Do State Ethics Commissions Reduce Political Corruption? An Exploratory Investigation

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INTRODUCTION

Political corruption is typically defined as "crimes by public officials for personal gain."[1] But there should be no doubt about the corrosive effects of malfeasance among public officials on the well-being of the polity in general. For example, several recent studies link unethical behavior in government to a wide variety of deleterious social outcomes, from economic growth to trust in government and participation in elections.[2] The existence of such negative

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1. Edward L. Glaeser & Raven E. Saks, *Corruption in America*, 90 J. PUB. ECON. 1053, 1055 (2006); Adriana S. Cordis, Corruption and the Composition of Public Spending in the United States 1 (July 2012) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with the University of South Carolina Upstate).

2. For a discussion of the relationship between political corruption and economic growth in the United States, see Noel D. Johnson et al., *Corruption is Bad for Growth (Even in the United States)*, 147 PUB. CHOICE 377 (2011). For a discussion of the association between political corruption and trust in

spillovers from political corruption underscores the need for public policies that limit the opportunities and rewards for such behavior, as well as increase the likelihood that corrupt activities are discovered and punished.

State ethics commissions, along with so-called freedom of information acts[3] and campaign finance and lobbying regulations, are the quintessential institutional "fixes" for political corruption that have been adopted in the states over the last several decades. Yet there is surprisingly little evidence that institutions designed to enhance these goals actually work in practice. Instead, anticorruption policies tend to be based more on the intuition of public administrators or self-appointed watchdogs from the press than from any systematic evaluation.

Perhaps the best example of this unfortunate tendency is found in the recent work of the State Integrity Investigation (SII), a consortium of nonprofit "good government" groups that rates states based on their risk of corruption.[4] SII rated states based on fourteen different broad criteria based on data collected by reporters in each state; the ranking criteria include: public access to information, the presence of independent ethics commissions, methods of political financing, and methods of judicial selection.[5] However, the methodology employed by SII is devoid of any analysis or reference to studies that would suggest the criteria used to rank states are effective in reducing political corruption. The result is thus a ranking of states' risk of political corruption that strains credulity; for example, SII rates New Jersey as the least corrupt state despite its notoriously checkered experience with public corruption.[6]

In fact, despite a robust scholarly literature on the determinants and consequences of political corruption, only recently have social scientists undertaken systematic evaluation studies of state political institutions in order to test the efficacy of common anticorruption policies. On a positive note (and in support of the intuition of many reform-minded observers), there is some evidence that methods of judicial selection and freedom of information acts really do have a significant impact corruption rates in the states.[7] On the other hand, there is no support for the often strongly held belief that campaign finance

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government and voter turnout, see BETH A. ROSENSON, THE SHADOWLANDS OF CONDUCT 136–38 (2005); DENNIS F. THOMPSON, ETHICS IN CONGRESS: FROM INDIVIDUAL TO INSTITUTIONAL CORRUPTION 141–43 (1995); Christopher J. Anderson & Yuliya V. Tverdova, *Corruption, Political Allegiances, and Attitudes Toward Government in Contemporary Democracies*, 47 AM. J. POL. SCI. 91 (2003).

3. *E.g.*, CAL. GOV'T CODE §§ 6250–6276.48 (West 2008).

4. ST. INTEGRITY INVESTIGATION, http://www.stateintegrity.org (last visited Jan. 29, 2013).

5. *Investigation Categories*, ST. INTEGRITY INVESTIGATION, http://www.stateintegrity.org/investigation_categories (last visited Sept. 30, 2013).

6. Paul Sherman & David M. Primo, *New Jersey Least Corrupt? Ha, Ha*, WALL ST. J., Apr. 4, 2012, at A13.

7. *See* Adriana S. Cordis, *Judicial Checks on Corruption in the United States*, 10 ECON. GOVERNANCE 375, 378 (2009); Adriana S. Cordis & Patrick L. Warren, Sunshine as Disinfectant: The Effect of State Freedom of Information Act Laws on Public Corruption 5 (Apr. 2, 2012) (unpublished manuscript), *available at* http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1922859.

reforms reduce political corruption.[8] However, to date, there has been no systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of state ethics commissions in combatting public corruption.

Nevertheless, the creation of state ethics commissions is generally understood by scholars to be a reaction to public concerns about corruption. Even so, there is a strong suspicion among these same scholars that such ethics commissions are inconsequential, or "toothless tiger[s]."[9] But in the absence of any systematic attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of these commissions or their structures, the fundamental question as to whether state ethics commissions serve to reduce political corruption remains unanswered.

