The Global State of Democracy
IN FOCUS

No. 4, December 2018

Corruption and the Global State of Democracy Indices

Summary of findings

This *GSoD In Focus* showcases data on corruption derived from the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices, International IDEA's measurement of democratic trends and performance for 158 countries between 1975 and 2017. Despite increased efforts to combat corruption, global levels of corruption have not decreased since 1975. The only region that has seen an improvement in its average corruption score is Latin America, although corruption remains widespread in several countries in the region. Despite the bleak picture when measuring global and regional averages, a number of countries have made progress in reducing their levels of corruption. Since 2006, these countries have outnumbered those with worsening levels of corruption.

BOX

Key facts and figures

- Global levels of corruption are at the same level in 2017 as they were in 1975.
- Apart from Latin America, which has seen some improvement in its regional Absence of Corruption score, all other regions have seen a slight decrease since 1975.
- Until 2006, more countries increased their corruption levels than reduced them; this trend reversed after 2006 as more countries reduced their levels of corruption than increased them.
- This contrasts with other dimensions of democracy, which have all seen more countries declining than advancing since 2014 (for Fundamental Rights) and since 2016 (for Representative Government and Checks on Government).
- Between 2012 and 2017, levels of corruption reduced in 24 countries but increased in 13.
- In 2017, positive developments were driven by countries in Africa and Asia and the Pacific: 30 per cent of countries in Africa and 17 per cent of countries in Asia and the Pacific saw levels of corruption fall between 2012 and 2017.
- At the same time, 40 per cent of countries in Africa are in the 25th percentile in the world with the highest levels of corruption. Nonetheless, 45 per cent of the countries demonstrating progress over the past five years are still below the global average for Absence of Corruption.
- Overall improvements in democratic performance do not always result in less corruption. Among the countries that have improved their Representative Government scores since 1997, 50 per cent also improved their Absence of Corruption scores, but 44 per cent did not.
- In 2017, 17 countries performed better than the global average score on Representative Government, but at or below the world average for Absence of Corruption. For these countries, improvements in democratic performance have therefore not been accompanied by reduced corruption. Of these countries, the largest share (47 per cent) are in Latin America and the Caribbean.

1. Introduction

Corruption undermines the impartial administration of state power, and the fairness and predictability of its exercise. This can help to undermine the legitimacy of and citizens' trust in democracy (International IDEA 2017, Chapter 5). When government officials abuse their office for personal gain, through embezzlement, bribery or theft, they undermine the fairness of policy implementation and increase the discrepancy between policy and practice, which threatens the fulfilment of democratic principles.

For this reason, the GSoD Indices include a measurement of corruption in their understanding of democracy. The GSoD Indices on Absence of Corruption measure the extent of different forms of corruption, broadly defined as the abuse of office for personal gain (OECD 2008: 22; Skaaning 2018), in the executive and in public administration. This measurement is closely connected to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16, to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies, and Target 16.5 in particular, which aims to substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all its forms (United Nations 2018). The GSoD Indices data on corruption also supports an evidence-based approach in the implementation of the United Nations Convention against Corruption by providing country-comparable data on corruption.

2. Trends in Absence of Corruption

The GSoD Indices data on corruption measures the extent of different forms of corruption in the executive and in public administration. The measurement focuses on the extent of the absence of corruption. Scoring runs from 0 to 1, with a high score indicating low levels of corruption and a low score indicating high levels of corruption. A decline in the trend line thus denotes a deteriorating situation, while an increase in the trend line shows an improving situation. All the declines or gains referred to in this issue of GSoD In Focus are statistically significant.

Five indicators have been aggregated into this measurement. Four of the indicators specifically cover theft, embezzlement and bribery in both the executive and the public sector (based on Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) expert surveys). The fifth indicator is a broader measure of government corruption from the International Country Risk Guide (ICRG) (Skaaning 2018; see also Table 2). The analysis in this GSoD In Focus looks at trends in the Absence of Corruption measurement from a long-term (42 years), medium-term (20 years) and short-term (10 years) perspective (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows global and regional trends for the Absence of Corruption. Despite increased efforts to combat corruption, global levels of corruption have persisted at much the same level since 1975. This is in stark contrast to other aspects of democracy, which have seen widespread improvements over the past 42 years.

