

The Eroding Effect of Corruption on System Support in Sweden

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Sweden is consistently found at the top in international indices of corruption. In recent years, however, several instances of corruption have been exposed, and surveys show that large shares of Swedish citizens harbor perceptions that public corruption is widespread. Drawing on recent surveys, two questions are asked. First, to what extent do Swedish citizens believe that corruption constitutes a serious problem? Second, how do citizens' evaluations of the extent of public corruption affect support for the democratic system? Approaching the issue from a comparative Nordic perspective, the data indicate that Swedes are considerably more prone to believe that politicians and public officials are corrupt than their Nordic counterparts. The analysis also suggests that such perceptions constitute an important determinant of support for the democratic system. Thus, even in a least likely case of corruption, such as Sweden, growing concerns about corruption has a potential to affect democratic legitimacy negatively.

Introduction

Corruption—understood as the abuse of public power for private gain (Treisman 2000, 399)—distorts free market competition, reduces the readiness of companies to invest, and inhibits entrepreneurship. It threatens the legitimacy of the rule of law and is often said to lower public confidence in political institutions. Corruption therefore undermines important prerequisites for both economic growth *and* democratic governance (cf. Bowler and Karp 2004; della Porta and Vanucci 1997; Goudie and Stasavage 1998; Jain 2001; Rose-Ackerman 1999; Uslaner 2008). It is often assumed that “bad governance,” and especially corruption, constitutes daunting threats to democratic development and political legitimacy in new and consolidating democracies. It is less clear, however, how corruption affects political support and legitimacy in established democracies, where corruption is traditionally regarded as rare and where levels of social trust and equality are high.

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Here, we set out to analyze public perceptions of corruption and abuse of power in a setting of advanced democracies with a record of good performance when it comes to control of corruption. We maintain that Sweden is a particularly interesting case to examine closer if one wants to learn more about the effects of corruption. In international rankings—such as Transparency International’s (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index, the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, and the Rule of Law Index (Agrast, Botero, and Ponce 2010, 2011) presented by the World Justice Project—Sweden has consistently received top rankings. Since TI launched their corruption index in 1995, Sweden has never been ranked lower than the sixth least corrupt state in the world. The high rankings in international comparative indices, and a general international image of a “clean” country, correspond neatly with the general Swedish self-image; that is, Sweden is a country where corruption and abuse of power hardly ever takes place. Sweden therefore approximates something that resembles a “least likely case” concerning the occurrence of corruption and low quality of rule of law. Results on the effects of corruption found here, so we argue, are most probably magnified in other settings. Thus, this article sets out to test the common assumption that corruption—or in this case, public *perceptions* of prevailing corruption among politicians and public officials—undermines legitimacy and erodes public trust in the democratic political system *even* in a least corrupt setting.

The article proceeds as follows. Initially, central concepts of the analysis are defined and operationalized. In the second section, a descriptive analysis of public perceptions of corruption and institutional fairness is presented. This analysis puts Sweden in a broader perspective comparing public perceptions of corruption and abuse of power in the Nordic countries. The third section uses recently collected data from a Swedish national survey (Survey 2009) to show that perceptions of institutional fairness and public corruption is an important determinant of public support that has been underestimated in earlier research on system support in advanced democracies, such as Sweden. In the fourth and last section, we present the conclusions and discuss the implications of our analysis.

Perceptions of Corruption and System Support: A Procedural Fairness Perspective

The last decade has seen a steady increase in empirical studies of the causes and effects of “quality of government” (cf. Adserà, Boix, and Payne 2003; Charron and Lapuente 2010; La Porta et al. 1999; Rothstein 2011; Rothstein and Teorell 2008). These studies share one basic premise: They consider corruption as perhaps the most serious challenge to governance of high quality and development in general. Besides hampering economic development, corruption contravenes what has been put forth to be the

basic principle of quality of government, namely, *impartiality in the exercise of public power*. Rothstein and Teorell (2008, 170) define this principle as, “when implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take anything about the citizen/case into consideration that is not beforehand stipulated in the policy or the law.”

