

DECONTAMINATING SUBJECTIVE CORRUPTION INDICATORS

The effect of predispositions towards government on perceptions of corruption

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Summary. We criticise the use of general perceptions of corruption as indicators for actual corruption. We show that citizens' perceptions of corruption are embedded in general attitudes towards government. General predispositions towards government result in a considerable degree of generalisation in answering patterns in surveys. General opinions on public sector corruption may therefore often be no more than reflections of citizens' general image of the public administration. We support our claim by an analysis of a survey (n=3168) on citizens' perceptions of the public sector in Belgium.

Keywords: corruption, trust in government, survey methods, measuring corruption, perceptions of the public sector

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Introduction

In this paper we criticise the use of general perceptions of corruption as indicators for actual corruption. We will show that citizens' perceptions of corruption are embedded in general attitudes towards government, and that these subjective corruption indicators may be heavily influenced by predispositions towards government, and therefore do not reflect actual corruption in a reliable way. Most of the items that are used in surveys do not rely on respondents' experiential basis, and leave considerable freedom to respondents whether to take certain aspects into account. This creates problems of comparability, and invites respondents to broaden their frame of reference to whatever factor they wish when giving an opinion on corruption. Citizens' opinion about the ethical behaviour of civil servants is embedded in general attitudes towards government (Van de Walle, 2004b). Perceptions of administrative corruption hence are also influenced by general attitudes towards the administration and government, rather than being a mere cause of these attitudes.

In this paper, we use data from a general survey organised in Flanders in 2003. In a first part, we briefly present some of the available survey material on citizens' perception of corruption in Belgium. Subsequently, we show that many opinions on government are in fact part of a general predisposition towards government, and that these opinions can therefore not be considered as expression of individual experience. This is illustrated with a series of survey items on trust in institutions. We further illustrate these findings by analysing opinions on corruption, which, as we will show, mainly follow the general attitudinal tendencies. We end by suggesting possibilities for coming to better measurement of corruption.

Data

Most of the data in this paper comes from the *Werken aan de Overheid* survey (WADO-Working on Government), which was organised as part of a research project commissioned by the ministry of the Flemish Community (2000-2004, www.kuleuven.ac.be/io/trust). Participants were inhabitants of the Flemish Region (aged 18-85) Three surveys have been organised: a face-to-face survey (2002, n=1248, response rate 68,2%), a first mail survey (2002, n=2166, response rate 63,5%), and a second mail survey (2003, n=3168, response rate

61,9%²). We will only use data from the 2003 survey. Questionnaires were sent with two-week intervals. Fifteen successive waves covered a period of half a year (second half of 2003). In this way, the impact of events on citizens' opinions could be measured, and long-term impact and evolutions analysed. We do not, however, analyse trends in this paper. Respondents received an announcement letter, the questionnaire with postage-paid return envelope, and a reminder. A limited number of presents (approx. 0.5 to 1% of respondents) were given to respondents by means of a lottery. For detailed information, please consult the sourcebook (Van de Walle, Kampen, Maddens, and Bouckaert, 2004). The questionnaire contained items on socio-demographics, citizens and public services, citizens and politics and citizens and society.

Perceived corruption in Belgium

Before analysing our own data, we will briefly present some of the available data on citizens' perception of corruption in Belgium. The 1995 ISPO General Election Study (Beerten, Billiet, Carton, and Swyngedouw, 1997) revealed that 29% of the Belgians thought politicians to be more corrupt than other people, while 65,5% did not see a difference. This study also revealed that citizens have more problems with politicians who *demand* bribes or payments for granting government contracts than with politicians who *accept* money for a contract. A politician using bribes for funding his or her personal election campaign is considered more reprehensible than is a politician who transfers the money to his or her political party. Yet, even in the latter case, 73,9% of respondents considered accepting bribes as unacceptable³.

