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# Community perceptions of corruption by public officials

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**Abstract |** In July 2023 the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) commenced operation. Prior to this, we surveyed a large sample of online Australians (*n*=11,304) about their perceptions of corruption and legitimacy among public officials.

A sizeable minority of respondents believed that over half of all politicians and government institutions were involved in corruption. Younger, unemployed and First Nations respondents perceived higher levels of corruption, as did respondents with lower levels of education and those living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Perceptions of corruption were associated with diminished levels of perceived legitimacy of public officials, but this relationship was moderated by other factors.

Perceived corruption and the legitimacy of public officials go hand in hand. Implementing measures to address one may help improve the other.

Corruption is characterised by the misuse of power and authority by public officials and can include a wide range of behaviours such as bribery, nepotism, fraud and embezzlement (Graycar & Prenzler 2013). Corruption, whether actual or perceived, has a range of harmful effects, including on inequality, service delivery, tax revenue, economic growth and even the environment—effects that are hardest felt by the most disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the community (De Vries & Solaz 2017; UK Department for International Development 2015). International evidence points to a relationship between corruption and the perceived legitimacy of public officials. Corruption within government can erode the public's confidence and trust in political institutions, which in turn diminishes the community's belief in the legitimacy of the political system (Erlingsson, Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson 2022; Seligson 2002). Perceived legitimacy is essential to effective governance: when a government is viewed as legitimate it is more likely to be stable, effective and widely supported (Dix, Hussmann & Walton 2012).

Recorded instances of corruption among Australian public service (APS) officials have been rare. In the 2021–22 financial year, 138 APS employees were found to have breached their Code of Conduct (APS Commission 2022a). In the 2022 APS Employee Census, three percent (*n*=3,645) of employees reported that they had witnessed another public service employee engage in potentially corrupt behaviour in the previous 12 months (APS Commission 2022b). According to an older survey, less than one percent of Australians had personally observed, or had a family member observe, corrupt behaviour among public officials in the past five years (McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012).

However, *perceptions* of corruption are quite different. In this same 2012 survey, political parties and the federal government were rated as corrupt by 37 percent and 32 percent of respondents respectively, while levels of confidence in these institutions were low (McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012). More recently, in a survey of 1,204 Australian adults conducted as part of the 2020 Global Corruption Barometer, two-thirds of respondents believed that corruption was a problem in government, while there were similarly poor perceptions of the ability of both Commonwealth and state and territory governments to handle corruption (Transparency International 2020).

Globally, Australia is among the least corrupt nations. The Corruption Perceptions Index is an annual measure of perceived public sector corruption across 180 countries and territories based on surveys of businesspeople and experts (Transparency International 2022). The index rates each country on a scale from zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Between 2012 and 2021, there was a decrease in Australia's score (from 85 to 73) and international ranking (from 7th to 18th); however, Australia's performance on this index improved in 2022 (with a score of 75 and ranking of 13th).

Recent increases in perceived corruption by public officials may relate to the enormous social, political and economic changes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bonotti & Zech 2021). Emerging research supports a relationship between declining political trust and perceived legitimacy during the pandemic, particularly among people who believed healthcare responses to be ineffective or controversial (Eichengreen, Saka & Aksoy 2022; Weinberg 2022; Weingart, van Schalkwyk & Guenther 2022).

In late 2022, the Australian Government introduced legislation to establish an independent National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), with broad jurisdiction to investigate corruption in the Commonwealth public sector. The NACC commenced operation in July 2023. It is important to understand community perceptions of corruption among public officials prior to commencement of the NACC. This paper therefore provides a baseline measure of perceived corruption. Further, given the harmful consequences of corruption (De Vries & Solaz 2017; UK Department of International Development 2015), the paper also examines community perceptions of corruption and its relationship with the perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions.

# Method

## Sample

This research used data from a large sample of online Australians surveyed about their political and social beliefs. The survey collected, among other things, information about respondents' perceptions of politicians and government institutions, including the extent to which they are involved in corruption and whether they act with honesty and integrity, consider the views of the community in decision making, and treat people fairly and with respect.

The survey was conducted by Roy Morgan Research between 3 November and 6 December 2022. Respondents were recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source panel and a panel managed by PureProfile. The survey was sent to members of these panels aged 18 years and over who had voluntarily joined to receive incentives in exchange for completing surveys. Proportional quota sampling was used to ensure the sample was broadly reflective of the spread of people living in Australia. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics population data (ABS 2023a). Participants were first recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source survey panel, which comprises individuals recruited through a rigorous clustersampled, face-to-face survey approach. The majority of respondents (58.7%) were drawn from this panel. The raw completion rate for invitations sent to this panel was 7.1 percent; however, 78.3 percent of respondents who opened the invitation and who were eligible to participate in the research went on to complete the survey. Poor quality responses and duplicates were removed from the final sample.

The survey took respondents an average of 23.8 minutes to complete. The final sample size was 13,302 respondents. The data were weighted by age, sex and usual place of residence to ensure the data were representative of the spread of the Australian population. Additional random iterative method weights were applied to correct for education level and internet and social media use. All of the findings presented in this paper are based on weighted data.

Given the focus of the paper, the sample was limited to respondents who answered at least one of the two questions about the perceived level of corruption of politicians and government institutions ($n$=11,304). Of those who were excluded (15.0% of eligible sample; $n$=1,998), most responded 'don't know' ($n$=1,916), whereas a small number of respondents chose not to answer the corruption questions ($n$=82).

Respondents who answered the corruption questions differed from those who did not in their gender ($F$=114.04, $p$<0.001), age ($F$=41.32, $p$<0.001), educational attainment ($\chi^2$=27.37, $p$<0.001), geographic remoteness ($F$=5.78, $p$=0.003), employment status ($F$=48.38, $p$<0.001), relative socio-economic disadvantage/advantage ($F$=7.42, $p$<0.001), and likelihood of being born outside of Australia ($F$=9.58, $p$=0.002). Further analysis revealed that these differences were likely due to different levels of interest and engagement with politics. Respondents who did not answer questions about corruption among public officials were significantly less likely to agree with the statement that they often talked with family about politics (29.1% vs 42.9%; $F$=63.55, $p$<0.001) or that they often talked with friends about politics (26.6% vs 40.6%; $F$=71.07, $p$<0.001). They were also much less likely to say they were quite interested or very interested in politics (19.6% vs 38.0%; $F$=94.0, $p$<0.001).

Characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Fifty-one percent of respondents were male and 49.0 percent were female. One-third (29.3%) of respondents were aged 18–34 years, 49.9 percent were aged 35–64 years, and 20.8 percent of respondents were aged 65 years or over. First Nations respondents accounted for 2.8 percent of respondents, and one in five respondents were born outside of Australia (21.5%). Two in five respondents (40.6%) had been to university. The majority of respondents were living in metropolitan areas (73.3%), while 23.3 percent were living in regional areas and 2.6 percent in remote areas. Around one-third of respondents (36.8%) lived in the least disadvantaged postcodes according to the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (ABS 2023b), while 16.8 percent lived in the most disadvantaged postcodes. Two-thirds of respondents (65.3%) were employed, while 4.3 percent were unemployed at the time of completing the survey. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (70.6%) reported being at least moderately interested in politics.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics (*n*=11,304)**

| **Gender**[a] | **%** | ***n*** | **Employment status**[e] | **%** | ***n*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 51.0 | 5,708 | Employed | 65.3 | 7,285 |
| Female | 49.0 | 5,492 | Other | 30.4 | 3,390 |
| **Age in years** | **%** | ***n*** | Unemployed | 4.3 | 475 |
| 18–34 | 29.3 | 3,296 | **Socio-economic dis/advantage**[f] | **%** | ***n*** |
| 34–64 | 49.9 | 5,621 | Quartile 1 (most disadvantaged) | 16.8 | 1,871 |
| 65+ | 20.8 | 2,336 | Quartile 2 | 20.2 | 2,254 |
| **Remoteness**[b] | **%** | ***n*** | Quartile 3 | 26.2 | 2,927 |
| Major city | 74.5 | 8,320 | Quartile 4 (least disadvantaged) | 36.8 | 4,112 |
| Regional | 23.0 | 2,568 | **Born outside of Australia**[g] | **%** | ***n*** |
| Remote | 2.5 | 283 | No | 78.5 | 8,814 |
| **Education level**[c] | **%** | ***n*** | Yes | 21.5 | 2,416 |
| Year 12 or lower | 30.7 | 3,442 | **Interest in politics**[h] | **%** | ***n*** |
| Vocational training | 28.6 | 3,207 | Not at all interested | 10.4 | 1,160 |
| University degree | 40.6 | 4,543 | Not very interested | 18.9 | 2,112 |
| **First Nations**[d] | **%** | ***n*** | Moderately interested | 32.6 | 3,641 |
| No | 97.3 | 10,879 | Quite interested | 21.0 | 2,347 |
| Yes | 2.6 | 296 | Very interested | 17.0 | 1,897 |

a: Excludes respondents who listed gender as 'other' (*n*=2) or 'non-binary' (*n*=51), due to the small number of respondents

b: Geographic remoteness ratings are derived from the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia classification (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2021), which is based on postcode data. Excludes 68 respondents who did not provide a valid postcode

c: Excludes respondents who responded 'other' (*n*=34), 'don't know' (*n*=3) or 'prefer not to say' (*n*=15)

d: Excludes respondents who responded 'don't know' (*n*=21) or 'prefer not to say' (*n*=54)

e: Currently employed includes respondents who are working full-time, part-time or who are semi-retired. 'Other' employment status includes respondents who are studying full time, home makers, unable to work due to illness, retired, or seasonal workers. Excludes respondents who answered 'don't know' (*n*=4) or 'prefer not to say' (*n*=32)

f: Quartiles derived from scores on the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (ABS 2023b). The index is based on postcode data to indicate people and households living in areas of greater disadvantage (lower scores) or greater advantage (higher scores). Excludes 75 respondents who did not provide a valid postcode

g: Excludes respondents who answered 'don't know' (*n*=5) or 'prefer not to say' (*n*=17)

h: Excludes respondents who answered 'don't know' (*n*=47) or 'prefer not to say' (*n*=37)

Note: Some percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

## Main variables of interest

Perceived corruption among public officials was measured using two questions. Respondents were first asked the proportion—on a scale from 0 to 100—of Australian politicians that they believed were involved in corruption. They were then asked the same question about government institutions. Responses were recorded in increments of 10 percent (ie 0%, 10%, 20% and so on). To analyse differences between respondents in perceived corruption and its relationship with perceived legitimacy, we recoded this variable to range from zero to 10.

To measure perceived legitimacy, participants were asked how often they believed politicians and government institutions 'act with honesty and integrity', 'consider the views of everyday citizens in their decision-making', 'treat everyday citizens with fairness and equality' and 'treat everyday citizens with dignity and respect'. Response options on these subscales included never (1), occasionally (2), sometimes (3), mostly (4) and always (5). These ordinal scales were converted to a continuous variable for analysis (Sullivan & Artino 2013). All four legitimacy subscales shared statistically significant correlations (ranging from 0.66 to 0.80, $p<0.001$) and had excellent internal consistency for perceived legitimacy among politicians ($\alpha=0.91$) and government institutions ($\alpha=0.90$).

Responses across the four legitimacy subscales were combined into one composite rating to create a comprehensive and multi-dimensional measure of perceived legitimacy that could be used as the outcome variable in regression analyses. Combining multiple scales into one measure can also produce more accurate statistical analyses by minimising any item-specific measurement error (Boateng et al. 2018). Average legitimacy ratings for politicians were created by calculating the mean across the four politician subscales, and average legitimacy ratings for government institutions were created by calculating the mean across the four government institution subscales. Average legitimacy ratings were only generated for respondents who answered at least three of the four subscales for politicians ($n$=11,134) or government institutions ($n$=11,144). Including respondents who did not answer one of the four questions maximised the sample size, without meaningfully altering the findings when compared to a composite rating where those with any missing responses were excluded (based on sensitivity checks performed with regression analyses; see note under Figure 4).

## Analyses

All analyses were undertaken using weighted data. To assess whether different sociodemographic categories were associated with mean differences in respondents' levels of perceived corruption, an adjusted Wald test was used with a Bonferroni correction (in which the *p*-value was divided by the number of comparisons being made). Multiple linear regression was used to examine whether higher levels of perceived corruption were associated with lower levels of perceived legitimacy for both politicians and government institutions. These models estimated the linear relationship between the independent variable (perceived corruption) and the outcome variable (perceived legitimacy) while controlling for potentially confounding variables.

Separate regression models were estimated for politicians and government institutions and included sociodemographic variables that have been associated with political legitimacy in prior research. These include gender, age, Indigenous status, geographic remoteness, employment status, highest level of education level, relative socio-economic disadvantage, and whether the respondent was born overseas (Meyer et al. 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2022). We also included a variable that measured respondents' level of interest in politics. We began by estimating regression models for both politicians and government institutions with main effects only. We then re-estimated these models with interaction effects between corruption and other variables that were significant in the main effects model. This allowed us to assess whether the relationship between corruption and perceived legitimacy varied according to other respondent characteristics.

