

# Realism About Political Corruption

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Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 2015. 18:387–402

First published online as a Review in Advance on January 26, 2015

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at [polisci.annualreviews.org](http://polisci.annualreviews.org)

This article's doi:  
10.1146/annurev-polisci-092012-134421

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## Keywords

political conduct, institutions, norms, ethics, accountability, impartiality, rationality, experiments, political realism

## Abstract

This article explores how realism in political theory can inform our understanding of political corruption. Whereas political moralists see corruption as a problem of implementation, which does not undermine their values, realists see corruption as posing a more fundamental problem, challenging the very nature of politics and undermining the attempt to establish and exercise authority in the ordering of conflict and the allocation of resources. Recent realist work has sought to characterize a discrete type of “institutional” corruption, and to construct political corruption as the antithesis of good governance or impartiality. Other work has focused on the micro level, drawing on new insights from psychology and experimental economics to analyze individual decisions and motivations to behave corruptly. This article challenges scholars to build future research upon a richer understanding of the realities of political life that are intrinsic to both individual and institutional patterns of corruption.

## INTRODUCTION

Is political corruption a central topic in political theory? Not at all. Should it be? That is a more complicated question. Corruption might be seen merely as one of a number of potential failures of realization. We know what values should be pursued by politics but we are conscious that these are often imperfectly embodied in practice. That there is political corruption does not compromise or put into question the values we advance and so, consequently, does not challenge our sense that political corruption is at best a marginal topic for political theory. It is a problem of implementation, not an issue of substance. That seems to be one standard view, which we might term, following Williams (2005, ch. 1), political moralism.

This view might also be said to capture many republican theorists. As Buchan & Hill's *An Intellectual History of Political Corruption* (2014) shows, a long tradition of republican thinking has hinged on the sense of an ideal order under the constant threat of corruption, and we can recognize similar thinking about corruption in a number of other cultural traditions (Makdisi 2000). Republicanism has a similar formal structure to political moralism when it has a conception of the common good that is specified independently of the exigencies of politics. This is true for republican theories of resilient nondomination (Pettit 1997, Skinner 1998, Maynor 2003), as well as for alternative conceptions of the common good(s) that republican orders achieve. There may be some pragmatic, instrumental interest in corruption, in the course of thinking about the forces that may subvert the achievement of the good and about what forms of social and political institutions, practices, and structural preconditions might serve to diminish the incidence or impact of corruption. But, in fact, republican views have had rather little impact on modern thinking about corruption, although cases have rightly been made for republicanism's potential relevance both as a way of framing the analysis of corruption and as a source for proposals for combating it. Nonetheless, the crucial theoretical work seems done and dusted—and the focus shifts both to the more practical questions of implementation (assigned to institutionalists) and to the more abstract conceptions of the goods that we can share in common (on which political theorists can dwell).

The dominance of these views of politics accounts for the relative lack of interest among political theorists (especially normative political theorists) in the problem of corruption—despite its extensive incidence in the world. This review focuses on three aspects of recent literature on politics and corruption: institutions, impartiality, and rationality. We argue that only an alternative, realist, view of political theory that problematizes each of these components has any real chance of grasping the complexity of the relationship between politics and corruption. For realists there is no single, objective account of any one of these components, and the very nature of politics is the attempt authoritatively to impose order where there are competing and incommensurable values and interests. That ordering cannot be an impartial or neutral process because every outcome has winners and losers and gives priority to some values over others. Consequently, the outcome cannot flow from a rational consensus; it must be a political ordering, forged through power, manipulation, rhetoric, argument, and incentives. There is an irreducible component of “fiat” in politics: in the imposition of order and the establishment of institutional arrangements that legitimate their claim to authority (insofar as they can) by their salience as the solution to conflict. On this understanding of politics, both institutional arrangements and claims to authority are inevitably partisan and potentially contestable. Although corruption is not the only thing that can go wrong with such institutions, it has a special significance because it questions the authority and stability of that political fiat and its claim to order conflict. Rather than being a residual question for politics, wherever corruption is at all extensive it threatens the institutions and legitimacy of the status quo, and it reopens the question of the principles on the basis of which the existing order

claims people's allegiance. In this "realist" view, the absence of significant reflection in political theory on the nature, forms, and sources of corruption is a serious failing of the subdiscipline (see, e.g., Galston 2010, Philp 2012).

The most striking feature of the literature on corruption more generally in the last 30 years has been the ascendancy of economic analysis in a field that, until the end of the 1970s, was dominated by political scientists and students of development. For political theorists, what is most notable about this recent literature is how severely attenuated its understanding of politics is. Economics has focused largely on the quantitative analysis of large datasets in relation to various measures of corruption or on modeling corruption in principal-agent or rent-seeking terms. The quantitative analysis is dogged by its reliance on poor-quality data, especially where the data are based on perceptions of corruption and where these perceptions are dominated by western business executives (Johnston 2002, Philp 2006). Economists' accounts are also poorly served by their definitions. "Bribery" is generally used as either synonymous with or the key indicator of corruption, even though in its purest form, as a one-off misallocation of a public service or good, bribery is significantly less troubling than systems riven with violence and intimidation that systematically subvert governing institutions and the public sector. Furthermore, the idea that political corruption should be understood in terms of rent-seeking and failures of contract design for principal-agent relations encourages us to see government and politics as the primary sources of corruption in otherwise self-regulating markets (Hopkin 2002; see also Polanyi 1944, Granovetter 2007).<sup>1</sup>

There have, however, been three major areas of development in thinking about corruption that, although flawed, should prompt some serious reflection by political theorists and can help enrich our understanding of the difficulties that political corruption poses. Below, we focus in turn on institutional analysis, impartiality claims, and studies of situated rationality and incentives. In each case, the literature overstates the possibilities for objectivity and consensus; but in each case, we can learn a good deal about why political institutions might be so insistently fragile.

