Partisanship, Information, and Perceptions of Government Corruption

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Abstract

This article analyzes how partisanship and political information influence perceptions of government corruption at national and regional levels and whether information attenuates the impact of partisanship. The data are drawn from surveys of recent elections held in Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. Almost everywhere, partisans of the incumbent parties and the most-informed citizens perceive less corruption than their nonpartisan and less-informed counterparts. However, there is no evidence of an interaction effect between information and partisanship. We note one interesting exception: In Quebec, the better informed perceive more corruption, especially those who are also partisans of opposition parties. We discuss how this pattern may be related to the emergence of a corruption scandal before the Quebec election.

It has become commonplace to speak of “disaffected democracies” (Pharr & Putnam, 2000). Trust in governments in postindustrial democracies has eroded. Citizens increasingly believe that governments are unresponsive to their needs, and they frequently hold politics and politicians in low esteem (Dalton, 2004). Corruption and, in particular, perceptions of corruption have fed into this democratic malaise. Perceived corruption can foster a “culture of distrust” (Melgar, Rossi, & Smith, 2010, p. 120) that diminishes confidence in political institutions, encourages harsher evaluations of the performance of the political system, and makes citizens less trusting of civil servants (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003).
Not surprisingly, then, we have been seeing a resurgence of interest in perceived corruption. Studies have examined whether citizens’ perceptions of the amount of corruption accord with those of elites as measured by Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (Melgar et al., 2010; Tverdova, 2011). They have examined how citizens’ own characteristics shape their perceptions about corruption (Melgar et al., 2010; Tverdova, 2011) and the extent to which citizens perceive a “culture of corruption” (McCann & Redlawsk, 2006). Studies have also looked at the impact of macroeconomic performance on perceived corruption (Melgar et al., 2010).

In this article, we examine the impact of partisanship and political information on perceptions of corruption. There are good reasons to expect that both factors matter. Studies have found evidence of a “home team effect,” whereby people who voted for the incumbent government tend to perceive less corruption than opposition supporters (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Tverdova, 2011). Moreover, a recent survey experiment conducted in Spain found that people evaluated the same offense less harshly if it involved a politician from their own party (Anduiza, Gallego, & Munoz, 2013). However, there has been no assessment of the impact of party identification on perceptions of the extent of corruption. Similarly, while studies have looked at the impact of education on perceived corruption (Melgar et al., 2010; Smith, 2010; Tverdova, 2011), none have examined how political information influences people’s perceptions of the degree of corruption in their government.

Our analyses draw on survey data from 11 elections conducted in Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland to analyze how partisanship and political information influence perceptions of government corruption at the national and regional levels. Encompassing a variety of countries and regions within these countries and elections at different levels (national, subnational, and supranational), the data enable us to examine the impact of partisanship and political information in diverse settings.

The Role of Partisanship and Information

The classic statement of partisan bias is found in The American Voter. Campbell and his colleagues (1960) argued that party identification “raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (p. 133). While this conclusion has not gone unchallenged, the weight of evidence points to the pervasiveness of partisan biases. Gerber and Green (1999) launched the most serious challenge. They show that people’s evaluations change in parallel ways in the face of new information, regardless of their partisanship. However, Bartels (2002) argues that parallel shifts are what we would expect if partisanship biases information
processing; if new information were assessed in an unbiased manner, the views of well-informed partisans of different parties would converge.

A number of studies have confirmed Bartel’s (2002) conclusion that partisan perceptual biases pervade subjective judgments (see, e.g., Burden & Hillygus, 2009; Carsey & Layman, 2006). In the case of a Canadian corruption scandal, people’s opinions about whether the prime minister had known about the scandal before taking office proved to be strongly affected by their partisanship (Blais et al., 2010). Partisanship can also influence how people interpret the same facts. Gaines and his colleagues (2007) found that partisans’ interpretations of the number of casualties in the Iraq War and the failure to find weapons of mass destruction tended to bolster their existing partisan opinions.

Partisan biases can even color people’s perceptions of objective facts (Bartels, 2002; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; but see Blais et al., 2010; Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007). Partisans are more likely to be correctly informed about facts that reflect well on their party, but less likely to know facts that cast their party in a negative light. These perceptual biases are especially evident for topics that attract a good deal of media coverage. Indeed, one study found that “the levels of knowledge for politically uncongenial facts are all but impervious to the amount of news coverage” (Jerit & Barabas, 2012, p. 14).

