TURNING A BLIND EYE: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE OF PARTISAN BIAS IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS CORRUPTION[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article considers how partisanship conditions attitudes towards corruption. Stirred by the puzzle of why corruption does not seem to have the electoral consequences we would expect, it explores whether party supporters are more tolerant towards corruption cases when they affect their own party. The partisan-bias hypothesis is confirmed by a survey experiment carried out in Spain, a country where a number of corruption scandals have been recently visible. The results show that the same offense is judged differently depending on whether the responsible politician is a member of the respondent's party, of unknown partisan affiliation, or of a rival party. Furthermore, the degree of partisan bias depends on political sophistication. This suggests that although partisanship may induce tolerance to same-party corruption practices, the partisan bias disappears when political awareness is high.

Keywords: corruption, attitudes towards corruption, party cues, partisanship, survey experiments, political knowledge

INTRODUCTION

According to a classic definition, corruption is "behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence. This includes such behavior as bribery (use of a reward to pervert the judgment of a person in a position of trust); nepotism (bestowal of patronage by reason of ascriptive relationship rather than merit); and misappropriation (illegal appropriation of public resources for private-regarding uses)" (Nye 1967:419). Corruption has both negative political (Nye 1967, Seligson 2002, Anderson and Tverdova 2003) and economic (Mauro 1995, Svensson 2005, Lambsdorff 2006) consequences. Either because of these consequences or because of moral considerations, public opinion is expected to bear a negative evaluation on corruption.

In spite of this, political corruption does not seem to have devastating consequences for the career and electoral fate of corrupt politicians (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters1977). Golden summarizes the striking conclusions of existing research as follows: "The average voter remains willing to give electoral support to political representatives who are allegedly involved in criminal wrongdoing, whether that voter is American, Japanese or Italian. Moreover, the modal corrupt politician is successfully reelected despite charges, or even convictions, of illegal behavior" (Golden 2006:8). Other authors have claimed that the political consequences of corruption scandals depend on a number of contextual conditions (see for instance Dobratz and Whitfield 1992, McCann and

Dominguez 1998, Davis, Camp and Coleman 2004, Jiménez and Cainzos 2004, Ferraz and Finan 2008). Nevertheless a puzzle on why some citizens do not censure corrupt politicians harshly persists.

We argue that one reason why citizens do sometimes not judge corrupt politicians harshly is that pre-existing political preferences affect the way corruption is perceived, and the extent to which it is tolerated. Partisanship conditions how critical with political corruption citizens are: citizens judge the exact same offense differently if the responsible politician is a member of their party, of unknown partisan affiliation, or a political rival.

This paper makes three contributions to the literature on opinions towards corruption. First, it provides compelling evidence that partisans are more tolerant to corruption scandals that affect their own party. Extensive research has shown that partisanship affects a wide range of political evaluations. Party cues matter for policy evaluations, candidate choice, attribution of blame among politicians, and issue opinions (Miller and Shanks 1996; Bartels 2000, 2002; Coan et al 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Brader and Tucker 2009). However, previous research has downplayed the importance of partisanship on attitudes towards corruption (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977:958-9). By using an experimental design, which manipulates only the name of the affected party while holding all other information received constant, we are able to look at this question and to prove in an endogeneity-free way that partisanship biases the judgment of corruption cases.

Second, this article improves our knowledge of which individual factors affect how harshly people judge corruption. Although the macro-correlates of political corruption have received substantial attention in the literature, the predictors of individual attitudes towards corruption have not been a

frequent object of analysis. We provide observational evidence on the consequences of individual characteristics for the degree of tolerance to corruption practices.

Third, the article uncovers conditions under which partisan bias appears. People with low levels of political knowledge are not only more tolerant to corruption, but also more sensitive to party cues. This provides support for the intuition that an unsophisticated public is less likely to punish corrupt politicians in elections, and contributes to the discussion on how political awareness conditions the effect of partisanship on political perceptions and attitudes. Some of the findings point to the fact that the political context may also play a relevant role, as not all parties are equally affected by this partisan bias in corruption judgement. Supporters of the Popular Party (PP) seem to be more lenient towards corrupt politicians of their party and we discuss reasons that may explain this finding.

The first section of the article develops the different arguments outlined by the literature on why and when the average citizen tolerates corruption, and why partisanship may bias perceptions of corruption. Section 2 describes an original survey experiment embedded in an online survey carried out over a sample of the Spanish population. The experiment investigates the impact of partisanship on attitudes towards corruption. Individuals read hypothetical news that reported a suspected corruption case. The treatments consisted of three groups: the affected politician's party affiliation was unknown to one group, the party affiliation of the politician matched the respondent's in the second group, and the affected politician was a member of a different party than the respondent in the third group. The results, presented in section 3, show that partisans are significantly less harsh when judging their own parties' corruption cases. In particular, partisans with average or low levels of knowledge are more lenient towards corruption and more likely to show a partisan bias. Section 4 discusses the implications of the findings.

WHY VOTERS MAY NOT CARE MUCH ABOUT CORRUPTION, AND WHY PARTISANSHIP MATTERS

Normatively, the rational-legal precepts of democratic theory indicate that citizens should negatively evaluate corrupt political officials. However, this does not always happen to the same extent. Several explanations have been given by previous research on why citizens accept corrupt politicians. The *limited information hypothesis* (or the ignorant voter in its earliest version) argues that citizens vote for corrupt politicians because they are not sufficiently informed about their misbehaviors. If people knew with certitude that an official was corrupt, they would evaluate that person negatively and vote against him or her (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2010). Accordingly, an informed electorate is expected to reduce political corruption (Adserà, Boix and Payne 2003) and increase accountability (Pande 2011). Although it is empirically difficult to isolate the effect of information, research has shown that corruption affects electoral results when the media broadcast conclusive evidence to citizens. Ferraz and Finan (2008) for instance found that the release and broadcast --particularly via local radio-- of the outcomes of an audit carried out in Brazilian municipalities had a significant impact on incumbents' electoral performance in the 2004 elections.

If the electoral resilience of corrupt politicians was only an information problem, then investigative reporting and its distribution would ensure electoral accountability. However, even when information is available, some citizens do not consider corruption as an important problem and do not punish it electorally. Why are citizens lenient towards corrupt politicians *even when they know about it*? The literature suggests two alternative explanations: citizens do not give *credibility* to this

information, or they do not consider it *important* enough compared to other elements when they think about politics. Building on this previous work, we argue that information about corruption is evaluated differently depending on which party is affected.

