


Party Systems And The Control Of Politicians

gOVERNMENTAL CORRUPTION - GRAND AND PETTY FORMS OF theft, bribery and rent-seeking by public officials - is strikingly common in democracies around the world. This raises a host of questions: Why does democratic competition sometimes fail to curb malfeasance? Why can elections help corrupt politicians to power? Why do voters often fail to punish corrupt incumbents?

These questions are so perplexing because electoral competition should in principle allow voters to select clean politicians and to replace representatives who fail to curb corruption. Survey after survey, both globally and in specific countries, show that voters are deeply concerned about corruption and it is not surprising that they care. In every democracy of the world, looting the public purse is a crime and its corrosive effects are plain. Corruption damages growth and development. It undermines the effectiveness of aid, squanders national wealth, distorts markets and competition, drives away investment, and accentuates social inequality. But corruption also fouls up the politics of countries. The cost of corruption is not just the cost of bribes. Bribes go to fund political ambitions and careers; they finance election campaigns, pay for patronage networks, and attract crooks into politics. Across a range of democracies in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe voters regularly identify corruption as a major problem, express a belief that their national governments have a responsibility to address it, and find their politicians wanting.

When democracies fail their citizens in this way, party systems are often at the root of the problem. Governmental corruption is a public policy outcome for which politicians are in principle accountable - they may invest resources to fight it, or tolerate it and possibly even engage in it. Informed voters, who can enforce accountability, can give powerful incentives to their politicians to mitigate corruption. But often party systems make it difficult for voters to make informed and effective choices at the ballot box. Three party system features in particular affect the capacity of voters to control their representatives - party system institutionalisation, competitiveness and the existence of programmatically structured (rather than clientelistic) competition.





When Indian and Brazilian citizens took to the streets this year in anti-corruption demonstrations, they were seeking to re-establish control over their politicians and to remedy the widespread failure of governing and opposition parties to address endemic corruption.


Brooms in the national colours of Brazil are placed at the Copacabana beach, in southern Rio de Janeiro, as a protest against corruption in politics.

The level of institutionalisation distinguishes the party systems of most advanced industrial democracies from many recently democratised countries. In institutionalised systems, parties have societal roots and organisational stability, party labels and reputations are informative, and voters can use them as reliable shortcuts in distinguishing good and bad types of politicians. Contrast this with poorly institutionalised party systems like that of Russia in the 1990s. With the exception of the Communist Party, parties had weak or non-existent social roots and in the three assembly elections during that decade, Russian voters were confronted with a system in which new parties emerged, while existing ones disappeared, split or merged, and parliamentarians switched parties between elections. This lack of institutionalisation undermined the effectiveness of elections as a tool for voters to select good representatives and punish corrupt ones, and throughout the 1990s, corruption in Russia became an increasingly prominent problem.

Equally important in combating corruption is the competitiveness of the party system because it shapes the opportunities for citizens to cast a meaningful vote against the incumbent. Competitiveness can suffer when there is too little or too much competition. The former situation characterises many of the new African democracies, in which the parties that led the independence or democratisation struggles have established a degree of electoral hegemony that in itself presents formidable barriers to any meaningful opposition challenge. In the 2009 Namibian general elections, for instance, President Hifikepunye Pohamba and his South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) party were elected, each with over 75 percent of the vote. As governing parties like SWAPO in Namibia or the African National Congress in South Africa rack up years of uninterrupted incumbency, facing no genuine threat of replacement, accountability is weakened and corruption is becoming an increasingly prominent problem. But competitiveness can also suffer when party systems are highly fragmented as in Brazil, where over twenty parties currently hold seats in the assembly. Such systems offer voters extremely diverse choices and few clues about who is likely to emerge as the winner. High levels of fragmentation make it harder for voters to distinguish which parties are committed to clean government, split the opposition vote, and make electoral co-ordination to oust corrupt incumbents less likely.

The third party system feature – whether party competition is programmatically structured – has similarly powerful consequences for the ability of voters to control their politicians. Where party competition is programmatic, politicians compete on the basis of policy commitments, which voters use to select their representatives and to assess their performance. In clientelistic systems like those of India and Brazil, in contrast, parties compete primarily by offering targeted material benefits in return for votes and their policy positions are often diffuse, erratic, and lack credibility. This lack of credible information about policy aims makes it more difficult for voters to distinguish clean challengers from those for whom fighting corruption is not a priority. In India, for instance, the scant credibility of the opposition Bharatiya

Janata Party's attempt to position itself as an anti-corruption alternative to the governing Congress party was revealed when a multi-million dollar corruption scandal broke in October 2011, which suggests that the party has been involved in systematic malfeasance at the highest levels. Such a lack of credible information about policy aims creates co-ordination problems for voters who aim to punish corrupt incumbents. In both India and Brazil, citizens thoroughly disaffected by the failure of governing and opposition parties to redress malfeasance have taken to the streets to demand effective measures to curb corruption. In the short run, these are promising steps. In the longer run, though, corruption control in these two democracies will turn on the ability of voters to control their politicians in more regular ways through democratic elections.

As Chandrashekhar Krishnan, Executive Director of Transparency International UK, has observed, struggles against corruption are primarily internal battles in each democracy that outsiders can only try to support, but not lead. The principal cause of governmental corruption is a lack of will among a country's politicians. The most effective way to instil that will into a political class is to give voters the information and the choices to throw the scoundrels out. 

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