The routledge companion to media and scandal

Howard Tumber, Silvio Waisbord

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Publication details
Roberto de Miguel Pascual, Rosa Berganza
Published online on: 17 Apr 2019

How to cite :- Roberto de Miguel Pascual, Rosa Berganza. 17 Apr 2019, Media priming effects and ethical ambivalence in corruption scandals from: The routledge companion to media and scandal Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Sep 2023

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MEDIA PRIMING EFFECTS AND ETHICAL AMBIVALENCE IN CORRUPTION SCANDALS

Roberto de Miguel Pascual and Rosa Berganza

Empirical evidence demonstrates that the media impact of political scandals does not always determine election results. Even though, according to surveys, the general public appears to be preoccupied with corruption scandals, a considerable portion of voters tend to forget or forgive the inappropriate behavior of politicians when they cast their vote at the polls. In this chapter, we explore this inconsistency in attitude measurements, which tend to be based on the questions about one’s personal beliefs regarding corruption. Empirical evidence shows that the use (or abuse) of surveys to measure citizen’s perceptions of corruption leads to prejudiced inferences. Such interpretations are commonly proposed by global corruption watchdog organizations as well as by national and transnational public opinion research institutions. Our goal in this chapter is to evaluate the importance of measurements of implicit association as additional instruments for observing the effects of political scandals on public opinion.

Many social scientists have displayed bewilderment at the frequent, paradoxical reelections to office of politicians who are well known to the general public as participants in corruption, involved in criminal prosecutions, or who have even been convicted of a crime.

For instance, in the U.S. Congress, being caught up in a corruption scandal does not necessarily mean one’s political career is over, since 60 percent of Congress members involved in such scandals win reelection. In his examination of more than 130 Congressional corruption cases over the course of 35 years, Marko Klasnja (2017) found that the key to the resilience shown by corrupt politicians is, at least in part, that voters are simply not paying attention. Whereas voters with high levels of political awareness punish corrupt officials more than ethical ones, voters with lower levels of political awareness do not.

Despite accusations of bribery, false accounting, false testimony, tax fraud, misappropriation, mafia connections, and money laundering, Silvio Berlusconi served three full terms as the prime minister of Italy. The coalition of parties that ran Italy under his government won elections in 1994, 2001, and 2008, and was the second most powerful political force during the elections of 1996, 2006, and 2013. McNally (2016, 976) has claimed that “social norms that justify corruption in one’s peer group extend to voting and increase the likelihood of supporting Berlusconi at all points on the ideological spectrum.”

In their research report on the ways that the same phenomenon appeared in the Spanish municipal election held between 2003 and 2007—a period marked by an economic upturn and a real estate bubble unprecedented in the country’s history—Rivero-Rodríguez and
Fernández-Vázquez (2011) found that a not insignificant number of mayors accepted bribes and granted development permits, operating within various networks of corruption whose most immediate effect was to create jobs and improve short-term economic indicators. Given such benefits, according to these authors, people were quite happy to turn a blind eye to what was happening behind the scenes: “it’s a paradox . . . in a place where corruption is more widespread, even voters who are aware and concerned about corruption might not have the incentive to punish” (ibid., 116). Indeed, these authors found that voters are far more lenient towards corruption when it directly benefits them.

Along with these cases, examples documented in the United States (Peters & Welch 1980; Dimock & Jacobson 1995; Welch & Hibbing 1997; Klasnja 2017), the United Kingdom (Eggers & Fisher 2011), India (Kapur & Vaishnav 2017), Japan (Reed 1999), Italy (Chang, Golden & Hill 2010), Mexico (Del Castillo 2003), and Spain (Rivero-Rodríguez & Fernández-Vázquez 2011; Riera et al. 2013; Anduiza et al. 2014), among many other countries and regions, confirm that electoral immunity in the wake of political scandal constitutes a phenomenon worthy of detailed explanation. Regardless of the political or electoral system, the compared literature provides sufficient evidence that citizens’ indulgence towards corruption deforms the basic democratic principle of accountability inasmuch as “the unpopularity of corruption and the popularity of the corrupt” (Kurer 2001, 63) invade the political arena.

