Does Corruption Pay? The Survival of Politicians Charged with Malfeasance in the Postwar Italian Chamber of Deputies

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Abstract

Using survival analysis techniques, we study the political fate of members of the Italian lower house in the first eleven postwar legislatures (1948-94). Over the course of this period, more than 40 percent of deputies were charged with potentially serious malfeasance. Reelection rates for these allegedly dishonest legislators were less than for their ostensibly honest counterparts — 51 percent compared with 58 percent — but nonetheless even representatives charged with serious wrongdoing had greater than even chances of being reelected into the next legislature. These results are strikingly similar to those reported for the US, suggesting that in both places voters exact surprisingly little electoral retribution of legislators charged with corruption and illegality.

Using multivariate analysis of each of the eleven separate legislative periods, we find that charges of serious wrongdoing are significantly associated with vote loss only in Legislatures VII and XI. These are the two postwar periods when Italy’s major opposition party, the Italian Communist Party, supported the government (in the Seventh Legislature) or had reestablished itself as a non-communist opposition (in the Eleventh Legislature, following the collapse of the Soviet Union). We interpret this as indicating that voters repudiated allegedly dishonest representatives only when the challenger was politically acceptable.
One of the compelling justifications for democracy is that public officials can be held accountable. Elected representatives who betray the public trust by engaging in illegal activities (or in other ways extracting excessive rents) while holding public office are vulnerable to electoral retribution and loss of office. But could involvement in criminal activities instead enhance the chance of reelection, perhaps thanks to the campaign contributions that frequently comprise the illegal activities? Does the population of political wrongdoers decrease over time as a result of voters’ punishment, or increase, as politicians who receive illegal campaign contributions successfully utilize their proceeds to drive their honest competitors out of office? Do voters use their electoral influence to “throw the rascals out,” or do public officials successfully exploit the advantages of public office to immunize themselves against electoral retribution?

In this paper, we study these and related questions with a preliminary inquiry into members of the Italian parliament who were subject to investigation by the judiciary for suspected malfeasance over the eleven postwar legislatures spanning the years from 1948 to 1994. Our work aims to enhance understanding of the electoral consequences of political corruption, and more generally the underpinnings of accountability in democratic polities. Our dataset, which we believe is unique in scope and depth, allows systematic empirical investigation into the political consequences of suspected corruption over many legislatures. It contains information on all persons elected to the Italian lower house between 1948 and 1994, as well as on all requests by the judiciary to remove parliamentary immunity in order to proceed with investigations for suspected criminal wrongdoing. Since these requests number in the thousands, we have a sizeable pool of alleged malefactors.
We employ a survival analysis and logistic regressions to investigate whether deputies charged with malfeasance are more or less likely than their counterparts not so charged to enjoy reelection. Our basic result is that judicial proceedings against a deputy for other than minor transgressions do indeed significantly lower the probability of reelection, by about 7 percent. Thus, judicial allegations of wrongdoing hurt the political careers of elected national officials. This provides evidence that voters consider legislative malfeasance worthy of electoral retribution.

However, these allegations of involvement in illegal activities do not uniformly impose politically catastrophic consequences. Our finding that members of parliament are less likely to be reelected when their misdeeds are made public is qualified in two ways. First, when we break these findings down by legislative period, we find that in only two legislatures in our dataset —the Seventh (1976-1979) and the Eleventh (1992-1994) — is a charge of corruption negatively associated with the probability of reelection. In the other nine postwar legislatures, the effect is either statistically indistinguishable from zero, or — in the first two postwar legislatures (1948-1956) — is actually positive. Second, even when a deputy is charged with a potentially serious crime, he is nonetheless likely to be reelected to national office. Those charged with malfeasance enjoy greater than even reelection rates, or 51 percent compared with the 58 percent for their honest counterparts.

What does this imply about the willingness of Italian voters to throw the rascals out? Our data document that Italian electors tolerated what we believe must be unusually high levels of suspected illegality among national legislative officials for forty years before the system collapsed. The collapse, moreover, was triggered mainly by
independent, relentless judicial investigations, and only secondarily by changes in voting behavior (Golden 2004b).

