



What matters more, public integrity or private integrity? Perceptions about corruption in political candidates in Brazil and Mexico

O que importa mais, a integridade pública ou a integridade privada? Percepções sobre corrupção em candidatos políticos no Brasil e no México

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ABSTRACT | Purpose: This article examines how different moral value systems shape electoral preferences and perceptions of corruption regarding political candidates in Brazil and Mexico. It distinguishes between personal moral values related to the private sphere and social moral values associated with the public and institutional sphere, seeking to identify which dimension carries greater weight in leadership evaluation. **Method:** A mixed-methods approach is employed. The quantitative stage relies on longitudinal data from the World Values Survey between 1981 and 2019, using factor analysis and the construction of a moral evaluation index. The qualitative stage consists of comparative focus groups conducted in both countries, structured according to the tripartite model of attitudes, encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. **Findings:** The findings show that Brazilians place greater emphasis on public integrity, displaying lower tolerance for corruption in political office even at the expense of perceived effectiveness. Mexicans, by contrast, adopt a more pragmatic stance, valuing both public and private morality and showing greater tolerance toward corruption when candidates are seen as competent. In both contexts, a gap emerges between declared moral values and actual electoral choices, largely mediated by emotional and situational factors. **Originality and Value:** The study advances the literature by demonstrating the fluid and context-dependent nature of moral attitudes and their implications for political accountability and democratic decision-making.

Keywords | Perception of corruption; Public integrity; Morality; Political behavior; Political culture



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RESUMO | Objetivo: O artigo investiga como diferentes sistemas de valores morais influenciam as preferências eleitorais e as percepções de corrupção em relação a candidatos políticos no Brasil e no México. O foco analítico está na distinção entre valores morais pessoais, associados à esfera privada, e valores morais sociais, vinculados à esfera pública e institucional, buscando identificar qual dimensão exerce maior peso na avaliação da liderança política. **Metodologia:** Adota-se uma abordagem de métodos mistos. A etapa quantitativa baseia-se na análise longitudinal de dados do World Values Survey, abrangendo o período de 1981 a 2019, com aplicação de análise fatorial e construção de um índice de avaliação moral. A etapa qualitativa consiste em grupos focais comparativos realizados nos dois países, estruturados a partir do modelo tripartite das atitudes, contemplando dimensões cognitivas, afetivas e comportamentais. **Resultados:** Os resultados indicam que brasileiros tendem a valorizar mais a integridade pública, demonstrando menor tolerância à corrupção no exercício de cargos políticos, mesmo em detrimento da eficiência percebida. Em contraste, mexicanos apresentam uma postura mais pragmática, atribuindo importância tanto à moralidade pública quanto à privada, com maior disposição para tolerar comportamentos corruptos quando associados à competência ou efetividade governamental. Em ambos os casos, observa-se inconsistência entre valores declarados e escolhas eleitorais efetivas, fortemente mediadas por fatores emocionais e contextuais. **Contribuições:** O estudo contribui para a compreensão das relações entre moralidade, comportamento político e corrupção, evidenciando a instabilidade das atitudes morais e seus limites na promoção da accountability democrática.

Palavras-chave | Percepção da corrupção; Integridade pública; Moralidade; Comportamento político; Cultura política.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a persistent societal, political, and economic challenge affecting a wide range of countries. Fraudulent, dishonest, and criminal behaviors can be observed among actors entrusted with power, both in democracies and autocracies, and in contexts characterized by either free-market economies or expansive government intervention. While corruption has legal definitions and consequences, it is also deeply rooted in moral considerations. The extent to which individuals engage in corrupt acts, justify such behavior in pursuit of self-interest, or perceive the presence of corruption is closely tied to their moral value systems.

All individuals possess a value system that defines certain behaviors as “moral,” allowing them to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, or justifiable and unjustifiable. When individuals hold these values seriously, they expect others to adhere to them as well (Duska & Whelan, 1975). As these values are derived from morality, they inform expectations not only about personal behavior but also about the conduct of others. Thus, moral judgment serves as a normative guide for interpersonal conduct (Dworkin, 2011), as well as for participation in social and political life (Lledó, 1985; Assunção & Silva, 2017).

This article focuses on voter behavior, and specifically on public morality from the perspective of citizens. Our aim is to investigate how different systems of moral values influence leadership preferences—particularly when voters are faced with the choice between a “dishonest” candidate and one considered morally exemplary—and how these systems shape perceptions of corruption.

For analytical purposes, moral values are divided into two dimensions: personal values, which pertain to the private sphere, and social values, which concern individuals’ interactions within the



public sphere, especially with institutions (Da Matta, 1984). The study seeks to answer the following questions: Which set of moral values—personal or social—is more important in the evaluation of political candidates? Should political leaders be held to a higher standard of conduct based on personal morality, social morality, or both? Do people demand more from others than from themselves?

