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CORRUPTION VOTING AND POLITICAL CONTEXT:

Testing the Micro Mechanisms

GEORGIOS XEZONAKIS

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QOG THE QUALITY OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTE
Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
Box 711, SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG
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ABSTRACT

The electoral consequences of individual perceptions of corruption are an important component of political accountability. In this paper I am concerned with what drives variation in *corruption voting* across countries. While the accountability through elections mechanism is frequently assumed as a force that connects party system and levels of corruption, this mechanism is rarely tested at the individual level. I argue here, and findings suggest that it is so, that features of the party system related to clarity of responsibility in terms of policy outputs and stable system features such as plurality electoral rules might prime corruption as an issue in voting calculations. I test these expectations with individual level survey data from Module 2 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.

Georgios Xezonakis
The Quality of Government Institute
Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
georgios.xezonakis@gu.se

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Political accountability is a fundamental feature of and a yardstick for evaluating democracy (Powell, 2000). The effectiveness of democracy in keeping those in power in check is wholly relevant in the case of corruption. A large body of research has engaged into a review of the systemic/contextual factors that can account for variations in the levels of corruption at the aggregate level. A number of country specific factors have been deemed relevant in this sort of studies (see Person and Tabellini, 2003; cf. Kunicova and Ackerman, 2005, Charron, 2011, Chang and Golden, 2007). The argument here is that different institutional arrangements (e.g constitutional arrangements or the electoral formula) provide differential incentives and opportunities to elites to engage in corrupt behaviour and extract rents. Similarly it provides differential opportunities and incentives to both elites and voters to monitor, and for that matter sanction, corrupt behaviour (Charron, 2011). This paper provides some evidence regarding the second part of the mechanism which concentrates on the ability of voters to monitor corrupt behaviour through features of the system that might politicize and make corruption more salient.

As such I am mostly concerned with the contextual conditions that are related to variations in corruption voting. By that I mean the effect that perceptions of corruption have on support for the incumbent. I specify five contextual conditions that might prime corruption perceptions as an influence on voting, following research that has been done both at the aggregate and at the individual level. Taking insights from the economic voting literature (Powell and Whitten, 1993) and from research on the determinants of corruption (Tavits, 2007; Kunicova and Ackerman, 2005; Chang and Golder, 2010; Charron, 2011), I argue that features of the party system related to clarity of responsibility in terms of policy outputs, the electoral system and relative levels of corruption might prime corruption voting.

Results suggest, in accordance with previous findings, that corruption perceptions are primed as an influence on the vote in plurality electoral systems, during elections with a long run chief executive and in less fragmented party systems. The interaction effect of majority governmental status and 'benchmarked' corruption is not as clear and possibly negligible.

Findings carry implications both for voting behaviour models and research on the mechanisms available in electoral democracies to reward or punish (un)corrupt political elites.

In the remainder of this paper I first provide a theoretical justification of the contextual features that I expect should prime corruption voting. In the next section I present the data that I am using to test my hypotheses. Here I take advantage of Module 2 of the Comparative Study of

Electoral Systems which includes questions about voting behaviour together with perceptions of how widespread corruption is. Results of the logit models will follow and the paper will conclude with some final remarks.

Political Context and Corruption Voting

The main question I am concerned with in this paper is, what drives variation in corruption voting across countries. Much like the case of economic voting I consider corruption voting as a product of the evaluation of the incumbent from the part of the voter and a corresponding choice come election day (punish or reward).¹ While it is a finding in the literature that corruption allegations might hurt re-election chances for incumbents (Chang and Golden, 2004; Peter and Welch 1980, Ferraz and Finan 2008), they do not seem to hurt them enough, that is voters do not seem to ‘care (much)’ about corruption (Golden 2006).

Research suggests that for holding legislators accountable the information and political environment is important. Mechanisms that have been highlighted are the role of the media in disseminating information about malfeasance (Chang, Golden and Hill, 2010) the credible and serious challenge by opposition parties (Chang and Golden, 2004), or the increased salience of corruption as a product of the agenda setting power of an anti-corruption party (Klasnja, Tucker and Deegan-Krause, 2012; cf Krause and Mendez, 2009).

