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Corruption, Brazil



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Synonyms

[Accountability](#); [Brazil](#); [Bribery](#); [Corruption perception index](#); [Corruption scandals](#); [Global corruption barometer](#); [Malfeasance](#); [Public administration](#); [Public control](#); [Transparency](#)

Definition

It is important to stress that no definition of corruption is completely clear-cut (Svensson 2005). Transparency International (2016) characterizes corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” and has been widely adopted.

Introduction

Corruption was not part of the international research agenda until the 1990s. Partly driven by the waves of democratization and globalization, the theme has gained worldwide attention since then. Recent studies on the subject have consistently maintained that corruption delays and

distorts economic development; preempts basic rights and due process; and diverts resources from basic services, international aid, and countries’ economies (Johnston 2005).

The following sections summarize the recent research agenda on corruption in Brazil. The first section analyzes how corruption is being internationally measured and how Brazil scores in the most employed corruption assessments. The second section details how corruption was understood in Brazil before the boom in the international anti-corruption agenda. The third section deals with different approaches taken by corruption studies in the country in the last years. In the conclusion, I discuss the growing attention directed to the field due to recent scandals and I stress the need for establishing methodologically and theoretically strong approaches in corruption studies.

The Scenario in Brazil: Perception and Experience Measurements

Measuring corruption is a difficult task, both due to the secretive nature of the phenomenon and to the variety of forms it may take. In recent decades, the research agenda on corruption, insofar as empirical approaches are concerned, has followed different paths. It has, for example, developed perception and experience measurements that try to capture the extent of corruption in the world.

There have been studies that measure corruption based on aggregate perception measurements, such

as the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) from Transparency International. The CPI was the first systematic attempt to compare perceived levels of corruption in the public sector, determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys across a range of countries. The CPI ranks countries based on a scale from 0 (very corrupt) to 100 (very clean), in the attempt to identify broader trends and contrasts. In 2018, the CPI covered 180 countries. Latin American countries continued to score poorly for corruption and Brazil was among the countries with poor scores (holding the 105th position). Brazil has fallen 8 points since 2012, when it scored 43. This means that in 2018 the country had reached its lowest mark (Transparency International 2019).

Alongside the CPI, another composite measurement based on the perception of corruption is the Control of Corruption Index indicator from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI). Calculated since 1996 by the World Bank, the Control of Corruption Index measures perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain; taking into account not only petty and grand forms of corruption, but also the “capture” of the state by elites and private interests. Brazil’s score in this Index has also shown a sharp decline in the last few years. Ranging from -2.5 (lowest control of corruption) to 2.5 (highest control of corruption), Brazil scored -0.53 in the WGI of 2017 (World Bank 2017). This is the lowest indicator ever to be attributed to Brazil.

But the CPI and the WGI are not the only type of corruption measurement available for scholars, practitioners, and decision-makers in Brazil. In this regard, Transparency International produces a more objective measurement of corruption: the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB). This is the world’s largest survey in which citizens are asked about their first-hand experience with corruption in their daily lives.

In the 2016–2017 GCB round, 162,136 people were interviewed in 119 countries (Transparency International 2018). The results for Brazil show that corruption is on the rise: the majority (78%) believe that the level of corruption has increased and 56% believe that the government was underperforming in the fight against corruption.

Brazilians also have a high level of distrust in the political arena: both Executive and Legislative Branches are perceived to be taken over by corruption. However, when compared to other countries in Latin America, Brazil scores fairly well in regard to the incidence of bribery: only 11% of Brazilians were reported to have paid a bribe to access public services (contrastively, people in Mexico were the most likely to say that they had paid a bribe – 51%).

The results regarding the engagement of civil society were remarkable. When compared to other Latin American countries, Brazilian citizens were the most likely to feel empowered against corruption (83%) and were the most committed to the fight against corruption: the country had the biggest proportion of people who would report corruption even if that meant spending an entire day in a Court to provide evidence.

On the one hand, the measurements based on perception have become controversial, despite their prominence in the researches. Critics argue that perceptions are not necessarily a reflection of reality and that the indexes rely on the perception of experts who many times are based outside the country in question. On the other hand, experience measurements must deal with the hesitation surrounding the interviewing method. Considering that direct questions about people’s involvement with corrupt activities may intimidate interviewees, especially during a face-to-face encounter, this method could inadvertently underestimate the phenomenon.

