Tale of Two States
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Dickens begins his classic novel, A Tale of Two Cities, with one of the most quoted lines in all of literature: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Dickens was writing about the turbulent and tempestuous events of the late 18th century. But he could well have been chronicling contemporary New Jersey politics.

A state of vast affluence, cultural achievement, and business vitality, New Jersey, politically speaking, is a mess. The soon to be ex-Governor James McGreevey’s much reported personal troubles are only emblematic of much deeper and more profound problems.

By any measure the extent and scope of corruption found in New Jersey is shocking. Just since 2002, the U.S. Attorney has obtained convictions of 58 New Jersey officials. The state leads the nation in the number of ex-mayors now in federal prison. And ongoing Grand Jury proceedings and U.S. Attorney investigations promise only to add to this sordid record.

Nor is any of this new. The roots of corruption go deep in New Jersey, stretching back to the late 19th century - when great urban political machines built power bases among arriving immigrants by trading jobs and housing for votes on Election Day. Back then most everything was for sale in New Jersey.

Some observers believe it still is. Certainly little has changed to interrupt the tawdry and venal practices of the past: controls on lobbyists are still weak, patronage still thrives, and the search for ready campaign cash still drives New Jersey politicians. Corruption in New Jersey is inexcusable, but it surely is not inexplicable.

Pennsylvania, however, is a different tale. In Pennsylvania government today, official corruption is scarce, dishonest politicians are rare.

The record is not perfect. A former Attorney General, went to jail in the early 1990’s for fund raising corruption, several members of the state legislature have resigned or been convicted, and recently, charges have been brought against several for corrupt practices in Philadelphia. But by and large Pennsylvania politics are relatively clean today. Not since 1979 has there been a major corruption scandal in the executive branch of government.

Why corruption differs markedly between the two states is something of a mystery. Indeed, historically Pennsylvania if anything has been more corrupt than New Jersey.

In fact, the two states even share a “political culture”— described by scholars as “individualistic-entrepreneurial.” In individualistic-entrepreneurial states, politics is typically viewed more as a business opportunity than a civic engagement. Those in politics see public life as more a chance to make a buck that make a difference.
True to this ethos, many Pennsylvania politicians have made more than a few bucks doing the public’s business. Nor did all this happen a long time ago. As recently as the 1970’s, corruption was rife in Pennsylvania.

Kickbacks, fraud, macing, bribery, job selling, and income tax evasions were common charges. During this period, the U.S. Justice Department declared that Pennsylvania was the most corrupt among the 50 states. According to the Philadelphia Bulletin, 238 politicians resigned, were charged or convicted of political corruption charges in Pennsylvania.

But this changed dramatically, beginning about 25 years ago. Today, political corruption in Pennsylvania is no longer accepted or expected as it once was.

But the happy news for Pennsylvania is not so happy for New Jersey. And it also raises some provocative questions. What has changed Pennsylvania politics so markedly in the past quarter century, but not New Jersey?

Many factors can be cited, but three stand out as explanations for the divergent paths taken by the two states:

- **Political patronage**—the practice of using government jobs to build political power—differs significantly between the two states.
- **Executive leadership**—Pennsylvania governors have been much more proactive against corruption than have New Jerseys.
- **Electoral consequences**—Pennsylvania voters seem ready to vote against corruption, while New Jersey voters have not consistently done so.

**PATRONAGE**—In Pennsylvania, traditional patronage practices inspired much of the earlier corruption. Now, it is largely gone, the victim of civil service reforms and collective bargaining agreements. Locally, the notorious “court house gangs” have disappeared or are mere shells of their former existence. In Pennsylvania, patronage is no longer a major cause of corrupt behavior.

New Jersey, however, is a different story. There, traditional patronage appointments continue. And locally patronage jobs still build political power. Moreover, in New Jersey modern patronage has been extended to “pay to play” quid pro quo arrangements for government contracts and other preferments. Governor McGreevey’s troubles apparently began when he used a patronage appointment unwisely.

**EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**—Pennsylvania’s last four administrations featured governors who would not tolerate corruption. It began in 1979 with former federal prosecutor Republican Dick Thornburgh, who first was elected in a corruption-busting campaign and then ran a squeaky-clean eight-year administration. Democrat Bob Casey followed Thornburgh for eight years, and he also finished his two terms without major corruption as did his successors Republicans Tom Ridge and Mark Schweiker, and to-date Democratic Governor Ed Rendell.

These governors differed enormously in personality and policies. But they all agreed that the age of boddle was really over in Pennsylvania—and that corruption would no longer be tolerated.
New Jersey has not been so fortunate with its governors. One writer to the New York Times recently put it: “(It should be clear) that America's most powerful governor's office has become its most problematic.” To be fair, few if any of New Jersey’s recent governors have been personally corrupt. Indeed, some have been exceptionally able.

But, even those governors who were not participants in the corruption themselves did nothing to root out the underlying conditions that allowed it to persist. They did little to break it up. It can be said with respect to corruption that Pennsylvania governors decided to be part of the solution; whereas, New Jersey governors, even when not part of the problem, have neither been part of the solution.

ELECTORAL CONSEQUENCES--Finally, corruption has declined in Pennsylvania because the politicians of Pennsylvania now know that the people of Pennsylvania will retaliate electorally against parties and politicians that practice it. That was the lesson of Dick Thornburgh’s victory in 1978, and a lesson remembered by Bob Casey in the 1980’s and Tom Ridge in the 1990’s. That understanding is now deeply embedded in the political psyche of Pennsylvania politicians. Voters are now likely to punish at the polls any party or any politician that is shown to be pervasively corrupt.

New Jersey voters have sent no such compelling message. Certainly, some prime issues have energized the Garden State’s voters during past statewide contests, especially with debates over property taxes, auto insurance, and even racial profiling. Voters unhappy with Trenton decisions or decision-makers have roughed up both Republicans and Democrats.

But no recent governor has run against corruption and neither party has taken any significant lumps over the corruption issue. The voters of New Jersey may care about the corruption issue. It’s unlikely however, that New Jersey politicians will take them very seriously, until corruption costs them at the polls.

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