



## When do City Governance Structures Prevent Corruption? a Review of Municipal Corruption: From Policies to People

by Kimberly L. Nelson and Whitney B. Afonso. New York: Routledge, 2024, 216 pp., (Paperback), \$42.39 (eBook), \$42.39, ISBN 1032213094

Elizabeth Kane & Shaun Khurana

To cite this article: Elizabeth Kane & Shaun Khurana (06 Mar 2026): When do City Governance Structures Prevent Corruption? a Review of Municipal Corruption: From Policies to People, International Public Management Journal, DOI: [10.1080/10967494.2026.2629540](https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2026.2629540)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2026.2629540>



Published online: 06 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 10



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Municipal Corruption: From Policies to People**, by Kimberly L. Nelson and Whitney B. Afonso. New York: Routledge, 2024, 216 pp., (Paperback), \$42.39 (eBook), \$42.39, ISBN 1032213094

In *Municipal Corruption: From Policies to People*, authors Kimberly L. Nelson and Whitney B. Afonso investigate the institutional conditions associated with fraudulent and illegal behaviors by U.S. city officials (Nelson and Afonso 2024). The book begins by developing and testing hypotheses about what forms of government and local demographic factors predict corruption, based on previous publications (Nelson and Afonso 2019; Afonso and Nelson 2023). Then, they create profiles of instances of corruption in six cities with varying demography, form of government, and oversight structures to develop descriptions of pathways and safeguards against corruption. At the core of this book is a practical orientation backed by the authors' academic journal-style voice and rigorous treatment of multiple data sources on corruption. The authors' findings translate into evidence for which corruption deterrence strategies city governments, of varying resource capacities, may adopt and future research avenues on ethical city governance. These include adopting a council-manager form of government, patching gaps in internal government oversight, boosting public engagement in external community oversight, and encouraging ethical self-regulation via codes in city personnel behaviors (pp. 195–197).

The book's introduction provides a strong case for researching municipal corruption by recounting the history of city governance reforms to break up political machines and strengthen merit-based systems. This history is connected to classic scholarly issues in public personnel management on the relationship between public managers' values and behaviors and democratic representation in bureaucracy. The authors say that despite its infrequency, municipal corruption damages city service delivery capacities through the loss of public dollars to individual city officials' motives for private gain, which have downstream impacts on public budgeting, policy implementation, and citizen wellbeing (p. 1). Faced with the probability of city officials behaving unethically, Nelson and Afonso contend that institutional arrangements, including the local demography and the city's form of government, can safeguard against corruption (p. 4).

Nelson and Afonso carefully distinguish their theoretical expectations for how different institutional arrangements protect cities from corruption in two models: the principal-agent model and the professionalism-performance model (pp. 24–27). The authors use these two models to suggest seven hypotheses about how demographic factors (poverty, unemployment, education, and population size) and the form of government (council-manager, mayor-council, or mayor elected at-large) relate to the probability of corruption (pp. 30–34).

The authors implement a purposeful sequential multi-method design to test their models and develop descriptions of how corruption mitigation works. They first tested their seven hypotheses using a large dataset sourced from U.S. government reports and watchdog organizations, focusing on all U.S. cities with council-manager or mayor-council forms of government that had populations greater than 10,000 from 1990–2020 (p. 42). Quantitative analysis is a clear strength of their journal articles and this book. Chapters 4 and 5 present descriptive statistics and findings estimating the relationship between the form of government and whether a city has a documented corruption event. The data is analyzed using binary logit regression, rare events logit regression, and propensity score matching. They also provide detailed descriptions of their choices in modeling strategies, the intuition behind how modeling works, and why those methods are reliable. Following their quantitative analysis, they develop qualitative profiles of individual corruption events in six cities that vary in their demography, form of government, and oversight processes. The authors' justification for case selection is ideal given their research purpose to describe limitations on form of government as complete intervention to corruption. The cases selected for profiles include

reports of corruption in Jacksonville, FL, New Orleans, LA, Cincinnati, OH, Camden, NJ, Bell, CA, and Dixon, IL. The details of these cases are tied back to the professionalism-performance model across Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11. These analyses provide a more nuanced description of how the combination of oversight, demographics, and form of government variables combine to structure the risk of corruption.