The best-known source for corruption indicators is the Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). This index ranks countries based on perceived corruption among politicians and public officials⁴. Even though the CPI does not lend itself for making meticulous time-series comparisons, the trend for Belgium in recent years is quite clear: Since

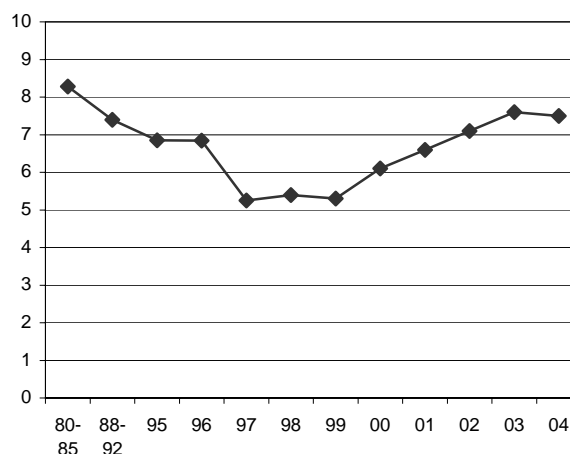
² In the 2003 survey, 25-44 aged are underrepresented, 45-60 aged tended to return the questionnaire more often, and the +70 category is again underrepresented. Response was higher in rural areas.

³ Combining 'hardly acceptable' and 'never acceptable'. Of the remaining respondents, 17,8% stated this is 'sometimes acceptable', and 5,4% stated that accepting money and giving it to one's party is 'completely acceptable'.

⁴ <http://www.transparency.org>, note that CPI scores cannot just be compared on a year-to-year basis, as composition has changed a number of times.

1999 there is a unambiguous positive trend (the lower the score, the higher perceived corruption). The score does not return to 1980s level, but this is probably due to changes in the method of measurement and the fact that data for Belgium and Luxembourg have not always been disaggregated. Luxembourg generally ranks better than Belgium.

Figure 1: Belgium in the Corruption Perceptions Index



Source: Transparency International: Corruption Perceptions Index

Belgium is not only doing well in the scores, but also in the ranking. In 2004, it ranked 17th among the least corrupt countries (on a total of 133 countries). This puts the country on a par with the U.S.A. and Ireland, and higher than e.g. France, Spain and Japan. Still, Belgium performs worse than many other EU15 countries, and than most of its neighbouring countries (with the exception of Germany).

Additional information on Belgian citizens' attitude towards corruption can be found in the 1999 European Values Study. One question was about the perceived occurrence of taking bribes. Table 1 shows the answers in a series of EU15 countries.

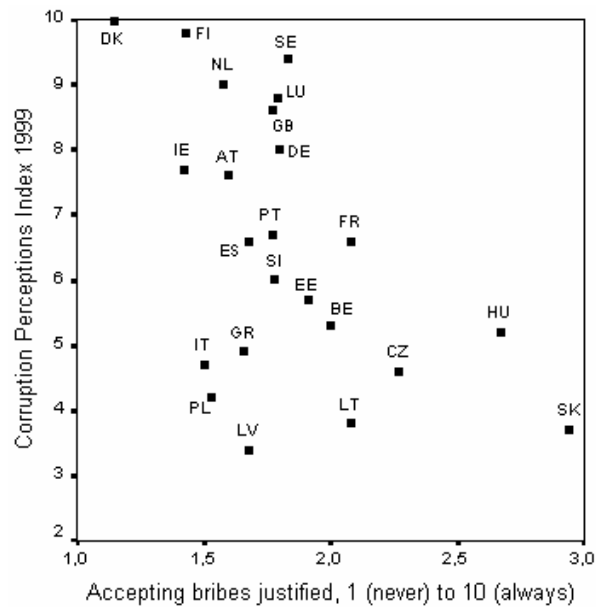
Table 1: According to you, how many of your compatriots do the following? Accepting a bribe in the course of their duties?

%	almost all	many	some	almost none
BE	4,8	23,0	63,5	8,7
AT	2,4	30,4	63,3	3,9
DE	5,1	27,9	61,2	5,8
FI	2,3	20,3	64,5	13,0
IT	7,4	43,8	46,5	2,3
LU	0,9	9,7	38,1	33,0
UK	1,8	29,4	60,0	8,7

Source: European Values Study, only results for EU15 (Halman, 2001)

Another question asked to what extent citizens considered it justified for someone to accept a bribe in the course of his or her duties. The percentage of respondents that considered accepting a bribe never to be justified increased from 77,7% in 1981 to 78,6% in 1990 and to 84,1% in 1999.

