

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Corruption of “Corruption”

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## Abstract

Our contemporary understanding of political corruption draws from two different sources, a modern view that corruption occurs where officials follow improper procedures and a more ancient view of corruption as a systemic failure to live up to political ideals. The ability to shift between these views makes it easy for political partisans to locate corruption where it suits their political interests. Since accusations of corruption easily become challenges to the legitimacy of officeholders and institutions, there is danger in carelessness with the language of corruption. Awareness of these circumstances should lead us to be cautious with the language of corruption and to resist its slide toward becoming a mere means of political struggle.

**Keywords:** Corruption; Political Philosophy

The language of corruption looks increasingly like a casualty of American politics. To take a recent example, soon after Kamala Harris became the presumptive nominee, a story resurfaced that Donald Trump had donated a total of 6000 dollars to Harris’s successful election campaigns for the office of the Attorney General of the State of California. Asked to comment, Trump’s campaign spokesman Steven Cheung responded, “At that time, some 15 years ago, President Trump was a global businessman and knew how to play the game and win the game with corrupt politicians like Kamala Harris.”<sup>1</sup> This justification raises questions. If a politician counts as corrupt for taking a private campaign donation, is the donor also corrupt? Or are they both constrained by a corrupt system? Would that excuse them both? But Trump’s donations to Harris were legal under a system of campaign financing that has withstood challenges in courts. By what standard then is anything here corrupt?

Cheung’s rhetoric was moderate in comparison to that of Trump, who routinely calls his opponents “crooked.” Such language may seem artless and reflexive but it mirrors public attitudes. Before Biden’s exit from the campaign, polling showed that roughly seven in ten Americans registered as Democrats or Republicans considered the opposing party’s presidential candidate too corrupt to be fit for office.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the acrimonious House Committee on Oversight and Accountability probed the candidates’ affairs for evidence of corruption, while each side rejected the other’s investigation as politically motivated.

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<sup>1</sup> Bisset, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Bump, 2024.

Trump's ongoing legal troubles have fueled the perception of corruption on both sides. He has been found guilty of several charges, notably of falsifying business records to cover up reimbursement of his attorney for hush money payments made during the 2016 election. Another prosecution, for appropriating documents sensitive to national security, was dismissed by a judge who owes her appointment to the defendant. Trump is still indicted for attempting to subvert the 2020 election, and more cases may come. It remains to be seen how these proceedings will be affected by a ruling from a Supreme Court split along party lines that presidents are immune from prosecution for actions within their "sphere of constitutional authority." Yet it is already clear that many Americans regard some cross-section of these investigations, prosecutions, convictions, or judicial rulings as moves in a struggle for power. So, not just politicians but officials responsible for stopping political corruption stand accused of corruption, often in harsh terms. Politically engaged Americans readily call a candidate a crook or conman, a prosecutor or judge a partisan hack, or say the entire political system is rigged.

The danger here is that charges of corruption can become challenges to legitimacy. As the philosopher Bernard Williams points out, even those who believe politics to be fundamentally about power and not values must recognize that citizens do not see politics that way.<sup>3</sup> We believe there is a difference between mere power which can make us bend, and legitimate authority, to which we yield for a good reason. When we deny the legitimacy of power, we claim the right to resist, to fight back with power, if we can. We deny this legitimacy when we say corrupt officials are unfit for office, corrupt decisions are not binding, corrupt rules need not be followed, and corrupt institutions do not deserve our loyalty. So, much is at stake today in what we mean by "corruption" in politics.

