

Says Who? An Experiment on Allegations of Corruption and Credibility of Sources

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Abstract

To hold politicians accountable for corrupt practices, voters must rely on reports from third parties and view these accusation sources as credible. We conducted a survey experiment varying sources for corruption accusations and measuring citizens' evaluations of political candidates in Colombia. Consistent with prior surveys, we find that respondents trust newspapers more than the judiciary or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Corruption accusations coming from the leading national newspaper drive down levels of support and trust for corrupt politicians relative to identical accusations made against identical candidates by NGOs and the judiciary. Our results also indicate that people with lower levels of education were more responsive than more educated individuals to corruption accusations coming from newspapers when compared to those coming from the judiciary or an NGO. Perceptions of candidate competence did not move with perceived trustworthiness.

Keywords

political corruption, voter information, watchdog agencies, Latin American politics, democratic accountability

Introduction

Information about candidates' prior behavior is widely assumed to be crucial for empowering voters in electoral democracies.¹ All things being equal, voters would prefer to reject corrupt politicians because of the inefficiency and injustice inherent in the practice of corruption (Maloy 2014).² However, to hold corrupt politicians accountable, voters need to be aware of their past behavior. As voters do not typically observe corrupt behaviors by elected officials directly, they must rely on reports from third parties, and the credibility of different sources reporting corruption accusations may vary in the minds of voters. This paper uses a survey experiment in Colombia to understand what sources of corruption accusation are viewed as most credible and whether this variation in the credibility of sources of information has an impact on the way individuals evaluate politicians accused of corruption.

To this end, we fielded a survey experiment in Colombia, varying sources of corruption accusations and measuring citizens' evaluations of political candidates. We focused on a country with non-negligible levels of perceived corruption and competitive elections. Our survey presented all respondents with the biographical sketch of a hypothetical corrupt candidate running in the upcoming congressional elections and randomly varied

the source attributed to a corruption accusation. The three sources included an electoral monitoring nongovernmental organization (NGO), a court, and a well-respected national newspaper. These three organizations were selected because they are central actors in an electoral accountability process that hinges on the availability of information. Colombia is an excellent case for the study because it features a reputable national newspaper, a relatively independent judiciary, and credible NGOs. All things being equal, at the aggregate level, credible sources should be more influential than sources deemed less credible.

Consistent with Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) results for Colombia, our sample trusts newspapers more than they trust NGOs and courts,³ so we expect corruption accusations coming from newspapers to drive candidate evaluations down more than accusations from NGOs or the judiciary. Controlling for

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baseline levels of generalized trust, whether or not the respondent is partisan, and other relevant variables, we find that corruption accusations coming from the leading national newspaper reduce the likelihood of both voting for and trusting the corrupt politician relative to accusations from NGOs or the judiciary. As an important check on our findings, this newspaper effect does not exist among respondents who view either courts or NGOs as more trustworthy than newspapers. Interestingly, people with low levels of education were more responsive to newspapers compared to NGOs or the judiciary than were more educated individuals. We speculate that this result is due to the fact that less educated respondents were generally unfamiliar with NGOs and may not have entirely positive feelings toward the judicial system. This result suggests that printed media with high standards of journalism in Colombia carries a special weight in the evaluations of political candidates for important segments of the population—even if they may not read the newspaper itself.⁴

An interesting side note is that accusations of prior corruption cause respondents to deem candidates less trustworthy but are not part of a voter's calculation in determining competence to hold office. This finding supports one mechanism hypothesized by scholars arguing that voters trade off corruption for other issues (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977), in this specific case, perceptions of administrative competence.

This paper advances the understanding of the conditions under which citizens respond to information about corruption and provides empirical evidence of the role that specific sources can play in disseminating this information. Increasing governmental transparency and providing voters with accurate information about politicians are a priority in both developing and developed countries. However, our findings suggest that transparency might not be enough to ensure democratic accountability. For information to be an “antidote” against corruption (Winters, Testa, and Frederickson 2012), it has to come from sources voters deem credible. This result sharpens our theoretical understanding of how information about corruption affects election outcomes and reinforces Lupia and McCubbins' (1998, 75) call for creating institutions that promote reasoned choices.

Literature Review

Even though voters tend to hold negative attitudes toward corruption, evidence of the electoral impunity of corrupt governments and politicians abound throughout the world. Studies conducted in the United States (Dimock and Jacobson 1995; Peters and Welch 1980), Italy (Chang, Golden, and Hill 2010), the United Kingdom (Eggers and

Fisher 2011; Pattie and Johnston 2009), and Spain (Costas, Sole-Olle, and Sorribas Navarro 2010; Rivero Rodriguez and Fernandez Vazquez 2011), for example, document the limited electoral punishment corrupt governments often face.

In the last decade, experimental designs have been frequently employed to isolate the effect of corruption information on voters' attitudes and behavior. However, these studies have provided mixed and possibly contradictory results. Although a few studies conclude voters respond as expected to information on corruption by punishing corrupt politicians (Ferraz and Finan 2008), other studies find that this response varies by class (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013), is contingent on the political party of the politician accused of corruption (de Figuereido, Hidalgo, and Kasahara 2011; Muñoz, Anduiza, and Gallego 2012), on the level of corruption in a given country and the state of its economy (Klasnja and Tucker 2013), or may even not be observed (Banerjee et al. 2010; Pereira, Melo, and Figueiredo 2009). Thus, there is little consensus on how voters respond to information about corrupt politicians.

