

How does clarity of alternatives affect the electoral fortune of corrupt politicians?

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ABSTRACT

This article lays out a theoretical framework for understanding the effects of the clarity of alternatives on corruption voting. Traditional approximations to the question of why corrupt politicians win elections focus on the limited availability of information and voter biases toward in-group candidates. I argue that while citizens are ready to punish corruption, the electoral toll for a corrupt candidate is reduced in settings of unclear electoral choices. I find support for this theoretical framework by examining the accountability enhancing consequences of the clarity of alternatives in Latin America. The results indicate that politicians running for office in settings of weak clarity of alternatives sustain less electoral damage than those running in settings of strong clarity of alternatives. The implication is that party decisions that increase voter uncertainty about the menu of choices contribute to the electoral fortune of corrupt politicians.

1. Introduction

Politicians accused of corruption are often able to retain political power and win elections, both in advanced and developing democracies. While we know a lot about how voter biases and preferences affect electoral accountability for corruption, we know less about the systematic influence that patterns of party competition exert on the electoral fortune of corrupt politicians. This paper examines an alternative reason why questioned politicians are able to win votes despite their widely publicized corrupt record. The central proposition is that informed voters punish corruption leniently because of the lack of clearly identifiable electoral alternatives. That is, uncertainty about the credibility of viable choices makes burdensome for voters the enforcement of electoral penalties on candidates suspected of corruption.

Although scholars typically view the failures of electoral accountability for corruption as a function of misinformation or disinformation about government officials' behavior (e.g., Chang et al. 2010; Ferraz and Finan 2008; Larreguy et al. 2015), researchers in recent years are increasingly documenting systematic variation in corruption voting among informed citizens (e.g., Chong et al., 2015; Klásnja et al., 2021; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013; Boas et al. 2019). These studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of why voters choose to overlook corruption, even when exposed to credible information. However, the contribution has focused mostly on partisan affiliations (Anduiza et al., 2013; Blais et al., 2017), state of the economy (Klásnja

and Tucker, 2013), corruption types (Botero et al., 2019; Fernandez-Vazquez et al., 2016), candidate competence (Vera, 2020; Munoz et al., 2012), and gender (Le Foulon et al., 2021; Reyes-Housholder, 2020). They have therefore left unanswered how institutional features can play a part in narrowing voters' ability and willingness to punish observed corruption.

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for thinking about the extent to which corruption voting depends on the institutional features that reduce political uncertainty. It adopts the concept of the clarity of alternatives (COA), originally developed in the literature on conditional economic voting, as an alternative mechanism through which political institutions influence the way voters respond to performance information, and applies it to the study of corruption voting. This paper defines COA as voters' ability to anticipate viable and predictable parties, and argues that the effect of corruption on voting is enhanced by the COA.

To illustrate how variation in the COA influences the potential for electoral accountability for corruption, I use both cross-national panel data and within-country individual-level data from Latin America. First, I examine cross-national electoral data and show that political uncertainty about the menu of choices is a real problem for voters but also that it varies consistently with levels of corruption. Next, I complement the observational analysis with experimental evidence from Colombia and Peru, two multiparty democracies in Latin America characterized by uninstitutionalized party systems with varying levels of competition. The experimental evidence shows that an exogenous corruption

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indicator is associated with less electoral damage to candidates running for office in settings of weak COA than in settings of strong COA.

These results make two contributions. First, they contribute to an emerging literature on corruption that highlights the role of clean options in voters' attitudes toward corrupt behavior (Agerberg, 2019; Pavao, 2018). These studies have found that voters overlook corruption accusations when they think other parties are also corrupt. This paper extends upon such work by considering the relevance of system-level features of party competition. It offers a scheme to classify electoral settings by the COA, which captures the institutional characteristics of an election. This paper then assesses how the extent to which an election facilitates the identifiability of alternatives shapes the opportunities to punish corrupt politicians and, crucially, affects the aggregate levels of corruption. The combination of two experimental studies and an observational study sets this paper apart from others because it allows describing why electoral accountability for corruption fails in weak COA settings and how it can ultimately influence the macro-levels of corruption in large sample of democracies.

Second, the results are consistent with the theoretical arguments that emphasize the role of political institutions in economic voting (e.g., Anderson 2000, 2007; Duch et al., 2008; Hellwig and Samuels 2007; Powell and Guy, 1993). This paper provides novel experimental evidence that the clarity of alternatives (COA) is a critical accountability mechanism independent from the clarity of responsibility, which is consistent with such approaches. As Tavits (2007) puts it: "it is not only important for the voters to easily identify those who are responsible for government performance, but it is also important to have clear alternatives available when voters seek to throw incumbents out of office" (Tavits, 2007, p. 221). Nevertheless, there has been little experimental evidence in support of the COA, which is a second hurdle voters face when applying electoral penalties to corrupt politicians who have been directly blamed for corruption. The paper fills this gap by showing that corruption does not equally damage all politicians' electoral fortune to whom responsibility for corruption is easily attributed and that the COA explains this additional source of variation.

2. The puzzle: party competition and electoral accountability for corruption

There is widespread scholarly agreement that the structure of electoral offer matters for electoral accountability. Studies of accountability for corruption have demonstrated that voters choose to overlook corruption when they lack clean options. Well-established literature on conditional voting has also confirmed that having numerous government parties is detrimental to the clarity of responsibility, thereby decreasing the likelihood of economic and corruption voting. However, this literature assumes that when voters seek to throw out a corrupt party, there are alternatives available. In this paper, I advance a theory about the clarity of alternatives (COA), and propose that party competition features that reduce uncertainty about the available alternatives shape voter responses to corruption. To my knowledge, the intuition that the voting calculus of citizens is interwoven with the structure of the electoral offer, a fundamental theoretical insight in the voting literature, has not yet been directly examined in corruption voting studies.

The empirical research has shown that having a clean choice is vital for corruption voting. Voters do not actively oppose corrupt politicians when they perceive corruption to be too ingrained in the political elite to be effectively combated. In highly corrupt contexts, citizens expect so little from their representatives that they cannot conceive of a clean standard for judging a case of corrupt behavior (Pavao, 2018). The electoral landscape is such that corruption is not a distinctive quality among electoral options on which voters can base their voting decisions. Reinforcing the thesis of corruption voting as a product of clean choices, Agerberg (2019) also showed that voters will punish corruption when offered an explicitly clean option. In other words, the way voters experience elections and perceive the electoral offer in highly corrupt

environments influences the fundamental operation of electoral accountability.

