Responsiveness to Corruption:

Evidence from U.S. Local Governments

Elizabeth Mitchell Elder*

Hoover Institution, Stanford University

emelder@stanford.edu

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between local government corruption and public perceptions of corruption in the United States. I present a new dataset on local government corruption which contains case-level geographic and career information about government officials implicated in corrupt practices. I then use granular data on public opinion about local governments to measure the responsiveness of citizen perceptions actual corruption. Public opinion is weakly responsive to variation in corruption. These results provide important descriptive context and initial explanatory findings on the understudied area of local government corruption in the United States.

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1 Introduction

In 2007, Cuyahoga County, Ohio was home to one of the largest local government corruption probes in recent United States history. Over the next six years more than 70 people were convicted as part of "Operation Airball" and the investigation that led to it—the first, a construction manager who paid $6,000 to building inspectors to expedite a project's approval; the last, a county engineer's office employee who planned debauched trips to facilitate tens of thousands of dollars in bribes to powerful county officials. The two men at the top of the corruption ring, Jimmy Dimora and Frank Russo, were respectively sentenced to 28 and 14 years in prison (Heisig 2018; U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of Ohio 2013).

In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, 150 hundred miles to the southeast, conditions were far different. Both Allegheny and Cuyahoga counties had about 1.2 million residents. But in Allegheny County, a total of two people were charged by federal prosecutors with crimes related to local government corruption between 2007 and 2012, compared to Cuyahoga's 91. Even setting aside the years with the major Cuyahoga probe, the Ohio county was home to more than four times as many local government corruption charges as the Pennsylvania county between 2000 and 2020.

What explains such stark differences in corruption charges between local governments? This question has been difficult to approach in an American context due to a dearth of data. The highest-quality administrative data, from the Department of Justice, cannot be disaggregated below the district court, and existing measures based on media reports are imprecise and likely incomplete.

This paper introduces a dataset that connects every federally-prosecuted case of local

government corruption to an individual local government and the official(s) involved. This allows the measurement of local government corruption at the level of individual cities, counties, and other government bodies. Using this dataset, I describe the kinds of officials involved in these corruption cases and the nature of their misconduct, as well as the geographic distribution of corruption. The current paper presents a pilot version of the dataset, limited to the states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky.

This data suggests strikingly high rates of local government corruption in a few large counties—including those containing Gary, IN, Cleveland, OH, and Philadelphia, PA—and in a collection of small, isolated places in Kentucky and West Virginia. Public safety officials, including police officers, are the kind of government employee most heavily represented in these cases. The most common forms of misconduct include embezzlement and bribery.

Criminal prosecutions are an important way elected officials are held accountable for misconduct. But citizens, too, have a role to play: if citizens accurately perceive the corruption in their governments, those in places with greater problems may demand policies or vote for politicians that limit the misuse of public office. However, citizen perceptions of corruption cross-nationally do not always closely track with other measures.

To explore the relationship between observed corruption and citizen perceptions, I conducted a survey of the pilot region. Americans who live in counties with more corruption between 2000 and 2020 do perceive their officials to be slightly more corrupt than those who live elsewhere. However, the size of this relationship is modest.

Residents of more corrupt counties are distinctive in other ways. They are slightly more willing to accept a corrupt official's misbehavior is performing well on other dimensions, and they may be more likely to engage in conspiratorial thinking. Their trust in government,

though, is no lower than among people who live elsewhere. These patterns in public opinion bear further investigation.

These findings suggest that localities, large and small, vary greatly in their levels of official corruption. Residents of Cleveland have experienced less honest governance over the past 20 years than those of Pittsburgh. That citizens are aware of these stark differences, though, and eager to hold these officials accountable, is less clear. These data will enable future research on the sources of variation in corruption across places and the ways citizens incorporate it into their views of those who govern them.

2 Measuring Corruption

Corruption can be broadly defined as the misuse of public office for private gain. Scholars interested in measuring corruption can draw on several possible kinds of data, each of which captures a different facet of this broad concept.

The most common way to measure to corruption in a place is to simply ask people how corrupt it is. These survey-based measures of corruption vary on two key dimensions: their informants of interest (mass public vs. experts) and their target (perceptions or experiences of corruption). While mass and elite perceptions of corruption often correlate well with one another (Charron 2016), experiences and perceptions of corruption are often only weakly related (Mishler and Rose 2008; Seligson 2006; Semukhina and Reynolds 2014).

Surveys of the mass public in a country can reveal how much its residents trust public officials to conduct themselves with integrity, or how much they feel corrupt government officials affect their daily life. Some such surveys ask respondents about how much corruption

they perceive in their area, using questions like "how big of a problem do you think corruption is in your area?" or "if someone offered a public official in your area a bribe, how likely do you think it is that they'd accept?" These kinds of questions capture subjective perceptions and seem to be based largely on symbolic concerns, media accounts, high-profile cases, and approval of the system overall (Agerberg 2022; Lancer Julnes and Villoria 2014; Melgar, Rossi, and Smith 2010; Van de Walle 2008; Villoria, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2013). Thus, they may be more usefully thought of as capturing levels of trust or legitimacy in governments rather than the actual frequency of corruption (Morris 2008).

While residents of a country have direct experience with public officials, their attitudes may be colored by local norms about what kind of behavior is "corrupt," which could make comparisons across polities difficult. An alternative approach is to ask experts in or on an area how corrupt they perceive the area to be (e.g. PRS Group 2022). Experts are better equipped to apply specific, clearly-defined standards of what constitutes corruption. Experts may also observe corruption that is not visible to everyday citizens, as in the Boylan and Long 2003 survey of state house reporters.

Another approach is to directly measure corrupt behavior by asking respondents (e.g. regular people or business owners) whether they have paid a bribe recently (see Transparency International 2021). This is not very useful in low-corruption contexts where few, if any, respondents in a typical sample will have directly paid bribes, and it only captures one particular form of "petty" corruption. In studies of developed democracies that allow citizens to specify what comes to mind when they think of corruption, they often cite other kinds of conduct, including both grand corruption and legal but unsavory forms of favoritism (Bauhr et al. 2010; McCann and Redlawsk 2006). So, at least in some contexts, these experience-

based measures of bribes may not be well-suited to capturing the breadth of corruption citizens are concerned about.

Survey measures are invaluable for researchers interested in understanding the day-to-day experience of corruption among citizens or the extent to which a country's political system is generally seen as fair. Virtually all cross-national research uses survey measures of one form or another, as other measures are impractical to collect cross-nationally and/or are not comparable between places. For example, if two countries have different standards for prosecuting corruption, researchers cannot meaningfully compare levels of corruption based on counting those countries' prosecutions. For research focusing on a single country, though—like here, the United States—other measures are available. These measures can capture identified instances of corruption rather than general perceptions of its commonness.

It is sometimes possible to identify corruption in procurement processes for public resources using financial records. For example, Di Tella and Schargrodsky 2003 calculates the gap between the estimated cost of infrastructure projects and their actual cost, showing that residents of Indonesian villages may be weakly aware of the levels of corruption in these projects. Reinikka and Svensson 2004 calculates the gap between aid money given to schools in Uganda and that actually spent on those schools. These measures are fine-grained and very useful for measuring local variation, though they are limited to particular kinds of expenditures and corruption.

