



DEEP DIVE LAW

# How the Trump administration has undermined the fight against public corruption

MAY 13, 2026 · 5:00 AM ET



Ryan Lucas

6-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



President Trump reacts to a question from a reporter after signing a series of executive orders, including a pardon for former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, in the Oval Office at the White House in February 2025.

Andrew Harnik/Getty Images

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In 2024, a federal jury needed just two hours to return a guilty verdict for former Las Vegas councilwoman Michele Fiore for pocketing some \$70,000 in donations to build a memorial for police officers killed in the line of duty – and spending it instead on herself, including rent and her daughter's wedding.

Then, weeks before Fiore was scheduled to be sentenced in May 2025, President Trump granted her a full, unconditional pardon.

Fiore is one of at least 15 former elected officials and their co-conspirators who were either charged with or convicted of corruption offenses – and then pardoned by Trump after he returned to office last year.

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Legal experts say the pardons are but one way the Trump administration has undermined the fight against public corruption.

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#### **POLITICS**

#### **Who has President Trump pardoned and why?**

"There are all sorts of things that the administration has done that suggest an increasingly casual perspective on public corruption," said Dan Greenberg, a

senior legal fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. "Pardons are an important piece of that puzzle."

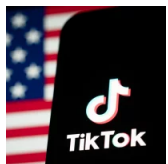
Another piece is the dismantling of the Justice Department's Public Integrity Section, which was created after Watergate to investigate and prosecute public corruption and election crimes.

Columbia Law School professor Richard Briffault said that taken together, the administration's actions send a signal that it doesn't think corruption should be treated seriously.

"There's kind of a disdain for the very idea that corruption is a problem," Briffault said. "They're acting as if corruption is simply not an issue, and people who were convicted of corruption were unfairly treated."

## "Hailstorm" of pardons

President Trump has granted pardons early and often in his second term, including some 1,500 on his first day in office for all of the Jan. 6 Capitol rioters.



LAW

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Among the former elected officials and their co-conspirators, one pardon was for a Virginia sheriff who was convicted of accepting \$75,000 in bribes in exchange for appointing businessmen as deputies. Another was for the former speaker of the Tennessee state house and his aide, who were convicted of a kickback scheme involving taxpayer-funded mailer services.



NPR INVESTIGATION: JANUARY 6, 2021

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All three of them are Republicans.

Not all of the pardons went to members of the GOP. The former Democratic governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich, and Texas Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar

were also among those pardoned.

Still, in total, more than half of the 15 Trump pardons related to public corruption were granted to Republicans or Trump supporters, and a top administration official involved in the pardon process, Ed Martin, posted on social media last year: "No MAGA left behind."

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## **POLITICS**

### **How President Trump is changing presidential pardons**

Greenberg said every president occasionally makes mistakes in the pardon process.

President Bill Clinton came under fire for pardoning former hedge-fund manager Marc Rich, and President Joe Biden was roundly criticized for pardoning his son, Hunter, as well as preemptively pardoning other family members.

Greenberg likens such controversial pardons to a hailstone coming out of a clear blue sky, but he says in the Trump administration, "what we have now is we have a hailstorm."

"There are just a pile of pardons that I think appear to any reasonable person to be not just highly questionable but just obviously disturbing," he said.



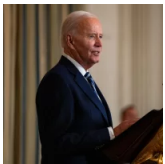
## POLITICS

### President Biden pardons son Hunter

In a statement to NPR, the White House defended the president's actions.

"President Trump has exercised his constitutional authority to issue pardons and commutations for a variety of individuals, including those who have been victims of Biden's weaponized justice system," said spokeswoman Abigail Jackson.

"And the only pardons anyone should be critical of are from President Autopen, who pardoned and commuted sentences of violent criminals including child killers and mass murderers – and that's not to mention the proactive pardons he 'signed' for his family members like Hunter on his way out the door."



## POLITICS

### Biden shortens sentences for nearly 2,500 people, setting a record

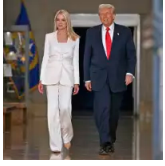
#### "Chilling effect" at the Justice Department

The pardons send a signal about priorities, and that has a trickle-down effect on enforcement.

John Keller, who worked for more than a decade in the Justice Department's public corruption-fighting section, said after Trump's 2024 election win, career prosecutors who had worked public corruption investigations were reluctant to move forward on cases that they thought would be unpopular with the incoming administration.

"So I think it has a chilling effect on specific cases. I think it has a chilling effect generally on prosecutors from pursuing public corruption cases at all," he said.

That, combined with a "resource drain" across the Justice Department, he said, means "the current administration is making it practically more difficult to pursue these cases for even the handful of agents and agencies that may still be willing to do them."



## LAW

### **Critics warn DOJ is being politicized despite vows to end its purported weaponization**

The Justice Department unit that investigates and prosecutes public corruption and election crimes is called the Public Integrity Section. It was set up after Watergate, and for the past 50 years has gone after federal, state and local officials who have abused their public office.

