

Strong Support, Weak Policies: Views on Corruption of Citizens and Legislators in Three Countries*

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Abstract

To understand limited anti-corruption policies, we study legislator and citizen beliefs and preferences about corruption in three countries. Deploying parallel surveys in Colombia, Italy, and Pakistan, we investigate support for a political agency theory that sees politicians as rent-seekers and for an information theory that hypothesizes instead that politicians misperceive voter preferences. We find limited support for either. Using a series of vignettes that invoke tradeoffs in making political decisions that could result in corruption, we find that citizens and politicians in all three countries perceive corruption to be common and are equally likely to condemn it. Politicians' understanding of citizens' concerns are largely accurate and politicians themselves are rarely committed rent-seekers. Our evidence suggests that feeble anti-corruption policy agendas may persist because established political parties lack electoral incentives to prioritize fighting corruption. [133 words]

1 Introduction

Citizens in democracies generally disapprove when their elected representatives engage in corruption (Incerti, 2020; de Sousa, Clemente and Maciel, 2023), which naturally raises the question of why such behavior persists. The two most immediate and standard explanations are as follows. First, politicians’ preferences may diverge from those of voters, an assumption built into classical political agency models (Ferejohn, 1986; Besley, 2006), which presume that politicians are rent-seekers. In this framework, corruption persists because voters exercise inadequate political control over their elected representatives, who are inherently predisposed to corruption. A second well-studied explanation is rooted in asymmetric information models, in which politicians and voters share preferences but politicians misperceive voters’ policy positions and priorities (Canes-Wrone, Herron and Shotts, 2001; Butler and Nickerson, 2011; Broockman and Skovon, 2018; Walgrave et al., 2023; Furnas and LaPira, 2024). In this case, even a vote-maximizing politician might place insufficient weight on anti-corruption policies due to inadequate information about voters’ concerns.

Evaluating these theories requires information about how politicians themselves perceive and judge corruption. Yet we know little about their views on corruption because public officials have so rarely been surveyed on the topic. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap with original data from three countries — Colombia, Italy, and Pakistan — collected via parallel surveys of citizens and legislators. Our central goal is to compare the views of politicians and citizens within each country with hypotheses guided by a political agency model and by an informational theory of voter preference misperception.¹ Our data provide a unique and rich cross-national empirical basis on which to evaluate whether politicians appear tolerant of corruption because of their putative rent-seeking nature or whether instead they underestimate voters’ concerns about corruption — or perhaps for some other reason altogether.

If citizens dislike corruption and negatively evaluate politicians’ involvement in corrupt activ-

¹Hypotheses were pre-registered. We filed separate pre-analysis plans for the citizen and legislator samples. These will be made publicly available upon publication.

ities — and our data substantiate these known facts about ordinary people — this suggests at least a latent demand for anti-corruption policy. Yet anti-corruption policies seem relatively rare compared to the political demand for them (Johnston and Fritzen, 2020). Political agency and information theories propose different theoretical mechanisms for this same outcome: namely, anodyne anti-corruption policies that fail to reflect the anti-corruption preferences of voters (Rothstein, 2011).

We investigate this puzzle using data from parallel original surveys of citizens and politicians in Colombia, Italy, and Pakistan. The core component of the surveys is a series of vignettes. The five vignette scenarios confront respondents with situations in which politicians must trade off aversion to corruption against some other principle — for example, efficiency, electoral competitiveness, or kinship ties. We designed the vignettes to minimize the chances that participants would see an obviously “right” answer to questions related to corruption. (For a longer discussion of social desirability bias, see Section 3.5.) For each vignette, we elicit responses on what citizens and politicians consider the more desirable outcome, as well as what they believe would be more likely to occur if such events transpired in their country. We also implement an experimental informational treatment, inspired by recent studies that use information to realign policy preferences of politicians with those of citizens (Kalla and Porter, 2021; Pereira, 2021; Hjort et al., 2021; Jalland, Roth and Wohlfart, 2023). Finally, our surveys seek views about the prevalence of corruption and the effectiveness of anti-corruption enforcement, and allow us to examine the extent to which social motivations, compared to self-interest, are correlated with tolerance of corruption by politicians.

On the basis of the evidence we present, we contend that the failure of politicians to promote active and effective anti-corruption policies seems unlikely to stem from either inherent predispositions to corruption on the part of elected officials or from politically consequential misperceptions of voter preferences. Instead, our data suggest the importance of a party-centered theory of anti-corruption policy. We infer from our survey evidence that corruption may not serve as an electorally valuable political issue for the main established political parties in our three countries. These parties all lack the electoral incentive to prioritize fighting corruption because, as our data reveal, doing so is unlikely to persuade voters from the main rival established party to shift their electoral allegiance. In

all three cases, challenger parties have already arisen that have successfully attracted voters in part on the basis of anti-corruption agendas. Thus, the small proportion of voters in each of the three countries who take anti-corruption policy as their top priority appear to have already shifted their electoral allegiance. Anti-corruption strategies offer little electoral value for major established parties in the search for votes. This leaves the anti-corruption policy agenda at a political stalemate.

Our theory redirects attention from voter preferences and behavior to the strategic incentives of political parties. Knowledge of voter preferences does not necessarily translate into party platforms or into policy outcomes. Our findings suggest that scholars might refocus attention on political parties' efforts at attracting votes from rivals to understand the modest anti-corruption policies that politicians typically champion.

The remainder of this paper is organized into four major sections. First, we briefly review relevant literature and outline the hypotheses guiding the research design. Second, we present information about the surveys and treatments. Third, we present our results for each of the six main hypotheses we investigate. In the same section, we present some additional results relevant to a strategic interpretation of anti-corruption efforts and advance that preliminary interpretation of the data. A final section provides a brief discussion of questions for future research.

2 Theory and Literature

Scholars have long examined the extent to which the policies endorsed and adopted by political elites align with the preferences of citizens. Work in the United States pioneered this line of investigation, assessing whether representatives supported policies enjoying public backing (Erikson, 1971; Page and Shapiro, 1983). More recent studies have extended this literature using parallel surveys, survey experiments, and related techniques designed to measure policy congruence between citizens and their elected officials. A central focus of this newer work is whether politicians misperceive voter preferences, and whether providing lawmakers with accurate information realigns their beliefs with those of citizens (e.g., Butler and Dynes, 2016; Broockman and Skovon, 2018; Walgrave et al., 2023;

Furnas and LaPira, 2024; Hsiao and Kuipers, 2025). Findings vary across policy domains: in some areas politicians underestimate voter concern, while in others they overestimate it. Realignment is thus possible but, based on studies conducted thus far, highly uncertain.

Parallel-survey studies in the domain of corruption are rare. Most corruption research focuses instead on why voters fail to punish corrupt politicians at the polls (de Vries and Solaz, 2017; Dunning et al., 2019). Only a handful of studies have directly collected survey data from politicians about corruption. For example, McAllister (2000) compares Australian legislators' and voters' expectations about legislative ethics, finding that citizens hold legislators to higher standards than legislators themselves do. Márquez Romo and Romero-Vidal (2023) uses data from 18 Latin American countries to show that governing-party politicians perceive less corruption than opposition-party politicians, extending research on partisan-induced bias in perceptions of and electoral responses to corruption (Rundquist, Strom and Peters, 1977; Anduiza, Gallego and Muñoz, 2013; Cornejo, 2023). In Portugal, Pereira et al. (2023) finds both voters and legislators support stronger financial transparency, while Gouvêa Maciel and Santos (2024) analyzes the language Portuguese legislators and citizens use to describe corruption. Thus, of the research we have located, only McAllister (2000) and Pereira et al. (2023) compare politician and voter responses to identical questions, and both are single-country studies set in wealthy, stable democracies. To our knowledge, no prior study examines informational misalignments in the specific domain of corruption or studies corruption views across a large range of economic development.

Against this backdrop, we designed our survey to test two distinct and fundamental theoretical explanations for misalignments between policy outcomes and voter preferences in the corruption domain: political agency theory and information asymmetry theory. As we observe in the introduction, we will also undertake an exploratory analysis of a third theory based on party incentives, though this was not part of our original pre-analysis plan and arose as a possible way to interpret our main and very surprising results.

2.1 Political Agency Theory

Political agency models (Ferejohn, 1986; Besley, 2006) depict politicians as rent-maximizers. “Rents” include illicit gains from corruption as well as other personal benefits of office. In this framework, voters evaluate policy outputs but cannot directly observe rents. Voters prefer better policy performance and tolerate rents only to the extent these do not reduce performance to below an acceptable threshold. Several standard assumptions in this framework yield clear empirical implications:

Political ambition: Politicians seek reelection to maintain access to rents (Schlesinger, 1966; Mayhew, 1974).

Conditional corruption: Politicians will engage in as much corruption as is electorally survivable.

Tolerance gap: Since by assumption voters do not benefit from the corruption that flows from rent-seeking, politicians will tolerate higher levels of corruption than voters.

