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Public Perceptions of Corruption in East Asia: A Comparative Study of Japan, Singapore, and South Korea

Isaiah Nielsen

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes perceptions of corruption through comparative case studies of South Korea, Japan, and Singapore. It looks to political party affiliation and socioeconomic status for effects on an individual's perception of corruption. It hypothesizes that individuals more affiliated with the ruling party will perceive the government as less corrupt and individuals that are less affiliated will perceive it as more. Socioeconomic status is split into income, social status, and education variables. Individuals with a lower income and status will perceive the government as more corrupt, while overall higher status and income individuals will perceive it as less. On the other hand, education is predicted to have the opposite: the more educated will perceive more corruption than the less educated. This research found that the hypotheses are not all supported, but the statistical results from the South Korea case are much stronger than in Singapore and Japan. The results and analysis can be beneficial to the future study of perceptions of corruption.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption has been a salient topic of political science research for decades. One important aspect of corruption research is the problem of *perception*. Perception of the level of government corruption will vary from one individual to another. What then are the factors that affect varying levels of perceived corruption? This research focuses on two factors that affect an individual's perception of corruption – political party affiliation and socioeconomic standing (income, social status, and education). This research answers the following question: To what extent does political party affiliation (partisanship) and socioeconomic standing (income, social status, and education) affect an individual's perception of corruption? The research uses South Korea, Japan, and Singapore as case studies to study this question.

This research chose individuals in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore as the unit of analysis. These countries were chosen for following reasons: they are all considered democratic¹, have similar Confucian influence, share regional proximity, have historical connections, and possess quickly emerging and strong economies. Most importantly, corruption has been accepted as rampant in this region, but corruption perceptions research remains scarce.

This research has four main hypotheses: 1) Individuals affiliated with the ruling party are less likely to perceive corruption. Conversely, individuals less affiliated with the ruling party are more likely to perceive corruption. Individuals will be more forgiving of the party they helped to put in power, but those who are kept out of power will likely be more critical. 2) Lower income individuals are more likely to perceive corruption, while higher income individuals are less likely

¹ China and North Korea, countries more associated with corruption, were not chosen for this design. North Korea and China are excluded because there is no reliable polling data. Either respondents would fear repercussions and change their answer, or the government would fabricate the responses. Either way, it is best to study corruption in similar forms of government because corruption can take on drastically different meanings morally and legally in non-democratic states (Heidenheimer and Johnston 2002).

to perceive corruption. Those in more difficult financial situations are likely to be critical of the government, while wealthier individuals tend to be supportive of the government. 3) Individuals of lower social status are more likely to perceive corruption, while those of higher social status are less likely to perceive corruption. Individuals that consider themselves left out will also be more watchful for corruption, but individuals with higher status may be more lenient with the government. 4) Educated individuals are more likely to perceive corruption, while less educated individuals are less likely to perceive corruption. More educated individuals will better understand their political institutions and corruption's negative effects on, but less educated will not.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on corruption became active in the last few decades (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Transparency International's well-known Corruption Perception Index (CPI) was not developed until the late 1990s. In Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, the taboo on research of political corruption has only recently been broken (Heidenheimer and Johnston 2002; Quah 1999). The aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which saw one of the largest International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailouts ever in South Korea, revealed corruption in East Asia and many theories arose in the literature (Weder 1999). Increasing awareness of corruption in East Asia captivated scholars' attention to understand the impact corruption has on the all-important economic growth (Kang 2002; Mauro 1995; Sam 2005; Weder 1999). This research, however, differentiates itself from studying corruption's effects on growth to studying the variables that affect the perceptions themselves.

Corruption literature has established a connection between political party affiliation and perceptions of corruption. Using survey data in Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico, one study found that individuals with politically affiliated to an opposition party are more likely to perceive government corruption (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004). Another study of respondents in Spain that found that individuals more affiliated with the party in power are less likely to perceive government corruption (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013). The literature recognizes that "partisanship conditions attitudes toward corruption" (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013, 1664).

