

Corruption and Democracy: A Cultural Assessment

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Government transparency is an increasingly important topic in both stable and new democracies, and the task of measuring the level of corruption in public office, as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), by Transparency International, is of great value. In addition, corruption is also part of culture and society, not just government, and measuring the extent to which ordinary citizens are willing to justify corrupt acts is a complementary effort to measuring perceptions of government corruption. It has been documented that corruption is negatively related to economic development and to the existence of democratic institutions.¹ The question is whether both systemic and cultural modes of corruption are involved in such relationships. It is also feasible that corruption can play an important role in political competition. In Latin America, for example, opposition electoral campaigns have benefited from exposing corrupt incumbents. Nonetheless, Latin American publics are, on average, more permissive of certain corrupt practices than most publics from Western Europe and East Asia. Consequently, fighting corruption becomes one of the main tasks of newly democratic governments. The question is whether democratization is reducing corruption or not. More specifically, as democratic political attitudes become more widely shared, is corruption permissiveness decreasing?

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Corruption has a cultural side, and most societies have a certain degree of corruption permissiveness, with some of them being, on average, more likely to justify corrupt practices than others. Although measuring corruption is a difficult task, an index of corruption permissiveness based on citizen responses to survey questions may reflect the extent to which corruption is justified in different societies. There are significant cross-national and cross-regional variations in corruption permissiveness, and attitudes toward corruption are indeed strongly and negatively related to democratic attitudes. Corruption permissiveness is, in particular, strongly and negatively correlated with support for democracy and with interpersonal trust, both of them being important components of a democratic political culture.

In newly democratic countries, corruption may be seen as part of the inherited practices from old authoritarian regimes and governments have the implicit or explicit task of fighting it. However, the publics from those countries might as well think that corruption continues under the new democratic governments. The following example may illustrate this: In a poll conducted in Mexico in 2001, a year after the historical elections that ended 71 years of interrupted PRI rule, 40 percent of respondents agreed that bribes are necessary to deal with government authorities, whereas 57 disagreed.² This serves as an indicator of corruption in government, but, as mentioned earlier, perceptions of citizen corruption may be as important as the former. For example, 47 percent thought that most people in their country are corrupt, while 32 per cent believed most people are honest. This shows the other side of the coin, in which corruption not only is a problem of governing, but also a daily expectation among the mass publics. A combination of both is reflected in the following: there is a wide belief that if an honest

person gets a job in public office, it is most likely that that person would become corrupt, according to 6 out of 10 respondents. On the contrary, 3 out of 10 Mexicans said that the person would remain honest despite his or her position.³ This is very indicative not only of how people perceive the chances that public officials could be involved in acts of corruption, but also how they actually think that there are more corrupt than honest people. This leads to another question: to what extent are mass publics likely to justify acts of corruption in their daily lives?

In this article, I analyze data from the World Values Survey (WVS), which includes 64 societies in 4 rounds of surveys conducted between 1981 and 2001. By constructing an index of corruption permissiveness, that is, the extent to which individuals tend to justify certain practices that can be considered corrupt, I analyze the cross-national differences in such a measure and its relationship with indicators of a democratic political culture. In particular, this data show how corruption permissiveness relates to support for democracy and interpersonal trust, and how it compares to the Corruption Perception Index, a poll of polls published by Transparency International.

Support for Democracy and Corruption Permissiveness

Stable democratic institutions and corruption are expected to be negatively related, but at first, this relationship sounds as if it is solely the rule of law—part of a democratic society—which prevents corruption. What about support for democracy and corruption permissiveness as cultural traits? Evidence from the World Values Survey

shows that these two variables are, in fact, strongly and negatively related, and that there is a great deal of cross-regional and cross-national variation in both.

