

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



The foundational effects of gender: Exploring Latin American elites' perceptions of corruption

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Abstract

Do women perceive corruption differently from men and why? Using elite survey data from over 3000 Latin American legislators nested in 49 country-years, we explore who perceives corruption as an important national problem. We find that women legislators place more importance on corruption than men. We further examine three potential mechanisms to understand why: support for effective states, power marginalization, and corruption salience. We explore whether these mechanisms work through pathways of moderation or mediation. We find little support for hypotheses that gender interacts with these factors, but we do find that gender mediates who supports effective states and who is marginalized from power. In both the moderation and mediation analyses, we continue to find an underlying, robust effect of being a woman on rating corruption's importance. Thus, while debate over mechanisms remains, gender is foundational to explaining elites' corruption perceptions. Women consistently perceive corruption as more important than men.

KEYWORDS

corruption, elite attitudes, gender, gender stereotypes, Latin America

1 | INTRODUCTION

What does women's presence in elected office mean for corruption? A recent review suggests that more women in office leads to less corruption (Alexander, 2021), but considerable debate exists about the mechanisms linking elites' gender to corruption attitudes and behavior. One contributing factor may be that gender shapes who perceives corruption as problematic. If gender influences women elites to perceive corruption as a more important national problem than men, these differences could matter for whether and when women's increased descriptive representation affects corruption rates.

Exactly why women's corruption attitudes may diverge from those of men remains debated. For some, the explanation lies with gender role socialization, which may lead women to be more law-abiding and less risk-averse (Cumming et al., 2015; Dollar et al., 2001). Others look to gendered processes in society and politics. As

a structurally marginalized social group, women are more likely than men to benefit from effective bureaucracies that deliver social welfare and protect rights, for instance (Alexander, 2021; Alexander et al., 2019; Stensöta et al., 2015). As politicians navigate gender role stereotypes, women legislators may adapt their views in order to conform to voters' expectations about women's greater honesty, thereby avoiding sanctions for violating gender norms (Barnes et al., 2020; Barnes & Beaulieu, 2014, 2019; Eggers et al., 2018; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Women officeholders may also criticize corruption because they cannot access its benefits: women elites are more likely to be outside the "old boys' networks" that typically manage opportunities to engage in and gain advantages from corruption (Bjarnegård, 2013; Daby, 2021; Goetz, 2007). Though they suggest different mechanisms, these explanations all identify how gendered social structures and political processes shape women's corruption perceptions,

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leading women's attitudes about corruption to differ from those of men.

Yet when it comes to political elites, these mechanisms are often tested indirectly, as scholars usually lack direct measures of what elites think. Most studies exploring how gender shapes corruption perceptions use mass public opinion surveys or survey experiments that vary the gender and corrupt behavior of the hypothetical elite featured in the vignette. We build on this research by leveraging elite survey data, where lawmakers are asked their corruption perceptions directly. Our data come from the 2010–2022 waves of the Latin American Elites Database from the University of Salamanca (PELA, by its Spanish acronym), which is fielded to members of Latin America's lower or unicameral houses following each legislative election.

The PELA survey allows us to explore who perceives corruption as an important national problem, with an emphasis on whether and why women perceive corruption differently from men. We examine whether women perceive corruption as a more important national problem compared to men, finding consistent support that being a woman matters for corruption perceptions. We further examine three potential mechanisms that help us understand why women differ from men in their corruption perceptions. The first mechanism focuses on support for effective states: corrupt states cannot deliver effective social services and rights protections, and women especially benefit from these public goods (the *effective states* hypothesis). The second examines power marginalization: legislators with less experience are more likely to be excluded from opportunities to access and benefit from corruption, and women are often outside prestigious networks that allow them to accumulate more opportunities (the *power marginalization* hypothesis). The third suggests that legislators' attitudes respond to actual corruption levels and to voters' gendered expectations that women should react more adversely to high levels of corruption (the *corruption salience* hypothesis). Together, these mechanisms suggest that women are not “naturally” more honest or risk-averse, but that gendered processes in society and in politics influence how women may think about corruption differently than men.

Yet the mechanisms vary in their potential causal pathways. The corruption salience hypothesis suggests not only a direct link between corruption perceptions and the context but also that context and legislator gender should interact: all legislators should rate corruption as problematic when corruption is high and therefore salient, but gendered expectations may lead women to express greater opprobrium than men. The first two hypotheses, however, suggest alternate potential causal pathways. In one pathway, the causal variables may continue to affect corruption perceptions directly. Women, those who support effective states, and those who are marginalized from power should all perceive

corruption as more problematic, but there may be an interaction effect where women “supporters” and women outsiders perceive corruption as even more problematic than similarly situated men *and* more problematic than women “non-supporters” and women insiders. For instance, women who are political insiders have gained access to elite networks, and so may be more tolerant of corruption than women who are political outsiders. In another pathway, gender may still directly affect corruption attitudes, but gender's effect here may be partially mediated by legislators' support for effective states or their power marginalization. Gender shapes why women more than men favor effective states and why women more than men are outside power, and then these variables—support for effective states and power marginalization—directly shape corruption perceptions. The first pathway is one of moderation, and the second one of mediation.

Since the literature offers reasons to suspect either moderation or mediation in the case of support for effective states and power marginalization, we pursue two alternate modeling strategies. First, we use standard regression models with interaction terms to evaluate all three hypotheses (effective states, power marginalization, and corruption salience). Second, we use a mediation model to evaluate the two hypotheses for which the pathway could be different (effective states and power marginalization). Drawing on data from over 3000 elite respondents across 17 countries over 13 years (2010–2022), our dependent variable is legislators' ratings of corruption as an important national problem on a scale of 1–10. To capture legislators' support for an effective state, we use the PELA question about legislators' preferences for states that help people solve problems. To operationalize legislators' outsider status and thus marginalization from power, we measure their past political experience on a scale from low to high. And to proxy corruption salience, we look at the country's actual corruption level, following studies indicating that all legislators perceive corruption as problematic when corruption is high and therefore important to voters (Márquez Romo & Romero-Vidal, 2023).

