

BUILD TRUST BY FIGHTING CORRUPTION

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Attacks on government find resonance with the public not just because of claims that bureaucrats can't do anything right or wield too much power, but also because of a widespread belief that public officials have selfish motives. That's a big problem. As Bill Galston points out elsewhere in this forum, Americans need to see public leaders as competent and responsive in order to trust them—but also as having *integrity*. While making government work better may be the most important step in rebuilding trust, it is also crucial that progressives mount a new attack on corruption in government—and get credit for the successes we have already had in this area.

None of this will be easy.

Political corruption has loomed large in the news over the past few years, with a seemingly unending string of scandals—from Jack Abramoff to Charles Rangel. These high-profile scandals, along with an avalanche of smaller cases around the country, reinforce some of the public's worst fears about government officials.

While politics is less corrupt than in most past eras, when political machines filled the public sector with cronies, there is still plenty of corruption and, at times, this issue can drive political outcomes. Public concerns about corruption following the Abramoff affair played a decisive role in helping the Democrats retake Congress in 2006 and this issue strongly influenced several recent governor races. In some states, corruption has been a ubiquitous topic in recent years, including Alabama (where four state legislators were recently arrested for taking bribes and where a former governor was convicted on corruption charges in 2006); Alaska (where six state legislators have been sentenced in felonies in the past three years); California (where a cabal of public officials looted the city of Bell); Connecticut (where a former governor, John Rowland, recently served prison time); Florida (which leads the nation in public corruption cases and where scandals have roiled Palm Beach County); Illinois (where one former governor, George Ryan, is serving prison time and another, Rod Blagojevich, is trying to stay out of prison); Louisiana (where former governor Edward Edwards recently completed a nine-year prison sentence for a host of crimes); Michigan (where former Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick has been charged with dozens of felonies); New Jersey (where 44 people, including three mayors and two state legislators, were arrested for corruption in 2009); New York (where a number of top political leaders including a former state comptroller and former Senate Majority Leader have faced federal charges); and Tennessee, (where four state legislators were nailed on federal charges of accepting bribes). Corruption has also shaken Capitol Hill, as a slew of legislators have faced serious charges or been destroyed by scandal—Rangel, Tom DeLay, Ted Stevens, Duke Cunningham, Maxine Waters, John Ensign, and more. In 2009 alone, federal authorities charged **1,082 individuals across the nation in corruption cases involving the public sector and convicted another 1,061.**¹

¹ <http://www.justice.gov/criminal/pin/docs/arpt-2009.pdf>

The constant stream of corruption stories over the past few years comes on top of decades of high-profile political corruption cases including Watergate, Abscam (which sent six members of Congress to prison), the Keating Five, the House banking scandal (which led to charges against six members of Congress), the Congressional Post Office scandal and conviction of Dan Rostenkowski, the fall of House Speakers Jim Wright and then Newt Gingrich for ethical transgressions, and the appointment of six Independent Counsels during the 1990s who investigated not just Bill and Hillary Clinton, but also Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy, HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros, and others. Did I miss anything? Oh, yes: The conviction of numerous lesser known federal officials of serious crimes, like Congressional members David Durenberger, Jim Traficant, Charles Diggs, and William Jefferson. There was also the Iran-Contra scandal, which kept Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh busy for seven years and resulted in charges against a number of high-level government officials.

We live in an age of political scandal and it has taken a toll. When [Gallup asked respondents](#)² in a poll last October to use one word to describe government, “corrupt” was one of the top three words used. Incompetence at the proverbial DMV office is one sure way to turn Americans off to government. The recurrent spectacle of public officials heading off to prison is surely another.

Progressives are schizophrenic when it comes to corruption. At one level, we are fierce opponents of corruption and since the 1960s liberal reformers have sought to ferret out all kinds of abuses in the public sector. It is liberals who have led efforts to crack down on the poisonous effects of campaign money and insidious “revolving door” ties with industry. It is liberals who tend to blow the whistle most loudly about cronyism or the abuses of private contractors working for government. And it is progressive watchdog groups—like the PIRGS or the Center for Responsive Government—that have led the charge for stronger ethics rules, at both the national and state level, that limit the gifts and perks that public officials can receive. Looking back to earlier eras, it was progressive reformers who promoted modern civil service systems to professionalize government and insulate it from political patronage.

