

# The Corruption Playbook

## *How They Steal in Plain Sight*

Political corruption in America is not subtle. It does not happen in shadowy back rooms. It happens on camera, in public filings, in White House meetings with open visitor logs, in congressional votes that follow lobbying checks with eerie precision. The reason it persists is not secrecy. The reason it persists is normalcy.

This guide explains the most common mechanisms of political theft in plain language — what they are, how they work, and what to look for.

### **Play #1: The No-Bid Contract**

How it works: Government contracts are supposed to be awarded through competitive bidding. No-bid contracts bypass that process, allowing officials to award lucrative contracts directly to donors, allies, or former employers without competition.

*Real example: During COVID-19, billions in PPE contracts went to vendors with political connections, no track record in medical supply, and in some cases, nonexistent inventories.*

### **Play #2: The Regulatory Rollback**

How it works: An industry donates heavily to a candidate. The candidate wins. The industry's regulators are replaced with industry insiders who dismantle the rules the industry never liked.

*Real example: The revolving door between Wall Street and Treasury is so established it has a nickname: 'Government Sachs.' Between Goldman Sachs and the federal government, over 40 officials have moved back and forth since the 1990s.*

### **Play #3: The Shell Company Donation**

How it works: Money moves from a corporation to a shell company to a Super PAC to a candidate — with each step obscuring the original source.

*What to watch: When a Super PAC receives a large donation from an LLC with no employees and no history, start following the chain.*

### **Play #4: The Family Business**

How it works: Official does a favor for a corporation. Corporation hires official's spouse, child, or sibling. No explicit exchange ever occurred.

*Real example: Kushner Companies received \$2.5 billion in financing from Qatar's sovereign wealth fund shortly after Jared Kushner advocated against a State Department position Qatar opposed.*

## Play #5: The Post-Office Payday

How it works: Official supports legislation or policy favorable to an industry. Official leaves government. Industry pays official six figures in consulting fees, speaking fees, or a board seat.

*The numbers: Former members of Congress who become lobbyists earn an average of 1,452% more in their first year of lobbying than their congressional salary.*

## Play #6: The Emergency Exception

How it works: Emergency conditions — pandemic, natural disaster, national security — are used to justify bypassing normal procurement rules, oversight, and competitive bidding. The emergency ends. The contracts remain.

*Watch for: Emergency contracts that are renewed long after the emergency is over, or that go to vendors with no emergency response experience.*

## Play #7: The Foundation Shuffle

How it works: A nonprofit foundation is established by or connected to a public official. Corporations donate to the foundation. The foundation's work happens to benefit the corporations. The official's decisions happen to favor them.

*What to look for: Check foundation donors against companies that benefit from decisions made by the foundation's connected official.*

## How to Spot It

- Follow the contracts: USASpending.gov shows every federal contract award.
- Follow the donations: OpenSecrets.org tracks all political donations and lobbying.
- Follow the revolving door: OpenSecrets.org tracks when officials move between government and industry.
- Follow the money after: What did they do when they left office?
- Ask who benefits: When a policy changes, ask who gets richer.