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The Corruption Debates: Left vs. Right— and Does It Matter— in the Americas

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1

Ideology and the Corruption Debates

NO ONE (OPENLY) SUPPORTS CORRUPTION. NO POLITICIAN promises to increase it; no organization, treaty, or movement promotes it. "The undesirability of corruption," as Peter Bratsis (2003, 9) notes, "is taken as a given." This sweeping, universal condemnation, according to Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2020, 88), translates into a global consensus on the norms of good governance.[1] This all suggests that corruption and its antithesis represent an apolitical, nonpartisan, and nonideological issue: a rather astounding statement amid the divisive and corrosive political environment that seems to prevail nationally and internationally.

But such harmonious appearances may merely hide intense debate and disagreement among scholars, activists, and politicians about the nature of corruption and how to fight it. Surely anyone reading Robert Reich (2020), US Supreme Court decisions in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) or *McDonnell v. U.S.* (2016), or listening to US president Donald Trump, US senator Elizabeth Warren, Mexican president Andres Manuel López Obrador, or Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro address the issue might ponder whether they are in fact talking about the same thing. Rather than apolitical, nonpartisan, or nonideological, corruption and efforts to contain it instead seem politicized and contested, drawing from and contributing to polarization, conspiracy theories, the rise of populist and antiestablishment candidates, social movements, and even, some contend, a crisis of

democracy and authoritarian creep. Much of this may stem from the fact, as Jonathan Mendilow and Ilan Peleg (2014, 1) point out, that "students of corruption have used the term in so many contexts and with such versatility that it lost much of its theoretical and practical significance, while in colloquial speech the negative connotations frequently turned it into little more than a term of disparagement against disliked governments or individual officials."[2] This condemnation likely extends beyond just us students of corruption. As Susan Rose-Ackerman (2018, 98) avers, "the term 'corruption' is often used to condemn behavior that violates the speaker's values."

Corruption may indeed be a broad, ambiguous, and elastic term, but it is hardly irrelevant. As reflected in countless public opinion polls, politicians' speeches, the fact that from 2016 to 2018 alone eleven presidents have been impeached for corruption,[3] the elaborate and costly efforts of national and international organizations to fight corruption, and the abundant literature on the topic, corruption enjoys immense importance among voters, politicians, activists, administrators, and academics. The concept of corruption has indeed become integral to the modern language of politics.

To help sort through this central concept and the confusion, the current study embarks on an examination of the ideological dimensions of corruption and anticorruption: the corruption debates. It grapples with a series of questions addressing ideas, policies, and their impact. The overarching question is whether there is an identifiable difference between the left and right within the area of corruption and anticorruption. More precisely, to determine whether there is an underlying ideological pattern to the breadth and ambiguity surrounding corruption and anticorruption. Do ideas about corruption/anticorruption align with traditional ideas associated with the left and the right? Can such differences be identified within the scholarly literature or the rhetoric of politicians? Does a distinct populist narrative on corruption/anticorruption exist, and can it too be differentiated between left-populist and right-populist viewpoints? Even if definitions, approaches, theories, and/or political rhetoric exhibit such ideological foundations, do such differences actually play out in the anticorruption policies adopted by governments of the left and right? Pushing it a step further, even if such discernible ideological distinctions exist at the level of ideas, rhetoric, and/or policies, do left and right governments differ in how well they actually fight (or don't fight) corruption? Alternatively, is

it possible that embedded within a broader politicized and polarized setting, corruption/anticorruption debates merely give the appearance of such ideological variation, but rather than pivoting along a left/right split they actually pivot more along a within-power/out-of-power axis?

Like most overture chapters, this one sets the stage. It begins by providing a brief overview of the limited literature related to questions linking ideology to corruption and anticorruption. Though research has focused on the role of partisanship and even ideology in shaping people´s perceptions of corruption or political campaigns, and, as shown in the next chapter, many depict certain views on corruption as ideological, few have explicitly explored the questions raised here. The next section further arranges the set by briefly laying out the key concepts: corruption, anticorruption, left, right, and populism. The chapter's more extensive penultimate section then crafts a series of hypotheses, a couple of caveats, weaves in an overview of the book's structure, and prefaces some key findings. The chapter concludes by highlighting the study's various challenges and limitations and, finally, addressing the question of the relevance and utility of the endeavor.

