

THE ROOTS OF CORRUPTION: MASS EDUCATION, ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND STATE BUILDING

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Abstract

The roots of corruption are highly contested. We argue there is path dependence across almost a century and a half, based on five theories of a causal mechanism between universal education and control of corruption. We show a powerful statistical link between education levels in 1870 and corruption levels in 2010 for 78 countries, and it remains strong even when controlling for change in the level of education, gross national product per capita, and democratic governance. Regime type is generally not significant. We trace early education to levels of economic equality in the late 19th and early 21st centuries—and argue that more equal societies educated more of their citizens, which then gave citizens more ability to reduce corruption. We present historical evidence from Europe and Spanish, British, and French colonies that strong states provided more education to their publics—and that such states were themselves more common where economic disparities were smaller.