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# Same scandal, different interpretations: politics of corruption, anger, and partisan bias in Mexico

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**ABSTRACT**
Instead of focusing on "why voters appear to tolerate rather than punish" as most previous literature, this paper advances an alternative explanation: it seeks to explain how voters process information about corruption. Consistent with research on public opinion formation, this paper argues that voters can perceive the same event and make different interpretation about its meaning. Based on an original survey experiment conducted during the 2018 presidential election in Mexico, this study finds that citizens hold partisan attitudes and are motivated to protect these partisan predispositions, which make them interpret common events in different way. In particular, when this study informed voters that an unnamed candidate engaged in corruption, respondents unequivocally considered such actions as corrupt. However, when the name of their co-partisan candidate was explicitly mentioned as engaging in the same activities, voters rejected to qualify them as corrupt. Partisans are not "tolerating" or "condoning" corruption; partisans tend to choose interpretations that rationalize their partisan priors and justify their co-partisans' behavior.

## Introduction

Why do voters punish candidates' illegal behavior like corruption in some contexts but condone it in others? The comparative literature has advanced explanations such as voters' lack of information about candidates' misdeeds (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013), candidate competence (Vera 2020), the credibility of the sources of information on which the accusations rely (Botero et al. 2015; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017), or voters' unwillingness to punish co-partisan candidates (Anduiza, Gallego, and Munoz 2013; Ecker, Glinitzer, and Meyer 2016), among others. Instead of focusing on the question why voters appear to *support* corrupt candidates rather than punish them (e.g. vote choice), this paper advances an

alternative explanation in which voters' partisan bias limits the electoral consequences of corruption. It analyzes how voters process information about corruption, in particular, if they consider, qualify co-partisan politicians' illegal actions as corruption. Consistent with research on public opinion formation, this study argues that voters can perceive the same event and make different interpretation of its meaning (Gaines et al. 2007). This difference stems from citizens' partisan attitudes and their motivation to protect these partisan predispositions, which make them interpret common events in different ways (Bartels 2000; Gerber and Huber 2010; Zaller 1992). Citizens are thus less likely to qualify some illegal activities as corruption when co-partisan candidates have engaged in them compared to when out-partisan candidates engage in the same activities. Partisans thus are not tolerating or condoning corruption or perceiving corruption as more or less severe; rather, many of them choose interpretations that rationalize their partisan beliefs, which in turn make them not qualify their co-partisans' actions as corrupt practices.

This paper relies on an original survey experiment conducted in Mexico during the 2018 presidential campaign. The Mexican Party system experienced a major electoral shock when MORENA candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, won the presidential election. Relying on populist rhetoric similar to that of his 2006 presidential campaign (Bruhn 2012), López Obrador denounced the PRI, the PAN, and the political establishment for being part of a "political mafia" that had brought Mexico to economic ruin through corruption and neoliberalism. During the campaign, the electorate reported high levels of negative partisanship and anger about the situation in the country (Aparicio and Castro Cornejo 2020), which were rooted in grievances about the state of the economy, public safety, and corruption. This context offers an ideal case to analyze the conditions under which voters – particularly MORENA voters – view events through a partisan bias.

In particular, when a survey experiment informed voters that an unnamed candidate had engaged in corruption, respondents unequivocally considered such actions corrupt. However, when their co-partisan candidate – Andrés Manuel López Obrador – was explicitly identified as engaging in the same activities, co-partisans failed to qualify the latter as corrupt. This behavior is particularly strong among co-partisans exhibiting higher levels of anger, which – as previous studies have found – exacerbate biased opinion updating (Suhay and Erisen 2018). Consistent with partisan bias theory, the survey experiment did not affect out-partisans' behavior; they considered such actions as corruption regardless if the out-partisan politician was explicitly named or not. These findings are consistent with recent studies suggesting that partisanship in Latin America is not as weak as previously considered (Baker and Renno 2019; Castro Cornejo 2019; Lupu 2015). Voters in Mexico also have a tendency to engage defensive mechanisms when they face

new information. From their own perspective, co-partisans are not condoning corruption, since they do not qualify those activities as corrupt. This study's findings improve our understanding of the conditions under which voters support corrupt politicians. They also raise concerns about the public's polarization since voters tend to see corruption through a partisan lens and are less likely to hold co-partisan elected officials accountable for their performance in office.

## Corruption, partisan bias, and opinion formation

The label "corruption" refers to a diverse set of activities: electoral fraud, patronage, bribery, vote buying, extortion, nepotism, graft, embezzlement, exchanges of political campaign donations for political favors, and money laundering, among many others, and implies the misbehavior of an elected politician. How do voters respond to these common misdeeds? Since corruption is normatively negative and hinders economic development or undermines trust in political institutions, it is expected to be rejected by the electorate. However, voters do not seem to strongly reject this behavior when they have the chance to punish candidates' misbehavior in free and fair elections in both developing and established democracies (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977).

