

## The New Normal

Scandals as a Standard Feature of Political Life in Nordic Countries

Pollack, Ester; Allern, Sigurd; Kantaloa, Anu; Ørsten, Mark

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## **The New Normal: Scandals as a Standard Feature of Political Life in Nordic Countries**

ESTER POLLACK  
Stockholm University, Sweden

SIGURD ALLERN  
University of Oslo, Norway

ANU KANTOLA  
Helsinki University, Finland

MARK ØRSTEN  
Roskilde University, Denmark

All political scandals trigger discussions of trust, but in a competitive commercial media climate, both important and minor legal offences and moral transgressions are regularly treated as scandalous media events. Today, actors in social media and mainstream media organizations can collaborate on cases that might develop into scandal news. In this article, which is based on an analysis of 101 political scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden from 2010 to 2016—and a study of political scandals in the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2017–2018—we show that mediated scandals have become a standard feature of political life in Nordic countries. Compared with earlier decades, there has been an exponential rise in the number of scandals; at the same time, the rate of resignations and dismissals following scandals is lower than before. Offences related to economic affairs, including corruption, and personal behavior scandals, such as accusations of sexual harassment, constitute the most prominent scandal types. However, regarding sexually related behavior scandals, there are interesting differences between the Nordic countries.

*Keywords: political scandal, media, right-wing populist parties, corruption, sexual harassment, #MeToo, Nordic countries*

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Ester Pollack: ester.pollack@ims.su.se  
Sigurd Allern: sigurd.allern@media.uio.no  
Anu Kantola: anu.kantola@helsinki.fi  
Mark Ørsten: oersten@ruc.dk  
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Since the 1960s, political scandals have become a prevalent feature of political life in countries with dissimilar political cultures, economic standards, media systems, and levels of corruption (Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2011; Thompson, 2000; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004). Nordic welfare states such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have long been perceived as a contrast to this development, comprising a relatively scandal-free zone in Europe (Logue, 1988). Foreign observers may have exaggerated the cleanness of earlier Scandinavian politics, but the prevalence of political scandals in the first decades following World War II was very low, and such scandals did not involve large-scale corruption. Transparency International's (2017) *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016* still ranks the Nordic region as among the least corrupt areas in the world.

Several studies published in the last decade have, however, shown that the Nordic countries can no longer be regarded as exceptions to this international trend. Scandals in the 1980s and 1990s were still relatively rare, but at the turn of the millennium, they became a recurrent feature (Allern, Kantola, Pollack, & Blach-Ørsten, 2012; Herkman, 2017; Kantola & Vesa, 2013). Scandal reports regularly captivate the public's attention, strongly influencing public debate and government action.

This development has gradually led to a generalized and inflated use of the term *scandal* in political news reports and public debates. Prerequisites for misdeeds that may develop into political scandals include mediated visibility, intense public communication about an affair, and actors who are willing to condemn a misdeed's real or imagined defects (Ludwig, Schierl, & von Sikorski, 2016; Lull & Hinerman, 1997). Falling under the media's scandal umbrella are large-scale corruption revelations, security scandals, sexual harassment, minor fiscal evasions by politicians, private sex peccadilloes, and examples of scandalous talk in television broadcasts. Some scandals, major and minor, result in media hunts for weeks and may force political leaders to resign. Others are shorter in duration, as news stories reveal norm transgressions that are quite trivial and easily forgotten by the public. Most political scandals are linked primarily to individual politicians' norm transgressions and improper conduct. Another category comprises scandals that can be linked primarily to mistakes concerning public policy or the actions of government institutions (Midtbø, 2007). In every case, mediation and public reactions are a constitutive factor.

Based on a mapping of political scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden in 2010–2016, and supplemented by a study of scandals in the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2017–2018, we analyze the characteristics of Nordic scandals and their consequences. The comparative study is based on a most-similar-system design. Nordic countries<sup>1</sup> are not uniform, but Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have a long history of economic and cultural cooperation and have many similarities, not only in their democratic traditions, political institutions, and political culture but also in their media systems and journalistic cultures. In all four countries, the popular tabloids and their online sites have traditionally played a leading role in person-oriented scandals and media hunts.

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<sup>1</sup> Iceland and the Faroe Islands also belong to the Nordic countries, but they have not been examined in this study.

Concerning the registration of scandals and scandal types, we adopt the definitions and categories used in Allern et al. (2012), which differentiate six scandal types. The first two are offences in economic affairs (economic scandal, with corruption as an important subtype) and abuse of political power positions (power scandal). A third category is unacceptable personal behavior, which includes subtypes such as sex scandals, accusations of rape and sexual harassment, and misuse of alcohol or drugs. Because of strong traditions of public regulation in Nordic countries, a fourth category is offence concerning other laws and regulation. A fifth category that has gained some interest is talk scandal, defined as an unacceptable utterance that creates headlines and commentary and arouses public anger. Most often, this occurs when a politician makes careless public comments without thinking about the public's reactions (Ekström & Johansson, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Talk scandals may also come about after more planned provocations, including through postings on Twitter and other social media platforms. The sixth and final category comprises other and mixed scandal types not covered by the above categories.

