

# The Merit of Meritocratization: Politics, Bureaucracy, and the Institutional Deterrents of Corruption

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## Abstract

Comparative studies of corruption focus on the selection and incentives of policymakers. With few exceptions, actors who are in charge of implementing policies have been neglected. This article analyzes an original data set on the bureaucratic features and its effects on corruption in fifty-two countries. Two empirical findings challenge the conventional wisdom in literature. First, certain bureaucratic factors, particularly meritocratic recruitment, reduce corruption, even when controlling for a large set of alternative explanations. Second, the analysis shows that other allegedly relevant bureaucratic factors, such as public employees' competitive salaries, career stability, or internal promotion, do not have a significant impact.

## Keywords

Corruption, Bureaucracy, Meritocratic recruitment, Public administration

Jesus Gil, the mayor of Marbella, Spain, from 1991 to 2003, replaced a professional bureaucracy with political appointees. The result of this absence of bureaucratic checks of elected officials' activities was a corruption network in which some individuals accumulated hundreds of millions of euro. By contrast, during the summer of 2009 the politically appointed county governor in Gotland, Marianne Samuelsson, granted permission to an important businessman to build by the seashore, which is normally protected by law in Sweden. Samuelsson justified her decision by referring to the businessman's importance. Her actions were exposed by a professional bureaucrat in Samuelsson's staff, and media accused her of setting aside the fundamental legal principle of impartiality. As a consequence, Samuelsson was forced to resign.

These examples illustrate the important role professional bureaucrats may play in curbing corruption. The actions and choices of public employees have nevertheless often been overlooked in the comparative literature on corruption. This article argues that the employment terms of public employees and, in particular, the extent to which they are dependent on their political masters are essential for understanding why some states have been able to establish noncorrupt institutions while others are stuck with corruption and bad government.

The current literature on deterrents of corruption focus mainly on the political side of the state, for example, the effect of democracy, electoral systems, or veto players (Andrews and Montinola 2004; Keefer 2007; Montinola

and Jackman 2002; Persson, Tabellini, and Trebbi 2003; Treisman 2000). There are however only a few examples of studies that consider the bureaucratic side of the state and its role for controlling corruption (e.g., Rauch and Evans 2000).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, despite indications that both political and bureaucratic factors have an impact on controlling corruption, they have rarely been tested together.

This article first develops three hypotheses taking the bureaucratic side of the state into account and second, aims at bridging the gap between the two institutional approaches by testing which political and bureaucratic factors do matter for curbing corruption. To fulfill the second goal, this article uses a unique data set based on a survey completed by 520 experts from fifty-two countries, which, to the best of our knowledge, represents the most encompassing data set on bureaucratic structures at the cross-country level.

While the previous literature on bureaucracies relies heavily on socialization of bureaucrats into well-functioning units (e.g., Rauch and Evans 2000), this article suggests a more institutional mechanism, namely, the separation of careers between politicians and bureaucrats. In short, we

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argue that whereas Marianne Samuelson in Gotland was checked by a professional body of public servants, Jesus Gil in Marbella was able to coordinate his corrupt intentions with the bureaucrats he had himself selected. This mechanism does not require any assumptions about higher competence, higher morals, or in any way a “better” nature of professional bureaucrats as compared to political appointees. Professional bureaucrats are just required to be held accountable differently from politicians: whereas the latter are held accountable before the electorate, the bureaucrats are held accountable to their peers. When politicians and professional bureaucrats thus have different interests to cater to, and their future careers are not intertwined, collusion for taking bribes becomes a more strenuous collective action problem, and thus less likely.

### Existing Political Explanations for Corruption

Although the positive effects from noncorrupt government institutions seem fairly undisputed today, the unanswered question is still why some states have been able to establish noncorrupt institutions while others cannot get rid of corruption and bad government. Generally speaking, the institutionalist literature has focused on political factors as the main explanation. First, numerous cross-country studies deal with the impact of the type of political regime on corruption: are democratic states more or less corrupt than authoritarian states? In particular, many authors have explored what Harris-White and White (1996, 3) or Sung (2004, 179) define as the “contradictory” relationship between democracy and corruption. There seems to be a significant, albeit nonlinear, relationship between democracy and corruption, characterized as either U-shaped (e.g., Montinola and Jackman 2002), J-shaped (e.g., Bäck and Hadenius 2008), or S-shaped (e.g., Sung 2004). One recurrent finding is that in terms of control of corruption and quality of government, younger democracies perform worse than authoritarian regimes and much worse than older democracies (Keefer 2007). Thus, we would expect the level and the years of being a democracy to impact the level of corruption

A second political factor explaining corruption involves the members of the political elite. In particular, empirical studies show that the more women in the national parliament, the lower the level of corruption in a given country (Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti 2001). Although the causal direction of this relationship is unclear, the significant effect of the number of women in parliament for the development of certain public policies is a reason to take this relationship seriously (Wängnerud 2009). *Ceteris paribus*, one should expect that women in political positions may matter for reducing corruption.

A third important political factor follows from the virtues associated with separation of powers and,

specifically, from Tsebelis’s (1995) veto player theory. Along those lines, Andrews and Montinola (2004) predict that the greater the number of veto players, the more difficult it will be for them to achieve the coordination required for engaging in corruption and will thus result in lower levels of corruption. Using a similar argument, Persson, Roland, and Tabellini (2000) maintain that as elected officials in presidential systems cannot make credible commitments to each other, rent-seeking and corruption will be lower than in parliamentary regimes. Another political determinant of corruption to consider is thus the number of veto players and other political constraints.

