

# **How do politicians' responses to scandals differ on social media? An evaluation of three case studies using the contingency theory**

## **Introduction & Research Questions**

Political sex scandals have been one of the oldest and most prominent forms of crisis communication for as long as there have been politics and political leaders. American politicians are no exception to this rule. Whether it involves former president Thomas Jefferson allegedly fathering several children with his slave (Horton & Horton, 2006) or former senator John Ensign having an affair with a former campaign staffer's wife (Graham 2011), American politicians have been having sex scandals since the founding of the republic. In fact, in recent years, there have been so many sex scandals that outlets like CNN have ran pieces that generalize the responses to sex scandals, from the initial revelation to the seemingly inevitable resignation (Mullen 2013).

However, despite a political sex scandal being the ultimate public relations crisis communication situation, there have been precious few examinations of a politicians response to a sex scandal analyzed through crisis communication theories. One such review was conducted by Moran (2012), who analyzed politician's responses to sex scandals through Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Theory, finding that politicians most often utilized the reducing offensiveness tactic (pg 49). However, none have been done through the contingency theory, first developed by Cancel et al. (1997), which posits that crisis responses should be evaluated through a continuum from advocacy to accommodation. In fact, despite the multiple verifications of the theory (Cancel et al. 1999), there is room to analyze the practical

implications of the theory utilizing further case studies. Additionally, political sex scandals are a highly valuable way in which to expand this theory, because it represents a unique form of crisis communication management, one that involves singular figures instead of overall organizations.

Even further, studying sex scandals is highly valuable within the realms of general communications studies and political science research. Williams & Delli Carpini (2000) found that the media attention that political sex scandals get was so strong, that the notion of “media gatekeeping” collapsed completely, indicating that media outlets were simply reporting whatever the most recent developments were in the saga. This helps to indicate the potential power of crisis communications responses, as the media is a potential captive audience. From a political science perspective, Bowler & Karp (2004) also found that political sex scandals can have a dramatic impact on not just opinions about individual politicians, but about overall faith in the government as a whole (pg 271). Again, this indicates the importance of a strong response, as it’s not just the reputation of an individual politician that is on the line, but also the loss of institutional faith in the government as a whole.

As mentioned earlier, finding recent examples a politician sex scandal to analyze through a few case studies is not a particularly hard task, nor is hard to find a few that have gathered significant media attention during the time period in which it took place. However, it is useful to consider case studies from a wide variety of political arenas to see if there are any differences between how the response is conducted. For example, perhaps there is a difference in how a sitting member of the House of Representatives responds to a scandal compared to a candidate running for political office, or even an elected official at a different level of

government, such as a mayor. Thus, for the purposes of this case study, I will evaluate three case studies: Anthony Weiner's 2011 twitter controversy, former presidential candidate Herman Cain's 2012 sexual harassment charges and former Illinois gubernatorial candidate Dan Rutherford's sexual harassment charges in February of 2014. The reasoning behind studying each is simple; they all offer a different dimension in terms of studying the response to sex scandals. Weiner, for example, was a sitting congressman who had his scandal originally break through Twitter and had already utilized Twitter as one of the primary ways he communicated to constituents. Cain, on the other hand, was a major candidate for the Republican nomination and despite having a relatively active Twitter account; his Twitter wasn't a central part of Cain's identity as a candidate. Finally, Dan Rutherford represents another unique dimension, as a Republican who was against gay marriage, Rutherford became embroiled in a sexual harassment scandal with another man.

These case studies now having been defined, it is important to detail the questions that I will be looking to answer by investigating these case studies. As mentioned repeatedly, I will be looking to not only define how politicians choose to respond to sex scandals, but also how they utilize social media in those responses. Even further, I will be looking to see if there is any substantial difference in how they use social media as compared to more traditional forms of communication, such as press releases or interviews with media outlets. Specifically, I will be looking to provide preliminary answers for two questions:

**RQ 1:** Where do various scandal responses fall under the contingency continuum?

**RQ 2:** Is there a substantial difference between social media posts and traditional media outreach when it comes to the contingency continuum?

## Theoretical Framework

Before conducting the case studies and answering the research questions, it is important to place my topic within an overall area of mass communications research, and then branch out to various marketing and advertising theories that will help support the topic. For the purposes of this research, the broad mass communication topic that my project best falls in is the agenda-setting theory of mass communications research. Agenda setting, as defined by McCombs (2002), involves the “ability [of the news media] to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda.” The reason that this project fits under the larger umbrella of agenda setting is simple, crisis PR communications is largely about helping to influence and drive conversation through the media. In discussing crisis communications, Coombs (2007) explained the importance of agenda setting.

As noted earlier, most stakeholders will learn about a crisis from the news media. Hence, how the news media frame (define) the crisis is an important consideration. Research from agenda setting and reputation (Carroll, 2004) suggest that the stakeholders will adopt the media's frame for the crisis. A crisis manager may find it difficult to change the media's frame for the crisis and be forced to manage within that crisis frame.

Again, the reasoning behind putting my research topic under the umbrella of agenda-setting is fairly simple, it allows for the notion that the media coverage of the crisis communications content as being of critical importance., As McCombs & Shaw (1972) explained in his original work on agenda setting theory, “candidates go before the people through the mass media

rather than in person” (pg 176). Although social media has allowed politicians to somewhat skip the direct media outreach, how the media covers a political scandal can play an outsized role in determining the political damage that a scandal can do.

Another study that provided more detail to the notion of agenda-setting being a critical factor for crisis PR communications is Kiousis, Popescu & Mitrook (2011), which attempted to find the relationship between public relations materials, agenda-setting and public perceptions towards companies. Interestingly, Kiousis et al. (2011) didn't just focus on first-level agenda setting, which is the notion that the media simply can influence the types of issues that people can talk about. Instead, the authors also tested to see whether there were any second-level agenda setting, which is the notion that the media can influence not just the types of issues that the general public talks about, but also can influence how they feel about those issues. Kiousis et al. (2011) measured this second-level agenda setting by analyzing media coverage of certain companies through *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, press releases of companies through *PR Newswire*, and survey data from *The Harris Interactive Survey* (pg 154). They found that, at least for articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, there was a substantive relationship between tone of news articles and the financial performance and public opinion of the company (pg 161). This adds substance to the claims of Coombs (2007) as explained above, as Kiousis et al. (2011) were able to help prove a relationship between press coverage and public opinion. Even further, Kiousis et al. (2011) found a relationship between the tone of press releases and the tone of media coverage (pg 161). This shows that not only is agenda-setting powerful, but public relations tactics can play a key role in how that agenda is set.

Aside from agenda setting research, another core theory for this project is the contingency theory, which was first founded by Canel et al. (1997). Contingency theory is the theory that crisis communications responses by a company or other entity can be placed on a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. When responding to a crisis, a company can take a stance ranging from this continuum, although this does not necessarily represent the specific strategies that a company can take when it comes to responding to a crisis. Canel et al. (1997) identified 87 variables for inclusion in the group of factors that affect the degree of accommodation that PR practitioners can take (pg 31). These factors include categories such as characteristics of the external public, the nature of the threats, the industry environment, corporation characteristics and the individual characteristics (pg 60). Although some of these factors have been eliminated and others have been added in recent years (Canel et al., 1999), the contingency theory is still seen as one of the most important and relevant theories in public relations and has been used in a wide variety of ways, including in evaluating how certain countries respond to crises (Ye & Pang, 2011).

To summarize, agenda-setting and contingency theory will be the two biggest theories that this study will be based on. However, there will be several other theories that will be used due to their specific relevance to this topic, including theories about how social media is used to respond to a crisis. Although crisis communications research has been expanding rapidly in the past few years, I believe that my project will help enhance this literature while adding a new element to crisis communications research.

