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THE MORAL VALIDATION OF CORRUPTION: «GESTIÓN» AND THE POLITICAL REPRODUCTION OF CORRUPT PRACTICES

LA VALIDACIÓN MORAL DE LA CORRUPCIÓN: LA «GESTIÓN» Y LA REPRODUCCIÓN POLÍTICA DE PRÁCTICAS CORRUPTAS

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ABSTRACT: How are politicians known to be corrupt able to maintain power and electoral support? While research has suggested that corrupt politicians buy off the poor, that voters normalize and overlook corrupt practices, or that they are authorized by particular cultural logics, in this article I argue that voting for a corrupt politician may represent instead a morally validated response to the institutional structures through which state resources are distributed and the political practices that develop as a result. Based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural Colombian village, I describe practices of gestión used by local political groups to access public resources that are concentrated in the national state. To engage in gestión, municipal politicians develop 'godparent' relationships with national-level politicians that have the power to direct centralized state resources to the village. These relationships are based on favor-trading, including through mobilizing local votes and the corrupt capture of state funds. In this situation, voters not only overlook corrupt practices but come to understand them as necessary to access sorely needed state resources. What matters, for moral evaluations in a village in desperate need of state investment, is not how much is stolen but how much is left.

Keywords*:* *corruption, elections, morals, ethnography, Colombia*

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RESUMEN: ¿Cómo pueden los políticos conocidos por ser corruptos mantener el poder y el apoyo electoral? Si bien las investigaciones han sugerido que los políticos corruptos compran a los pobres, que los votantes normalizan y pasan por alto las prácticas corruptas, o que están autorizadas por lógicas culturales particulares, en este artículo sostengo que votar por un político corrupto puede representar, en cambio, una respuesta moralmente validada a la situación. Estructuras institucionales a través de las cuales se distribuyen los recursos estatales y las prácticas políticas que se desarrollan como resultado. Basado en tres años de trabajo de campo etnográfico en una aldea rural colombiana, describo prácticas de gestión utilizadas por grupos políticos locales para acceder a recursos públicos que se concentran en el Estado nacional. Para participar en la gestión, los políticos municipales desarrollan relaciones de 'padrinos' con políticos a nivel nacional que tienen el poder de dirigir recursos estatales centralizados a la aldea. Estas relaciones se basan en el intercambio de favores, incluso mediante la movilización de votos locales y la captura corrupta de fondos estatales. En esta situación, los votantes no sólo pasan por alto las prácticas corruptas, sino que llegan a entenderlas como necesarias para acceder a recursos estatales que tanto se necesitan. Lo que importa, para las evaluaciones morales en una aldea que necesita desesperadamente inversión estatal, no es cuánto se roba sino cuánto queda.

Palabras clave: *corrupción, elecciones, moral, etnografía, Colombia*

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January 2022, two months before Colombia's congressional elections. Hundreds gather in the main square of the rural village of Briceño, Antioquia. Nearly all wear bright red t-shirts proclaiming their support for the House and Senate candidates whose campaign visit provides the occasion for the rally. The shirts were distributed by a highly organized local political team coming off a victory in the 2019 mayoral elections. Thanks to this victory, team members occupy all the local government jobs. With national elections around the corner, their work is dominated by campaigning –technically illegal for municipal employees, but a widespread practice. Even the provision of basic services offers the opportunity to remind voters of the importance of voting for their political godparents (*padrinos políticos*), the politicians that (they hope) will send national state resources to the municipality to fund the road paving, agricultural, and home improvement programs that constitute the tangible benefits of state investment for poor farming communities.

When they get word that the candidates are close, the rally mobilizes, hopping on a hundred motorcycles and the beds of a dozen pickup trucks to form a welcoming caravan. The red wave, accompanied by a soundtrack of constant honking, travels down the village's steep and unpaved entrance road to meet the candidates on their way up. There is an unexpected absence, however: Julián Bedoya, senator and leader of 'Liberal Renovation,' the arm of the Liberal Party whose candidates are visiting today. Bedoya is not running for reelection –the rumor (later confirmed) is that he is preparing for a run at the governorship of Antioquia. But everyone in attendance knows that he is the real power behind today's rally.

