



UNIVERSITY OF
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PERCEPTIONS OF PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS AND SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY IN THE NORDIC WELFARE STATES

GISSUR Ó ERLINGSSON

JONAS LINDE

RICHARD ÖHRVALL

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Department of Political Science

University of Gothenburg

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ABSTRACT

The Nordic countries are known for their well-functioning public administrations. In indices measuring control of corruption and the quality of the rule of law, these countries frequently occupy top positions. This article seeks to nuance this picture, and demonstrates that a country's top position in comparative indices does not necessarily mean that citizens view the state of affairs in the same way as depicted in expert surveys and aggregate indices of the quality of government. Drawing on theories of procedural fairness, we argue that widespread public perceptions about the unfairness of civil servants may have a negative effect on the legitimacy of the political system, even in these 'least corrupt' settings. Statistical analyses of individual level survey data from the European Social Survey reveals that even in advanced welfare democracies, public perceptions of procedural fairness have a significant effect on system support.

Key words: procedural fairness, corruption, quality of government, satisfaction with democracy, system support, Nordic welfare states, least corrupt societies

Gissur Ó Erlingsson
Centre for Municipality Studies
Linköping University, Sweden
gissur.erlingsson@liu.se

Jonas Linde
Department of Comparative Politics
University of Bergen, Norway
jonas.linde@isp.uib.no

Richard Öhrvall
School of Social Sciences
Linnaeus University, Sweden
richard.ohrvall@gmail.com

Introduction

The Nordic welfare states are generally described as success stories when it comes to government effectiveness and state capacity. They continuously receive top ratings in comparative indices on corruption and the quality of rule of law. In the 2011 edition of the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), all Nordic countries – except Iceland – were found in the top six positions (Transparency International 2011), a pattern that has been consistent since Transparency International (TI) first launched CPI in 1995.¹ Subsequently, corruption², problems relating to non-impartiality on behalf of the authorities, and other flaws in quality of the *rechtsstaat* are typically seen as peripheral problems in these contexts.

Nevertheless, recent events – and evidence from contemporary research – suggest that violations of the norm of impartiality may be a real cause for concern even in the Nordic countries, not least in Sweden (Erlingsson et al 2008, Andersson et al 2010, Andersson et al 2012, Statskontoret 2012) and Iceland (*The Telegraph* 2009-06-11; cf. Kristinsson 2012). Moreover, as we will be evident in this article, available cross-national surveys testify to relatively widespread notions of public mistrust in government institutions and public officials, in particular when it comes to different aspects of impartiality and abuse of power. There is thus a somewhat puzzling discrepancy between expert evaluations portraying these countries as non-corrupt and well functioning advanced democracies, and – at least in some instances – critical public perceptions of the impartiality of public authorities and officials.

Taking the pronounced distrust in these high trust societies into account, it is interesting to ask how these public perceptions of the fairness of the public administration are connected to more general satisfaction with the democratic political system. Evidence from developing and transitional settings has shown that public perceptions of the impartiality and fairness of government institutions exercise a substantial effect on system support and political legitimacy (cf. Linde 2012; Seligson 2002). This article sets out to investigate if this effect is found also in the Nordic countries. Our main argument is that although the Nordic countries are most often regarded as world leading when it comes to impartiality, control of corruption and government effectiveness, it would be unwise to view the high rankings in international indices as an indication that the citizens in these countries do *not* perceive problems with impartiality of government institutions and public officials, or that problems of corruption and abuse of power are non-existent. We argue that public *perceptions*

¹ The same pattern is found when consulting the Worldwide Governance Indicators (World Bank 2011), and also, the Nordic countries are widely known for their high levels of social and political trust (cf. Delhey & Newton 2005).

² By corruption we refer to the abuse of a position of public authority for personal gain.

of problems related to lacking impartiality and corruption, rather than the actual situation, constitute an important base for the general satisfaction with the democratic political system.

In order to empirically investigate this, we do two things. First, we demonstrate that that substantial shares of Nordic citizens express concern about the honesty of public officials. Secondly, we investigate in what way such perceptions affect citizens' satisfaction with the way the democratic system works. We show that the 'procedural fairness effect' found in other settings, is also present in countries in a 'least corrupt' setting.

The article proceeds as follows. The second section presents our theoretical framework and previous research on the relationship between perceptions of different aspects of procedural fairness and system support. In the third part, we present our data and some central methodological considerations. The empirical analyses and the results are presented in the fourth section, and in the fifth and concluding section we summarize and discuss the implications of our findings.

Theoretical framework

Our main argument is that perceptions of the honesty and fairness of the public administration are important factors when citizens' evaluate the functioning of the political system. We thus side with the 'procedural fairness' argument, i.e. that the fairness of the procedures through which institutions and authorities exercise authority is crucial for the willingness of individuals to defer to decisions and rules created and implemented by those authorities (Tyler 2006). According to Herian et al. (2012), when it comes to the working of public authorities four components upon which people judge procedural fairness have been put forth: the ability of individuals to express their standpoints, the consistence of the authority in its application of processes and transparency of the decision-making process, respectful treatment of individuals, and the trustworthiness of the authority (cf. Tyler 2006).

In other words, procedural fairness theory assumes that evaluations of the fairness of procedures and implementation of policy are independent of the self-interest of individuals, and therefore also independent of outcomes and the actual content of implemented policies (Linde 2012; Van Ryzin 2011; Kumlin 2004; Tyler 2006; Kurer 2005; Lind and Tyler 1988). Whether citizens regard policies and decisions as legitimate depends primarily on whether or not they believe them to be fair and impartial and if they are implemented in a fair and impartial manner (Gilley 2009, 72; Tyler et al. 1989; Tyler 2006; 1994). Fair and impartial procedures also constitute the foundations of Rothstein and Teorell's theory of quality of government (Rothstein and Teorell 2008; Rothstein

2011): the most important aspect of quality of government is the way the authorities implement public policy. Accordingly, the basic principle of quality of government is *impartiality in the exercise of public power* (Rothstein & Teorell 2008, 170). Thus, in this article we are, in a broader sense, dealing with public perceptions of the quality of government and its relationship with system support on the micro-level.

