

Democracy:

Fighting Corruption and Restoring Trust in Government

August 2026



Top Line

Corruption in government has long been a problem in the US, and Trump's pervasive, out-in-the-open corruption is making it far worse. We need decisive action in the US Congress to address Trump administration corruption, re-establish mechanisms to guard against future corruption, and clearly demonstrate that corruption has no place in our government.

- 1. Corruption is a huge problem in the US Government.**
- 2. The Trump administration has increased corruption and the perception of the US government as corrupt.**
- 3. Corruption is also an issue in Texas.**
- 4. Legislators must take decisive action to fight corruption and restore trust in our government.**
 - a. Investigate, and if appropriate prosecute, Trump's corrupt activities**
 - b. "Trump-proof" the Presidency – put guardrails in place to ensure that no future President can engage in such high-level corruption**
 - c. Restore the mechanisms that protect against corruption**
 - d. Reduce the corrosive effect of money in politics**
 - e. Model ethical behavior at all levels of government**

Backup

1. Corruption is a huge problem in the US Government

"Corruption" is "the dishonest, fraudulent, or criminal use of entrusted authority or power for personal gain or other unlawful or unethical benefits". (1) Corruption occurs in politics, business, education, media, and other fields. Here we are concerned specifically with corruption in government. (1)

- a. International ratings show the US is more corrupt than most other advanced countries, and it has gotten worse in the past 10 years.
 - Transparency International's Corruption Index is a widely used source for information about corruption across countries. The Corruption Index ranks 182 countries and territories worldwide by their perceived levels of public sector corruption. The results are given on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Each country's score is a combination of at least 3 data sources drawn from 13 different corruption surveys and assessments. (2)
 - Factors that influence a country's Corruption Index include the prevalence of bribery, diversion of public funds, and officials using their public office for private gain without facing consequences. It also reflects the strength of mechanisms to control corruption, such as financial disclosure laws for public officials, access to information on public affairs and government activities, and legal protection for people who report cases of bribery and corruption. (3)
 - As shown in the table below, the US scores poorly on the Corruption Index:
 - As of 2025, the US ranks below most large, advanced countries (a higher score is better, meaning less corruption and better guardrails)
 - Our ranking has fallen significantly over the past 10 years, from 16th to 29th among all countries in the index.
 - Our Corruption Index score has fallen farther than any of these large, advanced countries since 2015.
 - In just 10 years, we have gone from well above average among these countries to well below average. (4)
 - And this does not yet fully reflect the pervasive corruption of the second Trump administration.

Corruption Index (2015 and 2025)

Source: Transparency International

	2015		2025		Change in Score
	Corruption Score	Rank	Corruption Score	Rank	
Switzerland	86	6	80	6	-6
Sweden	89	4	80	6	-9
Netherlands	84	9	78	8	-6
Germany	81	11	77	10	-4
Australia	79	13	76	12	-3
Canada	83	10	75	16	-8
Japan	75	18	71	18	-4
United Kingdom	81	11	70	20	-11
Belgium	77	15	69	21	-8
Austria	76	16	69	21	-7
France	70	23	66	27	-4
United States	76	16	64	29	-12
Korea (Republic of)	54	43	63	31	9
Israel	61	32	62	35	1
Czechia	56	38	59	39	3
Spain	58	37	55	49	-3
Italy	44	61	53	52	9
Large Country Average	72.0		69.0		-3

Source: Transparency International

- 2015 - <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2015>

- 2025 - <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2025>

b. Corruption harms our country and our society in multiple ways, including:

- **Erosion of trust in government** - Corruption undermines public confidence in government, weakens the rule of law, and can lead to the abuse of power. This can result in “state capture”, where private interests (e.g. corporations, billionaires) control public policy for personal gain. (5)
- **National Security Risks** - Corruption enables illicit finance, money laundering, and foreign influence operations, posing direct threats to U.S. national security. (6)
- **Lower quality of public services** - When contracts and public resources are allocated through corrupt means, the quality of infrastructure, education, and health services declines, directly impacting Americans’ well-being and safety. (7)
- **Hurts our economy** - A study by the US Congress Joint Economic Committee found "Unfair advantages for firms and executives with political connections

at the expense of more productive and innovative firms stifles innovation and constrains the American economy." (8)

