

**Political Corruption and the Ethical Judgments of American Citizens:  
Are Government Officials Held to a Higher Standard?**

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**Abstract**

In this paper we consider whether citizens view corruption on the part of public officials to be more onerous than the same actions taken by “ordinary” citizens. While some studies suggest that public officials are held to a higher standard, we find evidence in a survey experiment of a more democratic view of corruption, where citizens acting in their private interests are expected to be as honest and trustworthy as any public official. We also find evidence that citizens are attuned to the political environment in their assessments of corruption, with partisanship significantly conditioning expectations of public officials but not of citizens engaging in the same “corrupt” practices.

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## Introduction

Few topics in American politics receive as much attention from scholars, journalists, pundits, and the mass public at large as *political corruption*. Over the last thirty years, the “-gate” suffix has been appended to dozens of scandals and controversies, from Billy-gate and Contra-gate in the 1970s and 80s, to Monica-gate in the 1990s, to Plame-gate in 2005. As the 2006 midterm elections approach, talk of wrongdoing in politics will only intensify, with the Democrats attempting to indict Republicans in Congress and the White House on charges of fostering a “culture of corruption.” Research on voting behavior suggests that such charges may be salient on the day of the election. Candidates running for election or reelection under a cloud of scandal are significantly more vulnerable (Banducci and Karp 1994; Dimock and Jacobson 1995; Jacobson and Dimock 1994; Peters and Welch 1980; Welch and Hibbing 1997; Fackler and Lin 1995; for comparative evidence, see Lanoue and Headrick 1994; Clarke et al. 1998; Bowler and Karp 2004).

While it is clear that voters can react strongly to news of ethical lapses in government, less is known about how Americans reason about political corruption. Do citizens make use of firm ethical principles as they consider what is fair or foul in public life? If so, what are these principles? In this paper, we take a close look at one widely held, but not adequately tested, assumption among researchers: in the eyes of the electorate, public officials acting in a formal political role are expected to conform to a much higher ethical standard than individuals acting in a more “private” capacity (Peters and Welch 1978, 976; Johnston 1986, 379).

We assess this claim through a survey experiment, where subjects evaluate how much wrongdoing is implied in hypothetical scenarios involving political exchanges of one kind or another (e.g., bribery). In some instances, it appears that public officials are indeed held to a more demanding ethical standard than “private” individuals. Yet these differences in evaluations are not large in substantive terms. For much of the American public, corruption can occur even when government officials are not directly involved in questionable exchanges; as they consider the ethical parameters of civic life, citizens do not cleanly separate public from private roles. At the same time we find that

citizens' views of official corruption are conditioned, at least in some cases, on partisanship, while their assessments of the behavior of private individuals are not. This interesting and unexpected finding suggests that the political environment plays an important part in shaping popular understandings of what is corrupt.

### **Theoretical Background**

Public opinion on complex topics such as ethics and corruption in politics is liable to reflect a jumble of considerations and qualifications (Peters and Welch 1978, Table 1; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Amid this complexity, one evaluative dimension appears to be particularly important: when Americans consider what constitutes “political corruption,” there is a strong tendency to equate corruption with lawbreaking (Redlawsk and McCann 2005; Johnston 1986). Respect for the principle of the “rule of law” runs deep in American political culture. Indeed, comparative political scientists often single out the United States as unique because of its “legalistic-rationalistic” mindset (Almond and Verba 1965; Huntington 1981). Not surprisingly, bribe-taking, the hiring of “ghost employees” for public works projects and other patently illegal activities are widely viewed as corrupt.<sup>1</sup>

Research further suggests that a sizeable portion of the electorate views many ostensibly legal behaviors as corrupt as well, if favoritism or brazen “self-interest” is implied (Johnston 1986; Hibbing 2002; Redlawsk and McCann 2005). An official in a government agency who uses his or her connections to help an unemployed friend find a job could be seen as corrupt, even when such actions do not violate any laws. The same could be said for a host of other activities – a candidate who engages in prodigious (but legal) fundraising for a campaign, a member of Congress who flies home frequently to consult with wealthy business owners in the district, and an office seeker who promises voters special policy benefits if he or she is elected. Political reformers frequently acknowledge this much more expansive

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<sup>1</sup> There is a small amount of variation in these judgments, with women, older Americans, the better educated, and the more affluent being particularly likely to condemn lawbreaking as “extremely” corrupt. Very few citizens, however, see bribery, ghost employment, and other such actions in government as “not at all corrupt” (Redlawsk and McCann 2005).

understanding of corruption when drafting legislation to “clean up” politics. As the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002 was being debated, for example, lawmaker after lawmaker emphasized the importance of avoiding not only corruption, which was no doubt understood in narrow legalistic terms, but also the “appearance of corruption,” an open-ended phrase that might touch on many everyday activities in politics.

In this paper, we seek to broaden the study of public opinion towards corruption even further by exploring whether government officials are expected to conform to a higher ethical standard than American citizens acting in a “private” capacity. When voters are asked to describe their ideal president, traits like “honest,” “sets a good moral example,” and “not favoring special interest groups” readily come to mind (Kinder et al. 1980). Judgments about personal integrity also surface when survey respondents report what they like or dislike about presidential candidates (Miller et al. 1986), and in multivariate models of voting choices, impressions of the contenders’ moral uprightness may be highly significant predictors of candidate preference (see, e.g., Kinder 1986; Klein 1996; McCann 1990). Are individuals as demanding when considering the traits necessary to be an “ideal” private citizen?