The index of corruption permissiveness constructed for this article is a measure of culturally justifiable corrupt practices. The purpose is to assess how such a cultural trait varies among different countries and regions of the world, and how it has evolved through the last two decades. The index is based on individual responses to questions that address four issues: The extent to which individuals justify “claiming government benefits to which you are not entitled”, “avoiding a fare on public transport”, “cheating on taxes if you have a chance”, and people “accepting a bribe in the course of their duties”. Each variable was originally measured using a ten-point scale (where 1=never justifiable and 10=always justifiable), but an additive index summarized the responses into a five-point scale where 1 means respondents consider these acts as “never justifiable” and 5 as “always justifiable”. The reason to simplify the additive scale into one with 5 points was to make it as comparable as possible to other constructed indexes of political and social attitudes, such as support for democracy. Questions regarding the extent to which respondents justify acts of corruption are likely to be contaminated with social desirability biases: it may be hard to admit that such acts are indeed justifiable. In the World Values Survey, about half of respondents, on average, placed their responses in the first category of the 10-point scale, meaning that the act referring to was hardly justified. Nonetheless, the additive index provides enough cross-national and cross-regional variation and it allows us to draw some conclusions.

As a note, the index of corruption permissiveness has a modest correlation with International Transparency’s Corruption Perceptions Index. Taking the results from the

2001 CPI and the ones derived from the 1995-2001 World Values Survey, the correlation with data from 58 societies included in both studies is -.32, meaning that relatively high scores on transparency (the CPI is measured in a scale where high scores mean less corruption) are associated with low levels of corruption permissiveness. In other words, countries that have higher levels of corruption permissiveness in the WVS tend to be those with less corruption in the CPI (though there are exemptions, as shown below).⁴

The five-point composite index of support for democracy is based on responses to 4 questions: whether “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” is a good or bad way of governing the country, whether “having the army rule” is good or bad, whether respondents agree or disagree that “democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling”, and agree or disagree that “democracies aren’t good at maintaining order”.⁵

Figure 1 shows the average scores for each country in the scales of corruption permissiveness and support for democracy. The correlation between both variables is -.43, indicating that high support for democracy is associated with low citizen justification of corruption. Among the most supportive of democracy and least likely to justify corruption are Japan and the United States in the 1995 survey. However, while the Japanese stayed in a similar level on both scales by 2000, the American public expressed the same level of support for democracy, but its score on corruption permissiveness increased significantly between 1995 and 2000.

Some countries from Latin America experienced some movement from one survey to the next: Chile and Venezuela moved relatively in a similar fashion, but Mexico had a trajectory in the opposite direction. Venezuelans grew in both support for

democracy and corruption permissiveness from 1995 to 2000. Chileans stayed in a similar level of support for democracy, but extended their corruption permissiveness. Mexicans became slightly less likely to justify corruption, but also less supportive of democracy, as measured by the index. Uruguay is the Latin American country with the highest level of support for democracy and the lowest level of corruption permissiveness, followed by Argentina, which is significantly less supportive of democratic rule and more likely to justify corruption. In contrast, Brazil has the lowest score on support for democracy and the highest one on corruption permissiveness.

In South Asia, the Philippines' trajectory is similar to the Chilean, with no movement in support for democracy and a broadening in their corruption permissiveness. Unlike Chileans, Filipinos have a lower level of support for democracy and are much more likely to justify acts of corruption. There are few cases among formerly Communist countries where trajectories in time can be assessed, but Serbia is one interesting exemption. The Serbs were the only ones that moved along the regression line, becoming less permissive towards corruption and more supportive of democracy in the last few years. Most of the societal average scores follow the negative-relation pattern, but there are some outliers: Both Vietnam and India show low levels of corruption permissiveness, but also low scores on support for democracy. At the opposite end, Croatia scores highly on support for democratic rule, but also on corruption permissiveness.

The reason why trajectories in time are only shown for some countries in Figure 1, is that questions for the index of corruption permissiveness are included since the 1981-84, but the current questions of support for democracy have been included in the

questionnaire since the 1995 wave. I will return to changes over time later, referring to the early surveys.

