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# Corruption and Trust: Theoretical Considerations and Evidence From Mexico

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## Abstract

The growing empirical literature on political corruption shows trust (interpersonal and political) to be both cause and consequence of corruption: a conclusion that largely builds on studies using cross-national measures of corruption based on perceptions of corruption rather than actual experience, raising questions of endogeneity. The lack of trust fed by corruption is considered critical in that it undermines government efforts to mobilize society to help fight corruption and leads the public to routinely dismiss government promises to fight corruption. After disaggregating the major concepts, this article empirically explores the relationship linking corruption and trust in Mexico based on data from the 2004 Americas Barometer survey. The authors discover a powerful mutual causality between perceptions of corruption and trust in political institutions that suggests that rooting out perceptions of corruption or shoring up trust in public institutions will be an extremely difficult project for anyone who takes on the task.

## Keywords

political corruption, interpersonal trust, political trust, legitimacy

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Scholars have devoted substantial attention in recent years to the concept of trust (e.g., Boeckmann & Tyler, 2002; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Critin, 1974; Earle & Cvetkovich, 1995; Fukuyama, 1995; Hagan, Merkens, & Boehnke, 1995; Hetherington, 1998; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Kaase & Newton, 1995; A. H. Miller, 1974; W. Miller, 1980; Muller, Jukam, & Seligson, 1982; Putnam, 1993, 2000). Many studies cast trust as an independent variable and find that it influences political behavior and institutional practice. Recent writings on social capital, for example, identify interpersonal trust along with civic involvement as a determinant of economic development, political participation, and effective democratic institutions (see Fukuyama, 1995; Hagan et al., 1995; Klesner, 2007; Putnam, 2000). Other studies, by contrast, cast trust as the product rather than the cause of institutional performance. These studies suggest that poor, mismanaged government breeds distrust, not the other way around. As Rothstein and Stolle (2002) succinctly put it, "Government policies and political institutions create, channel and influence the amount and type of social capital" (p. 7). Taken together, these findings suggest that trust influences institutional performance just as institutional performance shapes the public's trust in their institutions and in one another.

In a similarly perplexing manner, the growing political corruption literature portrays trust as both cause and effect of corruption. Some point to the lack of trust in others and in political institutions as a major causal component underlying corruption, often creating a degree of tolerance toward official wrongdoing and feeding expectations of such conduct, whereas others find clear evidence that corruption fosters low levels of political trust and erodes regime legitimacy. Such findings not only raise questions about the role of trust but also point to potential mutual causality wherein low levels of trust nurture the corruption that in turn undermines trust in government and society. This suggests a vicious circle in countries suffering systemic corruption: a situation with significant implications for the prospects of fighting corruption and even for gauging the effectiveness of anticorruption measures (Manion, 2004; Wesberry, 2004).

Mexico offers an excellent case to study these individual-level reactions to corruption. Under the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the pervasiveness of corruption came to be widely known through spectacular scandals that implicated persons close to Presidents José López Portillo and Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Few Mexicans have escaped the famous *mordida*, or bribe, that has lined the pockets of many law enforcement officers and public officials. Indeed, corruption clearly played a functional role in greasing the wheels of Mexican government under the PRI, especially when

a large state role in the economy made the resources available for corruption great and the weakness of civil society organizations made it difficult to attack corruption (Morris, 2001). In Mexico's post-PRI democracy, we might expect citizens to give the former oppositionists now governing the benefit of the doubt by not simply assuming that public officials are corrupt. Yet despite the PRI's fall, Mexico remains mired at 72nd place in Transparency International's Perception of Corruption Index (CPI) in 2007 (Transparency International, 2007), and democracy has seemingly done little to alter the levels of corruption (Morris, 2009). As we will see, perceptions of corruption continue to have a profoundly negative impact on trust in political institutions, whereas the experience of corruption and its perception still lowers the public's trust in its national institutions.

Following a discussion of the various nuances of the trust–corruption equation, in which we explore their mutual causality, this article examines perceptions of corruption and trust in political institutions in Mexico based on data from the 2004 AmericasBarometer (AB) survey of that nation. The empirical section explores popular opinion regarding corruption and trust and sets out and tests a range of factors influencing popular perceptions of corruption in Mexico and institutional and interpersonal trust. To prefigure our findings, we discover a powerful mutual causality between perceptions of corruption and trust in political institutions that suggests that rooting out perceptions of corruption or shoring up trust in public institutions will be an extremely difficult project for anyone who takes on the task. At minimum, this helps explain the slow progress on both fronts in many developing democracies and points to the challenges of building trust and creating effective democratic institutions.

## **Trust and Corruption**

Like the broader political culture literature, much of the recent research on corruption identifies trust as both cause and consequence of corruption. One perspective posits that low levels of trust nurture corruption. According to this view, a lack of trust in others within society and/or in the government prevents the adoption of a universalistic ethos and cooperative behavior and favors instead instrumental and individualistic approaches to problems. As one of Mexico's most trenchant political commentators wrote, "A society that holds little trust in others tends to extreme care and caution, diminishing social and economic transactions and impeding social cooperation" (Rubio, 2007). Distrust thus fosters a tolerant or acquiescent attitude toward corruption and, by creating the expectation of corrupt behavior among others, feeds

individual participation in corruption. Some studies stress the lack of generalized trust within society or lack of interpersonal trust. Heidenheimer (1996, p. 339), for instance, attributes widespread corruption in Italy during the post–World War II period to the lack of trust among its citizens. Bardhan (1997), in turn, refers to a “frequency-dependent equilibrium” wherein participation in corruption is a function of one’s expectation of corrupt behavior by others.<sup>1</sup> Xin and Ruden (2004, p. 298) similarly contend that a culture of mistrust elevates the amount of perceived corruption in society which thereby provides a justification for such behavior. Cross-national studies using aggregate data by La Porta, Lopez-De Silanes, Shleifer, and Vishny (1997) and Moreno (2002) and individual-level analyses by Seligson (1999) and Davis, Camp, and Coleman (2004) also lend empirical support to this view. La Porta et al. find lower levels of interpersonal trust in societies with higher levels of corruption, whereas Moreno shows that such societies also tend to be more tolerant or permissive of corruption. Seligson’s study on Nicaragua and that by Davis et al. on Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico also identify interpersonal trust as a significant predictor of individual-level perceptions of corruption in government.