Recent works analyze the conditions that make some voters vote for politicians they know to be corrupt (Carlin, Love, and Martinez-Gallardo 2015; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013). These studies tend to focus on the question why voters appear to *support* rather than punish corruption. In other words, previous studies have primarily focused their analysis on vote choice. For example, studies have found that voters are willing to trade corrupt activities for other types of government performance that they care about more (Muñoz, Anduiza, and Gallego 2016; Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017) or because voters tend to overlook this aspect of government performance since voters perceive corruption to be a constant among politicians (Pavao 2018). The growing field of experimental literature also identifies conditions that make voters more likely to discard information about corruption: the credibility of its source (Botero et al. 2015; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017), the partisan proximity of the source of information and media outlets (Botero et al. 2019), candidate competence (Vera 2020) and, assuming a prominent place in the literature, voters' reluctance to punish co-partisan candidates (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Anduiza, Gallego, and Munoz 2013; Ecker, Glinitzer, and Meyer 2016; Solaz, De Vries, and de Geus 2018).

In contrast, this paper provides nuance to our understanding of the way partisanship works and influences how voters process information about corruption. Previous literature on corruption and voting behavior argues that in-

group loyalty based on partisanship undermines the punishment of corruption since voters become tolerant of corruption and less likely to punish it. According to this literature, partisanship conditions vote choice in several ways. First, it can weaken the punishment of corruption because in-group loyalty motivates voters to protect their group status (Tajfel 1981). Such behavior has no instrumental benefits but expressive benefits rooted in partisanship. Partisanship can also bias voters' evaluations of the incumbent when they assess corruption performance (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Ecker, Glinitzer, and Meyer 2016) and affect the perceived seriousness of corrupt activities (Anduiza, Gallego, and Munoz 2013). In these cases, voters tend to tolerate or condone co-partisans' corruption and avoid punishing it.

This study focuses on an alternative mechanism: perceptions about corruption. Instead of analyzing if voters fail to reject corruption, this study analyzes if voters consider co-partisans' illegal activities as corrupt, an alternative way in which voters' partisan bias limits the electoral consequences of corruption. Rather than support a corrupt candidate because they share the same partisanship – which makes them tolerate the candidate's illegal actions – citizens consider some activities as corrupt depending on the politicians' partisanship. Although it is possible that voters update their beliefs in a Bayesian way, revising their opinions as they consume information (Gerber and Green, 1998), partisanship makes citizens interpret common events, such as corruption, through partisan lenses (Bartels 2000, 2002; Zaller 1992). This means that voters do update their beliefs, but this process is biased by partisan attachments: voters protect their in-group by choosing interpretations that rationalize their partisan beliefs, which makes them fail to consider their co-partisans' actions as corruption.

Partisanship thus constitutes a "perceptual screen" in information acquisition and processing (Campbell et al. 1960; Gerber and Huber 2010). When asked about their opinions about corruption, citizens have multiple motivations about these events (Druckman 2012). However, as several studies suggest, when it comes to politics, the literature has found that accuracy is often sacrificed at the expense of partisan concerns (Jerit and Barabas 2012; Taber and Lodge 2006). This is what Gaines et al. (2007) refer to as "same facts, different interpretations:" voters can accurately perceive the same fact and yet make different judgements about its meaning. Citizens make every effort to maintain their preexisting opinion by seeking out confirmatory evidence, discrediting information that does not fit their preexisting conceptions, and attributing more strength to arguments that bolster their own opinions (Taber and Lodge 2006). Partisanship thus increases directional motivations instead of accuracy motivations (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017).

The literature on opinion formation has analyzed episodes of political controversy that are viewed through a partisan lens, such as political scandals

(Wagner, Tarlov, and Vivyan 2014) or facts like the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Jacobson 2010; Gaines et al. 2007), among others. A second group of studies has analyzed how factual beliefs about politics can be affected by partisanship. They analyze the beliefs on climate change, the differences in evaluations of crime, and with a prominent role in the literature: the economy (the deficit, the unemployment rate, inflation, or retrospective economic conditions; Bartels 2002, Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1987; Gerber and Huber 2010). For example, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that the deficit has risen during a Democrat administration and Democrats are more likely to say that inflation has risen under a Republican administration. These findings provide evidence of partisan biases in economic perceptions (Bartels 2002) since partisans tend to rate the economy more favorably when their party holds power (Evans and Andersen 2006).

As far as attitudes toward corruption are concerned, voters' judgement will differ depending on whether the politician involved is a co-partisan or an out-partisan candidate. Partisans are guided by directional goals, actively seeking facts that support their partisanship. However, partisans not only exonerate politicians, tolerate his or her actions, or downplay the severity of such actions. Driven by their partisan bias, voters are also less likely to qualify some illegal activities as corruption when their co-partisan candidates engage in such activities. This means that judgments about whether a practice is corrupt or not are likely to depend on whether respondents' co-partisan candidate is involved.

In light of this discussion, the main hypothesis of this study is as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (Partisan Bias Effect): Voters are more likely to judge an offense as corrupt when an unnamed candidate engages in it; however, voters are less likely to qualify the act as corrupt if the politician belongs to their party.

If this hypothesis about partisan bias holds, the next step is to investigate why and how this effect on voters' perceptions of corruption takes place. In other words, under what conditions partisan biased evaluations of corruption occur. As recent studies have found, there are three factors that might affect voters' tendency to engage information with a partisan bias: affective polarization, anger, and candidate evaluations. Each of these factors carries its own empirical implications. Affective polarization is the tendency to view copartisans positively and opposing partisans negatively (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), which make ordinary partisans dislike and distrust each other (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). This means that polarization is not primarily rooted on ideology but on identity (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018). Given voters' tendency to develop an in-group/out-group identity (Tajfel 1981), polarized partisans resort to motivated reasoning to view their party as acting in good intentions

(Edelson et al. 2017) and others as acting to immoral ends (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016). In other words, the more polarized partisans' affective responses toward opposing parties are, the more influence these negative feelings are likely to have on political perceptions, in this particular case, about politicians' corrupt actions.

