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Leaders or Villains? The Role of Corruption in Shaping the Stereotypes of Politicians

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Abstract

The ways in which politicians are stereotyped contribute to perceptions of the legitimacy of their power, status, and leadership. In this research, we examined how corruption impacts the stereotypes of politicians. By examining stereotype content, we posited that corruption should elicit morality-related traits, while in contexts of no corruption, both morality and competence should emerge as key dimensions. With two experiments ($N_{combined}$ = 272), participants were presented with either a corruption or no corruption condition and were asked to provide traits describing politicians. Results revealed that in the corruption conditions, (low) morality emerged as the key dimension explaining most variance. In the no corruption conditions, (high) morality and (high) competence emerged as a single key dimension. Our findings reveal one of the multiple pathways by which corruption impacts society – perceiving politicians as having extremely low morality has implications for general trust and meritocracy, contributing to the erosion of democracy.

Wordcount: 150

Keywords: Stereotypes, corruption, politicians, morality, competence

Leaders or Villains? The Role of Corruption in Shaping the Stereotypes of Politicians

Corruption has serious political, social, environmental, and economic costs (Transparency International, 2024). The presence of corruption has been associated with lower development and economic growth (della Porta, 1992; Johnston, 2005; Mény, 1992). It is linked to low quality of democracy (de Sousa, 2011; Rothstein, 2005; Warren, 2004) and greater income inequality (Graf Lambsdorff, 2006). Additionally, corruption contributes to a misfit culture that can spread insecurity (Moriconi, 2018a) and results in a decrease in trust in politicians, civil servants, and public institutions (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Armah-Attoh et al., 2007; Chang & Chu, 2006; Morris & Klesner, 2010). Regrettably, there are currently no signs pointing towards a resolution of this significant societal and political issue. The Corruption Perceptions Index, which assesses 180 countries around the world, revealed in its last annual version that average corruption levels worldwide have remained unchanged for over a decade (Transparency International, 2023).

In the political sphere, several authors have linked widespread corruption with the rise of populism. For example, Daniele et al. (2023) showed that exposure to persistent corruption lowered trust toward institutions and, in the long term, stimulated the support of populist parties. Moreover, Kubbe and Loli (2020) consider that corruption is a crucial determinant of the moral underpinnings of populist ideology. In fact, populist leaders are generally outsiders who pave their way to power by criticising political corruption and promising to eradicate political elites (Carrión & Korman, 2023; Curini, 2017; Kubbe & Loli, 2020; Mendilow & Phélippeau, 2021). However, according to Kossow (2019, p.2), once in administration, "populists generally do not effectively fight corruption, rather they have been advancing new forms of corruption." In fact, the author warns that populist leaders often use corruption as "a pretext to dismantle democratic institutions" and interfere in judicial independence, press freedom and political rights of some social sectors and minorities (Kossow, 2019, p.2; see

also Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, 2017; Curini, 2017; Moriconi, 2018b). In this sense, following Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), democracies can die. According to these authors, modern democracies do not collapse because of revolutions or military coups, but rather as the result of democratically elected leaders slowly undermining them, eroding norms, and attacking the independence of the judiciary and the press.

While these studies, mostly from political science, contribute to our understanding of the effects of corruption, they only refer to institutional issues and the actions of government leaders. Research from a psychological perspective, examining the effects of corruption on individuals is less common (for a notable exception, see Tay et al., 2014). Such a perspective is critical because it may help identify some of the individual-level mechanisms by which corruption impacts broader societal variables. In the present research, we addressed this gap with two experiments testing the effects of corruption on people's perceptions of politicians. More specifically, we examined differences in stereotype content by analysing the specific traits that emerge when people are presented with scenarios of high levels of corruption compared to scenarios of low levels of corruption. Our findings expand on previous knowledge by studying potential deleterious pathways through which corruption impacts society.

Stereotypes of Politicians

Stereotypes are beliefs that people hold about different groups. These act as general heuristics, helping people to arrive at quick inferences and judgments in relation to others (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Lippmann, 1922). A relevant function of stereotypes is to justify the power of some groups over others while communicating that society is legitimate and fair (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). As such, in the context of stereotypes attributed to politicians, these stereotypes should determine the legitimacy of politicians' power, status, and leadership. Political science has long recognised the crucial role of perceptions of politicians in

influencing voter's decision-making (e.g., Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1998; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Sears et al., 2000; Sigelman et al., 1995).

However, studies examining stereotypes of politicians as a group are still rare. Most of the literature on the topic of stereotypes has studied how people perceive politicians belonging to underrepresented groups. This body of work encompasses research focusing on the stereotypes ascribed to female (Bauer, 2015; Schneider & Bos, 2014), gay and lesbian (Golebiowska, 2001), Jewish (Berinsky & Mendelberg, 2005), Catholic (McDermott, 2007) and Black (Schneider & Bos, 2011) politicians, or on how politicians are perceived when they have a regional accent (Ash et al., 2024). These studies play a crucial role in providing knowledge about issues of representativeness concerning these groups. However, they offer a limited understanding of the stereotypes of politicians as a group. There are some studies focusing on politicians as a group but these are part of analyses examining multiple groups (e.g., Koch et al., 2016). The details about this specific group and the role of contextual cues such as corruption remain unexplored.

Research shows that there are two important dimensions involved in social perception – 'competence' and 'warmth' (Fiske et al., 2002). There are other models that use different names for these two dimensions (Abele et al., 2021) as, for example, the ABC model that named these as 'agency' and 'communion' (Koch et al., 2016). There are other differences as Koch et al. (2016) further propose a third dimension, 'beliefs', which concerns perceptions of social groups' conservative-progressive beliefs.

Despite the significance of models such as the ABC model, to explore the stereotypes of politicians, we used the two main dimensions from Fiske et al.'s (2002) stereotype content model. We used this model due to the relevance that these two dimensions have to the context of this study and, especially, because of a later development highlighting a dimension of 'morality'. Fiske et al.'s (2002) model posits that *competence* and *warmth* are two central

dimensions of social perception underlying the stereotypes of social groups. *Competence* is typically related to traits such as ‘independent’ and ‘intelligent’, while *warmth* is associated with terms such as ‘honest’ and ‘sociable’. This model provides a framework for analysing stereotype content, which has been supported and replicated across multiple cultures and groups (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske & Cuddy, 2006).

In addition to this theorising, scholars have proposed that the warmth dimension can be further divided into morality and sociability (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2011; Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Leach et al., 2007). These two dimensions are related, but sociability specifically refers to social connections with traits such as ‘friendly’, while morality refers to the correctness of individuals and example traits are ‘sincere’ and ‘trustworthy’. Brambilla et al.’s (2021) work shows that “morality, sociability, and competence make unique contributions to impression development” (p. 4). Indeed, the authors point out that morality takes a central role in people’s perceptions of social groups and distinguishing between sociability and morality can improve the analysis of group perception. Goodwin et al.’s (2014) research also points in this direction, further adding that traits only related to warmth, namely, sociability, show little predictive value of global impressions of others.

That being said, and given that we are interested in the effects of corruption, we considered this distinction important because of the associations between corruption and the morality of politicians. We thus considered the dimensions of competence, sociability, and morality.

The Effects of Corruption on Politicians’ Stereotypes

Previous research has shown that successful groups tend to be ascribed high competence, whilst less successful groups tend to be ascribed moderate sociability (e.g., Conway et al., 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Fiske et al., 2002; Judd et al., 2005). While one might be inclined to consider that politicians are generally perceived as a successful group

(Koch et al., 2016), this might not hold true, especially in contexts characterised by high levels of corruption. It is thus vital to examine politicians' stereotypes in detail. However, due to limited research specifically addressing these stereotypes, we can only infer, indirectly, their content by examining previous studies with specific subgroups. For example, studies with female politicians often use their male counterparts as a comparison and given that male politicians may be considered the norm, we can extrapolate to politicians in general. In this work, common traits to define male politicians are related to the competence dimension (e.g., assertive, strategic, self-confident, and ambitious; Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Other related studies showed that successful politicians are depicted with competence traits that, in this context, were rendered to be more important than traits belonging to sociability and morality dimensions (Druckman et al., 2004; Funk, 1996; Kinder, 1986). A study examining Black politicians revealed that, despite numerous differences between Black and White politicians, most shared traits were associated with the competence dimension of stereotype content (e.g., ambitious, confident, and determined; Schneider & Bos, 2011).