Although such studies emphasize societal or interpersonal trust as a key determinant of corruption, other scholars attribute corruption to the more refined notion of political trust as opposed to interpersonal trust. Defined as a “basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people’s normative expectations,” political trust, like interpersonal trust, is also thought to mold the public’s predisposition to engage in certain activities such as corruption (Hetherington, 1998, p. 791). According to Della Porta (2000), the “lack of confidence in government actually favors corruption insofar as it transforms citizens into clients and bribers who look for private protection to gain access to decision-makers” (p. 205). Cleary and Stokes (2006) similarly find that the lack of trust in institutions fosters clientelism. Research by Guerrero and del Castillo using focus groups in Mexico City offers qualitative support for this view. They find that the lack of legitimacy of the law coupled with perceptions of corruption within certain institutions, particularly the notion that “everyone is doing it,” greatly reduces the risk of detection and punishment and thus creates a disincentive to follow the written rules. “If a particular institution projects a corrupt image, the individuals that interact with that institution will tend to perceive low risks in offering a bribe” (Guerrero & del Castillo, 2003, p. 2).

Other corruption-related research, however, reverses the causal arrow connecting trust and corruption. Rather than seeing low levels of

trust—whether interpersonal or political—as causing corruption, this approach envisions corruption as eroding the level of trust (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Chang & Chu, 2006; Della Porta, 2000; Doig & Theobald, 2000, p. 6). Anderson and Tverdova (2003), for example, using a dual empirical approach, find that the higher the perception of corruption among individuals, the lower their support for democratic political institutions, whereas at the macro level, societies with higher levels of corruption tend to exhibit more negative attitudes toward civil servants. Using a different measure of corruption based on participation in corrupt exchanges in a small set of Latin American countries, Seligson (2002) also confirms corruption's corrosive impact on political trust and regime legitimacy. According to A. H. Miller and Listhaug (1999), this relationship occurs because corruption undermines trust in institutional effectiveness and institutional fairness, which serve as key indicators of support for the overall political system. Looking more specifically at the impact of political scandals on trust, Bowler and Karp (2004), Pharr (2000), Chang and Chu (2006), and Peters and Welch (1980) all show how corruption helps shape the public's attitudes about government, political institutions, and incumbent politicians. Pharr, for instance, finds misconduct in office to be a better predictor than policy performance to explain the low levels of political confidence found in Japan. Chang and Chu demonstrate that political corruption has strong trust-eroding effects regardless of contextual factors in Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Taiwan. Peters and Welch show that a voter's knowledge of corruption negatively affects voting behavior in U.S. congressional elections. McCann and Domínguez (1998), by contrast, show how such perceptions of corruption in Mexico translate into voter apathy rather than support for the opposition.

Though most studies examining the impact of corruption on trust tend to focus more on political trust and regime legitimacy, there is reason to treat the two forms of trust—interpersonal and political—in tandem (Inglehart, 1990; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Putnam, 1993). Lane (1959, p. 164, cited in Brehm & Rahn, 1997, p. 1003), for instance, contends that there is a mutual relationship between the two because “trust in government officials may be a ‘specific instance of trust in mankind.’” Levi (1996) identifies a similar linkage, noting how building confidence in governmental institutions has the potential to restore levels of interpersonal trust. Empirical studies tend to confirm this linkage. Brehm and Rahn (1997), for example, statistically demonstrate the mutual influence between the two, though they find that confidence in public institutions has a stronger impact on interpersonal trust than vice versa. And though Newton and Norris (2000) find social trust to be only weakly associated with institutional confidence at the individual level,

they do find the relationship to be much more robust at the national level (also see Kaase, 1999). Looking more precisely at distinct institutions within government, Rothstein and Stolle (2002) uncover a rather strong relationship between confidence in what they refer to as “order” institutions (police, judiciary) and interpersonal trust. They conclude that “societies in which the impartiality of the order institutions cannot be guaranteed, which is expressed by lower citizens’ confidence in these types of institutions, also produce lower generalized trust (and vice versa)” (p. 21). In summarizing this relationship, Rothstein and Stolle (2002) contend that “government institutions generate social trust only if citizens consider the political institutions to be trustworthy” (p. 16).

To be sure, some posit mutual causality linking trust—both interpersonal and political trust—to corruption and hence the vicious circle that it produces (Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999; Hetherington, 1998; Rothstein & Stolle, 2002). Della Porta and Vannucci (1999, p. 261), for example, plot the circularity in the following terms: misadministration → mistrust in the implementation of citizens’ rights → search for individual solutions to problems → propensity for paying bribes → demand for corruption → individualized responses to problems through bribery → increased perception of maladministration. Seligson (2002, p. 414) also alludes to the methodological problem of mutual causality when he notes that because the perception that bribes are needed may be a function of a low evaluation of government, we cannot be sure if corruption is responsible for the decline in trust in government or the result.

## Slippery Concepts

As with any analysis, exploring the trust–corruption equation demands conceptual clarity. One clear distinction in the literature already noted separates interpersonal trust and political trust. Though both refer to feelings of trust, the objects of those feelings clearly differ. So although survey questions may fail to define precisely what constitutes “trust,” they are abundantly clear in distinguishing between trust in other members of society (interpersonal trust) versus trust in the government or particular aspects of the political system (the politicians, the civil servants, rule of law, etc., which some authors label political trust and others institutional trust). Because of this distinction, the relationship between the two dimensions of trust remains theoretically open, though as mentioned, research shows a correlation linking the two types of trust and shows both forms of trust to be a cause and an effect of corruption. This leads us to formulate our first hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1a* ( $H_{1a}$ ): Corruption will strongly determine levels of interpersonal trust.

