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Are different types of corruption tolerated differently?

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Abstract

In the past two decades, abundant research on corruption has established its negative impact on human well-being. Indeed, general scholarship finds that it is appropriately shunned across contexts, with citizens in different cultures and contexts expressing a general aversion to corruption. However, what is less explored is whether different types of corruption are tolerated differently. To address this question, we explore citizen attitudes towards different types of corruption in Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Romania, and Spain. Participants were presented with vignettes describing different corrupt scenarios—specifically, traffic bribery, nepotism, state capture, patronage, embezzlement, clientelism, conflict of interest, and quid pro quo—and asked to score each one on an 11-point Likert scale. We used a neutral narrative in the vignettes to minimize the bias that may be introduced through the wording.

Our results suggest different types of corruption are tolerated differently. Specifically, tolerance of corruption (1) varies across types of corruption, with embezzlement and patronage being, on average, the least and most tolerated types of corruption, respectively; (2) varies across countries, with respondents from Indonesia and Spain being, on average, the most and least tolerant, and (3) varies across countries for the same type of corruption, with respondents expressing more consensus about their disapproval of embezzlement compared to that of clientelism, nepotism, or conflict of interest. The study finds several statistically significant differences in tolerance of corruption across countries and scenarios, reflecting the versatility of corruption and the importance of specification and contextualization when devising public anti-corruption initiatives.

Keywords: Corruption; public opinion; survey data; Latin America; Europe; Asia.

1 Introduction

In the past two decades, abundant research on corruption has established its negative impact on human well-being. Indeed, an overall finding in the scholarship is that corruption is appropriately shunned by citizens in different cultures and contexts (Rothstein and Varraich, 2017). This aversion is similar across contexts, whether one asks someone in high-trust, low corruption settings like Nordic countries, or low-trust, high-corruption settings like those in Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, survey results from regions in India and in sub-Saharan Africa show that people in these societies take a very clear stand against corruption and view the problem in much the same manner as it is understood in, for example, Denmark or by organizations such as the World Bank and Transparency International (IDASA et al., 2008; Widmalm, 2005, 2008; see also Miller et al., 2001; Nichols, Nichols). In other words, there is little tolerance for corruption across the globe. This general aversion, expressed through the similar understanding of corruption across the board, is juxtaposed against the empirical realities where we continue to observe corrupt politicians being voted in to power, what Oskar Kurer has dubbed the “unpopular corruption and popular corrupt politician” paradox (2001). Despite people across the world sharing a general aversion to corruption, suggesting little tolerance for corruption, corrupt people are still being voted into office. This paradox is further complicated by the fact that most studies do not disaggregate corruption, instead use it as a wholesale concept. This raises a spate of questions. If corruption varies across contexts, does tolerance also vary across these contexts? If so, what causes this variation? More importantly, if corruption manifests in different forms in different contexts, is one form tolerated less than another? And if so, from a policy perspective, is one form of corruption less damaging than another? It is against this backdrop that we address the following question: are different types of corruption tolerated differently?

The aim of this article is to empirically explore whether different types of corruption are tolerated differently. Put another way, can we empirically observe a variation in how different

types of corruption are tolerated. As our starting point, we want to address two issues at hand. We believe there is a conflation of two issues which has caused a gap in our understanding. The first issue is a normative one. When citizens are asked in surveys to rank whether they find corruption to be okay or not, the data gathered is reflective of citizens' normative stance towards corruption. Simply put, in these instances citizens understand corruption as a concept. More specifically, people understand corruption as a high-level, umbrella concept (Varraich, 2014). Here, the core of the concept of corruption is observed as an injustice (Rothstein and Varraich, 2017).¹ The second issue that has caused a gap in our understanding regards the operationalization of corruption in the empirical scholarship. Studies that explore tolerance of corruption at the individual level tend to capture tolerance of different empirical forms of corruption, where the concept itself often remains undifferentiated and is operationalized in several ways. Typically, a normative definition is provided without a disaggregation of corruption types that enable operationalization (Bussell, 2015). Finally, in much of the scholarship tolerance of corruption is typically not defined, instead, it is extrapolated from voting behaviour.

We move the scholarship forward by addressing these two gaps head on. Building on the established scholarship, and to maintain the normative understanding of corruption captured by much of the survey data, we use corruption as an umbrella concept (Varraich, 2014). We define corruption as the lack of impartiality in the exercise of public power.² Simultaneously, we disaggregate corruption into different types of corruption most often experienced by citizens in different contexts on a day-to-day basis. Thus, we operationalise corruption as nepotism, clientelism, patronage, state capture, and conflict of interest. Disaggregating corruption into these different types serves the purpose of capturing empirical realities of how citizens in different contexts experience corruption in their day-to-day lives, and through this venue allows us to

¹ If corruption is seen in juxtaposition to its opposite—quality of government—then it is defined as partiality in the exercise of public power.

² Contrary to the traditional interpretation of corruption as the abuse of entrusted public for private gain (Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020), our focus on impartiality avoids narrower concerns on financial rewards and gives priority to citizens' perceptions.

explore if there is a variation in the tolerance of these different forms. Our approach helps bring together the normative concept of corruption into a framework that simultaneously operationalises the concept through a range of empirical scenarios representing different types of corruption. These typologies share a normative core with the central concept but allows for context specific manifestations of corruption to be dealt within one framework. As such, this paper brings together two subsets of scholarship – the literature on tolerance of corruption and typologies of corruption. This helps bring together the normative and empirical into one framework, and allows a more nuanced analysis of the tolerance of corruption. We build on Chang and Huang (Chang and Huang, 2016) to define tolerance of corruption as the willingness to put up with a lack of impartiality in the exercise of public power.³ This definition is broad enough to include all types of corruption our vignettes apply, to capture citizens tolerance toward corruption in general, as well as their views of the presence of corruption in their political system.

We explore the core question of this paper using data gathered through an online survey, from six different countries (Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Romania, and Spain). Our selection was based on the varied levels of aggregated corruption across these countries, offering a variation of contexts to explore tolerance towards corruption. In the 2022 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) Brazil ranked 94th among 180 countries and territories, India 85th, Indonesia 110th, Mexico 126, Romania 63rd, and Spain 35th. The substantial variation in aggregated corruption ensures that our results are not driven by the selection of cases at a certain level of corruption. Data were collected via an online survey administered between October 2020 and January 2021 using advertisements on the social media platform Facebook. A total of 2,347 subjects completed the survey: Brazil (394), India (398), Indonesia (399), Mexico (389), Romania (379), and Spain (388). Participants were presented with vignettes describing different forms of corruption – including nepotism, clientelism, patronage, state capture, and conflict of interest,

³ Our definition differs from the one offered in Pozsgai-Alvarez (2022, 382) as “as an individual’s moral approval of, or willing participation in, a corrupt event”; as well as from the early work by Chang and Kerr (2017), who distinguish between corruption perception and corruption tolerance by defining the latter as “citizens’ proclivity to condone politicians’ malfeasance” (2017, 67).

and asked to score each type on an 11-point Likert scale of acceptability, where 1 means low tolerance and 11 indicates high tolerance. We used a neutral narrative in the vignettes to minimize the bias that may be introduced through the wording. The results show that, while the average level of corruption tolerance varies somewhat from country to country (with Indonesia at the top and Spain at the bottom), the degree of local tolerance of different types of corruption is not homogeneous. These results point to the value of context when assessing the relative prevalence of corruption. Unlike previous research our focus is on citizens' perceptions, and whether these differ in their toleration of different kinds of corruption.

