

COMBATING CORRUPTION THROUGH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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A REVIEW OF
RELEVANT SOCIAL SCIENCE AND
PUBLIC OPINION LITERATURE

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Introduction

Corruption is more than just a matter of law and law enforcement; it is also a matter of culture, social norms, and public discourse. In coming years, public attitudes will play a key role in whether corruption can be successfully combated in countries around the world. Will people at various levels of society continue to tolerate or participate in corrupt acts? Can the public be mobilized to support and protect anti-corruption institutions and actors? Can public power be brought to bear in ways that hold to account those who are found to engage in corruption? To what extent do people understand the stakes involved and see a role for themselves and their leaders in rooting out corruption in favor of something better? Can people distinguish between genuine efforts to combat corruption and those that are simply a political strategy to gain power?

This literature review summarizes key learnings from existing research concerning how advocates against corruption can change and improve those public attitudes, public narratives, and cultural understandings.

In general, the literature shows that decades of work by advocates for good governance and the rule of law have resulted in accomplishments. Advocates have built public awareness and convinced majorities of the public in various places that some forms of corruption are destructive and wrong. Unfortunately, progress on another front has been much more elusive: how to translate that awareness of a problem into effective—consistent, constructive, active, persistent, and powerful—public backing for anti-corruption efforts.

The *Global Corruption Barometer* reveals that people around the world perceive and experience corruption

at significant, even alarming rates—reflecting, in one sense, the success of attempts by international and domestic organizations and government agencies to reveal and punish corruption. But increased public awareness is also a double-edged sword. Shedding light on corruption can spread pessimism about government, and can even lead to the perception that anti-corruption agencies aren't effective (Byrne, Arnold, & Nagano, 2010). As the following literature review reflects, (anti-)corruption frames and narratives have the potential to precipitate the following undesirable effects:

- 1) increasing cynicism and the distance people feel from the government,
- 2) spreading the image that anti-corruption is primarily a political weapon wielded between candidates during elections or used to punish political opponents, or
- 3) making people feel that corruption is more common than it actually is, thereby encouraging participation in activities like bribery.

On a brighter note, the *Global Corruption Barometer* reports that worldwide, most believe that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption (Transparency International, 2017). This finding implies potential for shaping a productive, empowering narrative around anti-corruption. The key question is: *Which frames, narratives, arguments and so forth have the greatest potential to inspire productive collective action in support of anti-corruption efforts?*

The following literature review provides a guide through past and current anti-corruption messaging and, where available, the effects of these messages, in three countries: the USA, Brazil, and North Macedonia. As the table showing the Corruption Perceptions Index reveals, these three countries face different levels and kinds of corruption, as well as different public understandings of what corruption is. While all three have seen perceptions of corruption increase over a several year period, starting points are different enough to suggest quite different challenges in different places. In all cases, however, the literature reveals the need for more focused research on empowering and productive narratives for anti-corruption efforts.

Table: Corruption Perceptions Index, 2015-2018¹

	USA	BRA	NM
2015	76	38	42
2016	74	40	37
2017	75	37	35
2018	71	35	37
2019	69	35	35



¹ Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index gives countries a score up to 100, with 100 meaning the country is perceived as most "clean" and 0 meaning the country is perceived as most corrupt. The global average was 43 for 2018 (Transparency International, 2018). While this index is often criticized as merely a measure of subjective opinion, perception itself is an important dimension of the current project, and differences among countries are significant enough to suggest distinct challenges no matter what facts underlie the numbers.



I. What is corruption and why does it happen?

TAKEAWAYS:

- “Corruption” covers many different activities at different levels of public life
- Corruption can be understood as a problem of individual choices, of collectively practiced norms, or even as solutions to ordinary people’s everyday problems, used to navigate dysfunctional systems
- Understanding where corruption comes from is critical for formulating a narrative that avoids the pitfalls of previous anti-corruption efforts

Perhaps the first challenge for advocates and communicators lies in the question of what “corruption” refers to and whether different forms of it call for significantly different approaches and narratives.

Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” A variety of activities and violations are captured by this definition, which is intentionally broad. Transparency International elaborates:

Corruption can be classified as grand, petty and political, depending on the amounts of money lost and the sector where it occurs.

Grand corruption consists of acts committed at a high level of government that distort policies or the central functioning of the state, enabling leaders to benefit at the expense of the public good.

Petty corruption refers to everyday abuse of entrusted power by low- and mid-level public officials in their interactions with ordinary citizens, who often are trying to access basic goods or services in places like hospitals, schools, police departments and other agencies.

Political corruption is a manipulation of policies, institutions and rules of procedure in the allocation of resources and financing by political decision makers, who abuse their position to sustain their power, status and wealth.
(Transparency International, 2019b)

This broad definition acknowledges that corruption can occur and be sustained at many levels, may not always involve money, and can often be legal (or involve the manipulation of the law or policies). To accompany their definition, Transparency International also publishes an “Anti-corruption Glossary” defining dozens of terms associated with corruption and anti-corruption efforts.

Populations and subpopulations may experience corruption very differently. The broad and inclusive definition helps capture this diversity, while also showing why it can be difficult to generalize. In the three countries of interest in this literature review, large numbers of people consider corruption to be a problem, yet the activities that make up that problem vary between countries:

- In the United States, the disproportionate influence of money in politics is top of mind.
- In Brazil, politicians are viewed as thieves of public money and as highly involved in organized crime.
- In North Macedonia, political parties are long perceived as corrupt and some forms of bribery are viewed as acceptable and widespread—e.g., as ordinary individuals seek (better, quicker) public services.

The situation in each country is far more complex than a single sentence can convey, but the fact remains that what makes up the problem of “corruption” can mean many and different things.