**FIGURE 1. ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION: GLOBAL AND REGIONAL TRENDS, 1975–2017**
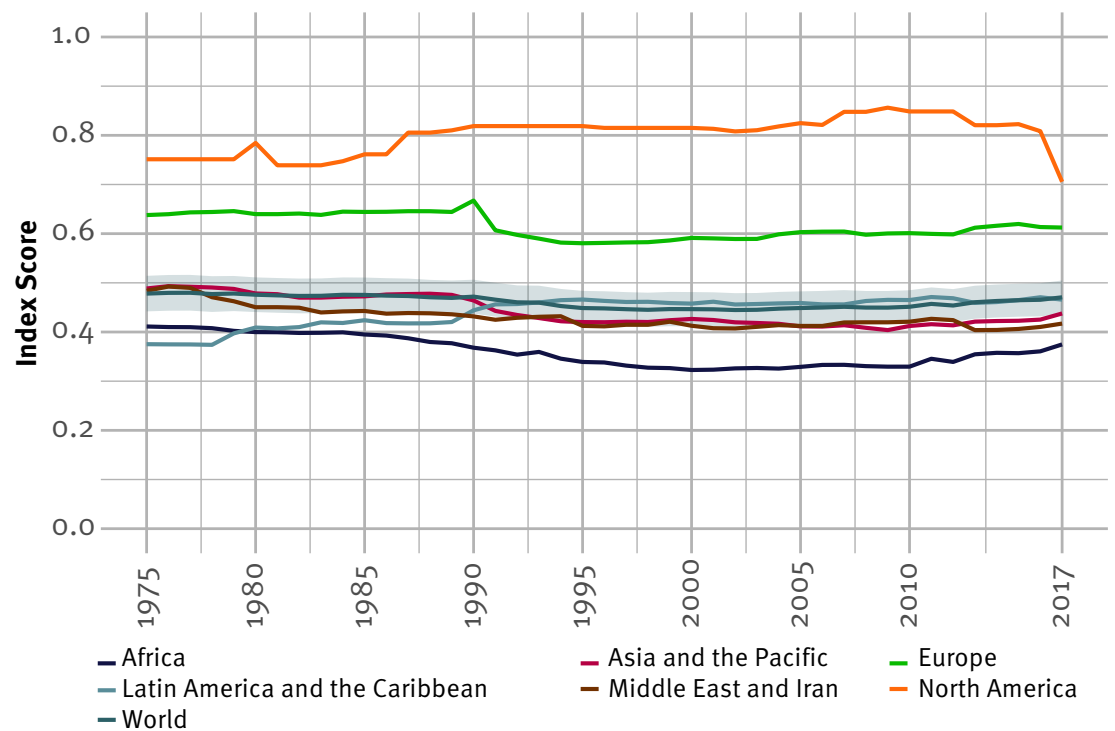
Note: This graph shows trends in the level of corruption over time by region. The y-axis shows the score (0 to 1) and the x-axis the years. Higher scores indicate lower levels of corruption.
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, ‹https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices›.

3. Regional trends

This stagnation is also true at the regional level. Latin America and the Caribbean is the only region to show some progress in reducing regional corruption levels since 1975. Since 2016, North America has witnessed a worsening situation, with declining scores that are primarily driven by developments in the United States, as well as a slight decline in Canada. Nonetheless, only North America and Europe outperform the global average with regard to Absence of Corruption, while Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East and Iran, and Latin America and the Caribbean score in line with the global average.

In addition, 55 per cent of countries in Europe are among the 25 per cent of countries in the world with the lowest levels of corruption, along with 20 per cent of the countries in Asia, 18 per cent of the countries in Latin America and Caribbean and 17 per cent of the countries in the Middle East and Iran. Africa is the region that tends to perform least well on Absence of Corruption. Only three countries in Africa are among the countries in the world with the lowest levels of corruption, while 43 per cent of the countries in the region are in the 25th percentile, with the highest levels of corruption in the world. Among the countries with the highest levels of corruption, half are in Africa. (Only 31 per cent of the countries in the world are in Africa.) Almost one-third (30 per cent) of the countries in Asia and the Pacific are in the 25th percentile with highest levels of corruption in the world, while this is the case for one-quarter of the countries in the Middle East and Iran, and 23 per cent of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION BY REGION, 2017
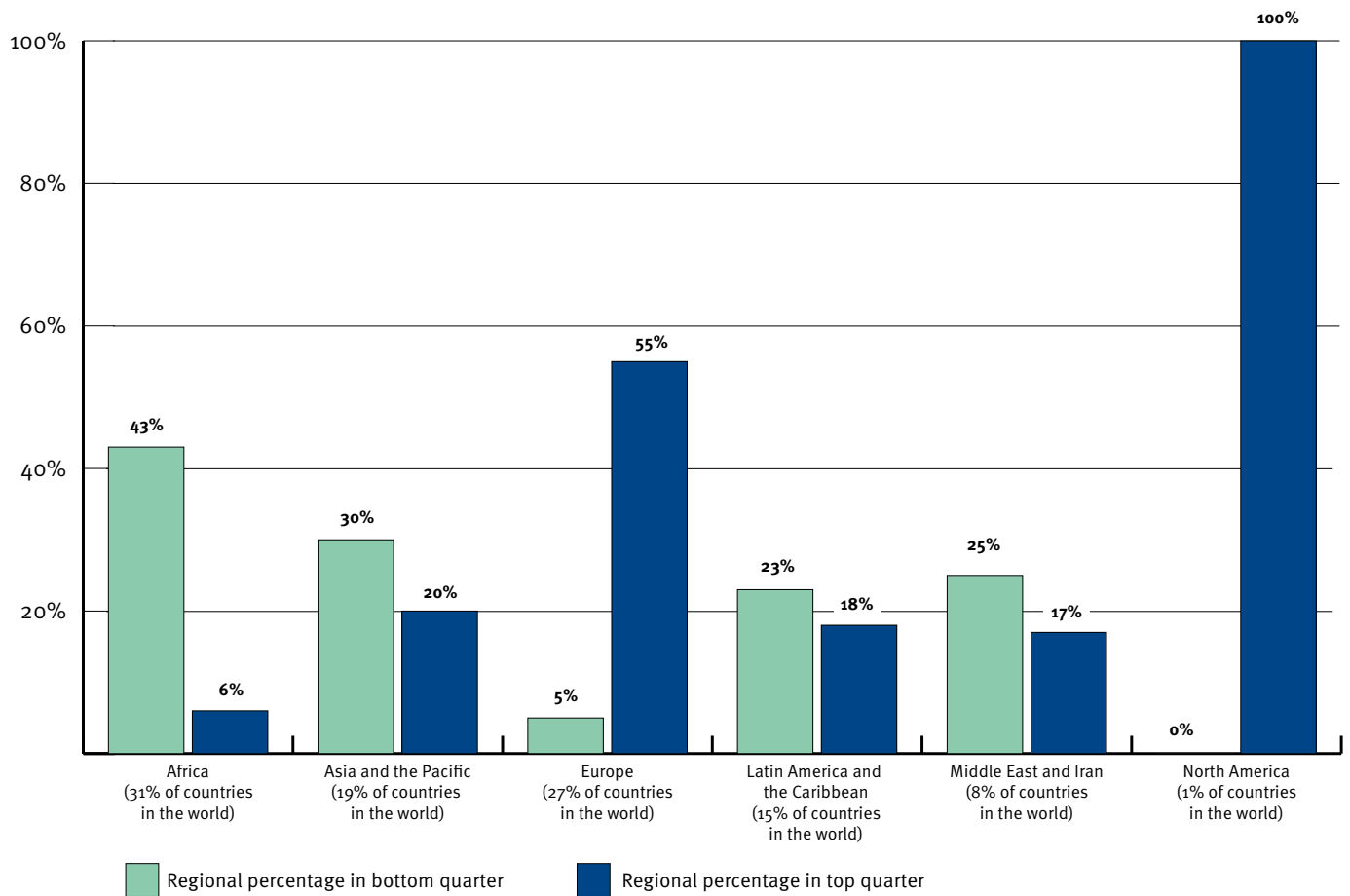
Note: This graph shows the proportion of countries in a region in the bottom 25% and the top 25% on Absence of Corruption in 2017.
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, ‹https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices›.

