Essay

"Non-Corrupt Government": Less Than Good, More Than Impartial

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Abstract: In recent years, the study of corruption has become one of the most prominent in the social sciences. If there is corruption, however, it is because something has been corrupted; something pure has been sullied. This pure element serves mainly as a normative reference: It may never have constituted a social and political reality. However, the purpose of this article is to try to define what its components might be. In this way, theoretical considerations can be used to provide a more solid basis for the fight against corruption. The position of this paper is that the opposite of corruption should be explicitly defined without the use of abstract categories such as good governance or integrity. The paper will begin with a discussion of the concept of "non-corrupt government" and then proceed to a theoretical analysis of the main issues involved. It will conclude with some practical remarks on how to build, in the most parsimonious way, the benchmark of quality that corruption undermines. The contention is that a "non-corrupt government" is based on four principles: (1) equality (input side), (2) reasonableness (input side), (3) impartiality and professionalism of the administration (output side), and (4) accountability of the office (output side).

Keywords: corruption; non-corrupt government; good governance; democracy; equality; reasonableness; impartiality; accountability

1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of public corruption[1] has become one of the most prominent in the social sciences. Yet, as this shift in research priorities was taking place, another, more recent change—the focus of this paper—began to emerge. It rises from a natural question: If we do not have a specific behavior, institution, or order in mind (which will restrict the value of any consideration of wider scope) and indeed what we refer to could have never constituted a social or political reality, what could the opposite of public corruption be? After all, if there is corruption, it is because something pure has been sullied or decomposed. The aim of this paper is to try to identify what the components of this diffuse reference object could be. The meaning of public corruption itself merits further discussion (Heywood 2014) but a definition that succinctly captures the phenomenon and is widely used by scholars and international anti-corruption organizations is "the abuse of public office for private gain". This takes us beyond the narrower option, where corruption implies acting against the law because of advantages promised or given by a third party. It also avoids the pitfall of legal definitions that fail to identify some of the worst cases, where corrupt deals are institutionalized in law and economics, as recognized in recent work on regulatory capture (Philp 2006, p. 47) or "legal corruption" (Mendilow and Peleg 2016). At the same time, the definition discussed is more specific than the one that views public corruption as synonymous with all types of wrongdoing by functionaries acting contrary to the public interest (Huberts 2018, p. 24).

A consideration of what the construction of a "non-corrupt government" involves may take two essential paths. The maximalist one takes off from the assumption that the opposite of corruption is "good government". The problem is that good government

is a broad concept that means, among other things, effectiveness and efficiency, data management capacity, and the ability to utilize technology, all involving foresight and managerial capacity. None of these is guaranteed by the lack of involvement in corruption alone. The concept of good government also includes moral dimensions. "Integrity" would be an overly broad concept. As Huberts (2018) argues, government that wastes public resources, discriminates, and uses authority improperly may undermine public integrity regardless of whether its members engage in corruption. The alternative, minimalist path takes off from the assumption that the opposite of corruption is assessed by the "quality of government," understood as impartiality in implementing policies. The difficulty here is that a government may be impartial in implementing corrupt policies. In such cases, to be impartial may mean to abuse power for private gain regardless of the victims.

Such problematic options force us to clarify the purpose that leads us to question what we mean by "non-corrupt government". As noted above, this is both practical and theoretical. If there are no clear principles underlying the fight against corruption, we are likely to end in (1) short-sighted and strategically meaningless reforms or (2) overly complex and unfocused attempts at reform. Having a clear beacon to guide the prevention of corruption in both the short and long term is necessary if we are to locate an effective way forward.

2. The Concepts Associated with "Non-Corrupt Government"

In its most philosophical form, political science has long dealt with problems such as the legitimacy of power and the justice of the system. It was far less concerned with the normative aspect of the "how" question: in what manner to govern or how services should be provided from the citizens' point of view (Kirby and Wolff 2021). In other words, and from a theoretical perspective, following Easton's (1965) well-known terminology, there has been much research of political system input (elections, parties, political culture) but a less philosophical study of the system's "black box".

