



Combatting institutional corruption: The policy-centered approach

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Abstract

How can institutional corruption be combatted? While recent years have seen a growth in anti-corruption literature, examples of countries rooting out systemic corruption remain few. The lack of success stories has sparked an academic debate about the theoretical foundations of anti-corruption frameworks: primarily between proponents of the principal-agent framework and those seeing systemic corruption as the result of collective-action problems. Through an analysis of current principal-agent and collective action anti-corruption literature, this article adds two additional arguments to the debate: (a) the need to specify what one talks about when talking about systemic corruption and (b) the necessity to move beyond the principal-agent versus collective action frameworks dichotomy towards a policy-centered approach for how to combat institutional corruption. Having outlined how institutional corruption can be seen as one type of systemic corruption, this article shows how a policy-centered approach such as strengthening the appearance standard through an independent public commission can address theoretical mechanisms emphasized in each anti-corruption framework—thus arguing that the frameworks complement rather than rival each other. The article ends by arguing for an anti-corruption discourse acknowledging that a multifaceted problem such as corruption requires multiple frameworks rather than attempts for silver-bullet explanations.

Introduction

Tammany Hall was the Democratic Party-political machine dominating New York City's politics in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Originally it was formed to counter the city's political hegemony, but once in power swiftly became a political machine catering to the interest of their political cronies and, primarily, those of an exclusive inner ring ([2], p. 123–26). One of the premier figures in the Tammany inner ring was George Washington Plunkitt, who once held four political positions

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simultaneously. Plunkitt, however, did not go down in history as the political entrepreneur he believed himself to be. Instead, he became infamous for how he handled the “practice of politics”, for what he called “honest” and “dishonest” political graft. Dishonest graft, Plunkitt believed, was the workings of thugs: blackmailing gamblers, saloonkeepers and the disorderly. Honest graft was a different matter. To maintain power and control, Plunkitt and members of Tammany Hall bent the political system and took advantage of their insider positions to enrich themselves, or “I seen my Opportunities and I took ‘em” as Plunkitt ([34], p. 10), described the practice. This form of honest graft was according to Plunkitt never completely rooted out during his tenure, mainly since the authorities spent their days looking for corruption in all the wrong places: “That is why” Plunkitt said, “when a reform administration comes in and spends a half million dollars in tryin’ to find the public robberies they talked about in the campaign, they don’t find them” ([34], p. 12).

There is little to suggest that many of today’s anti-corruption initiatives are significantly more effective than they were in Plunkitt’s days: “The answers seem to keep coming” Heywood ([15], p. 83) writes in reference to the many anti-corruption initiatives as of recent, “but the problem remains stubbornly resistant to resolution” (p. 83). The failure to combat corruption has several dire consequences. For example, the belief that corruption is widespread among out-of-touch elite politicians is a central factor explaining disbelief in democratic governance [47]. The corruption-problem is immense for consolidated democracies. For example, a recent survey found that 68 percent of the population in the European Union believed that corruption is a widespread problem (European Commission [8]). The problem of corruption is in peoples’ minds generally not limited to bribery. In Sweden, often described as a least-corrupt country, the same survey showed that 37 percent of the population believes that corruption is widespread in society (European Commission [8]), although previous studies have shown that less than one percent of the population in Sweden claims to have given or taken a bribe ([5], p. 65). In the United States Congress, daily workings of lobbyist have arguably contributed to a drastic decline in confidence and a pervasive belief that the legislative branch primarily answers to big business and corporations – a recent survey found that 81 percent of American’s believe that members of congress act dishonestly [33]. The importance to combat corruption in established democracies can thus hardly be overstated.