My main concern here is not what drives perceptions of corruption (corruption perceptions as dependent variable) but rather what might ‘prime’ these perceptions at the polls. This work is similar to research that identifies institutional and contextual variables that might lead to incumbent votes losses (Krause and Mendez, 2009), or those that identify the effect of systemic variables on levels of corruption (Charron, 2010; Tavits, 2007). What is fundamentally different in this study is that this is done at the individual level and concerns the interaction between political context and individual perceptions about corruption. Corruption is related to a host of other policy outcomes not easily controlled for in aggregate cross sectional analysis. It is important that the electoral con-

¹ In a recent manuscript Klasnja, Tucker and Deegan-Krause (2012), put forward a similar idea like the one presented here. They use a parallel with economic voting and the distinction between sociotropic and pocketbook voting, suggesting that personal experiences with corruption (pocketbook corruption voting) and perceptions of the prevalence of corruption (sociotropic corruption voting) are two distinct mechanisms through which corruption voting works. In that sense this research is mostly concerned with what can account for variations across countries in sociotropic corruption.

sequences of corruption and how these might vary across countries take into account individual voting behaviour and check if and which features of the political context prime the corruption vote.

I argue here that certain features of a party system (time invariant or not) can account for the variation since they might raise (or depress) the salience of corruption through media or party signals to the voters. An increased therefore politicisation of corruption might result in those perceptions featuring more prominently in voting calculations. In the next section, I specify some of these features that I consider relevant.

Institutional Structure and Clarity of Responsibility

Research on the causes of corruption has highlighted the importance of political institutions. The argument here is that different institutional arrangements (e.g constitutional arrangements or the electoral formula) provide differential incentives and opportunities to elites to engage in corrupt behaviour and extract rents. Similarly it provides differential opportunities and incentives to both elites and voters to monitor, and for that matter sanction, corrupt behaviour.

At the constitutional level, the number of veto points seems to be relevant. Presidential and federal systems with high institutional competition tend to constrain corruption and provide less opportunities for rent extraction (see Person and Tabellini, 2003; cf. Kunicova and Ackerman, 2005).

Another stream of research originates in a classic (albeit not empirically true) formulation, by Myerson (1993) and focuses mainly on the electoral system and its implications: Corruption should thrive in two party systems (SMD systems) and be easier to combat as more (and new) parties contest elections (PR systems). Subsequent tests show that the data do not fit the theory. The short story and the prevailing finding is that, majoritarian systems provide more constraints on corruption as compared to Proportional Representation (PR) systems (Kunicova and Ackerman, 2005). Monitoring difficulties for both voters and political opponents are greater in PR systems as collective action problems for the aforementioned groups are more likely in those settings (Kunicova and Ackerman, 2005: 597). More nuanced approaches fine tune this argument by focusing on issues like

district magnitude, electoral formula or ballot structure (see, Person et al., 2003; Charron 2011; Chang, 2005; Chang and Golden, 2007).

Ultimately, wherever the theoretical argument or the actual mechanism rests on (either the side of the voters or the side of the elites), the main assumption is that voters take their evaluations about corruption in the polling booth and vote accordingly: If the institutional arrangements give the principals (voters) the opportunity to identify corrupt behaviour then they will punish and replace corrupt agents (politicians/incumbents). Increased accountability should, therefore, lead to a more compliant behaviour from the part of the agent (i.e less corruption).

However, as others point out the variation across political contexts according to monitoring opportunities cannot rest solely on constitutional or electoral arrangements (Tavits, 2007:219). Moreover theoretical arguments based on the above provide less robust theoretical predictions as to the direction that the relationship between constitutional arrangements/electoral system and corruption takes (Tavits, 2007; see Kunicova and Ackerman, 2005; cf Myerson, 1993 and Perrson and Tabellini, 2003). The argument here is that taking into account solely the formal institutional structure of the party system might obscure the full range of accountability enhancing features available to the voters and as such the opportunities for monitoring and control.

