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Does the Presence of Women in Politics Reduce Corruption in Latin America?

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ABSTRACT

Corruption has become one of the most important political challenges for Latin American governments in recent years. Is the presence of women in politics a solution to corruption problems? Research from the early 2000s on women's representation in parliaments and corruption levels from countries around the world suggests that the answer to this question is "yes." However, analysis of the relationship between women in government and corruption in Latin America shows that the answer is "not yet." Greater presence of women in Latin American governments has the potential to reduce corruption but only when combined with institutional improvements to the quality of democracy and electoral accountability in the region.



Corruption and corruption scandals have long plagued Latin American democracies, but in recent years, attention to corruption and public frustration with it has taken center stage. Examples of rampant corruption throughout the region include Brazil's 2005–2006 *mensalão* scandal and the country's current *lava jato* scandal; allegations in Argentina that former presidents Néstor and Cristina Kirchner skimmed from public coffers while in office; the Mexican president's wife's questionable housing deal; and, perhaps most extensively, the customs scandal in Guatemala that forced the resignations of the country's vice president and president last year. Citizen frustration has been evident through street protests, at the ballot box, and in public opinion surveys and government approval ratings.

Table 1 shows the most recent data on corruption in 18 Latin American countries from Transparency International's 2015

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) released earlier this year. Although the corruption scores of countries vary, Latin America's regional average and the fact that only three countries are among the least corrupt countries in the world (Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica) indicate that corruption continues to be a serious problem in the region. The prevalence of and concern with corruption in Latin America raises important questions about how to reduce corruption in politics.

One possible answer to this question emerged in the early 2000s when researchers at the World Bank identified an interesting relationship—representation of women in government, particularly in legislatures, is associated with reduced levels of corruption. Dollar et al. (2001) directly compared women's representation in parliaments with overall corruption levels in their governments and found a strong correlation between the two across a large number of countries. Swamy et al.

Is women's representation in public office a solution to corruption in Latin America? Not yet.

TABLE 1 — CORRUPTION IN LATIN AMERICA (2015)

Country	CPI Rank (Highest = Most Corrupt)	CPI Score (Highest = Least Corrupt)
Uruguay	21	74
Chile	23	70
Costa Rica	40	55
El Salvador	72	39
Panama	72	39
Brazil	76	38
Colombia	83	37
Peru	88	36
Mexico	95	35
Bolivia	99	34
Dominican Republic	103	33
Argentina	107	32
Ecuador	107	32
Honduras	112	31
Guatemala	123	28
Nicaragua	130	27
Paraguay	130	27
Venezuela	158	17
Average		38

NOTE Transparency International's CPI measures corruption perceptions but, as they note, "Capturing perceptions of corruption of those in a position to offer assessments of public sector corruption is the most reliable method of comparing relative corruption levels across countries" (Transparency International 2015, 1).

SOURCE Data available at <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015>.

(2001) explored the relationship between corruption and women in parliament, bureaucratic agencies, and the labor force, finding that the presence of more women in these institutions was associated with less corruption. In the aftermath of this research, some governments enthusiastically brought women into civil service positions as an anti-corruption measure (Moore 1999). The state of Mexico, for example, implemented an all-female corps of traffic officers in 2013 in an explicit effort to end problems of police accepting bribes when issuing citations (Kahn 2013).

Fifteen years have passed since Dollar and Swamy initially linked the presence of women in government to lower levels of corruption. During this period, women's representation in politics increased dramatically in Latin America (see Figure 1). Yet, corruption appears to have become more, rather than less, problematic for governments in the region. Is women's representation in public office a solution to corruption in Latin America? Not yet. Research has found no relationship between women's representation and corruption in Latin America. However, in combination with institutional reforms to improve the functioning of democracy and electoral accountability, women's presence in government does have the potential to improve the corruption problems that plague the region.

CAVEATS REGARDING THE LINK BETWEEN WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND CORRUPTION

In the years since the initial findings from Dollar et al. and Swamy et al., research on women's representation in government and corruption has expanded. Three important caveats to Dollar's and Swamy's findings have emerged. First, the relationship between women's representation and reduced corruption is context-specific. In other words, it exists in some countries and political contexts, but not all. For example, Esarey and Chirillo (2013) found that the relationship is strong and significant in democracies but nonexistent in authoritarian regimes. In a series of cross-national experiments designed to measure willingness to engage in corruption, Alatas et al. (2009) found that women were less susceptible to corruption in some countries but not in others. Specifically, they found gender differences in willingness to engage in and tolerate corruption in Australia but not in India, Indonesia, or Singapore.

