

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

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Abstract

Corruption cases have limited electoral consequences in many countries. Why do voters often fail to punish corrupt politicians at the polls? Previous research has focused on the role of lack of information, weak institutions and partisanship in explaining this phenomenon. In this paper, we propose three micromechanisms that can help understand why voters support corrupt mayors even in contexts with high information and strong institutions: implicit exchange (good performance can make up for corruption), credibility of information (accusations from opposition parties are not credible) and the lack of credible alternatives (the belief that all politicians are corrupt). We test these mechanisms using three survey experiments conducted in Catalonia. Our results suggest that implicit exchange and credibility of information help explain voters' support for corrupt politicians.

KEYWORDS Corruption; voting; mayors; survey experiment

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, 63) that is often found at the local level. The puzzle is relevant not only because a failure to punish misconduct undermines democratic accountability, but also because local governments are responsible for the provision of important services. The impact of

corruption at the local level, where the interaction between citizens and the public sector is most frequent, can be most damaging, particularly if it remains unpunished by citizens.

Previous research has identified several contextual factors that help explain why voters do not throw out corrupt politicians. Information is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for citizens to punish corrupt politicians (Chong et al. 2015; de Figueiredo, Hidalgo, and Kasahara 2010), and weak institutions may also reduce the electoral consequences of corruption (Manzetti and Wilson 2007). These explanations, however, do not account for the fact that corruption is not punished harshly in advanced industrial democracies that have abundant information and strong institutions such as the US (Dimock and Jacobson 1995; Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977), the UK (Eggers and Fisher 2011), Japan (Reed 1999), Italy (Chang, Golden and Hill 2010) and Spain (Rivero-Rodriguez and Fernandez-Vazquez 2011; CostasPérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2012).

One recent solution to this puzzle claims that partisanship biases citizens' perceptions. In particular, partisans are less likely to perceive a corruption case as a severe offence when it affects their own party rather than the opposition party (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013). This previous research has focused on the evaluation of corruption cases rather than on voting intentions or voting behaviour. Hence, we still know little about why many informed voters are unwilling to punish corruption cases at the polls. This paper proposes three micro-mechanisms that may 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 their party leaders. 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 partisans who maintain support for allegedly corrupt officials reduce their level of cognitive dissonance through three mechanisms that help them justify the decision to vote for a corrupt politician of their own party.

First, voters may think that a successful administration, in terms of access to and distribution of resources, compensates for the costs of corruption. This explanation has already been suggested in the classic work by Rundquist, Strom, and Peters (1977) under the label of implicit exchange, and it is captured in the Brazilian expression 'rouba mais faz' (he/she steals, but delivers). Second, voters may think that the opposition parties instigate the accusations of corruption in order to win votes. Hence, information is not credible. We label this mechanism the credibility of information hypothesis. Third, voters may think that all parties are equally affected by corruption cases and thus, even if they reject corrupt practices, corruption may not actually make them change their vote because the other parties cannot be expected to behave lawfully. This mechanism is the lack of clean alternatives' hypothesis.

In order to test each of the hypotheses, we designed three experiments embedded in a survey administered in Catalonia in 2012. We randomly presented respondents with a short piece reporting allegations of corruption by a (co-partisan) mayor in which we varied the extent to which the aforementioned mechanisms can apply. We then asked respondents about

their eventual support for the mayor. Mayors are the head of local governments, which in Spain have often witnessed the eruption of corruption scandals, so our study can shed light on the mechanisms of political accountability at the local level.

The paper is structured in five sections. The ‘Theory’ section that follows discusses previous theories and empirical findings on the limited electoral consequences of corruption. The ‘Empirical strategy’ section describes the survey experiments. The ‘Results’ section presents the results, and the ‘Discussion’ section discusses the findings.

