

# COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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## The effect of consumption of corruption-related news on political cynicism

**Abstract**

Disenchantment with politicians and politics –also called political cynicism– is understood as a phenomenon that deteriorates the functioning of democracy. One of the factors that can impact this disenchantment is the appearance of corruption within the political sphere. Prior research has studied the relationship between corruption and trust in politics; this study aims to investigate the link between corruption-related news and political cynicism in Spain. The study uses an experimental approach to investigate the impact of news reporting corruption on the political cynicism of Spanish citizens and to argue that the consumption of corruption-related news increases cynical attitudes and political cynicism. The present study also investigates whether the involvement of renowned politicians, along with the perceived level of corruption that is reported, has an impact on political cynicism. The results show that political cynicism does not depend solely on consumption of corruption-related news; the involvement of renowned politicians in corruption cases and differences in education levels also play a key role in increasing cynicism. Based on the results of the participants assigned to the control group, the study also reveals that Spanish citizens express a baseline level of cynicism that is already very high.

**Keywords**

**Cynicism, political cynicism, corruption, news, media, trust in institutions, education.**

In recent years, corruption has become a common phenomenon in Spain. Transparency International maintains a yearly index of countries' perceived level of corruption. In 2017, Spain obtained its lowest score in history: 57 points out of 100 (where 100 is defined as "very transparent"), and its global position was 42 out of 180 countries (Transparency International, 2017). As a result, according to the Center for Sociological Research in Spain, which measures the major concerns of citizens on a monthly basis, corruption has become one of the foremost concerns of Spanish citizens (CIS, 2018a).

Citizens must trust government institutions in order for a democracy to function effectively. Concern about corruption issues, however, can influence trust in politicians and cause negative attitudes toward them. The belief that people are insincere and only interested in themselves is known as cynicism. This concept has acquired another dimension related to public life, institutions and politics: The idea that politicians and institutions are self-interested and seek only self-profit instead of to benefit the public good is what we

understand as *political cynicism*. The cynic tends to hold that the “political system is corrupt; its players are Machiavellian partisans uninterested in the public good; its process driven by a concern with winning, not governing” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 19).

Political cynicism is the association of politics and politicians with something negative (Agger, Goldstein & Pearl, 1961). Understanding political cynicism is thus more important in a context that includes corruption, a normatively negative practice that tends to disgust citizens and decrease their satisfaction with democracy (Pellegata & Memoli, 2018). If citizens do not trust politicians because of their involvement in corruption, cynicism is more likely to emerge. In the case of Spain and other Southern European countries, there is an abundance of corruption among the political elites. These cases are frequently on the front pages of newspapers and receive considerable TV coverage. A media diet dominated by corruption-related news highlighting the dysfunctionalities of the system and their cost –approximately 90 billion Euros per year (Molina, 2016)– can strengthen cynical attitudes amongst citizens.

Increased familiarity with the elements that trigger disconnection from politics can help to determine how to re-engage citizens through public discourse and reduce the lack of interest that results from political cynicism. Through an approach that specifically addresses the relationship between news and political cynicism, this paper provides insight into the role of the media in political cynicism when corruption is involved.

The aim of this study became especially relevant when, in the process of this research, Spain’s political corruption led to a critical moment in the nation’s history: the first successful motion of censure against the ruling party in the Spanish democracy. Presented after the ruling party was convicted for one of the most well-known cases of corruption, the subsequent motion of censure resulted in the dismissal of the Government and the designation of a new government. This is the most notable example of the severity with which corruption has affected Spain and its institutions. The motion of censure followed years of outrage and media coverage of political scandals.

In this research, therefore, we wish to shed light on the phenomenon of political cynicism. Analyzing the role of the media, and more specifically the role of corruption-related news on political cynicism, will help to explain the latter and hopefully serve to reduce it. Hence, the main question of this study is: “To what extent does exposure to media coverage of corruption cases influence individuals’ political cynicism?”

## 1. Political cynicism

A 2017 Pew Research study showed that Americans’ trust in government was near historic lows; only 20% of respondents said that they usually trusted the government to “do the right thing” (Pew Research Center, 2017). In addition, trust in NGOs, businesses, government and the media in the US decreased between 2017 and 2018 (Edelman, 2018). This distrust is not, however, unique to America. In Europe, “an increasing majority of Europeans distrust national governments (61%) and national parliaments (60%)” (European Commission, 2018). In recent years, disconnection from politics has been observed as an increasing phenomenon across many other Western countries (Torcal, 2014).

