

# Sorry Not Sorry: Presentational strategies and the electoral punishment of corruption

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**Abstract:** A growing literature has explored various factors that hamper the electoral punishment of corruption. Most studies have focused on how voters react to a corruption allegation, but this focus leaves out an important, common aspect of corruption allegations that voters also encounter: politicians' blame avoidance strategies. This study examines how politicians' presentational strategies in response to corruption allegations affect voter sanctioning. Employing an online survey experiment on a sample of 3531 U.S. citizens, we find that politicians' action-oriented strategies, such as denying allegations, acknowledging a problem but denying responsibility, or acknowledging a problem and taking responsibility, are more effective than passive non-response. These three active strategies do not differ in their effectiveness. This result is robust to heterogeneous levels of state-level corruption, partisan bias, and political knowledge. Our findings suggest that politicians' presentational strategies may undermine political accountability for corruption, although they do not fully counteract the effect of corruption on voting intentions.

## 1. Introduction

Corruption, defined as the misuse of public office for private gain, erodes democratic accountability, stifles economic progress, and reduces trust in government (Bardhan 2017; Rose-Ackerman 1999). Numerous anti-corruption measures have been developed at both the domestic and international level, and governments have created formal agencies to reduce corruption. In a representative democracy, elections are a key institutional mechanism to combat corruption, allowing citizens to punish corrupt politicians at the ballot box. While some studies have shown that voters punish corruption (e.g., Krause and Mendez, 2009), others have revealed that corrupt politicians often win elections (e.g., Chong et al., 2015). The juxtaposition of the overwhelming evidence of corruption's ill effects and the empirical reality that corrupt politicians often remain in office, in both developing and established democracies worldwide, presents the central paradox our research aims to address: why do voters support corrupt politicians?

An extensive literature has attempted to explain this paradox by unpacking the key cognitive stages of voters' responses to corruption, namely, information acquisition, blame attribution, and behavioral response (De Vries et al., 2017). Research on the information acquisition phase has focused on the quantity and quality of information voters receive about the corrupt act (e.g., Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017). Research on voters' attribution of blame for corruption has examined the influence of voters' in-group biases as well as

institutional features that affect blame attribution, such as the clarity of responsibility for the corruption (e.g., Anduiza et al., 2013; Solaz et al., 2019; Tavits 2007). Studies of the behavioral response stage have analyzed other factors, including the availability of alternative candidates, the impact of patronage and vote buying, and the policy benefits of choosing a corrupt politician (e.g., Agerberg 2020; Bøttkjær and Justesen 2021; Klačnja and Tucker 2013; Muñoz et al., 2016; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013). Taken together, this research suggests a nuanced and complex cognitive relationship between learning about a corrupt act and voter sanctioning of corrupt politicians.

While the existing literature provides important insights into the electoral punishment of corruption, it has not considered how politicians' rhetoric in response to corruption allegations affects voter sanctioning. Yet in virtually every instance of a corruption allegation, politicians have an opportunity to use their bully pulpit to shape public opinion and mitigate voter sanctioning. A growing literature on blame avoidance suggests that public officeholders devise strategies to deflect or avoid blame for adverse events (Hood 2011; Hood et al., 2016; McGraw 1990). This is supported by the literature on negativity bias in politics and politicians' risk aversion (Weaver 1986). That is, elected officials accused of corruption may attempt to avoid blame using spin, argument, and rhetoric; these are presentational strategies (Hood 2002). While politicians' blame avoidance efforts via impression and media management are not new in the age of "spinocracy" (Hood 2011), only a

few empirical studies have examined the effects of politicians' presentational strategies (e.g., Hood et al., 2009, 2016; McGraw 1990), and to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has examined the impacts of presentational strategies on voters' attitudes toward corruption allegations. This is a missing piece in understanding the electoral sanctioning of corruption.

We advance the literature by developing a theory of which presentational strategies are most effective at limiting voter sanctioning of corrupt politicians. Our theory leverages insights from various research programs, such as the literatures on blame avoidance (Hood 2002, 2007, 2011; Hood et al., 2016; McGraw 1990, 1991; Weaver 1986), norms of action theory (Soroka 2014; Olsen, 2015; 2017), and crisis communication (Coombs 2006, 2007, Coombs and Holladay, 2002). We identify four distinct presentational strategies from a typology by Hood et al. (2009, 2016): (i) a passive stance (PS)—saying nothing, (ii) problem denial (PD)—denying that corruption took place, (iii) problem admission and responsibility denial (PARD)—admitting that corruption occurred but refusing to take responsibility, and (iv) problem admission and responsibility admission (PARA)—admitting that corruption occurred, apologizing for the corrupt act, and taking responsibility. Norms of action theory suggests that PS is the least effective strategy, since from the reference point of “problem-setting,” saying nothing is inferior to addressing the problem. Situational Crisis Communication Theory posits that the greater the responsibility taken, the lesser sanctioning will be. As such, among the action-oriented strategies PARA is most effective, followed by PARD, with PD least effective. Taken together, we argue that PARA is most effective at mitigating electoral punishment of corruption, followed by PARD, then PD, then PS.