Political scandals generally trigger discussions of trust in politicians (Isolatus & Almonkari, 2014), with individual politicians being particularly severely punished for political hypocrisy (Bhatti, Hansen, & Olsen, 2013). The most scandal-prone politicians seem to be power holders representing parties with government positions (Allern et al., 2012). However, many mediated political scandals concern small sums of money, minor legal offences, and moral transgressions with limited societal consequences. These are treated as major scandals in a competitive commercial media climate and are enhanced through sharing and commenting on social media. From the perspective of democratic institutions, "scandals may erupt around the wrong forms of deviance or, more troubling still, they may erupt over nothing" (Sass & Crosbie, 2013, p. 856). In empirical studies of scandals, this complicates analyses of development trends. We run the risk of counting vultures and sparrows as the same type of bird.

The article is organized as follows. In "Potential Reasons for Increased Scandalization," we discuss factors and societal changes that we believe have contributed to an increased incidence of mediated political scandals. Thereafter, we present five research questions concerning the development of Nordic political scandals. In "Mapping of Scandals: Method and Data," we explain how political scandals have been defined, mapped, and coded. In "Nordic Scandals 2010–2016: Incidence and Consequences," we present the annual number of new scandals in the four countries and analyze the consequences for the politicians involved. These results are compared with data from earlier decades. In "Scandalized Politicians and Their Parties," we present data concerning the distribution of scandals between the Nordic political parties. In "Types of Political Scandals," we describe the distribution of scandal types from 2010 to 2016, with most weight being placed on the incidence of corruption scandals and sexually related scandals, compared with earlier decades. In "Scandals in the Wake of #MeToo," we discuss how changing social norms and public debates affect the interpretation of mediated scandals. Finally, "Conclusion" contains

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<sup>2</sup> In Sweden, from 2015–2016, the popular tabloids used unacceptable utterances as a basis for repeated attacks against Åsa Romson (the Green Party), the then minister for the environment in Stefan Löfven's center-left government. One of her sins was her reference to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as "an accident" in a television interview, a statement she quickly regretted.

finishing thoughts about the incidence of various scandal types and the problematic mediated mixture of important scandals and more trivial norm violations.

### **Potential Reasons for Increased Scandalization**

Why do political scandals seem to be more prevalent today? We maintain that in the Nordic context, changes and challenges in four societal areas are especially important.

The first area of importance concerns media development. Economic, technological, and political changes in the media system have influenced and altered the channels of political communication and the relations between journalists and politicians. Until the mid-1980s, the media system in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden followed the democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), characterized, among other things, by a mass-circulated, party-affiliated press; the coexistence of press freedom and a tradition of state intervention in the media sector. Broadcasting was still a state monopoly, politically based on principles of neutrality and consensus orientation. Some important elements of this model still exist (such as public service broadcasting), but two basic changes are the fall of the party press and the commercialization of the media market (Allern, 2017; Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe, 2014). This has also resulted in the gradual weakening of the old type of political loyalties between political reporters, media pundits, and political parties. Journalistic revelations of scandals became a symbol and self-legitimation of the new independence, which could be combined with market-oriented news criteria.

Over the last decade, the Internet and the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter have provided political parties and other political actors with several new media channels and platforms for communication and debate. One important consequence of this is that rumors and accusations that may more easily than before lead to public scandals may be disseminated outside the editorial control of legacy media and independent of professional journalists' self-imposed press ethics obligations. Politicians also use Facebook and Twitter messages as a way to communicate directly to a public of followers. This may sometimes lead to a talk scandal, but messages via social media can also be used to minimize the effects of scandal reporting in the news media. As the #MeToo movement has shown, it has been possible to organize groups and circulate petitions with accusations about scandalous behavior that are later channeled to the mainstream media at very short notice.

The second area of importance for the incidence of scandals is political culture. Today's political climate is characterized by a high degree of visibility and a culture in which the personal character and trustworthiness of individual leaders have become more important. As in most Western democracies, class-based voting patterns have declined, and voter volatility has increased. Voters are now generally more erratic and less faithful to parties and party ideologies (Nedergaard & Wivel, 2017). In all four countries, right-wing anti-immigration parties have grown in membership, gaining substantial voter support (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). This may have increased the likelihood of neopopulist scandals through the use of unacceptable behavior or language against nonnative inhabitants (Herkman, 2017). To gain media visibility, political parties adopt journalistic news values and adapt their practices to media demands—a development characterized as a mediatization of politics (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). When

covering political scandals, news outlets allow for individual angles and entertaining tabloid dramatization. As a consequence of this personification of party politics, individual politicians' norm violations have gained importance as a basis for political scandalization (Jenssen, 2014). The personalization and individualization of politics have also weakened the loyalty inside political parties. When a politician is scandalized, the sources of the media leaks are often members of the same party who see an opportunity to weaken or eliminate a competitor (Jenssen & Fladmoe, 2012).

The third area of importance is the influence of social and political movements in the shaping of ethical norm debates, which sometimes lead to legislative changes. Examples include legislation enhancing equality between men and women in work and family life and the greater awareness of sexual harassment as a societal problem. As Downey and Stanyer (2013) point out, change in societal norms and legislation concerning sexual conduct may increase the probability of scandals relating to sexual behavior. Sweden and Norway have both illegalized the purchase of sexual services, a law reform that arguably makes political scandals related to sexual harassment and prostitution more probable. This development, and the stronger representation of women in Nordic parliaments and governments, has in many ways challenged old patriarchal power structures and habits. As the #MeToo movement demonstrates, this is an ongoing process.