Research has also repeatedly shown that people vote poorly-performing incumbents out of office less often when the responsibility for government outcomes is spread across multiple parties (Duch et al., 2008; 2006; Duch and Raymond, 2007; Powell and Guy, 1993). For instance, economic voting is less likely when the government is composed of multiple parties in a parliamentary system, or when the government is divided between one party controlling the executive branch and another one controlling the legislative branch in presidential systems (Powell and Guy, 1993; Hobolt et al., 2013; Rudolph, 2003). The responsibility attribution framework has been applied to policy issues (De Vries et al., 2011), as well as non-policy, valence considerations such as corruption (Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits, 2016; Tavits, 2007). In their corruption study, Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits (2016) showed that governments with unified control of policymaking are more likely to see a nation's state of corruption as a determinant of the vote.

The existing literature assumes that a precondition related to the electoral context holds: namely, that voters are capable of discerning viable electoral choices. In addition to assessing whether the incumbent government is to blame for observed corruption, voters need to consider the alternatives available to them in the party system. The problem is that voters in developing democracies cannot always discriminate among options because parties are often volatile, their party reputations are flimsy, and the uncertainty about the menu of choices is high. In the words of Anderson (2000, p. 155), "not all systems provide clearcut or easily predictable alternatives." In this paper, I adapt the framework of the COA for the study of corruption voting.¹

3. The theory: clarity of alternatives and party competition

The COA is a crucial component of electoral accountability for corruption in developing countries. Party systems in developing democracies are often volatile, and elections not always competitive. As a result, voters cannot often anticipate viable and predictable parties that can credibly commit to fighting corruption. I argue that voters will have more significant opportunities to hold corrupt candidates effectively accountable when the COA is strong. In contrast, a pure sanctioning strategy of corruption voting will be less prevalent among citizens when parties are less stable and less competitive. These two dimensions of party competition, stability and competitiveness, will affect corruption voting.

The COA is key to electoral accountability for corruption in emerging democracies because voters' uncertainty with the menu of choices is particularly prevalent in these settings. In emerging democracies in developing countries, "party systems are more fluid –with identifications, programs, and electoral options all subject to recurrent shifts" (Bustikova and Zechmeister, 2017, p. 92). Voting behavior studies, however, have underestimated the importance of political uncertainty that impairs citizens' ability to coordinate collective action in developing democracies (Lupu and Riedl, 2013). Uncertainty with the menu of choices is one of the most compelling institutional constraints voters in developing democracies face when attempting to coordinate a vote against public office abuses.

A key component of the COA is the stability of party competition. Comparative studies of political parties highlight the informational role of well-institutionalized party systems. Predictable parties can credibly commit to fighting corruption because they have a more established

¹ The COA framework is consistent with the general literature on electoral accountability assumes a rational voter will evaluate a candidate retrospectively to make prospective decisions (Ashworth, 2012). In that sense, the COA framework can potentially be applied to the study of accountability for other issues, such as crime or unemployment. However, the analyses of these other issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

brand and clear reputation, which enhance the informational value of party labels and the credibility of their promises (Schleiter and Voznaya, 2016). Party systems in emerging democracies, however, are characterized by high levels of volatility (e.g., Kreuzer and Pettai 2003; Mozaffar and Scarritt 2005; Roberts and Wibbels 1999; Tavits 2005) and low institutionalization (e.g., Dix 1992; Kuenzi and Lambright 2001; Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Randall and Svasand 2002; Stockton 2001). Under these circumstances, voters are more skeptical of party promises and less ideologically attached to party labels. It is also very difficult for skeptical and distrusting voters to conceive a partisan alternative to coordinate an opposition vote in these settings.

In addition to stability, highly competitive patterns of competition are also crucial to electoral accountability. Elections in emerging democracies do not always offer viable opposition parties, which worsen voters' inability to anticipate parties as credible political alternatives to corruption. In some subnational enclaves political alternation has not taken hold, and in dominant party subnational systems the electoral connection is fragile or non-existent (Gibson, 2005; Giraudy, 2010; Hiskey and Moseley, 2018). But even in multiparty systems, the fluctuation in the closeness of elections is such that voters are sometimes unable to find viable opposition parties. Competitive party systems can help make information and effective choices available to the electorate (Schleiter and Voznaya, 2014). Elections that are not minimally competitive certainly preclude a meaningful vote against poorly performing incumbents. As a result, uncompetitive races compound the impossibility of anticipating credible options.

These two minimal conditions, stability and competitiveness, are particularly critical in settings of high corruption where clean alternatives cannot be taken for granted. For voters to begin identifying the integrity of their choices, parties need to be at least competitive and minimally stable. Establishing the identity of available choices requires parties distinguishable enough to embody a legitimate political actor with a distinct brand that is willing and capable of solving the problem salient in voters' minds. In contrast, when the minimal requirements of stability and competitiveness are not met, voters have negligible opportunities for punishing a corruption politician, even if blame attribution was clearly established.²

This focus on COA does not mean that the clarity of responsibility is an unimportant factor contributing to corruption voting. The clarity of responsibility and the COA are two separate mechanisms through which political institutions affect voters' attitudes toward corruption in developing democracies. While the two are empirically difficult to separate, the COA is an analytically different obstacle voters face when applying electoral penalties to corrupt politicians. Rather than referring to the structures in government that disperse power and thus blur political responsibility for a corruption crisis, the COA instead relates to the dynamics of the electoral offer that underlie political uncertainty, which might cloud voters' ability to discern political alternatives to corruption. In fact, Anderson (2007) has already stated that the "clarity of responsibility really matters only when voters perceive viable alternatives to the incumbent" (2007, p. 284). This paper therefore focuses on the COA because although the problem of the clarity of alternatives (COA) has been recognized in the field of comparative political behavior, it has not been adequately conceptualized or theorized.

In sum, the theory of electoral accountability for corruption advanced in this paper focuses on the role that the structure of electoral choices has on voters' responses to corruption. The characteristics of party systems may interact with individuals' political preferences in a way that affects the electoral fortune of corrupt politicians. While voters might be generally inclined to punish corrupt politicians, the extent to

² In addition to competitiveness, ideological proximity might play a role in viability (Elia and Schwandt-Bayer, 2021), especially in democracies where programmatic linkages are more prevalent and voters engage in ideological or policy voting.

which they are able to exercise their disappointment with corrupt politicians is limited by the availability of electoral alternatives to corruption. When the COA is weak, voters will reject corrupt politicians at a lower rate than when the COA is strong.

