Corruption and Electoral Accountability: Avenues for Future Research

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Abstract

The vast majority of people across the globe lives in countries characterized by high levels of corruption, commonly defined as the public misuse of private gains. Although the exact costs of corruption are difficult to estimate, research suggests that corruption is bad for economic and social development. Not only has corruption been shown to have a detrimental effect on a country's economy, the ability to generate tax revenue and social equality, the political effects of corruption are also considerable. Owing to its association with weak state capacity, corruption may damage the ability of governments to craft and implement policies in areas in which continued intervention and investment is needed and their capacity to respond quickly and effectively to sudden shocks. Owing to these undesirable outcomes, elections are supposed to curb corruption because voters will throw the rascals out. Recent research, however, suggests that more often than not corruption goes unpunished at the ballot box. This essay sets out possible research avenues to find out why this is the case.

INTRODUCTION

Many academics, policy makers, and pundits assume that fair and periodic elections will curb political malfeasance because of voters' disdain of corruption. Much of the recent empirical literature, however, contradicts this view. On average, the effective electoral sanctioning of corruption is rare (De Vries & Solaz, 2017; Fisman & Golden, 2017). Even if there is a clear incentive for a society at large to root out corrupt practices, as this would increase societal welfare, political elites, and voters, especially in high-corruption contexts, face enormous coordination challenges that favor the status quo (Klašnja, Little, & Tucker, 2016). An important question then arises: why voters reelect politicians who steal from them?

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In previous work, we have highlighted three stages that are important in voters' decision-making about how to deal with candidate corruption: an *information acquisition*, *causal attribution*, and *behavioral response* stage (De Vries & Solaz, 2017). Information acquisition refers to the ways in which voters learn about corruption. Causal attribution is the process by which voters assign blame to a politician (or bureaucrat) for corruption. Finally, a behavioral response denotes that voters choose to act on their corruption evaluations and blame attribution by throwing the rascals out. A breakdown of any one or more of these stages can result in corruption not being punished at the ballot box. Finding out how each of these stages matter is important for the design of behavioral or institutional solutions to increase accountability for corruption and by doing so increasing societal welfare.

Much of the existing literature deals with the first and last stage. When it comes to information acquisition, empirical work demonstrates that a lack of punishment of corruption is the result of the quantity and quality of information that voters receive. Information dissemination could be imperfect due to a lack of media reporting, political control of the media, high levels of illiteracy, or the lack of credible sources (Botero, Cornejo, Gamboa, Pavão, & Nickerson, 2015; Ferraz & Finan, 2008; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). When it comes to the behavioral response stage, a wealth of evidence suggests that voters trade-off corruption information against other benefits when they decide how to cast their ballot. These benefits could be based on side-payments (Fernández-Vázquez *et al*., 2016), performance in other areas, or policy pledges (Klašnja & Tucker, 2013; Rundquist, Strom, & Peters, 1977). Hence, voters may tolerate corrupt practices, or even approve of them, because they value other things more.

The way in which causal attribution matters has received far less scholarly attention. Could it be the case that voters simply might not update their beliefs about candidate quality even when presented with concrete evidence of malfeasance? Some recent field and laboratory experimental evidence suggests that this is indeed the case. So far, this is based on only a handful of studies and we do not know if these findings are generalizable. Moreover, to date, we do not yet have a comprehensive understanding of the factors that explain why voters fail to update their beliefs about candidate quality even if they are confronted with unambiguous corruption information. Against this backdrop, we suggest that the main challenge for future research is to develop a coherent understanding of how causal attribution matters for the electoral punishment of corruption.

In the ensuing sections, we first elaborate the three stages that are important in voters' decision-making about candidate corruption and discuss existing work in terms of the stages they examine. Second, we highlight several

important avenues for future research regarding the role of causal attribution. Finally, we conclude by highlighting why these avenues of future research are so important for our understanding of corruption more broadly.

