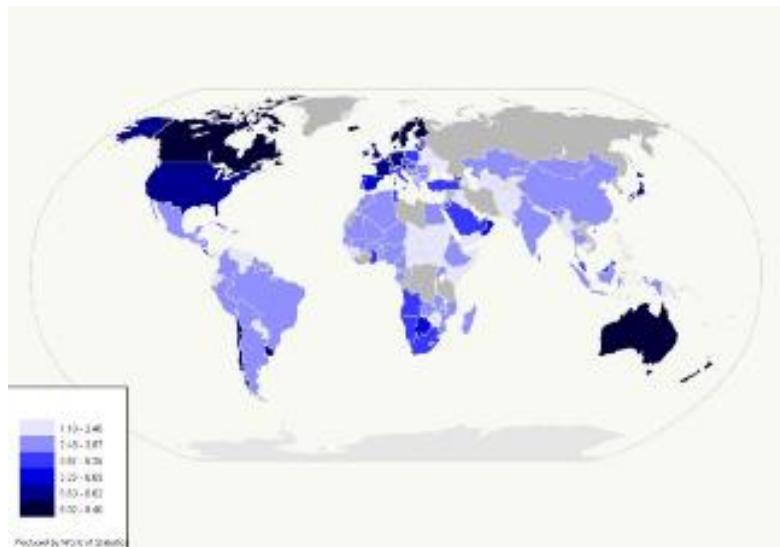


01/2014

Double Standards in Tolerance towards Corruption

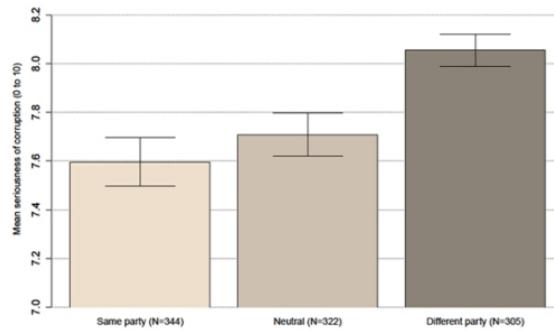


Not only politicians, but also citizens have double standards when judging the severity of corruption: an experiment shows that individuals are more tolerant when corruption affects politicians from the party they sympathise with. Data shows that this perceptual partisan bias is more important among Spain's Popular Party (PP) supporters than among supporters of the Spanish Workers' Socialist Party (PSOE). Finally, it has been observed that the bias disappears when citizens have high levels of political knowledge.

The reaction of the Catalan party Unió Democràtica to the Pallerols case and the Spanish Popular Party to the Gürtel case once again has revealed a concerning tolerance for corruption, particularly when it affects "our party". Tolerance is normally attributed to politicians, who surely have a non negligible share of responsibility.

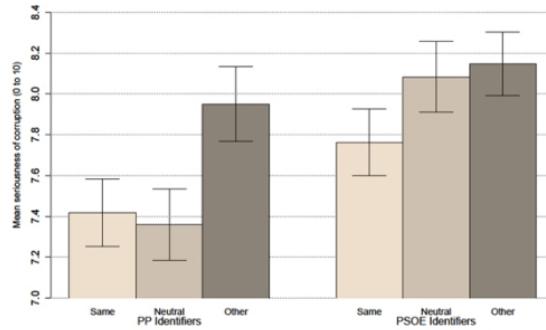
But what about citizens? In this analysis based on a survey experiment we show that there is a double standard when judging similar cases of corruption, depending only on whether the alleged corrupt belongs or not to a political party with which we sympathise.

Figure 1 reflects this difference. The assessment of the severity of a hypothetical case of corruption is significantly higher when the affected party is not ours (dark bar) than when it is our party (light bar).



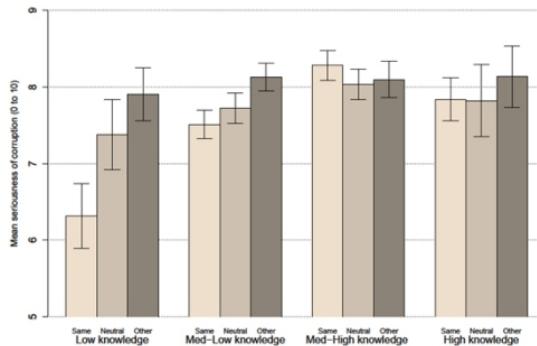
Graph 1. Perceived severity of the same corruption case depending on whether the person affected belongs to the same party as the respondent (same party), the main opponent party (different party), or the affected party is unknown (neutral).

The data also tell us that not all supporters have the same degree of double standards. According to figure 2 the difference is much greater amongst PP supporters than amongst PSOE supporters. It seems that this is due to individual characteristics of PP supporters (in the multivariate analysis this was controlled), but it could also be speculated that the actual cases of corruption could have the effect of accentuating these “double standards”.



Graph 2. Perceived severity of the same corruption case depending on whether the person affected belongs to the same party as the respondent (same), the main opponent party (other), or the party is unknown (neutral,) distinguishing between PP supporters and PSOE supporters.

Finally, the data shows that the double standard disappears when people have medium to high levels of political knowledge (Figure 3).



Graph 3. Perceived seriousness of the same corruption case depending on whether the affected belongs to the same party as the respondent (same), the main opponent party (other), or the party is unknown (neutral), for low levels of political knowledge (low knowledge), medium low (med-low), medium high (med-high) and high (high knowledge).

The encouraging side of these results is that high levels of political information lead to a significant reduction of tolerance towards corruption affecting one's own party.

The parties affected by recent scandals may also be interested in knowing that the main mechanism that protects this relative tolerance seems to be the "implicit exchange": good management and funding in exchange for a limited electoral punishment for the corrupt. Some studies have shown that punishment on the evaluation of governments resulting from corruption is accentuated in contexts of economic crisis. It would therefore be desirable and expected that tolerance decrease in the current social and economic context.

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References

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