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# French Ambiguities in Understandings of Corruption: Concurrent Definitions

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**ABSTRACT** *Our research adds new empirical evidence to the debate about the 'grey area' of social understandings of corruption. Focusing on French citizens' ambiguities regarding the definition of political corruption we examine the notion of 'greyness' and identify the situations that give rise to controversies concerning the social definition of behaviour as 'corrupt'. We examine the controversies that may arise from variation in the perception of behaviours as being normal or deviant, as well as from differences in evaluations (ranging from excusable to inexcusable) of their gravity. We argue that there are certain behaviours that people perceive as being deviant but not necessarily punishable because they are somehow consistent with their values and norms or belong to the category of 'petty favouritism' that have few harmful consequences for the public interest. The paper is based on a multiple correspondence analysis of data deriving from a nationally representative sample survey carried out in France in February 2006 on citizens' perceptions of professional politicians, public office holders and political corruption. The analysis reveals the existence of four types of representation, the first two of which (manifested by 50.5% of respondents) are coherent from a normative point of view while the other two types (manifested by 49.5% of respondents) are characterised by different forms of normative ambiguity.*

**KEY WORDS:** Grey corruption, perceptions, France, whistleblowing, norms, values

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate ambiguities in understandings of corruption among the French public. In particular, we focus on the content of what Heidenheimer calls 'grey corruption'. As is well known, this term 'indicates that some elements, usually elites, may want to see the action punished, others not, and the majority may well be ambiguous'. As such, it is distinguished from 'black corruption' – action 'which a majority consensus of both elite and mass opinion would condemn and would want to see punished on grounds of principle' – and from 'white corruption' – action which the majority of both elite and mass opinion would not vigorously punish because 'they attach less value to the maintenance of the

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values involved than they do to the costs that might be generated as the result of a change in rule enforcement' (Heidenheimer, 2005, p. 152).<sup>1</sup>

Corruption has been the object of a significant amount of theorising and empirical research in recent decades, and this has produced a wide range of alternative explanations, typologies and proposed remedies. Competing definitions of corruption can be found in a wide range of social science disciplines, including anthropology, law, political science and sociology. Nevertheless, corruption remains a highly normative issue. It is not surprising therefore that it is often a matter of considerable dispute and that there is little agreement on how to define it.

Our research is based on the quantitative analysis of data deriving from a nationally representative sample survey carried out in France in February 2006 on citizens' perceptions of professional politicians, public office holders and political corruption. At a theoretical level, our work is part of a broad literature on the ways in which political corruption is socially represented and constructed. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part offers a brief review of the state of the art concerning research into relationships between citizens and their elected officials, and social perceptions of political corruption; and it describes the main hypothesis that has guided our research. The second part describes the survey that we carried out and explains the methodology we used in analysing the resulting data. It also gives concrete examples of the way we have chosen and used our variables. The third part presents the most significant findings concerning ambiguity in citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards corruption as revealed by our quantitative analysis. Finally, the fourth part analyses French citizens' ambiguities regarding the reporting of corrupt behaviour, and describes the moral conflicts they perceive as being entailed by the practice of reporting.

### **The 'State of the Art' in Corruption Perceptions Research**

Citizens' perceptions and judgements of corruption among office holders have been studied for a long time. Ever since the work of Lincoln Steffens in 1906,<sup>2</sup> the question of citizens' attitudes regarding 'corrupt' politicians has remained an abiding issue in research into the contradictions of democracy. During the 1980s a number of Anglo-Saxon investigations into the political and social impact of accusations of corruption showed that they do not always have concrete effects – either on the images of individual political actors or on their electoral performances. In many advanced democracies the re-election of corrupt candidates, even ones carrying court convictions, contradicts assumptions that citizens judge corruption severely. It seems that voters do not sanction political corruption in any automatic way (Pharr, 1999; Rundquist *et al.*, 1977). Principles of integrity appear to be tempered and influenced by norms of 'tolerance' and especially by other criteria for judging political actors (for example, their effectiveness, the degree to which their behaviour reflects a commitment to other values and so on). Individuals have volatile perceptions regarding 'unethical' behaviours and it is to be anticipated that they will make unexpected judgements regarding corrupt office holders. The field of 'perceptions' is full of normative conflicts between legal, economic, political and informal social rules that, in the name of efficiency and functionality, have for long made possible the mystification and justification of 'corrupt behaviour'.

