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When Do High Levels of Corruption Justify a Military Coup?

By Brandon Bell
LAPOP Undergraduate Research Fellow
Vanderbilt University

Executive Summary: This *Insights* report assesses how various measures related to corruption predict the public's acceptance of interruptions in democratic processes. When considering a scenario of high corruption, corruption victimization is one of the strongest predictors of support for a military takeover of the government. In contrast, an individual's perception of corruption in general does not significantly influence his or her support for a coup d'état. In addition, those who are older, more educated and who are wealthy are more likely to oppose military-takeovers under a scenario of high corruption, along with those citizens who have a positive perception of the government's attempt to curb corruption.

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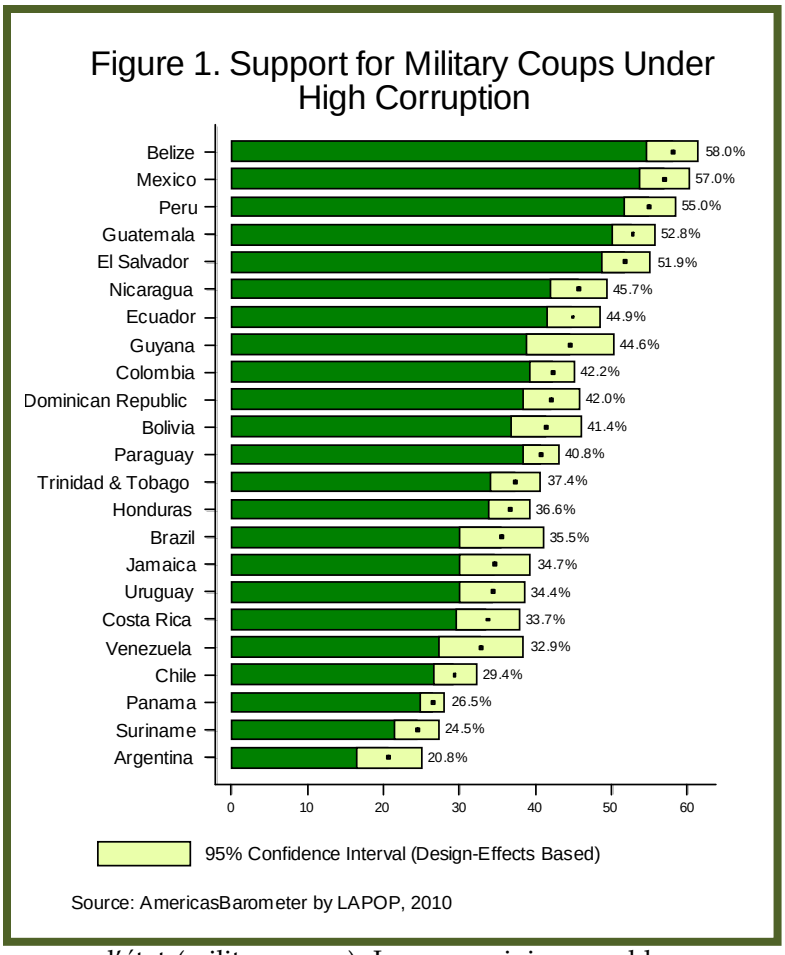
Corruption is viewed by some as the "grease" that makes it possible for democracy to function (Merton 1957; see also Huntington 1968), but corruption can also have the pernicious effect of weakening public support for democracy (e.g., Morris and Klesner 2010). Public support for democracy is especially critical in regions of the world in which "interruptions" to normal democratic politics have not been uncommon. In Latin America, Valenzuela (2004) counted 14 pre-term departures of presidents between 1985 and 2004, and as recently as 2009, the region witnessed another such incident when the Honduran military escorted President Zelaya out of the country (see Seligson and Booth 2009). As Seligson and Booth (2009) suggest, public tolerance for unconstitutional and undemocratic maneuvers can fuel instability by signaling to elites the public's willingness to acquiesce to such turns of events. Thus, in a region in which perceptions of corruption are high (Seligson and Smith 2010), it is important to understand the ways in which corruption can lead individuals to express higher levels of approval for interruptions to the democratic rules of the game.



