

# POPULAR INTERPRETATIONS OF 'CORRUPTION' AND THEIR PARTISAN CONSEQUENCES

David P. Redlawsk<sup>1</sup> and James A. McCann<sup>2</sup>

Using a large six-city exit poll from 2000, we examine popular judgments of what constitutes “political corruption” in the United States. We find two distinct evaluative dimensions: corruption understood as *lawbreaking*, and corruption as *favoritism*. These judgments are heavily conditioned by the voter’s socioeconomic background and are politically consequential. Subjective understandings of “corruption” shape perceptions of how much corruption actually exists in government. Furthermore, and more importantly, these normative assessments play a significant part in voting decisions. Individuals who judged illegal activities such as bribe-taking to be “corrupt” were more inclined to back one of the major party candidates in 2000; those who believed that favoritism in politics was “corrupt” (e.g., an official recommending an unemployed friend for a government job) were more likely to vote for Al Gore or Ralph Nader.

**Key words:** political corruption; favoritism; exit poll; voting; third parties.

## INTRODUCTION

Few subjects in American politics attract as much attention as *corruption*. As the historian Gordon S. Wood recounts in his study of the American Constitutional founding, the principal driving force behind the revolutionary war was the desire to be free from English corruption. “‘Alas! Great Britain,’ said one Virginian in 1775, ‘their vices have even extended to America! . . . The torrent as yet is but small; only a few are involved in it; it must be

Department of Political Science, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, 52242, USA; Department of Political Science, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, 47907-2098, USA.

soon stopped, or it will bear all before it with an impetuous sway” (Wood, 1969, p. 110). Writing in the early days of the Progressive Era, Brooks (1909) recognized a similar sentiment; “in the whole vocabulary of politics, it would be difficult to point out any single term that is more frequently employed than the word ‘corruption.’” In our own time, stories of ethical lapses, abuse of authority, lawbreaking and scandals are commonplace. A recent search of the CNN on-line news archive turned up, for example, some 2400 articles on corruption of one kind or another.

Against this backdrop, scholars striving for a rigorous assessment of corruption face the daunting challenge of coming up with clear terminology. Much like Justice Stewart Potter’s famous statement on obscenity in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964)—“I know it when I see it”—an objective, all-encompassing definition of political corruption seems hard to pin down (Johnston, 1996, Nas et al., 1986). Our goal in this paper is not to impose yet another definition of corruption. Instead, we consider corruption from the point of view of citizens at the voting booth. After all, whatever the consequences of corruption, *perceptions* of just what is corrupt will surely condition how citizens respond to it. When asked to comment on a wide variety of hypothetical political actions, how do individuals determine which are above board and which are corrupt? Are these judgments conditioned by social and economic groupings, partisanship, and ideological leanings? And are evaluative dispositions toward the subject of corruption consequential? That is, do they shape concrete assessments of how much wrongdoing occurs in government and candidate preferences at the ballot box?

Using a large exit poll conducted in six cities during the 2000 presidential election, we examine these questions. As we might expect, we find that the vast majority of voters see patently unlawful activities as quite corrupt. On the other hand, there is much more variation in attitudes toward ostensibly legal behaviors where some kind of favoritism is implied. Many citizens are unwilling to label such actions “corrupt,” while others offer a harsh appraisal. Regression analysis allows us to map the roots of corruption dispositions and show their impact on voting decisions. Our analysis suggests that the term *corruption* is fundamentally ambiguous in American politics. It means different things to different individuals, and these divergent understandings can have markedly different political implications.

### Theoretical Background

Much of the research on public opinion regarding corruption in the U.S. and abroad examines how perceptions of wrongdoing affect presidential approval ratings, support for democratic processes, voting preferences, systemic legitimacy, or political trust (see e.g., Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Bratton and Mattes, 2000; Davis et al., 2004; Dimock and Jacobson, 1995;

McCann and Dominguez, 1998; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Morris, 1991; Peters and Welch, 1980; Pharr, 2000; Seligson, 2002; Welch and Hibbing, 1997). These studies suggest that beliefs about corruption can exert strong and significant independent effects on many key attitudes and behaviors, even after controlling for party identification, ideological orientations, economic evaluations, and many other relevant factors. Indeed, for many citizens judgments concerning integrity in politics may be more meaningful than material, partisan, or ideological concerns.

Yet when individuals reflect on political ethics and corruption, how do they determine what is acceptable behavior in a given setting? Some authors argue that assessments depend partly on current events. News reports of scandals can raise the salience of "corruption" as an issue and prompt calls for change or reform (e.g., Colazingari and Rose-Ackerman, 1998; Jacobson and Dimock, 1994; Tolchin, 127–132). Others suggest that political and economic institutions play an important part in structuring public or elite perceptions of corruption (e.g., Alt and Lassen, 2003; Chang and Golden, forthcoming; Geering and Thacker, 2004; Golden, 2003). At a fundamental level, however, very little is known about how citizens actually reason about wrongdoing in politics. Seligson (2002, p. 426) recognizes that what is "corrupt" to one person might not be "corrupt" to another, and these differences may bear directly on political preferences. Anderson and Tverdova (2003, note 5) further posit that perceptions of corruption may be multidimensional, with different evaluative criteria intersecting to produce multiple perspectives on how "corrupt" politics is in a given instance.

Unfortunately, empirical model building has not kept pace with these conceptualizations. For the most part, researchers commonly equate "political corruption" with lawlessness. Fackler and Lin (1995), for instance, define corruption as any of a "variety of unlawful . . . acts by political actors." In a similar vein, Meier and Holbrook (1992) measure corruption within a particular historical period by counting the number of public officials convicted of some crime in state courts. More generally, Nye (1989, p. 966) defines political corruption as "behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private regarding influence. This includes such behaviors as bribery . . . nepotism . . . and misappropriation."