Even within national populations, subpopulations may be affected by some corrupt acts more than others. For example, Black and Hispanic Americans are less likely than White Americans to trust police and other public authorities (Pew Research Center, 2019). The Global Corruption Barometer continues to reveal complexity, recently surveying respondents about “sextortion,” in which sex is the currency of the bribe and which disproportionately affects women over men. One in five people in Brazil reported that they themselves or someone they knew had experienced sexual extortion (Pring & Vrushi, 2019). In North Macedonia, Albanian citizens are 3.8 times more likely to report pressure to engage in corruption, compared to Macedonian citizens (Nuredinoska, Trpovska, & Ivanoska, Corruption Assessment Report for Macedonia, 2018).

Other distinctions also affect how corruption can be explained and how it should be addressed. Historically, anti-corruption efforts are animated by two different approaches to corruption: principal-

agent theory and collective action theory. The former understands corruption as a problem of *individual* economic actors who will commit corrupt acts so long as there are the resources and opportunities to do so (Schwickerath, Varraich, & Smith, 2017, p. 60). The latter understands the problem as one of changing *norms* and practices, as corrupt acts may have been the societal or cultural “norm” for some time (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017, p. 13). Increasingly, scholars are also approaching corruption as a way that ordinary people navigate everyday challenges in their particular local contexts. Marquette and Peiffer (2015) write:

Corruption is difficult to deal with not only because monitoring and sanctioning corrupt behaviour presents technical challenges (principal-agent theory), or because when corruption is perceived to be ‘normal’ few may be willing to abstain from participating in corrupt exchanges or be reluctant to take the first step to enforce anti-corruption reforms (collective action theory), but also because corruption is the means through which many solve real problems that have deep social, structural, economic and political roots. (Marquette & Peiffer, 2015, p. 1)

These different understandings of corruption may be relevant to communications strategies, as understandings about where corruption comes from may inform narratives about proactively addressing it. If one were to adopt the “principal-agent” approach, messages might focus on heightened monitoring and reducing chances for individuals to participate in corrupt acts. Messages could also emphasize greater transparency, such as Brazil’s online portal of government spending that journalists and other members of the public can access. Messages might also emphasize protecting whistleblowers and providing more and better information about how corruption can be reported, campaigns we’ve seen in both developing and developed countries (Peiffer, 2017) (New York City Global Partners, 2012).

On the other hand, adopting the “collective action” approach in a communication campaign would mean using messaging to help reinforce or change norms regarding corrupt acts and public expectations. If bribes were common, for example, a campaign encouraging individuals to refuse to pay bribes

and demand receipts from officials would seek to change the everyday practices of ordinary people. In India, fake “zero rupee” notes have been printed and used to “pay” and shame officials who asked for bribes (Byrne, Arnold, & Nagano, 2010, p. 3). A difference of the collective action approach from the principal-agent approach is that the “new” norm of anti-corruption is connected to existing cultural frames or norms. Instead of focusing on monitoring and reporting, it approaches corruption as a social institution (not just the sum of individual corrupt acts), which needs to be properly understood in order to be transformed (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017, p. 8).

Finally, acknowledging and understanding that individuals may use bribes or other corrupt acts to obtain necessary services or solve other problems may require an entirely different kind of messaging. This would take into account cultural or local contexts, where these practices play a role in the lives of many people, who may have few other options available. Scholars have criticized the anti-corruption “industry” for implementing anti-corruption strategies which ignore the local contexts in which they are implemented, which may increase awareness and perceptions of corruption without actually having a measurable effect on lowering incidences or experiences of corruption (Kearns, 2015, pp. 11-12).





II. What is the goal of anti-corruption narratives?

TAKEAWAYS:

- Activists should be clear about the type of corruption they want to address and transform
- They should also clarify the goal of an anti-corruption narrative

- 1) changing culture,
- 2) facilitating reporting, and
- 3) increasing knowledge of and support for government anti-corruption efforts (Kohn, 2019).

As the US case reveals, an additional goal is:

- 4) to garner support for legislation to close loopholes for behavior deemed unethical, for instance related to campaign financing.

As noted earlier, analysts maintain that any communication campaign should begin with clear understandings of the type of corruption it seeks to attack, in order to best gauge the challenges and possibilities—and the best routes to communicate those with the public. For example, if your aim is to support protections for whistleblowers in private companies to reveal dangerous work practices, lawbreaking, and government corruption (European Commission, 2017), the target is corruption in the private sector. Other targets may include corruption in higher education that is leading to a “brain drain” in North Macedonia, as young scholars seek employment elsewhere (Freedom House, 2019), or vote-buying in Brazil, where 40% of people report having been offered a bribe in exchange for voting, one of the highest rates in Latin America and the Caribbean (Pring & Vrushi, 2019, p. 25).

A recent post on the *Global Anti-corruption Blog* identified three primary goals for anti-corruption public relations:

Anti-corruption advocates should keep these diverse goals in mind when considering how anti-corruption messages have been framed and the public’s responses to them. While some frames, such as the idea that ordinary people can help change the situation, could be useful in messaging in support of all goals, other frames may lend themselves more toward one or another.

Anti-corruption scholar Mungiu-Pippidi (2017) distinguishes between two different kinds of success for anti-corruption policies and campaigns—even as she acknowledges that they are ultimately intertwined. One project is changing the culture and the perception of corrupt practices, the other is changing actual behaviors. It is a partial success to change the norm, so that a majority of people—who may have previously perceived nepotism, bribery, and other corrupt practices as reciprocal exchanges—come to view these acts as unacceptable and incompatible with a functioning democratic

bureaucracy. Yet, changing the actual behaviors of people remains an additional challenge, and for this, anti-corruption legislation needs to be effective, people need reliable information, whistleblowers need protection, and the punishment of corruption needs to be viewed as a triumph—not as a failure. In short, culture and top-down practices must both shift.

