

# Coalition governments and Corruption in Developed Democracies

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## **Abstract**

It is acknowledged that corruption is one of the main problems of current Western democracies. Several studies have searched empirical regularities between perceived corruption and variety of economical, political, judicial, bureaucratic, religious and geo-cultural variables. However, there is still a considerable theoretical confusion as to how any of these variables relates to levels of corruption. This research note suggests that coalition governments provide an opportunity for mutual control by monitoring and checking one another parties. Thus, both the number of political parties in the cabinet and the existence of different mechanisms create additional controls between coalition parties that may reduce their incentives and ability to engage in corrupt practices. The empirical evidence offered tends to support the main argument.

**Keywords:** *political corruption, coalition governments, control mechanisms, coalition agreements, watchdog junior ministers.*

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Research note to be presented at the XII Congreso de la Asociación Española de Ciencia Política y de la Administración (AECPA), July 2015.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Deterring and tackling political corruption is a key challenge for any country. Its importance is reflected in the World Bank President's recent description of corruption as "public enemy number one" (World Bank, 2013). In order to meet this challenge, policy-makers need a robust understanding of the political, economic, and cultural determinants of corrupt behaviour. This research note aims to extend this understanding by examining the impact on political corruption of one key institutional feature of democratic systems, namely their tendency toward government by a coalition of parties.

*How does government by coalition impact political corruption?* An extensive literature on accountability and clarity of responsibility suggests that single-party governments should be less corrupt than coalition governments (e.g., Powell and Whitten, 1993; Anderson, 2000). However, elections are imperfect instruments of accountability (e.g., Powell, 2000) and no research has yet looked in detail at the functioning of coalition governments in practice and the consequences of this for political corruption. This is an important gap because, as I argue below, there may be important political and institutional mechanisms which actually reduce corruption in coalition governments compared to single-party governments.

To advance some findings, I observe that the relationship between coalition governments and the level of perceived corruption exists. Thus, all the formulated hypotheses have their logic and are robust when adding other explanatory variables of corruption perception relevant in the literature. More precisely, these show that coalition governments are perceived less corrupt when they are composed by two or three political parties in the cabinet, when establishing a coalition agreement and when they allocate cross-partisan watchdog junior ministers.

This research note proceeds in four sections. I first briefly summarise the main empirical findings on the determinants of corruption focusing on those factors related to political institutions. Secondly, I present the theoretical framework and hypotheses of the research note, adopting the rationale approach to corruption. Thirdly, I describe all the methodological questions related to the empirical

analysis. Next, I explain the results of the empirical analysis. Finally, I summarise the main findings and suggest possible paths for future research.

## **2. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS ON THE DETERMINANTS OF CORRUPTION**

Corruption manifests itself in multiple ways and has distinct meaning in different cultural and historical contexts. Corruption is usually defined as “the misuse of public office for private or personal gain” (Hutchinson, 2005: 03). It is essential to distinguish between those factors that facilitate the growth of corruption –such as historical, structural and cultural factors– from those that are more direct causes (Bull and Newell, 2005). The development of corruption is therefore dependent not just on the presence of certain structural or historical variables but also, as Williams (2000) points out, on the number and nature of opportunities and the risk and consequences of detection. In recent years, a growing community of political scientist and economists has sought to understand why in some countries governments structures are more corrupt than in others. Thus, existing studies have uncovered empirical regularities in the relationship between perceived corruption and a variety of economic, political, judicial, bureaucratic, religious and geo-cultural variables (e.g., Ades and Di Tella, 1997; Lambsdorff, 2005; Treisman, 2007; Seldadyo and de Hann 2006). On-going research analyses both causes and consequences of corruption in developing (e.g., Olken and Pande, 2012) and developed countries (e.g., Chang and Golden, 2004; Vivyan et al., 2012; Eggers et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, there is no commonly-agreed-upon theory on which to base an empirical model of corruption phenomenon (Alt and Lassen, 2003). By now, it is established that “the perceived corruption measured by aggregate indexes is lower in economically developed countries, long-established liberal democracies, with a free and widely read press, a high share of women in government, and a history of openness to trade” (Treisman, 2007: 212). Nevertheless, perceived corruption levels also vary to a considerable degree across established democracies. Recent studies have tried to explain these cross-democratic differences by looking at the effects of political institutions. According to Tavits (2007), the existing arguments