Theory

The limited electoral consequences of corruption

Previous research has found that, contrary to what democratic theory would prescribe, corruption often only reduces incumbents’ share of the vote to a small extent. As a consequence, the suspected candidate ends up being reelected very frequently. Similar patterns have been documented in several countries. In the US, Peters and Welch (1980) estimated that candidates for the House of Representatives who are charged with corruption lose between 6% and 11% of their expected vote share, and, although less likely to be re-elected than uncharged candidates, they were more likely to be reelected than not. A follow-up study showed a slightly larger effect of corruption on re-election probabilities (Welch and Hibbing 1997), yet those charged were still more likely than not to be re-elected. Dimock and Jacobson found that although there was a 5% reduction in the incumbents’ share of the vote when affected by a corruption scandal in the House of Representatives in 1992, the survival rate was still 80% compared to 98% of those not affected (Dimock and Jacobson 1995).

In the UK, Eggers and Fisher assessed the electoral impact of the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal, focusing on whether MPs who were involved in the scandal retired at a higher rate or received lower electoral support in the 2010 general election than those who were not involved in the scandal. While involvement in the expenses scandal led to a higher retirement rate and a lower vote share, the results suggest that the scandal had only a small impact on constituency-level electoral outcomes (Eggers and Fisher 2011). Similarly, Reed found that in Japan legislators indicted for corruption only lost a few percentage points of the vote share and being convicted actually increased their share of the vote (Reed 1999).

Chang, Golden and Hill (2010) examined Italian deputies suspected of criminal wrongdoing. They found that only in the latest legislature did voters hold politicians relatively accountable and remove them from office. Slomeczynski and Shabad (2012) showed how in Poland perceptions of corruption do have a limited but significant impact on vote choice, while Chiru and Gherghina (2012) found that corruption perceptions affected party loyalty in Bulgaria.

Several studies have examined the case of Spain with a special focus on the local level. Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro analysed press reports published between 1996 and 2009 and showed that in Spanish municipalities corruption accusations reduced the vote for the incumbent by three percentage points on average. Extensive newspaper coverage or direct judiciary intervention increased this figure to 9–12 points (Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2012). In another analysis, Rivero-Rodríguez and Fernández-Vázquez (2011) concluded that mayors accused of corruption were not punished at the polls, although the same authors in a later piece (Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, and Rivero 2013) showed how those cases of corruption that can be thought of as generating positive externalities to the community by boosting economic activity in the municipality – such as illegal urban developments – are driving this lack of punishment.

Using survey evidence, Deegan-Krause, Klasnja and Tucker showed that personal experience with corruption reduced the probability of voting for an incumbent, but perceived corruption did not (Klasnja, Tucker and Deegan-Krause 2016). Pocketbook corruption seems to affect voting to a larger extent than sociotropic perceptions. In advanced democracies, citizens do not have extensive personal experience with corruption practices, so these results also suggest that the effect of corruption is limited. The general picture of the literature, therefore, tends to point to some electoral punishment of corruption, but it tends to be limited and, apparently, contingent. This finding has motivated research about the reasons for voters' tolerance and the conditions under which electoral punishment may be particularly weak (or strong).

Researchers have identified several contextual and institutional factors that enhance accountability. de Figueiredo, Hidalgo, and Kasahara (2010) found in a randomised field experiment conducted in a Brazilian mayoral election in 2008 that providing information on corruption reduced the vote for the incumbent by three percentage points. However, providing information only had electoral consequences when a left party was affected and also reduced electoral turnout. Similarly, Ferraz and Finan (2008) exploited the randomised disclosure of expenditure audits of several municipalities before and after the 2004 election in Brazil and found a significant negative effect on incumbents' share of the votes when information on corrupt practices was made available to the public before the election. Cong et al. (2011) showed that information reduced support for the incumbent, but it also reduced

votes for the challengers and overall voter turnout in Mexico's local elections. This research suggests that voters may respond to information by withdrawing from the political process and that they do not punish corrupt incumbents extensively even when information is available. Krause and Méndez (2009) found that increases in perceptions of corruption reduced the incumbent's share of the vote, but only in new democracies and parliamentary systems. Manzetti and Wilson (2007) argued that citizens vote for corrupt politicians where clientelism is widespread and institutions are weak because voting helps citizens secure the delivery of goods. Politicians maintain electoral support by manipulating government institutions to benefit their clientelistic networks.