Tavits (2007) applies an economic voting idea to corruption and argues that ‘clarity of responsibility’ is the important feature of a party system that one should focus when exploring how variation in monitoring opportunities is related to variations in corruption. The classic formulation of ‘clarity of responsibility’ states that in understanding variation in the size of economic voting across countries one needs to pay attention to how blurred or clear the lines between government and opposition are regarding their influence on policy outputs and more specifically on economic policy: ‘If the legislative rules, the political control of different institutions, and the lack of cohesion of the government all encourage more influence for the political opposition, voters will be less likely to punish the government for poor performance of the economy. Responsibility for the performance will simply be less clear’ (Powell and Whitten, 1993:393). So it is the diffusion of political power that is again important here but now what is more relevant are not the actual institutions (say competition between chambers or between the executive and the legislature) but rather the political actors (i.e political parties). Again the argument rests on the ability of voters to attribute blame and vote accordingly. Punish incumbents for adverse economic outcomes or reward governments for solid economic performance.

Previous research has demonstrated that the ‘clarity of responsibility’ argument is relevant in the case of corruption. To the degree that corruption can be considered governmental output as much as (un)employment then governments are expected to be punished by the principals when corruption prevails in a country and vice versa. Therefore political contexts that increase clarity of responsibility will exhibit less corruption (Tavits, 2007).

The above represent two distinct approaches regarding the relation between political context and corruption. One focuses mostly on formal rules and institutions and the second incorporates features of the political system that are related (and to a degree causally) with the institutional structure but can exhibit more variation through time, inside contexts with similar institutional configuration. Cross nationally, the above findings are based mainly on aggregate level data measured at the country level.

I propose in this paper to apply the insights from this strand of research in a cross country corruption voting model testing in effect the theoretical micro mechanism on which these studies rest upon. Testing the micro-foundations might help clarify contradicting findings in previous literature.

Much like economic voting context should mediate the effect of corruption related voting for or against incumbents. Following Powell and Whitten (1993) and Tavits (2007) I focus mainly on majority status of government, cabinet duration and the degree of party system fragmentation in order to test the clarity of responsibility argument. According to Powell (2000) the main indicator of clarity of responsibility is the degree in which one party has control of both the executive and legislative branches of the government. Minority governments (control only over the executive) represent the lower clarity setting since executives in this case cannot initiate and enact legislation without the support of other parliamentary parties. Various coalition governments (shared control of both the executive and legislature) fall somewhere in between in the clarity scale.

Cabinet duration is another obvious way through which voters can receive information and hold government accountable for corruption. A short lived government should not prime respondents perceptions of political corruption as will governments which hold office for a longer period of time. Note here that this prediction is not concerned with how government duration might be related to corruption levels. Quick succession of governments in power might provide more incentives for elites to engage in corrupt activities and in the long run increase overall levels of corrup-

tion. But as far as voter information is concerned using corruption, as a yardstick for their choice might not be easily achievable.

The size and fragmentation of the party system is also relevant. While the ability to assign blame is important the accountability mechanism might not work if voters cannot identify an equally clear and potentially viable alternative. This can work on the opposite direction though. Monitoring of government corruption on the elite side is higher in multiparty systems and therefore information for voters plentiful and possibly more salient. It is therefore an open question as to whether party system fragmentation will prime or not corruption voting.

I add an additional contextual variable that I believe might be important. As Powell and Whitten (1993) argue the influence that objective economic conditions (e.g inflation) might exert on incumbent support is not important only in itself but as compared to similar outcomes in other countries. For example a 10% unemployment will probably be a consideration for government support but might carry an added weight on voting calculations if most other countries in the region have an unemployment rate of 6%. I propose therefore to consider 'benchmarking' country corruption levels and using that variable as an additional feature of context.

