

A Narrow Wind: Corruption, Governance, and the Global Rise of the Authoritarian Right

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Abstract

The advancement of populist authoritarian tendencies in liberal democracies across the globe has been topic of concern in both academic and mainstream political thought. Several populist movements in the West have expressed a desire to stem corruption as part of their overall platform. Is the state's ability to control corruption connected to a rise in authoritarian tendencies? Using a social trust theory lens on corruption, this paper examines the linkage between social trust, corruption, and rising tendencies toward populist authoritarianism. Using panel data from 32 countries over a period ranging from 1995 to 2014, statistical evidence is presented to show evidence of the link between social trust, the state's ability to control corruption, and the rise in authoritarian tendencies. A state with a high level of governance and a falling level of control over corruption has a higher likelihood of experiencing a rise in authoritarian tendencies.

Keywords: Corruption; Global Governance; Authoritarianism; Social Trust; Populism; Political Trust; Rule of Law.

I: Introduction

On October 28th, 2018, the Brazilian presidential election ended with former military officer and avowed right-wing populist authoritarian Jair Bolsonaro winning. The left-leaning Worker's Party that he ran against had in 2016 been driven out of power in the Chamber of Deputies; Bolsonaro's election finished off the complete electoral defeat of a party that had ruled in Brazil since the 2003 election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Bolsonaro is a controversial figure, within and outside of Brazil. He is an admirer of Brazil's previous military dictatorship, whose rule from 1964 until 1985 was marked by human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings (Reeves, 2018). He has vowed to torture leftist opponents, clear "Marxists" out of the universities, to ignore human rights when convenient, to strip environmental protections from the Amazon rainforest, and has made abusive comments regarding gender and sexual minorities (Reuters, 2018). Why did Brazil choose to veer off in such a hard-right, authoritarian direction?

One common theme that recurred throughout the electoral campaign was the corruption that had flourished under the previous Worker's Party government (Reuters, 2018). Donald Trump, whom Bolsonaro voiced a policy and attitude-driven affinity for, also ran a presidential campaign that played upon American perceptions that the federal government in Washington, D.C. was thoroughly corrupt and that he would "Drain The Swamp" upon his arrival in the Oval Office (C-Span, 2016). He decried his opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as a "corrupt elite insider" (BBC, 2016). For these two, the perception (and at times, the stark reality, in the case of Bolsonaro's predecessor Lula da Silva) (Londono, 2017) of corruption in governance was a major factor in the wave of popular support that buoyed their success.

Bolsonaro and Trump are just two examples of a rise of populist right-wing authoritarian governments that have cropped up across the globe in the past several years. The post-Soviet space

of Eastern Europe, parts of the Asian Pacific region, and the post-Arab Spring MENA region have all experienced a rise in authoritarian governance since 2013, and with Trump and the Five Star Movement in Italy even the liberal democratic order of Western Europe and North America have experienced this phenomenon. Is corruption, specifically the state's ability to control corruption, a major factor in this authoritarian rise?

This paper will examine the links between the rise of right-wing authoritarianism and the state's willingness or ability to control corruption. Using panel data comprising 32 countries over a period between 1995 and 2014, this paper will show that control of corruption is a major, significant factor in whether a state will experience a rise in authoritarianism. This paper will begin by examining the links between corruption, social trust, and right-wing authoritarianism in the literature. It will then outline the design of the study, display the results, and discuss the results in light of the theory built from the literature.

II: Literature and Theory

Corruption is a pervasive, endemic problem that has been the focus of the international community since the end of the Cold War, and especially since the turn of the 21st Century. Definitions of corruption can vary depending on what exact aspect of corruption one wishes to study. A general-purpose definition that captures most aspects of the problem – and, consequently, one that is cited often in the literature – is that corruption is “the misuse of public office for private gain” (Treisman, 2000: 399). This definition is broad and captures both ‘petty corruption’ (typically the acceptance of bribes by public officials in order to provide services to the public) and ‘grand corruption’, which Susan Rose-Ackerman defines as “collusion among the highest levels of government that involves major public sector projects, procurement, and large financial benefits among high-level public and private elites” (Rose-Ackerman, 1999: 27).