In the context of corruption, we might observe a different pattern. In fact, the literature shows that status predicts competence and that competition negatively predicts warmth (Cuddy et al., 2007; Kervyn et al., 2015). Socially dominant groups are stereotyped as possessing more of the culturally dominant traits (Cuddy et al., 2015). Furthermore, Russell and Fiske (2010) posit that when a powerful group is perceived to be less open to influence from the powerless, the latter does not make an effort to acquire complete information about said group, making their perceptions less flexible. Brambilla et al. (2021) further show that "evaluations based on warmth information are strong and stable whereas evaluations based on competence information are weak and dependent on accompanying warmth information" (p. 6). From this, it is possible to infer that corruption may affect how

politicians, i.e., a high-status group, are stereotyped. In a context characterised by high levels of corruption, politicians may be perceived as competitors, in the sense that their success may threaten societal well-being, resulting in negative views of their warmth. Furthermore, if corruption is dominant, there may be the implication that politicians in these contexts are stereotyped as being corrupt, i.e., with negative morality-related traits. Finally, if people in these contexts feel like their voices are not heard and that they cannot influence politicians, this stereotype may be more difficult to change.

Moreover, Ramos and Moriconi (2018) showed that, in several countries affected by corruption in Latin America, politicians were mainly depicted with morality-related traits such as dishonest, corrupt, and liar. The authors found that competence and sociability traits were rarely used, and morality was the dominant dimension in a group of countries enduring high levels of corruption. Thus, it appears that corruption may undermine the perceptions of politicians in the sense that their competence and sociability traits become overlooked. In line with this, Bertolotti et al. (2013) suggest that a negative perception of politicians' morality is likely to change depending on the frequency of political scandals in their countries. In one of the few studies focusing on the stereotype of politicians as a group, Fiske and Durante (2014) showed that, across multiple countries, politicians tend to be rated using low morality traits (e.g., untrustworthy). The authors note that in Switzerland (a country with low levels of corruption), politicians were perceived as competent but as having low warmth (i.e., sociability and morality). In India, Mexico, and Italy (countries with higher levels of corruption), politicians were perceived as having both low competence and low warmth. Thus, it appears that politicians may be always perceived as having low morality, but different levels of corruption might determine whether they are perceived as having high or low competence (see Fiske, 2018).

The Present Research

Most studies about the effects of corruption have been in the disciplines of political science, economics, and sociology where the analysis of large survey data is often privileged. Experimental work on this topic is still rare and the literature has invariably been cross-sectional. In the present work, we used two experimental studies with the aim of shedding light on the causal links between corruption and its outcomes. Moreover, we were interested in which traits were activated by a scenario of corruption (vs. no corruption). After reading our manipulations containing these scenarios, we asked participants to write three traits describing politicians in the scenario allocated to them. The open-ended question had the aim of providing a non-obstructive measure so that participants could give their spontaneous responses, without being confined to a list of already chosen traits. With this approach, participants provide information based on recall rather than recognition. Such free-response methods have been the focus of recent stereotype content research, showing that spontaneous responses allow us to capture more nuance and complexity of social reality (Nicolas et al., 2022). Another advantage of this method is that it allows to ascertain which traits are recalled more frequently, showing which dimension is more representative of the group's stereotype (see Nicolas et al., 2022).

This article reports all measures regarding the primary analysis, and there were no data exclusions or dropouts. The online supplemental materials contain additional analyses. The questionnaire, data, and syntax are openly available for each study on Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/h36tz/?view_only=2dd31b76e8724efa9bf71f0454c6b825). The reported studies were supported by the Scientific Commission of the Centre of International Studies (CEI) of ISCTE – Instituto Universitario de Lisboa and followed its Code of Ethical Conduct in Research from its Centre of International Studies (CEI). They have also been carried out in accordance with principles detailed by professional associations and treaties such as the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, the APA (American

Psychological Association) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, and the International Sociological Association's (ISA) Code of Ethics. All participants provided informed consent and were informed about the purpose of the study.

Our data permitted an analysis of the valence and accessibility of these stereotypes. Based on the literature presented above, we predict that morality will be central in the perceptions of politicians independently of the context. However, we expect that a context of corruption elicits more negative traits, compared to a context of no corruption. Additionally, we predict that, in the context of corruption, few of the emerging traits will be related to competence and sociability dimensions. In contrast, in a context of no corruption, we predict that the stereotype of politicians should mostly reflect traits related to both competence and morality, with sociability taking a small or negligible role.

Study 1

Method

Participants

We used a multiple correspondence analysis approach for our data analysis. To calculate sample size, Blasius & Greenacre (2006) state that this type of technique is based on relative values and the sample size is not important unless there is an interest in statistical inference involving the estimation of confidence intervals that were not required in our study. Nevertheless, while there are different recommendations in the literature regarding the adequate sample size for this type of analysis, 100 observations are often recommended as a minimum, with a consensus that larger samples are better (Gorsuch, 1983; Kline, 1994). With this approach in mind, for this study, we recruited a total of 147 individuals (57 males, 90 females), from Lisbon, Portugal. Their ages ranged from 18 to 81 years old (M = 35; SD = 13.89). Most of the sample had a university degree (70%), with the remaining individuals having completed primary school (2%), high school (27%), and 1% did not specify.

Approximately half of the total participants (*n* = 74) were asked to read about a corruption scenario, while the other half (n = 73) were presented with a low corruption scenario.

Procedure

Participants were given a questionnaire in paper format about perceptions of politicians. Each participant was randomly allocated to one of two conditions. (i) A "high corruption" condition, in which they were asked to describe politicians in Brazil – a country that is familiar to participants and is often associated with high levels of corruption. (ii) A "low corruption" condition, in which participants were asked to describe politicians in Sweden – a country that is often associated with low levels of corruption. In these conditions, the following instructions were presented: "*Societies are composed of various groups about which people generally have some knowledge. In fact, the ability to form quick impressions about the groups and the individuals within them simplifies our social lives significantly. Often, the opinions we form are based on direct contact or what we learn from other people. In this study, we ask you to provide your opinion on what people think about politicians in* ***Brazil/Sweden****. By politicians, we mean all individuals holding positions of power related to politics (such as members of parliament). Naturally, the impressions people have may (or may not) reflect what you believe to be true. Therefore, we ask you to please provide your responses based on what you think is the opinion of people in our society regarding politicians in* ***Brazil/Sweden****, even if you disagree with those opinions*". Participants were then prompted with an open-ended question asking them to provide three adjectives used by society to describe politicians in Brazil or Sweden.[1] Asking participants to rate how society views the targets (instead of how participants view them) is a typical method used in

[1] The questionnaire included other measures that were used for another project. However, because these measures were presented after the data used in the present research, we do not anticipate any form of interference with the results presented below.

stereotype content research with the aim of reducing social desirability biases (e.g., Fiske et al., 2002).

