

# **Learning Effects of Anti-Corruption Reform in Public Organisations: Explanations from Social Psychological Theory**

Don S. Lee  
Sungkyunkwan University  
[don.lee@g.skku.edu](mailto:don.lee@g.skku.edu)

Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling  
University of Nottingham  
[j.meyer-sahling@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:j.meyer-sahling@nottingham.ac.uk)

Soonae Park  
Seoul National University  
[psoonae@snu.ac.kr](mailto:psoonae@snu.ac.kr)

## **Abstract**

Scholars have debated whether the adoption of anti-corruption policies can enhance public sector ethics. In this article, we argue that existing studies based on institutional or rationalist approaches have limitations in explaining changes in individual ethical behaviour and thus employ social psychological theories that offer alternative explanations. We leverage a unique setting in South Korea where an anti-corruption policy came into effect for all public officials in 2016, and conduct surveys of more than 5,000 public servants before and after the implementation of the anti-corruption policy. Our analysis of original survey data shows the role of cognitive and social learning in shaping individual motivation to engage in ethical behaviour. Public servants who are more aware of the new anti-corruption policy are willing to behave more ethically than those less aware, and their motivation is shown to increase over time. Our research has important implications for the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies and public service ethics in the “New Normal”.

Keyword: Anti-corruption Reform, Social Psychological Theory, Public Service Ethics

What is the impact of anti-corruption laws on ethical behaviour in the public service? Much of the research on the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies has focused on the role of anti-corruption agencies, commissions, boards, and equivalent (Batory 2002; De Sousa 2010, Quah 2007, 2010). While there are examples of anti-corruption agencies that have successfully reduced corruption, most prominently the Anti-Corruption Commission of Hong Kong (De Spelville 2010), most of the studies argue that anti-corruption agencies and commissions have failed to live up to their promises (Batory 2002; Quah 2007, 2010). This critical reading reflects wider concerns of policy-makers and international organisations that anti-corruption reforms in transitional or developing countries have been unsuccessful (Disch et al. 2009; Hanna et al. 2011; Mungiu-Pippidi 2017; UNDP 2014).

The poor record of anti-corruption reforms has been principally traced to factors such as inadequate institutional design, a lack of staff and resources, poor implementation and a lack of political will, and, in the first place, the reliance on inadequate theoretical foundations to devise anti-corruption strategies and policies. Principal-agent theory has been most influential in developing instruments to curb corruption in the public sector (Klitgaard 1988; Olken and Pande 2012; Rose-Ackerman 1978). Yet its focus on getting the incentives right has been criticised by those who conceptualise corruption as a collective action problem (Mungiu-Pippidi 2011; Persson et al. 2013; Rothstein 2011) and who focus on the problem-solving capacity of anti-corruption interventions, particularly in non-Western contexts (Marquette and Peiffer 2015).

Whereas principal-agent models assume that increased monitoring, tougher sanctions and rewards for ethical behaviour are the most promising recipe for fighting corruption, other theories suggest a different mix of tools. Collective action theory, for example, emphasises the need for a “big push” or a “big bang” of reform measures and the importance of reform alliances and pacts to ensure sustained political will to overcome problems of corruption and

to change entrenched social norms of corrupt behaviour in the public and private sectors (Marquette and Peiffer 2015; Mungiu-Pippidi 2016; Persson et al. 2013). Although collective action theory provides a new theoretical grounding for understanding systemic corruption, thus far, there is little understanding of the process through which big-push type reform initiatives, such as major anti-corruption reforms, can work themselves through the public service to eventually achieve a new, less corrupt state of affairs.

Moreover, research in international development and economics has focused on anti-corruption interventions associated with the principal-agent framework (Gans-Morse et al. 2018; Hanna et al. 2011; Olken and Pande 2012). By contrast, recent reviews of anti-corruption policies in developing countries, in particular, have stressed the general lack of systematic evidence surrounding the effectiveness of most anti-corruption policies and the lack of understanding of how different types of events associated with collective action based approaches to corruption can bring about change.

On top of this theoretical gap, there are considerable methodological and empirical concerns regarding the results of anti-corruption research. Most studies about the effectiveness of anti-corruption instruments, such as setting up anti-corruption agencies, have relied on qualitative case studies (De Spelville 2010) or the comparison of a small number of cases (Quah 2007, 2010). In the case of quantitative studies, they have relied on cross-sectional data measured either at the country level (Mungiu-Pippidi and Dadasov 2017; Treisman 2007; van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001) or at the individual level (Kwon 2014). Yet these approaches tend to suffer from shortcomings, such as problems of omitted variable bias and reverse causality. In short, there remains considerable room for adopting better research designs that allow us to identify causal effects of anti-corruption policies on reducing corruption in the public sector.

In this article, we leverage a unique setting in South Korea where in 2016 an anti-corruption law, the so-called Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, came into effect for all public servants. We examine how the implementation of the anti-corruption law, which sets out the scope of corruption and details both penalties for it and procedural guidelines for public servants on how to react if they encounter instances of corruption, including how to report and declare gifts offered in the work context, has had both immediate and longer-term effects on the public sector. We rely on social psychological theories (e.g., Bandura 1977, 1986; Bicchieri 2006, 2016) to conceptualise the process through which public servants learn to apply what can be classified as a high-profile, big-push type of anti-corruption reform. By addressing the cognitive and interactive – and thus social psychological – dimension of anti-corruption interventions (e.g., Bicchieri and Ganegonda 2017), our approach complements existing research and helps identify conditions under which anti-corruption reforms can be successful.

The article hypothesises that public servants behave more ethically when they are more familiar with the procedures and regulations of the law. Moreover, we expect that the extent to which they behave ethically increases over time among those better aware of the details of the law due to a learning effect. We focus on the willingness of public servants to report ethical problems to upper management. This goes beyond the prevention of unethical behaviour and refers to the promotion of ethical behaviour that “exceeds some moral minimum” (Trevino et al. 2006) and involves a willingness to incur the costs to the individual of reporting malfeasance, which are also well-known from studies of “whistle-blowing” (Near and Miceli 1985). Accordingly, the willingness to report ethical problems has been used in other studies on public and private sector ethics as a proxy for ethical behaviour (Hassan et al. 2014; Meyer-Sahling et al. 2019; Warren et al. 2014; Wright et al. 2016).

