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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

The Prevalence and Moral Rejection of Corruption in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses citizens' perception of corruption in Sweden along two dimensions: a) the spread of corruption among public officials, politicians, and businessmen, and b) the degree of acceptance for corrupt behaviors that violate the norm of impartiality, or in any other way represent the exercise of power in the grey zone between legal and directly illegal behavior. Building on a national representative sample from 2010, we show differences in perceptions of the occurrence and acceptance of corruption in different sectors, among different segments of the Swedish population, and for different types of corrupt behavior. Our results show differences between the private and public sector. Businessmen are perceived as more corrupt than public sector employees, which, in their turn, are perceived more corrupt than politicians. Similarly, Swedes believe that it is somewhat more acceptable for a private actor with public power to breach the norm of impartiality, the example being a private doctor letting a friend or close relative advance in the health care queue in comparison to a public sector doctor. We also show that there are differences in the tolerance towards different types of corruption in Swedish society, and that there are regional variations in the acceptance of corruption. In particular, younger persons and citizens of the city of Gothenburg show a somewhat more acceptable attitude towards corruption. The findings have implications for understanding the scope and effects of new public management reforms. They also have implications for understanding the effects of an increased exposure of corruption, and how exposure may gradually shift norms in society and make corruption more acceptable.

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Introduction¹

Most international organizations, NGOs, and policy makers have by now officially endorsed that corruption is undemocratic and a serious threat to economic growth and development (Holmberg et al. 2009; Mauro 1995; Gupta 2000). Widespread corruption leads to lower economic growth, trust, and maybe even less happiness and life satisfaction. During an extensive period of time, corruption was perceived as a kind of lubricant, or positive incitement, in growing economies. However, the last decade of public opinion surveys show that people worldwide are surprisingly in agreement regarding the fact that corruption is vicious and something that ought to be fought.

The almost unanimous global moral condemnation of corruption does not mean that corruption or anticorruption can be understood without understanding variations in perceptions of corruption and the social acceptability of different forms of corruption. The institutional set up and anticorruption policies in many ways interact with these perceptions. Perceptions of the spread of corruption can even, in an initial phase of a negative development, potentially play a larger role than the level of the *actual* existence of corruption. Consequently, knowledge about perceptions of corruption is important not only in countries where corruption is extensive, but also in countries where corruption is not as widespread. Thorough analyses of citizens' perceptions of corruption in low corruption contexts have the potential to increase the knowledge of how such institutions can be created and preserved, and make it possible to examine the causes and mechanisms of corruption. This kind of knowledge can enrich and make the work of anticorruption more efficient also in other parts of the world where corruption is an excessive problem.

This paper provides an analysis of one of the most extensive surveys of Swedish citizens' perceptions of corruption so far. According to international rankings, Sweden, together with several Nordic countries, is considered to be nearly free from corruption (Transparency International 2010). In 2009 year's representative survey of Swedish citizens (conducted in collaboration with the SOM Institute), we could identify that only a very small portion of the Swedish population had ever been offered to pay a bribe. Merely 1.2 percent of the population had been offered to pay a bribe to a public sector employee. Equivalent number for private companies was 1.3 percent (Oscarsson 2010). Despite the fact that institutions in low-corrupt countries are often used as role-models in international contexts, and the larger and growing interest in corruption in low corruption societies, we know relatively little about corruption in these contexts. Previous research on corruption in Sweden has dealt with, among other things, political corruption (Rothstein & Eek 2009), corruption in the public sector (Andersson 2002), and public corruption

in Swedish municipalities (Erlingsson, Bergh & Sjölin 2008). Although Sweden has been part of several larger surveys on perceptions of corruption, there exist few representative studies on the acceptability of different forms of corruption, and what kinds of acts are considered corrupt.¹ Previous attempts to understand the acceptability of different types of corrupt acts have almost exclusively focused on subsets of the Swedish population (Bauhr et al 2010; Andersson 2002). The perceived frequency of corruption is somewhat better covered in previous studies (Oscarsson 2010, Linde & Erlingsson 2011).²

We analyze two dimensions of citizens' views of corruption: the Swedish people's view of *the spread of corruption* and *the degree of acceptance* for different types of corrupt behaviors. The formats for measurement are developed to give a better insight of the occurrence of corruption and increase our knowledge of whether there exist systematic differences concerning norms among diverse groups in the Swedish society.

