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Popular Rogues

Citizen Opinion about Political Corruption

Darrell M. West
Katherine Stewart

Trust in the honesty of public officials is a crucial condition for stable democratic systems. Yet despite the presumed centrality of honesty in government, there has been a long tradition of “popular rogues” who are considered dishonest and corrupt, but retain popularity for their strong and effective leadership. In this paper, we look at the phenomenon of popular rogues using the case of the former Mayor Buddy Cianci of Providence, Rhode Island. With data from two statewide Rhode Island opinion surveys (one before the trial and the other at its end), we present a “teeter-totter” model of public opinion whereby voters balance competing qualities of honesty and leadership. Depending on whether the assessment involves job performance or legal guilt, citizens employ different criteria. This model has ramifications for leadership in democratic systems and the prospects for citizen support in a scandal-based political era. Although city, state, and national politicians are the object of character attacks and personal scandals, it does not mean they always lose popular support in political settings.¹

“The guy’ s a rogue Rogues get things done.”

— Former President George Herbert Walker Bush
(referring in a *Providence Journal* column to
then Providence Mayor Buddy Cianci)

It is a truism of political thought that citizen confidence in the honesty and trustworthiness of government officials is a vital requirement of stable democratic systems.² Leaders depend on citizens for support and cooperation, and a willingness to pay taxes that finance a wide range of government services. Unless the public trusts politicians, it is said, leaders cannot govern successfully or survive long in elective office.

Journalist James Fallows notes, for example, that “the great problem for American democracy in the 1990s is that people barely trust elected leaders or the entire legislative system to accomplish anything of value.³ The politicians seem untrustworthy while they’re running, and they disappoint even their supporters soon after they take office.” This sentiment is echoed by political scientist James Q. Wilson, who argues that “in the long run, the public interest depends on private virtue.”⁴ Scholar Michael Robinson predicts that “democratic systems do not — cannot — survive monetary or social crisis with institutions that lack the public’ s trust and respect.”⁵

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These virtuous sentiments notwithstanding, there has been a long tradition in the United States of “popular rogues” who are considered dishonest and unethical, but who retain popularity because of their strong and effective leadership. Huey Long was a governor and senator from Louisiana who was widely considered to be dishonest, but who also was very popular with voters and was respected for his ability to get things done. Mayor James Michael Curley of Boston and Governor Edwin Edwards of Louisiana were convicted of political corruption, but they were seen as popular and charismatic leaders. Former President Bill Clinton was impeached over allegations of unethical misconduct in his affair with Monica Lewinsky, yet he retained high job approval ratings.

In this paper, we look at the phenomenon of popular rogues. Using the case of Buddy Cianci, former mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, we examine public opinion on political corruption. With data from an opinion survey, we present a “teeter-totter” model of public opinion whereby voters balance competing qualities such as honesty and leadership. Even leaders who are seen as dishonest and guilty of corruption can receive high ratings on overall job performance if their leadership skills counter-balance a perceived lack of integrity. However, there are differences in how citizens view rogues depending on whether the assessment is made in a political or legal context. As we note in the conclusion, our argument has more general ramifications for leadership in democratic systems and the prospects for citizen support in a scandal-based political era.

Views about Political Corruption

Concern about the persistence of corruption has generated a number of books and articles regarding its incidence. Some take the form of case studies, in which prominent individuals such as Curley, Long, and Richard Daley of Chicago are profiled.⁶ Others come in the form of comparative approaches across governmental units that analyze variations in corruption. For example, Meier and Holbrook collected data on the number of officials convicted of corruption in American states and argued that historical/cultural, political, and bureaucratic reasons accounted for the variation.⁷ Still others focus on the perceptions of elected officials. In their analysis of elite attitudes toward corrupt acts, Peters and Welch present a transactional model centering on perceived costs and benefits to state legislators. They argue that factors such as whether the payoff is long-range and the donor is a constituent mediate legislator attitudes toward corruption.⁸ Finally, some research investigates the electoral ramifications of corruption charges and finds that such charges cost the typical incumbent 6 to 11 percentage points of their expected vote total.⁹

Despite the persistence of corruption in American politics, few researchers have updated the analysis of political corruption.¹⁰ Part of the problem is methodological. It is difficult to collect systematic data on this subject because corruption typically is a private act with few witnesses. The non-public and episodic nature of corruption means there is a “small N” problem in the investigation of this subject. Individual episodes come to light mainly when specific officials are accused or indicted, which limits the opportunities to compile systematic data.