This *Insights* report[1] focuses on the following question from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer survey[2] by LAPOP, in which 38,521 survey participants stated that it would or would not be justified for the military to take power. Here is the question that they were asked:

JC13: [Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances:] when there is a lot of corruption.[3]

Figure 1[4] shows the percentage of respondents who would support a military coup d'état under conditions of high corruption. The highest percentage of support is found in Belize at 58.0%, with Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, and El Salvador all at or above 51.9% in support for a military take-over. The great majority of

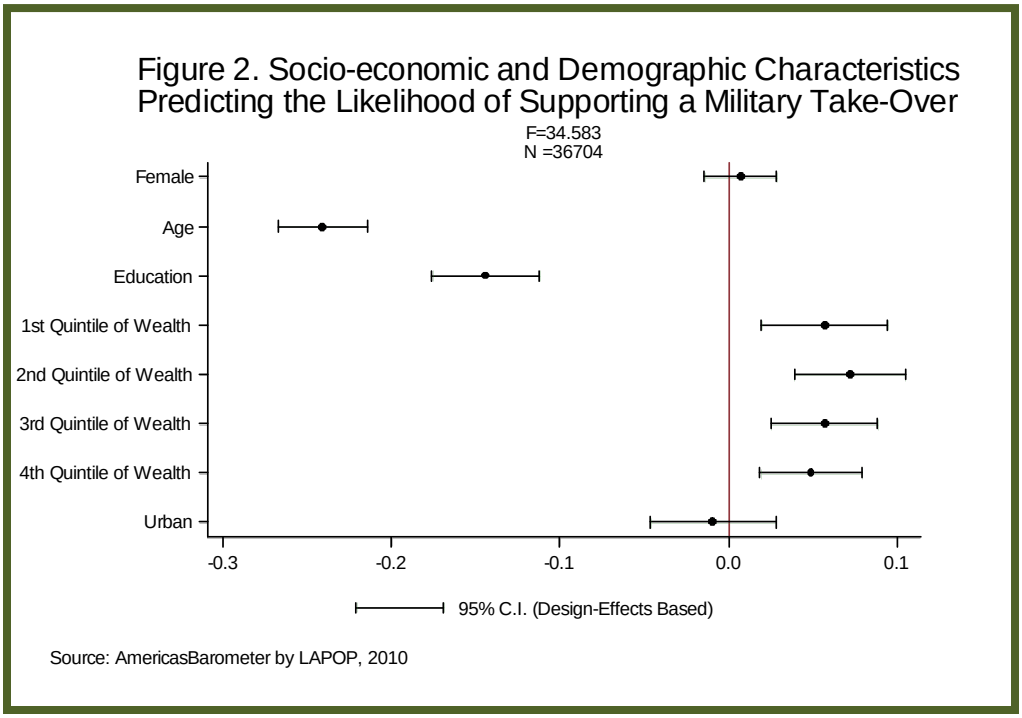
[1] Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php. The data on which they are based can be found at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php

[2] Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

[3] Non-response was 1.83% for this question across the sample. The question was not asked in Haiti, which does not have an army. The question was customized for Costa Rica and Panama by replacing "los militares" with "Fuerza Pública" and "Fuerza Pública de Panamá," respectively as these two countries also do not have armies. Analysis was conducted using STATA v12.

[4] Because the focus of the *Insights* series is on the Latin American and Caribbean region, I exclude the U.S. and Canada from the comparative analysis in Figure 1 and all subsequent analyses.

countries are within the 30% to low 40% support range. At the lower end are Chile, Panama, Suriname, and Argentina, all with less than 30% of respondents expressing support for a military take-over of the state given corrupt governmental conditions. At first glance, it may not be surprising to find Argentina at the bottom, with 20.8% support, given its poor experiences with repressive military rule in the 20th century. However, other Latin American nations have experienced similar struggles with military regimes and still reported relatively high numbers. For example, 52.8% of respondents in Guatemala said a military take-over would be justified under the specified condition.



While most countries fall within a 12.8 percentage point range (between 32.9% and 45.7%) with respect to average rates of justifying a military take-over, there is still substantial variation among the 23 nations reported in Figure 1. Given the range of responses to this question in a region with a long history of military dictators and coups, it appears as if additional factors than just a nation's prior experience with democratic stability affect public support for a future military take-over under conditions of high corruption.

