

Condoning Corruption: Who Votes for Corrupt Political Parties?

Chandan Kumar Jha
Madden School of Business, Le Moyne College

Introduction

Although it is well-documented that voters tend to punish politicians with criminal and corruption charges, such politicians continue to be represented in sizable proportions even in democracies where free and fair elections are held (Welch and Hibbing, 1997; Ferraz and Finan, 2008; Dutta and Gupta, 2014; Banerjee et al., 2014). Hence, it is important to understand what factors are important in determining not only the tolerance of corruption, but a majority of electorates voting for corrupt political parties over and over again. Yet, while a number of institutional, economic, and historical factors at macro-levels have been identified that determine the level of corruption across countries (see, for example, Treisman, 2000), the individual-level characteristics associated with condoning corruption by the electorate remain scarcely investigated and poorly understood.

This study seeks to identify the individual characteristics that determine voters' tolerance of corruption by their preferred political parties. One reason voters tend to condone corruption by their preferred candidates is the absence of a clean alternative (Dutta and Gupta, 2014). It is noteworthy that the dataset used in this study provides a non-corrupt alternative. The study goes on to explore the determinants of abstaining from voting if an individual's preferred political party was involved in a corruption scandal. Besides individual-level characteristics, the study also explores the effects of macro factors – regional and country-level – on these two outcomes.

Data and Empirical Strategy

The primary variable of interest has been created using the following two questions from the European Quality of Government Index (EQI) Survey (Charron et al., 2015) :

- "What political party would you vote for if the national parliamentary election were today?"
- "Now imagine that that party was involved in a corruption scandal, which of the following would be most likely?"

(1) "Still vote for preferred party" (23%)

(2) "Vote for another established party not involved in the corruption scandal" (37%)

(3) "Not vote at all" (40%)

Since the variable of interest is a discrete choice variable, I estimate the following function using ordered-probit estimation (marginal effects reported in the Figure)

$$Vote_{i,r,c} = f(X_{i,r,c}, X^R, X^C) \quad (1)$$

Since fixed effects cannot be included in non-linear regressions, I modify the responses to these questions and estimate the following using OLS (results reported in the Table)

$$MVote_{i,r,c} = \alpha + \beta X_{i,r,c} + \gamma X^R + \delta X^C + \varepsilon_{i,r,c} \quad (2)$$

where $MVote_{i,r,c}$ equals 1 if the respondent chooses option (1) and 0 otherwise. Next, to explore the factors that determine the likelihood of abstaining from voting rather than voting for the non-corrupt alternative, I drop the responses with option (1) and create an index such that $MVote_{i,r,c}$ equals 1 if the respondent chooses (3) and 0 otherwise. $Vote_{i,r,c}$ and $MVote_{i,r,c}$ is the response of individual i living in region r in country c . $X_{i,r,c}$, X^R and X^C denote individual characteristics and regional and country-level variables, respectively.

Results

The results show that individuals with tertiary levels of education and higher levels of incomes are more likely to vote for their preferred political party even if that party was involved in a corruption scandal. On the other hand, women and unemployed individuals are less likely to condone corruption by their preferred party. While regional-level factors are not found to be significant, country-level corruption, not surprisingly, is positively associated with the likelihood of condoning corruption. Further, greater political rights, government spending, and openness to trade are all negatively, significantly associated with condoning corruption.

