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The Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption

Second Edition

Edited by Paul M. Heywood, Ina Kubbe and Anna K. Schwickerath

"The *Handbook* harnesses the best minds in the field to show how far we have come in understanding political corruption's complexity and variation. While the volume establishes that there are no easy solutions to such a pernicious phenomenon, it equips the reader with the right questions and approaches to embark on their own investigations."

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THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION

The second edition of *The Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption* showcases the most innovative research being conducted globally in the field of political corruption and provides a new point of reference for all interested in the topic.

In presenting current research trends, the handbook addresses the pressing need for more detailed understanding of the intricacies of political corruption, including the need to adapt to emerging challenges and devise more effective strategies to curb its impact on societies. The handbook provides a balance between reviewing the 'state of the art' within different disciplines and subdisciplines and offering in-depth insights into the most recent developments in the field. Alongside some updated chapters, it also covers new topics, including democratic backsliding and populism, media capture and digital journalism, illicit financial flows and money laundering, corruption in contexts of conflict and migration, and the growing use of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies in anti-corruption efforts. Its structure, themes, and direction underscore the interdisciplinary nature of corruption research, bridging disciplines such as economics, psychology, political science, and law.

The Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption is an essential reference for scholars and students within comparative politics, global governance, economics, development studies, criminology and criminal justice, sociology, anthropology, psychology, law, and international relations. More broadly, it will appeal to policymakers, activists, journalists, and practitioners in civil society organisations, focusing on transparency and accountability.

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This *Handbook*, which builds upon the foundations laid in the first edition published in 2015, reflects many conversations, collaborations, and shared commitments across borders, disciplines, and generations. One of the most valuable and rewarding aspects of putting together a handbook is learning about research topics that do not usually fall within one's own field, which we found to be particularly inspiring. As editors, we are deeply grateful to all the contributors, whose excellent chapters offer critical insight, rich evidence, and theoretical innovation. Their work not only advances the field but also brings political corruption research closer to the lived realities of those who experience it.

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Finally, this book is dedicated to those who suffer under corruption's weight, whose opportunities are stolen, whose voices are silenced, and whose rights are violated, and to those who, often at great personal risk, continue to resist it. Whether whistle-blowers, journalists, public servants, activists, or concerned citizens, this volume is for them.

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INTRODUCTION

The Politics of Naming, Knowing, and Governing Corruption

Paul M. Heywood, Ina Kubbe, and Anna K. Schwickerath

Ten years ago, in the introduction to the first edition of this *Handbook*, it was suggested that 'the only thing over which there is consensus amongst scholars is that corruption is a bad thing that causes major harm to individuals and societies and that it needs to be reduced'. In this new edition of the *Handbook*, we explore not only whether we are still searching for consensus on core issues but also whether there are new questions and issues around corruption that require new approaches to analyse and address them. It is certainly the case that early paradigms that defined the field – anchored in transparency reforms, rule-of-law orthodoxy, and principal–agent models – promised policy legibility and normative clarity. These frameworks were instrumental in shaping a generation of academic, policy, and civil society responses to corruption, projecting a sense of technical mastery over what was presumed to be a universal and measurable problem. Yet taken together, the contributions to this volume demonstrate that those models have not only failed to deliver lasting transformation but, in many cases, also actively obscured the very dynamics they were meant to expose. They offered the illusion of governance without fully grappling with the structural inequities, symbolic meanings, and political contingencies that make corruption both resilient and protean.

This second edition of the *Handbook* emerges, therefore, not as a catalogue of improved tools or 'best practices' but as a critical reframing of the foundational questions that have shaped the field over recent decades. It continues the shift away – foreshadowed but not fully explored in the first edition – from the managerial rationalities that once dominated the anti-corruption agenda, offering instead a richer, more politically grounded understanding of corruption as a complex social, institutional, and epistemic phenomenon. It invites readers to reconsider not just how corruption is governed but how it is imagined, contested, and reproduced across contexts, thereby requiring anti-corruption initiatives to be more nuanced, targeted, and politically informed. In doing so, the *Handbook* also takes into account those voices that critically question the field. For instance, in the 100th episode of the Kickback podcast,[1] Michael Johnston posited that research should concentrate more on those corrupt activities that are 'legal or at least not clearly illegal'. This he described as 'extremely useful for understanding links between inequality and corruption'. In the same episode, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi observed that corruption has, in some circumstances, been

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used as a 'functional' and 'instrumental' tool to support other ends, arguing that, in practice, both corruption and anti-corruption have been increasingly weaponised for political ends; accordingly, we should invest ever more research effort into exposing in concrete detail the real harms and downsides corruption generates. The chapters of this handbook seek to provide that greater focus and intensification.