Our analysis focuses on the cases of Brazil and Mexico—the two largest democracies in Latin America—both of which experience high levels of corruption across multiple sectors, including government, business, law enforcement, and the judiciary. A mixed-methods approach was employed. In the quantitative phase, data from the World Values Survey (1984–2019) were analyzed to assess how individuals’ moral opinions vary, to distinguish between personal and social moral values, and to examine the relationship between these values, leadership preferences, and perceptions of corruption. In the qualitative phase, focus group discussions were conducted to explore the consistency between individuals’ stated moral values and their reasoning when evaluating real political candidates.

The article is organized into five sections. The first presents the theoretical framework and the conceptualization of moral values, along with a definition of a “dishonest” political leader. The second outlines the methodology in detail. The third reports the quantitative findings on shifts in moral attitudes in Mexico and Brazil, identifies which values are more influential in political judgments, and introduces a morality index for each country. The fourth section presents the qualitative analysis, examining how individuals make electoral decisions based on their moral systems and other belief structures. The article concludes with a summary of findings and reflections on their broader implications.

1 MORAL VALUES AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR, A THEORETICAL APPROACH

According to Duska and Whelan (1975), all individuals possess a value system that establishes a set of positions considered “correct,” allowing them to discern actions and practices as either right or wrong, good or bad, justifiable or unjustifiable. This set of values constitutes morality. When individuals take these values seriously, they expect others to follow and agree with them (Duska & Whelan, 1975). Because these values derive from morality, they imply a behavioral model that applies not only to oneself but also to others. In this sense, moral judgment represents a normative framework for how we treat others (Dworkin, 2011), and how we relate to one another in a political and social community (Lledó, 1985; Assunção, 2017).

The value system referred to here will be termed the Moral Values System, which is divided into two dimensions: personal values and social values. The former comprise values shaped within the private sphere—particularly in the home and within the family unit—constituting what Da Matta (1984) describes as a set of collective symbols rooted in domestic life. These values arise from “personal morality,” understood as “principles, norms, and ideas that guide a person’s life without considering others” (Assunção, 2017, p. 18). This set of values—often referred to as family traditions—defines people’s morality and is embedded in cultural codes of honor and shame, delineating right from wrong and acceptable from taboo. Concepts such as “moral obligation,” “family man,” “good man,”



and “respectable woman” are grounded in this personal moral framework (Assunção, 2017). According to Da Matta (1984), the home constitutes a space of strong moral significance and is considered a moral entity in itself. Thus, the home is more than just a physical location—it is a moral space: “an area where we realize ourselves as human beings with a physical body, and also a moral and social dimension” (Da Matta, 1984, p. 25).

By contrast, social values pertain to the public sphere, formed through interactions in spaces such as the street and the workplace (Da Matta, 1984), but also manifesting in relationships within state institutions. These values, grounded in public morality, help individuals determine how to act in social interactions and in relation to public goods and services provided by the state. From the citizen’s perspective (rather than that of public officials), individuals face moral dilemmas such as whether to pay taxes, misuse public resources like scholarships or welfare benefits, or justify breaking the law for personal gain at others’ expense. Our research focuses on the moral dilemma faced by voters in choosing between honesty and performance—between the private and public morality of political leaders.

Based on this Moral Values System, we pose several key questions: Which set of values—personal or social—matters most in evaluating political leaders? Should politicians be expected to behave beyond reproach from the perspective of personal values, social values, or both? Do individuals hold others to higher moral standards than they hold themselves? In conservative societies such as Brazil and Mexico, these questions may be especially pertinent, as there may be a tendency to separate the “good man”—defined by family behavior—from public behavior. Do people apply the same standards of morality in private and public life, or are these realms judged differently? And if there is a distinction, does it influence people’s political attitudes and behavior?

Robert Altemeyer (2006) introduces the concept of the “double standard” to describe the moral reasoning of individuals with authoritarian personalities. The term denotes the use of inconsistent or contradictory standards in moral judgment, allowing individuals to rationalize their decisions in retrospect. According to Altemeyer (2006), people often hold compartmentalized beliefs and readily employ a double standard: “people simply evoke the idea that they will later justify what they decided to do” (p. 81).

This type of double standard can be understood through the lens of attitude theory, as proposed by Bizer, Barden, and Petty (2006). Attitudes are relatively enduring evaluations that individuals hold about people, objects, topics, and ideas (Bizer, 2004). These evaluations consist of three components: (a) cognitive—referring to beliefs and thoughts about an object; (b) affective—encompassing emotions, moods, and feelings; and (c) behavioral—pertaining to past or future actions toward the object. Together, these elements constitute the Tripartite Model of Attitudes (Bizer et al., 2006). When all three components are aligned positively toward an object, a consistent positive attitude emerges. However, inconsistencies among the components may occur—for example, a person might feel positively in affective and behavioral terms, but harbor negative cognitive beliefs. In such cases, overall attitudes are shaped by the component given the most weight.

From another perspective, Dworkin (2011) emphasizes that for individuals to act morally, there must be a link between moral judgment and motivation. Moral judgments, according to Dworkin, are



not beliefs in themselves and require a second act—such as an “emotional outburst,” an “expression of desire,” or the formulation of a plan—to translate into action. Thus, it is emotion or desire that motivates moral behavior, aligning with the affective component in the Tripartite Model (Bizer et al., 2006).

