

The Calculus of Corrupt Decision-Making: An Integrated Analytical Framework

El cálculo de la toma de decisiones corruptas: un marco analítico integrado

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Abstract

This article develops an integrated decision-making model of engagement in corrupt transactions. Existing utilitarian, institutional, and psychosocial-cultural accounts typically operate in analytic isolation, producing a persistent gap in their integration; this model fills that gap by bringing these perspectives together within a probabilistic specification. Drawing on core contributions from the literature, corrupt engagement is modeled as the probabilistic outcome of crossing a moral hurdle and performing a learning-shaped cost-benefit calculus. By clarifying public agents' choices and providing policymakers with actionable tools to design integrity policies that jointly address ethical, institutional, and behavioral drivers, the model offers a more realistic and policy-relevant perspective than approaches focused solely on utilitarian incentives or legal sanctions.

Keywords: Corruption, Decision making, Government policy, Public administration, Governance.

Resumen

Este artículo desarrolla un modelo integrado de toma de decisiones sobre la participación en transacciones corruptas. Las explicaciones utilitaristas, institucionales y psicosociales-culturales existentes suelen funcionar de forma aislada desde el punto de vista analítico, lo que genera una brecha persistente en su integración; este modelo llena esa brecha al reunir estas perspectivas en una especificación probabilística. Basándose en las principales contribuciones de la bibliografía, la participación en actos corruptos se modela como el resultado probabilístico de superar un obstáculo moral y realizar un cálculo de costes y beneficios basado en el aprendizaje. Al aclarar las opciones de los agentes públicos y proporcionar a los responsables políticos herramientas prácticas para diseñar políticas de integridad que aborden conjuntamente los factores éticos, institucionales y conductuales, el modelo ofrece una perspectiva más realista y relevante para las políticas que los enfoques centrados únicamente en los incentivos utilitarios o las sanciones legales.

Palabras clave: Corrupción, Toma de decisiones, Política gubernamental, Administración pública, Gobernanza.

1. Introduction¹

Recent research on corrupt transactions draws on rational choice and new institutional economics, understanding corrupt exchanges as the result of individual decision-making processes (Gorsira et al., 2018; Manara et al., 2023; Rabl, 2011; Rabl & Kühlmann, 2008). Yet these frameworks often understate the roles of bounded rationality, heuristics, and contextual influence (Hortal & Martínez, 2024). The logic

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of transaction costs remains influential, positing that actors weigh the costs of search, enforcement, and negotiation when engaging in illicit exchanges. However, more recent contributions argue that cultural–normative identification and collective binding alter decision probabilities in corruption beyond pure cost–benefit calculus (Fürstenberg & Uhl, 2025). In other words, public officials' choices reflect not only perceptions of opportunities and risks but also moral alignment, reputational exposure, and adaptive learning within their institutional milieus (Uhl et al., 2025; Vieira, 2023). This constellation underscores the need for an integrated framework that jointly accounts for the ethical, institutional, and behavioral drivers of corrupt decision-making.

Methodological individualism assumes that engagement in corrupt transactions is best explained by focusing on individual agents and their preferences. However, a realistic model must go beyond the hyper-rationality of neoclassical economics by acknowledging the limits of cognition and information. Behavioral research emphasizes that individuals intend to act rationally but do so within cognitive and informational constraints (Dhami, al-Nowaihi & Sunstein, 2019; Simon, 1997). These insights highlight the significance of incomplete information, power imbalances, and the inherent unpredictability of social interactions.

Uncertainty further complicates the decision-making process. Public officials rarely operate with perfect information or complete knowledge about the likelihood of outcomes, making it impossible to estimate the consequences of corruption with precision. Instead, agents rely on subjective probabilities shaped by their beliefs, heuristics, and prior experiences, which is consistent with contemporary work on expected utility under uncertainty (Fürstenberg & Uhl, 2025). Risk perception and its valuation vary across individuals, meaning that the same institutional environment may generate divergent decisions depending on how agents interpret their incentives and constraints (Hortal & Martínez, 2024; Kubbe & Engelbert, 2018; Wright et al., 2016).

In this context, corruption emerges as a decision-making challenge in which agents continuously weigh opportunities for illicit gain against ethical norms, institutional constraints, and their own knowledge. The probabilistic and subjective nature of decision-making underscores the need for integrated models that can combine utilitarian incentives, bounded rationality, and normative environments. By bridging these dimensions, scholars can better explain the persistence of corruption across diverse contexts and design more effective strategies to strengthen integrity in public administration.