To the extent that Italians in the second half of the twentieth century tolerated illegality among public officials, they did so, however, at rates not much different than their American counterparts. Peters and Welch (1980) document that candidates to the US House of Representatives charged with corruption are likely to be reelected to public office, although they suffer losses of 6 to 11 percent in their expected vote shares depending on whether they are Democratic or Republican. Dimock and Jacobson (1995) estimate that the ultimate impact of the 1992 House bank scandal, when legislators were exposed as having written bad checks and which resulted in the greatest turnover in the US House of Representatives in 40 years, was to reduce incumbents’ vote shares by 5 percent (p. 1157). The survival rate of those implicated in bad check writing was 80 percent, compared with 98 percent of those with no overdrafts (p. 1133). Similarly, our data show that Italian deputies affiliated with Christian Democracy (DC) and with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) — the only two parties for which we currently have complete information on the numbers of individual votes received — for whom the judiciary request a removal of immunity on potentially serious criminal charges (a subset of total requests that excludes charges involving slander, libel, and related crimes) lose 3 percent in their share of preference votes and 8 percent if they are charged repeatedly during the same legislature, but typically go on to get reelected. In other words, our Italian findings are strikingly similar to those observed for the US. The unusually high levels of political corruption Italy experienced in the postwar era were therefore not due to substantially
different behavior on the part of voters when confronted with allegedly criminal political representatives.

This, we believe, should give pause for thought, especially to those of us who might have suspected that the unusually high levels of political corruption characteristic of postwar Italy stemmed from some peculiarly Italian cultural proclivity for criminality. Italian voters appear only slightly more tolerant of illegal activities by their political representatives than American voters. But Italian politicians appear to engage with substantially greater frequency in criminal wrongdoing. This naturally raises the question, to which we return in our concluding section, of just how the rate of political corruption seen in postwar Italy became so high if it did not arise from any unusual patterns of electoral behavior.

Our paper proceeds as follows. We first provide an overview of our dataset, including descriptive details about allegations of illegal behavior by deputies during the postwar era and information about some characteristics of charges and of those charged. Section 3 details the statistical techniques of analysis we employ and presents results. A fourth section pulls together and interprets our findings. A concluding section speculates about their comparative implications.

**Political Corruption among Italian Deputies**

Over the forty-five years that comprise our dataset, and that Italians call “the First Republic,” Italy elected eleven legislatures and 6,800 deputies.¹ Because many deputies held office repeatedly, only 2,923 different individuals filled these 6,800 parliamentary

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¹ Legislature I sat 574 deputies, Legislature II sat 590, and Legislature III sat 596. The remaining legislatures each sat 630 representatives. These numbers ignore substitutes, who may have taken office mid-term due to death or the resignation of an incumbent.
seats in the lower house during the 45-year period. Over the course of these eleven legislatures, the Ministry of Justice transmitted to parliament 3,149 official documents requesting the removal of parliamentary immunity from members of the lower house in order to proceed with investigations into possible criminal wrongdoing — or more than the number of individuals who served as deputies! These requests, known as richieste di autorizzazioni a procedere (RAP), form the basic information that we analyze in this paper. Many deputies were charged more than once, either within the life of the same legislature or in different legislatures, so that in total, 1,588 individual deputies (or 54 percent of all deputies) were charged at least once during the eleven legislatures we study. This is a presumably extraordinarily high figure for an assembly of elected representatives in a wealthy democratic society.

Many RAP, however, were relatively trivial, involving allegations that arise naturally in the life of a professional politician. Following on a study by Ricolfi (1993) of RAP lodged during Legislature XI, we class charges as either “minor” crimes (which we also call “opinion” crimes in what follows) or “major” (the latter we also label “serious,” “malfeasance” or, more bluntly, “corruption.”) We class as minor all charges involving opinion crimes, because these are especially likely to arise during the process of political campaigning. These include libel, slander, defamation, and related items. We class as serious all other crimes. These involve a whole variety of allegations, from the somewhat mundane to the genuinely severe. A great many involve explicit

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2 The dataset we use is available from Golden 2004a.
3 A single RAP may name multiple deputies (in which case, our dataset records the RAP once for each deputy named) and a single RAP may list multiple statutes from the penal code.
4 That comparable information on numbers of criminal charges against legislators in other nations is not available suggests such charges are infrequent elsewhere.
5 We code as opinion crimes charges that list articles from the Italian penal code numbers 269, 272, 278, 286, 290, 303, 385, 340, 341, 342, 403, 405, 595, and 596, as well as anything related to fascist activities. We are grateful to Davide Petrini for help with this classification.
allegations of political corruption, involvement in illegal party financing, or abuse of office. In the Eleventh Legislature, for instance, the modal allegation was “violazione norme finanziamento pubblico dei partiti,” with “abuso di ufficio” and “corruzione per un atto contrario ai doveri di ufficio” running close behind (Ricolfi, 1993, p. 24, table 3). But as we have argued elsewhere (Golden and Chang 2001), precisely because it was so difficult to strip parliamentarians of their immunity — doing so required a majority vote by the relevant chamber — and because parliamentarians were aware that they were likely to be protected by their colleagues from prosecution, almost any crime could involve elements of abuse of office. The difficulty in successfully prosecuting a member of parliament must have encouraged wrongdoing; unlike ordinary citizens, Deputies and Senators were largely protected from the legal consequences of breaking the law. As a result, parliamentarians may have been encouraged to commit offenses knowing they would not be stripped of their parliamentary immunity for minor acts — or even, in most cases, for major ones. In such an environment, any classification that interprets “corruption” simply as pocketing public monies or accepting illegal campaign contributions is excessively narrow.