A second caveat is that the reason why women's representation is linked to less corruption is *not* that women are essentially more honest or trustworthy than men. Dollar et al.'s (2001, 423) study suggested

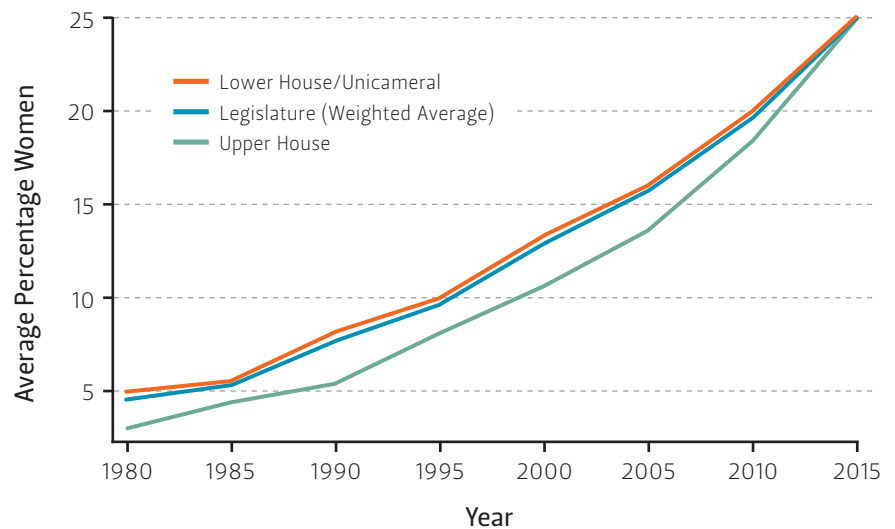
that the perception that women are “more trustworthy and public-spirited than men” is the reason why they are associated with less corruption in government. Yet this was roundly dismissed as a “myth” by gender and politics scholars (Goetz 2007), and it did not explain why the relationship exists in some countries but not others.¹ More recent scholarship has suggested that women have had less opportunity to engage in corruption because they are often excluded from power and patronage (Tripp 2001; Goetz 2007; Branisa and Ziegler 2011); however, one recent study found that the link between women’s representation and corruption holds true even after accounting for levels of political opportunity (Torgler and Valev 2010). Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2016) argued that the relationship results from women’s greater risk aversion and concern that gendered views of women in government can disproportionately hurt women more than men.

Third, it is possible that the relationship between women’s presence in government and corruption runs in both directions. In other words, it is possible that having more women in government leads to less corruption, and less corruption may encourage more women to enter politics. Women may be less likely to engage in corruption than men (for any of the reasons just mentioned), thereby making public sector corruption less pervasive. At the same time, women may be less likely to enter corrupt political systems because political recruitment of women is more difficult in clientelistic or corrupt societies, where women are more likely to be excluded from male-dominated election networks (Bjarnegård 2013; Stockemer 2011; Sundström and Wängnerud 2016).

IS WOMEN’S PRESENCE IN GOVERNMENT LINKED TO CORRUPTION IN LATIN AMERICA?

The evidence marshaled for this policy brief suggests that, no, women’s presence in government is not currently a solution to corruption in Latin America.

FIGURE 1 — WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICAN LEGISLATURES (1980–2015)



NOTE Data on women in legislatures are from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), various years.

