

Exploring the Relationship between Informed Understanding of Democracy and Corruption Permissiveness in India*:

An Explanatory Research

인도 내 민주주의 이해도와 부패관용성 간 관계:
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국문초록

기존 선행연구는 시민의 부패관용성(corruption permissiveness)을 통제할 수단으로서 민주주의의 역할에 주목해왔으나, 두 가지 중요한 질문에 대답하지 못해왔다. 첫째, 견고한 제도와 긴 민주주의 역사를 지니고 있음에도 불구하고, 일부 민주주의 국가에서 여전히 높은 부패관용성이 목격되는 이유는 무엇인가? 둘째, 유사한 민주주의 수준을 보유한 국가들, 또는 심지어 동일한 국가 내에서도 왜 부패관용성은 차이를 보이는가? 본 논문은 견고한 민주주의 제도와 높은 수준의 부패관용성을 동시에 보여주는 인도 사례에 주목하고, 시민들 간 민주주의에 대한 이해도 차이가 이들의 부패관용성 차이를 유발하는지 검증함으로써 이 연구 공백을 메우려 한다. 본 논문은 순서형 로지스틱 회귀분석(ordinal/ordered logistic regression)과 이에 따른 강건성 검증(robustness check)을 통해, 인도 시민의 민주주의 이해도와 부패관용성 간에 통계적으로 유의미한 음(-)의 관계가 있음을 확인했다. 이 연구결과를 바탕으로, 본 논문은 민주시민교육을 위한 장기간에 걸친 국가적 정책의 개발 및 도입을 제언하며, 이 교육은 참여자 중심 방법론을 통해 시행되어야 한다고 주장한다.

주제어: 민주주의 이해도, 부패관용성, 민주시민교육, 인도, 순서형 로지스틱 회귀분석

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I. Introduction

Corruption has negative political and economic consequences, such as undermining economic growth, impeding development, and diminishing the effectiveness of political institutions (Hodge et al., 2011). A more severe consequence, however, is its potential to normalize corrupt behavior, making it widely perceived as justifiable (Stephenson, 2020). This corruption permissiveness among citizens not only reflects individual attitudes but can also drive actual engagement in corrupt activities (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Gino et al., 2009), potentially escalating national levels of corruption and creating a vicious spiral where high permissiveness leads to higher corruption, which further increases permissiveness. Given the severity of this cycle, recent research has deemed addressing corruption permissiveness more crucial than solely focusing on national corruption levels (Lavena, 2013).

Traditionally, previous studies have viewed citizen permissiveness toward corruption as a problem in less or newly democratic societies with fragile institutions (Gouvêa Maciel, 2021). These studies, grounded in institutionalist theory, assume that democracy provides more effective mechanisms for detecting and punishing corruption by aligning officials' authority with public interests. This institutional context increases the costs of engaging in corruption, thus reducing incentives for rent-seekers and public officials to participate in corrupt activities (Rock, 2009) and thus leading citizens to perceive corruption as unethical and unjustifiable.

However, this perspective fails to account for why democracies with robust institutions and a long history of democratic practices still exhibit high levels of citizen corruption permissiveness¹⁾, as well as why there is variability in permissiveness among individuals in democracies with similar democratic commitments and even within the same country.

This article argues that the research gap arises from neglecting a crucial fact that the effectiveness of democratic institutions in curbing corruption is closely linked to the presence of democratic norms among individuals (Sandholtz & Koetzle, 2000). As Vigil (2007) highlights, democracy encompasses not only institutional structures but also normative values, such as equality and participation, which actively condemn

1) According to a recent report published by the European Commission (2017), even in advanced European democracies, approximately 30% of citizens are permissive toward corruption and believe that not reporting corruption is justifiable.

corrupt behavior. Therefore, even in countries with well-established democratic institutions, public permissiveness toward corruption may remain high if the prevailing norms do not strongly oppose corruption. This suggests that broadly shared democratic norms are essential for ensuring that democratic institutions effectively combat corruption.

Here, it is important to note that for broadly shared democratic norms to effectively play a role in controlling corruption permissiveness, there must be a proper understanding of democratic principles among individuals. Without this understanding, the inherent effect of democratic norms on corruption permissiveness may diminish or become distorted, as democracy can mean different things to different people. This can lead us to posit that the degree of corruption permissiveness among citizens varies based on how well or poorly they are informed about democracy.

Despite its theoretical importance and plausibility, current literature on this relationship is limited, and to the best of the author's knowledge, no studies have yet addressed it.²⁾ This article thus aims to investigate whether the permissiveness of corruption among individuals correlates with their understanding of democratic norms. The potential findings from the article is expected to enhance current knowledge about the relationship between democracy and corruption permissiveness at the individual level and offer policy implications.

For this analysis, the article particularly focuses on India. Despite its enduring democratic history and well-established institutions (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2018), corruption has become so normalized among Indian citizens that it is often seen as a way of life. This makes New Delhi a case that challenges typical institutionalist explanations, making it an ideal setting for this analysis.

In operationalizing individuals' informed understanding of democracy and their permissiveness toward corruption, this article specifically uses data from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (WVS). Additionally, it employs an ordinal/ordered logistic regression model as the analytical technique rather than conventional linear

2) One might argue that a few prior studies have already explored aspects of this relationship (e.g., Bhavnani & Condra, 2012; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). While these works raise some questions similar to those addressed in this article, they primarily focus on why and when citizens vote for corrupt politicians, even in societies with strong democratic institutions and high accountability. In contrast, this article seeks to examine the association between individuals' informed understanding of democracy and their tolerance for corruption—an area that, to the best of the author's knowledge, has not been thoroughly explored in these or other studies.

regression since the dependent variable is ordinal with more than two categories.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section 2 defines key terms, such as corruption permissiveness and informed understanding of democracy, through a review of existing definitions. It then empirically examines Indian citizens' perceptions of corruption and their understanding of democracy, leading to the development of testable hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the data and methodology, while Section 4 presents the regression analysis and conducts multiple robustness checks. Section 5 discusses and interprets the findings, and Section 6 addresses the policy implications and limitations of this article.

