

Why do voters forgive corrupt mayors? Implicit exchange, credibility of information and clean alternatives¹

Abstract

Corruption cases have limited electoral consequences in many countries. Why do voters often fail to punish corrupt politicians at the polls? In this paper, we propose three micro mechanisms: implicit exchange (good performance makes up for corruption), lack of credible information (corruption charges are denied by the affected party), and lack of clean alternatives (all parties are perceived as affected by corruption). We test these mechanisms using a six-treatment survey experiment. Our results suggest that implicit exchange and implausibility of accusations help explain voters' support for corrupt politicians. We failed to treat the perception that all parties are not equally affected by corruption.

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Introduction

Researchers have often been puzzled about the limited effects of corruption on voting behaviour and election results. It is a “widely observed paradox: unpopular corruption and popular corrupt politicians” (Kurer 2001, p. 63). The puzzle is relevant because a failure to punish misconduct undermines democratic accountability. Previous research has identified several contextual factors that condition the electoral consequences of corruption. Information has been found to affect incumbent’s vote (Figueiredo et al. 2000; Ferraz and Finan 2008) but also opposition’s (Cong, De la O, Karlan and Wantchekon 2011). Parliamentarism and being a new democracy seem to strengthen the relationship between perception of corruption and voting, but with the usual endogeneity concerns (Krause and Mendez 2009). Corruption has larger electoral consequences when it is politicized, i.e. when some political parties actively campaign against corruption (Bagenholm 2009), when economic circumstances are harsh (Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2012) or when it affects people personally (Deegan-Krause, Klasnja and Tucker 2011). On the other hand clientelism and weak institutions facilitate voting for corrupt politicians (Manzetti and Wilson 2007)..

These contextual explanations, however, do not account for the fact that corruption is not punished harshly in advanced industrial democracies that have abundant information and relatively strong institutions such as the US, Japan, Italy or Spain. In addition, we know little about the micro causal mechanisms that are behind the limited consequences of corruption for voting behaviour.

This paper proposes three such micro mechanisms that are expected to be behind the limited electoral consequences of corruption. These mechanisms apply particularly to

citizens with a preference for a party. Partisans face a cognitive dissonance problem when corruption affects one of its officers (Anduiza, Gallego and Muñoz 2014). On the one hand, partisans have a preference based on their predispositions. On the other hand, they are confronted with the fact that their preferred option is, or could be, corrupt. We argue that three different contextual elements can help partisans to reduce cognitive dissonance and make them more likely to vote for a corrupt candidate.

First, voters may think that a successful administration, in terms of access to and distribution of resources, compensates for the costs of corruption, with an implicit exchange taking place. Second, voters may think that the opposition parties instigate the accusations of corruption in order to win votes. Hence, information is not credible.

Third, voters may think that all parties are equally affected by corruption. Thus, even if they reject corrupt practices, corruption may not actually make them change their vote because other parties cannot be expected to behave lawfully. In order to test each of the hypotheses we designed a six-treatment experiment embedded in a survey administered in Catalonia in 2012. The purpose of the research design is not to analyse to what extent these contextual features (good performance, lack of credible information and lack of clean alternatives) are present in real corruption cases, but rather to state whether, when present, they affect attitudes towards voting. We find evidence that confirms that both implicit exchange and absence of credibility increase the probability of voting for a corrupt politician.

The paper is structured in three sections. The first section presents the three mechanisms. Section 2 describes the survey experiments. Section 3 presents and discusses the results.

Theory

Contrary to what democratic theory would prescribe, corruption often only reduces incumbents' share of the vote to a small extent. As a consequence, the suspect candidate ends up being re-elected very frequently. Similar patterns have been documented in several countries: in the US (Peter and Welch, 1980, Welch and Hibbing 1987, Dimock and Jacobson 1995), the UK (Eggers and Fisher 2011), Italy (Chang, Golden and Hill 2010), Japan (Reed 1999), Spain (Costas, Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro, 2010, Rivero-Rodriguez and Fernandez-Vazquez 2011). Our point of departure is different from previous work that has tried to explain under what conditions corruption is more likely to have electoral consequences: we analyze the micro-level mechanisms that link contextual characteristics with electoral behaviour and explain why people may vote for a corrupt politician. We propose that three analytically distinct mechanisms.

