

# The Electoral Underpinnings of Corruption in Rich and Poor Democratic Polities<sup>1</sup>

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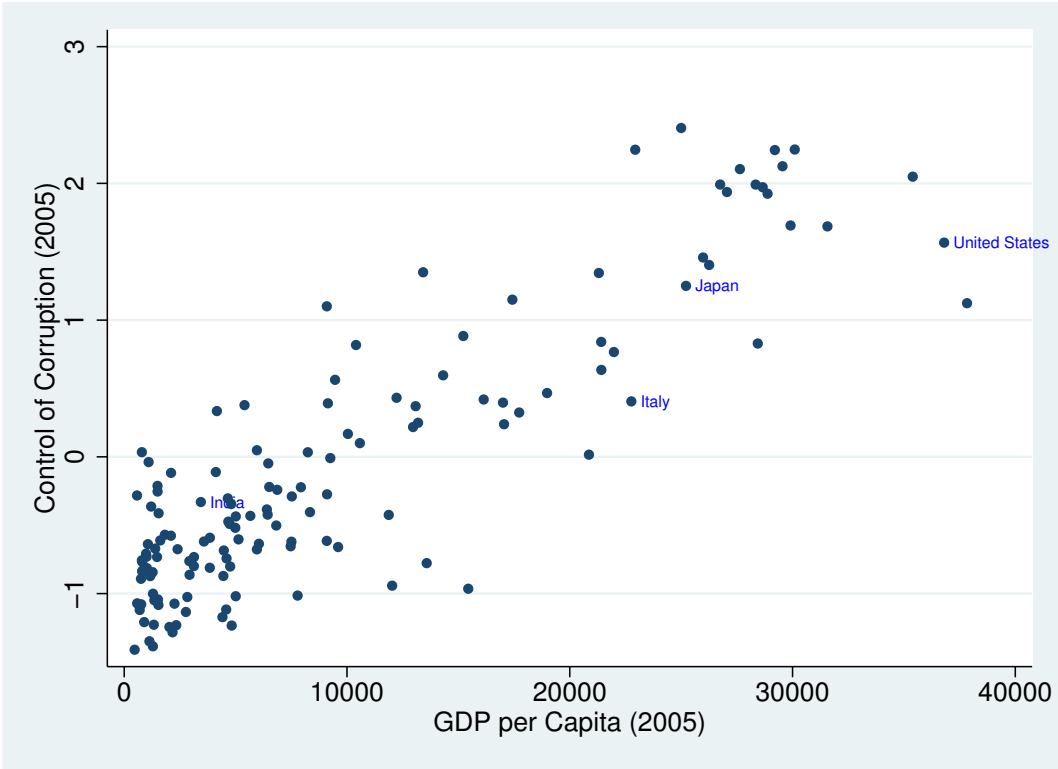
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It is the world's poor nations that experience truly devastating levels of corruption, meaning the illegal use of public office and authority for personal or political gain. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between one standard measure of corruption and the level of economic development. The relationship is linear and obviously extremely strong; in fact, level of economic development accounts for fully three-quarters of the variation in the extent of corruption ( $r = .84$ ).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: Index of Corruption in Countries Around the World by Level of Economic Development



Why are poor nations so corrupt? Contextual factors that encourage frequent corruption in poor countries include the greater reliance on government and the more extensive use

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<sup>1</sup>Although there are a number of different cross-national measures of corruption available, all draw on the same data and are highly intercorrelated. Work underway by (Hawken 2009) documents that despite the overall high level of correlation across various measures, considerable discrepancies exist for middle income countries. This problem is not pertinent for our purposes.

of government regulation, the greater prevalence of ethnic fractionalization, and in general the weakness of markets (Bardhan 1997, Rose-Ackerman 1978). (Pande 2007) argues that in contexts of poverty and inequality (especially when most politicians are drawn from a small upper class and receive higher than average salaries), patronage politics often emerge carrying with them greater opportunities for political corruption.