Yet, despite the absence of supportive evidence, political actors frequently make strong claims about the importance of ethics reforms and the organizational structure of ethics commissions. For example, several states proclaim that their ethics commissions' activities promote the integrity of democracy and public confidence in government by curbing political corruption:

> The Nevada Commission on Ethics . . . strives to enhance the public's faith and confidence in government . . . .[10]
>
> The EEC [Executive Ethics Commission] promotes ethics in public service and ensures that the State's business is conducted with efficiency, transparency, fairness, and integrity.[11]
>
> The Office of State Ethics promotes integrity in government by . . . .[12]
>
> The Ethics Commission . . . promotes Oklahoma citizens' confidence in state government by . . . .[13]

Of course, such self-serving arguments are to be expected from any political organization, but these claims stand in stark contrast to the comparative indifference given to ethics commissions in the social science literature.

In this study, we conduct the first comprehensive statistical evaluation of the efficacy of state ethics commissions as anticorruption policy. As an initial and exploratory foray, we focus on two basic hypotheses: (1) Do state ethics commissions serve to reduce political corruption? and (2) Does it matter to this end whether state ethics commissions are structured as bipartisan or nonpartisan

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8. *See* Beth A. Rosenson, *The Effect of Political Reform Measures on Perceptions of Corruption*, 8 ELECTION L.J. 31, 32 (2009); Adriana S. Cordis & Jeff Milyo, Do State Campaign Finance Reforms Reduce Political Corruption? 5 (Jan. 2012) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with the University of Missouri Political Economy Research Lab), *available at* http://web.missouri.edu/~milyoj/files/Cordis_Milyo_CFR_and%20Corruption.pdf.

9. *See, e.g.*, ROSENSON, *supra* note 2, at 114.

10. ST. OF NEV., COMM'N ON ETHICS, http://ethics.nv.gov (last visited Jan. 30, 2013).

11. ST. OF ILL., EXECUTIVE ETHICS COMM'N, http://www2.illinois.gov/eec/Pages/default.aspx (last visited Jan. 30, 2013).

12. ST. OF CONN., OFF. OF ST. ETHICS, http://www.ct.gov/ethics/cwp/view.asp?a=3510&q=415018 (last visited Jan. 30, 2013).

13. OKLA. ETHICS COMM'N, http://www.ok.gov/oec (last visited Jan. 30, 2013).

bodies? To be sure, state ethics commissions also differ in the details of appointment procedures, jurisdiction, investigative authority, manpower, and budgetary resources. However, consistent data across states and over time is sparse when it comes to these characteristics. Consequently, we start with the more fundamental and feasible investigation of whether state ethics commissions appear to be causally related to political corruption in the states.

II. DATA AND METHODS

We seek to understand the relationship between the presence and type of ethics commissions in the states and public corruption among state and local government officials via the standard statistical methods used in policy evaluation studies. This requires that we quantify the types of ethics commissions, as well as the amount of corruption across states and over time. In this section, we first describe our data sources and measurement strategies for these key variables; we then describe our analytical approach.

A. State Ethics Commissions

The key explanatory variables in our analysis are the presence and type of state ethics commissions. We obtained data on state ethics commissions from the Council of Government Ethics Laws (COGEL)[14] and the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL).[15] Specifically, we coded the year each state commission was established, the manner in which commissioners are selected, and any restrictions on the partisan composition of these bodies (see Table A1).[16]

Currently, forty-one states have ethics commissions; the states that do not are: Arizona, Idaho, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia, and Wyoming. Most state ethics commissions were established in the 1970s or earlier. The earliest adopting states were: Hawai'i, Louisiana, and New Jersey. Between 1970 and 1980, another twenty-five states created ethics commissions, largely in reaction to the national Watergate scandal. A second wave of state ethics commissions were established between 1987 and 1994 in Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, and West Virginia. Since that time, the creation of state ethics commissions has been sporadic; the most recent adopters include: Illinois in 2003; Colorado and Tennessee in 2006; and Utah in 2010. The staggered timing of the adoption of state ethics commissions, together with an absence of clear regional or partisan patterns, provides a natural experiment well suited for studying the effects of state commissions on political corruption in the states.

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14. THE COUNCIL ON GOVERNMENTAL ETHICS LAWS, http://www.cogel.org (last visited Jan. 30, 2013).

15. NAT'L CONF. OF ST. LEGISLATURES, http://www.ncsl.org (last visited Jan. 30, 2013).

16. In states with multiple ethics commissions, we focus on the regulatory body with the more expansive jurisdiction (*i.e.,* not strictly legislative commissions).

