



## KNOWLEDGE OF OFFICIAL ETHICAL STANDARDS AND TOLERANCE TOWARDS CORRUPTION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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**Abstract.** Corruption is often defined as a deviant conduct from established legal and formal norms and expected ways of behaving in the exercise of official duties and the discharge of official responsibilities. Readiness to tolerate corruption will hinge primarily upon the evaluator's understanding of what those ethical standards are. This means that citizens' willingness to accept corruption as something "normal" to the functioning of democracy or "beneficial" to economic development is likely to be affected by how knowledgeable they are about the ethical standards of governing public office. Such knowledge can be instilled by academic and experiential learning. So, we question *to what extent citizens' knowledge of official ethical standards affect their tolerance towards corruption?* Based on new individual level data collected from six focus groups conducted in Portugal, we show a possible negative association between the appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards and tolerance towards corruption. The results are exploratory, but sufficiently interesting to test our hypothesis with a larger sample.

**Keywords:** corruption, democratic norms, knowledge, tolerance, ethics.

### Introduction

For each office of entrusted power in a modern democratic society there are guiding principles that prescribe to officeholders established, accustomed,

or expected ways of behaving in the exercise of official duties and the discharge of official responsibilities. These required and prohibited behaviours “are defined by norms that are socially determined” and therefore produce “standardized expectations” (Truman 1971: 347), embedded in a society’s normative system (Johnston 1986).

Corruption is a conduct or practice deviant from the official ethical standards governing an office of entrusted authority. The understanding of what constitutes a deviant conduct in office, and therefore what is or is not corruption, will hinge “primarily upon which value systems underpin the evaluator’s conceptualisation of ethics” (Rose-Ackerman 1999: 223). Some individuals may regard certain deviant conducts as something “normal” to the functioning of democracy or “beneficial” to economic development. Therefore, citizens’ readiness to tolerate corruption is likely to be affected by how knowledgeable they are of the ethical standards governing an office of delegated authority.

Although there is abundant literature on citizens’ perceptions of acceptable or unacceptable conduct in the discharge of official duties (Mancuso et al. 1998; Allen & Birch 2012) and on why people are more likely to tolerate certain corrupt practices than others (Moreno 2002; Pop 2012; Pozsgai-Alvarez 2015; Hunady 2017; Malmberg 2019; Gouvêa Maciel 2021), little has been said about the relationship between citizens’ knowledge of ethical standards governing an office of entrusted authority and their willingness to accept corruption as something good for society both in political and economic terms.

The literature on public integrity (OECD 1997) suggests that professional training of officeholders can improve their fundamental and applied knowledge of what those ethical standards are, why their observance is important to organizational performance and how they ought to be observed in practical scenarios, calling for additional fieldwork in this domain. Our research question tries to hook on that missed link highlighted by practitioners, by asking *to what extent citizens’ knowledge of official ethical standards affect their tolerance towards corruption?*

We argue that citizens’ readiness to tolerate corruption is directly related to their knowledge of what those official ethical standards are. Education not only plays an important role in raising awareness about the resilience, causes and effects of corruption it also helps to set higher

ethical standards for those holding office. Though education, individuals are expected to be more knowledgeable of ethical standards governing public life and to develop critical thinking about these issues. This, in turn, will make them more capacitated to actively participate in public affairs and help strengthening good governance.

Ethics education is increasingly invoked as an essential ingredient to a sound anticorruption policy. Not surprisingly, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC 2004) in its Article 13 recognizes the importance of ethics education for the prevention and fight of corruption and calls upon signatory States to undertake “public education programmes, including school and university curricula; that contribute to non-tolerance of corruption.” In response to this global concern, countries have increasingly developed efforts to raise awareness of the adverse effects of corruption on development and democratic governance, not only by inculcating the young generation through education programmes, but also by intensifying ethics training within public and private sector organisations. The general belief is that societies or organisations with a more disseminated knowledge of ethical standards tend to be characterized by greater certainty of the appropriateness of actions, which in turn lowers costs of regulation and enforcement of those standards.

Knowledge about official ethical standards can be acquired via two different learning processes: through a classroom-based constructive and reproductive process (*academic learning*); or through a workplace-based first-hand experience (*experiential learning*). Some individuals develop their ethical knowledge while enrolled in BA programmes that include the topic of corruption and ethics as part of their syllabi. Others acquire knowledge of official ethical standards at the workplace through induction training or by being told what the boundaries of acceptable or unacceptable conduct are when experiencing ethical dilemmas and/or corruption-related conducts in their organisational settings.

Appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards is important to reduce tolerance towards corruption in society. We contend that the more individuals demonstrate an appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards is, in other words, if individuals know what the official notions of transparency, integrity, impartiality, etc., are, they are less willing to accept or relativize the adverse political and economic effects

of corruption. That said, having a formal understanding of such standards it is not in itself a sufficient deterrent of the individuals' decision to engage or resist corruption. Such knowledge needs to be put to the test, in concrete organisational settings. Hence, we also contend that the more experiential knowledge on ethical standards acquired by individuals over the years, the less prone they are to tolerate the institutional and economic effects of corruption.

This study contributes to two emerging strands of corruption research: one that examines tolerance towards corruption in democratic societies (Moreno 2002; Pop 2012; Pozsgai-Alvarez 2015; Hunady 2017; Malmberg 2019; Gouvêa Maciel 2021); and one that looks at individual attitudes towards unethical conduct and propensity to engage in unethical conduct in organizational contexts (Chen & Tang 2006; Lau 2010).

Our article is organized in four parts. First, we engage with the dedicated literature and derive our hypotheses concerning the relationship between citizens' perceived knowledge of official ethical standards and their degree of tolerance towards the effects of corruption. Second, we justify our case selection and define our research design with the respective literature-derived hypotheses, methods, and data. Third, we test our hypotheses empirically. Fourth, we conclude the article by highlighting and discussing the major empirical findings.

## **I. Knowledge of official ethical standards and tolerance towards corruption**

In democratic societies, public roles are legally bound and entrusted with impersonal powers, functions, and obligations (Johnston 1986: 50). Both office holders and citizens at large accept that their interactions are governed by principles of fair dealing and competent administration. These principles can sometimes be disregarded (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Rose-Ackerman 2002). Not surprisingly, official ethical standards, such as fairness, impartiality, integrity, honesty, accountability, transparency, governing offices of entrusted authority have been challenged, revisited, or reinstated over time and across different institutional settings, signalling that the understanding and appropriation of these standards in a given society is not always linear and progressive.

There are abundant literature that suggests a negative relation between the diffusion of ethical standards in each organizational context or society and its resilience to corruption (Truman 1971; Rose-Ackerman 1999; Pizzorno 1992; Mény 1997). According to this theoretical assumption, abstinence from engaging in informal and illegal exchanges, is not only dependent on the legal penalties associated with breaking the law, but also on 'the moral costs' imposed by one's consciousness, peer pressure and public reproval (Rose-Ackerman 1978; Pizzorno 1992).

Recent experimental studies question this theoretical assumption, by showing that knowing 'to recognize whether the issues are ethical or unethical', does not necessarily refrain individuals from engaging in unethical conduct (Chen & Tang 2006, 89). However, the same study also concludes with a word of caution that those students who "have received training regarding social responsibility and managerial ethics in the 'Principles of Management' course [...] may have reduced, or very likely changed, the propensity to engage in unethical behavior" and call for further in-depth examination of this issue.

Anand, Ashforth & Makendra (2005) argue that if ethical standards are not consistently upheld within an organisation, individuals involved in corruption will attempt to rationalize their unethical behaviour. Socialisation processes are not only important to help individuals acquiring appropriate knowledge of the official ethical standards governing their duties they are also important to motivate them to assimilate into the organisation's ethos. Socialisation into the values, principles and norms providing normative guidance to an organization and its members, is a lengthy process and not always successful. Not all individuals will acknowledge and internalize the ethical standards that are encouraged by the organisation.

In countries where official ethical standards are consistently interpreted and widely diffused across society, individuals are likelier to refrain from engaging in corruption. Where these standards are not or have not been consistently interpreted, regularly upheld or and widely recognised, moral costs are weak to deter individuals from engaging in corruption (De Sousa & Moriconi 2013). A wider consensus on the official ethical standards is likely to refrain individuals' readiness to accept or endure corruption.

Therefore:

**Hypothesis 1** – *Individuals with an appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards, are less willing to tolerate the adverse political and economic effects of corruption.*

If individuals show different degrees of knowledge and appropriation of ethical standards, then education may play a role in shaping individual attitudes towards corruption. Although official anticorruption discourses and strategies, both at domestic and international levels, claim that societies with higher levels of education are more resilient to corruption, empirical studies show that the effects of education on the propensity to relativize the political and economic effects of corruption are more variegated, especially in democratic societies.

