

## **DISSERTATION SUMMARY**

**Prince Aian G. Villanueva**

**Conditional and Differential? Locating the Role of Civil Society in  
Anti-corruption Policy Outcomes**

Ph.D. Dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**György Gajduschek, Ph.D.**  
Professor

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**Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science**

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## Table of Contents

1. Background and rationale .....	4
2. Theoretical approach.....	6
3. Research questions and study design .....	8
4. Qualitative comparative analysis as a method .....	11
5. Main findings .....	14
6. Conclusions, contributions, and limitations.....	16
7. Main references.....	19
8. Author's relevant publications .....	28

# 1. Background and rationale

Due to the wide recognition of the complex nature of corruption, democratic governments and civil society are prompted to shift their anti-corruption strategies to holistic ones. The failure of previous anti-corruption approaches is in part brought about by separate, individual interventions to tackle such a systemic problem (Gans-Morse, *et al.*, 2018). Hira (2016), for instance, noted that the focus on formal institutional incentives while ignoring culture has contributed to the failure of reforms in developing countries. Perhaps this is why Svensson (2005) calls for the investigation of the contextual dependencies of corruption. This complexity seems to resonate with what qualitative comparative analysts hold regarding the importance of contexts and with the configurational character of much of social life.

The same can be told about the supposed role of civil society (CS) in democracy and anti-corruption. Encarnación (2012) claimed that the errors in understanding the conditions under which CS can be most effective is largely due in part to the neglect of important contexts: while a strong CS may be a transformative political force capable of fixing the political system, there is a possibility that under certain (deteriorating) political conditions, CS may as much be a burden as a help. Indeed, while participation in CS has been considered as one of the most promising routes to tackle corruption, functioning democratic institutions increase the costs of corruption for both public and private partners (Bertelli *et al.*, 2021).

Putnam's (1993, 2000) prominent work on social capital highlights the importance of civic participation on the democratic performance of a society. Such social capital, cooperative social networks, based on trust and reciprocity, is needed to monitor government performance and more broadly, to participate in the public policy process. While drawn mainly from research on industrialized and developed countries, international donors now emphasize the need for CS as a

crucial factor for the social, economic, and political development in the Global South (Brass, 2021, p. 2). The expectation that societies will further democratize via CS and thus be able to address corruption is however rather more complex and complicated. As Hira (2016) pointed out, while democracy should open the space up for more competition and alteration of clientelistic networks, having a democracy is not a requirement for anti-corruption. On the other hand, speedy democratization has been an appealing argument to radically change perceptions about corruption (Rothstein, 2011) since only when well-functioning democratic institutions are in place that growth and transformation can begin (Rose-Ackerman, 2007) but building institutional capacity such as the rule of law in weak states has become a promising avenue for international organizations to address corruption (Jetter and Parmeter, 2018). Such is the complicated character of the relations between corruption and democracy and the role of CS is situated in this context. Encarnación (2012) succinctly captured the dilemma facing governments tackling corruption: do we promote CS development or political institutionalization?

The supposed place of CS in anti-corruption is even more compounded by events that directly assault their presence in the world over, regardless of the institutions, type of government, and economic development in place. The closing of civic space phenomenon can indeed be observed in many countries across typologies. For example, although later on declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in June 2019, the anti-corruption activists in Ukraine were required to file detailed personal financial and asset declarations annually after the 2017 amendments to the Law on Preventing Corruption until April 2018. The case of Guatemala is no different. The government did not renew the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala's (CICIG) mandate in 2018. The year 2019 saw the unilateral termination of such mandate, with the government claiming it put the country's security at risk. The CICIG

contributed to efforts to investigate criminal networks and structures and ensured pursuance of notable corruption cases in the post-conflict period (Amnesty International, 2019). Developed economies and consolidated and long-standing democracies are not spared, from the US to Brazil and India (Varieties of Democracy, 2020). In these societies, and the world over, not only are CS as components of democracy attacked by government repression; censorship on the media, threats to freedoms of expression, and attacks on free and fair elections, among many others, are a regular occurrence in what Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) call the phenomenon of autocratization.