Literature Review

Despite what has rapidly become a vast literature on corruption, it seems that few scholars have specifically or directly addressed the questions posed here. Some studies explore the role partisanship and ideological distance play in shaping perceptions of corruption, campaign rhetoric, and governance—and vice versa. Anderson and Tverdova (2003), Bågenholm and Charron (2016), Bauhr and Charron (2018), Chang and Kerr (2017), López-López et al. (2016), Pereira and Barros (2014), and Solaz et al. (2019), for example, all show how partisanship, in-group identity, and support for the government influence a person's perceptions of corruption.[4] Generally, people tend to be more tolerant of corruption within their own ranks, less likely to consider their candidate's misbehavior corrupt, and more likely to recommend weaker punishment when they do. Such findings offer some support for the alternative, power factor hypothesis, explored in Chapter 6: that both the left and right tend to associate corruption with their ideological opponents while dismissing the

corruption among their own, contributing to the appearance of a left/right division (López-López et al. 2016).

Flipping the direction of the causal arrow, some research examines how perceptions of corruption correlate with voting, partisan support, and ideology. Bågenholm (2013), Dimock and Jacobson (1995), Peters and Welch (1980), and Welch and Hibbing (1997), for example, all show how allegations of corruption decrease the vote for incumbents regardless of ideology. Survey experiments by Chong et al. (2015) in Mexico and Ferraz and Finan (2008) in Brazil draw similar conclusions. And while Burlacu (2020) finds that corruption actually has a negative effect on ideological voting particularly in high-corruption countries, Di Tella and MacCulloch (2009) and Smyth and Qian (2009) uncover a positive link between higher perceptions of corruption and the left. Di Tella and MacCulloch (2009) find that the perception of corruption increases the vote for the left, while Smyth and Qian's (2009) study in urban China highlights a "correlation between concern about corruption and belief that access to education and income distribution is inequitable and that social protection and unemployment are very serious problems": concerns that neatly align with the left.

Finally, some studies look at the ties that link left/right parties to corruption as either a campaign issue or on the actual level of corruption itself. Bågenholm's (2009) study of Central and Eastern European elections from 1983 to 2007, for instance, finds that right-wing parties were more likely during those years to employ anticorruption rhetoric in their campaigns. A subsequent study by Bågenholm examines the electoral fates and policy outcomes of specifically anticorruption niche parties in the same region. It shows that the more influential positions the anticorruption parties have in the government, the better the government's performance in fighting corruption: "Anti-corruption parties seem to matter and particularly so for the electorally most successful ones" (Bågenholm 2013, 192–193). Hessami's (2011) cross-national study of 106 countries over the 1984–2008 period, in turn, finds higher levels of corruption under right-wing governments, something he contends is due to their stronger ties to the private sector. By contrast, Klasnja's (2015) study on Romania links corruption not to party or ideology in power, but rather to length of time in office. Simply stated, the longer a party remains in power, regardless of ideology, the more likely its members are to become corrupt. In a somewhat related manner, studies by

Curini (2015) and Gingerich (2014) focus on the impact of ideological distance and balance within a party system on corruption and good governance. Curini (2015) shows that the closer together ideologically the parties, the more likely they are to focus their electoral campaigns on the personal valence issue of corruption. Gingerich (2014), in turn, finds evidence that ideological balance among parties contributes to good governance and lower levels of corruption.[5]

Conceptual Tools

Corruption/Anticorruption

Defining corruption—a virtual cottage industry in itself over the years—has long proved difficult. Despite countless efforts, none of the competing definitions have been able to withstand much analytical scrutiny. As Paul Heywood and Jonathan Rose (2014, 524) contend, "Academic research has struggled to develop an adequate conceptualization of corruption, which recognizes the complexity of the concept, its rootedness in certain ways of thinking about the nature of politics, and its relationship to social and economic exchanges." While the most common scholarly approach is to "plant the flag," so to speak, by adopting a particular definition and discarding competing formulas, the point here is to embrace the assorted definitions to try to understand their differences and, potentially, their ideological underpinnings. Since differences in definitions and conceptualizations of corruption—as the subsequent chapter shows—constitute a key rub differentiating left and right, I therefore refrain from offering (or siding with) a particular definition here. Though I will often return to the issue of definition, suffice it to note that corruption is indeed an extremely broad concept, intimately related to competing ideas of authority and the limits on power. As Michael Johnston (2004) notes, defining corruption centers on the political conflict over defining boundaries between wealth and power. Its meaning is highly contested and constantly under construction. In other words, it is a political construct and a moving target.

