Interested, Educated, and Alienated: Who Says Corruption is the Most Serious Problem Facing Their Country?

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Key Findings:

- Wealthier, more educated individuals and men are more likely to say that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country.

- Neighborhood insecurity and negative perceptions of the national economy reduce the likelihood of identifying corruption as the most serious problem.

- Support and belief in one's political institutions also reduce one's propensity to identify corruption as the most serious problem.

- People who are politically engaged are more likely to cite corruption as the most serious problem facing their country.

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Corruption is widespread in the Americas. Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), an expert ranking of corruption around the world, suggests that governments in the region are consistently "failing to tackle corruption."[1] Indeed, on a 100-point "cleanliness" scale, the Americas as a region falls below the midpoint.[2] Corruption can negatively affect economic productivity,[3] and can depress satisfaction with democracy[4] and political trust.[5] Corruption varies in scope, ranging from high-level scandals (e.g., the Panama Papers) to petty bribery associated with routine daily activities (e.g., traffic tickets).[6]

This AmericasBarometer *Insights* report examines perceptions of those respondents who believe that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country. In the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer survey, respondents were asked:

A4. In your opinion, what is the most serious problem facing your country?[7]

While there are other questions in the AmericasBarometer that ask about individuals' perceptions of or experiences with corruption, this question is particularly interesting because it is open-ended. If a respondent states that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country, this means that they are also choosing *not* to name other issues, such as crime or the economy, as their country's most pressing problem. Further, since the "problem" item appears early in the questionnaire, before corruption and other issues such as the economy are mentioned, the response is not conditioned by other parts of the survey itself. Understanding who prioritizes corruption over these other salient issues is important to deepening our understanding of corruption perceptions in Latin America.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents in 18 Latin American countries who indicated that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country.[8] Results vary substantially across the region, from a low of 1.1% of respondents in Uruguay to a high of 27.1% of all respondents in Peru identifying corruption as the most serious problem. Brazil, which has in recent years experienced a series of high-profile corruption scan-
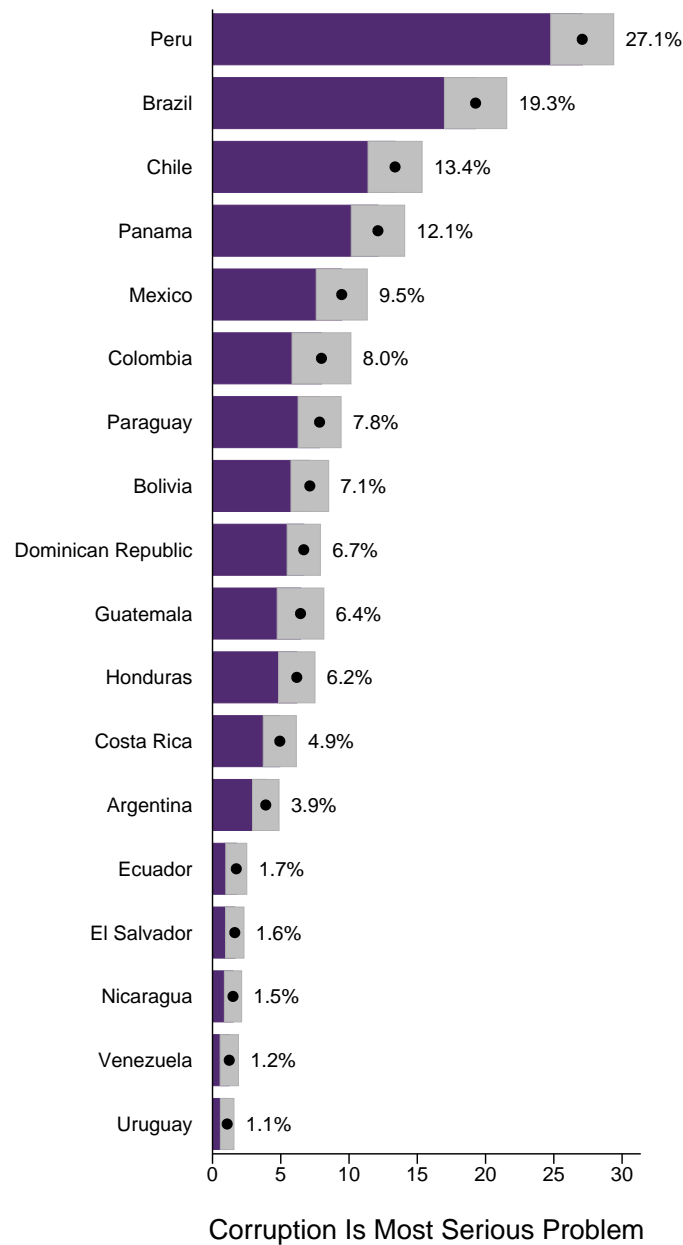
Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents Reporting that
Corruption Is the Most Serious Problem

dals, is second from the top, with 19% of respondents providing this answer.[9]

