Tolerance of Corruption or Ideological Blindness?*

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Abstract

There is evidence that people vote for corrupt candidates even when they have information that their representatives have misbehaved in the past. We propose that ideology is an important factor explaining this voting behavior, and we tested two psychological mechanisms for this effect through an experimental approach conducted among Facebook users. We found that ideology strongly predicts voting for a corrupt candidate. We found evidence for two mechanisms: a cognitive cost-benefit tradeoff and a change in perception. Our results hold for two different types of corruption: nepotism and money.

* Second draft prepared to be presented at the EBAPE’s Graduate Seminar, May 20, 2015. A previous version of this paper was presented at the Conference on Accountability and Public Goods Provision that took place at Brown University, on December 5-6, 2014. We would like to thank comments and suggestions offered by the participants of the conference, especially Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro, Matthew Winters, Daniel Hidalgo, Frederico Finan, and Thad Dunning. We also would like to express our gratitude to Luis Schiumerini, who carefully provided crucial comments and suggestions, and to Rafael Goldsmith, who played a key role offering decisive feedbacks and statistical assistance.
Introduction

It should be surprising that corruption persists in democratic countries, where voters have the chance to choose honest people for political positions. One widespread line of inquiry (Persson and Tabelini 2004; Ferraz and Finan 2008; Klasnja 2011) focuses on informational failures to explain the puzzle of electing corrupt candidates. Uninformed voters may reward corrupt incumbents primarily because of their inability to distinguish clean politicians from dirty ones. By increasing the level of information available to voters, corrupt incumbents are more likely to be penalized for deviant or dishonest behavior.

Ferraz and Finan (2008), for instance, argue that when voters acquire information about the true type of politician they will punish wrongdoing. Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013) also provides evidence supporting the “informational” hypothesis. The authors utilized a nationwide survey experiment in Brazil in which respondents were randomly exposed to vignettes containing information about the politicians’ involvement (or lack thereof) in corruption and party affiliation while being asked about the likelihood of support by a hypothetical voter. The authors report that respondents rejected the cost-benefit tradeoff, displaying greater sensitivity to information on political misconduct.

Another line of research, however, has provided evidence that voters may elect corrupt candidates even when they are informed about their wrongdoings (Manzetti and Wilson, 2007; Golden, 2009; Pereira and Melo, forthcoming 2015). Pereira and Melo (forthcoming 2015), for instance, argue that although voters hold politicians accountable for corruption, they do not do so to the point of preventing misbehavior, especially when politicians are able to reward voters with public goods in exchange for political support. Their findings supporting the cost-benefit tradeoff hypothesis suggest that while corruption decreases the probability of incumbent reelection, the negative effect of corruption diminishes as public expenditure rises.

Accordingly, Manzetti and Wilson (2007) claim that, especially in poorer countries, corrupt incumbents obtain votes by delivering basic goods and patronage jobs. Golden (2009) follows the same rational, explaining that even informed voters may vote for allegedly corrupt incumbents if they expect to receive material benefits that other parties or candidates cannot guarantee.

This comprehensive body of research implies that the effect of corruption on voting choice is conditional on other dimensions, such as access to information, delivery of public goods, or provision of material benefits. However, the role played by ideology has been under
investigated. Specifically, it is not clear if sharing ideological positions may facilitate voting for a corrupt candidate and, if so, the mechanisms that explain this effect. Myerson (1993), for instance, suggested that voters might tolerate a dishonest candidate if he or she is ideologically preferred. Golden (2009) agrees, showing that citizens weigh corruption charges along with ideological considerations.

Considering the possibility that ideology predicts voting for a corrupt candidate, it is not clear what psychological processes are behind this choice. On the one hand, it is possible that one should purposely choose a corrupt candidate when the benefits of sharing ideological views are preferred, making corruption thus tolerable. On the other hand, ideology may change the perception of corruption, in such a way that voters may see corrupt candidates as honest.

In this paper, we particularly investigate the extent to which ideological preferences influence voting for a corrupt candidate. In addition, we analyze whether a cognitive tradeoff and a change in the perception of corruption can explain the impact of ideology on voting choice. To do so, we carried out a survey experiment that advances our knowledge by doing two things. First, we brought ideology to bear on this question, while others have focused on valence issues (e.g., performance, different forms of spending). Second, we evaluated the relative importance of two mechanisms: tolerance of corruption (cost-benefit tradeoff) and ideological blindness (misperception of corruption).