This article makes two arguments about how to combat systemic corruption in established democracies. First, that the current anti-corruption literature has insufficiently recognized the several forms that systemic corruption can take. By returning to the systemic corruption roots as described historically by among others Plato and Machiavelli, and currently in the institutional corruption literature, the article argues that institutional corruption should be seen as one type of systemic corruption requiring its own anti-corruption approaches. Neglecting institutional corruption perspectives risks leading to a theoretical mischaracterization of what systemic corruption can mean in developed democracies. Similar to Plunkitt’s honest graft, the systemic bending of the political system by excluding out-groups is rarely addressed in anti-corruption policies or measurements, and therefore risks being overlooked by today’s anti-corruption workers. Second, the many shapes and colors of systemic corruption further stress the need to combat each corruption form on its specific

merits. By exploring how institutional corruption among elected officials can be combatted, this article argues for the need to move beyond the principal-agent versus collective action dichotomy towards a policy-centered approach – an approach exploring how each individual policy affects mechanisms outlined in either framework. These arguments are the two main answers to the research question posed in this article; namely, *how can institutional corruption be combatted?*

The article sets out discussing how the historical meaning of systemic corruption has been overlooked in today's anti-systemic corruption debate. It proceeds by arguing that the current anti-systemic corruption debate to a great extent has demphasized the political elements of corruption. Having outlined a complementary perspective, the article discusses how principal-agent and collective action frameworks respectively can address systemic corruption seen in its institutional form. Finding the dichotomy insufficient and unnecessary, the article argues that a policy centered anti-institutional corruption approach can bridge the dichotomy by addressing theoretical mechanisms highlighted in both frameworks. The article concludes on the humble note that its contributions lie as much in its attempt to introduce a way of describing systemic corruption in its institutional form as to combat it, calling for empirically guided research of anti-corruption policies.

Defining systemic corruption

To find a universal all-encompassing corruption definition would for corruption researchers be like finding the Holy Grail: it has not yet been done, and most likely never will be. The definition of corruption, what causes it, and how it is combatted, changes continuously as the (anti) corruption research field develops. Historical definitions and understandings of corruption were largely based on ethics and morals, where corruption was notoriously attributed to third world countries and former Western colonies in which “the natives” were considered morally inferior [46]. Depicting corruption in the language of ethics and morals did, however, hamper the development of pragmatic anti-corruption policies: “while political positions on corruption are often, understandably, morally black and white” Marquette and Peiffer write, “the most operationally useful new research is often more nuanced and avoids moral judgement” ([25], p. 815). The field has consequentially moved away from moralist and simplistic understandings of corruption towards exploring factors influencing its rise, impact, and fall – where international organizations such as Transparency International have developed measurements capturing corruption forms such as bribery, public embezzlement, and general fraud.

However, the cross-country indexes such as the Corruption Perception Index from Transparency International have been criticized for failing to consider the specific context in which corruption occurs; that giving a single number to a country fails to consider that corruption could vary both spatially across sectors and in form [1]. That cross-country comparisons are focusing on a certain type of corruption at a distinct level has arguably hindered discussion on the multidimensional corruption view outlined by Heidenheimer [12] and developed by Johnston [16, 18] in his

influential work on syndromes of corruption and deep democratization – exemplifying how corruption appears and functions differently in various social, economic, and political contexts.

Specifically, by de-politicizing systemic corruption these measurements diminish one of the central aspects that ancient Greek and renaissance philosophers alike talked about when they talked about corruption [42]. Rather than discussing the impartial delivery of goods and services in public administration, systemic corruption was in Western classical literature generally seen through the political entity. The conception of systemic corruption as an inherently political phenomenon was prominent in the writings of authors as different as Plato and Machiavelli. As stated in *The Republic*, Plato saw the greatest threat of corruption as steering the rulers away from the public interest towards the wealthy and influential, writing that “when the guardians of the laws and of the government are only seeming and not real guardians, then see how they turn the State upside down” ([34], p. 153). Plato was not alone among ancient Greek philosophers to depict corruption in these terms: similar understandings can be read in the works from Aristotle, Socrates, and Thucydides [26]. Machiavelli, on his part, argued that the systemic corruption in Florence was the result of systemic erosion of the rule of law and the separation between groups: “there is nothing too unjust, too cruel, too avaricious for them to attempt”, Machiavelli argued, that “laws and ordinances, peace, wars, and treaties are adopted and pursued, not for the public good, not for the common glory of the state, but for the convenience or advantage of a few individuals” ([21], p. 60).

