



## **Corruption in Catalonia:**

Citizens' perceptions and attitudes



I am pleased to present the opinions of citizens regarding the phenomenon of corruption. The timing of this presentation is not random; last 9 December was **International Anti-Corruption Day**, a symbolic date that we want permanently highlighted in our calendar.

This barometer of **Corruption in Catalonia: citizens' perceptions and attitudes** forms part of a series initiated in 2010 with which we seek to improve the design of public policies in this field, especially as regards prevention.

The study gathers data on the perception of corruption in Catalonia, on the levels of transparency and integrity in the Catalan public administrations and on citizens' attitudes and behaviours.

The fieldwork was conducted from 5 to 31 October 2018 through telephone interviews with 850 people. The sample is representative of the population with Spanish citizenship resident in Catalonia.

### **Most relevant aspects:**

- **The perception of corruption** remains high (71.9% consider the level to be very high or high, and 81.3% perceive corruption as a very serious or serious problem), despite levels having perceptibly diminished since 2014, when the curve reached its peak following the first survey in 2012. By gender, women perceive more corruption than men do (76% versus 67.5%) and are also in the majority in the perception that corruption has increased (37.4% against 23.2% of men).

**When the questions refer to knowledge from individual, personal and direct experience, the results fall drastically** and may be

considered minimal in relative terms<sup>1</sup>. Only 4.2% say they have witnessed bribes being used, while other behaviours (irregular conduct, application of inappropriate criteria or nepotism) attain percentages between 22% and 30%. The health sector is where most favouritism has been seen, involving family members, friends, companies or the sampled person themselves, together with the acceptance of gifts. Following inappropriate criteria in the application of rules is observed to a greater degree in the local administration, and bribery (though infrequent overall) is noted more in the administration of the Government of Catalonia (Generalitat) and local entities.

These results are compatible with the nature of the corruption that affects us, political corruption, which is centred on bias in the public decision-making process at the highest echelons of power and rooted in private interests, rather than systematic corruption<sup>2</sup> in the exercise of functions and provision of basic services.

- **Social tolerance** of irregular practices has steadily diminished in general terms. The rejection of previously accepted or justified conducts is growing, and the identification of corrupt behaviour improving. The result, in gender terms, is that men tend to punish more than women those parties affected by cases of corruption, as 48.4% would vote for another party, in contrast to 38.3% of women. Young people from 18 to 29 are more tolerant with corruption. By way of example, three times more people in this age range than in the overall result consider it very or fairly acceptable for a politician to lend support to a project which benefits an economic group, in consideration for the support that group has given to his or her party (9.4% vs 3.7% overall).

The young are also more likely to tolerate corrupt behaviours; almost half of those consulted believe that a public official undertaking electoral activities during working hours is not corrupt conduct (44.3% vs the 26.6% average).

However, there is room for improvement as regards the thresholds of tolerance. For example, a senior manager receiving a case of wine as a gift is accepted by 17.7%, and making a false entry in the electoral roll to fall within the school catchment area is considered justifiable by 28.2%. Citizens also find it more acceptable to “do someone a favour” to obtain something from the administration than to offer a gift or money (residual).

Commitment and involvement to fight corruption is growing significantly. Reporting irregularities is the preferred method of becoming actively involved, but those interviewed also consider other ways (their vote, joining or forming an association, or going public). Projections, in terms of electoral punishment, indicate some

---

<sup>1</sup> Comparable with those in Spain and surrounding countries, according to data from various studies (Transparency International’s Global Barometer of Corruption, Eurobarometer)

<sup>2</sup> Understood as that which affects citizens’ daily life (when bribes are paid, for instance, to the police, public officials, judges or doctors).



43.2% would vote for another party, while the intention to cast a spoilt or blank vote is also on the increase.

- How citizens perceive **politics** and those who dedicate their lives to it is a cause for much concern (the perception of little or no honesty is established at 54.2%, despite having recovered substantially). More than half believe that parties finance themselves illegally and that this influences significantly or very significantly in subsequent government decisions (81%). Mention should be made of the difference between the 42.7% of men and 32.7% of women who believe this to be the case.
- Citizens condemn the close links between **politics and business** (perceived by 82.9%) and are highly critical of the way public management accounts are rendered. At the same time, over 80% detect a lack of transparency in relationships between elected representatives and interest groups. The belief that the assets and economic activity of elected representatives should be monitored by an independent body has risen to 90%.
- Information on corruption offered by the **media** is considered to be not very or not at all objective by a substantial percentage (66.2%).
- A growing number of Catalans (69%) believe employees of the **administration** to be very or quite honest, but there exists a degree of ambivalence in the confidence expressed, with criticism of the favouritism received (according to 68%) by people and organisations close to the government. In terms of educational level, 70.1% of those with higher education think they are quite honest, while amongst those with lower educational levels the data falls to 50.5%. There is also clear reference to the need to professionalise the public administration, in order to ensure applicants are appointed on the basis of their merit and capability (in the opinion of respondents, currently guaranteed in only some 30% of appointments).
- As regards **risk areas**: public works, urban planning and justice are the public services where corruption is considered most widespread; financial institutions, political parties and the media are the worst-rated institutions; contracts, and the granting of licenses, authorisations and subsidies are the activities where most corruption is witnessed.
- Citizens' perception of the **transparency** of institutions is improving, though 54.8% still consider they allow little or no transparency (versus 58.5% in the previous barometer). The main effect of this opacity is distrust (having something to hide is the first reason considered by respondents when they are not given the information requested). In the case of the public administrations, some 49.7% of subjects with university studies believe them to be quite