## **Literature Review**

For the literature review, I will evaluate and add further depth to the theoretical underpinnings of this topic along with giving examples of some studies with special relevance to my research topic. First, I will start by explaining the difference in mediums, whether print or digital, when participating in crisis communications. Since a significant portion of my topic involves differences between social media and traditional communications, this is an important area to highlight. Afterwards, I will be examining how crisis communications can enhance the reputation of singular figures, which will help focus on crisis communications and individual politicians. Finally, I will evaluate case studies that evaluate contingency theory in crisis PR situations and investigate two techniques related to crisis management.

### **Evaluating the Internet and Mediums Difference In Crisis Management.**

One of the critical portions of my topic involves differentiating between mediums when it comes to communications strategies. There has been a robust amount of literature contrasting various mediums effectiveness when it comes to communicating during a crisis. A major study in this regard was done by Lee & Park (2013), which evaluated the importance of contingent message interactivity, which is the idea that websites' messages should be interrelated and interconnect with each other. Additionally, the study also tested whether there were "differences of perceptions of organization–public relational outcomes according to the type of communication channel" (pg 193). Overall, the study concluded that using the internet, specifically to help build a two-way conversation with customers "positively influenced both the perceptions of relationship management and the corporate reputation" (pg 201). Interestingly, the study even found that when familiarity of the organization was

controlled, the usage of Internet was still a significant factor in improving organization perception (pg 202).

Another study in this vein was done by Jin & Liu (2010), which discusses how PR practitioners should interact and handle the “blogosphere” and also contrasted with how a practitioner should handle blogger crises as compared to a more traditional media based crisis (pg 429). For one, it found that bloggers were judged as being “more credible than any mainstream media or online source” (pg 437). It also found that blogs can have a significant agenda-setting and agenda building function (pg 439). Most importantly, this study found that influential blogs can also drive media coverage and closely monitoring influential blogs that are related to a corporation was important (pg 441). These two studies are important because they help to demonstrate the differences of communicating online and with more traditional media sources during a crisis and they show the surprising credibility that online sources and mediums can have.

Another study in this topic was conducted by Schultz, Utz & Göritz (2011), which tested the impact of social and traditional media strategies on “recipients’ perceptions of reputation” of a company (pg 20). Additionally, Schultz et al. (2011) tested to see which made a bigger difference, message content or the medium that the message was broadcast in (pg 21). Schultz et al. (2011) found that the medium mattered more than the message, as none of the messages produced a statistically significant difference from each other (pg 25). It was also discovered that crisis communication via twitter “led to less negative crisis reactions than blogs and newspaper articles” (pg 25).

### **Crisis PR Communications and Leadership Figures.**

Considering that my topic involves politicians, it is useful to discuss literature that discusses public relations and best practices among leadership figures. One such study was conducted by Kim, Park & Cameron (2012), who tested a variety of characteristics to find the most effective ways for leadership figures to improve their public image and the public image of their company. Kim et al. (2012) found that above all else, transparency within leadership was the “most significant predictor of organizational reputation” (pg 1). Other key factors involved “the practitioners’ work engagement and willingness to adopt accommodation” (pg 1). One other surprising finding in the study was the notion that people perceived an organizational leader to be more than just the CEO, but also the communications leader (pg 20). This could have interesting applications to this topic, as it may foreshadow the importance of communications directors as a way for a politician to respond to a potential scandal.

Another study that involves singular figures was done by Men (2012), which measured the impact of CEO credibility and overall employee evaluation of an organization’s reputation. This study was largely focused on emphasizing the importance of the CEO’s image being seen as positive and credible, which Men (2012) hypothesized would have a large impact on internal and external perceptions of a company (pg 172). Men (2012) concluded that “employees who perceive the CEO as more trustworthy and honest tend to evaluate the organization positively” (pg 172). Although this involves organizations and not specifically politicians, this article has a high degree of applicability to my study due to the heavy focus on the importance of public relations establishing CEO credibility, especially how it can affect internal and external opinion about a company.

One final study in this subject area by Hwang (2012) evaluated how CEO's can utilize public relations to enhance their image and perception of their leadership. Hwang (2012) specifically studied how CEO's can use Twitter to manage their personal public relations. This study has proved especially relevant due to the fact that CEO's are increasingly creating and using their own personal Twitter accounts, including CEO's such as Jack Welch and Tony Hsieh. Hwang (2012) found that CEO's who use Twitter helped improve public attitudes about their corporations (pg 160). Hwang (2012) also found that using Twitter also helped the CEO improve perceptions about the CEO's leadership, as CEO's who used Twitter more likely to be perceived as being a "transformational leader (pg 161). This study is also directly applicable to my topic, as not only does it measure how public relations can affect a singular individual, it also contrasts leaders who use social media with those that do not.

### **Contingency Theory Case Studies.**

As mentioned in the above theoretical framework, contingency theory is a model of how companies or other entities choose to respond to a crisis situation. At its most basic form, contingency theory places the company stances on a continuum based from pure accommodation to pure advocacy, with a majority of company responses coming between these two poles. The first major academic article that created the contingency theory was done by Cancel, Cameron, Sallot & Mitrook (1997). Cancel et al. (1997) not only discovered the continuum, but also identified 87 variables that could affect the stances that PR practitioners are likely to take (pgs 61-63).

After the contingency theory was created, Yarbrough & Cameron (1998) devised a case study that tested the practicality of the contingency theory and comparing it to the four way communications model developed by Grunig (1984). After analyzing their case study, which involved three conflicts during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, Yarbrough & Cameron (1998) found support for the contingency theory. Additionally, Yarbrough & Cameron (1998) found that their case study “highlight[ed] the impracticality and inflexibility of two-way symmetrical or mixed-motive public relations as models of choice” (pg 39). This study is of particular importance to my proposed project topic, as not only does it analyze a situation through the contingency continuum, but it also demonstrates how this can be done through a series of case studies.

Another case study was conducted by Cameron, Pang & Jin (2008) that evaluated and compared the Chinese and Singaporean government responses to the 2003 SARS crisis through the contingency theory (pg 147-151). One quick point that the case study found was that although the government responses varied on the degree of openness, the governments “tend[ed] to move in a similar way” (pg 149). However, when compared side by side, the Chinese government tended to move in a more accommodative way, while the Singaporean government took a more advocacy focused approach. One way in which this study is relevant is that it focused on analyzing specific government actions and communications through the contingency continuum, which is similar to the way that office communications will be analyzed. However, while this study needed to not only focus on the contingency theory, but also the specific actions the governments took, my study can be more focused on the communications aspect of the crisis.

Yet another study in this model was done by Shin, Heath & Lee (2011), which contrasted the leadership styles of PR practitioners based on the contingency theory. Shin et al. (2011) differed from Cameron et al. (2008) in that they focused on the differences of PR practitioners between countries, specifically the U.S. and South Korea. Additionally, instead of analyzing stances through the contingency continuum, Shin et al. (2011) analyzed the specific factors that led to the various leadership styles that the PR practitioners were likely to take (pg 169). They found that PR practitioners in the US placed a greater emphasis on problem solving activities, while South Korean PR practitioners were more focused on being practical and resourceful (pg 183). This is important, as not only does it build on the contingency theory; it also contrasts the factors that influence the contingency theory in different countries.