The literature on socioeconomic status is summed well by this premise: "those most harmed by corruption should perceive more of it" (Maeda and Ziegfeld 2015, 5). Using aggregated data, one study found that socioeconomic status does increase perceptions of corruption (Maeda and Ziegfeld 2015)². A study of Britain showed that higher socioeconomic groups tended to hold a higher trust in the government (Xenakis 2010). The study explains that this trend is likely because in Britain the elite are generally more likely to be involved with or participating in the government. Interestingly, it found that lower socioeconomic groups also had a low perception of corruption – against the conventional wisdom of scholars (Xenakis 2010). It credits this to low participation either by choice or exclusion by elite. The issue here is that whether it is low participation or low perceptions that is causing the other is unclear (Kostadinova 2009). One study of Russia found that individuals from less developed regions tend to view the government as more corrupt than in more developed regions (Sharafutdinova 2010). It links this to general dissatisfaction with the current politicians but says these areas are not always politically competitive which is another established factor in perceptions of corruption (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004; Sharafutdinova 2010).

² The authors note that in significantly poorer countries the trend was not as strong. They hypothesize that poverty is a more concerning to the public than corruption (Maeda and Ziegfeld 2015).

Other studies explore whether perceptions of corruption can stand in for the real levels of corruption or not and other potential sources of bias (Charron 2016; Olken 2009; Park and Lee 2017). Whether or not “perceived corruption” is a perfect reflection of “real corruption” is not the point (Morris 2008; Treisman 2007). As some scholars point out, “the tendency of citizens to believe that their governments are corrupt is politically consequential” (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004, 700). For example, high perceived corruption hinders reporting on crime (Soares 2004), discourages voting (Kostadinova 2014), and changes who they vote for (Slomczynski and Shabad 2012). Furthermore, it affects the countries and governments itself. For example, high perceived corruption dampens foreign aid and investments (Davis and Ruhe 2003; Treisman 2007), hampers economic growth overall (Mauro 1995), hurts government efficiency (Heidenheimer and Johnston 2002), and erodes the public’s trust in their government and political system (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Bowen and Kassiola 2002; Tan and Tambyah 2011; Wang 2016). Corruption disenfranchises individuals and high perceptions affect their actions; hence, it is important to empirically understand it (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004; Treisman 2007). Therefore, East Asian studies on partisanship and socioeconomic status is a fitting addition to this literature to on the perceptions of corruption.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DEFINITIONS

The research design of this study is a comparative case study of survey data. Due to its nature, it is both a quantitative and qualitative work. This study works primarily with data from Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer Survey³ completed during 2014 and 2015. Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI) will be used to show the general trends on a recognized index with the countries, but no statistical analysis.⁴ It will only be used to note if there is a substantial shift in CPI from one year to the next (Treisman 2007) and give a general understanding of how corruption is perceived in these countries. Historical context and quantitative analysis of Asian Barometer Survey is the core of this comparative case study (Johnson, Reynolds, and Mycoff 2016).⁵

The dependent variable, “perceptions of corruption” is fairly self-explanatory, but “corruption” is not. Corruption has been difficult to gauge and define due to its inherent illegality. Corruption tends to not be fully understood until after scandals have been discovered and investigated (Woodall 1996). Consequently, there is several definitions that are debated in the literature (Heidenheimer and Johnston 2002); nonetheless, the following definition will be used for the basis of this study:

Political corruption [is] where a public official, in violation of the trust placed in him by the public, and in a manner harmful to public interest, knowingly engages in conduct which exploits the office

³ Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer Survey was distributed by the Asian Barometer Project Office (see “Acknowledgements”). The survey was completed in 2014 in Japan and Singapore and in 2015 in South Korea.

⁴ This is due to differences in design and sometimes surveys from one year to the next. It is better to avoid that issue entirely by using different data (Treisman 2007).

⁵ Regarding the external validity of this design: It is an understandable criticism, but “potential bias of this sort is not limited to case studies.” (Johnson, Reynolds, and Mycoff 2016, 201). This design is the best for the purposes of this study. The following should be noted as well: this is only one survey. That means that the model created in this research cannot account for the effects the history of corruption and its perceptions has had on the independent variables.

for clear personal or private gain in a way which runs contrary to the accepted rules and standards for the conduct of public office within the political culture, so as to benefit a third party by providing [the third party] with access to a good or service [the third party] would otherwise not obtain. (Philp 2002, 42).