Results

Analytical Approach

The resulting data was analysed with a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). MCA is an exploratory multivariate technique that aims at reducing the dimensionality of the data (Blasius & Greenacre, 2006). It is a technique for the analysis of nominal data, with the aim of uncovering and representing underlying patterns of relationships between categorical variables (Carvalho, 2017; Le Roux & Rouanet, 2010; Lebart, 2006). Due to its appropriateness in analysing categorical data, MCA is a somewhat common technique in social sciences (see Bühlmann et al., 2013; Flemmen et al., 2018; Weißflog & Grigoryan, 2024; Ziegler et al., 2022). MCA is identical to a principal components analysis (PCA), but while a PCA is used for numerical values, an MCA is used for categorical data (Le Roux & Rouanet, 2010; Rouanet, 2006). Just like other methods of factor analysis, MCA treats the data as existing in a high-dimensional Euclidian space and condenses this complex space into a smaller one with new, synthetic dimensions. It works by transforming the data into a matrix where all the possible responses are coded into binary (0 or 1) variables (Carvalho, 2017; Nenadić & Greenacre, 2006; van Horn et al., 2019). Each dimension is a group of a correlated set of related variables, and the chi-square distance is calculated both between the variables and the participants themselves to serve as the basis to determine the explained variance. As in a PCA, the first dimension accounts for the greatest explained variance. Each additional dimension explains the largest proportion of the remaining variance. This explained variance is represented by the dimensions' eigenvalue, which is a measure of inertia. Therefore, the first step in an MCA is to identify the dimensions that contribute to explaining the most variance in the data (van Horn et al., 2019).

After identifying these dimensions, the next step is to assess which variables contribute most significantly to this explained variance. This is achieved by interpreting the discrimination measures and contributions of the active variables in the dimensions. The variables that have higher discrimination measures in each dimension are those that are more differentiating and thus represent a higher explained variance. Generally, variables with discrimination measures higher than the inertia of the dimension will be considered the most relevant for the analysis (Le Roux & Rouanet, 2010; Rouanet, 2006). However, variables that do not fit this criterion but still have high discrimination measures (and are considered thematically relevant for the dimension) can still be considered in the analysis. On the other hand, the variables that have discrimination measures close to zero in both dimensions can be excluded from the solution, as they do not contribute significantly to the explained variance (Carvalho, 2017). Therefore, in this study, variables were kept in the model according to the following criteria: (1) the discrimination measure is higher than the inertia of the dimension; (2) the discrimination measure is not close to zero and its inclusion in the model is of thematic relevance. The variables with the highest discrimination measures and contribution values in a dimension (i.e., highest explained variance) are those that better explain that dimension.

Finally, an MCA offers insight into the relationship between the categories through their coordinates in a multidimensional space. MCA places each participant along the dimensions, by determining their coordinates. This is similar to how a PCA assigns factor scores to individual cases. Therefore, MCA reveals where each individual is positioned based on their overall pattern of answers. The respondents with similar answer patterns will be positioned close together on the dimensions; whereas if they are far from each other, they are likely to be negatively associated with each other. With this, it is possible to identify patterns in the data, by looking at the disposition of the categories in the space and assessing their

proximity (Blasius & Greenacre, 2006; Carvalho, 2017, Le Roux & Rouanet, 2010; Rouanet, 2006).

Main Analysis

We initiated our analysis with an MCA including all our data, which was followed by a cluster analysis. A separate MCA was also performed for each of the experimental conditions (i.e., high and low levels of corruption), in order to examine both conditions in more detail. The SPSS package v29 (IBM SPSS Statistics) was used to conduct all statistical analyses.

Participants wrote a total of 160 traits qualifying politicians in Brazil and Sweden. We retained in our analysis only the traits that were used by more than 1% of the sample for each of the two countries. The resulting final list of traits comprised a total of 45 traits, with 26 of them being unique to Swedish politicians and 23 referring uniquely to Brazilian politicians.[2] There were 4 traits that were mentioned in both conditions: corrupt, sociable, incompetent, and dishonest. The 45 selected traits were considered as active variables for the analysis and were subsequently converted into categories with two modalities – presence or absence, to represent whether they were used by each participant in this study. The two first dimensions were found to be relevant for the analysis and were therefore retained based on their eigenvalues (2.820 and 1.969, respectively) and inertias (0.063 and 0.044, respectively). After removing the variables that had low discrimination measures, a final list of relevant variables was reached and is presented below in Table 1, together with their discrimination measures in each dimension.

Table 1. Discrimination measures of the variables entered in the multiple correspondence analysis

Variables	Dimensions

[2] For a complete list of the adjectives used in each condition, please refer to Appendix 1..

	1		2	
	Discrimination	Contribution (%)	Discrimination	Contribution (%)
Honest	**0.406**	17.51	0.090	4.96
Competent	0.144	6.22	0.100	5.52
Fair	0.109	4.69	0.103	5.66
Efficient	0.063	2.70	**0.503**	27.72
Intelligent	0.012	0.52	**0.170**	9.38
Liar	0.153	6.60	0.010	0.56
Corrupt	**0.501**	21.60	0.025	1.41
Incompetent	0.152	6.54	0.014	0.75
Correct	0.177	7.61	**0.150**	8.27
Hard-working	**0.426**	18.37	**0.193**	10.66
Sincere	0.067	2.88	**0.281**	15.50
Dishonest	0.107	4.63	0.020	1.11
Ecological	0.003	0.14	**0.154**	8.49
Active Total	2.320	100.00	1.813	100.00
% of Variance	17.843		13.947	

Note: Values in bold are above the inertia of each dimension; underlined values are not close to zero but are thematically relevant.

Dimension 1 is related to the valence of traits, with some traits describing politicians positively (e.g., honest, hard-working) and others describing them negatively (e.g., corrupt). On the other hand, Dimension 2 seems to mostly differentiate traits based on their stereotype content dimension; that is competence (e.g., efficient, intelligent) and morality (e.g., correct, sincere). We thus have the following quadrants of traits: positive/competence, positive/morality, negative/competence, and negative/morality (see Figure 1). Our analysis showed Brazil emerging in the negative/morality quadrant, whereas Sweden emerged in the positive/competence quadrant. Indeed, as we anticipated, in a context of high levels of

perceived corruption (i.e., Brazil), morality is highly relevant, with one predominantly negative stereotype; while in the context of low levels of corruption (i.e., Sweden), competence and morality emerge as the key traits used to stereotype politicians.