In our first analysis, we find that women are more likely than men to perceive corruption as an important national problem. We then turn to evaluating the moderation and mediation pathways. We find little support for moderation. Legislators who are women, who support effective states, who are political outsiders, and who govern in high-corruption contexts are more likely to rate corruption as problematic, but gender does not interact with the latter three factors. Said another way, women “supporters” or women outsiders do not perceive corruption as more problematic relative to similarly situated men and differently situated women. This null finding for moderation holds when we pool all countries together, and when we split the sample between low- and high-corruption

contexts. In high-corruption contexts, however, we do find some support for corruption salience: it is when corruption is high and therefore resonant with voters—but not when it is low—that women, more than men, view corruption as problematic. In our second analysis, we find support for the mediation pathway, wherein gender shapes corruption perceptions indirectly: gender shapes which legislators support effective states and which legislators enter with less experience, and then these factors shape which legislators rate corruption as problematic. Yet a significant direct effect of gender on corruption perceptions remains. Thus, the effect of gender is partially but not entirely absorbed by the effect of legislators' support for effective states and the effect of legislators having less political experience.

Overall, we show that there is an underlying, robust effect of being a woman on perceiving corruption as more important. Women consistently perceive corruption as more important than men. This effect holds no matter whether the causal pathways modeling the gendered effects of social structures or political institutions are conceived as ones of moderation or mediation. This finding indicates that the persistent link between gender and corruption perceptions extends to women elites in Latin America, bolstering research that shows women have different corruption attitudes relative to men. Gender is foundational for legislators' corruption perceptions.

We also contribute additional evidence to the debate about the exact mechanisms shaping this link. First, we find some reason to believe that corruption salience may lead women elites to perceive corruption as important when corruption is actually high. Second, we generate evidence consistent with the effective state hypothesis and the power marginalization hypothesis through mediation. To our knowledge, this is the first study to suggest that effective states and power marginalization shape corruption perceptions via mediation rather than moderation. This result underscores the importance of pinpointing exactly *why* women perceive corruption differently than men: if gender affects elites' corruption perceptions through mediation, then gender is working through legislators' attitudes and lived experiences, which in turn influence who perceives corruption as important.

This paper proceeds as follows. To begin, we theorize the causal factors shaping who might perceive corruption as problematic and consider how gender may moderate or mediate these factors. Then, we analyze the effect of gender on corruption perceptions and the pathways linking gender to these perceptions. First, we explore the causal pathway based on moderation. Second, finding little support for our hypotheses that gender interacts with support for effective states or power marginalization to shape legislators' corruption perceptions, we turn to the causal pathway based on

mediation. We conclude by reflecting on how our results together contribute evidence that advances scholars' understanding of which elites perceive corruption as important, and when and why these elites are more likely to be women.

2 | EXPLAINING WOMEN ELITES' PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

Whether and why more women in power equates to less corruption remains an enduring question in comparative politics research (Alexander & Bågenholm, 2018; Bauhr et al., 2019; Esarey & Chirillo, 2013; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018; Grimes & Wängnerud, 2018; Jha & Sarangi, 2018; Pereira & Fernandez-Vazquez, 2023; Watson & Moreland, 2014). Studies examining whether the proportion of women officeholders corresponds with actual levels of corruption have found a positive relationship in electoral democracies (Bauhr et al., 2019; Esarey & Chirillo, 2013; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018, 2019; Jha & Sarangi, 2018). Other studies pivot from corruption levels to corruption perceptions, finding that higher proportions of women officials lower public perceptions that malfeasance is occurring (Barnes et al., 2018; Barnes & Beaulieu, 2014; Bauhr et al., 2019; Watson & Moreland, 2014).

Considerable debate exists, however, over the mechanisms linking women's descriptive representation to corruption. Some scholars point out that women are more risk-averse and law-abiding (Charness & Gneezy, 2012). Alternatively, women could be as likely as men to engage in wrongdoing but have fewer opportunities because they are political outsiders (Bauhr & Charron, 2020; Goetz, 2007). Others argue that observers expect women politicians to be more honest (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019; Wiesehomeier & Verge, 2020) and that women politicians experience disproportionate punishment when they violate this expectation (Waylen & Southern, 2021). Women officeholders might therefore eschew corruption to avoid paying the costs associated with violating gender stereotypes, as they rationally anticipate being held to higher and double standards when compared to men (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Across all these studies, the dependent variable shifts from countries' actual corruption levels to voters' perceptions of officeholders' attitudes and behavior.

Still, one consistent implication is that gender shapes individuals' orientations toward corruption. Mass surveys routinely find that women respondents perceive corruption as more problematic than men (Melgar et al., 2010; Swamy et al., 2003; Torgler & Valev, 2010). Elite surveys exploring corruption attitudes are less common, but one study found (but did not theorize or discuss) that being female is positively and significantly associated with rating corruption as

problematic (Márquez Romo & Romero-Vidal, 2023, p. 547). Accordingly, we expect a direct link between legislator gender and their corruption perceptions:

H1. Women legislators will be more likely to perceive corruption as an important national problem than men legislators.

Yet why might these gender differences exist? Rather than suppose an automatic link between individuals' biological sex and their dispositions, gender and politics scholars look at how ideas about men's and women's "appropriate" traits and roles influence the way men and women experience society and politics. They suppose that gendered social structures and political institutions explain some of the attitudinal differences that emerge between men and women. The PELA data allow us to identify and explore three ways gendered social structures and political institutions could explain divergences in men's and women's corruption perceptions: through women's greater likelihood to benefit from effective states; through women's unequal access to political power; and through women elites' conformity to gender role expectations, meaning expectations that they will behave honestly and combat wrongdoing while in office.

2.1 | Support for an effective state

Corruption undermines state capacity, as corrupt states cannot deliver effective social services and rights protections. This reasoning indicates that any legislator who prioritizes a strong administrative state should see corruption as an important problem. Still, scholars contend that because women remain a structurally marginalized and vulnerable social group, women *especially* care about securing state capacity (Alexander et al., 2019; Bauhr et al., 2019; Stensöta et al., 2015).

Effective states carry unique benefits for women, as women are more likely to be employed in low-wage occupations and thus more likely to depend on social protection and social insurance (PNUD, 2023). Moreover, effective states enforce laws that promote women's equality relative to men, including their rights to work and to participate in politics; to inherit property and to receive fair treatment in family law; and to access reproductive health services. In Latin America especially, strong links between corruption and impunity for femicide and violence against women further strengthen women's incentives to support effective states (PNUD, 2023). For these reasons, past studies of gender and corruption saw support for effective states as one mechanism linking women's presence in office to less corruption (Alexander et al., 2019; Bauhr et al., 2019; Stensöta et al., 2015).

Building on this intuition, we posit three ways that support for effective states could affect elites' attitudes about corruption. First comes the direct effect: all effective-state "supporters" should think corruption is important. Second comes how this belief may interact with gender: given their greater likelihood to benefit from high-capacity states, women supporters will think corruption is more important than men supporters. Third comes the mediation effect: the gendered social structures that make women more concerned with effective states explain *who* wants an effective state and preferences over effective states explain which legislators perceive corruption as more important. We list these hypotheses as follows:

H2A. Legislators who support effective states will be more likely to perceive corruption as an important national problem.

