Policy brief
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Why People Vote for Corrupt Politicians in Afghanistan

In brief

- The practice of corruption, in both cohesive and fragile states, appears to be perplexing given that voters dislike corruption. Thus, why would one vote for a corrupt politician? Understanding the roots of corruption may aid policymakers in designing policy solutions.

- One understudied reason is that voters may knowingly vote for corrupt politcians. This study addresses this line of enquiry and asks, to what degree do voters support corrupt politicians? Why do voters support corrupt politicians? And how, and to what degree, can voters be persuaded to penalize corrupt politicians.

- Key findings:
  - Voters sometimes knowingly vote for politically corrupt candidates, implying that making voters aware of political corruption is not always an effective strategy for disincentivizing political corruption.
  - IGC-funded data collection efforts show that these patterns exist in Afghanistan, too. Perceived reasons behind this pattern range from people being promised private goods, lacking information, to corrupt politicians being coethnics.

- It should be noted that this research is extremely preliminary and the next stage, experimental investigation of the causes of voting for corrupt politicians, has not been undertaken yet.

- However, the observational analysis of data cross-nationally and in Afghanistan illustrates that, even if voters are aware of corruption, they do not always punish it.

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Policy Motivation

"Our research will inform the design of transparency-enhancing anti-corruption programs, by identifying the conditions under which they are likely to be helpful or not"

If voters dislike corruption, why does it exist amongst politicians, even in societies characterized by strong institutions and high accountability? 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 and policy makers. Understanding the electoral roots of corruption should also help policy makers design suitable remedies for the problem. In this research agenda, we aim 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? Second, why do voters support corrupt politicians? Third, how, and to what degree, can voters be persuaded to penalize corrupt politicians?

Policy Impact

Answers to these three questions promise to enhance our theoretical and practical understanding of voting behavior with regard to corruption, and could also suggest possible remedies for the presence of corruption. In particular, our early IGC-funded research suggests that programs designed to identify for voters the existence of political corruption may not always reduce electoral support for corrupt politicians. Under certain conditions – which we are in the process of investigating – voters may support corruption in exchange for other benefits, and so transparency programs that clarify those trade-offs for voters actually could exacerbate the problem. We hope that our research will inform the design of transparency-enhancing anti-corruption programs, by identifying the conditions under which they are likely to be helpful or not.

Audience

Academics who study institutions and governance in developing and post-conflict countries, and policy makers responsible for instituting electoral reform and discouraging corruption among politicians.

Policy Implications

"There is substantial variance in the cross-national relationship between corruption and voting behaviour"

Voters sometimes knowingly vote for politically corrupt candidates, implying that making voters aware of political corruption is not always an effective strategy for disincentivizing political corruption

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.[1] 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 behaviour.

"Corruption perceptions are associated with a small vote penalty of approximately 1 % point of the vote for corruption scores of 3 (out of 5) and higher"

IGC-funded data collection efforts show that these patterns exist in Afghanistan, too

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. 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.[2] There remains substantial variation in the degree to which corruption is penalized, however.[3]

Implementation

We stress that our research is extremely preliminary and our experimental investigation of the causes of voting for corrupt politicians has not been done. Our observational analysis of data cross-nationally and in Afghanistan underlines that 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-

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1. Cabinet turnover data are from Banks (2011). Corruption data are from the International Country Risk Guide dataset (PRS Group 2004).
2. 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.
3. 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.

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.

Dissemination

Ideally, we would like to disseminate IGC findings to those in the policymaking community in developing countries in Africa and South Africa.

