

CSI 14: Is Britain becoming more corrupt?

Summary

- 40% think that ('grand') corruption is widespread in Britain. This is especially so in perceptions of political parties (59%) but much less so for education (15%), the military (18%) and NGOs (19%)
- Experience of ('petty') corruption is much rarer – but not trivial – at 10% over five years
- Accounting for frequency of contact, it appears that bribery is more common in land, registry and permit services and the judicial system
- Attitudes are strongly opposed to corruption revealing that there is no 'social norm' of corruption
- Perceptions of grand corruption have increased over the last decade
- It is possible that experiences of petty corruption have also increased, though the data are less clear cut

Introduction

Many people believe that in developed countries such as Britain corruption is largely absent and that business and politics are fair and clean. However, recent cases such as the major investigation into activities at the football governing body, FIFA, provide reason to believe that corruption also occurs in the developed world. In Britain, in the last decade alone, several big banks have been caught manipulating borrowing rates, editors of major newspapers have stood trial for phone-hacking, scores of politicians were caught with their hand in the public purse during the expenses scandal. These examples may or may not meet with tight academic or legal definitions of corruption, but it is clear that they represent a change in the perceived moral standing of British institutions and the officials working within them. It is unclear if these recent events represent a rise in corruption, or if new transparency measures mean it is easier to spot today compared to the past (such as the Freedom of Information Act which eventually exposed MPs' expense claims in 2009). This is not an easy question to answer – all criminal activity is difficult to measure because people are reluctant to own up to it. In this briefing note we explore measures of *attitudes* (e.g. do you think corruption is acceptable?), *perceptions* (how corrupt do you think officials are?) and *experiences* (have you ever been asked for a bribe?) to determine how much corruption there is in Britain and indeed, whether it is on the rise.

Defining corruption

It is important to note the different meanings of the term corruption in everyday language, in the law, and among scholars. A recent headline on FIFA, for example, ran 'The Stench of Corruption' though the legal charges themselves are related concepts of fraud, racketeering, and money-laundering¹. A simple and widely-used definition is that corruption is 'the misuse of public position for private gain' (e.g. World Bank). Classic examples often involve two parties such as where a private sector contractor pays a government official a bribe in order to induce the official to award a contract, contrary to prescribed procedure. Some scholars have noted that it is the involvement of the second party which distinguishes corruption from other organizational misdeeds such as

Measurement Issues

The organisation *Transparency International* collects information on business practices and other factors from experts in professional institutions and uses it to construct the Corruptions Perceptions Index (CPI). The CPI can be interpreted as perceptions of the checks and balances that are in place to guard against corruption, which in turn might be considered a measure of opportunity for corruption to occur. However, despite the widespread application of CPI to ascertain how 'clean' a country is, we prefer to apply survey methods which are based on a representative sample of the British (or UK) population, rather than relying on information from experts.

Measuring experience of corruption is difficult, largely because the kind of national surveys used are unlikely to reach the main perpetrators and because, even when anonymous, many may prefer not to own up to criminal activity, or might consider their own behaviour to be within the law where others would think differently. However, several surveys ask about experiences of 'petty' corruption, that is, the small-scale bribes to officials in public (or other) institutions and we report these alongside perceptions of 'grand' corruption and attitudes about its acceptability.

There are also important areas of corruption research on the 'revolving door' between government and business, the preferential access to ministers enjoyed by the wealthy, the use of tax havens, and match-fixing in sport. We consider these to be important areas not able to report these in this briefing note due to space limitations.

embezzlement². Others have sought to widen the definition, such as that from David Whyte's recent book: 'the distortion and subversion of the public realm in the service of private interests'³. In Britain, as in other developed nations, many institutions that were once public are now private (such as utility providers, and some aspects of welfare delivery and even the legal system), and it is thus necessary to consider the broader public realm rather than the narrower idea of those working directly in the government.

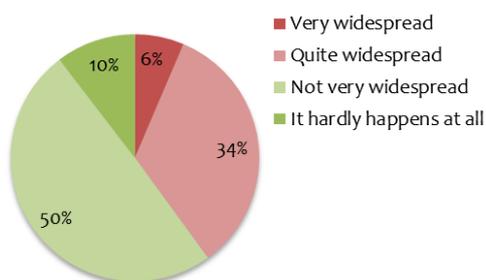
It is likely that public opinion reflects the wider definition of corruption. This briefing note largely considers perceptions, and it therefore follows that much of the analysis included reflects the broader definition. Much of the behaviour considered corrupt may not be illegal (e.g. just a small handful of MPs were prosecuted for false accounting among the many who had to pay money back) but a corrupt act is always a deviation from social rules or expectations of some kind. We distinguish *grand* corruption (at the highest levels of society by leading political elites, major companies, etc.) from *petty* or *street-level* corruption (corruption in ordinary people's daily lives, such as bribes paid for licences etc.).