Implicit exchange

Voters take different dimensions into account when deciding for whom to vote: candidates' personal characteristics, issue positions, or past performance. While they may dislike the fact that a candidate is accused of corruption, they may still vote for the candidate if he or she has a strong record on other dimensions. A candidate's positive characteristics may counterbalance the negative effects of corruption accusations. A number of studies have highlighted the relevance of candidate traits –among which competence- for voting behaviour in scandal contexts (see for instance Funk 1996). Rundquist et al. suggested this explanation after arguing that support for corrupt politicians cannot be only due to lack of information or direct vote-buying (Rundquist et

al. 1977). More recent research argues that support for politicians suspected of corruption depends on their ability to distribute patronage benefits (Manzetti and Wilson 2007) or to contribute to economic growth (Fernandez-Vazquez, Barbera and Rivero 2013) This argument is also used by Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga (2012) to explain that perceptions of corruption have stronger electoral consequences in hard economic times, suggesting that citizens are willing to trade off political corruption for economic well-being. Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2010) assess the consequences of corruption and competence on vote choice. Although they argue that information about corruption is more important than the candidates' performance (incompetent clean candidates are more likely to be voted for than competent corrupt ones), competence doubles support for a corrupt candidate. In line with their work, we examine the effect of competence perception on electoral punishment of corruption.

Our first hypothesis thus states that support for politicians suspected of corruption increases when they have a good record in public good provision, for example in attracting investments, presiding over economic growth and securing well-being for their constituency.

Credibility of information

A second explanation is that the origin of and reactions to charges of corruption affect their credibility. Under some circumstances, citizens simply do not believe that charges of corruption against a politician are credible and thus they disregard corruption accusations (Rundquist et al. 1977:957). Even if they have information about a corruption case, citizens may discard this information as not credible.

This explanation is particularly relevant for understanding lenience to corruption in partisan contexts. Parties and politicians react to scandals providing excuses and justifications (Mc Graw 1991) but also eventually denying the accusations. Partisans might regard stories about corruption as mere ‘partisan tricks’ devised by their party’s rivals in order to win the election (Ferraz and Finan 2008). The reaction of all involved parties is crucial to determine whether an accusation is perceived as well funded and credible or whether it is perceived as noise. The party charged with corruption can signal that an accusation as credible, for example by investigating the case. It can also generate the perception that an accusation is not credible by denying the charges.

Our second hypothesis is that the propensity to support a corrupt politician will significantly increase if the party refuses to acknowledge the charges. In contrast, accusations of corruption should have a stronger effect on voting if the party recognizes that the allegations against one of its members are legitimate.

Lack of clean alternatives

If voters believe that all parties or contending candidates are corrupt to a similar extent, there is no reason for them to change their votes. Withdrawing support for a preferred party in order to punish corruption makes more sense if voters can expect that the alternative party will be less corrupt. If, however, voters expect all politicians to be dishonest, they should vote for their preferred candidate and disregard any information about corruption. As Fernandez-Vazquez and Rivero argue “voters may reject dishonest behaviour but still not have reasons to change their mayor provided that they expect that the likelihood of future corruption is at least the same with the opposition in power” (Fernandez-Vazquez and Rivero 2011).

Thus, our third hypothesis states that voters are more likely to vote for a corrupt candidate of their preferred party when all parties or alternative candidates are perceived to be equally prone to corruption.