From this framework, we expect politicians to be willing to overlook some corruption if doing so advances their electoral prospects, to be more willing than voters to justify or engage in lying or deception, and to express greater tolerance of corruption.

Simple extensions to political agency theory allow for politician heterogeneity: politicians differ in their intrinsic motivation, with some more self-interested and others more public-spirited (Besley, 2006; Gulzar and Khan, 2024). Given heterogeneous politician types, there will be an observed range among politicians in their willingness to overlook corruption, to engage in deceitful behavior, and to tolerate corruption. More public-spirited politicians will be less predisposed to these behaviors.

From these assumptions, we derive the following testable hypotheses:

H1: Politicians will, on average, express lower expectations of corruption than voters.

H2: Politicians will, on average, express greater tolerance of corruption than voters.

H3: Among politicians, those who are more self-interested will express greater tolerance of corruption than those who are more public-spirited or socially-minded.

2.2 Information Theory

An alternative explanatory framework assumes that politicians and voters may share a similar aversion to corruption but that politicians misperceive the value or intensity of voter preferences.

The literature on elite misperceptions shows that politicians often have inaccurate beliefs about public opinion (Butler and Dynes, 2016; Broockman and Skovon, 2018; Walgrave et al., 2023; Furnas and LaPira, 2024; Hsiao and Kuipers, 2025). These errors can lead to an under- or an over-allocation of political and policy attention to certain issues and, likewise, to policy outputs that direct either too few or too many resources to specific areas. This framework suggests that voters may prefer more aggressive anti-corruption policies than we observe but that misperceptions by politicians will lead them to underestimate how much voters dislike corruption. This logic suggests:

Underestimation of prevalence: Politicians will believe fewer citizens see corruption as widespread than is actually the case.

Underestimation of concern: Politicians will believe citizens are less concerned by corruption than is actually the case. Note that this implication is observationally only partially equivalent to what we have labelled the *tolerance gap* above. The difference is that in the first case, politicians tolerate corruption because they want to profit from it, whereas in the second, they discount it because they lack accurate information about voters' tolerance. In the second case, therefore, information will realign the preferences of the two whereas in the first, information about voters' values by itself will not.

Correctability: Providing accurate information should update politicians' beliefs toward greater public concern.

Based on this reading of information theory, we specify the following hypotheses:

H4: Politicians will, on average, underestimate the proportion of citizens who believe corruption is widespread.

H5: Politicians will, on average, underestimate the concern citizens have about reducing corruption.

H6: Providing accurate information about citizens' views will increase politicians' estimates of public concern about corruption.

2.3 Summary and Empirical Leverage

The two theories generate distinct empirical signatures. Political agency theory predicts gaps between politicians' and citizens' own preferences; information theory predicts gaps between citizens' preferences and politicians' beliefs about those preferences (second-order beliefs). By measuring (1) citizens' preferences, (2) politicians' preferences, and (3) politicians' second-order beliefs about citizens' preferences in Colombia, Italy, and Pakistan — and by experimentally providing politicians with accurate information about citizens' views — we test both sets of hypotheses directly.

3 Survey Design, Data Collection, and Sample

3.1 Settings

Most prior studies of corruption are either located within a single country or compare groups of similar countries, such as wealthy democracies. Because corruption is generally more frequent in less developed countries but has over time been greatly reduced in the world's wealthy democracies, we sought to assess political agency and informational asymmetry theories across the full range of political economic conditions with electorally representative institutions. Such a design lays the foundation for claims of external validity of our research. Selection of the three countries was thus based on our goal of maximizing variation in per capita GDP and geography among the world's electoral democracies. A secondary set of considerations involved linguistic convenience and our expected ability

to access politicians.² Similarly, we restricted our investigation to three countries to provide proof-of-concept for the feasibility of politician-citizen parallel survey research on corruption in disparate empirical settings. The intersection of these various considerations led us to choose Colombia, Italy, and Pakistan.³

In addition to providing heterogeneity in GDP per capita, the three country cases exhibit substantial differences in the frequency of corrupt transactions taking place in each, as far as we are able to measure this. Transparency International (TI) produces a subjective Corruption Perceptions Index, which in 2023 scored Italy 56, Colombia 40, and Pakistan 29, each out of 100, where higher numbers indicate less corruption.⁴ The Subnational Corruption Index of petty corruption, which draws on surveys of citizens reporting actual experiences of corruption, also shows large differences, with a scores of 86, 70, and 65 for Italy, Colombia, and Pakistan respective; this puts Pakistan in the third, Colombia in the fifth, and Italy in the eighth decile of countries worldwide.⁵ Thus, cross-national measures of corruption suggest the frequency of corruption differs markedly across the three countries. Over-

²Initially, we proposed to work in Brazil rather than Colombia but were unable to elicit politician responses to our survey despite intense efforts over nearly a year. This failure illustrates the difficulties in collecting the type of data used in the present study.

³According to the World Bank, in 2022 (the year our surveys were first fielded) Pakistan's GDP per capita was USD 1,597; Colombia's was USD 6,630; and Italy's USD 34,158. Pakistan is classified by the World Bank as a lower-middle income country; Colombia as an upper-middle income country; and Italy as a high income country.

⁴Information from https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KcQjw0_WyBhDMARIsAL1Vz8vNmilX6Hujb2Te0TAQ0kVJW9cmFmorQTNZwz31vxdV8yf-bszGfYsaAsOPEALw_wcB, accessed August 23, 2025.

⁵Data for Italy from 2022 and for Colombia and Pakistan from 2018; available at [THISNEEDSUPDATINGhttps://globaldatalab.org/scd/table/petty/COL+PAK+ITA/?levels=1&interpolation=0&extrapolation=0](https://globaldatalab.org/scd/table/petty/COL+PAK+ITA/?levels=1&interpolation=0&extrapolation=0), accessed August 23, 2025; for a discussion, see Crombach and Smits (2024).

all, the three countries where we work exhibit considerable variation in the underlying phenomenon we study. We know of no other studies that implement parallel surveys of politicians and voters in countries across a similar range of economic and political development.

We implemented the politician surveys among directly elected legislators at the national and/or the first-level subnational political unit in each of the three countries. We chose to study legislators because there are so many of them — many more than elected executives — offering us a potentially large enough sample size for quantitative analysis. We work at the national or state/provincial level because politicians at these levels tend to be visible to voters and to have already accumulated considerable professional experience in the political arena. By the time someone accedes to the state or national political level, they are personally familiar with many other politicians as well as the leaders of their own party, and they are aware of common practices — including whether there are credible rumors of corruption in the political arena. We did not want to study municipal-level politicians because many of these individuals are effectively amateurs, with little political experience, and thus unrepresentative of the professional political class that is subject to so much scrutiny and dislike in electoral democracies. We also doubted that municipal politicians would necessarily have access to information about higher-level political corruption or about the beliefs of citizens in their country generally. We wanted to focus on professional politicians because these persons are likely to have been exposed to the opportunities for political corruption that come with public service.

3.2 Survey Design

In this section we provide a brief overview of our survey instrument, which was designed and administered in Qualtrics, with a focus on the sections that are relevant for the analysis presented in this paper.

After asking for consent to take part in the study, the main survey begins in Section 3, which contains background questions, including those about partisanship; Section 4 presents the five vignettes capturing tolerance of and expectations for corruption when posed as a trade-off with another

value (e.g., efficiency, kinship, or electoral competitiveness). Since the vignette questions are central to our analysis, we provide considerably more detail on each of them as well as their presentation shortly, and we also discuss in more detail concerns about social desirability bias. Section 5 includes standard questions measuring preferences for redistribution; Section 6 asks questions about perceptions of corruption and about first- and second-order beliefs about whether politicians would be exposed, charged, and convicted if they engaged in it; and Section 7 asks questions related to trust, both toward politicians specifically and more generally towards others. Section 8 asks subjects for open-ended feedback about the survey as well as whether they think the survey was biased.

The survey that we circulate to legislators is identical to the one sent to citizens except for two additional elements aimed specifically at elected officials. First, immediately after the background questions, we insert a section asking about motivations for entering public office (Section 4). Second, at the end of the survey (but before asking about bias and seeking general feedback) we randomize delivery of an information treatment (Section 10). The information treatment shows legislators pictographs illustrating how their responses to the five vignettes compare to the average answers by citizen respondents in their country. We then ask legislators several questions to examine how they interpret the differences between their views and those of their citizens.