The next section offers a scheme that classifies electoral settings by the extent to which they facilitate the identifiability of electoral alternatives.

4. The clarity of alternatives in developing democracies

I define the COA as a quality of the electoral environment that reduces uncertainty about the credibility of party choices. A setting with *weak* COA is one in which voters cannot make effective choices among clearly distinguishable parties. The COA thus varies along two dimensions of party competition in an electoral democracy: the degree of electoral competitiveness and the stability of the electoral offer. Both dimensions are important for accountability because they contribute to decreasing uncertainty about the menu of choices.³ That is, a situation of *strong* COA emerges when two necessary and sufficient conditions are met: high stability (i.e., voters in a district select from among firm and predictable choices), and high competitiveness (i.e., voters in a district select from among viable and feasible alternatives). In contrast, a situation of *weak* COA emerges when both conditions are deficient.⁴

These dimensions of inter-party competition represent two necessary components of the concept of COA. Whenever the party system offers a stable pattern of interaction of parties, and this competition is contested enough to offer viable alternatives with real chances of winning, the opportunities for punishing corrupt politicians increase. The main idea behind the concept of COA is, therefore, that clarity can be improved with both stability and competitiveness. When political parties seem viable, voters may find in them relevant electoral choices. Conversely, elections that favor the incumbent might not undermine accountability if political parties are stable and if well-known options remain open. The theoretical framework thus specifies two separate dynamics of party competition, competitiveness and stability, as important constituents of the COA.⁵

4.1. A typology of clarity of alternatives

Placing a party system along the continuum of each of these two dimensions will help us determine the opportunities that the system produces for electoral accountability for corruption. As Fig. 1 shows, voters will face fewer opportunities for accountability in electoral systems classified as having Type I weak COA (low-low quadrant), and voters will face greater opportunities for accountability in settings classified as providing strong or moderate types of COA (low-high, high-low, and high-high quadrants). Next, I describe how party politics works in each quadrant and how these patterns of party competition restrict or enhance electoral accountability for corruption.

4.1.1. Type I: weak clarity of alternatives

We should expect that electoral accountability for corruption suffers the most in a setting of Type I COA (i.e., low-low quadrant). This type of

³ A district is said to be high on the first dimension, stability, when voters in a district select from among firm and predictable choices (i.e., low volatility), and a district is high on the second dimension, competitiveness, when voters in a district select from among viable and feasible alternatives (i.e., close race).

⁴ It is enough for one of the two conditions (low competitiveness or low stability) to be absent for a case to fall outside of the set of weak COA cases. When one of the two conditions is not met, intermediate types of COA emerge.

⁵ These two dimensions are different in nature too, as the competitiveness dimension is a static feature of elections (occurring at one point in time), whereas the stability dimension is a dynamic characteristic (occurring across time).

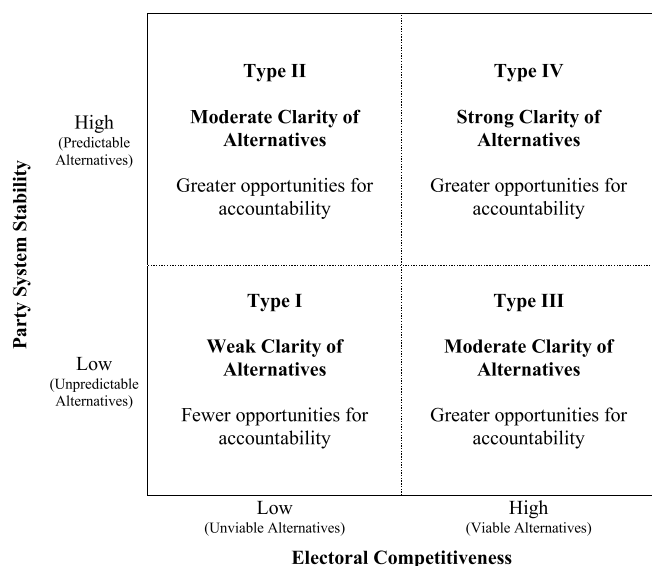


Fig. 1. Theoretical types of clarity of alternatives (COA) in developing democracies.

setting appears in the lower left corner of Fig. 1 and represents an environment of weakly competitive elections and unpredictable electoral alternatives. When uncompetitive elections correspond with unstable competition, this electoral setting will offer voters only unstable and unviable partisan choices. Therefore, minimal opportunities for electoral accountability can be expected in this situation.

The joint deficiency of the two dimensions of party competition—competitiveness and stability—increases uncertainty about electoral options and diminishes incentives for voter coordination, thereby undermining voters' ability to effectively punish a corrupt politician. Type I (weak) COA makes voter coordination harder and it signals to voters that a vote against a corrupt politician might go to waste. Therefore, the risk of a corrupt politician's electoral survival increases in a setting of weak COA because voters cannot identify viable or predictable alternatives to support.

4.1.2. Type II: moderate clarity of alternatives due to high stability

A second type of electoral setting appears in the upper left corner (i.e., high-low quadrant). In this cell, a district is high on stability but low on competitiveness. High levels of electoral stability imply predictable party alternatives with a track record or recognizable party brand. In this setting, there are predictable parties, even though some of these alternatives may not have realistic chances of winning in the given race.⁶ As a result, this electoral setting increases the opportunity for electoral accountability relative to a setting with weak COA, given that it offers predictable options with established reputations.

This stability dimension is particularly important in new democracies, because not every party system provides easily predictable party alternatives (Mainwaring, 2018). Firm and steady electoral alternatives are particularly important for corruption voting, because these are types of political entities with long-term horizons who are more likely to invest in efforts to curb corruption.

4.1.3. Type III: moderate clarity of alternatives due to high competitiveness

A third type of electoral setting appears in the bottom right corner (i.e., low-high quadrant). In this cell, the opportunities for accountability also increase relative to a cell with weak COA, but in this case due to

high levels of competitiveness. In this type of electoral district, the competitiveness condition is high, but the stability condition is low. This means that viable alternatives are present, but they are not highly predictable (i.e., they do not have an established reputation). Nevertheless, viable alternatives increase the opportunity for accountability relative to a case of weak COA, where alternatives lack both stability and competitiveness.

