

Working paper

# Why People Vote for Corrupt Politicians

Evidence from  
Survey Experiments  
in Afghanistan

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## **Introduction**

If voters dislike corruption, why does it exist amongst politicians, *even* in societies characterized by strong institutions and high accountability?<sup>2</sup> A possible, understudied reason for this phenomenon is that, sometimes, voters might knowingly vote for corrupt politicians. Understanding this potential cause of corruption is important since corruption is thought to be a significant barrier to economic growth and democratization, and these are central concerns for social scientists (Mauro 1995; Holmberg, Rothstein and Nasiritousi 2009) and policy makers. Understanding the electoral roots of corruption should also help policy makers design suitable remedies for the problem.

In this report, we describe our ongoing efforts to answer three important and related questions about corruption and voting behavior, using data from Afghanistan. First, to what degree do voters support corrupt politicians? IGC support has enabled us to provide a preliminary answer to this question, using newly collected observational data. Second, why do voters support corrupt politicians? A series of IGC-supported qualitative interviews with journalists has helped us shed light on this question. And third, how, and to what degree, can voters be persuaded to penalize corrupt politicians? Answers to these questions promise to enhance our theoretical and practical understanding of voting behavior with regard to corruption, and could also suggest possible remedies for the phenomenon.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Canadian Sponsorship Scandal (Krauss 2005) and the Keating Five savings and loan scandal (Shenon 1989).

To structure our examination of the circumstances under which voters punish corrupt politicians, we draw on standard theories of voter behavior and accountability. An extensive literature on voter behavior argues that voters choose among candidates for political office depending on their expected utility. In their efforts to maximize their utility, voters trade-off candidates' positive characteristics against their negative ones, of which corruption might be one. The second theory that we draw on comes from a rich literature on accountability, which argues that voters penalize corruption when they are made aware of it. We put these two literatures together, to argue that voters penalize corruption when they are made aware of it, provided the benefits of voting for a corrupt candidate do not outweigh its costs. We seek to understand when this is the case, i.e., the conditions under which information allows voters to hold politicians to account.

We examine the vote penalty for corruption in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. First, regular voting (since 2004)<sup>3</sup> and corruption coexist in the country. Further, and as we document in the next section using an IGC-supported data collection effort, there is considerable variation in corruption in the country. Second, the United Kingdom's security interests in Afghanistan make it a particularly important case to study since corruption is thought to be at the root of a number of problems—from security to development—that plague the region. Our project will therefore have a particular validity in post-conflict contexts.

## **Main Findings**

We start by examining observational data on voting and corruption cross-nationally and within Afghanistan. This approach shows that there is almost no corruption penalty cross-

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<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan has had four national elections since 2004. Presidential elections were held in 2004 and 2009, and parliamentary elections were held in 2005 and 2010.

nationally, and a small corruption penalty in Afghanistan. Before we proceed to describe our results, it is worth noting that this approach does not tell us whether the relationship between corruption and voter support of politicians is causal (large corruption penalties could cause corruption, for example, by reducing politicians' time horizons), however, nor will it explain the variance in voter support for corrupt politicians. To investigate further whether and why voters might punish or support corrupt politicians, we propose to use survey experiments, embedded in a nationally representative survey of Afghanistan's voting-age population. We describe these efforts in the concluding section of this report.

Figure 1 illustrates cross-national variance in the degree to which voters support or penalize corrupt politicians. It plots, for 1984-2003 and for 123 countries across the world, the number of major changes in government cabinets on the y-axis, and a corruption measure from the International Country Risk Guide on the x-axis.<sup>4</sup> While the raw data plotted on the left hand side suggest that corruption is positively associated with cabinet turnover, thereby suggesting the presence of a corruption penalty, controlling for cross-country heterogeneity by including country fixed effects (these data are plotted on the right hand side) causes this association to disappear. This rudimentary exercise suggests that there is substantial variance in the cross-national relationship between corruption and voting behavior.

