Exposure to Violence and Citizens' Willingness to Tolerate Government Corruption in Mexico

Sector(s): Crime, Violence, and Conflict, Political Economy and Governance

Location: Greater Mexico City

Sample: 800 individuals

Target group: Adults

Outcome of interest: Attitudes and norms Corruption and Leakages

Intervention type: Information

Research Papers: Are voters too afraid to tackle corruption? Survey and experimental evidence fr...

Partner organization(s): The Mamdouha S. Bobst Center for Peace and Justice, Buendía y Laredo

In Latin America, the rise of organized crime coupled with the state's weak enforcement of the rule of law have allowed criminal organizations to use violence, intimidation, and corrupt practices to gain and maintain power. In this context, increasing state capacity and reducing corruption could lead to greater violence as competing interests vie for power. An increase in violence may affect citizens' support for efforts to reduce corruption. Researchers evaluated the impact of exposure to violence and fear of future violence on citizens' willingness to tolerate government corruption in Mexico. They found, in this context, that greater exposure to violence decreases citizens' tolerance of corruption.

Policy issue

In Latin America, the rise of organized crime coupled with weak state capacity to enforce the rule of law have allowed criminal organizations to use violence, intimidation, and corrupt practices to gain and maintain their power. In this context, increasing state capacity and reducing corruption could cause greater violence as competing interests vie for power. How do citizens react when reducing corruption leads to higher levels of violence? Political science literature suggests that violence can increase community cohesion and voter participation, empowering voters to root out corrupt politicians. But a separate body of literature in psychology suggests that fear can cause people to be risk-adverse, leading voters in unstable environments to vote for politicians with criminal connections, or be dissuaded from removing corrupt officials whom they view as necessary for establishing and enforcing order. To examine the relationship between these competing dynamics, researchers evaluated the impact of exposure to violence and fear of future violence on citizens' willingness to tolerate government corruption in Mexico.

Context of the evaluation

In 2012, Mexico held general elections to replace the outgoing President Felipe Calderón. Calderón's legacy was heavily colored by his large-scale government crackdown on drug trafficking in the country. Polls and journalistic accounts from the time suggest that the continued violence surrounding the Mexican Drug War was one of voters' principal concerns in the elections. The key presidential challenger and eventual winner of the election, Enrique Peña Nieto, campaigned on a platform to reduce violence by focusing on day-to-day crime, rather than large drug trafficking organizations. But critics viewed his party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, as one that would return Mexico to an unofficial policy of accepting bribes and allowing traffickers to operate

with impunity in exchange for lower violence. Thus, the 2012 elections brought to the fore citizens' opinions about corruption and violence, and the trade-off between the two.

Details of the intervention

To examine the causal relationship between citizens' fear of violence and tolerance of corruption, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation one week before the 2012 presidential elections that used an in-person survey of 800 adults aged eighteen years and older in the Greater Mexico City area. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of two surveys—a "fear" survey designed to emphasize fear about drug-related violence, and a neutral survey that did not emphasize any particular emotion.

In the "fear" survey group, participants were shown pictures of drug-related violence, and then asked to write a description of what they feared about drug-related violence. In the neutral comparison group, survey participants were shown pictures of various natural wonders in Mexico, and were asked to write about what they thought Mexico could do to better improve and maintain their nation's natural beauty. By targeting and eliciting fear in some respondents but not others, researchers were able to measure the impact of fear on respondents' answers to subsequent questions in the survey.

Both surveys then asked participants about their willingness to trade corruption for violence on a 1 to 7 scale, in which 1 represents lots of violence and little corruption, and 7 represents little violence and lots of corruption. All participants were also asked to rate their fear about violence related to the Drug War on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot) to examine how the two surveys impacted self-reported levels of fear.

Researchers also asked all participants additional questions to measure participants' exposure to criminal victimization, psychological stress, and perceptions of violence and corruption in their neighborhoods.

Results and policy lessons

Researchers found that the "fear" survey had varying effects on how much fear it elicited, based on participants' previous exposure to crime. To measure this, they created a crime victimization index based on the number and type of crimes perpetrated against each individual or someone in the individual's social network. Participants who had been personally exposed to higher levels of crime and received the "fear" survey reported levels of fear about the Drug War that were 0.27 points higher than for the neutral survey comparison group. However, participants with less exposure to crime who received the "fear" survey actually reported fear levels that were 0.77 points lower than for the neutral survey group. This finding aligns with studies conducted by psychologists that suggest acknowledging a fear may actually lessen it.

Individuals who were exposed to more crime and who received the "fear" survey, and thus were more likely to report higher levels of fear, were more willing to reduce corruption even in the face of more violence. A one-point increase in the crime victimization index decreased the individual's response to the corruption trade-off question by 0.21 points, indicating the individual was willing to trade more violence for less corruption.

These findings suggest that the relationship between fear, exposure to violence, and political behavior is not straightforward. While exposure to violence may increase fear of future violence, these dynamics may actually empower citizens to fight corruption.

GarcÃa-Ponce, Omar, Leonard Wantchekon, and Thomas Zeitzoff. "Are Voters Too Afraid to Tackle Corruption? Survey and Experimental Evidence from Mexico." Working Paper, December 2014