## INSTITUTIONS

The pioneering work on "institutional corruption" was undertaken by Dennis F. Thompson in the early 1990s. Thompson had no objection to the analysis of corrupt relations in which an individual exploits political office to make illicit gains, but he argued that this was only one means by which institutions might go wrong in ways that are best understood as corrupt. Thompson saw the need for a conception of corruption that weakened the insistence on individual gain, maintained the idea that something illicit was going on, and identified the harm more abstractly in the impact of conduct on the working of institutions and processes. For example, is doing a favor (that one can do because of one's office) for a donor to one's political campaign an example of corruption? Thompson took the line that, insofar as it works in tandem with the political system to promote competition in the democratic process, it is acceptable. If, on the other hand, it undermines and damages the political process it is not. On this account, the tendency of the action matters more than the intent. In the "Keating Five" scandal, where several people behaved in ways that favored a particular contributor in regulatory terms, then whether or not they were individually corrupt, their actions constituted institutional corruption (Thompson 1993, 1995).

Thompson widened the remit of malfeasance by explaining why motive and intention need not be necessary criteria for wrongdoing and by suggesting that the violation of the appearance

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<sup>1</sup>"You can have a market in anything; you just can't have a market in everything" (Rothstein 2011, p. 209).

standard could in itself be a distinct wrong in public office (Thompson 1995, pp. 124–30; Stark 2003). He was concerned with developing an account of legislative ethics more than with narrowly identifying additional cases of corruption. (That is not a criticism, however, and his work did much to block one standard move, namely that if an action is not formally illicit, then it is ethical/permissible.) Thompson’s analysis prompted further thinking in political theory, and Warren (2004, 2006, 2015) in particular sought to draw from the nature of democracy as a process a set of ethical constraints and judgments about corruption among those engaged in politics. Both Thompson and Warren might be thought to owe something to Walzer’s (1983) use of the interpretation of practices to reveal their underlying and intrinsic normative and practical commitments, so as to have a basis for a critical normative evaluation of aspects of the practice.

The most recent contribution to an institutional approach to corruption comes from Laurence Lessig, most prominently in *Republic Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress—and a Plan to Stop It* (2011). The core of Lessig’s account can be found in Chapter 14 of *Republic Lost*, where he largely follows Thompson: We need to distinguish the ordinary meaning of corruption, which he associates with bribery, from activity that effectively defeats or undermines the purposes of the institution concerned. If allowing campaign contributions for elected judges undermines the independence and objectivity of judges, it is corrupt, even if those individuals are not themselves acting from corrupt motives. But Lessig’s ambition for his approach goes further than Thompson’s. In the beginning of his foreword to a collection of papers on the pharmaceutical industry emerging from the Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics at Harvard, which he heads, Lessig identifies the Center’s mission as helping ethics to “grow up” through the study of institutional ethics. Institutional corruption should not be understood as a matter of moral right and wrong but as “systematic and strategic influence which is legal, or even currently ethical, that undermines the institution’s effectiveness by diverting it from its purpose or weakening its ability to achieve its purpose, weakening either the public’s trust in that institution or the institution’s inherent trustworthiness” (Lessig 2013, p. 2).

In contrast to Thompson and Warren (see also Miller 2010), who work with reasonably substantive conceptions of democracy as the institutional framework from which to generate judgments about corrupt and noncorrupt activity, Lessig (2011, 2013) pauses at the point of identifying the purposes of an institution or practice. He reminds us that not all institutions have identifiable purposes and that, in those that do, what is dysfunctional for that purpose is not always something to which we should object. For Lessig, identifying an influence as corrupting an institution does not tell us whether or not we should condemn or intervene to regulate such activity. Indeed, Lessig wants us to take seriously the thought that the corruption of an institution may be a positive outcome. What marks his account of corruption is this sharp separation of institutional analysis from ethical judgment, and the differentiation of criteria for identifying a corrupt influence from the (consequentialist) criteria to be used to assess whether the behavior in question is to be condemned.

There are clearly gains from this separation. Good people acting honorably do not thereby always act for the best—and, as Mandeville pointed out, private vices can be public virtues. But it stands against the dominant traditions of thinking about political corruption. It also invites us to separate the analysis of institutions from the deeper functional purposes they have by virtue of their place in politics. Using Lessig’s (2011, 2013) approach, we can talk about behavior that corrupts an institution even when we believe that institution serves no positive purpose within the broader political system. And where it does serve such a purpose, we can still ask whether its corruption is to be condemned. For other analysts of institutional corruption, such as Thompson, Warren, and Miller, describing the behavior as corrupt does involve moral condemnation.

Lessig (2011, 2013) sets up his analysis in this way partly because he rightly resists the standard (but empty) definition of corruption as “the abuse of public power and influence for private ends.”

