Corruption and scandal have long been regular and conspicuous features of American politics and government. From the land, oil and railroad scandals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the presidential, congressional and electoral scandals of the late twentieth century, the United States has rarely enjoyed a reputation for political probity or institutional integrity. Some American states are less corrupt than others and the federal judiciary experiences fewer scandals than do the executive and legislative branches but, overall, corruption is not confined geographically or institutionally.

The way in which corruption is understood in the United States is a product of legal, social, economic and political cultures and contexts. Rules regulating political conduct were conspicuous by their absence in the nineteenth century and, what may appear as conspicuously corrupt by modern standards, was then perceived as ‘politics as usual’.

Corruption can be simply defined as the abuse of public office for private benefit but, of course, that simply raises a number of questions regarding the meaning to be attached to words like ‘public’, ‘office’, ‘private’ and ‘benefit’. There are spatial as well as temporal differences in the perception of corruption. Thus, not only is conduct now viewed as illegitimate when once it was customary but conduct which is corrupt in one modern democracy is seen as acceptable or even commendable in another. Since the 1970s, nepotism has been viewed as corruption in the US Congress but, in the British House of Commons, MPs routinely employ their spouses as secretaries and researchers at the taxpayers’ expense. In the United States this would be corrupt but, in the UK, it is seen as a perfectly proper, practical and convenient arrangement, at least by MPs themselves.

The abuse of office is more obvious when it involves illicit payments made in order to secure some direct, immediate and tangible benefit, for example, a bribe to secure a public contract or where election results are fraudulently manipulated. From a legal perspective, corruption is a very difficult charge to prosecute because it involves proving intent and action and prosecutors have to link the action to the payment or benefit. Such crude corruption still occurs but it has largely been replaced by more complex, more indirect and less tangible ways of distorting the conduct of public office. The intent may be to persuade an official not to do something or to do something a long time in the future. It is not unknown, for example, for there to be suspicions that regulators of particular industries have been ‘encouraged’ to regulate with a light touch in anticipation of lucrative employment opportunities in the regulated industry. The ‘revolving door’ between public and private employment may offer many benefits but it also increases the risk of corruption.

If private benefits can be immediate or deferred, specific or implied, they can also be indirect and institutional. Much discussion of corruption assumes it has an individualistic character, a single official receiving a simple bribe from another individual who needs a favour. But more often it involves groups, companies and organizations and the benefit is a collective rather than individual one. An executive in a media company could, for example, offer a bribe to a senior figure in the Federal Communications Commission in the hope of his company being allocated a lucrative broadcasting licence but the company could also make a large campaign contribution to a political party in the knowledge that, if victorious, the party will appoint commissioners to the Federal Communications Commission who are likely to be ‘sympathetic’ to that particular media company.

While corruption has long been a notable part of American political life, attempts to regulate and control it effectively began in the 1970s in response to the Watergate scandal. The use of public agencies to pursue private vendettas against ‘the enemies of the state’, most notably the creation of an in-house team of burglars.
based in the White House itself, was sufficiently scandalous to elevate the issue of corruption up the political agenda. Corruption and misconduct now play an important role in contemporary American political debate. Politicians are more sensitive to the issue, the media display a keener interest in exposing misconduct and the rules governing official conduct have become more restrictive.

There seems to be a new ‘iron law’ of American politics; the more you look for corruption and scandal, the more you are likely to find it. This makes it very difficult to assess whether there is more corruption now than there was in the past because it is difficult to separate issues of awareness and investigation from actual incidence. Corruption receives much greater attention now than it did before. This is linked to the growth of a culture of mistrust which encourages the press and the public to question the motives of all politicians and to assume that, in varying degrees, they are all crooks.