The empirical analysis is based on original survey data from more than 5,000 public servants, gathered as part of a nationally representative survey in South Korea. It compares public servants' responses to ethical issues within the public sector before and after the enforcement of the anti-corruption law. The findings from our analysis, which adopts exact matching and time-series survey designs as methodological improvements over past work on the subject, strongly support our predictions. We find that public servants are more willing to report ethical problems they encounter when they are better aware of the procedures and regulations of the anti-corruption law. By contrast, among those less aware of the details of the law, there is no significant change in their willingness to report ethical problems after the implementation of the law. Furthermore, our findings show that public servants become gradually more willing to report ethical problems over time as they develop a better understanding of the law. At the same time, we find no such time-series effect among those with little understanding of the law. This finding suggests that social learning has a powerful but differential impact on how individual public servants respond to and process the implementation of a major new anti-corruption law which shares features of a big-push initiative against corruption in the public sector.

Our analysis contributes to the theme of public service ethics in the “New Normal” in two ways. First, our finding suggests that, although institutional and rationalist approaches built on principal-agent and collective action theories provide useful mechanisms to curb corruption in the public sector, their recipes for fighting corruption, such as increased monitoring, tougher sanctions, or the focus on big-push reforms, are incomplete. Rather, as we show the effects of social learning and social norm change in the context of implementing an anti-corruption policy, it follows that changes in cognitive and social processes are essential pre-requisites for promoting an individual's willingness to engage in ethical behaviour and, by implication, lower their motivation to behave unethically. Second, our

finding also indicates potential challenges that public sector organisations may face in adopting and implementing anti-corruption policies. While existing research on anti-corruption reform tends to focus on the effect of reform agencies and programmes by viewing (anti)corrupt behaviour as an outcome, our analysis, which builds on social psychological theories, shows that the effect of anti-corruption reform efforts will be better understood by treating (anti)corrupt behaviour as a process and attempting to encourage/discourage it through cognitive and social learning.

### **Existing Explanations of the Effect of Anti-Corruption Reforms and Their Limitations**

Anti-corruption research has traditionally applied rationalist models of behaviour to the conceptualisation of corruption and the identification of tools to combat it. Following Becker and Stigler's (1974) classic understanding, an individual is assumed to engage in corruption if the benefits of corrupt behaviour outweigh its potential costs, such as penalties. Building on this perspective, principal-agent theory suggests that corruption can be reduced if monitoring and sanctions for corrupt behaviour are raised in order to increase incentives to behave honestly. Notwithstanding the criticism of behavioural economists and social psychologists that human behaviour tends to deviate systematically from the predictions of Becker and Stigler and their successors, principal-agent models have long been the main source of inspiration for anti-corruption reformers around the world (see Hanna et al. 2011; Ugur and Dasgupta 2011). Yet, the dismal record of anti-corruption reforms, especially in developing countries (see Grans-Morse et al. 2018 and Prasad et al. 2019 for reviews), has led to a considerable amount of soul-searching and efforts to seek to understand what has gone wrong.

One of the primary critiques points out the inadequate choice of theoretical framework (Persson et al. 2013; Rothstein 2011). According to this argument, the poor record

of anti-corruption reforms has been due to a theoretical misinterpretation of the nature of corruption, in that principal-agent theory is unable to offer adequate practical solutions to the problem. Specifically, Persson et al. (2013), most prominently, assert that principal-agent theory will not help if principals themselves are “unprincipled,” because the success of anti-corruption reforms depends on the ability of principals to hold agents accountable for their actions. Furthermore, Persson and colleagues argue that principal-agent theory fails to acknowledge the collective, group-level dimension of corruption. According to critics of the principal-agent view and proponents of the collective action perspective, corruption is more accurately depicted as a problem of collective action, in which non-corrupt individuals suffer significant costs in a world where everyone around them is corrupt. To put it differently, if everyone needs to pay a bribe or give a gift to receive a public service, non-bribing citizens are likely to be left out and will struggle to get access to the service. In a corrupt context, non-corrupt behaviour hence encounters costs (Heywood 2017; Marquette and Peiffer 2015; Persson et al. 2013).

While collective action theory, in general, is also based on rationalist assumptions of behaviour, as in the case of principal-agent theory, it is more compatible with social psychological theories, such as the theory of social norms (e.g., Bicchieri 2006, 2016; Köbis et al. 2018; Krupta and Weber 2013), insofar as both theories take into account the *inter-*dependence of human interaction. Social norms theory assumes that individuals do not necessarily act in accordance with their material interest, but may incur psychological costs if they do not do what others do and what other people whom they deem important expect from them (see Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991 for the distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms). Applied to the context of systemic corruption, social norms theory suggests that an individual will engage in corrupt behaviour if everybody else does so and if no one of importance to them disapproves of this kind of behaviour. Therefore, social norms

theory shares the view of collective action theory in that it understands individuals' corrupt behaviour as dependent on the levels of (dis)trust and the norms they perceive in society.

Following this rationale, important questions arise as to how the costs of behaving in a non-corrupt way can be lowered and how the norms of being corrupt can be changed. Whereas principal-agent models focus on adjusting monitoring and incentives for public servants, anti-corruption approaches that employ the lens of collective action theory stress 1) the need for "big push" or "big bang" reforms, 2) "anti-corruption pacts" that are agreed upon among major political and social groupings, and 3) "grand coalitions" that can coordinate efforts to address corruption, in order to depart from the status quo and subsequently sustain a new, less corrupt equilibrium (Johnston and Kpundeh 2002; Marquette and Peiffer 2015; Peiffer 2012; Persson et al. 2013). Big-push reforms have mainly been associated with historically exceptional circumstances, such as defeats in wars or other major economic and political crises, raising concerns that less dramatic conditions may not suffice for change towards a less corrupt state of affairs (Prasad et al. 2019). In this article, we argue that anti-corruption laws may qualify as big-push type reforms, especially if they are associated with the authority of prominent leaders in government and politics to raise the salience and authority of the reform. In other words, the introduction of an anti-corruption law should have the potential to promote ethical behaviour among members of the public service and might hence lead to less corrupt behaviour in the wider public sector.

While collective action theory provides a theoretical underpinning for the expectation that a big-push type of anti-corruption law will trigger less corruption among public employees, it is much less clear how the *process* of such change will unfold. The basic assumption of collective action theory is that the presence of an anti-corruption law will alter civil servants' cost-benefit calculation of corrupt behaviour. Accordingly, more employees will see the benefits of behaving ethically than its costs after the adoption of the law, which in



turn leads to a new, less corrupt equilibrium. Still, this rationalist approach fails to offer any account of the cognitive and social processes through which individuals change their calculation, but appears to assume that change will occur instantaneously.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, social psychological theories are potentially better equipped to explain change in individual behaviour through processes of social learning and norm change (e.g., Bandura 1977, 1986; Bicchieri 2006, 2016). In the following section, we develop our hypotheses concerning the impact of anti-corruption policies on individual behavioural change, building on the theories of social norms and social learning.