Anger also is a core component of how people see the political world (Marcus 2003). It is associated with motivated reasoning and reliance on preexisting considerations (Brader 2005; Hyddt, Feldman, and Weber 2007; MacKuen et al. 2010). Recent research on opinion formation suggests that emotions uniquely affect partisan processing of political news and information, which can enhance or lessen partisanship's influence on voters' beliefs (Weeks 2015). For example, while anxiety increases political information seeking, learning, and deliberation, anger has the opposite effect (Valentino et al. 2011). MacKuen et al. (2010) find that anger makes citizens less likely to search for attitude-challenging information. Similarly, Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau (2007) find that anger decreases individuals' interest in learning about candidates with whom they disagree, causing people to heavily rely on their priors (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau 2007) and orienting them to think in a way that defends allies and attacks opponents (Lazarus 1991; Suhay and Erisen 2018). In other words, anger enhances the partisan bias process: angry individuals dismiss contrary information, seek information that supports their views, and establish the directions and the strength of the partisan bias (Weeks 2015). In fact, recent literature has found that anger is particularly important during campaigns, since populist candidates tend to appeal to voters' anger (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Aguilar and Carlin 2017) and are able to motivate individuals to assign blame to the political establishment (Abelson 1995). This makes the partisan bias effect particularly important among voters who hold grievances against the establishment.

The second set of hypotheses reflects the main takeaways from this discussion:

> Hypothesis 2a (Affective Polarization): Voters with higher levels of affective polarization are less likely to judge the same offense as corrupt if their co-partisan candidate is involved.

> Hypothesis 2b (Anger): Voters with higher levels of anger are less likely to judge the same offense as corrupt if their co-partisan candidate is involved.

Candidate evaluations are also likely to moderate voters' evaluations. Candidate evaluations constitute a major element of what the early Michigan school of voting behavior referred to as the "funnel of causality" that leads to vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960). Voters use their partisan attachments as a shortcut for making political judgments (Bartels 2000; Sniderman

2000) and tend to confirm and reinforce their prior beliefs, particularly rejecting the information that is inconsistent with their political predispositions (Zaller 1992; Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). However, we should expect some variation among voters, particularly in young democracies where parties are weakly institutionalized – party roots in society are weak (Mainwaring 2018), parties have weak brands (Lupu 2015) and an important proportion of voters self-identify as independents (Castro Cornejo 2021a) – making voters more likely to be swayed by short-term forces (Lupu, Oliveros, and Schiumerini 2019). In these contexts, some voters have not developed a long-term partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), but their political attachments constitute a running-tally of political evaluations (Lupu 2013; Castro Cornejo 2021b) allowing a candidate bias influence their political evaluations. In this context, voters who hold weakly formed partisan attachments and particularly, independents, are likely to rely on candidate evaluations when evaluating politicians' actions:

The last hypothesis of this paper thus proposes:

> Hypothesis 2c (Candidate Evaluations): Voters who report a favorable opinion of the candidate involved in the corruption scandal are less likely to judge the same offense as corrupt if that candidate is involved.

The next section applies the theory of partisan bias and opinion formation to the Mexican electorate.


## Anger, affective polarization, and the rise of the populist left in Mexico

The Mexican party system can be considered fairly institutionalized compared to the rest of the party systems in the region (Mainwaring 2018). The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN), and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) have been the major contenders in each election since Mexico's transition to democracy in 1997. While the three major parties have fairly strong party organizations and meaningful party labels, most studies argue that partisanship is weakly rooted in society (Greene 2011). However, recent research suggests that these findings are an artifact of question wording and that partisanship is actually widespread within the electorate (Baker and Renno 2019; Castro Cornejo 2019). This conclusion is consistent with recent studies about partisans in Latin America (Lupu 2015) and Mexico's National Electoral Study (Beltrán, Ley, and Castro Cornejo 2020), which found that, excluding independent leaners, 59% of the electorate self-identified with a political party during the 2018 presidential election. In addition, the same data suggest that affective polarization has increased.
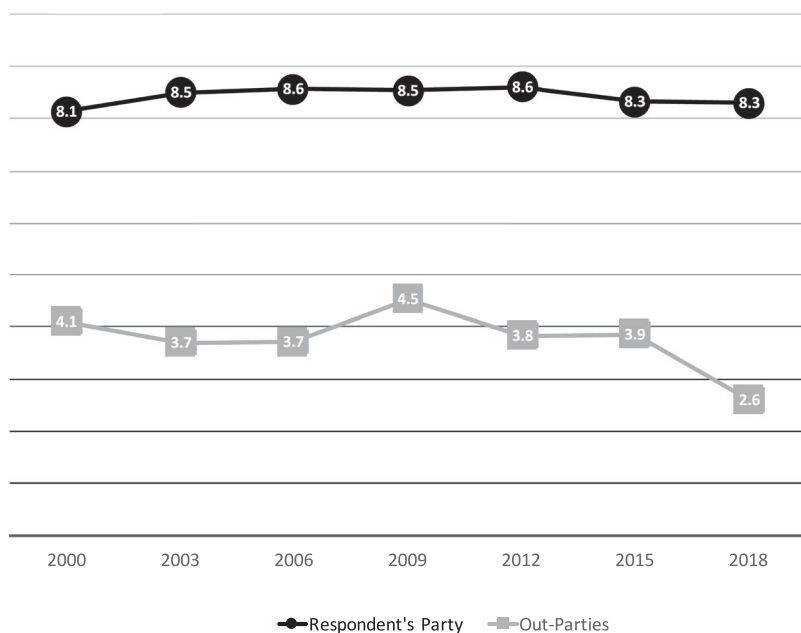
**Figure 1.** Affective polarization in Mexico (2000–2018). Notes: Average feeling thermometer ratings of own party and opposing party (0: Very bad; 10: Very good). Source: National Electoral Study (CSES Mexico).