The Independent Variable: Perceptions of Procedural (Un)Fairness

Quality of government is an *output*-related phenomena. In order for political institutions to be impartial, they have to rest on a basic norm of universalism, where public integrity is understood as equal treatment of citizens regardless of the group to which one belongs, for example, on the basis of ethnicity or sexual orientation (Mungiu-Pippidi 2006, 87–88). Hence, quality of government as impartiality rules out all forms of corruption and “particularistic” practices such as clientelism, patronage, and discrimination (Rothstein and Teorell 2008, 171). However, it is important to keep in mind that the universality of the principle of impartiality does not imply universality when it comes to the actual content of policies (Kurer 2005, 223). It is also important to note that impartiality is seen as the basic norm of quality of government, not the only aspect of it. A government that is perfectly evenhanded in its total incompetence would hardly qualify as “high quality.”

The focus on impartial implementation of public policies means that public perceptions of the impartiality of public institutions, and the impartiality of the actors that implement public policy, is our main concern.¹ We argue that citizens’ evaluations of the impartiality of institutions and public officials have a significant impact on evaluations of the performance of the political system as a whole (cf. Anderson et al. 2005; Dalton 2004; Easton 1965, 1975; Norris 1999). Our theoretical and empirical claim is thus closely related to the argument behind the “procedural fairness” theory, that is, the willingness of citizens to defer to the decisions and rules created and implemented by public authorities and institutions depends on the fairness of the procedures through which these authorities exercise their authority (Tyler 2006). The procedural fairness theory assumes that evaluations of the fairness of procedures and implementation of policy are independent of one’s self-interest (Kumlin 2004, 42; 2007, 373; Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler 2006). Whether citizens regard policies and decisions as legitimate depends on whether they believe them to be fair and impartial and, naturally, if they are *implemented* in a fair and impartial manner (Gilley 2009, 72; Tyler 1994, 2006; Tyler, Caspar, and Fisher 1989).

The Dependent Variable: System Support

Scholars working within the field of system support have generated hypotheses about the impact of a large number of factors that are expected

to explain variations in public support for the political system. The various explanatory factors that have been investigated can be categorized into a number of broader areas of interest. Throughout the last decades, scholars have highlighted the importance of issues such as different aspects of *economic* performance and development, both actual and perceived (cf. Clarke, Dutt, and Kornberg 1993; Finkel, Muller, and Seligson 1989; Rose and Mishler 1994); *political factors*, such as perceptions of the regime's respect for human rights, levels of corruption (on the macro level), being a political winner or loser, type of electoral system, and political interest (cf. Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson and Tverdova 2001, 2003; Blais and Gélinau 2007; Evans and Whitefield 1995; Hofferbert and Klingemann 1999; Mattes and Bratton 2007; Wagner, Schneider, and Halla 2008); interpersonal and institutional *trust* (cf. Dalton 2004, 69–71; Putnam 1993; Kunioka and Woller 1999; Warren 1999); and *value change* (cf. Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

The explanatory factor that is our main concern here—public perceptions of procedural fairness—has received limited interest from political scientists that have analyzed determinants of political support. However, a small but growing stock of evidence that supports the “fair process effect” has been produced. Scholars have shown that the legitimacy of political authorities and institutions diminishes when norms of procedural fairness are not adhered to. This is true in established as well as new democracies. In the American context, Tyler, Caspar, and Fisher (1989) demonstrate that diffuse support for the political system is to a large extent a product of the citizens' judgment of procedural fairness. Kumlin shows that individual experiences from interaction with welfare institutions have a substantial effect on trust and social capital in Sweden (Kumlin 2004; cf. Kumlin and Rothstein 2005).² Miller and Listhaug (1999) find that public evaluations of the fairness of government processes are an important aspect when it comes to judging the trustworthiness of government in the United States and Norway.

The importance of procedural fairness on system support has also been found in more recent democracies. For example, it has been shown that support for the democratic political system in the 10 postcommunist Central and East European Member States of the European Union is to a large extent a function of public perceptions of fairness and perceptions of the extent of corruption among public officials (Linde 2012). In a comparative analysis of four Latin American countries, Seligson (2002) concludes that procedural injustice and partiality in the form of corruption has a significant negative effect on support for the political system in general. In a more recent study of eight Latin American countries, Booth and Seligson (2009) find that citizens that have been subjected to corruption consistently evaluated the performance of their governments and political institutions more negatively. However, it is important to note that the two latter studies investigate how people's *actual experiences* (and not perceptions) of corruption affect political support. Interestingly, the findings of the few

micro-level analyses available also seem to travel well to the macro level: In a panel analysis of aggregated West European survey data, Wagner, Schneider, and Halla (2008) show that high-quality institutions, such as successful control of corruption and rule of law, exercise a strong positive effect on aggregate levels of satisfaction with democracy.