II. Conceptualization, Context, and Hypotheses

How does an individual's informed understanding of democracy influence their permissiveness toward corruption? What steps are necessary to operationalize both concepts? To answer these questions, I will first define the key terms central to this article: corruption permissiveness and informed understanding of democracy.

Firstly, corruption permissiveness generally refers to the willingness to justify acts of corruption in society (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). This definition raises another conceptual question: what is corruption? As corruption is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, many scholars have attempted to define it systemically. One representative effort is Heidenheimer's categorization (1970), which introduces three perspectives: (1) public office-centered definition, (2) market-centered definition, and (3) public interest-centered definition.

A public office-centered approach to corruption uses rules and regulations as a starting point for distinguishing corrupt from non-corrupt activities. According to this perspective, corruption is defined as behavior that deviates from the formal duties of a public role for private gain. This definition has become widely used and a standard for systemic comparative corruption studies due to its conceptual stability over time, clear demarcation between corrupt and non-corrupt behavior, and ease of operationalization (Kunicová & Rose-Ackerman, 2005). However, a noted deficiency of this definition lies in its inability to account for the variability in legal provisions and formal rules across different countries (Groop, 2013). In this sense, critics argue that employing this

definition can lead to divergent interpretations of what constitutes corruption.

Secondly, market-centered definitions are based on market theory, as the name implies. Assuming a public official is a rational actor following public choice theory, this approach posits that the official will use their office as a business to maximize personal income unless effective control mechanisms are in place. Therefore, in this approach, corruption refers to situations where an officeholder treats and uses their office for personal profit maximization. However, the market-based approach focuses more on explaining why corruption occurs and the circumstances that encourage rule breaches rather than on defining corruption itself (Williams, 1999). Thus, it cannot serve as an alternative definition of corruption (Han, 2022).

Lastly, public interest-centered definitions view corruption as behavior that subverts the public interest or common good for private gain (Williams, 1999). From this perspective, even legal activities can be considered corrupt if they harm the public and its interests. However, despite emphasizing the role of the public, this definition has been criticized for the difficulty in distinguishing between public and private interests and for overstretching the notion of corruption.

While each definitional approach has its pros and cons, this article adopts a public office-centered definition of corruption, defining it as ‘the misuse of public office for private gain.’ This choice is based on the definition’s conceptual reliability and the article’s focus on a single case, which minimizes the impact of the definition’s drawback of overlooking variations in formal rules across different countries. Accordingly, corruption permissiveness in this article is defined as ‘an individual’s willingness to justify acts involving the misuse of public office for private gain.’

Next, what does the notion of informed understanding about democracy mean? To address this, we first need to comprehend what an informed understanding constitutes. In general, understanding complex political concepts such as democracy involves the cognitive ability to identify the essential attributes of these concepts and to discriminate them from what they are not. In this sense, *identification and discrimination* are the two integral components of an informed understanding of democracy (Cho, 2015, emphasis in original).

Among these, discrimination is particularly crucial for evaluating how well or poorly individuals understand democracy (Cho, 2015). For example, when citizens are asked to identify and list the essential attributes of democracy, their responses may vary significantly because the concept of democracy can mean different things to different

people. Thus, while individuals may identify certain attributes as essential to democracy, the variation in these identifications can make it challenging to assess who has a more or less informed understanding of democracy.

On the other hand, if we focus on individuals' cognitive ability to discriminate between democratic and non-democratic characteristics when asked to evaluate both simultaneously, we can assess and compare their informed understanding of democracy. In other words, if citizen A can accurately distinguish democratic attributes from non-democratic ones, while citizen B confuses the two, we can conclude that citizen A has a more informed understanding of democracy than citizen B.

However, given the varying perspectives on the essential characteristics that distinguish democracy from its alternatives, it is crucial to select commonly emphasized attributes as criteria that evaluate individuals' informed understanding of democracy. In this context, this article argues that adopting the criteria proposed by Cho (2015) is beneficial, as they reflect the common emphasis on the notion of democracy (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Coppedge et al., 2008). According to Cho (2015), the informed state of democratic understanding among citizens depends on whether four regime characteristics—free elections, civil liberties, military takeover, and religious authority—are correctly structured in a cognitive system.

The first attribute, free elections, has been widely accepted as an essential dimension of democracy. Democracy fundamentally relies on rule by *demos* (the people), making the holding of free and fair elections at regular intervals crucial for enabling the expression of the people's will. However, for elections to genuinely reflect citizens' diverse values and interests, it is essential that citizens are fully protected from non-democratic measures. Otherwise, even if citizens can participate in elections, these elections could serve as instruments of authoritarian control (Schedler, 2002). Therefore, safeguarding civil rights and civil liberties is essential to ensuring that democratic political systems function properly, making these protections another core element of democracy along with the existence of free and regular elections.

On the other hand, the attributes of military takeover and interference by religious authority are fundamentally opposed to democratic principles. Specifically, when the military or religious authorities, who are not democratically elected by citizens, take over the government or interfere in the legislative process, the essential element of democracy—rule by *demos*—is violated. As a result, these authorities generally cannot attain democratic legitimacy from ordinary citizens, further limiting citizens' political

choices. Therefore, these two regime characteristics are inherently incompatible with democracy (Cho, 2015).

Based on this discussion, this article considers the first two attributes—free elections and civil liberties—as essential components of democracy, whereas the last two characteristics—military takeover and interference by religious authority—indicative of non-democracy. Consequently, the ability of citizens to distinguish between these democratic and non-democratic attributes can serve as a measure of their understanding of democracy.

Drawing from these criteria, this article examines how Indian citizens perceive corruption and their ability to distinguish democratic characteristics from non-democratic ones, using data from the seventh wave of the WVS. As one of the most comprehensive survey datasets, covering nearly 120 societies and approximately 95% of the world's population, the WVS provides a reliable measure for evaluating citizens' perceptions and their informed understanding of democracy.

