

Women Can't Win: Electoral Double Standards in the Face of Corruption*

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Abstract

Research using survey experiments and public opinion data highlights the gendered electoral consequences of corruption: Revealing corruption increases support for female representation, yet female politicians are punished for corruption more harshly. In this research note, we evaluate whether these findings translate to the real world. Using data from an anti-corruption program in Brazil, we find that revealing corruption (especially among male incumbents) increases the probability of women seeking office in mayoral elections. However, we find no effect of on the probability of women winning elections. Leveraging term limits, we identify incumbents' incentives to counter the rise of female challengers as the primary mechanism. Our results imply that barriers are such that, at the end of the day, women can't win.

Cross-national studies consistently find a negative relationship between female political representation and corruption in politics (Dollar et al., 2001; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2019; Swamy et al., 2001). Many attribute this relationship to stereotypes of women as more honest and trustworthy than men (Dollar et al., 2001; Ulbig, 2007; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Dolan, 2013; Barnes and Beaulieu, 2014, 2018; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2019). Others contend that the negative relationship stems from women’s historical exclusion from power networks and patronage opportunities (Tripp, 2001; Goetz, 2007; Frank et al., 2010) or from females’ purported discomfort with violating valued political norms and risk aversion (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2017; Barnes and Beaulieu, 2018).

We know less about the relationship between corruption revelation and the gendered nature of voting decisions. That is, it remains unclear whether and how corruption revelation distinctly impacts the distinct electoral prospects of male and female candidates, especially in real world political contexts. Recent experimental and public opinion research assess the gendered electoral consequences of corruption revelation, but we don’t know whether their findings translate to the real world.

Survey experiments conducted in the United States demonstrate that voters disassociate female politicians with electoral fraud, corruption, and other illicit activities (Barnes and Beaulieu, 2014). Barnes and Beaulieu (2018) explain this perceived disassociation with risk aversion, marginalization, and honesty mechanisms. Funk et al. (2019) use public opinion data to study an implication of this research in the context of Latin America, considering whether political parties react strategically to voters’ perceptions relating to gender and corruption. They show that Latin American political parties nominate more women to the national legislature in moments of political and economic crisis accompanied by high corruption perceptions.

Though Barnes and Beaulieu (2014, 2018); Funk et al. (2019) imply that corruption revelation yields electoral benefits for female candidates, survey experiments conducted in wide-ranging contexts suggest that female politicians, specifically, face greater electoral

sanctions for corruption than their male counterparts. In their conjoint experiment, Eggers et al. (2018) find that British respondents (especially females) express an intent to sanction misconduct among female incumbents more harshly. Using a similar design, Pereira (2020) also finds a disproportionate backlash against corrupt female politicians in Mexico (but not in Brazil).¹

We argue that the traditional methods of inquiry used to probe the relationship between corruption revelation and the gendered nature of electoral decisions face limitations that prevent us from deducing real world political realities. Research relying on corruption perceptions in public opinion cannot disentangle whether parties nominate more women because voters perceive them as a viable alternative to replace corrupt politicians or due to a negative glass cliff effect in which women are more likely to be nominated to vulnerable positions (Ryan et al., 2010).² As we discuss below, our study leverages term limits to adjudicate these explanations.

In turn, survey experimental research bumps up against recent findings of a discrepancy between voters' self-reported and actual responses to corruption (Boas et al., 2018; Incerti, 2020). For illustration, Boas et al. (2018) show that Brazilians indicate strong anti-corruption norms when asked to evaluate fictional candidates. However, when informed of their own representatives' malfeasance in a field experiment, voters take no sanctioning action.³ To our knowledge, we provide the first attempt to address the relationship between the gender of corrupt officials and female electoral performance in a real world political context.

Our research note considers two questions: Does corruption revelation increase political support for female candidates? Are female candidates disproportionately sanctioned when corruption revelation is tied to women? To address these, we estimate linear probability

¹The author attributes the null result in Brazil to President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment countering the stereotype about corruption being rare among female politicians.

²The literature on the glass ceiling suggests this phenomenon may arise due to positive stereotypes about women or simply because they are used as scapegoats (Ryan et al., 2016). Applications to politics find evidence only for the latter explanation (Ryan et al., 2010).

³Pavão (2018) explains this discrepancy suggesting that widespread perceptions of corruption render electoral sanctions ineffective. Fernández-Vázquez et al. (2015) deduce that voters overlook corruptions when it brings side benefits.

models with data from a randomized auditing program of Brazilian municipalities. We find that the probability of having at least one female mayoral candidate increases with the incidence of revealed corruption. However, our results indicate that the probability of female candidates winning the election remains unchanged, regardless of corrupt incumbents' genders.

