

The Paradoxical Effects of Combating Corruption on Institutional Trust and Political Engagement: Evidence from a Natural Experiment

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Abstract

While fighting corruption has become a high priority in many countries around the world, the widespread adoption of anti-corruption measures has yielded few tangible results. This paper asks whether, in failing to promote better governance, efforts to combat corruption may in fact generate negative political consequences. To address this question, we examine a natural experiment involving the sentencing of former Argentine President Menem on corruption charges. Exploiting the coincidence in timing between Menem's case and fieldwork on a nationally-representative survey, we show that the announcement of Menem's sentence paradoxically eroded public trust in institutions and produced "resigned citizens" who expressed reduced interest in politics, lower willingness to participate in collective demonstrations, and greater intention to cast spoiled ballots and to abstain from voting. Overall, our findings shed light on an important understudied link between anti-corruption policy and political participation in chronically misgoverned societies.

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Introduction

Combating corruption has become a high priority in many countries around the world. A large body of research now shows that corruption and misgovernance can compromise investment and economic growth (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Mauro 1995), undermine political attachments (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Chang and Chu 2006; Chong et al. 2015; Della Porta 2000; Seligson 2002), and inhibit trusting and cooperative social relations (Gächter and Schulz 2016; Herrmann, Thöni, and Gächter 2008; Rothstein 2011b). Accordingly, the fight against corruption has gained prominence in academic and policy circles (Heineman and Heimann 2006; Ivanov 2007; Mungiu-Pippidi 2006). Yet, despite the widespread adoption of anti-corruption initiatives, scholars and policymakers increasingly recognize that efforts to fight corruption have so far yielded few tangible improvements in chronically misgoverned societies (Heywood 2018; Hough 2017; Johnston 2018; Meagher 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Svensson 2005).

The present paper asks whether, in failing to promote better governance, attempts to combat corruption may instead generate negative political consequences. While numerous studies have attempted to diagnose the challenges underlying unsuccessful anti-corruption initiatives, little attention has been paid to citizens' reactions to such enforcement efforts. Addressing this gap is important as scholars widely acknowledge that, given the disappointing record of formal anti-corruption reforms, political participation via collective action and electoral mobilization are crucial for improving governmental accountability (Bauhr 2017; Bauhr and Grimes 2014; De Vries and Solaz 2017; Morris and Klesner 2010; Peiffer and Alvarez 2016). Thus, it becomes vital to understand how states' (non)performance in the fight against corruption shapes patterns of popular political engagement.

To address these issues, we examine the effect of *symbolic prosecutions* on institutional trust

and citizens' willingness to engage with the political system. We define such prosecutions as prominent attempts to punish high-level corrupt individuals via formal judicial channels. Such actions have become part of the standard anti-corruption "toolkit" in recent years, as former leaders of Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Israel, Italy, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Romania, Slovenia, and South Korea have been convicted on corruption charges in the past decade alone. At the same time, scholars have questioned whether such prosecutions serve only a token purpose without having any real impact in curbing levels of systemic misgovernance (Hough 2017, 177). We therefore focus on symbolic prosecutions as a typical example of the general ineffectiveness of broader anti-corruption reforms.

We argue that symbolic prosecutions may backfire by eroding popular confidence in public institutions. First, such prosecutions can serve to remind citizens that corruption exists at the highest levels of government, thereby undermining trust in the integrity of public officials (Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2012; Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro 2017). And while, in principle, these negative effects could be counter-balanced by positive evaluations of oversight institutions (e.g. the courts), this restorative mechanism is unlikely to work in societies where such institutions have traditionally been ineffective (Maier 2011). Instead, precisely because symbolic prosecutions represent a conspicuous break from established patterns of impunity, such activities may paradoxically highlight how much corruption "normally" goes unpunished. Consequently, citizens are likely to further lose faith in the ability of oversight institutions to redress abuses from the "top down."

Furthermore, we examine the downstream effects of symbolic prosecutions on citizens' intentions to engage in "bottom up" forms of accountability. In doing so, we bring new empirical evidence to bear on contrasting theoretical perspectives about the potential for mobilizing civic action in the fight against corruption (Bauhr 2017; Bauhr and Grimes 2014; Kostadi-

nova 2009; Stockemer, LaMontagne, and Scruggs 2013). On the one hand, information about the inability of courts and prosecutors to effectively control corruption is predicted to produce widespread indignation, leading to increased political participation and demands for greater accountability. On the other hand, evidence of entrenched corruption could convince citizens that engagement is pointless because “the system is broken,” and thereby precipitate a popular withdrawal from the political process.

We test these predictions in the context of a natural experiment involving the sentencing of former Argentine President Carlos Menem on charges of corruption and illegal arms smuggling. In our context, the announcement of Menem’s sentence on June 13, 2013 following a decades-long legal battle is predicted to send two countervailing signals. First, the court’s decision could be seen as the ultimate fruition of prosecutors’ longstanding attempts to punish wrongdoing at even the highest levels of government. At the same time, however, the sentence also reminded citizens of the extent of corruption in Argentine politics, while underscoring the weakness of a judicial system which had not managed to score a single conviction in over 700 prior corruption cases (*Clarín*, June 14, 2013).¹ These features of Menem’s case thus provide an ideal opportunity to examine the effects of symbolic prosecutions in a highly-corrupt society.²

Exploiting the coincidence in timing between the court’s decision and fieldwork on the nationally representative Latinobarómetro public opinion survey, we estimate the causal effect of Menem’s sentencing on institutional trust and political engagement. We find a consistent negative impact on a broad range of political attitudes. Specifically, individuals surveyed in the aftermath of the court’s decision displayed significantly lower trust in parliament, political parties and the judiciary, and became more pessimistic about the state’s ability to keep

¹Furthermore, even Menem’s final sentence remained in doubt since he could claim immunity from incarceration as a Senator, and moreover could still appeal his sentence to the Supreme Court.

²Argentina ranked 106 out of 177 countries in Transparency International’s 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

corruption in check. These results support our contention that judicial action in Menem’s case was largely seen as a symbolic measure which did little to signal the credibility of the state’s anti-corruption efforts, while instead reminding citizens of the depth of Argentina’s governance problems. Looking further at downstream effects on political engagement, we find that citizens interviewed after Menem’s sentencing expressed reduced interest in politics, lower willingness to participate in collective demonstrations, and greater intention to cast spoiled ballots and to abstain from voting in future elections. Overall, these results suggest that ineffectual anti-corruption efforts produce “resigned citizens” who react to impunity by disengaging from the political process.

Our research relates closely to a growing literature linking corruption to low electoral participation (Chong et al. 2015; Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004; Kostadinova 2009; Stockemer, LaMontagne, and Scruggs 2013). According to these studies, exposure to malfeasance leads citizens to believe that no clean alternatives to corrupt incumbents exist, and thus there is no point in turning out to vote. We extend this scholarship in two directions. First, we look beyond participation in the electoral arena to consider broader forms of political engagement (e.g., willingness to demonstrate). These “extra-electoral” behaviors are important to the extent that citizens who are frustrated at the ballot box may resort to more radical forms of political action to express their grievances (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004; Stockemer, LaMontagne, and Scruggs 2013). Our analysis suggests, however, that this is not the case. Rather, resignation in the face of entrenched corruption appears to engender a generalized withdrawal from both electoral and non-electoral forms of political engagement (at least as measured in survey responses).