Data

In order to test the three hypotheses, we designed three survey experiments that were embedded in a survey carried out in Catalonia in April 2012. The survey was administered online to a sample of 1,500 individuals (selected with gender, age and education quotas from a commercial database).²

The case of Catalonia is analytically useful for several reasons. First, corruption scandals were a salient issue in Catalan and Spanish politics at the time the survey was conducted. Spain is a country with moderate levels of corruption, scoring 6.1 on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (very clean) in 2010 (Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International). This makes the topic relevant and the hypothetical case presented to the interviewees believable enough to make them elicit realistic answers. Moreover, existing evidence points to a limited to non-existent degree of electoral punishment of corruption in Spain, and therefore, our motivating puzzle is especially relevant in this case: citizens do not seem to judge corruption harshly. Additionally, Spain has an institutionalized party system with over 60% of its citizens reporting being close to a political party (Dalton and Weldon 2007: 183).

² Participants in the on-line panel are recruited only through active invitation and no self-registration to the database is allowed. The resulting sample presents some differences with respect to probability samples in that it underrepresents older, less educated and residents in rural areas. The quotas did not fully correct these deviations.

In the three experiments, respondents were shown vignettes in which a newspaper reported on a corruption inquiry. In all experimental conditions, the piece of news explained that a company allegedly paid bribes to a mayor in order to win a contract to build a park. By design, the mayor always belonged to the party to which the individual felt closer. This is because the explanations for why voters support corrupt politicians apply to citizens with a preference for the affected party. Non-supporters or partisans of a different party would be very unlikely to vote for a candidate accused of corruption. In order to identify partisanship, we first asked participants which party they felt closest to. If they answered none, a follow-up question asked whether there was one party with which they agreed more than with others. In our sample of 1,500 respondents, 1,102 reported some degree of closeness to a party. Respondents that were not close to any party did not take part in the experiments.

Each of the three experiments had two treatment conditions: a positive and a negative one. In the first case, the expected mechanism was explicitly operating and the mayor was portrayed as competent, the information as non-credible and the alternatives as not clean while in the negative treatment the mechanism was explicitly not operating: the mayor was not competent, the information was portrayed as being credible and the alternatives as being clean. This design grants us more control, since any ambiguity regarding our mechanisms is ruled out.

Respondents were subject to only one treatment, that is, they only read one of the vignettes. The piece of news had a title and three very short paragraphs. The core description of the case, in the first and third paragraph, was identical across conditions

(see complete wording the appendix). The experimental manipulations modified the content of the title and the second paragraph as follows:

- **Implicit exchange:** In the positive condition, the mayor had a strong performance record. This positive information should counterbalance the negative consequences of being accused of corruption. In the negative condition, the mayor had a poor record.
- **No credible information:** In the positive condition, the mayor's party does not acknowledge the charges and claims that the corruption accusation benefits the opposition party. In the negative condition, the party regrets the mayor's actions, and thus signals that the accusation is credible.
- **Lack of clean alternatives:** In the positive condition, the piece of news reports that other parties have also been previously accused of corruption in the same municipality. This information conveys the message that all parties are equally affected by corruption. The negative condition specifies that previous municipal governments had been honest.

Our dependent variable is the willingness to vote for the mayor's party measured with the following question: "If the case described above referred to the municipality where you live, what would be the probability that you would vote for this mayor?"

Respondents could choose a position in a scale from 0 (would never vote for him) to 10 (would vote for sure). As the accusation of corruption is present in all treatment and control vignettes, we expect this probability to be rather low. The focus of interest is on the differences in the reported probability to vote across experimental conditions when implicit exchange, credibility of information and availability of clean alternatives are present or absent. Since it is not possible to ensure that the three treatments are equal on

strength, we will not be able to directly compare the effects among them, but rather judge if each of them separately has an effect on the probability to vote.

In order to make sure that the respondents had read and understood the news, we included one manipulation check after each experiment. After the implicit exchange experiment respondents were asked: “Could you assess this mayor’s administration during his mandate?” They could choose “The administration has been generally positive” or “The administration has been generally negative”. After the credibility experiment respondents were asked: “Could you assess the extent to which the mayor’s party recognizes the corruption accusation?” Respondents could chose “The mayor’s party does NOT recognize the alleged mayor’s crime” or “The mayor’s party DOES recognize the alleged mayor’s crime”. After the availability of clean alternatives experiment respondents were asked: “Could you assess whether corruption affects one or several parties?” Respondents could choose “Corruption in this municipality affects only the current mayor” or “Corruption in this municipality affects several political parties”.³

Results

Table 1 shows the main results of the experiment. Two of our experimental manipulations produced the expected effects. The noise treatment and the implicit exchange treatment generated a large and statistically significant increase in the reported probability of voting for the allegedly corrupt mayor in the next election. On the other hand, the cynicism treatment did not appear to have a clear effect.

