Corruption and Political Participation

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Abstract

Recent events in democracies worldwide have drawn a lot of attention to the relationship between corruption and political participation. Some studies have focused on understanding the impact of corruption on the level of trust in institutions. This paper uses a random corruption audit program in Brazil to cast light on the relationship between corruption and political participation. Different from other studies, we analyze corruption impacts at a different electoral level from where the corruption act took place. Empirical analysis shows that while being a standard deviation away from the mean of corruption violations and having random audits released before the election is not associated with a decrease in null voting on the local level, being in the same position as the corruption violation distribution and having random audits released prior to the election is associated with a 4% decrease in null voting in gubernatorial elections. This result casts light on the possible spillover effects of corruption and suggests that it may increase political participation when we isolate supply effects.

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1 Introduction

Corruption is a complex political, social, and economic phenomenon present in all parts of the globe. The burden it imposes on modern societies is such that former World Bank president James Wolfensohn once referred to it as the "Cancer of Corruption." Fighting it will likely be done on several different fronts, and increasing information and transparency will be one of those. Think Thank International Transparency lists information as one of the critical factors in the struggle against corruption, calling information "a human right that can act as a safeguard against corruption."

The relationship between corruption and information has been widely investigated by political scientists and economists. Several works focus on the consequences of corruption-related information for incumbent politicians. For example, incumbents who are found to be more corrupt face lower re-election probability [Ferraz and Finan, 2008, Costas-Pérez et al., 2012, Larreguy et al., 2014], and audit programs are associated with a reduction in corruption [Ferraz and Finan, 2011].

Less is known, however, about the impact of corruption-related information on voter participation. Some articles have cast light on this question by showing causal evidence that corruption may have no effect [Banerjee et al., 2010, Humphreys and Weinstein, 2012] or decrease political participation [De Figueiredo et al., 2011, Chong et al., 2015, Giommoni, 2021]. However, this literature focuses on elections where the information released directly involves one candidate, and this is not the ideal set-up to evaluate theories suggesting that corruption undermines voters' confidence in public institutions [Bowler and Karp, 2004, Clausen et al., 2011] or compromises trust in the political system in general [Pharr and Putnam, 2000, Richey, 2010, Morris and Klesner, 2010]. Corrupt politicians may affect the supply of candidates, confounding effects and mechanisms. For example, suppose a mayor is found to be corrupt. In that case, he may pull out of a subsequent election, leading the race to be less competitive and voters to have lower participation not due to lower trust in the system but because of the level of competitiveness.

Using an anti-corruption program that randomly audits municipalities for irregularities

in their federal transfer funds, we show that municipalities in which information of violations was released prior to the elections had lower levels of null and blank votes for both mayor and governor (and hence higher participation). This result is interesting for two main reasons. First, while some papers have shown that corruption may have no effect or decrease participation, this is the first causal study that shows an increase in participation. Second, we also show that the effects spill over to other positions (Governors) who were not directly accountable for the funds at a local level.

2 Literature & Contribution

The existing literature linking corruption to turnout is still small, and findings present mixed results. The predominant view in the literature is that corruption affects citizens' participation negatively. Advocates of this relation generally propose that a certain level of trust in politicians and government officials is necessary for political participation. This argument is made more clear in Wagner et al. [2009] and Rothstein [2003], where authors argue that if citizens have lower levels of trust or satisfaction with politicians at various levels of the government, they have less interest in leaving home on election day.

This theoretical argument finds mixed support in empirical analyses. McCann and Domınguez [1998], for example, analyses national-level survey data and establishes that individuals who think that political corruption is more widespread are less likely to vote in elections than individuals who think that there is less corruption in the political system. Other correlational studies have found similar evidence for individual countries and regions [Kostadinova, 2003, Simpser, 2005, Stockemer et al., 2013].

Causal studies supporting this view are scarce, albeit existent. Making use of an experiment in Mexican local elections, Chong et al. [2015] shows that voters react to the provision of corruption information by withdrawing from the political process. Focusing on Italian municipalities for the period 1999-2014, Giommoni [2021] also suggests that exposure to corruption has general and negative effects on political participation. Finally, De Figueiredo

et al. [2011] conduct an experiment in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo. After informing voters about the challenger's record of corruption, the authors find that the treatment reduced turnout by 1.9 percentage points.