To test our argument, we conduct an online survey experiment of 3531 voting-age United States citizens. Survey respondents were presented with a vignette that describes a hypothetical case of a governor engulfed in a corruption scandal. The vignette varies along two dimensions: (i) the four presentational strategies, plus a no corruption condition, and (ii) the political party of the hypothetical governor—Republican, Democrat, or independent. Respondents were then asked to indicate their voting preference in the hypothetical gubernatorial

election. Our results show that presentational strategies have a significant effect on voters' electoral punishment of corruption, although none of the four presentational strategies fully offset the electoral toll of corruption allegations. We find that the passive stance is least effective at mitigating electoral sanctioning, while the other three strategies—PD, PARD, and PARA—did not differ significantly in their effects. This suggests that the adoption of an action-based response to corruption has more influence on voter sanctioning than the content of that response. Furthermore, a series of tests on potential moderators shows that our main findings are robust. Merging observational data on state corruption levels from the Department of Justice with our survey experiment data, we test if these results are replicated across subgroups with different state corruption levels. We find no moderating effects of state corruption levels on our main results. We also show that respondents' partisanship and political knowledge do not affect the relative efficacy of presentational strategies.

These findings have significant implications for our understanding of political accountability. First, our study shows that politicians' presentational strategies can weaken the electoral sanctioning of corruption. Our data suggest that action-based strategies (PD, PARA, PARD) are more likely to mitigate electoral sanctioning of corruption than an inaction-based strategy (PS). Second, while it has been widely reported that politicians involved in corruption allegations adopt presentational strategies, the literature has not provided a systematic theory explaining relative effects of different presentational strategies. This study is one of the first scholarly attempts to theorize voters' cognitive processing of presentational strategies used by corrupt politicians. Lastly, from a normative perspective, our results raise a serious concern that politicians' blame avoidance strategies undermine political accountability. Incumbent politicians who attempt to deflect blame for their malfeasance have ample resources to devise and use presentational strategies to do so (Hood 2011). Effective presentational strategies may therefore hamper electoral accountability mechanisms.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. The extant literature on voting for corrupt politicians

The standard way of thinking about corruption and vote choice is straightforward: voters sanction corrupt politicians at the ballot box, selecting clean politicians over their corrupt counterparts. In reality, corrupt politicians are often re-elected, casting doubt on this model, which is based on a litany of tenuous assumptions, for example, that (i) corruption is easy to detect, (ii) once detected, it is obvious who is to blame, and (iii) when corruption is clear and correctly attributed, voters eschew other considerations and simply choose to punish the corrupt politician. Recognizing that these assumptions do not always hold in reality, [De Vries et al. \(2017\)](#) provide a theoretical model that identifies a series of stages between voters' evaluations of corruption and their vote choice. In this "revisionist model," voters acquire information about corruption from their own experiences or perceptions (the information acquisition stage), then determine who is to be blamed for the corrupt act (the blame/causal attribution stage), and finally decide whether to sanction the politician (the behavioral response stage).

Recent research has furthered our understanding of each of these stages. Research on the information acquisition stage is premised on the assumption that learning about corrupt misdeeds by a politician leads citizens to vote them out of office. Empirical work has shown that corruption information affects vote choice ([Chang et al., 2010](#)), but is contingent on the credibility of the information source ([Botero et al., 2015](#); [Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017](#)) and characteristics of the voters, such as their political sophistication ([Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017](#)).

Research on the blame attribution stage shows that it is often unclear who is to be blamed for a corrupt activity. Political institutions that lack clarity of responsibility make it difficult for voters to evaluate politicians' corruption ([Abramo 2008](#); [Klašnja et al., 2016](#); [Tavits 2007](#)). Psychological factors such as in-group biases may also affect voters' punishment of corruption. [Anduiza et al. \(2013\)](#) find that partisans tend to view the same offense less seriously if it is taken by members of their in-group (see also [Solaz et al., 2019](#), [Elia and Schwindt-Bayer, 2022](#); and [de Figueiredo et al., 2023](#)).

Finally, even if voters learn about corruption and correctly attribute the blame for it, it is not always punished. Voters may lack a desirable alternative ([Agerberg 2020](#); [Chong et al., 2015](#); [Vera 2022](#)) or focus on the politician's other qualities, such as their economic performance ([Klašnja and Tucker 2013](#); [Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013](#); [Muñoz et al., 2016](#); [Pavão 2018](#)). Additionally, voters can simply be bought via patronage ([Bøttkjar and Justesen 2021](#)) and contextual factors such as the prevalence of corruption and structural economic conditions may play a role ([Klašnja and Tucker 2013](#); [Klašnja et al., 2018](#)).

The existing literature has advanced our understanding of the conditions under which corruption affects vote choice,<sup>1</sup> but important gaps still remain. In particular, the literature on blame attribution implicitly presents a "voter-driven" model of corruption evaluation and vote choice. When corruption information is provided, voters process that information based on their own prior experiences and characteristics, which can be affected by their in-group biases and their ability to decipher complex institutional relationships. In this model, politicians are seen merely as passive bystanders, content to accept the public's interpretation and unable to respond to the charges levied against them. We know this is not the case in practice. When a corruption allegation is levied, politicians use a variety of presentational strategies to avoid

<sup>1</sup> We examine presentational strategies used in response to corruption allegations and leave the politician's actual culpability ambiguous. This reflects elections in the real world, where voters often have limited information about corruption from sources whose credibility varies ([Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2016](#)) and no final court decision that clarifies responsibility.

blame and mitigate electoral sanctioning. Moreover, there is significant theoretical and empirical ambiguity as to which strategies are more likely to mitigate voter sanctioning. These presentational strategies are further discussed in the following section.

### 2.2. Presentational strategies and corruption voting

We develop an argument examining how the presentational strategies of politicians involved in corruption allegations influence voters' punishment of corruption. Specifically, we build on the typology of presentational strategies developed by [Hood et al. \(2009, 2016\)](#)<sup>2</sup> to explore how different approaches to blame avoidance mitigate voters' sanctioning of corruption. We first discuss each of the four presentational strategies (real-world examples of each of the strategies are given in [appendix A](#)) and construct our argument as to their potential relative effectiveness.

