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Quality of Government (QoG) as Impartiality: Review of the literature on the causes and consequences of QoG

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Abstract

This article discusses the quality of government (QoG) as impartiality research agenda in social sciences. The article has three sections. First, it considers the intellectual roots and the emergence of the concept, highlighting the attributes of the concept of the QoG—such as universality, unidimensionality, normativity, and procedurality—that distinguish the QoG from other conceptualizations of “good institutions.” Second, it reviews existing multidisciplinary literature on the effects of the QoG, focusing on a variety of data and methods employed to evaluate the link. The review concludes that there exists a broad consensus linking impartiality in the exercise of political authority with important macro- and micro-level outcomes, such as economic growth, legitimacy, political participation, and preferences. Finally, this article reviews the literature on the causes of the QoG, focusing on four factors whose positive effect on higher QoG has so far gathered the most robust empirical support: meritocracy in the allocation of bureaucratic jobs, gender equality, universal education, and taxation.

Introduction

Why do some countries enjoy high levels of material well-being, long life expectancy, and low child and maternal mortality while others do not? This is one of the oldest and most central questions of the social sciences. A systematic inquiry into this question goes back to at least Adam Smith's book "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations," written in 1776 (2010 [1776]), which hails the importance of the free market. This important account was a dominant explanation of the causes of prosperity and poverty until the 1990s when social scientists began to appreciate the role of institutional explanations, particularly the role of political institutions, in property rights protection, enforcement of contracts, and other practices that safeguard the fruit of entrepreneurship from private theft or government expropriation (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012; Holmberg & Rothstein 2012; North 1990). The "neo-institutional revolution" of the 1990s set forth a large empirical literature linking such "good institutions" as democracy, rule of law, government effectiveness, or meritocratic bureaucracy with a number of socially important outcomes, ranging from economic performance (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Chong & Caderon, 2000; Knack & Keefer, 1995; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016) to child deprivation (Halleröd et al., 2013) and subjective well-being (Tavits, 2008). By the 2000s, the "good governance" approach was adopted by international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank as their worldwide policy agenda; they proclaimed good governance as a precondition for functioning markets and also a determinant of the effectiveness of aid (World Bank, 2002).

While the idea that political institutions are of the utmost importance for positive social outcomes became widely accepted by both the academic community and practitioners, the big question as to what constitutes political institutions that enhance welfare for all members of society remains debated. In this debate, attention has been paid to the effect of political regimes, specifically the extent of democracy, on valued social outcomes (Acemoglu et al., 2019; Barro, 1997). Another distinctive approach that emerged within this broad paradigm emphasises the role of the so-called "output" side of politics—institutions regulating the exercise of political power. In their seminal publication, Rothstein and Teorell (2008, p. 165) argued that "the impartiality of institutions that exercise government authority" is the critical quality of "good institutions." This approach, and the literature that has grown from this conceptualization of "good institutions," is known as the quality of government (QoG)

approach. This article provides a review of the accumulated literature on the quality of government

The paper is organised as follows. Section one discusses the emergence of the “institutions matter” argument and the early literature on the link between governance and valued social outcomes. Section two follows with a discussion of the difficulties apparent in attempts to conceptualize governance. Section three outlines the quality of government conceptualization of governance, and the paper concludes with a section on how to achieve quality of government.

Institutions Matter

Since Douglas North’s (1990) ground-breaking work on the link between institutions and economic performance, institutions have been seen as the root cause of development, understood in a broad sense as economic prosperity, population health, people’s access to basic services such as safe water, sanitation, health care or education, as well as the lack of civil conflict and people’s subjective well-being. North conceptualized institutions as “the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction” (North, 1991, p. 97). Institutions are formal (such as constitutions and laws) and informal (such as codes of conduct, traditions, beliefs, and values) rules that influence all actors in a society, including individuals and organizations. Governments are particularly important actors in these “rules of the game,” as they create and enforce most of the formal rules. Given their special status as the foremost rule-makers, the quality of government institutions has become a focal point of neo-institutional literature.

The early neo-institutional literature largely used very broad measures of the quality of government, such as the Gastil indices of civil liberties and political violence—a predecessor of Freedom House’s measure of democracy, or those produced by private companies, such as the International Country Risk Guide (ICRG) and Business Environment Risk Intelligence (BERI), capturing the quality of contract enforcement, corruption, and bureaucratic quality (Hall & Jones, 1999; Knack & Keefer, 1995; Mauro, 1995). In 1999, the World Bank began to aggregate and publish governance indicators based on the perceptions of both experts and citizens (Kaufmann et al., 1999). An ongoing project of the World Bank, known as the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), has six measures of country-level political institutions: Voice and Accountability, Political Instability and Absence of Violence, Government Effectiveness,

Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law and Control of Corruption. Although this literature was instrumental in establishing a robust link between “good institutions” and such important social outcomes as gross domestic product per capita (Knack & Keefer, 1995; Mauro, 1995), output per worker (Hall & Jones, 1999), economic growth (Mauro, 1995), and poverty reduction (Chong & Calderon, 2000),¹ it soon became clear that the very concept of “good institutions,” or “good governance,” was in need of further conceptualization.

Good Governance

While the potential good of “good governance” is broadly recognised, the term suffers from being ill-defined and conflated (Fukuyama, 2013; Grindle, 2004; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). This conceptual ambiguity is easy to recognize by looking at the unrealistically long “laundry list” of elements included in the “package” of good governance: rule of law; secure property rights; contract enforcement; accountability; transparency; anti-corruption measures; democratic governance, civil society participation; government credibility and predictability; and respect for human rights (Rothstein & Tannenber, 2015, p. 39-41). Conceptual ambiguity and corresponding problems with measurement (Kurtz & Schrank, 2009; Langbein & Knack, 2009; Thomas, 2010) not only affect the strength of scientific inference but also make meaningful policy advice impossible (Andrews 2013; Grindle 2004; Rothstein and Tannenber, 2015, p. 41).