Both the credibility given to information regarding corruption cases and the importance attached to them can be affected by partisanship. Partisans may be more tolerant in order to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1962). Being confronted with a corruption case affecting one's own party may produce a contradiction between two cognitions: preferring a party and knowing that this party's candidate is or may be corrupt. Because dissonance is uncomfortable, people tend to modify one of the cognitions to avoid it. Changing party identification may be more difficult than modifying the degree of tolerance to corrupt misbehavior. Thus, downplaying the importance of corruption when it affects the own party is to be expected as it reduces cognitive dissonance. It is well-known that people tend to see the political world in a way that is consistent with their political predispositions (Sherrod 1971, Gerber and Green 1999, Zaller 1992). This argument is consistent with the theory of motivated information processing (Taber and Lodge 2006, Meffert et al. 2006), which argues that people's reaction to information is mediated by their prior beliefs through the *attitude congruence bias* 'where they tend to evaluate arguments and evidence that support their priors as stronger and more compelling than contrary arguments' (Taber et al. 2009:139).[2] For example, having voted for a party increases how positively citizens evaluate a candidate relative to the rival (Beasley and Joslyn 2001, Mullainathan and Washington 2009).

Partisans presented with information about corruption may not believe it. Particularly if not confirmed by court ruling, information about corruption cases may be considered a "partisan trick" (Rundquist, Strom, and Peters 1977:955), i.e. noise resulting from partisan conflict rather than a real

problem. This lack of credibility is particularly acute in polarized or contentious political contexts (such as the Spanish political system). Partisanship may affect to what extent people give credibility to news about corruption cases: a partisan is more likely to consider corruption scandals that affect her own party as political noise made by competing parties, which the media magnify. People who have no party affiliation or who are close to other parties should be more likely to give credibility to corruption cases, and thus be more severe in their judgment.

Even when they are aware of the existence of a corruption case that affects their own party, partisans may still bear a less negative judgment on it than other citizens. An informed individual may consider other aspects -including real or potential material benefits, economic performance, constituency service, ideology, or issue positions of the politician- when judging him or her. For instance, research has found that citizens support corrupt officials if they bring material benefits to their constituency (patronage, pork barrel) (Manzetti and Wilson 2007, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2010). Punishing a corrupt legislator can stop the flow of public goods coming into the district (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, and Weingast 2000, Golden 2006:9). Corrupt officials may be perceived to have other qualities that "compensate" in their supporters' eyes. These other aspects that may matter more to voters are varied, but in any case they should be more salient for citizens who feel close to the party of the corrupt politician.

In sum, previous research suggests several reasons to think that partisanship influences perceptions of corruption (and eventually its electoral consequences). In order to avoid the dissonance produced by supporting the party of a corrupt politician, partisans may consider corruption scandals of same-party candidates as noise produced by competing parties, or they may downplay the importance of the case, relative to other considerations. Thus, our main hypothesis is:

H1: Citizens judge the same offense less severely if the politician belongs to the respondent's party, than if it is of unknown partisan affiliation, or belongs to a different party.

Additionally, we hypothesize that the degree of partisan bias –that is, the difference in the evaluation of a corruption case when it affects one's own party– depends on the level of political awareness of the individual. However, there are opposite arguments on the direction of this moderating effect. On the one hand, previous findings suggest that politically knowledgeable and sophisticated citizens are less likely to rely on partisan cues, and more likely to engage in the systematic processing of relevant information. Indeed, Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly (1989) argued that heuristic-based processing of information requires less effort and less ability than systematic processing. Kam (2005) finds that the effect of party cues on attitudes decreases as political awareness (political knowledge) increases: unsophisticated citizens tend to rely more on party cues than on issue-relevant values when forming opinions. In their analysis of blame-attribution and partisan cues Mahotra and Kuo (2008) report that citizens make more principled assessments when given information about officials' responsibilities (and thus when they are more knowledgeable). Arcenaux (2007) finds that as political awareness increases, individuals are more likely to negatively evaluate candidates affiliated with their political party with counter-stereotypical positions, meaning that they engage more in systematic processing than unsophisticated people. Thus, we can expect political knowledge to reduce partisan bias.

H2a: Politically aware individuals are less affected by partisan bias in their attitudes towards corruption.

On the other hand, experimental literature on motivated reasoning suggests the opposite effect: the politically aware have better-developed cognitive schemas and stronger predispositions that contribute to more biased information processing (Meffert *et al*. 2006, Taber and Lodge 2006). Evidence so far is limited to experiments with students, and it is inconclusive (Taber *et al.* 2009 failed to find an effect of political knowledge on the biased processing), but it points at the alternative hypothesis. In the context of the elaboration-likelihood model of persuasion, Petty and Wegener (1999) explicitly address this ambivalence by arguing that the direction of the moderating effect of prior knowledge depends on its nature. Holding biased or *attitude-congruent* knowledge on a topic increases the ability of the individual to respond, or contest a new and incongruent piece of information, and therefore may reinforce the bias in their processing of the information. On the contrary, if the individual holds fairly objective knowledge on the topic, he or she may more easily recognize 'the merits –or faults- at either side (Petty and Wegner 1999: 58).

H2b: Politically aware individuals are more affected by partisan bias in their attitudes towards corruption.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We test these hypotheses in Spain. This case is analytically useful for several reasons. First, corruption scandals were a salient issue in Spanish politics at the time the survey was conducted. Spain is a country with moderate levels of corruption, scoring 6.1 on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (very clean) in 2010 (Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International). This makes the topic relevant and the hypothetical case presented to the interviewees believable enough as to make them elicit realistic answers. Moreover, existing evidence points to a limited to non-existent

degree of electoral punishment of corruption in Spain (see for example Rivero and Fernandez-Vazquez 2011), and therefore, our motivating puzzle is especially relevant in this case: citizens do not seem to judge corruption harshly. Additionally, Spain has an institutionalized party system with over 60 per cent of its citizens reporting being close to a political party (Dalton and Weldon 2007: 183). It is a good setting, thus, to test whether partisanship is filtering the perceptions and preventing the scandals to have electoral consequences.

To test our hypotheses we designed an original survey experiment. Isolating the effect of partisanship on attitudes is difficult, as party closeness may both influence and be influenced by issue opinions and evaluations. Cross-sectional survey evidence cannot solve this mutual causality problem. However, survey experiments allow identifying the causal effect of partisanship by ensuring that only the affected party changes, while holding other features of the situation constant. Randomization of treatment assignment assures attaining covariate balance in individual characteristics. For this reasons, researchers use survey experiments to demonstrate that party cues affect opinions and choices (Arceneaux 2007; Brader and Tucker 2009; Coan et al. 2008; Kam 2005; Rahn 1993).

The experiment was embedded in an online survey, which was completed by 2,300 individuals older than 15 and younger than 45 years of age in November 2010. The sample consisted of Spanish citizens with internet access, which is over 83% in that age range.[3] The Internet diffusion rate, much lower above this age range, was the primary reason for the design of a sample of respondents within those age limits. The survey was administered online and included a variety of questions on political attitudes and behaviors. It also included the standard socio-demographic controls (a comparison of the socio-demographics of our online survey with another face-to-face standard

survey carried out in the same dates on a representative sample of the Spanish population is included in the Appendix 1).