Why voters support corrupt politicians

One of the most intriguing features of this puzzle relates to the heterogeneity of electoral outcomes. The effects of corruption scandals seem to vary widely according to the type of incumbent (major, deputy, president), as well as according to the differing electoral and political systems, political cultures, and so on, concerned. Some corrupt majors, members of Congress, or MPs lose the bulk of their share of votes, while many others are able to retain or even increase their electoral support.

Thus, the paradox of corruption tolerance appears to be deeply perplexing for political scientists. Scholarship in this area provides a whole repertoire of explanatory factors (Jiménez & Caínzos 2006; Riera et al. 2013), generally organized according to one of two general approaches: (a) those focusing on the contextual level of analysis, based on the individual features of each corruption scandal, the specificities of the denounced politician (Fernández-Vázquez & Rivero 2011; Chang et al. 2012), or the institutional setting (Tavits 2007; Ferraz & Finan 2008); and (b) those which place greater emphasis on the individual variables that determine the impact of political corruption on vote choice (Anduiza et al. 2014).

Due to the limitations of cross-national research, the micro-level approach to corruption and voter behavior has become the form of analysis used most extensively. Such analysis operates at the individual level, concentrating on the (ir)rational nature of unethical/irresponsible polling. Electoral behaviorists have gathered evidence suggesting that both partisanship and political awareness play a significant role in explaining why people do not systematically throw corrupt politicians out of office (Anduiza et al. 2014). According to these researchers, partisans are less likely to perceive and punish corruption (Dimock & Jacobson 1995; Anduiza et al. 2014).

At this point one may easily infer that the political science literature provides no definitive answer to the conundrum posed by ethical ambivalence towards corruption. Neither the micro-level perspective nor the macro-contextual level of analysis delivers an even tentatively operational solution to the puzzle of the null electoral costs of political scandals: when controlling for contextual or structural conditions, this paradox equally disrupts most democratic systems, wherein a citizen’s party loyalty is nothing but a relic of the past and freedom of information is fully guaranteed.
The problem of who is observing what and how, when measuring perceived corruption

Assuming that all human beings are essentially rational, that most people understand that political corruption endangers both general and private prosperity, and that most of the electors make systematic use of all the information available to them before deciding whom to vote for, the enigma of why political scandals do not ruin political careers leads us to the question of how to measure the public’s perception of political misbehavior itself. Is the general public capable of assessing with any precision the degree to which corruption inheres within a social system?

It is difficult to gauge the public’s perceptions of corruption. Political misconduct is carried out in secret and most bribes pass by unnoticed by the media, so the citizenry is forced to assess the extent of such activities mainly by the “tip of the iceberg,” as portrayed by the press (since experiences with personal corruption remain anecdotal and becoming a victim or an actor in unethical events is demographically rare). Until recently, neither longitudinal studies nor cross-national aggregated data analyses existed. Indeed, it has been widely acknowledged that cases of corruption are easily observed but hard to quantify, since selecting comparable cases in cross-national political research and drawing inferences about such an ambiguous phenomenon is quite difficult (Dogan & Kazancigil 1994; Del Castillo 2003).

Given the impossibility of measuring corruption directly, due to its clandestine nature, researchers have turned to survey methods to carry out their examination of the topic. Currently, comparative studies analyzing corruption by survey focus on social judgments about a general belief, the degree to which the agreement or disagreement with the data by those making such judgments are, if not entirely accurate, at least recognizable to the general public (Clausen et al. 2011). International organizations dedicated to analyzing social perceptions of corruption draw upon a wide range of methodologies. Some formulate their questions within the framework of national or transnational surveys. Others do so by compiling indices and interviews with national experts on personal perceptions of corruption.

Such indices include: the International Country Risk Guide, which culls from opinion surveys aimed at experts and journalists; the Index of Business International, based on a worldwide opinion survey; and the Corruption Perceptions Index, published by Transparency International, the only international NGO dedicated specifically to investigating and combating corruption throughout the world, which combines various opinion surveys carried out by different private organizations, alongside interviews with analysts and experts from several countries.

