

# The Role of Scandal in U.S. and Japanese Politics: Trump, Abe, and Their Political Futures

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**Abstract - Continuing the research I began in my previous paper *The Acquisition of Formal and Informal Political Power in the United States and Japan* (presented at the Young Researchers Conference in 2018) in this paper I will examine the role of scandal in the politics of the United States and Japan, as well as the extent to which scandals lead to the decline or consolidation of formal and informal political power. In these last two years since the presentation of my first paper, the United States and Japan have both experienced dramatic changes and important events in politics. Using the research compiled in the previous paper as background information on U.S. and Japanese political culture, this new and updated paper will analyze shifts in American and Japanese politics and will predict whether or not Trump and Abe's scandals will have a significant effect on the future of their respective political careers.**

*Key Words* – Political Scandal, Political Culture, Donald Trump, Shinzo Abe, Elections

## INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing, the U.S. presidential election is nearly seven months away, and voters will be forced to make an important decision: whether or not to allow President Donald J. Trump a second term. Trump's rise to power in 2016 was unusual, as he held no prior experience holding political office. He was also well known for his long career in the real estate business, and for the numerous scandals he was said to be involved in. Trump's victory in 2016 illustrated his ability to overcome those major hurdles for his campaign, and also illustrated the willingness of American voters to overlook those issues. However, Trump has been faced with numerous new scandals after entering the White House, including the "Russia collusion" investigation, multiple reports of extramarital affairs, and a controversial call with a foreign leader that led to his impeachment. As Trump begins to

campaign for a second term, there is no doubt that these scandals will play some kind of role in the 2020 election.

In Japan, numerous scandals have haunted the Abe administration. Unlike Trump's scandals, these cases have not attracted widespread attention from the rest of the world, nor have they led to any widespread protests or demonstrations. Attempts by the opposition to remove Abe from office (through a vote of no confidence) have also been soundly defeated, although the scandals have led to sporadic declines in Abe's approval ratings. Over the years Abe has been able to consolidate power despite the divisions and different factions within the Liberal Democratic Party and has also been able to lead the party to impressive victories in parliamentary elections. His ruling coalition currently holds 314 out of the 465 seats in Japan's House of Representatives. With this strong support behind him, Abe has become the longest-serving Japanese prime minister since the end of the Second World War.

This piece will argue that the scandals of both Trump and Abe will not have a major impact on their long-term informal political influence and will likely have a minimal impact on the outcome of elections (the consolidation of formal political power). My examination of recent U.S. and Japanese politics suggests that although scandals are important in terms of temporarily shaping public opinion and can sometimes lead to specific election outcomes, it is generally not the most important factor that citizens and voters consider.

For the purposes of this paper, 'scandal' is defined as acts of legal or moral misconduct by those who hold significant societal power, as well as the public criticism and outrage that comes as a result of this behavior. This paper will analyze several political scandals and will place a particular focus on the public backlash that came as a result of these cases. As previously defined in my 2018 paper, 'formal political power' is the legitimate acquisition of positions of political office through legal appointments and elections, while 'informal political power' refers to

unofficial political influence over powerful public officials or the public itself. Informal power can thus be observed in lobbying data, public approval numbers, social media trends, and any other metric that represents one's popularity and influence in society or among the politically powerful.

### **THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL SCANDAL IN THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN**

Before diving into the question of how scandal will affect future political events in the U.S. and Japan and how this ties into the systems of formal and informal power mentioned in the previous paper, one must examine the history of scandal in the United States and Japan, and how this has affected culture, society, and elections in the past.

**United States** In the United States, scandal has always been present at the highest levels of government, including the presidency. Thomas Jefferson was known for having extramarital affairs, Warren G. Harding's presidency is still plagued by the Teapot Dome scandal, and more recently even popular presidents such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton have faced widespread public criticism for scandals that they played a role in. Additionally, members of Congress have been involved in numerous scandals over the years (such as the Jack Abramoff scandal). This section will examine the Watergate scandal during Richard Nixon's presidency, the Iran-Contra scandal during Ronald Reagan's presidency, and the extramarital affair scandal of Bill Clinton's presidency as a framework to analyze the effect that Trump's scandals will have on his political future.

Watergate is perhaps the most consequential political scandal in the history of the United States. Although scandals have always played an important role in American politics, the extensive investigation and widespread media coverage was something that the nation had never seen before. The case involved a break-in into the Watergate complex in Washington D.C. in July 1972, where the Democratic National Committee office was located. Those arrested had ties to Richard Nixon's reelection campaign and had been caught stealing documents and wiretapping phones. Nixon immediately denied his involvement in the break-in and took sweeping action to cover up any potential link between those involved and his administration. After an extensive investigation by intelligence agencies and the Congress that spanned nearly two years, Nixon resigned in 1974.

