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In the Eyes of the Beholder? Understanding Policymakers' Perceptions of Corruption

Most research on corruption attitudes focuses exclusively on voters, despite the strategic role of political elites in anticorruption efforts. To fill this research gap, we study the drivers of perceptions of corruption among legislators, using comparative longitudinal survey data of over 3000 policymakers in 18 Latin American countries. We develop a novel theoretical framework based on the influence of motivated reasoning and the moderating effect of the economic context. Our results suggest that legislators supporting the government systematically perceive lower levels of corruption in contexts of economic growth. Conversely, opposition legislators consistently consider corruption an important issue, regardless of the macroeconomic situation. Since the perceptions of corruption for legislators supporting the government are dependent on the economic context, our results show that both government and opposition legislators are likely to perceive corruption as a relevant issue during economic downturns, suggesting that economic crises can open windows of opportunity for anticorruption reforms.

Introduction

Corruption is a major challenge for democratic governance, as it disrupts the functioning of the rule of law, contributes to underdevelopment, and lowers citizen's trust in institutions and political processes (Holmes 2006; Mauro 1995; Morris and Klesner 2010; You and Khagram 2005). While abundant research has studied perceptions of

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corruption among the public (Anduiza et al. 2013; Blais et al. 2010; Chang et al. 2009; Golden 2006; Slomczynski and Shabad 2012), little is known about perceptions of corruption among those who are tasked with controlling corruption through legislation.

Among voters, perceptions of corruption seem largely a function of the information available, the credibility assigned to it, and the extent to which corruption is considered to be important vis-à-vis other issues (Anduiza et al. 2013; Breitenstein 2019; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013). However, this extensive literature on corruption perceptions among mass publics stands in contrast with the lack of studies on the drivers of corruption perceptions among legislators. This research gap is particularly relevant, since policymakers are expected to implement anticorruption measures despite weak or even negative incentives to do so (Brinkerhoff 2000; Boly and Gillanders 2018; Fritzen 2005; Pope and Vogl 2000). This results in a structural difficulty to enhance stringent anticorruption policies.

In order to shed light on elites' attitudes towards corruption, we develop a novel theoretical framework based on the influence of motivated reasoning and the moderating effect of economic performance on perceptions of corruption among political elites. To test our expectations, we rely on a comparative longitudinal survey data of 3000 policymakers from 18 Latin American countries, collected over the span of 10 years (2009–19).

Our results suggest that legislators supporting the government systematically perceive lower corruption levels. The economic context can increase such *governing effect*, as legislators belonging to the ruling majority are less likely to see corruption as an important issue when the economic context is improving. Conversely, opposition legislators consistently perceive corruption as an important issue, regardless of the macroeconomic situation. Our results indicate that the economic context can also reduce the *governing effect*, since government legislators are more likely to consider corruption as a more important issue in periods of economic hardship. Thus, the economic context can reduce the government-opposition perception gap. Based on these results, we posit that economic crises can open windows of opportunity to approve anticorruption reforms.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, we develop our theoretical framework to explain elites' perceptions of corruption, building on the literature on the incumbency disadvantage, motivated reasoning, and the moderating effect of economic

performance. Second, we present our case selection, data, and methods. We then turn to the results of our statistical analyses to discuss their implications and avenues for future research.

Understanding Perceptions of Corruption Among Policymakers

A large body of literature has studied the causes and consequences of citizens' attitudes towards corruption. While citizens can combat corrupt elites through electoral choice (Charron and Bågenholm 2016), the average voter is willing to give electoral support to corrupt politicians (see Chang et al. 2009; Golden 2006; Martínez-Rosón 2016, among others). To some extent, such tolerance for corrupt leaders can be explained by the absence of information (see Rundquist et al. 1977; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013). Nevertheless, perceptions of corruption among individuals are not only a function of the information available but of the credibility assigned to it (Anduiza et al. 2013; Blais et al. 2010) and the extent to which corruption is considered to be important vis-à-vis other issues (Asquer, Golden, and Hamel 2020; Breitenstein 2019; Klasnja and Tucker 2013; Martínez-Rosón 2016). Crucially, there is evidence that, even if given the same information, citizens consider corruption less serious when it affects their own party than when it affects another one (Anduiza et al. 2013; Blais et al. 2010). Thus, motivated reasoning can dampen citizens' assessment of the seriousness of corruption.