Brazilian Studies on Corruption

In Brazil, before the boom in the anticorruption agenda in the 1990s, corruption studies were matters of historic and sociological approaches. Studies on patrimonialism, for example, have shown how the separation between the private and public spheres in Brazil was problematic (Faoro 1958). Brazilian political thinkers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries aimed to understand the Brazilian “identity.” In this regard, the high incidence of corruption throughout the country’s history has crystallized the idea of corruption as an

inexorable outcome. In addition, these Brazilian historiographical interpretations have set corruption as one of the perverse inheritances of the Portuguese colonization process.

The analyses of such important “interpreters of Brazil” run the risk of essentializing corruption as an inherent aspect of the Brazilian personality. For instance, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1995) defended the Brazilian culture as strongly patriarchal and patrimonialist; furthermore, Roberto DaMatta (1997) emphasized the “*malandragem*” in Brazilian individual ethics and social relations. The Brazilian character – naturally corrupt – has established an analytical and conceptual trap.

In the last decades, there has been a growing effort to make our way out of this trap. Differently from Holanda and DaMatta, corruption studies no longer understand this phenomenon as a remnant of premodern and predemocratic Brazil. For example, the Federal University of Minas Gerais and its Public Interest Research Center (Centro de Referência do Interesse Público) launched the book *Corrupção: Ensaios e Críticas* (Avritzer et al. 2008) in which it is possible to find entries of themes related to corruption written by Brazilian researchers. Later, the same research center launched “Corrupção e Sistema Político no Brasil” (Avritzer and Filgueiras 2011), a collection of papers about corruption and the political system in Brazil.

Another collection of articles on corruption in Brazil worth mentioning was released in 2002. Organized by Bruno Speck, “Caminhos da Transparência: Análise dos Componentes de um Sistema Nacional de Integridade” (Speck 2002) analyzes the system of integrity developed in Brazil to fight corruption. This was one of the first attempts to understand the institutions, processes, and areas to be addressed when considering reforms aimed at systematically combating corruption.

In relation to corruption studies in Brazil, the trend of studying accountability institutions in their relation to corruption control is rising. Books such as *Corruption and Democracy in Brazil: The Struggle for Accountability* (2011), organized by Timothy Power and Matthew Taylor, and *Democratic Accountability in Latin*

America (2003), organized by Scott Mainwaring and Christopher Welna, have brought forth a multitude of studies on democratic accountability in Brazil and Latin America and also on the challenges posed by the fight against corruption in the region. All these collections have in common the analyses of institutions, rules, and practices that could facilitate or curb corruption. The books describe the scenario in the country especially when it comes to institutional design.

Even the studies that analyze corruption and its cultural aspects do not claim anymore that it is an intrinsic characteristic of Brazilians. This trend investigates how corruption relates to social practices, how it impacts the quality of democracy, and how it impacts the trust in political institutions (Moisés and Meneguello 2013).

The anticorruption research agenda has got out of the trap. Recently, the two bursts in corruption studies are related to publicly accessible administrative data and corruption scandals. On the one hand there are the construction of datasets to objectively measure corruption from administrative data and relate it to socio-economic and political variables. On the other side, there are detailed case studies of corruption scandals.

Administrative Data and the Focus on Electoral Rules

The first burst focuses on more objective measurements and analyzes corruption through the study of administrative data. One of the most disseminated administrative data to measure corruption in Brazil is the lottery program (*Programa de Sorteios Públicos*) developed by a federal agency to oversee municipal expenditure of federally transferred funds. Since 2003, the Brazilian internal control agency (Office of the Comptroller General – CGU) has disclosed objective data on corruption involving federal resources transferred to municipalities.

The literature that refers to CGU reports has usually performed tests to understand corruption drivers and consequences. The most famous studies are those by Ferraz and Finan (2008, 2011), which used data from the lottery program’s

random audits to evaluate how the disclosure of the findings impacted the electoral performance of incumbents. They concluded that the dissemination of information regarding corruption in local governments had had a significant impact on the likelihood of reelection, reducing the chances by 7%. The authors also found that mayors that were on the path to being reelected were significantly associated with less corruption.