Bagenholm suggested that corruption has larger electoral consequences when it is politicised, i.e., when some political parties campaign against corruption (Bågenholm 2009). Finally, Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga (2013) showed that the economic context moderates the effect of corruption on electoral outcomes: when the economy is weak, individuals apply a higher penalty to presidential approval for perceived political corruption than in good economic times, when corruption is less consequential for incumbent support.

At the individual level, partisanship is a crucial variable that helps understand why individuals do not withdraw support from corrupt politicians. Dimock and Jacobson (1995) found that voters of the incumbent party were more likely to think that the incumbent is innocent than other individuals. When facing the alternative between condemning an incumbent they liked or considering the offence as inconsequential they often chose the latter. Davis, Camp and Coleman (2004) showed that partisans of opposition parties were more likely to perceive corruption than supporters of the party in power. Anderson and Tverdova (2003) showed that the negative effect of corruption on evaluations of the political system is attenuated among supporters of the incumbents and Gonzales et al. (1995) found that partisans provided more favourable evaluations to allegations of political misconduct affecting politicians of the same party. While most previous research draws on observational data, recent experimental work (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013) has confirmed that partisans are more likely to tolerate corruption cases that affect their own party. Political sophistication, however, reduces this partisan bias. Fackler and Lin (1995) show that by including information about corruption together with information about the economy in their presidential voting model, they can better explain presidential election outcomes in the post-New Deal US.

So why do voters often support corrupt politicians? Three causal mechanisms

While previous studies address the question of under what conditions corruption is more likely to have electoral consequences, they have not studied the reasons why

some citizens decide to vote for a corrupt candidate. An important puzzle is why corruption does not dramatically reduce the incumbents' share of the vote in contexts with abundant information and strong institutions. It has been found that partisans have a tendency to support their preferred party's candidates, which is often resistant to corruption allegations. We propose that three analytically distinct reasons may explain why these voters maintain their support for politicians suspected of corruption. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the first work that tests these three explanations empirically.

Implicit exchange

An old hypothesis is that voters take different dimensions into account when deciding for whom to vote, including the 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 suspected candidate if he or she has a strong record on other dimensions. Rundquist et al. suggested this explanation after arguing that support for corrupt politicians cannot be due only to lack of information or direct vote buying (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977). More recently, researchers have argued that support for politicians suspected of corruption depends on their ability to distribute patronage benefits (Manzetti and Wilson 2007). In a more general case, however, we can expect voters to support politicians who are attractive candidates, have congruent issue positions or provide valuable goods, in spite of their being accused of corruption. A candidate's positive characteristics may counterbalance the negative effects of corruption accusations.

A related argument is that an honest challenger may not be considered as capable of delivering good economic outcomes as a corrupt incumbent who has presided over robust economic growth. This idea has also been suggested as a possible explanation for the startling finding that corruption has no electoral consequences at the local level in Spain (FernándezVázquez, Barberá, and Rivero 2013). Relatedly, it has been argued 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. Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013) 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.

Our first hypothesis thus states that support for politicians suspected of corruption increases when they have a good record (e.g., 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 credibility of the allegations. Under some circumstances, citizens simply do not believe that charges of corruption against a politician are credible and thus they disregard accusations of corruption (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 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. Partisans might often 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 founded and credible or whether it is perceived as partisan noise. The party charged with corruption can signal that an accusation is credible, for example, by investigating the case. It can also generate the perception that an accusation is not credible by arguing that another party has invented the story in order to win votes.

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 recognises that the allegations against one of its members are legitimate.

Lack of clean alternatives

Finally, 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 in the discussion of their finding that accusations of corruption do not reduce the vote share for the incumbent party, ‘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’ (Rivero-Rodríguez and Fernández-Vázquez 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.

Empirical strategy

In order to test the three hypotheses, we designed three experiments that were embedded in a survey carried out in Catalonia in April 2012. The survey was

administered online to a sample of 1500 individuals (selected with gender, age and education quotas from a commercial database).