### **Alternative Explanations from Social Psychological Theories**

Social psychological theories are helpful for understanding the cognitive and social processes that precede behavioural change. In particular, they are suitable for explaining individual public servants' change of ethical behaviour in the context of adopting anti-corruption policies, because theories of social psychology explain how an individual's cognitive processes mediate the effects of social context on his or her behaviour (Ajzen 1985). For example, as one of the most referenced social psychological theories, social learning theory (e.g., Bandura 1977, 1986) is typically invoked to capture the process of change. The theory assumes that individuals change their behaviour as a result of observing and imitating new or alternative role models around them. These role models or templates provide new information that allows individuals to update their beliefs and attitudes towards a particular type of behaviour or object. As a result, individuals may question existing norms or change their behavioural intentions, which may lead to the actual change of behaviour (see Thaler and Helmig 2016 and Warren et al. 2014 for applications to public and private sector ethics).

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<sup>1</sup> Principal-agent theory faces the same challenge in that it assumes that public servants update their beliefs and preferences after the enforcement of anti-corruption measures in a quasi-automatic process.

Social psychological theories, such as social norms and social learning theories, present key concepts in explaining the process of cognitive or behavioural change. Among them, the first to make a difference for engaging in corruption – or not – is an individual's *awareness* (Bicchieri and Ganegonda 2017; Moore 2008; Reynolds 2006). Individuals who are fully aware of the negative consequences produced by their corrupt behaviour will be less likely to engage in corruption than those who are not. The second concept that is central, particularly in social norms theory, refers to *personal normative beliefs*, defined as an individual's belief about what one should do (Bicchieri 2006). Normative beliefs affect one's judgement of whether engaging in corrupt behaviour is appropriate, and the contexts one has been exposed to play a crucial role in shaping his or her beliefs about socially acceptable behaviour (Bandura 1977). An additional key concept used by social norms theorists to explain individual behavioural change is *empirical expectations*, which refer to the extent to which an individual believes that a sufficient number of other members would engage in a particular behaviour (Bicchieri 2006, 13). For example, applied to the context of corruption, empirical expectations concern the expected prevalence or commonness of corrupt behaviour and thus have a powerful impact on an individual's likelihood of engaging in corrupt behaviour (Bicchieri and Ganegonda 2017).

The logic of social psychological theories helps capture the differential impact of anti-corruption laws on ethics in public administration. Focusing our analysis on anti-corruption laws as awareness-raising instruments at the first stage of ethical decision-making (see Moore 2008), which are the first of the three mechanisms outlined above, anti-corruption laws essentially provide new templates that demonstrate to individuals what kind of behaviour is desirable for them as public servants and in their relation towards citizens. Public servants are provided with guidance on how to provide public services while abiding by the principles of the law and how to respond when they experience or observe unethical behaviour, such as

how to declare the offering of gifts or how to report gift taking by fellow public servants. In the context of anti-corruption reform, codes of ethics may play a similar role in providing new models for civil servants, which allow them to learn about desirable behaviour in the public sector (Thaler and Helmig 2016). Compared to codes of ethics, anti-corruption laws should be more influential learning instruments for public servants, as non-compliance does typically lead to disciplinary proceedings and the issuing of sanctions, while ethics codes may not be enforceable without the complementary application of disciplinary codes (Meine and Dunn 2013; Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen 2022).

While civil servants are expected to be more conscious of the negative externalities of engaging in corrupt behaviour through the implementation of anti-corruption laws in general, not all of them will change their behaviour to a similar degree, because the learning of and from the anti-corruption law will moderate the impact of the law on the behaviour of public servants. Among public servants who are affected by the law, those who fail to recognise its purpose and implications or are not aware of the details of the law itself may still behave unethically by not regarding such behaviour as an offence (Anand, Ashforth and Joshi 2004). In situations where public servants appreciate the aims of the law, they may remain reluctant to develop cooperative attitudes towards the law if they are ignorant of its specifics; a mechanism that is well known from studies of whistle-blowing in the private sector (Near and Miceli 2016). In sum, the more familiar public servants become with the details of the anti-corruption law, the more likely they are to demonstrate ethical behaviour in their organisation. Therefore, our first hypothesis is that:

***Hypothesis 1.** The effect of an anti-corruption law on ethical behaviour will be larger among public servants who are more aware of its objectives and procedures and more familiar with its regulations than among those who are less aware of and less familiar with them.*

One of the major criticisms of anti-corruption reforms is that the effects are often short-lived. Classic cases are efforts to train civil servants where the well-intentioned effect of the training dissipates as time goes by (Warren et al. 2014). It is conceivable that the same happens with the impact of anti-corruption laws: their adoption leads to some form of immediate shock that will raise awareness among public servants and influence their attitudes in the short term, but over time they may fall back into an established pattern if they find that the norms around them have not changed much. The difficulty of a major change is well attested by studies of sociological institutionalism (March and Olsen 1989) that find it tends to attach a premium to established patterns of behaviour and to resist sustained change.

However, social norms and social learning theories provide more nuanced theories of individual behavioural change by differentiating the effect of macro situational processes that discourage unethical behaviour and promote ethical behaviour (e.g., implementation of anti-corruption laws) across micro psychological processes of individual decision-making (Ajzen 1985; Bicchieri and Ganegonda 2017). According to Bandura (1977, 1986), the effect of social learning reinforces behavioural and norm changes over time, which, we argue, will have a powerful impact on individuals' motivation to engage in ethical behaviour among those better aware of legal purposes and procedures. As the number of adopters and role models around them increases, public servants who are exposed to and socialised by this environmental change are more likely to display a shift in personal normative beliefs and find engaging in unethical behaviour less acceptable (see Douglas and Martinko 2001). In terms of social learning theory, symbolic learning from templates, such as anti-corruption laws, advances towards synthetic learning from both templates and the role modelling of others.