Mungiu-Pippidi (2017) also talks about the contrast between a “universalistic” system versus a “particularistic” system, (where status and connections means some individuals get special treatment). She notes that around the world, as people move into the middle classes they often see themselves as stakeholders in a more universalistic system, where everyone is treated equally and fairly. She places great importance on seeking allies among those who stand to benefit from equitable competition:

Demand for good governance and participation in anti-corruption protests is increasing all over the world—but not sufficiently to change governance. The middle classes have perhaps not grown enough in the last two decades to make this happen...

...As a ground rule, though, whoever is competitive stands to lose in a particularistic society. He or she faces two options: to desert particularism and move on to a more meritocratic realm (hence the close correlation between corruption and brain drain), or to stay and fight. These are our recruitment grounds. (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2017, p. 18)

In general, however, the research survey shows that there is as yet no agreed upon term or distinction that fully or vividly articulates for people what the opposite of corruption is.





III. Strategies & challenges in anti-corruption framing

TAKEAWAYS:

- Narratives about corruption affect political participation
- Anti-corruption efforts may increase perceptions of corruption, ironically skewing public opinion of corruption-fighting agencies as ineffective
- Even positive anti-corruption messages can trigger heightened concerns about corruption
- Avoiding anxiety, negativity and fatalism will be a central challenge to any anti-corruption narrative

Even after identifying the type of corruption to target and clarifying the goals of a new, transformative narrative, getting the message across in ways that motivate engagement rather than disengagement is not as simple as it seems. The literature shows that narratives about corruption have tended to affect the voting public undesirably.

A recent literature review highlighted findings from various sources showing that voters who are aware of corruption tend to disengage from politics and

refrain from voting (Garcia Bedolla, 2018). The review summarizes other findings showing that corruption may erode party attachments in systems where voters have viable other parties to choose from, while ideologically strong voters tend to continue to support their party despite known corruption (Charron & Bågenholm, 2016). So while each country experiences specific conditions, awareness of corruption may, counterintuitively, be a consistent detrimental factor to the democratic political process, in the absence of the right cultural narratives to frame and combat it.

Byrne et al. (2010), in their white paper for anti-corruption agencies, detail the ways that public support for anti-corruption efforts is strikingly fragile. The media and civil society organizations can undermine investigations by government agencies by reporting on them too soon, or the act of publicly uncovering corruption sheds light on funds that cannot be recovered or acts that cannot be prosecuted (Byrne, Arnold, & Nagano, 2010, p. 12). Accusations that the agency is ineffectual can lead to its demise, even when it was actually being effective at uncovering corrupt practices—a “shoot the messenger” reaction.

The irony is that, although implementing a high-profile anti-corruption campaign may reduce the level of actual corruption, it simultaneously increases public awareness and perceptions of corruption. (Byrne, Arnold, & Nagano, 2010, p. 21)

Byrne et al. (2010) also suggest framing strategies to help anti-corruption agencies send productive messages to the public. They recommend thematic vs. episodic framing, for example; that is, focusing on the context in which events are happening rather than the individual incidents that journalists often use in reporting (23). Likewise, as part of an effort to build support for anti-corruption agencies, they differentiate between “issue” and “strategic” framing. In this case, strategic framing focuses on explaining the process of anti-corruption work.

Putting the topic in a strategic frame would require looking at how corruption is discovered, what sanctions can be imposed, and what the anti-corruption agency is doing to fight the problem. Because framing determines where the audience puts its attention, a strategic frame will be more effective when the goal is to promote the work of anti-corruption agencies. (Byrne, Arnold, & Nagano, 2010, p. 24)

Finally, Byrne et al. (2010) warn about the appeal of negative or “loss” framing, which uses negative emotions to create urgency, but which usually results in fewer details being remembered. On the other hand, negative framing does not always result in undesired reactions, depending on goals of the communication. In the US, negative attacks about the ideological extremity of political opponents have been shown to be very effective (in making the opponent seem more ideologically extreme), especially against conservative candidates (Banda, 2014).

An important task will be finding a compelling alternative to the “loss framing” that seems built into the discourse of corruption and anti-corruption, and to articulate better what the positive, aspirational opposite of corruption is, which the UN defines in its Convention against Corruption (United Nations, 2004) as “promot[ing] integrity, accountability and proper management of public affairs and public property.”

As mentioned earlier, very few studies actually assess the effects of anti-corruption messages and narratives on the public, yet among those that do, they find—consistent with discussion so far in this section—that messaging about anti-corruption can have unintended consequences. For example, any

mention of the topic can often trigger negative thoughts about corrupt politicians and weak government response—even if the information is about recent anti-corruption successes.

Some research shows that mentioning even successful anti-corruption efforts has negative effects on a person’s thinking about the problem of corruption. An experiment (Peiffer, 2017) conducted amongst 1000 individuals in Jakarta, Indonesia tested four different messages about government and corruption to see how exposure to these messages would affect perceptions of corruption in government. Participants were divided into five groups: one control group and four groups which received one message about corruption in government. Two of the messages were negative: one highlighting widespread grand corruption in Indonesia, and one highlighting widespread petty corruption, such as bribes. The other two messages were positive: one detailing recent government successes in fighting corruption and recovering funds, and one explaining how accessible it had become for ordinary people to fight corruption. As an example, here is the latter message highlighting civic engagement:

Now, more than ever before, ordinary citizens are finding it easy to get involved in the fight against corruption. If corruption is witnessed, ordinary citizens can either call or text the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)’s 1575 corruption hotline, and those that do are guaranteed to remain anonymous and the information shared confidential. People have the right to access government information and last year the government launched an online data portal to make it even easier for the public to access government budgets and documents. Also, several vibrant anti-corruption organisations exist across the country; citizens can get further involved by becoming a member of these organisations or attending their events, like the annual anti-corruption week events or rallies held on International Anticorruption Day. (Peiffer, 2017, p. 7)

Participants were then asked eight questions measuring their perception of corruption in government and anti-corruption efforts. Surprisingly, even those exposed to the positive messages

reported being more worried about corruption than those in the group that received no message. Even more concerning, those in the groups exposed to any of the four messages reported less pride in government's efforts fighting corruption than the control group. The civic engagement message above had a negative effect on their perception that the fight against corruption was "easy to join."