The WVS evaluates citizen corruption permissiveness and their informed understanding of democracy using closed-ended questions. To assess corruption permissiveness, respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they think accepting a bribe in the course of one's duties is justified, on a scale from 1 (never justified) to 10 (always justified). For evaluating democratic knowledge, the WVS includes four questions about essential (non)democratic characteristics. Respondents rate the importance of the following on a scale from 0 (against democracy) to 10 (definitely essential): "People choose their leaders in free elections" for free elections; "Civil rights protect people from state oppression" for civil liberties; "The army takes over when the government is incompetent" for military control; and "Religious authorities ultimately interpret the laws" for interference by religious authorities. Note that, for ease of interpretation, this article reverses the scores for the last two items regarding non-democratic characteristics—military control and religious authority—so that lower values indicate a poorer understanding of democracy. Figures 1 and 2 report the distributions of Indian citizens' frequency changes in corruption permissiveness and democratic knowledge, respectively.³⁾

3) The initial sample size of this dataset was 1,692. However, after excluding missing data, non-responses, and "don't know" responses, the sample sizes were reduced to 1,671 for corruption permissiveness, 1,581 for free elections, 1,476 for civil liberties, 1,484 for military takeover, and 1,522 for religious authority.

Figure 1. Distribution of citizen corruption permissiveness

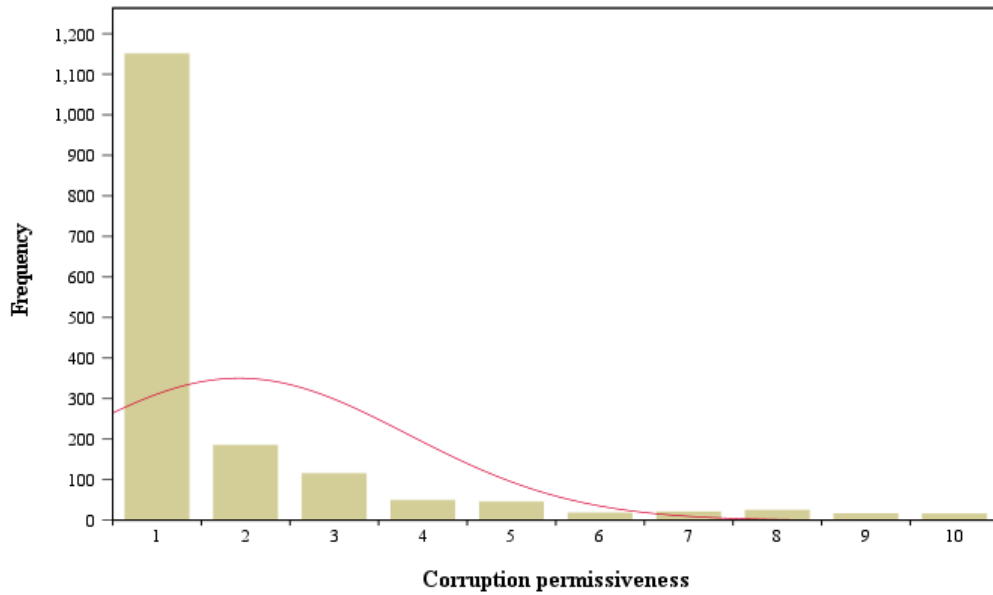
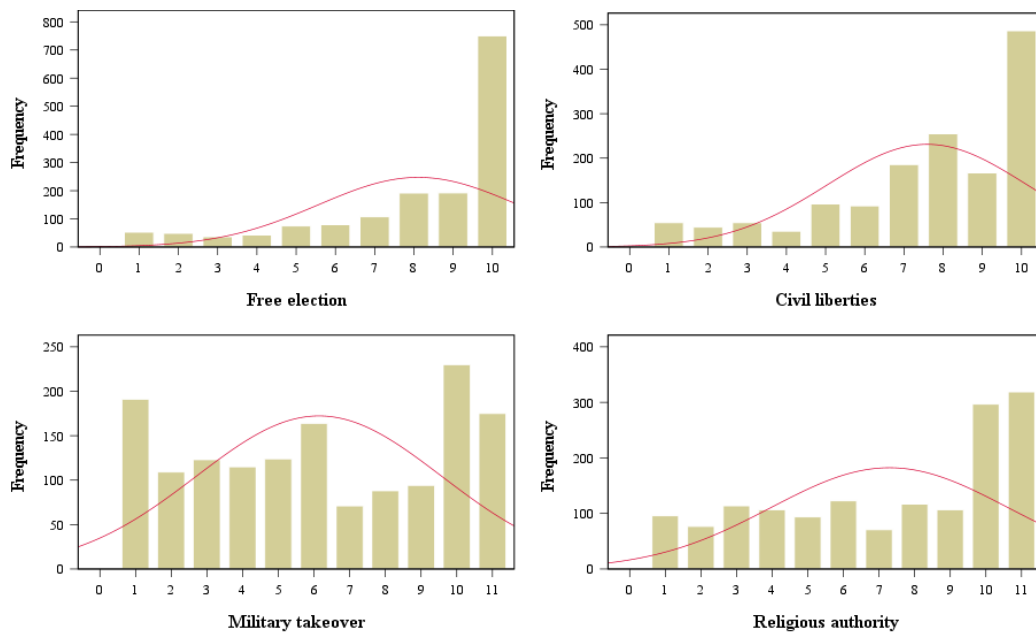


Figure 2. Distributions of understanding about democracy



With regard to corruption permissiveness, most Indian citizens appear to be less permissive of corruption in this dataset. Approximately 68% of respondents indicated

that corruption is never justifiable, while only about 4% rated the justification for accepting a bribe as higher than 7, suggesting they see corruption as highly justifiable.

Meanwhile, an examination of Indian citizens' informed understanding of democracy reveals wide variations in comprehending the four regime characteristics. Regarding the two democratic attributes, 67.1% and 53.8% of respondents evaluated free elections and civil liberties, respectively, as essential parts of democracy by rating them higher than 8. In contrast, fewer respondents recognized that military takeover (29.5%) and religious authority (42.8%) are not essential to or are against democracy. This indicates that many Indian citizens struggle to discriminate non-democratic attributes from democratic ones, suggesting their widespread confusion between democratic and non-democratic practices.

