

**A Comparison of Perceptions of Corruption
in Mexico and the United States**

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Abstract

Contrary to widely-cited measures showing significantly higher levels of corruption in Mexico than the U.S., other surveys show strikingly much closer results. Such patterns raise fundamental questions regarding the underlying meanings and forms of corruption that inform surveys used to calculate a nation's level of corruption. This paper explores these differences and similarities while highlighting the distinct patterns of corruption found in the two countries. It argues that the two publics seem to emphasize a certain form and broader understanding of corruption that distances them somewhat from the views expressed by experts who employ a more narrower approach. The study underscores the serious mismatch between different conceptualizations and types of corruption, and how corruption is measured.

Keywords: corruption, Mexico, United States, perceptions, methodology

Widely used measures ranking countries by level of corruption tend to give the impression of being rather precise as if asking which country is more corrupt actually makes sense.¹ Yet these indicators based on subjective perceptions fail to differentiate among the vast types, forms, or patterns of corruption, or the many different understandings and meanings of corruption. As such, they tend to hide the long-running debate in the literature over how to define corruption. This is problematic. As Paul Heywood (2015) recommends, “scholars of corruption need to take particular care over how they conceptualize and analyze an issue that has increasingly far-reaching real world political consequences.”

For instance, Transparency International’s (TI) widely employed Corruption Perception Index (CPI) shows Mexico (with a score of 30 in 2016 on their 0 [high] to 100 [low corruption] counterintuitive scale and ranking 123rd least corrupt of the 176 countries in the index) is marred by extremely high levels of corruption, while its northern neighbor, the U.S. (with a score of 74 ranking 18th of 176) suffers seemingly much lower levels of corruption. The two, in short, hardly seem comparable. Other surveys from the business community or survey-based rankings on the rule of law certainly reinforce this general assessment (World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report, World Justice Project Rule of Law). Yet, both the Mexican and the U.S. publics tend to consider their governments, politicians and political parties highly corrupt. In a

¹ Paul Heywood (2015, 2) notes the impossibility of even pondering “which country is more corrupt?” noting how, “our contemporary understanding of corruption...is based upon the idea not only that this kind of question actually does make sense, but also that it can be answered in an uncomplicated and un-contentious way.”

2013 Gallup poll, for instance, 79% of U.S. respondents considered corruption widespread throughout the government, ranking corruption as a major problem, while in Mexico's 2012 National Poll of Political Culture (ENCUP 2012) 72% ranked corruption 5 on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). These similarities among the two publics repeat across many national and international polls suggesting that perhaps despite the views of experts, corruption has become central to the political narrative on both sides of the river (see Curry 2016).

The fundamental question here is whether we are really talking about (and hence measuring) the same thing. Though grounded in the scholarly debate over how to define corruption, this puzzle centers in large part on how those polled actually conceptualize corruption in their own minds when choosing their responses. The foregoing data raise a series of questions: Why, based on this example, does expert opinion on corruption in the U.S., as reflected in the Corruption Perception Index, seem to vary so widely from the U.S. publics' views, while expert and public views on Mexico seem to align more closely? To what extent do the patterns and understandings of corruption differ among a) the experts, b) among the experts and the public, and c) across the populations in these two countries?

This paper seeks to explore these questions, detailing along the way the distinct patterns of corruption in Mexico and the U.S. and the different meanings and types of corruption that seem to inform those measures (see Johnston 2005 on distinct syndromes of corruption in the two). Analysis here highlights how distances between the two nations' levels of corruption begin to shrink when focusing on public opinion as opposed to expert opinion, and when employing broader interpretations or meanings of corruption; how the patterns of corruption differ across institutions and how those differences influence perceptions; and, finally, how both countries share a perception of widespread corruption broadly conceived particularly within the input side

of the political equation: an arena where corruption is more commonly viewed from a systemic perspective and tied to the violation of what Mark Warren (2004) refers to as “second order norms.”² Fundamentally, the analysis shows how despite the explosive growth in scholarly and popular attention to corruption over the past few decades, there remains a serious mismatch between conceptualizations and typologies of corruption on the one hand, and how corruption is measured, on the other.

Organizationally, part one of the paper frames the question by presenting general measures of corruption for the two countries. Discussion then proceeds by focusing on what these differences and similarities among the various groups tell us with regards to the underlying meanings employed by the survey respondents and related forms of corruption in the two countries. Analysis moves from looking at expert views in both countries to the views of the two publics followed by a comparison of expert versus public opinion in the U.S. and Mexico. I conclude by discussing some implications for the comparative study of corruption.

Broad Measures of Corruption: Comparing Mexico and the U.S.

A handful of measures have surfaced in recent decades that purport to gauge the level of corruption within countries. These measures have unleashed a flood of quantitative studies that offer key insights into the causes and consequences of corruption (for a review see Dimant 2013; Treisman 2007) and helped push corruption high atop government agendas throughout the

² Second order norms refer to the somewhat vague principles such openness, publicity, and inclusion that control the creation of the laws or first order norms: the more explicit laws and policies (Warren 2004, 331).

world.³ At the same time, the measures themselves have attracted substantial debate and criticism (see, for instance, Andersson and Heywood 2009; De Maria 2008; Galtung 2005; Kurer 2005; Pellegata and Memoli 2012; Razafindrakoto and Roubaud 2010; Soreide 2006).