Many, however, are also familiar with the dark side of his power. Bedoya, referred to in news reports as the '(Political) Chief Immune to Corruption Scandals', (Chaverra Colorado, 2019) has just been hit with another: the revelation that from 2020 to 2021, his wife's communications company executed contracts in six different Antioquian municipalities where Bedoya serves as political godfather. Briceño, where the company executed six contracts for a total of $83,000 (a large sum for an impoverished village of only 8,000 inhabitants), is one.

Corruption scandal notwithstanding, the atmosphere is festive. The loudest cheers are reserved for a promise from María Eugenia Lopera, the candidate for the House of Representatives. Before the current mayor's term is over, she says, she will personally find the resources to pave the 28-kilometer entrance road to the village, a public works project with tremendous material and symbolic significance: it would cut down transportation times and costs, diminish the likelihood of periodic landslides that leave the village cut off from the outside world, and bring villagers closer to the tantalizing promise of modernity.

As the applause dies down, I ask one of the rally organizers, a municipal employee, about the report on corruption. He says it will have little effect on local voting: "Nobody pays attention to that", he says. "That's what people expect from politicians".

Indeed, when election day comes around, Bedoya's candidates for the House and Senate receive 53% and 49% of Briceño's votes, respectively –a massive number given the hundreds of possible candidates.

Why do communities like Briceño continue supporting politicians they know to be corrupt? How are corrupt practices reproduced, and in a related question, why do corruption reforms so often fail?

An extensive scholarly literature on corruption offers a variety of potential answers. For one, corrupt politicians may buy off poor voters –or, more sympathetically, we may understand the poor as choosing to harness their political support to meet daily survival needs rather than punish corrupt politicians (Manzetti and Wilson, 2007). Conversely, voters may not consider corruption, because they either judge politicians on other criteria or simply assume that all politicians are corrupt (Klašnja, Lupu and Tucker, 2021; Pavão, 2018). And finally, we might understand corruption as authorized through its association with cultural logics like gift-giving (Pierce, 2016; de Sardan, 1999).

In this paper, however, I offer a distinct explanation for why voters don't punish corruption through an ethnographic analysis that links three elements: institutional structures through which state resources are distributed, political practices to access these resources, and communities' moral evaluations of politicians. Based on three years of ethnographic research, I describe a village in desperate need of public funds that are concentrated in the national and departmental-level governments (in Colombia, departments are the administrative equivalent of states). The performance of the municipal government depends not only on its execution of an established municipal budget, but on its gestion –the ability to seek out additional resources– mostly through developing 'godparen' relationships with the powerful national –and departmental– level politicians that can access centralized state resources for projects like paving the village's access road. These relationships depend on both electoral support and corrupt exchanges. Thus, voters not only overlook corruption, but even morally validate corrupt practices insofar as they help grease the wheels for more resources to arrive to the village. What matters is ultimately not how much is stolen, but how much is left.

WHY DO VOTERS SUPPORT CORRUPT POLITICIANS?

In much of the world, and particularly the Global South, corruption has become central to political practice and mobilization. Politicians find great success campaigning on anti-corruption platforms, while a variety of actors invoke corruption to besmirch their rivals and meet distinct political and economic goals (Hsu, 2001; Kajsiu and Grisales, 2019; Lyall, 2018). International organizations like the World Bank have declared corruption "the single greatest obstacle to economic and social development" (de Sousa, Hindess and Larmour, 2012; Zaloznaya and Reisinger, 2020), while a multi-billion dollar international anti-corruption industry aggressively intervenes in impoverished countries (Sampson, 2010; Wolf and Schmidt-Pfister, 2010). And finally, experiences and discussion of corrupt practices are central to how communities worldwide encounter, criticize, and make claims on the state (Bocarejo, 2018; Doshi and Ranganathan, 2017; Gupta, 1995). Yet despite all the attention to denouncing and countering corruption, corrupt practices have proved remarkably enduring, not least because corrupt politicians are repeatedly reelected, even when their malfeasance comes to light (c.f. Pavão, 2018; Pereira, Melo, and Figueiredo, 2009).