4. Country-level trends

Despite the stagnation in reductions in global and regional levels of corruption, individual countries have seen advances in reducing corruption, while others have seen setbacks and increases in corruption levels. Figure 3 shows the number of countries that have advanced or declined in their Absence of Corruption score over the previous five-year period. Until 2006, more countries were experiencing a deteriorating corruption situation than an improving one. Since 2006, however, the number of countries reducing their corruption levels has consistently been higher than the number of those increasing them. This positive development is at odds with other democratic aspects covered by the GSoD Indices, where more countries have been declining than advancing since 2014 (see International IDEA 2018b). By contrast, 2017 saw the highest number (24) of countries improving their Absence of Corruption score and hence reducing their levels of corruption since 1980. In 2017 only 13 countries saw a decline (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION: ADVANCERS AND DECLINERS, 1980–2017
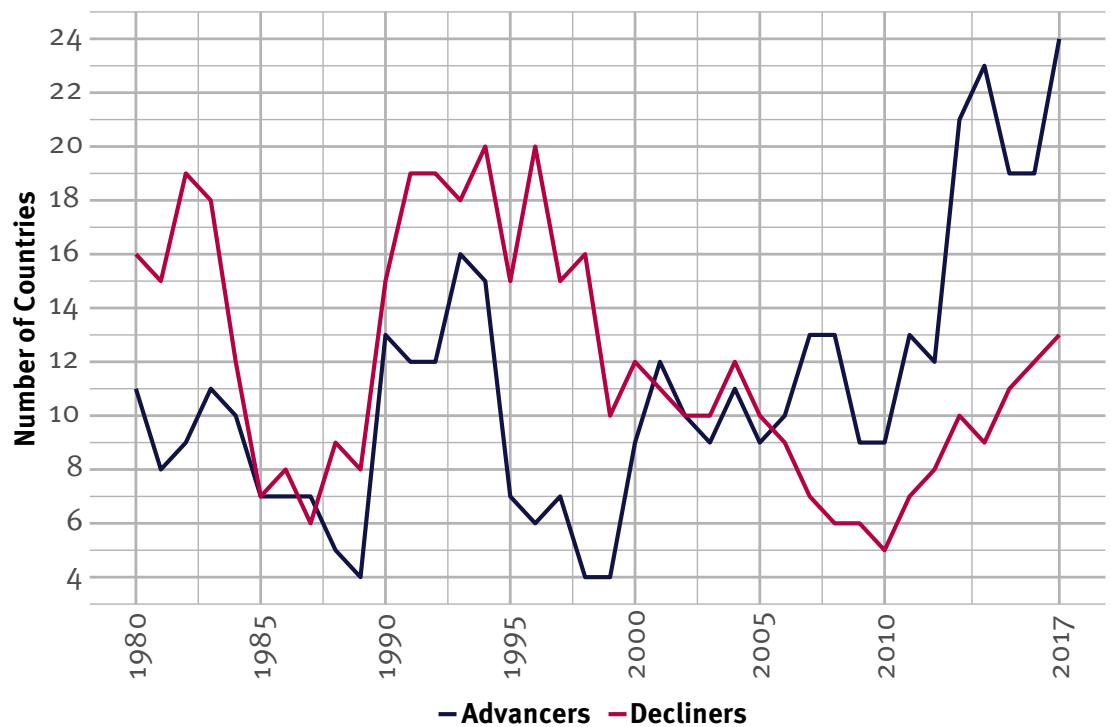
Note: This graph shows the proportion of countries advancing or declining over a five-year period. A country is classified as an advancer if it has seen a statistically significant improvement compared to its own scores five years previously. If a country sees a statistically significant decline compared to five years previously than it is classified as a decliner. Note that this analysis does not consider scale; small and large changes are treated in the same way.
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, ‹https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices›.