Due to the few of number of cases in some regions, it is hard to calculate cross-regional differences in support for democracy and corruption permissiveness. However, the data at hand allow us to have a good idea of how these two indexes vary across regions. Western democracies, for example, have the highest score on support for democracy (an average of 3.93 in the 5 point scale), as opposed to other regions of the world. The score for Western democracies was obtained from 12 surveys conducted between 1995 and 2001 in 9 countries, including two samples of the United States taken in 1995 and 2000. The second highest score in support for democracy is observed in East Asian societies (3.84), which includes China and Japan. Africa comes third, with an average of (3.51) resulting from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda. Seventeen formerly Communist societies obtain a score of 3.50, higher than that of Latin America (3.41), and South Asia (2.91), this latter defined only by three countries: India, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The Vietnamese public is the one with the lowest score in support for democracy among all countries considered in the study.

Cross-regional differences in corruption permissiveness result in a somewhat different ranking: East Asian societies are the least likely to justify corruption (1.19), followed by Western democracies (1.33), and African societies (1.34). Many of the African countries score low in International Transparency's CPI, meaning that corruption is high. However, the few African publics included in the World Values Survey show that corruption permissiveness at the citizen level is lower than in other regions. For example, Nigeria is one of the most corrupt countries in the CPI, but it has a relatively

low score in the index constructed with World Values Survey data. Rather than being contradictory, these opposing results may show the reality of high corruption in a country where corrupt practices are culturally rejected, or may also reflect the social desirability effects mentioned above. Latin America and South Asia have higher levels of corruption permissiveness (1.53 and 1.57, respectively), but formerly Communist societies have the highest average level of corruption permissiveness among all regions considered here (1.64).

In sum, corruption and democracy seem antagonistic, not just for the fact that democratic institutions increase government transparency, but also because corruption permissiveness at the citizen level is negatively related to support for democracy. Nonetheless, support for democracy as such is not an indicator of how democratic a country is. It reflects the extent to which democratic rule is massively accepted. In this section I have shown how such acceptance is related, generally, to rejection of morally corrupt practices. It is now the turn to assess how corruption permissiveness and interpersonal trust, an important component of a democratic political culture, relate to each other.

Trust and Corruption

It has been widely documented that social capital lubricates the functioning of democratic rule, and that interpersonal trust is a central component of social capital.⁶ Scholarly work on the subject also shows that interpersonal trust is positively related to economic development and democracy.⁷ From these propositions, we should expect that trust and

corruption are also negatively correlated. This is, in fact, what results from individual survey responses to the World Values Survey.

Figure 2 shows the countries's average positions on two scales: corruption permissiveness and interpersonal trust. Trust is represented by the percent of respondents who say that "most people can be trusted". The correlation coefficient between these two variables is $-.46$, indicating that, generally, more trusting societies also tend to be less likely to justify corruption. The relationship runs from highly trusting societies with relatively low corruption permissiveness, like Norway, Sweden and China, to generally distrusting and highly corrupt permissive societies like Brazil and the Philippines. Nonetheless, there are some societies where both trust and corruption permissiveness are low. Zimbabwe and Puerto Rico are the best examples of low trust and low corruption. However, there are hardly any cases where both corruption permissiveness and trust are high. This indicates that corruption and trust simply do not go together in a positive way.

There are trajectories over time in some countries that resemble those in Figure 1, which shows the scores for support for democracy and corruption permissiveness. Serbia is a clear case where corruption permissiveness decreased in the last few years, but trust also decreases significantly. The same happens in Mexico, but less significantly. On the other hand, Spain experienced moderate increases in both corruption permissiveness and trust. China is the case where trust increased and corruption permissiveness decreased in the last few years, though differences are minimal.

