# Is a Corrupt Government Totally Unacceptable?

Guillermo Cordero and André Blais

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**Abstract.** Corrupt governments are not always punished by voters. Under certain circumstances citizens consider voting for the incumbent party even if the party is perceived as corrupt. Using survey data for Spain, we analyse what makes citizens reject (or not) the idea of voting for a corrupt party. Previous research has shown that party identification, ideology and political information play a role in voters' reactions to corruption. We argue that voters judge corruption in relative terms; what matters is not how corrupt the incumbent party is perceived to be but whether it is deemed to be more corrupt than the other parties.

 **Keywords:** Corruption; electoral behaviour; government; ideology; parties.

## 1. Introduction

A wide range of contributions from the social sciences have analysed the effects of corruption on politics. Corruption has been shown to have negative effects on the legitimacy of political institutions (Seligson 2002; Anderson 2003) and on turnout (McCann & Domínguez 1998; Chong et al. 2011). Corruption also has negative consequences on macroeconomic performance (Mauro 1995; Rose-Ackerman 1999; Montinola & Jackman 2002; Svensson 2005; Lambsdorff 2007). However, and against the principles of democratic theory, corruption does not seem to have univocal effects on electoral behaviour (Ecker 2015). Contrary to expectations, the existence of corruption in politics often does not provoke a strong public response. This lack of response has been documented in countries with different political cultures and traditions, such as Canada (Blais, Gidengil & Kilibarda 2015), Italy (Chang, Golden & Hill 2010), Mexico (Chong et al. 2011), the UK (Vivyan et al. 2012), the US (Rundquist *et al*. 1977; Peters & Welch 1980; Dimock & Jacobson 1995), and Spain (Anduiza et al. 2013; Muñoz et al. 2012; Rivero-Rodríguez & Fernández-Vázquez 2011).

Although some works show evidence in the 'expected' direction, meaning that corrupt candidates and parties get lower levels of support (Welch & Hibbing 1997; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro 2013), this punishment is usually not so severe in terms of losses (Peters & Welch 1980), and it also affects turnout and challengers' support (Chong et al. 2011). Nevertheless, the most common finding has been that even

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when perceived as corrupt, politicians, parties and governments tend to be re-elected (see Kurer 2010 for a comprehensive review).

Why do voters 'turn a blind eye' to corruption (Anduiza et al. 2013)? Different explanations have been offered by previous works. These studies have traditionally focused on two main elements: information and partisanship. According to these studies, citizens who are less informed and those who identify with the incumbent party are less likely to punish the government for corruption. However, little attention has been paid to the political offer and its effect on the relationship between corruption and electoral behaviour.

Using empirical data at the individual level for Spain we demonstrate that what matters is how corrupt a given party is deemed to be, *compared to the others.* With this finding we place the focus on how citizens evaluate the parties relative to each other. Voters may not want to punish a corrupt government when the other parties are perceived to be equally corrupt.

## 2. Partisanship, corruption and electoral behaviour

There is a common puzzle in political science. How is it possible that corrupt political parties and politicians are (re)elected in many contexts? This is against the principles of democratic theory, yet there are many instances where voters fail to punish corrupt governments. One common response by the previous literature to this question is the (lack of) information. If citizens vote for corrupt parties, it is because they are not informed about this misbehaviour (Adserà et al. 2003; Ferraz & Finan 2008; Chang et al. 2010; Chong et al. 2011; Winters & Shapiro 2013). Citizens need information to reward the government when it performs well and punish it when the performance is bad (Przeworski et al. 1999). However, information is not a sufficient condition. As stated by Rundquist and his colleagues, every party has incentives to accuse other parties of corruption, so voters may not give much credibility to these accusations (1997).

More importantly, those citizens that self-identify with a party tend to dismiss claims that their party is corrupt. This (second) explanation is inspired by the work of Campbell and colleagues (1960) in 'The American voter'. These authors describe a 'perceptual screen' through which partisans tend to filter and interpret the political information that they receive. The effect of partisanship on perceptions of corruption has been broadly confirmed by many authors in different contexts (Anduiza et al. 2013; Blais et al. 2015; Chang, Golden & Hill 2010; Chong et al. 2011; Dimock & Jacobson 1995; Peters & Welch 1980; Rivero-Rodríguez & Fernández-Vázquez 2011; Rundquist et al. 1977; Vivyan et al. 2012).