This understanding is tidy and might ring true for many citizens as they pass judgment on political actions. As some authors have stressed, however, there is much more to "corruption" than breaking the law (Dolan et al., 1988; Peters and Welch, 1978; Philp, 1997; Wallis, 2003; Warren, 2004). Many behaviors that are technically legal might nonetheless violate well-established democratic or communal norms. Favoritism, putting one's self-interest above the well being of all, unbridled partisanship, pettiness, or

extravagance among governing officials—many voters might condemn all of these as “corrupt.”

Warren (2004, p. 330) writes that a legalistic definition of corruption is a legacy of 18th century liberalism, and is most clearly seen in James Madison’s trenchant defense of the U.S. Constitution in the *Federalist Papers*. To Madison and the other liberal founders, corruption occurred when government officials overstepped the formally recognized boundaries of their public office. Within the legally constituted confines of these offices, however, favoritism was not to be condemned. Indeed, it was to be expected and even lauded; under the celebrated logic of *Federalist 51*, self-interested actors responding to factional pressures would check and balance each other.

The ethics underlying this logic were controversial even in Madison’s day, as chroniclers of the Federalist-Antifederalist debate during the Founding period have shown (Hofstadter, 1969; Storing, 1981; Wood, 1969). More recently, Warren (2004) describes a “democratic” view of political corruption that is at odds with this legalistic “Madisonian” tradition. Within a modern democracy, the ultimate normative objective is *mass political inclusion*: “[E]very individual potentially affected by a decision should have an equal opportunity to influence the decision . . . [C]ollective actions should reflect the purposes decided under inclusive processes” (333). These sentiments were amply on display during the Populist and Progressive eras in American politics, as reformers extended the voting franchise, instituted direct primaries, and increased the number of elective offices; anything less than these reforms, it was said, would imply “corruption.” The principle of democratic inclusion remains a common touchstone today. Under this much broader conceptualization of political corruption, many common activities in a system of liberal representation—backroom deal-making and logrolling, the mobilization of particular factions to further one’s political causes, brazen appeals to partisanship, for example—might be called into question.<sup>1</sup>

In the limited empirical literature in this area, mapping the nuances of ethical judgments among citizens has been a central goal. As one would expect, surveys find that a wide variety of political actions, not all of them strictly illegal, may be considered “corrupt” to one degree or another. One intriguing finding is that the citizen’s socioeconomic status conditions beliefs about what is fair or foul (Gardiner, 1970; Jackson and Smith, 1996; Johnston, 1986, Table 4). Individuals at the higher rungs of society, as indicated by their level of education, income, or employment, are more apt to think *legalistically* about corruption. To these people, self-interested actions and blatant favoritism tend to be viewed as “just politics” and not condemned, as long as no laws were violated. However, these more elite members of society come down harder on lawbreakers. Officials who accept bribes, embezzle, falsify documents, and commit other serious crimes are extremely likely to be labeled corrupt. For citizens with lower social or economic sta-

tus, these tendencies are reversed. In this case, individuals who act out of self-interest and disregard community values—but do not break the law—are apt to be seen as corrupt, while actions that violate the law are slightly less likely to be condemned.

Johnston (1986) speculates that these class differences might come about for two general reasons. Citizens with more education or income may be better informed about politics, and thus more aware of and less offended by narrow minded, self-interested government officials, while those who are unfamiliar with the often petty give-and-take of politics could have higher expectations of altruistic behavior. Along different lines, Johnston also offers an interest-based argument: individuals with higher status might be accustomed to receiving particular benefits and services from government. "It may well be that what lower and middle status people regard as illegitimate favors and advantages are seen by higher status groups as merely the fruits of merit and expertise . . . The legitimacy of special favors and privileges, it seems, has much to do with whether one views them from above or below" (p. 387). Jackson and Smith (1996) raise a similar point in their comparison of elite versus non-elite beliefs about corruption in New South Wales, Australia.

Aside from socioeconomic class differences, studies suggest that an individual's gender and age can affect judgments of right and wrong in politics. Swamy et al. (2001) note, for instance, that women in the United States are significantly more inclined than men to condemn violations of communal norms and laws (e.g., littering, avoiding a fare on public transportation, accepting a bribe in the course of one's duty). This difference may stem from variations in gender roles. In general, women are expected to be more public-spirited and helpful, while the male role emphasizes self-assertiveness and nonconformity (Dollar et al., 1999; Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Eckel and Grossman, 1998). Beliefs about appropriate behavior in politics would follow from these contrasting self-images. Swamy et al. also posit that more material concerns could be at work. Women have traditionally had less access to valuable resources and power. Longstanding norms regarding "fair play" in social relationships can partially rectify this imbalance. Consequently, women might have a greater personal stake in upholding ethical rules within a community. Less attention has been devoted to life-cycle and generational effects on attitudes towards corruption. In one survey of Reading et al. (1970) found that older individuals were generally more tolerant of corruption and ethical lapses. Later research, however, has failed to confirm this relationship (Malec, 1993).