Possible explanations for such findings could be "corruption fatigue" and desensitization. In Indonesia, where corruption is considered widespread, any message about corruption/anti-corruption, positive or negative, triggered heightened worries about corruption and **doubts that it can be effectively addressed**. Another explanation for this outcome could be "motivated processing" where pre-existing negative beliefs are triggered even when hearing a message that focuses on recent positive changes (Peiffer, 2017, p. 16). The positive information was not enough to shift thinking, but rather only brought the negative thoughts to the foreground, causing the reported heightened worries—even when compared to the group that received no message at all about corruption (or anti-corruption).

A small study in Ukraine hinted at another level of complexity as people's different understandings about the prevalence of corruption affected their responses. Researchers showed anti-corruption messages—one stressing that bribery rates were falling and one stressing that rates were rising—and then measured people's stated willingness to give a bribe themselves. Among Ukrainians who thought most people give bribes, the anti-corruption messages had a positive effect, with the positive messaging doing marginally stronger. Among those who assumed that most people do not give bribes, both messages backfired, increasing people's asserted willingness to give a bribe themselves (Gans-Morse, 2018).

A 2016 experiment (Bond, 2016) also demonstrated further the challenges of creating positive effects in reference to fighting corruption. This experiment investigated how information about corruption and anti-corruption affected the likelihood of UK citizens to support sending development aid abroad.

Researchers found that for people on the fence, any discussion of corruption—however framed—reduced people's willingness to send aid. The only exception was a message that acknowledged the presence of corruption as inevitable, and put the focus firmly onto the benefits of aid:

Corruption is also a reality of life in Kenya, but this does not mean that aid is wasted. For example, aid from the UK has helped 300,000 of Kenya's poorest children go to school, over 50% of them girls. Aid has also improved maternal and reproductive health services helping 15,000 more women give birth with the help of nurses, midwives or doctors. Aid works despite corruption. (Bond, 2016, p. 6)

Clearly, the fact that talking about corruption so often brings on anxiety, negativity and fatalism is going to be a central challenge for developing new and constructive narratives.



IV. Perceptions and messaging effects in countries of interest

This section addresses political and cultural dynamics in each of our countries of interest—the US, Brazil, and North Macedonia—as well as what is known (sometimes very little) from testing of various anti-corruption messaging. Both the academic and policy research communities have published an abundance of literature on how to measure *perceptions* of corruption and experiences of corruption—as well as a related literature that explores individuals’ and the public’s reaction to information about specific acts of corruption. However, very little research exists on how anti-corruption advocacy narratives can shape public opinion and public behavior. This is despite the fact that transparency activists and anti-corruption agencies identify public opinion as important for supporting their efforts (Byrne, Arnold, & Nagano, 2010). Campaigns aim to change norms about participating in corrupt practices like bribes, encourage voting out corrupt politicians, support anti-corruption agencies in the court of public opinion, and so on.

USA

Takeaways about Americans’ attitudes:

- Corruption is mostly about big money’s influence in politics
- Perceptions of the level of corruption correlate closely with one’s satisfaction with the sitting president and the state of the economy (the

more dissatisfied, the higher the perceived level of corruption)

- Anti-corruption and “anti-big money in politics” messages have a big impact on voters
- Opportunities for *both* real reform and populist rhetoric exist

Varied sources find that Americans are very concerned about corruption in their government. Before the 2018 midterm elections, the Wall Street Journal, NBC News, and Fox News all reported that corruption was a top concern for voters that November (Sozan & Roberts, 2019). The Center for American Progress Action Fund produced this short summary of public opinion on the situation:

Nearly two-thirds of voters assigned “a lot” of blame for the dysfunctional political system to “wealthy political donors” and “money in politics,” according to an October 2017 poll by The Washington Post and the University of Maryland. And recent polling from the Center for American Progress Action Fund shows that Americans’ most widely shared view of the government’s role is to make sure the country works for the benefit of all, not just those at the top. (Sozan & Roberts, 2019)

Americans' ideas about corruption come largely from their understandings of the role of big money in politics and elections. These perceptions are articulated in widely known metaphors, including Washington as a "swamp," and the "revolving door" through which politicians and staffers alternatively step into corporate and lobbying positions in D.C. and then back into official positions when it suits their interests (Sozan & Roberts, 2019). Given the prevalence of narratives about corruption, and the fact that voters identify corruption as a key problem as they head to the polls, the question remains whether this concern leads to any collective action in support of anti-corruption efforts in the US. Research demonstrates that the situation is complicated.

Since 2005, Topos has done extensive research into the alienation that Americans feel toward their elected government. We have found that Americans currently do not experience themselves as citizens who participate in a representative government, but rather as subjects under elite rule that serves its own interests rather than the public's.

Americans believe that the proper system is government by and for the people, and because they see that ideal being violated, they view their representatives and the system as corrupted. Politicians and public officials are presumed to serve their own interests and the interests of their cronies and donors. In common with other researchers included in this literature review, we have found that shining a light on corruption—even the proposals to fight against corruption—promotes pessimism rather than engagement (Topos Partnership, 2015b).

In its research efforts, Topos has more successfully addressed the problem through strategies that incline people toward embracing their power as citizens (i.e. civic engagement), finding that aspirational ideas such as having one's voice heard, having a say, seeing and experiencing practical paths to influence are much more motivating than calls to fight against political corruption and self-dealing (Topos Partnership, 2016).

