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THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CORRUPTION SCANDALS

Main findings and challenges

Macarena Ares, Sofía Breitenstein and Enrique Hernández

Introduction¹

Political corruption subverts basic democratic principles. In fact, the absence of corruption is considered paramount for high-quality governments, and numerous scholars have identified the negative social and economic effects of corruption (Jain 2001). These undesirable effects, together with its negative moral implications, make corruption one of the most relevant sources of political scandals.

This chapter focuses on the political consequences of corruption scandals. There is an increasing number of studies that analyze the political consequences of corruption on citizens' political attitudes and behavior. However, while there is a growing consensus about the negative effects of corruption on individuals' political attitudes, the debate is not settled as to whether these are further reflected in electoral behavior. Through a critical review of the most relevant literature on this matter, this chapter elaborates some of the reasons why citizens might not punish politicians involved in corruption scandals: (i) because *they don't know*—for example they do not receive information about corruption, they question the credibility of this information, they cannot clearly attribute responsibilities for corrupt practices, or they forget about scandals that have taken place long before an election; (ii) because *they don't want to*—for example because punishing corrupt politicians conflicts with previously held attitudes like partisanship, or because voters receive side benefits from corrupt acts; and (iii) because *they can't*—for example there are no non-corrupt alternatives to vote for, or the ones available are too different from voters' preferred parties.

The attitudinal consequences of corruption scandals

Institutional theories contend that political support and attitudes towards politicians are endogenous to the performance of political institutions (Mishler and Rose 2001). In other words, the political attitudes of individuals, such as their trust in institutions or their confidence in politicians, depend to a large extent on the performance of political institutions and on what political authorities do (or do not do). Hence, citizens are expected to update their political attitudes rationally according to their evaluations of politicians' performances.

Following institutional theories, multiple studies have addressed the impact of corruption scandals, and corruption more generally, on political attitudes. Corruption provides a clear example of negative performance of political authorities, since procedural performance and fairness are undermined by the authorities' misuse of public office. Moreover, corruption represents a clear breach and violation of the power entrusted to political authorities. While institutions and politicians that perform well and produce desirable outputs should be evaluated positively, corruption—as a clear violation of some of the fundamental procedural principles of democratic accountability, equality, and openness—should reduce political support and lead to negative evaluations of politicians and institutions.

Studies conducted across different contexts have found considerable support for these propositions. Corruption, and especially individuals' perceptions of it, have been linked to: negative attitudinal reactions such as lower trust in politicians, political parties, and representative institutions (Mishler and Rose 2001); negative evaluations of the performance of the political system and government (Anderson and Tverdova 2003); or dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy (Villoria et al. 2013).

These negative effects of corruption have also been observed when, instead of focusing on corruption generally, studies have assessed the attitudinal consequences of specific scandals. These scandals, which frequently attract wide media coverage, provide a clear instance for citizens to learn about the wrongdoings of politicians. Bowler and Karp (2004) conclude that the U.S. House Bank scandal had a negative impact on individuals' approval of representatives and the US Congress.² Similarly, Pattie and Johnston (2012) find a negative impact of the UK MPs' expenses scandal, which not only affected the evaluation of these politicians, but also respondents' emotional reactions (i.e. the scandal made respondents very angry). Similarly, Ares and Hernández's (2017) quasi-experimental study reveals that the Bárcenas scandal in Spain had a corrosive effect on individuals' trust in politicians.³

The electoral consequences of corruption scandals

Following a logic similar to that of institutional theories of political support, we would expect voters to punish corrupt politicians at the polls (corruption voting). Electoral support should be based on what politicians do while in office. This is precisely the logic of the performance voting model, developed mainly to explain the punishment/reward of incumbents for bad/good economic performance. If voters punish bad performance in office they should also punish politicians involved in corruption, since—as in the case of the economy—corruption has a clear valence component (Ecker et al. 2016). Moreover, when evaluating a candidate, honesty and integrity rank among the most important traits that individuals take into account (Allen et al. 2016). Hence, even beyond performance considerations, the punishment of corruption should be accentuated by the clear signal that politicians' involvement in corruption scandals sends about these traits.