Further Readings

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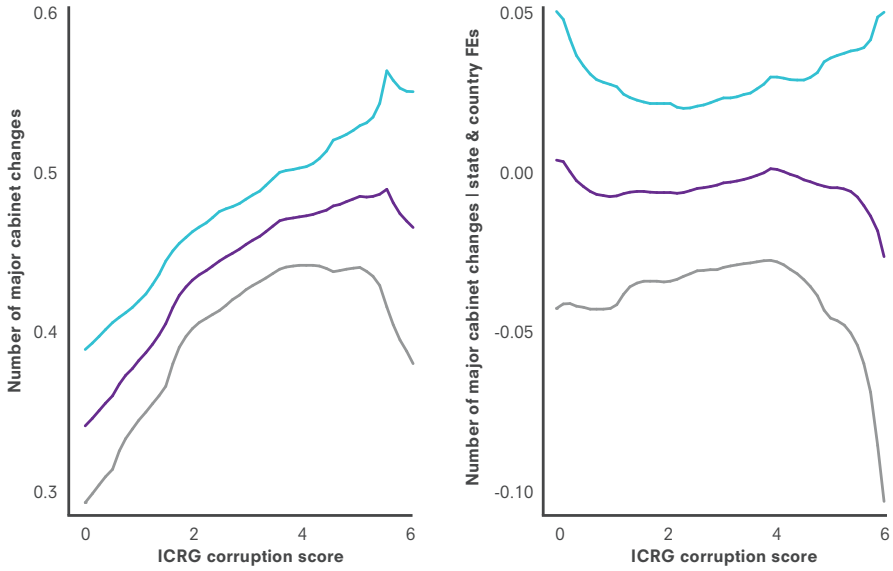
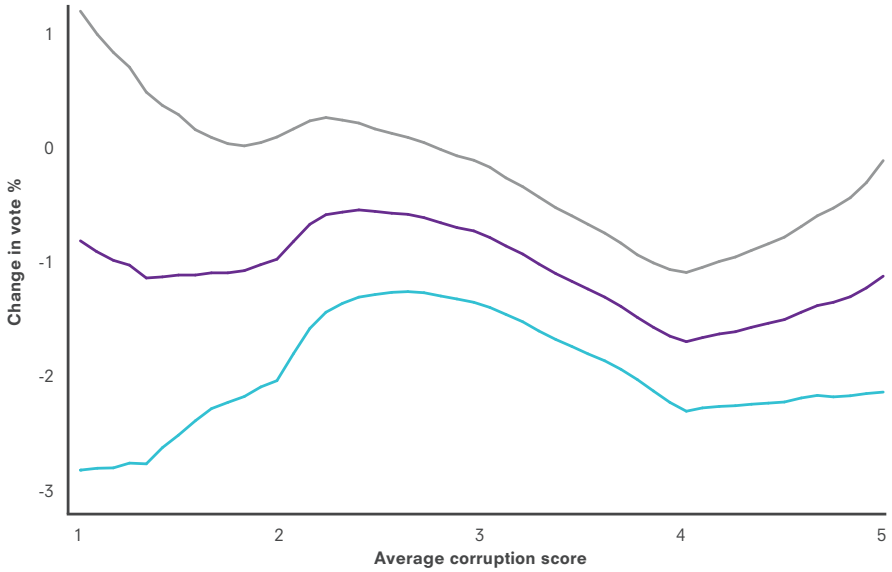
Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Governmental Turnover and Corruption, 1984-2003



Kernel = epanechnikov, degree = 0, bandwidth = .68, pwidth = 1.2

Figure 2: Change in Candidate Vote % and Corruption Perceptions for Afghanistan's MPs



kernel = epanechnikov, degree = 0, bandwidth = .44, pwidth = .67

Table 1: Top Reasons why Afghan Journalists' Think that Voters Tolerate Corruption

Voters tolerate corruption because...	% of 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 to help with the bureaucracy	1.3
they are promised public goods	0.8

About the authors

Rikhil R. Bhavnani is an Assistant Professor and Trice Faculty Fellow in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a faculty affiliate at the La Folette School of Public Affairs and the Center for South Asia. Professor Bhavnani's research and teaching focus on inequalities in political representation and corruption among politicians, particularly in South Asia. Prior to starting at UW-Madison, Professor Bhavnani was a visiting fellow at the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University. He has worked at the Center for Global Development and the International Monetary Fund, and received a PhD in political science and an MA in economics from Stanford University.

Luke N. Condra (Ph.D. Political Science, Stanford University, 2010) is Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and a faculty affiliate of the Matthew B. Ridgway Center for Security Studies, the Ford Institute for Human Security, and the Governance Group, at the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests are in international security and political violence. His current work, situated in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, focuses on elements of state building in areas characterized by conflict. He is working on a project that develops and tests a theory of African ethnic group involvement in civil war over the past quarter century. The project uses geographic, political, and economic data collected for hundreds of ethnic groups and their participation in rebel groups fighting in different conflicts against the state. Other research is published (with Jacob N. Shapiro) in the American Journal of Political Science.

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