Relevant advances in our understanding of citizens' perceptions of corruption have not been mirrored from the side of political elites (Albala 2016; Kasemets 2012). As previous research shows, studying political elites' perceptions is relevant given their role in the policymaking process and influence over public administrations (Anderson and Harbridge 2014; Arana 2018; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Skrenty 2006; Weihua and Maoliang 2017). When it comes to legislation on corruption, elites' political will is a decisive factor to determine the success or failure of anticorruption reforms (Brinkerhoff 2000; Pope and Vogl 2000). However, previous studies show that elites adopting anticorruption measures are often attempting to police themselves and thus face weak or even negative incentives to do so (Boly and Gillanders 2018; Fritzen 2005). We argue that, in fact, the structure of incentives for policymakers influences the way in which they think of and perceive corruption.

Recent evidence suggests that party leaders tend to force malfeasant legislators out of office, but only when corruption is salient

to the public (Asquer, Golden, and Hamel 2020). If the potential electoral costs of corruption are the trigger for some anticorruption measures, the changes in perceptions of corruption can be the mechanism behind them. In democratic contexts, opposition members tend to be more secure in their seats and more likely to obtain electoral benefits than members of the party in power (Batzilis 2019; Ferraz and Finan 2008; Park 2019). By contrast, governing parties tend to face worse electoral prospects, and this is even more the case in developing democracies (Klasnja 2015, 928). A suggestive body of research has found strong evidence for the so-called incumbency disadvantage by which governing parties in many developing democracies face significantly stronger disadvantages when seeking reelection.

As Klasnja (2015) points out, comparative research shows that corruption is an important component of electoral behavior in developing democracies due to the combination between frequent bribe victimization and high corruption perception (see Ferraz and Finan 2008; Klašnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause 2016). Therefore, corruption can explain, at least partially, the large incumbency disadvantage in developing democracies. Admittedly, corruption can involve opposition parties, but the literature indicates that if individuals are presented with information about corruption, they tend to decrease their preferences over governing parties (Adserà, Boix, and Payne 2003; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013).

Considering the importance of the incumbency disadvantage, we expect the electoral prospects of policymakers to have an important influence on their perceptions of corruption. That is, if public opinion research suggests that citizens often consider corruption less serious when it affects their own party, this political bias might be stronger among politicians, who are less likely to suffer from severe deficits of information thanks to their insider positions. While studies have typically assessed whether voters use motivated reasoning to fit evidence with prior beliefs, a growing body of work provides evidence of motivated reasoning among politicians as well (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Christensen et al. 2018; Esaiasson and Öhberg 2020). Some authors even show that elected politicians are more resistant to *debiasing* and tend to rely on motivated reasoning more than the general public (e.g., see experimental evidence from Christensen and Moynihan (2020) or Schönhage and Geys 2022).

If motivated reasoning can be understood as seeking information that supports individuals' predispositions and

discarding information that conflicts with them (Anderson and Harbridge 2014), this is more likely to occur when individuals process information through the lens of their party commitment (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). Thus, we expect motivated reasoning to exert a strong influence on how legislators fit evidence with their prior beliefs. Unlike voters, legislators have a direct involvement with political parties and have government responsibilities when they belong to the party or coalition in power.

Both motivated reasoning and the incumbency disadvantage have been studied among political elites. We put forward an analytical approach that combines them in the domain of corruption. As Anderson and Harbridge (2014, 701) point out, although finding appropriate tests of motivated reasoning and partisan biases among elites is more complicated than among the public, doing so offers a possibility to study the psychology of elites without relying on psychological profiles or inferences from the close reading of speeches (George and George 1998; Seyranian and Bligh 2008). Accordingly, in this study we posit that policymakers are likely to engage in *governing-motivated reasoning*. Our approach contributes to this growing scholarship that aims to test motivated reasoning among legislators.

We hypothesize that policymakers might perceive different corruption levels depending on their political role, minimizing corruption concerns for government legislators (those supporting the party or coalition in power), while increasing their perception of corruption levels among opposition legislators. We thus expect:

Hypothesis 1: *Legislators whose party is in government or holds the majority in power will perceive lower corruption levels.*

The underlining idea of the hypothesis presented above is that policymakers' perceptions of corruption will depend on their governing or opposition status due to motivated reasoning. This might be even more apparent in periods of economic malaise, in which governing parties are even more likely to be electorally punished (Carlin and Hellwig 2019; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010; Pérez-Liñán 2007; Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich 2017). In line with Stokes (2001), and as Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga (2013) show, corruption perceptions matter more to explain evaluations of sitting executives in the face of adverse economic conditions, when the public tends to exhibit a stronger intolerance of corruption. In periods

of economic hardship, individuals simultaneously tend to exhibit a stronger intolerance of corruption and to associate their concerns of corruption with governing parties (Breitenstein 2019; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013).

