CORRUPTION, IDEOLOGY, & POPULISM

the rise of valence political campaigning

LUIGI CURINI

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The Rise of Valence Political Campaigning

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Introduction

A large body of analysis published in recent decades has shown that political campaigns are important (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2002; Sides 2007). This is not surprising: political campaigns have the power to arouse attention, shape and reframe ideas, activate citizens, and, eventually, place contestants ahead in the electoral race (Nai and Walter 2015). But campaigns are also about positioning and highlighting issues on the political agenda. Political corruption, as will be discussed at length throughout this book, is one of the issues that parties can put forward during such electoral events. Broadly defined as the use of political power for illegal personal gains, corruption is a phenomenon that has been frequently investigated in the literature. Many researchers have attributed it to various causes. Most studies show, for example, that established democracies are greatly affected by political corruption, but they are so to a lesser extent than non- or proto-democratic states, while rules and traditions matter in determining the level of political corruption. However, these studies do not identify the conditions under which political corruption can be expected to play a significant role in political confrontation. Do parties talk about corruption only as a by-product of occasional exogenous factors (i.e. scandals reported in the press) or are they induced to do so by systemic regularities? And what are the broad consequences?

These are the research questions addressed by the present book. To deal with them, I shall link political corruption to the growing literature on valence issues (Stokes 1963), given that political corruption and honesty are possibly the most prominent examples of what are commonly understood to be non-policy valence issues (Stokes 1992) (Chap. 1).

Then, from a theoretical point of view, I shall use a straightforward spatial model to link the incentives of parties to highlight corruption issues in their electoral confrontation with ideological considerations.

Almost 60 years ago, Daniel Bell (1960) made the provocative claim that ideological polarization was diminishing in Western democracies: 'in the Western world there is a rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues: the acceptance of a Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism. In that sense, the ideological age has ended' (Bell 1960: 373). Forty years later, Francis Fukuyama (1989) pushed the 'end of ideology' mantra even further by talking explicitly about the 'end of history'. With the demise of the Cold War, he argued all large ideological conflicts had been resolved. The contest was over, and history had produced a winner: Western-style liberal democracy. Since then, other far-reaching processes such as European integration and globalization, with the connected erosion of domestic sovereignty and reduced policy options available to national leaders, have worked in the same direction, further restricting the ideological menu from which parties can choose their positions vis-à-vis each other and the voters during an electoral campaign.

According to the model presented in this book, these macro trends are likely to have a major impact on the motivations of parties to discuss (or not) political corruption. It will be shown, in fact, that the incentives of political actors to highlight the valence issue of corruption increase as the spatial distance separating a party from its ideologically adjacent competitors decreases. Intuitively, this happens because when parties are adjacent from a spatial point of view, praising one's own policy position or criticizing that of the other party is tantamount to praising the other's position and criticizing one's own because the two positions are so similar. Thus, a higher degree of ideological party similarity incentivizes parties to find different means to distinguish themselves before the electorate so that voters are induced to support them (and not the others). Investing in a valence campaign based on a non-policy valence issue such as corruption provides parties with that opportunity.

This result applies, with relatively small qualitative differences, in both a two-party system (Chap. 2) and a multi-party one (Chap. 3) on considering one or two dimensions of political confrontation (Chap. 4) and regardless (with some caveats) of the direction of valence campaigning (i.e. purely negative, as occurs when a party accuses other parties of being corrupt, or positive, as when a party praises itself for being honest).

Finally, what is true for a particular non-policy valence issue like corruption applies in principle to any other non-policy valence issue, as will be discussed below.

In what follows, the hypothesis of an inverse relationship between the distance of a party from its ideologically adjacent competitors (i.e. its 'neighbours') and its incentive to campaign on political corruption will be tested in a variety of contexts (ranging from a longitudinal case study centred on Italy to a comparative study focused on both national and European elections) while drawing on various sources of data (such as legislative speeches, party manifestoes, and social media tweets). This will be done by following an incremental pathway that adds a layer of complexity in each successive chapter compared to the previous one.

