

# 1. Introduction: political science and the importance of good government

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In October 2009, a senator in the United States Congress from the Republican Party, Tom A. Colburn, proposed an amendment to cut off funding from the US National Science Foundation (NSF) to research in political science. His argument was that research produced by political scientists was a waste of taxpayers' money because it is irrelevant to human well-being. Instead, Colburn argued, the NSF should redirect its funding to research in the natural sciences and engineering that would, for example, produce new biofuels or help people with severe disabilities.

Although Colburn's initiative was much criticized and eventually voted down, it has given rise to a lengthy discussion within the discipline as well as in the media about the issue of relevance. In October 2009, *The New York Times* ran an article in which several leading political scientists recognized that the discipline was experiencing increasing difficulty making a case for its relevance in broader social and political discourse. Among these were Joseph Nye, who stated: "the danger is that political science is moving in the direction of saying more and more about less and less".<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in 2010, panels at the annual meetings of both the American and the British political science associations were organized around the issue if, or to what extent, or for whom, political science should or could be relevant.<sup>2</sup> The issue also came up in journals<sup>3</sup> and reports from both the American and the European political science associations. An example is an official report from the American Political Science Association about the future of the discipline issued in 2011. In its summary, the report states:

Political science is often ill-equipped to address in a sustained way why many of the most marginal members of political communities around the world are often unable to have their needs effectively addressed by governments. . . . This limits the extent to which political science is relevant to broader social and political discourse.<sup>4</sup>

And Senator Coburn has not given up. In 2011 he issued a report arguing for the elimination of NSF funding not only to political science but to

other disciplines in the social sciences as well such as economics, sociology and business administration.<sup>5</sup> The problem of relevance is thus not confined to political science. An example is the discussion within economics after the 2008 financial crisis where, for example, a leading scholar (and Nobel Laureate) Paul Krugman stated: “most work in macroeconomics in the past 30 years has been useless at best and harmful at worst”.<sup>6</sup>

A central theme of this book is to address this issue about the relevance of political science by showing that in all societies the quality of government institutions is of the utmost importance for the well-being of its citizens. Since its start in 2004, The Quality of Government (QoG) Institute at the University of Gothenburg, which is the organizational base for the research presented in this volume, has focused on precisely this issue.<sup>7</sup> Three factors differentiate the research presented in this volume from most of what our colleagues in the discipline are doing, and make it relevant for human well-being.

First, unlike most empirical political scientists, we do not shy away from analyzing and taking a stand towards the normative issues in our field of research. Instead, we present a normative political theory of what should count as “good government”, “quality of government”, or for that matter, a “good society”. Second, unlike most work in political theory or political philosophy that has long discussed these normative issues, we do not balk from empirical research. On the contrary, we argue that not only can concepts such as “good government” and “quality of government” be defined but they can also be operationalized and measured. Third, we show that such measures can be theoretically and empirically related to two other types of variables. One type can explain the huge variation in *good government* that, according to the measures we use, exists between countries (or groups of countries). This is research that tries to explain the “how you get it” question. The research sets out to answer the following question which is, to put it mildly, of some relevance: if a society wants to increase the quality of its public authorities, how can this be done?

The other type of variables we use are measures of various aspects of human well-being such as population, health, subjective well-being, access to safe water and economic prosperity. These are analyzes that aim to explain the “what you get” question. If a country (or a region), has a high (or low) *quality of government*, what does this mean for the well-being of its population? As we show, it means a lot. Needless to say, living in a society in which infant mortality is low, where people are reasonably satisfied with their lives, where access to safe water is not a problem and that is economically prosperous are issues that are relevant for most people. The

research that is presented in this volume shows that for these (and several other) measures of human well-being, the variables that are central in political science are profoundly relevant.

Our answer to Colburn's initiative to close down research in political science is the following. If we were to summarize the causes behind the *opposite* to human well-being today on a global scale, our interpretation of the results of our research is as follows. Factors such as high infant mortality, early death and illnesses, lack of access to safe water, unhappiness and poverty are not caused by a lack of technical equipment, effective medicines or other types of knowledge that comes out of the natural or engineering science. Instead, it is caused by the fact that a majority of the world's population have to live in societies that are dominated by dysfunctional government institutions. How to address these problems calls for more, not less, research in political science.

