

Political Corruption and Voter Turnout in China:
The Effects of Perception, Experience, and Purchases

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of
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2020

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Voter turnout reflects political participation in both democracies and autocracies, and corruption's impact on turnout is a matter of long-term debate. Previous literature has addressed three major theories: the distrust theory, trade theory, and the removal theory. However, the empirical analysis of corruption's impact on turnout is limited, especially for authoritarian regimes. Though several researchers discuss the cross-national impact of corruption perception on turnout, they do not evaluate the effect of actual corrupt activities. Based on village-level elections in China, this research responds to the gaps in the literature by analyzing how corruption perception, experienced corruption, and electoral corruption impact turnout in contested elections in autocracies. This paper estimates hierarchical generalized linear models and uses mediation analysis to analyze data from the China Survey 2008. It finds: (1) citizen perceptions of corruption depress turnout by lowering interest in elections, which is inconsistent with the removal theory; (2) both corruption perceptions and experienced corruption can raise people's concern about Chinese democracy and consequently depress turnout; this mediation analysis reveals that corruption influences turnout through dwindling trust in the regime; (3) electoral corruption increases turnout directly, which supports the trade theory. Overall, although corruption can directly "buy" votes, it may undermine voting by decreasing political trust in both elections and the regime.

Contents

Abstract	iv
Contents.....	v
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures	viii
Acknowledgements	ix
1. Introduction	1
2. What Is the Mechanism by Which Corruption Impacts Voter Turnout?.....	4
2.1 The Distrust Theory: More Corruption, Less Trust.....	6
2.2 The Trade Theory: Supporting Corrupt Candidates for Benefits.....	10
2.3 The Removal Theory: Voting Against Corruption	13
3. Corruption and Turnout in Chinese Rural Elections.....	17
4. Research Question and Hypotheses.....	26
5. Datasets and Methods	28
6. Variables.....	31
6.1 Dependent Variable: Voting Behavior.....	31
6.2 Independent Variables: Perceptions, Experience, and Electoral Activities of Corruption	31
6.3 Control Variables: Political Attitudes and Demographics	32
7. Results.....	35
7.1 Hierarchical Generalized Linear Models	35
7.2 Mediation Analysis	41

7.3 Robustness Checks	44
8. Conclusions.....	48
Bibliography	51

List of Tables

Table 1: Independent Variables.....	31
Table 2: Summary Statistics.....	34
Table 3: Corruption Perception on Turnout.....	38
Table 4: Corruption Experience on Turnout.....	39
Table 5: Electoral Corruption on Turnout.....	40
Table 6: Corruption Perception on Turnout, Mediated by Concern for Democracy.....	41
Table 7: Corruption Experience on Turnout, Mediated by Concern for Democracy.....	42
Table 8: Corruption Perception on Turnout, Mediated by Interest in Elections.....	42
Table 9: Corruption Experience on Turnout, Mediated by Interest in Elections.....	43

List of Figures

Figure 1: Corrupt Perceptions' Impact Mediated by Interest in Elections.....	46
Figure 2: Corrupt Perceptions' Impact Mediated by Concern for Democracy.....	47
Figure 3: Corrupt Experiences' Impact Mediated by Concern for Democracy	47

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges Melanie Manion for her detailed and careful guidance on the paper. The author also appreciates helpful comments from John Aldrich, Zhipeng Bao, Ying Chi, Xiaoshu Gui, Christopher Johnston, Pierre Landry, Azzedine Layachi, Zeren Li, Yue Lin, Edmund Malesky, Peng Peng, Nayma Qayum, Griffin Riddler, Daniel Stegmueller, Linchuan Zhang, Hongshen Zhu, and participants at the 51st Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Political Science Association. Questions and comments should be addressed to the author at chengyu.fu@duke.edu. All errors and omissions are his own.

1. Introduction

Voter turnout reflects political participation not only in democracies but also in autocracies that hold contested elections. Existing literature addresses both institutional and individual-level determinants of turnout. Corruption can influence citizen voting behavior through both channels. Three theories dominate literature on the effect of corruption on turnout. The distrust theory argues that those who perceive the institutions and candidates as corrupt may choose not to vote because they have low trust in the reliability of the regime and election outcomes. The trade theory, by contrast, argues that individuals may support corrupt candidates in exchange for potential benefits. Finally, the removal hypothesis argues that individuals who perceive more corruption may choose to vote against corrupt officials. However, we lack systematic research of voter incentives in contested elections in authoritarian regimes. The analysis of corruption's impact on turnout is even more limited. Further, though several researchers (e.g., Shi, 1999a, 1999b; Chen and Zhong, 2002) discuss the impact of corruption perceptions and corruption level on turnout in different countries, their results are incompatible and they fail to take actual corrupt activities into consideration. Insights about which theory explains corruption's impact on participation are also overlooked.

This paper responds to gaps in the literature by focusing on how corruption perceptions, experienced corruption, and electoral corruption impact turnout in village

elections in China. By estimating hierarchical generalized linear models (HGLMs) and using mediation analysis to analyze data from the China Survey 2008, I advance three arguments. First, citizen perceptions of corruption decrease voter turnout through lowered interest in elections. This finding argues against the removal theory and indicates, instead, that corruption functions through reduced trust in elections. Second, both corruption perceptions and experienced corruption can decrease turnout, moderated by greater concern about democracy in China. This mechanism indicates that corruption influences turnout through reducing trust in the regime. Third, activities of electoral corruption increase turnout directly, which supports the vote-buying theory. In all, although corruption can directly “buy” votes, it may undermine voting by decreasing political trust in both elections and the regime.

Overall, the paper aims to contribute to the discussion of corruption and voter turnout in three ways. First, since village-level voting is a contested election that involves actual power shifts, findings here can be compared with contested elections in other dictatorships and developing democracies. Conclusions provide insights into the role of corruption in democratic transitions in authoritarian settings. Second, the paper shows that corruption perceptions, experienced corruption, and corrupt electoral activities are significant determinants of voter behaviors in village elections in China. Specifically, electoral corruption may promote turnout rapidly, but it undermines voter participation in the long run as corruption perceptions are higher after vote-buying.

Third, this analysis demonstrates that although corrupt candidates may directly “buy” votes, trust in elections and towards the authorities may serve as an intermediary by which corruption impacts voter turnout indirectly. These findings indicate that corruption has dual effects on voting behavior, providing evidence for both the trade and the trust theories.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the three theories about the impact of corruption on turnout. Section 3 summarizes the literature on contested village elections in China. Section 4 presents the research question and corresponding hypotheses. Section 5 discusses the dataset and empirical strategies for estimation. Section 6 summarizes the variables adopted in the analysis. Section 7 presents estimation results: HGLM regressions, mediation effects, and robustness checks. The final section concludes and discusses the agenda for future research.

2. What Is the Mechanism by Which Corruption Impacts Voter Turnout?

Voter turnout is an important research subject in political science. According to Aldrich (1993), “turning out to vote is the most common and important act of political participation in any democracy.” Even in authoritarian regimes, whether elections are contested or without choice, higher turnout is a significant indicator of active political engagement, as it reflects citizen willingness to participate in regular political activities designed by dictators. Current literature gives great emphasis to both institutional (Blais 2006; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Jackman 1987; Powell 1982, 1986) and individual-level (Blais 2006; Finkel 1985; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Smets and Van Ham 2013) determinants of turnout. Corruption is one of the most significant factors that may influence citizen voting behavior.