The competitiveness dimension is important for the COA because when political opposition presents as a viable contender, voters may find in them a meaningful opportunity to cast a vote against the least preferred candidate. Competitiveness implies that uncertainty will diminish too, because close races will involve greater scrutiny of candidates. Moreover, viable contenders will facilitate voter coordination, increasing not only voter perception that a selected party will have a strong mandate but also that once in office they might not need to make policy concessions to other parties when forging government coalitions.

4.1.4. Type IV: strong clarity of alternatives

The fourth type of electoral setting appears in the upper right corner (i.e., high-high quadrant). This cell combines both high competitiveness and high stability, therefore representing another instance of increased opportunities for electoral accountability relative to a district without clear alternatives. In this ideal setting, voter uncertainty is the lowest possible because parties are highly competitive and stable at the same time. In other words, party competition in this ideal context is vibrant, open, and energetic. While parties have established brands, their positions are not too dominant as to stifle competition, instead they regularly face healthy opposition parties that have good chances of winning. Notice that COA is agnostic about the integrity of opposition parties.

In general, the COA can lead to different opportunities for electoral accountability for corruption. By combining two relevant features of party systems in developing democracies—competitiveness and stability—we can identify four types of COA offering different opportunities for accountability. I hypothesize that the opportunities for accountability are the weakest in Type I COA, and strongest in the other types of COA.

5. Empirical strategy

In order to investigate how the clarity of alternatives shapes electoral accountability and corruption, I use both observational and experimental methods. First, I use cross-national panel data from Latin America to determine the frequency of elections in each type of clarity of alternatives, describe the cases of national elections characterized by weak clarity of alternatives, and evaluate whether Type I (weak) COA is strongly correlated with high levels of corruption. If my COA theory is correct, and COA does in fact reduce opportunities for electoral accountability, we should expect to see that there is a macro-level relationship between corruption and COA. One downside of this observational data, however, is that the analysis does not provide direct evidence of the individual-level mechanism linking corruption levels to COA.

I complement the observational study with experimental evidence from Colombia and Peru, which shows the mechanism of the COA at work. In particular, I test whether an exogenous corruption indicator is associated with less electoral damage to candidates running for office in settings of weak COA than in settings of strong or moderate COA. The exogenous corruption indicator is manipulated through a survey experiment that randomly assigns some respondents to a corrupt or an honest candidate. The two experiments are important as they show how corruption voting is lower in weak COA settings, but they also come with a limitation. I use pre-treatment electoral variables to measure COA, as it is not a randomized treatment. To address concerns about the lack of exogenous variation in COA, I carefully analyze potential confounders and discard the possibility that the observed COA effects are an artifact of other institutional factors systematically dampening corruption

⁶ Remember that low competitiveness here denotes elections won by a landslide; it does not preclude contestation.

voting.

While the limitations of an observed COA indicator still hold, the experimental design has several advantages: a) it controls for macro-institutional factors that could make corruption exposure more likely and thus corruption voting too, b) it rules out the possibility that publicized corruption would not directly involve the representative in question muddling blame attribution, and c) it offers a direct measurement of individual level electoral support for corrupt leaders rather than indirect evidence from observed corruption outcomes.

In conclusion, the two components of the research design complement each other and alleviate the weakness that each might have in isolation. The paired experiments allow for an individual-level description of how citizens living in weak COA settings evaluate corrupt leaders in the context of a survey. The observational study allows for a test of the consequences of reduced electoral accountability on the macro-levels of corruption in a large sample of democracies. Finally, I address the limitations of the lack of exogenous variation in COA with a careful analysis of potential confounders in the experimental section. While none of these approaches provides clean causal evidence on their own, in conjunction, they are informative of the relationship between COA and electoral accountability.

6. Corruption and electoral uncertainty

To illustrate how these dynamics work in emerging democracies, in this section I use panel cross-national electoral data from Latin American countries. Latin America is an interesting region to observe variation in the competitiveness and stability dimensions of the COA as it is well known for fluid party systems and weak party identities (Lupu, 2011; Mainwaring, 2018).

To measure corruption, the abuse of public office for private gain, I use the political corruption index calculated by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al., 2020). Corruption is a notoriously difficult concept to measure because of its hidden nature, hence researchers rely mostly on perceptions to gauge corruption. The V-Dem project uses country expert surveys to measure corruption perceptions in various spheres of the government (executive, legislature, judiciary and public sector) and offers a summary index of political corruption that is comparable over time. This index captures the breadth of political corruption, thus reflecting the extent to which power is exercised for private gain, including different types of corruption in different areas and levels of the polity realm. The appendix provides summary statistics and confirms that the results are robust to alternative measures of corruption.

To measure competitiveness and stability, I use vote-share data from Latin America gathered from official electoral management bodies (EMBs). Using the Latin American Presidential and Legislative Elections (LAPALE) database (Cohen et al., 2018), I calculated measures of competitiveness and stability for 18 countries spanning 40 years, from democratic transitions to current times. First, competitiveness is calculated by the margin of victory, that is, the difference between the share of votes cast for the winning candidate and the second-place candidate in an election. Taking the percentage point lead that a candidate or party has in an election over the candidate or party ranked second allows me to determine if there was any moderately viable challenger. Second, stability of the party system is measured by applying the classic Pedersen formula to capture electoral volatility. This index provides a measure of net aggregate vote shifts from one election to another, which is key to capturing voter uncertainty with the menu of choice. To make both measures comparable, I rescale them to range from 0 to 1, where higher values denote higher stability and higher competitiveness.

The key independent variable is a dummy variable characterizing the type of clarity of alternatives (COA). Using information on the levels of competitiveness and stability of the electoral offer, I create four dichotomous variables to capture the four possible combinations. For instance, for Type I COA, the dichotomous variable equals 1 when both

levels of competitiveness and stability fall below average, and 0 otherwise.⁷ Fig. A2 in the appendix reveals the distribution of COA types in national elections in Latin American between the 1980s and 2018. Type IV COA is slightly more frequent than the other COA types.

