

Unequal Empowerment, Unequal Trust? Socio-Demographic Heterogeneity in Corruption Perceptions in Spain

Luis Ramos,¹ Jesús Palomo² and Manuel Villoria³

Abstract

Recent scholarship on public integrity has emphasized that the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies depends not only on the existence of formal instruments, but also on their capacity to activate accountability mechanisms from below. Within this framework, this article examines the role of social empowerment as a possible demand-side leverage point and investigates the extent to which its relationship with corruption perceptions is mediated by institutional trust and conditioned by individuals' sociodemographic position. Using Spanish survey microdata, we estimate a Bayesian structural equation model with moderated mediation and partial pooling by sex, allowing us to assess heterogeneity in the mechanism across age, income, education, and gender. The results show that institutional trust maintains a negative and consistent association with corruption perceptions, whereas the average effect of social empowerment remains limited under assumptions of homogeneity. However, the indirect effect through trust becomes clearly stronger among higher-income individuals and, especially, among older cohorts. Education adds little heterogeneity once material resources are taken into account. Taken together, these findings suggest that empowerment-based strategies may generate unequal benefits unless they incorporate specific measures to reduce activation barriers among more vulnerable groups.

1. Introduction

Corruption constitutes a central problem for democratic quality and the performance of public institutions, not only because of its economic costs, but also because of its capacity to erode legitimacy, distort incentives, and undermine citizens' trust (Bågenholm & Charron, 2014; Engler, 2020, 2023; Warren, 2004, 2024). The literature has addressed this phenomenon from a range of theoretical approaches because of their implications for the design of anti-corruption policies, most notably principal-agent and collective action frameworks (Klitgaard, 1988; Marquette & Peiffer, 2015; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). From the latter perspective, corruption is not merely a set of individual transgressions, but rather a self-reinforcing social dynamic: when such transgressions are perceived as normal and widespread, incentives to act against them diminish and collective action dilemmas become entrenched (Ostrom, 1998; Persson et al., 2013). The result is a trap of cynicism and distrust in which it becomes difficult to sustain oversight, reporting, or civic mobilization, especially when institutions are perceived as unresponsive, thereby blocking the emergence of citizen actors willing to monitor and demand accountability on a sustained basis (Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016; Rothstein, 2005). Under these conditions, the anti-corruption challenge is no longer simply a matter of increasing control or sanctions, but rather one of institutional and normative changes: altering expectations, reducing the costs of action, and creating conditions for cooperation.

¹Dept. of Public Law I and Political Science, King Juan Carlos University. luis.ramos@urjc.es.

²Dept. of Business Economics, King Juan Carlos University. jesus.palomo@urjc.es.

³Dept. of Public Law I and Political Science, King Juan Carlos University. manuel.villoria@urjc.es

In practice, these tensions help explain why a large share of anti-corruption reforms produce uneven or disappointing results. On the one hand, integrity packages tend to rely on “supply-side” instruments (regulation, oversight, auditing, specialized agencies), whose effectiveness depends critically on institutional capacity, genuine independence, and coordination with the broader justice system and public administration (e.g. de Sousa, 2010). On the other hand, even when the control infrastructure is strengthened, the proliferation of safeguards may increase rigidity, transaction costs, and control “pathologies” that reduce governmental effectiveness without resolving the deeper dynamics of the problem, since corruption is a “wicked problem” (Anechiarico & Jacobs, 1996). Taken together, this suggests that corruption behaves as an adaptive, context-sensitive phenomenon, in which isolated instruments may shift the problem to other parts of the system or produce paradoxical outcomes in the short term (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013).

In this context, the leverage points perspective offers a particularly useful framework for rethinking the design and evaluation of integrity policies. Its central idea is that complex systems contain intervention points where relatively targeted changes can generate disproportionate effects, and that not all levers have the same “depth”: some operate on surface-level parameters, while others affect information flows, rules, feedback loops, goals, and paradigms (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 1999). This approach is valuable because it makes it possible to connect causal explanations (relationships between variables and feedback mechanisms) with teleological explanations (change induced by human intention), and because it helps in thinking through the sequencing and complementarity between “shallow” and “deep” interventions (Fischer & Riechers, 2019; Meadows, 1999). Applied to public integrity, the focus shifts from merely possessing anti-corruption tools to understanding how those tools are connected in ways that transform systemic dynamics: what information circulates, who can activate it, at what cost, and with what likelihood of response.

In the field of accountability, this logic has translated into the argument that transparency or information alone are rarely sufficient to produce sustained improvements (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010). The effectiveness of “demand-side” strategies depends on their capacity to translate citizen voice into institutional consequences and, conversely, on whether the state’s capacity to respond (“teeth”) is activated and perceived as credible (Fox, 2015). This point is crucial because it connects directly to the problem of expectations: if reporting or claiming rights generates no response, participation retreats; if a response exists and is perceived as effective, institutional trust and incentives for collective action may be reinforced (Fox, 2015; Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016). In terms of civic resources and capacities, moreover, the activation of voice mechanisms can be expected to depend on unevenly distributed time, skills, and resources, thereby shaping the extent to which citizens are effectively incorporated (Verba et al. 1995).

On this basis, Palomo, Villoria and Ramos (2026) propose a systemic framework for studying corruption through leverage points theory, distinguishing between supply-side and demand-side trajectories and identifying social empowerment as a key lever on the citizen side. In their formulation, social empowerment is not understood as an abstract attitude, but as a set of concrete conditions that enable social accountability: knowledge of reporting channels, perceived protection, expectations of usefulness and efficacy, and willingness to act. These conditions may strengthen institutional trust—as an evaluation of system performance and impartiality—and, through this mechanism, contribute to reducing perceptions of corruption (Palomo et al., 2026).

This article is situated within that research agenda, but introduces a question that is decisive for both theory and public policy: does this demand-side lever operate homogeneously across the citizenry? Who can really activate the demand-side leverage point, and under what conditions? In complex social systems, the activation of the same lever may depend on unequally distributed costs, risks, and resources. We therefore extend the approach proposed by Palomo et al. (2026) to the national level and assess whether the mechanism social empowerment → institutional trust → perception of corruption—and its direct and indirect relationships—varies systematically according to sociodemographic factors, given that the existing literature shows that variables such as gender, income, age, and education shape attitudes towards corruption and perceptions of it. Empirically, we use survey microdata and estimate a moderated mediation model within a Bayesian structural equation modelling framework, which allows us to obtain conditional indirect effects and characterize heterogeneity in the mechanism in ways that are directly relevant for the design of integrity policies. More specifically, we argue that a strategy aimed at activating the demand-side leverage point can only be considered “holistic” if it takes its sociodemographic dimension seriously: who can activate it effectively, under what conditions, and with what consequences for trust and perceptions.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we develop a literature review that ranges from theories of corruption to different theoretical approaches applicable to each of the sociodemographic variables that may condition social empowerment. Second, we present the research design, followed by the results analysis in which the model is estimated. Finally, we set out the discussion and the conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Theories of corruption

There are different approaches that allow us to understand and study corruption and the fight against it. Among them, several theoretical frameworks stand out, particularly the principal–agent and collective action approaches, which are closely connected (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). The first highlights how corruption represents the breakdown of an intangible social contract and relationship of trust established between public representatives—agents—and those they represent—principals—as a result of the agent obtaining greater economic benefit from corruption than from acting in the interests of representation (Klitgaard, 1988). Whereas this first theoretical approach analyses corruption from a top-down perspective, the second, collective action, does so from a bottom-up point of view.