Theory and Hypotheses

Corruption and Ideology

When facing the dilemma of choosing a candidate, voters are concerned about the policies that will be implemented, which involve tradeoffs such as more or less government spending (Ansolabehere, 2006). Because each voter has spatial preferences over the issue, he or she chooses the candidate closest to an ideal policy, which means the vote follows a certain ideological preference.

There are ideological systems that have been identified in the literature, such as liberal, conservative, socialist, feminist, fascist, or others (Festenstein and Kenny, 2005). People may identify themselves through one of these ideological traditions, which in turn will influence voting choice in an election. Other authors suggest that ideological self-identification is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of politicians’ evaluation
and choice in a number of countries, such as the United States (Mann, 1980; Conover and Feldman, 1981; Scotto, Stephenson, and Kornberg, 2004; Jost, 2006; Devine, 2012) and Brazil (Singer, 1998; Carreirão, 2002).

One common simplification of the concept of ideology is as a position on a liberal-conservative continuum (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993, Berry, Ringquist, Fording, and Russell, 1998), where voters position themselves according to their attitudes toward the size and role of government (Devine, 2012) or toward the willingness to change the status quo (Conover and Feldman, 1981). In two-candidate elections, they vote for the candidate whose ideology is closest to their own (Berry et al. 1998).

Singer (1998) explains that even when people are not aware about the meaning of ideological positions (e.g., the differences between left and right orientation), an intuitive knowledge and feeling about the preferences of a candidate is sufficient to allow them to vote coherently with their own ideas. Conover and Feldman (1981) explain that ideological identifications have largely symbolic meanings.

However, what would happen when the ideologically preferred candidate is corrupt? It has been assumed that voters usually would prefer to vote for an honest candidate instead of a corrupt one (Myerson, 1993; Person and Tabellini, 2004; Winters, and Shapiro, 2010; de Figueiredo, Hidalgo, and Kashara, 2011). This situation, thus, creates a problem for voters, who have to choose between honesty and ideology.

This condition happens in particular when there are two options for the voter only. This might happen when there are only two established parties, which is the case of the American electoral system (Myerson, 1993), or when there are only two competing candidates, which is the case, for instance, of a runoff presidential, gubernatorial or mayoral election in Brazil (Albuquerque, 1992).

Addressing this puzzle, we argue that voters might tolerate a dishonest candidate if he or she is ideologically preferred, because switching to an honest candidate risks giving the victory to a candidate of the opposite ideological preference. This idea is in accordance with Rundquist, Strom and Peters (1977), Myerson (1993), and Golden (2009), who discuss the possibilities that voters might support a corrupt politician in case he or she mirrors their ideological preferences.

Because ideology is a multidimensional concept, voters can access candidates’ values and behaviors in terms of some policy dimensions, such as economic, foreign and social policies (Devine, 2012). According to Feldman and Johnston (2014), “people may use the liberal-conservative dimension to guide their political behavior, but they can differ in the way
they understand that dimension in terms of substantive policy content. While some citizens may see liberalism and conservatism as primarily about social issues, others may understand the dimension in terms of economics, while others may see both domains as relevant to ideological categorizations.” Recent work by Zumbrunnen and Gangl (2008) supports this expectation. They find that economic conservatism and sociocultural conservatism exist as distinct strands and have unique influences on ideological self-identification in multivariate analyses.

Therefore, in order to be consistent with this multidimensional approach to the concept of ideology, we measured it in those two dimensions: economic and social. Its measurement is better explained below in the methods section. Thus, if voters have to choose between a corrupt candidate and a candidate opposing their ideology, their dilemma could be different when the corrupt candidate is similar to their own ideology in all dimensions, or in just one of the ideological dimensions.

Bringing these two dimensions to our context, we suggest that voters have higher tolerance to a dishonest candidate when he or she is ideologically preferred in both economic and social dimensions (sophisticated ideologies) than when he or she is ideologically preferred in only one of these two dimensions (inconsistent ideologies). In other words, we hypothesize the following:

*H1: Voters are more likely to choose a corrupt candidate when they share the same ideology:*

*H1a: When voters and the candidate share the same ideology in the economic dimension, voters are more likely to choose the corrupt candidate than when they mismatch.*

*H1b: When voters and the candidate share the same ideology in the social dimension, voters are more likely to choose the corrupt candidate than when they mismatch.*

*H1c: When voters and the candidate share the same ideology in both dimensions, voters are more likely to choose the corrupt candidate than when they match in only one dimension.*

If these hypotheses regarding voting choice hold true, the next step is to investigate why and how these effects take place on voters’ perception. We propose two competing explanations: First, voters may perceive their candidate as corrupt but believe they will be better off by tolerating a corrupt politician rather than voting for an alternative candidate.
whose ideology is contrary to their own (tradeoff mechanism). Second, people may ideologically identify themselves with the corrupt candidate in such a way that they do not perceive the candidate’s corruption as something very wrong (change in perception).