Participants in the online panel were recruited only through active invitation and no self-registration to the database was allowed. The resulting sample presents some differences with respect to probability samples in that it underrepresents older, less educated individuals. The quotas did not fully correct these deviations: compared to the last wave of the European Social Survey (ESS),¹ we have an overrepresentation of the medium and highly educated and an under-representation of those with a low level of education (18% in our sample and 53% in the ESS). This is in part linked to the under-representation of those over 55 (16% in the experiment and 35% in the ESS) and the overrepresentation of those between 25 and 34, and 35–44 years of age.

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 institutionalised party system with over 60% of its citizens reporting being close to a political party (Dalton and Weldon 2007, 183). It is a good setting, therefore, to test which mechanisms prevent corruption scandals from having electoral consequences.

In order to identify the effect of the three proposed mechanisms on the punishment of corruption, we chose to rely on a set of survey experiments. This design, based on random assignment of respondents to different treatment conditions, allows for a robust and internally valid identification of the effects of the vignettes: by design, any differences across groups shall be attributed to the treatments; therefore, we can rule out unobserved confounders that are always a concern in observational research. However, the fact that we observed the expected effects in a controlled experimental setting does not preclude the possibility that this might not be the case in the real world.

Question wording of the experiments

Implicit exchange experiment: Treatment (good management) and control (poor management)

[PARTY] mayor, with a highly	[PARTY] mayor, with a questionable
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<p>successful record, charged with corruption</p> <p>A judge has accused the current mayor of the town of XXXXXXXXX, of [PARTY], of corruption.</p> <p>The [PARTY] mayor stands out for his good management. Under his mandate, the municipality has attracted investment, several long-awaited infrastructure projects have been completed, and taxes have been lowered.</p> <p>The inquiry focuses on the award without a public tender for the construction of a park to a company that allegedly paid bribes to [PARTY] public officers. The park was awarded for 4.5 million in 2006, and a year later the budget increased to 9.5 million.</p>	<p>record, charged with corruption</p> <p>A judge has accused the current mayor of the town of XXXXXXXXX, of [PARTY], of corruption.</p> <p>The mayor [PP / CiU / PSC / ERC / IC-V] stands out for his poor management. Under his mandate, the municipality has not attracted investment, long-awaited infrastructure projects have not been finalized, and taxes have been raised.</p> <p>The inquiry focuses on the award without a public tender for the construction of a park to a company that allegedly paid bribes to [PARTY] public officers. The park was awarded for 4.5 million in 2006, and a year later the budget increased to 9.5 million.</p>
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Credibility experiment: Treatment (party backs mayor) and control (party does not back mayor)

<p>[PARTY] defends a mayor charged with corruption and accuses the opposition of lying</p> <p>A judge has accused the current mayor of the town of XXXXXXXXX, of [PARTY], of corruption.</p> <p>Yesterday, the regional executive of the [PARTY] regretted that the opposition has launched unfounded attacks against the mayor to gain political advantage and cover their own problems. Therefore, “appropriate measures will be taken” against the representatives of the opposition that have accused the mayor.</p> <p>The inquiry focuses on the award without a public tender for the construction of a park to a company that allegedly paid</p>	<p>[PARTY] regrets the behaviour of a mayor charged with corruption</p> <p>A judge has accused the current mayor of the town of XXXXXXXXX, of [PARTY], of corruption.</p> <p>Yesterday, the regional executive of the [PARTY] regretted that the mayor has broken the trust the party had placed on him, and said that “appropriate actions will be taken” once the details of the charges are revealed. Other party officials requested the resignation of the mayor and his expulsion from the party.</p> <p>The inquiry focuses on the award without a public tender for the construction of a park to a company that allegedly paid bribes to [PARTY] public officers. The</p>
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<p>bribes to [PARTY] public officers. The park was awarded for 4.5 million in 2006, and a year later the budget increased to 9.5 million.</p>	<p>park was awarded for 4.5 million in 2006, and a year later the budget increased to 9.5 million.</p>
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Availability of clean alternatives experiment: treatment (all parties are corrupt) and control (other parties are not corrupt)