These positive developments are driven by countries in Africa and Asia and the Pacific. In the period 2012–17, 31 per cent (15) of African countries and 17 per cent (5) of countries in Asia and the Pacific reduced their levels of corruption. In Africa, all subregions with the exception of North Africa improved their Absence of Corruption scores. West Africa saw the greatest number of countries improving (Benin, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal). In Asia and the Pacific, all countries making advances are in Central Asia or South East Asia.

While these improvements are laudable, many of the gains occurred in countries (including Angola, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, Swaziland, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) with high levels of corruption, and which still fall well below the global average on Absence of Corruption. Of these countries, six still scored in the 25th percentile in the world for the highest levels of corruption. Furthermore, positive developments at the country level have not yet impacted the global averages. While there has been a net improvement (i.e. more countries advancing than declining) every year since 2006, this was in single digits for three of these years, with gains in one country being cancelled out by declines in another. For better or for worse, the vast majority of countries have maintained their existing levels of corruption.

5. Corruption and democracy

International IDEA considers Absence of Corruption an essential dimension of democracy, which is why it is included in the GSoD framework. The literature and empirical data show that corruption not only affects people's level of trust in politicians but can also contribute to the undermining of trust in democracy more broadly, as well as the functioning of democracy (Arkhede Olsson 2014; Fisman and Golden 2017). Recent events show that corruption is a salient electoral issue that can make or break governments (Carothers 2018; Bågenholm 2010).

The GSoD Indices can be used to measure the correlation between different dimensions of democracy within the GSoD framework. Some examples of this type of basic analysis are shown below. More complex multivariate regression analyses can also be carried out with the GSoD Indices but are beyond the scope of this GSoD In Focus. The following basic correlation analyses must therefore be read in the context of further analysis being required in order to draw more robust conclusions on the relationships between democracy and corruption.

Chapter 5 of The Global State of Democracy (Perdomo and Uribe Burcher 2017) shows a moderately strong correlation between high levels of Representative Government and low levels of corruption. Of the 158 countries covered in the GSoD sample, 90 per cent of the countries in the top 25 per cent in the world on Representative Government also have the lowest levels of corruption. This provides a general indication that countries with high levels of Representative Government are usually better at curbing corruption than governments with weak Representative Government (see Figure 4).
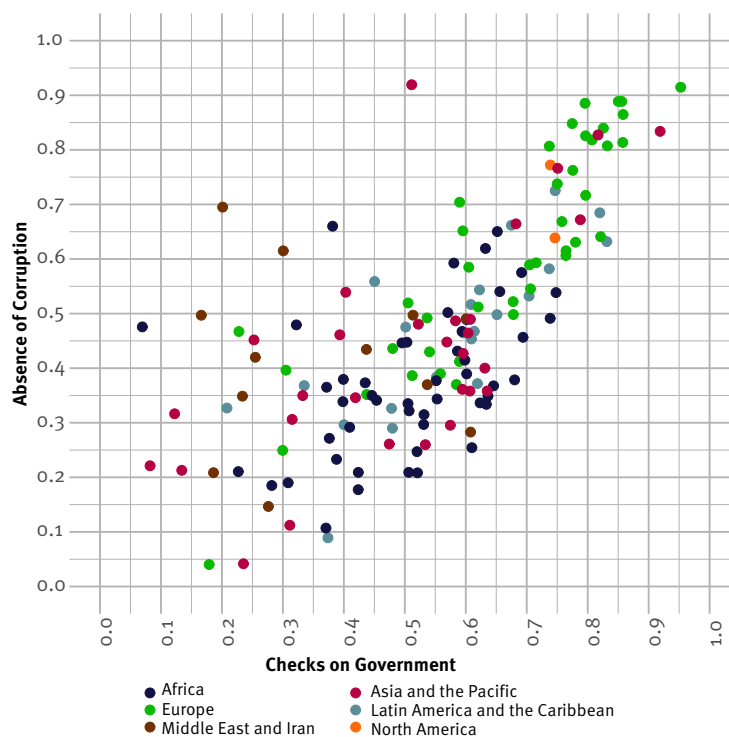
FIGURE 4. REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT BY ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION, 2017
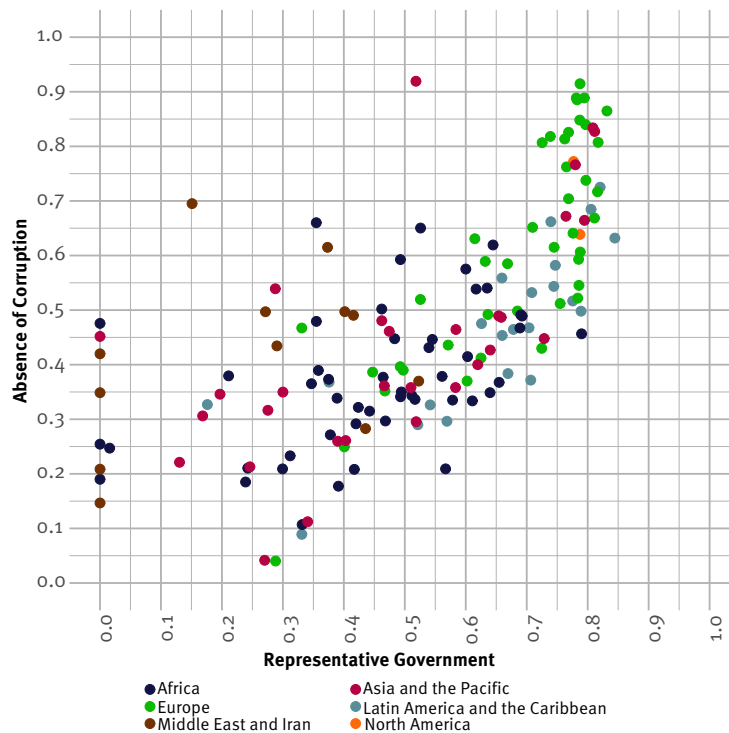
Note: This graph shows the relationship between Representative Government and Absence of Corruption. Both the Representative Government attribute and the Absence of Corruption subattribute have a scale that runs from 0 to 1, with a higher score indicating a higher level of Representative Government and greater Absence of Corruption, respectively. Pearson's correlation coefficient results: n = 157, r = .663, p-value < .005.
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, <https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>.