When looking through the lens of non-corrupt behavior, what matters is whether a government's decision-making is impartial and whether it respects legality in the implementation. It is assumed that being impartial supports policies of higher quality, with positive impacts on human well-being. In short, although it is not always the case, the justice of the procedures is supposed to guarantee the justice of the outcomes (Rawls 2005). At the end of the day, what most affects the well-being of people is that they can eat healthily, educate their children, and walk safely on the streets (Rothstein 2021). These results are not guaranteed only by free elections or a progressive constitution recognizing the rights of citizens but also by a "non-corrupt government" that works properly and has what some authors call quality of government (Bågenholm et al. 2021).

Normatively, then, we could assume that the opposite of corruption is democracy. Unfortunately, there are many examples of democratic governments elected by the citizenry in free and fair elections, whose corruption, waste, clientelism, and inefficiency levels are alarming. We also have effective authoritarian governments (Fukuyama 2016). Amartya Sen (2011) compared the effectiveness of the governments of democratic India and totalitarian China, with results that, from an Indian point of view, were quite depressing. It could be argued that this and similar examples are taken from countries with low democratic quality. Some claim that if we measured the quality of democracies, following the famous model of Diamond and Morlino (2006), surely the "non-corrupt government" would correlate with the quality of democracy. A quality democracy does not feature only free and fair elections but also horizontal accountability, political competition, the rule of law, civic participation, guaranteed freedoms, political equality, and the ability to respond to citizen demands. In sum, there can be a government with low corruption without democracy, and there can be democracy with a corrupt government, although a high-quality democracy (in the few places where it exists) certainly also has low corruption as one of its features. Fighting for a high-quality democracy is a noble end that is worthy of support. However, it is too demanding an objective for a single government to achieve, primarily if it draws from pre-

vious institutional weaknesses, dependency paths anchored in poverty, and unsupportive social practices (Acemoglu and Robinson 2013).

The question we should ask, then, is where to start a reform process? Perhaps a good place to start is by looking for a vehicle to drive the rest of the necessary institutional reforms. This priority will likely lead us to begin by improving the impartiality of the government (Rothstein 2021). History shows us that most of the best functioning democracies in Europe were endowed prior to their democratic consolidation with meritocratic and effective bureaucracy. In short, they drew on a state that had already been in operation for decades. The conclusion is that the quest for a quality democracy might begin by taking an interest in the impartiality of the government (Bågenholm et al. 2021).

Another concept that should be set apart from "non-corrupt government" is that of good governance. Setting aside the multiple meanings of governance, good governance is understood as the process of collectively defining the set of formal and informal institutions that the state, civil society, and the market must respect to achieve the common good (Kaufmann et al. 2004). Yet, this concept is too broad and covers much more than this paper intends to discuss. In its effort to measure good governance, the World Bank indicators include six dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, and government effectiveness, as well as horizontal accountability, political competition, the rule of law, and control of corruption. For this paper, of special interest are control of corruption and, to a certain extent, the rule of law and regulatory quality, as we will see later. Suffice it to say that, according to this concept, governance includes state institutions but also the market and civil society. According to Rothstein (2021), good governance is so broad a concept that it encompasses practically every social relationship except the purely commercial and family relationships. This makes it difficult to operationalize and measure (although Kaufmann and others have courageously tried to do so). Moreover, it includes the very effects of good governance (notably, stability or efficiency), thereby generating a tautology that further complicates measurement.

The key, then, is to inquire what among the elements included in the concepts of quality democracy and good governance would be essential for avoiding corruption, and that is impartiality. But to achieve a non-corruption status, impartiality should include both the input and the output of the government's decisions. By the former we do not mean what should be approved but the way it should be done—respecting the principles of equality and reasonableness. The latter includes actions that implement hard or soft law (Meyer 2009) or apply more or less standardized guidelines and procedures. In these cases, civil servants must act impartially, without considering criteria that are not previously established and without personal considerations. In sum, impartiality is not all that good government requires, let alone all that good governance would require, but it opens the way to good government and is the essence of anti-corruption.

Empirical studies (Dahlström et al. 2012; Charron and Rothstein 2018) suggest that among the factors mentioned above, what best correlates with low corruption is the impartial implementation of government policies. Polls (Charron 2021) suggest that this value is more important to people than factors such as electoral cleanliness or the makeup of the party system. Moreover, it generates social trust (Dinesen and Sønderskov 2021) and citizens' subjective feeling of well-being (Helliwell 2014; Helliwell et al. 2021). This, in turn, makes it easier to overcome problems of collective action, thereby facilitating economic development and enhancing the propensity to pay taxes. As the final beneficial chain reaction, all the above help generate better financed social policies and greater equity (Svallfors 2013).