One explanation for this fact describes citizens –and particularly the poor– as bought off by corrupt politicians. Many of the scholars from this approach come from a rational-choice tradition that sees both voters and corrupt actors as utility-maximizing actors responding to economic incentives (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016). From this perspective, the poor are particularly susceptible to vote buying, as we could expect them to gain more utility from selling their vote to a corrupt candidate than seeking the long-term benefits that might come from supporting an honest politician (Stokes *et al.,* 2013). This has also been understood as a consequence of state deficiency: when the poor face weak state institutions that fail to adequately provide public goods through legitimate channels, they may hold their nose and support corrupt politicians in exchange for material rewards that help them meet pressing economic needs (Manzetti and Wilson, 2007). But the particularistic distribution of material resources can also create affective loyalties (Auyero, 2001). As James Scott (1969, p. 1144) described in a classic text on the US, when political machines succeeded in meeting their poor clients' material needs, "hints of municipal corruption and graft were winked at, even applauded, by the machine clientele as the social banditry of an urban Robin Hood".

A second explanation suggests that voters overlook corruption in their voting decisions. This may happen if they prioritize partisan loyalty (Jankowski, Juen and Lewandowsky, 2022), public works projects (Lazar, 2005), or government effectiveness (Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá and Rivero, 2016; Klašnja *et al.,* 2021). When voters are relatively indifferent to corruption, research shows that political party leaders may be more likely to punish corrupt candidates because of their concern with protecting the party brand (Asquer, Golden and Hamel, 2020). But particularly in countries with high levels of corruption, voters may see corruption as a pressing issue and still overlook it because of a deep-rooted cynicism. As Pavão (2018) shows in Brazil, voters who believe that all politicians are corrupt will simply ignore it in their voting decisions –ironically, offering the least accountability precisely when it is most needed.

And finally, voters may support corrupt politicians if they subsume corruption within other cultural practices, seeing it as one of many forms of reciprocal social exchange (Torsello, 2015). In this sense, anthropologists have insisted on a culturally relativist approach that seeks to understand local moral evaluations of corrupt exchanges rather than simply assuming their immorality (Arellano-Gault, Trejo and Rojas-Salazar, 2022). De Sardan (1999), for example, argues that in Africa, corruption is legitimized through association with distinct cultural logics like gift-giving, solidarity networks, and the imperative for civil servants to redistribute resources to their family members (see also Schilke and Rossman, 2018). The clientelist distribution of resources, often understood as a corruption of politics, may also be collectively understood as moral when these resources repay political support and campaign participation (Diamond, 2021).

Each of these three explanations –that voters are bought off, overlook corruption, or culturally authorize corrupt acts– have some relevance to explaining the case of Briceño. However, they miss a large part of the story by failing to link voters' moral evaluations of corruption to the political practices and institutional structures that inform them. In taking up this challenge, I follow more recent calls to understand corruption within structured patterns of social relations that develop over time (Garrido, Wilson and Zaloznaya forthcoming; Zaloznaya, 2017). I also follow studies that, while not addressing voting, have described corruption as unfolding through structural processes like bureaucratization, state formation, or the changing relationship between local and national governments (Garrido forthcoming; Torsello, 2011). Still, just as cultural approaches have tended to overlook structure, work describing institutional structures has mostly not connected them to voting practices or moral evaluations. Voters may morally validate corruption, this case study shows, when it takes place through a set of political practices and relationships directed to accessing needed resources through given institutional structures.

METHODS AND THE LAY OF THE LAND

This article draws on more than three years of ethnographic research from 2018 to 2023 in the isolated mountain village of Briceño. Such extended fieldwork was essential for three reasons. First, it allowed me to build the trust needed to access insider political spaces and have my interlocutors be forthcoming about corrupt practices and their own motivations. Second, it let me observe how state resources gradually changed the territory and villagers' lives. I came to understand how campaign promises to improve roads or fix up homes were essential to local families' hopes to scratch out dignified lives.

And third, it permitted me to understand how the cyclical nature of electoral politics informs political practice and allegiances. Indeed, while this article focuses on the March 2022 congressional elections, these elections are impossible to understand outside the elections that precede and follow them. It was in the campaign for the October 2019 mayoral election, which I also ethnographically observed, that Julián Bedoya established himself as godfather of the political team I describe in the first section, in part by securing them the Liberal Party nomination. This political team campaigned for him in 2022 to repay this favor, strengthen their claim on resources he promised for the village, and show their strength in preparation for the upcoming 2023 mayoral campaign.

