
A Note about Sources

N.B. For readers who’d like to read more, or who are undertaking their own research, here is a select bibliography of my sources for this piece. As with all the bibliographies for New Yorker essays that I post on my Harvard faculty website, this brief discussion mentions a good number of works consulted but it’s neither an exhaustive inventory of my sources nor a survey of the scholarship in a given field. Instead, I’ve listed works I found most useful or especially provocative. I have generally only included manuscripts, journal and magazine articles, and books; I haven’t listed interviews here at all; I’ve not included things like newspapers, advertisements, patents, legislation, and policy statements; and I’ve generally left out citations from specialized bodies of literature in fields like medicine and law. A last caveat: these brief bibliographies are all frozen in time: I do not update them, and they therefore don’t include anything written on these subjects after the date on which my essay was published.

“It would be impossible for an historian to write a history of political corruption in America,” Walter Lippmann wrote in “A Theory about Corruption” in Vanity Fair in November 1930. “What he could write is the history of the exposure of corruption. Such a history would show, I think, that almost every American community governs itself by fits and starts of unsuspecting complacency and violent suspicion.” More or less the same can be said of the history of scholarship on the subject: the more people worry about corruption, the more scholars study it. It comes in fits and starts.

What counts as corruption has been the subject not only of constitutional debate but also of longstanding scholarly dispute. Social scientists have tended to define political corruption broadly, as the behavior of a public servant who places private gain above public interest, at the expense of public trust in government. A very good, if older introduction to the broad, comparative social science scholarship on corruption is Political Corruption: A Handbook, edited by Arnold J. Heidenheimer et al (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989). A significant sub-field, especially in the middle, post-colonial decades of the twentieth century, concerned the relationship between corruption and development. An influential essay was Samuel P. Huntington, “Modernization and Corruption,” in Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 59-71. Huntington argued that “modernization breeds corruption.” The inverse of this argument is a kind of American exceptionalism, which insists that there ought to be less corruption in the United States than in any other country in the world. This argument comes and goes. Mostly, it goes. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholarship on corruption in the United States was informed and colored by the political tumult of the 1960s, and, above all, by the Watergate scandal. See, e.g., Carl J. Friedrich, The Pathology of Politics: Violence, Betrayal, Corruption, Secrecy, and Propaganda.

Another wave of books about corruption, more often written by reporters and open government activists than by social scientists, has followed in the wake of the presidencies of Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama. Representative is Tom Fitton, The Corruption Chronicles: Obama’s Big Secrecy, Big Corruption, and Big Government (New York: Threshold Editions, 2012). Meanwhile, a rich field of inquiry among political scientists has been the study of the consequences of corruption. Especially provocative is Martin Gilens, Affluence and Influence: Economic and Political Power in America (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).


The March 29, 2013 indictment of Malcolm A. Smith and other defendants has been unsealed. U.S. v. Malcolm A. Smith, Daniel J. Halloran, and Vincent Tabone is 13 Cr. 297 (2014). For this piece, I consulted court documents, including transcripts of recorded conversations. Andrew Cuomo’s office’s announcement of the July 2013 appointment of the Moreland Commission to Investigate Public Corruption is online, as is the Moreland Commission’s December 2013 preliminary report. The New York Times investigation into the governor’s relationship to the commission appeared in July 2014.


Lippmann thought corruption wasn’t so bad; after all, it’s better than outright tyranny, or civil war. “The common American assumption about political corruption is naïve and misleading,” he believed. Bands of thugs are mankind’s “natural governments,” while reformers represent “artificial government.” They’re meant to fight each other; the fight will never end. “The traffic in privileges, which is what corruption is, has never long
lacked men smart enough to find ways of defeating the ingenuity of the reformers.” Not many people who have written on the subject wholly agree with Lippmann, or else they might not have bothered to write. But some agree with him a lot.

--J. Lepore
August 15, 2014