Some studies suggest a negative association between levels of formal education and tolerance towards corruption. Malmberg (2019) found that males with less formal education are more prone to tolerate corruption. In a similar line, Hakhverdian & Mayne (2012) also found that ‘citizens with the lowest levels of education are unresponsive to the effects of corruption’. Other authors, like Gatti, Paternostro & Rigolini (2003) concluded that there is no such association, or that it only holds valid for some segments of the population, depending on the approach used to measure tolerance towards corruption. Gouvêa Maciel (2021) recently found, using data from the European Value Survey and the Eurobarometer, that male individuals with higher formal education are more tolerant towards corruption, whereas less educated unemployed tended to be more tolerant towards corruption.

Most of these studies focus on the individual’s level of formal education obtained as a determinant of the propensity to tolerate corruption, and not the type of learning they have experienced. Ethical standards can be taught through formal education, but they can also be transmitted through induction training and inferred from real first-hand experience in handling ethical dilemmas at the workplace. The influence of academic and experiential learning on the individual’s knowledge of official ethical standards and how that affects their readiness to tolerate corruption remains largely untested in the dedicated literature.

Some studies support the claim that formal education matters, university students from different disciplinary areas, engaged in formal ethics education, including an introduction to ethical principles and moral reasoning, significantly improve their ethical awareness, sensitivity, and reasoning (Allegretti & Frederick 1995; Self and Olivarez 1996). Another example comes from the testing of 707 students from two undergraduate business courses at a major research university, found that formal ethics education enhances 'student's ethical awareness and reasoning (Lau 2010).

Other studies point in the opposite direction. Individuals with lifelong learning experience, are likely to display a more solid and applied knowledge of ethical standards, influenced by implicit beliefs and judgements constructed and appropriated at the workplace, on an everyday basis. Experiential learning means getting to know how people interact at the organizational level, understanding what rules, deontological principles and protocols regulate such interaction, and becoming familiar with routines and established patterns of conduct (Cleminson & Bradford 1996: 255). Previous research reports that business practitioners are less tolerant of questionable business practices than students (Purcell 1977; Hollon & Ulrich 1979; Arlow & Ulrich 1980; Stevens 1984). In a similar vein, Chen & Tang (2006) found that real first-hand experience may enhance students' wisdom to refrain from engaging in unethical conduct more than knowledge about business ethics 'acquired from books and case studies in the classroom'.

We argue that demonstrating declarative knowledge of ethical standards does not necessarily make individuals less tolerant towards the adverse effects of corruption. On the contrary, they may develop a more complacent reasoning of the effects of corruption at the abstract level. By engaging with concrete ethical problems at the workplace during their professional life, and being required to act upon them, individuals gain a practical knowledge of the official ethical standards. The more first-hand experience individuals acquire in applying those abstract principles to handling real-life ethical problems or dilemmas, the less prone they are to embark on accommodating views on the institutional and economic effects of corruption, hence the hypothesis:

**Hypotheses 2** – *Individuals with a more experiential knowledge of the official ethical standards are less prone to tolerate the economic and political effects of corruption.*

## II. Research design

In corruption studies, case study research is common practice because they provide an in-depth analysis of this contemporary and real-life phenomenon in a circumscribed context (Doig & McIvor 1999). By focusing on a single national case, we deepen our knowledge on potential explanatory factors of individuals' attitudes towards corruption and hopefully contribute to the formulation of new generalizations to be tested subsequently by further empirical inquiry. This is particularly informative in an area – tolerance towards corruption in democracies – that is lacking theoretical development (Moreno 2002; Gatti, Paternostro & Rigolini 2003; Pop 2012; Lavena 2013; Pozsgai-Alvarez 2015; Chang & Kerr 2017; Hunady 2017; Gouvêa Maciel 2021).

