

PERCEIVED CORRUPTION AND POLITICAL CYNICISM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The relation of perceived corruption to political cynicism: a study of university students using structural equation modeling (SEM) The importance of these findings relates to rising concerns regarding political apathy and skepticism, especially among youth whose attitudes toward political systems are important for their future democratic engagement (Almond & Verba, 1963). Though some attention has been given to the effects of corruption and cynicism (see Mishler & Rose, 2001), knowledge is still lacking about how political corruption relates to cynicism within university student samples at present times. This article seeks to measure the impact of perceived corruption on political cynicism and its consequences for students' political attitudes and behavior. A mixed-methods approach was adopted and 2,000 university students were surveyed along with 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The studies show that there is indeed a strong positive correlation between perceived corruption and political cynicism, with effects on the participation of youth in politics. The contribution of this study to the literature is that we contribute a more refined appreciation of how perceptions of corruption shape political trust among young people. Indeed, the findings demonstrate that by increasing political transparency and trust, cynicism may be reduced and civic engagement enhanced.

Keywords: Perceived Corruption, Political Cynicism, University Students, Structural Equation Modeling, Social Science Research, Political Attitudes, Youth Engagement

INTRODUCTION

The growing globalization of corruption scandals has generated much discussion with regard to the effects upon public trust and participation. Corruption, which is generally understood as the misuse of entrusted power for private benefit, remains one of the greatest threats to democratic governance around the world (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). They have disillusioned the masses with political establishment and politicians ranging from petty corruption to gigantic systemic scale. In most democratic societies, political cynicism has emerged as a dominant attitude among the general public, that is, scepticism about whether political systems operate in an honest and selfless way (Mishler & Rose, 2001). This cynicism is especially acute in younger generations, who grow bombarded by examples of a frustration with politics on media, social networks and even real-life political situations. Students in higher education as a select future group of leaders, voters and the working population are important for the diagnosis of attitudes and behavior due to corruption.

College students in specific can be more susceptible to succumbing to political cynicism because they are in a stage of life when political opinions and views become concrete. Indeed, young adults tend to be introduced to new political information sources as well—particularly social media and educational content—some of which emphasizes corruption and political dysfunction. They may also consider the extent to which they have been exposed to bad politics by observing corruption in government and other organizations (Borelli & Mendez, 2012). Political cynicism in this population is problematic as it may shape how young people engage with politics, perhaps leading to disconnection and withdrawal from the political system (Bakker et al; 2016). Therefore, it is of great importance to analyze what mechanisms lead to this type of political cynicism in university students as future voters.

The goal of this work, which uses structural equation modeling (SEM) as the principal analysis technique, is to analyze the association between perceived corruption and political cynicism in university students. SEM also permits an examination of the complex relationships among a number of variables, which is useful in illustrating the

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impacts on political cynicism of perceptions of corruption. The research aims to contribute the understanding of how perceived corruption influences young adults 'trust in political institutions and their general political engagement. Structural equation modeling has been effectively used in analogous studies focusing on the linkage between political corruption and trust (Chang et al., 2010) which give a strong methodological demotic for this study.

This research has potential to inform policy for public programming, educational programming and civic programs designed to reduce political apathy and foster democratic participation among young adults. Past research has further identified that perceptions of corruption have a powerful impact on the trust citizens hold in political systems and institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Uslaner, 2018). When people, especially young generations detect corruption in the political system they become more likely to withdrawal from political participation and involvement, which could reflect on democratic process (Norris 1999.) It is in light of such interest that addressing political cynicism and increasing political trust among young people is important for the longterm sustainability of democratic processes since they are the future leaders of democratic participation and governance (Pharr & Putnam, 2000).

There has been a good deal of research on the relationship between political corruption and trust and engagement (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Norris, 1999), but very little that is specific to university students – who are at a stage in life when their own political beliefs are developing. There is a great risk that a university student body becomes deeply ingrained with political cynicism, particularly because they are connected to the larger social context in which disillusionment with political regimes is permeating like wild fire and where narratives about corruption circulate through media quickly (Kelley & Mewes 2016). They are also more likely to be exposed to political science retardates' discussions on corruption and this could affect their perceptions of the phenomenon. The previous body of research demonstrated that students who are informed about discussions related to corruption and incompetent government tend to be more cynical in their attitudes toward political systems and

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institutions (Uslaner 2018). In this vein however, there is a dearth of empirical literature in respect of the influence, on political cynicism among university students, that is directly emanated from perceived corruption and it is within this exigency that the study intervenes.