It is empty because nothing guides us on the question of when the use of power for private ends is an “abuse,” despite the fact that it is surely here that the line between corrupt and noncorrupt must be drawn. (Consider, for example, the use of public office to increase one’s chances of reelection by pursuing certain policies.) Although Lessig clearly wants to claim that institutional corruption is a form of “corruption,” the distinctiveness of his account of institutional corruption makes it very difficult to identify its points of congruence with other forms of corruption. One such point might be the emphasis on undermining the institution’s capacity to fulfill its purpose, which relates to the idea that corruption involves the decay or destruction of the nature of a thing. But, as Lessig notes, other things may undermine an institution’s purpose—such as incompetence—and we use the term corruption to pick out more “systematic and strategic” action directed at that undermining. Indeed, it is this systematic element that explains many analysts’ reluctance to treat cases of outright theft or fraud as corrupt, since such activities may make no attempt to influence the way the institution functions. But any parallels with more traditional accounts are undercut by two further aspects of Lessig’s account, concerning intentions and legality.

Like Thompson and Warren (but more strikingly), Lessig has little interest in people’s motives or intentions. For example, he maintains that people with the best intentions can behave in ways that defeat “what the individual understands the institution’s goal to be” (Lessig 2013, p. 2). This move by the “institutional” school parts company with more common definitions of corruption. Yet it is hard to let go of these elements completely. For example, Lessig wants to distinguish ways in which institutions can go wrong and to deny, for example, that laziness and incompetence amount to corruption. But if his criteria of “systematic and strategic” influences—especially “strategic”—are core components of institutional corruption, people surely must know that they are distorting and undermining the purposes of the institution and must intend to do so. The well-intentioned by definition do not know they are having such effects, so can their actions be described as systematically and strategically undermining the institution? And if it is the unintended consequences of their actions that do the undermining, can we treat that behavior as “strategic”? Lessig also raises the possibility that participants might regard the behavior in question as ethical in terms of the values and practices of the institution. Yet, if we insist that corruption includes cases where people regard their own behavior as ethical within the institution, but where it has the result that the institution is subverted, we seem to lose an essential component of strategic undermining. If people who do what the shared institutional norms and rules require nonetheless damage the institution, then the institution is in a mess; if people follow their own sense of what is right for the institution and end up harming the institution, this too suggests some wrongheadedness. But it is hard in either case to see why we should think of the behavior of the individuals or the institution as corrupt, since there is no strategic undermining here. Cases where people pursue their own concerns without regard for the integrity of the institution or the formal role requirements they have, or where people see that the institution is in a mess and seek to exploit it to their advantage, do retain a connection with corruption: There is strategy and self-seeking. Cases where people know the rules but break them for the good of the institution also retain at least some element of strategic action, even if the action is meant to undermine the norms and rules rather than the institution. In contrast, it would seem odd to describe those who act subversively for revolutionary ends as corrupt. Although they act strategically, we need to distinguish the character of particular acts and the character of the wider endeavor of which they are a part and which frames their purposes.

If it is strategy that makes the subversion of the purposes of an institution corrupt—whereas other activities might simply be inefficient, contradictory, or otherwise self-defeating—then there is no good reason to distinguish sharply between corrupt conduct that is legal and corrupt conduct that is illegal. Both exploit opportunities for their own ends in ways that subvert the institutional

order. A less sweeping claim about legality was made by the World Bank (2000) in its insistence that conduct can be legal but corrupt when state capture is involved—when the legislative process is partially taken over or suborned by outside interests so that laws are passed that serve those interests. This might be taken as insisting that legality should not be part of the definition of corruption (just as “abuse” should not) because it implies a distinction between legal and illegal (use and abuse) that should be guided by the definition rather than presumed by it. But Lessig’s insistent attempt to make sure that his definition excludes more familiar forms of corruption, thereby ruling out cases already defined as illegal, has the perverse result that there is insufficient common ground in his definition for us to think that what he is discussing is corruption.

There are also grounds for political theorists to resist Lessig’s insistence that it is a distinct question whether what is dysfunctional for an institution’s purpose is necessarily to be objected to. As philosophers concerned with politics, both Thompson (1993, 1995) and Warren (2006, 2015) would hold that what is bad for democracy and its instantiation in our political institutions is bad *per se*; this is a categorical judgment, not a hypothetical one. This categorical sense of the wrongness of behavior that systematically subverts political institutions need not be a feature only of a Kantian political moralism. Political realists can share the sense that politics is an attempt to weave and to legitimate a whole cloth—even if it is an ongoing project whose legitimacy is always on the line. Corruption subverts or suborns the processes through which a political order produces and reproduces itself. As we struggle to establish and maintain the order, so we develop and refine our understanding of what undermines it. If we find that there is no harm in the subversion of particular institutions linked to politics, then we cease to regard them as politically corrupt. The definition of corruption is then integral to our understanding of politics, not something that can be split off and judged independently. Indeed, for realists, as for many republicans, not to see the judgment about institutional dysfunctionality in politics as a normative judgment might in itself be taken as a failure or corruption of judgment, rather than as a way of helping ethics “grow up” as Lessig (2013, p. 2) suggests. It might be a lesser evil than some others, but in calling it corruption we indicate that it is an evil.