Other researchers measure corruption by counting stories in news media (see, e.g., Dincer and Johnston 2017; Glaeser and Goldin 2004). Many important instances of corruption appear in media reports: official misconduct is an important area of investigation for local newspapers especially. However, for an instance of corruption to be reported in news media,

several preconditions must be present. There must be a news organization in the area the corruption occurs. The news organization must be sufficiently independent that they can report the news without fear of retribution. And, the corruption must be interesting enough to their audience to merit reporting. These conditions are not always met—for example, in a news desert, or in a rural area where corruption is commonplace and local power structures are strong. News attention to corruption may also be higher in places where it is less acceptable or widespread. News reports, then, are most useful as a measure of *public attention* to corruption rather than the frequency with which it occurs.

Finally, in some places, it is possible to obtain records on cases of corruption that are pursued in the judicial system. The U.S. Department of Justice's Public Integrity Section, for example, publishes reports on the number of corruption cases they pursue each year (see, e.g, Alt and Lassen 2010; Glaeser and Saks 2006). Not all actions that might meet a citizen or expert's definition of "corruption" constitute crimes, and not all criminal acts are uncovered by the legal system. However, these records are the most comprehensive source of individual instances of corruption available in the United States. This is the data source I draw on here.

Different measures of corruption do not always correlate well with one another, or with other variables of interest. For example, Treisman 2007 reports that national-level survey measures of perceived and experienced corruption are associated with different outcomes, while Goel and Nelson 2011 use data on U.S. states to show the same result with prosecution, survey, and media-based measures. This is not necessarily surprising; circumstances that lead citizens to report day-to-day experiences of corruption may not result in criminal prosecution, and vice versa. By measuring prosecutions here, I am capturing the rate at which local

officials engage in severe, observable misconduct. This measure sets aside public perceptions and attention to focus on specific acts that meet standard criteria for criminal behavior.

3 Legal Data on Public Corruption

Nearly all cases of public corruption in the United States are handled by federal courts, regardless of the level of government in which they occur. This was not always the case—historically, corruption among local and state officials was often dealt with in local or state courts, to predictably mixed results (Maass Jr 1987). Since the establishment of the Department of Justice's Public Integrity section in 1976, though, these cases have come almost wholly under federal government control; A. S. Cordis and Milyo 2016 estimate that the DOJ prosecutes nearly 95% of cases of government corruption that go to court in the United States today.

The Department of Justice keeps records of the cases referred to U.S. attorneys by investigators, including codes designating these cases as constituting "official corruption" and whether the corruption involved federal, state, or local government officials. These cases are referred to U.S. Attorneys' offices by the agency that investigated the corruption in question, often the FBI. Regardless of whether the case is eventually pursued further, the DOJ compiles, reviews, and records these cases across its offices (Artello and J. Albanese 2019). These yearly records have been regularly requested through the Freedom of Information Act by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), a nonprofit group that has been gathering and storing records on the activities of the federal government, since 1986 (A. S. Cordis and Milyo 2016).

A case enters the TRAC-maintained records when a person is charged with a crime in a U.S. District Court by a U.S. Attorney. TRAC data on local government corruption, then, contains all instances of people charged with crimes in connection with local government corruption for several decades. This represents a major improvement over the previous most-used data source on government corruption, reports to Congress from the DOJ's Public Integrity Section. These reports suffer from serious reliability problems and cannot be disaggregated below the district level (A. Cordis and Milyo 2021; A. S. Cordis and Milyo 2016). Researchers have only recently begun to explore these rich data.

The TRAC data allows researchers to investigate the number of cases in which charges are filed by federal prosecutors, the status of those cases (i.e. whether they are pursued by prosecutors and how they are resolved), and details about their contents, including the charges filed, penalties imposed, and justice system personnel involved. This has allowed researchers to draw many useful conclusions about the nature of government corruption in the United States (e.g. Artello and J. Albanese 2019; Artello and J. S. Albanese 2020, 2022).

However, the TRAC data do not include individual information about the people being accused of corruption and their role in government, nor does it describe their particular alleged wrongdoing beyond the charge filed. Most importantly for scholars of local governments, the most granular geographic information on any case is the district in which it was filed (e.g. the Southern District of Illinois). Researchers interested in relating local government corruption to features of local areas thus cannot use the TRAC data. In this paper, I introduce a supplemental dataset that adds this information.

3.1 Supplements to the TRAC Data

To obtain more granular information about local government corruption, I link the TRAC data on court cases with information on individual local officials and the governments in which they serve. I use data from the years 2000-2020[1]. At present, this process has been initiated for a pilot group of six states: Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.

To link cases in the TRAC data to more granular information, I draw on the Public Access to Court Electronic Records database (PACER). PACER provides access to court filings that are matters of public record from all United States District Courts. Filings in PACER include information present in the TRAC data, including dates, personnel, and charges filed, as well as additional information about the individuals charged.

I, along with research assistants, used details common to both datasets to link each case of local government corruption in TRAC to an individual case record in PACER. This was possible for 96% of the individuals charged in TRAC in the pilot set. Some linkage failures occurred because there was not sufficient information to individually identify a case, sometimes because a case or some of its filings were sealed. Other times, there were no cases present in PACER that matched the details of the case in TRAC, perhaps due to errors in one record or the other[2].

Once a record in TRAC was linked with a single record in PACER, we used both the case filings in PACER and a broader set of media sources to gather further information

1. Though the data may extend further back, it is not clear whether the case categorization system was consistent before the year 2000, so the present study begins there.

2. For example, we often found filing date discrepancies of a day or two, and longer discrepancies could prevent us from locating a match.

about the case. First, we recorded the name of the person being charged, the county in which the alleged crime occurred, the name and type of the polity in which the alleged crime occurred (e.g. Adams Township, or Cleveland Metropolitan School District), and the role of the charged person in government (if any).

Importantly, we also determined whether each case constituted local government corruption, working under the definition of a public official using their office for personal gain. This is broadly the same definition used to categorize cases, and in 84% of cases, we agreed that the case constituted corruption. The remaining cases involved no government officials (e.g. a local nonprofit director defrauding a public program), involved a public official but did not involve their office (e.g. a city supervisor buying drugs), or involved only state or special district officials.

3.2 Advantages and Limitations

The remainder of the paper will rely on this dataset of DOJ prosecutions linked to PACER records and media reports. While we manually verified that every case in this data constitutes public corruption, there are instances of public corruption this data does not capture.

A drawback of relying on federally-prosecuted cases is that only crimes of a certain magnitude—those which involve a large amount of money or seriously threaten public trust—are pursued. Indeed, A. S. Cordis and Milyo 2016 find that the corruption cases pursued in state courts tend to involve lower-level employees like DMV clerks or school teachers and modest amounts of money. Though A. S. Cordis and Milyo 2016 find that these state-level instances constitute less than 5% of all corruption cases, and likely an even smaller proportion

of "significant" cases, they indicate that lower-level corruption is likely underrepresented in our data.