Higher levels of corruption are often shown to have negative effects on social trust, and this corrosive effect on social trust in turn has a negative effect on aspects of the state and governance that rely on open and honest coordination for ethical success. Social trust theory is largely an outgrowth of Robert Putnam's early work on social capital, which is a combination of norms, networks, and social trust, and holds that a key factor in the maintenance of a successful democratic state is a certain level of trust between citizens in that state. (Putnam, 1993). Social trust is the key linkage here, as several studies have noted that corruption can be seen as the basis for the disintegration of state functions, state institutions, and the trust that citizens have in those bodies and therefore in each other. Higher levels of social trust are correlated with higher levels of confidence in the institutions of the state (Granlund and Setälä, 2012); higher growth in corruption is found to influence a lower perception of other citizens in general (Rothstein and Eek, 2009).

Social trust has also been seen to have an influence on judicial institutions as well as institutions charged with governing economic matters (Bjornskov, 2009). Anna Alon and Amy Hageman, in a study of post-Soviet transition states, find that higher levels of corruption and higher levels of "particularized trust" (trust in personal family and friend networks) led to a reduced willingness to comply with tax regulations (Alon and Hageman, 2012). The influence of social trust on institutional trust has been seen as a "mediating factor" between perceived levels of corruption in society and an individual's life satisfaction (Ciziceno and Travaglino, 2018). The well-trod link between corruption and economic growth has also been studied through a lens of social trust, with the finding that both the absence of corruption and higher levels of social trust are significant in states that feature faster rates of economic development (Seritzlew et al, 2014).

Some studies find a more direct route between social trust and corruption without the intervening factor of institutional confidence. Peter Graeff and Gert Svendsen defined social trust

as “positive” social capital and corruption as a “negative manifestation” of social capital, using the divide between universalistic and particularistic networks to frame the two (Graeff and Svendsen, 2012). Applying this framework to a study of European countries, they find that corruption directly impacted poorer European states economically, and that “the augmentation of positive social capital could work as an effective counterforce to corruption, even if it does not compensate for the economic loss” (Graeff and Svendsen, 2012: 2844).

There is some evidence of a correlation between social trust and the overall mores of a society. A study on corruption and trust finds that the potential for universalistic attitudes, particularly collective action for environmental concerns, is sharply reduced in areas with high levels of corruption (Harring, 2012). A cross-national study by Natalia Letki finds that “the creation of stable, transparent, and efficient institutions is necessary for the emergence of a culture of honesty and civic morality among citizens” (Letki, 2006: 321). Letki’s study conflates a number of questions of social mores into a single indicator; while this technique is replicated in part here, it should be noted that each of the questions that is subsumed under the social mores category indicates different types of morality. Briefly, it can be stated that there is a difference between being willing to evade fares for public transportation and being willing to evade taxes. However, the conflation gives a useful indicator of the general overall social mores of a particular state, and as such it is used here.

Corruption’s effect on democracy has also been studied, although the majority of the literature in this branch focuses on the effect of corruption on voting behaviour, particularly electoral turnout (see Dalhberg and Solevid, 2016; Stockemer et al, 2013; Miles, 2015). Democracy is more than just electoral snapshots, however; turnout is important, but so is civic engagement. The link between social trust and corruption involves also studying the link between

institutional decay and civic engagement, often in the form of political and non-political volunteering. In a study of twenty European democratic states, Nicolas Griesshaber and Benny Geys finds that denser “inclusive” social networks (networks based on voluntary service and universal membership potential) were correlated with lower levels of corruption; “exclusive”, in-group defined organizations had the opposite result (Griesshaber and Geys, 2012: 72). Jose Lopez and Jose Santos find similar results with regard to the negative aspect of this – that the “formation of closed particularistic groups” were a “breeding ground for the development of corruption and rent-seeking” (Lopez and Santos, 2014: 706-7). Another study, on political participation in European countries, finds further evidence that poor governance, in the form of corruption, negatively impacts civic engagement (Hoaghe and Quintelier, 2014). John Ishiyama, et al, finally, find in a study of Georgia that there is a positive association between levels of social trust and the rate of volunteering; they tie this correlation to an explanation as to why Georgia displays higher level of social trust and institutional confidence than other post-Soviet states in the region (Ishiyama, et al, 2018).