There is no reliable ‘hard’ data about levels of corruption in the United States and no way of being certain whether there is more now than there was in 1950 or even 1850. We do have opinion poll evidence which suggest that public trust in the integrity of politicians fell sharply in the last third of the twentieth century. We also know that at different points in American history, there have been upsurges of political and public discontent about standards of public ethics and conduct. These periodic ‘moral panics’ have provoked a variety of reform efforts and, as a result, there are good grounds for the claim that the United States has the most comprehensive and stringent anti-corruption laws and rules of any modern democracy. Thus, while we cannot prove that corruption has increased in frequency or importance, we can say that public cynicism has reached new heights and, as part of a hitherto unsuccessful effort to calm the public’s fears, an unprecedented range of reform measures have been implemented.

Any assessment of the causes of corruption has to take note of the political culture and institutional framework of government. The key principles of the American constitutional design are federalism and the separation of powers. Both principles encourage the dispersal and fragmentation of political authority and, in so doing, they multiply the number of potential decision and access points. Critics claim that the American system of government is designed not to work and, if this is an exaggeration, it remains the case that the system is not conducive to swift, decisive action. American politics and policymaking are complex and the system lacks cohesion and purpose. It is, for example, quite common for the executive and legislative branches to be controlled by different political parties. To British observers, the idea of having a Labour government but a Conservative majority in the House of Commons seems absurd and unworkable. But, in his second term, President Clinton had to come to terms with the political fact that his Republican opponents controlled both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This phenomenon of ‘divided government’ further complicates an already complex system and makes coherent policymaking extremely difficult.

Divided government exacerbates the already formidable problems of governing in such a fragmented and porous political system. It is only possible because American politics normally lacks the hard edge of ideological conflict which makes co-operation with political opponents so difficult in other political cultures. American politics depends on the skills of politicians to broker compromises. It is a system of incremental change in which principle and consistency are singular disadvantages. It is, almost
by definition, a system in which it is easier to prevent change, to protect the status quo, than it is to promote comprehensive reform.

Political activity in the United States is not driven by political principle or ideological conviction but by pragmatism and reciprocity which means that politics is a market place in which deals are struck and favours exchanged. Where party loyalty and ideological purity are not effective guides to political action, they tend to be replaced by individual self interest. Despite the continuity of the two party system, legislative politics in the United States is inherently individualistic where each representative and senator seeks to gain allies on particular pieces of legislation by a process of ‘horse-trading’ or ‘logrolling’ whereby individuals who offer their support for a cause expect, even require, something in return. Nothing is sacred and everything is negotiable. Presidents seek congressional support by offering favours or by directing public funds to key constituencies. Within Congress, individual legislators will trade support for particular favourite pieces of legislation so that an urban Democrat might vote in favour of higher farm subsidies on the understanding that a rural Republican will reciprocate by voting for new housing projects in urban ghettos.

In a fragmented political system so evidently lacking in cohesion and discipline, the opportunities for intervention by external actors such as business corporations are plentiful. American politics and government is characterized by openness and an ease of access to politicians and officials. In terms of state theory, the United States falls into the ‘weak state, strong society’ category and the possibility of making political decisions without reference to those who are affected by them would seem heretical. Interest groups have multiple points of access at both the federal and state levels and, when their efforts are unsuccessful at one level or with one institution, they quickly move to another. The point is that such activity is not only legitimate but is considered by many to be commendable, as evidence of the health of American democracy and the means by which politicians are required to respond to those who put them in office.

The individualistic character of politics and, in particular, the lack of strong party or ideological loyalties, means, on one interpretation, that American politicians enjoy a status and independence which is rare in Europe. Viewed differently, it could be argued that, stripped of party protection, politicians are isolated and vulnerable to both legitimate and illegitimate pressures from individuals, groups and organizations. In particular, the fact that every American elected politician from county to state to national level is expected to raise their own election funds means they are dependent on donations from wealthy contributors. No doubt some contributors are motivated by altruism and a concern for the public good but usually the norm of reciprocity applies. Most contributors expect office holders to grant them privileged access and timely information. Many commentators suspect that contributors’ expectations go well beyond access and information and place obligations on officeholders to intervene in administrative or legislative policies and processes for the particular benefit of major campaign contributors. This could, for example, involve inserting an amendment in a bill, obstructing a bill in whole or part or exercising pressure on regulators.