Though the most widely used measures are subjective based on the perceptions of corruption, they differ in terms of the subjects expressing their perceptions and the nature of the survey questions.⁴ The most widely used indicators both politically and in scholarly analyses (Andersson and Heywood 2009), Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and the Control of Corruption indicator from Governance Indicators of the World Bank group, draw on multiple surveys of business executives, and country and aid experts. TI's Global Corruption Barometer, like a number of other national polls, by contrast, gauges the publics' perceptions of corruption.⁵ Precisely what these measures measure -- the essential validity question -- however,

³ I intentionally leave the term corruption undefined here since that is in large part the purpose of this analysis. On the debate in the literature over definition see, for instance, Philip (1997, 2015); Etzioni (2014); and Johnston (2004). Even the U.S. Supreme Court has long struggled to define corruption. For an overview of that debate see Dickerson (2013); Issacharoff (2010); and Raban (2011).

⁴ Some objective measures have been developed and tried, but raise other sets of problems. See, for instance, Dincer and Gunlap 2012; Global Integrity Reports; Hendrix 2005; and Johnston 1983.

⁵ The CPI and the CC index are compiled from multiple surveys to produce a single measure per country, TI's 2014 CPI included 12 data sources and roughly 50 variables or questions ranging from "In your country, how common is diversion of public funds to companies, individuals or groups due to corruption?" to "Do whistleblowers, anti-corruption activists, investigators, and journalists enjoy legal protections that make them feel secure about reporting cases of bribery and corruption?" Some questions broadly relate to the "political system" while others specifically ask about the extent of corruption within specific institutions like the customs office or city government. Though considered expert opinion, one of the 12 sources in TI's CPI, World Justice Project Rule of Law survey, includes responses from experts and the general population. The WB's Control of Corruption lists six representative sources gauging 15 variables, and 16 non-representative sources reporting on another 29 variables. The wide range of variables includes the public's trust in politicians, diversion of public funds, irregular payments in various areas, state capture, level of "petty" corruption, the intrusiveness of the country's bureaucracy, the extent of "red tape," transparency, the prosecution of office abuse, etc. Unlike the CPI and

is not entirely clear and largely lost in forcing such a broad and multidimensional concept as corruption into a single indicator. “None of the indexes,” as Rotberg (2017, 54) notes, “is able effectively to control for the manner in which built-in attitudes may influence responses.”

Table 1 offers comparable data from TI for Mexico and the U.S. Most of the data show Mexico with substantially higher levels of perceived corruption than the U.S. This is not particularly surprising: a point I will return to later. The key point here is that the calculations and spreads are hardly uniform suggesting underlying conceptual and/or methodological differences. Data relying on expert/business views (the CPI) tends to show a much wider gap in the levels of corruption than data based on public opinion (GCB). Whereas 93% of Mexican respondents in the GCB classified corruption as a “serious problem” or “a problem,” a substantial majority, 69%, of U.S. respondents did so. And while 87% of Mexicans polled classified their public officials as “corrupt” or “extremely corrupt,” again more than a majority, 55% of U.S. respondents expressed this view. At one level, the numerical separation on the CPI, a 48 point spread (26-74) is greater than the spread in the other two (24 points and 32 points). At another level, the CPI score hardly seems to suggest that a majority of the people would express the view they do. So just this cursory view tends to suggest that the U.S. public perceives a much higher rate of corruption than suggested by the experts, while experts and the Mexican public

the CC, TI’s Global Corruption Barometer provides more than one measure, differentiating the levels of corruption by governmental institutions as discussed below. Even so, as with the many questions used to compile the expert measures, these still fail to grapple with what constitutes corruption or what respondents mean by corruption when responding. Some studies have sought to compare different forms of corruption that are arguably rooted in competing definitions, though these distinctions are often entirely subjective. Studies by Heidenheimer (1970), Jackson and Smith (1996), McAllister (2000), Atkinson and Bierling (2005) and Walton (2015), for instance, identify differences along a scale of the perceived seriousness or “corruptness” of different corrupt or unethical acts, while Kaufmann and Vincent (2011) and Dincer and Johnston (2014) differentiate and examine legal versus illegal corruption.

seem to be in somewhat closer agreement. This trend is quite evident in a number of other national polls tapping into the U.S. publics' views. In the 2012 American National Election Study (cited in Bowler and Donovan 2016, 290), for example, 60% of respondents felt that "about half" or more "of the people running the government" were corrupt. In a 2013 Gallup poll, 79% of respondents in the U.S. agreed that corruption is "widespread throughout the government" (Gallup 2013). Such views suggest that in contrast to the expert view both the Mexican and U.S. publics' tend to see their governments and politicians in similar terms. Further analysis of more specific questions on the public opinion surveys will help crystalize the similarities in their viewpoints and a shared underlying corruption narrative.

[Table 1 here]

This initial descriptive data raise questions centering largely on whether the four groups are actually referring to the same thing, and thus what the results may be telling us.⁶ Why do expert and public perceptions seem to align in the case of Mexico, but not in the U.S.? If the distance in the perceptions expressed by expert and public opinion in the U.S. suggests that the two embrace different understandings about the measuring of corruption or may be applying different criteria and, conversely that the closer agreement among expert and public opinion in Mexico suggests that those two groups operate based on a shared understanding and criteria, then

⁶ Some find a cross-national correlation linking the expert-based surveys and public opinion surveys (see Canache and Allison 2005; Razafindrakoto and Roubaud 2010). A study of Latin American countries, for example, finds the strongest statistically significant correlation linking the CPI to the GCB to the question relating to corruption among the police at $r = -.64$ (Stanfill et al. 2016). Other studies, however, point to the differences between the two. Looking at surveys of public and experts in eight African countries on participation in corruption, Razafindrakoto and Roubaud (2010) find that experts overestimate and produce views distinct from the public, suggesting ideological bias on the part of the experts. Focusing on European countries, Pellegata and Memoli (2012, 9) similarly conclude that there are differences in the ways citizens and experts evaluate corruption.

why might such expert/public differences exist in one case, but not the other? Is it possible that the experts in both cases share a certain understanding and approach that differ fundamentally from the two publics' views? And even despite strikingly similar sentiments, are the Mexican and U.S.'s publics really referring to the same thing? In that none of these general perceptions specify the meaning of corruption or even the type of corruption, it is difficult to assert that they are all in fact referring to the same thing. As Tina Soreide (2006, 6) contends, it is "not clear to what extent the level of corruption reflects the frequency of corrupt acts, the damage done to society or the size of the bribes."