A second branch of literature suggests that there is no relation between turnout and corruption. Peters and Welch [1980] focus on the U.S. and reports that there is no correlational evidence that corruption and an individual's likelihood to show up on Election Day are linked. Similarly, Banerjee et al. [2011] find that releasing information about candidates' criminal records prior to the election in India has no causal impact on participation. Stockemer and Calca [2013] is the only study to this date to establish a positive relationship between corruption and participation. While analyzing voting data for Portuguese legislative elections in 2005 and 2009, authors find a positive relation between turnout and corruption. Results should be understood as correlational ones, but authors provide an explanation to conciliate their findings with previous literature. They suggest that the increase in mobilization on the sub-national level may be due to citizens using low-corruption municipalities as a benchmark for corruption levels, increasing mobilization to reach those levels. While most studies on the correlation between corruption and participation seem to rely to some extent on the idea that corruption reduces trust in public servants and politicians [Anderson and Tverdova, 2003, Richey, 2010, Morris and Klesner, 2010], there is no reason to assume that this reduction in confidence is made homogeneously among all politicians on the political spectrum.

Furthermore, we analyze the effects of corruption on a different national level compared to the one violations that took place. While analyzing data at the local level when corruption takes place at the local level may have provided valuable contributions to the literature, it has some limitations. First, local-level elections are subject to first-order effects where several effects can be confounded. For example, it is an established result that voters punish corrupt politicians [Ferraz and Finan, 2008], if this punishment leads elections to be less contested, participation may decrease because voters attribute a lower probability to their vote being pivotal and not because they are actually attributing it to their entire political class.

Second, it is subject to supply effects. Upon receiving information about corruption, it is reasonable to assume that not only voters' priors are updated but also candidates. For example, more corrupt candidates may decide to apply if corruption is higher than expected, discouraging the voter who cares about corruption. Hence, it is crucial to find a setup that is not subjected to supply-side effects.

3 Background

3.1 Brazilian Electoral System

Brazil is a democratic country, with all of its 5,570 municipalities being governed by a mayor elected every four years in direct elections. Elections in municipalities with more than 200,000 registered voters feature a second-round run-off in case no candidate receives a single majority in the first round. Mayors are term-limited and are allowed to be in office for a maximum of eight years (or two consecutive terms). Voting in Brazil is compulsory, with small sanctions applied in case of absence on election day. However, they are also allowed to "justify" their absence exempting themselves from the paying fine (valid justifications include sickness or being out of the country). Hence, given these light penalties, it is not surprising that even with compulsory voting, a little more than 30 million Brazilians (over 20% of registered voters) did not vote in the 2018 election. If a voter decides to be present on election day, he faces the choice of voting for a candidate, blank or null. Blank and null votes usually represent a meaningful share of total votes cast by Brazilian on polls. In the 2010 presidential election, Blank and Null votes represented 8.64% of all votes, with states like Alagoas casting a total of 11.68% of Blank and Null votes.

Even though Blank and Null are terms usually used interchangeably by Brazilian voters and the media, they are slightly different by some technicalities. A Null vote is a vote for a non-existent party or candidate, while a Blank vote is a form of a valid vote. If a voter in the voting booth presses the numbers of a non-existing party, that will count as a Null vote. Since 1998, however, this is unlikely to be done by mistake as voting in Brazil is

done electronically. After typing in the number of the candidate, a picture of the candidate and their basic information are displayed to the voter before they confirm the vote. Hence, mistakes are unlikely, and most of the time, these votes are cast intentionally. Blank votes are cast using a "Blank Vote" button on the electronic voting machine. In theory, these are valid votes but for no particular candidate. Since both of these votes are used with similar intentions and in both cases, voters abstain from choosing a candidate, we pool them together and interpret them as a non-participatory vote.