Perhaps not, at least according to a survey item that appeared in the 1992 and 1998 American National Election Studies. When asked whether candidates running for public office should display higher moral standards than an “average” citizen, survey participants agreed by a two-to-one margin that they should (see Table 1). The consistency of these responses over a six-year period – 63.0% in 1992 and 65.3% in 1998 claimed to have higher ethical standards for office-seekers – suggests that this is a rather well-grounded disposition in U.S. public opinion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, since none of the 1992 respondents were interviewed again in 1998, it is not possible to gauge how stable this item is at the individual-level. It is worth noting that beliefs about “higher moral standards” were somewhat more highly correlated with partisanship in 1998. That year, 78% of the self-identified Republicans stated that candidates should be held to a higher standard, as opposed to 60% of the Democrats. In the 1992 survey, the comparable figures are 72% (Republicans) and 59% (Democrats). This slight change hints at a possible contextual element in ethical judgments. By November of 1998, talk of scandals and personal misconduct in the Clinton White House had become commonplace. Republicans at this time might have found such news particularly offensive, given that the president was a Democrat, and updated their views on whether “candidates should exhibit higher moral standards” accordingly. In the following section, we examine at greater length the impact of partisanship on ethical reasoning.

[Table 1 about here]

Indeed, the search for a commanding figure in politics that can rise above the pettiness and self-centeredness of day-to-day life in a free society may be traced at least to the constitutional founding period of the 1780s. As the historian Gordon S. Wood (1987, 81-84) writes,

[T]he founders did not intend the new Constitution to change the character of the American people... Since 1776 they had learned that it was foolish to expect most people to sacrifice their private interests for the sake of the public welfare ...Madison's *Federalist* No. 10 was only the most famous and frank acknowledgement of the degree to which interests of various sorts had come to dominate American politics...Despite their acceptance of the reality of interests and commerce, the Federalists had not yet abandoned what has been called the tradition of civic humanism... 'The whole art of government,' said Jefferson, 'consists of being honest.' Central to this ideal of leadership was the quality of *disinterestedness*... Dr. Johnson defined disinterested as being 'superior to regard of private advantage; not influenced by private profit'; and that was what the founding fathers meant by the term.

Many of the ANES respondents in 1992 and 1998 apparently subscribed to the framers' notion of disinterested civic leadership in the Jeffersonian and Washingtonian mold: private citizens seeking to further their interests in politics have more "ethical latitude" than governing elites and those aspiring to hold public office. Among scholars monitoring political wrongdoing in the United States and abroad, it is also common practice to search for corruption solely at the elite policymaking-level. Nye's oft-cited (1967, 417) definition illustrates this tendency: "[Corruption is] behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (close family, personal, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence."<sup>3</sup> Given this conceptualization, private individuals in the pursuit of personal economic or social benefits might be guilty of pettiness, partisanship, narrow-mindedness, or outright lawbreaking – but not *political corruption*.

Along different lines, Mark Warren (2004) proposes an alternative "democratic" view of political corruption. To Warren, corruption in a democracy is any form of "duplicitous and harmful exclusion of those who have a claim to inclusion in collective decisions and actions" (329). With its focus on collective decision making – something that occurs inside *and* outside formal governing institutions – this

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, see also Johnston (2001), Peters and Welch (1978), and Heidenheimer (1989).

definition is not restricted to public officials. Private auditing firms, hospitals, drug companies, and scientific research teams can all, according to Warren, become politically corrupt. In a modern democracy, the lines between “public” and private” roles are frequently blurred, inasmuch as actors in both spheres might wield substantial power over the electorate. Corruption occurs when individuals and groups in either domain attempt to avoid accountability while determining how scarce social resources are to be allocated (Warren 2004, 332; see also Hibbing 2002). Thus under this rubric, one could condemn many routine political transactions as corrupt, even if no government officials are directly involved and no laws are broken. Corruption in this “democratic” sense is not simply a failure of character at the elite-level, or the misuse of public office for personal gain, as the Federalists and most contemporary observers would have it.

To what extent do Americans resonate with this “democratic” understanding of corruption? The findings in Table 1 hint at an enduring public-versus-private (or elite-versus-mass) distinction in the citizens’ ethical judgments. However, the instrumentation available in the American National Election Studies does not allow us to delve very deeply into this question. Opinion surveys we conducted in 2000 and 2004 suggest that “average” citizens acting in a private capacity might be considered corrupt – as corrupt as government officials – if they seek special treatment or put their own individual concerns above a well recognized “public good.” An overview of these results is presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

The findings from 2000 are taken from a large exit poll we conducted on the day of the general election in six cities, Miami, FL, New Orleans, LA, New York, NY, Kenosha, WI, Iowa City, IA, and Lafayette / West Lafayette, IN.<sup>4</sup> In 2004, we surveyed a group of randomly selected likely voters in the New Hampshire Democratic Primary. In both cases, respondents were asked how corrupt a number of brief scenarios would be, based on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all corrupt) to 3 (somewhat corrupt) to 5 (extremely corrupt). The scenarios in our polls covered a wide range of behaviors, some legal and others

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<sup>4</sup> See Redlawsk and McCann (2005) for details concerning sampling.

illegal, some involving government officials acting in a formal role and others where the behavior of “private” citizens is evaluated:

*How corrupt would it be if . . .*

- Someone on the government payroll did no work for the pay?
- A police officer accepted money not to write a traffic ticket?
- A citizen claimed government benefits to which he or she was not entitled?
- An official gave a contract to a campaign contributor without considering other contractors?
- An elected official with many wealthy backers supported a tax cut that largely benefited the rich?
- An elected official raised campaign funds while inside his or her government office?
- Voters supported a candidate for office in return for a promise to fix potholes on their street?
- An official recommended an out-of-work friend for a government job?
- A political candidate running for public office took a \$500 donation from a wealthy business owner? [Asked only in the 2004 survey.]

