

Money and Time in Access to Public Services: How do Citizens Evaluate Different Forms of Bureaucratic Corruption?¹

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Abstract

There is extensive research about how bureaucracies in the developing world depart from the Weberian ideal and the ways in which corruption distorts the provision of public services. However, less is known about how citizens respond to the corruption they encounter in daily life. In this study, we implement a conjoint experiment to investigate how citizens evaluate different forms of corruption in the public sector. We find that they prefer ‘speed money’ corrupt bureaucrats and reject ‘petty theft’ corrupt bureaucrats when seeking a government service. In addition, this preference for ‘speed money’ is not more salient among citizens who perceive the bureaucracy as inefficient. Instead, those who can afford to pay bribes are more accepting of bureaucratic corruption. These findings indicate that citizens might come to accept bribe-taking bureaucrats as necessary to speed up access to services, especially if they have the economic resources to overcome the barriers to service delivery.

Keywords: Bureaucratic efficiency, public services, corruption, bribery, Global South

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1. Introduction

State administration in the Global South is plagued by petty corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency, which constitute a significant barrier to equitable and timely access to public services. Such corruption and inefficiency have been attributed to politicized bureaucratic structures, weak meritocratic recruitment, and complex regulations, among other root causes. While several studies have examined the causes and consequences of the ills of public administration in the developing world, they have largely overlooked how citizens perceive corruption in their daily interactions with street-level bureaucrats. We thus have a limited understanding of which individual considerations and contextual factors explain individual preferences for (or rejections of) corrupt behavior by bureaucrats in service delivery positions.⁵

While citizens cannot hold corrupt bureaucratic agents accountable at the ballot box, capturing their attitudes toward bureaucratic corruption is important because they can influence the type of anti-corruption policies governments promote, such as civic education or administrative reforms. Some scholars suggest that bureaucratic corruption can become normalized when citizens are socialized into paying bribes to “grease the wheels” of an inefficient bureaucracy (Collier 2000). Individuals might also become desensitized to petty corruption if they believe the practice is widespread—i.e., that “everyone does it” (Corbacho et al. 2016). If corruption is so normalized in a society that citizens do not think it is reprehensible at a normative level, a massive civic education campaign is necessary to reduce the level of petty corruption (Collier 2000). However, citizens might perceive bureaucratic corruption as ethically reprehensible but still prefer to deal

⁵ There is extensive research on the factors that shape citizens’ decision to pay bribes at the grassroots level (see for instance Erlich, Gans-Morse, and Nichter 2022; Rose and Peiffer 2015; Tavits 2010). We build on the important insights of those contributions but our focus here is different. Our goal is to understand how citizens evaluate bureaucratic corruption, not why they decide to pay a bribe. The questions are related but distinct, since citizens might choose to pay a bribe even when they disapprove of corrupt public officials.

with a bureaucrat who accepts bribes to speed up their access to services. If that were the case, fighting bureaucratic corruption would require administrative reforms that increase the availability of (and the speed of access to) critical government services. A costly civic education campaign would be ineffective at reducing petty corruption without addressing the factors that create a strategic preference for bribe-taking bureaucrats. Our study allows us to weigh in on this important question.

In this article, we investigate bureaucratic corruption from the citizens' point of view, including the circumstances under which bureaucratic corruption is accepted and which forms of bureaucratic corruption are more likely to be tolerated. We argue that citizens may tolerate some types of corrupt bureaucratic behavior if they perceive it to be functional. However, a strategic preference for dealing with a corrupt bureaucrat does not imply that individuals approve of bureaucrats who request bribes to do their jobs efficiently. This misalignment between normative evaluations and strategic decisions emanates not from a universal preference for favoritism and arbitrariness, but from a dissatisfaction with bureaucratic inefficiency in a context of low-quality governance. Therefore, we expect that citizens disapprove of all forms of bureaucratic corruption in principle, but tolerate a certain type of corruption (what Ang (2020) labels 'speed money,' discussed in more detail below) to overcome the obstacles of inefficient government.

We examine these hypotheses by studying citizen evaluations of public sector employees in Paraguay. A significant proportion of Paraguayans report paying bribes to street-level officials in service delivery positions, with a bribery rate similar to that of other Global South countries (Global Corruption Barometer 2017). Despite the adoption of civil service reforms in the 2000s, the Paraguayan public administration is still characterized by inefficient policy implementation and inadequate provision of public goods and services (Schuster 2021). Paraguay is thus an

excellent case to study whether citizens evaluate corruption as functional to low-quality bureaucracies.

We designed an original conjoint experiment and embedded it in an online sample of 3,107 adult Paraguayans between July and August 2021. To analyze preference heterogeneities, we use a priming experiment and heterogeneous treatment effects on a matched sample. The empirical analyses lead to three main findings. First, citizens reject promotions for bureaucrats who engage in ‘petty theft’ and ‘speed money’ corruption, which suggests a strong normative condemnation of all forms of bureaucratic corruption. Second, citizens exhibit a slight preference for ‘speed money’ corruption bureaucrats but reject ‘petty theft’ corruption bureaucrats when seeking assistance for a government service, which suggests they engage in strategic calculations when evaluating speed corruption. Third, the tolerance of ‘speed money’ corruption does not depend on perceptions of bureaucratic inefficiency. Rather, the preference for bureaucrats who take bribes to provide timely access to government services is greater among wealthier and more educated respondents.

This paper makes three contributions to the comparative literature on corruption. First, it distinguishes between normative and strategic attitudes toward corruption among the mass public. Previous research on bureaucracies in the developing world sometimes conflates the two types of attitudes, assuming that the prevalence of bribery among frontline service delivery workers implies that citizens seeking access to such services consider corruption to be an acceptable behavior of public servants. We show that while citizens sometimes opt to deal with a bribe-taking bureaucrat for a government transaction, they might still disapprove of all forms of corruption in principle.

In a second contribution, this article provides experimental evidence of the effects of different forms of corruption that complements prior scholarship which argues that voters sometimes exchange corruption for tangible economic benefits (Klašnja and Tucker 2013;

Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, and Rivero 2016; Weschle 2016). This literature is limited to the study of grand corruption involving politicians and candidates running for office; it has overlooked unelected public officials who engage in petty corruption. Yet such petty corruption deserves scholarly attention, as most citizen engagement with the government occurs through day-to-day interactions with public servants (Lipsky 1980). We fill this gap in the literature by showing that public evaluations of bribery are permeated by the need to overcome the barriers to government services.

Third, this study advances a broader literature that examines the disproportionate effects of corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency on the poor and less educated in the Global South (e.g., Auyero 2011; Roseth, Reyes, and Santiso 2018; Mocan 2008; Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019). Drawing on the insight that bribery inflicts more harm on low-SES citizens than the wealthy and powerful, we show that they are also less likely to tolerate corruption in the bureaucracy than the more socioeconomically advantaged. The misalignment between normative and strategic preferences for speed corruption is more evident among individuals who can afford to pay bribes.

2. Theory: Citizens' Evaluations of Bureaucratic Corruption

Effective public administrations require bureaucratic agencies that recruit based on merit instead of discretionary appointments, and foster the equal application of the law rather than favoritism and arbitrariness. Bureaucracies in the developing world depart from this bureaucratic ideal in multiple ways. Their organizational structure is plagued by regulatory overcomplexity and limited interbranch coordination, making them slow and inefficient (Gould and Amaro-Reyes 1983; Roseth, Reyes, and Santiso 2018). Public sector jobs also tend to be disproportionately directed to

political supporters (Grindle 2012; Oliveros 2021; Toral 2023). Furthermore, the lack of professionalization in the bureaucracy leads to different forms of corruption among public servants, including embezzlement of public funds and demands for bribes to provide services (Dahlström, Lapuente, and Teorell 2012; Rauch and Evans 2000; Rose-Ackerman 1999). These forms of petty corruption can divert essential resources away from public goods and services, and hence directly influence the quality of life for many citizens.