relating institutions to corruption can be divided into two lines or reasoning: the constitutional structure, and the electoral system of a given country. From the first set of arguments, some studies note that institutions that create a competitive environment in the provision of a public service tend to reduce corruption by decreasing the extraction of rents (Lederman et al., 2001; Persson et al., 1997). For some scholars, the above competitive environment is present in presidential and federalist countries (Firsman and Gatti, 2002; Persson and Tabellini, 2003; Lederman et al., 2005). Conversely, others suggest that competition between different institutions in fact does not reduce corruption. Instead, constitutional arrangements that produce fewer veto points or fewer institutions with overlapping mandates should be associated with lower levels of corruption by making easier to monitor the performance of different institutions (Tavits, 2007). Thereby, parliamentarism and unitarism would tend to reduce corruption (Gerring and Thacker 2004; Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman 2005). Indeed, there are other scholars who empirically demonstrate that presidential systems are associated with significantly higher perceived corruption (Panizza, 2001; Gerring and Thacker, 2004; Lederman et al., 2005).

In relation to the second set of arguments, Chang and Golden (2007) state that electoral systems that generate incentives to cultivate personal votes are associated to greater perceived corruption. Conversely, Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman (2005) suggest that this type of electoral system generates incentives to avoid corruption since voting for individual candidates creates a link between individual performance and reelection, and makes easier for voters to identify corrupt politicians and punish them (also see Persson et al., 2001).

In contrast to those institutional determinants, the effect of coalition governments on political corruption has received very little attention. On the one hand, the clarity of responsibility literature (e.g., Powell and Whitten 1993, Anderson, 2000; Tavits, 2007) implies that single-party governments should be less corrupt as voters are more able to assign responsibility to the incumbent government. Similarly, Bussell (2012a, 2012b) and Ravi (2013) find that corruption is a “major issue in countries ruled by coalition governments” (Ravi 2013: 50), mainly because of the coalition bargaining process. On the other hand, one of the only (albeit cursory) published empirical studies comparing levels of

perceived corruption across countries with single-party and coalition governments suggests that perceived corruption is actually, if anything, lower under coalitions (Lijphart, 1999: 288).

Given the existing theoretical and empirical literature is still contradictory leading to conflicting claims about mechanisms by which institutions influence the level of corruption (Tavits, 2007), this research aims to (1) identify whether coalition governments actually curb corruption, and if so, (2) through which mechanisms.

### **3. THEORY**

There are different theoretical approaches to analyse corruption phenomenon which influence in how evaluating corruption and in formulating potential methods to prevent it. The most relevant and influential approach to corruption drives from the economic perspective. This approach focuses on “incentives and disincentives that influence public officials’ behaviour and their propensity to accept bribes or abuse their position” (Hutchison, 2005: 04). Thus, the economic approach to corruption looks at the economic rationale behind corrupt practices. As Morgan (1998) describes, “model the corrupt as a rational actor who decides whether to engage in corrupt activity by balancing the potential benefits against potential costs and consequences” (1998: 12).

Coalition governments are a type of government that *per se* have two or more different political parties sharing the cabinet (Müller and Strøm, 2010). Coalition parties are therefore constantly cooperating and negotiating political issues. This continuous procedure, as a foundational process of democracy, supposes a greater control between coalition partners, which may create an environment with fewer incentives to be corrupt than in single-party ones. Accordingly, there are at least two distinct mechanisms through which coalition governments might limit corruption.

First, Jousten and Keränen (2009) note that “corruption occurs most easily when the decision is made by one person alone, [...] since all the people concerned must [otherwise] be convinced of the advisability of deciding in favour of the

interest group, and there is always the possibility of someone blowing the whistle on any shady transaction” (2009: 09). From this perspective, coalition governments may discourage corruption if the presence of multiple parties in the cabinet effectively increases the number of independent voices and interests, as compared to a single-party cabinet where dissent may be more muted due to the power of the party leader. This is also in line with Tsebelis (1995, 2002), who defines each coalition partner as a *partisan veto player* with the ability to block policies or activities. Accordingly, the veto power is exercised “through the authority structures of the cabinet or through other binding agreements between the leaders of the coalition parties” (2002: 96) (also see Budge et al., 2001). Thus, in contrast to single-party governments, the coalition cabinet provides an opportunity for mutual control by monitoring and checking one another but also help to enforce coalition policy (Strøm et al., 2010).

