



**POLITICAL CORRUPTION  
AND IT'S EFFECTS ON CIVIC INVOLVEMENT**

**By: Lilliard Richardson**

**School of Public and Environmental Affairs**

**Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis**

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## Political Corruption and Its Effects on Civic Involvement

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Despite the substantial potential impact of corruption on civic engagement and consequently the health of our democracy, political science has not devoted much attention to measuring corruption or its effects in the almost 35 years since Peters and Welch (1974) lamented that, “the systematic study of political corruption has been neglected by serious students of American politics” (983). The analysis in this chapter seeks to fill in one of the many gaps in our knowledge about this topic: does corruption have an impact on civic engagement? Few scholarly studies have empirically evaluated the effects of corruption on citizen attitudes or behaviors, and in the preceding analysis we used survey data of citizen activity to assess the impact of state corruption conviction rates on citizen participation in political activities.

In particular, the analysis shows that higher state rates of Federal corruption convictions on a per capita basis were associated with significantly less citizen participation in activities associated with the campaigns and elections of 2008 and 2010, such as attending meetings, displaying political signs, volunteering for campaign work, donating money to campaigns, and voting.

Furthermore, higher state corruption rates were associated with citizen attitudes questioning the honesty and integrity of elections and distrust in state and local governments. In turn, these attitudes of distrust and lack of confidence in electoral integrity were associated with a significantly lower likelihood of citizens engaging in

important political activities such as volunteering for campaigns, donating money to campaigns, and voting.

Scholars and political commentators have long been concerned about the pernicious effects of corruption and the potentially corrosive effect of long-term corruption on citizen attitudes, and this study provided empirical evidence of one important effect. Democracy depends on the active support and willing compliance of citizens to laws and policies, but corruption and the perception of corruption can lead to dissatisfaction with the system, less confidence in the honesty and integrity of the system, and less willingness to actively engage in democratic processes.

Effects such as those found in this analysis suggest the importance of further study of the issue as well as cause for concern about the continuing problem of corruption in many American states.

Numerous scholars over the years (Aristotle, Locke, Mills, Tocqueville) have argued that democratic governance depends upon the civic engagement of its citizens. Citizen involvement in the political process, however, hinges on citizens' confidence in the soundness of the political system, their perception of the effectiveness and responsiveness of government institutions, and the degree to which people feel confident that officials running those institutions are competent and trustworthy. As Miller (1974) suggests, democracy is only possible "when the relationship between leaders and the public is based on mutual understanding and reciprocal trust rather than the use of coercive and arbitrary authority" (989). While corruption can be defined in various ways (Nye 1967; Peters and Welch 1974; Meier and Holbrook 1992), in its more

extreme form it could certainly damage this sense of reciprocal trust and confidence in the trustworthiness of leaders.

Scholars have examined various factors shaping civic engagement, including socioeconomic characteristics, resource constraints, psychological disposition, membership in social associations, and political institutions (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Putnam 2000; Tolbert, McNeal, and Smith 2003; Kwak, Shaw, and Holbert 2004), but less is known about the potential impact of political corruption on civic engagement. Political corruption and unethical behavior by public officials could result in low trust in government and cynicism about the process, and alienated or cynical citizens may see little reason to expend effort on civic activities. If citizens perceive that public servants are paying special heed to only certain well-financed interests, they may feel that civic activities are a waste of time and effort.

If citizens do not engage in the political system, this could have important long-term effects on state politics and public policy. Citizen dissatisfaction with governmental performance and the responsiveness of democratic institutions is widespread (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Norris 1999), and this phenomenon is potentially troubling as low levels of support for democratic institutions can have negative consequences for governance (Powell 1982, 1986). Because of such concerns, states have adopted a wide variety of reforms designed to reduce corruption and to enhance citizen engagement. While the efficacy of these laws may be in question, the incidence of corruption varies substantially across the states (Meier and Holbrook 1992).

One recent study of corruption in the states uses data from the Public Integrity section of the Department of Justice on convictions per capita to argue that Chicago has

been, “the most corrupt area in the United States” since 1976 (Simpson et al 2012). Further, Illinois has been the third most corrupt state in the total number of convictions (1828) behind California (2345) and New York (2522). The study also shows that the corruption rate per capita in Illinois (1.42 or sixth on a per 10,000 basis) is more than twice that of California (.63 per 10,000), and yet some states such as Hawaii and Idaho have had recent years with no convictions. Given the variation across the states, does a state’s experience with corruption have an impact on citizen political activity?