While the evidence on the attitudinal consequences of corruption scandals is clearly in line with institutional theories, the findings on the electoral punishment of corruption are more ambiguous. Although in surveys citizens express a clear rejection of corruption and state their low intentions to vote for corrupt candidates (Pattie and Johnston 2012), the punishment of corruption at the polls ranges from null to moderate.

Voters appear only mildly to punish corrupt politician in elections. In different U.S. congress elections, between 57 and 91 percent of candidates involved in corruption scandals were reelected (Welch and Hibbing 1997). Similarly, studies have documented the mild electoral consequences of recent corruption scandals, as for example the UK expenses scandal

(Vivyan et al. 2012). This null to moderate punishment of corruption is replicated across different countries such as Germany (Kauder and Potrafke 2015), Italy (McNally 2016), or Spain (Riera et al. 2013). Comparative analyses also indicate that the impact of corruption scandals on the fortunes of corrupt politicians is limited (Jiménez and Caínzos 2006; Bågenholm 2013).

Why do citizens vote for corrupt politicians?

While one could normatively argue whether the punishment of corrupt politicians at the polls is too mild or just about right, it is undeniable that there are many citizens who do vote for corrupt candidates. This circumstance is paradoxical for two reasons. First, because the evidence about the negative effects of corruption scandals on political attitudes is quite clear. Second, because global surveys such as the World Values Survey indicate that in most countries citizens consider that corrupt acts, as for example receiving a bribe, are never justifiable.

Voters might support candidates in spite of their involvement in corruption scandals for different reasons that operate both at the institutional and at the individual level. Voters might support corrupt politicians because at the time of the election *they don't know* about their corrupt actions or who should be held accountable, because *they don't want* to punish them due to partisan loyalties or the reception of side benefits from these corrupt acts, or simply because *they can't* punish corruption at the polls due to the absence of adequate alternatives.

Information availability

In consolidated democracies the media plays a key role in making corrupt acts known to the wider public (Tumber and Waisbord 2004). In fact, corrupt acts will only become scandalous when they are publicly disclosed, which most often occurs through the mass media (Balán 2011). Therefore, information availability is a key factor for citizens to hold politicians accountable.

A competitive media market and a minimum level of media independence that facilitates the disclosure of corruption scandals are, therefore, of the utmost importance. A greater news coverage of corruption scandals has been shown to depress the vote share of local corrupt politicians (Costas-Pérez et al. 2012). In fact, through a quasi-experiment in Brazilian municipalities, Ferraz and Finan (2008) indicate that the electoral consequences of the corrupt practices revealed by random audits of municipalities are magnified in those where local radio divulged information about the audit.

While there is no doubt that information is crucial for holding politicians accountable, it cannot account for why, even when information is available and voters are aware of the involvement of politicians in scandals, a substantial number of citizens tends to forgive corrupt politicians at the time of voting. This was, for instance, the case in the UK parliamentary expenses scandal which exposed members of parliament from different parties. Even if information was available and voters were aware of the implication of an MP in the scandal, they were only marginally less likely to support that MP (Vivyan et al. 2012).

Clarity of responsibility

An underlying assumption for the electoral punishment of corruption is that voters know who to blame for corruption. Institutional settings provide differential opportunities and incentives to monitor and punish corrupt behavior (Xezonakis et al. 2015). To study how the institutional context favors or impedes the attribution of responsibilities, one line of research has drawn on the notion of clarity of responsibility. This is a property that captures the extent to which

citizens can single out responsibility for politicians' actions. A low clarity of responsibility allows politicians to shift the blame to other actors for their actions. Different factors—such as the characteristics of the electoral and party systems, or the number of veto players—usually determine the clarity of responsibility of a given institutional system.

Although the moderating role of clarity of responsibility has not been addressed for the specific case of corruption scandals, studies suggest that this property of the institutional setting does influence the extent of corruption voting. When clarity of responsibility is high—when the government has been in power for a longer time and it is controlled by a single majority—there is a stronger negative effect of generic measures of corruption on the likelihood of voting for the incumbent, while when clarity of responsibility is low—in proportional electoral systems and contexts of higher party fragmentation—the impact of corruption on the vote for incumbents is weaker (Xezonakis et al. 2015; Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits 2016).