The contemporary political science and sociological literature includes a wide variety of works that have attempted to establish the criteria to which citizens have recourse in their perceptions and judgements of illegitimate behaviour, as well as their impact on political attitudes (Bézes & Lascoumes, 2005; Gorta & Forell, 1995). Two main tendencies may be identified. First, several works focus on the impact on political behaviour of electors' knowledge of accusations levelled against candidates (Fackler & Lin, 1995; Johnston, 1986, p. 368) and the implicit trading that operates during the electoral period. Voters often retain confidence in candidates who represent their fundamental values, even if they are accused of corruption (Peters & Welch, 1980). Second, since the beginning of the 1980s, constructivist approaches have become widely popular. Initiated by Arnold Heidenheimer (1970), these approaches reject any *a priori*, 'objective' definitions of corruption. Heidenheimer (2005) was the first to use the term 'grey corruption' in order to draw attention to possible contradictions between the perceptions of elected officials and those of ordinary citizens. Following the same approach, other empirical studies have highlighted the sheer diversity of perceptions citizens can have of behaviours deemed to be illegitimate (Mancuso *et al.*, 1998; Peters & Welch, 1978). Fairly obviously, the way in which behaviour is perceived varies with social group membership, and perceptions are also influenced by a wide range of conjunctural and contextual factors (Atkinson & Mancuso, 1985; Johnston, 1986). Some recent works have focused on 'the political construction of corruption': Girling (1997) and Johnston (2005), for example, argue that definitions of corruption depend mostly on the type of political regime and on the way in which political power is exercised.

A number of research studies have been based on surveys conducted by means of questionnaires administrated to different social groups (elected officials, bureaucrats, economic actors etc.) and these have generated information about the degree of severity with which specific types of behaviour tend to be judged. Most of the previous studies have also assessed the impact on perceptions of a range of explanatory variables (demographic, socio-economic, political). Finally, some studies have shown how judgements of the ends being pursued can attenuate the severity of judgements of the means. Three elements are always relevant to citizens' judgements of given acts: The type of actor involved (whether s/he is an insider or an outsider with respect to the political arena); the type of corrupt act; the presence or absence of a justification in terms of the ends the corrupt act was intended to serve. We may assert that non-consensual representation and their related normative conflicts – 'grey corruption' in Heidenheimer's terms – dominate.

The intention of our study is to understand and to define this notion of 'greyness' and to identify the situations that give rise to controversies concerning the social definition of behaviour as 'corrupt'. The controversies may arise from variation in the perception of acts as being normal or deviant, as well as from differences in evaluations of their gravity (as indicative of reprehensible fault, or not). We make the assumption that there are certain behaviours that people judge as being deviant but not necessarily punishable because they are somehow 'routinised' or belong to the category of 'petty favouritism' that has few, if any, damaging consequences for the community or for the public interest. Conversely, other forms of behaviour (for example, the financing of political parties by private enterprises) may be easily accepted and rarely sanctioned – but then deemed reprehensible if citizens, in

accordance with their moral values, perceive the behaviour as a threat to the public interest.

### **Methodology**

The survey conducted in France on the social representations of political corruption was administered to a large sample consisting of 2,000 persons of French nationality, aged 18 years or above. The interviews were carried out face-to-face during a period of three weeks. Information was also gathered about the sex, age and level of education of each respondent, as well as about the occupation of the head of the household.

With respect to previous research, the contribution of our investigation to the study of 'grey corruption' is threefold. First, our survey asked respondents about those contraventions of norms of public probity whose illegitimacy is less clear-cut, for example, those involving the search for personal gain through favouritism and nepotism. Second, we focused on citizens' relationships with the world of politics and its representatives and on the kinds of deviant behaviour to which these can give rise. That is to say, we looked not only at the integrity of public office holders but also at the integrity of citizens and at their behaviour in attempting to elicit favours from public officials. Third, we took into account attacks on integrity in private relationships between citizens and hypothesised the existence of a link between public and private integrity.

The responses to the questionnaire were analysed using multiple correspondence analysis (Le Roux & Rouannet, 2004, p. 365). This method constructs a geometrical model of the data by projecting the cases onto a space and ranging them across a number of axes to give a cloud of modalities and a cloud of individuals. It identifies the principal co-ordinates that differentiate the modalities and the individuals in the sample. Cleavages are measured using a set of active modalities that characterise the subjacent dimensions. Using the individual responses, this type of analysis allows us to understand how the active modalities are articulated with each other to form a system/pattern of responses. The geometric analysis is based on a calculation of the distances between individuals constructed by the modalities of the responses to the selected questions (among two individuals the wider their pattern of responses is the greater the distance between them will be). The cloud of modalities summarises the differences among individuals. This organisation allows us to determine the principal co-ordinates, treated on a hierarchical basis according to the significance of the cleavages they cause, from the most important to the most residual. Each individual obtains a score that determines his or her position on each of the principal co-ordinates.

In the analysis we introduced passive modalities that describe and characterise the principal co-ordinates constructed using the active modalities. Passive modalities are socio-demographic variables (sex, age, education etc.).

The main outcome of this analysis suggests that two principal co-ordinates differentiate the interviewees. The first co-ordinate has the most cleavages and points towards the acceptance versus the reprobation of favouritism. This illustrates the question of limits in terms of how far an activity is perceived as 'corrupt' or not, for example, the acceptance versus the rejection of favouritism. The second co-ordinate

is related to perceptions of the degree of importance of the corruption, for example, its seriousness. The combination of these two co-ordinates allows us to demonstrate the weight of ambiguity in the definition of corruption. Intersecting these two 'principal co-ordinates', allows us to distinguish four types of respondent. The first two types are coherent from a normative point of view (50.5% of respondents) while the other two types are characterised by different forms of normative ambiguity (49.5% of respondents). Let us examine successively each of the principal co-ordinates and the response frequencies of the questions retained for analysis.