Second, most coalition governments develop some kind of control mechanism in order to ensure a credible commitment to the coalition compromise and to limit the pursuit of the more narrow objectives of any individual coalition partner (Martin and Vanberg, 2004; Strøm et al., 2003; Falcó-Gimeno, 2014). These different mechanisms create additional controls between coalition parties that may reduce their incentives and ability to engage in corrupt practices. The literature on control mechanisms is extensive and diverse. As table 1 displays, Strøm et al. (2010) summarise the main ex ante and ex post mechanisms of control that are available to coalition parties.

**Table 1. Mechanisms and arenas of control coalition**

	<b>Executive Arena</b>	<b>Parliamentary Arena</b>	<b>Extraparliamentary Arena</b>
<b>Ex ante mechanisms</b>	Portfolio allocation	Investiture vote	Coalition agreements
<b>Ex post mechanisms</b>	Mutual control in cabinet; Junior ministers	Parliamentary questions; Parliamentary committees	Coalition committees

Source: Strøm et al. (2010: 522) in “Parliamentary Control of Coalition Governments”

Ex ante controls are thought to reduce uncertainty and the resulting opportunism in coalition governance, usually by constraining the actions and policies of coalition

partners after the government is formed (Strøm et al, 2010). By contrast, ex posts mechanisms are intended to control the behaviour of cabinet ministers in office and enforce coalition cooperation by lowering the potential for hidden action (moral hazard) in coalition government situations (*ibid.*). Amongst the above mechanisms, this research focuses on the two most studied institutions when monitoring control in coalition governments, these are: coalition agreements, and cross-partisan watchdog junior ministers. On the one hand, coalition agreements are thought to constrain seriously the ability of ministers to escape the inter-party policy compromise (Strøm et al., 2003; Timmermans, 2003, 2006; Moury, 2011). On the other, cross-partisan “watchdog” junior ministers constitute an important source of information for coalition parties that can alleviate existing information asymmetries between them and the party in charge of the respective portfolio (Thies, 2001; Kim and Löwenberg, 2005; Verzichelli, 2008; Martin and Vanberg, 2011). As Falcó-Gimeno (2014) explains, the combination of the two foregoing mechanisms provides a good overview of the control mechanisms that multiparty governments use to establish.

Consistent with the aforementioned arguments, the following four hypotheses arise:

**Main hypothesis:** Political corruption is actually lower in countries with coalition governments than in countries with single party governments.

**Sub-hypothesis a)** The more political parties in the cabinet, the lower the level of corruption.

**Sub-hypothesis b)** The existence of a coalition agreement reduces corruption in coalition governments.

**Sub-hypothesis c)** The allocation of Watchdog Junior Ministers from one coalition partner to another's jurisdiction reduces corruption in coalition governments.

#### **4. METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS**

When speak about empirical research on corruption field, it is essential to understand that measuring corruption remains hard for a variety of reasons. At the

most fundamental level, those who are involved in corruption are actively seeking to hide their behaviour for fear of punishment or shame. Identifying the full extent of different types of corruption will often require a deep understanding of the broader institutional, social, political and cultural context in which the corrupt behaviour is taking place (Kaufmann et al. 2006).

Taking into account this panorama, Kaufmann et al. (2006) note three ways in which corruption can be measured: a) by gathering the informed views of relevant stakeholders, which include surveys of firms, public officials, and individuals as well as views of outside observers in NGOs, multilateral donors, and the private sector, b) by tracking countries institutional features, which provides information on opportunities and/or incentives for corruption; and c) by careful audits of specific projects (2006: 01). Amongst these three ways of gathering data, most empirical studies have used the first one, namely the use of perceived corruption in order to measure it. Then, the main issue to concern is that the perception-based indexes do not measure either corruption itself or the actual level of corruption of a given country but only opinions about its prevalence. In this sense, Treisman (2007) notes that such opinions may not be based on any direct knowledge and they could therefore be biased. Since corruption usually leaves no paper trail, perceptions of corruption based on individuals' experiences are sometimes the best, and the only, information that researchers have (Kauffman et al. 2006: 02). In this sense, Kauffman et al. (2006) explain, "if for instance citizens believe that the courts and police are corrupt, they will not want to use their services regardless of what the objective reality is" (2006: 02). So, perceptions matter directly. Being aware of the above methodological limitations, researchers have recognised that perception-based indexes are a value and useful tool to study corruption empirically as "they have made the immeasurable concept measurable" (ibid.: 03).

