

Briefing Paper

ELECTORAL CORRUPTION

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This survey of electoral corruption provides an overview of the phenomenon, including a summary of the scholarly research on the topic and an assessment of the relevance of research findings for the practitioner community. The paper is grounded on the assumption that elections are the keystone of modern democracy, and that understanding electoral corruption and addressing its main causes can improve electoral integrity around the world.

Introduction and background

Elections are the keystone of democracy as we know it, but the spectre of corruption and manipulation hangs over all electoral processes. For as long as elections have been held, they have been subject to efforts to corrupt them. Vote-buying and fraud were features of elections in ancient Athens and Sparta two and a half thousand years ago (Staveley, 1972: chap. 5) as well as in early modern elections across the world (Posada-Carbó, 1996; 2000), and the same problems haunt electoral conduct in virtually all contemporary states. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that electoral corruption may be growing as a problem.

Not so many decades ago, many of the world's most authoritarian states refrained from holding elections at all, whereas in the post-Cold War world, changes in value systems and the forces of globalisation have made it increasingly difficult for states to resist the pressure at least to pay lip service to democracy. Consequently, many more states have begun to hold elections, though the quality of electoral conduct in a number of them leaves much to be desired.

Before embarking on a review of the scholarly literature on this topic, it is necessary to provide a brief consideration of what is meant by the term 'electoral corruption' and what types of activities are collected

under this rubric. The phenomenon here termed 'electoral corruption' goes by a number of names: electoral malpractice, electoral misconduct, electoral malfeasance, electoral fraud, and electoral manipulation. These terms will be used interchangeably in the present analysis. The defining feature of this activity is that it involves the abuse of electoral institutions for personal or political gain.

Electoral corruption can be broken down for the sake of convenience into three types according to object: the manipulation of rules (the legal framework), the manipulation of voters (preference-formation and expression) and the manipulation of voting (electoral administration) (see also Birch, 2009).

The manipulation of rules involves the distortion of electoral laws so as to benefit one party or contestant in an election. Electoral rules are manipulated to some extent in virtually all states, democratic or otherwise, but electoral rule manipulation can be classified as a form of electoral corruption when it seriously distorts the level playing field subtending elections, as, for example, when the rules governing candidacy prevent certain political forces from contesting elections, or when large sectors of the adult population are excluded from the franchise.

The manipulation of voters takes two principal forms: efforts to distort voters' preferences and efforts to sway preference expression. Voters' preferences are distorted by means of a variety of illicit forms of campaigning: campaign tactics that are deceptive, activities that violate campaign finance laws (typically through over-spending), the use of state resources to support the campaign of a particular candidate or party, or severe bias in media coverage of the election. These techniques are designed to alter voters' true preferences. The other main form of voter manipulation involves the alteration of how preferences are expressed at the polling station, through vote-buying or intimidation in the aim of increasing the vote of a specific political force.

The manipulation of voting takes place through a variety of different forms of electoral maladministration, from classical acts of fraud – personation, ballot-box stuffing, mis-reporting – to other more subtle acts that skew the conduct of an election in favour or against a particular contestant. These can include the under-provision of voting facilities in opposition strong-holds, lack of transparency in the organisation of the election, bias in the way electoral disputes are adjudicated in the courts, and so on.

Broad analytic distinctions such as this are useful in helping us to conceptualise the different ways in which elections can be manipulated, yet it is virtually impossible to list all the different varieties of electoral corruption. Not only is the manipulation of elections highly context-dependent, but technological advances and sheer ingenuity have led to a regular increase in forms of electoral manipulation ever since elections as we know them began to be held 2,500 years ago.

That said, it is important to note that there are many serious problems with electoral processes that cannot be attributed to intended manipulation. The line between intentional corruption and unintended maladministration stemming from incompetence, negligence, lack of resources or simple bad luck is a fine one, and it is often in practice impossible to be sure the extent to which a given problem with an election can be attributed to intentional manipulation or an unintentional mistake (Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002). A large number of the problems that beset contemporary elections are the result of limited state capacity and lack of experience rather

than intentional efforts to subvert the democratic process.

But whatever the cause of poor electoral conduct, it cannot be denied that when elections go wrong, democracy and governance can suffer considerable damage that often takes a very long time to remedy. Following this brief introduction to the problems of electoral corruption, the following sections consider in turn the salient issues in this topic area, recent research findings, and how these research findings can be put to use by practitioners. A short conclusion and a bibliography wrap up the analysis.