Perceptions of the spread of corruption

In the 2010 year's SOM-survey, we asked the following question: "In your opinion, to approximately what extent are following professions in Sweden involved in some kind of corruption?". The respondents were given the opportunity to rate the professions *politicians*, *public sector employees* and *businessmen* on a scale from 1 ("not at all") to 7 (to a very large extent"). About three fourths of the respondents (72, 73, and 74 percent) had an opinion on the matter.ⁱⁱⁱ

¹ A few studies also deal with the subject of perceptions of corruption in Sweden. Charron & Lapuente (2011) show why some regions in Europe, including Sweden, have better quality of government than others, based on citizens' perceptions. Economic inequalities and poverty are also investigated through perceptions of corruption in Holmberg & Rothstein's study (2010).

² Linde & Erlingsson (2011) present results showing that a large share of Swedish citizens perceives that corruption is not uncommon among politicians and public officials. Indeed, compared to the other Nordic countries, Swedish citizens have the highest levels of distrust for politicians and public officials concerning them being involved in some kind of corrupt act. The authors argue that this perception may have negative effects on the legitimacy of the democratic system.

Table 1, The Swedish people's assessments of the occurrence of corruption among different professions, 2010 (percent)

| | Not at all | | | To a very large extent | | | | Sum percent | Number of respondents | Mean |
|-------------------------|------------|----|----|------------------------|----|----|---|-------------|-----------------------|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | | | |
| Politicians | 6 | 19 | 18 | 19 | 21 | 10 | 7 | 100 | 1 146 | 3.91 |
| Public sector employees | 3 | 15 | 16 | 21 | 22 | 14 | 9 | 100 | 1 157 | 4.22 |
| Businessmen | 3 | 9 | 18 | 21 | 24 | 16 | 9 | 100 | 1 160 | 4.38 |

Table commentary: *The results are from the 2010 year's SOM-survey. The question wording: "In your opinion, to approximately what extent are following professions in Sweden involved in some kind of corruption?"*

The results show that businessmen were clearly perceived as more often being involved in corruption (mean 4.4) than public sector employees (4.2) and politicians (3.9). Although the mean differences in the assessments can be seen as small, they are clearly statistically significant ($p < .001$). In other words, when the Swedish people assess which profession is the most involved in corruption, businessmen are the profession that is the most inclined to be involved in corruption, followed by public sector employees and politicians.

According to expectations, the new question format gives a considerably larger variation in the assessments of the occurrence of corruption than earlier used measurements. The three professions are assessed to be involved in corruption to a greater extent than expected. The end point of the scale ("not at all") attracts only a very small amount of respondents (6, 3 and 3 percent). The averages for the different categories are around the scale's center value (4).

Nevertheless, we would like to highlight that this is an initial measure. This is the first time we have used this survey instrument, and comparisons with other countries and other time periods are lacking. Therefore, we ought not to draw too far-reaching conclusions based on point estimates. However, the larger variation in responses to this survey instrument may allow for more detailed studies of differences among diverse groups' perspectives on the occurrence of corruption.

What factors explain Swedish people's assessments of to what extent the three different professions are involved in corruption? There are several possible reasons for expecting variations among different groups in Sweden. Below, we discuss some of the central hypotheses regarding perceptions of corruption.