In the experiment, respondents read a randomly assigned vignette, consisting of a brief simulated newspaper article reporting a case of corruption that was either related to a) a mayor from their preferred party, b) a mayor from a different party or c) a mayor with no specific party affiliation. Respondents were informed ex-ante that the situation was hypothetical. Using a hypothetical situation provides more precision in the treatment as there is no reason to worry about pre-treatment exposure.

The vignette read as follows:

> *Now, consider the following hypothetical situation:*
>
> ***[No party mentioned/ PP/ PSOE] Mayor may have obtained favors for his relatives***
> *The public prosecutor F.P. sent a letter yesterday to J.G.R., the [No party mentioned/ PP/ PSOE] mayor of XXXX town. The letter informs him that allegations of influence peddling which have come to light have led him to open an official case. According to the allegations, mayoral decrees allowed two of the mayor's relatives to obtain employment as town hall staff or to receive a pay rise for jobs that they already occupied there. After the subpoena, the public prosecutor will decide if there is sufficient evidence to open an investigation into the matter.*

Figure 1 displays, as an example, the original vignette presented to the group with no partisan reference. The design of the vignette was intentionally different from any known state-wide newspaper, in order to avoid that the partisan inclination of the newspaper influenced the results.

Figure 1 about here

After reading the vignette respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of the suspected fact in a 0-10 scale ranging from '*I don't think this is serious'* to '*I think this is very serious'*, which is our dependent variable.

The situation presented to the respondents was conceived to be as realistic as possible: most corruption allegations in Spain are found at the local level (see Costas, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2010, Rivero and Fernandez-Vazquez 2011). We purposely chose a situation that reports a mere suspicion, because this should lead to a more benign judgment. And we chose a case that, though clearly illustrative of corrupt misbehavior, gave some space for tolerance.[4] This was intended to reduce the expected skew in our dependent variable.

The respondents' partisanship was assessed in a previous question worded "*For which of the following parties do you feel more sympathy, or which one do you feel is closer to your own ideas?*" Respondents were then offered a list with the 11 parties that held seats at the Spanish lower chamber at the moment of the survey, and they could choose one. The partisanship question stood very early in the questionnaire and the experiment was at the end.

The analysis is restricted to supporters of the two major parties, the Spanish Workers' Socialist Party (PSOE) and the conservative Popular Party (PP). Party identifiers of small parties and non-partisans were excluded because the 'different party' treatment would not capture the same distance effects. Non-partisans might be leaners, and small party supporters may also feel relatively closer to either the PP or the PSOE. Restricting the analysis to PP and PSOE, the two main state-wide parties with a widespread rivalry, ensures that the 'same party' and the 'different party' treatments differ in their meanings for respondents in an equivalent way.[5]

The treatment condition was randomly assigned at the beginning of the survey. Table 1 shows the distribution of treatments across respondents.

Table 1 about here

To ensure that the randomization worked correctly and that there is covariate balance across the groups, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression predicting the three treatment conditions which included partisanship, gender, age, education, and employment status as independent variables. The Likelihood ratio Chi square test was not statistically significant (p=.92), implying that the model is not distinguishable from the null model (see Appendix 1).

RESULTS

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the dependent variable. Most of the sample is concentrated in the four upper values of the scale, with the mode (31.7%) at value 10. Indeed, the average value is 7.8, and the median is 8. The measure of skewness of the distribution is -0.84.[6] It appears that, despite

having presented a common situation of corruption allegations without a court ruling, there is a strong tendency among respondents to express highly severe judgments on corruption.

Figure 2 about here

Beyond the descriptive statistics, we are interested in the distribution of responses across treatment groups. If our main hypothesis is correct, the judgment of the case should be, on average, significantly softer for the 'same party' treatment than for the 'no party' treatment, and for the 'no party' treatment than for the 'other party' treatment. We expect respondents to express more negative views of the same case if it affects a political opponent than if it refers to a representative of the party they feel close to. Figure 3 displays the average values for each of the treatment groups and the 95% confidence interval. The mean for the 'one's party' group is the lowest (7.6), while 'other party' group has the highest average (8), expressing the most severe evaluation. The differences are small, but this is not particularly surprising given the distribution of the variable. In a Bonferroni multiple-comparison test of the mean differences, the differences between the 'one's party' and 'other party' treatments reach conventional levels of statistically significance ($p=0.02$), while 'one's party treatment' is not distinguishable from the 'no party' group.

Figure 3 about here

The experimental manipulation of the vignettes produced results that run in the expected direction. When asked to evaluate a case of corruption, respondents tend to express harsher judgments if this affects a member of a different party than if it refers to an official of their preferred party. This

suggests that indeed, partisanship is a filter through which citizens perceive the severity of corruption.

While the effects of the treatments are relatively weak, the average treatment effect may hide stronger effects in specific subgroups of the population. More specifically, hypothesis 2 suggests that political knowledge affects the treatment effects. To explore this possibility we replicate the analysis with political knowledge identification as moderator. While hypothesis 1 was concerned with Average Treatment Effect (ATE), which has been shown to be significantly different from zero, the analysis corresponding to hypothesis 2 aims at better understanding these effects by estimating Conditional Average Treatment Effects. Figure 4 presents the mean perceived severity of the corruption case by levels of political knowledge and by treatment group to assess the hypothesis that partisan bias is conditional upon political awareness. The treatment had no significant effect on the judgment of the case for people with high levels of political knowledge. At high levels of political awareness, there is a widespread consensus that the hypothetical situation is very serious. However, among people with average or low levels of political knowledge, which party is affected - the respondent's or another- makes a difference in the assessment of the case. Among people who could not answer any of the three knowledge questions the assessed severity of the case in a 0 to 10 scale is 1.6 points higher if the case affects the rival party than if it affects the party with which the respondent identifies. The difference is significant (p-value=0.02) and large in magnitude relative to the distribution of the responses. Similarly, for respondents that could just answer one of the questions of political knowledge receiving the treatment 'other party' increased their average score of seriousness about 0.6 points with respect to the 'same party' treatment (p-value of the difference=0.07). Both groups represent, combined, a 56% of our sample. Poorly informed citizens are more influenced by partisanship in their assessment of the corruption case than people with high

levels of knowledge, thus confirming hypothesis 2a and not hypothesis 2b. This is probably related to the fact that we measured factual and therefore unbiased knowledge.

Figure 4 about here

A multivariate test

In order to have a more general perspective of the factors that influence attitudes towards corruption and to increase the precision with which the effect of partisanship is estimated, we have run a multivariate analysis with individual predictors of attitudes towards corruption. The literature systematically analyzing individual correlates of attitudes towards corruption at the individual level is strikingly scarce. The multivariate model includes, following previous work (Gatti, Paternostro and Rigolini 2003), socio-demographics (gender, age, education, size of locality), political attitudes and opinions (perceptions on the economic situation, left-right self identification, interest in politics, political knowledge, party closeness, closeness to the PP). Question wording and operationalization can be found in Appendix 1. Treatment effects, as well as the interaction terms between these and political knowledge are also added in a different model. Additionally we have checked whether the partisan bias is the same for all parties, and report the only significant interaction found (with being close to the Popular Party, PP). Table 2 displays the results.

