Corruption, Salience, and Political Selection*

Matteo F. Ferroni†

April 13, 2025

Click here for latest version

Abstract

Using new survey and experimental data, this paper investigates how salience and partisanship shape voters' willingness to support corrupt politicians. I conduct a large-scale online survey experiment in the United States in which respondents evaluate hypothetical candidates varying in competence, corruption, and political affiliation. In the absence of party cues, voters respond to the relative salience of candidate traits. When corruption is perceived as widespread, competence becomes the salient characteristic, leading to an increase in support for the competent candidate, even if they are the most corrupt one. However, once political affiliation is introduced, it strongly overrides other traits: voters overwhelmingly prefer co-partisan candidates, regardless of their competence or honesty. A salience treatment mimicking increased media exposure to corruption reinforces these patterns by normalizing corruption and increasing support for competent but corrupt politicians. Open-ended responses show voters tend to ignore party loyalty as the reason behind their choice, favoring a rationalization of why competence, or honesty, is the most important characteristic. These findings highlight behavioral mechanisms behind the persistence of corruption, particularly in highly polarized contexts.

Keywords: Corruption, Salience, Voting, Survey, Online Experiment.

JEL Codes: D72, D73, D91, P16

*I am indebted to Alberto Alesina, Ray Fisman, Giorgio Saponaro, Stefanie Stantcheva, and Francesca Zambrini for feedback and comments. I would also like to thank the seminar participants at Renmin University of China. I am grateful to the Institute for Economic Development at Boston University for its generous support. This project was approved by the Boston University Charles River Campus IRB (protocol number: 5281X).

†Ferroni: University of Missouri (e-mail: mffkh@missouri.edu)

1 Introduction

Why do voters continue to elect corrupt politicians? Despite widespread public disapproval of corruption, politicians credibly accused of misconduct are often reelected or maintain strong support. This phenomenon is not limited to a specific country or context but rather appears to be a persistent feature of many democratic systems. While information, media coverage, and institutional reforms are often proposed as solutions, their effectiveness is mixed. This paper aims to understand why voters sometimes overlook corruption and shed light on the conditions that shape their willingness to do so.

To answer this question, I designed and implemented a large-scale online survey experiment in the United States. My experiment is based on an adaptation, first developed by Zambrini (2016), to the political context of the salience model by Bordalo et al. (2013b). In this version of the model, instead of looking at the trade-off between quality and price of goods, I focus on the corruption-competence trade-off, which has been widely studied and documented in the literature (see, for example, Klašnja and Tucker, 2013, and Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). Additionally, I also introduce the party affiliation of the candidates to study how party loyalty interacts with the saliency of the other attributes. Respondents were randomly assigned to hypothetical candidate matchups, where levels of competence and corruption were varied, and in some cases, party affiliation of the candidate was introduced. Importantly, to create a clear trade-off, the most competent candidate is always the most corrupt one. In an additional experiment, I included a salience treatment to mimic higher media exposure to corruption scandals and see its effects on the choice of candidates. Finally, I explore the motivations, elicited through open-ended questions, behind respondents' choices.

The results show that salience plays a central role in voters' decision-making. In the absence of political affiliation cues, the way voters weigh competence against dishonesty is strongly influenced by which trait appears more salient. In line with the model's predictions, when average corruption levels are low, honesty becomes the salient characteristic and respondents become more likely to select the most honest candidate, even if less competent. However, when average corruption is high, voters focus instead on competence, leading to a large share of respondents selecting the most corrupt candidate. This suggests that when corruption is perceived to be widespread, it loses its electoral cost, creating a setting in which competent but corrupt candidates are more likely to be selected.

When political affiliation is introduced, however, it strongly dominates all other characteristics. The vast majority of both Democratic and Republican respondents choose the candidate from their party, regardless of their competence or corruption levels. The only exception is among Independent respondents, who remain responsive to changes in salience. This finding highlights the powerful role of partisanship in electoral behavior and helps ex-

plain how polarization may reinforce the persistence of corruption.

To further investigate the role of salience, I implemented a treatment designed to simulate increased media coverage of corruption scandals. I find that this treatment, rather than encouraging voters to penalize corruption, leads to the opposite effect. By making corruption appear more common, the treatment causes voters to shift their attention to other traits, namely competence. As a result, treated respondents were more likely to vote for the more competent, but also more corrupt, candidate. These effects are entirely muted when party affiliation is introduced, further demonstrating that in polarized environments, informational campaigns are unlikely to shift behavior.

Finally, I analyze respondents' open-ended justifications for their vote choices. Even when voters select the candidate from their party, they rarely cite partisanship as the reason. Instead, they justify their decision by referring to competence or honesty, suggesting an awareness that political choices should ideally be based on merit or ethics, even if behaviorally this is not the case.

Taken together, these results provide new evidence on how voters evaluate corruption and suggest that both salience and partisanship play crucial roles in enabling corrupt politicians to survive electorally. While information alone may not be enough to deter corruption, understanding how voters process and prioritize different traits is key to designing more effective anti-corruption mechanisms.

1.1 Related Literature

A large body of work in economics and political science has documented the consequences of electing dishonest politicians. First, corruption has been associated with lower investment and reduced economic growth (Mauro, 1995; Bardhan, 1997; Treisman, 2000; Graf Lambsdorff, 2006). Second, it has been linked to higher poverty and income inequality (Li et al., 2000; Gupta et al., 2002; Canache and Allison, 2005). Third, the election of politicians motivated by personal gain rather than public service can erode institutional trust and the perceived legitimacy of democratic governments (Rose-Ackerman, 1978; Morris, 1991). Despite these consequences, corrupt politicians are routinely reelected, raising an important puzzle about voter behavior and accountability.

A partial answer to why voters support corrupt politicians lies in the competence-corruption trade-off hypothesis, first articulated by Rundquist et al. (1977). Their early experimental work showed that voters may be willing to overlook a candidate's dishonesty if they are perceived as effective or competent, a trade-off often captured by the Latin American expression *"roba pero hace"* ("steals but gets things done"), which is often used in popular culture to express voters' preference for competent but dishonest politicians. More recent empirical studies in Latin America confirm that citizens are often willing to trade off integrity for com-

petence (Rosas and Manzetti, 2015; Choi and Woo, 2010; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga, 2013), while formal models have outlined the conditions under which this trade-off holds (Desierto, 2023). One clear signal of political competence is economic performance, which plays a prominent role in explaining why voters may overlook corruption (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2016; Manzetti and Wilson, 2007; Rosas and Manzetti, 2015; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga, 2013). A number of experimental studies support the idea that voters adopt a pragmatic approach to corruption, showing greater tolerance when the economy is performing well (Klašnja and Tucker, 2013; Klašnja et al., 2021). However, not all studies find support for this trade-off. Some show that even when public goods are delivered, voters remain unwilling to endorse corrupt politicians (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013), or that competent politicians are punished more harshly for corruption than incompetent ones (Esaiasson and Muñoz, 2014).