Locating the place of CS in anti-corruption given such contexts poses a daunting challenge. An important question that merits attention is thus: what configurations of political institutions enhance or mitigate corruption? Taking a cue from the civil society-corruption and the larger democracy-corruption nexus scholarship, and with institutionalism as an overarching theory, this dissertation intends to contribute to the discussion on the question via three related studies.

## 2. Theoretical approach

The study is grounded on an overarching institutional approach to corruption. Institutional theories look at the institutional design of political systems and focus on how institutions shape behavior (Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman, 2005). In *Syndromes of Corruption*, Johnston (2009) claims that problems with participation and institutions not only contribute to corruption but shape it in a variety of ways. Several anti-corruption tools used by governments and international non-governmental organizations to address corruption are founded on these very same institutions.

Following the institutional logic and from a configurational, set-relational perspective, corruption is a product of a combination of different factors, including these institutional ones. From the standpoint of qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), corruption implies conjunctural causation, equifinality, asymmetry, and multifinality. First, *corruption results from conjunctural*

*causation*; that is, it is a product of a combination of different conditions. *Corruption is also equifinal*: there possibly are multiple pathways to it. Third, the absence of conditions that lead to the presence of corruption may not necessarily lead to its absence; thus, *corruption is asymmetrical*. Lastly, *corruption implies multifinality*: the conditions leading to the presence of corruption may be causally relevant for both the presence of corruption and its absence.

In the process of locating the supposed anti-corruption role of civil society, the dissertation is guided by the same institutional and configurational foundation. The said role of civil society is conditional on several (democratic) political institutions. This deviates from the two common strands in the study of civil society-corruption linkage which are from the optimists who argue that civil society's anti-corruption role is undeniable and the skeptics who claim that civil society can possibly become corrupt if not conduits for corruption. Given the "conditionality" literature then, and through set-theoretic analysis particularly QCA, the supposed anti-corruption role of civil society is conditioned by such democratic institutions as socio-political integration, media freedom, and public deliberation and engagement, among others.

These same democratic institutions are challenged and constricted by a larger phenomenon known as democratic backsliding or autocratization. Given this process and the importance of context in QCA, looking at corruption and anti-corruption in regimes of different types is one way to understand corruption and the anti-corruption role of civil society as politically contentious phenomena. While anti-corruption interventions succeed by means of the introduction of reforms to political institutions, building capacity of enforcement institutions, and reinforcement of civil society oversight, it transpires only to the extent that the nature of the polity is considered.

In emerging democracies, or those that are in transition, corruption is a transitional phenomenon given that procedural practices have yet to be founded on firm liberal culture and

effective institutions (Harris-White and White, 1996; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). In backsliding democracies, or autocratizing states as referred to in this study, anti-corruption is increasingly a concern. As Amundsen and Jackson (2021) note, “because de-democratizing leaders and would-be autocrats benefit from corruption, traditional governance-focused reforms are rolled back, and traditional anti-corruption measures can be hijacked and weaponized” (p.4).

The importance of context, in this case the polity or regime, in understanding both corruption and the anti-corruption role of civil society cannot be understated. Boulding’s (2014) pertinent question succinctly captures this: which institutional conditions might influence whether civil society is inclined to work toward developing clientelistic relationships with politicians, or conversely, when they may be more likely to employ other strategies for serving members’ needs (p.676)? Moreover, given this, one may ask, does civil society play the same anti-corruption role in autocratizing states as it does in democratizing contexts?

In what follows, the specific research problems and study design are briefly presented.

### 3. Research questions and study design

Corruption is studied not only from different academic disciplines and theoretical perspectives but also from a myriad of empirical approaches. While this is the case, most of corruption research is rather statistical and cross-sectional and less comparative (Johnston, 2009). There is also a long tradition for in-depth case studies that explore it. However, despite the influx of articles and scholarly publications on corruption, set-theoretic method, particularly Qualitative Comparative Analysis, is yet to be applied extensively. Only few studies on the configurations of corruption have so far been done (Stevens, 2016; Ingrams, 2018; Zimelis, 2019; Dunlop et. al, 2020). This, despite the increase of QCA applications since its introduction in 1987 by Charles Ragin.