The moderating role of the institutional context should be addressed by future studies focusing on particular corruption scandals. Contexts of lower clarity of responsibility should provide more opportunities for politicians or institutions involved in scandals to shift the blame to other actors. Moreover, other characteristics of the institutional context, like party fragmentation, could also moderate the impact of scandals on voting. The dynamics of party competition and the extent to which parties need to rely on others to form a government will provide different incentives for competing or opposition parties to capitalize on the scandals affecting other parties.

Information credibility and partisanship

Once a corruption scandal is disclosed by the press the politicians involved in it are likely to react. Since other politicians can use corruption scandals instrumentally to discredit their opponents (Bågenholm 2013), those involved in a scandal often react by casting doubts about the credibility of the accusations (Balán 2011).

This reaction by the politicians involved in a scandal is guided by the idea that the credibility of the information disclosed plays an important role in the electoral consequences of corruption. Accusations have a greater impact on the support for corrupt politicians when they originate from a trusted source (Botero et al. 2015; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2016). For example, in the Brazilian case analyzed by Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, corruption accusations had a greater impact when they originated from official federal audits. Similarly, in the Colombian case analyzed by Botero et al., the most credible source of information was a respected nonpartisan newspaper. These sources are considered more credible because they have fewer incentives to distort strategically reality or lie.

In media systems with a high degree of political parallelism and audience segmentation, media outlets will offer different, or even contrasting, images of corruption scandals, which will be targeted to the preferences of their particular audience (Mancini et al. 2017). This is likely to reduce the credibility of the accusations, since citizens could be more prone to question the objectivity of the information. This should be especially prevalent in countries where journalists respond to particular and partisan interests instead of defending the public interest (Mancini et al. 2017).

Even when credible information is available, individuals' prior beliefs can distort how they process this information. Supporters of a political party filter and interpret the information they receive through a partisan lens, which is likely to bias the reception, interpretation, and acceptance of political information (Zaller 1992). Party identification can, therefore, bias individuals' assessments of the credibility of the information they receive, how they judge the severity of the actual cases of corruption, and, ultimately, the extent to which they tolerate corruption scandals.

All these partisan biases weaken the electoral punishment of corruption precisely because those who should withdraw their support from corrupt politicians are those who already voted for them. Experimental evidence supports the idea that partisanship biases the consequences of corruption, since individuals judge the same corrupt acts less harshly if they are committed by members of the party they support (Anduiza et al. 2013).

Availability and perception of alternatives

Confronted with the involvement of politicians in a corruption scandal, party supporters can either ignore the scandal or punish the politicians involved by switching to another candidate or abstaining. This decision will be influenced by the availability of non-corrupt and viable alternatives.

Where corruption is widespread citizens might perceive that all politicians are involved or benefit from corrupt activities. Focus groups conducted in Brazil confirm the expectation that citizens will tend to either abstain or overlook corruption when casting a vote, precisely because they tend to perceive all politicians as equally corrupt (Pavão 2015). Moreover, providing information about the corrupt behavior of incumbents does not only reduce the vote share of incumbents, but also of the main opposition parties (Chong et al. 2015). Therefore, in contexts of widespread corruption, information about the incumbent's malfeasance can lead voters to question additionally the integrity of all mainstream political elites.

Even when citizens do not perceive corruption to be widespread, the available alternatives might still not be appealing for them. The decision to vote for a party is largely driven by ideological proximity between the voter and the party. Non-corrupt parties that do not share the ideological leaning of voters might, therefore, not be an attractive alternative. In line with this idea, analyses of 24 European countries indicate that voters will defect from a party involved in a corruption scandal when they can find an alternative that is close to their own ideological position (Charron and Bågenholm 2016). In the absence of such an alternative, voters might either vote for the corrupt party or abstain.

Trade-offs and side benefits

Informed voters might also vote for corrupt candidates when, in exchange, they receive compensation such as goods, money, or any other direct benefit (see Mares and Young 2016). Vote buying implies an explicit exchange between voters and politicians that might only be possible under certain circumstances. However, this exchange between corrupt politicians and voters can also be implicit. Corruption might generate some side benefits for constituents, as, for example, in the construction of new infrastructure that is built as a result of bribes received by politicians. Fernández-Vázquez et al. (2016) reveal that these implicit trade-offs of corruption explain why mayors who engaged in corrupt behaviors that brought benefits for the local economy were reelected in Spanish local elections.