The first strategy is the passive stance (PS), in which a politician simply does not respond to the corruption allegation. This strategy is derived from the classical justification for blame avoidance: risk-averse politicians put more weight on the negative ramifications of a misstep than the potential benefits of a good response ([Weaver 1986](#)). By this logic, politicians gravitate toward doing nothing as a strategy in and of itself, fearing the ramifications of a miscalculation. In other words, they prefer not to comment on corruption allegations, believing the potential costs of not commenting are lower than the costs of making comments that are poorly received.

The second strategy is problem denial (PD), in which politicians claim that "there is no (real) problem—that is, no significant avoidable loss, risk or harm—by means of denial, justifications or excuses" ([Hood et al., 2009](#), 697; see also [McGraw 1990, 1991](#)). In its simplest form, problem denial sidesteps the need for blame in the first place. If no avoidable loss or harm took place, there is no need for blame ([Hood 2011](#); [McGraw 1990](#)). This approach comes with high risks and high rewards. Successful problem denial removes all forms of blame, but if the strategy fails, it is particularly deleterious to a politician's reputation. If the public finds out that an allegation was true and the politician lied, the politician will face a significant loss of credibility.

The third strategy is problem admission and responsibility denial (PARD). In this scenario, the politician admits that there is a problem, but either argues that someone else is responsible or claims some minor portion of the responsibility while obfuscating who is ultimately responsible. An obvious benefit of PARD is that politicians can shift or decrease blame by claiming that events were beyond their control or jurisdiction, that the problem was unforeseen, or that they had no knowledge of the corruption. Another benefit of admitting a problem is that the politician may be seen as worldly, and more in touch with the way that the corruption scandal is unethical and may affect the lives of regular people ([Hood 2011](#)). Politicians can use this strategy to elicit sympathy, claiming that they were also "hapless victims," completely unaware of the corruption going on under their noses. However, PARD also has downsides. A failed PARD strategy invites derision and a loss of credibility if a politician fails to prove to the public that they were not responsible. Furthermore, when politicians claim to have been unaware, and therefore victims, they may be seen as unfit to hold the position they are in, since they did not know what was taking place within their jurisdiction.

<sup>2</sup> Presentational strategies are not the only blame avoidance strategies at politicians' disposal. [Hood \(2011\)](#) notes that politicians also engage in agency strategies (the delegation of formal responsibilities to maximize credit and minimize blame) and policy strategies (choosing policies and their implementation to limit risk). However, these strategies are used before corruption allegations are made, while presentational strategies are an *ex post* response to corruption charges. For alternative blame management typologies, see [McGraw \(1990\)](#) and [Weaver \(1986\)](#).

The final strategy is problem admission and responsibility admission (PARA). As in PARD, the politician admits that there is a problem, but in this case either admits personal culpability, offers an institutional apology or response, or offers some sort of explanation (Hood et al., 2007). PARA may benefit politicians by disarming critics and attracting sympathy. It can de-energize potential attacks before critics cast blame on the politician. Moreover, by publicly admitting responsibility, the politician can frame themselves as an honest and sincere person, humbly acknowledging their mistakes and prudently moving to repair the damage done. This strategy has the added benefit of allowing the politician to differentiate themselves from the stereotype of a sleazy, dishonest politician. The risk of this strategy is that it may be perceived as insincere, undermining the politician's credibility, and lead to demands for more than an easy apology. Furthermore, as with PARD, admitting the problem may frame the politician as incompetent, and they may be punished for this at the ballot box.<sup>3</sup>

Before we begin examining the relative efficacy of the four presentational strategies, we first consider the effect of these strategies versus a counterfactual of no corruption. In other words, can the four presentational strategies fully offset the negative sanctioning effects of a corruption allegation? Our expectation here is straightforward: in accordance with the majority of previous empirical results, we expect lower levels of voter support when respondents are presented with any of the four presentational strategy vignettes (all in response to a corruption allegation) than when respondents are presented with the no corruption condition.

**Hypothesis 1.** Voter support for a politician who is not accused of corruption will be higher than for a politician who is accused of corruption and engages in any of the presentational strategies.

We now develop hypotheses differentiating the effects of the various presentational strategies, and build on frameworks from the fields of social psychology, public administration, crisis communication, and political science. The first theory that helps differentiate the four presentational strategies is the “norms of action” theory, which combines insights from psychology and public administration. Its main idea is that in political and administrative contexts “problem-setting” makes action the norm, thus inaction is seen as a failure to act and is interpreted more negatively than action (Olsen 2017, Kahneman and Miller, 1986). In other words, respondents evaluate action or inaction from the reference point of the initial problem, and therefore prefer a response that does something to address it, rather than one that does nothing and allows the problem to persist. Zeelenberg et al. (2002) show that prior negative outcomes condition the way that subsequent actions are viewed, and assert that inaction is weighted more heavily in evaluations of a prior outcome than a subsequent action. It is therefore straightforward to assert that action is a rational response to a negative initial outcome (in this case, a corruption scandal). This is also consistent with an argument from game theory by Macy (1995), who argues that “win-stay, lose-shift” is a rational strategy that agents play when faced with positive or negative events.