Leaving aside the controversy about sampling procedures in corruption indices (see Del Castillo 2003; Golden & Picci 2005), corruption surveys, like any other observation instrument involving participant self-reporting, are susceptible to a wide range of biases. The most common of these appears when researchers ask respondents to rate the extent and severity of corruption (Ko & Samajdar 2010). Examples of ambiguous questions include “Is corruption a problem in your country?” and “Is corruption in government widespread?” which are used by the World Bank Corruption Index (World Bank Group 2014). Questions such as these and others like them have caused researchers to doubt the reliability and validity of indices measuring corruption. In general, the problem lies in using perception measurements as if they were accurate indicators of corruption levels. It is sufficient to note that, in the absence of a universal definition of the nature of the phenomenon, there is a strong possibility that some of the interviewees might be directly implicated in cases of corruption, while others may lack any sophisticated knowledge of the problem. Both situations result in there being measurements of corruption by means of surveys that have as an intrinsic weakness a notable lack of consistency and stability (reliability) and a null capacity of generalization (validity) (Golden & Picci 2005, 39).
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Still, the methodological fragility of such an instrument is especially exacerbated when questions are not formulated on questionnaires about personal experiences of corruption but rather about the degree to which the interviewee agrees with a general statement about the behavior of third parties. Therefore, the perceived ratings of corruption registered on surveys exhibit the discrepancy between actual and perceived levels of corruption. This is largely the result of the biases in respondents, which may be driven to some extent by principle but even more notably by prejudice (Donchev & Ujhelyi 2014). Corruption indices based only on surveys may thus be neither valid nor reliable (Lee 2004; Lambsdorff 2006; Doncheve & Ujhelyi 2014; Park & Lee 2016), at least while people’s perceptions of corruption are informed by “opinion rather than experience” (Treisman 2007, 213).

Putting to one side the chimerical goal of capturing objective corruption perceptions, other factors that may determine the validity and reliability of evaluations of political corruption include the quantity, quality, and availability of political information. The omnipresence of electronic technologies in people’s daily lives, together with continuous access to media news and social networks, undoubtedly heightens awareness of the honesty, or lack thereof, of politicians, the judiciary, and local and central administrators. But in order to correlate objective political awareness and polling behavior, researchers still need to subscribe to the well-known practice of including knowledge and policy issue questions in surveys (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Althaus 2003). Among other items, respondents should answer questions pertaining to their factual knowledge about politics and institutions (e.g., “Who holds the majority in the Parliament?”), their ability to recognize important political figures (e.g., “Name a member of the presidential Cabinet”), or the proper placement of parties and candidates on a left–right scale of policy issues. These items have been proven to be more effective at measuring differences in political awareness than other alternatives, such as education, self-reported media use, or political participation (Klasnja 2017). Yet, what is wholly lacking is empirical evidence comparing subjective voters’ evaluations and objective criteria based on their factual knowledge of the effects and extension of corruption (Kurer 2001).

These concerns have encouraged researchers to develop alternative corruption indices with the goal of more accurately gauging the impact and extension of corruption. The World Bank, for instance, has proposed an index which would combine information from multiple surveys, the values of which would more precisely correlate with others from the same country, under the assumption that a statistical association among diverse sources leads to greater reliability (Kaufmann et al. 1999a; 1999b). Different Latin American institutions have decided to utilize instruments that both sample large numbers of individuals and ask a battery of questions focused on first-hand experiences with corruption rather than solely on perceptions of it (Seligson 2002). One example of such an initiative is the Index of Corruption and Good Government from Transparency in Mexico, which measures the rates and extent of bribery within public administrations by means of data gathered from a sample of citizens who have experienced such situations first-hand, along with data aggregated from 38 public service organizations considered to be “critical” by the Transparencia Mexicana (TM) (Del Castillo 2003).

Other international corruption-monitoring organizations have tried to mitigate perceptual biases by capturing either the real incidence of experience with corruption among the interviewees or by assessing the respondents’ levels of awareness about different forms of bribery. For instance, Gallup World Poll questions (2008) included “Was there at least one instance in the last 12 months when you had to give a bribe or present, or not?” Here, again, empirical evidence shows that very few respondents have had first-hand experiences with corruption, leading numerous scholars to voice their skepticism regarding people’s inferences about corrupt behaviors given their inaccuracy (Andersson & Heywood 2009; Heywood & Rose 2014), even
though such evidence is still commonly used. Instead, The World Economic Forum’s Executive Opinion Survey (2016) posed the question: “In your country, how common is it for firms to make undocumented extra payments or bribes?”