The case of the ‘Keating Five’ offers a striking example of the potential for corruption and for a negative impact on public policy making. To many observers, ‘The Keating Five scandal became symbolic of the collapse of congressional ethics’. The collapse of the savings and loan industry in the 1980s eventually
Cost the American taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars. If the proximate cause of the scandal was the wave of financial deregulation promoted by the Reagan Administration, it also received support from many members of Congress. The Lincoln Savings and Loan was acquired by an Arizonan property speculator, Charles Keating, whose reckless investment strategy attracted the attention of the federal regulators. Keating declined to co-operate with the regulators and sought political protection from his friends in the United States Senate. It emerged that, in 1987, five senators had intervened on Keating’s behalf with the federal regulators accusing them of harassing a respectable businessman. All five senators had received substantial campaign contributions from Keating. In 1989, Lincoln Savings and Loan collapsed at a cost to the taxpayers of two billion dollars.

The causes of corruption in any political system are broadly similar and depend on the structure of incentives, the range and number of opportunities and the risk and consequences of detection. Where there are frequent opportunities, the prospect of large gains and a minimal risk of detection, it is likely that corruption will flourish. Where opportunities are limited, gains are modest, the risk of detection high and the penalties draconian, corruption will be lower. Some areas of government activity in the United States, as elsewhere, are peculiarly susceptible to corruption. The usual ‘hotspots’ include public procurement and contracting, capital projects, customs and excise, taxation, licensing and all forms of regulatory activity. When the scope and size of government grows, as the federal government did in the 1930s, so do the opportunities for corruption. Given the current scale of American government, the opportunities for corruption are numerous but, because of the federal system, the opportunities are disproportionately large at the state and local level. The federal government in Washington is less a direct supplier of goods and services than a source of funding to state, city and local governments to enable them to deliver services to citizens. The major exception is defence procurement where the federal government still contracts directly with suppliers.

Federalism multiplies the points of access and influence and thus disperses opportunities for corruption. Attempting to control corruption in American government is therefore a complex task because there are so many layers of government to tackle. The political culture is receptive to interest group activity and elected representatives are expected to respond to the needs and claims of their constituents. This combination of structural and environmental factors contributed to the problem of controlling corruption because it increases the opportunities for corruption and complicates efforts to reduce it. One consequence is that levels of corruption vary from state to state depending on local circumstances and traditions. Corruption flourished in the era of the urban political machine which controlled many American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because ‘bosses’ needed state resources for patronage purposes. The risks of detection and punishment were minimized by the politicization and corruption of police departments and judges and the intimidation of political opponents.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of corruption in the United States is its links to the funding of electoral campaigns. Where some European states rely heavily on state funding and others channel funding through strong central party organizations, the United States places unusual responsibility on individual candidates to fund their own election campaigns. The consequences for corruption in the United States are considerable. Political parties have long experienced a bad press and distrust of parties (or factions) has been a major theme in American political history from the founding of the republic. The corruption of party machines gave rise to a reform movement in the early twentieth century whose aim was to weaken parties. The introduction of primary elections helped erode the party bosses’ control over candidate selection and encouraged the separation of candidates from parties which has become such a striking and distinctive feature of American electoral politics. Party machines had funded election campaigns through corruption but their decay and destruction did not offer any obvious solution to the problem of how to fund election campaigns in the future. American political parties lack any concept of membership let alone any aspiration to mass membership. Political affiliation is measured by voting party identity expressed through voting intentions rather than by
ideology or the possession of a party membership card. Deprived of internal sources, it has been necessary to seek external sources of campaign funding.