### **Crisis PR Techniques.**

Having discussed agenda-setting, the contingency theory and public relations theories that apply to leadership figures, it is important to discuss some PR techniques that politicians could potentially use to respond to a scandal. By considering such techniques, it will be easier to analyze such strategies when they are used by politicians after a scandal. One such strategy was discussed by Arban & Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005), the notion of “stealing thunder” (pg 425). Stealing thunder is a relatively simple concept, it is when an organization “breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties” (Arban & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, pg 425). After evaluating companies that used the stealing thunder approach, Arban & Roskos-Ewoldsen found that people perceived the crisis as less severe and were more likely to purchase the product (pg 430). Additionally, Wrigley (2011) did

a study where she contrasted the approaches of two politicians, former New York Governors Eliot Spitzer and David Patterson. Wrigley (2011) found that because Patterson utilized the “stealing thunder” approach, stories about his scandal were “more positively framed” and had “fewer negative media frames” (pg 50).

One other strategy was discussed by Kim, Kim & Cameron (2011), who analyzed whether enhanced corporate social responsibility efforts could help potentially “inoculate a company prior to a crisis” (pg 86). Largely, they found that prior corporate CSR didn’t have a major impact on how a company was viewed during or after a crisis (pg 87). Instead, Kim et al. (2011) suggested that a company should instead focus on enhancing the opinion of corporate ability, which they found to have a much larger impact on how people view a company during and after a crisis. This has a few directly applicable results for my topic. For one, it could indicate that no matter a politician’s prior reputation or goodwill before a crisis, if they are unable to respond properly to a crisis, they could face serious ramifications. Additionally, if a politician is able to show a high degree of effectiveness during and after the crisis, that could help them survive certain scandals without losing a great deal of credibility and support.

### **Summary.**

This literature review expanded on the two major theoretical underpinnings of this study, agenda-setting and contingency theory. It found several studies that helped explain not only the relation to crisis communications, but also how they are directly applicable to the topic and to politics at large. After agenda-setting and contingency theory were better explained,

studies based on individual leadership and specific PR strategies were analyzed, with an emphasis on how they relate to the overall topic.

## **Methods Section**

As mentioned, my topic is analyzing politicians' responses to sex scandals through the contingency theory, with a special focus on whether there is a substantive difference between social media posts and more traditional forms of media outreach, including communication forms such as press releases. Additionally, I have explained that I plan to use three case studies as my primary method to analyze politician's responses to sex scandals. Thus, for this section, I will elaborate on how I gathered and analyzed the data, along with explaining the special benefits of using the case study approach and showing some examples of this being done in this topic field.

First, after I pick my three case studies that I will choose to analyze, I accessed as many of their office responses as possible, both by accessing old social media posts and past press releases through the office. Through tools like PR Newswire, gathering old press releases was a manageable process. Additionally, Topsy was utilized to look at past tweets sent through twitter accounts, even posts that may have been previously deleted. Another tool that was useful to help determine press coverage around an event was LexisNexis. This also allowed some access to prior social media posts, along with giving an overall sense of media coverage around an event.

Having explained how I accessed the data, it is important to detail exactly how I analyzed the data. Specifically, I analyzed and detailed the specific language that went into the

social media posts, including investigating tone, style and the timeliness of the post. Additionally, I synthesized the data to help determine organizational stance, which will determine where something gets placed along the contingency continuum. Finally, I used tools, like LexisNexis, to evaluate the media response to the various techniques. The overall goal was to be able to tell a story about the response to a scandal response, utilizing both social media posts and traditional office communications to help detail exactly how this response was conducted. It is important to note that there are small differences with each case study in terms of evaluating media coverage, simply based on the nature and quantity of the coverage around the events.

The methods having been described, it is important to provide a defense for case studies as a smart and logical way to conduct research in the field of public relations. As detailed in the literature review, case studies have been frequently utilized as a sound way to go more in depth when it comes to investigating and testing specific theories. For example, only a year after the contingency theory was originally designed, Yarbrough & Cameron (1998) published another article that analyzed the contingency theory through a case study. Overall, as described by Cutler (2004), “case studies, if thoughtfully conceived and well executed are a research tool well suited to the study of public relations” (pg 365). However, Cutler (2004) does caution that “poor methodology” frequently renders case studies in the PR field near useless.

**First Case Study: Anthony Weiner’s 2011 sexting scandal evaluated along the contingency continuum.**

***May 27- June 1: The scandal develops and takes shape.***

The controversy first started when then-Rep. Anthony Weiner, (D-NY), on May 27, 2011 sent a photo of an erect male penis to a 21 year old college student using his main twitter account. Quickly, Weiner took the picture down and claimed his account was hacked. This was verified by the first tweet he sent, which said “Tivo shot. FB hacked. Is my blender gonna attack me next? #TheToasterIsVeryLoyal.” Despite not making a ton of sense, this fit well within his overall office message to reporters, which also claimed that he was hacked. However, retrospectively, he tried to fit the “hacking” in with some of the rest of his problems. First, it is important to note that he’s taking a fully advocative approach with both his social media posts and his traditional office communication. His Twitter account went even further, claiming not only that he was hacked, but again fitting it in with his other, more mundane problems, such as his Tivo not working. This would seem to indicate him using the Benoit (1997) image restoration strategy of reducing the offensiveness of an event by minimizing its importance, again comparing it to more mundane problems. At this point, an analysis of the news articles from the three sources doesn’t amount to much, as only Politico published a story, which simply repeated Weiner’s claims that his account was hacked (Allen & Smith, 2011).

After two days of relative quiet during the Memorial Day weekend, on Tuesday, May 31, Weiner fielded 7 minutes of reporter questions in an impromptu press conference outside of his office. At this press conference, he refused to admit, one way or another, whether his account was truly hacked or whether he’d sent the lewd photos from the account himself (Sherman, 2011). Further, Weiner, who was a very frequent tweeter prior to the incident, didn’t post any tweets out from his account throughout the day. At this point, the media coverage started to intensify further and Weiner started getting critiqued from all media sources. For

example, Salon published an article titled “Anthony Weiner’s awkward press conference” where Kornacki (2011) criticized his performance as “totally out of character” for Weiner. Additionally, Salon published three other articles during this time period, all of which were critical of Weiner in some way. Meanwhile, Politico published four stories on the incident, while Human Events cracked a joke about it in an unrelated article (Hayward 2011). Overall, analyzing Weiner’s behavior throughout the day reveals a dramatic shift in strategy. For one, Weiner flipped from outright denial and an advocative approach to trying to ignore the incident or not clearly addressing it, indicating a shift in the continuum to a slightly more accommodative approach. Additionally, Weiner did not really deploy one of Benoit’s (1997) image restoration strategies, as he simply refused to answer direct questions on the incident at all.

The next day, on June 1, Weiner completely shifted his strategy back to a full advocative approach, but utilized a different strategy to do so. As Weiner did a series of interviews on MSNBC, he tried to mock the controversy, making fun of the connection between his last name and the “sexting” conversation. For example, on *The Rachel Maddow Show* Weiner joked

“It seems like what happened someone somehow got access to my Twitter account and tweeted a joke, I guess. You know, when your name is Weiner, you get some of those sometimes. I happen to be quite literally because I was on your show, I was tweeting at that very moment I saw it pop up there (Maddow 2011).

This kept with the theme of his tweets, one of which sent out on June 1<sup>st</sup> was as follows “Sorry for all the unwanted attention on #WeinerYes follows. I didn't mean to make you famous. #CollateralDamage.” However, as Weiner was completing this tour, he was generating even more negative media coverage. Between June 1 and 2, Politico published eight stories on the

incident, including a piece by Smith (2011) which heavily criticized his handling of the scandal response. Additionally, Salon published seven pieces, all of which were also critical of Weiner's response to the scandal, while Human Events published two columns both mocking Weiner and the scandal. Overall, Weiner seemed to shift back to a fully advocative approach, as he actively mocked the scandal and the media firestorm around it. According to the image restoration tactics laid out by Benoit (1997), Weiner likely fell under the provocation by joking that the media infatuation with the scandal was partially due to his last name sounding like the topic of the scandal.

