**[Slide 1 – Title]**

**The Crisis of Corruption Today: America Compromised**

We face many crises in American politics and government including income and racial inequality, the corrosive effect of money in elections and lobbying, and the lack of citizen participation in politics and government. We also face the crisis of political corruption that further undermines our democracy. As Larry Diamond writes, “nothing more readily saps democracy of its legitimacy than the widespread perception that government officials are mainly there to enrich themselves, their cronies, and their parties rather than to serve the public.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

This applies to the United States today.

[Slide 2 – Definition]

While there is considerable debate about its precise definition, political corruption is the use of political or governmental office for the private benefit for oneself or one’s family and friends.[[2]](#endnote-2)

[Slide 3 – Stealing]

In the simplest cases, corruption takes the form of outright bribes to public officials. But there are many subtle forms of financial, institutional, and moral corruption. In the case of political corruption, the benefits to officials, their families, and friends can be anything of value. But there is also ethical corruption which may not bring immediate material payoffs. In addition, institutional corruption can occur in which the individuals may act morally, but the institutional outcomes are biased and corrupted. Whichever form corruption takes, it is never in the interest of the public.

[Slide 4 – Cost]

There are real costs to corruption. Internationally, the financial costs of corruption are over a Trillion Dollars a year. But the greater cost may be the loss of faith in government and the undermining of justice, equality, and democracy itself.

[Slide 5 – A Continuing Problem]

Corruption is not just a problem at the national and international level. It is a problem in states like Illinois, New Jersey, and Louisiana.

[Slide 6 – Cost in Illinois]

For example, in Illinois, which is the third most corrupt state, the cost of corruption is more than $500 million a year, which is one reason that the state debt of over $140 billion, is one of the highest in the nation.

[Slide 7 – Corruption in Major Cities]

Corruption also occurs in the cities and towns where most of us live. Overall, in a single decade from 1998 – 2019, the Department of Justice reports that 19,953 public officials were convicted of public corruptions and thousands who were charged in that decade are still awaiting trial.

This graph shows the level of corruption in larger American cities based on federal court convictions. The good news is that the number of corruption convictions is declining in most cities. But now that the pandemic is lessened and the federal courts have reopened, more corruption cases are being tried in many states and cities.

[Slide 8 – Institutional Corruption]

[Slide 9 – Emoluments]

The level of public corruption was vividly illustrated by the Trump campaign of 2016 and the Trump administration from 2016-2020.

However, the issue of corruption has existed since the beginning days of the United States. Our Founding Fathers were concerned about the ability of foreign powers to subvert the government through corruption. The common practice of the 18th century was for kings to give expensive gifts to foreign ambassadors. Then, the ambassadors would act favorably toward the foreign power rather than the nation they represented. So, the writers of our Constitution put in an emoluments clause to forbid foreign gifts. However, this old form of bribery was updated in the modern era.

[Slide 10 – Trump Hotel]

President Trump and his family enriched themselves by having foreign guests and lobbyists stay at his hotel down the street from the Whitehouse and play golf at his resorts.

[Slide 11 – Ivanka Trump]

Other members of the Trump family also profited financially. For instance, Ivanka Trump sat next to foreign leaders at state dinners who then gave her permission to sell her beauty products in their countries.

[Slide 12 – Roger Stone]

Many leaders of Trump’s presidential campaign staff pled guilty to a laundry list of public corruption charges and lying to cover up their actions. Evidence of this malfeasance was documented by the report by Special Counsel Robert Mueller in 2019.[[3]](#endnote-3) According to the *New York Times* and *Reuters* as of August 2020, eight people among his campaign leadership had been found guilty of crimes in the 2016 campaign that elected Trump.[[4]](#endnote-4) Those convicted included Trump’s campaign manager, Paul Manifort, along with his campaign advisers, Roger Stone, and Steve Bannon. Several other campaign officials were also charged with crimes.[[5]](#endnote-5) In the final weeks of his presidency, President Trump pardoned Paul Manifort, Roger Stone, and other campaign and government allies.[[6]](#endnote-6)

[Slide 13 – Cabinet]

Many members of Trump’s administration, even at the cabinet level, were also guilty of corruption. Within the first two years of his term, 24 notable government officials quit or were forced to resign. Four cabinet members were forced to resign because of their misuse of public offices, funds misspent on travel or redecorating their offices at exorbitant cost to the taxpayers, using federal employees for personal tasks rather than government work, and corrupt land deals.