Second, we show that these negative effects can be triggered not only by exposure to corruption *per se*, but also by information about the state’s attempts to redress the problem. Our primary contribution is thus to link patterns of political disengagement to the state’s *anti-*

corruption activities. In this vein, our paper also speaks to a growing recognition among corruption scholars of the potential for stalled reforms to generate popular cynicism and delegitimize the political process (Bågenholm and Charron 2014; Bauhr and Grimes 2014; Hough 2017; Ivanov 2007; Johnston 2018; Rothstein 2011a). We underscore the gravity of these concerns by presenting (to our knowledge) the first causal, individual-level evidence substantiating the link between a state’s anti-corruption activities and patterns of political engagement. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for anti-corruption policy and political participation in chronically misgoverned societies.

Anti-Corruption Efforts and Institutional Trust

Intellectually, most contemporary anti-corruption efforts draw upon the logic of principal-agent theory (Klitgaard 1988; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016). Under this model, principals (citizens or rulers) delegate governance tasks to agents (public officials) who can potentially abuse their discretion for private gain. In this context, anti-corruption efforts aim to control agents’ misbehavior by increasing the probability and severity of sanctions, thereby deterring corruption at the margin (Becker and Stigler 1974). In the policy arena, these ideas are often operationalized in the form of stronger anti-corruption laws, initiatives to improve institutional transparency, and the ramping up of investigative and prosecutorial activities.³

While many high-corruption countries have formally adopted this package of policies, implementation “on the ground” is frequently wanting (Heywood 2018; Hough 2017; Johnston 2018; Meagher 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013; Svensson 2005). Especially in countries where corruption is endemic, oversight agencies often lack the

³Of course, anti-corruption reforms also encompass a broader range of policies (e.g. corruption prevention and “moral education” campaigns) that do not necessarily derive from the principal-agent model. See Hough (2017) and Manion (2004).

resources and incentives to exercise their monitoring and sanctioning powers effectively (Van Aaken, Feld, and Voigt 2010). As Svensson (2005, 35) notes, “in many poor countries, the legal and financial institutions [tasked with enforcing the rules] are weak and often corrupt themselves.” Investigations can thus become easily bogged down or stymied by political opposition (Lawson 2009; Wrong 2009), and to the extent that prosecutions do take place, they are likely to be of a token or symbolic nature: individual misdeeds might be investigated and punished, but these actions send no wider signal that the “expected penalty” for corruption has increased.

In fact, prosecutions may potentially worsen popular perceptions about the extent of misgovernance for several reasons (Johnston 2018; The Economist 2016). First, high-profile prosecutions are often linked to prominent scandals which have been shown to lower trust in implicated politicians, as well as associated institutions such as political parties and Parliaments (Ares and Hernández 2017; Bowler and Karp 2004; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012; Solaz, De Vries, and Geus 2018; Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro 2017). In this context, anti-corruption activities can “re-expose” citizens to prior accusations of wrongdoing or lend greater credence to previous allegations, thereby resurrecting the original scandal in the public consciousness (Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2012; Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro 2017). Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H1: Prosecuting corruption erodes trust in actors involved in wrongdoing, as well as associated institutions.

In principle, these negative effects could be counter-balanced by positive evaluations of oversight institutions such as police or the courts (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012; Maier 2011; Manion 2004). For instance, successful prosecutions could signal that enforcement agencies have both the institutional capacity and the determination to respond effectively to instances of abuse. These events can thus generate trust in specific branches of the state tasked with

ensuring “top down” accountability, leading to the following hypothesis:

H2a: Prosecuting malfeasance increases trust in oversight institutions, and strengthens confidence in the state’s anti-corruption efforts.

It is worth noting, however, that this restorative mechanism is predicted to work only in societies with well-established systems of accountability (Maier 2011). In contrast, governments may face a real challenge in demonstrating that anti-corruption efforts are having an impact in countries where citizens regard oversight institutions with a high degree of cynicism (Dancey 2012; Hough 2017). In these cases, targeting high-level officials may even backfire since the unprecedented nature of such prosecutions can paradoxically serve to highlight just how much corruption normally goes unpunished. Following this reasoning, we hypothesize that:

H2b: Prosecuting malfeasance *in high-corruption contexts* erodes trust in oversight institutions, and reduces confidence in the state’s anti-corruption efforts.

Anti-Corruption Efforts and Popular Political Engagement

While the literature paints a rather pessimistic picture of the likely effects of anti-corruption efforts on institutional trust in societies with a history of impunity, previous research is much less settled when it comes to the question of political engagement. On the one hand, some studies suggest that citizens could substitute for the role of ineffective oversight agencies in holding public officials accountable. For instance, models of retrospective voting predict that citizens will respond to corruption by mobilizing at the ballot box to “throw the bums out” (for a recent review, see De Vries and Solaz (2017)). Evidence from Brazil (Ferraz and Finan 2008), Italy (Chang, Golden, and Hill 2010), Mexico (Chong et al. 2015), Spain (Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2012) and the United States (Peters and

Welch 1980; Welch and Hibbing 1997) lends support to this mechanism by showing that corrupt incumbents lose vote share and face a higher probability of removal, although the electoral consequences can also often be mild (Bågenholm 2013).⁴

Along these lines, Bauhr (2017) and Bauhr and Grimes (2014) describe a similar “indignation” hypothesis with respect to non-electoral forms of political participation. Under this mechanism, evidence of continued impunity generates popular frustration which is then “channeled into movements pressuring for investigations of abuses...Public pressure, if sufficiently well orchestrated and noticeable, prompts actors with formal accountability powers to react and redress problems” (Bauhr and Grimes 2014, 295). In addition to pressuring prosecutors to take action in “sensitive” cases, organized citizens may also mobilize to shield formal oversight agencies from political interference (Grimes 2013; Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000). Taken together, these literatures support the hypothesis that:

H3a: Ineffectual anti-corruption efforts increase citizens’ willingness to take part in both electoral and non-electoral forms of political activity.

However, several lines of research cast doubt on this hypothesis. Most notably, it has been found that political participation depends upon feelings of political efficacy (Levi and Stoker 2000, 486). In contrast, if citizens come to believe that their involvement will not make a difference, then they are more likely to adopt the “rational” response of withdrawing from the political arena (Peiffer and Alvarez 2016; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013).

In highly-corrupt contexts, revelations of wrongdoing and evidence of continuing impunity may serve to create the impression that “nothing can be done” about corruption. Electorally,

⁴More generally, the magnitude of the effects may depend upon larger contextual factors such economic conditions or media coverage, as well as whether corruption is individually “traded-off” against partisanship considerations or other desirable goals (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013; Charron and Bågenholm 2016; Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, and Rivero 2016; Klašnja and Tucker 2013; Klašnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause 2016; Konstantinidis and Xezonakis 2013; Solaz, De Vries, and Geus 2018; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013).

this effect is manifested in the belief that all politicians are corrupt, and thus there is no point in voting since challengers are likely to be just as bad as incumbents. This conjecture finds support in the turnout literature, which shows that corruption increases the rate of electoral abstention (Chong et al. 2015; Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004; Kostadinova 2009; Stockemer, LaMontagne, and Scruggs 2013; Sundström and Stockemer 2015).