Not surprisingly, it is clear that lawbreaking (bribery, shirking responsibilities in a government job, no-bid contracting) is more uniformly condemned than other presumably legal actions (assisting an unemployed friend, accepting campaign contributions). Interestingly, it appears that citizens who are clearly breaking the law but acting in a private capacity (claiming benefits to which one is not entitled) are viewed on average as being about as “corrupt” as the police officer who accepts a bribe or the government employee who does no work for the pay. In this case, at least, there is apparently little distinction between “public” and “private” roles.

Similar findings emerge in both samples when an indisputably lawful action is considered, voters supporting a candidate in return for a promise to fix potholes on their street. On the whole, the exit poll respondents in 2000 believed that this behavior is *more* corrupt than an official assisting an unemployed friend. Among the Democratic primary participants, citizens voting specifically to get their potholes repaired were seen as more corrupt than the political candidate who accepts a \$500 donation from a wealthy business owner. On what basis would such judgments be rendered? Warren (2004) and Hibbing (2002) offer a rationale: these voters are aiming to exploit electoral processes in order to gain particularistic benefits. Nearly one out of five participants in the six-city survey and one out of ten of the

likely primary voters saw such behavior as *extremely* corrupt – a minority viewpoint, to be sure, but a strikingly large percentage given conventional understandings of the term “corruption” (Nye 1967; Peters and Welch 1978; Johnston 2001). On the face of it, citizens appear to be quite “democratically minded” when ruling the ethics of civic life. “Regular” Americans seem to be held to the same standards of behavior as government officials.

Yet these studies as designed cannot shed very much direct light on this question, and certainly cannot assess causality. No systematic effort was made to test whether attitudes towards officials differ from those towards citizens. While in some of the scenarios listed in Table 2 citizens are the actors, we cannot be sure whether it is the scenario itself or the actor that generates these attitudes. In addition, because question order was not varied – all respondents received the scenarios in the same order – we cannot discount the possibility of simple question order effects. A more rigorous examination is necessary to assess the public / private distinction in ethical reasoning.

## **Experimental Design and Findings**

### **Design and Data**

The most direct way to test whether Americans view the behavior of public officials and ordinary citizens through different ethical lenses is to compare evaluations of hypothetical political transactions, holding constant the type of transaction taking place but varying the role of the main protagonist in the hypothetical scenario. Survey experiments provide the perfect tool to do this. A representative national sample can be drawn which can then be randomly assigned into different treatment groups. In this way, we get the best of both worlds – the external validity of the survey combined with the ability to draw causal connections provided by experiments. We designed a telephone-based survey experiment along these lines, with two manipulations in a 2 X 2 design, a Principal Actor (PA) manipulation and a Normative/Emotion Reaction (NE) manipulation.



For the PA manipulation, one randomly selected half-sample of respondents was asked to evaluate six short hypothetical scenarios where a government official was taking the initiative or was the center of attention. Following from our earlier work, we asked respondents to evaluate how much corruption would be indicated based on a five-point scale (1=not at all corrupt, 5 = extremely corrupt). These scenarios were adapted from the items that had appeared in the six-city exit poll in 2000 and the 2004 New Hampshire primary poll. Some actions were patently illegal, while others were not technically against the law but hinted at special privileged relationships in politics. Respondents in the remaining half-sample evaluated the same hypothetical scenarios, but this time an ostensibly “private citizen” was cast as the initiator of the action:

*How corrupt would it be if. . .*

Group 1: Official Actor

- A police officer asked for money from a speeding driver in exchange for not writing a ticket?
- A senator put a person on the government payroll who did no work for the pay?
- An elected official offered a contract to a campaign contributor without considering other contractors?
- A government official recommended an out-of-work friend for a government job?
- A candidate running for office promised a group of voters that the potholes on their street would be fixed if they voted for him or here?
- An elected official sought the opinion of a corporate executive who had given large campaign contributions?

Group 2: Citizen Actor

- A speeding driver offered money to a policy officer in exchange for not writing a ticket?
- Someone appointed by a senator to a government job did no work for the pay?
- A campaign contributor requested than an elected official grant a contract to him or her without considering other contractors?
- An out-of-work friend of a government official asked the official to recommend him or her for a government job?
- A group of voters agreed to vote for a candidate running for office if he or she promised that the potholes on their street would be fixed?
- A corporate executive who had given large campaign contributions offered opinions to an elected official?

The NE manipulation was designed to assess the extent to which citizens either think that any particular action can be justified, or the extent to which the action generates an emotional (angry)

response. Again the sample was split in half, with one group asked “To what degree can [name of action] ever be justified?” and given three response options: always (coded 1); sometimes depending on the situation (2); and never (3). The other group was asked to indicate “How angry does [action] make you feel?” again with three options: very angry (coded 3); somewhat angry (2); and not angry (1). Thus, ultimately we have four experimental cells, with roughly one-quarter of respondents in each.