The interaction between perceptions of corruption voting and stable features of the institutional context will also be tested. I will focus here on a distinction between plurality and proportional representation. Much like in the case of clarity of responsibility the expectation is that the accountability mechanism should work better in plurality systems and therefore the corruption voting should increase in those settings.

Data

Module 2 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) is the core database used in this analysis. The CSES module 2 compiles 41 pre and post election surveys in 49 countries. For the purposes of this paper I focus on parliamentary democracies. This and a combination of other data limitations, limits the sample of available election studies to 25 (see Appendix table A1 for a list of countries and election studies). The CSES provides the main level-1 variables used in the voting models: i) a dichotomous dependent variable that measures incumbent voting; and ii) the key independent variable of perception about corruption. The dependent variable is scored as 1 if

the respondent has voted for the party(ies) in government and 0 otherwise. Non voters are excluded from the analysis.

The survey question on which the main independent variable is based measures, on a 4 point scale, answers to the question ‘How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking amongst politicians is in [country]: very widespread, quite widespread, not very widespread, it hardly happens at all?’ (for a review of these data see Holmberg, 2009). Admittedly for the purposes of this project the question is not ideal. First it might limit respondents to the scenario of political corruption. It concentrates it to the behaviour of politicians and other instances of corruption for example in the public sector, might not be captured. Therefore the performance of the government in combating corruption in general, might not feature much in the respondent’s answer. We cannot really be sure whether the cue ‘such as...’ prevents respondent’s from considering other instances of corruption. It does represent, however, an evaluation of how efficient or inefficient politicians are in the exercise of their duties and of course on the quality of their policy making.

Another issue with this question is that it does not take into account individual experiences with corruption. Much like personal economic situation vs overall economic conditions in a country, corruption might be primed for voters only in cases where they have been personally and directly affected by corrupt activity (e.g having to pay bribes to public officials).

For most of the systemic variables I rely on the Database of Political Institutions (DPI) compiled by Beck, Keefer and Clarke, (2001, updated through 2010). Four variables are used. A combination of the seats in parliament for the government and the number of parties in government gives the measure of majority status. This is scored as 30 for minority governments, 60 for coalition governments, and 100 for one party majority government (as in Powell, 2000). Time in government for the chief executive gives the indicator for the cabinet duration. For the party system fragmentation variable I relied on publications by Gallagher and Mitchell (2008) on the effective number of electoral parties. I use the electoral rule that governs the allocation of the majority of house seats (proportional vs plurality) to classify countries according to electoral system.

The benchmarking variable was calculated by subtracting the country's score on the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) from the maximum score of CPI in the country's region. Regions follow the coding by Teorell and Hadenius (2007).²

Results

All models report results from multilevel logistic models with random intercepts. Estimating a pooled data model in the 26 election studies in my sample can lead to erroneous conclusions if there are unobserved differences between countries (Hsiao 2003; Greene 2007). Thus I estimate a model that takes into account country-specific effects to ensure that unobserved differences between countries are not driving key findings. I have opted for a random effects estimation, which does deal with some of these potential problems with clustered data (see Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009).

The following equation presents the basic model specification:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Incumbent Vote} = & \quad - B_1 \text{Corruption} + (\text{controls}) & & \text{(level 1)} \\
 & \quad + B_3 \text{Context} & & \text{(level 2)} \\
 & \quad - B_2 \text{Corruption} * \text{Context} & & \text{(cross-level)}
 \end{aligned}$$

Perceptions about how wide spread corruption is are interacted with the five features of the political context described above. I expect of course perceptions of corruption to exert a negative effect on incumbent voting vote. Level 1 control variables include evaluations of government performance and ideological distance from the ideological position of the government on the left right scale.

Table 1 reports results for the basic specification (with no interaction terms). Model 1 is a simple bivariate relationship between perceptions of corruption and incumbent voting. The second model includes the additional two controls. All variables work as expected. Beliefs of widespread

² See Appendix table A2 for some descriptives on the system level variables.

corruption reduce the log odds of voting for incumbent party(ies) in both models. So do negative evaluations of overall government performance and ideological distance from the position of the government.

