



The Historical Roots of Corruption

Why does corruption persist over long periods of time? Why is it so difficult to eliminate? Suggesting that corruption is deeply rooted in the underlying social and historical political structures of a country, Eric M. Uslaner observes that there is a powerful statistical relationship between levels of mass education in 1870 and corruption levels in 2010 across 78 countries. He argues that an early introduction of universal education is shown to be linked to levels of economic equality and to efforts to increase state capacity. Societies with more equal education gave citizens more opportunities and power for opposing corruption, whilst the need for increased state capacity was a strong motivation for the introduction of universal education in many countries. Evidence for this argument is presented from statistical models; case studies from Northern and Southern Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand; as well as a discussions of how some countries escaped the “trap” of corruption.

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Mass Education, Economic Inequality, and
State Capacity

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Preface

This project stemmed from ideas I developed in my 2008 book, *Corruption, Inequality, and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge University Press). I formulated the idea of an “inequality trap” (see Chapter 1 here) to explain why institutional reforms do not “cure” corruption, but public policies that lead to universal social welfare programs do, an idea that my colleague and friend Bo Rothstein had developed. We developed this argument in a 2005 article for *World Politics* (“All for All: Equality, Corruption, and Social Trust”). The universal social welfare program that we believe is most important and that I discuss in my 2008 book is mass education. Education frees ordinary people from depending upon corrupt leaders and instills in them feelings of civic pride and national unity – all of which lead to less corruption.

All I had in my 2008 book were some anecdotes about the impact of education in the United States. So the link between education and corruption remained hypothetical. In 2011 I came upon a paper through the Social Science Research Network by Christian Morrison and Fabrice Murtin, “A Century of Education” (originally written in 2008) with estimates of primary, secondary, and tertiary education across what are now 78 countries. There was a link to their data set, now expanded to include estimates from 1870 to 2010. I first plotted the 1870 school enrollment data (the earliest year) to levels of corruption in 2010 from Transparency International. The result was an $R^2 = .699$, and using more recent education data did not improve the fit.

The questions that gripped me were: How do we account for the effect of education on corruption 140 years later? And why does this effect persist over time? I sent the initial graph (see Figures 2.2–2.4 in Chapter 2) to Bo Rothstein with the puzzle of why this persists over time. He responded that the answer lay within the development of a strong state that could compete with other institutions (notably religious). So we set out to work together on this book and the explanation involved state power but quickly included economic inequality

(which had been the subject of our earlier work). We developed the framework together and in 2012 published an article in *Comparative Politics*. Since then Rothstein departed from Göteborg, Sweden to take on a position at the University of Oxford – and that has occupied him fully. So he withdrew from this joint project, other than reading it and giving me suggestions, but leaving the bulk of the work to me. There are sections of Chapters 1, 3, and 6 that are his work, but I have redone most of them to fit my larger argument. He will agree with most of my argument, but not all of it so his culpability is limited.

So apart from my wife, who had to tolerate my moods when things were not always going smoothly and the long hours it takes to write a book, my greatest debt is to Bo. That said, others were of great help. Ewout Frankema, Claudia Goldin, Phil Keefer, and Frederick Solt (in alphabetical order) helped by providing data. We received useful comments (also listed alphabetically) from Isabella Alcaniz, Christian Bjørnskov, Ernesto Calvo, Peter Thisted Dinesen, Sergio Espuelas, Jacob Gerner Hariri, Ira Katznelson, Phil Keefer, Robert Klitgaard, Alex Lascaux, John McCauley, Fabrice Murin, J Katarina Ott, Aleksandar Stulhofer, Jong-sung You, Christian Welzel, Bob Woodberry, and especially David Sartorius (who taught me much of what I know about education in Latin America).

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I also benefited greatly from audiences at universities where I presented this work. They include (those marked by an asterisk were keynote speeches):

- Fifth Laboratory for Comparative Social Research Workshop, “Social and Cultural Changes in Cross-national Perspective:

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Subjective Well-being, Trust, Social capital and Values,” Higher School of Economics, Moscow, April 6–10, 2015.

- Conference on Education and Global Cities; Horizons for Contemporary University, Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, Russia, May 21, 2016.
- Hans Dieter Klingemann Lecture, University of Lueneberg, Germany, June 13, 2016.
- Summer Academy on “Path Dependencies in Economic and Social Development,” Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Akademie für Politische Bildung, June 15, 2006.
- Martin Paldam Workshop, Aarhus University (Denmark), September 25, 2012.
- Department of Economics, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-sheva, Israel, January 10, 2013.
- Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Mexico City, February 19, 2015.
- Seinan University, Fukukoa, Japan, March 19, 2015.
- American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, August 31–September 3, 2016.
- School of Business, Department of Economics and Finance, Queensland Institute of Technology, Brisbane, Australia, July 14, 2016.
- Conference on Understanding Governance Virtuous Circles: Who Succeeded and Why, European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State Building, Berlin, Germany, July 8–12, 2015.
- Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University (Denmark), October 5, 2015.
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- International Congress on Applied Sciences Social Capital ICAS 2015, Konya University, Turkey, October 23–24, 2015 (Member of Scientific Committee for the Conference).

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I have received strong support over the years from the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, College Park and especially from my department chairs, Mark Lichbach and Irwin Morris. John Haslam has been greatly supportive as editor at Cambridge University Press.

But the real support lies at home, where I am fortunate to have a son who is sometimes cynical, but always very bright and very humorous. After four years of a very demanding academic regimen at Colorado College, Avery better appreciates academic arguments and makes some strong ones himself. And I am more than fortunate to have in my life Debbie, my loving wife. She never doubted me or the worth of this project because she is a superb exemplar of why honesty in public and private life is so critical.