*Hypothesis 1b* ( $H_{1b}$ ): Corruption will strongly determine levels of confidence in public institutions (political trust).

Inversely,

*Hypothesis 2a* ( $H_{2a}$ ): Levels of interpersonal trust will influence corruption.

*Hypothesis 2b* ( $H_{2b}$ ): Levels of confidence in public institutions (political trust) will influence corruption.

A second conceptual distinction teases out corruption and perceptions of corruption. For better or worse—and the debate rages—public perceptions of corruption have routinely been used in cross-national research as a proxy measure of political corruption. The two concepts, however, are not identical (see del Castillo, 2003; Johnston, 2000; Morris, 2008), and few studies have explored the relationship. Clearly, as Seligson (2002) notes, popular perceptions of corruption are far more pronounced and widespread than the reality of corruption or what he denotes as victimization. In short, perception of corruption “reflects more than actual conditions” (Camp et al., 1999, p. 4). Looking more systematically at the relationship between the two, Morris (2008) finds them to be only mildly related and to carry different determinants and consequences. This basic distinction means that because most cross-national studies have actually used “perceived corruption” to measure corruption, any relationship they find between “corruption” and trust (interpersonal or political trust) actually refers to the perception of corruption. Moreover, because perception is “more than” corruption and because it too affects trust and thus corruption, it becomes important to analyze the determinants and the effects of perception and its link to trust separate from those tied to corruption itself. This raises the following questions: Are some individuals more likely than others to distrust politicians, envision widespread corruption, expect such behavior, and oblige? What determines how an individual will react to corruption and the perception of corruption? Has corruption, for instance, created such an environment of distrust that it prevents some from even believing that it is possible to tackle corruption? Is it difficult under such conditions to mobilize citizens to participate in anticorruption programs, leading to the further entrenchment of corruption itself? This allows for the refinement of our earlier hypotheses and the specification of two additional hypotheses:

$H_{1a}$  (Revised): Personal experience with corruption will strongly determine levels of interpersonal trust.

$H_{1b}$  (Revised): Personal experience with corruption will strongly determine levels of confidence in public institutions (political trust).

Hypothesis 3a ( $H_{3a}$ ): Perceived corruption will strongly determine levels of interpersonal trust.

Hypothesis 3b ( $H_{3b}$ ): Perceived corruption will strongly determine levels of confidence in public institutions (political trust).

Inversely,

$H_{2a}$  (Revised): Levels of interpersonal trust will influence personal experience with corruption.

$H_{2b}$  (Revised): Levels of confidence in public institutions (political trust) will influence personal experience with corruption.

Hypothesis 4a ( $H_{4a}$ ): Interpersonal trust will strongly determine perceived corruption.

Hypothesis 4b ( $H_{4b}$ ): Confidence in public institutions (political trust) will strongly determine perceived corruption.

A third and related conceptual problem centers on drawing a distinction between “perceptions” of corruption, on one hand, and political trust, on the other. Beyond the possible endogeneity of the relationship, arguably these two concepts have at times been operationalized in ways bordering on tautology. Two questions often used to measure trust in government, for example, are, “How often can you trust the government to do what is *right*?” and “Is Government run by a few people looking out for their *own interests* or run for the benefit of all?” (Michelson, 2003, p. 924, italics added). Both questions, however, seem to be rather general phrasings of the type of question often used to gauge the level of (perceived) corruption (“Are politicians corrupt?”) because most respondents would tend to define corruption as a situation wherein those in the government do something that is inherently not *right* and as a type of behavior that puts the public official’s *own interest* above those of the people. Is it even possible, in other words, to believe that those in government are acting in accordance to what they should be doing (what is right and for the benefit of all) and yet simultaneously hold the view that they engage in a type of behavior that by definition deviates from that norm (corruption)? This raises the question, then, of whether the query “How frequently do politicians engage in corruption?” which measures the perception of corruption, does not also gauge at least in part the lack of trust in politicians to “do the right thing” or both? Though trust in the government



or trust in politicians or even regime legitimacy certainly encompasses far more than simply perceptions of corruption, perceptions of corruption must nonetheless be considered a fundamental component of political trust. Accepting this view, it seems then that the “corruption–perception of corruption” linkage noted earlier and found within the literature may be just one variant of the broader “corruption–trust” linkage. Viciously rounded this means that the lack of trust in politicians or institutions combines with the perception of corruption to create the expectation of corruption and inductively feed corrupt behavior, whereas corruption itself deductively confirms and reinforces people’s expectations of others. People then view and interpret politics itself through these lenses of limited trust in the law, in the institutions, and in the expectation of corruption as an informal institution (Lauth, 2000). This discussion leads us to our final hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 5 ( $H_5$ ):* A strongly endogenous relationship links perceived corruption and confidence in public institutions (political trust).

*Hypothesis 6 ( $H_6$ ):* A strongly endogenous relationship links confidence in public institutions (political trust) and experience with corruption.

Few studies have explicitly looked into the determinants or the impact of individual perceptions of corruption because most empirical research on corruption examines societal-level variables. As noted earlier, Seligson (1999) shows individual-level participation in corruption influences perceptions of corruption, whereas Davis et al. (2004) link perceptions of corruption to interpersonal trust. Interpersonal trust, in turn, has been shown to be inversely related to permissive attitudes toward corruption (Moreno, 2002), age, city size, and female gender and positively related with income and years of education (Power & Clark, 2001) and political participation (Klesner, 2007). Even fewer studies have looked into the consequences of perceptions of corruption. McCann and Domínguez (1998), as noted, explore the electoral consequences of the perception of corruption in Mexico, finding that rather than a vote for the opposition (voice), individuals who perceive high levels of corruption in the government were more likely to abstain (exit). In a related study, Brinegar (2003) found that opposition party members tend to hold stronger anticorruption views.