Partisan biases can be explained in terms of motivated reasoning. Drawing on the notion of hot cognition, motivated reasoning (Fischle, 2000; Kunda, 1990; Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006; Redlawsk, 2002; Taber, & Lodge, 2006) highlights the importance of automatic affective responses that may bias partisans’ processing of new political information. When these automatic responses are triggered before conscious processing, the updating of prior evaluations will be influenced by unconscious biases.1

This body of research suggests that partisans of different parties will tend to see things differently when it comes to assessing the amount of corruption in government (see Blais et al., 2010). In fact, there is evidence of partisan bias when people are asked to judge the seriousness of a case of corruption. In Anduiza and colleagues’ (2013) experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to read a short news account of a case of corruption involving either a mayor from their preferred party, a mayor from another party, or a mayor whose party affiliation was not specified. Respondents judged the case less serious when it involved a mayor from their preferred party, though the

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1This does not mean that people who engage in motivated reasoning are completely insulated from the effects of negative information. Redlawsk’s (2010) experimental work on candidate evaluations has demonstrated the existence of an “affective tipping point”: “At some point even the most strongly held positive evaluation should flag in the face of repeated negative information” (p. 564). The theoretical underpinnings of this insight derive from work on affective intelligence that links careful processing to increased anxiety (Marcus, Newman, & MacKuen, 2000).
effect was modest and only statistically significant for one party. An online experiment conducted in the United States also found evidence of partisan bias in judging corruption (see McCann & Redlawsk, 2006). At the time, Republican Vice-President Dick Cheney was being criticized over a no-bid contract given to a defense contractor for whom he was previously chief executive officer. Republicans were less likely than Democrats to consider extending no-bid contracts to be corrupt. Partisanship had no effect on judgments when the action involved a private citizen.

Similarly, using data from the International Social Survey Program, Anderson and Tverdova (2003) found that corruption had a much weaker impact on evaluations of the political system among respondents who had voted for the incumbent government. A study using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems reports a similar effect on perceptions of the extent of corruption (Tverdova, 2011). However, both studies include countries with higher levels of corruption than most postindustrial democracies. It is possible that the impact of voting for the incumbent in the most corrupt countries reflects not so much selective perception as the fact that government supporters may benefit from government corruption in the form of patronage jobs or the awarding of contracts (see Anderson & Tverdova, 2003).

As far as we can tell, however, no study has examined how party identification per se affects perceptions of the level of corruption in government. While we can expect partisans of governing parties to see less corruption in government, it is not clear whether partisans of opposition parties tend to perceive more corruption than nonpartisans. The question is whether party identification simply leads to more positive views of one’s own party or whether it also promotes more negative views of competing parties. The conventional wisdom holds that it does both: Partisans tend to praise “their” party and denigrate other parties. However, there is some evidence of asymmetry in the operation of partisan bias. Jerit and Barabas (2012) report that the perceptual biases in knowledge of objective facts that reflect negatively on the opposing party were more muted. Anduiza et al. (2013), meanwhile, found that whether respondents received a neutral treatment or an opposition party treatment made no difference to how serious they considered the corruption depicted in their vignette to be. We test the conventional wisdom by comparing both incumbent and opposition partisans with nonpartisans. Given how cynical nonpartisans tend to be (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961), it is not obvious that opposition partisans will perceive more corruption than nonpartisans.

We are also interested in how people’s general level of information about politics affects their perceptions of government corruption. We predict that the most politically informed citizens tend to see less corruption than the
least-informed citizens. Why? Our premise is that the dominant public mood in most democracies nowadays is one of basic distrust of politicians and governments. This view has been put most forcefully by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002, p. 124):

In sum the typical assessment of politicians seems to be that [...] they have been sucked into a situation in which their self-interest and advantageous position in the polity encourage them to enter a different realm [...]. The result is that a cabal of elected officials consistently takes advantage of ordinary people.

This cynical view of politicians and governments is the one most widely conveyed by the media (Zaller, 1999) and the one that most people tend to accept. Those who follow politics more closely are bound to discover that things are more complicated, and that while there is indeed corruption in government, as in all domains of human activity, most politicians are about as honest (or dishonest) as ordinary citizens. In short, the tendency to overstate the amount of corruption should be weaker as one’s level of information increases.