3.2 Random Audit Program

Each year, Brazilian municipalities receive large transfer amounts from the federal government to guarantee the local population access to basic public services such as health care, education, and sanitation. Mayors and legislative bodies have some degree of discretion to allocate these resources, opening a sizeable door to mismanagement and corruption. CGU (Controladoria Geral da União) is the federal agency responsible for investigating the proper use of government funds and ensuring transparency of public finances. Targeting a decrease in municipality corruption levels, CGU launched an anti-corruption program aimed at municipal governments in 2003. The so called Programa de Fiscalização por Sorteios Públicos (Monitoring Program with Public Lotteries), consists of random audits of municipal use of federally transferred funds. During each round of the program, 60 municipalities were chosen by a publicly held draw in Brasília, where all noncapital municipalities with a population of up to 500,000 inhabitants are eligible for selection. Upon selection, the CGU compiles information on any federal fund transferred to the given municipal government within the past four years. Following that compilation, CGU creates an audit task force for randomly selected specific government projects. Around 15 auditors are then dispatched to the audited municipality for one to two weeks to verify the general delivery of public services associated with the project. Auditors then analyze relevant documents and receipts associated with transferred funds, interview the local population, and policymakers, and attempt to find any evidence of misgoverning. Upon completion of inspections, a final report describing all the

irregularities is submitted to the CGU office in Brasília.

It is noteworthy to mention that incentives for corruption are low among auditors. First, the fact that audits are not performed by an individual auditor already makes bribing extremely costly. Second, auditors earn above-average salaries and are hired based on open public examinations.

4 Data

We will use CGU (Controladoria Geral da União) data to build a corruption measure for the period of 2006 to 2015. This period encompasses three Brazilian Gubernatorial Elections (2006, 2010, 2014) and 20 audit draws. Figure 1 displays the number of audited municipalities per year. CGU data contains a detailed description of all irregularities found by the auditors for each inspection order, including information on the sector, the amount audited, a description of the irregularity, and a classification of the irregularity. This classification is made into three categories: Formal violation, Moderate violation, and Extreme Violation. Formal violations are the mildest of the three and do not implicate corruption. Examples of this type of violation are documents that were not properly filled out or even not properly formatted. Moderate violations and extreme violations, however, can be interpreted as acts of corruption or mismanagement and are, most of the time, hard to separate in terms of intensity. Consider the reports about Nova Glória in draw #34: Overprice in the purchase of medicines for a public pharmacy was classified as an extreme violation. Meanwhile, several students for which the local government had been receiving federal transfers were found to be non-existent, and this violation was considered moderate. Even though one could argue that overpricing is a more clear act of corruption, both violations seem to imply at least some sort of mismanagement. Hence, in this paper, we use the combination of both as a measure of corruption.

Figure 2 displays a histogram of the number of corruption violations found by the municipality. Notice that all municipalities have at least one medium or extreme violation. The

distribution is also skewed to the right, showing us that there are some outlier municipalities with extremely high corruption levels. We do not exclude these from the analysis.

Electoral data comes from *Tribunal Superior Eleitoral* (TSE), the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court. This data contains the number of votes as well as personal characteristics of candidates such as gender, race, education, and income for all governors that participated in races in all 26 Brazilian States.

Finally, municipality-level data comes from the 2000 National Census and includes demographic, economic, and social characteristics of households in each Brazilian municipality. To supplement this, we use data from Perfil Municipio for the availability of media in Brazilian municipalities.

5 Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to study whether corruption disclosure affects the level of null and blank voting in municipalities where it takes place. To estimate this relation, ideally, we would randomly assign disclosure of corruption across municipalities and then measure the differences in corruption levels across both groups. Since this experiment is unfeasible, we will exploit the design of the random audit program, and we will compare municipalities that have their corruption violations disclosed months before the elections with municipalities whose corruption violations are disclosed months after using the following regression:

$$\begin{aligned} VS_{msyl} = \alpha + \beta_0 Release_{msyl} + \beta_1 Violations_{msyl} + \\ \beta_2(Release_{msyl} * Violations_{mysl}) + \\ X_{ms} + \vee_s + \omega_y + \theta_l + \epsilon_{msyl} \end{aligned}$$

Where VS_{msyl} is the null and blank vote share in municipality m, state s, electoral cycle y, and lottery l. $Release_{msyl}$ is an indicator of the release date being before the election, and $Violations_{msyl}$ is the Z-score of the number of violations. The term ϵ denotes unobserved

variables that determine vote share.