But as we have just indicated, impartiality cannot be restricted to outputs; impartiality (as an equitable consideration of interests) also plays an essential role in how the government makes decisions, how its regulatory tasks are carried out, and how policies are designed. On the other hand, a "non-corrupt government" must meet certain preconditions to promote the impartial application of the rule.

In the following sections, this paper will analyze these ideas and provide reflections on how to realize them. The discussion of "non-corrupt government" must take into account who the government is. When different authors talk about the quality of government, they usually talk about the quality of the public administration. Our analysis takes as its starting point a broader concept of government that includes the legislative and judicial branches. Nevertheless, our text focuses on the administration without denying the legislature's essential role in ensuring the impartiality of the input and the judiciary in the impartial application of the law.

3. "Non-Corrupt Government" (Input)

The aspiration of a "non-corrupt government" can be traced to the origins of the concept of government itself. Essentially, it is connected to the idea of the common good: Honest government works for and is justified by the common good rather than the limited good of its members or supporters. When those in office serve their own exclusive interest, they are no different from criminals (Augustine of Hippo 1963); what legitimizes their actions is their quest for the welfare of the community. Similar, even earlier ideas can be found in the East. The "*Mandate of Heaven*" legitimated the virtuous king in ancient China, and even earlier, the *Rajadharma* listed the obligations of a king to ensure the prosperity and peace of his subjects during his reign. In these and similar sources, the condition for legitimacy is that decisions are to be made independent of private interests and led by the quest for the common good (Mungiu-Pippidi 2021).

The obvious question is who defines the common good. We can point to two contrasting paradigms (Rothstein 2021). The so-called Platonic–Leninist model is where leaders "know" what is fair and good for the community and lead it towards that end. Moreover, the demand is for levels of virtue and wisdom that may be achieved by Plato's philosopher but is practically unattainable in other rulers. There is little wonder that history has shown that such claims often ended in horror (Dahl 1989). There are simply too many incentives for abuses of power. The second paradigm is the democratic one. In both its republican and liberal versions, government follows the will of the people and the common good is the result of an ongoing conversation among diverse populations that is ensured by participatory procedures and agreed-upon "rules of the game". It is easier to find "non-corrupt governments" within this second paradigm because there is institutional and civic control when it comes to generating the input of its policies, norms, and programs. There is no "closed" government program outside the popular will; what do exist are mandatory principles and procedures that the government must follow if it seeks the legitimacy of an "honest government". In brief, a "non-corrupt government" (or honest government) must be subject to two interchangeable principles: equality and ethical universalism. The former means that all community members must be treated as if they were equally qualified to participate in the decision-making process. The principle may be based on the idea of human dignity, from which this principle of procedural equality of the parties involved arises (Ceva 2016). "Every individual potentially affected by a collective decision should have an opportunity to affect the decision proportional to his or her stake in the outcome" (Warren 2004, p. 337). Hence, the search for effective participation and communication mechanisms is necessary; however, if, for various reasons, direct participation or an entirely equitable participation through associations is not possible—as is often the case in real life—representatives should convey the interests of all in a balanced manner, through impartial research and listening, before ruling on policies and regulations. What it all boils down to is that government must draft policies and generate rules (bills, regulations) on the basis of impartial preparatory activity, creating conditions under which everyone may participate, be listened to, and have his/her interests considered. Democratic (read "honest") government is obligated to support achievements with the greatest possible equality, reasonableness (Barry 1995), and respect for the principles that have been established earlier and that serve as the constitutional bases of the governance system (Rawls 2005). Thus, it is presumed that, in established democracies and under normal circumstances, most citizens

will be able to evaluate policies and regulations and reasonably explain their conclusions. To quote Barry (1990, p. 2), the evaluation of policy is "a process of reasoning with the object of deciding whether it is a desirable policy or not... if you have reasons, you must be able to give those reasons. Therefore, to evaluate a policy is simply to take the necessary steps to be able to justify or argue . . . the desirability or otherwise of that policy".