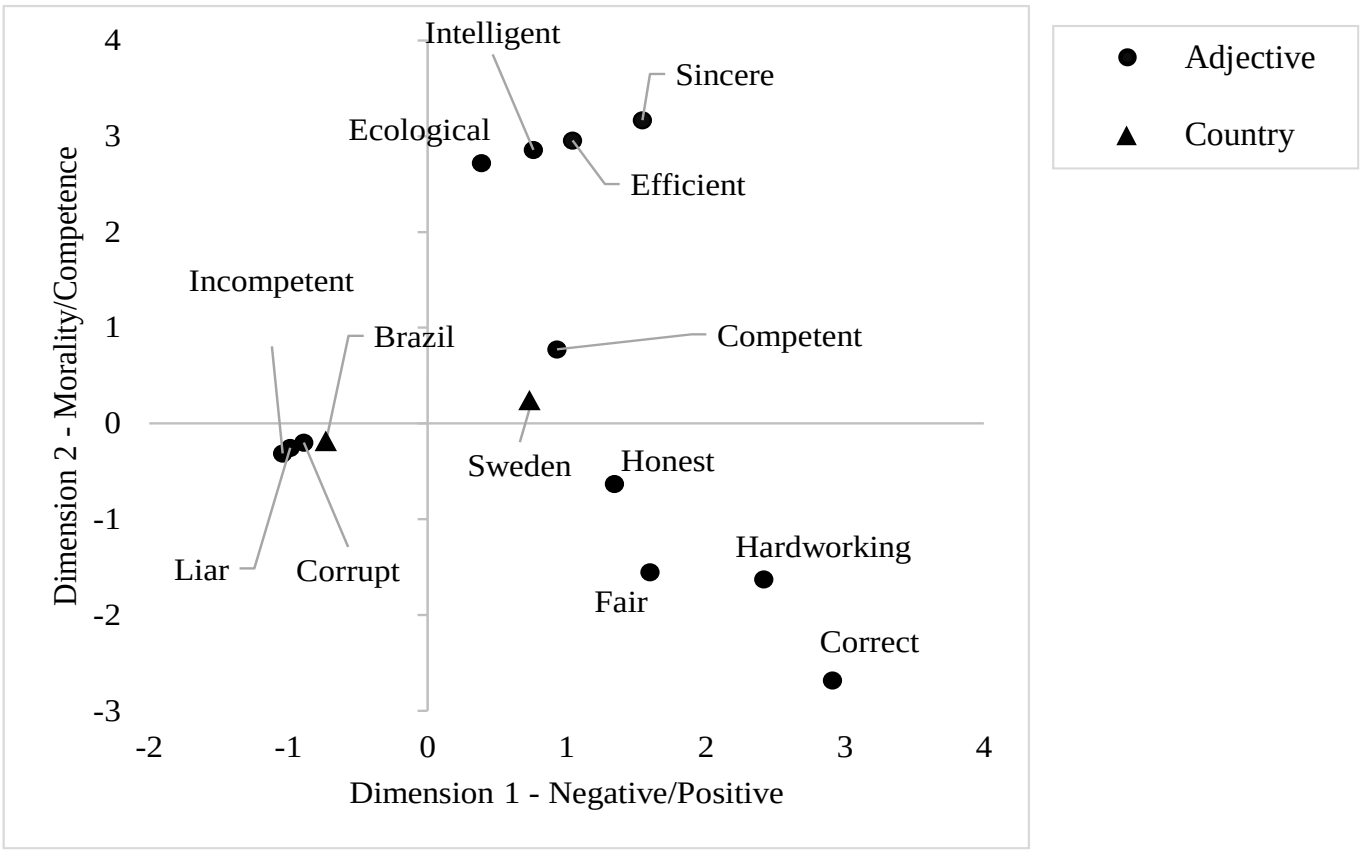


Figure 1. Topological configuration of the traits used and projection of countries

The identified groups were then validated through hierarchical cluster analyses, which consider the objects' (individuals') scores as input variables. This was followed by a non-hierarchical cluster analysis, with a k-means method, which allows for a better understanding of the weight of each cluster, as well as their composition according to participants' patterns (Carvalho, 2017). This analysis identified 4 clusters (see Figure 2). Our results revealed three subgroups that were distributed across the positive quadrants. Clusters 1 and 4 comprise 1.4% and 28.6% of the participants, respectively. These two clusters are mostly associated with

high competence traits. Cluster 2 includes 6.1% of our participants and is mostly associated with high morality traits. For the negative quadrants, only one subgroup was found, which contained most of the individuals (63.9%) and is associated with low morality traits (Cluster 3).

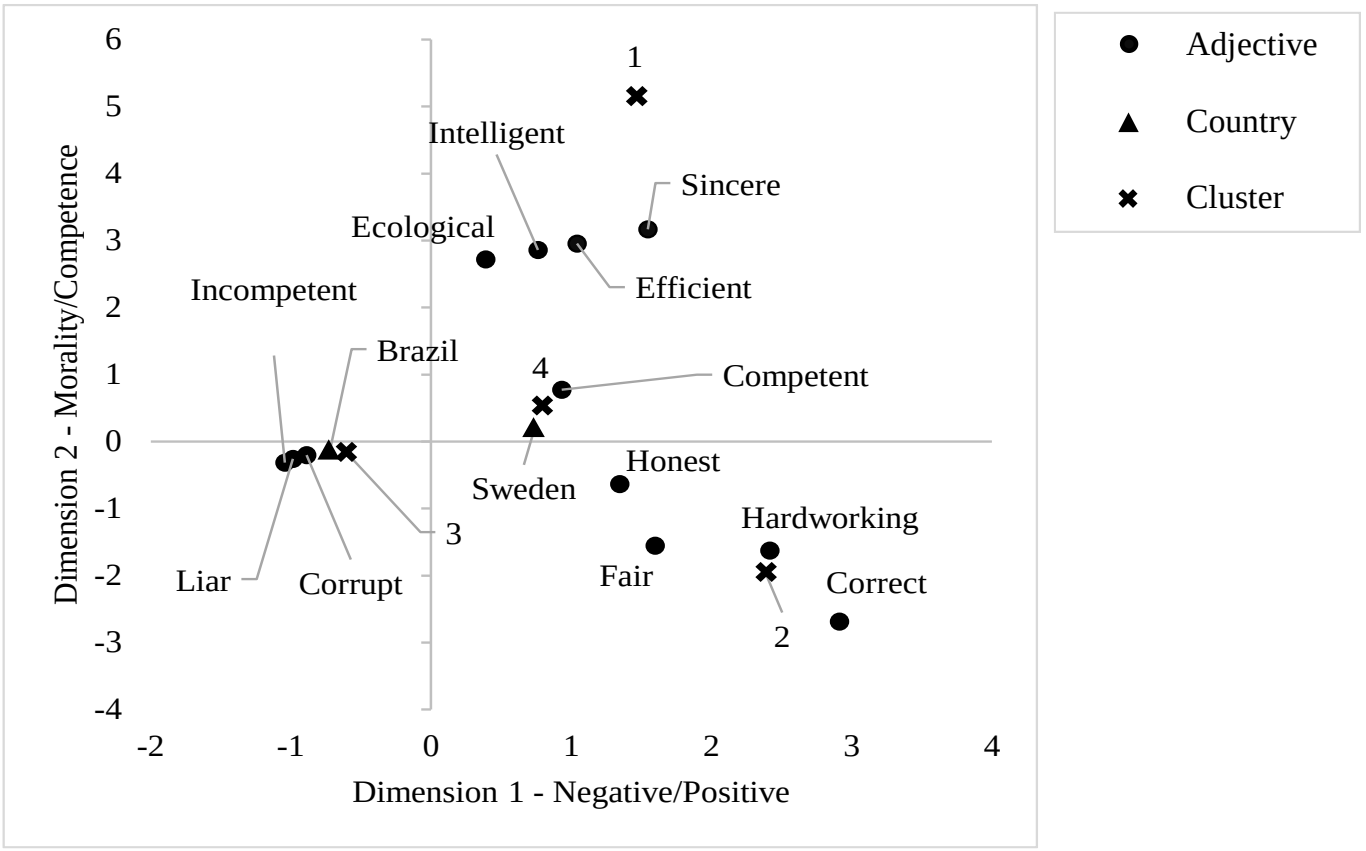


Figure 2. Topological configuration of the traits used and projection of countries and clusters

Separate MCAs for Each Experimental Condition

To analyse the condition of high levels of corruption in detail, we considered a separate analysis with the 23 traits emerging from the condition referring to Brazil. We retained the first two dimensions based on their eigenvalues (1.881 and 1.783 respectively) and inertias (0.082 and 0.078 respectively). The variables with low contributions were removed and we ended with the most relevant variables presented in Table 2. In this

condition, politicians are mainly described with low morality traits. Indeed, both dimensions share the characteristic of differentiating the objects mostly based on morality traits, while having some traits associated with competence (e.g., ambitious and incompetent). The patterns in the data show discrimination groups based mostly on morality, and competence is given little relevance.

Table 2. Discrimination Measures of The Variables Entered in the Multiple Correspondence Analysis for the High Levels of Corruption Condition

Variables	Dimensions			
	1		2	
	Discrimination	Contribution (%)	Discrimination	Contribution (%)
Cheat	0.063	3.52	**0.157**	9.71
Ambitious	0.002	0.10	**0.325**	20.04
Corrupt	**0.167**	9.39	0.085	5.25
Fake	**0.163**	9.14	0.027	1.68
Incoherent	0.028	1.54	**0.312**	19.24
Incompetent	0.042	2.33	<u>0.099</u>	6.09
Thief	**0.717**	40.25	0.049	3.00
Manipulative	**0.202**	11.32	0.006	0.37
Liar	0.030	1.66	**0.367**	22.65
Unreliable	0.046	2.56	**0.159**	9.82
Swindler	**0.324**	18.18	0.035	2.16
Active Total	1.781	100.00	1.619	100.00
% of Variance	16.189		14.722	

Note: Values in bold are above the inertia of each dimension; underlined values are not close to zero but are thematically relevant.