H2B. (moderation). Women legislators who support effective states will perceive corruption as an important national problem more than men legislators who support effective states.

H2C. (mediation). Women will support effective states more than men and then those with higher support for effective states will be more likely to perceive corruption as an important national problem.

2.2 | Power marginalization

A longstanding explanation for corruption perceptions among political elites relates to those who can and cannot benefit from corruption. The reasoning holds that elites who are outside power and therefore cannot leverage corruption's gains will be more critical that corruption exists. For instance, legislators in opposition parties cannot access state resources for illicit purposes, and so rate corruption as more important than legislators in governing parties (Márquez Romo & Romero-Vidal, 2023).

For gender scholars, power marginalization affects women especially. Women remain underrepresented in most legislatures, recent gains notwithstanding. Women face sexist and discriminatory treatment within political parties (Bjarnegård, 2013) and within parliaments (O'Brien & Piscopo, 2019). Within parliaments, they hold fewer prestigious positions: they comprise just 22% of speakers worldwide, for instance (IPU, 2023). Women's access to political power remains dominated by "old boys' networks" that manage resources and opportunities, including campaign funding (Maddens et al., 2023; Piscopo et al., 2022; Smulders et al., 2019) and patronage

and clientelism (Bjarnegård, 2013; Daby, 2021; Goetz, 2007; Stockemer, 2011; Stockemer & Sundström, 2019). Women's marginalization from political power places them uniquely on the "losing side" when it comes to accessing and benefiting from corruption—a fact that voters recognize when assessing women politicians' probity (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019; Wiesehomeier & Verge, 2020). If women cannot engage in and benefit from corruption, they face greater incentives to dislike corruption and to prioritize rooting it out (Bauhr et al., 2019).

Scholars often use experience to proxy whether scholars are inside political networks and thus can access the resources associated with officeholding (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2014; Pereira & Fernandez-Vazquez, 2023; Wiesehomeier & Verge, 2020). The effects of experience are gendered. For instance, first-time men candidates raise more money relative to first-time women candidates, suggesting that men newcomers can enter networks and gain resources and opportunities faster than women newcomers (Piscopo et al., 2022). Yet the gender gap in funding disappears among women and men incumbents, suggesting that men's advantage diminishes as women's and men's experience converges (Piscopo et al., 2022). More on point, French municipalities with new women mayors have less corruption, for example, but municipalities with incumbent women have no less corruption than municipalities led by men (Bauhr & Charron, 2020; though Pereira & Fernandez-Vazquez, 2023 report null findings in the Spanish case).

Putting the literature together, we thus posit three ways power marginalization could affect corruption perceptions. As with support for effective states, we posit direct effects, interaction effects, and mediation effects. First comes the direct effect: legislators outside power networks will perceive corruption as more problematic than legislators inside power networks. Second comes the way gender makes power marginalization more pronounced for women: since women outsiders are doubly marginalized (for being a woman and for being outside power networks), they will perceive corruption as more problematic than similarly situated men and insider women. Third comes mediation: gender explains who is inside and outside power and this variation in status, in turn, explains corruption attitudes.

H3A. Legislators with less power will be more likely than legislators with more power to perceive corruption as an important national problem.

H3B. (moderation). Women with less power will be more likely than men with less power to perceive corruption as an important national problem.

H3C. (mediation). Being a woman legislator increases the likelihood of power marginalization and those marginalized from power are more likely to perceive corruption an important problem.

2.3 | Corruption salience

Corruption perceptions may also respond to contexts where corruption matters. Legislators may shape their attitudes in response to what they think voters view as important. For instance, Márquez Romo and Romero-Vidal (2023) argue that governing party legislators will generally not perceive corruption as important, since they benefit from access to state resources and would not risk censure by criticizing their own party's leadership. Yet when voters become restive about the economy, governing party legislators too begin to perceive corruption as more problematic: they fear voters' sanction for increasing corruption and express greater opprobrium to avoid blame.

By extension, women legislators may also adapt their corruption perceptions to the context, as they might anticipate that gender stereotypes could condition whom voters expect to see denouncing corruption when corruption is salient. Generally, women politicians face greater punishment when failing to conform to stereotypical expectations about women's "natural" honesty and morality (Giudetti et al., 2023). Women chief executives are more likely to be accused of corruption (Schramm et al., 2021), and they receive lower public approval ratings during corruption scandals than men (Reyes-Housholder, 2020). During the UK expenses scandal, women Members of Parliament who abused their expense accounts received more media criticism and lost their seats more frequently relative to men MPs who also abused their accounts (Waylen & Southern, 2021). Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff was impeached for financial malpractice despite no evidence of personal financial enrichment, whereas her male successor faced more serious charges but never endured impeachment proceedings (Ansell, 2018). Survey experiments show that Mexican voters (but not Brazilian voters) would punish corrupt women more harshly than corrupt men (Batista Pereira, 2021).

Even as debate continues about whether and which voters punish corrupt women more severely (Barnes et al., 2020; Le Foulon & Reyes-Housholder, 2021; Martínez-Rosón, 2016), the *impression* that women will face greater sanction could alone shape women politicians' behavior (Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2018). Women elites anticipate that stereotypes shape parties' and voters' perception of their leadership skills, adjusting their behavior accordingly (Bauer & Santia, 2022; Windett, 2014). Indeed, women are more likely than

men to run anti-corruption campaigns (Alexander & Bågenholm, 2018).

Women may face additional career-related incentives to position themselves as “political cleaners” (Goetz, 2007) when corruption levels are actually high. Real-world evidence supports the notion that women politicians gain advantages when voters are unhappy about corruption. In these contexts, parties nominate more women candidates (Funk et al., 2019), presidents become more likely to adopt gender quotas (Valdini, 2019), and prime ministers appoint women as finance ministers (Armstrong et al., 2022).

Tying these findings together leads us to two ways that the context of corruption could shape legislators' perceptions of corruption as an important problem. First comes a direct effect: when corruption is high, legislators anticipate voter dissatisfaction, adjust their corruption orientations, and rate corruption as problematic. Second comes the gendered effect, where women—even more than men—adjust their attitudes to criticize corruption in high-corruption contexts, to avoid gender penalties. These adjustments need not be insincere; rather, legislators are rationally updating their attitudes as the political situation evolves. We do not anticipate a mediation pathway related to corruption salience, as individual legislator gender cannot explain national corruption scores.

