mean belief in allegation by communication strategies **compared to the prior to communication levels**. Columns correspond to different scandal types.

*DV:* Belief in allegation (0-100)

Denial	-5.52*** [1.50]	-5.00*** [1.54]	-3.24* [1.56]	-3.11* [1.51]	-1.18 [1.55]
Apology	11.45*** [1.47]	10.90*** [1.56]	11.22*** [1.52]	12.18*** [1.53]	10.21*** [1.56]
Constant	61.95*** [1.23]	59.91*** [1.27]	61.49*** [1.27]	64.41*** [1.22]	64.36*** [1.28]
Observations	1,561	1,587	1,584	1,533	1,611
R-squared	0.071	0.052	0.047	0.059	0.033
Scandal	Affair	Harassment	Sexting	Assault	Rape

# S7: Partisan Effects: Study 1

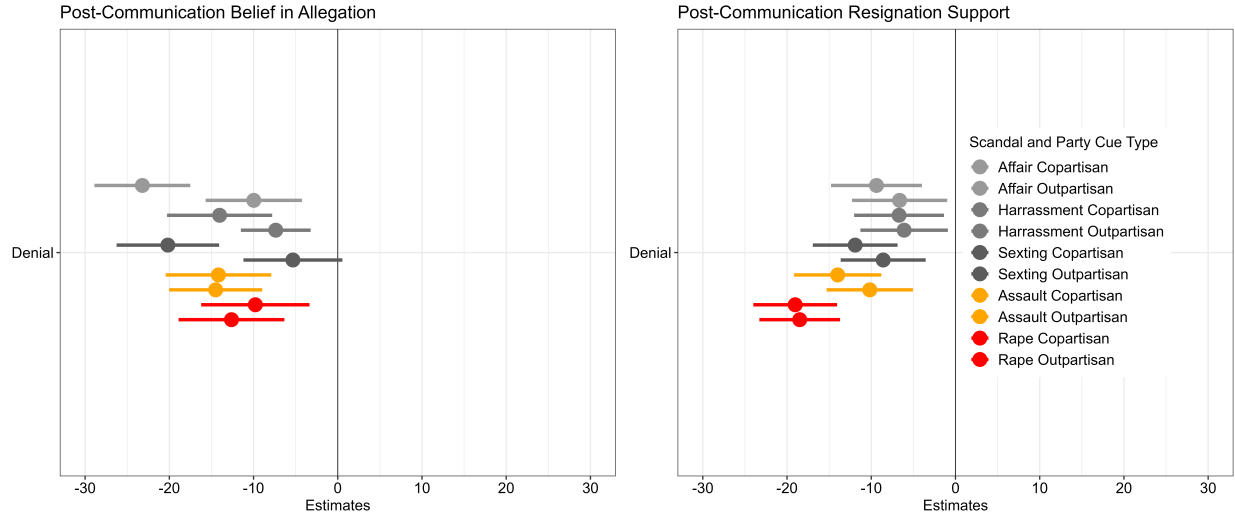
## Baseline Differences by Partisanship



**Figure S7.1:** Note: The **left panel** depicts the baseline differences between partisan alignment types (co-/out-partisan) on the level of pre-treatment (prior) perceived seriousness of the allegations in the different scandal scenarios. The **middle panel** depicts the baseline differences between partisan alignment types (co-/out-partisan) on the level of pre-treatment (prior) belief in the allegations in the different scandal scenarios. The **right panel** depicts the absolute differences between partisan alignment types (co-/out-partisan) on the level of resignation support in the different scandal scenarios.

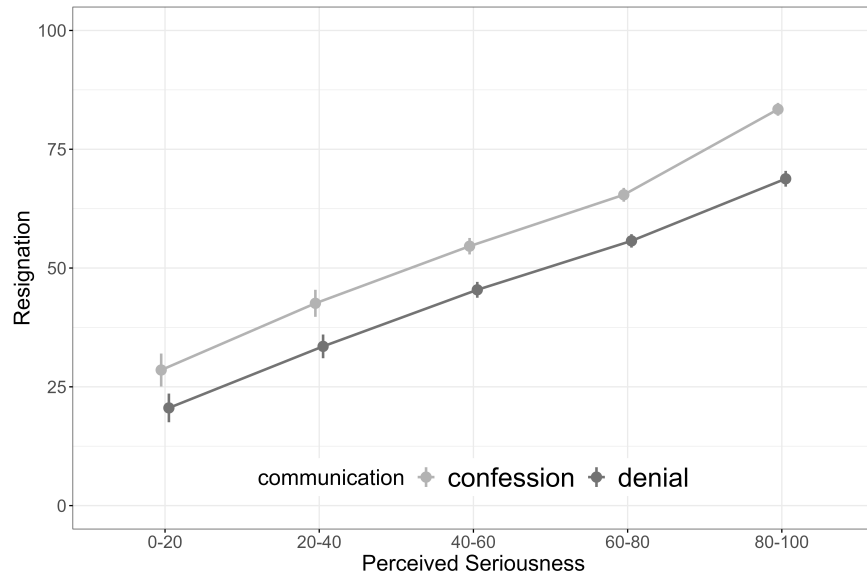
## Differences in Communication Effects by Partisanship

**Table S7.2:** The **zero lines** represent the reference groups, where respondents received an apology. The **left panel** shows the effect of denial on the post-treatment levels of belief in the allegations for the different partisan alignment subsets of the sample in the different scandal scenarios. The **right panel** shows the effect of denial on the level of resignation support for the different partisan alignment subsets of the sample in the different scandal scenarios. All marginal effects are obtained from OLS regressions. Error bars denote 95% CIs.



