

The Brazilian experience shows that voters are more forgiving of incompetence than they are of corruption

Corruption in the U.S. is perceived as being on the rise, with research showing that voters are increasingly concerned about the relationship between private financial interests and politicians. But are voters willing to forgive corrupt politicians if they are competent? New research which looks at the Brazilian case by [Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro](#) and [Matthew S. Winters](#) shows that voters are merciless when it comes to forgiving corrupt officials and politicians, and that their electoral success is usually a result of lower voter information.



At the end of June 2013, over one million people took to the streets in cities across Brazil. Protests that had begun in the city of São Paulo in reaction to mass transit fare hikes had become a nationwide movement and had taken on a number of additional concerns, such as the overall cost of living in Brazil, substandard provision of social services, police brutality, and corruption. In a survey that we ran in July 2013, over half of our respondents described corruption as one of the main reasons for the protests, and one in five said that it was *the main reason* (second only to the fare increases).

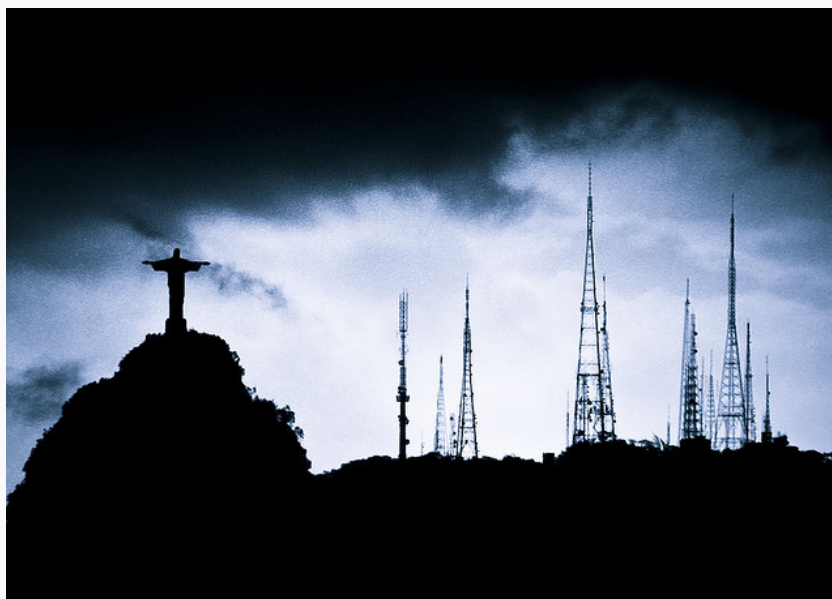


Corruption is big business in Brazil, costing the country between 1.4 and 2.3 percent of its total GDP, according to [a 2010 study](#) by FIESP, the Federation of Industries of São Paulo State. Corruption is alleged to be one of the reasons why stadium construction and other infrastructure projects related to the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics have lagged behind and experienced severe cost [overruns](#). The 2005 Mensalão scandal – in which the ruling Worker’s Party (PT) made payments to national legislators to guarantee their votes – demonstrated that corruption affects the highest levels of government in Brazil.

Persistent political corruption in a democracy necessarily means that voters are choosing to put corrupt politicians in office. And despite the anti-corruption message of the 2013 protests, a piece of conventional wisdom in Brazil for many years has been that they willingly do so, opting to support corrupt politicians because those politicians are otherwise performing well. “*Rouba, mas faz,*” in Portuguese: “He robs, but he gets things done.”

In ongoing research that we began in the summer of 2010, we set out to see whether Brazilian voters really thought this way, being willing to trade-off some political corruption in exchange for good performance in other areas. In focus

group discussions, people would tell us that the attitude was widespread but that they themselves did not condone it. And while three-quarters of our 2010 survey respondents thought that it was somewhat or very common for politicians to take bribes, an even larger proportion said that they themselves had never personally voted for a



Can corrupt politicians be redeemed by competence? Credit: Anthony Goto; CC by 2.0

corrupt politician. Very few people were willing to admit to personally accepting political corruption.