Can we arrive at a common understanding? Some may think that is unattainable because what counts as politically corrupt is changing, politically contested, and can only be settled through the contest. This is not obviously right, although it is hard to get a clear view on the subject. Political theorists prefer definitions, but citizens mostly rely on examples. Taking bribes, stuffing ballot boxes, and using campaign contributions as personal assets are paradigm examples of corruption, but then whether Trump's phone calls to the Georgia Secretary of State or his attorney's payments to an actress look like the paradigms depends on what we recognize or ignore in the details of the cases. Standard definitions of corruption such as "abuse of public office for private gain" are too narrow and vague to guide us beyond uncontroversial examples. Social scientists, for their part, mostly avoid the question by measuring corruption indirectly through perceptions, that is through polling public and expert opinions. For example, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) rates countries on a 100-point scale. The lower the score, the higher the level of perceived corruption. The United States currently ranks 24th in the world behind Canada and countries in Northwestern Europe. During the Trump administration, the United States CPI score dropped from 76 to 67, while under Biden it rose only slightly to 69. This is instructive, but the CPI does not reveal what gets perceived as corruption.

Perhaps though, our difficulty is not that we lack an informative definition but that most of us have internalized potentially conflicting views. In fact, there are two distinguishable sides to our common understanding of political corruption and they have different origins. One of them is modern and the other ancient. One focuses on political procedures, on how

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, 2005.

officeholders act, and the other on political systems and their social consequences. By retracing these two views, we may be able to recognize their tension within our own thinking and better understand why it is so easy for politically engaged Americans to see politicians as corrupt.

The modern procedural view about corruption sprang from the thought of liberal political philosophers since John Locke and took shape by the nineteenth century after large professional bureaucracies became essential to the functioning of government in Western industrialized liberal democracies. In these states, governing is the work of officeholders, some elected but most unelected. Their powers and responsibilities are set by rules, including laws and explicit regulations but also uncodified norms or expectations of propriety. These rules require them to treat citizens as political equals and to respect their basic rights. Corruption, in this view, happens when officeholders violate such rules in order to serve their personal or factional interests.

The more ancient view is that political corruption is a condition of civil societies that are unhealthy or fall short of an ideal. Aristotle's discussion of the types of Greek city-states in his *Politics* is a classic source for this view.<sup>4</sup> According to Aristotle, there are two ways to identify corruption. The first is to consider whether individuals lead flourishing lives. An ideal state provides citizens the best chance to become both happy and virtuous, while a corrupt state reduces citizens to misery and vice. The second way is to consider the competing interests of social classes. Here, Aristotle is concerned about the conflict between the few and the many, the educationally and economically advantaged elite, and the more numerous, poorer working class. An ideal democracy, for Aristotle, avoids conflict by balancing the interests of the few and the many and serving both. In contrast, an oligarchy is corrupt because it serves the few and neglects the many, while a radical form of democracy is corrupt because it serves the many to the disadvantage of the few. The ancient view also allows not just societies but individual political actors to count as corrupt on the basis of the social consequences of their actions. So, for example, the contemporary Aristotelian conservative political theorist Patrick Deneen criticizes liberal elites as corrupt for pursuing policies that promote vice as well as economic inequality.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, there is trouble with both views. The ancient opposition between corrupt and ideal states raises suspicion in modern minds. Even if we agree with Aristotle that a state should promote the happiness and virtue of its citizens, modern people prefer to decide for themselves how to be happy and virtuous and they resent others stepping in to decide in their behalf. In contrast, the modern view of corruption as improper procedure remains neutral about what is an ideal state, but this advantage is unstable. If corruption could only happen when an official breaks an explicit rule, it could be eliminated just by rewriting the rules. In Hungary, for example, officials distribute government funds without a competitive bidding process straight to vendors with close ties to political leaders. The practice is legal, but that should not stop critics from calling it corrupt. When they do, they may appeal to norms of liberal democratic government as the spirit behind the letter of the rules. Inevitably though, this spirit is an ideal. If on the other hand, they condemn corrupt officials for failure to serve the public interest or the common good, they also step toward the ancient view, although the ideal stays indefinite.

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Deneen, 2023.

Each of these views captures something important about what “corruption” means, but holding them together allows us to shift focus back and forth between individual actions and the embedding systems, between rules and outcomes. We may reasonably find it hard to decide which view of corruption matters more in a particular case. That makes it easy to shift views as suits our partisan preferences. Easy, but not fair. When we consider campaign financing, do we fault a system or its political actors? The politicians and donors we admire negotiate the same system as those we despise. So, whatever excuses one should excuse the others. To take another example, how do we regard a proposal to reclassify a large part of the federal workforce in order to replace career bureaucrats with political appointees? How, on the other hand, do we regard a proposal to reform appointments and terms of Supreme Court justices? We may argue that nothing is corrupt if the positions are properly filled and the officeholders follow the rules or we may argue that a system that regularly produces foul results requires reform. But we should resist shifting arguments depending on whether we support the officeholders or favor the consequences of their decisions for our own political faction.