TABLE 1. CORRUPTION AND INCUMBENT VOTING

	(1)	(2)
Corruption	-0.24*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)
Government Performance		0.64*** (0.02)
Ideology		-0.35*** (0.01)
Constant	-0.01 (0.13)	0.37*** (0.11)
Observations	32,428	25,176
No of Groups	26	25

Multilevel Models with Random Intercepts. Dependent variable is Incumbent Voting. Standard Errors in Parenthesis.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 2 reports results of five different models. In the first model the interaction is between perceptions of corruption and majority status of government, in the second model the interaction term has years in government, the third model party system fragmentation, the fourth the electoral system and the final the corruption benchmark. All models control for the overall levels of corruption in the country using Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. Three out of the five interaction terms appear to be significant. Those for cabinet duration, effective number of parties and plurality electoral system. For the first two the negative sign suggests that corruption voting has an added effect on voting the more years a government is in power and less of an effect as the party system becomes more fragmented. For the third the negative sign suggests that we can expect more corruption voting in plurality electoral systems.³

³ Note that these models have been tested using alternative specifications and controls. For example in the case of model 3 a control for the electoral system (that can account for party system fragmentation) does not alter the results. Also a full model containing the full range of systemic variables and interaction terms leaves substantive results unaffected.

TABLE 2. CORRUPTION VOTING AND SYSTEM LEVEL CHARACTERISTICS

	(1)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Government Performance	0.64*** (0.02)	0.64*** (0.02)	0.63*** (0.02)	0.64*** (0.02)	0.57*** (0.02)
Ideology	-0.35*** (0.01)	-0.35*** (0.01)	-0.35*** (0.01)	-0.35*** (0.01)	-0.38*** (0.01)
Corruption	-0.03 (0.05)	0.10** (0.05)	-0.26*** (0.08)	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.07* (0.04)
CPI	0.02 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.12** (0.05)
Majority Status	0.00 (0.00)				
Corruption*Majority Status	-0.00 (0.00)				
Cabinet Duration		0.10* (0.06)			
Corruption*Cabinet Duration		-0.05*** (0.01)			
Effective Number of Parties			-0.21** (0.09)		
Corruption*Efnp			0.04** (0.02)		
Plurality				0.80*** (0.23)	
Corruption*Plurality				-0.14*** (0.05)	
CPI Benchmark					-0.20* (0.12)
Corruption*Benchmark					0.02 (0.02)
Constant	-0.06 (0.39)	-0.25 (0.33)	0.80* (0.47)	-0.01 (0.29)	-0.69 (0.50)
Observations	25,176	25,176	24,366	25,176	21,742
No of Groups	25	25	24	25	21

Figures 1 to 5 graph the effect of corruption perceptions for the five interaction terms. As was expected, figures 1 and 5 reveal a largely negligible interaction effect as confidence intervals seem to overlap, even though the interaction seems to be following the expected direction (that is corruption voting is diminishing). In Figure 2 the graphing of the effect suggests that anything less than three years in government is not enough for corruption perceptions to have a significant impact on voting for an incumbent but as tenure increases corruption seems to become more salient in voting decisions. Similarly, in a system that has upwards of 5 effective parties corruption perceptions do

not seem to exert a significant effect on voting behaviour as is evident in Figure 3. Finally, Figure 4 suggests that corruption voting is borderline significant in PR systems but clearly much more primed in systems where the majority of the legislature is chosen by plurality rules.

All in all, the ‘clarity of responsibility’ argument seems to hold for the two out of the three features that were specified. As was expected plurality systems tend to provide more opportunities for corruption voting as opposed to PR systems. Finally, the issue of corruption does not seem to be ‘internationalised’ as the distance from benchmark countries in terms of overall levels of corruption, does not exhibit a significant interaction effect.