Missing from the current scholarship is the treatment of corruption as characterized by causal complexity in set-theoretic terms (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Most of the studies thus far treat corruption symmetrically and this is where QCA can contribute further. The symmetrical treatment of corruption assumes that what causes corruption is the same mirror image of what could bring about anti-corruption. Addressing the causes of corruption is not necessarily the same that would bring about an effective anti-corruption. In set-relational terms, the conditions for the presence of corruption are and possibly different for its absence. Perhaps, this is what Zimelis (2020) pushes for when claiming that anti-corruption should also be studied and not just corruption, to wit: “we need to study specifically the elements of anti-corruption, especially those that lead to more effective anti-corruption, to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the causes and remedies to corruption” (p. 298).

The analysis of the contextual dependencies of corruption remains as an important agenda in corruption research. However, the identification and exploration of which of these conditions and their configuration leads to both the absence and/or presence of corruption remain relatively wanting. In what follows, I explain the study design from a correlational approach to corruption to a set-relational one.

The dissertation moves from a correlational (Study 1) to a set relational approach (Studies 2 and 3) to corruption. The first study serves as a springboard for the argument that civil society cannot battle corruption all alone. While internal civil society characteristics may have an influence on political corruption, external factors such as the presence of open and transparent political institutions (Alt and Lassen, 2003; Lindstedt and Naurin, 2010), strong rule of law and well-established political legal structures and democratic institutions (Zhan, 2012; Rose-Ackerman, 2007), among many others, are as crucial. Similarly, an often-neglected aspect in the

civil society literature particularly on the symbiosis between civic engagement and government effectiveness are aspects of public administration (Serageldin, 1996; Anechiarico, 1998). Thus, with the broader institutionalist framework as an overarching theory, and learning from the public administration/bureaucracy-civil society nexus, the first study raises the question: *What is the effect of civil society environment, transparency of laws and predictability of enforcement and rigorousness and impartiality of public administration on corruption?*

Given that the regression model derived in the first study offers only one formula for political corruption, the second study probes whether there are multiple pathways to corruption using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). The supposed impact of civil society on corruption is situated within a context of conditionality; that is, civil society exerts an influence only in combination with other conditions. The conditionality scholarship provides that the anti-corruption effects of civil society may be conditioned by several conditions such as media freedoms (Ahrend, 2002; Themudo, 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2016) and the presence of independent public deliberations (Newman *et al.*, 2004; Booher, 2004), among others. With the current assaults on civil society in mind, it is imperative to look at this conditionality in the context of contemporary autocratization, referred to as democratic recession (Diamond, 2015) or democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Walder and Lust, 2018) in the literature. As such, the study asks: *What are the configurations of corruption in countries in the third wave of autocratization (1994-2017)?*

The third study extends the immediately preceding question in the context of countries that did not experience substantial autocratization in the given period. Following the theoretical underpinnings of QCA, it is possible that the same conditions may produce a different outcome given the context. Similar to the second study, the last study locates the role of civil society in anti-corruption, albeit in non-autocratizing cases. As such, the question put forward is: *What are the*

*pathways to corruption in states that did not experience substantial autocratization in the third wave?*

Table 3.1 The study design

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Test</b>	<b>Scope</b>	<b>Dissertation section</b>
Correlation	Hierarchical multiple regression	200 countries and territories (1789-2017)	Chapter 4- Study 1
Set relation	Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA)	33 autocratizing states (1994-2017)	Chapter 5- Study 2
		30 non-autocratizing democracies (1994-2017)	Chapter 6- Study 3

#### 4. Qualitative comparative analysis as a method

While current research on CSO's effects have stated their results in a seemingly configurational manner albeit drawing mostly from quantitative methods, they have not formalized such as set relations and in causal complexity. Similarly, while there are cross-national studies on the causes of corruption, most of these are highly quantitative and to a much lesser extent, qualitative. I departed from these studies by utilizing qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), a comparative analytical technique that has the strengths of large-N statistical studies (variable-oriented) and small-N case study research (case-oriented) (Ragin, 1987). As a point of departure and as a means forward, through QCA, the dissertation contends that, as in the case with case-oriented methods, there is a possibility that (1) the effects of single factors may depend on the presence or absence of other conditions (*conjunctural causation*) and (2) unlike those offered by standard regression analyses, there may be multiple paths to the same outcome (*equifinality*) (Gerring, 2007). This is currently neglected in the extant literature. As such, my dissertation also intends to fill in not only a theoretical but also a methodological gap in the study of corruption.