## Limitations

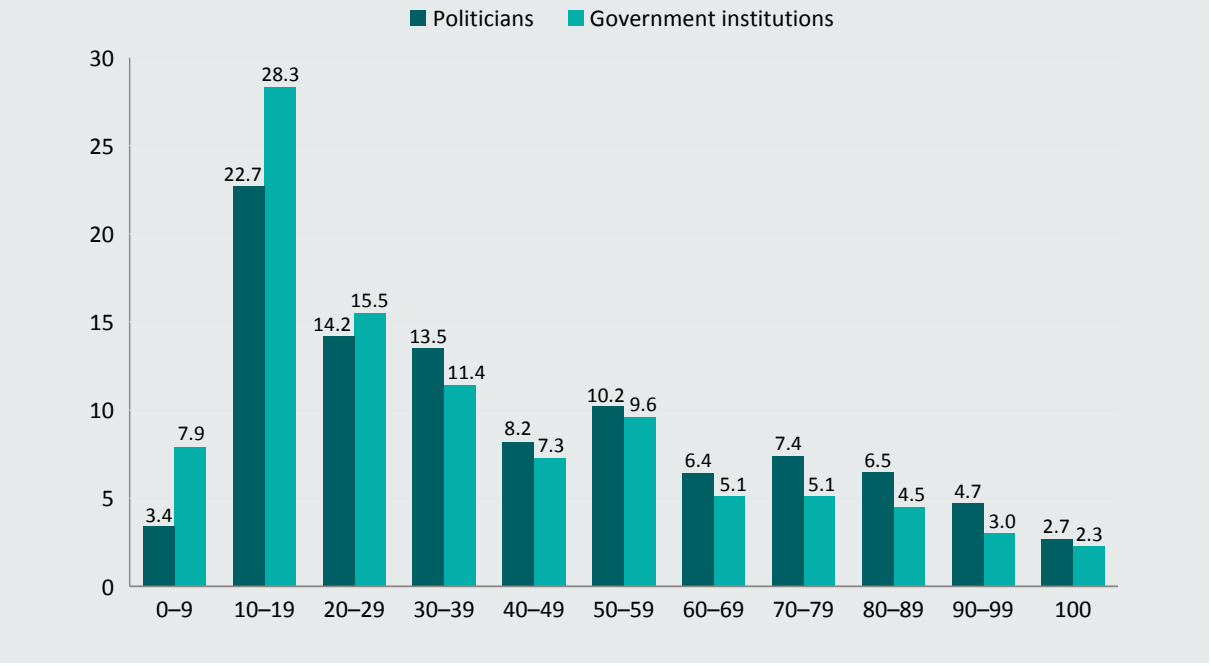
Several key limitations must be acknowledged. While the sample is large and representative of the spread of the Australian population according to key demographic characteristics, proportional quota-based sampling is a non-probability sampling method and we are cautious not to generalise the results. Additionally, the questions in the survey were broad in focus, meaning the responses reflect generalised perceptions of corruption and legitimacy rather than being specific to certain levels of government, organisations or individuals. The cross-sectional nature of these data means we cannot infer causal relationships between perceptions of corruption and perceived legitimacy. Although previous research suggests that exposure to corrupt behaviour contributes to a deterioration in perceived legitimacy (Erlingsson, Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson 2022), it is also possible that the perceived legitimacy of public officials influences community perceptions of corruption (UK Department for International Development 2015). While extensive data were collected, there are likely other unmeasured confounding factors associated with both perceptions of corruption and perceived trust or legitimacy (Melgar, Rossi & Smith 2010).

# Results

## Perceived corruption among public officials

Corruption ratings were based on the estimated proportion of politicians or people working in government institutions believed to be involved in corruption, with higher ratings indicating greater perceived corruption (Figure 1). Respondents most commonly reported that they believed between 10 and 19 percent of politicians (22.7%) and those working in government institutions (28.3%) were involved in corruption. Approximately two in five respondents (38.0%, *n*=4,143) believed that at least 50 percent of politicians were involved in corruption. For government institutions, nearly one-third (29.6%, *n*=3,144) of respondents believed that over 50 percent of those working in government institutions were involved in corruption. When expressed as a mean rating, the average level of perceived involvement in corruption was 3.87 (out of 10; *SD*=2.74) for politicians and 3.23 (out of 10; *SD*=2.65) for government institutions, and there was a strong correlation (*r*=0.82, *p*<0.001) between these ratings.

**Figure 1: Respondent estimates of the proportion of politicians and people working in government institutions involved in corruption (*n*=11,304) (%)**




Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

We then analysed corruption ratings for politicians (P) and government institutions (GI) to determine how they varied according to the characteristics of respondents (Table 2). Female respondents recorded significantly higher ratings of perceived corruption than male respondents for both politicians (3.97 vs 3.76; $F$=15.08, $p$<0.001) and government institutions (3.39 vs 3.06, $F$=36.04, $p$<0.001). The perceived level of corruption for politicians ($F$=407.45, $p$<0.001) and government institutions ($F$=475.39, $p$<0.001) varied by age group, with younger respondents reporting higher ratings of perceived corruption. Respondents aged 18–34 years (P=4.69; GI=4.19) reported higher perceived corruption compared to those aged 35–64 years (P=3.88; GI=3.13), who in turn reported higher corruption ratings than those aged 65+ years (P=2.70; GI=2.07).

First Nations respondents reported significantly higher levels of perceived corruption than non-Indigenous respondents for politicians (5.36 vs 3.82; $F$=64.12, $p$<0.001) and government institutions (4.99 vs 3.18; $F$=86.63, $p$<0.001). Perceived level of corruption among politicians ($F$=74.72, $p$<0.001) and government institutions ($F$=61.44, $p$<0.001) also varied by employment status. Unemployed respondents (P=4.53; GI=3.90) reported higher levels of perceived corruption than employed respondents (P=4.04; GI=3.37) and those with 'other' employment status (P=3.37; GI=2.78). Perceived level of corruption for politicians ($F$=48.89, $p$<0.001) and government institutions ($F$=95.59, $p$<0.001) was also associated with a respondent's level of education. Respondents with a university level education (P=3.56; GI=2.81) reported lower levels of perceived corruption than respondents with a Year 12 level of education or below (P=4.16; GI=3.65) or vocational training (P=4.01; GI=3.38) as their highest level of educational attainment.