The norms of action theory maps directly onto the set of presentational strategies. When citizens learn about a corruption allegation, they expect some form of action from the politician and see this as an attempt to address the problem, since action is the norm in politics. The PS strategy will be seen as inaction, since the politician does not act on the

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that these four strategies do not necessarily run the gamut of all plausible rhetorical strategies. Anecdotal examples such as denouncing the corruption allegation as a political attack (a “witch hunt”) or outright admitting to corruption but claiming that it was necessary to “get things done” do not fit neatly into the four categories. Still, our choice of rhetorical strategies was based on well-known existing theories—Hood’s presentational strategies framework and Situational Crisis Communication Theory—that provide theoretically grounded rationales for their typology.

corruption problem in a context where action (to solve the problem) is the expectation. The three other presentational strategies—PD, PARD, and PARA—are all action responses, hence they will be evaluated more positively than PS. We therefore propose a second hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2.** Passive stance (PS) will lead to lower levels of voter support than problem denial (PD), problem admission and responsibility denial (PARD), and problem admission and responsibility admission (PARA).

While the norms of action theory differentiates action from inaction, it does not differentiate between action-based strategies. We therefore build on research from the crisis communication literature, particularly situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), to draw inferences about the relative efficacy of PD, PARD, and PARA. Coombs (2006, 2007) suggest that there are three primary crisis response strategies: (i) denial—asserting that there is no crisis, (ii) diminishment—excuses or justifications denying an intent to do harm or claiming a lack of control over events, and (iii) rebuilding—taking full responsibility and/or asking for forgiveness from stakeholders. There is a clear conceptual connection between the presentational strategies and the SCCT strategies: PD corresponds to denial, PARD to diminishment, and PARA to rebuilding.

According to the SCCT literature, the underlying difference among these three strategies is the perceived acceptance of responsibility, with denial demonstrating the least acceptance of responsibility and rebuilding demonstrating the most (Coombs and Holladay 2002, 2006). SCCT further argues that the more a crisis is a product of intentional action on the part of the perpetrator, the more responsibility must be accepted.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, rebuilding strategies are the most effective, followed by diminishment and then denial. This is because the more “intentional” a crisis, the greater the negative affect felt by stakeholders. Rebuilding strategies, in which the subject demonstrates remorse and empathy by asking stakeholders for forgiveness and reinforces these sentiments with promises of compensation or greater effort, can blunt their negative affect and induce sympathy for the accused party.<sup>5</sup>

We apply the logic of these crisis communication strategies to corrupt politicians’ presentational strategies and voters’ sanctioning behavior. We assume that corruption is seen as an intentional crisis that produces high negative affect among voters. This assumption is plausible because corrupt activity such as bribery is the product of deliberate planning by the politician. Politicians who engage in PARA—accepting responsibility, asking for forgiveness, expressing remorse, and promising to do better—may blunt voters’ negative affect and elicit sympathy. In contrast, PD would be the least effective strategy, as pure denial could worsen the crisis in the eyes of voters with high negative affect. We would expect PARD to be more effective than PD but not as effective as PARA because PARA combines the element of problem admission, which could lower negative affect, with responsibility denial, which could increase negative affect.

The idea that accepting responsibility and seeking forgiveness and redress is the most effective form of apology is consistent with social psychology research. This literature finds that effective apologies are characterized by greater comprehensiveness (admission of wrongdoing, acceptance of responsibility, acknowledgement of harm) and greater non-defensiveness (limiting excuses and justifications). These features enhance the value of the apology, increasing its effectiveness and perceived sincerity in contexts as varied as private apologies, intergroup apologies, and corporate apologies (Gonzales 1992; Coombs and

<sup>4</sup> This may not hold true in accidental crises (see Coombs 2007).

<sup>5</sup> The logic of SCCT is consistent with recent work in international relations which argues that increased remorsefulness and regret make for more effective political apologies (Kitagawa and Chu 2021).

Schmidt 2000). For example, Schumann and Dragotta (2020) show that in the context of the #MeToo movement, comprehensive and non-defensive apologies were preferred to denials.

Overall, these studies suggest that the more forthright and apologetic someone is, the lower the reputational damage that results from their misbehavior. In terms of politicians' presentational strategies, it would follow that the more responsibility accepted, the more effective a strategy will be. We therefore propose the following two hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 3.** Problem admission and responsibility denial (PARD) and problem admission and responsibility admission (PARA) will lead to higher levels of voter support than problem denial (PD).

**Hypothesis 4.** Problem admission and responsibility admission (PARA) will lead to higher levels of voter support than problem admission and responsibility denial (PARD).

Together, Hypotheses 1–4 suggest an ordering of the effectiveness of various presentational strategies at mitigating voter sanctioning. We posit that voter support will vary across conditions: Passive Stance (PS) < Problem Denial (PD) < Problem Admission and Responsibility Denial (PARD) < Problem Admission and Responsibility Admission (PARA) < No Corruption.

### 3. A survey experiment on presentational strategies

We test our theory by conducting a survey experiment on 3531 voting age U.S. citizens.<sup>6</sup> The experiment was embedded in an online survey administered by Qualtrics in May 2022. Representative sampling quotas were set up for gender, age, race, party affiliation, and household income. The sample resembles the general population along several key demographics and includes respondents across fifty states and Washington D.C. (see appendix B).<sup>7</sup> The U.S. is a suitable context to examine how presentational strategies affect voter response because its established political institutions with strong presence of media and a robust non-profit sector would make politicians' corruption allegations and blame avoidance strategies salient and known throughout the relevant population. Examining corruption voting in the U.S. context, so far unexamined in the survey experimental corruption literature, also provides greater contextual breadth to extant work that has mostly examined developing countries, while at the same time building on growing scholarship examining corruption voting in "developed," relatively low-to-moderate corruption contexts such as Sweden and Spain (Anduiza et al., 2013; Muñoz et al., 2016; Klačnja and Tucker 2013; Klačnja et al., 2021).<sup>8</sup>

In the experiment, we present a vignette that describes a hypothetical governor, and randomly vary elements of the vignette across two dimensions: (i) the type of presentational strategy employed by the governor accused of corruption, plus a no corruption condition<sup>9</sup>: a) passive stance, b) problem denial, c) problem admission and responsibility denial, d) problem admission and responsibility admission, and e) no corruption); and (ii) the political affiliation of the governor: a)

Republican, b) Democrat, or c) independent.<sup>10</sup> This is a between-subjects 5 X 3 factor design. The characteristics of respondents across treatment conditions are balanced, as shown in appendix C.