A fourth group of political factors is the characteristics of the electoral system. According to comparative studies, the impact of the classical distinction between majoritarian and systems with proportional representation (PR) systems on corruption must be qualified and its different components analyzed separately. One feature linked to PR systems, the existence of large voting districts, has positive effects on controlling corruption as larger voting districts lower the barriers of entry. At the same time, one feature peculiar to majoritarian systems, namely, a higher share of Members of Parliament (MPs) elected in single-member districts, also results in lower levels of corruption as candidates who are elected from party lists have less individual accountability and are thus more prone to engage in corrupt activities (Persson, Tabellini, and Trebbi 2003; cf. Kunikova and Rose-Ackerman 2005; Chang and Golden 2006). The size of districts and the share of MPs elected in single-member districts thus also need to be taken into account.

In sum, the comparative literature has found that all these political institutions have a significant impact on corruption and this article will therefore include them as alternative explanations in the empirical analyses that follow. This literature has however neglected how the design of the administrative apparatus differs between countries. We therefore now turn to the literature of bureaucratic structures to develop our main hypothesis.

### Existing Bureaucratic Explanations of Corruption

The past decade was said to be a “time to rediscover bureaucracy” (Olsen 2005), and numerous authors have defended the Weberian bureaucratic organization (Suleiman 2003; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004, ch. 8). Contrary to the view among scholars and international organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, Weberian bureaucracy does not seem to be an “organizational dinosaur helplessly involved in its death struggle” (Olsen 2005, 1). It has in fact been found to have positive effects in terms of good governance—especially in small-*N* studies (Wade 1990; Evans 1995).

The Weberian bureaucratic ideal type contains a very large set of structural characteristics: a formalized,

standardized, hierarchical, and specialized bureau with professional administrative staffs that enjoy merit-based, lifelong employment and organized careers. However, the diverse components of Weberian bureaucracies may not necessarily occur together in practice (Hall 1963; Olsen 2008). We are thus left with the intriguing question of which characteristics of Weberian bureaucracies may contribute to the control of corruption.

Rauch and Evans's (2000) address that issue in a pioneering study of thirty-five developing countries. They test the impact on corruption of three Weberian components: the level of meritocratic recruitment, the existence of competitive salaries, and the degree of internal promotion and career stability. While the effect of the latter two could not be clearly established, the level of meritocratic recruitment seemed to reduce the level of corruption in the sample of countries that were analyzed. It is however important to note that Rauch and Evans use a formal definition for meritocratic recruitment, as they define it as the existence of competitive formal examinations and the possession of university degrees among the employees of core economic agencies.

Despite the innovative nature of Rauch and Evans's (2000) analysis, several reasons justify further study of the relationship between bureaucratic features and corruption. First, Rauch and Evans do not control for the standard political variables of the institutionalism literature. The relationships they find between merit-based bureaucracy and control of corruption might therefore simply be spurious. Second, their sample of thirty-five mostly "semi-industrialized" countries is dominated by countries that are at a critical stage of economic development, which is precisely when bureaucratic characteristics might be more necessary according to the "developmental state" literature (see, e.g., Amsden 1989; Johnson 1982; Wade 1990). As the influence of bureaucratic structures might subsequently have been overestimated, this result needs to be replicated in other contexts. Third, Rauch and Evans do not offer clear causal mechanisms through which the Weberian characteristics deter corrupt behavior among state bureaucrats. This motivates the theoretical contribution of this article: to detect the particular bureaucratic characteristics that are relevant for tackling corruption and identify the causal mechanisms through which they act.

### **How Does Bureaucratic Structure Affect Corruption?**

As mentioned, the Weberian bureaucratic ideal type has many characteristics. This article focuses on the group of features that are most often claimed to deter corruption, namely, the characteristics of staff policy. Similar to Evans and Rauch (1999, 749), this article therefore looks

at "the relevant determinants of recruitment and career patterns for bureaucrats."

The first column of Table 1 summarizes the major elements of a Weberian bureaucracy's staff policy that may curb corruption. These three elements represent the three hypotheses that this article subjects to empirical testing. The second column offers the causal mechanisms through which those elements should affect corruption. The third column shows the empirical indicators that should have a positive impact on the control of corruption according to each mechanism.

According to the literature, the first bureaucratic deterrent of corruption is its closedness. Bureaucracies can be grouped or classified according to how closed or open they are (Bekke, Perry, and Toonen 1996, 5; Lægveid and Wise 2007, 171). Contrary to open bureaucracies (e.g., Netherlands, Denmark, New Zealand), closed bureaucracies (e.g., France, Greece, Spain, Belgium) are characterized by career stability, lifelong tenure, and special laws that cover the terms of employment for public sector employees that differ from the country's general labor laws. In closed bureaucracies, civil servants have self-managed organizations, generally known as Corps, which enjoy a great deal of autonomy and whose legal status differs from their counterparts in the private sector. It is reasonable to assume that an esprit de corps is created through long-term socialization in closed bureaucracies. This esprit de corps would generate a set of common norms within the bureaucracy, fostering impartial and noncorrupt behavior. According to Rauch and Evans (2000), this is the most decisive mechanism of a Weberian bureaucracy. They maintain that the formation of stronger ties among public employees reinforces the adherence to codified rules of behavior, and "ideally, a sense of commitment to corporate goals and 'esprit de corps' develop" (Rauch and Evans 2000, 52). The first hypothesis we will subject to empirical testing is thus that a closed bureaucracy will prevent corruption.