Of the 1,588 deputies charged over the eleven legislatures, 1,192 had RAP lodged against them for serious crimes and 649 for minor (opinion) crimes. (Of course, some deputies were charged with serious offense and with minor crimes at different times.) The rate of alleged criminality among Italy’s postwar legislators is, using the somewhat stricter definition that excludes opinion charges, 41 percent. It goes without saying that this is still an unusually high figure.
The RAP reflect allegations of wrongdoing, not convictions. As far as we are aware, data on convictions are not available. In any event, we know that they are few, and that most deputies charged with wrongdoing over the postwar era were never convicted. Given that, how do we know the RAP accurately capture malfeasance among elected representatives, and not only judicial activism or perhaps merely judicial prejudice? Do we have any way to estimate the “real” incidence of political corruption? How much error are our data likely to encompass?

These are important questions, to which we offer a variety of answers. No single answer will satisfy all, but we hope that taken together, they will cumulatively reassure appropriately skeptical readers that our data on the number of deputies accused of corruption: (i) do not contain systematic biases; and (ii) are appropriate for the purposes for which we use them. Our answers to these questions are threefold:

1) First, if charges against deputies are mainly a function of judicial zeal, not “real” malfeasance, we might see a high correlation between the two types of charges — charges for minor and serious crimes — across electoral districts and legislative periods. Where charges mainly reflect judicial activism, the judiciary might be expected to manufacture many charges as possible, both serious and trivial. In fact, however, the correlation coefficient between the numbers of these two classes of charges over electoral districts and legislatures is +.54, which is high but not, to our eyes, so high that we suspect

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6 The Chamber failed to lift immunity for most deputies; see the data presented in Cazzola, 1988, p. 113. In the postwar era through 1987, only about 20 percent of RAP were conceded by the Chamber, thereby allowing the judiciary to proceed. An even smaller proportion would have gone to trial.

7 Accusations that the Italian judiciary is partisan in its pattern of allegations may be found in Burnett and Mantovani 1998.

8 The judicial office in a specific area of Italy investigates alleged criminal activities that occur only within its jurisdiction. There are 29 judicial districts across the Italian territory. The constitution requires the public prosecutor to open an investigation if criminal wrongdoing is suspected.
that charges are mainly a function of judicial zeal. We present additional
evidence, below, to document that the two types of charges do not run
together temporally.

2) Second, we incorporate a measure of judicial activism and effectiveness into
our statistical analysis as a control. The measure is the annual average length
of civil trials in the lower courts. Data are only available from 1970 onwards,
so we can effectively control only for the period since 1970; that is, we
necessarily exclude the first four legislative periods in specifications that
include this variable. Including it does not fundamentally affect our statistical
results, and provides some reassurance that the RAP reflect genuine
malfeasance not merely judicial zeal.

3) Finally, our purpose here is to study how judicial investigations and public
allegations of corruption affect the political careers of elected officials. Due
to an absence of data, we remain necessarily agnostic about whether officials
are guilty, and focus instead on whether investigations carry with them
electoral consequences. The information that a RAP has been lodged against
a deputy is a matter of public record, so voters have access to that fact.9 Our
study aims to assess whether the electorate, once information is released
implicating a deputy in wrongdoing, exacts electoral retribution.