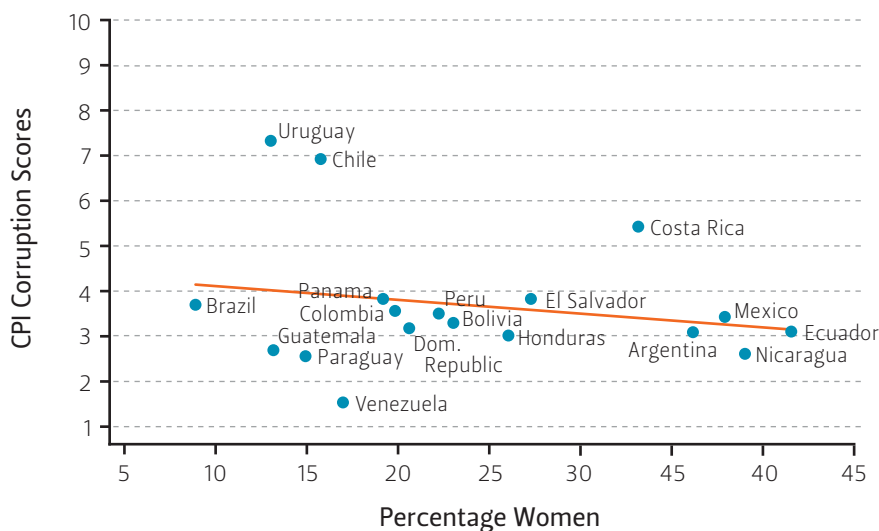
SOURCE See <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

First, there is no indication that governments led by women are any less corrupt than governments led by men. Corruption scandals have plagued the governments of female presidents recently elected in the region. In Costa Rica, corruption scandals marred the administration of Laura Chinchilla (2010–2014). Several of her ministers were accused of involvement in a range of corrupt activities, including tax evasion, inappropriately awarding government contracts, and influence peddling, which contributed to her record-low presidential approval ratings (around 10 percent). In Brazil, Dilma Rousseff’s Worker’s Party (PT) has been hurt by widespread accusations of corruption. Rousseff herself has been temporarily removed from office amid impeachment proceedings related to allegedly unauthorized budget maneuvers during her presidency. A final vote on her impeachment is due at the end of August, 2016. Even Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, who left office in 2010 with exceptionally high approval ratings, was quickly engulfed in a scandal at the start of her second term in 2014 when her son was accused of using his position to negotiate

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favorable terms on a real estate deal. Her popularity has yet to recover. Although no allegations of corruption have been targeted directly at these female presidents, their administrations have been as strongly associated with corruption as previous male-led presidential administrations. No evidence suggests that *las presidentas* have been less associated with corruption than *los presidentes*.²

FIGURE 2 — RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CORRUPTION AND WOMEN'S LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATION IN LATIN AMERICA (2015)



NOTE Lower corruption scores = more corrupt

SOURCE Author's analysis.

Second, correlations between women's presence in legislatures and corruption levels reveal a similar lack of relationship. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the percentage of a country's national legislature that is female and its CPI score in 2015.³ Although the line suggests a slightly declining relationship, it is not a statistically significant correlation.⁴ To the extent that it does decline, it exhibits a trend of more women in legislatures being associated with more corruption, not less. Similar comparisons made using annual data on women in legislatures and CPI scores from 1998 through 2010 also indicate no significant relationship between women in national legislatures and public sector corruption in any of those years

(results not shown).⁵ Despite the rapid adoption of gender quotas throughout Latin America in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which led to large numbers of women getting elected to national legislatures in the region,⁶ corruption does not appear to be any less prevalent in countries with more female legislators.⁷

Only a few studies have specifically examined gender and corruption in Latin America; yet, they have also raised questions about the extent to which women in government might be associated with corruption. Schwindt-Bayer (2010, 170–176) used the 2006 Americas Barometer survey data to explore the relationship between citizen perceptions of corruption and women's representation in government. The study concluded that women's presence in legislatures, the presence of a female president, and the proportion of a presidential cabinet that is female had no relationship with corruption perceptions.⁸ In contrast, Wängnerud (2012, 237–239) found an association with women in government and corruption among municipal governments in Mexico. Grimes and Wängnerud (2012) show that this relationship reflects both women's challenges getting into office in corrupt political contexts and lower levels of corruption resulting from women's presence in office.⁹

REDUCING CORRUPTION IN LATIN AMERICA

Little evidence supports a link between women in government and corruption in Latin America. Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer's (2016) research suggests a possible answer as to why. They maintain that the relationship is strongest in countries with high electoral accountability—that is, where voters have the opportunity to detect corruption and punish public officials for that corruption. They argue that if women are more risk averse than men or are more likely to be harshly punished for corruption than are men, then conditions of high accountability would yield women who are less willing to engage in corruption because such actions are risky for them. In contrast,

where accountability is weak, corruption is no riskier for women than for men, and they may be equally likely to engage in corrupt activities (or at least be no less deterred). They identify four accountability contexts to test whether the relationship between women's representation in government and corruption is stronger when accountability is high. In governments where corruption norms are absent, a parliamentary system is in place, personalistic electoral rules are in effect, and freedom of the press is respected, the relationship is strong. In governments where corruption norms are pervasive, a presidential system is in place, strong party-centered electoral systems are in effect, and freedom of the press is regularly violated, the relationship is weaker or nonexistent.