In this paper, we subscribe to the classic definition of corruption offered by Nye (1967: 419), which states that “corruption is behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains.” In his work on political corruption, Scott (1967, 1972) argues that large modern bureaucracies in developing countries provide public goods and public services that represent valuable commodities to many citizens. Given limited state resources, regulatory complexity, and the lack of a professional bureaucracy, the problem is that demand for government services far outstrips their limited supply. Corruption is therefore an integral part of the operation of bureaucracies in the developing world, as citizens use their wealth and connections to try to gain access and influence bureaucratic decisions. In Scott’s (1972: 26) words, corruption in the public sector is expected to flourish “when the formal political system (...) is unable to cope with the scale or the nature of the demands being made on it”.

This paper investigates citizens’ attitudes toward bureaucratic corruption by focusing on two different attitudinal outcomes: normative preferences and strategic preferences. The focus on normative preferences allows us to analyze citizens’ value judgments regarding the abuse of bureaucratic positions for private gain. The analysis of strategic preferences allows us to assess whether citizens prefer to deal with a corrupt public official in contexts of low bureaucratic

efficiency. Examining both attitudes in the same study helps us understand whether strategic and normative preferences move in tandem, or whether a normative condemnation of corruption might be accompanied by tolerance of corruption in practice (Boas, Hidalgo, and Melo 2019).

Normative evaluations and strategic preferences involve different processes. Norms are value judgments about the socially appropriate course of action or behavior. When people judge behavior, they compare it to a socially defined normative standard (Bicchieri 2005). Preferences, by contrast, refer to individual likes and dislikes, and are a matter of personal choice about what a person will do in a particular context (Lichtenstein and Slovic 2006). Conceptually and empirically, it is helpful to separate norms from preferences. Sometimes they will be aligned, for example if individuals think corruption should be strongly condemned and prefer to deal with honest bureaucrats in their interactions with the government. However, people could also hold norms and preferences that are not aligned. For instance, they could prefer to deal with bribe-taking bureaucrats even if they strongly condemn corruption as an inappropriate behavior of public servants.

The previous literature on patronage and petty corruption in the developing world often fails to distinguish between strategic decisions to pay bribes and value judgments about corrupt bureaucrats. Since ordinary people willingly enter into patronage systems and pay bribes, it is assumed that they find petty corruption acceptable (Letki, Górecki, and Gendźwiłł 2022; Piliavsky 2014). In his classic essay on corruption, Scott (1967: 512) states that the average citizen in the developing world “cares a good deal less whether the actions of the (...) bureaucrat conform to standards of due process than whether the outcomes benefit him or not.” This neutral (or even positive) normative evaluation of bribe-accepting public servants is sometimes ascribed to socialization in contexts of high corruption and state inefficiency (Letki, Górecki, and Gendźwiłł

2022; Collier 2000). We are skeptical of the view that citizens find corruption acceptable (or are completely indifferent towards it). There is evidence that citizens in the developing world hold a strong social norm against corruption in principle (Agerberg 2022). Using evidence from regional survey barometers around the world, Rose and Peiffer (2015: 21-22) show that four in five people regard it as unacceptable for a public official to request a bribe. Therefore, while people might pay bribes to speed up a government transaction, they likely disapprove of bureaucrats who request bribes.

In the political domain, the literature has revealed a tension between an almost universal rejection of corruption in principle and tolerance for corrupt politicians in practice. For example, a recent study of political corruption in Brazil demonstrates that there is a divergence between strong anti-corruption norms and continuing electoral support for corrupt mayors who deliver policy benefits (Boas, Hidalgo, and Melo 2019). In the same vein, it is reasonable to expect that citizens in developing countries may normatively reject all forms of bureaucratic corruption, but strategically tolerate corruption practices that facilitate access to essential services.⁶

Petty corruption has immediate material consequences for ordinary citizens, since paying a bribe (or failing to do so) can mean essential public services will be granted, denied, or delayed. As Letki et al. (2022) explain, petty corruption “yields direct returns such as access to goods and services.” Therefore, a focus on frontline bureaucrats is crucial as the effective provision of public services depends on the employees who ultimately deliver these services, which range from health care and education to identity cards and marriage certificates.

⁶ The emphasis on the strategic considerations people sometimes use to assess corruption in office is not without precedent in the political science literature on corruption. From the literature on electoral accountability, we know that voters sometimes acquiesce to corruption in exchange for tangible economic benefits (Klašnja, Lupu, and Tucker 2021; Klašnja and Tucker 2013; Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, and Rivero 2016; Weschle 2016; Botero et al. 2019; Vera 2020).

To study whether (and when) there is a misalignment between normative evaluations and strategic preferences regarding bureaucratic corruption, we build on Ang's (2020) typology of corruption, which distinguishes between two types of corruption in the bureaucracy: 'petty theft' and 'speed money.' 'Petty theft' refers to self-regarding forms of corruption in which public officials act alone to appropriate public funds or divert their use, including "acts of stealing, misuse of public funds, or extortion among street-level bureaucrats" (Ang 2020: 2). 'Speed money' is two-way or transactional corrupt acts that citizens and firms can assume will generate a short-term benefit. This type of corruption involves "petty bribes that businesses or citizens pay to bureaucrats to get around hurdles or speed things up" (Ang 2020: 2).

We contend that a misalignment between normative and strategic attitudes is particularly evident in 'speed money' corruption. Public officials engage in this form of corruption when they ask for bribes to speed up access to a service or obtain a document. Where the bureaucracy is inefficient, citizens might tolerate (or even prefer) dealing with bureaucrats who engage in 'speed money' corruption. In contexts with high levels of corruption, petty corruption "will be perceived as functional and effective, and thus largely acceptable" (Letki, Górecki, and Gendźwił 2022: 2).

Experiencing long delays due to bureaucratic inefficiency can represent important costs for citizens who are forced to miss work and forfeit income while they wait their turn in the halls of government agencies (Auyero 2011). When faced with administrative hurdles and long delays, ordinary people in the developing world often draw on money, patronage networks, and status to try to speed up access to essential services (Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019; Secor 2007; Piliavsky 2014; Corbridge 2004). This implies that people living in ineffective states might prefer to deal with a bureaucrat who accepts bribes to facilitate access to services, rather than with a more honest public servant.

We argue that citizens seeking access to government services will strategically accept ‘speed money’ corruption, but normatively and strategically disapprove of ‘petty theft’ corruption. We expect citizens to always evaluate ‘petty theft’ very negatively: it is a clear violation of public trust and brings no benefit to citizens who rely on the public sector to conduct government transactions. On the contrary, stealing public funds has negative welfare consequences because it depletes resources that are necessary to deliver public goods and services. Citizens should therefore strongly disapprove of ‘petty theft’ in the bureaucracy from a normative standpoint. They should also prefer to avoid dealing with a public official who embezzles funds because this behavior signals that the bureaucrat is untrustworthy and unlikely to be motivated by public service. In sum, normative and strategic preferences move in tandem when citizens evaluate ‘petty theft’ in the bureaucracy.

This discussion yields the following pre-registered hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Citizens in the developing world will reject both ‘petty theft’ corruption and ‘speed money’ corruption when they are asked about their *normative* evaluations.

Hypothesis 2: Citizens in the developing world will reject ‘petty theft’ corruption but accept ‘speed money’ corruption when they are asked about their *strategic* preferences.