For our estimate of interest, β_2, to be consistent, a necessary condition is that the timing of the release of corruption audits be uncorrelated with elections timing. Two main reasons contribute to believing that this hypothesis holds. First, the design of the program guarantees audit reports are released altogether by an independent federal agency (free from any local influence) only a few months after the draws. Second, if the timing of audit release is random, we shouldn't see any consistent significant difference in characteristics between municipalities audited before and after the elections. Results for that analysis can be seen in Table 1. Column (3) displays simple differences between municipalities audited before and after the election. Municipalities audited before and after only differ significantly in terms of the percentage of the population with high school and the percentage of households with TV. Nonetheless, when we look at the specification used for our main analysis, none of these point estimates are significant. To increase precision, we will include these variables as controls in the main specification.

We will also include an interaction of whether the municipality was audited prior to the elections with the level of corruption discovered in the audit. The idea is to capture the fact that the effect of new information will depend on voters' prior beliefs regarding the incumbent's corruptness. Hence, since our effect of interest will vary according to the level of corruption revealed, we will capture this differential effect with this specification.

Another challenge faced in estimating the effects of corruption over participation is isolating the direct effect of dissatisfaction. Voters punishing corrupt politicians is an already well-established result in literature [Ferraz and Finan, 2008]. Hence, in municipal elections, voters may switch to null simply as a substitute for having their preferred politician convicted. To isolate this mechanism, we focus on gubernatorial elections, a different level from the one where violations took place. Governors have no responsibility for local budgets and, hence, shouldn't be held accountable for corruption that takes place at the municipality level. Furthermore, focusing on gubernatorial elections isolates supply-side effects also documented in the literature [Giommoni, 2021]. Upon receiving information about corruption,

it is reasonable to assume that not only voters' priors are updated but also candidates. For example, more corrupt candidates may decide to apply if corruption is higher than expected, discouraging the voter who cares about corruption.

6 Results

Table 2 presents the main result of our paper. Both linear and quadratic specifications present estimators of similar signs and magnitude. On average, a one standard deviation increase in the violations distribution combined with having these violations released before the election is associated with a significant 0.63 percentage points decrease in null and blank votes on the linear specification and 0.682 percentage points on the quadratic form. The magnitude of this effect is also significant, with a 6.4% and a 6.9% decrease of a 9.8 percentage points baseline, respectively. Column (3) displays the results of the semi-parametric estimation, which is in line with the previous models. Analysis of this specification contributes to the evidence that our results are not driven by the functional form chosen.

One problem with interpreting this decrease in null and blank votes as an increase in participation is that it can be generated by a decrease in turnout. If null and blank votes are decreasing, but turnout is also decreasing, the overall effect on the proportion of the population that casts valid votes is uncertain. Moreover, one could argue that null votes decrease because voters who would vote null are now staying at home. Hence, it is important to analyze the impacts of corruption on turnout. This analysis is presented in Table 3. Estimators from both the linear and quadratic models are statistically non-significant, which suggests that it is unlikely that a decrease in turnout is the driver of the decrease in null votes.

Table 4 and Table 5 display the results of the robustness checks for the quadratic and the semi-parametric specifications, respectively. In the quadratic case (Table 4), removing lottery fixed effects increases standard errors and leads to a small absolute reduction in the point estimate. The same reduction relative to the fully saturated model is observed in the

model without State Fixed Effects and controls and without State and Lottery Fixed Effects. We interpret these estimators as contributing to the evidence that a singular choice of model is not driving the main results.

7 Conclusion

Using a large national-level anti-corruption program in Brazil, we analyze the impact of corruption information disclosure on voter participation. Different from all of the works in previous literature, we focus on an electoral level different from the one where violations took place. We argue that this is an ideal analysis if one wants to evaluate the consequences for the entire political system. Our analysis shows that an extra standard deviation on the corruption violation distribution and having violations released before the elections is associated with a decrease in null and blank votes of 6.5%.