This article makes several contributions to the literature by exploring the previously understudied question of corruption tolerance and typologies of corruption. Theoretically, by treating corruption and an umbrella concept we can retain the normative understanding of corruption to ensure it is reflective of the overall aversion expressed by citizens in survey data across regions. Bringing these together allows us to get a holistic understanding for corruption, where normative understandings of people are acknowledged alongside the complexity that arises from people's lived experiences and interactions with various forms of corruption. We focus on corruption in the public sphere, where we understand corruption as the absence of impartiality in the exercise of public power (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008). This definition reinforces the core normative understanding of corruption as injustice, as reflected in the survey data where citizens shun corruption (Rothstein and Varraich, 2017). Empirically, we provide original data from vignettes describing different types of corruption, at the individual level based on direct questions about the tolerance of corruption in relation to each type of corruption. This is a novel contribution to the study of tolerance of corruption because our data draws on citizens' responses to a comprehensive range of plausible situations, and thereby has greater validity than other measures. Much of the existing data on tolerance of corruption found in the political behaviour scholarship extrapolates tolerance of corruption from citizens' voting behaviour. Simply put, unlike extant studies that study tolerance of corruption in an indirect manner, we study tolerance

of corruption directly, where our data presents a range of vignettes that describe situations citizens have found themselves in, and then ask them to directly scale how tolerable such a situation is.

The paper is organized in five sections. In section 2, we review the literature and introduce our theoretical framework, delimiting the choices we make in the operationalization of corruption tolerance. Section 3 introduces the data, methods of the study, and analysis. In section 4, we discuss the empirical findings. Section 5 concludes.

2 Why do citizens tolerate corruption?

Much of the scholarship on tolerance of corruption has stemmed from the electoral constraint argument. This is essentially rooted in the understanding that citizens across the globe share an aversion to corruption (Hadroon and Heinrich 2013). Therefore, if people in general have an aversion to corruption and do not tolerate corruption, the assumption is that wherever citizens have the power to hold their leaders accountable via elections, they can “vote the rascals out.” This aversion to corruption is often extrapolated to translate to citizens having little tolerance for corruption. Simply put, citizens in general have a low tolerance for corruption and those citizens in democracies have elections at their disposal as a tool to curb corruption, and thus will vote out corrupt politicians. The empirical evidence for this assumption however is mixed (Fisman and Golden 2017, Mares and Young 2016), where we regularly observe corrupt politicians being voted into office across the world. Examples include the late Italian Prime minister Berlusconi, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, and corrupt politicians in Spain being voted back into office (Agerberg 2020). Thus, one of the central questions of the scholarship is why voters support corrupt politicians, where voting for corrupt politicians is used as a proxy for tolerance of corruption.

The contemporary scholarship is shaped by two predominant hypotheses – the information hypothesis and the tradeoff hypothesis. The information theory argues that generally citizens will

‘vote the rascals out’ if they have the credible and reliable information about a politician being corrupt (Bågenholm 2013, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017). Winters and WeitzShapiro (2013) argue, based on a survey experiment in Brazil, that people will vote for corrupt leaders if they lack information. However, when citizens have access to credible and reliable information about corrupt acts by a candidate, their tolerance for corruption will be low and very likely will hold the politicians to account (2016, 2017).

Juxtaposed against this argument is the tradeoff theory. This argument rests on a clientelistic logic of quid pro quo. It explains tolerance of corruption through the lens of costbenefit analysis, where voters knowingly vote for corrupt politicians because they expect the overall benefits from a politician’s term in office to be greater than the costs associated with corruption (Manzetti and Wilson 2007,). These gains are usually in terms of material benefits, or may be nonmaterial as well, but mostly are instrumental in nature – where nonmaterial benefits include but are not limited to connections to government officials or fixers (Auyero 2000, Brusco et al 2013, Stokes 2015).

A pivotal contribution by Michael Johnston questions the overarching expectation of corruption control through elections, and whether the lack of “voting the rascals out” can be seen as evidence of tolerance (2013). Importantly, the study highlights that the expectation bar is set quite high, one that is unrealistic even for mature democracies to achieve, and points out the dangers of placing the onus on citizens instead of sharing the burden of corruption control across systems. The piece underscores the important point of staying away from blanket solutions, and instead encourages spreading our effort across institutions, dividing the weight of responsibility on to entire systems instead of a single process within in a system. It also highlights the limits of using voting behaviour as a proxy for tolerance of corruption.

There is an emerging literature that attempts to understand tolerance of corruption beyond the information and tradeoff arguments. This wave of research goes back to basics and addresses imperative questions that until now, remain under-researched. These questions include “what is

tolerance of corruption,” “what are the linkages between the normative understanding of corruption and tolerance of corruption?”, “is there a variation in tolerance of corruption” and “are corruption levels influenced by tolerance of corruption,” “is there a variation in the tolerance of corruption between elected officials and bureaucrats” and “what factors explain the variation” and “what do tolerance of corruption measures actually measure” among others (Erlingsson and Kristinsson 2019, Erlingsson and Kristinsson 2018, Maciel 2021, Pozsgai-Alvarez 2015, Chang and Kerr 2017, Carrasco et al 2019). These questions pertain to understanding tolerance directly, instead of via voting behaviour.

A promising aspect of this recent output has been the directness with which tolerance of corruption is being understood – where questions and methodology ask direct questions pertaining to citizens tolerance toward corruption, rather than via proxies such as voting behaviour. This allows us as researchers to better disentangle what drives the citizens’ attitudes in both how corruption is perceived, but also as the second actor in a corrupt transaction. To this end, scholars have been exploring vastly different avenues to understand what factors drive tolerance, and how these then translate in different spheres of the citizens’ lives. In their study of 8th graders across Latin America, Carrasco et al (2019) provide us with a seminal study that empirically explores the effect that school structures that include open classroom discussions and political sophistication of the individual (here seen as civic knowledge) affect how tolerant one is of corruption. Their findings help rebuke the socioeconomic arguments that poorer people are more tolerant of corruption. Instead, they find that civic knowledge and settings where open discussion is encouraged as factors that shape citizen attitudes towards corruption, and attenuate in the case of tolerance of corruption. These findings reinforce those of Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2016) who also find that citizen characteristics shape tolerance of corruption, where education plays a decisive factor. A novel finding of their work is that people from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to be more tolerant of corruption (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013).

Building on this emerging literature, we explore whether tolerance of corruption varies depending on the type of corruption the respondent faces. To explore this, we use the framework of corruption as an umbrella concept (Varraich 2014), defined as the lack impartiality in the exercise of public power. We follow Chang and Huang (2016) and define tolerance of corruption as “a willingness to put with those things that one rejects” (2016:33). This allows us to keep the normative understanding of corruption intact, while allowing vignettes to describe specific types of corruption. These include bribery, nepotism, state capture, patronage, embezzlement, clientelism, conflict of interest. Each corruption type shares an overall family resemblance with the normative understanding of corruption (Varraich 2014).

3 Empirical Analysis

3.1 Data

Data were collected via an online survey administered between 19 October 2020 and 05 January 2021. Participants were recruited using advertisements on the social media platform Facebook. A total of 2,347 subjects from the following six countries completed the survey, with frequencies offered between brackets: Indonesia (399), India (398), Romania (379), Brazil (394), Mexico (389), and Spain (388). 54.1% of all participants were male and 45.9% were female, with a mean age of 48 and 53, respectively. The mean number of years of education for the entire sample was 14.5, with only 0.1 years difference in the means between males and females.

The survey used a vignette design based on corruption-related scenarios in line with the precedent theoretical discussion. The scenarios were devised to elicit a moral opinion (that is, prompt respondents to make an ethical or moral judgment of each scenario) without explicitly using corruption-related terms such as bribe, theft, or others. Respondents were asked to evaluate the acceptability of the actions described in each scenario along an 11-point Likert scale, from ‘completely unacceptable’ (1) to ‘neutral’ (6) and ‘completely acceptable’ (11). Table 1

presents the vignettes designed for each scenario. Additionally, the demographic variables of age, sex, and years of schooling were also included in the survey.