Drawing on the results of earlier research, we expect to find a statistically significant effect of citizens' perceptions of the extent of public corruption on support for the performance of the political system in general. In other words, citizens will evaluate the performance of the political system negatively if they believe that the system is partial in the exercise of political power.

Perceptions of Impartiality in Sweden and the Nordic Countries

It is important to view Sweden's top rankings in different corruption indices from a comparative perspective. Many countries have serious problems with corruption and abuse of power. Sweden's low levels of corruption are, of course, good news. Politically, corruption is violating fundamental democratic principles, such as transparency, equality, and fairness. In essence, it contravenes the basic principle of impartiality; that is, public institutions should operate in an impartial, rule-based manner, a principle that has been emphasized as the defining feature of high-quality government (Rothstein and Teorell 2008). If citizens perceive their political representatives and civil servants as being devoted to their own (or relatives and friends) enrichment, rather than to the public interest, trust in, and support for, the democratic political system and its institutions could very well be eroded.

The fact that Swedish authorities are viewed as leading when it comes to fair and impartial institutions is not in any way a guarantee for the *absence* of corruption. In fact, throughout the last two decades several corruption scandals have been exposed at all levels of government. Sweden has also recently been internationally criticized for the way it deals with its problems of corruption. For example, the European Council has expressed harsh critique against Sweden for lacking a formal regulation on political party financing, and already in the early 2000s, Sweden was criticized by GRECO (Group of States against Corruption 2001) for lacking sufficient means to detect and prevent corruption. Additionally, recent surveys have showed that, for example, one out of six top officials in Swedish municipalities have experienced bribe attempts (Dagens Samhälle 2010), and one out of three Swedish municipalities experienced cases of corruption in 2010 (Sveriges Radio 2010).³ As Erlingsson, Bergh, and Sjölin (2008) argue, it may well be the case that corruption and other departures from the norm of impartiality constitute an increasing problem throughout the past three decades. From our perspective, this is bad news. The theory described previously predicts that corrupt and partial behavior

on behalf of public officials—and even more serious, widespread *public perceptions* of corruption—should negatively affect public evaluations of the performance of the political system.

To investigate this hypothesized relationship, we start out by inquiring how Swedish citizens perceive the impartiality of politicians, public officials, and institutions. In order to give a feel for the specific problems Sweden faces, we will initially place Sweden in a comparative Nordic perspective, presenting data on perceptions of institutional fairness and extent of corruption also from Denmark, Finland, and Norway. Like Sweden, these countries have earned an international reputation as being in the top when it comes to belonging to the world's least corrupt countries. In the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index, they all placed themselves among the six least corrupt countries in the world. Denmark and Finland shared the position as the second most successful countries in the world at combating corruption with a score of 9.4. Sweden was ranked fourth, and Norway received the sixth place with 9.0.

In order to investigate public perceptions of procedural fairness, we will utilize survey data tapping ordinary citizens' views of the impartiality and fairness of public officials. Table 1 presents responses to a question about to what extent the respondents believe that public officials are treating people fairly. The data reveal a substantial degree of distrust in the fairness of public officials in the Nordic countries covered in the International Social Survey Program's (ISSP's) survey "Role of Government IV."

In Sweden, ranked as number one in World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index in both 2010 and 2011, no less than 13.5% of the respondents state that public officials only "seldom" or "almost never" treat people fairly. Only one out of four believe that people "almost always" are being treated evenhandedly. There are no dramatic differences between the Nordic countries, although Danes stand out substantially more satisfied with the fairness of public officials, while Swedes show the highest levels of discontent. Swedish citizens are also those clearly most prone to think

TABLE 1
Fair Treatment from Public Officials, 2006 (%)

	Almost Always	Often	Occasionally	Seldom	Almost Never
Sweden (<i>n</i> = 1,030)	24.9	35.5	26.1	9.9	3.6
Denmark (<i>n</i> = 1,301)	44.9	36.5	12.9	3.6	2.1
Finland (<i>n</i> = 1,101)	32.0	40.5	18.1	7.0	2.5
Norway (<i>n</i> = 1,227)	25.5	40.7	23.0	7.7	3.2
Mean (<i>N</i> = 4,659)	31.8	38.3	20.0	7.0	2.9

Source: ISSP 2006.