Accordingly, corruption is described from the ground up, beginning with society and assuming that individual decisions can affect group dynamics, and that trust in institutions and in fellow citizens is essential (Marquette & Peiffer, 2015). In this sense, if someone breaks the rules—whether formal or moral—and such behavior comes to be understood by others as expected, society is likely to fall into what are known as second-order collective action problems (Ostrom, 1998). Acting rationally no longer means fighting corruption but instead becomes synonymous with the normalization of corrupt practices—even if most people would prefer them not to exist—thus generating a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape and eliminating what Persson et al. (2013) call “principled principals”, that is, individuals willing to monitor the agent’s behavior.

Both theories explain corruption and anti-corruption measures through an economic and rational choice lens. In both cases, whether among citizens or their representatives, actors behave in the most rational way according to their perception of greater utility for their collective or individual interests in a world of limited resources (Rose-Ackerman, 1978). It is rationality that leads individuals to make self-interested decisions, ranging from breaking the law in order to obtain greater political benefit to normalizing corrupt practices, which may then spread to others in what Rothstein (2005) terms “social traps”, with a marked cultural component, laying the foundations for what may become systemic corruption (Jackson, 2025). These theories, together with approaches centered on the institutional quality of states (Lambsdorff et al., 2004; North, 1990), have thus far enabled the development of very different anti-corruption initiatives. The main problem with all of these approaches is that, in practical terms, there is no single measure or specific instrument capable of eliminating corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017).

For this reason, developing effective anti-corruption measures requires a holistic approach based on international standards, in which different repressive and preventive instruments are combined in what Sampford et al. (2005) define as a “bird’s net strategy”, such as transparency and good governance laws (Cordis & Warren, 2014; Fox, 2007; Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010), controls on conflicts of interest involving public officials (Rose, 2014; Rose-Ackerman, 2014), lobbying regulation (Bunea, 2018, 2019; OECD, 2014), the implementation and use of ethical codes (Findlay & Stewart, 1991; Villoria, 2019), the establishment of independent anti-corruption agencies (Doig, 1995; Doig & Norris, 2012; Gemperle, 2018), and the associated protection of whistleblowers (Armstrong & Francis, 2015; Mechtenberg et al., 2020; Onyango, 2021). All of these measures must, moreover, rest on the premise of independence and capacity on the part of the authorities tasked with investigating corruption (Recanatini, 2011; Villoria, 2012).

However, these measures, usually advanced from the supply side of public policy, do not always work. For example, De Sousa (2010) shows how anti-corruption agencies (ACAs) are commonly understood as the last line of defense against corruption when everything else—the police and the judiciary, among others—fails. In his article, adopting an institutionalist approach, he identifies internal and external variables such as political will and the existence of budgets commensurate with their functions, which explain why these agencies sometimes fail because of poor design or lack of capacity (see also Cleveland et al., 2009; Zhang, 2024; Zhu et al., 2019).

One of the main perverse effects of corruption on societies is the loss of social and political trust. From a cultural perspective, political trust can be understood as a set of values and attitudes acquired, according to socialization theories, during the impressionable years or early stages of life (Inglehart, 1977; Putnam, 2001), and which tend to change little and to “crystallize” over time. From this perspective, social and political trust are closely related to interpersonal trust (Putnam et al., 1994). Institutional approaches, however, offer a different understanding of trust. Although they agree that trust consists of a set of values and attitudes, and that direct experience is an important element (Mishler & Rose, 2001), they argue that trust is constructed on the basis of evaluations of institutional performance, thereby adopting a more rational perspective (Hetherington, 2005), and that it may vary over time depending on individuals’ experiences with institutions (Hudson, 2006; Nye et al., 1997). Thus, Hardin (2006) argues that social and political trust are not stable elements but rather processes or phenomena that vary depending on the degree of knowledge of institutions and the belief that they are trustworthy.

To examine the link between trust and corruption, we adopt an institutionalist approach, according to which political-institutional performance can foster higher levels of social trust. As Uslaner (2013) explains, trust and corruption are two variables that negatively reinforce one another: the presence of one—such as corruption—implies a decline in the other—trust—which in turn leads to greater corruption, thereby generating a vicious circle that is difficult to escape (Uslaner, 2004). In this way, trust comes to function both as a cause and as a consequence of corruption (Morris & Klesner, 2010). Where it exists, trust becomes a foundational element of social capital that is essential for the maintenance of liberal democratic systems and for conferring legitimacy on their institutions (Putnam, 2004), as well as for providing society with a cohesive moral order (Kubbe, 2013). Moreover, the existence of social trust and the resulting strengthening of social capital enable individuals to predict the behavior of other members of a community, even when they are different from themselves (Fukuyama, 2014; Putnam et al., 1994), which in turn hinders the emergence of, and helps resolve, second-order collective action dilemmas (La Porta et al., 1997; Uslaner, 2001; Zak & Knack, 2001).

Trust thus emerges as the link between citizens and institutions (Bianco, 1994). Corruption, by contrast, generates among citizens the perception that public representatives do not act to pursue the greatest social benefit, but rather their own individual interests (Beesley & Hawkins, 2022; Van Der Meer, 2017), thereby destroying trust in the representative system, institutional legitimacy, and democratic effectiveness (Gamson, 1968; Hetherington, 2005; Mishler & Rose, 2001), as well as harming the economy (Arrow, 1972). Indeed, the absence of social trust is one of the most important factors in determining the effectiveness of different anti-corruption measures (e.g. Adelopo & Rufai, 2020). Furthermore, once social trust has been broken, rebuilding it is usually a difficult and slow process (Tjulin & Klockmo, 2000; Wilson, 1997) that requires not only political will, but also close collaboration with citizens. Public authorities must therefore ensure that, in the case of corruption, citizens know where to report cases, feel an obligation to report them when they witness them, feel safe and protected in doing so, and believe that such reporting is useful and will have some effect (Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016). This is what we may call social empowerment.

Social empowerment

The concept of empowerment has traditionally—but not exclusively—been used in the field of feminist and gender studies. It is a polysemic concept with two essential features shared by all its definitions: it is a process rather than a state, and it is linked to the set of capacities that enable action on issues affecting both individuals and collectives (Kabeer, 1999; Rappaport, 2002). Empowerment is also grounded in the notion of power, and is defined as a process through which a set of individuals, organizations, or groups lacking formal power recognize the existence of power dynamics, develop capacities to gain control over their lives, exercise that control without limiting the rights of others or interfering in others' control over their own lives, and support the empowerment of other individuals (McWhirter, 1991; Rowlands, 1995, p. 103).

However, the process of empowerment has moved beyond gender studies and has been applied across a range of disciplines, including social work, education, psychotherapy, and nursing (Adams, 1996; Gibson, 1991; Hagquist & Starrin, 1997; Proctor et al., 2006). Empowerment has thus become a theoretical model that allows us to understand the processes and consequences of exercising control over individual, organizational, and

collective decisions (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). In the field of corruption, the concept—and theory—has also been used to analyze the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures under the label of “social empowerment”. Fox (2015) refers to this as the “sandwich strategy”, as a way of creating synergies between society and the state in order to bring about institutional change (Evans, 1996). It is a process of co-empowerment already theorized by other authors (Ackerman, 2004; Ostrom, 1996), which begins from a scenario in which state forces opposed to accountability are more powerful than those genuinely committed to fighting corruption. In this context, state actors—top—and civil society—bottom—engage in mutual empowerment, such that, with social support, these actors are able to implement institutional changes that enhance accountability, while in turn providing protection and resources to civil society. In this way, the strengthening of collective action through accountability claims—what Fox terms voice—is complemented by greater institutional capacity—or teeth. Social empowerment, therefore, is not simply a matter of having more information or transparency, but requires citizens to take part in accountability processes, thereby generating the necessary conditions for demanding integrity (Verba et al., 1995).

