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Research Paper **46**

Message received?
How messages about corruption
shape perceptions

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The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative based at the University of Birmingham, and working in partnership with La Trobe University in Melbourne.

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Contents

About the author

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Most anticorruption programmes include awareness raising about corruption and about efforts to tackle it. Yet so far there is little research evidence to show what impact such messages have. How – if at all – do they influence people's beliefs about corruption or about fighting it?

This paper reports on an original survey experiment across 1,000 households in Jakarta that tested how four different messages affected respondents' perceptions of corruption. As expected, 'negative' messages on the widespread prevalence of corruption heightened worries about its ill effects, depressed confidence in the government's anticorruption work and reduced the belief that ordinary people could easily fight corruption. Surprisingly, however, 'positive' messages about government successes in controlling corruption and about how to get involved in tackling it tended to have the same effects. The paper discusses ways to make sense of these findings and what they could mean for anticorruption efforts.

Introduction

The 2004 United Nations Convention Against Corruption instructs signatory states to 'raise public awareness regarding the existence, causes and gravity of and the threat posed by corruption'. Commuters in any major city are likely to pass billboards, posters and murals sharing messages on the ills corruption has caused, on the need to refuse to bribe, on citizens' rights to report corruption and/or on who to call to report it. The assumption behind such efforts is that they will, at the very least, encourage people to refuse to be involved in the corruption they encounter (Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014).

Yet Persson, Rothstein and Teorell (2013), among others, argue that the more widespread people believe corruption is, the more likely they are to join in with corrupt behaviour. This concern is rooted in the logic that when corruption is perceived to be pervasive, people may think resistance will attract social sanction for deviating from the perceived norm; or incur a higher price or longer wait for a service, or even denial of the service altogether; and/or make them miss out on an opportunity to gain from a corrupt exchange that others will take advantage of.

A further concern is that perceptions of corruption as widespread reduce willingness to fight it (Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016). When people think corruption is common, they may become overwhelmed by the problem and sceptical about whether it can be effectively tackled. Other research suggests that cynicism about the political process is amplified by citizens' perceptions that corruption is widespread and they may, as a result, disengage from it (Andersson & Heywood, 2006).

At the most basic level, the extent to which messages about corruption shape perceptions is important because people act based on their expectations and beliefs. Influential messages could be harnessed as an important tool in the fight against corruption, depending on how they shape perceptions. If, however, anticorruption messaging is backfiring, we have to understand how these messages influence the perceptions that people rely on to make a decision about whether they will or won't engage with anticorruption measures.

Only two studies so far have gauged how messages influence perceptions of corruption. Both are limited: they each test for the effect of only one type of message, and they collectively assess two types of perceptions (perceived levels of corruption and perceptions of the government) (Chong et al., 2015; Hawkins et al., 2015).

The Jakarta experiment

This paper reports on an original survey experiment conducted with 1,000 households in Jakarta in 2015. Its design makes it possible for the analysis to tease out an important potential causal relationship—how have four messages about corruption shaped how sample groups viewed corruption, the government and their own role in fighting corruption?

The sample was divided into five groups. A control group was shown no message; the others were shown one of four messages. Two negatively toned messages focused on *grand corruption* committed by high-profile public officials, and on the pervasiveness of *low-level petty corruption*. Two positively toned messages highlighted *government successes* in controlling corruption, and routes to *civic engagement* through which citizens could help fight corruption.

Four categories of perception were used to gauge beliefs about:

- how corrupt the government is or has become (levels);

- what harm corruption has caused (consequences);

- how effective the government has been in fighting corruption (government efficacy); and

- what role ordinary citizens can play in fighting corruption (civic involvement).

Findings and implications

- **A new message about the corruption environment is unlikely to change how corrupt people think their government is.** The analysis shows that, irrespective of the tone of the message someone is exposed to, their perceptions of corruption remain fairly stable. This suggests that investing in awareness raising may turn out to be a waste of resources.

- **Messages about how widespread corruption is may not fire up opposition to it.** They may instead trigger or increase a sense of resignation that could undermine grassroots anticorruption efforts. Analysis of the data suggests that 'corruption fatigue' was provoked among those exposed to messages about the prevalence of both grand and petty corruption. These groups' responses showed heightened worries about the ill effects of corruption on development, depressed confidence in the government's efforts to combat it, and a reduced belief that ordinary people can easily take action against corruption.

- **Anticorruption efforts may be hindered by the way the media covers corruption.** The *grand corruption* message was similar to much news reporting on corruption.

- **Even 'positive' messages about the fight against corruption can have negative effects on people's perceptions.** The *government success* and *civic engagement* messages had the same negative effects on respondents' perceptions as the other messages. Awareness raising may do more harm than good; no message at all may be better than a positive message.

While surprising, these findings are not necessarily inexplicable. One interpretation is that people may use motivated processing when thinking about corruption; a new message may not reframe beliefs because any message about corruption may prompt people to recall negative views they have already formed (Taber et al., 2009).

It seems extreme to suggest that all efforts to raise awareness of corruption should stop. After all, it is a normative democratic goal that citizens learn about the quality of their government and are alerted to any misbehaviour among those who govern or deliver services on behalf of the state. But getting awareness raising right will mean going beyond 'doing no harm'; it will demand that researchers deepen their understanding of how beliefs about government are formed and how interventions shape them through further investigation.

- Future research should examine the extent to which these findings hold true beyond Jakarta. It may be that in other governance contexts citizens report different responses to positively and negatively toned messages about corruption.

- Further research could also examine whether repeated exposure to a message influences perceptions differently: how does prolonged exposure (for instance, in the form of an anticorruption film, or attendance at an all-day anticorruption event, or exposure over weeks or months) shape perceptions in intended or unintended ways?

- More could be done to investigate links between messages, perceptions and citizens' anticorruption activity.

The implications of this study clearly sit uncomfortably with hopes for using awareness raising to inspire civic anticorruption activism. However, if future research draws similar conclusions, this will radically challenge current thinking about how to effectively engage the public in the fight against corruption.

1

Introduction

In many developing countries, and especially in their major cities, residents are regularly presented with different messages about corruption. A simple commute through a major city is likely to involve passing billboards, posters and murals that contain messages about the ills corruption has caused, on the need to refuse to bribe, on the rights citizens have to report corruption and/or on who to call to report it to. Even in the privacy of the home, messages about corruption may seep in; the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in Indonesia, for example, funds corruption-themed films, television programmes and advertisements (Kuris, 2012)—and this is not an exceptional case.

Outside of these channels, people may even hear about anticorruption from their children. In several countries, anticorruption ethics programmes are targeted at primary school-age children. They are expected to raise the awareness of adults as well as youth: children are expected to go home and talk to their parents about resisting corruption (Kuris, 2012).[1]

Many of these messages are crafted by those hoping to control corruption, but in environments where the press enjoys some freedom there will also likely be frequent headlines that cover high-profile corruption scandals, news stories on the government's efforts to control corruption and, of course, coverage when a politician publicly brands another politician with the scarlet letter 'C'. Speaking of news coverage in Indonesia, Widjayanto, a professor at the University of Paramadina, commented, 'Nowadays, if you open the newspaper, my friend jokingly says, if there are 10 stories, then 11 will be about corruption' (Kuris, 2012).

Corruption's high profile is partly due to the success of the anticorruption awareness-raising agenda, which has achieved an extraordinary geographical reach and now has a prominent role in most anticorruption programmes. The agenda's call was codified in Article 13 of the 2004 United Nations Convention Against Corruption, wherein signatory states were instructed to 'raise public awareness regarding the existence, causes and gravity of and the threat posed by corruption'.

Several things remain unclear, however, about what effect, if any, the varying messages people have received about corruption have had. Of particular interest for the research presented here is whether and to what extent different messages about corruption shape perceptions of the corruption environment. At the most basic level, the extent to which messages about corruption shape perceptions is important because people act based on their expectations and beliefs. Influential messages could be harnessed as an important tool in the fight against corruption, depending on how they shape perceptions. It also may be the case that anticorruption messaging is backfiring: messages may shape perceptions in a way that ultimately discourages civic action. To understand if and how varying messages about corruption influence whether people choose to mobilise to fight corruption or engage in corrupt activity, we first have to understand how these messages influence the perceptions that people rely on to make those types of decisions.

We know little about how different messages about corruption shape beliefs about governance. However, a cornerstone of political psychology research is the demonstration that even subtle primes in messages can influence perceptions of political issues; as such, any message about corruption may prove very influential. On the other hand, it may be the case that messages about corruption are falling on deaf ears. Research on desensitisation suggests people can become numb to a message if they see it repeatedly and often. Research on motivated processing documents the tendency of certain people with respect to certain topics to discount new information if it challenges preconceived perceptions.

Only two studies have gauged how messages influence perceptions of corruption. Both are limited; they each test for the effect of only one type of message and collectively assess two types of perceptions (perceived levels of corruption and perceptions of the government) (Chong et al., 2015; Hawkins et al., 2015).