H4A. Legislators will perceive corruption as more problematic in contexts where corruption is actually high, relative to contexts where corruption is actually low.

H4B. Even as all legislators' perceptions of corruption as problematic will rise as actual corruption rises, women will place higher importance on corruption relative to men.

3 | DATA AND METHOD

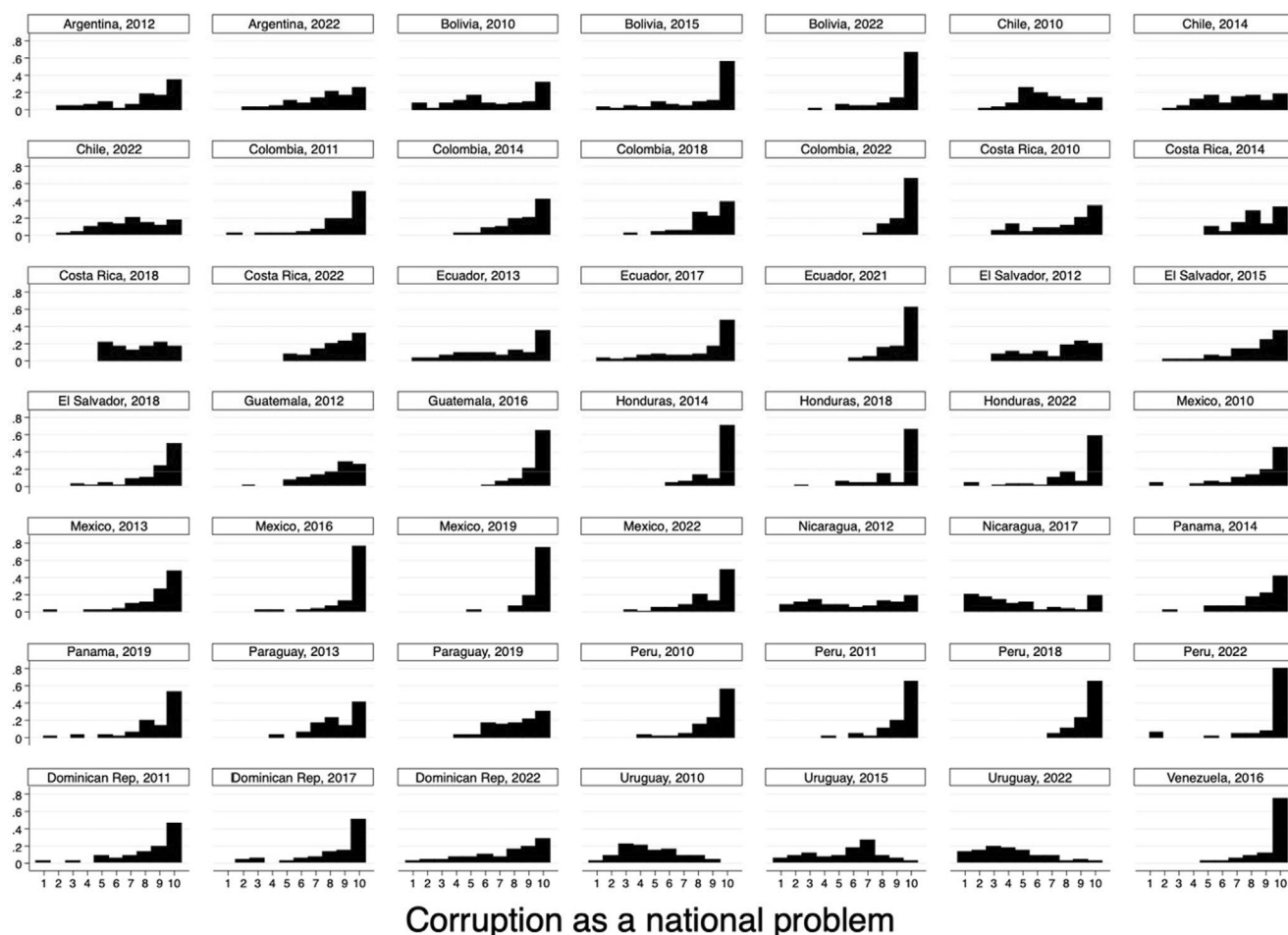
To study legislators' corruption perceptions, we built a dataset from the University of Salamanca's Latin American Elites Database (PELA, by its Spanish acronym). The PELA surveys ask questions that capture information about elites' political opinions, policy preferences, and political careers. Surveys are conducted in the lower or unicameral house after each country's legislative election. Enumerators collect the data via in-person interviews with each legislator, but legislators are told that data collection itself is anonymous and informed consent is obtained. Analyses using PELA data have confirmed that the anonymity allows legislators to largely express their own attitudes (rather than those of their party), with few social desirability effects (Alexander et al., 2023; Carnes & Lupu, 2015; Saiegh, 2009). Enumerators gather a representative

sample, and legislators' responses are weighted according to their political party's size in the chamber. To further protect respondents' anonymity, legislators whose parties obtained five or fewer seats have their party identification recorded as “other.”

To measure our dependent variable, we use the survey question asking legislators if they think that corruption is an important national problem. This question is well suited to studying corruption perception, as it captures legislators' sense of corruption as troublesome, which is distinct from legislators' assessment of actual corruption levels. (Legislators' assessment of actual corruption levels could, of course, influence their answer, a possibility accounted for in our corruption salience hypothesis.) Respondents answer on a scale ranging from 10=very important problem to 1=not an important problem. We draw on surveys between 2010 and 2022, which all asked this question in this way. Our final dataset covers all 17 Spanish-speaking Latin American countries (all save Cuba), with at least two waves for each country.¹ In total, the dataset includes responses from 3767 legislators in 49 country-years.

The dependent variable is not normally distributed. Forty-three percent of legislators answer 10, meaning that corruption is a very important problem. The proportion of respondents choosing each point on the scale then steadily decreases, from 15% choosing 9 to 2% choosing 1. In most countries in most years, a plurality of respondents selects 10. Only Chile (2010, 2014, 2022), Costa Rica (2018), Nicaragua (2012, 2017), and Uruguay (2010, 2015, 2022) deviate from this pattern, but in all these cases a plurality of legislators still mark corruption as more important relative to less important. This distribution underscores how corruption is a salient problem in Latin America, one recognized by elites and voters alike (Canache & Allison, 2005; Elia & Schwindt-Bayer, 2022; Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2022). Figure 1 shows the distribution of Latin American legislators' answers across all 49 country-years (see Appendix A for tabular frequency distributions for the full dataset and for each country-year).