Finally, we need to consider whether being informed conditions the impact of partisanship. Zaller (1992) argues that highly informed partisans are more likely to resist information that conflicts with their partisan predispositions, and there is evidence that among those with strong predispositions, it is the most politically informed who are the most reluctant to revise their judgments in the face of information that challenges their predispositions (Taber & Lodge, 2006). The well informed are the most apt to ignore, discount, or counterargue information that conflicts with their prior opinions, to seek out confirmatory evidence, and to attach more weight to information that buttresses their opinions (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Similarly, Gaines and his colleagues (2007) report that it was the better informed who were most prone to interpret facts in predictably partisan ways. However, Bartels (2002) finds that partisan biases are equally evident among the highly informed and their less-informed counterparts. Blais et al.’s (2010) study of the role of partisanship and political knowledge in perceptions of a corruption scandal in Canada, meanwhile, found that respondents who were more informed were more likely to correctly perceive objective facts relating to the scandal, regardless of their partisanship: “[...] perceptions of the verdict of the commission of inquiry into the scandal were strongly affected by people’s overall level of political knowledge and they were strikingly impervious to their partisan predispositions” (p. 2). Similarly, in Anduiza et al.’s (2013) experiment, people who were politically aware proved less likely to fall back on partisan cues. The treatment effect was limited to those with average or low levels of political knowledge.

Our study builds upon prior research with the aim of contributing to our understanding of the role of partisanship and information with respect to
overall assessments of government corruption. As pointed out by Jerit and Barabas (2014), the literature on partisan biases focuses on “performance issues” such as crime, deficit, inflation, and unemployment. We extend this analysis to assessments of honesty/corruption, which, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) have persuasively argued, are at the heart of growing distrust of politicians and governments. Previous studies on perceptions of corruption, for their part, have documented the presence of partisan biases, but most have not considered the joint role of information and partisanship. Furthermore, most examine specific cases of corruption, whereas we focus on general assessments of corruption and we do so in a comparative context.

We thus formulate the following four hypotheses:

\( H_1 \): Partisans of incumbent parties perceive less corruption in government than nonpartisans.

\( H_2 \): Partisans of opposition parties perceive the same amount of corruption in government as nonpartisans.

\( H_3 \): The better informed perceive less corruption than the less informed.

\( H_4 \): The impact of partisanship on perceptions of corruption is weaker among the better informed.

The Study: Data and Method

Our goal is simple and straightforward. We wish to explore the link between partisanship and information, on the one hand, and perceptions of corruption on the other hand. We also want to determine whether the effect of partisanship is conditioned by respondents’ level of political information.

We examine citizens’ perceptions of the degree of corruption in government in 11 elections held in five different countries between 2009 and 2013, using data from the Making Electoral Democracy Work project (Blais, 2010). During the election campaign, respondents in each of these 11 surveys were asked to indicate how much corruption they perceived (hardly any, a little, some, a lot) in government. To facilitate the analyses, perceived corruption is coded on a scale from 0 (hardly any corruption) to 1 (a lot of corruption). The elections and levels of government covered by the study are listed in the Appendix. We include three elections in Germany, three in Switzerland, two in Canada and Spain, and one in France. Four of the 11 elections are national, and each includes samples from two regions; the other seven elections are regional. These cases enable us to examine the impact of partisanship and information in different contexts.

With one exception discussed below, the sample size is about 1,000 respondents in the case of regional elections and 2,000 respondents in the case of national elections. Note that in the latter case, the sample is made up of about 1,000 respondents each in two of the country’s regions (see the Appendix).
The surveys are online quota-based surveys that guarantee that the samples are representative of the population under study regarding age, gender, education, and region. In each case, there was a 20-min pre-election survey conducted within the 2 weeks preceding the election and a 10-min post-election survey (among as many of the pre-election survey respondents as possible). In this study, we use the pre-election survey, which contains all the relevant variables.

The exception is (the German region of) Bavaria where we have a much larger sample (about 4,000). The regional election took place just 1 week before the national election. The first two waves of the study were conducted just before the regional election and the national election, respectively. We use the first wave for measures of perceived level of corruption (at both the regional and national levels) and the relevant wave (first for the regional level and second for the national level) for measures of party identification and political information.

We estimate multivariate ordinary least squares regressions in which the dependent variable is the perceived level of corruption in government, and the main independent variables are partisanship (dummy variables for incumbent party partisan and opposition party partisan; the reference category is nonpartisan), the level of information, and the interaction between the partisanship variables and information. Level of political information is based on the proportion of correct responses to political knowledge questions and has been coded on a 0 to 1 scale (see the Appendix).

Our estimations include controls for age, sex, and education. We first estimate a pooled model using data for all 11 elections. Ten election dummies are included to control for any election-specific characteristics. We then reestimate the same model in each of the 11 elections to test the robustness of the findings.