Using hypothetical scenarios in survey experiments confers unique advantages. First, the vignette experiment allows us to precisely manipulate the experimental conditions such that each condition clearly corresponds to one of the presentational strategies. Relatedly, the hypothetical scenario also allows us to hold the information environment constant (e.g., information salience, treatment strength), ensuring that the only relevant variation across experimental groups is the difference in presentational strategy and political party affiliation of the governor. Real-world cases are loaded with prior expectations, for example, the political record of the incumbent or the contextual history of the region. In our experiment, we control for those factors by providing the same information about the hypothetical politician. Second, our experiment with a hypothetical politician follows the approach used by existing studies on voter support for corrupt politicians (Anduiza et al., 2013; Bøttkjær and Justesen 2021; Eggers et al. 2018; Klačnja and Tucker 2013; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013, 2016). This helps us make comparisons with and connections to the existing literature.

On the other hand, the survey experimental approach raises concerns about external validity, in particular whether survey experimental results replicate in real-world scenarios. While this is a common limitation of laboratory and survey experiments, which must rely on hypothetical cases, hypothetical experimental data may differ from the outcomes of real-world scenarios. Based on a meta-analysis of 30 articles involving field, survey, and lab experiments on corruption voting, Incerti (2020) finds a discrepancy between field and survey experimental findings: information about incumbent corruption lowers intention to vote substantively in survey experiments, while it produces little treatment effects in field experiments. This can be explained by social desirability bias and hypothetical bias in survey experiments<sup>11</sup> and contextual differences (noncompliance, treatment strength, outcome choice sets, decision complexity) across experimental settings (see Boas et al. 2019).

However, recent studies suggest that findings from a survey experiment are similar to those from behavioral data (Coppock and Green 2015; Hainmueller et al. 2015). It may suggest that respondents adhere to similar norms and thought processes when assessing corrupt behavior and associated political responses in survey experiments versus real-world situations. Moreover, Schwandt-Bayer and Corruption (2016) note that although the willingness to punish corrupt politicians may be overestimated in surveys, this overestimation is similar across treatment groups and does not bias overall treatment effects (see also Bøttkjær and Justesen 2021).

While acknowledging trade-offs in our research design, we highlight

<sup>10</sup> Note that we did not specify the gender of the governor in the vignette. While this may lead to variation in interpretations based on gender: e.g. respondents in states with a woman governor are more likely to picture a woman governor than respondents that never had (or do not currently have) a woman governor, the experimental design ensures that such perceptions are on average similar across treatment and control conditions. Still, extant work has found that women elites are punished more harshly for corruption (Esarey and Schwandt-Bayer, 2018), and these gender effects may be present in our study. Unfortunately we lacked the statistical power to test for differential effects. Future research can fruitfully examine how gender, as well as other characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or age, affect the efficacy of presentational strategies.

<sup>11</sup> The concern is that respondents may not report actual preferences due to social desirability and underestimated costs of changing voting decisions in reality. However, Bøttkjær and Justesen (2021) find that voters' punishment of corrupt politicians become attenuated when they are offered patronage in hypothetical settings. This suggests respondents report their vote decisions even though they are not socially desirable (see also Klačnja et al., 2021). To ensure a candid response, we announced at the beginning of the survey that we strictly maintain confidentiality of responses.

<sup>6</sup> The pre-analysis plan (PAP) is attached in appendix G.

<sup>7</sup> The sample is not balanced in terms of gender. We control for gender in the analysis and the results remain unchanged.

<sup>8</sup> The United States is ranked 24th in the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, while Spain is ranked 35th and Sweden is ranked 5th.

<sup>9</sup> We did not include a condition with corruption allegation without any information about a governor's response because of statistical power concerns. Additionally, a pure corruption allegation condition opens up the possibility of respondents' imagining the politician's using any of the presentational strategies. This may prevent us from identifying the effects of each of the presentational strategies in comparison to the pure corruption allegation condition. Future research may include this condition and use it as the baseline measure of voters' willingness to punish corruption in relation to the four presentational strategies. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this insight.

that our experiment renders high internal validity, identifying causality between our treatments and outcome variables. Moreover, we believe that the aforementioned benefits of the hypothetical vignette versus using real-world examples outweigh the potential limitations in generalization. Nevertheless, we are cautious in extrapolating our findings to real-world voting behavior and limit transferability to election cases that resemble our experimental design (e.g., incumbent’s performance, salience of corruption information, ambiguity of corruption allegations; further described below).

Respondents in the survey are randomly assigned to one of our fifteen conditions. Each of the conditions begins with the basic script, presenting our treatment, the political affiliation of the governor. It is important to note that we explicitly consider a competent governor to mitigate the potential effects of performance-based assessments to better isolate the effect of the presentational strategies. For example, if the governor was poor performing, we may not see variation in the respondents’ level of support for the allegedly corrupt governor, since poor performance plus a corruption allegation is difficult to offset with just a rhetorical strategy. On the other hand, if the performance of the governor was not specified, respondent’s own assumptions may affect their voting intentions. The case of a competent governor addresses this concern and emphasizes the ostensible role of various presentational strategies.