Instead of referring simply to corruption, however, I tend to use throughout the current study the compound term *corruption/anticorruption*. This amalgam stresses the intrinsic relationship linking the two. From an anthropological perspective, corruption and anticorruption are seen as one phenomenon locked in a dialectic.[6] Simply

put, how one understands corruption (particularly its meaning, nature, and causes) largely determines one's approach to battling it. Hence, the more expansive the scope of the term, the broader the remedy. If, for instance, corruption is thought of primarily as the result of a government distorting market forces and thereby creating the opportunity for rents, then the solution centers on either eliminating these distortions or at least preventing officials from rationally acting upon the opportunities created by them. If, however, corruption is seen in terms of legal, institutional activities (systemic corruption) that tend to privilege certain interests over the public's interest, then the solution tends to rest more on fundamental normative and institutional reforms. And if corruption is seen even more broadly as the structural result of capitalism and trying to force a round peg (capitalism) into a square hole (democracy), then the solution focuses on either eliminating or controlling capitalism or taming democracy (Girling 1997; González Casanova 2007). Broadly, if there are indeed ideological differences as explored here, then someone politically aligned with the right will tend to employ rightist solutions to address corruption, while their leftist counterpart will tend to utilize items from the leftist tool kit.

Ideological Markers: Differentiating Left, Right, and Populist

In order to differentiate left and right within the field of corruption/anticorruption, it is obviously necessary to identify left and right markers. Without delving into the vast literature on ideology, the current analysis differentiates left and right along two rather widely accepted dimensions. The first, the traditional political economy arena, focuses on state involvement in the economy. In schematic fashion, the left supports greater state intervention, the right less. The left's inclination favoring a larger state role in the economy rests largely on its prioritizing the values of equality and social justice fastened to an underlying lack of confidence in the ability of the free market to achieve those goals. The right's insistence on limited state involvement in the economy reflects its emphasis on prosperity and economic freedom, its abiding confidence in the "hidden hand" of the market and in the private sector to achieve these goals, and an inherent distrust of government.[7] As we will see, these tendencies often translate rather loosely and easily in terms of corruption, with

the left seemingly more likely to blame corruption on the private sector and its privileged influence over politics, while the right assigns blame on the inflated state and its intervention in the economy.

The second dimension used here to differentiate left and right centers on competing visions of democracy: republican versus liberal. The left generally embraces a more republican, Rousseauian view of democracy stressing community, participation, equality, and the concept of "the people" as sovereign. Such a view harmonizes well with its political economy values of economic equality and social justice and an emphasis on popular participation as a means to arrest the influence of capitalist forces. The right, in turn, tends to embrace a more Madisonian and Schumpeterian view of liberal democracy. This liberal version of democracy rests firmly on the idea of maximizing individual freedom (liberalism), including in particular the right (sanctity) of private property. It envisions government limited primarily to maintaining order and liberty—liberty as security—envisioning state power as largely antithetical to enhancing the scope of individual freedom. It also tends to be somewhat wary of popular participation (aka populism; mob rule; tyranny of the majority) and sees elections as the primary mechanism by which people participate in the political process and exercise some minimal control over the elite. Some embracing this republican perspective even go so far as to question the existence of a "public" or "common" interest (see Hayek 1978).

These competing visions of democracy have been expressed in similar yet slightly different terms by others. Chantal Mouffe (2005, 2018), for example, draws a parallel distinction between what she labels as political liberalism (rule of law, separation of powers, and deference to individual freedom) and the democratic tradition based on the ideas of equality and popular sovereignty. "We can agree on the importance of 'liberty' and 'equality for all,'" she contends, "while disagreeing sharply about their meaning and the way they should be implemented, with the different configurations of power relations that this implies" (Mouffe 2005, 113–114). Such differences clearly play out in the left/right ideological struggle. This political distinction is also neatly illustrated by the historic debate between Federalists/Antifederalists over what would become the US Constitution. Whereas the Rousseauian/Jeffersonian view emphasized a government close to the people (local councils) that taps civic virtue as key to preventing corruption, the Madisonian/liberal version that

won out posited a new vision of pluralism and a Montesquieun division of powers and institutional checks and balances as the more realistic means to prevent corruption.[8]

As they have throughout contemporary history, these left/right ideological differences scaled along both political economy and democracy dimensions nurture conflict that may be irreconcilable. Indeed, in what Mouffe (2005) labels as the "democratic paradox," liberalism denies democracy and democracy denies liberalism. In her analysis of agonistic politics, these views cannot be reconciled by way of pluralistic compromise.

Beyond these specific political and economic differences there also lies a more materialistic difference regarding the desirability and value of the status quo. Tilted more to protecting private property and maximizing personal liberty than empowering people, the more orthodox Madisonian system of political liberalism tends to offer a certain degree of protection for the status quo by institutionally dividing and sharing power. Among other results, such constituted power has the effect of rendering change difficult, piecemeal, and gradual. The republican or democratic tradition, by contrast, seeks to more readily empower popular demands, utilizing participation in everyday governance to challenge and alter a status quo that the left sees as privileging certain interests over those of the public, tending toward oligarchy (Vergara 2020).