An important theme connects the approaches of Johnston, Jackson, Smith, Swamy, and others: to understand the impact of corruption on mass political behavior, it is necessary to chart citizen interpretations across the many strata of American society. We concur. But to date this work is

limited both in terms of available data and the assessment of clear political implications. With this paper we extend the literature on corruption in several new directions. Using a very large dataset of actual voters, we first employ factor analysis to assess the structure of the reasoning behind normative evaluations. We then make use of multivariate regression modeling to assess how these evaluations vary across socioeconomic, demographic, and political groups. In the final part of the analysis, we consider whether beliefs about corruption funnel citizens into one partisan camp or another. Candidates running for office often cloak their arguments in reformist or moralistic terms. Such appeals have been particularly pronounced in third party and independent presidential campaigns from across the ideological spectrum (e.g., Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996, and Ralph Nader in 2000). Yet little research has been done so far on whether the citizen's personal understanding of what is fair game in politics affects how susceptible he or she is to such arguments.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS

Data for this study were collected through exit polls carried out during the November 7, 2000 presidential election. Exit polls, while imposing some limits on the scope of questions that can be asked, have the advantage of capturing the attitudes of people directly engaged in the most basic of political processes. Our surveys were conducted under faculty direction by students enrolled in political science courses at colleges and universities in seven cities. A standard form containing about 50 questions was used in each location, although each poll also had room for a short series of questions on local issues. The cities in the poll were New York City, Miami, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Kenosha, WI, Lafayette and West Lafayette, IN, and Iowa City, IA. Because of collection problems, data from Los Angeles are unavailable for analysis.<sup>2</sup> Thus the results reported here come from the remaining locations, three major metropolitan areas and three small Midwestern cities (total  $N = 6829$ ).

At each location, voting precincts were chosen randomly with each precinct weighted according to its voter population so as to assure that every voter in the relevant jurisdiction had an equal chance of being selected. Within precincts, interviewers systematically selected voters leaving the polling place according to a preset plan and attempted to get them to complete the survey instrument.<sup>3</sup> Those who agreed were handed the questionnaire and asked to complete it unaided by the interviewer. Upon completion, the exit poll was dropped in a box next to the interviewer. Interviewers braved a variety of weather conditions, voter attitudes, and problems at the polls in completing the project, for which they generally received partial course credit.<sup>4</sup>

Exit polls are not, of course, a random sample of all citizens in a given locality. Obviously, these polls can only survey those who are actually voting on the day of the election. As such, then, the results can only be generalized to voters rather than the public as a whole. Yet for the purposes of this study voters are exactly the population of interest, since a key aspect of the study is an examination of how attitudes towards corruption affect vote choice. That having been said, it is important to validate the exit poll data in some fashion. We collected the actual vote for president from the relevant geographical areas in order to compare how the vote reported in our exit poll comports with what actually happened in the polling booth. As reported in Appendix A, we see a very close link between the actual vote for president and the vote reported by our samples. Of the 12 vote totals for Bush and Gore, nine of them are within 1.5% of our exit poll reports. Of the other three, the largest variance is in New Orleans, where we underreport Gore's vote and overreport Bush's vote by about two and a half percent. Given the relatively small percentages received in most cases by Nader and Buchanan, it is not surprising that our variance is a bit greater, where our exit poll generally overreports the third party vote. Overall, though, we believe this provides good evidence that our exit poll interviews fairly represent voters in their communities.

*Descriptive statistics and dimensionality.* The questionnaire included a wide range of questions. Our primary focus here is on a group of questions where voters rated the extent to which various hypothetical actions by government officials or citizens were corrupt, based on a five-point scale (1="not at all corrupt," 3 = 'somewhat corrupt,' 5 = "extremely corrupt"):

How corrupt would it be if . . . ?

- A police officer accepted money not to write a traffic ticket on a speeding driver
- A citizen claimed government benefits to which he or she was not entitled
- A government official gave a contract to a contributor without considering other contractors
- An elected official raised campaign funds while inside his or her government office
- Someone on the government payroll did not work for the pay
- An official recommended an out-of-work friend for a government job
- Voters supported a candidate for office in return for a promise to fix potholes on their street
- An elected official with many wealthy backers supported a tax cut that largely benefited the rich.

**TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics and Factor Analysis of the Corruption Battery**

	Mean (s.d.)	% Extremely Corrupt	Factor Loadings		Communality
			Factor 1	Factor 2	
How corrupt would it be if:					
Someone on the government payroll did no work for the pay?	4.38 (1.03)	66.4	0.707	0.162	0.526
A police officer accepted money not to write a traffic ticket on a speeding driver?	4.35 (1.02)	63.6	0.769	0.052	0.595
A citizen claimed government benefits to which he or she was not entitled?	4.31 (0.97)	58.7	0.794	0.072	0.636
A government official gave a contract to a campaign contributor without considering other contractors?	4.19 (1.06)	54.4	0.717	0.228	0.567
An elected official with many wealthy backers supported tax cut that largely benefited the rich?	3.81 (1.35)	45.3	0.194	0.636	0.441
Voters supported a candidate for office in return for a Promise to fix potholes on their street?	2.88 (1.52)	22.6	0.062	0.819	0.675
An official recommended an out-of-work friend for a government job?	2.79 (1.44)	17.6	0.030	0.788	0.622
An elected official raised campaign funds while inside his or her government office?	3.66 (1.32)	33.3	0.398	0.519	0.428

*Note:* Factor loadings were derived via principal component analysis, with VARIMAX rotation. All items scored on a five-point scale (1 = "not at all corrupt," 5 = "extremely corrupt"). The two factors explain 56% of the variance; a third factor would have an eigenvalue far below 1.0.



Table 1 provides the summary statistics for these responses including the percentage of respondents who labeled each activity as "extremely corrupt."<sup>5</sup>

Of the eight hypothetical situations, all but two have means above the midpoint of the scale, indicating that voters tend to see them as fairly corrupt. The actions with means below the midpoint (the items on fixing potholes and recommending an unemployed friend for a job) both have relatively large variances, showing less general agreement on how corrupt such actions really are. On the other hand, the four actions scoring the highest (not doing any work on a government job, bribery, no-bid government contracts, and accepting government benefits to which one is not entitled) exhibit much less variance and are widely denounced, with more than half of all voters considering them to be "extremely corrupt."