In contrast, using data from an original survey experiment—conducted across 1,000 households in Jakarta—the current study tests for the influence of four messages on four types of perceptions. The messages tested are on 1) corruption committed by high-profile public officials (*Grand corruption*); 2) the pervasiveness of low-level corruption (*Petty corruption*); 3) successes the government has had in controlling corruption (*Government success*); 4) and the various channels through

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1   The KPK's awareness-raising tactics are not exceptional; international donors and domestic anticorruption bodies have supported a similar set of activities in several countries (see ADB/OECD (n.d.), Pakistan Case for another example). The author learned in June 2014 of a child-focused anticorruption programme in Fiji.

which citizens can get involved to fight corruption (*Civic engagement*). The four categories of perceptions gauged are beliefs about 1) how corrupt the government is or has become (*Levels*); 2) what harm corruption has caused (*Consequences*); 3) how effective the government has been in fighting corruption (*Government efficacy*); and 4) what role ordinary citizens can play in fighting corruption (*Civic involvement*).

The experimental design makes it possible for the analysis to tease out an important potential causal relationship—that is, how these messages have shaped how people viewed corruption, the government and their own role in fighting corruption. The results raise considerable cause for concern with respect to the efficacy of anticorruption awareness raising. They can be summarised along three lines. First, the messages had little impact on perceptions of how corrupt the government is (*Levels*). Second, messages on the prevalence of corruption heightened worries about corruption's ill effects, depressed confidence in the government's fight against corruption and reduced the extent to which people thought it was easy for ordinary people to fight back. Third, and most surprisingly, the study shows that even positively framed messages about the fight against corruption could have similar negative influences on perceptions. The *Government success* and *Civic engagement* treatments also worked to increase worries about corruption's consequences, depressed pride in the government's efforts to fight corruption and reduced the extent to which people think it is easy for ordinary people to fight back.

The paper concludes with a discussion on how to make sense of these unexpected findings and the implications they have for anticorruption efforts and for future research.

2
Literature review

The potential power of perceptions

The study of how perceptions of the corruption environment are formed, shaped and maintained deserves the attention of both academic and policy-making audiences because, at the most basic level, 'agents base their actions on their perceptions, impressions, and views' (Kaufmann et al., 2009: 4). Several ideas have been developed on whether, how and why perceptions of corruption have influenced the political actions of ordinary citizens. Optimistically, for example, many anticorruption campaigners hope raising awareness of pervasive corruption will motivate the public to get involved in the civic anticorruption movement or at least reject opportunities to engage in corruption (Peiffer & Alvarez, 2016). Those espousing greater transparency as a measure to fight corruption similarly assume both that citizens will both disapprove of the corrupt acts revealed and that this disapproval will translate into a willingness to become active in the effort to hold corrupt officials accountable (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014).

Many others warn that popular worries about the pervasiveness of corruption may instead result in unsavoury outcomes. Persson, Rothstein and Teorell (2013), among others, argue that the more people perceive corruption to be widespread, the more they will participate in corruption themselves and the less confident they will be that their own efforts to control corruption will work (see also Bauhr & Nasiritousi, 2011; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2011; Rothstein, 2011). The first concern—that perceptions of corruption as pervasive will lead to more corrupt behaviour—is rooted in the logic that, when people believe corruption is a widespread problem, they may think resisting it will 1) be sanctioned socially (for deviating from the perceived norm); 2) mean they will have to either pay more or wait longer for a service than someone else who has engaged in corruption; 3) result in being refused a needed service altogether; and/or 4) miss out on an opportunity to gain from a corrupt exchange from which others will benefit.

Speaking to this concern, several studies on bribery have established that perceptions of high levels of corruption are positively associated with the likelihood of paying a bribe (Mocan, 2008; Morris, 2008; Hunt & Laszlo, 2012; Peiffer & Rose, 2014).[2] Being survey-based analyses, however, these studies have not been able to nail down the causal direction: while it seems plausible that people prepare themselves to pay a bribe when they think it will be expected of them, the association may speak to the fact that having to pay a bribe increases how corrupt a person perceives the government to be (Peiffer & Rose, 2016: 17). Attempting to tease the causal direction out, using a survey experiment in Costa Rica, Gingerich et al. (2015) found respondents who had been exposed to a message that depicted a high rate of co-nationals paying bribes were more likely to state that they would pay a bribe than those who had not been. The results of this particular study, while not generalisable beyond the Costa Ricans surveyed, do indicate that there may be good cause for this particular concern.

Peiffer and Alvarez (2016) describe the second concern—that perceptions of corruption as widespread reduce willingness to fight it. A feeling of corruption being the norm may induce 'corruption fatigue': 'instead of motivating people to voice their discontent with how pervasive corruption is, people become less motivated to do anything to counter it' (ibid.: 353). The idea here is that, when people think corruption is widespread, they may become overwhelmed by the problem and sceptical as to whether it can and/or will ever be effectively tackled. At the very minimum, they may doubt that their individual actions will do much to change the corruption tide. Speaking to the potential validity of this concern, using data from the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, Peiffer and Alvarez (2016) find that, in developing countries, perceptions of corruption being widespread are associated with an unwillingness to protest corruption, report it to the authorities and pay more for a product produced by a company that has not engaged in corruption.

There is also research that suggests perceptions of corruption may negatively influence political engagement: when citizens feel corruption is practised widely, they may be more likely to be politically cynical and, as a result, disengage from the political system (Andersson & Heywood, 2006). The worry here is that people will wash their hands of trying to engage with a political system they think is being bought. To this end, Bauhr and Grimes (2014) found that, in countries where corruption is prevalent and there are higher levels of transparency, citizens tend to have less political interest, want to be less politically

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2   A related study is that of Dong, Dulleck and Torgler (2012), who, using data from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey, show that the more respondents perceive their compatriots as engaging in corruption, the more tolerant they are towards someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties.

involved and have lower trust in the state. This finding is interpreted as meaning that, *because* the citizens in these countries have access to information about the high levels of corruption that occur, they have become politically resigned, rather than inspired.[3] Along this vein of interpretation, using experimental methods, others have found that, when people are exposed to information about the corrupt activity of a candidate, they are less likely to vote (Figueiredo et al., 2011; Chong et al., 2015). However, in other experimental studies, exposure to corruption information led people to say they would punish the implicated politicians at the polls (Ferraz & Finan, 2008; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013).[4]

How might messages shape perceptions?

Awareness-raising messages are meant to inspire civic activism through their impact on beliefs about corruption and the larger governance environment. Research on desensitisation and motivated processing, however, gives us reason to believe that such efforts may struggle to be effective. Especially in environments where people are inundated with messages about corruption, an additional message about corruption may not have any impact at all: people may have already become desensitised. 'In general terms, desensitisation refers to the gradual reduction in responsiveness to an arousal-eliciting stimulus as a function of repeated exposure' (Krane et al., 2011). If a person has become desensitised to a message about corruption deeply harming development, for example, even if such a message initially heightened fears about corruption's consequences, their additional exposure to similar messages will not necessarily stimulate worries at all, and certainly will not stimulate worries to the same degree as with the initial exposure.

A second reason why exposure to corruption messages may not influence perceptions of the corruption environment is that people tend to ignore information that disagrees with certain perceptions they have already formed (Meffert et al., 2006; Taber & Lodge 2006; Taber et al., 2009; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). Motivated processing (sometimes called motivated bias) describes the tendency of people to discount information that upsets how they have come to view the world. So, to apply this to the subject at hand, if someone has come to view the government's efforts to fight corruption as ineffective, and they are exposed to a message that touts the government's achievements in fighting corruption, they may not, fully or at all, take the message's information about success into consideration. If they are motivated processors, when evaluating the government's efforts, instead of using new information about the government's achievements, they will recall only the failures that previously so strongly shaped their opinion of the government's efforts.

From these two concepts—desensitisation and motivated processing—an overarching null hypothesis is articulated:

> *H0: Exposure to a message about corruption will have no influence on perceptions of the corruption environment.*

However, plenty of other research suggests that even the simplest messages about corruption can significantly shape perceptions. Much experimental political psychology literature shows that political messages, and the ways in which these messages are framed, can have significant influences on attitudes and behaviour on a subconscious level—that is, outside of the awareness of citizens (Berinsky et al., 2010; Nosek et al., 2010; Carter et al., 2011). Arguably, messages about corruption are especially poised to be influential. According to Erisen, Lodge and Taber's (2014) review of experimental social psychological literature, messages are likely to have a large subconscious impact when they are centred on a topic that may be tainted by social desirability biases. Corruption itself—as an abstract concept—is socially undesirable. Cross-national survey responses to questions about how wrong bribery is tend to show that the vast majority of people condemn bribery as being morally reprehensible (Rose & Peiffer, 2015: 21-22). Moreover, especially those messages crafted by anticorruption government bodies or civil society frame corruption as being socially undesirable.