The interest in, and understanding of, systemic corruption beyond bribery, nepotism, and fraud has increased on both the academic and political arena. This broader corruption understanding that includes the failure to uphold proper appearance standard was for example taken up politically by two front-runners for the 2020 democratic presidential nomination in the United States: Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. “On issue after issue, widely popular policies are stymied because giant corporations and billionaires who don’t want to pay taxes or follow any rules use their money and influence to stand in the way of big, structural change” Elizabeth Warren argued, adding that “We got to call that out for what it is: corruption, plain and simple” [43]. Bernie Sanders spoke already in the 2016 democratic presidential nomination campaign about what he saw as undue influence in the policy-making process: “Do you know why we can’t do what every other nation on earth is doing [on healthcare]?” Sanders asked rhetorically, “It is because we have a campaign finance system that is corrupt, we have the Super PACs, we have the pharmaceutical industry poring hundreds of millions of dollars into lobbying” [39].

Academically, the call for greater focus on the political dimensions of corruption has found its home in the institutional corruption literature, re-sparked by Dennis F Thompson’s seminal book “Ethics in Congress: from individual to institutional corruption” [40]. The institutional corruption perspective underlines the political dimension in systemic corruption by focusing on the input rather than the output phase of the political process, where institutional corruption among other things are actions that create a constitutionally undue dependence in the input phase. The most quoted example of such as systemic tendency is the one presented by Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders above: that the United States

political and campaign finance system is heavily influenced by private donations from a variety of special interest organizations. The corruption in this case is institutional since the election process, and in extension the United States political system, can be seen as partly dependent on interests other than the those the institution is obliged to serve [20]. Likewise, Mark Warren [44] points to how breaches of inclusion in democratic deliberation can be another form of input corruption, where corruption “breaks the link between collective decision making and people’s powers to influence collective decisions through speaking and voting, the very link that defines democracy” (p. 328). Institutional corruption is thus a form of systemic corruption and, although variations exist, can broadly be seen as actions breaking the democratic political decision-making processes by unjustly transferring private interests to policymakers in disregard of due political process, public deliberation, and political competition. More precisely, institutional corruption is in this article seen as various forms of breaching the democratic political process.

The consequences of institutional corruption for democratic trust are potentially severe, as the decreasing trust in the United States Congress shows. Like individual forms of political corruption threatens public confidence in emerging democracies ([27], p. 86), systemic corruption at the institutional level risks subverting the public trust at the core of democratic institutions and the elected officials who occupies them ([3], p. 12). Perceptions of extensive institutional corruption leading to a perceived, or actual, capture of the policy process thus risks hurting the legitimacy of democratic governance [11, 13, 29].

While the academic literature has moved beyond bribery as a sole descriptor for corruption towards complicating and situating corruption in its particular context, the current discussion on how to battle systemic corruption has yet to fully incorporate the same complex descriptions. For example, when discussing whether principal-agent or collective action understandings of corruption are most effective in tackling systemic corruption, Persson, Rothstein and Teorell [31] write that the countries which are ridden with the most widespread corruption are mainly located in developing regions, labeling Kenya and Uganda as “typically thoroughly corrupt countries” (p. 450). These are, according Persson et al., countries in which being corrupt is the norm rather than the exception; the failure to understand this has in extension led to a “theoretical mischaracterization of the problem of systemic corruption” ([31], p. 451). The article sparked an intense academic debate on the theoretical characteristics of systemic corruption, with defenders arguing that the principal-agent frameworks remain useful on one side and proponents for the collective action framework on the other: most strikingly seen in the exchange between Persson et al. [31, 32] and Marquette and Peiffer [24, 25]. This exchange, however, has been held on the theoretical ground outlined by the original article from Persson et al. [31]: that systemic corruption is the endemic misuse of public office for private gain. An extensive debate about how to combat the type of systemic corruption as outlined by Persson et al. [31] through their examples of Kenya and Uganda is inherently valuable. The debate should, however, be explicit about the type of systemic corruption that is under scrutiny, where institutional corruption is likelier to have comparably greater relevance in more consolidated democracies. How systemic