Interestingly, survey participants tended to be as hard on "regular" citizens going about their private business as government officials acting in a professional role. People who claimed government benefits to which they were not entitled were condemned to the same degree as "ghost" employees on the government payroll and police officers who accept bribes. On the lower end of the scale, officials who use their influence to help an unemployed friend were viewed on average as slightly less corrupt than voters who support candidates in return for a promise to fix potholes on their street. These findings diverge somewhat from Peters and Welch's (1978) expectation that individuals acting in "private" roles would be judged less harshly than people in government exploiting a "public" position for personal gain.

Overall the mean scores in Table 1 point to two distinct groupings of evaluations. In the first are the four scenarios that clearly involve lawbreaking; in the second are actions where privileged access to government or favoritism is implied. The factor analysis described in the right hand columns of the table confirms this structure. Two dimensions emerge cleanly, one made up of the first set, and a second based on the last four.<sup>6</sup> Only in the case of fundraising while inside a governmental office are the loadings somewhat ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> While standard conceptions of corruption clearly encompass the first factor—obvious lawbreaking—our second factor appears more nuanced. The appearance of a favoritism dimension lends support to the argument of Warren (2004) and others that there is more to corruption than simply illegality, at least for a significant subset of respondents. While lawbreaking is clearly more condemned, the results in Table 1 indicate that many voters also rate actions that fall under the heading of "politics as usual" as quite corrupt.

*Multivariate analysis.* Based on these results, two summary attitude indices can be created. (Because of its ambiguous loadings, the item on fundraising is excluded.) The correlation between the "Lawbreaking" and "Favoritism" scales is .30, which tells us that respondents saw these two kinds of actions as fairly distinctive. Do these different understandings of

**TABLE 2. OLS Models of the Two Corruption Evaluation Dimensions**

	Corruption as "Lawbreaking"		Corruption as "Favoritism"	
	<i>b</i> (se)	Beta	<i>b</i> (se)	Beta
<i>Socioeconomic traits</i>				
Education	0.090 (0.013)**	0.20	-0.104 (0.018)**	-0.08
Family income (over \$50K)	0.130 (0.020)**	0.08	-0.083 (0.029)**	-0.04
Race (White)	0.046 (0.026)***	0.07	-0.128 (0.036)**	-0.05
Gender (female)	0.125 (0.019)**	0.08	0.377 (0.028)**	0.17
Age	0.160 (0.010)*	0.20	0.110 (0.015)*	0.09
<i>Partisanship</i>				
Democrat	-0.006 (0.024)	-0.00	0.057 (0.035)***	0.03
Republican	-0.013 (0.029)	-0.01	-0.172 (0.043)**	-0.07
<i>Ideological position</i>				
Liberal	-0.067 (0.024)**	-0.04	-0.042 (0.034)	-0.02
Conservative	0.097 (0.026)**	0.05	0.078 (0.039)*	0.03
<i>Place of residence</i>				
Iowa City, IA	0.047 (0.034)	0.02	0.120 (0.052)**	0.04
Kenosha, WI	0.130 (0.032)**	0.06	0.344 (0.048)**	0.13
New York City	0.031 (0.039)	0.01	0.041 (0.058)	0.01
New Orleans	0.151 (0.036)**	0.07	0.152 (0.055)**	0.05
Miami	-0.181 (0.036)**	-0.09	0.186 (0.051)**	0.07
Constant term	3.497 (0.062)**		3.020 (0.083)**	
Adjusted $R^2$	.105		.074	

*Note:* Robust (heteroskedastic-consistent) standard errors in parentheses. West Lafayette/Lafayette, IN residence serves as the baseline comparison for the city location dummies.  $N=5911$  (first model) and 5885 (second). The Law Breaking dependent variable is the average score on NOWORK, BRIBE, BENEFITS, and CONTRACT; The Favoritism dependent variable is the average score on TAXCUT, POTHOLE, and JOB. Respondents with high scores on these indices tended to see these actions as highly "corrupt".

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.10$ .

corruption vary from person to person? Table 2 lists the results from two regression analyses, where the Lawbreaking and Favoritism indices are dependent variables. The predictors in these models are level of education, family income, race, gender, age, partisanship, and political ideology. We also include a set of city dummies to control for the possibility that local contexts may have a bearing on beliefs about integrity in politics.<sup>8</sup>

The first set of coefficients dramatically illustrates the possibility raised by Johnston (1986) and others regarding social class. Individuals with more education, those with higher family incomes, and whites were significantly more inclined to equate illegal actions with corruption. Female voters were similarly more likely to fault this behavior. In contrast to Gardiner (1970), younger respondents were markedly less condemnatory. Political dispositions play a role too in these evaluations. Self-identified liberals took a slightly softer stance on lawbreaking, while conservatives were firmer in

their convictions that bribery, fraud, and the other kinds of legal violations counted as "corruption." We also find substantial regional variation in attitudes, with individuals in Miami being particularly less likely to equate law-breaking with corruption.

When the dependent variable is "Favoritism" (second column), the effects of education and income operate in the opposite direction, with higher status voters being particularly less inclined to perceive corruption. This finding is in keeping with Johnston (1986); it suggests that behavior that is "just politics" for the upper rungs of society is seen as questionable or worse for the less well off. Race again enters into the equation, with whites voicing less concern as well. Women and older respondents, on the other hand, continue to be significantly more negative in their assessments.

*Consequences of corruption dispositions.* If the normative standards used to evaluate the various hypothetical scenarios in Table 1 are meaningful to respondents, we would expect them to matter when voters gave their impressions of actual wrongdoing in government. Early in the exit poll, participants stated whether there is more corruption in the federal government in comparison to 20 years ago, and how many officials in government are "crooked" (quite a few, not very many, or hardly any). Individuals scoring high on the "favoritism" dimension would presumably perceive more "corruption." After all, doing favors for friends while in office, voting to further one's own particular interests, and backing policies that benefit some groups more than others are everyday occurrences in American politics.