Whether respondents lived in an area of relative socio-economic disadvantage or advantage was also associated with their perceived level of corruption among politicians ($F$=17.06, $p$<0.001) and government institutions ($F$=24.36, $p$<0.001). Respondents who lived in areas of highest advantage (quartile 4, P=3.63; GI=2.95) reported lower levels of perceived corruption among both politicians and government institutions compared with respondents living in areas of less advantage, including quartile 1 (P=4.12; GI=3.60), quartile 2 (P=4.00; GI=3.31), and quartile 3 (P=3.94; GI=3.29). Finally, perceived corruption varied according to the respondent's level of interest in politics. More specifically, as interest in politics increased, the level of perceived corruption among both politicians ($F$=80.84, $p$<0.001) and government institutions decreased ($F$=86.35, $p$<0.001). The level of perceived corruption was lowest among respondents who were very interested in politics (P=3.33; GI=2.71), and highest among those respondents who were not at all interested in politics (P=5.24; GI=4.63).

**Table 2: Mean corruption ratings, by respondent characteristics**

| | | Politicians | | Government institutions | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean | *SD* | Mean | *SD* |
| Gender | Male | 3.76 | 2.72 | 3.06 | 2.62 |
| | Female | 3.97 | 2.76 | 3.39 | 2.67 |
| Age in years | 18–34 | 4.69 | 2.46 | 4.19 | 2.50 |
| | 35–64 | 3.88 | 2.82 | 3.13 | 2.67 |
| | 65+ | 2.70 | 2.47 | 2.07 | 2.20 |
| First Nations | No | 3.82 | 2.80 | 3.18 | 2.63 |
| | Yes | 5.36 | 2.80 | 4.99 | 2.82 |
| Geographic remoteness | Major city | 3.84 | 2.72 | 3.21 | 2.64 |
| | Regional | 3.90 | 2.83 | 3.23 | 2.68 |
| | Remote | 4.19 | 2.68 | 3.53 | 2.53 |
| Employment status | Employed | 4.04 | 2.72 | 3.37 | 2.63 |
| | Unemployed | 4.53 | 2.64 | 3.90 | 2.61 |
| | Other type | 3.37 | 2.74 | 2.78 | 2.65 |
| Highest level of education | Year 12 or below | 4.16 | 2.53 | 3.65 | 2.51 |
| | Vocational training | 4.01 | 2.50 | 3.38 | 2.39 |
| | University degree | 3.56 | 2.96 | 2.81 | 2.79 |
| Relative socio-economic dis/advantage (quartiles) | Quartile 1 (least advantaged) | 4.12 | 2.80 | 3.60 | 2.69 |
| | Quartile 2 | 4.00 | 2.72 | 3.31 | 2.60 |
| | Quartile 3 | 3.94 | 2.74 | 3.29 | 2.68 |
| | Quartile 4 (most advantaged) | 3.63 | 2.70 | 2.95 | 2.60 |
| Born outside of Australia | No | 3.85 | 2.72 | 3.21 | 2.63 |
| | Yes | 3.95 | 2.83 | 3.29 | 2.75 |
| Interest in politics | Not at all interested | 5.24 | 2.77 | 4.63 | 2.70 |
| | Not very interested | 4.18 | 2.55 | 3.53 | 2.46 |
| | Moderately interested | 3.72 | 2.62 | 3.06 | 2.47 |
| | Quite interested | 3.56 | 2.70 | 2.89 | 2.59 |
| | Very interested | 3.33 | 2.89 | 2.71 | 2.88 |

Note: *SD*=standard deviation. Differences between groups reported in text were all statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

## Perceived legitimacy of public officials

Ratings describing the perceived legitimacy of politicians were similar across the four subscales (see Figure 2). Approximately half of the respondents believed politicians either 'never' or only 'occasionally' act with honesty and integrity (50.0%), consider the views of everyday citizens (50.7%), treat everyday citizens with fairness and equality (48.4%), or treat everyday citizens with dignity and respect (44.5%).

As shown in Figure 3, approximately one-third of respondents believed representatives of government institutions either 'never' or only 'occasionally' act with honesty and integrity (31.7%), consider the views of everyday citizens (40.8%), treat everyday citizens with fairness and equality (34.2%), or treat everyday citizens with dignity and respect (33.6%). When these subscales were converted into an overall rating of perceived legitimacy, the average rating was 2.57 (out of five; *SD*=0.93) for politicians and 2.91 (out of five; *SD*=0.93) for government institutions, and there was a strong correlation ($r$=0.81, $p$<0.001) between these ratings.

**Figure 2: Perceived legitimacy of politicians (%)**

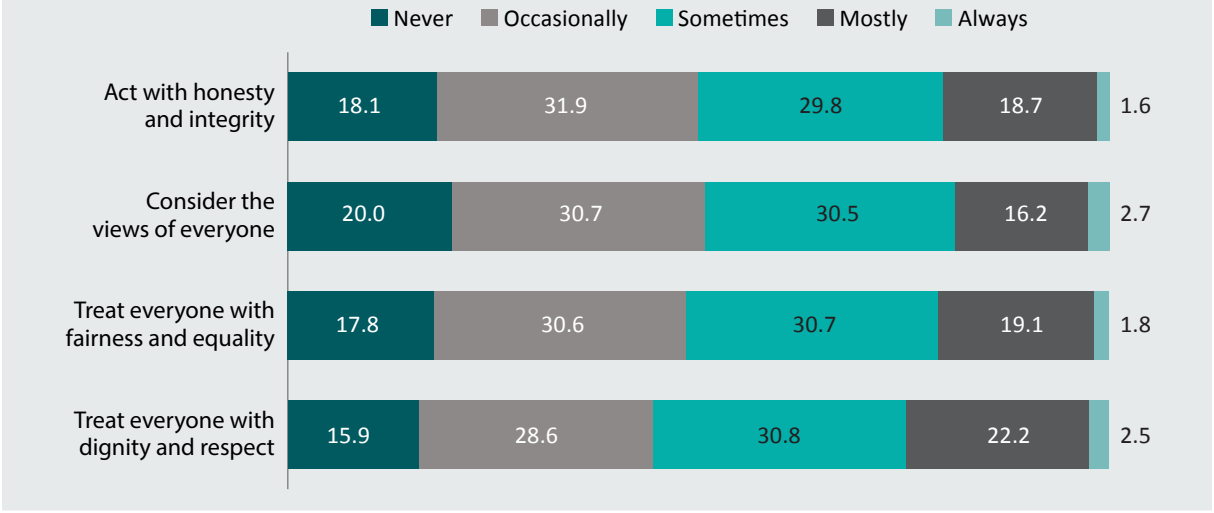
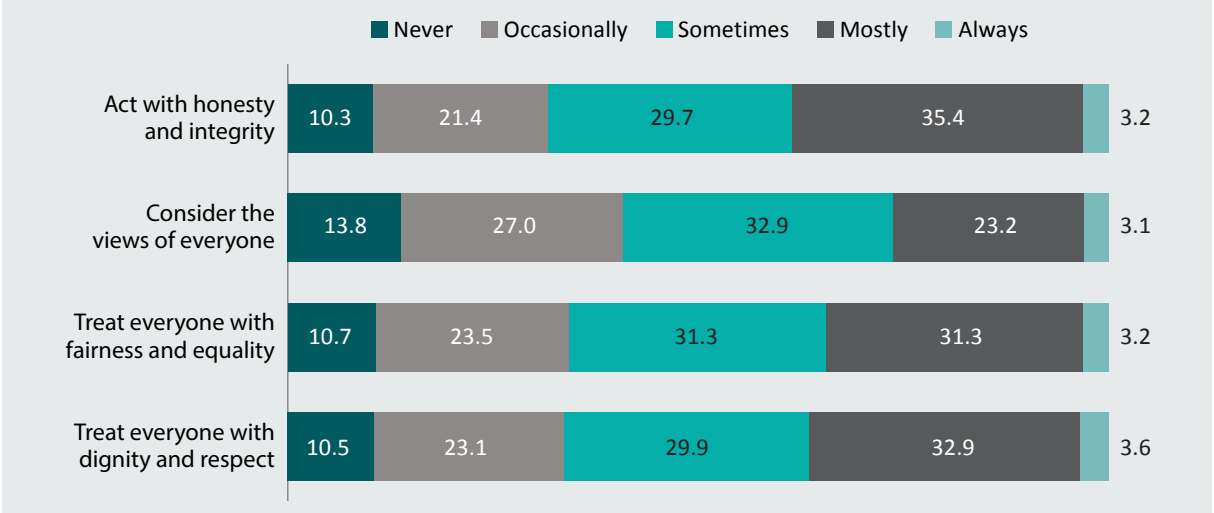



