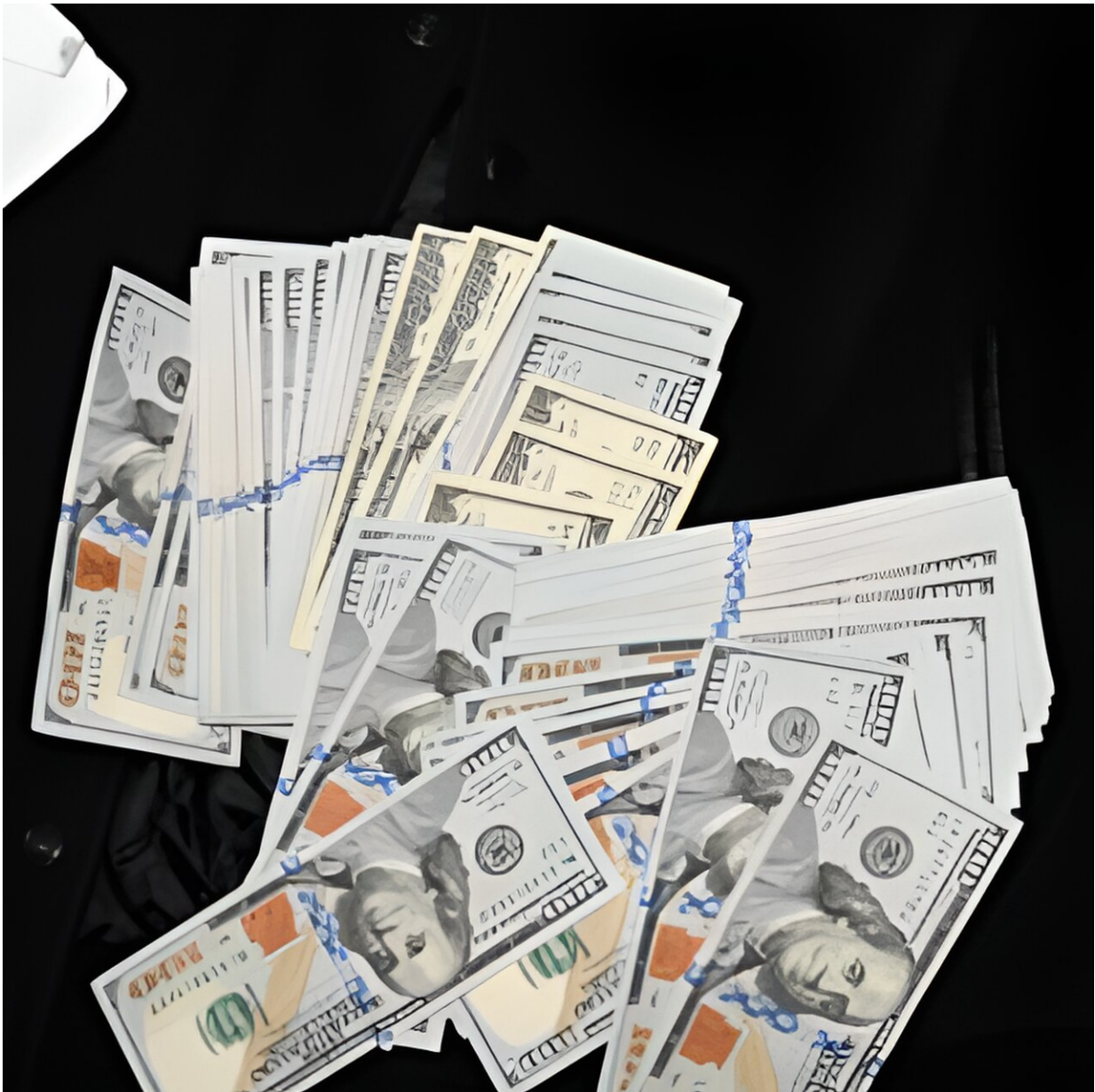


# What causes political corruption? Experts explain

November 17 2023, by Christian Hetrick

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A photograph of a jacket found by federal agents during a raid of the home of U.S. Senator Bob Menendez, which prosecutors say contained the envelopes full of cash included in the photo above. Credit: U.S. Justice Department via Wiki Commons

A wave of political corruption scandals has rocked institutions across America.

In recent years, there have been several high-profile examples of elected officials monetizing their public service to enrich themselves, their families or their allies. This week, U.S. Rep. George Santos [dropped his bid for re-election](#) after a House ethics report claimed he spent campaign funds on personal expenses. U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez, meanwhile, is facing his second bribery indictment. (Both men deny the charges). And former Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder was [convicted in a \\$60 million bribery scheme](#).

The USC Sol Price School of Public Policy teaches future leaders the importance of ethics and selfless public service. So, we spoke with some of the school's experts on what's causing the stream of scandals and what can be done to combat corruption, which corrodes trust in government.

"If you're already skeptical of government—if you're already jaded—these abuses are just one more nail in the coffin," said USC Price School Professor and Vice Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion LaVonna B. Lewis. "You can't condemn an entire institution because of the behavior of a few, but unfortunately, the behavior of the few is what has high visibility."

## **Individual ethics vs. the system**

Corruption is a [human condition](#), so it will always be an issue to grapple with, said Frank V. Zerunyan, Professor of the Practice of Governance at the USC Price School. Many elected officials who run into trouble let the power of their positions go to their heads and come to believe there's nothing wrong with their unethical conduct, he said.

"We're all human," said Zerunyan, who also serves as a council member of Rolling Hills Estates, Calif. "I tell students that if you're not disciplined enough and don't think about the value of ethics and the importance of your function, your other human aspects become really relevant and potentially play a role in how you breach the ethical values."

The U.S. political system, however, puts a lot of pressure on even the most ethical politicians, said Mindy Romero, Assistant Professor at the USC Price School. To be successful, elected officials must listen to not only their constituents, but [political leadership](#), donors, and advocacy groups—all of whom are crucial to their aspirations. That [balancing act](#) can explain, for example, why elected officials may cast votes that run counter to what their constituents want.

"People are incentivized to put their own survival first," Romero said. "So, we've already got a structure that requires elected officials to compromise often their own beliefs and policies and how they should be serving their voters."

## **Are we seeing more corruption lately?**

It's worth noting that the U.S. is one of the least politically corrupt countries in the world, ranking number 24 out of 180 nations, according to Transparency International. It's also unclear whether there has been more corruption here lately—or just more attention to the problem, USC Price School experts said. (For the record, Denmark ranks as the least-corrupt country. It is also the second happiest.)

One reason more scandals may be uncovered is new technology, which has created a trove of digital evidence, experts said. For example, the online search histories of Menendez allegedly revealed that he used his computer to research the value of gold bars.

The rash of criminal charges and negative news stories can make the public feel jaded about their elected officials, Lewis said. There needs to be more recognition of public officials who stay out of trouble, have a track record of accomplishments and help their constituents, she added. "There doesn't seem to be space to celebrate people who, for decades, have done the right thing in the public interest," Lewis said.

## **What can be done?**

"We need to take the incentives out of politics," Romero added. "People will want to pursue a political life for power, but also for economic gain. And we have a lot of money in politics, everywhere you turn."

Zerunyan said he teaches students common sense ethics, the value of public service and the importance of each students' future role as representatives of the public and their institutions.

"We try to teach them that this is a selfless prophecy: 'Public service is beyond you,'" Zerunyan said. "If you're doing this service for your personal gain, don't do it, because one day you will disgrace your name and family."

Provided by University of Southern California

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