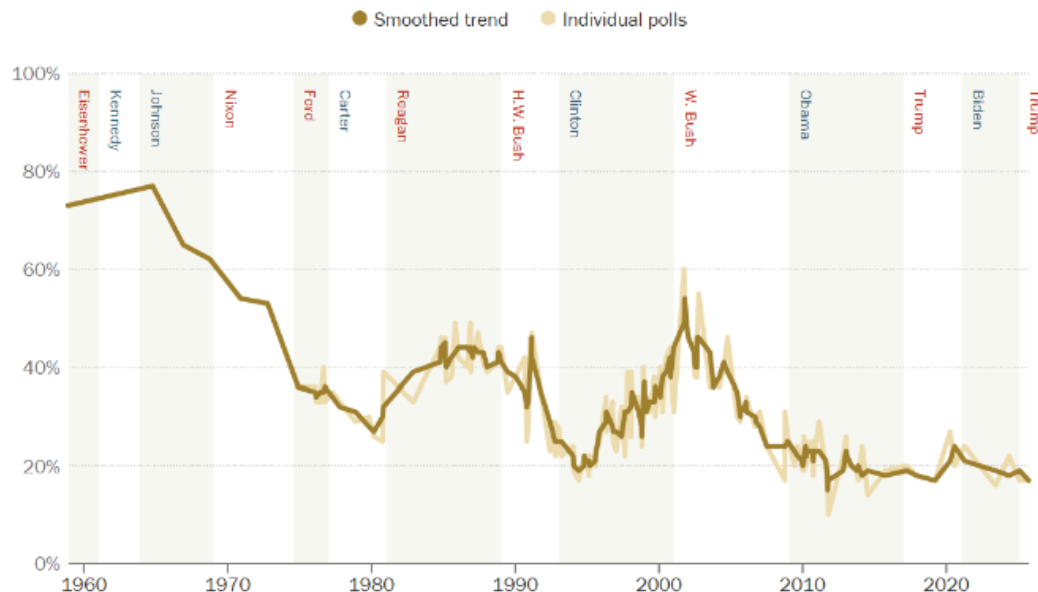
- **Diminished Global Influence** - Corruption at home weakens the U.S. position as a global leader in promoting democracy and good governance, making it harder to advocate for anti-corruption reforms abroad. (9)

c. As a result, confidence in our government is low

- As shown in the graph below, trust in our government was high in the 1950's and early 1960's, when the allies had won WWII, the US showed strong international leadership with the formation of the United Nations and the rebuilding of Europe, and with widely shared economic gains following the war.
- Trust fell in the 1960's and early 1970's, during Vietnam and Watergate.
- Trust rose, then fell during Reagan and GHW Bush, then climbed during Clinton, but fell again during the GW Bush administration, due to the war in Iraq and the botched response to Hurricane Katrina.
- Trust in our government has been stuck at around 20% since the end of the GW Bush administration. (10)

Public trust in government near historic lows

% who say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always/most of the time



Source: Pew Research, 6/24/24, <https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/public-trust-in-government-near-historic-lows-5/>

2. The Trump administration has increased corruption and the perception of the US government as corrupt

Numerous analysts and organizations have highlighted Trump's corruption. For example, the Campaign Legal Center has published a long list of corrupt transactions. CLC observes:

*"Since his return to the White House in January 2025, President Donald Trump has continued the same "transactional" approach to governing that characterized his first term, albeit now with **an even greater, unprecedented level of unabashed political corruption**. Trump has made clear that favorable treatment from his administration is available for a price — and wealthy individuals, companies and special interest groups have lined up to pay." (11)*

As a result of his blatant corruption and dishonesty, recent surveys show that **only 30% of Americans consider Trump to be "Honest and Trustworthy"**. (12)

Here are just a few of many instances in which the Trump Administration has engaged in or enabled corruption:

1. Normalizing dishonesty. Trump often lies, and repeats lies even after his falsehoods have been documented. For example, PolitiFact has reviewed over 1,000 statements by Trump, and found **76% of them to be "Mostly False", "False", or "Pants on Fire"**. (13)

2. Collecting money for access and favors. The Brennan Center reports "Since taking office in January 2025, President Trump has pocketed an estimated \$3 billion from his various business enterprises. His family is estimated to have raked in billions more. Much of the money appears to be coming from foreign governments and others seeking to curry favor with the Trump White House."