Since Mexico's transition to democracy, the proportion of voters who both like their party and greatly dislike the opposing parties has increased significantly (Figure 1).

However, while partisanship continued to be widespread among the Mexican electorate in 2018, the emergence of a new major party has transformed the partisan attachments of an important part of the electorate. While partisan loyalties were fairly stable between 2000 and 2015, when priistas formed the largest partisan group, and panistas and perredistas followed in second and third place in 2018, morenistas became the largest partisan group in the country. According to the 2018 National Electoral Study (CSES), 22% of the electorate self-identified with MORENA, 17% with the PAN, 14% with the PRI, 4% with the PRD – which lost a significant part of its partisan base after MORENA's appearance in 2015 – and 6% with small parties. In addition, 33% self-identified as independents – a proportion of voters that has remained fairly consistent since the previous elections. In other words, the decay of the Mexican party system has not entailed the demise of partisanship – as in other Latin American countries (Venezuela or Perú: Morgan 2011; Seawright 2012) – but the development of new partisan loyalties, particularly, to MORENA.

This means that while some voters have been able to develop long-term partisanship consistent with socio-psychological theories of partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), others had embraced short-term partisanship that allowed them to direct their loyalty to a new party. This last type of partisanship seems to behave more like a "running tally" of political evaluations (Lupu 2013; Castro Cornejo 2021b), which is consistent with more rationalist interpretations of voting behavior (Fiorina 1981). This is particularly the case of the nascent partisanship of MORENA, which mostly inherited PRD partisans, proceeded to become the major leftist political party in Mexico, and is strongly tied to López Obrador's political figure.[1] However, while nascent, recent studies already find that MORENA partisanship already moderates voters' attitudes and behavior, such as their retrospective evaluations of the economy, security, corruption, belief in a corrupt elite, and turnout (Castro Cornejo, Ley, and Beltrán 2020). As opposed to uribismo, fujimorismo or other personalist political identifications in Latin America, Lopez Obrador – similar to Evo Morales and MAS (Movement to Socialism, in Spanish) – has a strong party organization inherited from the PRD, particularly in Mexico City and southern Mexico, that has allowed MORENA to become a strong party label and identification.

As previously mentioned, the Mexican Party system experienced a major electoral shock in the 2018 presidential election when the main anti-PRI opposition candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, won the presidential election and his party won a majority in Congress. López Obrador had run for president in 2006 and 2012 as a PRD candidate and eventually founded his own personalistic party, MORENA, in 2015. Similar to his 2006 populist rhetoric (Bruhn 2012), López Obrador divided Mexican society between the "people" and a corrupt elite during his 2018 presidential campaign. He depicted the incumbent PRI and the PAN as representing the same interests and being part of a "political mafia" that had impoverished Mexico with neoliberalism and corrupt policies His successful campaign can partially be attributed to voters' negative evaluations of the national economy, public safety, and corruption. According to Mexico's National Electoral Study (CSES), these three areas registered the most negative evaluations since the electoral study was first conducted in 1997: two thirds of the electorate considered the national economy, public safety, and corruption worse than under the previous governments. The PRI incumbent's presidential approval also registered its lowest level since Mexico's transition to democracy

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[1]In fact, in the same original survey that this study is based on, around two thirds of MORENA partisans declared that they had previously self-identified with the PRD 19% of respondents declared that they had previously identified with the PRI and 16% with the PAN.

(Cornejo et al. 2022). Moreover, most voters reported being very angry about the state of the country: respondents averaged 7.1 on a 0–10 scale (independents scored 7.5, MORENA voters 7.2, PAN voters 6.8, and PRI voters 6.7).

The next section explains how the survey experiment presented respondents with a situation that described a seventeen-year-old Mexican corruption scandal, the so called "videoscandals," in which the media made videos of prominent politicians public and López Obrador was involved. As recent literature suggests, citizens' responses to real political events provide a window of opportunity to study the process of opinion updating (Jerit and Barabas 2012). In this particular case, López Obrador's personal assistant, René Bejarano, appeared in one of the released videos receiving cash (around USD$45,000) from a well-known businessman. The video was recorded a year before the 2006 presidential election, when López Obrador was still Mayor of Mexico City. As several media outlets reported, the businessman received a substantial number of construction contracts from the government of Mexico City and, in exchange, he funded several political campaigns for the PRD, allegedly including López Obrador's presidential bid. René Bejarano faced a trial and was imprisoned for 10 months. López Obrador denied any knowledge of his personal assistant receiving money from the businessman. He accused the PRI, the PAN, and the "political mafia" of being behind the videos, alleging that this constituted a "conspiracy" against his campaign.