The fifth of these areas is the development of the economy, both regionally and internationally. Since the 1990s, large Nordic companies that are partly or completely state owned have invested and expanded in many parts of the world, including Central Asia and other regions that are notorious for extensive corruption. To secure contracts, these companies have established partnerships with straw companies owned by corrupt power holders and have become involved with various types of bribery. The result has been several large-scale financial scandals, leading to criminal investigations in multiple countries. Moreover, the deregulation and liberalization of the public sector in all Nordic countries has created opportunity for more private competition and lobbying for public contracts, increasing the importance of securing the right political contacts and connections. As a consequence, several internal corruption cases, especially in the municipal sector, have gradually sullied the impression of the Nordic countries as a corruption-free zone (Gedde-Dahl, Magnussen, & Hafstad, 2008; Kornhall, 2016). In the last two decades, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden have also signed international agreements concerning the struggle against corruption—a political obligation that has influenced and increased police investigations into bribes and embezzlement.

### Research Questions

Our reasoning in the first two sections can be summarized in five research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: The frequency of scandals:* Has the incidence of political scandals increased in 2010–2016 compared with earlier decades?
- RQ2: The consequences of scandals:* Is the rate of resignations and dismissals following scandal stories higher than in earlier decades?
- RQ3: The role of political parties in scandals:* Are the Nordic right-wing populist parties more scandal prone than other political parties?

*RQ4: Economic scandals:* Has the incidence of economic scandals related to corruption become more frequent in 2010–2016 compared with earlier decades?

*RQ5: Personal behavior scandals:* Has the incidence of sexually related scandals increased in 2010–2016 compared with earlier decades?

In relation to these research questions, we will also analyze and comment on the differences and similarities of the four Nordic countries.

### **Mapping of Scandals: Method and Data**

How scandals are defined and operationalized influences any empirical analysis of development trends. Markovits and Silverstein (1988) restrict political scandals to acts that, in the quest for political power, violate due process and procedure. According to this view, economic or sex-related scandals by politicians may only be considered relevant as political scandals if they are linked primarily to an abuse of power with political aims. In contrast, Lull and Hinerman (1997) and Thompson (2000) use a wider and more sociological definition: Violations of accepted values and social norms may lead to political scandals if they are made known and visible through the media, arouse public criticism, and anger and threaten politicians' reputations. We will adhere to the latter definition, which includes personal scandals concerning double standards and hypocrisy among politicians; it also makes an operational definition easier.

In their study, Allern et al. (2012) mapped scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden from 1980 to 2009, separating mediated national political scandals (i.e., the case had to be characterized as scandalous and given broad media coverage in at least two leading national media organizations for five days or more) from minor and local affairs. We used the same categories in this study, allowing us to compare recent trends with those of earlier decades.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a standard requirement has been whether the assumed norm violations or wrongdoings were linked to transgressions by national political leaders or to norm violations concerning public policy or the actions of publicly owned institutions.

This means that most local political scandals, and a long range of critical, ephemeral media reports about the assumed defects or "scandalous" behavior, have been excluded. Media organizations occasionally try, without success, to turn their own revelations into a scandal of national interest. In other cases, politicians may successfully avoid a tough and long-lasting media hunt by employing the strategy of public self-criticism and quick resignation.

As in the studies mentioned above, we differentiated between *scandals* and *scandalized politicians* as coding units. In some cases, economic or administrative scandals in public institutions and public companies develop into political scandals because the government is ultimately responsible. However, in these cases, the chair of the board or the CEO, or both, is legally responsible for the institution's or company's actions, and the politically responsible minister will only be scandalized if, prior to the revelations, he or she was aware of the

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<sup>3</sup> The same operational definition was used in an analysis of populism and political scandals in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden (Herkman, 2017).

norm violations or—when they became known—did not follow up on the case properly. In such cases, the scandal did not contribute to the list of scandalized politicians. In 2010–2016, nine Nordic politicians were involved in more than one scandal. Each of these politician-related cases was coded separately.

The registration of scandals from January 1, 2010, to December 31, 2016, including their coding, was based on documented or assumed norm transgressions reported by the media, without any further independent investigation of the evidence connected to the transgression. The main source for the registration of scandals, including their evaluation in relation to our selection criteria, were electronic media text archives, particularly the largest Nordic media archive, Retriever.<sup>4</sup> We started with a list of well-known public scandals, in most cases including the names of the scandalized politicians. We searched for coverage of these cases by the two to four largest newspapers (published in the capital of each country) in the media archives and copied a selection of informative articles (news and commentaries) about the cases. We excluded scandals or affairs that resulted in news headlines but that were covered for fewer than five days from our scandal list. To avoid false negatives, we also used *scandal* (in the various languages) as a single search word. This search returned many examples of the frequent use of the term in the media, but only a few political cases (with coverage lasting five days or more) could be added to the list. When necessary, this information was supplemented by biographical and other factual information from Wikipedia or other encyclopedias. Each scandal was registered once—the year the media coverage began.

We used this information to establish a register containing factual information about the mediation of each scandal case: start year, country, how the norm violations were described in the press, the main actor(s) involved, party affiliation, gender and political position, and the political and (eventual) judicial consequences of the scandal. All four authors collected the data, and we were each responsible for our respective home country. We then discussed, compared, and cross-checked the national lists of scandals to secure a common practice. We used this documentation as the basis for the coding, with one of us responsible for general oversight. We discussed cases of doubt until we reached agreement.<sup>5</sup>

Our study of scandals related to the #MeToo movement in the Nordic countries was based on a registration of accusations of sexual harassment launched in the period from November 1, 2017, to January 31, 2018, using the same guidelines described above. We also mapped parliamentary debates, law proposals, and ethical debates directly related to the media coverage of the #MeToo initiatives.