The first co-ordinate concerns the degree of tolerance of acts of favouritism on the part of public office holders and private citizens. This is certainly the most discriminatory dimension and distinguishes between those who have a high level of tolerance of favouritism and those who condemn all its forms unreservedly. We may say that the first have a 'restrictive conception' of offences against integrity and will censor only instances of 'grand' corruption, while the second have an 'extensive conception' of integrity and offences against it. They consider any kind of favouritism, whether on the part of public office holders or private citizens, as an offence against the community.

The questions concerning unambiguously corrupt behaviour were excluded from the analysis because of their inability to discriminate effectively – the almost universal condemnation they elicited being too evident. Such items included: 'To secretly sell to a competing enterprise a list of your employer's clients' (regarded as 'not acceptable' or 'rarely acceptable' by 90.3%); 'To offer 200 euros to a policeman in order to avoid a penalty' (regarded as 'not acceptable' or 'rarely acceptable' by 87.3%). Four other questions are clearly discriminatory and are inter-correlated: (1) 'To ask an elected official for a letter of recommendation in order to obtain a place at the kindergarten' ('rarely acceptable' or 'not acceptable', 27.3%; 'sometimes acceptable' or 'acceptable', 73.3%; 'don't know', 0.3%); (2) 'To use one's network of political connections to help a friend to find a job' ('rarely acceptable' or 'not acceptable', 29.4%; 'sometimes acceptable' or 'acceptable', 70.2%; 'don't know', 0.3%); (3) 'To join a political party in order to obtain social housing' ('rarely acceptable' or 'not acceptable', 50.3%; 'sometimes acceptable' or 'acceptable', 49.0%; 'don't know', 0.7%); (4) 'To accept a cruise holiday paid for by a client' ('rarely acceptable' or 'not acceptable', 46.4%; 'sometimes acceptable' or 'acceptable', 52.7%; 'don't know', 0.9%).

The second co-ordinate relates to citizens' judgements of the extent of corruption among elected office holders, politicians and in the representative institutions in general, as well as its evolution over time. This second co-ordinate distinguishes those who estimate the level of corruption to be widespread among politicians and inside the representative institutions from those who believe that the level of corruption is not significant or is in decline.

We asked our respondents five questions designed to measure their perceptions of the actual incidence of corruption in public life. These, with the relevant proportions given in parentheses, were:

- Q15 – Would you say that generally speaking French elected representatives are rather honest (34.8%) or rather corrupt (60.2%)?

- Q35 – Would you say that nowadays in France there is: More corruption than before (32.6%); the same amount of corruption as before but we just talk about it more (61.6%); less than before (4.4%)?
- Q37 – When an elected official is accused of corruption, who is most likely to be the accomplice: Heads of enterprises (33%); members of the official’s family (16.9%); public administrators (16.1%); banks (16%); trade union representatives (7.3%)?
- Q38 – In your opinion in which of the following sectors is there most corruption: Political parties (41.6%); financial circles (24.6%); private firms (including sporting circles) (11.3%); the media (including showbusiness) (8.2%); the public administration (5.3%)?
- Q39 – For each of the following, please tell me whether you think there is a lot of corruption: at the presidency (29.7%); in the government (32.5%); among deputies (17.2%); among regional or departmental councillors (9.7%); among mayors (7.5%); among senators (14.2%).

The multiple correspondence analysis revealed the existence of a third co-ordinate. This co-ordinate refers to citizens’ perceptions of the identities of corrupters. It distinguishes those who believe that those in financial and economic circles are the most significant perpetrators of acts of corruption from those who emphasise the nepotism and clientelism of proximity (relational clientelism). The results based on this co-ordinate are not discussed in the present paper.

After we combined the characteristics of the respondents in terms of their placements on the three co-ordinates we were able to assign each of them to one of four categories describing a different attitudinal profile (Table 1).

Perceptions of offences against integrity can be grouped into two categories on each of two dimensions: (1) The degree of tolerance or condemnation of acts of corruption; (2) perceptions of the actual incidence of acts of corruption (Table 2).