Firstly, we propose a *trust hypothesis*, i.e. that perceptions of corruption are closely related to inter-personal and institutional trust. Secondly, it is also thinkable that persons who themselves belong to one of the three professions businessmen, public sector employees and politicians, are better informed of the spread of corruption in the social sector where they work. We call this hypothesis the *hypothesis of personal reference*. Whether this better insight leads to perceptions that corruption is more or less commonly existent in the own sector, is however an empirical question. In a globalized world, we expect that persons, who have industrious contacts overseas through travel or work, also have acquired more experience of corruption abroad. We imagine that *experiences* like those can make an imprint on their assessments of how corrupt different professions are in Sweden. Thirdly, we believe that *media exposure* can affect the perceptions of how corruption is spread among different professions, since most swedes gain information on corruption from the mass media rather than from direct personal experiences.

In table 2 below, we present the results of a regression analysis, explaining the Swedish people's assessments of the spread of corruption among politicians, public sector employees and businessmen. For each and every one of the professions, we estimated a regression model in two steps where the trust and confidence variables have been added in the second model.

Table 2, Modeling Swedish people's assessments of the spread of corruption, 2010 (unstandardized regression coefficients)

| | Politicians | | Public sector employees | | Businessmen | |
|--|-------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| Woman | 0.10 | 0.12 | 0.04 | 0.05 | -0.17* | -0.23** |
| Age 16-85 | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | -0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Education | | | | | | |
| Low education | 0.23 | 0.08 | 0.14 | 0.03 | 0.03 | -0.04 |
| High education | -0.21* | -0.01 | -0.49*** | -0.32*** | -0.20* | -0.09 |
| Income | | | | | | |
| Household income >600SEK | -0.42*** | -0.18 | -0.30*** | -0.12 | -0.10 | 0.04 |
| Concern | | | | | | |
| Is businessman him-/herself | 0.06 | 0.15 | 0.05 | 0.06 | -0.16 | -0.20 |
| Is a public sector employee him-/herself | -0.00 | -0.03 | -0.20* | -0.26** | 0.11 | 0.09 |
| Is a party member him-/herself | -0.48** | -0.31 | -0.57*** | -0.46** | -0.62*** | -0.56*** |
| Place of residence | | | | | | |
| Rural | -0.39*** | -0.32** | -0.37*** | -0.32** | -0.62*** | -0.54*** |
| Living in Stockholm or Malmö | -0.00 | 0.05 | -0.19 | -0.15 | -0.09 | -0.09 |
| Living in Gothenburg | 0.46* | 0.18 | 0.40* | 0.34 | 0.47** | 0.41* |
| Media exposure | | | | | | |
| Exposure for television news | -0.07 | -0.05 | -0.08* | -0.06 | -0.08** | -0.06 |
| Experiences | | | | | | |
| Grown up outside Europe | -1.08*** | -0.99** | -0.92** | -0.81* | -0.83** | -0.63 |
| Ideology | | | | | | |
| Left-right self-placement | -0.42** | 0.10 | -0.05 | 0.34* | -0.75*** | -0.47*** |
| Confidence | | | | | | |
| Trust among people | | -1.07*** | | -1.02*** | | -0.55** |
| Trust for politicians | | -2.15*** | | -1.59*** | | -0.68*** |
| Trust for judges | | -0.58** | | -0.50** | | -0.52** |
| Trust for corporations | | -0.11 | | -0.07 | | -0.70*** |
| Intercept | 4.73*** | 6.35*** | 5.06*** | 6.35*** | 5.15*** | 6.23*** |
| Number of respondents | 1030 | 850 | 1039 | 857 | 1044 | 861 |
| R ² | .06 | .21 | .07 | .17 | .08 | .13 |

Table commentary: The results are from an OLS regression analysis of data from the 2010 year's National SOM-survey (www.som.gu.se). The three dependent variables are scaled from 1 "not at all" and 7 "to a great extent". All independent variables have been standardized to 0-1, except the age variable which is coded between 16 and 85.

The results show strong support for the hypothesis of trust. We find a very strong relationship between interpersonal trust and assessments of the spread of corruption: People who trust other people have a more positive perspective of the existence of corruption, than people who do not trust other people as much. The results confirm that there is an intimate relationship between trust among people and perceptions of corruption (Rothstein & Uslaner 2005; Seligson 2002; Morris & Klesner 2010; Rose-Ackerman 2001; Treisman 1998).