Again, regional differences are hard to assess with asymmetries in the number of cases. Nonetheless, the data at hand provide the following rankings. Western democracies have the highest level of trust, with an average of 43 percent. Norway and

Sweden are the countries where more respondents say that, generally, you can “trust most people”, 65 and 64 percent in the latest surveys, respectively. In comparison, 36 percent of Americans express trust, a smaller proportion than that observed in China, where slightly over 50 percent of Chinese said, both in 1995 and 2000, that you can trust most people. On average, East Asia’s level of trust is about 37 percent. The lowest average level of trust is observed in Latin America (16 percent), which has a slightly lower average score than the ones in South Asia (19 percent) and Africa (17 percent). Only 3 percent of Brazilians, 5 percent of Peruvians, and 6 percent of Puerto Ricans say they generally trust most people, contributing to the fact that Latin American societies are, on average, the most distrusting of all. The highest level of interpersonal trust in Latin America was observed in Mexico in the 1995-97 survey, but it went down to 21 percent in 2000, below Dominican Republic in 1995 (25 percent), and Chile in 2000 (22 percent). Post-Communist societies have an average level of trust of about 23 percent. The highest is Montenegro in both of its surveys (30-33 percent) and the lowest is Slovenia in 1995: 16 percent.

In sum, corruption permissiveness is negatively related to support for democracy and to interpersonal trust. If we take the latter two variables as indicators of a democratic political culture, there is some evidence that justifying acts of corruption is culturally undemocratic. The question is whether the wave of democratization that has taken place since the mid-1970s has reduced the justification of morally corrupt practices among the mass publics. The next section addresses this question by looking at the data gathered between 1981 and 2001 in both stable democracies and democratizing polities.

Changes in Corruption Permissiveness Over Time

The *World Values Survey* offers the opportunity to compare the values and cultures of over 60 societies in a time span of two decades. However, not all the countries where the survey has been carried out have consistently participated in every wave. This makes it difficult to assess how the index of corruption permissiveness has evolved both regionally and cross-nationally in a significant number of countries. Nonetheless, as the same set of questions about corruption have been asked in every single wave of the survey, from 1981 to 2000, it is possible to look at some of the general trends (See Table 1 in the Appendix).

Corruption permissiveness in Western democracies has remained about the same during the last two decades, even though there are some noticeable changes in particular countries. The United States is the most dramatic case. After dropping from 1.26 to 1.14 between 1990 and 1995, the score on the 5-point corruption permissiveness index increased to 1.39 in 2000, meaning that corruption permissiveness has increased among the American public. The score in West Germany increased from 1.41 to 1.61 between 1990 and 1995. In other countries, like Canada and Spain, the score on corruption permissiveness went down, meaning that there is a generally lower level of acceptance of corruption among those publics.

The average score of corruption permissiveness in East Asia, where corruption is less justified than anywhere else, according to the surveys, also reflects a reduction between 1995 and 2000. The decrease in the index is more noticeable in China. In

contrast, corruption permissiveness increased in South Asia, particularly in India and the Philippines.

The most significant change in corruption permissiveness was observed in post-Communist societies between 1990 and 1995, when the score on the five-point index went up from 1.46 to 1.67. In this sense, the fall of Communism may have been a catalyst to greater acceptance of corruption in those societies. For example, the scores went up in Russia (from 1.45 to 1.65), Latvia (1.38 to 1.81), Lithuania (1.35 to 1.58), and even in East Germany (from 1.17 to 1.51), despite German reunification. After 1995, some countries seem to go in the opposite direction, though. The surveys conducted in Serbia and Montenegro in 2000 show a reduction of corruption permissiveness, but unfortunately we do not have recent data for other post-Communist countries to verify that the trend from the early 1990s has actually reversed.

The trend in Latin America shows some variations as well. The average regional score went down from 1.80 in three societies surveyed in 1990-1993, to 1.52 in 9 countries surveyed in 1995-1997. Then it slightly increased to 1.56 in three countries surveyed in 2000. Mexico is the only country where corruption permissiveness has systematically decreased in the 1990s, when it experienced a deep political transformation and higher political competition. In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela, the average score on corruption permissiveness went up.

In sum, despite the relatively strong association between corruption permissiveness and democratic attitudes, particularly support for democracy and interpersonal trust, democratization does not seem to reflect a reduction in culturally unacceptable corrupt practices. During the early 1990s, corruption permissiveness

increased in most post-Communist societies. In Latin America, several countries also showed a higher justification of corruption by the end of the decade than in the mid 1990s. Corruption permissiveness even increased in some advanced industrial societies, such as the United States. Besides its governmental dimension, as measured by the CPI, corruption has a cultural face in both stable and new democracies.