In practice, assuming that corruption can be reduced through a single instrument (e.g. transparency, sanctions, or the creation of an agency) leads to partial designs that tend to displace the problem to other areas of the system (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010). This is consistent with understanding corruption as an adaptive and wicked phenomenon, both shaped by and shaping many different variables (Anechiarico & Jacobs, 1996), which implies that the context in which corruption occurs becomes essential for understanding and combating it (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013). Informal norms, political incentives, institutional capacity, and citizens’ expectations thus reinforce one another. In such environments, interventions do not produce linear effects: partial measures may shift the problem to other parts of the system or generate paradoxical outcomes in the short term (for example, more information may increase detection and, with it, temporarily raise perceptions of corruption). From this perspective, the analytical challenge does not lie merely in listing anti-corruption instruments, but in identifying sensitive points in the system where a relatively focused intervention may trigger broader and more sustained change. It is precisely here that the leverage points perspective becomes useful. The concept refers to the idea that, in complex systems, there are especially sensitive “points” at which intervention can produce disproportionate changes relative to the effort invested (Meadows, 1999). Fischer and Riechers (2019) argue that applying a leverage points perspective to a systemic problem makes it possible to connect causal explanations—variables that influence one another within a system—and teleological explanations—changes resulting from human intention. Abson et al. (2017), building on Meadows, redefine the different leverage points proposed by the author into four categories, ranging from parameters—the most straightforward interventions—to purposes or intents, that is, the fundamental goals of the system or paradigm shifts.

The framework proposed by Palomo et al. (2026) brings this perspective into the anti-corruption field by offering a systemic reading of corruption control, in which leverage points are distributed across two major complementary trajectories. On the one hand, there is a “supply-side” trajectory, which includes institutional capacities, integrity rules, specialized bodies, and guarantees of independence and enforcement; on the other hand, there is a “demand-side” trajectory, linked to citizens’ capacity to activate social accountability. The underlying hypothesis is that holistic strategies are effective when they connect both sides: without state capacity to respond (teeth), transparency and

reporting generate frustration; without social activation (voice), institutional architecture becomes formalistic, vulnerable to capture, or politically reversible.

In this sense, Palomo et al. (2026) regard social empowerment as one of the leverage points theorized by Meadows (1999), and as essential to the design of holistic anti-corruption policies that allow for social participation from the outset. In a subsequent article, Palomo et al. (in press) show how, in a specific region of Spain, where a second-order collective action dilemma had emerged and was followed by a critical juncture as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis, the social empowerment promoted by the Valencian regional government proved decisive in successfully preventing corruption, generating new social norms (Kubbe et al., 2024), strengthening institutional trust, and reducing perceptions of corruption. In this way, the creation of a genuine advocacy coalition with political will, comprising government, the media, and civil society (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000), succeeded in producing robust and effective anti-corruption measures.

However, it is worth asking whether this social empowerment generated through political and institutional voluntarism is homogeneous across societies, or whether its effectiveness can therefore be assumed from an aggregate perspective. One of the basic premises of citizen empowerment is the need to generate and reconfigure the social norms governing individual behavior (Castro & Batel, 2008; Simpson, 2015), and in the anti-corruption field this is not always straightforward (Jackson & Kobis, 2018; Kubbe et al., 2024). Moreover, at the micro level, we also know that citizens' behaviors regarding corruption vary according to certain sociodemographic characteristics. In the same vein, this article aims to examine more closely the effectiveness of social empowerment, taking into account that, in aggregate terms, it may conceal heterogeneity in citizens' capacity to activate accountability mechanisms. Its anti-corruption effect depends not only on the existence of institutional channels, but also on the resources and willingness required to use them. Within this framework, gender, age, and educational level may condition the activation of voice practices and, therefore, the translation of social empowerment into lower levels of corruption and/or changes in its perception.

Sociodemographic factors, corruption, and social empowerment

The analysis of average mechanisms in anti-corruption governance may obscure fundamental micro-level inequalities in who can effectively activate the available leverage points. In this section, we develop an approach that brings together economic resources, gender position, educational capital, and life trajectory and political socialization.

Household income

Although literature has tended to prioritize variables such as education or gender in explaining attitudes towards corruption, individual income level constitutes a key structural factor that conditions citizens' real capacity to demand accountability. Traditionally, the relationship between income and corruption has been analyzed from a macroeconomic perspective, showing that systemic corruption exacerbates inequality and disproportionately affects lower-income groups, who depend more heavily on public services (Gupta et al., 2002; Johnston, 2005; Jong-sung & Khagram, 2005). Some studies, such as that by Peiffer and Álvarez (2016), stress that income level does not have a direct effect on demands for accountability. However, the impact of income on civic activation

and social empowerment needs to be analyzed as a variable that mediates the relationship with perceptions of corruption and trust (see other papers that use income as a mediating variable, Arvin & Lew, 2014; Welsch, 2008), always taking into account a perspective centered on vulnerability and the asymmetric distribution of risk. If income is analyzed merely as another independent variable, the results may be contradictory. Some studies show that lower income levels may be associated with greater tolerance of corrupt practices, both among public employees (e.g. Guo & Tu, 2017) and among citizens (Moriconi & Carvalho, 2016; Redlawsk & McCann, 2005). Others yield the opposite result: higher income implies greater permissiveness towards corruption (e.g. Gatti et al., 2003), probably because there is a greater likelihood that such individuals may be able to pay bribes (Hunt, 2007; Hunt & Laszlo, 2005; Plata, 2012).

Lazarsfeld et al. (1945) had already theorized citizen involvement in the public sphere, arguing that it does not depend solely on civic will, but also on the availability of time, money, and skills. In the specific context of anti-corruption, activating voice mechanisms (Fox, 2015) may entail both significant opportunity costs and risk. For lower-income citizens, this risk is considerably greater: their high dependence on social benefits, informal support networks, or, in some contexts, clientelist networks (Auyero, 2001; Justesen & Bjørnskov, 2012; Mangafić & Veselinović, 2020; Stokes et al., 2013) may mean that challenging the status quo could result in the loss of vital resources. In this same vein, Clemente et al. (2024) find that the propensity to report corruption is greater among public officials than among private-sector workers because of the greater job security enjoyed by the former, whereas the risk of reprisals is higher in private firms. Similarly, workers who perceive lower risks associated with job loss tend to show less tolerance of corruption in their organizations (Heese & Pérez-Cavazos, 2021).

By contrast, citizens with higher income levels possess a socio-economic safety cushion. This economic capital gives them greater independence from state or local structures, thereby increasing their capacity to participate more actively and activate voice mechanisms (Scholzman et al., 2012), while drastically reducing the personal cost of activating accountability mechanisms. Thus, whereas for a high-income citizen the use of a reporting channel may be perceived as the exercise of a right without consequences for their livelihood, for a low-income citizen it may represent exposure to a risk that is often unaffordable (Amini & Douarin, 2020; Di Tella & Schargrodsky, 2010). This helps explain why formal empowerment tools, however well designed from the institutional supply side, are not appropriated homogeneously by social demand.

This asymmetry in risk assumption directly affects how social empowerment translates into institutional trust. The literature on political trust suggests that it is built on rational evaluations of institutional performance and impartiality (Hetherington, 2005; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). Citizens with higher incomes and greater economic security tend to perceive fairer and more responsive treatment from public administrations, which allows them to place greater trust in them and facilitates a greater willingness to report corruption (Oboro-Offerie et al., 2025). By contrast, vulnerable citizens often experience institutional interactions as more bureaucratized, extractive, or ineffective (Uslaner, 2001). Consequently, for lower-income groups, the mere existence of empowerment tools is not sufficient to break entrenched cynicism or generate a significant increase in institutional trust, thereby interrupting the mediating mechanism that reduces perceptions of corruption.