Pooling disparate results from experiments can be difficult. The experiments are necessarily conducted at different times in different elections across different countries. The possible explanations for the heterogeneous findings are far more numerous than the number of studies, and saying anything definitive is impossible. Some scholars have studied types of corruption (Johnston 1996; Rose-Ackerman 1999), and area specialists may focus on the differences across contexts, but it is also possible that differences in the treatments provided account for some of the results. Although it is certainly possible that the flyers distributed by De la O et al. (2010) are more effective than the campaign of meetings, posters, and puppet shows employed by Banerjee et al. (2010), we focus instead on the cited source of the information about corruption accusations. In earlier experiments, the corruption allegation has been attributed to federal government audits of municipalities (e.g., Ferraz and Finan 2008), reports from the federal auditor (De La O et al. 2010), a public prosecutor (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013), a combination of judicial decisions and newspapers (e.g., de Figuereido, Hidalgo, and Kasahara 2011), or not attributed to any source (e.g., Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013).

An exception is a working paper by Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2014) that varied the source of corruption information in a survey experiment conducted in Brazil. Corruption accusations were attributed either to a federal audit (deemed as a more credible source) or to an opposition party (the less credible source), and the authors found that respondents are more likely to punish the corrupt candidate when accusations come from the credible source.

Rather than picking sources with clear differences in objectivity (e.g., opposition parties are motivated to spread even dubious accusations of ethical wrongdoing), we study the relative credibility of three actors that play a critical role in disseminating information about corruption to voters. In particular, we study corruption allegations advanced by the judiciary, a reputable newspaper, and a well-regarded NGO in Colombia. We chose these sources because these three actors play pivotal roles in the process of generating corruption accusations. Newspapers produce investigative pieces that expose politicians' misdeeds, NGOs work on the ground and monitor elected officials' behavior, and courts prosecute politicians who engage in illegal behavior. In Latin America in particular, these three institutions have been key in bringing attention to corruption scandals and promoting social and electoral accountability (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006; Waisbord 1996). Mere logic does not require one of these sources to be deemed more credible than the others by virtue of its existence, and the trustworthiness of each source cue will depend on the social and political context.

Source cues and heuristics have been found extremely important in political decision-making. Mostly uninterested in public affairs, with low levels of information about political issues, and lacking coherent ideological foundations for their opinions, citizens look for simple ways to make political judgments and overcome their low levels of political information (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Effective source cues can take many different forms such as opinion leaders (Druckman 2001a; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Mondak 1993a, 1993b), endorsers with varying incentives to be truthful (Boudreau 2009a), news organizations (Turner 2007), political parties (Cohen, n.d.; Kam 2005; Rahn 1993), ideological groups (Brady and Sniderman 1985), or interest groups (Lupia 1994). Individuals take cues from more credible and trusted sources (Petty and Wegener 1998) because the validity of information from trustworthy sources is generally less scrutinized than that of less trustworthy sources (Druckman 2001b; O'Keefe 2002; Lupia 2011; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Miller and Krosnick, n.d.). Thus, we expect that the most trusted sources should affect a respondent's vote choice the most.

People turn to elites for guidance and, while they are selective about which frames to believe, they gravitate toward frames from sources they perceive to be credible (Druckman 2001a). Source credibility is a multidimensional concept, but Lupia (2000) usefully argues that there are only two requirements for a source to be viewed as credible. First, the source must be viewed as possessing the relevant knowledge, and second, the source must

be trusted to reveal what it knows.⁵ As this definition suggests, trust is a key dimension of credibility. In fact, the literature refers to credibility and trust interchangeably, often using one concept as a proxy for the other (Druckman 2001a, or Miller and Krosnick 2000).⁶ Following this literature, in this paper, we operationalize credibility as trust.

When asked about trust in a variety of institutions, respondents in Colombia perceive newspapers to be more trustworthy than the judiciary and NGOs. The short-term profit motive represents an incentive to provide sensationalist news, and, specifically in younger democracies, authoritarian legacies and the partisan nature of the media could alter incentives to avoid investigative or critical reporting. In recent decades, however, some mainstream publications in South America have turned to watchdog reporting as the political spectrum opens up, media outlets become less dependent on official financing, and growing political competition increases demands for political accountability (Waisbord 2000).

In democracies, printed media can become central actors in a process of public political accountability (Tumber et al. 2004). Reporting on corruption can provide public visibility and bolster a reputation for investigation. Indulging purely prurient interests may diminish the credibility of a journalistically oriented newspaper, which will hurt its reputation as well as its long-term profit motive because consumers purchase newspapers if the information is deemed accurate and credible. Thus, the long-term interests of journalistically oriented newspapers demand keeping high standards and maintaining a reputation for honesty.⁷

The newspaper we used in our experiment, *El Tiempo*, is one of the oldest, most respected, and best-known newspapers in Colombia. Because our sample trusts newspapers more than NGOs and the judiciary, we expect newspaper cues to shift opinion more than the NGO or judiciary cues. The major exception to this rule is among the respondents who rank either NGOs or the judicial system as more credible. For these people, we do not expect the *El Tiempo* cue to outperform the other two.