Nixon remains the only U.S. president to ever

resign the office, and this came after two years of extensive investigation and overwhelming pressure from congressional leaders and political insiders, which indicated to Nixon that his chances of impeachment and removal from office were inevitable. The Watergate case illustrated that evidence of a link between a politician (in this case the president of the United States) and suspicion of criminal conduct (or other wrongdoing of equal stature) is not necessarily enough for someone to immediately lose the formal political power he or she has consolidated over the years. Nixon was reelected the same year as the Watergate break-in with an electoral landslide, defeating Democrat George McGovern with 520 electoral votes compared to McGovern's 17 electoral votes, and secured a popular victory of nearly 20 million votes. [1] However, Nixon later made serious mistakes in his own handling of the scandal. For example, it was revealed that he had arranged "hush money" for the five burglars caught breaking into the DNC office. He had also ordered the CIA to obstruct the FBI's investigation into the break-in, and had fired Archibald Cox, the independent special prosecutor tasked with investigating the break-in. These abuses of presidential power and Nixon's obstruction of justice were investigated over a long period by Congress and the public, who now had easy access to this information through 24-hour news coverage. [2] This led to Nixon's eventual demise, and it is often said that the cover-up was what brought Nixon down, not the break-in. Nixon not only suffered a serious loss of his formal political power (by resigning from his position as president), but also a loss of the informal political influence that he had consolidated over the years. President Gerald Ford's pardoning of Nixon is generally considered to be a major factor in Ford's loss to Jimmy Carter in the 1976 presidential election and compounded on the distrust of government and Nixon's allies, which had come as a result of Watergate. [3] Although public sentiment on Nixon's tenure has shifted somewhat in recent years (notably, Nixon has been praised in recent years for his efforts regarding environmental protection), at the time the scandal received enough public outrage to cause a demise in Nixon's formal and informal political power, and the loss of Nixon's informal political power over the public (a decline in public trust) even led to the loss of Ford's formal political power.

Watergate, however, seems to be an outlier and a stark contrast to the way political scandals have played out in more recent years, such as in the case of Iran-Contra. Iran-Contra was a major scandal that plagued Ronald

Reagan's administration. Reagan's administration had operated an arms trade with Iran, which had recently gone through an Islamic revolution in 1979 and had been holding American hostages. Using the funds secured by this arms deal, the administration would be able to fund the Contras in Nicaragua, an anti-communist group that had been fighting a guerrilla conflict with the leftist Sandinista government. The press first reported on the scandal, and after further investigation by Attorney General Edwin Meese, it was revealed that much of the money secured from the arms deal (\$18 million of the \$30 million total) was not officially accounted for. Reagan was forced to retract earlier statements in which he denied any negotiations with Iran or terrorists, and it was revealed that Reagan's national security advisor John Poindexter was aware that the diverted funds had been sent to the Contras. Investigations by Congress concluded that Reagan's lack of oversight had enabled the diversion of funds, and included televised testimonies of key players in the scandal, including President Reagan. Reagan's vice president George H.W. Bush was elected president in 1988 and pardoned many who were implicated in the scandal. [4] Reagan did, to an extent, lose the trust of the public during this scandal. However, it can be said that Reagan managed to maintain both formal political power and informal political influence. In terms of formal political power, there were no serious attempts to impeach Reagan, and his own vice president was able to carry the 1988 election in a 426-111 electoral landslide. [5] In terms of informal political power, Reagan continues to be revered to this day by the American center-right as a hero of modern American conservatism.

Bill Clinton's extramarital affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky consumed the second term of his presidency. Kenneth Starr was an independent special prosecutor appointed to investigate the Whitewater controversy, a scandal that involved Bill and Hillary Clinton and a series of real estate transactions they had made with James and Susan McDougal. Several inquiries were opened into the Whitewater case, but none had gathered enough evidence to charge the Clintons with criminal conduct. [6] However, when Kenneth Starr took over the investigation in 1994, the investigation would change direction and look into a completely different issue: Bill Clinton's extramarital affair with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Bill Clinton had faced allegations of sexual misconduct prior to his election as president and the investigation into these allegations, combined with the Starr investigation into the

Whitewater scandal, led to the stunning reveal in 1998 that Clinton had been having an affair with Lewinsky. The case went to federal court, and after denying the claims for months, Clinton eventually testified before the court's grand jury, admitting responsibility and apologizing to the American public. He was impeached in January of 1999 for perjury and obstruction of justice but was acquitted of both charges in a Senate trial the following month. Clinton did lose some formal and informal political power as a result of his scandals. He became the second president in American history to be impeached by the House of Representatives, and his scandals contributed to a long-lasting public image of Clinton and his family as inauthentic, untrustworthy, and unethical. However, Clinton was *not* removed from office, and the Democratic Party even gained seats in the 1998 midterms. [7] The focus by Republicans on impeachment is generally considered to be a cause of the Democratic gains in these elections. [8] Clinton also left office as one of the most popular presidents in modern American history, maintaining a strong hold on his influence over the public. [9]