-
- 1 **Traffic Bribe:** You accidentally ran a red light and immediately get pulled over by the police. The officer suggests that he can overlook the transgression, but only if you give him a token amount of money as a "thank you". How acceptable do you think this is?

 - 2 **Nepotism:** There is an upcoming promotion that requires your skillset. You have been shortlisted as a finalist. The position is awarded to the son-in-law of the company CEO, who does not have the relevant skills. How acceptable do you think this is?

 - 3 **State Capture:** A member of congress/parliament has proposed a bill to change the rules that regulate a [key industry] in the country. Shortly after, an investigative report by the [public service news outlet] highlights that the proposed bill was written by the law firm of a [key private sector stakeholder] operating in that industry. How acceptable do you think this is?

 - 4 **Patronage:** Your party has just won the local election and many positions within the bureaucracy are vacant. You are offered one of these jobs despite you not having any experience or skillset within public administration. How acceptable do you think this is?

 - 5 **Embezzlement:** You read on the news that a municipal official was caught transferring funds from the department's budget to his private account. How acceptable do you think this is?

 - 6 **Clientelism:** There is an upcoming general election and your local politician has offered you a brand new moped in exchange for you voting for him. How acceptable do you think this is?

 - 7 **Conflict of Interest:** A parliamentary/congressional committee is currently discussing revisions to the law that concerns an important sector of the economy. As they debate a number of possible changes, it comes to light that the committee chair is part-owner of a company currently operating in that same sector. How acceptable do you think this situation is?

 - 8 **Quid Pro Quo:** Your office computer is obsolete, but your boss refuses to buy any new equipment this year. The person in charge of purchasing office supplies offers to get you a better computer if you get him a bottle of his favorite wine. How acceptable do you think this is?
-

The frequency distribution of responses to the eight corruption-related scenarios can be found in Figure 1, where the 11-point Likert scale has been collapsed to 3 points— ‘Unacceptable’ (1-5), ‘Neutral’ (6), and ‘Acceptable (7-11). The distributions have been arranged from highest to lowest levels of ‘unacceptability’.

3.2 Preliminary results

The preliminary exploration of the data reveals a varying degree of corruption tolerance across scenarios, with less than 5% of respondents expressing a neutral or approving attitude

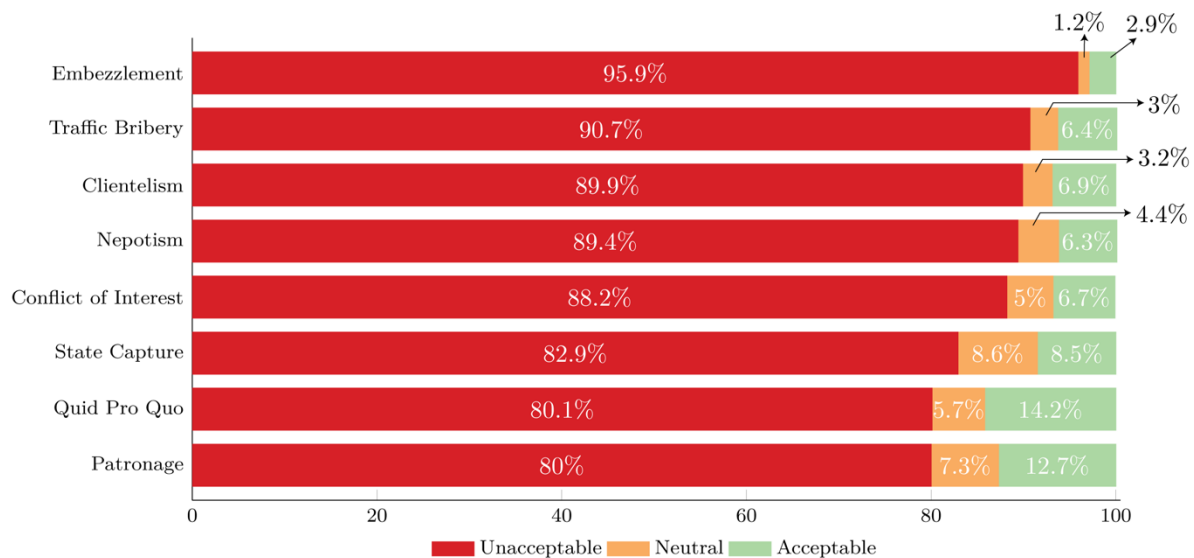


Figure 1: Tolerance frequency for each corruption type (all countries) from most to least unacceptable.

toward embezzlement—the scenario least tolerated—but as much as 20% feeling the same way about patronage. Between the two, the frequency of responses finding a corrupt scenario unacceptable varies between 80% and 90% approximately, without a clear pattern across. For example, while embezzlement represents a clear case of theft and, hence, more easily denounced in moral terms, we expected state capture to be similarly condemned on the grounds of the negative impact on fairness and political representation. Yet, this was not the case, and a significantly higher number of respondents—5.3% more, to be precise—found the scenario of

conflict of interest to be more unacceptable than that of state capture, regardless of the fact that both of them described events involving parliamentary affairs. Furthermore, Table 2 presents the results of the t-test for each pair of corruption types, which allows us to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the means of two variables. As can be observed, the large majority of variations in the level of tolerance across corruption types is statistically significant (with the exceptions of clientelism versus traffic bribery, and patronage versus quid pro quo).

To look deeper into the distribution of responses, we create a ‘corruption tolerance index’ that aggregates each participant’s responses across scenarios and adds their point value — keeping the 11-point Likert scale used in the survey. As there are eight scenarios, considering all scenarios to be completely unacceptable gives the participant a score of 8 in the index (458 participants received this score). On the other hand, responding to all scenarios as being completely acceptable produces a score of 88 (11 participants reached this score). Finally, a neutral response to all scenarios gives a score of 48 (again, 11 participants were found here). Figure 2 presents the mean level of corruption tolerance by country, age, sex, and education.⁴

We can observe an equally heterogeneous rate of tolerance of corruption among peoples, from Indonesia at the top of the rank with a mean almost double that of Spain, at the bottom. While respondents from Indonesia appear by far the most tolerant of corruption, there is only a gradual decline in the means of India, Romania, Brazil, and Mexico. In terms of age, there is a clear trend toward lower tolerance of corruption for older respondents across countries—although those between 13 and 17 years old are not well represented in the data (only 18 participants from all six countries), it is apparent that younger individuals on average find different corruption scenarios more acceptable than their older counterparts, with the lowest level of tolerance being found among those 65+ of age. On the other hand, sex does not seem to be a key demographic

⁴ The number of years of education is divided into categories based on Schneider (2022).

variable here (although men in our sample are on average slightly more tolerant than women. In the case of education, we can also observe a general—even if inconsistent—trend toward lower corruption tolerance among those with higher levels of education.