Part of the reason for such conceptual ambiguity is that the notion of “governance” has at least two distinctive meanings in the social science and development lexicon. Using Rothstein’s (2013) metaphor, the first, and the broadest, “world of governance” relates to all questions of how groups of people govern themselves, be it in the public or private sectors. In this world of “global,” “corporate,” “interactive,” or “network” governance, governance is “a meta-concept for all possible forms of order in a number of different settings” (Rothstein 2013: 8). However, as Keefer (2009) noted, a subject of scientific inquiry with such a broad scope— all questions concerned with how people govern themselves—risks becoming impossible to research.

¹ It has to be noted that the contemporaneous literature on the effects of democracy on economic development remained largely inconclusive, while Robert Barro’s seminal research concluded that “More political rights do not have an effect on growth [...] The first lesson is that democracy is not the key to economic growth” (Barro, 1997, p.1, 11).

Another notion of governance relates to “the exercise of political power to manage a community’s affairs” (Gisselquist, 2014, p.,515). Although narrower in its scope, with a focus on political power, this “world of governance” is also riven with a number of problems, the major of which is concerned with the outcomes of governance and democracy.

With regard to outcomes of governance, there is a strong tradition of defining governance in this way. For example, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation—produces the widely used in social sciences Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG)—is unapologetic in defining governance as “all of the political, social, and economic goods and services that any citizen has the right to expect from his or her state, and that any state has the responsibility to deliver to its citizens” (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2012, p.1). Similarly, many aid organizations, such as the US Agency for International Development, focus on outcomes in defining good governance (Keefer 2009: 441). However, the problem with defining governance as its outcomes, such as goods and services, is that arguments about the effects of good governance on outcomes risk becoming analytically tautological (D’Arcy & Nistotskaya, 2020; Keefer, 2009; Rothstein & Tannenber, 2015) and useless as policy advice (Andrews, 2008, 2013). Given that they describe development itself rather than how to achieve it through some specific changes to governance, it amounts to “telling countries that the way to develop is to become developed” (Andrews, 2008, p.380).

Another problem with the definition of governance as the manner in which political power is organized to manage a community’s affairs is that it includes both the “input” and “output” sides of politics. While the “input” side is concerned with *access* to political power (such as principles of political representation, including elections, the extent of political and civil rights, and the party systems), “output” relates to the *exercise* of power, such as the judicial system and the public administration (Rothstein & Tannenber, 2015, p.52). Many organizations and scholars include both sides of the political process in their definitions of governance. For example, two of the World Bank’s six indicators of good governance are about access to power (Voice and Accountability and Political Instability and Absence of Violence), while the other four indicators tap into the exercise of political power. The distinction between the two sides of politics has long been appreciated in political science (Fukuyama, 2013; Huntington, 1968, p. 1) but was largely lost in the “good governance” agenda of international organizations in the 2000s. This distinction is, however, crucial, as it allows to establish

independent effects of better “access to power,” in the form of democracy; and better “exercise of power,” in the form of better adherence to the rule of law and less corruption, on socially valued outcomes (Rothstein & Tannenber, 2015; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

To sum up, the “good governance” research and policy agenda that emerged in the 2000s, following the “neo-institutional” revolution, was based on a notion of governance that lacked conceptual precision. Given this terminological and conceptual confusion regarding governance and good governance, there was an urgent need for a greater conceptual precision of the foundational concept of the literature. A mounting critique of that state of affairs was offered by Rothstein and Teorell (2008, p.168) who argued that if “good governance” is everything, then, “maybe it is nothing.” Rothstein and Teorell not only critiqued the status quo but they also offered a novel conceptualization of governance as the quality of government, reviewed below.

Quality of Government

In its fundamental drive to identify “rules of the game” that can provide development outcomes for citizens, the quality of government approach is part of the neo-institutional literature. However, having observed that a wide variety of differing institutional arrangements may lead to such outcomes, Rothstein and Teorell (2008) began a search for the common denominator for pro-development institutions.

Thus, their research was to identify what constitutes high or low quality of government. Furthermore, such an attribute needed to be specific and precise enough to be operationalized so as to facilitate the assessment of governance across countries and regions for research and policy ends. Operationalization, and therefore measurement and comparison of polities, would have been impacted if the definition of high or low quality of government had been as vague as “good governance.”

In their seminal publication, Rothstein and Teorell (2008) proposed the following concept of the quality of government (QoG)— “the impartiality of institutions that exercise government authority”—which removed a great deal of conceptual confusion and offered a solid conceptual platform for a thriving multidisciplinary literature.

In what follows, I review the concept of the quality of government, focusing on several of its properties that constitute scientific progress, compared to the concept of “good governance.”

Unidimensionality

Unlike the overwhelming majority, if not all, of existing definitions of good governance, the QoG is deliberately a unidimensional concept. There are a number of well-founded reasons to reject multi-dimensionality. One of the key issues associated with this broad approach is that they are excessively complex and all consuming. As Keefer (2009) puts it, "If studying governance extends to all questions related to how groups of people govern themselves [...] then, there are few subjects within political science and political economy that do not fall within the governance domain." Second, multi-dimensional conceptualizations of "good governance" often conflate procedures of governing with policy content (Rothstein & Tannenbergh, 2015, p.52), thereby failing to provide the distinction between institutional particularities and the basic principles of governing that is required. Third, multi-dimensional approaches fail to differentiate between access to and the exercise of political power, which many argue are phenomena of differing nature (Fukuyama, 2013; Huntington, 1968). If the aim is to theorise and empirically test the relationship between the output and input sides of political processes and their mutual impact on human well-being, then, clearly, the latter cannot be included into the definition of the former. For this reason, the spectrum of democratic traits—from "free and fair" elections to participatory governance—needed to stay outside of a new definition of good governance. Multi-dimensional approaches also fail to offer a route to effective operationalization and measurement. Similarly, by oftentimes including that which needs to be explained within the definition (e.g., government effectiveness), multidimensional approaches preclude essential investigation into variation in these concepts.