The obvious cure for corruption is electoral competition, which in principle allows voters to throw out political representatives who permit or encourage bad governance. Figure 2 presents the same data as displayed in Figure 1 except that each country is identified by regime type. Regimes are classed as either democracy or dictatorship, using the (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub & Limongi 2000) coding.<sup>2</sup> Democracies populate the entire range of the index of corruption. The statistical relationship between regime type and the index of corruption control used here is weak ( $r = -.40$ , with democracies coded 0 and autocracies 1). Democratic electoral institutions do not predict a systematic reduction in corruption.<sup>3</sup>

This paper offers a preliminary study of democratic failure in politically stable and well established rich and poor democracies. The empirical context is a political system in which elections decide who holds public office and in which electoral fraud is irrelevant or trivial to the electoral outcome.<sup>4</sup> Using parallel datasets assembled for one wealthy democratic country — Italy — and one poor one — India — I investigate patterns of democratic failure across levels of economic development. I focus on the *selection effects* of corruption. Corruption may distort which specific individuals are selected for public office, crowding out more competent individuals or individuals whose preferences are more aligned with those of the public. This may occur in a variety of different ways. If political representatives

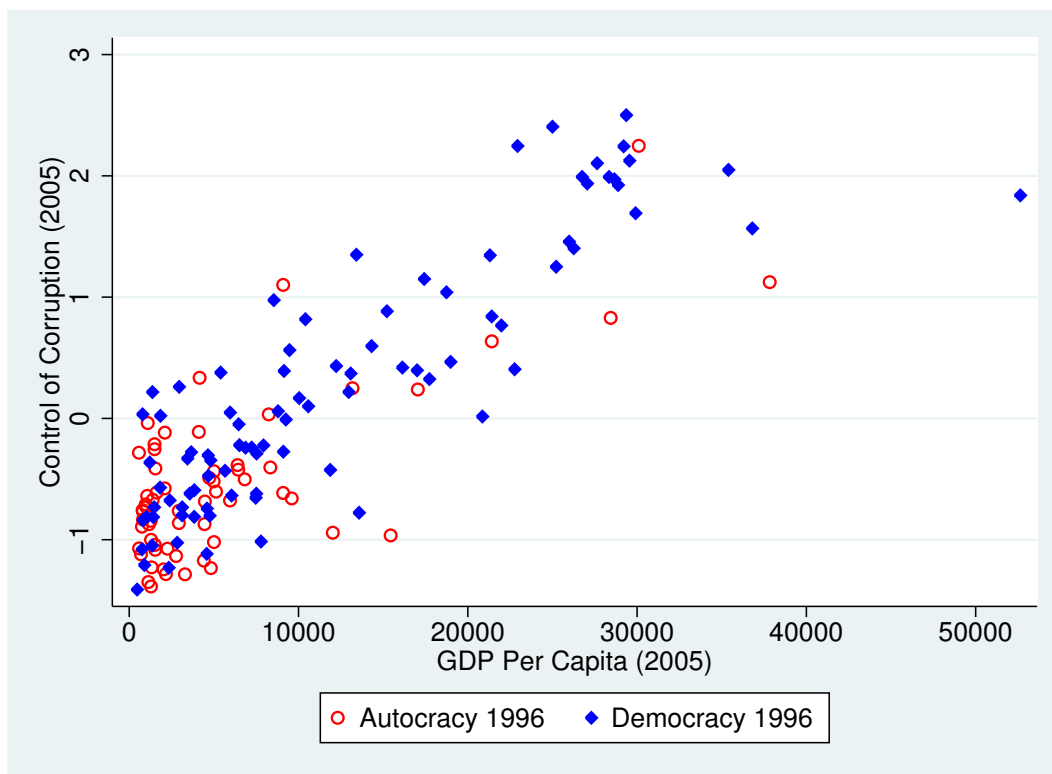
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<sup>2</sup>The regime coding is from 1996 because I have not yet located coding for later years.

<sup>3</sup>Some research suggests that it takes decades before democratic institutions improve accountability and reduce corruption and that newly-established democracies are often highly corrupt. However, these results do not appear stable across various studies.

<sup>4</sup>Although corruption may affect the selection of political leaders in non-democratic contexts, the underlying complexities in thinking systematically about how such leaders are selected even without corruption precludes extending the present analysis to non-democratic polities.