As a configurational approach, QCA examines set relations between cases, rather than correlations between variables (Ragin, 2000). These cases then are described as to their degree of

membership in the set of cases that has a specified condition. QCA then identifies whether specified conditions or configurations of conditions (including those that are linked by the Boolean operators, AND and OR) can be considered as being consistently necessary or sufficient for a specified outcome to occur (Stevens, 2016). Since it can provide consistency scores for each condition or configurations of condition, it can also determine which of them are either individually necessary, sufficient, or both (Arugay, 2014).

A necessary cause produces the outcome but usually in conjunction with other causes. There are two interrelated measures of fit associated with QCA: consistency and coverage. Consistency “gauges the degree to which the cases sharing a given condition, thought to be necessary, agree in displaying the outcome in question”. As the consistency score of a cause approaches one (1), it becomes increasingly a necessary condition for a given outcome. High consistency scores (i.e., more than 0.75) also mean fewer *logical contradictions*, which are cases which have the same cause/s but have opposite outcomes. On the other hand, coverage is “the degree to which instances of the condition is paired with instances of the outcome” (Ragin, 2008, pp.44-45). Coverage scores are relevant only if consistency scores are high since variance in the impact of the cause or set of causes are minimized (Grofman and Schneider, 2009). Given a high consistency score, the coverage score of a given causal condition tells us to what extent it can explain the outcome from the universe of cases (Arugay, 2014).

A sufficient cause is one that is capable of producing the outcome but is not the only cause with this capability. There can also be several or multiple combinations of causes, that is, the outcome is determined by equifinality or conjunctural causation (Arugay, 2014) as argued for in this study. Since there are five hypothesized causes in the study, there can be thirty-two (32) causal

configurations<sup>1</sup>. Similar to the causal necessity test, the most important configurations are those where consistency scores are above 0.75.

Specifically, I use a fuzzy set QCA, which uses a coding scheme with a continuous scale from 0 to 1 with assigned thresholds for each value. Whether a case is a full member or non-member of a given condition or outcome is decided through calibration (assignment of fuzzy set scores) based on the researcher's specification of three thresholds: full membership (1), full exclusion (0), and crossover point of maximum ambiguity (0.5). A case that has a value that is higher than the chosen threshold for full inclusion would be assigned a score of 1 (full membership) while a case that has a value that is just below this threshold would have a score just below 1. A case with a value that is below the threshold for full exclusion from the set will be assigned a fuzzy set score of 0. A case that has a value near the chosen crossover point of maximum ambiguity will be assigned a fuzzy set score near 0.5 (Stevens, 2016). Since fuzzy set scores range from 0 to 1, the differences as to the extent of membership of a case to the given conditions and outcome are observed unlike in crisp-set QCA where membership to a set is only dichotomous (full membership and exclusion only). Fuzzy set allows the researcher therefore to incorporate finer gradation in the analysis (Ragin, 2008).

The results of the QCA will offer a complex solution (causal configuration) to corruption. Fuzzy set QCA provides an option to minimize this complex solution to a parsimonious one based on the rules of Boolean algebra (Arugay, 2014). It does so by eliminating inconsistent configurations (those whose consistency scores were below 0.75). Inconsistent causal configurations mean that while they share the same combination of causal condition, they did not lead to the outcome (Arugay, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> The formula in determining the total number of rows or causal configurations is  $2^k$  where  $k$  is the number of conditions (Ragin, Strand, and Rubinson, 2008).