<p>Third mayor of municipality, this time from [PARTY], charged with corruption</p> <p>A judge has accused the current mayor of the town XXXXXXXXX, of [PARTY], of corruption.</p> <p>This is the third mayor of this town involved in a corruption scandal. His two predecessors, who belonged to parties currently in opposition, were involved in cases of illegal party financing, bribery, and embezzlement of public funds.</p> <p>The inquiry focuses on the award without a public tender for the construction of a park to a company that allegedly paid bribes to [PARTY] public officers. The park was awarded for 4.5 million in 2006, and a year later the budget increased to 9.5 million.</p>	<p>A [PARTY] mayor charged with corruption</p> <p>A judge has accused the current mayor of the town XXXXXXXXX, of [PARTY], of corruption.</p> <p>This is the first corruption scandal affecting the town. His predecessors, belonging to two parties currently in opposition, have not ever been affected by any corruption scandal.</p> <p>The inquiry focuses on the award without a public tender for the construction of a park to a company that allegedly paid bribes to [PARTY] public officers. The park was awarded for 4.5 million in 2006, and a year later the budget increased to 9.5 million.</p>
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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 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 and clean alternatives are present or absent. Since it is not possible to ensure that the three treatments are equal in 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 recognises the corruption accusation?’ Respondents could choose ‘The mayor’s party does NOT recognise the alleged mayor’s crime’ or ‘The mayor’s party DOES recognise the alleged mayor’s crime’. After the 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’.²

Results

Table 1 shows the main results of the experiment. Two of our experimental manipulations produced the expected effects. The credibility 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 clean alternatives treatment did not appear to have a clear effect.

Table 1: Main results of the experiments

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

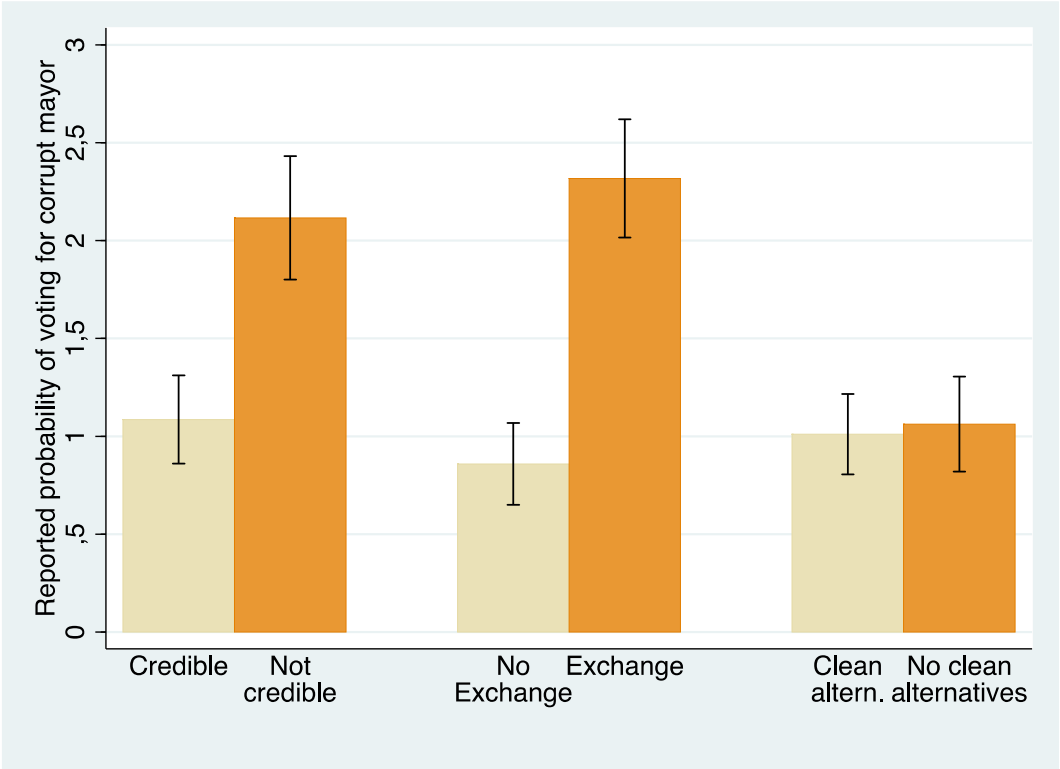
^{NB}: One-tailed t-test

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 the mayor with a poor record. However, even with this skewed distribution, we found important differences across treatment conditions. It is the exchange mechanism that, in our experiment, 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 strongly suggests that supporters of a party are more willing to vote for officials suspected of corruption if they otherwise have a strong track record. Good performance can compensate for dishonesty.