For the condition of low levels of corruption, a total of 26 traits were included in the model as active variables. A two-dimensional solution was found to be the most appropriate for the data, with the first two dimensions having an eigenvalue of 2.235 and 1.928, and inertia of 0.086 and 0.074, respectively. The most relevant variables were kept for analysis (see Table 3). In this condition all traits were positive. Also, politicians were mainly described with competence traits, but some morality traits were also used. Overall, competence emerges as the main dimension explaining most variance. Morality is also mentioned but is less prominent than competence.

Table 3. Discrimination Measures of the Variables Entered in the Multiple Correspondence Analysis for the Low Levels of Corruption Condition

Variables	Dimensions			
	1		2	
	Discrimination	Contribution (%)	Discrimination	Contribution (%)
Competent	0.064	3.19	**0.276**	16.78
Correct	**0.247**	12.27	0.135	8.17
Efficient	**0.325**	16.14	0.003	0.18
Honest	**0.339**	16.83	0.000	0.01
Intelligent	**0.255**	12.67	**0.415**	25.19
Fair	0.148	7.32	0.050	3.04
Practical	0.004	0.22	0.112	6.83
Strict	0.105	5.23	**0.224**	13.58
Sincere	0.103	5.09	**0.232**	14.12
Hard-Working	**0.424**	21.05	**0.199**	12.10
Active Total	2.016	100.00	1.646	100.00
% of Variance	20.155		16.460	

Note: Values in bold are above the inertia of each dimension; underlined values are not close to zero but are thematically relevant.

Discussion

Our findings were in line with our predictions and revealed that in the high corruption condition, (low) morality emerged as the key dimension explaining the most variance. In the no corruption condition, (high) competence and (high) morality emerged as key dimensions. Morality was a central dimension in both conditions. We also predicted that corruption would elicit more negative traits, and this was confirmed and perhaps surpassed by our results, showing that corruption only elicited negative traits.

These results also show that in the positive quadrants, which are associated with the condition with low levels of perceived corruption (Sweden), more subgroups are formed. This suggests that, in this case, the stereotype of politicians is more heterogeneous, compared to the stereotype of politicians in the condition of high levels of corruption that has only one subgroup. These characteristics are important because the homogenous and highly negative stereotype of politicians in contexts of high levels of corruption might be more resistant to change (Baumeister et al., 2001; Russell & Fiske, 2010).

It is important to note that our findings contrast with previous studies in which negative moral behaviours produced negative impressions of competence and where positive moral behaviours did not have an effect on judgements about competence (Stellar & Willer, 2018). Our findings were also different from research showing that positive perceptions of someone's traits on one dimension lead to negative inferences about traits on another dimension (Kervyn et al., 2012). In our study, in a context with high levels of corruption, politicians' competence is dismissed, with negative moral traits dominating the ways in which they are stereotyped. In contexts of low corruption, the stereotype is positive and based on both morality and competence traits. These findings suggest that the absence of corruption may lead to a halo effect when stereotyping politicians, whereby positive impressions of

someone on one dimension positively affect judgements on other dimensions (Kervyn et al., 2012). On the other hand, corruption undermines public perceptions of politicians, creating a mismatch between how they are perceived and what is expected from leaders making key decisions for their country. Ultimately, it questions some of the core principles of our societies, such as legitimacy and meritocracy, further impacting democracy and societal justice.

Study 2

A potential limitation of Study 1 is that, beyond levels of corruption, participants might associate Brazil and Sweden with other societal and economic characteristics. To mitigate the influence of these unmeasured characteristics on our findings, we conducted a second study, informed by a pilot study, in which we selected a country that was neutral to participants.

Pilot Study

The main goal of our pilot study was to find a country that was neutral to participants in terms of perceived valence (i.e., how much people liked each country), and knowledge about its culture and its levels of corruption. From a list of 27 countries representing different regions in the world (i.e., Canada, Denmark, USA, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, New Zealand, Singapore, Australia, Japan, Iraq, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, Cape Verde, Bosnia, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Angola), participants were asked to what extent they would like to live in each of these countries and how much they knew about their culture. Additionally, participants were asked to rate these countries in terms of corruption levels. Our results revealed that Singapore was the most neutral and the country about which people had less knowledge about its culture (for further details including the statistics and results, see Ramos, Moriconi, Marques, & Branco, 2024). We thus used Singapore for our experimental

manipulations in this study and presented the country as either having high levels of corruption or as having low levels of corruption. By having the same country in both conditions, we addressed some of the limitations of Study 1 and provided an additional test to our hypotheses.

Method

Participants

Following the same recommendation as in Study 1, i.e., having a sample size of at least 100 observations, we recruited a sample of 125 individuals (28 males, 97 females), online in Portugal. Their ages ranged from 17 to 81 years old (M = 20; SD = 10.19). Most of the sample completed high school (62%), with the remaining individuals having completed a university degree (37%). Approximately half of the total participants (n = 66) were asked to read about a corruption scenario, while the other half (n = 59) were presented with a low corruption scenario.

Procedure

This study was advertised online on social media. Participants were invited to respond to an online questionnaire about perceptions of politicians. As in Study 1, we included an initial text with our experimental manipulations of high and low levels of corruption. The text contained the following information: "*Since 1995, Transparency International has issued an annual corruption ranking. This ranking includes 176 countries that are ordered according to their degree of corruption, based on expert opinions and opinion surveys. In this ranking, corruption is defined as "the improper use of public power for personal gain" and ranges from countries with low levels of corruption, such as Denmark, to countries with high levels of corruption, such as Somalia. An interesting case is Singapore, a country little known to the Portuguese, which has surprised with its positions over the past few years. If we compare it only with other developed countries, Singapore has been considered one of the countries with*

*a **higher/lower degree of corruption**. It has consistently ranked among the top 10 developed countries **with the most/least corruption**. We would like to ask you to imagine that you had to move to Singapore for work. Based solely on the information we provided about this country; we want to know what you would expect regarding the functioning of Singapore".* After reading this text, we asked participants to image politicians in Singapore. To help with this task, we provided the following definition of politicians "By politicians, we mean all individuals holding positions of power related to political life (such as members of parliament)". Considering that individuals did not know much about Singapore, asking participants to describe politicians according to what they believed represented society's opinion was not possible. Therefore, we invited participants to instead write the three adjectives that they believed best characterised politicians in Singapore.[3]

Results

We followed the analytical strategy used in Study 1. We initiated our analysis with an MCA followed by a cluster analysis for the total sample, and then separate MCAs for each experimental condition.

Main Analysis

In total, 144 traits were mentioned when describing politicians in across the two conditions. A total of 46 traits were used by more than 1% of the participants and were used in our analysis. From the total of 46 traits, 20 were used in the high corruption condition and 26 were used in the low corruption condition.[4] The two first dimensions were retained based on their eigenvalues (2.846 and 2.051, respectively) and inertias (0.063 and 0.045, respectively). The variables with low discrimination measures were removed and the list of

[3] The questionnaire included other measures that were used for another project. Because these measures were presented after the data analysed in the current research, we do not anticipate any form of interference with the results presented below.

[4] For a complete list of the adjectives used in each condition, please refer to Appendix 2.

variables that were kept for the analysis is presented below in Table 4, together with their discrimination measures in each dimension.

