

Political corruption scars young voters forever, new research finds

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New research finds that political corruption has a long-term scarring effect on trust in democratic institutions and on voters' behavior and that such an effect differs according to one's age cohort, with first-time voters at the time of corruption revelation still being affected 25 years

later.

In particular, Bocconi University's Arnstein Aassve, Gianmarco Daniele, and Marco Le Moglie focus on the Italian Clean Hands [scandal](#) that, between 1992 and 1994, revealed widespread [corruption](#) among Italian politicians. Twenty-three percent of national MPs and a staggering 75% of MPs from the then ruling Christian Democrat and Socialist parties were charged with corruption and the 1994 electoral campaign was centered on this topic. Political corruption, completely missing on Italian TV news up to then, became the most salient topic both in TV news and newspapers (with almost 90% of the front pages covering the scandal in 1993).

Using data from Trustlab, an effort coordinated by the OECD to collect nationally representative data of trust and [political beliefs](#) in a comparative setting, the scholars find that Italian first-time voters in 1994 were 9% more likely to vote for populist parties in 2018 (according to their self-reported behavior) and recorded lower institutional trust (i.e. trust in parliament, government and civil servants). Their trust in bodies not immediately related to the Clean Hands scandal (police, media, and [financial institutions](#)) and their social trust (trust towards other individuals) were unaffected.

The effect is stronger for less educated individuals and for people more exposed to TV news in the areas most affected by the corruption scandal. Furthermore, the effect is driven by the 2018 vote for the populist right-wing party Lega, while vote for the left-wing populist [party](#) Movimento 5 Stelle is substantially unaffected.

"Our study highlights the relevance of an informational political shock when malleability of beliefs and attitudes is higher, both because of the age of the first-time voters and because eligibility to vote entails an unprecedented exposure to politics and political news", says first author

Arnstein Aassve, a Full Professor of Demography at Bocconi University.

First-time voters at the time of the scandal also report harsher attitudes towards immigrants and refugees in 2018, "suggesting", the scholars write, "a fascinating spill-over effect, whereby the detrimental effects of corruption might not be limited to [trust](#) and voting, but they might extend to policies supported by populist parties".

More information: Arnstein Aassve et al, Never Forget the First Time: Youth Exposure to Corruption, Institutional Trust and Populist Voting, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2018). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3280498](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3280498)

Provided by Bocconi University

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