8 Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Distribution of Audited Municipalities per Year

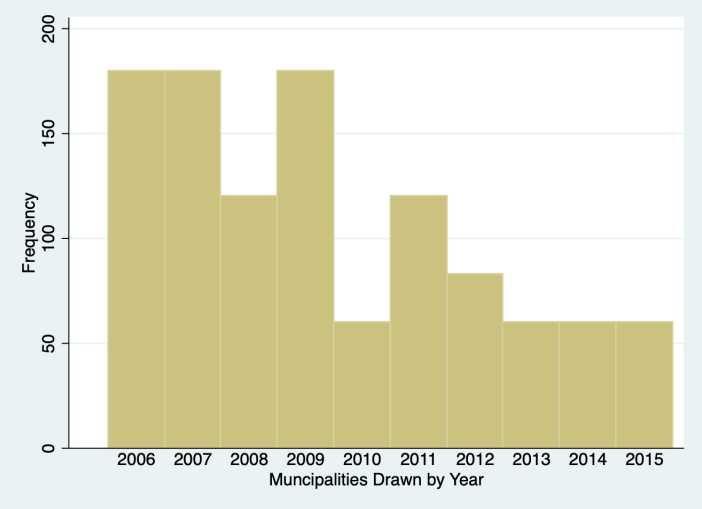

Figure 2: Distribution of Audited Municipalities per number of Violations

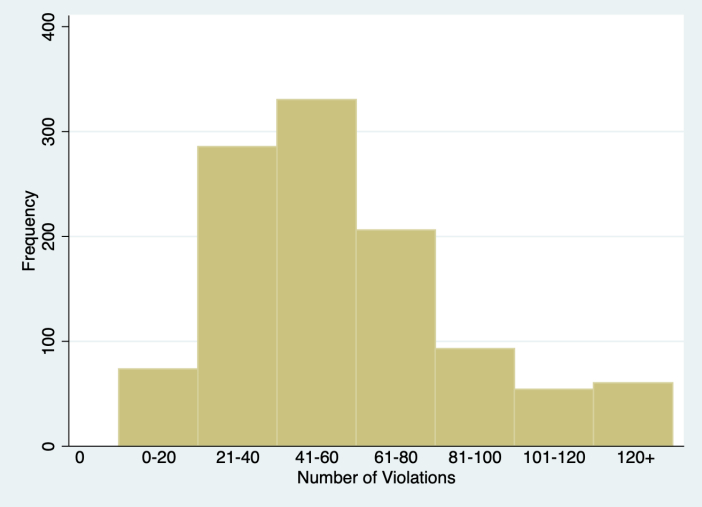

Table 1: Balance Checks

	Audited Before	Audited After	Difference	Interaction Difference
Population Total	25942.336	23298.481	2643.855	-5779.593
			(3996.588)	(6364.279)
White %	0.497	0.473	0.023	-0.019
			(0.018)	(0.023)
Mixed %	0.424	0.448	-0.024	0.022
			(0.017)	(0.021)
Black %	0.064	0.060	0.004	-0.005
			(0.004)	(0.004)
Others %	0.016	0.019	-0.003	0.001
			(0.003)	(0.002)
Literate %	0.865	0.865	-0.000	-0.001
			(0.003)	(0.005)
High School %	0.158	0.147	0.011**	-0.006
			(0.005)	(0.008)
College %	0.026	0.025	0.001	-0.001
			(0.002)	(0.002)
Single %	0.558	0.569	-0.011	0.005
			(0.008)	(0.012)
Married %	0.377	0.368	0.009	-0.004
			(0.007)	(0.010)
Income Mean	351.966	343.283	8.684	0.015
			(10.817)	(14.695)
Income Median	199.395	194.519	4.876	-1.112
			(4.819)	(6.003)
Phone %	0.162	0.147	0.015	-0.004
			(0.011)	(0.014)
Wash Machine %	0.143	0.124	0.018	-0.003
			(0.011)	(0.014)
Radio %	0.803	0.791	0.011	0.008
			(0.009)	(0.012)
TV %	0.738	0.718	0.021*	0.005
			(0.014)	(0.021)
CPU %	0.028	0.025	0.003	-0.003
			(0.002)	(0.003)

Notes: Columns 1 and 2 report the mean of characteristics in municipalities audited before and after the election, respectively. Column 3 computes the difference and the associated standard error. Column 4 reports the estimated coefficient with its respective standard error of the regression of each characteristic using our main specification. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2: Effects of Corruption on Null Votes

