

DEMOCRACY AND CORRUPTION ¹

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ABSTRACT

It's been revised the arguments linking democracy to the control of corruption starting from the often heard call for a "strong man", an autocrat that could give a country the needed stability and that could take the decisions required to get rid of corruption. Clearly, the call does not survive empirical scrutiny. Rather, the evidence shows a robust negative relationship between level of corruption and level of democracy. However, the evidence also shows that the potential of democracy in fighting corruption hinges upon a series of conditions, and that the mere existence of formal political competition through regular elections on its own is not enough.

Keyword: Democracy, corruption, elections, politicians.

Content: 1. Introduction, 2. linking between democracy and corruption, 3. Empirical evidence, 4. Conclusion.

¹ La Universidad Autónoma del Caribe, Barranquilla, Colombia, www.uac.edu.co. La investigación se adelantó desde enero 2013 hasta marzo de 2014. Fecha de recepción 10/02/2015, fecha de aceptación 5/05/2015

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RESUMEN

Se han revisado los argumentos que relacionan la democracia con el control de la corrupción, comenzando desde la llamada frecuente por un “hombre fuerte”, un autócrata que pudiera darle al país la estabilidad necesaria y que pudiera tomar las decisiones requeridas para acabar con la corrupción. Claramente, la llamada no sobrevive a un escrutinio empírico. Más bien, la evidencia muestra una relación negativa sólida entre el nivel de corrupción y el nivel de democracia. Sin embargo, la evidencia también muestra que el potencial de la democracia en la lucha contra la corrupción depende de una serie de condiciones y que la mera existencia de una competencia política formal a través de las elecciones regulares, no es suficiente en sí misma.

Palabras clave: Democracia, corrupción, elecciones, políticos.

RESUMO

Tem sido revisto os argumentos que ligam a democracia ao controle da corrupção a partir da chamada muitas vezes ouvi de um “homem forte”, um autocrata que poderia dar a um país a estabilidade necessária e que poderia tomar as decisões necessárias para se livrar da corrupção. Claramente, a chamada não sobreviver a um escrutínio empírico. Em vez disso, a evidência mostra uma relação negativa entre o nível robusto de corrupção e nível de democracia. No entanto, a evidência mostra também que o potencial da democracia no combate à corrupção depende em cima de uma série de condições, e que a mera existência de uma concorrência política formal através de eleições regulares sobre a sua própria, não é suficiente

Palavras chave: 1. Introdução, 2. Vinculação entre democracia e corrupção, 3. A evidência empírica, 4. Conclusão.

1. INTRODUCTION

Controlling corruption requires often not only profound changes in the system in a given society but usually also requires overcoming the more or less open resistance from individuals or organised interests that are gaining from the status quo. In this context, it is not uncommon to hear the call for a “strong man”, usually accompanied by a loose reference to the “success” of Singapore. Can we really trade-off political rights and liberties for lower levels of corruption? The arguments in favour of such a view are the same as sometimes put forward with respect to the promotion of economic growth. Allegedly, the “strong men” can give stability to the country enabling thereby coherent long term policies with “vision”. A further argument is that this good dictator is able take fast decisions without the need to go through the process of democratic dialogue and accountability that is often perceived as cumbersome and diluting.

But betting on authoritarian problem-solvers is risky for various reasons and cannot stand up to rigorous empirical tests (Easterly, 2014, Rodrik, 2007). Indeed, the argument of the “strong man” is flawed because of a fundamental problem: the autocrat cannot credibly commit himself, or herself, to a given set of decisions. An autocrat can take decisions without significant control. This may enable him to impose “good” laws and policies, but he can also change them again the next day for whatever reason. Stability in autocracies is thus more likely to be an exception than the rule. Moreover, an autocrat is highly vulnerable to become a kleptocrat; that is, a ruler that uses the state for its private enrichment. Even if there may be some saints out there – the probability to end up with one is quite low. And even this saint may end up succumbing to the temptations of its power after some time³.

Put differently, a look at the Control of Corruption Index from

³ See Transparency International (2004: 13) for a list of ten infamous kleptocrats and the amounts they stole from their countries.