SHORT OVERVIEW OF EXISTING RESEARCH: THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION AND OTHER BENEFITS

The idea that voters hold politicians to account for corruption fits classical models of retrospective voting. These models maintain that voters use elections to sanction low-performing politicians by selecting high-performing ones (Besley, 2006). In order to win elections, candidates need to convince voters that they are competent and thus able to promote and secure their well-being. Voters form beliefs about candidate competence by paying attention to quality signals, such as developments in their living standards, the current state of the economy or corruption scandals among other things (Fiorina, 1981). When voters indeed cast their ballots based on these beliefs about candidate quality, we can expect that periodic and competitive elections help to ensure that high-quality candidates get elected and are being reelected. Information about candidate corruption is important, because it acts as a signal for voters that candidates are of low quality. As a result, we would expect corrupt politicians to be punished at the ballot box, and the extent to which this happens to vary by the quality of the signal. However persuasive this theoretical account may be, the real world turns out to be more complex. While some studies find that corrupt activities indeed take a considerable electoral toll on incumbents, especially when the information signal is clear or people's ability to distill it is high (Ferraz & Finan, 2008; Klašnja, 2016; Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2017), other work suggests that voters might reelect politicians they know to be corrupt even when confronted with strong evidence of malfeasance, because they prefer other benefits or due to group loyalty (Anduiza, Gallego, & Munoz, 2013; Rundquist *et al*., 1977; Solaz, De Vries, & De Geus, 2018).

These conflicting findings might not be entirely surprising when we consider that several conditions should be met in order for retrospective voting to exist (Healy & Malhotra, 2013). In our previous work, we outlined three stages that are important for holding candidates accountable for political malfeasance, an *information acquisition*, *causal attribution*, and *behavioral response* stage. Information acquisition relates to voters needing to be aware of corruption. In the first stage of information acquisition, it follows that in order for voters to be able to punish corruption, they need to know about it. Becoming aware of corruption is not always easy, because elected public officials engaged in corrupt activities have an incentive to hide information, and may try to influence the media or the judiciary not to

report on or prosecute their malfeasance. The literature suggests that people learn about corruption either through personal experience or through indirect perception by ways of media reporting for example (Klašnja, Tucker, & Deegan-Krause, 2016). The second stage of *causal attribution* refers to the fact that when voters are informed about candidate corruption, they need to attribute responsibility for it and adjust their evaluations of the candidate quality accordingly. Research has demonstrated that blame attribution is far from straightforward, and often plagued by group-serving biases. Whereas voters tend to attribute positive events or outcomes to their preferred in-group, they absolve the in-group of blame for negative events or outcomes (Anduiza *et al*., 2013; Solaz *et al*., 2018). The last stage refers to *behavioral response*s. These blame attributions should also lead voters to adjust their voting decisions by either voting for the opposition or by refraining to cast a ballot in the first place. Voters have to consider a large array of factors when deciding for whom to cast their ballot, and corruption may simply not be a salient issue in a specific election campaign (Chang, Golden, & Hill, 2010; Klašnja, Tucker, *et al*., 2016). Moreover, even if voters find corruption important, they might be willing to trade it off against some other benefit they care about more (Rundquist *et al*., 1977).

The majority of work to date has focused on the information acquisition and behavioral response stage. When it comes to the former, studies suggest that the lack of electoral punishment of corruption is largely a function of the quantity of information available to voters (Chang *et al*., 2010; Ferraz & Finan, 2008), and the quality of that information (Botero *et al*., 2015; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). A seminal study on the role of information conducted by Ferraz and Finan (2008) studies the effects of publicly released audit reports about corruption practices in Brazilian municipalities. The authors show that information dissemination increases the electoral punishment of corruption, and that these effects were most pronounced in those municipalities where locally based radio stations disclosed this information. Recent work in a similar vein suggests that not only the quantity of information matters but also the perceived quality of the source of information (Botero *et al*., 2015; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). The source deemed most credible by voters may differ greatly from context to context. For instance, a study from Brazil shows that respondents were more likely to punish a candidate for corruption when the information stems from a federal audit rather than from the opposition party (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013), while a study conducted in Columbia found that corruption allegations made by the leading national newspaper rather than a nongovernmental organization or the judiciary engenders the strongest effects on punishment (Botero *et al*., 2015).