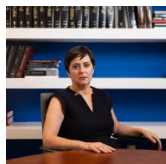
Under this Trump administration, the section has been decimated.

It had around 40 full-time staff when Trump returned to office in January 2025. That number has dropped to just two full-time attorneys today, according to current and former officials.

It was handling around 175-200 open matters – investigations and charged cases – when Trump returned to office. That number has plummeted to around 20 today, those officials say.

Cases that the section already had open before the change in administration have been allowed to proceed, but many have been declined or handed off to U.S. attorneys' offices, where they often are dropped.

The Justice Department did not respond to a request for comment.



## POLITICS

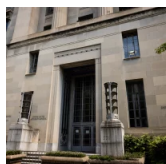
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#### **Risk of "corroding effect" nationwide**

Legal experts say this pullback from enforcement can have a long-term impact.

"If you don't have enforcement, what happens over time is the kind of corroding effect of public corruption leads to just a broken system of government where public officials are serving themselves first and then the public comes second," said Keller.

He was acting chief of the Public Integrity Section when he resigned in February 2025 after the Trump administration's department leadership directed him to dismiss a corruption case against then-New York City Mayor Eric Adams.



## LAW

### **Fallout from Eric Adams case continues at the Justice Department**

Blowback over the Adams case prompted a wave of resignations and marked the start of the Public Integrity Section's gutting.

Public corruption cases are notoriously complex. They demand time and resources. Big city U.S. attorneys offices, including in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, have the means to do them on their own.

Smaller states and more rural areas, however, will be hit hardest by the demise of the Public Integrity Section, current and former officials say, because it's in those places that the unit often stepped in with resources and expertise to bring cases and hold state and local officials to account.

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## POLITICS

### **What's behind Trump's pardons of people convicted of public corruption?**

As an example, Keller points to the prosecution of a former small-town Pennsylvania police officer who was convicted of bribery and other crimes,

including using his position to obtain sex from two women in exchange for favors in public prosecutions.

"Because public integrity no longer exists, those cases aren't being done and there's no one to step into the shoes of the Public Integrity Section to do them," he said.