Their quantitative analyses reveal that the binary logit model underestimates the frequency of corruption compared to the rare events logit model, city managers in a council-manager form of government are associated with reduced corruption, and that poverty increases the incidence of corruption (p. 54). Their propensity scores matching analysis yielded the same results, providing consistency of the findings and demonstrating their applicability across a wide range of contexts (p. 80). In their city profiles, Nelson and Afonso detail how each of the six cities demonstrate that no form of government provides complete protection against corruption because of the various ways gaps in oversight appear across different forms of government and local demographics. These oversight gaps share common themes such as unchecked power in executive-level jobs ranging from the Jacksonville Electrical Authority's CEO and CFO to Dixon, Illinois's comptroller, or lack of monitoring in boundary spanning interactions with possible contractors, such as in bribes in New Orleans, LA, and Cincinnati, OH. The profile analyses suggest that by establishing clear monitoring mechanisms, accountability standards, ethical codes, and enforcement procedures, state oversight can help to limit opportunities for misconduct and ensure that local governments adhere to legal and ethical norms.

The discussion of the quantitative analyses offers comprehensive evidence for the theoretical test of the authors' professionalism-performance model but misses an opportunity to engage in middle-range theory development (Merton 1968), especially based in their qualitative findings (Mjøset 2009). The authors open the book by stating that there is not a single theory on the causes and consequences of corruption because of the multi-level and multi-theoretical nature of the phenomenon (p. 17). They also justify choosing to study corruption in governments at the institutional level because of data limitations on observing individual criminality (p. 17). Based on this, we wanted the authors to take the opportunity to inductively coin and propose a public management specific framework or theory on municipal corruption with their findings. Many of the components appear to be present, including theoretically complex constructs focused on how elements of organizational structure shape institutional malfeasance risk. Even without explicit commitments to a theory, we expect future public management studies will cumulatively gather around the perspective offered in this book (Peters and Torfing 2025) to study how management aspects like agency rules, uses of discretion, job design incentives, and oversight shape outcomes like fraud, embezzlement, bribes, and other corruption in government indicators. Overall, the book contributes an important and timely discussion of how city governance structures can mitigate corruption, and further theory development would broaden the impact of the author's work to other public management scholars thinking about accountability and organizational structures to prevent misconduct.

The impact of this book lies in how the authors conceptualize corruption risks through the actionable options of restructuring governance, implementing oversight, and engaging in ethical codes. The case studies are particularly helpful by providing accessible and relevant examples of municipal corruption, demonstrating that no form of government is immune to corruption and oversight is the best course for prevention. In the concluding chapter, the authors synthesize the book's central themes by articulating a set of best practices for effective state oversight of local governments. They contextualize these recommendations within contemporary governance frameworks and illustrate their application to current oversight practices. Additionally, the authors include representative documents and procedural materials, which serve to substantiate abstract principles and offer readers practical insight in operationalizing oversight mechanisms (pp. 170–198). This section of the book would be well suited to the public administration practitioner classroom. Scholars and researchers will find the authors' quantitative analysis chapters especially valuable as assigned readings in research-oriented settings. The authors' use of rare events logit

regression and propensity score matching offers advanced undergraduate and graduate students a clear introduction to the underlying logic of these methods, as well as guidance on assessing the conditions under which each approach is most appropriate. Overall, *Municipal Corruption: From Policies to People* provides value to multiple audiences and makes important strides in understanding managerial solutions to municipal corruption.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the University of Florida IFAS.

## Notes on contributors

*Elizabeth Kane* (ekane@ufl.edu) MPA, is a PhD student at the University of Florida IFAS. Her research program considers nonprofit and public management questions regarding fiscal stewardship and governance.

*Shaun Khurana* (shaunkhurana@ufl.edu) PhD, is an assistant professor at the University of Florida IFAS. His research program considers nonprofit and public management questions regarding administrative burden, performance accountability, and voice in organizations.

## ORCID

Elizabeth Kane  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-2953-5594>

Shaun Khurana  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7153-3993>

## References

- Afonso, W., and K. Nelson. 2023. "Hot Town, Corruption in the City: Assessing the Impact of Form of Government on Corruption Using Propensity Scores." *Public Administration Review* 85(1):73–92. doi:10.1111/puar.13737.
- Merton, R. K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press.
- Mjøset, L. 2009. "The Contextualist Approach to Social Science Methodology." In *The SAGE handbook of case-based methods* (pp. 39–68). London: SAGE.
- Nelson, K. L., and W. B. Afonso. 2019. "Ethics by Design: The Impact of Form of Government on Municipal Corruption." *Public Administration Review* 79(4):591–600. doi:10.1111/puar.13050.
- Nelson, K. L., and W. B. Afonso. 2024. *Municipal Corruption: From Policies to People*. New York: Routledge.
- Peters, B. G., and J. Torfing. 2025. "Theoretical Framing of Public Administration Research." *International Journal of Public Administration* 48(5–6):306–320. doi:10.1080/01900692.2024.2446901.

Elizabeth Kane  and Shaun Khurana   
University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA

 ekane@ufl.edu

 shaunkhurana@ufl.edu

© 2026 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2026.2629540>