Three theories currently dominate discussion of the relationship between corruption and voter turnout. First, the distrust theory argues that individuals who perceive the institutions and candidates as corrupt may choose not to vote because they have low trust in the reliability of the regime and election outcomes. The trade theory, by contrast, argues that individuals may support corrupt candidates in exchange for potential benefits (public spending, employment, or even cash). Finally, the removal hypothesis argues that individuals who perceive more corruption may choose to vote against corrupt officials. We have many comparative studies to test these different

theorized relationships, but most of them concentrate on democracies and developed countries.

It is not reasonable to generalize the results of democracies to the elections in the authoritarianism regimes: the patron-client relationship which prevails under dictatorship may foster corruption, and the elections suffer more from informal (sometimes illegal) personal linkages, due to a lack of supervision and accountability. In this case, elections in authoritarian regimes are more likely to suffer from corruption activities and corruption perceptions. However, current research fails to explain which one (or more) theory explains the relationship between corruption and turnout in nondemocracies. The elections of village committees in China offer a great platform to examine the three arguments in the context of a dictatorship that runs elections that make sense in real-life politics.

Village elections in China were introduced in the early 1980s as a response to the deterioration of organizations and leadership at the rural grassroots (Manion 1996). The existing literature examines long-standing existence of corrupt officials in rural China, the establishment of village-level direct elections, motivations of authorities in promoting democratic participation, and economic and social outcomes of electing rural leaders. These studies suffer from several problems. First, studies focusing on turnout in China are few, and we lack systematic research on Chinese voters' incentives to vote. Further, some researchers raise hypotheses on how corruption influences turnout in

China, but their inferences are based on qualitative observations, and should be further tested by empirical analysis. While several researchers discuss the impact of corruption on turnout in China, their focus is the local congress elections, which has little impact on voter livelihood. Other issues exist as well: datasets are now outdated; results are inconsistent with each other; moreover, many studies use anti-corruption sentiments as the independent variable, which is not a proxy for corruption.

To demonstrate how this paper addresses the gaps in previous research, the two following sections review the literature about corruption, voter turnout, and rural elections in China. Sections 2.1 to 2.3 analyze the hypotheses and cross-national implications of distrust, trade, and removal theories about the impact of corruption on voter turnout. Section 3 discusses village elections in China, covering both the general literature on these elections and arguments in the literature about the relationship between corruption and voter participation.

2.1 The Distrust Theory: More Corruption, Less Trust

The first and most straightforward theory about corruption and voting posits that individuals who perceive higher levels of corruption tend not to vote in elections, due to a lack of trust. The general hypothesis is that awareness of bribes has more devastating effects than the act of corruption itself: it fosters institutional instability and the deterioration of relationships among individuals, institutions, and states - and thus generates a “culture of distrust” towards some institutions (Melgar et al. 2010). Those

who perceive more corruption have been found to have lower levels of regime support and trust in government; regime support and trust in government have, in turn, been linked to the propensity to vote (Birch 2010). Those who perceive more corruption may not vote, even against the incumbent,¹ because they lack confidence in the outcome of elections organized by the regime. They also believe their vote does not affect the result: “pre-determined” candidates will definitely win.

Such an argument seems intuitive. It accords with the observation that individuals who are disappointed with electoral institutions or even the whole political system tend not to vote. Several works provide comparative evidence to support this theory. Bowler and Karp (2004) analyze data from the United States in 1992 and the United Kingdom in 2001 and find that scandals involving legislators can have a negative influence on constituent attitudes toward institutions and the political process. Seligson (2002) uses national sample survey data from four Latin American countries in 1998 and 1999 to test the effect of experienced corruption on beliefs in the legitimacy of the political system. He finds that, independent of socioeconomic, demographic, and partisan identification, exposure to corruption erodes confidence in the political system and reduces interpersonal trust. Although these results are not directly linked with turnout, they indicate that corruption can undermine trust in electoral institutions and the regime.

¹ Thanks to Xiaoshu Gui for pointing out this issue.

A broader cross-national study is conducted by Sundström and Stockemer (2015), who find that citizen perceptions of corruption make them, in the aggregate, less likely to cast a ballot. They argue this is because corruption reduces the value of the civic duty of voting: it can spur distrust of elected leaders and generate feelings of resignation from having corrupt leaders, whatever the outcome of the election. However, Sundström and Stockemer analyze data aggregated at the regional data in Europe, instead of individual data, which makes their conclusions less robust: many factors, like trust in regimes and internal efficacy, are not measurable or manipulable at this level.

The more serious problem is that these papers fail to provide empirical evidence on distrust as the mechanism that bridges corruption and lowers turnout. They are testing either corruption perceptions or political trust, but not both.

Therefore, other researchers have worked to directly link the three variables. Larmer and Fraser (2007), for instance, study Zambia's 2006 election to examine the impact of corruption on trust and voter choices. Michael Sata's Patriotic Front (PF) attacked the president and his party for their supposedly corrupt relationship with foreign investors (mainly from China). This viewpoint resonated with urban Zambians, already angered by the negative impact of economic liberalization. The opposition successfully exerted an effect on Zambia's politics: Sata got 29 percent of the presidential vote, a considerable increase from the 3 percent share in 2001. PF won every urban parliamentary seat in the capital Lusaka and the politically crucial Copperbelt region,

rising from a small new party to the second biggest one in the Congress. This case study illustrates that a higher level of corruption can be associated with lower trust in government and less support, and the opposition may seize influence through this decreased trust. However, whether turnout is impacted still needs further examination.

Some other papers reveal a more complicated relationship. Anderson and Tverdova (2003) demonstrate with analysis of a 1996 survey data in 16 mature and newly established democracies² that citizens in countries with higher levels of corruption express more negative evaluations of the performance of the political system and exhibit lower levels of trust in civil servants. However, the adverse effect of corruption on assessments of the political system is not prominent among supporters of the incumbent authorities. In other words, while corruption is a powerful determinant of turnout across widely varying political, cultural, and economic contexts, it does not uniformly diminish support for political institutions across all segments of the electorate; for supporters of the incumbent, the negative effect of lower trust may be offset.

This subsection has reviewed a few studies on corruption's impact on distrust toward the government and the political system. Only two studies work on the relationship between corruption and voting (Larmer and Fraser 2007; Sundström and

² The countries are Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, Slovenia, Sweden, and the United States.

Stockemer 2015), and their empirics are not robust. Other researchers have illustrated the non-effect of distrust, as shown in Anderson and Tverdova (2003). The lack of strong support for the distrust theory here generated a second theory - voters trade ballots for benefits.

2.2 The Trade Theory: Supporting Corrupt Candidates for Benefits

The second theory, which can be referred to as a “trade theory,” claims that a higher level of corruption may promote the level of voter turnout. Proponents of this theory focus on the expected economic benefits, instead of the trust in regimes and elections, linked with casting ballots for corrupt officials, and they analyze the choices of both the candidates and the voters.

On the one hand, it is reasonable to conclude that officials have the motivation to exchange economic benefits (public funding, job opportunities, or even money) for ballots, as long as it maximizes their economic and political outcomes. Escaleras et al. (2012) argue that corruption rents increase the value of holding public office and, hence, elicit more considerable demand-side effort in building winning coalitions. Analyzing a pooled time-series dataset of the U.S. public officials convicted of misusing their offices between 1979 and 2005, they find, after controlling for other influential factors, that governmental corruption raises voter turnout rates in gubernatorial elections. Callen and Long (2015) find considerable evidence of aggregation fraud in favor of connected candidates and that the announcement of a new monitoring technology reduced theft of

election materials by about 60 percent and vote counts for connected candidates by about 25 percent in Afghanistan. Such empirical evidence, consequently, shows that candidates have the incentive to “buy” votes with the economic resources so that they can gain more benefits after being elected.