Expert Opinion in Mexico and U.S.

In grappling with this puzzle, I begin by considering expert opinion as expressed in the CPI, and the wide differences between expert assessments in Mexico and the U.S. What does the CPI measure and are those looking at Mexico and the U.S. employing the same meaning and understanding of corruption, thus applying comparable criteria? To what extent do the results reflect true differences in the levels of corruption in the two countries and to what extent might those differences be shaped by the types of corruption or by the nature of the measures themselves?

A poll of polls composed of various questions with different phrasings from the general to the specific (see fn. 5), many contend that the widely employed CPI tends to stress certain types of corruption while neglecting other types. As part of what many consider an orthodox approach, the CPI tends to privilege individual forms of corruption, particularly bribery and governmental graft that impinge on the private sector, while neglecting favoritism, nepotism, conflict of interest, influence peddling, abuse of power, electoral fraud, vote buying, state capture, systemic and institutional forms of corruption, what many now refer to as "legal

corruption” (Kaufmann and Vicente 2011), and other forms of corruption that do not involve financial transactions or impact the private sector (see Andersson and Heywood 2009, 749; De Maria 2008; Dobel 1978; Johnston 1989; Soreide 2006). Fredrik Galtung (2005, 11) best captures this commonly-held critique when he claims that the CPI would more accurately be called a “bribe takers perception index” or an “extortion perceptions index.” These more orthodox measures, in short, tend to reflect a rather narrow definition of corruption characterized as a form of individual behavior – rather than being systemic -- involving the violation of legal norms of public office or entrusted power for personal gain (Nye 1967; Etzioni 2014).

Within the definitional debate, many acknowledge that defining corruption is more than a simple academic exercise, but rather a political/ideological matter that rests in part on prevailing views of the proper use of political power: a discourse shaped in large part by those controlling the narrative (Johnston 1996, 2004) or, to use Gramscian terms, those exercising hegemonic power (see Carnoy 1984). And while the rough contours of the corruption narrative are certainly shaped by a democratic meta-narrative positing that the government and those exercising state power should serve the public interest, in its more specific formulations – what actually counts as corruption or is deemed illegal -- the narrative is shaped largely by those exercising political power and crafting the appropriate laws and policies. It is within this context that many contend that the views and conceptualization of corruption embedded in the CPI represent a component of a hegemonic narrative crafted by the international financial community, international business and western political leaders expressing an ideological bias that privileges the forms of corruption often found in developing countries while downplaying the types of corruption found in more developed countries (see Bedirhanoglu 2007; Brown and Cloke 2004, 2011; Bukovansky 2006; De Maria 2008; Rocha, Brown and Cloke 2011; Sandoval-Ballesteros 2013).

This approach tends to stress a rather narrow definition of corruption as defined largely by the law and focused primarily on the administrative side of the political equation; on what Warren (2004) refers to as “first order norms” (the laws and policies created by the public officials). Moreover, it is “based upon an implicit understanding of ‘proper’ politics as being Western-style liberal democracies” (Andersson and Heywood 2009, 750) and thus tends to associate corruption with poor, developing and non-democratic countries (Galtung 2005). Embedded within a neoliberal model that is inherently anti-state (Hall 1999), this orthodox approach tends to see corruption as an institutional design problem (Philp 2006, 6) rooted in a Principal-Agent framework (Marquette and Peiffer 2017). Treisman (2007) even notes how CPI could be uncovering experts’ suppositions or biases regarding the determinants of corruption. To be sure, critics characterize the view as a-historic, biased, contradictory and politicized, and as fulfilling an ideological and political function (Bedirhanoglu 2007).

If we accept the notion that the two sets of experts evaluating Mexico and the U.S. are basically in agreement regarding this approach -- and strong correlations have been found among the various surveys relying on expert opinion (see Galtung 2005; Heywood and Rose 2014; Mauro 1997) -- then the higher perception of corruption in Mexico may reflect the fact that Mexico, first, suffers the class of corruption emphasized in this narrative, and secondly, is almost automatically suspect or assumed to suffer high levels of corruption given its non-western developing status and weak democratic traditions and institutions. By contrast, the lower perception of corruption in the U.S. may reflect the fact that the country does not suffer the class of corruption emphasized in the narrative and, being a developed, democratic country, is assumed by experts to suffer less corruption than other countries. In other words, if we accept these underlying tendencies, then the differences in levels of corruption between the two nations

as reflected in the CPI arguably overstates the level of corruption in Mexico, while understating the level of corruption found in the U.S. As we will see from more detailed public opinion data, Mexico indeed ranks high in terms of routine forms of bribery and extortion within the major administrative units of the state: precisely the forms and meaning of corruption best captured by the CPI.

