

FACT BRIEF

Corruption

When the country’s top officials use the power you lend them to serve themselves, their families and friends, or their party. Some of it is crime. But much is legal even though it breaches public trust that only your vote can stop.

7 ways the most powerful officials turn public power into personal gain.

What is the issue?

You hear the word about almost anything a politician does. This brief uses it for one thing: a serious breach (legal or illegal) of public trust for personal gain.

Who gained: We the People, or the official?

KNOW THE TERMS

- Public trust** — Power and resources held on your behalf, to be used for public purposes.

Corruption — One 2025 scholarly definition: “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain that harms the public interest.” The authors add that it “does not necessarily have to be illegal.” [1]

Conflict of interest — A personal financial stake in a government matter the official helps decide.
- Pardon • Commutation** — A pardon forgives a federal crime. A commutation shortens the sentence. Together they are called clemency.

Norm — A long-standing practice officials follow though no law or written rule requires it.

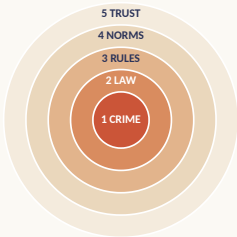
Retribution — Using official power to punish a particular person or group. One news agency’s test: the act is “aimed at specific individuals or entities, with evidence of intent to punish.” [2]

Corruption is an abuse of power, and anyone with institutional power can commit it. This brief focuses only on documented cases in the top U.S. federal offices: the President, the Vice President, Cabinet members, members of Congress and Supreme Court justices, since 2021. Where there is imbalance, it is because the facts lead there. These are examples, not a full count. The same test was applied to officials of both parties.

Of the seven types of corruption listed here, some break the law. Some break rules and norms, and may or may not bring consequences. The only consequences for some are impeachment or loss at the ballot box. Before reading about the seven, note the diagram below. The farther from the center, the more enforcement depends on We the People.

Five rings: how far from a crime?

All break public trust; many have no punishment but the vote. Each ring out, fewer laws apply and enforcement falls to the press, discretionary official action, impeachment, and the ultimate power: We the People.



THE ACT	ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM
5 Legal, but a breach of public trust	Legislation, colleagues and We the People (voting)
4 Breaks a long-standing norm	The press, the public, colleagues
3 Breaks the institution's own rules	Members of the institution itself
2 Breaks a federal law	Courts, inspectors general and watchdogs
1 A crime	Prosecutors, judges, juries

A Taking money for official acts

Bribes, kickbacks, fraud. The official gains.

RING 1 Both parties: at least eight members of Congress charged since 2021. Five are Democrats and three are Republicans. President Trump (R) then pardoned or freed three of them: former Rep. George Santos (R), Rep. Henry Cuellar (D) and former Rep. Stephen Buyer (R). [3]

RING 1 A congresswoman charged with stealing disaster funds. Rep. Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick (D-Fla.) was charged in November 2025 with stealing \$5 million in disaster funds, which she denies. [4] In March 2026 a House Ethics panel found 25 ethics counts against her proven. [5]

RING 1 A senator convicted of bribery. Sen. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.) was convicted in 2024 of bribery and acting as a foreign agent, and sentenced to 11 years in prison. [6]

B Profiting from the office itself

The official's own business earns more because of the office.

RING 5 \$1.4 billion in crypto income in one year. President Trump's disclosures show crypto income of \$57.4 million for 2024 and more than \$1.4 billion for 2025. The White House says neither he nor his family has conflicts of interest. [7]

RING 5 Dinners for the top buyers. In May 2025 the President hosted the 220 largest holders of the crypto coin that carries his name. In its first four months 58 wallets made about \$1.1 billion and about 764,000 lost money. [8] In early October 2026 the coin's website announced a third such dinner, on Nov. 22, for the top 185 holders. [9]

RING 5 Licensing fees up more than tenfold. The Trump company's licensing and development fees rose from just over \$5 million in 2022 and 2023 to \$59 million in 2025. [10]

RING 5 No law forbids it. No law requires a president to give up business interests. [11]

C Gifts and payments from people who want something

Money or valuables flow to the official, or to a project the official controls.

RING 5 A jet from Qatar. In May 2025 the Defense Department accepted a Boeing 747 from Qatar for use as Air Force One. The department said it followed all federal rules. [12] The President said: "It'll go to my library." In August 2026 a White House official said no final decision had been made. [13]

RING 5 More than \$90 million in settlements. Five media and technology companies agreed to pay more than \$90 million to settle lawsuits Donald Trump had filed against them. The suits were civil claims: defamation, censorship over suspended accounts, and a slanted interview edit. At least \$37 million was directed to his presidential library or the White House ballroom. [14]

RING 5 A record inauguration fund. The President's 2025 inaugural committee raised \$239 million. The previous record was \$107 million. [15] An advocacy group found that 58 donor companies facing federal enforcement actions gave \$50 million of it. By April 2025, 17 of them had cases dropped or paused. [16]

RING 3 344 gifts to the justices. Supreme Court justices accepted 344 gifts worth about \$3 million from 2004 to 2023, an advocacy group counted. It counts 101 more that Justice Clarence Thomas likely received, worth about \$1.8 million. [17]

D Family and associates profit

Relatives, partners or political allies gain.