Messages have also been found to be impactful, on a subconscious level, when they go noticed but are not recognised as particularly influential (Erisen et al., 2014). If this is the case, even in an environment of inundation by messages about corruption, a single message may impact perceptions, even if it has not necessarily 'stood out' among the rest.[5] The counter, general, hypothesis then follows:

3   Galtung and Tisne (2009: 100) warn that negative beliefs about failed anticorruption reforms may have a similar impact: 'corruption-aware-ness campaigns—complete with radio spots, billboards, newspaper ads, and leaflets in schools—are frequently mounted in an attempt to rein in graft. In post-war settings, however, bringing attention to the problem risks doing more harm than good: By raising expectations for reform, such campaigns, if they do not succeed, can have a destabilizing impact, fuelling cynicism about the state and politicians.'

4   Also using a survey experiment, though this time in Spain, Anduiza, Gallego and Munoz (2013) found information about corruption scandals negatively influenced evaluations of the involved politician, though the effects were tempered both by partisanship and by the political awareness of the respondents. In Uttar Pradesh, Banerjee et al. (2010) found for citizens who had been exposed, a message of encouragement to vote for 'clean' politicians failed to have an impact on prospective voting.

5   Others have found that repeated exposure to messages can lead to stronger or cumulative effects on perceptions (see Lecheler & de Veresse, 2013 for a review of this literature). This may be because, if a message has an initial impact on perceptions, then repeated exposure to the message or a similar message will cause a recall of the initial reaction to the message, heightening its salience and thereby reinforcing its original impact (Cappela & Jamieson, 1997; Price & Tewsbury, 1997). Price and Tewsbury 1997: 199) articulate the effect as being 'when particular constructs become subject to routine activation and use over time, via applica-bility and accessibility, then there is certainly the potential for long-term and perhaps cumulative effects'.

H1: Exposure to a message about corruption will significantly shape perceptions of the corruption environment.

Messages about corruption can take different tones. For instance, messages that encourage citizens to get involved may take a positive empowering 'you can make a difference' tone, whereas messages from a headline news account of a corruption scandal can take a very negative 'elites caught stealing public money' tone. If messages do influence perceptions, should we expect differential effects based on the tone of the message? Erisen et al. (2014) argue perceptions are cognitively formed at an early stage of processing information and, during that early stage, either positive or negative feelings about the subject and environment are aroused. Describing this process, at a subconscious level, 'positively valenced primes spread activation to considerations in memory that are themselves positively charged, while negative stimuli tend to activate negative considerations' (190). Relating this to corruption messages, it suggests those with a positive tone will elicit positive perceptions and those with a negative tone negative perceptions.

H1a: Exposure to a positive/negative message about corruption will have a positive/negative influence on perceptions of the corruption environment.

Research on corruption messaging

So far, very little research has been done on how messages about corruption influence perceptions of the corruption environment. Two exceptions stand out. In Lima, Peru, Hawkins et al. (2015) exposed a convenience sample of survey respondents to 'transparency information'—information on how money is spent and what procedures exist to execute policies—from government websites. They found that exposure to transparency information about the government increased positive perceptions of the government's fight against corruption but had no impact on perceived levels of corruption. Somewhat similarly, Chong et al. (2015) examined whether information about mayoral corruption in Mexico influenced perceptions of corruption levels. They report that, for the most part, their corruption information treatment did not influence the degree to which people thought the municipal government was dishonest.

Going beyond what these studies have done, the present study makes two main contributions. First, in exposing survey respondents to four different types of messages about corruption, it is able to examine whether and how different messages about corruption affect perceptions. Hawkins et al. and Chong et al. each expose citizens to only one type of message. Second, the present study goes beyond gauging how messages affect perceptions of how prevalent corruption is (Hawkins et al. and Chong et al.) or how well the government has done in fighting corruption (Hawkins et al.), and adds to these an examination of how exposure to different messages influences perceptions of the consequences of corruption and whether an ordinary citizen can make a difference in the fight against it. Arguably, these two perceptions are both potentially extremely important. In the same way that messages about how prevalent corruption is can potentially induce 'corruption fatigue', messages about the harm corruption has caused may provoke a sense of being overwhelmed by the entirety of the problem, and reduce willingness to fight it. Messages that positively shape the belief that ordinary people may perhaps be instrumental in controlling corruption may work to counter any 'corruption fatigue' that exists.

3

Method

To test how different messages about corruption influence perceptions of the corruption environment, an experimental study was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia. Indonesia was chosen as the site for the test for a few reasons. First, corruption is thought to be a considerable problem there. Second, corruption tends to be discussed socially and is not a taboo topic; as such, it was assumed that responses to the survey questions had a good chance of being honest reflections of beliefs. Third, the government's KPK has led a very public and, by some accounts, successful fight against corruption. This was important given the interest the study had in examining the impact a message about genuine government success in fighting corruption might have on perceptions.

The study ran from 8 June 2015 to 7 July 2015. It recruited 1,000 participants from different households within Jakarta. Working with the Regional Economic Development Institute, the study identified 100 villages within Jakarta, with the aim of recruiting subjects from different socioeconomic backgrounds: 35 were considered relatively 'low income', 45 'middle income', 15 'higher income' and 5 of a 'very high income'. Ten households in each village were selected, by choosing every fifth household encountered by the enumerator who was walking through the village.

Sample characteristics

Of this sample, 9% were under 25 years old, 24% were between 25 and 35 years old, 30% were between 36 and 45 years old, 21% were between 46 and 55 years old, 13% were between 56 and 65 years old and the rest (3%) were over the age of 65. A small percentage of the sample (2%) had no formal education, 14% had completed primary school only, 67% had completed secondary school, and the rest (17%) either had some university education or had completed university education. Twenty-eight percent of the sample reported a household monthly income of below 3 million IDR, 29% reported between 3 and 6 million IDR, 18% between 6 and 9 million IDR, 13% between 9 and 12 million IDR, and 10% over 12 million IDR. The sample was split evenly between males and females.

To the extent to which they were available, the demographic statistics of the sample can be compared with statistics for all of Indonesia, reported by the World Bank's World Development Indicators (most recent year available). According to these indicators, close to 100% of the adult population have completed primary school and 81% have completed lower secondary school. These statistics are fairly consistent with the sample of subjects used here. Also, 93% of the Indonesian adult population are between 15 and 64 years old, and 7% are over 65 years old. The sample of subjects in this experiment, therefore, seems to be slightly younger. While this and other potential differences not unearthed should be kept in mind when drawing generalisations from this study, there is no expectation that this difference will affect the efficacy of the experiment.

Design

Participants in the study were randomly assigned to one of five groups: *Control* (no treatment), *Grand corruption* (treatment designed to raise awareness of corruption scandals involving high-profile officials and large sums of money), *Petty corruption* (treatment designed to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of bribery by ordinary citizens and local-level corruption), *Government success* (treatment designed to raise awareness of successes the KPK specifically has had in fighting corruption) and *Civic engagement* (treatment designed to raise awareness of the opportunities and the ease with which ordinary citizens could participate in civic-based anticorruption activities) (n=200 for each group). Difference of means tests on basic demographic indicators revealed no significant differences among the five groups with respect to the demographic data collected.

Eleven professional enumerators from the Regional Economic Development Institute visited the selected households. They read to the subjects a short introductory paragraph that described the study's aims to 'learn what citizens think about public services and the experiences they have had with public officials'. It was explained that the responses to the questions on the survey would be treated confidentially, that the interview would likely take a maximum of 15 minutes and that, if at any time they wanted to, the subject could stop answering the questions posed. The subjects were then asked basic socio-demographic questions. In the *Grand corruption, Petty corruption, Government* success or *Civic engagement*

groups, the demographic questions were followed by, depending on the preference of the subject, either the enumerator reading the respective treatment paragraphs to the subjects or the subject reading the treatment themselves. After exposure to the treatment (or not for those in the control group, which proceeded immediately to the next set of questions), the subjects were then asked questions about their perceptions of corruption.[6]

Treatments

The *Grand corruption* treatment sought to raise awareness of many corruption scandals involving high-profile public officials and large sums of money. It mentioned scandals that were the subject of front-page news in Indonesia. Part of the rationale for this particular treatment came from the 2011 advice of Alun Jones, then Chief of Communication and Advocacy for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Jones advised that anticorruption awareness raising should take advantage of big corruption scandals by publicising them in their efforts to call attention to the issue. The treatment paragraph read:

> 'Corruption continues to undermine the economy, the quality of services, and the capacity of the government to reduce poverty in this country. A recent report notes that 'never in Indonesian history have there been so many politicians imprisoned for corruption, often together with officials and businesspeople.' Recent corruption cases include a former Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court taking billions of rupiahs in bribes and the Sport Minister being involved in a multi-billion rupiah corruption scandal.'

The *Petty corruption* treatment exposed subjects to statements meant to heighten awareness about the widespread prevalence of 'local-level' corruption that involved ordinary citizens. This treatment was included because bribery and other 'local-level' corruption are the types of corruption that ordinary people tend to have direct experience with, and corruption fatigue is hypothesised as being triggered when people believe their peers in society (not just elites) are engaging in corruption (Persson et al., 2013). The treatment used statistics produced and publicised by Transparency International. It read:

> 'Corruption continues to undermine the economy, the quality of services, and the capacity of the government to reduce poverty in this country. Local-level corruption is considered to be widespread across all public services and agencies. According to a recent survey, 43% of Indonesians have had to pay a bribe to a government official in the past year and 70% believe that this type of corruption has increased in the last two years.'