Additionally, *specific* confidence for the representatives of three professions – measured through confidence for *politicians*, *judges* and *corporations* – shows even stronger relationships. All other things

being held equal, people with high confidence for politicians have a considerably more positive perspective of the occurrence of corruption ($b = -2.15$) than people with low confidence for politicians. As expected, confidence for corporations – our *proxy* for confidence for the profession businessman – has a large effect on perceptions of corruption among businessmen, but no effect on perceptions of the level of corruption among public sector employees and politicians. The results give a limited support for the hypothesis of personal reference. Persons who themselves are public sector employees believe, fully according to expectations, that corruption among public sector employees is considerably lower in comparison to other groups ($b = -.26$). To be a member of a political party – which in our analysis is a *proxy* for belonging to the profession politician – generally leads to a more positive assessment of corruption, despite which profession is asked about, and even under control for general confidence for politicians (model 2).

Unfortunately, survey instruments measuring travel habits and visits abroad did not occur in the same questionnaire in the 2010 year's SOM-survey as the questions on corruption. However, the hypothesis of experience also includes persons growing up in countries outside Sweden, or who have immigrated to Sweden. Persons who have grown up in countries outside Europe have, in earlier studies, generally shown to be more concerned than other groups regarding corruption as a phenomenon and as a societal problem (see Oscarsson 2010), maybe because of their experiences from other countries where corruption is more widespread. Nevertheless, when we ask about specific professions in *Sweden*, we do not see a similar pattern. All other things being held equal, persons who have grown up outside Europe provide, on the contrary, a more positive assessment of politicians, public sector employees and businessmen regarding involvement of corruption, than other groups.

There is a very distinct city-rural pattern in the Swedish people's assessments of the occurrence of corruption. Persons living in rural areas generally assess corruption as being less widespread than persons living in urban areas. The results may well indicate that persons living in genuine rural areas have less experiences of corruption, and that corruption is perceived as a larger problem in bigger cities.

Especially interesting to note, is that there are differences between Swedish cities. During the fieldwork of the study, a bribery scandal in Gothenburg was revealed by Sweden's leading TV-program of investigative journalism (the TV-program *Uppdrag granskning*). The bribery scandal created excessive uproar and involved several incidences regarding public sector employees accepting bribes from private businessmen. The results of the study indicate that the bribery scandal actually

had a measurable local effect on the people of Gothenburg's view on the occurrence of corruption. Persons living in Gothenburg believe that corruption is more common than persons living in other parts of Sweden, even in comparison to persons living in Stockholm and Malmö (Sweden's largest and third largest city, and Gothenburg being the second largest city in Sweden). All other things being held equal, persons living in Gothenburg have almost a half unit higher average value on the assessments of how often corruption occurs. Despite the effects being large, they do not always reach statistical significance.

We also estimate other interesting effects; for example, women make a more positive assessment of the profession businessmen than men do, high educated people tend to make a more positive assessment of the spread of corruption among politicians and public sector employees, and persons living in households above a certain level of income (who on a yearly basis earn more than 600 000 crowns, or approximately 90 000 USD), tend to have a more positive perspective of the spread of corruption. Party ideology does not have a relationship with the assessments of corruption (not presented in the table), however, the regression analysis clearly shows that among persons who have political affiliations towards the right, businessmen are assessed to be less involved in corruption than among persons who themselves affiliate towards the left. High educated people, high-income earners, and persons with political affiliations towards the right, consider the spread of corruption to be less than low educated people, low-income earners, and persons with political affiliations towards the left.

Acceptance of corruption

Even though people all over the world believe corruption is morally wrong, some types of corruption are still perceived as more acceptable than others. The forms of corruption, which are perceived as more acceptable or less acceptable, can vary among different contexts and potentially also among different policy areas.