Ethics commissions also exhibit diversity in their internal structure, which affords us another point of comparison. For the purpose of our analysis, we classified state ethics commissions into four broad types based upon restrictions on the party composition of commission: 1) bipartisan or nonpartisan; 2) no party majority; 3) not all one party; and 4) no restrictions. Bipartisan commissions are those that require an even number of commissioners evenly split between the two major parties; the states with this structure are: Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee. We also included Wisconsin, which prohibits commissioners from holding any partisan affiliation, in this category. While most states restrict appointments in order to prevent one party from holding all the seats on the commission, several also prohibit one party from holding a majority of the seats. States with the latter restriction are: Colorado, Maine, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, and Texas. In Table 1, we describe the number of states with each type of ethics commission and how the frequency of different types has changed by decade from 1980 to 2010.

Table 1: Restrictions on Party Composition of State Ethics Commissions

	1980	1990	2000	2010
Number of States with Ethics Commissions:	*28*	*32*	*37*	*41*
Bipartisan/nonpartisan	3	3	4	5
No single party majority	4	4	5	7
Not all members the same party	13	17	19	20
No restrictions on party composition	8	8	9	9

B. Public Corruption in the States

The dependent variable throughout our analysis is political corruption in the states. Most empirical research on the causes and consequences of public corruption in the United States examine state-level data on convictions for "official corruption" as recorded by the Department of Justice. This is because the vast majority of all public corruption convictions in the United States are the result of federal prosecution.[17]

We obtained administrative data on federal corruption convictions under license from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University.[18] TRAC employs the Freedom of Information Act to make large quantities of records from various federal agencies available to the public. Information on criminal cases from the Department of Justice is available beginning in 1986. Using the TRAC archive, we collected data on all convictions classified by prosecutors as official corruption among state and local government

17. Cordis & Milyo, *supra* note 8, at 9.
18. TRACFED, http://tracfed.syr.edu (last visited Jan. 30, 2013).

officials from 1986–2010. Finally, in order to compare public corruption convictions across states, we normalized these by the pool of government officials in each state. For each year, we calculated the number of official corruption convictions per 10,000 state and local government full-time-equivalent civilian employees (FTEs).

As shown in Table 2, there are few convictions among state and local public officials in the United States, at least relative to total state and local government employment. Over the twenty-five years we examined, the average annual conviction rate per 10,000 state and local government FTEs is just 0.13, with a standard deviation of 0.17.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Five-Year Waves Analysis, 1986–2011 (n=250)

	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Dependent Variable:	
Official corruption convictions per 10,000	0.13
state and local government FTEs	(0.17)
Key Independent Variables:	
Ethics Commission (0,1):	0.67
Bipartisan/nonpartisan (0,1)	0.07
No party majority (0,1)	0.09
Not all same party (0,1)	0.34
Other State Institutional Controls:	
Index of campaign finance regulations (0 to 4)	1.74
	(1.12)
Legislative term limits (0,1)	0.22
Appointed judges (0,1)	0.54
Partisan judicial elections (0,1)	0.16
Republican control of state government (0,1)	0.19
Democratic control of state government (0,1)	0.22
State Demographic Controls:	
Age 65+ (%)	12.38
	(2.00)
Black (%)	9.94
	(9.36)
Other minority race (%)	5.60
	(9.47)
Hispanic (%)	6.86
	(8.48)
High school (%)	80.52
	(6.95)
College (%)	22.58
	(5.06)

Table 2 *(continued)*

	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Poverty (%)	13.00
	(3.74)
Union (%)	13.45
	(6.09)
Log (state population)	15.01
	(1.01)
Log (real per capita income)	10.41
	(0.18)

C. Analytical Approach

In order to estimate the effect of ethics commissions on the rate of public corruption in the states, it is necessary to account for the delay in observing corruption convictions. Apart from this, contemporaneous comparisons between the presence of ethics commissions and corruption may be confounded by the likelihood that ethics commissions are more likely to be adopted either in the wake of political scandal or in states that suffer from persistently high levels of public corruption.

We addressed this challenge in three ways. First, we examined patterns in the raw data over the course of decades in order to observe any slow-moving trends. Second, we pooled our annual state-year observations into five nonoverlapping, five-year waves of state-level data; this permitted us to use multivariate regression analysis to examine the effects of state ethics commissions on average corruption convictions in years *t+1* through *t+5*. We used this "waves analysis" to compare average measures of state institutions and demographics over the five years prior to average corruption convictions five years hence. Third, we utilized annual data and multivariate regression analysis to estimate eleven separate indicators for each year before and after the implementation of a particular reform from *t−5* to *t+5*. We then plotted the estimated coefficients and ninety-five percent confidence interval for these indicators. This allowed us to easily observe any delayed impacts of ethics commissions, as well as evidence of any "reverse causality" from episodes of corruption prior to reform.