The Publics' Perceptions

As highlighted earlier, perceptions of corruption among the two publics are in much closer agreement than the views expressed by the experts (see Table 1). This begs the question of what the two publics have in mind in terms of corruption and whether they are in fact talking about the same thing. While Mexicans may be referring to the type of corruption noted by the experts, including widespread bribery, extortion, and graft, there is ample evidence to suggest that their US counterparts are not. Data from the Rule of Law index and numerous surveys of business executives, for instance, clearly show that while Mexicans may be pointing to the widespread prevalence of these bureaucratic forms of corruption affecting citizens and business, this is much less a concern for their US counterparts (see Rule of Law Index; Global Competitiveness Report).

Empirical studies offer a slightly better understanding of the factors influencing the public's perceptions of corruption than those shaping expert opinion, including an individual's participation in corrupt acts and expectations of corruption; assessments of the provision of public goods, economic performance, and the quality of institutions; political beliefs and exposure to the media; their trust (mistrust) in the government and others; and levels of inequality within society (see Mocan 2004; Morris and Klesner 2010; Olkem 2006; Rusciano 2014; Smith 2008; You and Khagram 2005; Villoria et al. 2014, 205; Wroe et al 2015, 2; Zhu et

al 2012). Wroe et al. (2015, 2), for instance, note how “pre-existing feeling of mistrust towards politicians may well affect responses to their alleged impropriety, predisposing citizens to ascribe corrupt motives to their actions.” At a very general level then, the public’s views are shaped by multiple aspects of the political culture.

But despite different political cultures, the views of the two publics show some rather striking and surprising similarities pointing to a common underlying narrative. Table 2 shows a comparison of the publics’ views of the degree of corruption within the specific institutional arenas. The data allow for a comparison across institutions as well as a comparison of the relative ranking of the institutions.

[Table 2 here]

Consistent with earlier findings, we again see Mexicans sensing higher levels of corruption than their U.S. counterparts (avg. scores among the institutions 62% to 47%). The distance in the average scores is only 15 percentage points with a near majority in the US sensing corruption. The gap, however, is not uniform and is much more pronounced in certain areas than in others. The largest differences can be seen in the two institutions within the justice system: the police and the judiciary, both located in the administrative/implementation side of the political system. This difference most likely incorporates widely distinct views on the perceived levels of corruption and impunity in the two countries and the relative strengths and weaknesses in the rule of law and state institutions, both of which are often tied inversely to corruption. In contrast to these institutions related to the rule of law, however, the extent of corruption is somewhat similar in other areas. Most importantly, both publics consider political parties and the legislature to be highly corrupt. Also comparable are the areas of education, religious institutions,

medical/health care, business, and the media, where U.S. respondents actually considered these institutions more corrupt than the Mexicans.

A second observation based on the GCB data compares the relative ranking across institutions. This perspective partially controls for the impact of political culture. Here, Mexican and U.S. respondents both ranked political parties as the most corrupt institution and the legislature (the institution controlled by those parties) as the second most corrupt in the case of the U.S. and third most corrupt in the case of Mexico following the police. This underscores a widely held perception of corruption among the people as significantly affecting the political/representative side of the equation. This suggests a more systemic interpretation of corruption relating largely to issues of representation and democratic inclusiveness. Similar parallels here point to lower relative levels of corruption within the military (ranking 10th for both countries), and NGO's (ranking 7th on Mexico's scale and 10th on the U.S. scale). These relative rankings also point to large differences in the areas of police corruption, ranked second most corrupt by Mexicans compared to its seventh place ranking by the U.S. public. While a major issue in Mexico, police corruption is also an extremely high profile, conspicuous form of corruption. Overall, this supports the notion that while both the Mexican and the U.S. publics may share a concern about certain sorts of political corruption as it relates to representation, it is only in Mexico where a pattern of widespread bureaucratic corruption among the police and judicial system is also a major concern.

These patterns with respect to corruption are also reflected in polls gauging the levels of confidence in key public institutions. Data from the World Values Survey (2010-2014), for instance, show low levels of confidence in parliament/congress and political parties in the two nations and much wider differences with respect to the civil service, the courts and the police.

Based on data from the WVS wave 6 (Mexico 2012, U.S. 2011), for instance, 73.8% of Mexican respondents compared to 76.7% of U.S. respondents expressed a lack of confidence (“not very much” or “none at all”) in congress, while 76.9% (Mexico) versus 85.3% (U.S.) lacked confidence in political parties. Again, the parallels are clear. By contrast, whereas 77.6% of Mexicans had “not very much” or “none at all” confidence in the civil service, 52.4% of U.S. respondents felt this way. A similar gap in the levels of confidence can be seen with respect to the courts: 68.2% (Mexico) versus 42.1% (U.S.). And with respect to the police, while only 28.4% of Mexican respondents expressed confidence (“a great deal” and “quite a lot”) in the police, 68.3% of respondents in the U.S. did so.

A further indication that the two publics seem to be referring to the same thing when assessing corruption – a focus centered on representation that sees both the parties and congress as corrupt – involves responses to the classical question of the extent to which the government is run by a few big entities acting on their own best interests: arguably a question that taps into a much broader view or definition of corruption – whether those controlling government are actually pursuing the public interest or their own self-interest. As shown in Table 3, 64% of the U.S. public said the government in the U.S. was “entirely” or to a “large extent” run by a few big entities compared to just 62% among Mexican respondents. On the flip side, 10% of US respondents said this occurred to “limited extent” or “not at all” compared to 13% of their Mexican counterparts. Here the gap in perceptions has largely disappeared.