## Case Selection and Data

Although our literature review suggests that the interrelationship of trust and corruption operates at both the individual and the societal level as well as

across those levels, in this study we are striving to focus at the individual level of analysis to sort out how perceptions and experiences of corruption shape individuals' trust in each other and in political institutions and vice versa. This focus leads us to eschew a multicountry analysis because substantial institutional and other contextual variability across countries would force us to work those differences into our models and would needlessly complicate our effort to draw conclusions about the individual-level variables in which we are interested. Hence, for this article we focus on the case of Mexico using the Latin American Public Opinion Project's (LAPOP) AB data.<sup>2</sup> LAPOP's surveys have repeated questions that have proven especially effective in exploring corruption in other national contexts, including questionnaire items that ask about both the perception of corruption and the experience of or participation in corrupt acts. It also poses a full array of questions on interpersonal trust and trust in public institutions, including questions on trust in institutions that allow us to avoid the problems of a tautological relationship with perceptions of corruption mentioned above. Using a multistage probability sample, LAPOP interviewed 1,556 Mexicans 18 years and older in their homes in March 2004.<sup>3</sup>

As noted at the outset, Mexico has a long history of entrenched corruption. In terms of perception, one survey found 79% of respondents agreeing with the statement "politicians are corrupt" (Transparencia Mexicana, 2001). In the AB survey, when given the opportunity to rate a series of types of public figures on a 10-point scale where 1 was *very corrupt* and 10 was *very honest*, 38% gave congressional deputies the very worst rating (a 1). Deputies received scores of 1, 2, or 3 from 62% of respondents. Respondents rated the police as even more corrupt, with 63% of respondents giving one of the three worst scores, whereas the ratings of other categories of public figures were not as low, but hardly encouraging. In terms of actual participation in corruption, half of respondents admitted to having paid a bribe or to having been asked to pay a bribe within the previous 12 months in the AB poll. Similarly, Mexicans are skeptical about the trustworthiness of their neighbors and political institutions. Almost two thirds of Mexicans, for instance, expect their fellows to take advantage of them given the chance, whereas trust in such institutions as the police and political parties, as shown in Table 1, is exceedingly low.

One key to assessing trust, according to Hetherington's (1998, p. 791) definition of political trust, involves "people's normative expectations." Data from the 2001 Encuesta Nacional de Corrupción y Buen Gobierno (ENCBG) survey suggest that such normative expectations are indeed high in Mexico despite the high levels of corruption. Of respondents, 87%, for instance, felt

**Table 1.** Trust in Public Institutions

Institution	Low (1-2)	Medium (3-5)	High (6-7)	Total
Armed forces	9	45	46	100
National commission on human rights	11	44	45	100
National government	17	57	26	100
Supreme court	18	60	22	100
Attorney general	19	57	24	100
Congress	19	59	22	100
Local government	19	56	25	100
Electoral tribunal	21	48	30	100
Political parties	33	53	15	100
Police	33	50	17	100

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project, AmericasBarometer, Mexico module, 2004.

that politicians should be held accountable, 74% rejected the idea that “it is better to have money than to be right,” and 84% rejected the Mexican saying that “*el que no tranza, no avanza*” (he who does not cheat, does not get ahead). Moreover, 80% believed that citizens should obey the law without exception. Respondents similarly overwhelmingly disapproved of a series of corrupt, unethical and illegal acts. Though when asked whether “public officials can take advantage of his/her position as long as they do good things in office,” perhaps a more appropriate measure of tolerance, 55% of respondents agreed whereas 39% did not. Indeed in the AB survey, in contrast to the numbers admitting to have paid low level bribes, only 12% of respondents answered yes to the question of whether it was acceptable to pay bribes because of the poor quality of public service provision in Mexico.

For our multivariate analysis, *perception of corruption* is measured based on an index that sums the respondent’s answers to questions in which she or he is asked how corrupt she or he perceives members of congress, government ministers, city officials, the police, judges, military officers, leaders of political parties, leaders of nongovernmental organizations, and the president to be. It ranges from 0 to 100. Following Seligson (2002), we create an index for *participation in corruption*, or the experience of corruption, normalized to a 1 to 100 scale, based on the sum of all responses to a battery of questions about whether a bribe had been paid or solicited or even observed being paid to the police, judges, public employees, municipal authorities, or in the

workplace. Again following Seligson, we use an index of *interpersonal trust*, normalized to a 0 to 100 scale, based on three questions (see the online appendix, available at <http://documents.kenyon.edu/polsci/Morris-Klesner-CPS-Oct10-APPENDIX.pdf>, for question wording and index construction details). Our definition of *institutional trust* follows that of Chang and Chu (2006) and is an index normalized to a 0 to 100 scale summing the respondent's responses about the degree of confidence in the public institutions shown in Table 1.

## Modeling the Relationship of Trust and Corruption

The hypotheses about the endogenous relationship between corruption and trust that we outlined above require that we explicitly allow for endogeneity in estimating the models we develop below. In terms of statistical modeling, the presence of an endogenous independent variable in an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression will produce residuals correlated with that endogenous variable, thereby violating the assumptions of OLS. Following Chang and Chu (2006), we address this issue by creating simultaneous equations models (SEM) in which we treat corruption and trust as endogenous variables in the equations that predict the other. To fully test the relationships hypothesized above, we created four SEMs, each a two-equation multiple equations model, to explore the interrelationship of (a) interpersonal trust and the experience with corruption, (b) interpersonal trust and perceived corruption, (c) institutional trust and the experience of corruption, and (d) institutional trust and perceived corruption. The fourth model is the most obviously endogenous relationship. The SEM models are estimated via three-stage least squares (3SLS) regression, in which in the first stage instrumented values for all endogenous variables are estimated. The final equations of the multiple equations models are then estimated with the instrumented variables replacing the endogenous ones.