### ***Data and variables***

In empirically testing the hypotheses posed above, I use information from Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive (version of July 24, 2008). It comes from two books: "Coalition Governments in Western Europe" (Müller and Strøm, 2003), and "Delegation and Accountability in Parliamentary Democracies" (Strøm et al.,



2006). These provide information on 424 cabinets, of which 260 are coalition governments, and covers seventeen democracies –Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom– from mid-twentieth century to the end of 90s.

The dependent variables of this research are therefore *Type of Government*, *Number of Political Parties* in that Cabinet, *Existence of Coalition Agreement*, and *Existence of Cross-Partisan Junior Minister* in that cabinet. In order to test the main hypothesis, the first dependent variable *Type of Government* refers to the number of political parties participating on the cabinet. It is coded as a dichotomous variable, which takes value “0” when single-party government, and value “1” when coalition government. The second dependent variable *Number of Political Parties* measures the number of political parties participating in that cabinet. The other two dependent variables refer to institutions that are through to keep an eye on the actions undertaken by the other partners in their own ministries: the presence of “watchdog” Junior Ministers, and the Existence of a Coalition Agreement. The former refers to the existence of a “general contract between the parties that define the set of political offices to be filled, the prerequisites and favours to be distributed, the mechanism of governance, and the public policies to be conducted” (Müller and Strøm, 2010: 159). The latter refers to the allocation of watchdog Junior Ministers in the other coalition partners’ jurisdictions. The purpose of these “watchdogs” is controlling their ministers’ departmental activities and reporting violations of the coalition agreement to their own party. In turn, the party can invoke coalition conflict management mechanisms also described in the coalition agreement (Müller and Strøm, 2008). Both variables are coded as dichotomous variables; the first takes a value of “1” when coalition partners fit their compromises in a coalition agreement, and “0” when it does not; the second takes value “1” when coalition partners allocate watchdog junior ministers in the other partners’ jurisdictions, and “0” when it does not.

The most widely accepted measures of corruption are provided by Transparency International (Corruption Perception Index), and the World Bank (Governance Indicators) (Kaufmann et al., 2003). Transparency International has yearly measures of perception of corruption from 1995 to 2013, but there is no

information about all years for all countries. The World Bank had biannual data from 1996 to 2002, and posteriorly, now publishes new versions yearly for most countries. Although activities identified in these datasets include both political and bureaucratic corruption, regarding that it is now commonly accepted that the two tend to go together (Tavits, 2007). Despite the different methodologies and, sometimes, different sources, the two ratings are extremely highly correlated. In the years for which both have been available, the correlations has varied between  $r = 0.96$  in 2002 and  $r = 0.98$  in 2004 (Treisman, 2000: 213). Transparency International has stated that CPI scores are useful for comparisons across time; notwithstanding, they also warn that such comparisons can be misleading because of methodological changes between years (Lambsdorff, 2005). On the contrary, the index designers' advocate that the sources continue to show a high degree correlation and the results are largely invariant to the chosen methodology (*ibid.*). Also, Sandholtz and Gray (2003) note that Transparency International country scores "are consistent across time and time-series analysis may be feasible with the corruption data if the index is consistently extended" (2003: 776).

The lack of updated information about coalition governments' characteristics has entirely determined the case selection on this research. That is, the only corruption data available for the research purpose lies from 1995 through 1999, among the seventeen countries considered on the Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive. Consequently, I have considered solely Corruption Perception Index from 1995 to 1999 as the dependent variable. The original coding of CPI index has been reversed so that a higher score indicates a higher level of corruption.

Additionally, the statistical model also includes a battery of control variables identified as potential predictors of the level of corruption from previous cross-national studies (e.g., Gerring and Thacker, 2004; Treisman, 2000, 2007). The level of economic development is measured by *GDP per capita* from World Bank sources; the level of democratic development is measured by *Democratic all years from 1930 to 1995*, coded by Beck et al. 2001 (Treisman, 2000); *Protestantism* is measured by the share of protestants in the total population, from La Porta et al., 1999 (Treisman, 2000); and, ultimately, *Decentralization* is refers to whether or not a given country has autonomous regions, coded from Beck et al. (2001) in Database of Political Institutions (2012).

## 5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

I use simple and multiple linear regressions to test the four hypotheses posed above. Tables 2 and 3 present the results of the analyses. The *type of government* variable performs equally well in both types of regressions, even controlling for the aforementioned control variables identified as potential predictors of the level of corruption from previous cross-national studies. Thus, according to the results, coalition governments are negatively and significantly relation to the level of perceived corruption (*main hypothesis*). That is, the mean decreases by 0.94 points when a coalition government rules. Probably it is not a huge increase, but it may be empirically affirmed that coalition governments affect somehow the perceived corruption. This may be because it is necessary to analyse deeply the relationship between the type of government and perceived corruption.

