

## Book Review

– *The corruption debates: Left vs. Right—and Does It Matter—in the Americas*, Stephen D. Morris. Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2021

Until now the academic debate on corruption in Latin America has been mainly oriented to explore the role strategic actors and institutions play in the production and reproductions of corruptive practices in the region such as government officials, parliament, political parties, and the armed forces. However, practically no attention has been paid so far to the impact the political and ideological orientation of governments can have on the combat on corruption and its outcomes. Are there differences between right-wing and left-wing governments in the ways they look at corruption, and in their degree of effectiveness to combating it? Or to put it more plainly: are left-wing governments more corrupt than right-wing ones or vice versa?

In this book Morris takes the challenging task to explore this underexposed facet of corruption. By introducing the Right-Left cleavage in the discussion, he has opened a new promising lane in a debate that until now had systematically avoided this key political dimension. In chapter 1 he provides a brief but useful review of the few existing studies on the role played by partisanship and ideology in shaping people's perceptions of corruption, as well as their views about its causes and possible solutions. Morris stresses the existence of clear ideological markers, which have been aligned along the traditional schism state vs market. While the right has generally blamed governments, bureaucracies and state agencies as the main villains of corruption, the left has systematically pointed at capitalism and the private sector as the main causes of this blight.

In chapter 2 Morris explores how ideas and approaches about corruption and the ways to combat it are connected with left-wing and right-wing orientations. The right normally embraces neoliberal and neo-institutionalist positions, proclaiming the need to reduce the role of the state in the economic and societal domains and to implement top-down technocratic solutions. This should lead to a reduction of unconstrained rent-seeking behaviour among key social and political actors in society. The left, by its part, privileges the strengthening of state controls and regulations, and the fostering of citizens' participation in

monitoring public probity and preventing economic and financial abuses committed by the elites.

Chapter 3 focuses on the particular rhetoric used by left-wing and right-wing politicians when dealing with the corruption issue. For this purpose, Morris compares the anti-corruption plans deployed by the 2012-2018 administration of Peña Nieto (right) and the successive administration of López Obrador (left) in Mexico, identifying a series of ideologically rooted differences among both presidents. In this chapter the author also pays attention to the left-right split in the United States and its impact in the rhetoric on corruption used by both the former left-wing presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and the right-wing President Donald Trump. The fact that Sanders has never been in power and the Trump administration represents a quite *sui generis* case, makes this comparison between these figures rather difficult and not very representative for US politics. In any case, the incorporation of the US case in a book that is meanly dealing with the Latin American region has not resulted in a visible value added.

In chapter 4 Morris assesses a series of anti-corruption policies applied by both left-wing and right-wing governments, including among others, the cases of Maduro in Venezuela, Lula da Silva in Brazil, and Fernández de Kirchner and Macri in Argentina. This chapter reveals that despite the existence of the marked differences in the rhetoric about corruption used by left-wing and right-wing leaders, the policies applied by them do actually possess many similarities. According to Morris, these similarities could be the result of the influence exerted by experts and international organizations over national anticorruption agendas.

Chapter 5 focuses on the outcomes of the anticorruption efforts of left-wing and right-wing governments. For this purpose, Morris makes use of an impressive arsenal of data on corruption elaborated by international organizations such as Transparency International and the World Bank, as well as by many academic monitoring institutions. This chapter provides a tsunami of statistical information about a large number of Latin American countries, presented in 17 tables and 27 figures. The great abundance of numbers and graphics clearly contrasts with the relatively brief general analytical reflexions made by the author in this chapter. Morris' conclusion is that the existing data shows a mixed performance of left and right governments in combatting corruption, what does not allow to say that right-wing governments are more successful in fighting corruption than left-wing ones or the other way around.

In chapter 6 Morris deploys a very interesting and challenging interpretation about a factor that in his view seems to be crucial in determining the position adopted by left-wing and right-wing forces on corruption. He calls it the 'power factor'. As he points out the discussion on corruption has become strongly politicized, constituting nowadays an important instrument in the struggle for power between the right and the left. In his view, the stand adopted by both sectors are not so much determined by their ideological differences, but by the fact of being in-power or out-of-power. In other words, what seems to be critical is if they are in government or in the opposition. When both sectors are in power, they show

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for instance big reluctance to adopt a critical stance about the evidence of widespread public corruption. However, when they are in the opposition, right and left-wing politicians become real zero-tolerance crusaders against all form of corruption in their countries. Morris has produced a pioneering work on the role played by the left-right cleavage in the phenomenon of corruption in Latin America. This book offers a valuable set of ideas and rich body of analytical instruments that can be used and further elaborated by a new generation of scholars in country-based or comparative studies.

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