The disconnect between the normative condemnation of speed-money corruption and the strategic acceptance of this practice might seem puzzling at first. Theories of cognitive dissonance suggest we should see congruence between people’s belief systems and their actions because individuals want to minimize the cognitive discomfort that results from internal inconsistency (Festinger 1957). However, we believe that in contexts where aligning beliefs with behavior can be costly (e.g., authoritarian regimes) or inefficient (e.g., dysfunctional bureaucracies), citizens can often separate abstract values (*corruption is bad*) from strategic actions (*bribes are necessary*

to access a service). Known in cognitive psychology as mental partitioning, this strategy can help individuals organize information, manage complexity, avoid cognitive dissonance, and adapt to different contexts (Holland et al. 1989). For instance, in his study of public opinion in the Soviet Union, Shlapentokh (1986) reveals a disjunction between the belief systems of socialist workers (e.g., contempt for the free market) and the survival strategies they adopted in their everyday lives (e.g., participation in the black market to access essential goods). These inconsistencies are ascribed by Shlapentokh to the disconnect between the “pragmatic” and the “theoretical” (or “mythological”) layers of the individual mind.

In a similar vein, our main argument is that in contexts of bureaucratic inefficiency, people are more likely to pragmatically accept ‘speed money’ corruption in their daily interactions with the bureaucracy, even if they reject this practice from a normative standpoint. An important implication of this argument is that bureaucratic sclerosis leads citizens to accept dealing with bribe-taking public servants because it shapes their perceptions of how long and tedious it can be to access public services through formal channels. However, it is important to keep in mind that bureaucratic hurdles are not experienced in the same way by all citizens in developing countries. Depending on the frequency, recency, and types of encounters with bureaucratic agencies, citizens should have different perceptions of bureaucratic inefficiency, which will moderate their attitudes toward bureaucratic corruption.

The theoretical expectation regarding normative evaluations is that citizens will reject both types of corruption *regardless of their perceptions of bureaucratic inefficiency*. As we argued above, this across-the-board rejection is predicated on the well-known fact that citizens hold a strong social norm against all types of corruption in principle.

We have different expectations regarding strategic preferences. On the one hand, citizens who perceive bureaucratic inefficiency to be greater should be more likely to express a strategic preference for ‘speed money’ corrupt officials in order to obtain government documents in a more timely manner. On the other hand, citizens’ strategic rejection of bureaucrats who engage in petty theft should not be influenced by perceptions of bureaucratic inefficiency.

Hypothesis 3: Perceptions of higher levels of bureaucratic inefficiency will not affect citizens’ acceptance of ‘speed money’ or ‘petty theft’ corruption when they are asked about their *normative* evaluations.

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of higher levels of bureaucratic inefficiency will lead to greater acceptance of ‘speed money’ but not of ‘petty theft’ corruption when citizens are asked about their *strategic* preferences.

3. Research Design

3.1. The case of Paraguay

Paraguay is an ideal setting in which to explore public assessments of corrupt bureaucratic behavior for three main reasons. First, corruption is sufficiently widespread to make our treatments credible. Paraguay has one of the highest levels of corruption victimization in Latin America (AmericasBarometer 2018/19) and has bribery rates similar to those in other Global South countries (Global Corruption Barometer 2017). Paraguay is ranked 128th among 180 countries in the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, scoring 30 on 0-100 a scale where 100 signifies the least corruption. This score places Paraguay near the Global South average of 31, indicating that its corruption levels are typical for the Global South, not an outlier. Second, corruption in Paraguay does not only involve elected officials; it also includes appointed public

sector employees, especially street-level officials in service delivery positions, who are the focus of our conjoint experiment. Paraguayans report high corruption victimization in their dealings with local government employees, the judicial system, and the agency in charge of producing identity cards and passports (Global Corruption Barometer 2017).⁷ Bribery is also widespread in the public health and public education systems. In other words, it is common for Paraguayan citizens to pay bribes to process documents or receive a public service. In fact, for a typical employee to receive a bribe to accelerate a government transaction is “the way of doing things in the public sector” (Molinas and Pérez-Liñán 2005).

Third, bureaucratic performance is perceived to be inefficient, slow, and politicized in Paraguay despite the adoption of civil service reforms. While the presidency of Fernando Lugo (2008-2012) marked the end of 61 years of government by the Colorado Party and advanced the professionalization of the bureaucracy, reforms of the public administration have been limited (Hetherington 2018; Schuster 2014). During the Lugo administration, competitive appointments of public officials were mostly focused on technical rather than service or managerial positions, and involved only a minority of vacancies and institutions (Schuster 2014:13). Thus, some still characterize Paraguay as a neopatrimonial state in which the majority of appointments, promotions, and salaries are decided based on political loyalties (Schuster 2021). As a result, the weak Paraguayan public administration suffers from inefficient policy-making and implementation as well as the inadequate provision of essential public services. The 2019 Worldwide Governance Indicators data demonstrates the low quality of public administration. Paraguay received a score of -0.55 on the “government effectiveness” indicator that ranges from -

⁷ Nearly a fifth (19%) of Paraguayans who processed a document in the *Departamento de Identificaciones* report that they had to pay a bribe to obtain the document or speed up the service (Global Corruption Barometer, 2017).

2.5 (weak) to 2.5 (strong) governance performance, one of the lowest scores in South America (the average for the region was -0.18).⁸

3.2. Survey design

To examine how citizens evaluate corrupt bureaucratic behavior, we conducted a preregistered conjoint experiment in Paraguay in July–August 2021 (see Appendix K for details). The experiment was embedded in an original online survey implemented by Offerwise, a professional market research firm with ample experience in Latin America. They recruited the respondents (3,107) from their proprietary list of Paraguayan panelists through email invitations (see Appendix A for more details about the sample design). To generate a sample that looks like the Paraguayan population, we adopted quotas for age, gender, and education. In Appendix B, we compare the distribution of the demographic variables in our sample to those of population-level variables for which comparable data is available. As is often the case with online surveys, our sample is slightly younger and more educated than the national population. In Appendix I, we use representative matching to correct imbalances in the sample (Kuffuor, Visconti, and Young 2022), and this correction does not affect the main conclusions of the study.

3.3 Conjoint experiment

We use a choice-based conjoint design to study the factors that shape tolerance or rejection of corruption in the public sector. This design allows us to study the multidimensional preferences underlying a citizen’s choice while reducing social desirability bias. Prior research has used conjoint analyses to assess citizens’ preferences about candidates, migrants, and public officials (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Carnes and Lupu 2015; Oliveros and Schuster 2018). Choice-

⁸ This indicator captures “perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures.” (Kaufmann et al. 2011).

based designs help reduce social desirability bias since respondents evaluate profiles with multiple attributes, which makes it harder for respondents to guess the subject of the researchers' investigations—and thus less likely that they will refrain from endorsing a controversial (or socially undesirable) trait (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Wallander 2009). This last point is particularly relevant since survey experiments usually overestimate people's punishment for corruption due to social desirability bias (Incerti 2020). Conjoint experiments have also been shown to have high external validity when comparing their results to behavioral benchmarks (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015), and these designs have been used in both developed and developing countries (Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018; Mares and Visconti 2020; Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan 2020).