Previous research on procedural fairness and system support

Much of previous research on the relationship between public perceptions of procedural fairness and system support has focused on perceptions of corruption in developing countries and new democracies where corruption constitutes a problem on all levels of society. Central to our argument is that it has been showed that the legitimacy of political authorities and institutions becomes diminished when they do not adhere to norms of procedural fairness. When it comes to new democracies, Linde (2012) shows that public support for the performance of the democratic political system in post-communist democracies is to a large extent determined by the way citizens perceive the extent of corruption among public officials and the degree of fairness they expect when they deal with the authorities. Such perceptions also have a strong and significant effect on the probability that citizens express support for non-democratic regime alternatives. Seligson (2002) has reported similar results from empirical studies of system support and legitimacy in Latin American countries (cf. Booth & Seligson 2009).

Much less is known about the strength of this relationship, or if there is one at all, in established democracies. However, the few studies that have drawn on indicators related to procedural fairness and system support have testified to the validity of the 'procedural fairness effect'. Kumlin (2004) has for example shown that individual experiences from interaction with universal welfare institutions have a substantial effect on trust and social capital in Sweden. In the United States, Tyler et al. (1989) found that diffuse support for the political system, or a regime's ability to maintain the allegiance of its citizens, is to a large extent a product of the citizens' judgement of procedural fairness. In a study of American and Norwegian publics, Miller and Listhaug (1999) found that public evaluations of the fairness of government processes is an important aspect when it comes to judging the trustworthiness of government. Linde and Erlingsson (forthcoming) have demonstrated that in Sweden public perceptions of corruption among local level public officials and politicians have a strong effect on satisfaction with the democratic political system. And, although not focusing on

system support *per se* but nevertheless strongly related to the theoretical claim in our study, an experimental study of Swedish students by Esaiasson (2010) found that the perceived fairness of treatment had a decisive impact on their acceptance of decisions by government officials. A particularly interesting finding here was that *perceived* fairness mattered much more than the *actual* conduct by the officials.

This finding is particularly interesting for the argument proposed here. From previous research we know that the problem of corruption and misconduct on behalf of officials has a strong effect on the legitimacy of the political system in countries with experiences of systemic, grand corruption in the form of ‘state capture’ by corrupt networks, for example among post-communist countries (cf. Karklins 2005, Holmes 2006). In such countries, corruption is not only threatening the legitimacy of the political system, but may also constitute a threat to the whole political system. What is much less clear, however, is how perceptions of corruption and violations of the principle of impartiality affect system support in advanced democracies, such as the Nordic countries, where the problem of corruption is less alarming, and where the share of citizens that have been subjected to different types of corruption, such as being asked for a bribe in exchange for a service they are entitled to, is very small (Oscarsson 2010).

As discussed above, in comparative indices the Nordic countries most often receive top positions. However, this does *not* mean that problems of corruption and abuse of public power do not exist. The few available comparative surveys that ask respondents about issues related to procedural fairness and corruption report that quite substantial shares of the publics perceive partial treatment in the public sphere as a real existing problem. The case we want to make is the following: although correlated, the *actual* level of corruption in such societies is less important than the *perceived* extent of corruption among public officials and politicians when it comes to citizens assessments of the functioning of the political system. In the following, we test this proposition empirically by using available survey data on public perceptions of the honesty of public officials in the Nordic countries.

Data and Methods

Only a few comparative surveys have addressed the questions about the public perceptions about the fairness of public officials in the advanced West European democracies. Among the most pertinent examples, we find specific waves of the *International Social Survey Programme* (ISSP), the *Eurobarometer* and the *European Social Survey* (ESS). In this paper we use data from the second wave of the ESS, carried out in 2004. This wave included a special module entitled ‘Economic Morality in Eu-

rope: Market, Society & Citizenship’, which entailed a set of questions on trust and confidence in the state and government, and also other questions of vital interest given our purpose here. There are primarily two reasons for using the second wave of the ESS. Firstly, all five Nordic countries are included in the survey. Secondly, the survey comprises questions that are of key concern for our study, e.g. questions on both the respondents’ support for the democratic system and perceptions of the fairness of public officials. Also, the ESS is a high quality survey that provides a very rich data material that gives opportunities to estimate models with controls for a number of theoretically relevant factors.

The second wave of the ESS includes data from 25 countries.³ The survey population consists of persons 15 years and older who are residing in private households, regardless of nationality and citizenship. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews. The sample sizes, and also the response rates, differ between countries. The response rates range from 44 to 79 per cent. With the exception of Iceland, the Nordic countries are in the upper part of that range.⁴ The number of respondents also varies by country: Iceland has only 579 respondents, but otherwise the number varies between 1,442 and 3,026. Hence, the data include responses from a substantial number of respondents from each country, thereby facilitating our analysis. In total, the survey includes responses from 57,537 individuals.

Our two key variables are related to support for the democratic system and trust in public officials respectively. The former is our dependent variable, measured through the question ‘And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?’ The respondents were asked to give their answer on an 11-point scale that ranged from ‘Extremely dissatisfied’ to ‘Extremely satisfied’. The question about trust in public official is our main explanatory variable and was included in a set of questions with the wording ‘How much would you trust the following groups to deal honestly with you?’ The question had five response categories: distrust a lot, distrust, neither trust nor distrust, trust, and trust a lot. We will study this variable both when it comes to distribution over the response categories within different countries, but also as an independent variable in statistical models.⁵

³ The survey was carried out in 26 countries, but due to some mistakes in the sample design, no respondents in the Italian sample received all questions and that sample is therefore not included in the integrated sample that we use in our analysis, leaving us with data from 25 countries. Those 25 countries are: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine and United Kingdom.