This shift in personal normative beliefs will be confirmed with the development of empirical expectations that a majority of the observed conform to the alternative social norms

and that behaving in accordance with them might be less costly and hence potentially beneficial over time (Bicchieri 2016). In other words, from a social learning perspective, we expect that the effect of an anti-corruption law on behavioural change should gradually increase rather than diminish due to learning, especially among individuals conscious of their purposes and procedures. On the other hand, the reinforcing effect of social learning on behavioural and norm changes should be limited among those with little understanding of the details of an anti-corruption law. Thus, we propose that:

***Hypothesis 2a.** Public servants who are more aware of the objectives and procedures and more familiar with the regulations of an anti-corruption law will behave more ethically over time.*

***Hypothesis 2b.** The ethical behaviour of public servants who are less aware of the objectives and procedures and less familiar with the regulations of an anti-corruption law will not change over time.*

### **Context: Anti-Corruption Reform in South Korea**

The Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, also known as the Kim Young-ran Act, is an anti-corruption law named after Kim Young-ran who proposed the bill. Kim Young-ran is the former chairperson of the Anti-corruption and Civil Rights Commission. In several aspects, the anti-corruption law fulfils the criteria of a “big-push” type of anti-corruption reform. First, the Act is associated with South Korea’s highly respected former Supreme Court Justice Kim Young-ran. Her strong drive to introduce this bill, from proposal to enactment, and its potential implications have caused this law to attract much attention in Korean

society.<sup>2</sup> Second, from the beginning of its implementation, the Act has been regarded as a reform measure that would bring in and sustain fundamental norm changes among public servants. At the stage of deliberation and enactment, there was a significant controversy over the fact that the law clashed with Korean traditions and gift-giving culture,<sup>3</sup> where it would be difficult to draw a line between “what amounts to corruption and what should be accepted as part of social etiquette”; a challenge often stressed by ethnographic research on corruption in developing countries (Prasad et al. 2019).<sup>4</sup> Third and importantly, however, the Act attempts to clearly define misconduct and unethical behaviour by detailing what is acceptable or not in terms of financial or other advantages (Article 1).<sup>5</sup> In a word, the anti-corruption law has been expected to raise public servants’ awareness and reshape their behaviour, which is clearly distinguished from the Act on the Protection of Public Interest Whistleblowers already enacted in 2011.

Initial reactions to the passage of the bill were thus a mix of sceptical and cautious views, particularly from senior government officials, legal advisors, and business members who were widely exposed to business entertainment practices and would be directly affected by the law.<sup>6</sup> The Korean Bar Association, the Journalists Association of Korea and some private schools challenged the law and argued that its provisions were unconstitutional, an argument that however was rejected later by the Constitutional Court of Korea (Rask 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.acrc.go.kr/en/board.do?command=searchDetailPrint&menuId=020501&boardNum=69411&confId=62> (accessed October 30, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> From the collective action perspective, if gift-giving culture was a prevalent norm among a certain group of people in the public sector, then people who did not give a gift to them might have been unfairly treated by them. While there was no upper limit on the value of such gifts before the adoption of the Act, the new law not only set a clear upper limit but also made public service providers feel reluctant to accept any gifts of an excessive value.

<sup>4</sup> “South Korea Tightens Rules Against Gifts to Fight Graft.” *New York Times*. March 3, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> *Source*: The Handbook of the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, the Anti-corruption and Civil Rights Commission of South Korea.

[http://www.acrc.go.kr/acrc/board.do?command=searchDetail&menuId=0502070101&method=searchDetailViewInc&boardNum=61617&currPageNo=1&confId=128&conConfId=128&conTabId=0&conSearchCol=BOARD\\_TITLE&conSearchSort=A.BOARD\\_REG\\_DATE+DESC%2C+BOARD\\_NUM+DESC](http://www.acrc.go.kr/acrc/board.do?command=searchDetail&menuId=0502070101&method=searchDetailViewInc&boardNum=61617&currPageNo=1&confId=128&conConfId=128&conTabId=0&conSearchCol=BOARD_TITLE&conSearchSort=A.BOARD_REG_DATE+DESC%2C+BOARD_NUM+DESC) (accessed August 19, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> “South Korea's new graft law strikes deep into corporate culture.” *Financial Times*. September 26, 2016.

Since the Act took effect in September 2016, public opinion has gradually turned more positive, taking a more optimistic view of its wide-spread reform effects. A survey conducted by Gallup Korea in late 2016 showed that the law was supported by 71% of Koreans, and that many of them thought the law might have a short-term adverse effect but would help to take Korean society in the right direction eventually (Rask 2017).

Evidence from the civil service also suggests that the law's enforcement, thus far, seems to have resulted, as desired, in a boosting effect on ethical behaviour among public servants. According to Pak Un Jong, the former Chairperson of the Anti-corruption and Civil Rights Commission, for the last two years, since the implementation of the law, a majority of cases (70%) are actually self-reported by public servants. This pattern aligns with the Commission's original intention of implementing the Act for a preventive, "anti-corruption" purpose rather than for criminal punishment.<sup>7</sup>

From public servants' career perspective, they also have incentives to comply with the law. Public servants in South Korea, who are recruited through competitive centralised examinations, are regularly assessed for career advancement. When they reach senior ranks, they are still evaluated for promotion by a committee, which takes into account their career history and performance, including rewards or punishments based on their ethical behaviour, as well as specialisation (Kim 2010).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, any public employees who seek promotion will perceive benefits of ethical behaviour and costs of misconduct. In addition, according to the Act, not only will unethical behaviour, including negligence, be penalised and thus discouraged, but also ethical behaviour, such as the reporting of malfeasance, will be

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20180921089400001> (accessed August 23, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> *Source:* The official website of the Ministry of Personnel Management (<http://www.mpm.go.kr/english/> accessed August 19, 2019). Most central and local public servants of Korea are promoted based on a rule-bound system. For example, it takes three years to be promoted from grade 9 to 8, five years from grade 8 to 7, seven years from grade 7 to 6, and nine years from grade 6 to 5, on average (Lee and Park 2021c). Public servants ranked at grade 5 or lower are assessed for promotion through a written series of tests, while senior civil servants who are ranked at grade 4 or higher are evaluated for promotion by the Promotion Review Committee (Kim 2010).

encouraged and protected. Therefore, the implementation of the Act is expected not only to increase awareness of (un)ethical behaviour based on its clear definition of misconduct but also to encourage public servants to report misconduct occurring in their organisation and contribute to enhancing integrity in Korean society more broadly “by reducing the practices of improper solicitations and bribery as well as promoting the fair performance of public officials’ duties”.<sup>9</sup> The Act started being enforced on September 28, 2016.

### **Survey Design, Sampling, and Balance**

To test the effect of the anti-corruption law and civil servants’ learning on their motivation to engage in unethical behaviour, we collected data from original surveys conducted between 2015 and 2018, the periods both before and after the enforcement of the Act. The fact that the adoption of the Act was an intervention made by “nature” rather than by researchers or the actors involved (i.e. public servants), and the timing of its application chosen randomly by lawmakers, from public servants’ perspective fulfils the almost ideal conditions of a natural experiment (Dunning 2012). In any natural experiment, the robustness of causal inference relies on the reasonable assumption of “as-if” random assignment of “treatment”, which rests on law enforcement in the case of our study. We believe this “treatment” has shaped public servants’ motivation and behaviour differently, compared to a public servant group before the anti-corruption law took effect.