Importantly, American perceptions about corruption may be more influenced by people's political allegiances and satisfaction with the current government than by the actual level of corruption. Looking at over 30 years of research, Persily and

Lammie (2004) find that—more than race, education, age, or even party affiliation—one's opinion of the sitting president is a better predictor of perception of corruption in government (156). Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement: "Quite a few people running the government are crooked."

The gap was greatest on the crooked question in 1972, when 57% of those who disapproved of the President considered government officials crooked, while only 31% of those who approved of the President registered the same response. While it has never reached that great a disparity since 1972, there is a consistent ten-point difference on the "crooked" question between those who approve and those who disapprove of the job the President is doing. (Persily & Lammie, 2004, p. 157)

Called the "sour grapes" hypothesis, the fact that one is not being represented by one's preferred candidate makes one more likely to perceive that there is a problem with corruption—and the opposite is just as true: Trust increases as one's preferred leaders are in power. The current political situation seems to further support this hypothesis. While a majority (76%) of Americans today think that trust in the federal government has declined in the past generation, respondents' reasons why differed along partisan lines:

Republicans and those who lean Republican are more likely [than] Democrats and those who lean that way to mention government performance problems and corruption (31% vs. 24%). But Democrats are more likely to cite Trump's performance as a contributor to problems related to trust in the federal government (24% vs. 3%). (Rainie, Keeter, & Perrin, 2019)

Furthermore, when a corruption scandal does break, voters may tend to stick with their party as an affective, emotional response to the information. Only those who cognitively reflect on the information, which requires mental effort, will possibly adjust their attitudes (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017).

Likewise, people's belief in the prevalence of corruption fluctuated with their sense of how the economy was doing and whether the government

was wasting their tax dollars. From 1980 to 2002, those who reported thinking that the economy has gotten worse over the past year were more likely to agree that the government was run by “a few big interests” in comparison with those who thought the economy had stayed the same or gotten better. This was also tightly bound in people’s minds with “government waste.” (Persily & Lammie, 2004, pp. 160-162)

This correlation between political-economic dissatisfaction and the sense of a corrupted system has made corruption a tempting rhetorical device. Because much of the influence of money in US politics is effectively legal, and even Constitutionally protected as “free speech,” the dividing line between what is corrupt and what isn’t has less to do with actual legality, and more to do with ethical judgements about whether officials are taking care of the people’s interests or serving their own or others’ interests. Once again, in this case, Topos has found overt anti-corruption messaging evokes anger and concern, but also cynicism and political disengagement (Topos Partnership, 2016). So, while anti-corruption messages that focus on reducing government waste and curbing the influence of big money in politics may trigger strong public emotions, the anger may be undirected—offering potential *both* for truly reform-minded candidates and for populist candidates trying to exploit diffuse public dissatisfaction about government and politicians.

On the other hand, successful messages focus less on money as a source of corruption and more on money as a barrier that prevents regular people from running for office to represent us. This focus changes the narrative from one where (bad) politicians and government need to be punished—by denying them votes and funds—to a narrative where we get better, more responsive government by providing public funds for elections, limiting campaign donations, shrinking the scale of campaigns, and other reforms (Topos Partnership, 2015a).

Table: “Democratic proposal to reduce government waste and make government more efficient” and respondent reactions to supporting the Democratic Congress, 2007

PROPOSAL	“MUCH” OR “SOMEWHAT” MORE LIKELY TO SUPPORT THE DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS
Audit every federal department and agency to make sure their funding is going to meaningful projects instead of the bureaucracy.	75%
Eliminate no-bid contracts when companies get government contracts, by requiring all government contracts to be awarded through a competitive bidding process.	69%
Institute a strong whistleblower law to protect government employees from retribution if they report waste or corruption.	68%

In a survey from 2007, over 500 American “likely voters” answered questions about legislation that would lead them to support the Democratic Congress. Popular proposals were introduced as “Democratic proposals to reduce government waste and make government more efficient.” Proposals explicitly targeting corruption generated significant support: 68% stated they would be more likely to support the Democratic Congress because of a proposal in support of government whistleblower protections. Also popular were proposals eliminating no-bid contracts (69%) and auditing every government agency (75%). (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2007)

Polling from 2016 and 2017 Congressional elections in battleground states revealed that “money in politics” messaging was very effective at attracting the support of key voting groups, including independents, for Democratic candidates (End Citizens United, 2017). Messages including the concepts of “corruption,” “pay to play,” and

“unlimited, undisclosed money in politics” had a greater impact on voters re-thinking their choices between the Democratic candidate and a generic Republican candidate when compared to other traditionally Democratic messaging. Participants were asked to re-vote after receiving the message about anti-corruption measures (End Citizens United, 2017, p. 2).

Table: Groups Most Impacted by Money in Politics Messages

Vote Movement On Re-Vote After Messaging (End Citizens United, 2017, p. 2)

WISCONSIN (2017)	MONTANA (2017)	NEVADA (2016)
Rural voters +30	Moderate Men +21	Latinos +24
Somewhat Conservatives +24	Non-college Independents +18	Non-white men +22
Non-college Independents +21	Rural voters +17	Independents +17

The poll, conducted by a political action committee, recommended the following messaging for Democratic candidates:

The influx of big money in our elections threatens our very democracy. Too many politicians—including my opponent—are bought and paid for by special interests, while the voices of everyday Americans are being drowned out. I’ll fight to end the rigged system that puts special interests above you. I’ll work to stop the unlimited special interest money in our elections and close loopholes that allow foreign interests to secretly influence our elections, to restore your voice.

The potential here is for leaders to use the urgency drummed up by the frame of systemic corruption to channel support for real, productive solutions enacted by candidates interested in reform. The very real danger is that such a negative frame could precipitate apathy and inaction, even entrenching understandings of government as deeply corrupted.