**Figure 3: Perceived legitimacy of government institutions (%)**




Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

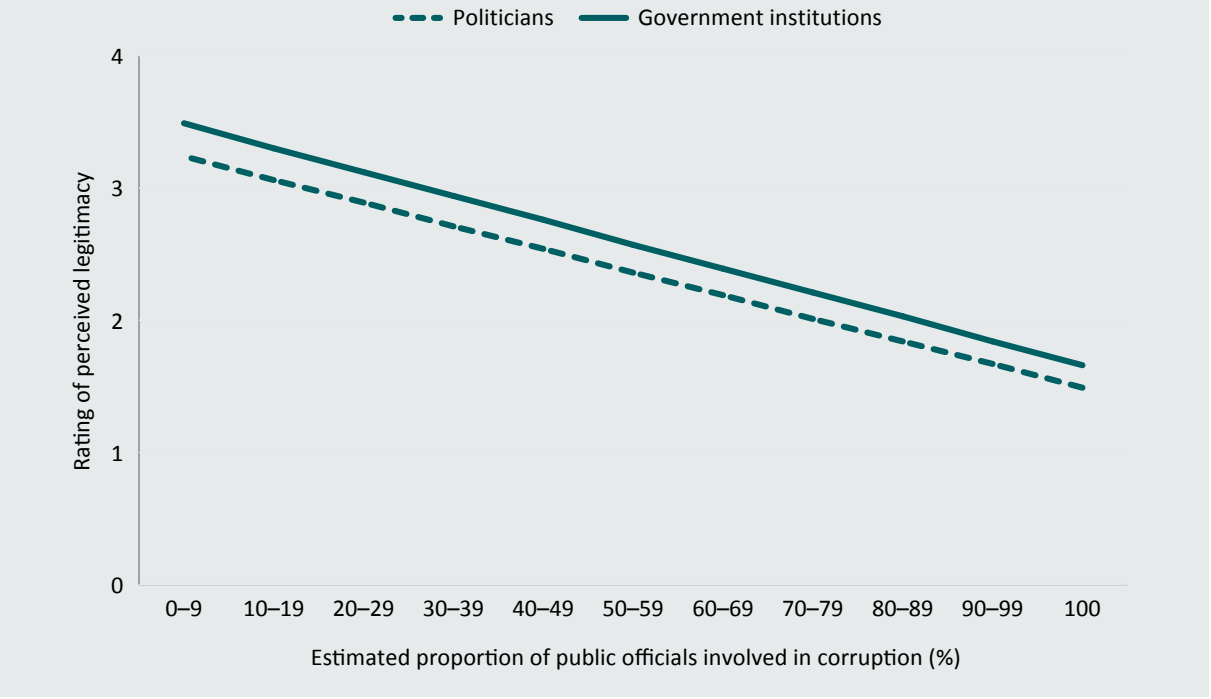
It is possible to draw several conclusions from this stage of the analysis. First, a significant minority of respondents believed that most public officials are involved in corrupt behaviour. This was especially true among respondents who are more likely to experience social exclusion (O'Donnell 2022)—younger, female and First Nations respondents, respondents who were unemployed, and respondents who were living in low socio-economic areas. Respondents who were less interested in politics also had higher levels of perceived corruption, suggesting perceived corruption may lead to disengagement. Finally, similar to perceived corruption, a sizeable proportion of respondents believed public officials never or only occasionally acted with integrity, considered everyone's views, treated people fairly or treated everyone with respect—suggesting perceived legitimacy was low.

## Relationship between perceived corruption and perceived legitimacy

To establish whether perceived corruption and legitimacy were related to one another, the next stage of the analysis involved estimating two multiple linear regression models with the perceived legitimacy of politicians and the perceived legitimacy of government institutions as the dependent variables. Both models included perceived corruption (among politicians and government institutions, respectively) as an independent variable, along with sociodemographic characteristics and the level of interest in politics. This allowed us to measure the relationship between perceived corruption and perceived legitimacy of public officials, controlling for the potential confounding effect of these other variables.

There was a statistically significant relationship between perceived corruption among politicians and the perceived legitimacy of politicians ($B$= −0.17, $p$<0.001). The same was true for government institutions ($B$= −0.18, $p$<0.001). As perceived corruption increased, the perceived legitimacy of public officials declined (and vice versa). This is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the predicted score (out of five) for the perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions at each level of perceived corruption, having controlled for other variables in the model. Among respondents who reported that less than 10 percent of politicians were corrupt, the predicted perceived legitimacy score was 3.24. Among respondents who believed 50–59 percent of politicians were corrupt, the predicted perceived legitimacy score was 2.36. Similar estimates were produced for government institutions (3.49 and 2.57), respectively.