The data also shows a moderately strong correlation between Checks on Government—which measures dimensions of the rule of law such as Judicial Independence, an Effective Parliament overseeing the executive, and Media Integrity—and Absence of Corruption, providing a general indication that countries with strong rule of law institutions and effective Checks on Government are generally better at curbing corruption than those where such institutions are weak. The relationship is stronger for countries with higher scores on Absence of Corruption and hence with lower levels of corruption (see Figure 5). There is very little variation in the top performers on Absence of Corruption, as these countries tend to have high scores on Checks on Government as well. However, countries with lower scores on Absence of Corruption show more variation in their performance on Checks on Government.

FIGURE 5. CHECKS ON GOVERNMENT BY ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION

Africa • Asia and the Pacific •
Europe • Latin America and the Caribbean •
Middle East and Iran • North America •

Note: This graph shows the relationship between Checks on Government and Absence of Corruption. Both the Checks on Government attribute and the Absence of Corruption subattribute have a scale that runs from 0 to 1, with a higher score indicating a higher level of Representative Government and greater Absence of Corruption, respectively. Pearson's correlation coefficient results: n = 157, r = .693, p-value ‹ .005.
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, ‹https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices›.

Looking at levels of Representative Government in combination with Civil Society Participation, the correlation between Representative Government and corruption is weak for countries with low levels of Civil Society Participation (see Figure 6). In other words, more Representative Government does not constrain corruption if civil society is very weak. A similar conclusion can be drawn for Media Integrity.

FIGURE 6. REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT AND ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION ACCORDING TO CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION
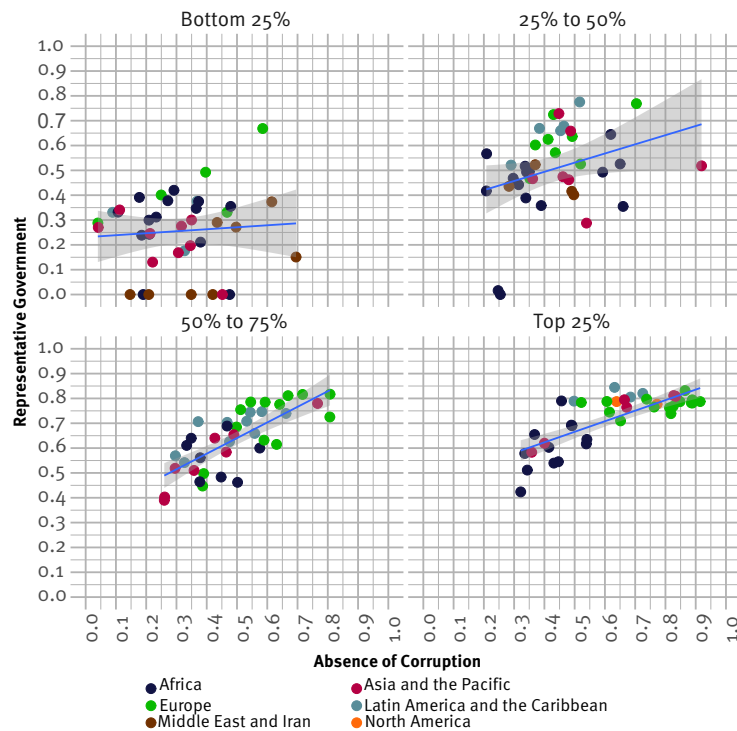
Note: This graph shows the relationship between Representative Government and Absence of Corruption for countries grouped according to their level of Civil Society Participation of 157 countries. Both the Representative Government attribute and the Absence of Corruption subattribute have a scale that runs from 0 to 1, with a higher score indicating a higher level of representative government and higher absence of corruption, respectively. The blue lines (fit lines) indicate the average corruption levels of countries depending on levels of representative government.
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, ‹https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices›.