To reconcile these divergent findings, scholars have pointed to a range of moderating factors. First, both the severity and the benefits of malfeasance matter. For instance, corruption that results in job creation (Klašnja et al., 2021) or that is welfare-enhancing (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2016) tends to be less damaging to a candidate's electoral prospects than corruption that offers no benefits. Similarly, corrupt practices framed as clientelism are often punished less severely than those perceived as pure private enrichment (Botero et al., 2021). Second, the credibility of information sources shapes voter reactions, with more credible sources eliciting stronger responses (Botero et al., 2015, 2021; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, 2017). Third, group identities play a role, as voters are more likely to excuse corrupt behavior when it involves politicians from their same party (Anduiza et al., 2013; Chong et al., 2015). These factors interact with the trade-off logic, conditioning whether and how voters respond to corruption cues.

This literature connects closely with a broader set of vignette-based and field experimental studies that examine how voters process information about corrupt candidates. Banerjee et al. (2010, 2014) find that exposing Indian voters to randomized candidate profiles reduces support for corrupt politicians. Similar interventions using report cards (Banerjee et al., 2011) or audit data (Bobonis et al., 2010; Ferraz and Finan, 2008) have shown that credible exposure to corruption can, under certain conditions, improve electoral accountability. However, other studies caution that effects are highly context-dependent, often mediated by partisanship or voter disengagement (Arias et al., 2022; Chong et al., 2015; De Figueiredo et al., 2011). In some cases, rather than prompting voters to punish malfeasance, information can reduce turnout or erode party identification. These findings underscore why simply informing voters about corruption may not improve accountability, a point also noted in recent reviews (De Vries and Solaz, 2017).

One key contextual factor appears to be the baseline level of corruption. In high-corruption environments, voters may consider dishonesty to be the norm, reducing its salience

and electoral cost. However, the psychological mechanisms underlying this context-dependent trade-off remain less well understood. A growing literature suggests that when corruption is perceived as widespread, voters adjust their expectations accordingly and may become more tolerant of corrupt politicians. For example, Chang (2020) shows that in East Asia, voters are more forgiving when corruption is seen as institutionalized. Pavão (2018) and Bauhr and Charron (2018) argue that in such environments, the comparative disadvantage of a corrupt candidate is diminished, not only because alternatives are also likely to be corrupt but because even honest candidates are perceived as unlikely to remain clean. Similarly, Klašnja and Tucker (2013) find that voters in high-corruption countries are more willing to overlook corruption when other dimensions, like economic competence, are favorable. Arias et al. (2022) and Pavão (2018) further highlight how expectations of systemic corruption shape whether new information about malfeasance has any effect at all. When voters believe that "they are all corrupt," individual acts of dishonesty may be discounted or ignored. However, it is important to note that this tolerance is not universal. As Vera (2020) shows, in some contexts, voters still punish corrupt politicians regardless of how common corruption is perceived to be. Recent advances in behavioral economics, particularly salience theory, offer a useful framework for modeling how voters prioritize different candidate attributes in different settings.

Salience theory, developed by Bordalo et al. (2012), posits that individuals do not weigh all attributes of a decision equally. Instead, attention is drawn to features that differ most from the contextual average. This leads to context-dependent preferences, where decision weights are distorted in favor of salient characteristics. The model has been applied across domains: from consumer choice (Bordalo et al., 2013b) and asset pricing (Bordalo et al., 2013a), to judicial decisions (Bordalo et al., 2015) and lottery choice (Bordalo et al., 2012). In each setting, salience explains why individuals might disproportionately focus on certain attributes, even when doing so deviates from rational utility maximization (see Bordalo et al., 2022, for a review of this literature). This framework can be readily extended to the context of political selection, as first proposed by Zambrini (2016). When voters face a competence-corruption trade-off, the salience of each trait may vary depending on the broader context. For example, in a high-corruption setting, the marginal dishonesty of a candidate may be perceived as relatively unimportant, shifting attention toward competence instead. Salience theory thus provides a behavioral explanation for why voters may knowingly support corrupt candidates in some contexts but not in others.

This paper contributes to this literature by bringing salience theory into the study of corruption and electoral behavior. While existing work has shown that information can reduce support for corrupt candidates, I argue that how voters process that information depends critically on the context and what traits become salient as a result. I experimentally manipulate both the average level of corruption and the presence of political affiliation cues to

examine how these features interact with voter decision-making. In doing so, this paper helps to clarify when and why corruption matters to voters, and why, in some cases, it does not.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. In Section 2, I describe in detail the data collection and survey design. The results of my experiments are presented in Section 3. Section 4 explores the motivations behind respondents' choices. The last section concludes.

2 Data Collection, Sample, and Survey Design

2.1 Data Collection and Sample

The survey was designed using the online platform *Qualtrics* and then distributed by the commercial survey company *Respondi* through its mailing lists and dashboards. Respondents are recruited through various marketing channels and, once they have agreed to be recruited for surveys, receive regular email links and can find surveys on a dashboard. Before entering the survey, respondents were only told the expected length of the questionnaire, but not the topic. They were assured that they were completely anonymous and that there was no way to ever link their responses to their identity. After starting the survey, respondents reached a consent page informing them that they were about to take an academic research survey destined solely for research purposes and run by a nonpartisan researcher from Boston University. They were asked to respond accurately to the best of their knowledge and were assured that participation was entirely voluntary. After proving their consent, respondents were channeled through a set of screening questions used to enforce the quotas, as I describe below. To ensure data quality, respondents also had to pass a reCAPTCHA test and an inattention trap to reach the first actual block of the survey.

The survey was run between September 11 and October 11, 2019. The total sample contains 3,002 US-born respondents aged 18 to 69. Respondents were paid by the survey company if they completed the survey in their entirety. The pay per survey completed was \$1.10. The median time for completing the survey was 10 minutes.

Respondents were sampled using quota sampling. I imposed quotas on age, gender, and income. Table A-1 shows the characteristics of the sample compared with those of the US adult population. The sample is by construction representative of the US adult population along the quota dimensions of age, gender, and income groups. In addition, the sample is also broadly representative of non-targeted dimensions such as the share of respondents who are married, those who are employed or unemployed, their geographical area, and their political affiliation. Overall, respondents are less likely to have completed only high school and more likely to have a college degree than the average adult. Respondents are also less likely to be part of a minority. However, it is worth noting that these shortcomings are common in most

online surveys, as discussed in Stantcheva (2023).

2.2 The Survey

The complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix Section A-4. Not all questions were used for this project, but they can be used in future works. I now provide information on the blocks composing the survey and their core elements.