The flaw in this model is that it assumes that all, or at least most, citizens seek to reach political decisions on the basis of reasonable agreements. In the absence of this prerequisite, as in the case of close-minded parties, substantive political arguments constitute an often insurmountable challenge (see also Majone 1997). At the time of writing, the examples of the Trump-led Republicans and the messianic Right in Israel serve as vital illustrations. It could be argued that, even where unreasonable people are involved, conflict management requires the "non-corrupt government" to assume a "procedural equality" (Ceva 2016, pp. 118–19). Everyone has the opportunity to express opinions regardless of their rational basis, thereby establishing "just ways of treating each other in a conflict" (Ceva 2016, pp. 81–84). The result, of course, should not be the triumph of the unreasonable but initial respect for every point of view. This makes it possible to better manage conflicts and avoid abuses of power.

As for the generation of rules, as Habermas argues, "only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of creation of the right that, in turn, has been legally constituted" (Habermas 1996, p. 132). Consequently, legal regulations born from communication between subjects in an environment free of coercion, endowed with information, and guided by the most appropriate arguments (principles of discourse), constitute a legitimized Right, a Right that can be coercively imposed and is, at the same time, moral. The public sphere is thus connected with power, and ultimately human rights are connected to sovereignty: "The legitimacy of law ultimately depends on a communicative arrangement. As participants in rational discourses, in fair negotiations, consociates under the law must be able to examine whether a contested norm meets or could meet with the agreement of all those possibly affected (. . .). The internal connection between popular sovereignty and human rights is that human rights precisely establish the conditions under which the various forms of communication necessary for politically autonomous lawmaking can be legally institutionalized" (Habermas 2018, p. 279).

These ideas lead to the conclusion that a "non-corrupt government" should ideally try to create the conditions for free and respectful public debate. It should promote deliberation between free and equal beings on the basic strategic paths that require decision and be highly respectful of any laws arising from such a communicative arrangement. This does not guarantee the absence of unreasonable options but ensures social accountability and moderates destructive polarization and the abuse of power. This idea of equality can also be defended from the ethical universalism theory.[2]

Beyond the denotational level, the principle under discussion may be defended on utilitarian grounds (Bentham 2000). For John Stuart Mill (1864, chap. 2, p. 9), the greatest principle of happiness holds that "actions are right in the proportion that they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and privation of pleasure". Mill clarifies that this calculation is made possible, however, only where all members of society are equally considered. Every member of society counts for one and nobody for more than one (Mill 1861, chap. 5, p. 257). On this basis, Mill (1864, chap. 2, p. 24) considers the meaning of moral action. To be one of many requires each to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. Pragmatically speaking, once the problem and possible solutions have been identified, it would be a matter of designing policy while considering costs and benefits for all those affected and logically choosing the alternative that generates greater benefits and lower costs for the majority. In this task, it would be entirely consistent to open up channels of participation so that everyone may defend his or her interests, as this creates spaces for the collective intelligence that is necessary for dealing with complex problems. Other time-related and information-processing constraints (Jones and Baumgartner 2005) are required, but this

becomes a primary condition. It should be noted that this utilitarian approach is not based on the concept of human dignity that served as the major building bloc of the previously mentioned ideas. Nevertheless, from a rule utilitarian standpoint, the addition of the rule of respect for human dignity coincides with an optimal moral code, one that would produce the highest level of expected utility if it were followed by all members of society, or at least by those with the greatest responsibility.

In brief, a "non-corrupt government" must embrace equality and reasonableness as the foundation of its decision-making. If it does not, even should it base its decisions on fairness in applying laws, it opens the door to inequality. A "non-corrupt government" might try to listen to all sides and accept the value of political equality yet still fail to adopt substantive policies that reduce structural conditions that favor inequality. For many classical thinkers, economic, social, and legal inequalities were contrary to freedom and stable republics. Plato, for instance, criticized the senseless cult of material wealth, arguing that it would lead to abuse, corruption, and the eventual overthrow of the state (Buchan and Hill 2014, 25 et seq). Aristotle, for his part, argued that a state characterized by a polar division of wealth is prone to class conflict and tyranny. Economic polarization fosters a situation where the rich are busy hoarding money, while the poor lack the means to defend their freedom (Buchan and Hill 2014, 25 et seq).