Our samples include national and local civil servants employed by South Korean government. Although we made every effort to contact and obtain answers from the same civil servants over time, we encountered a clear roadblock in using a longitudinal panel design. In contrast to public opinion surveys, civil servant surveys were distributed at participants' place of work (see Lee and Park 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Park and Lee 2021; Park et

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<sup>9</sup> The Anticorruption and Civil Rights Commission Publications.



al. 2021), and some respondents were reluctant to participate in our surveys every year, leaving us with a varying sample size each year.<sup>10</sup> We thus employed a repeated cross-sectional survey design yearly from 2015 to 2018 to test the impact of the 2016 law. In order to reduce sampling error and improve the representativeness of our samples, civil servant respondents were sampled to be representative of the South Korean civil service population in terms of demographic and employment characteristics. Specifically, we hired Hankook Research, one of the largest survey research firms in Korea, which used a stratified sampling method based on civil service population data (gender, civil service rank, and recruitment type) from the statistical yearbook.<sup>11</sup> We endeavoured to have our samples selected as randomly as possible from the civil service population. Except for some central government agencies that were not accessible for security or cost-effectiveness reasons, respondents were drawn from all central agencies and local governments, proportional to the size of each unit.<sup>12</sup> In 2015, before the Act came into effect, 1,350 civil servants were contacted to be sampled. After the Act was implemented in September 2016, we conducted surveys in November 2016 and November 2017, where 1,669 and 2,766, respectively, were contacted to be sampled.

In our study, the pre- and post-Act samples were drawn from the same Korean civil service population. Yet, due to temporal differences between the two groups, we employed matching methods to ensure the two groups were comparable. Specifically, we used coarsened exact matching (CEM) to match pre- and post-Act samples on several demographic (age, gender, levels of education) and civil service (rank, recruitment path, job category, private sector experience) characteristics. To implement CEM, matches are chosen

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<sup>10</sup> In addition, the sampling frame varies across years, as our project intended to draw samples from central and local civil servants separately every alternate year. The response rates of our surveys differed slightly, ranging from 50 to 60 percent.

<sup>11</sup> Survey samples collected by Hankook Research (<https://www.hrc.co.kr/eng/>) have been broadly used in social science research and media. To access the statistical yearbook, see <http://www.mpm.go.kr/mpm/>.

<sup>12</sup> The human research subjects aspect of our research protocol was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board.

by first coarsening covariates (i.e. characteristics) into discrete categories and then pairing pre- and post-Act samples so that they are exact matches on all included covariates. With an exactly balanced subset of data, we can then estimate the effect of the Act without the need to control for these covariates. CEM provides an advantage over other matching methods in that it can ensure balance while also reducing bias, model dependence, and estimation errors (Iacus, King, and Porro 2012). By comparing pre- and post-Act samples that otherwise share similar background characteristics and civil service experiences, our aim is to better isolate the direct effect of implementing the anti-corruption law on civil servants' motivation and behaviour. Our matched samples include 1,028 civil servant respondents in 2015 (before Act), 1,503 in 2016, and 2,502 in 2017 (after Act).

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the respondents by group before and after implementation. For demographic characteristics, we have data on **education** (0 if no higher education, 1 if a B.A. as the highest degree, 2 if a graduate degree); **gender** (0 if male, 1 if female); and **age** group (1 if 19-36 years, 2 if 37-45 years, 3 if over 46 years). For civil service characteristics, we have information on civil service **rank** (0 if grade 5 or lower (6-9), 1 if grade 4 or higher); **recruitment path** (0 if open recruitment, 1 if centralised civil service examination); **job category** (0 if technical, 1 if administrative); and **private sector experience** (0 if no experience, 1 if more than a year of experience). The *F*-test results in Table 1 indicate that none of these characteristics differ across the two groups at conventional levels of statistical significance within pre- and post-Act samples.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Respondents by Group, Before and After Anti-Corruption Act

	Before Act	After Act	<i>F</i> -Test	
Education	1.18	1.17	0.00	(0.97)
Female	0.340	0.342	0.01	(0.93)
Age	2.045	2.060	0.33	(0.56)
Civil service rank	0.037	0.032	0.93	(0.33)
Recruitment path	0.857	0.863	0.29	(0.59)
Job category	0.759	0.750	0.40	(0.53)
Private sector experience	0.304	0.306	0.02	(0.88)
N	1,028	4,005		

### Measurement and Analysis

To test the hypotheses proposed above, we adopt and specify our dependent and independent variables. For the dependent variable, building on a single-item measure used to assess respondents' ethical behaviour in recent studies (Meyer-Sahling et al. 2019; Warren et al. 2014; Wright et al. 2016), we measure civil servants' motivation to engage in ethical behaviour from answers to the following question, "You are willing to file an allegation of misconduct in your organisation." Respondents' answers are recorded on a five-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)". The reporting of misconduct or ethical problems more generally reflects a type of ethical behaviour that goes beyond the basic avoidance of unethical behaviour. It has been considered to exceed an ethical minimum and has been used by other studies of public and private sector ethics as a valid indicator of ethical behaviour (Hassan et al. 2014; Meyer-Sahling et al. 2019; Trevino et al. 2006; Warren et al. 2014; Wright et al. 2016).<sup>13</sup>

Regarding our independent variables, we measure civil servants' awareness of the procedures, regulations, and objectives of the anti-corruption law from answers to the following two questions: "I am well aware of the procedure to file a complaint under the Kim

<sup>13</sup> The reporting of misconduct resonates closely with measures of "whistle-blowing" (Near and Miceli 1985). However, given the breadth and contents of the Anti-Corruption Law in South Korea, our interest is in ethical behaviour more broadly rather than whistle-blowing narrowly. For a recent study that examines the challenge of measuring corruption, especially, perceptions of corruption, see Abreu and Gomes (2021).

Young-Ran law” and “I am familiar with regulations related to the Kim Young-Ran law”. For both questions, respondents were asked to answer on a five-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5)”. For both questions used to measure our independent variables, we conducted pilot surveys with 30 public employees prior to their rollout, to ensure that we did in fact test respondents’ knowledge of the law and reporting process and not something else. We find that our pilot surveys drew consistent answers from respondents to the questions we asked about the Kim Young-ran Act.

In analysing the impact of the anti-corruption law on civil servants’ motivation to engage in ethical behaviour, we first compare civil servants’ responses before and after the implementation of the Act, using mean responses from groups with different levels of awareness and familiarity. Then, we turn to results from multivariate regression models for robustness.