Tradeoff mechanism or tolerance

According to the standard economic model of rational behavior, one should act in a dishonest manner when the benefits are higher than its costs, which is a cognitive process (Allingham, and Sandmo, 1972; Becker and Stigler, 1974). Considering this tradeoff, in an election context it is possible that voters consciously tolerate corrupt candidates when the benefits are believed to compensate the costs.

This cognitive tradeoff has been found in studies in which a not “totally honest”, but efficient person is preferred compared to an honest, but “not that efficient” person (Figueiredo, 2004, Almeida, 2006, 2007). There is even a literature suggesting there are circumstances in which corruption is not that harmful, but instead has some social, economic and institutional roles in transition societies (Sousa, 2008). For this reason, we propose that:

H2a: Despite voters’ perception of their candidate as corrupt, they believe it is worthwhile to keep supporting this candidate because they can extract benefits by sharing the same ideology.

Misperception of corruption

Literature on psychology suggests that people tend to discount information about dishonest behavior more often when the person who commits it is oneself instead of others (Chimonas, Brennan and Rothman, 2007). The reason for it is that it is more painful for people to see themselves dishonest than to see others. In this case, discounting dishonest information works as a painkiller, facilitating acting in a dishonest manner (Mazar et al., 2008).

For instance, physicians reported that receiving gifts from the pharmaceutical industry is generally wrong, but when they faced this situation themselves, their evaluation changed, especially when they remembered how much sacrifice they made during medical training (Sah and Loewenstein, 2010).

Because ideology is part of one’s self-identity (Iborra, 2005; Teles, 2008; Pimentel, 2008), it is possible to infer that people who hold strong ideological positions are more likely
to access information about corruption in a biased manner. For instance, Van Kenhove, Vermeir and Verniers (2001) explain that an extreme-left view that considers that the rich are responsible for social inequality makes people reevaluate theft such that stealing from the rich is not considered being a crime.

In another example consistent with this rationale, Crawford and Pilanski (2014) provide empirical evidence that conservatives are against some forms of ideological expression when the subject is liberal and in favor when the subject is conservative, while liberals are against the same forms of expression when the subject is conservative and against when the subject is conservative.

Mazar et al. (2008) explain that many behaviors have malleable categorization, which allows people to reinterpret them in a self-serving manner. This is consistent with the claim that people are more likely to arrive at conclusions that they want to arrive at, but their ability to do so is constrained by their ability to construct seemingly reasonable justifications for these conclusions (Kunda, 1990). Therefore, thinking about an electoral context, we suggest that voters consider corruption information less relevant when the candidate shares their own ideological positions.

For this reason, we propose the following:

**H2b: When voters’ and the corrupt candidate’s ideology match, voters are less likely to perceive him or her to be corrupt.**

Further evidence from psychology suggests that people have internal reward mechanisms that exert influence on their decisions, in such a way that when the temptation for dishonesty arises, people’s moral standards are also taken into account (Mazar et al., 2008). The authors explain that even if misbehaving seems to be worthwhile, the fact that this behavior is perceived as being wrong seems to be sufficient to prevent one from doing so.

Considering this fact, Mazar et al. (2008) explained that people often feel the conflict between benefiting from doing something wrong and acting according to their belief in being honest. As a result, they tend to cheat, but ‘just a little’. In other words, the authors explain that people tend to commit small dishonest acts, which allow them to have some benefit while not affecting an honest self-image. In fact, under some circumstances, the perceived “wrongness” of dishonest behavior influences one’s decision to commit it (Newman, 1979, Erffmeyer, 1984, Goldstone and Chin, 1993).

For example, Farrington and Kidd (1977) found that more people claimed to own a coin that did not belong to them when its value was low compared to high. Gino and Pierce
(2010) found that people tend to discount the wrongness of crossing ethical boundaries to hurt or help others when the action restores equity. Mazar et al. (2008) also found that students cheated only 20 percent of the possible average magnitude, even when they had no chance to be caught.

Considering these ideas, it is possible that our evaluation of other people’s acts, such as politicians’, might follow the same pattern. Even though it has not been explained by the literature yet, it seems reasonable that doing something ‘just a little’ wrong may sound acceptable because it would not hurt honesty, but if wrongness becomes larger than this ‘little’, it may be perceived as too much and the politician will be considered corrupt.