This formula offers another peculiarity: people’s perceptions of the corruption problem may be influenced by the communications media’s coverage of political scandals, regardless of the degree to which scandals can be generalized or the real rates of corruption in the social system as a whole. In fact, Transparency International asked expert members of a sample chosen to calculate the Bribe Payers Index (2006) to name which news sources had most deeply influenced their perceptions of corruption. Eighty percent of the interviewees cited the print as their first choice, whereas first-hand experience came in at third place. This last point is of fundamental importance, given that much of society’s judgment about corruption is influenced by the ways political scandals are treated by the media as well as by the public’s selective perception of this type of information.

External influence on perceptions: media contents and media priming effects

To determine if greater knowledge of political reality determines one’s beliefs, attitudes, and behavior with respect to corruption, it is necessary to analyze the quantitative aspects of the information one receives as well as the process leading to the formation of opinions after exposure to coverage of political scandals.

With regards to the qualitative features of political information, models suggest that the news media may either influence or increase biases in the ways one perceives corruption. Primarily, the regularity and salience of news stories about corruption may distort one’s vision of reality or cause one to make inaccurate or faulty interpretations of the phenomenon, leading one to believe that, for instance, we live in a political system that is more corrupt than it really is (Tversky & Kahneman 1973). Secondly, the media tend to exaggerate the negative consequences of corruption, given that they normally are more interested in reporting about a government’s failures than its successes (Duffy et al. 2008; Birkland 2011; Park 2012). Thirdly, the media’s selection of the daily news agenda tells “audiences what to think about, which inherently guides perceptions of what they [the public] ought to think” (Singer 2011, 100).

With respect to content, Entman (2007) has claimed that there are three general types of biases in the way media represent political reality: distorting biases (news that deliberately distorts or lies about reality), biases of content (news that favors a partisan point of view), and decision-making biases (referring to the subjectivity of journalists, which tilts content inadvertently). With regard to biases in news coverage, this last subtype integrates at least five other factors: personalization (falsely attributing the cause of a problem to a person or social group); dramatization (giving special relevance to crises and conflicts as well strategically focusing political news on winners and losers); fragmentation (isolating stories from the larger context in which they take place); biases of attribution centered around authority figures (distrust toward the behavior of governing authorities); and negativity (showing a preference for negative facts) (see Patterson 1994; Cappella & Jamieson 1997; de Vreese & Elenbaas 2008; Berganza 2009; Bennett 2009; Adriaansen et al. 2011; 2012; Park & Lee 2016; and many others).

All of the above brings us to the main point of whether and/or how these biases affect the ways receptors perceive unethical politics. Scholarship on media priming has long registered the residual, often unrecognized, consequences of media exposure on subsequent judgments and behaviors. As a matter of fact, generally speaking, the external-influence process results in media stereotypes of politicians that are frequently paired as a group concept with specific attributes
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(i.e., corruption). Over time, regular exposure to these stereotypes in the media may create biased memory traces, which can be reactivated (primed) by successive exposure to the media coverage of scandals (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. 2009; Arendt 2013; Arendt & Marquart 2015).

According to the social-psychological “hot cognition hypothesis,” the basis of any political reasoning, such as that informing judgments about corruption scandals, is a dual process in which citizens inertly couple pre-existing knowledge and preferences with affects (Morris et al. 2003). Arendt and Maquart (2015) have demonstrated that media priming effects on corruption are only noticeable to members of the public when these have already established strong automatic associations between “politicians” and “corruption” in their long-term memory (LTM) prior to exposure to media scandals (“politicians are corrupt”). Priming demands the activation of LTM for storing facts, beliefs, and predilections, as well as a method for redirecting one’s knowledge about leaders, parties, and issues from LTM to working-declarative memory, where it can be attended to (Rumelhart & Norman 1988). As attention is very limited, stereotypes from the media fulfill the need for heuristics (cognitive cues) and other simplifying mechanisms for thinking and reasoning about corruption which, if needed, become expressions of affiliation/detachment in surveys, for example. This directly contradicts the claims of many political scientists who hold that there is a strong correlation between an increase in voter information (or political awareness) and a lower tolerance for corruption (see e.g., Stapenhurst et al. 2006).