## S8: Effects by Respondent-Level Seriousness: Study 1

Figure S8: Resignation Support by Respondent-Level Seriousness



Note: Plot depicts the differential effects of apologies and denials on resignation support by perceived scandal seriousness at the respondents' level. Error bars denote 95% CIs.

We also compared the relative effects of apologies and denials for scandals that respondents felt equally serious regardless of allegation type. This produces regions of seriousness which are below our least serious observed scandal's mean perceived seriousness (affair). We confirm the findings of Study 1 about the relative advantage of denial compared to apology, even in the case of scandals which are perceived empirically the least serious by respondents.

## S9: Numerical results: Study 2

**Table S9.1:** Note: Coefficients show the change in mean resignation support by communication strategies **compared to the allegation stage (control) levels**. Columns correspond to different scandal types. Standard errors are adjusted by robust OLS models which account for the multiple measures given by the same respondents (in the allegation and in the response stage).

<i>DV: Change in Resignation Support (0-100)</i>		
Denial	-6.47*** [1.47]	-6.60*** [1.27]
Apology	-0.22 [1.32]	8.80*** [1.50]
Allegation Baseline	0.89*** [0.02]	0.83*** [0.02]
Constant	6.39*** [0.96]	12.30*** [1.56]
Observations	984	1,012
R-squared	0.753	0.674
Scandal	Affair	Assault

**Table S9.2:** Note: Coefficients show the change in respondents' belief in the allegation by communication strategies **compared to the allegation stage (control) levels**. Columns correspond to different scandal types. Standard errors are adjusted by robust OLS models which account for the multiple measures given by the same respondents (in the allegation and in the response stage).

<i>DV: Change in Belief in allegation (0-100)</i>		
Denial	-6.56*** [1.45]	-4.06*** [1.21]
Apology	14.82*** [1.31]	16.70*** [1.45]
Allegation Baseline	0.76*** [0.03]	0.77*** [0.03]
Constant	16.17*** [1.83]	15.66*** [1.72]
Observations	984	1,012
R-squared	0.585	0.608
Scandal	Affair	Assault

## S10: Numerical results: Study 3

**Table S10.1:** Note: Coefficients show the change in the mean resignation support by the communication strategies' combination with evidence (before/after) **compared to the evidence only levels**. Standard errors are adjusted by robust OLS models which account for the multiple measures given by the same respondents.

*DV: Resign (0-100)*

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Apology, then Evidence	-2.22 [1.60]
Denial, then Evidence	1.07 [1.47]
Evidence, then Apology	-0.44 [1.15]
Evidence, then Denial	-3.81* [1.17]
Allegation Baseline	0.56*** [0.03]
Constant	40.35*** [2.28]

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Observations	1846
R-squared	0.344

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**Table S10.2:** Note: Coefficients show the change in the respondents' mean belief in allegation by the communication strategies' combination with evidence (before/after) **compared to the evidence only levels**. Standard errors are adjusted by robust OLS models which account for the multiple measures given by the same respondents.

*DV: Belief in allegation (0-100)*

---

Apology, then Evidence	4.62*** [1.36]
Denial, then Evidence	0.10 [1.33]
Evidence, then Apology	4.43** [1.07]
Evidence, then Denial	-7.25*** [1.20]
Allegation Baseline	0.41*** [0.03]
Constant	54.32*** [2.33]

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Observations	1,846
R-squared	0.216

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## S11: Study 3 Replication of Study 1 and Study 2

Utilizing the repeated measures design, we can use the only response groups at the pre-evidence stage of Study 3 to offer a successful replication of the previous studies.

**Table S11.1** Note: Coefficients show the change in the mean resignation support by the communication strategies **compared to the allegation levels**. Standard errors are adjusted by robust OLS models which account for the multiple measures given by the same respondents.

<i>DV: Resign (0-100)</i>	
Apology	7.32*** [1.69]
Denial	-6.11*** [1.51]
Constant	64.5*** [0.80]
Observations	1,846
R-squared	0.018

**Table S11.2:** Note: Coefficients show the change in the respondents' mean belief in allegation by the communication strategies **compared to the allegation levels**. Standard errors are adjusted by robust OLS models which account for the multiple measures given by the same respondents.

<i>DV: Belief in allegation (0-100)</i>	
Apology	18.40*** [1.33]
Denial	-2.20 [1.31]
Constant	64.41*** [0.66]
Observations	1,867
R-squared	0.082