Dworkin (2011) also discusses the concept of “amoralists”—individuals who claim to hold moral convictions but are unwilling to act on them. This notion resonates with Altemeyer’s (2006) concept of the double standard.

Building on these frameworks, this research hypothesizes that both Brazilians and Mexicans may be more tolerant of deviations from moral standards in the public sphere (social values), while being less permissive in the private sphere (personal values). Applied to the electoral context, this suggests that voters may overlook the dishonesty of political leaders if other attributes, such as competence or effectiveness, are perceived as more important. This pattern has been observed in studies from both rational choice (Rundquist, Strom, & Peters, 1977) and psychological perspectives (Esaiasson & Muñoz, 2016).

Several other scholars have also explored the trade-off between morality and other factors in political decision-making (Lane, 1962; Peters & Welch, 1980; Bezes & Lascoumes, 2005; Rennó, 2007; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Esaiasson & Muñoz, 2014; Pérez, 2015; Martínez, 2016). Their findings generally suggest that moral concerns are often outweighed by other considerations, such as policy positions or candidates’ perceived ability to deliver results. Nonetheless, recent studies suggest a potential reevaluation of honesty in public life (Barbosa, 2020; Sousa, 2021, 2023), indicating the need to revisit the role of moral values in electoral decisions.

The concept of the “dishonest politician” in this research refers to voter perceptions of immoral or reprehensible political behavior—perceptions shaped primarily by media and political discourse rather than legal judgments or convictions. Thus, dishonesty in this context does not necessarily imply legal guilt (Rennó, 2006; Sousa, 2023).

2 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative analysis aims to determine, through statistical methods, whether there is consistency between the two dimensions of moral values and, based on this, to identify which dimensions of the Moral Values System have the greatest influence on the selection of political leaders. To this end, data from the World Values Survey (WVS) were utilized, covering both Brazil and Mexico from 1981 to 2019. This period includes the seven waves of surveys conducted and enables an examination of the evolution of moral values over time in both countries.

The WVS assesses individuals’ moral attitudes using a set of variables, including:

- v177: Claiming government benefits without entitlement
- v178: Avoiding paying for public transportation
- v179: Stealing property



- v180: Tax evasion
- v181: Accepting a bribe
- v182: Homosexuality
- v183: Prostitution
- v184: Abortion
- v185: Divorce
- v186: Premarital sex
- v187: Suicide
- v188: Euthanasia
- v189: Men who beat their wives
- v190: Parents who hit their children
- v191: Violence against other people

These variables were grouped into the dimensions of Personal Values and Social Values using an inductive approach through factor analysis. The analysis was conducted separately for each country and across the seven waves (1981–2019) to observe how the variables clustered and changed over time.

The factor analysis revealed that Social Values can be further divided into two subdimensions: 1) Institutional Interaction: Variables concerning interactions with state institutions, including “Evading taxes,” “Claiming government benefits without entitlement,” “Accepting bribes,” “Avoiding paying for public transport,” and “Stealing property”. 2) Violence-Related Values: Variables addressing violent behaviors, such as “Violence against other people,” “Men who beat their wives,” “Parents who hit their children,” and “Suicide” (see Table 1).

It is noteworthy that forms of domestic violence—particularly against women and children—and suicide, which were historically considered private matters, now appear classified as public concerns. Conversely, it is somewhat surprising that abortion continues to be grouped under personal values, despite its increasing presence in public and institutional debates.

This differentiation between personal and social values allows for the analysis of two distinct behavioral and attitudinal patterns:

The first relates to being a “good person” within the private or family sphere.

The second refers to behavior in public or institutional contexts.

These distinctions provide a useful framework for exploring how moral values shape individuals’ attitudes toward political leadership and corruption.



Table 1. Variables of moral values in Brazil and Mexico

Social values (public sphere)	Subdimension Interaction with the State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Evade taxes if you have the opportunity”. • “Receiving benefits from the government without deserving them”. • “Accept bribes”. • “Avoid paying public transportation tickets”. • “Stealing the property of others”.
	Subdimension Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Violence against other people”. • “Men who beat their wives” • “Parents who hit their children” • “Suicide”
Personal values (private area)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Homosexuality” • “Prostitution” • “Abortion” • “Divorce” • “Euthanasia” • “Sex before marriage” (casual sex)
<p>Total explained variance: 51.51% Number of components: 3 Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.</p>		

Source: Elaboration by the authors with data from Haerpfer et al., 2020.

From a qualitative perspective, to assess attitudes toward morality and political behavior, comparative online focus groups were conducted in Brazil and Mexico. These were designed based on the Tripartite Model of Attitudes proposed by Bizer, Barden, and Petty (2006), which includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components.

A total of five focus groups were conducted: two in each country and one pilot group used to refine the methodology. Each group consisted of six participants. In Brazil, participants were selected from each of the country’s five major regions, with an additional participant from the most populous region. In Mexico, given the existence of eight regions, these were restructured into five for comparative purposes, with one participant selected from each region and an additional participant from the most populous one, as detailed in Table 2. Each country held one group composed of young adults and another of older adults. Gender parity was ensured in all groups, with three women and three men per session.