To address this question of whether state corruption affects citizen engagement, we rely on survey data for our measure of political activity. We also use the survey data to generate measures for partisan, attitudinal, and demographic variables. For the measure of state corruption, we rely on data from the Public Integrity section of the Department of Justice on convictions per capita. In the next section, we describe the data in more detail, and we then turn to a description of the methods before describing the results of our analysis and our conclusions.

## **Data**

While a direct measure of the impact of corruption on political activity may not be possible, we may be able to gain some traction on the issue by first developing a measure of civic engagement. To do so, we rely on a survey conducted by a consortium of universities called the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES). The number of participating universities has varied across the years, but in 2008 there were over 32,000 respondents in the CCES, and in 2010 there were over 53,000 CCES respondents (Ansolabehere 2008; 2010). The survey is conducted

online by YouGov, and it has a common content of questions for all respondents and a team module of questions asked of 1,000 respondents. For some models, we are able to use data from the common content so the sample is quite large, but for a few models we use the much smaller sample from a team module.

YouGov uses a matched random sample methodology to develop a sample for its surveys. Relying on general population studies, they develop a target population and then pull a random set of respondents from this target population to create a “target sample.” Using a matching algorithm, potential respondents who match the target sample are selected from the national sample of participants (Rivers 2007; Vavreck and Rivers 2008). A multi-mode study of the 2010 CCES compared with a random digit dialing telephone survey and a random sample mail survey showed similar results for attitudinal measures across the three modes (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2011). All of the regression models we estimate below use the survey weights provided by YouGov.

#### *Political Activity Measures.*

In election years such as 2008 and 2010, the CCES has asked several questions related to an individual's political activity, such as attending political meetings, displaying political signs, volunteering for campaigns, donating money to a campaign, and voting for various state and federal offices. While this list of activities may fall short of the deeper public participation suggested by theorists of strong democracy (Barber 1984) or deliberative democracy (Fishkin 1993; see Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs 2004) and do not include the range of online avenues of political influence now available

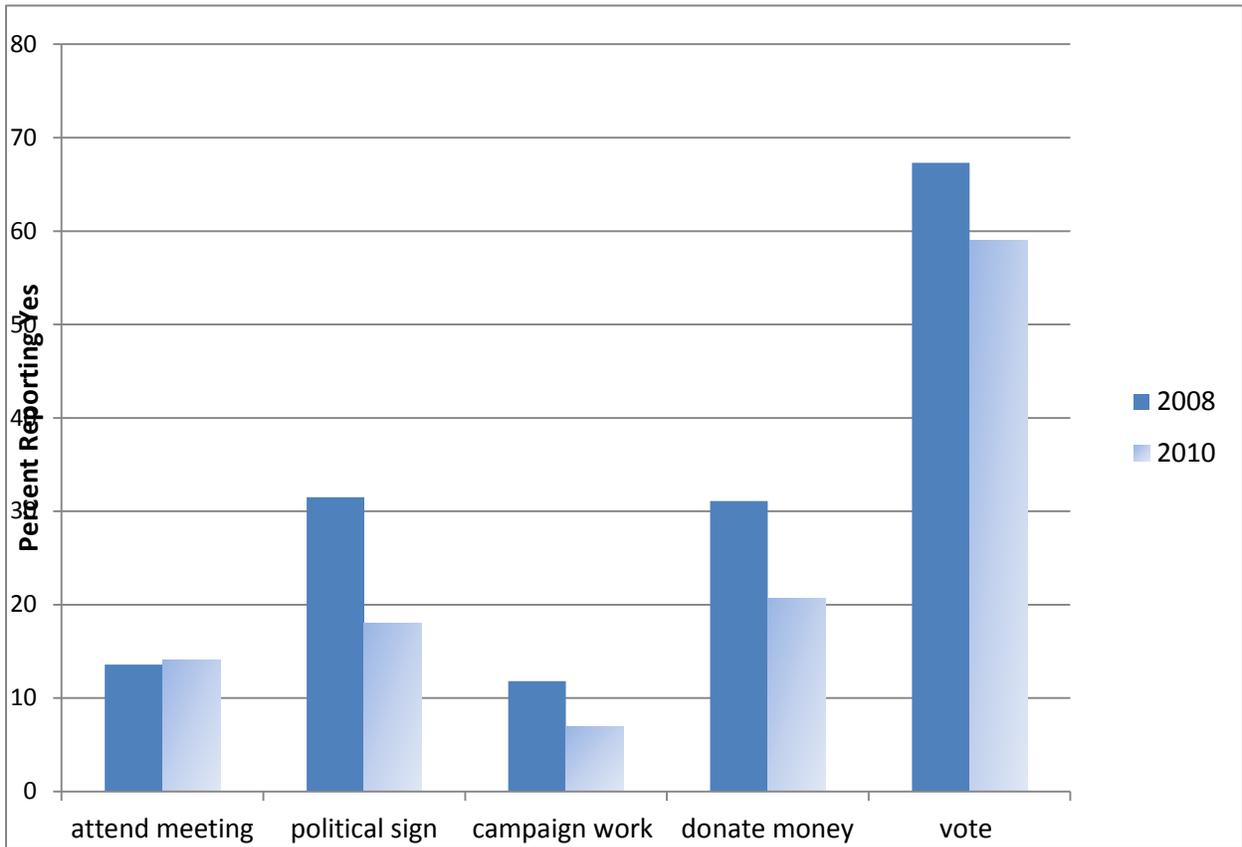
to a citizen, they do provide a minimal foundation of civic engagement in the American electoral process.