***June 6-June 8: The scandal intensifies further.***

As the drumbeat of news coverage further intensified, a further revelation was released, involving Weiner sending shirtless photos of himself to a second woman. These revelations finally were a tipping point of sorts, as Weiner decided to call a press conference where he tearfully apologized for the repeated incidents and admitting that he was the one that sent all of the photos. Additionally, Weiner admitted to lying repeatedly about the incident (McAuliff & Sledge, 2011). The media coverage around this event was intense, as Politico published a remarkable 18 stories from June 6 to June 7 detailing the press conference and Salon.com wasn't far behind with 15 in the same time period, while Human Events published three pieces. These were all uniformly negative about the press conference, as it seemed that the bigger news wasn't the revelation that it was him behind the photos, but that he was, at the time, unwilling to resign from office. For example, the lead story about the event from the Politico by

Epstein & Haberman (2011) focused equally on the press conference and his pronounced unwillingness to resign.

It is important to admit that the only communication that Weiner had was through the press conference, as he had been completely silent on Twitter since June 1, when he sent the tweets that mocked his present situation. Although clearly a dramatic shift on the contingency continuum from advocacy to accommodation in that he admitted complete fault for the situation, it likely doesn't fall under total accommodation, as Weiner had yet to resign his seat.

### ***June 16: The resignation.***

On June 16, after President Obama and several Democratic members of the House of Representatives and Senate called on him to resign, Anthony Weiner finally gave up his seat in Congress. He continued his lack of posting on social media, as instead the story leaked initially to social media. Later in the day, Weiner called a press conference where he confirmed the reports of his resignation. The media firestorm continued, as Human Events posted a story about how his resignation could prompt the GOP to possibly take his house seat in a special election (Pietrusza, 2011). Additionally, Politico published seven more stories on the incident, including focusing on the larger significance of Weiner's resignation. Again, the only way of communicating that Weiner utilized was the press conference and office leaks, as he kept his total social media freeze until he started his New York City mayoral campaign in early 2012. Additionally, Weiner had traveled the entire range of the contingency continuum, from fully denying and ridiculing any accusations of his alleged sex scandal to fully admitting guilt and

eventually resigning from office. Even more dramatically, this switch took place in little over a two-week period, helping to illustrate just how quickly things can change in politics.

### ***Discussion of Weiner Incident.***

Having now discussed the Weiner incident, it is useful to evaluate Weiner's response using the research questions outlined earlier. The first RQ involved investigating exactly where Weiner's responses fell along the contingency continuum. As one can clearly see by glancing over the paper, his responses were largely clumped on the extremes of the contingency continuum, with his advocative responses being utilized so clearly that he was actively mocking people who were criticizing him and his accommodative responses involving him crying multiple times during press conferences. This could be largely because the scandal that he was accused of, sending exposed pictures of himself while in a committed marriage, is such an obvious fault that as soon as he admitted guilt, he was unable to pick any stance aside from an extremely accommodative one. Thus, it would be highly useful to run this test on other political sex scandals, to see if the swing between outright advocacy and outright accommodative is as extreme.

The final research question involved investigating whether there was a substantial difference when it came to whether there was a difference between social media posts and more traditional media outreach when it came to the contingency continuum. The answer to this question appears to be mixed. After careful investigation, it was found that his tweets largely mirrored his traditional office communication, including in content and where it was

placed along the contingency continuum. Essentially, Weiner wasn't tweeting an advocative stance and then immediately going on television to express a more accommodative view.

However, Weiner only utilized social media and Twitter when it was to express an advocative view. In fact, after June 1 when Weiner abandoned his advocative stance, he didn't post a single tweet or post on social media at all, instead utilizing press releases and press conferences to express his more accommodative views. Why was this the case? A significant portion of this likely involved the way that Weiner already utilized social media platforms. In fact, Weiner was largely aggressive and forceful on Twitter, frequently mocking other users and his political opponents. His office staff and Weiner himself might have found that there would be a disconnect if he, all of a sudden, started using his social media posts to apologize for sending inappropriate pictures. Additionally, since the scandal was largely concentrated on his usage of social media posts, it is possible that he didn't want to be seen frequently utilizing a platform that had already put him in hot water. Either way, it would also be highly useful to look at other case studies to perhaps investigate if this trend holds with politicians who didn't commit their sexual transgressions over social media.

**Second Case Study: Herman Cain's sexual harassment charges evaluated along the contingency continuum.**

***October 30-October 31: The first story gets released.***

Before the sexual harassment allegations against Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain, he was riding high in recent polls of the 2012 Republican presidential candidates.

This was somewhat remarkable, considering Cain had extremely poor name recognition before the campaign, as he'd never been involved in organized politics before the 2012 Republican nomination process. According to CBS News on October 25, 2011, Cain was supported by 25% of Republican primary voters, compared to only 21% for the eventual nominee, Mitt Romney (Daly, 2011). This represented an eight percentage point increase for Cain since the CBS poll last month. However, a mere six days after the CBS News poll, Politico released an investigative report that detailed two former employees of the National Restaurant Association who had complained of "sexually suggestive behavior by Cain that made them angry and uncomfortable" (Martin et al., 2011). Although Cain had been in some minor campaign finance trouble before the allegations, this was the first time a substantially negative story had come out against the candidate.

Cain's primary twitter account, @thehermancain, delivered an immediate response to the allegations, as they posted a tweet mere minutes after the story published that said "From Team HC: Sadly we've seen this movie played out before. Mr. Cain and all Americans deserve better bit.ly/uU0j7a." The link was to a press release, in which Cain fully denied all of the charges pressed against him. Specifically, the release said

Dredging up thinly sourced allegations stemming from Mr. Cain's tenure as the Chief Executive Officer at the National Restaurant Association in the 1990s, political trade press are now casting aspersions on his character and spreading rumors that never stood up to the facts.

Since Washington establishment critics haven't had much luck in attacking Mr. Cain's ideas to fix a bad economy and create jobs, they are trying to attack him in any way they can.

Sadly, we've seen this movie played out before – a prominent Conservative targeted by liberals simply because they disagree with his politics.

Mr. Cain — and all Americans, deserve better (Burns, 2011).

There are a few important things to note with this response. One is the relative cohesiveness of the twitter message and the press release. They all focus on the notion that the scandal is a distraction from the substance of the campaign. The tweet even uses the final takeaway line from the release with the intention to discredit the attackers. This message is an interesting combination of two of the Benoit (1997) image restoration strategies, the “simple denial” and “attack accuser” (pg 179). Cain is clearly denying the charges, and did so throughout the entire campaign. However, he is also attacking source of the article by saying that he's being “targeted by liberals,” although it is unclear exactly who he is referring to in this response. Cain's team also utilized Twitter's promoted tweets feature to showcase this response, indicating that his blaming of liberals was the message he wanted to get out into the media (Bingham, 2011).

The next day, Herman Cain did a media blitz, conducting two separate interviews on Fox News channels, including appearances on “Happening Now” and “On the Record with Greta Van Susteren.” In these appearances, Cain continued to completely deny all charges, claiming to not even know one of the females by name (Van Susteren, 2011). Additionally, when asked on “Happening Now” what his message would be to supporters, Cain said that his campaign would continue to “stay on message” and repeated core campaign ideas, including his tax and foreign policy plans (Lee, 2011). Overall, in the two media interviews, Cain largely focused on denying all charges, along with encouraging the media to focus more on his campaign platform. Additionally, Cain had a pre-arranged media appearance at the National Press Club that day and

he used that opportunity to further rebut the sexual harassment charges leveled against him (Galloway, 2011).