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9 Ricolfi (1993, p. 166, fn. 5) reports that the Italian equivalent of the Associated Press (the Agenzia
Nazionale Stampa Associata, or ANSA) in fact reported only approximately one RAP in four during the
life of the XI Legislature. However, the number of RAP lodged during the XI Legislature was, as we detail
shortly, truly exceptional, and the press may have been too swamped to report them all. One would expect
that in other periods, political parties would publicize investigations into deputies affiliated with rival
parties using the country’s widely-read party press, and that the RAP would generally have been widely
reported. Still, it would be useful to have information on the extent to which voters were in fact aware that
their representatives were under judicial investigation. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, no
such information exists.
We therefore assume that voters take allegations seriously enough to potentially alter their votes; in other words, the logic of our inquiry assumes that deputies against whom RAP are lodged are sufficiently likely to be guilty that it would be reasonable for voters to take the RAP into consideration when deciding whether to reelect the deputy. We recognize, however (and we discuss at greater length in the concluding section to this paper) that there are many reasons that voters may legitimately believe that accusations of corruption do not warrant a withdrawal of political support from the deputy.

**Some Descriptions of the Data**

We turn now to some initial descriptions of our data. In Figure 1, we show the proportions of deputies charged with minor crimes and with serious malfeasance by legislature. Three aspects of the data are worthy of note. First, smaller proportions of deputies are charged with minor (opinion) crimes than with serious malfeasance for every legislature except the First. Second, the proportion of deputies charged with minor crimes remains relatively constant from the Fourth Legislature onwards. From the Fourth forward, between 6 and 9 percent of deputies in each legislature are charged with minor crimes. Prior to that time, by contrast, upwards of 15 percent of deputies are charged in a single legislature. Indeed, of the 649 deputies charged with minor crimes over the eleven legislatures we study, more than a third (230) were charged during Legislature I.

Why the reduction in the number of charges for minor opinion crimes after the early postwar legislatures? In the first three postwar legislatures, charges are frequently lodged against Communist and Socialist deputies in attempts to discredit them politically with the intensification of the Cold War. In the Second Legislature, to give an example,
38 percent of deputies affiliated with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) are charged with minor crimes, a far larger proportion than are charged in any other party, and far more than the average proportion of PCI deputies so charged over the entire period (13 percent). Of the 99 deputies charged with minor crimes during Legislature II, 54 of them (55 percent) were Communist, although Communists filled only 24 percent of the seats in the Chamber at that time. The avalanche of opinion charges early in the postwar era is thus easily interpreted as an outgrowth of the early Cold War. By the Third Legislature, the number of these charges had settled down to “normal” levels.  

*Figure 1: Proportions of Deputies Charged by Class of Allegation and Legislature*

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10 While we have no data to assess this hypothesis, it seems a reasonable assumption that charges for opinion crimes were often instigated by politicians affiliated with center-right parties against their Communist and Socialist rivals in the early postwar era, whereas in later legislatures, such charges would have been instigated by politicians competing within the same party.
A third important characteristic of the data displayed in Figure 1 is that the numbers of charges for serious malfeasance display an upward trend over time, culminating in the extraordinary onslaught of judicial accusations in Legislature XI, when 35 percent of deputies were named in RAP for malfeasance. A formal test finds that legislative period is itself a highly significant and positively signed predictor of the number of deputies charged over the eleven legislative periods (or of the proportion charged — since the total size of the Chamber is almost unaltered over the eleven legislatures, raw numbers of deputies charged and proportions charged yield essentially similar results). The same is true even excluding the Eleventh Legislature. This suggests that it will be useful to consider period effects in our statistical analysis.

We find a similar pattern in the cumulative proportion of deputies charged. Figure 2 shows the proportions of deputies serving in each legislature who were charged with serious crimes in that or any preceding legislature. This information allows an initial evaluation of whether the Italian parliament was subject to increasing rates of alleged criminality among its members.
The time trends that we observe in our data resonate with earlier (non-quantitative) studies of Italian legislative malfeasance. A standard interpretation is that the Italian political class, by reinvesting the proceeds of illegal kickbacks into political campaigns, created an illicit mechanism of “natural selection,” driving out of public life those who failed to engage in such tactics (Pizzorno 1992, p. 36). Thus far, our data do not reject this interpretation. Over time, Italy’s Chamber of Deputies was increasingly populated by legislators suspected of engaging in illegal activities.

We now examine patterns of charges for serious crimes by legislators affiliated with governing parties and those representing parties of the opposition. Figure 3 shows the numbers of deputies who are charged divided into government and opposition, where
“government” is defined as deputies elected to any party holding ministerial posts at any time during the life of the legislature. The data show a reversal in the identity of the accused over the postwar era. In the first part of the period, parliamentarians affiliated with opposition parties were much more likely than those affiliated with the governing parties to be incriminated by the judiciary. By the Sixth Legislature (seated in 1972), the pattern had switched, and deputies in governing parties — dominated by Christian Democracy, and including three small centrist parties, as well as the Socialists by that time — were more frequently charged. We also compared the proportions (not just absolute numbers) of deputies charged by government and opposition, and we reached exactly the same conclusion. These data suggest that we will want to control for the partisan identity of the accused in examining the effects of charges of malfeasance on incumbency.