⁴ The response rates are: Denmark 65, Finland 71, Iceland 51, Norway 66 and Sweden 66 per cent (Billiet & Pleysier 2007). For more technical information on the survey, see the project website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

⁵ One could question whether a Likert scale item could be used in such way, i.e. if there are equal distances between the response categories. We have therefore, as a robustness test, also estimated corresponding models with the varia-

In our statistical models, we will also include a variety of control variables. First, we include a set of variables to control for individual characteristics, i.e. sex, age, education, economic situation and urbanity. Second, we add a set of control variables regarding opinion and participation, which in earlier research have been showed to affect system support: news consumption, political interest, interpersonal trust, being a political winner or loser, and opinion on the economic situation in the country. How these control variables are constructed is presented in more detail in the following section.

In the ESS, the sample designs differ between countries. In some countries a stratified, multi-stage sample design is applied, while simpler designs are used in other. All Nordic countries use simple random sampling, or designs that could be treated as such, e.g. systematic sampling with implicit stratification. In this article, we will estimate a model for the Nordic countries. Hence, the sample will be stratified by country. The stratification and the population weights will be taken into account in the estimation. We will also present models for each of the Nordic countries. The models will be estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. In estimates on distribution over variables, where we will also include other countries in the survey, design weights and sample design will be considered.

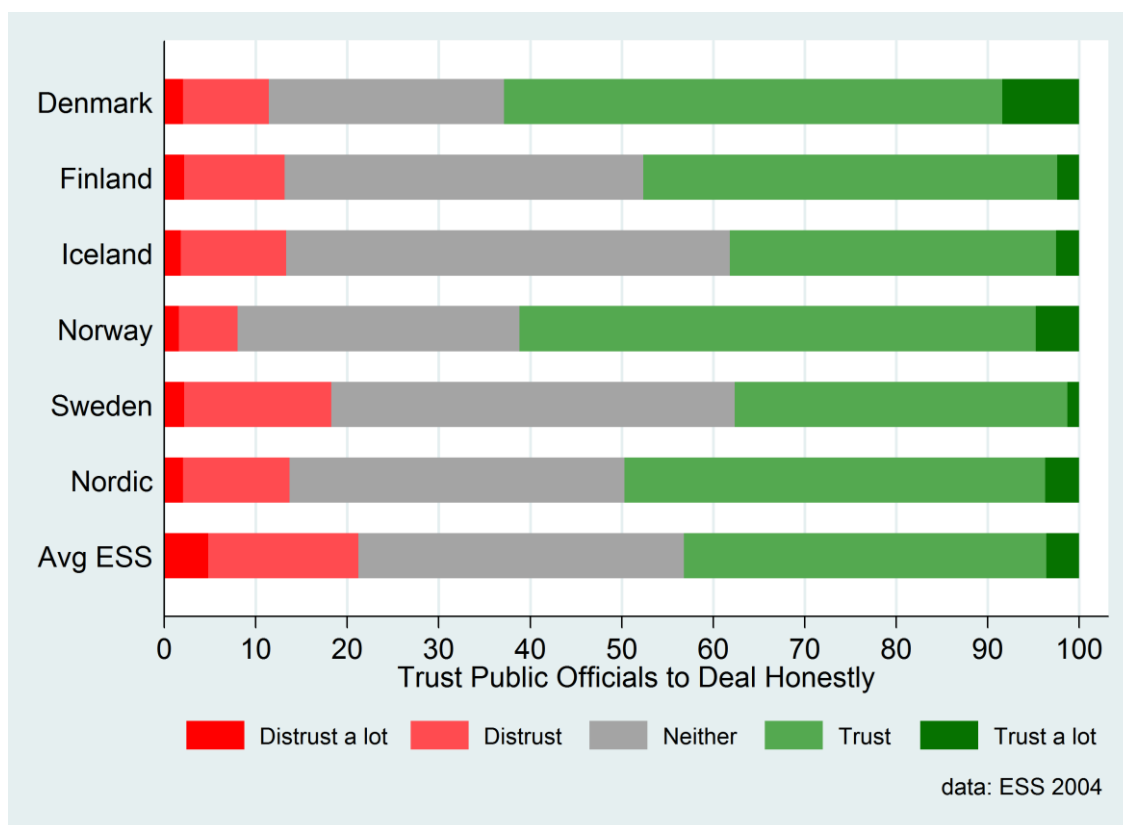
Procedural fairness and satisfaction with democracy in the nordic countries

How does the Nordic public perceive the honesty of the public administration in its dealing with ordinary people? In the 2004 ESS, the respondents were asked about their trust in public officials. The question had five response categories: distrust a lot, distrust, neither trust nor distrust, trust, and trust a lot. As expected from the general image of the Nordic welfare states portrayed in comparative indices, the data show small shares of citizens expressing a lot of distrust in public officials to deal honestly with them, i.e. there is not much variation regarding the share of citizens distrusting public officials *a lot* (Figure 1). However, if we combine both response categories expressing distrust, the variation becomes substantial. Only eight per cent of the Norwegians express distrust in the honesty of public officials, while the corresponding figure for Sweden is above 18 per cent. The other Nordic countries fall in-between. If we consider the Nordic countries as a whole, taking

ble after it has been dichotomized, i.e. when the two first response categories have been coded as zero and the other three as one. Our dependent variable is also measured on a scale, but since it an 11-point scale it is more reasonable to assume equal distances between the response categories.

differences in population sizes into account, the share expressing any distrust in public officials is close to 14 per cent.

FIGURE 1. PERCEPTIONS OF HONEST TREATMENT FROM PUBLIC OFFICIALS, 2004 (PER CENT)



Source: European Social Survey 2004.

Comments: The estimates for 'Nordic countries' refer to the Nordic countries as a whole, taking differences in population size between countries into account. The 'Average ESS' refers to average over all countries included in ESS 2004, without considering differences in population sizes.

The Swedish level of distrust should be viewed in broader comparative perspective. The average level of distrust over the 25 countries in the ESS – which covers no less than seven new democracies in Eastern Europe that pushes the average upwards – is 21 per cent.⁶ If we exclude the post-communist countries, the average is roughly the same as for Sweden. Hence, distrust in public officials is higher in Sweden than in other Nordic countries, and in a broader European perspective, the Swedish figures are on average. The other Nordic countries stand out as having a relatively high trust in public officials, whilst Sweden – interestingly, since it ranked first in the Rule of Law Index

⁶ This is an average of the estimates for each of the 25 countries in the 2004 ESS.