I begin the analysis with a simple comparison of the distributions of party system competitiveness and stability. Fig. 2 shows that the two dimensions of the COA do not correlate, as assumed by the necessary and sufficient conditions structure of the concept. From the results, it is clear that some Latin American countries may have highly competitive elections but the party system could be unstable, and thus reduce the COA for voters. Likewise, some countries may exhibit highly stable party system but electoral races may have a foregone outcome, which would reduce the COA too. As a result, both off-diagonal cases would be moderate types of COA, and these elections will fail to deliver the full range of opportunities for voters to identify viable and credible alternatives to corruption. These results echo the theoretical types of COA presented in the previous section.

National cases illustrate the political dynamics in each quadrant. While a majority of presidential and legislative elections fall on the high competitiveness and high stability quadrant, many national elections belong to the three quadrants possessing relatively scarce opportunities for electoral accountability. For instance, the presidential election of Peru in 2011 is a case in the lower right quadrant, where the value of party system stability is low but competitiveness is high. The presidential election in Venezuela in 1983, on the other hand, is a case of high stability and low competition on the upper left quadrant. Indeed, AD won elections by a landslide in 1983, before the collapse of the party system in Venezuela. Finally, the worst case for accountability, the lower left quadrant is represented by the 1994 Brazilian presidential election, a case of both low competition and low stability. The appendix provides a table with a sample of national elections in each quadrant.

To examine how the COA relate to corruption, I run two-way fixed effects regression models that control for time trends as well as measured and unmeasured time-invariant confounders (Imai and Kim, 2019). I include a number of common control variables that have been shown to affect corruption in previous cross-national work—democracy, economic development, and decentralization. Democracy is said to

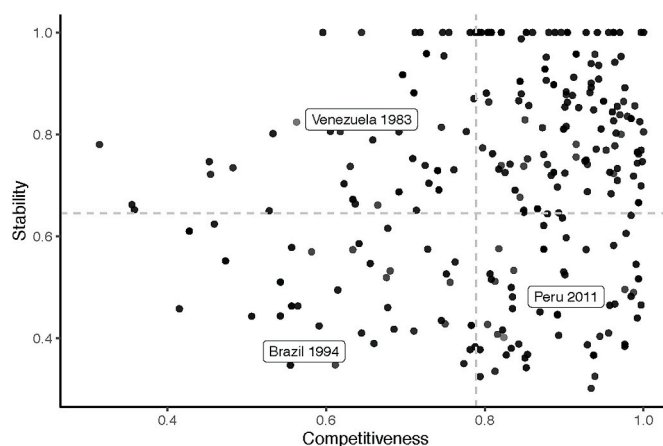


Fig. 2. Two dimensions of the clarity of alternatives: competitiveness and stability.

⁷ My theory focuses on Type I COA because this is the weakest of all COA types, and it is where voters cannot make effective choices. I opt for a categorical variable because the necessary and sufficient conditions structure of the concept of COA does not provide a justification for a continuous measure (Goertz, 2006; Collier et al., 2012).

reduce corruption through its increased levels of monitoring and horizontal accountability (Montinola and Jackman, 2002; Treisman, 2007; Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman, 2005). In addition, different democratic constitutions are thought to vary in the extent to which they limit opportunities for corruption. Thus, political systems that decentralize power and those that feature executive presidents increase the number of institutional veto players in the policy process. To control for the effect of decentralization on corruption (Gerring and Thacker, 2004), I use a decentralization indicator from the 2017 Database of Political Institutions (DPI) that captures whether state/province governments are locally elected (Cruz et al., 2018). Finally, to control for economic development, one of the most important predictors of corruption (Treisman, 2007), I use the log GDP per capita from the Maddison Project Database reported in the V-Dem Project data.

In Table 1, I report the results from four models of corruption in Latin America. If our theory of electoral accountability is correct, we should observe the greatest amount of corruption in settings with weak COA. The first model shows that Type I COA significantly relates to higher levels of corruption. A point increase in Type I COA, relative to a baseline of the other COA types, is related to a 0.029 increase in corruption. That is, elections with weaker COA present higher levels of corruption than settings of stronger COA. As expected, we can observe a positive correlation between corruption and weak COA. I show the relationship is robust across multiple model specifications, including one-way fixed effects, in the appendix.

These results are in line with the expectation that there is macro-level relationship between corruption and the COA. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that problems with responsibility attribution and not problems with the COA explain the lack of accountability for corruption in developing democracies. In the same vein as the COA, the underlying assumption of the clarity of responsibility is that voting is context-dependent. Clarity of responsibility refers to the unified control of government over policymaking, which could increase electoral accountability (Powell and Guy, 1993). The second model thus introduces a control for the clarity of responsibility, captured by the majority status of government, as proposed by Schwandt-Bayer and Tavits (2016) in their study of the accountability for corruption. It confirms that weak COA still significantly correlates with higher corruption when controlling for the clarity of responsibility. Specifically, going from other COA types to Type I COA is related to a 0.024 increase in corruption.

A possible objection to these results is that we cannot discard reverse causality between corruption and the COA. It is possible that COA is a result, not a cause, of reduced levels of corruption. For instance, if voters

are constantly throwing out corrupt incumbents, we could expect to see more electoral instability. Moreover, high corruption levels could still be associated with COA settings through the effect of clarity of responsibility institutions on politicians, not through voting behavior. To address these issues, in the next section, I show that when we control for clarity of responsibility in an experiment, by clearly assigning corruption to a single candidate, the electoral accountability still fails to materialize in settings of weak COA. More importantly, the exogenously varying corruption attribute that the experiment randomly assigns to respondents allows us to ascertain that corruption voting is the outcome, not the cause, of the COA.