## 5. Main findings

Utilizing a four-step hierarchical multiple regression, the first of the three studies tried to unpack the question related to the factors that determine the level of political corruption. Guided by the nascent literature on civil society-corruption nexus and institutionalism as an overarching theory, *civil society structure* [which includes civil society organizations (CSO) participatory environment, which measures the involvement of people in CSO; and CSO consultation, which measures whether or not major CSOs are routinely consulted in policy], *civil society environment* (which includes institutions that directly affect CSO's movement: CSO repression, which assesses the extent to which governments repress CSOs; and CSO entry and exit, a measure of the degree to which the government controls entry and exit of CSOs), *transparency of laws and predictability of enforcement*, and *rigorousness and impartiality of public administration* are expected to have a predictive capacity on political corruption. The regression models confirm the argument put forward in the paper: while civil society and its structure is a significant determinant of the level of political corruption, the introduction of civil society environment (Model 2), transparency of laws and predictability of enforcement (Model 3) and rigorousness and impartiality of public administration (Model 4) in the regression model accounted for additional variance in political corruption. However, and more importantly, of the three predictors entered after civil society structure (in Model 1), it was transparency of laws and predictability of enforcement that had the highest additional variance (21.7%), followed by rigorousness and impartiality of public administration (11.5%), and civil society environment (1.4%). These results point not only to the importance of institutional arrangements, transparency of laws and predictability of enforcement in this case, but also to the quality of public administration, in curbing corruption.

Given that the regression performed above shows the average net effects of the independent variables, a fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA) was used in the second study to look at the combinations of conditions, necessary and/or sufficient for corruption to occur. As such, an exploration of the combinatorial effects of the conditions reflects much of the configurational character of much of social life. Five relevant conditions were chosen in the analysis: *robust civil society organizations*, *extensive media freedoms*, *wide and independent public deliberations*, *high sociopolitical integration*, and *high political exclusion*. A configurational analysis of 33 episodes or cases of contemporary autocratization (1994-2017) (1) reveals that there is no necessary precondition for the presence of high perceived corruption, even the “democratic” conditions considered in the study; and (2) confirms the “conditionality” of civil society’s anti-corruption effects as it was found out that a robust civil society combines with the presence of extensive media freedoms and simultaneously the presence of wide and independent public deliberations to produce the outcome, high perceived corruption. The configuration of corruption also includes two individually sufficient conditions: the presence of high political exclusion as well as the absence of sociopolitical integration. These results are robust based on the sensitivity checks.

Finally, the last study extends the preceding investigation albeit in the context of 30 democracies that did not experience autocratization episodes in the third wave of autocratization. While it is particularly the absence of a robust civil society organization combined with other conditions that lead to the presence of high perceived corruption in autocratizing states, following the logic of QCA, it may very well be that the pathway for the presence or absence of the outcome, high perceived corruption, in non-autocratizing democracies, is different from those that experienced autocratization. The results of the analysis confirm this. Though the results for the outcome absence of high perceived corruption are striking, they are not surprising as they are in

line with the theoretical foundations of QCA: the absence of high perceived corruption in non-autocratizing states is not brought about by robust civil society organizations (both in their presence or absence, and/or in combination with other conditions) but by the presence of wide and independent public deliberations combined with the absence of high political exclusion.

In the following table, the pathways to corruption in both contexts of autocratization and non-autocratization are summarized.

Table 5.1 Pathways to corruption and its absence in the third wave of autocratization (1994-2017)

<b>Regime</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Pathway</b>
Autocratizing states	High perceived corruption	~SOCIOPOLINTEG + HIGHPOLEXCLU + ~ENGAGE*~ROBUSTCSO* ~EXTENSIVEMEDIAFREE
	Absence of high perceived corruption	-
Non-autocratizing states	High perceived corruption	~ENGAGE*~ROBUSTCSO*HIGHPOLEXCLU
	Absence of high perceived corruption	ENGAGE*~HIGHPOLEXCLU

Note: Only the intermediate solution based on the theoretical directional expectation is reported in this summary; \* denotes logical AND; + denotes logical OR; ~ denotes absence of the condition; - not possible to perform the analyses of necessity and sufficiency given that no consistency score was higher than 0.75.