The *Government success* treatment aimed to raise awareness of achievements made by the Indonesian government, and specifically the KPK, in fighting corruption. It was tested because Peiffer and Alvarez (2016) found perceptions of government effectiveness in fighting corruption were positively associated with a greater willingness to fight corruption. It read:

> 'The government has received praise from the international community for its recent successes in fighting corruption. The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), especially, has an impressive record of attacking corruption. Since the KPK was established it has arrested nearly 400 people on charges of corruption, and has achieved a 100% conviction rate. In the first 6 months of 2014 the KPK recovered 2.8 trillion rupiah of stolen government money.'

The *Civic engagement* treatment included statements to emphasise the many things citizens can do to join in the fight against corruption and was included as an attempt to echo messages that anticorruption civic campaigns often publicise to try to empower ordinary citizens to fight corruption. It read:

> 'Now, more than ever before, ordinary citizens are finding it easy to get involved in the fight against corruption. If corruption is witnessed, ordinary citizens can either call or text the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK)'s 1575 corruption hotline, and those that do are guaranteed to remain anonymous and the information shared confidential. People have the right to access government information and last year the government launched an online data portal to make it even easier for the public to access government budgets and documents. Also, several vibrant anticorruption organisations exist across the country; citizens can get further involved by becoming a member of these organisations or attending their events, like the annual anticorruption week events or rallies held on International Anticorruption Day.'

All of the facts cited in the treatments were drawn from news and political reports, or from the results of Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer.

Dependent variables

Four categories of perceptions were scrutinised, with two questions on the survey asked of each category. Table 1 displays the exact wording of each perception question, the range of response options and the mean response score given by the full sample of respondents (Appendix 1 provides full distribution figures).

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6   Ethical approval was obtained at the University of Birmingham for the study prior to it being conducted.

Perceptions of corruption levels were gauged by means of responses to a question about how common corruption was believed to be among public officials and whether levels had changed in the previous two years. The mean responses to both of these questions revealed that the average respondent thought corruption was common and levels had stayed the same over the previous two years.

Two questions were included to capture the extent to which respondents were concerned over whether corruption—grand and petty, respectively—was harming development in Indonesia. The average respondent expressed that they were 'somewhat worried' about the negative consequences corruption had had on development in Indonesia.

In order to assess perceptions of the government's efforts to fight corruption, one question asked about how proud the respondent was of the government's efforts and another asked for an opinion on whether the government was 'all talk but no action' on the issue of fighting corruption. The average respondent was paradoxically somewhat proud of the government's efforts and tended to slightly agree with the idea that the government had done very little to reduce corruption.[7]

The final category of perceptions gauged referenced civic engagement in the anticorruption movement. The first question in this category asked for an opinion as to how easy it was for an 'ordinary citizen' to get involved, and the second whether respondents thought ordinary people could make a difference in the fight against corruption. The average respondent agreed it was easy to get involved and ordinary people could make a difference.

Estimation strategy

Pair-wise difference of means tests were conducted to determine the extent to which the treatments affected the dependent variable responses. These analyses test for whether the mean response each group gave to each respective dependent variable question was statistically different to the mean response all other groups gave. If a statistically significant difference is detected, it is then concluded that the associated treatments had differential impacts in terms of shaping the perception gauged. The use of this type of analysis is appropriate when it is possible to assume that the only differences between the groups are that they received different treatments in the experiment (or did not receive a treatment, in the case of the control group). This assumption is made in this case based on the fact that no significant differences were found among the five groups with respect to the demographic questions posed at the beginning of the survey. Given the size of the sample (1,000 respondents), a difference in means is considered statistically significant at the less than 0.05 p-value level.

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7   As the full distribution shows (Appendix 1), the responses present a bit of a puzzle: a fairly high percentage of respondents expressed some degree of pride in the government's efforts and a similarly high percentage also agreed with the notion that the government was all talk and little action on the matter.

Table 1 Dependent variable questions

Perception category	Label	Wording	Response options	Mean response
Corruption levels	Corruption common	Taking into account your own experience or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is…	1 very uncommon to 5 very common	4.1 (closest to 'common')
	Corruption change	Over the past two years how has the level of corruption in Indonesia changed?	1 decreased a lot to 5 increased a lot	3.4 (closest to 'stayed the same')
Corruption's consequences	Grand corruption's harm	How worried are you that grand corruption is harming development in Indonesia? By grand corruption, I mean corrupt acts involving large sums of money, committed by high profile public officials.	1 not worried at all to 4 very worried.	3.4 (closest to 'somewhat worried')
	Petty corruption's harm	How worried are you that petty corruption is harming development in Indonesia? By petty corruption, I mean bribes paid by ordinary citizens and corrupt acts committed by local level public officials.	1 not worried at all to 4 very worried.	3.2 (closest to 'somewhat worried')
Government efficacy	Pride in government's efforts	How proud are you of the government's efforts to control corruption?	1 not at all proud to 4 very proud.	2.4 (closest to 'somewhat proud')
	All talk, no action	How strongly do you disagree or agree with the following statement: there is much talk from the government about fighting corruption but very little is done to actually reduce corruption?	1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.	3.5 (between 'neither' and 'agree')
Civic involvement	Easy to get involved	How much do you agree with the following statement: it is now easier than ever for an ordinary citizen like me to report corruption or attend rallies against corruption?	1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.	3.7 (closest to 'agree')
	Ordinary people can make a difference	How much do you agree with the following statement: ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption?	1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.	3.7 (closest to 'agree')

(*Note*: Mean response scores reflect the full sample's mean response.)

4

Results

Little effect on perceptions of corruption levels

The messages had very little influence on perceptions of levels of corruption. Figure 1 displays the mean response each group had to the 'corruption common' question, as well each mean's confidence intervals (95% level). As the difference in means in Table 2 shows, no statistically significant differences were found between the mean responses of the groups to the question of how common corruption is in government. This means that, irrespective of whether a group was exposed to a treatment, and which one, all groups tended to perceive corruption as similarly common.

Correspondingly, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean response given to the question of how corruption levels had changed in the previous two years between the *Control* and each of the treatment groups (Figure 2, Table 2). In other words, those not exposed to a message about corruption tended to hold the same perception of whether corruption levels had changed as those who had been exposed to the four different messages. The idea that messages have little impact on the perceived level of corruption is not entirely surprising; as discussed earlier, the two studies that have examined perceptions of corruption using experimental methods draw a similar conclusion. Hawkins et al. (2015) found transparency information had had no impact on perceived levels of corruption, and Chong et al. (2015) found information about mayoral corruption had done little to influence perceptions of how dishonest the government was.

There was, however, a statistically significant difference between the mean responses to the question about whether corruption had increased between the *Petty corruption* group and the *Government success* group (p-value: 0.030). Compared with the *Petty corruption* group, the *Government success* group, on average, was less likely to think corruption had increased in the previous two years (see Figure 2). The difference between the two groups' mean responses is quite large—almost a quarter of a point (on a five-point scale). This finding aligns well with the H1a hypothesis; the *Petty corruption* treatment—a negatively toned message—elicits a more negative perception of corruption being on the rise—whereas the positive message of the *Government success* group did the opposite. Given that this is the only pair of groups for which a significant difference is found, however, caution should be used when judging the weight of this particular finding.