The turn to institutional corruption as a focus has matched a wider renewed attention to institutional questions and to the nature of good governance. One major trend since 1989, following developments in the World Bank and the work of Kaufmann (2005) has been to turn from measurements of corruption to governance indicators. This involves a commendable move toward identifying elements that are more immediately promising in policy terms. For political moralists and republicans, the many dimensions of governance represent openings for more sophisticated work on standards of good governance and the nature of democratic institutions. But the governance agenda tends to make two assumptions that weaken its value. First, it tends to treat conditional goods as absolute goods; for example, transparency and accountability are seen as things to be maximized, when, in fact, they can (like most elements) work positively or negatively in different contexts and institutional settings (Bauhr & Grimes 2014, Philp 2008). Second, it assumes that no components of good governance are in conflict with each other, when many clearly are—free press versus the protection of personal privacy, voice and accountability versus freedom from regulatory burden, etc. If governance is composed of multiple values that pull in different ways and compete with each other on various dimensions, then we cannot use good governance as a standard with which to define and address political corruption, since the standards for good governance are not independent from those demarcating corrupt and noncorrupt behavior.

The key question with respect to the “institutional corruption” turn for political theorists must be what gives an institution or a system of governance its basic integrity and thereby provides the basic normative structure from which corruption constitutes a type of deviation. Republicans and political moralists both make light work of this, linking the institutional turn to the nature of the

common good, or to a set of distinctive, usually democratic values (as Thompson and Warren do). Realists find this more difficult because they are skeptical about the claim that institutions have single or unified sets of purposes. Rather, they should be recognized as involving the imposition of some principles over others and the securing of normative hegemony over a number of possible alternatives. [In some contexts, even this may exaggerate the coherence of the institutional logic or, indeed, the salience of politics as the primary authoritative mode of allocation, as has been the case in some African states (see Olivier de Sardan 1999, Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2006).] This divergence of paths is also clear in the second area of development in the study of corruption that we wish to address—one that in many respects follows up the institutional turn but identifies the core of quality of governance as lying in impartiality. This is most persuasively undertaken in the work of Bo Rothstein and his Quality of Government Institute in Gothenburg. Although a good deal of this work has a more empirical and institutional focus, one central aspect of the good-governance agenda is of particular relevance to a political theory of corruption.

## IMPARTIALITY

Good governance has been extensively discussed by Rothstein in terms of impartiality in the exercise of public power. “When implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take anything about the case/citizen into consideration that is not beforehand stipulated in the law or policy” (Rothstein & Teorell 2008, p. 170). Indeed, Rothstein (2014) now argues that good governance in the form of impartiality is precisely the opposite of corruption. He distinguishes between political and public/administrative decisions (or between decisions about ends and objectives and decisions made within parameters set by political decisions). Political/output decisions are not impartial, and (by definition) cannot be. They are not necessarily self-interested, but in them someone often, as Williams (2005) puts it, “wins.” The procedures for reaching these decisions usually have elements of impartiality built in—for example, the decision may be defended by reference to the benefit to the community at large or by reference to some element of legitimacy operative in the political community, rather than by an appeal to merely personal or sectional interests. But it cannot be claimed that political decisions themselves express the principle of impartiality; they are merely constrained by it in certain procedural respects. People win office by appeals to partial as well as to general considerations; the struggle for power is constrained by rules that define the process but do not determine the outcome; political decisions are affected by a range of considerations in which impartiality may play a greater or lesser role. Not to see this would be to think that partiality can be entirely eliminated and replaced by perfectly impartial procedures—but that would eliminate politics itself.

Rothstein’s (2011) account has many strengths. What unites claims about corruption cross-culturally is a sense that goods and services are misallocated through the use of the powers of office—that they are distributed to those who have no just claim, for the benefit of those with a responsibility not to misallocate them. The content of the rules does not have to be cross-cultural; the cross-cultural generality is the idea of a distribution that is subverted or compromised. Corruption occurs when people violate widely shared norms of familialism for unsanctioned gain, just as it does when impartial bureaucratic norms are violated. In both cases, there is a conception of role or office with certain responsibilities, generating certain expectations, and these are violated to benefit those who should not benefit and (often, though not invariably) to benefit the person holding the office in ways that are not legitimated by the office. This definition emphasizes that societies are, in broad terms, social organizations that aspire to shared patterns of expectation in relation to power and authority. Within a society, basic ideas of legitimate exchange and distribution operate in relation to key positions of authority, generating expectations and judgments

of legitimacy in relation to their exercise. Where these normative patterns are widely shared, it is possible to identify cases of corruption and to see why judging someone to be corrupt is both a normative and an institutional judgment. Where they are not, it can be difficult to identify institutions and their ends, and still more difficult to ground the normative judgments that are intrinsic to claims about corruption. The insistence, for example, in Mungiu-Pippidi's (2006) work on particularism in the Balkans that goods distributed partially comply with local norms but are nonetheless corrupt must involve a contrast between the systems that frame the actions. If one starts from localism and treats the external regulatory environment as foreign, then its norms are inapplicable and carry no weight, in which case we cannot describe people's conduct as corrupt. To see their conduct as corrupt we have to identify a clash of norms, where the formal, institutional norms are potentially salient, and where local norms are intentional subversions of these norms. But we can certainly imagine similar cases where the term corruption would be inappropriate—as, for example, where the formal norms are imposed by a foreign power, where the formal norms consistently serve some special interests rather than others, or where they lack any wider legitimacy. Western analysts have a pretty strong sense of the direction of travel in systems from local particularism to national institutional normative patterns based on impartiality, but that expectation tends to be based on an often unreflective commitment to nation-states, markets, and the impartiality of legal and administrative processes. Bureaucratic norms of public office are often reasonably straightforward in their specification of role responsibilities, but the political world works differently. Rothstein (2011) insists that corruption relates less to the politically partisan dimensions of politics and more to the distortion of decision-making procedures and to the influence of partisan and partial interests and considerations in the implementation of decisions. This gives us a clear line and focus—we must develop governance institutions that are thoroughly impartial. Nonetheless, restricting the analysis of corruption to this domain is limiting.