However, the relationship between democracy and corruption is not as simple as these correlations suggest. The picture becomes more complex when looking at democratic performance over time, and at outliers with low levels of democratic performance that have succeeded in reducing corruption. There is an ongoing debate about which factors explain corruption and which factors help to curb it (Perdomo and Uribe Burcher 2017; Rothstein and Teorell 2015). Several countries, such as Rwanda, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are often cited as outliers. These have low levels of performance on their Representative Government score—ranging from 0.15 to 0.52, and hence below the world average of 0.53—but are among the countries in the world with the lowest levels of corruption.

Moreover, if the evolution of democratic performance over time is analysed, the countries that improve their democratic performance do not necessarily reduce their levels of corruption. In the past 20 years, 50 per cent of the 31 countries that improved their scores on Representative Government—which measure elements related to electoral democracy—also saw improvements in their Absence of Corruption scores, while 44 per cent saw no changes and two countries—Afghanistan and Burundi—saw worsening levels of corruption.

In 2017 there were 17 countries with relatively strong democratic performance (higher than the global average on Representative Government) but high levels of corruption (at or below the world average for Absence of Corruption). Hence, these countries perform relatively highly on aspects such as clean elections, free political parties, elected government and inclusive suffrage but struggle with high levels of corruption. Almost half (47 per cent) of these countries are in Latin America and the Caribbean. More specifically, five of the eight countries in South America fit in this category. The inverse is true for only six countries—Gambia, Oman, Rwanda, Singapore, Tanzania and the

UAE—which have low levels of democratic performance coupled with low levels of corruption. Table 1 lists the countries that fall into three different performance categories on the nexus between Representative Government and corruption performance: (a) those with low levels of Representative Government and low levels of corruption; (b) those with high levels of Representative Government and high levels of corruption; and (c) those with high levels of Representative Government and low levels of corruption.

TABLE 1. ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION VERSUS REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT, 2017

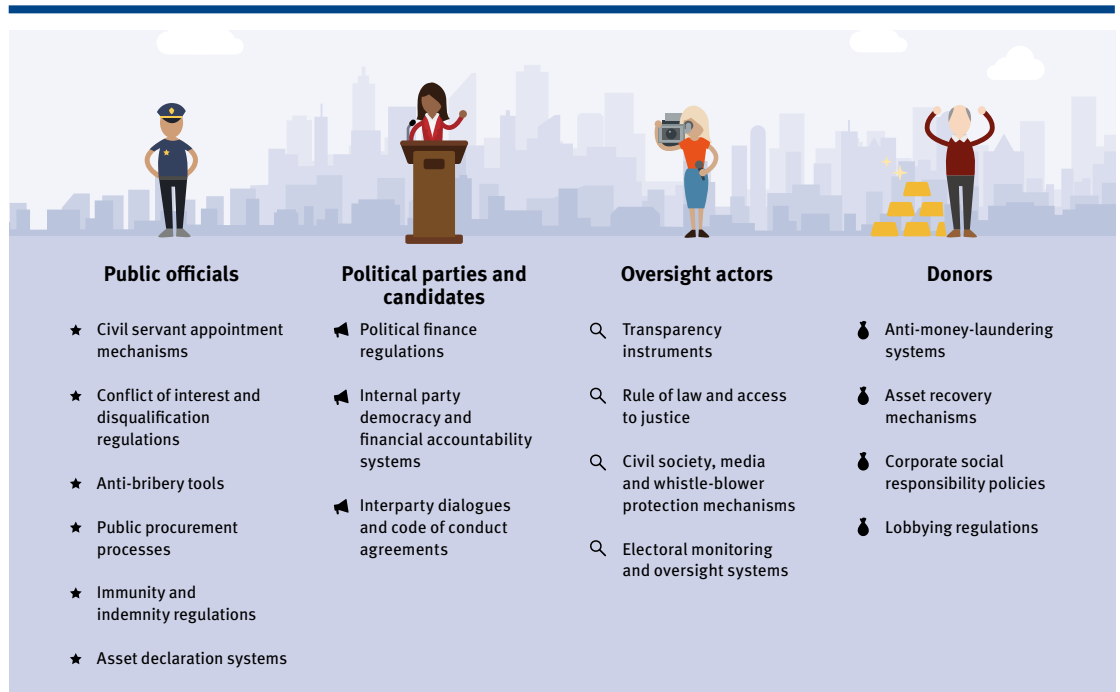| Low levels of Representative Government with low levels of corruption (Below Representative Government world average but above Absence of Corruption world average of 0.47 in 2017)	High levels of Representative Government with high levels of corruption (Above Representative Government world average and at or below Absence of Corruption world average in 2017)	High levels of Representative Government with low levels of corruption (Above Representative Government world average and above Absence of Corruption world average in 2017)
Gambia Oman Rwanda Singapore Tanzania United Arab Emirates	Argentina Benin Brazil Bulgaria Colombia Croatia El Salvador Greece Guatemala Lesotho Mauritius Mexico Paraguay Peru Romania South Africa Timor-Leste	Australia Austria Belgium Canada Chile Costa Rica Cyprus Czechia Denmark Estonia Finland France Georgia Germany Hungary Ireland Italy Jamaica Japan Lithuania Netherlands New Zealand Norway Panama Poland Portugal Republic of Korea Slovakia Slovenia Spain Sweden Switzerland Taiwan Trinidad and Tobago United Kingdom United States Uruguay