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

A rather obvious disposition of this book is to start with chapters dealing with what quality of government (QoG) is, followed by contributions analyzing how to get QoG and ending with studies of what QoG eventually gives you. That is, we begin with what it is, follow up by how to get it and finish with what you get.

### Part I What It Is

Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell's "Defining and measuring quality of government" (Chapter 2) starts off the "What it is" part of the book. They introduce the concept of quality of government and its cousins "good governance" and "state capacity", and find a serious lack of conceptual precision in the scholarly literature. Arguments for the preferred term "quality of government" are presented as well as why it should be defined as government having *impartial* institutions. When exercising public power, the basic norm should be impartiality. In implementing laws and policies, government officials should not take into consideration anything about the citizen or case that is not stipulated beforehand in the policy or the law. The theoretical reasoning is then followed up by a brief presentation of how The QoG Institute has tried to empirically measure impartiality across some 90 countries worldwide. The authors use a web-based expert survey in which mainly public administration researchers are asked to grade and determine bureaucratic recruitment and decision making in countries of their choosing. The results prove

to be quite successful. Impartiality can be measured comparatively in a meaningful way.

In Carl Dahlström, Victor Lapuente and Jan Teorell's "Public administration around the world" (Chapter 3), The QoG Institute's empirical web-based measurements of government impartiality are fleshed out in more detail and cross-source validated and tested for respondent perception biases. However, based on the results, the authors also make an original contribution to research on bureaucratic decision making. Factor analysis of the answers to the survey, reveals two dominating dimensions: one distinguishing between professional versus politicized bureaucracies and the other contrasting public-like more closed to private-like more open bureaucracies. Both dimensions are applicable in Western democracies and post-communist countries, while only the first professional-politicized dimension is relevant in other parts of the world such as Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Control of corruption is an essential ingredient of QoG – not a defining component, but a central prerequisite. In "Need or greed corruption?" (Chapter 4), Monika Bauhr problematizes different forms of corruption and makes a distinction between need and greed corruption. Need corruption happens when services citizens are entitled to are provided only after paying a bribe. Greed corruption, on the other hand, occurs when the bribe is used to gain personal advantages to which citizens are not entitled. Need corruption typically builds on coercion; greed corruption on collusion for mutual benefits. As a consequence, greed corruption is less visible and more hidden. Bauhr also begins to study the two forms of corruption empirically, using comparative data from the World Values Survey and the QoG Dataset as well as data from recent Swedish surveys. One striking finding is that the unobtrusiveness of greed corruption makes it possible for it to coexist with reasonably high societal trust in low-need corruption contexts. She also points to several important implications of this distinction for understanding the effectiveness of anti-corruption policy.

The Weberian notion of public employee impartiality as a central principle of bureaucratic government needs to be elaborated and complemented in order to be applicable in modern-day states with large branches of welfare undertakings. That is the argument put forward by Helena Olofsdotter Stensöta in "Impartiality and the need for a public ethics of care" (Chapter 5). Stensöta's conceptual analysis and review of the scholarly literature lead to the conclusion that impartiality is insufficient for proper implementations. It needs to be supplemented by a public ethics of care (PEC). PEC views people as interdependent; it highlights sensitivity to context in politics as well as when it comes to implementation, and it elevates the importance of responsiveness.

## Part II How to get it

This part contains eight chapters that all deal with the problem of how to explain the occurrence and level of QoG around the world. Thus, QoG is the dependent variable in the chapters and a whole host of explanatory factors are introduced and in many cases also applied in empirical analyses.

Part II starts with a chapter that asks the contentious question – what type of political regime produces a better quality of government? Is it representative democracies, single-party systems, monarchies, military dictatorships or maybe ad hoc personalistic regimes? The somewhat provoking question is whether democracies always “work better” than autocracies when it comes to QoG. In “In democracy we trust, but how much?” (Chapter 6), Nicholas Charron and Victor Lapuente conclude, after an extensive literature review as well as independent empirical tests of their own, is rather nuanced. There is a wide variation in QoG at either end of the autocratic–democratic dimension, while QoG tends to be relatively poor for states in the “grey zone” in the middle of the spectrum. Regime type has a J-shaped relationship with QoG, which tends to be highest among the more advanced democracies – but it is not lowest among the most authoritarian dictatorships. It is among transitional regimes between authoritarian and democratic states that we find the most corrupt and non-qualitative governmental systems.