Fund raising by political parties in the United States has operated within a political culture and legal context which is driven by a fear of corruption. In 1907, 1921, 1940 and 1947, laws were passed which sought to eliminate or at least control donations to parties from business corporations and, more recently, trade unions. But expectations that legal restrictions would reduce the influence of vested interests over political candidates were soon disappointed. The 1907 Tillman Act which banned contributions to businesses and banks merely served to encourage more indirect forms of contribution. Thus, senior executives in corporations would make it known that they expected or even required employees to make individual contributions to nominated candidates for which they would later be reimbursed. Not only did contributors find ingenious and innovative ways around legal restrictions but the commitment to enact legislation was not matched by a determination or ability to enforce it. The Corrupt Practices Act 1921 limited the size of campaign contributions and required candidates to submit reports of expenditures, presumably in the expectation that this would reduce corruption and promote transparency. The Corrupt Practices Act was superseded by the 1971 Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) but, in its fifty year life, not a single candidate or contributor was convicted for offences under it.

By the 1960s, a leading commentator could observe that ’American politics is atomized and each candidate must in some way or other cover his own personal campaign expenses’. When that candidate was Richard Nixon, it ultimately produced the notorious Watergate scandal which was at root a campaign funding scandal. It was a scandal involving illegal contributions from some of America’s best known companies including Goodyear and American Airlines, the exchange of contributions for favourable government decisions in the case of the Associated Milk Producers Inc, the solicitation of donations backed by the threat of sanctions against those who initially declined and the apparent sale of ambassadorships to major contributors. The illegal donations were matched by a series of illegal expenditures including the formation of the notorious burglary squad, ‘the Plumbers’, established inside the White House. Watergate generated a series of anti-corruption measures and, with regard to campaign funding, FECA was amended in 1974 with the aim of eliminating large donations and reducing the costs of elections. The impact of the reforms was to accelerate the already clear trend toward the separation of candidates from parties. In terms of campaign funding, American election law affords political parties no special status but rather treats them like any other private source of money, a potential threat to the public interest.

Other democracies do things differently and it is more usual to find that ’Campaign finance law has been aimed at protecting parties from special interests rather than treating parties as special interests’. Despite FECA and its subsequent amendments in 1974, 1979, and 1991, what characterizes American campaign finance reform is the consistent ingenuity of candidates and contributors in finding ways around the legal restrictions. The Federal Election Commission has a reputation for ineffectiveness which is matched by few federal agencies. It investigates only a small proportion of alleged violations and, on the rare occasions it comes to a judgement, the penalties are usually light. It is underfunded, overworked and politically deadlocked.

Campaign finance reform is a regular feature of political debate and a wide range of reforms have been canvassed. Sometimes it is even possible to pass a new law but they generally do little to allay concerns about levels of corruption in the system. Laws can be circumvented or inadequately enforced. In the case of the ‘Keating Five’, the campaign contributions were legal and the senators defended themselves on the grounds that they did not do anything illegal or improper. The legal counsel to the Senate Ethics Committee argued that what was important was the appearance of impropriety and he claimed that a senator ‘should not engage in conduct which would appear to be improper to a reasonable, non-partisan, fully informed person’. It is not clear how many politically conscious individuals in Washington can meet this person specification.
Rather understanding how the American political cloth is woven and recognizing that pulling at one thread might unravel the entire political fabric.

In any comparative study of contemporary political corruption, the distinctiveness of the United States consists in three features of American political life. The first, as we have seen, is the idiosyncratic system of campaign finance which makes it difficult for politicians to avoid giving the appearance of corruption. The problem has been exacerbated by the steep rise in campaign costs associated with the need to buy expensive television and radio time. The second distinctive feature is the tendency to overreact to corruption scandals by introducing ever more onerous and rigorous anti-corruption measures. This has the consequence of setting the threshold of corrupt conduct at a lower level and this makes it more difficult for politicians and officials to establish and sustain a reputation for integrity. The attempts to tackle the abuses of campaign finance have resulted in making the system extremely complex thus making it ever more difficult for candidates to stay within the rules. Thus, the appearance of corruption is more striking in the United States because the law threshold and complex arrangements make it easier to point to unethical and illegal behaviour by politicians. This is linked to the third distinctive feature of American political corruption; the use of corruption allegations as a political weapon. Such allegations are a feature of many democratic systems but, in the United States, they are easier to make both because of the constitutional protections of freedom of speech and hence the lax libel laws and because if you operate with a low threshold of unethical conduct it is easier to identify violations of laws and rules. The problem is that corruption allegations are a double edged sword and those who live by it sometimes also die by it as former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, found to his cost. The outbreak and intensification of the ‘corruption wars’ has been a notable feature of American politics since Watergate.