Three features of these results are especially worth highlighting. First, attitudes regarding public integrity are quite diverse. Only one quarter of those interviewed strongly condemned the different forms of offence against integrity (Type 4). Three quarters of respondents were relatively tolerant (to different degrees and with respect to different forms of corruption) – either because they perceive the corruption that exists as being not very important (Type 1), or because they perceive some types of corruption as being a structural necessity (‘the system works that way’) (Type 2), or because they are ambivalent about corruption, condemning it in the abstract, but accepting concrete instances of a petty nature (Type 3). Second, tolerance of corrupt activities does not concern well-known cases of legally punishable corruption. It

**Table 1.** Classification of respondents

Type	Frequency	%
1 Tolerant optimists	526	25.9
2 Intolerant realists	292	14.4
3 Worried pragmatists	711	35.1
4 Denunciators	499	24.6

**Table 2.** Classification of perceptions concerning offences against integrity

	Incidence of corruption perceived as being limited	Corruption perceived as being widespread	Total
High tolerance of favouritism	Type 1 Tolerant optimist 25.9%	Type 3 Worried pragmatist 35.1%	61%
Low tolerance of favouritism	Type 2 Intolerant realist 14.4%	Type 4 Denunciator 24.6%	39%
Total	40.3%	59.7%	

concerns minor self-interested arrangements, the search for private gain, or what is known as ‘grey corruption’. Overall, the majority of French citizens tend to relativise what opinion polls usually show as strong condemnation of corruption. Some people do not consider favouritism to be a form of corruption. Others consider corruption to be an important phenomenon but they accept the existence of favouritism.

Third, respondents belonging to each of the four categories differ quite substantially in terms of their socio-demographic and political characteristics.<sup>3</sup> The typical member of the T1 group (tolerant) is a highly qualified professional whose political outlook places him or her in the ‘mainstream’, whose vote mainly goes to a party located on the centre-right but who may occasionally vote for a party on the centre left. On the other side, group T4 (denunciator) tends to consist of less well-educated persons, in lower status occupations. Most of the time they are supporters of protest parties (of the extreme right or the extreme left). Finally, groups T2 and T3 are composites, where those belonging to T2 (the intolerant realists) are on average slightly better educated and have slightly higher status occupations than those in T3 (the worried pragmatists).

### Attitudes Regarding Reporting Practices

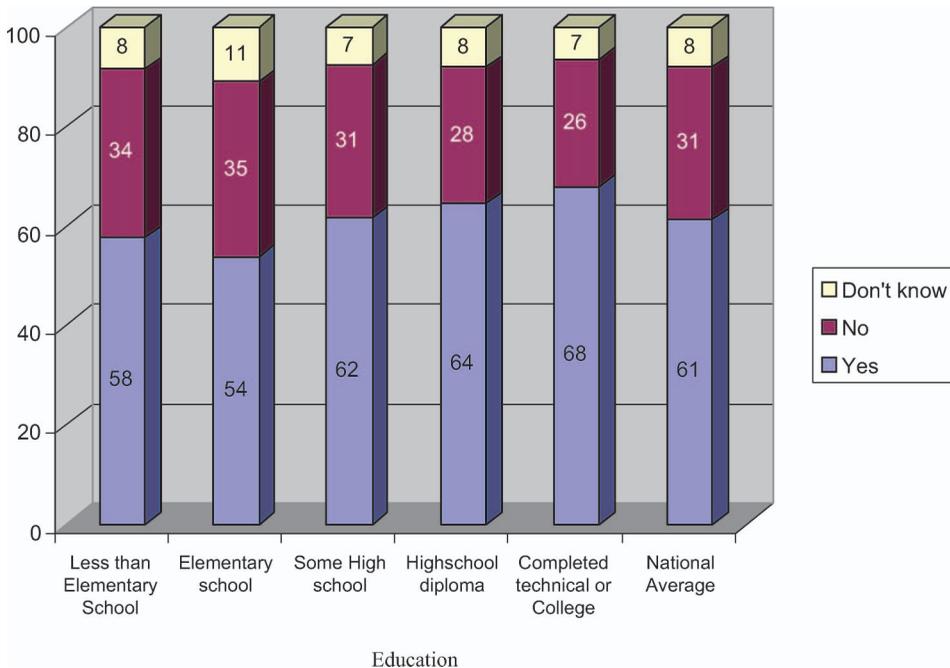
The ambiguities in French citizens’ attitudes concerning corruption become even more evident when it comes to the reporting of corrupt behaviour. Most of the research hitherto carried out into reporting practices, usually known as ‘whistle-blowing’, has focused on the employees of private companies who have attempted to reveal fraudulent inside behaviour to internal or external authorities (Glazer & Glazer, 1989; Nader & Ross, 1972). Other work has focused on public employees faced with hostile managers in local government or in national health services (Frize & Jennings, 2001; Homewood, 2001). Usually whistleblowing is defined as an act of ‘courageous dissent’, a practice that contributes actively to defence of the general interest. This is why the majority of works have focused mainly on the difficulties faced by whistleblowers in proving the truth of the information they reveal – and why several studies have focused on the degree of legal protection that should be granted to whistleblowers (Lewis, 2001). However, no scientific research has analysed the reporting of corruption by ordinary citizens in their day-to-day lives.