Table 2 about here

Most of the independent variables influence responses to the severity scale in the expected direction. As in the bivariate analyses, the treatment had a statistically significant effect.

Respondents presented with a case that was either non-partisan, or related to the party they feel close to, judge it less harshly that those who received the different party stimulus.

Additionally, several of the other independent variables have a significant effect on the dependent variable. Women express less negative views on the corruption case (contradicting some previous findings, see Swamy 2011, Benno and Neven 2006, but in line with others such as Tverdova 2011). Age has no significant effect, while education increases severity of judgment. A more positive evaluation of the economic situation comes with a less stringent evaluation. Citizens living in large cities are less severe in their assessment of the case. Political interest and knowledge are positively related to the perceived severity of the corruption case presented in the survey. Strong partisans of whichever party, on average, judge more harshly, but those who declared to be close to the PP express less negative judgements. Ideology (self-location in the left-right scale) does not seem to significantly affect attitudes towards corruption.

The coefficient for the interaction term regarding political knowledge confirm hypothesis 2a. Having received a treatment referred to one's party makes opinions less severe, but this partisan bias is significantly weaker among people with high levels of political knowledge.

Among the PP sympathizers the effect of the treatment bias is significantly higher, both for the 'same party' and –especially so- for the neutral treatment. Figure 5 displays the mean perceived seriousness of the case by party closeness (none, PSOE, PP) and treatment, for a better understanding of the implications of this interaction effect. PP supporters are more tolerant of corruption if it affects their party (or when no party is mentioned, suggesting that they may implicitly associate corruption with their party) than if it affects the PSOE. Partisan bias is higher

among PP sympathizers than among PSOE sympathizers. The average rating of the situation in the neutral and the 'same party' conditions is 7.4 while it is 8 in the 'different party' treatment. A t-test confirms that we can reject the null hypothesis that among citizens close to the PP there is no difference in the average rating of the situation when the suspected politician is a PP member and in the other two conditions (p-value=0.01). Among PSOE supporters, the average difference in the rating of the situation between the same party and the different party conditions is 0.4, but it does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (p-value of the Bonferroni test of mean differences=0.3). Thus, we conclude that respondents close to the PP are more tolerant to corruption when their party is affected than PSOE supporters. This partisan bias found for PP supporters was not matched for any other party (estimation not shown).

Figure 5 about here

DISCUSSION

Using experimental evidence, we have shown that citizens consider corruption less serious when it affects a politician of the party they feel close to, than when it affects a politician belonging to another party. This perceptual partisan bias can be one of the mechanisms that limit the electoral consequences of corruption. The literature on heuristics considers that partisanship provides people with a few, simple cognitive cues that facilitate decision-making. In this case, the cue has rather undesirable effects as partisanship increases lenience towards corrupt political practices. The degree of severity with which corruption is judged is subject to different standards. This seems to support previous research arguing that voters' views on the severity of an offense reflect rather than cause perceptions of guilt or innocence, and are conditioned by prior views about the incumbent (Dimock

and Jacobson 1995, Gonzales et al 1995). As a consequence, partisanship may hinder the capacity of citizens to hold politicians accountable.

The analyses have further shown that the degree of partisan bias is not homogeneous among the population. Both tolerance to and partisan bias in corruption judgment are larger when political knowledge is low. Citizens with low levels of political knowledge rely more on partisan cues. Conversely, people with high levels of political knowledge are less tolerant of corruption, regardless of whether it affects a politician of their own party or of other parties. This suggests that in a knowledgeable society tolerance to corruption may be smaller and less subject to partisan bias.

The analyses have also shown that not all partisans are equally affected by partisan bias in their levels of tolerance to corruption. Citizens that are close to the PP are both more tolerant to corruption and more likely to show a partisan bias. Note also that this effect is not due to PP sympathizers having different social or attitudinal characteristics –such as being right-wing-, as in the multivariate analysis these have been controlled for.

This finding seems to point to the fact that the circumstances of each party may condition the degree of partisan bias in tolerance to corruption. Not all parties are equally affected by corruption scandals, and that can have consequences for the degree of tolerance that partisans express towards their parties' misbehavior. Asymmetry in the frequency of corruption allegations among the parties, combined with the logic of motivated information processing, should lead partisans of the most affected party to be more lenient to corruption cases that affect their party. This expectation is congruent with the polarization effect described by Taber and Lodge (2006) as a corollary of the motivated information processing: if voters assimilate evidence that is congruent with their partisan

predisposition but counter-argue opposing information, this will lead to cumulatively larger differences in opinion. Thus, it could be that supporters of the party most affected by corruption are more permissive in their judgment. This difference could also be a derivative of the noise hypothesis: a sharp asymmetry in the frequency of corruption accusations towards one party could favor the idea, among its followers, that they respond to partisan manipulation rather than legitimate charges, thus reducing the severity of the reaction.

The Popular Party (PP) has been more visibly affected by corruption scandals than other parties. Although this perception may not reflect the actual number of criminal processes initiated, it is widespread in the public.[7] This is probably because some of these corruption cases ("Gurtel", "Palma Arena", "Fabra") that have been made quite visible by mass media in the months previous to the survey. Although we cannot conclude from the evidence presented here that PP sympathizers are more tolerant and prone to partisan bias *because* their party is more affected by corruption, this is a crucial point that deserves further attention. If this was the case, visible corruption scandals may put pressure on voters who feel close to the affected party to attach less importance to them. The worrying corollary is that the levels of acceptance to corruption may increase in contexts particularly affected by it, resulting in a vicious circle where corruption breeds lenience.

While the effects shown by the treatment in the survey experiment are relatively weak, they are congruent with our theoretical expectations. The modest size of the effects is probably at least partly due to the weakness of the treatment itself, as it did not refer to real-life cases but to a hypothetical situation. Choosing real-life cases would have made it impossible to ensure a homogeneous intensity of the treatments. However, real world treatments would probably have resulted in more divisive judgments and stronger effects.

Another limitation is that the skew of the dependent variable (the severity scale) limits our ability to discriminate among respondents. There is some margin to improve the wording and increase the amount of variance. Our impression is, however, that the skew is not a result of social desirability bias. In a list experiment, which facilitates providing sincere answers, administered in the same survey (not reported in this paper) we found that fully 100% of the respondents reported that they would not vote for an incumbent suspect of corruption. The results of the list experiment strongly suggest that respondents do not hide their true evaluation of corruption in an interview context. The most plausible interpretation is that citizens sincerely dislike and condemn corruption but indulgence operates unconsciously or when taking other considerations into account.