³ All the analyses were replicated only for the respondents that did answer correctly to the manipulation checks and results proved stable.

Table 1: Main results of the experiments

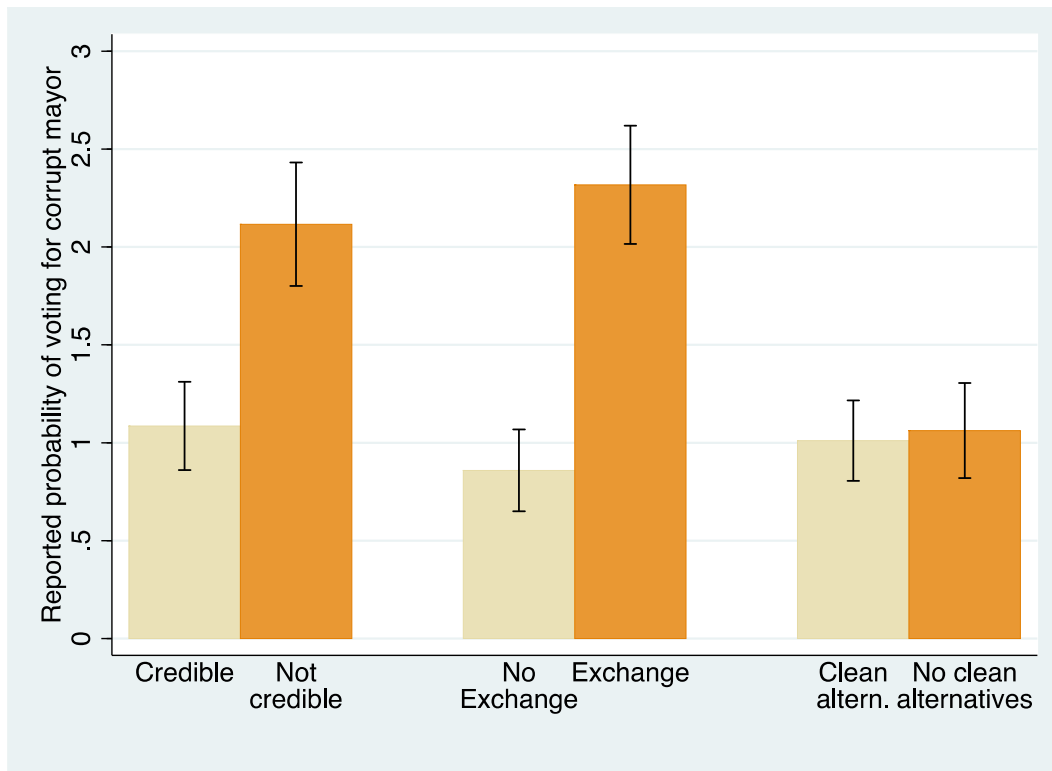
| | Average probability | Difference | P-value ^{NB} | N |
|----------------------|---------------------|------------|-----------------------|-----|
| Implicit exchange | 2.32 | 1.46*** | 0.000 | 205 |
| No implicit exchange | 0.86 | | | 170 |
| Not credible | 2.11 | 1.03*** | 0.000 | 187 |
| Credible | 1.08 | | | 173 |
| No clean alternative | 1.06 | 0.05 | 1.000 | 177 |
| Clean alternative | 1.01 | | | 190 |

^{NB}: One-tailed t-test

The average reported probabilities of voting for the mayor are very low in all experimental conditions, with a maximum of 2.3 (on a 0-10 scale) for the exchange condition that underlined the positive record of the mayor and a minimum of 0.86 for the vignette of a mayor with a poor record. Figure 2 represents the results graphically. However, even with this skewed distribution, we found significant differences across treatment conditions. The exchange mechanism appears to have the strongest effect. The reported probability of voting for the accused mayor is almost three times larger when the mayor is competent than when he is incompetent. This suggests that supporters of a party are significantly more willing to vote for officials suspected of corruption if they otherwise have a strong track record.

