

VOTING FOR CORRUPTION

THE SOURCE: “Lacking Information or Condoning Corruption: When Do Voters Support Corrupt Politicians?” by Matthew S. Winters and Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro, in *Comparative Politics*, July 2013.

IN JUNE, WHAT BEGAN AS PROTESTS AGAINST a fare increase for São Paulo’s buses and subways ballooned into nationwide demonstrations that brought over a million Brazilians into the streets. For weeks, protests raged in more than 100 cities, and President Dilma Rousseff’s approval rating plummeted to 30 percent. The Brazilian government struggled to respond; much like Occupy Wall Street two years earlier in the United States, the loosely organized movement voiced no clearly defined demands.

Most of the anger seemed to stem from frustration with Brazil’s pervasive political corruption. Last year, the country placed 69th on Transparency International’s annual Corruption Perceptions Index—a bit better than Liberia and China, but far worse than other Latin American countries such as Uruguay and Cuba. And while Brazil has many pressing needs, it is spending more than \$13 billion to host the upcoming World Cup, creating, in the process, vast new opportunities for bribes and graft.

Brazil is a democracy, however, which raises a question: If corruption is such a problem, why don’t citizens simply vote rotten politicians out of office? In fact, there’s some evidence that corruption in Brazil got worse *after* democratic civilian rule resumed in 1985. Writing in *Comparative Politics*, Matthew S. Winters and Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro—political science professors at the University of Illinois and Brown University, respectively—compare two different explanations for why citizens, in Brazil and around the world, vote for crooked politicians.

“Either voters lack information about corrupt behavior and therefore unknowingly support a corrupt politician,” they explain, “or they knowingly support a corrupt politician because of his performance in other areas.”

Conventional wisdom suggests that in Brazil, at least, the tradeoff hypothesis is correct, and in recent surveys a significant number of Brazilians said they’d be willing to accept some shady dealings by individual politicians as long as they did their job. As a local saying goes, “*Rouba, mas faz.*” (“He robs, but he gets things done.”)

But broad, cultural explanations have their limits: “In a public opinion poll, respondents may provide socially conforming answers rather than their genuine

opinions,” Winters and Weitz-Shapiro say. Upper-class Brazilians, for instance, who are more likely than others to embrace international norms about corruption and governance, might provide answers they think others want to hear, instead of their honest opinions.

To short-circuit this tendency, the authors told their survey participants about “Gabriel (or Gabriela), who is a person like you.” Then the participants were asked whether they thought Gabriel(a) would vote for various hypothetical mayoral candidates who varied in their accomplishment and their willingness to accept bribes. Their responses indicated that the Gabriel(a)s were adamantly anti-corruption. A clean candidate who was described as incompetent was nonetheless deemed acceptable by 62 percent of respondents, while a mere 28 percent said they would vote for a corrupt but competent candidate.

The study’s findings also undermine another commonly held assumption, that the poor are much more willing to tolerate corruption than the rich. Quite the contrary. Respondents in the lowest income brackets—who were more likely to report that they had been asked for a bribe in their daily lives than those in the middle and upper classes—were also more likely than those in the higher

income brackets to say that Gabriel(a) would prefer the law-abiding yet incompetent mayor over the dirty but effective one, by 65 to 54 percent.

So why, if Brazilians are inclined to vote bribe-taking politicians out of office, do so many corrupt politicians survive? A cynic might say that the voters have no choice—every politician is corrupt—but lack of information is clearly part of the answer.

Nearly three-quarters of those who agreed that corruption is rife nevertheless said they had never voted for a shady politician.

Even though Brazilian journalists have broken a number of high-profile corruption stories, and 78 percent of respondents in the study expressed the belief that it was common for politicians to accept bribes, most of the respondents evidently didn’t think the particular politicians who represented them did so—nearly three-quarters of those who agreed that corruption is rife nevertheless said they had never voted for a shady politician. This finding

reminds Winters and Weitz-Shapiro of a truism about U.S. voters: “The average American hates Congress but loves her congressperson.”

The contrast between how Gabriel(a) voted and how real Brazilians do may come down to the “type of information Brazilian voters typically encounter about corruption.” Most voters come across stories about corruption that describe the scale of the problem but don’t finger specific individuals, and, coming from partisan sources well before an election, the news is unlikely to change a voter’s mind.

“These results,” the researchers argue, “should cheer opponents of corruption, since presumably it is easier to repair an information deficit than to change

preference[s].” A new crop of initiatives in Brazil aims to disseminate specific information about corrupt politicians in the weeks leading up to elections, and the recent protests have prompted President Rousseff to propose a bill that would elevate political corruption from a minor offense to a major felony.

Yet the fact that the upper and middle classes don’t care about corruption as much as the lower class could indicate obstacles to substantial change. After all, “as opinion leaders and members of the media represent the viewpoints of the wealthy, citizens may not gain access to the information that they need in order to know who is and is not corrupt.”

Rouba, não sei: “He robs, but I don’t know.” ■