The second bureaucratic deterrent of corruption would simply be a well-paid bureaucracy. The causal mechanism of this second hypothesis (i.e., "temptation") is based on the classical assumption in the economics literature that public servants maximize expected income. Economic incentives, carrots and sticks, should be established so that public servants are not tempted to engage in corrupt behavior (Becker and Stigler 1974). Studies disagree whether the relative level of wages compared to the private sector or their perceived fairness might ultimately deter corrupt behavior. Yet the general idea, while inherently difficult to subject to empirical scrutiny, is that public servants' incentives may be affected by, on the one hand, their wages and, on the other, the probability of detection and the penalty for corruption (Van Rijckeghem

**Table 1.** Bureaucratic Structures as Deterrents of Corruption

Hypotheses on the effects of bureaucratic structure over corruption	Causal mechanisms	Observable indicators
Hypothesis 1: A “closed bureaucracy” will curb corruption.	<i>Esprit de corps</i> : The key is to “create better types” through socialization of certain values, strong ties among the members of the Corps, and isolation from external influences.	1a. Competitive formal examinations 1b. Career stability/secure tenure 1c. Special laws for public employment (as opposed to standard labor laws)
Hypothesis 2: A “well-paid bureaucracy” will curb corruption.	<i>Temptation</i> : The key is to pay bureaucrats enough so they do not engage in corrupt behavior to complement their salaries.	2. Competitive salaries in the public sector
Hypothesis 3: A “professional bureaucracy” will curb corruption.	<i>Separation of interests</i> : The interests of principals and bureaucratic agents are separated because they are responsive to different chains of accountability.	3a. Meritocratic recruitment 3b. Non-politicization of public service posts 3c. Internal promotions

and Weder 2001, 308). This second hypothesis will also be put to an empirical test.

One major caveat of these two hypotheses in the bureaucratic literature is that it is unclear whether their theoretical mechanisms are backed empirically. The result from Rauch and Evans’s (2000) seminal article actually provides very mixed support. Only their indicator of meritocracy seems to exhibit a systematic effect on the control of corruption. On the contrary, the development of career stability, which should be linked to their main theoretical mechanism (*esprit de corps*), does not appear to have a clear effect on reducing corruption. Similarly, the empirical evidence is mixed with regard to the effect of competitive wages. While Rauch and Evans (2000) and Treisman (2000) do not find empirical support for this hypothesis, other studies do (Van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001).

This article offers a third hypothesis based on an overlooked Weberian characteristic. We borrow the label *bureaucratic professionalism* from Silberman (1993), who distinguished between organizationally oriented and professionally oriented bureaucracies. This article claims that a professional bureaucracy reduces corruption not by selecting more competent agents, but by introducing agents whose interests are known to differ from those of politicians; that is, through a mechanism of *separation of interests*. A meritocratic recruitment of bureaucrats separates the careers into two different professional groups: elected officials on one side and professional bureaucrats on the other. This results in two groups with different chains of responsiveness and subsequently with different careers.

On the one hand, the general implication of this mechanism is well known (for an overview, see Svava 1998, 52). Ever since Frank Goodnow’s (1900) statement that some aspects of the bureaucracy may be harmed by politics and should be shielded from it, students of public administration have warned against the negative effects of merging the roles of politicians and bureaucrats (e.g., Aberbach,

Putnam, and Rockman 1981; Peters and Pierre 2004; Weber 1978).

Scholars from transaction-cost economics have also noted the potential negative effects of a uniform provider of public goods. Miller and Hammond (1994) formally show that any provider of public goods has incentives to maximize the “residual” inherently generated by the supply of any public good at the expense of social efficiency. For example, the Leviathan in charge of providing public information to a community can lie about the costs of construction to extract higher contributions from the taxpayers. Citizens therefore face the problem of how to “constrain the political leader from giving in to incentives for abuse and inefficiency” (Miller and Hammond 1994, 24). Miller and Falaschetti (2001) stress that while there is no perfect solution to this dilemma, one way to minimize its consequences is to transform the residual-owner into a team of agents with “known different interests.” In our case, this conforms to professional bureaucrats and elected officials. As a result of their heterogeneous nature, these agents will face a collective action problem if they want to collude in corrupt activities. In effect, as a most preferred example of a “residual-minimizing” polity, Miller and Hammond (1994, 23) propose establishing a “professional bureaucrat” who counterbalances the more homogeneous interests of elected politicians.

Applying that reasoning to this article, unlike the prevailing view in the corruption literature that tends to see autonomous bureaucrats as superior, corruption according to our view is prevented not because merit-recruited bureaucrats are “better types” than the political appointee, but simply that they are “different types.” Our main point is that both politicians and the professional bureaucracy need to be involved to undermine, and hence deter, corrupt behavior. Relatively high levels of corruption may thus also be expected from an administration that consists exclusively of merit-based bureaucrats without control by agents with a different (e.g., political) nature.

Several empirical examples illustrate this point. For one, there were frequent complaints about corruption and opacity in the most autonomous administrative corps of some bureaucratic authoritarian states such as Franco's Spain (Lapuente 2007, 221-24). Similarly, in Japan, merit-recruited bureaucrats have traditionally been regarded as powerful actors who are autonomous not only in policy implementation, but also in policy-making (Connors 2000, Nakamura 2001). Japan is a clear example of the lack of separation of interests between elected politicians and bureaucrats as they frequently share similar career patterns (Dahlström and Lapuente 2011).