In addition, because U.S. Attorneys' careers advance based on high conviction rates, they largely pursue cases they feel quite sure will result in conviction (Artello and J. Albanese 2019; Rasmusen, Raghav, and Ramseyer 2009). Cases where prosecutors are unsure about the strength of their evidence—for example, if they are unsure about the extent to which witnesses will cooperate—are unlikely to be pursued very far. This is ameliorated by the fact that the DOJ data includes all cases in which charges are filed, even those the government decides later not to prosecute further, so cases need not be sure bets to be captured here.

In addition to these drawbacks, there are important advantages to these cases being investigated and prosecuted using the resources of the federal government. Legal systems in different localities have different abilities and inclinations to hold their public officials accountable. If cases were only pursued within states or localities' courts, we might be concerned about undercounting corruption in poorer jurisdictions without the capacity to investigate complicated cases. This could also undercount corruption in places where it is widely accepted, because of a lack of will to punish it, while counting it completely in places where corruption is not accepted and therefore vigorously pursued. Federal government prosecutions substantially level the playing field on both fronts.

However, inequalities likely remain in the ability of federal officials to pursue corruption cases across places. Former investigators and attorneys report cases where people adjacent to corruption are reluctant to speak out about what they have observed (Artello and J. S. Albanese 2022)—precisely in the kinds of places where corruption is so common or corrupt people so powerful that potential witnesses see little benefit and much cost to cooperating

with investigations. This means corruption may yet be undercounted in places where it is high.

Data from the legal system will also inevitably miss instances of corruption that are never brought to investigators' attention. Public corruption is almost never uncovered through routine audits or disclosures; instead, almost all cases arise through tips from investigative journalists, criminal defendants looking to make deals to lessen their sentences, and whistleblowers who are adjacent to the corruption (Artello and J. S. Albanese 2020). Relying on these incidental methods of discovering corruption ensures cases will be missed where there is no journalist, defendant, or whistleblower to report them.

In all, this data lacks some lower-level corruption and is likely to undercount corruption in some places where it is endemic. However, it has the advantage of relative uniformity in the resources and incentives available to pursue corruption cases. It also contains more detailed information about individual places and people involved in corruption than has previously been possible. For these reasons, the augmented TRAC data presented here represents an advance in scholars' ability to describe local government corruption in the United States.

4 Data and Descriptive Statistics

Between 2000 and 2020, 729 people were referred to the DOJ on 2,306 charges of local government corruption through 489 distinct cases in the pilot 6-state sample. The corruption alleged in these referrals took place across 79 counties and 147 distinct local governments.[3] I

3. These are subject to increase as the remaining cases are added. The current dataset includes all cases from the Illinois Central and Southern, Indiana Southern, Kentucky Eastern and Western, Ohio Southern, Pennsylvania Middle and Western, and West Virginia Northern and Southern districts, as well as an 81% sample of the Illinois Northern, 67% sample of the Indiana Northern, 51% sample of the Ohio Northern, and a 35% sample of the Pennsylvania Eastern. All county-level counts in unfinished districts are multiplied by

focus here on all cases in which charges are filed, even if the cases are not pursued further, to be as inclusive as possible of questionable conduct uncovered by federal investigators. This also allows the data to include recent cases in which charges had been filed, but the case was not yet resolved, at the time of the 2020 snapshot. Almost 90% of people charged were eventually convicted of at least one charge; about half of charges filed eventually resulted in convictions[4].

A total of 443 charged people have been linked to records thus far; 298 were themselves local government officials, while the remaining 143 were non-government personnel involved in government officials' activities. Non-government personnel include, for example, people who paid bribes to government officials, or people who intimidated witnesses at the behest of government officials. Figure 1 shows the composition of the public officials by features of their position and the arm of government in which they serve.

A plurality—twenty-nine percent—of local government officials referred for corruption charges were public safety personnel, including police officers, detectives, sheriffs and their deputies, correctional officers, and employees of other public safety organizations. Another twenty percent were elected officials of county and municipal governments, including mayors and city and county councilors. Many non-elected professionals referred for corruption were employed by departments related to public works, including engineers and managers at water and roads departments. Others were employed by school districts, health departments, and libraries (all categorized under social and educ. services) or by the local legal system

a factor that reflects the number of remaining cases, people, or charges to be linked.

4. Of the 2,081 individual charges resolved by the time of data collection, 1,135 resulted in convictions. Only 188 resulted in not guilty verdicts or were dismissed with prejudice, while 347 were dismissed without prejudice and 411 were resolved in another way (like the filing of a superseding indictment, or a transfer to a different district).

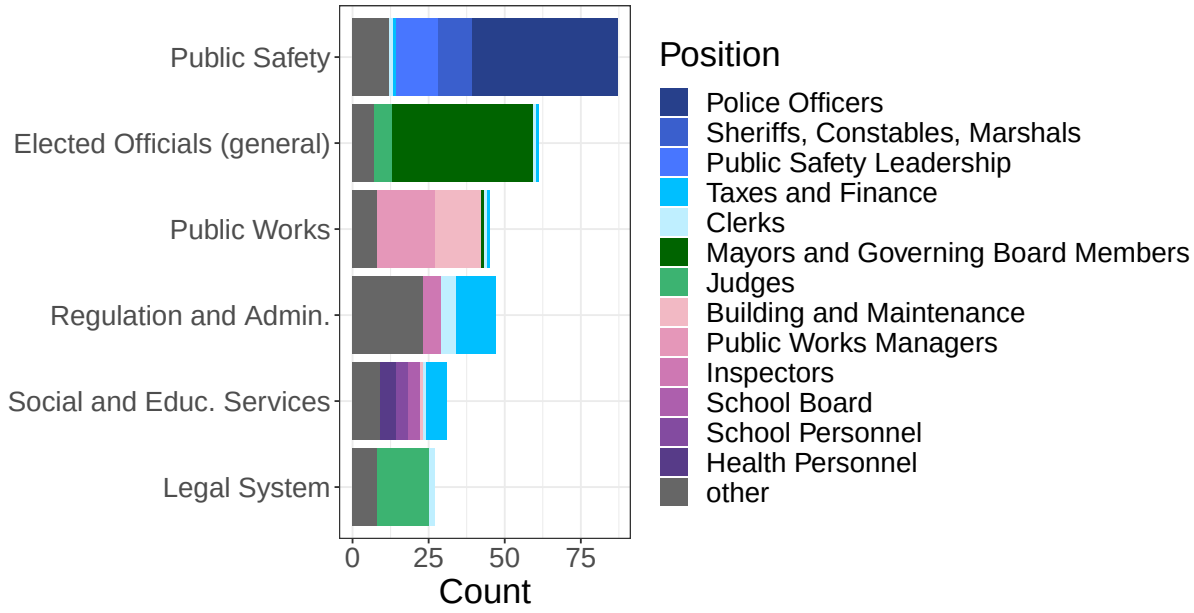

Figure 1: Roles of Local Government Officials Referred on Corruption Charges

(like judges and district attorneys). Finally, 16% occupied various tax, finance, inspection, regulation, and administration roles.