Independent variables used to predict the perception of corruption and participation in corruption include institutional trust and interpersonal trust, tolerance toward corruption, whether the PRI is the ruling party within the state, the respondent's retrospective sociotropic evaluation of the economy, an index of community involvement meant to measure social capital, and education. In the equations predicting perception of corruption, we include participation in corruption as an explanatory variable. Independent variables used to predict interpersonal and institutional trust include participation in corruption, the perception of corruption, tolerance toward corruption, whether the PRI is the ruling party within the state, the respondent's

retrospective sociotropic evaluation of the economy, an index of community involvement meant to measure social capital, and education. The equations predicting institutional trust also include interpersonal trust as an explanatory variable. The measure of tolerance toward corruption is based on responses to a question that asks, "In our society, do you think paying bribes is justified based on the poor public services that are provided?" We expect those more tolerant of corruption to be less likely to perceive corruption but more likely to participate in it. As the long-term ruling party, the PRI has been most clearly associated with public corruption, and we expect that residents of PRI-governed states will be more likely to perceive and to experience corruption. Sociotropic evaluations of the economy are employed as a control in the models because overall positive feelings about the state of the economy may color respondents' perspectives on the regime and its policies and respondents' evaluations of interactions with public officials. To capture social capital, we create an additive index from three measures of social and political involvement: whether the respondent has attended a public meeting in the previous year, has solicited a public official for help with a problem, and has been involved in community efforts to solve problems. Studies of social capital and political participation have linked organizational involvement to the development of interpersonal trust. We expect that those forms of participation should promote higher levels of trust and diminish the sense that corruption is widespread. Finally, as additional exogenous variables in the first stage of the 3SLS estimations, we employ age and sex.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

Our tests of the interrelationship of interpersonal trust and both the perception of corruption and the experience of it suggested no such interrelationship. A simple OLS regression to predict interpersonal trust incorporating the explanatory variables listed above did show that actual participation in corruption was the only significant predictor of lower levels of interpersonal trust. However, when we estimated the SEM models in which interpersonal trust appeared as a dependent variable (those listed as Models 1 and 2 above), none of the independent variables of interest, including both the perception and the experience of corruption, predicted interpersonal trust. (For brevity we omit reporting the results of these models.) We conclude, therefore, that in the Mexican context interpersonal trust is not predicted by corruption in a significant way, and we reject hypotheses  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{3a}$ .

Trust in institutions is another matter. Table 2 reports the results of 3SLS estimation of an SEM model in which perception of corruption and

**Table 2.** Simultaneous Equations Model of Perception of Corruption and Institutional Trust

	B	SE	z	p > z
<b>Predicting perception of corruption</b>				
Institutional trust	<b>-0.61</b>	<b>0.16</b>	-3.74	.00
Interpersonal trust	0.04	0.02	1.65	.10
Experience with corruption	0.05	0.03	1.83	.07
Tolerance of corruption	<b>-3.29</b>	<b>1.63</b>	-2.02	.04
Organizational involvement	<b>-1.08</b>	<b>0.56</b>	-1.92	.05
Sociotropic economic evaluation	0.65	0.95	0.69	.49
PRI governor	-1.73	1.09	-1.59	.11
Education	<b>-0.95</b>	<b>0.49</b>	-1.95	.05
Intercept	<b>99.62</b>	<b>6.71</b>	14.86	.00
$\chi^2$	83.23			
p	< .00			
<b>Predicting institutional trust</b>				
Perception of corruption	<b>-1.65</b>	<b>0.46</b>	-3.57	.00
Interpersonal trust	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.03</b>	2.15	.03
Experience with corruption	0.08	0.06	1.30	.20
Tolerance of corruption	<b>-5.43</b>	<b>2.51</b>	-2.17	.03
Organizational involvement	-1.79	1.24	-1.44	.15
Sociotropic economic evaluation	1.08	1.39	0.78	.44
PRI governor	-2.86	2.29	-1.25	.21
Education	<b>-1.57</b>	<b>0.79</b>	-2.00	.05
Intercept	<b>164.58</b>	<b>35.19</b>	4.68	.00
$\chi^2$	77.51			
p	< .00			

N = 1,262. PRI = Institutional Revolutionary Party. Endogenous variables: perception of corruption, institutional trust; exogenous variables: interpersonal trust, experience with corruption, tolerance of corruption, community involvement, PRI governor, sociotropic economic evaluation, education, sex, and age. Figures in bold are statistically significant at the .05 level. Three-stage least squares estimation.

institutional trust are the dependent variables, whereas Table 3 provides the results of a model with participation in corruption and institutional trust as the dependent variables.<sup>5</sup>

### *Institutional Trust and Perceptions of Corruption*

Table 2 suggests a strong interrelationship between institutional trust and perceptions of corruption, supporting our hypothesis (H<sub>5</sub>) of an endogenous

**Table 3.** Simultaneous Equations Model of Experience With Corruption and Institutional Trust

	B	SE	z	p > z
Predicting experience of corruption				
Institutional trust	<b>-0.34</b>	<b>0.07</b>	-4.66	.00
Interpersonal trust	<b>-0.05</b>	<b>0.02</b>	-2.03	.04
Tolerance of corruption	<b>8.09</b>	<b>2.03</b>	3.98	.00
Organizational involvement	<b>4.60</b>	<b>0.68</b>	6.77	.00
Sociotropic economic evaluation	<b>2.15</b>	<b>0.87</b>	2.48	.01
PRI governor	<b>4.28</b>	<b>1.33</b>	3.23	.00
Education	<b>3.99</b>	<b>0.62</b>	6.40	.00
Intercept	<b>16.54</b>	<b>3.97</b>	4.16	.00
$\chi^2$	173.12			
p	< .00			
Predicting institutional trust				
Interpersonal trust	<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.02</b>	4.57	.00
Perception of corruption	<b>-0.48</b>	<b>0.04</b>	-12.63	.00
Experience of corruption	0.09	0.16	0.53	.60
Tolerance of corruption	<b>-5.75</b>	<b>2.23</b>	-2.57	.01
Organizational involvement	-0.06	0.91	-0.07	.94
Sociotropic economic evaluation	<b>3.50</b>	<b>0.65</b>	5.40	.00
PRI governor	0.79	1.21	0.66	.51
Education	<b>-1.74</b>	<b>0.87</b>	-2.00	.05
Intercept	<b>75.27</b>	<b>3.32</b>	22.69	.00
$\chi^2$	442.80			
p	< .00			