A further benefit of this set of activities is that it provides variation in the resources expended to participate in the political process, primarily time and money (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995). Voting, donating money to a campaign and displaying a political sign involve minimal commitments of time (the most uniformly constrained resource for citizens), but volunteering for a campaign or attending meetings can be far more time intensive. On the other hand, greater financial resources make it much easier to donate money to a campaign, and those with meager resources may find it more difficult to get away from a job, hire a babysitter, or arrange transportation to attend political meetings, volunteer for a campaign or even vote. Because time and financial resources are not distributed uniformly, demographic factors often reveal different patterns of political activity (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995).

As Figure 1 shows, citizens are far less likely to report campaign work or attending a political meeting than they are to display a political sign in their yard or donate money. Clearly, time intensive activities such as attending a meeting or doing campaign work are relatively rare with less than one in seven respondents reporting they had engaged in these political activities. Displaying a political sign or donating money was far more common in the presidential election year of 2008 (at about one-third reporting yes for each activity), but substantially lower rates are reported for the midterm election of 2010. Finally, about two-thirds of respondents reported turning out to vote in 2008, and 59 percent reported voting in the 2010 midterm election. Overall,

there is considerable variation in the levels of citizen engagement across types and between the two different types of elections.

Figure 1, Percent of Respondents Reporting Political Activities by Election Year

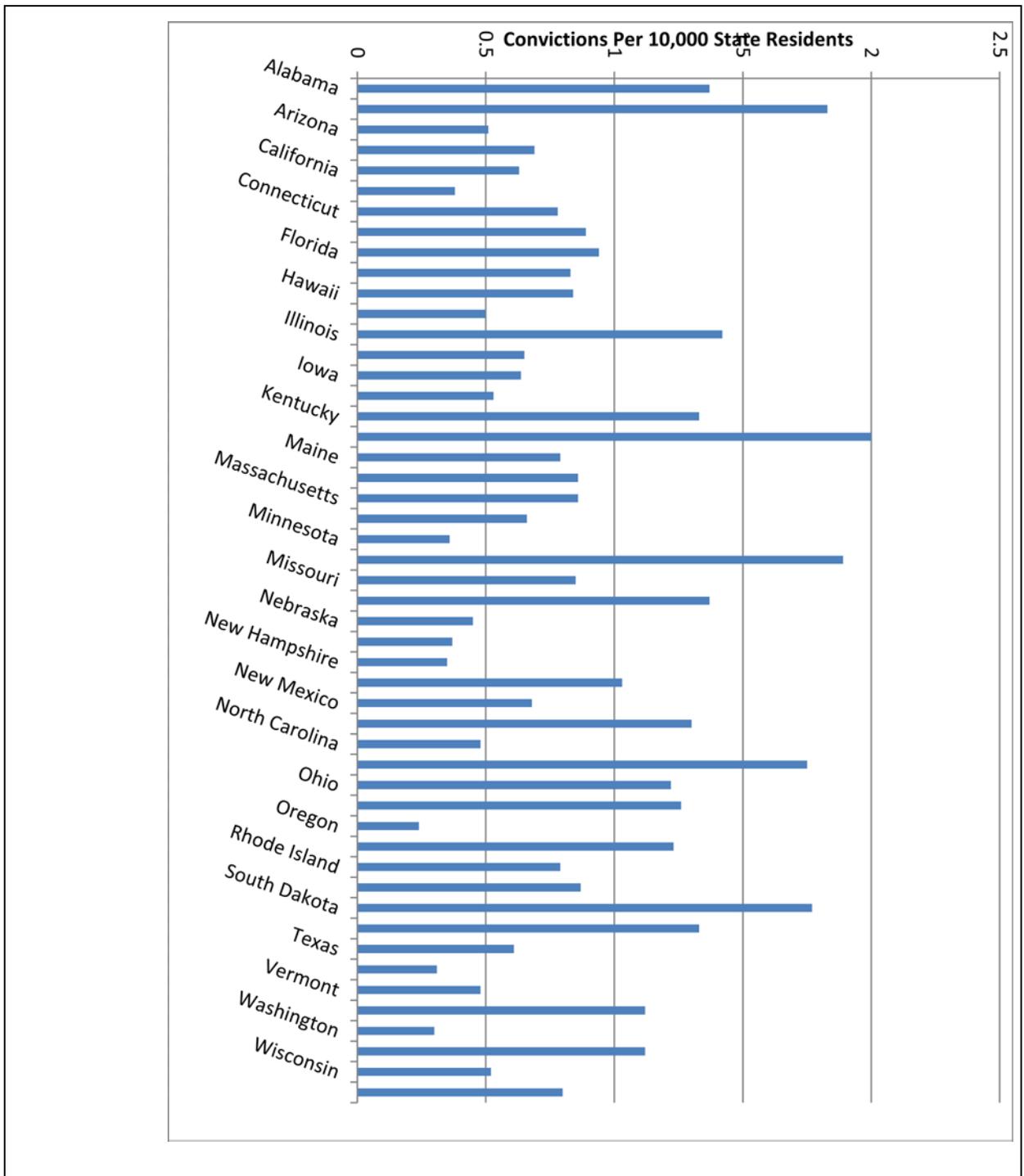