Background socioeconomic questions. All respondents were first asked about their demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds, such as gender, income, race, education, employment status, ZIP code, marital and family status, voting history, and political leanings. My main measure of political affiliation is identification with a party: Democrat, Republican, or Independent. I also queried them about their primary source of news and their overall media and social media consumption. Finally, I also elicited respondents' moral values by asking them a subset of questions from the *Moral Foundations Questionnaire* (Graham et al., 2013).

Salience treatment. At this point in the survey, half of the respondents were randomly selected to be shown the salience treatment, described more in detail in Section 3.3. This treatment, designed to mimic a higher media exposure to corruption scandals, consisted of making respondents read a few news headlines on this topic.

Salience experiment. In the next block, respondents were provided with a vignette describing a hypothetical scenario in which they had to choose between two candidates running for mayor. The candidates differ in their level of competence and corruption. As I will describe more in detail in Section 3.1, I experimentally manipulated the average level of corruption of the two candidates to modify the salient characteristic. In an additional manipulation, discussed in Section 3.2, I introduced the party affiliation of the two candidates to explore whether this characteristic dominates the other two. Respondents were therefore randomly assigned, with equal probabilities, to six different scenarios varying in the level of corruption (low; high) and in the party affiliation of the two candidates (no party; first candidate Democrat; first candidate Republican).

Attitudes towards corruption. Respondents were then asked questions related to corruption, such as how frequently they believe it is for a politician to accept bribes and if they believe that a politician who does a lot but steals a little is better than a completely honest one. They were also asked to rank by importance the factors that influence their decision to vote for a local politician, such as honesty, experience, and ideology.

Policies against corruption. In this block, I asked respondents about their views on policies aiming at fighting corruption. First, they were asked whether the government should allocate more resources to fighting corruption. Then, respondents had to evaluate how effective certain policies, such as more severe penalties and reducing term limits, are in reducing corruption.

Feedback, motivation, and perceived bias. The survey ended by asking respondents whether they felt it was biased, to motivate their choice in the salience experiment, and inviting them to provide open-ended feedback.

3 Experimental Results

Through the survey, I conducted three different kinds of experiments that I will discuss below. To guarantee data quality and screen out careless respondents, in all the analysis below I exclude respondents who took less than 5 minutes to complete the whole survey. First, in Section 3.1, I discuss the main salience experiment, where I experimentally manipulated the average level of corruption to change the salient characteristic of the candidates. This experiment relies on the 471 respondents who didn't receive the salience treatment and were assigned to the vignette without the candidates' political affiliation. Second, in Section 3.2, I look into the effect of introducing the party affiliation of the candidates. For this analysis, I include all the 1,385 respondents who weren't shown the salience treatment. Finally, in Section 3.3, I explore the effect of higher media exposure to corruption scandals. All 2,766 respondents are included.

3.1 Salience Experiment

The experiment. For this experiment, I rely on an adaptation (first proposed by Zambrini, 2016) to the political context of the salience model by Bordalo et al. (2013b). In their model, a consumer has to choose between goods characterized by one positive characteristic (their quality) and a negative one (their price). I extend it to the context of a voter having to choose which candidate to vote for in an election. As in their model, candidates have a positive characteristic (their competence), and a negative one (their dishonesty). When facing a choice between two candidates, if one of them is both more competent and less dishonest, what the voter is going to choose is obvious. But when one of the two candidates is both the most competent, but also the most dishonest, a trade-off appears and the choice faced by the voter is no longer trivial. Salience theory predicts that which candidate the voter chooses depends on which characteristic, competence or dishonesty, is perceived as the most salient.

If competence is the salient characteristic, voters will choose the most competent candidate, even if more dishonest. If instead dishonesty is the salient characteristic, voters will choose the least dishonest candidate, even if less competent.[1]

To test this hypothesis, I introduced in my survey a vignette describing an election between two candidates characterized by the two aforementioned characteristics.[2] More specifically, respondents have to choose between two candidates for mayor whose competence is defined by the number of jobs they created in a previous term in office, and their dishonesty by the amount of public funds they had allegedly embezzled. To create a trade-off, the candidate who created more jobs is also the candidate who embezzled more money. In this first experiment, I don't mention the political affiliation of the candidates. This ensures that the choice is entirely driven by the competence and dishonesty levels of the candidates.[3] The goal of my experiment is to manipulate the salient characteristic and see how this affects respondents' choices. To do so, I kept constant the level of competence of the two candidates (Candidate A created 3,000 jobs; Candidate B created 2,000 jobs) and randomly assigned respondents to two different settings: the low-corruption setting, and the high-corruption setting. In the low-corruption setting, Candidate A allegedly embezzled $30,000, while Candidate B $10,000. In the high-corruption setting, they respectively embezzled $80,000 and $60,000. It is important to notice that I kept the difference in money embezzled by the two candidates fixed in the two settings ($20,000). This allows me to ensure that differences in choices between the two settings are not driven by how much money Candidate A embezzled more than Candidate B in one setting relative to the other.

These numbers were chosen to produce a different salient characteristic in the two settings. In the low-corruption setting, Candidate A embezzled 200% more than Candidate B ($30,000 vs $10,000), while being only 50% more competent (3,000 new jobs vs 2,000). In this setting, dishonesty is the salient characteristic, and voters are expected to prefer Candidate B. In the high-corruption setting, Candidate A, while still being 50% more competent, now embezzled only 33% more money than Candidate B ($80,000 vs. $60,000). For this reason, in this setting competence is the salient characteristic, and voters are expected to prefer Candidate A over B more than in the low-corruption setting. Intuitively, this can be seen as a situation where, when everyone is very corrupt, voters won't care much about little differences in the money stolen and will therefore base their choices on other characteristics of the politicians such as competence.

Finally, it is important to notice this doesn't imply everyone will choose Candidate A in the high-corruption setting and Candidate B in the low-corruption setting. There are many

[1] In Appendix Section A-1, I formally discuss this model.

[2] The full text of the vignette can be found in Appendix Section A-4.

[3] I also ask participants to imagine they were living in a different city, to avoid that they get primed by their local politics.

other reasons behind a voter's choice such as the relative importance that each of us assign to competence and dishonesty. It is not hard to imagine a voter who would always choose the most honest candidate, no matter how incompetent they are, or another who would always prioritize competence, no matter the cost.[4] My experiment aims to show the existence of salient voters whose choice depends on the salience of the candidates' characteristics and can therefore vary depending on the context.