Table 3 confirms this expectation. After controlling for social and demographic traits and political dispositions, citizens believing that these political actions were "extremely corrupt" were far likelier to perceive more corruption today and believe that "quite a few" people in government are crooked ( $p < 0.001$ ). The coefficient of 0.317 for "favoritism" in the first model implies that, all things equal, a voter would have a 69% chance of agreeing that corruption has increased over the last twenty years.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, voters who did not condemn any of the "favoritism" behaviors had just a 38% chance of perceiving more corruption now.

In a similar fashion, the favoritism scale strongly conditioned beliefs about the number of crooked officials. Those scoring highest on this dimension were considerably more likely to see corruption in high places (72%, as opposed to a 51% chance for individuals at the low end of the scale). The effect of the "lawbreaking" dimension is also statistically significant in this model, with individuals taking the strongest positions believing that corruption in government is more common. This coefficient, however, is approximately half the size of the effect for favoritism. On the whole, the findings from these models offer striking evidence that citizens who view corruption in a broader "democratic" perspective possess a very different impression of integrity in politics. Survey-based indices that code the level of corruption

**TABLE 3. The Impact of Corruption Understandings on Perceptions of Political Wrongdoing**

	More Corruption Now? <i>b</i> (SE)	How Many Officials Are Crooked? <i>b</i> (SE)
Corruption as <i>Lawbreaking</i>	-0.050 (0.041)	0.129 (0.040)**
Corruption as <i>Favoritism</i>	0.317 (0.027)**	0.225 (0.027)**
<i>SES</i>		
Age	-0.092 (0.032)**	-0.336 (0.031)**
Education	-0.229 (0.038)**	-0.145 (0.037)**
Race (White)	-0.323 (0.073)**	-0.103 (0.072)
Income	-0.237 (0.060)**	-0.117 (0.058)*
Gender (Female)	0.249 (0.058)**	0.279 (0.057)**
<i>Political dispositions</i>		
Liberal	-0.198 (0.068)**	0.145 (0.069)*
Conservative	0.317 (0.081)**	0.078 (0.077)
Democratic identifier	-0.369 (0.072)**	-0.218 (0.070)**
Republican identifier	0.279 (0.088)**	-0.086 (0.084)
Constant	0.587 (0.229)**	
Cut 1		-2.893 (0.231)
Cut 2		-0.147 (0.223)
Pseudo $R^2$	.071	.047

*Note:* Coefficients estimated through logistic regression. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ . Dummy variables for the cities were included as predictors to control for regional variation; heteroskedastic-robust standard errors are reported.  $N = 5562$  and  $5713$ . The dependent variable in the first model was coded 1 for respondents who saw “a lot more corruption in the federal government than there was 20 years ago” and 0 for those who disagreed with this statement. In the second model, the dependent variable was coded 3 for respondents believing that “quite a few” government officials are crooked, 2 for those who believed that “not very many” are crooked, and 1 for those saying “hardly any.” Source: Six-City Exit Poll, 2000.

within a country based on the respondents’ reports of bribery in local government offices and courts (e.g., Seligson, 2002), or elite-level impressions of policymaking processes (e.g., Alt and Lassen 2003; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Mischler and Rose, 2001) may be missing a significant piece of the phenomenon.

On the day of the election, did the two corruption dimensions matter as citizens made choices in the voting booth? Our analysis implies that the different normative frames citizens employ when considering political actions may lead to different kinds of political mobilization. On one hand, we might expect these frames to differentiate Democratic from Republican voters. Perhaps a stronger possibility, however, is that individuals who did not conform to traditional Madisonian principles in politics were pushed away from the two-party system, a system that is firmly predicated on liberal ethics (Barber, 1984; Hofstadter, 1969). Citizens who did not define political corruption solely in terms of lawbreaking may have found a home in one of the third-party movements in 2000.

Research on voting for third party and independent candidates finds that distrust of or hostility towards the federal government can drive voters away from the two-party system (Gold, 1995; Hetherington, 1999; McCann et al., 1999; Rosenstone et al., 1996). Our surveys allow us to put a finer point on this notion by factoring in the different orientations towards political corruption. To test these effects we use multinomial logistic regression analyses, where the dependent variable is the respondent's voting choice in the 2000 presidential election (coded 1 for George W. Bush, 2 for Al Gore, and 3 for Ralph Nader, and 4 for Patrick Buchanan). These results appear in Table 4.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the 2000 presidential contest did not feature the kind of blazing third party campaigning that characterized the 1968, 1980, or 1992 elections. Fortunately, however, our exit poll included far more

**TABLE 4. The Impact of Understandings of Corruption on Voting Choices in the 2000 Presidential Election**

	Bush	Nader	Buchanan
Corruption as <i>Lawbreaking</i>	0.043 (0.071)	-0.293 (0.096)**	-0.634 (0.189)**
Corruption as <i>Favoritism</i>	-0.087 (0.047)***	0.133 (0.073)***	0.004 (0.193)
<i>Beliefs about political wrongdoing</i>			
More corruption now?	0.481 (0.100)**	0.264 (0.152)***	0.315 (0.352)
How many officials crooked?	0.039 (0.094)	0.010 (0.135)	0.074 (0.284)
<i>Political trust and efficacy</i>			
How often trust government?	-0.094 (0.086)	-0.451 (0.136)**	0.134 (0.239)
Officials care what voters think?	0.092 (0.105)	0.200 (0.155)	0.536 (0.312)***
<i>SES</i>			
Age	0.020 (0.052)	-0.242 (0.084)**	0.478 (0.141)**
Education	-0.124 (0.063)*	0.254 (0.084)*	0.085 (0.174)
Race (White)	0.567 (0.119)**	0.815 (0.180)**	-0.466 (0.364)
Income	-0.027 (0.097)	-0.163 (0.150)	-0.419 (0.343)
Gender (Female)	-0.133 (0.094)	-0.519 (0.146)**	-0.315 (0.329)
<i>Political dispositions</i>			
Liberal	-0.805 (0.129)**	0.694 (0.151)**	-0.472 (0.460)
Conservative	0.961 (0.116)**	0.378 (0.245)	1.133 (0.330)**
Democratic identifier	-2.036 (0.109)**	-2.329 (0.166)**	-2.326 (0.402)**
Republican identifier	2.592 (0.131)**	-0.256 (0.274)	0.329 (0.407)
<i>Most important problem</i>			
Economy/jobs	-0.333 (0.159)*	-0.682 (0.260)**	-0.454 (0.511)
Education	0.115 (0.108)	-0.524 (0.178)**	-0.754 (0.443)***
Crime	0.225 (0.142)	-0.900 (0.276)**	0.266 (0.415)
High taxes	0.270 (0.154)***	-0.307 (0.285)	-0.636 (0.753)
Constant	-0.431 (0.479)	-2.277 (0.800)**	-1.657 (1.130)**