According to the third hypothesis presented here, this integration of careers, and thus the lack of effective internal checks and balances, should lead to opacity and abuse of power. As a matter of fact, the press has blamed the highly autonomous Japanese bureaucracy—a “foggy fortress” wielding “enormous power”—for the “depth of corruption and bad governance” in Japan since the 1980s (*The Economist* 2010). In-depth studies of corruption in West European countries, such as De Graaf and Huberts's (2008) analysis of ten Dutch corruption cases, also point out the negative consequences of closed and enduring relationships among civil servants. One constant finding in the corruption cases in the Netherlands is that “because of loyalty and solidarity, colleagues are hesitant to report suspicions of another's corrupt activities” (De Graaf and Huberts 2008, 646). In other words, in contexts as diverse as Spain, Japan, and the Netherlands, isolated civil servants—irrespective of their “merit” when selected for their positions—may engage in corrupt activities. Autonomous public employees by itself does not seem to have been enough to deter corrupt behavior.

On the micro level, there are two reasons why separating the interests of politicians and bureaucrats, or what we refer to as a *professional bureaucracy*, may hamper corruption. First, introducing bureaucratic agents whose interests differ from those of their principals makes opportunistic actions such as accepting bribes or organizing kickbacks more difficult. While either elected officials or professional bureaucrats may engage in corrupt behavior, this requires coordination with actors who have different interests. Weakening the ties between politicians and bureaucrats generally diminishes the opportunity of collusion between these two types of actors.

Second, recruiting individuals from two different constituencies, one political and the other professional, establishes two parallel hierarchies of accountability. As Alesina and Tabellini (2007, 169-70) point out, “the main difference between top-level politicians and top-level bureaucrats lies in the ways in which they are held accountable. Politicians are held accountable, by voters, at election time. Top-level bureaucrats are accountable to their professional peers or to the public at large, for how

they have fulfilled the goals of their organization.” As a result, the careers of professional civil servants are independent from the careers of political incumbents. The future prospects of civil servants, inside or outside the administration, will therefore depend on their professional status and not on following the instructions of politicians. This in turn increases the chances for both types of actors to reveal and expose corrupt acts by the other type. In other words, creating different lines of accountability enables whistle-blowers on either side of the divide to take action against corruption.

These two reasons combined provide the micro-foundation for the separation of interest mechanism. Contrary to a political appointee, professional bureaucrats will not have much to gain from playing along if they observe corrupt behavior among politicians. For example, they have no interest in rewarding the supporters of any particular politician because their career is not dependent on the reelection of any political sponsor, but on the judgment of their professional peers. They have, however, much to lose by not exposing corrupt behavior. Their career will be seriously damaged if they are revealed to have known about corruption and failed to expose it. Basically the same argument applies to elected officials or political appointees when they discover a potentially corrupt behavior by merit-recruited civil servants.

## Data and Method

To test this theoretical argument, we need data on both corruption and the structure of the bureaucracy. With respect to the former, this article relies on the latest issue of the widely used World Bank Governance Indicator “control of corruption” from 2008 (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2009). It is a perceptions-based measure of corruption, “including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as ‘capture’ of the state by elites and private interests,” and draws on nineteen different sources of data (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2009, 6, 79).<sup>2</sup> It is sometimes argued that both administrative and political corruption should not be collapsed into one composite measure. From the theoretical perspective of this article however, this does not represent a major problem as the separation of interest mechanism should be expected to reduce both forms of corruption.

To find useful gauges of the structure of public administration, original data were collected through a country-expert survey that was completed by 520 public administration experts from fifty-two countries (see Appendix A at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>). A majority of the countries are located in Western Europe and North America together with post-communist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Only seven non-Western and non-post-communist countries are evaluated by at least three respondents: India, Brazil,

South Africa, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and Turkey, the last four of which are members of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Our sample of countries is thus heavily geared toward the developed world. As a result, it stands in relative contrast to the thirty-five developing countries analyzed in the pioneering Evans and Rauch (1999) data set on bureaucracies.

The exact wording of the questionnaire items that are based on the mechanisms used in Table 1 are presented in Appendix B (see <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>).<sup>3</sup> As shown in a related paper (reference deleted for anonymity), a principal component factor analysis reveals two independent dimensions in the structure of the sampled public administrations. The first dimension consists of meritocratic recruitment (the applicants' skills and merits decide who gets the job), the absence of political recruitment (the applicants' political connections determine who gets the job), and that members of the political elite recruit senior officials for internal promotion (i.e., that senior officials are internally recruited). The additive index representing this dimension has been labeled *bureaucratic professionalism* because it combines the features previous scholars have assigned to a professional bureaucracy (e.g., Silberman 1993).

The second dimension consists of recruitment through a formal examination system, lifelong careers, and special employment laws for public employees (i.e., employment contracts that differ from general labor laws). We label the additive index representing this dimension *bureaucratic closedness*, as it captures the most distinctive elements of closed civil service systems (Bekke, Perry, and Toonen 1996, 5; Lægheid and Wise 2007, 171).

It is important to note that our data show that competitive salaries, the bureaucratic feature linked to the "temptation" mechanism, does not correlate significantly to any of the two dimensions. This indicator is therefore included as a separate indicator in the empirical analysis. In summary, these three indicators reflect the three bureaucratic aspects described in Table 1.