Results. Figure 1 reports the results of the first experiment.[5] The first two bars compare the share of respondents who chose to vote for the most corrupt, but also most competent, candidate in the low-corruption (in blue) and in the high-corruption setting (in orange). The figure shows that by increasing the average level of corruption, more respondents decide to vote for the most corrupt politician, a result in line with the fact that competence has become the salient characteristic. It is worth noticing that slightly less than half of the respondents (44.7%) always choose the most honest candidate, even when the level of corruption is high. On the other hand, there are 34.3% of respondents that would vote for the most competent, but also most corrupt, candidate even in the low-corruption setting. This means that around 20% of respondents would choose a different candidate when the salient characteristic changes. It is important to notice that this share would vary greatly with the choice of different numbers in the vignette experiment.[6] The goal of this experiment was to prove the existence of this cognitive mechanism in a political setting, not trying to estimate a share of the population more or less prone to be affected by salience.

The next set of bars split the sample between Democrat and Republican respondents. While the effect is still significant for both groups (see Table A-2), Democrats react more strongly to the change in corruption level. The smaller effect among Republicans is due to a higher vote share for the most corrupt candidate in the low-corruption setting. A possible explanation is that compared to Democrats, a larger share of Republicans gives more importance to competence than honesty, even when the salient characteristic is dishonesty.

3.2 The Role of Party Affiliation

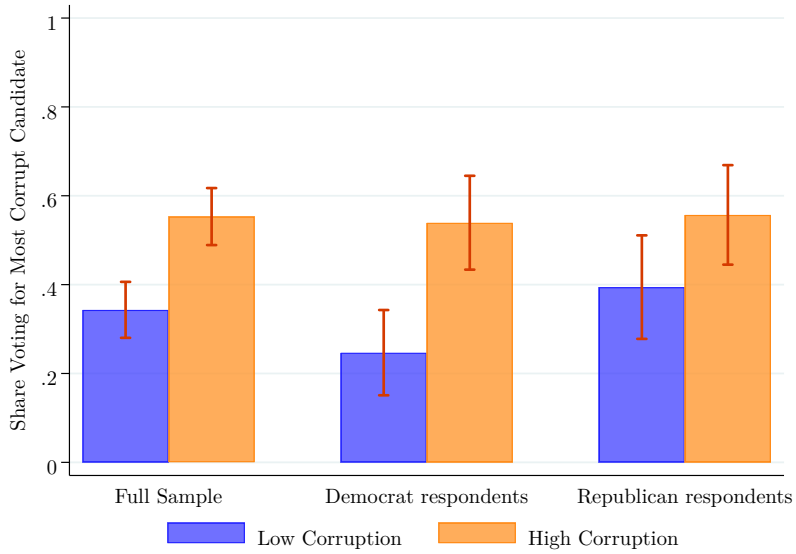
Introducing party affiliation. In the real world, candidates are very often affiliated with a political party, and their political ideology is a characteristic very important for voters. This is especially true in recent years, where we have observed a rise in polarization and party-line voting. In this section, I explore what happens when I introduce the party affiliation of the candidates. The vignettes employed are the same, with low- and high-corruption settings.

[4] These correspond to the cases where θ_1 or θ_2 are equal to 1, as discussed in Appendix Section A-1.

[5] Table A-2 provides the results in regression form.

[6] In theory, you could find numbers for which you would find a 100% shift from one candidate to the other when the salient characteristic changes.

FIGURE 1: EFFECT OF AVERAGE LEVEL OF CORRUPTION ON CANDIDATE CHOICE



Notes: The 95% confidence interval is reported for every share. I include respondents who were not assigned to the salience treatment.

The only difference is that I now add the following sentence: *"The first candidate (who we will call Candidate A) is supported by the Democratic/Republican Party, while the second (who we will call Candidate B) is supported by the Republican/Democratic Party."*

Now, respondents will have to weigh three different characteristics when choosing who to vote for: competence, dishonesty, and party affiliation. As it is hard to quantify political ideology, I can't apply the salience model to make a prediction in this setting. Nonetheless, we can expect that, if competence and dishonesty are more salient than party affiliation, we will find a similar share of voting as in the case without party affiliation. If instead, political ideology dominates the other characteristics, we will find that respondents will prefer the candidate from their party, independently of their competence and dishonesty, and whether they are in a low- or high-corruption setting.

Results. Figure 2 reports the effects of adding candidates' parties by respondents' party affiliation.[7] As can be seen in Figures 2a and 2b, both Democratic and Republican respondents focus almost entirely on the political affiliation of the candidate when choosing who to vote for. When the most corrupt candidate is a Democrat, more than 80% of Democratic respondents vote for them. This is a significant increase from the setting where the party

[7]Table A-3 provides the results in regression form.

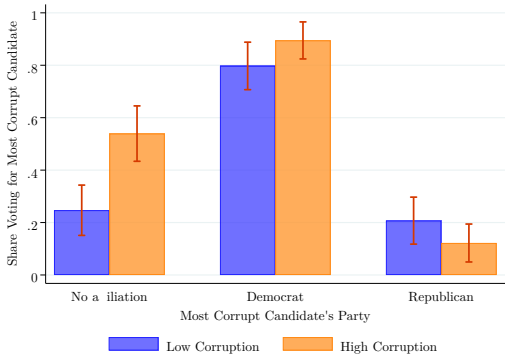
affiliation wasn't revealed when only 40% of them voted for the most corrupt candidate. A similar effect can be found among Republican respondents.

It is also important to notice that political affiliation completely dominates the other characteristics in the decision of who to vote for. If we compare the vote share in the low- and high-corruption settings, we don't find any significant difference anymore.[8] This means that the salience effect caused by the corruption level disappears as political affiliation is now the most salient characteristic of the three.

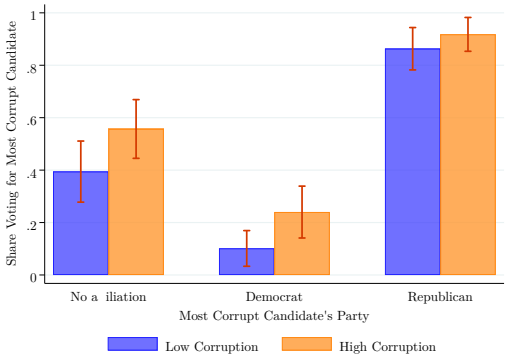
Nonetheless, this holds only for Democratic and Republican respondents. In Figure 2c, it can be seen how Independent respondents are completely unaffected by the party affiliation of the candidate. Their behavior is indistinguishable between the three scenarios, with the level of corruption still playing a role in switching the salient characteristic for some respondents.