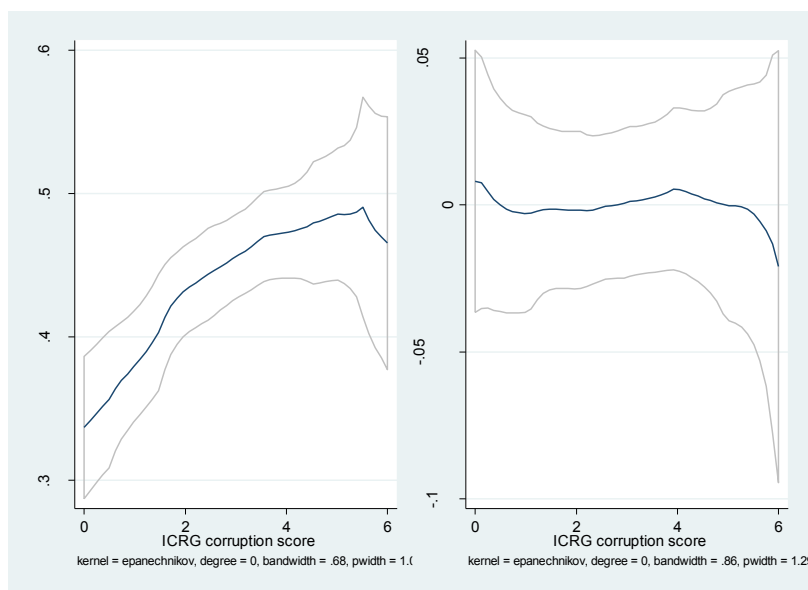
Indeed, sub-national studies also suggest that there is substantial variance in the degree to which voters support or penalize corrupt politicians. Chang, Golden and Hill (2010) show that Italian voters largely failed to penalize corrupt politicians in successive parliamentary elections, and only did so substantially in the election of 1994, in response to an information campaign. Using survey experiments in Brazil, Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2010) corroborate this finding.

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<sup>4</sup> Cabinet turnover data are from Banks (2011). Corruption data are from the International Country Risk Guide dataset (PRS Group 2004).

Others, however, have found evidence of a corruption benefit for politicians. Reed (1999) finds that, more often than not, Japanese legislators convicted of corruption in the postwar era were reelected. Similarly, in studies by Peters and Welch (1980) and Welch and Hibbing (1997), members of the US House of Representatives charged with corruption were more likely than not to be reelected.

Figure 1. Governmental Turnover and Corruption, 1984-2003



The cross-national variation in the corruption penalty, in fact, persists when we analyze newly-collected subnational data on changes in vote shares and corruption perceptions in Afghanistan. Afghanistan ranks among the most corrupt countries in the world,<sup>5</sup> and the policy and academic literature consistently point to corruption as a major problem (e.g., Jones 2008; Mullen 2009; Chaudhuri and Farrell 2011).<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that one in two Afghans bribed government officials in 2009 (UNODC 2010, 4), and that bribes have recently totaled approximately \$250-300 million per year (Torabi and Delesgues 2008, 25). Members of

<sup>5</sup> Transparency International (2009) rated Afghanistan as the second-most corrupt country in the world.

<sup>6</sup> Shockingly, in a country that has experienced so much violence since 2001, 59% of Afghans surveyed by the United Nations thought that public dishonesty is a greater concern than insecurity (UNODC 2010, 3).