The cross-country variations in the two additive indices, bureaucratic professionalism and bureaucratic closedness, are presented in Figures 1 and 2 (by construction, they range from 1 to 7). Figure 1 primarily shows countries that belong to the Anglo-American tradition, such as Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, or to the Scandinavian administrative tradition, such as Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, at the top of the Bureaucratic Professionalism continuum, which is consistent with conventional expectations. However, it also includes countries that belong to the East Asian administrative tradition, like Japan and Korea, which are known for a strong professional bureaucracy (Painter and Peters 2010). Further down we find countries whose civil services are known to be highly politicized, such as Spain, Italy, and Mexico (Matheson et al. 2007).

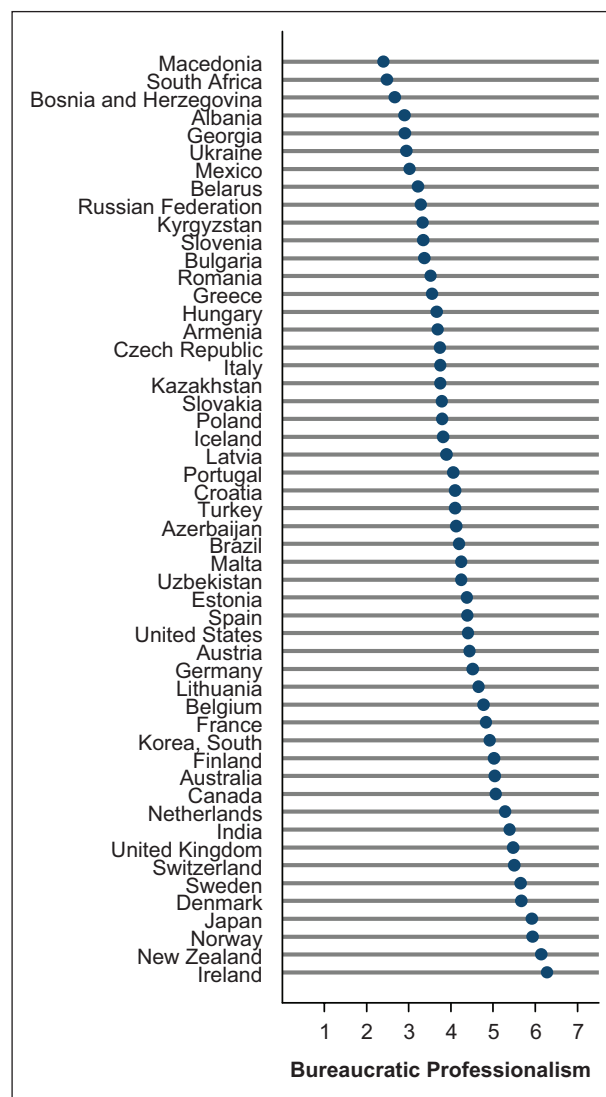
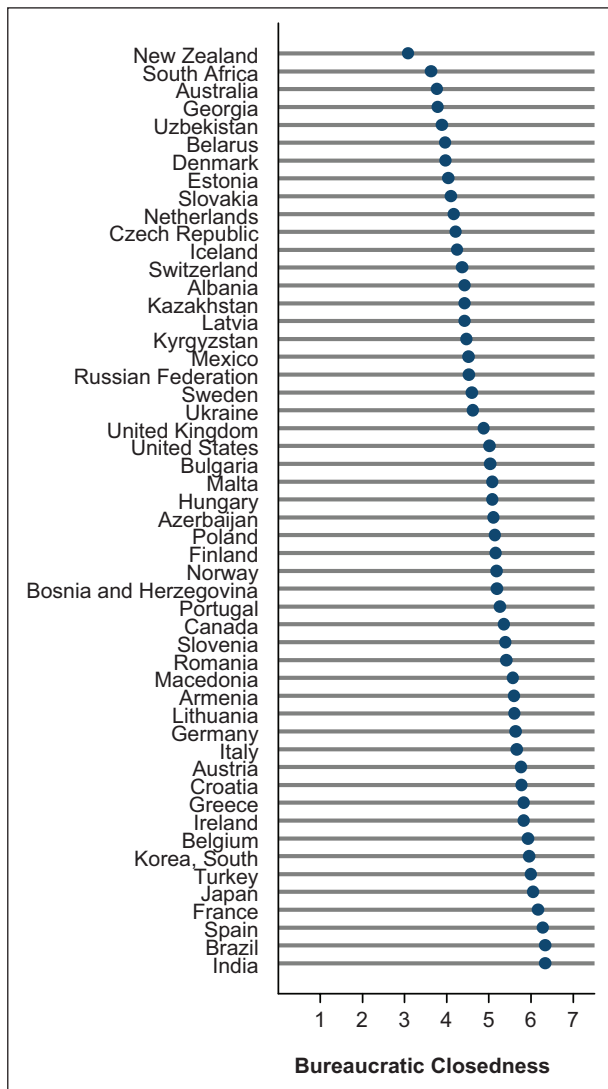


Figure 1. Bureaucratic professionalism (country scores)

Figure 2 shows the extent to which the civil service systems are "closed." Again, the ranking seems to correspond to established observations. The countries at the top are Brazil, India, Spain, France, and Japan, the last three of which are often pointed out as some of the clearest examples of a closed bureaucratic structure (Silberman 1993, 12). New Zealand's administration is the least "closed" or most "open," which is also consistent with the descriptive accounts in the literature (Lægheid and Wise 2007, 171-73).

