

# How do I vote the scoundrels out? Why voters might not punish corrupt politicians at the polls

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**Abstract** While we frequently hope electoral democracy can serve as an important constraint on corruption, there are good reasons to think that such might not be the case. This paper analyzes two closely-related questions: should we expect voters to punish corrupt politicians or parties at the polls, and should we expect such influences to check corruption generally? While there have been clear-cut cases in which such punishments have been massive and decisive, they are much the exception. Indeed, a variety of factors having to do with corruption as a concept and as a political issue, the nature of competitive electoral politics, and more recent economic and political trends reshaping important aspects of liberal democracy, all point toward a pessimistic assessment. Ideas for changing that state of affairs are few, because the difficulties reside less at the level of fixable “problems” and more with the inherent workings of liberal political and economic systems. Efforts to improve the quality of news coverage and civic education, however, and any prospects for strengthening and deepening civil society, may hold out some hope for the longer term.

## Introduction: a cornerstone of reform

“Vote the Scoundrels Out!” was a favorite slogan of anti-political machine activists in American cities a century ago, and the expectation that competitive electoral politics can and should be expected to restrain corruption is a commonplace notion. Most transparency proposals, many political-finance reforms, and the emphasis anti-corruption analysts place on a strong civil society and a free press are linked to the notion that an aroused and informed public will demand better performance from government—or at the very least punish the venal and ineffective—and that the ballot box offers the most authoritative way in which they can do so.

In fact, there have been cases in which voters have ousted corrupt officials and, in many instances, punished their political parties as well. Italian voters demolished the nation’s entire party system—save for the Communists—in 1993 in the wake of the *Tangentopoli* scandals and revelations from the *Mani Pulite* investigations. Richard

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