Structurally, the volume retains much of the original architecture developed by Paul M. Heywood while centring on six thematic pillars: understanding corruption, unpacking its causes, measuring its extent, examining its shape and scope and changing nature, reflecting on recent approaches in anti-corruption and integrity promotion, as well as exploring the current and emerging landscape for (anti-)corruption. These foundational categories remain conceptually central, but they are now interrogated from a wider range of disciplinary and methodological perspectives. The volume also broadens the assessment of consequences to encompass the increasingly transnational nature of many corrupt exchanges. Each section balances continuity with innovation, offering fresh empirical insights while engaging critically with the assumptions that underpinned earlier scholarship.

At the heart of this shift is a recognition that corruption is not merely the violation of rules or norms; it is a struggle over how those rules and norms are constituted, by whom, and in whose interest. This reframing challenges the view of corruption as a self-evident and ahistorical category, instead treating it as a politically constructed, discursively mediated, and institutionally embedded set of practices. Rather than assuming corruption is a singular object of regulation or reform, this volume highlights its diverse and often contradictory manifestations, each of which is subject to contestation, negotiation, and redefinition. In this light, corruption is not a stable category of governance in itself but a discursive frame through which legitimacy is asserted, blame is allocated, and hierarchies of power are reproduced or challenged.

This volume is therefore concerned not only with what the notion of corruption *is* but also with how its various dimensions and manifestations are made *visible or invisible*, *moral or amoral*, *criminal or customary*. It examines corruption in all its complexity not as a fixed object of analysis but as an unstable and contested set of signifiers – shaped by legal imaginaries, cultural narratives, moral vocabularies, and institutional configurations. In doing so, it foregrounds the politics of knowledge production in corruption studies: how concepts travel, how definitions acquire authority, and how particular framings foreclose or enable specific modes of intervention.

In summary, this edition includes some chapters that have been revised (a substantial undertaking given that more than a decade has passed since the previous edition was published), and others that explore more recent advances and emerging topics. As a field that continues to evolve, corruption research has undergone significant changes in recent years in terms of the range of issues it investigates. The chapters in this volume reflect this change while also providing additional depth on more well-worn issues, such as how we should define corruption. Notably, there has been a growing emphasis on the complexity of corrupt exchanges, the fundamental role of socio-political and economic context, the increasingly transnational nature of much corruption, and a growing recognition of the importance of sector-specific analyses that seek to provide actionable evidence. Taken together, the handbook, we believe, offers a rich and nuanced account of the state of the art in research on political corruption.

Part 1: Understanding Corruption – Reframing the Foundations

The first section of the *Handbook* revisits the definitional terrain of corruption – not with the aim of finally settling debates (surely an impossibility), but rather to highlight their continued relevance. The chapters assembled here explore corruption not as a static object to be pinned down by increasingly precise typologies but as a range of politically charged and historically variable categories that demand critical interrogation. Rather than seeking consensus, the contributors illuminate the conceptual tensions and normative stakes that underlie how corruption in its various dimensions has been framed in theory and operationalised in practice.

Jonathan Rose provides a lucid overview of the definitional debates that have shaped the field, tracing the arc from legalistic formulations to more expansive normative approaches. He shows how different disciplinary 'vantage points' – legal, political, economic – have led to divergent conceptualisations, each with its own blind spots and ideological implications. Mark Warren's chapter expands this conversation by asking what is politically at stake in defining corruption in democracies. For Warren, corruption is not only about rule-breaking but also about the subversion of democratic representation. He argues that corruption fundamentally erodes the link between citizens and institutions, hollowing out the normative legitimacy of democratic governance. This shift from institutional design to political accountability marks a critical recalibration of how the harm of corruption is understood.