Recent research in the field of political trust suggests not only a decrease of trust in political and social institutions, but an increase in the belief that the current aim of politics is to work for self-profit rather than the general interest. This has been shown to be the case in Spain, where the political situation is perceived as “very bad” by the majority of the population (CIS, 2018b). In addition, people consider corruption and fraud to be the country’s second most significant problem (17.7%), and politics, parties and politicians the third (12.5%).

These figures suggest a belief that goes beyond distrust; across the globe, but particularly in Spain, politics and politicians carry negative associations, a phenomenon called *political cynicism* (Agger *et al.*, 1961). This early definition alluding to the perception of a political elite disconnected from ordinary citizens’ concerns still applies today. Scholars have also referred

to a *spiral of cynicism* (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), which, as De Vreese and Elenbaas (2008) found when analyzing political cynicism, “fuels public discontent and eventually leads to individuals’ disengagement from politics.”

Further descriptions of political cynicism include a “strong distrust in the reliability and competence of politicians” (Adriaansen, Van Praag & De Vreese, 2010) and a perceived gap between voters and their representatives, presumably increased by media coverage (Jackson, 2011; Schuck *et al.*, 2013). The common ground among all of these definitions is a feeling of disconnection between politicians and citizens.

## 2. Corruption-related news

The deterioration of institutional trust and the emergence of political cynicism have been attributed to the under-performance of government, reflected in disturbing elements such as economic struggle; crime, in the case of some Latin American countries (Blanco & Ruiz, 2013); and incidents of corruption, in Southern European countries like Spain or Portugal (Torcal, 2014). Torcal (2014) has presented evidence of the decrease of trust in politics in Spain as a result of the spread of corruption. Corruption is therefore a key element for the study of political cynicism.

In Spain, where corruption appears frequently, media outlets cover the phenomenon widely, and the relationship between media coverage and public opinion is tangible. Palau and Davesa (2013) found that when the media provides extensive coverage of corruption, the number of citizens who consider corruption one of the major national problems increases simultaneously.

The attention triggered by these negative stories may justify their visibility in the media (Bradley *et al.*, 2018). Considered by the media very salient, arousing and relevant information (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Haselmayer *et al.*, 2017; Meffert *et al.*, 2016; Soroka & McAdams, 2015), negative stories like corruption-related news receive more coverage because of the systemic deficiencies they report.

Moreover, the Spanish media has been defined as an extension of political parties, with newspapers aligned toward the traditional parties –right- and left-wing- accused of providing more extensive coverage of the scandals of the rival party (Castromil, 2012). This political parallelism is characteristic of the Spanish media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). By providing unequal visibility to corruption scandals based on the party involved, these practices deteriorate the watchdog role of the media (Palau & Davesa, 2013).

It is generally known that greater exposure to news about corruption can lead to an increase in people’s concern about the topic (Palau & Davesa, 2013) and that these stories command more attention due to their negativity. On a related note, prior literature has found a positive relationship between the consumption of news media and political trust (Strömbäck *et al.*, 2016) and a causal relationship between perceptions of corruption and trust in political institutions, which decreases when corruption is high (Morris & Klesner, 2010; Kubbe, 2014; Ares & Hernández, 2017). The influence of the media in shaping opinions has been extensively analyzed by prior literature.

Since cynics are more likely to interpret information in a more negative way (Dancey, 2012) than non-cynics, the present study examines whether the consumption of corruption-related news leads to an increase in cynicism toward politics. Does level of exposure to corruption-related news influence political cynicism? This question leads us to our first hypothesis:

H1. Political cynicism will be higher after exposure to corruption-related news compared to no exposure to corruption-related news.

### 3. Corruption as an isolated case versus a generalized trend

This study largely focuses on the influence of exposure to corruption-related news on political cynicism. Political cynicism is a complex phenomenon, thus, we are also interested in other variables that can contribute to the appearance of political cynicism. One of these variables is the level of perceived corruption, or whether corruption is perceived as an extensive problem or as unrelated individual cases.

For this reason, it is important to analyze the way in which corruption-related news is framed—in other words, whether corruption is presented as a series of isolated cases (the level of corruption is perceived as low) or as a generalized trend (the level of corruption is perceived as high). We know that emphasizing certain aspects of reality through words and pictures while sidelining others can lead audiences to have different reactions to the information (Entman, 1993).

An episodic frame presents issues through specific examples, while thematic frames explain these issues by placing them into a broader context (Gross, 2008). In other words, an episodic frame involves a narrative where context or a link between cases is not provided. By contrast, thematic frames provide more context and more in-depth understanding.

Previous research has established that episodic frames produce more emotional responses and are more arousing for the reader than thematic ones (Aarøe, 2011). These episodic frames, however, were largely understood as news items that focused on the human face of the story, a specific person. The present study understands the thematic frame as the context of prior related cases of corruption.