D. Control Variables Used in Multivariate Regression Analysis

In all of our subsequent regression analyses, we controlled for an array of state political institutions and demographics, as well as year indicators.[19] The

19. The set of control variables is adopted from Cordis and Milyo, *supra* note 8, at 20–21.

particular institutions that we controlled for include an index of state campaign finance regulations, legislative term limits, judicial selection, and party control of state government. The list of state demographic controls include characteristics such as age, education, ethnicity, and race, as well as poverty, union membership, real per capita income, and state population. All control variables are listed in Table 2.

All of the control variables that describe political institutions are simple binary indicators, except for the index of state campaign finance regulations. This index ranges from zero to four, based on whether states have no limits on contributions to candidates, limits on corporate contributions, limits on all contributions, public financing in gubernatorial elections, or public financing in both legislative and gubernatorial elections.[20]

III. EVIDENCE FROM BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS

Public corruption rates among state and local government officials are not highly correlated with either the presence of state ethics commission or restrictions on the party composition of these commissions. To illustrate this, we plotted average annual conviction rates for the period 2001–2010 for each state against the time period each state adopted an ethics commission in Figure 1A. Looking at the plot, there is no clear pattern to suggest that states with older ethics commissions experience less corruption than those with newer ethics commissions. Nor does it appear that states without ethics commissions experience systematically higher rates of corruption among state and local officials than states with ethics commissions of any vintage.

20. The effects of state campaign finance laws on corruption are examined in Cordis and Milyo, *supra* note 8, at 11–12.

Figure 1A: Average Annual Conviction Rate in the 2000s
Convictions per 10,000 State and Local Government FTEs

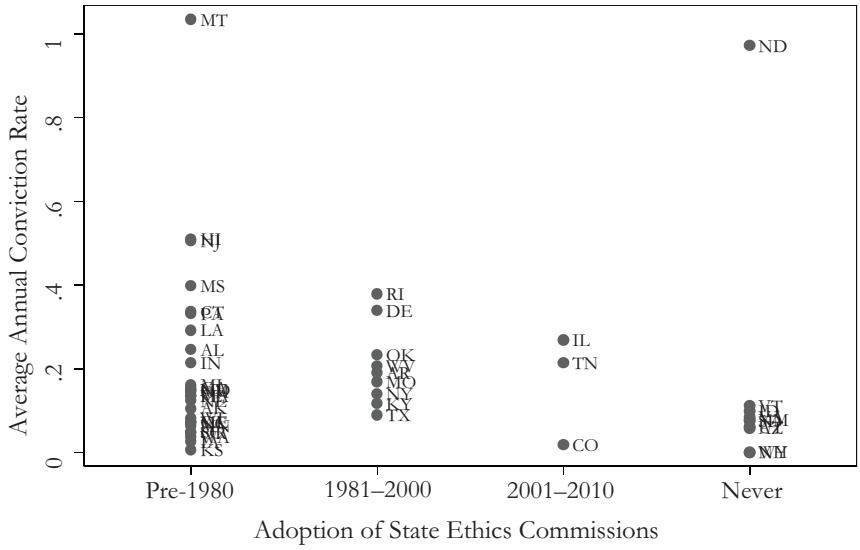
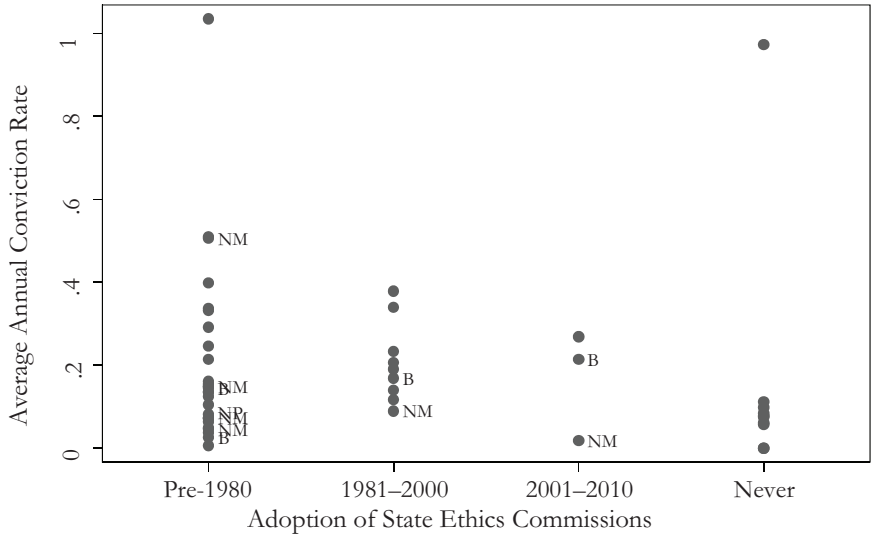