2. Traditional approaches and their limitations

The literature on corruption has generated a diverse range of analytical models that aim to explain why public officials engage in corrupt transactions. These models vary in their assumptions about individual motivation, institutional constraints, and social context. While each has provided valuable insights, they also present significant limitations when considered as stand-alone explanations.

Early rational choice perspectives, such as Becker's (1968), frame corruption as the result of an individual's cost–benefit calculation: if the expected gains outweigh the risks of detection and sanction, corruption becomes a rational choice. Similarly, Lui (1985) models corruption as a function of queuing, suggesting that bribes accelerate access to scarce public goods. In contrast, Klitgaard's (1988) model (Corruption = Monopoly + Discretion – Accountability) formalizes the structural incentives underlying corrupt exchanges. These models are parsimonious and elegant, but they tend to reduce corruption to a purely utilitarian calculus, overlooking the psychosocial, moral, and cultural dimensions that constrain or facilitate corrupt behavior (Gelbrich et al., 2016).

Institutionalist and game-theoretic approaches sought to refine these assumptions. Rose-Ackerman and Plifkas's (2016) principal–agent framework highlights how asymmetric information and weak monitoring allow agents to deviate from principals' goals. Johnston's (2005) expands the scope by embedding corruption within broader institutional and participatory configurations, while the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners' fraud diamond incorporates organizational pressures, opportunities, rationalizations, and individual capacities (Humphrey et al., 2023). Likewise, Basu, Bhattacharya, and Mishra (1992) emphasize asymmetric punishment, arguing that strategic leniency toward bribe-givers, coupled with strict sanctions against bribe-takers, could reduce extortion. These

refinements incorporate institutional design and enforcement, but their applicability is often limited to specific contexts, leaving the role of cultural and moral factors unresolved.

More recent models incorporate psychosocial and relational dimensions. Gorsira et al. (2018) examine the role of attitudes, social norms, and rationalizations, while Fišar, Kubák, and Staněk (2021) explore how reciprocity and whistleblowing interact to influence corrupt decisions. Zheng, Ren, and Sun (2021) focus on social ties and find that networks of kinship and friendship increase the likelihood of bribery. Similarly, Verma and Sengupta (2017) demonstrate how corruption emerges in networks as a stable equilibrium. These perspectives move beyond individual rationality by emphasizing embeddedness and collective dynamics. However, they risk over-socializing the agent, potentially underestimating the resilience of individual incentives and the structural determinants of corruption.

A distinct set of contributions highlights situational and behavioral drivers. Mishra and Samuel (2024) introduce a model in which discretion amplifies the trade-off between temptation and commitment to honesty. Hu and Oak (2023b, 2023a) examine asymmetric punishment and intermediated corruption, highlighting how institutional arrangements influence the relative risks of direct versus indirect bribery. Uhl (2025) emphasizes the role of moral predispositions and self-control in shaping decisions in specific situational contexts. These models enrich the analysis by integrating micro-level behavioral factors but face difficulties in operationalization, as variables such as “temptation,” “self-control,” or “social ties” are not easily measurable across empirical contexts.

Taken together, existing models can be classified into three broad clusters: (i) classical utilitarian models, which reduce corruption to a rational utility-maximization problem (Becker, 1968; Klitgaard, 1988); (ii) institutionalist models, which emphasize the structure of incentives, monitoring, and sanctions (Basu et al., 1992; Johnston, 2005; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016); and (iii) psychosocial and behavioral models, which stress norms, social ties, and situational predispositions (Di Zheng et al., 2021; Gorsira et al., 2018; Uhl et al., 2025). Each cluster provides partial insights but, when taken in isolation, fails to capture the complexity of decision-making in corrupt exchanges. Utilitarian models often ignore moral and cultural filters; institutionalist models underestimate the role of learning and adaptation; and psychosocial models struggle to generalize beyond specific cultural contexts. These limitations underscore the need for integrated frameworks that combine utilitarian, institutional, and moral-psychosocial dimensions into a unified decision-making model.

3. The integrated decision-making model

The model synthesizes the core dimensions of a public agent’s decision-making process into a single probability of engaging in corrupt transactions, drawing on Vieira’s (2013, 2021) earlier analysis and an extensive review of the literature. Decision-making is conceived as a continuous, integrated system in which each factor enters a common logistic function, allowing the agent to constantly weigh all elements simultaneously. This unified specification organizes decision-making in a compact, probabilistic, and estimable form, capturing uncertainty and heterogeneity across agents and contexts, thereby making it more compatible with empirical modeling, scenario simulations, and predictive analysis.