The link between the rise of authoritarianism and the control of corruption lies in social trust as well, in that a decay in institutional confidence would be (as per Granlund and Setälä) represented in a decay in general social trust. This decay in social trust, driven by the perception that the deck is stacked against the ordinary citizen by the kind of ‘corrupt elites’ railed against by Bolsonaro, Giuseppe Conte, and Donald Trump, drives increasingly large sectors of the populace of certain states to gravitate toward populist authoritarian figures as a way to provide easy answers to their reduced level of trust in the basic nature of the state. This can be seen as a backlash against the economic policies of neoliberalism that have resulted in increasing inequality and wealth concentration (Bugaric and Kuhelj, 2018; Chacko, 2018); this effect is exacerbated in democracies,

where the “public expects its government to be not only competent but ethical” (Wang, 2016: 229). The connection between the lack of control of corruption and the rise of authoritarianism is also linked specifically to right-wing ideology; Dalibor Rohac et al. find that corruption is linked to larger vote shares for right-wing populist parties, although they caution that this effect is diminished somewhat when controlling for institutional quality over time, and tends to inflate when combined with immigration effects (Rohac et al, 2017: 393).

Given the literature consulted, we should expect to see that states with certain characteristics will show greater odds of moving into right-wing authoritarianism. First, states which show less control over corruption will have better odds of becoming authoritarian; they will also show lower levels of general social trust, have lower levels of civic engagement, and have higher percentages of citizenry willing to break standard social mores against cheating and stealing. As per the findings in Wang, states with higher levels of governance should also show a greater affinity for moving to authoritarianism if combined with the presence of a requisite level of corruption; Wang’s conclusion that “the contribution government performance makes to building political trust can be seriously damaged once the government gets involved in corruption” (Wang, 2016: 228) will be tested on a wider scale than just in East Asia. Finally, states with higher percentages of the populace supporting right-wing ideologies should also show a greater affinity toward moving into authoritarianism.

III: Methodology

In order to study the effects of corruption and other variables on the chances of a state turning toward authoritarianism, panel data was constructed from four waves of the World Values Survey, comprising any country that had been surveyed at least three times during the most recent

four waves. This gave a set of 32 countries and 108 instances ranging from 1995 to 2014. Specific variables were chosen to model specific effects and are listed below.

In order to model corruption, the World Bank's Control of Corruption indicator is used. Corruption indicators have received a mixed reaction in the literature, as they are typically based on elite perceptions of aspects of corruption; as such, it is unsure from an empirical standpoint if it reflects the actual "level of corruption" on the ground (Gingerich, 2013; Knack, 2007). The Control of Corruption indicator is, however, used here for two reasons. Typically, quantitative studies on corruption will use either the World Bank indicator or the Corruption Perception Index, published by Transparency International. The first reason for choosing the World Bank variable is that the two are highly correlated ($r=0.93$) and can thus be used at times interchangeably. Given this, the second reason is that the Control of Corruption indicator is specifically more suited to our purposes, in that it measures the state's success or failure specifically at the *control* of corruption within the state, rather than its overall level. It must be stressed, however, that the World Bank's methodology for generating the Control of Corruption indicator is based in part on business leaders, elites, country analyst and non-governmental organization's *perceptions* of the state's ability to control corruption. The specific definition used in constructing the indicator is "capturing *perceptions* of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as the 'capture' of the state by elites and private interests" (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2010: 223); emphasis in the above definition is added by the author for this paper.

In addition, another World Bank indicator, Rule of Law, is used to measure the quality and performance of governance, as per Wang (2016). Both World Bank-derived variables are standardized scores between -2.5 and 2.5, with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

A measure of social trust is gathered from the ‘general trust’ question in the World Values Survey, which asks respondents to agree or disagree with the statement “In general, most people can be trusted.” This is a standard measure of social trust, used in studies such as Serritzlew et al (2014) and Reeskens and Vandecasteele (2017).