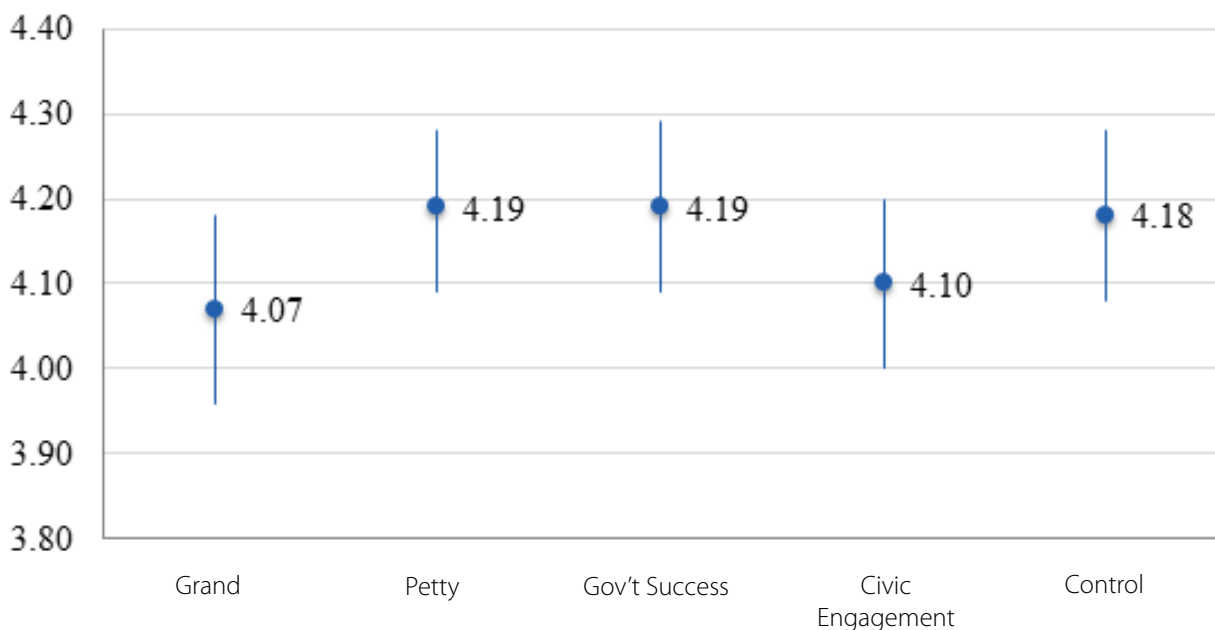### Figure 1: Mean responses to 'corruption common'
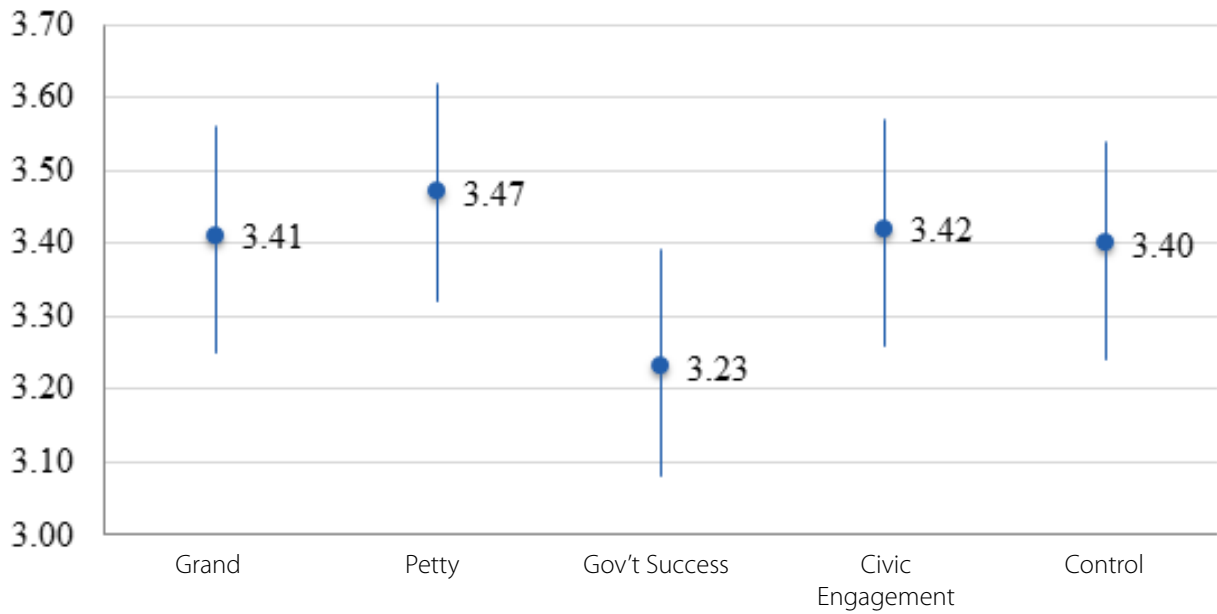
Figure 2: Mean responses to 'corruption change'

Table 2 Full results from pairwise difference in means tests

	Corruption common		Corruption increased		Grand corruption		Petty corruption		Pride in gov't		All talk, no action		Easy to engage		Ordinary people make diff.	
	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV	C	PV
Petty vs. Grand	.12	.117	.06	.567	-.04	.576	.06	.450	.02	.837	.15	.090	-.08	.347	.09	.194
Gov't vs. Grand	.12	.113	-.18	.111	-.07	.382	-.04	.661	.13	.116	-.05	.572	.01	.944	.06	.370
Civic vs. Grand	.03	.729	.01	.949	-.13	.084	-.14	.072	.14	.096	.04	.673	-.05	.533	.02	.793
Control vs. Grand	.11	.132	-.02	.891	-.16	.038	-.36	.000	.76	.000	-.03	.712	.15	.071	-.02	.807
Gov't vs. Petty	.00	.980	-.24	.030	-.02	.751	-.10	.235	.12	.170	-.20	.024	.08	.314	-.03	.682
Civic vs. Petty	-.09	.223	-.06	.612	-.09	.243	-.20	.011	.12	.144	-.11	.201	.03	.752	-.07	.298
Control vs. Petty	-.00	.956	-.08	.478	-.12	.128	-.42	.000	.74	.000	-.18	.039	.22	.006	-.11	.123
Civic vs. Gov't	-.09	.215	.18	.097	-.06	.397	-.11	.175	.01	.924	.09	.322	-.06	.490	-.04	.525
Control vs. Gov't	-.01	.935	.16	.145	-.09	.230	-.33	.000	.62	.000	.02	.844	.14	.084	-.08	.253
Control vs. Civic	.09	.246	-.02	.841	-.03	.724	-.22	.007	.62	.000	-.07	.428	.20	.016	-.04	.611
Std err	.07		.11		.08		.08		.09		.09		.08		.07	

C: Contrast; PV: P-value.

Some unexpected effects on perceptions of corruption's consequences

The messages had both expected and unexpected influences on perceptions of corruption's consequences. As expected, the difference in means, displayed in Figure 3, and the means tests of Table 2 reveal that exposure to the *Grand corruption* message heightened worries about the harm high-profile corruption was having on development in Indonesia; the *Grand corruption* group's mean response was significantly higher to that question than the *Control's*. The effect, however, is modest: the difference in means is less than a fifth of a point on the four-point scale. Those exposed to the *Petty corruption* message were also significantly more worried about petty corruption's harm on development (Figure 4 and Table 2) than those in the *Control*. In this case, the difference in means is much larger: .42 points. These results are quite intuitive; they show that exposure to information about the widespread prevalence of a type of corruption will likely raise concerns as to the negative influence that type of corruption is having on development more widely.

Perhaps more interestingly, however, is that, across both questions, there is no statistically significant difference between the mean response given by the *Government success* group and that given by the *Petty corruption* group, or between the mean response given by the *Government success* group and that given by the *Grand corruption* group. Put another way, the tests indicate that messages that promote government's success have an influence in heightening worries about corruption's consequences that is statistically indistinguishable from that of messages that publicise how widespread the problems of corruption are. Moreover, in the case of responses to the question about the harm petty corruption is causing, those exposed to the *Government success* treatment were significantly more worried about petty corruption's harm than those in the *Control* (significant difference in means, p-value: 0.000). The effect is quite large too: there is a third of a point difference between the two means. This means that messages that promote the government's wins in the fight against corruption will have a similar influence in terms of heightening worries about corruption's harmful effects to those that raise awareness of the widespread nature of corruption. While unexpected, these are not necessarily unintuitive findings. Especially if people are prone to be motivated processors when it comes to information about corruption, awareness-raising messages promoting success may cause them to recall already formed opinions about all of the corruption problems the government has had to deal with as it has built its record of success, as well as those that it still has to tackle.

Those exposed to the *Civic engagement* treatment were also significantly more worried about petty corruption's harm to development than the *Control* (p-value: 0.007), which again shows that a 'positive message' can also heighten worries about corruption's consequences. As the difference in means in Table 2 shows, the effect of the *Civic engagement* treatment on worries about petty corruption is much smaller (a difference in means of a fifth of a point); while the treatment significantly heightened worries about harm (compared with in the *Control*), it did not do so to the same degree that the *Grand corruption, Petty corruption* or even *Government success* treatments did.

Both the expected and the unexpected findings are potentially very important for understanding the role messages may play in encouraging a civic fight against corruption. If worries about corruption's consequences tend to promote a sense of corruption fatigue, then these findings suggest that those working to rally a popular anticorruption movement may be safer not investing in any awareness campaigns about corruption. Even 'positive' messages about the fight against corruption may work to heighten concerns about corruption's ill effects.