To determine whether our results stem from the strategic responses of incumbent mayors (in anticipation of voter behavior) or due to a negative glass cliff effect, we leverage mayoral term limits in Brazil and find that the effect of revealing corruption is stronger in municipalities with male incumbent mayors that are term-limited. We interpret this as preliminary evidence in favor of the explanation that revealing corruption generates public support for female politicians, as women are more likely to run in reaction to corruption in open seats races. However, this public support is still insufficient to increase women's political representation.

This research note contributes to our understanding of the implications of corruption revelation for gender-based political accountability. Corruption creates public support for female candidates, but this effect subsides when the corrupt incumbent in question is female. Our findings raise concerns about corruption increasing public support for female candidates but failing to influence their actual prospects of election.

1 Data, Hypotheses, and Research Design

Between 2003 and 2015, Brazil's supreme audit institution, the *Controladoria Geral da União* (CGU), implemented an anti-corruption program that randomly selected municipalities for auditing of their federal funds. The program also determined at random how many and which budget areas or service orders to cover. Throughout the 2003-2015 period, the program organized 40 lotteries, covering 2,369 audits across 1,949 municipalities.⁴ Reports of audit findings are public, and local media outlets actively publicize findings to increase voters'

⁴Municipalities with less than 500,000 inhabitants were eligible for auditing. These municipalities comprise about 92% of the country's 5,570 municipalities.

awareness of political malfeasance in their communities (Ferraz and Finan, 2008).

The random nature of the CGU’s anti-corruption audits creates opportunities to estimate the causal effects of corruption revelation. To do so, scholars rely on different measurement strategies. For example, Ferraz and Finan (2008) rely on mere counts of corruption violations from CGU audits, whereas Avis et al. (2018) leverage CGU classifications of infraction severity in service orders (available beginning with the 20th lottery) to calculate the total number of moderate and severe infractions per audited municipality and divide it by the total number of service orders.

We use the operationalization of corruption in Avis et al. (2018) as our primary explanatory variable. As they argue in defense of their measure, moderate and severe infractions are clear instances of corruption that are hard to distinguish from each other in magnitude. Additionally, audits vary over time in the number of service orders they cover, so a continuous measure of corruption that averages over the total number of service orders is desirable to ensure comparability. To extend our coding before the 20th lottery, we use machine-coded categories from previous work using supervised learning on audit report documents to reproduce the original CGU classification (Diaz, 2020).⁵

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of our continuous corruption variable - constructed both with machine-coded and CGU-given infraction classifications - over both election year and lottery number and confirms coding comparability over time.

⁵These machine-coded categories tend to underestimate outliers, see the appendix in Diaz (2020) for more details on the coding procedure. As this works against our efforts to uncover an effect, we are unconcerned.