RING 5 Federal money to companies the President's son's firm part-owns. In 2025 the Defense Department gave about \$71 million in contracts and a \$620 million loan to four companies part-owned by a venture firm where Donald Trump Jr. is a partner, according to a letter three Democratic senators sent the Pentagon. [18] The firm says it played no role. The Pentagon says: "No company receives preferential treatment." [19]

RING 5 The President's son-in-law negotiates for the country and raises money abroad. By early 2024 Jared Kushner's investment firm managed about \$3 billion in foreign money, \$2 billion of it from Saudi Arabia's government fund. It has collected about \$157 million in fees from foreign clients, two Democratic lawmakers wrote. [20] A newspaper reported in March 2026 that he was seeking \$5 billion or more from foreign governments while negotiating for the United States. The White House said he "only acts in the best interests of the American public." [21]

RING 5 A Cabinet secretary's sons and a government stake. The day the Commerce Department announced a stake of up to \$1.6 billion in a rare-earths company, the investment firm run by Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick's (Trump administration) sons led a \$1.5 billion fundraising for that company, three Democratic senators wrote. [22]

RING 2 Contracts that reached a former campaign ad chief. The Homeland Security Department awarded \$220 million in advertising contracts without full competition. A subcontractor was a firm whose chief had run the ads for Secretary Kristi Noem's (R) 2022 campaign. The department said it has no role in choosing subcontractors. [23]

RING 5 Paintings by the President's son. A buyer who paid a combined \$94,000 for two Hunter Biden paintings was appointed by President Biden (D) to a federal commission in July 2022. [24]

E Trading on an inside position

Officials own or trade stock in companies their decisions affect.

RING 5 Nearly half of Congress owns stock. 258 of 533 members of Congress owned stock in 2025. [25]

RING 5 Trades around the tariff decisions. From the first tariff plan to the pause (Feb. 13 to April 9, 2025), 53 members of Congress of both parties reported more than 2,200 stock trades. [26] On April 9 the President posted "THIS IS A GREAT TIME TO BUY!!!" Hours later he paused some tariffs, and stocks rose 9.5%. House Democrats asked the securities regulator to investigate and say they got no substantive answer. [27]

RING 5 3,600 trades in three months. A May 2026 filing listed more than 3,600 stock trades in the President's accounts in three months. The President says he never speaks to the people who run the money; his company says outside firms control the trades. [28] Purchases of two chipmakers' stock came a week before his Commerce Department loosened chip-export rules, two Democratic lawmakers wrote. [29]

F Clemency for allies, donors and family

The pardon power used for people tied to the president by politics, money or blood.

RING 4 About 1,750 grants, most by two orders. President Trump has granted clemency to about 1,750 people since January 2025, by this brief's count. Most were covered by two orders: one for people charged in the Jan. 6, 2021 attack, one for offenses tied to the 2020 presidential election. [3]

RING 4 22 politicians in corruption cases. President Trump has pardoned or freed 22 politicians convicted of or charged with corruption-type crimes across his two terms, a watchdog group counts. [30]

RING 4 \$1 billion owed to victims, erased. President Trump's pardons in 2025 wiped out more than \$1 billion in court-ordered restitution. [31]

RING 5 A pardon after a fundraiser. Paul Walczak was pardoned 12 days after he was sentenced. His mother had attended a \$1 million-per-person fundraising dinner weeks earlier, a newspaper reported. A White House official said he had been targeted for his family's politics. [32]

CONTEXT What President Biden's grants were for. President Biden granted a record 4,245 pardons and commutations. Nearly all were commutations, including about 1,500 for people already moved to home confinement during the pandemic [33], 2,490 on a single day, and 37 death sentences changed to life. [34]

RING 4 A president pardoned his son. On Dec. 1, 2024 President Biden pardoned his son Hunter for any federal offenses over nearly 11 years. [35]

RING 4 And five more relatives. In his final days in office President Biden pardoned five more relatives. [36]

G Protecting allies and punishing rivals

The gain is power, for the official or the party.

