

Research Statement

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My research focuses on the challenges to accountability and representation in the Global South. This is an area where strategic behavior from both citizens and politicians precludes the identification of successful interventions. My current agenda analyzes the unintended electoral consequences of investigating and exposing corruption, as well as the gendered patterns in citizens' evaluation of politicians' performance in office. This agenda also informs a methodological research program on navigating research design tradeoffs in experiments and quasi-experiments. This document outlines my substantive research program on the electoral consequences of corruption. Please refer to my cover letter or [research page](#) for a more comprehensive coverage.

The literature in political science and economics on electoral accountability highlights voters' adverse selection problem: They prefer to have good over bad elected officials but they can only infer an incumbent's type through observable outputs of their performance. Therefore, corrupt incumbents have incentives to hide illicit activities and appear good. To fight corruption, governments, civil society organizations, and scholars devote considerable resources to implementing and evaluating anti-corruption interventions that attempt to bridge the information gap between voters and politicians' performance in office. However, the cumulative evidence suggests that these interventions rarely translate into voters sanctioning corrupt incumbents.

A recent explanation for the lack of electoral sanctions is that politicians undertake preemptive behavior to ward off the negative consequences of corruption. For example, previous research shows that political parties avoid nominating legislators investigated for corruption to reelection. On the other side of the coin, research also shows that local level elected officials switch away from parties investigated for corruption after securing reelection. In short, politicians avoid direct association with corruption.

I expand on this research in work funded by the Lemann Center for Brazilian studies at the University of Illinois, using data from a long-running anti-corruption program in Brazil that randomly selects municipalities to audit their use of federal funds, and combining text analysis and machine learning to create the most comprehensive dataset of corruption infractions to date. I make two contributions to the literature.

First, in a working paper, I argue that the main reason why politicians update their behavior in reaction to increased monitoring is because they expect increased scrutiny from their constituents. This contrasts from previous work suggesting that the primary incentive is top-down enforcement. I show that being selected for auditing leads mayors to shift public spending in an attempt to minimize the chances of uncovering irregularities. Mayors selected for auditing spend less and concentrate their spending in fewer areas when they are eligible for reelection and when the audits are announced close to an election year.

In another working paper, I argue that politicians are also responsive to revealed corruption even when they are not directly connected to it. This is because revealed corruption drives politicians in nearby localities to undertake preemptive behavior to ward off a negative reaction from their constituents. I argue that politicians fear being caught in an electoral anti-corruption wave even when there is no evidence of their own wrongdoing. I show that mayors in municipalities exposed to nearby corruption are more likely to seek reelection under a different party, and that they do so in a pattern that suggests an attempt to secure more resources for reelection.