As each of the cues in the experiment described in the next section "Experimental Strategy and Data" provides exactly the same information and only varies the source to which the information is attributed, differences between individuals with different levels of education are likely to be driven by two main factors: the higher responsiveness of low sophisticated voters to political cues and the perceived credibility of the source cue. First, social and political cues are often found to have a greater impact on the attitudes and preferences of less politically sophisticated individuals than on their more sophisticated counterparts (Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Boudreau 2009b; Lupia 1994; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).

Because low information voters tend to be less partisan than high information voters, and lack coherent ideological foundations for their opinions, citizens seek simple ways to make political judgments. In fact, research has found that low information voters are more persuadable and more responsive to the political context of elections (Zaller 2004), because sophistication builds up reservoirs of knowledge that creates resistance to change (Converse 1962). In contrast, highly sophisticated voters stick with their party and are less responsive to new information.

A second factor that leads us to believe that the newspaper source cue will be especially effective among individuals with low levels of education is brand awareness. Passive and active advertising can lead to brand awareness so commercial ventures with mass audiences such as newspapers are likely to be familiar to a broad spectrum of the populace—even those who are generally inattentive to politics. In contrast, NGOs are largely anonymous and not well known.

However, the general point of this paper is that trust in a given source of information is likely to boost the credibility and the effectiveness of corruption accusations coming from this source. To test our expectations that, in Colombia, newspapers should be the strongest cue (at least among people who did not rank NGOs or the judiciary as more trustworthy) and that this effect will be largest among respondents with lower levels of education, we conducted the experiment described in the next section.

Experimental Strategy and Data

We fielded an original telephone survey experiment in Colombia in November of 2011. The survey was conducted by IPSOS-Napoleón Franco and covered approximately 801 people in four main cities: Bogotá (313), Medellín (196), Cali (194), and Barranquilla (98). The survey used landlines as the sampling frame and included quotas for gender, age, city, and socioeconomic status (SES).⁸ The survey sample was divided into three randomly assigned groups of roughly 267 individuals apiece, which appear balanced across observed covariates (see Table A1 in the online appendix at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>).

We chose to run the survey in Colombia for three main reasons. First, Colombia has non-negligible levels of perceived corruption (62% of Colombian respondents to the Global Corruption Barometer perceive corruption in the public sector as being a *very serious problem*), suggesting that respondents were likely to find the corruption accusations of the treatments realistic. Second, Colombia has good examples of all three institutions included in the experiment (NGOs, judiciary, and newspaper). Last but not least, elections in Colombia are generally free and

fair—particularly in urban areas—which allows us to observe more genuine attitudes toward politicians that are free from undue pressures. Thus, Colombia exemplifies well the conditions of many developing democracies in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere in which electoral processes are carried out amid relatively high levels of perceived corruption. Colombia likely differs from other settings in the specific ranking of domestic institutions according to trust—however, as it is credibility and not the source itself that explains our results, our argument can shed light on the political dynamics of other democracies.

Respondents in each of the groups were presented with a hypothetical candidate's profile. The profile contained information on the candidates' profession, marital status, previous work, and public service experience. The candidate was also accused of gaining a surprising sum of money while previously working in a public office.⁹ To create an incentive for the respondent to support the hypothetical candidate, the candidate shared an ideological position with the respondent (i.e., left, center, or right), which is a useful predictor of vote choice in Colombia (Olivella and Rodríguez Raga 2009).¹⁰ Albeit imperfect, using ideology allowed us to provide respondents with information on the candidate's policy positions. The survey asked respondents to locate themselves in a left–right scale from 1 to 7, where 1 = *left*, and 7 = *right*. The hypothetical candidate was labeled “leftist” if the respondent answered 1 or 2; “centrist” if the respondent answered 3, 4, or 5; and “rightist” if the respondent answered 6 or 7. Given the fragmentation of the political spectrum, ideological placement should not cue that the candidate has ties to a specific sitting coalition or strong power broker.¹¹ Further, the candidate is presented as having successful prior public office experience but not in an elected position; hence, we do not expect any incumbent effects.

The only difference across the three conditions was the source of the accusation of misused funds.¹² The accusation could come from research conducted by the largest national newspaper in the country, *El Tiempo*; the electoral monitoring NGO, *Misión de Observación Electoral* (MOE); or a lower court *Juzgado Tercero de Medellín*.

Unlike countries where printed media is clearly partisan (e.g., Argentina), *El Tiempo* cannot be easily associated with a given party.¹³ In fact, in their analysis of different types of media in Colombia, García Sánchez and Wills Otero (2011) offer evidence to support the argument that newspapers, together with Internet and radio, are a less biased and more independent source of information than television media. Furthermore, when asked about trust in a variety of institutions, respondents in Colombia perceive newspapers to be more trustworthy

than the judiciary and NGOs. The short-term profit motive represents an incentive to provide sensationalist news, and, specifically in younger democracies, authoritarian legacies and the partisan nature of the media could alter incentives to avoid investigative or critical reporting. In recent decades, however, some mainstream publications in South America have turned to watchdog reporting as the political spectrum opens up, media outlets become less dependent on official financing, and growing political competition increases demands for political accountability (Waisbord 2000).