One of the most well-known works on how partisanship biases perceptions of facts is that of Bartels (2002), who demonstrates that democrats and republicans have, for instance, very different interpretations of how the economy is doing. This is what is called 'motivated reasoning'.[3] This bias can be explained by a diversity of reasons. Jerit and Barabas (2012) argue that partisans show higher levels of knowledge on the facts that confirm their perceptions. This suggests a mechanism of biased selection of information whereby people tend to ignore information that contradicts their views. Furthermore, the information that confirms our views is more easily accepted (Ditto et al. 1998). As demonstrated by Blais

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[3] See Taber & Lodge (2006) for a full elaboration of the argument.

and his colleagues, this dampens the impact of information (Blais et al. 2015), as 'negative' information tends to be dismissed as lacking credibility (Ferraz & Finan 2008; Rivero & Fernandez-Vazquez 2011).

That being said, partisans sometimes change their opinions about relevant political facts as they receive information that contradicts their predispositions (Gerber & Green 1998). The bottom line, however, is that partisanship acts as a heuristic, simplifying and deforming the acquisition of information (Zaller 1992). Thus, citizens select the information that they receive, and once pre-selected, the information is interpreted to reinforce previous views, avoiding or dismissing information that contradicts prior perceptions (Sniderman et al. 1991; Zaller 1992; Taber & Lodge 2006). According to this argumentation, corruption should have a lesser impact among those who already support the incumbent (Dimock & Jacobson 1995; Anderson & Tverdova 2003).

But, what happens in the next step in the causal chain? Once the citizen does perceive a party to be corrupt, how can he/she support it? Some authors point to self-interest, meaning that those who expect to benefit from corruption may show higher levels of acceptance (Kurer 2010). These benefits are not necessary direct, such as patronage (Manzetti & Wilson 2007). A citizen could consider voting for a corrupt party if he/she considers that this party is the most competent to manage the economy (Rundisquist et al. 1977). Citizens could also opt for a corrupt party if they consider that it defends policy positions with which they agree. Nevertheless, these mechanisms have been proven to play especially when the economy is doing well, citizens being more prone to punish when the economy is not performing satisfactorily (Rundquist et al. 1977; Melgar et al. 2010; Jerit 2012; Zechmeister & Zizumbo-Colunga 2012).

Despite the interest that corruption raises in the social sciences and the number of studies trying to answer how corrupt governments can be re-elected, the role played by the supply side has barely been empirically analysed. According to Adserá, Boix & Payne (2000), the presence or absence of party competition should be a crucial factor. The threat of losing power should make politicians more accountable, and should provide incentives to behave 'correctly'. Ecker and his colleagues test the role of competition,[4] as citizens may opt for a different and not-corrupt party only if they believe that bringing a new government will make a difference (2015: 6).

In a theoretical approach to this issue, Kurer (2010) argues that three groups of theories at the supply side could explain why citizens support corrupt incumbents: elite theories (the existence of an elite culture that helps to hide corruption), barriers to entry (the existence of legal barriers hampering the entrance of new actors in the political arena) and party systems (weak party systems that strengthen the power of individual actors). However, even in countries with well-established and strong parties, corruption often remains unpunished. The 'elite cultural explanation' is likewise not applicable to contexts where the population is worried and well informed about cases of corruption.