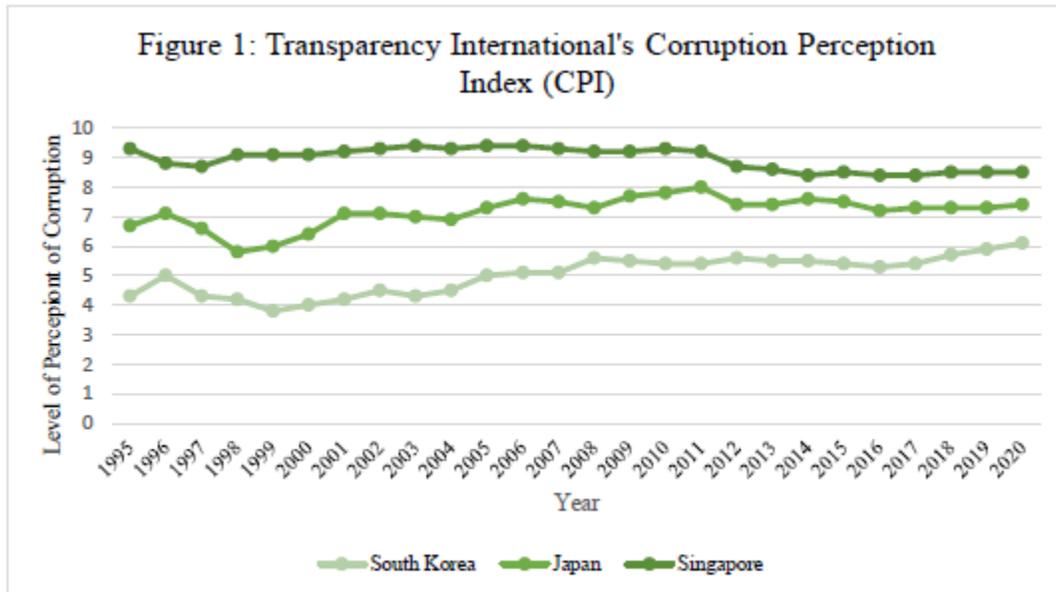
This provides enough detail for broad comparative use and supports broad comparative use. Then, perceptions of corruption are simply what level an individual perceives government corruption.

The two independent variables are political party affiliation and socioeconomic status. Political party affiliation is understood as the level of how strongly one supports or aligns with a political party. In this study, it will be important whether they align with the ruling party. Socioeconomic status is already an established index that is generally defined as a combination of education levels, job sector, status, and income (American Psychological Association 2019). This study will run separate analyses for each except of job sector⁶ to test the socioeconomic status.

DATA AND FINDINGS

South Korea, Singapore, and Japan contain “elite cartel” forms of corrupt institutions (Hellmann 2017). The “elite cartel” is the term when businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats, etc. exchange money and favors for political or financial advantage. In each country it looks slightly different. South Korea has a powerful business establishment (the *chaebol*), enduring bureaucrats, and a polarized partisan climate. Politicians, fearing turnover, seek monetary support in exchange for favors later. Japanese and Singaporean officials exchange public work contracts and government programs for campaign money to keep single-party dominance (Hellmann 2017). South Korean citizens have generally been disapproving of corruption and there have been attempts to curb it to some success (Weder 1999), but the perception remains high. Singapore has been perceived as one of the top cleanest countries and an exemplary country in anti-corruption policy, but they are not exempt from their elite cartel ways (Hellmann 2017). Japan’s government remains somewhere in between but is still widely seen as mostly corrupt (Woodall 1996). Nonetheless, they all have the similarity of elite groups working together unfairly/illegally to keep or gain power at the expense of the public they are supposed to represent.

⁶ Job sector is too difficult to quantitatively use as potential dependent variable with the data currently possessed. It is limited in regression use and statistically analyzing it would require making assumptions and decisions that may hamper its overall helpfulness to understanding socioeconomic status’ and perceptions of corruption’s relationship.



Source: [Transparency International](https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi) (accessed Feb. 7, 2021).

Notes: The higher score the less corrupt the country is perceived to be, the lower scores indicate a higher level of corruption. The early years for CPI have a scoring method out of ten and the later ones out of one hundred. The earlier ones are excluded in this chart have slightly different methods and less countries but are included anyway. This chart does not include the variance for each year, nor the number of surveys used. This is not a statistical analysis, but a way of visualizing the general level in each of the case studies.

DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES⁷

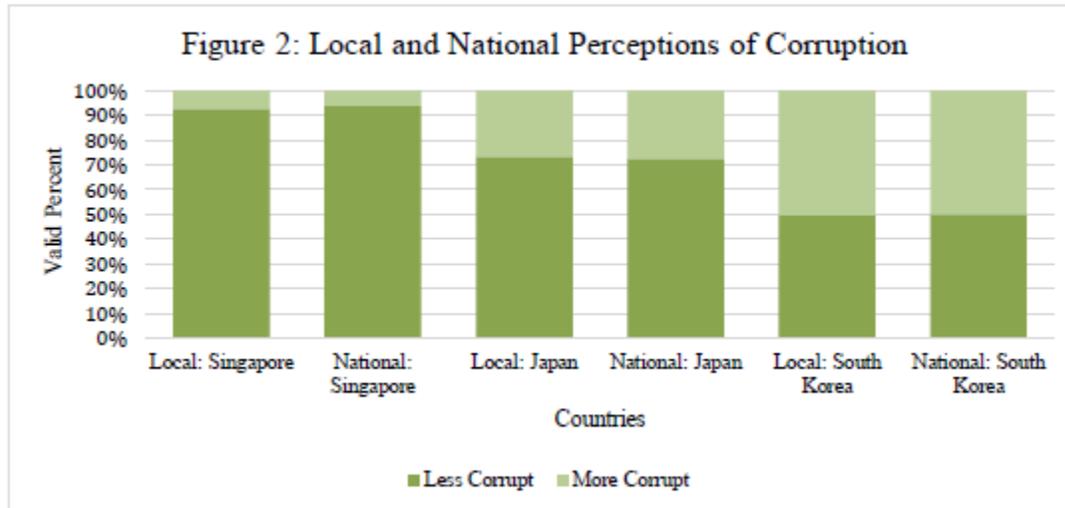
Respondents were asked on a scale of 1-4 how widespread they think corruption and bribe-taking are in their local and national governments – the higher the number, the more corrupt they saw the officials as. To more accurately gauge perceptions of corruption, both local and national models were created (Table 1). The frequencies show some critical caveats that must be addressed (Figure 2). Japan and Singapore have a massive skew towards a much lower perception of corruption, while, in South Korea, it is more split. This problem exists in both the national and local models. To alleviate the skew and allow for better analysis, the perception variables were transformed to be dichotomous (1 - no officials or few are corrupt; 2 - many officials or all are corrupt).

⁷ The control variables are not analyzed in depth but are summarized here. Age (increasing number = increasing in age), trust in national government (1-4: increasing number = less trust), trust in civil service (1-4: increasing number = less trust), and interest in politics (1-4: increasing number = more interest). Age is a common control variable. The variables on trust in institutions/officials were chosen because of the acknowledged relationship gleaned from the literature. Interest in politics was to control for those who are just interested in politics and may have inherent extra concern in corruption. Also, a correlation matrix showed they had the least impact on each other.

Table 1: National and Local Perceptions Correlation⁸

South Korea	$r = .695^{**}$ and two-tailed sig. test = .000
Japan	$r = .533^{**}$ and two-tailed sig. test = .000
Singapore	$r = .636^{**}$ and two-tailed sig. test = .000

Source: Data used from Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4. See “Acknowledgements” about distribution. The survey was completed in 2014 in Japan and Singapore and 2015 in South Korea.



Source: Data used from Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer Survey. See “Acknowledgements” about distribution of data. The surveys were completed in 2014 in Japan and Singapore and 2015 in South Korea.

Respondents were asked to choose which party they felt closest to from a list of political parties corresponding to their countries. In every case, there were many respondents that were either non-aligned or aligned with smaller parties. To ensure testing was possible, the variables were transformed to be dichotomous. The transformed variable placed all respondents into two following categories: 1 – those non-aligned or aligned with an opposition party; 2 – those aligned with the ruling party.

Table 2: Political Affiliation Variable

South Korea	1 = Non-aligned and all opposition parties	2 = Saenuri Party (ruling)
Japan	1 = Non-aligned and all opposition parties	2 = Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) (ruling)
Singapore	1 = Non-aligned and all opposition parties	2 = People’s Action Party (PAP) (ruling)

Source: Original data found at Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4. See the “Acknowledgements” about distribution. The surveys were completed in 2014 in Japan and Singapore and 2015 in South Korea.

⁸ * denotes statistical significance at a 95% confidence interval ($p < .05$). ** denotes statistical significance at a 99% confidence interval ($p < .01$).

Respondents were asked their education level, their social status, and their quintile income level. The education variable is a scale starting at “no education” and ending at “post-graduate education.” The social status variable is a scale from 1-10 and the quintile income variable is a scale from 1-5. A higher number means more education, more income, and higher status. A lower number signifies less education, less income, and lower status. They were also transformed, but only to remove those who did not respond – something done with all the variables in this research.

