

Article: “From Thucydides to Mayor Daley: Bad Politics, and a Culture of Corruption?”

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From Thucydides to Mayor Daley: Bad Politics, and a Culture of Corruption?

I. A Sour Political Season

“Don’t Vote—It Only Encourages Them!”

The words appeared on a chalkboard outside a London pub the day after Margaret Thatcher called the 1987 general election, but they might just as well be the motto of half or more of the American electorate in 2006 as well. Deep into a midterm election campaign in a time of war and economic worries—a campaign that could change control of one or, conceivably, both houses of Congress, and that will set the stage for the next presidential election—disenchanted voters far outnumber political enthusiasts. Between 60–70% of poll respondents say the country is “on the wrong track,” and roughly the same percentages say they are “dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States.”¹ “Wrong track” responses are more common among non-registered voting-age respondents than in the population as a whole.² Neither party in Congress enjoys a net positive assessment by the public.³ The Pew Research Center regularly

asks, “Regardless of how you feel about your own representative, would you like to see most members of Congress reelected in the next congressional election, or not?” In June of this year 29% answered “yes” and 57% “no”—a major change from October of 2000 when 40% said “yes” and 34% responded “no.”⁴ Despite these levels of apparent alienation, and the sizeable stakes in play this year, there are few signs that voter turnout in 2006 will rise above the dismal levels traditionally associated with midterm federal elections.

Voter disillusionment is nothing new, in itself, and it very likely has diverse causes, some of them immediate and short-term. An intractable war, an unpopular president, and a divided, even feckless, opposition party are an unpromising recipe for vibrant, enthusiastic political participation. But longer-running forces are at work too. For two generations now voters have been urged to vote for “change”—whatever that may mean to them—yet, while the outcomes of elections manifestly do matter, few voters see much connection between the votes they cast and the changes they seek or get. Indeed, the changes that elections do produce

rarely if ever appear as clear-cut choices during a campaign; instead, many issues and appeals—particularly “culture-war” issues—are deployed for strategic or tactical reasons rather than as serious designs for policy.⁵ Such campaigns and appeals come and go, and yet in important ways the political universe changes relatively little: re-election rates in the House of Representatives run as high as 98%, and a quarter to a third of House incumbents in a typical year face only token opposition or none at all. Doing the same thing repeatedly with the expectation of different results is a popular definition of madness; voting for “change” only to see the same faces return to power will be seen by at least some voters as unrewarding. Incumbents are not necessarily bad people, and there are numerous good reasons why they might be re-elected. Still, any political system weighted heavily in favor of incumbents is likely to have problems of accountability, at least at the level of perceptions.

A “culture of corruption”?

But another factor contributing to the view that the nation is “on the wrong track” is the sense, felt by many, that the political system and those entrusted with running it have become deeply corrupt. That issue is a common theme in popular political discussions but deserves more attention here. Compared to our colleagues in other countries, and in other fields such as economics, American political science as an institutionalized discipline has remained steadfastly uninterested in corruption issues for generations. High-quality work by American political scientists does appear, sometimes with a primary focus on corruption itself and sometimes as part of more general research on various political systems, but political science job descriptions, conferences, sections, and panels with specific corruption themes remain very much the exception in this country, and corruption cannot really be termed a recognized subfield of the discipline. Possible explanations abound: the normative and public-service dimensions of the issue may make it seem “unscientific” or unprofessional; those who study corruption are too easily (and wrongly) dismissed as scandal chasers looking at current events rather than at

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issues of theoretical significance; and corruption may seem—wrongly, again—to be a problem mostly “out there,” in countries with warmer climates and weaker institutions. But this blind spot in American political science research is unfortunate for many reasons. Anti-corruption reform, after all, is a deep-rooted part of our political history and culture (Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996). Our profession originated in a desire to bring research to bear upon the problems of democratic life—one of which, then and now, is corruption. A look at corruption may help us understand some of the forces sustaining the current malaise in politics.