The theoretical contribution of Kurer (2010) is very welcome in this regard. Kurer reminds us that citizens will be ready to punish the incumbent when there are alternatives in the party supply. However, we argue that they will do this to the extent that they see other parties as being less corrupt. In this regard, Charron and Bågenholm (2016) analyse how ideology and party offer play an important role in the relation between corruption and electoral behaviour. As they demonstrate, citizens located at the poles of the

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[4] Ecker, Glinitzer & Meyer (2015) analyze the level of corruption in the country, but do not consider perceived corruption in the government and the other parties.

ideological scale are expected to be more influenced by ideology, since the number of political alternatives at these extremes tend to be lower. These authors also highlight the relevance of party supply; this relationship is expected to diminish as the number of parties increases. However, in the theory of economic voting a voter can punish the government only if there are valid alternatives to opt for (Ecker et al. 2015). In the same way, citizens could vote for a corrupt party in those contexts where other parties are also perceived as corrupt. This would be so if judgments about corruption are relative, that is, people are willing to punish the incumbent government only when they believe that it is more corrupt than the alternatives. This may be the case in a growing number of democracies, in which trust in politics has decreased in the last decades (Dalton 2004), and where perception of corruption has generated the so-called 'culture of distrust' (Melgar et al. 2010).

A context of general distrust thus weakens accountability, as voters believe that whoever is elected will behave in the same fashion. In the specific case of corruption, the issue is not whether the rascals should be thrown out or not but whether the rascals are worse than the other options.

## 3. The case

The conservative Spanish People's Party (PP) was able to win the 2015 general election despite being extremely unpopular (11 per cent of the population think its management is 'good' or 'very good', CIS Centre for the Sociological Research, Study 3104, July 2015). Spain represents an excellent case of study as the incumbent PP (Partido Popular - People's Party) was plagued with many cases of corruption during its mandate (2011-2015), and still was able to obtain the support of more than one-quarter of the voters in 2015. Although it suffered significant electoral losses (from 45 per cent of the vote in 2011 to 29 in 2015), the PP still was able to obtain more than 7 million of votes, and to maintain its position as the party with most votes and seats.

Spain's score on the Corruption Perception Index by *Transparency International* during the government of the PP fell from 65 to 58 (Transparency International 2015, the scale ranges from 0 'highly corrupt' to 100 'very clean'). The public perception of Spaniards agreed with this trend, as shown in Figure 1. In 2011 only 2 per cent of the population mentioned corruption as one of the most important problems in Spain. This percentage peaked in 2014, with a 64 per cent of the population concerned about corruption (51 per cent in 2015).
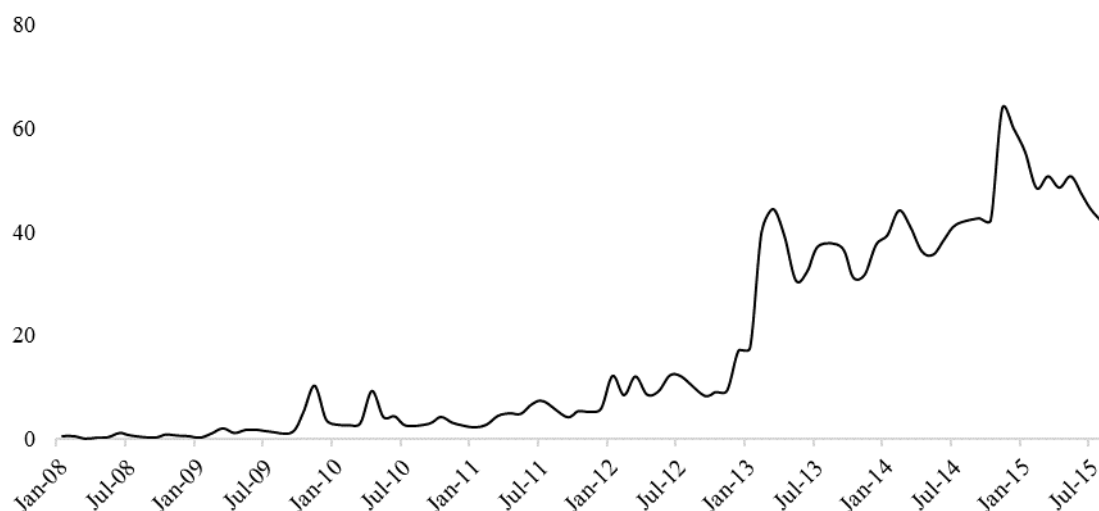
**Figure 1.** Percentage of people who believe that corruption is among the three main problems of the country.
Source: CIS (www.cis.es).