**Japan** Japanese politics was completely reformed at the end of the Second World War when the occupying American forces reformed Japan's government and wrote a new constitution for the country. Since then, several political scandals have captivated the nation and led to the demise of some powerful political figures. While there haven't been quite as many large-scale political scandals as the United States (where virtually every administration has faced at least one), these scandals have shaped the political culture and history of Japan and can provide hints as to how political scandals will shape the future.

The Lockheed scandal (ロッキード事件) occurred in 1976 and is often considered to be the most high-profile political scandal in Japanese history. The case involved bribes between the Lockheed Corporation (now Lockheed-Martin) and top Japanese politicians and business officials, including Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka. Lockheed's former chief operating officer and vice president A. Carl Kotchian admitted to this on February 6, 1976, to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and revealed that the bribes involved a promise that All-Nippon Airways (a major Japanese civilian airline) would purchase Lockheed's Tri-Star jet. When these reports reached Japan, it was revealed that leaders of the Liberal Democratic Party had been involved. Among them was Kakuei Tanaka, the former

prime minister, who was eventually arrested and imprisoned. Although the LDP suffered a setback in that year's elections, it held onto its parliamentary majority. [10] [11] Today, Tanaka remains one of Japan's most popular prime ministers. Although the LDP's formal political power took a major loss, Tanaka continued to hold on to informal political power. The prime ministers who followed Tanaka were known to be close allies of him, and the Japanese public continues to admire the uneducated and poor country boy who eventually became prime minister. [12] [13]

The Recruit Scandal (リクルート事件) was exposed in 1988 and involved some of Japan's top political leaders. Recruit was a Japanese real estate company that engaged in insider trading with Japanese media executives, bureaucrats, and politicians. Between 1984 and 1986 it offered unlisted shares in real estate subsidiaries to this group, and those who purchased the unlisted shares were able to sell them at high prices after Recruit went public in 1987. Those implicated in the scandal included Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita, Chief Cabinet Secretary Keizo Obuchi, and former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, as well as numerous other high-profile politicians. At the time, Japan had very few anti-insider trading laws and regulations, and thus very few of these politicians were ever charged with crimes. Formal power and informal power were both lost to an extent; the LDP suffered setbacks in elections and lost some public support. [14] [15] [16] However, the LDP managed to hold on to their formal political power (as the ruling party) until 1993, and although their credibility was hurt temporarily, they remained a powerful and popular force in Japanese politics.

### **TRUMP, ABE, AND SCANDAL: WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR**

**Trump** In the two years since I presented my previous paper *The Acquisition of Formal and Informal Political Power in the United States and Japan*, the political scene of the United States has changed dramatically. The midterm elections were a stunning blow to the Trump administration and the Republican Party, as the Democrats were able to gain a majority in the House of Representatives. The new Democratic majority supported the Russian election meddling and Trump-Russia collusion investigation, and this culminated in the publishing of Robert Mueller's official report in April 2019. Although Mueller did not charge Trump with any official crimes, he also did not rule

out the possibility that Trump had committed crimes. Despite calls for further investigation by Congressional Democrats, the investigation ended there and did not lead to impeachment proceedings or an indictment of the president. Some key Trump campaign officials, such as former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, former Trump campaign CEO Paul Manafort, and longtime Trump advisor Roger Stone have been arrested and indicted for criminal conduct. However, Trump claimed that the Mueller report had vindicated him, and his approval ratings remained static. [17] In September of 2019, an anonymous whistleblower reported that Trump had pressured (with the threat of halting military aid) Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky on a phone call to investigate former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., a political rival who had announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020. This allegation led to heavy criticism from Congressional Democrats, who argued that Trump had invited a foreign power to interfere in the 2020 presidential election, and that he had abused the powers of the presidency to advance his personal political interests. House Democrats, now in the majority, quickly began an investigation into the matter, calling witnesses to committee hearings and introducing articles of impeachment. Despite arguments from Congressional Republicans that the process was rigged and that Trump had genuine concerns about Biden's alleged corruption in Ukraine, the witnesses confirmed that Trump had solicited a "quid pro quo" with Zelensky, asking for an investigation into Biden in exchange for military aid and an official White House meeting between the two leaders. Democrats introduced two articles of impeachment: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The two articles passed Congress on December 18, 2019, with no Republican support for both articles. This made Trump the third president in U.S. history to be impeached by the full House of Representatives. His defense team in the Senate trial included high-profile lawyers such as Alan Dershowitz and Kenneth Starr. The Republican-controlled Senate refused to call witnesses to the trial, and both articles were rejected on party lines (48-52 and 47-53), with the exception of Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT) who voted yes on article I, the abuse of power. [18]