Social-psychological research has also shown that stereotypical associations can become automatically activated when they appeal to a social group concept (Arendt & Marquart 2015, 187): the automatic activation of specific attributes (e.g., “corrupt” when thinking of “politicians”) happens regardless of whether or not citizens perceive the specific attribute as accurate. These automatic group-attribute associations are formally known as implicit attitudes (Greenwald et al. 2002), and may or may not accompany an explicit ethical judgment (e.g., when someone automatically declares that a politician should be severely punished after an economic scandal, even as that same individual perpetrates tax fraud). So, regardless of the type of stimulus concerned, media priming should always be considered from both sides: the explicit-stereotyped level, and the implicit level, which operates beyond consciousness. In terms of our enigma, whereas explicit attitude scales (i.e., surveys) measure the degree of conformity with a fixed (propositional) statement founded on the effect of published political misbehavior, there are complementary observation instruments based on the measurement of non-conscious feelings, such as the implicit association test (IAT) (see Greenwald et al. 2002), by which it is possible to determine the strength of the beliefs about corruption of candidates, parties, or the political system as a whole. The IAT ultimately allows researchers to illuminate why some citizens manifest explicit attitudes that are clearly against political corruption but certain implicit weak attitudes toward the same phenomenon.

A reasoned (re)action: social priming and corruption tolerance

Nevertheless, electoral tolerance of political corruption cannot be explained only by way of the correlation between what people explicitly say and what they actually feel, given media priming. The famous theory of reasoned action might be of some assistance in definitively clarifying the paradox posed by voters’ ethical ambivalence. According to this theory, an individual’s behavior is determined by his or her behavioral intention (BI) to execute that behavior, which may be considered the most accurate prediction of behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). BI is a function of two elements: an individual’s attitude toward the behavior (A) and a subjective norm (SN). A is defined as “a person’s general feeling of favourableness or unfavourableness for that behaviour” (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980), which, in our case, is consistent with the idea that
a series of implicit remnants regulates the verbal expression of ideas about political corruption or voting decisions. SN, on the other hand, is defined as a person’s perception that most of the people who are important to him or her think he or she should or should not perform the behavior in question (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980) along with his or her motivation to comply (MC) with those referents.

Moreover, according to the theory of reasoned action it might be argued that if people perceive toleration of corruption to be a general pattern of behavior, voters will be socially primed, that is, they will become more tolerant of corrupt politicians in turn; if a voter believes corruption to be common among his or her peers, he or she “is more likely to consider corrupt actions acceptable, and to be tolerant of a corrupt politician” (McNally 2016, 983).

Theories of pro-social behavior have already demonstrated that the conduct of significant others makes its effects felt in several ways; complying with taxes (Frey & Torgler 2007), obeying of traffic rules (Fernández-Dols 1993b), or engaging in criminal behavior (Kahan 1998) are examples of unethical social-driven conduct. Consequently, the mechanism by which a voter believes that corruption is unacceptable but, at the same time, experiences a cognitive dissonance on this topic because of his or her perception that his peers and acquaintances systematically violate anti-fraud social norms may provide a plausible solution to the puzzle of corruption tolerance. Fernández-Dols (1992; 1993a; 1993b) and Fernández-Dols & Oceja (1994) have empirically demonstrated this social-psychological phenomenon under the perverse norms hypothesis: “Perverse norms are those formal or informal norms that are universally infringed by a social group, even though they can result in sanctions” (Fernández-Dols 1992, 3). According to this hypothesis, persons who believe (or feel) the perversity of a norm (e.g., abusive taxation in a context of systematic corruption scandals) become more tolerant towards forms of behavior that involve corruption (i.e., the transgression of laws or norms for personal gain). Thus, such an approach would make an important contribution to our understanding of whether voters end up choosing to punish corrupt politicians.

References


