

Corruption and turnout in Portugal—a municipal level study

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Abstract This article ventures to be one of the first studies that examines the relationship between corruption and electoral turnout on the sub-national level. Taking Portugal, a southern European country with nationally relatively high levels of corruption and relatively low levels of turnout, as a case, we examine the relationship between the two concepts across Portugal’s 304 out of 308 municipalities for the legislative elections in 2005 and 2009. Controlling for municipal level GDP per capita, unemployment, the percentage of senior citizens, and population density, as well as the closeness of the election and the district magnitude, we find corruption to be a rather strong mobilizing agent. Compared to “clean” municipalities, our results indicate that turnout is several percentage points higher in “very corrupt” municipalities.

Introduction

There is widespread evidence that political corruption, or the misuse of public office for private gains, has negative influences on the economic and social well-being of countries [14, 35]. For example, there is plenty of support for the stipulation that, whenever public contracts go to the highest bribe payer instead of to the best service provider, then governments and bureaucracies dissipate resources and slow down infrastructure projects [39]. In addition, bribery, money laundering, and the exchange of money for personal favors brings down investment and renders bureaucracies ineffective [31]. Beyond the economic realm, corruption might also spread into the social spheres, in that it decreases citizens’ satisfaction with their government and political system more generally [34, 44].

However, it is less clear how citizens’ anger with their politicians manifests itself at elections. Do enraged citizens’ rush to the polls to punish corrupt politicians or do

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