In the final chapter (Chap. 5), the general consequences of the previous findings will be discussed by connecting them to three main topics. First, it will be shown how these results can be directly related to the literature on political (and electoral) accountability. Second, the model based on ideological considerations will be extended to illustrate how it helps explain the anti-elite rhetoric of parties generally connected to what can be identified as a 'populist strategy'. Third, and finally, the theoretical points discussed will be related to well-established theorizing on parties and party systems, in particular with the cartel party theory. The book will finish by highlighting an unfortunate trade-off: while a long list of works have thoroughly discussed the risks of a wide ideological polarization for the everyday life of a polity, the possible negative externalities of an extreme valence campaign generated by a short ideological distance among parties have been generally underestimated. However, it will be argued, this is an important issue for contemporary democracies.

This book would have been impossible to write without my frequent discussions with Paolo Martelli over the years. What I have learnt about the 'power of valence issues' is entirely due to his guidance. I have discussed earlier versions of some of the chapters of this book at several conferences and seminars: among others, the annual meeting of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP), Rome, September 2009; the congress of the European Political Science Association (EPSA), Berlin, June 2012; the New Developments in Modeling Party Competition Conference, Berlin, July 2012; GLOPE2 Tuesday Seminars, Waseda University (Tokyo), 2012 and 2013; and the 8th ECPR General Conference, Glasgow, September 2014. I acknowledge all the helpful comments made by seminars' participants and in particular by Luca Verzichelli, Willy Jou, Susumu Shikano,

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All data and scripts to replicate the analyses reported in each chapter of the present book are available online at: http://www.luigicurini.com/scientific-publications.html.

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CHAPTER 1

Political Corruption and Valence Issues

This chapter links the literature on political corruption with that on valence issues. It will discuss how the former literature has generally sought to understand the consequences of political corruption, as well as the reasons for its diffusion in different countries, while discarding (with few exceptions) the factors that could explain why political actors may have an incentive to campaign (in a stronger or weaker way) on political corruption issues. By doing so, the possibility of investigating the outcomes of the choice to 'invest in corruption' is precluded. I will argue that looking at political corruption using the framework provided by the valence issues literature helps fill this gap.

In this regard, I will present the different interpretation of the concept of valence issues first introduced into the literature by Stokes's seminal article (1963), focusing in particular on the distinction between non-positional policy-based valence issues (e.g. issues such as reducing crime or increasing economic growth) and non-policy-based ones (e.g. credibility, integrity) (Clark 2014). In contrast to positional policy issues, which involve a clear conflict of interest among groups of electors (being in favour of or against the welfare state, gay marriage, and so on), when dealing with either policy or non-policy valence issues, voters hold identical positions (preferring more to less or less to more, depending on the issue). Corruption (honesty) is a typical example of a non-policy valence issue.

I will then highlight how the aforementioned types of valence issues, together with positional policy issues, can be viewed and analysed within a common theoretical framework that differentiates the possible

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campaigning moves available to political actors (candidates and/or parties) according to two simple criteria.

This latter point leads directly to the connection between political corruption and valence issues that will be theoretically and empirically investigated in the following chapters. To anticipate an aspect thoroughly discussed below, if political corruption is treated as a valence issue, it becomes possible to focus on how parties' relative ideological positions and electoral considerations affect their emphasis on campaigning on corruption.

1.1 The Growing Interest in Corruption

Since the mid-1990s, from leading international organizations, such as the EU and OECD, to international media and individual governments, the topic of corruption has become almost ubiquitous in policy circles. The debate on corruption has not taken place only in the public domain, however, because also academic attention to it has grown considerably over the years. This becomes apparent on conducting a simple bibliometric check. The scores reported in Fig. 1.1 are based, respectively, on a Google