Figure 2: Perceptions of corruption (TI) and justifiability of accepting bribes (EVS) in the EU-countries



Source: Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 1999, where '10' means that corruption is perceived to be very low; European Values Study. 'Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between. Someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties.' Scale 1 (never) to 10 (always), mean score (Halman, 2001)

The general tendency is that countries where citizens consider accepting bribes not to be justified are also countries where corruption is perceived to be lower, though there are exceptions. In countries such as Italy, Poland, Greece and Latvia receiving bribes is considered not acceptable, yet corruption is perceived to be rather extensive.

Our "Working on Government" 2003 survey contained a number of issues related to corruption and favouritism. We analyse five items more in detail. Three of these deal with corruption-related issues. Two other with the somewhat less relevant, but perhaps also interesting, issue of equal treatment.

Table 2: Perceptions of unethical behaviour in the public sector in Flanders

%	<i>totally</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>not agree, not</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>totally</i>
	<i>disagree</i>		<i>disagree</i>		<i>agree</i>
21.8. Civil servants are more corrupt than other people	8,4	28,7	38,2	19,0	5,7
40.3. Politicians are more corrupt than other people	3,0	18,4	36,2	29,4	13,1
21.9. You need 'connections' to get something done by government or the public administration	2,1	11,3	30,5	40,5	15,7
21.6. All users of public services are treated equally	10,9	40,2	26,1	16,7	6,1
21.7. Users of public services always get what they're entitled to	7,8	35,4	35,5	18,6	2,7

Source: Werken aan de Overheid (WADO) 2003, n=3168.

The issues related to corruption and those related to equal treatment refer to different dimensions. There is evidently something wrong with equal treatment. Just one out of five respondents agrees that users are treated equally and get what they're entitled to. Over half of the respondents refutes that users of public services are treated equally.

An astonishing 56,2% of the respondents thinks you need connections to get something done from government or the public administration. Only 13,3% disagrees. The image is somewhat more positive when enquiring for corruption directly: just under a quarter of the respondents thinks that civil servants are more corrupt than other people. Politicians, however, are thought to be more corrupt than other people by 42,4% of participants in the survey. Answers to these three questions correlate quite substantially.

Women and the lower educated tend to think connections are essential to get something done. Of the respondents with a university-level education, just 36,8% thinks connections are necessary, while this amounts to 56,2% for the research population as a whole. Respondents with a management position, and, not surprisingly, civil servants disagree. Even though the effect drops in a multivariate analysis, older people tend to think connections are needed more often than others.

The pitfalls of using general perception indicators

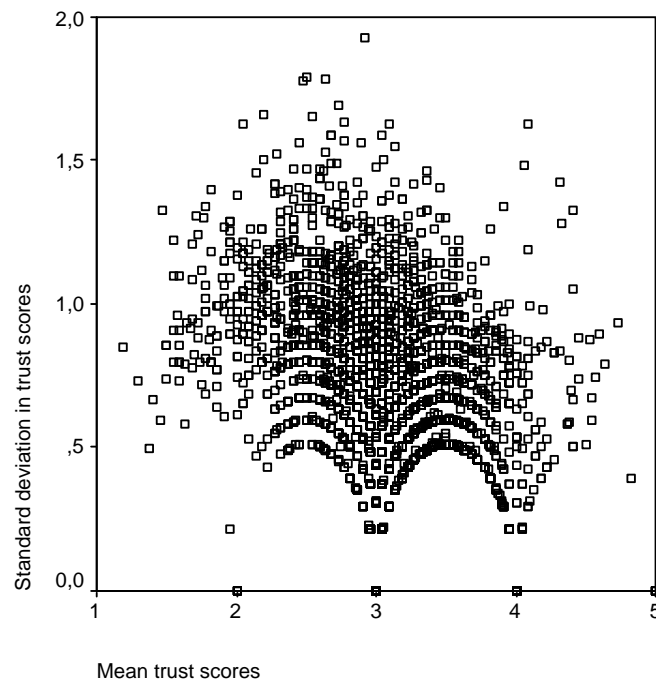
We have shown that quite many respondents in our survey indicate that having connections helps to get something done. There also is a minority who thinks that civil servants are more corrupt than other people. What do these statistics mean? Are these opinions and attitudes a reflection of actual individual experience? Our previous research on citizens' perceptions of public services and on citizens' trust in institutions has shown that there is a substantial