Populism offers an added dimension to the classic left/right ideological differences. Less elaborate than an ideology, populism (1) articulates the existence of a society divided between the "people" and an "elite," (2) stresses an antagonistic relationship between the two, (3) embraces the idea of popular sovereignty and claims to represent the "true" will of the people, and (4) denigrates the elite (see De la Torre 2014; Mudde 2004; Müller 2017). Many analysts link populism to corruption. This occurs at two levels. First, populism tends to naturally portray the elite and their control as corrupt because it thwarts the will of the people. Populist leaders thus rhetorically stress the issue of corruption and promise to fight it in order to recapture and promote the will of the people. Their emphasis, as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018) correctly note, tends to be on the democratic issue of "how to control the controllers." And yet, at a much more concerning level, many analysts tend to characterize populist leaders as charlatans who merely use anticorruption as a political weapon, not to fight corruption per se but rather to undermine the

institutional checks and balances ostensibly designed to fight corruption, thus dismantling democracy and establishing authoritarian controls (see Curini 2017; Kossow 2019; Mounk 2020; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Mungiu-Pippidi 2020; Urbinati 2013).

But despite this common populist dimension and its links to corruption, it still remains possible to differentiate left and right. Labelling the current period a populist moment, Mouffe (2018, ch. 1, par. 36)[9] distinguishes right and left populists based on their values and varying conceptions of "the people" and "the elite." Right-populists, she avers, tend to define the "people" in largely nationalistic (often in ethnic, racial) terms, while characterizing the "elite" in political terms as the existing political establishment ("deep state") that controls power to serve their own self-interests and to provide handouts to immigrants and minorities considered beyond the scope of "the people." Left-populists, by contrast, tend to define the "people" in broader, more inclusive, and less nationalistic or ethnic terms linked more closely to the concept of popular sovereignty, and depict the "elite" as an oligarchy composed of collusive economic and political interests. And though both left and right populists seek to change the system by essentially giving power back to the "people," thus promoting their true interests, their means and objectives for doing so differ. Right-wing populists promise to bring back national sovereignty, "reserved for those deemed to be true 'nationals,'" by stripping power from the ruling elite, but they do not necessarily see the forces of capitalism and neoliberalism as part of that establishment (ch. 1, par. 38). Instead, they seek to dismantle government social programs, reduce government regulations, strengthen the private sector, broaden the scope of liberty, and weaken the role of technical expertise in government: aspirations easily aligned with the right. The left-wing populist, by contrast, "wants to recover democracy to deepen and extend it," dismantle or curb the neoliberal economic system, and reduce the political influence of the economic elite. In so doing, left populists embrace more egalitarian objectives while seeking to radicalize democracy by destroying the oligarchical system (ch. 1, par. 39).

While the foregoing left/right map helps define the central markers used here, it still leaves open the question of what I mean by ideological alignment. Generally, ideas or policies related to corruption/anticorruption can be considered aligned with the left or right when the meaning of corruption, its causes, or the recommendations to

fight it echo or overlap with the social and political problems identified (or prioritized) by the left or right; when the views on corruption fit within a broader narrative explaining the causes of broader social problems; and/or when the solutions fit within the context of left- or right-wing policy perspectives. At a more superficial level, however, the alignment can also relate to political alliances and, in a sense, "guilt by association" (Gephart 2012). This is particularly pertinent in discussing the alternative power factor thesis and whether people tend to attack or dismiss the anticorruption policies of their ideological adversary not because the policies themselves are fastened to left/right differences but simply because of the ideology of the person promoting the policies. Outside the power factor thesis, however, it is certainly possible for a leftist (rightist) president to support rightist (leftist) anticorruption policies (if policies can be differentiated ideologically) or more nonideological, or mainstream, centrist policies. In fact, as we will see, this tends to characterize certain aspects of anticorruption policies.

Guiding Hypotheses, Caveats, Methodology, Structure, and Limitations

To help further clarify the purpose of the current study, orient the analysis, and offer a better program guide to what lies ahead, this section aims to weave together a series of guiding hypotheses, a pair of caveats, an overview of the methodology and structure of the book, and even preface key findings. It concludes by addressing the study's various limitations and how the analytical endeavor contributes to the conversation.

The primary organizing hypothesis of the current study is that there exists what can be considered a left/right distinction related to debates over corruption/anticorruption. This overarching hypothesis relates, first, to the ideas found within the literature, political rhetoric, and anticorruption policies of governments. Here, the focus centers largely on how corruption/anticorruption is defined, conceptualized, theorized, and fought that tend to align with the more traditional ideas associated with the left and the right.