7. Clarity of alternatives and accountability for corruption

Having established that weak COA settings are characterized by lower corruption, this section presents experimental evidence of the causal mechanism at work, corruption voting. The survey experimental evidence comes from two multiparty democracies in Latin America, Peru and Colombia. The purpose of this analysis is to provide micro-level evidence of the relationship between the COA and an exogenously-driven estimate of corruption voting. The measure of corruption voting comes from randomly exposing survey respondents to corrupt and honest candidates, and then inquiring respondents about their likely support. By randomizing the corrupt profiles of candidates, I am able to estimate the average causal effect of corruption accusations on voters' reported electoral support.⁸

Colombia and Peru provide two ideal settings to explore the relationship between COA and corruption voting. They are two Latin American countries with similar multiparty systems and weak partisan identities. In both countries, candidate-centered elections should make politicians individually accountable to voters (Carey and Soberg Shuggart, 1995; Crisp et al., 2014). Moreover, weak partisanship should make candidate traits and valence issues like corruption a relevant determinant of electoral support (Bustikova and Zechmeister, 2016; Carlin et al., 2015; Lupu, 2014). Nevertheless, given the episodes of electoral impunity of politicians associated with crime that these countries have lived through in the past decades, Colombia and Peru also embody the paradox of unpopular corruption but popular corrupt leaders.⁹ Finally, Colombia and Peru share with other Latin American countries that they have undergone processes of party system deinstitutionalization. Although the decline of traditional parties has been less dramatic and less abrupt in Colombia, the disconnect between local and national party politics is an important commonality between the two.

7.1. Within country design

An important advantage of the within-country design in this pair of experimental studies is that it allows me to hold constant the effects of macro-institutional factors that could be associated with the outcome we desire to account for, electoral accountability for corruption. These macro-level confounders include the form of government, the electoral system, the level of decentralization, or the strength of democratic institutions.

⁸ The experiment was designed by the author as part of a larger project investigating the impact of corruption on citizens' political behavior in Latin America. See Appendix for a detailed description of the experimental setup and survey samples.

⁹ For example, in spite of blatant evidence of corruption during his ten-year tenure between 1990 and 2000, the Peruvian former president Alberto Fujimori has remained popular until today, and his political heir Keiko Fujimori has led one of the most successful parties in the 2010s. Similarly, in Colombia, a majority of legislators investigated for corruption were reelected to the upper and lower chambers of congress in 2006, after the massive revelations of electoral campaign financing flowing from the Colombian paramilitaries.

Table 1

Two-way fixed effects regression estimates for corruption.

	Dependent variable: Political corruption	
	(1)	(2)
Type I COA	0.029*** (0.011)	0.024** (0.011)
Clarity of Responsibility		0.0002* (0.0001)
Democracy Level	-0.012*** (0.002)	-0.012*** (0.002)
GDP per capita (log)	-0.080*** (0.017)	-0.078*** (0.017)
Decentralization	0.039*** (0.020)	0.064*** (0.014)
Observations	1067	1043
Unit fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Number of units	32	32
R ²	0.347	0.379
Adjusted R ²	0.229	0.332

Note: Period 1978–2017. Clustered standard errors by unit. Unit and time fixed effect estimates omitted from table. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Moreover, the present design also allows for a direct measurement of corruption voting, which complements the cross-national evidence presented in the previous section. While the quantitative analysis established the negative relationship between the structure of the political offer and corruption, it could not directly observe voting preferences against corruption. The experimental design in this section, therefore, aims to open the black box of causality and observe to what extent the electoral setting influences voter attitudes toward corruption. To do so, it uses an exogenously-driven corruption voting indicator measured at the individual level. By randomly assigning information to voters about the bribe-taking behavior of a politician and then measuring voting attitudes for corrupt and clean candidates, the coding of electoral support allows for a direct measurement of corruption voting. Thus, in this design, corruption voting will be stripped out of institutional factors leading to higher corruption.

More importantly, the effects of responsibility attribution are controlled by design. The main experimental manipulation is individual corrupt behavior, eliminating any ambiguity with regards to responsibility. Having respondents be treated with a corruption accusation attached to a singular politician makes this design capable of detecting a psychological effect of the dynamics of inter-party competition beyond its influence on voter capacity to assign responsibility. Any evidence of a conditioning effect of party competition structure on voting against a corrupt candidate in this design can, therefore, be confidently attributed to weak clarity of alternatives, not to voters' difficulty in assigning responsibility for corruption.

7.2. Experimental setup and measurement

To measure electoral support for corrupt politicians, I use respondents' answers to a survey question about the likelihood of support for a vignette candidate who is randomly described to have a corrupt or honest record. The dependent variable of vote intention is measured by a continuous variable ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 represents 'highly unlikely' to vote for vignette candidate and 7 is 'highly likely' to vote for vignette candidate. For ease of analysis, I re-scale it to a variable taking a minimum of 0 when the likelihood of supporting a hypothetical candidate is the lowest and 100 when this likelihood is the highest.

The independent variable is a corruption accusation on the candidate's record. Corruption is portrayed as bribes in exchange for public contracts because bribery in public procurement is one of the most common and severe types of corruption in Latin America (Morris and Blake, 2010; Rotberg, 2019). In the recent Lava Jato scandal that involved public officials in over a dozen Latin American countries, several politicians in Colombia and Peru were found to have received bribes and illegal campaign donations for helping Odebrecht, a Brazilian construction firm, win bids for construction projects. In addition, I chose to identify the source of the corruption accusation as an international organization because existing literature on credibility of information indicates that many national monitoring agencies are confronted with counter-accusations of politicization.¹⁰

To measure the COA, I use the two aforementioned dimensions of party competition: party system stability and electoral competitiveness.

¹⁰ For instance, Botero et al. (2019) investigate whether a newspaper, a local NGO, or a judicial source is more credible, and they find that citizens in Colombia see newspaper reports of corruption as more serious accusations than reports brought by the judiciary or by a local NGO. In line with the concerns about the politicization of the sources, Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013) find that federal audits in Brazil are seen as more credible sources than accusations brought by opposition parties. Therefore, to reduce the chances that respondents might dismiss my corruption treatment because of a national source's suspected political motivations, I opted to attribute the corruption accusation to an international organization that would be removed from national politics.

Given the spatial unevenness of party competition in both countries, I take advantage of within-country variation in stability and competitiveness to identify electoral districts of weak COA.¹¹ I calculate a binary variable of COA that takes the value of 1 if party system stability or electoral competitiveness falls below the national mean (weak clarity), and 0 otherwise (moderate and strong clarity).¹² In Colombia, 6 of 33 departments fall into the category of weak COA while in Peru, 5 of 25 regions offer weak COA (see Appendix for a list of departments by COA type.)

The indicators I use to operationalize electoral competitiveness and party system stability are the same I used in the previous empirical section, the margin of victory and electoral volatility. To build the electoral competitiveness index at the subnational level, I calculate the mean margin of victory in presidential and legislative elections in the two most recent elections.¹³ The margin of victory is calculated as the percentage of votes for the winning party minus the percentage won by the second-place party. In Colombia the average district-level margin of victory goes from a minimum of 6.6 to a maximum of 28.3, and in Peru the range is 7.7–33.6. I subtract the victory margin between the top two parties from 100, such that the measure varies along the full 0–100 interval, with higher values indicating more a competitive race (tight elections). This metric captures whether there was a serious contender in the election.

