

Corruption and Political Mobilization: Evidence from a Natural Experiment

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People change their voting habits in reaction to political scandal based on whether they believe that voting can effect change.

At least theoretically, citizens can combat corruption among elected officials by voting out the perpetrators and electing other candidates. Despite this option, corruption persists. Research has suggested that citizens lack the information necessary to vote out bad actors. Still other research shows that even with adequate information, voters do not respond as expected. What explains this phenomenon?

This research sheds new light on this question by analyzing responses to the 2010 Kabul Bank crisis, one of the largest banking failures in the world, which revealed corrupt links between high-ranking Afghanistan public officials and the largest Afghan private lender. Within days, the scandal triggered widespread bank runs and the largest government bailout in the country's

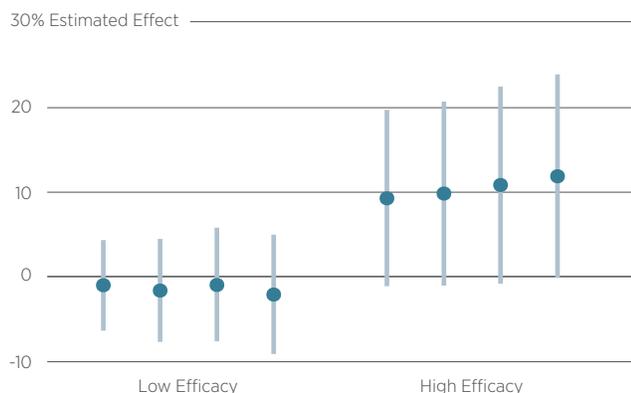
history. The scandal unfolded three weeks before the 2010 parliamentary election and, in a bit of providential coincidence, the scandal also occurred midway through the collection of a nationwide survey, which included questions about corruption in government, voter preferences, and the efficacy of government institutions.

The timing of the survey, along with a fixed sampling that was randomized within districts, allowed the authors to adopt a novel quasi-experimental approach when analyzing the results. The authors reveal the following key findings:

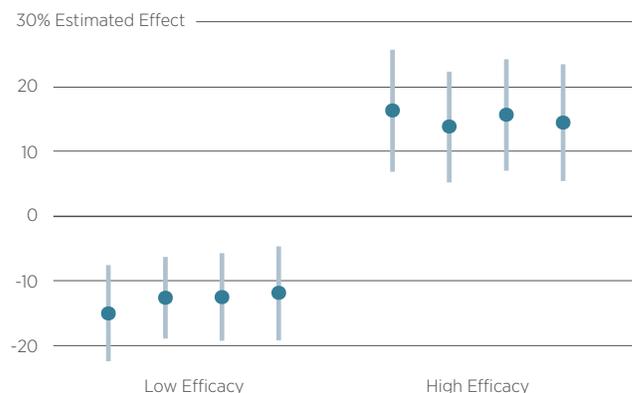
- Overall, while individuals interviewed after the scandal broke were no more or less likely to think that corruption in government was a serious

Figure 1 • Sensitivity of Heterogeneous Effects to Alternative Pre/Post Windows

Impact of Scandal on Perceived Corruption



Impact of Scandal on Intent-to-Vote



Note: Figure displays regression coefficients from benchmark models in Table 2 Columns 5 and 6, respectively. Each point estimate in tandem represents the estimated heterogeneous effects if the pre/post cutoff is decreased by 1 day, starting at 6 and ending at 2 days. Each set of reported coefficients replicates the benchmark specification in the main analysis with varying sample cutoffs. All other model parameters and specifications (standard errors, weights) remain consistent with benchmark specification.

problem, the informational shock did cause a statistically and substantively significant decrease in citizens' intention to vote in the parliamentary election scheduled two weeks later.

- However, the authors also find that in areas with low political efficacy, that is, where citizens are skeptical of their ability to influence political reform, news of the scandal did not affect these individuals' assessment of corruption being a serious problem in government, but the news did make them less likely to intend to vote in the parliamentary election several weeks later.
- In contrast, in areas with relatively high levels of self-reported political efficacy, the authors find a mobilizing effect from information about corruption on voter turnout: In this case, the unfolding bank scandal had a sizeable, positive, and highly statistically significant effect on respondents' intention to vote.

While the authors are careful not to lend a causal interpretation to their observed heterogeneous effects, their findings do suggest that political efficacy likely plays an important role in shaping how voters mobilize in the wake of an unexpected corruption scandal. Regardless of what explains variation in the ebb and flow of political efficacy across and within countries, this work suggests that citizens will react differently to information about corruption because of political efficacy.