The participants in our conjoint experiment were asked to evaluate different pairs of public employees who randomly varied in their corruption record. We focus on two plausible corrupt practices: speed and theft corruption (Ang 2020). For the first treatment (*speed*), the public official has received bribes to speed up the processing of documents or he/she has not. For the second treatment (*theft*), the public official has diverted public funds to her/his bank account or he/she has not. We also include other relevant characteristics to generate profiles that resemble real public officials, but we do not have theoretical expectations for their effects. These are bureaucrats' age (30, 40, or 50 years old),⁹ gender (man or woman), education (primary, secondary, or college), and party affiliation (Colorado Party, Liberal Party, or no party affiliation). Table 1 provides the full list of attributes used to generate the set of hypothetical public employees. The order of attributes was fully randomized in every public employee profile. Since survey participants evaluated five pairs of bureaucrats, we cluster the standard errors at the respondent level.

⁹ Age can serve as a proxy for the length of experience working in the public sector.

Table 1. List of public officials' attributes

Attributes	Values
Speed Corruption	Has NOT received bribes to speed up the processing of documents. Has received bribes to speed up the processing of documents.
Theft Corruption	Has NOT diverted public funds to his/her bank account. Has diverted public funds to his/her bank account.
Gender	Man Woman
Party ID	Partido Colorado Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico No party affiliation
Age	30 years old 40 years old 50 years old
Education	Primary education Secondary education College education

To measure normative evaluations, we asked respondents to select which public officials should be promoted to a higher position in the Civil Registry. In this hypothetical situation, we expect survey participants to base their choices on the criteria of an ideal bureaucrat, someone deserving of a promotion or whose behavior is normatively acceptable. We know that workplace promotions serve as encouragement to workers who merit better employment conditions, such as increases to wages and benefits or a higher rank within an organization. In a bureaucracy, this means advancement to a higher-level job and possibly more responsibility. Responses to this question will thus capture normative assessments of the hypothetical public official's behavior and performance.

To measure strategic preferences, we put respondents in a hypothetical scenario in which they need a certificate promptly and must select which official can help them. Therefore, the choice

of a public official directly translates into positive or negative returns for the respondent, who is a potential service user (e.g., obtaining the needed documentation in time or not). This question also captures the strategic dimension of seeking a personal benefit since we ask respondents to think about who will help them (personally) rather than who will be faster (on average). If, for instance, survey respondents are more likely to select a bribe-taking public official, that decision implies a willingness to pay a bribe to obtain a certificate on time (otherwise the preference for a bribe-taking public official is meaningless). It is therefore a quintessentially strategic decision rather than a simple perception of which bureaucrat processes documents more rapidly.

To connect our design to the hypotheses, we expect survey respondents to reject bureaucrats who engage in 'petty theft' when asked about their normative and strategic preferences. Meanwhile, we expect survey participants to reject 'petty theft' but to prefer 'speed money' corruption when asked about their strategic preferences.

To analyze the conjoint experiment, we provide the marginal means (MM)—the percentage of times that survey participants chose profiles containing that attribute level, averaged across all other attribute levels (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021). Therefore, the MM of each attribute level can be interpreted as the probability of preferring a public official with that characteristic. An MM equal to 0.5 represents indifference (50% probability of being chosen in a pair comparison). Values above 0.5 indicate favorability, and those below 0.5 denote unfavorability for the given attribute level (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020). In Appendix E, we report the results when estimating the average marginal component effect (AMCE), which represents the average difference in the probability of being preferred between two different attribute values (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). We provide the MMs because they

do not require preferences to be expressed against a baseline such as the AMCE. However, the results are consistent across both parameters of interest (i.e., MM and AMCE).

3.4. Perceptions of inefficiency

We use a pre-registered survey experiment to prime survey respondents to think about the inefficiency of the bureaucracy in Paraguay. Just before the conjoint experiment was introduced, participants in the treatment group were randomly primed with the following sentence and figure (Figure 1): “According to multiple international reports, the Paraguayan bureaucracy has been characterized as slow and inefficient, occupying one of the last places in the region.” The control group was not exposed to any prime.

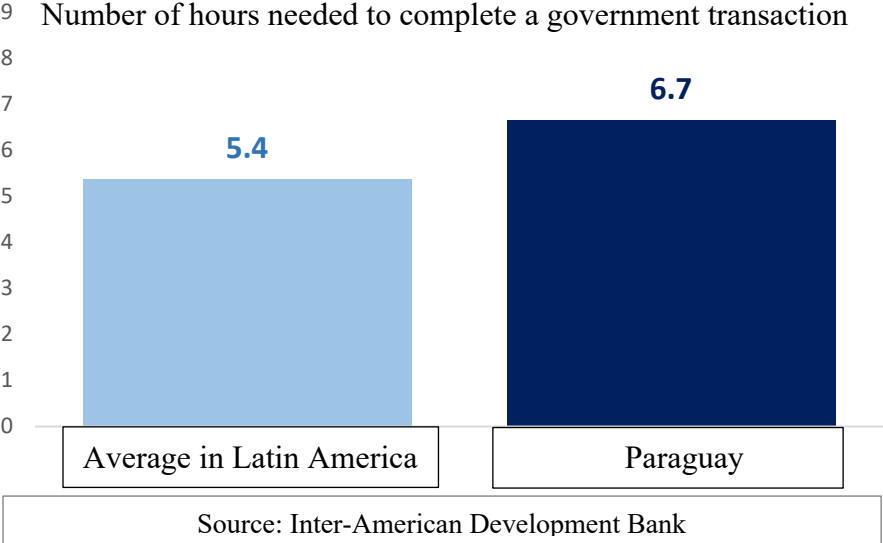


Figure 1. Priming Experiment

We also used a direct question to capture perceptions of inefficiency before the priming and conjoint experiment as a robustness check. However, due to space constraints we present this additional pre-registered analysis in the Appendix (see Appendix C).

4. Results Conjoint Experiment

Figure 2 displays the effect of speed and theft corruption on the normative outcome: preference for promotion (Hypothesis 1). The dots indicate the probability of being preferred, and the lines denote 95% confidence intervals. We provide the point estimates and the standard errors in parentheses for the attributes of interest (speed and theft corruption). Appendix D reports the results of the other attributes.

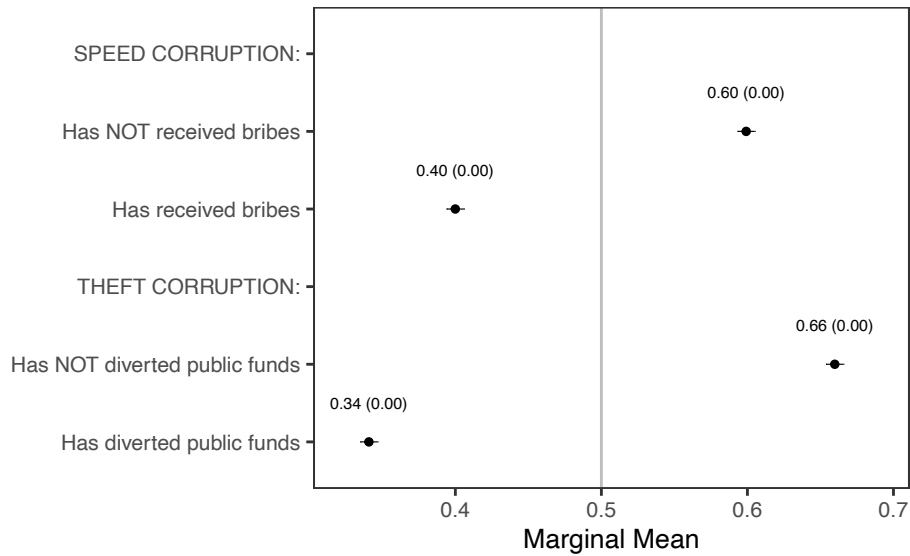


Figure 2. Probability of Being Preferred (Normative Outcome: Promotion). Full results are reported in Appendix D.