Individual Characteristics and Support for a Military Takeover Given High Corruption

In this section, I examine the way five socioeconomic and demographic variables predict public support for a military take-over of the state during times of high corruption. First, I expect education to be a negative predictor of support for a military coup, given that higher education is argued to foster democratic values. Previous research (Lipset 1959; Glaeser et al. 2006) indicates that there is a consistently high correlation between education and stable democracies over the past half-century. Many scholars also (Lipset 1959; Krishna 2008; Córdova and Seligson 2010) theorize that economic difficulties at the individual level correlate with reduced support for democracy. This follows in the vein of thinking that "poor people make poor democrats," although recent scholarship finds evidence against this argument (Krishna 2008, p. 5). Therefore, I expect to see the most support for a military take-over among the poorest.

Figure 2 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis that assesses how education and wealth, but also gender, urban residence, and age, relate to support for a military coup. In order to examine the effects for different levels of wealth, the wealth measure is divided into five quintiles.[5]

[5] Each variable was tested for linearity, but evidence for nonlinearity was only found in the wealth variable. The richest quintile was preserved as the baseline for comparison

Each independent variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical axis. The dot represents the impact of the variable, and the bar represents the confidence interval. When the bar does not intersect the vertical "0" line, that variable is statistically significant. While gender and urban versus rural are not statistically significant, the other variables are, with 95% confidence.

The data support my expectation for education: education is a negative predictor of support of a military take-over. The results also show that age is a significant negative predictor, with older individuals less likely to support a coup. This could be due to the fact that the younger members of these societies did not live under the authoritarian regimes that took hold in many countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Córdova and Seligson 2010), or it may be that the young in general are more inclined than the old to accept undemocratic transitions of power. This finding requires more study.

Wealth matters as well, but the results are somewhat different than I had originally expected. Compared to the wealthiest quintile, all lower wealth quintiles express greater support for a military take-over in times of corruption. Interestingly, the nonlinear results show that the least wealthy do not show more support for a coup than the middle classes, which is consistent with the research reported by Krishna noted above.[6]

While support for a military take-over under conditions of high corruption can be partially explained by these individual characteristics, broader attitudes concerning corruption throughout Latin America and the Caribbean must be considered in order to fully appreciate regional commitment to democracy.

Corruption and Democratic Support

While it may seem obvious that corruption has deleterious effects on democracy in general, it is important to discern what aspects of corruption make individual citizens more prone to support a military take-over under a high corruption scenario. Clearly, individual socio-economic and demographic characteristics shed some light on the issue, but what specifically about *corruption* makes individuals willing to abandon the rules of the democratic game?

It is important to consider how corruption might motivate citizens to discard their democratic values and permit a military coup d'état. And, yet, this is not a perfectly straightforward task, as merely defining corruption has long stymied politicians, scholars and the mass media. Transparency International (TI), a leading Non-Governmental Organization which has spent nearly two decades raising corruption awareness, defines it as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Transparency International 2010, p. 5). Yet, some scholars (Andersson and Heywood 2009) object to the term "entrusted" powers, as if those officials, dictators and despots who are never "entrusted" with power cannot be corrupt.[7] Others (Brown

against the four dummy variables. See Abby Córdova, 2009, "Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth using Household Asset Indicators" for a description of the construction of the wealth index:
http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0806en.pdf

[6] If anything, the second quintile of wealth appears to express marginally lower support for a military take-over, but that result is not statistically significant, as the model shows the effects for the four lower wealth quintiles are not statistically distinct from each other. To further consider the economic dimension, drawing upon ideas presented in other scholarship (see, e.g., Krishna 2008), I conducted a series of logistic regression analyses to determine if the macroeconomic situation of each country had a conditioning effect on the relationship between wealth and the individual respondent's willingness to support a coup. To do so, I divided the countries above and below a Gross National Income (GNI) of US$4,000, respectively, and then ran the model in Figure 2 for each subset. Interestingly, the results show that individual wealth is only a statistically significant predictor of individual support for a coup in the more wealthy countries, that is, those with a per capita GNI over US$4,000.

[7] The Pearson's correlation between **JC13** and Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index, presented in Appendix C, shows little correlation and underscores the difficulty in analytically studying various facets of corruption from the macro and micro levels (See Ruhl, 2011).