Key issues and problems

Electoral corruption is an area in which practitioners have arguably made greater advances to our understanding than have academics. Academic researchers have been relatively slow to take this up as a topic of scholarly analysis, and electoral malpractice is only just now emerging as a coherent sub-field within the discipline of political science. The overview that follows therefore combines the insights of practitioner and academic work on this topic.

Four topics have dominated the study of electoral corruption: debates over how best to measure the quality of elections; studies of the causes of electoral corruption; analyses of the effects of poor electoral conduct; and strategies for improving the quality of elections.

The measurement of electoral corruption

Whenever one sets out to measure something that is covert, one encounters problems arising from the fact that those involved in it have a strong incentive to cover up or disguise in some way. The measurement of electoral corruption is thus something that it is difficult to do directly, and most measures of this phenomenon rely on indirect or proxy measures of some form.

Electoral misconduct has been measured in two main ways: (a) by means of perceptual data such as reports written by observers, legal charges, court rulings, or the findings of popular surveys and opinion polls; or (b) by means of 'election forensics' (Myagkov *et al.*, 2009) that involve undertaking statistical analyses of election results in order to identify patterns that are unlikely to be found in unmanipulated elections.

To study electoral corruption, researchers have relied on a variety of different data sources, including Taylor and Hudson's coding of electoral irregularity in 112 states in the mid-1960s (Taylor and Hudson, 1972), the 'fraud' indicator in the World Bank Database of Political Institutions (Beck *et al.*, 2001), Robert Pastor's database of 'flawed' elections (Pastor, 1999a), Birch's database of electoral malpractice (www.essex.ac.uk/government/electoralmalpractice), or the Freedom House 'electoral process' subscore of the well-known Freedom in the World Index (www.freedomhouse.org).

Cross-national survey datasets that contain questions on electoral integrity include the Latinobarometer and Afrobarometer survey series, Module I of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the 2004 International Social Survey Programme survey.

A wide variety of country-level data have also been employed to analyse electoral corruption in particular contexts, including surveys (McGann and Dominguez, 1998; Stokes, 2005), election results (Berezkin *et al.*, 1989; Powell, 1989; Oberst and Weilage, 1990; Baum, 1991; Mayfield, 1993; King, 2001; Christensen, 2005; Herron and Johnson, 2007; Myagkov *et al.*, 2007; 2008; 2009) and official criminal data (Molina and Lehoucq, 1999; Lehoucq and Molina, 2002; Eisenstadt, 2002; Ziblatt, 2009).

The causes of electoral corruption

Politicians in all countries face a trade-off between the desire to be re-elected and the desire to retain legitimacy (Schedler, 2002b, pp. 36-7; Birch, 2007). They may be tempted to engage in electoral malpractice in order to ensure their re-elections, but in many contexts the cost of misconduct in the electoral sphere will be too high, as electoral conduct will, if detected, have such a negative impact on their legitimacy that it will not be worth the risk. This is not true in all contexts, however, and the study of the causes of electoral corruption is largely a matter of identifying the conditions under which the corruption of elections will seem to make sense to political actors – in the sense that the risk to legitimacy will not be a sufficient deterrent – and the circumstances under which the risks of corruption are too high.

A number of different factors have been found to shape risk perceptions and consequently behaviour by politicians when confronted with the choice of whether 'to corrupt or not to corrupt' (Birch, 2009).

The first main category of factors is derived from the institutional framework governing elections. In theory many different institutions could affect levels of electoral corruption in a state, from territorial organisation to executive type or judicial structure, but the two aspects of institutional design that have been most thoroughly studied in the context of electoral corruption are electoral system type and electoral management body design.

A second set of factors that shape the electoral context are those related to a state's socio-economic circumstances; how rich it is, how well educated its population, how traditional its culture, and the extent to which corruption pervades other aspects of political and economic life.

A final set of factors relates to a state's insertion in the international arena, and specifically, the extent to which it welcomes international election observation missions to monitor its elections.

All of these factors have been found to be associated with the degree of electoral corruption. In addition, the dynamics of the interactions between governing party, opposition elites and masses has also been shown to be closely associated with the quality of elections. In some states political forces in power are able successfully to co-opt and buy off the opposition for extended periods of time by means of patronage perks of various types, and minor offices in government. In other cases efforts to quell opposition through co-optation have been less successful, and active repression has been necessary. Sometimes repression is successful and in other cases it is not successful. The precise outcomes of contests between political groups in society typically depend on their relative assets as well as on a variety of contingent factors (Magaloni, 2010).