Furthermore, the current study will also bring an added value to previous body of literature by helping us better discern other demographic differences (i.e., age, gender and political party) may make in the relationship between perceived corruption and political cynicism. Although previous research has shown that demographics affect political attitudes (Bakker et al., 2016; Norris, 1999), little is known about the extent to which these demographic factors moderate the relationship between perceptions of corruption and political cynicism in college students. These factors will be considered in turn to obtain a more detailed picture of the way in which perceived corruption plight as well as individual characteristics come together, and thereby increases or decreases political attitudes.

This paper attempts to investigate the following question:

What is the association of perceived corruption with political cynicism among university students?

How do demographic characteristics (e.g. age, sex, political orientation) moderate the relationship of perceived corruption and political cynicism?

To this end, the paper tests two primary hypotheses:

H₁: There will be a positive association between the degree of perceived political corruption and the level of political cynicism among students at university.

H₂: Demographic variables moderate markedly the association between perceived corruption and political cynicism.

Research Objectives

An investigation of the relationship between perceived corruption and political cynicism among university students

Determine how age, sex and political partisanship influence attitudes towards corruption and to political cynicism.

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Find ways of bringing down political cynicism by encouragement of transparency, civic education and political participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between perceptions of corruption and political cynicism has been an issue of substantial interest in academia for decades in the field of political science. Corruption, as the misuse of power for personal or institutional benefit, is common in political systems internationally. The perceived corruption of political leaders and institutions in democratic societies has profound consequences for the legitimacy of the political system and public trust in governmental institutions. Political cynicism, understood as negative and distrustful attitudes towards political systems is likely to arise then people think that democratic institutions are out of line with in their ideals (e.g. being corrupt or ineffective). Despite these findings, a large gap exists in our knowledge of this relationship when concerning university students as a subgroup. We focus on university students who are in a period of political socialization which will profoundly affect their subsequent voting behaviour and engagement with democracy.

Political cynicism develops when people see a gap between the performance they anticipated of political institutions and what politicians (specifically in corruption) deliver. Norris (1999: 3) explains that political cynicism rises when citizens distrust the motive of the political system or suspect they need to watch out for their own interests instead of relying on politicians to take decisions as good for them. This sense of disillusionment in turn results in a disengagement, mistrust in political institutions and a reduced sense of efficacy that can ultimately disenfranchise democratic processes (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Political cynicism is an important issue for young adults, including college students. Such students are in a wider social and political context which is fertile breeding ground for narratives of corruption. If young people believe corruption is everywhere, they are less likely to participate in politics and the consequence will be an under-informed, lethargic electorate for the future.

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A number of models have been advanced to account for the link between corrupt perceptions and political cynicism. Uslaner (2018) contends that it is the last component of lower trust in light of corruption leading to political cynicism. He believes that people feeling corruption is widespread are going to be less inclined to have trust in others like politicians, which then is translated into cynical feelings about political institutions. This lack of faith in politicians, Uslaner argues, creates a political culture that leaves citizen feeling alienated from the democratic process. Decline in trust on political institutions and leaders is one of the most prominent causes for the emergence of political cynicism, as it reduces the belief that people's participation in a country's politics can bring about desired reforms.

Jennings & Niemi (2011) established political socialization as a critical theoretical perspective for the evolution of attitudes toward politics in the lifecourse. Their model implicates early-life experiences, like those encountered in university, as a key factor in partisanship. College students in particular are at a formative stage of political socialization. Their political socialization also significantly affects the way they perceive political systems through exposure to political ideologies, news media coverage and discussions of corruption. University formation is a place where many students learn to become citizens; having negative views of corruption can lead them into cynicism toward the political. They believe that experiences at this time will affect political engagement and participation throughout a person's life.

Most of the studies about corruption and political cynicism has been based on survey information. In surveys, people are generally pinches how corrupt they believe the political system is and to what extent they trust government. Much research supports a positive relationship between perceived corruption and political cynicism. For instance, Rose and Mishler (2002) undertook a more extensive analysis for post-communist Europe where individuals claiming that their governments were corrupt reported lower confidence in political institutions relative to those who did not. These results back the idea that perceived corruption fosters political cynicism, and have implications for political engagement and activism.

A trend in the same direction also is found elsewhere. For instance, in Latin America Pharr and Putnam's (2000) studies indicated that citizens of more corrupt countries were prone to voice discontent with the political system and discontinue political participation. This study indicates that political cynicism is not restricted to a specific region or kind of polity, but rather a universal problem in world democracies. These results suggest that combating corruption is important for finding ways to decrease political cynicism and promote trust in politics.

