

New York, Andrew Cuomo, and the six most corrupt states in the country

Analysis by [Aaron Blake](#)

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New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) announced his resignation amid sexual harassment allegations Tuesday, after which The Post's Philip Bump provided a must-read piece on the sordid recent history of top New York politicians.

Bump summed it up accordingly:

Philip Bump 
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Farewell to the gov who was succeeded as AG by a guy who resigned in disgrace and preceded by a guy who declined to run for reelect due to scandal, who stepped in for a guy who resigned in scandal and who had four acting It gov's who were later indicted!

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Resetting the "days since a governor resigned in scandal" sign to zero.

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The last three New York governors — all Democrats — have exited office amid scandal, with Cuomo and Eliot Spitzer resigning and David Paterson declining to run after replacing Spitzer.

Which got us thinking: Where does it rank on the list of most corrupt states? Three consecutive governors is quite the achievement, as are the scandals that have consumed New York's broader executive government and legislators. As Bump notes, no fewer than four acting lieutenant governors who served under Paterson were ultimately indicted.

Many attempts at discerning the most corrupt states have focused on the raw numbers of corruption convictions, but there's certainly something to be said for corruption, scandals and resignations reaching the highest levels repeatedly, as they have in New York. (The Daily Beast's Harry Siegel has another must-read piece on this.)

So, below is a more subjective review of some of the biggest modern offenders.

1. New York

New York has four major elected statewide officeholders: governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and comptroller. Since the 2006 election, 18 people combined have served in these positions, and 11 of them ultimately succumbed to scandals.

This includes some double-counting, given that Cuomo served as attorney general and governor, and Paterson served as lieutenant governor and then governor. But even if you account for that, that's nine out of 16 statewide officeholders over the past 15 years — a majority! Remarkable.

Beyond the governors and acting lieutenant governors, the numbers also include former state attorney general Eric Schneiderman (D), who resigned in 2018 amid his own sex scandal, and former state comptroller Alan Hevesi (D), who resigned in 2006 while pleading guilty to a felony for defrauding the government.

And it doesn't even account for the full scale of scandal in the state legislature — including the conviction of the former state assembly speaker a few years ago — or the scandals in the congressional delegation, notably recent convictions of former congressmen Anthony Weiner (D), Michael Grimm (R) and Chris Collins (R). (President Donald Trump later pardoned Collins.)

2. Illinois

While New York governors are great at resigning due to scandal, Illinois governors might be the best at actually being convicted of crimes. Since 1961, the state has had 11 governors, and four of the 11 have wound up serving prison time: Rod Blagojevich (D), George Ryan (R), Dan Walker (D) and Otto Kerner (D). (Trump commuted Blagojevich's sentence.)

Other recent scandals ensnared a powerful Chicago alderman and several top state legislators, and former longtime state House speaker Mike Madigan (D) resigned early this year after being implicated in a bribery scandal. (Madigan has not been charged.) And that doesn't include convicted former members of Congress: powerful former House Ways and Means Committee chairman Dan Rostenkowski (D) and former congressmen Jesse Jackson Jr. (D) and Mel Reynolds (D). Former congressman Aaron Schock (R) resigned amid his own scandal, but his felony charges were dropped thanks to a deal with prosecutors.

3. Louisiana

Former congressman Billy Tauzin (R-La.) often remarked that "half of Louisiana is under water and the other half is under indictment."

And few can compete with the big names or the methods involved here. Former governor and senator Huey Long (D) set the standard. But it's been picked up by former Democratic governor Edwin Edwards (whose supporters used the slogan "vote for the crook," and who later actually did go to prison), former New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin (D) and former Democratic congressman William Jefferson (he of the \$90,000-in-the-freezer infamy). Plenty of other names grace the state's list of convicts in recent years.

There's also the prostitution scandal that (eventually) ended the political career of Sen. David Vitter (R).

4. Alabama

The one southern state generally recognized as giving Louisiana a run for its money, Alabama has seen three of its last six elected governors convicted: Robert Bentley (R), Don Siegelman (D) and Guy Hunt (R). Its state House speaker, Mike Hubbard, was also convicted in 2016 and began his sentence last year.

5. New Jersey

This state might have fallen on this list somewhat in recent years, but its five-decade record and the nature of the scandals are tough to beat.

It was central to Abscam, with convictions of a U.S. senator, congressman and the mayor of Camden. Trenton's mayor was convicted in 2014. Newark's mayor was convicted in 2008. Sen. Robert Torricelli (D) dropped out of the reelection race in 2002 over a campaign finance scandal. Gov. Jim McGreevey (D) resigned in 2004 over a relationship with a man whom he had put on the state payroll.

Three mayors and two state legislators were ensnared in a large-scale “Bid Rig III” bribery scandal in 2009, which resulted in guilty pleas or convictions for the vast majority of defendants. And the prosecutor who brought that last case and used it to ascend to the governorship, Chris Christie (R), eventually saw his once-promising political career effectively ended by his own “Bridgegate” scandal.

Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) was indicted in 2015 but was later cleared.

6. Rhode Island

The subject of a great podcast series called “Crimetown,” Rhode Island and particularly its capital, Providence, have earned that nickname.

There’s Republican-turned-independent Mayor Buddy Cianci’s repeated convictions (and his ability to keep his political career going despite them). There’s former state House speaker Gordon Fox (D). There’s former governor Edward DiPrete (R). And there’s lots of other state legislators, mayors and city council members.

CITY JOURNAL

EYE ON THE NEWS

The “Miserable” State

Pervasive corruption helps explain why New Jersey scores heavily on a recent survey of states with the bleakest cities.