We need not accept Mill's argument or that of Aristotle to reach the conclusion that both lead to: that avoiding corruption through output impartiality is an insufficient condition for the construction of a "non-corrupt government". Equality and reasonableness are terms that may give the impression of undermining representativeness. In a representative democracy, governments should carry out their electoral program. Yet they can do so in a manner that respects equality and reasonableness or in an authoritarian manner. They can do so by listening to all those affected by their decisions and adjusting their programs to fit the demand for reasonableness or by steps that would favor the groups they represent without such adaptations. A "non-corrupt government" will opt for the former strategy so as to avoid the risk of domination by the urge to have and use power.

An alternative to promote this equality in policy design could be to incorporate a lottery into the configuration of various deliberative and solution-proposal bodies, with participants selected randomly and stratified demographically. Empirical research has identified various models of representative deliberative processes, ranging from bodies that provide informed citizen recommendations on policy issues, such as the citizens' assembly or citizens' jury/panel, to permanent representative deliberative bodies, such as permanent citizens' observatories (OECD 2020). Current experiences have even generated groups of citizens selected by lottery to participate in constitutional reforms, as in Ireland (Farrell et al. 2020) and Iceland (Bergmann 2016).

This article has so far summarized a few theories about what a "non-corrupt government" could be from an input perspective. No corruption is involved in the preparation of bills, regulations, and the design of policies when:

1. The foundation is laid for equal access to decision-making while avoiding asymmetries that promote privileged access and silence the weakest.
2. Public spaces for deliberation are promoted and created—driven by the ethics of discourse and reasonableness—that promote civic energy access to government offices.
3. The voice of citizens and social groups involved—even when unreasonable—is heard, and decisions are made without being influenced by criteria that are external to the quality of the arguments and data, even when they may be tempered by previous electoral commitments made by the government.

These are all procedural criteria that do not determine policies or their outcomes. Since all these criteria are rarely met in "real life", it is worth concluding this section by highlighting that point three would be the priority, since it would be easier to reach an overlapping consensus and to avoid non-rationally-based disagreements (Scanlon 1998). This is what the European Commission is trying to achieve through its feedback and consultation procedures (European Commission 2021), not forgetting, however, the possibilities offered

by lotteries to strengthen equality and deliberation in the generation of citizen proposals for public decisions (Fishkin 2009).

4. "Non-Corrupt Government" (Output)

Once a decision is made, what should the "non-corrupt government" do? Our concern here is with the way services should be provided to citizens (Kirby and Wolff 2021). Max Weber argued that the administration should serve the system of rational–legal authority through management that adheres to the law and an institution that is impersonal, professional, rational, and hierarchical (Weber 1979). The opposite of this type of management, typical of modern societies, is patrimonialism and arbitrariness. Another way of defining patrimonialism is based on the difference between limited versus open–closed-access orders. The former situations are characterized by elite control of political and economic systems. The latter permit all who meet certain impersonal criteria to form political and economic organizations. Good government promotes open access, where economic and political competition is the key to development (North et al. 2006).

Along these lines, Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) distinguish between extractive and inclusive institutions. Inclusive institutions encourage the entry and participation of large numbers of people and guarantee the impartial application of the law, private property, and the provision of services. Fukuyama (2015, 2016), on the other hand, argues that the key to good governance is impersonality. With this, he returns, in part, to Weber and the idea of an administration that applies the laws with impersonality, in a way that works to promote the common good. The way to measure impersonality would be through the autonomy of the bureaucracy insofar as politics are concerned (Dahlstrom and Lapuente 2018). Supporters of such a conception could point to data showing that a professional and impersonal administration correlates with greater development. However, as Weber himself anticipated, it is also liable to lead to an iron cage. According to Rothstein (2021), Fukuyama's thesis may well lead to a general feeling that we are confronting a "soulless administration", one that is effective but insensitive to human circumstances. For the value of empathy is not easily incorporated into an impersonal administration.

Rothstein and Teorell (2008) offer what is probably the most well-known theory of output impartiality. For them, this constitutes the key to governmental quality:

1. When implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take anything into consideration about the citizen/case that is not stipulated beforehand in the policy or the law.
2. All citizens should be treated alike irrespective of personal relationships and personal likes and dislikes (Rothstein and Teorell 2008, p. 170).
3. To ensure such behavior, meritocratically selected civil service officials should be offered guarantees that incentivize them to act impartially, promote economic growth, and respect essential human rights (Rauch and Evans 1999; Charron et al. 2019; Dahlström et al. 2012; Linde and Dahlberg 2021). In light of what is stated above, all three elements are essential components of a "non-corrupt government".