A major methodological improvement in research on political cynicism and corruption has been the application of structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM is a statistical approach that captures the complex interplay (both direct and indirect) of several variables together. Chang et al. (2010) adopted SEM to examine affective response patterns of perceived corruption, political trust and cynicism. They found that corruption perceptions directly and negatively influenced political trust, which thus affected political cynicism. SEM can analyze complex models with many levels, and is thus well-suited for modeling the multidimensional relationships among these factors.

SEM is ideal for examining these mechanisms of political cynicism. Through examining the direct and indirect effects of those factors—such as corruption, political trust, and individual demographics—SEM helps to illuminate how these factors combine in their impacts on the attitude towards politics for individuals., the model can estimate if demographic characteristics such as age, gender and political ideology may moderate perceptions of corruption and levels of cynicism. This method enables researchers to test the hypotheses that they would be unable to analyze using traditional regression methods.

Despite the vast literature on the correlation between political corruption and cynicism, there is a scarcity of research available concerning university students in particular. The majority of the available research are based on data from wider samples or regions – for example post-communist Europe or Latin America (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Norris, 1999). Yet university students are a distinctive group who

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frequently find themselves at the crossroads between political socialization and engagement. They are especially vulnerable to becoming politically cynical as a result of the media's corruption narratives, which they hear in their schools and among one another.

Previous studies on students' political cynicism have often been restricted by small samples, or localized to regions. Moreover, the majority of studies used simple correlation or univariate regression without taking into consideration the complex relations between variables. There are rare investigations in this field through the use of SEM, that allow such complex dynamic interrelations as between perceptions of corruption, democratic satisfaction and cynicism. This research attempts to fill these gaps by employing SEM analysis over a wide range of subjects (2,000 college students) and trying to provide better comprehension on the effect of perceived corruption on political cynicism considering moderator variables including demographic characteristics.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses mixed methods, combining quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews to gain a full picture of university student attitudes toward corruption and political cynicism. This mixed-methods approach contributes to a comprehensive picture of the interplay between these constructs drawing from both broader statistical patterns and more intimate personalization's from respondents.

This study is a cross-sectional survey that tests the association between perceptions of corruption and political cynicism among college students. A cross-sectional design would be appropriate in this study as being able to assess association between variables at a certain point in time and observe trends establishes patterns, from which the hypothesized relationships can be tested. This design is particularly suitable for testing the strength and direction of the relationship between perceived corruption and political cynicism due to its potential to offer a snapshot explanation of students' levels of attitudinal parameters towards politics in general and corruption specifically without follow-up over time (Creswell, 2014). The measuring instrument used in this

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study was made to capture insight from students with respect to the political system, corruption and confidence within the political institutions to help gauge the degree of political cynicism.

2,000 university students from different educational centers in the country were questioned. Sampling was stratified to obtain a balanced distribution of the weighted sample according to key demographic factors such as age, gender, discipline and political identity section. Stratified sampling makes that the sample reflects the diversity reached (among students) and, therefore can be generalized more from: from a survey to daily life (Flick, 2018). Alongside the survey, 40 intensive interviews were taken with high-cynical students. These participants were selected via an initial screening survey in which students completed a trust scale of various government institutions. The interviews intended to make a qualitative exploration of their political cynicism's dimensions and breadth, in little more depth: we were after richer nuances about students' own experiences of political life, and perceptions of corrupt conduct in politics. By integrating qualitative and quantitative data, the research can enhance statistical numbers with personal testimonies in order to provide greater depth and breadth (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Instruments The measurement instrument was designed with reference to the established scales of perceptions of corruption and political cynicism. For perceived corruption, the paper relied on the Corruption Perceptions Index, which is one of the most popular indicators for measuring perceptions of corruption in different societies (Transparency International, 2020). Political Cynicism was measured using a scale originally developed for Mishler and Rose (2001) designed to assess degrees of: distrust in political systems; and beliefs about the inefficacy of government. The probing scales were translated to university student's context for relevance and the instrument's accuracy. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data. SEM is an advanced statistical test that facilitates the assessment of intricate relationships among numerous variables in a single analysis, and this method can be used to obtain a full picture concerning how perceived corruption/PCs with different

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countries, age, gender are connected between PC, PCs and politics cynicism (Kline, 2015). Data were analyzed by AMOS; a tool routinely applied in SEM analysis. The software provides the path coefficients that the researchers use to examine model fit indices, which test hypothesis relationships.