On the other hand, voters may also have the motivation to obtain benefits from elections, and these exchanges may also take place in advanced democracies. For example, Rundquist et al. (1977) provide one of the seminal studies of the trade theory. By providing undergraduate experiment participants with corruption messages and other policy information about candidates, they observe that information about the candidates does make a difference in the probability of remaining with the corrupt candidate.

For instance, subjects who received information on the candidates’ Vietnam War platform had a 44 percent probability of voting for the corrupt candidate, whereas subjects who received no information had a zero probability of voting for the corrupt candidate. Although no one would campaign just as a corrupt candidate, this contrast indicates that citizens can tolerate corruption to a great extent if the candidates favor policies that fit the voters’ demands. Partisanship is also a significant determinant of voters’ support for corrupt officials in Rundquist et al. (1977), and such results fit with Karp and Banducci (2008)’s point that voters who have stronger partisan preferences tend to possess enhanced political efficacy and increased voter participation. Since

tolerance of bribes is also a form of corruption, this considerable difference indicates that individuals, even if they are aware of credible corruption news about their candidates, tend to vote for them in exchange for policies they prefer.

In addition to the U.S. case, it is not surprising to expect that when the supervision is weak and when the “corruption culture” is widely accepted, the trade theory is more likely to hold. Pereira and Melo (2015), as an example, analyze a dataset on mayoral elections (2000 and 2004) in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco, and they argue that although corruption decreases the probability of incumbent reelection, incumbents' performance in delivering public goods mitigates the reputational losses. Similarly, Manzetti and Wilson (2007) find that people in countries where government institutions are weak and patron-client relationships strong are more likely to support a corrupt leader from whom they expect to receive tangible benefits. Thus, it shows that as long as corrupt leaders can satisfy their clientelist networks by manipulating government resources, they are likely to retain political support.

Nevertheless, although Manzetti and Wilson make plausible arguments, their analysis suffers from several problems: first, satisfaction toward government does not equal voting for candidates; the former is much broader than the single “to vote or not to vote” problem. Second, the “economic satisfaction” is far from the pork voters expect from participation: it is likely that incorrupt leaders with effective economic policies also receive praise on this dimension. Controlling for the economic performance (public

expenditure, for example) of the incumbent officials and the individual-level demographic variables would help check the robustness of results, but Manzetti and Wilson fail to do so.

Lastly, a theoretical question arises: what if the corrupt incumbent cannot satisfy voters' needs? Will citizens vote him or her out, or will they just be absent from the elections? This discussion leads to the third hypothesis regarding corruption and turnout: the removal theory.

2.3 The Removal Theory: Voting Against Corruption

The removal theory, as Besley and Smart (2007) put it, means that voters will discipline candidates who may act against the public interest and will vote those politicians who are most likely to act in citizens' interests. The expectation that competitive electoral politics can and should restrain corruption is a common notion, and there are plenty of cases in which voters ousted corrupt officials and even punished their parties as well (Johnston, 2013). For instance, in the United States, Richard Nixon's Republican Party took a massive hit in the Congressional elections of 1974. In Italy, voters demolished the entire party system in 1993 in the wake of the Tangentopoli scandals. Moreover, Mexican voters turned their backs on the legendary PRI in 2000; and the UK's parliamentary expenses scandal cost some MPs their seats in 2010 (Johnston, 2013).

Whether and how voters remove certain corrupt officials, however, is much more complicated than researchers' expectations. Akarca and Tansel (2016) conduct a case study of Turkey and they find that the corruption and incompetence, related to the relief efforts of the 1999 earthquake, tainted all established parties, and provided the spark that caused the structural break in the political system. However, when casting their ballots in 2002, Turkish voters seem to have taken into account the performance of all parties that have contributed to the magnification of the earthquake disasters. Furthermore, the voters appear to have allocated the blame rationally, taking into consideration the division of labor in the central government, and the relative influences the parties had on local administrations. These findings demonstrate a comprehensive mechanism through which voters decide on the removal of corrupt candidates.

This decision process is further complicated by its possible interactions with electoral systems. Myerson (1993) develops a formal model to predict the relative effectiveness of different electoral institutions for reducing government corruption. He shows that approval voting and proportional representation are fully effective: all equilibria exclude corrupt parties from legislative seats. Plurality voting is partly practical, which means that there always exist some equilibria that eliminate corruption. Borda voting is ineffective because, for some situations, no equilibria can guarantee the exclusion of corrupt parties. No empirical evidence, however, is provided to examine these interactions.

In sum, as is noted by Argersinger (1985), corruption is always playing a complex but significant role in elections - both in the Gilded Age and in current times. That is why three different hypotheses have emerged to explain the possible correlation of corruption and voter turnout. The removal theory, in general, receives relatively less attention in previous literature, for elections in democracies are naturally treated as a tool to clean out the corrupt officials. However, as indicated in Section 2.2, the trade theory also applies to democracies, which counters some researchers' confidence in elections. Further, this removal theory is perhaps not reasonable in non-democratic settings: recent studies have pointed out that elections in authoritarian countries may be semi-competitive, and may serve the goal of cooperation and cooptation (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006) or monitoring and information-gathering (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, 2018) instead of democratic government transitions. In this case, elections in these regimes tend to be inherently corruptive, and the conclusions about corruption and turnout in democratic nations may not be generalizable for such institutions.

Therefore, whether the elections in dictatorship serve to exclude corrupt officials is in doubt. With the fact that the polls of authoritarian and post-communist regimes receive little attention, more research should be conducted to improve the understanding of determinants of democratic participation in autocracies, and to test the relationship between corruption awareness and election participation in non-democratic settings. The elections of the village committee in China offer a great platform to

examine the three arguments in the context of a dictatorship, which runs polls that make sense in real-life politics. It will also provide insights into the democratization of (rural) China, which has appealed to researchers since the 1980s.

3. Corruption and Turnout in Chinese Rural Elections

Direct elections in villages have been introduced to local China since the early 1980s and were formalized as an institution by law. Currently, there are mainly two types of direct elections in China: the election of deputies of the local (village-level or community-level) people's congress, and the elections of village heads and village committees. The former one is "by no means fully competitive and democratic" (Chen and Zhong, 2002), but the latter one is more significant in Chinese politics since the officials elected by the rural residents have real power in executing policies and exerting political and economic influence on residents. Moreover, in 2001, President Jiang Zemin announced that villagers' self-government must not be extended to higher levels. Since then, electoral experimentation was formally forbidden in a nationwide moratorium (Stromseth et al., 2017), and village-level elections seem to become the "lighthouse" of Chinese democratic transformations.

Previous research has quite high expectations of the village-level elections in China. Epstein (1997) points out that elected cadres in villages may contribute to some of China's economic and social goals, namely facilitating the implementation of central policies, improving the local economy, and maintaining stability. In addition to being seen as serving these practical ends, democratic elections are having an ideological impact on Chinese villages as well. Village elections can be seen as a democratic

experiment, a training program for 900 million Chinese villagers in democracy, transparent governance, and political accountability.

O'Brien and Han (2009) find that although the exercise of power requires more grassroots participation and is overall not democratic, the procedural components of these village-level elections are relatively complete, and voter turnout is generally high, in some areas reportedly over 90 percent. Brandt and Turner (2007) even argue that very poorly conducted elections can still have significant incentive effects. That is, even corruptible elections provide leaders with strong incentives to act in the interests of their constituents. Therefore, a higher quality of the votes for village heads may promote the democratic transformation and reforms in China.