In the political context, the literature provides evidence of the relativism of what is and is not considered corruption (Schwenke, 2000, Le Billon, 2003), since ethical norms are ubiquitous (Resnik, 2011). Corruption is commonly defined as the misuse of public office for private gain (Le Billon, 2003), but it is not clear what actions are considered ‘misuse’. This idea suggests that there are modes of corruption that are considered ‘more wrong’ than others.

Johnston (1986) explains that the kinds of behaviors that will be socially defined as corrupt can vary as a function of social attachments and customs, such as kinship, political culture and popular attachment to government (or lack of it). It may also vary as a function of attributes of the political process, such as its speed, patterns of access and exclusion; and economic characteristics, such as relative size of the public sector.

Therefore, it is possible that the same behavior will be considered corruption for a group of people and not for others. For example, Filgueiras (2009) found that people who understand public interest as everybody’s responsibility perceive that an act committed by anyone that negatively affects the government is corruption. On the other side of the coin, people who understand public interest as a government’s responsibility perceive that an act is corruption only when a politician or a public bureaucrat commits it.

Mazar et al. (2008) explained that the fact that something is wrong seems to be sufficient to prevent one from doing so, because people want to have an honest self-image. Going back to an election context, imagine that a person has to make a choice between a corrupt and an honest candidate. Even if the corrupt candidate seems to be a better choice (e.g., more experienced), the fact that he or she is perceived as corrupt (e.g., what he or she did is perceived to be ‘very wrong’) should be sufficient to prevent this person from voting for the candidate.

In other words, ideology can create a state of blindness, in which voters see the candidate’s misconduct as not ‘wrong enough’. If corruption is not ‘very wrong’, voters may
believe that it is not a problem for them to vote for this candidate. Thus, we propose the following:

\textit{H3a: The way corruption is perceived (how wrong it is) mediates the effect of ideology matching on voting choice.}

However, it is possible that some cases will provide very salient corruption information, making it hard to be misperceived. In these cases, the fact that people search for arguments in an attempt to arrive at desired conclusions (Kunda, 1990, Mazar et al., 2008) may not be enough to change corruption perception. We argue that when this is the case, it is still possible that voters are so motivated to choose a certain candidate that they may find other reasons for this choice.

The motivated reasoning literature explains that people often rely on a biased set of cognitive processes, accessing, constructing, and evaluating beliefs in a self-serving manner (Kunda, 1990). In a case in which corruption information is too salient to be misperceived, motivated voters may still engage into a biased cost-benefit evaluation, in which the benefits of choosing the candidate gets so accessible in their mind that choosing this candidate may still seem worthwhile.

For this reason, we propose the following:

\textit{H3b: When perception of corruption is high, a motivated cost-benefit evaluation mediates the effect of ideology matching on voting choice.}

\textbf{Political Context}

We used a hypothetical election in our survey experiment, in which we entertain scenarios where a corrupt candidate faces a non-corrupt candidate. Even though our scenarios were hypothetical, it is important to discuss the political and electoral context in which the experiment was applied. The survey was posted on the Facebook platform between the first round and the runoff presidential election in Brazil; precisely, two weeks prior to the runoff election, which took place on October 26, 2014. This political environment became an excellent opportunity to test the impact of voters’ ideological attachment on their tolerance for corruption.

Despite the high number of presidential candidates and the great degree of uncertainty concerning who would be able to win, the extremely competitive first round of the race in 2014 consolidated as winners the two main political and opposing ideological blocks that
have polarized Brazil since 1994. On the one hand, the Workers’ Party (PT), with President Dilma Rousseff running for reelection, and on the other hand, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), with his candidate the former governor of the state of Minas Gerais, Aécio Neves. As none of the candidates obtained a simple majority in the first round, the two first finishers had to dispute a runoff election three weeks later.

During the electoral process, a major corruption scandal was disclosed involving the national oil company, Petrobras (controlled by the Brazilian government, although having private ownership through stock market listing). The scheme entailed kickbacks financed by cash creamed from inflated contracts. The scale of the wrongdoing could dwarf the other major scandal of recent years, known as Mensalão – monthly bribes to legislators for voting in favor of government-sponsored legislation – and further undermine not only the reputation of the company that has long been seen as a national treasure, but also the political reputation of the incumbent president running for reelection. Petrobras is seen as so important that both the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) and the Senate had launched investigating committees to probe the scandal.