*N* = 1,262. PRI = Institutional Revolutionary Party. Endogenous variables: experience of corruption, institutional trust; exogenous variables: interpersonal trust, perception of corruption, tolerance of corruption, community involvement, PRI governor, sociotropic economic evaluation, education, sex, and age. Figures in bold are statistically significant at the .05 level. Three-stage least squares estimation.

relationship between these two critical evaluations of contemporary Mexican politics. As we hypothesized ( $H_{3b}$ ), respondents with stronger perceptions of corruption exhibit a lower level of political trust, and conversely ( $H_{4b}$ ), those who express greater trust in national political institutions are less likely to perceive corruption. Even after creating instrumented values for these two endogenous variables in the first stage of the 3SLS regression procedure, each remains the most powerful predictor of the other in the second-stage equations. Indeed, a 10% decline in the index of institutional trust would be

matched by a 6% increase in the perception of corruption index, whereas a 10% increase in the perception of corruption index leads to more than a 16% decline in the institutional trust index. Tolerance of corruption is inversely related to both variables, too: Those more tolerant of corruption are less likely to perceive it, which is intuitively understandable, whereas those more tolerant of corruption also have lower levels of trust in political institutions, which is not an immediately obvious relationship. Education is similarly inversely related to both trust in political institutions and the perception of corruption. The less educated are more likely to perceive corruption, which may reflect a greater experience with it. The less educated are similarly more likely to be distrusting of political institutions, perhaps a result of a less salutary experience with political institutions. Those with greater involvement in organizations have lesser perceptions of corruption—those who do not engage themselves in community affairs are more likely to think that public officials are corrupt than those who actually interact with them, suggesting that direct involvement with local officials tends to reduce one's propensity to perceive them as corrupt.

Interpersonal trust is related to institutional trust in a direct way, suggesting that trust is a broader value with two different dimensions, although the relationship is weak in the second-stage equation. However, interpersonal trust is not strongly related to perceptions of corruption—in the second-stage equation the coefficient is just barely significant at the .10 level, with a very low value that in terms of our hypothesis ( $H_{4a}$ ) has the wrong sign, whereas it is insignificant (but with the hypothesized sign) in the first-stage regression. Consistent with the findings of Seligson (2002), and as we would expect, the experience of corruption is positively related to the perception of corruption—those who have been solicited for a bribe, paid a bribe, or witnessed the paying of a bribe have a stronger perception that politicians, public officials, and those associated with law enforcement and sentencing are corrupt, but the relationship is weak in the second-stage equation once institutional trust is added into the model (where institutional trust is absent, as in the first-stage equation, the experience of corruption is a stronger predictor of the perception of corruption). Living in a state governed by the PRI has no significant relationship to either dependent variable in this SEM model.

### *Participation in Corruption and Institutional Trust*

In the SEM model we report in Table 3, we have excluded the perception of corruption as a predictor of the experience of it because of our sense that there



is also an endogenous relationship between those two variables (those who have high perceptions of corruption are more likely to find it). Here we see that more trusting respondents (whether of other persons or of political institutions) are less likely to experience corruption, supporting  $H_{2a}$  and  $H_{2b}$ . Here a 10% decline in the institutional trust index leads to greater than a 3% increase in the index of participation in corruption. In contrast, those more tolerant of corruption participate more in it. Those involved in organizational life experience corruption more, as do the more educated and those living in PRI-governed states. The experience of corruption is about 4% greater in PRI-governed states according to Table 3. Last, those who have positive evaluations of the national economy have also participated more in corruption.

Although institutional trust is a strong predictor of participation in corruption, with the expected relationship, actual participation in corruption is not a significant predictor of institutional trust, leading us to reject  $H_{1b}$ . The variables we found to be statistically significant predictors of institutional trust in Table 2 remain significant and of roughly the same magnitude in Table 3, joined by the respondent's sociotropic retrospective evaluation of the economy (those with a more positive view of the economy's performance have higher institutional trust). The results in Table 3 provide at best limited support to our hypothesis ( $H_6$ ) of endogeneity between participation in corruption and trust in institutions.

## Implications for Regime Legitimacy

What these models demonstrate is that the perception of corruption and trust in political institutions are highly interrelated. Mexicans who distrust public institutions are likely to believe that politicians, public figures, and those involved in law enforcement and the judicial system are corrupt. Mexicans who see corruption among politicians, public figures, judges, and the police are likely to distrust all political institutions.