## Results

We start the empirical analysis by testing the political institutional variables used in the comparative studies of corruption compared to the bureaucratic professionalization index. This index may be interpreted as mainly capturing the separation of interest mechanism, as its four



**Figure 2.** Bureaucratic closedness (country scores)

components refer to the bureaucratic features through which the mechanism of separation of political and professional interests is assumed to work (Table 1). The other dimensions of Weberianism, as well as their constitutive components, are set aside in this analysis.

Table 2 reports a series of cross-country regressions with the control of corruption indicator as the dependent variable, which was reversed to enhance interpretability (so that higher scores means more corruption, and vice versa).<sup>4</sup> As there is no standard set of economic and political determinants of corruption, we tested several alternative specifications. The first and most restrictive model is an exact replica of Rauch and Evans's (2000) specification and includes only GDP per capita (logged), level of education, and degree of ethno-linguistic fractionalization. The second model is based on New Political Economy explanations of merit adoption, including

proxies for what Lapuente and Nistotskaya (2009, 5) define as "intra-temporal and inter-temporal political fragmentation": the extent to which political power is currently fragmented (i.e., the number of veto players or political constraints on the current executive), or is fragmented over time (i.e., level and years of democracy). In addition, we also included the traditional cultural argument, which states that professional bureaucracy should be particularly suitable to "protestant ethics" (La Porta et al. 1997).

Models 3 and 4 follow the specification of some of the most encompassing models in the literature on corruption. In one of the broadest literature reviews to date, Treisman (2007, 211) argues that "quite strong evidence suggests that highly developed, long-established liberal democracies, with a free and widely read press, a high share of women in parliament, and a history of openness to trade, are perceived as less corrupt." Model 3 thus includes measures for all these correlates of corruption. Moreover, model 4 replicates the model used in Persson, Tabellini, and Trebbi's (2003) much cited work on electoral rules and corruption. It includes Rauch and Evans's (2000) variables together with the inverse of the average district size; the proportion of legislative candidates elected by plurality votes for individuals; the level and number of years of democracy; Protestantism, Confucianism; trade volume; and a dummy for OECD members. Model 5 assembles a parsed control model that retains every determinant that emerges as statistically significant in any of models 1 through 4.<sup>5</sup> Regional dummies are also introduced to eliminate the influence of some relatively extreme outliers.

The results show that the index of bureaucratic professionalism works as a statistically significant deterrent of corruption across all these specifications.<sup>6</sup> According to final parsed model, the coefficient of  $-0.24$  may be interpreted as indicating that a one unit increase on the 7-point scale of professionalism, all else being equal, leads to about a fourth standard deviation decrease in the level of corruption.

Retaining the same parsed control model, we now proceed to test the different alternative mechanisms in Table 3. First, our professionalism index is compared against the clusters of bureaucratic features that emerged from the principal components analysis: the open versus closed civil service dimension and the competitiveness of public wages. It is interesting to note that only professionalism emerges as a significant deterrent of corruption. The index for closed civil service systems, while only marginally significant, even has the wrong sign (indicating that more closed systems have higher levels of corruption, although not significantly so).<sup>7</sup> This implies that the traditionally praised bureaucratic features that have been expected to curb corruption through long-term socialization process in an esprit de corps are not supported in our

**Table 2.** Bureaucratic Professionalism and Corruption (Weighted Least Squares Estimates)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Professionalism	−0.34*** (0.08)	−0.25*** (0.08)	−0.29*** (0.09)	−0.34*** (0.09)	−0.24*** (0.08)
Log(GDP/cap)	−0.89*** (0.11)	−0.53*** (0.13)	−0.22 (0.20)	−0.58** (0.23)	−0.24* (0.12)
Education	0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)		0.00 (0.00)	
ELF	−0.34 (0.36)			−0.13 (0.35)	
Level of democracy (Polity)		−0.01 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.03)		
Level of democracy (Freedom House)				0.08** (0.04)	
Years of democracy		−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	
Political constraints		−0.97** (0.48)			−0.75* (0.41)
Protestantism		−0.01** (0.00)		−0.01*** (0.00)	−0.01** (0.00)
Confucianism				0.50 (0.37)	
Freedom of the press			0.01* (0.01)		0.01** (0.01)
Newspapers			0.00 (0.00)		
Television sets			−0.00 (0.00)		
Female representation			−0.02*** (0.01)		−0.01 (0.01)
Year opened to trade			0.00 (0.01)		
Inverse of district size				0.23 (0.86)	
Share of legislators elected by plurality vote				−0.30 (0.77)	
Trade volume				−0.00 (0.00)	
OECD member				−0.14 (0.20)	
Number of countries	50	47	43	39	47
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.810	0.887	0.908	0.882	0.924

Note: Entries are weighted least squares regression coefficients (standard errors within parentheses), with the inverse of the estimated error variance in the corruption perceptions measure used as weight. The dependent variable is the inverse of the World Bank “control of corruption” indicator from 2008. Model 5 contains regional dummies for Western, Latin American, African, and Asian countries. The constant term has been suppressed from the table. ELF = OECD = Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

data. In addition, the salaries of public employees do not seem to have any effect.