### **Nordic Scandals 2010–2016: Incidence and Consequences**

#### ***Incidence***

Let us first turn to RQ1, concerning the frequency of new scandals: Has the incidence of political scandals increased in 2010–2016 compared with earlier decades? Table 1 shows the yearly incidence of political scandals in the four countries from 2010 to 2016.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.retriever.no>; <https://www.retriever.se>; <https://www.retriever.fi>; <https://www.retriever.dk>

<sup>5</sup> To test intercoder reliability, an independent coder recoded 15 cases of the registered national scandals involving politicians. Cohen's kappa for the variables used in this study was 0.815 or higher, which reflects very high agreement.

**Table 1. Incidence of Political Scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 2010–2016.**

Country	Year							Total
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	
Denmark	2	5	2	5	1	5	1	21
Finland	3	4	5	4	3	3	0	22
Norway	3	5	7	2	3	2	1	23
Sweden	8	3	8	2	1	3	10	35
Total	16	17	22	13	8	13	12	101

Sweden tops the list with 35 scandals, with fewer incidents reported in Denmark, Finland, and Norway (21, 22, and 23 scandals, respectively). However, it is worth noting that the number of scandals varies considerably from year to year in all countries. The scandal incidence in the Nordic region was highest in 2012 (22 scandals) and lowest in 2014 (8 scandals). When patterns and tendencies are analyzed, it is necessary to cover periods longer than a few years.

An earlier analysis of Nordic political scandals from 1980 to 2009 based on the same criteria revealed an increase in scandals in the first decade of the new millennium. Whereas 32 national political scandals were registered in the four countries in the decade 1980–1989, and 33 were registered in 1990–1999, the incidence increased to 90 in 2000–2009 (Allern et al., 2012). In answering RQ1, the development from 2010 to 2016 suggests that this trend continues. In the seven-year period from 2010 to 2016, the number of registered scandals (101) was already higher than in the preceding decade, and this development occurred in all four countries. Political scandals have become a standard feature of political life in the Nordic countries; they have become the new normal.

### ***Consequences for Scandalized Politicians***

Scandals have uncertain outcomes. Neither journalists nor politicians can fully predict the possible reactions and counterreactions to a media hunt. Reporting is usually wide-ranging and intense. Scandals topple political careers. At the personal level, the consequences can be dramatic. Initial disclosures may lead to new disclosures, followed by commentaries, negative opinion polls, and speculations. Old allies withdraw support, and old enemies see opportunities for revenge. However, as Jenssen and Fladmoe (2012) note, those who are attacked will defend themselves. When mediated accusations seem to be exaggerated, attempts at scandalization may trigger some sympathy, and an appropriate dose of self-criticism may mitigate the political pressure.

Do most scandalized politicians resign? Because many of the most spectacular scandal cases end in dismissal or resignation, it is a widespread perception that this is the most typical consequence. Table 2 shows that only one-third of the scandals from 2010 to 2016 resulted in dismissal or resignation, whereas nearly half of them (47%) only resulted in mediated public debates and critique.

**Table 2. Political Consequences for Nordic Politicians Involved in Scandals by Country, 2010–2016 (%).**

Consequence	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	All
Dismissal or resignation	33	32	38	31	33
Other reactions/sanctions	29	26	10	16	19
Limited to public debate and critique	38	42	48	53	47
Total	100	100	100	100	99
<i>n</i>	21	19	21	32	93

The remainder (19%) ended in other reactions, such as a timeout, a reprimand from the party, or a forced change of parliamentary committee duties. In the three previous decades, 1980–2009, the rate of dismissal or resignation was higher (47%), other formal reactions lower (3%), and the share attracting only public critique was 51% (Allern et al., 2012). There thus seems to be a negative answer to RQ2, on whether the rate of dismissal and resignation following scandal stories in 2010–2016 was higher than in earlier decades. The reactions and consequences were less dramatic for a larger share of scandalized politicians in the previous period. This pattern was the same in all four countries.

### Scandalized Politicians and Their Parties

The Nordic countries are all parliamentary democracies with multiparty systems, but the Finnish electoral system combines a proportional list system with mandatory candidate voting. Finland has a long tradition of broad coalition governments, but today, coalition governments have also become the most typical solution in the other Nordic countries. In the period 2010–2016, the only single-party government was Lars Løkke Rasmussen's Danish cabinet (June 28, 2015, to November 28, 2016).

A high proportion (46%) of the 93 scandalized politicians in 2010–2016 had a government position (as a minister or state secretary), confirming that politicians in positions of power are more exposed to scandal than others. The news media generally prioritize scrutiny of ministers' actions. However, the share of scandals involving government members in this period was somewhat lower than the 55% observed in 1980–2009 (Allern et al., 2012).

Table 3 presents an overview of scandal cases related to politicians from parties represented in the Nordic national parliaments, listing their degrees of cabinet experience.