When selecting bureaucrats for promotion (normative outcome), the results demonstrate that bureaucrats who do *not* receive bribes have a probability of 0.6 of being preferred; those who *do* accept bribes have a probability of 0.4. Additionally, bureaucrats who have *not* diverted funds have a probability of 0.66 of being preferred, and those who *have* done so have a probability of 0.34. These findings confirm Hypothesis 1—that citizens in the developing world reject both ‘petty theft’ corruption and ‘speed money’ corruption when asked about their normative preferences. The

point estimates for speed and theft corruption are the largest; preferences for college-educated public officials come next with a 0.54 probability (see Appendix D).

Figure 3 plots the effect of speed and theft corruption on the strategic outcome: preference for assistance in government transactions (Hypothesis 2).

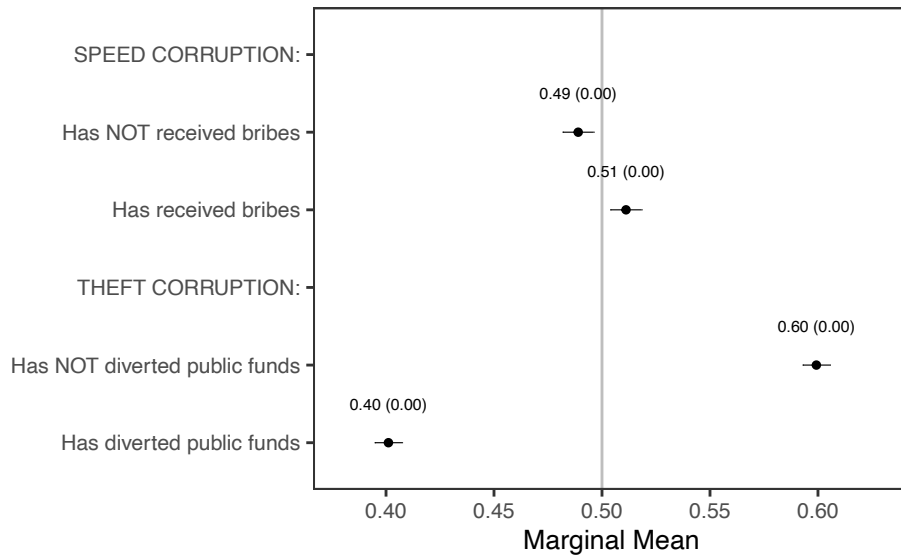


Figure 3. Probability of Being Preferred (Strategic Outcome: Assistance). Full results are reported in Appendix D.

When selecting bureaucrats for assistance (strategic outcome), the results show that bureaucrats who do *not* accept bribes have a probability of 0.49 of being preferred; those who *do* accept bribes have a probability of 0.51.¹⁰ Bureaucrats who have not diverted public funds have a probability of 0.60 of being preferred, and those who *have* done so have a probability of 0.40. These findings confirm Hypothesis 2 since Paraguayans do not just tolerate, but are slightly more likely to select, a bureaucrat involved in ‘speed money’ corruption when asked about their strategic

¹⁰ These findings should not be interpreted as a majority of people preferring a corrupt public official since results can be explained by subgroups allocating more weight to specific preferences (Abramson et al. 2022). However, they should be interpreted as the change in the probability of being preferred when comparing a given attribute level (e.g., bribe-taker) to a baseline attribute level (e.g., not a bribe-taker) (Bansak et al. 2022).

preferences. However, they punish officials involved in petty theft in a way that is very consistent with what we observed in the evaluation of normative outcomes.

Since the probability of preferring a bribe-taking bureaucrat increases substantially from 0.40 when considering the normative outcome to 0.51 when considering the strategic outcome, the effect sizes of selecting a bribe-taking bureaucrat depend on the point of comparison. They are substantive and significant when comparing normative and strategic outcomes, and small (but significant) when comparing bribe and non-bribe takers within the strategic outcome. The point estimates for theft corruption are the largest, and those for speed corruption are the same as preferring women and larger than selecting 30 year olds, 40 year olds, and officials with a secondary education. In Appendix F, we provide diagnostics for the conjoint experiment. In Appendix G, we correct for the multiple comparisons problem, a common concern when evaluating multiple hypotheses.

5. Perceptions of inefficiency

To measure how perceptions of inefficiency can affect the outcomes, we use the priming experiment described in section 3.4. Figure 4 provides the conditional marginal means for the normative outcome for the treatment and control groups at the top, and the difference between the groups at the bottom. Figure 5 does the same for the strategic outcome.

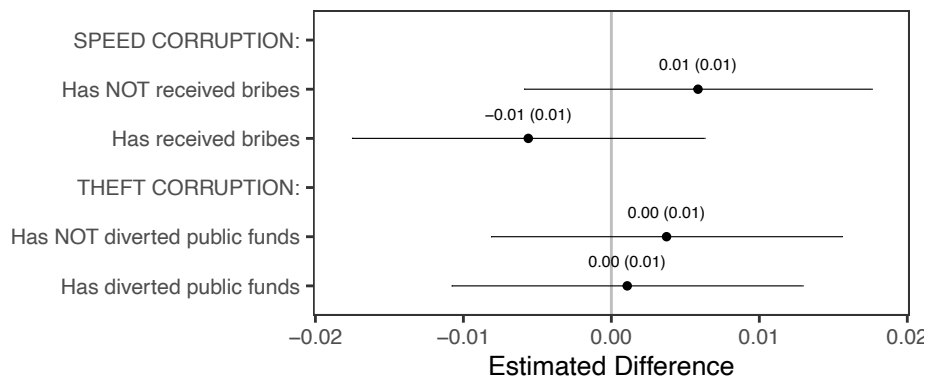
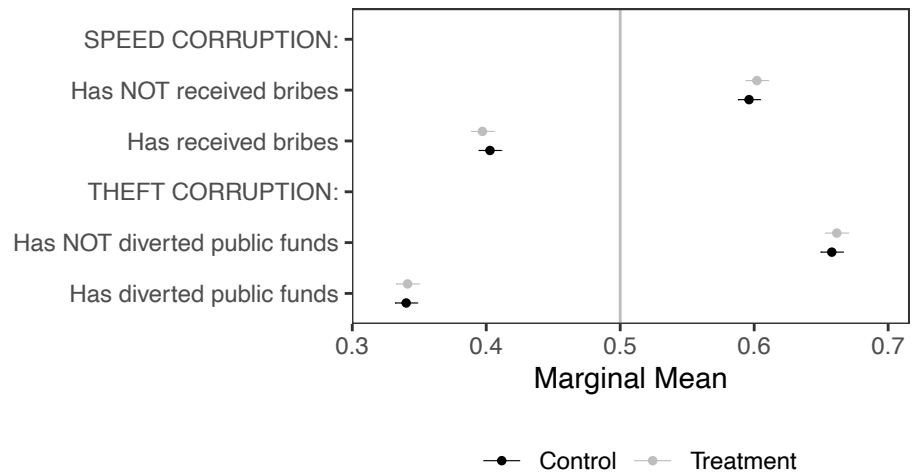


Figure 4. Conditional Marginal Means for Priming Experiment (Normative Outcome: Promotion). Full results are reported in Appendix D.