Episodic frames are more emotionally engaging, “but this alone does not make them a more compelling rhetorical device for someone seeking to change opinion” (Gross, 2008). In fact, when emotions are not involved, “thematic frames generally seem to be stronger than episodic frames” (Aarøe, 2011). Since the durability of emotional reactions to episodic news is yet to be determined—and the stimulus material of this study will not highlight a human perspective—we expect that, when reading news that provides context for the extensive problem of corruption, citizens will be more demotivated by this frame than by the one that does not provide context. In other words, perception of corruption will be high for thematic frames (high levels of corruption) and low for episodic frames (low levels of corruption). It is worth noting that, unlike prior research (Aarøe, 2011), the operationalization of the frames does not focus on emotions, but highlights the attribution of responsibility (Iyengar, 1996), and more specifically, whether or not corruption represents a widespread tendency. Consequently, political cynicism will vary as well:

H2. Political cynicism will be higher when exposed to a high level of corruption-related news than when exposed to a low level of corruption-related news.

### 4. Politicians involved

Reactions to corruption-related news may vary depending on the status of the politicians who are being implicated. Scandals oftentimes receive media attention due to the characters they involve (Romano, 2014). In addition, being involved in a scandal generates more media attention for the party as a whole (Vos, 2014). The presence of a celebrity, for instance, is considered more interesting by the public. To make a story more attractive, journalists tend to seek out the values that make it newsworthy and build upon them (Boukes & Vliegthart, 2017).

One of these values is personification, or focusing on a specific person, like a famous politician, to add value to the story. Perceived political relevance plays an important role for journalists, who tend to publish information that is seen as relevant (Helfer & Aelst, 2016).

The inclusion of relevant politicians can strengthen cynical attitudes: “media content about political scandals, as a type of negative news, may also generate or reinforce people’s cynicism through seemingly confirming the dirtiness of politicians” (Lee, 2017). Lee (2017)

found that a scandal surrounding one political figure influenced citizens' attitudes toward other political objects; this *spillover effect* affects both politicians and political institutions. In summary, the involvement of a well-known politician in a scandal makes a news item more attractive and more likely to be published, potentially strengthening cynical views not only toward the politicians involved, but other politicians and institutions.

Thus, the extent to which a politician implicated in a scandal is well-known is relevant during the gatekeeping process (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016) and may also lead to cynical reactions to the reported events. This will be tested by the following hypothesis:

H3. Political cynicism will be higher after exposure to corruption-related news that includes renowned political figures.

Due to the aforementioned spillover effect, scandals implicating famous political figures lead to a tendency among citizens to bundle all politicians into the same category. When we combine the scandalous involvement of prominent political figures with cases of severe corruption, the effect of news exposure could be even higher. The magnitude and drama (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2017) of political scandals, together with the participation of notorious politicians and the cynicism it triggers, are expected to have a combined impact on political cynicism. This leads to the fourth hypothesis:

H4. Political cynicism will be higher when people are exposed to high levels of corruption AND cases where renowned politicians are involved.

It is important to consider the role of previous party preferences on reactions to corruption-related news. According to Anduiza, Gallego and Muñoz (2013), due to partisan bias, individuals can judge differently depending on whether the responsible politician is a member of the respondent's party.

## 5. Education

Whether political cynicism affects citizens equally depends on individual-level characteristics, one of which may be individuals' level of education. More highly educated individuals may have a deeper understanding of the functioning of politics and institutions, and thus feel less demotivated by information about corruption. Alternatively, the moderating influence of education may take a different direction. More highly educated people also tend to be more attentive to news, while those who are less educated are more likely to avoid it (Ksiazek, Malthouse & Webster, 2010).

Although some studies observe a positive relationship between education and cynicism (De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Schuck *et al.*, 2013), these are outnumbered by research that suggests a negative relationship; in other words, studies tend to support the idea that less-educated people are more cynical. Adriaansen *et al.* (2010) found that "less educated citizens express somewhat higher levels of political cynicism than highly educated ones." Similar findings were uncovered by Pattyn, Van Hiel, Dhont and Onraet (2012), who determined that participants with a college or university degree were less politically cynical than those with a high-school degree and those without a high-school degree.

For their part, Agger *et al.* (1961) analyzed the relationship between education and income and political cynicism, arguing that lower social status leads to high political cynicism. According to this research, less-educated people may have a more punitive attitude toward an elite that is usually perceived to be unresponsive to public opinion.