The characteristics of our sample might introduce some bias in the results. Citizens with low levels of education were under-represented in the survey. However, if sample bias affects the results, it does so in a way that runs counter our hypotheses. Partisan bias is larger among citizens with low levels of political knowledge, so presumably a replication with a more representative sample should reveal stronger treatment effects.

In sum, this research points at one of the mechanisms that can help explaining why corrupt politicians tend to suffer little or no direct electoral punishment, a fact that has for long puzzled political scientist, especially, but not only, in Spain (Barreiro and Sanchez Cuenca 2000, Costas, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas-Navarro 2010, Rivero and Fernandez-Vazquez 2011). Partisans perceive a scandal in a less severe way when it affects their party if political awareness is not high. This fact suggests that partisan bias in perceptions may reduce the extent to which corruption is punished electorally, but also that this can be corrected increasing political awareness.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Distribution of treatments

	Same party	Neutral	Different party	Total
Close to PSOE				
N	167	167	142	476
%	35.08	35.08	29.83	100
Close to PP				
N	177	155	163	495
%	35.76	31.31	32.93	100
Total				
N	344	322	305	971
%	35.43	33.16	31.41	100

Table 2. OLS regression model. The dependent variable is the severity scale 0-10

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	b/se	b/se	b/se
Experimental treatment: Same party as PID	-0.45**	-1.53***	-0.14
	(0.17)	(0.52)	(0.24)
Experimental treatment: Neutral	-0.28	-0.30	0.13
	(0.18)	(0.52)	(0.25)
Somewhat interested in politics	0.87**	0.92***	0.80**
(ref. not interested)	(0.35)	(0.35)	(0.35)
Quite interested in politics	0.97***	1.00***	0.90**
	(0.35)	(0.35)	(0.35)
Very interested in politics	0.88**	0.90**	0.80**
	(0.40)	(0.40)	(0.40)
Political knowledge	0.57**	0.15	0.53**
	(0.23)	(0.40)	(0.23)
Evaluation of the economic situation	-0.48***	-0.47***	-0.50***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
PP identifier	-0.91***	-0.90***	-0.43
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.29)
Strength of party identification	0.05	0.06	0.04
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Education	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Woman	-0.19	-0.20	-0.22
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Age (years)	0.00	0.00	-0.00
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Age squared	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Big city (>500,000 inhabitants)	-0.17	-0.21	-0.15
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)
Left-right identification (0-1)	0.16	0.18	0.19
	(0.50)	(0.50)	(0.50)

Same party treatment*pol. knowledge		1.22**	
		(0.56)	
Neutral treatment*pol. knowledge		0.02	
		(0.56)	
Same party treatment*PP identifier			-0.63*
			(0.35)
Neutral treatment *PP identifier			-0.83**
			(0.36)
Constant	6.75***	7.07***	6.74***
	(1.41)	(1.43)	(1.41)
R-Squared	0.103	0.110	0.109
RMSE	2.031224	2.025584	2.026539
Obs.	824	824	824

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01. Entries are regression coefficients (standard errors).

Figure 1: Neutral vignette

Alcalde podría haber beneficiado a familiares

Redacción. 04/10/2010

El fiscal F.P. remitió ayer un escrito a J.G.R, alcalde del municipio de XXXX en el que le informa de que se ha abierto de oficio un expediente ante la publicación de acusaciones de tráfico de influencias. Según las mismas, dos familiares del edil obtuvieron plaza en la plantilla del ayuntamiento o mejoraron las condiciones económicas del puesto que ya ocupaban gracias a decretos de la alcaldía. Después de la citación, el fiscal decidirá si existe algún indicio que permita abrir una investigación al respecto.