These items were included as part of a much larger survey instrument administered through the Time Sharing Experiments for the Social Science (TESS) program.<sup>5</sup> In total, 530 respondents took part in our experimental modules, all of whom were surveyed via computer-aided telephone interviewing (CATI).<sup>6</sup> A national sample was drawn of telephone numbers randomly generated using a technique which allowed for both unpublished numbers and new numbers to be included. Following selection, numbers were matched to a database of business and non-working numbers. All matches were subsequently purged from the original sample. At each residential telephone number the TESS interviewer randomly selected a respondent from all household members age 18 or older. TESS has calculated the response rate on the particular omnibus survey we were part of at 30.8%.

## **Findings**

The primary purpose of our survey experiment was to disentangle the influence of the actor from the action. While prior studies had held that citizens might judge public officials more harshly than their fellow “average” Americans, our earlier study (Redlawsk and McCann, 2005) seemed to suggest this is not the case, at least not for the range of corruption scenarios we used. In this new experimental study, we can be quite confident that any differences we find in our experimental groups can be accounted for by

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<sup>5</sup> The TESS website at <http://www.experimentcentral.org> contains details concerning recruitment of respondents and survey administration. We gratefully acknowledge support from the TESS program, from Diana Mutz and Arthur Lupia (Principal Investigators), and from the National Science Foundation, which provided funding for the data collection. The Indiana University Center for Survey Research administered the surveys. Of course, we alone are responsible for all analyses and interpretations presented here.

<sup>6</sup> This sample may seem relatively small compared to the American National Election Studies series and our own exit poll in 2000. The fact that our interest is in comparing randomly assigned experimental groups rather than assessing public opinion *per se* allows us to work with smaller samples while retaining confidence in the internal validity of our experiment. The *N*'s for our experimental groups were: Official Actor/Normative = 131; Official Action/Emotional = 140; Citizen Actor/Normative = 134; Citizen Actor/Emotional = 125.

changes of actor, since all else is held constant and the groups are randomly assigned. We will examine the differences in our scenarios when the actor is changed and then consider what might drive any differences we find.

We start with Table 3, which presents the mean responses from the subjects. While it is not our purpose to directly compare the TESS findings with our earlier surveys, it is worth noting that the same patterns we found in 2000 and during the New Hampshire primary – with very different samples and techniques – appear in our latest data. We have previously identified a sizeable distinction between behaviors that are clearly illegal (bribery, no-bid contracts, ghost employees) and those that are actually legal yet perhaps seen as shady by ordinary citizens (recommending an unemployed friend for a job, advice by a corporate executive to an official, votes exchanged for pothole repairs). We find the same thing here. Illegal activities are clearly seen as corrupt, regardless of actor (mean values range from 3.98 to 4.45 on the 5-point scale used in our previous studies), while the other scenarios are viewed with at least some suspicion on average (2.35 – 2.92). Actions that many academic researchers, political commentators, and lawmakers might consider merely “politics” were actually viewed as corrupt by a not insignificant proportion of respondents. In both halves of the TESS sample, for example, more than ten percent of the study participants stated that promises of pothole repairs would be “extremely” corrupt; approximately the same number believed that seeking opinions from campaign contributors was this corrupt.

[Table 3 about here]

While it is gratifying to find relatively few differences from our earlier surveys, we focus most closely on the experimental manipulations. The first column in Table 3 contains the results for our “how corrupt” question and our normative/emotional manipulation for subjects where the scenarios had a public official as the actor; the second column shows the same scenarios when citizens are acting in a more private capacity. The third column examines the differences in the means between the two groups. Turning first to the legal but “shady” scenarios, we see virtually no differences between how respondents react to official actors versus citizen actors. Officials are no more or less likely to be condemned as

corrupt for any of these actions, nor do respondents show differences in either normative (justification) or emotional (angry) responses to the scenarios by actor. The only exception is a small difference in how angry respondents feel about votes in exchange for pothole repairs. When a candidate asks for a vote in return for a promise to repair potholes, respondents are angrier than when voters offer their vote to a candidate for the same return. Still this difference is small and barely rises to statistical significance ( $p < .10$ ). The overall picture suggests that for these legal scenarios citizens do not care who is actually taking the lead. While they do not condemn these actions at the same level as those that are patently illegal, respondents are still quite negative in many cases.

Unlike the legal scenarios in our study, subjects responded differently to the illegal scenarios depending on the nature of the actor. For both bribery and ghost employees, respondents told that an official was the actor were more likely to see corruption than those reacting to the actions of private citizens. Here we see some evidence that in the eyes of the electorate, officials are held to a higher standard of behavior. Yet even so, respondents did not demonstrate any large or significant differences in whether these illegal actions could be justified depending on the actor. That is, citizens are not generally seen as more likely to be justified in carrying out these actions even if they are given a small benefit of the doubt in terms of the actual level of corruption. On the other hand, bribery by officials does make respondents angrier than bribery by citizens. But these differences are not large, and in fact are not consistent across scenarios. All we have to do is turn to another illegal scenario – awarding no bid contracts – to see that respondents actually find citizens who ask for no-bid contracts to be *more* corrupt than officials who offer them! Given the responses to the other illegal actions, and our expectations from earlier research suggesting citizens hold officials to a higher standard, this result is especially intriguing.