	Embezzlement	Traffic Bribery	Clientelism	Nepotism	Conflict of Interest	State Capture	Quid Pro Quo	Patronage
Embezzlement	0.000							
Traffic Bribery	0.502***	0.000						
Clientelism	0.555***	0.053	0.000					
Nepotism	0.652***	0.150**	0.098*	0.000				
Conflict of Interest	0.840***	0.338***	0.285***	0.187***	0.000			
State Capture	1.171***	0.669***	0.616***	0.519***	0.331***	0.000		
Quid Pro Quo	1.568***	1.066***	1.014***	0.916***	0.729***	0.398***	0.000	
Patronage	1.500***	0.998***	0.945***	0.848***	0.660***	0.329***	-0.068	0.000

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Difference in mean scores between corruption types

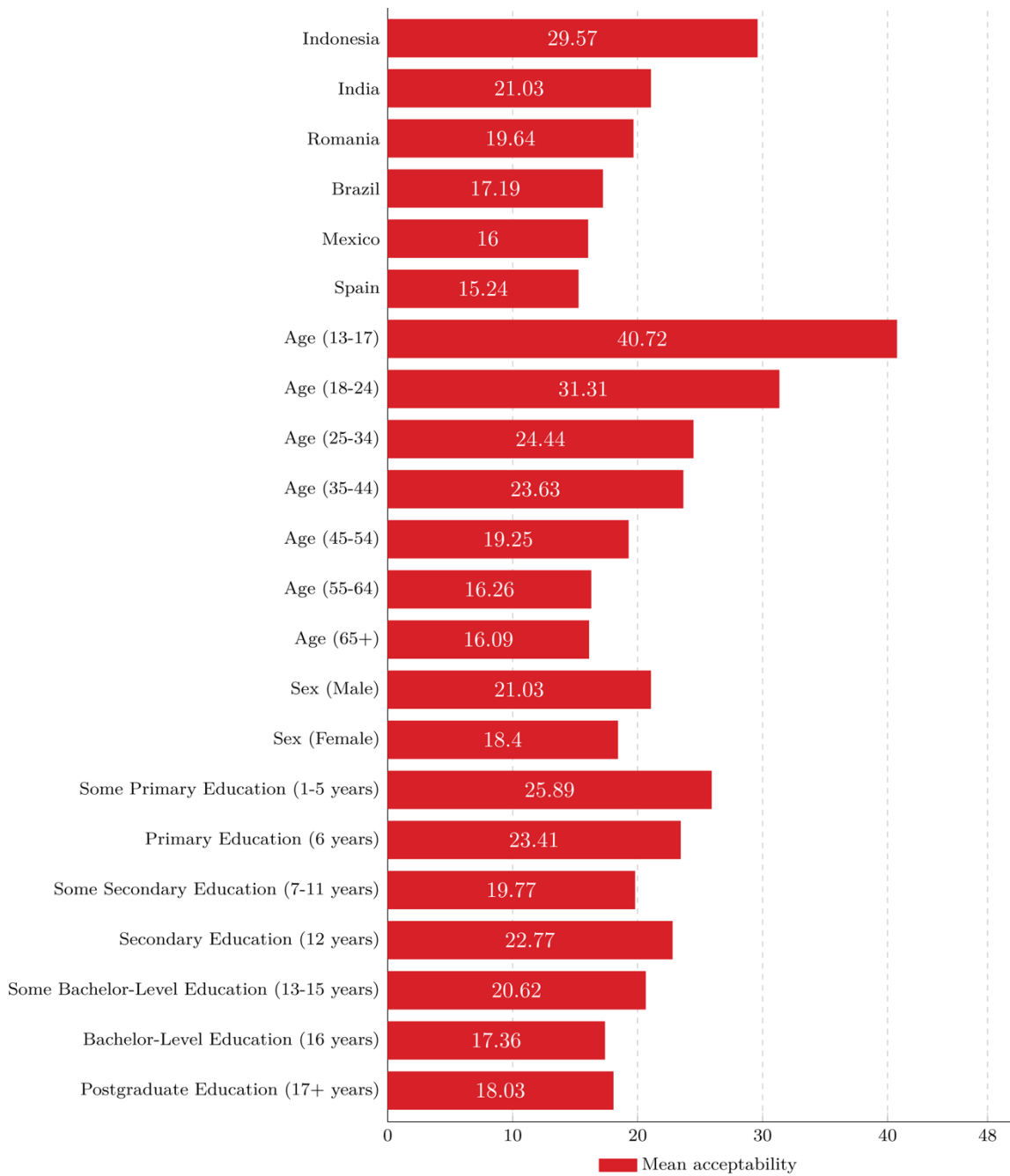


Figure 2: Mean individual corruption tolerance index for key demographic groups.

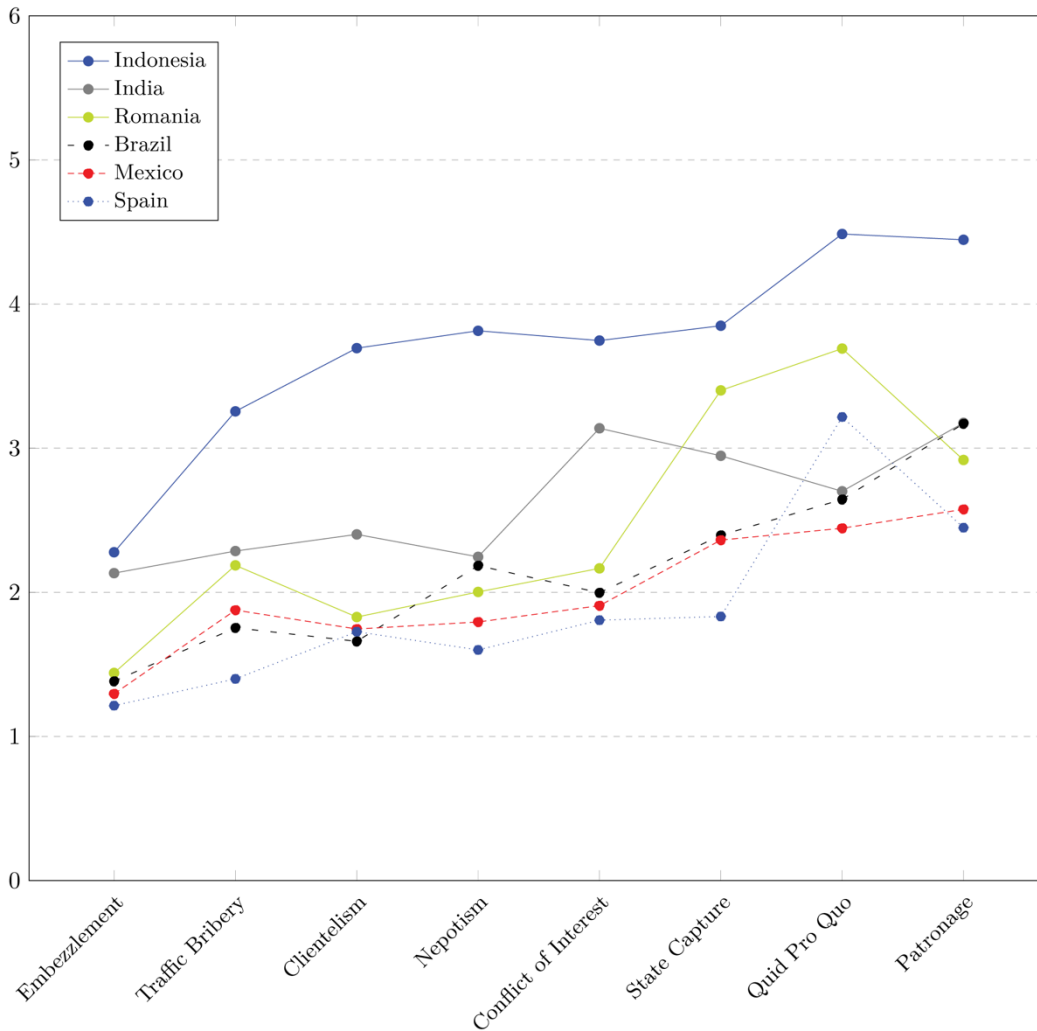


Figure 3: Mean tolerance for each type of corruption in each country

Concluding this exploration of the data, we look again into individual scenarios. Figure 3 presents the mean response to each one of the eight vignettes included in the survey, for the six countries. While a heterogeneous degree of corruption tolerance across countries is again observed—e.g., country means go from 1.21 to 2.28 in the case of embezzlement and from 2.45 to 4.45 in the case