Note: Coefficients estimated via multinomial logistic regression; voting for Gore is the baseline alternative.

\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .10$ . Dummy variables for the cities were included as predictors to control for regional variation; heteroskedastic-robust standard errors are reported.  $N=5281$ . Pseudo- $R^2=.452$ . The Hausman test shows that the "independence from irrelevant alternatives" (IIA) assumption applies in this model. Source: Six-City Exit Poll, 2000.

respondents than in most surveys, and we were able to net 331 Nader voters and 55 backers of Buchanan, groupings sufficiently large to make multivariate regression analysis feasible.

In this model, voting decisions are regressed on the two corruption scales, beliefs about the actual incidence of wrongdoing in government, standard measures of trust and efficacy, the salience of particular issue areas (measured by asking voters to note the most important problem in their community), and the other controls from the previous tables. Unfortunately, due to space limitations our exit poll could not accommodate questions on personal assessments of the presidential contenders, retrospective economic evaluations, and opinions on specific policy issues. We are therefore unable to provide a fully specified logistic regression model of the vote (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2000; Alvarez and Nagler, 1995). Nevertheless, by including the many predictors available to us, we are able to gauge rather precisely whether the normative standards citizens employ when thinking about corruption matter above and beyond their general level of trust in government, ideology, partisanship, and socioeconomic class.

The coefficients for these latter items conform to much previous work on elections in the United States. By far the most significant predictors of the vote are party identification and ideological orientation. Voters who were most concerned about the economy tended to side with Al Gore, while those believing that “high taxes” were most troublesome leaned toward George W. Bush. We see as well that race was a strong factor differentiating Gore from Bush voters. Individuals who were less trusting of the federal government were significantly more inclined to back Ralph Nader, a finding that matches Hetherington (1999). After controlling for these substantial effects, clear evidence emerges that the corruption scales conditioned electoral choices. Individuals espousing more of a legalistic perspective were inclined to reject third party candidates ( $-0.293$  for Nader and  $-0.634$  for Buchanan,  $p < 0.01$ ), and were slightly more likely to back Bush ( $0.043$ , not significant). At the same time, the results for the “favoritism” index show that voters who voiced doubts about the propriety of the three legal but self-serving actions in politics were drawn somewhat more to Gore over Bush, and especially toward Nader.

It therefore appears that supporting a minor presidential candidate represents not so much an outpouring of pure cynicism about government—i.e., a desire to “throw the bums out” because officials are crooked, unresponsive, or untrustworthy—as is often suggested in the scholarly literature on third parties. Behind such a decision is also a more principled statement about proper versus improper motives and actions in politics. The normative disagreement between Madisonian liberals and democratic idealists is very much alive in contemporary party competition (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Warren, 2004).

**TABLE 5. Probability of Backing a Presidential Candidate by Scores on the Corruption Indices**

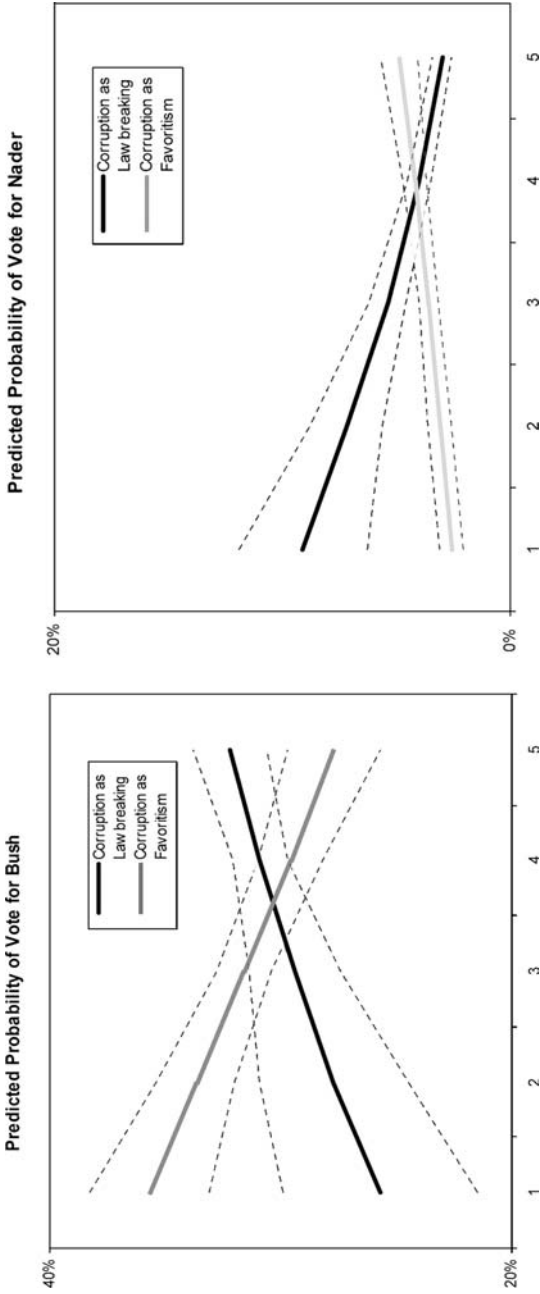
	Predicted Probability of Candidate Support			
	Bush	Gore	Nader	Buchanan
<i>Corruption as Lawbreaking Score</i>				
1	0.257 (0.042)	0.604 (0.049)	0.095 (0.028)	0.044 (0.029)
2	0.277 (0.031)	0.628 (0.034)	0.072 (0.016)	0.029 (0.011)
3	0.294 (0.020)	0.640 (0.021)	0.054 (0.008)	0.012 (0.004)
4	0.309 (0.012)	0.645 (0.012)	0.040 (0.005)	0.006 (0.002)
5	0.322 (0.016)	0.644 (0.016)	0.030 (0.004)	0.003 (0.001)
<i>Corruption as Favoritism Score</i>				
1	0.357 (0.026)	0.611 (0.026)	0.026 (0.005)	0.005 (0.002)
2	0.337 (0.017)	0.628 (0.017)	0.031 (0.005)	0.005 (0.002)
3	0.316 (0.012)	0.643 (0.012)	0.036 (0.004)	0.005 (0.002)
4	0.296 (0.014)	0.656 (0.014)	0.042 (0.005)	0.005 (0.002)
5	0.277 (0.020)	0.668 (0.020)	0.049 (0.008)	0.006 (0.003)

