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the role of parliament in curbing corruption

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The Role of Parliaments in Curbing Corruption

Since the mid-1990s a growing body of work has consistently shown that corruption has major economic implications. Corruption affects the rate of economic growth (Mauro, 1997), is associated with and possibly a causal factor in higher infant mortality, lower literacy, lower life expectancy and lower income per capita (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2014), as well as in greater inequality (Pelizzo, 2012). Given its economic implication, the international community has become increasingly interested in corruption. The literature has gone on to categorize various types of corruption, to discuss the conditions under which corruptions is believed to flourish, to quantify the costs of corruption and to identify some steps that can be taken to curb and possibly eliminate corruption. Within this latter stream of inquiry considerable attention has been paid to the role that legislatures can play in curbing corruption.

Broadly speaking, scholars have identified three sets of actions that parliaments and legislatures can take to reduce corruption (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2014). Firstly, as legislative bodies, parliaments can introduce and enact legislation to regulate campaign and party financing as well as to tackle corruption and money laundering.

Secondly, legislatures can also establish codes of legislative conduct to provide parliamentarians with guidance as to how they are expected to conduct themselves, to explain what appropriate legislative behaviour is and to establish sanctions for possible breaches of the codes themselves (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2014). Moreover, legislatures are able to set up ethics committees to clarify ethical dilemmas that members may encounter in the course of their legislative activities and to administer the implementation of the code.

Last but not least, legislatures can contribute to curbing corruption by effectively performing their oversight function. By holding the government to account for its actions, its expenditures and its policy implementation, parliaments are (or have the potential to be) the cornerstone of any system of accountability.

A growing body of work has consistently argued that the relative effectiveness with which legislatures perform their oversight function makes a significant contribution to the quality of democracy, the legitimacy and the stability of political regimes, and the fight against corruption (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2012). A recent GOPAC study confirmed this, demonstrating empirically that countries in which legislatures effectively hold the executive to account effectively display higher democratic quality, greater political stability and less corruption (GOPAC, 2013).

The dividends of effective parliamentary oversight have led some scholars and practitioners to investigate the determinants of this success. The most recent contributions to this line of inquiry have shown institutional design and agency plays a key role in determining the effectiveness with which legislators perform their oversight function (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2013). Regarding institutional factors, the number and type of oversight tools, the presence of independent oversight bodies and the availability of free and reliable information have all been shown to influence the capacity of a legislature to successfully perform its oversight function (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst,
2013). But while these three factors can provide an accurate indication of the oversight potential of a legislature, oversight effectiveness cannot simply be reduced to monitoring capacity.

Indeed, the effectiveness of an oversight regime reflects not only the oversight capacity of a legislature but also the political will to make an effective use of such capacity (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2012). In our work we have argued that the single most important determinant of oversight effectiveness is the relative level of popular demands for good governance and transparency (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst, 2013). Such public demands, often articulated by civil society organizations such as Verona Pulita, make it clear to legislators that they can win popular political support by fulfilling their duties as overseers. Public expression of a desire for good governance therefore has the potential to compel legislators to work productively as part of a “checks and balances” system. Not all legislators can be expected to be effective overseers merely for the sake of integrity, but all of them can be relied upon expected to execute their duties effectively when these neatly overlap with their own political self-interest.

Bibliographic references


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Verona Pulita is a civil society organization that in recent months has uncovered and denounced several scandals and instances of corruption in the city of Verona, Italy.