FIGURE 2: EFFECT OF PARTY AFFILIATION ON CANDIDATE CHOICE

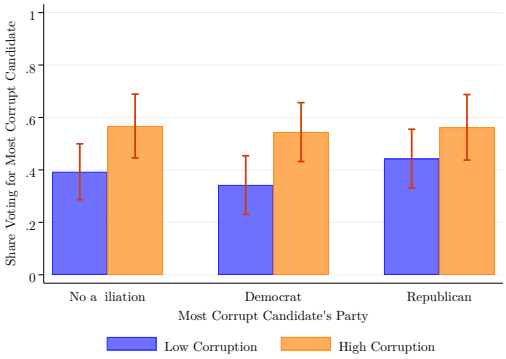
(A) DEMOCRATIC RESPONDENTS



(B) REPUBLICAN RESPONDENTS



(C) INDEPENDENT RESPONDENTS



Notes: The 95% confidence interval is reported for every share. I include respondents who were not assigned to the salience treatment.

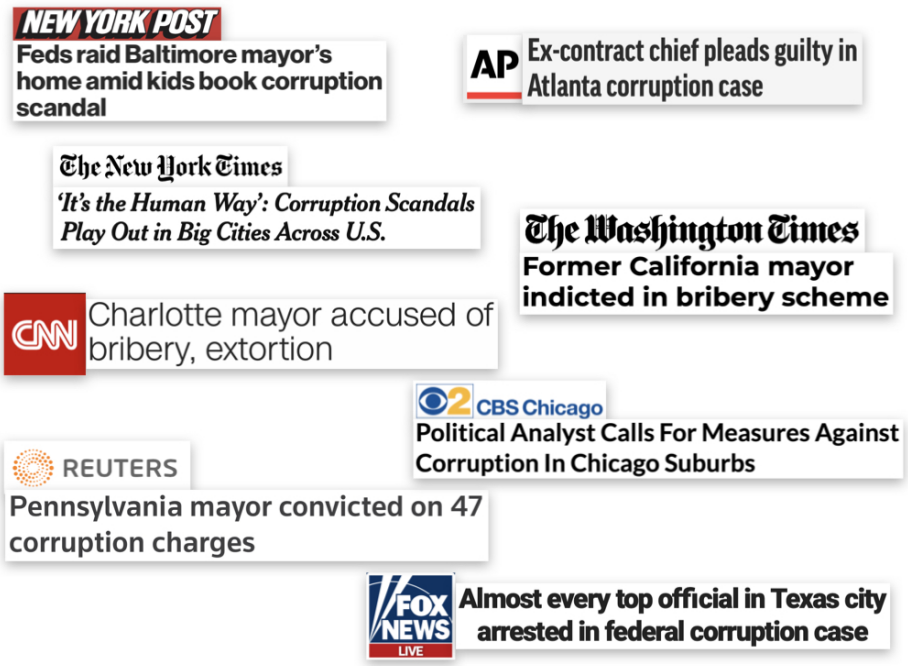
[8]The lack of significance can be formally seen in Columns 2 and 3 of Table A-2.

3.3 Salience Treatment

I will now discuss the effect of mimicking a higher media exposure to corruption scandals.

The treatment. Half of the respondents were randomly assigned to read some news headlines on corruption scandals, as shown in Figure 3. To avoid any sort of bias, headlines were selected to cover the whole media political spectrum, ranging from Fox News on the right, to The New York Times on the left, passing through more neutral news outlets such as Reuters. For the same reason, I also selected news coming from various regions of the US (to avoid heterogeneous treatment effects depending on the respondents' location) and I only included headlines that don't mention the politicians' names or party affiliations.

FIGURE 3: SALIENCE TREATMENT



Differently from information treatments, the aim of this treatment is not to provide new information to respondents but to make them focus their attention on corruption. This is why I call it a salience treatment. Nonetheless, the effect on the choice of the candidate is ambiguous. On the one hand, making respondents think about corruption could lead them to perceive dishonesty as the salient characteristic and therefore prefer the most honest candidate. On the other hand, the treatment could increase the perceived level of corruption, leading respondents to focus on competence and prefer the most competent, even if more corrupt, candidate.

Depending on which channel dominates, I expect to see different treatment effects depending on the average corruption level. In the low corruption setting, where dishonesty is the salient characteristic, I expect to find an effect only if the second channel dominates. In this case, the treatment would make competence the salient characteristic leading more people to choose the competent and corrupt candidate. In the high corruption setting, the opposite would hold. Since in this setting, competence is already the salient characteristic, I expect to find a treatment effect only if the treatment is successful in making respondents focus on corruption, with a consequent increase of people preferring the honest candidate. Finally, I would expect to find an effect in the scenarios where the party affiliation is revealed only if the treatment is strong enough to make dishonesty, or competence, more salient than the political alignment of the candidate. But, given the results discussed in the previous section, it will be quite unlikely.

Treatment effect on the candidate's choice. Table 1 represents the effects of the salience treatment on the choice of the candidate. In this table, I distinguish the treatment effect for all the settings presented above and the political affiliation of the respondents. In columns 1 and 2, I show the effect when candidates don't have a party affiliation. A higher exposure to corruption scandals appears to influence voters' choice only in the low-corruption setting.[9] This is in line with the interpretation that the treatment, by increasing the perception of the frequency of corruption, makes respondents focus on other characteristics when choosing who to vote for, ending up selecting the most corrupt politician.[10] This is an important result, as it shows a perverse effect of the treatment. We would expect that, by making voters more aware of corruption, they would punish corrupt candidates more. But, if a higher awareness leads voters to focus on other characteristics, this strategy might backfire, as shown by my experiment.

The lack of effect on the high-corruption setting can be explained by the fact that, since those respondents perceive a higher level of corruption, for them the salient characteristic is already competence and they are basing their choice on it. This is in line with the null result in column 3 of Table 2 showing that the treatment doesn't affect the perceived frequency of corruption in that setting.

[9]The null result on Republican respondents can be explained by the fact that, at the baseline, they are already more likely to vote for the most corrupt candidate than Democrats (39% vs 25%). The salience treatment is not strong enough to increase this share even further.

[10]This interpretation is supported by the fact that treated respondents are more likely to perceive corruption as common, as shown in column 2 of Table 2.