THE MODELS AND RESULTS

The dependent variables are dichotomous. Since dichotomous variables are non-linear, traditional linear regression is not possible for these models. Hence, for a robust claim, it is best to run a binary logistic regression test with control variables to create regression models. The results are given in the following tables:

Table 3: Singapore Models for Local and National Perceptions

Variable	Local Model		National Model	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Political Party Affiliation	.182	.666	.281	.538
Education	.065	.596	-.012	.924
Subjective Social Status	.247	.098	.034	.820
Income Quintile	-.561**	.008	-.405	.067
Trust in National Government	.954**	.006	.808*	.028
Trust in Civil Servants	.557	.089	.155	.662
Age	-.031*	.049	-.039*	.024
Interest in Politics	-.247	.277	-.205	.414
Overall Model Signifiers				
Model Significance	.000**		.004**	
Nagelkerke R for Model	.203		.127	

Source: Data used from Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer Survey. See “Acknowledgements” about distribution of data. Note: This survey was taken in Singapore in 2014.

Table 4: Japan Models for Local and National Perceptions

Variable	Local Model		National Model	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Political Party Affiliation	.004	.982	.082	.670
Education	-.155*	.012	-.159**	.010
Subjective Social Status	-.221**	.000	-.155*	.011
Income Quintile	-.174*	.019	-.062	.407
Trust in National Government	.213	.204	.454**	.008
Trust in Civil Servants	.647**	.000	.487**	.002
Age	-.027**	.000	-.021**	.000
Interest in Politics	-.041	.741	.032	.792
Overall Model Signifiers				
Model Significance	.000**		.000**	
Nagelkerke R for Model	.160		.131	

Source: Data used from Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer Survey. See “Acknowledgements” about distribution of data. Note: This survey was taken in Japan in 2014.

Table 5: South Korea Models for Local and National Perceptions

Variable	Local Model		National Model	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Political Party Affiliation	-.372**	.008	-.577**	.000
Education	.038	.425	.050	.299
Subjective Social Status	-.123**	.009	-.204**	.000
Income Quintile	-.066	.241	-.004	.937
Trust in National Government	.235*	.012	.300**	.001
Trust in Civil Servants	.359**	.000	.122	.214
Age	.000	.944	-.002	.783
Interest in Politics	-.042	.610	-.061	.454
Overall Model Signifiers				
Model Significance	.000**		.000**	
Nagelkerke R for Model	.068		.082	

Source: Data used from Wave 4 of the Asian Barometer Survey. See “Acknowledgements” about distribution of data. Note: This survey was taken in South Korea in 2015.

In the Singapore model, political party affiliation is weak and statistically insignificant in both models. The education variable is inconsistent between the local and national models and without significant confidence. The social status variable has a positive relationship in both the national and local models, but also not significant. The last variable, the income, has a strong relationship in the predicted direction in both models but it is only statistically significant in the local model.

In the Japan model, political party affiliation has an incredibly weak relationship and no statistical significance in both models. The education relationship is negative and has strong statistical significance but moderate to weak relationship in both models. Subjective social variable is significant in both local and national and has decent strength. Income has a negative relationship in both the national and local perceptions but is only significant in the local.

In the South Korea model, the political party affiliation relationship is strong and statistically significant in both models – especially in the national model. Education has a positive relationship, but a very weak and statistically insignificant relationship in both models. For the subjective social variable, it is significant but not extraordinarily strong in either model. Income quintile, on the other hand, is neither significant nor strong in either model.

DISCUSSION

The Singapore model does not support any of the hypotheses with the potential exception of income – the only variable with a strong and significant relationship. The main reason for this result is the massive skew in the frequency in perceptions ([Figure 2](#)) – over 90% of respondents perceived little or no corruption. This causes difficulties when trying to outright support or reject the causal factors of the respondents with high perceptions. There is an extraordinarily strong positive relationship with those who trust the government less also having a high perception of corruption. Considering most respondents in Singapore trust their government, it is unsurprising that the few people with low trust also perceive more corruption. Even with a significant model and a stronger Nagelkerke r-square, it does not

really support any my hypotheses almost at all which is attributed, mainly, to the skew.

The Japan model supports more of the hypotheses but suffers the same skew problem as Singapore. The political party affiliation relationship is weak and different from the predicted direction, but this is also unreliable due to the skew. Japan's education relationship is different from the other two cases in that it is a negative relationship and statistically significant with a moderate-weak B in both models – which is not what I hypothesized. This could be because the more educated acknowledge corruption as the way of politics and life and the less educated have been accustomed to government scandals (Woodall 1996). The social status and income variables go in the predicted directions and have some statistical significance. In sum, the Japan model with its significance and a solid Nagelkerke r-square more closely supports my hypotheses on social status and income but is not completely reliable due to the severe lack of variance.