Conclusion

The acceptance of corrupt practices is culturally undemocratic. Democratic institutions are expected to diminish the possibilities of corruption in government, but there is an expected relation between a democratic political culture and corruption permissiveness as well. The efforts to measure perception of government corruption are only one side of the coin. The other one centers on the extent to which mass publics are becoming more or less likely to tolerate or accept some corrupt practices in society. Survey data from over 60 societies show that there is a negative relationship between corruption permissiveness and support of democracy, and between the former and interpersonal trust. However, the trend in the last two decades, when democratization took place in a significant number of countries from Latin America, South Asia, Africa and the post-Communist world, indicates that corruption permissiveness has not decreased significantly. In some cases it has even increased.

There are important cross-national differences in corruption permissiveness, which suggests that in some countries there is a wide cultural basis for the justification of corruption. The level of corruption permissiveness is higher in post-Communist

societies, followed by Latin American countries, and South Asian publics. But the increase observed in the last decade is not exclusive of those societies. There is an observable increase in corruption permissiveness in Western democracies as well, the most significant being in the United States.

Figure 1. Corruption Permissiveness and Support for Democracy

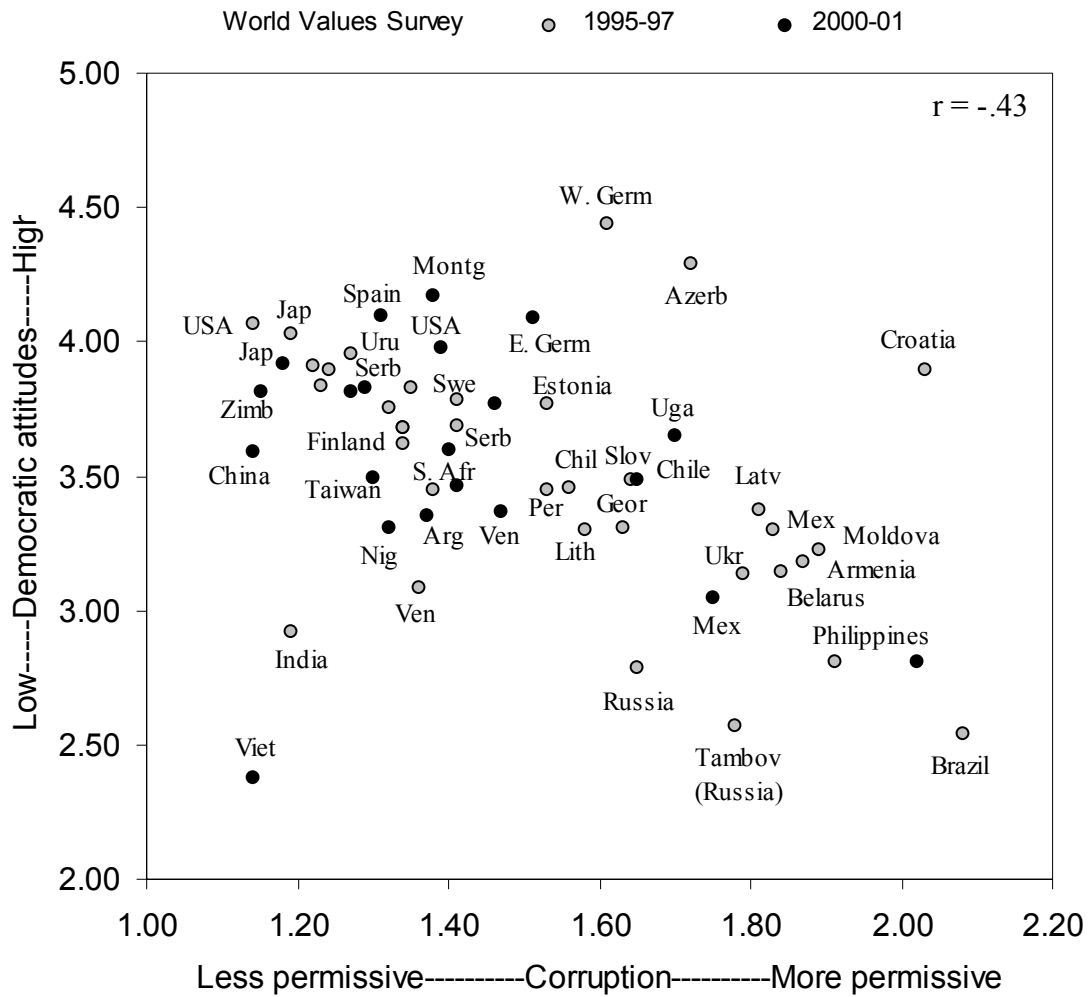
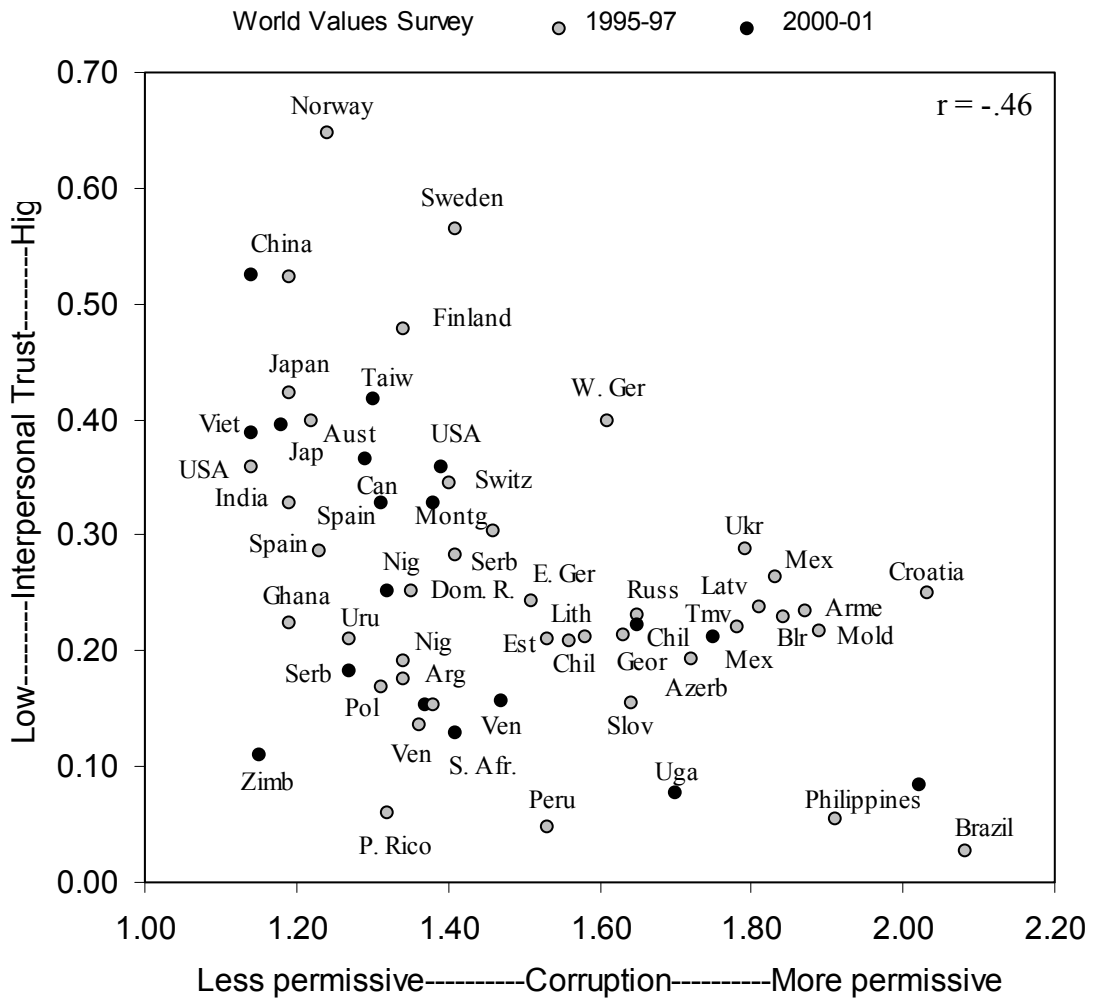