### *Case selection*

In this area, Portugal is a particularly interesting case due to the high degree of ambivalence regarding its citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards corruption. According to Eurobarometer data, Portuguese citizens have a high degree of intolerance towards corruption. As this is measured in terms of people's acceptability of giving bribes, gifts, or favours to get something in return from a public official,<sup>1</sup> the Portuguese case presents values above the European Union (EU) average, being like Nordic democracies that are connoted, for instance, as "very clean" due to their consistent high scoring in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. At the same time, Portugal has systematically displayed

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<sup>1</sup> EB79. QB4T (Tolerance index to corruption) "Talking more generally, if you wanted to get something from the public administration or public services, to what extent do you think it is acceptable to do any of the following? To give money; To give a gift; To do a favour."



high levels of perceived corruption in the country, well above the EU average.<sup>2</sup> Using data from the 2006 survey on *Corruption and Ethics in Democracy*<sup>3</sup> applied to a representative sample of the Portuguese population, De Sousa and Triães (2008) concluded, by looking at people's responses to attitude statements and hypothetical integrity scenarios, that citizens tend to condemn corruption in abstract and symbolic terms but are willing to accept corruption in practical and strategic terms. In other words, most Portuguese citizens believe that corruption is a conduct or practice deviant from legal and formal standards and social expectations about those standards. At the same time, several authors show that the Portuguese believe that when a given official conduct or action is intended to address a noble cause or results in a positive outcome to the community, independently of being a breach of ethical standards governing public life, it is not corruption (De Sousa & Triães 2008; De Sousa 2008; De Sousa & Triães 2009). These earlier findings are illustrative of the ambiguity surrounding citizens' judgements of corruption and their greater or lesser tolerance towards corruption.

### *Data*

Our data<sup>4</sup> stems from a short questionnaire applied to six focus groups aimed at capturing subjective dimensions of corruption to inform the questionnaire design of a larger survey study on people's attitudes, perceptions and experiences of corruption and austerity in democracy (De Sousa et al. 2021). Participants were selected taking into consideration two overlapping dimensions: formation (academic *vs* experiential knowledge of corruption) and age (young and senior citizens). We conveyed four focus groups with students in their last year of BA programmes in disciplinary areas that include corruption/ethics as topics in their course

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<sup>2</sup> EB79.1 QB5 "How widespread do you think the problem of corruption is in (OUR COUNTRY)?". In 2005, 91% of the Portuguese perceived corruption as a major problem in their country, with an increased to 97% in 2009 and 2011, and a slight drop to 92% in 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Data for the 2006 survey available in De Sousa (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Available at Magalhães et al. (2020).

syllabi (i.e., Law, Economics, Political Science and Public Management and Administration). All students were young individuals with little or no prior job experience. The other two focus groups included senior citizens from different Lifelong Learning Programmes, in other words, retired professionals with a longstanding professional experience in confronting and dealing with ethical dilemmas in organisational contexts. On average, our target groups had a similar rate of participants ( $\approx 9$  to 13 per group), conforming to the average size suggested in the literature (Morgan 1997; Adler & Clark 2008). A total of 66 participants (30 male and 36 female) were enrolled.

We are conscious of our limited database, not only in terms of the number of participants, but also and the fact that it lacks sociographic information about the respondents, such as age, years of experience, and job position that could be used as control variables in our analytical model. As already mentioned, these focus groups were designed and implemented as part of a six-step survey development strategy. The decision to analyse the responses to the short questionnaire applied at the beginning of the focus groups was only made after their implementation. Since we had applied a new question (i.e., matching a set of ethical principles with their standard definition) that we were unable to fit into our mass survey for practical reasons (which had to do with the overall length of our questionnaire), we opted to do this exploratory analysis using the available data from the focus groups. This means that all findings reported in this article need to be interpreted with caution, since they just signal pathways to interpret possible associations between the variables treated in this study.

### *Dependent Variables*

Our dependent variables were measured by the answer to the question<sup>5</sup> that tried to gauge participants' willingness to tolerate corruption. We probed participants' flexibility to relativize the adverse effects of corruption on democratic performance, both in terms of its functioning (political,

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<sup>5</sup> See Question 4 in Annex 1.

POL) and its outcome (economic, ECO), by asking them to specify on 0-10 Likert scale their level of (dis)agreement with the functionalist belief that ethical standards may be bypassed or downplayed to enable economic growth and that corruption may be regarded as a normal feature of democratic politics.

### *Independent Variables*

Our first independent variable was measured by testing the focus groups participants' appropriate knowledge of the official ethical standards governing public life. This was done by asking the participants to match a set of basic ethical principles with their standard definition, as commonly laid down in codes of conduct and other deontological legal texts, in a paper-and-pencil questionnaire distributed to them at the beginning of the focus group meetings<sup>6</sup>. By means of the percentage of correct answers, we built this variable on a scale of 0 - 100, where 0 means that no match and 100 means perfect match between all surveyed ethical principles and their standard definition. This variable was operationalised by confirming through the respondents' answers how many correct matches they scored. Consequently, we consider that a given respondent has an appropriate knowledge of the official ethical standards if s/he makes more correct matches. We have labelled this independent variable *Ethical knowledge*. The second independent variable *Experiential learning* of official ethical standards was constructed as a dummy with one (1) for senior participants with lifelong professional experience and zero (0) to younger participants with little or no practical experience on these matters.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

In the table below, we present the descriptive statistics of the variables coded and used in this study.