Figure 1B: Average Annual Conviction Rate in the 2000s
Convictions per 10,000 State and Local Government FTEs



Notes: B=Bipartisan; NM=No Party Majority; and NP=Nonpartisan

In fact, the Spearman rank correlation between average annual corruption convictions in the 2000s and a binary indicator for whether states have an ethics commissions established prior to 2000 is 0.28 ($p<0.05$). This means that states

with ethics commissions had a statistically significant *higher* corruption rate among state and local officials in the 2000s compared to states without any ethics commission. Of course, this perverse association may be the result of states with higher corruption rates choosing to adopt ethics commissions. On the other hand, recall that the raw data in Figure 1A does not suggest that the vintage of ethics commissions matters, either. Even so, we return to this concern momentarily.

In order to check whether restrictions on party composition of commissions are correlated with conviction rates, we relabeled the scatter plot to show commissions that prohibit any party from controlling a majority of the commission seats (see Figure 1B). Once again, there is no obvious pattern indicating that either bipartisan/nonpartisan (B) or no party majority (NM) types of commissions experienced very different corruption rates in the 2000s compared to states with no restrictions on commission membership or even no ethics commission. Among states with ethics commissions, the Spearman rank correlation between the presence of restrictions on the commission composition and conviction rates is just −0.13 ($p>0.10$). This weak and statistically insignificant correlation suggests no association between corruption and the rules governing the composition of ethics commissions.

We now reconsider the possibility that reverse causality confounds the foregoing analysis. In other words, states may establish ethics commissions in response to a history of particularly high corruption rates; and in that case, it may be possible that corruption in those states is on the decline, but still relatively higher than in other states. We addressed this concern by examining the *changes* in average annual conviction rates within each state from the 1990s to the 2000s. In Figure 2A, we plotted the change in these corruption rates among state and local officials against the vintage of each states ethics commission. Most observations lie above the zero-change line indicated in the diagram; this means that most states experienced an increase in corruption from the 1990s to the 2000s. This is especially true for North Dakota and Montana; the former has no ethics commission but the latter was an early adopter. In general, corruption rates appear to increase more slowly on average for states that are late adopters or have no ethics commission (other than North Dakota). However, the Spearman rank correlation between ethics commissions established prior to 2000 and changes in conviction rates is still positive (i.e., perverse), but small and not statistically significant (0.10; $p>0.10$).

Figure 2A: Change in Average Corruption Rates from 1990s to 2000s
Convictions per 10,000 State and Local Government FTEs

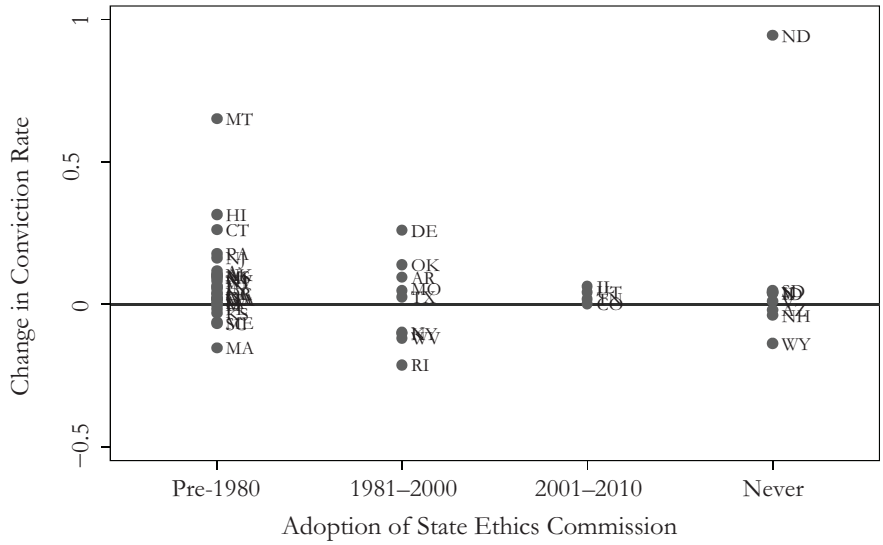
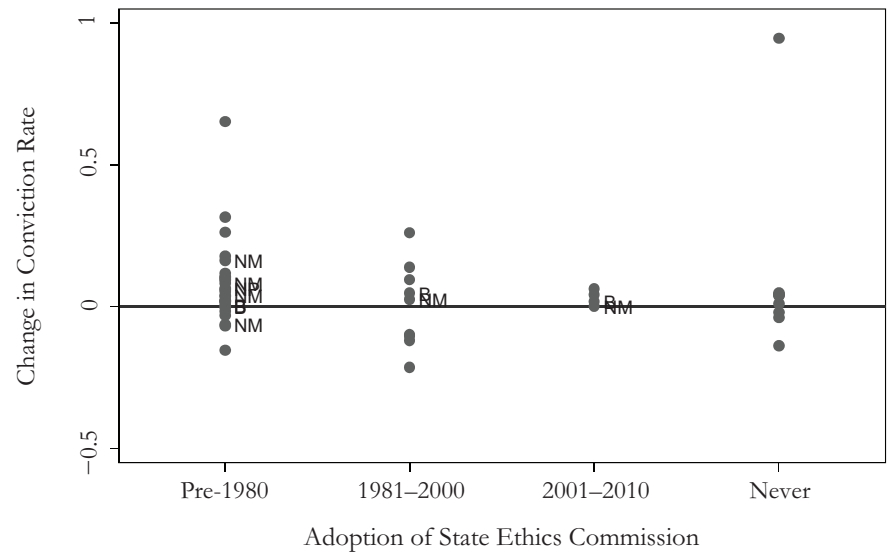