**Figure 4: Overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions, by level of perceived corruption (predictive margins)**




Note: Predictive margins were estimated based on the coefficients for the variable perceived corruption in a main effect only regression model where perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions was the dependent variable. Model 1 (Politicians): $F(19,13283)=247.73$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.316$, constant=2.99 (2.92–3.07). Model 2 (Government institutions): $F(19,13283)=203.33$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.322$, constant=3.33 (3.25–3.41). As a sensitivity check, this analysis was repeated for the sample of respondents who provided answers on all four legitimacy subscales, with near identical findings

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

We then examined whether the relationship between perceived corruption and legitimacy was moderated by other known characteristics of respondents. Several independent variables besides perceived corruption were associated with the perceived legitimacy of public officials. Gender, age, Indigenous status, employment status, education level, relative socio-economic disadvantage and whether the respondent was born overseas were all associated with the perceived legitimacy of politicians. Similarly, age, Indigenous status, education level, relative socio-economic disadvantage and whether the respondent was born overseas were all associated with the perceived legitimacy of government institutions. The respondent's level of interest in politics was also a strong, statistically significant predictor of perceived legitimacy in both models (respondents who were more interested in politics had higher levels of perceived legitimacy).

To examine whether these variables moderated the relationship between corruption and perceived legitimacy, the regression analysis was then repeated, with the inclusion of interaction terms for these variables. The results from these models are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Linear regression predicting overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions**

| | | Model 1: Politicians Coefficient (95% CI) | Model 2: Govt institutions Coefficient (95% CI) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Corruption | | −0.15 (−0.17, −0.13)*** | −0.16 (−0.18, −0.13)*** |
| Gender | Male | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Female | 0.07 (0.02, 0.12)** | −0.01 (−0.05, 0.01) |
| Age | 18–34 | −0.20 (−0.27, −0.12)*** | −0.13 (−0.20, −0.06)*** |
| | 35–64 | Baseline | Baseline |
| | 65+ | 0.09 (0.02, 0.16)* | 0.03 (−0.03, 0.08) |
| First Nations | No | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Yes | 0.03 (−0.21, 0.28) | 0.005 (−0.19, 0.20) |
| Geographic remoteness | Major city | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Regional | −0.01 (−0.06, 0.03) | −0.005 (−0.06, 0.07) |
| | Remote | 0.01 (−0.08, 0.11) | 0.11 (−0.06, 0.28) |
| Employment status | Employed | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Unemployed | −0.001 (−0.07, 0.07) | −0.01 (−0.05, 0.03) |
| | Other | −0.04 (−0.21, 0.13) | −0.03 (−0.13, 0.06) |
| Education level | University | Baseline | Baseline |
| | High School | −0.08 (−0.15, −0.01)** | −0.16 (−0.22, −0.10)*** |
| | Vocational training | 0.04 (−0.02, 0.10) | −0.02 (−0.07, 0.04) |
| Born overseas | No | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Yes | −0.07 (−0.13, −0.004)* | 0.004 (−0.05, 0.06) |
| Relative socio-economic dis/advantage (quartiles) | Quartile 1 (least advantaged) | −0.04 (−0.12, 0.04) | −0.01 (−0.09, 0.07) |
| | Quartile 2 | 0.04 (−0.03, 0.12) | −0.03 (−0.10, 0.04) |
| | Quartile 3 | −0.002 (−0.07, 0.06) | −0.009 (−0.07, 0.05) |
| | Quartile 4 (most advantaged) | Baseline | Baseline |
| Interest in politics | Not at all | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Not very | 0.22 (0.09, 0.35)*** | 0.28 (0.15, 0.40)*** |
| | Moderate | 0.43 (0.30, 0.55)*** | 0.41 (0.29, 0.52)*** |
| | Quite | 0.46 (0.33, 0.59)*** | 0.42 (0.30, 0.54)*** |
| | Very | 0.51 (0.38, 0.64)*** | 0.37 (0.25, 0.50)*** |
| Corruption × gender | Male | Baseline | – |
| | Female | 0.01 (−0.02, 0.002) | – |
| Corruption × age | 18–34 | 0.05 (0.04, 0.07)*** | 0.04 (0.03, 0.06)*** |
| | 35–64 | Baseline | Baseline |
| | 65+ | −0.03 (−0.05, −0.01)*** | −0.02 (−0.04, −0.06)** |

**Table 3: Linear regression predicting overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians and government institutions (cont.)**

| | | Model 1: Politicians Coefficient (95% CI) | Model 2: Govt institutions Coefficient (95% CI) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Corruption × First Nations | No | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Yes | 0.03 (−0.01, 0.07) | 0.03 (−0.005, 0.07) |
| Corruption × geographic remoteness | Major city | – | Baseline |
| | Regional | – | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.003) |
| | Remote | – | −0.03 (−0.08, 0.02) |
| Corruption × employment status | Employed | Baseline | – |
| | Unemployed | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.002) | – |
| | Other | −0.01 (−0.04, 0.02) | – |
| Corruption × education level | University | Baseline | Baseline |
| | High school | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.004) | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.009) |
| | Vocational training | −0.03 (−0.04, −0.01)*** | −0.03 (−0.05, −0.01)*** |
| Corruption × socio-economic dis/advantage | Quartile 1 (least advantaged) | 0.003 (−0.01, 0.02) | −0.008 (−0.03, 0.01) |
| | Quartile 2 | −0.02 (−0.03, −0.001)* | −0.003 (−0.02, 0.02) |
| | Quartile 3 | −0.01 (−0.02, 0.005) | −0.009 (−0.03, 0.008) |
| | Quartile 4 (most advantaged) | Baseline | Baseline |
| Corruption × born overseas | No | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Yes | 0.03 (0.01, 0.04)** | 0.02 (0.007, 0.04)** |
| Corruption × interest in politics | Not at all interested | Baseline | Baseline |
| | Not very interested | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.01) | −0.02 (−0.05, 0.002) |
| | Moderately interested | −0.02 (−0.04, 0.003) | −0.03 (−0.05, −0.002)* |
| | Quite interested | −0.02 (−0.04, 0.005) | −0.03 (−0.05, −0.001)* |
| | Very interested | −0.02 (−0.04, 0.008) | −0.01 (−0.04, 0.02) |

***statistically significant at $p<0.001$, **statistically significant at $p<0.01$, *statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Note: 95% *CI*=95% confidence interval, Baseline=reference category. For categorical variables, the largest group was selected for baseline category. Regression model for politicians (Model 1): $F(35,13267)=162.11$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.329$, constant=2.89 (2.76–3.02), $n=10,425$. Regression model for government institutions (Model 2): $F(34,13268)=136.39$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.332$, constant=3.25 (3.12–3.37), $n=10,251$