One might expect corruption to be an objectively more serious problem in countries where more individuals cite it as the most pressing issue. Figure 1 belies this expectation. For example, the proportion of respondents listing corruption as the most serious problem facing their country in Chile is relatively high (13%); the CPI, however, suggests that Chile is one of the least corrupt countries in the region. In Venezuela and Nicaragua, in contrast, the CPI suggests that corruption is quite high compared to other countries in the region, yet fewer than 2% of respondents identify corruption as the most salient problem.[10]

This points to a second possible explanation for citing this issue as the most serious: corruption may only become a salient problem when citizens' more basic concerns are addressed.[11] This so-called "post-materialistic" argument maintains that individuals' attention and values shift as they achieve economic security. The following sections assess this explanation by first looking at socioeconomic and demographic factors that, if positively correlated with beliefs that corruption is the most serious problem, would suggest that concern is post-material. I then move on to examine attitudinal factors associated with individual perceptions that corruption is the most serious problem in their country.

Who Cares About Corruption?

Figure 2 begins by examining how five key demographic factors (wealth, education, urban versus rural residence, age, and gender) shape perceptions that corruption is the most serious problem in one's country.[12] Previous research offers two competing sets of expectations. A first set of scholarship shows that wealthier individuals are more likely to tolerate corruption than are poorer individuals, as long as politicians provide public goods.[13] Based on this work, I expect that wealthier individuals will be less likely than poorer individuals to say that corruption is the

most serious problem facing their country.

Education and wealth, however, are also measures of socioeconomic status and economic security.[14] If corruption is an issue that receives attention only after other more pressing issues have been addressed, then higher levels of education and wealth should be associated with a greater likelihood of citing corruption as the most pressing issue. Figure 2 provides a first cut at testing these competing hypotheses, while also controlling for age, urban/rural residence, and gender.[15]
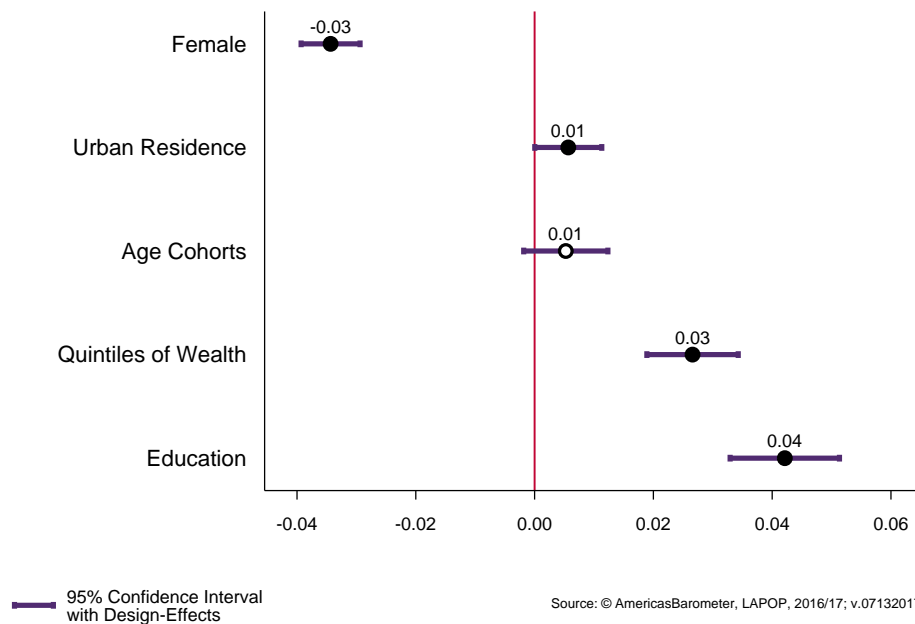

95% Confidence Interval with Design-Effects

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17; v.07132017

Figure 2: Demographic Measures of Citing Corruption as Most Serious Problem

Figure 2 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis predicting the likelihood of naming corruption is the most serious problem. Each independent variable is listed on the vertical axis. Black dots represent the change in the probability that an individual will give this response associated with a maximal increase in a given independent variable. Horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals around these estimates. Dots to the right of the red "0" line indicate a positive relationship, while dots

to the left of the line signal that individuals with a particular character-istic are less likely to say that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country. Hollow dots with lines that cross the line at 0 are not considered statistically significant.