Mathias Färdigh, Emma Andersson and Henrik Oscarsson in “Press freedom and corruption” (Chapter 7) re-examine one of the most heralded “truths” in the discussion on democracy and QoG, namely that press freedom is essential. They focus on control of corruption as an operational variable of QoG, and bring new and improved comparative data to the analysis. A novel estimation technique is applied to multiple indicators of press freedom as well as to different measures of corruption control. The results confirm previous conclusions. The relationship between press freedom and control of corruption remains – the freer the press, the cleaner the government. However, press freedom is most important in fighting corruption in established democracies. Among emerging democracies, freedom of the press is less important, and other modern institutions such as a well-functioning legal system are of greater, significance.

Carl Dahlström and Victor Lapuente in “Weberian bureaucracy and corruption prevention” (Chapter 8), also study control of corruption but now the focus is on the organization of public administration as the explaining factor. It has been suggested that corruption could be curbed by fostering a traditional Weberian bureaucracy guaranteeing lifelong careers, and formalized recruitment alongside strong legal protection for

civil servants. Based on comparative empirical tests involving close to 100 countries, Dahlström and Lapuente demonstrate that these suggestions do not work. They are mere myths of corruption prevention. Instead, the authors highlight the relative success of an alternative more open way of organizing public administration where politicians act in cooperation with unelected bureaucrats in making policy decisions. High hopes should not be put on anti-corruption reforms that rely on separating the activities of politicians and bureaucrats.

Corruption and bad governance is not only a problem for the afflicted countries. It is also an international problem. Consequently, many international organizations have addressed the problem of how to best fight corruption and create high-quality government. However, norm diffusion and policy implementation have not been very successful. In “Do international organizations promote quality of government?” (Chapter 9), Monika Bauhr and Naghmeh Nasiritousi note that most studies evaluating the effects of international anti-corruption programs have concentrated on the recipient end of the targeted action, that is mostly on emerging democracies and their lack of political will and underdeveloped institutions. Bauhr and Nasiritousi turn their attention to the other end of the spectrum and look at hampering factors that are internal to the international organizations’ own efforts. Based on the literature and selected case studies they identify six factors that make international organizations less effective in promoting good government in targeted countries: imprecise data, market pressures, conflicting policy advice, no mainstreaming of norms, incomplete internalization norms among member states, and a low priority for QoG issues.

Ruling elites play a crucial role in controlling or promoting corruption. Anna Persson and Martin Sjöstedt start off their analysis in “State legitimacy and the corruptibility of leaders” (Chapter 10), by stating that no study of corruption can overlook the actions of leaders. Corrupt behavior of political elites will be copied by other actors further down the hierarchy. The “fish rots from the head down” as the Germans say. Persson and Sjöstedt’s contribution focuses on what motivates leaders. Why do some eat in office and others not? Their analysis is primarily theoretical and based on an extensive review of the literature. The main conclusion is that various forms and degrees of state legitimacy shape and constrain incentives of leaders. Political elites in states lacking legitimacy have greater opportunities and incentives to engage in corrupt practices.

In “Legislators and variation in quality of government” (Chapter 11), Staffan I. Lindberg makes the important point that bad QoG not only arises from dysfunctions on the bureaucratic implementation side of politics. It can also grow out of electoral mechanisms on the input

side. Lindberg brings data from an electoral candidate survey in Ghana in order to study to what extent non-impartial behaviors such as constituency services and the provision of clientelistic goods are part of the electoral process and how it affects voters' actions. His finding is that MPs differ in how much they engage in these kinds of behaviors and that voters have started to demand greater impartiality from candidates. An increased value is put on impartially provided goods. But clientelistic politics and selective "gifts" are still very much part of Ghanaian elections, making goods provision less impartial. Elections matter for good government.