What kinds of conduct brought these officials to the attention of the legal system? Following Albanese and Artello 2019, I label each case based on the form(s) of corruption involved: receiving and/or soliciting bribes, extortion, contract fraud, embezzlement, official misconduct, obstruction of justice[5]. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the results.

Figure 2 shows that bribery and embezzlement were the most common kinds of behavior for which local government officials were charged. Bribery cases involve local officials being paid in return for voting a particular way or awarding a contract to a particular vendor (the latter being both bribery and contract fraud). Embezzlement cases include, for example, a librarian who used library funds to pay for personal expenses, and a deputy sheriff who sold

5. I found only one person referred for violation of regulatory laws. I combined the categories of soliciting and receiving bribes, as it was not always clear from available information which label applied. I categorized only the behavior of local government officials, not other people involved in the case; this therefore omits cases where, for example, the only person charged was a non-government official who offered a bribe.

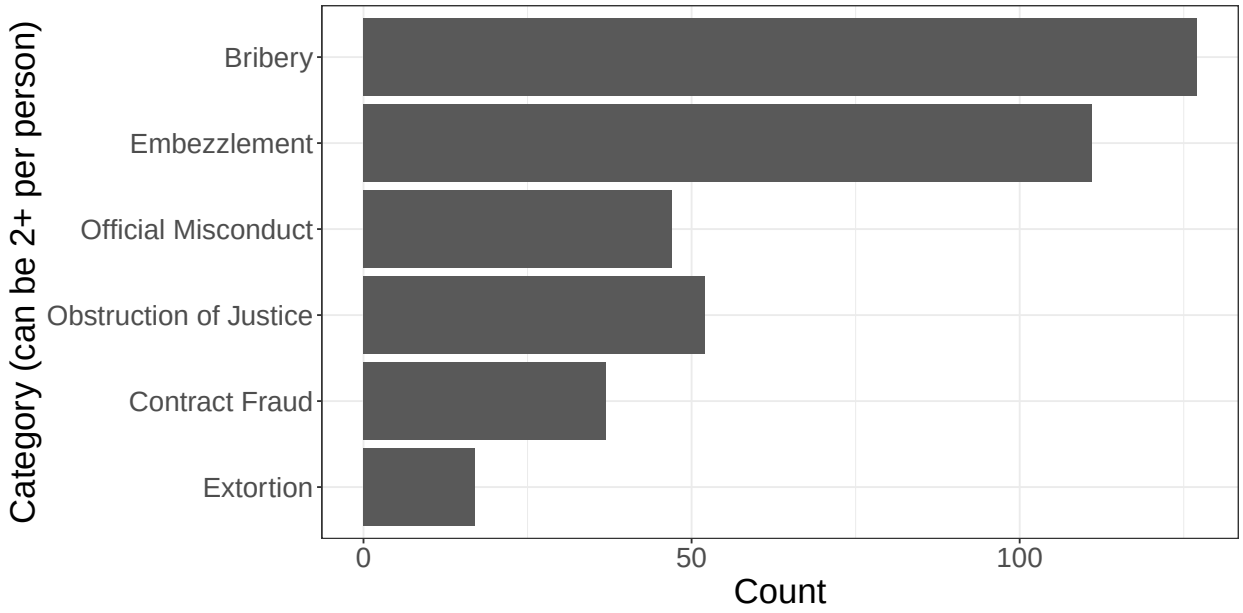

Figure 2: Type of Corrupt Behavior in Referral

ammunition purchased by the county and kept the profit for himself. Obstruction of justice largely involved tampering with witnesses or lying to investigators. In official misconduct cases, local officials abused their power to win elections (as in the city engineers who targeted road maintenance in exchange for votes in a primary election) or further other interests (as in the traffic court judge who fixed the traffic tickets of patrons in his bar). Less common were contract fraud and extortion.

I next describe the geographic distribution of these referrals. I group each case by county, then merge the by-county corruption numbers with statistics from the United States Census on the total number of residents and the total number of full-time equivalent local government employees.

Figure 3 plots three measures of local government corruption by county: the total number of people charged with local government corruption, the number of people charged per 1 million county residents, and the number of people charged per 10,000 local government

employees.

The counties with the highest total numbers of charges include, unsurprisingly, the region's largest cities: Philadelphia County (Philadelphia), Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), and Cook County (Chicago), as well as the counties containing East St. Louis (St. Clair, Illinois) and East Chicago and Gary (Lake, Indiana). But these also include several counties with smaller populations, including Berks and Luzerne Counties in Pennsylvania. The counties containing other large cities, like Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Indianapolis, have noticeably lower totals.

Adjusting the number of charges for a county's population and number of government employees produces somewhat different results than the raw counts. Philadelphia, Cuyahoga, Lake, and St. Clair counties remain high by these measures, but Cook County no longer appears especially corrupt. And a new set of counties enters the top tier: of the 19 counties with at least 51 people charged per 1 million residents, 12 are small counties in Kentucky, and 3 more are small counties in West Virginia and Indiana. For example, Fulton County, KY had a median population of about 7,000 during this period, among the smallest 5% in the region. In 2017, five people were convicted of participating in a scheme in which contractors overcharged the county for constructing a new jail, which the county jailer authorized and received kickbacks from. These five people represent a large enough proportion of the county's population to place it at the top of the rankings in corruption per capita.

This example illustrates one issue with measuring corruption in this way: because corruption referrals are not very frequent, one or two instances of corruption can matter considerably for where a county falls, especially in small counties. Of the 19 counties with 51