While favoring a lean conceptual definition, the Quality of Government Institute rejects a unidimensional operationalization that sees QoG as simply the absence of corruption. Although a corrupt society is the opposite of a high quality of government, the QoG is much more than this. It is also the absence of nepotism, clientelism, friendism, and other -isms that are a norm in the exercise of government authority in many parts of the world (Carlin, 2012; Dahlström et al., 2015).

Normativity

The quality of government as impartiality is undoubtedly a normative concept. In order to understand what high/low quality of government (or good/bad governance) is, it is necessary to define what constitutes "high" and "good." One way to define good institutions/high quality of government is to describe what outcomes such institutions bring

about. For example, a celebrated book by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, p.74, 76) sees good institutions as those that “allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities [...] but also provide a level playing field that gives them the opportunity to do so.” Defining good institutions/high quality of government in such a way provides “very little, if any, distance” between the explanatory variable—good institutions—and the outcome to be explained (Rothstein & Tannenber, 2015, p.54). In other words, the explanatory power of outcome-based definitions of good institutions is low, and this undermines their value as a tool for scientific research.

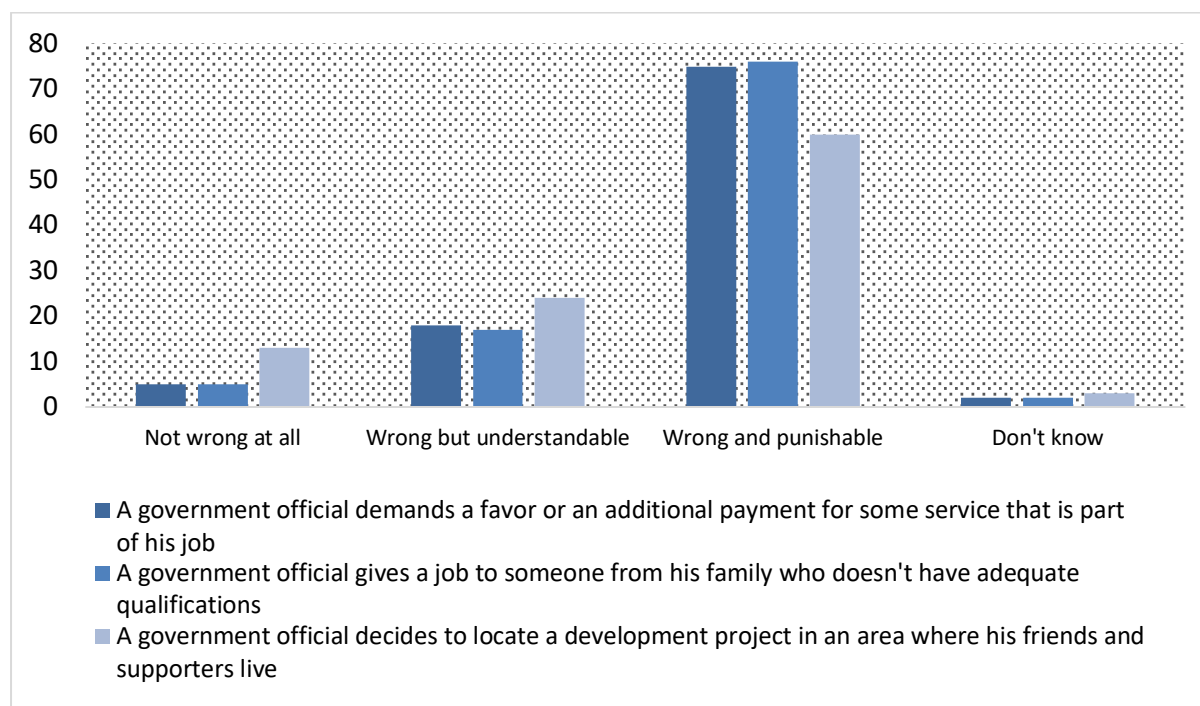
Another way to define high quality of government is to think of an underlying normative principle that should underpin the good exercise of power. In search of such a normative principle, Rothstein and Teorell (2008) took inspiration from Robert Dahl’s (1989) principle of political equality. Political equality is the foremost important attribute of any government, as it generates political legitimacy and, consequently, ensures the very existence of political order: elected representatives’ rule on behalf of citizens, while citizens obey the rules made by the representatives. Rothstein and Teorell (2008) argue that impartiality is the equivalent of Dahl’s political equality, but for the output side of politics. Impartiality is a specific norm to which everyone and everything related to the exercise of government power are adherent to. If the norm of impartiality is followed in decision-making and decision implementation, this will lead to the improved well-being of societies as a whole (improved social welfare) and also to improved perceptions of government by citizens. Thus, defining the quality of government as a normative principle has the important methodological advantage of not falling into the trap of tautology, suffered by many non-normative conceptualizations of good institutions/good government, as discussed above.

It is important to note that the QoG Institute’s approach towards the conceptualization of the quality of government as a normative principle does not come at the expense of the concept of the quality of government being alien to empirical operationalizations and measurements. On the contrary, impartiality in the exercise of political authority has been successfully operationalized and measured in several ways—not only as the absence of corruption but also as the absence of clientelism and nepotism, and also as the use, for instance, of the principals of meritocracy and gender equality in the recruitment and appointment of civil servants.