However, rural elections have failed to trigger such political development in China. One reason, I argue, is that corruption is always a severe problem in local-level elections, even from Mao's time. Burns (1978) examines the election of production team cadres from 1958 to 1974 and finds that team members are not so concerned with corruption and may encourage it by, for example, not electing a storekeeper who refuses to record more work points for a day's pesticides spraying than the team leader authorized. Petty corruption will not preclude the team cadre from continuing in office: a team cashier was dismissed for fraud in 1964, but from 1968-70 was elected team political officer and team leader from 1970-74. Personal linkage with the influential figures has a somewhat more substantial impact in this stage of Chinese politics.

Although Zhang et al. (2012) argues that there is no evidence that households earn significant rents from having a family member who is a village cadre, their research does not consider the benefits from corruption and bribes, and it is, in fact, one of the most critical returns for the position of village officials.

With the existence of corruption in rural elections, different researchers offer various ideas about the theory that best explains the linkage of corruption and voter turnout. The theory that was advanced earliest is the “removal” one. Shi (1999a) is one of the first researchers to concentrate on the village committee elections in China. He focuses on the role of powerful leadership and well-established institutions on successful democratic reforms in authoritarian regimes like China. Another article by Shi further investigates the determinants for voters’ participation. He finds that those with more resources tend to vote in pursuit of their political interests. These wealthy individuals have more contact with officials, and they may work to guard their property against the embezzlement of corrupt officials. Therefore, he argues that those who are aware of official corruption and hence want to see corrupt officials punished tend to vote in semi-competitive elections (Shi, 1999b).

Many early researchers share such a positive view. Li (2003) claims that resourceful villagers are quick to treat voting as a way to dislodge corrupt, partial, and incompetent cadres. He points out that some villagers have successfully used the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees to demand elections for this purpose (O'Brien

and Li, 1996). Su et al. (2011) find that electoral procedures have played a crucial role in signaling the democratic intent of local governments. Villagers were more responsive to meaningful elections with higher-quality electoral procedures. Besides, competitive politics has reactivated traditional social ties and networks in village lives, which have mobilized villagers to voting stations. Additionally, O'Brien (2001) also says that the villagers' committee elections heightened cadre responsiveness and drew rural residents into the local polity. At the same time, some rural people are even starting to challenge improper elections using the language of rights, forcing open blocked channels of participation and struggling to make still-disputed rights real.

However, as time goes by, the removal theory seems not applicable to Chinese politics. Therefore, supporters of the other two theories have emerged. The proposers of the trade theory made their points also at an early stage. Shen (1998) offers one of the earliest records of trade theory. He finds that some places deliberately encouraged the rich and the competent to join the party and select the entrepreneurial party branch secretary, while some private entrepreneurs also developed a strong sense of political participation: they were no longer satisfied with economic success but were actively seeking a "boss secretary" position. Thus, they bring their corrupt business strategies to politics, and the existence of bribes (commonly money and gifts) in village-level and even township or county elections is no longer surprising news.

Researchers also model this process. As is illustrated by Takeuchi (2013), the local electoral competition motivates candidates to buy votes rather than to mobilize voters in China's rural elections. Consequently, corruption becomes one of the most significant determinants of voter's behavior in such elections for village heads, and such correlation corresponds to the real-life phenomenon that bribes, like vote-buying, are observed during village-level elections (Takeuchi, 2013). This situation accords with Levy and Gao (2007)'s summary that, while the rich (mainly the bosses coming from the villages) are highly involved in the village-level elections in Hu Jintao's time, especially in Zhejiang Province, their money is involving into village politics as well. Since they tend to buy votes (and they have the resources to do so), the corruption in elections is further strengthened in many rich-led villages.

Further, some scholars combine "distrust" with "removal" hypotheses. For example, Li (2011) argues that individuals who distrust government leaders' commitment to the public interest have both a stronger demand for a leadership change and a stronger preference for popular elections. He claims that distrust in government leaders may have enhanced the need for leadership change, which in turn may have reinforced the preference for elections. Besides, distrust in incumbent leaders has, in effect, induced demand for systemic changes, as introducing a popular vote for government leaders would require a significant constitutional amendment.

Lastly, Chen and Zhong (2002) predict a new result: they demonstrate a non-effect of anti-corruption sentiment on voting. They find that the desire to punish or remove corrupt officials from their current positions of leadership does not necessarily relate to voting behavior in local people's congress elections in their empirical studies. There are three possible explanations for the insignificant influence of corruption awareness on participation in voting: first, elected candidates do not possess the power to counter the corrupt officials because corruption is widespread in local politics. Thus those who want to reduce corruption have weak incentives to vote. Second, elections are not the conventional way that citizens identify and punish corruption. Third, the nomination process has been primarily controlled by the township government and village party committees, while *hai xuan* (open and free nominations of candidates) was only experimented with in some villages (Zhong and Chen, 2002). In this case, villagers can hardly pick the candidates they want before elections are held. They sometimes can just choose from two corrupt candidates, rather than voting for a clean official to counter a corrupt one.

However, problems in research designs challenge the argument these researchers make about corruption perception and voter turnout. First, the datasets are outmoded, at least 20 years old today. Their conclusions, thus, generally reflect the conditions when the democratic reforms were not fully stabilized. Second, the empirical results concentrate on the elections for deputies of the people's congress, who possess weak

powers in checks and balances and exert little influence on residents' political and economic life. On the contrary, with the introduction of elected village heads, rural residents have the power to choose their leaders, and they are more significant figures for the study of elections and corruption in Chinese politics.

Third, researchers like Chen and Zhong (2002) do not rule out the possibility that a higher level of corruption awareness may decrease people's voting participation since their focus is anti-corruption campaigns, not corruption itself. Finally, "corruption" consists of perceptions, previous experiences, and current engagement. It is likely that more than one theory holds for the linkage between corruption and turnout, while different dimensions of corruption fit different theories summarized in Sections 2.1 to 2.3.

Therefore, the effect of corruption on voters' participation in China is one of the problems that have not been fully solved by previous researchers. Furthermore, in political practices, China is trying to adopt new political reforms: for instance, allowing direct elections of township heads. The village-level and township-level elections have many differences: in prevalence, in voters' motivation, in the mobilization abilities, and of course, in the impact of corruption on voting choices. Pitifully, the empirical studies regarding participation in elections for town heads are not adequate, and it is helpful to incorporate this phenomenon into the research of Chinese voter behaviors.

Finally, some researchers may claim that a reversed causality problem will challenge the discussion of corruption impacting voting behavior.³ For instance, Manion (2006) argues that the democratic transitions in Chinese villages may promote citizens' trust (i.e., a lower level of corruption perception). Martinez-Bravo et al. (2011) also illustrate with survey data that the introduction of elections affected policy outcomes in a way that is consistent with the predicted effects of increased local leader accountability. In other words, they provide insights into the possible influence a democratic reform would have on citizens' awareness of corruption, which seems to be a different causal direction with our study.

However, Manion conducted her survey in 1990 and 1996, when the law on jiceng zizhi (i.e., local-level self-governance) has just been established. Martinez-Bravo and his co-authors utilize village-level data from a panel of 217 villages for the years 1980-2005, when the electoral reforms are most active. In this case, their studies focus on ongoing democratic reforms. However, after these policies turn into stable institutions, the voting system faces little change, and what happens in Chinese reality is that corrupt elections and officials erode trust in the existing institutions, and finally causing a low turnout. Thus, the primary causality concern should also switch from Manion's and Martinez-Bravo's questions to what the paper discusses in this literature review: is

³ Thanks to Daniel Stegmüller for pointing out this issue.

corruption a determinant of voting behaviors in rural China? This problem is more meaningful for current Chinese politics.