The most relevant finding for the present study was made by Hakhverdian & Mayne (2012), who determined that education was negatively related (less educated = more cynical) to institutional trust in corrupt societies. This may be the case in Spain, where corruption could be perceived as a significant issue. We therefore expected a similar outcome in our own study, where we analyze the effect of corruption-related news on political cynicism, with education moderating this effect. This leads to the final hypothesis:

H5. The effect of exposure to corruption-related news on political cynicism will be stronger for less-educated people than for more-educated people.

To summarize, this study will test whether political cynicism is influenced by the consumption of corruption-related news, the involvement of famous politicians in this news, and the interaction of the aforementioned factors with individuals' level of education.

It is worth considering the relevance of the socio-economic context of Spain, which has been plunged into a serious financial crisis since 2008, with significant economic and social consequences. This period, which led to unusually high rates of unemployment, youth exodus and poverty, undoubtedly contributed to a greater penalization of those activities that perverted the exercise of political and public endeavors.

## 6. Methods

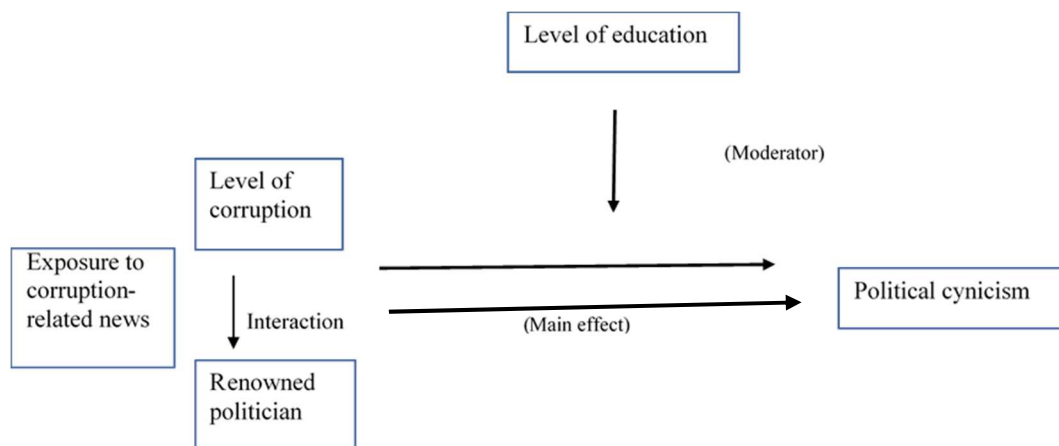
### 6.1. Design

A 2 (corruption: high, low) by 2 (politician: renowned, non-famous) plus 1 (control) between-subjects design was used, with participants randomly assigned to one of the four conditions or to the control group. The conditions in this study are:

1. a group that reads an article reporting low levels of corruption involving a renowned politician,
2. a group that reads an article reporting low levels of corruption involving a politician that is not well-known,
3. a group that reads an article reporting high levels of corruption involving a renowned politician,
4. a group that reads an article reporting high levels of corruption involving a politician that is not well-known, and
5. a control group with no exposure to any stimuli.

Participants answered a battery of questions after the manipulation to measure their political cynicism. This design allowed to us assess to what extent the independent variable of exposure to corruption-related news caused the expected effect (increase of political cynicism) by comparing these results with those of the control group.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual model.



### 6.2 Sample

The sample (a convenience sample) was contacted through Facebook contacts and groups, Twitter and via personal contact. Participation was open to any person who identified as a Spanish citizen over 18 years old. The total number of participants was 359, with approximately 70 people per condition.

Randomization among conditions was successful. Participants' distribution according to gender ( $p = .949$ ) was not significantly different between groups. The mean age was also similar in all conditions, with no significant differences ( $p = .902$ ). The mean age of participants was 36.21 years old.

The composition of the sample consisted of 97 men (27%), 253 women (70.5%) and 9 participants who preferred not to indicate their gender (2.5%). Participants with different educational backgrounds were included in order to test the moderation effects of their level of education. 1.7% of participants only attended primary school, 24.3% had a high school diploma, 53.8% of participants had a Bachelor's degree, 17.3% had a Master's degree and 3.1% had a PhD.

### 6.3. Procedure

Respondents were told that they would participate in a study of "political affairs," after which they were randomly assigned to one of the conditions (four experimental conditions and a control group). The procedure had three phases.

First, participants answered a questionnaire that measured their political knowledge via questions regarding the Spanish political situation and a battery of statements measuring anti-elitism attitudes. The factor and reliability analyses showed that these statements measured a single concept, giving as a result a scale ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = .73$ ) with average reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .68).

Respondents were asked to place themselves on an ideological scale from left to right and indicate their highest level of education achieved. Participants' ideologies had a left-wing tendency (0 = left, 10 = right;  $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ). Overall, 60.4% of the participants placed themselves in the left-wing range of the ideological spectrum.