Chapters 2–4 strive to answer this central question. Chapter 2 parses the vast literature on corruption to explore how ideas, perspectives, and recommended reforms tend to align with or echo the tradi-

tional ideas associated with the left and the right. As shown, generally the right tends to embrace a narrower definition of corruption grounded more firmly in the law (the more traditional notions of bribery, extortion, graft, and nepotism), utilize a more market-oriented approach focusing on rent-generating activities of the state rooted in an institutionalist principal-agent theoretical framework, and concentrate on administrative forms of corruption and the violation of what Mark Warren (2006) labels as first-order norms (the written established laws, rules, etc.). This perspective also tends to focus more on the problem of corruption plaguing developing countries, offers changes that seek to reduce the role of the state in the economy and society, and bolsters Madisonian forms of democracy—a position that parallels a general understanding of the right, neoliberalism, and neoinstitutionalism. Criticizing the right/orthodox view as ideological, the left, by contrast, tends to characterize and define corruption in much broader terms, centering more on the notion of the public interest with a greater focus on systemic, institutional forms of corruption and the violation of second-order norms (Warren 2006) (the more ambiguous principles, beyond the law, guiding political decisionmaking), including legal forms of corruption. The left tends to stress broad structural factors, with particular attention to the corrupt influence of capitalist forces, socioeconomic inequality, and the lack of public participation in policymaking. Consequently, the left tends to offer solutions centered less on dismantling the state and freeing market forces and more on strengthening state controls and regulations, reining in capitalist forces, and making institutional changes to enhance representation and participation by the public in both the decisionmaking process and in conducting oversight: an approach that parallels left-oriented thinking more generally.

Chapter 3 addresses the main question inside the rhetoric of politicians. Focusing on a select set of political leaders from America the region (aka the Americas, with reference to the hemisphere; America, after all, is not a country), the initial part of the chapter compares the treatment of corruption/anticorruption within the respective national development plans of former Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) and current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024). The comparison illustrates key ideological, left/right differences between the two that reflects and builds on many of the ideologically rooted differences on corruption/anticorruption identified in the literature in Chapter 2. The chapter's second section then compares

the campaign rhetoric on corruption and how to fight it with consideration of four politicians from the contemporary period: current Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro (2018–2022), López Obrador of Mexico, two-time US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, and the former US president Donald Trump (2016–2020). Incorporating populism into the analysis, it posits, first, that corruption plays a central role in the thinking and rhetoric of many contemporary political leaders who clearly articulate a frontier between "the people" and an "elite," casting the former as victim and the latter as perpetrator of corruption. Second, and despite this shared tendency, it remains possible to distinguish between left-populist and right-populist views on corruption/anticorruption. Discussion illustrates the common populist tendencies while distinguishing among the left (López Obrador and Sanders) and the right (Bolsonaro and Trump).

Chapter 4 concludes the focus on ideas by comparing the anticorruption policies of a select group of left and right governments from the region. This includes the policies of the three victorious presidential candidates examined in the prior chapter—Bolsonaro (R), López Obrador (L), and Trump (R)—as well as the governments of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) (L) and Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) (R) in Argentina; Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) (L) in Brazil; Peña Nieto (2012–2018) (R) in Mexico; and Nicolás Maduro (2013–) (L) in Venezuela.[10] Based on a review of government documents and policy statements, assessments by international organizations, and secondary sources, the analysis searches for any pattern of differences that might align with the left/right nature of these governments. It includes assessments of how government policies may have strengthened or weakened anticorruption efforts, particularly the government's reactions to allegations of corruption within its own ranks. As the analysis shows, such policy differences do exist, but they remain rather limited in comparison to the rhetorical divergence among politicians or the differences rooted in the scholarly literature. Many governments of the left and right share a number of programs and approaches to battling corruption and even react in similar ways when facing allegations of corruption within their ranks. Such similarities provide a degree of continuity and may reflect the role of professionals within government, particularly autonomous agencies, and the influence of international organizations and international agreements over national anticorruption agendas.

Chapter 5 stretches the central hypothesis beyond ideas and policies to focus on the outcomes of the anticorruption efforts of left and right governments. The working hypothesis quite simply contends that there is an empirically verifiable difference between the two. This is tested by examining data for the countries of the region during the 2005–2020 period. Categorizing governments as left or right as the independent variable, a range of measures reflecting the views of different groups (experts, businesses, and the public) is used to try to gauge the impact of their anticorruption policies. Measures include the widely used Corruption Perception Index and the Global Corruption Barometer from Transparency International (TI), the executive survey of the Global Competitiveness Report (GCR) of the Global Economic Forum, the Americas Barometer surveys from Vanderbilt's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), and specific metrics within the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) and the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WBI) from the World Bank. The analysis also utilizes data on integrity measures (mechanisms designed to control corruption) such as the WBI's Rule of Law Index, the Rule of Law Index by the World Justice Institute, and the Open Budget Survey (OBS) of the International Budget Partnership. Though existing proxy measures of corruption are all methodologically challenged, they nonetheless provide a rough glance at the levels of corruption and hence the governments' effectiveness in combatting it. Generally, the analysis shows mixed performance of left and right government and, overall, limited progress in battling corruption. Such an outcome points to the significant political challenges of fighting corruption and perhaps even to our limited understanding of anticorruption.