Rothstein and Teorell's argument has been criticized on several grounds. First, they restrict the quality of government that matters to citizens to the output dimension. This is liable to imply that the quality of decision-making in general is an irrelevant consideration. Thus, a government that makes sectarian decisions captured by interest groups or even issues policy that is contrary to human rights would be considered a good government if these decisions were applied impartially (Agnafors 2013). Faced with this criticism, Rothstein has argued that there can be no consensus on which policies express governmental quality and that there can only be solid agreements on the implementation procedure, with impartiality being the critical value in this sphere alone (Rothstein and Varraich 2017).

This paper takes a stance against this argument. As previously argued, agreement on the principles that guide decision-making is possible while human dignity requires it. The Rothstein/Teorell stand also neglects the cultural variable. Rothstein's (2021) retort was the argument that corruption or its opposite are not open to relative interpretations,

especially as multiple polls show global public support for impartiality and a rejection of corruption. Another criticism is that Rothstein does not consider the fact that the discretion with which the administration operates requires a more comprehensive guide than what is provided by law and professional standards. The rules are not always clear; nor do they cover all possible problems. In many cases, public servants must choose among interpretations and priorities, and in such cases the yearning for impartiality will not suffice (Kirby and Wolff 2021).

An additional issue, pointed out by Ceva and Ferretti (2021, pp. 96–97), is the need for a parallel set of norms that, on the one hand, bind citizens' behavior towards institutions and officials and, on the other hand, define the accountability of offices (ibid., p. 177). Public organizations are institutions formed by structures of interrelated, rule-governed roles to which authority is delegated to enable the performance of specific functions (ibid., p. 47). Good governance will be based on the correct generation of patterns of interrelationship between the different institutional roles, the proper division of tasks between the occupants of the roles, and the clear definition of the terms of the mandate of power by which the different roles are entrusted (ibid., p. 142). On the basis of these ideas, it can be concluded that "non-corrupt government" depends on clarity about roles, tasks, and rules to be followed by both sides of the equation. Thus, the conditions that the "non-corrupt government" must meet include:

1. The assignment of coherent missions so that no essential functions are left uncovered but duplicity is avoided. This would entail effective coordination and interdependence among the organizations under discussion.
2. Ensuring that units are created within each organization that are necessary to accomplish the overall mission and that each unit has a clear mission. The effective interaction of all units must also be ensured.
3. Ensure that, within each unit, positions and roles guarantee the fulfillment of the unit's mission and that each position has a clear mission from which functions and tasks are interdependent.

In a well-ordered society, then, the structures and procedures of public institutions are designed and work in concert to accomplish their mission. Yet, "well-designed institutions cannot remain faithful to their raison d'être unless office holders exercise their powers in accordance with the terms of the mandate entrusted to their institutional roles" (ibid., pp. 56–57). Consequently, "the duty of accountability is the primary component of a public ethic of office" (ibid., p. 100). The conclusion is that a "non-corrupt government" should promote accountability and be impartial in applying the rules.

5. Discussion and Practical Implications

Following Rothstein's (2021) criterion, it seems clear that a single variable—impartiality—applied to the administration's output is the most important component of a "non-corrupt government". His defense of ontological parsimony in the face of conceptual obesity is strong, but his option is excessively radical and the use of his measurements could result in the legitimation of non-democratic regimes in a way that anchors them in a political system without freedoms. Furthermore, countries with complex democracies, multiple races, ethnic diversities, inequalities, and poverty will scarcely be able to advance in the scale of good government. One way of improving the results could be the authoritarian establishment of meritocratic administrations while freedoms are suspended. History shows us that, in Europe and China, meritocratic administrations were the fruits of despotic reformers rather than the outcome of the "normal" development of democracy (Mungiu-Pippidi 2021).