Figure 2: Index of Corruption in Democratic and Autocratic Countries Around the World by Level of Economic Development



use illegally gotten monies to fund their political campaigns, they may thereby obtain an electoral advantage. This in turn establishes a vicious cycle in which precisely because the corrupt are more likely to win office, political corruption is perpetuated. Likewise, if public office attracts officials willing to ally themselves with a criminal class that is not afraid to use violence and intimidation to secure votes, those who fail to engage in such tactics may find themselves electorally penalized. The mechanisms that underlie the failure of democratic electoral control may be different in different settings. Ultimately, of course, my aim is to explain the regularities and the variations observed in the specific instruments used by political representatives in successfully manipulating electoral selection. The present paper lays out a part of the analytic problem and some preliminary data.

Some literature has already provisionally established that voters regularly return corrupt

politicians to elected office (Kurer 2001, Manzetti & Wilson 2007). In this paper, I substantiate this claim with systematic data and begin to consider two interrelated questions. First, when does corruption prove electorally advantageous? This question is important for understanding the conditions that may systematically compromise democratic accountability. Second, how and why does the reelection of corrupt incumbents differ between wealthy and poor democracies? This question is important for understanding why corruption is so much more pervasive in poor countries.

There are at least four separate reasons why a corrupt candidate may be elected to public office assuming that, all else equal, voters prefer honest to corrupt public officials and therefore that a “culture” of corruption does not obtain:

**Information:** voters do not have enough or sufficiently salient information about the criminal behavior of the candidate;

**Ideology:** voters know the candidate is corrupt but weigh the policy position or other fixed characteristic (such as ethnic identity) of the candidate or his party as more important than his personal characteristics in their voting calculus;

**Incentives:** voters know the candidate is corrupt but they expect to receive patronage or pork-barrel benefits if the candidate is elected that would not be forthcoming if the challenger won;

**Intimidation:** voters fear physical violence on the part of the candidate or his associates that would be forthcoming if the challenger won.

In each of these cases, coordination problems may intrude into the decision making of the voter as well as into the availability of honest challengers. Ignoring the fact that it may not be rational to vote at all, it may not be rational to vote for an honest candidate if the corrupt have a lock on political power. In this case, voters may behave strategically, reelecting corrupt incumbents because voting sincerely may allow an even worse candidate

to gain office (Myerson 1993). Another related issue is the possible absence of an honest challenger, which necessarily forces voters to endorse a corrupt candidate. However, since corruption is by assumption not valued by voters, political entrepreneurs ought always to offer honest candidates as alternatives if existing candidates are corrupt. As a result, we ought not to observe political races with no honest candidate. I therefore assume sincere voting obtains and do not discuss coordination problems and the strategic voting that may result. Similarly, I assume there is always at least one honest challenger available. Finally, for the moment I do not distinguish types of voters (informed versus uninformed, ideological versus non-ideological, poor versus rich).

A cross-national dataset appropriate for the study of the electoral underpinnings of corruption in various democratic countries does not exist. Corruption is difficult to observe and there is no standard indicator that can be used across different countries. Serious questions have been raised about the validity of perceptual measures of corruption (Arndt & Oman 2006), which currently provide the only source of comparable data and which I necessarily used earlier to map corruption around the countries of the world. Some have suggested that perceptual measures mainly tap petty corruption rather than grand (Kenny 2006). Other work documents biases by respondents in surveys of corruption (Treisman 2007, Olken Forthcoming). Even disregarding these problems, data on perceptions of corruption cannot be used to study the conditions under which voters reelect political representatives who are corrupt because to do that we need information on the criminal histories of individual politicians.

It is therefore necessary to assemble data on political corruption and voter behavior for individual countries. I have collected comparable (although not precisely identical) data on Italy and India, where information is available on the criminal backgrounds of candidates to the national legislatures. Although in principle such data could be biased, for instance if judicial investigations displayed bias, comparison of this measure with an objective measure of corruption involving the extent of “missing infrastructure” in Italy in the period around 1990 shows a very close correlation (Golden & Picci 2006). We cannot know if this would

be true for other countries at other times, but this possible problem is outweighed by the advantages offered by a measure of corruption that attaches to individual politicians and electoral districts. In what follows, I present original data on the electoral consequences of legislative corruption for these two countries and I also summarize results reported by other scholars for the other two countries on which I have located information, the United States and Japan.