During the online focus group sessions, participants in both countries engaged in an experimental activity designed to explore their attitudes—cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally—toward political candidates with differing public and private moral profiles. The purpose was to determine which dimension of morality (personal or social) was more salient in shaping electoral preferences, and under what circumstances. This was achieved using real-life-inspired scenarios presented as vignettes based on the 2018 national elections in each country.



Table 2. Geographic area of Focus Group participants

Mexico				Brazil			
Region	Population	Participants	City	Region	Population	Participants	City
North	25.239.143	2	Sinaloa	Norte	18.672.591	2	Manaus
Occident	13.737.253	2	Guadalajara	Noroeste	57.374.243	2	Recife
Orient	17.257.977	2	Xalapa	Centro-oeste	16.504.303	2	Brasília
Center	39.417.450	4	Ciudad de México, Toluca, Cuernavaca	Sureste	89.012.240	4	São Paulo Rio de Janeiro
South	18.329.509	2	Yucatán	Sur	30.192.315	2	Porto Alegre

Source: Elaboration by the authors.

3 ATTITUDES AND MORAL VALUES IN BRAZIL AND MEXICO

To evaluate attitudes, a Moral Evaluation Index was developed. This index ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represents a higher level of “morality”—indicating that a behavior considered wrong is never justifiable—and 1 represents a higher level of “immorality,” meaning that the behavior is always justifiable regardless of context. The index was constructed using variables drawn from the Moral Values System described previously.

Each variable was measured on a scale from 0.10 to 1.00, with 0.10 indicating that the behavior is “never justifiable” and 1.00 indicating that it is “always justifiable.” The Moral Evaluation Index was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the selected variables, grouped into both personal and social moral dimensions.

Based on the premise that citizens tend to be more permissive or tolerant in the public sphere than in the private one, it is hypothesized that the Moral Evaluation Index will be higher for social values than for personal values. A higher index in the social domain suggests a greater willingness to justify morally questionable actions in public or institutional (or public) contexts.

Moral values in Brazil

According to data from the World Values Survey (WVS), Brazil exhibits a marked incongruence between the trajectories of social and personal moral values over time. The morality shaped “within the home” appears to follow a different path from that formed in the spheres of “the street and the workplace” (see Graph 1). Both dimensions of morality briefly converge in 1991 (with an index value of 0.28) and again in the early 2000s (0.35). However, in 1997 and from 2005 to 2014, their trajectories diverge significantly: immorality in the private sphere begins to rise, while social values begin to reflect increasing moral demands.

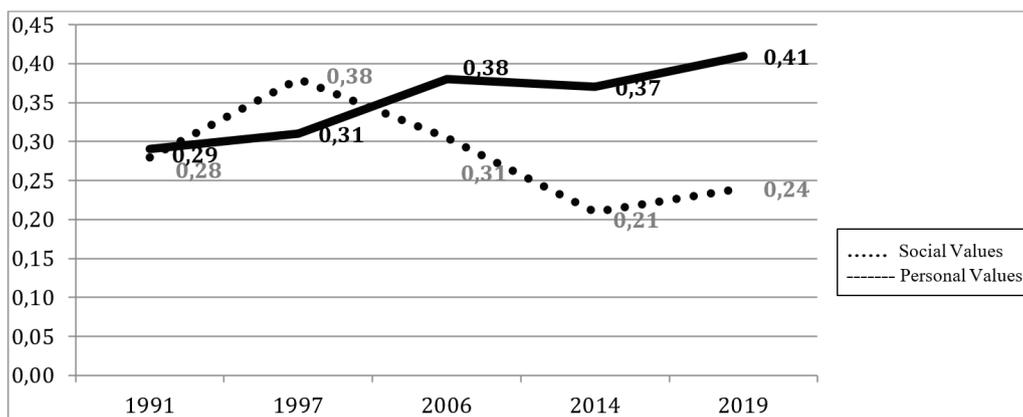
This divergence becomes more pronounced after 2006, as social values begin to exhibit a stronger moral orientation. The gap between these two dimensions widened considerably in 2014, a shift that may be linked to major national events—most notably, the political corruption scandals associated



with Operation Lava Jato¹, which began that same year. In the subsequent period, both dimensions of morality followed a parallel upward trend in the Moral Evaluation Index, indicating a broader shift toward greater tolerance of immoral behaviors.

These findings suggest that moral values in Brazil are not static; rather, they evolve and fluctuate over time. Notably, social values show greater variation and volatility, which reflects a changing tolerance for public transgressions—such as bribery—that were more accepted during parts of the 1990s but later condemned in subsequent years. In contrast, personal values follow a more consistent pattern, with a steady increase in immorality over time, particularly from 2014 onward.

