



Development Review

Reducing bureaucratic corruption: Interdisciplinary perspectives on what works



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ABSTRACT

This article offers the first comprehensive review of the interdisciplinary state of knowledge regarding anti-corruption policies, with a particular focus on reducing corruption among civil servants. Drawing on the work of economists, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists, we examine seven policy categories: (1) rewards and penalties; (2) monitoring; (3) restructuring bureaucracies; (4) screening and recruiting; (5) anti-corruption agencies; (6) educational campaigns; and (7) international agreements. Notably, rigorous empirical evaluation is lacking for the majority of commonly prescribed anti-corruption policies. Nevertheless, we find growing evidence of the effectiveness of policies based on monitoring, including anti-corruption audits and e-governance. In addition, adequate civil service wages seem to be a necessary but insufficient condition for control of corruption. An emerging skepticism regarding the effectiveness of anti-corruption agencies also is apparent in the literature. We conclude with broader lessons drawn from our review, such as the recognition that when corruption is a systemic problem, it cannot be treated in the long term with individual-level solutions.

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Contents

1. Introduction	172
2. Methodology	173
3. Rewards & penalties	174
3.1. Extrinsic motivations	174
3.2. Intrinsic motivations	175
3.3. Penalties	175
4. Monitoring	175
4.1. Top-down audits	175
4.2. Bottom-up civil society monitoring	176
4.3. Transparency initiatives	177
4.4. E-governance	177
5. Restructuring bureaucracies	178
5.1. Decentralization	178
5.2. Bureaucratic discretion	178
5.3. Bureaucratic competition	178
5.4. Staff rotation	179
5.5. Whistleblowing	179

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5.6. Streamlining regulation	179
6. Screening & recruiting	179
6.1. Meritocratic recruitment.....	179
6.2. Integrity screening	180
7. Anti-corruption agencies	180
8. Educational campaigns	181
9. International agreements.....	182
10. Discussion: So what works?	182
11. Conclusion	183
Conflict of interest.....	183
Acknowledgments	183
References	184

1. Introduction

The pernicious economic, social, and political effects of corruption have been well documented (for reviews, see [Olken and Pande, 2012](#); [Svensson, 2005](#)), leading influential organizations to emphasize the importance of reducing corruption. For example, fighting corruption is not only an explicit target of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals¹ but also widely considered to be a prerequisite for the successful implementation of other SDGs aimed at mitigating poverty, improving healthcare, and providing education ([UNDP, 2014](#); [World Bank, 2016](#)). However, while scholars and policymakers are in near consensus about the importance of combatting corruption, development of effective strategies is infeasible without a clear sense of which anti-corruption policies are likely to succeed.

With the aim of supporting evidence-based policymaking, this article assesses the interdisciplinary state of knowledge regarding anti-corruption policies, with a particular focus on reducing corruption among civil servants. Our approach stands apart from earlier works in a number of ways. First, existing literature reviews have yet to break out of disciplinary silos, with economists writing primarily to economists ([Olken & Pande, 2012](#); [Svensson, 2005](#)); political scientists to political scientists ([Treisman, 2007](#)); sociologists to sociologists ([Heath, Dirk, & de Graaf, 2016](#)); and anthropologists to anthropologists ([Torsello & Vendard, 2016](#)). By contrast, this study draws comprehensively on research from across the social sciences.² Meanwhile, whereas many existing reviews focus on specific methodological approaches, such as cross-national regression analyses ([Treisman, 2007](#)) or experiments ([Abbink, 2006](#); [Serra & Wantchekon, 2012](#)), this study identifies areas of consensus and divergence in the findings of scholars working with a wide range of methodological tools and analytical frameworks. Finally, although earlier reviews often touched on the question of “what works” when combatting corruption, they also focused more broadly on other important topics such as the definition, measurement, prevalence, and consequences of corruption. This study therefore provides the first systematic review devoted exclusively to anti-corruption policies.³

The findings presented below are based on our analysis of 260 studies from across the social sciences, which in turn were culled from a broader preliminary survey of the literature on corruption.

They represent what we believe to be a nearly exhaustive collection of all existing analyses that focus primarily on bureaucratic corruption;⁴ offer insights into policies for reducing corruption; and consist of empirical, as opposed to theoretical, analyses. In the case of some academic disciplines, such as economics, many of the studies included explicitly sought to evaluate the impact of specific anti-corruption policies. In other disciplines, particularly those relying on ethnographic approaches, policy impact evaluation was rarely an explicit goal. We therefore relied on the expertise of appropriately trained members of our research team to identify implicit lessons of policy relevance. Our focus is solely on academic scholarship and our review does not include policy reports or internal assessments conducted by aid donors.⁵ The majority of our sources have been published in a peer-reviewed format, but given the recent burst in empirical work on corruption, we also include working papers that we believe will be published in high-quality journals in the near future. Additional information about our inclusion criteria and methodological approach is provided in Section 2 below.

A review on the “state of knowledge” in any area of inquiry requires a clear definition and conceptualization of the topic at hand. We define corruption as the misuse of public office, authority, or resources for private gain, while recognizing that the definitions of many of these terms themselves may be contested. With the exception of some works in anthropology, where scholars have been wary of applying universal definitions (see discussion in [Torsello & Vendard, 2016](#)), we found that the definitions of corruption employed by nearly all studies we examined were compatible with our conceptualization. Within the broader concept of corruption, our focus was on corruption involving appointed civil servants rather than elected officials – or on what we refer to as bureaucratic corruption (sometimes also called administrative corruption). Finally, we recognize that bureaucratic corruption itself comes in many forms and that each of these may require different anti-corruption policies.⁶ But given the relative lack of empirical evidence on policies for combatting corruption, we did not find it feasible at this time to offer a systematic assessment of policies for addressing specific sub-types of bureaucratic corruption.

To offer an accounting of what we do and do not know, this article evaluates the interdisciplinary evidence on seven categories of anti-corruption policies: (1) rewards and penalties; (2) monitor-

¹ See Target 16.5 of SDG 16 at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>.

² This article is based on a collaborative effort by a team of economists, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists supported by a USAID Learning Agenda Questions Research Grant. See [Prasad et al. \(2017\)](#) for a companion paper that presents a new research agenda for addressing systemic corruption.

³ Other relevant reviews include [Schmidt \(2007\)](#) and [Jancsics \(2014\)](#). The former provides an overview of research on anti-corruption research but focuses narrowly on the post-communist region. The latter discusses theoretical approaches to corruption from an interdisciplinary perspective but does not offer a comprehensive review of empirical studies.

⁴ Though they are often intertwined with bureaucratic corruption, we do not include studies of patronage and clientelism in our review (see, e.g., [Hicken, 2011](#); [Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007](#)). State capture – the illicit purchase of favorable laws or decrees – also falls outside our scope (see, e.g., [Hellman, Jones, & Kaufmann, 2003](#)).

⁵ For evaluation of foreign donors' anti-corruption policies, see the report by [Johnson, Taxell, and Zaum \(2012\)](#).

⁶ For example, [Shleifer and Vishny \(1993\)](#) distinguish between coordinated and uncoordinated corruption, and [Ryvkin and Serra \(2015\)](#) emphasize the difference between extortionary and collusive corruption.

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