Figure 2. Corruption Permissiveness and Interpersonal Trust



APPENDIX

**Table 1. Corruption Permissiveness by Region and Country, by year.
(1=Low and 5=High in a 4-item composite index)**

	1981-84	1990-93	1995-97	2000-01
Western democracies	1.37	1.36	1.28	1.40
Australia	1.43		1.22	
Austria		1.17		
Belgium	1.51	1.70		
Britain	1.39	1.26		
Canada	1.41	1.29		1.29
Denmark	1.23	1.19		
Finland	1.25		1.34	
France	1.83	1.69		
Iceland	1.28			
Ireland	1.47	1.32		
Italy	1.24	1.34		
Netherlands	1.40	1.33		
N. Ireland	1.28	1.22		
Norway	1.28	1.25	1.24	
Portugal		1.65		
Spain	1.43	1.43	1.23	1.31
Sweden	1.14	1.25	1.41	
Switzerland			1.40	
USA	1.26	1.26	1.14	1.39
W. Germany	1.41	1.41		1.61
East Asia	1.22	1.14	1.23	1.16
China		1.12	1.19	1.14
Japan	1.19	1.15	1.19	1.18
South Korea	1.25		n.a.	n.a.
Taiwan			1.30	
South Asia		1.14	1.55	1.58
India		1.15	1.19	
Philippines			1.91	2.02
Vietnam				1.14
Turkey		1.13	n.a.	n.a.
Ex-Comunist countries		1.46	1.67	1.33
Armenia			1.87	
Azerbaijan			1.72	
Belarus		1.72	1.84	

Bulgaria	1.33			
Croatia			2.03	
E. Germany	1.17		1.51	
Estonia	1.33		1.53	
Georgia			1.63	
Hungary	1.81			
Latvia	1.38		1.81	
Lithuania	1.35		1.58	
Moldova			1.89	
Montenegro			1.46	1.38
Poland			1.31	
Romania	1.32			
Russia	1.45		1.65	
(Moscow)	1.80			
Serbia			1.41	1.27
Slovenia	1.40		1.64	
Tambov			1.78	
Ukraine			1.79	
Latin America	1.62	1.80	1.52	1.56
Argentina	1.36		1.34	1.37
Brazil		1.56	2.08	
Chile		1.62	1.56	1.65
Dominican Rep.			1.35	
Mexico	1.88	2.23	1.83	1.75
Peru			1.53	
Puerto Rico			1.32	
Uruguay			1.27	
Venezuela			1.36	1.47
Africa	1.48	1.42	1.30	1.39
Uganda				1.70
Ghana			1.19	
Nigeria		1.42	1.34	1.32
South Africa	1.48		1.38	1.41
Zimbabwe				1.15

Source: World Values Survey, author's calculations.

¹ See for example Seymour Martin Lipset and Gabriel Salman Lenz, "Corruption, Culture, and Markets", in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, L. E. Harrison and S. P. Huntington, eds. (New York: Basic Books, 2000)

² *Reforma* newspaper, October 30th, 2001.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The results from both indicators were observed in a scatter-plot and cases distribute relatively well along the negative regression line. There was only one extreme case, Bangladesh, which appears as one of the most corrupt countries in the CPI and has the lowest score in corruption permissiveness in the World Values Survey. This country was left out of the analysis.

⁵ The WVS questionnaire also includes two items on support for democracy that, with exception of Russia, have a relatively high level of support in most cases. Also, there is an item in which respondents agree or disagree that “in democracy, the economic system runs badly”. The former were not included in the index, so the test on support for democracy could be a little less driven by social desirability biases towards democratic rule. The latter was excluded so the index would not be affected by perception of the current economic conditions in each country.

⁶ See for example Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), and Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

⁷ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)