### *Corruption Variable*

Our main question of interest is whether corruption in a state could be associated with less citizen engagement in the electoral process. To test for this idea, we rely on a measure of corruption in a state using data on convictions for the period from 1976 to 2010 from the Public Integrity section of the Department of Justice (2010). Corruption could be defined as a broader concept entailing unethical behavior or a perception of money influencing political decisions (Peters and Welch 1974), but opinions vary on whether such activities constitute corruption, and reliable data is not available. Convictions for legal violations provide a foundation of what would be construed as corruption, and citizen perceptions are likely to follow media attention to relevant events, such as arrests, trials, and the announcement of a verdict.

Convictions within a particular year could contribute to citizens' confidence in government for certain high profile cases, but it is more likely that a number of convictions over time would create enduring attitudes about corruption and the trustworthiness of public officials in a state. As Figure 2 shows, convictions per 10,000 state residents over the period from 1976 to 2010 vary considerably. Louisiana leads the pack with two convictions per 10,000, and Alaska, Mississippi and the two Dakotas are close behind with Illinois having the highest rate among populous states. On the other hand, Oregon has the lowest rate with Utah and Washington also among the least corrupt states. For perspective, Louisiana's 2.0 rate is more than six times higher than Oregon's rate of 0.3. Figure 2 shows the rate for 1976 to 2010, which was used in the models for political activities in 2010, but the rate for 1976 to 2008 was employed in the 2008 models.

Figure 2, Federal Public Corruption Convictions Per 10,000 State Residents, 1976 to 2010



### *Trust and Honesty of Elections*

While the convictions data provides a direct measure of how corruption in a state could influence citizen engagement, attitudinal measures can help further explain the impact of corruption. Corruption incidences could lead to citizens having less general trust in government, and it could also bring into question the honesty of the electoral system. We would expect that those with low trust in government and who do not believe in the honesty of elections would be less likely to participate in political activities.