Note: Question reads: "In your opinion, how often do public officials deal fairly with people like you?" "Can't choose" and "No answer" have been left out.

TABLE 2
Treatment by Officials Depends on Personal Contacts, 2006 (%)

	Definitely	Probably	Probably Not	Definitely Not
Sweden (<i>n</i> = 1,133)	41.0	48.5	9.0	1.6
Denmark (<i>n</i> = 1,287)	8.4	32.3	24.8	16.5
Finland (<i>n</i> = 1,075)	13.4	43.5	36.1	7.0
Norway (<i>n</i> = 1,234)	21.4	46.7	28.0	3.9
Mean (<i>N</i> = 4,729)	20.7	42.5	29.3	7.5

Source: ISSP 2006.

Note: Question reads: "Do you think that the treatment people get from public officials in [country] depends on who they know?" "Can't choose" and "No answer" have been left out.

TABLE 3
Public Officials Involved in Corruption, 2006 (%)

	Almost None	A Few	Some	Quite a Lot	Almost All
Sweden (<i>n</i> = 936)	8.2	30.6	36.6	21.8	2.8
Denmark (<i>n</i> = 1,133)	31.1	53.5	12.4	2.2	0.8
Finland (<i>n</i> = 970)	13.5	36.1	33.2	14.6	2.6
Norway (<i>n</i> = 1,164)	8.2	29.9	42.7	18.7	0.4
Mean (<i>N</i> = 4,203)	15.6	37.8	31.0	14.0	1.6

Source: ISSP 2006.

Note: Question reads: "In your opinion, about how many public officials in [country] are involved in corruption?" "Can't choose" and "No answer" have been left out.

that the treatment people get from public officials depends on personal contacts (Table 2).

A quite stunning 41% of the Swedish respondents believe that individual citizens "definitely" can take advantage of personal contacts in their dealings with public officials. Another 48% believe that this is "probably" the case. In the other Nordic countries, corresponding levels are much lower, with Danish respondents expressing the highest levels of trust in the impartiality of public officials. It seems evident that there is a widespread feeling among Swedish citizens that many public officials disrespect the principle of impartiality in their implementation of public policy. This is particularly interesting considering Sweden's international reputation as a country where rule of law reigns and where problems of corruption are held to be among the lowest in the world.

We now turn to a number of questions more specifically concerned with corruption among public officials and politicians. The first question concerns corrupt behavior among public officials (Table 3). Once again, the Swedish respondents report the highest levels of distrust. About a fourth of the Swedes regard "almost all" or "quite a lot" of the public officials as

TABLE 4
Politicians Involved in Corruption, 2006 (%)

	Almost None	A Few	Some	Quite a Lot	Almost All
Sweden ($n = 929$)	11.3	32.5	34.3	17.1	4.7
Denmark ($n = 1,170$)	40.0	46.8	9.7	2.2	1.2
Finland ($n = 957$)	17.0	37.1	29.8	13.8	2.3
Norway ($n = 1,138$)	22.4	32.3	34.4	10.3	0.6
Mean ($N = 4,194$)	23.6	37.5	26.4	10.3	2.2

Source: ISSP 2006.

Note: Question reads: "In your opinion, about how many politicians in [country] are involved in corruption?" "Can't choose" and "No answer" have been left out.

being involved in corrupt activities of some kind. Not even 1 out of 10 Swedes believes that "almost none" take part in corrupt activities.

The same pattern is found when citizens are asked about the extent of corruption among politicians (Table 4). Almost 22% of the Swedish respondents report that "quite a lot" or "almost all" politicians are corrupt to some extent. The corresponding figures in the other countries are substantially lower, with Denmark at the other end of the spectrum (3.4%).

When it comes to perceptions of absence of corruption, there is considerable variation between the four countries. In Denmark, the share of respondents thinking that "almost no" politicians are behaving corrupt is 40%. In Sweden, this proportion is only 11%, while the corresponding figures for Finland and Norway are 17% and 22%. Thus, again, Sweden stands out as a distinct negative case among the Nordic neighbors. All in all, this presentation of available comparative data forms a pattern. Compared to their Nordic neighbors, Swedish citizens are considerably more negative in their evaluations of the way public officials and politicians stick to the principles of fairness and impartiality in political decisions and the implementation of public policy.