In addition, corruption studies suffer from conceptual problems. Much of the work in this area ignores the role of the public in rewarding or punishing leaders seen as corrupt. Many models lack public opinion data measuring citizen views about corruption. Some are simple models that view corruption as a uniform “bad,” and assume that the perpetrator will be penalized by voters. In reality, citizens take a

more differentiated view of corruption, at least in the case of popular rogues. With such politicians, it is not unusual for voters to balance competing personal qualities in their overall assessments.

As illustrated in a conceptual framework developed by Zaller,¹¹ voters form impressions about politicians by using a variety of considerations. Employing reasoning based on a Receive-Accept-Sample model, Zaller emphasizes “top-of-the-head” impressions that people form as they acquire information. Depending on factors such as how recently information is acquired, the range of impressions that particular individuals hold, and the existence of political predispositions, citizens judge leaders more or less favorably.

In this research, we present a variation on this perspective that we call a “teeter-totter” model of political assessment. In our model, voters employ a multi-dimensional view of leadership when confronted when accusations of corrupt politicians. Instead of considering corruption a moralistic feature that monotonically drives down leadership popularity, public assessments of corruption are more variegated. Citizen reactions are mediated by several factors, such as the venue of the charge (legal or political settings), the nature of the assessment (job performance versus legal guilt), and the deflecting behavior of strategic politicians in response to accusations of corruption.

For example, the public employs different standards in legal versus political settings and in assessments involving legal guilt versus job performance. Legal venues centering on corruption focus more on factors related to honesty, guilt, and integrity, whereas political venues feature a wide range of qualities beyond honesty important for overall job performance, such as caring, compassion, and leadership ability. Depending on which dimension and venue is at stake, voters exercise different standards in response to corruption accusations.

The strategic behavior of politicians also is important to how the public responds. Both in legal and political settings, politicians seek to divert attention away from their own alleged misdeeds toward the conduct of opponents. This occurred, for example, in the impeachment proceedings against President Bill Clinton. Those accused of misconduct frequently seek to frame charges in ways advantageous to themselves. When the prosecution is put on trial, deflecting tactics affect how citizens view the accused politician.

As shown in Figure 1, there are four possibilities when voters balance corruption and leadership: popular leaders, unpopular leaders, popular rogues, and unpopular rogues. Popular leaders are those who are seen as honest and effective leaders. This would include leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan or successful mayors such as Edward Rendell of Philadelphia or Rudolph Giuliani of New York City. Unpopular leaders are officials such as Jimmy Carter who are viewed as honest but ineffective. Popular rogues are seen as dishonest yet effective and would include leaders such as Long, Curley, and Edwards. Unpopular rogues are viewed as dishonest

Figure 1

A Multi-Dimensional View of Political Corruption and Leadership

	<i>Honest</i>	<i>Dishonest</i>
<i>Effective Leader</i>	Popular Leader	Popular Rogue
<i>Ineffective Leader</i>	Unpopular Leader	Unpopular Rogue

and ineffective and would include leaders such as Mayor Milton Milan of Camden, New Jersey, Mayor Joseph Ganim of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and San Bernardino County Supervisor Jerry Eaves of California. These individuals typically do not have very long or successful political careers.