However, while poor economic performance often decreases governments' electoral prospects, good economic performance can give new life to corrupt governments (Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013, 1196). Previous research finds that citizens tend to react negatively to corruption when the economy is poor, yet consider corruption less important when the economy grows, particularly in countries with high levels of corruption (Klasnja and Tucker 2013). Furthermore, experimental research shows that a strong economic performance can moderate the negative effect corruption has among voters (Breitenstein 2019). Therefore, considering that citizens are more tolerant with corruption when the economy is performing well, and thus their levels of support are less affected by corruption perceptions, government legislators might perceive corruption as a less important issue in periods of strong economic performance.

Accordingly, in addition to testing if governing-motivated reasoning influences policymakers' perception of corruption levels, we also account for a possible conditional effect of the economic context among governing legislators. Since citizens tend to associate their concerns of corruption and their evaluations of incumbents depending on the (good or bad) economic conditions, we assess whether the economic cycle makes governing legislators more likely to perceive corruption a more (or less) relevant issue. In particular, we expect:

Hypothesis 2: *Governing legislators will perceive higher corruption levels during periods of economic malaise, yet they are more likely to perceive lower corruption levels in contexts of strong economic performance, when corruption is less salient and citizens' electoral behavior is less influenced by corruption.*

Data and Methods

Case Selection

Our study focuses on Latin American elites. Since incumbents are in a stronger disadvantage position in developing democracies,

the region offers an ideal context to study how electoral pressures foster governing-motivated reasoning. Corruption has been a critical political and economic issue for Latin America since the return of democratic rule to most countries in the region in the 1980s. Almost every country in the region has witnessed corruption scandals involving sitting or former presidents, governors, ministers, and other top government officials (Blake and Morris 2009). In 2016, a large majority of citizens in countries such as Brazil (83.4%), Mexico (77.2%), Peru (77%), Colombia (74.9%), Venezuela (74.2%), and Panama (74%) considered that "most or all politicians are involved in corruption" (LAPOP 2016). In 2019, most Latin American citizens (53%) considered that corruption levels had increased in their country in the previous 12 months (Transparency International 2019).

A large number of high-profile corruption cases have shaken most countries in the region over the past few years. At least a third of Latin American countries have been affected by the ongoing *Lava Jato* corruption scandal, which involved construction and oil companies, presidents, cabinet ministers, and regional leaders across the continent (Rotberg 2019). In 2019, Peruvian ex-president Alan García committed suicide after police entered his house to arrest him for being allegedly involved in the Odebrecht corruption case. Three more Peruvian former presidents (Alejandro Toledo, Ollanta Humala, and Pedro Pablo Kuchinsky) faced accusations related to the Odebrecht case, which in 2016 involved presidents, ministers, and parliamentarians from at least 12 Latin American countries. While Odebrecht stands as a transnational case of corruption in the region, more localized cases have been frequently reported. For example, Chile has faced salient corruption cases such as Caval, Penta, or SQM. In El Salvador, former presidents Francisco Flores and Antonio Elías Saca were accused of illicit enrichment. The Guatemalan ex-president Otto Pérez Molina resigned after being accused of money laundering and was arrested shortly after. In Brazil, president Jair Bolsonaro's son was involved in a corruption scandal; in Mexico, former president Enrique Peña Nieto was accused of receiving benefits in exchange for contracts in the so called "White House." In Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru, several public officials are facing charges of fraud against public administration during the COVID-19 crisis.

Overall, studying perceptions of corruption among policymakers in Latin America allows us to test our theoretical expectations following a typical case design (Seawright and Gerring 2008) in a context where corruption is both salient and an important political and economic challenge.

Data

In order to test our hypotheses, we rely on the Latin American Elites Project (PELA-USAL) developed by Alcántara (2022), which gathers data on the opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of the legislative representatives of all Latin American countries between 1994 and 2021 on issues such as democracy, economy, political careers, and, more recently, clientelism and corruption. PELA-USAL allows us to study in an unprecedented way the evolution of corruption perceptions among policymakers, using a comparative longitudinal survey dataset of over 3000 policymakers across 18 Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Venezuela). We use all available waves of PELA-USAL in which legislators were asked to assess the seriousness of corruption in their countries. These elite surveys were fielded in all Latin American countries at least once between 2009 and 2019: two countries were observed four times, five countries were observed three times, nine countries were observed twice, and two countries were observed once. Table A1 in the online supporting information presents a detailed account of the legislative terms covered in each country, as well as the specific years of fieldwork and total number of interviewees.

