

## Realities and Perceptions of Corruption in Illinois

By some measures Illinois is among the most corrupt states in the nation. According to an analysis of U.S. Department of Justice reports of convictions for public corruption from 1976 to 2010, 1,828 persons in Illinois have been found guilty during this time frame, more than in any states but New York and California.<sup>1</sup> On a per capita basis, Illinois ranked third among the large states in public corruption convictions. The United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois (metropolitan Chicago) tallied more convictions for public corruption over a thirty-five-year period than did any district court in the nation.<sup>2</sup>

And that represents only the illegal corruption. Illinois officials have become masters of milking our governments and taxpayers through legal corruption. We are deeply disturbed, for example, by the 2011 *Chicago Tribune* investigation that found that Chicago alderman Edward Burke doubled the annual pension of his buddy, former state representative Bob Molaro, to \$120,000.<sup>3</sup> Burke had Molaro work for just one month at \$12,000, which created an annualized salary rate that qualified him for the doubling of his legislative pension. What did Molaro do to earn the \$12,000? He wrote a paper about the sorry state of our public pension systems, basically laughing at the taxpayers who will pay the extra pension benefits for Molaro! For too many public officials in Illinois, doing well in public office comes before doing good for the public.

By other measures, however, Illinois is in the middle of the pack when it comes to corruption. Professor Richard Winters at Dartmouth College points out that if the numbers of elected officials per state are considered (Illinois has more than forty thousand, far more than most states, because we have more units of local government than any state), then Illinois is really about average in terms of convictions for public corruption per thousand elected state and local officials.<sup>4</sup>

Yet reality may lie in the eye of the beholder, and when it comes to perception, Illinois consistently ranks among the most corrupt states in the nation. For example, in a 2012 poll that we conducted, one-third of those surveyed identified Illinois, unsolicited, as such, following only New York and California. And a full 45 percent of the respondents over age thirty-five named Illinois as one of the most corrupt states.<sup>5</sup> Other Midwestern states were rarely mentioned as among the most corrupt, which means that Illinois sticks out like a sore thumb in the heartland region.

Journalists believe Illinois to be one of the most corrupt states as well. In 2000, Richard Boylan and Cheryl Long surveyed journalists nationwide, who ranked Illinois third highest in corruption among the forty-five states with usable numbers of responses.<sup>6</sup>

Widely held perceptions such as these are also bad for business in Illinois. In the national survey cited above, 60 percent of the respondents said knowing about corruption in a state would have a negative or strongly negative effect on their decisions to locate in such a state.<sup>7</sup>

Possibly more important is a 2011 survey we took of seventy economic development professionals in Illinois (the people who work to attract business to a community). Three in four surveyed said corruption in Illinois had a negative impact on their business recruiting.<sup>8</sup> Among the forty-nine written responses to this question, two provide particular insight. One says, “Unfortunately and especially in manufacturing and international circles, there is an understanding that corruption in Illinois that once occurred at an individual level has moved to systemic corruption.” The other states, “As part of an economic development marketing group that spans Illinois and Iowa, I keep hearing that Iowa makes sense as a business location if you just want to fill out an application and have a transparent process. Illinois works better if you have political clout and are willing to use it. I think that is a travesty and that is what Illinois is becoming known for—pay to play.”

What has come to be called “the Chicago Way” or “the Illinois Way” of public corruption has likely undermined the voters’ sense of political efficacy.<sup>9</sup> Why apply for a city or state job if you think that only friends of political insiders will be hired? Why report corrupt officials if you think they won’t be punished and that the system may turn the powers of government on you instead? Voters may sometimes laugh at the antics of corrupt public officials, but in the end they feel powerless, lose their faith in government, and vote less often because they believe that the fix is in. Lilliard Richardson found in his study of the 2008 national elections that “convictions (for public corruption) per capita are strongly associated with lower political activity across the board.”<sup>10</sup>

And there are tangible costs to corruption. Political scientist Dick Simpson estimates that it costs Illinois and its governments \$500 million each year. “Governor Blagojevich’s well-publicized corruption antics” he writes, “led to a lowering of the state’s bond rating, which cost the state more than \$20 million during a recent bond issue. Corruption also takes time and resources away from police and prosecutors. Blagojevich’s first trial costs tens of millions of dollars to investigate and prosecute.”<sup>11</sup>

## Observations

Why is there so much corruption, or at least the strong perception of corruption, in Illinois?

