

**Corruption and Political Support:
The Case of Peru's *Vacuna-gate* Scandal**

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Abstract: Classic theories of public opinion suggest that negative shocks can undermine system support in weak democracies, but scant work has systematically assessed this thesis. We identify Peru's explosive *Vacuna-gate* scandal as a most likely case for finding a connection between corruption and political support. The scandal's unexpected revelation in the middle of the 2021 AmericasBarometer Peru survey created conditions for a natural experiment. Applying an unexpected-event-during-survey design, we consider the consequences of the scandal for perceptions of corruption, system support, and support for democracy. We find robust evidence that the scandal increased already high perceptions of corruption and we find tempered evidence that it lowered system support. Yet, contrary to expectations derived from prior theories, we find no effect on support for democracy. In the conclusion we discuss the nuanced ways that scandal may shape democratic stability.

Corruption decreases system satisfaction (Anderson and Tverdova 2003) and promotes populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018), populist parties (Foresta 2020), and illiberalism (Levitsky 2018). From this perspective, corruption *indirectly* undermines democracy by increasing the public's appetite for politicians and policies that erode democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). But, does corruption also *directly* undermine democracy by diminishing public support for it? The evidence is remarkably tenuous, and most research on this topic relies on correlational analysis (see Bailey and Paras 2006; Canache and Allison 2005; Ruderman and Nevitte 2015). Focusing on a country in which support for democracy is comparatively weak, we use an unexpected-event-during-survey design (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernández 2020) as a natural experiment to test the causal effect of one type of corruption – a high-level scandal involving illicit early access to Covid-19 vaccines – on public opinion.

Peru's weakly consolidated democracy represents what Gerring (2007) calls a "most likely" case for finding a connection between corruption and support for democracy. Under an Eastonian framework (Easton 1975), allegiance to democracy is comparatively more malleable in systems that have lower "reservoirs of goodwill" toward the system. These days, only one-in-two Peruvians express support for democracy, among the very lowest rates in the region (Castorena and Rosario 2021). Simmering discontent coupled with crises that "jolt" public opinion are ripe conditions for eroding beliefs in the validity of democracy (Easton 1975).

We contrast support for democracy with attitudes that are consequential for the indirect pathway through which corruption is theorized to diminish democracy: perceptions of corruption and political legitimacy. Extending Easton's logic to theorize that attitudes toward politics are more mutable in weakly institutionalized contexts, we expect scandal will boost perceptions of political corruption and diminish system support in Peru. And, in fact, extant evidence linking

corruption to lower levels of political trust and system legitimacy is comparatively more robust (Ares and Hernandez 2017; Seligson 2002). Yet, not all research supports this connection: some find that scandal fatigue or countervailing conditions, such as economic upturns, mitigate against the opinion consequences of corruption and scandal (Carlin, Love, and Martínez-Gallardo 2015; Kumlin and Esaisson 2011; Zechmeister and Zizumbo-Colunga 2013). Others find little or mixed evidence that diminished trust in politicians and/or parties spills over into evaluations of the system more generally (Halmburger, Baumert, and Rothmund 2019; Maier 2011).

To assess the opinion consequences of exposure to a high-level political corruption scandal, we use data from the 2021 AmericasBarometer. The *Vacuna-gate* (Vaccine-gate) scandal – in which the public learned that former president Martín Vizcarra, his wife, and other elites had clandestinely subverted the rules in order to be vaccinated against Covid-19 early – was revealed in the middle of fieldwork for the Peru survey. Because the survey used random digit dialing, we apply an unexpected-event-during-survey design to assess differences in public opinion expressed by those who are treated with the scandal (those interviewed after the scandal broke) and by those who are not (those interviewed before the scandal broke) (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernández 2020).¹

We find that the scandal led to increased perceptions of corruption among politicians and may have modestly reduced political legitimacy – that is, support for the Peruvian political system. However, we find no significant effect on individuals’ support for democracy. On the one hand, this is a positive finding: even in most-likely cases, the public decouples political malfeasance from democracy, leaving support for democracy resistant to scandal. That the public

¹ As we note later, in the last stage of the survey, the fieldwork team filtered out Lima residents to balance the sample; we apply a matching approach to account for that potential confound.

increases its skepticism regarding the integrity of politicians and, in a tempered way, the legitimacy of the system is consistent with the notion of “critical citizens” who are rationally dissatisfied with imperfect democratic systems and yet committed to democracy as an ideal (Norris 1999, 2021).