FIGURE 1. MARGINAL EFFECT OF CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS OVER MAJORITY STATUS

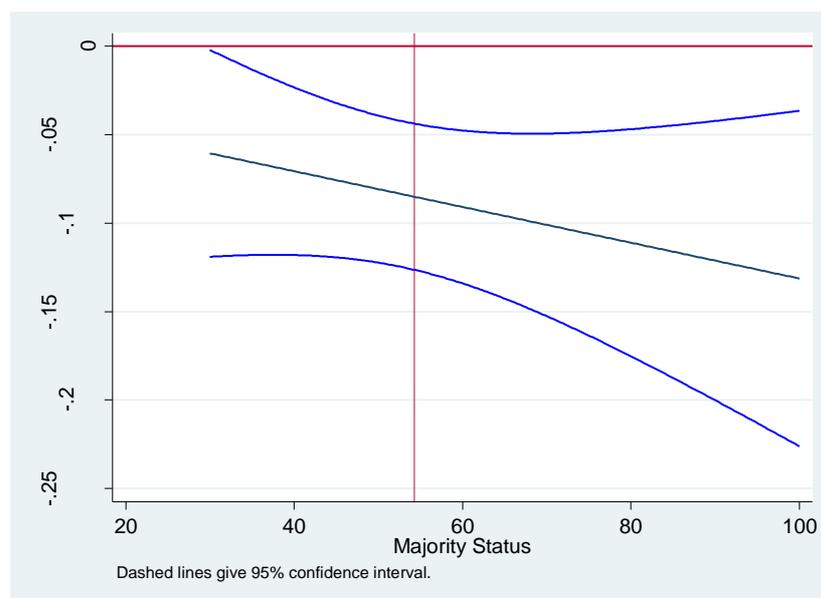


FIGURE 2. MARGINAL EFFECT OF CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS OVER CABINET DURATION

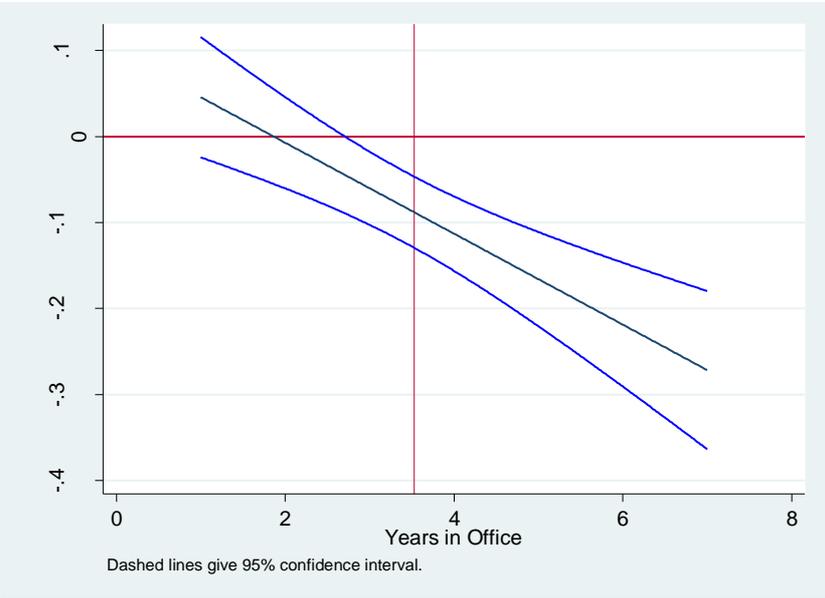


FIGURE 3. MARGINAL EFFECT OF CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS OVER EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF PARTIES