Figure 2B: Change in Average Corruption Rates from 1990s to 2000s
Convictions per 10,000 State and Local Government FTEs



Notes: B=Bipartisan; NM=No Party Majority; and NP=Nonpartisan

Finally, we reexamined whether restrictions on party composition are related to *changes* in average annual corruption convictions across decades (see Figure 2B).

Once again, there is no obvious directional relationship, although states with restrictions on the commission's composition seem to experience less overall change in corruption rates over time. The absence of any significant relationship is confirmed by the Spearman rank correlation between restrictions on party majorities and changes in the conviction rate, which is just −0.05 ($p>0.10$).

This first pass analysis reveals no strong bivariate relationship between the presence and type of state ethics commissions and public corruption. However, there may be important differences in other institutions or demographics across states that adopt ethics commissions and those differences serve to mask the true relationship in this simple analysis. For this reason, we turned to regression methods in order to control for other confounding factors that may affect political corruption rates in the states.

IV. EVIDENCE FROM REGRESSION ANALYSIS USING FIVE-YEAR WAVES

We regressed the average annual corruption rate for years $t+1$ to $t+5$ on the average annual values of independent variables from years $t-4$ to t; this yields five nonoverlapping time periods (or five observations per state). That is, we matched state characteristics from 1981–1985 to corruption rates in 1986–1990; state characteristics in 1986–1990 to corruption rates in 1991–1995, etc. This approach mitigates concerns about both the time delay between corrupt acts and convictions, as well as any delay in the impact of ethics reforms on corruption rates.

Regression estimates (and the absolute values of the t-statistics) for the waves analysis are shown in Table 3. In the first column, we report the estimated coefficients for a model that examines only whether any type of ethics commission was established in the prior five-year wave. The second column of Table 3 shows results for a model that examines commission types defined by restrictions on party affiliation. The two regression models are otherwise identical in the control variables that are included. For ease of exposition, we report the estimated coefficients for political institutions, but not for demographic or year variables (full results are available from the authors). All standard errors have been adjusted for clustering within state observations over time.

Table 3: Effects of Ethics Commissions on Corruption
(Convictions per 10,000 State and Local Government FTEs)

	(1)	(2)
Ethics commission	0.02	
	(0.66)	
Bipartisan/nonpartisan		−0.03
		(0.83)
No party majority		0.02
		(0.30)
Not all same party		0.02
		(0.58)
None		0.05
		(0.61)
Index of campaign finance regulations	−0.02	−0.2
	(1.22)	(1.25)
Legislative term limits	0.03	0.03
	(0.64)	(0.62)
Appointed judges	−0.03	−0.02
	(0.80)	(0.63)
Partisan judicial elections	−0.01	−0.01
	(0.24)	(0.29)
Republican control of state government	0.10	0.10
	(1.99)	(2.00)
Democratic control of state government	0.03	0.03
	(1.15)	(1.23)
Controls for state demographics and year indicators	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.30	0.31

Notes: $^{**}p<0.01$ and $^{*}p<0.05$. Coefficient estimates and absolute value of *t*-statistic from ordinary least squares estimation (standard errors clustered by state).

