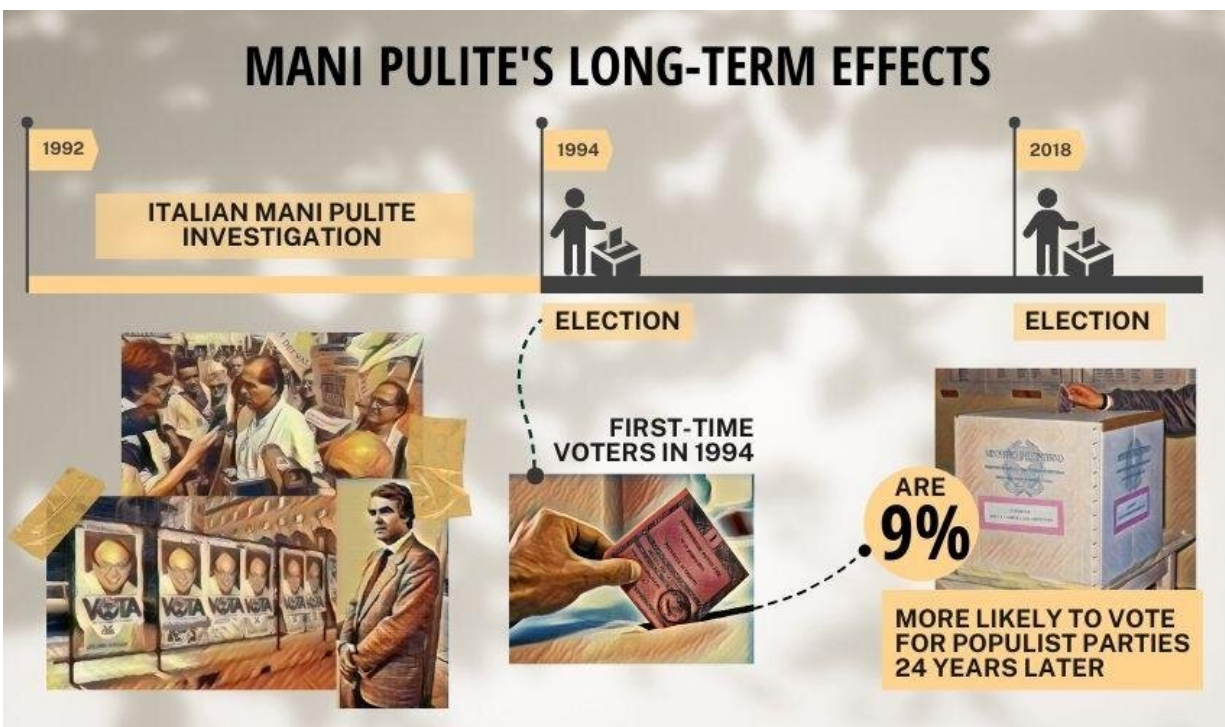


Corruption episodes haunt democracies for decades, study finds

March 29 2023, by Fabio Todesco



Credit: Weiwei Chen

The short-term effects of corruption are often obvious. Numerous sources, both in Russia and in the West, consider the military's endemic corruption one of the main reasons of the logistical problems, very low troop morale, and massive casualties of the Red Army in Ukraine. In late 2016, a corruption scandal cost the first woman elected head of state in

an Asian country, South Korea's Park Geun-hye, impeachment.

We can well imagine that the ongoing "Qatargate," a political scandal raised by the suspicion that some members of the European Parliament have been bribed by the governments of Qatar, Morocco and Mauritania, may have immediate, distressing effects on the involved politicians, if they are found guilty. But what about the long-term damage to European institutions?

The Italian Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) investigation which, between 1992 and 1994, revealed widespread corruption among Italian politicians, highlights that [political corruption](#) also has a long-term scarring effect on [trust](#) in democratic institutions and on voters' behavior. This effect differs according to one's age cohort, with first-time voters at the time of corruption revelation still being affected more than 20 years later.

A recently published study in *The Journal of Politics* by Arnstein Aassve, Gianmarco Daniele, and Marco Le Moglie reminds us that 23% of national MPs and a staggering 75% of MPs from the then ruling Christian Democrat and Socialist parties were charged with corruption in those years 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 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: Gianmarco Daniele et al, Never Forget the First Time: The Persistent Effects of Corruption and the Rise of Populism in Italy, *The Journal of Politics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1086/723019](https://doi.org/10.1086/723019)

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