A similar resignation logic also applies to other forms of political engagement such as reporting corruption, participating in antic-corruption protests, or joining an anti-corruption organization (Peiffer and Alvarez 2016). As Bauhr and Grimes (2014, 296) note, “if citizens become cognizant of corruption but see no available means of bringing about sanctions or change, they may elect to invest their invariably finite personal resources in other endeavours.” Writing in the Eastern European context, Kostadinova (2009, 696) also argues that a deficiency in political efficacy has “distorting effects on political participation: if one cannot influence the outcome, why bother to [try]?” In light of these arguments, we hypothesize that:

H3a: Ineffectual anti-corruption efforts reduce citizens’ willingness to take part in both electoral and non-electoral forms of political activity.

Evidence from a Natural Experiment in Argentina

We test these hypotheses in the context of a natural experiment involving the 2013 sentencing of former Argentine President Carlos Menem on charges of corruption and arms smuggling. This announcement represented the culmination of a legal battle stretching back almost two decades beginning with an initial investigation into the then-sitting President ordered by Judge Jorge Urso in 1995 (*La Nueva*, March 9, 2013). Menem was found guilty by Urso in 2001 and even served five and a half months of house arrest, but was subsequently freed

as his trial continued under several appeals from both sides (*La Voz del Interior*, June 14, 2013). In 2011, Menem was formally declared innocent but this decision was overturned and the case re-opened in 2013. He was finally convicted on March 8 (*Tiempo Sur*, March 8, 2013) and sentenced to seven years in prison on June 13, 2013.

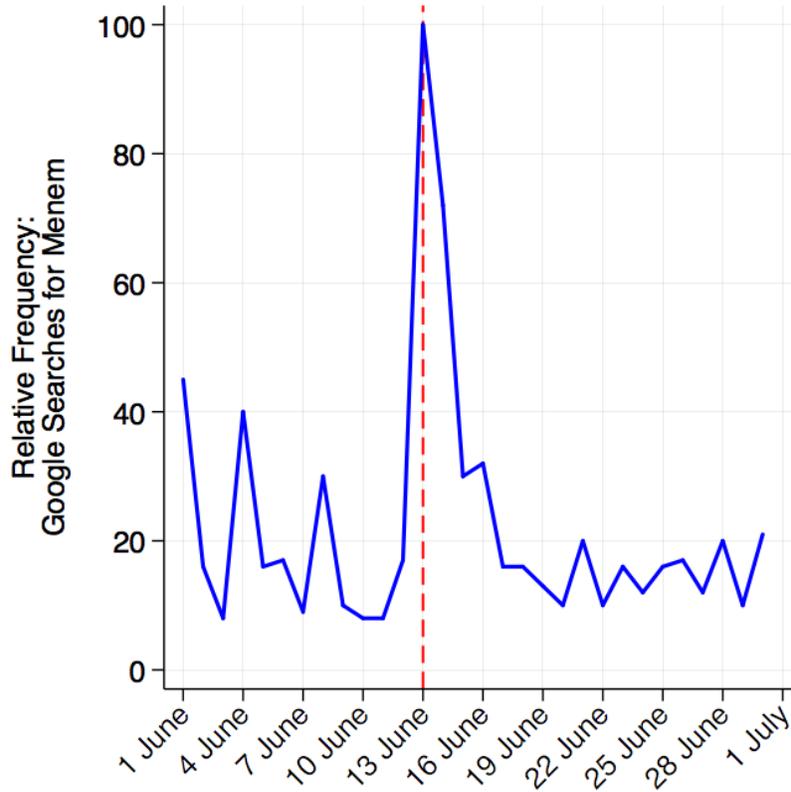
Menem’s case generated a high level of interest in the news media and was followed closely by the public. An analysis of Argentina’s most popular newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, reveals prominent coverage during the days before and after the sentencing and, in particular, on the evening of the sentencing and the morning after.⁵ A similar picture emerges when looking at Google searches for the search term “Menem” that originated from Argentina: while citizens sought information on Menem both in the lead up to the sentencing and afterwards, interest spiked on the day of the announcement itself (see Figure 1).

What inferences might citizens draw from news of Menem’s sentence? Importantly, as described above, details of Menem’s case were already well-known to the Argentine public, as Menem had previously been convicted and served a term of house arrest in 2001. Against this backdrop, one consequence of Menem’s June 13 sentence was to refocus public attention on two countervailing pieces of information already available to citizens: (a) the prior corruption scandal and (b) prosecutors’ longstanding efforts to punish the ex-President.

At the same time, the sentence also generated new information about the performance of Argentina’s oversight institutions. Of particular note, Menem was the first official to be sentenced to prison in over 700 cases involving high-level corruption (*Clarín*, June 14, 2013). This fact, however, could be read in two different ways. On the one hand, many newspapers like *La Nación* characterized the event as the beginning of an unprecedented “new era”

⁵Our own examination of newspaper headlines reveals that the outcome of Menem’s trial was one of the most important news items on June 13 and 14, 2013. Other national news stories reported in national newspapers included a train crash, clashes between soccer fans and the police, ongoing coverage of a murder and disappearance case, and political disagreements over the nomination of magistrates.

Figure 1: Google Trends: Searches for “Menem” in June 2013



Notes: The y-axis displays the relative frequency of Google searches originating from Argentina for the search term “Menem.” Google Trends provides this data as a normalized measure which sets the highest number of queries for “Menem” during the search period at 100. Search activity on other days is displayed as a fraction of this number. There is a spike in searches on 13 June, 2013, corresponding to the date Menem’s sentence was announced.

of accountability (*La Nación*, June 18, 2013). On the other hand, precisely because the sentence was so exceptional, it could serve to underscore the general weakness of the judicial system. Along these lines, doubts remained about whether Menem’s sentence could actually be imposed since he could claim immunity from incarceration as a sitting Senator, and moreover could still appeal his sentence to the Supreme Court. For these reasons, it was far from certain that the fanfare with which Menem’s sentence was greeted in the popular press would be echoed in the sentiments of Argentine citizens.

In short, we argue that Menem’s sentencing both reminded citizens and generated new information about corruption and accountability in Argentine politics. Importantly, however, these signals could be interpreted in opposing directions that either strengthened or eroded public confidence in Argentine institutions.

