Evidence of ethics violations by President Donald Trump and his inner circle continues to accumulate, with a rash of plea deals, indictments and guilty verdicts broadsiding the White House in recent weeks. But while Americans grapple with what some observers have called the most corrupt presidential administration in U.S. history, a remarkable wave of anti-corruption activism has swept the rest of the globe.

In the past three years alone, corruption scandals have led to the ousting of prime ministers in Pakistan and Malaysia, impeachments of presidents in Brazil and South Korea, and resignations of presidents or prime ministers in Guatemala, South Africa and Iceland. Anti-corruption protests also toppled a crooked leader in Ukraine in 2014 and inspired the 2010 uprising against Tunisia’s president that launched the Arab Spring.

As a political scientist specializing in good governance in emerging economies, it is gratifying to see the fight against corruption take center stage. The consequences of corruption, such as reduced economic growth and ineffective political institutions, are well-known, leaving little doubt that curbing graft is a worthy goal.

At the same time, anti-corruption activists face a growing—yet largely unrecognized—dilemma. Publicizing the threats posed by corruption is an essential first step in fighting it, since citizens can’t object to what they don’t know about. Yet shining a spotlight on corruption and making the fight against it a central political platform also come with risks and downsides.

First, some types of anti-corruption messages may have unintended consequences. When anti-corruption organizations report mind-boggling statistics, such as the fact that one in four citizens around the world...
the global paid a bribe to access public services last year, or when online platforms catalogue hundreds of thousands of extortion attempts by public officials, the blunt message that emerges is that corruption is part and parcel of everyday life.

Contributing to the impression that “everyone is doing it,” even when the goal is to stop a given behavior, is dangerous. Recent studies, including one conducted in Costa Rica, back up the argument that “corruption behaves as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12244): As people’s belief that others give bribes grows, they themselves become willing to engage in graft. Social psychology research on social norms (https://www.cdacollaborative.org/blog/recognizing-potential-destructive-power-social-norms/) supports these findings, indicating that the willingness to engage in a given behavior rises when a behavior is perceived as common, even if the behavior in question is morally or legally dubious. As a result, poorly crafted informational campaigns against certain unwanted behavior may backfire, as has been the case with some anti-drug campaigns (http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.92.2.238) or campaigns to promote vaccinations (http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/133/4/e835.short).

Second, anti-corruption campaigns often cast aspersions widely, creating the impression that all public officials are corrupt. As a society comes to believe that government as a whole is rotten, it can contribute to another self-fulfilling prophecy, in which well-intentioned citizens self-select out of public service while citizens prone to corruption self-select in with the explicit aim of their own enrichment. For example, in a study (https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20150029) of university students in India, where the public sector has a reputation for being corrupt, economists from Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania found that students with a high propensity for dishonesty were more likely to aspire to a career in the civil service. Meanwhile, students with a high propensity for altruism and a desire to contribute to the public good were less likely to pursue a career as a civil servant.

On a wider political level, whether in countries struggling to build democracy or, for that matter, in the United States, there is danger in casting the entire political class as corrupt and vilifying them to voters who already are disillusioned with their institutions of government. A further concern is that opportunistic politicians can frequently co-opt the overly zealous rhetoric of genuine reformers and cynically employ anti-corruption crusades as a cudgel against their opponents, who may or may not be corrupt.

**Anti-corruption activists risk becoming a victim of their own achievements if ubiquitous attention to corruption’s ills is not matched by specific tools for fighting it.**
Third, there is the risk that high-profile anti-corruption movements can unrealistically raise expectations. When it comes to abolishing corruption completely, there are very few outright success stories. Smaller victories—successful investigations of a corrupt leader, the reform of specific institutions—certainly occur, but they are unlikely to match the hopes of citizens who have been mobilized by the promise of wholesale social or governmental change. Moreover, rigorous evidence about which anti-corruption policies work remains disturbingly scarce. Here, too, anti-corruption reformers face a dilemma. A big-picture, inspirational approach may help launch new political and social reform movements, but it also may lead to harmful anti-corruption fatigue when graft proves resilient.

There are no easy solutions to these dilemmas, but anti-corruption activists should begin by recognizing that a turning point has been reached. In contrast to 20 years ago, citizens and policymakers around the world are fully aware that corruption is a significant problem. This already is a major victory for anti-corruption crusaders. What is needed now is to seize this moment to identify the most effective strategies against corruption and to reset expectations for future generations of public officials about the limits of behavior that citizens will tolerate.

To this end, anti-corruption activists should avoid alarmist strategies that seek to mobilize citizens by over-emphasizing corruption as a widespread problem. Instead, it’s important to direct concerned citizens to concrete tools for addressing corruption. In Ukraine, for example, where in 2016 and 2017 I conducted dozens of research interviews with activists and public officials as a visiting Fulbright scholar, coalitions of anti-corruption organizations offer online platforms with legal advice and “how to” instructions for responding to extortion and bribes. More broadly, anti-corruption campaigns should emphasize positive trends that draw attention to progress that is being made, rather than to the harm corruption continues to inflict. Such campaigns may be able to harness social norms to their advantage by creating the impression that other citizens are successfully fighting against, not engaging in, corruption.

Similarly, reformers must walk a fine line by holding corrupt officials accountable while avoiding the broad demonization of all public officials. Decent and dedicated public servants are the cornerstone of uncorrupt societies, and anti-corruption efforts should balance criticism of existing bureaucracies with strategies to inspire honest, talented members of society to join the public sector. Programs directed at changing high school and university students’ perceptions about the meaning and desirability of public service could potentially be particularly effective.
Finally, it is important to maintain a pragmatic perspective on corruption. Corruption’s consequences are very real, but the notion that it lies behind all of society’s woes—and the related conclusion that victory over corruption will be followed by a flourishing system of good governance and a booming economy—leads to dangerously unrealistic expectations.

The successes of anti-corruption activists across the globe should be celebrated. But they risk becoming a victim of their own achievements if ubiquitous attention to corruption’s ills is not matched by specific tools for fighting it, if stories of public sector corruption drive idealistic young people from government service instead of inspiring a new generation of future civil servants, and if rising expectations outpace real-world success stories. Recognizing and organizing around the anti-corruption reformer’s dilemma is a first step in avoiding this fate.

Jordan Gans-Morse is an associate professor of political science at Northwestern University and the author of “Property Rights in Post-Soviet Russia: Violence, Corruption, and Demand for Law” (Cambridge University Press, 2017). He was a 2016-2017 Fulbright scholar in Ukraine.

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