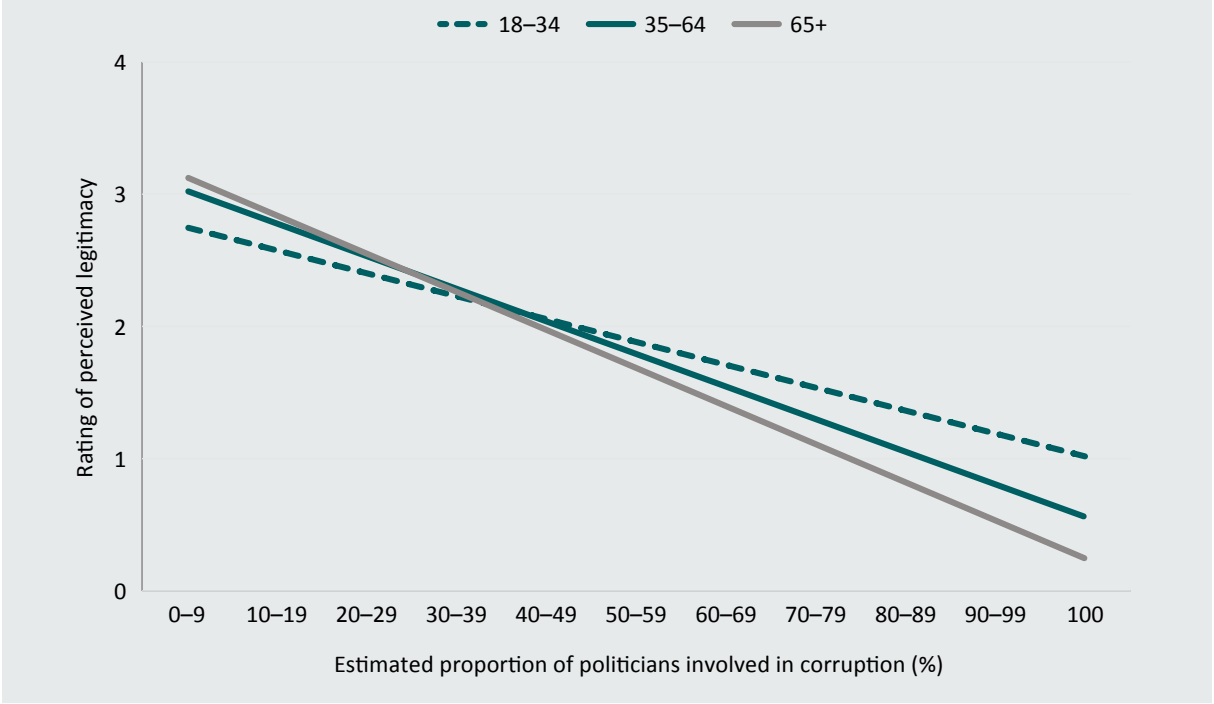
Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

There were several statistically significant interactions. We can show the moderating effect of these variables on the relationship between perceived corruption and legitimacy by estimating the predictive margins. We first show the predicted score for legitimacy of politicians at each level of corruption, according to the age of the respondent (Figure 5). This shows that, in terms of the perceived legitimacy of politicians, the perceptions of older respondents were more susceptible to the level of corruption. That is, there was a sharper decline in the level of perceived legitimacy of politicians among older Australians when the level of corruption increased. While older respondents (aged 35 years and over) perceived politicians as more legitimate than younger respondents when they thought the level of corruption was low, they had more negative perceptions than younger respondents when they thought corruption was more prevalent.

Next, we report the predicted score for legitimacy of government institutions at each level of corruption, according to the respondent's level of interest in politics (Figure 6). This shows that the level of perceived corruption by government institutions had the largest effect on the perceived legitimacy of those institutions among respondents who were moderately or quite interested in politics. Their views of the perceived legitimacy of government institutions were much closer to those of respondents who were not at all interested in politics—who had the poorest perceptions of government institutions—when they believed corruption was more common.

Finally, the relationship between corruption and legitimacy also varied according to whether or not the respondent was born overseas and their level of education. The level of perceived corruption among both government institutions and politicians had a larger effect on the perceptions of respondents who were born overseas. When perceived corruption was low, they had similar views to respondents born in Australia. When perceived corruption was high, they rated the legitimacy of public officials much lower. The same was true of respondents who said vocational training was their highest level of education, relative to people who had a university or high school education.

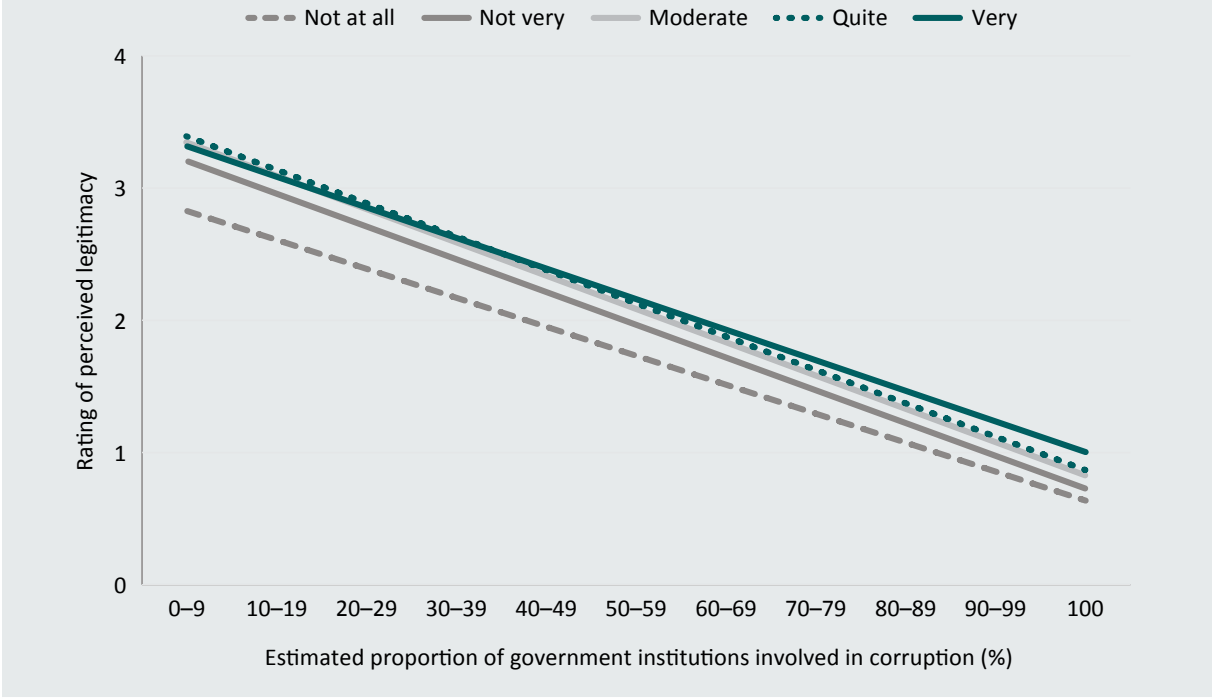
**Figure 5: Overall rating of perceived legitimacy of politicians, by level of perceived corruption and respondent age in years (predictive margins)**




Note: Predictive margins were estimated based on the coefficients in the regression models presented in Table 3.