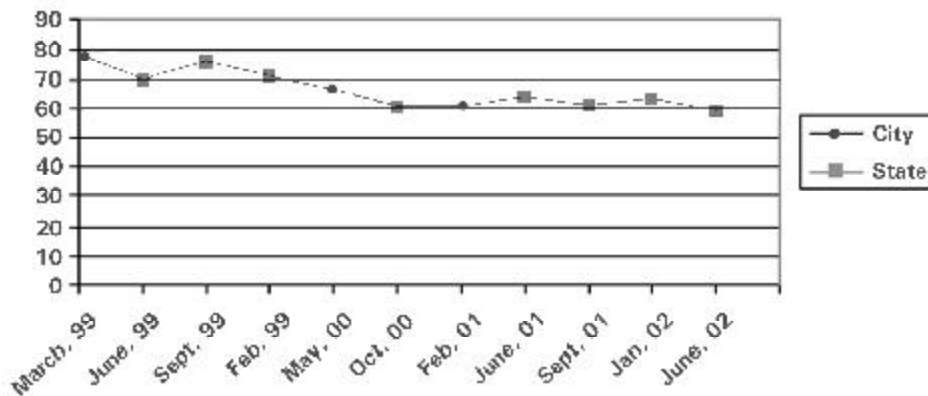
Data and Method

This research focuses on public opinion toward the category of popular rogues. Taking advantage of a contemporary case involving the indictment and subsequent conviction of former Providence Mayor Buddy Cianci, we use a “natural experiment” to test our model of political corruption. Mayor Cianci was a popular and charismatic leader who garnered high job-approval ratings over a series of city and state surveys between 1999 and 2002. For example, in a March 1999 Providence city survey, Cianci earned an 77 percent job approval rating. In a Rhode Island state survey that year, Cianci had a 69 percent rating. As shown in Figure 2, no city or state survey over this time period has shown Cianci dropping below 59 percent approval (even during the course of his Spring 2002 trial).

This case represents a natural experiment because in 2001, Mayor Cianci was

Figure 2

Cianci Job Performance



indicted for political corruption. On April 2, 2001, federal prosecutors accused Cianci of 30 counts of corruption, including bribery, extortion, racketeering, money laundering, and witness tampering. This followed an April 1999 announcement by the U.S. Attorney’s office that it was commencing a corruption probe called Operation Plunderdome dealing with extortion, bribery, and racketeering in Providence city government. Six individuals in or closely tied to city government subsequently were convicted or pled guilty on corruption charges.

Following his indictment, rather than adopt a low profile, Cianci gave interviews to dozens of state and national media outlets defending his leadership and attacking the prosecution. Appearing on the nationally syndicated Don Imus radio show, Cianci joked about the indictment and claimed opponents were out to get him.¹² When the lead prosecutor was found to have taken an incriminating videotape of a

key witness home to show to friends and family members, Cianci lambasted federal officials, and the prosecutor subsequently was suspended for 30 days from the case. Despite the hoopla surrounding the case, in June 2002 a jury found Cianci guilty of racketeering and a judge sentenced him to more than five years in federal prison. Cianci began serving his prison term in December 2002.

To see how citizens reacted to the Cianci indictment, we undertook two statewide Rhode Island surveys, one before his trial started and the other at the very end of the trial. The pre-trial survey consisted of 400 registered voters interviewed between June 9 and 11, 2001. The post-trial survey took place between June 8 and 10, 2002 with 482 registered voters around the state. Sampling for both surveys was completed through random digit dialing and telephone interviews conducted at a Brown University survey center using professionally paid, trained, and supervised interviewers. The sampling frame was statewide and not limited to the city of Providence because the jury pool in federal corruption cases is statewide registered voters. Each survey had a margin of error of around five percentage points.

As shown in the Appendix, we asked several questions in the 2001 survey about Mayor Cianci's job performance as well as questions regarding his leadership, city management, honesty, and guilt. We also asked for views about corruption in Providence city government. The 2002 survey asked identical questions about Cianci's job performance, leadership, management, honesty, guilt, and corruption in Providence city government.