Afghanistan's lower house of parliament have routinely engaged in corruption of various types, including the trafficking of drugs, electoral fraud, profit-skimming in the organization of pilgrims' travel to Saudi Arabia, corruption in the purchase of wheat seed, war crimes, corruption in Parliament's legislative voting and its confirmation of cabinet ministers, colluding with government agency officials to secure jobs for associates, and facilitating non-competitive bidding on construction contracts.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, corruption is, and is perceived to be, an obstacle to political and economic development in Afghanistan. In considering how explaining behavior in Afghanistan could shed light on behavior in other countries, it is worth noting that while the record in Afghanistan is egregious, these types of corruption among legislators occur across a wide range of countries.<sup>8</sup>

To examine the relationship between corruption and voting in Afghanistan, we used IGC funding to ask 255 of the country's journalists to rate the MPs from their provinces (for a total of 249 MPs) in terms of how corrupt they are perceived to be. While imperfect, corruption perception measures have been shown to be correlated with evidence of actual corruption in other contexts (Banerjee and Pande 2009). We combine these data with vote tallies from the 2005 and 2010 national parliamentary elections to estimate the degree to which being perceived as corrupt is associated with a vote penalty, or a decrease in vote shares between elections.

Figure 2 summarizes our findings, suggesting that corruption perceptions are associated with a small vote penalty of approximately 1 percentage point of the vote for corruption scores of 3 (out of 5) and higher.<sup>9</sup> There remains substantial variation in the degree to which corruption is

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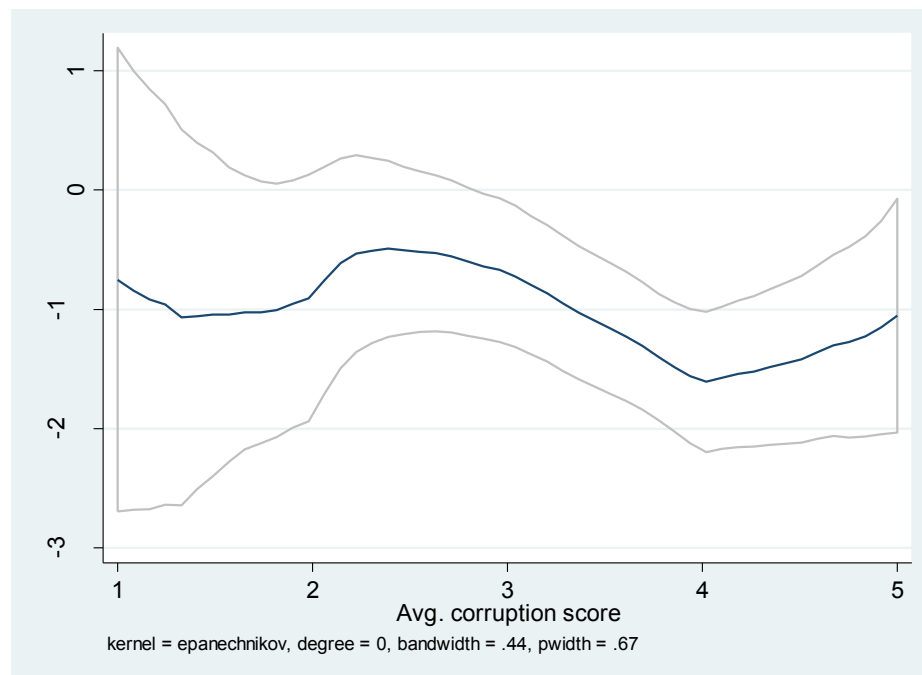
<sup>7</sup> Shane, Mazzetti, and Filkins (2010); Carter (2008); High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption (2012).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Italy: "Mr. Fix-it in a fix"; South Africa: Meldrum (2010); Liberia: "Suspended Liberia speaker defiant."

<sup>9</sup> A candidate with a corruption score of 3 sometimes takes a bribe, a candidate with a corruption score of 4 takes a lot of bribes, and a candidate with a corruption score of 5 always takes a bribe.

penalized, however.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 2. Change in candidate vote % and corruption perceptions for Afghanistan's MPs