A measure of the support for hard-right politics is captured by the self-placement variable contained in the World Values Survey (WVS); the question asks respondents to place themselves on a 1-10 scale where 1 indicates far-left beliefs and 10 represents far-right beliefs. In order to capture the rise of specifically *right wing* authoritarianism, the proportion of respondents answering the question with a value of between 8 and 10 is used.

Two other variables were used to capture levels of civic engagement and the base level of morality in society. Civic engagement was gathered from a series of questions in the WVS that asked respondents if they had ever volunteered for a variety of organizational types; to prevent multicollinearity, specifically non-political volunteering positions were used, such as sports teams or cultural groups. A sense of a society’s mores was gathered from a series of questions that asked the respondents to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how justified they felt a series of antisocial actions were, ranging from fare evasion on public transportation to accepting a bribe as a public official. The proportion of those who answered between 8 and 10 on each question was added and the arithmetical mean was used as the general ‘moral barometer’ of the society. This is similar to the technique used in Letki (2006), although this paper drops the portion of the indicator that deals with religious-cultural items such as homosexuality or abortion since our interests here skew more toward universally unacceptable behaviour in society, as opposed to polarizing items whose taboo nature depends from country to country and even between regions within those countries. As stated previously, there are some problems with conflating differing types of morality questions under

an overall heading of “social mores”, but it gives a useful snapshot of the general state of those social mores and as such the technique is partially replicated.

The dependent variable, coded as whether a given country has taken a turn toward authoritarianism in the past five years, was interpreted broadly in order to increase instrument sensitivity. A country was coded as ‘turning toward authoritarianism’ (indicated as “Authoritarian” in the results) if it had met at least one of two conditions: it had a significant (greater than 0.3) drop in The Economist Intelligence Unit’s *Democracy Index*; or it had dropped in either the Civil Rights or Political Rights ratings for Freedom House’s *Freedom In The World Index*. This provided a list of states comprised of: Brazil, India, Mexico, Moldova, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, South Africa, Turkey, Egypt, and the United States.

As control, the logged value of GDP per capita for the year observed and the unemployment rate in the country for the year observed were used. These are standard control variables used in most corruption studies.

These variables are then placed into a panel generalized linear model that provides a maximum likelihood estimation; this process was provided through the ‘pglm’ package for R (Croissant, 2017). This model was chosen for two reasons. First, the use of a binary dependent variable requires a type of logit/probit regression, which the PGLM model provides; secondly, it allows the regression to consider change in variables within groups over time. It differs in output from the more typical ordinary least squares regression in that instead of R-squares it provides the logged value of the likelihood of the model, which allows for comparisons between models. The coefficients must also be interpreted in terms of log odds; a one unit increase in the independent variable increases or decreases the log odds of the dependent variable outcome being Authoritarian by a given amount.

IV: Results

Table 1 (Dependent Variable: Authoritarian Outcome)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control of Corruption	-1.599*** (0.46)	-1.752*** (0.532)	-2.185*** (0.669)	-2.38*** (0.674)
Rule of Law	1.345** (0.479)	1.858*** (0.56)	2.332*** (0.678)	2.346*** (0.71)
Trust	-	-0.034* (0.015)	-0.021 (0.016)	-0.019 (0.017)
Right Wing	-	0.041* (0.02)	0.042* (0.02)	0.044* (0.021)
Social Mores	-	-	0.11* (0.049)	0.125* (0.058)
Civic Engagement	-	-	0.032 (0.02)	0.038 (0.026)
GDP	-	-	-	0.66 (0.68)
Unemployment	-	-	-	0.027 (0.034)
C	-0.068 (0.13)	-0.318 (0.53)	-1.4* (0.669)	-4.52 (3.068)
Log-Likelihood	-65.19	-55.18	-43.02	-42.19
Iterations	4	5	5	5

(Significant coefficients in bold with asterisks indicating significance level, standard errors in parenthesis)

Model 1 considered the corruption variable and the rule of law variable on their own with the dependent variable. Model 2 adds in the social trust variable and the measure for right wing support. Model 3 combines all independent variables, and Model 4 includes all independent

variables and the two control variables of GDP and unemployment. Table 1 shows the results as well as output statistics from the model.