Through our survey of perceptions of political corruption in France, we wanted to understand how far citizens would go in reporting corrupt behaviour. Overall, French citizens perceive corruption to be a serious problem and the surveys

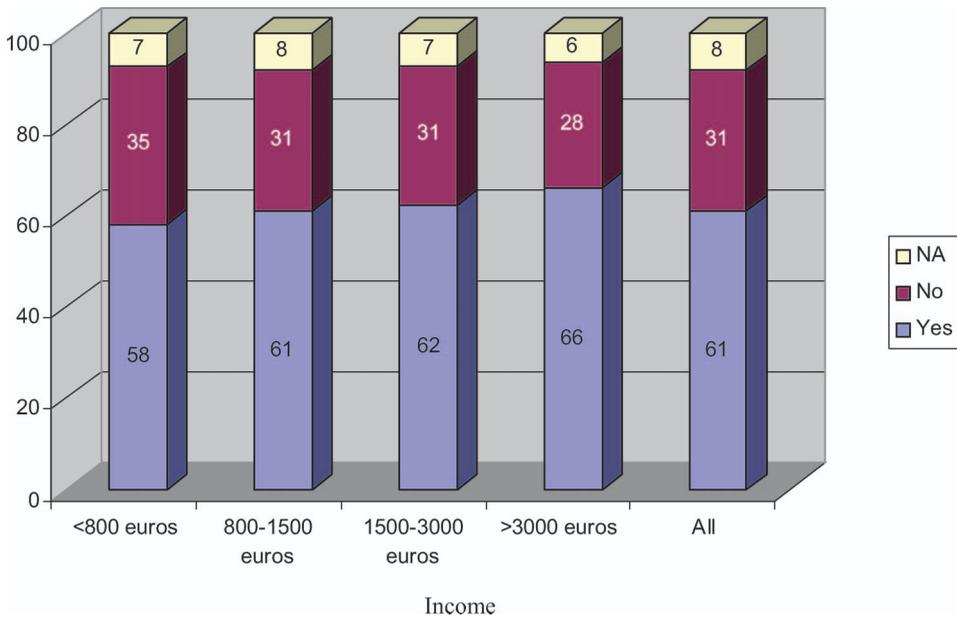
administered in France during the past 25 years have shown that citizens view their political leaders as being rather corrupt.<sup>4</sup> They also believe that the problem of corruption is increasing in significance and that it represents an important political issue. On the other hand, they do not systematically sanction corrupt behaviour – either through their electoral choices or through a willingness to report it. Our data suggests that the strong condemnation of corrupt public officials will not automatically be translated into a willingness to report their behaviour. Presentation of the most significant results of our survey will allow us to understand who is likely to be willing to report corrupt behaviour, why, and under what conditions.

In France, reporting is not a common practice. More than 30% of our respondents said that they would not report an illicit act. This confirms our general assumption that there are normative conflicts between different ideals and standards and that the French are generally ambiguous regarding the definition of corruption. Our analysis shows that reporting is linked to social integration and to the possession of a range of specific competences ('social capital'). Therefore it appears to be more a sign of commitment to the social system than the consequence of a simple moral reaction against illegitimate behaviour. The willingness to report depends mostly on two distinct variables: The respondent's level of education and their monthly income (see Figures 1 and 2).

On the basis of our empirical results we may assert that the people most well disposed to the notion of reporting corrupt behaviour are: Men in general; young people between the ages of 18 and 35; people belonging to the upper and middle class



**Figure 1.** Attitudes towards denunciation of corruption by level of education  
 Q: If you were aware of an act of corruption would you report it?

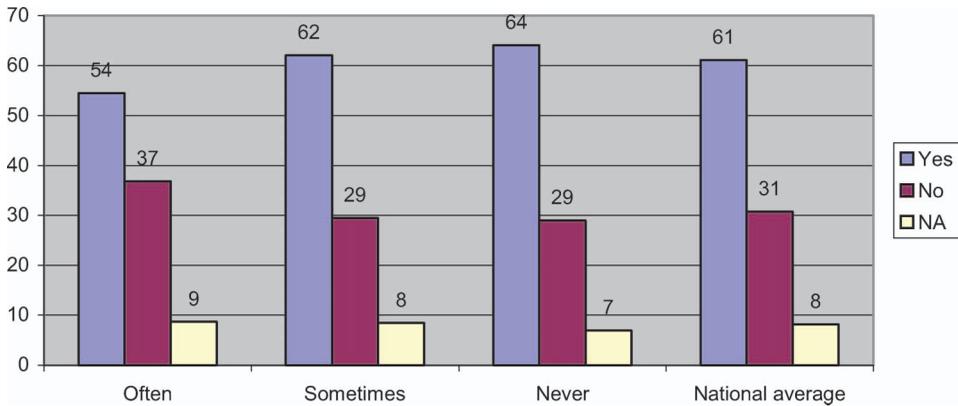


**Figure 2.** Attitudes towards denunciation of corruption by income  
Q: If you were aware of an act of corruption would you report it?