**Table 3. Politicians Involved in Scandals, 2010–2016, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden by Party Affiliation and the Party's Cabinet Membership.**

Party Name and Country	Number of Politicians Involved in Scandals	Number of Months Party Spent in Cabinet, 2010–2016
Moderate Party (Conservatives), Sweden	10	57
Venstre (Liberal-Conservatives), Denmark	10	39
Labor Party, Norway	8	45
Social Democratic Party, Sweden	8	27
Swedish Democrats, Sweden	8	0
Finns Party, Finland	7	19
National Coalition Party (Conservatives), Finland	6	84
Green Party, Sweden	5	27
Center Party, Norway	4	45
Conservatives, Norway	4	39
Social Democratic Party, Finland	3	47
Social Democratic Party, Denmark	3	45
Social Liberal Party, Denmark	3	45
Progress Party, Norway	3	39
Conservative People's Party, Denmark	2	22
Socialist People's Party, Denmark	2	28
Green League, Finland	2	65
Centre Party, Sweden	1	57
Socialist Left Party, Norway	1	45
Centre Party, Finland	1	37
Danish People's Party, Denmark	1	0
Venstre (Liberals), Norway	1	0

Of the 32 parliamentary parties, as many as 22 experienced a scandal for at least one national politician belonging to the party during the seven-year period, confirming the new normality of scandalization. In the top 10 of this list, we find, as one would expect, some of the largest Nordic parties—all with long cabinet experience. Of all the Nordic parliamentary parties, 10 recorded zero scandals in the same years, among them the Christian Democrats of Sweden and Finland and the left socialist parties of Denmark (the Unity List), Sweden, and Finland. However, the Liberals in Sweden and the Swedish People's Party in Finland—two parties with long cabinet participation—also avoided scandalization.

Regarding RQ3 (Are the Nordic right-wing populist parties more scandal prone than other political parties?), the results are somewhat mixed. As Table 3 confirms, the right-wing populist and nationalist parties in Sweden and Finland are both in the top 10 list: Politicians from the Sweden Democrats (SD) were involved in eight national scandals, and politicians from the Finns Party contributed to seven scandals. Most of the right-wing populist scandals in Sweden and Finland were connected to negative attitudes toward immigration or racist ideologies. A Finnish example is the talk scandal of 2015 involving Olli Immonen, an MP from the Finns Party. He posted a text on his Facebook page, stating, among other things, that he dreamed of a nation strong enough to conquer the enemy called multiculturalism. This resulted in an anti-Immonen demonstration involving 15,000 people in Helsinki. In Sweden, one of the scandals involved three leading members of the right-wing populist SD, widely known as the "iron bar scandal." Outside a restaurant, the politicians harassed several persons by uttering racist and sexist comments. When they were met with protest, one of them armed himself with an iron bar.

Three scandals in the same period were linked to the liberalist, anti-immigration Progress Party of Norway, a party that, since 2013, has been part of Erna Solberg's cabinets. Only one scandal was linked to the nationalist Danish People's Party. In the period 2010–2016, the party was part of the parliamentary majority behind Lars Løkke Rasmussen's conservative cabinets but declined to accept cabinet positions. One reason for this difference between Denmark/Norway and Sweden/Finland concerning right-wing scandals may be that the Danish People's Party and the Progress Party are the most seasoned and established of the four anti-immigration parties, possibly having stronger vetting of their party candidates at the national level.

### **Types of Political Scandals**

Table 4 shows the relative importance of different types of scandals in the four countries in 2010–2016, divided into the six categories of norm violations described earlier.

**Table 4. Nordic Political Scandals by Norm Transgression and Country, 2010–2016  
(% Within Country).**

Type of Norm Transgression	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	All
Offence in economic affairs	33	23	39	37	34
Abuse of power	29	14	9	9	14
Unacceptable personal behavior	10	14	35	17	19
Offence concerning other laws and regulations	14	5	9	9	9
Unacceptable talk/utterances	--	32	4	14	13
Other or mixed types	14	14	4	14	12
Total	100	102	100	101	101
<i>n</i>	21	22	23	35	101

Offences in economic affairs constituted the largest scandal category, representing one-third of the scandals in the Nordic region as a whole. The second largest category comprised personal behavior scandals, with 19%. There are, however, some important variations between the countries. Economic scandal is by far the most prominent scandal category in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, but Finland deviates somewhat from this pattern, with talk scandal as the most highly recorded scandal category and economic scandal taking second place. Talk scandals were also regular in Sweden, but uncommon in Denmark and Norway. Personal behavior scandals were especially commonplace in Norway, but less so in the other countries. Denmark had more scandals linked to abuses of power than the other countries.

### **Corruption Scandals**

Economic scandal is a highly mixed category, in terms of both money and political importance. At one end of the spectrum are political scandals of rather trivial transgressions.<sup>6</sup> At the other end are large-scale corruption cases involving Scandinavian companies' investments and expansion in notoriously corrupt regions of the world. Corruption, "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Transparency International, 2017, s.1), is an important subtype of economic scandal. Corruption includes accusations of bribery, kickbacks, embezzlement, and various favors related to the abuse of political positions. From 2010 to 2016, 18 of the 34 registered economic scandals were related to accusations or documentation of such practices. An exception was Denmark, where none of the economic cases were characterized by the media as belonging to this subcategory. The registered corruption scandals included, among other affairs, a bribery case in the municipality of Gothenburg, a conservative Norwegian MP's abuse of his political

<sup>6</sup> An illustrative example involves a Danish case in 2014. Lars Løkke Rasmussen, the then conservative-liberal opposition leader, was scandalized in the press because his party (Venstre) had paid for his men's designer clothing and shoes, despite the fact that he was a highly paid MP.

position for the benefit of a family private business, and a social democratic city manager in Finland who accepted bribes from an architectural firm seeking public contracts.