When one looks at Cain's twitter account on October 31, it largely mirrors his many media appearances throughout the day. His first tweet encouraged fans to watch his appearance on "Happening Now," saying "Team HC: Be sure to watch Mr. Cain on Fox News Happening Now today at 11:15am ET." His second, third and fourth tweets of the day also encouraged his fans to tune into another media appearance, this time notifying fans of Cain's National Press Club appearance. The fourth tweet also put a positive spin on the appearance, saying "I think I left the National Press Club today on a high note, watch the video and RT if you agree! [cs.pn/vgJUy](https://cs.pn/vgJUy)." In addition to informing his followers about the appearance, the tweet also refers to the fact that Herman Cain actually sang during the event. The final tweet that Cain sent out on October 31 involved his thanking fans for sticking with him, saying "I am blessed to have such great supporters! Thank you all for your support & prayers today & throughout my campaign!"

When looking at the two days' events through the contingency continuum (Cancel et al., 1997), it is pretty clear that Cain is sticking with the advocative approach in both his tweets and official media appearances. However, when one drills further, there are subtle differences in how he utilized Twitter and his official media appearances. Specifically, Cain used the traditional media appearances to repeatedly rebut the specific charges of sexual harassment. That largely wasn't how he utilized Twitter, however. He instead used it as a way to rally supporters of his campaign and inform his supporters about the media appearances. In this case, it is clear that Twitter played a support role in the response, not the main avenue that

Cain utilized to respond. Given that Hwang (2012) found that Twitter can be used by CEOs to help improve personal image, it makes sense that Cain would use Twitter to generally inspire his supporters, instead of specifically rebutting each charge.

***November 1-4: The scandal deepens.***

On November 1, there was a new development in the Herman Cain sexual harassment scandal. One of the lawyers for the women that accused Cain of sexual harassment, Joel Bennett, asked for his client, the accused women, to be released from a nondisclosure agreement. This would allow his client could speak to the charges that she filed (Somashekhar & Grimaldi, 2011). While this story was in the press, Cain made another appearance on a Fox News show, this one the O'Reilly Factor. In this media appearance, Cain again fully rebutted the charges against him and said that it hadn't hurt his campaign at all, citing fundraising highs his campaign had reached the day before. Bill O'Reilly asked Cain very detailed questions about his response to the scandal, with Cain saying he'd done the media appearances for his supporters and to "get out in front of" the potential scandal (O'Reilly, 2011).

Cain's campaign sent out three tweets on November 1, all of which help to illustrate a different element to his response. The first tweet that Cain sent out was to emphasize the high fundraising total that Cain had received as a result of the scandal, saying "@TheHermanCain had 1 of best fundraising days ever yesterday. We say~Let's go for two! bit.ly/oVN4oc Pls RT." This compliments Cain's appearance on the O'Reilly Factor, where he also emphasized his high fundraising as a logical rebuttal to the notion that his campaign was suffering from the sexual harassment allegations. Cain also sent out a tweet that encouraged his followers to watch his

O'Reilly factor segment, saying "Team HC ~ Please tune in to the O'Reilly Factor at 8 pm ET."

Again, this sticks with the tweets from the day before, where Cain notified his viewers of upcoming media appearances. Finally, Cain also sent out another tweet attempting to distract from the scandal which said "Team HC -- "We the People" reject attacks...Cain takes 10 pt. lead in #SC <http://tinyurl.com/3tox8vw> #tcot #Cain2012." This was clearly done to logically rebut the notion that his campaign was in trouble, despite the fact that the South Carolina Republican primary was still three months away and there were several primaries that were scheduled to take place beforehand.

On November 2, the scandal worsened for Cain. A third woman emerged claiming to have received "unwanted sexual remarks" with Cain while Cain was at the National Restaurant Association (James, 2011). This time, instead of Cain's blaming the media, as he did in his October 30 statement, Cain blamed fellow Republican presidential nominee Rick Perry for the release of the sexual harassment stories in a phone call to Cain's supporters (Zeleny & Rutenberg, 2011). Aside from the campaign phone call, Cain was largely absent from the press about the scandal, as his campaign didn't send any tweets on November 2.

After another quiet day on November 3, on November 4, Bennett, the lawyer for one of the accusers, released another statement, in which a woman details a "series of inappropriate behaviors and unwanted advances" over "one to two months" ("A timeline of Herman Cain's troubles," 2011). Although the statement didn't contain any specifics, there was a fresh round of calls for Cain and the National Restaurant Association to allow the alleged victims to release the details of the reports, including from former George W. Bush political adviser Karl Rove (Burns, 2011). Again, Cain didn't make any public comments or appearances in which he

mentioned the scandal, as his only appearance was at an Americans for Prosperity event.

Although Cain didn't make any public comments, he did send a tweet related to the scandal that said "Team HC ~ The time for smears is over. It's time for bold solutions. Give to the Iowa Fund today. <http://bit.ly/t3YiLE>." This fits with the theme of past Cain tweets, as he is again trying to paint the scandal as a distraction from his larger campaign goals. Even further, this tweet also encourages further donations, as Cain had previously used high fundraising totals to explain why the scandal wasn't negatively affecting his candidacy for president.

***November 7-9: A fourth woman emerges, then the scandal dies down.***

Through November 7, the Cain campaign was still running relatively strong, as Gallup found him in a statistical tie with presumptive Republican front-runner Mitt Romney (Newport, 2011). However, a fourth woman, Sharon Bialek, emerged, accusing Cain of asking for sexual favors in exchange for helping her find a job (Daly, 2011). Additionally, Bialek made the accusations in a high-profile New York City press conference and further announced that she was being represented by Gloria Allred, a famous civil and gender rights lawyer. Immediately after the story was released, Cain issued a statement questioning the credibility of the witness, saying "Activist celebrity lawyer Gloria Allred is bringing forth more false accusations against the character of Republican front-runner Herman Cain" (Daily, 2011). Cain also held a press conference the next day, saying that the accusations against him were "baseless, bogus and false" (Garner, 2011). Interestingly enough, the Twitter account for Cain's press staff, not the actual Herman Cain Twitter account, issued the response, which again attacked Gloria Allred, saying "Welcome to the campaign, Gloria Allred. What took you so long?#Iowa fund ==>

<http://t.co/UPd0oPjW> #iacaucus.” Specifically, the tweet is doing two different things: questioning the credibility of Gloria Allred as a lawyer and encouraging people to donate as a result of the attacks of Cain. This was the last tweet from either Cain account that ever mentioned the scandal.

After the press conference by Bialek, the fourth woman to accuse Cain of sexual harassment, his candidacy began to significantly decline in the Republican primary field. By November 11, his candidacy was eight points behind Romney and he fell to a 26% approval rating among Republicans, compared to 44% of those who disapproved of Cain (Weigel, 2011). Even more remarkably, 39% of Republicans wanted Cain to drop out of the race immediately due to the accusations. As a result of these accusations building up and the subsequent decline in approval, Cain decided to suspend his campaign on December 3, 2011.

### ***Discussion of the Cain incident.***

Having looked over the responses that Cain had with the scandal, it is useful to evaluate Cain’s responses based on the two research questions outlined. The first RQ asks where the various scandal responses fall along the contingency continuum. In this case, it is clear that all of Herman Cain’s responses, throughout, have been completely advocative. From the very beginning, not only did Cain deny all of the charges against him, he oftentimes denied even knowing who the accuser was. Even as the charges against him continued to leak, he never strayed from the position that he would be completely exonerated, once all of the facts were released. This type of consistency is vastly different than with Rep. Weiner, who wildly swung

across the contingency continuum, especially towards the later days of his scandal. Say what you will about Herman Cain, but he was consistent in denying the charges from start to finish.