[Table 3 here]

While still relying on popular perceptions, a distinct approach to measuring corruption looks at actual participation in corrupt acts. Though participation influences perceptions, clearly (and universally) perceptions of corruption are much greater than actual experience with

corruption (see Morris 2008; Razafindrakoto and Roubaud 2010). According to the discussion so far, Mexico not only suffers far more bureaucratic corruption than the US, but the public (and experts) acknowledge this pattern of corruption even though they also recognize and even stress (in agreement with their US counterparts) forms of corruption related to representation and whether the government serves the public interest. Consequently, we would expect large differences in these measures. Indeed, as shown in Table 4, participation measures echo the point regarding different patterns of corruption in the two countries. Not only are Mexicans far more likely to have paid a bribe in the past 12 months than their U.S. counterparts (the “democratization of corruption” in Mexico?), but the particularly high levels of participation in Mexico relating to the police and the judiciary reaffirm the findings noted earlier that ranked these institutions as second and fourth most corrupt within the country with correspondingly low levels of confidence. This again points to a crucial difference between the two nations in terms of the types of corruption the countries face and a difference that contributes to differences in the perceptions of corruption by both the public and the experts.

[Table 4 here]

In closing out the comparison between the publics, focus turns to the publics’ perceptions of change, assessment of governments’ efforts to fight corruption, and views on political efficacy. Once again, the data show the two publics think alike. Though Mexicans exhibit a somewhat more critical viewpoint, both publics point to an increase in corruption over the past two years. Whereas 71% of Mexicans believed corruption had increased, 60% of U.S. respondents thought so. Viewed from the opposite angle the similarities are even more striking with 8% of Mexican compared to just 10% of U.S. respondents sensing any decline in corruption over that period. Similarly, when asked how effective the government’s actions are in fighting

corruption, the differences between the two countries once again seem comparable with sizable majorities -- 73% of Mexicans versus 59% of U.S. respondents -- grading the governments' actions as ineffective. Once again, the other end of that scale points to only 11% of Mexicans compared to just 19% of U.S. respondents deeming the governments' efforts effective. The differences wane even further when looking at the publics' perspective on the imagined role or efficacy of the public in terms of fighting corruption. Here, only 5 percentage points separate the proportions of Mexicans agreeing or strongly agreeing (81% versus 76%) that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption compared to their U.S. counterparts. In short whatever form of corruption the public perceives to exist within the two countries, the public tends to discount the government's efforts to fight it and see the people's role as critical. This finding takes on even greater significance given the broader differences in the narratives regarding the natures of the two political systems: democratic, strong rule of law and institutions on the one hand versus weak democratic/authoritarian, weak rule of law and weak institutions on the other.

Experts versus Public Perceptions

The final issue centers on whether the views of the experts really differ from those held by the public? At a preliminary level, it should be noted that the tendencies in the data presented earlier are clearly in the same direction. In other words, Mexico suffers higher levels of corruption according to both experts and the public, even though the views of the Mexican and U.S. publics align quite closely in many polls depending on the nature of the survey question. This suggests that the views by the experts on Mexico and the Mexican public tend to overlap and thus may be referring to the same thing.

Expert v US public

Perhaps the most noteworthy gap among the four groups of observers here separates expert and public opinion in the U.S. The distance between the two views makes it hard to argue that they are looking at or evaluating the same thing. According to the CPI, corruption is at best a minor issue in the U.S., while for the public it is a major issue. As Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan (2016, 273) note “many Americans would seem to have a different sense of corruption” than implied by standard definitions. If the meaning of corruption underlying expert views discussed earlier centers on a narrow, legal-based definition emphasizing bribery in the public administration, the question then is what meanings and forms of corruption does the public employ? If the public considers the government corrupt, what does that mean exactly, especially since the experts have a different take on it? Fortunately, public opinion polls include a number of questions that help provide a sense of the narrative underlying their perceptions of corruption.

As presented earlier, according to the GCB, the U.S. public clearly considers political parties and congress to be the most corrupt institutions in the country. In fact, 76% of respondents considered political parties either “corrupt” or “extremely corrupt,” while 61% held this view of the legislature, ranking these as the first and second most corrupt among the many institutions in the survey (see Table 2 earlier). In response to a rather straightforward query in a 2016 Economist/ YouGov poll, “Do you think the Democratic/Republican party is corrupt?” 51% of Democrats and 62% of Republicans said yes (see Frankovic 2016). This institutional arena, in short, tends to be the primary locus of a lot of corruption in the public’s eye.

Given the role of parties and legislature in theoretically representing the people on the front end of the political system it is not surprising then that underlying these sentiments lie

deeper notions by the public that the government fails to represent their interests and instead tends to represent the interests of a few big entities acting in their own best interest. To reiterate the data in Table 3 earlier, 64% of the U.S. public said the government in the U.S. was “entirely” or to a “large extent” run by a few big entities with only 10% of respondents saying this occurred to “limited extent” or “not at all.” Indeed, large numbers consider members of Congress beholden to those financing their electoral campaigns (see Bowler and Donovan 2016, 276). In a 2012 poll conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, for instance, 77% agreed that members of Congress are more likely to act in the interest of a group that spent millions to elect them than to act in the public interest (Brennan Center for Justice, nd). In a December 2013 YouGov poll, 53% felt the government provides more to help the rich than the poor (19%) or the middle class (8%): the preferred answer across gender, age, party ID, voter registration, race, education and region. In a 2010 poll, 85% of respondents felt that corporations have too much influence, while 93% said average citizens have too little (cited in Nichols and McChesney 2013, 84; see Hart Research Associates 2010). In another study (Blas et al 2012), 29% said politicians vote to please their contributors “all the time” with another 41% saying they do so “often,” with only 18% selecting “sometimes” or “never.” In the same study, on 0-10 scale rating the level of influence on members of congress, big companies and lobbyists both rated 8.16, followed by the wealthy at 8.02, and PACs at 7.98 with the average voter ranked last with a score of 2.82 (see also Gilens 2012 and Gilens and Page 2014). Indeed, as Justice Stephen Breyer of the U.S. Supreme Court noted in his dissent in the case of *McCutcheon v. FEC* (2003), “Where enough money calls the tune, the general public will not be heard” (cited in Dickerson 2013, 109). Such influence seemingly extends beyond the legislature into the judiciary. A Justice at Stake survey in 2011 found 76% of respondents expressing the view that campaign contributions have at least