Figure 2 shows that, on average, the wealthiest and most educated are more likely to cite corruption as the most serious problem. The likelihood of giving this answer over any other increases by 3 and 4 percentage points, respectively. This is consistent with the post-material hypothesis, with corruption becoming salient only when an individual's basic needs are guaranteed. Those who reside in urban areas are 1 percentage point more likely to cite corruption as the most serious problem, while females are 3 percentage points less likely than males to give this response. The next section delves into this and other potential attitudinal predictors of this belief.

Additional Individual-Level Factors

The analyses presented above suggest that identifying corruption as the most serious issue may be a problem of privilege. Put another way, corruption (like feminism and LGBT rights) may be an issue that gains importance as basic needs, like personal and economic security are met. The AmericasBarometer includes several variables that capture the economic and physical security that might provide an individual with the ability to focus on corruption. To capture economic security, I use a variable that asks individuals about their ability to save versus feeling they do not have enough money to make ends meet.[16] I measure individuals' feelings of physical security with a measure of whether or not an individual sees their neighborhood as safe.[17]

In addition to these main measures of security, I control for system sup-port. Scholars have found that individuals in the Americas with higher levels of support and trust for democratic institutions perceive less cor-ruption among officials.[18] Similarly, individuals who support efforts to

maintain social stability even when doing so threatens their own interests perceive less corruption.[19] And Bohn (2012) finds that perceptions of corruption are higher among Latin Americans who view institutions as failing. All three of these studies measure types of "diffuse support"[20] or "system support," which captures the belief that the political system is moral and right. High levels of system support indicate faith in democracy itself as well as the institutions that are meant to help it function.[21] Based on this past work, I expect that those expressing greater system support, which I measure using an index,[22] will be less likely to report that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country.

95% Confidence Interval with Design-Effects

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17; v.07132017
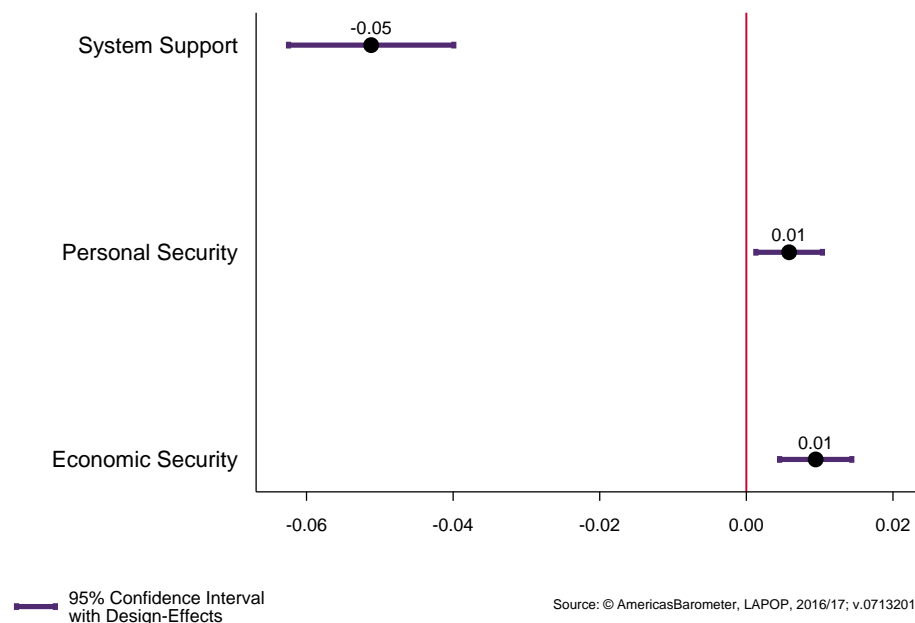
Figure 3: Security and System Support

Figure 3 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis that regresses beliefs that corruption is the most serious problems on these measures of system support and physical and economic security.[23] First, as expected, respondents who feel more physically and economically secure are more likely to say that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country. Compared to those who feel insecure, those who feel safe in their neighborhood are 1 percentage point more likely

to citing corruption as the most serious problem facing their country. Similarly, individuals without major economic problems are 1 percentage point more likely to cite corruption than some other problem.[24] Beyond the scope of this report, those experiencing more economic security or threats to physical security may be more likely to cite crime or economic problems as the most serious issue facing the country.

Figure 3 also shows that individuals who report high levels of system support are five percentage points less likely to say that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country. This finding echoes scholarship cited above linking satisfaction with the political system to less critical views of the prevalence of corruption. Also, it could be that corruption is being linked to specific actors in addition to the system. This relationship between "specific support" and citing corruption as the most important problem might be more likely to occur where corruption scandals have been particularly infamous. Other work on this topic should consider this in the future.