	(1) Null %	(2) Null %	(3) Null %
Violations*Released	-0.00630**	-0.00682***	
	(0.00281)	(0.00262)	
Violations	-0.000959	-0.000798	
	(0.00114)	(0.00129)	
Released Before	-0.00533	-0.00701	0.00629
	(0.00578)	(0.00592)	(0.00630)
$Violations^2$ *Release		0.00228	
		(0.00156)	
$Violations^2$		-0.000202	
		(0.000566)	
Release* 2nd Quintile			-0.00772
			(0.00520)
Release* 3rd Quintile			-0.0156***
			(0.00501)
Release* 4th Quintile			-0.00388
			(0.00530)
Release* 5th Quintile			-0.0206***
			(0.00606)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Draw FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean	0.098	0.098	0.098
Observations	1153	1153	1153
R2	0.598	0.598	0.602

Notes: This table reports the coefficients of equation 1. Column 1 reports the linear and Column 2 the quadratic specification. Column 3 displays the results of the semi-parametric estimation.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3: Effects of Corruption on Turnout

	(1) Turn Out %	(2) Turn Out %	(3) Turn Out %
Violations*Released	0.00209	0.00397	
	(0.00448)	(0.00472)	
Violations	-0.00652***	-0.00900***	
	(0.00244)	(0.00267)	
Released Before	-0.00735	-0.00436	-0.0172*
	(0.00942)	(0.00985)	(0.0102)
$Violations^2$ *Release		-0.00324	
		(0.00245)	
$Violations^2$		0.00248**	
		(0.00110)	
Release* 2nd Quintile			0.00760
			(0.00912)
Release* 3rd Quintile			0.0190**
			(0.00946)
Release* 4th Quintile			0.00854
			(0.00926)
Release* 5th Quintile			0.00844
			(0.0110)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Draw FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean	0.808	0.808	0.808
Observations	1153	1153	1153
R2	0.481	0.483	0.484

Notes: This table reports the coefficients of equation 1. Column 1 reports the linear and Column 2 the quadratic specification. Column 3 displays the results of the semi-parametric estimation.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4: Robustness Check - Null & Blank - Quadratic

	(1) Null %	(2) Null %	(3) Null %	(4) Null %
Violations*Released	-0.00682***	-0.00614**	-0.00535**	-0.00567**
	(0.00262)	(0.00265)	(0.00248)	(0.00288)
$Violations^2$ *Release	0.00228	0.00154	0.00158	0.00294*
	(0.00156)	(0.00160)	(0.00155)	(0.00161)
Violations	-0.000798	-0.000604	-0.000498	0.00216
	(0.00129)	(0.00129)	(0.00123)	(0.00133)
$Violations^2$	-0.000202	-0.000247	-0.000249	0.000644
	(0.000566)	(0.000592)	(0.000559)	(0.000621)
Released Before	-0.00701	-0.00694	-0.00421*	-0.00544*
	(0.00592)	(0.00577)	(0.00246)	(0.00294)
R2	0.5983	0.5696	0.5663	0.3949
Observations	1153	1162	1162	1153
Lottery FE	Yes	No	No	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	No	No
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Notes: This table displays the quadratic specification. Column 1 includes Lottery Fe, State FE, and Controls. The outcome variable is the null and blank vote share.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5: Robustness Check - Null & Blank - Semi-parametric

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Null %	Null %	Null %	Null %
Released Before	0.00629	0.00341	0.00484	0.00511
	(0.00630)	(0.00629)	(0.00359)	(0.00423)
Release* 2nd Quintile	-0.00772	-0.00451	-0.00415	-0.00345
	(0.00520)	(0.00531)	(0.00527)	(0.00573)
Release* 3rd Quintile	-0.0156***	-0.0123**	-0.0118**	-0.0166***
	(0.00501)	(0.00495)	(0.00491)	(0.00594)
Release* 4th Quintile	-0.00388	-0.00160	-0.000914	-0.000476
	(0.00530)	(0.00531)	(0.00517)	(0.00593)
Release* 5th Quintile	-0.0206***	-0.0191***	-0.0173***	-0.0156**
	(0.00606)	(0.00602)	(0.00574)	(0.00715)
R2	0.6021	0.5734	0.5700	0.3977
Observations	1153	1162	1162	1153
Lottery FE	Yes	No	No	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	No	No
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Notes: This table displays the semi-parametric specification. Column 1 includes Lottery Fe, State FE, and Controls. The outcome variable is the null and blank vote share.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

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