For all these reasons, it is hypothesized (H1) that income level will moderate the indirect effect of social empowerment on the perception of corruption through

institutional trust. Specifically, this mediating mechanism is expected to be weak or non-significant for lower-income citizens, but to strengthen robustly as household income increases, consolidating trust and reducing perceptions of corruption much more markedly among higher socio-economic strata.

Gender

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, corruption studies have increasingly examined how gender may influence the way individuals tolerate or perceive corruption. Studies such as Dollar et al. (2001) started from behavioral differences associated with gender, arguing that men tend to be more self-interested than women in different situations, including in matters of integrity (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998) and ethics (Reiss & Mitra, 1998). Together with Swamy et al. (2001), this body of research came to suggest that, as a general rule, women tend to be less corrupt than men and, in turn, that corruption is lower when women occupy positions of power (Agerberg, 2014; Treisman, 2007). Subsequent studies showed that when levels of corruption are high, the number of women in positions of power is lower, and vice versa (Esarey & Chirillo, 2013; Sundström & Wängnerud, 2016); and that when women gain access to positions of responsibility, corruption and corruption risks tend to decline (Bauhr et al., 2019; Bauhr & Charron, 2021)—although women also tend to adapt to corrupt dynamics in order to remain in power.

Goetz (2007) criticizes these approaches for constructing women as essentially incorruptible subjects, pointing out that much of this literature is based on normative perceptions of women rather than on an analysis of the concrete opportunities and constraints they face. In this sense, the author shifts the focus towards access to politics, barriers to entry, and the way in which gender, understood as a process of socialization, shapes opportunities for corruption (p. 88). This shift is particularly relevant for distinguishing between effects on “actual” corruption and effects on the public perception of integrity. Indeed, the inclusion of women as candidates in scandal-ridden contexts may be used as a partisan strategy to project an image of incorruptibility and restore social trust (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2014; Watson & Moreland, 2014), without this necessarily implying immediate transformations in institutional practices.

From an institutionalist perspective, institutions are not only formal rules, but also informal norms and practices shaped by gender relations, in many cases of a patriarchal nature, which condition preferences, incentives, and opportunities for participation (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Waylen, 2011, 2014). One of the main arguments advanced by Esarey and Chirillo (2013) in exploring the relationship between gender and corruption is that contexts differ, and that the existence of strong and impartial institutions mediates this relationship. In this direction, Salamon (2025) argues that, where corruption is widespread or systemic, women’s participation and their impact on public policymaking tend to be lower. There is also evidence that greater empowerment of women, reflected in higher participation by women in the public sector, may be associated with lower levels of corruption (Jin, 2016), and that women have a greater ethical and service-oriented motivation to participate in the public sector (Bright, 2005; Riccucci, 2018). These latter findings are grounded in theories of gender socialization and the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), which suggest that women tend to orient their activity towards serving the interests of others as a consequence of gender socialization, thereby contributing to higher levels of involvement in the public sector and greater motivation in participation. These effects should be interpreted in conditional rather than essentialist terms, since they depend on institutional design, informal rules, and the unequal costs of participation.

Applied to anti-corruption, this implies that gender may be related not only to the presence of women in public office, but also to the differential capacity of men and women to activate accountability mechanisms. When the activation of reporting mechanisms is analyzed at the micro level, women's willingness to report illegal practices decreases when channels are not safe or anonymous (Feldman & Lobel, 2010; Kaplan et al., 2009; Liyanarachchi & Adler, 2011), since they perceive a greater risk of personal or professional setback if the whistleblower's identity is revealed. Therefore, rather than assuming a naturally lower or higher propensity to report, it is more appropriate to understand these differences as the result of differentiated costs, incentives, and institutional guarantees, from a feminist institutionalist perspective. This way, we hypothesize (H2) the indirect impact of social empowerment on the perception of corruption, mediated by institutional trust, is weaker for women than men.

Age

Age is perhaps the least studied sociodemographic variable in relation to corruption, and arguably the one that generates the least consensus regarding its impact on corruption and perceptions of it. Most studies that treat age as a variable show that it is usually the independent variable with the greatest impact on individual tolerance of corruption (Gouvêa Maciel, 2021; Hunady, 2017; Pop, 2012). Although age has been linked to perceptions of corruption—with mixed results (e.g. Jackson & Smith, 1996; Mancuso et al., 1998; Melgar et al., 2010)—seminal studies such as that by Torgler and Valev (Torgler & Valev, 2006) show that the tolerance or justification of corruption as a political, social, and cultural phenomenon decreases as individuals grow older. In the same vein, Sim (2024) also finds that perceptions of corruption themselves decline as individuals age.

Moreover, age also has a marked system-legitimizing component within democratic systems (Nyqvist et al., 2024). Seminal studies such as Glenn (1974) indicate that younger individuals tend to be much more revolutionary and open to political and institutional change than older individuals, in line with what Inglehart (1977; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) would describe as a shift from materialist to post-materialist values. Inglehart (1997) also argues that most of an individual's values are acquired during childhood and adolescence—what he terms the impressionable years—and the findings of researchers such as Devine and Valgarðsson (2024) point in this direction in relation to political trust. The trust of younger people tends to be more malleable, whereas as they grow older that trust stabilizes. Daniele et al. (2023) show, in this sense, that when young citizens' political socialization is affected by a major corruption scandal, the gap in trust persists throughout their lives, which is also referred to as a cohort effect (Lindström & Kokko, 2002).

However, some authors argue that individual attitudes and values may also be shaped over time, especially those related to social behavior. Age-related attitudinal differences may be linked to individual experiences across life cycles, such as transitions from education to work or into retirement (Weiss, 2020). Changes in attitudes and values may occur in adulthood when certain events acquire social relevance sufficient to enable opinion change (Kiley & Vaisey, 2020; Swidler, 2001), although such relevance is intrinsic only to some beliefs and behaviors (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). While Kiley and Vaisey (2020) find that trust in institutions is formed during impressionable years, other authors such as Dahlberg and Linde (2018) argue that political trust can indeed change in adulthood, since it is exogenous to the political system (Mishler & Rose, 2001). In their research on Swedish migrants, they show how institutional quality plays an essential role

in shaping political trust, which declines among individuals residing in countries with weaker institutions or higher levels of corruption.

Taking into account that social trust is a malleable concept depending on the institutional context, age may condition the translation of social empowerment into anti-corruption outcomes through at least two mechanisms: (i) differences in civic resources, social capital, and political efficacy that facilitate the activation of voice practices; and (ii) differences in institutional trust deriving both from life trajectories linked to contexts of crisis and from exposure to corruption scandals. Consequently, it may be expected that, on average, older age will be associated with higher levels of social empowerment—especially in its institutionalized dimensions—greater institutional trust, and, through this channel, lower perceptions of corruption. When older citizens perceive the existence of real and effective empowerment mechanisms—reporting channels, protection, and usefulness—the restorative impact of this empowerment on their overall view of the system is much deeper and more transformative than among younger cohorts, which are often characterized by greater skepticism or systemic cynicism, as well as greater political participation through informal channels.

It may therefore be expected, on average, that greater age acts as a catalyst that strengthens the link between institutional trust and the reduction of perceptions of corruption. For this reason, it is hypothesized (H3) that age will act as a positive moderator: the older the individual, the stronger the increase in institutional trust derived from social empowerment will be in reducing perceptions of corruption, compared with younger citizens.