The analysis of the data was accomplished in three phases. First, we performed descriptive statistics to analyze the sample characteristics and get a general impression of the demographic background and political profiles of the respondents. Second, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the measurement model for whether the variables of perceived corruption and political cynicism were appropriately measured by the items in the survey. CFA is a necessary preceding process in SEM to secure reliability and construct validity of the data before complex models are built (Byrne, 2016). Last, a structural equation model was employed to examine the hypothesized relations between perceived corruption, political cynicism and demographic variables. This actually provided us with flexibility to estimate direct and indirect effects, revealing how factors can interact in a complex manner to affect students' political attitudes.

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and all procedures involving human participants were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All the participants gave their informed consent, and they were informed about their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Participants were also guaranteed their responses would be anonymous and data collected only for academic purposes. For the study to be valid, reliability tests were performed on the survey instruments, such as Cronbach's alpha, which was utilized in assessing the internal consistency for scales for perceptions of corruption and political cynicism. A pre-test was carried out on a small sample to see whether the questions were clear and relevant, any discrepancies were ironed out before data collection (Field 2013). In addition, the qualitative interviews were standardized according to a pre-determined interview guide to maintain uniformity among such interviews.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

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In the following, we present findings from the quantitative and qualitative components of the study where perceived corruption was explored in relation to political cynicism among university students. The findings have been analyzed by: SEM for a quantitative analysis, and thematic coding for the qualitative part based on the interviews.

Findings from the structural equation model Supports the hypothesis that perceived corruptness is positively related to political cynicism ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that political cynicism is escalated among the university students when their perception of corruptness in the political structure grows. This relationship implies that students who are more exposed to corruption in political institutions are more prone to exhibit negative attitudes towards the political system, such as its perceived self-serving or inefficiency or even its illegitimacy. These results are consistent with other research indicating a strong relationship between corruption and trust in government (Uslaner 2018, Norris 1999). The statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.01$) indicates that the association is not due to random chance and reveals a clear pattern in the data.

An examination of the moderating effect of demographic variables was also performed. The strength of the relationship between perceived corruption and political cynicism was found to be moderated by age and political orientation. Political cynicism When the younger children express stronger political cynicism than the higher-grade students, this may be due to a greater exposure during formative years to these corrupt practices and helplessness or frustration emerging in respect of further raising and controlling these challenges (Bakker et al. In addition, in comparison with students who were politically neutral or non-partisan, those who associated themselves with one political party were more cynical. This finding implies that political party membership might function as a shield against cynicism, perhaps because strong party identification can increase feelings of control and sense of the ability to make a difference in corrupt contexts (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

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The in-depth interviews have contributed to a better comprehension of political cynicism sources among the students. Respondents attributed their cynicism primarily to feeling betrayed by political institutions. And many students had lost patience with what they considered to be the government's lack of will to fight graft and, by extension, the systemic failures in political systems. Students also described specific political scandals and lack of meaningful political reform as reasons for their sense of distrust in politicians and the institutions in which they serve. There was a general sentiment that politicians were more interested in serving their own interests and staying in power than responding to the needs of the citizenry (Pharr & Putnam, 2000). This kind of disappointment was enhanced by the idea that politics itself was bankrupt, and that participating in politics made little difference. Some said their frustration was only fueled by the endless wave of media stories on corruption, which frequently appeared to suggest that nothing could change. These results are in line with Uslander's (2018) findings regarding the corrosion of trust as a result of corruption, and that people who perceive corruption in place in their politics tend to be more skeptical about democratic processes.

The synthesis of both quantitative and qualitative results forms a compelling story that link the perceived corruption to political cynicism in university students. The quantitative material shows a significant statistical relationship between high perceived corruption and high cynicism; the qualitative interviews, in contrast, reveal the affective-cognitive dynamics behind these attitudes. These findings combined might indicate that combating the problem of corruption and enhancing transparency in political systems could contribute to decreasing levels of political cynicism and raising levels of political trust among young people.