some impact on judges' decisions (cited in Nichols and McChesney 2013, 59). Such a narrative, in turn, informs an underlying lack of trust in the system. Indeed, data from the U.S. American National Election Studies have shown as many as 75% of respondents trusting the government only "some of the time" or "never" (Pew Research Center 2014a; for historic data on trust see Pew Research Center 2014b; see also Johnston 2012).

In contrast to the understanding of corruption depicted by experts, the U.S. public, at one level, seems to be training much of its attention on the political side of the equation – political parties, legislatures, etc. -- rather than on the output side of government which it seems to acknowledge as being less corrupt. This class of corruption encompasses campaign contributions, lobbying, revolving door politics, state capture, gerrymandering, etc. In doing so, the public seems to be reflecting a broader, more systemic approach or understanding of corruption that stresses the extent to which the government actually violates the norm represented by the public interest not only for private (avarice) gain, but more importantly, for political and/or partisan gain. So whereas expert views might incorporate a narrower definition centered on the abuse of legal authority for private gain, exemplified by bribery in the administrative units of the state, the U.S. public's view seems to incorporate a much broader definition that includes the illegal as well as the legal yet unethical use of public power and resources for private and/or political gain (Etzioni 2014). This broader narrative incorporates definitions of corruption as a form of exclusion (Rusciano 2014, 42; Warren 2006, 804), as the impartial implementation of government policies (Rothstein 2011), and as institutional and systemic (Thompson 2013), encompassing the various forms of "legal corruption" (Bowler and Donovan 2016, 274; Kaufmann and Vicente 2011;) considered by many analysts as the primary form of corruption confronting the U.S. (see also Dincer and Johnston 2014; Funderburk 2012;

Lessig 2011, 2013; Mendilow 2016; Selds 2014). The contention here is that experts' understanding of corruption embrace a more restricted, legalistic interpretation in contrast to a broader definition held by the public. This view finds empirical support in the work of Redlawsk and McCann's (2005) on the U.S., McAllister (2000) on Australia, Allen and Birch (2012) on the U.K. and Atkinson and Bierling (2005) on Canada which all find differences between elite and popular views on what constitutes corruption. Rusciano's (2014) cross-national study of corruption similarly found that the public tends to see corruption as a form of exclusion and disempowerment leading to perceived inefficiencies: "the more empowered citizens are, the less corrupt they perceive their nation to be" (p. 42).

Expert and Public Opinion in Mexico

Turning now to expert and public opinion in Mexico we are struck with what may seem a bit of a paradox. The high levels of agreement between the two sets of observers initially suggests that they may be relying on a common approach and understanding of corruption rather than different ones, as seen in the U.S. But despite the similar results, if expert views parallel the expert views used in the US and yet US public adopts a different approach, then is the Mexican public adopting a view more similar to the experts or one parallel to the US public?

Clearly, as reflected in the CPI, the GCB and numerous national polls over the years (see Transparencia Mexicana 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010) both the experts and the Mexican public perceives extremely high levels of corruption. At one level, public opinion polls face some of the same problems as expert polls like the CPI (Andersson and Heywood 2009) and reflect the same orthodox, hegemonic narrative on corruption employed by experts and this is reflected in the parallels between Mexican experts and the public. In short, both publics, including obviously the

Mexican public, like the experts, tend to emphasize the types or patterns of corruption found particularly in Mexico, thus feeding the finding that Mexico suffers higher levels of corruption than the U.S. in both sets of measures. According to the GCB 2013, 90% of the Mexican public considers the police “corrupt/extremely corrupt,” with 87% considering public officials, and 80% the judiciary as corrupt. This informs the high level of agreement between experts and the public.

At the same time, however, the Mexican public also seems to embrace the broader approach reflected in U.S. public opinion. Like in the U.S., 91% of the Mexican respondents considered political parties “corrupt” or “extremely corrupt” – deemed the most corrupt institution as seen in the U.S. – and 83% feeling this way about the legislature. Reflecting a broader definition or approach to corruption, the views of the Mexican public also parallel US views regarding the extent to which the government is run by a few entities acting in their own best interests with 62% (compared to 64% in the U.S.) responding “entirely” or “to a large extent” to that question. National polls tend to sustain this view with large majorities either strongly agreeing or agreeing that public officials are unconcerned about people like themselves (75%), and that when laws are made the politicians take into account either the interests of the political party or their own personal interests rather than those of the people (67%) (ENCUP). Such views, as noted with respect to the US public, reflect a much broader understanding of corruption that stresses the lack of representation; the view that those in the government are pursuing their own interests at the neglect of the public interest. In sum, the Mexican public seems to employ a multi-dimensional view encompassing both the forms of corruption often associated with corruption (from a legal perspective) as well as broader understanding of corruption that relates to representation and inclusiveness.