It is limiting because politics complicates the line between domains of partiality and impartiality by its sovereignty over the rules of the game. The aspiration for an impartialist framework free of partisan political influence, which dominates much Anglo-American political philosophy, fails to acknowledge that the political order is the product of partisan political will. If the impartialist story of the implementation of decisions were the only story to be told about politics, then we could survive with an account of corruption that links it to derogation from principles of public office involving the substitution of private for public interests in the making of administrative decisions. Politicians are corrupt when they interfere with the implementation of decisions, or when they subvert decision-making procedures for individual or sectional gains. But properly political victories could not be corrupt. Yet the handling of political power is complex; policies and decisions can enhance both legitimacy and incumbent power and can bring collateral status and longer-term financial benefits to incumbents. Does it matter what the primary motive is for their adoption? We might be clear that pursuing private financial gain is unacceptable, but incumbent and party gain is often so closely tied to legitimacy that the accurate identification of motive and intention is difficult. Yet there is a difference between a party that holds onto power by massaging particular parts of the electorate (for example, through the maldistribution of goods and services that should be distributed universally) and a party that makes a genuine attempt to pursue wider common goods. Where the latter is consistently set aside in favor of the former, it does not seem inappropriate to talk of corruption.

The basic problem for a good-governance understanding of corruption is that the line between political decision making and the impartial administration of policy cannot be sharply drawn. Decision makers might aim, as Barry (1995, pp. 104–5) suggests, at “the reasonable”; but in politics with deep divisions and disagreements, that is likely to be too ambitious. And in such politics, decisions about what can be legitimated to whom to consolidate power and authority



are likely to be more pragmatic than rooted in abstract claims of impartiality. As Williams (2005, p. 3) argues, the first question of politics is order. Solving that problem may involve establishing a number of impartial institutions, but the problem of order itself is not one that can be solved impartially. Just as there can be a market for anything, just not a market for everything, so there can be impartiality with respect to anything, but not with respect to everything.

The impartiality story makes it easy to see what kind of conduct we want from those executing public policy but less easy to know what to do about politics. In the literature on corruption, the attempt to shift the focus onto the implementation and administration of political decisions draws attention away from the facts that political systems entail the power to make such decisions and that those decisions can legitimately be thought of as corrupt when self-serving. Schmitt (1976 [1927]) points out that the power of decision is itself neither necessarily egalitarian nor impartial, and the boundaries of what counts as self-serving are set *by* politics, not *for* it—creating a situation in which charges of corruption and the evasion of principle for self-serving ends inevitably remain potential components of political struggle.

How are we to manage this slippery terrain? How do we deal with a realm in which people are driven by competitiveness and the desire for power while their office makes claims of authority, procedural probity, and an ethic of responsibility? What does, could, or should motivate those in power if the principles of impartiality on which a good-governance perspective insists cannot themselves determine how politicians should act? What is going wrong when people act corruptly—what drives them; and what patterns of incentives, education or training, or political culture might lead them to act differently? With Lessig (2011), we need to recognize that good people don't necessarily produce good outcomes and bad don't necessarily produce bad—but how exactly should agent motivation, intention, and outcomes connect in modern political systems? Political theorists may be accustomed to identifying different dimensions of the modern world—authority, rational deliberation, self-interest maximizing—but these do not map wholly discrete domains of state, forum, and market (Elster 1986). Each constantly and consistently bleeds into and implicates the others, and there is very little focus on how these varied components might be brought together with more or less optimal results. Crucially, there is little understanding of what might motivate people to act in ways that will produce better outcomes where neither political moralism nor republicanism is able to address the multiple dimensions of the political realm. The recent history of corruption in the west, not to mention the rest of the world, suggests over and over again that corruption is not a problem that is solved once and for all by well-designed political systems; rather, it is a recurrent issue for every political order that commits to certain broad means and ends, which it seeks to defend against the range of competing aspirations, understandings, and motivations that exist within the polity—and often coexist within individual agents within the political system. There are some good people and some bad, but the other 95% of those in politics face such a wide range of competing pressures, incentives, and commitments that they often need assistance (in part from institutional design and political culture, although these cannot be fully determinative) to resolve in relatively acceptable ways. In contrast to the certitude of political moralism and republicanism, political realism recognizes the openness of political judgment, in particular the extent to which it is decisionist (i.e., what makes it right is what we do to make the decision stick and work), draws on multiple motives, and is inevitably, on some dimensions, partial.

Understanding this process seems to us an important challenge for political theorists and others interested in political corruption, even if it requires them to look to a range of other disciplines for insights into what might motivate responsible political conduct. In the final section of this review, we examine the recent growth in experimental economics and psychological research concerning rule and norm compliance. These literatures represents a third domain in which the search for

principles and models to better understand and explain corruption raises deep problems about the understanding of a core element of western thinking—in this case the idea of rationality.