In both surveys, job approval was measured through the question "how would you rate the job Buddy Cianci is doing as mayor of Providence? Excellent, good, only fair, or poor." Views about his leadership, management, and honesty were based on yes/no answers to the following questions: "Do you think Providence Mayor Buddy Cianci has provided strong leadership for the city?" "Do you believe Buddy Cianci is an honest person?" "Do you think Buddy Cianci has provided effective management of Providence city government?" In order to determine how citizens felt about his guilt, we asked the question "Buddy Cianci has been indicted on charges including corruption, bribery, and extortion. Do you believe Cianci is guilty or not guilty of these charges?" Finally, we asked about corruption in city government as follows: "How serious of a problem do you think corruption is in Providence city government? Very serious, somewhat serious, or not very serious."

In the 2001 survey, before Cianci's trial started, 81 percent said they believed corruption in Providence city government was a very or somewhat serious problem. Seventy percent said Mayor Cianci has provided strong leadership for the city, but 48 percent claimed he has provided effective management of city government and only 22 percent believed he was an honest person. Fifty percent did not think Cianci was an honest person.

When asked whether they thought Cianci was guilty of the corruption, bribery, and extortion charges for which he is under federal indictment, 41 percent said he was guilty, 21 percent believed he was not guilty, and 38 percent did not know or offered no opinion. Despite the withering assessments of his personal character, 64 percent gave Mayor Cianci excellent or good marks for how he handled his job.

After his 2002 trial, 83 percent said they believed corruption in Providence city government was a very or somewhat serious problem. Sixty-seven percent said Mayor Cianci has provided strong leadership for the city, but 44 percent claimed he has provided effective management of city government and only 19 percent believed he was an honest person. Fifty percent did not think Cianci was an honest person.

When asked whether they thought Cianci was guilty of the corruption, bribery,

and extortion charges for which he is under federal indictment, 52 percent said he was guilty, 25 percent believed he was not guilty, and 23 percent did not know or offered no opinion. Fifty-nine percent gave Mayor Cianci excellent or good marks for how he handled his job.

Since we have before and after public opinion data on job performance as well as citizen assessments of Cianci's legal guilt, we evaluate the impact of venue on public opinion. We posit that legal venues involving assessment of guilt elevate factors such as citizen impressions of the politician's honesty, while more explicitly political judgments such as evaluation of job performance elevates judgments about leadership quality. Using descriptive and inferential statistics, we study the citizen qualities that go into judging politicians and how judgments are influenced by legal versus political venues.

Table 1

Views about Mayor Cianci's Personal Honesty and Job Performance		
	2001	2002
Honest and Good Job Performance	19%	19%
Dishonest and Good Job Performance	27	26
Dishonest and Not-so-Good Job Performance	21	24
Honest and Not-so-Good Job Performance	2	0
Unsure	31	31

Source: Rhode Island Surveys, June, 2001 and June 2002

A Multi-Dimensional View of Honesty and Job Performance

Before presenting the multivariate results, we look at how citizens assess Cianci with regard to his performance and honesty. Table 1 shows that one-fifth of the overall sample in 2001 and 2002 puts him within the category of honest and effective leadership, one-quarter describe him as dishonest but doing a good job, and one-fifth says he is dishonest and ineffective. Very few (2 percent in 2001 and 0 percent in 2002) claim Cianci is honest and poorly performing, and one-third are unsure how to evaluate him.

These results provide descriptive evidence in support of the proposition that voters balance competing dimensions when judging politicians. A sizeable number of voters see no contradiction between thinking a public official is dishonest but also believing that politician is doing a good job. As theorized by the notion of a popular rogue, some elected officials earn positive marks even when a major proportion conclude he is not honest. In Cianci's case, this was true both before and after his corruption trial.

To assess perceptions about Cianci's guilt as well as views regarding his job performance, we conducted multivariate analysis with two different dependent

variables: guilt (coded as a dichotomous variable with 0 being guilty and 1 being not guilty) and job performance (measured through a four point scale running from 1, excellent to 4, poor). The rationale for focusing on these two questions was to look at the impact of political versus legal venues on views about Cianci. Guilt is a legal concept that is assessed through a federal trial. Job performance is assessed based on the mayor’s performance in office and how he handles his duties.