Descriptive information about the main independent and dependent variables is provided in the Appendix. In the pooled data set, the mean score for perceived corruption is 0.61, the mean level of political information is 0.67, and the percentages of respondents who identify with the incumbent and opposition parties are 24% and 23%, respectively.

The Findings

Table 1 presents the results of a simple additive model for the pooled data set and for each of the 11 elections. For the sake of simplicity, we indicate only

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2In the case of national elections, the question is about the level of corruption in the national government, and in the case of regional elections, it is about corruption in the regional government. As the dependent variable is an ordinal variable, an ordinal logistic (logit) or probit model would be more appropriate. We present the findings of ordinary least squares regressions for ease of understanding. The results are similar with logit estimations.

3In the pooled model, we have weighted the data so that each regional election study and each region within a national election study has the same number of respondents (N = 1,000).
the coefficients for the two party identification dummy variables and the level of political information.

The results concerning identification with an incumbent party are clear: All 12 coefficients are negative, and 11 of them are statistically significant. We can thus confirm that partisans of governing parties systematically perceive less corruption than nonpartisans (H1). All in all, the average corruption score for those who identify with the incumbent parties is 0.15 lower than it is for nonpartisans. Because the overall corruption mean across these 11 elections is 0.61, this is a substantial difference. The impact is particularly strong in Spain and particularly weak in Switzerland, perhaps because identifying with a governing party does not mean much in a country where several parties share power in the executive (the so-called magic formula).

What about partisans of opposition parties? Should we expect them to perceive more corruption than nonpartisans? The usual assumption is that the partisan screen works both ways, that is, partisans perceive their party more positively and the other parties more negatively. However, there has been little systematic investigation of how symmetric (or asymmetric) the partisan screening effect is.

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Table 1
Perceptions of Government Corruption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country or region</th>
<th>Incumbent I.D.</th>
<th>Opposition I.D.</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Observation (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pooled Canada</td>
<td>-0.15*** (0.00)</td>
<td>0.02** (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.02* (0.01)</td>
<td>21,933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>-0.20*** (0.03)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.18* (0.08)</td>
<td>1189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>-0.23*** (0.03)</td>
<td>0.11*** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.17* (0.08)</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Saxony</td>
<td>-0.17*** (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.06* (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.07 (0.04)</td>
<td>5,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bavaria</td>
<td>-0.15*** (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.07*** (0.01)</td>
<td>832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>-0.03* (0.02)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.11*** (0.02)</td>
<td>1,936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucerne</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.08 (0.03)**</td>
<td>-0.17*** (0.03)</td>
<td>1,075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zurich</td>
<td>-0.06** (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.11*** (0.02)</td>
<td>1,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>-0.27*** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.04** (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.11*** (0.03)</td>
<td>1,834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalonia</td>
<td>-0.25*** (0.03)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.11*** (0.03)</td>
<td>1,951</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Cell entries are estimates from ordinary least squares regression models with standard errors in parentheses. Estimates are weighted to take into account variance in sample sizes.

Source. Making Electoral Democracy Work. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
Table 1 shows inconsistent opposition party identification effects. The coefficient is not significant in five elections; it has a significantly negative sign in four instances and is significantly positive in two cases. The magnitude of the coefficient is always relatively weak, at <0.10 in 10 instances of 11. The pooled model suggests a tiny positive effect, but this is only because of the relatively strong positive coefficient observed in Quebec, which is clearly an outlier. The appropriate conclusion is that there is no systematic opposition party identification effect.

It is not that those who identify with opposition parties do not perceive much corruption in government—they do. Rather, it is that they do not see more corruption than nonpartisans (H2). It would thus seem that the impact of partisanship is asymmetric: Partisans view their own parties as less corrupt than do nonpartisans, but they do not necessarily view other parties as more corrupt than do nonpartisans. This is not altogether surprising, given how negative the perceptions of nonpartisans are.

We are also interested in how information affects perceptions of corruption. Our general hypothesis is that the better informed are more prone to challenge the conventional wisdom that there is a lot of corruption in government (H3). The hypothesis is broadly confirmed. The relationship between information and perceptions of corruption is negative in 11 instances of 12 and significant in 11 cases. However, the province of Quebec emerges as an important outlier. We not only fail to see a negative relationship between information and perceived corruption, we observe the opposite relationship and it is relatively strong. That is, in Quebec (which we examine in greater depth below), the better informed perceive more corruption than the poorly informed. It is only because of this outlier case that the pooled model shows a small overall negative effect. With the Quebec election removed, the coefficient is a hefty -0.11. As predicted, the perceived level of corruption in government declines as one becomes more politically informed.