Secondly, participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions. Based on the condition to which they were assigned, they either read one of the four manipulated articles or no articles (in the control group). Respondents in the manipulation conditions were told that the article was recently published by a national newspaper; the article was altered in order to not give hints about the newspaper and avoid biased responses.

Lastly, participants were asked to complete a posttest with questions measuring their political cynicism and trust in institutions, as well as some demographic questions regarding their age, gender, income and news consumption. After finishing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed.

### 6.4. Stimulus material

The stimulus material consisted of four versions of an article reporting the investigation of the illegal financing of one of Spain's major political parties, the Socialist Party (PSOE). This illegal financing consisted of irregularities during the political campaign of the 2008 general elections.

We chose this party due to its relatively lower involvement in corruption cases compared with the rival party (the Popular Party, the party in government at the start of this study, representative of the right wing), so that participants would be less familiar with reading about it. The Socialist Party has also been involved in corruption cases; its appearance would not be so shocking as to be perceived as extremely unusual, but, in comparison with the Popular Party, it would be more surprising. For this reason, we decided to choose the party representative of the left wing. The articles that mentioned a renowned politician focused on former President of the Spanish government Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The implication of a high-profile politician such as an ex-president made the articles more scandalous.

The politician used for the low-profile condition was fictional and was named "Andrés Reyes." A real but lesser-known politician was originally mentioned. After conducting a pre-test with 47 participants, however, the results showed that people tended to indicate that they

had recognized a politician in the text. The pre-test asked if they had recognized a politician in the text, which could be understood as asking whether or not they had noticed that a politician was mentioned in the article, even if they were unfamiliar with him or her. To solve this, the question was reworded to: “did you recognize a politician whom you previously knew in the text?” Whether due to misunderstanding of the question or to social desirability—respondents pretending to appear more knowledgeable—the use of a fictional name would avoid this problem in the main study.

Levels of the factor of corruption were high, low and none (control group). The article that presented low levels of corruption reported a single case of corruption, in other words, an event-oriented report, so an episodic frame was used. By contrast, the high corruption category presented the same case with an additional paragraph that provided context by summarizing previous cases of corruption in the party. The aim of this additional information was to present the issue of corruption as a generalized trend, creating broader context by using a thematic frame.

At first, this extra paragraph was the only difference between conditions, but since the pre-test showed no significant differences among participants’ perceptions of the level of corruption between the different articles, the text was modified to make these differences more evident. To do so, the low-corruption article became more neutral, only suggesting, rather than assuming, that the alleged crimes had been committed, while highlighting the isolated nature of the case without a broader picture (episodic frame). The high-corruption article was modified to appear even more severe and punitive, and portray a systemic problem of corruption.

## 7. Measures

The main dependent variable was political cynicism, and it was measured through a battery of questions combining different items employed in prior research that proved to be reliable. This battery was combined in a single scale consisting of 13 statements. Individuals were asked to respond to a five-point Likert scale, indicating to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

Examples of these statements included the following: (1) “In Spain, politicians never tell us what they really think;” and (2) “to succeed in politics, a politician does have to give up his personal integrity.” These statements were retrieved and modified from scales used by Adriaansen *et al.* (2010), Agger *et al.* (1961), Dancy (2012) and Pattyn *et al.* (2012). The statements originally measured “cynicism toward elected officials” and “political cynicism.”

A factor and reliability analysis revealed that this battery measured two different concepts: political cynicism and perception of politicians’ personal integrity (represented by only two statements: “to succeed in politics, a politician does have to give up his personal integrity” and “no man can hope to stay honest once he enters politics”). The first scale ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) was reliable (Cronbach’s alpha = .88); the scale measuring personal integrity of politicians ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), however, was not (Cronbach’s alpha = .55). Thus, we decided not to include these two statements in the analysis and used only the scale measuring political cynicism.

Participants were also asked about their trust in institutions and to rate their own trust in the country’s parliament, legal system, politicians and political parties. This was measured on a scale from 0 (“no trust at all”) to 10 (“completely trusting”). This battery was originally obtained from the 2017 World Values Survey. This scale ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ) consistently measured trust in institutions (Cronbach’s alpha = .85).

Since level of education was the moderator, we expected the effect of exposure to corruption-related news on political cynicism to be stronger for those who were less educated. The categories were (1) No studies, (2) Primary school, (3) High school, (4) Bachelor’s degree, (5) Master’s degree and (6) PhD.



Participants were also asked about their average income, as well as their gender, political knowledge, anti-elitism attitudes and news consumption. Political knowledge was measured with a series of original questions designed for the current Spanish political landscape and recent history. A battery of three questions measured frequency of news consumption (Benesch, 2012). All of the batteries of questions used proved to be reliable.