Perceptions of grand corruption

In the Corruption Perceptions Index, the UK comes out well, being ranked 14/174 in the 2014 report⁴; it sits just above Belgium and Japan and just below Iceland and Germany. In stark contrast to this index, when members of the public are asked about their perceptions of 'grand' corruption (i.e. among elites), the picture is more negative. 74% agree ('tend to agree' or 'totally agree') that corruption is a major problem in the UK, and 40% think corruption is widespread – see Figure 1.

Perceptions around election procedures, on the other hand, are more positive with just 9% believing vote-counting to be dishonest, shown in Figure 2.

How widespread is corruption? (CSES)



Corruption is a major problem in our country (EB)

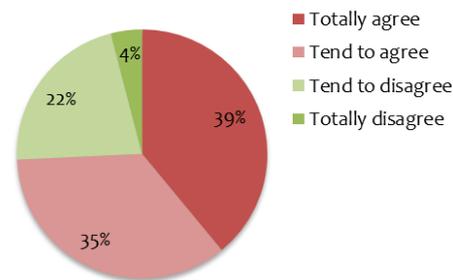


Fig 1 (above) – The majority believe that

corruption is a major problem; 40% think it is quite or very widespread. Sources: Eurobarometer 2011; Comparative Study of Electoral Systems 2005

Thinking of the last national election in Britain, how honest was it regarding the counting and reporting of the votes?

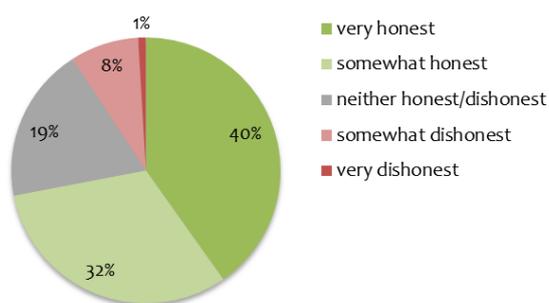


Fig 2 (left) – Most people believe elections in Britain are honest. Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 2006

To what extent do you perceive the following to be affected by corruption?

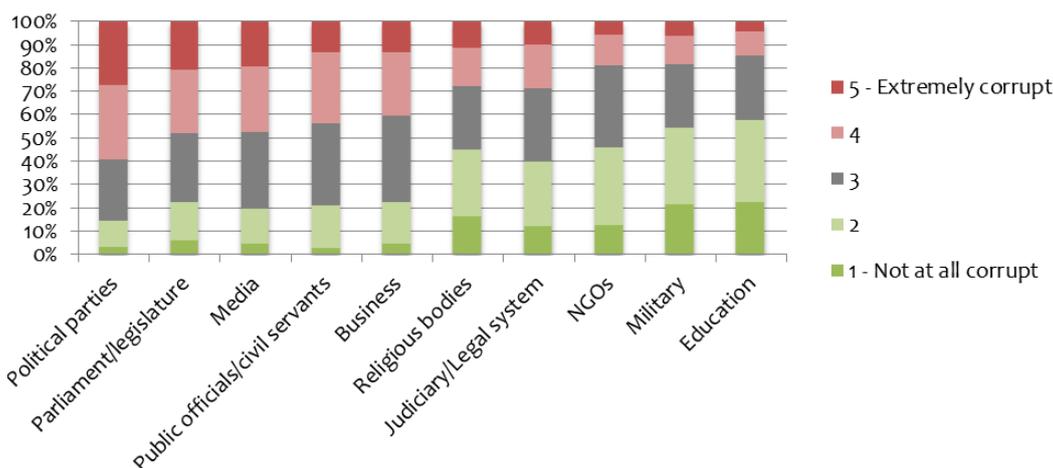


Fig 3 (left) – Political parties, parliament and the media are perceived to be the corrupt

Source: The results presented rely on data from the TI Global Corruption Barometer (pooled from years 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2013) provided by Transparency International

There are differences in perception by institution. In Figure 3 we can see that political parties, parliament and the media are perceived to be more corrupt than NGOs, the military or educational institutions. To illustrate, 59% believe political parties to be corrupt (aggregate of scores 4 and 5) compared to 15% of educational institutions.