- Brennan continues "The scale of President Trump's self-enrichment is unprecedented, as is his openly transactional approach to governing." (14)
- The American Bar Association states "The Trump administration has exchanged government benefits, appointments, pardons, and policy decisions for financial contributions from wealthy individuals, corporations, and foreign governments, creating **an unprecedented pay-to-play culture**." (15)
- Here are a few specific examples cited by the American Bar Association:

- Pilgrim's Pride, a poultry processing company, offered the single largest donation—\$5 million—to Trump's inaugural fund before obtaining a "production speed waiver" from the Agriculture Department
- The medical device company Extremity Care contributed millions of dollars to Trump's super PACs before the Trump administration delayed a policy that would have limited Medicare coverage of the company's costly bandage products—thus safeguarding its bottom line, at consumers' expense.
- Paramount, the media conglomerate, settled a legally dubious lawsuit Trump had filed against it by agreeing to pay \$16 million to Trump's presidential library fund. Days later, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), presently chaired by Trump acolyte Brendan Carr, signed off on Paramount's proposed merger with Skydance Media.
- The Campaign Legal Center lists dozens of additional examples of ultra-wealthy individuals and corporations who have paid Trump millions of dollars for favors, appointments, and beneficial legal rulings. (16)

3. Selling pardons. The Cato Institute points out "**The scope and magnitude of Trump's second-term pardons are unprecedented.** Joe Biden granted 80 pardons in his four-year term, but Trump's pardons make his predecessor's look like a drop in the bucket. In the first year of the second Trump administration, the president issued 166 individual pardons, as well as a mass pardon that erased the verdicts of more than 1,500 January 6 Capitol rioters." (17)

- Many of these pardons also eliminated penalties that convicted fraudsters were ordered by the courts to pay. For example, Trevor Milton no longer has to pay \$660 million he defrauded from investors, and Lawrence Duran, who no longer must repay the government he defrauded \$87 million.
- And in many cases these pardons came in exchange for political support or contributions. For example, Trump pardoned Paul Walczak (who evaded millions of dollars in taxes) after Walczak's mother raised millions of dollars for MAGA candidates and paid a million dollars to dine with the president at Mar-a-Lago. Trevor Milton, the securities fraudster mentioned above, donated \$1.8 million to Trump's campaign before a presidential pardon wiped out all \$660 million of his restitution obligations.
- Cato also notes "Before Trump pardoned Changping Zhao—who headed the cryptocurrency exchange Binance while it fostered more than 1.5 million illegal virtual trades as well as prohibited transactions to Al Qaeda, Isis, and Hamas—

Zhao had brokered a \$2 billion investment in Eric and Donald Trump, Jr.'s cryptocurrency business, World Liberty Financial. "

- 4. Hiring criminals into the administration.** Hiring criminals and giving them responsible positions in the administration obviously undermines confidence in government ethics. The organization Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington points out that in his first Administration Trump hired convicted criminals or people convicted of crimes based on their work in the administration, including Michael Flynn and Steve Bannon. (18)
 - In his second term, Trump hired convicted criminal Peter Navarro, who served four months in prison last year for his contempt of Congress conviction, stemming from his failure to respond to congressional subpoenas for information about Trump's scheme to overturn the 2020 election, to be his senior counselor for trade and manufacturing.
 - Trump also nominated Charles Kushner, his daughter Ivanka's father-in-law, to be his administration's ambassador to France. Kushner, who was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison for campaign finance violations, tax evasion and witness tampering, was pardoned by Trump in 2020.
- 5. Insider Trading.** Trump has made multiple trades in stocks of companies that his actions then directly affected. (19)
 - In recent months, as Paramount and Netflix vied to buy Warner Brothers, Trump bought stock in all three companies.
 - As CNBC reported, Trump "scooped up shares" in the data firm Palantir. Soon after, he abruptly praised the firm. "Palantir Technologies (PLTR) has proven to have great war fighting capabilities and equipment," Trump posted, even highlighting its ticker name. "Just ask our enemies!!!" All this while Palantir was winning big federal contracts.
 - Trump invested in Oracle while brokering its deal to buy TikTok.
 - Among his biggest purchases has been Nvidia stock, which has seen steep increases after the U.S. government cleared 10 Chinese companies to purchase its advanced chips, in a big reversal from earlier national security concerns.
- 6. Violating the Emoluments Clauses.** The Emoluments Clauses in the US Constitution prohibit the President from receiving any profit, gain, or advantage from any foreign or domestic government. Trump violates these clauses by continuing to profit from his businesses, by accepting valuable gifts from foreign representatives, and by using his properties for official business at taxpayer expense. (20)