The second research question asks whether there was a substantive difference in the responses in social media, as compared to traditional media, along the contingency continuum. In this specific case, there were no differences. Cain utilized both platforms to completely deny all charges throughout the entire scandal. However, there were some substantial differences in how Cain communicated on Twitter as compared to his traditional media interviews. For one, Cain utilized Twitter as a way to issue rapid-fire responses immediately after these details were published. Additionally, Cain used his Twitter account to encourage people to actively participate in the campaign, especially through donating. Also, Cain utilized his Twitter as a way to attempt to push out stories that were more favorable to his campaign, such as a new poll or a record fundraising day. In contrast, the media appearances were designed to specifically refute all of the sexual harassment charges that Cain faced in a much more matter of fact manner. The media appearances were largely focused on the scandal as well, as Cain was sometimes unable to steer the conversations back to the core talking points that he wanted his campaign to communicate, with The O'Reilly Factor being a particularly good example.

**Third Case Study: Dan Rutherford's sexual harassment allegations evaluated along the contingency continuum.**

***June 3: Dan Rutherford enters the race for Illinois governor as a Republican.***

The Republican nomination for governor of Illinois in 2014 was seen as a relatively good position to have. Despite the fact that Illinois leans Democratic on statewide elections, as

President Barack Obama won the state in 2012 by nearly 16%, it had a Democratic governor, Pat Quinn, who was “one of the most unpopular governors in the country” (“Illinois Governor’s race looks like a toss up,” 2013). Quinn had a 60% disapproval ranking, partially due to a pension reform plan that attempted to limit public employee pensions, which were over \$100 billion in debt (Garcia, 2013). As a result of Quinn’s unpopularity, several Republicans were eager to jump into the race to face him and the first one to enter the race, on June 3, 2013, was State Treasurer Dan Rutherford.

Rutherford came into the race with a few clear positives. He was one of only three Republicans elected statewide during the 2012 elections, elections that otherwise featured Democrats winning all but two of the statewide positions. Additionally, Rutherford was the only Republican nominee in 2013 that had a net positive approval rating, with his 24% approval rating, compared to a 20% disapproval rating (“Illinois Governor’s race looks like a toss up,” 2013). However, Rutherford also came into the race with some potential problems. As the Chicago Tribune (2013) detailed in their initial write-up of Rutherford’s entry into the race, his tenure as State Treasurer was “bumpy,” as he’d frequently “bragged about cutting spending...but routinely made use of the state plane for his travel between Chicago, Springfield and other cities.” Additionally, Rutherford, who was a bachelor, was subject to numerous rumors that questioned his sexuality, especially after he was “the sole Republican vote in favor of adding "sexual orientation" to the state's non-discrimination statute” (Eaton, 2012).

Despite the rumors about his personal life and possible minor corruption as State Treasurer, Rutherford was in a fairly positive position when he first entered the race. In a poll done two days after his entrance into the race, Rutherford had a nine-point lead over the next

closest challenger, state senator Bill Brady. Businessman and multi-millionaire Bruce Rauner, who would eventually win the nomination, had only 5% of the vote in the poll. However, despite the strong position, Rauner would eventually take over the race, as he spent over \$6 million dollars of his own money to support his campaign (Corfman, 2014). Despite Rauner's spending massive amounts of his own money, Rutherford was still in contention and only 10% behind Rauner in a poll conducted in November of 2013 ("Illinois Governor's race looks like a toss up," 2013).

Rutherford gained a unique reputation on his social media outlets, especially Twitter, during the campaign. Specifically, the Associated Press ran an entire story based on Rutherford's Twitter account, which "chronicles the Illinois treasurer fixing home appliances, jogging on the treadmill and eating his sister's famous goulash" (Lester, 2013). However, the account also landed Rutherford in hot water, as he would sometimes tweet about his experiences on the campaign trail, despite billing them as official State Treasurer activities (Lester, 2013). Essentially, Rutherford's Twitter account could be seen as a window into all of his activities as an elected official, both positive and negative.

### ***January 31: The first developments emerge.***

Rutherford's campaign took a major hit in the end of January. Rutherford called a press conference where reporters were expecting that he'd come to "announce an endorsement, unveil a policy initiative or share some other ostensibly positive news in his bid for Republican nomination for governor" (Mihalopoulos, 2014). Rutherford had instead come to announce that an unnamed and unidentified employee was alleging misconduct by Rutherford. Rutherford

didn't specify exactly who was making the claim or what they were alleging that Rutherford had done, but he did say that there was "absolutely no truth to the allegations" (Ahern, 2014). His official statement—which he also posted on his Facebook page—went slightly into explaining the incident, but mainly focused on blaming Bruce Rauner for the incident

I have launched an independent investigation into allegations of misconduct made against me by an employee of the Illinois Treasurer's Office. The Office has retained Ron Braver and Associates. Ron has 25 years of law enforcement experience that will prepare him well for this important investigation.

Let me make this very clear, there is absolutely no truth to the allegations, no factual support or merit.

Christine Svenson is an attorney making demands on behalf of the accuser and is directly linked to my opponent Bruce Rauner. This connection only came to light when my opponent was forced by the media to disclose itemized payments within his campaign operation. Svenson's law office was paid at least once as it appears on his very recently amended campaign report (Ahern, 2014)

Having given the press conference in which he angrily denied all of the charges, Rutherford was extremely active on his Twitter account in rebutting the charges. Rutherford sent at least 13 tweets on January 31 and they fell into three main categories: retweeting encouragement from his supporters, retweeting supporters who blamed Rauner and mentioning the media stories that talked about his press conference. All of these tactics were on the completely advocative side of the contingency continuum developed by Cancel et al. (1997), as they featured Rutherford not taking any blame for the incident and instead blaming outside parties for his problems.

The first, and most frequent, type of tweet was Rutherford featuring people who agreed with his notion that Rauner was behind the event. One such tweet came from the username

@fortlocks2 and said “@RutherfordDan The timing of this is so obviously a setup. Rauner and his staff should be ashamed to play these kind of games” and another came from the username @reagan\_ronnie, which said “@RutherfordDan @BruceRauner People rarely understand the dynamic of dirty politics when great sums of money are used.” Additionally, Rutherford used his Twitter feed to highlight general support from people, including tweets from @GhostGadgetGuy, who said “ @RutherfordDan Go get em' Dan!” Finally, Rutherford utilized his feed to highlight upcoming media appearances, such as a local TV appearance: “Rutherford: Gov rival Rauner behind staffer's allegations [http://abclocal.go.com/wls/story?section=news%2Fpolitics&id=9414843 ...](http://abclocal.go.com/wls/story?section=news%2Fpolitics&id=9414843)” In addition to being completely on the advocacy side of the spectrum, Rutherford attempts to utilize the “shift the blame” image restoration strategy, which was theorized by Beoit (1997). Simply put, Rutherford is almost completely blaming the incident on his opponent, while admitting no fault of his own.

To summarize, Rutherford, stayed completely on the advocative side of the contingency continuum throughout the day. He largely used his Twitter account to amplify the encouragement he was getting from his supporters, especially when they agreed with his framing of the issue. Additionally, Rutherford utilized his Twitter account to mention his upcoming media appearances, similar to what Herman Cain did with his Twitter account during his scandal. One other similarity with Cain is worth noting: both utilized their fundraising numbers as a way to respond to the scandal. On February 1, Rutherford tweeted that “Home after several campaign stops, large crowds They were not fundraisers yet \$2635 in checks were given & \$2100 came in on line #twill.”