Dependent Variable: Perceptions of Corruption

Our dependent variable is legislators' perception of corruption, which we measure with a question from the PELA-USAL survey asking legislators to assess the seriousness of corruption in their countries on a 10-point scale (1 if they consider it has no importance and 10 if they consider corruption a very important issue).[1] Mean seriousness of corruption in all available waves of PELA-USAL between 2009 and 2019 is 8.2, indicating that most legislators report corruption to be quite an important issue in their countries. There is, however, important cross-national variation. We find the lowest levels of perceived seriousness of corruption in Uruguay (5.1), Nicaragua (5.1), and Chile (6.6), while legislators in Mexico (9.2), Honduras (9.2), Peru (9.4), and Venezuela (9.5) hold the highest levels of concerns over corruption.

Covariates

As regards our explanatory variables, we take into account Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, unemployment, and inflation as our macroeconomic indicators of interest. Our main individual-level predictor is whether the legislator belongs to a governing or an opposition party. We also include individual control such as ideology, political experience, and sociodemographic characteristics. All of these have been used as explanatory variables influencing perceptions of corruption (Bonifácio 2013; Charron and Bågenholm 2016; Cordero and Blais 2017; Martínez-Rosón 2016; Torgler and Valev 2006).

Main Covariates

Government opposition. We classify legislators depending on their responses to the question: "Do you belong to the government or to the opposition?" The resulting dummy variable (1 for government) allows us to control for the effect of being not only in the governing party but also in the governing coalition or the coalition that holds the majority in power. It is therefore important to keep in mind that *government legislators* refers to both those who belong to the same party as the president and those from other parties supporting it.[2]

Economic performance. In order to assess the effect of economic performance on perception of corruption levels, we account for three country-level variables: the annual national percentage of GDP growth, unemployment, and inflation, drawn from the World Development Indicators (WDI 2021). GDP growth captures the annual percentage growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency. Unemployment measures the annual percentage of labor force that is without work yet available for and seeking employment, based on the International Labour Organization dataset (ILOSTAT). We use inflation in additional analyses included in the online supporting information.

Controls

Corruption. We expect corruption perceptions to be related to actual levels of corruption, but we are interested in the influence of legislator's position in relation to the government (supporting or

opposing it), and of the economic context, rather than the effect of corruption itself. To control for the level of corruption in each country-year, we introduce in our models the Political Corruption Index from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, proposed by McMann et al. (2016). The index measures the pervasiveness of political corruption in a country taking the average of four V-Dem scores: (1) public sector corruption index; (2) executive corruption index; (3) the indicator for legislative corruption; and (4) the indicator for judicial corruption, equally weighting these four different government spheres (see McMann et al. 2016).

Political experience. We use a dummy variable indicating whether legislators were occupying a seat in parliament for the first time or whether they had been reelected (1 for reelected). Over 65% of the legislators in our sample were occupying a seat for the first time.

Ideology. We rely on a question that asks legislators to place themselves on a 10-point left-to-right scale (1 = *radical left*; 10 = *radical right*). Empirical evidence on the effect of ideology on corruption perceptions among the public has offered mixed results.[3] Hence, we include this variable to control for possible effects of ideology on corruption perceptions without formulating any expectations.

Sociodemographics. We include commonly used individual-level control variables:[4] gender (1 = *female*), age (a continuous variable that varies from 19 to 86 years old), and education (3-point scale: 1 = *undergraduate*, 2 = *graduate*, and 3 = *postgraduate studies*). We take the group "undergraduate" as a category of reference; it groups legislators without studies, with primary, high school, or lower-level professional education, which represent 20.25% of our sample.

Methods

Our sample includes a total of 3272 respondents, from which 2884 have valid responses in all the survey questions of interest. These individual-level observations are nested in 18 countries between 2009 and 2019. Although single-level models are possible, the failure to account statistically for such grouping may lead to biased standard errors (Fairbrother and Martin 2013; Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother 2015). In order

to account for the clustering of observations within country-years and countries, we employ a multilevel modelling approach. We fit a two-level random-intercepts model, where the intercept depends on random characteristics of the country to which individuals belong, and the independent variables are the characteristics of individuals or countries. We include a linear time variable to control for the fact that our variables of interest follow trends over time (increasing or decreasing, respectively, for all countries), reducing the possibility of spurious correlations (Fairbrother 2014).[5]

Results

Figure 1 displays policymakers' average perceived level of corruption and the Political Corruption Index in the 18 Latin American countries included in our sample. We observe a moderate and positive correlation between the pervasiveness of corruption

