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Corruption and Anti-Corruption from the Left and Right in the Americas

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Corruption has become a central part of the language of modern politics. Candidates, voters, aid experts, activists, analysts, and politicians all stress the problem and the need to battle it. Tapping into this wellspring of popular discontent, the recent electoral campaigns of Enrique Peña Nieto and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico in 2012 and 2018, respectively, of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018, and of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the U.S. in 2016 and 2020, respectively, prominently featured the twin themes of corruption and anti-corruption. But were these politicians really referring to the same thing? Is corruption a uniquely apolitical issue featuring broad agreement on the contours of good governance and the technical, institutional solutions needed to secure it, as some seem to suggest?

Despite consensus on the ills of corruption and the need to address it, there remains a fundamental lack of agreement on what it is. But this dispute over the meaning and nature of corruption extends far beyond academics, who tend to debate such things (ad infinitum and ad nauseam) to encompass voters, politicians, experts, and others. The seemingly simple task of comparing corruption in Mexico and the U.S. helps illustrate the conundrum. While the various measures of corruption rooted in expert opinion, such as Transparency International's (TI) highly cited Corruption Perception Index (CPI), indicate that Mexico (ranked 124th least corrupt among 179 countries in the 2020 CPI) suffers much

higher levels of corruption than the U.S. (ranked 25th), comparisons based on public perceptions tend to reveal a much narrower gap, with majorities in both countries considering corruption to be widespread, particularly within the congress and political parties (see TI's Global Corruption Barometer, 2013). In a 2013 Gallup poll, for instance, 79% of U.S. respondents considered corruption widespread throughout the government (Gallup 2013)—a finding one would more likely associate with Mexico and a sentiment that Trump clearly tapped. In fact, in TI's 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, 64% in the U.S. and 62% in Mexico believed to a "large extent/to some extent" that [their] government served the interests of the few rather than the many (one competing definition of corruption). While experts and citizens from the neighboring countries are seemingly not referring to the same thing, it remains unclear what they mean by corruption (and, ultimately, whose perspective we should privilege) (Morris 2018). As Susan Rose-Ackerman (2018, 98) avers, "the term 'corruption' is often used to condemn behavior that violates the speaker's values."

A recent study by the author explores the central question of whether there are discernable ideological or left/right differences regarding definitions, approaches, views, policies, and their outcomes on corruption and anti-corruption. In summary form, the study: a) parses the literature to examine the scholarly debate



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over definition, identifying how competing formulas align with traditional views that are associated with the left and right and/or represent certain underlying interests tied to the left and the right; b) compares the statements on corruption and anti-corruption within Peña Nieto's and López Obrador's National Development Plans (PNDs) and in the electoral campaigns of Bolsonaro, López Obrador, Peña Nieto, Sanders, and Trump, highlighting left, right, and populist themes; c) analyzes the respective anti-corruption policies of Fernández de Kirchner (left) and Mauricio Macri (right) in Argentina, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (left) and Bolsonaro (right) in Brazil, Peña Nieto (right) and López Obrador (left) in Mexico, Trump (right) in the U.S., and Nicolás Maduro (left) in Venezuela to discern any potential left/right differences; and d) based on a range of measures of corruption and integrity, empirically analyzes and compares the changes in the levels of corruption among left and right administrations in the hemisphere over the 2005–2019 period. Finally, offering an alternative hypothesis to a left/right ideological division, the study proposes an in-power versus out-of-power division to the competing perspectives on corruption and anti-corruption. Instead of depicting an apolitical approach to a technical issue, this alternative hypothesis stresses the political context of the debates over the meaning and nature of corruption and how to fight it, as well as the strategic weaponization of those narratives.

Much of the analysis for the study builds on the author's prior work on corruption in Mexico, but this time reaches beyond Mexico by offering a more comparative perspective (Morris 1991, 2009). Still, the country's case figures prominently in the analysis. An examination of the differences between Peña Nieto's and López Obrador's thinking on corruption offers a sample of the study's analytical direction. Based on their respective National Development Plans and campaign rhetoric, whereas Peña Nieto tended to view corruption largely in terms of its exacerbating effect on the nation's security challenges within the justice system and emphasize administrative forms of corruption, bureaucratic and technical

reforms, and the issue of state intervention in the economy, López Obrador clearly conceives of corruption in a much broader context that aligns with views from the left. To begin with, largely because of his perceived scope of its impact, López Obrador posits the fight against corruption as a higher priority than did his predecessor. In fact, López Obrador seems to blame corruption for many, if not most, of Mexico's societal ills, including the inhibition of economic growth (corruption is deemed its "principal inhibitor," PND, 8) and development (14), the government's massive debt (48), and the stagnation of the domestic market (48). Corruption is blamed for undermining both the capacity of institutions to operate legally and the people's rights and needs (14), and it is credited for the nation's poverty, inequality, institutional deterioration, generalized insecurity, violence, and loss of sovereignty (36, 48). Such a broad, sweeping impact obviously makes the fight against corruption a *sine qua non* to providing greater societal well-being, affecting virtually all policy arenas.