The resignation of President Nixon in 1974 in anticipation of his impeachment made it difficult even for optimists to sustain their belief in the integrity of American government. From landslide re-election to total disgrace in two years is as precipitous a fall in political fortunes as can be found anywhere on the globe. The revelations of his abuses of office and the subsequent revelations of those of his predecessors in office helped develop and reinforce a growing public distrust of politicians. If the president turns out to be a crook, what price a senator or representative? Watergate ushered in an era of reform, a drive for stronger limits of political conduct, more transparency, and greater accountability. Not only was FECA amended in 1974, after the Lockheed scandal the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act was passed. In 1978 the Ethics in Government Act became law and, among other provisions, it established the Office of Independent Counsel. This single reform was intended to protect the integrity of investigations of executive branch misconduct, the law provided new restrictions on ‘revolving door’ appointments by imposing a one year looking-off period for officials, it established the Office of Government Ethics (OGE) to provide ‘overall direction of executive branch policies related to preventing conflicts of interest’ and added to financial disclosure requirements and rules governing blind trusts.

But it is important not to see the Ethics in Government Act in...
isolation. In the Justice Department a new Public Integrity section was established which developed close working relationships with U.S. attorneys across the country. Most states created boards or agencies to oversee public ethics, conduct investigations, issue advisory opinions and collect and consider financial disclosure statements. Following Watergate, the FBI made the investigation of corruption one of its most important priorities. It embarked on a pro-active strategy of setting up what became known as ‘sting’ operations designed to test the integrity of federal and state politicians and officials. In 1980, the ABSCAM investigations exposed one senator and a number of representatives taking bribes. In the early 1990s, US attorneys and the FBI embarked on a number of corruption investigations at state level and there were corruption scandals in Arizona, California, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia. An FBI sting operation in South Carolina trapped five state legislators into agreeing to sell their votes to support a proposed bill. In the same year in Kentucky, fifteen charges as part of another FBI sting, ‘Operation Boptron’ relating to the horse racing business. Between 1980 and 1992, the number of corruption charges filed in the federal courts rose by 70%. The rise of corruption up the government agenda had triggered a political and law enforcement response. Public integrity was now a ‘hot’ issue and a public integrity bureaucracy grew up to combat corruption at all levels. Determining whether corruption has increased is a difficult task but there are certainly many more people, both inside and outside of government looking for it, and many more allegations are made about it than was the case thirty years ago.

The use of corruption charges as a political weapon has been particularly striking and damaging in the United States Congress. Few institutions can thrive when there is a breakdown of trust between colleagues but, when the institution relies on shared understandings and a norm of reciprocity, the problems become particularly acute. Congressional politics have become increasingly partisan and accusatory and this has created more difficulties for an institution which already lacks discipline and coherence. One source of this tension was the affront to partisan sensitivities caused by the circumstances of Nixon’s resignation. Republicans in the House of Representatives had long been resentful of the way they were treated by the seemingly permanent Democrat majority and with the way in which the Democrats were able to contain their own scandals. One young ambitious Republican anxious to make a name for himself determined to bring down the most powerful figure in the House, Speaker Jim Wright and his chosen weapon was to accuse him of corruption.