We selected five statements portraying actions which violate the norm of impartiality, or in any other way represent the exercise of power in the grey zone between legal and directly illegal behavior (Rothstein & Teorell 2009; Kaufman 2002). Thereafter, we asked the respondents to answer to what extent they believed the actions were acceptable. A longer battery of questions has previously been used in a pilot survey accompanied by several other statements (Bauhr et al. 2010). However,

this is the first time we obtain estimates of the acceptance of corruption in a national representative sample.

In line with our expectations, and even in line with most international surveys on the matter, the acceptance of corruption was very low among the respondents. Close to half (46 percent) ticked “never acceptable” on all the five sub-questions and the average assessments are all lower than 2.1 on the 7-point rating scale.ⁱⁱ

However, the table below additionally shows that there are significant differences in swedes’ acceptance of different sorts of improper behavior. In the table below, the statements are ranked according to the level of acceptance. At the top, we find the actions which the Swedish people believe are the least acceptable, namely a public sector employee asking for a fee to carry out a service that already is a part of his/her job description. This action more or less corresponds to the classic picture of corruption where public sector employees at the passport center, social insurance office, health care facilities, or police, charge an extra fee. Eighty-nine percent of the swedes answer that this behavior never is acceptable (average 1.28).

Table 3, The Swedish people assess five corrupt actions according to the level of acceptance, 2010 (per cent)

| | Never acceptable | | | Always acceptable | | | | Sum per cent | Number of respondents | Mean |
|--|------------------|----|---|-------------------|---|---|---|--------------|-----------------------|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | | | |
| A public sector employee asks for a fee to carry out a service that already is a part of his/her job description | 89 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 100 | 1504 | 1.23 |
| A public sector doctor allows a friend or close relative advance in the health care queue | 77 | 11 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 100 | 1517 | 1.49 |
| A businessman offers a gift or a service to a public sector employee to win a contract | 76 | 10 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 100 | 1471 | 1.56 |
| A public sector employee offers a job to a close relative although the formal qualifications are missing | 73 | 12 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 100 | 1515 | 1.58 |
| A private doctor allows a friend or close relative advance in the health care queue | 59 | 13 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 100 | 1492 | 2.08 |

Table commentary: The results are from the 2010 year’s National SOM-survey. The question is: “In your opinion, to what extent can the following actions be acceptable?” The corrupt actions are in the table ranked according to the share answering “never acceptable”.

One of the most interesting differences in the table above is the one between the two similar formulated scenarios concerning doctors letting a friend or close relative advance in the health care queue. Interestingly, the share who believes that the behavior is “never acceptable” is clearly lower (59 percent) for the private doctor than for the publically employed doctor (77 percent). Hence, our respondents experience that partly different moral guidelines should be used for doctors who work privately, in comparison to doctors with equivalent work in a public setup. This result concurs with what we previously have seen in our pilot studies. It is potentially a controversial result, not the least in relation to the discussions regarding private medical care: Do Swedish people adhere to a different set of norms in order to assess acceptable behaviors for private actors than for publically employed actors? The result is perhaps especially noteworthy, since extensive public means are currently financing the private medical care in Sweden. We need additional studies in order to learn more about whether it is the distinction private-public that, in this context, is driving the results.

The results above also show that there is a difference among the acceptance of different forms of violations against the norm of impartiality in public administration. Bauhr (2011) draws attention to the existence of two forms of corruption; *need* and *greed* corruption. This distinction concerns the basic motivation for paying a bribe, which generally also has implications for the relationship between the actors involved. Perceptions of corruption in the form of greed are, in this case, measured with the help of the question how acceptable it is that “a businessman offers a gift or a service to a public sector employee to win a contract”. The businessman offers a gift in order to receive a benefit that he or she is not legally entitled to, and the more favorable treatment of the corporation occurs at the expense of the surrounding society and the taxpayers as a collective. The example of the public sector employee offering a close relative or friend work, can also be attributed this category of corruption.