[Slide 14 -- Impeachment]

As for President Trump, he was impeached twice by the House of Representatives, but the Senate refused to remove him from office. The first time he was impeached for pressuring the President of Ukraine to investigate a political opponent and for obstruction of Congress. The second time, he was impeached for inciting the January 6, 2021, insurrection in which a mob attacked the Capitol. His connection to the insurrection were later detailed by the January 6th Special Committee of the House of Representatives.

[Slide 15 – Institutional Corruption]

Corruption does not only take the form of “individual corruption.” As Lawrence Lessig writes in his book, *America Compromised: “*We have allowed core institutions of America’s economic, social, and political life to become corrupted.”

When an individual gets caught taking a bribe to pass a law favoring a private party, it is an individual act of corruption. The preverbal rotten apple in an otherwise honest government. But given the level of corruption in America today, we have a rotten apple barrel.

[Slide 16 – Money primary]

Just one example of institutional corruption is when political candidates must first raise a lot of money from rich individuals and corporations before they can become viable candidates. Both candidates running for office and their contributors may be personally honest; but having to raise large sums of money inevitably makes the candidate beholden to special interests. Other examples include corporations or financial institutions that become too big to fail; news media who report what is most entertaining or profitable rather than the news citizens need; academics who are paid to testify to support the claims of companies that pay them; and lawyers who conform to business interests of their clients rather than what they personally know is right.

[Slide 17 – Pork Chop Sandwich]

As Mary Francis Berry writes in her book *Five Dollars and a Pork Chop Sandwich:*

“The good news is that all of us who want clean elections with better candidates and accountability can affect change by taking concrete steps. We can work against voter suppression and help citizens who do not have government IDs get them….[We can end] the disenfranchisement of felons…and [join] in the mobilization against the influence of money in politics…”

[Slide 18 – Ending Corruption]

Here is a broader agenda of what we can do to curb political corruption in American politics and government:

* Demand more transparency and accountability of government and public officials.
* Hire more inspectors general, including in the suburbs and local governments.
* Provide civic engagement programs in our schools by passing the Civics Secures Democracy Act.
* Encourage more citizen participation in government and politics by changing the dates of elections, creating Automatic Voter Registration, and new rules for considering legislation in the state legislature.
* Adopt public financing for political campaigns as New York City, Maine, and Minnesota have done.
* Elect better public officials who will not just promise but will carry out reforms.
* Change how we remap legislative districts and adopt term limits for public officials.
* End political machines and permanently change the culture of corruption.

1. Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nearly every article or book on corruption develops a similar definition of corruption but it is, in fact, a complicated and contested term. For a fuller discussion, see Jonathan Rose, “The Contested Definition of Corruption,” in *Global Corruption and Ethics Management*, ed. Carole L. Jurkiewicz, 3-10 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), and Bo Rothstein and Aiysha Varraich, *Making Sense of Corruption* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Washington Post Staff, “The Mueller Report, Annotated,” *Washington Post*, last updated December 2, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com, accessed August 27, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Reuters lists those convicted at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-bannon-associates-factbox-idUSKBN25G1YU. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kevin Johnson, “How Many Trump Advisers Have Been Criminally Charged? Manafort, Stone and Steve Bannon Makes 7,” *USA Today*, August 20, 2020, last updated August 21, 2020.Reuters counts the total as eight, see https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-bannon-associates-factbox-idUSKBN25G1YU [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Balsamo, “A Look at 29 People Trump Pardoned or Gave Commutations,” *AP News*, December 24, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-donald-trump-robert-mueller-paul-manafort-elections-2793e154c7eec45dc81fdeaf9b432b6f, accessed January 12, 2021.

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   Thomas J. Gradel and Dick Simpson, *Corrupt Illinois: Patronage, Cronyism, and Criminality.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)