### **Partisan Predispositions and No-Bid Contracts**

The contrast between the findings for the “bribery” and “ghost employment” items versus “no-bid contracting” warrants further attention. In particular, it is worth thinking about what was happening in the overall political environment as the data for this study were being collected. While it seems there is always some claim of corruption floating around, especially during an election year, there is no particular

reason to think that responses to either the bribery question or the ghost employee question were influenced by the election environment itself. There were no specific claims raised during the campaign about putting people on payroll without work being done, and our bribery question focuses specifically on a more petty type – a police officer taking (or requesting) a bribe in exchange for not writing a speeding ticket. On the other hand, the question of no-bid contracts was a very real one at the same time the TESS study was administered. The survey went into the field on October 31, 2004. A week earlier, on October 24, the Associate Press reported that a whistle-blower had come forward with claims that no-bid contracts for work in Iraq were illegally provided to Halliburton, the company previously headed by Vice President Dick Cheney (Mann, 2004). A few days later another report had the FBI beginning an investigation of Halliburton's contracts (Solomon, 2004). It did not take long for the Democratic candidate for Vice-President, John Edwards, to respond, calling the no-bid contracts “special favors” and “wrong” (Kerry-Edwards, 2004). Halliburton stories were picked up by hundreds of newspapers and other media sources and became a significant part of the last week of the election campaign.

It seems quite possible that this media coverage of Halliburton influenced respondents' perceptions of the corrupt nature of no-bid contracting. Yet looking back at our earlier studies, the influence, if any, appears to make respondents *less* condemning of these contracts overall (M=3.98 in the TESS study, 4.23 in New Hampshire Democratic primary study, 4.19 in 2000 Exit Polls). The New Hampshire study provides a clue about where we should look for an explanation. That study surveyed only likely Democratic primary voters, and in so doing, found the most condemnation of no bid contracting in any of our studies. If partisanship were driving at least part of this effect, we might well expect Republicans during the election of 2004 to be supportive of a Republican administration seeking re-election, even to the point of shaping their stances regarding what is and is not corrupt. In short, partisan predispositions may be powerful enough to condition evaluations of hypothetical scenarios where no references to Vice President Cheney or the Halliburton controversy are provided, but where laws are clearly being broken.

We examine this possibility by considering the impact of partisanship on the question of how

corrupt no-bid contracts are. We specify three OLS regressions predicting the perceived level of corruption, as well the action's justifiability and the anger it provokes. We enter our principal actor manipulation and partisanship, along with an interaction term between the two into the models. The results are presented in Table 4. We find no main effects for the actor manipulation or for partisanship itself for any of the dependent variables. But the interaction of the two is significant for both the perception of corruption and the amount of anger it provokes; in the "ever justified" model, this interaction barely misses conventional statistical significance ( $p=.104$ ). In each case, the negative sign on the interaction term indicates that when a government official is said to be extending a no-bid contract, Republicans had less of a negative reaction than Democrats. However, when a private citizen is the principal actor, partisanship plays no role whatsoever. This finding suggests that our respondents were in fact attuned to the political environment in which they found themselves, whether they realized it or not. Mass dispositions regarding integrity and corruption in American politics are somewhat flexible, and may partly reflect partisan rationalizations. Actions that Democrats condemn as corrupt may be viewed as aboveboard by Republicans if incumbent Republican officeholders are linked at the time to such behaviors.<sup>7</sup>

[Table 4 about here]

This argument cannot be directly tested with the data we have available. After all, we did not ask questions about sources of information, attention to media, or even the importance of the election to the respondents. None of the usual measures that might connect to the finding that Republicans were more likely to let officials off the hook than Democrats are available here. While we do think it instructive that the same result does not attain when citizens are the actors, this is still a bit tenuous.

Fortunately, though, we can return to our 2000 election exit poll for some corroborating evidence. In that survey, the wording for the "no-bid contract" item closely parallels the TESS question. As noted in

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<sup>7</sup> We should note that party identification did not significantly interact with the experimental treatment for any of the other attitude items in the TESS surveys. These non-findings lend further weight to our conjecture that news reports involving specific government actions can condition more general dispositions toward corruption in a given domain.

Table 2, respondents that year found this action to be quite corrupt. But it is not the overall response that interests us here. Instead, we have the opportunity to examine the effects of partisanship on responses to this same scenario gathered four years before the TESS experiment, and thus four years before the media discussion of no-bid contracts in 2004.

We specified an OLS model predicting attitudes towards no-bid contracts using predictors available in our exit poll. We had a three point partisan scale available, indicating whether Republican, Democrat, or Independent. We entered the two parties into the model, with Independent as the reference category. The results are presented in Table 5. All else equal, *both* Republicans and Democrats were less condemning of official action in 2000 than were independents, with relatively little difference between them. The inference is clear. Something changed between the election of 2000 and the election of 2004. We contend that this “something” is the confluence of a Republican administration combined with extensive media coverage of no bid contracts granted to Halliburton in Iraq. Republican respondents had every reason to believe that officials granting no bid contracts were less corrupt, while Democrats could easily see them as more corrupt. Since Halliburton was tied closely to Vice President Cheney, the awarding of contracts would be seen in the light of official action, not citizen action. Thus in 2004, Republicans remained just as skeptical as Democrats about citizen actors, while giving official actors some benefit of the doubt. And while Republicans do not necessarily try to justify what happens any more than do Democrats, they are clearly less angry about such actions than are Democrats.