2006; Alatas 1990), however, generally agree with Transparency International and identify betrayal of trust as the most basic, universally comprehensible conception of corruption.[8]

To cast a broad net with respect to measures of public opinion concerning corruption, I examine three specific indicators of public opinion as they relate to support for a military take-over in the presence of corruption: corruption victimization (measured in terms of incident counts)[9], government performance with respect to combating corruption[10], and perception of political corruption.[11]

With respect to corruption victimization, scholarship (Seligson 2002, 2006; Dininio, 2009) suggests that this is a leading contributor to an individual's willingness to support anti-democratic movements such as a military take-over of the current regime. Studies of corruption victimization "have an appealing authenticity because they draw on the personal experiences of thousands of people rather than on perceptions" (Ruhl 2011, p. 44).[12] Basing their claims on this seemingly more objective indicator of victimization, many scholars maintain that personal contact with episodes of corruption such as bribery "erodes belief in the legitimacy of the political system" (Seligson 2006, p. 382). In fact, Dininio (2009, p. 148) concludes that corruption victimization not only in Latin America but also in Africa "was the largest reason for people to rate their government as less legitimate, ahead of crime victimization, personal income, and whether or not a person voted for the government in power."

Scholarship also points to the potential relevance of government efforts to combat corruption. Dininio (2009, p. 153) asserts that successful government programs aimed at eliminating corruption will "mobilize civil society, the business sector, and media and enlist them as key stakeholders and partners in this [governmental] effort." By involving the public at large in collaborative corruption fighting programs, one might infer that democratic tendencies should be bolstered under such conditions.

Exogenous factors such as international aid can also affect public perception of the efficacy of anti-corruption programs and, by extension, regime legitimacy. For example, Andersson and Heywood (2009) suggest that many international "good governance" initiatives are almost exclusively directed at those countries with already well functioning anti-corruption programs. Although the external aid might raise the saliency of corruption in general, these programs might also reinforce the public's perception of their government's success in combating corruption while neglecting those countries whose anti-corruption programs are struggling or nonexistent.

For the last category, perceptions of corruption, the literature indicates that it plays a role in public trust in the overall regime. Morris and Klesner (2010) argue that perceptions of corruption and trust in government are endogenously linked. They assert that a "lack of trust in politicians or institutions combines with the perception of corruption to create the

[8] Brown (2006, p. 76) recognizes that there is no basic template, so researchers must preserve the essential betrayal of trust component of corruption while basing "their analysis deeply within the specific social context with which they are concerned."

[9] This corruption victimization count measure is calculated using the **EXC** series of questions, inquiring the number of ways a citizen has been victimized in the past year through bribing the police, courts, school officials, coworkers, health service providers, municipal workers, or public employees.

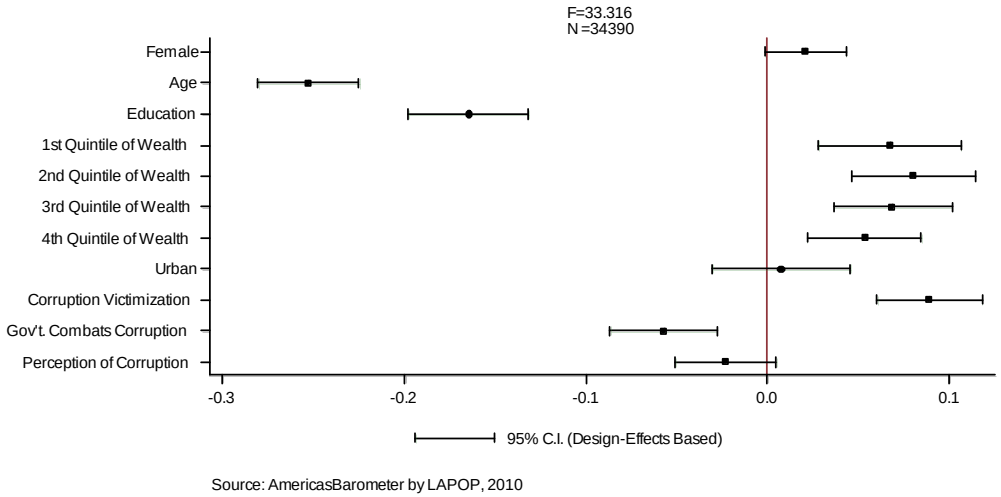
[10] This is based on a rescaled version of question **N9**, asking respondents on a scale of 1-7, "To what extent would you say the current administration combats government corruption?" with 1 corresponding to "Not at all" and 7 corresponding to "A lot."

[11] This was measured using a rescaled version of question **EXC7**, "Taking into account your own experience or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is (1) Very common (2) Common (3) Uncommon or (4) Very uncommon?"