transparent, versus 36.2% of those with lower educational levels. Thus, the higher the level of education, the greater the belief that there is transparency in the public administrations.

- The barriers to **reporting** cases of corruption are based in circumstances that lie beyond the control of the potential complainant: a huge rise has been noted in the main reasons given, namely the difficulty in securing evidence (for almost half the citizens) and the fear of reprisals (soaring to 30%). As regards what is considered most effective in combatting corruption, young people from 18 to 29 think it would be public dissemination of the problem in the social networks (18.9% versus 12% overall), while voting for clean candidates or parties that promise to fight corruption efficiently is the option for 37.5% of the over 65s (the overall average is 30.6%).

The Anti-Fraud Office would like to add **some considerations**:

1. The **perception of corruption** remains at unacceptable levels which, taken in relation to the amount of personal and direct contact with corruption (relatively low and comparable with the countries around us), speaks to us of a serious problem concentrated in the higher spheres, which brings about an undesirable bias in public decision-making due to the interference of interested parties. In this regard, the Anti-Fraud Office urges institutions and parties to act in coherence with the gravity and extension of the problem and build a serious political commitment to anti-corruption policies.
2. **Further education** is necessary on corruption and its effects. Any “abuse of a public position for private gain” merits application of this term and the strongest possible rejection from all social sectors. This must be the case whether the corruption is pecuniary or of some other nature, current or deferred, for the culprit’s own benefit or that of a third party (family member or the party, for instance), and whether it takes place in the public or the private sector, from the administration to the university.  
Corruption damages the economy but also kills social capital and the people’s trust (especially among the younger population) in merit, effort and talent. There is no room for complacency or ambiguity. Nor can it be considered a personal matter; it is an issue intrinsically linked to the quality and integrity of the institutions, which can and must be stronger and do more, from a preventive focus.
3. There is a perception of greater **transparency**. However, in view of the results this development seems somewhat more formal than substantive, as there is no translation into satisfactory rendering of accounts or greater confidence of objectivity in decision-making.



4. The commitment and **dedication of political leaders** to confront corruption is insufficient. For their part, citizens seem very willing to get involved. So mechanisms must be put in place to ensure easy access to public information and simple and safe channels for communicating complaints. There is also an urgent need for a **comprehensive regime of protection for whistleblowers** which grants the Anti-Fraud Office competences in the area of safeguarding and protecting them, and includes the power to impose penalties where necessary.
5. The need to **professionalise the public administration** and guarantee the criteria of merit and capability is widely shared. This reform is essential, long-awaited and systematically unattended. The depoliticization recommendation, particularly relevant at senior management level, is fully in line with the opinion of the OECD. The *Government at a glance 2017* report highlights the anomaly of Spain (among the bottom positions, along with Turkey and Chile) in replacing all senior post-holders in the administration every time there is a change in government.
6. Particular emphasis should be placed on the most vulnerable sectors and institutions, and no effort spared in the **management of risks** inherent in those activities more prone to corruption, such as public procurement. The Anti-Fraud Office should be a key element in the design and elaboration of the National Strategy, and should assume supervisory roles.

When considering **conflicts of interest**, it should be borne in mind that they are the background to a good deal of corruption cases. They must be properly identified and their risk managed to avoid alteration of the impartiality and objectivity of decision-making. The Anti-Fraud Office recommends comprehensive reform in this area and, in particular, calls for an improvement in the system of making, recording and supervising declarations of goods and interests, and for the creation of a single electronic register in Catalonia, which the Office itself will oversee. It also insists in the need to establish a specific system for ex-post activities (revolving doors), for which the Office would be the watchdog, and regulation of conflicts of interest through the electoral law.

7. It is absolutely essential that control organisations have sufficient **resources and competences**. An exercise in coherence and determination on the part of political power is necessary to make this so.