To measure the stability of the party system, I calculate electoral volatility of each electoral district in the two countries using voting results from the past two legislative and presidential elections. To construct electoral volatility at the subnational level, I follow the standard Pedersen index. This index is calculated by taking sum of the absolute changes in vote shares divided by two. The threshold of inclusion was zero, meaning that all small parties are included in the calculation.¹⁴ The treatment of splits, merges, and name changes follows a "relaxed linkage" method (Bertoa et al., 2017), such that parties are linked to their largest successor or predecessor whenever information of party continuity is available. As a result, the district-level average volatility in Colombia ranges from 26.6 to 42.1, and in Peru from 26.2 to 56.8. This measure captures the total amount of change experienced by all individual parties in a party system.¹⁵ The appendix provides summary statistics and a detailed description of the aggregation procedures.

7.3. Analysis

To understand how the COA works, I examine how differences in corruption treatment effects vary across districts of Type I COA versus other types of COA. I argue that voters' opportunities for electoral accountability are reduced the most in settings where party competition offers neither predictable nor viable alternatives. Therefore, I estimate this heterogeneous treatment effect of corruption in a regression framework with a treatment-by-covariate interaction. This analysis should be interpreted as the heterogeneous treatment effect of corruption with COA as a moderator indicator.

¹¹ See appendix for a detailed description of district-level variance of party system competitiveness and stability in Colombia and Peru.

¹² I used competitiveness and stability to measure the COA rather than an attitudinal measure of the perceptions of the alternatives because the concept calls for a measurement that relies on the characteristics of the electoral setting. This operationalization of the COA also allows for consistency with the observational study, which relies on cross-national panel data of electoral variables.

¹³ See appendix for a detailed description of indicators and aggregation procedures.

¹⁴ While some scholars argue that only relevant parties should be included in the analysis, excluding small parties could "simplify the political space in ways that don't reflect citizens' decision-making environments." (Cohen et al., 2018).

¹⁵ Some scholars disaggregate this measure into extra and within-system electoral volatility (Birch, 2003; Powell and Tucker, 2014; Mainwaring et al., 2017), this distinction is not theoretically relevant for the clarity of alternatives.

I find empirical support for the idea that the COA contributes to political accountability for corruption. Model 1 in Table 2 shows that Type I (weak) COA reduces the impact of corruption on electoral support in the first study, in Peru. As we move to contexts without clear alternatives, the punishment for corruption diminishes. The interaction effect has a positive sign, indicating that the negative corruption effect is moderated by the weak clarity of electoral choices. The difference between the effects of corruption under weak COA versus other COA types is statistically significant.

Model 4 in Table 3 show that Type I (weak) COA reduces the impact of corruption on electoral support in Colombia as well. In this second study, I find further empirical support for the idea that COA is important for political accountability for corruption, which is reassuring that the effect is not an artifact of chance or the particular distribution of the survey respondents in districts of weak COA in Peru. As we move to contexts of weak COA in Colombia, the punishment for corruption diminishes. The penalty for corruption when clarity is 0 (other COA types) is approximately 20.02 points, whereas the penalty for corruption when clarity is 1 (weak COA type) is approximately 8.29 points.¹⁶

The moderating effect of weak COA can be graphically observed in Fig. 3, which plots the estimated coefficients for corruption on electoral support by the COA. The punishment of corruption decreases as we move from a context of relatively strong clarity of viable alternatives to a context of weak clarity of viable alternatives. In Colombia, voters living in contexts of Type I (weak) COA punish corrupt officials leniently, decreasing electoral support by 8 percentage points ($p < 0.01$), and those living in contexts of other COA types (strong/moderate COA) punish corruption by 20 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). In Peru, the punishment for corruption diminishes from 21 percentage points ($p < 0.01$) in contexts of strong/moderate COA to 14 percentage points ($p < 0.01$) in contexts where, on the contrary, voters cannot discern electoral alternatives.

Given that COA is not a randomized treatment in this experiment, we need to interpret these results with caution. The moderated treatment effect cannot be causally identified without accounting for confounders (Kam and Trussler, 2017). Therefore, I perform three tests to rule out the potential confounders of the COA. First, I adjust our regression by adding sociodemographic control variables and district fixed effects. Models 2–3 and 5–6 show that the results hold even after introducing district fixed effects and controlling for individual-level factors, such as age, education, gender, and economic evaluations.

Second, I interact other covariates with the corruption treatment to fully identify the effect of the clarity of alternatives. In particular, I

Table 2
Corruption effects on electoral support by clarity of alternatives in Peru.

	Dependent variable: Electoral Support		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Corruption	-21.261*** (2.280)	-21.052*** (2.236)	-20.157*** (2.466)
Type I COA	-3.534 (2.958)	-9.967 (8.079)	-9.704 (8.381)
Corruption * Type I COA	6.860** (3.395)	7.467** (3.360)	6.969* (3.638)
Constant	50.589*** (1.642)	53.509*** (6.522)	51.563*** (7.387)
Observations	1271	1271	1202
Controls	No	No	Yes
District FE	No	Yes	Yes

Note: Entries are coefficients from complex survey regressions and standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

¹⁶ Alternative model specifications in the appendix further provide support for this finding.

Table 3
Corruption effects on electoral support by clarity of alternatives in Colombia.

