

THE WIDER WORLD

Is Corruption Like Pornography? Do We Know It When We See It?

By Diane Chido
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Alleged corruption in all three branches of the federal government is garnering recent headlines. There are the allegations of President Biden's family members enriching themselves through his public offices. There's also New York Congressional Representative George Santos' alleged campaign finance improprieties. Finally, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas' alleged acceptance of expensive trips and tuition for a relative. There is also widespread concern about police in America.

Whether or not these headline cases constitute forms of corruption or illegal activity is for the House and Judiciary Ethics committees and individual departments to determine, but what about the concept in general? Would successful prosecutions of all these cases help to reduce corruption in our society? In the grand scheme, is our society particularly corrupt? Delving deeper into the concept of corruption will help us better identify it, understand it, and potentially avoid it.

We all believe in a transparent, accountable democratic system in which every person is considered equal before the law and with an internal compass guiding those in public service toward ethical behavior as a hallmark of our equitable society.

Transparency International, a global civil society organization, has presented its annual Corruption Perception Index since 1995, revamping its methodology in

2012.[1] This group studies corruption in over 100 countries and provides a ranking and score for each that is used by millions of researchers and analysts worldwide to gauge how their own country compares to others and to assess progress over time.

TI defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” TI lists numerous aspects of corruption with the key elements as:

- Public servants demanding or taking money or favors in exchange for services;
- Politicians misusing public money or granting public jobs or contracts to their sponsors, friends, and families;
- Corporations bribing officials to get lucrative deals.

The question of whether these public servants have abused their power for private gain can be debated *ad infinitum* in the court of public opinion, but this means little in terms of legal action or professional censure. However, the court of public opinion must not be discounted, as it essentially determines elections, which heavily influence judicial outcomes and federal, state, and local laws.

This is well understood by Transparency International, as it does not measure the *actual* level of corruption in a society, but rather the *perception* of its existence and to what degree it is present. TI understands that the national perception of the integrity of its leaders is equal to, or even more important, than their actual level of corruption.

In Kenya, the 2007-08 presidential elections were marred by violence that killed at least 300 people. This was due to a public perception that the winning candidate was not legitimate, not because he had not won the most votes, but because in Kenyan phrasing, it had not yet been “his turn to eat [at the public trough].” This suggests that the public perception of public service is *only* for private gain.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. spent 15 years attempting to build a national police force. This was problematic because Afghanistan has traditionally existed as a collection of city states, each with its own autonomous authority, sometimes subject to a king in the capital of Kabul, and sometimes not. This means that if we ask a native of Herat to serve as a police officer in Kandahar, 350 miles from home, he has every incentive to desert or take unauthorized time off because he has now left his family to the potential predations of police from Mazar-i-Sharif, or elsewhere.

This same officer may alternatively decide that his newly earned position of influence and the hardships of being away from home permit, even encourage, him to find ways to increase his meager base salary by participating in

roadblocks for bribes or other activities we would consider abuse of power. Many studies indicate that in countries where police are paid a living wage, there is less likelihood that they will prey on the very population they are sworn to protect.[2]

Of course, it is not just the money, but in the case of Afghanistan, it requires a connection to the population it serves, which is why many U.S. departments require their members to live in the community over which they have jurisdiction. It also requires the feeling of being valued as well as training and recruitment that give the police a sense of duty that we expect here. The culture of the police within an overall culture of integrity also factors into studies of police corruption.

Thus, the definitions and models of corruption we typically use tend to fit Western perceptions that fit in meritorious societies, where we value skills and experience. In traditional societies, family and clan or tribal support may be the hallmarks of integrity, manifestations of which we tend to view as corrupt. Think of all the mafia movies in which the paramount virtue is loyalty to The Family, Inc., something valued over all else. We can understand this and recognize when it is time for Fredo to go in *The Godfather* series, but we would not expect to apply this model to society as a whole today. (Apologies for the spoiler to the 10 people who have not yet seen the epic series.)

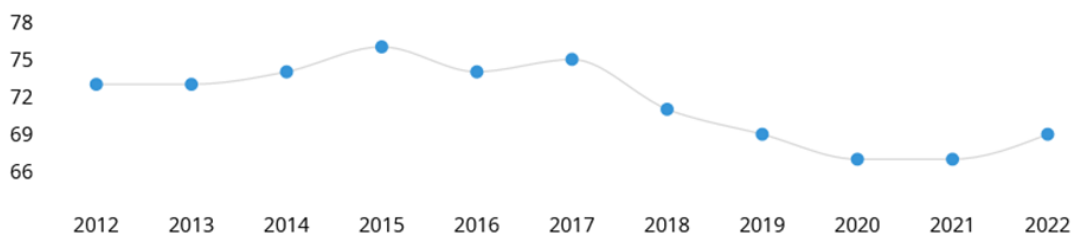
So where does the United States rank in the 2022 Corruption Perception Index[3]? Twenty-fourth out of 100, meaning the public perception of corruption is lower in 23 other countries. The top five countries in this latest ranking are Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, and Singapore. The Scandinavian countries are typically at the top of this and most other listings for similar attributes, such as the Democracy Index[4] and the Freedom of the Press Index[5]. As we know, they are considered Democratic Socialist countries that pay the highest tax rates in the world in exchange for universal education, healthcare, and numerous other services. In this construct, the taxpaying population actively expects and holds accountable its government as it believes it has a right to reciprocity. New Zealand is a similar case.

Singapore, however, is an autocratic island state, but with a government that strives for equity, harmony, and accountability from its citizens. While the crime rates are very low, the government also encourages its citizens to report on each other for perceived antisocial behaviors. It also has one of the highest population surveillance rates using a large police force and vast numbers of video cameras in public spaces. Despite the changes in our society since 2001 that have increased our tolerance for government surveillance, it is arguable that few Americans would trade their sense of freedom and right to privacy for lower crime and corruption.

The U.S. is also ranked below France, where again, we have seen an activist population rioting against a presidential executive order raising the retirement age from 62 to 64. In our Bill of Rights, the third amendment to the Constitution gives us the right “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” The French take this beyond mere letter-writing campaigns and frequently take to the streets to ensure their government hears their complaints loudly and clearly.

Since the new CPI measures were put in place, the U.S. has seen changes in its population’s perception of corruption, certainly helped by the divisions driven by state and federal controls imposed during the pandemic, which dropped our score (not our ranking) to 67/100. The chart below shows these changes, indicating a rising perception of integrity beginning in 2022 to 69, but not yet nearing the high score of 76 reached in 2015.[6]

Score changes 2012 - 2022



As we see the study and tracking of corruption at the national levels globally, there are local-level actions we can also observe. For instance, consider Rotary, a global-reaching service organization with local chapters worldwide. And consider Rotary’s Four-Way Test, a formulation that encourages people to always ask themselves in all they “think, say, or do,” whether their thought or action is “the truth, fair and beneficial to all concerned, and likely to bring goodwill and better friendship.”

Originally a formula developed for a firm undergoing a cultural transition in the 1930s, this test – which will be taught to Erie-area high school students at the Rotary Club of Erie’s upcoming 12th Annual Ethics Symposium – is now considered by millions of Rotarians across the globe when making decisions or taking action. As the three branches of government and police departments across the country consider their own ethical standards, perhaps the simple-yet-profound Four-Way Test may be a good one to which we subject our public servants and citizens in general.

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