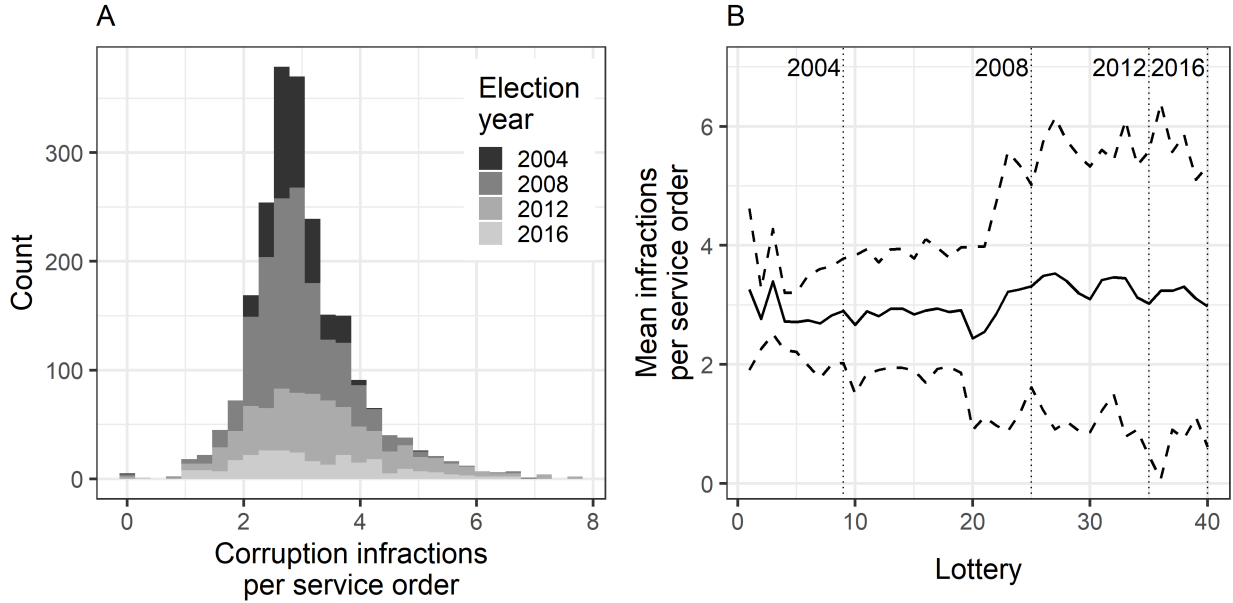


Figure 1: Distribution of the number of corruption infractions per service order by election year (Panel A) and by lottery number (Panel B). Associated election years are denoted with a colored scale in Panel A and with dotted vertical lines in Panel B. Dashed lines in Panel B denote 95% confidence intervals

We rely on data from the Brazilian electoral court (*Tribunal Superior Eleitoral*) to pair our continuous measure of corruption with two binary outcome variables that capture support for female candidates.⁶ First, we consider whether at least one female candidate contests the mayoral election for each municipality-election year. This serves as a signal of elite support for female candidates. We choose this measure over the number of female candidates since about 30% (6,668 out of 22,501) of the municipality-election years in Brazil in the period under study have at least one female candidate, yet only 4% (963) have more than one. The proportion only gets smaller as the number of female candidates increases.

Second, we consider whether a female candidate wins the mayoral election. This incorporates voter support for female candidates. We prefer this measure over female candidate vote

⁶This data is available through the *Centro de Política e Economia do Setor Público* at *Fundação Getúlio Vargas*: <http://cepespdata.io/>.

shares to avoid selection bias, as we only observe female candidate vote shares in municipalities with at least one woman running for mayor.⁷

We estimate the effect of audit-uncovered corruption infractions on female electoral support using linear probability models with election year fixed effects and clustered standard errors by election year. For robustness, we report results using logistic regression in section B of the appendix. Because we cannot assume that our corruption variable is zero in non-audited municipalities, we restrict our analysis to consider the subset of audited municipalities.

Following Funk et al. (2019), we hypothesize a positive relationship between corruption and support for female candidates, as expressed with probabilities of having at least one female candidate contesting the election and of having a female candidate winning the election. Yet, in line with Eggers et al. (2018) and Pereira (2020), we expect to observe a negative relationship between corruption revelation and support for female candidates when the incumbent revealed to be corrupt is female.

In what follows, we evaluate these hypotheses and report our primary empirical results. Section A in the appendix reports the numerical results underlying our figures.

2 Results

Figure 2 depicts the effect of one unit increase in the number of corruption infractions per service order on both the probability of having at least one female mayoral candidate (left) and the probability of electing a female mayor (right). We use different samples to evaluate our hypotheses. To evaluate whether corruption increases support for female candidates, our estimation considers audited municipalities with both male and female incumbents. For this pooled sample, a one unit increase in corruption increases the probability of having at least one woman running for mayor by about 3.5%, whereas the effect on the probability of electing a woman for mayor is indistinguishable from zero.

⁷As section B of the appendix shows, alternative versions of these outcomes do not change our results.