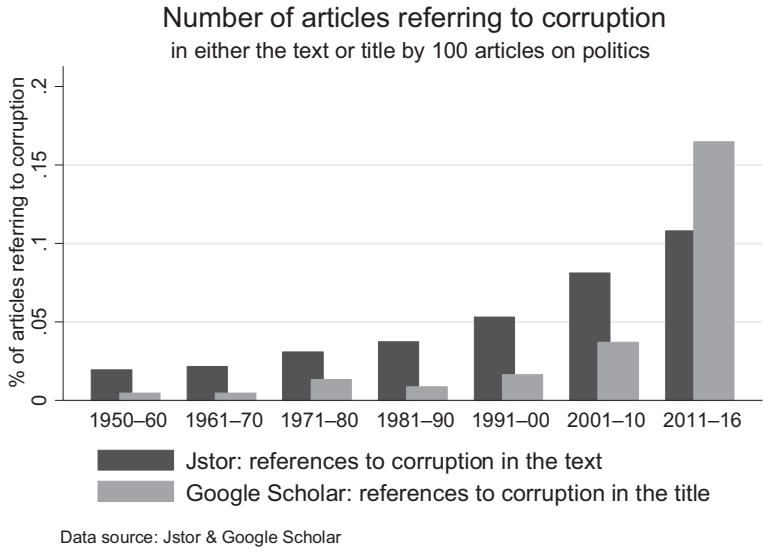

Fig. 1.1 Number of books and articles referring to corruption in either the text or title per 100 books and articles on politics

Scholar and a Jstor search query. The number of books and articles referring to corruption among all political science publications grown linearly over time, rising from 2% in the 1950s to 10.8% in the past 5 years (source: Jstor).[1] The same significant growth is found when focusing on the proportion of books and articles with the word 'corruption' in their title among all publications on politics: from 0.5% in the 1950s to 15% once again in the last 5 years (source Google Scholar).[2]

This growing interest is not surprising: corruption directly impacts on such important matters as fairness in the institutional and economic process, political accountability, responsiveness, etc. According to well-known definitions, corruption is 'the misuse of public office for private gains' (Treisman 2000: 399) or, also, 'an act by (or with acquiescence of) a public official' that violates legal or social norms for private or particularist gain (Gerring and Thacker 2004: 300). In both definitions, public officials are the main actors, while the extent and type of corruption are not specified (Ecker et al. 2016). Moreover, political elites may be held accountable not just for their own abuse of power and money but also for failing to limit corrupt behaviour in general (Tavits 2007).

Della Porta and Vannucci's (1997: 231–232) definition of corruption centres on another recurrent theme in the literature: the breach of a principal-agent relationship. For Della Porta and Vannucci, political corruption involves a secret violation of a contract that, implicitly or explicitly, delegates responsibility and the exercise of discretionary power to an agent (i.e. the politicians) who, against the interests or preferences of the principal (i.e. the citizens), acts in favour of a third party, from which it receives a reward.

The literature on corruption has mainly focused on two sub-topics. The first concerns the *consequences* of corruption. A wide-ranging and multi-disciplinary literature has shown that contexts which suffer from higher levels of corruption are associated with, for example, poorer health (Holmberg and Rothstein 2012) and environmental outcomes (Welsch 2004), lower economic development (Mauro 1995; Shleifer and Vishny 1993), and greater income inequality (Gupta et al. 2002). Moreover, it has also been underlined that corruption is a problem that plagues both developing and more economically developed regions such as Europe (Charron et al. 2014).

The political consequences of corruption have also been well-documented. Corruption undermines legitimacy in a variety of institutional settings (Mishler and Rose 2001; Seligson 2002). In particular, corruption destabilizes the democratic rules by favouring some groups—especially

the wealthy—over others (Engler 2016; Anderson and Tverdova 2003), thereby generating mistrust between the majority of citizens and their political leaders. Similarly, Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) have shown that corruption exacerbates social inequality, which in turn reduces people's social trust, while Kostadinova (2012) found that corruption lowers trust not only in the government and public administration but also in parliament and political parties in general. Widespread corruption also depresses electoral turnout, because high levels of perceived corruption lead to more negative evaluations of political authorities and the political system in general (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; McCann and Dominguez 1998).[3]