of patronage, with Indonesia showing the highest means in all eight scenarios and Spain, conversely, the lowest in all but for clientelism and quid pro quo—the graph also shows that tolerance is also somewhat inconsistent within countries. For example, Romania goes from a mean tolerance of embezzlement of 1.44 to more than double that amount for state capture, quid pro quo, and patronage. Similar within-country differences are found across all countries, where the mean scores tend to be lowest for embezzlement and the highest for patronage, with important increases between the two. A review and comparison of mean results for India and Romania offer a telling picture of varying tolerance across scenarios, not only climbing from one scenario to the other but also showing changes in their relative rankings in some cases. Indeed, while the mean tolerance of embezzlement, clientelism, and conflict of interest is evidently higher in India than in Indonesia—2.13 vs. 1.44, 2.40 vs. 1.83, and 3.14 vs. 2.17, respectively—the difference between the two countries is much less pronounced in the cases of a traffic bribery, nepotism, and patronage, and it is fully reversed for state capture (2.95 vs. 3.40) and quid pro quo (2.70 vs. 3.69). The mean tolerance of quid pro quo in Spain highlights this point—while the country ranks at the bottom of corruption tolerance in most cases, it reverses this trend to come in higher than Mexico, Brazil, and India for the specific case of quid pro quo.

3.3 Analysis

We begin exploring the core research question by estimating the variance of country means for each scenario. This will help us approximate the degree to which the mean tolerance of each corrupt scenario varies from country to country and to arrange scenarios from highest to lowest convergence. We quantify it by conducting a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)—the Kruskal-Wallis test, a nonparametric alternative, could not be employed for reasons explained later—and reporting the sum of squares between groups, where higher values indicate that the countries' means are farther from the grand mean. We conduct the test fully aware that the use of ANOVA for ordinal data has long been contentious (although Norman, 2010: 629 summarizes the position

in favor of using ANOVA by pointing out its proven “robustness with respect to non-normality”) and as such its usage here only provides a general approximation to between-group variance. The results are presented in Figure 4, between brackets, next to the Y-axis data labels. As observed there, the data suggests a higher degree of agreement among countries in relation to the (in)acceptability of embezzlement—even if Indonesia and India score somewhat higher than the rest of the group. On the opposite end, there appears to be much less consensus concerning the (in)acceptability of clientelism, nepotism, and conflict of interest—although much of these values can be again ascribed to the extreme means of Indonesia and India. When Indonesia is excluded from the group, state capture becomes the scenario with the least level of consensus, with a sum of squares of 557.7.

The variability in the level of acceptance of different corrupt scenarios also prompts us to assess how much consensus exists among respondents from the same country. Hence, standard deviations⁵ are estimated and the results are presented in Figure 5; these results are also rearranged in Figure 6 to more easily show the degree of variance to which each scenario is tolerated in different countries. We find that, in some cases, higher average tolerance of corruption coincides with greater spread in individual responses—responses from Indonesia and India, two countries with an evidently higher mean tolerance of embezzlement and conflict of interest, also have a markedly higher within-group variability. However, mean tolerance and standard deviation do not appear consistently together, as can be seen with regard to state capture, where data from Romania is found to be as spread out as that from Indonesia and India despite differences in their means. In any case, Figure 5 shows the presence of varying degrees of consensus among respondents from the same country with respect to different corrupt scenarios. For example, the standard deviation for embezzlement

⁵ The standard deviation is commonly used to describe the distribution of likert items. For example, Kalmijn and Veenhoven (2005, 390) find “no reason to discontinue the use of the standard deviation” for quantifying the inequality of happiness across nations, which is typically measured along a single 10-point likert scale.

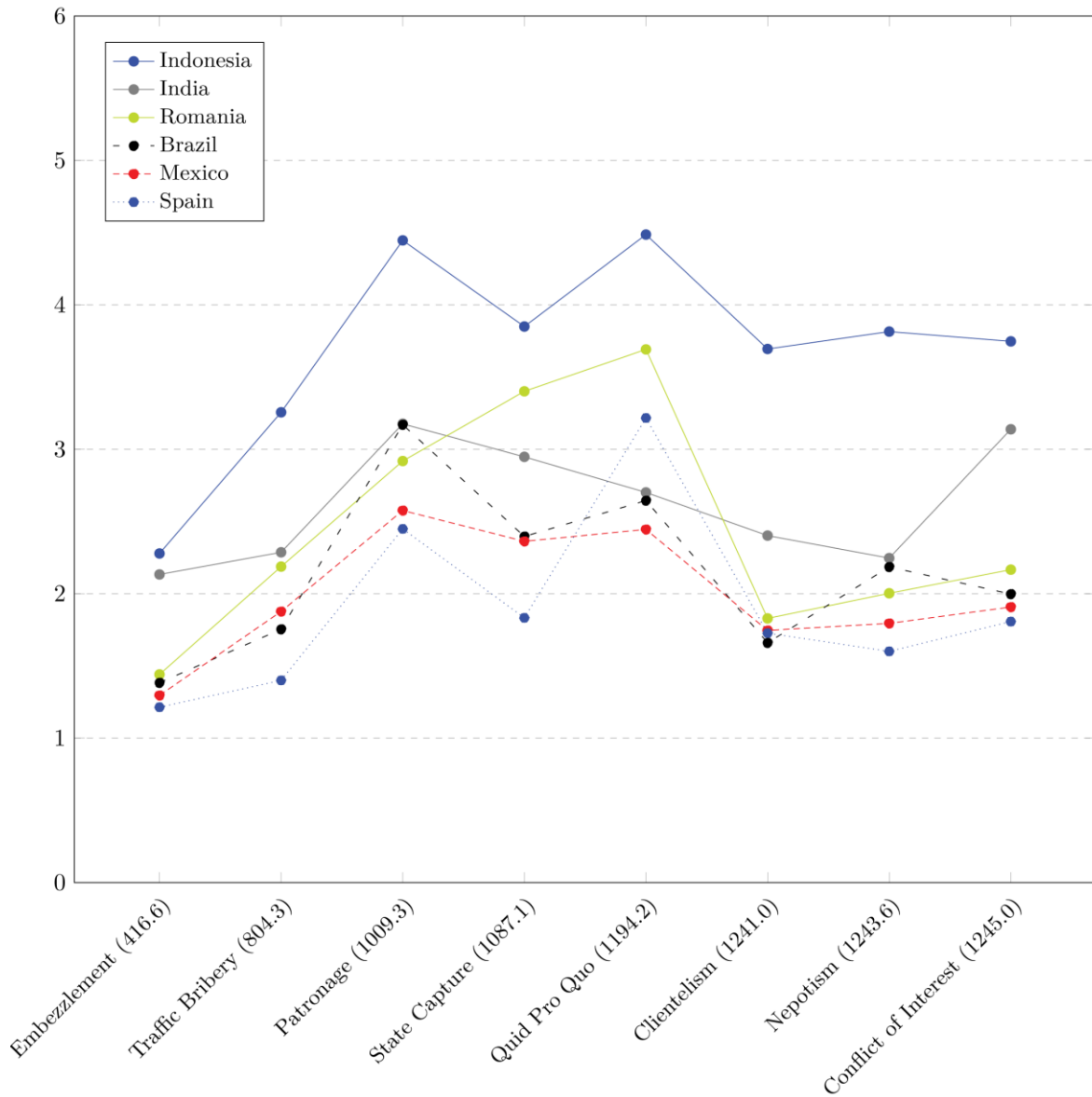


Figure 4: Average tolerance for corruption types in each country, from lower to higher variability between countries.

in Indonesia and India is over 2 points on the Likert scale, whereas it is less than 1 for Mexico and Spain; but all countries show a standard deviation of between 2 and 3 points for patronage and (with the close exception of Indonesia) quid pro quo. At the level of countries, Figure 6 also shows a higher standard deviation across all scenarios for Indonesia and India; however, other countries