As previously discussed, these misunderstandings can undermine the effectiveness of democratic norms in combating corruption by distorting the mechanisms through which democratic institutions are supposed to increase the costs of engaging in corrupt activities (Sandholtz & Koetzle, 2000). This, in turn, may not only raise the incentives for corrupt behavior but also decrease the perception of corruption as unjustifiable. Based on this expectation, this article formulates and tests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The relatively more (or the relatively less) Indian citizens evaluate free election as an essential attribute of democracy, the relatively less (or the relatively more) permissive of corruption.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The relatively more (or the relatively less) Indian citizens evaluate civil liberty as an essential attribute of democracy, the relatively less (or the relatively more) permissive of corruption.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The relatively more (or the relatively less) Indian citizens evaluate military takeover as a non-essential attribute of democracy, the relatively less (or the relatively more) permissive of corruption.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The relatively more (or the relatively less) Indian citizens evaluate the interference of religious authority in legislation as a non-essential attribute of democracy, the relatively less (or the relatively more) permissive of corruption.

III. Data and Methodology

For empirical analysis, this article employs the seventh wave of the WVS dataset, conducted in India from June to July 2023. This dataset is chosen for its reliability, extensive coverage, and representative sample size. Regarding the measurement of the dependent variable, the article selects an item that asks respondents, “Please tell me how justified you think these actions are: Someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties.” This item measures respondents’ corruption permissiveness on a 10-point scale, from 1 (never justified) to 10 (always justified), as previously discussed.

For the main independent variables, this article selects four criteria that reflect citizens’ understanding of democracy. These are operationalized using survey items that ask respondents how essential each of the following characteristics is for democracy: “People choose their leaders in free elections”; “Civil rights protect people from state oppression”; “The army takes over when the government is incompetent”; and “Religious authorities ultimately interpret the laws.” The response options range from 0 (against democracy) to 10 (definitely essential). For ease of interpretation, the article inversely codes the last two items regarding non-democratic attributes, as conducted in Section 2.

Additionally, the article includes several control variables deemed significant to citizen corruption permissiveness in previous studies (Han, 2023; Lavena, 2013). These controls encompass socioeconomic variables such as age, gender, marital status, education, and income, as well as sociocultural variables including religious affiliations, religiosity, generalized and institutional trusts, and individualistic/collectivistic outlooks. Given its profound significance in the Indian context, the article also includes respondents’ caste as a control variable.

Regarding the age variable, this article uses three measures: a continuous age variable for the main analysis, and two categorical variables dividing age into three groups (16 - 29, 30 - 49, and 50+ years) and six groups (16 - 24, 25 - 34, 35 - 44, 45 - 54, 55 - 64, and 65+ years) for robustness checks. For gender, the variable is coded as 1 for male and 2 for female. Caste categories are classified using an item that asks about respondents’ ethnic/caste groups, recoded as 1 for Scheduled Caste (SC), 2 for Scheduled Tribe (ST), 3 for Other Backward Class (OBC), and 4 for General. Marital status is measured on a scale from 1 to 6, ranging from “married” to “single.”

Educational attainment is classified into nine groups according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011. For income level, the article uses two measures: a 10-point scale (1 for “lowest income group” to 10 for “highest income group”) for the main analysis and a three-interval measure (1 for “low income group” to 3 for “high income group”) for robustness checks.

Moving to sociocultural controls, the article classifies individuals into ten groups based on religious denomination, ranging from 0 for “do not belong to a denomination” to 9 for “other.” For religiosity, it utilizes two separate items about the frequency of attendance at religious services and prayer, following Zakaria (2018). The first item is on a seven-point scale from 1 (frequent attendance) to 7 (nonattendance), and the second measures the frequency of prayer on an eight-point scale from 1 (frequent prayer) to 8 (never prays). Both items are recoded so that higher scores indicate more frequent attendance and prayer.

To measure levels of generalized and institutional trusts, the article includes two items. The first asks, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?” This measures individual generalized trust on a binary scale, with 1 for “most people can be trusted” and 2 for “need to be very careful.” The second item measuring individual institutional trust assesses confidence in civil service on a four-point scale, from 1 (high confidence) to 4 (low confidence). Both items are recoded so that higher values indicate higher trust.

Lastly, to measure individualism/collectivism levels, the article uses two items asking respondents’ life satisfaction and their sense of freedom of choice as alternative proxies, which were found to be strongly correlated with Hofstede’s individualism/collectivism index (Kang & Kwon, 2018). Life satisfaction is measured on a ten-point scale from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). Freedom of choice is assessed on a ten-point scale from 1 (no choice at all) to 10 (a great deal of choice).

This article employs an ordinal/ordered logistic regression model as an analytical technique, given that the dependent variable takes the ordinal form with more than two categories. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Obs.	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Dependent variable					
Corruption permissiveness	1,671	1	10	1.93	1.90
Independent variables					
Understanding of free elections	1,581	1	10	8.11	2.54
Understanding of civil liberties	1,476	1	10	7.60	2.54
Understanding of military takeover	1,484	1	11	6.14	3.43
Understanding of religious authority	1,522	1	11	7.29	3.32
Control variables					
Age	1,692	16	90	35.80	16.32
Gender	1,692	1	2	1.43	0.49
Caste	1,692	1	4	2.88	1.05
Marital status	1,691	1	6	3.01	2.34
Education	1,689	0	8	3.20	2.06
Income	1,665	1	10	5.44	2.56
Religious denomination	1,688	1	9	6.02	0.91
Religious attendance (religiosity)	1,680	1	7	4.98	1.71
Religious prayer (religiosity)	1,686	1	8	5.97	1.88
Generalized trust	1,668	1	2	1.18	0.38
Institutional trust	1,572	1	4	3.12	0.89
Life satisfaction (individualism/collectivism)	1,688	1	10	7.20	2.41
Freedom of choice and control (individualism/collectivism)	1,681	1	10	7.17	2.67

Note: Each figure is rounded to two decimal places.