In a related way, they tend to see the political regime as illegitimate. If we seek to explain diffuse support for the regime (following Seligson, 2002) with the a simple OLS model incorporating many of the explanatory and control variables we used in the SEM models, we find that the perception of corruption has highly corrosive effects for the Mexican public's confidence in the major political institutions and for regime legitimacy itself (see Table 4). Actual participation in corruption (likely as a victim of it) also erodes diffuse support (regime legitimacy), but not as strongly as does the simple perception of it: A 10% increase in perception of corruption index leads to a 4% decline in the diffuse support index, but a 10% increase

**Table 4.** Determinants of Diffuse Support (or Regime Legitimacy)

	B	SE	z	p > z
Intercept	<b>73.00</b>	<b>3.41</b>	.00	
Perception of corruption	<b>-0.40</b>	<b>0.03</b>	.00	<b>-.37</b>
Experience with corruption	<b>-0.08</b>	<b>0.02</b>	.00	<b>-.10</b>
Interpersonal trust	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.02</b>	.00	<b>.10</b>
Organizational involvement	0.55	0.53	.30	.03
Sociotropic economic evaluation	<b>2.98</b>	<b>0.61</b>	.00	<b>.12</b>
PRI governor	0.48	1.00	.63	.01
Male	-0.02	1.00	.98	.00
Education	-0.36	0.51	.48	-.02
Age	0.28	0.73	.70	.01
R <sup>2</sup>	.20			

N = 1,348. PRI = Institutional Revolutionary Party. Figures in bold are significant at the .001 level. Ordinary least squares estimation.

in the index of participation in corruption leads to only about a 1% decline in diffuse support.

### The Uniqueness of the Trust–Corruption Linkage

This mutual causality wherein corruption erodes trust in public institutions which in turn creates the conditions favorable to corrupt behavior—compounded by the fact that the perceptions of corruption are far more generalized than actual levels of corruption—creates a vicious circle that perpetuates corruption, the perception of corruption, and low levels of trust. This trust–corruption connection is unique for three reasons. First, unlike other problems that governments seek to address, corruption is predominately an endogenous matter. This means not only that corruption undermines faith in the institutions to do what they are supposed to do—such as administer a government service—but also, by undermining faith in government in general and politicians and civil servants in particular, that corruption undermines the people’s confidence in the ability of the government itself to fight corruption. An ineffective antipoverty program, for instance, may not necessarily undermine the people’s faith in the government’s ability to design and implement a more effective policy because they may attribute the failure to the lack of resources, to the sheer magnitude of the problem, or to the difficulties of reaching beneficiaries. Such assessments, however, do not

necessarily undermine the people's faith in the institution itself or the individuals running it or even delegitimize the task. But if widespread corruption undermines the people's trust in politicians or government, it is difficult for anyone to believe that the political system or the politicians can or will effectively address the problem. In short, if politicians are considered corrupt, then their rhetorical promises to crack down on corruption will tend to fall on deaf ears. Even sincere efforts to prosecute corrupt officials may be interpreted as a political tactic by corrupt politicians to go after their political enemies rather than a genuine effort to fight corruption (Wesberry, 2004). Coupled with impunity, corruption thus fosters a skeptical public: "Official versions are dismissed beforehand and the promises to follow an investigation to its ultimate consequences are received with general skepticism" (Aguilar, 2000).

Second, the lack of trust bred by corruption can potentially undermine citizens' willingness to actively work with others or the government to seek solutions to the problem of corruption. This tendency severely undermines societal and governmental efforts to fight corruption and may even weaken democracy in the process. As Johnston (2002) contends, perceptions of corruption "affect one's own choices as to participation or nonparticipation in politics" (p. 174). This problem becomes even more relevant given the current consensus among activists and analysts that citizen involvement, social empowerment, and even cogovernance are critical to designing an effective anticorruption program (see Ackerman, 2004; Johnston, 1998; Wesberry, 2004). Indeed, many of the current anticorruption programs weigh heavily on public involvement, stressing what Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000) refer to as the "new politics of societal accountability" (also see Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006). Initiatives include informing citizens about the toxic consequences of corruption, promoting honesty and integrity through public education programs, and organizing and empowering NGOs to become involved in the decision-making process and to collect and disseminate information on the activities of public officials (see Transparency International, 2003). This problem may be even more relevant in Latin America, where state institutions have evolved "to serve narrow political and economic interests" (Pearce, 2004, p. 496). Of course, citizen involvement in fighting corruption is already hampered at the outset by the "public good" nature of the results and the tendency to free ride (Banfield, 1975, p. 598; Olson, 1965). But on top of that, getting citizens involved arguably requires a minimal degree of trust and efficacy. As such, anticorruption campaigns face a difficult audience in terms of trying to mobilize and incorporate an already distrusting population.

A third problem relates to assessments of anticorruption programs. If corruption undermines the people's faith in the government and politicians, leading citizens to expect corruption and perceive it to be widespread, then it may be difficult to use opinion polls to gauge the results of anticorruption initiatives. This may be merely a methodological dilemma, but it nonetheless has important policy implications in that perceptions of corruption and public opinion often are used to help orient, target, and assess anticorruption measures. Because perceptions of corruption, such as Transparency International's CPI, are the most widely used measure of corruption, then looking at the public's perceptions of corruption is relied on to test whether corruption has increased or decreased, though longitudinal studies of corruption are grossly lacking. But rather than detecting changes in the level of corruption, such public opinion measures may indicate merely the depths to which the public has come to distrust their politicians and institutions and to expect corrupt behavior. This is particularly relevant because participation in corruption, as shown here, is much lower than actual perceptions of corruption. In sum, and combined with the earlier points, if the public is convinced that all politicians engage in rent-seeking behavior and that all institutions are riddled with corruption, not only will such a predisposition contribute to corruption itself, but it is also unlikely that the people will believe the politicians when they say they want to fight corruption, unlikely that they will join them or others in that effort when they seek their support, and unlikely that they will register real changes in the level of corruption when asked by pollsters regardless of the reality.