Data and Methods

To assess the effect of these countervailing signals on citizens’ political attitudes and expressed levels of engagement, we exploit a natural experiment produced by the coincidence in timing between Menem’s sentence and fieldwork on the Latinobarómetro public opinion survey. Specifically, we use the 13 June 2013 announcement of the court’s decision as a source of exogenous variation to define “treatment” and “control” groups in the Latinobarómetro data. The logic behind this designation is similar to the research designs employed in Ares and Hernández (2017), Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa (2018), and Solaz, De Vries, and Geus (2018). Our identification strategy rests on the idea that individuals who were surveyed immediately prior to the 13 June cutoff date are, on average, identical to individuals who were surveyed immediately after this date, except that the latter group is (potentially) exposed to information about Menem’s sentencing. If this ignorability assumption holds, we can estimate the causal effect of symbolic prosecutions on public sentiments by comparing average outcomes between these two groups.

Fieldwork for the 2013 wave of the Latinobarómetro survey in Argentina was conducted between June 1 and 30. A stratified, multi-stage probability sampling strategy of the Argentine population was used: in a first step, a random probability sample of localities/cities was drawn. Then, a random sample of street blocks within these localities/cities was selected. Within these street blocks, a random walk protocol was used to select the households to be contacted for door-to-door interviews. Finally, block-level gender and age quotas were used

to sample the specific individuals to be interviewed within each household.

According to information provided by Latinobarómetro, fieldwork was implemented in a decentralized manner across different parts of the country and was not adjusted in response to public events such as Menem’s sentencing. Furthermore, there was no systematic ordering as to how the fieldwork was rolled out across (randomly pre-selected) street blocks within cities. This fact, combined the simultaneous employment of multiple enumerators within localities/cities, meant in practice that multiple interviews were conducted across different areas of a city at roughly the same time. Therefore, while the assumption that the timing of Menem’s sentence is exogenous relative to the timing of the survey might seem credible even at the national level, this assumption is even more plausible *within* any given locality/city given the highly decentralized fieldwork structure used by Latinobarómetro. We therefore include fixed effects for the locality/city (CIUDAD) in all of our analyses, while noting that previous work has also followed this approach (see Ares and Hernández 2017; Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa 2018; Solaz, De Vries, and Geus 2018).

To formally test the ignorability assumption, we first examine whether observable respondent characteristics are balanced across the treatment and control groups, conditional on CIUDAD fixed effects. In order to ensure a sufficiently large number of observations in the treatment and control groups, we analyze observations within +/- 7 days of Menem’s sentencing. Our balance tests consider respondents’ AGE, GENDER, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION, HOUSEHOLD POVERTY, and PREVIOUS ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION. Full details on the construction of these variables are provided in the Appendix (see SI). Results from the balance tests are shown in Table 1. In support of the ignorability assumption, we observe that respondents have a similar profile across the treatment and control groups.

Table 1: Balance Statistics

Variable	Control	Treatment	Diff. means	<i>p</i> -value	<i>n</i>
Age	44.878	44.467	-0.411	0.811	761
Male	0.462	0.505	0.044	0.379	761
Incomplete high school	0.478	0.424	-0.055	0.239	761
Complete high school	0.208	0.231	0.022	0.609	761
Studied at university	0.313	0.346	0.032	0.432	761
Part of labor force	0.693	0.686	-0.007	0.883	761
Poverty	0.406	0.375	-0.031	0.475	757
Voted in past election	0.724	0.703	-0.021	0.565	759

Notes: The table entries are estimated through ordinary least squares regressions with CIUDAD fixed effects. The sample is restricted to observations within +/- 7 days of the announcement. Respondents in treatment ($n = 482$) and control ($n = 279$) groups do not differ significantly on any observable characteristics.

Results

In this section, we present our main analyses comparing treatment and control group differences— in—means with respect to a host of dependent variables which we introduce below. As before, we use +/- 7 days around Menem’s sentencing as a benchmark to define treatment and control groups. In the Appendix (see Figures A1-A3 in the SI), we show that our results are substantially unchanged using a larger 14 day window. Unfortunately, extending our analyses beyond 14 days is not feasible due to the short fieldwork phase of the Latinobarómetro survey.

For ease of presentation, we plot the estimated treatment effects in the main text, while reserving a full presentation of the estimation results for the Appendix (see Table A1, SI). All models are estimated with CIUDAD fixed effects. Following earlier work employing similar designs (Ares and Hernández 2017; Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa 2018; Solaz, De Vries, and Geus 2018), we also control for observable pre-treatment respondent-level characteristics in our main analysis, although we show in the Appendix that our estimates are virtually

identical without these controls (see Figures A1-A3).

Effects on Institutional Trust

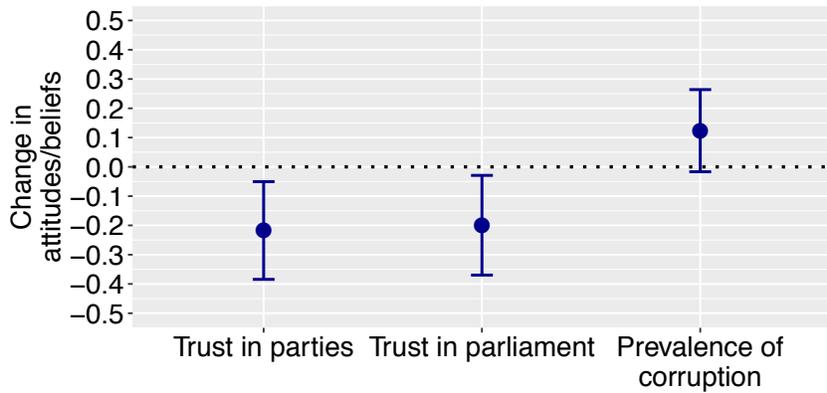
To assess H1, we first consider popular expressions of TRUST IN PARLIAMENT and TRUST IN POLITICAL PARTIES. Our choice of variables here is informed by earlier research showing that, when presented with evidence of *individual* wrongdoing, citizens are likely to generalize perceptions of malfeasance to associated institutions (Bowler and Karp 2004; Maier 2011). We thus expect that evidence of Menem’s guilt will also cast a negative shadow on the specific political institutions in which he is embedded. For related reasons, we expect that Menem’s sentencing will lead citizens to perceive a higher PREVALENCE OF CORRUPTION in government. All these variables are coded on a 4-point scale.

Figure 2 plots the estimated treatment effects with associated 95% confidence intervals for these three outcomes. We observe that Menem’s conviction erodes trust in Parliament and political parties. The coefficient on PREVALENCE OF CORRUPTION is just insignificant at the 5% level, but also points in the same direction. Overall, we take this as evidence in support of H1: anti-corruption activities serve to “re-expose” citizens to accusations of wrongdoing and thereby undermine trust in institutions associated with the original scandal.

To assess H2, we turn our consideration to popular evaluations of oversight institutions tasked with controlling corruption. Here we focus on expressions of TRUST IN THE JUDICIARY, as well as judgments about the state’s PROGRESS IN REDUCING CORRUPTION in state institutions over the past two years, and estimates of the state’s ABILITY TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM of corruption. Again, all items are coded on a 4-point scale, with higher values representing more optimistic evaluations.