Our independent variables include factors at the individual and country levels. To test H1 (*woman*), we proxy gender by using legislators' self-reported sex (0=man, 1=woman). To test H2 (*effective states*), we look to legislators' answers on the question that asks whether the state, rather than individuals, should be responsible for the well-being of people (1=strongly disagrees to 7=strongly agrees). To test H3 (*power marginalization*), we use the common proxy of political experience, creating an additive scale based on questions about legislators' previous posts: whether the legislator previously had positions in (i) a political party; (ii) an appointed office; (iii) an elected office other than the lower or single house of congress; or (iv) the lower or single house of congress (meaning they are *not* first-term lawmakers).



Corruption as a national problem

FIGURE 1 Corruption as a problem in the country (%). Source: Authors' elaboration based on PELA.

Legislators get 1 point for each question: those who say *yes* to all four questions receive a score of 4 (meaning they have all forms of political experience and are in at least their second term in congress) and those who say *no* to all four questions receive a 0 (meaning they have no political experience and are serving their first term in congress).

To test *H4 (corruption salience)*, we use actual corruption levels and ask how legislators' gender shapes corruption perceptions given low and high contexts of corruption. Recognizing that considerable debate exists over how to measure corruption at the country level (Charron, 2021; Suárez-Collado & García-Rendón, 2020, p. 116), we follow Márquez Romo and Romero-Vidal (2023) and others (McMann et al., 2020; Mechkova et al., 2022; Stockemer & Sundström, 2019) in using the Political Corruption Index from V-Dem (McMann et al., 2016). This index includes measures of several types of corruption (such as bribery, theft, and embezzlement), which cover acts of corruption in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches (Coppedge et al., 2024, pp. 305–306). The index ranges from 0 to 1, where values closest to 0 indicate less corruption and values closer to 1 indicate significant corruption.

We also include a number of individual-level control variables in our analyses, as mass survey research has identified additional factors shaping individual determinants of corruption perception (Bauhr & Charron, 2020; Canache & Allison, 2005; Martínez-Rosón, 2016; Melgar et al., 2010). We control whether legislators belong to the government or to the opposition (dummy, 1=opposition) as well as legislators' ideology (1-left 10-right scale), age (continuous), education (categorical measure based on level of studies completed), and income (categorical measure).² Opposition legislators have clear incentives to perceive and denounce corruption, compared to their peers in the governing party (Marquez Romo and Romero-Vidal, 2023). Conservative ideology and being older may both be positively correlated with low tolerance for rule-breaking and therefore a greater likelihood to perceive corruption as problematic. Those with more education may also perceive corruption as more problematic, since they are better positioned to understand its corrosive effects. Lastly, those with more income are perhaps better insulated from corruption's financial costs and are consequently expected to perceive corruption as less problematic.

As for the country-level factors, we include the proportion of women legislators when the survey was fielded, given research showing a relationship between women's descriptive representation and overall corruption perceptions (Watson & Moreland, 2014). We use the proportion of women in the lower chamber of parliament reported by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2023), the standard measure in the field. The two country-level variables—actual levels of corruption and the proportion of women in parliament—are not correlated ($r=0.08$).³ Descriptive statistics for all variables are found in Appendix B.

We use different models to test the different hypotheses. First, we explore our expectations related to the direct and moderation effects of legislator gender (H1), support for effective states (H2A and H2B), power marginalization (H3A and H3B), and corruption salience (H4A and H4B). For the latter, we use mixed-effects ordered logit regressions, with our analyses divided between a focus on individual determinants (gender, support for effective states,

and power marginalization) and national determinants (corruption salience). Second, we explore our expectations related to the mediating effects of support for effective states and power marginalization (Hypotheses H2C and H3C) using a mediation analysis.

4 | INDIVIDUAL DETERMINANTS OF CORRUPTION PERCEPTION

Table 1 reports three models examining how legislators' gender, support for an effective state, and power marginalization affect perceptions of corruption as an important national problem. Model 1 tests for the direct effects, and Models 2 and 3 introduce the interaction terms that test for the moderation pathway. We run ordered logistic regressions, which assume the ordinal nature of the 10-point scale of the dependent variable. Nonetheless, we also ran alternative models,

TABLE 1 Determinants of corruption perception among elites (I).

	(1)	(2)	(3)
<i>Gender</i>			
Woman	0.20 (0.09)**	0.22 (0.18)	0.31 (0.27)
<i>Effective state</i>			
State responsible	0.06 (0.03)*	0.06 (0.03)*	0.07 (0.04)*
<i>Power marginalization</i>			
Experience	-0.17 (0.04)***	-0.17 (0.05)***	-0.17 (0.04)***
<i>Individual controls</i>			
Opposition	1.04 (0.15)***	1.04 (0.15)***	1.04 (0.15)***
Ideology	0.06 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)**
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Studies	0.06 (0.04)*	0.06 (0.04)*	0.06 (0.04)*
Income	0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
<i>Interactions</i>			
Woman × Experience		-0.01 (0.08)	
Woman × State responsible			-0.02 (0.05)
/cut1	-5.84 (0.55)	-5.84 (0.55)	-5.81 (0.57)
/cut2	-4.98 (0.50)	-4.97 (0.49)	-4.95 (0.51)
/cut3	-4.11 (0.46)	-4.11 (0.46)	-4.08 (0.47)
/cut4	-3.47 (0.46)	-3.46 (0.45)	-3.44 (0.47)
/cut5	-2.71 (0.44)	-2.70 (0.43)	-2.68 (0.45)
/cut6	-2.21 (0.42)	-2.20 (0.41)	-2.18 (0.43)
/cut7	-1.62 (0.40)	-1.62 (0.40)	-1.59 (0.42)
/cut8	-0.85 (0.39)	-0.85 (0.39)	-0.82 (0.41)
/cut9	-0.08 (0.39)	-0.08 (0.39)	-0.05 (0.41)
<i>N</i>	3193	3193	3193
Pseudo R^2	12.18	12.18	12.18

Note: Standard errors adjusted for 49 country-years in parenthesis. Fixed-effects ordered logistic regressions (country-year fixed-effects are not shown in the table; see Appendix C for the full models). Stata command *ologit*.