In the 1970s the late student of American federalism Daniel Elazar contended that the United States was divided into three historical political subcultures: the moralistic, the traditionalistic, and the individualistic. In brief, the moralistic culture tends to see government as a positive force and believe that politicians are not expected to profit from political activity. Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan are dominated, in Elazar's construct, by this set of cultural attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

The traditionalistic culture tends to be operated by an elite that sees government as a means for maintaining the existing social order, and corruption by government officials is tolerated as a way of maintaining that order. This culture dominates in the Deep South. The individualistic culture sees government as a necessary evil that should be limited so as not to affect the individual's private business activities. Corrupt politics is accepted as a fact and is tolerated.

Illinois is dominated overall by the individualistic culture, according to Elazar, though he notes that southern Illinois is influenced heavily by the traditionalistic culture. Yet because two of the three political subcultures tolerate corruption, this framework, if there is anything to it, provides limited help in separating Illinois from other states.

We also subscribe to the additional theory that immigrants such as the Irish, Italians, and Poles found it difficult to enter legitimate businesses in Chicago that were dominated by the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who preceded them. Thus, they used their growing numbers to win at the business of politics, where many of them developed the tradition of providing government jobs in return for political support and of doing well as much as doing good.

Another reason why corruption exists some places but not others (at least, not as much), according to Michael Josephson, is that "corruption flourishes because it is allowed. Whatever you allow, you encourage."<sup>13</sup> In this regard, for example, the Illinois General Assembly lacks a "revolving door" prohibition, that is, one that would bar legislators from lobbying members of the General Assembly for at least one year after they leave the legislature. As a result, in 2012 several members of the Assembly resigned in the middle of their terms to take lobbying positions with interest groups with whom they had close legislative ties. Nobody in the political world of the General Assembly seemed to think much about it.

Enact a revolving-door prohibition for Illinois state legislators, barring them from lobbying members of the General Assembly for at least one year after they leave the legislature.

We also think that over the course of the past century our culture has developed an underlying sense that, for some of us, taking advantage of government is the thing to do, since everyone else does it.

For example, for several years Jim Nowlan conducted an exercise with his students at the University of Illinois at the beginning of his courses in American politics.<sup>14</sup> Most of the students were seniors, many headed for law school. Semester after semester, two-thirds of the students would opt for using bribery to get a brother out of a particularly burdensome DUI charge. The students rationalized their decisions with such observations as, "Everyone else does it" and "We'd be played the fools for not doing so for our brother."

Moreover, we simply don't think about the ethics of our actions. Rare is the person who enters politics planning to be corrupt. Some cynics would say that in Chicago that should read "planning to be caught." Why are so many in our state measured for striped suits when that wasn't our objective? When Jim Nowlan entered the Illinois legislature as a young man in the late 1960s, he had not previously thought about the fact that private gain could be made at public expense (our definition of corruption). He could easily have gone along with the way some people played the game and accepted "contributions" at about the same time action was taken on certain bills.

Fortunately, in his freshman year the late George O'Brien (a freshman legislator like Nowlan, and later a congressman) sent copies of the play *A Man for All Seasons* to his fellow freshmen. The play is about Thomas More, who rejected King Henry VIII's demand for a divorce. More stood on principle and paid the ultimate price with his head. Though far removed from the Illinois General Assembly, the play struck Nowlan like a thunderbolt. There are indeed matters of principle at play in politics, and one must be aware when they arise. And sometimes it may be difficult to stand up to a corrupt system. Ninety-seven Cook County court officials were convicted of bribery and related charges in the 1980s in Operation Greylord. Some may have lacked the fortitude to challenge the system in which they became caught up.

Maybe some cannot resist the temptation of financial gain based on inside knowledge or actions, and figure they won't be caught. In this day and age, it is best to assume that everything will be found out!

Several years ago, a young friend of Nowlan's moved back after college to his hometown, where he ran for mayor as a reformer against the ossified "old guard." Walking door to door, this friend won the full-time job of

mayor. A few weeks later, he was at a national mayors' conference in Washington, DC, hob-nobbing with Willie Brown of San Francisco and Rudy Giuliani of New York City.