Therefore, attributing this particular newspaper as the source of a corruption accusation is not likely to be taken as a partisan cue by respondents.

MOE is a citizen-led organization coordinating independent monitoring of national and local electoral processes, political campaigns, and political transparency. In recent years, for example, they have been actively engaged in denouncing the relationship between some politicians and members of the paramilitary forces. MOE is among the most established NGOs in Colombia, but most people would have little familiarity with the name or organization, as they generally do with all NGOs. In a 2013 survey of elites (*Cifras y Conceptos 2013*), only 12 percent of respondents admired the best-known NGO in the country, the Red Cross, and only 3 percent admired MOE. These numbers are surely lower among less-educated nonelites and indicate that NGOs enjoy very limited name recognition. The lack of recognition of this NGO, or any other, most likely affects its levels of perceived credibility.

Last, both midlevel and high courts in Colombia have been sites where regional and national politicians have withstood official scrutiny for political misdeeds. We chose a midlevel court in Colombia's second largest city (Medellín) because such accusations are likely to first surface in this type of court.¹⁴ In Colombia, the judiciary has had a reputation for independence, but as in many countries, the poor often experience a more conflicted relationship with the judicial system. Although the judiciary may be generally respected, less educated individuals—who are often poor and have low SES—may not feel particularly warm toward the institution. The 2011 Latinobarometer found that respondents with less than a high school education were 16 percentage points more likely to disagree with the statement “The judicial system punishes those who are guilty” than respondents with a high school diploma (52% vs. 36%). Similarly, 74 percent of respondents with low education levels said they had “little” or “no” confidence in the judiciary compared to 47 percent with a high school diploma. Thus, there is good reason to expect that the relative effect from the newspaper cue will be largest among respondents with lower levels of education and smaller for respondents with more education.¹⁵

All three institutions are generally perceived as credible and likely sources for corruption investigations. The profile of the candidate presented to respondents is typical of a candidate running in Colombian elections (see Appendix C of the online appendix for the entire questionnaire in English and the original wording in Spanish):

Sebastian Gonzalez is an engineer and has a Masters in public administration; he is married and has two kids. He is (*insert respondent's ideology*). Before running for Congress, he served as the head of his own consulting firm. He also served as Secretary of Transportation for 3 years, and while in office he obtained high performance evaluations and received the public service excellence award. Based on reports by [*source of information*], the media accused him of illegal enrichment supposedly associated with misuse of public funds. More specifically, Gonzalez could not justify the increase in his assets by US\$125,000 dollars during the period he directed public works in the province of Antioquia.

The only change across treatment conditions is the source of the corruption allegation.¹⁶ To measure trust in these sources, respondents were asked how much they trusted newspapers, NGOs, the judiciary, and other institutions on a 4-point scale (*very much, somewhat, a little, or not at all*). For example, 20 percent of the respondents trust newspapers *very much*, compared to 11 percent and 9 percent who trust the judiciary and NGOs *very much*. In this sense, newspapers represent the most reliable source of information among the treatments analyzed in this survey experiment. In fact, newspapers are as reliable as the radio (22%) and the President (24%; *very much*), although certainly not in the same level as the Catholic Church, the most reliable institution in Colombia (31%; *very much*). In contrast, only 4 percent of the respondents of this survey trust political parties *very much*.¹⁷ In Figure 1, we present average levels of trust, which tell a similar story.¹⁸ The radio (2.7%), the Church (2.7%), the President (2.6%), and the newspapers (2.6%) are the most reliable sources of information. The courts (2.2%) and the NGOs (2.1%) are less trusted but not as unreliable as political parties (1.8%).¹⁹

After reading the candidate profile, the respondent was asked to answer three different questions with a four-category response scale (*very likely, likely, unlikely, very unlikely*). We inquired about individuals' trust in the candidate, candidate preparedness (i.e., perception of how prepared the candidate is), and how likely a respondent was to vote for this candidate in the upcoming congressional election. Randomization guarantees that the three groups of respondents were identical on average for both observable and unobservable characteristics. Any systematic difference in the answers to each of the three questions used to measure candidate evaluation across groups provides an estimate of the differing impacts that

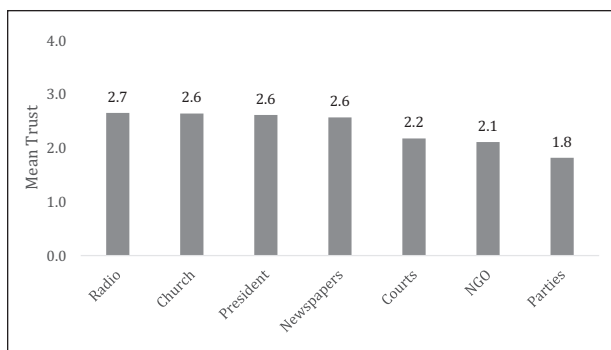


Figure 1. Mean trust across institutions.

the source of corruption accusations has on a respondent's trust of the candidate, the candidate's perceived qualifications, and the likelihood of voting for the fictional candidate. For example, if the group that received the candidate profile with an accusation from the newspaper, on average, had a worse evaluation of the politician than the other groups, we can infer that, on average, this particular source of information has a stronger impact on candidate's evaluation and on vote choice.