Table 1: Salience Treatment - Candidate Choice

	Vote Most Corrupt Candidate					
	No party affiliation		Democrat		Republican	
	Low corruption	High corruption	Low corruption	High corruption	Low corruption	High corruption
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Descriptive Statistics (control group)						
Democrat mean	0.25	0.54	0.79	0.89	0.21	0.12
Republican mean	0.40	0.56	0.10	0.24	0.86	0.92
Observations	237	235	236	230	234	219
Panel B: Salience Treatment Effect						
Treatment × Democrat	0.15**	-0.07	0.06	0.02	-0.13**	0.04
	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Treatment × Republican	0.02	0.11	-0.02	-0.08	-0.01	-0.03
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Observations	457	458	469	458	465	448
R^2	0.054	0.064	0.399	0.361	0.384	0.437

Notes: The dependent variable in all columns is an indicator variable equal to 1 when respondents choose Candidate A in the vignette experiment. All regressions include controls for gender, age group, race, income group, employment status, education, and macro-region fixed effects. Coefficients are not reported due to space constraints. Panel A reports the mean of the dependent variables for respondents who saw no treatment separately for Democrats ("Democrat mean") and Republicans ("Republican mean"). Panel B shows the treatment effects of the salience treatment interacted with the respondent's political affiliation ("Treatment × Democrat" and "Treatment × Republican") relative to the omitted category (no treatment). Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

When introducing the candidates' party affiliation, as shown in Columns 3 to 6, the treatment doesn't seem to produce a significant effect anymore. As the previous results showed, party affiliation dominates the other two characteristics in respondents' minds. This null result is therefore in line with the idea that the treatment, even if it is successful in increasing the perceived frequency of corruption, is not strong enough to make competence overtake political ideology as the most salient characteristic.

The only exception comes from Democratic respondents when facing a choice between a competent but corrupt Republican candidate and a less competent but more honest Democratic candidate in a low corruption setting (column 5 of Table 1). In this case, the treatment decreases the share of respondents selecting the most corrupt candidate. This opposite effect could be explained by the fact that the treatment, by interacting with the political affiliation of the least honest candidate, provides Democratic respondents an additional reason to not

vote for this politician.[11]

Finally, as the treatment increased the perceived frequency of corruption, I explore whether this led to an increase in support for anti-corruption policies. The results shown in columns 4 to 6 in Table 2 seem to suggest that this isn't the case. As the question asked whether the respondent believed *"the government should allocate more resources to the fight against corruption"*, the null result could be caused by the vagueness of the policies that would be implemented with the additional resources, but also by the inclusion of the government in this process. As people perceive corruption as more common, they might put less trust in the government to solve a problem affecting it. A more detailed exploration of support for a broader set of policies and solutions is needed, but, a first take from this null result is that higher exposure to corruption scandals doesn't automatically translate into a greater anti-corruption sentiment.

[11] It is less clear why there isn't a similar effect in the high-corruption setting (column 6). A hypothesis is that the lower share of respondents selecting the Republican candidate in the control group limits the effect of the treatment.

Table 2: Salience Treatment - Other Outcomes

	Corruption common			Support more resources to fight corruption		
	Overall	Low corruption	High corruption	Overall	Low corruption	High corruption
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Descriptive Statistics (control group)						
Democrat mean	0.59	0.57	0.61	0.58	0.58	0.58
Republican mean	0.63	0.55	0.67	0.48	0.46	0.48
Observations	1388	706	682	1391	707	684
Panel B: Salience Treatment Effect						
Treatment × Democrat	0.07**	0.08*	0.05	0.03	0.03	0.03
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Treatment × Republican	0.04	0.11**	-0.04	0.02	0.08*	-0.05
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Observations	2750	1390	1360	2753	1391	1362
R^2	0.054	0.064	0.055	0.049	0.051	0.053

Notes: The dependent variable in columns 1-3 is an indicator variable equal to 1 when respondents believe that it is *somewhat common* or *very common* for local politicians to accept bribes or embezzle public funds. The dependent variable in columns 4-6 is an indicator variable equal to 1 when respondent *supports* or *strongly supports* the allocation of more resources to the fight against corruption. All regressions include controls for gender, age group, race, income group, employment status, education, and macro-region fixed effects. Coefficients are not reported due to space constraints. Panel A reports the mean of the dependent variables for respondents who saw no treatment separately for Democrats ("Democrat mean") and Republicans ("Republican mean"). Panel B shows the treatment effects of the salience treatment interacted with the respondent's political affiliation ("Treatment × Democrat" and "Treatment × Republican") relative to the omitted category (no treatment). Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4 Voters' Motivations

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to explain, with an open-ended question, what led them to choose Candidate A or Candidate B in the vignette experiment. In this section, I will use these answers to explore how different groups of respondents motivated their choices in different settings. To do so, I followed Lobeck and Støstad (2023) and prompted ChatGPT 4.0, accessed in February 2025, to summarize the open-ended responses.[12] Responses were first divided into subgroups (e.g., answers provided by democratic respondents to the question on why they voted for the most corrupt and competent candidate when Repub-

[12] An emerging literature shows how LLMs outperform human coders in analyzing efficiently textual sources. See, for example, Bermejo et al. (2024).

lican) and then fed, one subgroup at the time, to ChatGPT with the request of summarizing the various answers to provide the two most commons arguments.[13]

In Table 3, I report the two main motivations for voting for the most competent, but more corrupt, and for the most honest, but less competent candidates when they don't have a party affiliation. I don't distinguish between low- and high-corruption settings as the role of salience is to affect the share of people giving more weight to one characteristic or the other, not the reasoning behind the choice.[14] Both when they select the most competent and the most honest candidate, the most used argument to explain their choice is to highlight how competence, or honesty, is more important than the other characteristic. The second most used motivation is instead, in both cases, that they just chose what they considered to be the lesser of two evils. This first set of results is interesting as it suggests that most respondents are convinced by their choice, genuinely giving more weight to the salient characteristic.

Table 3: ChatGPT Summaries - No Party Affiliation

Why voting most corrupt and competent	**Why voting least corrupt and competent**
(i) Candidate A was chosen because, despite being corrupt, they created more jobs and were seen as more effective in benefiting the community.	(i) Less corruption is better, even if it means less effectiveness because honesty and integrity matter more in leadership.
(ii) Many respondents felt that both candidates were equally corrupt, so they prioritized competence and results over the amount of money embezzled.	(ii) Neither candidate was ideal, but when forced to choose, many preferred the lesser of two evils, prioritizing reduced corruption over competency.
Observations: 457	Observations: 518

Notes: On the left column, ChatGPT summaries of respondents' answers to the question: "When you had to choose for which candidate to vote, you decided to vote for candidate A which was both the most competent but also the most corrupt. Could you please let us know what made you take this decision?" On the right column, ChatGPT summaries of respondents' answers to the question: "When you had to choose for which candidate to vote, you decided to vote for candidate B which was both the less corrupt but also the less competent. Could you please let us know what made you take this decision?" Respondents were allowed to leave the text box empty. For this reason, the sample used in this table is smaller than the one from previous analyses.

I now move to the motivations provided for the choice between candidates with their party affiliations. In Table 4, I regroup these motivations by the political affiliation of the respondents and by whether the chosen candidate was from their same party or not.[15]

[13] Additional details of this procedure in Appendix Section A-3.

[14] This is confirmed by the results in Table A-4 that show how the motivations provided in the two settings are identical.

[15] Results for independent respondents are shown in Table A-5.