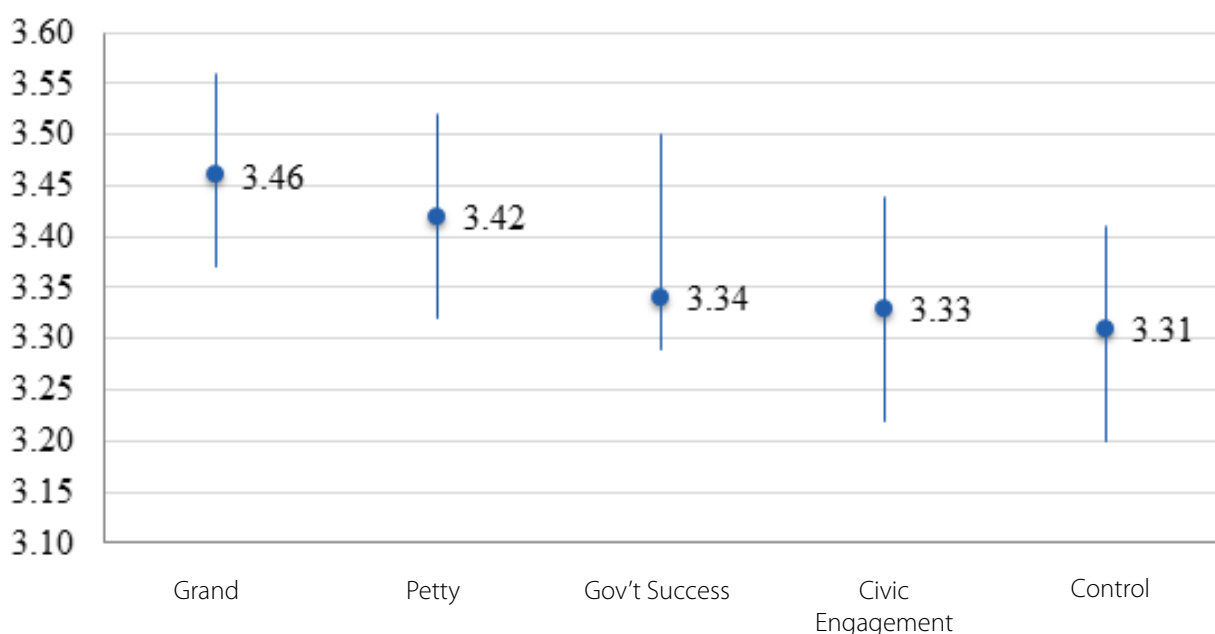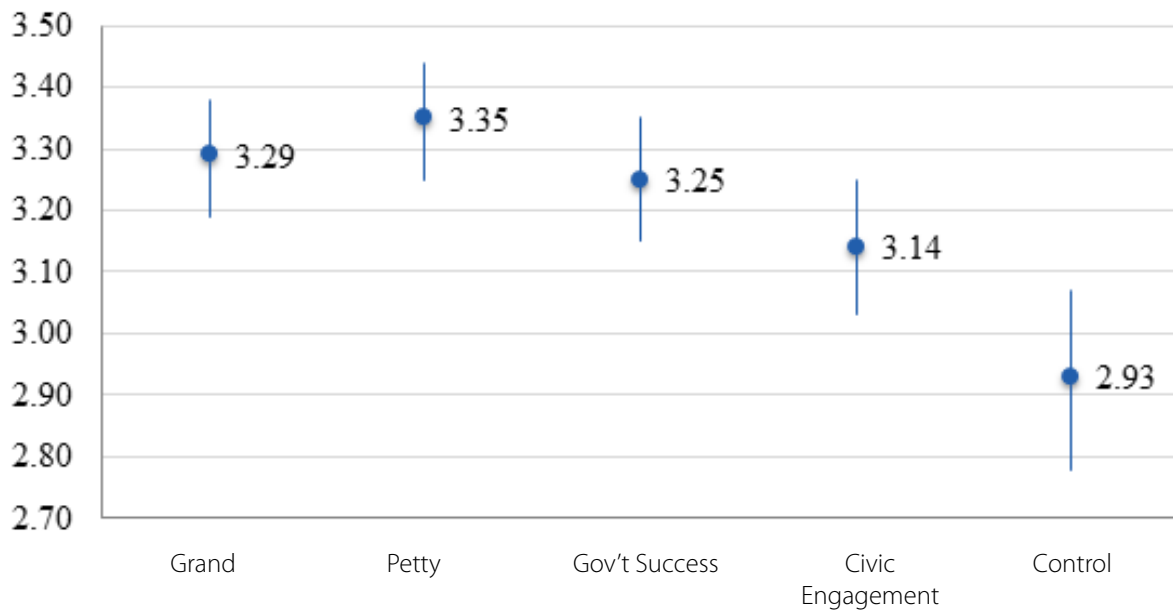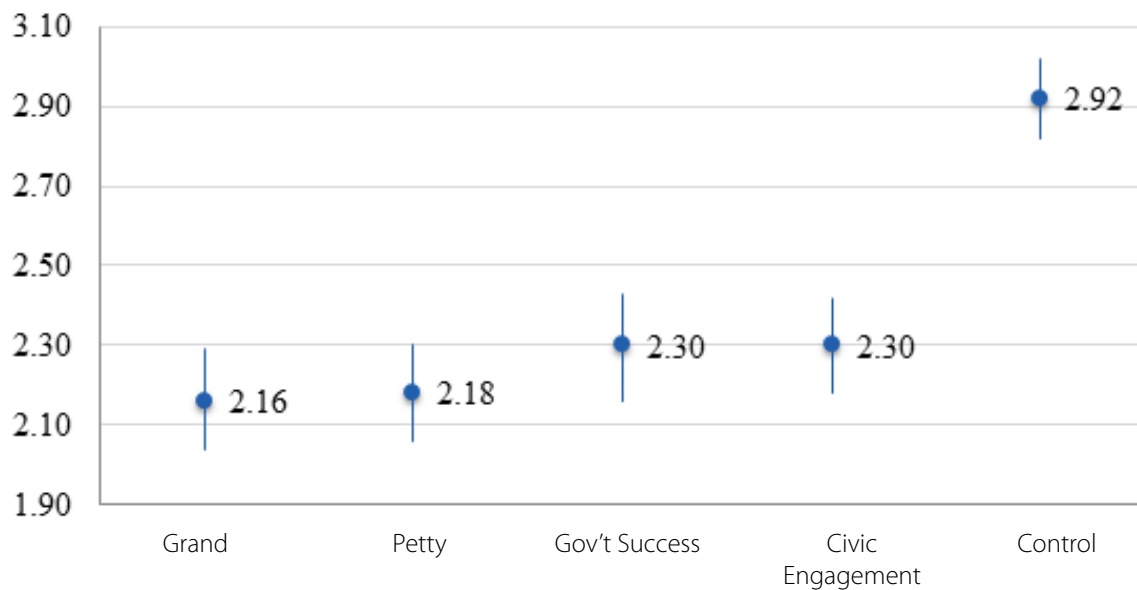### Figure 3: Mean responses to 'grand corruption's harm'

Figure 4: Mean responses to 'petty corruption's harm'

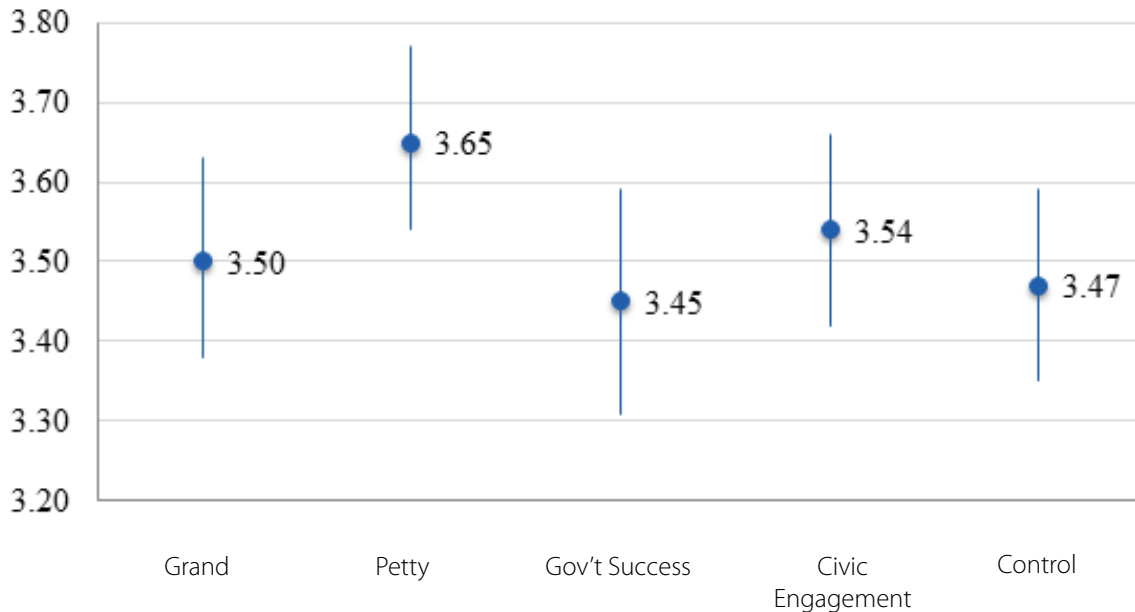## Reduced pride in government anticorruption efforts

The messages had differential influences on responses to the two questions referencing the government's fight against corruption. As Figure 5 and the difference in means test results of Table 2 show, all of the messages negatively influenced pride in the government's efforts to control corruption. Compared with the *Control's* mean response, all the treatment groups indicated that they had statistically significantly lower levels of pride in the government's efforts. Equally important to note is that there was no significant difference between the four treatment groups' mean responses to this question. Statistically speaking, this means each message had the same impact on pride in the government's efforts to tackle corruption. The estimated differences in means between the treatment groups and the *Control* were quite large too, ranging from 0.62 to 0.76 points (on a four-point scale).