For most of my research (from 2018-2022), the village was split into two clearly delineated political groups, each associated with competing factions of the Liberal Party. The mayor from 2016 to 2019 Danilo Agudelo (better known as Cenizo) led the first. Their most consequential political godfather was Luis Pérez, governor of Antioquia from 2016 to 2019. This team backed a losing candidate in the 2019 elections (mayors are not eligible for reelection in Colombia) and in the 2022 congressional elections supported two of Luis Pérez's allies: Jhon Jairo Roldan for Senate and James Gallego for the House. Cenizo himself was preparing for another run at the mayor's office in 2023 before he was tragically murdered on the streets of Briceño in April 2022.

The second group, described in the introduction, was led by Wilmar Moreno, mayor from 2020 to 2023. Wilmar led Cenizo's successful mayoral campaign in 2015 before the two had a public falling out and Wilmar formed his own political group. Their main political godfather was Julián Bedoya, and in the 2022 elections they supported Bedoya's handpicked candidates Juan Diego Echavarría and María Eugenia Lopera.

Elections had become a critical element of each group's –and indeed the entire village's– efforts to eke out a living. Before a landmark 2016 peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrillas brought a coca substitution program to Briceño, the village economy had been based on the cultivation of coca (the raw material for cocaine). After coca disappeared, the local economy collapsed. State investment, greatly increased through the peace process, became essential to local livelihoods: machinery and cement to build and maintain the roads that farmers now depended on to ship legal agricultural goods to market, agricultural and home improvement programs, and the public jobs that constituted nearly the only decent-paying work in the territory. Being on the winning side of the mayoral election was necessary to access these resources, most of which were distributed at the mayor's discretion and used to reward political supporters. And as I will describe, mobilizing voters for the congressional elections was critical to the municipal administration's ability to call on their political godparents to direct state resources to the village.

In this high-stakes and competitive environment, maintaining ethnographic access to both groups represented a difficult balancing act. Indeed, given my repeated insistence that I would maintain neutrality, I was initially surprised at the extent to which different campaigns invited me to planning meetings, rallies in rural hamlets, and their WhatsApp groups. However, as time went on and campaigns posted photos of me with their preferred candidate on social media, asked me to speak at their rallies (I either refused or spoke without professing support), or publicly referred to me as their campaign's 'international cooperation', I realized that they saw my presence as an advantage, the implicit endorsement of the white man from the USA. At the same time, once the 2022 congressional elections came around, my research participants were largely people I had known for four years and considered friends. My access, of course, was not as a fly-on-the-wall and I make no claims to objective detached observation –there is little doubt that I 'contaminated' the field, as my interlocutors engaged me directly. But rather than seeing this as a disadvantage, I follow other ethnographers in seeing my disruptive presence as productive of data (Levenson, 2022; Stuart, 2018): the ways they sought to draw me into their campaigns, their moral justifications in response to my naïve questions, and the comparison between what they told me they did, what I observed them doing, and what others accused them of.

"TRADING VOTES FOR PROJECTS": *GESTIÓN* AND THE DISCOURSE BEHIND POLITICAL SUPPORT

Two months before the political rally described in the introduction, the opposing political group holds its own rally for their candidates at a small kiosk outside town. Cenizo's political team has set up dozens of red plastic chairs, a green tarp to shelter attendees from the punishing pre-midday sun, and an elevated stage and sound system. 150 people crowd under the tarp. A half hour after the scheduled 11:00 start, Cenizo pulls up in his white SUV along with the candidate for the house of representatives James Gallego and Jhonathan Roldán, a departmental assembly member who is here to represent his uncle, senate candidate Jhon Jairo Roldan. The men wear identical white shirts with the names of both candidates and the message 'Cenizo Presente'. Luís Pérez, the political godfather behind this team, is also present –if not physically, on a different set of t-shirts. Two women circulate through the crowd with clipboards, wearing shirts that read 'Luis Pérez, President; Colombia, Think Big'. They are gathering signatures to get his name on the 2022 presidential ballot, in an election that will be held later this year.