Lisa Hill and Bruce Buchan, in turn, seek to locate the concept of corruption within historical and philosophical contexts. Their *longue durée* analysis reveals how corruption has never been a value-neutral descriptor but has instead always carried normative weight – mobilised to delegitimise enemies, discipline political actors, or impose order. From ancient republicanism to modern liberalism, their chapter shows that broader anxieties about authority, virtue, and moral decay have shaped the meaning of corruption. Importantly, they also remind us that attempts to 'depoliticise' corruption through technocratic definitions are themselves historically contingent moves – ones that often serve particular political projects under the guise of neutrality.

This theme of epistemic humility is echoed in the chapter by Fabiano Angélico and Jean-Patrick Villeneuve, who interrogate the Global North–South dichotomy that structures much of anti-corruption thinking. Their analysis reveals how narratives of dysfunction, often projected onto the Global South, obscure the systemic complicities that link Northern financial systems, legal frameworks, and corporate actors to the reproduction of corruption globally. Rather than treating corruption as a pathology of states characterised by weak institutions, they expose the transnational circuits of wealth, secrecy, and impunity that sustain it. In doing so, they call for a more relational understanding of corruption – one that resists the spatial and normative hierarchies that have long underpinned global anti-corruption efforts.

Justa Mwangi and Bernard Munyao Muiya's contribution challenges dominant binaries in corruption discourse by foregrounding ambivalence as an analytical lens. Drawing on empirical research across the East African region, they show how citizens navigate contradictory expectations and shifting meanings in everyday encounters with the state. Rather than treating corruption as a clear deviation from formal norms, the chapter reveals how practices often occupy morally and legally ambiguous spaces – simultaneously seen as necessary, illicit, and legitimate. By exploring how corruption is variously named, justified, or condemned depending on context, the authors invite the reader to move beyond moral absolutism and grapple with the complex, situated realities that shape public authority and accountability.

Corruption, in this view, is less an aberration of globalisation than one of its logics. Other chapters in this section go beyond historicisation and geographical considerations to critique the epistemological foundations of the field. Nik Kirby challenges the moral absolutism that often underwrites much anti-corruption discourse. Rejecting the premise that all corruption is inherently unethical, Kirby proposes a differentiated ethical framework that recognises the complexity of human agency in corrupt systems. His argument is particularly attuned to contexts where acts of corruption may represent not moral failure but survival strategies or forms of situated resistance. Rather than collapsing ethical evaluation into legal categories, he calls for a more nuanced engagement with the moral dilemmas that corruption entails.

This critical interrogation of dominant anti-corruption assumptions is further extended by Anya Schiffrin, Dylan Groves, Marco Kitundu, and Francis Nyonzo, who turn attention to the role of the media. Their chapter reveals how, both in states with limited institutional capacity and consolidated democracies, media outlets are frequently captured by political and corporate interests, thereby undermining their ability to function as independent *watchdogs*. In challenging the assumption that 'free media' inherently supports anti-corruption, the authors highlight the structural and financial vulnerabilities that compromise journalistic independence. Their analysis underscores the need to move beyond formal indicators of press freedom and attend instead to the political economies that shape media systems and their accountability functions.

Together, the chapters in this section do not offer a new definition of corruption – nor do they try to. Instead, they propose a reorientation: from definitional certainty to conceptual reflexivity, from universal templates to contextual understanding, and from normative closure to critical engagement. By foregrounding the political, moral, and epistemological underpinnings of corruption discourse, these contributions lay the groundwork for the rest of the volume. They signal that to understand corruption is not simply to describe what it is but to ask how – and for whom – it is made legible.

Part 2: Causes – Structural, Normative, and Cultural Roots

While the opening section interrogates the conceptual boundaries of corruption, the second section turns to the question of causality: why does corruption emerge and persist, often despite robust institutional frameworks and sustained reform efforts? Rather than offering monocausal explanations or reductionist models, the chapters in this section emphasise the multifaceted, embedded, and often contradictory forces that sustain diverse forms of corrupt practice. They explore the interplay between structure and agency, law and culture, and formal rules and informal norms – not to reaffirm these familiar binaries, but to unravel and expose their limitations. In doing so, they move beyond linear or technocratic accounts of causation and instead highlight the dynamic, context-specific processes through which corruption is enacted, justified, and resisted.