Given the context of a polarized party system, in which levels of anger and affective polarization are widespread among voters, it is likely that voters' partisan bias influenced opinion updating about corruption, particularly because the scandal involved López Obrador. The next section explains the survey experimental design used to test the hypotheses of this study.

## Empirical strategy and data

This study fielded an original nationally representative telephone survey experiment in Mexico between June 26 and 29, 2018, the week before the presidential election held on July 1st. The survey was conducted by *BGC Beltrán, Juárez y Asociados* and included a sample of 782 respondents,[2] who were randomly divided into 2 groups. These groups are balanced across observed covariates (see Table A1 in appendix). Respondents in each group were presented with two situations that described the aforementioned corruption scandal which took place in Mexico in 2004. The first

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[2]Three hundred sixteen respondents were part of the second wave of a panel survey. Four hundred sixty six respondents were contacted for the first time.

version described the corruption scandal omitting the names of the politicians involved; the second version identified the involved politicians.

The vignette describes the corruption scandal in which Andrés Manuel López Obrador's assistant received money from an important businessman. That money is described as a means to funding López Obrador's presidential campaign. It reads as follows:

> Version 1 (Without names): I am going to ask you to imagine a politician and his personal assistant. The personal assistant appeared in a video receiving millions of pesos in cash from a businessman. In the video, you can see the personal assistant putting a stack of bills in his bag. It is said that the businessman is giving him money so that the former can continue getting government construction contracts and the latter can use the money from the bag to allegedly finance the politician's presidential campaign

> Version 2 (With names): I am going to ask you to imagine Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his personal assistant, René Bejarano. René Bejarano appeared in a video receiving millions of pesos in cash from a businessman. In the video, you can see René Bejarano putting a bunch of bills in his bag. It is said that the businessman is giving him money so that the former can continue getting government construction contracts and the latter can use the money from the bag to allegedly finance Lopez Obrador's presidential campaign

After reading the vignette about the corruption scandal, respondents were asked the following question, which constitutes the dependent variable of this study:

> On a 0–10 scale, where 0 means that they are not corrupt and 10 that they are corrupt, how corrupt do you believe the actions of [Version 1: the aforementioned politician/Version 2: López Obrador] – who is going to allegedly benefit from the money in that bag – are?[3]

As previously mentioned, this dependent variable measures if respondents qualify the actions as corrupt, in contrast to most corruption literature that tends to focus on vote choice and evaluates if partisans "tolerate" or "forgive" co-partisan candidates' actions (e.g. if respondents vote for the alleged corrupt politician). The random assignment to the treatment condition guarantees that, on average, respondents exposed to different treatments will be identical in both observable and unobservable characteristics. Any systematic difference between the two groups' answers to the dependent variable question provides an estimate of how explicitly mentioning the names of the politicians makes respondents engage in biased opinion updating.

This study measures partisanship with a wording that mirrors the strategy followed by the American National Election Study (ANES): "Regardless of the

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[3]2% of respondents did not reply to the question and 9% replied "did not know."

party you vote for, do you consider yourself panista, priista, perredista, verde-ecologista, MORENA, or from any other political party?" To test hetero-geneous effects, this study analyzes variations across levels of anger, affective polarization, and candidate evaluations (hypotheses 2). To test the affective polarization hypothesis, this study relies on the following feeling thermometers: "On a 0–10 scale, where 0 means having a very bad opinion and 10 means having a very good opinion, what is your opinion of the PRI/PAN/MORENA?" Based on those three questions, a new variable estimates the difference between respondents' favorability of MORENA (in-group atti-tudes) and the mean favorability of the PAN and PRI (out-group attitudes). This variable is coded 0 if the distance between MORENA and the other parties is close to zero and 1 if the distance is greater.

To measure voters' opinion about López Obrador (candidate evaluation), the analysis considers relies on the following feeling thermometer: "On a 0–10 scale, where 0 means having a very bad opinion and 10 means having a very good opinion, what is your opinion of Andrés Manuel López Obrador?" It is important to highlight that among MORENA partisans, 97% report a favorable opinion about López Obrador (answered 8, 9 or 10 on the 0–10 scale) and only 3% reports an unfavorable opinion (answered between 0 and 7 on the 0–10 scale). Similarly, most out-partisans – PAN and PRI partisans (76%) –, reported an unfavorable opinion. In turn, about half of independents reported a favorable opinion of López Obrador. Finally, to estimate respondents' levels of anger with the general situation of the country, the analysis relies on the following question: "On a 0–10 scale, where 0 means not angry and 10 means very angry, how angry do you feel with the current situation of the country?" Later on, a variable that equals 1 if a respondent reports high levels of anger (choice 10 on the 0–10 scale, which represents 41% of the sample) and 0 if the respondent reports lower levels of anger was added to the analysis (see Table A2 in the Appendix for complete descriptive statistics).