An MC introduces the honored guests and announces their goal to get 2,500 signatures for Pérez from Briceño. He explains that the congressional elections are part of a greater project called 'Recuperating Dreams', a plan to recover control of the municipality from the political group that defeated them in 2019: "The first step is in 2022, to support the elections for the House and Senate. Then the next step, in 2023, is to take back the mayor's office and bring prosperity back to Briceño, with Cenizo. We can achieve this, thanks to our political godfathers" –here he points to Gallego and Roldán–"who can bring great projects".

Next to the stage, the MC announces, is "James Gallego, the right hand of Luis Pérez". Though he has never held elected office, Gallego served as the Director of Public Utilities in Luis Pérez's gubernatorial administration. He describes the projects he and Luis Pérez brought to Briceño from 2016 to 2019: aqueducts in two rural communities and 23 kms of paved roads.

Road paving, usually done on the steepest and most precarious stretches of rural roads, represents the most tangible benefit of state power for farming communities, allowing public transportation to reach their farms, protecting them from being stranded by periodic landslides, and reducing transport times and charges for agricultural goods.

He pivots from taking to giving credit. "When I was working with Luis Pérez, I had to put up with Cenizo, every day in my office, trying to get resources for Briceño. I don't know the municipal history, but I'm sure no mayor has ever paved more kilometers". He's right. Very few of Briceño's 230 kms of roads were paved before Cenizo (and Pérez as governor) took office in 2016.

Cenizo takes the place of honor as the last speaker. He explains that this congressional election is the first step in their mayoral campaign for 2023, a way to help put into office the men who will ensure that as mayor, he can access resources for the village: "Today, we're trading votes for projects. If you need the projects, give us the votes. There are two fundamental topics: roads and homes. I spoke with Mr. Roldán, and I said, 'I'll help you with votes, and you help me with roads.' And he agreed to give us 30 kilometers of road paving. And James Gallego is with Luis Pérez. If Pérez isn't president, he will be governor. But even if he's a bum in Parque Berrío (a park in Medellín with a reputation for thieves and drug addicts), he can benefit me more than some senator (a reference, as everyone is aware, to Julián Bedoya). I spoke with James Gallego, and he will give us 400 home improvements".

Home improvements are, following road projects, the second most important way in which public funds touch the lives of Briceño's residents. It's rare to find a rural home that has not received some form of publicly funded improvement, whether a concrete floor, the roof, the bathroom, or often the entire home. These programs depend on departmental or national funds and are distributed at the discretion of the mayor's office, making them ideal to reward political supporters.

"We all have different abilities", Cenizo continues, seeking a metaphor that will speak to his rural base. "If you're picking coffee, you may fill the bucket and look over, and see that someone else has only picked half. People ask me, 'where did you find the money to do those projects?' It's a gift. What they don't accept, is that to look for money, for gestión, there's no one better than Cenizo".

When they engage voters, both national and local politicians repeatedly invoke their ability to engage in gestión to bring resources to the village. While these practices of favor trading may challenge dominant western conceptions of appropriate logics for resource distribution, they are not in themselves considered corrupt on a local level. They are, however, linked with corruption in two ways: first, in their implementation, as the execution of any project provides opportunities to steal; and second, in their interpretation, as community members assume that national –and local– level politicians trade projects not only for votes, but for their own share of the budget.

After the speeches end, people stand in line for the customary *sancocho*, a stew of pork, potatoes, yuca, and plantains that a team of four women have been preparing behind the kiosk. I sit with Albeiro, a longtime member of Cenizo's political team, as we balance steaming hot Styrofoam bowls on our laps. He tells me that he's supporting Cenizo because as mayor, he worked very hard to execute public works projects.

"You can tell", he says, pointing to the former mayor's recent-model SUV, an ostentatious car that stands out in this impoverished village.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"It's not a secret to anyone that if the mayor works, he gets his share. But the communities don't care. If he paves from here to *Pueblo Nuevo* (a community 20 kms away on precarious dirt roads), no one will care if he makes some money for himself".

Later in the day, I go to buy meat from my butcher Emilio, who was also at the event. I ask him what he thought.

"It seemed good to me" he says. "Because those señores were the *indicados* (the right people for the job), those who can help us get what we need". He tells the story of when Luis Pérez visited Briceño in 2015 during his gubernatorial campaign, while Cenizo was simultaneously campaigning for mayor.