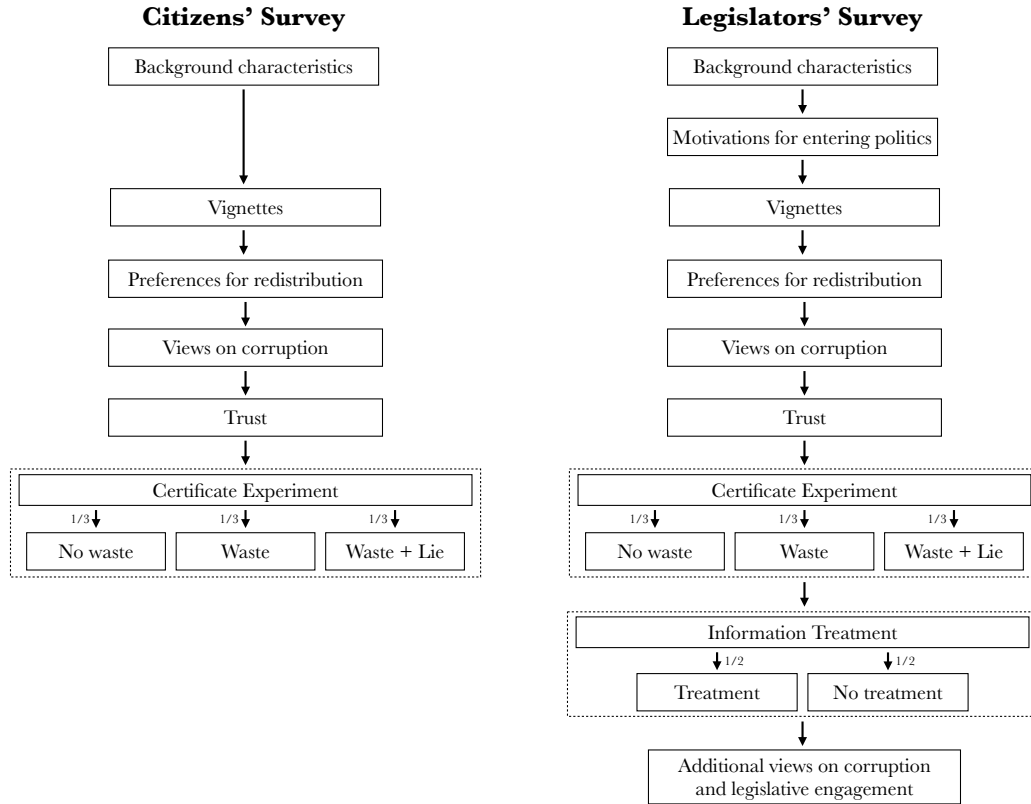
Figure 1 presents summary diagrams that show the components of the two surveys.

3.3 Data Collection and Sample

Data Collection. In 2021, we pretested the survey on 80 undergraduate students at Oxford University via the Nuffield Centre for Experimental Social Sciences. We did not pilot the survey among legislators, due to the uncertainties and difficulties that we anticipated in eliciting their responses; we were also concerned about spillovers that might affect answers by politicians if we piloted and then altered the survey instrument. After the pretests, we began rolling out a slightly modified survey in 2022; data collection was completed in early 2024.

In each country, we first ran the citizen survey and following completion of that research

Figure 1: Survey components



activity, the legislator survey. The citizen surveys were distributed online by commercial survey companies⁶ and respondents were paid standard amounts after completion. Before starting the survey, citizen respondents were told the expected length of the questionnaire but not given any information about the topic, the specific purpose of the survey, or the principal investigators.⁷ They were assured that they were completely anonymous and that there would be no way to link their responses to their identity. After starting the survey, respondents opened a consent page informing them that they were about to take an academic research survey devised solely for research purposes and run by nonpartisan researchers from Boston University and the European University Institute. They were asked to respond accurately to the best of their knowledge, and were assured that participation was entirely

⁶*Netquest* in Colombia, *Lucid* in Italy, and *Direct Focus Community Aid* in Pakistan.

⁷For both the citizen and legislator surveys, the median completion time was approximately 9.5 minutes, slightly under the 10 minute estimate we provided respondents in the instructions.

voluntary. After providing consent, citizen respondents were channeled through a set of screening questions used to enforce the quotas, described below. To ensure data quality, citizen respondents also had to pass a reCAPTCHA test and an inattention trap before reaching the first actual block of the survey; similar tests were not included in the legislator surveys because we deemed it unnecessary to screen out bots and because we did not want to offend legislators.

Depending on local circumstances, we used diverse methods to contact potential legislator respondents, methods which ranged from email and phone calls to in-person approaches. For phone calls and direct approaches, we used either undergraduate students (Colombia and Italy) or trained local enumerators (Pakistan), whom we hired so that contacts were made in the respondent’s native language. The phone calls prompted legislators to complete the survey that they had already received by email. In Table 1, we report basic descriptive features of the various surveys (excluding pretests).

Table 1: **Descriptive information about surveys of citizens and legislators**

Country/province	Subjects	Mode(s)	Number in pool	Response number	Response rate	Collection date
Colombia	citizens	online	NA	1,000	NA	Mar 2023
Italy	citizens	online	NA	1,998	NA	Nov 2021
Pakistan, KPK	citizens	online, in person	NA	1,484	NA	Nov–Dec 2021
Pakistan, Punjab	citizens	online, in person	NA	500	NA	Dec 2022
Colombia	Senators	in person	108	11	10%	May 2023 - March 2024
Colombia	Representatives	in person	188	35	19%	May 2023 - March 2024
Italy	Senators	email	461	11	2%	Jun 2022–Apr 2023
Italy	Deputies	email	863	22	3%	Jun 2022–Apr 2023
Italy	Regional legislators	email, phone	895	84	9%	Jun 2022–Apr 2023
Pakistan	KPK MPAs	in person	145	116	80%	Jun–Nov 2022
Pakistan	Punjab MPAs	in person	371	175	47%	Jan–Feb 2023

Notes: NA = not applicable. KPK = Khyber Pahktunhkwa. MPAs = Members of the Provincial Assembly. Vendors for citizens surveys: Colombia, Netquest; Italy, Lucid; Pakistan, Direct Focus Community Aid (DFCA). Surveys were circulated in Spanish in Colombia; in Italian in Italy; and in English and Urdu in Pakistan. Citizens were selected to be representative by age, gender, income, and macro-region in Colombia and Italy and rural/urban in KPK. The entire Punjab citizens’ sample was collected in the province’s capital, Lahore. In Italy, we surveyed Senators and Deputies elected in 2018 (to the XVIII Legislature) and also in 2022 (to the XIX Legislature), because the latter elections occurred while our survey was underway. Except for in-person citizen surveys in KPK, which were filled out on paper and subsequently input, all other in-person survey responses were collected electronically via Qualtrics on the enumerators’ tablets.

Sample. Our final citizens’ sample consists of 1,000 Colombians, 2,000 Italians, and 2,000 Pakistani (1,500 from the province of Khyber Pahktunhkwa (KPK) and 500 from the province of Punjab). Respondents were sampled using quota sampling, imposing quotas on age, gender, income, and

macro-regions. The final samples for all three countries are representative along these four dimensions (see Appendix Table ??).

For the legislator sample, we targeted all national-level legislators in Colombia, all national- and regional-level legislators in Italy, and all provincial-level legislators in the Pakistani provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Punjab. Our final legislator samples consist of 46 Colombian legislators, 117 Italian legislators, and 291 Pakistani legislators. Response rates ranged from 5.3% in Italy to 56.4% in Pakistan. More details appear in Table 1. In Pakistan, we successfully collected a representative sample by party affiliation in the provinces of KPK and Punjab. In Colombia and in Italy, given the difficulties of enrolling large enough samples of legislators, the legislator samples are not representative by party affiliation. Nonetheless, we managed to elicit legislator responses from across the political spectrum, dampening concerns that our results might be driven by any particular political ideology (see Appendix Table ?? for more details).

3.4 Vignettes

The vignettes that we wrote comprise the core of how we measure politician and citizen preferences and beliefs related to corruption. For each of five scenarios, we asked respondents both what they thought a politician *should* do under a particular scenario and what they thought *would* happen if such a scenario were to occur in their country. The five scenarios we presented depicted the following choices:

1. Whether a public official would/should assign a road contract to Company A, which is known to be scrupulously honest, or to Company B, which would complete the road more quickly without any sacrifice in quality but had been rumored to have bribed officials to get contracts in the past.
2. Whether a politician would/should punish a personal assistant who accepted a gift from a businessman and then helped him get a meeting with the politician.
3. Whether a candidate would/should accept an informal offer from a supporter to pay for cam-

paid ads on their behalf, despite it being against the law, in order to compete with a much better-resourced opponent.

4. Whether a government department head would/should hire a relative or a better-qualified candidate for a job.
5. Whether citizens would/should vote for a wealthy politician who had made generous contributions of local public goods but had bribed public officials when in business before entering politics.

Given their importance to our analysis, we show the first two vignettes in full in Figure 2 just as they were presented to respondents.⁸

Figure 2: Sample vignettes

An official of the PPRA (Public Procurement Regulatory Authority) is in charge of overseeing a highway contract. Two companies have made comparable bids. **Company A** is known to be scrupulously honest. **Company B** is rumored to have bribed officials in the past to get contracts but is very efficient in its business. It is expected that Company B will complete the road much more quickly than Company A, without any sacrifice in quality.