2010 and 2011 – diverges from this pattern. Moreover, when taking the share of trusting respondents into account, it might be quite surprising for some to note the relatively low shares of Nordic citizens that express ‘a lot of trust’ in public officials. For the Nordic countries as a whole the average is just below 4 per cent, in line with the average of the ‘western’ (or non-post-communist) countries.

Furthermore, the comparatively low shares of citizens expressing ‘trust’ or ‘a lot of trust’ in Sweden (37.6 per cent) and Iceland (38.2) might be seen as more surprising. Accordingly, in Sweden and Iceland almost half of the populations neither trust nor distrust public officials to be honest. The pattern observed in the data on perceptions of the honesty of officials provided by ESS is also manifested in other cross-national surveys containing different questions about perceptions of corruption and partiality among public officials, such as the ISSP and the Eurobarometer. There is a relatively large variation between the Nordic countries in terms of the extent of public dissatisfaction with procedural fairness and impartiality among public institutions, where Swedes are in fact much more prone to perceive corruption and partiality than their Nordic neighbors.

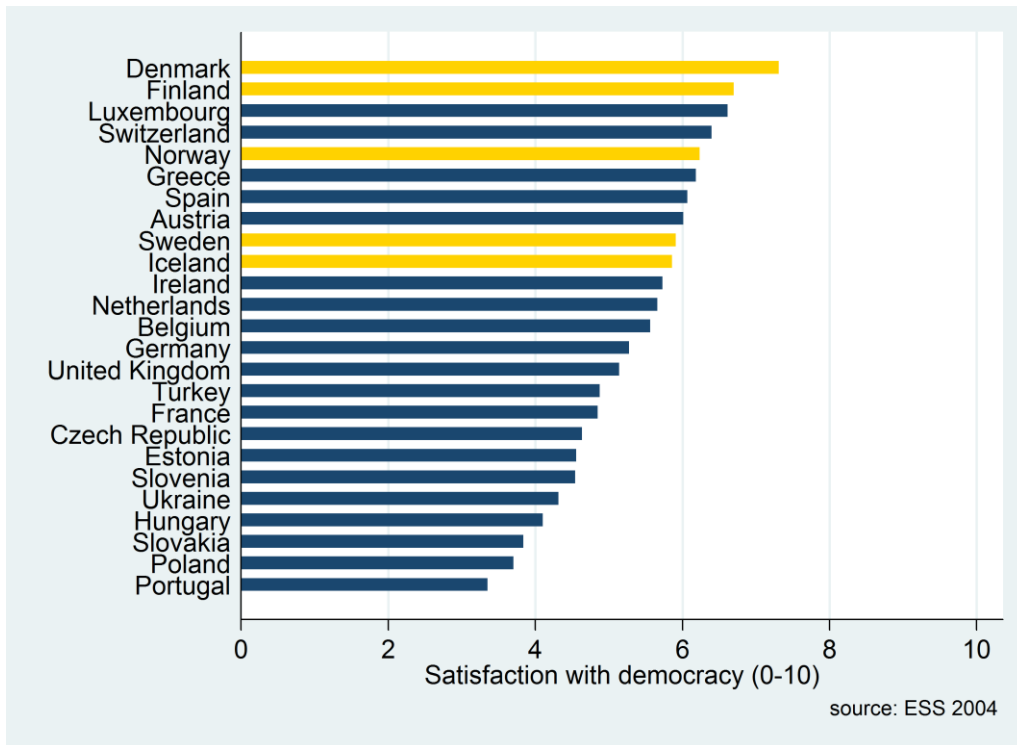
Satisfaction with democracy

Our purpose here is not to explain the variation, but highlight that there indeed is a substantial variation in the levels of trust in the honesty of public officials even in the ‘least corrupt’ Nordic societies that are homogeneous in many theoretically relevant respects (Erlingsson et al. 2008). Instead, we aim to investigate the effect of public perceptions of public officials’ honesty on an important aspect of system support: public satisfaction with the way democracy works. We are thus interested in what has been conceptualised as public support for the *performance* of the democratic regime, rather than support for the political regime on a more *principal*, or diffuse, level, such as support for democracy as the best political system (cf. Norris 2011; Booth & Seligson 2009; Linde & Ekman 2003). Although the meaning of the ‘satisfaction with democracy’ item has been debated, it has nonetheless remained the standard indicator of ‘generalised system support’, or what Fuchs et al. (1995, 332) call the ‘constitutional reality’ of a political system (cf. Linde & Ekman 2003; Norris 2011).

Figure 2 presents levels of satisfaction with democracy in the 25 countries in the ESS 2004. The Nordic countries, highlighted in the graph, are as expected all among the ten countries with the highest satisfaction. On the 11-point scale, they average from 5.9 in Iceland and Sweden to 7.3 in

Denmark. If we consider the Nordic countries as a whole, the average satisfaction with democracy is estimated to be 6.4. That average is the same for Switzerland, and of the non-Nordic countries, only Luxembourg has a higher satisfaction with democracy.

FIGURE 2. SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY 2004, ESTIMATES ON A SCALE 0-10, BY COUNTRY.⁷



⁷ Remember that the data is collected in 2004, hence the high scores for Greece are not all too surprising: they won gold in the UEFA European Championship in football, and hosted the Olympic Games in Athens that year.

Variables of interest when studying satisfaction with democracy

We aim to study the relationship between two variables: the effect of trust in the honesty of public officials on the satisfaction with democracy. As mentioned in the previous section, we will do so by applying multiple regression analysis. In the models, we will include a number of other theoretically relevant variables to control for other factors that also might affect the satisfaction with democracy.

The control variables can be divided into two separate sets. First, we include a set of variables to control for individual characteristics of the respondents. This set includes, apart from sex and age, variables regarding whether or not the respondent has a higher education, economic difficulties and lives in a bigger city. Apart from the age variable, all variables are dichotomous. Higher education refers to respondents who claim that they have completed tertiary education (ISCED 5-6). The variable referring to economic difficulties is based on a question regarding the feeling about the household's income nowadays. Respondents who have answered that they are 'living comfortably' or 'coping' on present income have been coded as zero, and respondents who have stated that they find it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' on present income have been assigned the value one. Whether the respondent lives in a big city or not, is also information based on survey responses.