Latin America is a region dominated by weak electoral accountability. Of course, variation exists across countries, but on the whole, the region operates in a culture of corruption, is almost entirely represented by presidential systems, and does not always respect the freedom of the press. In this context, we should not expect the presence of women in government to be associated with reduced corruption. Neither women's perceived risk aversion or their possible apprehension regarding disproportionately negative treatment from voters gets triggered in the region. In other words, we should not expect any kind of relationship between gender and corruption, at least with regard to women's presence reducing corruption levels.¹⁰

For Latin American countries to combat corruption, institutional reform continues to be necessary. Countries need to strengthen accountability mechanisms both vertically (strengthening ties between elected officials and voters) and horizontally (checks and balances across branches of government). Countries also need to continue efforts they have started in recent years, such as allowing international and national agencies to fully investigate and prosecute elites engaged in corrupt practices and continuing to reform institutions to make investigations and prosecutions easier (Economist 2015). Guatemala's agreement with the UN to create an international commission to conduct corruption investigations in the country

(Cicig, International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala) unveiled a major corruption scandal in early 2015 that led to the resignations and subsequent prosecutions of its former president and its first female vice president, Roxana Baldetti, on corruption charges. Brazil's judicial system has put unprecedented numbers of elected officials under investigation in its current Petrobras scandal, with many now facing prosecution. On one hand, all of this makes it appear that corruption has grown worse in recent years. On the other, it may just be making public what has long been hidden from public view. This publicity can help increase incentives for the press to be corruption watchdogs and challenge corruption norms in the region.

These types of changes combined with women's presence in office can work together to reduce corruption in the region more than either one can do on its own. It is now no surprise that the Mexican state that implemented an all-female police force to combat bribe-taking in traffic stops quickly found that female police officers were equally susceptible to bribery (Kahn 2013). Women's presence is not a panacea for reducing corruption. But, combined with increased accountability in the political system, it may work toward improving the region's corruption challenges.

Despite the rapid adoption of gender quotas throughout Latin America in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which led to large numbers of women getting elected to national legislatures in the region, corruption does not appear to be any less prevalent in countries with more female legislators.

ENDNOTES

1. Swamy et al. (2001) avoided guessing why the relationship might exist and instead focused on providing empirical evidence of the correlation.

2. In one case of direct female involvement in alleged corruption, Guatemala saw its first female vice president, Roxana Baldetti, resign in the face of corruption allegations in 2015.

3. Data on women in legislatures are from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), as of January 1, 2015. See <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif010115.htm>.

4. For the statistically inclined, the correlation was $r = -0.21$, $p = 0.40$.

5. Analysis was conducted using the cross-national time-series dataset from Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits (2016). The

relationship was not larger than $r = \pm 0.15$ and p -values never dropped below 0.55 in any of the annual correlations.

6. For more on gender quotas in Latin America, see Schwindt-Bayer (2015), <http://bakerinstitute.org/research/chiles-gender-quota-will-it-work/>.

7. Over-time comparisons were not conducted because the CPI did not become comparable over time until 2012. Comparing 2012–2015 scores reveals very small changes in most countries, with average scores of 38 in 2015, 38.6 in 2014, 37.7 in 2013, and 38.4 in 2012.

8. Interestingly, women's representation measured as formal rules (in the form of quotas and electoral disproportionality) and the passage of more women's issue policies were related to corruption. Countries with quotas, more women's issue policy passage, and less disproportional electoral rules had citizens who perceived less corruption.

9. They note, however, that the latter relationship had the weakest empirical support.

10. Gender quotas have worked to cancel out corruption networks' ability to exclude women, so no relationship would be expected in terms of more corruption reducing women's access to legislatures.

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