The credibility treatment also has a large effect: the probability of voting for the accused mayor is twice as large when his party backs him as 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 much more willing to support a politician charged with corruption if the party signals that the accusation is a partisan trick devised by the opposition. Figure 1 represents the results graphically.

Figure 1: Treatment effects



Our results suggest that both implicit exchange and credibility of information are mechanisms that help explain electoral support for allegedly corrupt politicians. According to our estimates, reminding voters of a strong record of accomplishments in office and convincing them that corruption accusations are mere partisan tricks can produce large increases in the loyalty of partisans to their preferred party.

It should be noted that in all experimental conditions respondents reported a low probability of voting for the corrupt candidate. Our 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 under a reasonable threshold. Previous research has also found huge discrepancies between survey answers and actual data (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013). When confronted with the abstract idea of corruption, individuals tend to show a severe judgement, perhaps due to social desirability. Similarly, we find that the probability of voting for hypothetical mayors charged with corrupt misbehaviour is very low. We certainly expected people to be reluctant to declare that they were willing to vote for a corrupt hypothetical mayor. The estimates presented here are certainly extremely conservative. Nevertheless, the fact that our treatments had significant results can shed light on the reasons why people support candidates suspected of corruption.

In contrast, we failed to find the same effect for the clean alternatives treatment. The reported probability of voting for the mayor was undistinguishable across treatment conditions. However, we cannot entirely rule out that the clean alternatives hypothesis can help explain electoral support for corrupt politicians based on these results. We suspect that our treatment was not as effective as the other treatments. Table 2 shows that individuals in the two treatment conditions of the experiment were similarly likely to report that corruption affected more than one party in the manipulation checks. For the other two hypotheses, most respondents answered the manipulation checks correctly. The fact that most respondents who took the ‘no clean alternatives’ treatment think that corruption affects all parties equally could be due to several reasons. The vignettes of this experiment were perhaps not clear enough. An alternative interpretation is that respondents have strong views that all parties are corrupt and that these preexisting views informed their response to the manipulation checks.³ The null results of the experiment can thus not be taken as conclusive evidence that the lack of clean alternatives cannot help explain voting for corrupt politicians.⁴

Table 2: Manipulation checks

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

Given the characteristics of our sample, reported above, and its differences with a probability sample in terms of education and age, we have explored the existence of heterogeneous treatment effects across educational and age categories. However, the data did not reveal any heterogeneous effect across age or education, unlike what has been found in Brazil, where higher socioeconomic status respondents were found to behave more in line with the implicit exchange hypothesis (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013). In this case, the absence of heterogeneous effects can be taken as an indication that at least the sampling biases shown above are not directly causing a severe bias in the estimated effects. Of course, this does not preclude that other deviations of our sample from the population parameters, that surely exist but are more difficult to estimate, could be causing some upward or downward bias in the estimation of the true effects in the population.

Discussion

This paper has examined three reasons that can help explain why citizens vote for mayors suspected of corruption even when voters know about the charges and in contexts with strong democratic institutions. Our focus on the micro-level mechanisms supplements previous aggregate analysis of the electoral consequences of corruption that directly assess the effect of corruption accusations on the likelihood of re-election. The paper has provided compelling experimental evidence that two of the mechanisms we propose, implicit exchange and credibility of information, significantly decrease the willingness of voters to punish corrupt politicians. In our experiments, a good administration record and the denial of the accusations by the affected party multiply the probability of voting for a corrupt candidate by three and two respectively.