The probability of engagement in corrupt transactions is given by the interaction of two sequential filters: first, the agent must overcome the moral barrier; conditional on this, the decision depends on the relative attractiveness of corruption. Formally:

$$Pr(\text{“engage”}) = \sigma(-\gamma Z_M) \times \sigma(\Delta U)$$

where:

$\sigma(-\gamma Z_M)$ = probability of surpassing the moral barrier, with Z_M the moral index (guilt, civic values, and reputational concerns);

$\sigma(\Delta U)$ = probability of engagement conditional on moral clearance, with ΔU the expected utility differential between engaging and abstaining.

This multiplicative specification is best interpreted as a two-stage hurdle model, in which agents must surpass a moral threshold before engaging in the subsequent evaluation of the utilitarian calculus of costs and benefits. Formally, this structure corresponds to a continuation-ratio logit specification, which can be estimated by maximum likelihood.

3.1. First term: public agents' moral cost barriers

The first term of the decision-making model functions as a barrier. Suppose the ethical-moral threshold is not overcome. In that case, the agent will neither proceed to calculate the expected utility of engaging in corrupt practices (the utilitarian component) nor attempt to maximize potential gains through experience and learning (the cognitive component). In this sense, the moral cost barrier constitutes the initial stage of the decision-making process.

The very first decision a public official makes, even before weighing the costs and benefits of engaging in any form of corrupt behavior, is to overcome this moral cost barrier, also known as the moral cost. This cost is a crucial determinant within the decision-making framework: if the agent is responsive to it, the potential advantages derived from utilitarian calculation are effectively nullified. Only once the moral cost barrier has been crossed can the agent consider any potential benefit associated with participation in a corrupt transaction.

The notion of moral cost derives from the psychosociological burdens associated with guilt, as well as the costs imposed by the agent's own ethical principles and moral values, which are strongly shaped by the civic values of the surrounding community, that is, by the sociocultural norms of the group to which the agent belongs. This barrier is deeply rooted in the moral and ethical perspectives internalized by the agent throughout processes of socialization and continually reinforced by the civic and sociocultural values of the groups with which the agent interacts, within the family, school, workplace, civic associations, and the broader political community. These principles, when transgressed, generate feelings of guilt and psychological discomfort that arise from both individual personality traits and the broader social environment.

Remarkably, the moral cost functions not only as a psychological mechanism but also as an institutional and cultural constraint embedded within the fabric of political life. Political culture shapes orientations toward political action by embedding moral obligations into decision-making processes. In parallel, social capital underscores how networks of reciprocity, trust, and civic engagement reinforce adherence to shared norms, magnifying the internalization of moral constraints against corruption. Thus, the moral barrier represents the intersection of individual conscience and collective expectations: when civic values are strong and widely shared, they increase the moral costs of corruption, rendering it less viable as a strategic choice. Conversely, in contexts of fragile trust and weak civic culture, which is characteristic of the Latin American context, the moral costs of engaging in corrupt practices diminish, thereby lowering the psychological threshold for such behavior (see Reis & Lopes, 2024).

Additionally, the model can be improved by clearly distinguishing between injunctive and descriptive social norms (see Bicchieri 2006; Gavrillets, Tverskoi, & Sánchez, 2024). In social norm theory, injunctive norms are prescriptive expectations about what individuals should do, namely, behaviors that are socially approved or morally accepted within a group. In contrast, descriptive norms refer to empirical expectations about what others actually do, reflecting the perceived commonality of a particular behavior (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009). These two dimensions frequently differ in environments prone to corruption: although injunctive norms officially condemn corrupt behavior, powerful descriptive norms indicating that many people engage in it can greatly reduce the moral penalty for wrongdoing. When public officials perceive that "everyone is doing it," the expected social disapproval embedded in ethical principles, civic values, and guilt collapses (see Gulino & Masera, 2023; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012). In settings where corrupt transactions are prevalent and readily apparent, descriptive norms weaken the moral barrier (See Grimes, 2012). This elevates the likelihood of moral clearance, thereby making it easier for individuals to justify transgressions to themselves and others.

From a contemporary perspective, this framework aligns with rational choice approaches that incorporate normative and institutional variables. While traditional rational choice models view corruption as the outcome of utility-maximizing behavior under weak monitoring and high payoffs, more recent scholarship has emphasized the bounded nature of such calculations, constrained by norms, identities, and institutional environments. In this sense, the moral cost shapes the agent's decision calculus by integrating ethical and social considerations into otherwise utilitarian reasoning. This convergence of rational choice, social capital, and neo-institutionalist approaches suggests that corruption is less a purely individual act of maximization and more a socially situated practice, whose feasibility is filtered through internalized moral barriers and reinforced by civic and institutional structures.