The first thing to notice is how similar the motivations of Democrats and Republicans are. Among both groups, those who selected the most competent candidate argued how competence is more important than corruption, while those who chose the least corrupt explained how honesty is the most important attribute.

Interestingly, party affiliation is not mentioned in the two most common motivations when selecting a candidate from the opposite party. This is in line with the idea that respondents are focusing on other characteristics when they decide to vote for a candidate with whom they are not politically aligned.

Finally, the most surprising result is that party loyalty appears only as the second most common motivation when explaining why respondents chose the candidate from their same party. As discussed in section 3.2, party affiliation clearly dominates the other characteristics, as more than 80% of respondents end up voting along party lines. Nonetheless, whether consciously or subconsciously, respondents tend to prefer to motivate their choice arguing the importance of one of the other two characteristics. This suggests that respondents are, at least in part, aware that basing your choice just on party allegiance is not the right approach to choosing the best candidate.

Table 4: ChatGPT Summaries - With Party Affiliation

Democratic Respondents	Republican Respondents
Why voting most corrupt and competent when from same party	
(i) Many voted for Candidate A because they believed competence and job creation mattered more than the level of corruption.	(i) Many voters prioritized competence over corruption, believing that a candidate who created more jobs and delivered results was the better choice despite their ethical flaws.
(ii) Others chose Candidate A primarily due to party loyalty, favoring a Democrat over a Republican regardless of other factors.	(ii) Others chose based on party loyalty, aligning with the candidate who matched their political ideology regardless of corruption concerns.
Observations: 284	Observations: 270
Why voting most corrupt and competent when from opposite party	
(i) Many voters prioritized competence and job creation over corruption, believing that more jobs benefited the community despite ethical concerns.	(i) Many respondents prioritized job creation over corruption, believing that a candidate who brought more jobs was the better choice despite ethical concerns.
(ii) Others felt forced to choose between two bad options and selected the candidate they saw as the lesser of two evils.	(ii) Others viewed both candidates as equally corrupt and simply chose the one they felt was more competent or experienced.
Observations: 61	Observations: 59
Why voting least corrupt and competent when from same party	
(i) Many voters prioritized honesty and viewed lower corruption as more important than competence, believing that reducing corruption leads to better governance.	(i) Many respondents prioritized honesty over competency, believing that a less corrupt candidate, even if slightly less effective, would be more trustworthy and better for governance.
(ii) Others based their decision primarily on party affiliation, with many Democrats refusing to support a Republican candidate regardless of the circumstances.	(ii) Others voted along party lines, choosing the candidate who aligned with their political ideology regardless of the corruption allegations.
Observations: 309	Observations: 278
Why voting least corrupt and competent when from opposite party	
(i) Many voters prioritized honesty over competence, believing that a less corrupt candidate, even if less effective, would be a better long-term choice.	(i) Many respondents preferred the less corrupt candidate, believing that honesty and trustworthiness were more important than competency.
(ii) Others felt forced to choose between two flawed candidates and selected the one who embezzled less, viewing it as the lesser of two evils.	(ii) Others felt they had to choose the "lesser of two evils" since both candidates were flawed, with some wishing for a better alternative.
Observations: 46	Observations: 39

Notes: ChatGPT summaries of respondents' answers by their political affiliation and the party affiliation of the candidate, to the following questions: "When you had to choose for which candidate to vote, you decided to vote for candidate A which was both the most competent but also the most corrupt. Could you please let us know what made you take this decision?"; "When you had to choose for which candidate to vote, you decided to vote for candidate B which was both the less corrupt but also the less competent. Could you please let us know what made you take this decision?" Respondents were allowed to leave the text box empty. For this reason, the sample used in this table is smaller than the one from previous analyses.

5 Conclusion

This paper leverages a large-scale survey experiment to investigate why corrupt politicians continue to be elected.

Focusing on the well-studied competence-dishonesty trade-off, I provide evidence that salience plays a crucial role in shaping voters' decisions. A perverse consequence of widespread corruption is that voters shift their attention to other traits, such as competence. In this setting, when corruption is perceived as the norm, competence becomes the salient characteristic. As a result, some voters may end up choosing a corrupt candidate simply because they appear more competent. This dynamic creates a vicious circle, where the normalization of corruption leads voters to deprioritize integrity, ultimately reinforcing the persistence of corruption over time.

When I introduce the political affiliation of the candidates, I find that this attribute strongly dominates all others. The vast majority of both Democrat and Republican respondents choose the candidate from their party, regardless of how corrupt or competent the candidate is. In contrast, Independent respondents remain responsive to the salient characteristic when deciding whom to vote for. This suggests that in highly polarized societies, where voters prioritize party identity over other candidate traits, it becomes even more likely that corrupt politicians will be elected.

While this pattern of party loyalty is evident in the voting behavior, respondents are less likely to explicitly cite partisanship as the reason behind their choice. Instead, they tend to justify their decision by emphasizing other characteristics, such as competence or honesty. This discrepancy suggests a level of normative awareness: voters seem to know their choices should be guided by integrity or ability, but ultimately fall back on party identity.

The salience treatment, designed to mimic increased exposure to corruption scandals, shows how campaigns aimed at raising awareness of corruption might backfire. By making corruption appear more common, the treatment caused competence to become the most salient characteristic, which led more respondents to vote for the most corrupt candidate. In other words, the intended goal of reducing corruption by highlighting its prevalence may have the opposite effect, making voters more likely to support corrupt politicians.

This paper not only shows how salience operates in the political domain and may help explain why voters knowingly support corrupt candidates but also highlights how polarization undermines efforts to promote accountability. Party loyalty, amplified by polarized environments, is a key behavioral factor that must be taken into account when designing effective anti-corruption policies and communication strategies.

References

Anduiza, E., A. Gallego, and J. Muñoz (2013). Turning a blind eye: Experimental evidence of partisan bias in attitudes toward corruption. *Comparative Political Studies 46*(12), 1664–1692.

Arias, E., H. Larreguy, J. Marshall, and P. Querubin (2022). Priors rule: When do malfeasance revelations help or hurt incumbent parties? *Journal of the European Economic Association 20*(4), 1433–1477.

Banerjee, A., D. Green, J. Green, and R. Pande (2010). Can voters be primed to choose better legislators? experimental evidence from rural india. In *Presented and the Political Economics Seminar, Stanford University*.

Banerjee, A., D. P. Green, J. McManus, and R. Pande (2014). Are poor voters indifferent to whether elected leaders are criminal or corrupt? a vignette experiment in rural india. *Political Communication 31*(3), 391–407.

Banerjee, A., S. Kumar, R. Pande, and F. Su (2011). Do informed voters make better choices? experimental evidence from urban india. *Working Paper*.

Bardhan, P. (1997). Corruption and development: a review of issues. *Political corruption*, 321–338.