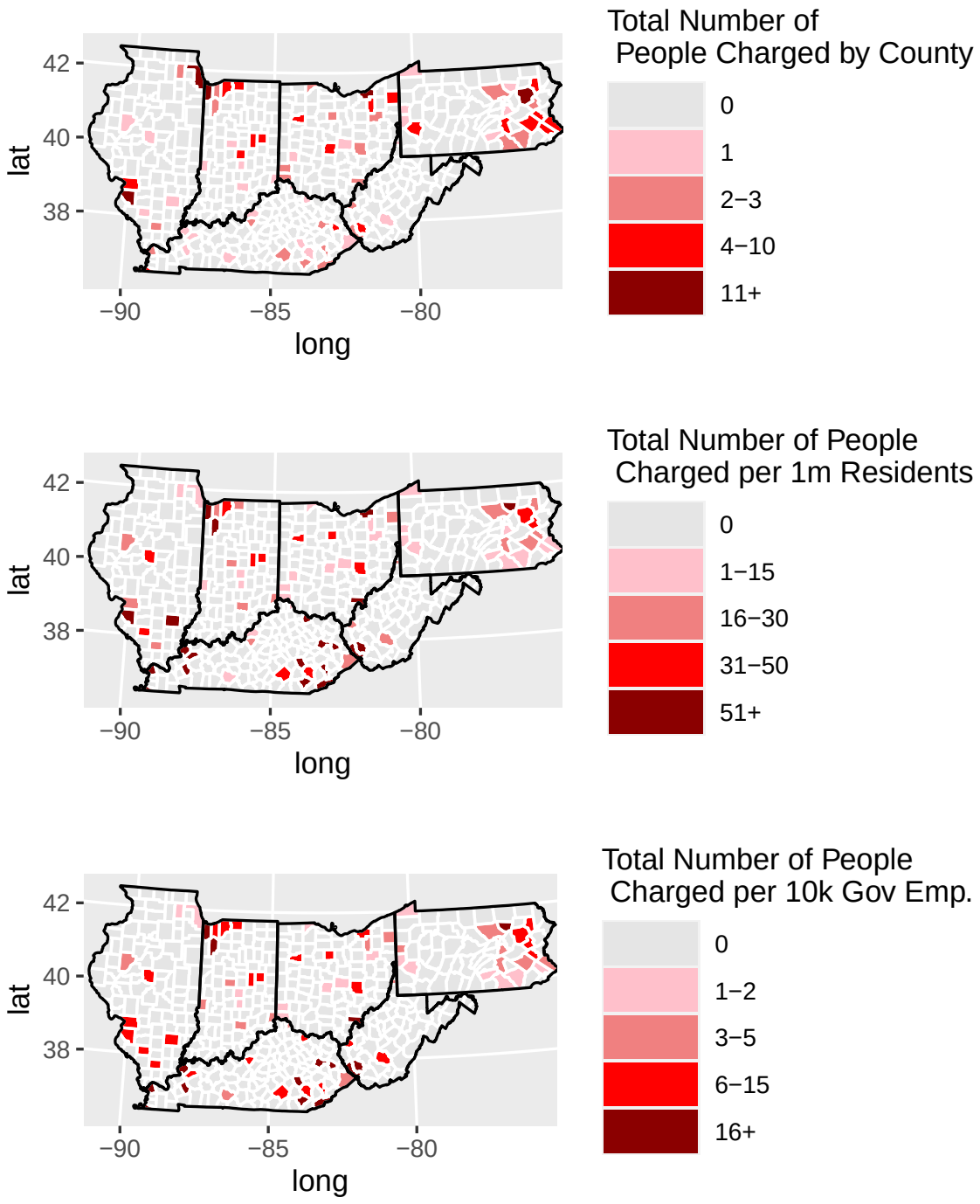

Figure 3: Charges of People for Local Government Corruption by County, 2000-2020

or more people referred per resident, only 3 have more than 4 separate cases of corruption. The data are "lumpy" even for large counties. As the example from Cuyahoga County in the introduction noted, a single investigation into the county government eventually led to more than 60 people being convicted of corruption-related crimes. As many tips that lead to corruption investigations come from people facing charges of their own (Artello and J. S. Albanese 2020), investigations like these can snowball, creating a few large waves of charges rather than a steady flow. Thus, researchers should take care in drawing conclusions about latent or general levels of corruption from only one or a few years of data.

4.1 Correlates of Corruption

When introducing a new measure, it is useful to compare it to established measures of the same construct. Because there are no existing local-level measures of government corruption in the United States, this is not possible here.

Another way to explore the linked TRAC measure is to test which other features of counties are associated with higher and lower rates of corruption. Figure 4 presents the relationship between the number of people charged with corruption in a county and other socioeconomic and political features of the county. In each case, I regress the total number of people charged with corruption per million people living in the county on the variable in question. All models are bivariate Poisson regressions, and for common plotting, all predictors are rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Points represent the coefficient on each predictor, and error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

First, some suggest that higher human capital and income in the populace decrease

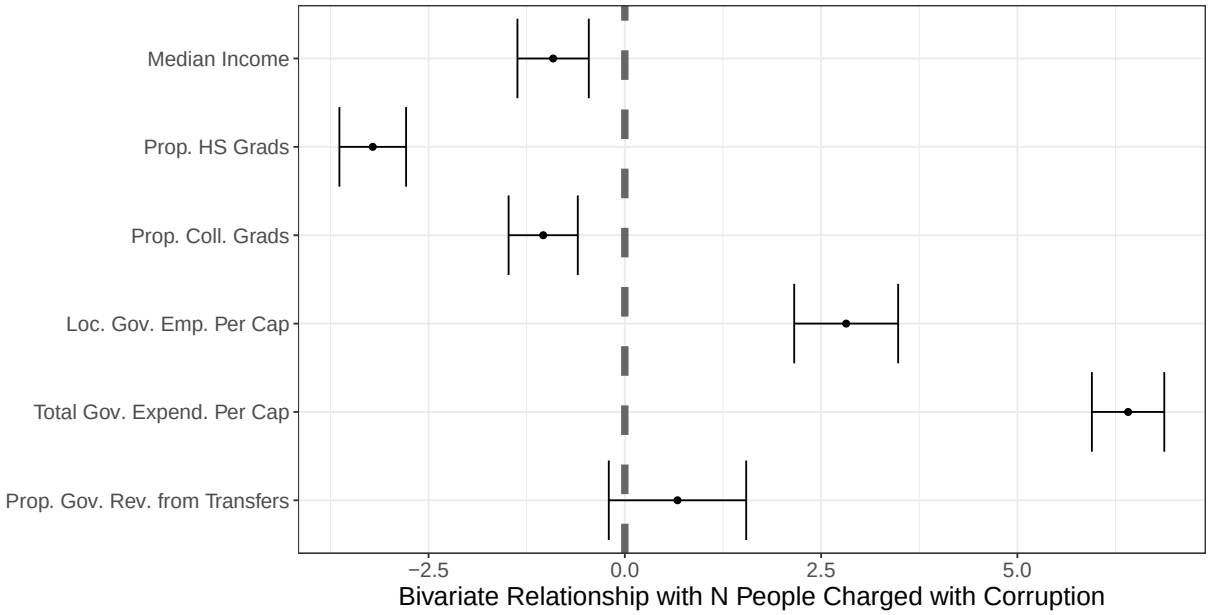

Figure 4: County-Level Correlates of Local Corruption

corruption (Glaeser and Saks 2006; Svensson 2005). Indeed, I find that that counties with higher incomes and proportions of high school and college graduates[6] have less corruption per capita, as shown in the first 3 rows of Figure 4.

Other scholars emphasize institutional features. Larger governments—that is, those with more resources under their control and a larger scope of policies under their purview—offer greater benefits and more opportunities to potentially-corrupt employees (Glaeser and Goldin 2004). The fourth and fifth rows support this notion: places with more local government employees and government expenditures per capita[7] tend to be home to more officials charged with corruption per capita.

There is some evidence that U.S. policymakers feel less accountable for the expenditure of public funds gained through grants, rather than through taxes (Dynes and Martin 2021; Fisman and Gatti 2002); it may be that employees of governments that rely more on

6. Education and income were measured using figures from the 2000 Decennial Census.
7. Government employees and expenditures were measured using the 2002 Census of Governments.

transfers are more likely to misuse these funds. The sixth line shows a suggestive, but not statistically significant, relationship between corruption and the proportion of governments' revenue received from intergovernmental transfers.

In all, these patterns conform with expectations about the kinds of places that are more and less likely to foster government corruption. More work is needed, of course, to understand whether these patterns are indicative of causal relationships.