Ina Kubbe and Bonnie Palifka's chapter in particular offers a panoramic synthesis of contemporary theory, arguing that no single variable – whether poverty, low salaries, or weak institutions – can account for the persistence of corruption. Instead, they propose a more integrative approach that combines structural, behavioural, and ideational dimensions. Crucially, they point out that while macro-level factors like inequality or colonial legacies shape the context, micro-level social practices and perceptions mediate how corruption is enacted and resisted.

Carl Dahlström and Víctor Lapuente provide a more specifically institutional lens, focusing on how the design of public administration influences corruption risk. Their analysis contrasts bureaucracies characterised by political patronage and discretion with those structured by meritocratic recruitment and clear rules. Drawing on comparative data, they argue that the integrity of public service is less about individual virtue and more about organisational ecology: the norms, incentives, and routines embedded in bureaucratic systems. Yet their chapter also acknowledges that formal rules alone are insufficient. Even the most rule-bound systems can be subverted if informal networks and power asymmetries remain unaddressed.

The tension between formal institutions and informal expectations is further explored by Raj Navanit Patel and Leena Koni Hoffmann, who delve into the social norms that shape behaviour in corrupt environments. Their chapter highlights a crucial paradox: norms can simultaneously constrain and enable corruption. For instance, expectations around reciprocity, loyalty, or kinship can normalise actions that contravene legal standards but uphold social bonds. In this sense, corruption cannot be understood solely through institutional diagnostics; it must be situated within the normative frameworks that structure everyday life. Patel and Hoffmann's work opens up a more anthropologically informed understanding of causality – one attuned to meaning-making, legitimacy, and social belonging.

Tufan Ekici and Omer Gokcekus bring a similarly critical sensibility to the study of religion and corruption. While much of the literature assumes that religiosity curbs unethical behaviour, their chapter shows that this relationship is more complicated. Drawing on cross-national data and case studies, they show that *belief intensity* does not straightforwardly translate into ethical conduct. Instead, the political theology of a religious tradition – how it conceptualises authority, obligation, and sin – matters far more. Moreover, the institutional context in which religion operates (for instance, whether it is aligned with state power or serves as a countervailing force) shapes its moral and political role. The chapter cautions against essentialist readings and advocates for a more context-sensitive approach to the cultural dimensions of corruption.

Claudia Baez-Camargo reinforces this cultural turn by returning to the theme of informality – not as a residual category of deviance, but as a central mechanism of governance. Her chapter argues that informal practices are not evidence of institutional failure but, rather, indicators of how power is actually exercised and negotiated. These practices are not temporary aberrations to be corrected by legal reform; they are *durable*, patterned behaviours that reflect deeper distributions of power and trust. Her work calls for a more politically realist account of corruption's causes – one that recognises how informal arrangements often serve as adaptive responses to the limitations, exclusions, or inefficiencies of formal institutions.

Taken together, the chapters in this section advance three core propositions: first, that corruption is sustained not just by individual incentives or institutional weakness but by complex social logics that reproduce themselves over time; second, that causality must be disaggregated – across levels (micro, meso, macro), domains (economic, cultural, political), and temporalities (historical legacies vs contemporary dynamics); and third, that any explanatory model must take seriously the role of meaning, legitimacy, and social expectation in shaping both corrupt behaviour and resistance to it.

By emphasising the normative and cultural underpinnings of corruption, this section deepens our understanding of why corruption persists despite decades of reform efforts. It reveals that causality is not a neutral terrain but one shaped by the analytical lenses we choose, the values we prioritise, and the worlds we seek to explain.

Part 3: Measurement – Methodological Reckonings

The third section confronts one of the field's most enduring and contentious challenges: how to measure corruption. Despite decades of investment in metrics – ranging from perception indices to objective administrative data – debates persist about what, exactly, is being measured, by whom, and to what political effect. This section underscores not only the technical limitations of existing instruments but also the epistemological stakes embedded in the act of measurement itself.

Ilona Wysmułek opens the section with a philosophical interrogation of corruption indices. Rather than treating measurement as a neutral exercise, she exposes the normative assumptions embedded in dominant tools, particularly those rooted in liberal legal frameworks and economistic rationality. Her chapter presses us to ask: does measurement illuminate corruption, or does it merely reflect the political imagination of those who construct the metrics?