Need corruption is in this case measured with the question of how acceptable it is that “a public sector employee asks for a fee or service to carry out a service that already is part of his/her job description”. If public sector employees charge an extra fee, individuals will be forced to pay in order to receive the service they in fact have legal right to. In this case, need corruption changes the relationship between the two parties involved from collusive to extortive. In table 3 above, there is a significant difference between swedes’ acceptance for greed corruption in comparison to need corruption. The results show that swedes see greed corruption as more acceptable than need corruption. Eighty- nine percent respond that need corruption is never acceptable, while the equivalent number for greed corruption is seventy-six. The difference is statistically significant. This result is

meaningful since greed corruption has effects on the democratic system's function, and can furthermore be difficult to curb with traditional anticorruption measures (Bauhr 2011)

In table 4, we present the results from a regression analysis showing which factors dominate the Swedish people's acceptance of different types of corrupt acts. A robust result, which is especially worth highlighting, is that there is an undoubtedly higher acceptance for all types of corrupt behavior among younger persons than among older. This result can be perceived to be worrying, since we in general envision that norms and values are formed early in life.

In light of the bribery scandal in Gothenburg in 2010, it is particularly interesting to note that the Gothenburg-effect is positive for all behaviors, but only statistically significant for the behavior of *offering a gift or service in order to win a contract*, i.e. the exact type of behavior that was demonstrated in the Gothenburg scandal. Consequently, this means, when all other things are being held equal, that people living in Gothenburg are more acceptable than others concerning the behavior to offer a gift or service in order to win a contract! The results can provide indirect support for the idea that there is occurring a slowly moving norm shift towards increased acceptance of corruption when citizens' perceptions of the spread of corruption change: i.e. when the perception of corruption is that corruption is commonly occurring or is becoming more frequent and widespread, it risks leading to an increased acceptance of corrupt behaviors (Persson, Rothstein & Teorell 2010; Bauhr 2011). The causal direction can of course be discussed. But to be able to understand how robust the results are, and to what extent our respondents are affected by the media coverage of the bribery scandal, which occurred during the time of the survey's fieldwork, it is imperative to obtain measures at additional time periods.

Table 4, Modeling the level of acceptance of five corrupt behaviors 2010 (unstandardized regression coefficients)

| | Offers a job to a close relative | Ask for a fee | Allows vancement queue | ad- Private in advancement queue | allows in Offers a gift or service |
|--|-------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|--|--|
| Woman | -0.07 | -0.01 | -0.09 | -0.37*** | -0.09 |
| Age 16-85 | -0.02*** | -0.01*** | -0.01*** | -0.01*** | -0.02*** |
| Low education | 0.01 | 0.12** | -0.09 | -0.31** | 0.07 |
| High education | -0.25*** | -0.10* | 0.11 | 0.06 | -0.21** |
| Household income > 600 t kr | -0.14* | -0.08 | -0.08 | -0.07 | -0.03 |
| Public sector employee | 0.08 | 0.07 | -0.05 | -0.16 | 0.07 |
| Rural | -0.05 | -0.13** | -0.08 | -0.06 | -0.12 |
| Living in Stockholm or Malmö | -0.03 | -0.06 | -0.02 | 0.10 | -0.17 |
| Living in Gothenburg | 0.13 | 0.06 | 0.11 | 0.45* | 0.38** |
| Reads "Göteborgs-Posten" ³ⁿ | -0.12 | -0.08 | -0.12 | -0.16 | -0.30** |
| Exposure of television news | -0.01 | -0.03* | -0.00 | 0.05 | 0.02 |
| Grown up outside Europe | 0.17 | 0.66*** | -0.27 | -0.82** | 0.19 |
| Home of a farmer | 0.10 | 0.39*** | 0.18 | -0.19 | -0.01 |
| Home of an official | -0.10 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.10 | -0.04 |
| Home of a higher official | -0.08 | 0.07 | 0.14 | 0.35* | 0.06 |
| Home of a businessman | -0.08 | 0.09 | 0.05 | 0.14 | 0.21 |
| Left-right self-placement | 0.05 | -0.04 | 0.16 | 0.87*** | 0.22* |
| Trust among people | -0.22 | -0.33*** | -0.55*** | -0.48** | -0.49*** |
| Intercept | 2.90*** | 1.91*** | 2.12*** | 2.56*** | 2.87*** |
| Number of respondents | 1 279 | 1 276 | 1 279 | 1 262 | 1 251 |
| R ² | .12 | .08 | .04 | .09 | .13 |