Figure 2: Distribution in the severity scale

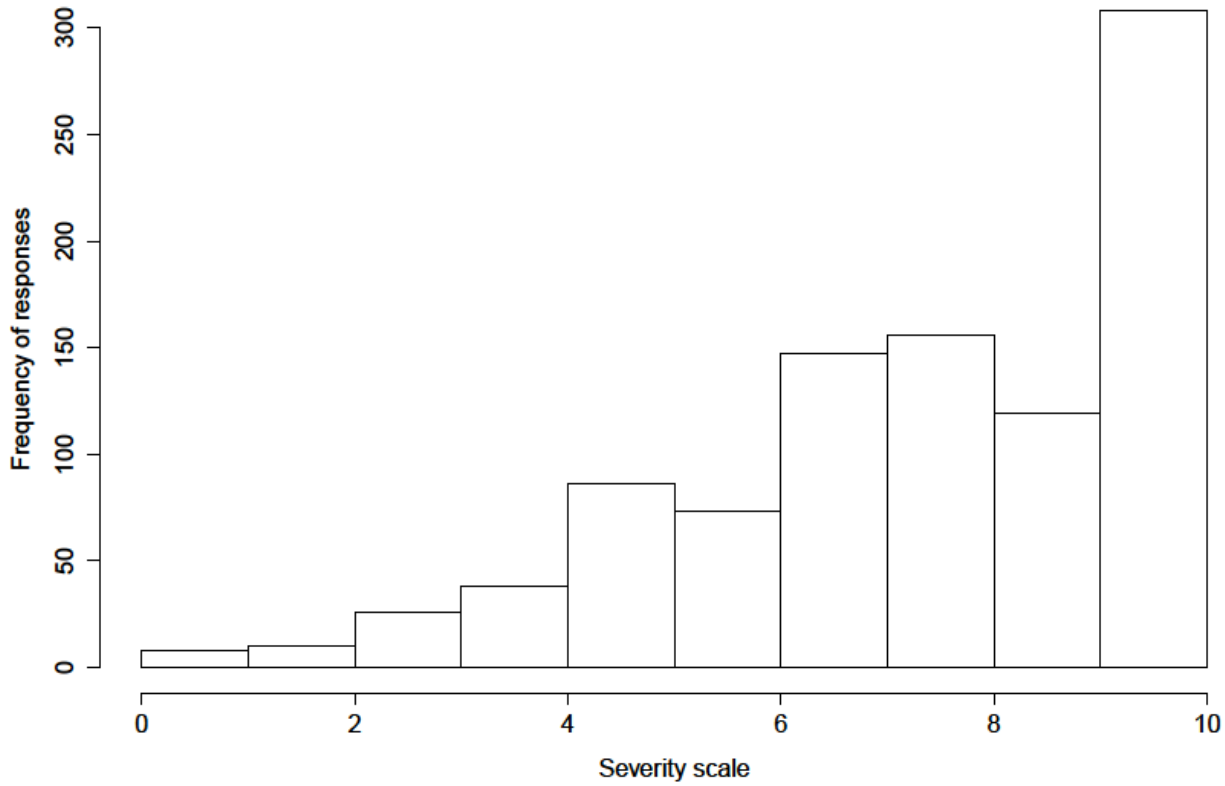


Figure 3: Perceived seriousness of corruption by treatment

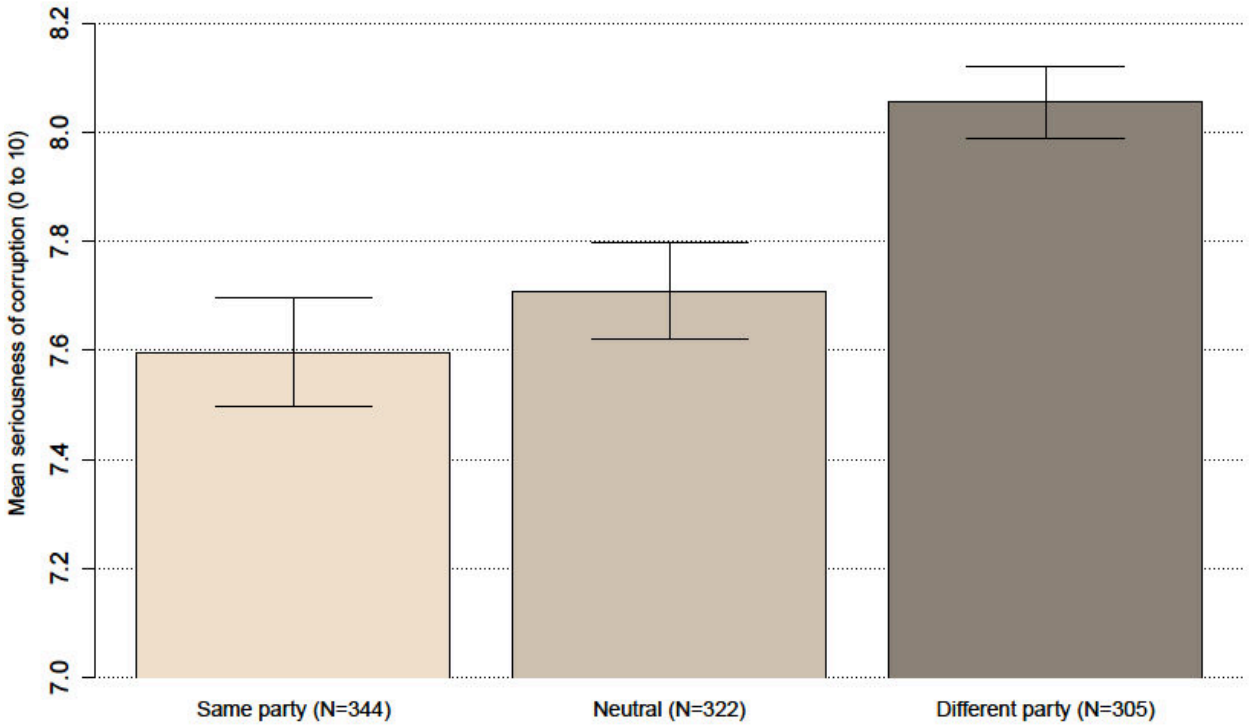


Figure 4: Perceived seriousness of corruption by treatment and political knowledge

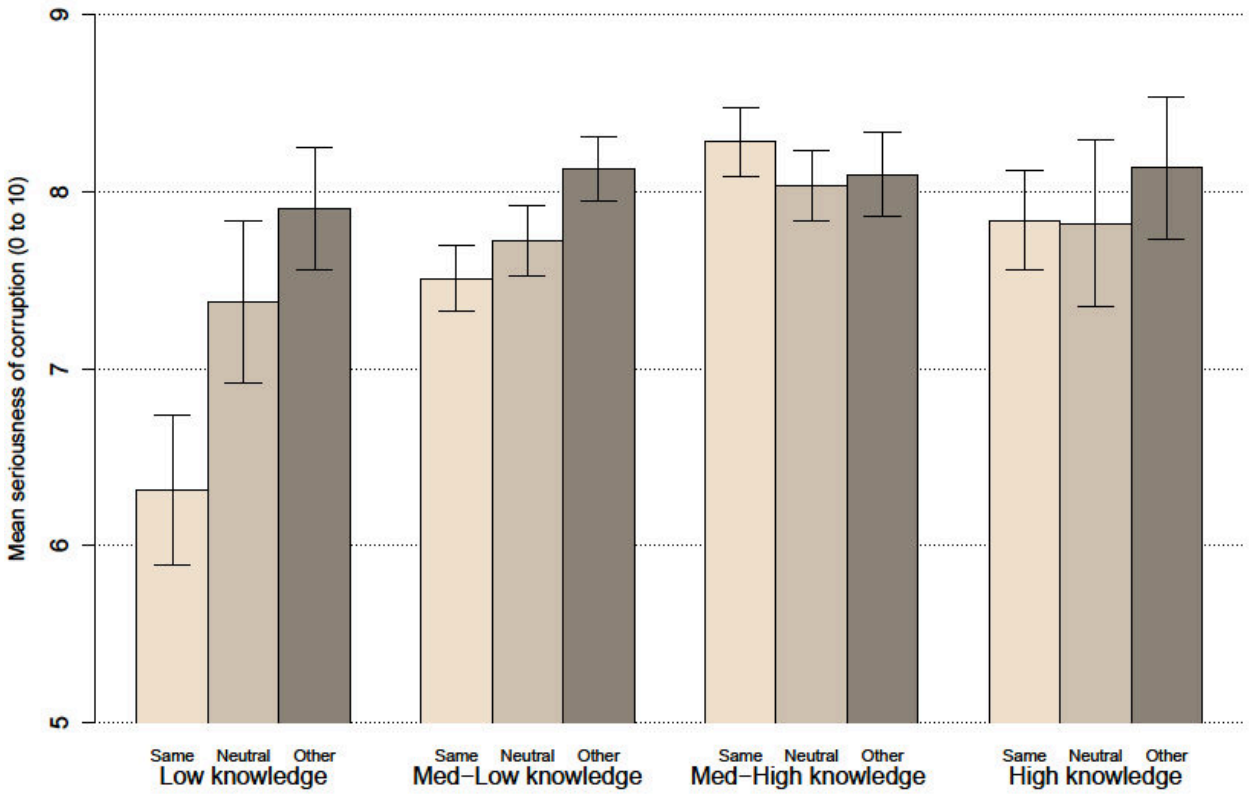
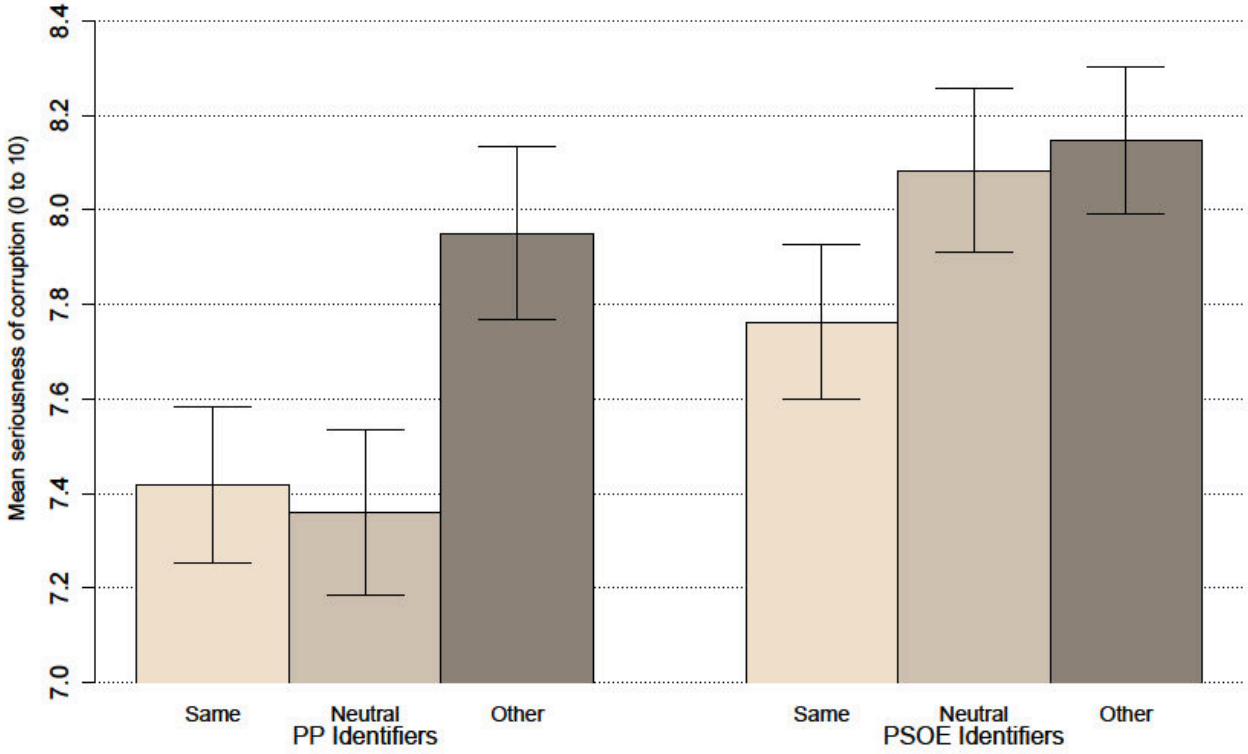