One last thing to note is that, although some of the studies in this section have limitations, they provide insights into other essential determinants for voting behavior in regimes like China. Chen and Zhong (2002), based on Shi (1999b), claims that people with stronger democratic orientation and a keener sense of internal efficacy are less likely to vote in semi-competitive elections. Those who are identified with the regime and have affective attachments to the political authority are more likely to vote. Callahan (2005) discusses the importance of social capital (especially social trust) in democratic reforms in authoritarian countries like Thailand. Some of these factors, which are exogenous to the paper's argument, should be re-examined in this study.

4. Research Question and Hypotheses

As discussed in Sections 2 and 3, we lack empirical evidence about which theory can best explain how corruption impacts voting in China. With several decades' focus on village-level elections, there are still debates about whether some variables are significant determinants of turnout. This paper tests the explanatory power of distrust, trade, and removal theories for the impact of corruption on village-level turnout in China. Different dimensions of corruption may exert different influences, so the paper evaluates corruption from three perspectives: perceptions of local corruption, experienced corruption, and corrupt activities in elections.

First, corrupt electoral activities may directly promote turnout by directly exchanging money for ballots. This conforms with observations in Chinese village elections (Shen 1998; Levy and Gao 2007; Takeuchi 2013). This is expressed as hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1, trade theory: Other things equal, electoral corrupt benefits will increase an individual's propensity to vote.

Second, although corrupt electoral exchanges may increase voter turnout in the short run, they confirm long-standing corruption perceptions and experiences of corruption. These two dimensions of corruption will undermine people's trust in the regime and capacity for implementing contested elections. This will, in turn, reduce willingness to vote, a theory expressed in hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2, distrust in the regime: A higher level of corruption perceptions or corruption experience decreases voter turnout by weakening beliefs in the integrity of the electoral process.

Finally, as indicated by previous research, rural elections in China were designed to remove corrupt and incompetent officials. The removal theory argues that corruption perceptions or experience triggers a higher level of turnout by increasing interest in voting for non-corrupt officials, as expressed in hypothesis 2.

Because elections do not eliminate corruption, and cases of fraudulently elected officials are more commonly reported, I expect evidence from village elections in China will not support the removal theory. I expect to find support for hypotheses 1 and 2, however.

Hypothesis 3, removal theory: Citizens with higher corruption perception or more experienced corruption are more likely to vote due to the desire to remove corrupt officials.

5. Datasets and Methods

I analyze data from China Survey 2008.⁴ This survey was implemented by the Research Center for Contemporary China of Peking University. It was completed in April through June of 2008, based on a stratified multi-stage probability sample of all Chinese adults.⁵ The survey consists of about 80-minute face-to-face interviews of 3989 Chinese citizens. Respondents are a random sample from the population of villagers at each unit and participated in the surveys with little supervision from officials. These factors guarantee strict control of research quality. This survey provides one of the most representative datasets in China regarding ordinary rural residents' political tendencies and actions.

As for the content, the data covers the political attitudes, political activities, and personal information of residents. One section of the questionnaire focuses on corruption perceptions, previous corruption experiences, and corrupt electoral activities. Some other questions involve political values and voting behaviors in village-level elections. Therefore, the dataset includes the variables that are necessary for the analysis of corruption and turnout in rural China. Since the China Survey 2008 consists of a

⁴ The China Survey is a project of the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University, in collaboration with the Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Peking University.

⁵ The researchers first devised county units in China into seven geographical regions, then split counties them between an urban and a rural stratum based on the share of rural residents. A total of 73 counties were selected according to the principle of probability proportional to measure of population size (PPS). They picked two townships or urban street committees for each county. Finally, for each township, they utilized the GPS/GIS method to enumerate the final spatial units (square seconds for each county), and interview all residents (one per household) of each spatial unit.

nationally representative sample, the results we infer from the dataset are generalizable to China overall.

I combine several estimation strategies. First, I estimate the effect of corruption in hierarchical generalized linear models (HGLMs). The dataset stratifies the respondents into four levels: province, county, township, and half-square minutes (HSMs). Since HSMs can be treated as a proxy of villages,⁶ I aggregate individual-level variables to reflect how variation of local conditions may influence residents' activities and attitudes. In the HGLMs, both the intercept and the coefficients of corruption variables can change across HSMs, which reflects the reality that the marginal effect of corruption and the baseline turnouts vary across villages. Further, as binary and ordinal variables (e.g., turnout and political attitudes) may serve as dependent variables, I use the "glmer" package in R, which combines generalized linear models and hierarchical estimates.

Second, I utilize mediation analysis to determine the indirect effects of corruption on turnout. Here the "mediation" package in R works. A mediation impact does not guarantee a causal effect. However, previous theories have illustrated the intermediary impacts of variables like distrust by qualitative evidence. Thus, the mediation analysis here, if a significant effect is found, empirically demonstrates the linkage between corruption, the mediator, and voter turnout. Section 7 also addresses the problem by evaluating how correlations between confounders and variables

⁶ I would thank Pierre Landry for figuring this proximity out.

influence the significance of mediation effects. This check can illustrate the robustness of results.

6. Variables

6.1 *Dependent Variable: Voting Behavior*

The dependent variable is the residents' participation in village-level voting, which is a 0-1 dummy. I first exclude the city residents, who have no chance of voting in rural elections. Second, the variable is always 0 if no election is held in the respondents' village. So this analysis keeps only interviewees who have experienced an election within the past five years.

6.2 *Independent Variables: Perceptions, Experience, and Electoral Activities of Corruption*

The three independent variables of theoretical interest measure are presented in Table 1.⁷

Table 1: Independent Variables

Independent Variables	Category	Explanations
Corruption Perception	Ordinal (1 for lowest, 4 for highest)	Respondents' perceptions of local officials' corruption levels.
Experienced Corruption	Ordinal (1 for lowest, 3 for highest)	Whether the respondent or his/her family members and close friends have witnessed or experienced cadre corruption. A value of 1 indicates none of them witnessed or experienced such corruption cases; 2 means either the respondent or his/her relatives and friends have done so; 3 means both of them have experienced or witnessed corruption.
Persuasion to Vote	Ordinal (1 for lowest, 3 for highest)	Whether, in elections, any other people tried to persuade the respondent to vote. If no persuasion took place, coded as 1; if there is persuasion to vote, but the vote is not targeted at any candidates, the variable will be coded as 2. Finally, if there is a persuasion to vote for a specific candidate, coded as 3.

⁷ The correlation coefficients of the three independent variables are: 0.1517 (perception and electoral), 0.27844 (perception and experience), and 0.09204 (experience and electoral). Therefore, although all these variables are significantly correlated, they capture various dimensions of corruption, and the effects would vary across aspects of corruption.

Variables 1 and 2 reflect the perceptions and previous experience of corruption. Some may question that variable 3, “persuasion,” does not indicate electoral corruption: it may reflect political mobilization instead. However, as is discussed in Sections 2 to 4, in recent Chinese village elections, ordinary citizens have weak incentives for voting, not to mention encouraging others to participate in elections. Only candidates and officials (especially those who run for elections) would mobilize voters to win support. During this process, exchanges of money for votes often take place (Zhang, 1998). Therefore, in this paper, persuasion to vote (especially for a specific candidate) can serve as a proxy for electoral corruption in Chinese village elections.

6.3 Control Variables: Political Attitudes and Demographics

Based on previous literature, both political attitudes and demographic features are likely to influence the voting behavior of citizens in China. Since a range of questions is covered in the survey, the paper controls them in the full-variable models to confirm the robustness of corruption’s impacts. The estimation of coefficients for both political attitudes and demographic variables helps establish whether their influence on rural citizens’ voting is consistent with previous works. Note that political attitudes serve as both control variables and mediators between corruption and voter turnout, with the latter relationship tested in Section 7.