According to North (1990), this filter may be conceived as an entry cost that varies across individuals yet is strongly conditioned by psychological, social, and cultural factors. The moral index Z_M is expressed as:

$$Z_M = \alpha_C C + \alpha_V V + \alpha_t t - \alpha_d d \text{ where:}$$

C = ethical principles (imposed by the agent's ethical principles and moral values);

V = civic values (derived from the sociocultural norms of the agent's community or reference group);

t = guilt (agent's internalized anticipated shame or fear of social disapproval, without actual public disclosure);

d = descriptive norm (agent's empirical expectation about how widespread corrupt practices are among relevant peers).

$\alpha_C, \alpha_V, \alpha_t, \alpha_d \geq 0$ = weights capturing relative salience.

The net moral index Z_M can assume positive values (imposing a barrier), zero (neutralizing the barrier), or even negative values (when the social environment actively encourages corrupt behavior). In this sense, the moral barrier serves as an initial filter for corruption-related engagement. Formally, this filtering mechanism can be represented by a logistic function:

$$b = \sigma(-\gamma Z_M) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{\gamma Z_M}}, \gamma > 0 \text{ where } \gamma \text{ controls the "rigidity" of the moral barrier. Since the logistic}$$

function already has a fixed scale, decision noise, if present, is captured through random effects or error terms in estimation.

The moral barrier functions as a soft trigger. This implies that the ethical-moral threshold is not a strict "all-or-nothing" mechanism, but rather a probabilistic filter that can gradually reduce the likelihood of engagement in corruption. Agents with low moral costs face a high probability of engagement, though not absolute certainty, while agents with high moral costs may occasionally succumb despite strong internalized constraints.

This specification brings the model closer to how morality operates in practice, not as a deterministic prohibition but as a probabilistic force that shapes decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and bounded rationality. By framing morality as a continuous rather than dichotomous constraint, the model avoids unrealistic assumptions of perfect compliance or absolute deterrence, instead acknowledging the gradational influence of ethics and civic values on behavior.

Under this specification, the probability $b = \sigma(-\gamma Z_M)$ declines toward zero as the moral index Z_M increases (when moral costs are high), effectively deterring engagement in corrupt transactions, and rises toward one when Z_M decreases (when moral costs are low or absent), signaling weak or nonexistent resistance. This formulation highlights how the interaction between individual morality, civic values, and reputational concerns functions as a probabilistic filter that conditions the agent's subsequent utilitarian calculations of costs and benefits.

By embedding the moral cost within a logistic function, the model explicitly captures the bounded and context-dependent nature of decision-making in corrupt transactions. It thereby links rational choice theory to sociocultural and institutionalist accounts, demonstrating that corruption is not solely the outcome of utility maximization under structural constraints, but also a function of moral and civic barriers that vary across institutional and cultural environments.

3.2. Second term: the relative attractiveness of corruption

Once the moral barrier has been overcome, the agent proceeds to evaluate the relative costs and benefits of engaging in or refraining from a corrupt transaction. The agent's utility function is assumed to increase with expected benefits but to decrease with expected costs. The engagement decision thus follows from a subjective calculation in which the agent weighs these competing factors and assigns an expected utility to the corrupt option relative to the baseline of abstention. In formal terms, the attractiveness of engagement is given by the difference in expected utility between the two alternatives:

$$\Delta U = E[u(w + e^{\alpha k_1} B - e^{-\beta k_2} C)] - E[u(w)] \text{ where:}$$

w = the agent's salary, received regardless of engagement;

B = the expected benefit of corruption, magnified by positive learning ($e^{\alpha k_1}$);

C = the total expected cost, reduced through learning-by-doing in cost avoidance ($e^{-\beta k_2}$);

$u(\cdot)$ = the utility function, depending on assumptions;

$k_1, k_2 \geq 0$ = learning stocks, increasing B and decreasing C ;

$\alpha, \beta > 0$ = parameters calibrating the strength of learning effects.

