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Can Financial Rewards Encourage Reporting of Electoral Fraud: Experimental evidence from Moldova

How can young democracies protect electoral integrity against vote buying and foreign interference? In Moldova, allegations of widespread electoral fraud and Russian interference have made this question particularly pressing. Efforts to curb electoral misconduct have commonly relied on moral appeals and formal monitoring. Authorities have also increasingly encouraged citizens to report vote buying, yet securing their cooperation remains a challenge. We test two policies to encourage reporting in a survey experiment with 1,550 adults in Moldova shortly before the September 2025 parliamentary election: a brief moral message and a guaranteed financial reward. Our study shows that while the moral message has no effect on willingness to report, the financial reward reduces reporting both a community member who accepted money for a vote and a political organisation paying people to attend a rally. These findings highlight the importance of testing reporting policies before implementation. Identifying interventions that fail or backfire can help authorities avoid costly mistakes in their efforts to strengthen democratic institutions.

Which policies can reduce electoral fraud?

Moldova's recent elections illustrate the importance of detecting electoral corruption. The presidential election and constitutional referendum on the country's European integration took place on 20 October 2024, followed by a presidential run-off on 3 November. International observers documented credible evidence of illicit financial inducements and foreign interference, predominantly attributed by Moldovan authorities and other interlocutors to Russia and pro-Russian political forces (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025).

Before the first round of the 2024 presidential election and the referendum on Moldova's European integration, police reported a scheme involving approximately 130,000 voters allegedly paid to oppose the referendum and support preferred candidates. This number represented almost 10 percent of normal voter turnout (Balmforth, 2024). Ahead of the parliamentary election on 28 September 2025, there were concerns that electoral fraud could again occur on a large scale. These concerns were reinforced by police investigations into renewed vote-buying activities linked to networks implicated in the previous year's election. Public authorities had launched initiatives ranging from civic appeals not to sell one's vote to campaigns encouraging citizens to report electoral corruption through established reporting channels.

Encouraging citizens to report wrongdoing can help authorities detect electoral fraud at a lower cost. Neighbours, colleagues and other witnesses often know who distributed money, where votes were bought and who organised transport—

information that can be difficult and expensive for authorities to obtain on their own. But providing a reporting channel is only a first step: people must also be willing to use it. The challenge is to obtain cooperation where citizens distrust authorities or view reporting as disloyal. Our earlier laboratory experiments in Moldova and France found that Moldovan participants considered reporting a tax evader less socially acceptable and reported less frequently. Nevertheless, making reporting possible increased tax compliance in both countries (Romaniuc et al., 2022). Thus, disapproval of reporting can coexist with a deterrent effect.

Against this background, we conducted a survey experiment with a representative sample of Moldovans to test two policies intended to encourage reporting: a moral appeal highlighting the social harm of electoral corruption and a financial reward for reporting. Financial rewards have proved effective in other settings. In Sweden, Campos-Mercade et al. (2021) found that a modest payment increased actual COVID-19 vaccination uptake by 4.2 percentage points. Rewards also receive support in the whistleblowing literature: Butler et al. (2020) found that financial rewards substantially increased reporting of wrongdoing in a laboratory experiment.

However, financial payments could also change how reporting is perceived: someone who would otherwise be seen as protecting the community might instead be viewed as acting for personal gain. Bénabou and Tirole (2006) explain how rewards can discourage prosocial behaviour by casting doubt on people's motives. In the case of electoral fraud, this concern may be particularly strong when reporting involves a neighbour or



another community member. Accepting money to report someone one knows may feel like profiting from that person's punishment

Our chosen methodology – a randomized experiment – is a gold standard for identifying causal effects of interventions because they create comparable groups exposed to different policies. Survey experiments are particularly appealing as an early stage of policy evaluation: they allow researchers to vary a message or proposed incentive while reaching a broad population at relatively low cost. As Stantcheva (2023) explains, surveys can create controlled variation and reveal beliefs and reasoning that administrative records do not capture. Their limitation here is equally important: we identify effects on stated willingness in hypothetical situations, rather than on actual reports or the incidence of electoral fraud.

A survey experiment before the election

We surveyed 1,550 adults aged 18 and older from different geographical areas. Interviews were conducted by telephone and in person, in Romanian and Russian. Respondents were assigned to one of the following experimental conditions: a baseline group with no additional message (521 people), a moral-message group (520), or a financial-reward group (509).

All respondents considered two hypothetical situations. In the first, they learned that someone from their locality had accepted money in exchange for voting for a particular candidate. They knew who the person was and when and where the payment occurred, and were told that authorities could substantiate it, for example through bank records. In the second, they

witnessed a political group distributing cash to people transported by minibus to attend a rally and hold placards. They could identify the location and a vehicle registration number. The second situation concerns paid political mobilisation, rather than a direct exchange of money for a ballot.