corruption in the institutional form can be combatted has thus yet to completely enter the current principal-agent versus collective action debate.

Combatting systemic corruption: The principal-agent and collective action frameworks

How systemic corruption is defined is not solely of academic importance. The definition of corruption and its mechanism has consequences for how anti-corruption policies are developed, applied, and evaluated. The current theoretical debate goes to the core of this issue. The principal-agent framework has been the most prominent anti-corruption framework used by political scientists, economists, sociologists, and international organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank [15]. The principal-agent understanding of corruption sees that corruption occurs due to imperfect information and diverging interest occurring when responsibility is delegated from a principal to an agent, such as when a voter delegates power to an elected official ([10], p. 210). A perfect non-corrupt setting is unlikely, given that principals and agents rarely, if ever, have completely entwined interests. The assumption is that an agent will engage in corruption when the potential benefits clearly outweigh the risk of getting caught. An anti-corruption policy based on the principal-agent framework must therefore reduce incentives for an agent to engage in corruption. This can be done by breaking the agents' information and discretion monopoly, thus strengthening the principals' possibility to hold agents accountable. Corruption will remain if principals are unable to hold agents accountable, summarized in Klitgaard's [19] often-quoted statement that "corruption = monopoly + discretion – accountability" (p. 75).

The principal-agent framework has recently been critiqued for failing to grapple with how corruption functions in certain social, economic and political contexts. The most vocal criticism has been that an underlying theoretical assumption in the principal-agent framework, that strengthening principals' potential to supervise deviant behavior from agents will decrease corruption, does not hold in systematically corrupt environments [31, 32]. Rather, in deeply corrupt settings the argument is that the principals' role in monitoring the agents from corrupt behaviors has been compromised, and that an anti-corruption framework therefore "cannot assume the existence of 'principled principals,' willing to hold corrupt officials accountable" ([31], p. 450). According to Persson et al. [31], controlling systemic corruption therefore rather resembles a collective action problem, and corresponding anti-corruption policies should consequently be based on a collective action rather than a principal-agent understanding of corruption.

The collective action framework turns attention from the principal-agent relation to coordination problems between principals themselves. This framework stresses that one inherent problem with collective action movements striving to acquire a public good – meaning a good that is non-excludable and non-rivalry, such as a corruption-free society – are according to the rational choice school of thought that participants are suffering from clear incentives to free-ride on the actions of others [28, 30]. The understanding among principals may thus be that they would collectively

be better off if no one acted corruptly, yet short-term costs and lack of confidence that others will do the same hinder collective action. A rational individual would therefore not engage in combatting, or even abstaining, from corruption since the possible benefits are public whereas the risks are individual. The argument from collective action proponents is that if principals are unable to fill their intended role, a principal-agent framework becomes “useless as an analytical tool since there will simply be no actors willing to monitor and punish corrupt behavior” ([31], p. 452). While recognizing that variations and combination of principal-agent and collective action frameworks exist, the next section turns towards how these frameworks in their original form can be used to combat institutional corruption.