The primary benefit derived from corruption typically takes the form of bribes, broadly defined to include financial, material, or symbolic rewards. Although utility is subjectively assessed, it is often reduced to financial gains analytically. Benefits may arise directly from rents, privileged information, monopolistic advantages, or discretionary rights. Public choice theory emphasizes the rent-seeking approach, framing corruption as the pursuit of monopolistic rents granted by the Government (Krueger, 1974; Tullock, Rowley & Tollison, 1988). Agents or groups seeking protection, licenses, titles, or regulatory privileges may also employ strategies ranging from lobbying and bureaucratic capture to pressure exerted by organized interests. Legal loopholes and regulatory discretion can create opportunities to enhance these benefits. Some regulations may unintentionally encourage corruption, especially when they are overly complex, contradictory, or rely heavily on discretionary power. This aligns with Holcombe and Boudreaux (2015), who contend that each regulation can create more opportunities for corruption, particularly when discretion or enforcement is selectively exercised.

At the same time, the role of wages cannot be overlooked. As Demirgüç-Kunt et al. (2023) argue, wage inequality in the public sector affects the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies. Alt and Lassen (2008) found that income inequality influences corruption among public officials, underscoring the importance of fair wages in reducing corruption. Large wage gaps can leave lower-paid public servants feeling marginalized, making them more susceptible to corruption as they seek ways to supplement their income. In such contexts, fair wages reduce the marginal utility of corrupt income, thereby lowering the incentives to engage in corruption. For this reason, the model treats the agent's wage as a baseline, the legitimate point of reference, against which corrupt alternatives to extract more rent are evaluated. The salary thus functions as a counterfactual: the income the agent risks by engaging in corruption. The attractiveness of corruption, therefore, derives from the expected utility of illicit gains net of the foregone utility of lawful income, generating a more realistic measure of decision-making incentives.

Adopting a New Institutional Economics perspective, the focus shifts away from viewing corruption as merely a social behavior, criminal, illegal, or cultural, and instead considers it a type of transaction within the broader spectrum of opportunistic actions that can undermine contract integrity (Huss et al., 2024). Thus, whenever an agent considers entering a corrupt exchange, they must weigh the costs associated with designing, maintaining, and enforcing such agreements (Lambsdorff, 2002). Just as legitimate transactions incur transaction costs, so do corrupt transactions. Yet, the transaction costs of corrupt exchanges tend to be even higher, given their reliance on secrecy and the need for discretion. These costs can be distinguished as:

- *ex ante*: the costs of initiating the agreement (searching for information, identifying partners, and defining contractual terms);
- *ex post*: the costs of safeguarding the agreement (enforcement) and securing the rights derived from the transaction.

In corrupt exchanges, *ex ante* costs are required to establish the agreement between the briber and the public agent, costs linked to information gathering and contractual design under conditions of secrecy. *Ex post* costs are necessary to guarantee the corrupt transaction, preserve illicit gains, and secure the impunity of the participants. Because corruption is illegal, recourse to the state's judicial apparatus is unavailable, as no court will enforce such contracts or property rights. Therefore, governance mechanisms must be entirely private, serving as a substitute for the absence of formal legal sanctions. From the standpoint of the agent's utilitarian calculus, these costs are given by:

$$C = \sum_{k \in \{i, n, e, s, y\}} \omega_k \mathbb{E}[C_k] + \lambda X^T \Omega X$$

where:

$\sum_{k \in \{i, n, e, s, y\}} \omega_k \mathbb{E}[C_k]$ = weighted expected cost of each component;

$X = (i, n, e, s, y)$;

i = informational cost (search, secrecy);

n = bargaining cost (negotiation, division of rents);

e = cost of safeguarding property rights (laundering, concealment, protection of illicit gains);

s = external reputational cost (external loss of trust and credibility upon exposure);

y = institutional liability cost;

$\omega_k \geq 0$ = contextual weights;

$\lambda X^T \Omega X$ = interaction effects among costs.

³ <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/dialogo-fallido-el-dia-cristina-convoco-gran-nid2246461/>; última vez consultado el 15 de junio de 2025.

The principal cost factors include: (a) information costs related to identifying opportunities and partners; (b) bargaining costs of negotiating and distributing the illicit benefits; (c) costs of securing property rights derived from corrupt rents; (d) reputational costs, such as the loss of trust when corrupt behavior is exposed; and (e) institutional liability costs, encompassing administrative, political, civil, and criminal sanctions such as notifications, fines, dismissals, restitution, contract termination, restrictions of rights, or even prison.