Source: The author

IV. Analysis and Findings

Table 2 presents the results of the ordered regression model, highlighting the relationship between individuals' informed understanding of democracy and their corruption permissiveness. The findings reveal a statistically significant negative correlation between each of the main independent variables and the outcome, thereby supporting all hypotheses H1 through H4.⁴⁾

In detail, the findings from Table 2 show that Indian citizens with a better informed understanding of democracy are less likely to be permissive of corruption, while those with a poorer understanding are more likely to tolerate it ($p < 0.001$). In terms of

4) A preliminary variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostic shows that all variables have VIF values below 2, indicating that multicollinearity is not a significant concern in this article. The VIF results are available upon request.

percent change, a one-unit increase in each variable pertaining to an informed understanding about democracy results in 16.9% (for an informed understanding about free elections), 10.5% (for an informed understanding about civil liberties), 12.4% (for an informed understanding about military takeover), and 8.2% (for an informed understanding about religious authority) decreases in the odds of being permissive of corruption when accounting for other predictors. All these findings can be strong evidence for hypotheses H1 through H4.

In addition to the main independent variables, several control variables included in this article are found to be significantly associated with the dependent variable. These controls include age, gender, marital status (i.e., being married), education, income, religious denomination (i.e., Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist), religiosity, and individualism/collectivism (i.e., freedom of choice and control). The variables for gender, marital status, income, religious affiliation, and attendance at religious services are statistically positively correlated with the outcome. This suggests that Indian citizens who are male, married, earn higher incomes, identify as Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, and regularly attend religious services are more likely to be permissive of corruption compared to their respective reference groups.

Specifically, a one-unit increase in the male variable corresponds to a 32.2% increase in the odds of being permissive of corruption compared to being female. Marriage is associated with a substantial 58.4% increase in the odds of tolerating corruption compared to being single. Additionally, a one-unit increase in income leads to a 19.4% rise in the odds of permissiveness toward corruption. This article also found that a one-unit increase in religious affiliation is linked to significant increases in the odds of corruption permissiveness compared to the reference group: 355.9% for Muslims, 374.9% for Hindus, and 1250.4% for Buddhists. Lastly, a one-unit increase in religious attendance results in a 12.7% increase in the likelihood of being more permissive of corruption.

On the other hand, the control variables related to individuals' educational attainment, prayer frequency, and levels of freedom of choice and control are negatively correlated with their permissiveness toward corruption. A one-unit increase in these variables corresponds to a 12.4% decrease (for education), a 9% decrease (for prayer), and an 8.9% decrease (for freedom of choice and control) in the odds of being permissive of corruption, respectively. These findings suggest that Indian citizens who are more educated, more religiously observant, and who exhibit greater individualistic outlooks are less likely to tolerate corruption.

Table 2. Findings of the ordered regression model (n = 1,237)

	<i>b</i>	S.E.	OR	95% CI
Informed understanding about democracy				
Free elections	-0.185***	0.028	0.831	0.787-0.877
Civil liberties	-0.111***	0.029	0.895	0.846-0.946
Military takeover	-0.086***	0.022	0.876	0.841-0.914
Religious authority	-0.132***	0.021	0.918	0.880-0.958
Age	-0.019**	0.006	0.981	0.970-0.993
Gender (ref. female)	0.279*	0.133	1.322	1.018-1.714
Caste (ref. General)				
SC	0.001	0.208	1.001	0.665-1.505
ST	0.403	0.278	1.496	0.867-2.583
OBC	0.196	0.150	1.217	0.908-1.631
Marital status (ref. single)				
Married	0.460*	0.194	1.584	1.082-2.319
Living together as married	-0.520	0.367	0.595	0.290-1.220
Divorced	-17.327	9707.483	0	0
Separated	-17.535	0	0	0
Widowed	-0.014	0.424	0.986	0.429-2.266
Education	-0.132***	0.035	0.876	0.817-0.939
Income	0.177***	0.029	1.194	1.126-1.264
Religious denominations (ref. other)				
Christian	1.484	0.860	4.411	0.819-23.784
Muslim	1.517**	0.445	4.559	1.904-10.903
Hindu	1.558***	0.402	4.749	2.160-10.454
Buddhist	2.603***	0.645	13.504	3.819-47.799
Religiosity				
Attendance	0.120*	0.048	1.127	1.025-1.240
Prayer	-0.094*	0.042	0.910	0.839-0.988
Generalized trust	-0.192	0.160	0.825	0.604-1.129
Institutional trust	-0.100	0.074	0.905	0.783-1.046
Individualism/collectivism				
Life satisfaction	-0.033	0.032	0.968	0.908-1.030
Freedom of choice and control	-0.093**	0.029	0.911	0.861-0.966
Chi-Square (df = 26)			364.873***	
Pseudo R ²			0.276	

Source: The author

Note: S.E.=standard errors; OR=odds ratio; CI=confidence interval; Nagelkerke Pseudo R² is presented. Cox and Snell Pseudo R²=0.255, McFadden Pseudo R²=0.114.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As a robustness check for the main analysis, this article conducts four additional regressions. Each model includes an alternative proxy for the dependent variable by combining and averaging the initial four items related to informed understanding of democracy (Model 1), different age measures coded into three and six intervals,