Of course, the evidence presented here derives from an experimental manipulation of the considerations respondents take into account when reacting to a hypothetical situation. This method is able to robustly identify the effect of the treatments, but it is limited in the extent to which we can confidently generalise our findings beyond the experimental context. Therefore, our contribution shall be supplemented by further research on the interaction of incumbent performance, information credibility and electoral punishment of corruption in the real world.

Our findings have relevant implications. First, they support the claim that many voters accept trading off acts of corruption for valuable outcomes such as good management or economic well-being. Recent research has shown that corruption decreases votes for the incumbent mostly in hard economic times (Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013). Our results are consistent with the idea that voters are less likely to hold politicians accountable in a good economy. The thought ‘rouba mais faz’ may be one of the main explanations that help one understand why corruption has limited electoral consequences. This finding is troubling. Corrupt politicians at the local level 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 and noise, at least momentarily. In contrast, they may have little incentive to investigate accusations promptly and withdraw support for suspected 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 address it. Of course, real-world situations may unfold differently, especially when a court condemns a defendant. Further research should complement this experimental evidence with observational data to assess whether party reactions affect the electoral consequences of corruption.

We can neither accept nor discard the validity of the lack of clean alternatives mechanism, because our experiment did not successfully manipulate perceptions about the ubiquity of corruption. Hence, further research is also required to examine whether the belief that all politicians are corrupt reduces punishment for corruption to a similar extent. This research may also require an examination of observational data that compare contexts where corruption is more pervasive, and thus many parties are affected, with other cases where this is not the case.

To conclude, our survey experiments provide evidence for two claims. First, voters are more willing to vote for mayors charged with corruption if the mayors have some other positive characteristics such as a good performance record. Second, voters are also receptive to the argument that corruption allegations are partisan tricks with limited credibility. These findings help solve an important puzzle in comparative politics and local government electoral studies, which is why citizens vote for politicians suspected of corruption.

Notes

1. We use the European Social Survey as a reference point given its high standards in terms of sampling accuracy. See the sampling guidelines of the ESS at http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round6/methods/ESS6_sampling_guidelines.pdf.
2. All the analyses were replicated only for the respondents that did answer correctly to the manipulation checks and results proved stable.
3. Survey data from the Catalan official survey institute from 2012 show that 23% of people consider that corruption is very widespread in Catalonia among politicians, while 56% consider it quite extended.
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 alternatives condition, but the difference is very small and insignificant. Since the treatment does not appear to have worked, these results are still inconclusive.

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Appendix: Original vignettes

- **Implicit exchange experiment: Treatment (good management) and control (poor management)**

P.3.D. Exchange [→ a P.4.B.]

Imputado por corrupción un alcalde [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -], cuya gestión ha sido muy exitosa

REDACCIÓN 10/3/2012 08:00

Un juez ha citado como imputado en un caso de corrupción al actual alcalde de la localidad de XXXXXXXXX, [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -].

El alcalde [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -] ha destacado por su buena gestión. Bajo su mandato se ha atraído inversión, se han finalizado infraestructuras y proyectos largamente esperados, y se han bajado los impuestos.

La investigación se centra en la adjudicación sin concurso público de la construcción de un parque a una empresa que supuestamente pagó sobornos a cargos [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/del partido del alcalde]. El parque se adjudicó por 4,5 millones en 2006 y, un año más tarde, el presupuesto se incrementó hasta 9,5 millones.

P.3.E. Exchange II [→ a P.4.B.]

Imputado por corrupción un alcalde [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -], cuya gestión ha sido muy cuestionada.

REDACCIÓN 10/3/2012 08:00

Un juez ha citado como imputado en **un caso de corrupción** al actual alcalde de la localidad de XXXXXXXXX, [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/-].

El alcalde [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/-] ha destacado por su mala gestión. Bajo su mandato no se ha atraído inversión, no se han finalizado infraestructuras y proyectos largamente esperados, y se han subido los impuestos.

La investigación se centra en la adjudicación sin concurso público de la construcción de un parque a una empresa que supuestamente pagó sobornos a cargos [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/del partido del alcalde]. El parque se adjudicó por 4,5 millones en 2006 y, un año más tarde, el presupuesto se incrementó hasta 9,5 millones.