degree of generalisation in respondents' answers to quite general questions (Van de Walle, 2004b, Van de Walle et al., 2005). Indicating that one trusts a certain institution quite often coincides with trust in most institutions. Certain general predispositions towards government influence most attitudes towards government-related aspects. Expressing distrust in government quite often coincides with complaints about corruption, waste, unfriendly civil servants etc. Below, we will demonstrate that when citizens frequently use similar scores for rating institutions, these ratings are not necessarily a genuine, individual evaluation of these institutions, but rather an expression of general attitudes towards government. Stating that connections are needed or civil servants are corrupt may therefore be the result of actual experienced corruption, but it may also be part of a general (negative) predisposition towards government.

We illustrate this by analysing respondents' trust in a series of institutions. In our survey, we included a series of 26 institutions, and asked respondents whether they trusted these institutions (see table 2 in the appendix). For 22 of these, we analysed patterns of answers: how often do people pick the same answer out of five possibilities (1=very little trust; 5=very much trust). Our data shows that a number of respondents tends to limit the extent of variation in their answers. The x-axis in the figure indicates the mean level of trust calculated for 22 government-related institutions for every respondent⁵. Trust scores range from 1 to 5. The Y-axis shows the standard deviation over these 22 institutions. The figure makes it visible that there are a considerable number of respondents that tend to use the same score over and over (notably 3 - *not little, not much trust*, and 4 - *trust a lot*). The figure does not give indications of a strong tendency to display generalised negative attitudes (where respondents would score 2 - *little trust* on most of the items).

⁵ The police, the educational system, the Flemish administration, the local administration, the legal system, Flemish government, Flemish political parties, Flemish parliament, the King, Belgian parliament, European Commission, Belgian government, Walloon political parties, army, De Lijn (public transport by bus and tram), VDAB unemployment agency, refuse collection, Belgian Post, NMBS railways, VRT public radio, and TV, the Federal administration, and the College of mayor and aldermen.

Figure 3: Patterns in response behaviour



Source: Werken aan de Overheid (WADO) 2003, n=3168.

The absence of variation in answering patterns makes analysis difficult. Expressing high trust in an institution may be an evaluation of that specific institution, but may also follow from a general pattern of high trust ratings. Displaying low trust in an institution in the survey may in a similar way indicate low trust in that specific institution, but may also be part of a generalised pattern of low trust. Evaluations of *one* institution should therefore be interpreted within the broader pattern of evaluations of *all* institutions. When a respondent's answers have a high standard deviation, we could rightfully claim this respondent makes a separate evaluation of all of the institutions. When, however, standard deviation is low, evaluation of a single institution may follow from a generalised attitude. This last step is a tricky one. It is of course possible that a respondent gives a true evaluation of every single institution and concludes that they all deserve the same level of trust (be it high or low).

Assume now that low standard deviation is an expression of generalisation and cannot follow from a *true* evaluation of each of the individual institutions. Based on the two scores displayed in the figure, we could divide our respondents into four groups:

- I. *Generalised negative* (low standard deviation and low mean): evaluations of the institutions follow from a generalised trust attitude, which is a negative one.
- II. *Dissatisfied* (high standard deviation and low mean): each of the institutions is evaluated individually, and the overall picture is a rather negative one.
- III. *Positive but critical* (high standard deviation and high mean): each of the institutions is evaluated individually, and the overall picture is a rather positive one.
- IV. *Uncritical positive* (low standard deviation and high mean): evaluations of the institutions follow from a generalised trust attitude, which is a positive one.

Two problems of interpretation remain: 1) how to determine what is a high or low standard deviation and mean? and 2) is the generalisation of the answers a result of a generalised trusting attitude, or is it a methodological artefact, e.g. because the respondent is lazy or tired?

We start with the first problem, and later deal with the second one. Determining when a standard deviation or mean is high or low is an arbitrary decision. We define a low standard deviation as a standard deviation that is lower than or equal to the mean standard deviation in the sample (.73 in this case). A low mean -this is a low overall level of trust- is defined as a mean that is lower than or equal to the mean of the mean trust scores for all respondents (3.07 in this case). Using these definitions, we can determine the size of each of our four groups, as is shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Clusters of citizens' attitude types

	<i>Low mean trust score</i>	<i>High mean trust score</i>	
Low standard deviation	Generalised negative (19,3%) I	Uncritical positive (32,9%) IV	=> generalisation (52,7%)
High standard deviation	Dissatisfied (29,7%) II	Positive, but critical (18,2%) III	=> no generalisation (47,3%)

Source: Werken aan de Overheid (WADO) 2003, n=3168.

