



Government size, democracy, and corruption: An empirical investigation

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on the effect of government size on corruption have produced mixed results. In an attempt to explain these ambiguous results, this study investigates the effect of government size on corruption by taking into account the role of the democracy in each country. Using annual data of 82 countries between 1985 and 2005, the estimation results indicate that an increase in government size can lead to a decrease in corruption if the democracy level is sufficiently high and, in contrast, can lead to an increase in corruption if it is too low. As robustness checks, the estimations using a different index of corruption and a different proxy for government size are also conducted. The results reveal that our main findings are robust. Furthermore, to address endogeneity problems, we conduct the instrumental variable estimation and the system generalized method of moments estimation, the results of which also support our primary findings. These results provide some important implications for policymakers seeking to perform government intervention without aggravating corruption.

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1. Introduction

Corruption is a phenomenon widely observed in both developed and developing countries. Since it has various effects on society, corruption is a central topic in the fields of both political science and economics. In recent years, there have been a large number of empirical studies on corruption, especially on its determinants. These studies include Goel and Nelson (1998), La Porta et al. (1999), Treisman (2000), Glaeser and Saks (2005), Serra (2005), Del Monte and Papagni (2007), Wilger and Goel (2009), and Saha et al. (2009), among others.¹ Although some consensus is obtained regarding the determinants of corruption (see Serra, 2005), the role of some factors which seem to be related to corruption remains unclear. This paper focuses on one such factor, government size, and its influence on corruption.

While minimum public services provided by the government, such as security, provision of infrastructure, and the consolidation of the legal system, are necessary and important in a country, it is well-known that an oversized government causes various inefficiencies. If government size is viewed as the degree of government intervention in remedying market failures, excessive intervention may inhibit market competition, i.e., government failures.

For instance, Lal (1985) points out the misallocation of resources by a government, and social scientists such as Mills (1985) argue that government failure is more problematic than a market failure. Government size can also be viewed as the number of bureaucrats and/or their expenses, such as wages and salaries. Nordasem (1971) defines government bureaucrats as agents seeking to maximize the size of their budgets and points out that they have no incentive to be efficient. Acemoglu and Verdier (2000) indicate that government failures, such as corruption, are the by-products of government intervention. In order to reduce corruption, higher wages are necessary to prevent bureaucrats from becoming corrupt. In this way, the relationship between the size of the government and its inefficiency, including corruption, has been an important topic in economics.

More precisely, there are two different points of view regarding the relationship between corruption and government size, which are empirically controversial. First, an increase in government size provides more opportunity for political rent-seeking, leading the politicians and bureaucrats to become more corrupt (e.g., Rose-Ackerman, 1978, 1999). This viewpoint is suggested by the “crime and punishment” model in Becker (1968). In other words, bigger governments increase the expected payoff of illegal activities and, as a result, give an incentive for more illegal activities, such as corruption. Similar to this viewpoint, Alesina and Angeletos (2005) propose a theoretical model in which bigger governments increase the possibility for corruption. They argue that when income inequality and unfairness are generated by corruption, the poor support a redistributive policy intending to correct inequality and injustice, and the rich also support it, because they can extract more rent from the increase in government size. As a result, the redistributive effect becomes small, and large corruption remains. Goel and

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¹ Another stream of study focuses on the effects of corruption on economic performance, particularly economic growth, foreign direct investment, or the outcome of specific public expenditures (e.g., Mauro, 1995, 1998; Balandier and Sengulha, 2006; Rogoff and Sengulha, 2008).

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