Education

Education is one of the most relevant sociodemographic variables for explaining individual attitudes towards corruption, although its effects are not uniform across all dimensions of the phenomenon. In general terms, it may be argued that a higher level of education enables individuals to understand politics more effectively (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013). In the field of corruption, the first line of research shows that a higher level of education is relatively consistently associated with lower tolerance or justification of corrupt practices. Hunady (2017) identifies, in the European context and at the individual level, that education is a relevant factor in explaining both tolerance of and experience with corruption, observing that the more educated tend to display lower tolerance, although they may be more exposed to corrupt interactions in certain contexts. In the same vein, Melgar et al. (2010) find that as individuals attain higher levels of education, perceptions of corruption decline. Similarly, and also taking into account that interest in politics may moderate this relationship, the findings of Truex (2011) and Dong et al. (2012) point in the same direction: a higher level of education reduces tolerance of corruption.

The relationship between education and institutional trust must also be formulated in conditional terms. Normally, when discussing the relationship between corruption and institutional trust, citizens are treated as a homogeneous whole that severs ties of trust with institutions. However, theories of personality applied in social psychology (Lewin, 1935) indicate that individuals tend to make decisions and develop political attitudes as a function of both macro-level variables and contexts, which are determined by formal rules embedded in institutions—that condition individual behavior—and by variables that generate individual differences, such as the economy or socialization itself—which shape

differences in the interpretation of social facts and in responses to them (Anderson & Singer, 2008).

In this vein, this paper argues that individuals' educational level is a differentiating factor when analyzing how social empowerment may influence perceptions of corruption and institutional trust. Recent studies show that a higher level of education is associated with greater interest in politics (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2024; Le & Nguyen, 2021), greater acquisition of political information—which also indirectly indicates greater political interest—(Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011), and greater participation in political events (Aars & Christensen, 2020; Aars & Strømsnes, 2007; Dubrow et al., 2022).

Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) and Witschge et al. (2019) show that the effect of education on institutional trust depends on the corruption context: in cleaner contexts, higher levels of education are positively associated with trust, whereas in more corrupt contexts the relationship may be reversed. Moreover, the corrosive effect of corruption on institutional trust intensifies among groups with higher levels of education, precisely because these citizens tend to be better able to evaluate institutional performance.

Given that citizens with higher levels of education usually possess greater cognitive and informational resources to assess government performance, their threshold of institutional demand is often higher. Consequently, the mere theoretical existence of empowerment tools such as reporting channels may not be sufficient to restore their institutional trust if they perceive that the broader context remains permeated by corruption. In addition, from a political economy perspective, we argue that the anti-corruption attitudes traditionally attributed to formal education may in fact be capturing the underlying effect of social class and material security. We therefore hypothesize (H4) that, in a country with low-to-moderate corruption such as Spain, a higher level of education will be associated with greater social empowerment, which will in turn make it possible to reduce perceptions of corruption directly, and indirectly through an increase in trust in institutions.

3. Research Design

This study builds directly on the leverage-points framework developed by Palomo, Villoria, and Ramos (2026), which conceptualizes corruption as a wicked problem in which durable improvements require interventions at strategically sensitive points of the integrity system. In the Spanish case, their empirical model treats citizens' perceptions of social empowerment as a demand-side leverage point that helps consolidate long-term improvements by increasing institutional trust and, through this channel and potentially also directly, reducing perceived corruption.

We re-analyze the same 2022 Spanish survey (Jiménez & Megías, 2023, Spanish component from Megías et al., 2024) and extend the inferential goal: rather than estimating a single, population-average mediation structure, we assess whether the empowerment-trust-corruption mechanism operates homogeneously across the population or whether it varies systematically by sociodemographic position. This extension is substantively important for public administration because many integrity reforms rely on citizen voice, reporting, and social accountability; if the “demand-side” leverage point works unevenly across socioeconomic strata, the resulting governance gains may be unequally distributed and may require complementary design features.

The full survey includes $N = 1,502$ respondents. We use complete responses on the indicator items and the relevant covariates (age, sex, income, education). The resulting analytic sample size is $N = 1,218$.

Measures and operationalization

Latent constructs from the 2022 survey

Following Palomo et al. (2026), we model three latent constructs: perceived corruption, institutional trust, and perceived social empowerment, each measured by multiple survey items.

- Perceived corruption. The latent construct is measured with (i) an item asking whether corruption has increased (5-point Likert scale), and (ii) three items asking respondents to estimate the proportion of corrupt actors (politicians, public officials, and citizens), with responses grouped into ordered classes.
- Institutional trust. Trust is measured using 0–10 evaluations of trust in the judiciary system, the regional government, and political parties.
- Perceived social empowerment. Social empowerment is measured using a set of binary items capturing (a) perceived protection for whistleblowers, (b) knowledge of where to report corruption, (c) self-reported willingness to report, (d) expectations that reporting triggers investigation/action, and (e) whether reporting is perceived as worthwhile. These items reflect the demand-side conditions for social accountability emphasized in the leverage-points model.

Sociodemographic variables and recoding for heterogeneity analyses

- Sex. Respondents self-identify as man or woman (coded as a two-category grouping variable).
- Age is recorded in years and treated as a continuous covariate. In the Bayesian SEM, age is standardized within the analytic sample. When presenting “age profiles,” we summarize heterogeneity at three reference values:
 - Age P25: the 25th percentile of standardized age (younger segment),
 - Age P50: the 50th percentile (median age),
 - Age P75: the 75th percentile (older segment).

These percentiles are computed directly from the analytic sample used in estimation.

- Income. Household income is recorded in ordinal brackets; each one is mapped to a midpoint in euros (e.g., “from 1,201 a 1,800€” mapped to 1,500), while “NS/NC/no income” are treated as missing. Income is then standardized in the analytic sample. As with age, “income profiles” refer to three reference values:
 - Income P25: 25th percentile of standardized income,
 - Income P50: median standardized income,
 - Income P75: 75th percentile of standardized income.
- Education is grouped into three substantively interpretable blocks:

- Primary or less, including incomplete primary/older categories),
- Secondary and vocational education,
- Higher education, including university degree and postgraduate education.

The three-level variable is coded ordinally (1–3) and standardized within the analytic sample.

Measurement equivalence and comparability across sex

Because one central aim is to characterize heterogeneity by sex, we first evaluated whether the measurement model behaves similarly across sex groups. Using Bayesian multi-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (using *blavaan* in R), we estimated configural, metric, and scalar models and compared deviance-based Bayesian fit indices. All three steps showed excellent and highly stable fit (e.g., BRMSEA $\approx$ 0.038–0.039; BGammaHat $\approx$ 0.992–0.993; BMc $\approx$ 0.952–0.960), supporting the interpretability of sex differences in structural relations without conflating them with measurement non-equivalence.

Statistical model

Stemming from the Bayesian structural equation model estimated in Palomo et al., 2026, in which perceived social empowerment is positioned as a demand-side lever that increases institutional trust and reduces perceived corruption, with institutional trust functioning as a mediator, we begin with the same general mediation structure at the individual level. Let:

- $\eta_i^{(E)}$ denote latent social empowerment,
- $\eta_i^{(T)}$ denote latent institutional trust,
- $\eta_i^{(C)}$ denote latent perceived corruption.

The structural component can be written as:

$$\begin{aligned}\eta_i^{(T)} &= a \eta_i^{(E)} + \varepsilon_i^{(T)}, \varepsilon_i^{(T)} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_T^2) \\ \eta_i^{(C)} &= c' \eta_i^{(E)} + b \eta_i^{(T)} + \varepsilon_i^{(C)}, \varepsilon_i^{(C)} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_C^2)\end{aligned}$$

The indirect effect of empowerment on perceived corruption through trust is $a \cdot b$, and the total effect is $c' + a \cdot b$.

This benchmark is informative but restrictive in one crucial way: it imposes a single set of structural coefficients (a, b, c') for all citizens, thereby assuming that the demand-side leverage point functions similarly across socioeconomic positions.