Topos research supports focusing on the outcomes that people want to see. Across multiple projects (for example, the role of science in policymaking, the regulation of corporate power, and fighting against privatization initiatives), we have found that narratives that focus explicitly on anti-corruption are consistently less engaging and interesting to people than messages that successfully focus on producing better public outcomes. For example, instead of focusing on the way in which politicians sideline science for corrupt reasons, it is more effective to focus on the important role that science plays in how we understand the present and the future, and how this perspective needs to be protected and advocated for in policymaking (Topos Partnership, 2017a). Instead of focusing on how privatization schemes promote corruption and self-dealing, it is more effective to focus on the idea that by rejecting privatization we citizens preserve our say about how important public goods and resources are managed (Topos Partnership, 2011). Rather than focus on the power that corporations have amassed to distort and influence our politics, it is more effective to focus on the tools that we have to ensure that corporations are small enough to regulate and control (e.g., through anti-monopoly laws, prevention of mergers, etc.), creating more engagement around solutions (Topos Partnership, 2017b). In each of these cases, although explicit anti-corruption narrative would have been appropriate in principle, the research showed that an implicit approach had more positive impacts.

The research thus indicates that when crafting messages about anti-corruption, one must take into account matters of political affiliation as well as beliefs about government, the economy and so on—since perceptions of corruption are likely to vary. It also indicates the real danger of populist candidates capitalizing on dissatisfaction with empty promises to fight corruption, and more broadly, the risk that a focus on corruption as a profound problem can backfire.

BRAZIL

Takeaways about Brazilians’ attitudes:

- Politicians are viewed as likely to be criminal and corrupt, especially at the state and local levels

- Voters have low tolerance for corruption (will vote against corrupt politicians given the opportunity)
- Related to the above, branding opponents as corrupt can be an effective political weapon
- Local press is too often compromised by local corruption, thus corruption at this level is rarely reported
- Anti-corruption efforts at the national level can be seen as merely a political weapon wielded against rivals

INSTITUTION	2017	2019
Members of Parliament	57%	63%
Local Government Officials	56%	62%
President/Prime Minister	52%	57%
Business Executives	35%	50%
Police	31%	38%

Corruption is a top-of-mind concern for Brazilians. Nine in ten report that corruption in government is a big problem, and over half think that corruption is on the rise in their country (Pring & Vrushi, 2019, pp. 8-10). Perhaps because of these perceptions, anti-corruption messaging can have powerful effects, with the current (directly elected) president Jair Bolsonaro including it as a foundational part of his platform in his 2018 campaign. While the literature on the effects of specific anti-corruption frames or narratives in Brazil is thin, there is promising literature on the reaction of Brazilians to information about corrupt politicians.

Mistrust in (and criminal behavior among) Brazilian politicians runs deep. Politicians long enjoyed impunity, and could even run for office having been convicted of a crime until they had exhausted their last appeal. As recently as 2008, 40% of Brazil's 513 federal deputies were involved in pending court cases. The 2010 "clean sheet" law barred those convicted by a second-level court from running for office (Fleischer, 2012, p. 6), but these measures haven't convinced Brazilians that officials are less corrupt. Recently, 90% report thinking that corruption in their government is a "big problem" (Pring & Vrushi, 2019, p. 10).

Table: Perceived Corruption in Brazil by Institution, 2017 and 2019² (Percentage who think that all or most people in these institutions are corrupt)

This pattern has translated into anti-corruption platforms such as the one that attracted many to vote for the populist politician President Bolsonaro. There is concern that the power and appeal of such anti-corruption platforms will decline as candidates use it merely as rhetoric, or even as a political weapon against opponents—rather than to initiate real reform. The recent assessment of a Transparency International Report is not optimistic:

Despite... expectations, in the past eight months, Brazil's anti-corruption framework has received a series of blows. President Bolsonaro has attempted to widen the scope of classified information to reduce transparency and has given little attention to corruption charges against members of his cabinet. ... The administration also put forward a relatively limited anti-corruption package, which is currently stalled in Congress, with little hope of approval. (Pring & Vrushi, 2019, p. 11)

These themes have played out in recent years upon the national stage. From 2017 on, a gigantic anti-corruption endeavor called "Operation Car Wash" enjoyed widespread public support; 61% of Brazilians reported that its progress was "great" or "good" (Long & Gandhi, 2019). This probe convicted or put under investigation over a hundred congressional representatives, recovered billions of dollars, and led to the conviction of ex-President Lula da Silva

² Information in table reproduced from (Pring & Vrushi, 2019, p. 37)

on corruption charges (Campello, Belarmino, & Thomé, 2018, pp. 7-8); (Freedom House, 2019). Yet leaks in the past year have revealed that prosecutors and then-lead judge Sérgio Moro were violating separations between the prosecution and judiciary, including in the case against Lula da Silva. Moro, the judge who convicted the ex-president, has since accepted a post to lead the ministry of justice under President Jair Bolsonaro. The accusations that Moro and the other prosecutors, far from being apolitical, were acting on behalf of Bolsonaro's party to weaken Lula da Silva and his party in the run up to the 2018 election (which Bolsonaro won) pollutes the narrative of rigorous, apolitical anti-corruption in Brazil that Operation Car Wash had come to represent (Long & Gandhi, 2019). If Brazilians take away the lesson that anti-corruption is a political weapon used by those in power to punish or silence their opponents, this can certainly affect their willingness to engage and support such policies.

Despite the public's longstanding and ongoing anger toward their politicians as corrupt and criminal, if they perceive themselves to have been burned by empty anti-corruption promises, or if they believe that anti-corruption legislation is only used as a political weapon, the concern is that a more skeptical, cynical public will be less inclined to step forward in support of anti-corruption initiatives in the future.