Universality

Impartiality as the chief normative principle underpinning the execution of political authority is a principle; the meaning of which is understood in a similar fashion by individuals and communities around the world. Several purposeful reviews of surveys and other evidence suggest that respondents in East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa strongly oppose corruption and demonstrate a similar understanding of the matter as the World Bank and Transparency International (Rothstein, 2014; Rothstein & Torsello, 2014; Rothstein & Varraich, 2017). As Figure 1 below shows, when faced with scenarios involving partial treatment by a government official, a majority of respondents in 18 African countries saw such actions as “wrong and punishable.”

Figure 1. Understanding of partiality in 18 African countries, % of respondents



Source:

Rothstein & Tannenber, 2015, p.59

n=25,086; year=2006; countries: Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Such a universal understanding of the meaning of impartiality in the exercise of political power is similar to the universality of human rights. Just as the right to a fair trial or freedom of expression are “a common standard of achievements for all peoples and for all nations” (UN 1948), the right not to be discriminated against or not to pay a bribe for a publicly funded service is a broadly shared understanding of what treatment by a public authority should look like.

The universality of the principle of impartiality has important methodological implications. Specifically, it enables comparison across political units. As Rothstein (2014) points out, one can only say that Denmark is less corrupt than Nigeria if what counts for corruption in the two countries are similarly understood.

Procedurality

The QoG conceptualization of good institutions rejects references to the content of government policies, adopting instead a procedural definition. The claim that good policies are the essence of good institutions in general and high quality of government in particular, existed in the literature prior to Rothstein and Teorell (2008). For example, the World Bank’s definition of good governance included “regulatory quality.” The problem with this, according to Rothstein, is that “sound policies” do not have a universal content. In other words, what is a sound policy in one empirical context may not be so in another (Rothstein & Tanneberg 2015, p.55-56; see also Andrews, 2013). Such a critique is fully justified by the failure of the so-called Washington consensus—a package of “sound policies” that developing countries were required to follow in exchange for World Bank loans in order to achieve higher levels of human well-being (Gore 2000).

The procedural definition of the quality of government—when deciding upon a case, a public official should not take into consideration anything about the applicant’s circumstances, which is not stipulated in policy or law beforehand (Rothstein & Teorell 2008, p.170)—has universal applicability, and it is also completely divorced from policy content. This detachment from policy content has been a persistent point of critique of the quality of government literature. Both sound and bad, and even evil policies (Anaphors, 2013) can be impartially implemented. And while impartial implementation of sound policies is likely to improve the human condition, impartial implementation of bad/evil policies may only multiply human misery. This critique also has an empirical pillar. Suzuki and Demircioglu (2019a) found

that for citizens with a vulnerable background (lower education and lower income) impartiality is not a necessary and sufficient criterion for such citizens to be satisfied with public services. Specifically, an increase in impartiality negatively influences the perceived quality of public education and health care services for vulnerable citizens. In other words, it is believed that impartiality does not equally benefit citizens with different backgrounds and may even be harmful for vulnerable citizens. Based on these findings, Suzuki and Demircioglu (2019a) argue that in addition to the focus on strictly enforcing laws and regulations in a neutral way, administrative processes should be more flexible to better accommodate the needs of vulnerable citizens.

The authors of the concept of the quality of government as impartiality accept this critique in general (Rothstein & Tannenbergl 2015, p.56-57), but they note that, in practice, discriminatory and other morally questionable policies rarely go hand in hand with truly impartial implementation. In most places around the world, the problem is not in impartial implementation of bad policies; rather, partiality in implementation undermines the "soundness" of many policies.

Quality of Government as Impartiality

In summary, the quality of government (QoG) is a normative, universal, and procedural conceptualization of the idea of "good institutions/good governance." The fact that the concept of the QoG is unidimensional and also divorced from the outcome-based conceptualizations of good institutions, enables it to be successfully operationalized, measured, and to be utilized in scientific research on the causes of human well-being in a meaningful way. The QoG's focus on the execution of political power distinguishes it from democracy—another powerful predictor of the human condition, thereby allowing research into the independent impact of the "input" (democracy) and "output" (QoG) sides of politics.

The Effects of the QoG on Socially Important Outcomes

In the last ten years, an impressive literature on the effects of quality of government has emerged, exploring the link between the extent of impartiality in the implementation of political authority and a host of socially important outcomes, ranging from the perceived legitimacy of public authorities, corruption, and entrepreneurship to policy advice, public

service provision, and the onset of civil wars. Whilst a full review of this literature is beyond the scope of this publication, in what follows, I have reviewed a selection of publications.

Meritocracy and Impartiality

One of the first and most influential studies on the effects of the QoG is a publication by Dahlström et al. (2012), which has had a profound impact (as of today, it has been cited nearly 400 times). This research was set to explore the link between meritocratic recruitment and public bureaucracy and the extent of corruption. This publication has a special place in the QoG literature, because it successfully argued that a meritocratic manner of recruitment to positions of public bureaucracy (rather than recruitment based on political or personal connections) is intrinsically linked with impartiality in the exercise of power by bureaucracy. In order to capture the extent of meritocratic recruitment, the Quality of Government Institute—a research group at the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, conducted an expert survey on the organizational design of public bureaucracies around the globe. Based on the assessment of at least three experts per country, the first QoG Expert Survey produced estimates of the extent of meritocratic recruitment in 52 countries (Dahlström et al., 2012). This data was then leveraged against the World Bank's data on corruption. The results of this exercise showed that corruption is lower in countries where meritocratic recruitment is practiced more often. This primary result of the empirical analysis provided strong support for the idea that meritocratic recruitment to public bureaucracies is associated with higher impartiality (lower corruption) and set a trend in the scientific literature of empirically measuring impartiality through meritocratic recruitment to bureaucracy.