From our perspective, seeing perceptions of procedural fairness as a potentially important determinant of political support, the first question that comes to mind is if the negative evaluations of the Swedish citizens compared to the publics in the other countries are transferred to the level of more general political support. Unfortunately, the ISSP 2006 survey does not carry any questions about support for the political system and its institutions, making it impossible to examine the relationship between perceptions of impartial treatment and system support.

The item that comes closest to a proxy for some kind of generalized political support is a question about whether or not the respondents trust civil servants to do what is best for the country.⁴ Of course, this question is closely related to the items asking about the fairness and

corruption of public officials and not surprisingly, the micro-level correlations between the “public officials variables” and trust in civil servants are strong.⁵ Somewhat more interestingly is the fact that public perceptions of the extent of corrupt behavior among *politicians* also are strongly correlated with citizens’ general trust in civil servants (Pearson’s r ranging from 0.28 in Denmark to 0.45 in Finland). On the aggregate level, the relationship is relatively strong. In Denmark, where citizens are most likely to believe that politicians and public officials are clean, 56% of the respondents also express trust in civil servants. The corresponding figure for Sweden is as low as 17%. Finland and Norway come in between with 45% and 35%, respectively. However, because our main interest is on the relationship between perceptions of procedural fairness and generalized system support, we need solid operational indicators of both perceptions of impartiality and political support.

The Effect of Perceptions of Corruption on Political Support

In order to carry out a thorough investigation of the relationship between perceptions of procedural fairness and political support, we turn to a recent survey of political attitudes among the Swedish population.

Data and Measurement

Our analysis draws on data from Survey 2009, a national survey that covers a representative sample of Swedish residents between 15 and 85 years of age and contains a number of questions about politics and trust that are relevant to our interests.⁶ It does not contain explicit questions about impartiality, but nonetheless a few questions about public perceptions of the extent of abuse of power among public officials and politicians. In the following, we will use two of these items as our measures of public perceptions of the impartiality of politicians and public officials. The first item deals with abuse of power among politicians and public officials, and the respondents have the possibility to agree or disagree to the following statement: “It is common that local-level politicians and public officials take advantage of, and abuse, their position for their own good.”

One may ask why we use an item that asks about perceptions of corruption at the local level. We argue that this is actually more relevant than looking at corruption at the state level in a country like Sweden. First of all, Swedish local self-government is comparatively strong and municipalities are economically potent, accounting for about two-thirds of all public output. Second, the local level is responsible for implementing important policy areas, notably social services, child care and pre-schools, elderly care, primary and secondary education, planning and building issues, health and environmental protection, waste management, and water and sewerage. In other words, as argued by Andersson

and Erlingsson (2012), regarding the opportunities to engage in corrupt behavior, municipalities deliver most of the services and production that the public sector is responsible for. There are several opportunities for civil servants to engage in corruption, merely due to the sheer number of activities that they carry out. Additionally, many of these activities are susceptible to corruption because they involve (1) managing procurement and purchasing; (2) granting permits and licenses, supervising and inspecting activities and operations (and shutting down those that violate the law); (3) exercising authority in matters directly relating to individuals; and (4) deciding how public resources are to be distributed, for example, grants to support the activities of organizations and groups (cf. Andersson 2008).

The data from the ISSP 2006 presented in the previous part showed widespread public discontent among Swedish citizens with the way politicians and public officials are acting on the national level. Although the question from Survey 2009 specifically asks about the local level, the results correspond almost perfectly with those from ISSP 2006, reported in Tables 3 and 4. The respondents are asked to agree or disagree with the statement that it is common that politicians and public officials take advantage of their position. A total of 19% of the respondents “definitely agree” with the statement that it is common that local-level politicians and public officials take advantage of their position, 29% agree “to a large extent,” and 41% agree “to some extent.” Only 11% of the respondents do “not at all” agree.

The second question that will be used reads: “How do you think that the problems with abuse of power among politicians and public officials have changed during the last 15 years?” The respondents have the option to choose from a five-point scale going from “increased a lot” to “decreased a lot.” The data provide strong evidence for the fact that Swedish citizens believe that corruption is a problem that has increased over the last two decades. A total of 56% of the respondents believe that the problem of corruption has increased “strongly” or “somewhat” during the last 15 years, while only 14% believe that corruption among politicians and public officials is a diminishing problem. These figures fit neatly with other available data. In a survey conducted in 2003, 40% of the Swedish citizens stated that they believed corruption to increase in the near future. In 2007, the share of pessimistic respondents had grown to 59% (Global Corruption Barometer 2003, 2007). Although these questions do not use the exact word “corruption,” we believe them to be useful proxies of the respondents’ evaluations of the extent of corruption as the abuse of public power for private gain, which has become the standard definition of corruption in comparative studies (cf. Erlingsson, Bergh, and Sjölin 2008; Sandholtz and Koetzle 2000).