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<sup>6</sup> See Question 3 in Annex 1.

Table 1

## Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	St. dev.	Max.	Min.
<b>Dependent Variables</b>				
(ECO) economic effect of corruption	2.53	2.34	8	0
(POL) political effect of corruption	2.29	2.79	10	0
<b>Independent Variables</b>				
Ethical knowledge	73.7%	28%	100%	0%
Experiential learning	0.66	0.48	1	0
<b>Sample size (N = 66)</b>				

As summarized in **Table 1**, 73,7% of the respondents have the appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards governing public life. Younger participants have the highest percentage of appropriate ethical knowledge (80%), followed by senior participants (60%). The data shows that, on average, participants relativize more (ECO) effects ( $\mu = 2.53$ ) than (POL) effects of corruption ( $\mu = 2.29$ ). To corroborate this, a Pearson's correlation was calculated and obtained  $r = -0.66$  and  $r = -0.68$ , indicating, as predicted, a high negative correlation between the appropriate knowledge of ethical principles and the relativization of corruption for ECO and POL effects for seniors' participants. For younger participants, however, the parameters are not highly correlated ( $r = -0.06$  and  $r = -0.03$ ). In this line, the negative correlation between groups was significant in both ECO and POL effects. In terms of ECO effects, a variation of 1,000% was observed between seniors and younger participants. For POL effects, the variation between senior and younger participants was 2,167%. This means that senior participants, in general, apply more their knowledge of official ethical standards to relativize the effects of corruption than younger participants. Using the Fisher z transformation to highlight the significance of the difference between two correlation coefficients, we found  $z = -2.64$  for ECO effect and  $z = -2.88$  for POL effect. Both are significant to 1%, which means that Pearson's correlation for senior participants is smaller than younger ones.

From this preliminary descriptive analysis, it results interesting to further explore the relationship between the senior respondents' experiential learning of official ethical standards and their predisposition to relativize

the economic (ECO) and political (POL) effects of corruption. Our graphical analysis of the correlation between our independent variable on the appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards and our dependent variable on the degree of relativization of the effects of corruption shows that, 42% of all respondents score 71-100%, 44% hit 36-70% and only 14% hit 0-35%. We also include the 0-10 Likert scale to bring information about the relativization of ECO and POL corruption effects (vertical axis in the **Figure 1**).

To better show the association between the independent and dependent variables we opted for an intuitive graphical visualization. Clemente & Lírío (2017) argue that this is an adequate procedure to small samples comparing parameters between groups. Our analysis is only exploratory, meaning that all suggested associations should be interpreted with caution and should be tested using larger samples.

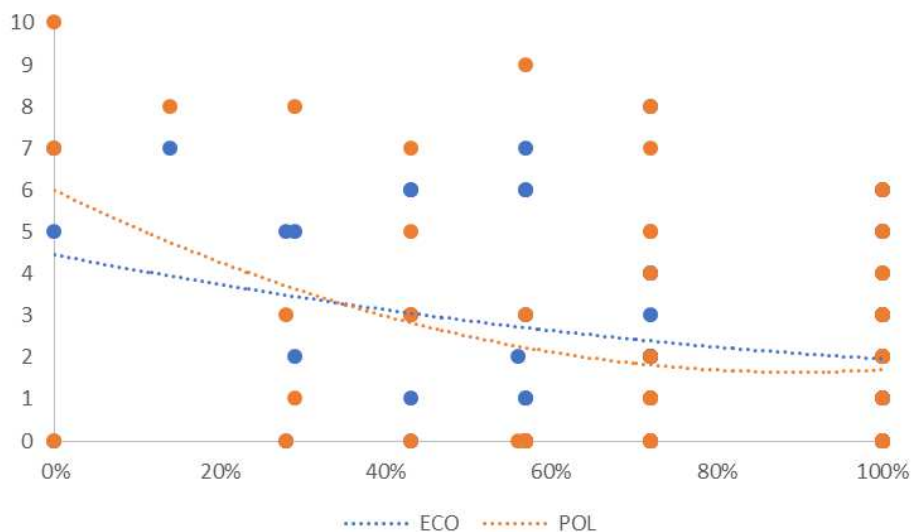


Figure 1. Appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards vs relativization of (ECO and POL) corruption effects – all respondents