Using this method, the group of uncritical positive respondents is by far the largest one (32,5% of the sample). Their overall mean is high, and they do not really differentiate between the institutions. Contrary to claims as would the Belgian population be generally very negative towards government, it is not the group of the generalised negative that is the

largest one, but that of the uncritical positive. It seems there is a considerably large group that has a positive predisposition towards government. This is in some way positive for government, but may also indicate absence of critical attitude and an inclination towards obedience. Almost 20% are negative and generalise this negative attitude to most of the institutions listed. This means that for 52,7% of the respondents we find a certain degree of generalisation. Of the groups where there is no generalisation, the dissatisfied is the largest one, with 29,7% of the respondents. 18,2% has an overall positive attitude, but still is critical towards certain institutions.

Though our method used for assembling these groups may be disputed, it may be one of the few methods for doing so. Identifying causes for this discontent is now the main challenge. The first step in the analysis compares all four groups on relevant socio-demographic differences. In the second step, we analyse differences between the two extreme groups (positive and negative generalisers; uncritical positive and generalized negative) more in depth.

A general conclusion is that there are no fundamental, clear, and overarching differences between the groups. People in the group of *uncritical positives* are older and more religious. We find more women, and this group tends to vote for the three main classic political parties (Christian-Democrats, Liberals and Socialists). They vote less often for the extreme right. The *generalised negative* are not religious, often in their 30s or 40s, and more individualist. The *dissatisfied* tend to be male, and younger than 30 or over their mid 40s. They vote for the Flemish Nationalists and extreme right more often. In the *positive but critical* we find more civil servants.

In the next step, we use a Chi square test to compare the two extreme groups in our typology: the *uncritical positives* and the *generalised negatives*. The huge difference in absolute levels of trust in institutions suggests that these two groups will be fundamentally different. Differences are, however, not as fundamental as one may have thought. Both groups only differ on a very limited number of variables. In a multivariate model however, most of these differences disappear. The *generalised positives* generally are more religious, somewhat less individualistic, and more traditionalistic. There are more women in this group.

The two groups do differ on most if not all items probing for an evaluation of the political and administrative system (political alienation, satisfaction with policy), but we do not find differences related to the general principles and values underlying a political or administrative system: participation vs. efficiency, popular participation vs. technocracy, defending the general vs. personal interest, lower taxes vs. better services, majority decisions vs. minority

influence, electing politicians vs. participation in politics. All this seems to suggest that there is no fundamental difference in values between these groups. Unfortunately, this does not teach us much about the reasons for discontent. All we are able to say at this point is that the *generalised negativists* are negative because they are negative, and that the *uncritical positivists* are positive because they are positive.

There remains a possibility that the extent of generalisation we have found does not reflect the respondents' opinion, but is just a methodological error, e.g. the tendency not to bring variation in one's answers and just tick the same box over and over again. Analysis of face-to-face interview data, and the interviewer-reported motivation of respondents allowed for a partial test, and revealed that motivation to participate in a survey is also quite high in the group of generalisers. This suggests the extent of generalisation we have found cannot only be attributed to a methodological artefact.

Still, there are no ultimately convincing arguments for defining whether a repeated answering pattern reflects a measurement/methodological error, or whether it measures a genuine opinion. The extent of generalisation (over 50% of respondents) however shows this is a factor we need to take into account. Certain attitudes measured in surveys hence may be the result of this process of generalisation, and cannot be considered as stand-alone opinions.

What about perceptions of corruption?

Considering the degree of generalisation, it is very likely that this generalisation will extend to opinions of corruption as well. The two groups with a low mean trust score also report high perceived corruption. The opinions on corruption thus mainly follow the general attitudinal tendencies. In a next step, we look at correlations between opinions on corruption and trust in specific institutions and services. High correlations possibly suggest a corrupt image for the service or institution in question.