For political attitudes, I consider political efficacy, support for the regime, accountability of elections, interest in village-level elections, and concern for the democratic development of the whole country. They reflect individual-level attitudes toward both the elections and the whole party-state regime. As for demographic variables, I include gender, party affiliation, education level, age, and age squared. These variables cover major determinants for election participation in rural China and contribute to a comparison of results with Shi (1999b) and Chen and Zhong (2002). Some of these variables may be closely related to the independent variable,⁸ but the VIF results show that these correlations are not severely impacting the regression results. Besides, excluding one or two of these control variables does not impact the significance and values of the coefficients, and therefore the paper presents the results of controlling all of these variables.

Here we present Table 2, summarizes the basic statistics (e.g., number of observations, mean, median, and standard deviation) for all the variables utilized in this paper. Two issues should be noted: first, the overall turnout is about 76 percent for village-level elections. The number is high, but a standard deviation of 0.42 indicates a high variation of turnout. Second, the average values of corruption perception, corruption experience, and electoral corruption are 2.77 (out of 4), 1.28 (out of 3), and

⁸ I am grateful to Daniel Stegmueller and Christopher Johnston for pointing out this question.

1.26 (out of 3). In this case, people generally have a middle-level perceived corruption of officials, while the actual corruption cases are not common.

Table 2: Summary Statistics

	n	mean	sd	median	min	max	skew	kurtosis	se
Vote	2256	0.76	0.42	1	0	1	-1.24	-0.45	0.01
Corruption Perception	1833	2.77	0.85	3	1	4	-0.04	-0.85	0.02
Corruption Experience	1857	1.28	0.64	1	1	3	2.03	2.52	0.01
Electoral Corruption	2139	1.26	0.58	1	1	3	2.11	3.16	0.01
Interest in Elections	2217	2.49	0.94	3	1	4	-0.08	-0.91	0.02
Concern for Democracy	1577	3.92	2.69	4	0	10	0.32	-0.65	0.07
Support for Regime	1989	2.87	1.30	2	1	5	0.23	-1.24	0.03
Political Efficacy	1523	18.94	4.80	19	7	34	-0.08	-0.04	0.12
Accountable Elections	2017	2.63	0.84	3	1	4	-0.36	-0.44	0.02
Age	2274	47.27	14.93	46	18	92	0.23	-0.51	0.31
Gender	2274	0.49	0.50	0	0	1	0.02	-2.00	0.01
Education	2274	5.53	4.05	6	0	18	0.13	-0.69	0.09
CPC Membership	2273	0.07	0.26	0	0	1	3.24	8.52	0.01

7. Results

Below, I present the main estimation results. The first subsection presents the HGLM regression tables of three independent variables separately. The second subsection presents the mediation analysis to see how corruption variables affect turnout directly or indirectly. The last part provides some robustness checks on the empirical results.

7.1 Hierarchical Generalized Linear Models

In Tables 3 to 5, I use HGLMs⁹ to estimate how the three variables of corruption impact voter turnout separately. Column 1 presents a bivariate regression; column 2 puts in the demographic variables for each respondent, while column 3 incorporates both the corruption variable and all the controls. In Table 3, there is also a column 4 that includes all control variables but not the independent variables. This model serves as a reference for all other HGLMs.

Three main results are presented in these tables. First, in Tables 3 and 4, both the corruption perception and experience with corruption exert negative impacts on turnout. These coefficients indicate that a higher estimation of local corruption undermines voters' willingness to cast the ballot. However, these impacts turn insignificant when political attitudes are included in the models. Some may argue that it

⁹ Note that in these regressions, I use a probit model so that mediation analysis could be implemented in Section 7.2.

is the political value (interest in elections, for instance), not corruption perceptions or experience, that influences turnout. However, the paper utilizes an exact estimation of corruption itself, with a weak correlation with other political phenomena. Therefore, in columns 1 and 2, significant coefficients of corruption perceptions or corruption experience indicate that corruption itself does have some impacts on turnout. These effects, however, are exerted through some mechanisms measured by the control variables, and thus the multivariate regressions yield insignificant coefficients. In this case, a mediated effect of corruption is expected.

Second, in Tables 3 to 5, only two political attitudes have significant effects on corruption: the concern for the democratic situation of the country and the interest in elections. The former reflects whether the citizens trust the regime for holding democratic institutions, while the latter, as is discussed in Sections 2 to 4, directly relates to the removal theory. In these tables, a greater concern for democracy undermines turnout across all models, while a lower interest in elections decreases turnout as well. Since these two variables' impacts change after corruption variables are included, concern for democracy and interest in elections may serve as intermediary factors between corruption and turnout. I test the possible mediation in Section 7.2.

Third, in Table 5, electoral corruption exerts a very robust impact on turnout, even when control variables are included. Those who are persuaded to vote have a much higher probability of voting, and the influence is robust. Therefore, the theory of

directly buying votes is likely to hold with such a strong impact of electoral corruption.

To figure out whether a mediation effect exists, however, I also test whether other political attitudes serve as a mediator for electoral corruption on voter participation.

Table 3: Corruption Perception on Turnout

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Vote in Village-level Elections			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Corruption Perception	-0.108** (0.049)	-0.124** (0.050)	-0.048 (0.080)	
Age		0.104*** (0.013)	0.098*** (0.019)	0.106*** (0.018)
Age (Squared)		-0.001*** (0.0001)	-0.001*** (0.0002)	-0.001*** (0.0002)
Gender		0.213*** (0.078)	-0.007 (0.107)	-0.004 (0.104)
Education		0.017 (0.011)	0.019 (0.015)	0.020 (0.014)
CPC Membership		0.121 (0.149)	-0.035 (0.187)	-0.062 (0.185)
Concern for Democracy			-0.034* (0.020)	-0.039** (0.020)
Regime Support			-0.001 (0.042)	0.002 (0.041)
Political Efficacy			-0.001 (0.012)	-0.002 (0.012)
Interest in Elections			0.346*** (0.065)	0.377*** (0.063)
Accountable Elections			0.040 (0.070)	0.060 (0.066)
Constant	1.145*** (0.153)	-1.594*** (0.345)	-2.390*** (0.630)	-2.829*** (0.564)
Observations	1,819	1,818	1,030	1,128
Log Likelihood	-924.090	-881.633	-473.085	-515.799
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,858.181	1,783.266	976.169	1,055.597
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	1,885.711	1,838.321	1,050.229	1,115.936

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4: Corruption Experience on Turnout

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Vote in Village-level Elections		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Corruption Experience	-0.122** (0.059)	-0.118** (0.060)	0.003 (0.081)
Age		0.104*** (0.013)	0.097*** (0.020)
Age (Squared)		-0.001*** (0.0001)	-0.001*** (0.0002)
Gender		0.122 (0.084)	-0.126 (0.116)
Education		0.021* (0.012)	0.021 (0.016)
CPC Membership		0.071 (0.157)	-0.060 (0.197)
Concern for Democracy			-0.044** (0.022)
Regime Support			-0.006 (0.045)
Political Efficacy			-0.0005 (0.013)
Interest in Elections			0.386*** (0.070)
Accountable Elections			0.091 (0.072)
Constant	1.036*** (0.097)	-1.717*** (0.348)	-2.568*** (0.627)
Observations	1,578	1,577	919
Log Likelihood	-788.221	-755.344	-411.712
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,586.442	1,530.689	853.424
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	1,613.262	1,584.321	925.773

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5: Electoral Corruption on Turnout

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Vote in Village-level Elections		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Electoral Corruption	0.538*** (0.091)	0.522*** (0.090)	0.668*** (0.128)
Age		0.103*** (0.014)	0.092*** (0.020)
Age (Squared)		-0.001*** (0.0001)	-0.001*** (0.0002)
Gender		0.231*** (0.083)	0.036 (0.111)
Education		0.022* (0.012)	0.026* (0.015)
CPC Membership		0.159 (0.159)	-0.076 (0.187)
Concern for Democracy			-0.040* (0.021)
Regime Support			0.001 (0.043)
Political Efficacy			-0.005 (0.013)
Interest in Elections			0.366*** (0.068)
Accountable Elections			0.090 (0.072)
Constant	0.270** (0.116)	-2.555*** (0.365)	-3.322*** (0.627)
Observations	1,726	1,726	992
Log Likelihood	-832.978	-794.897	-429.197
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,675.955	1,609.795	888.395
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	1,703.223	1,664.331	961.891

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

7.2 Mediation Analysis

To test whether corruption perception or corruption experience's influence on turnout is mediated by the interest in elections and concern for democracy, I use the "mediate" package in R to examine whether corruption functions in a direct or indirect way. I test whether these two variables mediate the corruption variables' impact and find three out of four models yield a significant average causal mediation effect (ACME). The estimation results are presented through Tables 6 to 9.