[12] Ruhl (2011) also presents evidence that measures of corruption victimization are weakened by the unwillingness of respondents to admit to participating in illegal activities such as bribery.

expectation of corruption and inductively feed corrupt behavior" (Morris and Klesner 2010, p. 1266).[13] Seligson (2002, 2006) also acknowledges the role that perceptions of corruption play in regime legitimacy and support for democracy. He characterizes trust as "an important precursor to legitimacy" which can be diminished by perceptions of corruption (Seligson 2002, p. 427). Ruhl (2011, p. 52) reaches a similar conclusion, stating that "public distrust generated by widespread corruption makes it difficult to build the broad mass support for democracy necessary for democratic consolidation." In this way, it seems that the public's tendency to lose trust in the government due to perceived corruption could ultimately undermine the legitimacy of the regime and open the possibility of support for a coup d'état.

Figure 3. Regression Analysis of the Determinants of Public Support for a Military Take-Over



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2010

Figure 3 presents the results of a logistic regression model incorporating these three indicators of public opinion with respect to corruption.[14] By comparing these results to those in Figure 2, we first see that the inclusion of these three measures of corruption do not significantly alter the results of the socio-economic and demographic predictors.[15]

More importantly, the model indicates that corruption victimization is the single greatest predictor of supporting a military take-over under conditions of high corruption. The large, significant and positive effect is consistent with expectations drawn from the literature, as discussed above. The more victimized an individual is by corruption, the more likely he or she is to accept military intervention under a scenario of high corruption. As expected, the results also show that positive perceptions of the government's efficacy in combating corruption negatively predict support for a coup.

[13] It is beyond the scope of this report to parse the analysis in such a way as to assess the extent to which perceptions of corruption fuel undemocratic attitudes and, simultaneously, the reverse. It is worth noting that corruption victimization could also be endogenously related to democratic attitudes, though presumably that link should be comparatively weaker. As Seligson (2002, pp. 423-424) writes "Rather, those experiencing bribery have a lower level of support for the legitimacy of the system than those who do not. Presumably the direction of causality here is clear since those from whom bribes were solicited could not be selected by public officials because of the latter's foreknowledge of the former's legitimacy perceptions. Or could they? What if bribe targets are selected precisely because the incumbent political party favors its friends and 'taxes' its enemies?"

[14] I also performed the logistic regression analysis with a trust index based on the AmericasBarometer's "B series" of trust in institutions questions. I found that its inclusion caused public opinion of the government's efficacy in combating corruption to be statistically insignificant to its support of a coup. In a way that fits with the literature, this suggests that trust in the government and its ability to combat corruption are related, with trust being a mediating variable when incorporated into the military take-over model.

[15] I considered the relevance of trust in the military as a predictor and found that it is positive and significant if added to the model presented in Figure 3; yet, the results of the other predictors were not affected by the inclusion of public trust in the military.

Finally, public perceptions of corruption in general are not statistically significant predictors of an individual's likelihood to discard the democracy and support a military take-over. This null result remains even if the other two indicators related to corruption are removed from the model. Thus, the results suggest that a government's efforts with respect to combating corruption and actual experiences are more important predictors of one's willingness to stick to the rules of the democratic game under high corruption than are perceptions of corruption. It may be that perceptions of corruption lower trust in government, as others have shown, but simply perceiving corruption does not necessarily translate into a situation in which the public deems the current regime illegitimate or otherwise worthy of being replaced by military governance.

Discussion

This *Insights* report examined the factors that might cause the general public to abandon the democratic rules of the game and support a military take-over of their own state when corruption is high. While the general public's seemingly high overall willingness to back a military coup d'état under such conditions seems to indicate some weaknesses with respect to the public's commitment to democratic values across the Latin America and the Caribbean, this report focused on what predicts individual opinions on this issue.

As the results show, the extent to which an individual citizen has been victimized by corruption proves to be one of the strongest predictors for his or her support of a military coup under conditions of high corruption. Even though some (see, e.g., Ruhl 2011) suggest that there are difficulties in measuring corruption victimization due to self-reporting on potentially illegal acts, the results still indicate a strong correlation between one's reported exposure to corrupt practices and decreased democratic values.