Graph 1. Difference in behavior of social and personal values in Brazil 1989-2019



Graph 1 illustrates that social values exhibit greater variability over time than personal values. Among the social value variables, those showing the greatest volatility include “Accepting a bribe,” “Avoiding paying public transport fares,” “Evading taxes when possible,” and “Receiving government benefits without entitlement.” All these behaviors show an upward trend in immorality in the most recent period (2017–2019), indicating increasing justification for these actions.

The variables “Stealing someone else’s property” and “Violence against other people” were only measured during the 2010–2014 and 2017–2019 waves. Nonetheless, they also show a rising trend in moral permissiveness, suggesting a growing social tolerance for these behaviors. The social values with the highest scores on the Moral Evaluation Index are “Evading taxes,” “Avoiding paying public transport fares,” and “Receiving government benefits without deserving them.”

In contrast, personal values have demonstrated a higher overall Moral Evaluation Index over time, implying an increasing tendency to justify behaviors traditionally associated with private morality. Divorce is among the most significant examples, with the index reaching 0.62 in both the 2010–2014 and 2017–2019 periods. Similarly, divorce and casual sex show relatively high levels of moral permissiveness, with index values of 0.56 and 0.45, respectively.

1 Set of investigations implemented by the Brazilian Federal Police on crime and corruption in politics involving presidents of the Republic, presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, governors and prefects.



Contrary to initial expectations, personal values exhibit higher immorality scores than social values. It was originally hypothesized that social values would show a higher Moral Evaluation Index, reflecting a greater public tolerance for deviations from social norms compared to those within the private sphere. However, the data from Brazil reveal the opposite: personal values have a higher index (0.35) than social values (0.28), contradicting the initial premise.

This finding suggests that Brazilians are more demanding when it comes to public morality, expecting behaviors in the public sphere to conform more closely to moral norms. Yet, this raises a paradox: if Brazilians hold such high expectations for public morality, why do they elect candidates perceived as “dishonest”? This apparent contradiction will be explored qualitatively in the following section, which examines leadership preferences—particularly the dilemma between choosing an honest political leader or one perceived as effective in delivering results.

Moral values in Mexico

In the case of Mexico, both dimensions of morality—personal and social—generally follow similar trajectories over time (see Graph 2). Across the survey waves, Mexicans show noticeable shifts in their moral evaluations, with social values exhibiting greater volatility and personal values displaying a steady increase in the Moral Evaluation Index.

Between 1981 and 1990, personal values—representing private sphere morality—had slightly higher immorality scores than social values. However, this pattern changed in 1996, when personal morality began to show consistently higher index scores than social morality, a trend that continued until 2019. Notably, 1996 was the only year in which the two moral dimensions diverged: social morality decreased (index = 0.27), while personal morality increased (index = 0.33). From 2000 onward, both dimensions moved in the same direction again, though at different paces—indicating that Mexicans became more demanding regarding social morality while becoming slightly more permissive in the private domain.

The years with the greatest demand for morality in the public sphere were 1996, 2000, and 2010. These peaks in moral expectations coincide with critical political and societal events in Mexico. The period 1994–1995 marked what has been described as a “political and moral crisis” (Olvera, 2016). This period was characterized by the emergence of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), an intensified struggle for democratization, the assassinations of prominent political figures (including PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio), and a structural economic crisis.

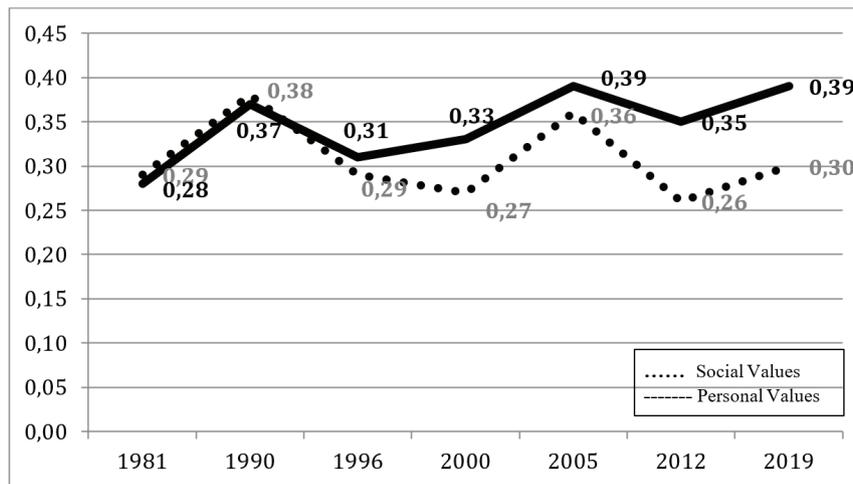
In response to public demands for democratic reform, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) was established in 1996 as an independent authority, marking a turning point toward more transparent and credible electoral processes. Later, in 2010, during the second right-wing administration of President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (PAN), the primary national crisis shifted to insecurity and violence, which also raised public concerns about ethics and governance.

From 2014 onward, Mexico faced a series of high-profile scandals involving human rights violations and corruption at the highest levels of government, leading to what Olvera (2016) describes as a multidimensional crisis—political, economic, social, and moral. These events appear to have



shaped Mexican citizens' expectations and evaluations of morality, particularly in relation to public institutions and political leadership.