As an alternative, we propose to relax the homogeneity assumption by allowing the mediation mechanism to vary across respondents in structured ways. Specifically, a hierarchical Bayesian moderated mediation with partial pooling is proposed, where the systematic variation in the structural coefficients is modelled as a function of age, income, and education, while allowing additional sex-specific deviations that are partially pooled (hierarchical shrinkage) rather than estimated in fully separate sex-specific models.

For respondent i in sex group $g(i)$, we specify:

$$\begin{aligned} a_i &= a_0 + a_{\text{age}} \text{Age}_i + a_{\text{inc}} \text{Income}_i + a_{\text{edu}} \text{Educ}_i + u_{g(i)}^{(a)} \\ b_i &= b_0 + b_{\text{age}} \text{Age}_i + b_{\text{inc}} \text{Income}_i + b_{\text{edu}} \text{Educ}_i + u_{g(i)}^{(b)} \\ c'_i &= c_0 + c_{\text{age}} \text{Age}_i + c_{\text{inc}} \text{Income}_i + c_{\text{edu}} \text{Educ}_i + u_{g(i)}^{(c)} \end{aligned}$$

with hierarchical priors:

$$u_g^{(a)} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_{a,\text{sex}}^2), u_g^{(b)} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_{b,\text{sex}}^2), u_g^{(c)} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_{c,\text{sex}}^2)$$

The conditional indirect effect for a given demographic profile is therefore:

$$\text{Indirect}_i = a_i \cdot b_i$$

and can be evaluated across substantively meaningful reference points (age and income percentiles; education blocks; sex).

Subgroup-specific mechanisms are often of central interest, yet estimating fully separate group models can be unstable, particularly when subgroup sizes are unbalanced or when multiple moderators are considered simultaneously. The proposed hierarchical specification borrows strength across groups to stabilize estimates, reduces overfitting, and yields direct posterior distributions for heterogeneity magnitudes (the σ parameters), making it possible to quantify whether sex-based differences in mechanisms are substantively meaningful rather than artifacts of sampling variation.

Measurement model

Each set of observed indicators is linked to its latent construct through a standard single-factor measurement model with item intercepts, factor loadings, and residual standard deviations. For identification, the first loading for each factor is fixed to 1 and latent scale is anchored through the priors and standardized indicators. The measurement parameters are held common across respondents; sex comparability is supported by the invariance checks reported above.

4. Estimation, priors, and diagnostics

We fit the hierarchical moderated mediation SEM directly in Stan via CmdStanR to enable efficient hierarchical sampling and continuous moderation using four MCMC chains with 1,500 warm-up and 1,500 post-warm-up iterations per chain, `adapt_delta` = 0.995, and `max_treedepth` = 15. We use weakly informative priors (Normal priors for structural coefficients; Exponential priors for scale parameters). To improve posterior geometry and avoid the pathologies common in hierarchical latent-variable models, we adopt a non-centered parameterization for the endogenous latent variables and standardize indicators prior to estimation.

Sampling diagnostics are satisfactory: `treedepth` is adequate, E-BFMI is acceptable, rank-normalized $\hat{R}$ values are near 1.00, and effective sample sizes are high. The small

number of divergent transitions (2 of 6,000) is negligible and does not materially affect posterior summaries.

Below we summarize the key structural parameters from the education-adjusted model (posterior mean; central 90% credible interval given by the 5th and 95th percentiles):

- *Average structural relations* (at mean standardized age, income, and education).
 - The coefficient linking institutional trust to perceived corruption is negative and credibly below zero: $b_0 = -0.470$ (90% CI: $[-0.776, -0.077]$). This indicates that higher institutional trust is associated with lower perceived corruption in the latent space, consistent with the mechanism emphasized in the original leverage-points model (Palomo et al. 2026).
 - The average association between empowerment and institutional trust is small and uncertain at the population mean: $a_0 = 0.043$ (90% CI: $[-0.276, 0.361]$).
 - The average direct association between empowerment and perceived corruption is small and uncertain: $c_0 = -0.029$ (90% CI: $[-0.383, 0.308]$).
- *Moderation by age and income.*
 - Age strengthens the link between trust and corruption perceptions: $b_{\text{age}} = -0.066$ (90% CI: $[-0.116, -0.018]$).
 - Income strengthens the association between empowerment and institutional trust: $a_{\text{inc}} = 0.087$ (90% CI: $[0.042, 0.131]$).
 - Income moderation of the trust–corruption association is directionally negative but uncertain: $b_{\text{inc}} = -0.041$ (90% CI: $[-0.093, 0.011]$).
 - Income moderation of the direct empowerment–corruption association is positive: $c_{\text{inc}} = 0.041$ (90% CI: $[0.006, 0.075]$). This indicates that the direct pathway does not uniformly reinforce the mediated pathway and underscores why decomposing total effects is informative.
- *Education moderation.*
 - Education moderation terms are near zero and uncertain (e.g., $a_{\text{edu}} \approx 0.005$, $b_{\text{edu}} \approx -0.027$, $c_{\text{edu}} \approx 0.011$), indicating that, conditional on income and age, education adds limited incremental heterogeneity to the structural mechanism.
- *Magnitude of sex heterogeneity (partial pooling).*
 - Posterior summaries for $\sigma_{a,\text{sex}}$, $\sigma_{b,\text{sex}}$, $\sigma_{c,\text{sex}}$ indicate non-trivial sex variation in mechanisms, but the hierarchical prior ensures these deviations are regularized and interpretable as systematic rather than purely sample-driven.

Sex matters in two distinct ways: (i) as a difference in latent levels (especially for perceived corruption), and (ii) as heterogeneity in the structural mechanism linking empowerment, trust, and corruption once you allow partial pooling by sex.

1) Sex differences in latent levels: Using posterior latent scores from the Bayesian SEM, women show higher perceived corruption than men at the latent level (woman – man $\approx +0.086$, 95% CI $\approx [0.072, 0.102]$, posterior probability the difference is positive ≈ 1.00). In contrast, sex differences in institutional trust and social empowerment latent means are negligible and uncertain (credible intervals include zero). In other words, the most robust “level” difference by sex is concentrated in perceived corruption, not in the other two constructs.

2) Sex differences in mechanisms. In the proposed hierarchical model, sex is not treated as a simple covariate shifting means, but as a grouping factor that induces partially pooled deviations in key structural coefficients (the empowerment–trust link, the trust–corruption link, and the direct empowerment–corruption link). The posterior summaries of the sex-heterogeneity scales remain non-trivial ($\sigma_{a,sex} \approx 0.238$, $\sigma_{b,sex} \approx 0.250$, $\sigma_{c,sex} \approx 0.268$), but are also not tightly identified (the lower tails include values close to zero). So, statistically, the data support some mechanism heterogeneity by sex, but the model also appropriately expresses uncertainty about its exact magnitude.

3) Sex differences in policy-relevant predicted effects (total effect of empowerment on corruption). Where sex becomes most substantively visible is in predicted corruption changes when moving from low to high empowerment (-1 SD to $+1$ SD), holding age and income at the same values:

- Men show consistently larger and more certain reductions in perceived corruption.
- Women show smaller reductions, and in several profiles the 95% credible intervals still include zero, with posterior probabilities of reduction well below men’s.

For example,

- Low income (IncP25), young (AgeP25):
Men: $\Delta \approx -0.138$, $\Pr(\Delta < 0) \approx 0.97$
Women: $\Delta \approx -0.015$, $\Pr(\Delta < 0) \approx 0.59$
- Median income (IncP50), median age (AgeP50):
Men: $\Delta \approx -0.146$, $\Pr(\Delta < 0) \approx 0.997$
Women: $\Delta \approx -0.023$, $\Pr(\Delta < 0) \approx 0.66$
- High income (IncP75), older (AgeP75):
Men: $\Delta \approx -0.198$, $\Pr(\Delta < 0) \approx 0.997$
Women: $\Delta \approx -0.074$, $\Pr(\Delta < 0) \approx 0.82$

Then, for the same income and age, the empowerment-based “corruption reduction” signal is stronger and more reliable among men.