Estimated treatment effects are plotted in Figure 3. In accordance with H2b (and against

Figure 2: Trust in Parties, Trust in Parliament and Prevalence of Corruption



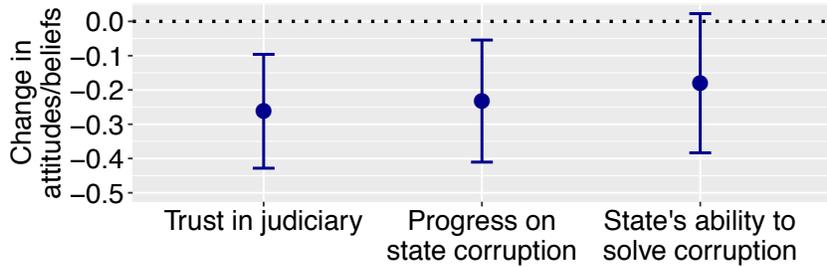
Notes: Effects are estimated with controls and CIUDAD fixed effects within +/- 7 days of Menem’s sentencing. The error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means. Outcomes are scaled on a 4-point scale.

H2a), we observe that Menem’s conviction actually undermines TRUST IN THE JUDICIARY, and also renders citizens more pessimistic about the state’s PROGRESS IN REDUCING CORRUPTION. Citizens also express greater doubt in the state’s ABILITY TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM of corruption, although this effect is (barely) insignificant at the 5% level. Taken together, these results support our contention that symbolic prosecutions do little to strengthen confidence in enforcement agencies, but instead serve to highlight the extent of malfeasance that normally goes unpunished in high-corruption contexts.

Effects on Political Engagement

Having established the negative effects of Menem’s sentencing on trust in institutions, we now turn to downstream effects on “bottom up” accountability. We first focus on a set of variables related to voting intention in future elections. Specifically, we examine the percentage of respondents who stated that they would refrain from casting a valid vote

Figure 3: Trust in Courts and the State’s Ability to Fight Corruption



Notes: Effects are estimated with controls and CIUDAD fixed effects within +/- 7 days of Menem’s sentencing. The error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means. Outcomes are scaled on a 4-point scale.

(INVALID VOTE).⁶ This variable is coded dichotomously.

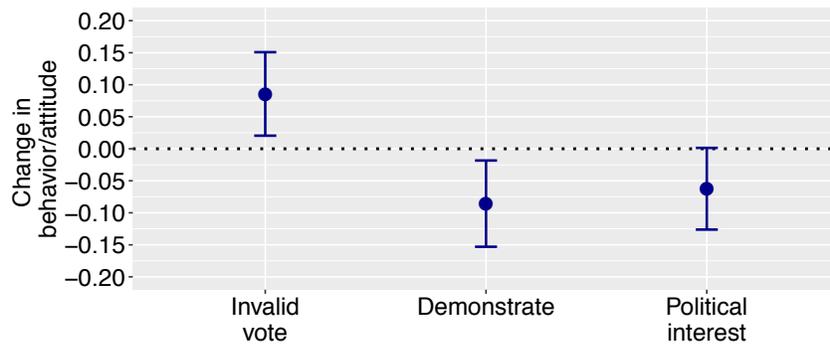
Second, we turn to a set of items eliciting respondents’ willingness to participate in demonstrations and protests about various political issues relating to (i) wages and working conditions, (ii) healthcare and education, (iii) exploitation of natural resources, (iv) land ownership, and (v) the defense of democratic rights. Although none of the issues directly relates to corruption, they do capture intentions to DEMONSTRATE for political causes more broadly. Respondents provided answers on a 1 to 10 scale. We average responses over all 5 items and rescale them on a [0 1] interval. Finally, we consider responses to the question “How interested would you say you are in politics?” POLITICAL INTEREST is measured on a 4-point scale, which we also rescale to [0 1] for ease of presentation.

Figure 4 plots the estimated treatment effects relating to intended political engagement. We observe a consistent demobilizing effect on vote intention and willingness to demonstrate (while not quite reaching the 5% significance level, results for POLITICAL INTEREST also point in the same direction). The effects are most striking for voting: pooling abstentions and

⁶We create this variable by combining the stated intention to either cast a “spoiled ballot” or abstain from voting all together. Given that voting in Argentina is theoretically mandatory, abstaining from voting altogether might be considered a particularly costly form of disengagement. See Figure A3 in the SI for a separate analysis of these forms of disengagement.

spoiled ballots, we observe that Menem’s conviction causes an additional 8.7% of respondents to state an intention to cast an INVALID VOTE in the next election. Overall, our findings are strongly in line with H3b, while casting doubt on H3a: symbolic prosecutions reduce citizens’ willingness to take part in both electoral and non-electoral forms of political activity.

Figure 4: Political Engagement and Political Interest



Notes: Effects are estimated with controls and CIUDAD fixed effects within +/- 7 days of Menem’s sentencing. The error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means. Outcomes are scaled on a 0-1 scale.

We briefly outline here the results of several additional analyses we conducted to assess the robustness of our main results. Full details are provided in the Appendix. First, we replicated our main results without the use of individual-level controls (see Figures A1-A3, SI). We also expanded the definition of treatment and control groups to include all respondents interviewed within +/- 14 days of Menem’s sentencing (see Figures A1-A3, SI). Our substantive conclusions remain unchanged under both sets of analyses. Finally, we also conducted placebo tests using three alternative, randomly-selected “cut-off dates” (June 10, 23, 27) to define treatment and control groups (see Figures A4-A6, SI). With the exception of a positive effect on TRUST IN PARLIAMENT for the June 23 cut-off and a negative effect for the state’s ABILITY TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM of corruption for the June 10 cut-off dates, none of the other dependent variables are statistically different across the placebo cutoffs.

Discussion

To summarize the preceding section, our analysis yields evidence of wide-ranging negative effects of symbolic prosecutions in the Argentine context. More specifically, we find that the announcement of Menem’s sentencing is causally associated with lower institutional trust (H1), greater pessimism towards oversight institutions (H2b), and reduced willingness to engage in “bottom up” forms of accountability (H3b).

A remarkable feature of our results is that the treatment dampens both vote intention and the willingness to take party in political actions beyond the ballot box. This runs counter to research arguing that these forms of political participation can function as substitutes: that is, when formal institutions are perceived as untrustworthy, citizens are likely to withdraw from voting and redirect their energies into extra-electoral activity (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004; Stockemer, LaMontagne, and Scruggs 2013). On the other hand, our results lend support to recent empirical work showing that the willingness to join in the fight against corruption is a function of high institutional trust (Bauhr and Grimes 2014; Peiffer and Alvarez 2016; Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013). Where such trust is missing (as in the case at hand), information about symbolic prosecutions may create indignant, but ultimately resigned, citizens.

Importantly, research suggests that this effect is moderated by the (often rational) expectation that citizens cannot make a difference against corruption anyways so there is no point in trying (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013). However, this does not rule out the possibility that such beliefs may be overturned even in high-corruption environments. Indeed, recent literature on the growth of anti-establishment parties suggests that outsider candidates and parties which can credible campaign against the “corrupt establishment” may indeed have this effect (see e.g., Bågenholm 2013; Bågenholm and Charron 2014). New

parties and outsider candidates with a strong anti-corruption platform such as Italy’s 5 Star Movement or Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro may – at least initially – increase feelings of political efficacy precisely because they disrupt expectations of “politics as usual,” and thereby mobilize otherwise disengaged citizens. While such conditions were largely absent in Argentina in 2013, it remains an open question whether we might see different effects of symbolic prosecutions if undertaken in circumstances where popular resignation is dispelled (e.g. after an anti-establishment party takes power).