## Results

Given that responses assigned to each treatment are expected to differ across partisanship, the analysis presents each partisan group's mean response on the 0–10 scale, where 0 means that the respondent believes the politician's actions are not corrupt and 10 that they are corrupt. As expected, Figure 2 shows an asymmetrical reaction to the treatment (complete regressions in Table A3 in the Appendix). Co-partisans behave differently when the name of the politician – López Obrador – is mentioned than when it is not. When the names were explicitly mentioned, MORENA partisans were less likely to believe that such actions qualified as corrupt (3.5) than when the names were not mentioned (8.1): the difference is substantively large and statistically
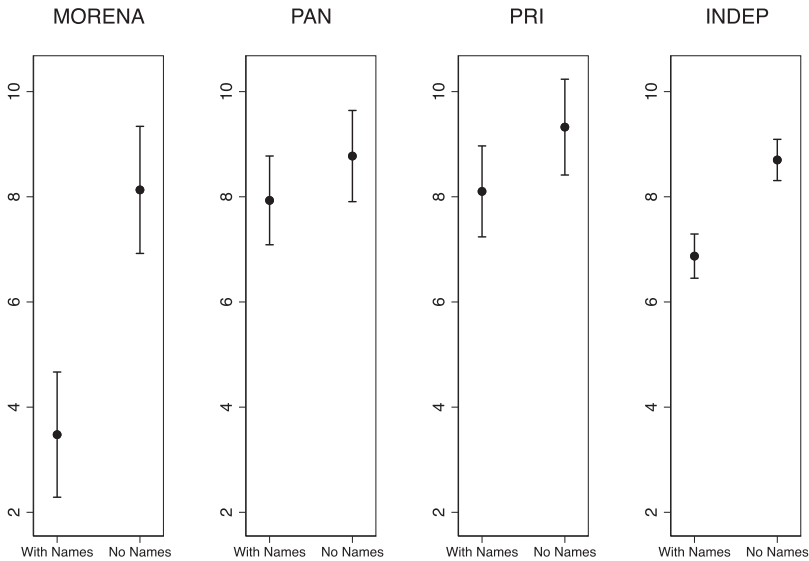
**Figure 2.** Perceptions of corruption across partisan groups (0 = Not Corrupt/10 = Corrupt).

significant, a 4.6-point difference on the 0–10 scale ($p < 0.01$). MORENA partisans view the events in the vignette through a partisan bias. Consistent with events studied by the literature on opinion formation, the results highlight the "same facts, different interpretations" behavior: judgments about what is corrupt and what is not depend on whether respondents' co-partisan candidate is involved, even though both versions of the vignette refer to exactly the same actions (hypothesis 1). In other words, the results strongly suggest that an opinion updating process biased by partisan motivations took place.

In the case of out-partisans, the opinion updating process is different. In both versions, the differences are not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The results of the survey experiment provide support for the main hypothesis of this study: the dramatic partisan bias that MORENA partisans experience is not registered among PAN and PRI partisans. The experiment did not significantly influence their perceptions about corruption – they consider such actions corrupt regardless of whether politicians are explicitly named or not. Figure 2 highlights the differences among out-partisans: a 0.9-point difference among PAN partisans and a 1.2-point difference among PRI partisan, although in both cases the confidence intervals overlap ($p > 0.05$). Since the involved candidate is an out-partisan candidate, they still believe the actions are corrupt. It is important to highlight that out-partisans' responses are remarkably similar to MORENA partisans' responses when they qualify as corrupt the actions of the unnamed politician. Only when the co-partisan politician is mentioned, the partisan

bias is activated among Morena partisans among independents, the difference between both versions of the survey experiment is 1.8. This is the only group – aside from Morena partisans – in which the treatment significantly influenced respondents' behavior and moved their responses in the same direction as Morena partisans. In the next lines, we explain why we believe this was the case.

To better understand the partisan bias among MORENA partisans and why the treatment also influenced independents' responses, Figures 3 and 4 examine three factors that can moderate the partisan bias according to the previous theoretical discussion: affective polarization, anger, and candidate evaluations (complete regressions in Table A4 in the Appendix). Among MORENA partisans, Figure 3 shows that affective polarization and candidate evaluations do not moderate the partisan bias effect (interaction terms, $p > 0.05$). However, anger moderates the partisan bias effect: voters with higher levels of anger about the situation of the country are more likely to change their opinion depending on whether or not their candidate engages in corruption ($p < 0.01$). Higher levels of anger make voters think that the illegal activities that the vignette describes – and explicitly mention the co-partisan politicians' names that were involved – do not constitute corruption.

Figure 3 reports the substantive effect of anger on biased opinion updating. When the vignette does not include the names of the politicians
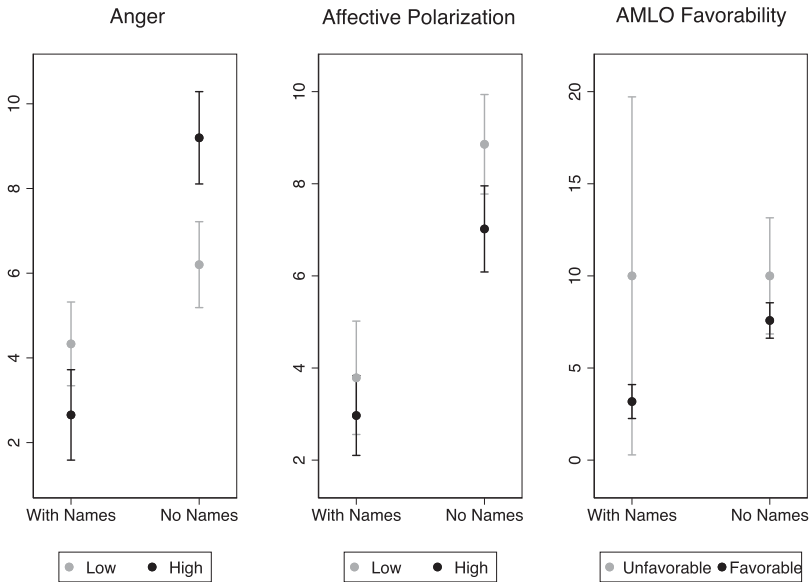