Corruption usually occurs at the intersection of the public and private spheres (Rothstein & Varraich, 2017); thus, Nordic governments' economic and political responsibilities regarding state-owned companies are of special importance. In the period 2010–2016, government-owned Scandinavian corporations, the majority of them Norwegian, were involved in several publicly debated corruption cases. Two cases were both related to Uzbekistan, where two large Nordic government-controlled telecom companies, Telia Company<sup>7</sup> and Telenor (as part owner in VimpelCom),<sup>8</sup> were involved in similar types of bribery. To get telecom licenses in Uzbekistan, large sums of money were channeled to the then president's daughter Gulnara Karimova through a post-box company registered in Gibraltar (Pollack & Allern, 2018). In 2017, Telia admitted to this corruption and agreed to pay a total financial sanction of US\$965 million in settlement. VimpelCom—in which Telenor had part ownership and several board positions—was forced to pay fines of US\$795 million.

Yara International,<sup>9</sup> a world-leading Norwegian producer of nitrogen fertilizers, was accused of bribing the oil minister in Muammar Gaddafi's (former) government in Libya and paying bribes in connection with the establishment of activities in India and Russia. In 2014, the company acknowledged criminal liability and accepted a corporate fine of NOK270 million, plus a confiscation of its dividends. In the same year (2014), the Norwegian Authority for the Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime brought corruption charges against Kongsberg Defense Company.<sup>10</sup> The case was related to agreements concerning the sale of communication equipment to the Romanian military. In 2017, a former Kongsberg sales director for Eastern Europe was sentenced to prison for four and a half years.

As if this was not enough, media revelations in 2016 documented that since 2012, the Norwegian energy company Statoil<sup>11</sup> had been paying US\$1.4 billion in "signature bonuses" to obtain operatorship of a large oil field outside of Angola. This money included NOK715 million earmarked to support "social purposes" in Angola, including investment in a new, nonexistent "research center."

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<sup>7</sup> The largest shareholder in Telia Company (formerly TeliaSonera) is the Swedish government, owning 37.3% in 2016. The Finnish government owned 3.2%.

<sup>8</sup> The largest shareholder in Telenor (as of 2017) was the Norwegian government, owning 54%. From 2013 to 2015, Telenor owned 33% of the shares and 43% of the voting rights in VimpelCom (today renamed VEON), but it chose to gradually sell off its shares following the corruption case.

<sup>9</sup> In 2016, the largest shareholder in Yara was the Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Fisheries (36.2%).

<sup>10</sup> Kongsberg Defense Company is a division of the international technology group Kongsberg. The Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Fisheries (Norway) is the largest shareholder (50%).

<sup>11</sup> The largest shareholder in Statoil is the Norwegian government (67%). On May 15, 2018, the company changed its name to Equinor.

RQ4 asked whether the incidence of economic scandals related to corruption was more frequent in 2010–2016 than in other decades. The answer to this question seems to be positive: One-third of the 66 economic scandals in the three decades 1980–2009 were based on accusations of corruption (Allern et al., 2012), but the corruption share of the 34 economic scandals in 2010–2016 was 53%.

### ***Personal Behavior Scandals***

The broad scandal category “unacceptable personal behavior” included 19 scandals in 2010–2016 involving 21 politicians. Of all these scandals, 10 were related to accusations of sexual harassment or prostitution, and seven resulted in legal processes. In the three decades 1980–2009, 11 of 38 behavior scandals were related to sex-related affairs or sexual harassment (Allern et al., 2012), indicating a positive answer to RQ5 (Has the incidence of sexually related scandals increased compared with earlier decades?).

In the Nordic region, sexual infidelity alone is not a sufficient transgression to warrant mediated scandalization. The most typical Scandinavian sex scandals include payments for sexual services from prostitutes, intercourse with minors, or accusations of rape or sexual harassment. In other words, the most frequent type of sex scandal relates to actions prohibited by law. It must, however, be noted that 7 of the 10 cases were Norwegian<sup>12</sup> and that no sex scandals were registered in Denmark.

Such differences may be influenced by political, cultural, and legal differences within the Nordic region. An example of legal differences concerns prostitution. A debate in the Nordic countries led to the criminalization of payments for sex in Sweden (since 1999) and Norway (since 2009). In Finland, it is illegal to purchase sex from prostitutes who are used in trafficking, but Denmark, despite some suggestions during the first decade of the 2000s, has no legislation that makes the purchasing of sex a criminal offence.

A further illustration of the differences concerning how laws and regulations may influence scandalization are the different limits for drunk driving in the Nordic countries. In 2016, Aide Hadzialic, a young minister in Stefan Löfven’s center-left government, attended a concert in Copenhagen. After a dinner at which she had consumed two glasses of wine, she drove her car over the bridge to Malmö, Sweden, and was stopped during Swedish police checks. The alcohol test showed a blood alcohol level of 0.2 grams per liter. It was legal (and nonscandalous) for her to drive in Denmark (and Finland), with a 0.5 gram-per-liter limit, but in Sweden (and Norway) the limit is 0.2 grams per liter. Accused of drunk driving, she resigned with immediate effect.

### **Scandals in the Wake of #MeToo**

The importance of changing social norms regarding mediated political scandals has recently been illustrated by the international #MeToo movement. In October 2017, *The New York Times* and the *New*

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<sup>12</sup> This is a recent development. From 1980 to 2009, Norway had only one sexually related scandal (Allern et al., 2012).