The basic script above is followed by our experimental variations of different types of information about corruption and presentational strategies. In the no corruption condition (a control group), the governor has never been accused of engaging in corruption.<sup>12</sup> The other four conditions start with a corruption allegation script, followed by different presentational strategies used by the governor to counteract the corruption charge. Full vignettes are described in Table 1. Following the vignette, respondents are asked to answer the following question relating to our main outcome, voter support: “How likely are you to vote for the governor?” The possible answers range from 1 (Very Unlikely) to 4 (Very Likely).<sup>13</sup>

There are several elements of the vignettes worth highlighting. First, our corruption vignette is a bribery allegation, since bribery is a well-known and common form of corrupt exchange, and because a majority of the experimental vignettes on corruption voting use a bribery vignette (for examples, see [Bøttkjær and Justenen 2021](#), [Muñoz et al., 2016](#); [Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013](#); [Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, 2017](#)). Furthermore, there are several high profile bribery allegations in the U. S. local government context (for examples, see [appendix A](#), [Taylor, 2023](#); [Wang and Weiser 2018](#)). Second, the specific corruption case we examine specifies a sum of “several million dollars in bribes.” While several extant survey experimental studies also fix the parameters of the corruption case, we acknowledge this limitation and leave further analysis on how severity of the case affects the efficacy of presentational strategies to future work. Third, we describe that the governor has not yet been convicted of corruption but is involved in corruption allegations. This is consistent with [Anduiza et al. \(2013\)](#) who suggest that presenting a corruption allegation with a mere suspicion should lead to a more lenient judgment. This implies that our vignette provides a conservative test for detecting treatment effects. Fourth, we use the language of the “governor’s office” to create some ambiguity around who was actually engaged in corruption. This can provide more space for tolerance as well, and allow presentational strategies to be more

<sup>12</sup> A potential concern for explicitly stating that the governor was not engaged in corruption is that it might arouse suspicion in respondents that the governor may be hiding something and is in fact actually engaged in corruption. In the results section we show that the No Corruption condition leads to significantly higher levels of voter support, thus assuaging this potential concern.

<sup>13</sup> The experiment did not feature a manipulation check. We acknowledge this limitation. We have included attention checks as well as several screeners to maximize data quality.

**Table 1**  
Experimental vignettes.

Condition	Text of vignette
Basic script	The [Republican/Democratic/independent] governor of a state like yours is running for reelection. Over the past few years, the state has experienced improvements such as an increase in jobs, improved public safety, and a reduction in crime.
No corruption	<b>Basic Script Plus:</b> The governor has never been accused of engaging in corruption of any sort.
Corruption allegation	However, a building contractor recently claimed that he paid the governor’s office several million dollars in bribes to get the contract for a Women’s and Children’s hospital. It is even possible that the governor took part in the bribe. The public prosecutor has announced that they will open an investigation into the matter.
Passive Stance (PS)	<b>Corruption Allegation Plus:</b> The governor did not release a statement regarding the corruption allegation.
Problem Denial (PD)	The governor has released a statement claiming to be innocent. In the statement, the governor explicitly denies the corruption allegation, and claims that none of their staff have been involved in any corruption.
Problem Admission and Responsibility Denial (PARD)	The governor has released a statement claiming that one of their staff members accepted a bribe to help the contractor get the contract but the governor had no knowledge of the supposed bribes.
Problem Admission and Responsibility Admission (PARA)	The governor has released a statement claiming that one of their staff members accepted a bribe to help the contractor get the contract. The governor claimed no knowledge of the supposed bribes but admitted responsibility for failing to monitor their staff and promised to combat corruption and to run a clean and honest administration.

effective. If the governor is convicted or directly accused of corruption, there may be little rhetorical spin that can be done to overturn perceptions. Fifth, we use a Women’s and Children’s hospital to make the condition realistic<sup>14</sup> and to build on a recent experimental study on corruption voting that uses a corruption case on the construction of a new health clinic ([Bøttkjær and Justesen 2021](#)).

For additional analyses, we include variables that are found to mitigate corruption voting: co-partisanship and political knowledge. For respondents’ partisanship, we ask the following question: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or something else?” We code as co-partisans Republican respondents who receive the vignette with a Republican governor, and Democratic respondents who receive the vignette with a Democratic governor. Otherwise, respondents are labelled as non co-partisans. To measure political knowledge, we utilize two survey items asking (1) the current Speaker of the House of Representatives of the US; and (2) the full name of Canada’s current Prime Minister. One point is assigned for each correct answer and the scores range from 0 to 2, higher scores means higher political knowledge. These questions were adapted from [Weitz-Shapiro and Winters \(2017\)](#).

A series of control variables are included in the survey: gender, race/ethnicity, age, state, education, family income, and political ideology (1: extremely liberal to 7: extremely conservative). These questions allow us to check whether our randomization was properly conducted and will be included as control variables in the robustness checks.

<sup>14</sup> It is adapted from a real world example—a corruption scandal in the city of Chicago ([Simpson et al., 2012](#)).

#### 4. Punishing corruption and presentational strategies

To examine our hypotheses, we perform a series of difference in means tests. Because respondents are randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions, mean differences in the outcome variable—their voting intentions—can be causally attributed to the treatment effect. The third row of [Table 2](#) and [Fig. 1](#) presents the results for [Hypothesis 1](#), comparing respondents' electoral support for the governor in the no corruption condition against conditions of a corruption allegation paired with each of the four presentational strategies. Our results clearly show that the condition in which there were no corruption allegations against the incumbent resulted in the strongest support from respondents, an average of 3.10 on the four-point scale. The difference between this outcome and each of the presentational strategy conditions ranges from .80 to .98, which is statistically significant and substantively large in each case. It is worth noting that none of the four presentational strategies explored in this study fully counteract the effect of corruption on respondents' voting intentions. Regardless of which presentational strategy is used, the presence of corruption information itself has a significant effect on voting intentions. These results support [Hypothesis 1](#), and are in line with existing studies on corruption voting that have shown that voters punish corrupt politicians ([Bøttkjær and Justesen 2021](#); [Chong et al., 2015](#); [Klašnja and Tucker 2013](#)).