Chapter 6 presents and explores an alternative: the power factor hypothesis. Offered perhaps with a pinch of cynicism, it contends that what might appear as left/right and partisan differences on corruption/anticorruption relates less to distinct ideologically based thinking and more to an in-power versus out-of-power dynamic. This alternative hypothesis posits that corruption/anticorruption has become politicized by both those in and out of power regardless of left/right, populist/nonpopulist stances. In the pursuit of power, both groups essentially weaponize corruption/anticorruption while at the same time attacking and trying to discredit their adversaries for doing the same. Just as governments often utilize the fight against corruption for political gain, out-of-power opponents stress how the government's anticorruption efforts actually concentrate power and weaken

anticorruption institutions. This attack is particularly potent when members of the government face allegations of corruption. Such political contention among in-power/out-of-power groups, however, is filtered through the hegemonic left/right and partisan prism, thus giving the impression of, and/or exaggerating, a left/right dimension to the issue of corruption/anticorruption.

Caveats

Two caveats shadow all the hypotheses entertained here. The first is a reminder of the relevant null hypothesis: that there are no or few differences between the left and right in any of the arenas examined. Basically, it posits that scholars, politicians, and governments, regardless of ideology, tend to see corruption basically the same way, offer/promise similar recommendations, act basically the same with respect to fighting corruption, and, in the end, produce mixed outcomes. The null hypothesis, in short, echoes the ideas captured in the opening motif of the chapter: that a broad, global consensus prevails in which all politicians, irrespective of ideological or partisan jersey, rail against corruption, claim it undermines the achievement of the national interest, embrace the common and universal goals of good governance, promise to fight corruption in order to get elected or retain power, and then, once in office, deploy similar anticorruption measures (though perhaps to limited avail).

The second caveat is that the hypotheses are neither binomial nor mutually exclusive. This means, first, that regardless of left/right difference in the understandings and approaches to corruption/anticorruption, areas of substantial agreement may still exist. It is not a question of either/or. Throughout, the analysis will strive to highlight common strands cutting across the left and right, or what could be seen as moderate positions that borrow from both. Simply put, this caveat suggests a model of concentric circles with the left and right overlapping and sharing many ideas and policies on corruption/anticorruption, but that the unshared portions of the two circles nonetheless illustrate different views that align with the left and right respectively. The nature of the two circles, their overlap and differences, are not static of course and may change as a result of the dynamic and contested construction of ideas on corruption/anticorruption. Generally, once-critical and heterodox ideas are often eventually deemed credible over time and tend to lead to the reformulation of ideas and even the broadening of the mainstream orthodoxy.

Second, this also means that the hypotheses are in some ways independent of one another and not mutually exclusive. Differences in one area or level do not necessarily translate to another. Even if there are clear left/right differences in the scholarly ideas and/or political rhetoric, for instance, there may be few if any differences in terms of actual policies or their impact. Similarly, despite left/right differences in the understanding of corruption or even policy approaches and/or distinct populist views, none precludes the polarization of corruption/anticorruption (the power thesis) that serves, independently, to magnify and exacerbate these left/right differences.

This second caveat, in turn, leads to a final hypothesis relating to the overall tendencies explored here. It suggests that the ideological-based differences in corruption/anticorruption tend to diminish as we descend the ladder of abstraction from ideas as expressed by scholars and even politicians on the campaign trail to government policies and, finally, to their impact. Prefacing the findings once again, such nuances are largely what this analysis, like most studies generally, reveals.

The concluding chapter circles back to the beginning of this chapter and echoes something often expressed in the literature: that despite its widespread use and universal condemnation, the concept of corruption is quite broad and ambiguous. It is hard to claim that it is so ambiguous that it is of limited use, however, because politically it carries prominence and relevance, particularly in the current epoch. Scholars, politicians, businesspersons, activists, and voters all talk extensively about corruption; they all condemn it; and they all fervently believe we should fight it, perhaps unaware of the fact that we may be referring to different things. Indeed, the current analysis reveals not only how the multiple meanings and ambiguities of corruption help project left and right differences but also how our intense focus on corruption contributes to its politicization and deepening polarization. Though arguably a cardinal component of the nature of politics itself, it does seem to have taken on a greater significance and urgency in recent years. Such issues are discussed and developed more fully in the final chapter, concluding with a brief discussion of corruption dilemmas.