The country split into two opposite sides. On the one hand, PT supporters alleged that corruption is a longstanding pathology attributable to the Brazilian political system as a whole and not necessarily restricted to PT administrations. It was also argued that during the former Cardoso administration and in states governed by the opposition, many corruption scandals had also emerged, thus raising doubts about which parties were really corrupt or not. Although President Rousseff was chairwoman of Petrobras’ board from 2003 to 2010, she denied any knowledge of graft.

On the other hand, the opposition blamed the Rousseff government for being responsible for the largest corruption scandal in Brazilian history, and the political and economic consequences remain unpredictable. The opposition also accused the PT and coalition allies of blocking further investigation by the committees in Congress. Although by very close margin, President Rousseff managed to be reelected.

Despite the hypothetical scenario of the experiment, the voting choice situation in which voters had to access information about corruption and their ideological preferences was present during the two weeks in which they answered the survey questions.

**Method**
To test all hypotheses, we ran a web-based survey experiment. We used a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design: mode of corruption – money vs. nepotism; economic ideology – matching vs. mismatching; and social ideology – matching vs. mismatching. We used two modes of corruption to check if our results hold for both of them.

Our sample comprised 1,045 Brazilian subjects who were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. We recruited these participants by placing an advertisement on the Facebook platform. This recruitment method is effective because it allows greater demographic diversity and representativeness than student samples (Samuels and Zucco, 2012). Interested participants answered an online survey.

The procedure was the following: when people agreed to participate, they received instructions asking them to imagine a second round presidential election in which they would have to choose between two opposing candidates. The participants (1) read the profile of both candidates; (2) made the decision on which candidate they would vote for; (3) answered a questionnaire measuring their own ideology; (4) read the manipulation text; (5) made a second decision on whom to vote for; (6) answered a questionnaire measuring the type of processing (whether the corrupt candidate was seen as a cost-benefit choice, or if he was seen as not corrupt); and (6) answered some socioeconomic questions.

The first option was Candidate A, who had long political experience. He had been a mayor twice and served as a state governor once, had 70% citizen approval, and was considered very efficient by the population. The second option was Candidate B, who lacked administrative experience. He had been a mayor just once and had only 30% citizen approval. When he was a mayor, he did very little to improve people’s quality of life. In this campaign, his platform focused on honesty in politics and public service. We purposely chose Candidate B to be less competent than Candidate A. After reading these political profiles, subjects chose for whom they would vote.

The questionnaire measuring type of ideology of the respondents contained the indicators displayed in Figure 1. This measure is an adaptation of the scale used by the Pew Research Institute. The Brazilian Institute Datafolha also uses a similar scale. We chose this scale because it captures both dimensions of ideology (economic and social) and it has been used in representative Brazilian samples, allowing us to compare our findings with the Brazilian population.

As said before, the survey used two dimensions of ideology, measured in terms of the role of the government in the economy, and in social values related to religion, gay marriage and legalization of marijuana. These dimensions were validated by exploratory and
confirmatory factorial analysis. All the indicators had two opposite sentences and subjects had
to agree with one of them or say they did not know.

Based on the traditional left-right ideological continuum, we called voters leaning
toward state intervention in the economy economic-conservatives and voters supporting
competition and less regulation economic-liberals. Concerning social values, we considered
as social-liberals voters in favor of civil liberties such as gay marriage and social-
conservatives those voters supporting restrictions on individual behavior like the use of drugs.

[Figure 1 about here]

The manipulations came next. The subjects read a vignette showing again the profile
of both candidates and saying that they found more information about Candidate A. In the
money condition, Candidate A was accused of causing a R$\(^1\) 4 million loss in public accounts
for stealing money (vs. appointing a relative to a public position). In the economic liberal
condition, Candidate A was in favor of privatizations and less intervention on economy (vs.
creation of state-owned companies and more intervention/regulation on economy), and in the
social liberal condition, he was in favor (or against) legalizing the consumption of marijuana
and of homosexual marriage.

Based on their score differences, subjects were classified into matching or
mismatching (whether or not his or her ideological view matches Candidate A’s) for both
economic and social views. After that, subjects answered to a questionnaire measuring the
type of processing, which contained the indicators displayed in Figure 2. Because corruption
can be chosen either due to a cognitive tradeoff (Figueiredo, 2004; Almeida, 2006, 2007) or to
the perception that it was not ‘wrong enough’ (Mazar et al., 2008), this scale contains two
dimensions, which were confirmed by exploratory and confirmatory factorial analysis.
Subjects rated the statements using a Likert-rating, ranging from 1 (‘I totally disagree’) to 5
(‘I totally agree’). Answers for each scale were averaged, resulting in one score for tradeoff
and another one for perception of corruption. In the later, because high levels of agreement
means lower perception, we reversed the scale.