[Table 5 about here]

How significant are these differences between Republicans and Democrats? It is important to recognize that even the strongest Republicans still tended to condemn no bid contracts as more than “somewhat corrupt,” and are at least somewhat angry about them. The differences though are not insubstantial. Table 6 shows the predicted responses by treatment group and partisanship for the level of corruption, justification, and emotional response. On average strong Republicans are more than a half-point lower on the five point corruption scale than strong Democrats when considering official actors; they are also much less angry about it on average (2.43 vs. 2.84.) No comparable patterns emerge for a

citizen actor. Figure 1 graphically presents the same data, making quite clear the nature of partisan predispositions on attitudes towards official and citizen corruption.

[Table 6 and Figure 1 about here]

### **Discussion**

A great deal of research on corruption has gone before us, yet relatively little of it has attempted to understand how ordinary citizens actually think about corruption. When considered at all, it is generally thought that citizens believe corruption is primarily about illegal acts by public officials. The results of our study belie this point. We find clear evidence that citizens can be just as hard on their compatriots as they can be on public officials. Survey evidence that suggests voters want their public officials to be “better” than they are may not be wrong, however. Instead, citizens appear to want everyone to be “better,” at least under certain scenarios. If it is abhorrent for public officials to offer no-bid contracts, it is also abhorrent for private citizens to ask for them. Likewise, putting people on the payroll who do no work is corrupt when a public official does it, and it is just as corrupt when the reference is the “lowly worker” himself or herself. Overall, while citizens find some actions less corrupt than others, it is the action itself that conditions perceptions of corruption, not the actor. As we have noted elsewhere (Redlawsk and McCann, 2005), Warren’s (2004) conception of a “democratized” sense of corruption appears to be grounded not only in the theory he proposed but in the data we have collected.

Interestingly though, one scenario stands out from the others in suggesting that official action is more onerous than citizen action. Officials who solicit bribes are condemned to a greater extent than citizens who offer them. Further, while our respondents were no more or less likely to consider bribery justified based on the actor, an official taking a bribe generated greater anger than did a citizen offering one. Of course this may be an artifact of the particular bribery scenario we provided – that of a driver and a police officer. This kind of situation is very familiar to any average citizen and there may simply be a bit of self-interest in the idea that offering a bribe might be slightly less corrupt than taking one!

Of more interest is the other scenario that stands out, the awarding of no bid contracts. At the time this study was in the field no bid contracts were in the air. The rebuilding of Iraq was a topic of grave



discussion, as was the awarding of no bid contracts to companies with close ties to the administration, like Halliburton. Democrats harshly condemned these unusual contracting procedures, while Republican officials defended them as necessary for the rebuilding effort. The oddity of finding our respondents more favorably disposed towards official actors than they were towards citizens drove us to look more deeply. When we did, we found that the attitudes towards official actors in this situation (and this one only) were driven strongly by partisanship, while the attitudes towards citizen actors were not. Republicans, responding to the political environment, appear to have been more willing to accept no bid contracts than were Democrats, a rational response to what they most likely were hearing about what was happening in an administration controlled by their party. We find it especially intriguing that this finding emerges in our fall 2004 TESS survey experiment, but not in our election 2000 exit polls.

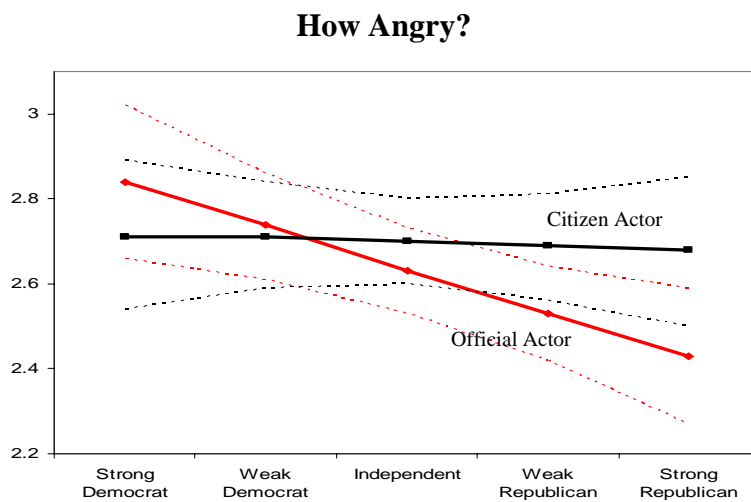
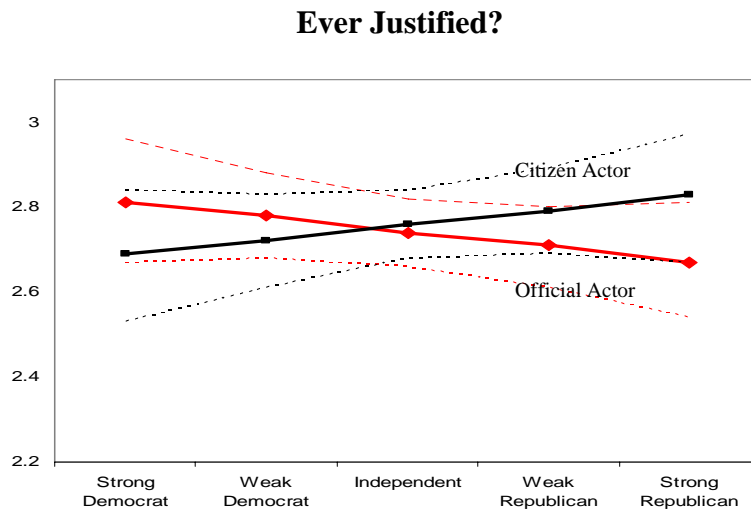
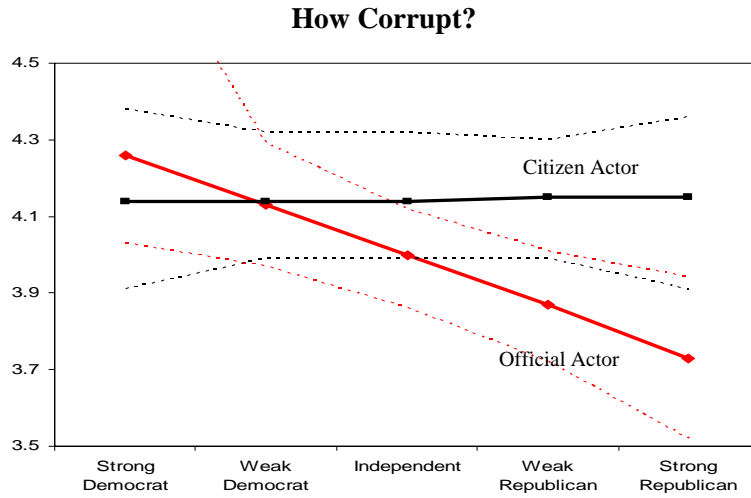
In some respects, the study of political corruption is always timely. But as this paper is written in late 2005, it is perhaps more timely than ever. The American political scene is rife with scandal. The former Majority Leader of the House is under indictment. A major lobbyist who has funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars (primarily to Republican lawmakers) is also under indictment and reports indicate he may begin cooperating with the government. A Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives recently pleaded guilty to taking millions of dollars in bribes. Meanwhile a federal prosecutor continues to investigate the leaking of a CIA agent's name by the White House. Clearly Democrats are hoping to make corruption a key – if not THE key issue of the 2006 elections. As they do, we should expect voters to respond to the cues they receive, and to respond in ways that have meaning and consequences. Political scientists would do well to do more to understand just how it is that citizens understand and define corruption, and how these dispositions in turn condition their evaluations of government, officials, and their fellow citizens.