Figure 5: Mean responses to 'pride in government's efforts'

As with the findings related to concern over corruption's consequences, these findings are both expected and unexpected. On the one hand, it is expected that negatively framed messages about the widespread prevalence of corruption (*Grand corruption* and *Petty corruption*) will prompt a reduction in pride in the government's efforts to tackle it; these messages remind people of or bring awareness to the fact that widespread corruption persists, in spite of the government's efforts. On the other hand, however, the results show that positively framed messages had the same impact. Even the treatment that explicitly cites successes that the government has had in fighting corruption worked to significantly reduce pride in the government's efforts. Once again, it may be the case that, mentioning corruption at all, even in a 'positive' tone referencing the fight against corruption, may prime citizens to recall negative feelings about corruption and anticorruption efforts.
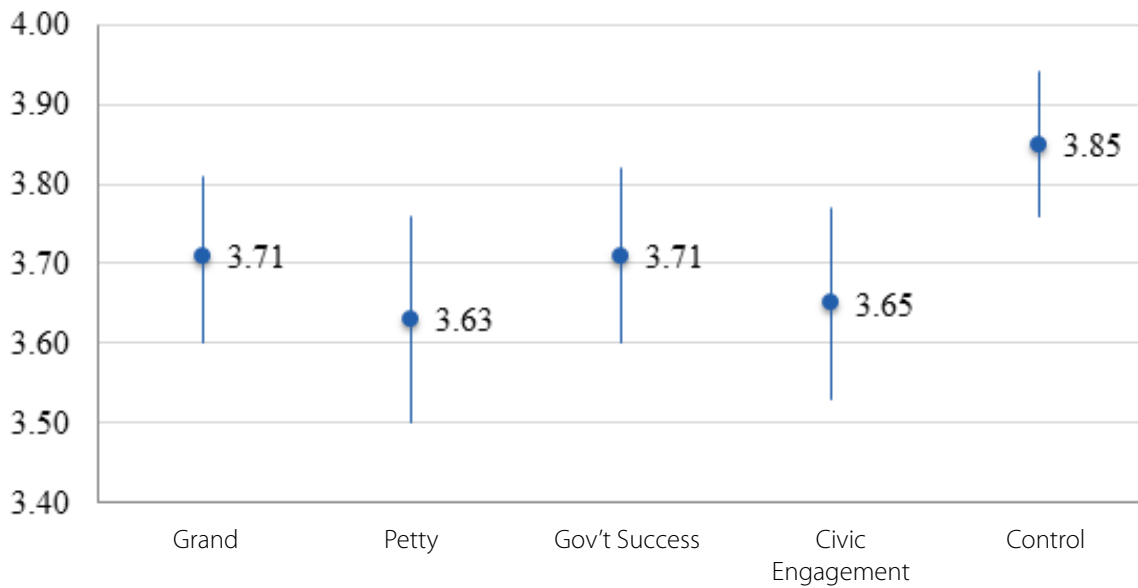
Figure 6: Mean responses to 'all talk, no action'

There were less robust effects when testing what influence the messages had on a perception of the government 'being all talk and no action' in the fight against corruption. As Table 2 and Figure 6 show, most treatments failed to have an influence on this perception. There were no significant differences between most of the groups' mean responses to this question and the *Control* mean response. The exception in this case is for the *Petty corruption* treatment, which worked to particularly erode confidence in the government's efforts as being genuine. Those exposed to the *Petty corruption* treatment were, on average, significantly more likely to agree with the idea that the government was 'all talk and no action' when it came to corruption than those in the *Control*. The effect here, too, was modest: the difference in means between the two groups (*Petty corruption* mean: 3.65, *Control* mean: 3.47) was less than a fifth of a point (on a five-point scale).
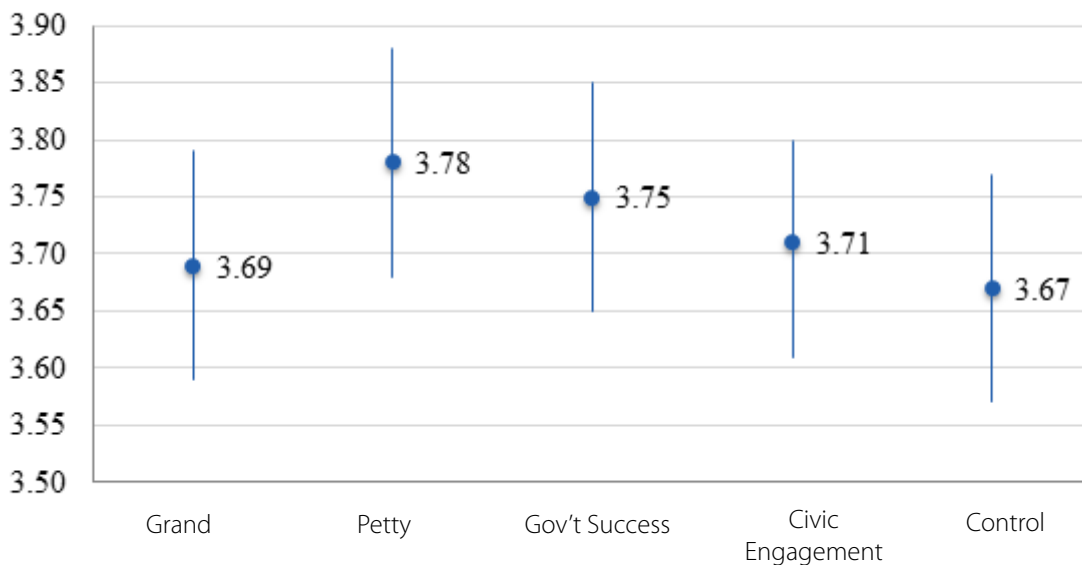
Reduced belief that fight against corruption easy to join

The messages also had differential influences on responses to the two questions on perceptions of civic engagement in the fight against corruption. The difference in means tests indicate that half of the messages work to significantly depress the perception that it is easy for an ordinary person to get involved in the fight against corruption. Compared with the *Control's* mean response, the *Petty corruption* and *Civic engagement* groups had statistically significantly (less than 0.05 p-value) lower levels of agreement with the idea that it was 'easy to get involved' in the fight against corruption (see also Figure 7). The other two treatment groups'—*Grand corruption* and *Government success*—mean response to this question was less than that of the *Control*, but the differences between these treatment groups' mean response and that of the *Control* are significant at the p-value <0.10 level. It is particularly important here that there is no significant difference between the four treatment groups' mean responses to this question. This, once again, means each message had the same (statistically indistinguishable) impact on this perception.

Figure 7: Mean responses to 'easy to join'

While perhaps it is unsurprising that messages emphasising the prevalence of grand and petty corruption have a depressive influence on the perception that it is easy to be personally involved in tackling corruption, it is, once again, surprising that the positively toned messages have a negative influence on this perception. Even those exposed to the message that emphasises the channels through which people can be involved (*Civic engagement*) agreed less, on average, with the statement than those who were not exposed to a treatment at all. The fairly robust effect across all of the treatment groups again demonstrates that positively toned messages may have unexpected, and potentially unintended, influences on perceptions of the corruption environment. Arguably, this particular perception is most important for understanding how messaging may influence action; in the words of Panth (2011: 1), 'citizens generally must believe that they can actually do something about corruption in order to summon the courage to act upon that belief'.

In contrast with these significant results, all of the messages failed to have a significant influence on perceptions as to whether ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption; there were no significant differences recorded between the means of any of the groups (between treatment groups and the *Control* and between treatment group pairs) to this question (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Mean responses to 'ordinary people make a difference'

5

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this experiment feed into three broad lessons. First, perceptions about how corrupt a government is seem fairly stable: the results of this study show that, irrespective of the tone of the message someone is exposed to, a new message about the corruption environment is unlikely to change how corrupt they think their government is. Those hoping that their messages will shape this perception should take heed. This result warns that investing in awareness raising may risk wasting resources.

Second, reports about the prevalence of grand and petty corruption seem to evoke 'corruption fatigue'; exposure to these messages heightened respondents' worries about the ill effects corruption was having on development, depressed their confidence in the government's fight against corruption and reduced the extent to which they thought it was easy for ordinary people to fight corruption. These findings are both intuitive and instructive. They suggest that messages about how widespread corruption is may not fire up the masses, but instead trigger or intensify a growing sense of resignation, which will ultimately undermine grassroots anticorruption efforts. Moreover, as the *Grand corruption* treatment was most similar to news reporting on corruption, these findings also suggest that anticorruption efforts may be hindered by the way the media covers corruption.

Third, and potentially most interesting, even positively framed messages about the fight against corruption may have some surprising and unintended effects on people's perceptions of the corruption environment. The *Government success* and *Civic engagement* messages had the same negative effects on respondents' perceptions as the other messages. This is remarkable, as these 'positive' messages were designed to do the opposite. One possible explanation is that people may use motivated processing when thinking about corruption; instead of a new message shaping beliefs about corruption, it may simply prompt people to recall their pre-existing negative perceptions.

This last lesson deserves particular attention. It suggests that even the most benign messages that mention corruption may shape perceptions in unintended ways. Awareness raising may be doing harm, not just potentially wasting resources: no message at all may be better than even a positively toned message.