The second set of variables includes questions relating to respondents' political views and interest. The variable 'Big news consumer' is coded one for those respondents who have answered that they on an average weekday read newspapers about politics or current affairs for half an hour or more, and zero for all other respondents. Among all the respondents in the ESS 2004, about one quarter of them is big news consumers according to this definition. Regarding the political interest variable, those respondents who have claimed that they are 'very' or 'quite' interested in politics are coded one and those who say that they are 'hardly' or 'not at all' interested are coded as zero. The second set of control variables also include three variables that in the literature on system support referred to above have been considered of importance. They are satisfaction with the economy, general trust and if the respondent is a political loser. The two first of those variables are measured on 11-point scales. In the case of general trust, the wording of the question was 'generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?', and the response scale ranged from 'you can't be too careful' to 'most people can be trusted'. The question about satisfaction with the present state of the economy had a response scale from 'extremely dissatisfied' to 'extremely satisfied. Finally, the variable 'political loser' is coded one if the

respondent in the previous national election voted for a party that was not included in the government that was formed after the election, and zero otherwise.⁸

The effects of procedural fairness on satisfaction with democracy

We now shift our focus to regression models where we have the above-mentioned ‘satisfaction with democracy’ item as our dependent variable. First, we study all Nordic countries as a whole, which gives us more observations in our analysis, but later on we also study models estimated for each of the Nordic countries. In Table 1, the results of three regression models regarding the Nordic countries are presented. In the first model (model A), the only independent variable is our key explanatory variable, i.e. trust in the honesty of public officials. The response categories presented earlier in this section are coded one to five, where a higher value corresponds to a higher trust in political officials among the respondents. As can be seen from the table, the correlation is significant and in the expected direction: higher trust is associated with a higher satisfaction with the democracy. One step on the five-point scale of trust in public officials corresponds with a 0.8 points higher satisfaction with the democracy (measured on the earlier mentioned 11-point scale).

⁸ For the Nordic countries, those who voted for the following parties in respective election are considered political losers. In the 2001 election in Denmark: those who voted for other parties than Liberal Party or Conservative People’s Party. In the 2003 election in Finland: those who voted for other parties than Centre Party, Social Democratic Party or Swedish People’s Party. In the 2003 election in Iceland: those who voted for other parties than Independence Party or Progressive Party. In the 2001 election in Norway: those who voted for other parties than Conservative Party, Liberal Party or Christian Democratic Party. In the 2002 election in Sweden: those who voted for other parties than Social Democratic Party, Green Party or Left Party. The two latter were not formally included in the Swedish government, but since they had an extensive cooperation we still consider them as such. Given our definition, those respondents who did not vote are not considered as political losers. Still, given the very high voting rates, among the respondents in the Nordic countries who were eligible to vote, this is not of importance for the analysis.

TABLE 1. EFFECTS ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY, NORDIC COUNTRIES IN TOTAL, UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (OLS)

Variables	A	B	C
Trust in public officials (1-5)	0.809*** (0.135)	0.751*** (0.133)	0.442*** (0.063)
Female (0,1)		-0.399*** (0.079)	-0.209 [^] (0.076)
Age (15-)		-0.007 [^] (0.003)	-0.005 (0.004)
Higher education (0,1)		0.429*** (0.042)	0.139 (0.071)
Economic difficulties (0,1)		-0.668*** (0.077)	-0.172 [^] (0.079)
Big city (0,1)		0.187 [^] (0.086)	0.100 (0.093)
Big news consumer (0,1)			0.156 [^] (0.073)
Political interest (0,1)			0.364*** (0.037)
Political loser (0,1)			-0.181 [^] (0.072)
General trust (0-10)			0.112*** (0.006)
Satisfaction with economy (0-10)			0.375*** (0.030)
Constant	3.711*** (0.642)	4.289*** (0.538)	1.967*** (0.154)
R ²	0.10	0.13	0.30
N	7,403	7,283	6,510

Source: European Social Survey 2004.

Comments: ^{*}= $p < 0.10$, ^{**}= $p < 0.05$, ^{***}= $p < 0.01$. The estimates refer to the Nordic countries as a whole, taking differences in population sizes into account. The values each variable can take are presented within brackets after each variable. Standard errors are clustered within countries and presented in parentheses under each coefficient.

In model B, we introduce our first set of control variables. This has almost no effect on our key variable, trust in public officials. If we study each of the control variables, we note that higher education is associated with higher satisfaction with democracy, and economic difficulties with lower satisfaction. This is not surprising. More surprising is the result that females have a somewhat lower satisfaction with democracy than men. Our other two control variables in our first set, age and living in big city, are not significant at conventionally used significance levels (i.e. $\alpha=0.05$).

In our full model (model C), presented in the final column of Table 1, we include all our control variables. None of our control variables in the first set are now significant. This includes the sur-

prising effect of gender. Of the new variables we introduce in the full model, news consumption and voting in the previous election for a party that was not part of the resulting government, are not significant. However, political interest, general trust and satisfaction with the economy are all significant and the coefficients all have the expected signs. For all of those variables the correlations are positive. Nevertheless, in line with our theoretical expectations, even after including all these control variables, our key variable, trust in public officials, still has a significant and positive effect on satisfaction with democracy. The effect has diminished compared to the smaller models, but even in our full model the effect is still highly significant, demonstrating the importance of public perceptions of procedural fairness for system support.⁹