In model (1), shown in the first column of Table 3, the estimated effect of establishing an ethics commission is to increase corruption rates by a statistically insignificant 0.02 convictions per 10,000 state and local government officials ($p>0.10$). In model (2), shown in the second column of Table 3, only bipartisan/nonpartisan commissions are estimated to reduce corruption rates slightly, albeit by an insignificant amount (−0.03; $p>0.10$). Further, none of the commission composition variables are statistically significant, either individually or jointly. In both models, the estimated effects are not only statistically insignificant, but very small relative to the observed variation in the data. For comparison, the standard deviation in corruption rates is 0.17, or an order of magnitude larger than most of the estimated effects associated with ethics commissions.

In fact, this regression analysis using five-year waves reveals no significant relationships between *any* state political institutions and political corruption. Of note, state campaign finance laws also have no significant effect on state

corruption rates; this is consistent with more detailed studies of the effects of state campaign finance reforms and corruption.[21] Finally, the absence of systematic variation in corruption across states and over time is also attested to by the low values for R^2 in these regression models.

Statistical significance aside, the only type of commission that is associated with lower corruption convictions is the bipartisan/nonpartisan model. However, the magnitude of this effect is quite small compared to the observed variation in corruption convictions across states and over time. Because the standard deviation of the dependent variable is 0.17, the reduction in corruption rates from establishing a bipartisan/nonpartisan ethics commission is less than twenty percent of a standard deviation (and not statistically significant).

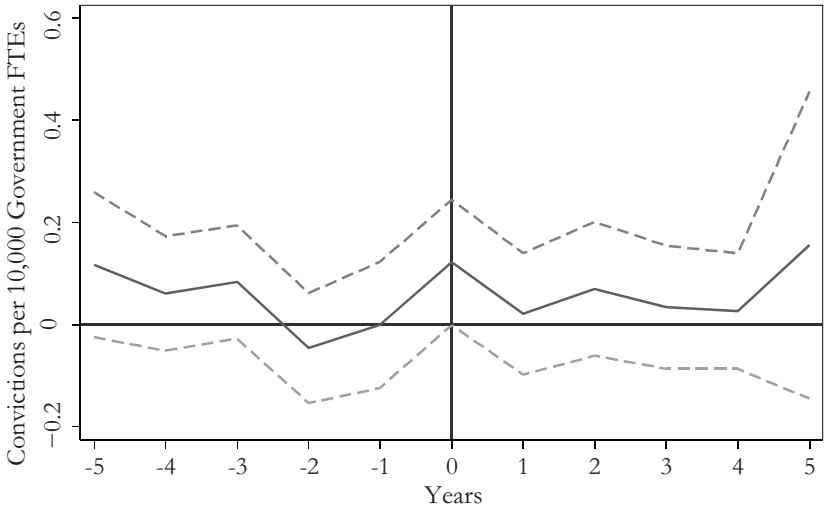
It is important to keep in mind, however, that the findings here may still be confounded by the presence of reverse causality. In order to formally address this concern, we examined the trends in annual corruption rates before and after episodes of reform that saw ethics commissions established in the states.

V. EVIDENCE FROM REGRESSION ANALYSIS USING ANNUAL DATA

In our final analysis, we regressed annual state conviction rates on contemporaneous annual values of the independent variables using the same control variables as above (i.e., model (1) in Table 3). However, instead of a simple indicator for the presence of an ethics commission, we now examine separate indicators for each of the five years leading up to and subsequent to the year in which a state ethics commission is established. We then plotted the estimated coefficients and ninety-five percent confidence interval for these eleven time dummy variables (from $t-5$ to $t+5$) in Figure 3. The solid line in the figure represents the coefficient estimates for each time indicator and the dashed lines represent the ninety-five percent confidence intervals for these estimates.

21. Cordis & Milyo, *supra* note 8, at 5.

Figure 3: Corruption Before and After Adoption of State Ethics Commissions
Estimate and Ninety-Five Percent Confidence Interval



The purpose here is to check whether the failure to find significant effects of state ethics commissions on corruption is an accident of timing. Consider the scenario in which state ethics commissions are both the product of a rash of corruption and instrumental in mitigating such corruption, we might then observe a strong inverted V shape centered just to the right of *t* (given some delay in observing the effects of commissions on convictions). This would indicate a steady rise in corruption rates up to the creation of an ethics commission, then a decrease in corruption after its creation. In this scenario, it is possible for *average* corruption rates before and after the adoption of a state ethics commission to be identical (as indicated in Table 3). Consequently, the waves analysis above may fail to uncover time trends that would strongly indicate that state ethics commissions have a beneficial impact on corruption rates.