On the other hand, such opinion dynamics hold the potential for democratic decay from the top down (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). To the extent that corruption increases these views – of a corrupt elite and illegitimate system – the public may be more willing to support illiberal, populist leaders who gain support by framing politics as a “conspiring elite” that has subverted the system to its own interests (Hawkins 2009, p. 1044, 1064; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018; Levitsky 2018). Even in most-likely cases, high-level scandals may not directly undermine support for democracy. But they hold clear potential to indirectly threaten democracy by sowing seeds of discontent.

Political Corruption, System Support, and *Vacuna-gate*

Can a major political corruption scandal like Peru’s *Vacuna-gate* have broader implications for the political system at large, and to what extent? Scholarship on political evaluations distinguishes broadly between two types of attitudes: specific support of incumbent politicians and diffuse support for the system. The former may encompass a wide array of offices, but it is nonetheless easier to delineate. Diffuse support, on the other hand, can manifest as belief in the authority of the system’s core institutions and processes or as an ideological belief in the validity of the regime type (Easton 1975). The former is referred to as *political legitimacy* or *system support*, the latter as *support for democracy* (Booth and Seligson 2009). We focus on both types.

A good deal of scholarship has considered the intuitive connection between corruption and evaluations of specific, implicated politicians, candidates, and political parties. Experimental work has shown that corruption scandals damage evaluations of candidates (e.g., Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2011, 2014; Funk 1996; McDermott, Schwartz, and Vallejo 2015), lower vote intention (Klašnja, Lupu, and Tucker 2021; Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013), and reduce attachment to the implicated political party (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro 2013; Wolsky 2022). Others have found that corruption can damage the approval of the government or president (Solaz, de Vries, and de Geus 2019; but see Fischle 2000; Zaller 1998), though this can be conditional on partisanship (Solaz, de Vries, and de Geus 2019), gender (Reyes-Housholder 2019), or the economy (Carlin, Love, and Martínez-Gallardo 2015). Effects can be quite modest (Bågenholm 2013) and many affected politicians go on to win elections (Bågenholm and Charron 2020), but it is still common to find that corruption scandals shape election outcomes (Basinger 2013; Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé, and Sorribas 2012; Peters and Welch 1980).

To what extent does a major corruption scandal affect diffuse political support? Easton (1975) provides a classic framework for considering this question. In general, in well-consolidated systems, diffuse support is likely to be inelastic in response to specific outcomes and events. As Easton (p. 444) puts it, “this type of evaluation tends to be more difficult... to weaken once it is strong.” Yet, where diffuse support is weak, where “discontent with perceived performance continues over a long enough time,” and/or at times marked by “the sudden frustration of expectations,” diffuse support may decline (Easton 1975, p. 445). The case of Peru and the *Vacuna-gate* scandal shares all three of these characteristics.

First, diffuse support is comparatively low in the country. According to the 2021 AmericasBarometer, Peru ranks highest in the Latin America and Caribbean region on the extent

to which the public views politicians as corrupt and in the bottom quarter with respect to expressing respect for the country's political institutions. Furthermore, only 50% of Peruvians express support for democracy, compared to the regional average of 62% (Castorena and Rosario 2021). While low, the attitude is far from immutable: in the 2012 AmericasBarometer, support for democracy in Peru was 10 percentage points higher.