In college this big farm boy had played football in a Big Ten program, and now he proudly wore a Rose Bowl ring, a good conversation starter when he was with Willie and Rudy. Yet the friend realized that he looked shabby without a suit. So he quickly bought a suit in Washington, using his city's credit card, the only one he had, planning to pay the city back.

Later the purchase became a *cause célèbre* in his small city. And it tarnished his otherwise fine reputation. We worry about the good guys who, like the young ex-mayor, have not thought about the fish bowl they are jumping into.

For the good guys who are newcomers to politics, we present our "Guide to Ethical Decision-making in the Twenty-First Century":

- Don't be careless. Even the slightest inadvertent indiscretion will get you. People do care—and do find out. It doesn't matter what *you* think about what you did. If others think it's indiscreet, it is. If it looks bad, it is.
- Is there any dimension of any decision you make that could be seen by others as personal gain at public expense? Or, as former Illinois auditor general Robert Cronson put it, "How would this sound to a grand jury?"
- Never justify a decision on the basis that "this is the way it has always been done." Times change. In the 1950s a federal jury acquitted Illinois governor William Stratton on charges of paying for, among other things, evening attire for his wife from campaign funds and not reporting the expenditures as income. Today, how would the jury find him on similar charges? We would bet "guilty."
- Identify a friend or acquaintance whom you respect for his or her integrity. (Ours would be Mike Lawrence, former head of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute.) Have him serve as your second opinion; how would he view a pending decision?
- If you have questions about a decision, assume it's the wrong thing to do.

1. Dick Simpson, James Nowlan et al., *Chicago and Illinois: Leading the Pack in Corruption*, University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Political Science, February 15, 2012, table 2.

2. *Ibid.*, table 1.

3. Jason Grotto and Ray Long, "Ex-Lawmaker Nearly Doubles His Pension with One Month of Work," *Chicago Tribune*, December 16, 2011. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-12-16/news/ct-met-pension-molaro-20111216\\_1\\_pension-fund-pension-crisis-public-pension](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-12-16/news/ct-met-pension-molaro-20111216_1_pension-fund-pension-crisis-public-pension).

4. Richard Winters, "Unique or Typical? Political Corruption in the American States . . . and Illinois," paper presented at the Ethics and Reform Symposium on Illinois Government, September 27–28, 2012, and available from the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

5. Illinois Integrity Initiative Survey, Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois, Urbana, December 2011. Survey was taken for the Initiative by Kelton Research, New York, New York and Culver City, California.

6. Richard T. Boylan and Cheryl X. Long, "Measuring Public Corruption in the American States," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*, 3 (2003): 420–38.

7. Illinois Integrity Initiative Survey.

8. Survey by Jim Nowlan of the members of the Illinois Development Council, May 2011. Two hundred surveys went out via Survey Monkey; seventy responses were received.

9. Dick Simpson and Melissa Zmuda, "Corruption in Illinois," paper presented at the conference "Is There a Culture of Corruption in Illinois?" Institute of Government and Public Affairs of the University of Illinois, Chicago, March 2, 2012.

10. Lilliard Richardson, "Political Corruption and Its Effect on Civic Involvement," paper presented at the Ethics and Reform Symposium, September 27–28, 2012, Chicago, and available from the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, p. 13.

11. Simpson and Zmuda, "Corruption in Illinois."

12. Daniel Elazar, "Political Culture of the United States," <http://academic.regis.edu/jriley/421elazar.htm>.

13. Michael Josephson, address at the Ethics and Reform Symposium held September 27–28, 2012, Chicago, sponsored by and remarks available from the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

38. The exercise is as follows: Your brother has just been charged with a serious DUI. He will lose his license if convicted. He is in his first job after college and he absolutely must have a car to do his job. His wife is at home, pregnant with their first child.

The brother has employed a veteran lawyer. The lawyer says that he knows his way around the court system and that if your brother will provide him \$1,000 in cash beyond his fee, he is confident he can have the charge dismissed.

Your brother turns to you for guidance. Should he:

- Go for it
- Reject the idea