Congress had approved its first code of ethics in 1968 and this was strengthened in 1977 as a pre-condition of a salary increase. Although the ethics committees in both houses were formally bipartisan, Gingrich’s attacks on the Speaker increased inter-party tensions. Although there were calls from other sources for an investigation of Speaker Jim Wright, it was the ultra conservative and ultra ambitious Gingrich who launched a personal crusade with the direct aim of destroying Wright and, indirectly, of smearing the Democratic majority with a reputation for corruption. In the short term, Gingrich’s strategy was successful in that Wright was forced to resign in 1989 and, when the Republicans captured control of the House in 1994, it was Newt Gingrich who became the first Republican Speaker for almost fifty years. Ironically, Gingrich’s allegations against Wright were never sustained but he did succeed in focusing public media and congressional attention on Wright’s misconduct. He is also responsible for helping to turn corruption from a matter of individual disgrace to a major battleground between the political parties. In his resignation speech, Wright portrayed himself as a ‘victim of a partisan vendetta and denounced the mindless cannibalism of attacks on politicians’ personal ethics’. Just before Wright’s resignation, the House Majority Whip, Tony Coelho, also resigned because of financial indiscretions and, four years later, the Chairman of the ways and means committee, Dan Rostenkowski, was convicted on corruption charges.

It might be thought that with leading Democrats resigning or being convicted on corruption charges and with his own election as Speaker, Gingrich’s triumph was complete. But making corruption charges is much easier than defending your reputation against them. House Democrats were angry at their loss of power in general and Gingrich’s role in particular and they wanted revenge. Gingrich soon found himself the subject of concerted attack and after prolonged investigations from the House Ethics Committee, he was censured and fined for ethics violations. Gingrich’s position was correspondingly weakened and his position declined further when he was out manoeuvred by President Clinton in the 1996 government shutdown. In 1998, Gingrich resigned as Speaker. The public integrity war had escalated and Gingrich’s successor was bound to come under close scrutiny. The favoured Republican candidate for the post, Bob Livingstone, abruptly resigned from Congress after allegations about his extramarital sex life. The double edged character of corruption and ethics allegations was now fully apparent and election campaigning became increasingly negative and ‘dirty’.

The impact of corruption can be assessed in a variety of ways. Most importantly, there is the impact on public perceptions of government and politics and the consequences it has for both public trust in politicians and electoral outcomes. Clearly, the way in which the public receives information about corruption is important and, in particular, the role of the mass media. Since Woodward and Bernstein ‘allegedly uncovered’ Watergate, a mythology has developed about idealistic and crusading journalists supported by fearless editors and proprietors. The reality is that serious investigative journalism is expensive, difficult and time consuming and both print and electronic media prefer to rely on the efforts of, and leaks from, law enforcement agencies. What has changed in the last five years is the growth of the internet and the interaction between mainstream and fringe publications. Internet sites are favoured by conspiracy theorists whose claims are then reported in reputable journals and given greater weight. The media’s attitude to politics and politicians has significantly changed over the past twenty five years. From being respectful, even deferential, they have become more inquiring and sceptical, more aggressive and intrusive. Their role has changed from lapdog to watchdog to attack dog. At the same time, levels of public trust and confidence in politicians and political institutions has declined. The integrity of politicians in contemporary America is on a par with car salesmen and estate agents. According to one survey in the 1990s, ‘over half the public believe that half or more of the members of Congress are financially corrupt’.

The decline in public trust is matched by a decline in voter turnout and while the explanation for this decline extends well beyond the impact of corruption, it clearly plays a part. Voters do not generally approve of corrupt legislators and one recent study concluded that ‘charges of corruption against an incumbent produce a negative effect on the incumbent’s share of the vote’. This effect varies according to circumstances but is estimated to be about ten percent. As a consequence, ‘twenty five percent of incumbents charged with corruption lose their general election bids’. In assessing why seventy five percent win anyway, it is important
not to assume that these voters are necessarily indifferent to corruption. The possible explanations are many and varied, for example, the belief that all politicians are corrupt and therefore corruption is not a ground for discriminating in voting. Some voters may lack sufficient information or be sceptical about the validity of particular charges. Ultimately, the weight attached to corruption charges will depend on a variety of factors including the voter’s closeness to the candidate in terms of partisan and policy preferences.