### 7.1. Manipulation checks

We conducted a chi-square test to check that the manipulation worked in the way we intended. For the first manipulation check, we found a small but significant difference between those who noticed the level of corruption and placement in a specific condition:  $\chi^2(3,285) = 47.34, p < .001, \tau = .056$ . In other words, participants were aware of the level of corruption they were reading about, according to the group in which they had been placed.

For the second manipulation check (whether they had recognized a politician in the text), we found a significant and strong difference between those who recognized a politician and the assigned condition:  $\chi^2(3, 285) = 150.27, p < .001, \tau = .53$ . As expected, participants assigned to a condition with a famous politician were more likely to indicate that they had recognized them in the text; they were aware of the presence of a famous politician. Thus, both manipulations were successful.

## 8. Results

Concerning the first and second hypotheses (exposure to news reporting high levels of corruption increases political cynicism compared to low levels of corruption and no exposure to news), we conducted a one-way ANOVA analysis that included the independent variable of exposure to corruption and the dependent variable of political cynicism.

We did not find a significant effect of the level of corruption on political cynicism; there were no significant differences ( $F(4,354) = 1.30, p = .272$ ) on political cynicism between those placed in the high category ( $M = 3.96, SD = .59$ ), the low category ( $M = 3.98, SD = .62$ ) and the control group ( $M = 4.1, SD = .62$ ). Thus, seeing corruption as a generalized trend or an isolated case did not significantly modify participants' scores on cynicism. Whether the news used an episodic or a thematic frame made no relevant difference to political cynicism, providing no support for H1 or H2.

For the third hypothesis (corruption-related news that includes renowned politicians increases political cynicism), we conducted a one-way ANOVA analysis with the independent variable of presence of a famous politician and the dependent variable of political cynicism. There was no significant effect of the presence of a famous politician on political cynicism ( $F(2,356) = 1.27, p = .281$ ). Participants in the famous categories ( $M = 3.97, SD = .62$ ) did not score significantly differently on political cynicism from people in the non-famous politician categories ( $M = 3.97, SD = .59$ ) or in the control group ( $M = 4.09, SD = .62$ ). In other words, the involvement of well-known politicians did not by itself have an impact on political cynicism, providing no support for H3.

To test the fourth hypothesis (the interaction between exposure to corruption-related news and presence of famous politician), we conducted a two-way ANOVA analysis. The main effects of level of corruption ( $F(1,281) = .04, p = .845$ ) and renowned politician ( $F(1,281) = .02, p = .875$ ) were non-significant. The result for the interaction effect was  $F(1,281) = 3.70, p = .057$ , with a small effect of  $n^2 = .01$ . Thus, the effect of high corruption-related news on political cynicism is more pronounced when it mentions a famous politician.

As previously mentioned, partisan bias should be considered when interpreting these results. The results, however, show that supporters of the party involved were generally more critical ( $M = 4.01, SD = .52$ ) of corruption than their political rivals ( $M = 3.94, SD = .67$ ), and post-hoc comparisons showed no significant differences in cynicism between these groups. Party affiliation therefore did not compromise the results of the experiment.

**Table 1:** Mean scores for political cynicism: exposure to corruption and renowned politicians.

	Level of corruption			
	High		Low	
	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Renowned politician	4,03	.57	3,90	.67
Regular politician	3,90	.62	4,05	.56

For the fifth hypothesis (the relationship between corruption-related news and political cynicism is stronger when education is low), we conducted a two-way ANOVA analysis including the moderator of education.

The interaction effect of education and corruption-related news was  $F(8,344) = 1.86, p = .06, n^2 = .04$ . The effect of corruption-related news varied for people of different education levels. Individuals with only primary studies and those with PhDs were the most cynical when exposed to high corruption and the least cynical when exposed to low corruption.

Both of these groups are the most influenced by the news they consume. Due to their small sample sizes, however, results must be interpreted with caution.

**Table 2:** Effect of exposure to corruption-related news and education on political cynicism.

Education	Level of corruption					
	High		Low		Control	
	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Primary school	4,36	-	2,91	.40	4,14	.83
High school degree	4,06	.52	4,07	.46	4,18	.45
Bachelor's degree	3,89	.60	4,03	.61	4,07	.68
Master's degree	3,93	.72	3,99	.62	4,08	.62
PhD	4,27	.62	3,23	.94	4,18	1.0

Although we did not find a main effect of education ( $F(4,335) = .679, p = .607$ ), there was a medium-sized significant main effect of exposure to corruption ( $F(2, 344) = 6.00, p = .003, n^2 = .03$ ). The effect of level of corruption becomes significant in this analysis once education is held constant—suggesting that, once education is controlled for, level of corruption does indeed have a significant effect on political cynicism. This reinforces the influence of education over cynicism (providing extra support for H5) and provides some support for H1 and H2.