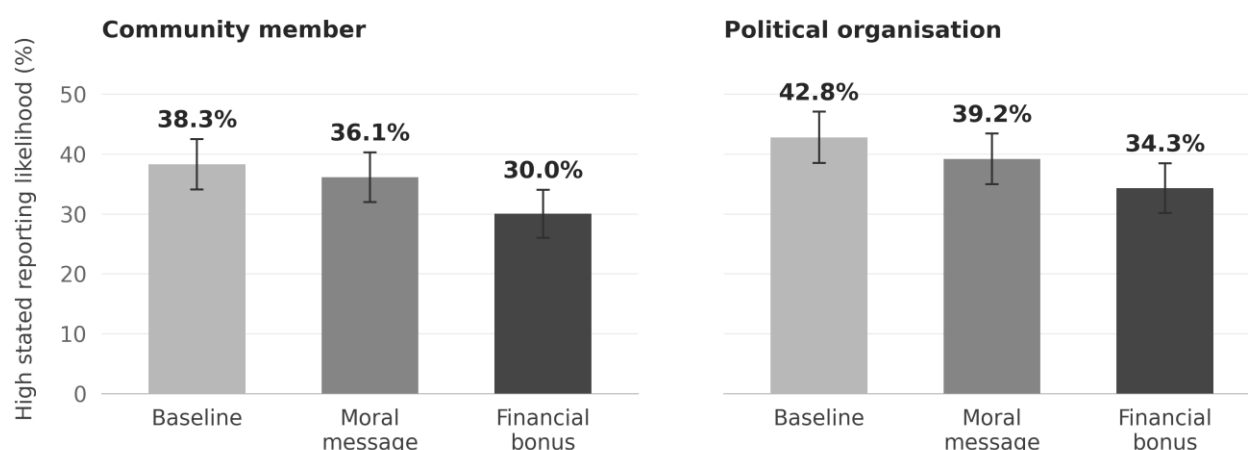
In both situations, reporting was described as anonymous. Respondents rated their likelihood of reporting on a scale from 1, meaning “not at all likely,” to 10, meaning “definitely will report.” They were then asked about reporting channels or reasons for hesitation, depending on their response.

Before the first situation, the moral-message group heard that three out of four Moldovans in a recent survey had said corruption was never justified, and that corruption, including electoral corruption, harmed the country. This combines information about a prevailing moral view with a reminder of social harm. The financial-reward group was told in each situation that reporting would bring a guaranteed reward of 400 lei (about 20 EUR).

We considered two situations because the target of a report may matter. Reporting someone from one's locality can expose an identifiable community member to punishment. A financial reward may then appear to turn disloyalty into a source of income. Reporting the political group that organises payments could be viewed differently, because the immediate target is an organisation rather than an individual neighbour. Fiorin (2023) provides closely related evidence from a field experiment with Afghan education employees asked to report absent colleagues. When participants were reminded that reports could lead to penalties, rewards reduced reporting



Figure 1. High stated likelihood of reporting by treatment and scenario



Source: Authors calculation

from 15 to 10 percent. When reports were guaranteed not to reach the government, rewards instead increased reporting from 6 to 12 percent. The findings show that the anticipated harm to a peer can change how people respond to payment.

Financial rewards reduced willingness to report

Figure 1 reports the share of respondents selecting scores 8-10, on a 0 to 10 scale, which we describe as a high stated likelihood of reporting. The percentages use the survey weights; the error bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

For the community-member scenario, high willingness to report was 38 percent in the baseline, 36 percent after the moral message, and 30 percent with the reward. For the political-group scenario, the corresponding shares were 43, 39, and 34 percent. The reward therefore reduced high reporting intentions by approximately eight percentage points in each situation.

Respondents were somewhat more willing to report the political group than the community

member. However, the reward reduced willingness in both situations by almost the same amount. We find no evidence of the predicted larger reward effect when the reporting target is an organisation. This does not establish why the reward backfired. The follow-up answers nevertheless show that concerns regarding harm to in-group members are relevant. Among the 771 respondents selecting “not at all likely” in the community-member scenario, 23 percent said they did not want to harm those involved (18 percent in the political organisation scenario); 14 percent did not trust authorities to act; and 13 percent believed nothing would change. The largest group, 31.4 percent, said it was not their business.

Policy implications

These findings highlight the importance of evaluating what works and under which conditions before introducing a policy more widely. An intervention that succeeds in one setting may be ineffective, or even counterproductive, in another. Evidence about policies that do not work is therefore valuable: it helps authorities avoid



spending resources on ineffective measures and design policies with greater impact.

First, financial rewards should be tested before they are introduced. The guaranteed 400-lei reward in our experiment reduced willingness to report, even though reporting was explicitly described as anonymous. This does not mean that all reporting rewards will fail. It does show that their effectiveness cannot be assumed from successful applications elsewhere. Different amounts, payment conditions, or ways of presenting the reward would require further evaluation.

Second, low-cost moral messages also need to demonstrate their value. Reminding respondents that corruption is wrong and harms the country did not increase reporting intentions. Condemning corruption may be easier than reporting someone from one's community. Future communications could address this decision more directly, explaining how reporting protects the community, what happens after a report, and how witnesses are protected. Testing these approaches would help authorities identify which messages encourage cooperation.

Third, more work is needed to understand the relationship between trust in public institutions and citizens' willingness to cooperate with the state. A large proportion of respondents expressed low trust in the Central Election Commission or the police. Higher trust was associated with greater

willingness to report, but our experiment cannot establish whether increasing trust would itself encourage cooperation.

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