5 Public Awareness

5.1 Survey Data and Measures

Are Americans aware of the level of corruption present in their communities? This section explores evidence on whether differences in the commonness of of corruption captured by the TRAC database translate to differences in public attention to the issue.

To test whether levels of measured corruption are related to public perceptions, I conducted a survey of 6,589 residents of the six-state pilot region. Respondents were recruited using Lucid Theorem, a vendor that collects survey takers from various online platforms. The responses were then weighted to resemble the region as a whole on several demographic characteristics[8]

The survey asked each respondent the county in which they lived. This allows me to link each person to the level of corruption in their county's local governments. It then asked a number of questions about people's perceptions of government officials and their honesty.

8. The survey was collected for multiple purposes, and for another project, I oversampled residents of subregions of interest. To account for this, and to assure the sample more closely resembled the region's population, I weighted the sample to Census targets on state of residence, race, gender, age, state by subregion, state by age, and subregion by age.

Perceptions of Corruption: The first measure of perceived corruption is a four-item battery capturing how likely respondents judge their officials are to engage in corrupt behavior:

1. How many government officials do you think would accept a bribe if they didn't think they'd get caught? (nearly all/most of them/some of them/a few of them/almost none)

2. How many government officials do you think are honest people doing their best to avoid corruption? *(reversed* (nearly all/most of them/some of them/a few of them/almost none)

3. How often do government officials in your area accept bribes from people in exchange for special treatment? (very often/somewhat often/not very often/rarely/never)

4. If a corrupt official were voted out of office, they'd just be replaced by someone just as corrupt. (strongly agree to strongly disagree)

Interestingly, these items evince low opinions of official honesty in this sample. About half of respondents said they thought officials would accept bribes most or nearly all of the time, and a similar proportion thought they did accept bribes somewhat or very often. Only a quarter saw officials as honest people doing their best. These items were combined into a scale using factor analysis; a single dimension model displayed good fit (CFI=.98; RMSEA=.07).

For the second measure of perceived corruption, I drew on the linked TRAC data to create 10 hypothetical scenarios of local government corruption drawn from real behavior. Each respondent viewed three of these scenarios and rated how likely it was that the corrupt acts would occur in their area, from "could definitely happen in my area" to "very unlikely

to happen in my area." These items also scaled together well on a single dimension and were combined.

Downstream Outcomes: Living under corrupt governments could affect many other dimensions of respondents' beliefs. The survey measured several possibly related variables: trust in government, the sense of efficacy, and populist beliefs.

Trust in local government was measured using the question "How much of the time do you trust your local government in [name] county to do what is right?" Four further batteries interrogated respondents' perceptions that government officials are honest, competent, fair, and responsive to citizen demands. The sense of efficacy was measured using a three-item battery of questions intended to assess whether people feel collective citizen actions can affect political outcomes. Populism was measured here using items that capture two dimensions of the construct plausibly related to corruption: anti-elitism and conspiracism.

The analyses below regress public opinion outcomes on corruption in a person's county, measured by the log of the number of people charged with official corruption per one million residents over the full period of 2000-2020. Models use robust standard errors and incorporate survey weights to improve the sample's demographic balance. Unless otherwise noted, the models do not include additional controls.

5.2 Survey Results

First, I test whether observed corruption in a county is correlated with residents' perceptions of corruption. Figure 5 simply presents the average perceptions of corruption among respondents in areas with different levels of observed corruption. By both the general question

measure and the specific scenario measure, people who live in counties with more charged government corruption perceive officials to be slightly more corrupt.

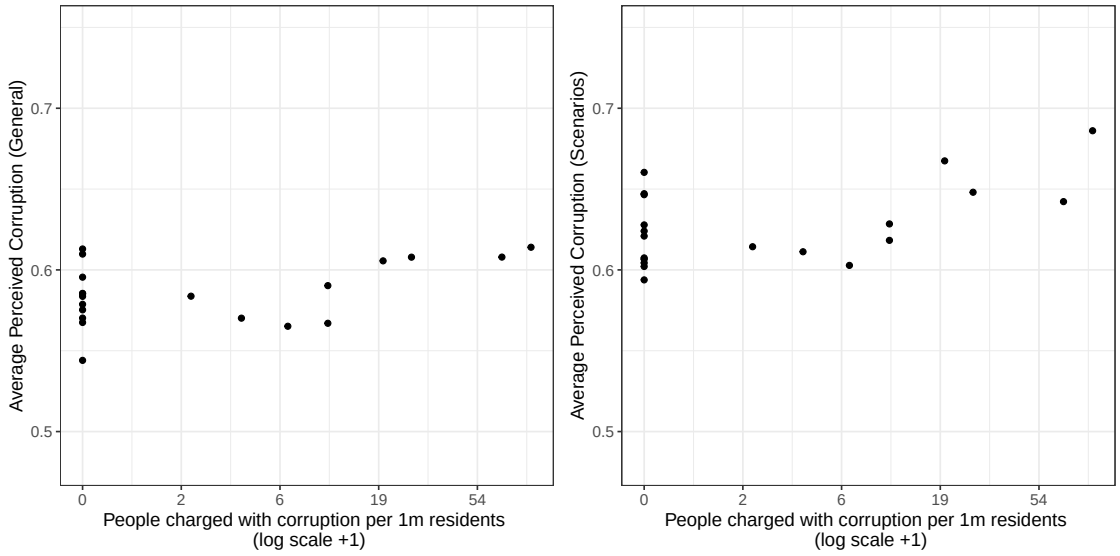

Figure 5: Average perceived corruption (y axis) among residents of counties with varying levels of observed corruption (x axis). Respondents are divided into equally-sized bins by their county's level of corruption.

To test this statistically, Table 1 regresses perceptions of corruption on observed corruption, as well as several additional control variables. The first two columns show the relationship between observed corruption and perceived corruption as measured by the 4-item general question battery, and the second two the measure with specific corruption scenarios. The first and third columns are bivariate regressions; the second and fourth add controls for the judicial district in which a resident resides, to account for any systematic differences in corruption cases between courts, as well as individual-level controls for partisanship, gender, and age.

The first two columns suggest a modest relationship between observed corruption and the general perceived corruption items: people in areas with more corruption see their government officials as slightly more corrupt. Adding controls matters little. The results are

	Corr. General		Corr. Scenarios	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	−0.436***	−0.355***	−0.406***	−0.414***
	(0.005)	(0.024)	(0.006)	(0.030)
Ppl. Charged Per 1m	0.005*	0.005*	0.013***	0.011***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Independent/Other Party		0.034***		−0.005
		(0.009)		(0.010)
Republican		0.048***		0.001
		(0.009)		(0.011)
Male		−0.005		0.005
		(0.008)		(0.009)
Other Gender		0.083***		0.098*
		(0.021)		(0.045)
Age		−0.002***		−0.001***
		(0.000)		(0.000)
District FEs		X		X
Num.Obs.	6313	6204	6313	6204
R2	0.001	0.046	0.007	0.021
R2 Adj.	0.001	0.044	0.007	0.018
RMSE	0.21	0.21	0.23	0.23

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 1: Perceptions of corruption, predicted by corruption in a person's county (as measured by the number of people charged with corruption per one million county residents). Columns 2 and 4 add district fixed effects and individual-level controls.

similar, though stronger, for the corruption scenarios. Though these relationships are significant, they are substantively small: by the scenario measure, a person in a county with 0 officials charged with corruption per million residents only perceives a tenth of a standard deviation less corruption than someone in a county with 10 per million (like Cook County), and a fifth of a standard deviation less than someone in a county with 51 per million (like Cuyahoga County).