***<0.01; **<0.05; *<0.1.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on PELA.

both linear and logits, and they do not significantly differ from those displayed in the table (see [Appendix C](#)).⁴

Model 1 shows that gender, support for effective states, and power marginalization independently shape legislators' corruption perceptions. Women, those who agree that the state should help individuals solve problems, and legislators with less experience all rate corruption as more important (coefficients are statistically significant at the 5%, 10%, and 1% levels, respectively). We thus find reasonably strong support for [H1 \(woman\)](#) and [H3A \(power marginalization\)](#), and suggestive support for [H2A \(effective states\)](#). Yet Models 2 and 3, respectively, show that corruption perceptions are not jointly shaped by gender and support for an effective state (Hypothesis [H2B](#)) nor by gender and power marginalization (Hypothesis [H3B](#)). Further, including the interaction in Models 2 and 3 eliminates the statistical significance of gender itself. Despite strong theoretical reasons to expect that women who support effective states or have less political experience would perceive corruption as an important national problem more than their similarly situated men peers or differently situated women peers, the interaction terms are not statistically significant. The causal factors of support for effective states and power marginalization continue to matter individually, with power marginalization appearing especially robust. (Effective states and power marginalization are statistically significant at the 10% and 1% levels in all three models, respectively). Yet gender does not seem to affect women who hold these attitudes or who are marginalized from power differently relative to similarly situated men and to differently situated women.

In addition to the individual effects of gender, support for an effective state, and power marginalization, the control variables reveal intriguing patterns. Belonging to the opposition raises legislators' perceptions of corruption as important (statistically significant at 1% in all models). Age and income do not affect corruption perceptions. However, ideology and education do matter: rightists are more likely than leftists to perceive corruption as an important problem, consistent with studies positing that more conservative individuals express less tolerance for corruption (Martínez-Rosón, 2016). Similarly, more educated legislators rate corruption as more important.

4.1 | National-level determinants: Corruption salience

To test the corruption salience hypothesis ([H4A](#) and [H4B](#)), we explore how actual corruption levels may shape legislators' attitudes about corruption as an important problem. Since we include national-level variables here, instead of fixed-effects as in the previous models, we run a three-level mixed-effects regression, also ologit, with legislators nested in country-years, nested in countries. We switch our modeling strategy because our focus moves to an

aggregate-level variable, actual levels of corruption, as proxied by PCI. This multilevel approach follows other authors who analyze survey data where individual observations are nested in country-years and country-years are nested into countries, including authors analyzing the PELA surveys (Singer, 2023) and structurally similar datasets such as the Afrobarometer (García-Rivero & Clari, 2023). In our case, observations from over 3000 legislators are nested in 49 country-years, and country-years are nested in 17 countries.

The model in [Table 2](#) repeats the individual determinants from the previous models but adds the

TABLE 2 Determinants of corruption perception among elites (II).

	(1)	(2)
<i>Gender</i>		
Woman	0.20 (0.10)**	0.24 (0.18)
<i>Effective state</i>		
State responsible	0.06 (0.04)*	0.06 (0.04)*
<i>Power marginalization</i>		
Experience	−0.18 (0.03)***	−0.18 (0.03)***
<i>Individual controls</i>		
Opposition	1.03 (0.17)***	1.03 (0.17)***
Ideology	0.06 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)**
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Studies	0.07 (0.04)*	0.07 (0.04)*
Income	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
<i>Aggregate</i>		
PCI	1.96 (0.98)**	1.97 (0.97)**
WMP	1.22 (1.39)	1.22 (1.39)
<i>Interaction</i>		
Woman × PCI		−0.08 (0.38)
<i>Constant</i>		
/cut1	−2.41 (0.65)***	−2.41 (0.65)***
/cut2	−1.55 (0.57)***	−1.55 (0.57)***
/cut3	−0.69 (0.60)	−0.69 (0.60)
/cut4	−0.06 (0.62)	−0.05 (0.62)
/cut5	0.69 (0.62)	0.70 (0.62)
/cut6	1.19 (0.61)*	1.19 (0.61)*
/cut7	1.77 (0.61)***	1.77 (0.60)***
/cut8	2.53 (0.59)***	2.54 (0.58)***
/cut9	3.30 (0.59)***	3.30 (0.59)***
N, Individual level	3193	3193
N, Country-years	49	49
N, Countries	17	17

Note: Multilevel ologit regression. Standard errors adjusted for 17 clusters in country in parenthesis. Stata command *meologit*.

***<0.01; **<0.05; *0.1.

Source: own elaboration from PELA.

national-level factors of corruption levels and women in parliament and adds the interaction between gender and actual corruption levels. The results support our expectation in Hypothesis H4A: PCI is statistically significant at the 5% level, indicating that legislators perceive corruption as more important when corruption is high. Yet as with the models above, we do not find support for the hypothesized interaction between gender and actual corruption levels. We do continue to see the direct effects of gender, support for effective states, and power marginalization repeated here in the multi-level model (the coefficients are statistically significant at the same level as in Table 1). Similarly, the controls follow the same patterns. The number of women in parliament (WMP) is not statistically significant.

4.2 | High- and low-corruption contexts: Different patterns?

We thus find no support for our expectations that gender interacts with legislators' attitudes and political experience to shape corruption perceptions. Here, we explore whether these results are explained by the structure of our data (rather than the limitations of the theory). Legislators already perceive corruption as maximally important: as shown in Figure 1, most legislators rate corruption's importance at 10, the maximum value on the scale. This pattern reduces variation on the dependent variable and reduces our ability to detect how legislators' perceptions might change as the independent variables change. Yet we do see more variation in the dependent variable among three of the four countries with the *lowest* PCI scores: Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay have the least corruption among the dataset's 17 countries *and* the most variation on the dependent variables for all their country-years in the dataset (Chile 2010, 2014, 2022; Costa Rica 2018; and Uruguay 2010, 2015, 2022). Averaging the PCI scores by country-years reveals that the least-corrupt country is Uruguay (PCI=0.064), followed by Chile (0.071) and Costa Rica (0.155). A jump then occurs, as the next least-corrupt countries are Colombia (0.429), Argentina (0.438), and Panama (0.534). The remaining 11 countries all score 0.6 or higher, and the most-corrupt country is Nicaragua (0.852). In sum, Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica have comparably low corruption (below 0.2 on the PCI), and the remaining Latin American countries have higher levels (between 0.4 and 0.9), with the majority having very high levels (0.6 or above).⁵

Here, we re-run our main individual-level models dividing the sample between the low-corruption countries, meaning Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, and the moderate to high-corruption countries, meaning the remainder. The split sample allows us to explore how gender (H1), support for an effective state (H2), and political experience (H3) could affect corruption

perceptions conditional on country groupings, rather than controlling for the country-level variables as we did previously (see Table 2). We split the sample based on the considerable difference between the data structure for the low-corruption countries and the medium-to high-corruption countries.