Concluding Discussion

Table 5 seeks to pull together and summarize the findings of the analysis. It shows differences and similarities among the pairs of observers in terms of the type of corruption taken into account when expressing their opinions, the underlying meaning and understanding of the concept, as well as the empirical differences. Perhaps the critical gap centers on the publics' perceptions rooted in a broader understanding of corruption that concentrates heavily on the political dimension and encompasses "legal" forms of corruption versus the experts' perceptions depicting a narrower understanding of corruption that loads strongly on the administrative/bureaucratic dimension in the delivery of government services and illegal forms of corruption. [Table 5 here]

More importantly, the analysis here highlights the multidimensionality of corruption, its various forms, and even the ideological and political underpinnings of how we talk about, describe and measure corruption. The analysis shows that while Mexico is generally considered to suffer higher levels of corruption than the U.S., the gaps between the two nations are less pronounced when based on public opinion as opposed to expert opinion, when employing broader interpretations or meanings of corruption, and when focusing on specific institutional arenas. Mexico clearly sports more "petty corruption" involving bribes and extortion vis-à-vis the police and the judiciary than the U.S. Yet, both publics tend to see their political parties, legislatures, and public officials as largely corrupt, suggesting a more intense focus on more systemic forms of corruption -- state capture, duplicitous exclusion and "legal" forms of corruption. The perception in both countries then is of high levels of corruption on the input side of the equation where corruption is more commonly seen from a systemic perspective. Consistent with Thompson's (2013) notion of institutional corruption, the people seem to see

many of their institutions operating in ways contrary to their stated democratic purpose with leaders abusing their power for their own personal or political gain.

Rhetorically, I suppose, one can ask: “whose perspective is closer to the truth?” The problem, of course, is that our rather rudimentary measures of corruption make it impossible to address such a question since we cannot discern or measure “the truth.”⁷ After all, both views constitute perceptions, not reality, thereby altering the query slightly to: “whose views should we trust to more adequately reflect reality?” Though perhaps an argument can be made that experts are more likely to agree on what corruption means and may even have a better understanding of the level and degree of corruption than the more impressionistic views of the public and/or that the people’s perceptions are more likely to be biased and skewed, incorporating something far more than actual “corruption” (Olkem 2006) -- indeed, as Atkinson and Bierling (2005, 1010) suggest, politicians see the public as naïve about the requirements of politics -- such a response may unduly privilege a certain conceptualization of corruption and a methodological approach both of which may be equally biased, restrictive, and ideological. After all, contrary to Lord Acton’s strikingly famous axiom, absolute power does not corrupt absolutely if it includes the power to define corruption or our approach to understanding it.

A more effective approach is to take these views together, incorporating them into a multidimensional understanding of the amorphous term “corruption,” thus acknowledging the concept’s contested, discursive nature. As Yue and Peters (2015, 446) point out, corruption is “a phenomenon that is in a constant state of becoming.” Even where, as in the U.S., experts may

⁷ Note, for instance, the lack of conclusive evidence linking campaign contributions to the behavior of members of Congress. Much empirical research testing the influence of campaign contributions have failed to conclusively show their impact on Congressional voting (see Ansolabehere et al 2002 meta-analysis of 40 studies), though others show a degree of influence (see Ansolabehere and Snyder 1999).

point to minimal levels of corruption, politically the public's views can hardly be dismissed, particularly given the more encompassing democratic meta-narrative and the perceived role such a perception may have in shaping political participation and popular demands. If indeed corruption is defined by what the public considers it to be, then by definition their views should carry substantial weight. Even so, what determines the distance between perception and reality, or the gap between actual corruption and the appearance of corruption to use the terms noted in the Supreme Court's ruling in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), remains an empirical question.

The publics' views in both countries suggest that the hegemonic narrative on corruption reflected in the elite view remains politically contested. Based on a broader understanding of corruption, this counter-hegemonic discourse, likely a result of growing income inequality and heightened polarization in both countries, plays a major role in shaping political and social movements, influencing the types of demands and overall assessments of government and society. These views arguably lay behind the support enjoyed by Donald Trump and even Bernie Sanders, two outsiders critical of the system and critics of the corruption. Trump campaigned on the notion that the system is corrupt. It is no surprise that such a position resonated among the public given the views expressed in the polls discussed above.

The analysis also raises a number of theoretical issues. Despite the explosive growth in scholarly and popular attention to corruption over the past few decades, there remains a serious mismatch between conceptualizations and typologies of corruption on the one hand, and how corruption is measured, on the other. This incongruence fuels confusion (Heywood 2015). As indicated from the discussion here, corruption is an incredibly broad and ambiguous concept with multiple meanings that assumes many forms (i.e. bribery, embezzlement, graft, fraud, abuse of power, obstruction of justice, nepotism, influence peddling). Such breadth has nurtured an

intense debate in the literature over definition (see Philip 1997, 2015; Etzioni 2014). Sadly, as Jonathan Mendilow and Ilan Peleg (2014, 1) point out,

Students of corruption have used the term in so many contexts and with such versatility that it lost much of its theoretical and practical significance, while in colloquial speech the negative connotations frequently turned it into little more than a term of disparagement against disliked governments or individual officials.

Denis Thompson (2013, 15) echoes the point:

we need to move beyond the focus on individual corruption that has preoccupied social scientists, political reformers, and ethics committees, and attend to the institutional corruption they have neglected. We have to turn from the stark land of bribery, extortion, and simple personal gain and enter into the shadowy world of implicit understandings, ambiguous favors, and political advantage.