Which company do you think the official **should** select?

Company A	Company B
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Which company do you think the official **would** select if this were to occur in Pakistan?

Company A	Company B
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(1.a) First vignette

A Member of the National Assembly discovers that his personal assistant was given a holiday gift of expensive Eid sweets by a businessman who had been trying to set up a meeting with the politician. After receiving the gift, the assistant set up a meeting for the following week, whereas it would normally have taken longer to make an appointment with the representative. Although not explicitly illegal, some people could see this as favoritism.

What do you think the legislator **should** do?

Nothing	Warn his assistant	Write up his assistant	Fire his assistant
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What do you think the legislator **would** do if this were to occur in Pakistan?

Nothing	Warn his assistant	Write up his assistant	Fire his assistant
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(1.b) Second vignette

We used a vignette format for three distinct reasons. First, although other survey methods, such as list experiments, are known to be particularly useful for sensitive issues, the vignette format allows us to study within-respondent relationships between views on corruption and other outcomes or characteristics. The method also allows us to assess respondents' distaste for corruption within a larger set of trade-offs, likely of varying intensity to respondents. Second, we were concerned that politicians might be put off by the mechanics of list experiments, perhaps interpreting the setup as condescending (or confusing). We thus anticipated that such a technique would reduce the response

⁸These particular vignettes are from the Pakistani survey's English-language version.

rate among politicians and limit the delivery methods of the survey (for instance, it is difficult to deliver a list experiment verbally, a method that we did not rule out when starting our research). Third, list experiments are more time consuming and increase the cognitive load on respondents. Eliciting elite responses to surveys is notoriously difficult (Vis and Stolwijk, 2021; Kertzer and Renshon, 2022) and we decided that using a more straightforward survey method would likely produce a higher response rate.⁹

3.5 Social Desirability Bias

The disadvantage of not using something like a list experiment is that respondents, and especially politicians, might answer the vignette questions in ways they judged to be socially desirable. Although it is difficult to disentangle sincere beliefs from public stances for politicians in the best of circumstances, we designed the vignettes with the specific purpose of lessening social desirability bias by making a “right” answer ambiguous and by asking respondents to choose between two morally defensible courses of action.¹⁰ Each vignette asks the respondent to make a choice in a situation that

⁹Incerti (2020) compares responses about corruption elicited via surveys and field experiments, and argues that voters fail to follow through in their voting behavior on the attitudes expressed in surveys. He interprets this to suggest that survey responses exhibit weak ground truth. The critique of corruption surveys in Incerti (2020) hinges on the claim that, while survey responses should predict voting behavior, there is no observed link from actual corruption exposure to election outcomes. However, the measure of electoral responsiveness used is based on the *average* effect of corruption exposure on voting. This captures voters’ preferences relative to the no-information case. To the extent that voters hold unbiased beliefs before exposure, we *should* expect no average effect as a result of exposure — rather, politicians exposed as more corrupt should have a negative information treatment effect whereas those that are less corrupt could even benefit from exposure. This heterogeneous result is exactly the finding of, for example, Ferraz and Finan (2011), and Banerjee et al. (2010).

¹⁰For work that takes a similar “tradeoffs”-based approach to inferring beliefs and/or preferences about preferences, see Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013); Klašnja and Tucker (2013).

presents a clear tradeoff between probity and another value, such as efficiency (Vignette 1), strict law enforcement (Vignette 2), the competitiveness of a democratic election (Vignette 3), family ties (Vignette 4), or redistribution (Vignette 5). We designed the vignettes to have no obvious right answer; perhaps it would be preferable to overlook some corruption to get public goods constructed more quickly, for instance, or to have a more competitive election; and kinship duties may be the highest obligation in some societies (e.g., [Read, 2018](#)). The intensity of the tradeoff across the five vignettes varied and was, we believe, clearly stronger in the first vignette (regarding road construction) and in the third (regarding an explicit legal violation of campaign financing laws) than in the second (about a gift to an assistant) and the fourth (about kinship ties). This variation was meant to ensure that respondents weighed their decisions thoughtfully and that the tradeoffs, while genuine, could easily produce a range of responses.

We also incorporated other features into the survey to minimize social desirability bias. All respondents were promised anonymity. For citizens, the promise was credible because the vendors who collected the data did not provide us identifying information. For politicians, it is possible that their self-consciousness about their responses made them skeptical of promises of anonymity. If this were the case, the opinions expressed by politicians in response to the survey may have been insincere, reflecting what they believed to be socially desirable responses. It is possible that some legislators interpreted some vignettes as having obviously right or wrong answers, or that some might have deliberately sought to give whatever answer they believed would be preferred by voters. We cannot definitively rule out these considerations for legislator respondents.

Nonetheless, the data we collected provide two pieces of evidence that reduce concerns about social desirability bias and that bolster confidence in the findings. First, there is variation in vignette responses, with politicians openly expressing tolerance of some — but not most — types of corrupt activities. From this, we infer that politicians took the time to individually consider each vignette and to think through and report what they deemed appropriate behavior in the specific scenario. Second, we find substantial variation in the stated motivations of politicians for entering politics, with some openly admitting to prioritizing self-serving goals in place of programmatic or public service

orientations. These more self-serving politicians also exhibit greater tolerance of corruption. This in particular shows that some politicians exhibit no reluctance in admitting to motivations and preferences that are socially undesirable. These variations suggest that our data reflect some genuine variation in politicians' corruption preferences and beliefs even if our surveys may not have captured all.

4 Results

We now present results of the surveys, organizing our presentation around the six hypotheses laid out in Section 2.3.

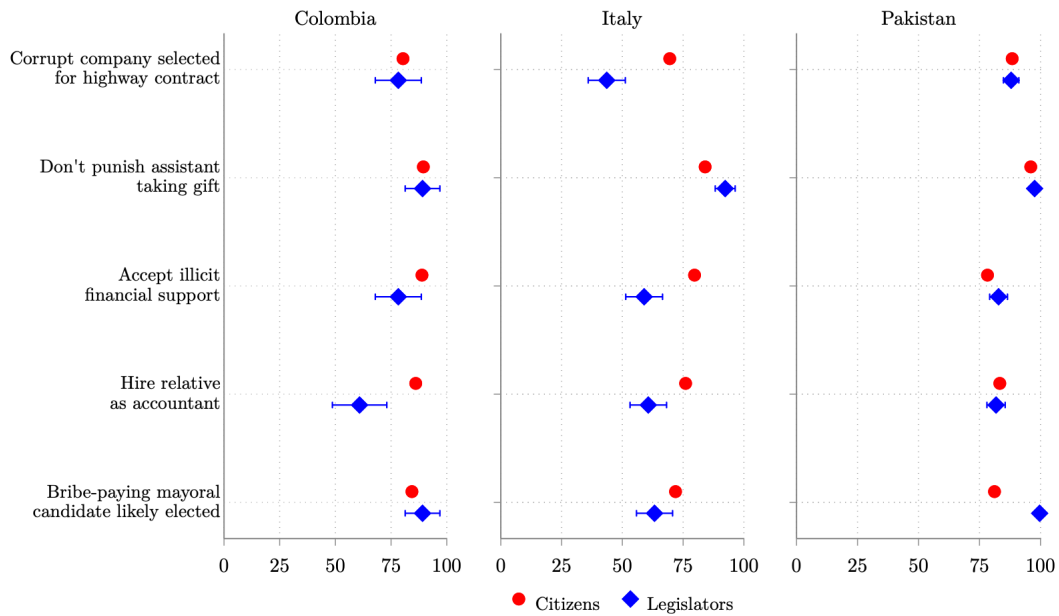
4.1 Results for Political Agency Theory

H1: Expectations of Corruption

To assess whether politicians expect less corruption than voters, we compare how legislators and citizens answered the “would” question for each vignette. Figure 3 shows a graphical representation of how the two groups of respondents answered questions about what subjects expect (“what would happen?”) by country; the corrupt outcome is always coded as the affirmative option. These capture what we label *corruption expectations*.

By large majorities, both citizens and legislators think the corrupt policy option would be selected in each scenario if it were to transpire in their country. While a relatively smaller fraction of Italians think the corrupt option would take place, even a vast majority of Italians believe the corrupt option would be selected. The largest gaps between what legislators and citizens expect is in Italy, where citizens generally believe the corrupt option would be selected more often than legislators. But even in Italy, in four of the five vignettes a majority of politicians believes that corruption would occur. Indeed, the extent of agreement between citizens and their elected representatives in all three

Figure 3: Corruption expectations: proportions of vignette responses expecting the corrupt outcome (what “would” happen if . . .)