For López Obrador, corruption goes beyond the administrative and illegal forms of corruption so often highlighted within the more orthodox-right approach to corruption expressed by Peña Nieto to encompass the systematic appropriation of state resources to serve particularistic ends. This includes privatization and neoliberalism. According to the PND, corruption represents "the most extreme form of privatization, meaning the transfer of goods and public resources to private individuals" (14). The PND directly links corruption to neoliberalism on multiple occasions (6, 8, 34, 36). Clearly, given the fact that privatizations, neoliberal policies, the Fobaproa bank bailouts, etc., have all been legal policy instruments by former governments, this systemic view of corruption embraces institutional, structural, and legal forms of corruption and other anti-neoliberal positions that align with leftist thinking. For López Obrador, corruption in Mexico entails a form of state capture by a political and economic elite, what he often referred to as "the mafia in power" who, acting on behalf of their own interests, "imposed [neoliberalism and] took control

of the institutions and perpetuated their control of them through successive electoral fraud” (7–8). Though the PND acknowledges that this pattern of corruption predates the neoliberal period in Mexico, it nonetheless suggests that corruption increased quantitatively and qualitatively during that period: “When the collusion between public and economic power, the increasing corruption and the factious utilization of the institutions created an exclusive oligarchy, a small elite [...] ran the country according to its own wishes without attending to national needs and attentive only to the expansion of its businesses” (34).

Such a broad, structural understanding of corruption, of course, fundamentally shapes the president’s anti-corruption policy recommendations. But while many of the proposed reforms include the rather standard orthodox measures centering on greater oversight, transparency, investigation, and punishment, many also seem to encompass a broader focus on political as opposed to strictly administrative forms of corruption—conflicts of interest and state-business alliances that lie behind government contracts and policy concessions, fiscal policy, tax avoidance, the revolving door that has been gaining speed in Mexico in recent years, and uncontrolled spending by and for public officials. Proposed policies include, for example, eliminating preferential policies favoring the private sector, as illustrated in the subsequent reforms to the energy sector and the pharmaceutical industry; austerity measures to curb excessive state spending by state officials on themselves and eliminate the current of former officials into the private sector; the scrapping of tax concessions that allowed large corporations to pay little to no taxes; and a much stronger emphasis on corruption within the private sector.

But while the sections of the study focusing on ideas and campaign rhetoric tend to highlight left/right differences, other analyses point to fewer ideologically-based differences, particularly in terms of actual state policies—many of which conform to international obligations—and policy outcomes, and to the deep-seated politicization of corruption and anti-corruption. On this latter point, in Mexico, this

includes the tendency for those out of power to cast the government’s anti-corruption efforts as selective, political, and a means to concentrate power and disarm opponents, rather than sincere efforts to fight corruption. The anti-López Obrador faction and many within the anti-corruption community are in fact outspoken in qualifying their agreement, on the one hand, with the president on the need to fight corruption with, on the other, sharp, pointed criticisms of the government’s lackluster support for the National Anti-Corruption System (SNA), the president’s attacks on the press and autonomous state agencies charged with promoting transparency and accountability, the slow and/or limited prosecutions of the many high-profile corruption-related cases, the dismissal of allegations against the president’s allies and his own brother, and the president’s tendency to scrap entire programs, agencies, and projects (e.g., *fideicomisos* and a new airport) as part of an anti-corruption strategy. Indeed, the opening line in a piece by critic Luis Rubio (2019) could hardly be more explicit: “The excuse is the corruption; the reality is total control.”

But as the study shows, such political debates over corruption and anti-corruption are hardly unique to Mexico. What Trump touted as an effort to dismantle the corrupt (“rigged”) system in the U.S., for example, was assailed by his opponents as a means of protecting and privileging the president’s interests, promoting right-wing policies, or shielding his and his family’s own corruption. In Brazil, the impeachment of then-President Dilma Rousseff for rather minor violations was part of an orchestrated strategy by opponents to brandish anti-corruption politically to discredit the long-ruling Workers’ Party (PT). It combined, as Aaron Ansell (2018) shows, “a peculiar blend of neoliberalism, Evangelical conservatism, sexism, racism and authoritarianism,” and was about much more than merely fighting corruption. Supported by Brazil’s conservative media, Rousseff’s ouster (coupled with the prosecution of Lula), in turn, set the stage for the election of Bolsonaro, who, like Trump, embraced a vision of corruption centering on the radical left’s control (capture) of not just the state, but of the nation’s universities,

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social media, and entertainment industry. In short, while perceptions of what corruption is and how to fight it differ, within an intensely polarized setting, all tend to utilize and weaponize the twin concepts of corruption and anti-corruption to pursue and protect their own political and economic interests. For some, of course, in today's setting, trumpeting anti-corruption has become the path to power, while corruption remains the means to partake in the spoils.

The study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the breadth, scope, and political nature of corruption and anti-corruption, and to their role in shaping and defining modern politics. Of course for observers of Mexico, understanding the politics of corruption continues to be central to understanding the dynamics of Mexican politics.

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