One relevant case of corruption during this period was the *Gürtel affair*, consisting in a corrupt organisation which laundered money and evaded taxes, bribing many PP local and regional leaders mostly in Valencia and Madrid (Cordero & Montero 2015; Orriols & Cordero 2016). The case came to public attention in 2009, although most of the trials took place between 2010 and 2011. As a consequence of this scandal, the regional president of Valencia, Francisco Camps, resigned in July 2011, four months before the general election (Pérez et al. 2011). Also the regional president of the Balearic Islands and former Minister of the PP, Jaume Matas, resigned. In Mach 2012 he was sentenced to six years of imprisonment by the 'Palma Arena case', reduced to nine months by the Supreme Court in 2013, accused of influence peddling (La Vanguardia 2012; Ceberio 2013).

Probably the most publicized case of corruption was the so-called 'Bárcenas' papers'. In January 2013 the most read newspaper in Spain, *El País*, published the alleged double counting of the PP between 1990 and 2009. In these accounts, the party's treasurers registered illegal bonus payments to several leaders of the national party, including prime minister Mariano Rajoy. According to this account Rajoy received 25,000 euros in the 1997-2008 period, although these accusations have been denied by Rajoy (Manetto & Cué 2013). When this double system was documented for the first time (31 January 2013) the percentage of Spaniards mentioning corruption as one of the three main problems in Spain jumped from 18 per cent to 40 per cent.

The most recent case of corruption with an important media coverage was the 'opaque cards' case, in which 86 members of the Board of Directors of the Madrid's regional government-owned bank *Caja Madrid* (known as *Bankia* after its fusion with other regional saving banks) were investigated for the misuse of the bank's credit cards. The investigated, most of them appointed by political parties, spent 15.5 million euros in 'expenses of representation' using the company's cards for personal purchasing including clothing and travel, and cash withdrawals (Orriols & Cordero 2016). This case became public in September 2014, when concern about corruption as one of the main problems of the country reached 64 per cent. The former

Spanish Finance Minister (PP) and former Head of the IMF, Rodrigo Rato, was among the accused for spending 58,800 euros in unauthorized spending (Minder 2014).

Additional relevant cases of corruption (Orriols and Cordero 2016) affected regional and local governments in Madrid (*Púnica Operation*, in which the PP's Counsellor of the regional presidency, Antonio Granados, was sent to prison in October 2014), Valencia (*Brugal case*, in which local and provincial leaders of the PP were investigated for improper award of public tenders), and also Andalusia (*Ere case*, which affected the regional branch of the main opposition party, the PSOE, and which led to the resignation of the former President of the region, Antonio Griñán in 2013). Most of these cases were still in trial during the 2015 electoral campaign, and the media was paying much attention to them. In fact, corruption is considered by Spaniards as the second most important problem in the country, only after unemployment, according to CIS (Study 3101, June 2015).

## 4. The data and the hypotheses

Using survey data allows to determine, at the individual level, how real cases of corruption affect the probability to vote for a corrupt party, controlling for other factors. With the goal of analysing citizens' willingness to support a corrupt party we use CIUPANEL,[5] an on-line quota-based survey with 2,410 respondents (88 percent response rate) conducted by the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in June 2015, just when corruption was the second main problem for Spaniards. Our dependent variable is whether the respondent finds it totally unacceptable to vote for the government (PP). The exact wording of the survey question was: 'There are many political parties in Spain that would like to have your vote. What is the likelihood that you will ever vote for any of the following political parties? Please specify your opinion on a scale of 0 to 10, in which 0 means "Not at all likely" and 10 means "very likely"'. This variable was recoded into a dummy variable; 1 corresponds to those who completely reject the idea of voting for the government (0 in the original scale), and 0 otherwise. This recoding of the original variable (See Figure A1 in the Appendix) follows a very conservative criterion, as we contrast those who give a 0, finding it totally unacceptable to vote for the PP with those who indicate some willingness, however slight it may be, to consider voting for the party. Two-thirds of the respondents indicate that they are not at all likely to ever vote for PP (Table 1). This decision has been taken in order to avoid problems related to the non-linear distribution of the dependent variable. However, when the analysis is replicated using the original linear metric of the variable, the findings remain stable (results shown in Table A1 in the Appendix).

