

The Street

Even Jack Abramoff Agrees With Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders: Washington Is Too Corrupt

By Emily Stewart

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One of Washington's most notorious lobbyists is singing the same tune as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders when it comes to corruption on Capitol Hill.

Jack Abramoff, dubbed by [Time](#) as "the man who bought Washington," was once among the most influential power players in U.S. politics, [rubbing elbows](#) with figures like Karl Rove, Ken Mehlman and President George W. Bush before being enveloped in scandal in the mid-2000s. There is [little Abramoff didn't do](#) during his time as a lobbyist to ensure his clients garnered favors from government, including lavishing gifts and campaign contributions on members of both houses of Congress on both sides of the aisle.

After serving 43 months in federal prison for his misdeeds, Abramoff has now emerged a reformed figure. He says Washington, D.C. has been corrupted by money nearly beyond repair and is calling for an overhaul of the system -- not unlike what the democratic socialist senator from Vermont has been saying on the presidential campaign trail, or, for that matter, billionaire businessman Donald Trump.

"Washington is about one thing, folks, and that's about power. Grabbing power, Keeping power, grabbing money, spending money," Abramoff said at a debate Wednesday hosted by [Intelligence Squared U.S.](#) in New York City. "The system that has developed is so immensely corrupt, is so corrosive of what we all believe -- what we were all raised to think about our government that the American people are rising up, and we just need to join them."

The words could easily have come from Senator Sanders, who at a [February Democratic debate](#) in Milwaukee against former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "The American people have responded to a series of basic truths, and that is that we have today a campaign finance system which is corrupt, which is undermining American democracy, which allows Wall Street and billionaires to pour huge sums of money into the political process to elect the candidates of their choice."

Or from Trump, who [is largely self-funding his campaign](#) and, like Abramoff, says he understands how broken the system is because he is one who used to take advantage of it. "Frankly, I know the system better than anybody else and I'm the only one up here that's going to fix that system because that system is wrong," the real estate magnate [said](#) during a GOP debate in March.

How dire has the situation become in Washington that Abramoff, Sanders and Trump seem to agree that the influence of money has placed American politics nearly on the brink of political disaster?

"There's no precise way of knowing, because we can't measure corruption very well. It's usually secret," said Michael Johnston, professor of political science at Colgate University and expert in political corruption and political culture.

According to Johnston, in legal terms, definitions of what qualifies as corruption has changed in recent generations. Still, compared to other periods in history, like the 1890s and the Gilded Age, the current system looks quite good.

Instead, what may differ today is perception.

"The pervasive power of money in politics is seen by most citizens as corrupting American," Johnston said.

According to a [2015 survey from Gallup](#), 75% of Americans perceive corruption as widespread in the country's government. A sense of reduced financial security among many Americans only compounds distrust in the political system. And even if much what's going on is technically legal (most of what Abramoff did was), it is largely beside the point.

"If 75% of people think money has corrupted politics, then the system is losing its credibility," Johnston said.

Compounding the situation is the fact that the influence of money in politics is quite different from what many voters believe. For example, Johnston said that Americans tend to think corruption is lowest in local politics and most problematic at the federal level, when in fact it is often the other way around. And even in the highest echelons, it is a lot more than a lobbyist dangling a check in front of a congressman -- it is a line buried deep in a bill added right before a vote, or a senator's aide intimating to a lobbyist that without a donation, they won't be able to help.

"Money's influence is huge, but it's in more complicated and more contextual ways than most people appreciate," said Johnston.

At Wednesday's debate, Abramoff surveyed the current political horizon and pointed to the rise of figures like Sanders and Trump as a consequence of this increasing corruption and money-fueled disillusionment among voters.

"Anyone who looks fairly at what's been going on politically in our country has noticed something, that there's a rebellion out there, whether it's the Bernie Sanders on the left or it's the Donald Trump,

whether he is on the right, or -- among Trumps, Trumpians, or Ted Cruz. People are dissatisfied," he said, highlighting Congress' dismal approval ratings as well. "A lot of it has to do, unfortunately, with the fact that we have a culture in Washington about taking our money and giving it out to those who can lobby best."

Is reform possible? Most agree that, while a herculean task, the answer is yes. Sanders says we need a revolution, Trump says we need Trump, and Abramoff says it can be done -- but it won't be easy.

"Washington's about grabbing power and grabbing money and grabbing things, and people who grab things don't like to give them up," he said.