From the results, the clearest indicator is that there is a strong, significant effect of both the perceived level of control of corruption and the quality of governance, as measured by the state's adherence to the rule of law. A one unit increase in the Corruption of Control (CoC) variable sharply decreases the log odds of a state becoming authoritarian, showing evidence for the idea that the perceived loss of control over corruption and its subsequently damaging effects is a cause for populations to move toward authoritarianism, and its vows to clean the system up. Simultaneously, a higher level of governance indicates a higher likelihood for an authoritarian turn; the effect is large and significant in the models, but in a separate panel generalized linear model regression (included in Appendix A) that considered it on its own with the dependent variable the effect was quite smaller (although still significant) and the sign was flipped, indicating that without considering corruption we can expect states with a better grasp on the rule of law to have a better 'defence' against turning toward authoritarianism. With consideration of corruption, though, the relationship becomes much stronger and moves in the opposite direction, indicating that the effect of corruption on the dependent variable is much greater in countries where the populace expects more from its government.

Adding measures of social trust and support for right-wing ideologies into the equation shows small, significant effects. However, once measurements for civic engagement and social mores are added in, social trust loses significance. Across the board, the log odds increase in the dependent variable outcome when considering right-wing support remains constant, albeit fairly small. The measurement of social mores has a small, significant effect, but the level of civic

engagement does not. The control variables of GDP and unemployment have no significant consideration in the final equation.

Considered together, the combination of control of corruption and the adherence to the rule of law (and its resultant level of governance) has the largest predictive effect on whether a state will experience a rise in authoritarianism. The level of support for right-wing ideologies and the basic level of social mores have smaller predictive effects; while they show evidence toward refuting Letki's claim that the 'effect of civic morality is unfounded' (Letki, 2006: 307) and to support Rohac et al.'s initial finding that support for right-wing ideology is linked to corruption, the effects are fairly minimal when compared to the effect of the main two variables. The lack of significance for the civic engagement variable indicates evidence that studies of civic engagement's effect on controlling corruption and strengthening democracy may lack a certain level of overall generalization.

Generally, what the results demonstrate is that the states most at risk of experiencing a rise in authoritarianism are those with highly developed state infrastructure that have allowed corruption to flourish in society, willingly or otherwise. These are states where citizenry has come to expect more from their government; Wang describes them as states where the 'public expects its government to be not only competent but ethical' (Wang, 2016: 229). When they stray from ethical behaviour, the resulting loss in confidence in the state drives the populace to elect authoritarians in order to punish the corrupt and fix the problem, which tends to confirm the idea that Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris bring up when they discuss the rise of populist authoritarianism as a 'backlash' (although their focus is on a 'cultural backlash', rather than one driven by poor ethical standards) (Inglehart and Norris, 2017: 446). These authoritarian outcomes may be slightly more likely in states with larger support for right-wing ideas in the population, and

in states with somewhat looser social mores regarding cheating and stealing. It does not, however, seem to have anything to do with the general level of trust citizens have for each other in a given society.

As a final, technical note, Wang (2016) insists that the proper examination of both measures of corruption and measures of governance requires an interaction term in order to fully model the relationship (Wang, 2016: 218); his ‘discrete choice model’ finds that the interaction term between the two variables had a negative relationship with political trust (Wang, 2016: 223). An equation similar to the models outlined above was run with such an interaction term (the results table is included as Appendix B) and found that the only major difference was that the effect on the log odds for both corruption and governance were reduced slightly, and that the variable for right-wing support fell outside of statistical significance. The Control of Corruption, Rule of Law, and Social Mores variables remained significant; when the interaction between the first two variables is considered, the particular partisan flavour of the tendency toward authoritarianism seems to matter less. While the interaction term was not significant at the 95% level, it did display the expected sign, indicating that it has a negative relationship both with Wang’s level of political trust and with the authoritarian outcome modeled here. It may be that there is a link between a rise in authoritarianism and a reduced level of social trust, but it may be a more indirect relationship than is modeled here.