Finally, we want to know whether information attenuates or exacerbates partisan bias (H4). We reestimated the regression models reported in Table 1 with the addition of interaction terms between information and identification with the governing or opposition parties. The great majority of interaction effects (17 of 22) are not significant (Table 2). The general pattern is thus that the impact of partisanship is independent of that of information. The strongest interaction effect occurs in Quebec with identification with an opposition party; we examine this in greater depth below. The pooled model indicates a tiny negative interaction between identification with an incumbent party and information, but this is driven entirely by the Spanish election. The bottom line is that the effects of party identification and information are basically additive. The main exception, of course, is Quebec, where the impact of
### Table 2

*Interaction Effects in Perceptions of Corruption*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country or region</th>
<th>Incumbent I.D. × information</th>
<th>Opposition I.D. × information</th>
<th>Incumbent I.D.</th>
<th>Opposition I.D.</th>
<th>Political information</th>
<th>Observation (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poolled</td>
<td>-0.04** (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.13*** (0.01)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.01)</td>
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<td>21,933</td>
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<td>Ontario</td>
<td>0.03 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.08)</td>
<td>-0.22* (0.09)</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.04)</td>
<td>1,189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>0.03 (0.22)</td>
<td>0.51** (0.17)</td>
<td>-0.25 (0.18)</td>
<td>-0.29* (0.13)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.10)</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>-0.18 (0.10)</td>
<td>-0.22** (0.08)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.08 (0.04)</td>
<td>1,752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>-0.14** (0.05)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.07*** (0.02)</td>
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*Source.* Making Electoral Democracy Work. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.*
information is positive rather than negative, and confined to those who identify with opposition parties.

The Quebec Case

The Quebec case is clearly worthy of further attention in light of these findings. There are two related questions that we need to address with respect to Quebec. First, why was perceived corruption so high at the time of the Quebec election? Second, why were the best informed, at least among opposition partisans, prone to see more corruption than the less informed?

The likely reason that perceptions of corruption in the Quebec government were so high is that the 2012 election took place amidst allegations of government corruption. These allegations, emerging from extensive journalistic investigation of collusion between Quebec government officials and the construction industry on government contracts and party financing, led to a good many questions during legislative sessions and ultimately requests for an independent inquiry. The incumbent Liberal government initially refused to create a commission of inquiry, instead establishing a special permanent anticorruption unit. However, the pressure eventually became too strong, and a commission of inquiry—the Charbonneau Commission—was created in the fall of 2011. At the time of the Quebec election, the Commission had just begun its investigations. While the commission uncovered the most serious scandals only after the election, reports about the presence of corruption had begun circulating in the weeks preceding the election. Corruption was thus on the public agenda at the time of the election. A content analysis of press coverage during the campaign indicates that corruption was relatively high on the agenda at the beginning of the campaign (Bastien & Lawlor, 2013). Given the allegations of corruption, it is understandable that many Quebeckers came to believe there was a substantial amount of corruption in the provincial government.

That said, it is difficult to believe there was more corruption in the Quebec government at the time than in, say, the Spanish government (Transparency International, 2012). Yet, Quebeckers perceived a lot of corruption, and the politically well-informed opposition partisans in Quebec perceived more corruption than the poorly informed, unlike everywhere else. It is possible that the effect of information about corruption on citizen attitudes is relative. That is to say, citizens who hear about corruption in a context apparently devoid of serious corruption, such as the Quebec government, might be more affected than citizens in a context where corruption has historically been substantial. In other words, new and dramatic information about corruption

The mean level of perceived corruption in Quebec was 0.80, compared with 0.56 in the other elections.
might increase citizens’ perceptions of corruption much more substantially than old and normalized information. This may be especially true of the well informed who generally perceive less corruption than the poorly informed. Assuming that this pattern traditionally held in Quebec, the news of corruption may have been more shocking to the well informed because it contrasted with their usual assumptions. The impact of the news about government corruption might have been so substantial that it led well-informed Quebeckers to perceive more corruption than poorly informed Quebeckers.