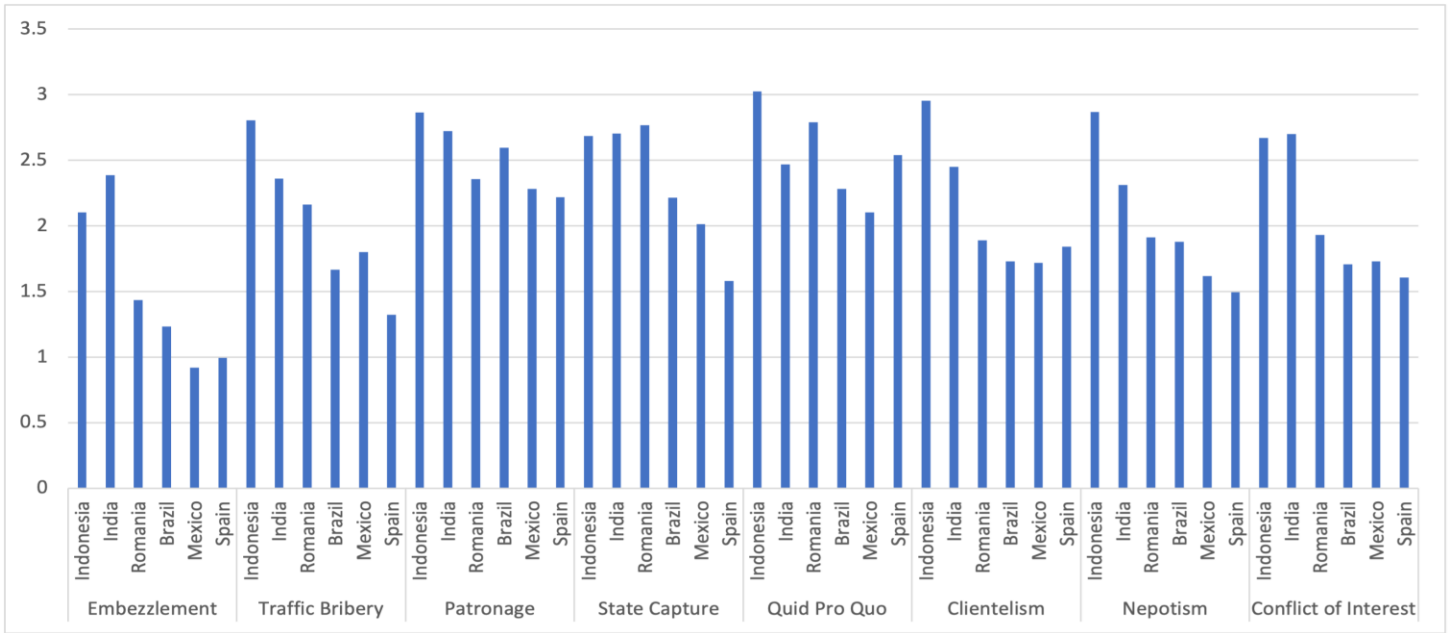


Figure 5: Within-group standard deviations, by type of corruption

show evidently heterogeneous results, with Romanians being in the least agreement when it comes to quid pro quo and state capture, Brazilians and Mexicans on patronage, and Spanish on quid pro quo as well. Finally, embezzlement shows the lowest degree of variance among respondents in almost every country, the sole exception being India, where respondents show a remarkable consistency across scenarios, and where nepotism and traffic bribery represent the two scenarios with the lowest standard deviation.

To further explore the extent to which individuals may express tolerance of some forms of corruption rather than others, we assess the consistency their answers to different corrupt scenarios. Considering the relevant survey questions to be items of a single measure of corruption tolerance, we use Cronbach’s Alpha, which is a coefficient of reliability with a value between zero and one. While a higher value normally indicates an optimal level of reliability, a good rule of thumb is that values of .8 are generally what we would expect to find when the items relate to each other (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). The results are presented in Table 3. As can be observed,

responses across the eight scenarios are found to be internally consistent in every country, meaning that the different forms of corruption included in the survey should indeed be considered to be part of the same construct.

Finally, we estimate the impact of Country on the level of corruption tolerance as reported by our survey participants. While the Kruskal-Wallis test—also known as the nonparametric version of the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)—was first considered, testing for homogeneity of data dispersion using the Conover squared ranks test (the nonparametric version of Levene’s test for variance; Conover and Iman, 1978) revealed that our data repeatedly violated such assumption and, therefore, made Kruskal-Wallis an inappropriate method.

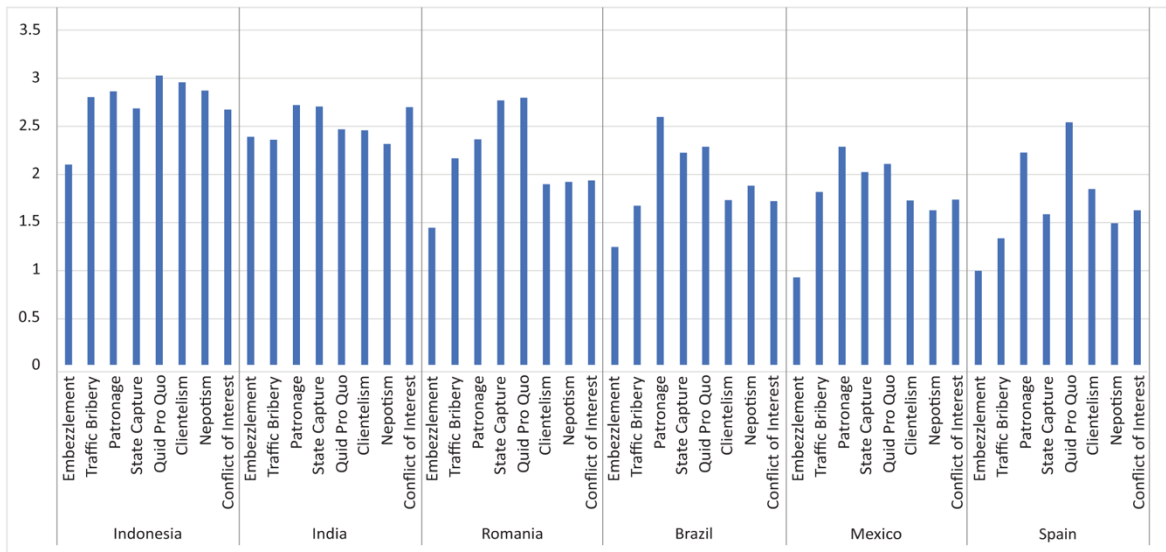


Figure 6: Within-group standard deviations, by corruption type for each country.

Scenario	Indonesia	India	Romania	Brazil	Mexico	Spain
Embezzlement	0.8071	0.8397	0.7912	0.8496	0.8089	0.7900
Traffic Bribery	0.8179	0.8284	0.7821	0.8559	0.8121	0.8095
Patronage	0.8164	0.8292	0.7832	0.8628	0.8106	0.7818
State Capture	0.8159	0.8250	0.8095	0.8645	0.8242	0.7900
Quid Pro Quo	0.8227	0.8216	0.7976	0.8587	0.8112	0.7812
Clientelism	0.8136	0.8203	0.7754	0.8480	0.7954	0.7683
Nepotism	0.8199	0.8234	0.7972	0.8617	0.8125	0.7786
Conflict of Interest	0.8080	0.8291	0.7837	0.8478	0.8123	0.7685
α	0.8345	0.8454	0.8116	0.8719	0.8307	0.8057
N	399	398	379	394	389	388

Table 3: Internal consistency of scenario responses.