V: Conclusion

The rise of authoritarianism in both liberal and illiberal democracies has been a topic of some concern in the latter half of the 2010s. Elections of populists with authoritarian tendencies and right-wing rhetoric have featured prominently in the politics of Italy, Poland, Hungary, Brazil, and the United States, among others. One possibility for this rise, derived from theories on

institutional decay by Susan Rose-Ackerman (1999) and Daniel Treisman (2000), is that it is a form of backlash against the failure of the state to control corruption; the resulting decay in institutional confidence drives the populace to embrace rhetoric from authoritarians promising to ‘clean up the mess’ of corruption . Using panel data from 32 countries over nearly 20 years, this paper shows some evidence for this theory, showing that when states with high levels of governance experience a loss of control over corruption, they are more likely to experience a rise in authoritarianism. While there is also some evidence that this phenomenon occurs more in states with higher support for right-wing ideas and lower levels of social mores, the effects of these predictors are small, especially when compared to the effects of corruption and quality of governance. This paper shows that there is some evidence for the theory that a populace’s response to an authoritarian anti-corruption campaign is strongly more positive when there is a perception that corruption is actually getting out of control in the country, and the populace expects better from its government. Given the results, we can see that corruption and populism are more strongly linked in more established or developed democracies; that is, where the rule of law is deeper and more firmly entrenched, higher levels of corruption are linked to higher probabilities of authoritarian-flavoured populism.

We could apply the finding here to a case like the United States, and state that one theory behind the rise of Donald Trump is that American voters were fed up with the rise in corrupt behaviour in their governments and replied well to Trump’s message of draining the swamp. We can see a drop in the American indicator for Control of Corruption (1.66 in 1999 to 1.27 in 2011) and a high level of Rule of Law (1.6 in 2011) as well as rising support for right-wing ideas (from 17.13 per cent in 2006 to 21.74 per cent in 2011). Given the results of the model for this paper, we can see that there is a clear sequence of events that may have taken place: the perceived rise of

corruption in governance in a state with an advanced level of the rule of law and a growing population of right-wing support led to a situation where the electorate felt comfortable embracing an authoritarian electoral campaign that promised to reduce or end that perceived high level of corruption.

Additional research should be directed toward teasing out further implications of this research regarding the link between corruption and populism. Qualitative analysis, particularly with regard to elite interviews and open-ended surveys, would offer crucial details in filling in more subtle aspects of the link between corruption and populist movements in long-developed, well-established democracies. Triangulation between the quantitative research presented here and qualitative exploration of the linkage would provide a more holistic view of how corruption and populism interact with each other in states with high governance indicators.

Additional research would also be required to break down the effect of social mores by particular type; that is, is there a specific behaviour like fare evasion or tax avoidance that makes a better predictor than the others that are included in the measurement used in this paper's model. It would also be instructive to examine regional effects, especially with regard to the civic engagement variable, to see if, for example, civic engagement becomes significant when examining the post-Soviet region, or if the effect is contained to Georgia alone. Finally, further localized case studies are needed to flesh out the role of corruption and anti-corruption drives on the rise of authoritarianism at the individual country level.

APPENDIX A

Table 2 (Dependent Variable: Authoritarian Outcome)

Variable	Model 1
Rule of Law	-0.27 * (0.13)
C	-0.038 (0.12)
Log-Likelihood	-71.769
Iterations	3

(Significant coefficients in bold with asterisks indicating significance level, standard errors in parenthesis)

APPENDIX B*Table 3 (Dependent Variable: Authoritarian Outcome)*

Variable	Model 1
Control of Corruption	- 1.773** (0.663)
Rule of Law	2.004** (0.699)
Trust	0.008 (0.023)
Right-Wing	0.034 (0.021)
Social Mores	0.098* (0.0496)
Civic Engagement	0.045 (0.026)
Control of Corruption: Rule of Law	-0.541 (0.289)
C	-1.462* (0.697)
Log-Likelihood	-41.117
Iterations	5

(Significant coefficients in bold with asterisks indicating significance level, standard errors in parenthesis)

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