**Figure 3.** Perceptions of corruption among MORENA partisans (0 = Not Corrupt/10 = Corrupt).
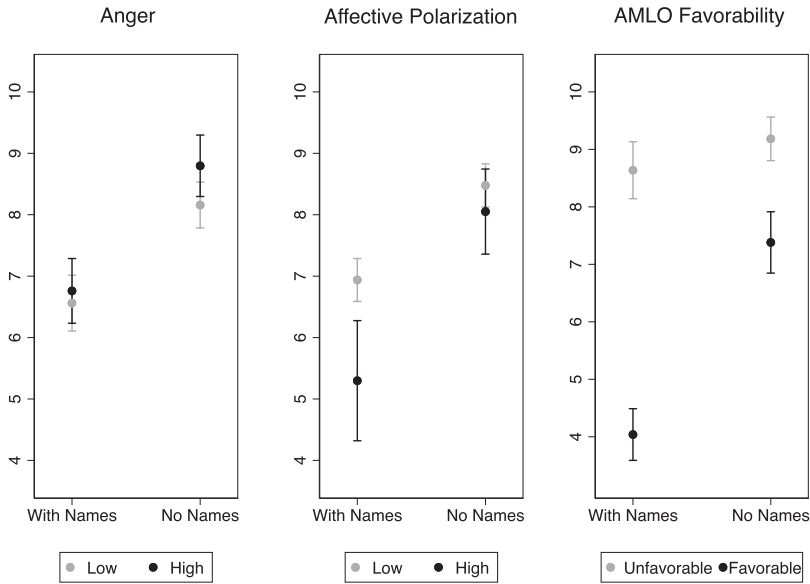
**Figure 4.** Perceptions of corruption among independents (0 = Not Corrupt/10 = Corrupt).

involved, angry MORENA partisans unequivocally qualify the actions as corruption (9.2). However, when their co-partisan politicians are explicitly mentioned, angry MORENA partisans strongly reject that those actions constitute corruption (2.6): the partisan bias effect is about 6.6-point difference, a large and statistically significant effect ($p < 0.01$). In contrast, the difference is only 1.9 points (from 6.2 to 4.3) among MORENA partisans with lower levels of anger (although the confidence intervals tend to overlap among Morena partisans who report lower levels of anger). Consistent with motivation reasoning theory, these results provide evidence that there is a biased updating process among angry Morena partisans that exacerbates partisan bias.

What is it about anger that motivates voters to engage in defensive mechanisms, choosing interpretations that rationalize their partisan beliefs? As mentioned before, in a party system marked by a programmatic decline and amidst an increasing deterioration of citizens' evaluations of the economy, public safety, and corruption, voters were ready to punish the parties that had governed Mexico since its transition to democracy: the PAN and the incumbent PRI. In fact, the same survey used in the survey experiment included an open-ended question that asked voters why they were reporting feeling angry about the situation of the country. MORENA partisans mentioned violence/public safety in the country (30%), bad PRI government (21%), widespread corruption (17%), economic deterioration (12%), and impunity (7%). This is why when facing information about their co-partisan

candidate, angry MORENA voters had their anger enhance the partisan bias process. This made them rely heavily on their priors and dismiss the information that López Obrador had engaged in corruption.

Overall these results are consistent with the partisan bias literature that highlights that events do not speak for themselves; people interpret them in different ways. An important question relates to the potential effect that the treatment of this study had on vote choice – which has been the focus of most literature on corruption and voting behavior. Table A6 in the Appendix reports that, 88% of MORENA voters declared their support for López Obrador (vote intention question) in version 1 and 89% in version 2. In other words, both groups were equally likely to support López Obrador's candidacy in the presidential election – which, at the moment of the survey experiment, was a few days away. These results are important since if this study had focused on that dependent variable, one of its conclusions would have been that, consistent with prior studies, voters tend to tolerate rather than punish corruption: they vote for their co-partisan presidential candidate regardless of corruption accusations. However, since this study analyzed if voters considered such actions corrupt, the results of this paper suggests that MORENA voters do not have anything to tolerate or pardon: they do not think that their co-partisan politician was involved in any corrupt activities and they support him enthusiastically. From their perspective, even if he is involved in some activities, those actions do not qualify as corrupt.