Steven Malanga

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Last week, Business Insider created a stir when it used demographic data to rank the 50 “most miserable” cities in America. Though California led the way with ten municipalities, considerably smaller New Jersey was close behind, with nine—including Newark, Trenton, Camden, and Paterson. Why was this case? I was asked. Several days later, an answer arrived, with the news that Atlantic City’s mayor, Frank Gilliam, had resigned after pleading guilty to stealing money from a nonprofit youth basketball club he’d help start, using the money to buy designer clothes and expensive meals. Part of a long line of Atlantic City mayors pushed out of office in disgrace, Gilliam had been elected mayor two years ago—defeating incumbent reformer Don Guardian with backing from a coalition of “top Democrats, unions, online gaming companies,” and other Jersey powerbrokers who thought that “there’s still money to be made” in the currently insolvent city, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* put it.

Dishonest mayors who step down in disgrace are “A Jersey Tradition,” as a recent headline in another paper described the long, debilitating history of municipal corruption in the Garden State. There, urban political machines manufacture politicians who regularly enrich themselves at the expense of those that elect them, preferring to line their pockets instead of building—or, in the case of Jersey cities, rebuilding—communities. Sometimes they hijack local institutions, like the school system, and use them as patronage mills, ensuring that the system doesn’t do its job. Or they steal directly from residents, including some of the country’s neediest people. Cities already suffering from urban ills like deindustrialization, high crime, and drug use wind up governed by political machines with little interest in doing the hard work of revival. This status quo goes unreformed because Garden State cities are run by one party—a

machine party, consisting of politically connected Democrats, government unions, businesses, and nonprofits that feed off government money. With change virtually impossible, everyone who can manage it gets out, leaving the least capable residents to fend for themselves.

Atlantic City exemplifies this model. Though the city didn't make the most-miserable list, *Condé Nast Traveler* once ranked it the world's worst vacation destination, and a 2010 state report labeled it "unclean and unsafe." Its success for decades lay in its flouting of laws that other localities forced themselves to live by. From the late nineteenth century through World War II, Atlantic City was a rogue town that openly permitted gambling, prostitution and, during Prohibition, speakeasies. When a Jersey governor sent a tough prosecutor to rein in residents in 1908, local grand juries refused to bring the indictments he sought. When Washington dispatched Prohibition agents in the 1920s, municipal officials jailed them and held them incommunicado, prompting a Justice Department official to call the town "the most corrupt city in America." Congressional inquiries in the 1950s on Mafia influence in the U.S. included an entire hearing devoted to Atlantic City, which one senator dubbed "a rotten town."

Despite this colorful history, state residents voted in 1976 to give Atlantic City an exclusive right to legal gambling, amid promises that the mob wouldn't be allowed into the business. Jersey made this deal even though two consecutive mayors preceding the vote were convicted of extortion and kicked out of office. Once legalized gambling arrived, two more mayors were driven from office in the 1980s, including Michael Matthews, whom the FBI caught on tape bragging about his connections with big-time gangsters like Philadelphia boss Nicodemo "Little Nicky" Scarfo and his underboss Phil Leonetti. Matthews later admitted that "greed got the best of me," which, one local businessman said, "should be the logo of the whole town."

The corruption was reflected in expensive but ineffective public institutions. For years, Atlantic City, blessed with casino tax revenue, had one of state's highest-paid police forces—but also one of Jersey's highest crime rates. Its schools still spend more per pupil than even many rich suburban districts, but its student performance ranks among the worst in the state—even when measured against similar urban districts. When Pennsylvania legalized casinos in 2004, Atlantic City lost its regional hold on the gambler's dollar and went bust. The state took over governance of the city in 2016.

Atlantic City is not alone. Hugh Addonizio, Newark's mayor during the city's sixties-era civil disturbances, was elected with Mafia help and ultimately convicted by federal

prosecutors of extortion (along with several other city officials). Sharpe James, who governed Newark from 1986 through 2006, was convicted of rigging the sale of city property and sent to federal prison. Officials prosecuted numerous other members of his administration, including the police commissioner and the mayor's chief of staff. One prosecutor, reflecting on Newark during those years, said, "They should tie a yellow ribbon around City Hall and designate it a crime scene." From the time that Addonizio governed Newark to the time that James departed, the city's population declined from more than 400,000 people to 275,000.

Meantime, Camden, once described as the "most dangerous city in America," saw three mayors busted for corruption during the 1980s and 1990s. In 2002, the state took over the city and maintained control until 2010. In 2013, Jersey took control of the city's school system—then the worst-performing in the state. So entrenched is the corruption and ineffective governance in Camden that even reformers have struggled to get a grip on local problems. In 2014, city officials, tired of the local police force's lackluster efforts against crime, took the unprecedented step of disbanding their force and forming with the surrounding county a new, countywide force that it hopes can be more effective.

Jersey is the home of the big corruption bust. The infamous Abscam investigation, in which federal officials created a shell company run by fake Arab sheiks to bribe local and federal officials, was based heavily in New Jersey. The investigation brought down a senator and congressman from Jersey, along with a Camden mayor, Angelo Errichetti, who tried to sell Atlantic City casino licenses. More recently, Operation Bid Rig—a federal investigation begun in 2002—has snared more than two dozen local officials, including former mayors of Hoboken, Secaucus, and Ridgefield, and a deputy mayor of Jersey City. In separate investigations over the last five years, mayors of Passaic and Trenton—two entries on the "most miserable" list—have been convicted of corruption.

Benjamin Franklin called New Jersey a "keg tapped at both ends," a reference to the bordering cities of New York and Philadelphia, to which much of the state's commerce flowed during the country's colonial period. Today, it's perhaps more accurate to say that Jersey is a keg tapped by its corrupt political culture—especially in its dysfunctional cities.

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