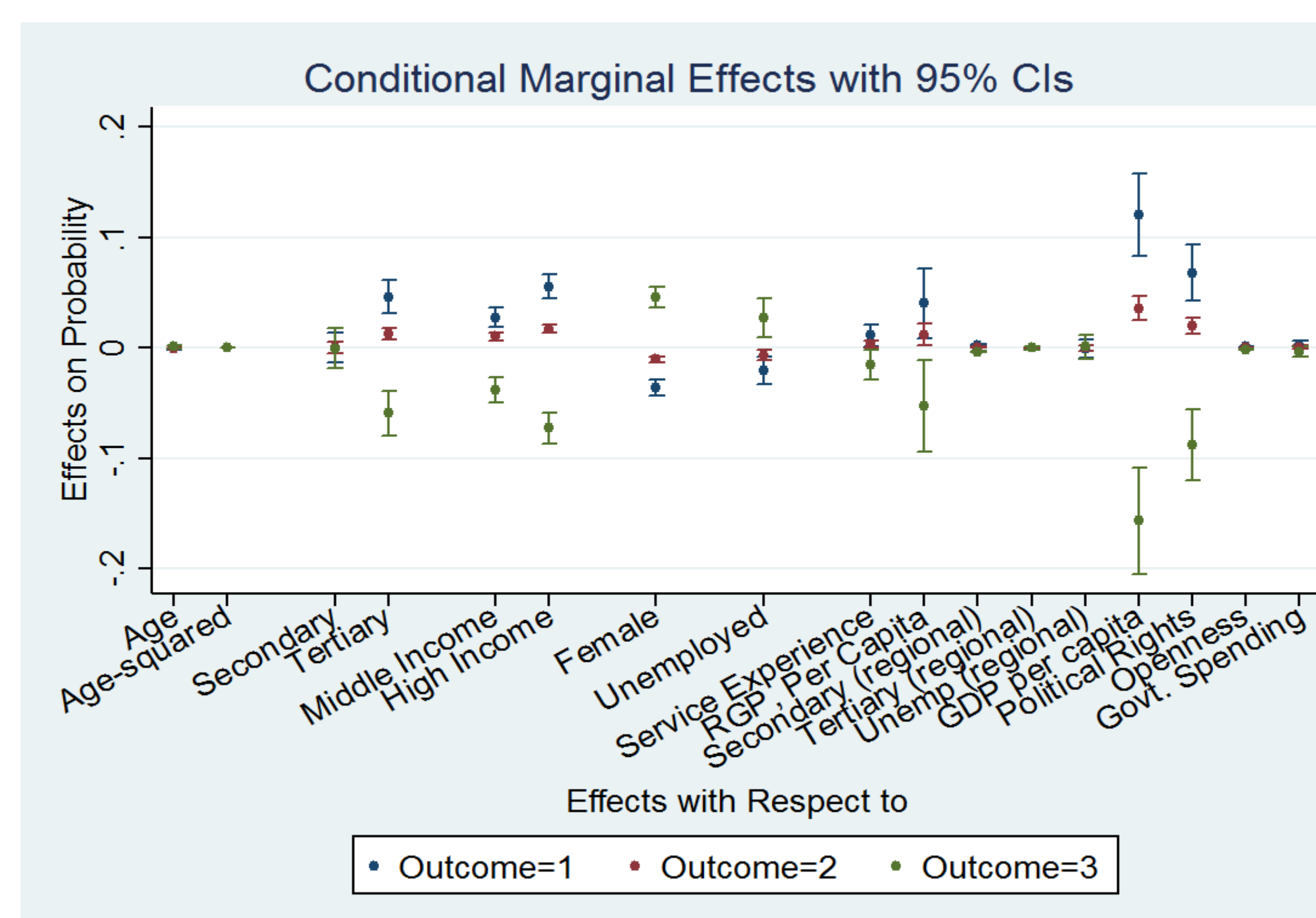
Next, higher levels of education and income are found to be negatively associated with the likelihood of abstaining from voting, while women and unemployed are more likely to choose "not vote at all" rather than vote for the non-corrupt alternative if their preferred political party was involved in a corruption scandal. Moreover, it is found that a greater per capita regional gross product is positively, and a greater share of population aged 25-64 with tertiary levels of educational attainment in a region is negatively, associated with abstaining from voting. Among country-level factors, greater levels of GDP per capita and openness are positively associated with the abstaining from voting, while a higher level of country-level corruption is found to be negatively associated with the likelihood of abstaining from voting.

Contact

Chandan Kumar Jha
Madden School of Business, Le Moyne College
1419 Salt Springs Rd, Syracuse, NY 13214
Email: jhack@lemoyne.edu
Website: <http://ckjha.weebly.com>
Phone: 315-445-4436

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The Figure depicts marginal effects, at means, on the decision to vote from an Ordered-Probit Estimation. Individual level controls as in column 1 and regional (NUTS 3) and country-level controls as introduced in columns 2 and 3 of the following Table. Obs. = 45,533 Countries = 17 NUTS = 153