4) Sex differences in the mediated component (conditional indirect effect). When you isolate the mediated mechanism (the indirect effect defined as the product of the empowerment–trust coefficient and the trust–corruption coefficient), sex differences are much smaller than the income gradient—especially at the upper end of income.

- At high income (IncP75), the indirect effect is clearly negative for both sexes and becomes stronger with age.
Example (AgeP75, IncP75):
Men: indirect ≈ -0.102 , $\text{Pr}(\text{indirect} < 0) \approx 0.9997$
Women: indirect ≈ -0.094 , $\text{Pr}(\text{indirect} < 0) \approx 0.9985$
- At low income (IncP25), the indirect effect is weak/uncertain for both sexes, and can even be slightly positive among younger respondents.

Then, sex differences in the mediated pathway exist but are modest relative to income; the strongest sex contrast appears in the total empowerment–corruption association, suggesting that sex differences may be operating more through (a) the direct component and/or (b) attenuation of the mediated channel at low income.

In sum, sex differences appear primarily in two places: women report higher latent levels of perceived corruption than men, whereas sex differences in latent trust and empowerment are comparatively small. In the hierarchical moderated mediation model with partial pooling, the empowerment-related reduction in perceived corruption is systematically larger and more certain among men across comparable age and income profiles, while the corresponding effects among women are weaker and often more uncertain. Importantly, once socioeconomic position is considered, the conditional indirect effect through institutional trust becomes strongly negative at high income for both sexes, and differences between men and women in this mediated pathway are comparatively modest. This heterogeneity is not visible in the population-average mediation model used in Palomo et al. (2026), which estimates a single mechanism for all citizens.

Conditional indirect effects across income and age

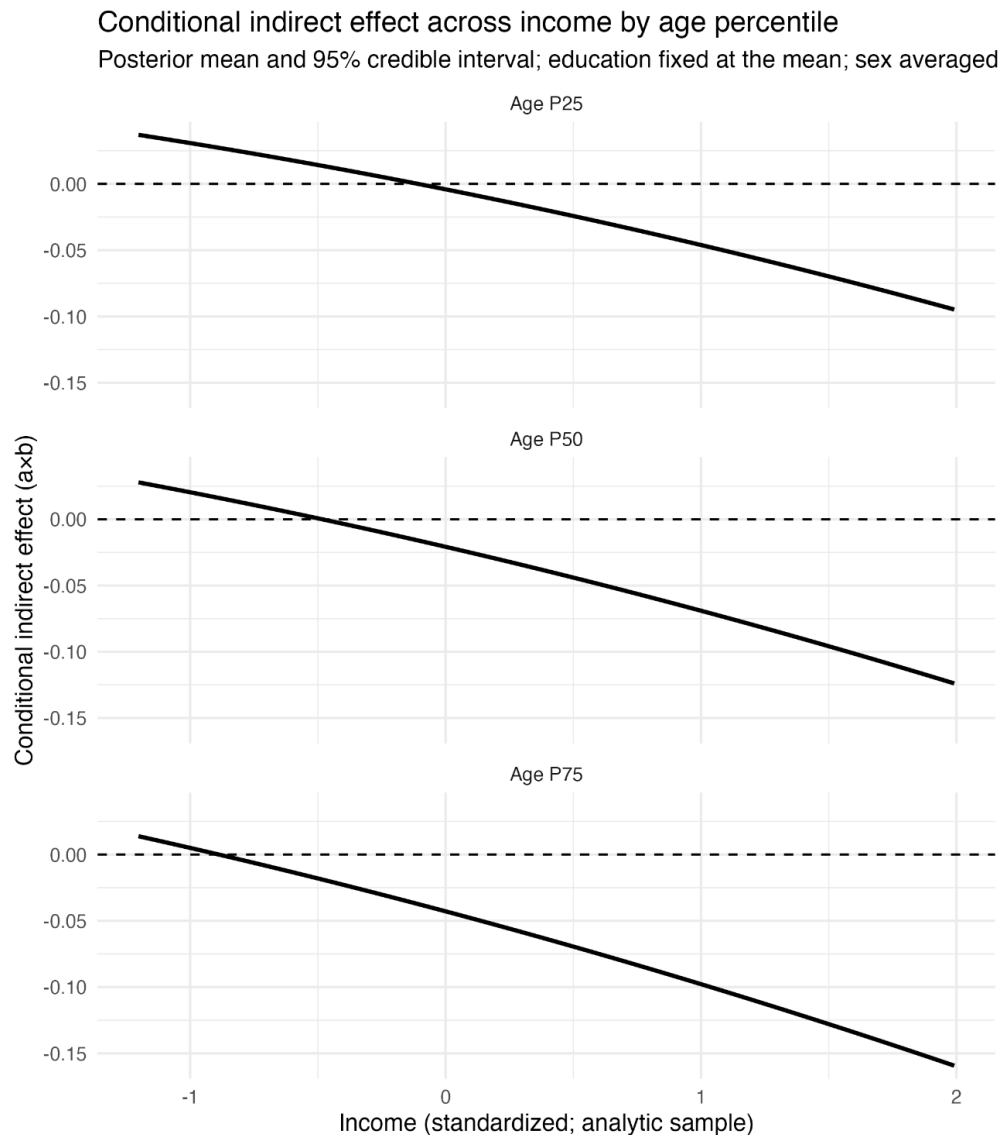
To present mechanism heterogeneity in a policy-interpretable way, we evaluate the conditional indirect effect $a_i b_i$ across demographic reference points where education is held at the median of the standardized education variable (Educ P50); and sex is evaluated separately for men and women.

The conditional indirect effect exhibits a clear socioeconomic gradient. At low income (Income P25), the indirect effect is near zero and uncertain across age percentiles for both sex groups. At high income (Income P75), the indirect effect becomes credibly negative and grows in magnitude with age for both men and women. For example, at Income P75 and Age P75 the indirect effect of social empowerment in the perception of corruption is approximately -0.102 among men and -0.094 among women, with posterior probability exceeding 0.998 that the indirect effect is negative. In contrast, among younger respondents at low income the mediated effect is weak and may not be distinguishable from zero.

This pattern indicates that the mediated leverage-point mechanism emphasized Palomo et al. (2026)—empowerment consolidating improvements through trust and, through trust, reducing corruption perceptions—operates most strongly among higher-income citizens, and particularly among older citizens within that stratum.

Figure 1 presents the posterior mean and 95% credible interval of the conditional indirect effect as income varies continuously (5th–95th percentile range), with separate

panels for Age P25, Age P50, and Age P75, holding education at the center ($\text{educ_z} = 0$) and averaging across sex.



Source: own elaboration.

5. Discussion

The results refine the demand-side argument advanced by Palomo et al. (2026) by showing that the relationship between social empowerment, institutional trust, and perceived corruption is not well captured by a single population-average mechanism. Rather than operating homogeneously across citizens, this leverage point appears to be socially conditioned. This finding is theoretically important because it aligns with the basic insight of the leverage points perspective: interventions in complex systems do not produce uniform effects across all actors, and their impact depends on how they interact with pre-existing resources, constraints, and feedback structures (Meadows, 1999; Abson et al., 2017; Fischer & Riechers, 2019). In that sense, our results suggest that social empowerment should not be understood as a universally available anti-corruption lever, but as a demand-side mechanism whose activation depends on citizens' position within the social structure.

