

# Are Politicians Especially Prone To Affairs?

by ALAN GREENBLATT



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Rich Pedroncelli/AP

Arnold Schwarzenegger has acknowledged that he fathered a child with a household employee before he became California governor.

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Normal people — plumbers, stockbrokers — certainly have affairs. But politicians sometimes seem especially susceptible to them.

Tuesday's revelation that former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger sired a child out of wedlock a decade ago comes two days after the arrest on sexual assault charges of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund and erstwhile front-runner in next year's presidential election in France.

"There is almost an exponential increase in opportunity when you have power," says Tom

Fiedler, dean of the Boston University College of Communication, who as a reporter helped break the story of an affair involving presidential hopeful Gary Hart back in 1987. "The other part is that there is an arrogance that attaches to power — that the normal rules of behavior are suspended and you're able to get away with things that normal people can't."

In recent days, the media have been reconsidering the political import of the affairs and divorces of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, as his presidential campaign gets under way. Last month, Nevada Republican John Ensign resigned his Senate seat in the face of legal investigations surrounding his affair with a former campaign staffer.

"There's good evidence that men with great power and status are, in fact, more prone to affairs," says Todd Shackelford, who directs the evolutionary psychology lab at Oakland University in Michigan.

In almost every human society, he notes, men who hold power have, "for better or worse," numerous chances to be unfaithful to their wives. "The best predictor of men's infidelities is sheer opportunity, and men with power have remarkable opportunity."

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## A History Of Scandals

*Sex scandals involving politicians and other prominent figures have been a recurring feature throughout U.S. history. Below are a selection of scandals from recent years.*

**2010**

## Nothing New About This

Shackelford says there's no evidence that affairs involving politicians are any more common today than they've ever been. Sex scandals in the United States date back to the earliest days of the republic, when sexual liaisons became issues for founding figures such as Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

Tiger Woods takes a break from golf following revelations of multiple affairs; then-President Obama's budget director, Peter Orszag, acknowledges that his ex-girlfriend had recently given birth to his child, six weeks before he became engaged to another woman.

#### 2009

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford admits to an extramarital affair with an Argentine woman; Sen. John Ensign admits to and apologizes for an affair with a former campaign staffer; David Letterman admits to having sex with a woman who worked on his talk show; film director Roman Polanski is arrested in Switzerland based on statutory rape charges in the U.S. decades earlier.

#### 2008

New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer confesses to hiring prostitutes, resigns; former senator and presidential candidate John Edwards admits to an extramarital affair; Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick resigns following criminal charges and publication of lewd text messages with his chief of staff.

#### 2007

Sen. David Vitter is revealed as a client of a prominent "D.C. Madam"; Sen. Larry Craig is arrested for making a pass at an undercover officer in an airport men's room.

#### 2006

Florida Rep. Mark Foley resigns following publication of explicit text messages sent to teenage pages.

#### 2004

New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey announces he is "a gay American" and resigns in the midst of sexual harassment charges.

#### 1998

President Bill Clinton is impeached after lying under oath about his sexual dalliance with a former White House intern.

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They have continued to the present day, from the 1998 impeachment of Bill Clinton for lying about sexual relations with a White House intern to the resignations amid scandal of Govs. Eliot Spitzer of New York and Jim McGreevey of New Jersey.

Journalists might have been more reticent about revealing peccadilloes 40 or 50 years ago, questioning whether they were germane to judging job performance. That's no longer the case, in the age of Twitter and gossip websites such as TMZ. "Because of TMZ, the media is driven to cover things like this," says Elayne Rapping, a professor emerita at the University at Buffalo.

But it's not just salacious interest that leads to wide media coverage of political sex scandals, says Fiedler.

"It's ultimately about trust," he says. "Character remains a major trait that people look at when they're judging leadership."

#### The Drive For Power

Last year Iris Robinson, a member of the Irish Parliament and wife of a top official in Northern Ireland's government, was sacked by her party following revelations that she had a 19-year-old lover.

But Robinson's case was fairly exceptional. Powerful men have been at the center of far more sex scandals than women. "Female politicians would mostly be so afraid of the consequences," says Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Ethics and Responsibility in Washington. "A male politician might be forgiven for an affair, but a woman won't be."

Both Fiedler and Rapping suggest that powerful men who cheat do believe that they can get away with it.

"Something seems to happen with certain public figures where they do seem to feel they have enough cover and they can get away with more than the average person can," says Charles Goodstein, a psychiatrist at New York University.

Goodstein is skeptical that men in the public eye are more prone to affairs than people pursuing less-publicized careers. Studies suggesting that about 15 percent of married men have affairs seem low, he says.

Even if such estimates are correct, he says, that would translate into 55 or 60 members of Congress having or having had affairs. That's far more than the number that have actually come to light in recent years.

Still, Goodstein does agree it's not a coincidence that powerful men frequently have affairs. Reaching positions of great power requires both drive and a healthy degree of narcissism, he says.

"There has to be something that pushes them in a certain direction where they can achieve power," he says. "That leaves them with a certain sense of entitlement, to be rewarded for all power means."

### **The Ultimate Aphrodisiac**

Affairs, in this view, are something like corruption — another temptation that comes with power. Men in high office — as well as celebrities such as David Letterman and Tiger Woods — find themselves presented with lots of opportunities to stray. Many of them will.

"There is a groupie effect," Sloan says. "In my experience working in Congress, women frequently flocked to politicians."

Politicians, Sloan points out, work long and unpredictable hours and often travel or even live away from their families. "My guess is, you'd find the exact same thing on Wall Street," she says.

### **Pushing Beyond The Limits**

Like other observers of the phenomenon, Sloan is quick to differentiate between consensual affairs and the charges of sexual assault brought against Strauss-Kahn. Still, there may be a similar thread of entitlement running through his earlier reported affairs and the alleged assault against a hotel maid.

"The only similarity would be that the rules, the laws about sexual assault, wouldn't apply to him," Sloan says.

Politicians who engage in run-of-the-mill cheating, Sloan says, also come to believe that there won't be consequences that apply to them. They may even believe they can talk their way out of trouble after their affair has been exposed, Fiedler says.

"By definition, top politicians are very lucky people," says Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. "Many are convinced they are invulnerable, blessed by Lady Luck. They do it because they can, secure in the belief they'll get away with it. Probably, most do."

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