Even without suffering loss of office, in an open-list system of proportional representation deputies may lose individual (so-called preference) votes because of electoral retribution for alleged criminality. For the moment, we have complete information on preference votes for only two parties, Christian Democracy and the Socialists. Our data, which necessarily exclude deputies serving in Legislature XI (because the electoral system was modified from pure PR to a mixed-member system beginning with elections to Legislature XII, and preference votes abolished) show that Christian Democratic and Socialist deputies who are charged with serious criminal activities suffer a 3 percent loss in the number of individual votes they receive, whereas DC and PSI deputies who are not charged with illegal activities typically gain 15 percent in the number of preference votes they receive from one election to the next. The gains
presumably reflect successful cultivation of political clienteles and extensive constituency service. Preference votes are politically important both because they order the candidates who will be seated in parliament from each multimember district (whereas the number of party list votes determines the seats allocated each party) and because they are used within parties to allocate resources and influence.

Figure 3: Numbers of Deputies Charged with Serious Offenses in Government and Opposition Parties by Legislature

Over the eleven legislatures we study, an average of 57 percent of deputies are reelected into the subsequent legislature. This is a comparatively low proportion. In the United States, 90 percent of incumbents stand for reelection, and more than 90 percent of them win (Jacobson 2004, p. 23). In Japan, which Reed characterizes as having “one of the lowest incumbent reelection rates in the industrialized world” (Reed forthcoming, p. 15), 82 percent of incumbents were reelected between 1963 and 1990. These figures
show that turnover in Italy’s Chamber of Deputies was relatively low even before the Eleventh Legislature saw the collapse of the postwar party system and the almost complete replacement of the country’s political elite.

What is the political fate of those charged with malfeasance? Figure 4 shows the proportion of deputies in each legislature who are reelected in the subsequent period, separating deputies into those against whom RAP for serious crimes are lodged and their uninvestigated counterparts. Over the forty years that we study, the average reelection rate for those investigated by the judiciary for serious malfeasance is 51 percent, whereas it is 58 percent for those investigated for minor crimes and for those not subject to any formal judicial inquiry. All national legislators have a good chance of serving again in the same office, regardless of allegations of malfeasance, but those subject to allegations of serious offenses see a reduced probability of retaining public office. In the next section, we examine whether this remains true once we introduce some necessary control variables.
Figure 4: Proportions of Charged and Not Charged Deputies Reelected by Legislature (Serious Offenses Only)

Statistical Analysis of Effects of Charges on Reelection Probabilities

We seek to assess the electoral consequences of political corruption. Specifically, we ask whether legislators charged with criminal wrongdoing are more or less likely to win reelection than their opponents who are not so charged. The effects of corruption on the political fate of legislators are theoretically ambiguous under the institutional arrangements that obtained in postwar Italy. On the one hand, it is reasonable to believe that corruption hurts electorally, since voters might use elections as sanctioning devices to replace representatives believed to be engaged in malfeasance (Przeworski et al. 1999). On the other hand, it is equally plausible that funds raised through kickbacks and other illegal payments aide dishonest legislators in subsequent electoral encounters, giving
them an electoral advantage. Various studies have documented the electoral importance of the “personal vote” in electoral systems where electoral competition takes the form of intraparty competition, such as the open-list PR system employed in pre-1994 Italy. It follows naturally that corrupt legislators might have extra campaign resources to outspend their opponents, winning more preference votes, and thereby enjoying greater likelihood of reelection. Hence, the impact of allegations of corruption on political longevity is fundamentally an empirical question.

We first employ a survival analysis to examine empirically the electoral consequences of corruption. Specifically, we use a grouped duration approach to model the underlying data generating process. Our data take the form of cross-sectional (individual legislator) time-series (eleven postwar Italian legislatures) with a binary dependent variable (BCSTS data henceforth). The unit of analysis is the incumbent in each legislature, and the binary dependent variable, \textit{REELECT}, takes the value of 1 if the incumbent wins the reelection and holds office in the next legislature. We use the two separate measures of legislative wrongdoing that we have already introduced. These are \textit{MINOR} (charged with an opinion crime) and \textit{MAJOR} (charged with a potentially major offense, often explicitly involving corruption or abuse of office). These independent variables take a value of 1 if the incumbent is charged in a given legislature and 0 if he is not. In this setup, the answer to our empirical inquiry boils down to the signs on the coefficients for \textit{MINOR} and \textit{MAJOR}. Charges hurt an incumbent if \textit{MINOR} or \textit{MAJOR} is negative, whereas allegations pay electorally if signs are positive.