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**Table 1.**
Description of variables included in the models

|  | N | Mean | S.D. | Min. | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Government unacceptable | 2,242 | 0.65 | 0.48 | 0 | 1 |
| Age | 2,410 | 48.01 | 15.36 | 18 | 90 |
| Man | 2,410 | 0.49 | 0.50 | 0 | 1 |
| Education level | 2,376 | 1.35 | 0.61 | 0 | 2 |
| Political information | 2,410 | 3.02 | 0.47 | 1 | 4 |
| Party identification | 2,410 | 0.03 | 0.18 | 0 | 1 |
| Ideological distance | 2,140 | 4.29 | 3.04 | 0 | 10 |
| Corruption government | 2,410 | 6.95 | 2.65 | 0 | 10 |
| Corruption parliament | 2,410 | 6.12 | 2.40 | 0 | 10 |

Source: CIUPANEL.

We analyse how individuals' perceptions of corruption affect their propensity to feel it completely unacceptable to vote for the incumbent PP. With this aim, we use three main independent variables. In the first place, we consider perceptions of corruption in the government, on a scale that ranges from 0 (the government is not corrupt at all) to 10 (the government is very corrupt). The mean score given by our respondents is 7 (Table 1); the median is 8 and the mode 10. This tells us that many Spaniards perceive the PP to be quite corrupt. We expect this variable to show a positive relation with thinking it is completely unacceptable to vote for the government (PP). At the same time, we consider perceptions of corruption in the parliament as a proxy for perceived corruption among the other traditional political parties.[6] This variable also ranges from 0 to 10. The mean is 6, which suggests that many Spaniards perceive widespread corruption, though slightly less severe among the other traditional parties (median 6 and mode 5; for more details about the variables included in the model, see Table 1).

We expect that those who consider corruption to be widespread in the political offer to be less likely to reject the idea of voting for the government. This is so if citizens' judgments about corruption are relative rather than absolute. Judgments are relative if citizens ask themselves not how corrupt an incumbent is but rather whether it is more or less corrupt than the other parties. The idea is thus whether voters 'benchmark' corruption as they appear to benchmark the economy (Kayser & Peress 2016; but see Arel-Bundock et al. 2016). If they do, controlling for their perceptions of how corrupt the incumbent party is, they should become more willing to support the government as the level of generalized corruption is perceived to be higher, since the relative performance of the government improves as the overall level of corruption gets worst (see Arel-Bundock et al. 2016 for an elaboration).

Elections, however, are not only about honesty and corruption. They are also very much about which party best represents our values and interests. This basic consideration has to be factored into the equation since many people may decide in the end to support a party even though they believe it is corrupt because it is the party that best reflects their beliefs and ideology. And so the third crucial independent variable in our model is the respondent's ideological distance from the government. Respondents were asked to locate themselves and PP on a 0 to 10 left-right scale, and we can thus create an ideological distance

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[6] At the time of the fieldwork (June 2015) the new parties Podemos (We Can) and Ciudadanos (Citizens) were not represented in the national Chamber.

variable which equals 0 when the person locates himself and PP exactly on the same score and 10 when he/she perceive the PP as very far from his/her position. The mean distance is 4, which tells us that quite a few voters perceive the PP not to reflect their own ideology (median and mode are 5). We expect the propensity to reject the incumbent government to increase with ideological distance.

As discussed in the previous sections, partisanship plays a very relevant role in attributing responsibility for corruption and also has an impact on individuals' determination to punish a corrupt party. For this reason, we insert party identification as a control. As previous research has shown, partisans of the government tend to perceive less corruption and are less inclined to conclude that corruption is a sufficient reason to completely reject a party (Dimock & Jacobson 1995; Anderson & Tverdova 2003). However, it is a common finding in the literature that partisanship is on the decline in developed democracies. Since the publication of 'The American Voter' in 1960, which defended the durability and relevance of partisanship in the formation of attitudes and its behavioural effects, a lot of things have changed. Political ties are less stable (Fiorina 1977, 1981; Franklin & Jackson 1983), partisanship is less and less common in old and new democracies (Abramson 1976; Rose & Mishler 1998; Thomassen 2005), and its connections with attitudes and behaviours are less intense (Baldassarry & Gelman 2008). In the case of Spain, partisanship is particularly weak (Barnes et al. 1985; Linz & Montero 2001; Krouwel 2012). However, it is still prudent to include party identification as a control variable.