Mihály Fazekas and Romain Ferrali push the methodological frontier forward through computational innovations. By leveraging big data – particularly from public procurement – they identify corruption risk patterns at scale. Yet even in these data-rich environments, the authors are attuned to the inferential gaps between what is observable and what is corrupt. Their contribution highlights the possibilities and limitations of algorithmic approaches in capturing *hidden* practices.

Shally Baloch, Thulani Mswelanto, and Fayyaz Yaseen pivot the lens from top-down indices to *citizen-led* initiatives. Their chapter illustrates how measurement itself can be a site of political contestation, shaped by grassroots activism, local knowledge, and the legitimacy that comes from community participation and ownership. In reframing quantification as a participatory act, they challenge the presumed neutrality of expert knowledge and reclaim measurement as a democratic tool.

Monika Bauhr, Nicholas Charron, and Marko Klašnja's chapter focuses on the institutional context, asking how corruption manifests – and is measured – across varying types of democracies. They reveal how institutional configurations, media freedom, and civic engagement influence both the incidence of corruption and the capacity to record or contest it.

In contrast, Vineeta Yadav and Bumba Mukherjee engage with the paradox of measurement under authoritarian rule. Their contribution shows how autocratic regimes strategically manipulate transparency, allowing for partial data exposure while maintaining control over permitted interpretive frameworks. In such contexts, measurement itself becomes a tool of governance, raising urgent questions about the complicity – or at least the political partiality – of international monitoring frameworks.

Finally, Dorothy Zinn closes the section with a necessary provocation: what if corruption cannot be measured at all? Her ethnographic intervention foregrounds corruption as lived experience – narrated, embodied, and mediated through local understandings of morality, legality, and survival. Zinn's work does not reject measurement *per se* but challenges the assumption that numbers can fully capture what corruption means in context.

Together, these chapters refute the notion that measurement is a purely technical domain and, indeed, question whether the very idea of measurement can result in settled agreement. Instead, they reveal it as an arena of methodological innovation, political power, and epistemic struggle – central to how corruption is made legible, governable, or ignored.

Part 4: The Changing Shape and Scope of Corruption – Contextual Considerations

Rather than treating manifestations of corruption as simply deviations from institutional norms or a breakdown in governance, this section explores the enduring and adaptive structure of how corrupt practices operate, reflecting a logic of social organisation that distributes power, resources, and legitimacy, but which also shifts and adapts as circumstances change and new opportunities arise. The chapters collectively challenge the teleological assumptions that portray corruption as an obstacle to be overcome on the road to modernity. Instead, they interrogate how different forms of corruption are woven into the very fabric of political and economic systems, often functioning as an informal infrastructure of rule.

The first chapter in the section assesses some of the systemic costs of corruption, but Robert Barrington also emphasises a critical caveat: the most damaging effects are not always measurable in monetary terms. Instead, he highlights how corruption erodes trust, distorts institutions, and undermines collective capacity. His analysis reframes corruption as an existential challenge to democratic legitimacy – not just a fiscal or administrative problem.

David Jancsics, Elizabeth Perez Chiques, and Oliver Meza develop this argument further by focusing on the concept of *conflict of interest* – a term that often appears technocratic but conceals deeper moral and institutional tensions. Rather than viewing these conflicts as aberrations, they argue that they reflect contested boundary-making between public and private, legal and moral, formal and informal. Their chapter shows how such boundary work is not incidental but central to how modern states negotiate legitimacy and discretion.

Further chapters in the section dismantle the notion that the prevalence of corruption primarily represents a domestic governance failure – one that is most obvious in transitional regimes or bureaucratically weak administrations. Instead, the authors collectively trace how corruption is increasingly transnational, networked, and facilitated not only by informal systems but also by formal, legal infrastructures.

The following chapter by Felix Alshut and Brigitte Unger situates cross-border corruption within the broader concept of illicit financial flows, alongside money laundering and tax crimes. Although these forms of financial crime are highly interconnected, each field continues to rely on fundamentally different approaches to regulation, measurement, and policy evaluation. The authors argue for the development of new methods to quantify cross-border corruption, comparable to those already used to measure money laundering and tax crimes. Such approaches would enable more robust assessments of the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies.