RING 4 At least 470 targets. A news agency counted at least 470 people and institutions singled out for retributive punishment by the Trump administration in 2025. The White House rejects the word "retribution." [2]

RING 2 The President demanded prosecutions of two critics. President Trump publicly urged his Attorney General to act against his opponents: "JUSTICE MUST BE SERVED, NOW!!!" A prosecutor he then named charged a former FBI director with making a false statement and obstructing Congress, and New York's attorney general (D) with mortgage fraud. A judge threw out both cases, ruling the prosecutor's appointment unlawful. The White House said this "will not be the final word." [37]

The two presidents, side by side. This brief's research found no court, special counsel or vote of Congress that has found either President Trump (R) or President Biden (D) took a payment in exchange for an official act since 2021. The difference is in the documented private gain. For President Trump and his family, the sums in sections B, C and D run to billions of dollars, most of it legal. For President Biden, the record is the paintings in section D and the pardons of his son and five relatives in section F. House Republicans reported in August 2024 that the Biden family received \$27 million from foreign sources; the report offered no direct evidence of wrongdoing by Biden himself. [38] Their committee chairman says Biden "knew about, participated in, and benefited from his family's influence peddling schemes." [39]

! Status of the guardrails

Guardrails are the laws, offices and divisions of power that keep officials in check. Here is where they stand.

A president's official acts are shielded. The Supreme Court ruled on July 1, 2024 that a former president cannot be prosecuted for core official acts. [40] Justice Department policy says a sitting president cannot be indicted at all. [41]

The conflict-of-interest law skips the top. The President, Vice President, members of Congress and federal judges are not subject to the main conflict-of-interest law, with narrow exceptions. [42]

A code with no enforcer. The Supreme Court's Code of Conduct (Nov. 13, 2023) has five canons and no enforcement provision. It says: "Individual Justices, rather than the Court, decide recusal issues." [43]

The ethics office's acting head has a second job. As of June 2026 the Office of Government Ethics had no confirmed director; the President had sent a nominee to the Senate. The acting director named on June 23, 2026 is also the Acting Secretary of Labor. [44]

17 watchdogs fired in one night. President Trump fired 17 agency inspectors general on Jan. 24, 2025 without the 30 days' notice the law requires. A federal judge wrote: "President Trump violated the IGA. That much is obvious." She did not reinstate them. The government argued the notice rule intrudes on the President's power. [45]

The Attorney General's corruption unit: down from about 30 attorneys to two. The Justice Department section that prosecutes crimes by public officials had about 30 attorneys in 2023. [46] A news report put it at two in May 2026. The department did not comment. [47]

States run elections. The federal government has pressed to direct them. The Justice Department sued 30 states and Washington, D.C., for their full voter lists. Judges have dismissed 26 of the cases, and no court has ruled for the department. [48] After a March 2026 executive order on mail voting, the Postal Service adopted a rule restricting which mail ballots it carries. A judge found the rule likely violates the Constitution, under which states administer elections. On Sept. 14, 2026 the Supreme Court left that block in place. The government says the order protects the mail from voter fraud. [49]

WHEN YOU HEAR "IT'S CORRUPT," ASK:

1. Who gained: the official, the family, a donor, the political party?
2. What public power (including overt and covert influence) was used to get it?
3. Which ring is it in: crime, law, rules, norm, or acts that break no law but are wrong, abuses of power and serious breaches of public trust?
4. Who can enforce it? Did they? Did we?
5. What does the official say?
6. Would you accept this behavior from members of your party?

WHAT DO THE FACTS SAY?

- Legal doesn't mean right. 21 of the 27 facts in sections A to G broke no law; they sit in rings 4 and 5, where only the press, watchdogs and voters can act.
- The money runs to billions, and most of it is legal: \$1.4 billion in crypto income in one year, a \$620 million federal loan to a company the President's son's firm invested in, a \$239 million inauguration funded partly by companies facing federal enforcement.
- The President, his sons, his son-in-law and a Cabinet secretary's sons profited while their family held power.
- The pardon power went to allies, donors and family: about 1,750 grants by President Trump since 2025, 22 politicians in corruption cases across his two terms. President Biden pardoned his son and five other relatives.
- Side by side: neither president was found to have taken a payment for an official act. The difference is scale: billions in documented private gain for President Trump and his family; family pardons and one art buyer named to a commission for President Biden.
- The guardrails are weaker: ethics laws exempt the President, the Court's code has no enforcer, 17 watchdogs were fired, and the corruption unit is down to two attorneys.

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SOURCES

We encourage you to click on individual sources and read more.

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OUR RESEARCH PROCESS

Every Fact Brief follows the same discipline — so you can trust what’s on these pages, and check it yourself.

- 1 Identify issues voters care about.
- 2 Do independent, nonpartisan research using primary documents and verifiable, most up-to-date data.
- 3 Human-defined and directed throughout: we set the questions and the scope, redirect the research as fact patterns emerge, and verify every source. Three or more AI tools assist with searching, organizing and drafting. Claude.ai formats the final brief.
- 4 Cross-check for accuracy and fairness.
- 5 Produce a concise Fact Brief.
- 6 Verify that each key factual claim is backed by a directly relevant, credible source.
- 7 Present the facts on contested points; note where credible sources disagree.
- 8 Use sources across the political spectrum, chosen for reliability — not for the conclusions they reach.
- 9 Update each Fact Brief when appropriate.

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