We control for average levels of trust in institutions and also for whether the respondent identified with a party or not. For average trust, we created a new variable using the average trust in all the institutions not included in the experiment: the Catholic Church, the Presidency, and the radio. This control should be interpreted as a propensity to provide high or low rankings on the trust scale, and its inclusion in the analysis provides more accurate estimates by minimizing unexplained variance. For identification with a party, we created a new dichotomous variable that scored 1 if the respondent identified with any party, and 0 for those who stated not having an affiliation. Our goal here was to account for the fact that the minority of people with stated partisan identifications are less likely to shift their vote away from a candidate sharing their ideology. As these control variables are uncorrelated with the randomly assigned treatment, including them in the analysis does not bias results and only improves statistical precision.

We also examine the effect of source of information across different levels of education. To get a substantively meaningful distinction and large enough categories, we collapsed the levels of education into two groups, distinguishing those who have a high school diploma or less from those who have degrees above high school.²⁰ Online Appendix B includes the analysis using a six-category classification of SES based on income, demographics, and location of the household.²¹ The results are extremely similar and provide additional support to the argument that respondents with little familiarity with NGOs and

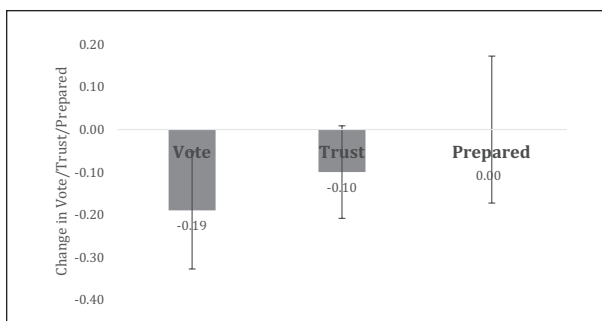


Figure 2. Effect of newspaper source versus NGO/court. NGO = nongovernmental organization.

potentially complicated feelings about the judiciary are more responsive to the newspaper treatment.

Results

Given our experimental design, if one accusation source is more effective than another, then we would expect respondents exposed to this source to express lower levels of intention to vote for and less trust in the candidate.²² Because our hypotheses involve the effectiveness of newspapers—the more trusted source relative to the other sources—and there were no systematic differences between the NGOs and courts in any of our analyses, we collapse the NGO and court categories to create a dichotomous treatment variable (0 = NGO or court, 1 = newspaper). Pooling the variables does not create a bias and makes the analysis easier to interpret. The online appendix contains analyses disaggregating the NGO and court categories (see Tables A3 and A4) that yield substantively similar results.

Newspapers—the source deemed most trustworthy, compared to NGOs and courts—are expected to drive down levels of support for the hypothetical candidate more than NGOs or the judiciary. Figure 2 presents the effect of the newspaper source compared to the NGO/court sources on intent to vote for the hypothetical candidate, trust in the candidate, and perceived preparedness of the candidate to hold office (all on a 4-point scale). As expected, accusations of corruption by newspapers are more effective at reducing electoral support than accusations from NGOs or courts. The difference between the sources in vote intention, -0.2 points on a 4-point scale, represents one-quarter of a standard deviation in the vote measure (see Table A6 in the online appendix) and is extremely unlikely to be due to random chance ($p < .005$). Translating the magnitude of this treatment effect into probabilities, attributing the corruption allegation to the newspaper caused the percentage of respondents saying they were *very likely* to support the candidate to fall from 62 percent to 52 percent—a 10 percentage point swing.

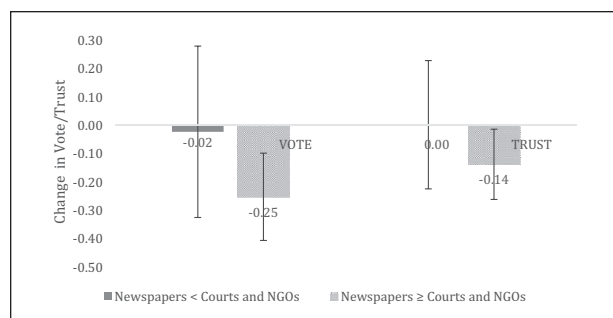


Figure 3. Effect of newspaper source versus NGO/court by baseline credibility.

NGO = nongovernmental organization.

The effect of accusation source on levels of trust in the candidate is similar but smaller in magnitude and approaches traditional thresholds for statistical significance ($p < .06$). A coefficient of -0.10 is 15 percent of overall variance in trust and translates into a decrease of 7 percentage points (from 58% to 51%) in the group saying they trust him *very much*. Thus, we can conclude across our entire sample that the newspaper is a more influential source of corruption allegations than either the NGO or the court.