*Note:* Probabilities were derived from the multinomial logistic regression model in Table 4, with all other predictors set to their mean values. *Clarify* software was used to calculate the estimates.

In Table 5 we show the political impact of these views by presenting hypothetical probabilities of support for the four presidential contenders. Drawing from the results of the multinomial logistic regression model, voters who saw illegal behaviors as “extremely corrupt” were on average four times less likely to abandon the major party system in the 2000 presidential election compared to those at the other end of the scale. On the other hand, those who condemned favoritism most harshly were nearly twice as likely as voters scoring a 1 on this scale to support Nader. This difference is made even clearer if we plot the results graphically as in Fig. 1, where we show the differing effects of perceptions of corruption on the Bush and Nader vote.

**CONCLUSION**

Defining political corruption is a substantial challenge to researchers. We chose, instead, to let voters define it for us. Given our battery of questions, voters generally agreed that illegal activities in politics pointed to corruption. However, there were widely divergent views on what might be called “old-fashioned politics.” A factor analysis of these many items—actions ranging from the most commonplace in a liberal democracy (i.e. an official gives some minor personal assistance to an unemployed friend) to the unambiguously criminal (i.e. bribe-taking)—leads us to conclude that two overarching themes structure judgments of fair versus foul behavior in politics: a “corruption-as-lawbreaking” dimension, and a “corruption-as-



**FIG. 1.** Probability of Support for a Presidential Candidate by Corruption Perceptions.  
*Note:* Probabilities were derived from the multinomial logistic regression model in Table 4, with all other predictors set to their mean values. *Clarify* software was used to calculate the estimates. Dotted lines represent  $\pm 1$  se.



favoritism" dimension. The former conceptualization is by far the most prevalent in the social science literature on corruption (see, for example, Fackler and Lin, 1995; and Nye, 1989). However, as Warren (2004) and others note, a citizen's "everyday understanding" of corruption can certainly accommodate the notion of "corruption-as-favoritism." The factor loadings in Table 1 validate this dimension, as do the regression models in Table 2, which show that the two dimensions are distinctive with regard to their socioeconomic, demographic, and political underpinnings.

Our analysis further shows that conceptualizations of corruption have clear implications both for perceptions of "how corrupt" government is and for outcomes at the ballot box. Recently, Bowler and Karp (2004) have suggested that given the linkages they find between scandal and citizen support for institutions, politicians would be well advised to "get their own House in order" before looking elsewhere for causes of citizen disenchantment. Our data suggest that whether or not politicians take this advice, they will be hard pressed to please that segment of the public that sees corruption not in Madisonian legalistic terms, but from a "politics as usual is suspect" lens. Unless the give and take of politics itself is somehow "cleaned up," citizens seeing corruption in what we call favoritism are unlikely to be convinced that all is now well.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the limitations of the study design. An exit poll by necessity must be brief; voters on their way home or to work will not fill out more than one or two pages. While the eight items we use to chart the voters' conceptions of corruption represent a wide range of questionable behavior in politics, we realize that additional work with more elaborate instrumentation is necessary to assess the nuances of ethical judgments. Yet this investigation highlights a noteworthy normative divide in American political culture, a divide that is not likely to be crossed by "post-Enron" and "post-McCain-Feingold" government reformers who are attempting to fight corruption by prosecuting lawbreakers. Even if every criminal were punished, the survey findings suggest that many citizens would nevertheless continue to lament the rampant "corruption" eating away at the foundations of American society. Such an outlook would make them well primed to rally behind outsider candidates in future elections.