respectively (Models 2 and 3), and a three-interval measure for income (Model 4). The results of these robustness checks are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Robustness checks (n = 1,237)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i> (S.E.)	OR (95% CI)	<i>b</i> (S.E.)	OR (95% CI)	<i>b</i> (S.E.)	OR (95% CI)	<i>b</i> (S.E.)	OR (95% CI)
Informed understanding about democracy (averaged)	-0.133*** (0.013)	0.875 (0.855–0.898)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Free elections	–	–	-0.185*** (0.028)	0.831 (0.787–0.877)	-0.184*** (0.028)	0.832 (0.787–0.878)	-0.188*** (0.028)	0.829 (0.785–0.875)
Civil liberties	–	–	-0.112*** (0.029)	0.894 (0.846–0.946)	-0.112*** (0.029)	0.894 (0.845–0.946)	-0.114*** (0.028)	0.892 (0.844–0.943)
Military takeover	–	–	-0.086*** (0.022)	0.918 (0.879–0.958)	-0.086*** (0.022)	0.918 (0.879–0.958)	-0.085*** (0.022)	0.919 (0.880–0.959)
Religious authority	–	–	-0.132*** (0.021)	0.876 (0.840–0.913)	-0.131*** (0.021)	0.877 (0.842–0.914)	-0.142*** (0.021)	0.868 (0.833–0.903)
Age	-0.020** (0.006)	0.980 (0.969–0.992)	–	–	–	–	-0.017** (0.006)	0.983 (0.971–0.995)
Age (three intervals)	–	–	-0.280* (0.121)	0.756 (0.596–0.958)	–	–	–	–
Age (six intervals)	–	–	–	–	-0.172** (0.061)	0.842 (0.747–0.949)	–	–
Gender (ref. female)	0.288* (0.132)	1.334 (1.030–1.726)	0.261* (0.132)	1.298 (1.001–1.682)	0.273* (0.133)	1.314 (1.013–1.704)	0.237 (0.132)	1.267 (0.978–1.642)
Caste (ref. General)								
SC	-0.016 (0.207)	0.984 (0.656–1.477)	0.004 (0.208)	1.004 (0.667–1.510)	0.001 (0.208)	1.001 (0.666–1.505)	-0.019 (0.208)	0.981 (0.653–1.474)
ST	0.478 (0.275)	1.613 (0.942–2.762)	0.423 (0.278)	1.527 (0.884–2.635)	0.399 (0.278)	1.490 (0.864–2.573)	0.392 (0.277)	1.480 (0.861–2.547)
OBC	0.183 (0.148)	1.201 (0.898–1.606)	0.191 (0.150)	1.210 (0.903–1.623)	0.197 (0.150)	1.218 (0.908–1.632)	0.180 (0.149)	1.197 (0.894–1.605)
Marital status (ref. single)								
Married	0.518** (0.193)	1.679 (1.150–2.452)	0.340 (0.187)	1.405 (0.973–2.030)	0.406* (0.189)	1.501 (1.037–2.173)	0.428* (0.194)	1.534 (1.049–2.243)
Living together as married	-.398 (0.366)	0.672 (0.328–1.376)	-0.642 (0.365)	0.526 (0.257–1.076)	-0.574 (0.364)	0.563 (0.276–1.149)	-0.534 (0.365)	0.586 (0.287–1.200)
Divorced	-17.447 (0)	0 (0)	-17.385 (9729.486)	0 (0)	-17.348 (9704.572)	0 (0)	-17.362 (9932.419)	0 (0)

Separated	-17.450 (0)	0 (0)	-17.595 (0)	0 (0)	-17.609 (0)	0 (0)	-17.468 (0)	0 (0)
Widowed	0.047 (0.421)	1.048 (0.459- 2.394)	-0.251 (0.408)	0.778 (0.350- 1.733)	-0.089 (0.420)	0.915 (0.402- 2.083)	-0.039 (0.424)	0.962 (0.419- 2.208)
Education	-0.132*** (0.035)	0.876 (0.819- 0.939)	-0.128*** (0.035)	0.880 (0.820- 0.943)	-0.133*** (0.035)	0.875 (0.816- 0.938)	-0.127*** (0.035)	0.881 (0.822- 0.944)
Income	0.175*** (0.029)	1.191 (1.125- 1.260)	0.173*** (0.029)	1.189 (1.123- 1.259)	0.176*** (0.029)	1.192 (1.126- 1.264)	-	-
Income (three intervals)	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.534*** (0.102)	1.706 (1.397- 2.081)
Religious denominations (ref. other)								
Christian	1.367 (0.865)	3.924 (0.720- 21.392)	1.554 (0.857)	4.730 (0.882- 25.381)	1.466 (0.860)	4.332 (0.803- 23.383)	1.424 (0.858)	4.154 (0.773- 22.309)
Muslim	1.505** (0.444)	4.504 (1.885- 10.751)	1.548** (0.445)	4.702 (1.966- 11.246)	1.544** (0.445)	4.683 (1.958- 11.201)	1.482** (0.445)	4.402 (1.840- 10.538)
Hindu	1.484*** (0.402)	4.411 (2.004- 9.699)	1.590*** (0.402)	4.904 (2.230- 10.794)	1.574*** (0.402)	4.826 (2.192- 10.612)	1.540*** (0.403)	4.665 (2.119- 10.278)
Buddhist	2.595*** (0.641)	13.397 (3.815- 47.040)	2.612*** (0.645)	13.626 (3.850- 48.231)	2.573*** (0.645)	13.105 (3.706- 46.386)	2.517*** (0.645)	12.391 (3.504- 43.860)
Religiosity								
Attendance	0.124** (0.048)	1.132 (1.031- 1.244)	0.120* (0.048)	1.127 (1.025- 1.240)	0.120* (0.048)	1.127 (1.025- 1.240)	0.118* (0.048)	1.125 (1.023- 1.237)
Prayer	-0.116** (0.041)	0.890 (0.821- 0.966)	-0.093* (0.042)	0.911 (0.839- 0.989)	-0.093* (0.042)	0.911 (0.839- 0.989)	-0.089* (0.042)	0.915 (0.843- 0.993)
Generalized trust	-0.196 (0.159)	0.822 (0.602- 1.122)	-0.182 (0.160)	0.834 (0.609- 1.140)	-0.190 (0.160)	0.827 (0.605- 1.132)	-0.193 (0.160)	0.824 (0.603- 1.129)
Institutional trust	-0.065 (0.073)	0.937 (0.813- 1.080)	-0.094 (0.074)	0.910 (0.787- 1.052)	-0.100 (0.074)	0.905 (0.783- 1.046)	-0.089 (0.074)	0.915 (0.792- 1.058)
Individualism/collectivism								
Life satisfaction	-0.074* (0.031)	0.929 (0.875- 0.987)	-0.034 (0.032)	0.967 (0.908- 1.029)	-0.033 (0.032)	0.968 (0.908- 1.030)	-0.025 (0.032)	0.975 (0.916- 1.038)
Freedom of choice and control	-0.112*** (0.029)	0.894 (0.845- 0.946)	-0.092** (0.029)	0.912 (0.862- 0.967)	-0.093** (0.029)	0.911 (0.860- 0.965)	-0.083** (0.029)	0.920 (0.869- 0.974)
Chi-Square	334.456***		334.456***		363.609***		355.892***	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R ²	0.256		0.256		0.276		0.271	

Source: The author

Note: S.E.=standard errors; OR=odds ratio; CI=confidence interval

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The robustness checks from Model 1 to Model 4 indicate that the explanatory power of the variables related to individuals' informed understanding of democracy remains significant and holds up even when several alternative indicators are included.