**Table 2. Regression analysis of Type of Government and Corruption Perception Index (reversed)**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Coalition Government	-,094			
Nº Cabinet Parties		,249		
Nº Cabinet Parties [2-3]			-1,374	
Nº Cabinet Parties [4-7]				,851
GPD per capita	-,025	-,027	-,011	-,026
Percentage protestant population in 1980	-,027	-,025	-,029	-,031
Democracy All Years [1930-1995]	-,273	-,025	-,158	,033
Decentralisation	,940	,674	,678	,868
Constant	3,771	3,656	4,357	3,404
Observations	108	108	108	108
R <sup>2</sup>	,686	,713	,734	,681

Unlike the first hypothesis, the empirical evidence for the second one is only partial. When regarding the number of political parties generally, as table 2 presents, the result is positively to the level of corruption. Despite the initial expectation was that coalition governments discourage corruption partially

because of the presence of multiple parties in the cabinet, it is also probably that at some point that participation, a high number of parties become counterproductive remaining less transparent and having difficulty to control the policymaking between the governing parties. For this reason, as table 2 indicates, when controlling the number of political parties through two dummy variables, the empirical evidence supports the main argument showing a curvilinear relationship. That is, the more political parties in the cabinet do not decrease the level of perceived corruption of European democracies and, consequently, the *sub-hypothesis B* needs to be rejected. Nonetheless, I found that when a coalition government consists of two or three political parties, there is a decrease of the level of perceived corruption.

To graphically enrich the understanding of how the effect of coalition government is indeed significant, figure 1 provides an overview of the estimated relationship between the Corruption Perception Index and type of government country by country. The first thing that stands out from that graphic is an overall tendency towards fewer levels of corruption in those countries where a coalition government rules. At second glance, however, the importance of culture, religion and geography seems essential for explaining variances in corruption levels amongst European democracies (e.g., La Porta et al. 1997). In this sense, Treisman (2000) suggests several ways by which religious traditions have often been thought to condition cultural attitudes towards social hierarchy. Thus, where the more “hierarchical religions” (such as Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam) dominate, challenges to office-holders might be rarer than in cultures shaped by more egalitarian or individualistic religions, such as Protestantism” (2000: 403). That is, “the greater tolerance for challenges to authority and for individual dissent, renders Protestant societies more likely to discover and punish official abuses” (*ibid.*: 427). As noted in figure 1, the relationship between type of government and the level of perceived corruption is certainly defined by the historical and cultural characteristics of European democracies. Apart from the empirical evidence posed above, figure 1 demonstrates that the Nordic European countries get lower levels of political perceived corruption than the Southern European countries –where historically and culturally have been collective social distrust– regardless of the type of government. However, this fact does not devalue

the relationship between coalition governments and perceived political corruption. Instead, it provides evidence that there is a need to further analyse to deeply understand which is or are the causal mechanisms through which coalition government actually reduce corruption.