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## APPENDIX A

**TABLE A1. Exit Poll Presidential Vote Compared to Actual Vote**

City	Reported Vote	Actual Vote	Variance
Iowa City, IA			
Bush	31.1	31.9	-0.8
Gore	59.0	59.2	-0.2
Nader	9.6	7.4	2.2
Kenosha, WI			
Bush	46.2	45.3	0.9
Gore	48.5	50.9	-2.4
Nader	4.6	2.9	1.7
Lafayette, IN			
Bush	52.4	54.5	-2.1
Gore	43.6	41.3	2.3
Nader	1.7	2.2	-0.5
Miami, FL			
Bush	45.7	45.8	-0.1
Gore	47.5	47.7	-0.2
Nader	5.0	6.4	-1.4
New Orleans, LA			
Bush	23.9	21.7	2.2
Gore	73.3	75.9	-2.6
Nader	2.6	1.7	0.9
New York, NY			
Bush	16.4	17.5	-1.1
Gore	76.0	74.8	1.2
Nader	6.4	3.2	3.2

*Note:* Table entries are percentages. Actual vote data are as reported by the local election authority on an official web site or via telephone. Percentages do not add up to 100% within cities because of write-ins and other third party votes in the actual vote totals, and because of votes listed for other candidates in the exit polls. The variance column reports the extent to which the exit poll overreports or underreports the vote.

## APPENDIX B. WORDINGS FOR ALL EXIT POLL ITEMS USED IN THE ANALYSIS

Corruption battery: "How corrupt would it be if:

- A police officer accepted money not to write a traffic ticket on a speeding driver?

- A citizen claimed government benefits to which he or she was not entitled?
- A government official gave a contract to a campaign contributor without considering other contractors?
- An elected official raised campaign funds while inside his or her government office?
- Someone on the government payroll did no work for the pay?
- An official recommended an out-of-work friend for a government job?
- Voters supported a candidate for office in return for a promise to fix potholes on their street?
- An elected official with many wealthy backers supported a tax cut that largely benefited the rich?" [In all cases, responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from "Not At All Corrupt" (1) to "Somewhat Corrupt" (3) to "Extremely Corrupt" (5).]

Beliefs about the incidence of political wrongdoing:

- "Does it seem that there is a lot more corruption in the federal government than there was 20 years ago?" [Yes coded 1, No coded 0]
- "How many of the people running the government do you think are crooked?" ["Quite a few" coded 3, "Not very many" coded 2, "Hardly any" coded 1]

Trust and efficacy

- "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" ["Just about always" coded 3, "Most of the time" coded 2, "Only some of the time" coded 1]
- "Public officials don't care much what people like me think" [Agree coded 1, Disagree coded 0]

Issue salience

- "What is the most important problem this city needs to address?" [Choices included crime, education, welfare, corruption, economy/jobs, racial and ethnic tensions, growth and sprawl, air and water quality, traffic, housing, and high taxes. The four dummies included as predictors in the multinomial logistic regression model in Table 4 were the most commonly chosen responses, with over two-thirds of the sample marking one of these issue areas.]

SES

- "Age: 18-29, 30-44, 45-64, 65+"
- "Education: No high school diploma, High school graduate, Some col-

lege, College graduate”

- “Race/ethnicity: African-American, White, Asian-American, Hispanic”
- “Income: Family income over \$50,000 before taxes” [Dummy coded]
- “Sex: Female, Male”

Political Dispositions

- “Do you consider yourself: Liberal, Conservative, Moderate”
- “Do you usually think of yourself as: Democrat, Republican, Independent”

Voting choices: “Which presidential candidate did you vote for?”

## NOTES

1. One of the focus group participants in Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s (2002) work on attitudes toward government policymaking nicely articulated this mindset: candidates and parties frequently have their “own agenda,” which implies that they are not “acting for service to the people” (34). The authors stress that the process through which policies are made may matter more than policy outcomes themselves; for a sizeable portion of the electorate, any political procedure that smacks of “special interest politics” (i.e., the “mass public” is excluded) is deemed illegitimate.
2. The Los Angeles exit poll was beset by problems ranging from an unwillingness of voters to participate to threats of gang violence at two polling locations. Interviewers were only able to collect 155 completed surveys, not enough to ensure any statistical value to the data.
3. As always, some voters refused to participate in the survey. Poll takers were instructed to record the gender, race, and apparent age of all refusals to allow weighting of the data. Refusal rates ranged from a low of 13% in Lafayette, IN to a high of 56% in New York City. The analyses in this paper were carried out on the unweighted data, since preliminary investigation showed no particular advantage to using the weighted data.
4. See Cole (2002) for detailed discussion of the pedagogy involved in this project.
5. This question format parallels that used in Jackson and Smith (1996), Johnston (1986), Morris (1991, Chapter 6), and Peters and Welch (1978), though the scenarios themselves and the response categories we use are different. On the whole respondents had little trouble offering their assessments of the scenarios presented to them. Missing data ranged from 2% (the question on bribery) to 4% (the fundraising item)
6. If we had been able to include even more scenarios in our corruption battery, it is possible that additional evaluative dimensions would have emerged (cf. Dolan et al., 1988). The eight items we analyze here, however, cover a very wide range of political behaviors. The factor loadings indicate a good fit between these scenarios and the two underlying dimensions; additional factors would have eigenvalues far below 1.0.
7. Since the distributions for many of these items are highly skewed, we replicated the factor analysis using LISREL’s weighted least squares estimator, which relaxes the assumption of multivariate normality. The same two-factor solution emerged nicely in this analysis, with comparable loadings.
8. Residual error variances might also fluctuate from city to city. To guard against spurious inferences, we report White’s heteroskedastic-consistent robust standard errors.

9. See King (1989, chapter 5) for a discussion of converting logistic regression coefficients to probability forecasts. We used Clarify software to calculate these predictions, with all of the other predictors set to their mean values (Tomz et al., 2003; King et al., 2000).
10. Multinomial logistic regression analysis can be used when a discrete-choice dependent variable has more than two values. The results compare each value of the dependent variable to the baseline value, which in this case is a vote for Al Gore. Thus, results under the heading "Bush" are the coefficients predicting a vote for Bush relative to Gore. The Hausman diagnostic test indicates that the "independence from irrelevant alternatives" (IIA) assumption upon which multinomial logit is based is tenable in this case.

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