Combating institutional corruption: The principal-agent & collective action frameworks

The principal-agent framework requires a well-informed and active principal that supervises and sanctions corrupt dissonance from agents. Fundamentally, for a principal-agent framework based anti-corruption policy to function the principals need to have the possibility to agree on what corruption is, to find out about it, and to agree that it is wrong. Even if the democratically complex question of who counts as a principal and therefore should be allowed to participate fully in a democracy by for example voting is left aside, the challenge described above is even more severe for institutional corruption. In institutional corruption elected officials’ gains can be political as well as private. To receive a political gain against one’s political opponents is a crucial part of the job for an elected official. To get general political advantages that also advances the interests of both the elected official and her constituents is not corrupt; on the contrary, it is generally considered admirable ([40], p. 67). To define when the strive for a political gain has breached the political democratic process is therefore more easily done in theory than in practice. Institutionally corrupt behavior is hence unlikely to spark the same outrage among principals due to its nature of not breaching institutionally sanctioned norms a – politician caught accepting a bribe tends to generate better headlines than slow but systemic breaches of the democratic process. Institutional corruption is thus generally harder to oversee for voters. Besides, without a clear corrupt value dissonance it could be argued that grievances will take a general rather than specific form: the resentment being aimed towards a “rigged system” rather than a specific elected official. Institutional corruption, as described above, could thus hollow out the value and purpose of the institution rather than betray voters’ trust. The original principal-agent framework could therefore be toothless if the principals do not have the institutional tools enabling them to determine when a breach of the democratic process has been made by an elected official.

The alternative framework discussed in this article, the collective action framework, points to other challenges for combatting institutional corruption. For the collective action framework, the primary issue to overcome pertains aspects of traditional collective action among actors as outlined by among others Olson [28] and Ostrom [30]. Collective action against institutional corruption shares the same

free-rider problem as in other forms of systemic corruption, namely that participants will weigh costs of participation with the potential gains, and whether or not these gains are public or private. The collective action problem creates major obstacles for principals to hold elected officials accountable and reduce institutional corruption, where two obstacles are particularly problematic. First, the high sophistication level for institutional corruption decreases possibilities for large-scale collective action. Previous research has found that citizens are more likely to engage in collective action and build sustainable mobilization against corruption that has clear and direct negative consequence for the average citizen rather than high-level corruption, since the negative effects from high-level corruption are less obvious than corruption taking the bread and butter away from the person on the street [4]. Second, social groups that are likely to suffer the greatest negative effects from institutional corruption by being excluded from the policy process are the same groups who are least likely to engage in non-state sanctioned collective action in the first place, since they often are the ones with the least social, financial, and organizational capital [29].

The principal agent and collective action frameworks point out several theoretical obstacles to combat institutional corruption. The obstacles, and in extension the frameworks, should however not be seen as mutually exclusive. The next section will outline a policy suggestion that arguably can address mechanism outlined by both frameworks, strengthening the articles argument for a policy-centered anti-institutional corruption approach.

Combatting institutional corruption: Towards a policy-centered approach

The collective-action and the principal-agent frameworks offer different solutions to the same challenge, but neither offers a universal framework that can combat all mechanisms enabling institutional corruption. Rather than ascribing merely to one framework, this article argues that both anti-corruption frameworks are useful for developing and analyzing anti-corruption policies. Anti-institutional corruption policies should hence be formulated and evaluated based on how they directly and indirectly enable voters to supervise elected officials as well as overcoming collective action problems. By adopting a policy-centered approach, the academic community can take several important steps: moving towards an understanding of the actual functions corruption serves in a society [25], anti-corruption prevention techniques being tailored after specific contexts [9], and ultimately closer attention being paid to various forms of corruption occurring simultaneously in numerous sectors [14].

The first step in combatting institutional corruption is to clearly define which of its aspects one is combatting. A major obstacle with defining corruption in institutional terms is that the process itself and the purpose of the institution is determined by the political process. How, a critic may ask, can breaches of democratic inclusion or the proper dependence ever be defined within the same political process that determines the medium for inclusion and dependence? The approach taken herein goes along similar lines as Bok [6], Thompson [40], and Mark Warren [45], namely that the answer lies in strengthening second-order trust – increasing voters trust that

claims made by their elected officials are not duplicitous, meaning that the reasons elected officials give for their actions are the actual reasons for their actions. Institutional corruption seen through this lens is linked to the democratic and political process by “excluding those affected from the processes of collective decision making that might justify the actions” ([44], p. 333) where duplicitous exclusion ultimately could “coerce people into acting against their will” ([6], p. 19). Taking departure in this formulation of systemic corruption, an anti-institutional corruption policy that could decrease duplicitous exclusion has been proposed by Thompson [40] and Mark Warren [45]: enforcing the appearance standard for elected officials.