Another set of studies suggests that corruption information might not lead voters to punish malfeasance, because they care about other benefits more. One of the first empirical papers on the topic by Rundquist and colleagues featuring a set of survey experiments suggested that voters often engage in a trade. Although they may generally disapprove of corrupt conduct, they need to weigh their corruption evaluations against policy benefits, and this may result in an overall positive balance in favor of reelection. As a result, they might prefer a corrupt candidate who represents their policy positions to a clean candidate who does not. Voters may trade off corruption against some material gains (Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, & Rivero, 2016), or turn a blind eye in favor of other benefits such as ideological proximity (Rundquist *et al*., 1977) or strong economic performance (Klašnja & Tucker, 2013). Overall, this evidence suggests that because voters care about a multitude of things when deciding to cast their ballot, oftentimes corruption becomes a secondary concern compared to other things like the state of the economy or a candidate's policy positions. If voters fail to punish corruption at the ballot box due to instrumental calculations, such behavior might not be irrational, but still normatively undesirable, as it does not incentivize politicians to be clean.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE WORK: TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF CAUSAL ATTRIBUTION AND PRIOR BELIEFS

Notwithstanding the compelling evidence outlining the important role that both information acquisition and voters' decisions to trade off corruption against other benefits play, to date we know much less about the intermediate stage of causal attribution. This is unfortunate, as we know that people do not process information objectively. Social psychologists, for example, have shown that people tend to make internal attributions (to their own in-group) for positive events or outcomes and make external attributions (to an out-group) for negative events or outcomes, something coined the "ultimate attribution error" (Pettrigrew, 1979). While studies on retrospective voting in political science have over the years paid considerable attention to causal attribution (for an overview see Healy & Malhotra, 2013), to our knowledge no study to date has explicitly examined causal attributions for corruption as a dependent variable. In the following sections, we suggest that understanding (i) how people attribute blame when exposed to information about corruption, and (ii) which factors hamper blame attribution are two important areas that deserve more scholarly attention.

As highlighted in the previous section, existing work centers on the study of how voters get informed about candidate corruption, and how they trade this information off against other benefits they may care about. Yet, could

it be the case that voters simply do not update their beliefs about candidate quality even when presented with unequivocal evidence of malfeasance? When group loyalties, based on partisanship, religion, ethnicity, and so on, are strong, corruption information of in-group members might not have any effect on voter's decision-making. Owing to the fact that corruption allegations may pose a serious threat to in-group status and the in-group's hold on power, people might absolve in-group members of blame. The most straightforward channel through which this would work is through people's in-group serving bias (Solaz *et al*., 2018). While voters tend to reward the in-group for positive outcomes, they absolve it of blame for negative outcomes. This would constitute a form of motivated reasoning in which people, because of their automatic affective ties to their in-group, selectively process information. Another channel through which this may work is through in-group status. Evidence from behavioral economics shows that people may gain some utility from the utility of others, in particular from members of their own in-group (Charness & Rabin, 2002). In his work on redistribution, for example, Shayo (2009) shows that individuals derive utility from having high-status members in their group. Because of this, poorer groups might not support redistribution from the rich to the poor even though it would benefit them personally. If we extend this insight to corruption-generated wealth, voters could gain some utility from the fact that a candidate from their in-group stands to gain from corruption even if they would personally lose out. In this case, voters might actually reward candidates from their own group for being corrupt.

In a recent study, we started to examine these possible channels by exploiting a real-world corruption scandal in Spain that fell in the middle of a survey fieldwork period and complementing it with laboratory experiments from the United Kingdom (Solaz *et al*., 2018). By comparing Spanish respondents before and after a corruption scandal was uncovered in a national newspaper, we show that in-group loyalty based on partisanship decreased the likelihood of withdrawing support for the ruling party due to corruption, while out-group identification increased it. In a next step, we replicated our results in a laboratory setting that allowed us to isolate in-group effects more carefully by controlling the precise setting and information voters they received as well as randomizing the group identity of the candidates that voters faced. The laboratory results support our findings from the Spanish case: voters fail to punish in-group candidates they know to be corrupt but punish out-group candidates for the same indiscretions. These findings are important and lead to a host of new questions. Which factors could condition the magnitude of the effects of in-group serving biases? And what kind of group identities might trigger these kinds of in-group effects, and which ones do not? These are crucially important questions for future work to address.