## 6. Conclusions, contributions, and limitations

The dissertation's more important share in the scholarship lies in specifying and formalizing the configuration of corruption while at the same time locating the role of civil society within this configuration. As such, that civil society organizations can contribute to anti-corruption is acknowledged in the study, but the view that they are an all-powerful actor in this regard is limited. The dissertation contributes to the scholarship by not only showing the conditional effect of civil society's anti-corruption role but also the possibility that such effect is differential.

First, civil society's effects are conditioned by several factors and that it is only in combination with these factors that CSOs can exert its supposed impact. While most studies on corruption are large-N quantitative, only very few QCA studies (see Stevens, 2016; Ingrams, 2018; Zimelis, 2019; Dunlop et. al, 2020) on corruption have so far been done. In the second and third studies, through Qualitative Comparative Analysis which has been rarely applied in corruption research, the dissertation makes a novel contribution on the understanding of corruption as a conjunctural, asymmetrical, equifinal, and multifinal phenomenon.

Second, and in relation to the one of the cores of QCA, such anti-corruption effect of civil society is context dependent. Although it raises more questions than confirms specific studies or much less answers them, the third study can be a starting point to look further into this supposed differential impact of civil society. Looking at Table 5.1, the condition presence of robust civil society organizations (ROBUSTCSO) does not figure in the absence of high perceived corruption in non-autocratizing states. This signals the possibility that there are instances in which locating civil society's role may be elusive. What the third study also highlights is the view that what brings about corruption may not necessarily be the same, or a mirror image, of that which brings anti-corruption. This is consistent with what corruption scholars who caution that if a true and meaningful understanding of the complex phenomenon that is corruption is wanted, anti-corruption must also be studied not just corruption, in contexts of development and not just underdevelopment, in democracies not just in autocracies, and possibly in local and not just in national levels.

However, as with any academic work, this study has its own limitations. The first concerns the conceptualization of corruption and civil society. Perceptions of corruption were used as a measure of success/failure of anti-corruption policy. While this limits corruption research in

general, it is possible to use proxies for corruption, and specify which types of corruption are accounted for by which conditions. The same is true with the use of a rather general conception of civil society. Although such is helpful and relevant as the study is a first attempt to formalize claims of necessity and sufficiency in relation to the anti-corruption role of civil society, the definition conflates non-governmental organizations with other actors beyond the state and market. A more nuanced understanding of which types of civil society can be relevant for what specific anti-corruption will be important in locating the role of civil society. The second involves limitations in time. Although the first study involved a very long timeframe, the second only dealt with contemporary democratic reversals (from 1994 to 2017). While it was important to determine such scope condition, to include earlier autocratization episodes might also shed light into the main issue on hand and provide an understanding of the development or trajectory of civil society's effects, if any, in anti-corruption. Third, while the solution formula derived in the QCA were of high consistency and coverage, to make causal claims based on these should be taken with caution, particularly so that a further and elaborate exploration of the causal chain is needed. This, for example, can be addressed via a study of the typical or deviant cases through process tracing.

These limitations can be addressed by succeeding research as mentioned. However, there are findings in the study that signal some theoretical and practical interest. First, a nuanced understanding of what impacts CSO consultation (as part of CSO structure in Chapter 4 and part of ROBUSTCSO in Chapter 5) have in anti-corruption can be investigated, while keeping in mind the role of context. There is a stark variation for example in countries that have not experienced autocratization as to the degree in which they consult civil society organizations in matters of public policy. Similarly, in some autocratizing states where robust civil society organizations together with extensive media freedoms and freedoms of expression thrive, corruption still

pervades. A look into the conditions under these contexts may be material. Second, one may ask, given the differential impact of robust civil society organizations (in both their absence and presence), can autocratization as a process be included in the analysis? The inclusion of autocratization as a condition and a process in a QCA analysis might be fruitful. This can be a direct test of the supposed impact of democratic backsliding in (anti-corruption) policy, a scholarship that currently not only attracts but also merits attention.

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## 8. Author's relevant publications

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