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**FIGURE 1 Predicted Response to No-Bid Contract Scenario, by Actor and Partisanship**



**TABLE 1 Public Opinion Regarding “Moral Standards” in High Office**

*“Do you think people who run for high public office should display higher moral standards in their personal life than does the average citizen?”*

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	<u>1992</u>	<u>1998</u>
Yes	63.0 %	65.3 %
No	34.7 %	32.2 %
Not Sure	<u>2.3 %</u>	<u>2.6 %</u>
Total	100.0 %	100.1 %

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Source: American National Election Studies, 1992 and 1996.  $N = 1,196$  (1992) and  $1,281$  (1998).

**TABLE 2 Evaluations of “Corruption” Scenarios**

<i>How corrupt would it be if . . .</i>	<u>Mean (SE)</u>	<u>Extremely Corrupt (%)</u>
<u>Six-City Exit Poll (November 2000)</u>		
A police officer accepted money not to write a traffic ticket?	4.35 (.01)	64
A citizen claimed government benefits to which he or she was not entitled?	4.31 (.01)	59
An official gave a contract to a campaign contributor without considering other contractors?	4.19 (.01)	54
An elected official raised campaign funds while inside his or her government office?	3.66 (.02)	33
Someone on the government payroll did no work for the pay?	4.38 (.01)	66
An official recommended an out-of-work friend for a government job?	2.27 (.02)	18
Voters supported a candidate for office in return for a promise to fix potholes on their street?	2.88 (.02)	23
An elected official with many wealthy backers supported a tax cut that largely benefited the rich?	3.81 (.02)	45
<u>New Hampshire Democratic Primary Poll (January 2004)</u>		
A police officer asked for money from a speeding driver in exchange for not writing a ticket?	4.51 (.04)	67
An elected official offered a contract to a political supporter without considering other contractors?	4.23 (.04)	45
A government official recommended an out-of-work friend for a government job?	2.86 (.06)	12
Someone on the government payroll did no work while receiving pay?	4.36 (.04)	51
A political candidate running for public office took a \$500 donation from a wealthy business owner?	2.33 (.06)	7
Voters supported a candidate running for public office in return for a promise to fix potholes on their street?	2.63 (.06)	10

Note: Responses were measured on a five-point scale (“not at all corrupt” = 1, “somewhat corrupt” = 3, and “extremely corrupt” = 5; no value labels were given for points 2 and 4). The items are presented in the order they appeared on the questionnaire. Source: Exit polling data collected by the authors on November 7, 2000 in Lafayette and West Lafayette, IN, Iowa City, IA, New Orleans, LA, New York, NY, Kenosha, WI, Miami, FL (lowest  $N = 6,100$ ); survey of likely voters in the 2004 New Hampshire Democratic Primary (lowest  $N = 393$ ).

