

THE VISIBLE 1% AND THE SILENT 99%: THE “RATIONALIZATION” OF CORRUPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

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For a country with a population of 334 million and a government workforce of over 22 million, the annual corruption rate in the United States has been relatively controllable for nearly a quarter of a century. According to authoritative anti-corruption assessments by Transparency International and other organizations, the overall level of integrity in the United States is still among the best in the world, and its integrity index is also at a median level. However, compared with the historical stage of power rent-seeking in the early 20th century, new forms of corruption such as hidden interest transfers and lobbying groups manipulating policies still permeate multiple political and economic fields. It is worth noting that the problem of corruption in the United States is not a unique phenomenon in contemporary times, but an institutional disease that has always been associated with the federal system, electoral politics and capital expansion in the United States since its founding in 1776.

Keywords: The United States of America politics; corruption; interest groups; lobbying.

ВИДИМЫЙ 1% И МОЛЧАЛИВЫЕ 99%: «РАЦИОНАЛИЗАЦИЯ» КОРРУПЦИИ В США

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Для страны с населением 334 млн человек и числом государственных служащих более 22 млн человек, за последнюю четверть века уровень коррупции в Соединенных Штатах был относительно стабильным. Согласно авторитетным антикоррупционным оценкам Transparency International и других организаций, общий уровень транспарентности в Соединенных Штатах по-прежнему остается одним из лучших в мире, а значения индекса находится на среднем уровне. Однако по сравнению с историческим этапом рентоориентированного поведения в начале XX в., появились новые формы коррупции, такие как скрытая передача интереса и лоббистские группы, манипулирующие политикой, которые проникают в политическую и экономическую сферы. Стоит отметить, что проблема коррупции в Соединенных Штатах не является уникальным явлением современности, а институциональной болезнью, кото-

рая всегда была связана с федеральной системой, избирательной политикой и ролью капитала в Соединенных Штатах с момента основания государства в 1776 г.

Ключевые слова: политика США; коррупция; группы интересов; лоббирование.

The current state of corruption in the United States: The U.S. Attorney General must submit a report to Congress every year, describing and summarizing the work of the Public Integrity Division under the Department of Justice. This report by the U.S. Department of Justice covers 50 states, a time span of 24 years, and involves 17,000 cases. The statistical table in the report shows that in the 24 years from 2000 to 2024, a total of 19,945 U.S. federal, state, and local government officials were charged with corruption, an average of 897 people per year, and 16,552 officials were convicted, an average of 778 people per year. Among them, the largest number of officials were federal government officials, followed by local government officials, and the least were state government officials. Private citizens involved in public corruption cases include corporate executives, contractors, and members of lobbying groups, totaling 6,657 people [1].

In recent years, although the number of cases has decreased, the overall situation of corruption in the United States has remained stable. Between 2000 and 2024, a total of 5,517 people was charged with corruption, an average of 1,103 per year; a total of 4,756 people was convicted, an average of 951 per year. The averages of these two indicators in the past five years are not far from the averages of the past 20 years.

According to the “Corruption Perception Index” published annually by Transparency International, the United States ranked 28th among a total of 181 countries and regions in 2024, with a CPI 2024 score of 65. In addition, based on a questionnaire survey of 55,000 people in 69 countries, Transparency International also compiled the “Global Corruption Barometer” to reflect the degree of corruption in various countries or regions from the perspective of the public. The survey shows that among the various state institutions in the United States, the political parties are the most affected by corruption, followed by legislative corruption, and then judicial corruption [2].

The U.S-style “bribed” corruption: The United States corruption is deeply rooted in its institutional structure, and its core driving force comes from the game of interest groups. Society is mainly dominated by two major groups: one is the business group covering business, finance, media and non-governmental organizations, and the other is the interest group including legislation, judiciary and administration. The power interaction between the two has derived two corruption models – “institutional corruption” in which the government controls the business community and “bribed corruption” in which the business community controls the government. The United States

essentially belongs to the latter: business groups systematically influence policy making through political donations, lobbying and other means, making legislation and public decision-making the product of interest group transactions. The typical characteristics of this institutional corruption are manifested in the continuous capture of government decision-making by economic interests.

The institutional corruption in the United States stems from the contradictory balance between the “free game” of interest groups and public order. When the country was founded, J. Madison had already predicted in the tenth article of the Federalist Papers that factional struggles could not be eradicated, and the key was to control their destructive power [3]. To this end, the Federal Lobbying Act of 1946 attempted to regulate rather than restrict lobbying, but it had fatal flaws: it did not establish a special regulatory agency, and the relationship between politicians and interest groups was vague, resulting in legal constraints being in name only [4]. This institutional design essentially condoned the institutionalized operation of money politics.