corruption   justice department   presidential pardons

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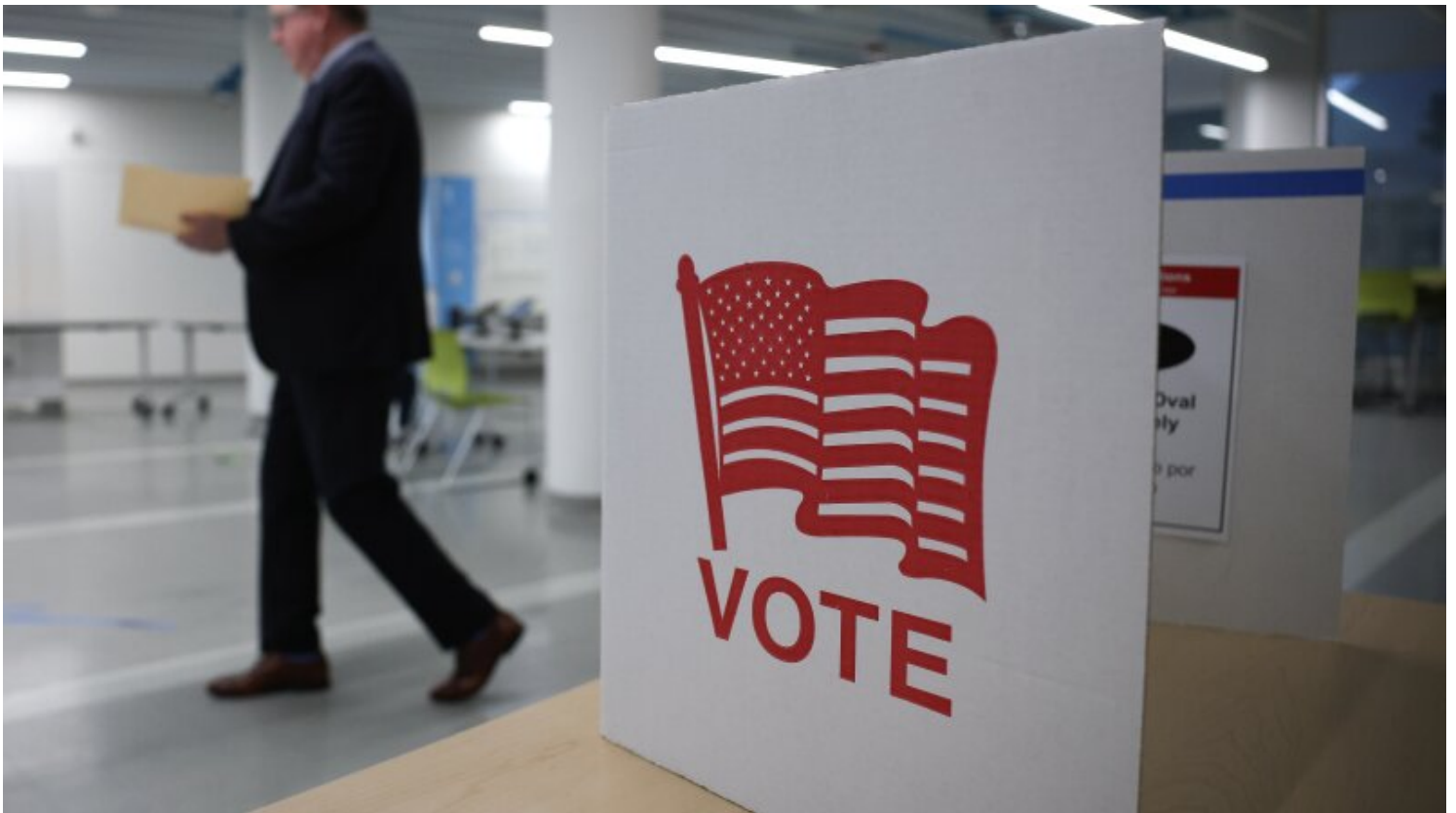
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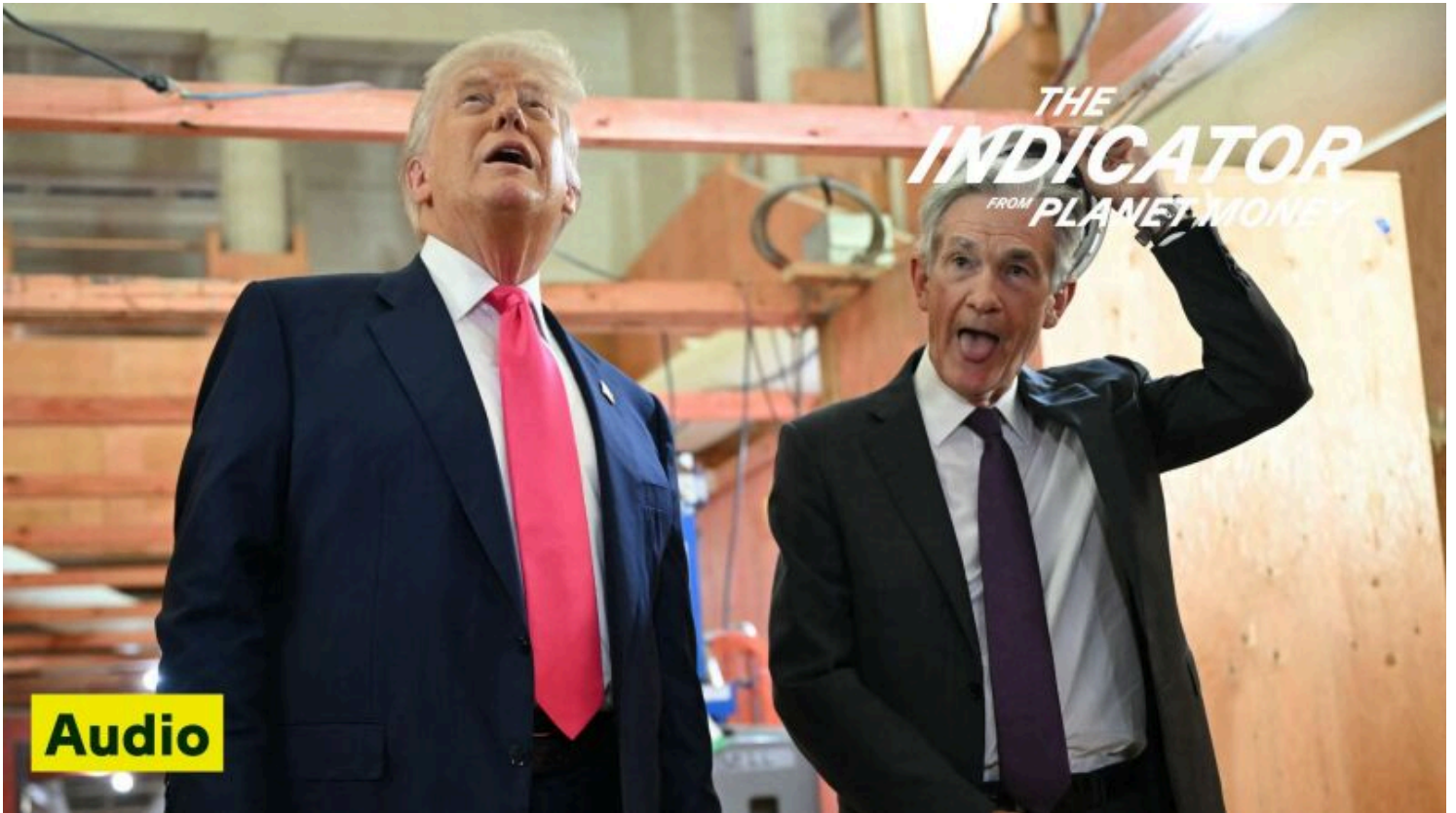
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