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, ‹https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices›.

The literature provides a number of possible explanations for these differences in patterns, without any conclusive evidence. For each explanation, outliers exist that do not fit the explanatory model. Among the explanatory factors put forward are the existence of robust institutions, including an independent judiciary and functioning checks on executive authority, as well as other integrity mechanisms, such as a professional public administration, to effectively prevent or reduce corruption in mature democracies where levels of corruption tend to be lower.

In addition, newer and less consolidated democracies may have fewer and less well developed accountability mechanisms or judicial systems, as well as a more fractured state apparatus, weak public administration, and a political party system built on patronage where corruption charges can be used for political mobilization and to discredit competitors (see Hydén 2006; Uslaner 2008; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016; Kopecký, Mair and Spirova 2012; Krastev 2004). The mixed record in curbing corruption may be because while judicial systems and institutions are weaker in newer and less consolidated democracies than in mature democracies, newer and less consolidated democracies also have the authority to implement forceful anti-corruption measures if the political will exists to do so (Fisman and Golden 2017).

Building on International IDEA's work on the role of money in politics, Perdomo and Uribe Burcher (2017) provide a set of policy recommendations on effectively preventing corruption as part of a wider effort to protect political integrity, based on the premise that comprehensive integrity-enhanced governance frameworks are needed to effectively prevent and deter corruption in politics and beyond (see Figure 7).

**FIGURE 7. MONEY IN POLITICS: INTEGRITY-ENHANCING SYSTEMS**

Public officials

★ Civil servant appointment mechanisms

★ Conflict of interest and disqualification regulations

★ Anti-bribery tools

★ Public procurement processes

★ Immunity and indemnity regulations

★ Asset declaration systems

Political parties and candidates

◄ Political finance regulations

◄ Internal party democracy and financial accountability systems

◄ Interparty dialogues and code of conduct agreements

Oversight actors

🔍 Transparency instruments

🔍 Rule of law and access to justice

🔍 Civil society, media and whistle-blower protection mechanisms

🔍 Electoral monitoring and oversight systems

Donors

Anti-money-laundering systems

Asset recovery mechanisms

Corporate social responsibility policies

Lobbying regulations

Source: International IDEA (2017)

6. The GSoD Indices and indicators of corruption

Although many data sets, including Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank's Control of Corruption Indicator, provide measurements of corruption, the GSoD Indices also include different data sources and provide a 42-year timeline, according to which scores can easily be compared between countries and across time. The Indices also enable comparisons with other dimensions of democracy integrated into the GSoD framework. Absence of Corruption is integrated within the GSoD Indices framework via the Impartial Administration attribute, which measures fair and predictable public administration (see Figure 8). This attribute overlaps heavily with the rule of law.