Table 3 shows the results for Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay on one side (models 1–2–3) and the remaining countries (models 4–5–6). These models contain only individual-level determinations, using ordered logistic regressions in order to follow our initial models (see Table 1). In low-corruption contexts, women are not more likely than men to perceive corruption as problematic. However, women are more likely than men to perceive corruption as problematic in high-corruption contexts, offering suggestive support for H4B. Turning to our other factors, the significance of support for an effective state—which was only marginally significant at the 10% level in the pooled sample (Table 1)—disappears. Power marginalization continues to directly shape corruption perceptions no matter the context (statistically significant in most models), as does opposition (statistically significant at 1% in most models) and ideology (statistically significant at 10% in low-corruption contexts and at 5% in high-corruption contexts). Overall, these results comport with our overall conclusion: we lack strong evidence to suspect that gender interacts with other factors to shape legislators' corruption perceptions.

5 | DETERMINANTS OF CORRUPTION PERCEPTION: THE MEDIATION PATHWAY

Women's corruption attitudes diverge from those of men, but the statistical evidence offers unclear answers as to why. Theoretically, gendered social structures and political institutions shape elite women's experience of politics, leading them to perceive corruption as more problematic. Yet we find limited support for this pathway as one of moderation. In our regression models, gender and power marginalization have consistent, statistically significant effects on legislators' corruption perceptions, and support for an effective state and actual corruption levels have some effect in certain models, but none of the moderation tests (the interaction terms) are significant.

Here, we turn to the mediation pathways and our mediation hypotheses. We propose (i) that women will support effective states more than men and that through this higher support for effective states, legislators will be more likely to perceive corruption as an important national problem (Hypothesis 2C) and (ii) that being a woman legislator reduces the likelihood of having political power and that through this power marginalization legislators will be more likely to perceive corruption as an important national problem (Hypothesis 3C). Thus,

TABLE 3 Determinants of corruption perception among elites (III): Low and high corruption.

	Low corruption			High corruption		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Gender</i>						
Woman	0.11 (0.18)	0.31 (0.27)	−0.04 (0.49)	0.22 (0.11)**	0.20 (0.22)	0.40 (0.31)
<i>Effective state</i>						
State responsible	0.12 (0.08)	0.12 (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)
<i>Power marginalization</i>						
Experience	−0.14 (0.07)**	−0.11 (0.07)	−0.15 (0.07)**	−0.18 (0.05)***	−0.18 (0.06)***	−0.18 (0.05)***
<i>Individual controls</i>						
Opposition	0.58 (0.24)**	0.58 (0.24)**	0.58 (0.25)**	1.18 (0.18)***	1.18 (0.18)***	1.18 (0.18)***
Ideology	0.05 (0.03)*	0.05 (0.03)*	0.05 (0.03)*	0.06 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)**
Age	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Studies	−0.02 (0.07)	−0.03 (0.07)	−0.02 (0.08)	0.09 (0.04)**	0.09 (0.04)**	0.09 (0.04)**
Income	−0.17 (0.11)	−0.17 (0.11)	−0.17 (0.11)	0.04 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
<i>Interactions</i>						
Woman × Experience		−0.13 (0.12)			0.01 (0.09)	
Woman × State responsible			0.03 (0.10)			−0.03 (0.06)
/cut1	−2.29 (0.73)	−2.26 (0.74)	−2.33 (0.70)	−5.13 (0.51)	−5.13 (0.50)	−5.08 (0.52)
/cut2	−1.13 (0.72)	−1.11 (0.73)	−1.17 (0.71)	−4.39 (0.46)	−4.39 (0.46)	−4.34 (0.48)
/cut3	0.02 (0.79)	0.04 (0.80)	−0.02 (0.79)	−3.70 (0.47)	−3.70 (0.46)	−3.65 (0.48)
/cut4	0.85 (0.84)	0.88 (0.85)	0.81 (0.84)	−3.18 (0.47)	−3.19 (0.47)	−3.14 (0.49)
/cut5	1.68 (0.79)	1.71 (0.80)	1.64 (0.81)	−2.48 (0.46)	−2.49 (0.45)	−2.43 (0.48)
/cut6	2.32 (0.76)	2.34 (0.77)	2.28 (0.78)	−2.05 (0.45)	−2.05 (0.44)	−2.00 (0.46)
/cut7	3.04 (0.74)	3.07 (0.76)	3.00 (0.76)	−1.51 (0.43)	−1.52 (0.42)	−1.47 (0.45)
/cut8	3.78 (0.74)	3.81 (0.76)	3.74 (0.77)	−0.72 (0.42)	−0.72 (0.41)	−0.67 (0.44)
/cut9	4.58 (0.75)	4.60 (0.77)	4.53 (0.77)	0.06 (0.42)	0.05 (0.41)	0.10 (0.44)
<i>N</i>	617	617	617	2576	2576	2576
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	9.49	9.51	9.49	9.67	9.67	9.68

Note: Standard errors adjusted for country-years (10 in models 4–5–6, 39 in models 7–8–9) in parenthesis. Fixed-effects ordered logistic regressions (country-year fixed-effects are not shown in the table; see [Appendix C](#) for the full models). Stata command *ologit*.

***<0.01; **<0.05; *<0.1.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on PELA.

it is perhaps not that gender, support for an effective state, and political experience all have independent effects on corruption perception, but that one shapes the others. Said another way, gender—being a woman—first shapes who supports an effective state and who is outside power. (We do not have a mediation hypothesis for corruption salience, as an individual legislator's gender cannot affect which countries have what corruption levels.)

Figure 2 displays the results of a mediation analysis with gender (being a woman) as the independent variable, political experience and support for an effective state as mediators, and corruption perception as the dependent variable, plus the individual-level controls (opposition, ideology, age, studies, and income; not shown). The full model appears in [Appendix D](#). As expected,

being a woman has a significant direct effect on both mediators: gender shapes legislators' political experience and support for an effective state, with women legislators having less experience and more support for an effective state. Also as expected and shown in previous models, both mediators have an impact on corruption perception: political experience reduces corruption perception, and support for an effective state increases it (the variables are statistically significant at 1% and 5%, respectively).