Table commentary: The results are from the 2010 year's National SOM-survey. All independent variables have been standardized between 0 and 1. The five dependent variables vary between 1 and 7. To the group "readers of "Göteborgs Posten" (the "Gothenburg Post"), all respondents are included who, on an open question concerning morning newspapers, answered that they read the Gothenburg Post. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Additional interesting results are that women and low educated people experience that it is less acceptable to let a close friend or relative advance in the health care queue, especially concerning private doctors. Low educated people have however somewhat higher acceptance for public sector employees asking for an extra fee. Persons who have grown up outside Europe have higher acceptance for a public sector employee asking for a fee to perform a service, but have clearly lower acceptance for letting friends and acquaintances advance in the health care queue.

³ "Göteborgs-Posten" is the second largest daily newspaper in Sweden and is based in Gothenburg (www.gp.se).

Perceptions of occurrence and acceptance of corruption: A vicious circle?

The results presented here gives us several new insights regarding Swedish people's perception of the spread of corruption, but also regarding the level of acceptance for different types of corrupt behavior. The results point at the difference in the assessment of corruption between the private and public sector. Businessmen are perceived to be more corrupt than public sector employees, which, in their turn, are perceived to be more corrupt than politicians. Swedes, in general, believe that it is somewhat more acceptable for a private doctor to allow someone to advance in the health care queue in comparison to a public sector doctor. Furthermore, the results show that swedes are more tolerant towards greed corruption in comparison to need corruption where the service citizens have a legal right to are conditioned by public sector employees asking for "extra fees" (Bauhr 2011). Interestingly, people in Gothenburg (the second largest city in Sweden) were found to be more accepting than average towards a businessman offers a gift or a service to a public sector employee to win a contract, which may reflect recent exposure of these behaviors and corruption scandals in this this area. In addition, the results indicate, all other things being held equal, that people living in this city believe that public sector employees and businessmen are more often involved in corruption than other groups. The results also show the relationship between factors such as gender, experiences of other countries, political affiliations, trust, income and age on corruption. Perhaps most importantly, we found systematic differences in the acceptance of corruption among different age groups in Sweden – younger people tend to find corruption somewhat more acceptable than older people.

Frequent surveys of citizens' perceptions of corruption are important surveillance instruments (Holmberg 2009; Bergh et al. 2010). If a growing proportion of citizens – rightly or wrongly – perceive that many other people seem to engage themselves in corruption, it can lead to a gradual change of norms and conceptions of what is normal behavior. This, on its own, represents a risk for increased corruption. From the individual's perspective, it may be perceived as increasingly costly to not stretch the limits and get involved in corruption. Even countries like Sweden are far from immune from ending up in a vicious spiral that is difficult to break. Our survey instrument, developed through the use of internet panels, experiments and representative samples of the Swedish population has worked well to provide such a surveillance instrument.

Notes

ⁱ The authors wish to thank Emma Andersson for her excellent contributions to this project.

ⁱⁱ Our question format is generous in the manner that the respondents have been given broad frames to form their definition of “some kind of corruption”. This is a conscious choice. In earlier research, we have, with the help of open questions about corruption, been able to establish that Swedes base their definition on a well-known standard definition on the subject; “improper usage of public means for private gain” (Bauhr et al. 2010). This definition gives however a limited understanding of what can be considered an “improper usage” or not. Several respondents form own examples from misuse on a local level and highlight wrongdoings especially concerning municipal procurement, licensing and supervision activities.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is also worth noting that the amount of respondents, who answered that they do not have an opinion, is merely 5-8 percent. This means that the respondents did not have a problem forming an opinion regarding our statements.

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