Finally, corruption has a possible impact on the vote-choice of citizens. According to democratic theory, one key mechanism through which citizens can combat corrupt elite behaviour is electoral choice. Given pervasive corruption among incumbents, or if a corruption scandal breaks prior to an election, voters who understand the costs of corruption should turn against the government in favour of a cleaner challenger and 'throw the rascals out' (Charron and Bågenholm 2016). In this respect, recent findings demonstrate that if corruption is perceived to be high, the electoral support for governing parties decreases (Klašnja et al. 2016; Krause and Méndez 2009). Similarly, several studies have found that the electorate actually punishes politicians and parties involved in corruption scandals (Clark 2009), while corruption allegations appear to harm the electoral prospects of the accused politicians (Peters and Welch 1980; Ferraz and Finan 2008). However, there is no lack of exceptions to this rule, since many voters still remain loyal to their preferred parties. For example, recent empirical studies have shown that the accountability mechanisms are less decisive in their impact, because corrupt officials in many cases are re-elected or punished only marginally by voters (Chang et al. 2010; Reed 1999; Bågenholm 2013). This may be because at least some voters personally benefit from the corrupt activities, for example in the form of clientelism (Fernández-Vázquez et al. 2016; Manzetti and Wilson 2007), or because citizens have strong loyalties to certain politicians or parties, so that a corruption scandal is not enough to change their voting behaviour (de Sousa and Moriconi 2013). Moreover, what really matters in some instances is not how corrupt a given party is perceived to be, but whether it is deemed to be more corrupt than the other parties (Cordero and Blais 2017).

Because the corruption issue is so important for its economic and political consequences, it is no surprise that understanding the *causes* of the phenomenon has garnered a great deal of recent scholarly attention as well. Most analyses of the causes of corruption start from the presumption that the abuse of public office for private gain stems from voters' inability to rein in their representatives. In the face of government malfeasance, scholars ask whether and how political institutions (but also political culture and the level of economic development: see Lipset and Lenz 2000; Montinola and Jackman 2002) affect it. Answers in the literature generally agree that corruption is lowest where political institutions give voters the ability to punish politicians who fail to perform according to expectations. In regard to the already-discussed principal-agent perspective, researchers often highlight the role and the importance of political competition (Alt and Lassen 2003) as measured through the existence of partisan and institutional checks in limiting agents' (i.e. politicians') discretion to act on their own behalf. However, given that with no reliable information about whom to check and when, the ability to keep agents in check (and thereby avoid a moral hazard problem) is hugely hampered; good government requires also that those who would like to see corruption punished are in a position to observe, report, or block undesirable behaviour (Brown et al. 2011). These elements—effective monitoring and institutional checks—are in fact fundamental to well-designed principal-agent relationships (Heller et al. 2016).

Montinola and Jackman (2002) and Charron and Lapuente (2010) have looked at how the level of democracy affects this principal-agent problem. Most studies show that established democracies are greatly affected by political corruption, but they are so to a lesser extent than non- or proto-democratic states, while also rules and traditions matter in determining the level of political corruption. Chang (2005), Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman (2005), and Chang and Golden (2006) examine how electoral rules affect how political candidates can be held accountable to voters. Tavits (2007) shows that the principle-agent relationship is tightened in the presence of clear lines of responsibility for enacting anti-corruption policies. The same happens if institutions such as parliaments, press freedom, and a free economy are in place (Bohara et al. 2004; Gerring and Thacker 2004). Finally, Andrews and Montinola (2004) suggest that increasing the total number of veto players in a democracy makes collusion more difficult and reduces actors' capacity to collude to accept bribes, which in turn should reduce corruption, at least in some given circumstances.[4]

1.2 Politicizing Corruption

As just seen, the topic of corruption has generated a massive amount of literature, both in and outside the academic field. However, with very few exceptions, analysing the reasons that could explain why political actors may have an incentive to campaign on political corruption issues has not received similar attention. This is surprising, since many new political parties which outperformed the political establishment in the past prominently politicised corruption (Hanley and Sikk 2014). For example, Bågenholm and Charron (2014) have shown in a study covering both Western and Eastern European countries that new political parties that do politicise corruption are more successful than new parties that do not. In terms of the electoral effects of politicising corruption, the two authors find that, even when controlling for a country's level of corruption, unemployment, inflation, electoral institutions, and history of democracy, when this tactic is used by new parties or parties in the main opposition, it leads to greater vote gains compared with the previous election than for the same type of party that refrains from this strategy. On average, politicising corruption increases a party's vote share by about 5.6% compared with the previous election. Such evidence suggests that there is ample opportunity to politicise corruption as a campaign issue.