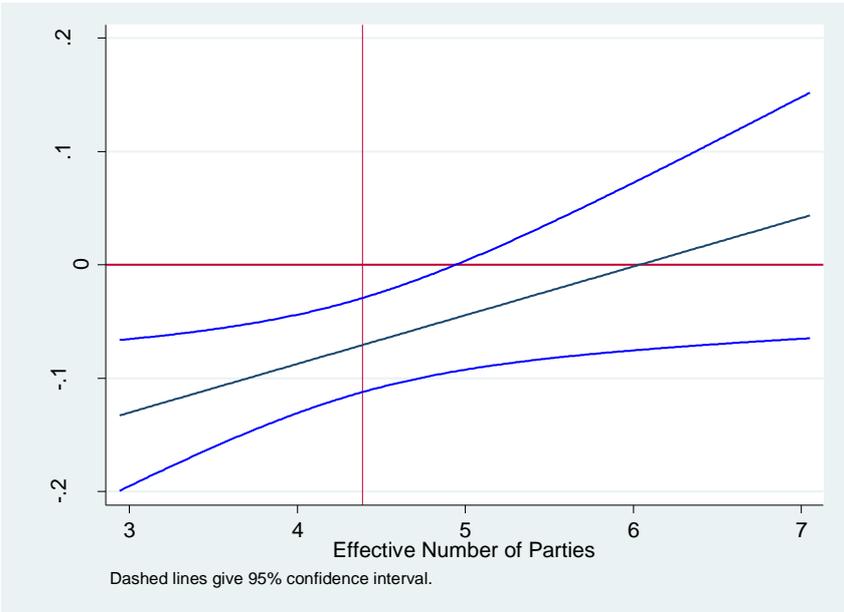


FIGURE 4. MARGINAL EFFECT OF CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS OVER ELECTORAL SYSTEM

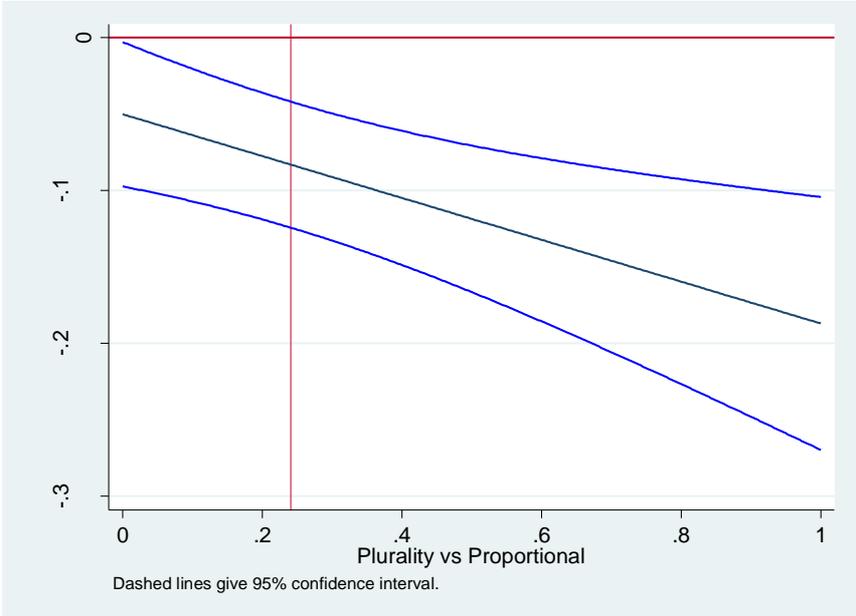
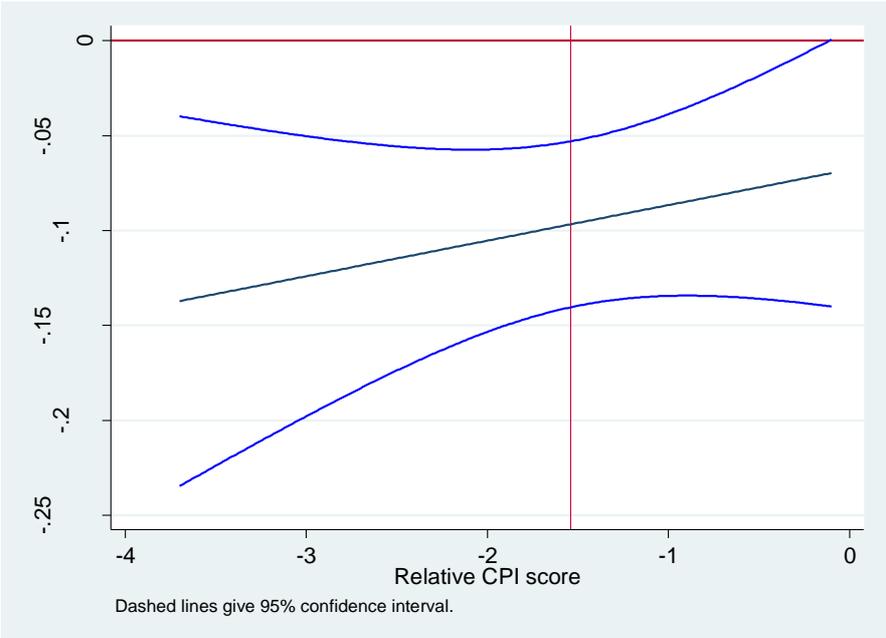