Prosper Simbarashe Maguchu adopts a human rights lens to reveal how corruption and abuse are *co-constitutive* in many authoritarian or illiberal settings. He critiques the siloed nature of anti-corruption and human rights discourses, arguing that both fields must be understood as responses to the same underlying dynamics of unaccountable power. His chapter exposes how corruption is often not the cause of rights violations but the mechanism through which they are rendered invisible, normalised, or legally insulated.

Miranda Loli and Anna K. Schwickerath turn to (post-)conflict zones, initially addressing definitional challenges, subsequently examining the corruption–conflict nexus and the prevailing scientific discourses within the field, providing insights into measurement approaches and anti-corruption interventions, with a particular emphasis on 'local and transnational dimensions'. The chapter offers a comprehensive perspective on a complex and fragmented field, focusing on the pivotal role of international organisations in confronting corruption and their efforts to combat it, including in the context of peace operations.

Rosa da Costa's contribution examines the intersections of corruption and global migration regimes. She argues that anti-corruption frameworks often ignore how corruption is embedded in the very systems that produce migrant precarity – from labour recruitment to asylum processing. Rather than being external to migration governance, corruption is shown to be constitutive of it: a profitable side effect of restrictive border regimes, legal ambiguity, and discretionary enforcement.

A further context given consideration within the section is that of the penal system, which is examined in the chapter by Sofie Arjon Schütte and John Podmore, who interrogate the corruption dynamics in prisons, where patronage, extortion, and survival logics entangle with questions of justice and punishment. The chapter shows how prisons function as *microcosms* of political corruption, reflecting wider logics of exclusion, inequality, and control. Similarly, but in a very different domain, Kristýna Bašná, Radim Bureš, and Jaroslava Pospíšilová analyse corruption in sports governance. Far from being peripheral, they argue that sports scandals illuminate the intimate entanglement of global capital, soft power, and national prestige. Both chapters emphasise that corruption is embedded in high politics and realms often relegated to the margins of scholarly analysis.

Together, these chapters dismantle the conventional narrative in the Global North that corruption is seen as a symptom of weak governance 'over there'. They expose instead an international architecture of complicity – one in which local dysfunction is often the surface expression of transnational opportunity structures. The contributors reveal that corruption is not only cross-border in operation but also trans-systemic in nature, being enabled by the interplay between informal networks and formal legal regimes, as well as public officials and private actors, national interests, and global capital.

This section forces a reckoning with the spatial politics of corruption discourse. It asks not just where corruption happens but where it is hidden, enabled, and rendered legitimate. It reminds us that fighting corruption without addressing financial secrecy, legal impunity, and the asymmetries of global governance is not only ineffective but also complicit.

Part 5: Anti-Corruption and Integrity Promotion – Critical Interventions

Much of the volume is concerned with deconstructing the epistemologies, instruments, and political uses of corruption discourse. However, this section shifts the analytical gaze toward different kinds of reform initiative and their practical implementation. These chapters do not assume that anti-corruption is always inherently virtuous; rather, they interrogate the normative, institutional, and strategic dimensions of anti-corruption and integrity promotion, emphasising the gap between aspirational design and political reality.

In her chapter, Elitza Katzarova examines the institutional architectures that have defined global anti-corruption efforts since the 1990s. She traces how international conventions, multilateral initiatives, and development frameworks have institutionalised anti-corruption as a normative imperative. Yet her analysis reveals that these structures often reproduce a technocratic logic – favouring legal harmonisation, audit cultures, and benchmarking over political contestation or structural reform. Katzarova shows how the very success of anti-corruption as a global norm has rendered it politically inert: embedded in donor conditionalities and global governance regimes but decoupled from local agency and democratic accountability.

Sope Williams complements this perspective through a legal lens, surveying legislative approaches such as the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) and the UK Bribery

Act, as well as various national transparency initiatives. Her chapter raises an unsettling question: how can law curb corruption when the legal system itself is often embedded in the same networks of patronage and impunity? Williams argues that legal reforms have often been both necessary and insufficient – powerful in signalling commitments but limited in transforming the informal power structures that render such laws ineffective in practice.