To test our hypotheses as to the relative efficacy of the presentational strategies, we compare voter support for a governor accused of corruption when different presentational strategies are used. Our second hypothesis predicts that respondents are less likely to support a politician who uses a passive stance than one who uses an active strategy, including PD, PARD, or PARA. The results in the fourth row show that the mean differences are statistically significant, supporting [Hypothesis 2](#). These differences are also substantively significant. Compared to the passive stance, voter sanctioning is reduced by 6.1% if the politician uses PD, 8.5% if the politician uses PARD, and 7.1% if the politician uses PARA. Put differently, using the PD strategy leads to a .13 increase in the 4-point Likert scale, PARD leads to a .18 increase, and PARA leads to a .15 increase, all versus the passive stance. These results support the norms of action theory, showing that a passive stance, in which a politician makes no statement regarding a corruption allegation, is less effective than more action-based strategies at mitigating blame for corruption. When a politician does not act in response to corruption allegations, voters may think the politician is actually involved in corruption and thus cannot respond.

Problem denial is associated with greater voting intentions than a passive stance, suggesting that some voters remain open to the possibility that the incumbent is not involved in the corrupt act. That there is higher voter support in both problem admission conditions compared

with the passive stance suggests that problem admission strategies confer legitimacy by enhancing credibility and trust ([Coombs 1998](#)). Together, action-based strategies are more likely than the inaction-based passive stance to mitigate respondents' electoral punishment of corruption, although they still do not fully counteract the effect of corruption on voting intentions.

To test our third hypothesis, we compare the effects of problem denial and problem admission (which includes both PARD and PARA). The mean intention to vote for a governor who engages in PD is 2.25, while it is 2.30 for PARD and 2.27 for PARA. However, these mean differences are not statistically significant at the .05 level. [Hypothesis 3](#) is not supported. The results show that whether an incumbent denies or admits to corruption in their presentational strategy does not produce significantly different effects on voting intention.

Our fourth hypothesis predicts that survey respondents will be more supportive of a corrupt incumbent who engages in PARA than one who engages in PARD. The PARA condition shows an average voting intention of 2.27, lower than the 2.30 in the PARD condition. As shown in row 6 of [Table 2](#), this mean difference is not statistically significant at the .05 level. Respondents do not show different punitive responses towards politicians with PARA versus PARD. [Hypothesis 4](#) is not supported.

These results are inconsistent with SCCT's implication that PARA would be more effective at mitigating negative responses, followed by PARD and then PD. Our findings show that the SCCT theory does not explain voters' reactions to corruption allegations. While we are unable to empirically disentangle the reasons for the lack of significant differences across the three action-based strategies, the existing literature suggests a variety of factors might be at play. First, the information hypothesis suggests that voters make punitive responses to corruption when they have more information and credible information ([Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017](#)). In other words, voters may not respond to empty rhetoric. Thus, the efficacy of a politician's presentational strategies may depend on the veracity of the corruption allegations and the quality of the accusations as well as the presentational strategy chosen. [Chong et al. \(2015\)](#) have found that corruption accusations with an ambiguous target tend not to influence voters. More detailed information about corruption allegations and the presence of verifiable facts may allow voters to determine whether a politician's reactions, such as their denial or admission of a problem, are sincere and trustworthy. Second, it is possible that our manipulation of PARD did not effectively change voters' attributions of blame or that the apology in our PARA treatment was not an effective apology in terms of its comprehensiveness or non-defensiveness, as described in the social psychology literature ([Schumann and Dragotta 2020](#)). For example, without substantive corrective action, a mere apology may not change voters' assessment of a politician accused of corruption. In more general

**Table 2**  
Corruption, presentational strategies, and vote intention.

Treatment Condition	No corruption	Corruption			
		Passive Stance	Problem Denial	Problem Admission and Responsibility Denial	Problem Admission and Responsibility Admission
1. N	756	634	777	686	678
2. Average response to vote intention (std. dev)	3.10 (.90)	2.12 (.83)	2.25 (.84)	2.30 (.88)	2.27 (.90)
3. Difference from no corruption		-.98 (p < .01)	-.85 (p < .01)	-.80 (p < .01)	-.83 (p < .01)
4. Difference from passive stance			.13 (p < .01)	.18 (p < .01)	.15 (p < .01)
5. Difference from problem denial				.05 (p < .25)	.02 (p < .60)
6. Difference from problem admission and responsibility denial					-.03 (p < .57)

terms, it is possible that a corruption allegation is so delegitimizing that no presentational strategy is sufficient to gain back the legitimacy that has been lost.

We perform a series of robustness tests including an OLS regression analysis that includes socio-demographic variables (gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, income, state dummies) and political attitudes. The findings are robust across the regression models (appendix D). None of these additional analyses provide substantively different results from the main findings of this study presented in Table 2.