[Figure 2 about here]

\(^1\) R$ stands for the Real, Brazil’s currency.
Results

The characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1. Before seeing the manipulations, 91% of the sample preferred Candidate A, confirming that they perceived it as a better choice, as anticipated. As expected, there are no significant differences across conditions, which indicates that randomization worked and therefore our results are not driven by any demographic characteristics. The only exception is a small difference in age between the economic matching (M = 31.9) and mismatching conditions (M = 30.4), which is significant, but very unlikely to be an alternative explanation for our findings.

We used participants’ own decision before the manipulation as a baseline for their choices. We used changes in choice as our dependent variable, which took the value of one if the responded rejected corruption, changing from Candidate A to other (Candidate B or not voting), and zero otherwise.

Overall, rejection of corruption was prevalent. 56.6% of participants changed from Candidate A to other (Candidate B or not voting) after learning that their preferred candidate was corrupt and had a certain ideology, 34.5% still voted for Candidate A, 7.5% still voted for other, and 1.3% changed from other to Candidate A (McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 551.29, p < 0.001$).

As we can see in Figure 3, there exist significant differences between subjects in which ideology matched compared to when they did not match, both in economic and social ideological dimensions. In other words, when voters and the candidate shared the same ideological preferences, voters were more inclined to vote for the corrupt candidate than when they had distinct ideological preferences.

According to it, when both ideological dimensions matches, Candidate A receives a higher proportion of rejection compared with the situation in which only the economic dimension matched as well as when only social dimension of ideology matched. Consistently, when both ideological dimensions mismatched, Candidate A received a higher proportion of rejection compared with when only economic matched and when only social matched.

[Figure 3 about here]
We then ran three logistic regressions of our manipulations on rejection of corruption using effects coding (e.g. match=1, mismatch=-1). Model 1 includes the direct effects of type of corruption, respondent’s economic ideology, respondent’s social ideology, candidate’s economic ideology, and candidate’s social ideology. In addition to these variables, Model 2 includes two interaction terms: economic matching and social matching. Model 3 includes a third interaction term: both matching. Table 2 shows the results.

[Table 2 about here]

Model 1 shows the main effects of both respondents and candidates’ ideologies on the likelihood that the respondent rejects the corrupt candidate. We did not find any difference between the types of corruption on rejection, which suggests that our participants see nepotism and stealing money as equally wrong.

H1 predicted that Voters are more likely to choose a corrupt candidate when they share the same ideology. Models 2 and 3 supported H1a and H1b. When voters and the candidate shared the same ideology in the economic or social dimension, voters were less likely to reject the corrupt candidate than when they mismatch. When voters and the candidate shared the same ideology in both dimensions, both effects summed, so that voters were even more likely to choose the corrupt candidate, supporting H1c.

This result suggests that matching in sophisticated ideologies (sharing ideological preferences in both dimensions) makes it even harder for the voter to reject a corrupt candidate than matching in inconsistence ideologies (sharing ideological preferences in only one dimension). In this case, the non-significant interaction term in Model 3 supports the idea that the additional effect of each dimension holds in the presence of the other.

Interestingly, in an exploratory analysis, we found that for economic liberals, matching in the economic dimension is more important than in the social, while for economic conservatives, matching in the social dimension is more important. While we did not have any predictions in this regard, it suggests that people from different ideologies not only differ within each dimension, but also in the weight that they place to them.

Psychological mechanisms

The next step is to investigate the psychological mechanisms behind these voting choices. Do people consciously evaluate the cost-benefit tradeoff by choosing a corrupt
candidate? Alternatively, do they unconsciously change the perception of corruption and consider the misbehavior as “not corrupt”? To investigate those two psychological mechanisms, we tested the indirect effect of social and economic match on rejection of corruption mediated by perception of corruption and cost-benefit evaluation.

We ran four linear regressions. The two first have cost-benefit evaluation as the dependent variable and the others have perception of corruption as the dependent variable. Our independent variables are type of corruption, subjects’ social and economic ideological dimensions, candidate’s social and economic dimensions, and economic and social matching. Table 3 presents the results.

[Table 3 about here]

For the cost-benefit tradeoff as the dependent variable, when the economic ideology of the respondent matches with the candidate’s ideology, corruption is easier to be accepted as a cost-benefit trade-off. Therefore, we find partial support for H2a, because corruption is only accepted as worthwhile for the economic dimension of ideology.