Second, discontent with political performance was simmering for years before the *Vacuna-gate* scandal. Peru has experienced a constant state of political crisis since 2017, when former president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski was first implicated in a massive corruption scheme involving Brazilian construction conglomerate Odebrecht (see, e.g., Zarate and Casey 2019). These days, only two-fifths of the public expresses satisfaction with how democracy is working in the country; the only country with a lower value in the region is Haiti, at 11% (Castorena and Rosario 2021). Following a peak in satisfaction in 2012, at 52%, this figure decreased steadily over the years to 21% in 2021.

Third, when the *Vacuna-gate* scandal broke on February 11, 2021, it jolted public opinion. On that day, Vizcarra claimed in a press conference that he had received the Sinopharm vaccine as a volunteer in the clinical trial (De La Quintana 2021).² In fact, he had obtained it through irregular means while it was still going through phase III trials in October 2020. On February 13, several cabinet members, including the health minister, resigned due to the news. That same day, researchers in charge of the clinical trials released a statement noting that the former president was not a volunteer in the trial. By February 17, prosecutors had opened an

² News of the scandal began to percolate the day prior, but we take February 11 as the scandal's official start date given that we find a large spike in Google searches of "vizcarra" after February 11 (see Figure A1).

investigation into nearly 500 public officials, including Vizcarra, the health minister, and the foreign minister (Osborne 2021).

The scandal marked the abrupt downfall of a popular politician. Following Kuczynski's resignation amid the Odebrecht scandal, Vizcarra's presidency was marked by high levels of approval as he championed anti-corruption reform and successfully evoked a constitutional right to dissolve an unpopular Congress, leading to early congressional elections in January 2020. Vizcarra's attacks on Congress placed him on the defensive against that institution, which successfully removed him from office in a second impeachment after a first one failed. Because many believed his removal was in response to his anti-corruption efforts, Vizcarra left office as an admired political figure, with an overwhelming majority of Peruvians approving of his presidency and expressing disagreement with his removal (*La Vanguardia* 2020). That made it all the more shocking for the public to see him revealed as the figurehead of a large scandal that involved sidestepping rules to access the Covid-19 vaccine before its public release. The scandal made frontline news in a country that has been one of the hardest hit by the pandemic (see Figure A2; Schwalb and Seas 2021).

In brief, the case of Peru's *Vacuna-gate* scandal is a "most likely" case for finding a connection between corruption and diffuse support: levels of support were low, discontent had been brewing for years, and the scandal was a shock. Yet, other findings in extant research provide reason to question whether the thesis will hold across all indicators of diffuse support. There is some evidence of "spillover" effects in which corruption scandals involving one or multiple individual politicians lead to worse evaluations for the institution to which the politician belongs (Bowler and Karp 2004; Chong et al. 2015; Lee 2018), politicians in general (Ares and Hernández 2017; Bowler and Karp 2004; Von Sikorksi, Heiss, and Matthes 2020), and

perceptions of political corruption (Villora, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2013). Other studies find limited spillover effects on diffuse values (Maier 2011; Ruderman and Nevitte 2016). In correlational analysis of Latin American public opinion, some find no evidence of a connection between corruption and support for democracy (Bailey and Paras 2006; Canache and Allison 2005). Such an outcome may be most common under conditions of scandal fatigue, when the public becomes dulled to news of another scandal following waves of scandals from administration to administration (Kumlin and Essaisson 2012; Waisbord 2004). Arguably, the Peruvian context is rife for scandal fatigue: since the transition to democracy, all of Peru's former presidents, multiple members of the judiciary, and many members of Congress have been implicated in major corruption schemes.

Measures and Models

Our data come from the 2021 AmericasBarometer survey of Peru, fielded between January 22 and March 26. The survey was designed to collect a national sample of voting-age respondents, who are 18 years or older, citizens or permanent residents of Peru, and have access to a mobile phone. Mobile phone coverage in Peru is approximately 87% (Montalvo, Pizzolitto, and Plutowski 2022). Participation in the AmericasBarometer is voluntary and not compensated. All interviewers are trained and certified to work on the project, and all interviews are audited before being approved using voice recording, timing checks, and metadata collected alongside the project. The final dataset consists of 3,038 interviews; of these, 1,332 were collected before the scandal broke on February 11 and 1,706 were collected after.