Determinants of Condoning Corruption and Abstaining from Voting: OLS Estimation

	"Still vote for the preferred party" = 1			"Not vote at all" = 1		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Age	-0.00169** (0.000669)	-0.00169** (0.000716)	-0.00259*** (0.000745)	-0.00222** (0.000895)	-0.00248** (0.00105)	-0.00428** (0.00114)
Age ²	0.0000331*** (0.00000689)	0.0000325*** (0.00000741)	0.0000393*** (0.00000769)	0.0000260*** (0.00000866)	0.0000303*** (0.0000103)	0.0000464*** (0.0000111)
Secondary	-0.00213 (0.00708)	-0.00429 (0.00812)	-0.00469 (0.00867)	-0.0408*** (0.00975)	-0.0368*** (0.0107)	-0.0117 (0.0102)
Tertiary	0.0285*** (0.00784)	0.0264*** (0.00876)	0.0223*** (0.00940)	-0.0991*** (0.0111)	-0.0927*** (0.0124)	-0.0655*** (0.0115)
Middle Income	0.0216*** (0.00461)	0.0216*** (0.00505)	0.0210*** (0.00534)	-0.0380*** (0.00609)	-0.0391*** (0.00679)	-0.0443*** (0.00723)
High Income	0.0432*** (0.00575)	0.0445*** (0.00613)	0.0487*** (0.00658)	-0.0632*** (0.00646)	-0.0633*** (0.00707)	-0.0647*** (0.00824)
Female	-0.0454*** (0.00398)	-0.0467*** (0.00448)	-0.0443*** (0.00456)	0.0238 (0.00494)	0.0189 (0.00533)	0.0202 (0.00572)
Unemployed	-0.00926 (0.00611)	-0.0125* (0.00699)	-0.0166** (0.00728)	0.0272*** (0.00819)	0.0322*** (0.00905)	0.0241** (0.0101)
Prior Service Experience	0.00322 (0.00527)	0.00199 (0.00580)	-0.00144 (0.00607)	-0.0390*** (0.00766)	-0.0350*** (0.00897)	-0.0395*** (0.00969)
RGP, per capita		0.0140 (0.0135)	0.0297* (0.0161)		-0.0934*** (0.0248)	-0.108*** (0.0363)
Secondary Edu. Attainment		-0.000525 (0.000714)	0.00353*** (0.000267)		0.00105 (0.00100)	-0.000233 (0.000483)
Tertiary Edu. Attainment		-0.000325 (0.000611)	0.000271 (0.000607)		0.00340*** (0.00102)	0.00360*** (0.00111)
GDP, per capita			0.0550** (0.0249)			-0.0317 (0.0567)
Control of Corruption			-0.0127 (0.0143)			0.116*** (0.0264)
Political Rights			0.0630*** (0.0187)			-0.143*** (0.0307)
Openness			-0.000905*** (0.000282)			-0.00455*** (0.000583)
Government Spending			0.00143 (0.00180)			0.00255 (0.00435)
NUTS FE	Yes			Yes		
Country FE		Yes			Yes	
Countries	25	20	18	25	20	18
NUTS	212	169	162	212	169	162
Adjusted R ²	0.041	0.032	0.024	0.094	0.094	0.068
Observations	59761	50546	48234	45940	38757	36985

Standard errors clustered at NUTS level in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. RGP = Regional Gross Product. In last 3 columns, respondents that choose "still vote for preferred party" are excluded from the sample.

Concluding Remarks

Electing corrupt politicians remains much a problem around the world, yet little is known about the factors that determine the reelection of corrupt politicians over and over again. This paper explores the determinants of a voter's likelihood of condoning corruption by his/her preferred political party. It finds that a number of individual characteristics as well as regional and country level factors affect an individual's decision to vote for her preferred party even if that party was involved in a corruption scandal. Besides the above-reported variables, a number of other factors such as the respondent's political leaning (moderate vs. extreme), first language, perceptions regarding the prevalence of bribery and corruption in politics, and trust in local media are found to be significant determinants of condoning corruption. Further, it is found that corruption may have a weakening effect on democracy as a significant proportion of voters choose to abstain from voting if their preferred party was involved in a corruption scandal. The study goes on to explore the factors that determine the likelihood that an individual will abstain away from voting rather than vote for a non-corrupt alternative. The findings of this study provide important insights and have important policy implications. For instance, the findings suggest that there may be other factors that may be more important to individuals than corruption. Further, findings suggest that educating individuals may not be sufficient to prevent corrupt parties from coming to power.