In the next step, we study models estimated for each of the Nordic countries respectively. In Table 2, such models that correspond to the full model in Table 1 are presented. There are some differences between the models, but the general picture is the same: Our key explanatory variable, trust in public officials, is highly significant and has a positive effect on satisfaction with democracy in all five countries. The same is true for satisfaction with the present state of the economy. Also, general trust has the same direction of the coefficients for all five countries as for the Nordic countries as a whole, and except for the model regarding Iceland the effects are significant. Studying political interest, the same result emerge: apart from the model regarding Iceland, the coefficients have the same sign as in the general model for all Nordic countries, and the effects are significant. Since the number of respondents is much fewer in the Icelandic sample, it is not surprising that is more difficult to find significant effects in that sample. If we look at the other control variables, we find some differences between the different countries. Still, the general picture regarding the variables of more interest is the same as in the full model for the Nordic countries as a whole.¹⁰

⁹ One could question whether a Likert item question, such as our variable on trust in public officials, with only five steps that might not be of equal distance, is suitable for regression models as those presented in Table 1. Therefore, as a robustness test, we have also estimated corresponding models where we have dichotomized that variable into a variable which have been assigned the value one if the respondent have answered with any response category expressing trust or indifference, and zero otherwise. Those models give a similar result: the variable regarding trust in public officials is significant and the coefficients have the same sign in all three models. The models are presented in more detail in the appendix.

¹⁰ We have also estimated full models for each Nordic country, where we have dichotomized the variable regarding trust in public officials. The results are presented in the appendix. For all five countries, trust in public officials is associated with a higher satisfaction with democracy. Apart from the model regarding Denmark, the variable is also significant for all countries.

TABLE 2. EFFECTS ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY, NORDIC COUNTRIES, UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION (OLS) COEFFICIENTS

Variables	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Trust in public officials (1-5)	0.215*** (0.068)	0.523*** (0.054)	0.706*** (0.142)	0.370*** (0.067)	0.542*** (0.071)
Female (0,1)	-0.206** (0.103)	-0.178** (0.070)	0.451** (0.204)	-0.073 (0.091)	-0.364*** (0.092)
Age (15-)	-0.005 ⁺ (0.003)	-0.009*** (0.002)	0.004 (0.006)	0.009*** (0.003)	-0.011*** (0.003)
Higher education (0,1)	0.087 (0.104)	0.342*** (0.076)	-0.384 ⁺ (0.216)	0.137 (0.099)	0.047 (0.112)
Economic difficulties (0,1)	-0.219 (0.335)	-0.200 (0.131)	-0.524 (0.416)	-0.209 (0.177)	0.011 (0.167)
Big city (0,1)	0.177 ⁺ (0.105)	0.127 ⁺ (0.077)	-0.299 (0.194)	-0.252*** (0.094)	0.194 ⁺ (0.099)
Big news consumer (0,1)	0.323** (0.159)	0.216** (0.108)	-0.235 (0.285)	-0.083 (0.136)	0.176 (0.167)
Political interest (0,1)	0.277** (0.121)	0.342*** (0.072)	-0.139 (0.200)	0.279*** (0.096)	0.332*** (0.100)
Political loser (0,1)	-0.347*** (0.103)	-0.104 (0.078)	-0.906*** (0.223)	-0.267*** (0.089)	-0.033 (0.097)
General trust (0-10)	0.108*** (0.028)	0.127*** (0.023)	0.046 (0.050)	0.106*** (0.028)	0.096*** (0.025)
Satisfaction with economy (0-10)	0.301*** (0.033)	0.379*** (0.026)	0.406*** (0.065)	0.315*** (0.024)	0.409*** (0.028)
Constant	3.683*** (0.422)	1.738*** (0.298)	1.282 ⁺ (0.715)	1.966*** (0.334)	1.801*** (0.310)
R²	0.19	0.35	0.32	0.22	0.31
N	1,035	1,782	419	1,638	1,636

Source: European Social Survey 2004.

Comments: ⁺= $p < 0.10$, **= $p < 0.05$, ***= $p < 0.01$. The values each variable can take are presented within brackets after each variable. Standard errors are clustered within countries and presented within brackets under each coefficient.

All in all, our empirical analyses provide a number of interesting results concerning public perceptions of procedural fairness and system support in the Nordic countries. First, there is a great deal of variation between the Nordic countries when it comes to public perceptions of honest treatment from public officials, with the Swedish respondents showing the highest levels of distrust (Table 1). Our analyses also make the case for the importance of perceptions of procedural fairness for general system support. We find a strong and statistically significant relationship between trust in the honesty of public officials and satisfaction with democracy. This pattern is consistent both when analyzing the Nordic countries together in one single model and also respectively in country specific models, and when controlling for competing explanatory factors (Tables 1 and 2). The effects of

perceived impartiality on behalf of public officials are strongest in Iceland and Sweden, where we also find the highest levels of distrust in public officials.

Thus, the results give at hand that public perceptions of non-impartial behavior in the implementation of public policy have a negative effect on system support even in countries that in general are viewed as non-corrupt and well-functioning democracies, such as the Nordic countries.

Conclusions and Implications

Historically, there has been a general lack in interest in describing and explaining problems relating to the problems of abuse of power in advanced democracies, i.e. settings that typically have been described as ‘clean’ and ‘honest’, where corruption is seen as non-existent and the *rechtstaat* as strong. In line with Girling’s (1997) way of reasoning, we have argued that this state of affairs is damaging to our general understanding of problems related to public misconduct in ‘least corrupt’ countries – such as in the Nordic welfare states. Corruption and other violations of the norm of impartiality do not automatically vanish when countries modernize and democratize. Rather, the nature and character of the problem changes. It is hence misleading – as is regrettably too often done – to simply refer to the top-positions these countries receive in international indices on corruption and rule of law, and claim that departures from the norm of impartiality are only peripheral problems there. We therefore argued that more country specific information is needed to flesh out the nature of and character of the potential flaws in the Nordic quality of government.

Against this background, this article has investigated a specific aspect of the problems that may be found in countries that are ranked high international indices. Using survey data from the ESS (2004), we demonstrated that public distrust in the honesty of public officials is found here as well, and that it is quite widespread in some countries. The data show that the publics – particularly in Sweden and Iceland – are not all too pleased with the way they believe that public officials are handling their affairs. Those expressing distrust in the honesty of public officials also tend to be significantly more dissatisfied with the performance of the political system in general.