Table 4. Discrimination Measures of the Variables Entered in the Multiple Correspondence Analysis

Variables	Dimensions			
	1		2	
	Discrimination	Contribution (%)	Discrimination	Contribution (%)
Honest	**0.241**	10.78	**0.170**	8.98
Assertive	0.036	1.63	**0.331**	17.49
Correct	**0.168**	7.54	0.047	2.48
Conscious	0.098	4.37	**0.156**	8.27
Professional	**0.164**	7.35	0.054	2.88
Competent	**0.163**	7.28	**0.155**	8.21
Responsible	**0.129**	5.77	**0.461**	24.36
Determined	0.036	1.63	**0.331**	17.49
Selfish	**0.260**	11.64	0.007	0.38
Dishonest	**0.255**	11.42	0.006	0.34
Corrupt	**0.247**	11.06	0.005	0.25
Liar	**0.141**	6.32	0.004	0.22
Self-centred	0.184	8.21	0.006	0.32
Committed	0.112	5.02	**0.158**	8.35
Active Total	2.234	100.00	1.893	100.00
% of Variance	15.961		13.520	

Note: Values in bold are above the inertia of each dimension; underlined values are not close to zero but are thematically relevant.

These results replicated Study 1's findings. The active variables that explain each dimension are those with the highest discrimination measures/contribution values in that dimension. As such, Dimension 1 is associated with the valence of the chosen traits (i.e., positive traits such as honest or negative such as selfish). Importantly, all negative traits were morality traits. On the other hand, Dimension 2 is associated with traits related to both competence (e.g., competent, responsible) and morality (e.g., conscious, honest). As in Study 1, the following quadrants emerged: positive/competence, positive/morality, negative/competence, and negative/morality. Figure 3 shows that the high levels of corruption condition emerged in the negative/morality quadrant, while the low levels of corruption condition was positioned in the positive/competence quadrant. In line with Study 1 and our predictions, we found that in a context of corruption politicians' stereotypes are highly centred around (low) morality, whereas in a context of low levels of corruption, these stereotypes are centred around (high) competence and (high) morality.

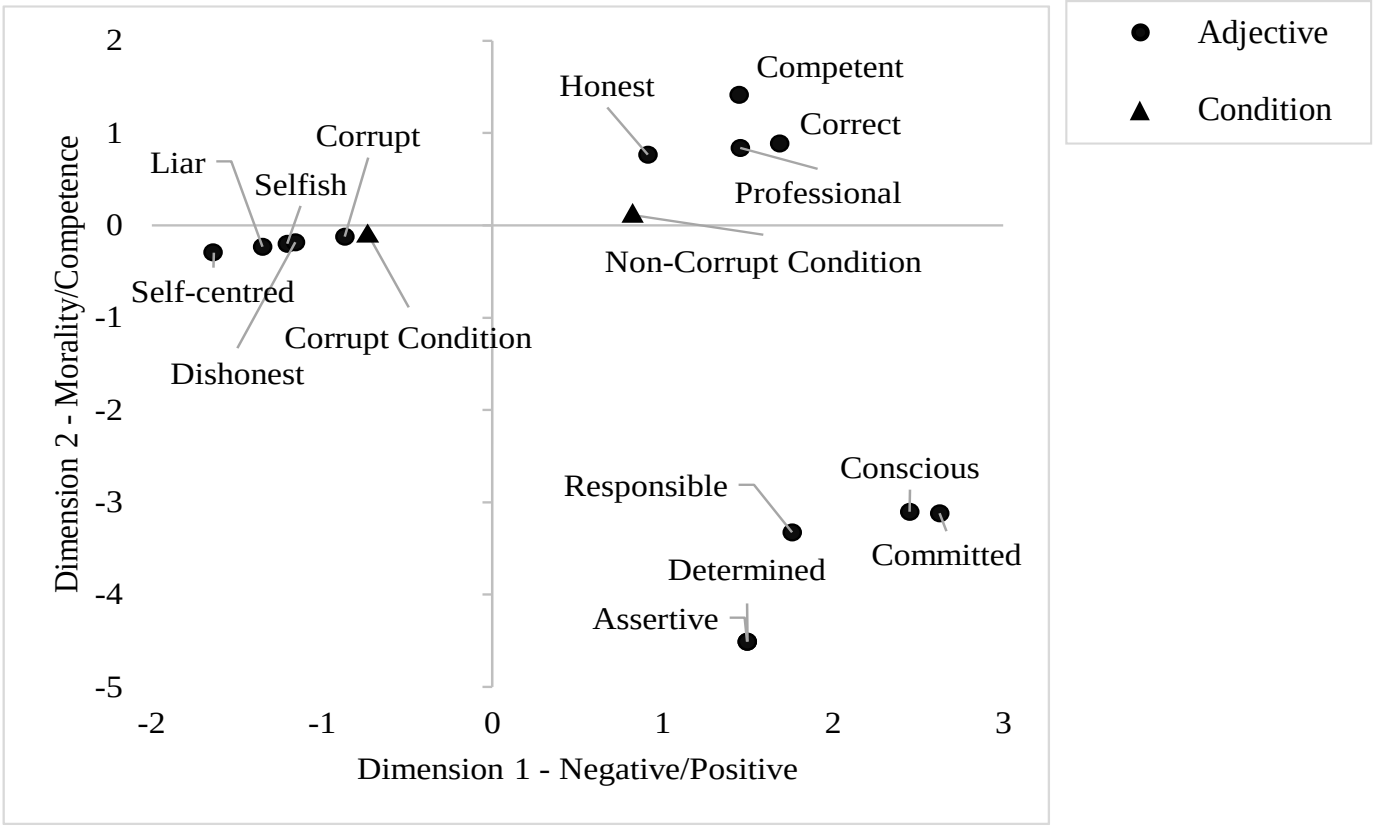


Figure 3. Topological configuration of the traits used and projection of countries

In the second part of our analysis, hierarchical and non-hierarchical cluster analyses revealed 3 clusters (see Figure 4). Cluster 1 held 30% of the total of cases and Cluster 2 only held 3%. Both clusters contain a mixture of traits related to high competence and high morality. Also, both were on the positive side of the plot, with Cluster 1 arising on the positive/competence quadrant, while Cluster 2 was positioned on the positive/morality quadrant. Finally, Cluster 3 emerged as the strongest cluster, containing most cases (67%). This cluster comprised traits related to low morality and was positioned in the negative/morality quadrant in the bi-dimensional plot, showing great proximity to the high levels of corruption condition.