The South Korea model has incredible variance in the perceptions variable which is the reason for the stronger relationships that supports the hypotheses. The model is significant, but a weaker Nagelkerke's r-square in both models is interesting considering the stronger individual relationships. Nonetheless, the political party affiliation relationship accounts for the most in both models – even more than the established trust in the government. The relationship is much stronger than the other countries which is mainly attributed to the lack of trust in the political parties and partisanship in South Korea (Park 1995) and to the stronger variance in the data comparatively. The social status variable has the strongest relationship and significance, but the income one has neither. Although it is also not statistically significant, the education variable goes the way that was predicted in South Korea. This may be because of the more authoritarian past of the South Korean government. President Park Chung Hee is noted for the repression of dissent among intellectuals which may still carry some skepticism in the educated community now. The hypothesis on political party affiliation is fully supported by the South Korea model and even continues the trend found in the literature (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004). On the other hand, the income and social status cases are only partially supported, and the education is only rejected because of a lack of statistical significance.

Regarding the political party affiliation variable in each case, political party systems and climates are another important explanation of the results. When the surveys were completed in Japan and Singapore, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and People's Action Party (PAP) continued to enjoy domination of politics in their respective countries. One study described this as the “fusion of party and state” (Hellmann 2017). Conversely, when they were completed in South Korea, there was a heavily polarized climate. The ruling Saenuri Party held a small majority over the opposition Democratic Unified Party in the National Assembly. South Korean citizens were strongly divided along partisan lines – which is represented in the data. This is a critical piece to explaining the sharp difference. It is not just political party affiliation, but also the level at which the parties view each other as mortal enemies or merely a party with different views.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the hypotheses were not completely supported or rejected in Singapore or Japan, but partially supported in South Korea. The political party affiliation hypothesis was strongly upheld in the South Korea model, but not in the Japan and Singapore models. Political scientists should be aware of a partisan bias when using perceptions of corruption surveys to measure corruption in polarized climates, but, in more hegemonic systems, the relationship requires more rigorous

institutional, cultural, and historical analysis. Regarding socioeconomic status, there is a lot of inconsistencies in the models. The variables went, for the most part, in the predicted direction just not always strong enough to be statistically significant. Besides, for Japan and Singapore, there was not enough variance in the data to have a robust claim. If anything, the fact that the South Korean model was much stronger with more variant data suggests an important factor of external validity.

Future research of perceptions of corruption in East Asia should continue to search for ways in which those perceptions are affected. Scholars should create panels (instead of just surveys once a year as the CPI and other indices do) to see, in real time and in longitudinal trends, if certain events (i.e., change in ruling party, economic downturn, etc.) change perceptions of corruption. Research should also include how a respondent's position on a right-to-left spectrum affects perceptions (Davis, Camp, and Coleman 2004). Further research into how specific job sectors of respondents, political engagement (once clarified), and political stability/instability affects perceptions of corruption would also be beneficial. Lastly, if the results of this research are any indication, strategies should be made for more variant survey data.

Quantitative data analysis on perceptions of corruption by themselves does not serve scholars much (Hellmann 2017; Reed 1996). One must understand perceptions alongside the historical perspective for it. The “elite cartel” corruption structure has negative effects in both the business and political sectors (Hellmann, 2017; Kang 2002). Corruption suppresses competition in the business sector – leading to financial inefficiency (Woodall 1996) and economic stagnation (Mauro 1995). Corrupt practices in politics become a tool to political party domination (and stagnation) like in Singapore and Japan or a contributor to political party instability and polarization like in South Korea. Researchers and policymakers think too quickly about government institution reform without considering the options for business reform. It maybe beneficial to explore reforms to the large business conglomerates⁹ in South Korea and Japan. If the government creates strong oversight institutions in the bureaucracies, passes meaningful business reforms, educates the public to corruption, and houses politicians with a sustained commitment to change, a successful lowering of real *and* perceived corruption will follow. Non-corrupt practices will be more in the interest of business and political leaders because of healthy competition, government oversight, and an unforgiving public. Ultimately though, if policy decisions on anti-corruption are to be made, using perceptions of corruption can be a helpful tool if they are understood in the context of the country from where they originated.

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⁹ They are called chaebol (재벌) in South Korea and zaibatsu (財閥) in Japan.

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