## RATIONALITY

Recent experimental research in behavioral economics and cognitive psychology has sought to shed light on the questions of what does and what could motivate those in positions of power. Experiments are designed to distill corrupt transactions down to their basic elements and subject participants to different treatments so as to establish which incentives motivate behaviors associated with corruption, such as rule-breaking or favoritism. These endeavors promise to help us grasp the strategic element of individual behavior that seems so important to our understanding of corruption, potentially allowing us to distinguish between possible motivations as well as to test anticorruption tools that might modify these behaviors.

Skeptics worry about the extent to which experiments can take into account the complex and multidimensional nature of decisions facing public officials, not to mention politicians. Many of the situations that are modeled in experiments focus on petty corruption; assume that public officials act within a set of clear rules, prohibitions, and responsibilities associated with their office; and tend to equate corruption with bribery. Serra & Wantchekon (2012, p. 1) define corruption as (a) involving rule-breaking to achieve illicit private gain and (b) occurring behind closed doors.<sup>2</sup> This definition of corruption assumes that the individual is aware of the rules and acts purposively to violate them. Yet this experimental construct is not replicated in many situations in which public officials operate, particularly in situations where the state is in transition from one type of system to another (e.g., from communist, authoritarian, or conflict-ridden to democratizing, state-building, or peace-building). In these contexts, public officials are unlikely to be sure which rules they should follow, and those rules might change frequently. This makes it much harder to know how people will act and on the basis of which interests (or group loyalties).

Abbink & Serra (2012) elaborate on the great efforts by experimentalists to capture characteristics of corruption that may be relevant to the decisions of individuals. One question concerns whether corruption should be modeled as a one-shot or repeated game. The two options might be appropriate for different types of corruption. For example, an encounter with an official who issues permits may be a one-shot affair, but company relationships with procuring authorities may well be repeated games. In either type, experiments can match subjects with strangers or known partners. In a repeated game with strangers, learning is possible, but only in a repeated game with known partners does it make sense to build a reputation for cooperation or compliance. In thinking about corruption in politics (as opposed to public administration), the repeated game with known partners seems most likely to account for the subtle bargaining and trade-offs that are characteristic of politics, not to mention the *quid pro quos* of party financing. Patron–client systems and so-called crony capitalism also look like repeated games, in which the formal institutional structure is undermined partly by building alliances and reputations, and in which it makes sense to punish defectors from the corrupt game or to adopt tit-for-tat strategies. Yet, in Lessig’s (2011, 2013) terms, the rules of the game are determined by the formal institutions and informal norms of a particular political system, creating complex sets of constraints and opportunities. These may

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<sup>2</sup>Senior (2007) identifies “secrecy” as a key element in corruption, and Offe (2002, p. 15) says, “All corruption. . .has to do with a violation of the norm of truth-telling.” Although this view seems to ignore phenomena associated with kleptocracies, it is a salient feature for modern democracies. Moreover, it is a salient feature of all institutions in which political legitimacy depends to a very high degree on popular consent.

push behavior in directions that undermine those institutions and norms, but it is not straightforward to identify rules that have been broken or norms that have been violated. Moreover, these constraints—and responses to them—may not be generalizable. It is a tall order to design experiments able to adequately replicate the long-term and complex game of alliances and trade-offs that underpin a career in politics.

Some experiments also seek to model individuals' thinking about the harm to the public interest that their corrupt act may cause. They do this either by treating all other participants in an experiment as "the public" and reducing their payoffs when corruption occurs (Abbink et al. 2002) or by penalizing another set of participants who are not involved in the game (Barr & Serra 2009, Cameron et al. 2009). Both techniques have disadvantages. In real-world situations, the costs of corruption may be indirect and long term, and they are not necessarily evident to office-holders. Moreover, these techniques assume the exclusion of public office-holders from the public. This might be how public officials view themselves, but whether it is accurate is an empirical question; it should not be an axiom.

Experiments are often seen as a way of testing policy interventions aimed at reducing corruption. Many of these are premised on Becker's (1968) theory that the optimal legal regime is one in which the cost of punishment, discounted by the probability of being caught, outweighs the benefit of engaging in the undesirable behavior. Experimental treatments thus seek to alter the balance of cost and benefit associated with taking a corrupt path. Abbink et al. (2002) find that, indeed, individuals contemplating bribery do appear to be deterred by the threat of punishment. Subsequent experiments have focused on the ability of individuals to calculate and weigh up risks associated with different penal regimes. Abbink & Wu (2013) find that the introduction of legal regimes that offer benefits in exchange for self-reporting can help to deter one-off cases of bribery but do not shift recurrent patterns. Fahr & Djawadi (2013) suggest that individuals engage in corruption because they underestimate the risk of being caught, in line with earlier findings in psychology suggesting that individuals lack the ability to accurately evaluate the probability of certain events (Kahneman & Tversky 1973).

Some experimental work first checks that individuals are aware of the rules, so as to exclude the possibility that they violate the rules accidentally. G. D'Adda & M. Drouvelis (unpublished data) identify awareness of norms among their experimental subjects but find that this awareness does not affect their likelihood of complying with norms in the situations they devise. However, when we seek to measure awareness of norms, it is not clear whether we are measuring what people think they themselves ought to do or what they think other people think they ought to do. Also, such attempts assume that people are able to articulate norms, which is critical if asking questions about norms is regarded as an appropriate way of eliciting information about awareness. We also need to account for how individuals perceive their own behavior. Snow (2009) points out that our perceptions of our own behavior may differ from others' perceptions. In a classic case of this disparity, observers' ascription of self-interest maximizing to agents may have nothing to do with the reasons people in fact act in particular ways—and if most public officials would balk at their conduct being described as self-interest maximizing, we seem to have an unbridgeable chasm between much of the experimental work and real-world intentions, motives, and actions.