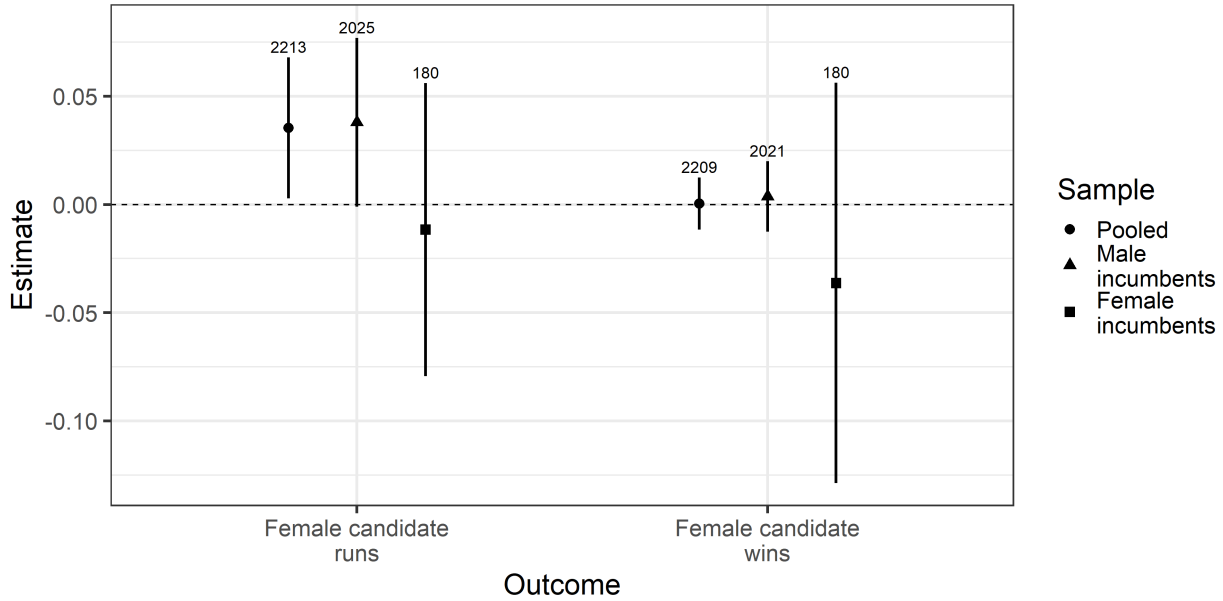


Figure 2: Effect of corruption infractions on the probability of having a women running for mayor and a woman winning the election divided by incumbent gender. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Numbers on top indicate sample sizes

To evaluate whether corruption decreases support for female candidates when the incumbent mayor is a woman, we split the sample into municipalities with male and female incumbent mayors. Figure 2 suggests that the results from our estimation using the pooled sample stem mostly from electoral dynamics in municipalities with male incumbents. The point estimates in the sample of female incumbents are negative on both outcomes, but the wider confidence intervals cover zero.

The smaller sample size in the group of municipality-election years with female mayors could mask a non-zero effect for two reasons. First, a few highly popular female incumbents may pull an otherwise negative effect towards zero. Second, if incumbents are resistant to the effects of corruption, our outcome variables would exhibit less variation in municipalities with female incumbents by construction (meaning female incumbents choose to run and win elections for reasons unrelated to corruption revelation). Section C of the appendix shows

that results are robust to influential observations and alternative outcome variables that ignore the status of female incumbents.

Taken together, the results in Figure 2 suggest that exposing corruption increases the probability of female candidates contesting local elections, but it does not affect their chances of winning elections. We identify two plausible explanations underlying our empirical observation. First, exposing corruption generates support for female candidates, yet incumbents (both male and female) may use their positions of power to counter female challengers and guard against electoral sanctioning. This interpretation aligns with a rich literature exposing that voters forgive politicians that exhibit otherwise good performance (see De Vries and Solaz (2017) for a review). For example, Pereira and Melo (2015) show that Brazilian mayors mitigate the negative electoral consequences of corruption through increased public spending.

Second, in line with the glass cliff phenomenon in politics, party leaders and other gatekeepers may encourage women to contest elections for riskier positions (Ryan et al., 2010). Interpreted in the context of our study, the glass cliff explanation would imply that corruption may increase the probability of women contesting elections not because of increased public support but because of the tendency of organizational leadership to promote women to vulnerable positions.

To adjudicate between these two explanations, we leverage the fact that Brazilian mayors can only hold office for up to two consecutive terms. This implies that mayors in their first term have reelection incentives, whereas mayors in their second term do not (Ferraz and Finan, 2011). Therefore, if the explanation that corrupt incumbents guard against electoral sanctioning with good performance in other areas underlies our results, then the effect of increasing corruption on the probability of female candidates contesting elections should be larger where the incumbent mayor is term-limited and not incentivized to offset electoral penalties. Conversely, if the negative glass cliff explanation underlies our primary findings, the effect of corruption revelation on the probability of female candidates contesting elections should be larger where the incumbent mayor is in the first term on the basis that races in

which there is an incumbent are riskier than open seat elections.

Figure 3 presents the results of models similar to those used for Figure 2 but with our sample further divided between municipality-election years with first-term (reelection eligible) and second-term (term-limited) mayors. Although most of our results in Figure 3 are indistinguishable from zero, we do find an effect of corruption revelation on the probability of having at least one female mayoral candidate in municipalities with male incumbent mayors who are term-limited. Within this sample, a one unit increase in corruption leads to a 6% increase in the probability of having at least one female mayoral candidate. We interpret this as evidence in favor of the explanation that exposing corruption does generate public support for female candidates. In the absence of incumbent advantage, female candidates capitalize on public support for their candidacies and contest open seat races. Our results are not supportive of the glass cliff explanation.