FIGURE 8. THE GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
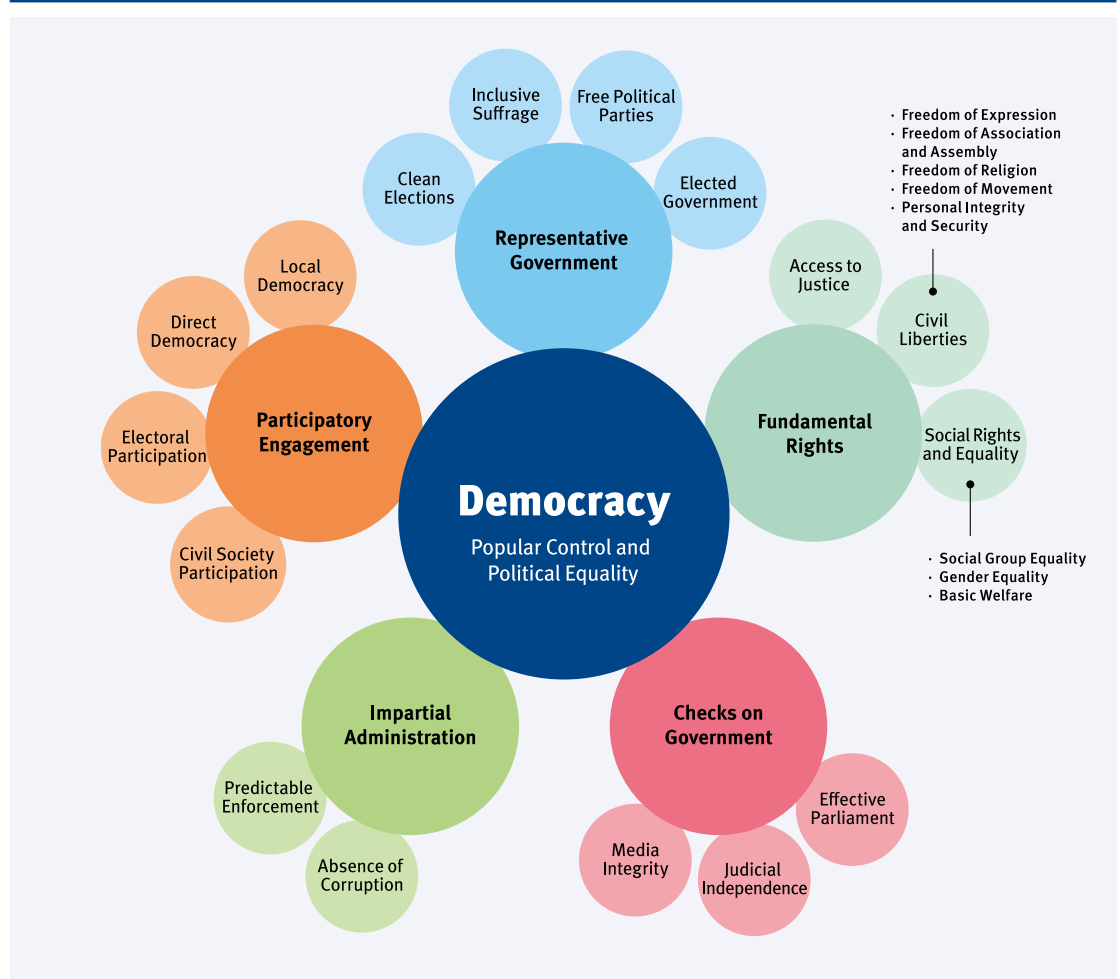
Source: Skaaning (2018)

Four of the five indicators used to construct the Absence of Corruption subattribute are from the V-Dem project's expert surveys. These indicators focus on corrupt practices by the executive and public administration, whereas the fifth indicator, from the ICRG, focuses on government corruption more broadly. Table 2 describes all the indicators used in this measurement.

TABLE 2. ABSENCE OF CORRUPTION VERSUS REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT, 2017

No.	Indicator	Description/question	Data set
4.1.1	Public sector corrupt exchanges (v2excrptps)	Expert survey: How routinely do public sector employees grant favours in exchange for bribes, kickbacks or other material inducements?	V-Dem
4.1.2	Public sector theft (v2exthftps)	Expert survey: How often do public sector employees steal, embezzle or misappropriate public funds or other state resources for personal or family use?	V-Dem
4.1.3	Executive embezzlement and theft (v2exembez)	Expert survey: How often do members of the executive (the head of state, the head of government and cabinet ministers) or their agents steal, embezzle or misappropriate public funds or other state resources for personal or family use?	V-Dem
4.1.4	Executive bribery and corrupt exchanges (v2exbribe)	Expert survey: How routinely do members of the executive (the head of state, the head of government and cabinet ministers) or their agents grant favours in exchange for bribes, kickbacks or other material inducements?	V-Dem
4.1.5	Corruption (F)	Expert survey: How widespread is actual or potential corruption in the form of excessive patronage, nepotism, job reservations, 'favours-for-favours', secret party funding or suspiciously close ties between politics and business?	ICRG

Source: Skaaning (2018)

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About the GSoD Indices

The Global State of Democracy Indices measure global-, regional- and country-level democratic trends over time, from 1975 to 2017. The conceptual framework for the Indices is based on International IDEA's broad definition of democracy, which emphasizes popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control (Beetham et al. 2008).

In the GSoD conceptual framework, this definition is translated into five main attributes of democracy: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration and Participatory Engagement. These are then subdivided into 16 subattributes and 8 subcomponents, to give 29 aspects of democracy based on 97 indicators.

The GSoD Indices take data, 70 per cent of which is from the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem), from 12 different datasets. More information about the overall framework can be found in *GSoD In Focus* No. 1 (International IDEA 2018a).

About this series

International IDEA launched the new GSoD In Focus series in 2018. These short updates apply the GSoD Indices data to current issues, providing evidence-based analysis and insights into the contemporary democracy debate.

Where to find the data

The GSoD Indices are available on the International IDEA website. Users can generate their own data visualizations and extract data at the country, regional and global levels across the attributes and subattributes for specific years or for selected time periods starting from 1975. The Indices are updated annually.
<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>

About International IDEA

Founded in 1995, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. The Institute is the only intergovernmental organization with a global mandate solely focused on democracy and elections, and is committed to be a global agenda-setter in the democracy-building field. With 31 Member States from all continents, International IDEA supports the development of stronger democratic institutions and processes; and fosters sustainable, effective and legitimate democracy through the provision of comparative knowledge resources, dialogues and partnerships at the global, regional and country levels.

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