## **Election of Corrupt Candidates in a Wealthy Democracy**

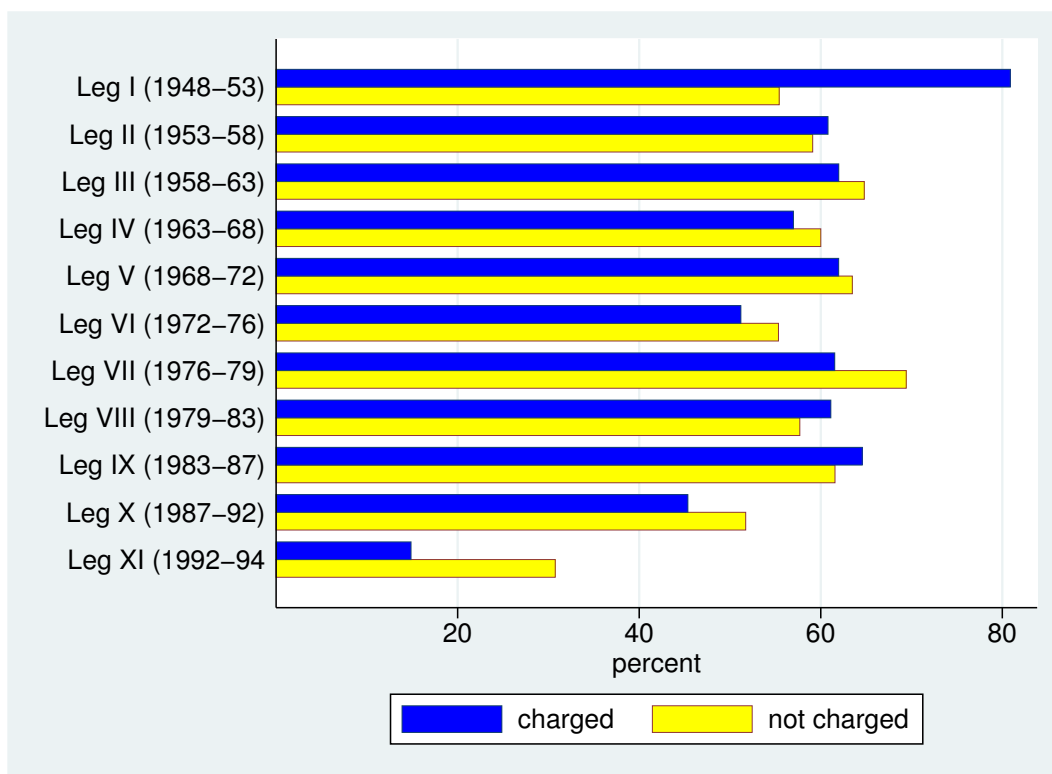
The Italian data has already been extensively documented and analyzed in a series of publications (Golden & Chang 2001, Golden & Picci 2005, Chang 2005, Chang & Golden 2007, Golden & Picci 2006, Chang, Golden & Hill 2009). During the first eleven postwar legislatures, covering the period from 1948 to 1994, more than half (54 percent) of the elected representatives to Italy's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, were charged by the judiciary at least once with malfeasance, meaning criminal wrongdoing.<sup>5</sup> Even if we exclude such trivial charges as slander, libel and defamation of character, which are often lodged against politicians by their electoral opponents, 41 percent of Italy's postwar deputies were charged with more serious crimes. Yet most deputies were reelected during this period, and the difference in reelection probabilities between those who were charged and those who were not is relatively slight — 51 percent compared with 58 percent. Most deputies were reelected whether they were allegedly engaged in illegal activities or not, as the data depicted in Figure 3 shows.

Nor do the Italian reelection rates for allegedly dishonest legislators appear unusual

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<sup>5</sup>The exact measure consists of requests by the judiciary to remove parliamentary immunity in order to proceed with an investigation on the basis of preliminary evidence of criminal wrongdoing or to remove immunity to bring charges.