The correlation between perceptions of corruption and general trust in government⁶ is the highest, directly followed by trust in the quite generally phrased items Flemish administration, Federal administration and municipal administration. At the bottom of the list are very specific services such as the railway company, the postal service etc., where correlations are very small, yet still significant. A traditional explanation would be that citizens tend to

⁶ General question near the start of the survey: "To what extent do you trust government" (1-5 scale)

associate institutions such as the Flemish or Federal administration with corruption, or, at least, that they associate these institutions more with corruption than is the case for services such as e.g. the postal service or the national railways.

Table 4: Trust and corruption: correlations

<i>trust</i>	<i>Correlation</i>			<i>Correlation</i>	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Sig.</i>		<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Government (general)	-0,31	**	European Commission	-0,17	**
Flemish administration	-0,26	**	Police	-0,17	**
Federal administration	-0,25	**	Courts/justice system	-0,15	**
Municipal administration	-0,23	**	Educational system	-0,12	**
Flemish Parliament	-0,20	**	Public transport (bus, tram)	-0,11	**
Flemish Government	-0,20	**	Flemish employment agency	-0,10	**
Belgian Parliament	-0,20	**	Public television	-0,10	**
Belgian Government	-0,20	**	Refuse collection	-0,08	**
Flemish political parties	-0,18	**	Army	-0,06	**
Walloon political parties	-0,18	**	Postal service	-0,06	**
College of mayor and aldermen	-0,17	**	Railway company	-0,05	**

Source: Werken aan de Overheid (WADO) 2003, n=3168, Kendall's Tau b, ** significant at the 0.01 level.

It would be incorrect, however, to infer from these findings that citizens experience or have experienced more frequent occurrences of corruption in these non-specific institutions ('the administration', 'government'). In fact, these correlations merely confirm something we have seen elsewhere in research on citizens' perceptions of public services: Citizens generally perceive more specific and concrete services in a more positive way, than is the case for government in general or for general concepts such as 'the public administration'. This finding has re-appeared over and over again in research the past 30 years (Grunow, 1981; Klages, 1981; Goodsell, 1983; Katz, Gutek, Kahn, and Barton, 1977; Hill, 1992). The baseline of these research findings is that the general image of the bureaucracy does not correspond to the evaluation citizens make about their own experience with public services ('bureaucratic encounters'). Even though we have not measured perceptions of corruption in very specific and concrete governmental institutions, we can quite confidently state that survey respondents will report lower corruption in many specific institutions than they will for the public administration or government in general. Exceptions to this 'general rule' will

then probably be services that have recently experienced corruption scandals, or services that traditionally had a very negative image.

For citizens, it is not easy to base their perceptions about or attitude towards corruption as expressed in a survey on personal experience. Fragmented evidence suggests that actual individual acts of corruption are quite limited in most Western countries. In the International Crime Victims Survey for instance, a question is included on actual experienced corruption in relations with e.g. customs officers, police officers and inspectors or other government officials⁷. Frequencies for this items are generally low to extremely low (Van Kesteren, Mayhew, and Nieuwbeerta, 2000). In our own survey, we included an item on politicians' constituency service, and to what extent citizens have approached a politician during the last four years for solving a personal problem⁸. Just 2,5 % of respondents mentioned more than one contact, while 9,6% of respondents admit having approached a politician one in the four preceding years. Using politicians constituency service does of course not equal corruption.

Naturally, reporting corruption, and especially one's own participation in corrupt practices will be subject to a desirability bias, but still the number of respondents whose answers on the survey items related to corruption are based on recently experienced corruption is likely to be extremely low. Hence, reactions to a statement such as 'you need connections to get

⁷ Q290: "In some countries, there is a problem of corruption among government of public officials. During 1999, has any government official, for instance a customs officer, a police officer or inspector in your country asked you, or expected you to pay a bribe or his or her services?". Answer = yes/no. In Belgium there were 9 'yes' answers on 2501 respondents in the 1999 survey.