II. Appearances Matter

Our corruption problem is not exactly the one we are told we have. Fears that campaign contributions and the power of wealth—both economic and cultural—have turned politics into an auction are oversimplified and largely misplaced. Instead, the problem is one of perceptions, and of values that may or may not be shared by citizens and those who aspire to lead them. It is a problem that harks back to some ancient views on the nature of corruption; and it is one about which the public has some important things to tell us.

Consider, again, a few survey findings: 66% of those responding to an ABC News poll in May, 2006, rated “the ethics and honesty of members of Congress” as either “not so good” or “poor,” a result worrisome enough in its own right but actually a modest *improvement* over responses from December, 2005.⁶ Asked to rate the ethics of their own House members, 36% responded “not so good” or “poor”; and as to whether one major party or the other seemed “better” in terms of ethics and honesty, 72% of respondents said there “isn’t much difference.”⁷ An April, 2006, *USA Today*/Gallup survey found that 42% of respondents expressed “not much” confidence in the ability of Congress to hold its members to high ethical standards, and 44% said the same of Congress’s ability to pass meaningful legislation dealing with its ethical problems.⁸ Not surprisingly, concern over the effects of campaign contributions and the activities of lobbyists runs deep: Fox News/Opinion Dynamics found in early 2006 that 65% of respondents agreed that “most elected officials in Washington make policy decisions or take actions as a direct result of money they receive from major campaign contributors.”⁹

These opinion results are not just reactions to revelations about such figures as lobbyist Jack Abramoff or Rep. William “Cold Cash” Jefferson (D-LA). In a way such views are all the more worrisome because they do *not* attach to any one leader, party, or episode whose influence on opinion might eventually fade. Instead, they may well tell us that something more basic about the system is broken—or, not the same thing but still significant, that basic aspects of leadership and citizenship are in decline. Most people base their judgments of the presence or absence of corruption not so much on formal-legal rules as on a range of standards and equivocations learned in everyday life (Johnston 1991; 1986). In the United States, where such social standards do not diverge from legal frameworks as dramatically as they do elsewhere, legality does matter, but so do more diffuse conceptions of such basic values as openness, honesty, fair play, and personal honor. Thus a surprisingly large slice of activity, both public and private, can be legal *and* corrupt as people perceive it. For example, ABC News and the *Washington Post* asked, in 2001, whether “politicians do special favors for people and groups who give them campaign contributions”; 80% of respondents said “yes, often,” and 13% said “yes, sometimes.” Of those giving either response, 67% said such favors are “a big problem.” An interesting contrast emerged in that group: 74% judged such favors “unethical,” but only 46% of those respon-

dents saw them as “illegal,” and 48% said they were “legal” (Pollingreport.com 2004). A significant share of the population apparently believes current laws not only fail to prevent, but actually permit, what they regard as unethical behavior.

III. An Older View of Corruption

Whether or not public perceptions are accurate—and in important respects they are not—if a solid majority of citizens in a representative democracy holds such views, then that democracy has a significant corruption problem. Understanding that problem requires a look back to a time before the rise of the liberal state, when most thinkers understood corruption differently. We are accustomed to viewing corruption as a property of a specific action, process, person, or group, but there was a time when it was seen as a collective state of being. Whole societies could and did become corrupt: recall Thucydides’ critique of the Athenians’ invasion of Melos, a decision that cast all Athens, and not just its leaders, into a state of lost virtue and moral disrepute.¹⁰ In the process leaders’ claims to rule, citizens’ reasons or obligations to follow, and indeed the morality of an entire political order were called into question. Much more recently, in an excellent discussion of those issues, Dobel summed up the corruption of a state as the loss of a capacity for loyalty (Dobel 1978, 960; see also Euben 1978)—a problem far transcending specific actions that might or might not violate a law.

