Corruption and Democracy: A Cultural Assessment

ALEJANDRO MORENO *

There is strong evidence that corruption has a negative impact on economic development and on the emergence and survival of democratic institutions.¹ This article asks, “To what extent does permissiveness toward corruption reflect cultural factors? If so, how widely does cultural acceptance of corruption vary across societies — and have the publics of given societies become less tolerant of corrupt practices as a result of the global trend toward democratization?” Data from successive waves of the World Values Surveys help us to answer these questions.

Awareness of the negative impact that corruption has on economic development and democratization, has made the study of government transparency an increasingly important topic. Transparency International has done valuable work in measuring the level of corruption in public office, and publishing the results in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). But corruption may reflect cultural factors, not just the actions of government officials, and measuring the extent to which ordinary citizens are willing to justify corrupt acts complements efforts to measure perceptions of government corruption. To what extent is cultural permissiveness toward corruption involved in these relationships?

Corruption can play an important role in political competition. In Latin America, for example, opposition electoral campaigns have benefited from exposing corrupt incumbents. Nonetheless, Latin American publics are, on the average, more permissive toward corrupt practices than most publics in Western Europe and East Asia. Consequently, fighting corruption becomes

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* Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, México City, Mexico.
one of the main tasks of newly democratic governments. In this sense, is democratization reducing corruption? More specifically, as democratic political attitudes become more widely shared, is permissiveness toward corruption decreasing?

Attitudes toward corruption vary cross-culturally. Most societies have a certain degree of permissiveness toward corruption, with some of them being more likely to justify corrupt practices than others. We will use an index of permissiveness toward corruption, based on citizen responses to survey questions, as an indicator of the extent to which corruption is considered acceptable in given societies. We find that attitudes toward corruption do indeed show a strong negative relationship to democratic attitudes. Permissiveness toward corruption is strongly and negatively correlated with support for democracy and with interpersonal trust, both of which are important components of a democratic political culture.

In newly democratic countries, corruption may be part of the inherited practices from old authoritarian regimes and governments have the task of fighting it. However, the publics of those countries may think that corruption continues under the new democratic governments. The following example illustrates this: In a poll conducted in Mexico in 2001, a year after the historic elections that ended 71 years of uninterrupted rule by one massively corrupt party, the PRI, 40 percent of respondents still agreed that bribes are necessary to deal with government authorities, whereas 57 disagreed. This serves as an indicator of corruption in government, but, as mentioned earlier, perceptions of citizen corruption may be as important as the former. For example, 47 percent thought that most people in their country are corrupt, while 32 per cent believed most people are honest. This shows the other side of the coin, in which corruption not only is a problem of governing, but also a daily expectation among the mass publics. A combination of both is reflected in the following: there is a wide belief that if an honest person gets a job in public office, it is most likely that that person would become corrupt, according to 6 out of 10 respondents.

On the contrary, 3 out of 10 Mexicans said that the person would remain honest despite his or her position. This is very indicative not only of how people perceive the chances that public officials could be involved in acts of corruption, but also how they actually think that there are more corrupt than honest people. The question is to what extent mass publics are likely to justify acts of corruption in their daily lives.

This article analyzes data from the World Values Survey and European Values Survey (WVS/EVS), which includes 64 societies in 4 rounds of

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2 Reforma newspaper, October 30th, 2001.
3 Ibid.