



Beware presidents claiming to have defeated corruption

by Andrew Thompson

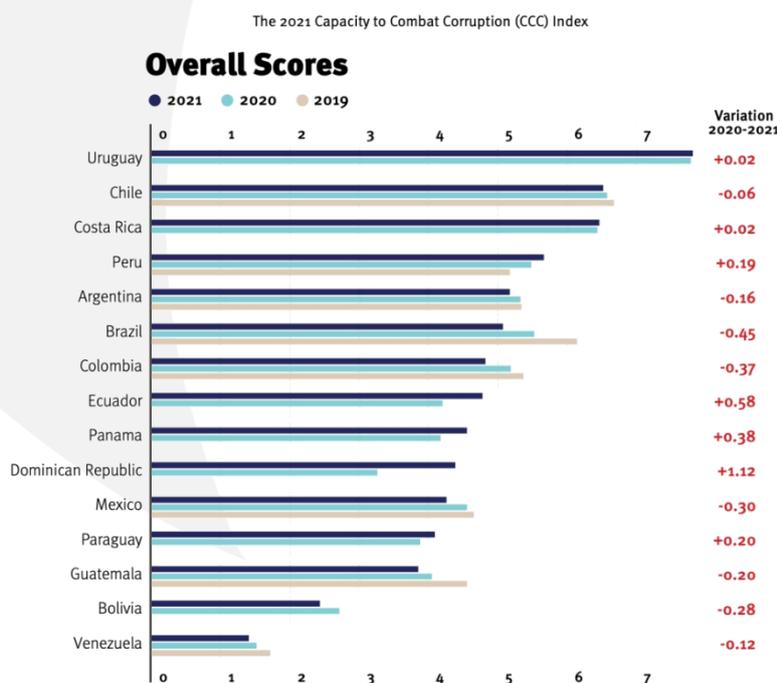
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What happened?

A new edition of the Capacity to Combat Corruption (CCC) index in Latin America shows the continent appears to be moving... in the wrong direction.

The details

The CCC is compiled by Control Risks, a consultancy, and the US-based Americas Society/Council of the Americas (ASCOA). I commented on last year's edition [here](#). The index is made by assessing three variables: legal capacity, strength of democracy and institutions, and strength of civil society. The 2021 edition, here, brings the bad news that things are deteriorating. It says that the efficiency and independence of anti-corruption agencies has reduced. The COVID-19 pandemic squeezed budgets for audit and scrutiny, and, by requiring rapid multi-million dollar emergency medical purchases, actually created new opportunities for corruption. Ministers in various governments took advantage and rolled back controls.



Source: [Control Risks](#)

The overall scores in the region's two largest countries, Brazil and Mexico, fell. The fall in Brazil was attributed to the closing down of the long-running Lava Jato investigation (into bribes and contract-fixing by the state oil company Petrobras), and by President Jair Bolsonaro's politicised appointments to head the federal police and the prosecutor-general's office. In Mexico the fall was attributed to budget cutbacks for the National Anti-Corruption System.

Ironically, the presidents of both countries say they are doing just fine. In March, Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) praised himself: "I can say there is no corruption. It's over because the president is not corrupt." Similar sentiments came from Bolsonaro, who said he was able to shut-down the Lava Jato probe because "there is no more corruption in government". The narrative they, and many other presidents' favour is one of their own single-handed and victorious struggle. The latest to join that group is El Salvador's Nayib Bukele, who has just closed the International Commission against Corruption and Impunity in El Salvador (Cicies), and who also proclaims corruption is "over".

Experience suggests these claims are usually wrong. The way to combat corruption is not though a single, simple, heroic individual, but though a series of apparently much more boring and complex collective efforts, systems and procedures. These include reform of criminal justice systems, better public procurement rules, more independent scrutiny of governments. In fact, some governments have improved their scores by using these methods, including the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Panama.

What does it mean?

Corruption is unfortunately not going away. Expect it to figure prominently in news reports from Latin America over the next year. Comparatively cleaner government – in countries like Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica usually requires sustained effort by more than one government.

About the Author

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As well as being a Canning House Associate Fellow, Andrew is a former foreign correspondent (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro) and a broadcaster for the BBC's Latin American Service. Working through La Rambla Research Ltd., he writes about economics, political risk, and business in Latin America.



These stories are also available on Andrew's blog site, [La Rambla Research](#).