Tempting as it is, on both theoretical and practical grounds, to avoid such sweeping judgments of today’s immensely complex governments and political systems, that sort of classical (for want of a better term) outlook on corruption is not dead by any means. Elements of it are on view, to varying degrees, in the opinion results discussed above, and even more convincingly (if more diffusely) in the public’s discontent about politics and ethics generally. For many citizens, as we have seen, illegality is in many respects beside the point: current laws either fail to prevent, or permit, what they regard as bribery, influence trading, and a whole style of government by leaders who “don’t care about people like me” and have become “out of touch” (both phrases being hardy perennials in opinion research, and both continuing to draw substantial amounts of agreement). With respect to loyalty, low voter turnout, dissatisfaction with current parties and electoral choices, and the widespread if diffuse conviction that wealth now dominates democratic institutions in unprecedented ways are not promising indications.

IV. So, Let’s Have Some Reform ... ?

Precisely how strong such trends have become, and how much of a threat they pose to the wellbeing of American politics, is impossible to say with precision. But one upshot is that our historically most favored response—to engage in the various sorts of institutional tinkering, tweaking, and innovation we generally call “reform”—is unlikely to be of much help. If illegality is not the issue, and if the public puts little trust in those who write the laws to come up with better ones, reforms will miss the heart of the “classical” corruption that afflicts us. Indeed, if done wrong such reforms may only make matters worse.

Consider, as one example, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA), known during its long journey through several Congresses as the McCain-Feingold-Cochrane Bill. It is the most extensive revision of federal campaign finance law since the Federal Election Campaign Act and amendments of the 1970s, and was portrayed by its advocates as a major, long-overdue reform response to a large, and at times shifting, set of concerns. Those issues included “soft money” (unlimited donations made to political party organizations, ostensibly for

party-building and get-out-the-vote activities, as opposed to “hard money” given to registered campaign committees and limited by law); the perceived power of Political Action Committees (PACs) and of others who make significant hard-money contributions; the proliferation of “issue ads” and their claimed detrimental effects upon the tone of politics; the rising costs of electoral politics; and the difficulties challengers have in funding competitive campaigns.

BCRA’s major provisions¹¹ include a total prohibition of soft money in federal campaigns, as well as a ban on broadcast advertising not funded with hard money—in effect, on messages not funded by campaigns themselves—within 60 days of a general election and 30 days of a primary. In effect that bans “issue ads” during those critical periods. Limits on individual contributions to campaigns were raised from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per federal election campaign. That was a welcome change, as inflation had reduced the value of the old \$1,000 maximum contribution by two thirds, forcing candidates to fund ever-more-expensive campaigns with contributions worth less and less. Limits on individuals’ total contributions across a two-year election cycle were also raised, and both the total and the per-campaign limits were indexed for inflation. PAC contribution limits, by contrast, were neither raised nor indexed. Finally, a “Millionaire Opponent” provision applies to House and Senate candidates whose opponents spend large amounts of their own money—spending that remains unlimited. Limits on individual contributions to those facing such opponents are raised, and limits on party spending on behalf of those candidates are removed, as opponents’ expenditures from their personal funds exceed a series of thresholds.

“Soft money” had certainly become a public concern, although it remains to be seen whether the total ban will be effective: new ways to raise and spend campaign money emerge all the time. BCRA survived constitutional challenges from a range of critics who, among other problems, saw the limits on broadcast advertisements as violating the First Amendment.¹² But let us consider a broader question: will this round of reform produce elections and a political process that will win back the active commitment and loyalties of a disillusioned public?