Beyond conceptualization and measurement, the results also show once again that not all forms of corruption go together (Johnston 2005). When viewed from a broader context in which Mexico suffers not only higher levels of corruption but also arguably greater “abuses of power” (corruption) in the form of a weak rule of law, impunity, human rights abuses, electoral fraud, etc. than the U.S., it is intriguing how so many of the interpretations of corruption by the two publics in terms of the failures of other aspects of democracy seem to align. In other words, despite the perceived differences in so many other areas, the two publics share the belief that their governments are corrupt and becoming more so, despite those other differences. This clearly points to the need to disaggregate our exploration of corruption to highlight distinct causes, consequences and dynamics. But underlying these views lie different political narratives regarding the nature of power, the state and society. Both Mexicans and U.S. citizens have

learned to expect corruption in different contexts, and distrust their political leaders; yet their anti-state/ anti-government narratives differ and have different historical roots. How do these components of the political culture influence the peoples' understanding of corruption, their expectations, and their interactions with the state? And what might those differences and similarities teach us about the nature of corruption both as a deviant form of behavior, as a systemic phenomenon, and as a contested and constructed concept?

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Table 1. *Corruption in Mexico and the U.S.*

A) Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2016

Based on multiple polls of country experts and business leaders

Scale = 0 (less clean or more corruption) to 100 (clean or less corruption) / Ranking among 176 countries

	<u>CPI score / Ranking</u>
Mexico	30 / 123 rd least corrupt
U.S.	74 / 18 th least corrupt

B) Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2013 (national public surveys)

1) "To what extent is corruption a problem in the public sector"

	Mexico	U.S.
Serious problem	79%	38%
A problem	14%	31%
A slight problem	5%	23%
Not really a problem	1%	6%
Not a problem at all	1%	2%

2) Percentage of respondents who considered the following institution is corrupt/extremely corrupt

	Mexico	U.S.
Public officials	87%	55%

Table 2. *Corruption by Area*

Percentage of Respondents who felt these institution were corrupt/extremely corrupt

	Mexico/ Ranking	U.S./ Ranking	Difference / Ranking
Political parties	91% /1	76% /1	+15 (5)
Legislature	83% /4	61% /2	+22 (4)
Military	42% /11	30% /11	+12 (6)
NGOs	43% /7	30% /11	+13 (7)
Media	55% /6	58% /3	-3 (10)
Religious	43% /10	35% /9	+8 (9)
Business	51% /7	53% /5	-2 (11)
Education	43% /7	34% /10	+9 (8)
Judiciary	80% /5	42% /7	+38 (2)
Medical/health	42% /11	43% /6	-1 (12)
Police	90% /2	42% /7	+48 (1)
Public officials	87% /3	55% /4	+32 (3)
Avg.	62	47	

Source: Transparency International, Global Corruption Barometer 2013.

Table 3. *Extent the government run by a few big entities acting in their own best interests*

	Mexico	U.S.
Entirely	26%	20%
Large extent	36%	44%
Somewhat	25%	27%
Limited extent	11%	8%
Not at all	2%	2%

Source: Transparency International, Global Corruption Barometer 2013.

Table 4. *Participation in Corruption (public)*

Anyone in household paid a bribe to one of 8 services in last 12 months

	Mexico	U.S.
Police	61%	7%
Judiciary	55%	15%
Land services	31%	17%
Registry/Permit	27%	14%
Education services	17%	11%
Utilities	17%	6%
Tax revenue	16%	9%
Medical services	10%	6%

Source: Transparency International, Global Corruption Barometer 2013.

Table 5. *Summary of Differences/Similarities among the Groups*

Paired Actors	Focus	Definitions/Meanings	Comparative Measures
Experts on Mexico and US	Both focus on more illegal forms of corruption occurring within the administrative/bureaucratic side –	Narrow view related to legal criteria and Weberian notions of bureaucracy	Mexico with substantially higher levels of corruption than the US. Casts the US as suffering minimal levels of corruption.
Publics in Mexico and US	Both tend to focus on representation and government pursuit of the public interest – encompasses “legal” forms of systemic corruption --	Broader definition related to pursuit of public interest, exclusion, and disempowerment, though the Mexican public recognizes multiple layers and meanings of corruption	Slightly higher levels of corruption in Mexico in terms of participation and within key administrative sectors, but views tend to coalesce and see high levels of political corruption, the failure of the government to act, and increases in corruption in recent years. Both see high levels of corruption.
Experts v. Public			
-- in Mexico	Both recognize the widespread prevalence of more illegal forms of corruption within the administrative/ bureaucratic side; however, the public’s views also highlight corruption among the parties and in congress, focusing on representation.	Whereas the two agree on a narrow definition of corruption, the public also recognizes the multiple layers and meanings of corruption, suggesting a broader definition.	Empirical agreement pointing to high levels of corruption in Mexico.
-- in U.S.	Substantial disagreement. Whereas experts tend to focus more on illegal forms of corruption within the administrative/ bureaucratic side (which both see as relatively low), the public also tends to focus more on representation and government pursuit of the public interest, perceives corruption within the campaign finance system, lobbying, the revolving door, etc. and hence “legal” forms of corruption.	The experts employ a narrower definition centered on the law and administrative/ bureaucratic corruption, while the public embraces a broader idea of corruption that includes “legal” forms of corruption and relates to representation, the pursuit of the public interest, exclusion and disempowerment.	Large empirical gaps between the two with the public sensing much higher levels of corruption than the experts.