Conclusion

The goal of this *Insights* report was to gain a better understanding of the type of citizen in Latin America who reports that corruption is the most serious problem facing their country. Overall, wealth, education, and male gender are associated with a greater likelihood of citing corruption. The results for wealth and education support the notion that corruption becomes a more salient issue as individuals' basic needs are fulfilled. I further test this post-materialism hypothesis by examining the effects of economic and physical security. In line with these expectations, individuals who are doing well economically and feel safe in their neighborhoods are more likely to cite corruption.[25]

These findings have important implications for public policy. The type of respondent described above - male, educated, wealthy, and secure – may have a disproportionate ability to influence national political priorities.[26]

Alternatively, corruption may continue to matter only to the secure, opening up the opportunity for politicians and officials to carry on with corrupt acts as long as they fulfill other duties.[27] This would hinder meaningful policies to reduce corruption, and perhaps even encourage other forms of poor performance.

Notes

1. Ebrard (2017). The Corruption Perceptions Index aggregates 13 data sources to quantify perceived corruption using a methodology that scores and ranks all countries on the same scale and allows for significant variation across countries and across time. Data from various sources are standardized (all variables are coded on a scale of 0-100 with 0 meaning the least corruption and 100 meaning the most) and each country's Corruption Perceptions Index score is the average of the standardized scores for that country. For more information, see http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_ index_ 2016.

2. The Americas as a region has an average score of 44, out of 100 points. Calculation by author, using data available at: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_ index_ 2017#table.

3. Bentzen (2012).

4. Villoria, Ryzin, and Laverna (2012).

5. Ionescu (2013).

6. See Morris and Blake (2009).

7. For this report, I recoded A4 as a dummy variable. Respondents that responded that corruption was the most serious problem take the value of "1" and those giving any other response are assigned a value of "0".

8. Grey bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimated percentage.

9. E.g., BBC (2018).

10. Levels of corruption victimization reported by AmericasBarometer participants across countries also align poorly with respondents' perceptions that corruption is the most serious issue in their country. For example, corruption victimization in Chile is relatively low, and in Nicaragua and Venezuela is substantially higher.

11. Inglehart (1981); Maslow (1943).

12. Gender is a dichotomous variable, coded as 1 for females and 0 for males. Type of residence is also a binary variable, with urban coded as 1 and rural coded as 0. Age is broken down into six categories: 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, and 66+. Wealth is measured in five categories using questions about possessions present in the respondent's household (see Córdova (2009). Education is measured in four categories (none, primary, secondary, and post-secondary). All variables in Figure 2 have been rescaled to range from 0-1, with 0 being the lowest value and 1 being the highest.

13. Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013).

14. Inglehart (1981); Franzen and Meyer (2010).

15. Country-fixed effects are included in the model but not shown in Figure 2.

16. I recoded question **Q10D**, which asks, "The salary that you receive and total household income... (1) Is good enough for you and you can save from it (2) Is just enough for you, so that you do not have major problems (3) Is not enough for you and you are stretched (4) Is not enough for you and you are having a hard time." I have made the variable binary, where 1 represents security (answers 1 and 2), and 0 represents insecurity (answers 3 and 4).

17. I recoded variable, **AOJ11**, which reads: "Speaking of the neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?" In the new variable, those who feel very and somewhat safe are coded as a "1", while those who feel somewhat or very unsafe are coded with a 0".

18. Morris and Klesner (2010).

19. Tan et al. (2016).

20. Easton (1975).

21. Easton (1975); Booth and Seligson (2009).

22. See Booth and Seligson (2009). System support is an index variable that combines the results of multiple questions about support for different national institutions: **B1**, "To what extent do you think the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial?", **B2**, "To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)?", **B3**, "To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are well protected by the political system of (country)?", **B4**, "To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of (country)?", and **B6**, "To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of (country)?". It has been transformed linearly to range from 0-1, where individuals with a score of 0 had the lowest possible average score on all these questions, and those with a score of 1 had the highest possible average score.

23. Figure 3 includes all of the variables included in Figure 2, including country-fixed effects.

24. While these effect sizes may be small, it is important to note that the percentage of people citing corruption as the most serious problem is rather small.

25. It is important to remember that perceptions of corruption are not necessarily accurate, and that respondents who believe corruption is the most serious problem may not have personal experience with corruption. This report does not include a discussion of corruption victimization's effect on citing corruption. When measures of corruption victimization are included, however, results presented in Figure 3 hold.

26. Hunt and Laszlo (2012).

27. Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013).

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