

## Brief 17: Corruption in Mexico

### Does Corruption Information Inspire the Fight or Quash the Hope?

#### A Field Experiment in Mexico on Voter Turnout, Choice and Party

Alberto Chong, Ana L. De La O, Dean Karlan, and Leonard Wantchekon

---

*Retrospective voting models assume that offering more information to voters about their incumbents' performance strengthens electoral accountability. However, it is unclear whether incumbent corruption information translates into higher political participation and increased support for challengers. The researchers provide experimental evidence that such information not only decreases incumbent party support in local elections in Mexico, but also decreases voter turnout and support for the challenger party, as well as erodes partisan attachments. While information clearly is necessary to improve accountability, corruption information is not sufficient because voters may respond to it by withdrawing from the political process. The researchers conclude with a discussion of the implications of their findings for studies of voting behavior.*

#### Research Question

What is the effect of information about an incumbent's level of corruption on a voter's behavior, such as support for their political party, support for the challenger, overall election turnout, and partisan attachments?

#### Background

The researchers study the behavior of voters faced with information about the performance of their elected representatives in Mexican Municipal Elections. The Mexican case is a good site to evaluate the effects of information when incumbents are term-limited. All elected officials in Mexico, including Mayors, are subject to single-term limits and serve three-year terms. Mayors are meant to provide basic public goods, such as infrastructure and public safety; however, many voters find it difficult to identify who is responsible for providing these services. Voters also believe that corruption is widespread and frequent.

The Mexican Federal Auditor's Office (ASF) periodically audits selected municipalities. In this study, the researchers are concerned particularly with voter reactions to audit information about spending within the Fund for Social Infrastructure (Spanish acronym: FISM) program--- a large federal transfer to municipalities that is meant to fund the provision of basic services. ASF audits show how much money was spent (out of the total allocation to the municipality), whether the spending benefitted poor neighborhoods, and how much corruption occurred – measured by the number of accounting irregularities, deviations from guidelines, and misuse of resources.

This study takes advantage of this institutional arrangement and audit mechanism to test previously un-testable hypotheses about the broader effects of information on voter behavior and beliefs.

## Research Design

### Treatment

The treatment consisted of citizen exposure to information about the use of FISM funding for public goods that was collected by the audit agency in 2007. The audits revealed that mayors did not spend all the money they received from FISM, that they did not spend all of the money in poor areas, and that in average 30% of funds were spent in a corrupt manner. The researchers show that only 10% of voters had been aware of the existence of FISM prior to their intervention.

The researchers created and distributed a leaflet that included information about FISM corruption within each municipality where the experiment was conducted. In order to separate the effects of corruption information from effects related to receiving a leaflet of any type, there was also a placebo treatment with information on the FISM that purposefully did not have information on FISM-related corruption. Units in the control group did not receive any information at all. Precincts were assigned to one of these three possible groups.

The researchers examined the following outcomes: turnout, vote share for the incumbent party and challengers, and partisan attachments.

### Units and Assignment Procedure

The researchers conducted the field experiment in twelve municipalities contained in three Mexican states —Jalisco, Morelos, and Tabasco—in 2009. The experimental units were polling precincts in audited municipalities within these states where there was an upcoming election. Polling precincts were randomly assigned to one of three groups: treatment, placebo, or control. The experimental design ensured that assignments were balanced within municipalities.

## Results

The authors find that exposing voters to corruption information results in a 1.3 percentage point decrease in turnout (or 2.5% decrease off the baseline), a .43 percentage point decrease in votes for the incumbent party, and a .86 percentage point decrease in challenger’s votes. The researchers also determine that providing information about spending and distribution (the placebo group) has no effect on vote choices. When it is revealed that corruption was high, incumbent and challenger votes decrease at higher rates.

**Table 1: Effects by Level of Corruption**

	Turnout	Incumbent Votes/Reg. voters	Challenger Votes/Reg. voters	Identification with Incumbent’s Party
<b>Corruption (Main Effect)</b>	-1.30* (.32)	-.43* (.20)	-.086* (.26)	-0.07* (.03)
<b>Low (0%-33%)</b>	-1.78* (.47)	-.67* (.29)	-1.10* (.37)	-.02 (.03)
<b>Middle (33%-66%)</b>	-0.30 (.44)	0 (.28)	-0.29 (.35)	-.14* (.05)
<b>High (66%-100%)</b>	-7.12* (1.37)	-2.65* (.87)	-4.47* (1.09)	-.08* (.03)

A priori, voters believe municipal government is dishonest, and voters’ beliefs remain unchanged when voters receive corruption information. Only in places where corruption was high did they observe a statistically significant increase in the belief that municipal government is dishonest.

Although researchers cannot fully explain why providing information about incumbent’s corruption affects all parties, they discuss and test a possible mechanism. Once corruption reaches a certain level, voters may interpret it as the equilibrium from which individual politicians, especially low-quality ones, cannot credibly withdraw. The revelation of incumbent’s corruption may lead voters to reevaluate the likelihood that challengers offer a credible prospect for better governance, and the rationale for supporting them falls accordingly. In support of this mechanism, researchers show that the effect of incumbent’s corruption information is larger when low quality challengers are in the ballot.

The study yields similar findings on the relationship between corruption information and partisan attachments. Corruption information causes a .07 percentage point drop in identification with the incumbent party, and de-identification is stronger among voters in highly corrupt municipalities.

## **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

This study finds that corruption revelations not only affect incumbent parties, but also have an overall effect of demobilizing voters—voters who learn about corruption are less likely to vote for challengers or turn out at all. When the corruption revealed is of the highest level, voters' already-grim view about the expected behavior of elected politicians worsens.

The study's authors believe the effects on overall participation are evidence that voters interpret corruption information as not only pertaining to the incumbent, but as evidence of a system-wide problem. Voters do not believe challengers can avoid committing corrupt actions in an environment where corruption is found to be pervasive.