Notes: The left subfigure shows the results for the Colombian sample; the central subfigure shows the results for the Italian sample; the right subfigure shows the results for the Pakistani sample. Each subfigure depicts the share of respondents in each group who expected the corrupt outcome to the vignette itemized on left vertical axis with its associated 90% confidence interval. For complete information about the vignettes, see Appendix ??.

countries is striking. It is also notable how modest the cross-country differences are across the three samples.

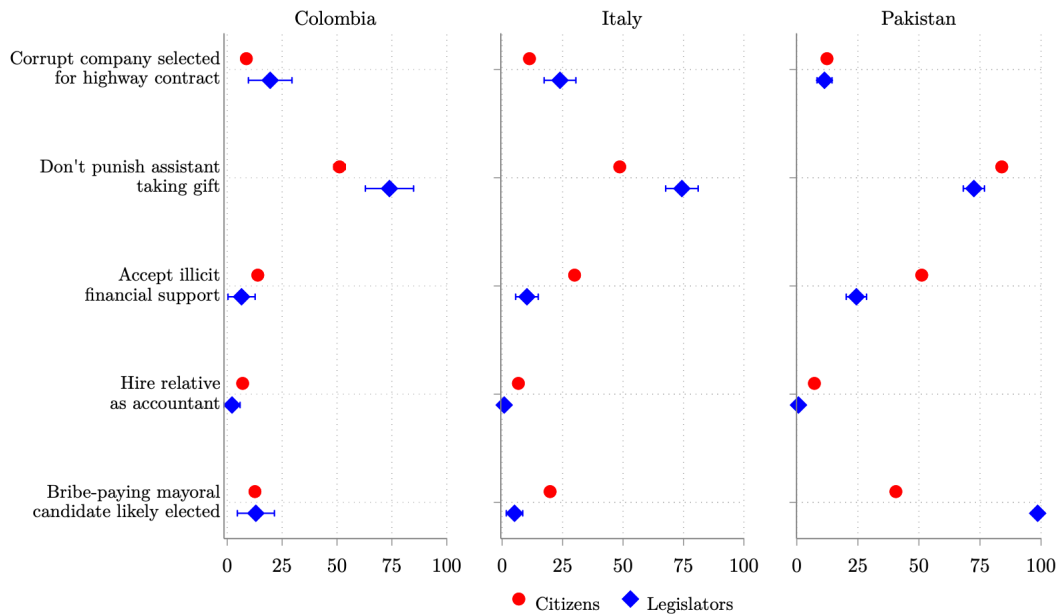
The patterns in Figure 3 are corroborated by data (Figure ??) that reports citizens’ and legislators’ beliefs about the prevalence of corruption in their country, in answer to a question specifically about this. More than 80 percent of both citizens and legislators in all three countries believe that corruption is either “common” or “extremely common.”

Thus, we observe no substantial differences between legislators and citizens in their views of the extent of corruption.

H2: Tolerance of Corruption

We now turn from respondents’ beliefs about expectations of what *would* happen in the vignettes to what they think the protagonist *should* do to assess whether politicians are more tolerant of corrup-

Figure 4: Corruption tolerance: proportions of vignette responses that endorse the corrupt outcome (what “should” happen if ...)



Notes: The left subfigure shows the results for the Colombian sample; the central subfigure shows the results for the Italian sample; the right subfigure shows the results for the Pakistani sample. Each subfigure depicts the share of respondents in each group who endorse the corrupt outcome for the vignette itemized on left vertical axis with its associated 90% confidence interval. For complete information about the vignettes, see Appendix ??.

tion that citizens. In Figure 4, we show the distribution of responses to the vignette questions about what subjects think ought to occur (“what should happen?”). These questions measure what we call *corruption tolerance*. We see that — with one exception on which we comment shortly — both politicians and citizens generally favor the non-corrupt choice in each hypothetical scenario. Fewer than a quarter of respondents endorse awarding a contract to an efficient but corrupt company (Vignette 1); and more than 80 percent of respondents support hiring an experienced candidate over a relative (Vignette 4). More than half of respondents in all three countries also support strict enforcement of campaign finance laws (Vignette 3) even when doing so erects an obstacle to a level playing field in democratic electoral competition. The consistent exception occurs in response to Vignette 2, for which majorities of both legislators and citizens say they believe that a politician’s assistant should be free to accept a small gift in exchange for allowing someone to jump the queue to meet with the politician.

The largest discrepancy between the responses of citizens and legislators is found in Pakistan.

Pakistani legislators are considerably more tolerant than citizens of a wealthy and socially-minded political candidate even if he is known to be corrupt (Vignette 5).¹¹

Overall, responses depicted in Figure 4 reveal that politicians and voters express values that are more alike than different. In particular, politicians do not express views that are more tolerant of corruption than voters. The general disapproval of corruption contrasts sharply with perceptions of its frequency which, as we saw in Figure 3, is deemed likely to occur by both legislators and by citizens in all vignette scenarios.

Both groups are generally more tolerant of corruption under comparable circumstances; for instance, responses to Vignette 2 show that both voters and politicians generally find it acceptable for a politician's assistant to receive a gift in exchange for making an appointment with the politician for the individual, despite the fact that using gifts to queue-jump may be socially undesirable even if legal. Respondents thus appear willing to openly express tolerance of corruption in some scenarios but not others. This resonates with the concern that we have already discussed about social desirability bias. While we cannot rule out insincere responses to the other vignettes, we are reassured by the fact that politicians are clearly willing to express high tolerance of corruption in some circumstances.

¹¹Note, however, that Pakistani politicians' responses to Vignette 5 may have been the result of confusion over the presentation of the vignette, which asked whether they would support the corrupt candidate, "apart from party allegiances." According to enumerators who conducted the surveys on our behalf, the diction we employed in the English version of the question (as well as its translation into Urdu) may have been interpreted by legislator-respondents as asking whether their party allegiance was such that they would support a candidate from their own party, despite his corruption. We believe this interpretation is likely, given that almost all politicians said they would support the corrupt candidate.

H3: Self-Interest versus Public-Mindedness and Tolerance of Corruption

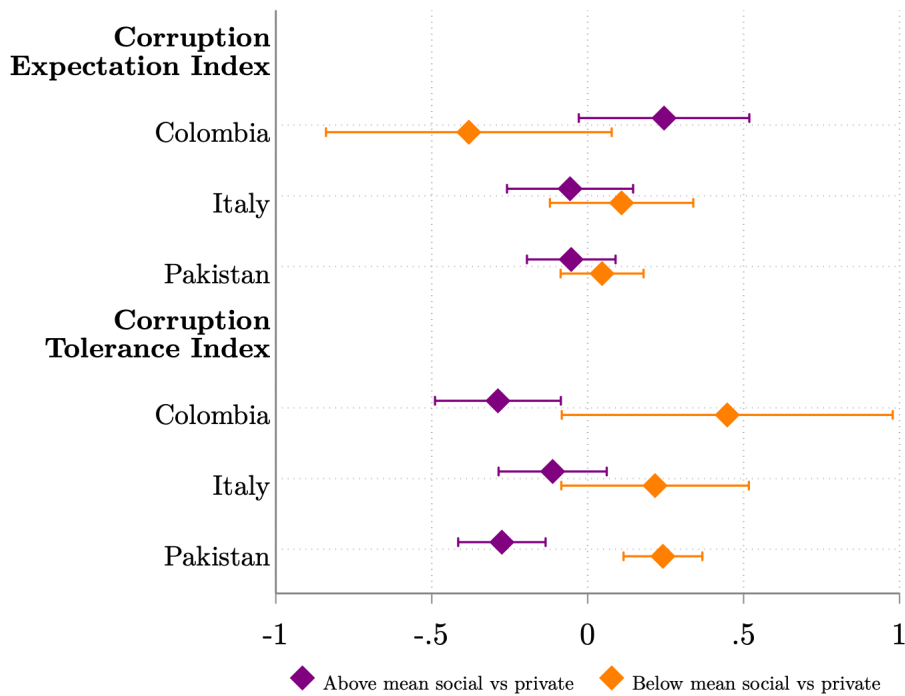
In evaluating possible heterogeneity among politicians in their tolerance of corruption, we assess how motivations for seeking public office among the politician samples are correlated with their tolerance of corruption. The survey provided six possible motivations for entering public office and asked each legislator to report the importance of each in his own decision to enter politics. We distinguish between social motivations (“to work on public policy and legislation” and “to help those in need or serve others in my community”) and those reflecting private and/or ego interests (“the salary,” “career opportunities or pension after holding office,” “less appealing opportunities in the private sector,” and “to get the admiration of others”). We then calculate a “social motivation index” by taking the (normalized) difference between social motivations and private/ego interests. In Figure 5, we break legislators in each country into those with below and above the mean of this social motivation index and compare their tolerance of corruption via their responses to the vignettes.

While any given legislator generally expresses a variety of motivations for entering politics, we observe a substantially greater intolerance for corruption amongst politicians with stronger social motivations. This is true across all three countries, though the difference is statistically significant only for Pakistan (plausibly because of the larger number of legislator respondents). In the upper half of Figure 5, we compare the more socially-motivated versus self-interested legislators, focusing this time on corruption expectations. Differences are very muted relative to the patterns on corruption tolerance.