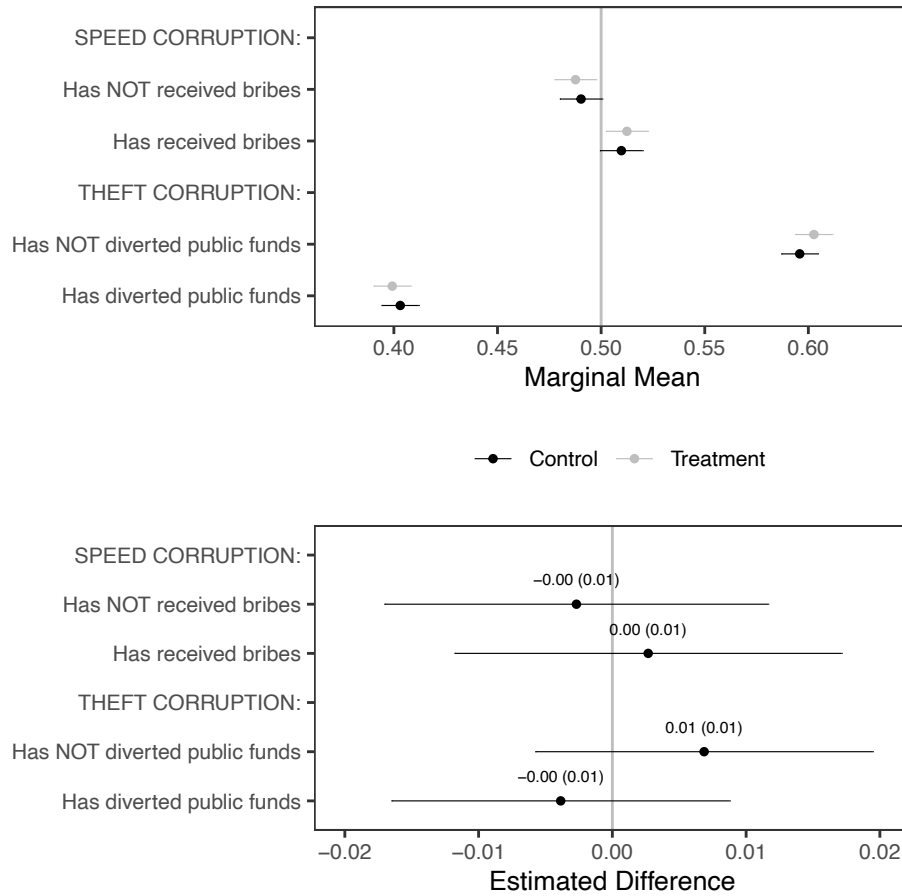


Figure 5. Conditional Marginal Means for Priming Experiment (Strategic Outcome: Assistance). Full results are reported in Appendix D.

The results show that there is no distinction in favorability between speed and theft corruption when comparing the control and treatment groups or when using both outcomes (i.e., normative and strategic). None of the estimated differences is distinguishable from zero.¹¹

These findings provide support for Hypothesis 3 but not Hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 3 posited that the normative rejection of both types of corruption would be independent of

¹¹ We also used a direct question about perceptions of bureaucratic efficiency to explore heterogeneous treatment effects. This analysis uses a matched sample, as described in Appendix C. The results are very similar and are presented in Appendix D (Tables A6 and A7). Appendix H provides additional details on the matching procedure.

perceptions of (in)efficiency. The evidence is consistent with this expectation; petty corruption is always rejected at the normative level, even by respondents who perceive the bureaucracy as inefficient. Hypothesis 4, by contrast, posited that the strategic acceptance of "speed money" corruption (not "petty theft" corruption) would be stronger among those who perceive the public administration to be slow and inefficient. We do not find evidence that respondents who perceive the bureaucracy as more inefficient (or those who are primed to think about bureaucratic inefficiency) have a stronger preference for speed corruption when seeking timely government assistance. That is, the strategic acceptance of a bribe-taking bureaucrat does not depend on perceptions of inefficiency.

6. Exploring alternative mechanisms

The results of our conjoint experiment provide partial support for our hypotheses. They confirm our theoretical intuition that citizens in a developing country prefer to deal with bribe-taking bureaucrats when conducting a government transaction (while rejecting all forms of corruption from a normative standpoint). However, we do not have enough evidence to confirm that tolerance of 'speed money' corruption is higher among citizens who perceive the bureaucracy as more inefficient.

To identify which factors might drive tolerance of (or a preference for) 'speed money' corruption in the Global South, we return to our experimental results and conduct a few additional analyses to assess whether individuals with a higher SES are more likely to express a strategic

preference for bribe-taking bureaucrats. Simply put, we compare how respondents' with more and less education and income evaluate public officials.¹²

These analyses were not pre-registered, and are therefore more exploratory in nature. However, these additional analyses are informed by previous studies on bureaucratic corruption in the developing world. In particular, the ethnographic literature on bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption demonstrates that individuals experience this phenomenon differently depending on their socioeconomic status. In a nutshell, slow and corrupt bureaucracies disproportionately affect the poor (Roseth, Reyes, and Santiso 2018). When bureaucracies are slow and inefficient, time-starved citizens use their money, influence, and connections to try to circumvent lines and speed up access to government services (Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019; Secor 2007; Corbridge 2004). Poor people lack those resources and are generally unable to pay bribes during government transactions (Mocan 2008). Nevertheless, officers often demand bribes more frequently from the poor, as they are seen as more vulnerable and less likely to report corruption (Fried et al. 2010). This leads to a diminished form of citizenship for poor citizens, who face long administrative delays that are not experienced by wealthier or better-connected citizens (Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2019).

It is therefore mostly poor people who wait in line (Auyero 2011); wealthier citizens can pay bribes to access government services and obtain preferential treatment (Scott 1972: 28-34). This might lead to a bifurcation in attitudes toward 'speed money' corruption. On the one hand, citizens with sufficient financial means might appreciate and take advantage of the opportunity to pay bribes to speed up their access to public services. On the other hand, poorer people do not

¹² As we did when estimating the heterogeneous treatment effects by perceptions of efficiency (see Appendix C), in this section, we use matched samples to compare groups with similar observed characteristics except for the ones of interest (i.e., income or education).

accept ‘speed money’ corruption because they cannot afford to pay bribes. If this exploratory hypothesis is correct, we should observe that high-SES citizens in the developing world are more likely to accept ‘speed money’ corruption than their less wealthy and less educated counterparts.

In this analysis we focus on the attribute of interest: speed corruption. Figures 6 and 7 display the results for the normative and strategic outcomes, respectively. Each is divided into two main columns: the first reports the results for heterogenous effects based on income (1: above median income, 0: below median income) and the second column presents the results for heterogenous effects based on education (1: more than high school, 0: high school or less). The top row provides the conditional marginal means for each subgroup, and the bottom row shows the differential effects.