Figure 5: Perceived seriousness of corruption by treatment and party ID



APPENDIX 1: Question wording, variable coding, sample characteristics, randomization test, perceptions on what is corruption.

Variable Coding in the multivariate analysis

Negative judgment of corruption: scale from 0 (not at all serious) to 10 (extremely serious). After the vignette respondents were asked *What do you think about this alleged fact? Think about it and mark your opinion on this 0 (I don't think this is serious) to 10 (I think this is very serious) scale.*

Party closeness: 0 (not close to any party), 1 (somewhat close), 2 (quite close), 3 (very close). *For which of the following parties do you feel more sympathy or which one do you consider closer to your own ideas? (List of parties, respondent can only mark one party) How close do you feel to this party? 1 Very close, 2 Quite close, 3 A little close*

PP close: dummy for close to the PP.

Political knowledge: Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent showed some knowledge, at least one correct answer from the following questions:

Recently the labor law reform has been approved. Would you say you know its content…? Much, Quite, A Little, Not at all.

Look at this picture for a few seconds (Picture of Minister of Education Angel Gabilondo). (Next screen) Could you tell me which position holds the person in the picture? Minister of Interior, Minister of Justice, Minister of Industry, Minister of Education, I don't know

Could you tell me in which year was the Spanish Constitution approved? Please write down the year here (possibility to write year or tick I don't know).

Evaluation of the economic situation: scale 1(very bad), 2 (bad), 3 (neither bad nor good), 4 (good), 5 (very good). *To start with, thinking about the general economic situation in Spain, would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, very bad?*

Education: scale with 11 categories. *Which is the highest level of education that you have completed? 1 I have less than 5 years of formal education, 2 Primary education (LOGSE) 3 Primary education (EGB), 4 Compulsory secondary education, 5 Vocational education, 6 Non-compulsory secondary education (Bachillerato LOGSE), 7 Non-compulsory secondary education (BUP-COU), 8 Higher vocational education, 9 Three year degree, 10 Four or more years degree, 11 Postgraduate studies.*

Big city: dummy 0 (lives in city with less than 500,000 inhabitants) 1 (lives in city with more than 500,000 inhabitants)

Left-right: *When talking about politics people often use the expressions "left" and "right". In a scale where 0 is "extreme left" and 10 is "extreme right", where would you place yourself?* The variable has been recoded so that 0 is extreme left and 1 extreme right).

Table A1. Characteristics of the sample

	On-line panel (18 to 44)	CIS2847 (18 to 44, internet users)
Age (average 18-44)	30.64	31.53
Gender (% women)	48.23	47.81
Education		
No education	0.05	0.29
Primary	8.75	27.26
Secondary	18.91	16.85
Vocational	24.95	27.26
3 year degree	18.52	13.05
4 year degree, MA, PhD	28.82	15.19
Close to PP (%)	22.67	20.84
Close to PSOE (%)	23.57	22.10
Evaluation of the economic situation (average 1-5)	3.92	4.07
N	2100	1027

Table A2. Randomization test. Mlogit regression model. Dependent variable: treatment

	Same party	Neutral
	b (se)	b (se)
Unemployed	0.13	0.28
	(0.24)	(0.24)
Gender	-0.02	-0.01
	(0.16)	(0.16)
Age	0.00	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education	-0.04	-0.02
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Big town (>50.000)	-0.18	-0.18
	(0.21)	(0.21)
Income	0.04	0.04
	(0.05)	(0.05)
Close to PP	0.12	-0.08
	(0.16)	(0.16)
Constant	0.00	0.25
	(0.41)	(0.41)
Pseudo R-Squared	0.003	
log likelihood	-1052.963	
log likelihood empty model	-1056.639	
LR Chi2	7.35191	
Sig.	.9202934	
Obs.	963	

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table A3. Percentage of people that consider corruption the following cases

	Percentage
A politician or civil servant that accepts money from a firm so that this firm gets a preferential treatment in an administrative contest.	89
A politician or civil servant that gets money to change the established land use of a plot.	89
A politician or civil servant that asks for money to speed-up an administrative procedure.	85
The change of land use regulations to promote wealth in a municipality.	75
A politician that hires a relative or close friend, regardless of his/her professional skills, to work for the administration (our example).	74
A politician that accepts valuable presents.	62
A politician that uses his official car for private trips.	53
A person working in the public sector that takes office material away from his office.	47
A person that works in the public health system and helps a close friend or family member to access a medical test skipping over the waiting list.	46

Source: CIS study 2859, available at www.cis.es

APPENDIX 2: replication with non-partisans and small party identifiers

In the article we have discussed the reasons for restricting our analysis to the partisans of the two main parties in Spain (PSOE and PP). However, this reduced our sample and might affect the results. In this appendix we present the replication of our results using partisans of the two main parties and non partisans on one hand, and all the respondents, (including also partisans from small parties) on the other hand. As it stands out, our results remain stable.