Figure 3: Proportions of Charged and Not Charged Italian Deputies Reelected by Legislature (Serious Offenses Only)



among wealthy democracies. Although there are only a handful of studies from other countries documenting the electoral fortunes of politicians charged with or convicted of illegal activities, the findings they report are similar to those for Italy. In Japan, (Reed 1999) finds that legislators lose only a few percentage points over their previous vote share when they are indicted or convinced of corruption, and in fact, those who are convicted actually see increases in their vote shares (p. 136). Sixty-two percent of legislators convicted of corruption over the period from 1947 to 1993 were subsequently reelected, according to Reed's data. In related work, (Nyblade & Reed 2008) show that electoral insecurity was one factor encouraging Japanese Diet members to engage in corruption because it offered them additional campaign funds. Candidates to the US House of Representatives charged with corruption during the period 1968 to 1978 were, like their Italian and Japanese counterparts, also more likely than not to be reelected to public office, although they suffered losses of 6 to 11 percent

in their expected vote shares depending on whether they were Democrats or Republicans (Peters & Welch 1980). In this period, 61 percent of allegedly-corrupt representatives were reelected. A follow-up study covering the period from 1982 to 1990 found that charges of corruption affected reelection probabilities more severely, and that 65 percent of corruption-charged incumbents were reelected compared with 85 percent of their “clean” counterparts (Welch & Hibbing 1997, p. 233). There is no information available on whether corruption may have been affected by electoral insecurity in the U.S.

These three countries are wealthy and well-established democracies, although it is worth pointing out that Italy and Japan were neither when the available data begins in the immediate aftermath of World War II. For all three cases, there is some evidence that electoral insecurity is a contributing factor and some indication that corruption is successful: in all three, most legislators who are charged with corruption are subsequently reelected.

The only case for which we have information that is useful for considering the four hypotheses noted earlier — information, ideology, incentives, and intimidation — is Italy. For that country, analysis has found that *incentives* and *ideology* underpinned the persistence of corruption over the postwar era (Golden & Picci 2008). The incentives include spending on public works projects and disability pensions, which are associated with incumbency advantage for legislators affiliated with the major parties of government over the postwar era. The chronic reelection of allegedly dishonest public officials only came to a screeching halt with the explosion of public *information* associated with the “Clean Hands” judicial investigations of the early 1990s (Chang, Golden & Hill 2009). Corruption does not seem to have recurred at the same level of intensity since (Acconcia & Cantabene 2008).

## Election of Criminal Candidates in a Poor Democracy

Using a new dataset assembled and currently being studied by (Golden & Tiwari 2009) allows us to compare 2004 candidates to India's Lok Sabha who exhibit criminal histories or face pending criminal investigations with their non-criminal counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Here I offer a preliminary look at the data.

More than 5,400 candidates stood for election to the national legislature in 2004 in India's 543 single-member districts and all of them were legally required to file affidavits in which they reported criminal histories or pending criminal charges. The overall proportion of criminal candidates out of the total pool of those running was less than 9 percent (475 persons). But fully 24 percent of those elected in 2004 (or 128 members of the national legislature) were criminals. It thus appears to have been politically advantageous to have been malfeasant.

Exploring the data further only confirms that this is true. Nearly half (43 percent) of India's legislative candidates were unaffiliated with any political party and had only a very slim chance of winning. Only five of the 2,385 independent candidates actually won seats. All but 28 received less than the average share (10 percent) of the vote received by all candidates across all districts. Although the average district saw 12 candidates compete for office, this falls to eight if we exclude unaffiliated candidates. Unaffiliated candidates are very numerous but politically almost entirely irrelevant. In fact, in most districts the winner and the first runner-up together collect more than 80 percent of the votes cast, making most races effectively two candidate contests.<sup>7</sup>

If we analyze only those candidates who are put on the ballot by a political party and

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<sup>6</sup>I will not distinguish those with previous convictions from those facing criminal charges.

<sup>7</sup>(Chakrabarti, Gangopadhyay & Krishnan N.d., p. 4) note that the share of the vote received by candidates not among the top two averages 17 percent, enough to unsettle the final outcome, but that is much less true if we exclude the unaffiliated, who have virtually no chance of winning the seat to begin with.

exclude independents, the ability of criminal candidates to gain seats in the legislature becomes even more striking. For partisan-affiliated candidates, being charged doubles the rate of winning a seat, increasing it from 18 percent to 36 percent. Of the 356 partisan-affiliated criminal candidates who stood for election to the legislature in 2004, 128 won their seat. For candidates listed as affiliated with one of India's numerous political parties, we find that being charged thus proves electorally advantageous. This distinguishes India from Italy. In Italy, incumbents under judicial investigation are reelected but not without suffering a small vote penalty. So the first reason that India has such a high level of legislative corruption is that voters appear to favor criminal candidates.