Limitations

Like any study, the current endeavor carries a number of limitations and warnings that should be taken into account when assessing its findings. These limitations reflect issues of time, space, scope, and

methodology. One difficulty centers on time and the dynamics of ideas on corruption/anticorruption. Everything is iterative. Ideas and policies are constantly evaluated, assessed, criticized, revised, rethought, and redesigned, and corruption/anticorruption is no different. Definitions, conceptualizations, explanations, approaches, strategies, and the like on corruption/anticorruption have evolved over the years in response to criticism, dead-ends, new ideas, and so on. In some areas the scope of the thinking has expanded; in other areas it has converged. This complicates a broad analysis of the field or policies, as offered here, which strives to understand and explain by offering portraits or snapshots views, comparing these at different points in time. But with so many moving parts within the highly contested, lively, iterative, and constructive process, it is much more complicated to adequately provide a streaming depiction. Though the exposition in Chapter 2 makes an effort to address the issue of change and the historiography of corruption/anticorruption-related ideas, it remains a rather static view linking certain ideas in the literature to the left and to the right. Of course, despite evolutionary changes in the field, such existing ideas nonetheless remain as part of the literature and continue to influence our thinking, even though "current thinking" on the topic may be a bit more nuanced. Beyond ideas and policies, the same temporal issue limits the empirical analysis. Comparing the impact of left and right governments in fighting corruption is complicated by the fact that in many cases the time periods of the two differ. This makes it difficult to determine whether the policies or the outcomes by one government compared to another reflects the policies the government pursued or the specific time period in which it governed and hence the lessons learned and experience gained over the course of time. It also complicates the use of robustness checks and control variables.

Time is also a limitation in terms of the time periods explored. Though analysis reaches back to some earlier thinking on corruption, most of the analysis here concentrates on the contemporary period of the twenty-first century. The political rhetoric and policies represent recent governments and political campaigns, while the empirical portion only looks at the record over the past fifteen or so years. Again, this limits the relevance and applicable scope of any findings just to the specific period and may not travel well across time.

A second limitation relates to space: specifically, in terms of the cases and evidence used here to test the hypotheses. Throughout, the

analysis is limited to select cases, making the results merely suggestive rather than conclusive. Whereas analysis of the literature looks broadly to parse out left/right differences, it does not offer an exhaustive review of the vast literature. Owing to the nature of the methodology and the limited number of cases examined, the analyses of political rhetoric and anticorruption policies are even more limited. Here, the cases were selected based largely on my work on Mexico and the United States and a basic understanding of Latin America. While it tries to incorporate the comparative approaches of both the most different systems (United States versus Latin American countries) and most similar systems (Latin America) designs, it nonetheless remains a small sample. Even the larger N made possible by cross-national empirical analysis still remains focused only on the countries of the region. This reflects in large part the relative ease of identifying left versus right governments in the region while basically controlling for the impact of nonregional factors on outcome. Nonetheless, this too renders the results suggestive, raising the question of whether they might apply to or can be duplicated by broadening the scope of the analysis to prior periods of time or other regions of the world.

A third limitation centers on analytical scope. The focus here centers largely on the independent variable of ideology and whether ideological foundations can be found within the ideas and political rhetoric related to corruption/anticorruption, the policies of anticorruption, and outcomes among left and right governments. On occasion, and where possible, other causal factors may be taken into account and discussed, but rarely is it possible to incorporate any sort of robustness checks to control for the influence of other factors on outcome. I am more interested in determining, for example, whether left or right governments perform better, worse, or the same in fighting corruption than accounting for the factors that determine success/failure of anticorruption measures.

Recommendations or my solutions to resolve the problem of corruption also lie beyond the scope of the current study. Frankly, I wish I knew. While Chapters 6 and 7 highlight both the positive and negative impacts of politicization and polarization on efforts to fight corruption, the study offers little in terms of actionable policy recommendations. Instead, as discussed in the concluding chapter, the study highlights many of the dilemmas that complicate and undermine efforts to fight corruption, helping to explain the poor outcomes most countries have achieved.

A final limitation relates to methodology. With the exception of the empirical analysis on outcome, the primary methodological tool used here involves the analysis of the literature on corruption, the speeches and writings of political leaders, and the policies based largely on reports and assessments of corruption/anticorruption within countries.[11] None of these is particularly rigorous or as scientifically objective as many of my colleagues might prefer. Even the empirical portion is basically limited to a descriptive review of the experiences of the countries and simply comparison of means. Nonetheless, I strive to maintain the basic principles of objectivity and fairness demanded of the task.