Additionally, the government's perceived efficacy in fighting corruption negatively predicts public support for a military takeover. It is important that international organizations and aid agencies do not limit anti-corruption efforts solely to those countries with already well established anti-corruption programs. As many scholars have noted, fear of squandering and misuse might sometimes cause economic aid agencies to shy away from those countries that are suffering the most from corruption and could use foreign assistance. For example, "The U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Account… announced that countries invited to bid for aid would have to demonstrate their commitment to good governance" (Andersson and Heywood 2009, p. 758). The literature suggests that this lack of ability to apply for aid diminishes the possibility of effective anti-corruption programs, thus negatively effecting public perception of government efficacy where corruption is high. This "vicious cycle" might partially explain why those countries that successfully combat corruption enjoy more political legitimacy and stability in general. At the individual level, this research suggests that those who perceive more efficacious efforts to combat corruption will be more committed to the democratic rules of the game. And, thus, it underscores the importance of programs that target corruption broadly as opposed to only within selected countries.

Finally, and to conclude, the results presented here are heartening in that they suggest that high perceptions of corruption among the public do not necessarily translate into a lack democratic values. This is important for both academics and policymakers, as anti-corruption campaigns may raise the salience of corruption. While such increased perceptions of corruption may erode trust in government (Seligson 2002, 2006; Morris and Klesner 2010), they do not necessarily likewise erode support for democratic governance.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Pearson's Correlation between JC13 and Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index

	Support for Coup	**2010 Corruption Perceptions Index***
Mexico	0.57	0.31
Peru	0.55	0.35
Guatemala	0.528	0.32
El Salvador	0.519	0.36
Nicaragua	0.457	0.25
Ecuador	0.449	0.25
Guyana	0.446	0.27
Colombia	0.422	0.35
Dominican Republic	0.42	0.3
Bolivia	0.414	0.28
Paraguay	0.408	0.22
Trinidad & Tobago	0.374	0.36
Honduras	0.366	0.24
Brazil	0.355	0.37
Jamaica	0.347	0.33
Uruguay	0.344	0.69
Costa Rica	0.337	0.53
Venezuela	0.329	0.2
Chile	0.294	0.72
Panama	0.265	0.36
Argentina	0.208	0.29
Pearson's Correlation Coefficient		-0.278946751

***1 Indicates "very clean." 0 Indicates "highly corrupt"**

**In addition to the United States, Canada and Haiti, both Suriname and Belize were omitted from the correlation due to a lack of data from the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Appendix B

Table 2. Determinants of Support for Military Take-Over under High Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010

	Coefficient	**Standard Error**	**Coefficient**	**Standard Error**
Urban	-0.009	0.018	0.007	0.019
4th Quintile of Wealth+	0.049*	0.015	0.053*	0.015
3rd Quintile of Wealth	0.057*	0.016	0.068*	0.016
2nd Quintile of Wealth	0.072*	0.016	0.081*	0.017
1st Quintile of Wealth	0.057*	0.019	0.067*	0.019
Education	-0.143*	0.016	-0.164*	0.016
Age	-0.240*	0.013	-0.249*	0.013
Female	0.007	0.010	0.020	0.011
Perception of Corruption			-0.023	0.014
Government Combats Corruption			-0.057*	0.014
Corruption Victimization			0.091*	0.015
Mexico	0.162*	0.021	0.150*	0.022
Guatemala	0.120*	0.020	0.112*	0.021
El Salvador	0.117*	0.021	0.113*	0.021
Honduras	-0.019	0.021	-0.026	0.022
Nicaragua	0.053*	0.023	0.053*	0.024
Costa Rica	-0.027	0.025	-0.038	0.026
Panama	-0.083*	0.020	-0.083*	0.020
Colombia	0.045*	0.021	0.052*	0.022
Ecuador	0.105*	0.031	0.101*	0.031
Bolivia	0.058	0.033	0.054	0.035
Peru	0.156*	0.022	0.138*	0.022
Paraguay	0.030	0.020	0.015	0.021
Chile	-0.042	0.024	-0.030	0.025
Brazil	-0.017	0.036	-0.033	0.038
Venezuela	-0.019	0.030	-0.018	0.028
Argentina	-0.146*	0.030	-0.167*	0.031
Dominican Rep.	0.047*	0.023	0.045	0.023
Jamaica	0.002	0.026	-0.004	0.026
Guyana	0.061*	0.028	0.047	0.030
Trinidad & Tobago	0.009	0.022	-0.023	0.022
Belize	0.150*	0.022	0.135*	0.024
Suriname	-0.087*	0.024	-0.099*	0.024
Constant	-0.423*	0.019	-0.396*	0.019
F	*34.58*		*33.32*	
Number of Observations	*36,704*		*34,390*	
* p<0.05				

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed.
Country of Reference: Uruguay
+Category of Reference: 5th quintile of wealth