Along these lines, another potential future extension could be to study how these effects are conditioned by partisan affiliation, which has been found to moderate perceptions of corruption in other contexts (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013; McCann and Dominguez 1998; Solaz, De Vries, and Geus 2018). For instance, supporters of anti-establishment parties may be more likely to view symbolic prosecutions as a genuine measure, and thereby become particularly engaged in the political process. Unfortunately, the Latinobarómetro survey does not contain an item measuring partisan attachments that allows us to examine this possibility in Menem’s case. However, the question of how partisan attachments influence the interpretation of countervailing signals inherent in anti-corruption prosecutions could be usefully addressed in future work.

A final issue relates to the persistence of our estimated treatment effects. Given the implementation of the Latinobarómetro survey, we cannot say much about changes in popular attitudes beyond a +/- 14-day window surrounding Menem’s sentencing date. Rather than examining the dynamics of opinion change in relation to exogenous events (e.g., Legewie 2013), we instead focus our contribution on the identification of causal effects linking symbolic prosecutions to institutional trust and political engagement. While scholars have speculated on the potential for (especially ineffectual) anti-corruption measures to backfire, rigorous evidence supporting this claim has so far been lacking. In this vein, our research shows that,

contrary to the high praise that symbolic prosecutions often receive (The Economist 2016), combating corruption can indeed generate negative political consequences in chronically mis-governed societies.

Conclusion

This article sheds light on the political consequences of state-led efforts to combat corruption by examining the effects of symbolic prosecutions on citizens' political engagement and trust in government. Our empirical evidence is drawn from a natural experiment in Argentina involving the sentencing of former President Carlos Menem, which we take as a prototypical example of a highly-touted, yet largely ineffective, anti-corruption measure. Exploiting the coincidence in timing of Menem's conviction with fieldwork on the 2013 Latinobarómetro survey, we find robust negative effects relating to a broad range of political attitudes including (i) lower institutional trust, (ii) greater pessimism about state's ability to combat corruption, and (iii) decreased willingness to engage in political action.

One important contribution of the present article is to connect two largely independent strands of corruption research. First, scholars and policymakers have increasingly come to recognize the basic failure of "top-down" anti-corruption reforms undertaken over the past two decades. Our paper links these developments to a second body of literature on the importance of "bottom up" political engagement via collective action and electoral mobilization for improving governmental accountability. By studying how citizens respond to the state's anti-corruption performance, we highlight the crucial connections between two alternative avenues of corruption control. Overall, our results suggest that in discouraging citizens from demanding greater governmental accountability, ineffectual anti-corruption measures may paradoxically prove detrimental to the ultimate aim of governance reform.

A broader implication of our findings is that policymakers should be cautious about combating corruption head-on in countries with weak institutions where reforms are not likely to succeed. Our results indicate that such an approach risks undermining confidence in the state and demobilizing popular engagement in the political process. This conclusion also speaks to an emerging historical view suggesting that most contemporary high-trust, low-corruption societies only managed to build government integrity *indirectly* - i.e. as the incidental result of more encompassing educational and institutional reforms (Rothstein 2011a; Rothstein and Teorell 2015; Uslaner and Rothstein 2016). Research on exactly how and why these deeper processes unfolded is still in its infancy, but the lesson appears to be that few of these measures were directly aimed at reducing corruption, even though they helped to set the stage for a long-run shift to better governance.

Importantly, this process of political, social, and institutional development took countries like Britain and Sweden decades to achieve. This may not be a welcome message for anti-corruption practitioners who witness firsthand the costs of misgovernance in many of today's developing (and some developed) societies. However, we would caution that the impulse to "do something" also involves risks and costs in terms of the potential for ineffectual anti-corruption initiatives to discourage and demobilize an already distrusting population (Morris and Klesner 2010, 1276). As much as corruption is often likened to a "disease" plaguing the body politic, corruption fighters would do well to remember the injunction: "First, do no harm" (Johnston 2018).

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Supporting Information:

The Paradoxical Effects of Combating Corruption on Institutional Trust and Political Engagement: Evidence from a Natural Experiment

Table of Contents

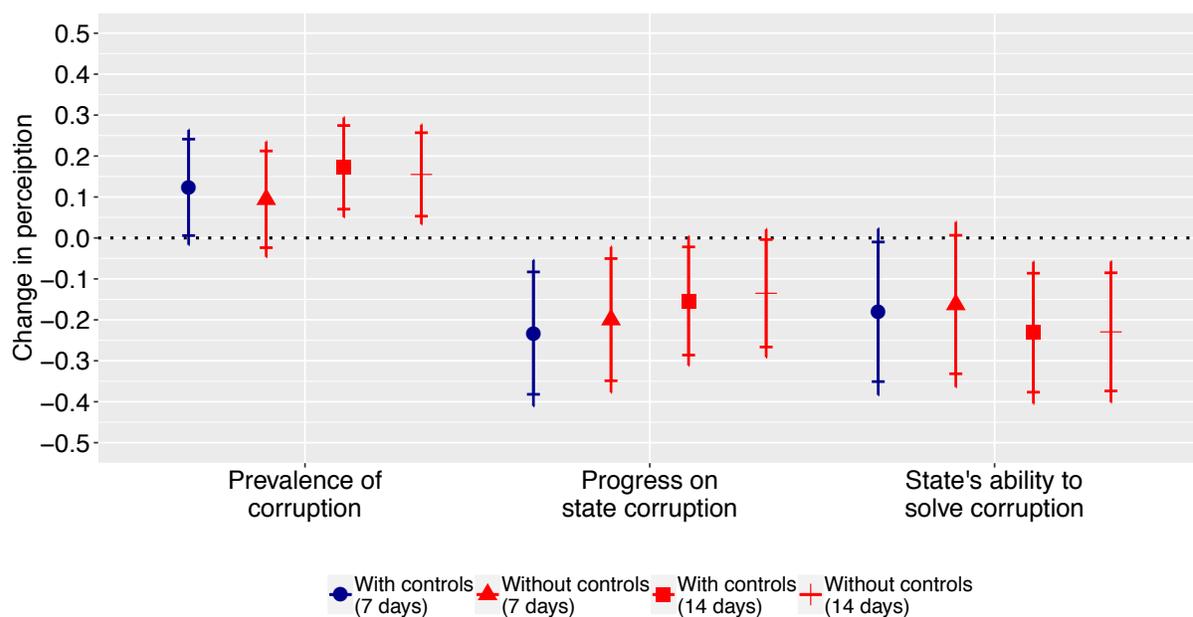
Table A1. Outcomes Presented in the Main Text	2
Figure A1. Impact on Trust on Perception of Corruption and Political Interest, Alternative Specifications	2
Figure A2. Impact on Trust in Actors Involved in Anti-Corruption Measures, Alternative Specifications	3
Figure A3. Impact on Political Interest and Propensity to Vote and Demonstrate, Alternative Specifications	3
Figure A4. Placebo Test: Impact on All Outcomes for First Randomly Selected Cut-Off Date (June 10)	4
Figure A5. Placebo Test: Impact on All Outcomes for Second Randomly Selected Cut-Off Date (June 23)	5
Figure A6. Placebo Test: Impact on All Outcomes for Third Randomly Selected Cut-Off Date (June 27)	6