We also asked respondents the reasons why they think that voters support corrupt politicians in Afghanistan in an effort to inform the set of mechanisms we wish to test in the next phase of our research. We coded the journalists' open-end responses into categories. The tabulation of their responses is shown in Table 1. These responses will be recognizable to students of voting behavior, and some of them fit with standard explanations of voting in states characterized by corruption and poverty. One surprising result worth noting, however, is the low percentage of journalists who identify information asymmetries as the reason that people vote for corrupt politicians. This underlines the fact that corrupt politicians are oftentimes tolerated in contexts such as Afghanistan, despite common knowledge about corruption. The top two reasons

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<sup>10</sup> One might think that features of the Afghan electoral system (e.g., its single non-transferable voting system prioritizing representation over accountability, or the legislature's impotence relative to the executive branch), rather than our individual-level factors, imply a lack of a vote penalty for corruption because voters do not know who to hold to account for bad behavior. The secondary survey data we collected show that there is, in fact, a small corruption penalty with considerable unexplained variation.

that voters vote for politicians whom they know to be corrupt are promises of private goods and loyalty to coethnics.

Table 1. Top reasons why journalists’ think that voters tolerate corruption

Voters tolerate corruption because ...	% respondents
they are promised private goods	36.0
corrupt politicians are coethnics	30.9
they lack information	12.7
corrupt politicians threaten voters	12.3
corrupt politicians are copartisans	4.7
they are promised help with the bureaucracy	1.3
they are promised public goods	0.8

Although both the simple cross-national and Afghanistan-specific analyses suggest substantial variation in the corruption penalty, these exercises suffer from two infirmities. First, because these analyses rely on observational data, their estimates of the corruption penalty might suffer from endogeneity. Endogeneity might be due to omitted variables (e.g., culture might cause both electoral turnover and corruption), or due to reverse causality (e.g., electoral volatility might cause corruption by reducing people’s time horizons and incentives to be honest). A second infirmity of these studies is that they find it particularly hard to discern *why* individual voters reward or penalize corruption, at least partly due to ecological inference problems. We hope to solve both problems in future research by employing a nationally representative survey of Afghanistan’s voters, in which we embed survey experiments. While using experimental evidence will solve the endogeneity problem, using individual-level surveys will help us understand the mechanisms by which the corruption penalty might hold.

We turn to describing the next steps for this project—which focuses on experimentally understanding why voters tolerate corruption—in the concluding section of this report. But



before we do, it is worth considering our last main finding—which rules out one possibility as to why voters might tolerate corruption—from our IGC-funded research. It is possible that voters fail to punish corrupt politicians because they lack alternatives, and not because they lack information about corruption. While this hypothesis might seem plausible in light of Afghanistan’s corruption levels, it is worth noting that some of Afghanistan’s MPs are thought to be remarkably “clean.” Ramazan Bashar Dost, a MP from Kabul, for example, is reputed to be particularly honest.<sup>11</sup> Malalai Joya, a MP from Farah, is known for her outspoken criticism of criminality in the government and was even suspended in 2007 for her remarks about Parliament.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the systematic data that we have collected on perceptions of corruption among Afghan MPs show that a full 31% of MPs are thought to never or only rarely take bribes, and further that corruption perceptions scores for MPs are near-normally distributed.<sup>13</sup> In other words, there is substantial variation in the degree of perceived corruption among MPs. Afghans, at the very least, perceive themselves to have the opportunity to select non-corrupt candidates for office. Given this, the question that we raised earlier—why voters tolerate corruption—becomes even more puzzling.

## **Policy Implications**

Our IGC-funded research has underlined the puzzle that we wish to study in our broader research project. Even in a context where corruption is substantial, and is widely viewed to be a problem by voters, it is not substantially punished at the ballot box. This is even the case in

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<sup>11</sup> Habib (2012). The data we collected confirms this observation: his average corruption rating is 1.25 (of 5), while the average rating for Kabul MPs is 2.75.

<sup>12</sup> Her average corruption score in the data is a 1, the lowest on the scale. *Foreign Policy* named her one of 2010’s Top 100 Global Thinkers.