We also control for age, gender, education and the level of political information. These variables are not only regular controls at the individual level in explanatory models of vote choice, but also variables influencing perceptions of corruption. As the literature has shown, being a woman is positively correlated with perceiving corruption in the government (Melgar et al. 2010). The impact of education and political information on perceived corruption has been also demonstrated in previous works (Blais et al. 2010; Melgar et al. 2010; Melgar, Rossi & Smith 2010; Tverdova 2011; Blais et al. 2015). More details of the variables included in the analysis are shown in Table 1.

Following the literature discussed in the previous section and the argumentation described in the preceding lines, we expect that:

*$H_1$: As perception of corruption in the government increases, the propensity to totally reject the idea of supporting the government increases*

*$H_2$. However, as perception of corruption in parliament increases, the probability of finding it completely unacceptable to vote for the government decreases.*

*$H_3$: The propensity to totally reject the government is higher among those who perceive it as ideologically distant (no matter how corrupt the government is perceived to be).*

Our approach consists in relating perceptions of the amount of corruption in government and parliament to finding it totally unacceptable to vote for the incumbent party through a survey. A common practice in studies of corruption is to implement experiments in which the respondents are exposed to fictitious cases of corruption and ask whether they would still be willing to vote for the corrupt candidate (see Anduiza et al. 2013). This kind of design is certainly useful to determine what types of corruption are deemed to be more (or less) acceptable but they are less relevant when it comes to ascertaining whether voters judge corruption in relative terms, which is the main focus of this study. Another approach has been

to ask people to imagine that the party that they support has been involved in a corruption scandal and to indicate if they would still vote for another party (see Charron and Bagelhom 2016). While this is an interesting design that throws light on the other considerations that affect vote choice, we are concerned in this research with how perceptions of corruption affect voters' attitudes.

## 5. Results

In order to analyse how perceptions of corruption and ideological distance affect the probability to reject voting for the government we run a logit regression model, given the dichotomous metric of our dependent variable.[7] Column 1 in Table 2 shows the results of the model described above. As can be seen, party identification shows the expected relationship with our dependent variable (findings hold in models excluding partisanship as a control variable; results available upon request). However, the main goal of the analysis is to study the effect of perceived corruption and ideology on considering it totally unacceptable to vote for the government. Our expectations are also met. The predicted probability to totally reject the idea of voting for PP increases by 40 percentage points when the government corruption score shifts from 0 to 10 (see Figure 2). These results confirm our hypothesis 1 and seem to (at least partially) reject the idea that citizens 'turn a blind eye' to corruption.

**Table 2.**
Logit models on considering a corrupt government totally unacceptable

|  | (1) | (2) |
|---|---|---|
| Age | -0.01** | -0.01** |
|  | (0.01) | (0.01) |
| Male | 0.17 | 0.17 |
|  | (0.16) | (0.16) |
| Education level (Reference: Primary) |  |  |
| Education level: Secondary | -0.12 | -0.13 |
|  | (0.37) | (0.37) |
| Education level: Tertiary | 0.08 | 0.10 |
|  | (0.38) | (0.37) |
| Political information | -0.35 | -0.43 |
|  | (0.23) | (0.23) |
| Party identification with government | -1.14* | -1.22* |
|  | (0.54) | (0.51) |
| Ideological distance with government | 0.74*** | 0.99*** |
|  | (0.04) | (0.13) |
| Perceived corruption in government | 0.40*** | 0.33** |
|  | (0.05) | (0.10) |
| Perceived corruption in parliament | -0.19*** | -0.49*** |
|  | (0.06) | (0.11) |
| Perceived corruption in gov. * Ideological distance with gov. |  | -0.04* |
|  |  | (0.02) |
| Perceived corruption in gov. * Perceived corruption in parl. |  | 0.04** |
|  |  | (0.01) |
| Constant | -1.80 | -1.11 |
|  | (0.93) | (1.08) |
| N | 2,027 | 2,027 |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.497 | 0.504 |

Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001 (two-tailed)
Source: CIUPANEL.

