

Personalist Leadership and Corruption: Evidence from Third Wave Democracies

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Abstract: Despite assertions that personalism in politics may cause backsliding and erosion of democracy, systematic empirical analyses of the effects of personalist leadership on the quality of government are scarce. We investigate how having parties with a dominant leader in the national government affects the integrity of political institutions. We argue that personalist regimes tend to foster clientelist networks while weakening the institutions of oversight. Engagement in corrupt activities is shaped by actors' expectations for gains and costs, their loyalty and professionalism, and the unpredictable behavior of the leader. Data from 32 Eastern European and Latin American countries associate personalist governments with higher levels of grand (political) and petty (bureaucratic) corruption. We also find that the time a regime stays in power intensifies its impact on malfeasance. These findings carry implications for how personalist leadership brought through democratic elections may undermine accountability, fair governance, and the quality of democracy in general.