

1 Introduction

Political competition and corruption have been widely discussed in the literature. Political competition—characterized by transparent structures, power diffusion, direct democratic instruments, and efficiency—protects the freedom of citizens, fosters innovation, and has a positive effect on economic growth. This is not only true for international political competition between states, but also for competition within the individual states, i.e. between citizens and elites, citizens and governments, or citizens themselves. A democratic and political system with strong institutional checks and balances should moderate political extremism and limit the power of public administrations, setting the stage for political competition. Switzerland and the United States and their direct democratic political systems have often been praised as being the best examples of the mechanism of action in this regard. However, even parliamentary democracies and even representative democracies usually show power diffusion. In a presidential system for instance, actual policies often result from a compromise between the legislature and the executive, another example that "even seemingly unitary systems are often constrained by opposition parties and coalition dynamics" (Rose-Ackerman, 1999: 144).

Corruption, defined as the "misuse of public power for private benefit" (Lambsdorff, 2001), has a lot of determinants and implications. The presence of corruption undermines trust in political institutions and in the rule of law principle. Regarding public goods and forms of collective decision making, corruption facilitates amoral cynicism and undermines all the motivation necessary for 'civic engagement' which is crucial for modern democratic commonwealth (Putnam, 1993). Many scholars argue that the efficient functioning of a democracy along with a transparent and effective political system would suppress corruption.

In this paper, we want to investigate the relationship between political competition and corruption by describing corruption as an indicator for the lack of political competition. Furthermore, we set political competition in direct relationship to public political discourse and claim that the level of political discourse is the underlying force. In Figure 1 two scenarios representing this interaction are depicted.

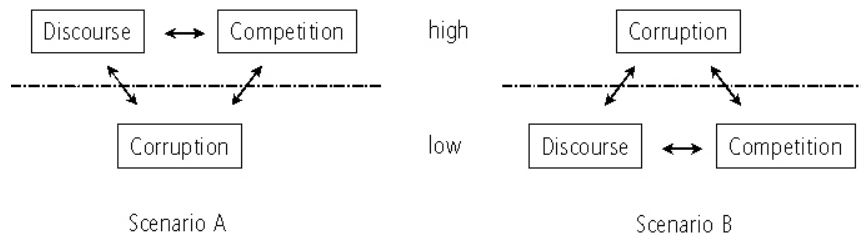


Figure 1: Interaction between political discourse, competition, and corruption

Jürgen Habermas was the first to introduce the concept of discourse on the basis of linguistically or communicatively tradition and shaped the notion of the 'public sphere' in his early work (Habermas, 1969a; 1989a) just to recast it during the 1980s to a form of radical pluralist democracy (e.g. Habermas, 1989b). In this context discourse is at utmost importance and emphasizes the active citizens who are engaged in a plurality of public spheres forming a whole network that carries the collective identity of a society (Styrdom, 2000). Moreover, discourse puts the existing institutions under pressure to change and open up in a more universalist direction. It can thus be seen as a form of communication that allows participants to influence and convince one another to the exclusion of psychological pressure, violence, or bribery, and eventually corruption (Styrdom, 2000). In the sense of political economics, political discourse is often paraphrased with discussion and deliberation even though these terms are almost always linked to the functioning and the process in politics. Political discourse can be associated with the idea that discourse spreads out information, generates incentives for citizens to inform themselves, makes them participate in the political arena, leads to an intense public discussion, fosters social norms, and contributes to a more sensible perspective regarding the provision of public goods.

Defenders of 'deliberative democracy' have pointed out that the process of political discourse and the resulting discussion have the effect of transforming citizens' views on different issues. Discussing political matters with fellow citizens and being confronted with their political motivation can lead to a change in mind because the "acceptance or rejection of certain reasons by one citizen can influence the acceptance or rejection of certain reasons by another" (Dacey, 1993: 17). Democratic institutions therefore have the purpose to reduce information costs, create incentives for political discourse, and motivate citizens to participate and discuss political matters. When these institutions are applied properly they foster political discourse, become binding restrictions and allow for political competition.

We can therefore postulate, that within a system of democracy political competition that gives space for an open, fair, and intense political discourse, lead to more transparency and accountability of the individual, and reduces the level of corruption within this system.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses aspects of political competition and its assumptions and links them to the role of political discourse. A selection of determinants regarding political discourse is discussed as well. This first theoretical part concludes with a short literature review on corruption. Section 3 presents the data. The empirical analysis for countries covered by the Euorobarmeter and the World Values Survey is presented to section 4. Concluding remarks are offered in section 5.