

BOOK REVIEW *Response*

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF CORRUPTION RESEARCH: A RESPONSE TO PACHECO-VEGA

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In his thought-provoking review of our book, *The Politics of Trash: How Governments Used Corruption to Clean Cities, 1890-1929*, Raúl Pacheco-Vega lays out the contributions of the book: both those that we had anticipated and those that we had not but are grateful to learn about. His review sparked our collective thinking about what corruption research ought to look like and the contributions it can make to research and practice.

Corruption is often seen as a public problem that states must eliminate. Yet sometimes corruption can also serve a public purpose. Research can identify

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the work that corruption is doing. In our book, we found that corruption motivated city officials to provide garbage collection and disposal services because it would benefit them financially or politically. Further, in some cities, corruption provided the capacity to pick up and dispose of trash. While it is true that delivering services without corruption may have been more efficient, it is not clear that city officials had the motivation to try or the resources to take on new garbage collection programs without it.

Research can also identify the relationship between informal (corrupt) regimes and formal (governmental) regimes, which varies across governments. We found that at times corruption was fully integrated into government so that the goals and capacity of informal regimes were also the goals and capacity of government. But at other times, informal regimes were located outside of formal structures, and they influenced governmental processes through conduits. Before we can study or address corruption, we first must understand the mechanisms by which informal regimes influence formal ones.

When researchers can unpack the work corruption does and its relationship to government, they will better be able to think about potential policy solutions. One-size-fits-all reforms are bound to fail because they do not take into account the void that corruption may fill or the ways in which it operates in different places. At the same time, reforms that address the work that corruption does and its relationship to government are much more likely to be successful.

In our book, we offer a comparative account of municipal corruption by analyzing nineteenth-century trash collection and disposal programs. As Professor Pacheco-Vega shows, there are other ways to go about the same thing. Building on his helpful advice, we offer a few fruitful avenues.

Corruption research can more effectively employ a subnational approach. Cities, regions, states, and provinces are all important governing bodies with varying levels and forms of corruption. Looking at subnational levels, holds national context constant, allowing scholars to make valid comparisons (Pacheco-Vega, 2021). Residents are also more likely to experience corruption first-hand at lower levels of governance (Meza & Pérez-Chiqués, 2019), and, ultimately, democratic government ought to be for the people.

Corruption research can also employ comparisons across cases. Our own research is a comparative case study of five major US cities. We are not suggesting that scholars need to become experts in many subnational governments. Instead, they may specialize in fewer cases that serve them well and exchange ideas or work with scholars expert in other subnational governments to build fruitful comparisons. Corruption research can likewise compare corruption across public services. The administration of garbage collection, wastewater, sewage, and other public services all involve distinct infrastructure, public-

private relations, expertise, and formal oversight. Comparing different public services can lead to comparison of different networks in terms of the entry and stabilizing points of corruption.

Relatedly, our historical approach allowed us to access records of corruption we would have difficulty accessing today. But, as Professor Pacheco-Vega notes, it also allows for comparison across space. Too often discussions of corruption focus on the Global South, without regard to the history and current practices of cities in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. History brings insights into the role of corruption in building the infrastructure that labels some places as ‘developed’.

Finally, as Professor Pacheco-Vega notes, corruption research may benefit from a multidisciplinary approach. Corruption is neither an easy problem to study nor solve. The more research and more diverse perspectives that there are, the greater the opportunity for collaborative research. To ensure that we are speaking the same language, however, we need a shared concept of corruption and shared mode of analysis that facilitates the comparison across cases, through time, and among disciplines. Here Oliver Meza and Elizabeth Pérez-Chiqués’ (2021) Corruption Consolidation Framework (CCF) offers an answer that is applicable to varied contexts in which corruption occurs. The framework gives researchers a common set of tools to facilitate their own research and to build comparisons across studies of corruption.

In sum, we are grateful to Professor Pacheco-Vega for his insightful review of our work, and we are hopeful that corruption researchers will continue their work at the subnational level across space, time, and disciplinary boundaries to make contributions to both research and practice.

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