Reputational costs reflect the social sanctions imposed by violating shared values. Yet, as adaptive expectations suggest, these costs can collapse when corruption is widely tolerated or normalized. In such contexts, what would otherwise constitute reputational damage may be replaced by social incentives to engage in corruption. This perverse dynamic may even reward agents who develop skills to expand the benefits and minimize the costs of corrupt practices, thereby reinforcing institutional arrangements that sustain and perpetuate corruption. Institutional liability costs, by contrast, are probabilistic and derive from the enforcement process itself. These costs are defined as:

$$y = \sum_{p \in \mathcal{P}} (\prod_{j \in p} p_j) \cdot \delta^{\tau_p} \cdot x_p + c_p^{process} \text{ where:}$$

$\mathcal{P}$ = set of alternative enforcement pathways (administrative, civil, criminal, political);

$\prod_{j \in p} p_j$ = product of probabilities across the sequential stages of pathway $\mathcal{P}$ (detection, denunciation, prosecution, judgment, enforcement);

δ^{τ_p} = temporal discount factor until sanction along pathway $\mathcal{P}$;

x_p = monetized sanction associated with pathway $\mathcal{P}$

$c_p^{process}$ = procedural costs incurred even without a final conviction.

Institutional liability costs thus represent the cumulative effect of possible sanctions across alternative pathways, each weighted by its joint probability of occurrence, discounted by time delays, and adjusted for process costs. The temporal horizon critically shapes the structure of institutional liability costs: as delays accumulate along the enforcement pathways, the effective deterrent impact of sanctions is progressively eroded. In the extreme, statutes of limitation or the expiration of restitution claims may render the sanction entirely ineffective, nullifying its cost.

It is important to note that sanctions constitute credible deterrents only when they are not merely prescribed in formal statutes but also effectively implemented. In practice, this presupposes that each stage of the accountability pathway (identification, denunciation, prosecution, judgment, and enforcement) operates adequately. Otherwise, even under extensive legal frameworks, the threat of sanctions may fail to translate into meaningful costs for corrupt agents.

This reminds rule-makers that increasing sanctions alone is not enough; effective enforcement of existing mechanisms is crucial in fighting corruption. Regulations are not neutral: complex or discretionary rules can normalize “rule-bending” and make illegal exchanges seem practical. Regulations can become part of the opportunity structure, increasing the number of decision points for illicit gains and enabling selective enforcement. A successful anti-corruption strategy, therefore, requires smarter regulation that reduces legal ambiguity and avoids creating bottlenecks that incentivize illicit payments.

Opportunity structures are an essential part of corrupt decision-making, operating alongside utilitarian motives and institutional constraints. Legal ambiguity, overlapping regulations, administrative discretion, and weak oversight create opportunities that reduce liability and make corruption seem safe or routine. These factors, as external parameters, influence costs and benefits by lowering the chance of sanctions, increasing enforcement inconsistency, and encouraging selective rule interpretation. Explicitly including opportunity structures shows how institutional design influences corrupt behavior and helps explain variation across contexts that incentives alone cannot fully account for. In formal terms, opportunity structures enter the model by reducing components of the institutional-liability cost vector and by lowering the moral index, thereby increasing the overall probability of engagement.

3.3. The dynamics of learning processes

Many authors emphasize the centrality of learning processes in the analysis of corruption (Lee et al., 2025). Thus, the skills, knowledge, and information regarding the most effective methods of creating, managing, and safeguarding corruption transactions are acquired and accumulated over time. This perspective emphasizes the significance of repeated interactions between agents and institutions in promoting learning through experience. Formally:

$$B = B_0 + \theta_B L$$

$$C = C_0 + \theta_C L$$

where:

B_0 = baseline corrupt benefits (bribes, rents, privileges);

C_0 = baseline expected costs;

L = the accumulated stock of knowledge;

θ_B, θ_C = parameters capturing how learning amplifies benefits and reduces costs.

From this perspective, agents who have already overcome the moral cost barrier must still confront initial learning hurdles: they must acquire the knowledge necessary to engage in corrupt transactions and gradually adapt their practices to maximize benefits while minimizing costs. The first dimension precedes utilitarian calculation and can be modeled as an informational cost. The second dimension reflects innovation, since even when an initial assessment produces no net gain, the agent may, through experience, develop strategies to shift the equilibrium, either by augmenting potential benefits or by discovering ways to reduce associated costs.

The agent's utility grows exponentially as it learns. This increase stems from both the discovery of new sources of benefit and the development of strategies to reduce transaction costs. The perception and balance of these attributes are not static, but dynamic learning is the mechanism through which such corrupt transactions become progressively more efficient. The accumulation of learning stocks and the parameters that calibrate their effects highlight the dynamic and cumulative nature of corruption.