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[7] The Pearson correlation between the independent variables are Distance*Corrup.Gov=0.49; Distance*Corrup.Parl=0.29; Corrup.Gov*Corrup.Parl=0.73). However, multicollinearity has been tested resulting the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) in 1.88, what indicates that multicollinearity is not a problem in our model.

The perceived corruption in the Parliament also impacts our dependent variable in the expected direction, confirming our hypothesis 2. This means that those citizens who perceive corruption in parties in general are less likely to find it completely unacceptable to vote for the government. Specifically, those who perceive a lot of corruption (the maximum score of 10) in the parliament get a predicted probability of totally rejecting the government 19 points lower than those who perceive no corruption (the minimum score of 0) in the parliament (see Figure 2). This finding supports the idea that voters judge corruption in relative terms.

Table 2 confirms that ideology is also a crucial determinant of voters' reaction to the incumbent party. Irrespective of perceptions of corruption, the willingness to consider voting for PP depends a lot on how ideologically close or distant the party is perceived to be. The logit coefficients indicate that in fact ideology matters more than corruption.[8] And indeed the propensity to completely reject the idea of supporting PP is 74 percentage points higher among those who are the most distant than among those who are the closest on the left-right scale (see Figure 2).
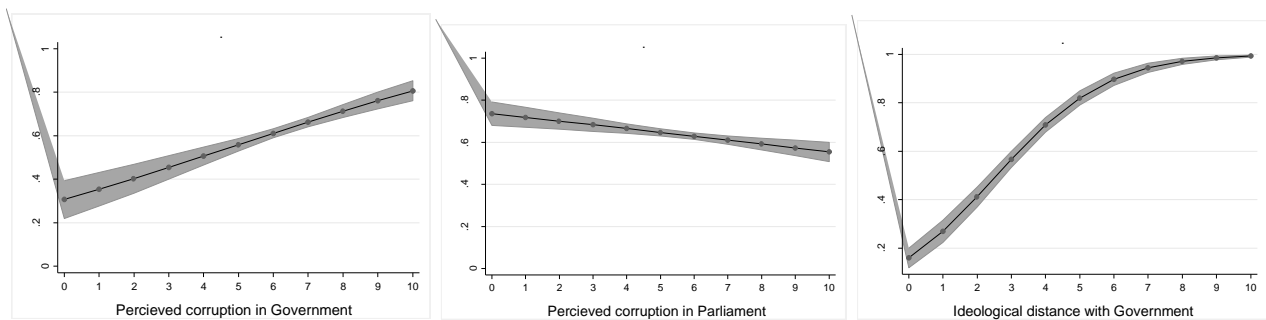


**Figure 2.** Predicted probabilities of considering a corrupt government totally unacceptable, by perceived corruption in the government, perceived corruption in the parliament and perceived ideological distance with the government.

Source: CIUPANEL database.

The previous analyses are based on an additive model in which each of our variables has an independent impact on the propensity to believe that a corrupt government is totally unacceptable. We can also test a model with interactions between our main independent variables. This model is shown in the second column of Table 2 and, more intuitively, in Figure 3. As shown, the probability of totally rejecting the idea of voting for the government among those who perceive it as ideologically distant is close to 1, no matter how corrupt it is perceived to be. However, perceptions of corruption matter a lot among those ideologically close to the government; the probability of feeling that the government party is completely unacceptable is close to zero among those who do not perceive corruption, but close to 0.75 among those who perceive a lot of corruption. The second interaction considered in the model is that between the level of corruption perceived in the Parliament and in the government. As shown in Figure 3, the impact of perceived government corruption is bigger among those who see less corruption in Parliament.