***February 3-4: Further details emerge about the victim.***

On February 3, there was another development in the scandal, as the exact nature of the offense and gender of the employee involved was revealed. Specifically, according to a report from the Chicago Sun-Times, it was a former male employee that made the claims and the claims specifically involved Rutherford sexually harassing the employee (Korecki & Mihalopoulos, 2014). Additionally, a concurrent report in the Chicago Sun-Times found that Rutherford had spent a record 32 days abroad as State Treasurer, including several trips with his personal assistant, Josh Lanning (Korecki, 2014). The kicker was that, according to Korecki (2014), the excuse to have them room together was that it had been done to “keep costs down.” Most national media outlets immediately tied the two incidents together, one example being Gawker, which ran a story titled “Illinois GOP Gov. Candidate Took Strapping Male Staffer on World Tour” which summarized the entirety of the allegations against the gubernatorial candidate (Trotter, 2014).

In contrast to the response after his press conference in January, Rutherford offered a very limited official response to the latest allegations, though he gave an interview to the Associated Press where he defended his earlier decision to go public with the allegations (which he still denied), saying “I know the accusations are completely false; I'm going public with it. That's the right thing to do” (Tareen, 2014). Additionally, his Twitter activity about the developments was extremely limited, as he only retweeted media clips about the overall state of the race, including his retweet of ABC7 Chicago journalist Charles Thomas that said “The @RutherfordDan @BruceRauner feud consumes @ILGOP Gov's primary.

<http://abclocal.go.com/story?section=news/politics&id=9418155>.” Although Rutherford didn’t adopt an advocative stance on Twitter, it is unlikely that his position shifted dramatically along the contingency continuum. For one, his official response and interview to the Associated Press still denied all of the claims. Additionally, his Twitter response wasn’t indicating any shift in content, as he simply didn’t say much about the scandal.

### ***February 10: The victim emerges.***

After a limited time where Rutherford responded sporadically to the scandal, mainly to retweet his supporters who proclaimed his innocence, the final part of the scandal broke when Ed Michalowski, a former employee, went public with all of the sexual harassment claims (Korecki, 2014). Korecki (2014) detailed a repeated string of sexual harassment claims from Michalowski, starting in 2011 and continuing on into 2013. Even worse for Rutherford, all of the details went public, including an incident where Rutherford allegedly approached Michalowski during a party and said “If you go home with me, you can have anything you want in the office” (Korecki, 2014).

Rutherford’s official response to the allegations was, again, to deny all of the charges that Michalowski brought. Rutherford held a 23-minute press conference the day the story broke, telling reporters “I stand right here and look you in the eye and tell you it’s wrong. It’s false” and that the whole thing “smells of politics” from Rauner (Korecki, 2014). As was the case with the last press conference that Rutherford had in January, there was another massive Twitter response to the scandal. First, he utilized his Twitter account to promote his various media appearances and his press conference, saying “I will be holding a media availability this

afternoon to address an ex-employee's false claims. #twill.” Additionally, Rutherford sent a total of 14 tweets on February 10, all of which retweeted various supporters who were skeptical of the claims brought against Rutherford. For example, he retweeted @jacob\_dickey, who said “@RutherfordDan setting the record straight with facts, supporting articles on allegations. We could use a guy like that in office. #twill” and @djfitzgerald111, who said “I think the charges being levied in the suit against @RutherfordDan are a load of crap.”

This response by Rutherford again firmly places him in the advocacy side of the contingency continuum. Again, Rutherford’s Twitter account was utilized as a way to show how his supporters were holding firm with him throughout the scandal, even as he was receiving negative media attention. This was in contrast to his response to the various allegations that were released a few days earlier, which was met with relative silence. This could indicate that Twitter was a key part in the Rutherford’s planning process. When he was able to properly coordinate a response, he heavily used his Twitter account to promote his supporters.

### ***February 11-March 18: The aftermath.***

After the barrage of scandalous revelations that the campaign suffered in little over two weeks, Rutherford struggled to regain any semblance of campaign footing. A poll conducted on February 11 helped show the damage in a very stark and direct way, as Rutherford found his support collapse to 9.7% (Flannery, 2014). Moreover, the frontrunner in the race, Bruce Rauner, was found to command 46% of the vote, giving him a commanding 36% lead over Rutherford (Flannery, 2014). In the end, Rutherford found his support completely collapse

before the March 19 election and ended up only getting 7.5% of the vote, with Rauner winning with a 40% plurality of the vote.

Why did Rutherford's support collapse so heavily after the scandal? There are many possible theories, but two particularly stick out. One idea is that the scandal particularly hurt Rutherford among social conservatives, who make up a large percentage of the electorate in a Republican primary. As David Yepsen, the director of Southern Illinois University's Public Policy Institute said in an Associated Press article, "This kind of accusation from another man is just going to be devastating to Rutherford with a lot of those voters... There's just no other way to portray this" (Tareen & Lester, 2014). Another idea is that Illinois voters were entirely sick of the corruption aspect of the scandal, having already had to deal with former governor Rob Blagojevich. As Doug O'Brien, a former aide to senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) said in another Associated Press article "The voters of Illinois are just so tired of having to put up with a lower standard for ethics among their elected officials" (Tareen 2014).

### ***Discussion of the Rutherford incident.***

Having evaluated the specifics of Rutherford's response, it is useful to evaluate the answers to both research questions with the Rutherford case study. The first research question asks where the various scandal responses fall along the contingency continuum, as defined by Cancel et al. (1997). The answer to this is relatively simple, both on Twitter and Rutherford's traditional media outreach. Specifically, Rutherford's actions fall entirely along the advocacy wing of the contingency continuum. As was repeatedly mentioned throughout the case study, Rutherford consistently denied all of the charges, even as they got progressively more serious.

This was continued on his Twitter feed which, if anything, amplified his denial by consistently retweeting his supporters who were skeptical of all the charges. Although Rutherford didn't use his Twitter account to mock the charges, like Weiner and Cain did, he clearly and repeatedly used it to deny all of the charges and to blame his opponent, Rauner, for the entire scandal.

The second research question asks if there was a substantial difference between Rutherford's social media posts and traditional media outreach on the contingency continuum. In the specific sense of this question, it appears that there was no substantial difference. As mentioned above, Rutherford repeatedly used his Twitter account to promote his followers' skepticism of the charges, only reinforcing his claim that he wasn't guilty of any of the charges. However, there were differences in how and when he utilized Twitter to respond to the scandals. One difference was that Rutherford utilized his press conferences to poke holes in the details of the allegations and to explain, in moral terms, why he wasn't guilty of the allegations. His Twitter, on the other hand, was largely used to demonstrate the notion that his supporters were staying with him throughout the scandal by frequently mentioning their support. Even further, he utilized Twitter as a way to add credibility to his claim that Rauner was behind the charges by allowing his followers to make the claim for him. Thus, if anything, his Twitter was on the more extreme end of the contingency continuum, as he not only utilized it to explain and defend his position, but he also used it to try to show that he had supporters rallying to his side.

#### **Overall discussion of case studies.**

For this portion of the paper, there will be four sections. First, I will compare and contrast the specifics of these three case studies, with a focus on how they differed in using social and traditional forms of media to respond to their sex scandals. After that, there will be a section that attempts to answer the research questions posed at the start of this paper. Finally, there will be sections that discuss some of the limitations to this approach and further research opportunities in this space.