The appearance standard stipulates that elected officials should avoid behavior and actions that give the appearance of corruption and undue influence in the democratic process. To be in accordance with the appearance standard, elected officials should avoid engaging in activities that could constitute duplicitous exclusion, and, in the words of Thompson [40], “When they fail to avoid doing so, they do not merely appear to do wrong, they do wrong” (p. 126). The appearance standard for elected officials therefore goes beyond establishing a corrupt motive or action, arguing that damages to political trust and the democratic process do not come from elected officials’ intent, but from how the actions are perceived by voters in the current political and social landscape. The formulation of appearance standards, or codes of conduct, on the institutional level to minimize the appearance of wrongdoing is neither new nor revolutionary. The concept of appearance is however often misunderstood, where appearance of corruption is seen as a lesser offense ([40], p. 124). The remaining part of this article will explore whether the policy suggestion to enforce the appearance standard through an independent public commission could, if properly designed, address mechanisms raised in both the principal-agent and collective action frameworks.

An independent public commission would be in accordance with the principal-agent framework by narrowing the information gap between voters and elected officials, thus enforcing the appearance standard through voter-elected official supervision rather than the self-regulatory ethics committees common in legislative bodies. The problem with self-regulatory ethics committees is that they generally are unlikely to make judgments on institutional practices they themselves are engaged in ([40], p. 131–136), where accused politicians have invoked what Rosenson [36] describes as the “everyone does it” defense. Internal legislative ethics standards can also be informal and differ among legislators. Mancuso [22] has for example argued that ethics standards in the British Westminster Parliament before the cash-for-questions scandal in the 1990s were “informal, imprecise, and incohesive” (p. 205). Enforcing the appearance standard through an independent public commission would circumvent these issues and enable voters to make individual judgments.

Selection to such an independent public commission will differ depending on the political context. While this article is hesitant to engage in detailed institutional engineering, the Office of Congressional Ethics (OCE) in the United States and the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) in the United Kingdom can serve as two examples. The key function for such an external public commission lies in its independent scrutiny rather than penalizing powers: neither the OCE nor the CSPL for example have the power to sanction members of the

legislatures. This independent scrutiny could highlight and contextualize breaches of the appearance standard to a wider audience – the media and, in extension, the voters. The media has played this intended pivotal role in several cases, for example in bringing down the previously mentioned Tammany Hall. In the Tammany Hall case, scandalous financial reports were handed to the New York Times, a newspaper, which through rigorous reporting informed the greater citizenry.

Still, to what extent principals will hold elected officials accountable will naturally vary – corruption is, after all, not the sole issue on the political agenda. While there are several contemporary examples of corruption being a decisive issue in national elections – such as when the 1976 republican party in the United States suffered a great electoral defeat in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal – there are also numerous modern examples of when clearly corrupt officials are re-elected to office. As Johnston [17] points out, several factors influence voters' potential and willingness to both uncover and punish corruption at the polling stations. The independent commission's primary function would be to uncover the potentially institutionally corrupt practices and communicate these clearly to the electorate, an electorate who then renders the verdict on whether the official still deserves their vote.