Another important avenue of future research is the importance of nature of prior beliefs for understanding the degree to which voters, in fact, update their evaluations of candidate quality in light of malfeasance revelations. A recent study by Arias, Balan, Larreguy, Marshall, and Querubin (2017) suggests that electoral punishment of corruption is rare when voters already believe that candidates are of low quality. Owing to their negative priors, a signal that the incumbent is corrupt will not be very informative. In fact, their evidence stemming from a field experiment conducted in Mexico, where voters were informed about malfeasant municipal spending or not, suggests that when priors were already negative, support for the incumbent party actually increased after corruption was revealed because voters positively updated their priors from information that was better than expected. These findings suggest that remedying information asymmetries may not always lead to the results that scholars or practitioners hope for. The evidence also leads to a host of new questions, for example, which prior beliefs matter, those relating to the incumbent as such or those relating to the prevalence of corruption in society at large? And under which conditions do these different types of priors matter most?

Concerning the latter, a study by Klašnja and Tucker (2013), comparing survey experimental evidence from Sweden and Moldova, for example, shows that voters in Sweden, a low-corruption country, responded more to information about corruption than voters in Moldova, a high-corruption country, do. What is more, voters in Moldova only responded to corruption information when economic conditions were poor. This perhaps suggests that while on average due to their priors about the prevalence of corruption, voters in high-corruption countries may not respond to one additional case of corruption, some heterogeneity in reactions most likely exists. This heterogeneity could be the result of the overall state of the economy as the study by Klašnja and Tucker suggests or individuals' prior beliefs about candidate quality as highlighted by Arias *et al*. (2017), but it could also be due to other prior beliefs people might hold.

We think that people's *social priors* might be especially important. Social priors refer to people's beliefs about society at large. The role of three sets of social priors seem especially important in our view, people's beliefs about (i) the *prevalence of corruption within society*, (ii) *the way other voters faced with corruption allegations will act* and (iii) the *quality of the pool of future political entrants*. These social priors are likely going to condition the extent to which voters will actually update their beliefs about candidate quality and blame the incumbent for corrupt activities. The pervasiveness of these prior beliefs, especially in high-corruption countries, may make it less likely that candidate corruption will be punished at the ballot box. Let us address each of them in turn.

When people already think that corruption is widespread, they do not punish corruption at the ballot box. This could be due to different reasons. It might be due to the fact that when corruption is believed to be prevalent, corruption allegations add little new information to voters' decision-making and therefore might carry very little weight in voters' minds. This type of reasoning is consistent with arguments that citizens residing in countries with higher quality of governance might display greater sensitivity to accountability failures (Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, & Friedenberg, 2017). It could also be the case that when corruption is more widespread, engaging in corrupt practices might be deemed more acceptable by voters (Fisman & Golden, 2017). Yet, it could also be that if voters think that corruption is widespread, they also believe that it takes a corrupt politician to navigate the system and to get things done (Bauhr & Charron, 2018). A recent study based on conjoint experiments that was embedded in surveys in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay shows no effect of reminding people about the prevalence of corruption in their country (Klašnja, Lupu, & Tucker, 2018). Yet, as the authors themselves admit, empirically establishing the effect of people's perceptions about the pervasiveness of corruption is difficult, in part because people's understandings of what corruption might actually entail are likely going to differ substantially between contexts in which corruption is more or less widespread, and among individuals. Studying how people's beliefs about the prevalence of corruption matter is an important area for future research.

Second, not only people's perceptions about the extent of corruption in society will likely affect their willingness to hold candidates to account for corruption, but also their expectations about the behavior of others. People's prior beliefs about the behavior of other voters relate to the importance of voter coordination in the punishment of corruption. When people think that others are unlikely to punish existing politicians for corruption, they are unlikely to do so as well (especially when there is any form of side-benefit that they could lose by withdrawing support from a corrupt incumbent). In order for voter coordination to occur, two conditions need to be met: first, voters have to agree that corruption is important for their vote, and second, they need to be able to agree to vote for another clean candidate. A study by Chang *et al*. (2010) highlights the importance of voter coordination. It is based on legislators in Italy's lower house between 1948 and 1994 and candidates of the two largest parties (Christian Democracy and the Italian Communist Party). The authors show that only in the 1992–1994 legislature did corrupt legislators face a serious electoral penalty. They suggest that this structural break in the response to corruption by Italian voters was due to the media coverage that grew out of the Clean Hands operation in the early 1990s. The authors argue that a wider

dissemination of information about corruption in the media not only makes corruption more salient in voters' minds but also provides a coordination signal to voters, who realize that others will most likely punish corruption as well.