It could well be argued that, in certain developing countries, the answer to building good administrations is authoritarianism. This, however, is a dangerous conclusion that Rothstein did not aim for. Thus, this paper proposes a vision of impartiality in which inputs and outputs are equally considered. Furthermore, it adds office accountability and reasonableness to qualify an administration as "non-corrupt". A "non-corrupt government" does not merely provide services in an impartial or non-particularistic manner. It must also

be valued for the way it designs policies or programs and develops general regulations or provisions. Nor does the "non-corrupt government" impartially apply standards that have been predefined by specific interest groups—for instance, standards that favor large donors to the party holding office. Similarly, the "non-corrupt government" cannot provide services that were designed in a biased way to favor the most powerful without the consideration of the interests of the majority. This does not mean that the government must follow certain policies and not others. Policies are defined according to the circumstances and the existing political majorities and minorities. There are no policies that are above democracy, yet the basic rules of the game itself are above circumstantial majorities and minorities. A good example of what I mean can be found in Israel today. The country has no constitution, and the desire of a slim majority in the Knesset (parliament) is to change the basic rules of the game to serve a narrow religious group. According to the argument here, this undermines not only the democratic nature of the country but also its claim to be a "non-corrupt government". Consequently, these basic rules of input impartiality and reasonableness constitute the basic principles of a fair regime. Moreover, they are in such a position because they are the only ones that could maintain a certain overlapping and stable consensus.

The conclusion is that a "non-corrupt government", in its role as a generator of political inputs, is subject to two essential principles of a procedural, not substantive, nature. Those are the principles of equality and reasonableness. Later, in decision-making, the information received, weighed, and analyzed with criteria of equality and reflexivity should give rise to programs or rules that favor some more than others, giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the community (Crick 1964, p. 21). A "non-corrupt government", therefore, opens its ears and promotes spaces to reflect and engage in reasoned debate. It is also required to generate (and share) quality data to make decisions (Noveck 2017). The institutional (and practical) consequence of respecting these principles will be:

1. Creating game rules that control conflicts of interest and manage them to prevent inequality;
2. Developing a system of standards, procedures, and bodies that regulate the activity of interest groups and avoid undue influence;
3. Following the rules and procedures of better regulation;
4. Promoting participation on a level playing field.

In the implementation phase of the rules, a "non-corrupt government" must, as numerous studies argue (among others, Rothstein and Teorell 2008) be guided by the principle of impartiality. This principle defines legality in numerous civil servant actions, but not all public activities are subject to legal regulations, even less so to clear standards that regulate all situations. Hence the importance of the ethic of office accountability. Ultimately, civil servants must make complex decisions often under the pressure of dilemmas. This is why ethical codes and training in ethics are essential. Without them, where the laws are insufficient, civil servants would make decisions in a highly dangerous moral vacuum. All this leads us to argue the necessity of ethical codes that would support the principle of impartiality. The institutional (and practical) consequences of this would be:

1. The development of a meritocratic civil service, where recruitment and professional career are unrelated to political/partisan decisions;
2. The consolidation of integrity systems in organizations, where ethical codes have a relevant and fully integrated role in the day-to-day operation;
3. The implementation of office accountability systems that enable effective oversight of government action through procedures that include rational planning and organization, transparent monitoring, and evaluation of the policies and programs.

In conclusion, we could say that (see Table 1) a "non-corrupt government" is based on four principles: (1) equality (input side), (2) reasonableness (input side), (3) impartiality and professionalism (output side), and (4) office accountability (output side). Given the interaction between the four components, there would likely not be any significant inconsistencies.

Table 1. "Non-corrupt government" and its promoting institutions.

Purpose	An Effective Control of Corruption Until Its Practical Elimination	
Who	The government as the executive branch, decoupling its purely political-partisan activity	
Phases	General provisions and policy design (input)	Decision implementation (output)
Principles	Equality and reasonableness	Impartiality and office accountability
Promoting Institutions	Development of better regulation Promotion of consultation on a level playing field Management of conflicts of interest Regulation of influencial activity by lobbies	Installation of a meritocratic and professional civil service Ethical codes and integrity frameworks in organizations Facilitation of office accountability (strategic thinking, planning, transparent monitoring, evaluation)
Measurement	Expert surveys and in-depth interviews	Expert surveys and in-depth interviews

Source: compiled by the author.