In Model 1, this article found that the variable for informed understanding of democracy remains highly significant, even when an alternative proxy is used, with its coefficient displaying a consistent pattern with the main regression analysis. Specifically, the article observes that a one-unit increase in this variable corresponds to a 12.5% decrease in the odds of being permissive of corruption among Indian citizens. This finding confirms that the main analysis outcomes are reliable and hardly affected by the specific operationalization of the dependent variable.

In addition to Model 1, the article notes that the main independent variables for informed understanding of democracy remain statistically significant and negatively correlated with citizen permissiveness toward corruption, even with the inclusion of several alternative proxies across Models 2, 3, and 4. These findings provide strong evidence supporting the main regression analysis as well as hypotheses H1 through H4.

Aside from the main independent variables, most control variables that were initially significant in the main analysis maintain their significance and show consistent patterns across all robustness checks. These controls include respondents' age, educational attainment, income levels, religious affiliations (Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist), religiosity (measured by religious attendance and prayer), and certain aspects of the individualism/collectivism variable (freedom of choice and control). However, a few variables, such as gender (male), marital status variables (being married), and another aspect of individualism/collectivism (life satisfaction), exhibited inconsistent patterns across the models. Nonetheless, their coefficients were consistent with the main analysis, and they did not significantly impact the findings related to the main independent variables.

V. Discussion

In summary, the main analysis and multiple robustness checks demonstrate that the key variables related to Indian citizens' informed understanding of democracy are

statistically significant and negatively correlated with their permissiveness toward corruption. These findings consistently suggest that as citizens gain a better-informed understanding of democracy, their tolerance for corruption decreases, and vice versa, robustly supporting hypotheses H1 to H4.

Turning to the control variables, this article found that respondents' age, gender, marital status, education, income, religious denomination, religiosity, and individualism/collectivism significantly influence citizens' permissiveness toward corruption. In the main analysis and across various robustness checks, the article consistently observes a negative correlation between the age variable and corruption permissiveness, which remains statistically significant even with the inclusion of alternative indicators. This result suggests that older (or younger) Indian citizens are less (or more) likely to be permissive of corruption. This finding aligns with previous research, which also indicates a negative correlation between age and corruption permissiveness (Torgler & Valev, 2006).

The gender variable is found to be positively correlated with citizens' permissiveness toward corruption in both the main analysis and robustness checks. This finding suggests that males are more likely to be permissive of corruption compared to females, aligning with research from various studies on gender differences and corruption permissiveness (Swamy et al., 2001; Torgler & Valev, 2010).

Besides the gender variable, the marriage variable also shows a positive correlation with the dependent variable, suggesting that married Indian citizens tolerate corruption more than their unmarried counterparts. This finding contrasts with previous research, which consistently suggests that married individuals are generally less likely to tolerate corruption (Torgler & Valev, 2010). However, in the Indian context, where corrupt practices are so entrenched that they are viewed not just as 'a way of life' but as 'the only way to get work done' (Transparency International India (TII) & LocalCircles, 2019), this unexpected positive association may stem from the specific regional conditions. In this corruption-friendly environment, married individuals, who may be more motivated to secure additional income, are likely to engage in corruption more frequently than their unmarried counterparts and become more permissive of corruption as they increasingly overlook its associated costs.

This interpretation may also explain the positive correlation between income and citizens' permissiveness toward corruption, as identified in the main analysis and several robustness checks. Considering the Indian context, individuals who earn higher

incomes might do so by effectively engaging in corrupt practices, which in turn makes them more tolerant of corruption. However, since this explanation has not been empirically validated, future research should test this hypothesis.

Regarding the education variable, this article found a negative correlation between Indian citizens' educational attainment and their permissiveness toward corruption. This suggests that individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to be permissive of corruption, while those with lower education levels are more likely to be permissive. This finding strongly supports the conclusions of the existing literature (Swamy et al., 2001; Lavena, 2013).

One of the two religion-related variables, specifically respondents' religious affiliation (i.e., Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist), is found to be statistically positively correlated with the dependent variable in the main analysis and across all robustness checks. This finding suggests that Indian citizens who self-identify themselves as Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists are more likely to be permissive of corruption than those who declare themselves as devotees to other religious denominations. While this result may seem noteworthy in that it suggests a higher likelihood of corruption permissiveness, particularly among Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, it may result from data skewness toward these three religious affiliations, which account for 93.5% of the population and have disproportionately large coefficients.

On the other hand, the two components of another religion-based variable—frequency of attendance at religious services and frequency of prayer—yield contrasting results: attendance at religious services is positively associated with permissiveness toward corruption, while frequency of prayer is negatively associated. These findings suggest that respondents who pray frequently are less likely to tolerate corruption, while those who regularly attend religious services are more likely to tolerate it. Although both variables are significant only at the 5 percent level, these findings are noteworthy as they consistently appear statistically relevant in the main analysis and across all robustness checks.

This article interprets the unexpected positive correlation between attendance at religious services and corruption permissiveness as a sign that religious communities may be fertile grounds for favoritism, cronyism, and nepotism, especially in a highly religious society like India (Gokcekus & Ekici, 2020). Specifically, individuals who frequently attend religious services are more likely to be closely affiliated with a religious community, forming a tight-knit circle of in-group members. In this context,

the more Indian citizens attend religious services, the more they may engage with a community where various forms of favoritism can thrive. As a result, those who regularly attend religious services may become more permissive of corrupt behaviors. However, since this hypothesis has not been empirically tested, future research should examine its validity.

Lastly, both the main analysis and multiple robustness checks consistently showed that individuals' cultural values, measured through the freedom of choice and control variable, are statistically negatively correlated with corruption permissiveness. This suggests that individuals with more individualistic values are less likely to tolerate corrupt behaviors, whereas those with more collectivistic traits are more likely to view corruption as acceptable. This finding partially supports existing literature, which indicates that individualistic values are associated with lower permissiveness toward corrupt activities (Han, 2022).