It is interesting to note that although accusations of corruption from newspapers are more effective than identical accusations attributed to NGOs and courts at driving down candidate support, there is no difference with regard to assessments of the candidate's preparedness for office. Typically, voters engage in motivated reasoning to argue against the candidate they oppose and attribute many negative traits to opposing candidates. Here, we see movement in vote intention and levels of trust, but no difference whatsoever with regard to perceptions of preparedness. If trustworthiness were viewed as a prerequisite for holding elected office, then we should observe a decline in the percentage of respondents describing the candidate as prepared. We do not observe this decline. Although our hypothetical candidate suffered "at the ballot box" in the vote intention question, this result provides evidence that trustworthiness and lack of corruption are not viewed as part of the ability to "get things done." In other words, honesty and qualifications for holding office are not moving in lockstep. As all three treatments posed the exact same questions, social desirability bias cannot be driving this result. The newspaper is more persuasive than either the judiciary or the NGO at changing votes and perceptions of trustworthiness, but competence remains unaffected. This provides evidence of a mechanism previously discussed in the literature, namely, that corruption accusations may not necessarily affect voters' perceptions of how competent a politician is (Rundquist,

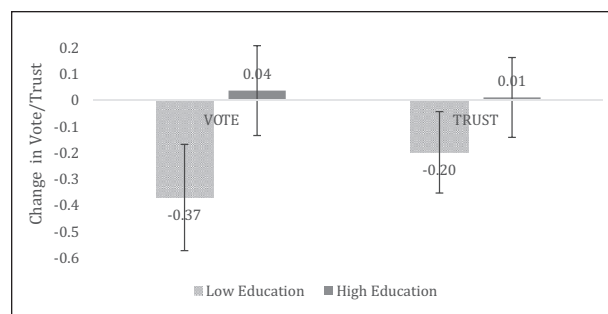


Figure 4. Effect of newspaper source versus NGO/court by education.

NGO = nongovernmental organization.

Strom, and Peters 1977). This null finding appeared for every subgroup in every model run, so we will not report it in the analysis that follows.

Although newspapers were more trusted than either NGOs or courts among our sample of urban Colombians, some respondents ranked either the court or the NGO as more trustworthy than *El Tiempo*. We should not expect to see newspapers driving down candidate evaluations among these individuals.²³ This expectation is borne out in the data. Figure 3 presents the same analysis as Figure 2, but splitting the sample into people who trust either NGOs or courts (solid dark bars) more than newspapers, and people who trust newspapers as much or more than NGOs or courts (cross-hatched light bars). Among the first group, there is no meaningful difference in the effect of the three sources on either vote choice (-0.02) or trust ($+0.00$). On the contrary, the second group exhibits large negative reactions to the accusation coming from newspapers instead of the courts or NGOs (-0.25 for vote intention and -0.14 for trust).²⁴ This result provides increased confidence that our data are behaving as expected and our results are not sample specific.

The more interesting heterogeneous treatment effect we expect is with regard to educational attainment. Figure 4 splits the sample into respondents with a high school diploma or less (cross-hatched light bars) or respondents having completed at least some college (solid dark bars). The pattern is unambiguous for both the vote choice and trust measures. Among respondents with low levels of education, newspapers drive down both vote choice by 0.37 points and candidate trust by 0.20 points (roughly 30% of the variance in trust) relative to the baseline of accusations made by NGOs or courts. In stark contrast, respondents with at least some college education show no difference in response for either vote choice ($+0.04$) or trust ($+0.01$). These differences cross traditional thresholds of statistical significance for both measures

($p < .001$). Online Appendix B repeats this analysis using a six-category government classification of SES and finds very similar results. Thus, we conclude that the effect of the newspaper's corruption allegations, vis-à-vis the NGO and the court, is even stronger among respondents who did not attend college.²⁵

Discussion

This manuscript provides evidence that voters differentiate between sources of information based on the credibility of the source. Our general finding is that trust in a civil-society organization promotes the credibility and effectiveness of allegations of corruption coming from that organization. On average, respondents in Colombia trust newspapers more than the judiciary and NGOs, and we find that corruption accusations coming from the leading national newspaper drive down levels of support and trust for corrupt politicians relative to identical accusations made against identical candidates by an NGO and the judiciary. This finding is buttressed by the absence of any newspaper effect among respondents who place greater trust in the judiciary or in the NGO.

Although, according to our sample, the most credible source of information in Colombia is a nonpartisan newspaper, newspapers are seldom independent sources of information in most developing countries. This fact makes *El Tiempo* a perfect case for our study and the Colombian case somewhat exceptional. However, what drives our results is the credibility that sources of information have among citizens, not the source itself, and the implications of our findings go beyond Colombia and *El Tiempo*. Our findings highlight the importance of credible sources of information more generally. The most credible source among an electorate may differ from country-to-country. It is reasonable to expect that locally trusted institutions will serve as superior conduits of information about corruption than less trusted newspapers.