Bauhr, M. and N. Charron (2018). Insider or outsider? grand corruption and electoral accountability. *Comparative Political Studies 51*(4), 415–446.

Bermejo, V. J., A. Gago, R. H. Gálvez, and N. Harari (2024). Llms outperform outsourced human coders on complex textual analysis. *Working Paper*.

Bobonis, G. J., L. R. C. Fuertes, and R. Schwabe (2010). Does exposing corrupt politicians reduce corruption? *Working Paper*.

Bordalo, P., N. Gennaioli, and A. Shleifer (2012). Salience theory of choice under risk. *The Quarterly journal of economics 127*(3), 1243–1285.

Bordalo, P., N. Gennaioli, and A. Shleifer (2013a). Salience and asset prices. *American Economic Review 103*(3), 623–628.

Bordalo, P., N. Gennaioli, and A. Shleifer (2013b). Salience and consumer choice. *Journal of Political Economy 121*(5), 803–843.

Bordalo, P., N. Gennaioli, and A. Shleifer (2015). Salience theory of judicial decisions. *The Journal of Legal Studies 44*(S1), S7–S33.

Bordalo, P., N. Gennaioli, and A. Shleifer (2022). Salience. *Annual Review of Economics 14*(1), 521–544.

Botero, S., R. Castro Cornejo, L. Gamboa, N. Pavao, and D. W. Nickerson (2021). Are all types of wrongdoing created equal in the eyes of voters? *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties 31*(2), 141–158.

Botero, S., R. C. Cornejo, L. Gamboa, N. Pavao, and D. W. Nickerson (2015). Says who? an experiment on allegations of corruption and credibility of sources. *Political Research Quarterly 68*(3), 493–504.

Canache, D. and M. E. Allison (2005). Perceptions of political corruption in latin american democracies. *Latin American Politics and Society 47*(3), 91–111.

Chang, E. C. (2020). Corruption predictability and corruption voting in asian democracies. *Public Choice 184*(3), 307–326.

Choi, E. and J. Woo (2010). Political corruption, economic performance, and electoral outcomes: a cross-national analysis. *Contemporary Politics 16*(3), 249–262.

Chong, A., A. L. De La O, D. Karlan, and L. Wantchekon (2015). Does corruption information inspire the fight or quash the hope? a field experiment in mexico on voter turnout, choice, and party identification. *The Journal of Politics 77*(1), 55–71.

De Figueiredo, M. F., F. D. Hidalgo, Y. Kasahara, et al. (2011). When do voters punish corrupt politicians? experimental evidence from brazil. *Working Paper*.

De Vries, C. E. and H. Solaz (2017). The electoral consequences of corruption. *Annual Review of Political Science 20*(1), 391–408.

Desierto, D. A. (2023). Corruption for competence. *Economics of Governance 24*(4), 399–420.

Esaiasson, P. and J. Muñoz (2014). Roba pero hace? an experimental test of the competence-corruption tradeoff hypothesis in spain and sweden. *Working Paper*.

Fernández-Vázquez, P., P. Barberá, and G. Rivero (2016). Rooting out corruption or rooting for corruption? the heterogeneous electoral consequences of scandals. *Political science research and methods 4*(2), 379–397.

Ferraz, C. and F. Finan (2008). Exposing corrupt politicians: the effects of brazil's publicly released audits on electoral outcomes. *The Quarterly journal of economics 123*(2), 703–745.

Graf Lambsdorff, J. (2006). *Causes and Consequences of Corruption: What Do We Know from a Cross-Section of Countries?* Edward Elgar Publishing.

Graham, J., J. Haidt, S. Koleva, M. Motyl, R. Iyer, S. P. Wojcik, and P. H. Ditto (2013). Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. Volume 47 of *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, pp. 55–130. Academic Press.

Gupta, S., H. Davoodi, and R. Alonso-Terme (2002). Does corruption affect income inequality and poverty? *Economics of governance 3*, 23–45.

Klašnja, M., N. Lupu, and J. A. Tucker (2021). When do voters sanction corrupt politicians? *Journal of Experimental Political Science 8*(2), 161–171.

Klašnja, M. and J. A. Tucker (2013). The economy, corruption, and the vote: Evidence from experiments in sweden and moldova. *Electoral Studies 32*(3), 536–543.

Klašnja, M. and J. A. Tucker (2013). The economy, corruption, and the vote: Evidence from experiments in sweden and moldova. *Electoral Studies 32*(3), 536–543.

Li, H., L. C. Xu, and H.-f. Zou (2000). Corruption, income distribution, and growth. *Economics & Politics 12*(2), 155–182.

Lobeck, M. and M. N. Støstad (2023). The consequences of inequality: Beliefs and redistributive preferences. *CESifo Working Paper* (10710).

Manzetti, L. and C. J. Wilson (2007). Why do corrupt governments maintain public support? *Comparative political studies 40*(8), 949–970.

Mauro, P. (1995). Corruption and growth. *The quarterly journal of economics 110*(3), 681–712.

Morris, S. D. (1991). *Corruption and politics in contemporary Mexico*. University of Alabama Press.

Pavão, N. (2018). Corruption as the only option: The limits to electoral accountability. *The Journal of Politics 80*(3), 996–1010.

Rosas, G. and L. Manzetti (2015). Reassessing the trade-off hypothesis: How misery drives the corruption effect on presidential approval. *Electoral Studies 39*, 26–38.

Rose-Ackerman, S. (1978). *Corruption: A study in political economy*. Academic press.

Rundquist, B. S., G. S. Strom, and J. G. Peters (1977). Corrupt politicians and their electoral support: some experimental observations. *American Political Science Review 71*(3), 954–963.

Stantcheva, S. (2023). How to run surveys: A guide to creating your own identifying variation and revealing the invisible. *Annual Review of Economics 15*(1), 205–234.

Treisman, D. (2000). The causes of corruption: a cross-national study. *Journal of Public Economics 76*(3), 399–457.

Vera, S. B. (2020). Accepting or resisting? citizen responses to corruption across varying levels of competence and corruption prevalence. *Political Studies 68*(3), 653–670.

Weitz-Shapiro, R. and M. S. Winters (2017). Can citizens discern? information credibility, political sophistication, and the punishment of corruption in brazil. *The Journal of Politics 79*(1), 60–74.

Winters, M. S. and R. Weitz-Shapiro (2013). Lacking information or condoning corruption: When do voters support corrupt politicians? *Comparative Politics 45*(4), 418–436.

Zambrini, F. (2016). Salience and political selection: an experiment on the competence-dishonesty tradeoff. *Master's thesis, Università Bocconi*.

Zechmeister, E. J. and D. Zizumbo-Colunga (2013). The varying political toll of concerns about corruption in good versus bad economic times. *Comparative Political Studies 46*(10), 1190–1218.