Finally, there are other multidimensional notions of what constitutes a "non-corrupt government": For example, Agnafors (2013) identifies six components of government quality (understood as the opposite of corrupt government). These are a minimum level of morality (human rights are respected) and public ethos, adherence to formal decision-making rules (such as non-contradiction and the obligation to justify decisions), the principle of beneficence, legality and impartiality, and institutional stability. When excessive, the problem with multidimensionality is that it complicates measurement and makes it difficult to understand the results, especially when the variables show significant differences in the data collected. Referring only to street-level bureaucrats, Zacka (2017) establishes four values that should guide the discretion of public officials: efficiency, impartiality, respect, and responsiveness. Heath (cited in Kirby and Wolff 2021) includes three components: legality, Pareto efficiency, and equality among citizens. Our study is not only concerned with street-level bureaucrats but also includes members of the government, Cisenior officials, and governmental decision-making. Therefore, Zacka's proposal is not sufficient for us. Our study shares much of Heath's proposal but adds a more significant concern for the decision-making phase of policymaking and considers office accountability an essential component of honest government. Overall, following Holmberg et al. (2009, p. 157), one can conclude that what is important to understand in terms of "non-corrupt government" is not so much the set of specific institutions that may coincide in the same country but rather the normative foundations to which such institutions adhere. Fortunately, there is some overlap in these foundations across the literature that has addressed this question. To put it briefly, theoretical advancements necessitate integration and parsimony (the integrative potential), as well as novel ideas and hypotheses (the generative potential) (Oeberst and Imhoff 2023, p. 14). We believe that the proposed framework for understanding a non-corrupt government as presented in this article has merits in both of these aspects.

6. Concluding with a Cautionary Note for Developed Countries

Although good governance is more than the absence of corruption, what is clear is that corruption impedes human welfare. According to Rothstein, the ultimate goal of a "non-corrupt government" is human well-being. Although this seems a mere utilitarian goal, when citizens enjoy good health, education, security, and employment services, they have the bases to be free (Sen 2000). A "non-corrupt government" creates the basis for government effectiveness and efficiency, even if it does not guarantee it, and ensures respect for human dignity better than others. Our vision of a "non-corrupt government" does not focus on developing countries or countries with systemic corruption. Nevertheless, such

settings often provide special and more acute cases, where, if applied, the principles could be of special benefit. Simply put, many developed countries have much room for improvement in reducing or eliminating corruption. In many of them, a kind of corruption in office causes enormous damage to equality and reasonableness. The clientelism of society means that the richest and best organized/financed sectors capture decision-makers, enabling them to further enrich themselves and maintain their predominance. The development of dark elites and the role of power brokers may make this situation even more dangerous (Wedel 2021).

This paper tried to systematize and analyze the debate on what the opposite of corruption is. We believe that the opposite of corruption should be explicitly defined without falling into more abstract categories, such as good government, good governance, or integrity. The prevention of corruption will likely lose focus if it falls into these abstract categories. Many countries have begun the effort to prevent corruption by introducing new public management principles or by reducing regulations and public agencies, and others by encouraging citizen participation or increasing the salaries of judges. These decisions may achieve other objectives but do not tackle the essence of corruption. Focusing on the essentials is a key to success. For us, what is essential is equality and reasonableness in designing policies and impartiality and accountability in implementing them. Once the essential is considered, a holistic approach is necessary to develop sound policies to prevent corruption.

Institutional Review Board Statement: As this is a theoretical essay that does not affect the rights or welfare of any individual or organization, ethical approval was not sought.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable (essay).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] This article does not deal with corruption in general, a concept that would include private-to-private corruption, or with the opposite of this broad concept. It deals only with corruption in the public sector. The opposite of corruption in general would be civic honesty (Cohn et al. 2019). But that is a topic far beyond the scope of this article.

[2] For Gewirth (1988), for example, ethical universalism means that all people are treated equally and impartially with respect to their respective goods and interests. This contrasts with particularism, the preferential consideration of certain individuals (e.g., the decision-maker, family or friends, or even members of a particular subnational group such as race), which is often correlated with corruption (Rotondi and Stanca 2015). As Mungiu-Pippidi (2021) argues, the distinction between those who should be treated equally and those who should be treated unequally is the foundation of ethical behavior. An honest government will reject particularism and promote rules and practices that prevent decisions from being biased ab initio or ex post, seeking through its actions to ensure that private interests do not prevail over the general interest.

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