During the U. S. presidential election of 2024, many partisan voters have become mistrustful of the opposing side and fearful of the consequences of losing. Many Americans are primed to doubt the legitimacy of political processes and decisions. Under such conditions, how can we prevent the language of corruption from degenerating until it is just an arm for political struggle? To start, we can recognize the conflicting ways in which we tend to think about corruption and acknowledge that accusations of corruption can undermine the legitimacy of institutions and officeholders. Beyond that, we can consider three suggestions about how to hold back the slide.

We may try to loosen the ties in our minds between corruption and legitimacy. Calling something “corrupt” is always a form of condemnation, but in many times and places, there is a high threshold of popular tolerance. Hungary under the leadership of Viktor Orbán has a CPI score of 42, the lowest in the European Union, and most Hungarians perceive their government and politicians as corrupt. However, as scholars such as Zsuzsanna Szelényi have documented, in spite of significant opposition to the regime, a strong majority of Hungarians consider corruption wrong and regrettable without delegitimizing their political system, the ruling party, or its leaders.<sup>6</sup> Plausibly, a major reason for this attitude is that many Hungarians link the political legitimacy of their government to the sovereign independence of their nation which was occupied or controlled by foreign powers for much of its history. In America, in contrast, the threshold of tolerance seems to be dropping, at least when the opposing party is under scrutiny. Some American conservatives, notably Republican vice-presidential nominee J. D. Vance, point to Hungary as a political model. Well, this is one Hungarian political tendency we could emulate. Just to be clear, the suggestion is not to tolerate more corruption but to recognize the legitimacy of institutions and officeholders that fall short of our ideals.

We may also try to moderate our accusations, staying within a safe zone near uncontroversial examples. A suggestion like this comes from Mark Philp, a political philosopher especially perceptive of the tensions and dangers involved in thinking about corruption.<sup>7</sup> According to Philp, we should only hold politicians to standards that fit the practical constraints they are under. Because politicians gain and maintain their offices by satisfying

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<sup>6</sup> Szelényi, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Philp, 2018.

their supporters, we cannot expect them to remain neutral on controversial questions of value or to serve citizens equally as we expect from career bureaucrats. So, Philp claims we “overreach” when we call politicians or donors corrupt for financing political campaigns in the way that is legal in the United States, even if we find the results of this system contrary to justice or the public good.

Philp’s caution is reasonable, but there is also at least one way in which we would do well to extend what we count as corrupt. The ancient view linking corruption to public vice still has something to teach us, if we recognize there are some virtues and vices most of our fellow citizens can agree upon. Consider the virtue of truthfulness, fundamental to so many good behaviors, valuable activities, and meaningful relationships. In our personal lives, we expect people we care about to be truthful with us and when truthfulness breaks down, we feel betrayed. How do our attitudes toward political speech compare? That it seems naïve to complain about lack of truthfulness in politics only demonstrates the extent of the difference. But there is no good reason to accept that truthfulness matters less in politics than elsewhere. A serious concern for truthfulness should shape our expectations not just of politicians nor even the press but also the voting public. It would require not us not just reject to lying and demagoguery, but also willful ignorance, selective use of evidence, and the taste for entertainment in place of public reasoning. As accusations of corruption have become routine performances in a candidate’s repertoire, many Americans not only tolerate but imitate and seem to enjoy this, while others respond in kind. We know this is untruthful. It is also dangerous when people consider corruption to be politically delegitimizing and their understanding of corruption already makes it easy to shift views and locate corruption where it serves their political purposes. Strange as it may initially seem, we should view the corruption of the language of corruption itself as a significant form of political corruption.

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