4. Implications of the Model for Public Integrity Policies

The integrated model influences how public integrity policies should be designed. In many governance systems, particularly in Latin America, dense regulation, wide discretion, and inconsistent enforcement create ongoing structural opportunities. Punitive measures alone seldom change behavioral patterns unless these structural opportunities are also addressed. By linking the probability of corruption engagement to moral costs, utilitarian incentives, institutional enforcement, and learning processes, it highlights specific policy levers through which governments can strengthen integrity. The integrated model implies five concurrent policy levers: (1) reinforce moral barriers; (2) shrink illicit benefits (rents); (3) improve legitimate payoffs/careers; (4) raise the multi-stage transaction costs of corrupt exchanges; and (5) disrupt corrupt knowledge while fostering integrity learning.

4.1 Reinforcing the agent's ethical-moral barrier

Latin American politics often exhibits tolerance for “everyday” corruption under partisan or clientelistic identities, weakening the social stigma that the model treats as the moral/reputational barrier (Botero et al., 2021; Cornejo, 2023; Figueiredo, 2025). The moral costs must be reinforced through ethics training, merit-based recruitment, and civic education. Experimental research shows that “small dishonesties” are highly sensitive to contextual cues, while comparative public administration evidence confirms that merit-based recruitment reduces systemic corruption (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017; Mazar & Ariely, 2006a). Policies that strengthen civic values and reputational sanctions, such as citizen audits, public sanction lists, and protection of investigative journalism, can increase the social and psychological barriers to corruption (Alcántara-Lizárraga & Jima-González, 2022; Fox, 2015; Odilla & Bidegain, 2025; Vieira, 2023). These findings align with the model's prediction that greater wrongdoing salience increases the moral barrier and the expected social cost of engagement.

4.2. Reducing illicit benefits (rents)

The illicit benefits can be curtailed by dismantling monopolistic rents and ensuring credible price references for public procurement. Latin American regulatory bottlenecks and concentrated markets (e.g., infrastructure, extractives, local licensing) create tollgates for bribery (Bersch et al., 2017; Mares & Young, 2018). Evidence from procurement reforms suggests that simplifying licenses and reducing

barriers can significantly decrease opportunities for bribery (Fazekas et al., 2022; Flyvbjerg, 2009). Similarly, transparent reference pricing systems, as implemented in ChileCompra (2025), lower the scope for systematic overpricing.

4.3. Improving legitimate payoffs and careers

Legitimate compensation structures shape the baseline against which corrupt gains are measured. Empirical studies show that competitive wages and career advancement opportunities reduce incentives to engage in corruption, particularly in high-risk environments (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2023). However, in many Latin American administrations, low, compressed wages and patronage-based careers raise the relative appeal of illicit income (Bersch et al., 2017). Evidence from a large-scale field experiment shows that higher pay and professionalized selection improved applicant quality and pro-social profiles in a Latin American setting, supporting “selection and motivation” channels that raise the lawful baseline utility (Dal Bó et al., 2013). Combined with meritocratic progression, this reduces the perceived need for side payments and strengthens self-selection into public service, aligning it with integrity. By reinforcing integrity as the more attractive equilibrium, fair pay and meritocratic progression can diminish the relative utility of illicit income.

4.4. Raising corrupt transaction costs

Because corrupt deals cannot be enforced in court, the transaction-cost structure (information search, bargaining, safeguarding, reputational exposure, and institutional liability) is decisive. Latin America’s political elites have traditionally been known for exploiting public institutions to safeguard their own corrupt interests and agreements (Panizza et al., 2022; Vieira & Miranda, 2024). The region’s challenges, including cartelization in public procurement, opaque beneficial ownership, and slow, uncertain enforcement, lower these costs for offenders. Moreover, the region’s Evidence-based levers include:

- Smart transparency and open contracting to raise ex-ante informational costs for tailoring bids and to enable third-party detection post-award (Adam et al., 2020).
- Anti-collusion analytics and independent monitors (Integrity Pacts) to raise bargaining and coordination costs of cartels (OECD, 2021).
- Beneficial-ownership registries and asset-recovery tools to raise safeguarding costs of laundering and holding illicit gains (Brun et al., 2021).
- Pipeline enforcement that prioritizes certainty and speed of sanctions over sheer severity, aligning with deterrence scholarship that certainty/timeliness dominates severity (Nagin, 2013; Power & Taylor, 2011).

4.5. Disrupting knowledge for corruption while building integrity learning

Repetition and stability foster corrupt learning-by-doing. Conversely, governments can build “integrity learning” by updating technology, deploying red teams, and strengthening compliance systems to prevent fraudulent practices from becoming widespread. The model’s learning channel predicts that stable, repeated interactions enable agents and networks to discover how to maximize benefits and minimize costs.