However, the degree of attention paid to corruption by both mainstream as well as new parties is something that changes over time in a quite striking manner. To anticipate some data that will be discussed at length in the next chapters, Fig. 1.2 reports the average degree of attention to corruption issues (which I label CORRUPTION) paid by parties in their electoral manifestos since 1945 until today in 42 democracies and 554 elections as recorded by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) dataset.[5]

Before beginning discussion of Fig. 1.2, it is important to point out that emphasizing corruption in a political confrontation (i.e. politicizing it) can be done in two different ways (see Bågenholm and Charron 2014). First, it can be addressed in general terms, so that parties raise the issue and suggest ways to deal with the problem, without making any explicit references to the other parties or politicians. Second, corruption may be politicised in more specific terms by accusing one's political adversaries of being corrupt. However, by focusing on manifestoes as codified by CMP in Fig. 1.2, the two types of politicization are not distinguished, which means that all forms of corruption rhetoric by parties in the election

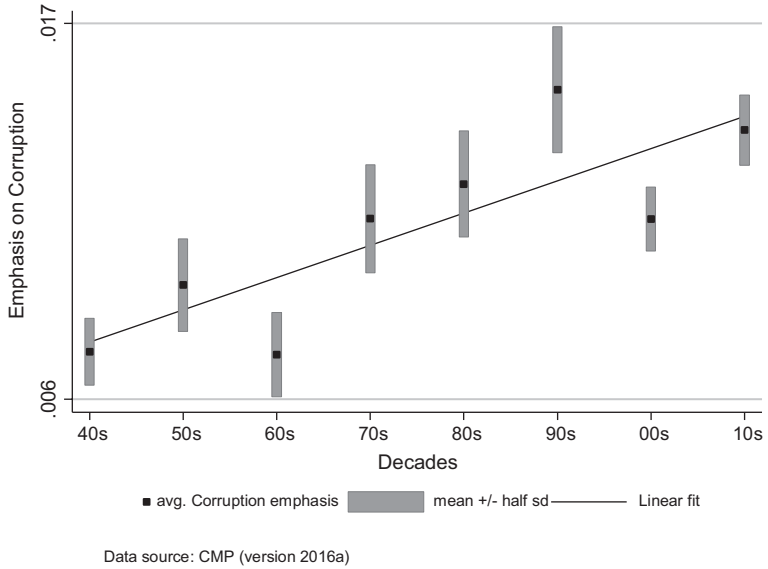

Fig. 1.2 Average emphasis on CORRUPTION in parties' manifestoes over decades

campaign are counted as politicisation of the issue (see Chaps. 2 and 3 for more details on this aspect).

In the CMP dataset, electoral programmes are coded by content analysis, i.e. by manually computing all occurrences of expressions with communicative meaning chosen among a predetermined list of topics. In other words, the coding procedures used by CMP involve sorting all politically meaningful expressions in each party's manifesto into a group of categories (welfare, defence, law and order, etc.), and then taking the percentages in each category as a measure of the party's priorities (Budge et al. 2001). Among these categories, 'political corruption' (per304 to use the CMP denomination) explicitly includes all references to the *need to eliminate corruption and associated abuse in political and public life*. Accordingly, only campaigns carried forward by parties with respect to 'grand corruption'—that is, corruption involving politicians and political parties—are analysed. CMP data do not enable a distinction to be drawn between 'grand' and 'petty' bureaucratic corruption cases, so that this difference, possibly important in some cases, is inevitably overlooked in the analysis.