This result is not as surprising as it might seem at first. As argued by Erlingsson, Bergh, and Sjölin (2008), there are reasons to expect that the practice of abusing public power for private gain has increased since the early 1990s. First, new public management reforms—organizational

reforms striving to make the public sector more market oriented—have been far reaching in Sweden. The *process* of transferring large volumes of assets (which once were publicly owned, financed, and administered) to private hands creates opportunities for corruption because no adequate mechanisms for supervision for the new ways of organizing the municipalities' activities has been designed. Also, these rather swift reorganizations have made roles and norms within public organizations unclear. Second, many municipalities have converted parts of their activities into independent subsidiary companies. This implies less transparency and public control in the public activity converted, moves large amount of administration of public resources away from the freedom of access to public records and makes it harder for citizens to appeal against decisions. All in all, these two developments have created opportunities for engaging in corrupt behavior, while simultaneously lowering the risk for being caught while engaging in such behavior.

In order to investigate the effect of perceptions of corruption on system support we need an indicator that taps generalized support for the performance of the political system. Survey 2009 provides a version of the frequently used question about "satisfaction with democracy."¹⁷ The "satisfaction with democracy" item has been debated in the literature on system support, and it has been discussed what it actually measures (cf. Anderson 2002; Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Canache, Mondak, and Seligson 2001; Linde and Ekman 2003). Empirical analyses have nevertheless shown that it should above all be treated as an indicator of support for the perceived *performance* of the political system (Anderson 2002; Linde and Ekman 2003; cf. Norris 1999), which is an important dimension of political legitimacy (Booth and Seligson 2009; Gilley 2009; Norris 2011). We will use this item as our dependent variable, that is, generalized support for the performance of the Swedish political system (cf. Fuchs, Guidorossi, and Svensson 1995).

To sum up, then, what we set out to do in the following part is to empirically investigate the effect of public perceptions about the extent of corruption on political support. Thus, in line with the procedural fairness theory we expect this effect to be negative; that is, people who perceive public officials and politicians to be using their positions for private gain are also less likely to evaluate the functioning of the political system negatively.

The Effect of Perceptions of Corruption on Support for Democracy

The relationship between perceptions of corruption and system support is tested by a series of regression analyses that are presented in Table 5. The dependent variable is the survey item "If you think about the democratic system in our country, how well do you think it works?" As indicated earlier, the performance of the Swedish democratic system is in general favorably evaluated by the citizens. A total of 75% of the respondents think that democracy works "very" or "fairly good" (8% and 67%, respectively),

TABLE 5
**Effects of Perceived Quality of Government on Satisfaction with Democracy
 (Logit Coefficients and Standard Errors)**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Politicians and public officials are engaged in corruption (1 = definitely disagree, 4 = definitely agree)	-0.584*** (0.072)		-0.476*** (0.081)
Development of corruption last 15 years (1 = strongly decreased, 5 = strongly increased)		-0.349*** (0.063)	-0.166** (0.074)
Political interest (1 = not at all interested, 4 = very interested)			0.333*** (0.088)
Interpersonal trust (1 = definitely disagree, 4 = definitely agree)			0.027 (0.082)
Gender (1 = female, 2 = male)	-0.141 (0.130)	-0.201 (0.123)	-0.245* (0.136)
Age	0.006* (0.004)	0.005 (0.003)	0.004 (0.004)
Education (six levels)	0.120*** (0.038)	0.169*** (0.036)	0.087** (0.041)
Income (five levels)	0.141** (0.056)	0.141*** (0.053)	0.151*** (0.058)
Number of observations	1,496	1,674	1,445
Pseudo R ²	0.07	0.05	0.09

Source: Survey 2009.

* $P < 0.10$, ** $P < 0.05$, *** $P < 0.01$.