### ***Comparing and contrasting the different case studies.***

When evaluating the three case studies shown above, there are a few important similarities and differences to notice. For one, each situation, as presented above, represented a unique and differing set of circumstances. For Rep. Anthony Weiner, as a sitting member of Congress, there was less of an immediate pressure to respond to his voters. However, with the Rutherford and Cain case studies, they were in the middle of furious campaigns for their offices, so responding immediately and thoroughly to the allegations was imperative to their campaigns. Despite that, the Cain and Rutherford case studies were different too. For one thing, Rutherford was running in a statewide election and only had to tailor his message to a few media markets. Cain, on the other hand, was running a nationwide campaign and had to respond to a variety of outlets and deal with a greater number of overall supporters.

Candidates also had their own style on Twitter, which impacted the nature of their social media response. Weiner, for instance, had frequently utilized his Twitter account to sarcastically respond to opponents of his policies and that carried over to his response, which consistently featured him joking about the allegations and saying things like “Touche Prof

Moriarity. More Weiner Jokes for all my guests! #Hacked!” Rutherford, on the other hand, had a frequently updated Twitter account that routinely featured mundane details of the campaign, so it follows that he frequently featured tweets of the exact nature of responding to this charge by saying “@TedMcClelland Mom and entire family are on board pushing back the false allegations.”

Despite the differences between the case studies, there are some clear parallels between how all three politicians utilized Twitter in their response to sex scandals. For one, all of the politicians studied used Twitter as a way to promote their upcoming media appearances, where they were able to respond to the allegations in a more thorough way. For example, Weiner utilized his Twitter to specifically promote his appearance on *The Rachel Maddow Show*, saying “On with Rachel tonight. Gonna talk about Trump eating pizza with a fork! #DudeYoureANewYorker!” Additionally, all of the candidates utilized their Twitter feeds as a way to present critiques of the persons making or bringing up the allegations, with these critiques frequently being sarcastic and of a somewhat derogatory nature. For example, the Cain-affiliated Twitter handle @CainPress responded to one of the people alleging Cain of sexual harassment by sarcastically saying “Welcome to the campaign, Gloria Allred. What took you so long?,” while Weiner tweeted “Wow, so many followers now. #IsThereTrollRemovalSoftware?”

Additionally, none of the politicians studied used their Twitter accounts to present anything remotely conciliatory to the people making the allegations. Of every single tweet studied in this review, in none of them did the candidate admit any fault, at all, with their actions. In fact, when Weiner ended up resigning, instead of tweeting about his resignation, he

simply stopped posting on Twitter entirely. Finally, all of the candidates utilized Twitter as a way to quickly respond to the allegations against them. As demonstrated in the Cain case study, Cain was able to respond to the POLITICO article in mere minutes after it was posted. Similarly, Rutherford responded to the allegations against him in real time by retweeting supporters of his campaign, who stood by him while the scandal was occurring. Both Cain and Rutherford also used their Twitter accounts to demonstrate how they were successfully fundraising off of the allegations, with Cain saying ""@TheHermanCain had 1 of best fundraising days ever yesterday. We say~Let's go for two!"

***Answers to the research questions.***

With the case studies now being evaluated and contrasted, it is easier to look back and answer the two research questions outlined at the start of the paper. These two research questions are as follows:

**RQ 1:** Where do various scandal responses fall under the contingency continuum?

**RQ 2:** Is there a substantial difference between social media posts and traditional media outreach when it comes to the contingency continuum?

The first one asks where the various scandal responses fall on the contingency continuum, as outlined by Cancel et al. (1997). This draws on one of the themes mentioned throughout this entire review, which is that all of the case studies involved tweets that were entirely on the advocative side of the spectrum. None of the candidates used their Twitter or social media responses to admit any personal fault. In fact, the only time there was an

accommodative response, with Weiner's press conference where he resigned, was completely ignored by Weiner's Twitter account. Other than that one instance, there was no accommodation on social media by any of the politicians that were studied. Given that they were all advocative, however, there were some differences in the specific image restoration techniques (Benoit, 1997) that the politicians utilized on social media. For one, some of the politicians used the "attack accuser" (pg 179) image restoration technique, as what happened when Cain sarcastically mentioned that one of the accusers was bringing in famed attorney Gloria Allred (Benoit, 1997). Rutherford, on the other hand, utilized the "shift the blame" (pg 179) technique when instead of admitting fault, he simply stated that his opponent, Bruce Rauner, was behind the attacks. So even though the politicians all were extremely advocative in their responses, there were some differences in the exact nature of their advocacy.

The second question asks whether there was a substantive difference between the social media and traditional media responses along the contingency continuum. The answer to this is decidedly mixed. As mentioned repeatedly throughout this study, all of the Twitter accounts analyzed were at the extremely advocative end of the continuum. However, a lot of the media appearances followed this exact same pattern. For example, in every single media appearance to this day, both Rutherford and Cain have denied all of the allegations against them. In fact, the only accommodative response at all involved Weiner, who admitted fault and quickly resigned from office afterwards. Again, though, there are differences in the nature of the social media responses from the more official forms of media communication, such as interviews and press conferences. None of the politicians studied utilized their Twitter to specifically rebut the details of the allegations, instead choosing to do that through traditional

media outreach. Instead, they generally utilized their Twitter accounts to rally their supporters or offering sarcastic responses to the accusers.

That being said, what was actually learned from this review? For one, as mentioned by Bingham (2011), social media is changing the nature of the way politicians can respond to scandals. It allows them a forum to immediately rebut any of the charges against them and, more importantly, it gives them a venue to demonstrate to the media that they are still in the good graces of their supporters. Additionally, it is important to note that there is almost no room for specific details on Twitter, which affects the nature of the response. None of the politicians studied utilized Twitter as a way to provide a detailed response, instead offering pithier comments about the accusers or rallying people to their side.

### **Limitations**

There are a few logical limitations to this style of academic research. For one, there is no quantifiable way to prove that all politicians responses to sex scandals will be on the advocative side of the contingency continuum. The reason is that there isn't a big enough sample size, nor a large enough data set, to demonstrably prove that there is a clear difference. Thus, the external validity of the study is fairly limited. Additionally, it is hard to exactly quantify the contingency theory as a whole. Essentially, how one should measure an accommodative response or an advocative response, or weight them, can be disputed. Because there aren't exact specifics, any judgments in this area will fall on the researcher, which can introduce a different set of biases in the study. This study only analyzed Twitter responses. It is entirely possible that how politicians respond to sex scandals is substantively different on different

forms of social media. For example, how a politician responds on Facebook or Instagram to a sex scandal could be entirely different from how they use Twitter. Finally, it is also possible that the politicians themselves did not use their own Twitter accounts, and that there was a dramatic differences in the tweets produced by staffers and the candidates themselves.

### **Further research opportunities**

There are a number of logical ways that this study can get expanded and built upon. For one, different forms of social media could be studied. As mentioned previously, this study was limited to studying how politicians responded using Twitter, so a follow up review could be how a politician utilized Facebook or another, newer form of social media to respond to a scandal. This type of study could also be done in a more quantifiable way, by perhaps doing a content analysis of the exact nature and language that is used in responses to sex scandals, comparing Twitter to other, more traditional media outreach. Additionally, due to the limited nature of the study, it is possible that simply studying more topics would help provide more backing to the theories demonstrated above, so as more politicians respond to sex scandals through social media, it could be evaluated and quantified using the contingency theory. Finally, it would be highly useful to evaluate a politician who was able to win his race, despite the allegations. Every case study in this study later lost or resigned, so it would be highly useful to study a political figure who was able to avoid resignation or an ignominious defeat.

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