In contrast to the current federal situation, there may be a more constructive track record of anti-corruption successes at the local level. For example, voters have been shown to punish local politicians when their corruption was revealed by a federal agency. In 2003, the Brazilian government began randomly auditing municipalities to reveal corrupt practices, then publicly disseminating the results. Because elections took place in 2004, a natural experiment was created, where some audit results were published before and others after the elections. A 2008 study showed that mayors revealed to be corrupt were punished at the polls (less likely to be reelected), while those whose clean records were revealed were *more* likely to be reelected. The effect was even stronger against corrupt mayors when the local radio station reported on the audit results (Ferraz & Finan, 2008). The implicit message the Brazilian government sent to its citizens was that they had the power to remove corrupt local politicians, and that transparency and the ballot box were the vehicles by which corruption could be stymied.

A complicating factor in Brazil is that revealing corruption and enabling voters to elect new leaders is preempted by state and local politicians' influence over regional and local news outlets. Officials and politicians are often in a position to prevent the investigation or reporting of corruption. A 2012 Freedom House report explains:

The Brazilian media gives broad and accurate coverage of corruption at the federal level, but less for smaller states and municipalities, as local media outlets are often owned or controlled by politicians. In general, although there is no specific federal law protecting them, at the national level whistleblowers, anti-corruption activists, journalists, and government investigators feel secure in reporting cases of corruption and bribery, and press denunciations of corruption have increased in recent years. However, at the state and municipal levels this is not always the case. (Fleischer, 2012) (Emphasis added.)

Thus, because local journalists are unable or unwilling to investigate or publish exposés on local corruption, voters do not have the information they need to remove corrupt local politicians.

One concern of researchers is the extent to which corrupt practices can become normalized and accepted by the public at large. One study used an experimental survey design to test how strong the norm against corruption is among Brazilians of various classes. In particular, researchers tested the "information hypothesis" against the "tradeoff hypothesis" amongst Brazilians. The former argues that when voters have information about an incumbent's corruption, they will vote for someone else, while the latter argues that citizens may overlook corrupt practices if they are otherwise satisfied with the politician's performance in office. Apparently, a common phrase in Brazil "succinctly summarizes the tradeoff hypothesis: 'rouba, mas faz' ('he robs, but he gets things done')" (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013, p. 9). The study, however, finds:

Voters in our survey are very sensitive to information about corruption—indeed so sensitive that the majority are willing to overlook poor public goods provision as long as a politician is described as not taking bribes. (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013, p. 18)

The research suggests that free information and transparency has the potential to create public support for changes, as corruption seems to be a deal breaker for many Brazilian voters. To add further nuance, lower-income individuals are even less likely to tolerate corruption than their higher-income counterparts. The authors hypothesize that this is because lower-income Brazilians bear the brunt of local corruption, being more likely to have been asked for a bribe in the past year (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013, p. 16).

A strong caution about these findings is that, given how Brazilians respond, accusations of corruption can be a very effective political weapon, *perhaps regardless of the facts behind the accusations, or the real intentions of the accuser.*

NORTH MACEDONIA

Takeaways about North Macedonians' attitudes:

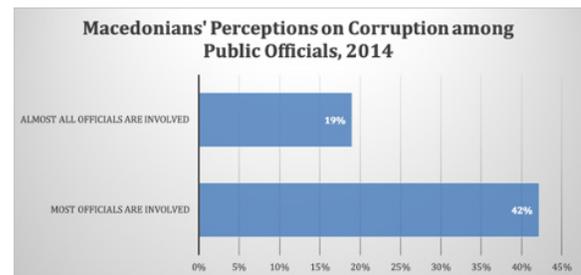
- Widespread belief that parties and politicians are corrupt and clientelistic—distributing rewards and punishments in turn for political support
- Conflicted attitudes on the acceptability of (petty) corrupt acts like bribes of money or gifts
- Divided perceptions on effectiveness of government agencies to address corruption and the use of anti-corruption as a political weapon
- Narrative from anti-corruption organizations that the country has a serious problem and few changes have helped

Advocates and communicators in North Macedonia have to navigate a complex cultural landscape when it comes to corruption. Although there is widespread consensus that corruption is woven through political and daily life, there is far less consensus about the extent to which this is a problem and whether Macedonians can do anything about it.

Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2019a)

has assessed North Macedonia as a 35, indicating a serious problem with (perceived) corruption.³ The public particularly assesses political parties as corrupt (political corruption, in Transparency International's terms): 68% of North Macedonians assess them as "corrupt" or "very corrupt" (McDevitt, 2016, p. 19). Independent oversight anti-corruption agencies are often viewed as ineffectual (McDevitt, 2016, p. 10), and there is a sense that anti-corruption actions may be used as a political weapon among political rivals. Complementing this view of endemic corruption is people's lack of real commitment to doing away with the problem. Macedonians often tend to believe that at least some corrupt practices (petty corruption) are just part of the way things get done; they don't perceive corruption as a major problem compared to other challenges like poverty or unemployment; and they see no sign that anti-corruption efforts change things.

Not surprisingly, anti-corruption organizations paint a bleak picture of the results of anti-corruption efforts in their reports, potentially bolstering a narrative that reforms do not result in real change. A recent campaign to add protections for whistleblowers would seem to have potential, but has not yet been successful.



[Percentages of Macedonians who believe that all or most officials are involved in corruption. Information in this table reproduced from (Nuredinoska, Sazdevski, & Gjuzelov, 2014, p. 18).]

Ironically, while a strong majority of North Macedonians believe that most if not all politicians engage in corruption, their actual experience of petty corruption (like paying bribes) is low in comparison (Nuredinoska, Sazdevski, & Gjuzelov, 2014, p. 18).