As can be seen in **Figure 1**, variables seem to have an absence of the relation and heteroscedasticity for both effects while the slope of the POL line is higher than the ECO line. This means that respondents who display a

higher appropriate knowledge of the official ethical standards could be less prone to relativize the effects of corruption and vice-versa. As expected, we found empirical evidence supporting, even preliminarily, hypothesis 1 (H1). That is, participants who show a more consistent knowledge of the official ethical standards governing public life seem to be likelier to express greater concern about the adverse economic and political effects of corruption on democratic performance.

To improve the sensitivity analysis, we disaggregated the data of **Figure 1** into the two target categories: younger respondents (**Figure 2**) and senior respondents (**Figure 3**). As presented in **Figure 2**, 55% of younger participants hit 71-100%, follow by 43% hit 36-70% and 2% hit 0-35%. The findings suggest that the variables have also an absence of the relation and heteroscedasticity. This means that younger respondents seem to be more prone to relativize the effects of corruption than older ones.

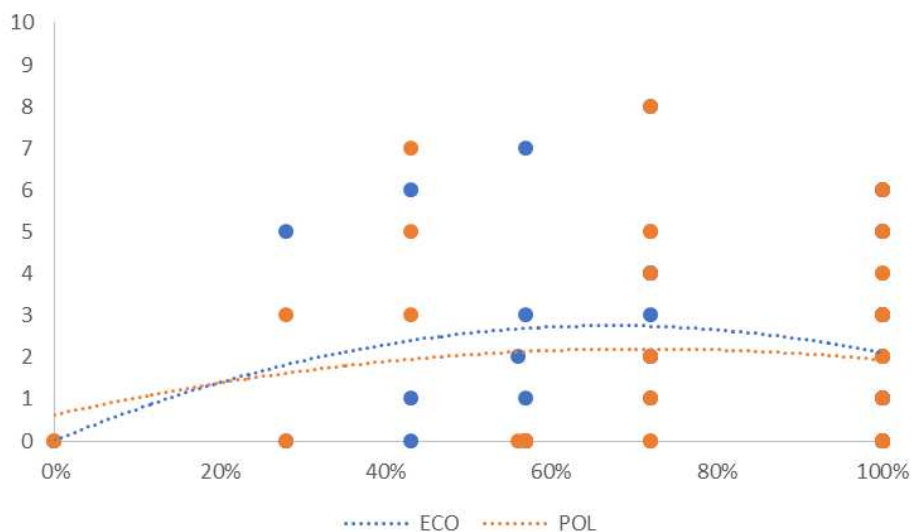


Figure 2. Appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards vs relativization of (ECO and POL) corruption effects – younger respondents

As presented in **Figure 3**, 24% hit 71-100%, 48% hit 36-70% and 28% hit 0-35%. **Figure 3** displays a negative correlation while the slope of the POL line is higher than the ECO line. This means that old respondents

seem to be less prone to relativize the effects of corruption than younger ones. These preliminary findings are also consistent with previous studies who have confirmed that education and experience influence individual-level tolerance and relativization of corruption (Villoria, Ryzin & Lavena 2013; Mocan 2008; Zakaria 2016).

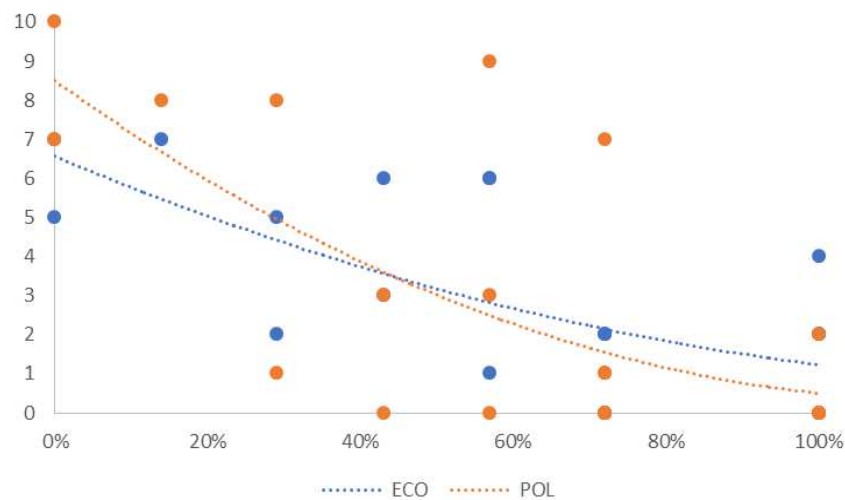


Figure 3. Appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards vs relativization of (ECO and POL) corruption effects – senior respondents