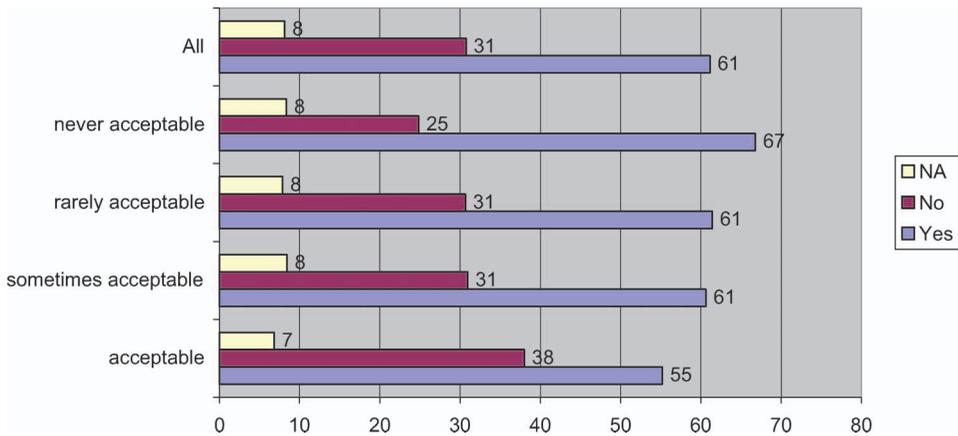
(as defined by the socio-professional category to which they belong); those with a high level of education and with an average monthly income of €1,500 and above (managers, researchers, teachers, intermediate professionals); and those who are not religious. On the other side, the people least inclined to report are females and those aged 50 and above. In terms of socio-professional categories, those least likely to report are craftsmen and street-level bureaucrats. To the same category also belong less educated people with a low monthly income, and the very religious.

The traditional variables, such as age, sex, political opinion and appreciation of the political leader's honesty, are not statistically significant. Figures 3 and 4 show that the most law-abiding persons, those likely to obey the rules, are also those most favourably disposed to reporting. More surprising is the fact that judgements of the degree of corruption do not play a major role in a willingness to report (Figure 5).

The data suggest the presence, among citizens, of significant normative obstacles in the way of whistleblowing. We asked those who said they would not report an act of corruption why they would not do so; 57.5% declared themselves to be opposed to whistleblowing 'on principle'. The proportions are larger among older people (that is, those aged 65 and above); among teachers and engineers; and among religious people. Other reasons given also mostly made reference to ethical principles and included ones based on notions of individual responsibility ('everybody is the master of their own actions') and the view that, in general, citizens do not need to, or should not, arbitrate in the place of officials whose specific responsibility it is to sanction illicit acts. As is shown by the results reported in Figure 6, even when people perceive elected representatives as rather corrupt they are hesitant to report them.

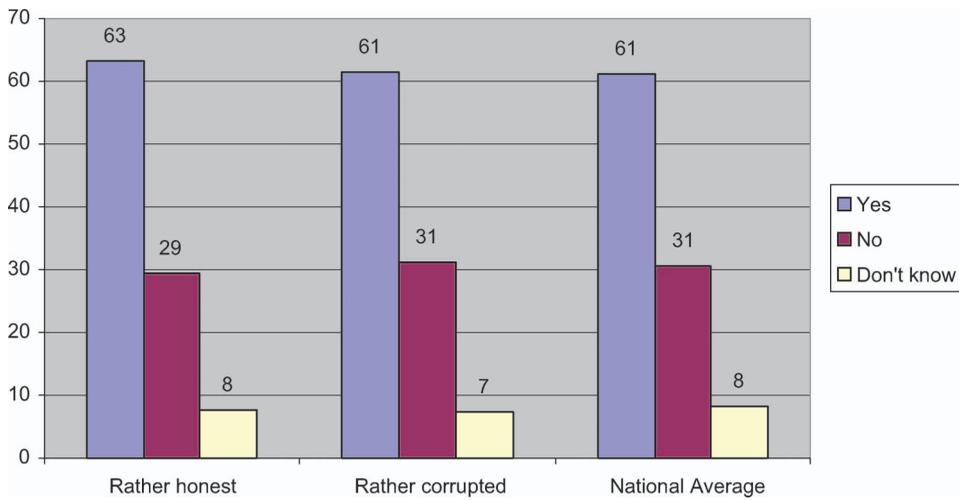


**Figure 3.** Attitudes towards denunciation of corruption by degree of honesty  
 Q: I'd like you to tell me if this has *often, sometimes, exceptionally* or *never* happened to you: To pay a craftsman in cash to avoid payment of VAT. Q: If you were aware of an act of corruption would you report it?