The consequences of electoral corruption:

Electoral misconduct can have a number of severe consequences for democratic performance. Most obviously, electoral corruption can result in the 'wrong'

people being elected, and can therefore subvert the democratic will. Electoral corruption also makes the resulting government less representative and less accountable than it would otherwise be; those who are elected in corrupt elections will obviously have less of an incentive to do as their constituents would want them to do. Poor-quality elections can also have knock-on effects for popular perceptions of the legitimacy of political leaders and it can undermine the bonds of trust that must link the people with their rulers as well as individual members of the political elite with each other.

But poor-quality elections also have a number of consequences that go beyond the bounds of representation and democratic accountability as narrowly understood. Corrupt elections can lead to corruption in other spheres. This is true for two principal reasons. Firstly those elected through corrupt means are more likely to be the sorts of people who would be prepared to engage in other forms of corruption once elected. Secondly, many forms of electoral malfeasance are quite expensive, and politicians are often tempted to use other forms of corruption to build up election war-chests that can then be used to fund their re-election through nefarious means. For this reason, corrupt elections can represent a considerable drain on the public purse.

Under certain circumstances, electoral corruption can have even more dire consequences in that it can provoke violence and sometimes even lead to civil war.

Strategies for reducing electoral corruption:

Historically, electoral corruption has been found to vary considerably from period to period. This has naturally caused scholars to wonder why in some contexts we observe dramatic increases or decreases in this phenomenon. Practitioners are particularly interested in the factors associated with decreases in electoral corruption, and research has established that there are a number of particular types of context in which electoral corruption declines, depending on changes in electoral institutions (including the franchise), changes in levels of socio-economic development and international pressure (including electoral assistance).

One of the questions that has particularly occupied a

number of scholars in recent years is whether the holding of elections eventually leads to democracy, in the sense that once a state begins to hold elections, the country will, under the right conditions, gradually become more democratic and elections will become cleaner (Howard and Roessler, 2006; Lindberg, 2009; Magaloni, 2010), or whether, on the contrary, electoral corruption and manipulation enable leaders in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states to use elections to prop up their non-democratic regimes (non-democratic regimes that use elections to help shore them up are often referred to as 'electoral authoritarians' (Schedler, 2006; cf Ziblatt, 2009), or 'competitive authoritarian' states) (Levitsky and Way, 2002; 2010).

This section has mapped the terrain of electoral corruption studies. In the next section we go on to survey the principal findings of research in this field.

Evidence and analysis

Electoral corruption has been studied by political scientists for decades, yet most of the existing research is based on case studies of particular elections in particular countries. The systematic comparative study of electoral irregularities remains in its infancy.

Yet research in the field of electoral corruption has yielded a number of important insights into this phenomenon and has gone some way toward addressing the questions identified in the previous section.

Much research has been devoted to delineating the different forms that electoral corruption takes and describing the political economy of electoral malpractice (e.g. Mackenzie, 1958; Pravda, 1976; Rouquié, 1978; Birch, 1997; Elklit and Svensson, 1997; Bratton, 1998; Elklit, 1999; Callahan, 2000; Schedler, 2002a; Elklit and Reynolds 2002; 2005a; 2005b; Schaffer, 2002; 2007; Brusco *et al.*, 2004; Case, 2006; D'Anieri, 2005; Stokes, 2005). A smaller body of scholarship has been concerned to examine the factors that condition perceptions of electoral corruption at mass level (McGann and Dominguez, 1998; Birch, 2008).

The systematic nature of electoral corruption is something that has been noted by virtually all commentators on this topic. The corruption of elections is not typically something that can be traced to individuals acting in isolation. Electoral corruption requires considerable logistical organisation, and as such it requires the collusion of many actors in different parts of the political system.

The systematic nature of electoral corruption can also be traced to the structures that subtend and facilitate it. Institutions – and specifically electoral institutions – are central in this regard. The electoral management structure provides the overarching framework within which electoral conduct takes place. It is therefore not surprising that electoral management body design should have been found to influence the quality of electoral governance. In particular, effective electoral commission independence has been found to have a strong positive impact on electoral integrity (Hartlyn, 1994; Lopez-Pintor, 2000; Mozaffar, 2002; McCoy and Hartlyn, 2006).

A second key finding is that single-member district electoral systems have been found to encourage electoral corruption to a greater extent than more proportional electoral systems (Lehoucq and Molina, 2002; Birch, 2007).