In the case of independents, their behavior is not moderated by anger but by candidate evaluations – Lopez Obrador's favorability.[4] Consistent with the theoretical discussion discussed in the previous sections of this paper, independents – who by definition do not have partisan attachments – are unable to activate a partisan bias to judge the actions of the politician mentioned in the survey experiment. In turn, short-term variables such as candidate evaluations moderate their response to the vignette. Similar to the behavior of out-partisans, the treatment did not affect independents with unfavorable opinions about López Obrador. In turn, independents with favorable opinion about López Obrador updated their perceptions about corruption when López Obrador was explicitly mentioned: 7.4 when the politician is unnamed and 4.0 when López Obrador is explicitly mentioned, a 3.4-point difference. In other words, their candidate bias made independents less likely to qualify the actions as corruption when a politician they like was involved.

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[4]Lopez Obrador's feeling thermometer was located in the first part of the questionnaire (before the experiment). Therefore, the information provided by the experiment did not influence the responses to the feeling thermometer questions.

In the case of out-partisans, as mentioned before, the experiment did not affect their responses; they consider the out-partisan politicians' actions as corruption, whether their names are explicitly named or when they are unnamed. Similarly, the interaction terms are not statistically significant; their behavior was not moderated by anger, affective polarization or candidate evaluations. Interestingly, while candidate evaluations are not statistically significant (see Figures A1 and A2 in the Appendix), among the vast majority of PAN partisans – who report an unfavorable opinion of López Obrador – there are no differences between the two vignettes. However, among some PAN partisans who report a favorable opinion of Lopez Obrador – around a fourth of PAN partisans – they are less likely to consider as corrupt the actions described in the vignette when the politicians are explicitly named. In the case of PRI partisans, we see a very similar behavior, although the interaction term is also not statistically significant. Consistent with theories of partisanship in Latin America, the partisan bias can be muted under some circumstances (e.g. Botero et al. 2021). In this particular case, when some short-term forces interact with their partisanship, e.g. when out-partisans have a favorable opinion of López Obrador, some out-partisans are less likely to consider such actions as corrupt when his name is explicitly highlighted in the vignette.[5]

## Discussion

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on corruption and opinion formation by accounting for the ways individuals form their judgments about what is right and what is wrong in politics. In corruption scandals or, more generally in politics, facts do not speak for themselves (Gaines et al. 2007). Voters can perceive the same event and interpret it differently. In this particular case, voters judge differently depending on the people involved in an illegal activity: they tend to qualify actions as corrupt if their co-partisan candidate was not involved. This means that partisans in young democracies like Mexico engage in defensive mechanisms to reinforce beliefs about their co-partisan candidate, even when there are no instrumental benefits at place but expressive benefits rooted in partisanship.

Citizens' responses to this highly partisan issue provide a window of opportunity to study the process of opinion updating in polarized environments. The evidence provided in this paper does not support a Bayesian model of political learning (Gerber and Green 1998) but presents evidence that voters update their evaluations in a partisan manner. While this research

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[5]The fact that the experiment is based on an event that actually happened in Mexico seventeen years ago means that some respondents might have remembered the scandal, potentially driving the results of the survey experiment. Table A5 in the Appendix reports that levels of information do not moderate respondents' reaction to the experiment.

focused on a corruption scandal in Mexico, the results of this paper can travel to other contexts in Latin America and elsewhere. We should observe partisan perceptual bias whenever a fact or event has partisan relevance (Jerit and Barabas 2012) as learning causes partisans to process information differently. This means that partisan bias can exist on a wide variety of issues and it is not confined to corruption. Moreover, if this study is replicated in other countries with weaker partisanship, engaging in partisan bias to protect in-group status may also be relevant but rooted in other variables such as ideology, co-ethnicity, or any factors that divide the electorate.

While the survey experiment establishes that partisan bias can shape voters' opinion formation, how this result generalizes to real-life settings remains an open question. Treatment effects in real-world contexts could be diminished by nuances about the specific scandal or politicians' motivations. Like all survey experiments, this study cannot place a value on these various factors (or speak to how non-respondents would have responded to the experimental stimulus). However, given that the survey experiment relies on a real-life corruption scandal, the logic of the findings of this paper is sufficiently compelling that it would be extremely surprising if a partisan bias played no role in real-life settings. In fact, given that the experiment is based on a real-life corruption scandal, it is highly likely that it provides conservative results. In other words, the difference between a "pure" control group and treatment would be larger, since probably some voters probably remember some of the details of the described event – even though it happened seventeen years ago – and might give López Obrador the benefit of the doubt (since, eventually, AMLO distanced himself from his close collaborator and accused a conspiracy). It should be highlighted that, if voters had actively remembered the corruption scandal, Morena partisans would not have reported a difference between control and treatment groups. However, as reported in this study, they did not condemn the behavior from the unnamed politician that directly parallels the 2005 "videoscandals."

Some features of corruption and partisan bias not tested in this paper may also turn out to be influential if examined in future studies. For example, one limitation of this study is that it only tests the effect of one candidate – Andres Manuel López Obrador – participating in a corruption scandal. In other words, it focuses on the most important politician of a major party. Thus, it constitutes a likely case of partisan bias. Future studies should consider adding more candidates to be sure that other candidates – beyond López Obrador – also create an in-group versus out-group perceptions. Future literature should also consider analyzing the type of corruption in which a co-partisan politician is involved (Botero et al. 2019). It is likely that more severe misdeeds will cause only strong partisans to engage in biased opinion updating, while weak partisans might accept that their co-partisan candidate is corrupt.

## Disclosure statement

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