But why should we care about how the public perceives the fairness of public officials? Is it not the actual levels of corruption that should be of interest in this field of research? The growing literature on quality of government argues that the most important aspect of quality of government is impartiality, i.e. that the actions of public officials should rest on basic norms of universalism and neutrality. More specifically: when they implement laws and policies, public officials should not take anything about the citizen or the case into consideration that is not beforehand stipulated in the

policy or the law (Rothstein & Teorell 2008; Rothstein 2011). Procedural fairness is therefore the key to quality of government.

This theoretical argument brings us to perhaps the most important contribution of this study. Previous research on the effects of perceptions of procedural (un)fairness on public support for the political system has typically been carried out in countries where problems of public misconduct and corruption are rampant, in some cases even threatening the very existence of the democratic political system. We have showed that unfavorable effects of perceptions of public official misconduct are also prevalent in countries where the problems of corruption and abuse of power take on a different form and where the problems are much less acute.

If one cares about the sustainability and quality of democracy, there is reason to argue that our findings are rather disturbing. It is namely precisely here that the nature of the corruption problem in established democracies may lie: it is not the *actual* levels of corruption and abuse of power in the Nordic countries that ought to worry us. In fact, survey data show that Nordic citizens' experiences of actually being asked to give bribes are extremely limited (cf. Oscarsson 2010), and cases of corruption that actually are brought to trial in court are few (cf. Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2007). As demonstrated, it is the public's *perceptions* of public officials implementing laws and policies in a dishonest manner that potentially has damaging effects on the political system as a whole, since these perceptions seem to have an eroding effect on public trust in the performance of the democratic system.

One implication of our results is worth dwelling upon briefly. When investigating data from the Eurobarometer, we find that quite substantial shares of the publics in Denmark, Finland and Sweden believe that the level of corruption has increased over the last couple of years (European Commission 2012). Swedish survey data has shown that increasingly, more and more citizens tend to think that corruption has become a worsening problem in Sweden (Erlingsson & Linde 2011). However, there is no hard evidence supporting the change in perceptions, i.e. that corruption on the ground has become more common in practice. As for example Wångmar (2012) has argued, it may well be the case the corruption levels in Sweden actually were higher, 60 years ago. Although the danger of increasing perceptions of public corruption should not be exaggerated, it is at least worth noting that the extensive game-theoretic literature on *tipping points* (Schelling 1971), *threshold models of collective behavior* (Granovetter 1978), or *social traps* (cf. Rothstein 2005), teaches us that perceptions of, and expectations about, the actions of others can have long term effects on the legitimacy of political systems. If citizens increasingly believe that public officials are behaving dishonestly, then, why should *they* pay taxes, act altruistically and follow the law? Perhaps the real challenge

for policy-makers in least corrupt settings does not lay in creating new rules, more supervision and harsher punishment for corrupt-like activities¹¹, but engaging in other types of activities that tries to ensure that the public gets a more correct and realistic view of the universalism and de facto procedural fairness of the system?

¹¹ In fact, as argued by Anechiarhico and Jacobs (1996), when designing elaborate systems of supervision and harsher punishment for corruption, governments that intend to combat and control corruption may well have the detriming side-effect of making public administration severely ineffective.

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APPENDIX

Additional models

TABLE A. EFFECTS ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY, NORDIC COUNTRIES IN TOTAL, UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (OLS)

Variables	A	B	C
Trust in public officials (0,1)	1.528*** (0.209)	1.426*** (0.216)	0.804*** (0.127)
Female (0,1)		-0.427*** (0.074)	-0.222** (0.075)
Age (15-)		-0.007 [†] (0.003)	-0.005 (0.004)
Higher education (0,1)		0.493*** (0.034)	0.162 [†] (0.070)
Economic difficulties (0,1)		-0.754*** (0.068)	-0.197** (0.070)
Big city (0,1)		0.196 (0.098)	0.099 (0.097)
Big news consumer (0,1)			0.175 [†] (0.070)
Political interest (0,1)			0.370*** (0.035)
Political loser (0,1)			-0.169 [†] (0.068)
General trust (0-10)			0.124*** (0.007)
Satisfaction with economy (0-10)			0.387*** (0.034)
Constant	5.125*** (0.446)	5.584*** (0.361)	2.580*** (0.067)
R²	0.06	0.10	0.29
N	7,403	7,283	6,510

Source: European Social Survey 2004.

Comments: [†]= $p < 0.10$, **= $p < 0.05$, ***= $p < 0.01$. The estimates refer to the Nordic countries as a whole, taking differences in population sizes into account. The values each variable can take are presented within brackets after each variable. Standard errors are clustered within countries and presented in parentheses under each coefficient.

TABLE B. EFFECTS ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY, NORDIC COUNTRIES, UNSTANDARDIZED REGRESSION (OLS) COEFFICIENTS

Variables	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Trust in public officials (0,1)	0.258 (0.207)	0.838 ^{***} (0.133)	1.196 ^{***} (0.354)	0.781 ^{***} (0.193)	0.950 ^{***} (0.146)
Female (0,1)	-0.213 ^{**} (0.103)	-0.212 ^{***} (0.072)	0.452 ^{**} (0.208)	-0.078 (0.092)	-0.373 ^{***} (0.093)
Age (15-)	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.009 ^{***} (0.002)	0.005 (0.006)	0.008 ^{***} (0.003)	-0.011 ^{***} (0.003)
Higher education (0,1)	0.100 (0.105)	0.366 ^{***} (0.077)	-0.410 [*] (0.219)	0.144 (0.099)	0.066 (0.112)
Economic difficulties (0,1)	-0.241 (0.334)	-0.214 (0.133)	-0.637 (0.425)	-0.209 (0.180)	-0.049 (0.167)
Big city (0,1)	0.178 [*] (0.106)	0.114 (0.078)	-0.319 (0.198)	-0.259 ^{***} (0.094)	0.206 ^{**} (0.099)
Big news consumer (0,1)	0.326 [*] (0.167)	0.221 ^{**} (0.110)	-0.217 (0.285)	-0.058 (0.140)	0.225 (0.169)
Political interest (0,1)	0.272 ^{**} (0.122)	0.368 ^{***} (0.074)	-0.078 (0.205)	0.279 ^{***} (0.097)	0.336 ^{***} (0.100)
Political loser (0,1)	-0.335 ^{***} (0.103)	-0.075 (0.080)	-0.920 ^{***} (0.224)	-0.272 ^{***} (0.090)	-0.050 (0.098)
General trust (0-10)	0.117 ^{***} (0.028)	0.148 ^{***} (0.024)	0.056 (0.051)	0.120 ^{***} (0.027)	0.108 ^{***} (0.024)
Satisfaction with economy (0-10)	0.305 ^{***} (0.034)	0.397 ^{***} (0.027)	0.423 ^{***} (0.065)	0.319 ^{***} (0.024)	0.415 ^{***} (0.028)
Constant	4.089 ^{***} (0.404)	2.479 ^{***} (0.278)	2.291 ^{***} (0.671)	2.461 ^{***} (0.297)	2.633 ^{***} (0.275)
R ²	0.18	0.33	0.30	0.21	0.30
N	1,035	1,782	419	1,638	1,636

