

Can Presidential Popularity Decrease Public Perceptions of Political Corruption? The Case of Ecuador under Rafael Correa

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On December 13, 2017, Ecuador's National Court of Justice (CNJ) found the current Vice President of the Republic, Mr. Jorge Glas, guilty of illicit association as part of several investigations into acts of corruption linked to the Brazilian company Odebrecht. For this crime, the CNJ sentenced Glas to 6 years in prison and the repayment of USD\$14.1 million to the Ecuadorian state.^{1,2} At the same time, the National Anticorruption Commission (CNA) presented data from their investigation into the cost of corruption in Ecuador in the last 10 years. According to the CNA, the cost has reached over USD \$35 billion dollars in bribes, overcharging in public contracts, tax evasion, commissions on petroleum exports and related imports, public debt, and current expenditures.^{3,4}

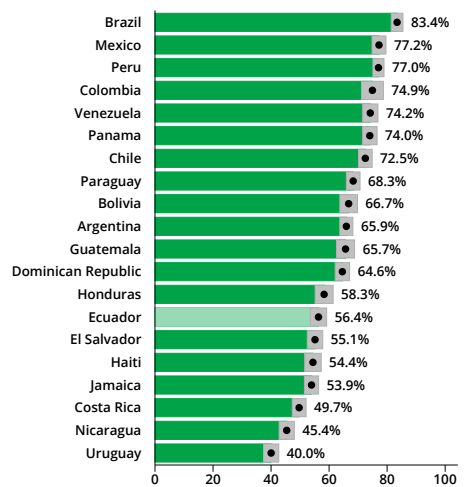
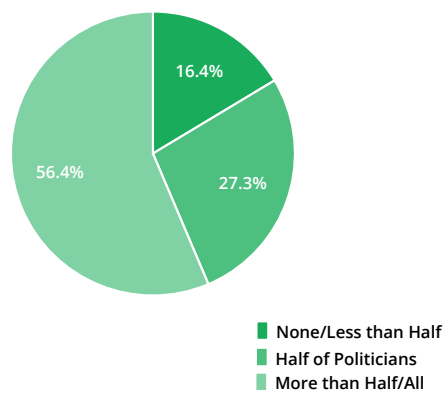
The Odebrecht scandal in Latin America points to a well-organized criminal network involving many politicians and high-ranking public employ-

ees. In Ecuador, some of these politicians and public employees were incarcerated during the government of former president Rafael Correa (2007-2017), while others remain at large. While these events have sent ripples of shock through the media and the public, data from the AmericasBarometer in Ecuador suggest that Ecuadorians’ assessments of the transparency of politicians varied considerably depending on levels of approval of Correa’s government.⁵

This *Topical Brief* arrives at this conclusion through analysis of the results of data from the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer surveys about the correlation between corruption perceptions and presidential approval.⁶ To measure corruption perceptions, we use the following question:

EXC7NEW: Thinking about politicians in Ecuador, how many of them do you think are involved in corruption?⁷

Perceived Corruption among Politicians Ecuador 2016/17



Percent Reporting More than Half or All Politicians are Involved in Corruption, 2016/17

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17; v.07172017

Figure 1: Corruption Perceptions in Ecuador and in Comparative Perspective, 2016/17

Figure 1 shows that 56.4% of Ecuadorians believe that more than half or all politicians (that is, the majority) are involved in corruption. In comparison

to the rest of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Ecuador is slightly below the regional average of 60.9%.

While perceptions of political corruption are comparatively low in Ecuador, there is a significant difference in corruption perceptions by president Correa’s approval rating, as shown in Figure 2. To measure presidential approval, we use responses to the following question:

M1. Speaking in general about the current government, would you say that the job that President Rafael is doing is...?⁸

Figure 2 displays the most important finding of this study: Correa’s job approval considerably attenuated citizens’ corruption perceptions.⁹ 89.3%, that is, almost 9 in 10 respondents who expressed strong disapproval of former president Correa’s administration, responded that the majority of politicians are corrupt. At the other extreme, only 46.1% of those who strongly approved of Correa’s administration reported that the majority of politicians are corrupt.