To test for these attitudinal measures, we use a subset of the CCES. As mentioned previously, the CCES has a common content for all respondents, but it also asks some questions for a smaller subset of 1,000 respondents (in what is called the team content). One of these subset samples was asked a question on trust in the state government and a separate one on local government, each with an ordinal response set from one (just about always) to four (hardly ever). Another question asks about the honesty and integrity of elections in the respondent's state, and its ordinal response set ranges from one (great confidence) to a seven (no confidence).

One concern with employing these variables separately in a regression analysis is that attitudes about distrust in state and local government as well as a lack of confidence in the honesty and integrity of elections are likely to be highly correlated. High correlation scores as well as a factor analysis of the variables show this to be the case so entering the variables separately in a regression model may be problematic. Therefore, we created an additive scale of the three concepts that ranges from three to fifteen with a higher score indicating less trust or confidence, and the expectation would be that those with higher scores would be less likely to participate in the electoral

activities. The mean and median are a ten on the scale, and about sixty percent of the cases are in the range from seven to eleven on the scale with over a quarter of the cases in the high distrust range from twelve to fifteen.

### *Control Variables*

To assess the factors shaping citizen activity, a range of demographic and partisan variables from the CCES are used in the models. In general, minorities, females, younger citizens, and those with lower education and lower income are associated with lower levels of political participation, but the effects may be different across the two elections. Midterm elections typically have lower voting turnout than presidential elections, and the demographic effects may be accentuated, especially for one dominated by the Republicans such as in 2010. Conversely, the Obama campaign in 2008 appealed to minorities, women, and young people so this may have ameliorated the demographic impact on citizen engagement.

The CCES includes two other variables that could shape citizen engagement: strength of partisanship and length of residence. Partisans are generally more invested in campaigns and the results of elections, and it is likely that those who claim to be strong Republicans or strong Democrats are more likely to engage in political activities than moderates. Likewise, those citizens who have lived in one place longer may be more connected to the community and face lower information costs on participation. The CCES has similar but different questions for the two elections. The 2008 CCES has an ordinal variable for length of residence, but the 2010 CCES has an interval variable for the years living in the current city. In general, we expect strong partisans to

have higher levels of participation across the political activities, and we expect those with longer residence in one place to have higher levels of participation.

## **Results**

Because each of the CCES questions for the political activities was asked as a yes/no dichotomy, binary logistic regression was used for all models. In addition, because each of the activities requires different levels of time and financial resources, the factors shaping the results could be different for each one so they are assessed separately. Further, because of the different nature of presidential versus midterm elections and the potential for Obama's presence on the ballot in 2008 to affect some of the variables, such as minority status and age, the models are calculated separately for each election year. Finally, the main question about the relationship between convictions per capita for each state is tested for 2008 and 2010 with the full sample, but the attitudinal questions about trust in government and whether elections are honest in the respondent's state were asked only for a 1,000 person subset of the sample in 2010. Further, because the political activity questions were asked in the post-election portion of the survey, there was a lower response rate so the analysis was conducted with about 800 respondents.

### *2008 Election Analysis with Convictions Rate*

Turning first to the logistic regression models for 2008 political activity, we can see in Table 1 that convictions per capita are strongly associated with lower political activity across the board. In most cases, the relationship is significant at better than the

.01 probability level (except for political signs at .05), and all of the coefficients are negative. Those citizens in states with higher corruption rates are significantly less likely to attend public meetings, display political signs, volunteer for campaign work, donate money to political candidates, and vote.

Table 1, Logistic regression analysis of 2008 political activity with state convictions per capita