### *Comparison of Mean Responses*

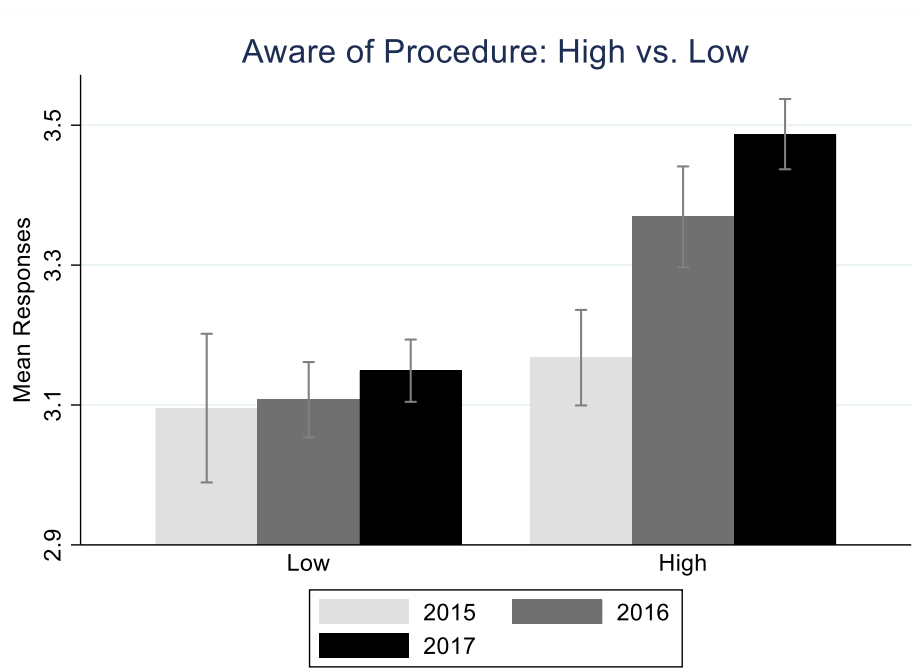
Below we show average estimates of our dependent variable, comparing civil servants’ responses over time from 2015 to 2017. In Figure 1, we break down civil servant groups into two concerning their awareness of the procedure to file a complaint under the anti-corruption law: those who have high versus low levels of awareness. Those who answered “strongly agree” or “agree” to the question “I am well aware of the procedure to file a complaint under the Kim Young-Ran law” are classified as a high-awareness group and those who answered anywhere on the rest of the scale as a low-awareness group.<sup>14</sup> In Figure 2, we similarly split civil servant groups into high versus low levels of familiarity. That is, those who answered “strongly agree” or “agree” to the question “I am familiar with regulations related to the Kim

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<sup>14</sup> In 2015 before the Kim Young-Ran law was adopted, we asked the question, “I understand guidelines or regulations related to public service ethics” to estimate civil servants’ overall awareness and familiarity.

Young-Ran law” are categorised as a high-familiarity group and those who chose the rest of the scale as a low-familiarity group.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 1.** Mean Responses over Time: Effects of Awareness of Procedure



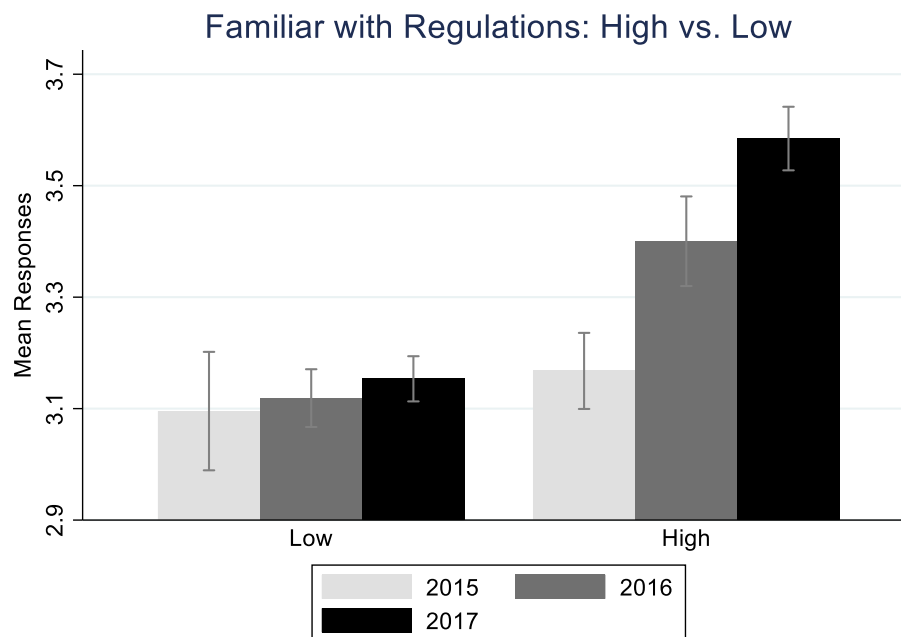
*Note:* The dependent variable is an answer to the question “you are willing to file an allegation of misconduct in your organisation” in a five-point scale. 95% confidence intervals are presented.

Figure 1 shows that civil servants’ willingness to file an allegation of misconduct in their organisation is greater in a high-awareness group than in a low-awareness group. In a high-awareness group, the effect of the anti-corruption law is not only substantively more significant than that in a low-awareness group, but such an effect is also statistically

<sup>15</sup> Our data show that 33.4% of respondents answered that they were better aware of the procedure to file a complaint under the Kim Young-Ran law in 2016, and the number increased to 38.3% in 2017. Regarding respondents who were more familiar with regulations related to the law, 43.1% of respondents answered thus in 2016, and the number increased to 50.12% in 2017. The data show a clear increase in the proportion of respondents who answered the two questions affirmatively, compared to less than 30% in 2015. The data indicate that, although a majority of public servants became familiar with regulations related to the new anti-corruption law after a year, it seems it took longer for them to fully understand the specific procedure to file a complaint under the law. This is not so surprising, because given the fact that the law clashed with the country’s traditions, it is expected that a large proportion of civil servants might have been initially resistant to learning about its specific procedure for taking action. According to the former Chairperson of the Anti-corruption and Civil Rights Commission, this is why the Commission published a handbook of the law and scheduled training programs to provide detailed instructions to all civil servants.

significant, while it fails to reach statistical significance in a low-awareness group. For example, mean responses from both high- and low-awareness groups are lower than 3.2 in 2015 (pre-Act period). However, in 2016 and 2017, after the anti-corruption law was implemented, while mean responses from a high-awareness group are higher than 3.3, those from a low-awareness group are still lower than 3.2 and statistically indistinguishable from those of 2015. Moreover, within a high-awareness group, mean responses are not simply higher in the post-Act period vis-à-vis the pre-Act period but also increase over time during the post-Act period. Therefore, Figure 1 suggests that the effect of an anti-corruption law on ethical behaviour is larger among public servants who are more aware of its procedures than among those less aware of them, as predicted in our first hypothesis; the former group is more likely to behave ethically over time than the latter group, as predicted in our second hypothesis.