One important American corruption problem is largely untouched by BCRA; a second, equally serious one is made worse. The first is the perceptions issue noted above: whether or not a great deal of bribery actually occurs, popular majorities believe the campaign finance process keeps their elected representatives in thrall to large contributors. Second, provisions justified to the public as making politics more open, and officials more accountable, may work instead to reduce political competition.¹³

Given the cost of campaigns and the sheer scope of policy benefits at stake, it is perhaps surprising there is not a great deal more bribery than there seems to be. But in practice donors are not nearly as powerful, nor are candidates and elected officials as vulnerable, as is commonly thought. Even maximum donations fund only a small share of most campaigns. Money alone does not guarantee election, and winners typically have many other political assets. The most decisive is incumbency: between 1980 and 2004 the share of House incumbents whose re-election bids were successful ranged from 90.5 to 98.8%; the 2004 figure was 98.7%, with only five incumbents losing to challengers (redistricting forced incumbents to run against each other in two cases). Some 86.4% of incumbents won at least 60% of the vote, and a third faced little or no significant opposition at all. In the Senate, re-election rates are only somewhat lower: in the Republican landslide year of 1980, 64.0% of senators running for re-election won. Between 1982 and 2004 the percentage of incumbents winning their re-election campaigns ranged between 75.0 and 96.9%, with 25 of 26 (96.1%) winning

in 2004 and 69.2% topping 60% of the vote (Ornstein et al. 2002; Common Cause 2002). Incumbents’ spending is generally driven by how much challengers are able to raise, with incumbents easily outspending their opponents. Contributors (particularly PACs), knowing that challengers are unlikely to win, give them little money. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy: in 2000, 63% of all PAC congressional donations went to House incumbents, and just 8% to their challengers; 14% went to Senate incumbents, and 3% to their challengers (Ornstein et al. 2002); and few incumbents were defeated.

Incumbents know they can win with or without a given contributor, can match or outspend most challengers with relative ease (a task made easier by the BCRA, whose all-hard-money, all-disclosure regime makes contributors to challengers easily identifiable by incumbents), and therefore owe that contributor nothing. Indeed, one study concluded that donors’ “leverage” is so small, and incumbents’ security so extensive, that contributions resemble protection payments, not legalized bribes (Keim and Zardkoohi 1988). Many individual donors are critical of the current system and of the donor-politician relationships it creates (Green et al. 1998)—not a result one would expect if donations were an easy way to buy favorable decisions. The immediate corruption risk may in fact be extortion of donors, particularly by top legislative leaders whose power to rewrite bills late in the lawmaking process has grown significantly in recent years—but the public perception remains one of powerful donors manipulating elected officials in a system of legalized bribery, and BCRA does little to dispel that view. Ironically, its all-hard-money regime, with the complete disclosure of contributions above a certain threshold that it implies, may only solidify public perceptions that big money is in the saddle.

Will elections under BCRA be any more competitive? Such a change seems unlikely: an all-hard-money regime is likely to benefit incumbents, with their established campaign and funding networks, while discouraging contributors from funding challengers. Interest groups’ “issue” or “attack” ads, now significantly restricted, were more often directed against incumbents than at challengers. Even the “Millionaire Opponent” provision, superficially a check against the clout of personal wealth, reinforces the trend. Self-financing is more essential to challengers, particularly in the House where many are newcomers to congressional politics, than to incumbents with their established hard-money operations and their ability to attract funds because they are likely winners. In most years, House challengers raise between 15 and 25% of their campaign money from their own funds (Ornstein et al. 2002). And indeed the early indications of BCRA’s effects are discouraging. The average House incumbent spent \$985,461 during the two-year 2004 electoral cycle, an increase of 27% over the 2000 average of \$774,159; major-party challengers spent an average of \$283,134 in 2004, a slight drop from their pre-BCRA 2000 average of \$295,315. In the Senate, incumbents spent an average of \$6,137,988 in 2004, compared to \$4,346,159 in 2000, while major-party challengers spent \$2,182,732—again, down from the 2000 average of \$2,481,378. Senate figures are less comparable between 2000 and 2004 because different states were in play in the latter year, but 2004’s challengers were of course running in the same states as the incumbents of that year, and still had declining funding while incumbents spent more.¹⁴

As noted, money alone does not decide the outcome of a campaign; indeed, many or most incumbents are re-elected because they are effective advocates for their states or districts. And, one pair of elections scarcely constitutes an enduring trend. Still, these results are at least consistent with the notion that legislation written by incumbents is working for incumbents very well indeed, and is unlikely to persuade many discouraged voters that a new age of open politics has dawned. Sadly, the most

significant “reform” of the role of money in electoral politics since the immediate post-Watergate era will do little to dispel the appearances of corruption; indeed it might, by further solidifying the already-formidable advantages enjoyed by incumbents, only intensify many citizens’ frustration with what they see as a remote, uncaring, and unchanging political establishment.

