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Elections as instruments for punishing bad representatives and selecting good ones

Brian F. Crisp [a, *], Santiago Olivella [b], Joshua D. Potter [a], William Mishler [c, 1]

[a] Department of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis, USA
[b] Department of Political Science, University of Miami, USA
[c] School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona, USA

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ABSTRACT

Many theories of democracy point out that voters make their choices based on two goals: the retrospective assessment of incumbents and the prospective choice between incumbents and challengers. Do voters react to malfeasance on the part of their elected representatives? If they abandon corrupt incumbents, are they able to select more virtuous replacements? In this paper, we assess the effects of corruption on voter loyalty and, conversely, of voter defection on subsequent malfeasance. We examine these relationships with data drawn from 169 elections across 72 countries. Our results show that malfeasance does indeed provoke voter defection, but that electoral volatility is not followed by lower levels of perceived corruption. We conclude by discussing the appropriate interpretation of our results, the future research they suggest, and their meaning for related, emerging literatures.

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1. Introduction

In *Federalist no. 57*, Madison wrote that "the aim of every political constitution is … first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of society, and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust." To put Madison's aims into action, voters must be able to choose wise representatives (selection) and to provide them incentives to remain virtuous (assessment) after they have been elected (Manin et al., 1999a).

In another idealized account of the role of elections, Maravall (2007) explains, "[e]lections work like this. (1) Politicians compete, transmitting prospective messages about their future policies and signals about their competence. (2) Voters select those candidates closer to their ideal policy positions and more able to implement their program. (3) Politicians, once in office, adopt policies and dedicate effort to carry them through. (4) Policies and effort, under particular exogenous conditions, produce outcomes that modify the welfare of citizens. (5) At the time of the next elections voters assess retrospectively such outcomes, and attribute them to policies and effort of the incumbent and to the influence of exogenous conditions. (6) Voters update their preferences about policies and candidates. (7) Voters re-elect or reject the incumbent. Elections, thus, both select and assess."[2]

While Maravall's theory stresses a policy dimension, it is not difficult to imagine "virtuousness" as a second

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: crisp@wustl.edu (B.F. Crisp).

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[2] Both Madison and Maravall, as well as countless others in between, offered their idealized versions so that they could explore the ways in which the relationships they rested upon might fail to come to pass in real democracies. Below we will review some of the challenges involved in using elections as instruments of selection and/or assessment.

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dimension critical to voters[3] or as part of what he identifies as "competence." In empirical terms, scholars have recently begun to focus on whether corruption – as opposed to economic performance or specific legislative outcomes – is a governmental output for which voters hold representatives electorally accountable (Chang et al., 2010; Peters and Welch, 1980; Tavits, 2007).

This depiction of elections as instruments for punishing bad representatives and selecting good ones is normatively appealing and has simple face validity, but both theoretical and empirical works have shown that the steps summarized by Maravall (2007) are fraught with challenges (as he himself discusses in detail). The prospective messages sent by politicians can be noisy or misleading; policy proximity may be one of multiple decision criteria used by voters; voters may lack, for a variety of reasons, knowledge about government outputs; it may not be clear whether or which incumbents are responsible for an outcome; acceptable replacements for underperforming representatives may not be available, etc. In this paper, we will summarize and evaluate some of the challenges facing voters when trying to use their vote choice to retrospectively assess and prospectively select legislators with respect to how corrupt they are perceived to be.

We begin by elaborating on the use of elections as instruments of retrospective assessment and prospective selection, noting several works that have made clear why these tasks may prove challenging if not impossible. As this literature makes clear, reasons abound for why punishing corrupt politicians and selecting virtuous ones may not be a straightforward process. Then, empirically, in order to determine whether elections can serve these dual purposes, we test for a reciprocal relationship between electoral volatility (as captured by the Pedersen Index of vote shares moving between parties) and political corruption (as captured by citizen responses to The Global Corruption Barometer).[4] We estimate Vector Auto Regression (VAR) models designed to account for any reciprocal relationship between the two using data from 169 elections in 72 countries. Whereas the potential for reverse causality is something that typically frustrates scholars, we explicitly focus on this possibility both theoretically and empirically.

We find that, as theories of retrospective democratic accountability would predict, where voters perceive politicians to be corrupt, they take their electoral support elsewhere, thereby increasing electoral volatility. However, contrary to the expectation of prospective selection (screening or mandate sending), the extent of electoral volatility does not reduce (perceptions of) corruption in the future. We conclude by discussing the appropriate interpretation of our results, future research to which they point, and their meaning for emerging literatures.

2. Elections as instruments of assessment and selection

With slightly different terminology, Manin et al., (1999b) offer a characterization of elections similar to the one from Maravall (2007). According to them, "'[m]andates' are particular kinds of signals that are emitted in elections: they constitute a choice among proposals … offered by competing teams of politicians … Once elected, the victorious politicians adopt policies. These policies become transformed into outcomes under the noise of conditions. As the electoral term ends, voters evaluate the outcomes and decide whether or not to retain the incumbent government" (p. 8). As with Maravall's account, voters are both prospectively selecting among options while retrospectively assessing performance. Unfortunately, despite the importance of elections for the functioning of democracy, after some reasoning Manin et al., (1999a) conclude that "citizens' control over politicians is at best highly imperfect in most democracies" (p. 50). Let us briefly summarize some of the reasons why it may be difficult for elections to serve as instruments of retrospective assessment or prospective selection, let alone both.

2.1. Challenges to retrospective assessment

One set of challenges to assessment are identified in the literature on *economic voting*, much of which relies at its heart on an understanding of voting as the practice of holding politicians accountable (Fiorina, 1981; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Kiewit, 2000; Sattler et al., 2008).[5] Voters assess the state of the economy, for example, and make a decision about whether the incumbent government should be rewarded with reelection. These evaluations on the part of individual voters need not necessarily correspond to some underlying objective reality (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). However, debates remain about whether voters accommodate economic constraints imposed on policy makers when the economy is relatively open (Alcañiz and Hellwig, 2011; Hellwig and Samuels, 2007); whether assessments are based on the voters' personal conditions or on general conditions (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000); what balance should be struck between modeling voters as retrospective assessors versus prospective choosers (Alesina and Rosenthal, 1995; Duch and Stevenson, 2008); the clarity with which voters can assign responsibility for an

[3] We discuss in greater detail below why voters might privilege some criteria over policy proximity in their vote choice decision.

[4] Elected officials may be voted out of office for a variety of reasons. Voters may punish incumbents for exogenous shocks (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Anderson, 2000). A new policy dimension might be introduced, dividing groups in the electorate along new axes that result in a drop in support for incumbents (Chhibber and Torcal, 1997). Inexperienced voters after a recent (re)establishment of democratic rule may be uncertain of their options or their preferences over them (Bielasiak, 2002). Given the multitude of sources of vote volatility, in an online appendix we provide a model explaining current perceptions of corruption where we examine the impact vote volatility conditional on past perceptions of corruption so that we can sort out the effect of volatility that follows high levels of past corruption from volatility that follows from other factors. The substantive results of those models do not vary substantially from those reported in the paper. Also in the online appendix, we provide additional models where we explicitly control for other sources of volatility as gleaned from the existing literatures on party systems and on economic predictors of vote choice (in a VARX type model); our substantive findings remain unchanged.

[5] In an experimental setting, Woon and Anderson (2012) found that voters are much more likely to rely on retrospective assessment than on prospective selection, in part because retrospection is easier or less uncertain.

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