Nor can the experimentalist account for what additional rules and norms—outside the terms of the experiment—might govern individuals' perceptions of what they ought to do. Moreover, those rules and norms might well conflict, or vary in salience according to the situation. For example, an office-holder may be aware that a course of action would violate the rules set out for a particular administrative domain but feel that the action would nonetheless be condoned by his or her superiors, who might behave in similar ways. In such a situation, where rule breaking

is institutionalized as a norm, is action in line with that norm perceived as corrupt? Even if one maintains a view of individuals as self-interest maximizing, the public official's interest in obtaining the short-term private gain modeled in an experiment will involve a series of calculations about how the (corrupt) act is viewed in the power structure in which the public official sits. How will a decision about whether to behave corruptly today affect that individual's long-term career prospects? Does her duty require her to stick to the rules or to act in line with her superior's expectations? It is difficult to replicate these subtleties when designing experiments, yet they may be highly relevant to the situations we wish to understand.

Serra & Wantchekon's (2012) suggestion, in the introduction to their collection, that secrecy is a key characteristic of corruption is also challenged by this portrait of informal power structures that sometimes dominate formal rules. In such circumstances, corruption might be fairly open. In many transitional and developing countries where corruption is rife, there is widespread awareness that corruption occurs, sometimes to a very detailed transactional level—everyone knows whom to pay and how much to pay for certain services—but that does not seem to mean that the act is not corrupt. The fact that secrecy is important to the experimentalists' definition of corruption suggests that the decisions they—or some of them—model are only a subset of a much broader range of transactions that we usually regard as corrupt.

A great deal of the experimental literature relies on a model of agents as self-interest maximizing and defines corruption in terms of the violation of rules and norms of public office for self-interested motives. This means that what needs to be explained is why some individuals sometimes choose *not* to engage in corruption, given that doing so is—in the absence of the credible threat of significant punishment—rational (optimal for self-interest). We should note how peculiar these assumptions are. If those who do not act corruptly only refrain because they are deterred, this does not offer much basis for confidence in those in public office. “Integrity” becomes associated with overcoming temptation in order to do the right thing, rather than with a settled motivation to do the right thing. If the only motive that prevents an individual from taking the corrupt course is the fear of being caught and punished, he or she is surely doing the right thing for the wrong reason. The assumption of self-interest maximizing also makes it difficult to answer Juvenal's classic question as to who is to guard the guardians. And it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of rules. If rules have no salience for the individual except where following them maximizes self-interest, then a rule is not being recognized. For it to be a rule, an agent needs to recognize it as a *prima facie* guide to conduct and/or as a way of initially framing a context. That a rule may subsequently be violated to maximize self-interest does not mean that we should understand compliance, where it happens, as also motivated by self-interest maximizing.

For many political theorists, doing the right thing for the wrong reason is at best troubling—at worst corrupt. A similar issue concerns paying people for integrity. As Dimant & Hehenkamp (2014) suggest, increasing the wages of public officials in an attempt to reduce incentives for corruption can be counterproductive: Although it might reduce corruption on the part of previously corrupt public officials (which is not entirely what one wants!), the policy change may also attract more corruption-inclined individuals into public office.

A more recent wave of experiments on policy interventions has drawn on “nudge” theory (Thaler & Sunstein 2008), which advocates tweaking the “choice architecture” facing individuals in ways that exploit psychological tendencies—including our apparent failures to act rationally some of the time—so as to encourage more people to make choices that are more optimal both for society and for themselves. One set of nudges is concerned with triggering people's predisposition to comply with or adjust to the norms of their group, and therefore seems highly relevant if we see corruption as a violation of norms. Thaler & Sunstein suggest that, if people wish to comply with the norms of their group, and care about what the group thinks of their behavior, then

policy that exploits these tendencies will nudge people toward more societally optimal choices. Experiments find that individuals are more likely to pay taxes on time, for example, after receiving information from the authorities telling them that most of the people in their community pay taxes on time. Note that such interventions do not work by incentives, for example by threatening to name and shame noncompliers, but rather prompt self-regulation. However, it is important to target the right group identity; in one experiment, the effect of the intervention was greater when the information related to the population of a town rather than a county or postcode group (UK Cabinet Office 2012). More generally, it is not clear how individuals distinguish among different possible group identities or manage conflicts among them.

One strand of psychology research suggests that individuals distinguish between their “in-group” and “out-group.” In an experiment where a confederate cheats ostentatiously in a task, the impact on other participants’ propensity to behave ethically differs depending on whether the confederate is seen as part of the in-group or the out-group; if the cheater is a member of the out-group, other participants are motivated to behave more ethically, but if the cheater is one of their own, they adjust downward and behave less ethically (Gino et al. 2009). Other work finds that psychological closeness to a scoundrel prompts others to behave less ethically themselves (Gino & Galinsky 2012) and that unethical behavior is more likely to be accepted by others if there is a gradual erosion of ethical standards rather than an abrupt shift—a “slippery slope effect” (Gino & Bazerman 2009). This work may be relevant to our understanding of the institutionalization of corruption. In a given context, if an individual perceives that certain behaviors—which others regard as corrupt—are common in his or her own in-group, then such behaviors do not constitute a violation of the norm for this group, even if they do constitute a violation of the norms that have purchase on another group (of which the individual may also be a member).