*Yorker* reported on high-profile actresses accusing the film producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment, assault, and rape. These public revelations became the starting point of a worldwide social movement in which women, under the hashtag #MeToo, posted their personal stories about sexual harassment.<sup>13</sup>

The #MeToo initiatives were quickly taken up in all the Nordic countries, though in different ways. It grew extensively in Sweden and Norway, but the movement became significant but less broad in Finland, and it led to limited public discussion in Denmark. Several groups of women shared their stories and debated strategies of empowerment in social media, mainly in closed forums on Facebook and Instagram. Once various organized groups of women decided to go public with their testimonies, legacy media became the arena for larger public debates. Some of the individual cases also grew into mediated political scandals.

In Sweden, the first accusations concerned a few well-known media personalities, journalists, actors, directors, and a cultural club owner affiliated with the Swedish Academy.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, actresses, singers, journalists, law practitioners, academics, trade union representatives, and so on united under other hashtags. This included the movement within the political sphere, #inthecorridorsofpower. The movement in Norway, Finland, and Denmark followed the same pattern, but on a smaller scale.

In this heated climate of debate, a couple of Swedish politicians hastily exited the political realm, with only their party affiliation named in the media. In Norway, several of the political parties reported that they had started their own internal investigations after whistle-blowing about sexual misconduct. The Swedish #MeToo movement also provoked political action. On December 17, 2017, a new law prohibiting nonconsensual sex was quickly proposed by Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven.

In addition, several well-known Swedish and Norwegian politicians were publicly accused of sexual assault or misconduct; most of these accusations turned into lasting media stories that fit the scandal definition related to national politicians used in this study (see the section "Mapping of Scandals: Method and Data"). Table 5 includes four such Swedish cases and three national Norwegian cases. There were no such cases in Finland and Denmark.

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<sup>13</sup> The phrase "MeToo" was originally coined years earlier by social activist Tarana Burke to shed light on sexual violence against women of color.

<sup>14</sup> The allegations typically concerned sexual misconducts in the past by men in power positions.

**Table 5. Mediated Political Scandals Connected to #MeToo from November 1, 2017, to January 31, 2018.**

Country	Name	Party	Position	Accusation	Consequence
Sweden	Urban Ahlin	Social Democratic Party	MP, parliamentary speaker	Sexual harassment	Public critique and debate
Sweden	Roger Morgert	Social Democratic Party	City commissioner for town planning and culture, Stockholm	Sexual harassment	Resignation
Sweden	Stefan Nilsson	The Green Party	MP	Sexual harassment	Dismissal from party assignments, retained seat in parliament but without party affiliation
Sweden	Lars Ohly	The Left Party	Former party leader	Sexual harassment	Banned from party assignments, left the party
Norway	Trond Giske	Labor Party	MP, deputy leader of the Labor Party	Sexual harassment	Resigned from his position as deputy party leader
Norway	Kristian Tonning Riise	The Conservative Party	MP, leader of the Young Conservatives	Improper sexual behavior involving young women	Resigned from his positions as leader of the Young Conservatives
Norway	Ulf Leirstein	The Progress Party	MP and deputy leader of the party's group in parliament	Sending pornographic pictures to a 14-year-old boy, sending sexual messages to a female party member	Withdrew from some party duties
Denmark	-	-	-	-	-
Finland	-	-	-	-	-

Another, though different, case concerned Trine Skei Grande, the leader of the Norwegian Liberals. During the #MeToo revelations, a right-wing online site, Resett, published a story that Grande had had sex with a 17-year-old boy at a local private party in 2008, defining this as a scandal. None of the larger national media organizations judged the case as newsworthy at this stage, and did not define it as a political scandal. However, the story became widely known through online media and social media, and Grande was forced to comment publicly on the case in a newspaper interview (Ruud, 2018). Prime Minister Solberg expressed her trust in the Liberal leader, and on January 17, 2018, she was named the new minister for culture in Solberg's cabinet.

A common trait of the cases in Table 5 is that accusations are leveled against incidents that, in most cases, transpired many years ago, with very few ongoing. This indicates a change in norms and cultural understanding: Actions and occurrences that were earlier not seen as worthwhile, or even possible, to report publicly turned in the autumn of 2017 into accusations that rendered collective and public condemnation or legal proceedings. Sweden and Norway are known for gender equality, and in the public debate, #MeToo became a turning point, shaped by a collective force.

Despite several public initiatives echoing the international #MeToo campaign, neither Finland nor Denmark experienced any outing of politicians accused of sexual misconduct. A possible, though unlikely, explanation is that sexual improprieties among politicians have been less common than in Sweden and Norway. Another, more likely, hypothesis is that the culture of silence in matters related to questions regarded as personal and sexual is somewhat stronger in the Finnish and Danish political environments than in those of Sweden and Norway.

A survey of advisors and staff in the Finnish *Riksdag* organized by the public service broadcaster YLE indicates that the latter explanation may be closer to reality: More than 1 in 10 respondents reported experiences of sexual harassment—a higher number than among employees elsewhere in Finland (Yle News, 2017, para. 1). In an interview in the leading newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* (Manninen, 2018), the movie director, author, and former politician and MP Jörn Donner claimed that during his terms as MP (1987–1995, 2007, and 2013–2015), he heard the most appalling stories told among men in the sauna of the parliament, but he refused to talk about them publicly. Donner's remarks might be illustrative of Finnish political culture: You do not talk publicly about sexual harassment. Another factor might be the cautiousness of Finnish media regarding the revelation of names in such stories.