A second reason consists of the fact that parties nominate so many criminals to run for the Lok Sabha in the first place. The data are not entirely comparable with those from Italy and would exhibit a higher rate of criminality even if the underlying frequency of criminal legislators was identical because for Italy we know only which incumbents are under judicial investigation while serving in the legislature whereas for India we know how many candidates have ever been convicted of criminal activity or currently face such charges. The Italian data is thus more circumscribed than the Indian, measuring only allegations of criminality lodged while serving in the legislature.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the discrepancy between the two measures is large enough to suggest that there is likely a much larger underlying phenomenon of criminal candidates in India than in Italy.

It is of course hardly surprising that contemporary India is more corrupt than Italy was in the postwar era. The average country at India's level of economic development is much more corrupt than the average country at Italy's level of development. To the best of my knowledge, however, this is the first documentation of any systematic differences in the electoral underpinnings of political corruption in rich and poor democracies. Until now, most

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<sup>8</sup>However, the charges brought by the Italian judiciary often reflect allegations of criminal activities that occurred prior to when the deputy was seated in the Chamber. They are not as temporally circumscribed as they might first appear as a result.

evidence about corruption in poor democracies involved bureaucratic corruption of various sorts. In addition, there is a body of research that claims that in important ways policy responsiveness functions well in democratic India. For the period from 1958 to 1992, (Besley & Burgess 2002) show that when calamity strikes, the large Indian state governments provide more food and calamity relief where voters have more access to information through the press and where the share of seats between the dominant Congress Party and its main competitor is narrower, a measure they refer to as *political competitiveness*. The extraordinary frequency of political corruption in India today seems at odds with the finding that an informed public and a dominant party fearful of losing office successfully engender policy responsiveness.

To begin to explore the electoral underpinnings of corruption in India, I investigate whether the nomination and electoral success of criminal candidates diminishes with political competition.<sup>9</sup> I therefore estimate two models. The first is simply:

$$Pr(corr) = pcurban + pcmuslim + pscst + pop + reserved + margin \quad (1)$$

where the probability of a criminal being listed on the ballot by his party ( $Pr(corr)$ ) is a function of the percent of the population living in cities ( $pcurban$ ), the percent of the population that is Muslim ( $pcmuslim$ ), the percent of the population belonging to a scheduled caste or tribe ( $pscst$ ), the total population of the district ( $pop$ ), a dummy coding whether the seat is reserved for an underrepresented group ( $reserved$ ), and the margin of victory of the winning candidate in the prior Lok Sabha election, which was held in 1999 ( $margin$ ). I estimate this only for those candidates affiliated with a political party and not for the unaffiliated. We already know that numerous unaffiliated candidates were predominantly not criminals and also that they were doomed to defeat; their presence on the ballot does not provide any genuine increase in political competition. If political competition reduces corruption, we ought to observe that political parties are less likely to field criminal candidates

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<sup>9</sup>For the moment, an absence of appropriate data on newspaper circulation precludes inclusion of this variable in the analysis.

where the margin of victory was tighter in the prior election.

The other variables in the model capture religious and ethnic diversity, which has been shown to result in worse governance along various dimensions; the size of the electoral district, which should make it more difficult for voters to gather information about candidates, as should the percent of the population living in cities; and whether the seat is reserved, which restricts the candidate pool (but not the electorate) to persons of only a specific gender or caste. Reserved seats should see fewer criminals nominated since women and members of scheduled tribes and castes will presumably have had fewer prior opportunities to enter the criminal political class.

The second model that I estimate is:

$$Pr(win) = corr + pcurban + pcmuslim + pcscst + pop + reserved + margin \quad (2)$$

where the probability of winning ( $Pr(win)$ ) is a function of whether the candidate is a criminal ( $corr$ ) and the same set of regressors as already used in Equation 1. Results are reported in Table 1.