Almost two-thirds of the population (63.1%)

³ The index is calculated from 13 surveys from independent institutions "specialising in governance and business climate analysis covering expert assessments and views of businesspeople."

responded that they had no need to bribe, 17.7% had to do so in isolated cases, while only 4.1% claimed that they had to bribe in all cases of interaction with public officials. (Nuredinoska, Sazdevski, & Gjuzelov, 2014, p. 19)

Public attitudes about corruption are conflicted and changeable. For example, in 2014, 45% considered some corrupt practices acceptable, which was up slightly from 39% in 2002 (Nuredinoska, Sazdevski, & Gjuzelov, 2014, p. 23). So, while the majority of Macedonians do not find corruption acceptable, it is by no means a point of cultural consensus. When respondents were asked if giving gifts, money, or favors to officials was needed to solve their problems, a majority (over 55% for each act) reported that they were “very likely” or “rather likely” to do each of the above in return for having their problem solved (Nuredinoska, Sazdevski, & Gjuzelov, 2014, p. 25). On the other hand, over 69% of people would condemn a member of Parliament for accepting cash to resolve a person’s problem (Nuredinoska, Sazdevski, & Gjuzelov, 2014, p. 22).

In the public sphere, the government’s relationship to corruption is similarly muddled. North Macedonia has an independent anti-corruption agency, the “State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption” (SCPC), but it holds only partial investigatory and no prosecuting powers, and if the Parliament does not act on its recommendations, the result can appear as selective application of anti-corruption laws (McDevitt, 2016, pp. 13-14). In 2019, a new law gave the Commission greater investigatory powers, but most of its investigations were limited to petty rather than grand or political corruption, especially in education and local government officials (Ilievska, 2019).

Unregulated government advertising and manipulation of civil society organizations by the long-ruling political party VMRO-DPMNE have contributed to the international and domestic public’s perception of Macedonia as a “captured state” (McDevitt, 2016). According to EU analysts, this is not an inaccurate view (Priebe, 2015, p. 6).

As a case in point, as in Brazil, a high-profile politician—an ex-prime minister, Nikola Gruevski—was recently convicted and sentenced to prison

for corruption. But since the prosecution only took place after Gruevski’s party, VMRO-DPMNE, was no longer in power, it begs the question of the extent to which his prosecution came about only because he was at the mercy of political rivals (Freedom House, 2019). Some believe that this is really a drive against corruption and 33% report that the current ruling party SDSM is doing a better job of “fighting corruption and organized crime” compared to VMRO-DPMNE, while 45% think that it’s the same (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2018, p. 27).

The fact that high-profile convictions tend to only occur after people have left office means that North Macedonia lacks a credible track record of prosecuting powerful people despite plenty of evidence of misdeeds. This can make such acts seem like consequences of politics rather than a true anti-corruption agenda.

The narrative coming from international and domestic anti-corruption organizations is that North Macedonia has serious ongoing problems with corruption, and that proposed reforms have had only limited success. In a recent report, Transparency International (Transparency International Macedonia, 2018) painted a bleak picture of anti-corruption progress in the country, with special attention to the period since 2015. In that year, a series of published wiretapped conversations shed light on political interference with the judiciary branch and the ruling coalition’s harassment of and attacks on their political rivals (McDevitt, 2016, pp. 15-20). TI Macedonia reports regression on many of their measures of anti-corruption progress, including the uncertain fate of the Special Prosecutor’s Office established to investigate and prosecute high-level corruption in the wake of the scandal (Transparency International Macedonia, 2018, pp. 7-8). In 2019, proceedings were undertaken against the Special Prosecutor herself for misuse of office, which has created widespread feelings of betrayal and disappointment among the public that supported the anti-corruption work. Overall, the narrative from prominent anti-corruption organizations is that Macedonia has a long way to go.



V. Conclusion: Going forward

The findings in the literature suggest that anti-corruption communicators need to keep in mind an important set of considerations regardless of where they are working.

Defining the problem

Any communications should start from a clear idea of what kinds of corrupt activities are targeted, at what level(s), what causes them, and why they are the strategic focus. Particularly since the public is prone to negative reactions and fatalism about the broad topic of corruption, being very specific about the specific acts and solutions to remedy them may head off these undesired reactions.

Avoiding an exaggerated picture

For certain problems such as petty bribery, the public tends to overestimate how widespread the practice is, and anti-corruption efforts may have exacerbated the situation in some cases. Further research should try to isolate which narratives about bribery empower citizens to say “no” to participating without raising undue worries.

Defining goals

Another critical step is choosing a goal for an anti-corruption narrative—norm/culture change, mechanisms for reporting, support for proposed legislation, more vigorous enforcement, and so forth. Again, raising awareness of corruption can lead to increased, even outsized, perceptions of and concerns about it. Even seemingly proactive messaging, like highlighting ways to get involved or improvements to reporting, can precipitate “corruption fatigue.” Articulating clear goals may

help focus campaigns, essential when an unfocused campaign may have the potential to do more harm than good.

Navigating partisan dynamics

In the US at least—and possibly elsewhere—thoughts and feelings about corruption can be very tied to attitudes towards current elected leaders. Communicators need to be aware that this dynamic can lead to unexpected responses, or to responses that are misinterpreted—e.g., enthusiasm interpreted as “success” when it actually reflects the political preferences of the audience and is unlikely to lead to longer-term change related to corruption.

Finding an aspirational strategy

The greatest and most important challenge for anti-corruption narratives is to carefully avoid triggering fatalism or apathy, and to instead promote hope and engagement. Since the research shows nearly all mentions of corruption have the potential to reinforce “corruption fatigue” and negativity, new narratives need to go further than just highlighting past successes to break through motivated processing, perhaps focusing on immediate action items or looking forward to new, achievable hopes for the future—or even focusing on other organizing frames altogether.

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