There is no evidence that these scandals had an immediate impact on Trump's approval among the American public, which shows he has been able to maintain his hold on informal political power. His approval ratings instead improved, indicating that impeachment does not

seem to be a major concern among American voters. Additionally, while several reports of extramarital affairs and other claims of inappropriate behavior have dominated press coverage of the Trump administration, there haven't been major drops in his approval and disapproval ratings, as his approval rating has remained near 40 percent and his disapproval rating at around 50 percent. [19] The 2020 presidential election will be the true test of whether or not these scandals can contribute to the demise of his formal political power, but because he has been able to so firmly maintain his grip on informal political power, it seems unlikely that this will have a major effect on the outcome of the election.

**Abe** The Abe Administration, which has become the longest-lasting Japanese administration since the end of the war, has seen its fair share of scandal as well. In February of 2017, it was revealed that the Japanese Finance Ministry sold heavily discounted land in Osaka prefecture to Moritomo Gakuen, a private school that was known for promoting right-wing nationalist education. Prime Minister Abe's wife Akie Abe was listed as an honorary principal of Moritomo Gakuen, and this led to allegations of government favoritism. The ministry maintained that this was not a reason for the sale, but documents detailing the transactions between the ministry and the school were destroyed. Allegations of Abe's favoritism and overstep of power arose again in May of the same year. A new veterinary department at the Okayama University of Science had been requesting approval from the Japanese Education Ministry for nearly 50 years and had finally received government approval. This department was to be run by school operator Kake Gakuen, and the allegations that Abe was personally involved came about after it was revealed that Abe and the head of Kake Gakuen were longtime friends. [20]

These scandals led to the worst drops in approval ratings for Abe. In February, after the Moritomo story broke out, Abe's approval ratings fell 8.3 percent (41 percent approval), and a poll conducted in July of 2017 indicated that Abe's approval ratings had fallen to 26 percent. [21]

The most recent scandal to hit the Abe administration is the Sakura Wo Miru Kai (桜を見る会) Scandal, which broke in November of 2019. The scandal centered on the annual cherry blossom-viewing event that Japanese prime ministers hold in the spring. The allegations against Abe were that he had misdirected public funds and

prioritized his own supporters (in his Koenkai organization) from his home constituency to participate in the event. His office in his home constituency had offered special exclusive packages to his Koenkai supporters, which included transportation to Tokyo and a stay at a luxurious hotel. Opposition parties took advantage of this opportunity to criticize the administration and slow its legislative agenda. Abe and his senior aides said documents detailing guest lists had been shredded, and that it could not provide specific information about guests out of concern for their privacy. The opposition pointed out what they claimed was a pattern of hiding and covering up wrongdoing, as well as an abuse of the prime minister's office for Abe's personal affairs. Although this led to an immediate six-point drop in approval ratings, his approval rating had improved since the Moritomo-Kake scandals and was still at a relatively strong 42 percent after the scandal broke. [22] [23] While Abe has sporadically suffered serious threats to his informal political influence over the public, his public image seems to recover, and he has been able to hold on to formal political power through elections.

More recently, Abe's administration and the LDP have been put under more intense scrutiny for the conduct of top party officials and members of parliament (some who served in Abe's cabinet) who have been investigated for various criminal activities, as well as a controversial new bill that would give the prime minister new powers over prosecutors. However, Abe's history of overcoming scandals suggests that it is unlikely that these new problems will destroy his political future.

## **CONCLUSION: WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW?**

Although these scandals have revealed the weaknesses of both leaders, they have also shown their strengths. Trump's major appeal among his core base of supporters is his 'authenticity', a concept that extends to his proclivity towards scandalous behavior. Thus, although some of Trump's behaviors have led to public outrage, this outrage is also what precisely excites Trump's core base. Although Abe has faced serious accusations of abusing the powers of his office, his ability to prevail over these problems and succeed in elections has revealed his ability to hold on to power by stressing the LDP's historical mandate to power (a mandate based on providing economic stability), rather than social issues which place more of a focus on the personal conduct of politicians.

Trump and Abe both lead powerful democracies

September 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>, Virtual

and economies, and will continue to face critical decisions that will have long-lasting effects. Terrorism, the threat of climate change, and the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) all illustrate the need for leaders who can unite and gather broad support from the people. Political scandals will most likely not have wide-scale or long-lasting impacts on the political futures of these two leaders, in terms of both formal and informal power. However, there is no doubt that both leaders will both face higher levels of public scrutiny and accountability as the world moves towards a more dangerous era.

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