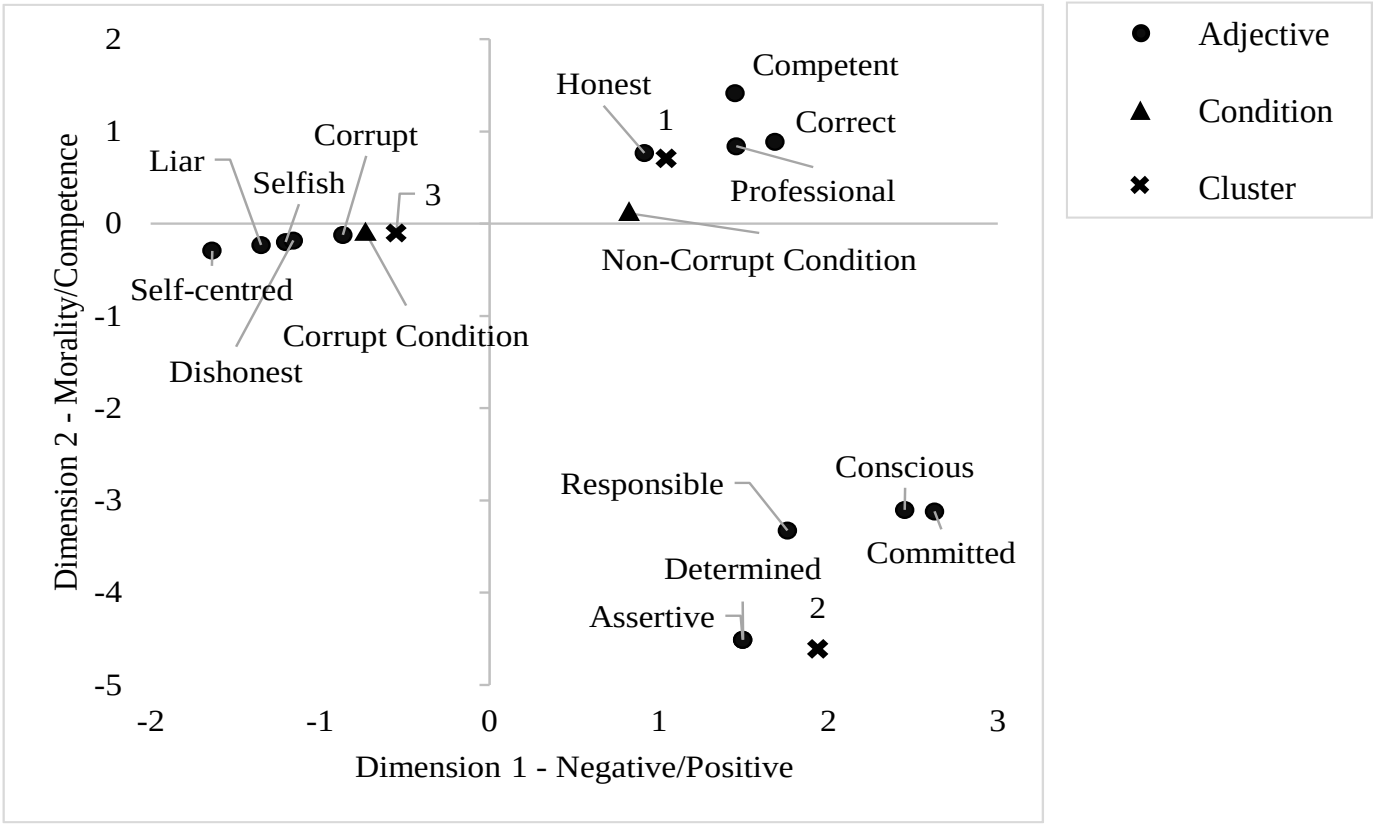


Figure 4. Topological configuration of the traits used and projection of conditions and clusters

Separate MCAs for Each Experimental Condition

In the context of high levels of corruption, 20 traits were considered as active variables for the analysis. A model with two dimensions was appropriate for the analysis, with the first two dimensions being retained with eigenvalues of 2.015 and 1.857 and inertias of 0.101 and 0.093. The most relevant variables are presented below in Table 5, together with their discrimination measures in each dimension. This analysis also replicates Study 1's findings by revealing that politicians, in this condition, are mainly stereotyped based on morality traits. That is, there is a prevalence of morality-related traits, with morality emerging as the key dimension explaining most variance.

Table 5. Discrimination Measures of The Variables Entered in the Multiple Correspondence Analysis for the High Levels of Corruption Condition

Variables	Dimensions			
	1		2	
	Discrimination	Contribution (%)	Discrimination	Contribution (%)
Controlling	0.118	6.23	0.030	1.71
Corrupt	0.034	1.81	**0.375**	21.58
Self-centred	0.117	6.16	0.000	0.02
Selfish	**0.226**	11.88	0.000	0.03
Immoral	0.186	9.81	0.055	3.14
Malicious	0.179	9.43	**0.362**	20.80
Opportunistic	**0.313**	16.48	**0.238**	13.69
Powerful	**0.379**	19.94	**0.278**	15.98
Manipulative	**0.347**	18.27	**0.401**	23.05
Active Total	1.902	100.00	1.740	100.00
% of Variance	21.132		19.334	

Note: Values in bold are above the inertia of each dimension; underlined values are not close to zero but are thematically relevant.

In the condition of low levels of corruption, a total of 26 traits were included in the model as active variables. The data revealed a two-dimensional model and we kept the first two dimensions (eigenvalues of 2.251 and 2.039, and inertias of 0.087 and 0.078, respectively). The most relevant variables were chosen and retained for the analysis (see Table 6), along with their discrimination measures in each dimension. These findings replicate Study 1's results. All the traits used to stereotype politicians were positive, with a mixture of competence and morality traits.

Table 6. Discrimination Measures of the Variables Entered in the Multiple Correspondence Analysis for the Low Levels of Corruption Condition

Variables	Dimensions			
	1		2	
	Discrimination	Contribution (%)	Discrimination	Contribution (%)
Honest	**0.232**	11.36	0.034	1.80
Professional	0.000	0.00	**0.451**	23.75
Serious	0.127	6.21	0.125	6.57
Correct	0.002	0.11	**0.502**	26.44
Integrous	0.088	4.29	0.137	7.21
Responsible	**0.553**	27.08	0.016	0.85
Impartial	0.008	0.40	0.147	7.73
Coherent	0.001	0.04	**0.357**	18.82
Assertive	**0.300**	14.69	0.057	3.01
Conscious	**0.184**	9.01	0.006	0.29
Determined	**0.300**	14.69	0.057	3.01
Committed	**0.247**	12.12	0.010	0.52
Active Total	2.041	100.00	1.897	100.00
% of Variance	17.011		15.809	

Note: Values in bold are above the inertia of each dimension; underlined values are not close to zero but are thematically relevant.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated our initial findings with a different manipulation. Our results showed that in the case of low levels of corruption, stereotypes can be more heterogeneous, comprising positive traits from both competence and morality. In contrast, in the case of high levels of corruption, the stereotype was more homogenous given that it was uniquely comprised of negative morality traits. In Study 2, we used the same country for the high and low levels of corruption conditions to better guarantee equivalence between the two experimental conditions. These results with a different manipulation and additional test to our predictions provide further confidence in our findings.

General Discussion

Our two experiments revealed that when people think about politicians in the context of corruption, they tend to mostly use traits that are negative and associated with a morality dimension of stereotype content. However, when people from the same population are asked to think about politicians in a context of low levels of corruption, they attribute traits that are positive and related to both competence and morality. Although it is natural that concerns about morality may emerge in contexts of corruption, it is not clear that morality could still be the most representative dimension when levels of corruption are low. Our findings suggest that morality is a strong dimension in both contexts, supporting the notion that morality has a dominant role in social perception (Brambilla et al., 2021; Goodwin et al., 2014; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Indeed, in intergroup relations, morality is seen as more desirable than competence and immorality as less desirable than incompetence (Phalet & Poppe, 1997). This is in line with Fiske and Durante's (2014) work showing that even in countries with low levels of corruption such as Switzerland, politicians tend to be rated using warmth-related

traits (i.e., sociability and morality traits). Despite morality being an important dimension in a context with low levels of corruption, competence emerged as a key dimension. This is critical because it should be expected that politicians as a high-status group in society should have virtues that legitimise their power. Previous work has argued that successful groups tend to be ascribed high competence (Fiske et al., 2002) and stereotyping politicians as being competent aligns these expectations with people's beliefs and perceptions. This, in turn, should positively reinforce politicians' status, strengthening their ability to exert their power. Perceived competence should also communicate that the procedures by which leaders exercise their authority are fair. When procedures are perceived to be fair, people tend to attribute greater legitimacy to leaders and become more willing to follow them (Tyler, 2003).

Our research used a free-response method revealing the content that is spontaneously available to perceivers. This type of free-response study has been rarely used and has the advantage of not restricting participants to a pre-set list of traits and dimensions (Koch et al., 2016; Nicolas et al., 2022). This approach allows us to contribute to existing social cognition theories of stereotype content. For example, Fiske et al. (2002) distinguished between warmth and competence, while other approaches such as the ABC model differentiated between status and beliefs (Koch et al., 2016). Our analysis with a specific context and target group (i.e., politicians) supported the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002) and more recent advances suggesting the significance of morality (Brambilla & Leach, 2014). The emerging traits were invariably related to either warmth (and the subdimension of morality more specifically) or competence, supporting a two-dimensional perspective of stereotype content along the lines of the stereotype content model.