The measurement of corruption derived from these studies is a byproduct of a governmental monitoring initiative. This means that the corruption indicator established from this data (which usually comes from classifying a broad spectrum of irregularities) is comprehensive. Moreover, the municipalities are chosen randomly in the entire country, which increases data reliability and generalization capacity. Unfortunately, actual lotteries are now rarely conducted and the lottery program has undergone several methodological changes – for example, the program no longer relies on a random sample.

Another common way to study corruption from administrative data is to analyze legal proceedings investigated in a country's courts. This can be misleading, though. Indeed, it is considered a more "objective" measurement, but it fails to consider that countries have different legal systems. Thus, when the legal system of a country is weak, cases of corruption may not be prosecuted or investigated efficiently, even if they are epidemic. Alternatively, the legal system could be corrupt itself.

Case Studies and the Focus on Corruption Scandals

In contrast with approaches based on administrative data, there are scholars dedicated to in-depth analyses of corruption. Their research carries out detailed case studies, highlighting corruption as a process immersed in complex human interactions which do not allow for comparisons that transcend time and space.

The recent anticorruption agenda in Brazil has focused on case studies, especially on the study of corruption scandals – according to Chaia and

Teixeira (2001), the majority of corruption studies in Brazil deal with analyses of major scandals, which have received special media attention. Taylor and Buranelli (2007), for example, analyzed six corruption scandals to understand how accountability institutions in Brazil worked together in order to tackle corruption.

After the Lava Jato investigation, corruption gained prominence in the country and generated a new flow of corruption studies focused on scandals. Lava Jato refers to Latin America's most widely known corruption scheme. Related events began unfolding in Brazil, in March of 2014. Construction companies were discovered to have been colluding with employees of Brazil's state-owned oil company to win public works contracts. The oil company's employees took bribes, while politicians obtained kickbacks as personal gifts or campaign donations (For more information, see <https://cgeg.sipa.columbia.edu/policy-briefs-lava-jato>). Over the last years, this Operation was responsible for a series of studies based on its findings. The problem with these case studies, besides the issues with generalization, is that selections based on media attention tend to refer to cases that are given greater priority than would usually be assigned to a case.

Conclusion

In line with the international agenda, the Brazilian academia has, in the last decades, undertaken the task of comprehending corruption. From the development of corruption measurements that take into consideration administrative data to the studies on the biggest corruption scheme in Latin America, corruption has been a growing area of interest in Brazil. Even so, there is room for improvement: we still need to use the measurements and tools available to us critically in order to engage in comparative studies with other countries; we must develop our own corruption measurements, especially ones that are appropriate for the local level; furthermore, we must use more robust theories – that view the phenomenon from the country's perspective without falling into the trap of the essentialization, – and

more robust methodologies, – that go beyond case studies and administrative data.

In recent years, the country has experienced a solid increase in laws and institutions that promote transparency and accountability. While progress has been made to combat corruption, no overarching policies have been set in place to address the structural causes of corruption throughout the country. It becomes necessary to understand the anticorruption institutional architecture; how it could be strengthened; how coordinated accountability institutions and efforts have been made; how could we strengthen accountability, fight corruption, and safeguard the country's democracy at the same time.

One of the biggest challenges for this research area now is to engage discussions on corruption with democratic theory. Is it possible to defend an intrinsic connection between democratic principles and corruption control? What are the costs of corruption for the country? Have the recent scandals promoted political instability? What are the unintended consequences of the fight against corruption? Surely, it is urgent to link the anti-corruption agenda with a broader defense of civil and political liberties, as well as human rights. This has been a missing link in the anticorruption agenda in general, but it must be taken seriously in a country whose political leaders claim to fight against corruption while they undermine basic citizens' rights.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Accountability](#)
- ▶ [Accountability Systems, Brazil](#)
- ▶ [Corruption](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Probity in Public Service](#)
- ▶ [Integrity and Corruption](#)
- ▶ [Integrity in the Public Sector](#)
- ▶ [Political Corruption](#)
- ▶ [Public Administration and Corruption](#)
- ▶ [Public Attitudes and Corruption](#)
- ▶ [Public Corruption](#)

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