21% claims that democracy works “rather badly,” while the share that believes that democracy works “very badly” is as small as 3%. Because of the very small portions of very satisfied and very dissatisfied respondents in the multivariate analysis, the item has been dichotomized, taking on the value 1 if the respondent thinks democracy works “very” or “fairly good” and the value 0 if the answer is “very” or “rather badly.”⁸

The first logistic regression model in Table 5 examines the effect of citizens’ perceptions of the *extent* of corruption among local-level politicians and public officials on satisfaction with democracy. It also includes four standard sociodemographic control variables (gender, age, education, and income). As our hypothesis suggests, perceptions of corruption show a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable, meaning that citizens who perceive politicians and public officials as involved in corrupt activities also tend to be discontent with the way the democratic political system works. The regression also shows that educational level and personal income have a positive effect on the dependent variable.

In the second model, we investigate how people’s perceptions of the development of corruption affect their evaluations of the performance of the democratic system. This item asks the question in what way the

respondents believe that the problems with abuse of power and corruption among local politicians and public officials have developed during the last 15 years. The analysis shows that also perceptions of the development of corruption have a statistically significant effect on political support, although not as strong as the perceived extent of corruption.

The third model in Table 5 tests the independent effects of the corruption variables, and also introduces two variables that in earlier studies have shown to be of great importance for system support. As expected from the results of earlier research, political interest also shows a statistically significant effect on support. However, interpersonal trust is not of any importance for generalized system support in Sweden, at least not when controlling for perceptions of corruption. The introduction of the control variables causes only minor changes in the effect of perceived extent of corruption. The coefficient is only slightly dwarfed and still statistically significant at the 99% level.

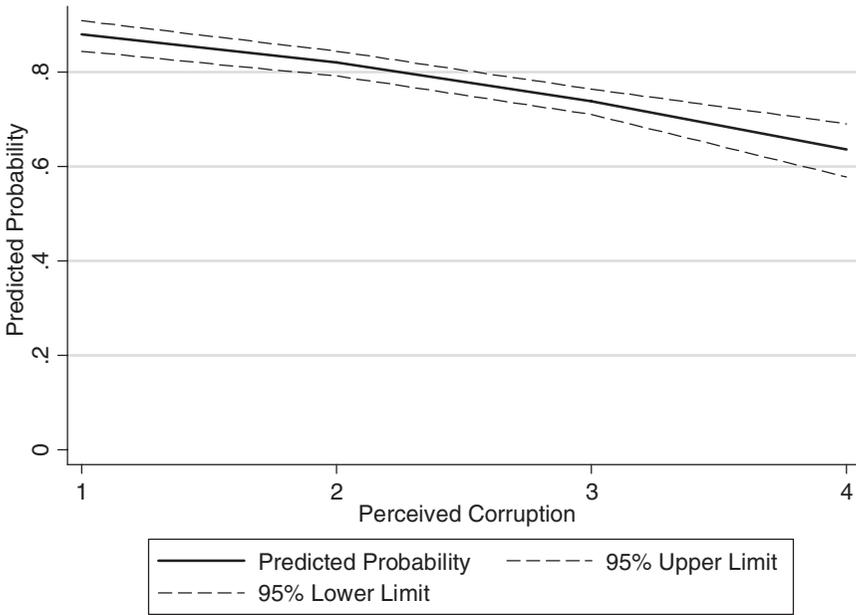
Whether or not the respondents believe that the problems with corruption have increased during the last 15 years seems to matter less when taking their perceptions of the current extent of corruption into account, but the effect is nevertheless significant at the 95% level. Thus, the empirical analysis provides strong support in favor of the “procedural fairness claim” proposed in this article, that is, the perceived level of impartiality in the processes of decision making and implementation of policies is a very important source of political support, also in a the relatively noncorrupt Sweden. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the logistic regression analyses, Figure 1 presents the results as predicted probabilities of satisfaction with the way democracy works.

There are quite substantial differences in predicted probabilities for different perceptions of the extent of corruption among local-level politicians and public officials. A person who strongly disagrees to the proposition that acts of corruption and abuse of power are common has a probability of 0.88 to also express satisfaction with the way the democratic system works. The corresponding figure for those who believe that corruption is widespread is 0.64, producing a difference of 24 percentage points between the two extreme positions. Although general system support in Sweden is at a very high level, seen from a comparative perspective, it is strongly affected by public perceptions of corruption. Therefore—from a perspective of democratic system support—it is worrying that a large share of the Swedish public believes that the extent of corruption has increased during the last decades and that it is likely that it continues to increase in the future.