**Table 3:** Mean political cynicism scores: exposure to high/low corruption-related news, controlling for level of education.

Level of corruption	<i>M(SE)</i>
High corruption	4,10(.14)
Low corruption	3,64(.09)
Control	4,13(.13)

The control group is the most cynical; their high cynicism score highlights the importance of participants' prior cynical attitudes, inviting us to pay closer attention to the high baseline level of cynicism in our sample. Since 2000, more than 2,000 cases of corruption have surfaced in Spain (Pérez, 2018). Frequent reading of corruption-related news over a number of years may explain why the stimuli produced relatively small effects overall, along with why the control group was already very cynical.

## 9. Discussion

This study provides an in-depth investigation of the causes of a phenomenon of cynicism where politics and politicians symbolize something negative, also known as political cynicism –more specifically, whether political cynicism can appear as a result of consumption of corruption-related news. In addition, we examined the extent to which the implication of renowned politicians influences cynicism, and whether the effect of corruption-related news on political cynicism is stronger for those who are less educated.

The use of thematic frames (high level of corruption) when reporting corruption had a small impact on political cynicism, but only after participants' level of education was controlled for. These small effects contrast with previous literature that analyzed the relationship with political trust, suggesting a robust relationship between media use and political trust (Strömbäck *et al.*, 2016). Other research indicated, moreover, that cynics tend to interpret ambiguous information in a more negative way (Dancey, 2012); this study, however, found minimal evidence that individuals were more cynical after reading news about corruption that was more alarming.

A focus on well-known politicians did not increase the severity with which individuals judged the reported cases. Although the inclusion of prominent characters had no influence on political cynicism by itself, two points are notable:

First, the influence of reading about famous politicians only appeared when combined with high levels of corruption; in other words, cynical reactions are more likely to appear when reading news about high corruption that involves notorious politicians. Cynicism increases as corruption does, but only when well-known politicians are present. This combination supports a cynic's view of equivalence, where politicians and institutions are the same and any corruption committed by a politician is typical (Lee, 2017). Although cynics are not more attentive to scandals, they tend to interpret these "in a way that negatively reflects on the actors involved" (Dancey, 2012), that is, in a way that reinforces their cynical attitudes. In this case, the presence of celebrity politicians in news concerning a high level of corruption reinforces the tendency to bundle all politicians together as corrupt.

Second, and surprisingly, those who received no stimuli at all were the most cynical, supporting the idea of a normalization of the phenomenon of cynicism in Spain.

Although the majority of participants indicated that they usually spend less than 45 minutes per day consuming news (through newspapers, radio or television), it is important to consider their consumption of news prior to this study, especially news related to corruption. In Spain, even news avoiders have been surrounded by information about corruption for years, and this clearly plays a role in their attitude toward politics.

Another concern of this study was to understand the role that education plays in political cynicism. Education by itself had no influence on political cynicism; a difference was shown only when combined with information about high levels of corruption. This partly contrasts with prior research (Adriaansen *et al.*, 2010; Agger *et al.*, 1961; Pattyn *et al.*, 2012) showing that less-educated people are more likely to be punitive toward politicians and more cynical. Our findings reveal that individuals with less education were the most cynical when consuming high levels of corruption-related news, but they were followed by individuals with the highest level of education (PhD). Those with the lowest and highest levels of education were, when asked about their opinions on politics and politicians, the most influenced by the news they

read. This finding, however, must be interpreted cautiously, since the size of these sample groups was small.

Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) argued that education is directly related to citizens' capacity to acquire and process information. According to their theory, higher-educated individuals are more influenced by the news they read due to their ability to effectively assimilate this information with their existing knowledge. In contrast, Ksiazek *et al.* (2010) – who categorized news consumers as news avoiders and news seekers – claimed that news avoiders tend to be less educated and “the influence of exposure to news is significantly greater for avoiders than news-seekers.” Our results showing higher media effects on those with the lowest and highest education levels is therefore supported by theory and provides a more nuanced picture than existing literature. Furthermore, this study highlights the moderating influence of education in the context of corruption-related news.

The strikingly high level of cynicism in the control group is worthy of further attention. Participants' high level of cynicism even without receiving any stimuli is a revealing symptom of the current state of politics and public opinion in Spain, and it should be taken as a warning sign of the extent to which political disenchantment can represent a dominant reality. Political cynicism appears to be a standard attitude in Spain, where corruption-related news is a staple of the daily media diet.