V. Conclusion

No one will conclude, on the basis of the foregoing, that the American political system is collapsing under the weight of corruption, that electoral politics is in its death throes, or that everything that seems sour and out-of-joint about the current state of politics grows ultimately out of perceptions of corruption. At the same time, despite the generally favorable ratings the U.S. receives on widely-publicized (and widely criticized) international corruption indices,¹⁵ we should not be quick to congratulate ourselves. While our economy has not been severely hobbled by corruption in the ways we see in some other

societies, that may also reflect the ways our mode of governance is rather accommodating to wealth in the first place, reducing the incentives to engage in overt corruption (that sort of perception, too, may intensify public disaffection).

Our corruption problem, arguably, exacts its costs in terms of the openness, competitiveness, and *credibility* of our political system, rather than in trends of GDP per capita. That, to the extent that it is a valid claim, points to a significant long-term difficulty: both in controlling the worst abuses of power and winning, or winning back, the loyalties of large numbers of citizens, we urgently need an electoral system that is *seen to be* open, genuinely competitive, and responsive to the wishes and participation of citizens. In that sense, citizens’ discontent, even if unfocused and disconnected from complex facts, should remind us of the continuing relevance of “classical” notions of corruption. They should also remind us of a sentiment frequently uttered by no less a reform idol than the late Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley: “Good politics is good government.”

Notes

1. www.pollingreport.com/right.htm (viewed 10 July 2006).
2. Time Poll conducted by Schulman, Ronca & Bucuvalas (SRBI) Public Affairs. June 27–29, 2006. *N* = 1,003 adults nationwide; at www.pollingreport.com/right.htm (viewed 10 July 2006).
3. Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll, June 24–27, 2006. *N* = 1,321 adults nationwide; at www.pollingreport.com/cong_rep.htm (viewed 10 July 2006).
4. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press; survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, June 14–19, 2006. *N* = 1,215 registered voters nationwide; at www.pollingreport.com/2006a.htm (viewed 10 July 2006).
5. For a widely-discussed popular version of that argument, see Frank 2005.
6. ABC News Poll. May 26–30, 2006. *N* = 1,044 adults nationwide. Margin of Error ± 3 ; at www.pollingreport.com/politics.htm.
7. *Ibid.* See also ABC News Poll at <http://1.abcnews.com/images/Politics/1003a2LobbyingandCorruption.pdf> (viewed 10 July 2006).
8. USA Today/Gallup Poll. April 28–30, 2006. Survey of 501 and 510 adults nationwide, respectively; at www.pollingreport.com/politics.htm (viewed 10 July, 2006).

9. FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, January 10–11, 2006. *N* = 900 registered voters nationwide. Margin of Error ± 3 for all registered voters; at www.pollingreport.com/politics.htm (viewed 10 July 2006).
10. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1954). Books 1–2, 5–19.
11. An excellent summary is available at www.fec.gov/pages/bcra/bcra_update.shtml.
12. See 251 F. Supp. 2d 176 and 948; text of the McConnell rulings is available at www.supremecourtus.gov/opinions/03pdf/02-1674.pdf (viewed 28 April 2005).
13. The following discussion draws upon Johnston 2005, Ch. 4.
14. Calculated from figures in Tables 2, 3, and 4, Campaign Finance Institute 2004.
15. The most widely publicized is Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, which ranks the U.S. 17th out of 158 countries in terms of clean politics and administration; at www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2005 (viewed 10 July 2006).

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