Another possible reason why well-informed Quebeckers may have perceived more corruption than the poorly informed is that they were more exposed to and receptive of information about corruption during the election campaign. If, as Bastien and Lawlor (2013) found, corruption was not front-page news throughout the campaign, it is possible that only the well informed received a substantial amount of news about corruption. Several studies have shown that when the flow of media information about a topic is weak, only well-informed citizens are paying enough attention to news about politics to receive the information (Converse, 1962; Nadeau, Nevitte, Gidengil, & Blais, 2008; Prior, 2007; Zaller, 1992). As such, it is possible that in a news environment where corruption was still not making headlines, well-informed Quebeckers were the only ones to learn about the emerging scandal.

Well-informed Quebeckers may have been the most likely to receive the information but that did not necessarily mean that they accepted its veracity. In line with Zaller’s (1992) “resistance axiom,” well-informed partisans of the incumbent party were significantly less likely than their opposition counterparts to perceive a high level of corruption in the Quebec government. This speaks to the importance of motivated reasoning: Those with strong priors and more information are the most likely to engage in biased information processing. Partisans of the incumbent party may have simply discounted the news about government corruption because reports of corruption may have less credibility in the context of an election campaign (Rundquist, Strom, & Peters, 1977).

Concluding Discussion

Our results clearly show that people view government corruption through a partisan filter when “their” party is in power. However, the workings of the partisan screen have proved to be asymmetrical: There is little evidence that partisans of opposition parties perceive more corruption in government than nonpartisans. The question whether partisans are only biased in favor of “their” party or are also biased against the other parties is an important one that has been neglected in the literature. Our findings are consistent with those of Anduiza et al. (2013) but not those of Blais et al. (2010).
More research is ultimately required to determine the conditions under which the impact of partisanship is symmetrical or not.

It is not immediately clear why in some cases nonpartisans would perceive more corruption than opposition partisans. It is possible that they perceive the most corruption because they are the most cynical about politics in general. Indeed, those who are least engaged in politics do tend to be the most cynical. Though disengagement is typically associated with low political information, an increasing number of “enlightened cynics” suggests there is something to political cynicism that extends beyond information (Dalton, 1984). Nonpartisans might, independent of knowledge levels, evaluate government honesty more negatively as a result of a generalized disaffection with political actors and processes.

We have found strong support for the expectation that being politically informed influences perceptions of government corruption. In all but one case, the more informed respondents were, the less corruption they perceived. We also looked at whether information conditions the impact of partisanship. The results here were mostly negative, as the great majority of the interaction terms proved to be nonsignificant. The impact of information is basically independent of partisanship. In other words, we find little evidence of politically aware partisans being more resistant than less-aware partisans to information that is at odds with their partisan attachments. This points to the possible limits of motivated reasoning in real-world settings where partisans may find it more difficult to avoid unpalatable information (Gaines et al., 2007).

Just why the better informed—regardless of partisanship—see less corruption remains unclear. The better informed are more exposed to media that give extensive coverage to instances (or even rumors) of corruption. Yet, they somehow seem able to resist the conclusion that there is rampant corruption. An explanation perhaps lies in the nature of journalistic content itself. Though all media, the argument goes, have adopted a more negative tone in recent years, they have not done so uniformly. “High-quality” news publications engage less in “junkyard dog journalism” and present content in a more nuanced way than lower-quality publications—such as yellow press papers—that tend to take relatively unmitigated and highly negative positions (Zaller, 1999). Because better-informed citizens are more likely to consume higher-quality news and less-informed citizens are more likely to consume lower-quality news (Baum, 2003), their respective views on corruption might reflect differences in the content of the media sources to which they pay attention (see Guggenheim, Kwak, & Campbell, 2011; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). Nevertheless, the mechanisms encouraging less-negative perceptions among the better informed require further investigation.
We were particularly interested in determining whether the relationship between information or partisanship and perceptions of corruption is consistent across different contexts. The main finding is that the same pattern emerges everywhere: Those who identify with the incumbent party and those who are better informed perceived systematically less corruption than the nonpartisans and the less informed. There is one important exception, however. In Quebec, at least among opposition partisans, the best informed perceived more corruption than the less informed. We have suggested two possible explanations. On the one hand, the allegations of corruption that had emerged may have led many of the best-informed opposition partisans to revisit their sanguine views about the level of corruption in the Quebec government. On the other hand, many of their less-informed counterparts may have been only vaguely (or not at all) aware of the allegations.

Finally, a limitation of the study should be highlighted. Our data are cross-sectional. As such, they allow us to compare citizens’ perceptions in various contexts but not across time. To examine the stability of perceptions and to ascertain how people react to the flow of information about scandals, longitudinal data would be necessary.

References


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