Thus, gender is a foundational factor shaping legislators' profile and attitudes. In this case, gender shapes their political careers and attitudes toward the state, and these variables, in turn, shape their perceptions of corruption as an important problem. The Baron and Kenny approach to testing mediation shows that 11% of the effect of woman on corruption

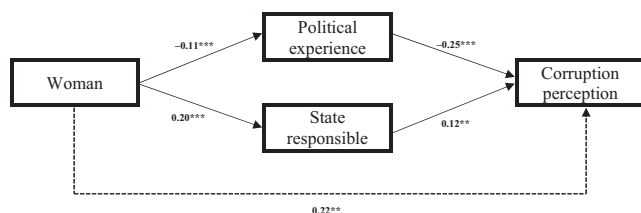


FIGURE 2 Mediation analysis: Gender and corruption perception. *** <0.01 ; ** <0.05 ; * <0.1 . 3193 observations. Arrows indicate the regression coefficient for the main independent variable of interest (woman in the first instance, and then the mediators in the second instance). Controls included: Opposition, ideology, age, studies, and income. Stata commands *sem* and *medsem*; command *gsem* with *ologit* provides the same results. Full mediation analysis is available in [Appendix D](#). Source: Authors' elaboration based on PELA.

perception is mediated by political experience and 10% of the effect of woman on corruption perception is mediated by support for an effective state. However, we do not find a full mediation, since we also find that a significant, direct effect of gender on corruption perceptions remains with the inclusion of the mediating variables. Even under inclusion of both mediators, being a woman still has a direct, significant impact on corruption perceptions. As shown in [Figure 2](#), the direct effect of gender on corruption perceptions is larger than gender's effect on the mediators and larger than or comparable to the mediators' effects on corruption perceptions. Gender shapes corruption perceptions directly, and it shapes how legislators experience society and politics, which then indirectly *also* shape their corruption perceptions.

6 | CONCLUSION

An empirical relationship seems to persist between women's descriptive representation in national legislatures and lower levels of corruption, though scholars debate the underlying mechanisms (Alexander, 2021). One avenue of research focuses on who perceives corruption as important, asking whether and why women perceive corruption differently than men. We use a unique, direct measure of legislators' attitudes found in the PELA surveys: how important do legislators rate corruption as a national problem? Using data from over 3000 legislators across 49 Latin American country-years, we explore who perceives corruption as a national problem, and why and how gender could shape these perceptions. To our knowledge, we are the first to study gender gaps in corruption perceptions among elites by using a survey question that directly measures their attitudes.

We use the PELA data to explore three potential mechanisms that could cause women's and men's corruption perceptions to diverge: (1) women's greater incentives to support an effective state (*effective state*

incentives); (2) women's greater likelihood to be marginalized from political power (*power marginalization*); and (3) women's adaptation to gendered expectations that they should behave as political cleaners when corruption is actually high (*corruption salience*). We hypothesize that while preferring an effective state, being marginalized from power, and confronting higher baseline corruption should shape men's *and* women's attitudes, these factors could lead women to express more concern about corruption than men. We explore whether the pathways are ones of moderation or, for effective states and power marginalization, mediation.

Our evidence is mixed, underscoring the difficulty researchers face in pinpointing what about gender affects baseline corruption attitudes. Across all potential pathways, we find that being a woman *does* lead women elites to rate corruption as more important than men, all else equal. Women consistently place greater emphasis on corruption than men. We contend then that gender has a foundational effect on corruption perceptions. Yet gender does not seem to further affect corruption perceptions when interacted with effective state support, power marginalization, or actual corruption levels: gender is not, at least in our analyses, making women perceive corruption differently when compared to otherwise similarly situated men or differently situated women. Gender, does, however, shape which legislators support effective states and which are outside power, meaning these variables act as partial mediators between gender and corruption perceptions. Some of the gender and corruption literature's most enduring explanations for why women's presence matters for corruption then seem to work through pathways of mediation rather than moderation.

Together, our results urge scholars to develop more nuanced understanding of how gender works through social, political, and electoral contexts to shape which legislators perceive corruption as important. Our analyses are limited by the data structure, including their observational nature and the tendency for legislators' baseline rating of corruption as important to be high. Our results point to several avenues for future research. First, scholars should further investigate how gender shapes the attitudes and experiences that legislators bring to elected office, as these factors influence their prioritization of corruption. For example, we find that legislators' ideology and education also predict corruption perceptions, raising additional questions about whether gender also first sorts legislators into different ideological and educational cohorts, which could mediate their corruption perceptions.

Second, a consistent finding across all our models is that power marginalization directly shapes legislators' corruption perceptions. We proxy power marginalization with experience, but other measures might better capture to what extent legislators are close to or far from opportunities to access resources. Future rounds

of the PELA surveys could ask, for instance, the extent to which the legislator perceives themselves as able to set agendas or shape party platforms. We look forward to future work taking up these lines of investigation.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study alongside the supplemental files are available at the LSQ Harvard Dataverse site: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/DQM700>. They are also available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Countries included are Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The question is not asked in Brazil.

² In previous versions of the models, we included religiosity, parents' studies and attitudes toward gender equality. We do not have strong theoretical expectations about these items' effects on corruption perceptions, and they were also not significant in any models. We therefore omit them from our analyses.

³ We also considered actual economic performance and levels of social spending. We ran alternative models adding the Economic Performance Indicator from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). In these models, economic performance is significant and negative, consistent with previous research (Márquez Romo & Romero-Vidal, 2023). These alternative models do not differ from those in the main text. As for social spending, scholars have posited that countries with more social spending reinforce women's greater reliance on effective states (Bauhr et al., 2019; Stensöta et al., 2015). This proxy makes sense when samples include advanced industrialized democracies that differ significantly in their welfare regimes' generosity. Yet Latin American countries do not display the same variation: all states invest heavily in welfare spending. Still, we ran alternative models adding public social expenditure as a percentage of GDP,

taken from the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL). In these models, social spending is not significant. Moreover, social spending correlates with women in parliament at $r = 0.05$, so social spending is not operating as an indirect proxy for women legislators' collective spending preferences. Further, social spending correlates with PCI at $r = -0.55$, suggesting that social spending proxies overall corruption (more social spending indicates less overall corruption). Lastly, we have a more direct measure of legislators' support for effective states: we ask their opinion about the state's role in peoples' welfare directly.

⁴ We ran alternative models as robustness checks: fixed-effects linear and logits (dichotomization at 1–6/7–10 and 1–9/10), multilevel linear, ologit and logits (dichotomization at 1–6/7–10 and 1–9/10). In the alternative models (Appendix C), gender is significant in the fixed-effects logit 1–9/10 and the multilevel ologit models; state responsible is significant in the fixed-effects logit 1–9/10, the multilevel ologit, and the multilevel logit 1–9/10 models. The direction and significance of the other coefficients relevant to our hypotheses remain the same.

⁵ Which does not mean that Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay are immune from corruption scandals nor that voters do not care about corruption. Rather, corruption is objectively lower here than elsewhere, and perhaps less salient relative to other potential national problems.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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