	Attend Meetings	Political Sign	Campaign Work	Donate Money	Vote
Convictions Per Capita	-0.229*** (0.066)	-0.102** (0.046)	-0.284*** (0.067)	-0.236*** (0.047)	-0.130*** (0.047)
Strong Partisan	0.185*** (0.047)	0.555*** (0.036)	0.431*** (0.052)	0.392*** (0.036)	0.697*** (0.034)
Minority	0.031 (0.058)	-0.088** (0.044)	0.225*** (0.060)	0.116** (0.045)	-0.239*** (0.041)
Female	-0.396*** (0.042)	-0.228*** (0.032)	-0.089* (0.047)	-0.402*** (0.033)	-0.138*** (0.034)
Age	-0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	0.003 (0.002)	0.024*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.001)
Education	0.211*** (0.017)	0.127*** (0.012)	0.252*** (0.020)	0.288*** (0.013)	0.269*** (0.014)
Income	0.087*** (0.009)	0.080*** (0.006)	0.085*** (0.009)	0.139*** (0.006)	0.066*** (0.006)
Income Answered	-0.925*** (0.112)	-0.603*** (0.083)	-0.698*** (0.124)	-1.074*** (0.087)	-0.344*** (0.083)
Length of Residence	0.035* (0.019)	0.030** (0.014)	-0.063*** (0.020)	-0.028* (0.015)	0.099*** (0.013)
Constant	-2.222*** (0.177)	-1.494** (0.121)	-2.781*** (0.198)	-2.715*** (0.136)	-1.671*** (0.121)
Wald Chi Sq	745.2***	900.9***	776.5***	2359.4***	1767.2***
Sample size	26933	26933	26933	26933	32685

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\*p<.01; \*\* p<.05; \* p<.10

The other variables are generally consistent with expectations, but there are a couple of important exceptions. As expected, strong partisans and men are significantly more likely to engage in all forms of political activity. Those respondents with higher education, higher income, and those unwilling to answer the income question are also significantly more likely to engage in all electoral activities examined. Age is significant only for donating money and voting, but it is in the expected direction of higher age associated with a greater likelihood of activity. Those who have lived in a residence longer are also more likely to attend meetings, display political signs, and vote, but against expectations they are less likely to engage in campaign work or donate money. Finally, minority status had mixed results as minorities were less likely to display political signs and to vote, but they were more likely to volunteer for campaign work and to donate money. These last two results are contrary to expectations, but it is likely to be related to the 2008 Obama campaign.

#### *2010 Election Analysis with Convictions Rate*

Although we know from Figure 1 that the levels of political activity were lower in the midterm election of 2010, the logistic regression analysis for the 2010 models of political activity are generally similar to the 2008 results with just a few exceptions (see Table 2). Most importantly, convictions per capita were significantly associated with all forms of activity except for displaying political signs, and similar to 2008 those citizens in

states with higher corruption rates were significantly less likely to engage in political activities.

Table 2, Logistic regression analysis of 2010 political activity with state convictions per capita

	Attend Meetings	Political Sign	Campaign Work	Donate Money	Vote
Convictions Per Capita	-0.162*** (0.050)	-0.068 (0.048)	-0.139** (0.069)	-0.296*** (0.048)	-0.254*** (0.045)
Strong Partisan	0.123*** (0.038)	0.400*** (0.037)	0.512*** (0.053)	0.340*** (0.036)	0.673*** (0.039)
Minority	-0.108** (0.050)	-0.330*** (0.049)	0.006 (0.065)	-0.079* (0.048)	-0.329*** (0.061)
Female	-0.334*** (0.037)	-0.309*** (0.035)	-0.175*** (0.049)	-0.350*** (0.034)	-0.605*** (0.034)
Age	0.021*** (0.001)	0.020*** (0.001)	0.022*** (0.002)	0.044*** (0.002)	0.053*** (0.001)
Education	0.269*** (0.014)	0.127*** (0.013)	0.309*** (0.019)	0.267*** (0.013)	0.362*** (0.014)
Income	0.088*** (0.007)	0.079*** (0.006)	0.060*** (0.008)	0.142*** (0.006)	0.102*** (0.006)
Income Answered	-0.898*** (0.080)	-0.738*** (0.074)	-0.711*** (0.108)	-1.330*** (0.076)	1.904*** (0.070)
Years in City	0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)
Constant	-3.355*** (0.128)	-2.904*** (0.123)	-4.825*** (0.186)	-4.058*** (0.132)	-2.858*** (0.161)
Wald Chi Sq	1560.9***	1307.2***	904.8***	2536.7***	5134.1***
Sample size	45789	45789	45789	45789	53765

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\*p<.01; \*\* p<.05; \* p<.10

The results for the other variables were also similar. Strong partisans, men, those respondents with higher education, those with higher income, and those unwilling to answer the income question were significantly more likely to engage in all forms of activity. The number of years living in a city was also associated with significantly higher likelihood of engaging in three of the five activities. In contrast to 2008, minorities were significantly less likely to participate in all forms of activity other than campaign work. Whereas minorities were significantly more likely to donate money to a campaign in 2008, they were significantly less likely to do so in 2010. This could be a difference in midterm versus presidential elections, but it is also likely to be related to the presence of the first minority presidential candidate on a major party ticket in 2008. Likewise, whereas age was a weak predictor of most activity in the 2008 election when many young persons were mobilized by the Obama campaign, the 2010 midterm election shows the more traditional pattern of older citizens being more likely to engage in all forms of political activity.