In some respects, such a low-level equilibrium seems to leave no way out; but even Mexico has been in this type of institutional dilemma before when it faced an electoral system that most felt was corrupt and fraudulent. In that case, a series of protracted and conflict-ridden reforms in 1994 and 1996 created an electoral institution, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), that was able to garner significant legitimacy among the public and politicians to mount credible and fair elections. It would seem that IFE's strict autonomy from the government and the incorporation of citizen counselors in a cogovernance arrangement were both critical in making this turnaround possible.<sup>6</sup> And yet, despite the legitimacy enjoyed by IFE leading up to the historic 2000 election and afterward when it issued major fines against both the PRI and the victorious Fox campaign for major campaign finance violations, subsequent developments before and after the 2006 election led to a notable withering of that support and a fall in public trust (Córdova & Murayama, 2006). Confidence in IFE fell from 74% before the 2006 election to 56% afterward (Fox, 2007, p. 4). Though still relatively high compared to other political institutions in the country, the decline is notable. Indeed, according

to Crespo (2008), 37% believed that fraud had occurred during the 2006 election, including many who actually voted for the victor. At minimum, the experience of IFE shows that progress in overcoming the lack of trust in institutions is possible, but not linear, and that previously depoliticized accountability institutions that struggle to gain trust can just as easily be repoliticized and captured by political interests, providing further confirmation of the widely held view regarding the corrupting tendencies of the political world (Eisenstadt & Poire, 2005; Rosas, Estévez, & Magar, 2005).

## **Conclusions**

Analysis of political corruption, particularly in countries where corruption is endemic, suggests a vicious circle wherein corruption breeds a climate of distrust that in turn feeds corruption. Beside perhaps magnifying the perceived level and extent of corruption, this equilibrium potentially undermines efforts to fight corruption based on citizen involvement and demands for social accountability. Indeed, in looking at the case of Mexico, data from a 2004 national survey show widespread perceptions of corruption, low levels of interpersonal and political trust, and some pessimism regarding the efforts of the government to address the problem. Regression analysis, in turn, shows that trust in political institutions influences perceptions of corruption but that although participation in corruption influences perceptions of corruption, it does not necessarily have a strong impact on feelings of trust in public institutions. Interpersonal trust, on the other hand, plays little or no role in the trust–corruption nexus, which parallels the conclusions of studies by Klesner (2007, 2009) that interpersonal trust is not a strong predictor of political participation in Latin America.

If distrust in political institutions nurtures corruption and yet perceptions of corruption somewhat independently of the actual levels of corruption feed distrust, then fighting corruption and gauging the effectiveness of that fight become even more formidable tasks. If few trust the politicians to do the right thing and expect corruption, then effective anticorruption efforts must be designed to disrupt that equilibrium. In Mexico, as shown, most tend to blame the politicians for widespread corruption and many see no way out. This view helps justify their own participation in corruption and spawns apathy toward doing anything about it.

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## Notes

1. Mishra (2006) presents a game theoretic model showing how the pervasiveness of corruption contributes to its persistence owing to people's notions of the expected behavior of others. This contributes to the stability of corruption over other forms of behavior.
2. There is no a priori reason to expect Mexico to exhibit patterns different from other Latin American countries or developing countries struggling to establish rule of law and fight political corruption. Despite a long history of civilian authoritarian rule under the hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Mexico's rankings in terms of both corruption and measures of trust are not particularly unique. In Transparency International's 2007 annual Corruption Perceptions Index, based on the views of experts and country analysts, Mexico ranked 72nd among 179 countries with a score of 3.5 on the 0 (*corrupt*) to 10 (*no corrupt*; counterintuitive) scale. This score positioned Mexico near average for the 18 Latin American countries in the study with higher levels of corruption than such regional leaders as Chile and Uruguay, but less corruption than in Ecuador or Argentina. In terms of participation, by contrast, 28% of Mexicans admitted to having paid a bribe within the past 12 months in the 2006 Global Corruption Barometer, compared to an average of just 17% among other Latin American countries and 9% worldwide. The AB 2006 similarly shows the level of social trust and trust in political institutions in Mexico to be similar to those of other Latin American countries. In recent studies using AB data for the region, Boidi (2008, p. 61) finds an inverse relationship linking involvement in corruption to trust in political parties, whereas Donoso (2008) shows a similarly negative relationship between corruption victimization and perception of corruption and support for institutions of the rule of law. We occasionally refer to descriptive data from the 2001 ENCBG (National Survey of Corruption and Good Government) by *Transparencia Mexicana*. The ENCBG includes 13,790 interviews of heads of households based on a national, probabilistic sample. The surveys were conducted by Grupo de Asesores Unidos, Pearson, and Pulso Mercadologico under the supervision of *Estadística Aplicada* during the months of June and July 2001.
3. Jorge Buendía and Alejandro Moreno conducted the survey for Latin American Public Opinion Project. The sample design included 130 randomly selected sampling sites. Individual respondents were chosen by quota based on age and gender to create a representative sample of the adult population. The survey has a

margin of error of  $\pm 2.5\%$  with a confidence interval of 95%. See Buendía and Moreno (2004, pp. 13-18, 75-77) for technical details of the survey design. They also provide a copy of the questionnaire (85-107). Technical information can also be acquired at [http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/i6Byz6/Technical Information of The Political Culture of Democracy in Mexico 2004.pdf](http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/i6Byz6/Technical%20Information%20of%20The%20Political%20Culture%20of%20Democracy%20in%20Mexico%202004.pdf), and the questionnaire can be found at <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/k63iiQ/Mexico%20CAMs%20questionnaire%202004.pdf>. We thank the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Program, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available.

4. To estimate a three-stage least squares regression system of equations, there must be at least as many additional exogenous variables used as instrumental variables as there are endogenous variables in the model—in our case, two. Because we do not have a priori theoretical explanations for why sex and age would explain the dependent variables, we employ them as instrumental variables.
5. Here we present only the final estimates of the simultaneous equations models. In an online appendix (available at <http://documents.kenyon.edu/polsci/Morris-Klesner-CPS-Oct10-APPENDIX.pdf>), we provide both the first-stage and the final estimates.
6. Although assessments of the process as fair went a long way in determining overall legitimacy and trust of the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE), consistent with Tyler (2000), the outcome arguably also played a role. The victory of Fox and the defeat of the PRI in 2000 surely helped legitimize the IFE.

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