"Cenizo asked him in front of everyone for ten kilometers of *placa-huellas*", Emilio says. "And Luis Pérez said he would give him 20 kilometers. And he did it, too!". He compares Pérez to an earlier gubernatorial candidate who promised to pave Briceño's 30 km access road, but never followed through. Unlike Pérez, who delivers on his promises.

"If he steals a little bit is another matter", he adds unprompted, laughing.

THE STRUCTURE BEHIND THE DISCOURSE

Similar statements –some version of "they steal, but at least they deliver"– have been documented across the world expressing a collective resignation to corruption (Bechev 2014; Lazar 2005; Rosero Durango 2018; Sime Rendon 2016). However, when affirmed and understood in light of the godparent relationships and institutional structures through which state resources are distributed, these statements take on a distinct moral significance. Indeed, the relationships of Briceño's political teams with their godparents trouble an assumption that is behind most critiques of corruption: that there is a direct and inverse association between the money lost through corrupt practices and the quantity of resources left behind to invest in the public good. From the perspective of the village, in fact, quite the opposite may be true. It's not so much that his supporters forgive Cenizo's 'share' or his shiny new car because they believe his claim that he is the best at engaging in gestión to bring state resources to Briceño. Instead, they understand that it is corrupt practices –emerging through and enabling relationships with his political godparents– that allow his successful gestión, ultimately bringing more resources and needed development to the village. By this logic, 'they steal but at least they deliver' becomes instead 'they deliver because they steal' –or at least allow others to do so.

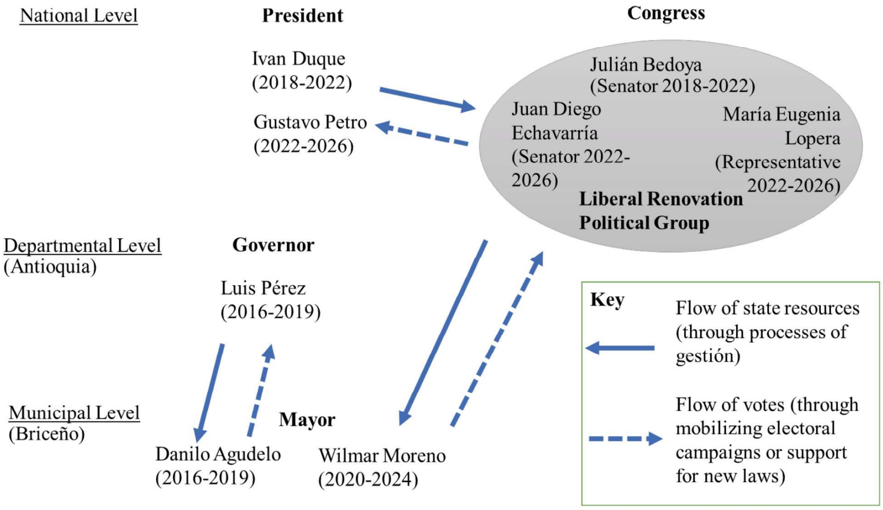
Are these understandings of the logics governing resource distribution accurate? Let's take, for example, the case of Luis Pérez, who even the rivals of Cenizo's political team recognized had brought significant resources to Briceño. Pérez, I learned, has a nickname among the contractors that executed state projects like road paving under his watch –'Luis 15', a reference to the percentage kickback he demanded of them from each contract. In 2019, a detailed investigation on "The Sophisticated Mechanism of Corruption of Luis Pérez" found that he and key political allies created a public-private partnership known as Valor+ to bypass legal requirements for competitive bidding processes and assign contracts worth millions of dollars to 'strategic allies' (Ávila and Salazar, 2019). In their execution, the report finds, these projects were subject to heavily inflated costs and millions of dollars that simply disappeared. Nevertheless, in municipalities like Briceño with mayors that were allied with Pérez, these projects brought needed development.

As governor of Antioquia, Pérez had access to a significant discretionary fund to execute projects. Legislators, however, do not. How, then, could congressional candidates from both of Briceño's political groups promise development projects for the village? This, as a high-positioned insider who works with Julián Bedoya (the godfather of the village's other political team) explained to me, represents a second process of *gestión*, hinging on a different set of reciprocal exchanges with the national executive branch –the president and the ministers they appoint.