Table A1. Outcomes Presented in the Main Text

Variable	Effect	SE	p Value	N
Progress on state corruption	-0.232	0.091	0.011	729
State's ability to solve corruption	-0.180	0.104	0.082	748
Prevalence of corruption	0.124	0.072	0.085	729
Political interest	-0.062	0.033	0.055	758
Demonstrate	-0.086	0.034	0.013	755
Invalid vote	0.086	0.033	0.010	714
Trust in judiciary	-0.262	0.085	0.002	754
Trust in parties	-0.217	0.085	0.011	753
Trust in parliament	-0.199	0.087	0.022	751

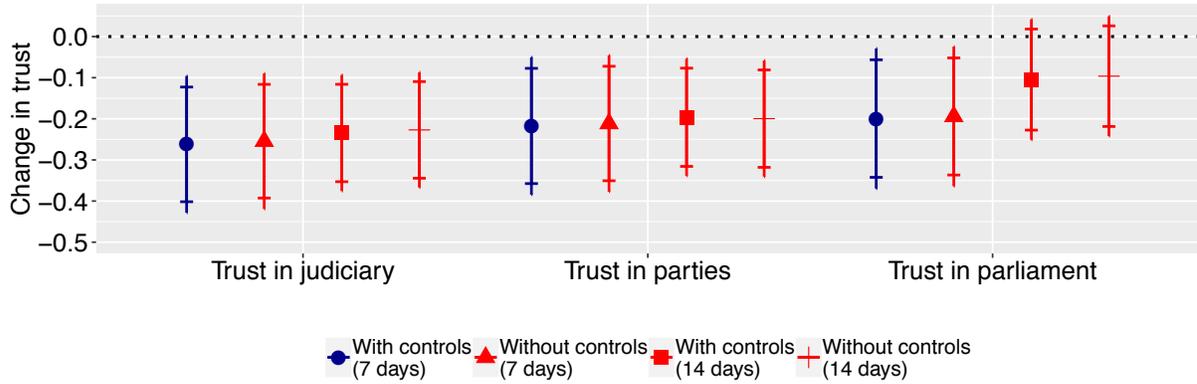
Note: Effects are estimated with controls and city fixed effects, within +/- 7 days. Outcomes are scaled the same way as in the figures in the main text.

Figure A1. Impact on Trust on Perception of Corruption and Political Interest, Alternative Specifications



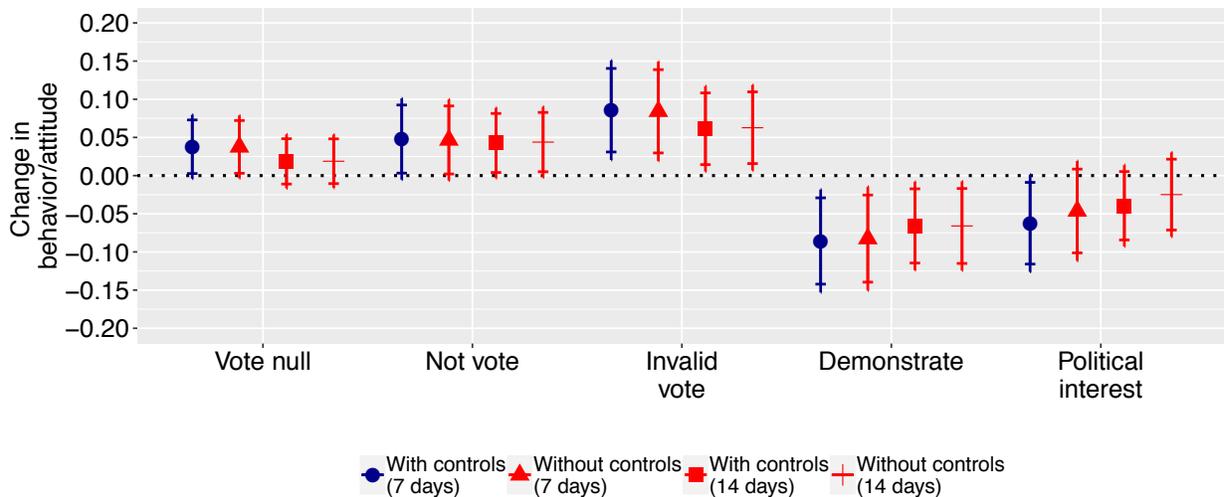
Note: Effects are estimated with city fixed effects. The main error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means; the small whiskers represent additional 90% confidence intervals. Outcomes are scaled on a 4-point scale.

Figure A2. Impact on Trust in Actors Involved in Anti-Corruption Measures, Alternative Specifications



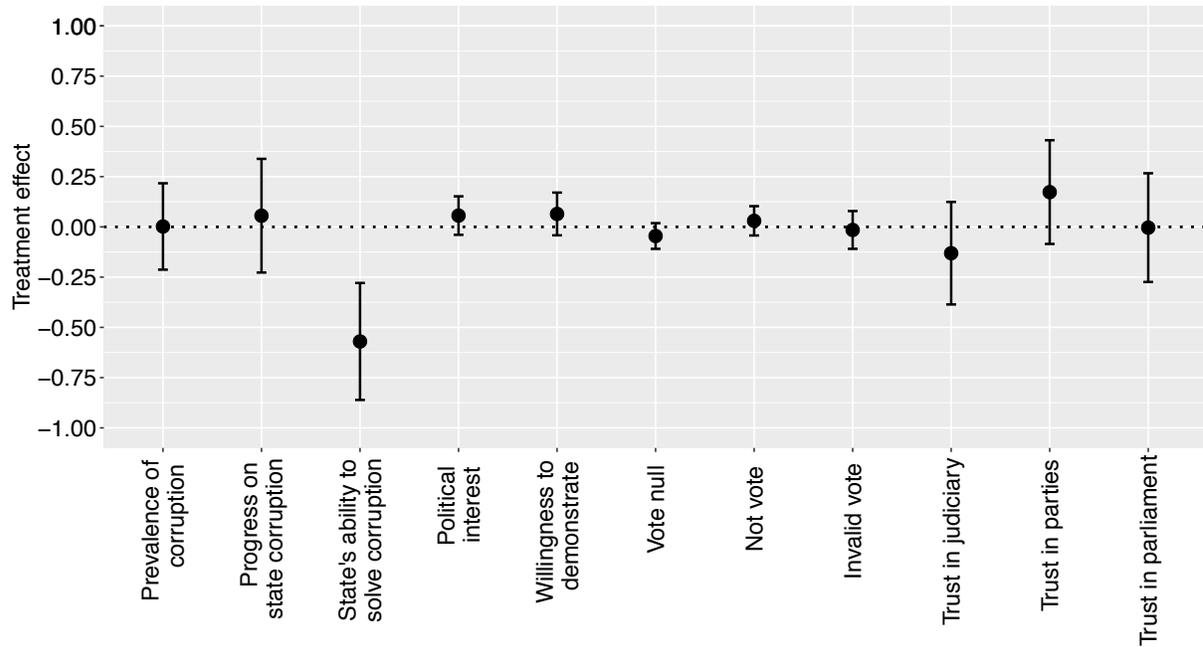
Note: Effects are estimated with city fixed effects. The main error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means; the small whiskers represent additional 90% confidence intervals. Outcomes are scaled on a 4-point scale.