Source: European Social Survey 2004.

Comments: ^{*}= $p < 0.10$, ^{**}= $p < 0.05$, ^{***}= $p < 0.01$. The values each variable can take are presented within brackets after each variable. Standard errors are clustered within countries and presented within brackets under each coefficient.

TABLE C. EFFECTS ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY, NORDIC COUNTRIES IN TOTAL, STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (OLS)

Variables	A	B	C
Trust in public officials (std)	0.306 ^{**} (0.051)	0.284 ^{***} (0.050)	0.167 ^{**} (0.024)
Female (0,1)		-0.162 ^{***} (0.032)	-0.084 [*] (0.031)
Age (std)		-0.052 [*] (0.022)	-0.040 (0.032)
Higher education (0,1)		0.174 ^{***} (0.017)	0.056 (0.029)
Economic difficulties (0,1)		-0.270 ^{***} (0.031)	-0.070 [*] (0.032)
Big city (0,1)		0.076 [*] (0.035)	0.041 (0.038)
Big news consumer (0,1)			0.063 [*] (0.030)
Political interest (0,1)			0.147 ^{***} (0.015)
Political loser (0,1)			-0.073 [*] (0.029)
General trust (std)			0.112 ^{***} (0.006)
Satisfaction with economy (std)			0.375 ^{***} (0.030)
Constant	0.393 ^{**} (0.110)	0.422 ^{**} (0.093)	0.041 [*] (0.018)
R ²	0.10	0.13	0.30
N	7,403	7,283	6,510

Source: European Social Survey 2004.

Comments: ^{*}= $p < 0.10$, ^{**}= $p < 0.05$, ^{***}= $p < 0.01$. The estimates refer to the Nordic countries as a whole, taking differences in population sizes into account. The values each variable can take are presented within brackets after each variable. Those variables with 'std' in brackets have been standardized to have a zero mean and a standard deviation equal to one. The dependent variable has also been standardized. Standard errors are clustered within countries and presented in parentheses under each coefficient.

TABLE D. EFFECTS ON SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY, NORDIC COUNTRIES, STANDARDIZED REGRESSION (OLS) COEFFICIENTS

Variables	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Trust in public officials (std)	0.081 ^{***} (0.026)	0.198 ^{***} (0.020)	0.267 ^{***} (0.054)	0.140 ^{***} (0.025)	0.205 ^{***} (0.027)
Female (0,1)	-0.083 ^{**} (0.042)	-0.072 ^{**} (0.028)	0.182 ^{**} (0.082)	-0.030 (0.037)	-0.147 ^{***} (0.037)
Age (std)	-0.040 [*] (0.022)	-0.069 ^{***} (0.015)	0.027 (0.045)	0.067 ^{***} (0.021)	-0.080 ^{***} (0.021)
Higher education (0,1)	0.035 (0.042)	0.138 ^{***} (0.031)	-0.155 [*] (0.087)	0.055 (0.040)	0.019 (0.045)
Economic difficulties (0,1)	-0.089 (0.135)	-0.081 (0.053)	-0.212 (0.168)	-0.085 (0.072)	0.005 (0.067)
Big city (0,1)	0.072 [*] (0.043)	0.052 [*] (0.031)	-0.121 (0.079)	-0.102 ^{***} (0.038)	0.078 [*] (0.040)
Big news consumer (0,1)	0.131 ^{**} (0.064)	0.087 ^{**} (0.044)	-0.095 (0.115)	-0.033 (0.055)	0.071 (0.068)
Political interest (0,1)	0.112 ^{**} (0.049)	0.138 ^{***} (0.029)	-0.056 (0.081)	0.113 ^{***} (0.039)	0.134 ^{***} (0.040)
Political loser (0,1)	-0.140 ^{***} (0.042)	-0.042 (0.032)	-0.367 ^{***} (0.090)	-0.108 ^{***} (0.036)	-0.013 (0.039)
General trust (std)	0.109 ^{***} (0.028)	0.128 ^{***} (0.024)	0.046 (0.050)	0.107 ^{***} (0.028)	0.096 ^{***} (0.025)
Satisfaction with economy (std)	0.301 ^{***} (0.033)	0.379 ^{***} (0.026)	0.406 ^{***} (0.065)	0.315 ^{***} (0.024)	0.409 ^{***} (0.028)
Constant	0.293 ^{***} (0.088)	0.016 (0.053)	0.201 (0.143)	0.093 (0.064)	0.034 (0.067)
R ²	0.19	0.35	0.32	0.22	0.31
N	1,035	1,782	419	1,638	1,636

Source: European Social Survey 2004.

Comments: *= $p < 0.10$, **= $p < 0.05$, ***= $p < 0.01$. The values each variable can take are presented within brackets after each variable. Those variables with 'std' in brackets have been standardized to have a zero mean and a standard deviation equal to one. The dependent variable has also been standardized. Standard errors are clustered within countries and presented within brackets under each coefficient.