In a more recent study on the link between meritocracy and corruption, Charron and his co-authors (2017) examine the empirical link between a broad measure of meritocracy in the public sector (not meritocracy in recruitment) and a measure of corruption in the public procurement sector. They found that in EU regions where respondents tend to agree with the statement that "Hard work is no guarantee of success in the public sector for most people—it's more a matter of luck and connections," there are more instances of corruption in public procurement.

In addition to cross-country analysis, research, based on individual-level data, provides support for the conjecture that merit-based recruitment to public bureaucracy diminishes corruption in bureaucracy. For example, Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2016) used data from

a survey of ministerial bureaucrats in five East European countries and showed that merit-based recruitment is strongly associated with less corruption.

Finally, a recent review of the literature on the organizational design of public bureaucracy and corruption found that merit-based entry to civil service is the only factor robustly associated with lower corruption (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018). In other words, there is a broad consensus that meritocratic public bureaucracies, particularly those practicing merit-based recruitment, are those which exhibit higher impartiality and, consequently, stand for higher quality of government.

Measuring Impartiality at the Country-level

The continued interest in the data on the extent of merit and other organizational features of public bureaucracies that safeguard impartiality (such as security of tenure), prompted the second and third waves of the QoG Expert Survey. The second wave was conducted in 2014 (Dahlström et al., 2015), and the data from that survey has been used in no less than 100 peer-reviewed and other publications. In 2020, the QoG Institute conducted the third wave of the expert survey, and the data release was scheduled for the end of 2020.

In addition to the cross-country data, the QoG Institute conducted an expert survey measuring merit, security of tenure, pay, and other features of the organizational design of bureaucracies in Russia's regions (Nistotskaya et al., 2015). This exercise demonstrated that the methodology of the survey works well not only in a cross-country context but is also applicable at the level of sub-national political units.

Another large survey conducted by the Quality of Government Institute is the European Quality of Government Index (EQI), which measured the quality of government in more than 200 regions of the European Union. Unlike the QoG Expert Survey, the EQI is based on perceptions of regional governments by roughly 200,000 residents of those regions. The EQI data are available for the years 2010, 2013, and 2017 (Charron et al., 2019), with the fourth wave currently being under way. This data enabled a large literature explaining the different outcomes observed at the subnational level in 28 EU countries, where the quality of government is either the main explanatory factor or one of the key alternative explanations (see for example, Crescenzi et al., 2016; Nistotskaya et al., 2015).

In addition to this, the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem)—a big research consortium that provides expert-based data on the state of democracy at the cross-country

level for a period of over 100 years—recently extended their data gathering effort to incorporate issues pertaining to impartiality in the exercise of political authority. Specifically, there is data on “the extent to which public officials generally abide by the law and treat like cases alike, or conversely, the extent to which public administration is characterized by arbitrariness and biases (i.e., nepotism, cronyism, or discrimination)” (Coppedge et al., 2018, p.157). This measure captures the extent to which decisions made by public officials abide by written rules and are implemented in an impersonal manner.

In all the above-mentioned data gathering exercises, the survey questions explicitly relate to the *de facto* practices of human resource management and bureaucratic behaviour, and not just *de jure* regulations, because research has shown that legal provisions do not automatically translate into *de facto* practices and behavior in the bureaucracy (Lapuente & Nistotskaya, 2009). All of the above-mentioned data are available for researchers and all other interested parties on the websites of the Quality of Government Institute (<https://www.gu.se/en/quality-government/qog-data>) and the V-Dem Institute (<https://www.v-dem.net>).

Quality of Government, Legitimacy, Support for Democracy and Trust in Political Institutions

The literature examining the effects of the quality of government on government legitimacy and satisfaction with democracy is a big part of the QoG literature. In a path-breaking study, Rothstein (2009) laid out an elaborate theoretical argument about how legitimacy is “created, maintained, and destroyed,” not at the input, but at the output side of the political system. In other words, the quality of government is at least as consequential for political legitimacy as the capacity of electoral systems to create effective representations.

Building on this theoretical framework, Dahlberg and Holmberg (2014) examined the independent effects of the input and output sides of politics on peoples’ satisfaction with how democracy works. Employing a large multilevel dataset, capturing different sides of the political process in 32 democracies, and individual-level satisfaction with democracy, they found that impartiality in the implementation of policies matters for peoples’ satisfaction with democracy more than factors such as ideological congruence: the degree to which an individual’s own political preferences coincide with the partisan colour of the government.

Dahlberg and Holmberg’s (2014, p.537) finding that “in understanding how people judge the functioning of their democratic rule, quality of government is more essential than

quality of democracy” was subjected to further interrogation, yielding more fine-grained conclusions. For example, Boräng et al. (2017) examined the proposition that the quality of government factors may have a stronger effect on satisfaction with democracy in younger democracies, finding that higher QoG is indeed linked with higher levels of diffuse support (support for the principles of democracy), and that this effect is stronger in younger democracies, but that it has no robust effect on specific support (support of the performance of a democratic regime). Furthermore, the QoG factor became an important corrective in the literature that explains satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions in terms of a regime’s economic performance. For example, Magalhães found that the conventional wisdom that satisfaction with the way democracies work and government approval is a fundamentally economic “performance-driven attitude” needs to be qualified: while economic evaluations are important, procedural fairness plays an important moderating role (Magalhães, 2016; Magalhães & Aguiar-Conraria, 2019).

Quality of Government, Political Participation, and Political Preferences

The quality of government factor has grown in prominence in the literature on political participation and voting behavior. A large subset of this literature examines the effects of the QoG, mostly proxies through corruption, on participation in democratic processes such as voting. This literature, rich in methodological approaches, empirical settings, and types of data, has reached a broad consensus that perceptions and experiences of poor quality of government suppress voting turnout (Dahlberg & Solevid, 2016; Hooghe & Quintelier, 2014; Kostadinova, 2009; Stockemer et al., 2013; Sundström & Stockemer, 2015).