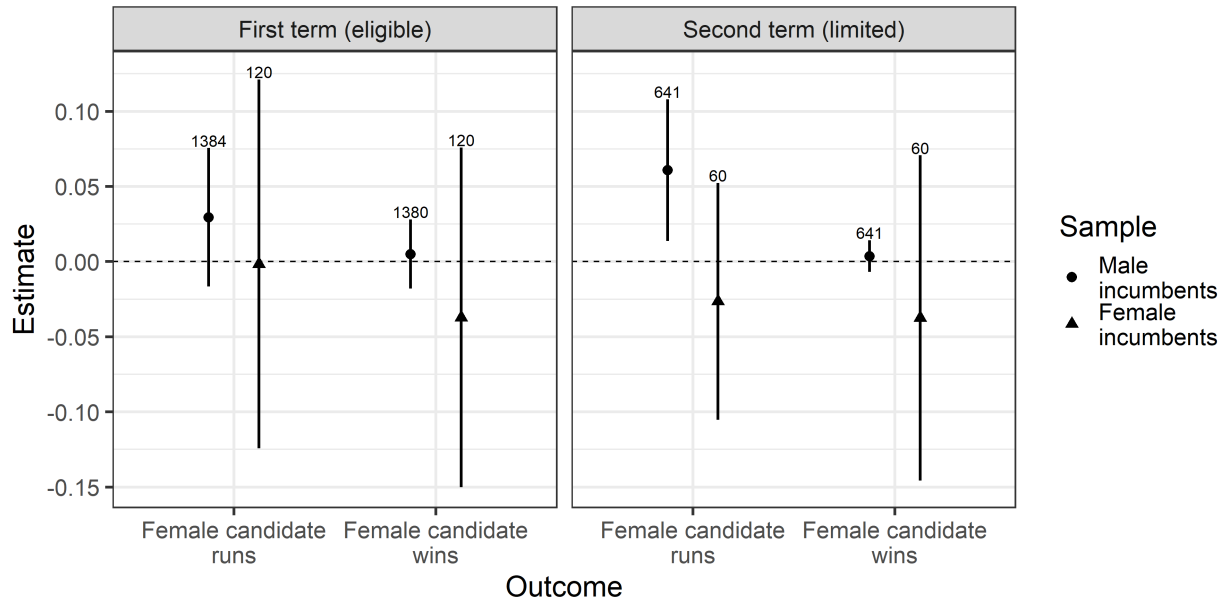


Figure 3: Effect of corruption infractions on the probability of having a women running for mayor and a woman winning the election divided by incumbent gender and term in office. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Numbers on top indicate sample sizes

3 Conclusion

Our results partially align with experimental and public opinion research on the gendered electoral consequences of corruption. We corroborate the existing finding that revealed corruption generates public support for female candidates in the form of an increased probability of women contesting office. This effect arises primarily from patterns found in municipalities with male incumbent mayors. When the incumbent mayor is female, revealed corruption makes it no more or less likely that there will be female candidates, even when the incumbent mayor is term-limited.

By contrast, we find no evidence that corruption revelation influences the probability of women winning elections. This leads us to conclude that though revealing corruption generates support for female politicians, this support is not enough to overcome the high entry barriers to politics women face. While further research is necessary to sustain this claim, our research note points in directions similar to previous accounts that highlight politicians' strategic reactions to avoid punishment from corruption (Fisman and Golden, 2017).

Future research would also benefit from considering plausible alternative mechanisms and dynamics underlying our findings. For example, some of our null results may stem from absenteeism or invalid voting. Katz and Levin (2016) join other scholars of Brazilian politics in suggesting that invalid votes reflect disenchantment with elections and democratic performance. Insofar as corruption exacerbates public frustration in these areas, instead of enacting gendered-specific punishments, voters may simply fail to turnout.

In addition, future research that seeks to understand the gendered electoral dynamics of corruption in the real world must grapple with the methodological challenge of small sample sizes. Our sample has a small number of female incumbents investigated for corruption. Currently, our point estimates suggest a negative relationship between corruption and the probability of female candidates winning office where the incumbent is female. With a larger sample of audited female incumbents, we might be able to determine whether the effect is distinguishable from zero.

Finally, future research should extend our study elsewhere. Although pervasive corruption and the country's unique municipal auditing program provide us with a rich opportunity to study this relationship in Brazil, scholars should not shy away from investigating these dynamics in other countries. Such studies could contribute to a cumulative body of knowledge to inform strategies and tactics to reduce the spread of malfeasance and enhance female political representation around the world.

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