The impact of corruption on the American economy is hard to gauge but the clearly the size and dynamism of the economy is such that the United States is better able to carry the economic costs of corruption than any other country in the world. since the passage of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in 1977, there has been growing concern in the United States about the lack of a level playing field in international trade. Where American companies risk prosecution for offering bribes to secure contracts overseas, rival companies from other nations were not similarly constrained and could even claim them as tax deductible expenses. Thus the United States has been the driving force behind the OECD Convention on bribery in international trade.

Corruption was ‘discovered’ as a global issue in the 1990s and the ‘discovery’ was disproportionately an American one. Multilateral agencies like the World Bank had studiously avoided the issue of corruption for forty years but, after the end of the Cold War and the growth of American concerns at the loss of competitive advantage in international trade, it made corruption a top priority. If American companies are constrained by domestic legislation, their desire is to see their competition constrained by their national governments or by international agreements. Part of the awareness raising exercise about corruption was the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) by Transparency International. This regularly judges the United States to be more corrupt than Canada, Hong Kong and Singapore. The only major European states thought to be more corrupt that the United States are France and Italy. The compilation of the CPI presents a number of methodological problems but most commentators would agree that the ranking of the United States is about right. Despite the vigorous anti-corruption efforts of the last twenty five years, and the lead it has taken in reducing corruption in international trade, the United States is still viewed as more corrupt than many other developed countries.

Conclusion

The post-Watergate years have not seen an era of corruption-free politics but rather an intensification of the ‘public integrity war’. Corruption has become a high profile issue although this does not necessarily mean that corruption is more prevalent or important. Some blame the media for elevating minor indiscretions into national headlines. In this view the media are like piranha and when they scent even a little political blood they engage in a ‘feeding frenzy’. Sabato argues that the media needs to discriminate between serious and trivial corruption. One problem with this approach is that as a corruption scandal unfolds, it is not always or even often possible to tell how important a scandal it is going to be.

Some conservative writers blame the liberal media and political analysts for the attacks on the Reagan Administration in the 1980s. In this view the problem was not that many of Reagan’s senior officials were corrupt but rather that their critics lacked a proper respect for office holders and established institutions. But it was the conservative media and ultra conservative commentators who sustained the assault on the alleged corruption of the Clinton presidency.

In determining what is to be done about corruption in the United States, it is important to start with an appreciation of how large and how serious a problem it is. Clearly some groups, such as Common Cause, take a pessimistic view and believe there in the need for the introduction and rigorous enforcement of comprehensive anti-corruption measures. As already noted, numerous anti-corruption measures have been implemented at federal and state levels in the late twentieth century but, as we have also seen they do not seem to have had much success in restoring public confidence and trust in politicians or the political process.

Corruption has become a political tool, even a weapon of first choice. Ginsberg and Shefter have argued that the decline of parties and the increasing frustrations of political deadlock have forced both Republicans and Democrats into a strategy of revelation and investigation and prosecution. While mobilising the electorate and swaying public opinion are extremely difficult and politically dangerous, there are short term gains for men like Newt Gingrich in using corruption to drive their opponents from office. The failures of ideologies and institutions have encouraged politicians to find alternative means of achieving their aims. Ginsberg and Shefter posed the question, ‘How did our politics reach the point where public officials now regularly seek to secure the imprisonment of their political opponents?’ The answer lies in the salience of corruption as a political issue in a polity which lacks policy coherence and institutional accountability. Where ideology and institutions fail to provide adequate guides, it is likely that the characters of those who seek to lead will be seen as more and more important.

Where public trust in political integrity breaks down, the rational response is to ensure that politicians and officials are weighed down with codes of conduct, disclosure requirements and a whole range of monitoring and supervisory procedures. There are two dangers here; the vigorous pursuit of corruption can become a primary goal in itself to the detriment of the conduct of government and the prospects of restoring public trust are reduced when the public integrity debate is infused with bitter partisanship. If present trends continue or intensify, the main casualties in the war against corruption will be American politicians and they will only have themselves to blame.