To illustrate how the public commission would function, consider the following hypothetical example. An elected official proposes a bill in the legislature that has been written by a company that also contributes to the politician's re-election campaign. The politician proposes the bill in his or her own name, without mentioning the company. In this case, the independent commission could scrutinize to what extent these actions are in accordance with the appearance standard by holding hearings and producing reports concerning these and similar practices. To what extent that the actions of elected official are deemed corrupt in the general electorate, as well as to what extent they are in fact punished at the polling stations, will as previously mentioned depend on several factors. Hence, the policy-suggestion to establish, or expand, an independent public commission that enforces the appearance standard through independent scrutiny could consequentially increase the possibility for voters to hold elected officials accountable through the mechanisms outlined by the principal-agent framework.

Enforcing the appearance standard through an independent public commission can also address collective action problems for voters and elected officials alike. For voters, strengthening regulatory frameworks can increase second-order trust in their elected officials by decreasing the sentiment in the population that the actual decisions are taken outside the political and democratic process [45]. By increasing trust in the democratic political process, voters are more likely to overcome collective action problems: "When people are mistrustful of government" Mark Warren argues, "they are also cynical about their own capacities to act on public goods and purposes, and will prefer to attend to narrow domains of self-interest they can control" ([45], p. 803). Hence, the independent commission could potentially increase trust on an institutional level, which is crucial given that low levels of trust is one of the the main theoretical obstacles in the collective-action framework.

Enforcing the appearance standard through an independent commission could in addition increase possibilities to overcome collective action obstacles between elected officials themselves. Elected officials may engage in practices they do not

support but engage in because abstaining comes with high individual short-term costs, such as suffering a comparative disadvantage to colleagues in winning reelection [41]. Enforcing the appearance standard through a public commission would provide elected officials with incentives to break with institutional practices they believe undermines the purpose of the office but participate in because they believe others are doing so. Empowering and incentivizing elected officials by strengthening and institutionalizing scrutiny of the appearance standard in this matter could also impact the set-up of the representative body, given that previous research has shown that the ethics legislation impacts who decides to run for political office [37]. Thus, beside addressing the principal-agent mechanisms as shown in the hypothetical example, an independent commission could simultaneously address collective action obstacles.

Yet, it is important to note that establishing an independent public commission is not a silver-bullet solution to overcome collective action problems or strengthening the votes possibilities to supervise their elected officials. Doing so is based on many factors and can be done in several ways: increasing the overall social trust through indirect fundamental structural changes [38], increasing access to and use of new technologies and social media [23], while also recognizing that only relying on structural conditions generally has limited explanatory power in overcoming collective action problems [7]. The policy-suggestion to form an independent public commission has been presented to illustrate the larger point about the policy-centered strategy – that an independent public commission can address mechanisms highlighted by both frameworks simultaneously. To design policies either on a collective action or principal-agent framework for institutional corruption is thus neither necessary nor useful, given that both can be addressed through the same policy-suggestion. This strengthens the case for a policy-centered approach that encompasses the theoretical insights from the collective action and principal-agent frameworks alike.

Conclusion

This article has argued that, like the anti-corruption crusaders trying to root out the corruption by the likes of Plunkitt in Tammany Hall, the anti-corruption advocates of today risk missing corruption where it essentially takes place in established democracies. Today's anti-corruption advocates need to have a nuanced and precise understanding of systemic corruption. To equate systemic corruption with endemic bribery risks neglecting the many forms systemic corruption can take and the impact they can have. By taking departure in the institutional corruption concept, this article has stressed the need to move towards a policy-centered approach that takes the academic and policy community beyond the principal-agent and collection action theory dichotomy. As the policy suggestion to establish or expand an independent public commission shows, there is no inherent contradiction in strengthening voters' potential to monitor elected officials and overcoming collective action obstacles among voters and elected officials alike. Future research could explore how specific anti-corruption policies for different types of corruption can address mechanisms outlined by either framework as well as to what extent policies based primarily on

either framework can have secondary effects for the larger anti-corruption agenda. Future research could also explore how enforcing the appearance standard could function for non-elected officials, such as senior civil servants. Continuously moving this research agenda forward will, hopefully, bring the anti-corruption advocates closer to rooting out the “honest graft” from the Plunkitts of today.

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