Overall, these results suggest that socially-minded politicians may be systematically less tolerant of corruption than their more self-interested counterparts. Encouraging the right type of person to seek public office — someone driven more by social rather than private motivations — might increase support for anti-corruption policies (Gulzar and Khan, 2024).¹²

¹²Details on the proportions of legislators in each country who listed each of the six motivations as important or very important are presented in Figure ??.

Figure 5: Vignette responses: what “would” and “should” happen by social vs private motivations for seeking public office



Notes: The figure depicts, by country, the average value of the *Corruption Expectation Index* (top three rows) and the average value of the *Corruption Tolerance Index* (bottom three rows) by social versus private motivations for seeking public office. *Above mean social vs private* is defined as being above the country mean of the *Social Motivation Index* as defined in the text; *Below mean social vs private* is defined as being below the country mean of the *Social Motivation Index*. Legislator sample only. All indices defined in Appendix ??.

4.2 Results for Information Theory

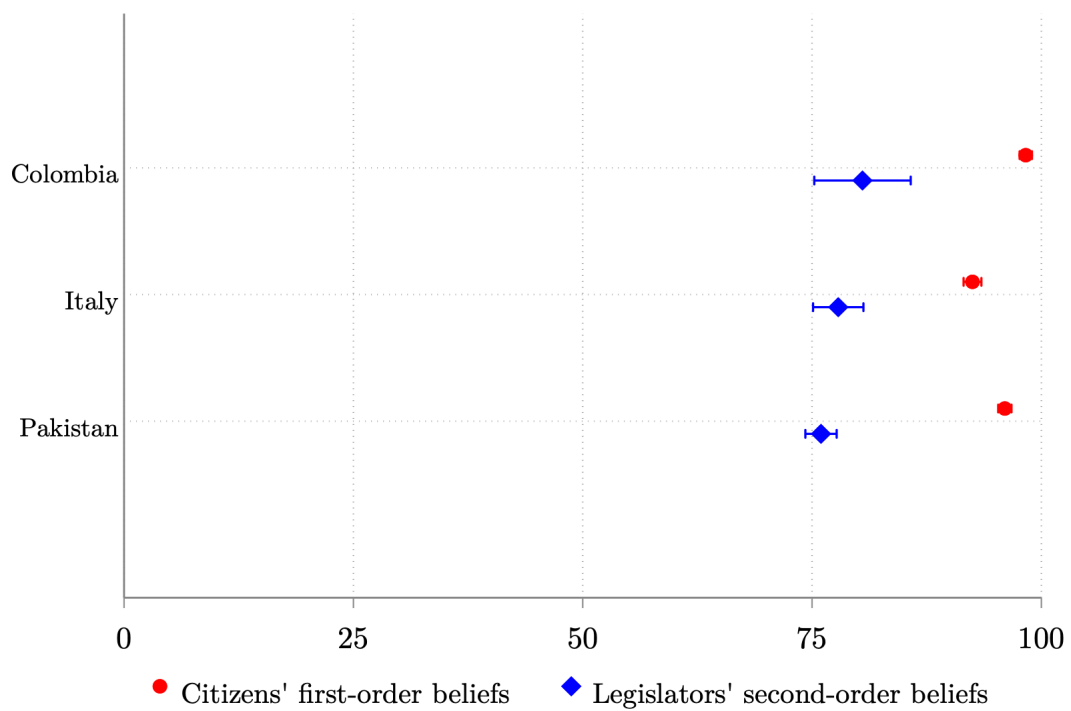
H4: Underestimation of Corruption Prevalence

To test the hypothesis that politicians underestimate how prevalent citizens think corruption is, we study legislators’ second-order beliefs; that is, we ask legislators how common they think citizens believe corruption is. We compare what legislators think about citizens’ views with the actual views that citizens report in the surveys to a first-order question about how common corruption is in their country.¹³ In Figure 6, we present graphical depictions of the results.

To assess each legislator’s initial belief about what citizens believe, we ask: “Out of 10 adult

¹³An alternative would have been to elicit legislators’ second-order beliefs using the vignettes, but we judged this too time-consuming for subjects and also potentially too cognitively demanding.

Figure 6: Legislators beliefs about citizens' views on corruption compared with citizens' actual views



Notes: The figure shows, by country, the share of citizens reporting that corruption is common or very common (*citizens' first-order beliefs*) and the average estimate by legislators of the share of adult citizens they believe hold this view (*legislators' second-order beliefs*). Values reported with its associated 90% confidence interval. All variables defined in Appendix ??.

citizens in [Colombia/Italy/Pakistan], how many do you think would answer [that corruption is] common or extremely common?” The median response was 8. Thus, legislators’ typical second-order beliefs were that citizens thought corruption was relatively common. The data reported in the figure show that in every case, legislators significantly underestimate how common citizens think corruption is, and the differences are substantial in all three countries. This said, interpreting these differences is not straightforward. In all three countries, the average legislator believes that more than 75 percent of citizens believe corruption is common or very common. This is very high, even though it is not as high as the reality — more than 90 percent of citizens actually think corruption is common or very common.

H5: Underestimation of Corruption Concern

To assess whether legislators underestimate citizens’ concern with reducing corruption, we ask the following question of legislators: “How concerned do you think citizens in [Colombia/Italy/Pakistan] are with political corruption relative to other major policy issues, such as the economy, social unrest, or public health? Much less concerned; Somewhat less concerned; About the same as other major concerns; Somewhat more concerned; Much more concerned.”¹⁴ Nearly 90 percent of respondents in Colombia (87 percent) and in Pakistan (89 percent) answered about the same, somewhat, or much more concerned, as did almost 50 percent of Italian legislators (46 percent).

To assess how citizens prioritize corruption, we turn to external data. We identify surveys in which representative samples of citizens in our three countries are asked to select policy priorities in an open-ended way or from a list that includes corruption as an option. For Pakistan, a Gallup survey conducted at approximately the same time as our study found that respondents overwhelmingly cited inflation (61 percent of responses) as the country’s top concern, followed by unemployment (21 percent); corruption was chosen by only 7 percent of respondents.¹⁵ Given that Pakistan is the highest-

¹⁴The question was asked after the information treatment, but, as we did not find any treatment effect, we report the combined share of control and treated respondents.

¹⁵See <https://www.gallup.com.pk/post/32893>, last accessed August 20, 2025.

corruption country in our sample, we would expect even smaller proportions of citizens to prioritize it in Colombia and Italy. Evidence of this is found in a 2007 survey conducted by the Colombian chapter of Transparency International, which reports that fewer than 3 percent of respondents selected corruption as their top concern (though it is notable that Colombia's corruption ranking with TI has worsened somewhat between 2007 and 2022).¹⁶ For Italy, we found no survey asking about policy priorities that included corruption as an option, which is itself telling. The results from these sources suggest that, if anything, legislators in our surveys *overestimate* citizens' ranking of corruption as a top policy priority. The evidence thus does not support H5.

H6: Realigning Legislators' Beliefs

We now turn to the information treatment in the legislators' survey. We randomly split legislators into two groups: treated and control. Those in the treated group were presented visual depictions of how their individual answers to the five vignette questions compared to the answers given by citizens in their country to the same vignette questions. Legislators in the control group were not presented any information. The pictographs were individualized in Qualtrics to generate legislator-specific information as legislators answered the survey. In Figure 7, we provide an example (from Pakistan, where the survey was available in English) of how we presented the information to a hypothetical treated legislator.

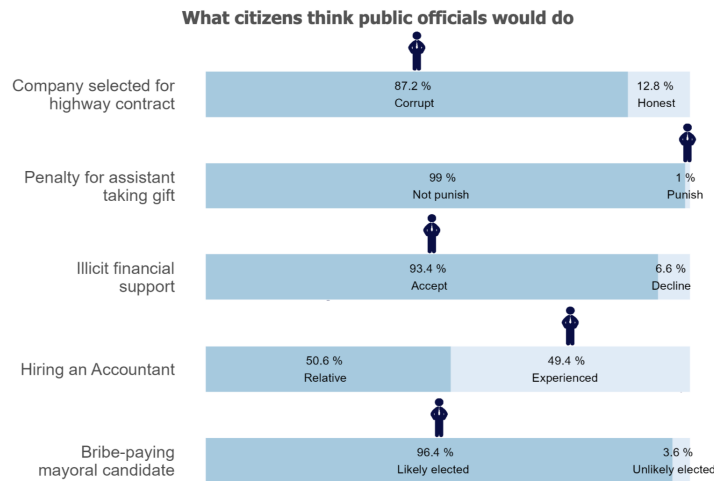
In the sample pictograph, the primary information that is conveyed is that citizens expect politicians to make corrupt decisions under all scenarios; this is indicated by high percentage of citizens who thought legislators would choose the corrupt option in all five scenarios. Whether this information affects a legislator's beliefs depends on whether or not he already holds an accurate view of what citizens believe; that is, on his initial second-order beliefs. In the sample pictograph, the hypo-

¹⁶Reference to the study may be found at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120323163515/http://www.transparenciacolombia.org.co/LACORRUPCION/EnColombia/tabid/101/language/es-ES/Default.aspx> using the internet wayback machine; it is not currently available online.