**Figure 2.** Mean Responses over Time: Effects of Familiarity with Regulations



*Note:* The dependent variable is an answer to the question “you are willing to file an allegation of misconduct in your organisation” in a five-point scale. 95% confidence intervals are presented.

In Figure 2, we display civil servants' willingness to file an allegation of misconduct in their organisation in high-familiarity and low-familiarity groups. We find that among public servants who are more familiar with the regulations of the anti-corruption law, the effect of the law is both statistically and substantively more significant than among those who are less familiar with its regulations. The figure shows that mean responses from high- and low-familiarity groups are both lower than 3.3 in 2015, before the Act was implemented. However, after its implementation, in 2016 and 2017, mean responses from a high-familiarity group are higher than 3.3, whereas those from a low-familiarity group are still below 3.3. Notably, within a high-familiarity group, mean responses are not just higher in the post-Act period vis-à-vis the pre-Act period but also increase over time during the post-Act period. This is a clear contrast to the pattern shown within a low-familiarity group where differences in mean responses are statistically insignificant over time. Consequently, Figure 2 confirms our findings from Figure 1 and further supports our predictions. In the next section, we further test our hypotheses through multivariate regression models to confirm the results based on mean responses.

### ***Statistical Analysis: Results from Ordered Logit Regression Models***

To estimate civil servants' motivation to engage in ethical behaviour varying across their levels of awareness and familiarity over time, we employ statistical models. Given that our dependent variable is an ordinal variable, we adopt ordered logit models in particular. All our models also include agency fixed effects to control for unobserved heterogeneity across organisations. Using a fixed effects specification will provide robustness to our results (see Miceli and Near 1985; Near and Miceli 1995), as it shows that our findings have relevance across agencies, not driven by specific organisations. Our models in a regression equation are:

$$Y_{i,t} = X_{i,t} \beta_1 + Year2016 \beta_2 + Year2017 \beta_3 + X_{i,t} Year2016 \beta_4 + X_{i,t} Year2017 \beta_5 + Z_{i,t} \beta_6 + \alpha_j + u_{i,t} \text{ for } t = 1, \dots, T \text{ and } i = 1, \dots, N,$$

where  $Y_{i,t}$  is the dependent variable observed for individual  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $X_{i,t}$  and  $Z_{i,t}$  are the time-variant independent and control variables, respectively;  $\alpha_j$  is the unobserved time-invariant organisational effect; and  $u_{i,t}$  is the error term.

In Table 2, we present two models for the results of testing our hypotheses, where the key independent variables are public servants' awareness of the Act's procedure, its interaction with the anti-corruption Act (H1), and its interaction with year 2016 and year 2017, respectively (H2). In Table 3, we further report the results of testing our hypotheses in two models, where the key independent variables are public servants' familiarity with the Act's regulations, its interaction with the anti-corruption Act (H1), and its interaction with year 2016 and year 2017, respectively (H2). With an exactly balanced subset of data generated through matching methods, we can estimate the effects of our independent variables, using maximum likelihood estimates without the need to control for other individual-level covariates. For full model specifications, we present our models including control variables in Appendix Tables A1 and A2.

**Table 2.** Ordered Logit Analysis: Public Servants' Awareness of Procedure

Variable	(1)	(2)
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Aware of procedure	0.074 (0.133)	0.073 (0.133)
Anti-corruption Act (ACA)	-0.079 (0.556)	
Year 2016		-0.002 (0.136)
Year 2017		0.134 (0.181)
Aware of procedure * ACA	0.797*** (0.149)	
Aware of procedure * Year 2016		0.576*** (0.171)
Aware of procedure * Year 2017		0.948*** (0.158)
Log-likelihood	-6556.67	-6549.41
Wald $\chi^2$	701.35	736.07
Prob > $\chi^2$	(0.000)	(0.000)

*Note:* Agency fixed effects are included in all models. A baseline category is year 2015. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

In Model 1 of Table 2, the interaction variable between *Aware of procedure* and *ACA* is positive and statistically significant. Based on the estimation of Model 1, public servants who are more aware of the procedure to file a complaint under the Act significantly increase their willingness to report misconduct in their organisation after the implementation of the anti-corruption policy (from 35% to 51.5%), but those who are less aware of such a procedure hardly change their willingness to report misconduct in their organisation after the policy implementation (from 33.5% to 31.9%).<sup>16</sup> Therefore, this finding supports our first hypothesis that the effect of the anti-corruption law on ethical behaviour is larger among public servants who are more aware of its procedures than among those who are less aware of them.

In Model 2 of Table 2, the interaction variable between *Aware of procedure* and *Year 2016* and the interaction variable between *Aware of procedure* and *Year 2017* are not only

<sup>16</sup> It is the aggregate proportion of respondents who answered “strongly agree” and “agree” to the survey question “You are willing to file an allegation of misconduct in your organisation” for the dependent variable.

both positive and statistically significant, but the latter is substantively larger than the former. Based on the estimation of Model 2, while there is almost no learning effect among civil servants who are less aware of the procedure to file a complaint under the Act on their willingness to report misconduct in their organisation over time (from 37.6% in 2015, 36.6% in 2016, to 39.1% in 2017), public servants who are more aware of this procedure are more likely to engage in ethical behaviour over time: the predicted marginal effects of *awareness* over time are 1.4 (in 2016) and 3 (in 2017) percentage points. Thus, this finding confirms our second hypothesis that while the ethical behaviour of civil servants who are less aware of the procedures of the anti-corruption law hardly changes over time, public servants who are more aware of the procedures of the anti-corruption law behave more ethically over time.

**Table 3.** Ordered Logit Analysis: Public Servants' Familiarity with Regulations

<b>Variable</b>	<b>(3)</b>	<b>(4)</b>
Familiar with regulations	-0.156 (0.136)	-0.157 (0.136)
Anti-corruption Act (ACA)	-0.259 (0.168)	
Year 2016		-0.237 (0.159)
Year 2017		-0.001 (0.183)
Familiar with regulations * ACA	0.880*** (0.150)	
Familiar with regulations * Year 2016		0.827*** (0.169)
Familiar with regulations * Year 2017		0.912*** (0.158)
Log-likelihood	-6579.39	-6576.24
Wald $\chi^2$	643.34	655.24
Prob > $\chi^2$	(0.000)	(0.000)

*Note:* A baseline category is year 2015. Agency fixed effects are included in all models. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

Moving to public servants' familiarity with the Act's regulations, in Model 3 of Table 3, the interaction variable between *Familiar with regulations* and *ACA* is positive and statistically significant. Based on the estimation of Model 3, public servants who are more familiar with regulations related to the Kim Young-Ran law considerably increase their willingness to report misconduct in their organisation after the implementation of the law (from 33.6% to 47.7%), whereas those who are less familiar with such regulations do not increase their willingness to report misconduct in their organisation after the policy implementation (from 37.1% to 31.7%). Thus, this finding further supports our first hypothesis that the effect of the anti-corruption law on ethical behaviour is larger among public servants who are more familiar with its regulation than among those who are less familiar with them.