This complexity is further explored in the contribution by Eran Itskovich and Justice Tankebe, who revisit one of criminology's foundational frameworks – deterrence theory – to interrogate why corruption, though legally defined as a crime, has long remained marginal within criminological research. Their chapter considers corruption as a distinct phenomenon that challenges conventional assumptions about rationality, enforcement, and sanctioning. By repositioning deterrence within broader socio-political and institutional contexts, the authors demonstrate that the effectiveness of anti-corruption reforms cannot be separated from the power structures and moral economies in which they operate.

The chapter by Anwesha Chakraborty, Alice Mattoni, and Fernanda Odilla centres civil society as both a potential agent of accountability and a mirror of the political systems it inhabits. They call into question the liberal assumption that civil society is inherently democratic or virtuous. Drawing on comparative case studies, they reveal how NGOs and watchdogs can be co-opted, instrumentalised, or hollowed out – especially in hybrid regimes or donor-dependent ecosystems. Their contribution underscores a recurring theme of the volume: anti-corruption actors may at times find themselves entangled in the very logics of inequality and clientelism they seek to resist.

Sofia Wickberg, Christopher Starke, Carlo Berti, and Roxana Bratu reconceptualise the media as not only a watchdog but also a key arena where corruption itself is defined, framed, and contested. Their chapter traces how legacy and digital media – shaped by ownership structures, political capture, and algorithmic platforms – mediate what becomes visible as 'corruption' and to whom. Moving beyond celebratory accounts of press freedom, they highlight the ambivalence of media systems: they can expose wrongdoing yet also reproduce patronage, polarisation, and moralisation through scandalisation and metaphor. By mapping how journalists, citizens, and cross-border data networks co-produce corruption narratives, the authors show that the media are both instruments and arenas of accountability in an age of digital transformation.

Júlia Miralles-de-Imperial turns the spotlight on technological innovations – such as blockchain, AI-driven procurement analysis, and crowdsourced whistleblowing platforms – that have gained traction as supposed anti-corruption silver bullets. While acknowledging their promise, she offers a balanced analysis of their limitations. Technological fixes, she argues, can depoliticise corruption by reducing it to a data problem. Moreover, they often divert attention from questions of power and inequality to those of efficiency and automation, thereby further entrenching managerial logics at the expense of genuine democratic engagement.

The volume's attention to *structural inequality* is sharpened in Elin Bjarnegård's chapter on the gendered dynamics of corruption. She argues that corruption is gendered not only in its effects – disproportionately affecting women and marginalised groups – but also in its mechanisms: from exclusionary networks to differentiated access to public goods. Her analysis resists both essentialist assumptions (that women are inherently less corrupt) and technocratic gender mainstreaming. Instead, she calls for an *intersectional* understanding of how corruption and gender are co-constructed in specific institutional and cultural contexts.

In their chapter, Paul M. Heywood and Nik Kirby highlight how the increasing emphasis over recent years on promoting 'public integrity' has all too often amounted to little more

than re-badged anti-corruption rhetoric. The effect has not only been to imply, wrongly, that integrity equals an absence of corruption but also to potentially damage prospects of developing a genuine transformative agenda based on an institution-first approach to integrity. They outline the key dimensions of such an approach, which addresses corruption more as a symptom than a disease.

Finally in this section, Duncan Smith advances sectoral pathways to reform. His overview of sector-specific approaches and initiatives demonstrates that corruption cannot be confronted in the same manner across the board; different policy areas – such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and security – generate distinct opportunity structures that require tailored strategies. Rather than waiting for systemic change, Smith emphasises the possibilities of incremental, sector-specific interventions that accumulate into broader transformations. His approach combines pragmatism with structural awareness, recognising that anti-corruption can be both fragmented and cumulative.

Together, the concluding chapters of the section do not offer simple solutions but rather confront the political economies, institutional incentives, and epistemic blind spots that have undermined so many anti-corruption efforts thus far. Indeed, overall, the chapters in Section 5 of the volume address the core question of what it means to reclaim anti-corruption as a genuinely political, ethical, and emancipatory project.