## Methods

We deduced two hypotheses that address the association between knowledge of ethical standards and tolerance towards corruption and tested them with novel individual data generated from a short questionnaire applied in six focus groups. We contend that citizens' relativization of the adverse economic and political effects of corruption in democratic societies is associated to their knowledge of the official ethical standards governing public life, and that this knowledge is likely to be higher in citizens with a longer professional experience. To complement the previous graphical analysis and check the hypotheses, we performed an *Ordinary Least Squares* regression (OLS) to test the association between our independent variables,

that are *appropriate knowledge* and applied knowledge (a dummy variable), and our dependent variables, that are *tolerance towards the political (POL)* and *economic (ECO) effects of corruption*. It is specified as following

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{i1} + \beta_2 x_{i2} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Expected sign    (-)                      (-)

were  $Y_i$  is the relativization of the economic (ECO) and political (POL) effects of corruption,  $x_{i1}$  is the “appropriate knowledge” independent variable, and  $x_{i2}$  is the “experiential learning” dummy.

### III. Knowledge of official ethical standards and tolerance towards corruption – a regression analysis approach

In **Table 2** we report the results of the OLS regression. We estimate the impact of “Appropriate knowledge” and “Experiential learning” independent variables on the relativization of the economic (ECO) and political (POL) effects of corruption, considering a clustered robust estimation of standard errors, since the observations may be subdivided into smaller-sized focus groups (“clusters”) and the sampling may be correlated within each group.

Table 2

#### Regression Results – clustered robust estimation

Variables	ECO	POL
<i>Independent Variables</i>		
Appropriate knowledge	- 2.77*	- 3.75*
	(1.628)	(2.061)
Experiential learning	-0.061	-0.068
	(0.528)	(0.712)
Constant	4.61**	5.10**
	(1.165)	(1.258)
<i>Sample</i>	66	66
<i>F statistic</i>	2.14*	3.13*
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.11	0.14

Note: \*\*p<0.05, \* p<0.12, Robust Std. Err. in parentheses.



Our analysis shows that the appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards has a negative significance in all regression specifications. This finding corroborates our hypothesis 1 (H1) in a weakly manner, since we report the results as “marginally significant”, implying that there could still be some kind of real effect going on. This means that citizens with less knowledge about official ethical standards could be more prone to relativize both economic and political effects of corruption. Moreover, appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards seems to have more impact on the political than on the economic effects of corruption.

We can also see in **Table 2** that dummy *Experiential learning* is negative in both regression specifications, however, no significance was found. This finding does not corroborate our hypothesis 2 (H2), although the dummy *Experiential learning* was expected to be negative. Since the no statistical significance could be a problem of the sample size,<sup>7</sup> we may assume that individuals with a longer professional experience, who have been familiarised with the applicability of these ethical standards in their professional routines could be less prone to relativize the economic and political effects of corruption.

## Conclusions

This study finds exploratory evidence to verify, even preliminarily, our main literature-derived hypothesis: appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards is associated with higher intolerance towards corruption. We also found differences along the formative dimension as expected: senior participants with a longer professional experience, and therefore, who have acquired a practical knowledge of the boundaries of proper and improper conduct in office, seem to be less prone to relativize the economic and political effects of corruption in democracy.

Our study suggests alternative ways to look to the association between individuals' knowledge of ethical standards and their (in)tolerance towards corruption which has been ignored in previous studies on perceptions of

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<sup>7</sup> According to Wooldridge (2012), a larger sample size tends to show more statistical significance into variables than a smaller one.

corruption, despite being referred in the dedicated literature, as well as, in the official anticorruption discourse, as one of the major deterrents of corruption. Moreover, since the deontological norms used to test the respondents' appropriate knowledge of official ethical standards were operationalized by using the standard definitions available in official codes of conduct and other deontological legal texts, this study increases our knowledge as to what extent such standards are diffused in the community. Deontological standards are only worthy at preventing improper conduct when all participants in the community, officeholders and citizens, know the principles that govern their actions and interactions.