⁸ "People sometimes call on politicians for solving personal problems. Did you during the last four year call on a politician's constituency service for solving some personal problem?". We use the Dutch word 'dienstbetoon', which is generally translated as constituency services, but which is in fact something more specific. 'Dienstbetoon' refers to the waning Belgian politicians' habit for holding office every week or month somewhere in their constituency to meet individual citizens. Traditionally, this practice has been associated with corruption, e.g. because citizens visited politicians to arrange jobs for family members or to get building permits. Nowadays, however, the practice has evolved into some kind of front-office social work, where politicians are considered easier to approach than are certain national administrations. Politicians are now believed to limit their 'dienstbetoon' to showing citizens the correct administration they should contact with a certain problem, or to referring citizens to the ombudsman. Of the respondents in our survey who had approached a politician, 33,9% stated it helped solving the problem, while 49,9% declared it did not. The others, 29,9%, took a neutral position.

something done from government' do not have a specific referential basis, but more probably refer to information about government in general that is present in the respondents' mind (Zaller, 1996). Most probably, this information concurs with general attitudes towards government and with the general stereotypes of government and administrations (Van de Walle, 2004a). The quite high correlation between 'you need connections ...' and trust in the Flemish/Federal/municipal administration does therefore not necessarily mean that citizens think that connections are needed to deal with these administrations, or at least, that connections are more needed in relations with these administrations as compared to services such as the Postal service, the employment agency etc. Instead, the high correlation most likely only indicates that opinions about trust in the Flemish/Federal/municipal administration and about 'you need connections ...' are both shaped referring to an identical mental concept of 'government' or 'the public administration'. The specificity of services and institutions such as the postal service makes it considerably easier for citizens to include individual experience and bureaucratic encounters into their attitude towards these services. Subsequently, correlations with opinions on corruption become smaller or almost non-existent because the source of the attitudes towards the specific institutions is different from the general concept to which citizens refer when forming an opinion about corruption.

Institutions such as the Flemish/Federal administration are quite heterogeneous institutions, and individual citizens do not really have frequent encounters with these administrations⁹. This makes it difficult for survey respondents/citizens to come to an experience-based evaluation of these administrations. Consequently, their opinion on these administrations will, just as the opinion on corruption, partly be based on their general preconceptions about government or the public administration (Van de Walle, 2004b).

This means that the opinion on corruption is probably part of an a-priori attitude towards government, and not so much the result of actual experience. General surveys do not really allow for distinguishing where or for whom these opinions are part of the general attitude towards government or where and for whom these opinions result from actual experienced corruption. The analysis of the items on trust in the institutions we have presented does show that the process of generalisation in citizens' opinions is quite strong and probably applies to a substantial part of the survey population. A similar analysis on patterns of answers related to

⁹ Or, a number of encounters with these administrations are experienced indirectly or citizens are not aware they are dealing with a service that is part of or depends on the Federal/Flemish administration.

the corruption items is not really feasible or relevant, because we have just three items, which are located at two different places in the questionnaire. Still, factor analysis reveals that our three corruption items load on one single factor explaining 63,4% of variance.

A need for better measurement of corruption?

This paper clearly shows that there is a need for better measurement of corruption, because general items on corruption risk to be contaminated by general predispositions towards government. Generally, there are two possibilities for avoiding contamination of corruption indicators by citizens' general predisposition towards government. One is to avoid broad and general questions, and instead to focus on specific and concrete situations. The other is to do away with measuring perceptions altogether, and to increase efforts to develop objective indicators of corruption.

Specific measurement

We have shown that general perceptions of corruption correlate with levels of trust in quite general institutions. The more specific an item in a questionnaire, the narrower the respondent's framework of reference for answering the question becomes. This may help filtering predispositions. A general question such as "is the public administration corrupt?" invites respondents not only to think about recent experience, but also to think about all possible administrations, about bureaucratic stereotypes, even about politicians etc. A more narrowly defined question such as "did you personally experience corruption in service Y during the past three encounters" drastically confines the framework of reference to service Y, and helps to exclude many of the general predispositions towards government or administrations. Specific measurement of corruption should therefore disaggregate the general corruption items and ask questions on corruption with regard to many different specific services, and with regard to many different appearances of corruption.

For policy makers, such a specific measurement is also important, because it shows them where and how corruption is manifest, and hence facilitates action. Policymakers who use general corruption indicators can in fact only use this information to decide on general measures to combat corruption, without knowing where action should take priority.