But there is another, less flattering side to the story. Progressives have often been inconsistent or opportunistic when it comes to spotlighting corruption and, worse, tolerant of corrupt practices and leaders. We are happy to expose wrongdoing by Republicans—think of the glee about the recent conviction of Tom DeLay—but tend to be ambivalent about cases within our own ranks. One reason that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi didn’t force Charles Rangel from his chairmanship of the House Ways and Means Committee early on was because there was no strong demand that she do so from either the party’s base or the liberal commentariat. If a Republican chair of Ways and Means had been accused of the same gross violations of ethics, progressive bloggers would have eaten him or her alive. Thanks to Pelosi’s passivity, the drawn-out Rangel saga no doubt reinforced the view of many Americans that public officials lack integrity—and just in time for the mid-term election.

Beyond a partisan reflex to defend our own leaders, progressives can go easy on corruption because we don’t like beating up on government, which has enough powerful enemies already. That may seem to make sense, except that it often renders us mute on issues that concern the public and should concern progressive reformers. Earmarks are one example.

² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/143492/Americans-Image-Federal-Government-Mostly-Negative.aspx>

You might think that a movement ostensibly committed to accountable government would go after secret and often wasteful pet projects of powerful legislators. Instead, progressives have tended to pooh-pooh earmarks as small change in a huge budget and have let the Tea Party frame this issue as part of a broader argument about why public officials can't be trusted.

Another example is the flagrant abuse of pension rules that have allowed some public servants to retire with outsized pensions based on inflated salary histories. This is an inexcusable practice that drains resources away from other public priorities. Also disturbing are the deceptive accounting practices that state officials have used to play down pension obligations or the "pay-for-play" deals these officials have struck with investment funds. But you won't find much mention of these abuses on say, the DailyKos or in a Bob Herbert column. We are, it seems, happy to let Fox News monopolize such issues and cast them in the worst possible light.

A final reason that the progressive coalition isn't great about calling out corruption is that Democrats are too closely linked to interests involved in corruption. In an earlier era, the alleged monkey business around the government bailout of Wall Street might have been seized on by Democratic leaders. But today Democrats are so closely tied to Wall Street that it is hard for them to take on political corruption involving the financial sector and so this issue was left to Tea Party activists. (Andrew Cuomo's prosecution of New York State Comptroller Alan Hevesi for receiving kickbacks from investment funds is a notable exception.) A similar story holds around wrongdoing by public sector employees. Quite apart from the liberal reflex to defend career public servants, many Democrats are hesitant to cross public sector unions, who rank as the largest and most loyal contributors to party committees and candidates, as well to 527s that work for Democratic victories. Sure, padded pensions may be outrageous, but is saying that publicly worth ticking off AFSCME? Maybe not.

Liberals may have largely invented modern oversight of the public sector and may have led efforts to get money out of politics, but we only episodically get credit for fostering good government. Worse, we are routinely caricatured as the defenders of public servants who are more interested in serving their own interests than the public interest.

Fairly or not, many Americans wonder why they should trust Democrats to expand government when Democrats seem to have little interest in stopping corruption within the public sector. And many may believe that Republicans, with their intense skepticism of government, will do a better job at rooting out corruption. A Gallup poll in 2010 found that the public trusted Republicans slightly more than Democrats to attack corruption. In truth, of course, the exact opposite is true. Republican policies, as we have seen again and again, lead to greater corruption by letting private actors—lobbyists, contractors, donors—wield more power over policymaking, all but ensuring cronyism and conflicts of interest.

Democrats are likely to find themselves at a more marked disadvantage on the corruption issue over the next two years. House Republicans, led by Darrell Issa, are orchestrating a wide-ranging investigation into alleged malfeasance within the Obama Administration—which Issa fatuously called "one of the most corrupt" in history. Even if most of Issa's fishing expedition turns up very little, you can count on the conservative propaganda machine to make the most of whatever misdeeds are discovered—even if the seeds of such corruption date back to the Bush years. As we know, the Republican Party has no compunction about

using investigations of even petty crimes to achieve political advantages that then can be used for more substantive ends. More broadly, of course, the right has long pursued a deliberate strategy of fostering distrust of government by portraying public officials as selfish, incompetent, and arrogant.