In addition to institutions, a key social structural factor that interacts with electoral corruption is the level of socio-economic development in a state, and a number of studies have linked lower level of socio-economic development with higher levels of electoral corruption (Gosnell, 1968; Scott, 1969; McDonald, 1972; Hartlyn, 1994; Lehoucq, 2003; Stokes, 2005). In addition there is some evidence that wealth inequality within states is associated with higher levels of electoral corruption (Ziblatt, 2009).

There is also a limited body of research that has investigated the interaction of electoral corruption with other sorts of corruption in the public sector, and other forms of corruption have been found to be one of the more important factors that facilitate malpractice in the electoral sphere (Birch, 2007). Thus different types of corruption hang together.

Culture and values have been found to impact electoral corruption as well. In particular, the dominance of more traditional cultural forms has been identified as one of the background conditions that provides fertile ground for several different forms of electoral corruption, in particular those that involve the corruption of voters (McDonald, 1972; Beck, 1997; Callahan, 2000; Schaffer and Schedler, 2005; Bermeo, 2010).

Finally, the presence of international observers has generally been associated with improved election quality (Bjornlund, 2004; Council of Europe, 2008: 147-8; Goodwin-Gill, 1994: 78; but see Beaulieu and Hyde, 2008 for a different perspective).

A considerable amount of research has also enabled us better to understand how electoral corruption can be effectively reduced.

In some cases, gradual social-structural and cultural changes over the years can result in an altered climate for electoral corruption, which may gradually become less prominent.

Institutional change can also lead to abrupt changes in levels of electoral malpractice. For example, changes in suffrage requirements that gradually make vote-buying too expensive, which then generates impetus for reform (O'Leary, 1962; O'Gorman, 1996; Lehoucq and Molina, 2002).

Likewise governments may face such severe legitimacy crises that they are obliged to 'clean up' their electoral process to prevent mass disturbances, as happened in Argentina prior to the Sáenz Peña law of 1912 (Díaz, 1983).

In other cases, electoral corruption can be dramatically reduced in a short period of time due to popular mobilisation. The 'colour revolutions' that took place in Serbia in 2000, in Georgia in 2003 and in Ukraine in 2004, where popular mobilisation resulted in fraudulent election results being overturned, has promoted a rash of studies that have helped us better to understand the conditions under which popular mobilisation can be of help in pressuring leaders to improve the quality of their elections. In other contexts also, popular mobilisation has

played an important role in bringing about reform (Eisenstadt, 1999; Magaloni, 2010).

The impact of electoral corruption on other aspects of politics, society and the economy have also been the object of a number of studies. For example, Birch has found that when large sectors of the population believe that elections are corrupt, this has the effect of depressing turnout (Birch, 2010).

In summary, scholars are only just beginning to study electoral corruption in a systematic way, but the research that does exist has identified a number of key causal factors that are related to this phenomenon as well as its effects.

Practical implications of research findings

Electoral conduct is an area in which international actors have begun to play a larger role in recent years, as election monitoring, electoral assistance and standard-setting in the electoral field has become more professional and more systematic (Pastor, 1999b).

International law (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) stipulates that elections must be held periodically; in addition they must meet five criteria to be considered free and fair: they must be held (1) by secret ballot, (2) under universal and equal suffrage (3) in a non-discriminatory manner (4) allowing direct choice and (5) free expression (Beigbeder, 1994; Goodwin-Gill, 1994; 1998).

There are also a number of approaches to electoral conduct that have come to be recognised as 'best practice' by the international community, following debate and practical efforts undertaken by organisations such as the United Nations, Inter-Parliamentary Union, International IDEA, and regional bodies.¹

There are an increasing number of organisations involved in electoral monitoring and assistance, from global intergovernmental organisation such as the United Nations, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and International

IDEA to regional bodies such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, Organization of American States and the African Union, to networks of electoral administrators - such as the Global Electoral Organization, the Association of Central and East European Election Officers - not to mention bilateral assistance projects and the work of international non-governmental organisations.

At the same time, there is still no international convention or treaty that is primarily concerned with elections, and we still lack a major international body with the clout to serve as an international elections watchdog or to adjudicate in the case of disputes; in other words, the international elections 'regime' remains patchy and under-developed despite the fact that a vast amount of effort and resources have gone into strengthening electoral conduct over the course of the post-war period. International legal institutions have not developed as far in the electoral sphere as in some other areas – e.g. trade, defence, or environmental regulation. The international elections regime is a hotchpotch of different regional organisations that monitor elections and offer electoral assistance.