Experience of petty corruption

In 2011, 1.5% (95% confidence intervals 0.7% – 2.4%) of the population said they had been asked or expected to pay a bribe in the previous 12 months according to the Eurobarometer survey. In a differently-worded question in the British Social Attitudes Survey, 90% say that they had not been asked for/ paid a bribe in the last five years, while 6% had seldom, 3% occasionally and 1% often. In summary, though experience of corruption is undoubtedly rare, it is not absent in British society⁵.

In the last five years, how often have you (or family member) come across a public official who wanted, or asked for, a bribe or favour in return for a service?

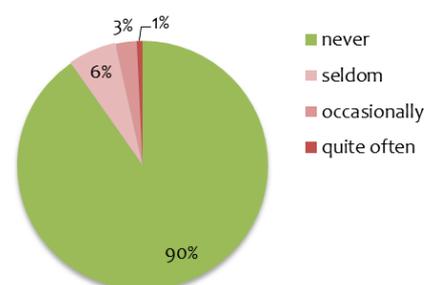


Fig 4 – 10% have been asked for or paid a bribe (total of occasionally, seldom, often) in the last five years

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 2006

Who is corrupt? Where does corruption happen?

To ascertain to whom or where these petty bribes are paid, we show a breakdown in Figure 5. The first column shows the total sample size and the second column the number saying that there were asked for/ paid a bribe to an individual in each type of institution in the last year. These numbers highlight the relative rarity of bribery, particularly in certain bodies. For example, just 25 people of over 5,000 asked reported paying a bribe to someone in the judiciary system, less than half a percentage point. By looking at these numbers the total number (and rate) of bribes appears highest among the utility providers (including water, gas etc.) and medical services at a little over 1 per cent for each. However, the degree of contact with these services varies a great deal with the majority having contact with utility providers (70%) or medical services (69%), but a much smaller percentage having dealings with the judiciary (10%), land services (13%) and registry/ permit services (14%). Accounting for these low contact rates suggests that bribery is far more frequent in these institutions. Of those having contact with land services (for example, regarding planning permission) 6.2% were asked for/ paid a bribe. The rate is 5% for the judiciary system and 4.9% for registry services.

Fig 5 – Bribes are frequent (as a % of contact) among land/ registry services and the judiciary system

Source: The results presented rely on data from the TI Global Corruption Barometer (pooled from years 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2013) provided by Transparency International

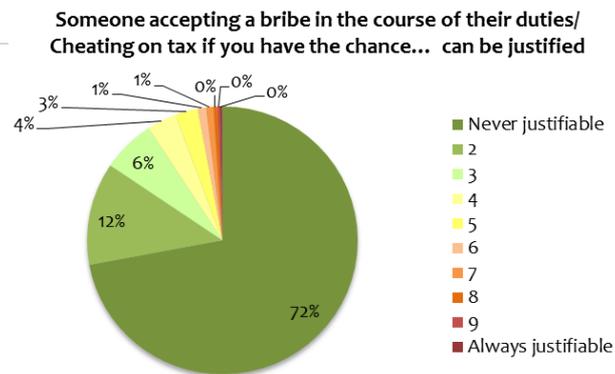
	N*	Paid a bribe?	Overall rate	Contact?	Paid bribe? %
Land services	4,032	31	0.77%	12.7%	6.2%
Judiciary system	5,057	25	0.49%	10.1%	5.0%
Registry/ permit services	6,057	42	0.69%	14.3%	4.9%
Education	6,057	50	0.83%	33.4%	2.5%
Police	6,057	33	0.54%	25.4%	2.2%
Tax revenue	6,057	49	0.81%	41.4%	2.0%
Utilities providers	5,057	57	1.13%	70.2%	1.6%
Medical services	6,057	62	1.02%	68.6%	1.5%

*Ns vary as not all questions asked in all years/ 'customs' excluded due to small n (asked in 2007 only)

Attitudes towards corrupt behaviours

Some people argue that corruption may be cultural, which is to say that it is deemed more or less acceptable according to the social context and social norms. Put simply, an individual is far more likely to engage in corrupt behaviour in a context in which it is more 'normal', and in which the 'costs' of being caught might be perceived as being lower. In this perspective, attitudes are a way to reveal underlying norms of corruption and may thereby proxy for actual behaviour. Figure 6 shows that corruption is not well tolerated among the British population with just 3% scoring 6 or above on a ten-point scale of bribery being justified.