We illustrate the estimated time trends in corruption before and after the adoption of ethics commissions in Figure 3. However, this analysis reveals very little in the way of significant movements in corruption convictions before or after episodes of reform. For most years, the ninety-five percent confidence intervals straddle the zero-change line, which indicates no statistically significant effect.

There is a marginally significant increase in the conviction rates coincident with the establishment of state ethics commissions (i.e., $t=0$ in Figure 3). The magnitude of this peak is about 0.12 convictions per 10,000 state and local government FTEs ($p<0.05$), which would represent a 100% increase in the average conviction rate. Given some delay between the occurrence of political scandals and any subsequent corruption convictions, this indicates that state commissions are indeed more likely to be adopted in the wake of a corruption

scandal, albeit not in response to chronically high corruption rates. This last observation is supported by the absence of any significant corruption in the five years prior to the establishment of a state ethics commission. Finally, we observed no significant decrease in corruption rates in the five years after the creation of a state ethics commission.

VI. DISCUSSION

In this study, we conducted the first systematic statistical evaluation of the effects of state ethics commissions on public corruption among state and local officials. Overall, we found no strong or consistent support for the common claims made by political actors that state ethics commissions are important policy tools for reducing political corruption. Nor did we find any significant evidence that the partisan composition of these ethics watchdogs matter. Of course, it is not possible to "prove a negative"; the failure to reject the null hypothesis is not the same as proving no effect.

Even so, the raw correlations and point estimates that we present indicate that state ethics commissions have only very weak, and possibly perverse, effects on public corruption. Consequently, while we cannot rule out some small beneficial impact of state ethics commissions, our results do imply that this outcome is no more likely than a harmful effect of similar or larger magnitude. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that there is no support for claims that state ethics commissions, including bipartisan and nonpartisan commissions, serve to reduce political corruption.

Our analysis also sheds some light on the determinants of state adoption of ethics commissions. We did not observe that state ethics reforms are more likely to occur in states with a recent history of chronic political corruption, at least when looking at the adoption of state ethics commissions over the last twenty-five years. Rather, ethics commissions appear more likely to be adopted in the wake of a transitory political corruption scandal, but are otherwise unrelated to corruption rates in the preceding or subsequent five-year periods.

The findings here should not be too surprising given the (thankfully) infrequent and sporadic nature of public corruption in the states; indeed, we find no significant association between political institutions (e.g., campaign finance regulations) and public corruption among state and local officials. This makes us less than sanguine that other features of state ethics commissions, such as jurisdiction, investigative authority, or resources will make an enormous difference in the efficacy of ethics commissions in addressing public corruption.

Nevertheless, it is possible that state ethics commissions serve a more symbolic purpose or achieve some outcome that is difficult to directly measure. Future research should investigate whether these more nebulous effects are manifest in greater public trust and confidence in state government and the integrity of the democratic process.

Appendix:

Table A1: State Adoption of Ethics Commissions

State	Year	Restrictions on Party Membership
Alabama	1974–	None
Alaska	1974–	Not all one party
Arizona		
Arkansas	1991–	Not all one party
California	1975–	Not all one party
Colorado	2006–	No majority for any party
Connecticut	1977–	None
Delaware	1994–	Not all one party
Florida	1974–	Not all one party
Georgia	1974–	None
Hawai'i	1968–	None
Idaho		
Illinois	2003– (E)	Not all one party
Indiana	1974–	Not all one party
Iowa	1973–	Bipartisan
Kansas	1974–	Not all one party
Kentucky	1992– (E)	None
Louisiana	1964–	Not all one party
Maine	1976–	No majority for any party
Maryland	1979–	Not all one party
Massachusetts	1978–	Not all one party
Michigan	1973–	Not all one party
Minnesota	1974–	Not all one party
Mississippi	1979–	None
Missouri	1991–	Bipartisan
Montana	1975–	None
Nebraska	1976–	Not all one party
Nevada	1975–	No majority for any party
New Hampshire		
New Jersey	1968–	No majority for any party
New Mexico		
New York	1990–	Not all one party
North Carolina	1977–2006	None
	2007–	No majority for any party
North Dakota		
Ohio	1974–	Bipartisan
Oklahoma	1990–	Not all one party
Oregon	1974–	No majority for any party
Pennsylvania	1979–	Not all one party
Rhode Island	1987–	Not all one party
South Carolina	1975–	None
South Dakota		
Tennessee	2006–	Bipartisan
Texas	1991–	No majority for any party
Utah	2010–	None
Vermont		
Virginia		
Washington	1973–	Not all one party
West Virginia	1989–	Not all one party
Wisconsin	1973–	Nonpartisan
Wyoming		