Americans distinguish between politicians' financial, sexual failings

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Americans are tougher on politicians for their financial misdeeds than their sexual ones, and men are more willing than women to tolerate sexual misbehavior in their elected officials.

The findings, part of a detailed survey by the Public Religion Research Institute, show Americans across religious groups consider it worse for a politician to cheat on taxes or take bribes than to commit adultery or send sexually explicit messages to someone.

"There's a dramatic difference when people are evaluating public officials' financial versus sexual misbehavior," said Daniel Cox, the institute's research director. "A significant number of folks think they can separate public officials' personal and public lives," and tend to think of sexual misbehavior as personal and therefore private.

More than nine in 10 Americans say it's an "extremely" or "very serious" moral problem for a public official to take a bribe, and more than eight in 10 say the same for a politician who cheats on taxes.

But fewer than seven in 10 Americans say it's a serious moral problem for a public official to have sex with a prostitute.

Former Rep. Anthony Weiner of New York resigned after lying about, and later admitting to, inappropriate relationships with women he met online. (RNS FILE PHOTO/Courtesy Office of Rep. Anthony Weiner)

The poll was conducted in the wake of several high-profile cases of politicians making headlines for their sexual behavior, including U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner, D-N.Y., who resigned after he lied about sexually explicit texts he sent to women he met online.

The poll also showed Americans resent politicians lying about sexual behavior more than the behavior itself.

While three in four (77 percent) of those polled consider lying to cover up an immoral sexual act a serious moral problem, only two-thirds believe a politician who has sex with a prostitute had committed a serious moral transgression.

“This is what we’ve been hearing about Anthony Weiner,” Cox said. “He may not have done anything illegal, but he went out of his way to conceal it, and people are saying that this is what got him into trouble. This is rated more serious than sexual misbehavior.”

There are no significant differences, however, in Americans’ views of virtual and actual sexual misconduct. Roughly two-thirds of those polled said it was a “serious moral problem” for a politician to send a sexually explicit message to someone other than a spouse or to have sex with a prostitute.

White evangelicals, however, are more likely than other religious groups to consider immoral personal behavior a disqualification for public office: 64 percent of evangelicals said a politician who commits an immoral act in private life cannot behave ethically in public life, compared to 43 percent of white mainline Protestants, 49 percent of Catholics and 26 percent of the religiously unaffiliated.

Significant gender differences emerged from the poll on views of politicians’ sexual behavior.

Sixty-three percent of women say a politician who has sex with a prostitute should resign, compared to 46 percent of men. And 64 percent of women said a male politician who cheats on his wife should resign, compared to 50 percent of men.

Women were somewhat less willing, however, to condemn a female politician who cheats on her husband, with 56 percent of women calling for her resignation, compared to 51 percent of men.

Other findings from the poll include:

- Republicans (71 percent) are more likely than Democrats (53 percent) to say a politician who has sex with a prostitute should resign. Republicans and Democrats are in closer agreement on whether a politician should resign for financial improprieties.

- Americans are split—44 to 44 percent—as to whether politicians who misbehave in their personal lives can behave ethically in their public lives. The remainder say "it depends" or are unsure.

- More than six in 10 Americans say public officials should be held to a higher moral standard than people in other professions.

- Nearly two-thirds of respondents say the moral behavior of politicians is about the same today as in the past, with 28 percent deeming it worse and 6 percent considering it better.

- By a margin of 54 to 33 percent, younger Americans (ages 18 to 34) are more likely than those over age 65 to believe a politician can behave honorably in office despite a personal moral failing.

The poll, conducted by PRRI in partnership with Religion News Service, is based on telephone interviews with 1,006 U.S. adults between June 16 and 19, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.