7. Weakening Oversight Mechanisms

- Within days of taking office, President Trump fired more than 17 inspectors general across the federal government. One former Inspector General explained that IG's "are nonpartisan independent watchdogs. So, whatever the priorities of the administration may be, we do independent oversight to look for waste, fraud and abuse and to ensure that the programs and operations of the departments we oversee are economical, that they're efficient, that they're effective. (21)
- In addition to firing IGs, Trump also fired the director of the Office of Government Ethics (OGE). The OGE works to prevent conflicts of interest in government and provides transparency regarding officials' financial holdings. (22)
- Shortly after taking office, Trump's Department of Justice (DOJ) moved to drop ongoing investigations and prosecutions involving serious violations of campaign finance and ethics laws. For example, New York City Mayor Eric Adams was indicted in September 2024 by a federal grand jury for, among other things, unlawfully soliciting or accepting political contributions from foreign nationals. However, Trump's DOJ moved to dismiss the case. apparently in exchange for his cooperation with the Trump administration's immigration crackdown in New York City. This sends two bad signals - first, that election violations are not important, and secondly, that doing Trump's bidding will get you favorable rulings. (22)
- On her first day in office, **Attorney General Pam Bondi disbanded the Foreign Influence Task Force**, an FBI team formed during President Trump's first term in office to combat foreign interference in elections from countries like Russia and China. (22)
- Early in his second term, Trump paused enforcement of the **Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA)** and has reduced enforcement activity. The FCPA prohibits US companies from participating in bribes and other corrupt practices in international business. One expert in international trade points out "The tone set by the president shapes how forcefully corruption laws are applied, and how companies and foreign officials and intermediaries assess the likelihood that bribe solicitation will be investigated. Barely a day goes by where there is not a credible allegation of corrupt practices, sometimes involving the president's companies and family directly. It has effectively stopped being news that the president's family is seeking to capitalize on his public office for private gain." (23)

Taken together, these actions have reduced American's confidence in our government and increased concerns about corruption. For example, a majority (52%) of Americans agree that "President Trump is a dangerous dictator whose power should be limited before he destroys American democracy," compared with only 44% who agree that "President Trump is a strong leader who should be given the power he needs to restore America's greatness." (24)

3. Corruption is also an issue in Texas

- a. Corruption is also a serious issue at the state level in Texas. Surveys by the Texas Politics Project found that "Political Corruption/Leadership" is a major concern for Texas voters.
 - In June 2025 it was identified as the "biggest issue facing Texas", above inflation, border security, and the economy. (25)
 - By April 2026 it had fallen to second place, behind only inflation. (26)
- b. Several factors explain this concern about corruption in Texas:
 - Texas is one of the most difficult states in which to vote, making it difficult for voters to hold candidates accountable. (27)
(Gerrymandering adds to this problem, by making many State House and Senate districts uncompetitive).
 - There are no limits on contributions to the Governor. Texas is one of only 12 states that do not have these limits. This creates a situation in which contributions can be used to gain important appointments or get favorable decisions. (28)
 - These contributions to Abbott can create clear conflicts of interest. For example, the Texas Tribune reports "One of Abbott's top donors is J. Doug Pitcock, chief executive of Williams Brothers Construction, who has given a total of \$4.3 million. His firm is one of the top recipients of Texas Department of Transportation contracts and has been awarded \$1.9 billion in work since 2020..." Although these types of projects are competitively bid, Abbott appoints the members of the state transportation commission, which approves TxDOT contracts. (29)
 - Contributions to Abbott also influence important appointments. For example, the Texas Tribune reports that "Eight of the 11 people appointed by Abbott to the University of Texas System Board of Regents are donors who have given over \$100,000 to the governor's campaign. (30)
 - Money influences policy. Large contributions from ultra wealthy people and corporations can also influence policy. Texas vouchers are a glaring example of this. Abbott did not have enough votes in the State House to pass his voucher bill, because it is unpopular in many areas. So, he got huge campaign contributions from billionaires (including \$6 million from Jeff Yass, a Pennsylvania billionaire) and used that money to support primary opponents that would support vouchers. **This is a direct link between billionaire contributions and policies that affect all of us.** (31)
 - Lack of effective ethical oversight enables these abuses. The Texas Ethics Commission is responsible for enforcing laws related to financial disclosures and conflicts of interest. In a 2025 official review of the Commission, the reviewers found several reforms that are needed. For example, they found that because of

complex reporting requirements, the Commission focused on "minor reporting errors instead of more serious ethical violations." The reviewers recommended several actions to improve the Commission's effectiveness, most of which the Texas Legislature failed to adopt. (32)

4. Legislators must take decisive action to fight corruption and restore trust in our government

Fighting the blatant and pervasive corruption of the Trump Administration will require strong, decisive action from Congress. Voters should also insist on candidates who have ethical backgrounds and commit to fighting corruption in government.