A very visible finding in worldwide research on corruption is that women tend to be less involved in corrupt behavior than men. Also, countries with a larger number of elected female politicians have on average lower levels of corruption than countries with fewer women active in legislative politics. Gender matters. In "Why women are less corrupt than men" (Chapter 12), Lena Wängnerud reviews previous studies and concludes that the field so far has been too occupied by monolithic theories trying to explain the gender difference on a very general level. Scholars have also been pre occupied in constructing gender-neutral explanations, trying to explain gender differences by things that are not gender based. Wängnerud argues for more case studies and more subnational studies to flesh out concrete substance and make it possible to discern potential causal mechanisms. At the end of the chapter a new "rationality perspective" is introduced as a vehicle for analyzing gender differences in the area of corruption. The hypothesis is that women more often than men – when calculating costs and benefits – actively choose to refrain from corrupt behavior. Wängnerud uses data from a Mexican corruption study involving subnational regional results to illustrate her reasoning.

Very often corruption is theoretically treated as a principal–agent problem. More active and vigilant principals (=citizens), more stringent law enforcement as well as more morally decent agents (=elites) help to alleviate corruption. This might be true for non-systemic corruption. However, for systemic corruption when "everybody" is involved – when bribing is the expected and necessary behavior to get things done – we are dealing with an informal institution and the principal–agent theory becomes less relevant. In such cases argue Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein and Jan Teorell in "Rethinking the nature of the grabbing hand" (Chapter 13), corruption is transformed into a collective action problem. Corruption in such systems becomes sticky because everybody expects everybody else to behave corruptly. Nobody wants to be the only one paying taxes. Perceptions and beliefs become central. Societies get locked

into social traps. The authors substantiate their arguments aided by data from two interview studies in Kenya and Uganda – two countries characterized by systemic corruption.

### Part III What You Get

Part III contains only three chapters. But to compensate for that the first of them, “Part of the solution” (Chapter 14) by Sören Holmberg, Bo Rothstein and Naghmeh Nasiritousi, is very broad with overviews of the relationship of QoG with a wide variety of phenomena such as democracy, economic growth, corruption and the rule of law. The literature review is supplemented by illustrative empirical proofs taken from The Quality of Government Dataset. The overall message is that QoG matters, but that a “one-size-fits-all” solution is probably not the way forward.

According to World Health Organization estimates, more than one billion people lack access to safe water, and as a consequence, 80 percent of all illnesses in developing countries are the result of waterborne diseases, claiming the lives of 1.8 million children every year. A conservative estimate is that 12,000 people die every day from water- and sanitation-related illnesses. Based on an empirical analysis involving some 190 countries, Sören Holmberg and Bo Rothstein’s “Access to safe water” (Chapter 15) shows that QoG has an independent effect on access to safe water. Quality of water cannot be improved only with the help of money, but also by better QoG. And this is especially true in poorer countries.

Finally, in “Happiness” (Chapter 16), Marcus Samanni and Sören Holmberg address an idea that might seem strange to many economists. The hypothesis is that government could be part of the solution instead of being part of the problem. The hypothesis is tested in the area of human happiness. The results are unequivocal – big government may be in contention, but good government is making people feel better. Effective government, the rule of law, bureaucratic impartiality and control of corruption make people happy and satisfied with their lives. Quality of government matters. It makes people happy.

## NOTES

1. Patricia Cohen, “Field Study. Just how relevant is political science”, *The New York Times*, October 20, 2009. See also David Glenn, “Senator proposes and end to federal support for political science”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 7, 2009.
2. Scott Jaschick, “Should political science be relevant?”, *Inside Higher Education*, September 7, 2010.
3. See the debate in *European Political Science*, **10** (3), 2011.



4. *Political Science in the 21st Century*, American Political Science Association, October 2011, p. 1.
5. “APSA responds to Senator Coburn’s Report on NSF Funding”, American Political Science Association ([www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org)).
6. “Dismal Science. Paul Krugman’s London Lectures”, *The Economist*, June 11, 2009.
7. For more information about The QoG Institute, see [www.qog.pol.gu.se](http://www.qog.pol.gu.se).