Several recent studies examined the role of coordination signals through different types of experimental treatments and found mixed results (Adida, Gottlieb, Kramon, & McClendon, 2017; Arias, Larreguy, Marshall, & Querubin, 2018; Yap, 2017). Citing evidence from a field experiment conducted in the context of legislative elections in Benin, Adida and colleagues show that voters only punished bad performance when information was accompanied with a message highlighting the importance of legislative performance for voter welfare and the fact that other villages in the constituency received the same information. Laboratory evidence from Australia, Singapore, and the United States also highlights the importance of positive coordination signals (Yap, 2017). Yet, evidence from a field experiment revealing mayoral malfeasance before the 2015 Mexican municipal elections suggests that accompanying leaflets detailing results of audit reports by loudspeakers in order to signal to voters that others received the malfeasance information as well did not significantly alter the effects of information on incumbent vote shares (Arias *et al*., 2018). All in all, these results highlight that understanding (i) which coordination signals matter and (ii) which conditions may hamper their effects are two important areas for future research.

Finally, voters' beliefs about the quality of the pool of future political entrants is likely important for their willingness to hold candidates to account for corruption. When people think that the pool of possible political entrants will also be corrupt, there is little reason to punish an existing politician for corruption. In their theoretical work on corruption traps, Klašnja, Little, *et al*. (2016) highlighted that overcoming corruption involves coordination not only among voters and existing candidates but also among possible entrants. Voters' perceptions about the quality of the pool of possible entrants will inform their behavior. When voters' expect an alternative pool of candidates for office to be likely as corrupt as current ones, why would they cast a ballot based on corruption? The pool of potential candidates has been found to be important in other aspects of political behavior as well, such as protest behavior (Meirowitz and Tucker, 2013). When voters become informed about widespread corruption of incumbents, this might influence their beliefs about the overall average quality of the pool of potential governments, especially if they have little experience with elections to begin with. While in established democracies, learning about corruption may lead people to think that they should root out this one bad apple, in newly established democracies this may not spark off pessimism

about all possible political candidates. Empirical examinations regarding (i) the way in which people's expectations about the quality of the pool of possible alternatives affect the likelihood of punishing corruption, and (ii) how these relationships differ based on people's experience with democracy constitute important avenues for future research.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, we have experienced somewhat of a boom in examining the extent to which people hold politicians to account for corruption, not least due to the widespread use of field, laboratory, and survey experiments. These experimental tools help researchers to overcome some of the core problems associated with studying corruption, such as the fact that politicians try to hide malfeasance and people may not want to admit that they support corrupt politicians. Much of this recent work has centered on the importance of corruption information and the willingness of voters, once they are informed about corruption, to trade it off against other benefits. In this essay, we have highlighted that the role of causal attribution has thus far received far less scholarly attention. Based on a handful of recent studies, we suggested that corruption might go unpunished at the ballot box simply because voters do not update their beliefs about candidate quality in light of unambiguous information about malfeasance. Recent work suggests that this is largely the result of the weight voters attach to in-group status and their prior beliefs about candidate quality. Yet, we do not know under which conditions these factors are important, and if other beliefs matter as well. Moreover, most of this early experimental work stems from one country context at one point in time, so we do not know if we can generalize existing findings.

Overall, we have highlighted two key avenues for future research. First, what is the role of role of attribution errors? To what extent do people fail to blame their in-group candidate for corruption, and punish out-group candidates for the same indiscretion? Which factors may condition the magnitude of these in-group effects? What is more, which kinds of group identities may trigger these effects, and which ones do not? These are crucially important questions for future work to address. Second, what is the role of people's beliefs about society at large? To what extent does the electoral punishment of corruption hinge on people's priors about the prevalence of corruption within society, the way they expect other voters to act, and the quality of the pool of future politicians? We believe that these social priors are crucial for understanding the conditions under which corruption gets punished at the ballot box. The extent to which they actually do, is an important topic for future research.

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