FIGURE 1
Average perceived corruption level vs. average political corruption.
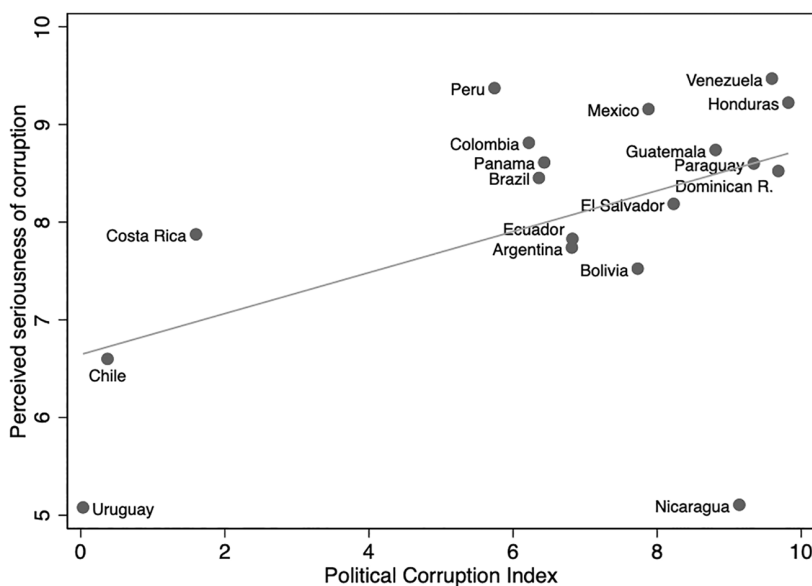
Note: The Political Corruption Index has been rescaled to facilitate substantive interpretation.

in each country according to V-DEM and the elites' perceptions of corruption ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Legislators in countries with the highest corruption scores (Honduras, Venezuela, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Dominican Republic) are the ones that perceive corruption as a more serious issue. On the opposite end of the scale, where legislators consider corruption to be less serious, we find great disparity. While elites from Nicaragua and Uruguay perceive similar levels of corruption, Nicaragua is on average one of the countries with the highest corruption score, while the Uruguay has the lowest. We also find similar levels of corruption concerns among the elite in countries with lower levels of corruption like Chile or Costa Rica and in countries with three times more corruption according to V-DEM like Bolivia, Argentina, or Ecuador.[6] These imbalances suggest that policymakers' perceptions of corruption levels do not exclusively depend on the actual pervasiveness of corruption in each country. To explore the role of both individual and national-level characteristics on perceptions of corruption, we turn to our statistical analysis.

Table 1 shows the results of three regression models with individual and country-level drivers of elite perceptions of corruption. At the individual level, we include the government-opposition status and all the political and demographic controls. At the country level, we include GDP growth and unemployment, while controlling for V-Dem's Political Corruption Index. To test whether the macroeconomic situation has a conditional effect on government legislators' perceptions of corruption, we interact economic growth and unemployment with the government-opposition variable in Models 2 and 3, respectively.

As all models in Table 1 show, the government variable has a strong negative effect: belonging to the governing party or coalition is negatively and significantly correlated with perceiving corruption as a more serious issue. As expected in H1, models 1 to 3 suggest that legislators' perceptions of corruption depend on their political role: those supporting the party or coalition in power tend to be less concerned about corruption, while members of the opposition are systematically more concerned about corruption.

As regards to the role of the economy, GDP growth has a negative and significant association in models 1 and 3, suggesting that legislators tend to perceive corruption as a less important issue in periods of strong economic performance. Unemployment has a small and positive coefficient in models 1 and 2 but fails to reach statistical significance.

TABLE 1
Individual and Country-Level Drivers of Corruption Perceptions
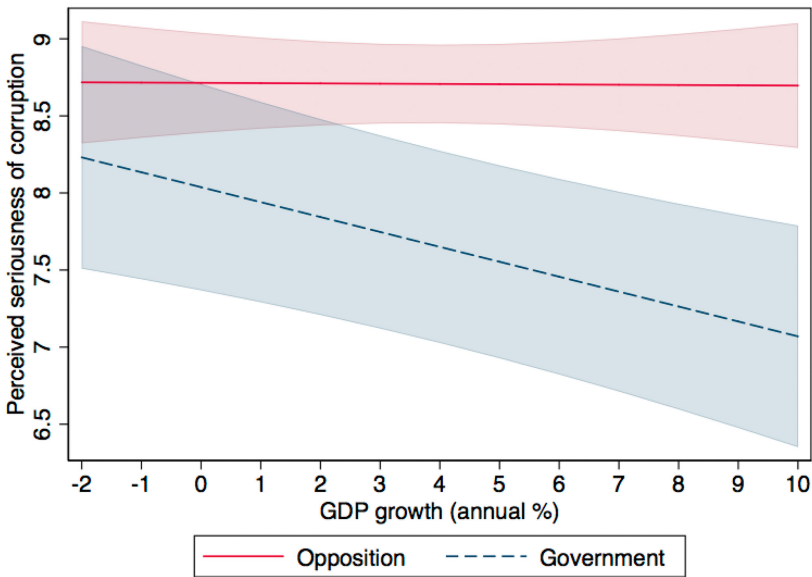among Legislators

