

Sunlight Disinfects, but Beware of the Shade Free Media in Weakly Institutionalized Environments*

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Abstract

Free media may not favor political accountability when other democratic institutions are weak, and may even bring undesirable unintended consequences. We propose a simple model in which politicians running for office may engage in coercion to obtain votes. A media scandal that exposes these candidates increases their coercion effort to offset the negative popularity shock. This may result in the tainted politicians actually *increasing* their vote share. We provide empirical evidence from one recent episode in the political history of Colombia, the ‘parapolitics’ scandal featuring politicians colluding with illegal armed paramilitary groups to obtain votes. We show that colluding candidates not only get more votes than their clean competitors, but also concentrate them in areas where coercion is more likely (namely, areas with more paramilitary presence, less state presence, and more judicial inefficiency). Harder to reconcile with other explanations and as a direct test of the effects of media exposure, we compare tainted candidates exposed *before* elections to those exposed *after*. We find that those exposed before elections get as many votes as those exposed once elected, but their electoral support is more strongly concentrated in places where coercion is more likely. Our results highlight the complementarity between different dimensions of democratic institutions.

Keywords: Media, Democracy, Elections, Colombia, Civil Conflict, Coercion.

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