Table 6: Corruption Perception on Turnout, Mediated by Concern for Democracy

Quasi-Bayesian Confidence Intervals					
	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value	
ACME (control)	-0.00374	-0.00885	0.00	0.044	*
ACME (treated)	-0.00377	-0.00849	0.00	0.044	*
ADE (control)	-0.00131	-0.02713	0.03	0.868	
ADE (treated)	-0.00133	-0.02729	0.03	0.868	
Total Effect	-0.00507	-0.02903	0.03	0.686	
Prop. Mediated (control)	0.11590	-2.48434	2.40	0.714	
Prop. Mediated (treated)	0.12423	-2.42262	2.35	0.714	
ACME (average)	-0.00375	-0.00874	0.00	0.044	*
ADE (average)	-0.00132	-0.02721	0.03	0.868	
Prop. Mediated (average)	0.12007	-2.44237	2.37	0.714	

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1					
Sample Size Used: 1030					
Simulations: 1000					

Table 7: Corruption Experience on Turnout, Mediated by Concern for Democracy

Quasi-Bayesian Confidence Intervals

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
ACME (control)	-0.00479	-0.01067	0.00	0.018 *
ACME (treated)	-0.00471	-0.01017	0.00	0.018 *
ADE (control)	0.00662	-0.02872	0.05	0.746
ADE (treated)	0.00670	-0.02920	0.05	0.746
Total Effect	0.00191	-0.03335	0.04	0.938
Prop. Mediated (control)	-0.06392	-3.75099	3.67	0.940
Prop. Mediated (treated)	-0.05863	-3.62371	3.61	0.940
ACME (average)	-0.00475	-0.01026	0.00	0.018 *
ADE (average)	0.00666	-0.02896	0.05	0.746
Prop. Mediated (average)	-0.06127	-3.68735	3.64	0.940

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 990

Simulations: 1000

Table 8: Corruption Perception on Turnout, Mediated by Interest in Elections

Quasi-Bayesian Confidence Intervals

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
ACME (control)	-0.009994	-0.017480	0.00	<2e-16 ***
ACME (treated)	-0.010071	-0.017035	0.00	<2e-16 ***
ADE (control)	-0.000684	-0.024333	0.03	0.89
ADE (treated)	-0.000761	-0.025198	0.03	0.89
Total Effect	-0.010755	-0.032005	0.02	0.42
Prop. Mediated (control)	0.461288	-6.518072	6.91	0.42
Prop. Mediated (treated)	0.480214	-6.300734	6.75	0.42
ACME (average)	-0.010033	-0.017297	0.00	<2e-16 ***
ADE (average)	-0.000723	-0.024718	0.03	0.89
Prop. Mediated (average)	0.470751	-6.409403	6.83	0.42

Signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 1030

Simulations: 1000

Table 9: Corruption Experience on Turnout, Mediated by Interest in Elections

Causal Mediation Analysis

Quasi-Bayesian Confidence Intervals

	Estimate	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
ACME (control)	-0.00354	-0.01179	0.00	0.38
ACME (treated)	-0.00349	-0.01179	0.00	0.38
ADE (control)	0.00672	-0.02759	0.04	0.75
ADE (treated)	0.00677	-0.02792	0.04	0.75
Total Effect	0.00323	-0.03236	0.04	0.92
Prop. Mediated (control)	0.02177	-3.42637	4.19	0.94
Prop. Mediated (treated)	0.02076	-3.30072	4.09	0.94
ACME (average)	-0.00352	-0.01171	0.00	0.38
ADE (average)	0.00674	-0.02773	0.04	0.75
Prop. Mediated (average)	0.02127	-3.36141	4.14	0.94

Sample Size Used: 990

Simulations: 1000

One thing to note is that, electoral corruption has no indirect effect on turnout.¹⁰

In other words, corruption in elections directly “buys” votes instead of impacting turnout through other mechanisms. Therefore, the first hypothesis holds: individuals who directly engage in electoral corruption tend to vote as a trade for other benefits.

In Tables 6 and 7, both corruption perceptions and corruption experience exert a significantly negative impact on voter turnout through concern for the country’s democracy, while there is no direct effect detected. Consequently, I argue that corruption decreases turnout through lower trust in the regime, which suggests the second hypothesis, that is, higher corruption perception or corruption experience may

¹⁰ Tables are available upon request.

decrease voter turnout through lower trust in the regime's reliability of holding elections.

In Table 8, corruption perceptions can also lower voter participation through lower interest in elections, which conforms with observations discussed in Sections 2 to 4. This result is counter to the removal theory, since those who want to vote against corrupt officials have a higher interest in elections, which increases turnout as a result. The contradiction between empirical evidence and the removal theory suggests that this theory does not apply to village-level elections in China. This is consistent with my conjecture in Section 4 that the removal theory is wrong for this case.

Finally, in Table 9, corruption experience has no indirect or direct effect if interest in elections serves as a mediator. It mainly indicates that interest in elections is not a suitable intermedator between corruption experience and turnout, but the finding does not necessarily argue against the third hypothesis. As discussed above, the removal theory claims that corruption promotes interest in elections, which leads to a higher turnout. Given that in Table 8, we find an insignificant effect of interest in elections, the results can still be used to counter the removal theory.

7.3 Robustness Checks

In this section, I test the robustness of HGLMs results and mediation effects. First, I find all the regression results are robust to different estimation strategies: pooling OLS, pooling Logistic, and hierarchical Logistic models. Second, I change mediators to

other political attitudes to see if alternative mechanisms mediate corruption's impact on turnout. The results show that none of these political values can serve as a mediator, which means interest in elections and concern for democracy are the only two possible mediators in the models here.

Third, mediation analysis often suffers from the problem of "sequential ignorability." Imai, Keele, and Tingley (2010) argue that this assumption is necessary for treating a mediation as "causal." It consists of two assumptions: (1) the treatment is independent of the potential outcomes and potential mediators, conditional on a set of covariates; and (2) the observed mediator is independent of all potential outcomes given the observed treatment and pretreatment covariates. Since this paper uses an observational dataset, I cannot randomize treatments or mediators to satisfy these two assumptions.

However, the "mediate" package provides a sensitivity analysis of the mediation effect by varying the sensitivity parameter: the correlation between error terms of the mediator and outcome models. I present Figures 1 to 3, all of which show how different mediation effects change across various values of the sensitivity parameter. I find that in Figure 1, when the parameter exceeds about 0.18, the mediation effect turns from negative to 0 or above. Thus, the proposed negative mediation effect is reversed after the correlation between error terms of different models increases to a reasonably large size. In this paper, a correlation of around 0.18 is quite strong, since the correlation between

corruption perception and electoral corruption, two variables that have strong theoretical connections, is 0.1517. Consequently, the conclusion of a mediation effect by interest in elections is relatively plausible given even fairly large departures from the ignorability of the mediator.