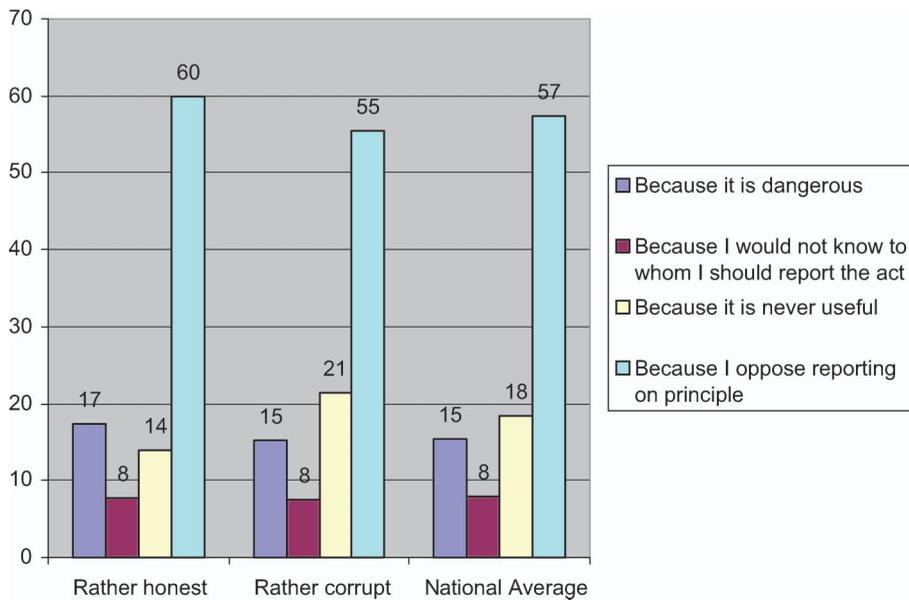
**Figure 4.** Attitudes towards denunciation of corruption according to citizens' opinion of black market employment  
 Q: I'd like you to tell me if you find the following *always, sometimes, rarely* or *never* acceptable: To work on the black market. Q: If you were aware of an act of corruption would you report it?

There are two additional variables relevant to favourable and unfavourable attitudes towards whistleblowing. The first concerns the 'greyness' of perceptions of the importance of the facts to report. This is a predictable outcome given that the most 'law abiding' are more likely, as compared to the sample generally, to be favourably disposed to reporting. In order to measure this tendency we used two indicators. One indicator is the acceptability of 'smoking in a public place where it is clearly forbidden' or 'working on the black market'. Another is the acceptability of 'driving a car after a well-lubricated evening'. Those who strongly condemned these



**Figure 5.** Attitudes towards denunciation of corruption according to citizens' judgement of the degree of corruption of political leaders

Q: Do you think that French politicians are rather honest or rather corrupt? Q: If you were aware of an act of corruption would you report it?



**Figure 6.** Reasons not to denounce the corruption according to the judgement of the degree of honesty of political leaders

Q: Why would you not report an act of corruption? Q: Would you say that generally speaking French elected representatives are rather honest or rather corrupt?

types of behaviour also declared that they would never commit such actions; and they are in most cases likely to report corruption. Nevertheless, the normative system is full of contradictions. For example, people who declare themselves to be very religious are very moral – but they are also very hostile to whistleblowing, which they perceive to be morally reprehensible (Figure 7). The proportion of French citizens in general who reject the idea of reporting corrupt practices because they are against reporting on principle is 57%, a proportion that rises to 62% for regular churchgoers.

The second variable is represented by peoples' attitudes regarding the French political system. This second type of variable takes into account citizens' participation in political life. We built an indicator able to measure this trend. The indicator is based on respondents' responses to the following statements: 'It is very important to get involved in political life'; 'It is very important to vote at elections'; 'It is very important to keep abreast of developments in national political life'. We observed a positive relationship between whistleblowing practices and our indicator of the extent of peoples' involvement in political life.

On the basis of our analysis we may suggest that attitudes favourable to reporting are directly linked to the level of citizens' integration and the degree to which they