This suggests that people in corrupt areas are at least a bit more likely to see their government officials as corrupt—especially when corruption is measured using scenarios that correspond to those actually observed in prosecutions of local government officials. However, these relationships are modest in size.

5.3 Media and Perceptions

Few citizens will have directly experienced the corruption prosecuted in the cases recorded in the TRAC data. For these instances of corruption to shape mass perceptions of corruption, they must be communicated to citizens by the mass media. That citizen perceptions of corruption are only weakly related to these actual cases, then, could result from a lack of media communication of these cases. There could be several reasons for this: areas may lack local media outlets to cover cases, media coverage may not be sufficiently reflective of corruption rates, or people may not pay sufficient attention to local media coverage. I will take each of these possibilities in turn.

5.3.1 Availability of News Media

5.3.2 Responsiveness of News Coverage

If local media outlets report about corruption primarily when these local cases occur, we might expect citizen perceptions of corruption to track its occurrence. Indeed, these cases are generally covered in local news: for a random sample of cases in the TRAC data, we collected data on whether the case received any coverage in local media, and the overwhelming majority were covered in at least one article.

However, media coverage of corruption likely reflects not only instances of charged corruption by local officials, but also corruption by other actors, anti-corruption efforts, and corruption by definitions broader than the legal one. If media coverage of corruption is mostly shaped by these other factors, citizen perceptions may be more loosely tied to its occurrence.

Other work has used media coverage itself as a measure of corruption. Glaeser and Goldin 2004 measure national corruption over time by searching a selection of newspapers for terms like "corruption" and "fraud"; Dincer and Johnston 2017 apply a similar method to states. I use a similar method here to measure media coverage of corruption in the region under study here.

I first identified 58 local newspapers based in the region of interest with archives available during some period between 2000 and 2020, the span of the TRAC data, using ProQuest's Global NewsStream database. For counties with multiple newspapers available, I selected the publication with the highest circulation based on the UNC News Desert Database, leaving 48 unique publications in 48 counties. These newspapers are not evenly distributed across the

region of interest: 18 are located in Ohio and 13 in Pennsylvania, while only 8 are in Indiana, 5 in Illinois, 3 in Kentucky, and 1 in West Virginia. Relative to the full list of publications in the UNC database, this means Illinois and Kentucky publications are underrepresented, while those in Ohio and Pennsylvania are overrepresented.

For each year available for each publication, I recorded the number of articles matching a search related to local government corruption: those that mentioned a corruption-related stem—corrupt-, fraud-, bribe-, or embezzle—and a word related to a local entity: city, county, or local. I also recorded the number of articles matching a search related to local politics: that is, they contained the stem govern- or politic- and the word city, county, or local. These can serve as a comparison for the total amount of coverage of local issues in the publication available in the archives.

I then tested how well the number of articles on corruption in a publication corresponded with the presence of new charges for corruption in local government that year. Figure 6 plots an illustrative example: articles on corruption in the Chicago Tribune alongside corruption charges in Cook County.

Figure 6 suggests there is some correspondence between media coverage and corruption cases. In 2005, the year in which the largest number of people were charged with corruption, there is also a spike in media coverage. Cases in 2001, 2005, 2009, and 2019 are accompanied or followed by small increases in news coverage, and overall coverage falls after 2006, when few people were charged. The overall correlation between these measures is .6. However, there are consistently 600-800 articles per year about local corruption in the Chicago Tribune, even in years in which no corruption was charged. This suggests other factors influence coverage.

For a more systematic look at the relationship between corruption coverage and its oc-

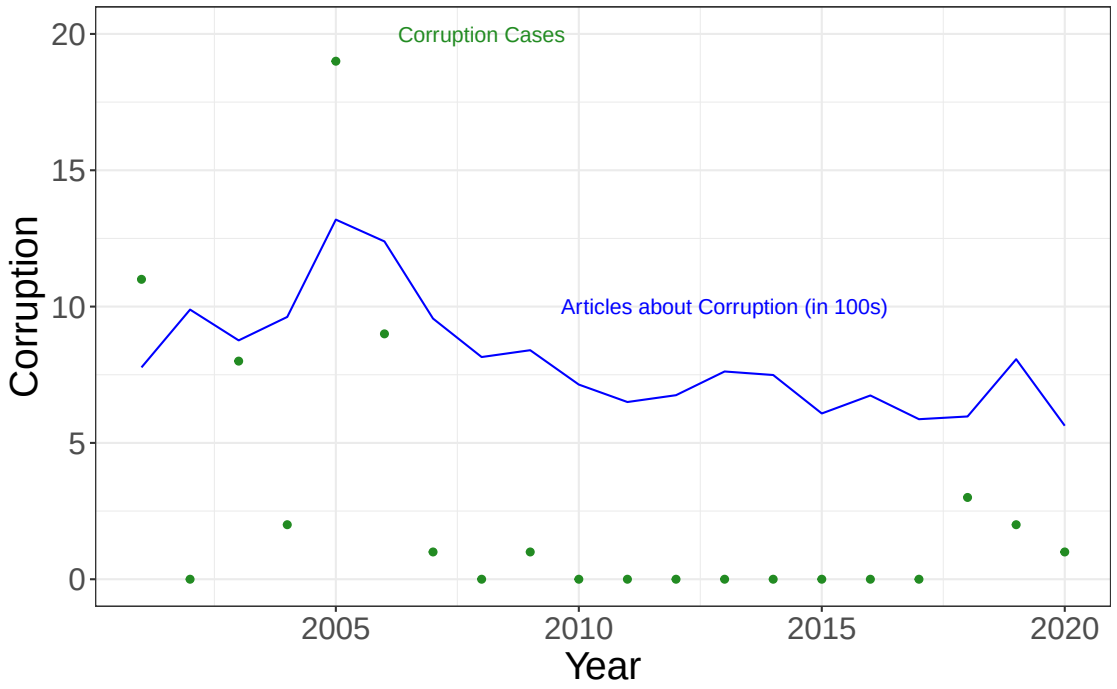

Figure 6: People charged with local government corruption and articles about local government corruption in Cook County.

currence, Table 2 shows the results of regressing the number of local corruption articles in an outlet in a year on the number of people against whom new charges of local government corruption were brought, controlling for the total number of local politics articles in the outlet in that year. The model includes fixed effects for each outlet, relying on year-to-year changes in corruption within localities to predict year-to-year changes in coverage. The relationship is significant and positive: for each person charged with corruption in a given year, we can expect an additional 10 articles on corruption in that person's locality's paper.