<sup>13</sup> It would have been even better, of course, to have corruption perceptions data for all candidates for political office, and not just MPs. There is excellent evidence on the wide variation in electoral corruption, as well (Callen and Long 2011).

elections where voters have the option to vote for decidedly less corrupt politicians. Why do voters fail to punish corruption in Afghanistan? Our IGC-funded research raises the importance of this question, which we hope to explore further in our larger project on this issue. Importantly, this research has policy implications in and of itself. It underlines how even if voters are aware of corruption in a context, they do not always punish it. This raises the very real possibility that transparency and accountability programs—which form the cornerstone of many an anti-corruption strategy—might not work by themselves to attenuate corruption. Other factors, such as a lack of ethnic voting or low levels of pork might be needed as well. In fact, if corruption “pays” in the sense that under certain conditions and for various reasons voters prefer it to an honest alternative, increasing transparency might not only fail to have an effect, but might worsen the problem. The latter could occur since transparency will make the trade-offs that voters face clearer, thereby enabling them—in some circumstances, which we aim to investigate—to make better educated choices to vote for corrupt politicians. Future work should therefore help us understand when transparency-enhancing reforms are likely to work, and when they are unlikely to do so.

Although the theories of voting and corruption that we employ to structure our investigation of the corruption penalty are general, in that they are unconstrained by geography, culture, or other such factors, our results are particularly likely to hold in post-conflict societies.

### **Future Research**

To further understand whether and the degree to which Afghanistan’s voters punish or reward corrupt politicians, we intend to employ three types of survey experiments—list experiments, experimental vignettes, and endorsement experiments—in the future, and subject to

receiving funding. These methods will experimentally determine whether there is a corruption penalty or benefit, and will do so in a manner that is free of social desirability bias, a problem that forthright questions about corruption—a taboo subject in Afghanistan, as elsewhere—face.<sup>14</sup>

Second, to understand why voters support corrupt politicians, we will examine the multivariate correlates of the corruption penalty using standard regression analysis and the methods proposed by Imai (2011). We will also substantially improve this analysis by directly manipulating various “mediating variables”—including hypothetical candidate ethnicity, ability, promises of pork, etc.—in our experimental vignettes, to see whether they temper or exacerbate effects of corruption. When drawing up the list of mechanisms we will be testing, we intend to draw on our IGC-funded interviews of journalists, which—as described previously—suggested several reasons why voters tolerate corruption. This approach will allow us to bring the same experimental vigor to our analysis of the corruption penalty’s variation as we will have used to investigate the existence of the corruption penalty.

Lastly, we also will employ our experimental vignettes to examine the efficacy of secular or religious reminders of corruption’s negative effects. Such reminders could form the basis of voter education campaigns, and would provide us with evidence with which to craft such campaigns.

Our approach will allow us to examine the degree to which voters support or punish corrupt politicians, the reasons for the same, and will speak to the possible efficacy of voter education campaigns. This will substantially deepen our understanding of the complex trade-offs that voters face, and will also help us understand when transparency campaigns are likely to remedy political corruption. This will help us generate practical solutions for electoral support

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<sup>14</sup> Condra’s fieldwork in Afghanistan indicates that discussions of corruption in Afghanistan are subject to this bias, since corruption is a taboo topic, at least partially because Islam forbids it.

for corrupt politicians. Our use of various experimental methods in combination with one another is unique, and will serve to increase our confidence in the results.

By focusing on the conditions under which the corruption penalty varies, rather than merely ascertaining whether a corruption penalty exists or not, these future proposed extensions of this project will represent the next generation of research on corruption (Pande 2011 and Besley 2012). Understanding the heterogeneous treatment effects of transparency is valuable in itself, and will also cast light on the possible general equilibrium effects of information disclosures. Politicians, after all, are likely to adapt to increased transparency by encouraging voters to accept corruption in a tradeoff. By examining these tradeoffs, we will gain an insight into politicians' likely strategies in response to transparency. This issue has not been well explored in the literature (Pande 2011; Olken and Pande forthcoming).

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