**TABLE 3 Survey Experiment Results: Means and Standard Errors**

<u>Scenarios</u>	<u>Official or Leader Takes Initiative</u>	<u>Citizens Take Initiative</u>	<u>Difference</u>
<i>Illegal</i>			
Bribery			
How corrupt?	4.45 (.05)	4.25 (.06)	.20 (.07) **
Ever justified?	2.90 (.04)	2.83 (.04)	.07 (.05)
How angry?	2.80 (.04)	2.38 (.07)	.42 (.07) **
No-Bid Contract			
How corrupt?	3.98 (.07)	4.17 (.06)	-.19 (.09) *
Ever justified?	2.75 (.04)	2.77 (.05)	-.02 (.06)
How angry?	2.63 (.05)	2.68 (.05)	-.05 (.07)
“Ghost” Employment			
How corrupt?	4.42 (.05)	4.28 (.06)	.14 (.08) #
Ever justified?	2.84 (.04)	2.81 (.04)	.03 (.06)
How angry?	2.82 (.04)	2.72 (.05)	.10 (.06)
<i>Legal</i>			
Recommending Unemployed Friend			
How corrupt?	2.35 (.08)	2.35 (.08)	-.01 (.11)
Ever justified?	2.05 (.05)	2.05 (.05)	-.01 (.07)
How angry?	1.68 (.06)	1.67 (.07)	.01 (.09)
Corporate Executive Gives Advice			
How corrupt?	2.92 (.08)	2.88 (.09)	.04 (.12)
Ever justified?	2.27 (.05)	2.19 (.06)	.08 (.08)
How angry?	1.96 (.07)	1.88 (.07)	.09 (.10)
Votes in Exchange for Pothole Repairs			
How corrupt?	2.81 (.09)	2.75 (.08)	.06 (.12)
Ever justified?	2.27 (.06)	2.23 (.06)	.04 (.08)
How angry?	1.89 (.07)	1.72 (.07)	.18 (.10) #

Note: See the main text for question wordings and response categories. # =  $p < .10$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ . Lowest  $N = 269$  for the “How Corrupt / Official or Leader” items; 257 for the “How Corrupt / Citizen” items; 131 for the “Justified / Official or Leader” items; 133 for the “Justified / Citizen” items; 139 for the “Angry / Official or Leader” items; and 122 for the “Angry / Citizen” items. Source: TESS surveys administered under the direction of the authors.

**TABLE 4 Impact of Party Identification on Evaluations of “No-Bid” Government Contracts: OLS Regression Estimates and Standard Errors**

	<u>How Corrupt?</u>	<u>Ever Justified?</u>	<u>How Angry?</u>
Official / Leader Takes Initiative (Dummy Coded)	.249 (.226)	.035 (.032)	-.009 (.037)
Party Identification	.001 (.049)	.198 (.146)	.215 (.175)
Party Identification * Official / Leader Takes Initiative	-.134 (.067) *	-.071 (.044)	-.094 (.053) #

Note: # =  $p < .10$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ . Constant terms were estimated but are not shown. Party identification was coded on a five-point scale ranging from Strong Democrat (1) to Strong Republican (5).



**Table 5 Partisanship and No Bid Contracts, 2000 Exit Polls**

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	B	SE
Partisanship		
Democrat	-.066*	(.036)
Republican	-.081*	(.042)
Age	.253***	(.015)
Education	.109***	(.014)
Income > \$50,000	.142***	(.029)
Race: White	.079**	(.040)
Sex: Female	.052*	(.028)
Ideology		
Liberal	-.004	(.034)
Conservative	.056	(.038)
Poll Location		
Iowa City	.066	(.054)
New York City	.098*	(.058)
Miami	-.149***	(.049)
New Orleans	.244***	(.056)
Kenosha	.169***	(.049)
(Constant)	3.082***	(.080)
Adjusted R2	.092	
N	5,486	

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\* $p < .1$  \*\*  $p < .05$  \*\*\*  $p < .01$

Table entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients, Standard Errors in Parentheses. Dependent variable: How Corrupt if Official Offers No-Bid Contract. Source: 6-city Exit Poll, 2000. For Poll Location, reference category is West Lafayette, IN.

**TABLE 6 Predicted Responses and 95% Confident Intervals for the “No-Bid” Contract Items, by Treatment Group and Partisanship**

	<u>Official or Leader Takes Initiative</u>	<u>Citizens Take Initiative</u>
How Corrupt?		
Strong Democrat	4.26 [4.03 – 4.90]	4.14 [3.91 – 4.38]
Weak Democrat	4.13 [3.97 – 4.29]	4.14 [3.99 – 4.32]
Independent	4.00 [3.86 – 4.12]	4.14 [3.99 – 4.32]
Weak Republican	3.87 [3.72 – 4.01]	4.15 [3.99 – 4.30]
Strong Republican	3.73 [3.52 – 3.94]	4.15 [3.91 – 4.36]
Ever justified?		
Strong Democrat	2.81 [2.67 – 2.96]	2.69 [2.53 – 2.84]
Weak Democrat	2.78 [2.68 – 2.88]	2.72 [2.61 – 2.83]
Independent	2.74 [2.66 – 2.82]	2.76 [2.68 – 2.84]
Weak Republican	2.71 [2.61 – 2.80]	2.79 [2.69 – 2.89]
Strong Republican	2.67 [2.54 – 2.81]	2.83 [2.67 – 2.97]
How angry?		
Strong Democrat	2.84 [2.66 – 3.02]	2.71 [2.54 – 2.89]
Weak Democrat	2.74 [2.61 – 2.86]	2.71 [2.59 – 2.84]
Independent	2.63 [2.53 – 2.73]	2.70 [2.60 – 2.80]
Weak Republican	2.53 [2.42 – 2.64]	2.69 [2.56 – 2.81]
Strong Republican	2.43 [2.27 – 2.59]	2.68 [2.50 – 2.85]

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Note: Predictions and confidence intervals were calculated using *Clarify* software (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King, 2003) based on the regression models in Table 4.