To identify more precisely the mechanisms that curb corruption, we take two additional steps: model (2) investigates the separate components of the professionalism index (although the twin items that capture the extent to

which recruitment is politicized have been averaged to reduce multicollinearity). Despite the fact that the components of the professionalism index are strongly inter-related, a recruitment system based on skills and merit emerges clearly as the strongest deterrent to corruption. In model (3) this indicator also supersedes the separate



**Table 3.** Components and Mechanisms (Weighted Least Squares Estimates)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Professionalism	-0.22*** (0.08)			
Closedness	0.13* (0.08)			
Competitive salaries	-0.01 (0.05)			
Meritocratic recruitment		-0.24** (0.09)	-0.25*** (0.08)	-0.28*** (0.07)
Politicized recruitment		0.07 (0.08)		
Internal promotion		-0.00 (0.07)		
Formal examinations			-0.01 (0.06)	0.03 (0.04)
Lifelong careers			0.07 (0.08)	
Special employment laws			0.05 (0.08)	
Number of countries	47	47	47	47
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.928	0.927	0.927	0.928

Note: Entries are weighted least squares regression coefficients, with standard errors within parentheses, and the inverse of the estimated error variance in the corruption perceptions measure used as weight. The dependent variable is the inverse of the World Bank "control of corruption" indicator from 2008. All models include the same control variables as model 5 of Table 3: log(GDP/cap), political constraints, Protestantism, freedom of the press, female representation, and regional dummies. The constant term has been suppressed from the table.  
\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

components of the bureaucratic "closedness" index, none of which alone is significantly related to corruption. Thus, neither formal examinations nor the guarantee of lifelong careers, nor special regulations that differ from the country's general labor laws seems to matter for deterring corruption when controlling for meritocratic recruitment. Finally, the two indicators of meritocracy are being compared: one is our preferred indicator of meritocratic recruitment, the other is an Evans and Rauch (1999) type of measurement, which inquires into the use of a formal examination system for recruitment in the public sector. The former indicator clearly gets the upper hand in this contest. In other words, whether civil servants need to pass a formal exam to join the civil service rather than the standard recruitment procedure in the private sector through CV screening and job interviews, such as in Scandinavian public sectors, is inconsequential. The only aspect that matters is whether civil servants are employed based on their skills and not depending on their political connections. These results have implications for the recruitment debate in some bureaucracies such as those in southern Europe. The opposition to the adoption in the public sector

**Table 4.** Correcting for Endogeneity (Weighted Least Squares and Weighted Two-Stage Least Squares Estimates)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Professionalism	-0.10 (0.08)		-1.15 (0.84)	
Meritocratic recruitment		-0.19*** (0.06)		-0.51** (0.18)
Corruption in 1996	0.35*** (0.10)	0.33*** (0.09)		
Number of countries	47	47	28	28
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.942	0.952	0.420	0.870

Note: Entries in models 1 and 2 are weighted least squares regression coefficients, in models 3 and 4 weighted two-stage least squares regression coefficients, with standard errors within parentheses, and the inverse of the estimated error variance in the corruption perceptions measure used as weight. The dependent variable is the inverse of the World Bank "control of corruption" indicator from 2008. All models include the same control variables as model 5 of Table 3: log(GDP/cap), political constraints, Protestantism, freedom of the press, female representation, and regional dummies. The constant term has been suppressed from the table.  
\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

of recruitment systems similar to those in the private sector (or in northern European public sectors), such as interviews and aptitude tests, is frequently based on the presumed ability of formal examinations to prevent nepotism and corrupt activities despite their costs and rigidities (Seage 1997). In the light of these results, this argument lacks empirical support.

Regarding the theoretically deduced causal mechanisms, the implications from Table 4 are compatible with the separation of interest mechanism. The results are also inconsistent with the esprit de corps and the temptation mechanisms. In other words, out of the three mechanisms in Table 1, separation of interests received the strongest support.

A potential objection to these results however concerns endogeneity bias. As perceptions-based measures were used on both side of the equation (albeit from different sources), how may we eliminate the possibility that the administrations of the less corrupt countries are simply perceived as being more professional and merit based? In Table 4, two strategies are employed to purge the estimates from endogeneity bias. First, one additional control is included that should at least ameliorate the problem: the lagged dependent variable, which implies that we draw on temporal variability in the corruption perceptions. We have hitherto relied solely on data from 2008, which is the most recent cross-sectional measure of corruption available. The first two models of Table 4 however control for the earliest available measure from 1996. As model 1 makes clear, this strategy reduces the effect of the professionalism index below standard thresholds for statistical

significance.<sup>8</sup> The merit indicator in model 2 however survives even this control. A unit increase in the extent of meritocratic recruitment thus corresponds to about a fifth of a standard deviation reduction in the perceived level of corruption in a country between 1996 and 2008.

Models 3 and 4 try yet another strategy: to instrument for professionalism and the meritocratic recruitment indicator by using an exogenous regressor. More specifically, we employ as an instrumental variable a measure of whether the state administration in a country was bureaucratic or patrimonial by the eighteenth century according to Ertman (1997). The measure is taken from Charron, Dahlstrom, and Lapuente (2010), who create a dummy variable for thirty-one OECD countries based on Ertman's division of modern European countries into two major categories: on one hand the polities like the German States, Sweden, or Britain, in which an autonomous merit-based bureaucracy was the result of the war-driven process of state building in the modern era; on the other the countries in which the state-building process led to the consolidation of a patrimonial administration, such as France, Spain, or Portugal.