\footnote{These two measures exhibit a correlation of +.18 with each other; in other words, different sets of deputies were usually charged with the two types of allegations.}
As an obviously underspecified first cut, we perform a grouped duration analysis (with a logistic link) and relate the probability of reelection for an incumbent to charges of corruption. To correct the problem resulting from temporal dependence underlying the BCSTS data, we follow Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998), and include the spell-identification natural cubic spline variables\(^{12}\) in the logit specification. We also include fixed effects for legislative period, because the preliminary analysis reported above suggests that legislative period is itself significantly associated with the numbers of deputies charged with wrongdoing. Including fixed effects for each legislative period controls for exogenous and unmeasured shocks that may affect the reelection probabilities of deputies in different legislative periods. Our results for this initial specification are reported in Table 1 under Model 1.

Table 1. Estimation Results for the Effects of Judicial Inquiry into Reelection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Major crime</td>
<td>-0.2401***</td>
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<td>-0.4491***</td>
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<td>[0.0665]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of previous terms</td>
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<td>-0.5375***</td>
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<td>Ruling party</td>
<td>0.3531***</td>
<td>0.4379***</td>
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<td>[0.0524]</td>
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<td>0.4380***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>[0.0519]</td>
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<td>Judicial efficiency</td>
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<td>0.4835***</td>
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</table>

Notes: Standard errors in brackets.
* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%
All tests are two-tailed. Coefficients for spline variables and for legislative period dummies are not reported.

\(^{12}\) These spline variables are simply the smooth function of a series of time dummy variables indicating the number of periods since the previous occurrence of the event. See Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998 for details.
As we see from the results shown in Model 1, the coefficient for our measure of serious allegations is significant and negative, whereas it is statistically insignificant (and positive) for minor charges. This naïve model estimates the overall reelection rate for all incumbents to be 57 percent. Importantly, the results suggest that a judicial investigation for a potentially serious offense decreases a legislator’s probability of reelection by 6 percent, which is a substantively meaningful reduction.

One might reasonably question the results of this simple model. We now incorporate some control variables into the model specification. First, it is reasonable to believe that deputies who control greater political resources are more likely to get reelected. To capture this, we incorporate information on deputies regarding (1) the total number of previous legislatures served; (2) whether the deputy belongs to a governing or an opposition party; and (3) whether the deputy is an elite legislator or a backbencher. For the latter, we use data on membership in the any of the parties’ various executive bodies. We expect that more terms in office, being a member of a government party, and being an elite legislator will equip a deputy with more resources, thereby increasing his reelection probability.13

We handle the issue of “repeated events” (that is, repeated reelection) with a counter variable that calculates the numbers of previous events. As argued by Box-Steffensmeier and Zorn (2002), the issue of repeated events may be consequential. In particular, when we have reason to believe that the second and subsequent events are likely to be affected by, and therefore different from, the first event, analyses that treat repeated events as independent are likely to yield misleading inferences since they

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13 In addition, we are currently collecting the data that will allow us to control for whether a deputy serves in government as either a minister or undersecretary and for the number of individual preference votes he received in the last national elections. The latter will allow us to control for prior vote margins.
overstate the amount of information each observation provides and lead to overly
optimistic standard errors.

The results of this expanded specification are reported in Model 2 of Table 1. Again, we see that the coefficient on our main independent variable of interest, our measure of major malfeasance, is negative and strongly significant. A minor charge, by contrast, is not significantly associated with reelection probabilities. The introduction of additional controls also proves useful to the model. Reelection is positively and significantly affected by membership in a government party. Party elites and longer-serving deputies are also more likely to be reelected than backbenchers. Terms in office is negatively associated with reelection probabilities, perhaps echoing findings for the US, where seniority fails to protect legislators charged with malfeasance (Peters and Welch 1980, p. 704). Importantly, our basic result remains unchanged. Deputies subjected to investigation by the judiciary for a potentially serious criminal offense see their probability of reelection reduced by 6 percent in Model 2.