For perception of corruption as our dependent variable, we find a main effect of type of corruption, so that people perceived the candidate as less corrupt when his corruption involved stealing money than when it involved nepotism. This finding suggests that our sample considers nepotism as a serious type of corruption, hard to accept, even when compared to stealing money. This finding is consistent with people’s negative perception of nepotism in other countries, such as Croatia (Budak, 2007), the United States, and Jordan (Abdalla, Maghrabi, & Raggad, 1998).

We also find a direct effect of respondent’s social ideology on perception of corruption, so that when people have conservative social ideology, they perceive Candidate A as less corrupt than when they have liberal social ideology. However, because most of our sample has liberal social ideology, this finding is unlikely to explain voting choice in this experiment.

More interestingly, however, is when economic ideology matches. In this condition, it is possible to observe that voters misperceive corruption information significantly more often. We find partial support for H2b, because voters are less likely to perceive Candidate A as corrupt when their ideology match, but this phenomenon happens only for the economic dimension.
After that, we investigate if the cost-benefit tradeoff and perception of corruption are predictors of rejection of corruption. We run four logistic regressions, using again rejection of corruption as our dependent variable. Our independent variables are again type of corruption, participants and candidates’ economic and social ideologies, and their interactions. In addition to them, Models 8, 9, and 10 include the predicted mechanisms: cost-benefit tradeoff, corruption perception, and both, respectively. Model 11 includes the interaction term of both mechanisms. Table 4 shows the results.

[Table 4 around here]

Model 8 includes the first mechanism: perception of corruption, which is a significant predictor of voting choice. This result means that when a voter perceives Candidate A as corrupt, the probability that s/he rejects him is higher than when s/he perceives him as less corrupt. We did not find support for H3a; however, this effect is consistent with our argument that misperception of corruption works as a painkiller, alleviating the conflict of having to choose between honesty and ideology.

Model 9 includes the second mechanism: cost-benefit tradeoff, which is a significant predictor of voting choice. This result means that when a voter perceives Candidate A as both competent and corrupt, a positive cognitive cost-benefit evaluation decreases the likelihood of rejecting him. This effect suggests that ideology is so important that the perception of corruption is not enough to prevent a voter to choose a corrupt candidate.

Model 10 and 11 included both mechanisms together, and their interaction term, respectively. When controlling for perception of corruption, cost-benefit tradeoff was a significant predictor of choice. Interestingly, their interaction term was significant, suggesting that when perception of corruption is high, a motivated cost-benefit evaluation reduces the likelihood of rejecting Candidate A, while when perception of corruption is low, the cost-benefit evaluation does not have any effect.

In addition, we analyzed if the indirect effects of social match and economic match on voting choice was mediated by perception of corruption and cost-benefit tradeoff. We found that only the indirect effect of economic match mediated by cost-benefit was significant (.103, 95% IC [0.58-.15]). In other words, when voters and Candidate A shared the same economic ideology, the decreased likelihood rejection was driven by both mechanisms.

Moreover, we explored the interaction between cost-benefit analysis and perception of corruption, and we found a significant negative interaction. When the candidate is not
perceived as corrupt, the cost-benefit tradeoff does not affect the rejection of corruption. However, when the candidate is perceived as corrupt, cost-benefit analysis has a significant effect on rejection. Figure 4 shows the effect of cost-benefit tradeoff on probability of vote change for different levels of perception of corruption.

[Figure 4 about here]

Finally, we found that the indirect effect of economic match on probability of vote change was significantly mediated by cost-benefit tradeoff at low levels of perception (-.03, 95% IC [-.049 to -.018]), but it is not significant for high levels of perception (-.005, 95% IC [-.021 to .008]), supporting H3b. This result suggests that when the participant did not perceive the candidate as corrupt, this lack of perception mediated the effect of economic match on choice (ideological blindness). However, when the participant perceived the candidate to be corrupt, the cost-benefit tradeoff drove the effect (tolerance of corruption). In other words, both mechanisms seem to complement each other in explaining why people are motivated to vote for corrupt candidates who share the same ideology.

**Discussion**

Even though in democratic countries voters have the electoral chance to choose honest candidates for political positions and punish those that misbehave, there are sometimes conditions where they may fail to do that. Previous research suggested that voters choose corrupt candidates when they do not have information about corruption, or when they receive some kinds of benefits for choosing them, in terms of personal favors or delivery of public goods.

Our research sheds light to a third important, but understudied factor that explains voting for a corrupt candidate: ideology. By using an experimental approach, we provide empirical evidence that ideology is one of these reasons that may justify why people would not punish corruption in an election. Specifically, our experimental analysis demonstrates that voters are more likely to choose a dishonest candidate when they share the same ideology, even acknowledging that this candidate may be corrupt. We additionally show that this effect is even stronger when both economic and social ideological dimensions match.