Therefore, multivariate ordered logistic regression with country-specific fixed effects using dummy variables was selected. Since our data is found to violate the assumption of proportional odds necessary for ordered logit, we transform the original values on the 11-point Likert scale to a 3-point scale, collapsing both sides of the neutral value into single categories. This reclassification of the data proves to satisfy the proportional odds assumption and allows us to proceed with the analysis. Table 4 presents the results of regressing each of the eight scenarios on our country and demographic predictors. Effects are provided in odds ratio, representing “the odds that an outcome will occur given a particular exposure, compared to the odds of the outcome occurring in the absence of that exposure” (Szumilas, 2010). Results greater than 1 reflect a positive correlation, while results below 1 reflect a negative correlation.

Unsurprisingly, being from Indonesia increases the odds of tolerating all corrupt scenarios in the study; but the range of the increase varies between scenarios, from 50% in the case of quid pro quo to 584% in the case of nepotism. The variability in the effects of Country—as represented by changes in the odds of expressing tolerance toward a given form of corruption—extends to country-to-country comparisons, with Romanians being four times as likely to tolerate state capture than Brazilians, but the two countries being largely on par when considering nepotism. Another example of the heterogeneity of results is the scenario of quid pro quo, in which case we

find the lowest degree of tolerance among the six countries (at 40% the odds found in Spain). Looking more closely, we see that the odds in India are higher for embezzlement, traffic bribery, and state capture; lower for quid pro quo; and not significant for patronage, clientelism, and nepotism. A similarly unique pattern of tolerance is to be found in other in Romania, Brazil, and Mexico.

Variable	Embezzlement	Traffic Bribery	Patronage	State Capture	Quid Pro Quo	Clientelism	Nepotism	Conflict of Interest
<i>Country dummies</i>								
Indonesia	4.497** (2.48)	6.644*** (2.37)	2.380*** (0.47)	7.678*** (2.22)	1.513* (0.28)	2.692*** (0.72)	6.836*** (2.16)	5.659*** (1.69)
India	3.439* (1.95)	2.556* (0.98)	0.999 (0.22)	4.239*** (1.29)	0.402*** (0.09)	0.857 (0.26)	1.621 (0.57)	3.696*** (1.17)
Romania	2.692 (1.62)	3.833*** (1.42)	1.305 (0.28)	9.032*** (2.55)	1.623** (0.28)	1.035 (0.33)	2.189* (0.76)	1.987* (0.66)
Brazil	1.420 (0.96)	1.576 (0.67)	1.908** (0.39)	3.086*** (0.94)	0.616* (0.13)	0.728 (0.25)	2.218* (0.78)	1.438 (0.50)
Mexico	0.813 (0.63)	2.691* (1.04)	1.281 (0.28)	3.257*** (0.99)	0.487*** (0.11)	0.901 (0.29)	1.503 (0.56)	1.511 (0.53)
<i>Control</i>								
Age	0.960*** (0.01)	0.980*** (0.01)	0.964*** (0.00)	0.984*** (0.00)	0.972*** (0.00)	0.960*** (0.01)	0.971*** (0.01)	0.969*** (0.01)
Sex	0.500* (0.14)	0.862 (0.10)	0.998 (0.12)	0.997 (0.12)	0.958 (0.11)	0.542*** (0.09)	0.633** (0.10)	0.977 (0.15)
Education	0.947* (0.03)	0.974* (0.02)	0.990 (0.01)	0.942*** (0.01)	0.983 (0.01)	0.964* (0.02)	0.982 (0.02)	0.970 (0.02)
<i>N</i>	2,347	2,347	2,347	2,347	2,347	2,347	2,347	2,347
<i>Pseudo R</i> ²	0.131	0.094	0.063	0.069	0.066	0.124	0.112	0.110

(Standard errors in parentheses)
*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 4: Country of origin as a determinant of corruption tolerance, with Spain as the reference group.

To better visualize and summarize the above regression results in the context of this paper, we plot the statistically significant odds ratios in Figure 7. If the level of corruption tolerance only varies from country to country but not from scenario to scenario—in other words, if the differences are a matter of national tolerance rather than scenario-specific tolerance—we would expect to see largely horizontal slopes (that is, flat lines) at different distances from 1 on the y-axis, with more tolerant countries farther above 1 and less tolerant countries farther below. On the other hand, if corruption tolerance indeed varies from scenario to scenario, we should see this reflected in the presence of positive or negative slopes, with the angle of inclination indicating the degree of change in the level of tolerance toward one scenario compared to the previous or next ones. As can be observed here, there are indeed crosscountry trends found in the data, but they are represented only through negative slopes (e.g., *quid pro quo*) and positive slopes (e.g., *state capture*). Overall, Figure 7 shows the presence of several statistically significant differences in tolerance of corruption, both across countries as well as across scenarios.

4 Discussion

The empirical analysis conducted in the previous section sought to find an answer to the question: are different types of corruption tolerated differently? As the query involved the intersection of two dimensions—namely, the cross-country and cross-behavioral study of corruption tolerance—we conducted the analysis by adding one layer of complexity at a time, thus exploring the individual components of the question before reaching our destination. The results can be summarized in the following three findings. First, tolerance of corruption varies across countries, with respondents from Indonesia and Spain being, on average, the most and least tolerant among the groups assessed. Second, tolerance of corruption varies across types of corruption, with

embezzlement and patronage being, on average, the least and most tolerated types of corruption, respectively. Third, corruption tolerance varies across