Part 6: The Current and Emerging Landscape for (Anti-)Corruption – Reimagining the Field

The final section of the book turns explicitly to reflection on where we stand with corruption studies and practice, acknowledging unintended consequences, but also asks not only what kinds of issues may emerge and what intellectual and political orientations should guide the field but also what role the field should play in addressing these issues. If earlier sections expose the limits of existing paradigms, these chapters offer a more holistic overview of the field, recognising shortcomings but also attempting to chart possible pathways forward shaped not by linear progress but by improvisation, contestation, and cross-disciplinary exchange.

Michael Johnston sets the tone with a provocative call for *possibilism*. Against the tendency to seek universal models or to evaluate reform efforts by how closely they approximate Weberian ideals, he argues for an orientation that prizes adaptability, coalition-building, and moral ambiguity. Possibilism accepts that anti-corruption will always be partial, fragile, and context-specific. Yet it also insists that this is not failure but the political reality of reform under conditions of inequality and pluralism. Johnston's perspective reframes success not as institutional convergence but as the capacity to assemble contingent alliances that shift norms and redistribute power.

Further underlining the urgent need to adopt new approaches, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi offers a scathing indictment of the anti-corruption industry itself. Her chapter addresses the discrepancy 'between the legal, *de jure* world of anticorruption and the real, *de facto* world of corruption'. While technocratic tools have displaced structural analysis and anti-corruption has become a performative ritual – serving donors, legitimising governance regimes, and maintaining the illusion of reform, leaving the underlying distribution of power untouched – the author emphasises the importance of greater 'contextualisation'.

This critical approach is also echoed by Digdem Soyaltin-Colella and Robert Csehi, whose chapter explores how populist regimes *weaponise* the anti-corruption discourse. Far from

enhancing accountability, such regimes often deploy anti-corruption rhetoric to purge rivals, consolidate power, and hollow out institutional checks. There is not a case of failed reform but of strategic inversion: anti-corruption as a technology of authoritarian legitimation.

Finally, Joseph Pozsgai-Alvarez reflects on the field as a whole, calling for an interdisciplinary theory of corruption. His contribution acknowledges the improbability of full conceptual convergence. Yet rather than treating pluralism as a liability, he reframes it as an intellectual resource. Cross-fertilisation across disciplines, methodologies, and normative frameworks, he argues, is essential for keeping the field dynamic and politically relevant. Pozsgai-Alvarez thus offers not closure but an invitation: to embrace corruption studies as an inherently interdisciplinary, contested, and *evolving* domain.

Taken together, the chapters in this final section invite us to reimagine the study of corruption as a project of continuous reinvention – pragmatic in its strategies, plural in its theories, and reflexive in its politics.

Conclusion: Critical Clarity, Not Conceptual Closure

This volume does not present a unified theory of corruption – and intentionally so. The search for a single, comprehensive framework risks flattening the very complexity that makes corruption such a vital and contested object of inquiry. Instead, the *Handbook* offers a politically grounded, ethically attuned, and methodologically plural set of perspectives that together illuminate corruption in its various forms not as a stable category but as a shifting set of practices that cut across the terrains of governance, legitimacy, and power.

As the chapters in this volume collectively demonstrate, corruption in all its manifest guises and complexity is not just something to be measured or fought – it is something to be interpreted, narrated, and when necessary, unlearned. Its operation is as much about the discourses that render practices visible or invisible as it is about the practices themselves. To study corruption is therefore to study the production of categories, the politics of naming, and the symbolic economies of virtue and vice.

This *Handbook* does not offer closure in the form of settled definitions or definitive solutions; instead, it offers orientation. It provides readers with critical tools for navigating the contested meanings, empirical variations, and normative stakes of corruption across contexts. It invites scholars to resist the allure of managerialism, practitioners to confront the political economies of reform, and students to approach corruption not as a puzzle to be solved but as a problem to be considered – and to develop strategies to combat it.

In this sense, the volume affirms that the value of corruption studies lies not in consensus but in contestation. By foregrounding pluralism, reflexivity, and critical engagement, it opens space for new questions, new alliances, and new imaginaries of governance and accountability. The challenge is not to end debate but to sustain it – creatively, rigorously, and politically.

Note

1 See comments made by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Michael Johnston in the 100th eposide of the *KickBack* podcast, 19 October 2023: https://soundcloud.com/kickback-gap/100-the-state-of-practice-in-the-corruption-field-insights-from-leading-global-thinkers (accessed 21 October 2025).

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