A detailed inspection of stereotype content in our findings showed that, in a context of corruption, politicians are stereotyped in a unidimensional, homogenous, and more concentrated stereotype. However, in the context of low levels of corruption, the traits

attributed to politicians are more dispersed, contributing to a more heterogeneous stereotype. These differences between contexts of corruption have key implications for politicians as a group. For example, in contexts of corruption, with such a concentrated and homogenous stereotype, all politicians will be perceived as having low morality. One of the implications of this is that if an honest politician emerges, it is unlikely that this person will contribute to changes in the stereotype. In these cases, the honest politician could be easily stereotyped as an atypical exemplar (i.e., this person's characteristics contradict stereotypes about the group; see McIntyre et al., 2016). According to the subtyping model (Hewstone, 1994), extremely atypical exemplars are subtyped from their group for being too atypical and are less likely to elicit changes in perceptions of the group. In a similar vein, Dovidio et al. (2017) argue that atypical exemplars are less effective in improving outgroup attitudes. Additionally, Brambilla et al. (2021) show that when anyone who is seen as extremely immoral behaves morally, this does not challenge perceivers' expectations, as immoral people are expected to try and act morally at times. For these reasons, stereotypes of politicians in these contexts should be more resistant to change. In contrast, in contexts with low levels of corruption, there is scope for the creation of subgroups because the stereotype is more dispersed and heterogeneous. This characteristic facilitates the formation of subgroups with overlapping and distinct characteristics, making it more challenging to subtype an individual.

Through our experimental studies, we were able to add a manipulation to account for the presence/absence of corruption, which unveiled that in contexts with high corruption, politicians were stereotyped with an exclusive focus on their (negative) morality while their competence was disregarded. On the other hand, in low corruption settings, they are attributed to positive morality and competence traits, indicating the presence of a halo effect. We believe this highlights the primary role of morality in stereotypes (Brambilla et al., 2021; Goodwin et al., 2014) and offers an alternative and complementary view to previous findings

which differ from ours (Kervyn et al., 2012; Koch et al., 2016; Stellar & Willer, 2018). Indeed, through our experimental studies, we found evidence that considering key contextual factors affects how politicians are stereotyped, extending Cuddy et al.'s (2015) findings that different contexts can bring out different traits when stereotyping socially dominant groups.

Our work has political implications that may explain some of the current changes in the global political landscape. For example, the analysis of the stereotypes of politicians may provide a micro-level explanation for the rise of populist leaders (Daniele et al., 2023; Kubbe & Loli, 2020). Populist leaders are understood as political outsiders who burst onto the electoral scene by pivoting themselves against the formal political class. They organise their campaigns around the idea that the formal political class is corrupt and therefore needs to be changed (Carrión & Korman, 2023). As our findings suggest, in contexts of corruption, negative stereotypes should be extremely resistant to change and, thus, new candidates will require new strategies to deal with this issue. A viable strategy (and perhaps the only one) is to present themselves as being completely different from the normal political status quo. With this strategy they can avoid the existent category and, because of this, avoid being labelled as immoral (see also Ramos & Moriconi, 2018). Moreover, in the face of corruption, it is likely that political parties might recruit more women. Since politicians in corrupt contexts are perceived as having low morality, introducing female political candidates – who are typically perceived as less likely to engage in corruption due to being either risk-averse or political outsiders (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019) – might become an attractive strategy.

A common worldview among people is that honest and hardworking individuals should be rewarded with success (Crandall & Beasley, 2001; Lerner, 1980) and group deservingness is indeed crucial for people's sense of justice and fairness (Jost & Burgess, 2000). However, in contexts of corruption, politicians are perceived as immoral, and this should violate people's sense of justice and fairness. In line with this idea, Ramos and

Moriconi (2018) showed with a sample of individuals living in countries with high levels of corruption that negative stereotypes of politicians were associated with a disbelief in justice. This sequence of events can potentially lead to the erosion of democracies. Our work deviates from the typical approach of political science focusing on political leaders' decisions and their impact on democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Instead, our research suggests that the stereotypes attributed to politicians in different contexts are a strong psychological pathway by which corruption may affect the legitimacy of politicians and the health of democracy.

To solve the issues mentioned above, it is crucial to direct the political focus to transparency policies within traditional politics. Our research demonstrates the significance of bringing ethical codes and integrity packages to political parties and the global political agenda. If the political class is perceived as corrupt, this paves the way for the political rise of outsiders and emerging populist movements. Traditional political parties should consider including an ethical restructuring of their procedures with the aim of maintaining their legitimacy and social prestige. Research has shown that voters reward political parties that adopt ethical self-regulations for the exercise of their office such as financial disclosure, term limits, lobbying registers and sanctions for MPs who are implicated in corruption cases (Pereira et al., 2023). In contexts of corruption, traditional political parties must consider the fight against corruption as a priority if they want to survive.

Limitations and Future Research

The main goal of this study was to examine how the stereotype of politicians may be affected by a key contextual factor such as corruption. Our experimental conditions contrasted scenarios of corruption with no corruption, but did not include a neutral condition that could provide a baseline description of politicians. With the experimental approach we used in our studies it was not advisable to include a neutral condition as this would likely elicit the perceptions of politicians in the context where our data was collected and would not

act as a real control condition. Therefore, we recommend that future studies should think of ways in which a control condition could be introduced, allowing us to have a baseline description of politicians that is then compared to contexts of corruption and no corruption. This endeavour could enrich our findings and contribute to a deeper understanding of the effects of corruption on stereotypes.

Additionally, the politicians that participants were asked to describe were of no real relevance to them, given that they were from other countries and their political ideas and orientations were not revealed. This decision followed the same logic as described above, as our interest was to understand the effects of corruption solely. However, future researcher could build on our experiments by considering a situation that is more closely aligned with the participants' context. This approach would allow us to understand the effects and interaction of other contextual factors, such as participants' political orientation and partisan biases.

Although Singapore was an unknown and neutral country to the population in Study 2, we could not guarantee that our sample did not include individuals with some knowledge about this country. We suspect that this is not the case, given that our manipulations were effective and that some basic information about the country's levels of corruption was enough to elicit differences in how the sample perceived Singapore. However, to fully mitigate these concerns, future researcher should consider the use of a fictional country.

In our experiments, we contrasted a scenario of high levels of corruption with another scenario of low levels of corruption. We chose these opposing and extreme cases so we could compare differences emerging from these two situations. However, as the Corruption Perceptions Index suggests (CPI; Transparency International, 2023), countries' corruption levels might be better understood with a continuous scale. Our findings may be generalisable to countries that are placed at the extremes of the CPI, but our findings should be interpreted

with caution for countries placed in the middle of the CPI ranking. Future research could study these cases as this would allow us to understand if a threshold point exists. That is, if there is a threshold in terms of corruption, in which the perceived competence of politicians starts to fade away and give space for a single dimension of corruption in terms of stereotype content. Furthermore, countries with low levels of corruption cannot entirely avoid some corruption (note that in the CPI no country receives a perfect score – Denmark occupies the first place in the ranking and has a score of 90 out of 100). Future work could examine the effects of corruption cases in countries where corruption is rare and not the norm.

Finally, we described the effects of corruption on the stereotypes of politicians, but it is possible that corruption might extend beyond this group and affect perceptions of other groups beyond the political domain such as lawyers, the police, judges, and doctors. It is also possible that our study's findings might be applied to immoral behaviours other than corruption. Understanding the boundary effects of corruption, as well as other immoral behaviour, is an important topic and future research could focus on this topic.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the impact of corruption on stereotypes of politicians. We ran two experiments where participants were presented with either a high or low corruption condition and were asked to provide traits describing politicians. In the first experiment, we used two countries known to participants, Brazil (high corruption) and Sweden (low corruption). In the second experiment, we used a single country, Singapore, that was neutral to participants in terms of valence and knowledge about its culture and corruption levels. The country was presented as either having high corruption or low corruption levels. Our results confirmed our initial expectations by showing that, in both experiments, corruption elicited low morality traits as the key dimension to describe politicians. On the other hand, in the low corruption conditions, only positive traits were used, with morality and competence emerging

as key dimensions. Our findings reveal one of the multiple pathways by which corruption impacts society. Perceiving politicians as having extremely low morality has implications for general trust and meritocracy and contributes to the erosion of democracy.

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