Progressives need a clear strategy for combating corruption in government. We also need to better market all the strides that reformers have made in ensuring the higher integrity of public officials. These efforts should complement many of the other suggestions made in this forum. Here's what a progressive strategy on corruption, integrity, and trust might look like:

Take Corruption Seriously

Democrats and progressives need to show that they care about corruption in government by more forthrightly addressing and condemning this problem. Outside of the good government groups, there is surprisingly little work or discussion about corruption by progressive think tanks or public intellectuals. That must change. The progressive reform tradition, along with current efforts by the PIRGs and other watchdogs, must be integrated into a broader progressive narrative about how government can advance the common good. Meanwhile, progressives need to show far less tolerance of corruption in their own ranks. Progressives undermine trust in government when they allow someone like Charlie Rangel to hold on to a top leadership position in the face of overwhelming evidence of unethical conduct. If Democratic leaders won't act in these cases, they should be pressured to act. Taking corruption seriously is especially important in terms of winning the allegiance of moderate voters. During his first two years in office, Bill Clinton failed to channel the deep public concerns about corruption among Perot voters—for instance, by pursuing campaign finance reform—and paid a steep price. Obama, it turns out, made a similar mistake and must now move to repair the damage.

Resurrect Campaign Finance Reform

For a period, money in politics was near the forefront of the progressive narrative about how to fix government and the nation more broadly. But campaign finance reform receded as an issue for progressives after the passage of McCain-Feingold and new Democratic successes at raising boatloads of money from wealthy donors like George Soros. *Citizens United* pushed this issue back onto the progressive and congressional agenda, but it's not a hugely popular cause for elected Democrats who are more entwined with large donors than ever before. It's tricky, to say the least, for such leaders to mount a hard-hitting case that money corrupts public officials – even though such arguments resonate with the public, including moderates and Tea Party types. Progressive advocates and alternative media need to step into the vacuum here and resurrect campaign finance as a central issue. The recent launch of Free Speech for People, a new effort dedicated to amending the Constitution to allow for better regulation of campaign spending, is a welcome development.

Target Lobbyists

In today's political system, lobbyists often serve as the middlemen between interested money and public officials. And, not surprisingly, lobbyists are often at the center of cases of corruption. For example, in the recent scandal in Alabama it was lobbyists who actually did

the dirty work of handling bribe offers. Progressive reformers have already worked mightily to better regulate lobbying and bring this shadowy industry into the open. But much more needs to be done, especially at the state level. And we need to get credit for the successes that we had. Ordinary Americans understand that lobbyists often corrupt the democratic process and progressives need to more effectively channel these sentiments.

Crack Down on Private Contractors

One of the bitter ironies of corruption in the public sector is that private companies are often the real culprits. For example, while recent headlines trumpeted the news that New York City had lost \$80 million in a fraud involving a new computerized payroll system, you needed to dig into the story to find that one of the biggest government contractors in the country—SAIC—was deeply implicated in abusive practices, presiding over hundreds of millions of dollars in cost overruns on the project and failing to properly oversee consultants. You see this same pattern in Iraq and Afghanistan. Americans who hear that billions of dollars in reconstruction aid has been wasted in war zones may chalk this up as one more example of government incompetence, when in fact it is corrupt private contractors—often with strong ties to power elites—who squandered the money. Cracking down on contractors isn't easy, because many of these firms do work that few other companies can do. But reforms in this area can save billions, reduce high-profile scandals, and clean up corruption in government that is not actually perpetrated by public officials.

Be Independent of Public Sector Unions

Just because progressives believe in government doesn't mean that we will always agree with public sector unions. While these unions play a crucial role in battling for greater resources for government and getting Democrats elected, they are still an interest group with an agenda that may at times put them at odds with good government progressives. If reformers feel they can never cross such unions, they will be less effective in ensuring that public officials act with integrity and are held accountable. Public sector unions, in turn, won't do their members any good over the long term if they try to muzzle Democrats who want to clean up corruption in the public sector.

Progressives can't rebuild trust in government without taking on the issue of corruption. This will be uncomfortable work at times, but it is essential—and not just for image reasons. Corruption drains the public sector of resources that are badly needed and perpetuates inefficiencies in government that harm its performance. A century ago, progressive reformers understood that cleaning up the public sector was essential to making it a more effective agent of change. Things are far better today, thanks in large part to liberal reformers who took up this mission again starting in the 1960s. Now it's time to once more renew this core pillar of the progressive/liberal tradition.