Since the information is limited and the nature of the analysis is only exploratory, our findings must be read with caution. Exploratory research is meant to be inexpensive. The data was collected through the application of a four-item questionnaire to a convenience sample, hence the small number of observations used in the analysis. Future work should expand the study to a wider sample, preferably in a mass survey, in order to provide more robust information for the parameters and allow us to test a series of demographic variables that are referred in the literature as relevant to explain tolerance towards corruption, such as age, gender and employment status.

The data related to our postgraduate FG participants also suggests that there may be differences across different disciplinary areas worth exploring in future research: students enrolled in graduate degrees with a strong legal component, such as law and public management and administration, trained more thoroughly on deontological ethics, show a higher intolerance towards corruption. This observation is in line with research findings previously reported (Hawkins & Cocanougher 1972; Goodman & Crawford 1974; Newstrom & Ruch 1975; Shuptrine 1979; Landry, Moyes & Cortes 2004). Unfortunately, due to the limited nature of our sample, we were unable to test whether different academic training on official ethical standards affects students' willingness to accept the adverse economic and political effects of corruption in democracy. More research is needed in this domain.

*Annex 1*

**STAGE 1.**

**Questionnaire testing group consistency in defining democracy and interpreting ethical standards**

We thank you in advance for your cooperation in answering the questionnaire which takes about 10 minutes to complete.

**Meanings of democracy**

*Q1. The term “democracy” can take on several meanings for different people. From the following list, what is, in your opinion, the most important meaning of democracy and the second most important. [Register one answer per column]*

	1st choice	2nd choice
[01] Political alternation		[ ] [ ]
[02] Good governance	[ ]	[ ]
[03] Economic development		[ ] [ ]
[04] Voting rights	[ ]	[ ]
[05] Rule of law	[ ]	[ ]
[06] Equality and social justice		[ ] [ ]
[07] Legality	[ ] [ ]	
[08] National independence		[ ] [ ]
[09] Civil liberties	[ ]	[ ]
[10] Citizen Participation		[ ] [ ]
[11] Peace and unity	[ ]	[ ]
[12] Multi party competition		[ ] [ ]
[13] Personal security	[ ]	[ ]
[14] Sustainability	[ ]	[ ]
[15] Majority rule	[ ]	[ ]
[16] Popular will	[ ]	[ ]
[98] Other: which?	_____	
[97] DK	[ ]	
[99] NA	[ ]	

### Ethical principles associated to democracy

*Q2. People often have different views on the ethical principles that should guide the performance of democracy. From the following list, please choose which is for you the most important principle associated to democratic performance and the second most important. [Register one answer per column]*

1st choice	2nd choice
[01] Effectiveness	[ ] [ ]
[02] Efficiency	[ ] [ ]
[03] Equality	[ ] [ ]
[04] Impartiality	[ ] [ ]
[05] Inclusion	[ ] [ ]
[06] Informality	[ ] [ ]
[07] Legality	[ ] [ ]
[08] Merit	[ ] [ ]
[09] Participation	[ ] [ ]
[10] Accountability	[ ] [ ]
[11] Solidarity	[ ] [ ]
[12] Sustainability	[ ] [ ]
[13] Transparency	[ ] [ ]
[98] Other: which?	_____
[97] DK	[ ]
[99] NA	[ ]

### Testing consistency in the interpretation of ethical principles

*Q3. Please match the principles in the left column with the appropriate definition from the right column [shuffle]:*

Principles	Definition
<b>Selflessness</b>	Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.
<b>Integrity</b>	They should not act or take decisions to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.
<b>Independence</b>	Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work.
<b>Objectivity</b>	Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.
<b>Accountability</b>	Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.
<b>Transparency</b>	Holders of public office should act and take decisions in a transparent manner.
<b>Honesty</b>	Holders of public office should be truthful

*Q4. Having these principles in mind, please answer to the following two questions by circling your position on a scale of 0-10, where 0 means totally disagree and 10 totally agree:*

1. In a context of crisis, some of these principles governing public life can be ignored to the advantage of economic growth.

(Totally disagree) 0....1....2....3....4....5....6....7....8....9....10 (Totally agree)

2. Corruption is part of the daily functioning of democracy.

(Totally disagree) 0....1....2....3....4....5....6....7....8....9....10 (Totally agree)

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