This process begins during national presidential elections (which take place two to three months after congressional elections –most recently, May 2022 and a run-off the next month). Supporting the winning candidate during the campaign –including through mobilizing their local political teams in places like Briceño– facilitates access to both the president and their ministers. Once they take office, the new president seeks to build a majority in both the house and the senate who will vote to support their budgetary proposals and legal reforms. They do so in large part by approving projects for congresspeople –projects these congresspeople use to reward their own political godchildren and maintain their voting base.

The lead-up and aftermath to the 2022 presidential elections provide a perfect example. After supporting the successful presidential candidacy of right-wing Ivan Duque in 2018, in 2022 both Luis Pérez and Julián Bedoya supported Gustavo Petro, widely favored to become the first left-wing president in the country's history. Did they have an ideological political awakening? Bedoya's associate assured me this was not the case: "This is a game. Julian Bedoya accesses all the projects (for municipalities under his control) because he always supports the (presidential) winner. He's never lost a campaign. So he always has the doors open. There's no political ideology, the left and right don't exist. The only thing that exists is benefit and convenience". After Petro won, and even as the leadership of his own liberal party began pushing back against the administration's reforms, Bedoya continued supporting the President, ensuring his continued access to national resources he could direct to his political godchildren as they prepared for the 2023 mayoral campaigns –and to support Bedoya's simultaneous run at governor.

FIGURE 1.
VISUALIZING THE FLOW OF RESOURCES AND VOTES THROUGH POLITICAL ALLIANCES AND GODPARENT RELATIONSHIPS


National Level
President
Congress
Ivan Duque (2018-2022)
Gustavo Petro (2022-2026)
Julián Bedoya (Senator 2018-2022)
Juan Diego Echavarría (Senator 2022-2026)
María Eugenia Lopera (Representative 2022-2026)
Liberal Renovation Political Group
Departmental Level (Antioquia)
Governor
Luis Pérez (2016-2019)
Municipal Level (Briceño)
Mayor
Danilo Agudelo (2016-2019)
Wilmar Moreno (2020-2024)
Key
Flow of state resources (through processes of gestión)
Flow of votes (through mobilizing electoral campaigns or support for new laws)

Source: The Author.

Even congresspeople who are not part of the president's ruling coalition may access resources for their supporters through what's known as *mermelada* (literally fruit jam), because of its use to sweeten political deals. *Mermelada* refers to resources national administrations trade to congresspeople –both projects for municipalities under their control and public positions they can use to reward their political supporters– in exchange for their vote for a particular initiative (Losada, 2019).

Ideology is not completely inconsequential in legislators' voting decisions: many Colombians do vote based on political ideology and congresspeople can also access resources through other means, particularly if they are allied with the departmental governor. However, the destination of a significant portion of state resources –including not only public works projects but jobs, direct transfers of money, or different forms of state economic subsidies– is determined by these processes of *gestión.* And for many legislators, their chances of living up to campaign promises, rewarding their political godchildren, and maintaining their voting base (and corrupt practices) depends on their ability to carry out exactly what Cenizo called on Briceño's electorate to do: trade votes for projects.

THE MORAL INVALIDATION OF CORRUPTION: WHEN *GESTIÓN* FAILS

In the 2022 congressional elections, the political team that supported Bedoya's candidates had a significant advantage. While Cenizo's supporters discussed the projects he and his godparents had brought to the municipality from 2016 to 2019, Wilmar's team controlled the municipal administration, meaning real-time access to resources they could use to sway voters. Municipal employees organized days of institutional offerings in rural areas that included free haircuts, health check-ups, legal advice, and exercise classes; having gathered the crowd, they insinuated the services were thanks to their political godparents and told attendees how to vote. The mayor offered the use of the municipal excavator to perform road maintenance in particular communities in exchange for their support. He also told community presidents that if their populations didn't vote for his candidates (though individual votes are secret, the municipality has rural voting stations that make it possible to see which areas voted for whom), they would hurt his ability to engage in gestión and their communities would be excluded from future municipal resources. For families who pledged their support, members of their political team negotiated a variety of particularistic benefits drawn from municipal funds: roof repairs, indoor bathrooms, and aqueducts to bring water to their homes.