In Figures 2 and 3, the turning points of the mediation effects are approximately -0.02 and -0.04, separately. These two correlation coefficients are relatively low, indicating that the mediation effects may be more vulnerable than indicated in Figure 1. In other words, corruption's effects, as mediated by interest in elections and concern for democracy, may suffer from confounders that require further investigation. However, given that corruption levels and political attitudes vary significantly across localities in China, such mediation may be robust in some regions while not in others. Thus, corruption's mediated effect may be still generalizable.

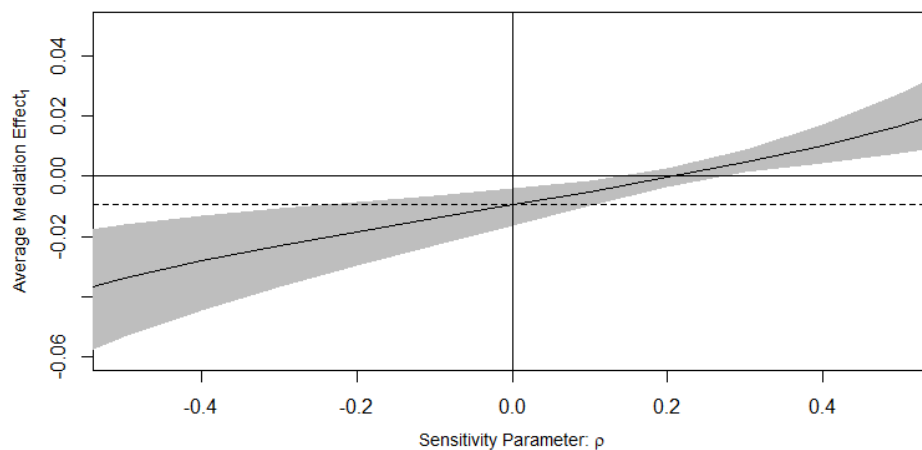


Figure 1: Corrupt Perceptions' Impact Mediated by Interest in Elections

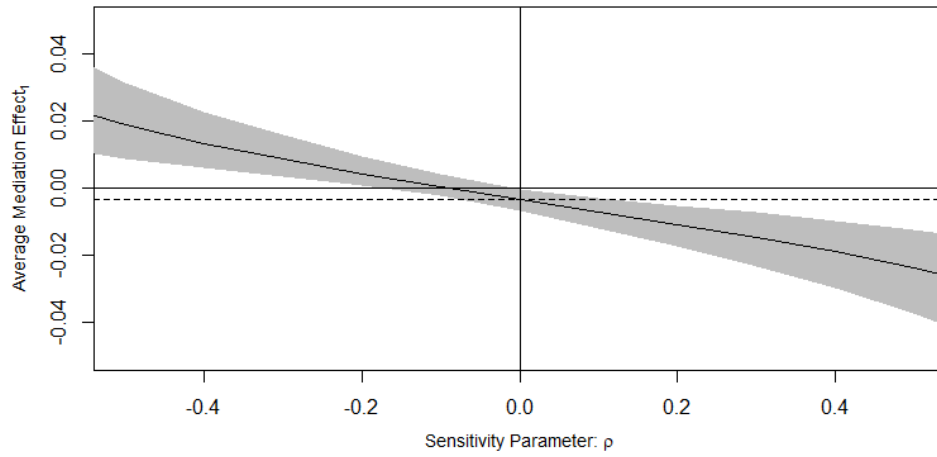


Figure 2: Corrupt Perceptions' Impact Mediated by Concern for Democracy

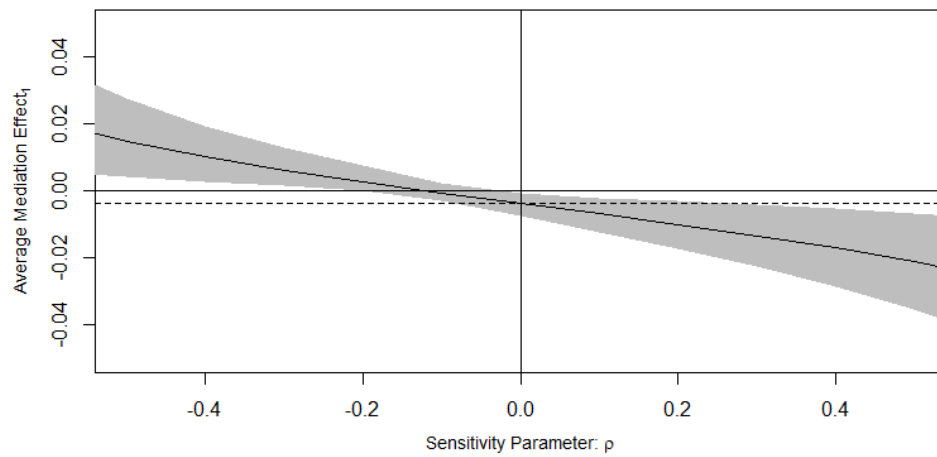


Figure 3: Corrupt Experiences' Impact Mediated by Concern for Democracy

8. Conclusions

Elections play a significant role in authoritarianism regimes, but the determinants of voting behaviors are not thoroughly investigated. Corruption is one factor that may significantly influence participation in elections, but there is no consensus on its actual impact in autocracies. This study focuses on the influence of corruption perceptions, experienced corruption, and electoral corruption on participation in village-level elections in rural China.

Using the China Survey 2008 data, the paper estimates HGLMs and mediation models, and finds that first, corrupt electoral activities may directly “buy” votes, which leads to a higher level of voter turnout in the short term. In the long run, however, a higher corruption perception of village officials and more experience with corruption cases significantly decreases the possibility of residents’ participation in village-level voting. This effect is indirect, mediated by lower trust in the regime and in elections.

Notwithstanding, with empirical evidence on corruption’s dual effect on voter turnout, there are still questions that require further research. First, future research should use China’s ongoing anti-corruption campaign to study how corruption reduction decreases turnout by practically eliminating vote-buying. By a comparison between the empirical results from both this paper and new data – the China Internet Survey 2018 data, for instance – researchers can identify the causal effect of removing corrupt officials on turnout in authoritarian China.

Second, further studies should also supplement quantitative data analysis with in-depth fieldwork. Given that qualitative evidence of corruption and voting is sparse in China, researchers can do fieldwork in rural China to gauge how corruption exerts both direct and indirect impacts on voting. Such a research plan would contribute to testing under different circumstances, which of the three dominant theories best explains corruption's impacts. With a lack of convincing stories of corruption taking place in rural elections in China, we are unaware of when and how distrust is effective when citizens decide to vote. A mixed-method analysis may include interviewing voting or non-voting villagers, learning about the Party branches' influence by surveying election organizers, and observing the existence and impacts of corruption in rural elections. The information from these qualitative studies would, therefore, re-examine the results of empirical studies, and provide insights into the actual interactions of candidates' bribes, the regime's manipulation, and voters' choices.

In addition to elections, examining corruption's impact on petitions and protests also contributes to the study of political participation. This research makes more sense in the Chinese context since corruption is more likely to trigger abnormal channels of interest expression. Future researchers may also generalize the study of corruption's dual effects to other authoritarian regimes and developing democracies. Anti-corruption reforms in Brazil and India, for instance, can provide fertile grounds for testing the arguments of this paper. Since competitive elections are routinely held, evidence from

these states can help build a comparable theory of corruption and participation across countries.

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