

Study finds biases about bribery in certain countries facilitate corruption

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A new study has shown that the expectation that a bribe will be accepted leads to more attempts at bribery. However, in the experiment the actual corruptibility of officials of certain nationalities did not match the

expectations of those offering bribes. Researchers urge that actively fighting biases can reduce corruption.

Whether or not people bribe—or attempt to bribe—others depends on which country the counterpart comes from. The nationality of the briber, in turn, is barely significant. That is the result of a study conducted with the participation of three researchers at the University of Cologne: Professor Dr. Bernd Irlenbusch, member of the Cluster of Excellence ECONtribute, Professor Dr. Andreas Glöckner and Dr. Angela Rachael Dorrough as well as scientists at the University of Amsterdam and the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. The study has been published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

With increasing globalization, more and more people interact across national borders. Until now, however, behavioral research has focused mainly on [corruption](#) within [individual countries](#). Irlenbusch and his team explored corruption in a highly controlled, international environment in a large-scale experiment. As part of the study, approximately 6,500 people from 18 countries participated online in a bribery game. They took on the roles of citizens and officials, keeping their actual nationalities. The citizens had to decide whether they would buy a license through official channels or bribe the responsible officials in order to obtain the license at a [lower price](#) and to receive more money at the end of the experiment. The officials could either accept or refuse the bribe.

In total, the citizens had to decide 18 times whether to bribe or not—once for each nation in the sample. They were then asked to estimate how likely it was that the officials would accept the bribe. If the assessment was largely correct, they were paid a bonus. In a further step, the participants swapped roles. The study also accounted for the harm corruption causes within societies: For each successful bribe, the researchers actually donated less money to a non-governmental

organization working to fight climate change.

It turns out that citizens of all nations offered bribes above average to officials from countries with a reputation for corruption. Indian officials, for example, were almost twice as likely to be offered bribes as Canadian ones. "Our study shows that the nationality of one's interaction partner and the expectations it gives rise to has a greater influence on the offering of bribes than one's own nationality," said Bernd Irlenbusch.

However, the participants tended to over- or underestimate the acceptance rates: Officials from countries with a reputation for corruption were less likely to accept bribes than people expected. At the same time, "citizens" underestimated how often officials from countries that do not have a reputation for corruption accepted the money. For example, on average, participants expected 42% of U.S. citizens to accept bribes in their roles as [public officials](#), while in fact they were successfully bribed 56% of the time. Among Russian officials in the game, the acceptance rate of 33% was significantly lower than the expected 47%.

The results show a pattern of human behavior. "People often base their behavior on what they expect others to do," Irlenbusch added. Efforts to overcome biases about certain nations could hence contribute to fighting corruption around the world, he concluded.

More information: Angela Rachael Dorrough et al, Conditional bribery: Insights from incentivized experiments across 18 nations, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2209731120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2209731120)

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