FIGURE 5. MARGINAL EFFECT OF CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS OVER RELATIVE CPI



Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined some of the contextual conditions that can account for variations in corruption voting across countries. I have argued that different features of the political and institutional context can lead to varying degrees of corruption politicisation and therefore prime corruption voting in different ways. I have specified five contextual conditions that might prime corruption perceptions as an influence on voting. Taking insights from the economic voting literature (Powell and Whitten, 1993) and from research on the determinants of corruption (Tavits, 2005; Kunicova and Ackerman, 2005; Chang and Golder, 2010; Charron, 2010), I argued that features of the party system related to clarity of responsibility in terms of policy outputs, the electoral system and relative levels of corruption might increase corruption voting. Results have indicated that voters might allow for corruption 'input' in their voting calculations when responsibility for policy outputs is clear (the cabinet duration and the party system size effect) and when institutional rules favour a clear competition between two main parties (the plurality effect). This results suggest, confirming previous findings, that the electoral context does mediate the effect of corruption providing less or more opportunities for holding corrupt politicians to account.

I have noted before a number of caveats for this research. More importantly, what the corruption question included in the CSES really measures. The fact that a) forms of corruption other than grand political corruption might not be captured and b) personal experiences with corruption are not measured at all might constitute a problem for this research. If anything I believe that this more likely underestimates the magnitude of the effects that were uncovered here and not really likely to annul them. In any case, the significance of corruption at the scale measured by this question is wholly relevant to voting behaviour and political accountability.

Finally, an added caveat has to do with a possible omitted contextual variable, that of the possibility that a clear anti-corruption party is standing for election. This would certainly increase the politicisation and of corruption with subsequent effects on voting behaviour (Klasnja, Tucker and Deegan-Krause, 2012). Later versions of this paper intend to captured this potential effect.

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Appendix A

TABLE A1. COUNTRIES AND ELECTION STUDIES

ALBANIA (2005)
AUSTRALIA (2004)
BELGIUM (2003)
CZECH REPUBLIC (2002)
DENMARK (2001)
FINLAND (2003)
FRANCE (2002)
GERMANY (2002 Telephone)
GREAT BRITAIN (2005)
HUNGARY (2002)
ICELAND (2003)
IRELAND (2002)
ISRAEL (2003)
ITALY (2006)
KOREA (2004)
NETHERLANDS (2002)
NEW ZEALAND (2002)
NORWAY (2001)
POLAND (2001)
PORTUGAL (2002)
PORTUGAL (2005)
ROMANIA (2004)
LOVENIA (2004)
SPAIN (2004)
SWEDEN (2002)

TABLE A2. SYSTEM LEVEL VARIABLE DESCRIPTIVES

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Cabinet Duration	40912	3.42875	1.74799	1	7
Majority Status	40912	54.59401	23.03034	30	100
Effective Number of Parties	39796	4.583739	1.487284	2.94	8.84
Plurality vs Proportional	40912	.2468469	.4311822	0	1
Relative Corruption	34696	-1.690365	1.087738	-3.7	-.0999999