Bureaucratic corruption in the United States is rooted in the “iron triangle” power axis – a systematic conspiracy consisting of interest group lobbyists, senior officials of the executive branch and core members of Congress. This mechanism operates through a three-tier structure: lobbying capital, industry representatives infiltrate the decision-making level through political donations and resource swaps; bureaucratic collusion: powerful officials such as department heads actively transfer policy-making power to interest groups; legislative manipulation: core members who hold the power to approve the budget fulfill their interest promises [5].

Invisible corruption under the “tip of the iceberg”: Why can the United States public tolerate a huge “corruption iceberg” for so long even though they know that it is hidden beneath the sea level?

First, regarding the level of corruption, whether it is the state or the government, there are varying degrees of “corrupt transactions”. People generally believe that corruption and bribery by public officials, bribery by non-public officials or private employees, etc. must be against the law; however, in many cases, some behaviors violate moral principles from an ethical perspective and are detrimental to the public interest from the perspective of efficiency and fairness, but they are not illegal. W. Wilson, a leading intellectual in the Progressive Era, pointed out that “the dirty atmosphere of city government, the behind-the-scenes transactions of state government authorities, and the chaos, redundancy and corruption that are common in Washington government are everywhere” [6].

Second, the choice of the US anti-corruption system and measures depends largely on the extent of corruption and its governance philosophy. Its

basic strategy is to lower the standards for judging the behavior of public officials and guide them to move closer to the adjusted standards. As a result, many behaviors that were once considered corrupt have gradually been included in the scope of normal political operations and defined as “sincerity” rather than “fraud”. This method of adjusting standards through legislation has legalized some behaviors that were originally identified or may have involved corruption, thereby achieving control over corruption to a certain extent.

Third, one of the characteristics of bribery-type corruption in the United States is that it usually manifests itself in the form of “marginal corruption”. The goals and rhetoric of corrupt officials are very close to public goals, even to the point where it is difficult to distinguish between public and private. Corrupt public officials often seek personal gain under the guise of public welfare or national interests, and often mix personal gain into public policies, thus blurring the boundaries of illegal corruption. Whether it is the “revolving door” mechanism of role exchange between officials and businessmen or the “iron triangle” relationship between legislatures, executives and lobbyists, although their respective benefits are often different in terms of a certain legislation, policy or appropriation, on the whole these people are the biggest beneficiaries of the current political process [7]. In many games, those who have the right to participate in decision-making trade votes in order to achieve a result that everyone is happy with. The “mutual vote” style of mutual protection among officials has greatly weakened the function of checks and balances and supervision between legislatures, judiciary and administration, between parties and between interest groups. All of these have helped to conceal corruption to a certain extent.

Fourth, the ambiguity of the supply and demand quantity and price formation process of public goods, as well as the related information asymmetry, is an important “technical level” reason for legal corruption or “hidden corruption”. The agreements on the quantity or price of public goods reached between public officials and the private sector are mutually beneficial. Therefore, in sharp contrast to corruption that infringes on private property rights, even if there are illegal acts, neither party has the motivation to report the other's illegal acts to the judicial authorities.

Fifth, the extent of corruption is closely related to public perceptions and subjective judgments, and the political system of the United States has, to a certain extent, weakened the public's sensitivity to corruption and increased the level of tolerance. Under the current electoral mechanism, even if the corrupt behavior of officials is exposed, voters tend to regard the relevant allegations as a means of partisan struggle and have a lower level of trust. In addition, politicians seek votes through material benefits, further reducing

public alertness to corruption and transforming the original monitoring relationship into an exchange of benefits between voter groups and candidates.

Sixth, statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice over the past 23 years show that the federal government has the highest corruption rate, followed by local governments, and the lowest rate for state governments [8]. However, this does not mean that state governments are more honest, but rather that corruption is more concealed. First, many state capitals are located in remote towns, making it difficult for public opinion supervision and inspection departments to intervene in a timely manner, resulting in a large number of corruption behaviors not being exposed and illegal officials being able to escape sanctions. Second, the administrative management level and political literacy of state governments are generally lower than those of the federal government, public officials have poor self-discipline, and superiors' supervision of their subordinates is also weak, providing opportunities for corruption. Finally, state governments control greater financial power, and the capital circulation mechanism stimulates officials' motivation for corruption. In particular, the federal government's transfer payments mainly come from taxpayers from other states, making it easier for state government officials to relax their vigilance against abuse of power psychologically.

The reason why corruption in the United States is rampant and can never be stopped is due to the contradictions between the principles on which the United States political system is based. James Buchanan, a famous the United States economist who analyzed the United States democratic politics, believes that politics can be divided into two categories, one is “politics of principles” and the other is “politics of interests”. However, modern the United States politics is not “politics of principles” but “politics of interests”, which means that citizens are divided into groups that should be rewarded or punished, and treated differently accordingly. In other words, the judgment of the effectiveness of political behavior comes from the recognition of individuals or interest groups. It is this “politics of interests” that provides fertile soil for “legal corruption” in the United States [8].

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