Figure 7: Sample treatment pictograph

The following figure compares the answers that you provided in response to the various scenarios that we presented to you a few minutes ago to those provided by a random sample of adults in Pakistan. The bars show the distribution of responses about what people expect politicians would do in each scenario and the little figure shows what you thought the official should do.

As you can see, **in 2 scenarios out of 5**, a majority of voters think that public officials will make decisions that are different from what you believed to be appropriate.



thetical legislator holds views that are already aligned with those held by voters in the first, third, and fifth vignettes, counting from the top down. In the second vignette, by contrast, the legislator would punish an assistant for taking a gift to queue-jump an individual seeking an appointment whereas almost no citizens would do so. In the fourth vignette, for which citizens’ views are almost equally divided, the legislator’s view aligns with the half that expects the nepotistic outcome.

After presenting the individualized pictograph to each treated legislator about what voters expect politicians to do, we ask legislators in both treatment and control the following question: “Do you think that voters’ views about how serious corruption is in [Colombia/Italy/Pakistan] are accurate?” Legislators could answer using a five-point scale that ran from “underestimate its seriousness a lot” to “overestimate its seriousness a lot.” Responses to this question reflect a politician’s beliefs about voters’ beliefs (hence, second-order beliefs) about corruption’s seriousness compared to the politician’s belief about the true level of corruption. The treatment provides information about the true value of citizens’ beliefs (holding constant each legislator’s beliefs about the true extent of corruption). The sign (and extent) of updating for whether legislators think citizens underestimate corruption — the

quantity we seek to measure — depends on the respondent’s initial beliefs. H6 predicts that legislators will update positively because we expected legislators to underestimate citizens’ concern with corruption.

We present results in Table 2. The initial specification shows results that pool responses from legislators from all three countries. These show the overall treatment effect on legislators independent of their initial beliefs or their country. Our outcome variable is *CitizenBias_l*, which captures legislator *l*’s response on a 5-point scale of the extent to which citizens under- or overestimate corruption. The median legislator’s response is that citizens hold accurate views of corruption, neither under- nor overestimating it. The coefficient on the treatment variable, *InfoTreatment_l*, is -0.26 and significant at the 5% level, indicating that the information treatment causes legislators to believe that citizens believe that corruption is uncommon relative to legislators’ initial beliefs. This result is the opposite of what H6 posits.

In Column 2, we collapse the outcome variable into a binary measure that takes the value of 1 if a legislator believes citizens overestimate corruption and 0 otherwise. Dichotomizing the dependent variable simplifies the interpretation of how the treatment affects legislator second-order beliefs independently of the scale on which those beliefs are measured. In this specification, the treatment variable’s coefficient remains negative and significant at the 5% level; its value (-0.11) implies a 35% reduction in the likelihood that a legislator believes that citizens overestimate corruption relative to a baseline value of 0.31. This again is the opposite of what we predict based on H6.

There are two assumptions underlying H6. The first is that legislators will initially underestimate citizens’ concerns about corruption. The second is that confronting legislators with accurate information will cause them to recalibrate their beliefs to align better with citizens’ actual concerns. The preceding analyses combine these two elements into a single regression.

To distinguish the extent to which our results are driven by incorrect updating versus inaccurate prior beliefs, we test whether legislators who initially believed that most citizens see corruption as common adjust their beliefs upwards *relative* to those who hold the view that citizens see corruption

Table 2: Information treatment effects on belief that citizens overestimate corruption

	Continuous (1)	Binary (2)	Binary (3)	Binary (4)
Panel A: Descriptive Statistics (control group only)				
All Legislators mean	3.01	0.31	0.31	0.31
Above threshold mean			0.37	
Below threshold mean			0.22	
Panel B: All Legislators				
Treatment	-0.26** (0.11)	-0.11** (0.05)		0.20 (0.22)
T x More than 80% corruption as common			-0.17*** (0.06)	
T x Less than 80% corruption as common			-0.03 (0.08)	
T x Second-order belief on corruption common				-0.04 (0.03)
Second-order belief on corruption common				0.04** (0.02)
Observations	352	352	352	352
R^2	0.051	0.026	0.039	0.044

Notes: The dependent variable in column (1) is a 5-point scale variable on the extent to which citizens under- or overestimate corruption, the dependent variable in columns (2) to (4) is an indicator variable for whether legislators believe that citizens overestimate the extent of corruption. All regressions include controls for gender, age group, education, and country fixed effects. All variables defined in Appendix ?? . Panel A reports the mean of the dependent variables for respondents who were assigned to the control group (no information treatment) and separately for believing that less or more than 80% of citizens believe that corruption is very common in their country. Panel B reports the coefficients from four different specifications. The first and second column shows the treatment effects of the information treatment. The third column shows the treatment effect on respondents believing that less or more than 80% of citizens believe that corruption is very common in their country separately. The fourth column shows the treatment effect interacted with the second order belief on how many people believe that corruption is very common. Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

as uncommon. That is, we allow for different treatment effects for legislators whose initial second-order beliefs are above the mean overall — the 37% of legislators who responded in the survey that 8, 9 or 10 out of 10 citizens believe corruption is common or very common — versus other legislators. To implement this, we include the interaction terms $InfoTreatment * I(CitizenBeliefs < 8)$ and $InfoTreatment * I(CitizenBeliefs \geq 8)$ in predicting $CitizenBias$. We report results in columns 3 and 4 for the binarized version of $CitizenBias$. In both cases, the negative treatment effect comes entirely from those with initially very high beliefs about citizens' corruption perceptions adjusting their second-order beliefs downward. The treatment effect for those with initially low beliefs is close to zero and statistically insignificant ($p = 0.707$). When we use a continuous measure of initial be-

liefs (Column 4), legislators with higher initial second-order beliefs adjust downward relative to those with lower initial beliefs but this interaction is not significant, which is as expected given the non-responsiveness of those with initially low expectations. In Table ??, we present results disaggregated by country.

These findings suggest some nuance underlying the surprising results that run counter to H6. We find that legislators' second-order beliefs are roughly accurate — something that H6 did not anticipate. Second, while legislators' beliefs update toward more accurate beliefs about citizens' concerns, this updating is asymmetric in a direction that runs exactly counter to H6. Only legislators who initially overestimate citizens' concerns adjust their views as a result of the information treatment. The results of the information treatment are thus driven entirely by the subset of legislators who held prior second-order beliefs that overestimated voters' concerns about corruption.

4.3 Summary of Hypothesis Tested

In Table 3, we summarize the six hypotheses we evaluated and enumerate the results found as a first step towards unpacking the failure of adequate anti-corruption policies. Overall, our results suggest that inadequate anti-corruption policy efforts may arise from two separate sources: first, the presence of a subset of politicians who weigh self-interest over the public interest (H3) and second, an underestimation by the average politician of how prevalent citizens believe corruption is (H4). These are the only hypotheses of the six that our data corroborate. Yet these findings alone do not line up with the predictions of either the political agency or information theories that are predominant explanations for the paucity of effective anti-corruption policies, nor do we believe that we could construct an adequate explanation of anti-corruption policy failure on the basis of these results alone.

In the next subsection, we will present ancillary results necessary to build out our interpretation of our results and provide a possible answer to this question. The answer we focus on involves strategic electoral considerations.

Table 3: Hypotheses grouped by theoretical framework

Political Agency Theory		
Number	Hypothesis content	Result
H1	Politicians will, on average, express lower expectations of corruption than voters.	Not corroborated
H2	Politicians will, on average, express greater tolerance of corruption than voters.	Not corroborated
H3	Among politicians, those who are more self-interested will express greater tolerance of corruption than those who are more public-spirited.	Corroborated

Information Theory		
Number	Hypothesis content	Result
H4	Politicians will, on average, underestimate the proportion of citizens who believe corruption is widespread.	Corroborated
H5	Politicians will, on average, underestimate the importance citizens attach to reducing corruption.	Not corroborated
H6	Providing accurate information about citizens' views will increase politicians' estimates of public concern about corruption.	Not corroborated

4.4 Party-Based Theory

The two models that motivated our survey effectively assume that, if a politician were to prioritize corruption *and* voters view corruption as a top policy priority, then he would attract votes from other parties. In this section, we suggest that perceptions of established parties and their commitment to anti-corruption reform are such that this is unlikely to be the case — all established parties are seen as equally corrupt by supporters and non-supporters alike, suggesting little electoral benefit from making anti-corruption policy a dominant campaign theme.