Finally, one objection to the use of judicial charges as proxies for malfeasance is that the charges might reflect judicial activism rather than the frequency of genuinely corrupt or illegal activities. To separate out the effects of judicial activism, we include the average length of judicial processes in the lower courts as a control variable.\footnote{Other studies that have used this variable include Bianco, Jappelli, and Pagano forthcoming; Fabbi 2001; and Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales 2002.} We have reaggregated the measure from Italy’s 29 judicial districts to its 32 electoral districts. This variable captures the relative efficiency of a notoriously highly variable judiciary; we believe it is reasonable to assume that judicial activism is tightly linked to the degree of overall judicial efficiency. Because the data on judicial efficiency are available only
from 1970 onwards, however, including this variable means we lose information on the first five postwar legislatures. Results of this specification appear in Table 1 as Model 3.

Judicial activism is significantly related to the probability of reelection, but the sign on the coefficient suggests that deputies elected from areas of the country with a more efficient judiciary enjoy greater, not lesser, probabilities of reelection, all else equal. Results for our other controls remain similar to those already examined in Model 2. Our estimation of the effect of serious judicial charges is even more substantively important than in the previous two models. Investigation for a potentially serious crime reduces the probability of reelection quite substantially (11 percent) in this specification, whereas charges involving libel and slander effect no electoral retribution.

We now use logistic regression analysis to examine the impact of accusations of minor and major offenses legislature by legislature. One reason to do this is because of trending in the data. We effectively remove the impact of trending by decomposing our analyses into legislative periods. For instance, voters may have gradually developed a preference for new representatives as they became politically more sophisticated over the forty years we study; or the judiciary may have become increasingly more adept at gathering potentially incriminating evidence against members of parliament. By estimating the impact of charges of wrongdoing legislature by legislature, we effectively handle such changes over time.

Our results are presented in Table 2.
Table 2. Estimation Results for the Effects of Judicial Inquiry into Reelection by Legislative Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leg I</th>
<th>Leg II</th>
<th>Leg III</th>
<th>Leg IV</th>
<th>Leg V</th>
<th>Leg VI</th>
<th>Leg VII</th>
<th>Leg VIII</th>
<th>Leg IX</th>
<th>Leg X</th>
<th>Leg XI</th>
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<td>Major crime</td>
<td>1.1917***</td>
<td>0.4460*</td>
<td>0.1394</td>
<td>0.0777</td>
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<td>-0.4744*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minor crime</td>
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<td>0.2038</td>
<td>0.3156</td>
<td>-0.3496</td>
<td>0.7338**</td>
<td>-0.1448</td>
<td>-0.2828</td>
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<td>0.7755***</td>
<td>0.8302***</td>
<td>0.4776***</td>
<td>0.7702***</td>
<td>0.2195</td>
<td>0.8331***</td>
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<td>Party elite</td>
<td>0.5815***</td>
<td>0.6350***</td>
<td>1.1261***</td>
<td>0.5218***</td>
<td>0.6202***</td>
<td>0.7618***</td>
<td>0.7584***</td>
<td>0.9774***</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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<td>-0.4050</td>
<td>0.2013</td>
<td>0.5159</td>
<td>-0.7071*</td>
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<td>0.1152</td>
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<td>-0.0736</td>
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<td>637</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standard errors in brackets.
* significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%
All tests are two-tailed.
Results from the eleven legislative periods confirm the importance of affiliation with the parties of government and elite status in the party apparatus for reelection. These two variables are statistically significant in most legislatures. We can interpret them as documenting the importance of control of government and party resources for retaining public office. Note, however, that party elites no longer enjoy reelection advantages starting in Legislature IX, and that deputies in the parties of government are actually more likely to lose office in the final legislative period. We interpret this as evidence that the electorate finally turned on the parties that had governed Italy uninterrupted since the end of World War II. Finally, being charged with a minor crime does not significantly affect reelection probabilities for deputies in any legislative period.

Our key independent variable, MAJOR, emerges as statistically significant in only two of the eleven legislatures — the Seventh and the Eleventh — thereby qualifying our earlier results in important ways. In Legislature VII, being charged with a potentially serious offense is associated with a 13 percent reduction in the probability of reelection, and in Legislature XI, the same type of charge is associated with a 7 percent reduction in the probability of reelection. We offer a preliminary interpretation of these results in the following section.