The public debate in legacy media developed somewhat differently in Denmark. The Danish union for journalists investigated several cases of sexual harassment, but no male figure in the media industry was publicly accused of sexual harassment. Several well-known people, such as author Morten Sabroe and the former leader of the nationalist Danish People's Party Pia Kjaersgaard, argued that the #MeToo movement reminded them of a witch hunt and of totalitarian states where people informed on each other.

This type of critique may seem relevant in individual cases when undocumented personal accusations from anonymous "witnesses" are published without editorial fact-checking and ethical considerations. However, it totally misses the unique strength of #MeToo as a social movement, which is how it changes the perspectives of the public debates concerning sexual harassment: "Finally politicians,

pundits and journalists see the situation from the viewpoint of young women” (Helseth, 2018, para. 2), the Norwegian sociologist and feminist Hanna Helseth summed up in a commentary.

The #MeToo movement shows that social media may offer alternative public spheres for initiatives and discussion, sometimes starting political processes that quickly influence legacy media and public institutions. It also demonstrates that scandalization is a politically and culturally constructed process, depending on the particular culture and media system in each country. This may lead to different practices even within the relatively homogeneous Nordic setting.

### **Conclusion**

The increased incidence of mediated political scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden from 2010 to 2016 shows that scandals are a standard feature of political life in Nordic countries. We found (answering RQ1) that, compared with earlier decades, the number of scandals in Nordic countries increased in the period from 2010 to 2016. Our conclusion is that political scandals can be characterized as the new normal; they have become a prevalent part of political life in the four Nordic countries and involve politicians from a majority of the parties.

At the same time, however (answering RQ2), the proportion of scandals leading to dismissal and resignation was lower than in earlier decades. Based on such correlational data, we cannot explain why, but several factors may have contributed to this development. One of them is the increased incidence of scandals that the public (despite the media headlines) regards as trivial. Increased incidence may lead to scandal fatigue (Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2011). Social media platforms have also given politicians new ways to mobilize supporters and more effectively defend themselves.

Concerning RQ3 about the right-wing anti-immigration parties’ role as scandal prone, the answer is mixed. Two of these parties, the SD and the Finns Party, can be characterized as relatively prone to scandals, especially those linked to racist utterances. However, in this respect, the established anti-immigration parties in Denmark and Norway do not differ from the majority of parliamentary parties.

With regard to types of scandals, offences related to economic affairs and personal behavior scandals are the most prominent scandal types. Corruption (answering RQ4) and sexually related scandals (answering RQ5) both recorded increases in 2010–2016 compared with earlier decades. Denmark is an exception among the Nordic countries, as also shown by the #MeToo movement. Cultural norms and legislation, which influence what is defined as scandalous, may thus differ radically between neighboring countries that, in most areas, are regarded as relatively similar. The scandals in the wake of the #MeToo movement also remind us that acts and problems that have long existed but have often been silenced may suddenly turn into scandals as moral scales and the political climate change.

However, some mediated political scandals concern small sums of money, minor legal offences, and moral transgressions with limited societal consequences. In the largest scandal category in 2010–2016 (offences in economic affairs), less than one in five resulted in dismissal or resignation. However, many of these “small-scale” scandals are treated as major public events in a competitive commercial

media climate and are augmented through sharing and commenting on social media. Sometimes the coverage grows into media hunts with dimensions similar to war reporting. It quickly arouses public interest, but it also diverts resources and attention from far more important societal questions, including potential scandals that are neglected or never investigated. The media blow up small deviant actions while ignoring much greater ones (Sass & Crosbie, 2013). If political parties and opponents agree to keep a potential scandal out of the public eye, elite consensus might even result in media silence about scandals of far greater importance (Entman, 2012).

A Finnish example that illustrates this problem well is the bribery of Slovenian officials by the state-controlled Finnish arms and security company Patria. The scandal involved a major Patria export product: an armored personnel carrier. The Finnish public broadcaster YLE exposed the affair in 2008, and the case developed into an enduring political scandal in Slovenia. In 2013, the previous Slovenian prime minister, Janez Jansa, and two other actors were sentenced to prison for bribery, and in 2017, the Slovenian Supreme Court upheld the guilty rulings (STA, 2017, para. 1). However, since their inception, the various Finnish coalition governments have practiced a policy of noninvolvement and silence. Another Scandinavian example of successful scandal avoidance and media silence is Denmark's and Norway's military contributions to the catastrophic Libyan Civil War in 2011. The bombing, sanctioned by a majority in the United Nations Security Council and led by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, resulted in a dissolved state, a protracted civil war, and a large-scale, ongoing refugee crisis.

An interesting consequence of the high incidence of media scandals relating to minor moral or legal transgressions is the construction of a simple and populist criticism of power. The symbolic mediated execution of a politician confirms the maintenance of the social order. Some leaders resign, and the political crew changes as new politicians and leaders take the place of old ones. Elected leaders are, in most cases, pressed to resign before those who elected them have had a say in the matter. They step down because the media pressure threatens the stability of the whole organization. The dramaturgy of scandal news provokes hasty decisions.

Decreasing economic resources and reduced editorial staff hamper time-consuming investigative journalism about political processes and backstage power operations, but simpler and person-oriented scandals are popular clickbait. In a commercial media market, rumors and accusations distributed through social media channels can easily influence the priorities of legacy institutions. As a result, a gap has emerged, in that public coverage of politics is becoming increasingly separated from the actual exercise of political power. Problematic policy processes are too seldom investigated, and some potential scandals are silenced. The distinction between the important and the trivial is blurred. In the long run, this may undermine the scrutiny of power holders and, consequently, of democracy.

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