We consider three measures of diffuse support: perceptions of corruption among politicians, system support (regime legitimacy), and support for democracy. For ease of

comparison, all are linearly transformed to range from 0 to 100 (see Appendix A for full wording and coding). Perceptions of corruption are skewed: 89% of Peruvians express that half or more of the country's politicians are corrupt. Previous research has operationalized system support as an additive index of four items that ask about respect for political institutions, protection of basic rights, pride in the system, and support for the system (see Booth and Seligson 2009). We opt to use principal component analysis instead because it makes fewer assumptions about the relationships among the items and omits respondents who did not answer all four questions. The four items load highly onto a single factor, with an eigenvalue of 2.14 (the Cronbach's alpha is 0.70). The mean value is 48.2. Support for democracy is measured by the respondent's level of agreement with the statement, "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government." The mean is 57.8.³ For all three variables, item nonresponse is low, ranging from 0.1% for system support to 2.5% for perceptions of corruption. Our analyses omit cases of nonresponse.

To model the effect of corruption scandal, we use a linear regression with an indicator for treatment (interview conducted after the scandal broke) versus control (interview conducted before the scandal broke) as our main independent variable. The unexpected nature of the event along with the survey's random digit dialing sampling method allows us to treat scandal exposure as exogenous.⁴ Yet, one feature of the survey design needs to be accounted for: under the adaptive approach applied by the survey team, respondents from the Lima province were

³ Perceptions of corruption and the political legitimacy module, respectively, were by design assigned to two splits of the questionnaire; individuals were randomly assigned to either questionnaire A or B. The support for democracy question and all demographic questions were asked of all respondents.

⁴ Table A1 reports the results of balance tests across key demographic variables.

filtered out towards the end of data collection to achieve a final sample balanced on geographic region.⁵ To address any potential confounding due to regional imbalance, we employ coarsened exact matching (CEM), which balances the treatment and control groups on the Lima province dummy variable (we also balance on age, gender, education and urban/rural residence), at the cost of only slightly reducing the sample (see Tables A1 and A2).

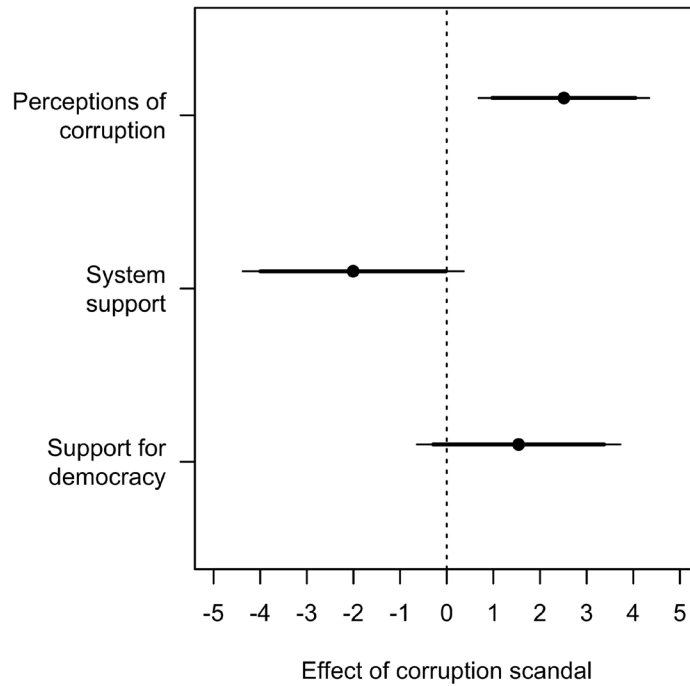
Findings

Figure 1 plots the estimated effects of the scandal on our outcome variables of interest. The figure shows results from a model with CEM weights applied that includes an indicator for treatment with the corruption scandal. We report results from regressing each dependent variable on treatment alone and, in the appendix, models that include controls for age, gender, education, urban/rural residence, and Lima residence.