To understand this, we start with some background on recent political shifts in the countries we study. In all three, the established party system has been disrupted in recent decades by new challenger parties that arose, in large part, on the basis of anti-corruption appeals. In Colombia, this is the *Pacto Histórico* coalition; in Italy, the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S); and in Pakistan, the *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI). These parties had received 18 percent, 33 percent, and 32 percent respectively in the

most recent national elections preceding our survey; thus, in all three countries, these parties have successfully leveraged corruption to attract large numbers of voters. While anti-corruption rhetoric was particularly central for the M5S and PTI, it was also relevant to the rise of Colombia’s Historic Pact.

We probed citizens’ views of these parties as well as the two established political parties in each country that had received the largest vote shares in the prior election.¹⁷ The specific question we asked was: “How likely do you think it is that the average member of the [COL: Chamber of Representatives][IT: Parliament][PAK: National Assembly] affiliated with [COL: Liberal Party/Conservative Party/Pacto Histórico][IT: Lega/Democratic Party/5 Star Movement][PAK: PTI/PML(N)/PPP] would be willing to accept a bribe?” The answers ranged from “Never” to “Certain” on a five-point Likert scale.¹⁸

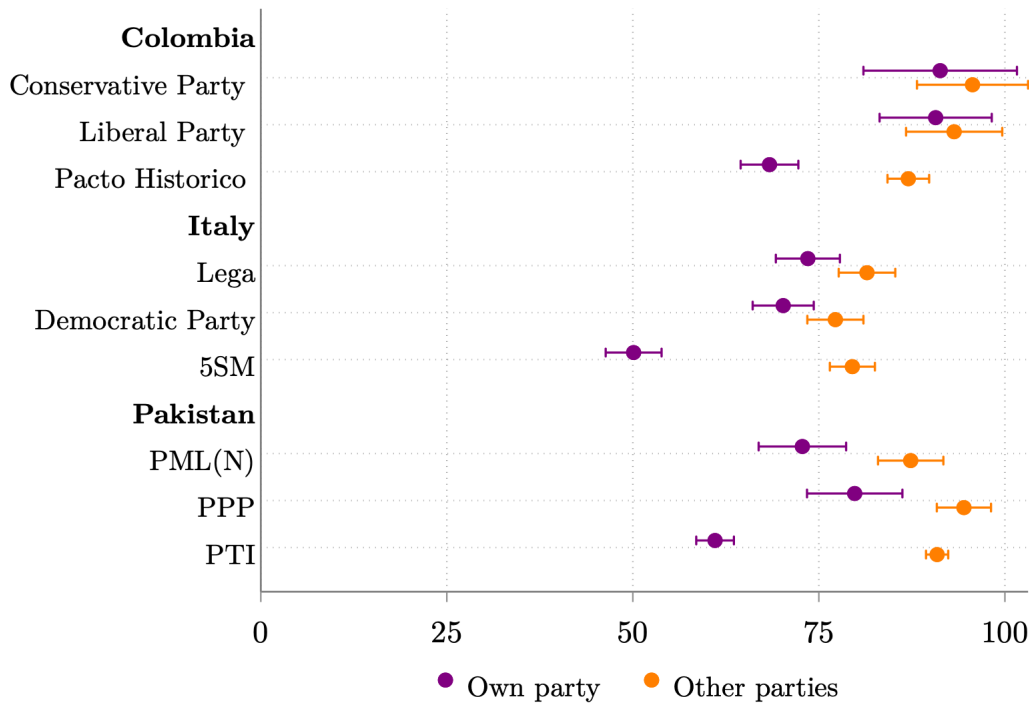
In Figure 8, we report the proportions of citizens, by party affiliation, who believe a legislator would accept a bribe. We sort respondents on the basis of their own party affiliation and present data on their responses regarding their own and the other two named party groups.

In all three countries, more citizens believe that legislators affiliated with parties other than their own are much more likely than their peers affiliated with the party the citizen supports to accept a bribe. Even so, more than half of citizen respondents believe that legislators in the party with which they identify would accept a bribe. This offers compelling evidence that citizens generally believe that anti-corruption efforts by political parties — even the party they support — are insincere; substantial

¹⁷The two established parties in the three countries that we named were (with their vote shares in the most recent national election preceding the survey in parentheses): in Colombia, the Conservative Party (12 percent) and the Liberal Party (14 percent); in Italy, the *Lega* (17 percent) and the *Partito Democratico* (PD) (19 percent); and in Pakistan, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML(N)) (24 percent) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) (13 percent).

¹⁸We ask this question in the legislator survey only in general and not by party because we judged it potentially offensive to ask legislators about their partisan peers and also unlikely to elicit sincere answers. For the legislator results, see Figure ??.

Figure 8: Share of citizen respondents who believe it likely a legislator accepts a bribe, by political affiliation



Notes: The figure depicts, by country and by party affiliation, the share of respondents, with its associated 90% confidence interval, who believe it is likely for a politician from their party, in purple, and from other parties, in orange, to accept a bribe. Citizen sample only. All variables defined in Appendix ??.

majorities of citizens believe the average legislator elected to *any* of the three major political parties would be willing to accept a bribe. Thus, citizens are not convinced that politicians are genuinely committed to anti-corruption efforts.

The most startling result is that in all three countries, citizens aligned with the three challenger parties are much less likely to believe their party’s legislators would accept a bribe than citizens who support the established parties. Moreover, there are very large and statistically significant differences between whether supporters of the Pacto Historico/5SM/PTI believe their own representatives and legislative representatives elected by other parties would accept a bribe. These results show that the challenger parties have been relatively successful in convincing their own voters of the honesty of their elected representatives, which supporters of these three parties believe to be much greater than honesty in other parties. The anti-corruption credentials of the challenger parties thus appear corroborated by the data, even if only relative to other major parties.

However, the differences between the share of respondents who believe it likely a legislator in their own party would accept a bribe and likely a legislator of another party would accept a bribe is very small for supporters of the main established parties in the three countries. In Colombia and Italy, there are no statistically significant differences for the Conservative/Liberal Parties or the Lega/PD. In Pakistan, the differences are statistically significant but substantively small. Supporters of the established parties in all three countries think their own representatives are likely corrupt, and there are no observable differences between the established parties in this regard.

What would we have to observe for new anti-corruption policy appeals to arise? These appeals would have to be electorally useful. In all three countries, the gap between what voters want — honest politicians and clean politics — and what voters think they get — widespread corruption and politicians likely to accept bribes with no public or judicial consequences — has been instrumental in giving rise to challenger parties, just as party system theory would expect. But the data reported in Figure 8 also shows that the established parties have little to gain from amplifying anti-corruption messages. Their supporters already think they are likely to be corrupt yet vote for them anyway, and the supporters of the other established party likewise think their legislators are corrupt and yet vote for them anyway. In this situation, anti-corruption appeals are not likely to shift voters from the other established party nor from the challenger party. Voters who prioritize anti-corruption efforts have already moved in large measure to support challenger parties. Anti-corruption rhetoric by established parties is, as a result, merely cheap talk and not electorally valuable. And voters appear to be aware of this. Anti-corruption rhetoric has, conversely, been electorally valuable for challenger parties — but only up to a point. Their supporters are much less likely to think legislators in these parties would accept bribes, but even so, at least half of supporters suspect their own anti-corruption representatives could become embroiled in corrupt activities. That is, the three electorates we study seem generally suspicious of the probity of their legislative representatives.

While only suggestive, we believe this collection of party-relevant findings (which, we repeat, were not pre-specified in our initial design), point toward the reputations and electoral incentives of parties to enact anti-corruption policies as a promising direction for future work.

5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have described the results of one of the first parallel surveys of legislators and citizens conducted on the topic of corruption, and the first such survey of respondents across multiple countries in multiple regions worldwide.

Our survey is motivated by the observation that, despite widespread citizen disapproval of corruption, there is an absence of effective anti-corruption policies enacted by their elected representatives. We have been guided by two dominant explanations for this phenomenon: political agency models, which assume that public officials are rent-seekers who are imperfectly monitored by the electorate; and asymmetric information models, in which politicians misperceive voter preferences.

We do not find evidence in support of the hypotheses we develop to test each of these theories, leading us to develop an alternative theory based on incentives of political parties to adopt policies that are most likely to attract new supporters. We show that established political parties are viewed as equally corrupt by supporters and non-supporters alike, which limits the usefulness of anti-corruption policy as a campaign theme.

We see our results as suggesting that focusing on party incentives rather than those of individual legislators may be a fruitful direction for further research. Our interpretation also emphasizes the crucial role of political entrepreneurs who can build the requisite support for reform, potentially attracting supporters from across the political spectrum (given the widespread disapproval of corruption among voters). The fact that emergent parties in each of the countries we study have come to prominence on anti-corruption platforms suggests their potential as a means of attracting support. Future work may explore whether and how this support can be expanded and ultimately translate into effective anti-corruption policies.

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