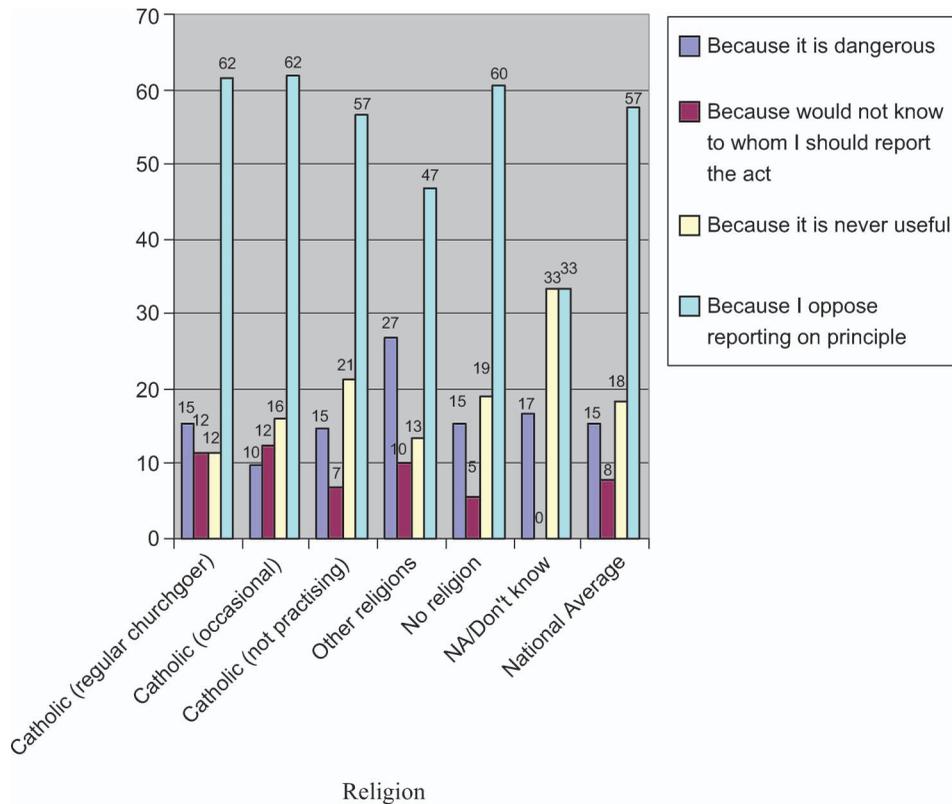


Figure 7. Reasons not to denounce by religion

adhere to dominant norms and values. Hostility to the idea of reporting corruption reflects peoples' mistrust of the political and administrative institutions and attests to a certain distance regarding dominant values and norms.

### Conclusion

The main purpose of our research was to analyse the 'grey area' of social understandings of corruption. The results of our survey and the analysis we have based on these results allow us to formulate the following general conclusions.

First, corruption is neither evaluated nor judged in a uniform manner. In terms of opinions expressed about abstract principles, a significant proportion of French citizens strongly condemn offences against public integrity. Nevertheless, a surprisingly large number of people hesitate to condemn corrupt behaviour and are very often tempted to use their political connections in order to satisfy some private interest (whether individual or familial or those of a private company). Our survey has shown that a large number of French citizens consider it normal to solicit the help of elected officials in seeking solutions to personal problems. In light of this finding, it is clear that they also believe that political personnel can and should address personal matters. This represents a kind of pragmatic view of political activity.

Second, the 'grey area' of social representations plays an important role in judgements of public integrity. Legal transgressions and violations of the law are usually judged more severely than the actions of those who are operating in the 'grey area'. Nevertheless, we should underline the important percentage of the population that tolerates favouritism and the search for private compensation in both private and public relations (61% of respondents); 35.1% of respondents accept favouritism while perceiving corruption as a significant phenomenon. The 'greyness' of social representations explains the relatively high level of tolerance of French people with regard to informal and formal arrangements. This tolerance is also confirmed by some of the results of the European Social Survey. The comparison of 24 countries shows that French people are overall more likely to tolerate corruption than the average European citizen.<sup>5</sup> This is the case for private integrity (for example, false declarations to insurance companies), but especially for public integrity where VAT fraud and the bribery of public servants were largely accepted. Forty per cent of Europeans consider it totally unacceptable to make a false declaration to an insurance company. For the French, this behaviour is widely tolerated and only 19% of them find it totally unacceptable. We find the same tolerance regarding VAT fraud: Only 32% of French citizens believe that it is totally unacceptable to pay cash in order to avoid tax, while 50% of Europeans regard this practice as totally unacceptable. Sixty-seven per cent of Europeans find it totally unacceptable (*très grave*) for a public servant to accept a bribe, compared with 49% of French citizens. For the most part, however, previous national and European surveys have shown citizens' reprobation regarding corrupt behaviour to be very high. In this respect, the results of our study contradict the norm.

Third, citizens' justifications of their acceptance of corrupt behaviour are extremely complex. Thus, certain circumstances and justifications can attenuate the severity with which corrupt behaviour is judged. The focus groups that preceded

our quantitative survey revealed that depending on the context, on the actors involved and on the facts presented the degree of tolerance and the kinds of judgement of acts of corruption could be extremely varied.

Fourth, in what resembles a chain reaction, the high level of tolerance of corruption makes the practice of whistleblowing appear almost unethical. Reporting is often seen as an uncivic practice and provokes negative reactions among a large part of the population (in particular, those whose knowledge of politics is limited).

The results of our survey and subsequent analysis demonstrate the need to distinguish between morality and politics. The criteria citizens use to evaluate politics are extremely diverse. In our opinion, the most important variable influencing evaluations and judgements of political corruption is the individual's conception of political activity (its goals and its means). The question of the image of corruption (its limits and its importance) is therefore part of the broader issue of the image of politics, its ultimate goals and its rules.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Heidenheimer *et al.* (1999, pp. 8–12) identified three categories of definition in the contemporary social sciences: Public office-centred definitions, market-centred definitions and public interest-centred definitions.
- <sup>2</sup> Steffens mentions the slight impact of corruption scandals on the political careers of elected municipal officials and shows that a large part of the electorate is ready to re-elect mayors accused of corruption and even to re-elect mayors convicted of corruption.
- <sup>3</sup> Thanks are due to Jean Chiche and Bruno Cautres for the statistical analysis on which these observations are based.
- <sup>4</sup> For the past 25 years, SOFRES has asked: 'Generally speaking, do you think that elected representatives are rather honest or rather corrupt?'
- <sup>5</sup> Behaviors are ranked from: Totally unacceptable, unacceptable, sometimes acceptable and acceptable.

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