We argue that there are several factors that help explain citizen judgments about guilt and job performance. Leadership ability was measured through a dichotomous variable “Do you think Providence Mayor Buddy Cianci has provided strong leadership for the city?” (yes or no). Management skills were rated through the item “Do you think Buddy Cianci has provided effective management of Providence city government?” (yes or no). Impressions of personal honesty were evaluated through the question “Do you believe Buddy Cianci is an honest person?” (yes or no).

We also included several control factors in our model, such as age (a six point scale from young to old), sex (coded as male or female), party (a dummy variable for being a Democrat or not), financial status (better or worse), and race (white or non-white) to make sure thoughts about guilt and job performance were not linked to the political, economic, and demographic features of the evaluators.

Table 2 shows the results for a logistic regression analysis of perceptions about Cianci’s guilt in 2001 and 2002. With a model that explains 55 percent of the variation, the only factors that were statistically significant in 2001 for his guilt, before Cianci’s trial began, were views about his honesty and impressions of his management skills in city government. The less honest people believed the mayor to be and the less effective they thought he was in managing city government, the more likely they were to conclude he was guilty of federal corruption charges. There was no statistically significant relationship between views about leadership and impressions of legal guilt.

Following his three-month trial, the only factor that was significantly related to views about his guilt was honesty. How voter’s saw Cianci’s personal integrity was

Table 2

Logistic Regression Model of Perceptions about Mayor Cianci Guilt (dichotomous scale)

	2001 Coefficient (S.E.)	2002 Coefficient (S.E.)
Cianci Leadership	-1.45(1.134)	-.58(.64)
Cianci Management	-1.16(.62)*	.10(.51)
Cianci Honesty	-2.84(.60)***	-3.49(.56)*
Personal Fin. Status	.77(.56)	.16(.47)
Sex	.60(.56)	.25(.46)
Democrat Party Identifier	-.96(.63)	-.02(.74)
Race	.28(.86)	-2.25(1.34)
Age	-.04(.16)	-.01(.16)
Constant	2.50(.22)***	7.46(2.44)***
R Square	55%	54%

*** p < .001; * p < .05

Source: Rhode Island Survey, June, 2001 and June 2002

the major determinant of whether they believed he was guilty of corruption. There was no tie to his leadership ability or to his management skills. Or to put it differently, in a legal venue, people judged guilt based on honesty because that is the primary personal trait of concern in the criminal justice system.

These results could not have been more different when contrasted with the factors seen as important for Cianci's overall job performance both in 2001 and 2002. As shown in Table 3, controlling for the same political and demographic considerations, impressions of leadership and management ability were much more important to overall job ratings than were views about honesty. When it comes to job assessments, voters were willing to rate Cianci positively in his overall job because they thought he was a strong leader and an effective manager. There was no statistically significant relationship between views about his honesty and how he was performing his job until after the trial. Following presentation of evidence documenting legal wrong-doing, voters were more likely to weigh honesty in job performance than had been the case before the trial started. Overall, the model predicted 41 percent of the variation in impressions about Cianci's job performance in 2001 and 50 percent in 2002.

Table 3

Ordinary Least Squares Regression Model of Views about Mayor Cianci Job Performance (four-point scale)

	2001 Unstandardized Coefficient(S.E.)	2002 Unstandardized Coefficient(S.E.)
Cianci Leadership	1.20(.18)***	1.12(.53)***
Cianci Management	.43(.16)***	.48(.13)***
Cianci Honesty	.21(.16)	.51(.14)***
Personal Fin. Status	.11(.14)	-.09(.12)
Sex	-.18(.14)	-.27(.11)*
Democrat Party Identifier	.00(.14)	-.23(.18)
Race	-.11(.23)	-.32(.20)
Age	-.00(.04)	.00(.04)
Constant	.00(.46)	.58(.53)
R Square	41%	50%

*** p < .001

Source: Rhode Island Survey, June 2001

Conclusion

To summarize, we have argued that voters have a multi-dimensional view of leadership conduct in which honesty is one factor in assessing political office-holders, but not the only or even the most important feature.¹³ Citizens employ a teeter-totter mentality when assessing popular rogues. Voters admit such rogues are dishonest and guilty of corrupt actions, but view them simultaneously as effective leaders. If a popular rogue has a charismatic personality or an inept opponent, he can maintain political support even when there are widespread doubts about his personal integrity.

This model demonstrates how public officials who are seen as dishonest can hold high job performance numbers, but also how such views are problematic in legal cases. In impressions regarding guilt, views of honesty and integrity are more central to public evaluations than feelings about leadership qualities. This contrast illustrates a clear difference between legal and political assessments.

These results have interesting ramifications for leadership in democratic societies as well as current proclivities toward scandal politics. If we generalize the model from corruption to general misconduct and personal scandal, observers can see how in the face of adultery and perjury, Clinton maintained high job approval ratings — above 60 percent — despite the Lewinsky scandal. With the economy strong and a successful assault on the tactics and motives of Independent Prosecutor Kenneth Starr, Clinton survived Gallup Poll numbers in January 2001 indicating that 58 percent of Americans believed he was not honest and trustworthy.¹⁴ Just as Mayor Cianci made his prosecutors the issue rather than his own conduct, President Clinton showed that a strong performance on the economy, a country at peace, and a deflecting legal defense were positively evaluated by voters.

This reasoning also explains why many members of Congress who have been accused of unethical behavior have been re-elected by their constituents. Although Peters and Welch found an electoral penalty following ethics charges, they also documented that in looking at eighty-three congressional candidates accused between 1968 and 1978, 62 percent won the subsequent election.¹⁵ According to Welch and Hibbing, this election success rate rose to 75 percent for congressional incumbents accused of corruption between 1982 and 1990.¹⁶ In practice, it takes more than allegations of conflict of interest to bring down congressional candidates.

Speaking more generally, our findings suggest that voters in stable, modern democracies do not place a premium on moralistic considerations such as the honesty and integrity of their leaders.¹⁷ Presidents, governors, and mayors can be accused of violating corruption laws and standards of personal behavior without jeopardizing their long-term political support from the general public. Indeed, as the press and political opponents have pressed the attack mode of scandal politics, voters have grown desensitized to corruption and scandal. As long as the leader is perceived as effectively managing government, providing strong direction, and not being paralyzed by the scandal, voters balance honesty and leadership in their overall assessments.

The major risk facing popular rogues is legal indictment. When the venue switches from a political to an explicitly legal setting, voter assessments are much more likely to be swayed by factors such as honesty than by effective leadership. Citizens consider the evidence and form impressions using different criteria than typically is the case in election campaigns and governing contexts. This gives politicians under an ethical cloud less room to engage in tactics designed to improve their image or damage that of opponents. In this situation, facts, evidence, and legal reasoning appear to matter more than assessments of general leadership performance. ❁

Appendix: 2001 and 2002 Rhode Island State Survey Questions

Job Performance: How would you rate the job Buddy Cianci is doing as mayor of Providence? 1 excellent, 2 good, 3 only fair, 4 poor

Guilt: Buddy Cianci has been indicted on charges including corruption, bribery, and extortion. Do you believe Cianci is guilty or not guilty of these charges? 1 guilty, 2 not guilty

Leadership: Do you think Providence Mayor Buddy Cianci has provided strong leadership for the city? 1 yes, 2 no

Honesty: Do you believe Buddy Cianci is an honest person? 1 yes, 2 no

Management: Do you think Buddy Cianci has provided effective management of Providence city government? 1 yes, 2 no

City Government Corruption: How serious of a problem do you think corruption is in Providence city government? 1 very serious, 2 somewhat serious, 3 not very serious

Sex: 1 male, 2 female

Race: Are you white, African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, or something else? (recoded as 1 white, 2 non-white)

Age: Are you: 1 18-24, 2 25-34, 3 35-44, 4 45-54, 5 55-64, 6 65 or older

Personal Financial Status: We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you and your family living there are: 1 better off, 2 worse off financially than you were a year ago

Party Identification: Regardless of how you vote, do you consider yourself 1 a Democrat, 2 Independent, 3 Republican, or 4 something else? (recoded as 1 Democrat, 2 Non-Democrat)

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