Latin American bureaucracies often feature low rotation in high-risk posts and predictable procurement routines, which foster learning-by-doing on the corrupt side (Falcón-Cortés et al., 2022; Polga-Hecimovich, 2019; Waxenecker & Prell, 2024). Countermeasures include unpredictable staff rotation, randomized audits, and varying auction formats, which break routines and raise the variance of corrupt payoffs. On the integrity side, agencies should institutionalize learning, update analytics, deploy risk management teams, and require supplier compliance programs, so that control systems improve more quickly than the tactics of offenders (Kijang & Onn, 2020; Vieira et al., 2024). This aligns with evidence indicating that public reforms, when iterated, shift beliefs and behavior over time, pushing organizations toward an integrity equilibrium.

Overall, the integrated model emphasizes that effective integrity policies must be multidimensional, simultaneously raising moral-cost barriers, lowering illicit benefits, increasing the transaction costs of corruption, disrupting corrupt knowledge, and fostering integrity learning to reinforce legitimate policy decisions. This layered strategy directly maps onto the probabilistic calculus of public agents, ensuring that corruption becomes not only less profitable but also less psychologically and socially acceptable.

However, for parsimony, more complex, but relevant, factors have not yet been incorporated into the proposed model.

The integrated model could be further refined by incorporating additional variables highlighted in the literature. First, organizational and political dynamics, such as elite capture, patronage, and systemic incentives, may help explain how structural factors influence individual decisions (Panizza et al., 2022). Second, behavioral and emotional dimensions, including cognitive biases, the normalization of deviance, and affective responses such as fear or indignation, may alter both perceptions of risk and the salience of moral barriers (Hortal & Martínez, 2024; Mazar & Ariely, 2006b). Third, the model should account for social embeddedness, recognizing that corruption often operates through networks of reciprocity and social expectations that can neutralize reputational costs (Di Zheng et al., 2021; Köbis et al., 2018; Verma et al., 2017). Fourth, temporal factors related to career horizons and electoral cycles influence how agents weigh short-term gains against long-term risks (Dal Bó et al., 2013; Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2023). Finally, perceptions of institutional legitimacy and trust in enforcement bodies can reinforce or weaken integrity choices (Kubbe & Engelbert, 2018; Wright et al., 2016). Integrating these dimensions would enhance the explanatory power of the integrated model and provide a more comprehensive basis for designing context-sensitive anticorruption policies.

5. Concluding remarks

This integrated model of engagement in corrupt transactions offers an advancement in understanding the individual decision-making process of public agents. By yielding a probability of engagement rather than a deterministic outcome, it explicitly incorporates uncertainty and variability across agents and contexts. This approach suggests that anti-corruption policies should concurrently focus on ethical, behavioral, and institutional aspects.

In Latin American settings, simply increasing statutory sanctions is not enough if the institutional environment still enables corruption due to poorly designed rules, lack of transparency, or excessive discretion. Therefore, this framework supports anti-corruption strategies that strengthen moral barriers, reduce illicit rents, enhance incentives for integrity, raise the costs of participating in corrupt transactions, and hinder the learning of corruption while promoting honest behavior.

The model's probabilistic structure makes the analytical framework more realistic by reflecting the heterogeneity of motivations, ethical and moral barriers, institutional constraints, and knowledge stocks. Its formulation is fully compatible with empirical estimation techniques such as logit and probit models, as well as with scenario simulations and predictive analyses. These features make the model not only theoretically consistent but also practically applicable, providing researchers and policymakers with a flexible tool for diagnosing risk factors, forecasting behaviors, and designing more effective integrity policies.

Despite its advantages, the model also presents important methodological and theoretical limitations. First, it relies on simplifying assumptions about its measurement, which in practice are difficult to quantify with precision. Second, the model treats certain components as independent, even though they may be strongly interdependent and influenced by broader political or cultural dynamics in real-world settings. Third, while the probabilistic formulation captures heterogeneity, it may still overlook cognitive biases and collective dynamics that shape public agents' decisions.

A remaining limitation of the model concerns the formal definition and operationalization of its core variables. While the framework identifies the moral, utilitarian, institutional, and learning components of corrupt decision-making, future research should specify their empirical distributions and derive measurement strategies to estimate their parameters with precision. Similarly, the model's probabilistic framework needs a clear plan for calibration and simulation, whether via survey experiments, behavioral data from audits, or Bayesian estimation, to enable testing of the proposed two-stage decision process in real-world scenarios. These steps lie beyond the scope of this theoretical contribution, yet they constitute essential avenues for future research to translate the model into a fully operational tool for integrity policy design.

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