This interpretation is particularly clear in the case of income. The conditional indirect effect is weak and uncertain at low-income levels but becomes credibly negative and substantially stronger at higher income levels, especially among older respondents. This pattern is consistent with the argument that the activation of voice is not costless. As Fox (2015) argues, demand-side accountability only becomes effective when citizen voice can be translated into institutional consequences, and this presupposes not only the existence of formal channels but also the capacity to use them. From this perspective, the income gradient observed in our models is substantively coherent with the literature on civic resources and participation, which has long shown that public engagement depends not only on willingness but also on time, money, and skills, among others (Lazarsfeld et al., 1945; Verba et al., 1995). It also fits with research suggesting that socially and economically vulnerable citizens are more exposed to dependency relations and retaliation risks, whether through reliance on public services, informal support networks, or clientelist structures (Auyero, 2001; Justesen & Bjørnskov, 2012; Stokes et al., 2013). Under these conditions, the mere availability of reporting mechanisms may be insufficient to generate the kind of trust-enhancing effect envisaged by the social empowerment framework. H1 is therefore confirmed.

This is relevant for the broader corruption literature because it helps explain why anti-corruption reforms often generate uneven outcomes. If corruption is treated as a wicked and adaptive problem, as suggested by Anechiarico and Jacobs (1996) and Mungiu-Pippidi (2013), then a formally identical intervention may have very different effects depending on who is able to activate it and at what cost. Our findings therefore reinforce the critique of one-size-fits-all integrity reforms. Supply-side designs may create formal opportunities for accountability, but these are not appropriated equally by all social groups. In this sense, the article complements Palomo et al. (2026) by showing that the demand side of anti-corruption governance is itself stratified.

Age also matters in theoretically meaningful ways. The mediated effect becomes stronger with age, especially at higher income levels, suggesting that older citizens are more likely to translate empowerment into institutional trust and, through it, into lower perceptions of corruption. This finding is broadly consistent with research showing that tolerance of corruption tends to decline with age (Torgler & Valev, 2006; Sim, 2024), and with work suggesting that age shapes political orientations and trust through both cohort experiences and life-cycle processes (Inglehart, 1977, 1997; Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024). At the same time, our results do not support a purely static reading of age. Rather, they are compatible with the institutionalist view that trust remains responsive to institutional performance and experience (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Hetherington, 2005; Dahlberg & Linde, 2018). In substantive terms, this suggests that older citizens may be better positioned to recognize empowerment mechanisms as credible signs of institutional responsiveness, whereas younger citizens may remain more skeptical about whether those mechanisms can produce real accountability. H3 is therefore confirmed, although its strength appears to depend partly on socioeconomic position.

The findings on sex are more nuanced. Women display higher latent levels of perceived corruption, while gender differences in latent trust and empowerment are comparatively small. Moreover, once socioeconomic position is taken into account, differences in the conditional indirect effect through institutional trust are more modest than the income gradient. This pattern is difficult to reconcile with essentialist accounts that portray women as intrinsically less tolerant of corruption or inherently more integrity oriented. Instead, it fits better with feminist institutionalist approaches that emphasize how gendered norms, risks, and institutional guarantees shape opportunities for

participation and accountability (Goetz, 2007; Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Waylen, 2011, 2014). In particular, the weaker and more uncertain empowerment-related reduction in perceived corruption among women is compatible with the idea that reporting and accountability mechanisms are not experienced under equivalent conditions. As previous studies have shown, women may be less willing to activate reporting channels when these are not perceived as sufficiently safe or anonymous (Feldman & Lobel, 2010; Kaplan et al., 2009; Liyanarachchi & Adler, 2011). At the same time, these gendered dynamics do not operate in isolation but intersect with broader structures of socioeconomic inequality. In this respect, material resources appear to be a stronger structural predictor than gender alone of citizens' effective capacity to activate voice mechanisms. Thus, while anti-corruption policies may foster social empowerment among both men and women, the effect of sex on the empowerment–trust–corruption mechanism appears to remain conditioned by socioeconomic position, with income exerting greater explanatory force than sex alone, confirming H2 partially.

By contrast, education adds limited explanatory leverage once age and income are incorporated. This does not mean that education is irrelevant to anti-corruption attitudes. As previous research suggests, higher levels of education are associated with greater political interest, information acquisition, and participation (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2024; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011; Aars & Christensen, 2020; Dubrow et al., 2022), and may also reduce tolerance of corruption (Hunady, 2017; Melgar et al., 2010; Truex, 2011). However, our results indicate that, once material position is taken seriously, education contributes relatively little additional heterogeneity to the empowerment–trust–corruption mechanism. One plausible interpretation is that some effects commonly attributed to education in the corruption literature may in practice be mediated or overshadowed by material security and differential exposure to risk. H4 is therefore not confirmed.

Taken together, these findings have a clear implication for anti-corruption theory and policy. They suggest that demand-side leverage points should not be evaluated only in terms of whether they exist, but also in terms of who can activate them effectively. This moves the debate beyond the standard claim that transparency and information are insufficient on their own (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010), towards a more distributional understanding of social accountability. In this study, social empowerment appears to work best where citizens possess the resources and security needed to convert voice into trust. Accordingly, a genuinely holistic integrity strategy would need not only to expand formal channels of participation and reporting, but also to reduce the unequal costs of using them.

Finally, because the evidence is based on cross-sectional survey data and perceptual indicators, the results should be interpreted as evidence of heterogeneous associations consistent with the proposed mechanism, rather than as definitive proof of causal sequencing. Even so, the pattern is theoretically coherent and substantively important: the anti-corruption potential of social empowerment is real, but it is socially uneven.

6. Conclusions

Palomo et al. (2026) demonstrate, using the 2022 survey and Bayesian SEM, that social empowerment can operate as a demand-side leverage point associated with improved institutional trust and reduced perceived corruption, with evidence that this mechanism is particularly salient in the Valencian case. Their contribution is to connect

complexity-theoretic leverage points to an empirically testable structural model and to show how demand-side empowerment can consolidate long-term outcomes in integrity reforms.

Our contribution is complementary since we show that the same leverage point mechanism is not well described by a single, population average mediation model. When age and income are incorporated as continuous moderators and sex is modeled with partial pooling, the conditional indirect effect varies sharply across socioeconomic position. In practical terms, the mediated mechanism linking empowerment to corruption perceptions through institutional trust is weak and uncertain at low-income levels but becomes reliably negative and increasingly large at high income, especially among older citizens. Education adds little explanatory leverage once income is included.

Mechanism heterogeneity helps reconcile “weak average effects.” Our results indicate that average estimates (such as the empowerment–trust link at the national level) can mask structurally different mechanisms across socioeconomic strata, which is precisely what a leverage-points perspective would predict in a complex social system. Furthermore, policy design implications are distributional, not only average. If empowerment reforms are intended to strengthen social accountability broadly, the finding that the trust-mediated mechanism is considerably stronger among higher-income respondents suggests that the demand-side leverage point may be more readily “activated” among groups with greater resources and capacity. From a governance perspective, this implies that empowerment policies may need additional design features—especially for lower-income citizens—to translate empowerment perceptions into trust improvements and ultimately into reduced corruption perceptions.

In short, the hierarchical Bayesian moderated mediation SEM advances the empirical leverage-points program by moving from an average treatment of the demand-side mechanism to an explicitly heterogeneous, policy-relevant characterization of who benefits most from empowerment-based integrity strategies, and under what socioeconomic conditions.

This study is not without limitations. The use of cross-sectional survey data prevents strong causal claims. In addition, the findings are drawn from the Spanish case and should therefore be generalized with caution. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal and comparative designs, while also incorporating behavioral measures of reporting and accountability and adopting a more explicitly intersectional perspective on the conditions under which demand-side leverage points can be activated.

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