Relevance and Utility

The current study is not a disguised effort to politically support or strengthen "my side" in the debate; instead, it springs from a genuine intellectual curiosity regarding the ideological underpinnings on corruption/anticorruption and the record of the left and the right in fighting corruption. I am a student, not a politician. But beyond satisfying curiosity, why is such an endeavor important, especially since, as just noted, recommendations are placed beyond its scope? Indeed, even if there are differences between the left and the right, what contribution does that make? First, the study seeks to offer conceptual and theoretical clarity that has important policy implications. Recognizing how the same term often carries different meanings and that we are often not talking about the same thing is important in advancing the conversation and specifying policy responses. As Arvind Jain (2001, 73) notes, "While it may appear to be a semantic issue, how corruption is defined actually ends up determining what gets modelled and measured." In fact, as an "umbrella term for a wide range of complex phenomena" (Ledeneva et al. 2017, 4), complexity is too often downplayed to enable research and measurement. Second, the study crystallizes the political dimensions not only of corruption but more fundamentally the meanings, approaches, and perspectives on the topic. Despite some efforts to treat corruption as a neutral objective term utterly divorced from politics, such a task is illusionary. Perspectives and understandings of corruption tend to privilege certain interests over others and reflect underlying political views, both of which carry policy and real world consequences. Finally, the study helps show how the inherently political struggle to define corruption and

determine what gets measured, modeled, and addressed through policy coupled with the sheer breadth of the phenomenon forge a series of dilemmas that contribute to the difficulties of fighting corruption. Combined, perhaps these suggest the need to more carefully disaggregate the different forms of corruption and move beyond the use of the generic term. But even that effort is fraught with political and moralistic problems.

* * *

With the stage set, analysis begins by parsing the vast literature on corruption. Once a largely neglected issue relegated to the margins, the topic has enjoyed substantial attention by scholars since the mid-1990s. As the next chapter shows, it is an intriguing field of study that has no disciplinary address: a fact that enriches the contributions and enlivens the debate.

Notes

1. Pointing to this global consensus and the lack of dissent surrounding the 2003 UN Convention Against Corruption or claims that it imposes Western hegemony, Mungiu-Pippidi (2020, 88, 89) refers to the "worldwide endorsement of the norms of good governance [as] one of the more striking achievements of modernization."

2. Anthropologists Muir and Gupta (2018, S6) point precisely to the lack of definitional precision as the key to the concept's success as a global term. Being hard to define and yet always considered bad, it is easy for people to use it to condemn any social ills.

3. Noted by Denisse Rodriguez-Olivari during a presentation at the International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, April 2020 (virtual).

4. Tavits's (2008) cross-national study, which overall shows people have higher levels of subjective well-being when (1) their governments perform well (i.e., free from corruption) and (2) the party of their choice is in power, finds, however, that having one's party of choice in power increases a sense of well-being only when governments are clean—not when they are corrupt.

5. Such studies are different from those stressing how certain definitions of corruption are ideological. Granovetter (2004, 8), for instance, links ideology to changing constructions of corruption: "The ideology that individuals use to effectively neutralize perceptions of imputations of corrupt behavior is in explicit contrast to another that would condemn and restrain reciprocity of this type as illegitimate and corrupt exchange."

6. In referring to this dialectic, Muir and Gupta (2018) point out how the two are in constant movement as each anticorruption action transforms the logic of corruption and each corrupt practice calls for new anticorruption measures. As a result, anticorruption always produces unintended consequences. Legalistic modes of anticorruption, for example, can distract people from other forms of corruption that may be legal, or anticorruption can encourage ways of gaming the system.

7. Martin and Shohat (2003) suggest that the tendency for government to favor private interests rests on an ideological position that assumes government is corrupt.

8. Indeed, much of the debate during the US Constitutional Convention centered precisely on how to prevent systemic corruption (see Madison 1961; Teachout 2014; Vergara 2020).

9. Occasionally, books read on Kindle (electronic format) fail to show page numbers, showing instead location numbers. Throughout this book, I cite these sources by chapter and paragraph.

10. As described in the chapter, these cases were selected in an effort to try to balance the number of governments of the left (4) and right (4), including where possible right and left within the same country, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, governments from both the moderate left (Fernández de Kirchner and Lula) and far left (Maduro). The inclusion of the United States provides an interesting contrast to Latin America and incorporates broader forms and understandings of corruption, building on the analysis from Chapter 3.

11. Much of the analysis here centers on identifying competing narratives about corruption. Generally, this approach is grounded in the field of discourse analysis (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Foucault 1969). Maarten Hajer (2005, 300), for example, defines discourse "as an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices." The underlying idea is that such narratives compete for dominance or hegemony, which is achieved when a particular narrative starts to determine the way a social unit conceptualizes reality, known as discourse structuration, and when the discourse is manifested in institutional arrangements (a system of measurement and policy measures), known as discourse institutionalization (Gephart 2012, 10). Of course, other narratives or discourses seek to contest the hegemonic discourse and weaken its hold on people's understandings of reality and its shaping of institutions and policies.