When election day came, the house and senate candidates supported by the municipal administration got 53% and 49% of the village's votes respectively, as compared to 18% and 21% for the godparents of Cenizo's team. This success extended past the village: María Eugenia Lopera (supported by Julián Bedoya) received the highest voting total for a candidate for the House of Representatives in Antioquia's history. How did she do it? Bedoya, members of his group told me, served as godfather to the administrations of 37 different municipalities in Antioquia (and had political teams in dozens of other villages). As in Briceño, each campaigned strenuously for his candidates.

But Bedoya's hold on the voters of Briceño would fade. While the administration had distributed some of the promised resources before the election, many they had committed to giving out after never materialized. Most consequential to the village was the paving of the entrance road, Lopera's promise that I describe in the introduction. By 2023, with Wilmar's administration in its final year, it became clear that this project would simply not happen.

With few public works they could point to, the popularity of both Wilmar as mayor and Bedoya's political allies as godparents cratered. The team that had campaigned for Bedoya's allies only a year earlier distanced themselves. Typical was this Facebook comment by a longtime member. In response to a post from Lopera, he wrote: "Briceño is waiting for what you promised us…

and now you're ashamed to even show your face. You've made the mayor look bad. Where is the paving of the main road?... Remember the caravans we did for you, and the votes we gave you".

Even Bedoya's group admitted it had lost its hold on Briceño, declining to support a candidate for the 2023 mayoral election. They claimed, however, that their failure to deliver on their promises was not their own fault, but rather due to Wilmar's poor administration as mayor. In fact, a close ally to Bedoya told me that they had done the *gestión* to approve the funds for multiple projects, but the municipality had failed to execute them after Wilmar impulsively fired the functionaries responsible for completing the needed paperwork.

Whatever the explanation, it was this failed *gestión* that conclusively established Wilmar, Bedoya, and Lopera as both corrupt and unworthy of votes within the village's collective political imagination. Ironically, their broken commitments actually meant less –not more– corruption, as opportunities to steal public resources disappeared alongside the promised projects. Stealing, however, was not the issue. Instead, for the moral evaluations of a village desperate for national-level resources, it was failing to deliver.

CONCLUSION

Readers familiar with an extensive literature on vote-buying, pork barrel politics, and clientelist practices may be unsurprised by the paved roads, new roofs, and indoor bathrooms candidates in rural Colombia promise and often distribute to marshal electoral support (Auyero, 2001; Stokes *et al.,* 2013). However, simply identifying these resources is not enough to understand how they translate into votes and ultimately end up reproducing corrupt practices. Nor, alternatively, is describing cultural practices that authorize corruption or the different reasons voters may overlook it (Pavão, 2018; de Sardan, 1999). Instead, the case of Briceño suggests that a more satisfying explanation lies in an analysis that links institutional structures, political practices, and moral evaluations.

The critical institutional structure described here is the centralization of state resources, which poor rural villages depend on national and departmental-level politicians to access. Municipal political groups do so through practices of *gestión,* developing 'godparent' relationships with these politicians that are based on reciprocal favor trading and particularly their ability to mobilize local voters. These voters are often fully aware that both local politicians and their political godparents are capturing significant public resources. However, when election day comes, voters may reward rather than punish corruption when they understand these practices as enabling *gestión* to bring needed resources to the village. Indeed, it is only when candidates fail to deliver that their corruption makes them unelectable. Villagers' moral evaluations of corruption, therefore, hinge not on what is stolen, but rather what is left behind.

For those interested in countering corruption in Colombia, it is an analysis that suggests reform should begin by targeting the institutional structures that make villages like Briceño beholden to powerful politicians who control resources and thus prevent voters from punishing corruption. But the basic model behind these empirical findings also travels outside Colombia.

We learn something new about corruption, I argue, when we interrogate how institutional structures for the disbursement of public resources lead to political practices that communities then morally evaluate with reference to their material needs. In linking institutions, practice, and meaning making, this model offers a more comprehensive way of understanding how and why distinct actors engage in, challenge, or accept corrupt practices. This is not an easy approach. Describing morally fraught political practices and collective efforts to make sense of them –and linking each of these to broader structures– requires prolonged and deeply embedded ethnographic research. However, in the face of decades of mostly-failed corruption reforms, this work becomes essential.

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