

Measuring Corruption from Public Justifications: Insights from the Brazilian Anti-Corruption Agency

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Abstract : This paper contributes to the discussions that consider corruption as a challenge to the establishment of more democratically inclusive societies in Latin America. The paper advocates an intrinsic connection between democratic principles and corruption control – it is only possible to achieve just forms of democratic life if accountability institutions are able to control corruption, and therefore control the political exclusions that it brings. Departing from a non-trivial approach to corruption, and recognizing a gap in democratic theory when thinking about this phenomenon, corruption is understood as the breakdown of the democratic inclusive rule, whereby political decisions are made (and actions were taken) in spite of those potentially affected by them. Based on this idea, this paper proposes a new way of measuring corruption, moving away from usual aggregate measures – such as the Corruption Perception Index – and case studies of corruption scandals. The main argument sustains that corruption is intrinsically connected with the ability to be accountable and to provide public justification for the political conduct. The point advocated is that corruption involves a dimension of political exclusion. It generates a private benefit which is, from a democratic point of view, illegitimate, since it benefits some at the expense of the decisions made by the political community. Corruption is then a form of exclusion based on deception and opacity – for corruption, there is no plausible justification. Empirically, the paper uses the audit reports produced by the Brazilian anti-corruption agency (the CGU - Office of the Comptroller General) in its Inspections From Public Lotteries Program to exemplify how we can use this definition to separate corruption cases from mismanagement irregularities. On one side, there is poor management and inefficiencies, and, on the other, corruption, defined by the implausibility of public justifications – because the public officials would have to publicize illegitimate privileges and undue advantages. CGU reports provide the justifications given by the public officials for the irregularities found and also the acceptance or not by the control agency of these justifications. The analysis of this dialogue – between public officials and control agents – makes it possible to divide the irregularities on those that can be publicly justified versus those that cannot. In order to hold public officials accountable for their actions, making them responsible for the exclusions that they may cause (such as corruption), the accountability institutions fulfil an important role in reinforcing and empowering democracy and its basic inclusive condition.

Keywords : accountability, brazil, corruption, democracy

Conference Title : ICAGGHR 2017 : International Conference on Anti-Corruption, Good Governance and Human Rights

Conference Location : Venice, Italy

Conference Dates : June 21-22, 2017