If our theory is correct, this historical experience should primarily affect corruption today through the use of a professionalized and nonpoliticized bureaucracy. While the results again support our theory for the individual meritocratic recruitment indicator, they do not apply to the professionalism index. The fact that the coefficient for this indicator has even increased to a magnitude of  $-.51$  is probably due to the fact that our instrumental variable also corrects for random measurement error in the independent variable. The previous estimates of the impact of any measure from the expert survey are therefore presumably downwardly biased.

In addition to the quantitative test based on Ertman's (1997) historical variable, we may also address potential endogeneity bias by adding empirical illustrations from the reduction of systematic corruption in some established Western democracies. The usual historical narratives for these cases show that chronologically, meritocratic recruitment did not happen after administrative corruption was curbed, nor as a consequence thereof. In Britain, for example, the introduction of merit in a series of reforms starting with the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan report was not a consequence of a less corrupt administration. Rather, meritocratic recruitment was a device used by reform-minded politicians to curb corruption. Merit was an instrument to put an end to "fringe emoluments received by the major office-holders and their relatives" (Rubinstein 1983, 62) in the period known as the "Old Corruption" (Harling 1995). Similarly, as many public administration scholars have noted, the goal of the Progressive Era reformers who pushed for the adoption of merit recruitment systems (i.e., Civil Service Commissions)

across cities in the United States was mostly to disable the urban political machines within which corruption seemed to prosper (Van Riper 1958; Kelman 1987; Schultz and Maranto 1998). The historical experience of the United States suggests that the extension of merit, pushed by Progressive reformers in "one of the great crusades of the age," was the key for "righting the urban wrongs" of extensive corruption in cities in the United States (Teaford 1993, 30, 37).

The historical experience in curbing systematic corruption in countries like Australia (Curnow 2003, 62), Canada (Kernaghan 2003, 88-8), Finland (Tiihonen 2003, 106), the Netherlands (Van der Meer and Raadschelders 2003, 183), and Sweden (Rothstein 1982, 37) is also consistent with this argument. In these countries too, meritocratic recruitment reforms preceded the historical break with widespread administrative corruption.

## Conclusion

The literature on corruption has focused on either political or bureaucratic determinants. By contrast, this article attempts to bridge this gap by testing both types of explanations simultaneously, drawing on an original data set on the administrative structures of fifty-two countries. The empirical results show that first, some bureaucratic factors (most notably the meritocratic recruitment of public employees) exert a significant influence on curbing corruption even when controlling for the impact of most standard political variables. We believe that these variables capture the effect of the bureaucratic professionalism. Second, the results also indicate that another set of bureaucratic characteristics that constitutes the backbone of what the literature defines as "closed" bureaucratic structure (career stability and formal exams for bureaucrats) do not have any relevant effect. The second finding is surprising since "closed" bureaucratic structures have previously been praised as key deterrents of corruption.

The positive effects of separating the bureaucracy from political interferences have been emphasized by influential scholars in public administration since the classical works of Weber (1978) and Goodnow (1900) and have more recently been fueled by the empirical work of Evans and Rauch (1999) and Rauch and Evans (2000). However, the literature on "Weberian bureaucracy" presents some shortcomings. As pointed out by several authors (e.g., Olsen 2008), most important among these shortcomings is that different parts of a Weberian bureaucracy do not necessarily go together. This has limited the ability to analyze which particular features traditionally associated with a Weberian bureaucracy actually matter for deterring corruption.

This article contributes to this literature by disentangling the causal relationship between a Weberian bureaucracy

and low levels of corruption. We identify two causal mechanisms from the literature, esprit de corps and temptation, and add a third one, which we call the separation of interests. Our argument is that the essence of a professional bureaucracy is not that merit-recruited employees are “better” compared with politically recruited, but simply that they are “different” from elected officials. When it comes to fighting corruption, it is very important, as the two different groups will monitor each other. We interpret the empirical results as an argument against the esprit de corps and temptation mechanisms. Instead, a recruitment process based on the skills of the candidates, which creates a professional bureaucracy, appears to be the most important bureaucratic feature for deterring corruption.

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### Notes

1. There are also important debates on bureaucratic accountability understood from an ethical point of view—especially within the American public administration scholarship and following Dwight Waldo’s normative agenda (e.g., Nigro and Richardson 1990). For a critical review, see O’Kelly and Dubnick (2006).
2. We prefer the World Bank Institute measure over the “Corruption Perception Index” (CPI) produced by Transparency International for the simple reason that it is based on a somewhat broader set of sources. The two indicators are however correlated at .99 in our sample of countries, and robustness tests using the CPI measure do not indicate any substantial difference to our results.
3. For more details on country and expert selection and the rationale underlying our questionnaire design, see Dahlström, Lapuente and Teorell (2010).
4. To consider cross-country variation in the degree of measurement error of the dependent variable, we follow Persson,

Roland, and Tabellini (2003) in weighing observations in the cross-country regressions with the inverse of the standard errors of the corruption indicator.

5. The one exception is the Freedom House measure of level of democracy, which we omit due to collinearity with the Press Freedom Index.
6. This result also holds when controlling for natural resource abundance in terms of fuels and for a common law legal origin.
7. Both closedness and salaries are significantly related to corruption if entered individually to the model, but closedness positively so, and with the coefficient for salaries only about half the size of the coefficient for professionalism.
8. It should be noted however that without the regional dummies in the model, professionalism comes out as statistically significant even in model 1 of Table 4. This result however hinges on the inclusion of one extremely influential outlier: South Africa.

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