Figure 6 – The vast majority believes that bribery is not justifiable *Source: World Values Survey 2005*



Has the level of corruption been changing over time?

The available data only allow us to examine trends over a relatively short timeframe. Firstly, we show how perceptions of grand corruption changed between 2004 and 2013. Figure 7 illustrates that political parties, parliament, business and the media are being increasingly perceived as corrupt,

perhaps not surprisingly given the recent high profile events. Of the institutions shown (which is restricted to those with consistent measures available) only the judiciary are perceived as being less corrupt than a decade ago.

Fig 7 – Perceptions of the political sphere, business and the media have deteriorated over the last decade

Source: TI Global Corruption Barometer

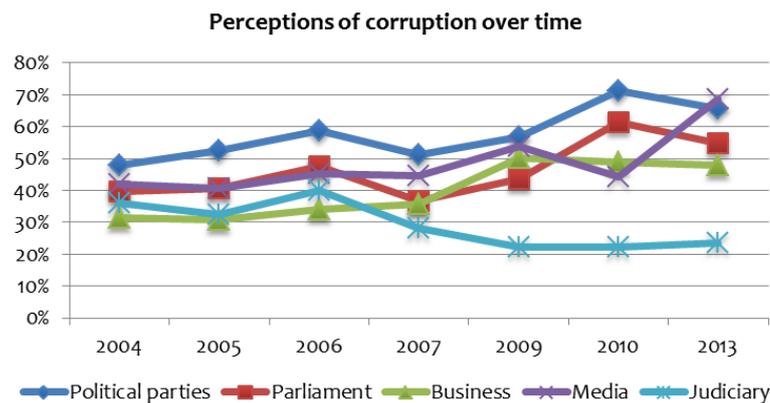
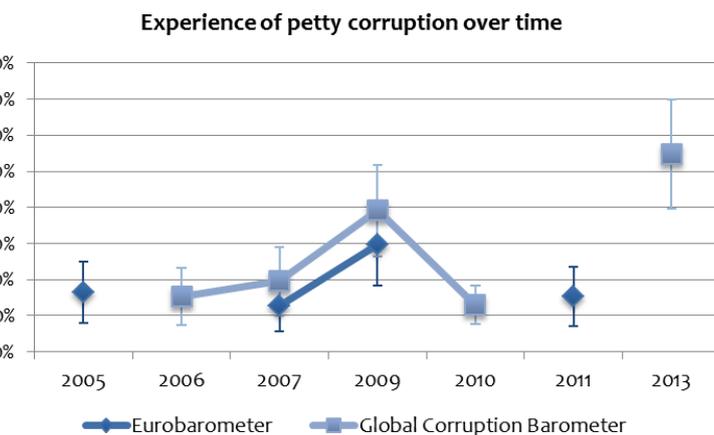


Fig 8 – Levels of petty corruption have fluctuated over the last decade but may be increasing

Sources: TI Global Corruption Barometer, Eurobarometer

What about experiences of corruption over the same period? Might petty corruption also increase in a context in which grand corruption is perceived to be growing? Figure 8 combines data from two sources with match each other well; between them they suggest fluctuation in the level of petty bribery ranging



from 1% in 2006/2007 to 5% in 2013. This most recent estimate might suggest that experiences of corruption, like perceptions, are on the up. However, the level was also high in 2009 at 4% and dipped in 2010/11 back to a little over 1%. This fluctuation, the short-run nature of the data, and lack of comparable estimates in each year mean that we must remain cautious in our conclusions.

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¹ The Guardian, 28th May 2015

² Jancsics, David "Interdisciplinary perspectives on corruption" *Sociology Compass* 8.4 (2014): 358-372.

³ Beetham, David "Moving beyond a narrow definition of corruption" in David Whyte *How Corrupt is Britain* (2015)

⁴ <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/results>

⁵ Estimates from the International Crime Victim Survey give far lower estimates of the prevalence of street level corruption than other sources. Between 1996 and 2005, just 0.16% of the population agreed that they had paid or been asked to pay a bribe. In comparison to other data, the ICVS may have been more restrictive by specifying "government or public officials".