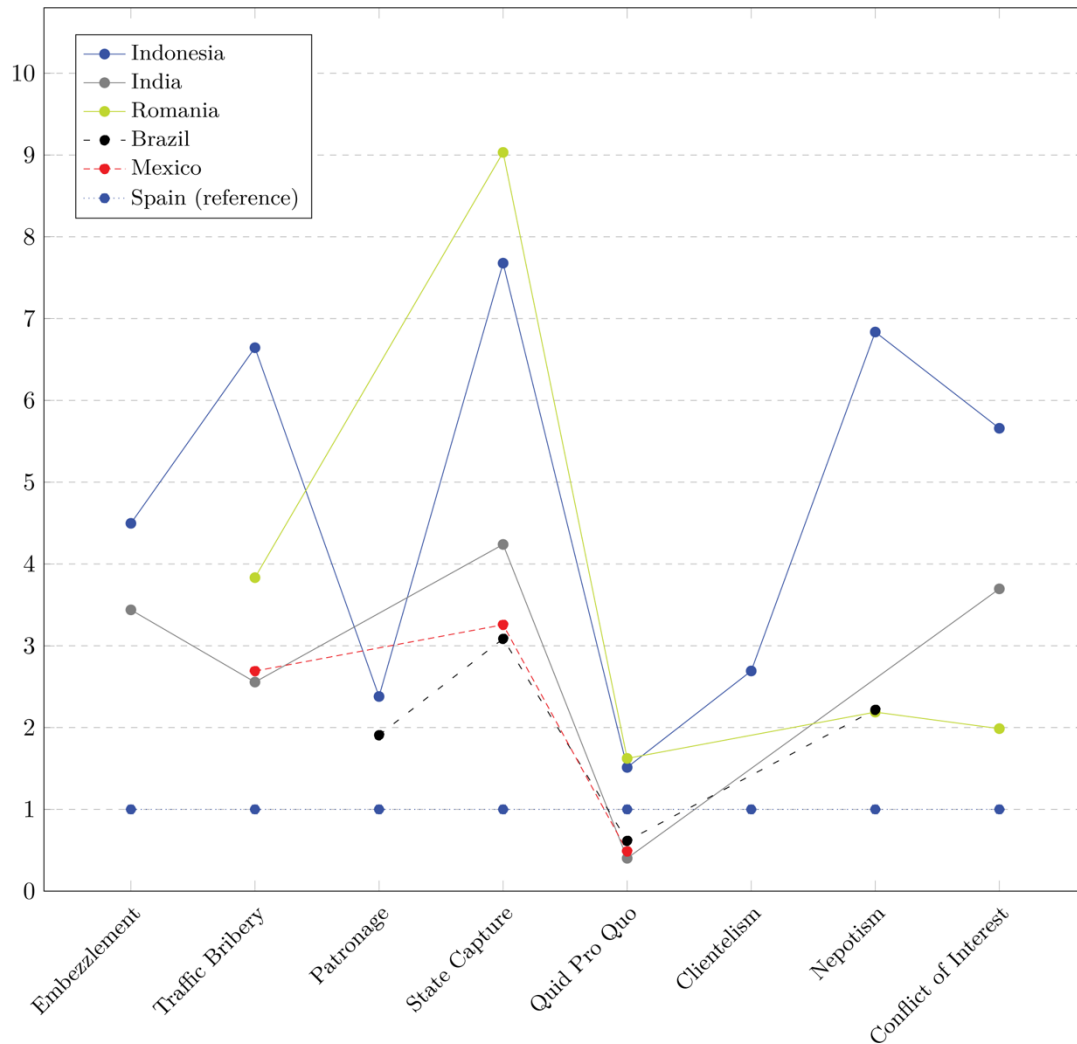


Figure 7: Statistically significant odd ratios, with Spain as reference group.

countries for the same type of corruption, with respondents finding more consensus about their disapproval of embezzlement compared to that of clientelism, nepotism, or conflict of interest.

The fact that respondents from one country were found to be more (or less) tolerant than those from another should be in itself largely uncontroversial. While the mean tolerance among Indonesian respondents is found to be almost double that in Spain, in general the mean respondent in all six countries may be described as being somewhat intolerant of corruption, ranging from 15.2 to 29.6 points out of a maximum of 88 points in our index. In other words, even if tolerance of corruption varies across countries, it is fair to say that it is not generally considered to be an acceptable practice among any of the groups assessed. A similar conclusion can be reached when disaggregating the concept into its different types—that is, into cases of traffic bribery, nepotism, state capture, patronage, embezzlement, clientelism, conflict of interest, and quid pro quo. Here too we can immediately appreciate that no form of corruption assessed in this study enjoys wide acceptance among respondents. However, just as some variation in the level of tolerance was in fact detected across countries, here too we observed a clear difference between the acceptability of embezzlement, traffic bribery, clientelism, or nepotism—which over 89% of all respondents found to be unacceptable—and that of state capture, quid pro quo, or patronage—at less than 83% each. This difference, which in the cases of embezzlement and patronage is as high as 15%, provides the first approximation to answering the research question—different types of corruption are indeed tolerated differently, and these variations are generally statistically significant.

With tolerance varying by country and type of corruption, it was still reasonable to presume some consistency in the way citizens from different countries ranked the various types of corruption. For example, respondents from both India and Mexico would appear to agree that, on average, quid pro quo is more tolerable than traffic bribery, even if they did not fully coincide in the degree to which either of the two types of corruption should be tolerated. In other words, differentiated tolerance of corruption could be hoped to follow a pattern in the way the various types are ranked across countries. However, such a premise was challenged by the results of the regression analysis. Taking Spain as the reference group, the results showed that despite its having

the lowest mean tolerance overall and across the majority of types of corruption, respondents from that country expressed a surprisingly higher level of tolerance toward quid pro quo—in fact, higher than India, Brazil, or Mexico— than otherwise expected. Likewise, although Romania had only the third highest mean tolerance of corruption overall, it topped the list for state capture, with nine times the odds that respondents from that country would express tolerance of this specific type of corruption compared to their Spanish counterparts—and more than twice that of Indian respondents. Similar variations in the relative acceptability of specific types of corruption can be observed from country to country. In short, the results show that different types of corruption are tolerated differently in different countries, and that the specific ‘ranking’ of tolerance for various types of corruption is intrinsically dependent on the location under assessment.

While the reasons behind such diversity in relative tolerance are not addressed in this study, the analysis of the data does identify a degree of heterogeneity in the degree of consensus surrounding the topic. Put in a different way, tolerance toward some types of corruption appear to have coalesced more in some cases than in others, and in some countries more than in others. Looking at the average tolerance, it is clear that cross-country consensus about the inacceptability of embezzlement is much higher than for any other type of corruption; whereas the opposite appear to be true for clientelism, nepotism, and conflict of interest. What is even more telling is the degree of variance found within groups: while respondents from either Indonesia or India are generally less in agreement about their tolerance of various types of corruption—even concerning embezzlement—compared to those from other countries, consensus over patronage and quid pro quo is also challenged in Brazil and Romania. A somewhat similar pattern of heterogeneity is evidenced in Spain and Mexico, with some scenarios being found more consistently intolerable than others. The resulting image is one of varying degrees of consensus about the acceptability of different types of corruption in each of the countries assessed.

5 Conclusions

The recognition of corruption as an umbrella term to describe a variety of events rather than a single activity made for an elementary but hitherto ignored question—are different types of corruption tolerated differently? In this study, we attempted to offer an answer by focusing on eight types of corruption that collectively represent a broad behavioral scope. Employing vignettes, we asked survey participants in Indonesia, India, Romania, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain the degree to which they found bribery, nepotism, state capture, patronage, embezzlement, clientelism, conflict of interest, and quid pro quo to be acceptable within the conditions established in their corresponding vignettes. The results point to the existence of differential corruption tolerance across types of corruption and countries, providing a resounding positive answer to our core question.

From the initial frequency distribution of responses, we observed a spectrum of tolerance, with embezzlement at its lowest point to quid pro quo and patronage at its highest. Despite an equally apparent distribution of responses across countries – with Spain and Indonesia at opposite sides of the tolerance spectrum – the heterogeneous level of tolerance toward different types of corruption remained evident when looking at the six countries under study separately. In other words, although the mean individual corruption tolerance differs from country to country, within each of them the level of approval of different types of corruption also presented significant heterogeneity. The majority of differences observed proved to be statistically significant even when controlling for age, sex, and education. The regression analysis performed gives us sufficient confidence to conclude that corruption is not interpreted as a monolithic phenomenon across countries. Instead, it appears to be subjectively evaluated based on the particularities of the case and against the backdrop of national conditions.

Although the present study did not attempt to explore possible explanations for this differential corruption tolerance, the spread of responses point to a complex picture in which

popular consensus appears to be rather fluid. While the possibility of explaining away these differences in consensus by reference to an underlying dimension that would create clusters from our eight vignettes was tantalizing, the data did not support such interpretation.

Regardless of country, participants appeared to consider all eight types of corruption as essentially belonging to the same phenomenon. This forces us to conclude that all types of corruption included in the study share a ‘family’ resemblance due to falling within the same umbrella concept—i.e., corruption (Varraich, 2014). However, their specific position within that family is dependent on intrinsic characteristics of the activity and specific country conditions.

Looking back to the way in which previous literature has approached corruption tolerance, it becomes clear that reducing this discussion to voting behaviour unnecessarily constrains the researcher’s capacity to assess the phenomenon of interest. By limiting the study to a few activities corresponding to political corruption, the assessment of corruption tolerance via electoral data misses not only a great degree of nuance, but it may misrepresent the way local people judge and interact with corruption. A different type of data – i.e., directly exploring individual attitudes toward corruption via survey, interview, or focus groups – offers the kind of nuance absent in electoral surveys. That said, this too must avoid treating corruption as a unitary concept or grouping different manifestations into a single construct. Only by truly recognizing the complexity of corruption and treating its study accordingly can research hope to provide the sort of granularity that decision making requires to confront the challenges inherent in anti-corruption work.

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