Since people will often obscure their true feelings when asked directly in a survey question, we also included an experiment in our survey, the results of which have been published in the journal [Comparative Politics](#). Each survey respondent heard about a mayor running for reelection. We described the mayor either as corrupt or not corrupt, and we also described the mayor as either having provided many public works to his city or few public works. We then asked our respondents whether or not they thought that someone like them would vote to reelect the mayor.

If a widespread “*rouba, mas faz*” attitude exists in Brazil, then our surveys should have revealed that many people would be more likely to reelect a corrupt mayor when that mayor had provided many public goods. Instead we found that information about good performance in the realm of public goods provision only slightly offset the corruption information.

Whereas 78 percent of respondents supported reelecting a mayor who was free from corruption charges (regardless of the level of public goods provision), only 19 percent were willing to support a corrupt mayor – a difference of 58 percentage points! Among clean mayors, good public works provision increased their popularity among our respondents by 26 percentage points, whereas good public works provision redeemed corrupt mayors to a lesser extent: their reelection chances increased by only 15 percentage points. Voters react sufficiently strongly to corruption that our clean but incompetent mayor was supported by 62 percent of the respondents who heard about him, while our corrupt but competent mayor garnered support from only 28 percent of those surveyed.

This willingness to withdraw support from corrupt politicians suggests to us that corrupt politicians get elected in Brazil not because voters are willing to trade-off corruption for performance but rather because they lack information about the corrupt behavior of politicians. Our individual-level survey data therefore underpins a finding by economists Claudio Ferraz and Frederico Finan. [In a 2008 article](#), those authors found that the revelation of corruption in advance of an election led to sharp reductions in re-election rates for mayors in comparison with *equally-corrupt* mayors where the corruption was revealed only after the election and therefore at too late a point in time for voters to act on the information. Since working harder to reveal corruption is something more easily done than convincing people to change the way that they view corruption, this is a positive result from the perspective of combatting political corruption in Brazil.

For this reason, we are optimistic about anti-corruption campaigns in Brazil. The federal government audits of municipalities that are studied by Ferraz and Finan have been one way in which local-level corruption has been revealed. And new survey work that we conducted in May 2013 demonstrates that citizens believe these federal audits to be a credible source of information.

Beyond electoral decisions by voters, in reaction to the protests, the Brazilian senate finally passed – after a three-year delay – a law increasing the penalties for [corruption](#). The country’s Supreme Court also upheld convictions of those implicated in the [Mensalão](#) scandal. These types of anti-corruption efforts in the law and justice sector are equally important to the voting behaviour that we study. And the fact that the new law and the Supreme Court ruling come in the wake of the protests might suggest that unconventional political participation can help bring about the anti-corruption initiatives that are necessarily in the hands of the government and not voters.

If our survey offers one point of caution, however, it was a finding with regard to our upper-class respondents. Surprisingly – and again in contrast to conventional wisdom – insofar as we found a group of people willing to condone corruption when a politician was otherwise performing well, it was among the upper class. Whereas clean if incompetent mayors were preferred by 34 percentage points to corrupt but competent mayors among our overall sample, among our upper class respondents, the advantage was only six percentage points, which was not statistically distinguishable from zero.

Given that members of the upper class have more influence over the media and over government decision making in times of normal politics, this evidence for a “*rouba, mas faz*” attitude among this group gives us some cause for concern. Yet it is important to note that our sample of upper-class respondents was fairly small – 110

respondents out of an overall sample of 2,002 Brazilians – which means that this result in particular calls for reexamination in future surveys.

This article first appeared at the [Democratic Audit of the UK blog](#).

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About the authors

Matthew S. Winters - *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Matthew S. Winters is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro - *Brown University*

Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Brown University.



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