We showed that ideology is more important than mode of corruption in affecting choice. The fact that more than half of the participants under the matching conditions decided
to vote for the corrupt candidate is striking and suggests that it is easier to accept corruption from a politician who shares one’s ideology.

We went a step further and investigated the psychological mechanisms behind this effect. Interestingly, when people read information that an ideologically preferred candidate is corrupt, they are less likely to perceive this corruption than when the candidate has the opposing ideology. In other words, ideological matching facilitates the belief that the candidate’s misconduct is not that wrong, since people are motivated to drive self-serving conclusions.

In addition, we showed that the way corruption is perceived affects choice. However, when people are unable to misperceive corruption information (e.g., it is too salient), people are still motivated to search for other mechanisms to support the candidate who matches his ideological preferences. This process leads to a biased cognitive trade-off that still favors the decision they already want to make. In other words, our results suggest that motivated reasoning can manifest in both misperception of corruption and a biased cost-benefit trade-off.

Therefore, our findings suggest that both tolerance of corruption and ideological blindness influence voting choice, in such a way that when an ideologically preferred candidate is corrupt, voters see their corruption as mild, but even when they acknowledge that corruption exists, choosing the corrupt candidate is still worthwhile. Finally, this study expanded current knowledge about corruption reappraisal showing that it not only happens for people’s own dishonest acts, but also for dishonest acts from other people, as long as they share the same ideology. By showing this, we suggest that dishonest from another person may hurt people’s own self-concept, as long as they identify themselves with this other person.

Even though our findings contribute to an understanding of why people choose corrupt candidates, they have some limitations. For instance, in the experimental procedure, we did not have conditions in which Candidate A is honest. Even though, our dependent variable is vote change, using people’s first intention as a baseline, we cannot separate the effect of corruption from the effect of ideology. Other experimental designs can replicate this study using different conditions.

Another limitation is that the manipulation said that the candidate was suspected of being corrupt, but there was no evidence to prove it. If the candidate had been presented as already convicted, the pattern of answers might have been different. This modification in the experimental design can also be tried in future research.

Finally, future research can investigate whether voters can differently reappraise other modes of corruption. For example, if instead of nepotism, the non-monetary type of
corruption were patronage or public contracts, would the reappraisal process be different? This kind of investigation could shed light on what kinds of behaviors are considered to be corrupt by Brazilian (or other nation’s) voters.

References


**Figure 1: Indicators of the Economic and Social Ideology Scale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of the government in the economy – Cronbach’s alpha = .6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Econ1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Econ2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Econ3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Econ4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social values – Cronbach’s alpha = .6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost-Benefit 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost-Benefit 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost-Benefit 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Choice % Candidate A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender - Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status - Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education - Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State - São Paulo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent's city is a state capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly income - above US$2,800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3: Cross tabulation - Choice vs. Economic and Social Matching

% Votes for Candidate A across Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Matching</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Mismatching</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Matching</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Mismatching</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Matching</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Mismatching</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
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Table 2: Logit Model of Type of Corruption and Ideology on Corruption Rejection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Corruption (1 = stealing money, -1 = nepotism)</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent's Economic Ideology (1 = liberal, -1 = conservative)</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition - Economic Ideology (1 = liberal, -1 = conservative)</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.42***</td>
<td>-.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent's Social Ideology (1 = liberal, -1 = conservative)</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition - Social Ideology (1 = liberal, -1 = conservative)</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.37*</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Both Matched</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-.06</td>
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</table>

N 1045 1045 1045

The top entries are logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05 (two-tailed tests)
Table 3: Effect of Economic and Social Matching on Cost-Benefit Tradeoff and Perception of Corruption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>DV: cost-benefit analysis</th>
<th>DV: perception</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Model 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.07 (0.06)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent's Economic Ideology</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>.08 (0.12)</td>
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<td>Economic Matched</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Matched</td>
<td>.08 (0.12)</td>
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</tbody>
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* The top entries are regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05 (two-tailed tests)
### Table 4: Logit Model of Type of Corruption, Ideology, Cost-Benefit Tradeoff and Perception of Corruption on Corruption Rejection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 8</th>
<th>Model 9</th>
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<tr>
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<td>-.05</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.38*</td>
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<td>(.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
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<td>(.08)</td>
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<td>(.10)</td>
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Figure 4: Effect of Cost-Benefit Tradeoff on Probability of Vote Change for Different Levels of Perception of Corruption.