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Corruption in Latin America: Understanding the Perception–Exposure Gap

Simone R. Bohn

Abstract: What beliefs do citizens who perceive levels of corruption in their countries to be of significance hold? Do those beliefs arise from their exposure to corruption? Furthermore, do perceptual and experiential corruption decrease the reservoir of legitimacy of a democratic regime? We attempt to answer these questions using the 2012 Americas Barometer survey of 24 Latin American countries. We find that whereas “rational-choice corruptors,” males and, to a lesser extent, individuals with resources are particularly exposed to corruption, perceived corruption originates from a sense of impunity derived from a negative evaluation of the state’s ability to curb corruption. In addition, we show that perceived corruption significantly decreases citizen satisfaction with democracy, but exposure to corruption does not. All in all, the policy implications of our study are straightforward: having an efficient and trusted judiciary is central to curbing both experiential and perceived corruption, even if it increases the latter in the short run.

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