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Individual-level indicators			
Government	−0.89***	−0.68**	−3.10***
	(0.08)	(0.34)	(0.52)
Ideology	0.07***	0.01	−0.01
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Female	0.09	0.20**	0.20**
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Age	−0.01**	−0.01**	−0.01**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education (graduate)	−0.02	−0.01	−0.02
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Education (postgraduate)	0.14	0.13	0.13
	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Reelected	−0.20**	−0.15*	−0.15*
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Intercept	−39.91	−40.95	−45.78
	(28.56)	(27.18)	(27.20)
Country-level indicators			
GDP growth	−0.05**	−0.00	−0.04*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Unemployment	0.01	0.01	−0.13**
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Political corruption	2.54***	3.06***	2.57***
	(0.75)	(0.51)	(0.54)
Time	0.02*	0.02*	0.03**
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Intercept	0.91	0.25	0.30
	(0.31)	(0.10)	(0.12)
Cross-level interactions			
GDP growth × Government		−0.10**	
		(0.04)	
Unemployment × Government			0.37***
			(0.07)
Log-Lik. (full model)	−5449.6	−5362.0	−5352.4
No. of cases	2667	2667	2667
No. of groups	18	18	18

Note: Model 1 assumes a random intercept; models 2 and 3 assume a random intercept and a random slope for the "government-opposition" variable. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

To test our second hypothesis, models 2 and 3 include an interaction between government-opposition status and our economic variables, GDP growth, and unemployment. This

interaction should inform us about the different effect that the economic context might have for government and opposition legislators. The significance of the interactive term for both GDP growth and unemployment indicates that the relationship between being a government legislator and perceptions of corruption is conditional on economic performance.[7] A graphical representation of this interaction will help us clarify this relationship. Figures 2 and 3 display the predicted perceptions of corruption for government and opposition legislators in different points of the economic cycle. In line with Hypothesis 2, government legislators are more likely to perceive lower corruption levels during periods of strong economic performance and more likely to be concerned about corruption during economic downturns (low or negative GDP growth and higher unemployment rates). Conversely, the economic context does not substantially change the corruption perceptions of opposition legislators, who consistently perceive corruption as an important issue.

FIGURE 2

Predicted perceptions of corruption for legislators, conditional on GDP growth.

Note: Predictive margins with 95% CIs.

FIGURE 3

Predicted perceptions of corruption for legislators, conditional on the unemployment rate.
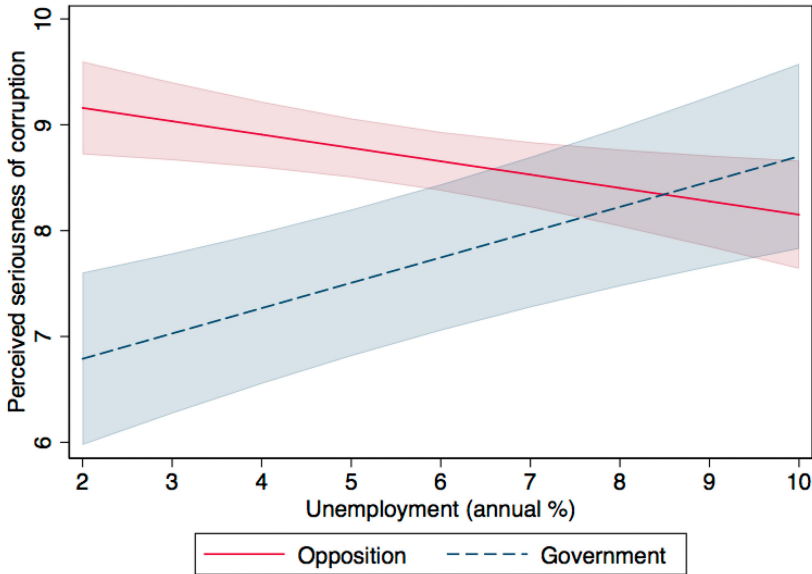
Note: Predictive margins with 95% CIs.

Crucially, economic hardship seems to increase awareness of corruption among governing legislators, reducing the gap between them and nongoverning legislators to the point that they are no longer significantly different. These findings indicate that economic downturns make both government and opposition legislators more likely to be aware of corruption as a serious issue, suggesting that economic crises might open windows of opportunity to approve anticorruption reforms. We return to this point in the discussion.

It is worth noting that the Political Corruption Index is positively and significantly correlated with perceiving higher levels of corruption, as Figure 1 suggested and as models in Table 1 seem to confirm. This result suggests that legislators' perceptions are responsive to the actual level of corruption and thus will express more concerns in contexts of higher levels of corruption. However, even within countries with higher average levels of corruption, policymakers whose party is in power tend to perceive that there is

less corruption compared with those whose party is not in power (in line with Hypothesis 1).

Finally, our models include some individual-level controls that provide us with additional insights about the factors that influence policymakers' perceptions of corruption. Female legislators seem to be more concerned about corruption than their male counterparts, although the differences are only statistically significant in two of our three models. By contrast, age seems to have a robust effect, suggesting that older legislators tend to perceive corruption as a less important issue. We do not find ideology or educational level to have any clear influence on corruption perceptions. Interestingly, political experience does play an important role, since legislators that have been reelected tend to perceive lower corruption levels, while those elected for the first time systematically express higher levels of concern.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article presents the first comparative study on the individual and contextual factors influencing corruption perceptions among legislators. To do so, we rely on the PELA-USAL elite-level survey, resulting from more than over 3000 interviews with legislators in 18 Latin American countries, a region particularly affected by endemic corruption levels over the last decades. We developed new theoretical arguments to identify contextual factors that might produce cognitive biases among policymakers, mirroring recent advancements in the study of motivated reasoning regarding corruption perceptions among voters. We argue that legislators have incentives to perceive lower levels of corruption when in power, and that this governing effect is likely to increase if the economy grows, since voters tend to be more tolerant with corruption in such contexts (Breitenstein 2019; Klasnja and Tucker 2013; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013).

Our results show that government legislators systematically perceive lower corruption levels, in line with our expectations. Furthermore, our findings shed light on how the economic context can increase such *governing effect*. While opposition legislators consistently see corruption as an important issue regardless of the macroeconomic situation, government legislators are less likely to see corruption as an important issue as the economic context improves. In line with the growing literature on motivated reasoning among politicians (Anderson and Harbridge 2014; Baekgaard et al. 2019;

Christensen et al. 2018; Christensen and Moynihan 2020; Esaiasson and Öhberg 2020), our study suggests that legislators are likely to engage in *governing-motivated reasoning*, minimizing concerns for corruption when they are in power (or belong to governing party or coalition), while increasing them as members of the opposition.

Moreover, our analysis shows that this perception gap—between government and opposition legislators—tends to increase as the economic context improves. Government legislators tend to perceive corruption as a less important issue during good economic times, when they are less likely to be electorally punished and citizens do not tend associate their concerns about corruption with their evaluation of (or preference over) governing parties (Carlin and Hellwig 2019; Klasnja and Tucker 2013; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013). In contrast, our results suggest that government legislators tend to perceive corruption as a more serious issue during economic downturns, when they are more likely to be electorally punished by citizens associating their concerns about corruption with their evaluation of the sitting government. Thus, based on previous studies that assess the policy consequences of political elites' perceptions (Anderson and Harbridge 2014; Brinkerhoff 2000; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Pope and Vogl 2000; Skrenty 2006), we posit that economic crises tend to result in a more widespread awareness of corruption among legislators, opening windows of opportunity for anticorruption reforms.

In fact, some of the most important anticorruption efforts in Latin America during the last decades have indeed resulted from economic shocks that forces political elites to introduce reforms after long periods of stability. For instance, in Mexico, until the economic crisis of 1994, the political elite had avoided introducing anticorruption reforms. However, and although the PRI still had a strong political control and partisan majority in Congress until 1997, the economic crises contributed to the approval of new important anticorruption measures during the following years (Petersen Cortés 2020). In Brazil, after a period of economic growth (2003–13), thousands of citizens took to the streets to demand accountability in a context of economic hardship and major corruption scandals. In order to recover legitimacy, Dilma Rouseff's (2011–16) government, supported by their coalition, introduced several anticorruption reforms in response to Operation "Car Wash" (*Lava Jato*). In Argentina, during the economic crisis that began during Carlos Menem's administration (1989–99), Fernando de la Rúa

launched a political platform that gained support by denouncing corruption. In the midst of a context of rising social unrest largely due to the exhaustion of the established economic model, one of the first measures of President de la Rúa's government in 1999 was the creation of the Anticorruption Bureau.

Our study provides new insights regarding the cognitive pressures that electoral accountability exerts on legislators' attitudes towards corruption. Governments' electoral disadvantage, particularly salient in contexts of economic crisis, increases government legislators' awareness of corruption. However, the moderating effect of the economy suggests that the *governing-motivated reasoning* can reduce government legislators' concerns about corruption in contexts of strong economic performance. Conversely, during economic downturns, government legislators tend to become increasingly aware of corruption, reaching similar levels to those of opposition legislators.

These results open new lines of inquiry, both for those interested in the political consequences of corruption as well as for scholarship assessing corruption perceptions (and its biases). Identifying the factors that influence political elites' awareness of corruption levels is a necessary step to advance in our knowledge of the systemic resistances that dampen the fight against corruption in democratic systems, as well as to identify the contexts that favor anticorruption reforms. Future research should delve into the additional mechanisms that might bias elites' perceptions in other domains and how they can shape policy outputs.

Our results also raise some questions that go beyond the study of political elites. Considering that most indicators on corruption are based on expert surveys, future research should assess the extent to which expert perceptions might also suffer from motivated reasoning to fit evidence with prior beliefs. Our analyses show that politically sophisticated individuals strategically adapt their perceptions to their role or position. Understanding the roots of cognitive biases among politically sophisticated individuals is the first step to overcoming the limitations that might stem from them.

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NOTES

1. "Next, I will name a set of issues that are common to a lot of countries. Can you indicate the degree of importance these problems currently have in [country] following a 10-point scale, 1 being 'no importance' and 10 'very important'? Corruption" (PRO112). AUTHOR, review sentence. What does "Corruption" refer to?

2. Although we could expect different effects for these categories, we lack information on the exact status of each legislator. Hence, it is not possible to assess the effect of the type of coalition partner (i.e., same party as the president, party in a preelectoral coalition or a party that formed a postelectoral coalition to enable the president to pass legislation). However, assuming that some of those considered governing legislators might only be part of an informal coalition—and therefore be less attached to the current government—we would expect them to be less influenced by *governing-motivated reasoning*. If that was the case, our results would only underestimate the moderating effect of being in government.

3. While some authors find that ideology does not significantly affect attitudes toward corruption (Anduiza et al. 2013), others suggest that supporters of conservative parties tend to be stricter in judging corruption scandals (Johnston 1991). Charron and Bågenholm (2016) find the relationship to be U-shaped: in systems with a low number of parties, voters on the extremes are more likely to vote for their preferred party even if it is facing a corruption scandal (while voters in the center are more prone to switch parties or stay home).

4. On the one hand, some scholars offer evidence consistent with the hypothesis that women engage in corrupt practices less than men (Martínez-Rosón 2016; Swamy et al. 2001), and thus a greater presence of women in parliament will lead to lower levels of corruption (Dollar et al. 2001). On the other hand, some authors argue that age is negatively correlated with rule-breaking, and older people are less likely to perceive corruption as justifiable (Bonifácio 2013; Martínez-Rosón 2016; Torgler and Valev 2006). Almeida (2007) and Bonifácio (2013) posit that citizens with higher levels of education tolerate less corruption and, conversely, Funk (1996) or Kinder (1983) that citizens with higher levels of education often tolerate more corruption than those with lower education degrees if corrupt politicians offer other values such as competence.

5. To assess the robustness of our results, we also run fixed-effects ordinary least squares models. Substantive results are unchanged when using a fixed-effects approach (see Table A3 in the online supporting information).

6. Figure A1 (Appendix A in the online supporting information) displays the average values of perceived seriousness of corruption in every country-year. While we find little variation over time in Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, Panama, Peru, or Dominican Republic, we see an increase in perceived corruption in Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Uruguay, and to a lesser extent in Brazil. Nicaragua is the only country in which we find a downward trend.

7. The results for inflation are less clear. Supplemental analysis suggest that inflation does not have any significant effect in our multilevel models, while our alternative specifications using fixed-effects (Table A3 in the online supporting information) would suggest a positive and significant effect. Thus, we only find limited support for a negative effect of inflation. The interaction between inflation and government opposition shows no substantive difference between both groups (Figure A2).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1 Supporting Information