This situation has implications for the ways in which states respond to international efforts to comment on and improve the quality of elections; it also has implications for electoral assistance itself. The weakness and fragmentation of the international electoral regime means that making assistance conditional on maintaining certain standards is somewhat more difficult than might be the case in another area. It also means that though electoral processes can be evaluated in relation to a relatively coherent set of international norms (see, for example, Elklit and Reynolds, 2005a; Boda, 2005; Katz, 2005; Council of Europe, 2008), domestic standards and norms are of overwhelming importance in the evaluation of electoral processes by political actors within states.

Another consequence of the weakness of the international electoral regime is that there are limited channels through which the findings of research on electoral corruption can be put into practice in any systematic ways. But this is not to suggest that these findings are not relevant or that they cannot inform practice in the sphere of electoral conduct.

The research findings that are arguably of most practical relevance are those that relate to the role of institutions and the role of civil society in holding governments to account for the quality of the elections they hold.

The practical relevance of the findings on electoral institutions goes without saying; institutions are among the easiest aspects of a political system to alter, and if the institutional determinants of electoral corruption can be identified, this can provide valuable advice for those who are in a position to initiate electoral reform as well as those who engage in democratic assistance. The importance of maintaining genuine electoral commission independence is one of the more relevant lessons from the research on electoral corruption.

The impact of electoral system design, and in particular the negative impact of single-member district electoral systems on electoral integrity, is also an important finding that could well be of relevance in informing the practice of electoral reform in a number of contexts.

The importance of popular mobilisation in maintaining or improving the quality of elections also has considerable practical relevance. Those active in the area of democracy assistance have played a key role in developing mechanisms through which members of the public and civil society groups can hold their governments to account for the quality of the elections they deliver. Tools such as domestic monitoring and quick counts have played a huge role in increasing the capacity of civil society in promoting good electoral governance.

Summary and conclusions

It is often remarked that democracy involves far more than the holding of free and fair elections. Commentators then typically move straight on to discuss all the aspects of that 'more', without considering in detail the role of free and fair elections in a democracy. While it is undeniably true that free and fair elections do not a democracy make, they are nevertheless an essential component of any democracy. In the modern world, electoral corruption is one of the major obstacles to democratisation; it is also a significant problem in many established democracies.

The research findings in the field can be summed up under a number of different claims: firstly, electoral corruption is systematic and operates by leveraging existing resources and structures in the society in which it operates. The systematic nature of electoral corruption means that it can never be entirely eliminated, but it can be significantly reduced if the structures and attitudes on which it relies are altered.

Secondly, institutions matter: institutional factors - from the overall architecture of the electoral system to electoral body management design and many other more minor aspects of the electoral regime - can be important in structuring the opportunities and the incentives that face political actors who might potentially be tempted to engage in electoral corruption.

Thirdly, electoral corruption is integrated into the political economy of a state in complex ways, and to understand how elections are corrupted in a state, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the way power is structured by both formal and informal institutions. It is for this reason that quick technical fixes are often ineffective in improving the quality of elections, as they do not engage with the underlying role of electoral corruption in regime maintenance. Institutional reform can be effective in improving the quality of elections, but only when that reform simultaneously works to restructure power relations and change the incentives under which key political actors operate.

Electoral corruption is a subject of tremendous importance, but the systematic study of electoral corruption is just beginning. Within political science this is currently a 'hot topic', and more and more scholars are beginning to study this problem. At the same time, it is the practitioner community, not political scientists, that has been most active in developing means of reducing electoral corruption, such as domestic and international monitoring, quick counts, analysis of the legal frameworks governing elections and other means of holding regimes to account for the quality of the elections they hold. The literature mentioned above on the 'colour revolutions' are an exception in this regard, but political scientists have a long way to go before they can provide a coherent theoretical account of how to reduce electoral corruption.

Much work remains to be done in the emerging field of electoral corruption, but the research that has been carried out to date has begun to give us insight into what drives this important phenomenon and the range of tools that can be employed to address it. Further research is required further to explore both the causes and the consequences of electoral corruption and to broaden our understanding of how best to reduce it.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the Inter-Parliamentary Union 'Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections' at <http://www.ipu.org/Cnl-e/154-free.htm> and the Council of Europe (Venice Commission) 'Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters' at [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2002/CDL-AD\(2002\)023rev-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2002/CDL-AD(2002)023rev-e.asp), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *International Electoral Standards: Guidelines for Reviewing the Legal Framework of Elections*, Stockholm: International IDEA, 2002, and the CSES 'Copenhagen Document' at http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1990/11/4045_en.pdf, the Organization for American States 'Inter-American Democratic Charter' at http://www.oas.org/OASpage/eng/Documents/Democratic_Charter.htm.

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