However, new corruption cases alone explain very little of the total variance in news coverage of corruption. A qualitative reading of the corruption coverage analyzed above offers several reasons for this. First, newspapers often cover corruption cases in other localities, even sometimes those in other states, and local angles on state and federal corruption cases.

	(1)
Total Local Politics Articles	0.123 ***
	(0.006)
People Charged with Corruption	9.811 **
	(3.018)
N. obs.	787
R squared	0.914

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2: Number of news articles on local government corruption, predicted by total local politics articles and new local corruption charges.

Second, local news sources cover cases of corruption prosecuted in state and local courts, often quite heavily. Third, many candidates, op ed authors, and concerned citizens write about "corruption" when referring to very general concerns about (for example) money in politics or voter fraud. Finally, this measurement strategy is imperfect and captures articles about private actors committing embezzlement and fraud.

This means that although new corruption charges are accompanied by detectable increases in corruption coverage, ebbs and flows in coverage are shaped by many forces beyond the emergence of new federal charges. Mass perceptions of corruption, then, may not be strongly responsive to levels of actual corruption charges.

5.3.3 Attention to Local News

The news coverage data from the previous section allows me to test whether people whose local papers cover corruption more often perceive their governments to be more corrupt—albeit in a limited way, given the few counties with available news archives and the lack

of over-time data on corruption perceptions. People whose local papers covered corruption more in the years leading up to the 2023 survey did not perceive their governments to be any more corrupt than people whose papers covered the issue less.

5.4 Consequences for Attitudes

Finally, Figure 7 shows the relationship between local corruption and several other dimensions of political attitudes that could be affected by exposure to corrupt institutions.

People who live in more corrupt localities are more likely to endorse conspiratorial views of current events. They are also *more* likely to view their government officials as responsive to their needs. There is no clear relationship with any other measure of trust in government, nor with respondents' perception that they can affect political outcomes. If anything, people in more corrupt areas are *less* hostile towards elites.

In all, it seems that general levels of government trust are not related to the level of corruption in an area. There are even a few dimensions on which people in corrupt areas seem more approving of their elected officials, though this is not consistent across measures. People in more corrupt areas do seem to engage in more conspiratorial thinking, though this relationship is based on only one item and is not precisely estimated. This pattern merits further investigation in future work: if validated, it suggests that people exposed to "conspiracies" in the form of actual official corruption are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories in general.

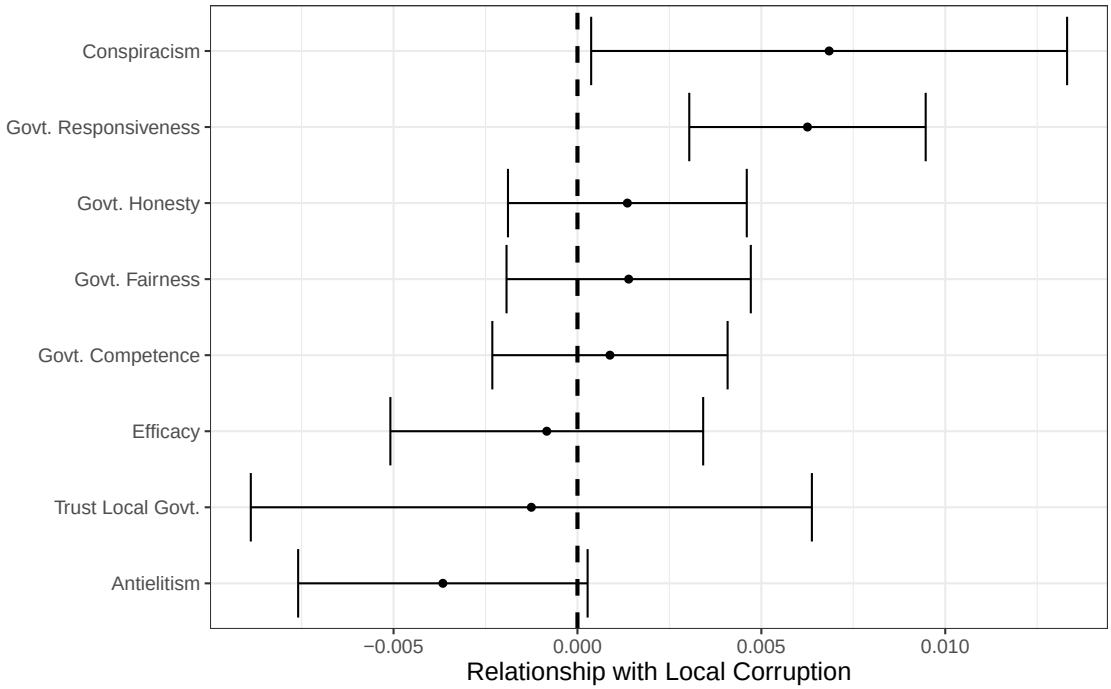

Figure 7: Relationship between county corruption (measured by the number of people charged with corrupt acts per million residents) and the variables on the y-axis. Points represent coefficients on local corruption in OLS regressions; error bars represent confidence intervals.

6 Discussion and Next Steps

This paper has introduced a new dataset of individual local government officials charged with corruption. By identifying the specific local governments implicated in misconduct, as well as the role of involved officials and nature of their behavior, this data opens up a range of new questions to researchers interested in studying local government corruption. Data this detailed and systematically collected was not previously available.

An important and unfixable drawback of this measure of corruption is its sparseness. Most local governments, and most counties, do not contain a single instance of corruption between 2000 and 2020. Even where data is not absent, it is irregular: Cook County (Chicago), for example, was home to 61 charges of corruption from 2005-2006, followed by 4 over the next 12 years; while it's possible Chicago became dramatically less corrupt after 2006, it's more likely that the prosecutions measured here come in waves for strategic and logistical reasons. Because of how unevenly cases are distributed across years and locations, some forms of analysis (like time series studies using corruption as an outcome) are unlikely to be possible.

The measure of county-level corruption used here correlates as expected with several relevant variables, including resident human capital and government size. Because previous local-level measures of corruption are not available, though, it is difficult to know how this measure is related to past measures of corruption. That only 6 states have so far been measured, and that this measure specifically focuses on local corruption, also complicates comparisons with existing state-level data.

The results presented here suggest people perceive government officials to be slightly

more corrupt in areas where corruption is, in fact, more common. However, this relationship is fairly weak—perhaps in part because people in most places, even those with no observed corruption in the dataset used here, see their officials as fairly corrupt. People in areas with more corruption may also be more accepting of corruption in otherwise-capable officials.

Substantially more work is needed to understand the ways in which living under a corrupt government shapes public perceptions of political actors. The weakness of the relationship between perceived and observed corruption suggests much else must be feeding into citizens' views. Media coverage is an important intervening factor here—an analysis that incorporates the causes of news reports about corruption could help account for citizens' exposure to information about corruption.

In addition, further work is needed to understand the downstream consequences of both perceived and experienced corruption for broader political attitudes. As the TRAC data suggest, many Americans do in fact live under governments that regularly produce corrupt officials. If this experience makes them more accepting of corruption, or more apt to believe in conspiracy theories, this has real implications for citizens' willingness and ability to hold government officials accountable for poor behavior.

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