Graph 2. Behavior of Moral Values in Mexico 1981-2019



Both dimensions of morality—personal and social—exhibit unstable trajectories, fluctuating between higher and lower levels of immorality across survey waves. Nonetheless, each dimension also demonstrates a period of relative stability, though these occur in different timeframes. Social values display a continuous decline in the Moral Evaluation Index between 1996 and 2000, suggesting a growing moral demand in the public sphere during that time. In contrast, personal values show a steady increase in immorality between 2000 and 2005, indicating a loosening of moral standards in the private domain.

According to the initial premise, social values were expected to have higher index scores, reflecting a greater societal tolerance for deviations from public morality compared to private morality. However, the data reveal the opposite pattern—similar to what was observed in Brazil. There appears to be a stronger demand for morality in the public sphere, contrary to the expectation that individuals would be more permissive with institutional or public transgressions.

Between 1981 and 2014, the average Moral Evaluation Index in Mexico was 0.31 for social values and 0.34 for personal values, suggesting that Mexican respondents consistently exhibited higher moral expectations in public settings than in private ones (see Table 3).



Table 3. Moral Evaluation Index Brazil and Mexico 1981-2019

Social values	Brazil (1989-2019)	Mexico (1981-2019)
Receiving undeserved government benefits	0,27	0,41
Evade taxes	0,31	0,29
Avoid paying fare on public transport	0,33	0,40
Accept bribe	0,21	0,24
Violence against other people	0,16	0,22
Men who beat their wives	0,14	0,20
Parents who hit their children	0,41	0,26
Suicide	0,17	0,24
Steal property of others	0,15	0,21
Index of Social values	0,28	0,31
Personal Values		
Homosexuality	0,39	0,35
Prostitution	0,27	0,32
Abortion	0,24	0,30
Divorce	0,56	0,47
Euthanasia	0,30	0,37
Casual sex	0,45	0,25
Index of Personal Values	0,35	0,34
Moral Index	0,32	0,33

Source: Elaboration by the authors with data from Haerpfer et al., 1989-2019.

Differences between both countries

The above analysis indicates that attitudes toward moral values in both countries are highly variable across time. This fluctuation suggests that there is no “fixed” or “strong” moral attitude; rather, attitudes toward morality appear to be unstable and malleable, making them susceptible to persuasion and broader societal events. As such, they influence not only the cognitive but also the behavioral dimensions of individuals.

As shown in Table 3, an analysis of the full period from 1981 to 2019 reveals more differences than similarities in the evolution of moral values between Brazil and Mexico. The average Moral Evaluation Index is slightly higher in Mexico (0.33) than in Brazil (0.32), indicating a marginally higher level of permissiveness or moral leniency among Mexican respondents. However, the two countries differ notably in how personal and social moral dimensions evolve.

The first key difference lies in the trajectory of personal and social moral values. In Brazil, these two dimensions follow distinct and sometimes opposing paths, with frequent divergence. In contrast, Mexico exhibits a greater degree of convergence: both personal and social values tend to move together over time, with the exception of brief divergences in 1996 and 2000. In most periods,



personal values display higher levels of moral leniency, indicating that the Mexican public tends to be more permissive regarding private behavior and more demanding in the public domain.

The second difference is the degree of volatility. In Brazil, social values are significantly more volatile than personal values, which remain relatively stable. This is not the case in Mexico, where both dimensions tend to fluctuate in the same direction, alternating between higher and lower moral evaluations of what is considered justifiable.

Despite these differences, there are also important similarities. In both countries, moral values are not stable over time—particularly social values, which are more sensitive to external influences. Another notable similarity is the relaxation of moral standards in 2018. During this period, both countries experienced increases in the Moral Evaluation Index for both personal and social values, indicating a general trend toward greater permissiveness. The increase was consistent across dimensions: social values rose by three points in Brazil and four points in Mexico, while personal values rose by four points in both countries.

When considering the total variations, the notion of a “double standard” (Altemayer, 2006) appears more pronounced in the Brazilian case, as evidenced by the wider gap between public and private moral values. A greater demand for morality in the public sphere implies heightened expectations for the behavior of political leaders and public officials, presumably leading to a stronger rejection of corruption and dishonesty.

However, this raises a fundamental question: why do some Brazilians—and Mexicans—still vote for dishonest political leaders? Why do “morally undesirable” votes persist in electoral behavior? These questions point to a critical issue: the role of morality in political decision-making. It may be that the honesty voters demand from political leaders is largely cognitive—what they say they value—rather than attitudinal, meaning that it does not always translate into consistent political behavior. This discrepancy will be further explored in the next section, which examines the preferences for political leadership and the trade-offs between honesty and effectiveness in electoral choices.

4 MORALITY AND ELECTORAL CHOICE

This section aims to explore voters’ attitudes toward the Moral Values System in greater depth. To analyze the cognitive aspects of attitudes related to morality and political decision-making, the focus group discussions began with a debate in which participants were asked to define private morality and public morality in their own terms. They then discussed which of the two was more important—or whether both were necessary—when choosing a political leader. In this initial stage, participants’ responses were abstract, reflecting their general attitudes and value judgments.