For perceptions of corruption, the treatment indicator is positive and statistically significant. Respondents interviewed in the post-scandal period believed that corruption was more prevalent among politicians compared to those interviewed in the pre-scandal period. The 2.5-point magnitude of the effect reported in Figure 1 is substantial when considering the already high average level of perceptions of corruption in the sample (about 82 points on the 0 to 100 scale). After exposure to the scandal, an additional 6.6% of those in the survey said that *all* politicians were corrupt (42.6% versus 36%).

⁵ The filter was applied beginning February 26. Interviews were assigned at random to a version of the questionnaire that included the filter or one that did not; when that mixed approach did not fully balance the sample, beginning on March 9 all interviews filtered out Lima residents until the fieldwork ended on March 26. The proportion of the sample in the pre-treatment condition that is a resident of Lima is 40% while it is 29% in the post-treatment condition.

Figure 1: *Effect of corruption scandal on public opinion*



Note: Values report the effect of corruption scandal on each dependent variable. For each variable, the top/darker point represents the result with coarsened exact matching weights. Thick and thin lines report the 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. Regression results are reported in Table A3.

Our results also show that scandal exposure appears to have a negative relationship with system support. The estimated effect is statistically significant at the 90% level, and represents a drop by about 2 points on the 0 to 100 scale. Considering Peru’s very low baseline level of system support, a further drop of 2 points suggests the strength of the impact on attitudes about the Peruvian political system. Finally, we find no statistically significant effect of the corruption scandal on the extent to which respondents agrees that democracy is better than any other form

of government; our estimates of treatment effect for this dependent variable are never statistically significant.⁶

Conclusion

Support for democracy matters: higher levels of expressed support for democracy translate into more stable and higher quality democracy (Claassen 2020). We assess the extent to which a major corruption scandal diminishes support for democracy in a most-likely case: Peru. In a context with low reserves of support for democracy and high discontent with the status quo has been high, the revelation that a popular former president and hundreds of officials and elites had secured early access to the Covid-19 vaccine shook the system. Yet, despite meeting Easton's (1975) criteria for the type of case that ought to experience a drop in diffuse support, we find no movement in public support for democracy following the *Vacuna-gate* corruption scandal in early 2021. In fact, Peruvians responded only by updating their perceptions of the scope of political corruption and perhaps their level of political support for the regime, with this latter effect only marginally significant. These results are consistent with the public's democracy-serving role as "critical citizens" (Norris 1999, 2021) and potentially good news for democracy.

Or are they? Ideally, critical citizens act as guardrails for democracy. But they may also indirectly contribute to its demise. In one such scenario, discontent leads the public to support a strong executive with leeway to centralize power and weaken democratic institutions and processes (Bermeo 1996; Levitsy and Ziblatt 2018). In a second scenario, persistent performance

⁶ These findings are also robust to models that include survey weights provided by LAPOP that adjust the sample to align with national benchmark data from the 2019 AmericasBarometer survey (see Table A5), as well as no weights (see Table A4).

failings combine with the election of leaders who are unsuccessful in managing the presidency, resulting in a rotating executive office. Following *Vacuna-gate*, an inexperienced leftist political outsider – Pedro Castillo – was elected to Peru’s presidency and quickly undermined by performance failings and an antagonistic Congress that has already attempted to impeach him twice. If he were to be impeached, Castillo would be the third Peruvian president in the last five years to have his term cut short. Even when scandals only tarnish perceptions of the integrity of government and support for it, democracy itself may still be at risk. As one political commentator put it, “Where politicians are the enemy, democracy is collateral damage” (Margolis 2022). And major corruption scandals like *Vacuna-gate* have the capacity turn politicians into enemies.

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