#### *2010 Election Analysis with Attitudes on Trust in Government and Honesty of Elections*

The results thus far show that citizens in states with higher corruption rates exhibit significantly lower activity rates, but an additional piece of the puzzle is whether citizen confidence in political institutions is related to electoral activity. In particular, if citizens have low trust in state and local governments and/or do not believe in the honesty and integrity of elections, it is likely that they will choose not to participate in civic affairs. As described previously, we developed an additive scale of distrust

ranging from 3 to 15, and it includes CCES questions about distrust in state and local government (separately) and a lack of confidence in the honesty and integrity of elections.

A variety of factors may contribute to attitudes of distrust, but a pattern of corruption over time or even a few highly salient cases in a state may help instill distrust and a lack of confidence in the system. Indeed, a regression analysis of the factors affecting the distrust scale (using control variables similar to the analysis in Tables 1 and 2) shows a significant relationship between corruption convictions per capita and higher levels of distrust. For reasons of brevity, we do not report the table, but the coefficient on convictions is a positive value of .941, the robust standard error is .361, and it is significant at the .01 level of confidence. While our intention is not to explain these attitudes (as a more complex model would be needed), the relationship provides some evidence of how convictions could affect attitudes that could in turn shape civic engagement.

The analysis of political activities for the smaller sample in the 2010 election is presented in Table 3. As one can see, the distrust scale is generally associated with less political activity across the board, and it is significantly less likely for campaign work, donating money to a campaign, and voting. Citizens with low trust in state or local government and/or the integrity of elections are less likely to be willing to use their valuable political resources of time or money to engage in civic activity. Finally, the results for the control variables are similar in direction to those in the larger sample, but because of the smaller sample size for the questions used in the distrust scale some of the variables do not attain significance in Table 3. Overall, the results for the models

employing the attitudes scale provide support for the previous findings that state corruption conviction rates are associated with significantly less political activity.

Table 3, Logistic regression analysis of 2010 political activity with trust and honesty of elections

	Attend Meetings	Political Sign	Campaign Work	Donate Money	Vote
Distrust Scale	-0.071 (0.054)	-0.062 (0.059)	-0.156*** (0.044)	-0.069* (0.036)	-0.214*** (0.058)
Strong Partisan	-0.177 (0.291)	0.565* (0.307)	0.405 (0.473)	0.039 (0.251)	1.065*** (0.296)
Minority	0.610 (0.372)	-0.221 (0.390)	0.157 (0.553)	0.449 (0.339)	0.378 (0.390)
Female	0.196 (0.278)	-1.007*** (0.282)	0.205 (0.527)	0.025 (0.254)	-0.924*** (0.318)
Age	0.042*** (0.010)	0.013 (0.012)	0.014 (0.030)	0.045*** (0.011)	0.059*** (0.013)
Education	0.169* (0.111)	-0.088 (0.115)	0.282 (0.196)	0.359*** (0.086)	0.281*** (0.102)
Income	0.156***	0.111**	0.141**	0.109***	0.135***

	(0.044)	(0.045)	(0.059)	(0.040)	(0.047)
Income Answered	-1.028**	-0.979*	-1.009*	-0.387	-0.302
	(0.516)	(0.513)	(0.594)	(0.479)	(0.542)
Years in City	0.010	0.019**	0.020*	-0.004	0.033***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.011)	(0.007)	(0.011)
Constant	-4.409***	-1.213	-3.947*	-4.871***	-2.201**
	(1.083)	(0.956)	(2.384)	(0.846)	(0.940)
Wald Chi Sq	94.5***	74.0***	80.2***	51.6***	89.5***
Sample size	807	807	807	807	808

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\*p<.01; \*\* p<.05; \* p<.10

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