In contrast to the literature on the link between corruption and the most profound empirical manifestation of partiality in the exercise of power and political participation, which is both voluminous and which, by and large, enjoys a consensus, the question of how perceptions and experience of the QoG affect peoples’ political preferences and actual voting choices remains understudied. In addition to several publications pointing to a broad effect of personal experience with the quality of state institutions on political preferences and political behavior (Klašnja et al., 2016; Kumlin, 2004), there are a few publications, which specifically examine the QoG’s effect on political preferences and voting behavior. An important step in the direction of better understanding the effects of the QoG on political preferences was made by Svallfors (2013) who found a clear independent effect of high QoG on attitudes toward

higher taxes and spending. He also found that government quality conditions the impact of egalitarian attitudes on voters' preferences toward tax and spending: voters with egalitarian attitudes are more likely to support higher taxes and more spending if they live under high QoG than egalitarian-minded voters living in low-QoG polities. Another important empirical link between the QoG and political preferences was found by Agerberg (2017). Specifically, Agerberg (2017) examined the link between individual perceptions of the quality of government and electoral support for populist parties. He argues that poor experience with state institutions makes citizens more susceptible to the rhetoric of populist parties, which exploit citizens' dissatisfaction with the establishment. Using a range of estimation techniques and data from 150 regions of the European Union, Agerberg (2017) finds strong support for the hypothesis that individual perception of low QoG leads to higher electoral support for populist parties.

Furthermore, there is a growing body of literature examining the conditional role of the quality of government on peoples' support for climate and other environmental policies (Davidovic & Haring, 2020; Haring 2012, 2014). Thus, Haring (2012) found that people are more likely to make economic sacrifices for environmental protection when they trust in political institutions, compared to people who distrust their political institutions due to high corruption. Using data from the European Social Survey, Davidovic and Haring (2020) explored whether the cross-national variation in public support for different types of climate policy instruments is associated with QoG levels and trust in political institutions, concluding that higher QoG and generalized trust are associated with higher support for pro-environmental taxes, but not with support for subsidies and bans.

Quality of Government, Economic Development, and Other Economics-Related Outcomes

The causes of economic development are a key research question not only for economists but also for researchers from other social sciences. As the concept of the quality of government has developed, so too has the empirical literature that examines its effects on economic development. One of the first publications in this literature was an article by Nistotskaya et al., (2015), examining the link between perceptions of government impartiality and entrepreneurship in the EU regions. Having bridged the QoG concept with the literature on entrepreneurial cognition, Nistotskaya et al. (2015) argued that the varying levels of entrepreneurial activity observed across the EU regions are not due to the lack of

entrepreneurial spirit in the regional population, but to the lack of government impartiality. They argued that an individual with a good business idea, living under a government that practices partial treatment of its citizens, will be unlikely to pursue their business idea. Having envisaged multiple barriers (from delays in business registration to unwarranted inspections) that may have been erected by the partial government on the way to the realization of their business idea, entrepreneurial-minded individuals would factor costs associated with biased practices by public officials into the expected utility from the business venture, eventually leading them to a decision not to start a business. This theoretical argument finds support in the cross-sectional data: EU regions characterized by higher (perceived) impartiality of government show, on average, higher levels of entrepreneurial activity (new start-ups per 100,000 regional residents).

The link between higher quality of government and entrepreneurship was further tested by Nistotskaya and Cingolani (2016), with both cross-sectional and panel data for a large sample of countries. In the cross-sectional analysis, Nistotskaya and Cingolani (2016) utilized the data from the second wave of the QoG Expert Survey, leveraging it against the data on the quality of pro-business regulations in nearly 90 countries. They found that meritocratic recruitment is associated with the Ease of Doing Business—a set of measures developed by the World Bank to measure the ease of the administrative process to open and operate a business in different countries. Proxying impartiality with the security of contracts for high-ranking bureaucrats, the authors found strong support for the link between the quality of government and levels of entrepreneurship, which is considered to be the backbone of higher levels of economic development.

Several recent studies directly engage with the issue of the quality of government's effect on economic growth, arriving at different results. Employing the EQI data and the EU regions empirical design, Rodríguez-Pose and Garcilazo (2015) found a strong positive effect on economic growth. Having set their study in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa and using survey data from Afrobarometer from the late 1990s, Ahlerup et al. (2016) found that countries whose governments are perceived as impartial are more likely to experience sustained economic growth of at least 2% for at least five consecutive years. However, research by Cornel et al. (2020), which utilized a cross-country design with long panel data, found that the positive effect of the impartial bureaucracy operates only in the short term and is stronger in recent decades. Considering that the data for impartiality comes from expert assessments and covers

a period of more than 100 years of human history, there is a higher chance of measurement error—something that should be taken into consideration when reflecting on the results of this research.

Apart from broad economic development and entrepreneurship, the social science literature examined the impact of the quality of government on other economic outcomes, for example, transport infrastructure (Crescenzi et al., 2016). Similarly, several studies asserted that countries with professional and impartial public bureaucracy tend to have higher national-level innovation outputs, such as scientific productivity (Fernández-Carro & Lapuente-Giné, 2016), knowledge and technology, and creative outputs (Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2019b), which are important factors of economic growth. Finally, a small literature also examines the effects of impartiality on the quality of public policies, reaching the consistent conclusion that higher QoG leads to entrepreneurship-enhancing regulation (Cingolani & Nistotskaya, 2016), whereas lower QoG leads to “public policy knowledge that is strategically biased or suppressed in a manner that benefits incumbents” (Boräng et al., 2018, p.7). Relatedly, Povitkina and Bolkvadze (2019) argued that low QoG hampers the adoption and implementation of the long-term policies necessary for securing the adequate provision of such public goods as drinking water.