Our analysis also finds that deputies who are investigated by the Ministry of Justice for malfeasance experience somewhat longer terms in office than their purportedly honest counterparts. We intend to investigate whether this is true because they are more likely to control political resources and to be politically influential. For
now, it speaks to concerns raised by students of American politics in their attempts to untangle the effects of campaign spending. As Jacobson (2004) has noted in that context:

For incumbents, spending a great deal of money on a campaign is a sign of weakness rather than strength. In fact, the more money they spend on the campaign, the worse they do on election day. That is, the relationship between the incumbent’s level of spending and share of the votes or likelihood of victory is negative (p. 44).

We face similar problems analyzing the impact of allegations of malfeasance on electoral performance: we have no way of knowing whether the allegations themselves reflect an underlying political weakness that is subsequently also picked up in the electoral performance of the incumbent. The reason this might be the case is that so many allegations involve abuse of campaign finance legislation, meaning that the very nature of the charges raises the distinct possibility that incumbents who were doing badly politically used their offices to extort or extract kickbacks in order to raise campaign funds, were then investigated by the judiciary for these illegal practices, and finally suffered electoral losses — not because of the allegations, but because of other causes that provided the incentives to raise campaign funds illegally in the first place. That deputies investigated for corruption go on to enjoy more terms in the legislature leads us to believe that these representatives may well not have suffered from some other underlying political weakness, but we are continuing to explore these issues.

**Interpretation and Theoretical Implications**

How can we interpret the fact that Italian voters “threw the rascals out” in only two of eleven legislatures? Only in the Seventh and the Eleventh Legislatures did deputies charged with malfeasance suffer statistically significant losses in the probability of
reelection. How could Italians allow themselves to be governed for four decades by an
elected political class that engaged, often repeatedly, in illegal activities?

The most striking characteristic of the Seventh and Eleventh Legislatures is the
shift in location on the political spectrum by Italy’s largest opposition party, the Italian
Communist Party (PCI) that occurred in these two legislatures, and only in them.
Legislature VII witnessed the government of “national solidarity,” when the PCI was part
of a broad governing coalition, albeit without ministerial posts. Legislature XI occurred
after the fall the of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the refoundation
of the PCI as the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS). In other words, voters appear
prepared to repudiate corrupt legislators only when the major opposition is politically
acceptable.

This flags the importance of what is known as the quality of the challenger. Even
in multimember districts, where candidates of the same party compete with each other for
preference votes, they ultimately compete with other parties for seats. In this context, the
“challenger” is not an individual but an alternate party list. And considerable research
into incumbency advantage in the US identifies the quality of the opposition as one
essential factor affecting reelection rates. Research into the 1992 House bank scandal, for
instance, verified that “the electoral impact of issues potentially damaging to incumbents
depends to a large extent on how effectively challengers are able to exploit them in
campaigns” (Jacobson and Dimock 1994, p. 604). Legislators may survive many an
accusation and scandal if the opposition is inept, or politically illegitimate, but are less
likely to do so when the opposition constitutes a politically acceptable replacement. And
the PCI was politically acceptable to many Italian voters only when it broke with its
communist heritage and relocated towards the center of the political spectrum.

**Conclusions and Comparative Implications**

Over the postwar era as a whole, we observe consistently high rates of alleged
malfeasance among Italian national political representatives. On average, about a quarter
of the members of the legislature is, at any one time, under investigation by the judiciary
for allegations of wrongdoing, either major or minor. What explains this extraordinary
pattern of criminality among Italy’s political elite?

Elsewhere, we have identified some aspects of the Italian political system that we
believe contributed to the unusually high rates of corruption among elected officials
observed there (Golden and Chang 2001; Chang and Golden forthcoming). Italy’s open-
list system of proportional representation, in combination with relatively large district
magnitudes (averaging twenty representatives per district) established incentives that
encouraged politicians to engage in corruption. In this paper, we have begun to
incorporate the voter into the story. We find no evidence that Italian voters behave
differently when faced with purportedly criminal political representatives than voters
elsewhere. All voters appear surprisingly tolerant of such behavior. Set within a
comparative frame of reference, our analysis leads us to the conclusion that Italian
political institutions, not voters, were mainly responsible for the widespread political
corruption observed there.

To us, however, this raises normatively troubling aspects to any theory of political
accountability. We see little empirical evidence that democratically elected politicians
are held individually accountable by voters. The theory of retrospective sociotropic
voting (Ferejohn 1986), which provides the theoretical bedrock for democratic accountability, does not require this, however. Instead, the theory requires that voters evaluate incumbents on the basis of aggregate performance characteristics, such as how well the economy is generally doing. In this framework, politicians may extract high rents so long as overall performance is adequate.
References Cited