In Model 4 of Table 3, the interaction variables between *Familiar with regulations* and *Year 2016* and *Year 2017*, respectively, are not only positive and statistically significant, but the latter variable is substantively larger than the former one. Based on the estimation of Model 4, civil servants who are less familiar with the regulations related to the Act show only a little change in their willingness to report misconduct in their organisation (from 41.8% in 2015, 36.8% in 2016, to 40.3% in 2017), but civil servants who are more familiar with these regulations behave more ethically over time: the predicted marginal effects of *familiarity* over time are 4.5 (in 2016) and 6.3 (in 2017) percentage points. Therefore, this finding confirms our second hypothesis, showing that the substantive effect of the anti-corruption law on civil servants' ethical behaviour is greater over time among those who are more familiar with its regulations than those who are less familiar with the regulations.

For robustness check, we address a potential social desirability bias that might affect our results. Although the single-item measure we used for our dependent variable is built on past research on ethical behaviour in the public sector, we were concerned that asking about

ethical behaviour might result in respondents giving answers perceived to be more desirable, particularly after the adoption of the law. Following a similar approach adopted by Meyer-Sahling et al. (2019), we asked about respondents' past work to see if they tended to answer in a socially desirable manner. Specifically, we tested whether our two independent variables were highly correlated with the question, "In the past 6 months, did you ever call in sick due to heavy civil service duties?" The results of this robustness test, which show insignificant coefficients of the two variables, are presented in Appendix Table A3.

In addition, we display the results from alternative model specifications in Appendix Table A4 to Table A6. In Table A4, we use two-stage ordered logit models with Heckman correction, in order to attenuate the potential endogeneity bias present in repeated cross-sectional survey designs. In the first stage, we estimate the effect of the law on changes in employee knowledge about the reporting process. Then, we use the predicted values of employee knowledge from the first stage as the independent variable in the second stage. The results show that the two independent variables measuring employee knowledge about the reporting process — *Aware of procedure* and *Familiar with regulations* — have positive and statistically significant effects on ethical behaviour. Furthermore, we test our hypotheses using linear models based on an ordinary least squares (OLS) approach. The results shown in Tables A5 and A6 are qualitatively similar to those of our main models in Tables 2 and 3 and graphically displayed in Figures A1 and A2.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

**Discussion.** In this article, we have sought to engage in the debate on whether the adoption and implementation of anti-corruption policies enhances public sector ethics by examining the impact of implementing the anti-corruption law in South Korea. We have done so by focusing on the role of cognitive and social learning in shaping individual public servants'

motivation to report unethical behaviour in their organisation. For our analysis, we have developed an original time-series survey design and conducted representative surveys with more than 5,000 civil servants before and after the anti-corruption Act came into force to compare their responses to ethical issues. We have found that public servants are more willing to report ethical problems when they are better aware of the procedures and regulations of the anti-corruption law, but among those less aware of the details of the law, we have seen no significant change in their willingness to report misconduct after the implementation of the law. Moreover, public servants are increasingly more willing to report misconduct over time when they develop a better understanding of the law, whereas no such time-series effect has been observed among those with a limited understanding of the law.

Our study makes several contributions to anti-corruption research. Theoretically, despite significant contributions by existing theories, such as principal-agent and collective action theories, in advancing our understanding of anti-corruption efforts, they have been incomplete in that they do not address the process through which individuals change behaviour in the presence of anti-corruption laws. We thus adopt social psychological theories to conceptualise the process through which civil servants learn to apply what can be classified as a high-profile, big-push type of anti-corruption reform. Empirically, there are considerable methodological concerns regarding the results of past anti-corruption research, and we attempt to fill this gap by adopting a more robust research design that helps to identify a clear effect of an anti-corruption policy on reducing corruption in the public sector. Specifically, our analysis, built on exact matching and time-series survey designs, is robust to estimation errors and better isolates the direct effect of implementing the anti-corruption law on public servants' motivation.

**Conclusion.** Although we endeavour to make our research design robust, there are some limitations in our study that can be addressed in future research. For example, the use of a

single-item measure for the dependent variable, although being adopted in recent studies (Meyer-Sahling et al. 2019; Wright et al. 2016), can be improved by a multiple-dimensional approach. In addition, while our analysis using repeated cross-sectional surveys with exact matching helps isolate the effect of the policy implementation, it is still vulnerable to differences among survey respondents over time, which can be controlled for by a longitudinal panel design.

Importantly, our study has clear implications: understanding civil servants' motivation to engage in ethical behaviour has practical implications as it is closely related to how they actually behave. According to the theory of planned behaviour, three factors — attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control — combine to determine an individual's intention, which then leads to behaviour (Ajzen 1988, 182; Bicchieri and Ganegonda 2017). In addition, public officials typically make decisions relying on their perceptions of reality rather than on reality itself (Thomas 1928). Therefore, as scholars of social psychological theories assert, changes in the cognitive and social processes of individual members in the context of implementing anti-corruption policies are likely to result in more ethical behaviour.

More broadly, recent assessments of government transparency and corruption levels at the country level by Freedom House and Transparency International seem to support our findings. For example, in its 2018 annual report Freedom House particularly mentioned the impact of the anti-corruption Act and ranked South Korea higher in its index: “The Kim Young-ran Act, or Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, establishes stiff punishments for those convicted of accepting bribes. The law applies to government officials as well as their spouses, journalists, and educators. In a survey of 300 domestic companies released in October 2017, 74 percent said the business environment had improved since the law went

into force in 2016.”<sup>17</sup> Transparency International also recognised the country’s anti-corruption efforts in its 2018 annual report, stating “... with a score of 57, South Korea also improved by three points since 2017. [In South Korea,] democratic principles and institutions proved effective in combatting corruption.”<sup>18</sup> While this bodes well for the government’s anti-corruption efforts, the question of whether such efforts will produce a long-term effect or may lead to similar results in developing nations (see e.g., Hanna et al. 2011; Olken and Pande 2012) remains to be seen and is left for future research.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-korea/freedom-world/2018> (accessed December 30, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/asia\\_pacific\\_makes\\_little\\_to\\_no\\_progress\\_on\\_anti\\_corruption](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/asia_pacific_makes_little_to_no_progress_on_anti_corruption) (accessed December 30, 2019).

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