**Figure 1. Regression Analysis of Type of Government and Corruption Perception Index (reversed)**

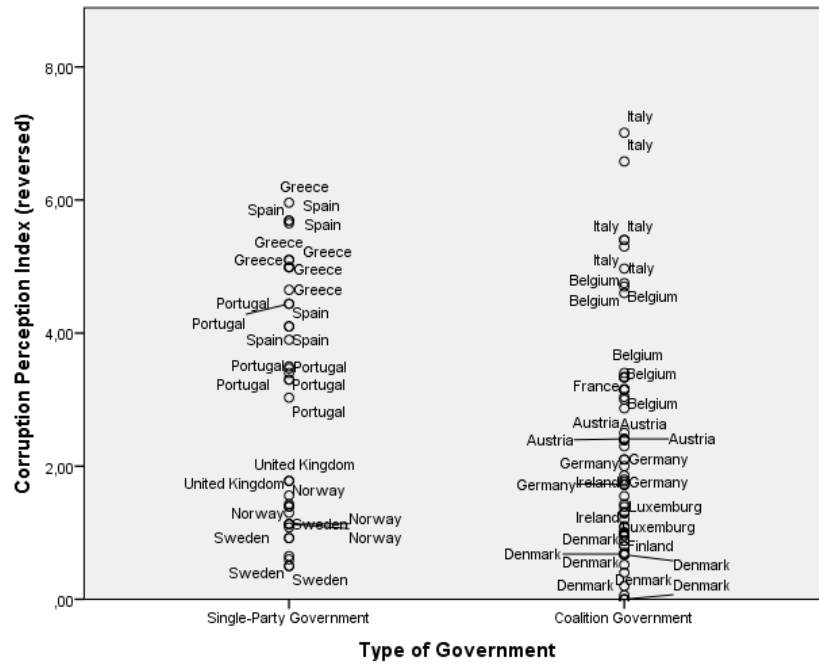


Table 3 displays the results of the effect of control mechanisms of coalition governments on perceived political corruption (*sub-hypotheses b and c*). The results provide a general support for the argument that each control mechanisms create additional controls between coalition parties that may reduce their incentives and ability to engage in corrupt practices. That is, both the establishment of coalition agreements and the allocation of cross-partisan watchdog Junior Ministers (WJM) are positively and significantly related to the level of corruption. Indeed, regarding the results, coalition agreement variable decreases impressively the level of perceived corruption in European countries. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that this explanatory variable has very low variability and, consequently, it should be necessary to enlarge the dataset to see if these results are truly robust.

**Table 3. Regression Analysis of the Control Mechanisms of Coalition Governments and the Corruption Perception Index (reversed)**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
Coalition Agreement	-2,770	
WJM		-,652
GPD per capita	-,017	-,034
Percentage protestant population in 1980	-,023	-,035
Democracy All Years [1930-1995]	-,011	-,712
Decentralisation	,262	,674
Constant	5,870	3,832
Observations	70	70
R <sup>2</sup>	,802	,654

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND OUTLOOK

This research note has dealt with the understudied topic of how coalition governments impact on political corruption. An extensive literature on accountability and clarity of responsibility suggests that single-party governments should be less corrupt than coalition governments as voters are more able to assign responsibility to the incumbent government. However, elections are imperfect instruments of accountability and no research had yet looked in detail at the functioning of coalition governments in practice and the consequences of this for political corruption.

This work has argued that governments may discourage corruption (1) if the presence of multiple parties in the cabinet effectively increases the number of independent voices and interests, as compared to a single-party cabinet where dissent may be more muted due to the power of the party leader; and when (2) coalition governments develop different mechanisms which create additional controls between coalition parties that may reduce their incentives and ability to engage in corrupt practices.

The emerging four hypotheses have been tested against the data. According to the empirical results, three of these formulated hypotheses have their logic and are

robust when adding other explanatory variables of corruption relevant in the literature. Coalition governments are negatively and significantly related to the level of perceived corruption in European democracies. Despite the initial expectation was that coalition governments discourage corruption partially because of the presence of multiple parties in the cabinet, the empirical evidence suggests that only governments composed by two or three political parties actually curb perceived corruption. Conversely, when the government consists of more than four political parties there is higher perception of political corruption.

In the case of the two control mechanisms –the existence of a coalition agreement and the allocation of cross-partisan watchdog junior minister–, the level of perceived corruption reduces. Furthermore, in the case of coalition agreement decreases impressively the perceived corruption. This result however needs to be interpreted cautiously. This explanatory variable has very low variability and therefore the results are not truly robust. For this reason, further research will need to add more variables related to the coalition agreement characteristics, such as size of agreement, distribution of offices or comprehensive policy agreement. In the case of watchdog junior ministers, it would be suitable to regard both quantitative and qualitative criteria. Thus, future research would consider both the allocated number of watchdog junior ministers in respect of the total number of ministers but also the degree of relevance of each ministry. In this sense, further research will also consider other control mechanisms regarded by Strøm et al. (2010: 522) in table 1.

This research note needs to be considered as a first contact with the question in mind: *How does government by coalition impact political corruption?* Accordingly, this work represents an attempt to provide both a theoretical and empirical evidence of how coalition governments impact the perceived levels of corruption in European democracies. Albeit the results clearly confirm that there exists a relationship between coalition governments and perceived corruption, further research needs to analyse properly with a larger dataset and therefore controlling for both common and country-specific factors.

## ***Acknowledgments***

I would like to express my deepest thanks to both Dr. Patrick M. Kuhn and Dr. Nick Vivyan for their support and contributions to my research proposal and, consequently, this research note.

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## **Database and links for data collection**

Strøm, K., Müller, W. C., & Bergman, T. Comparative Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive (*CPD*) [Online] Retrieved from:  
<http://www.erdda.se/index.php/projects/cpd/data-archive>