In the second stage of the discussion, participants were asked to evaluate specific scenarios. To facilitate this, a series of vignettes were presented in video format, simulating a televised news report covering an electoral campaign. Additional vignettes were provided in written format (see Annex 1). In each case, two candidates for an elected office were introduced, both facing allegations of dishonesty.



The first candidate was described as “dishonest in the private sphere but honest in the public sphere,” meaning that while their personal behavior may conflict with certain societal moral standards, their conduct in public office was marked by integrity and rectitude. The second candidate represented the opposite case: “honest in the private sphere but dishonest in the public sphere.” After reviewing these scenarios, participants were again asked which form of morality—public or private—they considered more important, allowing for a comparison between their abstract reasoning in phase one and their practical evaluations after being exposed to real-life political dilemmas.

In Phase 1, most Brazilian youth initially prioritized private morality. However, in Phase 2, their electoral choices and justifications reflected a shift toward emphasizing public morality, even when the chosen candidate supported policies that contradicted their private moral views. One participant expressed this tension clearly:

“I would vote for David Miranda, and I even voted for him because of the honesty issue—that’s the first thing I look at. I’m against abortion, so in this case I didn’t take that into account, but I would vote for Miranda because he is honest.” (Participant, Focus Group 1, Youth, São Paulo, Brazil, November 2020).

Following the voting exercise, when participants were asked again which type of morality was most relevant for choosing a politician, some shifted their positions and began to defend the primacy of public morality.

In contrast, Brazilian adults showed greater ambivalence. Initially, their views were divided regarding the importance of public versus private morality, and many found it difficult to separate the two. Nonetheless, when asked to make a decision, they tended to prioritize public morality, and most changed their initial reasoning to align with this stance. One noteworthy trend was that, when faced with particularly difficult choices, some participants—particularly adults from Manaus and São Paulo—based their decisions on anti-partisan attitudes, for instance: “I don’t vote for the Republicans”.

On the other hand, in abstract terms, the majority of young Mexican participants maintained that both dimensions of morality—private and public—are equally important. Although their behavioral choices revealed a preference for candidates who displayed public morality, they consistently upheld the belief that both types of morality are interrelated and equally relevant. This indicates a greater attitudinal consistency among youth, even more so than among adults. While the adult participants initially asserted that public morality was more important—and voted accordingly—several of them later revised their positions, expressing a more ambivalent stance and recognizing the value of both moral dimensions.

“Sorry for using this word, but Valter Nagelstein is an idiot. He’s a horrible, terrible person. I wouldn’t vote for Valter at all. I’d vote for Germano, even though there was mention of a (domestic) violence case, which really bothers me—because violence is unethical. As I said earlier, I care more about a candidate’s ethics than their morals. Yes, that bothers me, but less so than Valter. He’s sexist, rude, stupid. He was a councilman and made jokes about COVID



deaths. It's his personality”(Participant, Focus Group 1, Youth, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, November 2020).

A notable similarity between the two countries is that voters in both contexts express concern for and demand public morality when selecting political representatives. However, in most cases, participants appeared uncertain or inconsistent in their responses, often reconsidering their initial views. Brazilian participants, in contrast, demonstrated greater conviction and coherence in their moral and political attitudes. Across all focus groups, it became evident that emotional elements strongly influenced electoral decisions, occasionally leading participants to act against their ideological or partisan affiliations or their previously declared moral positions.

“I'd vote for the first candidate despite all his flaws. His life has to be corrected at some point. But I'd vote for him because the second candidate represents my worst fears. Extremism—whether from the right or the left—is very dangerous, very frightening. So even though I don't agree with the first candidate's personal behavior, I'd choose him” (Participant, Focus Group 2, Adults, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, November 2020).

A second vignette was introduced, presenting a new electoral scenario involving two candidates—one associated with private moral failings, and the other with public immorality (see Vignette 2, Annex 2). The second candidate provoked strong emotional reactions among participants, such as fear, indignation, hatred, and disgust. As a result, all participants voted for the first candidate, despite that candidate's prior history of domestic violence, which some participants—particularly female participants—acknowledged reluctantly:

“I'd vote for the first candidate, because the second one represents extremism—and extremes are dangerous, whether left or right. What do you think of someone who doesn't allow free thought? He's a hegemonic tyrant, someone who only wants power for himself” (Participant, Focus Group 3, Youth, Toluca, State of Mexico, December 2020).

The previous findings from the qualitative research demonstrate that electoral choice is not based solely on rational criteria regarding morality, but is deeply influenced by emotional and contextual factors. Based on the focus group discussions, it was identified that although voters in Brazil prioritize public morality and those in Mexico tend to value both dimensions, in concrete situations their decisions may contradict their abstract convictions. Emotions, rejection of extreme political options, and perceptions of candidate effectiveness play a decisive role in electoral preferences, even when these imply tolerance of previously rejected behaviors. This reveals the fragility of moral attitudes in real electoral contexts and confirms that, when facing complex dilemmas, voters adjust their behavior based on situational values rather than stable principles.



CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how different dimensions of moral values—personal and social—affect voters' evaluations of political leaders in Brazil and Mexico, the two largest democracies in Latin America. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines longitudinal data from the World Values Survey and qualitative evidence from online focus groups, we found that Brazilians place greater weight on public morality, prioritizing honesty in politics even at the expense of practical outcomes. In contrast, Mexicans value both personal and public morality but tend to be more pragmatic in electoral decisions, often tolerating corruption when candidates are perceived as competent or effective.

Importantly, our findings show that moral values are not static; rather, they evolve over time and respond to shifting political, social, and emotional contexts. Public moral values, in particular, display greater volatility and are more sensitive to national crises, such as corruption scandals or political violence. Moreover, the study confirms that moral attitudes are not always internally consistent: while many participants declare strong moral principles, their voting behavior may contradict those principles when affective and behavioral components override cognitive ones. This attitudinal dissonance was especially evident in the focus group experiments, where emotional reactions—such as fear, indignation, or antipathy toward political extremism—led participants to revise their choices, sometimes in direct opposition to their stated moral beliefs.

These findings point to the importance of understanding moral reasoning not merely as a set of values but as a dynamic, multidimensional process embedded in political and emotional contexts. They also suggest that political support for “dishonest” candidates cannot simply be explained by lack of moral concern, but rather by the weight voters assign to competing attributes such as efficiency, security, or ideological identity. Future research should further investigate how these moral trade-offs are shaped by media framing, political discourse, and institutional trust. In doing so, we can better understand the mechanisms by which morality influences democratic accountability—and the limits of that influence.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1

Focus Group Vignette – Example (Video Format, Transcription)

1. Which of these two candidates would you vote for and why?

Present video vignettes 1a and 1b without titles. (The ideal candidate was left out, you can only vote for those, what's left for you to choose are a and b) Imagine that you are now running for a senator position (a vacancy)

Vignette 1a. – “Competent but dishonest”

During the 2018 electoral process, former senator Aécio Neves da Cunha (PSDB) is a candidate for Federal Deputy and a defendant in “Lava-Jato”. According to official information, the politician was denounced by the PGR² for the crimes of passive corruption, a criminal organization, in which he had undue receipts of at least 2 million reais; He was also accused of trying to obstruct justice investigations. On the other hand, throughout his political career, as deputy, senator and governor, he carried out several actions that benefited the population, reduced bureaucracy, reduced his own salary and promoted laws aimed at simplifying and reducing taxes and expanding the rights of domestic workers.



Vignette b. – “Honest, but incompetent”

During the 2018 electoral process, federal deputy Adelmo Carneiro Leão (PT) was again a candidate to occupy a seat in the Chamber of Deputies. The politician is known for having an honest career and, so far, according to official information, he has not been involved in corruption scandals or legal proceedings. However, it is also known that, throughout his tenure as deputy, he had low legislative productivity and his proposals did not translate into direct benefits for the population. Furthermore, he has a history of moving away from the legislature to occupy other political positions.



² Procuradoria Geral da República. Inquérito n. 4.506/DF. N° 138546/2017/GTLJ-PGR. Relator Ministro Marco Aurélio, 02-06-2017. Available in: http://estaticog1.globo.com/2017/06/02/INQ_4506_N_138546-2017.pdf?_ga=2.160462270.263644840.1601652743-578917412.1601652742. Acesso em: 02 out. 2020.



Annex 2

Focus Group Vignette traditional format (Example)

Moderator: In the election for the municipal palace (mayoral elections) the following candidates remained for the second round. Which of these two candidates would you vote for and why?

Candidate 1. José Otávio Germano (Progressistas) was a state and federal deputy, councilor and Secretary of Transport, Justice and Security. Germano has a more liberal thought, and in his speech he aims to reduce social inequalities and expand freedoms. His private life was always the target of scandals: Germano cheated on his wife and had episodes of intra-family violence. One day it happened that two transsexuals came to set up a shack in Germano's building, they collected unpaid debts from the deputy for their sexual favors. The politician was ordered to pay R\$10,000, monetarily adjusted, to a transsexual from Porto Alegre. However, in the public sphere, Germano has no convictions for administrative improbity and his accounts were transparent.

Candidate 2. Valter Nagelstein (PSD) has already been a councilor for the third time. Valter is known for calling protesters "vandals", but he does not tolerate ways of thinking different from his; He is the leader of the far-right group "Armas pela Vida" and is one of the authors of the "school without party" project in Porto Alegre. In his private life he is considered a "good man" "family man" and is married and has children. However, in public life, he had some episodes of not delivering transparent accounts of his management. Furthermore, he was recently accused of offering services in exchange for votes, which is an electoral crime.

Moderator: And if you knew that Germano helped to spread the word about everyone staying at home, as well as social distancing during the pandemic, while Valter was a denialist and even posted jokes on social media about the deaths. Does this change your position?