Much can be done to build on this research. Future research should examine the extent to which these findings are generalisable beyond Jakarta. Similar experimental studies could also examine whether repeated exposure to a message influences perceptions differently, and/or the extent to which prolonged exposure (e.g. in the form of an anticorruption film, or attendance at an all-day anticorruption event) shapes perceptions in intended (or unintended) ways. It will also be important to examine if, and how much, exposure to various messages about corruption shapes perceptions over weeks or months. Finally, more could be done to gauge the extent to which messages influence people's willingness to get involved in the fight against corruption. While this study shows that most messages seem to either have a significant and negative influence on perceptions of the corruption environment or have little impact at all, new research should aim to investigate links between the messages, perceptions and actions.

The implications of this study sit uncomfortably with hopes for using awareness raising as a tool to inspire civic anticorruption activism. If future research draws similar conclusions, this will radically challenge current thinking about how to effectively engage the public in the fight against corruption. It seems incomprehensible to suggest that all efforts to raise awareness to the problem of corruption should stop. After all, it is a normative democratic goal that citizens learn about the quality of their government. Instead, further research on awareness raising will hopefully provide some direction about what types of messages will encourage and empower people to help tackle corruption, and about how awareness-raising efforts will be received in different governance contexts. Getting awareness raising right will mean going beyond 'doing no harm'; it will require researchers to deepen their understanding of how beliefs about government are formed and how interventions shape them.
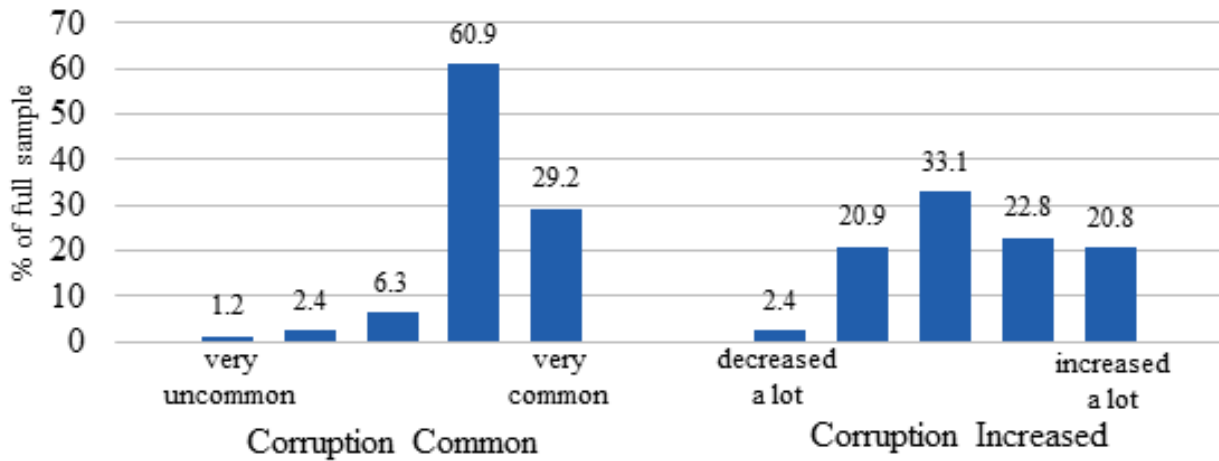
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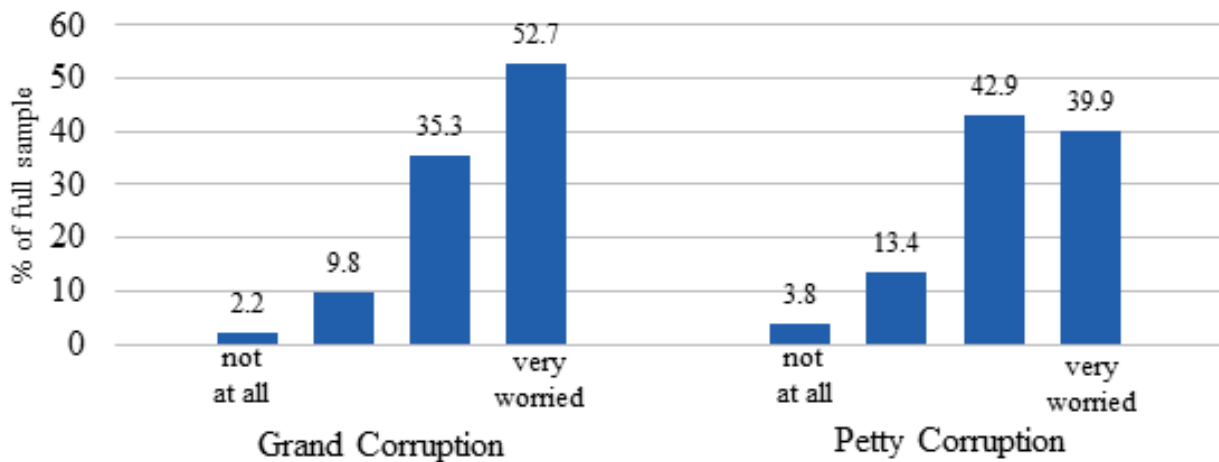
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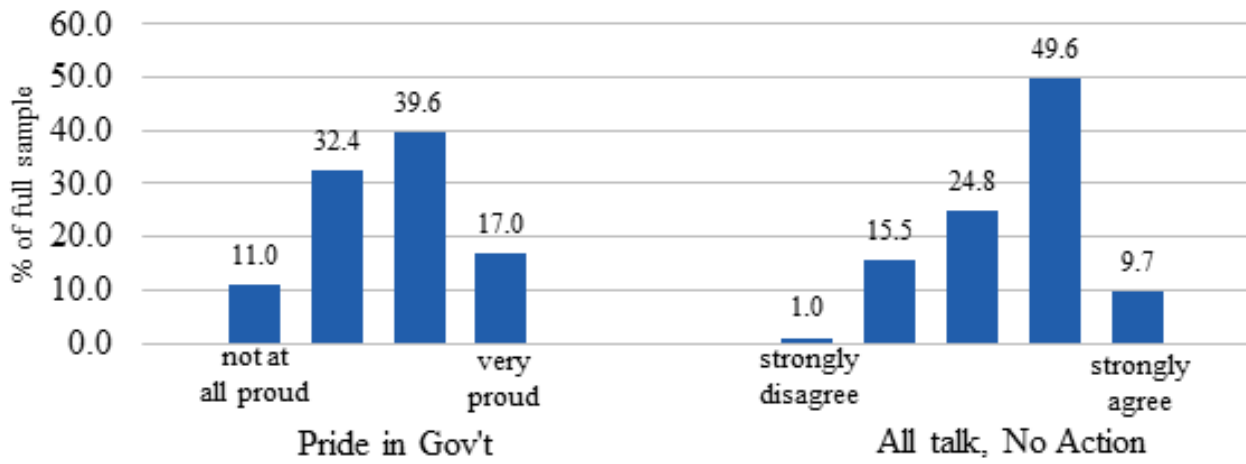# Appendix: Distribution of responses to dependent variable questions

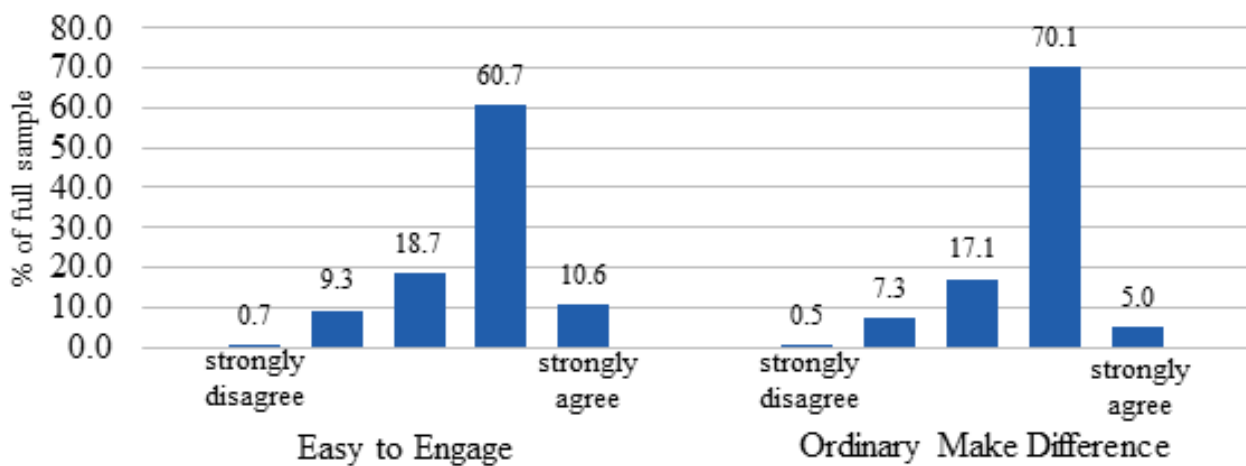## Distribution of perceptions of corruption levels

Distribution of worry about corruption's harm

Distribution of perceptions of government's efforts

Distribution of perceptions of civic engagement

DLP
DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM