

## **CORRUPTION AND TRUST IN MEXICO**

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### **Introduction**

The notion of trust has attracted substantial scholarly attention over the years (i.e. Boeckmann and Tyler 2002; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Chanley et al. 2000; Critin 1974; Earle and Cvetkovich 1995; Fukuyama 1995; Hagan, Merkens and Boehnke 1995; Hetherington 1998; Kaase and Newton 1995; Miller 1974; Miller 1980; Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982; Pierce and Converse 1989; Putnam 1993, 1995, 2000). Many studies, treating trust as an independent variable, find that it influences political behavior and institutional practice. Recent writings on social capital, for example, identify interpersonal trust along with civic involvement as an important determinant of economic development, political participation, and effective democratic institutions (see Fukuyama 1995; Hagan, Merkens and Boehnke 1995; Klesner 2007; Putnam 1995, 2000). Other studies, by contrast, cast trust as the product of rather than the cause of institutional performance. In short, poor, mismanaged governments breed distrust. As Rothstein and Stolle (2002, 7) succinctly put it, “government policies and political institutions create, channel and influence the amount and type of social capital.” Taken together, this suggests that trust influences institutional performance just as institutional performance shapes the public’s trust in their institutions and in one another.

The political corruption literature similarly portrays trust as both a cause and an effect of corruption. This mutual causality – wherein low levels of trust nurtures the corruption that in turn undermines trust in government and society – forges a vicious cycle in countries suffering systemic corruption, a situation that has crucial implications

for the prospects of fighting corruption and even for gauging the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures (Wesberry 2004). Following a discussion of the various nuances of the trust/corruption equation, this paper examines perceptions of corruption in Mexico based on data from the massive 2001 *Encuesta de Corrupcion y Buen Gobierno* conducted by Transparencia Mexicana. The empirical section explores popular opinion regarding corruption and trust, and sets out and tests a range of factors influencing popular perceptions of corruption in Mexico, the prospects of eradicating it, retrospective and prospective evaluations of changes in corruption, and trust.

### **Trust and Corruption**

Like the broader political culture literature, much of the recent research on corruption identifies trust as both cause and consequence of corruption. From one perspective, low levels of trust are thought to nurture corruption. According to this view, a lack of trust in others in society and/or in the government prevents the adoption of universalistic ethos and cooperative behavior and favors instead instrumental and individualistic approaches to problems. “Una sociedad que guarda poca confianza hacia el prójimo tiende a extremar los cuidados y precauciones, disminuye las transacciones sociales y económicas e impide la cooperación social.” (Rubio 2007). Distrust thus fosters a tolerant or acquiescent attitude toward corruption, and by creating the expectation of corrupt behavior among others, feeds individual participation in corruption. Some studies stress the lack of generalized trust within society or interpersonal trust. Heidenheimer (1996, 339), for instance, attributes widespread corruption in Italy during the post World War II period to the lack of trust among its

citizens. Bardhan (1997), in turn, refers to a “frequency-dependent equilibrium” wherein participation in corruption is a function of one’s expectation of corrupt behavior by others. Xin and Rudel (2004, 298) similarly contend that a culture of mistrust elevates the amount of perceived corruption in society which thereby provides a justification for such behavior. Cross-national studies by La Porta et al. (1997) and Moreno (2002) and micro-level analyses by Seligson (1999) and Camp, et al (2000) all lend empirical support to this view. La Porta et al. (1997) find lower levels of interpersonal trust in societies with higher levels of corruption, while Moreno (2002) shows that such societies also tend to be more tolerant or permissive of corruption. Seligson’s (1999) study on Nicaragua and Camp’s, et al. (2000) on Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico also identify interpersonal trust as a significant predictor of individual-level perceptions of corruption in government.

While such studies emphasize societal or interpersonal trust as a key determinant of corruption, other scholars attribute corruption to the more refined notion of political trust. Defined as a “basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people’s normative expectations,” political trust like interpersonal trust is thought to mold the public’s predisposition to engage in certain activities like corruption (Hetherington 1998, 791). According to Della Porta (2000, 205), the “lack of confidence in government actually favors corruption insofar as it transforms citizens into clients and bribers who look for private protection to gain access to decision-makers.” Research by Guerrero and del Castillo using focus groups in Mexico City offers qualitative support for this view. They find that the lack of legitimacy for the law coupled with perceptions of corruption within certain institutions, particularly the notion that “everyone is doing it,” greatly reduces the risk of detection and

punishment and thus creates a disincentive to follow the written rules. “If a particular institution projects a corrupt image, the individuals that interact with that institution will tend to perceive low risks in offering a bribe” (Guerrero and del Castillo 2003, 2).

Other corruption-related research, however, reverses the causal arrow. Rather than seeing low levels of trust – where interpersonal or political -- as causing corruption, this approach envisions corruption as eroding the level of trust (della Porta 2000; Doig and Theobald 2000, 6). Anderson and Tverdova (2003), for example, using a dual empirical approach, find that the higher the perception of corruption among individuals, the lower their support for democratic political institutions. At the macro-level as well they discover that societies with higher levels of corruption tend to exhibit more negative attitudes toward civil servants. Using a different measure of corruption based on participation in corrupt exchanges among a small set of Latin American countries, Seligson (2002) also confirms corruption’s corrosive impact on political trust and regime legitimacy. According to Miller and Listhaug (1999), this relationship occurs because corruption influences trust in institutional effectiveness and institutional fairness which serve as key indicators of support for the overall political system. Looking more specifically at the impact of political scandals on trust, Bowler and Karp (2004), Pharr (2000) and Peters and Welsch (1980) all show how corruption helps shape the public’s attitudes about government, political institutions and incumbent politicians. Pharr (2000), for instance, finds misconduct in office to be a better predictor than policy performance to explain the low levels of political confidence found in Japan. Peters and Welsch (1980) show that a voters’ knowledge of corruption impacts negatively on voting behavior in U.S. Congressional elections. McCann and Dominguez (1998), by contrast, show how

such perceptions of corruption in Mexico translate into voter apathy rather than support for the opposition.

Though most studies examining the impact of corruption on trust tend to focus more on political trust and regime legitimacy, there is reason to treat the two forms of trust – interpersonal and political -- in tandem. Lane (1959, 164; cited in Brehm and Rahn 1997, 1003), for instance, contends that there is a mutual relationship between the two since “trust in government officials may be a ‘specific instance of trust in mankind.’” Levi (1996) identifies a similar linkage, noting how building confidence in governmental institutions has the potential to restore levels of interpersonal trust. Empirical studies tend to confirm this linkage. Brehm and Rahn (1997), for example, statistically demonstrate the mutual influence between the two, though they find that confidence in public institutions has a stronger impact on interpersonal trust than vice versa. And though Newton and Norris (2000) find social trust to be only weakly associated with institutional confidence at the individual level, they do find the relationship to be much more robust at the national level (see also Kaase 1999). Looking more precisely at distinct institutions within government, Rothstein and Stolle (2002, 21) uncover a rather strong relationship between confidence in what the authors refer to as “order” institutions (police, judiciary) and interpersonal trust. They conclude that “societies in which the impartiality of the order institutions cannot be guaranteed, which is expressed by lower citizens’ confidence in these types of institutions, also produce lower generalized trust (and vice versa).” In summarizing this relationship, Rothstein and Stolle (2002, 16) contend that “Government institutions generate social trust only if citizens consider the political institutions to be trustworthy.”

To be sure, many analysts highlight the mutual causality linking trust -- both interpersonal and political trust -- to corruption and hence the vicious cycle that it produces (Della Porta and Vannucci 1997, 1999; Hetherington 1998; Rothstein and Stolle 2002). Della Porta and Vannucci (1999, 261), for example, plot the circularity in the following terms: misadministration → mistrust in the implementation of citizens rights → search for protection → propensity for paying bribes → demand for corruption → selective inclusion → increased perception of maladministration. Seligson (2002, 414) as well points to the methodological problem of mutual causality when he notes that since the perception that bribes are needed may be a function of a low evaluation of government, we cannot be sure if corruption is responsible for the decline in trust in government or the result.

### **Slippery Concepts**

As with any analysis, exploring the trust/corruption equation demands conceptual clarity. One clear distinction in the literature already noted separates interpersonal trust and political trust. Though both refer to feelings of trust, the objects of those feelings clearly differ. So while survey questions may fail to define precisely what constitutes ‘trust’, they are abundantly clear in distinguishing between trust in other members of society (interpersonal trust) versus trust in the government or particular aspects of the political system (the politicians, the civil servants, etc)(political trust). Because of this distinction the relationship between the two dimensions of trust remains theoretically open, though as mentioned, research shows a correlation linking the two types of trust and shows both forms of trust to be a cause and an effect of corruption.

A second conceptual distinction that should be stressed teases out corruption and perceptions of corruption. For better or worse -- and the debate rages -- public perceptions of corruption have routinely been used in cross-national research as a proxy measure of political corruption. The two concepts, however, are not identical (see del Castillo 2003; Johnston 2000) and few studies have explored the relationship. Seligson (2002) notes, for instance, that the two are significantly related, but that popular perceptions of corruption are far more pronounced and widespread than the reality of corruption. In short, perception of corruption “reflects more than actual conditions” (Camp, et al. 2000, 4). Looking systematically at the relationship, Morris (forthcoming) finds the two to be only mildly related and to carry different determinants and consequences. This basic distinction means that since most cross-national studies have actually used “perceived corruption” to measure corruption, any relationship they find between “corruption” and trust (interpersonal or political trust) really refers to the perception of corruption. Moreover, since perception is “more than” corruption and since it too impacts on trust and thus on corruption, it becomes important to analyze the determinants and the effects of perception and its link to trust separate from those tied to corruption itself. This raises certain sorts of questions: Are some individuals more likely to distrust politicians, envision widespread corruption, expect such behavior, and oblige? What determines how an individual will react to corruption and the perception of corruption? Has corruption, for instance, created such an environment of distrust that it prevents some from even believing that it is possible to tackle corruption? Is it difficult under such conditions to mobilize citizens to participate in anti-corruption programs, leading to the further entrenchment of corruption itself?

A third and related conceptual problem centers on drawing a distinction between “perceptions” of corruption, on the one hand, and political trust, on the other. Beyond the possible endogeneity of the relationship, arguably these two concepts have at times been operationalized in ways bordering on tautology. Two questions often used to measure trust in government, for example, are: “How often can you trust the government to do what is right?” and “Is Government run by a few people looking out for their own interests or run for the benefit of all?” (emphasis added) (Michelson 2003). Both questions, however, seem to be rather general phrasings of the type of question often used to gauge the level of corruption -- “are politicians corrupt?” -- since most respondents would tend to define corruption as a situation wherein those in the government do something that is inherently not right and as a type of behavior that puts the public official’s own interest above those of the people. Is it possible, in other words, to believe that those in government are acting in accordance to what they should be doing (what is right and for the benefit of all) and yet simultaneously hold the view that they engage in a type of behavior that by definition deviates from that norm (corruption)? This raises the question then of whether the query “How frequently do politicians engage in corruption?,” which measures the perception of corruption, does not also gauge at least in part the lack of trust in politicians to “do the right thing” or both? Though trust in the government or trust in politicians or even system legitimacy certainly encompass far more than simply perceptions of corruption, perceptions of corruption must nonetheless be considered a fundamental component of political trust. Accepting this view, it seems then that the “corruption-perception of corruption” linkage noted earlier may be just one variant of the broader “corruption-trust” linkage. Viciously rounded this means that the

lack of trust in politicians or institutions combines with the perception of corruption to create the expectation of corruption and feed corrupt behavior, while corruption itself confirms and reinforces peoples expectations of others. Politics itself is then viewed and interpreted through these lenses of limited trust in the law, in the institutions, and the expectation of corruption as an informal institution (Lauth 2000).

### **The Uniqueness of the Trust/Corruption Linkage**

This mutual causality wherein corruption erodes trust in public institutions and society in general which in turn creates the conditions favorable to corrupt behavior -- compounded by the fact that the perceptions of corruption are more generalized than actual levels of corruption – creates a vicious cycle that perpetuates corruption, the perception of corruption, and low levels of trust. This trust/corruption connection is unique for three reasons. First, unlike other problems that governments seek to address, corruption is predominately an endogenous matter. This means that corruption not only undermines faith in the institutions to do what they are supposed to do – like administer a government service -- but by undermining faith in government in general and politicians and civil servants in particular, corruption undermines the people’s confidence in the ability of the government to fight corruption itself. An ineffective anti-poverty program, for instance, may not necessarily undermine the people’s faith in the government’s ability to design and implement a more effective policy since the failure may be attributed to the lack of resources, to the sheer magnitude of the problem, or to the difficulties of reaching the beneficiaries. Such assessments, however, do not necessarily undermine the people’s faith in the institution itself, the individuals running it or even delegitimize the task. But

if widespread corruption undermines the people’s trust in politicians or government, it is difficult for anyone to believe that the political system or the politicians can or will effectively address the problem. In short, if politicians are considered corrupt, then their rhetorical promises to crackdown on corruption will tend to fall on deaf ears. Even sincere efforts to prosecute corrupt officials may be interpreted as a political tactic by corrupt politicians to go after their political enemies rather than a genuine effort to fight corruption (Wesberry 2004). This may not have the desired effect on the perceptions of corruption.

Second, the lack of trust bred by corruption can potentially undermine citizens’ willingness to actively work with others or the government to seek solutions to the problem of corruption. This tendency severely undermines societal and governmental efforts to fight corruption and may even weaken democracy in the process. As Johnston (1986) contends, perceptions of corruption “affect’s one’s own choices as to participation or nonparticipation in politics.” This problem becomes even more relevant given the current consensus among activists and analysts that sees citizen involvement and social empowerment as critical to designing an effective anti-corruption program (see Johnston 1998; Wesberry 2004). Indeed, many of the current anti-corruption programs weigh heavily on public involvement, stressing what Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000, 147) refer to as the “new politics of societal accountability.” Initiatives include informing citizens about the toxic consequences of corruption, promoting honesty and integrity through public education programs, and organizing and empowering NGOs to become involved in the decision making process and to collect and disseminate information on the activities of public officials (see Transparency International 2003). This problem may be

even more relevant in Latin America where state institutions have evolved “to serve narrow political and economic interests” (Pearce 2004, 496).” Of course, citizen involvement in fighting corruption is already hampered at the outset by the ‘public good’ character of the results and the tendency for free riders to enjoy the benefits, as Banfield (1975, 598) notes. But on top of that, getting citizens involved arguably requires a minimal degree of trust and efficacy. As such, anti-corruption campaigns face a difficult audience in terms of trying to mobilize and incorporate an already distrusting population.

A third problem relates to assessments of anti-corruption programs. If corruption undermines the peoples faith in the government and politicians, leading citizens to expect corruption and perceive it to be widespread, then it may be difficult to use opinion polls to gauge the results of anti-corruption initiatives. This may be merely a methodological dilemma, but it nonetheless has important policy implications in that perceptions of corruption and public opinion are often used to help orient, target and assess anti-corruption measures. Since perceptions of corruption, like TI’s CPI, are the most widely used measure of corruption, then looking at the public’s perceptions of corruption is often relied upon to test whether corruption has increased or decreased though longitudinal studies of corruption are grossly lacking. But rather than detecting changes in the level of corruption, such public opinion measures may indicate merely the depths to which the public has come to distrust their politicians and institutions and to expect corrupt behavior. This is particularly relevant since participation in corruption – a truer measure - is much lower than actual perceptions of corruption. In sum, and combined with the earlier points, if the public is convinced that all politicians engage in rent-seeking behavior and that all institutions are riddled with corruption not only will such a

predisposition contribute to corruption itself, but it is also unlikely that the people will believe the politicians when they say they want to fight corruption, unlikely that they will join them or others in that effort when they seek their support, and unlikely that they will register real changes in the level of corruption when asked by pollsters regardless of the reality.

## **Data**

The *Encuesta de Corrupción y Buen Gobierno* (ECBG) by Transparencia Mexicana stands as one of the first and still most extensive surveys ever conducted on corruption in Mexico. The ECBG includes 13,790 interviews mainly of heads of households based on a national, probabilistic sample. The surveys were conducted by Grupo de Asesors Unidos, Pearson and Pulso Mercadologico under the supervision of Estadística Aplicada during the months of June and July 2001. With over 100 questions, the survey presents an amazing wealth of data. Following a brief descriptive overview, I examine possible determinants of the perception of corruption, attitudes toward the possibility of eliminating corruption, assessments of changes in corruption, and trust.

Perceptions of Corruption and Participation. The data clearly reveal widespread perceptions of corruption throughout Mexico. Overall, 78.9% of respondents agreed with the statement “politicians are corrupt,” while only 11% outright disagreed. In terms of participation in corruption, 23.7% of respondents admitted to having paid a bribe to acquire at least one of the 38 different types of public and private services listed in the survey. When asked whether they had paid a

bribe in the past month to a public official, 2.2% of the over 13,000 respondents answered affirmatively.

Political and Interpersonal Trust. Measures of trust revealed a lack of trust in the system and in others. Whereas 38.7% agreed that “the government takes the interest of people like you into account when making laws,” 53.4% of the respondents disagreed with that view. The measure of interpersonal trust found an even smaller proportion of respondents, 28.2%, believing that others could be trusted compared to 71.8% who expressed a lack of trust in others. Interestingly, despite clearly blaming politicians for corruption, there seemed to be more political than interpersonal trust.

Tolerance and Normative Outlook. Hetherington’s (1998, 791) definition of political trust noted earlier pointed to a “people’s normative expectations” as a the benchmark. The survey suggest that such normative expectations are indeed high in Mexico despite the high levels of corruption. For instance, 87% of respondents felt that politicians should be held accountable, 74.3% rejected the idea that “it is better to have money than to be right,” and 84.1% rejected the Mexican saying that “*el que no tranza, no avanza.*” Moreover, 80.1% believed that citizens should obey the law without exception. Approval versus disapproval of a series of corrupt, dishonest and illegal acts shows substantial majorities clearly disapproving. On a 1- 5 scale running from approval to disapproval, the lowest average score of 3.45 for giving money to speed up a process was not far from the highest reprobation score of 3.92 for taking a product from a store without paying for it (Table 1). Respondents did offer more tolerant scores for clearly corrupt acts

compared to unethical or illegal acts, but the difference is quite small. By contrast, when asked whether “public officials can take advantage of his/her position as long as they do good things in office,” perhaps a more appropriate measure of tolerance, 54.5% of respondents agreed, while 39.1% did not.

[Table 1 here]

Fighting Corruption. A number of questions in the survey focused on efforts to fight corruption in Mexico. One asked whether it is possible to eliminate corruption. Given the widespread view that all politicians are corrupt, it may be somewhat surprising that 34.2% of respondents still believe it is “possible” to eliminate corruption while another 5.4% consider it “very possible.” By contrast, 35.7% of respondents believed that it is “*poco possible*” (unlikely) and 24.7% deemed the task impossible. Respondents also assessed changes in corruption during the prior year and their expectation for the coming year. Looking back, 21.5% said there was less corruption in mid-2001 than a year ago; 35.5% said there was more and 43.1% felt that the level had remained the same. Looking forward, respondents were a bit more optimistic: 33.4% felt that within a year there would be less corruption, while 29.6% envisioned more and 37.0% believed the level would remain the same.

If it is possible to reduce corruption, how then might this task be accomplished?

Though these measures will not be examined in subsequent regression models, the survey offers some interesting perspectives. First, in comparing the level of responsibility, the largest group of respondents believed eliminating corruption to be the responsibility of the government (37.7%) as opposed to the people (13.2%), though the largest group of respondents (44.5%) said everyone had a

responsibility. Second, among measures that might reduce corruption, 49.5% of respondents agreed that alternation in power would reduce corruption, though a striking 38.8% disagreed with that view. This is somewhat surprising given the optimism associated with the defeat of the PRI and the beginning of the Fox term less than a year earlier. Within that context, 70.2% felt that there was a sincere effort on the part of the government to eliminate corruption, but given the views regarding the future, it seems that for many, despite that the sincerity, the task is formidable. Looking more closely at various types of reforms ranging from education to laws, enforcement and citizen involvement, huge majorities all considered the measures listed by the survey to be of great importance in combating corruption, though rewarding honest officials and modifying the laws seemed to be the least useful approaches as shown in Table 2. Interestingly though substantial majorities believed it would help if citizens refused to pay bribes, demanded honesty or complained, only 21.4% actually admitted to knowing the process to denounce a case of corruption. Providing a further indication of the lack of trust in the political system itself, the most commonly cited reason for not denouncing a corrupt act, selected by 25.1% of respondents, was fear of reprisals. Another 16.8% simply saw it as futile.

[Table 2 here]

### **The Determinants and The Impact of Perceived Corruption**

In focusing on the mutual interaction of trust and corruption, this study explores two general questions. The first centers on the determinants of perceived corruption and the role of interpersonal and political trust in shaping such perceptions. The second

question focuses on the impact perceived corruption and trust have on an individual’s outlook toward corruption. To what extent does the perception of corruption and low levels of trust translate into a pessimistic attitude regarding the possibility of eliminating corruption or evaluations of past or prospective changes in corruption?

Few studies have looked explicitly into the determinants or the impact of individual perceptions of corruption since most empirical research on corruption examines societal-level variables. As noted earlier, Seligson (1999) shows participation in corruption to influence perceptions of corruption, while Camp et al. (2000) link perceptions of corruption to interpersonal trust. Interpersonal trust, in turn, has been shown to be inversely related to permissive attitudes toward corruption, (Moreno 2002), age, city size, and female gender and positively related with income and years of education (Power and Clark 2001) and political participation (Klesner 2007). Even fewer studies have looked into the consequences of perceptions of corruption. McCann and Dominguez (1998), as noted, explore the electoral consequences of the perception of corruption in Mexico finding that rather than a vote for the opposition (voice), individuals who perceive high levels of corruption in the government were more likely to abstain (exit). In a related study, Brinegar (2003) found that opposition party members tend to hold stronger anti-corruption views.

Table 3 presents the results from a series of OLS regressions using perception of corruption (model 1), the possibility of eliminating corruption (model 2), perceived change in corruption from one year ago and one year into the future (model 3), and trust (interpersonal and political) (model 4) as the dependent variables. All subsequent models incorporate the prior dependent variable into the equation. Other independent variables

examined include political trust and interpersonal trust, tolerance toward corruption and illegal behavior, participation in corruption, ruling party within the state, and the demographic variables age, education, income and sex. The prior section lays out most of these measures. Political trust is measured by agreement/disagreement to the statement “When making laws does the government takes into account the views of people like you,” while interpersonal trust is based on the question “Generally, would you say you can or cannot trust the majority of people.” The measure of tolerance toward corruption is calculated based on an index of responses to four questions: a) “To what extent do you agree or disagree that it is OK for an official to take advantage of his position as long as he does good?” And three questions asking the extent of approval or disapproval of b) giving money to speed up a process; c) paying a bribe to avoid a fine; and d) a government official favoring family or friends. Tolerance toward illegal behavior is measured by a respondent’s agreement or disagreement with the statement “Citizens should always obey the law.” Participation in corruption, in turn, is based on an index represented by the sum of all positive responses to a battery of questions about whether a bribe had been paid to obtain 38 different types of services from both the private and public sector. Though the survey provides no information on individual’s political allegiance or partisan identification, it does look at the party controlling the gubernatorial seat in the state. This variable is coded as a dummy variable for rule by the PRI. The potential impact of this variable is unclear. To the extent that a strong opposition may shine more light on corruption, it is possible that the perception of corruption in such states may be greater. On the other hand, it is possible that corruption may be considered more widespread in PRI-controlled states given the general perception linking corruption

to the old-PRI regime. Finally, sex, age, education and income are all used as control variables.

[Table 3 here]

## **Results**

Trust. All measures of trust used here were statistically significant and in the expected direction. Respondents with low levels of interpersonal and political trust were more likely to believe that all politicians are corrupt, that corruption cannot be eliminated, and that it had increased (would increase) in the recent past (the near future). In looking at the determinants of trust itself, participation in corruption had no impact whereas perceptions of corruption did. As expected, respondents perceiving high levels of corruption were more likely to distrust others and the political system. The model also shows interpersonal trust to be an important determinant of political trust and vice versa.

Tolerance. The data here provide mixed support to arguments and findings linking high levels of corruption to a culture of tolerance and permissiveness (Moreno 2002). In the aggregate the data show Mexicans to be rather intolerant of corrupt and illegal behavior despite the perception of widespread corruption. At the individual level, however, respondents who were more tolerant of corrupt and illegal conduct were indeed less likely to consider politicians corrupt (a less harsh standard), and yet more likely to sense that the level of corruption had increased (would increase) or remained (would remain) the same in the recent past (and into the near future). Those more tolerant of illegal conduct were also more likely to believe it difficult if not impossible to eliminate corruption. Though not approving of corrupt and illegal behavior, it would seem then that many in Mexico have simply accepted the sordid reality of corruption. As shown in

Model 4, tolerance of corruption and illegal behavior surprisingly translated into higher levels of interpersonal trust and yet lower levels of political trust.

Participation in corruption. Somewhat consistent with the findings of Seligson (20002), participation in corrupt transactions increased the likelihood of believing that all politicians are corrupt. Participation also fed the view that it is impossible to eradicate corruption. Involvement in corruption, however, had no influence on recent and future changes in corruption, nor on trust. Overall, perceptions of corruption proved to be a better predictor of attitudes regarding corruption and trust than actual involvement in corruption.

Party in power. Party in power at the state level did make some difference, but not necessarily in the expected direction. Respondents in states ruled by the PRI were slightly more likely to believe that politicians are corrupt as expected, but they were also more likely to feel that there would be less corruption one year in the future. Respondents from the PRI states also exhibited lower levels of interpersonal trust and yet slightly higher levels of political trust.

Perceptions of Corruption and Prospects of Change. As expected, the perception of corruption had a significant impact on the possibility of eliminating corruption, on evaluations of change, and on trust. Individuals sensing high levels of corruption were more likely to deem eliminating corruption impossible, more likely to see corruption as increasing or remaining the same in the past and near future, and more likely to distrust others and politicians. The possibility of eliminating corruption, in turn, influenced assessments of change in the expected direction. Individuals believing that it is

impossible or near impossible to eliminate corruption were less likely to believe that corruption had (or would) declined (decline).

Demographics. Among the demographic variables, education seemed to have no influence on any of the dependent variables. Age had a minor influence with younger respondents perceiving higher levels of corruption and yet less corruption than a year earlier. Sex had a more notable impact on the possibility of eliminating corruption, perception of change since the prior year and interpersonal trust with females being more pessimistic and less trusting. Higher income respondents were slightly more likely to see high levels of corruption, and though they were somewhat pessimistic about the prospects of fighting corruption, tended to see less corruption over the prior year and wax optimistic of change in the subsequent year. At the same time, higher income respondents exhibited higher levels of interpersonal trust and yet lower levels of political trust.

Despite these findings, it is important to stress the fact that none of the models explained much of the variation in the dependent variables as indicated by the low  $R^2$ . This is rather typical of corruption research looking at individual rather than cross-national data. Fundamentally, this means that we still know little about what shapes popular perceptions of corruption, views on the possibility of eliminating corruption or perceptions of changes in corruption, or even trust. Even the basic demographic factors like education and income had minimal influence over these variables.

## **Conclusion**

Analysis of political corruption, particularly in countries where corruption is endemic, suggests a vicious cycle wherein corruption breeds a climate of distrust that in

turn feeds corruption. Besides perhaps magnifying the perceived level and extent of corruption, this equilibrium potentially undermines efforts to fight corruption based on citizen involvement and demands for social accountability. Indeed in looking at the case of Mexico, data from a 2001 national survey show widespread perceptions of corruption, low levels of interpersonal and political trust, and pessimism regarding the ability of the government to address the problem. Regression analysis, in turn, shows that trust, both interpersonal and political, influences perceptions of corruption, views on the possibility of eliminating corruption and perceptions of changes in corruption; that views on the possibility of eliminating corruption influence perceptions and expectations of change; that perceptions of corruption and the possibility of eliminating it influence trust; and that participation in corruption influences perceptions of corruption and the possibility of eliminating corruption, but not feelings of trust.

If distrust nurtures corruption and yet perceptions of corruption somewhat independently of the actual levels of corruption feeds distrust, then fighting corruption and gauging the effectiveness of that fight becomes an even more formidable task. If few trust the politicians to do the right thing and expect corruption, then effective anti-corruption efforts must be designed to disrupt that equilibrium. In Mexico as shown, most tend to blame the politicians for widespread corruption and many see no way out. This helps justify their own participation in corruption and spawns apathy toward doing anything about it. But in many ways, Mexico has been in this type of institutional dilemma before when it faced an electoral system that most felt was corrupt and fraudulent. Yet through a series of protracted and conflict-ridden reforms, the *Instituto Federal Electoral* garnered significant legitimacy among the population and was able to

stage credible and fairer elections. It would seem that IFE’s total independence from the government was critical in making this turnaround possible (for a similar discussion on anti-corruption agencies see Wesberry 2004). Perhaps there are lessons here with respect to corruption. Clearly the government has a long way to go to tackle the problem itself and the perception of it.

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**Table 1. Normative Rankings**

<b>Approval (1) / Disapproval (5) of various acts</b>	
Mean Score	Type of Act
3.45	giving money to speed up process
3.69	pay bribe to avoid a fine
3.76	government official favoring family or friends
	} corrupt acts
3.50	lying for convenience if no one gets hurt
3.75	copy on a test
3.55	keeping money from a wallet you find
3.88	providing false information on a form
	} dishonest/unethical acts
3.80	driving above the speed limit if no police around
3.80	not paying taxes if not caught
3.92	taking product without paying from store
	} illegal acts

**Table 2. Measures to Fight Corruption**

% of respondents stating the following measure will do “much” to combat corruption (as opposed to “little” or “nothing”)	
91.0	improve education at home (culture, family)
88.9	punish the corrupt (government)
88.3	complain whenever there is abuse (citizen participation)
84.9	improve instruction in school (culture, schools)
84.8	organize to demand honesty (citizen participation)
81.1	always refuse to pay bribe (citizen participation)
80.1	simplification of procedures (government)
69.4	modify the law (government)
66.5	reward honest officials (government)
49.5*	alternation in power

\*% agreeing with the statement that this would reduce corruption

**Table 3.**

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
	Perception of Corruption (low to high)	Possibility of Eliminating Corruption (low to high)	Change in Corruption (from less to more) from one year ago      one year from now	
Constant	2.898*** (.032)	2.838*** (.049)	2.240*** (.053)	1.670*** (.056)
Political trust	-.022*** (.007)	.067*** (.009)	-.030*** (.008)	-.029*** (.007)
Interpersonal trust	-.053*** (.014)	.186*** (.018)	-.080*** (.016)	-.103*** (.015)
Tolerance of corruption	-.008** (.003)	.000 (.004)	.009** (.003)	.012*** (.003)
Tolerance of illegal conduct	-.091*** (.009)	-.037*** (.012)	.030** (.010)	.054*** (.010)
Participation in corruption	.023*** (.006)	-.023** (.008)	-.010 (.007)	.008 (.006)
Party in power (PRI=0)	-.030* (.013)	.028 (.016)	.021 (.014)	.061*** (.014)
Age (in 3 groups)	-.017* (.009)	-.010 (.011)	.071*** (.010)	-.021* (.009)
Education	-.002 (.001)	.003 (.002)	-.001 (.002)	.000 (.002)
Income	.014* (.006)	-.014* (.006)	-.028*** (.007)	-.039*** (.007)
Sex (F=0)	.019 (.013)	.098*** (.017)	-.152*** (.014)	-.024 (.014)
<b>Perception of corruption</b>		<b>-.085***</b> (.012)	<b>.041***</b> (.011)	<b>.025*</b> (.010)
		<b>Possibility of eliminating corruption</b>	<b>-.093***</b> (.008)	<b>-.144***</b> (.008)
			<b>Change from one year ago</b>	<b>.415***</b> (.009)
N	11,233	11,081	10,,969	10,685
(adj.) R <sup>2</sup>	.014	.029	.039	.218
F score	16.944***	31.148***	38.300***	220.923***

Model is OLS. Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard error in parenthesis. \*\*\* = < .001, \*\* = < .01, \* = < .05.

**Table 3, continued**

Independent variables	Model 4	
	Interpersonal Trust (low to high)	Political Trust (low to high)
Constant	.362*** (.027)	1.928*** (.055)
Political trust	.023*** (.005)	
Interpersonal trust		.101*** (.020)
Tolerance of corruption	-.005** (.002)	.076*** (.004)
Tolerance of illegal conduct	-.032*** (.006)	-.123*** (.013)
Participation in corruption	.001 (.004)	-.010 (.008)
Party in power (PRI=0)	.030*** (.008)	-.040* (.018)
Age (in 3 groups)	-.008 (.006)	.012 (.012)
Education	.001 (.001)	-.005* (.002)
Income	.051*** (.004)	-.065*** (.009)
Sex (F=0)	.097*** (.009)	.012 (.012)
<b>Perception of corruption</b>	<b>-.020*** (.006)</b>	<b>-.042** (.014)</b>
<b>Possibility of eliminating corruption</b>	<b>.050*** (.005)</b>	<b>.080*** (.010)</b>
N	11,081	11,081
(adj.) R <sup>2</sup>	.045	.055
F score	48.366***	59.606***

Model is OLS. Coefficients are unstandardized. Standard error in parenthesis. \*\*\* = < .001, \*\* = < .01, \* = < .05.