Quality of Government and Other Socially Valued Outcomes

The QoG Institute made a deliberate decision to make human welfare its top research priority (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2012) and, consequently, there is a host of studies examining the link between the QoG and different aspects of human welfare, such as those examining the extent of poverty, public health issues, environmental issues, social welfare, and subjective well-being. In this section, I will review several publications on this matter, which have had a considerable impact on the literature.

In one of the earlier publications, Holmberg et al. (2009) pointed to the positive empirical relationship between the QoG and about twenty outcomes related to human welfare, albeit only using bivariate regressions.

In Rothstein et al. (2012), the authors employed the QoG theoretical framework to explain the size and generosity of the welfare state. Using data from 18 OECD countries across 1984-2000, they found a direct and conditional (through working class mobilization) effect of the QoG on the outcome of interest.

In 2013, Halleröd et al. published an important study revealing a robust empirical link between the quality of government and child poverty and child deprivation at the cross-country level. The theoretical framework employed in this study is *bone fide* QoG, with a focus on impartiality in the exercise of government, but the empirical measure employed to capture the concept of the QoG is the World Bank's government effectiveness, which does not cleanly capture the concept of the QoG.

Drawing on the contrasting experiences of Sweden and Spain in the 1930s, Lapuente and Rothstein (2014) showed that a meritocratic bureaucratic structure had a stabilising effect during political turmoil and social conflict. Meritocratically recruited civil servants in Sweden, incentivized to maintain the state's neutrality by the fear that taking sides would put their careers at risk, tried to contain the political conflict with the executive sphere. Their actions mitigated class conflict and contributed to a peaceful solution in the form of a neo-corporatist agreement and welfare state. By way of contrast, officials in the highly politicised bureaucracy in Spain, hoping to advance their careers by political engagement, fuelled conflict, and contributed to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. This publication is a powerful narrative on how the quality of government may lead to two different paths of development in countries with many similar socio-economic conditions.

Povitkina has explored the role of the QoG in relation to the quality of the natural environment (Povitkina, 2015) and disaster preparedness (Persson & Povitkina, 2018). In an elaborate time-series analysis, she examined the interaction effects of democracy (input side of politics) and bureaucratic quality (the output side) on the levels of carbon dioxide emissions, finding that democracies emit less only if their bureaucratic capacity is high. If bureaucratic capacity is low, democracies do not do any better than authoritarian regimes. Persson and Povitkina (2018) find a seemingly similar result of the interaction between democracy and bureaucracy for the number of people being adversely affected by natural disasters.

Finally, the QoG factor is of interest to scholars of democracy and democratization. In the footsteps of a distinguished intellectual tradition in political science that argues for a "usable" state bureaucracy being in place in order for democracy to consolidate (Linz & Stepan, 1996), Cornell (2014) developed a conceptualization of such a usable bureaucracy as a low turnover bureaucracy and showed through a comparative case study (Peru and Bolivia) that high turnover rates of bureaucratic personnel negatively affect the implementation of democratic governance programs.

In sum, there is a large body of literature linking the quality of government as impartiality to a host of outcomes that matter for human well-being. This literature is varied in terms of methodological approaches, types of data, and empirical settings; and it is characterized by a broad consensus that the QoG matters for many outcomes, ranging from individual policy preferences to macro-outcomes such as public goods provision or environmental quality, affecting them directly and also indirectly.

How to Get High Quality of Government?

Despite this broad consensus, moving towards high quality of government presents a big problem for countries trapped in a low quality of government equilibrium. Broad structural (Charron & Lapuente, 2010; Dimant & Tosato, 2018; Goel & Nelson, 2010) and historical explanations (Alexander, 2010; Broms, 2017; Charron & Lapuente, 2011) of the QoG levels enjoyed by people today offer valuable insights into the problem, but they are of little use when it comes to policy advice, as they point to circumstances that are often beyond human intervention. What follows is a review of the literature on four institutions that seems to facilitate a move towards higher Quality of Government: *meritocracy, gender equality, universal education, and broad taxation*. This is not to suggest that this is an exhaustive list of causes of high QoG: the road to high QoG is neither simple nor straightforward, and a much longer list of factors is likely to be at play. Nevertheless, these four factors have been the most often discussed as necessary for high QoG.

Meritocratic Recruitment

The idea that the principle of merit, especially in the allocation of jobs in public bureaucracy, is a probable cause of a more educated and impartial bureaucracy is not original to the QoG approach. It has been around since at least the work of Max Weber, who laid down several principles for the organization of effective public bureaucracy, which was followed by a number of influential studies (Lewis, 1997; Miller, 2000; Rauch & Evans, 1999; Van Riper, 1958). Standing on the shoulders of these giants, QoG researchers were able to add several important missing pieces to the argument that merit-based allocation of bureaucratic jobs sends out a very strong signal regarding the impartiality of the state (Dahlström et al., 2012; Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016). Following Miller (2000), Cingolani and Nistotskaya (2016) argued that merit-based recruitment to bureaucracy

promotes impartiality by constraining the rent-seeking and other morally hazardous behaviour of individual politicians. On the other hand, Dahlström and Lapuente (2017) reasoned that meritocratic recruitment separates the careers of politicians and bureaucrats, creating a sub-system of checks and balances within the executive branch, thereby promoting adherence of both politicians and bureaucrats to the rule of law and improving effectiveness. Finally, the above-mentioned empirical work by Dahlström et al. (2012) revealed a robust relationship between merit and impartiality (the lack of corruption) in the, to date, largest sample of countries.

Gender Equality

The principle of impartiality in the exercise of power (and meritocratic recruitment) and the principle of gender equality—women and men should be treated equally and without discrimination or prejudice on the grounds of gender—are intuitively connected, and there is little surprise that there is high scholarly interest in the relationship between gender equality and impartiality/lack of corruption.