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[8] The logit coefficients can be compared since the three central independent variables are on the same 0 to 10 scale.
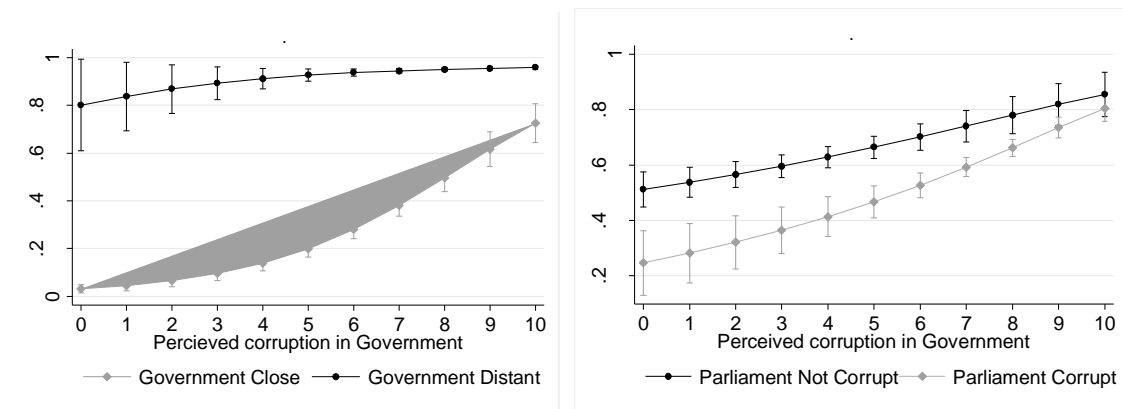
**Figure 3.** Predicted probability of considering a corrupt government totally unacceptable, by perceived corruption in government and perceived ideological distance with the government (left) and perceived corruption in parliament (right).

Note: Graph representation based in Table 2, Model 2. Bars represent 95 per cent significance intervals. "Government Distant = 8 points; Government Close=2 points" "Government Corrupt = 8 points; Government Not Corrupt =2 points; "Parliament Corrupt = 8 points; Parliament Not Corrupt =2 points".

Source: CIUPANEL database.

## 6. Conclusion

Governments are not always punished by the citizens at the ballot box. As demonstrated by the previous literature in a wide number of countries, some voters turn a blind eye to corruption (Anduiza et al. 2013) and rascals tend to be reelected. This lack of response has important consequences on the levels of political trust, legitimacy of the institutions, turnout, and accountability.

Empirical studies have shown that the lack of information and partisanship are key variables to explain this lack of accountability. Partisans and those less politically sophisticated tend to be less tough with corruption. However, little attention has been paid to the role of the political supply. According to the theory of the economic voting, accountability (in this case, punishing a government for corruption) is only possible where other parties are available and perceived as valid alternatives. In this sense, voters may be less harsh towards a corrupt party when they believe that the other parties are also corrupt.

In this paper we demonstrate that judgments of corruption are relative rather than absolute. Citizens 'benchmark' corruption as they appear to do with the economy (Kayser & Peress 2016; but see Arel-Bundock et al. 2016). In the case at hand (Spain), the propensity to consider the party in government (PP) as unacceptable is high among those who perceive it ideologically distant. However, perceptions of corruption have an effect among those ideologically close to the government, which hurts the party. According to our results, the party pays a penalty for being perceived to be corrupt but that penalty is reduced (partially discounted) because many voters perceive corruption to be rampant, and that perception makes them somewhat more indulgent towards the incumbent party.

Despite more empirical studies should be devoted to analyze the applicability of this finding to different contexts (such as countries with higher and lower levels of corruption among parties and a different party supply), these results have important implications in politics, as a narrow political supply hampers accountability. Voters may consider that all the parties are going to behave in the same fashion,

which may disincentive traditional parties to fight corruption when it is widespread. This fact is especially alarming if we consider the growing levels of distrust across the world. Political disaffection may lead to a 'culture of distrust' (Melgar, Rossi & Smith 2010) which in turn jeopardizes the quality of democracy.

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