The results show that electoral competitiveness in the prior legislative election is not significantly associated with the likelihood that a criminal appears on the 2004 ballot nor with the likelihood that a criminal wins the seat. In fact, a criminal background has a statistically significant *positive* impact on the likelihood of election. These findings reconfirm in a multiple regression context that in India, voters apparently favor criminal candidates for the national legislature.

In addition, results show that parties are more likely to list criminals in rural villages and that likewise criminals have higher probabilities of winning in rural areas and areas with small total populations. These latter results accord nicely with work by (Bardhan &

Table 1: Logit Estimation Results for the Effects of Political Competition on Criminal Candidates and Election, Lok Sabha (2004)

	CRIMINAL	ELECT
CRIMINAL		0.673***
		[0.074]
PCURBAN	-0.546***	0.092
	[0.159]	[0.137]
PCMUSLIM	-0.178	-0.277
	[0.248]	[0.216]
PCSCST	-0.840***	0.094
	[0.300]	[0.241]
TOTPOP	0.000	-0.000***
	[0.000]	[0.000]
RESERVED	-0.085	0.028
	[0.084]	[0.073]
MARGIN	-0.001	0.004
	[0.003]	[0.003]
Constant	-0.845***	-0.776***
	[0.147]	[0.137]
Observations	3050	3050

*Notes:* The regression for CRIMINAL refers to the probability that a person with a criminal background appears on the ballot. The regression for ELECT refers to the probability of winning the seat. MARGIN refers to the margin of victory by the winning candidate in the prior legislative election. Data excludes unaffiliated candidates. Standard errors in brackets. \* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%

Mookherjee 2006); see also (Bardhan & Mookherjee 2000), who present a model of politics in a poor democracy in which local government is captured by local elites, permitting ongoing corruption in the provision of public goods. Similarly, (Chemin 2008) shows empirically that poverty increases when criminals are elected as political representatives in India. The empirical results presented above resonate with this line of work, documenting that in India small rural villages are especially prone to political criminality.

In these settings, where voters are more easily identified and monitored than in large urban areas, political parties may use criminal candidates to intimidate voters. A recent

article in *Newsweek* has observed:

While the middle class protests, party workers distribute liquor and cash to woo voters in the slums. In lawless states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, thugs intimidate poor farmers into toeing the line. In riot-torn Gujarat and West Bengal, party cadres are alleged to harass and threaten nonsympathizers, sometimes confiscating their voter-registration cards. And elsewhere, aspirants like Raj Thackeray of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena — known for beating up migrants coming to Mumbai to hunt for jobs — use vandalism masked as street demonstrations to raise their political profiles (*Newsweek* March 16, 2009).

The estimation results just presented speak in part to the hypotheses introduced earlier. Measures of *information* and *incentives* are not yet incorporated into the analysis, and there is only secondary corroboration of the importance of *intimidation*. Thus far, I have been able to model in a preliminary way only one measure of partisan *ideology* or ethnic identity. Results showed no significant association between ethnicity and voter behavior returning corrupt candidates to public office; the coefficient on percent of the population that is Muslim, which is the measure used for ethnic fragmentation, is insignificant by conventional standards. This finding fails to substantiate other research showing that Indian voters often exhibit attachments to political parties organized along the lines of ethnic identity and that these attachments trump their evaluation of candidate quality (Banerjee & Pande N.d.). In a study of criminal candidates in the state of Uttar Pradesh, (Banerjee & Pande N.d.) find that winners from a pro-majority party are of worse quality (i.e. more corrupt) where the district is more strongly biased in favor of the majority population group.

## Concluding Observations

We have seen that in wealthy democracies, voters often return corrupt politicians to national office. In these countries, the corrupt on average have a slight electoral disadvantage compared with the non-corrupt but the disadvantage is not large enough to keep them out of office. In the poor democracy on which comparable data exist, the corrupt — using the term loosely to refer to all party-nominated candidates who report having been convicted of a criminal charge or face such a charge — appear to experience an electoral advantage. Voters exhibit an apparent preference for malfeasant representatives. This suggests that local capture is considerably more extensive in India than in Italy.

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