- a. Address Trump administration corruption.** Congress should investigate, and if appropriate prosecute, Trump and members of the administration who engaged in corrupt acts. Prosecution should only be pursued where both the facts and the law are clear, to avoid long, uncertain legal action. **The most important thing is to bring Trump corruption to light.**

It will be important for this to be bipartisan, involving members of the Republican party who oppose corruption.

- b. "Trump-Proof" the Presidency.** Trump has been able to commit corrupt acts in part because the rules are vague or informal. Making the rules more concrete will help to ensure that no future President engages in the vast corruption that Trump has.
 - Require that Presidential candidates provide at least 10 years of tax returns. In the past this has been voluntary, but Trump established a precedent of hiding his tax returns, potentially to avoid discovery of past tax fraud.
 - Codify emoluments restrictions in the Constitution to make them more specific and enforceable (33)
 - Clarify and strengthen the anti-nepotism statute so it clearly covers White House and "adviser" roles, closing the loophole Trump exploited to place family members in senior positions.
 - Require divestment or qualified blind trusts for assets that pose conflicts, including ownership stakes in closely held businesses.
 - Restore Congressional authority for the budget. Trump has repeatedly used threats of withholding money approved by Congress, which

violates Constitutionally defined roles. Congress can reaffirm its budget authority by strengthening the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act to explicitly bar the kind of unlawful withholding or reprogramming of funds that Trump uses, and to restore the Government Accounting Office's ability to bring civil actions when agencies defy appropriations law. (34)

c. Restore the mechanisms that protect against corruption in the government.

- Restore Congressional Oversight - in addition to passing legislation, oversight is a key responsibility of Congress. Congressional oversight is fundamental to making sure that laws are working as intended and are being administered in an effective, efficient, and economical manner. In the age of Trump, it is also essential to ensure that the Executive branch is using funds as Congress intended. (35)
- Recommit to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. The FCPA prohibits US companies from engaging in bribery and other corrupt actions in international business. The Trump Administration has narrowed the scope of FCPA enforcement, and enforcement activity has decreased during his administration. The Senate's Foreign Relations Committee has proposed legislation to restore the FCPA. (36)
- Reinstate the Inspectors General and the Office of Government Ethics
- In Texas, address the weaknesses identified by the Texas Ethics Commission (32)

d. Reduce the corrosive effect of money in politics - During the Trump administration, ultra-wealthy individuals and corporations have used large contributions to campaigns and to projects such as Trump's inauguration and ballroom to curry favor and influence Executive branch policy. It may be impossible to completely eliminate this conflict, but much can be done to reduce it.

- Limit Presidential slush funds, like the \$300 million Ballroom fund and Trump's proposed \$1.8 billion fund to reward people who attacked the Capitol and other criminals. (37)
- Congress should adopt transparency requirements and contribution limits for presidential inaugural funds, library funds and similar funds, which are largely unregulated vehicles that Trump has used to collect

large sums of money from those seeking access, pardons, or favorable rulings. (37)

- Strengthen the Federal Election Commission (FEC). The Brennan Center has developed a detailed analysis of the current shortcomings of the FEC, and proposed solutions. These include establishing a bipartisan process to vet nominees and strengthening the enforcement process. (38)
- **Pass the DISCLOSE Act**, which would require disclosure of the sources of dark money. This Act would make it harder to use intermediary groups to conceal the true sources of large political donations, by requiring groups that spend money on elections to disclose donors who have given \$10,000 or more during an election cycle. (39)
- At the state level, implement provisions to bar corporations from making political donations. Several states have done this or are in the process of doing it. (40)

- e. **Model ethical behavior.** Our political leaders should play by the rules in their personal actions and also insist that others do the same. Congress should take seriously its oversight responsibility. This includes holding the President accountable for unethical behavior and using the confirmation process to ensure that ethical people are appointed to important positions.

The Trump administration's corruption is blatant, wide-spread and out in the open. This rampant corruption is destructive to our democracy, our economy, our international reputation and our society.

Republicans in Congress have demonstrated that they will do nothing to constrain this corruption. We must elect leaders to Congress who will take corruption seriously.

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