This may be a fruitful area for future corruption research, potentially allowing us to explore the boundaries of particularism and cast light on which kinds of intervention might help individuals to develop allegiances to an alternative system of universalist allocation. In keeping with the realist approach, it brings some of the social and political realities back into the equation rather than assuming them away. Thus, one policy path for anticorruption efforts might be based on engineering or sustaining group identity in an effort to promote the desired set of norms. The group might be that of politicians, invoking professional norms and standards that apply to the vocation of being a politician. Alternatively, we might try to invoke a sense of the in-group as the citizenry, emphasizing the dual role that politicians play as both representatives of the citizens and citizens themselves and reinforcing their link with the public—whose interests are harmed by corruption—rather than that with colleagues who benefit.

For those who characterize corruption as the absence of impartiality in decision making, research in neuroscience offers important insights into humans’ ability to eschew efforts to influence their conduct. Kirk et al. (2011) conducted an experiment about the effect of sponsorship on professionals with a certain domain expertise—in this case, art critics. Their findings suggest that individuals within a profession are better able than laypersons to act impartially and to avoid efforts by others—in this case, financial sponsors—to influence their judgment. Notwithstanding the difficulty in defining impartiality in politics given incommensurable preferences, this suggests that there may be scope to build on the virtues associated with a vocation in politics in order to encourage certain kinds of judgment, or to nudge people toward optimal patterns of behavior. However, we also need to use caution in interpreting the results of this experiment. It is uncertain whether the art critics’ impartiality derives from expertise, from attachment to professional ideals for individual satisfaction, or from concerns to maintain a shared identity and group membership with members of a profession. Moreover, we cannot assume that the findings translate to either public officials or politicians.

Some of this literature distinguishes between descriptive norms (what most people in the community do) and prescriptive ones (what most people in the community approve of). Experiments have shown that, if subjects are given information only about descriptive norms, their behavior converges to the norm (i.e., people who behaved better to begin with start to behave worse), whereas if they are exposed to both descriptive and prescriptive norms, that effect disappears and hence overall behavior improves (Schultz et al. 2007). Indeed, motivation may have three distinct components: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic incentives, and (social or self) esteem concerns. The esteem concerns, in turn, can be intrinsic (valuing social esteem per se) or instrumental. Reputational payoffs may be nonlinear, increasing as more people in the group behave in the right way—or decreasing as fewer people do, leading to a negative spiral of increasing corruption. These motivations are difficult to tease apart! Attachment to a set of norms is also likely to shape individuals' views of their own interests, so they themselves may not know whether their perception of their interests is instrumental or intrinsic.

Experimental work also considers how individuals justify their corrupt actions to themselves and others, building on Snow's (2009) insights. This promises to deepen our understanding of motivations by looking at how individuals in public office might rationalize the dissonance between their self-interest-maximizing corrupt behavior and their overarching aims to serve the public interest. Drugov et al. (2014) find that people are less reluctant to engage in corruption where the corruption is channeled through an intermediary. This finding suggests that individuals are aware that the corrupt course of action is undesirable and seek to distance themselves from it. However, it remains unclear whether they take this course because they think they are less likely to be caught or because the use of a third party weakens their sense of responsibility for violating norms, or both.

Given the difficulties of modeling corruption realistically in the laboratory, an emerging body of work focuses instead on field experiments. These use subjects engaged in real transactions with public officials but might, for example, offer them incentives to achieve the results faster and then observe the effects. Alternatively, transactions might be tracked through a whole supply chain, allowing observation of how paths are altered as different stages of bureaucracy are encountered. These experiments are often difficult to set up and come with their own risks of bias (Sequeira 2012), but they promise to include much more of the rich context in which corruption occurs.

Experimental work and an associated focus on how to understand the dynamics of rule and norm compliance remain at a relatively early stage. But this work addresses a key set of issues for the understanding of corruption (in a world where it is difficult to get people to talk directly about their corrupt activities). As with the institutional and impartiality turns, however, the focus on rationality tends to obscure the variety and complexity of the forces at work in political corruption and overgeneralizes about the character of motivation. If political theorists are to become more realist about politics, they have to think less simplistically about what drives people in politics. There will be no quick, universalist answer to that question—which is why so much of the literature that focuses on a very narrow set of motivations for agents is of little value: Radically simplified assumptions produce radically simplified results. It is time political theory and political science took back political corruption from economics; time too that we addressed more systematically the range of motivations that people bring to politics and that are engendered in and by the activities of politics; and time for us to recognize that “dirty” is not entirely predicated on an antecedently identified “clean,” but rather these concepts are interdependent in complex ways that cannot be resolved by stipulation of a pure form. “Politics” is as contested as “corruption.” In recognizing that, we have to acknowledge that some of the more universalist ambitions of political theory and political science must be set aside in favor of attempting to work out what is going on, here and now, in this context rather than that; and what might work, to what ends, at what costs to

whom. The answers to these questions will necessarily vary—but if the price of political realism is a sensitivity to the particular, its reward is the ability to make a more practical contribution to addressing the realities of political corruption.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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