Unfortunately, countries with high levels of corruption are also likely to have less trustworthy sources of information and lower levels of trust in general. This association means that accusations of corruption may have lower impact on evaluations precisely where corruption is most widespread. Creating some very trustworthy watchdog organizations could have a positive effect on the reduction of corruption by augmenting the effects of accusations. Investments in independent media that can provide citizens with the credible information they need to effectively hold politicians accountable (e.g., incentivizing journalist training and in-depth investigative reporting) are likely to be necessary. Building up a resource that a broad cross-section

of the populace can view as trustworthy is key to fighting corruption.

Our results also indicate that people with low levels of education were more responsive than more educated individuals to corruption accusations coming from newspapers when compared to those coming from the judiciary or an NGO. Our experiment presented respondents with the same information about the candidate except for randomly varying the source of the corruption accusation. We speculate that people of low education levels may simply not be aware of NGOs and that they may perceive the judicial system in an antagonistic manner. Hence, they are more responsive to cues coming from an established, trustworthy newspaper. A possible explanation for the superior performance of the newspaper is that the advertising associated with commercial enterprises helps to establish a credible brand name. If true, then organizations concerned with electoral accountability should either aggressively promote their own brands or partner with (and perhaps bolster) commercial outlets such as newspapers. The roots of the differences we observe in trustworthiness across sources are unclear, however. Future research should do more to look at and determine why these differences are observed.

Interestingly, corruption accusations did not affect perceived preparedness of the hypothetical candidate, which suggests competence is viewed as orthogonal to trustworthiness in public officials. More to the point, trustworthiness is not a requirement for being deemed competent to hold elected office. These findings are in line with the "tradeoff hypothesis" (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977), which suggests that voters may strategically choose to overlook corruption when they think politicians are efficient and capable of delivering the goods or services they need. This disconnect between honesty and expected job performance opens the door for citizens to support corrupt politicians at the voting booth and deserves further attention in future studies. That said, respondents in our sample clearly valued honesty over competence as evidenced by the negative treatment effects for the vote outcome.

Future experiments should carefully consider the credibility of the treatment provided. Partnering with institutions perceived as trustworthy may enhance the credibility of the treatment and maximize the effect. Local knowledge of what the target participants view as credible can be leveraged to enhance the external validity and potency of the treatment. Although previous experimental research had noted that the source of the information could be a noteworthy factor in determining the impact of information on citizens' evaluations, our work is one of the first to provide evidence of this link.

Our findings also contribute to understanding the conditions under which voters are willing to exercise

accountability by rejecting candidates with dirty records. Although our results concur with the argument that information is an “antidote” to political corruption (Winters, Testa, and Frederickson 2012), we extend the argument by suggesting that the credibility of the information provided is an important component of this antidote. Researchers conducting experimental evaluations of anti-corruption programs should consider varying the attribution of information about corruption. *El Tiempo* looks like the most promising source for Colombia in our study, but in settings without a respected “paper of record,” another source may be deemed most credible by the target audience.

While our survey experiment establishes that information source can shape views of candidates, how this result generalizes to real-life settings is an open question. Treatment effects in real world contexts could be diminished by personal attachments to particular politicians (e.g., incumbency effects, charisma, or track record), inattention to the media (e.g., not reading the newspaper or being in a social network with someone who reads the newspaper), or countertreatments from the politician about whom information is published. Like all survey experiments, our study cannot place a value on these various factors (or speak to how nonrespondents would have responded to the experimental stimulus). However, the logic of our findings is sufficiently compelling that it would be extremely surprising if source credibility played no role in real world accusations of corruption.

Every year, millions of dollars are spent on efforts to increase governmental transparency, particularly around elections, to provide voters with information about the record and credentials of those who seek office. Our results suggest that transparency might not be enough to ensure democratic accountability. However, as Lupia and McCubbins (1998, 75) argue, institutions can be created to encourage truthfulness and help learners evaluate speakers’ credibility, therefore promoting reasoned choice—in this case, voting the corrupt bums out.

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Notes

1. An online appendix for this article is available at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results are available at www.nd.edu/~dnickers.

2. In this paper, we follow Nye’s definition of corruption: “a behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gain; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence” (Nye 1967, 966).
3. Details are available in Online Appendix A (Figures A1-A3).
4. Our research resonates with the negative campaign literature; however, as our focus is on the effect of varying the sources of information about corrupt misdeeds on candidate evaluations, and not the effects of these as negative political attacks, we knowingly focus on source cues. For an overview of the negative campaigning literature, please see Lau and Rovner (2009). We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.
5. McCroskey and Teven (1999) split this revelation requirement into two dimensions. The first is whether statements are viewed as truthful. The second is whether the source has the best interest of the person in mind. 6. For example, Druckman (2001a) relies on a 5-point scale of trustworthiness to measure credible and noncredible sources.
7. This characterization fits newspapers with high journalistic standards rather than tabloids, which typically traffic in the sensational.
8. In the areas covered by our survey, roughly 65 percent of the population has a landline. Thus, our survey cannot speak to whether the one-third of the population without landlines would respond differently to our experimental stimuli. That said, because our sample includes a higher proportion of high socioeconomic status (SES) respondents, who represent the least responsive subgroup, our estimated effects may be conservative. In other words, the actual differences between high and low SES respondents may be greater than we report. Furthermore, urban dwellers are likely to have the most exposure to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Misión de Observación Electoral, so the difference between a well-known and trusted newspaper and an NGO is probably larger in rural areas.
9. The sum of money the candidate could not justify was such that it would be deemed inappropriate but would not completely obscure his other attributes.
10. Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) data show that there are no substantial differences in the extent to which highly and poorly educated citizens understand ideological categories (see figures A6 and A7 in the online appendix).
11. We did not draw on partisanship because existing literature suggests convincingly that parties in Colombia are not meaningful labels. Partisanship does not reliably guide citizens’ voting behavior (Rodríguez Raga and Seligson 2011) because the party system is weakly institutionalized, highly fragmented, and volatile (Gutiérrez Sanín 2007; Pizarro Leongómez 2006). Self-reported partisan affiliation is very low; between 2008 and 2011, on average, 71 percent of LAPOP respondents reported having no partisan affiliation.
12. We decided not to introduce a “baseline” category with a noncorrupt candidate for three reasons. First, a candidate

