



Amid scandal, Spitzer has chance for political survival

Some politicians in delicate situations can repair image, history shows

By David Nitkin
March 12, 2008

The stained blue dress. The wide stance. The trip aboard the Monkey Business.

History is replete with images from prominent officials caught in sex scandals, and New York [Gov. Eliot Spitzer](#) now makes the list.

Spitzer, an aggressive former prosecutor dubbed the "sheriff of Wall Street," will also be known as Client 9, the moniker appearing in federal documents that allege that he hired a \$1,000-an-hour call girl to meet him last month at a Washington hotel.

As Spitzer weighs his next steps, past incidents offer clues about how fallout from personal scandals can be managed and whether they become career-killers. Politicians who survive, despite the damage to their reputations, come clean early, seek forgiveness and are able to ride it out because they have a strong political base or find a scapegoat for their problem.

Democrats seem to emerge from sexual scandals more easily than Republicans, said S. Robert Lichter, president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, citing the case of Rep. [Barney Frank](#) of Massachusetts, repeatedly re-elected despite being reprimanded in 1990 for his relationship with a gay friend who was running an escort service from Frank's Washington home.

Polling shows, Lichter said, that "a majority of Democrats would support a politician even if he is having an affair while married. A majority of Republicans would not."

The nature of the job also affects whether politicians can continue their careers, said Lichter, another Peep Show co-author.

Republican Sen. Larry E. Craig of Idaho said he will leave the Senate when his current term ends after it was revealed that he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge stemming from a gay-sex sting in a Minneapolis airport restroom. Craig said that his wide stance resulted in his making contact with an undercover officer in the adjoining stall.

But Gov. James E. McGreevey of New Jersey resigned shortly after acknowledging that he was gay and had an affair with a male lover whom he had appointed to a high-ranking state job. McGreevey, a Democrat, was married at the time.

"In terms of survival, it's tougher for governors than senators, because you are exercising an executive function," Lichter said. "A governor is running the state and dealing with the political opposition. You can't manage in that kind of uproar."

Former Rep. Robert E. Bauman, a conservative Republican from Maryland's Eastern Shore, lost his House seat in 1980 after his arrest for soliciting sex from a 16-year-old male prostitute and subsequently disclosed that he was a homosexual.

Timing of disclosures can also affect their impact, experts say.