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

**Figure 6: Overall rating of perceived legitimacy of government institutions, by level of perceived corruption and respondent interest in politics (predictive margins)**




Note: Predictive margins were estimated based on the coefficients in the regression models presented in Table 3.

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

## Discussion

The aim of this paper was to measure community perceptions of corruption among public officials, including politicians and government institutions, prior to the commencement of the NACC. While it was most common for respondents to say they believed that fewer than one in five politicians and government institutions were involved in corruption, a sizeable minority of respondents believed that over half of all politicians (38.0% of respondents) and government institutions (29.6% of respondents) were involved in corruption.

These results are consistent with prior work that has found a large proportion of people believe there is corruption in government (McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012). We can only speculate as to the reasons for these perceptions. Direct evidence and personal experiences of corruption are rare among the general public (McAllister 2013; McAllister, Pietsch & Graycar 2012). McAllister (2013) showed that subjective judgements of corruption have a much greater impact on the public's confidence in political institutions than personal direct experience of corrupt behaviour. McAllister points to the considerable publicity generated when high-profile scandals occur involving alleged corruption among prominent politicians and officials. The intense, ongoing media coverage such scandals attract creates a public perception that corruption is widespread in government (McAllister 2013). Certainly, this survey was conducted in the midst of public hearings of the Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, which has since made referrals to the NACC. Various other high-profile scandals involving public officials were also widely reported during the second half of 2022.

Perceptions of corruption were associated with diminished levels of perceived legitimacy of public officials. Respondents who perceived there to be higher levels of corruption were less likely to report that politicians or government institutions acted with honesty and integrity, considered the views of citizens, treated citizens with fairness and equality or treated citizens with dignity and respect. We cannot be sure of the direction of this relationship—perceived corruption may erode people's perceptions of the legitimacy of public officials, or the belief that public officials do not operate with integrity, fairness, inclusivity or respect may lead people to believe that they are involved in corrupt behaviour (UK Department for International Development 2015). Evidence does show that exposure to corruption within a political system may contribute to reduced confidence and trust in the government, which in turn reduces the perceived legitimacy of that government (Erlingsson, Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson 2022; McAllister 2013; Seligson 2002). Research by Dix and colleagues (2012) found legitimacy may be reduced when citizens believe that corruption has created an unequal distribution of and access to resources. That is, corrupt public officials are seen to allocate resources in a way that is exclusionary and prioritises their own self-interest above the needs and expectations of citizens. In fact, one of the strongest predictors of trust in government is whether citizens feel they have access to government resources and services that they find personally useful (Job 2005).

A perceived lack of access to resources or support may explain why certain sociodemographic groups were more likely to perceive public officials as corrupt. Perceptions of corruption were higher among groups that are more likely to experience disadvantage and marginalisation in society. In particular, young, unemployed and First Nations respondents, those with lower educational attainment, and those who live in socio-economically disadvantaged areas were more likely to perceive public officials as corrupt, consistent with international research (Melgar, Rossi & Smith 2010). In Australia, these groups often have limited access to services and fewer work or education opportunities, conditions which can generate feelings of political, social and economic discontentment (Dix, Hussmann & Walton 2012; Dijkstra, Poelman & Rodríguez-Pose 2019). The survey used in this study was conducted during a period of growing cost-of-living pressures, exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which may have amplified these feelings. Recent data show that these groups continue to feel that social, economic and political opportunities are not shared equally and remain disengaged from political processes (O'Donnell 2022). The effects of corruption—which include compounding inequality—are felt most strongly by these groups. The results highlight the importance of taking steps to reduce social exclusion.

While certain sections of the community were more likely than others to perceive public officials as corrupt, the impact of the level of perceived corruption on the perceived legitimacy of public officials varied between groups. It had a bigger impact on certain subsections of the community (at least among the large sample of the population surveyed in this study). The views of older respondents in particular were heavily (and negatively) influenced by the extent of perceived corruption, as were the views of respondents who were born overseas and respondents with vocational training as their highest level of education. It is possible these groups feel they are particularly impacted by the corrupt behaviour of public officials. Our finding that the views of respondents who were moderately interested in politics were also impacted more than people who were either more interested or less interested in politics reflects the effect of corruption on people's engagement in the political process. Further work analysing why the views of certain groups are influenced more than others, and the consequences of this, would help inform effective responses.

The current study supports the implementation of strong and visible anti-corruption measures in government. Prior evidence suggests that political legitimacy may deteriorate when corruption among public officials is not effectively regulated or investigated (Dix, Hussmann & Walton 2012). In addition, legitimacy can be strengthened when governments are seen to take credible action to prevent corruption (McAllister 2013). Indeed, there is robust support for such oversight among the Australian public. In 2022, the Australian Election Survey asked a nationally representative sample of voters (*n*=2,508) whether they would support or oppose a national body to investigate claims of government corruption (Cameron et al. 2022). Ninety-four percent of respondents supported the introduction of such a reform, while just six percent were opposed. Similarly, most respondents to the survey used in our study believed there to be at least some level of corruption among public officials. Of course, increasing the perceived legitimacy of government may also help to reduce perceived corruption. Further work—including longitudinal research—may help determine the direction of this relationship between perceptions of corruption and the perceived legitimacy of government.

Belief that public officials are involved in corrupt conduct can erode community confidence and trust in political institutions and may undermine the democratic process. Our findings suggest that Australians view corruption as a serious issue, and these views are stronger among certain groups within the community. Crucially, this study provides a baseline measure of perceived corruption and perceived legitimacy of public officials directly prior to the establishment of the NACC in mid-2023. There is high-quality evidence that increasing the risk of detection and the consequences of corrupt behaviour is effective in reducing public sector corruption, particularly when delivered as part of a suite of responses (Mugellini et al. 2021). However, the design and implementation of these measures have been shown to be crucial to their success (UK Department for International Development 2015). Increased accountability for corrupt conduct by public officials may over time help improve community perceptions of the extent of corruption and contribute to more trust and confidence in politicians and government. Simultaneously, efforts to improve community perceptions of public officials and the extent to which they operate with honesty, integrity, inclusivity and respect may also go some way towards addressing the level of perceived corruption, particularly in circumstances where no such corrupt behaviour exists.

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