

Corruption: No Longer an Iffy Proposition in Pennsylvania

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The question is no longer a speculative one. No longer can we ask "if" corruption, widespread and systematic, is returning full bloom to Pennsylvania. Instead, it is now time to ask "why" - why after an absence of a quarter of a century, the blight of public corruption has returned to the Keystone State.

Certainly there is no scarcity of evidence to that effect. The sheer number of lawmakers in Pennsylvania alleged, charged, and convicted of public corruption lately is virtually mind numbing. High profile cases like the conviction of Senator Vince Fumo and the indictments against the former number-two House Democrat significantly understate the problem. In recent years, nine other members of the legislature have been convicted of various types of public corruption.

Nor are state lawmakers solo offenders in the growing corruption. Two Luzerne County judges notoriously made national news lately when they admitted accepting more than \$2.5 million in kickbacks and committing income tax invasion in exchange for sending thousands of juveniles to detention centers. Another jurist, a former Superior Court judge bilked an insurance company out of thousands for falsifying an injury in an automobile accident.

The spate of indictments and convictions of state officials raises a question regularly reiterated throughout state history: how do we explain why corrupt and often politically suicidal behavior recurs with such painful prevalence in Pennsylvania?

Is it greed, recklessness, sheer stupidity, or something else that metamorphoses an honest politician into a crook?

A definitive answer to what has become Pennsylvania's perennial question has been elusive. Nevertheless, we can start by examining a number of plausible explanations that have been proffered by leading scholars on corruption - explanations best understood against the cultural and historical patterns unique to Pennsylvania.

Probably none of them alone adequately explains why corruption has returned, but taken together they present a reasonable gestalt of the forces and factors that require understanding before corruption can be stopped.

1. **Greed, Recklessness, and Stupidity** - Unquestionably some corruption can be attributed to good old fashioned human avarice, mixed liberally with a healthy helping of foolhardy arrogance. Some politicians become corrupt because they can. And the cause of some corruption goes no deeper than the human condition originally documented in the Garden of Eden and observed regularly since. It is regrettably but inarguably the case that some politicians will steal if they can. But this doesn't take us very far in understanding why corruption has become more prevalent. For that other factors come into play.
2. **Pennsylvania's Political Culture** - Political cultures imbue politicians with expectations about what practices are tolerated and which are not. Traditionally, the values of Pennsylvania's political culture have been complicit in the episodic bouts of corruption occurring since the Civil War. Labeled "individualist-

entrepreneurial," political scientists have argued that Pennsylvania state politicians are schooled to think of politics as a venue to better themselves rather than making things better. Pennsylvania's political culture, going back to the time of William Penn himself, has encouraged a kind of practical utilitarian approach to public affairs. Consequently, politics comes to be seen as something of a business, and the business of politics includes making money for those in it. This "culture," it is argued, leads to corrupt behavior by too easily tempted politicians.

3. **The Insatiable Need to Raise Campaign Money** - But political culture alone doesn't explain renewed corruption, or the type we are seeing. Even in an atmosphere in which corruption is tolerated there must be both opportunity and motivation for it to happen. One obvious motivation unique to modern politics is the insatiable need to raise campaign money for state legislative races. Pennsylvania now has million dollar state House campaigns - for jobs that pay \$78,000 - in districts representing 60,000 people. The "bonusgate" scandal in which staffers allegedly were paid public monies to work on campaigns is a direct consequence of the pressure on some politicians to raise (or steal) campaign resources.
4. **Pennsylvania's Zero-Sum Legislative Politics** - Driving this feverish push for campaign cash is Pennsylvania's not well understood "zero-sum" legislative politics. In the General Assembly power is concentrated in the hands of the majority caucus. The party that holds a numerical majority in each chamber gets to decide almost anything and everything that matters in state government. In the instant case, that means control over the \$29 billion Pennsylvania budget and virtually every major policy decision made by state government, such as Governor Rendell's health care, energy, and education recommendations and most certainly how the state closes the \$2.3 to \$2.9 billion deficit it faces.

Control of the agenda allows the majority to wield virtually dictatorial power, all of which reduces the minority to mere bystander status. Aggravating this is the current closeness of House control - with one party holding a majority by only a few seats - rendering competition fierce. This situation helps to create a legislature where winning is everything, setting in place an inexorable set of dynamics that explain in part the activities that led to the recent "bonusgate" indictments.

5. **Additional Factors Supporting Corruption** - The short list above is not exhaustive. The Public Integrity Section of the U.S. Department of Justice, studying the causes of corruption across the nation, has identified a number of other factors correlated with corruption. To an uncomfortable degree many of these factors are found in the structure and institutions of Pennsylvania government. Justice has found corruption occurring at much higher rates in states with a large number of local governments. If so this is not good news for residents of the Keystone State - Pennsylvania has one of the largest numbers of local governments in the country.

All of this is helpful in understanding what drives corruption, but what should we do about it? Are there ways to reduce or even eliminate corruption in Pennsylvania? Better and more law enforcement is one response, but that alone doesn't stop corruption from occurring or even increasing. Catching the crooks only after they have stolen the store is not a good long-term strategy. Instead, if we are serious about preventing corruption, we must look to its roots in our political practices and institutions. Doing this will not be easy, but neither has been the burden of corruption so long borne by Pennsylvanians.

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