The credibility of information treatment also has a significant effect: the probability of voting for the accused mayor is twice as large when his party backs him than when his party withdraws support from him. How a party reacts to an accusation of corruption seems to affect its credibility. Our results suggest that partisans are less willing to vote for politician charged with corruption if the party accepts the charges.

Figure 2: Treatment effects



In all experimental conditions respondents reported a low probability of voting for the corrupt candidate. These results may be seen as inconsequential, because an increase in willingness to vote for a politician from 1 to 2 on a 10-point scale still leaves the likelihood of the politician being re-elected below a reasonable threshold. Two aspects should be considered here. First, previous research has also found important discrepancies between survey answers and actual data (Anduiza, Gallego and Muñoz 2014) of electoral support for incumbents under corruption allegations. When confronted with the abstract idea of corruption, individuals tend to show a severe judgement that is not necessarily translated into actual voting behavior, the reported probability of voting for hypothetical mayors charged with corrupt misbehaviour is very low as we certainly expected. The estimates presented here are thus extremely conservative. Second, reported probabilities of voting for main parties in Spain are very

low. Using another online survey (CIS2855) we can see how average probability values range from 3.06 for PSOE to 2.27 for IU. Hence we know that even if reported probabilities are clearly below 5, this does not necessarily preclude actual voting for this candidate.

The absence of clean alternatives, on the other hand, does not seem to have a significant effect. The manipulation checks (reported in Table 2) show that individuals in the treatment and control conditions of the third experiment were similarly likely to report that corruption affected more than one party. The vignettes of this experiment were perhaps not strong enough to manipulate the widespread perception that all parties are affected by corruption. For the other two hypotheses, most respondents answered the manipulation checks correctly. The null results of the cynicism experiment can thus not be taken as conclusive evidence that the lack of clean alternatives does not explain voting for corrupt politicians.⁴

Table 2: Manipulation checks (% in columns for each treatment)

| Treatment | Manipulation check | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | “Good record” | “Poor record |
| No exchange | 29 | 72 |
| Exchange | 71 | 28 |
| Treatment | “Mayor’s party acknowledges” | “Mayor’s party does not acknowledge” |
| | No credibility | 34 |
| Credibility | 62 | 38 |
| Treatment | “More than one party” | “Only one party” |
| | No clean alternatives | 79 |
| Clean alternatives | 70 | 30 |

⁴ Repeating the analyses only with those respondents that gave the expected answer to the manipulation checks yields similar results. In that case the average probability of voting for the corrupt mayor is slightly higher for the ‘clean alternative’ condition, but the difference is very small and insignificant.

Our findings have several implications. First, they support the claim that voters accept trading off acts of corruption for valuable outcomes such as good management or economic well-being. Our results are consistent with the idea that voters are less likely to hold politicians accountable in a favourable economic context (Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2012). The thought “*Rouba mais faz*” may be one of the main explanations that help understand why corruption has limited electoral consequences. This finding is troubling. Corrupt politicians may get away with corruption if they preside – be it due to good management or serendipity – over economic growth.

Second, the finding that electoral punishment is reduced when the affected party denies the accusations also has unsettling implications. Parties may benefit from contesting accusations of corruption and increasing the levels of political conflict, at least momentarily. In contrast, they may have little incentive to investigate accusations promptly and withdraw support for suspect members. When a corruption accusation comes up, the optimal strategy may be for parties to deny any truth in the charge, rather than to investigate and clean up. Of course, real-world situations may unfold differently, especially when a court condemns a defendant. Further research should complement experimental evidence with observational data to assess whether party reactions affect the electoral consequences of corruption.

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