- **Credibility experiment: Treatment (party backs mayor) and control (party does not**

back mayor)

[El PP/CiU/El PSC/IC-V/ERC/Ciutadans/Solidaritat] lamenta la conducta de un alcalde de este partido, imputado por corrupción

REDACCIÓN 10/3/2012 08:00

Un juez ha citado como imputado en un caso de corrupción al actual alcalde de la localidad de XXXXXXXXX, [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -].

Ayer, la dirección regional [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -] lamentó que el alcalde haya roto la confianza que en él había depositado la formación, y aseguró que tomará las "decisiones oportunas" cuando se conozcan detalles de la imputación. Otros cargos han solicitado la dimisión del alcalde y su baja del partido.

La investigación se centra en la adjudicación sin concurso público de la construcción de un parque a una empresa que supuestamente pagó sobornos a cargos [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/del partido del alcalde]. El parque se adjudicó por 4,5 millones en 2006 y, un año más tarde, el presupuesto se incrementó hasta 9,5 millones.

[El PP/CiU/El PSC/IC-V/ERC/Ciutadans/Solidaritat] defiende a uno de sus alcaldes imputado por corrupción y acusa a la oposición de mentir

REDACCIÓN 10/3/2012 08:00

Un juez ha citado como imputado en un caso de corrupción al actual alcalde de la localidad de XXXXXXXXX, [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -].

Ayer, la dirección regional [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/ -] lamentó que la oposición [del PSC/del PSC/de CiU/de CiU/de CiU/ -] lance ataques infundados contra el alcalde para sacar réditos políticos y tapar sus propios problemas. Por ello, aseguró que tomará las "medidas oportunas" contra los representantes de la oposición que han acusado al alcalde.

La investigación se centra en la adjudicación sin concurso público de la construcción de un parque a una empresa que supuestamente pagó sobornos a cargos [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/del partido del alcalde]. El parque se adjudicó por 4,5 millones en 2006 y, un año más tarde, el presupuesto se incrementó hasta 9,5 millones.

- Availability of clean alternatives experiment: treatment (all parties are corrupt) and control (other parties are not corrupt)

Tercer alcalde del mismo municipio [, esta vez del PP/, esta vez de CiU/, esta vez del PSC/, esta vez de IC-V/ estavez de ERC/-] imputado por corrupción

REDACCIÓN 10/3/2012 08:00

Un juez ha citado como imputado en **un caso de corrupción** al actual alcalde de la localidad de XXXXXXXXX, [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/-].

Se trata del tercer alcalde de la localidad implicado en un escándalo de corrupción. Sus dos antecesores, que pertenecían [al PSC/al PSC/a CiU/a CiU/a CiU/-], estuvieron implicados en un caso de financiación ilegal y otro de cohecho y malversación de fondos públicos.

La investigación se centra en la adjudicación sin concurso público de la construcción de un parque a una empresa que supuestamente pagó sobornos a cargos [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/del partido del alcalde]. El parque se adjudicó por 4,5 millones en 2006 y, un año más tarde, el presupuesto se incrementó hasta 9,5 millones.

P.3.G. Cynicism II [→ a P.4.C.]

Imputado por corrupción un alcalde [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/-]

REDACCIÓN 10/3/2012 08:00

Un juez ha citado como imputado en **un caso de corrupción** al actual alcalde de la localidad de XXXXXXXXX, [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/-].

Se da la circunstancia que es el primer escándalo de corrupción que afecta a esta localidad. Sus antecesores, tanto [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/-] como [del PSC/del PSC/de CiU/de CiU/de CiU/-], no se han visto jamás afectados por ningún escándalo de corrupción.

La investigación se centra en la adjudicación sin concurso público de la construcción de un parque a una empresa que supuestamente pagó sobornos a cargos [del PP/de CiU/del PSC/de IC-V/de ERC/del partido del alcalde]. El parque se adjudicó por 4,5 millones en 2006 y, un año más tarde, el presupuesto se incrementó hasta 9,5 millones.