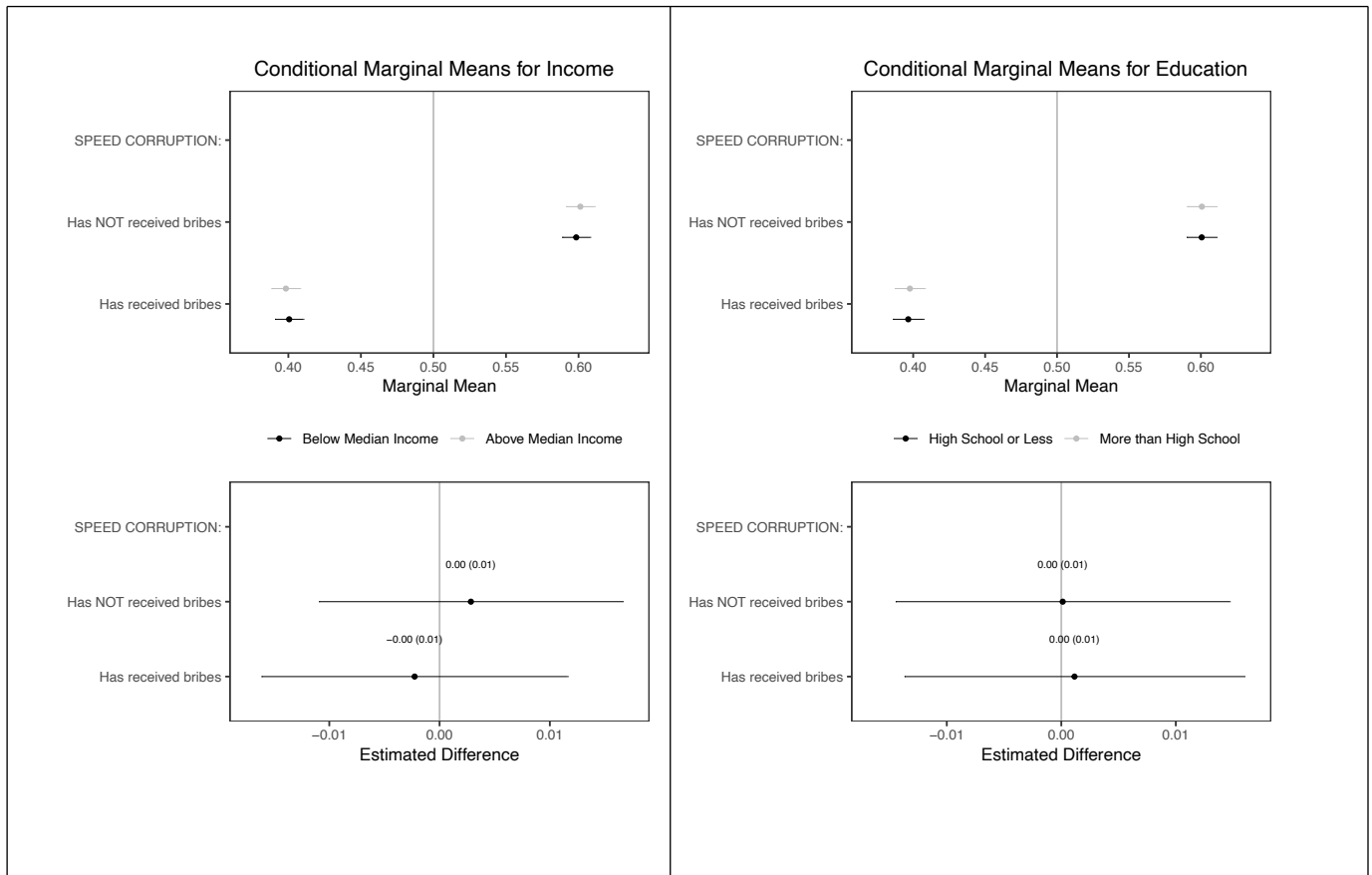


Figure 6. Conditional Marginal Means and Estimated Differences for Income and Education (Normative Outcome: Promotion). Full results are reported in Appendix J.

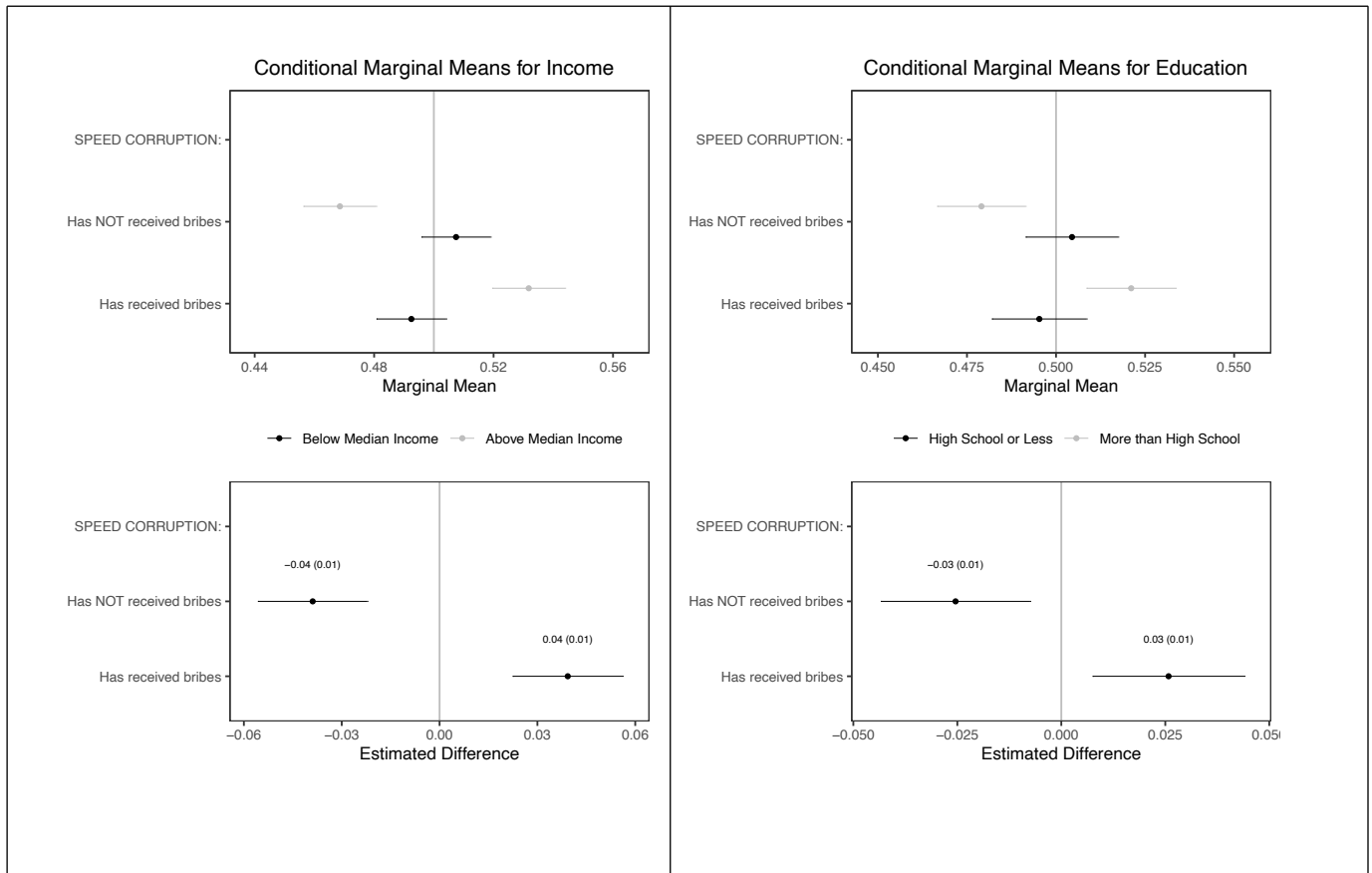


Figure 7. Conditional Marginal Means and Estimated Differences for Income and Education (Strategic Outcome: Assistance). Full results are reported in Appendix J.

We find that respondents with a higher income and a higher level of education are more likely to prefer bureaucrats who engage in speed corruption than respondents with a lower income and a lower level of education; the difference between these groups is significant. Therefore, these results show that SES is a significant factor associated with greater favorability toward speed corruption. High-SES respondents who can afford to pay bribes to overcome the barriers to accessing public services are more accepting of bribe-taking public servants when asked about their strategic preferences. By contrast, low-SES respondents do not report greater acceptance of

bribe-taking bureaucrats, and appear to be indifferent between officials who accept bribes and those who do not.