	Dependent variable: Electoral Support		
	(4)	(5)	(6)
Corruption	-20.024*** (1.885)	-19.728*** (1.853)	-19.759*** (1.893)
Type I COA	-14.688 (5.593)	-14.898 (3.477)	-15.460 (3.239)
Corruption * Type I COA	11.735*** (3.011)	10.166** (3.763)	10.711** (3.456)
Constant	55.444*** (1.507)	52.580*** (1.542)	68.098*** (7.259)
Observations	1024	1024	1009
Controls	No	No	Yes
District FE	No	Yes	Yes

Note: Entries are coefficients from complex survey regressions, and standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

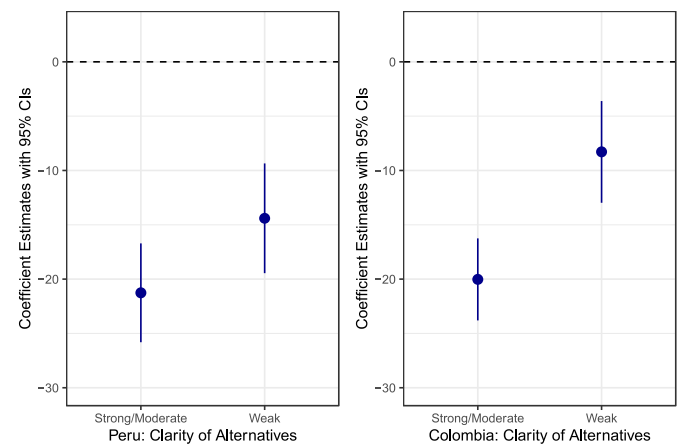


Fig. 3. Moderating effect of weak clarity of alternatives.

tested two potential confounders: widespread corruption and trust in institutions. The results in Tables 12 and 13 in Appendix show that the moderated effect of the COA remains after accounting for these potential confounders. Finally, I interacted the corruption treatment with sociodemographic variables to show that they do not cancel the moderating effect of the COA. I find that the COA effect is robust to the introduction of these additional moderators (Tables 14 and 15 in Appendix). Overall, these additional analyses reinforce the claim that COA is an important driving force behind voters' responses to corruption.

In a nutshell, this section provides suggestive empirical evidence that corruption voting varies with the COA type. Citizens living in a district in which elections offer only weak COA respond differently to a randomly assigned corrupt candidate than citizens living in a district with relatively stronger clarity. This evidence complements the cross-national statistical analysis presented earlier showing that the clarity of alternatives is significantly associated with lower corruption scores. Moreover, the present experimental evidence from two multiparty democracies in Latin America reinforces the intuition that the COA is in fact the mechanism connecting corruption and the structure of the electoral offer, and that clarity directly relates to voting preferences controlling for other potential confounders.

8. Discussion and conclusion

The main goal of this article was to introduce the concept of clarity of alternatives (COA) to corruption studies and present a scheme to classify electoral districts by the type of COA. The literature on voting behavior has pointed out that context and institutions are essential for electoral accountability, but it has not developed a theoretical framework for

thinking about what features of party competition matter for valence considerations like corruption, and it has not differentiated between the clarity of alternatives and the clarity of responsibility. Furthermore, there are no comparative studies examining the effect of the clarity of alternatives on the electoral success of corrupt politicians, despite the increasing evidence that clean options matter.

This study begins filling this gap in the literature by identifying the party competition dimensions that reduce political uncertainty about the menu of choices, and by examining an application of the COA framework to the analysis of electoral accountability for corruption in Latin America. The empirical strategy of this paper is to combine quantitative non-experimental research with survey experimental research in order to benefit from strengths of both methods while attempting to alleviate some weaknesses of each. The paper first examines the corruption-reducing consequences of the COA. As anticipated by our thesis, the results suggest that corruption is significantly and positively correlated with Type I (weak) clarity of alternatives.

The paper then examines the role that the clarity of alternatives directly plays in voting behavior. The results of the analysis of experimental data suggest that, in line with the hypothesis that political parties matter because they create opportunities for meaningful votes against corruption, voters are less likely to punish corrupt politicians when the clarity of alternatives is weak. By using an experimental approach to randomly assign corruption accusations to individual politicians that I then ask respondents to evaluate, I address the empirical challenge of disentangling the effects of responsibility attribution failures from the effects of clarity of alternatives. Holding constant responsibility attribution by design, I am able to confirm that the COA influences voters' willingness to sanction corruption, even when lines of responsibility are unambiguous.

The finding that the Type I (weak) clarity of alternatives reduces the punishment for corruption in multiparty systems suggests that, holding blame for corruption constant, electoral penalties for individual corrupt behavior depend on the availability of predictable and viable alternatives in a given electoral district. This particular configuration of party competition has an impact on the estimated level of corruption effects.

This result is relevant for the literature on the electoral survival of corrupt officials, given that while the public seems to be increasingly aware of corruption offenses, citizens' outrage and indignation are not always translated into electoral penalties. The evidence of the moderating effect of weak clarity of alternatives indicates that certain electoral settings, characterized by unpredictable and nonviable alternatives, offer minimal opportunities for a meaningful vote against corruption.

Certain limitations exist in this research. First, the findings may not be generalizable to all democratic regimes. Future research can offer a nuanced analysis of electoral accountability for corruption in more established democracies with more programmatic linkages and stable political parties. Second, I am not able to experimentally manipulate the type of clarity of alternatives in the subnational analysis. Because there may be factors associated with the institutional environment that may also be associated with voting behavior, in addition to socioeconomic characteristics that may exist across different parts of the country, I cannot claim any clear causal effect of the type of COA itself in producing the voting behavior differences that I find across constituencies. I attempt to account for the effects of some of the potential confounding characteristics by introducing a diverse set of controls in the subnational analysis and by complementing it with the cross-national analysis, but the limitations of an observational study still hold. Nevertheless, while none of the approaches on their own warrants causal interpretation, taken together, I propose that they are suggestive evidence of a causal relationship.

This study sheds some light on the accountability-enhancing role of context and political institutions in reducing corruption. Though most of the literature focuses on how monitoring institutions can control corruption by exposing wrongdoing in government, this paper highlights another crucial set of institutions in developing democracies. It

examines the patterns of party competition and finds that they too have an impact on reducing corruption through their effect on voters' perceptions of the available electoral alternatives. When voters have a meaningful alternative to corruption, they will punish it. This finding implies that corrupt politicians' electoral fortune is not only a function of misinformation or group affiliation, but also the absence of robust and energetic competition in democratic regimes.

Furthermore, these results have important implications for our understanding of corruption voting in developing democracies. The extent to which political parties can signal to voters the availability of clear electoral alternatives is often taken for granted in established democracies. However, in young democracies with fluid party systems like most Latin American democracies, the clarity of alternatives is often a crucial factor in electoral accountability. Party elites often change party labels and parties have little programmatic reputation. Party leaders also merge and split organizations, increasing voter uncertainty and hindering voter coordination. As a result, voters might fail to penalize corruption in the face of credible information.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102476>.

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