1. Two main parties and non-partisans

Perceived seriousness of corruption by treatment (average 0-10 scale)

Treatment	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
Same party treatment	7.60	2.17	344
Neutral	7.79	2.21	479
Different	7.93	2.12	666
Total	7.81	2.16	1489

Analysis of variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Prob > F
Between groups	25.39	2	12.70	2.73	0.07
Within groups	6915.06	1486	4.65		
Total	6940.45	1488	4.66		

Multiple-comparison test (Bonferroni correction). Mean differences and p-values

	Same party treatment	Neutral treatment
Neutral treatment	0.20	
	(0.59)	
Different party treatment	0.33*	0.14
	(0.06)	0.88

OLS regression model. Dependent variable: severity scale. PP, PSOE and non-partisans

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	b/se	b/se	b/se

Experimental treatment:	-0.37**	-1.44***	-0.17
Same party as PID	(0.16)	(0.44)	(0.21)
Experimental treatment:	-0.12	-0.54	0.10
Neutral	(0.14)	(0.36)	(0.16)
Somewhat interested in politics	0.66***	0.70***	0.63***
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.21)
(ref. not interested)			
Quite interested in politics	0.83***	0.85***	0.81***
	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Very interested in politics	0.97***	0.98***	0.94***
	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.27)
Political knowledge	0.56***	0.15	0.55***
	(0.18)	(0.26)	(0.18)
Evaluation of the economic situation	-0.39***	-0.38***	-0.40***
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
PP identifier	-0.77***	-0.75***	-0.32
	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.26)
Strength of party identification	0.09	0.09	0.07
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Education	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Woman	-0.22*	-0.22*	-0.24**
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Age (years)	0.11	0.11	0.11
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Age squared	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Big city (>500,000 inhabitants)	-0.23	-0.25	-0.22
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Left-right identification (0-1)	-0.19	-0.21	-0.16
	(0.41)	(0.41)	(0.41)
Same party treatment*pol. knowledge		1.20***	
		(0.46)	

Neutral treatment*pol. knowledge		0.48	
		(0.39)	
Same party treatment*PP identifier			-0.59*
			(0.33)
Neutral treatment *PP identifier			-0.77**
			(0.30)
Constant	5.11***	5.44***	5.13***
	(1.11)	(1.12)	(1.11)
R-Squared	0.095	0.100	0.101
RMSE	2.014141	2.010143	2.009948
Obs.	1224	1224	1224

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

2. Whole sample: two main parties, non-partisans and small party identifiers

Perceived seriousness of corruption by treatment (average 0-10 scale)

Treatment	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
Same party treatment	7.65	2.15	471
Neutral	7.92	2.15	635
Different	8.07	2.04	993
Total	7.93	2.10	2099

Analysis of variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Prob > F
Between groups	55.89	2	27.95	6.34	0.00
Within groups	9233.09	2096	4.41		
Total	9288.98	2098	4.43		

Multiple-comparison test (Bonferroni correction). Mean differences and p-values

	Same party treatment	Neutral treatment
Neutral treatment	0.26	
	(0.12)	
Different party treatment	0.42***	0.15

	(0.00)	(0.44)

OLS regression model. Dependent variable: severity scale. All

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	b/se	b/se	b/se
Experimental treatment: Same party as PID	-0.41***	-1.10***	-0.34**
	(0.13)	(0.37)	(0.15)
Experimental treatment: Neutral	-0.08	-0.17	0.06
	(0.11)	(0.30)	(0.12)
Somewhat interested in politics	0.54***	0.56***	0.52***
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)
(ref. not interested)			
Quite interested in politics	0.63***	0.64***	0.62***
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)
Very interested in politics	0.79***	0.80***	0.78***
	(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.23)
Political knowledge	0.52***	0.34	0.51***
	(0.15)	(0.21)	(0.15)
Evaluation of the economic situation	-0.31***	-0.30***	-0.31***
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
PP identifier	-0.67***	-0.66***	-0.30
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.22)
Strength of party identification	0.08*	0.09*	0.08*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Education	0.10***	0.09***	0.10***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Woman	-0.21**	-0.22**	-0.22**
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Age (years)	0.12**	0.12**	0.12*
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Age squared	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)

Big city (>500,000 inhabitants)	-0.23*	-0.23*	-0.22*
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Left-right identification (0-1)	-0.22	-0.23	-0.19
	(0.31)	(0.31)	(0.31)
Same party treatment*political knowledge		0.76**	
		(0.38)	
Neutral treatment*political knowledge		0.09	
		(0.33)	
Same party treatment*PP identifier			-0.40
			(0.28)
Neutral treatment *PP identifier			-0.72***
			(0.28)
Constant	5.12***	5.26***	5.14***
	(0.91)	(0.91)	(0.90)
R-Squared	0.082	0.084	0.086
RMSE	1.973395	1.972219	1.970684
Obs.	1766	1766	1766

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

NOTES

[1] Support for this research was provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (research grant CSO2010-18534) and by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. We are grateful to Carolina Galais for invaluable help in the definition of the treatment.

[2] See Westen et al. (2006) for neuroimaging evidence that partisans' reaction to threatening evidence towards their preferred candidate is qualitatively distinct from reasoning of people without emotional commitment to the issue. Van Veen *et al.* (2009) find also fMRI-based support for cognitive dissonance theory that identifies a conflict between cognitions as the trigger of attitude change.

[3] Source: CIS study 2847, will be available at www.cis.es in 2014. Internet users are defined in this survey as respondents that have used the internet at least once in the past 12 months.

[4] Survey 2826 of the CIS (December 2009, available at www.cis.es) asked people whether they considered specific examples as clear acts of corruption. Our example would be 5th out of 9. Table A4 in Appendix 1 shows the proportion of people that consider specific examples as corruption.

[5] As a robustness check, we replicated the analyses including party identifiers of small parties and non-partisans. Results can be found in Appendix 2 and do not change substantively.

[6] World Value Survey data offer an indicator that is even more skewed, with 75% of the sample saying that accepting a bribe in the course of duties is never justifiable (1 in a 1 to 10 point scale, see Gatti, Paternostro and Rigolini 2003).

[7] Roughly 70% of a representative sample of the Spanish population surveyed in December 2009 agreed with the fact that "the PP is involved in many corruption cases". Even among PP voters 53% agree with this statement. The percentage of agreement with the statement "the PSOE is involved in many corruption cases" was 44% (CIS study 2826). In another survey carried out in January 2011, 39 % of the sample considered that the PP was more involved in corruption cases than the PSOE, while only 12% considered the PSOE to be more involved in corruption than the PP (CIS study 2859). All the CIS studies mentioned here are available at www.cis.es .