Conclusions

Corruption is a topic that has typically been discussed in relation to developing or transitional countries. Since the mid-1990s, however, increasing attention has been paid to these issues even in advanced

FIGURE 1
Predicted Probabilities of Satisfaction with Democracy at Different Levels of Perceived Corruption



Note: The predicted probabilities are based on the logistic regression model 3 in Table 5. The effects of the independent variable are calculated when all other variables in the model are held at their mean

democracies, and nowadays it is widely acknowledged that even though states do get high ratings by TI and other monitoring organizations, it does not automatically imply that corruption and abuse of power do *not* constitute real problems and therefore can have detrimental effect even in these settings.

This article is about corruption in “least corrupt settings.” We have focused on Sweden, a state that has consistently been ranked among the six least corrupt countries in the world by TI. We approached the issue by highlighting one crucial negative effect of corruption that is often discussed, but is seldom investigated empirically, namely, “To what extent do public *perceptions* of corruption affect public support for the democratic system in an advanced democracy such as Sweden?” Our results indicate that Swedish citizens to a large extent believe their politicians and public officials to be corrupt. In addition, 9 out of 10 Swedes believe that individual citizens can take advantage of personal contacts in their dealings with public officials. This certainly raises questions about the universality and impartiality of the public administration in Sweden, particularly since

corresponding levels are much lower in the neighboring Nordic countries. These results further raise the question if international indices are able to capture the specific nature and extent of corruption in countries such as Sweden, where local self-government is strong and much of the presumed corrupt activities are expected to take place at the local level.

But what can these public perceptions really tell us? A critical reader could argue that there is no need to be alarmed by these results since the correspondence between citizen perceptions of corruption, and the actual occurrence of it, is in no way obvious. As valid as this argument may be, we strongly argue that it does not really matter whether or not citizens' perception of corruption and the actual extent of corruption correspond, at least not from the system support perspective adopted here. Our results show that even in a "least corrupt" setting, such as Sweden, citizens' perceptions of corruption do have an independent detrimental effect on their support for the political system. Although general system support in Sweden is comparatively high, we have showed that it is strongly affected by public perceptions of corruption.

Against this backdrop, it is deeply worrying that large shares of the Swedish citizens do believe that the extent of corruption has increased during the last decades and think that it is likely that it will continue to increase in the future. If the share of citizens who believes that politicians and public officials are using their positions for their own good is increasing in the future, as indicated by our data, in the long run it could have a significant eroding effect on general system support in Sweden.

Notes

1. The focus on impartial implementation of public policy, in particular on the local level, implies that we are dealing with the type of corruption that is often referred to as "petty" or "administrative" corruption in the literature.
2. Also see Esaiasson (2010) in which it is shown that the perceived fairness of treatment has a strong impact on citizens' acceptance of decisions by government officials. In fact, *perceived* fairness is observed to matter much more than the *actual* conduct by the officials.
3. This newfound interest in corruption and power abuse from Swedish media in 2010 was sparked by the exposure of a large-scale corruption scandal in Sweden's second largest city, Gothenburg, where several top officials had tight connections with a construction company, and allegedly, had let themselves be bribed to treat the company favorably in the municipality's purchasing processes.
4. The respondents had the possibility to "strongly agree," "agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" with the statement, "Most civil servants can be trusted to do what is best for the country."
5. The correlations between the "public officials involved in corruption" item and trust in civil servants are 0.33 for Denmark, 0.46 for Finland, 0.30 for Norway, and 0.36 in Sweden (all correlations significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed).
6. Survey 2009 was conducted by Survey Institutet (the Survey Institute) at the Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden. The questionnaire contains questions

about values, politics, the environment, confidence, corruption, religion, work, economy, and media. It was sent by regular mail to a randomly selected sample of Swedish residents between 15 and 85 years. The total number of respondents was 1,877. See Hagevi (2010) for technical information about Survey 2009.

7. In Survey 2009, the exact wording of the question is: "If you think about the democratic system in our country, how well do you think it works?"
8. The level of satisfaction with democracy measured by Survey 2009 (75% of the respondents stating that democracy works very or fairly good) corresponds very well to other surveys, for example, the Eurobarometer and the annual surveys conducted by the SOM (*Samhälle, Opinion, Massmedia* [Society, Opinion, Mass media]) Institute, where levels of satisfaction are usually between 70% and 80% <http://www.som.gu.se/som_institute/about-som/>.

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