Again, the socio-economic context sheds some light on this: The harshness of Spain's economic crisis has undoubtedly played a role in how its citizens perceive power and politics. The disgust that results from corruption is more difficult to face in a context of crisis, and it is more likely that citizens will turn their backs on politics.

One of the implications of this study is that, as argued by previous research in this field (Agger *et al.*, 1961), it mirrors a phenomenon of general distrust toward politics and politicians, along with the negativity that politics symbolize. Some lessons can be drawn from this: political cynicism is a reality in Spain. As noted in the introduction, Spanish citizens consider corruption to be one of their main concerns (CIS, 2018a), and this study's results suggest that not much has changed. Spain's political sphere must take notice of this reality of cynicism. This study can serve to encourage politicians to implement more measures against corruption, and to be more emphatic in their condemnation of it.

The aforementioned motion of censure in Spain is an excellent example of this condemnation. Political immobility can result in unexpected outcomes: It was not until a judicial sentence was delivered that action was taken by the opposition. Politicians should reconsider their positions in matters of corruption, react before judges leave them without other options, and pay more attention to citizens' claims. In regard to this, it is worth noting that following the motion of censure, the ex-government party (PP) held its first-ever primary elections.

For their part, journalists can draw their own conclusions from this study. It is their duty to continue informing the public about these issues, but journalists should acknowledge that wider coverage of corruption can lead directly to an increase in citizens' concerns (Palau & Davesa, 2013). The coverage of corruption-related news is usually extensive, but it does not necessarily promote deliberation. When coverage of corruption does not contribute to public discussion, mobilization or engagement in public life, democracy can be perceived as minimalistic (Strömbäck, 2005). Reporting corruption-related news as a depressing reality that citizens cannot change may enhance feelings of powerlessness.

To address this, we encourage the media to promote citizens' empowerment, showing the political and decision-making processes as open procedures that enhance inclusion – more specifically, to focus on policy measures against corruption that are being implemented at the local and regional levels and to provide a different view of political corruption, which is usually portrayed as a dead-end situation. Indeed, solution-oriented journalism could be particularly effective in the case of corruption. If news can relay ways in which corruption can

be solved, this could counter the disenchantment and lack of efficacy that accompany political cynicism.

Journalism faces numerous challenges, including the most recent ones concerning new technologies. The sought-after immediacy of social media oftentimes leads to disinformation and the reporting of false alarms that cannot be repaired, contributing to cynicism. The “fake news” phenomenon, of course, deserves a separate study, but it has undoubtedly contributed to the spread of various types of malicious information, in many cases related to corruption.

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the manipulations were ambitious, since distinguishing between different levels of corruption is not an easy task. In light of the pre-test and manipulation checks, however, the stimulus material was modified many times until the desired manipulation was achieved. Secondly, attitudes like cynicism can evolve over time, and this cross-sectional study analyzes cynicism at a specific point in time. We cannot measure the influence of prior consumption of corruption-related news (over a period of years), although this has an impact on participants’ attitudes toward politics. A longitudinal study may provide the opportunity to see how the consumption of news over time can result in the evolution of political cynicism.

Another limitation is the generalizability of the results. The sample is composed only of Spanish citizens, and the findings can be discussed within the Spanish context only. Although this is highly relevant for the context of corruption, a follow-up study could focus on different countries and media systems. Lastly, the convenience sample yielded a variety of educational backgrounds, but a more balanced distribution, especially one including highly-educated and less-educated participants, would make our conclusions more certain.

Overall, after analyzing the function of education in more detail, as well as the role of *celebrity politicians*, this study offers fresh and interesting findings. Concerning education, some authors have argued that higher education leads to low levels of cynicism, while others (De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Schuck *et al.*, 2013) have suggested the opposite. This study has found a middle point between these positions, with less- and more-educated participants being very cynical depending on the news they consume, and cynicism increasing along with corruption.

This influence of the media exemplifies how consumption of news can be further studied to analyze its impact on political cynicism. Future research could consider other moderator variables, like income (Agger *et al.*, 1961), ideology or even need for cognition. If political knowledge is related to cynicism, the extent to which participants enjoy the process of thinking (need for cognition) could be an interesting approach as well.

The results of this study focusing on news consumption and education gives us some hope. Some positive changes should be adopted: a reexamination of journalistic work, with a greater commitment to public interest; an approach that brings clarity to information saturation; and a reconsideration of the typical portrayal of corruption in the media to one that shows how citizens can participate more in inclusive political decision-making processes. Considering innovative approaches to media coverage of corruption is an indispensable element for tackling the alarming levels of cynicism among Spanish citizens.

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