VI. Conclusion

Among the numerous negative consequences of corruption, current scholars have increasingly focused on controlling citizen corruption permissiveness, which can create a vicious cycle where high permissiveness leads to greater corruption, which in turn reinforces permissiveness. Many researchers emphasize the importance of democratic institutions in this regard, arguing that they raise the costs of engaging in corruption, thereby reducing incentives for both rent-seekers and public officials to participate in corrupt activities and leading citizens to view corruption as unethical and intolerable.

However, previous research has overlooked the fact that the effectiveness of democratic institutions in curbing corruption depends on the presence of democratic norms among individuals, which must be based on a proper understanding of democratic principles to function effectively. Consequently, they could not clarify why democracies with strong institutions and a long-standing tradition of democratic practices still exhibit high levels of citizen permissiveness toward corruption, nor could they account for the differences in permissiveness among individuals within democracies that share similar democratic values, or even within the same country.

The purpose of this article, therefore, was to examine whether the level of corruption

permissiveness among citizens correlates with their informed understanding of democratic principles. To analyze this, the article specifically focuses on the Indian case, where corruption is often viewed as highly justifiable by citizens despite the country's long-standing democratic history and established institutions. Considering this paradox in New Delhi, the article argues that studying India provides valuable insights for addressing this research gap.

Using an ordinal/ordered regression technique, this article examined the relationship between Indian citizens' informed understanding about democracy measured through their ability to distinguish democratic characteristics from non-democratic ones and their permissiveness toward corruption. The results, confirmed by both the main analysis and robustness checks, revealed a significant correlation between these two factors. Specifically, the analyses indicated that Indian citizens with a better democratic understanding of free elections, civil liberties, military takeovers, and religious authority are less likely to be permissive of corruption, while those with a poorer understanding are more likely to be permissive. These findings robustly support all hypotheses developed in this article, from H1 to H4.

Additionally, several control factors were identified as relevant to Indian citizens' permissiveness toward corruption. These variables include age, gender, marital status, educational attainment, income, religious denomination, religiosity, and individualism/collectivism.

Among the various factors, the contradictory findings regarding individual religiosity—attendance at religious services and frequency of prayer—warrant particular attention due to their inconsistency with each other. Both the main analysis and robustness checks indicate that while religious prayer is negatively correlated with citizens' permissiveness toward corruption, as expected, religious attendance shows a positive correlation with permissiveness. This inconsistency is noteworthy since both variables are intended to measure levels of individual religiosity.

This article suggests that the unexpected positive correlation between religious attendance and corruption permissiveness may stem from frequent attendees becoming more embedded in a close-knit religious community. In a highly religious society like India, such communities might foster favoritism, leading regular attendees to be more permissive of corruption (Han, 2022). Yet, this hypothesis requires further empirical testing in future research.

In light of the findings, this article proposes that Indian policymakers should develop

and implement educational programs to enhance citizens' understanding of democratic principles, enabling them to better distinguish between democratic and non-democratic attributes. These programs could reduce corruption levels by fostering a stronger democratic culture and revitalizing the effectiveness of democratic institutions, which may likely be undermined or distorted by a lack of proper understanding of democracy among individuals.

Specifically, this article emphasizes the importance of democratic citizenship education as a critical component of these programs. Consolidating democracy requires changes in key areas, including institutional structures that shape citizens' democratic behaviors as well as the cognitive dimensions that reinforce individual commitment to democracy. While India's institutional and procedural aspects of democracy are well-established, there is a relative lack of democratic civic consciousness among citizens—an essential element for the effective functioning of democratic institutions. Therefore, Indian policymakers should prioritize the development of educational programs focused on enhancing democratic citizenship rather than solely improving democratic institutions.

When developing and implementing these programs, it is important to note that changes in citizens' consciousness and behavior must occur gradually, as they emerge within the context of *Lebenswelt* (everyday life). Therefore, democratic citizenship education should use participatory teaching methods that facilitate bilateral interactions. One such method is the Meta-Plan, a participant-centric approach that emphasizes seminar-style learning with visual aids and has been successfully employed in developed countries. In this context, Indian policymakers should develop long-term national educational plans that incorporate Meta-Plan methods to promote the notion of democratic citizenship among citizens.

Despite its contributions, this article acknowledges certain limitations. For example, the WVS dataset used may have inherent reliability issues. Future research should therefore consider supplementing this dataset with alternative proxies or more in-depth interviews to verify whether the observed correlation between citizens' understanding of democracy and their corruption permissiveness holds true in the Indian context. Additionally, as the findings of this article are specific to the Indian context, future research should aim to generalize the results by including a broader range of national samples. Furthermore, the article develops only four hypotheses, which may limit the potential for richer insights. Future studies should consider expanding the number of

hypotheses based on other relevant criteria to deepen understanding of the relationship between citizens' informed understanding of democracy and their corruption permissiveness. Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, this article does not provide the detailed theoretical framework necessary for exploring the relationship between an informed understanding of democracy and corruption permissiveness, as it primarily focuses on explanatory research. Therefore, future studies should aim to clarify the theoretical connection between these factors and reassess the correlation identified in this article.

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<Abstract>

Exploring the Relationship between Informed Understanding of Democracy and Corruption Permissiveness in India*:

An Explanatory Research

Han, Jinwon**

While existing studies have focused on the role of democracy in controlling citizens' permissiveness toward corruption, they often fail to answer two critical questions: (1) why do democracies with strong institutions and a long history of democratic practices still exhibit high levels of citizen permissiveness toward corruption?; and (2) why is there variability in permissiveness among individuals in democracies with similar democratic commitments, including within the same country? This article addresses these gaps by examining whether citizens' informed understanding of democracy is significantly correlated with their permissiveness toward corruption in India—a country that experiences the paradox of established democratic institutions alongside high levels of corruption permissiveness. Using ordinal/ordered logistic regression and conducting several robustness checks, the article found a significant negative correlation between informed understanding of democracy and corruption permissiveness among Indian citizens. Based on these findings, it recommends developing and implementing long-term national plans to promote democratic citizenship education through a participant-centric approach.

Key words: Informed Understanding about Democracy, Corruption Permissiveness, Democratic Citizenship Education, India, Ordinal/ordered Logistic Regression

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