After decades of research in the 1990s and the 2000s, a strong empirical link between different indicators of gender equality and levels of corruption emerged (Dollar et al., 2001; Esarey & Chirillo, 2013; Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2017; Grimes & Wängnerud, 2010; Stensöta et al., 2015; Swamy et al., 2001; Tripp, 2001). Despite the broad acceptance of the link between gender equality and higher QoG, theoretical interpretation of this phenomenon lags behind empirical work. Stensöta and Wängnerud (2018) provide a detailed overview of the most prevailing theoretical mechanisms, ranging from the argument that women are simply the “fairer sex” to the argument that being tied to the family and the private sphere much more than men, women lack the opportunities to engage with corruption, while still other researchers highlight how the socialization of women as less risk averse and how caring leads to less detrimental behaviour. The largest evidence bases for evaluating this link comes from studies on women’s political participation. Here, a separate discussion emerged concerning the role of female politicians’ engagement in anti-corruption efforts, with some arguing that a shift towards greater numbers of women in political office could induce a form of checks and balances, as new players introduce elite competition and control, while others suggest that the increased number of women in positions of power may draw media attention to a new situation and send a signal to society in a changed situation. However, there is also a large

body of literature that holds that the gender equality–low corruption link is a case of reverse causality: instead of higher proportions of women causing lower levels of corruption, corruption is seen as an obstacle to the political recruitment of women (Bjarnegård, 2013; Goetz, 2007; Stockemer, 2011; Sundström & Wängnerud, 2016).

In addition to the lack of clarity with regard to the mechanisms that explain the link between the increased political representation of women and lower corruption, there is little clarity concerning the role of women in public bureaucracy. While more women in parliaments are correlated with lower corruption, more women in the bureaucracy are not. Stensöta et al. (2015) explain this puzzling finding by pointing to the mediating role of institutional norms: while women in parliaments need to differentiate themselves from their male counterparts by demonstrating their incorruptibility, within a professional bureaucracy, personal attributes are less likely to be emphasized, requiring no such differentiation. The suggested difference between electoral and bureaucratic arenas is an important avenue for further research on the link between women in politics and corruption.

Rothstein (2011) has powerfully argued that increased gender equality may produce a “big bang” effect sufficient to disrupt a corrupt equilibrium. He uses the historical example of Sweden where a series of reforms, including the 1845 law on the right to equal inheritance by men and women, were followed by a remarkable decrease in the levels of corruption in the country. Taking the view that the disruption of established male-dominated power structures would in itself represent a “big bang,” any reform aimed at creating such a disruption, such as gender quotas for political representation, should have been welcome. However, the track record of the impact of gender quotas, currently practiced in more than 100 countries, on corruption is mixed (for review, see Bjarnegård et al., 2018), calling for more research into the mechanisms linking gender quotas with lowering corruption.

Universal Education

Uslaner and Rothstein (2016) argued that universal education offers another robust path to impartiality in the exercise of political power. The authors examined the relationship between historical universal education reforms and present-day corruption levels and revealed the path-dependent nature of such relationships over a century and a half. Specifically, they showed a strong correlation between the average number of years children spent in school in 1870 and corruption levels in states in 2010 in 78 countries, controlling for a number of

alternative explanations. Their theoretical argument is multifold; educated people are less likely to tolerate nepotism and other forms of patrimony, and the very idea that every child, regardless of their parents' economic, social, or cultural status, should, as a right, have equal access to the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills for future advancement is a strong call for impartiality in the state's relationship with its citizens. Furthermore, education is an important public good, which plants seeds of trust in the institutions that provided people with this good, creating "bottom-up" support for such a norm as government impartiality.

Taxation

The role of taxation in bringing about impartiality in the exercise of power is by and large linked with the "bottom-up" pressure of the population on government. When governments do not need to raise taxes because they have large non-tax incomes (from natural resources or other windfall revenue), they face political incentives that affect the ways in which they seek, use, and retain power. The absence of pressure from taxpayers makes powerholders less responsive and accountable to citizens in relation to both the input and output sides. As Moore (2007) states, lacking broad taxation makes states "simultaneously arbitrary and weak." Conversely, paying taxes makes individuals more interested in politics (Broms, 2015; Persson & Rothstein, 2015), as the looting of natural resources or abuse of aid funds is of direct concern to those who do pay taxes, because it is their money. This is consequential, because people are more likely to engage in the monitoring of government performance and other costly political behaviors (Paler, 2013), eventually leading to a higher quality of government (Baskaran & Bigsten, 2013; Broms, 2011; Moore, 2007; Prichard, 2015). In other words, a functioning system of broad taxation is likely to generate popular pressure for not only political representation but also lower corruption and better public goods provision.

Conclusion

The quality of government is a research field that sprouted from a paradigmatic change in the social sciences that associates the root cause of development with good institutions, especially good political institutions. Having rejected existing conceptualizations of good political institutions, Rothstein and Teorell (2008) put forward a new conceptualization—the quality of government (QoG) approach. The vision of good political institutions as impartiality

in the exercise of political authority enabled a large theoretical and empirical literature on the consequences of the quality of government. Currently, a broad interdisciplinary consensus exists that higher QoG leads to important, socially valued outcomes, ranging from better public goods provision and finishing with subjective wellbeing. While it is widely accepted that the impartiality of bureaucracy and other executive agencies is key to human well-being, the causes of high QoG are less understood. Nevertheless, four factors have been consistently linked with higher QoG. They are meritocracy in the allocation of jobs in public bureaucracies and other non-elected government posts; gender equality, specifically, higher political representation of women; universal education; and a system of broad taxation. The quest for a better understanding of the paths to higher QoG remains and is, however, far from being finished.

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