Voters can, however, knowingly vote for corrupt candidates without the need of an explicit or implicit inducement, since corruption is just one of the many factors affecting voter decisions. Voters can implicitly trade a candidate's integrity for other more valued characteristics like policy positions (Rundquist et al. 1977) or management record and performance (Muñoz et al. 2016). Among these characteristics, the economic performance of incumbents plays a prominent role due to its relevance for voting decisions. In line with this idea, both observational and experimental research indicates that incumbents involved in corruption scandals are only likely to be punished in negative economic contexts (Klašnja and Tucker 2013; Zechmeister

and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013). These analyses suggest that voters might be willing to trade competence for honesty. In fact, a good management record raises the probability of voting for a corrupt politician, and citizens would rather vote for a corrupt but competent candidate than for an honest but incompetent candidate (Esaïsson and Muñoz 2014; Muñoz et al. 2016).

Time and the electoral cycle

Time should be a relevant moderating factor for the attitudinal and behavioral implications of corruption. Time dynamics appear as particularly important for the electoral consequences of corruption, since elections are only held periodically and corruption scandals can happen at any time during the electoral cycle. The weak impact of corruption on voter behavior could be attributed to voters' short-lived memories, since citizens tend to take into account the events that occurred closer to election day when deciding their vote (Achen and Bartels 2004). This line of argument hence suggests that corruption scandals uncovered close to the day of elections should have a stronger impact. Yet, timing effects have not been addressed in analyses of the electoral consequences of corruption. There are, however, studies that have addressed the long-term attitudinal consequences of corruption that can provide some initial clues about these time dynamics.

Focusing on local corruption scandals, Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro (2017) propose that the attitudinal impact of corruption takes place through different mechanisms, and that only some of them entail a sustained impact of corruption in the long term. By relying on variation in the time elapsed between different local corruption scandals and the timing of a survey, these authors identify a more persistent effect of corruption scandals on trust in local politicians than in perceptions of corruption. Their explanation for this differential persistence of corruption effects revolves around the negative "side-effects" of corruption, which they judge as having longer-lasting implications. Corruption can lead to policy gridlock and to a deterioration of public finances. These two developments reduce political trust and, thus, sustain the negative effect of corruption scandals over time.

The evidence about the long-term impact of corruption is, however, not univocal. In fact, there are different reasons to believe that the political implications of corruption scandals might be short-lived. Firstly, citizens tend to base their political attitudes on top-of-the-head considerations (Zaller 1992). As a consequence, scandals should have a stronger effect on citizens' political attitudes shortly after they are uncovered, and these effects should decline over time. The study of the Spanish Bárcenas scandal involving the incumbent government indicates that its negative effect on citizens' trust in politicians was stronger just after the scandal was uncovered, and these effects decayed over time (Ares and Hernández 2017). These time dynamics of weakening effects over time could be further reinforced by shorter news cycles (Patterson 1998), which may reduce the number of days that a particular corruption scandal is covered by the media.

Conclusion: the way ahead

A burgeoning literature about the political consequences of corruption scandals has developed over the last two decades thanks to greater data availability, methodological innovations, and growing concerns about the deleterious effects of corruption. This literature has provided many answers about the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of corruption. However, many questions remain unanswered or require further scrutiny. The literature that has tackled the discrepancy between the attitudinal and the behavioral consequences of corruption

highlights the complexity of the mechanisms underlying the relationship between corruption scandals and citizens' reactions to them. In this sense, mixed-method studies combining quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as interdisciplinary approaches, could be the strategies that provide the highest returns.

One of the main methodological challenges for the study of the consequences of corruption is related to the measurement of corruption itself. Corrupt acts are an undesirable, unethical, and, in many cases, illegal behavior. Therefore, the actors involved have incentives to conceal them. This makes the measurement of corruption an extremely complex task. Objective measures, such as the amount of corruption charges being prosecuted, can be greatly biased by the willingness or capacity of states to fight this phenomenon. We, therefore, require more comparative databases on the occurrence of corruption scandals and the prevalence of corruption worldwide, which could be, for example, gathered through media analyses. The frequently used subjective measures based on survey respondents' perception of malfeasant practices can be biased by social desirability and endogeneity biases. In this regard, list experiments appear to be a potentially fruitful method to understand who is more likely to hide undesirable behaviors such as paying a bribe or voting for a corrupt politician and why.

Addressing the consequences of corruption is particularly challenging because some factors (such as the institutional context or voters' partisanship) intervene at different points in the chain linking corruption to behavior. This entails the need to overcome the threats imposed by possible problems of endogeneity and omitted variable biases. In light of these hurdles, studies have increasingly drawn on experimental methods, especially on lab and survey experiments. While, in comparison to observational studies, these methods are usually more effective for disentangling the causal effects of corruption, they are not free of challenges. For example, most survey experiments tend to concentrate on a single case (country) and their treatments and manipulations are adapted to the specific case under examination. Therefore, when the results of these experiments diverge it is not easy to determine whether the differences are related to contextual factors or to the different experimental protocols. Comparative, and probably collaborative, experimental studies should, therefore, be the way ahead for experimental analyses of corruption. However, experimental studies face further limitations. Most of them are based on fictitious scandals due to the difficulty of introducing experimental manipulations based on real-world scandals. A way to overcome these limitations is to combine experimental studies with quasi-experimental approaches that focus on real-world corruption scandals.

In any case, in order to understand fully the political consequences of corruption and disentangle the causal mechanisms linking corruption scandals to attitudinal and behavioral changes, quantitative evidence must be combined with the insights that can be provided by qualitative and ethnographic methods. Interviewing citizens and conducting focus groups among them is a fruitful way to understand the reasons why some people vote for corrupt politicians (Pavão 2015), or why some corrupt behaviors are considered less acceptable than others. Moreover, ethnographic methods could provide new insights as to how political elites perceive the consequences of corruption and how they respond to public disaffection generated by corruption scandals (Boswell et al. 2018).

Our review of the political consequences of corruption also points to different substantive questions that future research could address. Future studies should aim to distinguish between the short and long-term consequences of corruption. Introducing a temporal dimension in the analysis would allow us to unpack the long-term implications of corruption scandals (see e.g. Doherty et al. 2014). This could offer new insights into the perennial question of why most citizens do not punish corrupt politicians. Addressing temporal dynamics could reveal differences in the timing of attitudinal and behavioral effects as some of the implications might only

become visible in the long term. The importance of timing is an under-researched topic that could be addressed by studying panel individual-level data in combination with information on corruption scandals and their coverage in the media. Dynamic effects appear as particularly interesting for the study of corruption and partisanship. As we discussed above, partisanship is an important moderating factor in how voters process and react to corruption scandals. Future research could assess whether recurrent exposure to corruption has an updating effect on voters' partisan identification, and whether this has further effects in reducing bias or motivated reasoning at later points in time.

Future research should assess the implications of increasing political polarization for the electoral punishment of corruption. In highly polarized contexts, voters tend to base their vote decisions on ideological rather than performance considerations (Green and Hobolt 2008). Moreover, in these contexts voters place lower value on information and rely largely on party endorsements (Druckman et al. 2013). Future research should, therefore, address how information about corrupt practices affects public opinion and electoral behavior under different contexts of polarization. Initially we would expect polarization to depress corruption voting further. Given this troubling expectation, future studies should also focus on how to promote electoral accountability related to corrupt acts. Studies could assess how information about the negative social and economic effects of corruption could be effectively transmitted to citizens. In a similar vein, researchers could analyze whether and how civic education in schools might be an effective instrument to raise the awareness of young citizens about these pernicious effects.

Finally, future studies should not only focus on the negative consequences of corruption scandals, but also on the potentially positive consequences of the prosecution and punishment of corrupt behaviors. As we have discussed previously, in a context of widespread corruption voters might develop cynical attitudes which can lead them to overlook corruption. These skeptical attitudes could easily transform into dissatisfaction with the democratic system. Knowing whether and how anti-corruption efforts can translate into a reversal of the negative attitudinal effects of corruption could therefore be essential for the future health of democracies.

Notes

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- 2 This scandal revealed that some members of the House of Representatives had received interest-free loans from the House Bank. In 1992 the House disclosed a list of all members that had overdrafts and the amount of unfunded checks they had received.
- 3 The Bárcenas scandal is one of the most relevant corruption scandals in Spain in the last decade. In 2013 the main national newspapers leaked documents written by Luis Bárcenas, accountant of the Partido Popular (PP), that indicated that the party had received illegal contributions that were used to pay cash bonuses to members of the party.

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