To sum up, our results show that people can have conflicting views about what makes a good public official. Our analysis shows that respondents with above-median income are more likely to say that bribe-taking is wrong but view speed money corruption as okay. While Figure 6 shows that above-median-income respondents reward non-bribe-taking public officials, Figure 7 shows that they prefer bribe-taking officials when necessary.

7. Conclusions

Past research on citizens' evaluations of corruption in the developing world has focused overwhelmingly on political corruption. Political scientists have extensively analyzed the circumstances under which citizens hold corrupt politicians accountable. This paper focuses instead on citizens' perceptions of corruption in the *bureaucracy*. While “grand corruption” might be far removed from individuals' daily lives, citizens of many developing countries directly experience “petty corruption” in the public sector. It is therefore important to understand how citizens evaluate these forms of corruption that plague service delivery in bureaucratic agencies in the developing world.

We argue that there is an important—but often overlooked—distinction between citizens' normative evaluations and strategic preferences for corruption in the bureaucracy. While citizens always perceive petty corruption as inappropriate and undesirable, they sometimes strategically accept forms of corruption that can speed up access to government transactions. The results of our conjoint survey experiment in Paraguay support our theoretical expectations.

An important caveat is in order. We argue that individuals who seek to speed up government transactions may perceive ‘speed money’ corruption as effective. However, we do not maintain that petty corruption and the widespread use of bribes improve efficiency at the systemic level by “greasing the wheels” of a rigid bureaucracy (Huntington 1968, Leff 1964). On the contrary, previous studies have shown that bureaucrats can deliberately cause administrative delays to attract more bribes. In other words, corrupt officials might create ‘red tape’ to encourage bribery (Myrdal 1968; Banerjee 1997; Banerjee, Hanna, and Mullainathan 2012; Rose-Ackerman 1999). More generally, it has been demonstrated that corruption reduces bureaucratic efficiency (Olken and Pande 2012; Rose-Ackerman 1999). However, citizens in the developing world who want to conduct a government transaction or access a public service have to deal with the deficient public sectors that exist in their countries. In these contexts, time-starved individuals might prefer to deal with bureaucrats who can be bribed in order to avoid greater delays, even when the systemic costs are unmistakable.

Some readers might be more sanguine than we are about the normative implications of ‘speed money’ corruption. After all, there are plenty of legal ways for citizens in wealthy democracies with well-functioning bureaucracies to have access to faster/premium services (e.g., expedited processing of documents) by paying more. These legal surcharges and upcharges in interactions with the bureaucracy are relatively well tolerated. Citizens in countries where these legal pathways to preferential treatment are not available might perceive bribes as the functional equivalent and accept them as a fact of life. Scott (1972: viii) makes a very similar point when he argues that governments that provide legal ways for wealth to influence government decisions “often simply institutionalize a transaction between wealth and power that occurs illegally under a more restrictive set of rules.” We are skeptical about this line of reasoning for several reasons.

First, bribes are very different from legal fees for expedited services in that they generate a lot of uncertainty and unpredictability in citizens' encounters with street-level bureaucrats. This might lead to negative interactions with the government even for those who can afford to pay a bribe. Second, the legal fees paid for premium services increase government revenues and can be used to improve the quality of public service delivery for all citizens. By contrast, the illegal bribes paid to speed up access to government services in the Global South allow public servants to line up their pockets with no positive externality for the population at large. Third, our empirical results clearly suggest that citizens in Paraguay see all forms of petty corruption as morally reprehensible; even though they might on occasion accept to pay bribes to speed up access to services in a sclerotic bureaucracy. In sum, we think that providing legal and transparent ways for faster access to government services is not the equivalent of (and would be much preferable to) a "black-market bureaucracy" (Tilman 1968) that relies on bribes for preferential treatment.

One of the most surprising findings of our paper is that the strategic acceptance of 'speed-money' corruption does not depend on perceptions of inefficiency. What should we make of these results? We believe it would be premature to conclude that bureaucratic inefficiency and acceptance of bribe-taking public servants are entirely unrelated. Our conjoint experiment was conducted in a context of high bureaucratic inefficiency. Our priming experiment was designed to make the issue of bureaucratic inefficiency more salient for treated individuals, but the priming treatment might not be very effective if respondents in the control group also had recent negative experiences with a rigid and slow bureaucracy. It might well be the case that our design is not ideally suited to test the link between (perceived) bureaucratic inefficiency and evaluations of bureaucratic corruption because the de facto inefficiency in Paraguay shapes the perceptions of the entire sample. We therefore think that the evidence presented in this paper is not yet conclusive,

and more research is necessary to assess the link between bureaucratic inefficiency and attitudes towards corruption using alternative research designs. For instance, scholars could conduct an experiment similar to ours in high- and low-bureaucratic efficiency contexts simultaneously to assess whether there is less tolerance for bribe-taking public servants in contexts where the bureaucracy is more efficient. Another possibility would be to assess whether an efficiency shock in a particular context in the developing world (e.g., a bureaucratic reform that rapidly increases bureaucratic capacity and speed) leads to changes in attitudes towards bureaucratic corruption. We invite other scholars to join us in this effort to investigate this important question.

Our results have critical policy implications. International organizations and foreign aid agencies based in wealthy countries often focus their energy and resources on building a constituency for the rule of law and the fight against corruption in countries in the Global South (Popescu-Zamfir 2022; Byrne, Arnold, and Nagano 2010; Rika, Sujana, and Landrawan 2020). An assumption underlying these efforts is that citizens in developing countries have internalized corruption in public administration to such an extent that they do not see it as morally reprehensible. A large civic education campaign is therefore perceived as necessary to enlighten citizens about the ills of government and bureaucratic corruption. To paraphrase V. O. Key's (1966) famous assertion about voters, our results show that citizens in the Global South "are not fools." Bureaucratic corruption in all its manifestations elicits a strong normative condemnation. This suggests that most citizens are aware that bureaucratic corruption is reprehensible and should be combated. Citizens tolerate "speed money" corruption and are willing to pay bribes when they have the means to do so, especially in the Global South where bureaucracies are inefficient and government transactions take a long time.

Hence, solely relying on anti-corruption civic education campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of corruption may prove insufficient to effectively control corruption. Governments (and international organizations) that want to fight petty corruption in the developing world should consider directing their resources towards comprehensive administrative reforms. These reforms should prioritize expediting access to government services, minimizing human discretion, and enhancing transparency throughout governmental procedures (Rose and Peiffer 2015: 84-93). Government transactions should be made as fast and frictionless as possible to eliminate one of the key reasons that citizens tolerate (or even prefer) ‘speed money’ corruption. For instance, bureaucratic efficiency could be enhanced by increasing the use of technology in public administration and offering more services online (Roseth, Reyes, and Santiso 2018).

Our findings also have implications for our understanding of democratic citizenship in highly unequal contexts in the Global South. The link between economic inequality and uneven political influence is well understood. In settings where inequality is high, low-SES individuals tend to participate less in politics, which generates unequal political influence as elected officials pay more heed to those who are politically engaged (Lijphart 1997; Solt 2008). This leads to a diminished form of citizenship for those who lack economic resources. Our results suggest that this pattern is compounded by their unequal ability to navigate corrupt and inefficient bureaucracies. In the developing world, individuals who are well connected and relatively wealthy can circumvent cumbersome bureaucracies by paying bribes to street-level bureaucrats to speed up government transactions. By contrast, poor people are “patients of the state” (Auyero 2011) who must endure long waits in bureaucratic offices. Their lack of political influence in turn makes it less likely that politicians will respond to (often muted) demands for administrative efficiency.

In sum, our research suggests that economic inequality, political inequality, and inequality in access to government services are inextricably linked.

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