- with no corruption allegation does not help us to answer the question of what source is most effective in corruption allegations against candidates. Second, there would be very little variance in support as the candidate would share the respondent's ideology and have no counterbalancing negative information. Third, we wanted to look for heterogeneous treatment effects among less educated voters, so having three treatment arms with 267 respondents each rather than four arms with 200 apiece preserves statistical power.
13. Until the 1990s, *El Tiempo* was identified with the Liberal Party through its owners, the Santos family. However, in recent years, the Santos family has sold off its participation (today, 88 percent of the company is in the hands of an international conglomerate), and the partisan editorial line has dwindled. Moreover, the Liberal Party does not provide a strong ideological cue. For example, according to the 2010 AmericasBarometer, a regular regional study carried out by the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Colombians placed Rafael Pardo (the party's candidate in the most recent presidential elections) at 5.2 in the 1 to 10 ideological scale.
 14. Ideally, the city would have been varied so that no respondent came from the city of the politician mentioned in the vignette. However, an oversight on a late draft of the questionnaire omitted this instruction, and the city remained constant. Because respondents from Medellín behave no differently from respondents in other areas of Colombia, any bias introduced from this error appears small. We replicate the analysis without respondents from Medellín to check whether the point estimates remain similar. While we lose statistical significance in some instances, the point estimates remain near the results reported from the entire sample, and the overall shape of the results remains consistent (see Online Appendix D). Thus, we do not feel the Medellín respondents are driving the results reported in the text.
 15. This result also holds when we look for heterogeneity in income rather than education, with low-income individuals responding more strongly to the cue coming from the newspaper than from the judiciary or NGOs.
 16. To assure external validity, the vignette mentions that the media reported the corruption accusations, as it is very likely that people get information about corruption accusations via media outlets. Even if a court or an NGO makes an accusation, people will find out this information because news outlets report these accusations.
 17. Please see Table A2 in Online Appendix A for an overview.
 18. The LAPOP surveys of 2010, 2011, and 2012 have a similar distribution of trust (see Graphs A1, A2, and A3).
 19. Questions about trust in institutions were placed after the treatment in the survey instrument. We chose to do so to avoid these questions biasing the treatment. However, by placing the trust questions after the treatment, respondents who heard about newspapers, NGOs, or the courts in the treatment could be more likely to say that they trust these institutions. We checked for the impact of the treatment on each of the trust questions, and there was no detectable effect (see Table A18 in the online appendix).
 20. In our sample, 58 percent of respondents are in the first group (high school diploma or less). According to the most recent census, 74 percent of Colombians fall in that same category (Departamento Administrativo Nacional 2010). The proportion of respondents in our sample with higher education (42 percent) is higher than the national figures, probably because of the urban nature of our data. Note, however, that this urban bias is not uncommon in public opinion surveys in Colombia; in LAPOP's 2011 sample, AmericasBarometer's 2011 sample, 78 percent of respondents have degrees other than high school diplomas.
 21. Low-income neighborhoods are classified as strata 1 and 2, middle-income neighborhoods are classified as strata 3 and 4, and high-income neighborhoods are classified as strata 5 and 6.
 22. For ease of interpretation, the results reported in the text are from ordinary least squares (OLS), but ordered logit produces substantively similar results that are reported in the online appendix (see Tables A4, A7, A9, A11, A13, A15 and A17).
 23. Ideally, we would have fine-grained measure of trust in our sources and be able to make subtle distinctions in respondent preferences. Unfortunately, our four categories of trust provide noisy measures of trust at best. While it is clear that people who rank either the judiciary or NGOs as more trustworthy than newspapers have a clear preference, it is likely that the modal person placing the institutions in the same category actually share the broad-based preference for newspapers. Thus, the expectation for people giving all three sources equal ranks in trustworthiness is that newspapers are still preferred and do not differ from the general hypothesis (unlike those who explicitly ranked newspapers lower than either the judiciary or NGOs).
 24. The two-tailed probability that these differences are greater than zero was .17 for vote and .27 for trust.
 25. There is no reason to think that these results are driven by confirmation bias due to the perception that the polling firm partners with the newspaper. The omnibus survey involved commercial products, and our questions were introduced with a statement that attributes them to "researchers from the University of Notre Dame."

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