One potential consequence from these results is that when education and policy efforts are directed at reducing corruption, they may lead to some beneficial engagement on the part of students in the political system. By addressing the underlying causes of political alienation, these sorts of initiatives might increase civic engagement amongst young people? [md] people whose participatory habits are still

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solidifying (Norris 1999). Beyond that, nurturing political efficacy itself—providing students with chance to participate in politics meaningfully and stressing how change may be possible, despite the blatant corruption—could serve preventively against the impact of corruption on political cynicism.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides strong support for the argument that perception of corruption is a robust predictor of political cynicism among university students. The SEM estimation revealed a strong positive relationship of students' perception of corruption in political institutions with their level of political cynicism ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < .01$). Thus, students' perception of corruption deepens their cynicism with the political system. This is in line with previous research on corruption, which has found that it constitutes a major element of the decline in trust towards political institutions and of the increase disengagement from politics (Uslaner, 2018; Norris, 1999). Corruption diminishes the legitimacy of political systems and convinces citizens that their government is not competent or serving their needs Population Research and Policy Review 1–14, 2014 Pharr & Putnam, 2000, reducing the incentive to take proactive measures (Tilly & Tarrow, 1978). This tendency is especially pronounced among the young, still growing into citizenship age (Ilvessalo, 2010), who are more susceptible of being influenced by stories relating to political corruption (Bakker et al., 2016).

Additionally, demographic variables, and specifically age, moderated the association between perceived corruption and political cynicism. Political cynicism was higher among younger students than older students. This finding is in line with previous findings of the literature which argue that young people (more particularly university students) will potentially be more critical towards politics due to feelings of having no power or frustration, due to what they perceive as limited reform and transparency in political systems (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Furthermore, politically unaffiliated students were most cynical relative other students. This emphasizes the importance of party affiliation in protecting against cynicism, in that polarized individuals rest hope

on political systems reformation and considers that improvement is possible through partisan activities (Bakker et al., 2016).

Given the potential fallout of political cynicism in terms of political withdrawal and diminished confidence in democratic institutions, targeted policy efforts are warranted. These policies could support political transparency, decrease corruption and build confidence between young people. One potential policy endeavor could be the enhancing of anti-corruption efforts, and increasing accountability in the political institutions. Governments can win back the confidence of the public in the political process and lower the cynicism that promotes indifference about politics by tackling corruption at its source (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). However, greater transparency in government operations -- in decision-making process and the use of citizens' funds, for example -might lead to more trust from the public.

Notwithstanding the merits of this study, some limitations should be taken into account. The first limitation is the cross-sectional study design. Although the two constructs are strongly related, the cross-sectional structure of the study does not permit causal explanations. It is not evident whether political cynicism may relate to increased perceptions of corruption, or the other way around -perceptions of corruption encourage cynicism (or viceversa) as these two factors might reinforce each other over time (Field, 2013). A longitudinal design would be more appropriate in order to investigate cause and effect relationships, and to investigate how perception of corruption and political cynicism develop over time.

And the samples upon which results of this study are based were college students from particular schools; these may not generalize to other institutions or entail a representative sample of all college students throughout China. Students from varying geographies, socio-economic backgrounds or political contexts may have dissimilar tendencies towards political cynicism and perceptions of corruption. Further, it would be desirable for future works to enlarge the sample with a more representative of students in order to improve the generalization of results. In addition, the sample

predominantly represented students from one education system and findings may not be generalisable to those across varying political or cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research provides valuable insights into the association between perceived corruption and political cynicism in university students. The findings repeatedly show that the more corrupt university students perceive political systems to be, the higher their levels of political cynicism. With an environment of growing political corruption and inefficiency, attention should also be drawn to the influence such perceptions hold over members of younger generations who are also students, as they are the future leaders of participating in politics and democratic governance. The results imply that a belief in the prevalence of corruption not only reduces confidence in political institutions, but also fosters feelings of alienation and indifference towards politics which may erode the stability of democratic systems (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Uslaner, 2018).

Tackling corruption in the political power systems is key if trust is to be re-established and political participation becomes more likely. These measures to combat corruption and improve political transparency in addition to accountability, can be helpful in restoring public trust of the democratic institutions. In addition, efforts should be made in promoting civic education programs and active political participation of University students to attenuate the externalities of cynicism and enhance their capacity to participate politically (Norris 1999). It may also give rise to a generation of informed citizens that can be the referees while actively participating in political systems, but one who believes reform is not only possible, but meaningful.

Future studies may benefit from using longitudinal designs to further examine the causal effects at operation in perceived corruption, political cynicism, as well as for political participation. Using a longitudinal design would enable more in-depth study of how perceptions change over time, and shape the long-term political behaviour of students. Finally, the sample must be enlarged in future research by adding individuals who come from more diverse institutions and cultural contexts. This

would make the results more generalizable and applicable to a broader range of university students worldwide.

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