Figure A3. Impact on Political Interest and Propensity to Vote and Demonstrate, Alternative Specifications



Note: Effects are estimated with city fixed effects. The main error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means; the small whiskers represent additional 90% confidence intervals. Outcomes are scaled between 0 and 1.

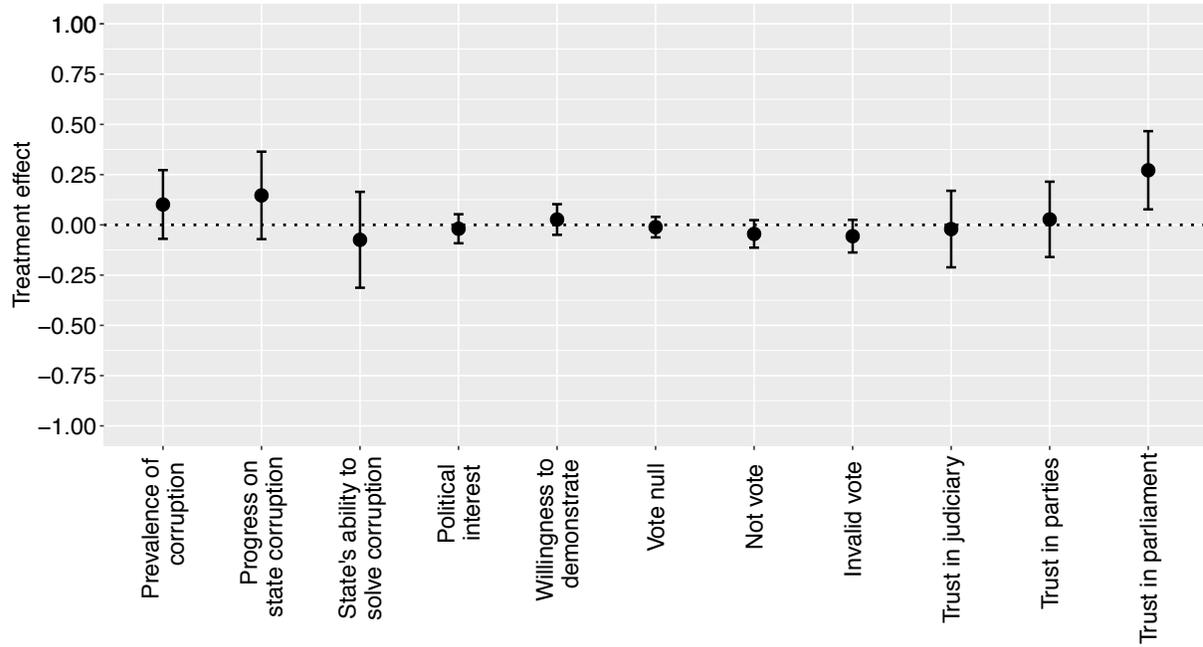
Figure A4. Placebo Test:
Impact on All Outcomes for First Randomly Selected Cut-Off Date (June 10)



Notes: Effects are estimated with controls and city fixed effects, within ± 7 days.
The error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means.

The randomly selected cut-off date was June 10, 2013.

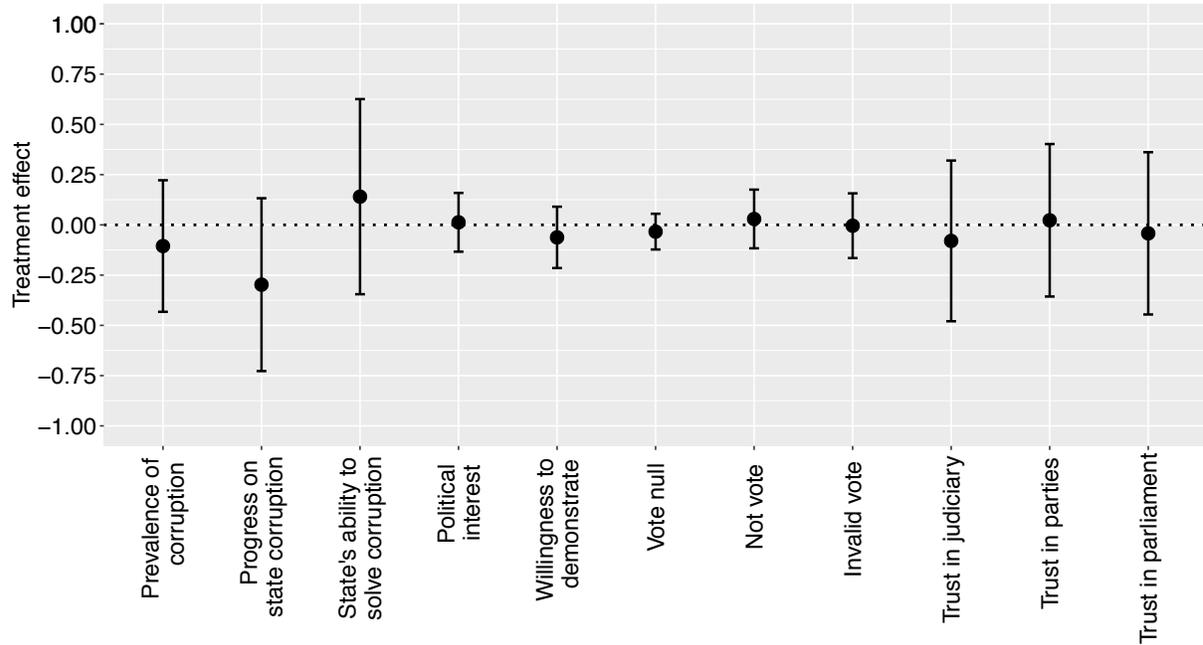
Figure A5. Placebo Test:
Impact on All Outcomes for Second Randomly Selected Cut-Off Date (June 23)



Notes: Effects are estimated with controls and city fixed effects, within ± 7 days.
The error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means.

The randomly selected cut-off date was June 23, 2013.

Figure A6. Placebo Test:
Impact on All Outcomes for Third Randomly Selected Cut-Off Date (June 27)



Notes: Effects are estimated with controls and city fixed effects, within ± 7 days.
The error bars present 95% confidence intervals for the means.

The randomly selected cut-off date was June 27, 2013.