Objective measurement

Possibilities for measuring corruption in an objective way are quite limited, and in the literature, not many examples can be found. One approach counts the number of cases related

to corruption before the courts. In Belgium, Yante (2003) analysed the number of lawsuits related to corruption. Despite the often defective judicial statistics, he did find a decrease, and also observed a tendency for more severe punishment in corruption cases. This relatively easy approach negates certain aspects, because corruption is essentially an illegal activity (Kaufmann et al., 2003). A falling number of lawsuits may also suggest decreasing judicial capacities or more hidden corruption. Essentially, effectively measuring corruption is *de facto* combating corruption.

Kaufmann et al., in their *Governance Matters III* working paper, refer to a small number of studies that attempted to measure corruption directly. They mention Di Tella and Shargrotsky (2003), who measure variation in procurement prices for medical supplies, where high variation suggests there is corruption involved, and Golden and Picci, who compare expenditure for public infrastructure in Italian regions and the existing stock of infrastructure, where high discrepancies hint at corruption (Golden and Picci, 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that general subjective corruption indicators risk to reflect citizens' general predispositions towards government, rather than actual experienced corruption. Therefore, there exists a possibility that countries where the public administration or government suffer from a very negative image will also be seen as countries where corruption is high. A general survey item on corruption invites respondents to refer to a broad range of possible aspects when expressing an opinion. Items that attempt to measure corruption in a more concrete and specific way restrict the general framework of reference for coming to an opinion, and may hence offer a more accurate reflection of reality.

In two different analyses, one on patterns of answers with regard to trust in institutions, another on correlations between perceived corruption and trust in institutions, we have shown that the effect of predispositions towards government may be quite substantial, and that generalisation in answers is real. Making surveys measure specific occurrences and expressions of corruption is one possible way for ameliorating current corruption indicators. In this way, the indicators are no longer 'contaminated' by the general predispositions. Efforts to develop methods for measuring corruption objectively should be increased, but unfortunately the literature does not yet offer many examples of how this may be done.

Appendices

Appendix Table 1: General trust in government: "To what extent do you trust government?" (Q.11)

	<i>frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Very little	421	13,3
Little	755	23,8
Not little, not much	1641	51,8
A lot	314	9,9
Very much	10	0,3
Missing	27	0,9

Source: Werken aan de Overheid (WADO) 2003, n=3168.

Appendix Table 2: Trust in institutions: "to what extent do you trust the following institutions, services and persons?" (Q.24)

	<i>very little</i>	<i>little</i>	<i>not much/not little</i>	<i>a lot</i>	<i>very much</i>
The police	5,4	16,3	45,2	30,3	2,8
The educational system	0,7	4,3	28,4	59,3	7,4
The Flemish administration	2,1	13,3	60,8	23,1	0,7
The municipal administration	2,6	12,7	50,0	32,7	2,0
The legal system	10,3	25,8	46,1	16,4	1,4
The Flemish press	5,9	21,3	50,7	20,4	1,8
Flemish government	5,7	19,7	54,1	19,6	0,9
Flemish political parties	10,7	28,3	49,2	10,9	0,8
The Church	17,4	22,9	39,7	17,3	2,8
The employers and the employers' organisations	4,5	14,7	51,5	26,6	2,7
The Flemish parliament	6,3	20,0	56,4	16,7	0,7
The trade unions	12,4	22,1	41,2	21,4	2,8
The king	10,3	11,7	39,5	28,4	10,0
The Belgian parliament	8,7	20,6	53,0	16,1	1,7
The European Commission	11,2	22,8	50,7	14,1	1,2
The Belgian government	11,2	22,9	48,1	16,1	1,6
The Wallonian political parties	22,2	28,8	43,1	5,6	0,3
The army	9,2	20,6	49,6	18,0	2,5
Public transport: bus & tram ('De Lijn')	1,8	7,3	40,3	44,8	5,8
The Flemish employment agency ('VDAB')	3,8	8,9	48,1	35,6	3,6
Refuse collection	1,7	4,5	23,8	59,2	10,7
Postal service	2,5	11,0	38,2	42,7	5,6

The national railways ('NMBS')	2,8	11,9	43,0	37,3	5,0
The public radio/TV ('VRT')	2,8	5,9	36,9	45,0	9,3
The Federal/Belgian administration	5,0	16,7	61,6	15,6	1,1
The college of mayor and aldermen	7,6	15,1	46,0	27,3	4,1

Source: Werken aan de Overheid (WADO) 2003, n=3168.

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