To further clarify the underlying mechanisms for our results, we explore potential moderators that might affect the efficacy of these presentational strategies. For brevity, we leave a more thorough exposition of these results to appendixes D to F. First, contextual factors such as corruption levels in a state might influence voters' response to politicians' presentational strategies and punishment of their corruption. We use data from the United States Department of Justice (2020) on corruption cases by state as a proxy for exposure to corruption combined with respondents' self-reports of the state in which they reside. We split the sample into four groups based on quartiles of state corruption levels and conduct mean difference tests but find no differences between the quartiles (appendix E). We next test the effects of co-partisanship<sup>15</sup> on voters' responses to corruption allegations and politicians' presentational strategies. Our analysis shows that respondents are more likely to support corrupt politicians from their own party (compared with independent politicians or politicians from the opposing party), indicating a partisan bias (appendix D; Anduiza et al., 2013; Solaz et al., 2019). We then examine if the effects of *presentational strategies* depend on co-partisanship (appendix F). Overall, we see little difference between the co-partisan versus non co-partisan sample in terms of the relative efficacy of the four presentational strategies, and find that these patterns are consistent with our main results. This may suggest that the mechanisms of how presentational strategies work are robust to partisanship, while partisanship itself shapes voters' responses to corruption allegations. Additionally, we explore if high versus low levels of political knowledge moderate the effects of the presentational strategies. No systematic difference across subgroups is found (see appendix F). While suggestive and not causal, our exploration of potential moderators indicates that our results are robust to a variety of plausible sources of heterogeneous effects.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The literature on corruption voting has focused on voters' cognitive processing and their characteristics, but has to date neglected the role of politician's rhetorical responses to corruption allegations in voter sanctioning. This study bridges this gap by formulating and testing hypotheses about the effects of politicians' presentational strategies on the electoral punishment of corruption using data from a survey experiment in the United States. Results from our survey experiment provide clear evidence that voters sanction politicians who are involved in corruption allegations. None of the strategies explored in this study fully offset the negative impact of corruption allegations on electoral support. We also compare the effects of four presentational strategies on mitigating voters' punitive responses to corruption. We expected problem admission and responsibility admission (PARA) to be the most effective mitigation strategy, followed by problem admission and responsibility denial (PARD), then problem denial (PD), and then a passive stance (PS). Our findings partially support our expectations, in that actions, whether denial or admission, lead to lower voter sanctioning than inactions. This is in line with Olsen's (2017) argument on the norms of action. However,

<sup>15</sup> The co-partisan group includes Republican respondents presented with a vignette with a Republican governor and Democratic respondents with a Democratic governor, while the non co-partisan group is comprised of the rest of the sample.

we find no difference among the effects of the three action-based strategies: PD, PARD, and PARA. The findings do not support SCCT or the literatures on political apologies and image repair, which suggest that apologies effectively mitigate blame. These results are robust to a variety of potential moderators, including state-level corruption, partisanship, and political knowledge.

Our results may lead to the implication that with respect to corruption allegations "any defense is better than no defense." Each action-oriented strategy is more effective than the passive stance, yet not more effective than each other. It is worth noting that this result accrues under potential scope conditions: First, corruption may be seen as a particularly severe offense, and under conditions of great severity voters may be less sensitive to the particulars of the rhetoric being employed and may care more that the politician takes the offense seriously enough to offer a response. Second, our results speak to short-term crisis management strategies rather than long-term comprehensive blame avoidance strategies. In reality, presentational strategies may be more or less effective when paired with other strategies to minimize long-term blame. Still, our results provide important empirical insights the relative efficacy of presentational strategies that, given their ubiquitous use by politicians around the world, remain evidently important.

Addressing a critical gap in the large and growing literature on corruption voting, this study proposes new avenues for future research. First, we do not claim that the four presentational strategies explored in this study are the complete set of ex-post blame management strategies. Moreover, the temporal sequencing of different presentational strategies can have different and complex impacts (see Hood et al., 2009, 2016). For example, would PARA be more or less effective at mitigating sanctioning of corruption if it followed an initial denial of the problem? Future work can more explicitly incorporate intertemporal dynamics into a holistic analysis of presentational strategy effectiveness. Second, considering that presentational strategies are delivered via the media, the effect of selective media exposure and the polarization of political communications may interact with such strategies. Future research may also explore if the effects of presentational strategies depend on the media outlets that report them or the format of these communications, such as direct personal statements versus statements from official spokespersons (see Hood et al., 2016). Third, future work can examine whether and to what extent these results replicate across countries with different levels of corruption. Given the myriad differences between high and low corruption states in terms of economic development, political systems, and media environment, among other things, the relationship between presentational strategies and voter sanctioning is not straightforward. Our results are worth examining in the context of countries with similarly (from a global perspective) low-to-moderate corruption levels, such as Sweden and Spain (Anduiza et al., 2013; Muñoz et al., 2016; Klačnja and Tucker 2013; Klačnja et al., 2021). In terms of generalizability, the intentional and deliberate nature of corruption may imply that the results may extend to other sorts of malfeasance of this nature. The U.S. case further suggests that the results extended to polarized countries with 2-party systems. Future work can examine if this is indeed the case.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a new generation of research on voters' responses to corruption. It deepens our understanding of corruption voting by systematically examining the impact of politicians' attempts to avoid and deflect blame. As the first study to compare the effects of the four presentational strategies using experimental data, our findings complement existing understandings of why corrupt politicians remain in office. The efficacy of action-based presentational strategies provoke interesting questions to be answered by future research aimed at improving political accountability and representative democracy. Politicians' presentational strategies are a double-edged sword that can aid or challenge voters' assessments of corruption allegations. Understanding how different presentational strategies are used and how they affect voters' attitudes could help improve electoral accountability mechanisms.



## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Dean Dulay:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Seulki Lee:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. This study was funded by Singapore Ministry of Education Academic Research Fund Tier 1 Grant (MSS21S008). The research design of this study was reviewed and approved by the Singapore Management University Institutional Review Board.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2024.102867>.

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