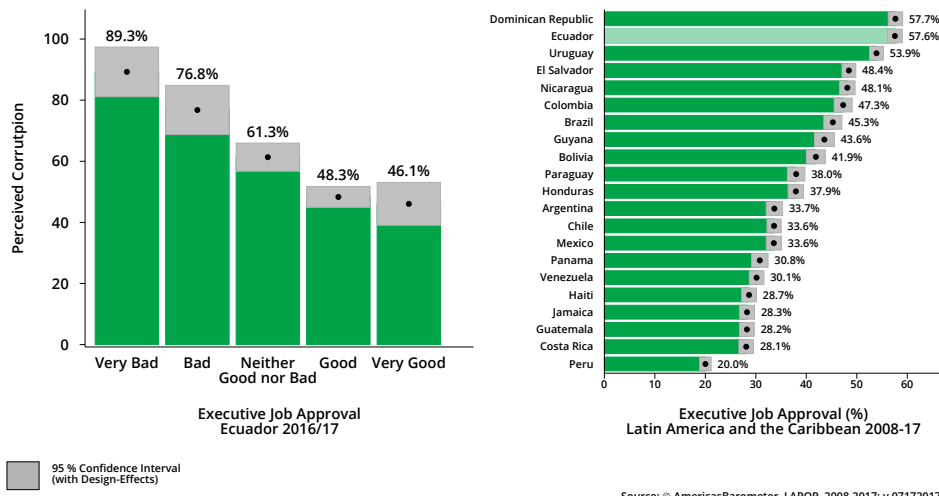


Figure 2: Perceived Corruption and Correa’s Job Approval, 2016/17

Figure 2 shows Correa’s average job approval (that is, the percent evaluating his performance as “good” or “very good”), as measured by the AmericasBarometer between 2008 and 2017. The data reveal that his

approval rating has been among the highest of all countries in the region. During his ten years in government, 57.6% of Ecuadorians indicated, on average, that his performance was good or very good. Given the evidence that high popularity mitigates public perceptions of political corruption, Correa's high approval ratings provide at least a partial explanation for why perceptions of political corruption have been comparatively low in Ecuador (per Figure 1). Because the most recent survey round was conducted while Mr. Correa was still in office, we do not know whether similar dynamics persist under Lenin Moreno's administration. However, we suspect that, due to broad media coverage, new efforts by the Comptroller and Attorney General, and above all, Moreno's commitment to the fight against corruption, public opinion may have changed significantly. It is possible that those who currently approve of Moreno's performance in office perceive high levels of corruption among Ecuadorian politicians. Corruption linked to the Odebrecht scandal in Ecuador and the rest of Latin America is widespread, and it is thus probable that investigations will follow new leads that will, in turn, uncover new involvements and lead to trials and sanctions for politicians, public employees, and business people. The results presented here may shed some light on how presidential popularity could be an attenuating factor in the perceptions people have about corruption in other Latin American countries.

Notes

1. Story from *El Comercio*: <http://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/tribunal-condena-jorgeglas-ricardorivera-odebrecht.html>
2. The verdict and sentence follow from Mr. Glas' participation in illicit activity, through one of his uncles, with employees of the Brazilian construction firm, Odebrecht. Additionally, the CNJ requested the General Prosecutor investigate the Vice President for other related crimes, such as bribery, collusion, influence trafficking, embezzlement, organized crime, performing illegal transactions through third parties, and money laundering.

3. Story from *El Universo*: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2017/12/14/nota/6525505/mas-35-mil-millones-se-estima-perjuicio-pais>
4. The damages (that is, the funds lost to corruption) total about 7 thousand public schools, 244 large hospitals, or more than 3 million two- and three-bedroom houses built by the “Mission Homes for All” program proposed by current President Lenin Moreno during the campaign. We use USD \$10,000 as the reference for each “Mission Homes for All” house. This estimate was used by President Moreno during the campaign. <http://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/politiko-2017/49/moreno-promete-entregar-250-000-viviendas-dignas>
5. It is important to note that Mr. Glas also served as Vice President under Correa.
6. The study in Ecuador was carried out from December 2016 to January 2017, with a nationally representative sample of 1,545 individuals.
7. The original question includes the response options, “None,” “Less than half,” “Half of all politicians,” “More than half,” and “All.” In this report, we compare the political attitudes of those who chose the options “More than half” and “All” politicians against those who chose the other options.
8. The original response scale contains the categories: “Very good,” “Good,” “Neither good nor bad,” “Bad,” and “Very bad (terrible)”.
9. This correlation is significant and robust to the inclusion of several covariates in a logistic regression model. The covariates fit in the model are corruption victimization, system support, recipient of government assistance, number of children, age, skin tone, material wealth, education, gender, place of residence, and occupation. The results of this model are available from the authors on request.

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This *topical* was edited by Dr. Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, Dr. Mitchell A. Seligson, Dr. Mollie J. Cohen and Emma Tatem. For more information follow us on Twitter at @lapop_barometro. The data and regional report from the 2016/17 round of the AmericasBarometer are available for free to download at www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop.