

Inside the Pardon Playbook: An Analysis of President Trump's Clemency Abuses

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ISSUES: **THE RULE OF LAW**



President Donald Trump signs a pardon in the Oval Office. Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok

When voters elect a president, they expect presidential power to be used to serve the public good — not to advance the narrow interests of political loyalists or wealthy donors.

Yet, since returning to office, President Donald Trump has normalized political corruption and abused public trust — including by transforming the presidential pardon power into a tool for rewarding allies. These actions deny justice to victims and undermine a core principle of democracy: equal justice under law.

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Trump's most concerning abuses of the pardon power fall into three categories:

- **Reward pardons**, which benefit donors and supporters who break the law on his behalf;
- **Corrupt pardons**, which excuse public officials who abuse their office as long as they pledge loyalty to Trump and his political agenda; and
- **Brokered pardons**, where deep-pocketed individuals hire well-connected lobbyists or political fixers to secure clemency.

Together, these abuses send a clear message: Loyalty and self-interest outweigh any commitment to protecting the public trust or “draining the swamp” by fighting corruption. Indeed, Liz Oyer, the Department of Justice (DOJ)'s former lead pardon attorney, has calculated that Trump's second-term pardons have wiped away at least \$1.56 billion in criminal penalties — including money owed to crime victims and to government treasuries.

Traditionally, the pardon power has functioned as a limited safeguard against unjust punishment — used sparingly to correct exceptional cases of unfairness or excessive sentences.

For decades, presidents of both parties have generally relied on recommendations from the DOJ's Office of the Pardon Attorney, where career officials review petitions using established criteria such as rehabilitation, acceptance of responsibility and the interests of justice.

Although past presidents occasionally skirted that system, Trump has largely abandoned it in his second term. Instead, his administration has created a parallel clemency pipeline that rewards political loyalty, financial support and personal connections — weakening public confidence that justice is applied equally.

Reward Pardons: Clemency for Donors and for Allies Who Break the Law for Trump

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...sizeable political donations or supporting Trump family business ventures. In other instances — most notably pardons for those who illegally sought to overturn his 2020 election loss — Trump is protecting those who break the law to support him.

Individuals who received pardons following financial support for Trump's political or business operations include:

- **Trevor Milton**, a tech executive convicted of defrauding investors, who was pardoned in March 2025 after pouring nearly \$2 million into pro-Trump political committees during the 2024 presidential campaign.
- **Paul Walczak**, a nursing home executive convicted of siphoning \$10 million from his employees' paychecks, received a pardon in April 2025, weeks after his mother contributed \$1 million to a Trump super PAC — her largest-ever political donation.
- **ChangPeng Zhao**, founder of the digital finance platform Binance, pled guilty in a sweeping money laundering case and agreed to pay \$4 billion in penalties. He received a pardon in October 2025 after his company took steps that enriched the Trump family by billions of dollars.
- **Timothy Leiweke**, former CEO of Oak View Group, was pardoned in December 2025 after the company donated \$250,000 to Trump's inaugural committee while under scrutiny by the DOJ.
- **Julio Herrera Velutini**, a foreign billionaire charged with bribing Puerto Rico's governor, received a pardon in January 2026 after his 25-year-old daughter — whose only previous donation was \$20 to Pete Buttigieg's presidential run — gave \$3.5 million to a Trump super PAC. CLC has asked for an investigation into whether Herrera Velutini was the true source of that multi-million dollar contribution, which would also have violated the law.

Not all of Trump's reward pardons involve money.

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On the first day in office, Trump issued a blanket pardon to over 1,000 people charged in connection with the deadly Jan. 6 insurrection — including people who assaulted police officers and engaged in other forms of violence as they sought to block certification of the 2020 election.

- In November 2025, he pardoned **Rudy Giuliani, Sidney Powell, and dozens of other allies** facing state charges related to efforts to overturn the 2020 election, followed by a December 2025 pardon for **Tina Peters**, convicted in Colorado for tampering with voting equipment. Presidential pardons cannot reach state offenses, but these pardons sent a dangerous signal to supporters: if they act to subvert future elections, Trump will protect them.

Again, the message is clear: Criminals who funnel money into Trump's political or business operations, and those who commit crimes to support him, can expect to be above the law.

Corruption Pardons: Granting Pardons to Disgraced Public Officials in Exchange for Loyalty

The second category involves excusing public officials convicted or accused of abusing their power — provided they pledge loyalty to Trump and his political agenda.

This pattern of excusing public corruption for loyalists repeats across multiple cases:

- **Michele Fiore**, a Nevada politician convicted of raising money to honor a slain police officer and instead spending it on plastic surgery and personal expenses, received a pardon in April 2025, with Trump citing her “outspoken conservative views.”
- **Former Rep. George Santos**, expelled by a bipartisan House vote after being found guilty of defrauding voters and violating campaign finance laws, received a pardon in October 2025, with Trump praising Santos for having the “Courage, Conviction, and Intelligence to ALWAYS VOTE REPUBLICAN!”

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miscalculated: when Cuellar declined to switch parties, Trump blasted him for a “lack of LOYALTY.”

- **Wanda Vasquez**, the former Puerto Rico governor charged with bribery, received a pardon in January 2026, along with the foreign billionaire accused of bribing her. In defending the pardon, the White House cited Vasquez’s endorsement of Trump but did not address the substance of the charges.

In several other cases, public officials who abused the public trust or committed campaign finance violations were rewarded with pardons — not because they had shown evidence of rehabilitation, but because they’d shown evidence of dedication to Trump.

Trump has also abused his prosecutorial discretion to excuse corruption by allies before a presidential pardon even became necessary. High-profile corruption investigations — including allegations that Senior DHS official and border czar **Tom Homan** accepted a \$50,000 bag of cash from undercover FBI agents posing as prospective government contractors, and that **former NYC Mayor Eric Adams** accepted bribes from Turkish nationals — have vanished into thin air.

By unraveling corruption convictions and shielding unethical public officials, Trump is not only erasing accountability for past misconduct — he is creating a permission structure that invites even more brazen corruption in the future.

Brokered Pardons: Clemency Secured Through Lobbyists and Political Fixers

Other pardons fall into a third category: brokered pardons, in which deep-pocketed individuals hire well-connected lobbyists or fixers to press clemency requests directly to the president.

For example, **Joseph Schwartz** — sentenced in April 2025 by Trump’s own Justice Department to three years in prison for a \$38 million tax fraud scheme — paid nearly \$1.1 million to two lobbying firms, which described their work as “seeking a federal pardon” and “federal presidential pardon advocacy” on congressional filings.

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This brokered pardons category often overlaps with others, with pardon seekers both hiring political fixers and funneling money into Trump's political or business operations. For example:

- Binance and its founder **Changpeng Zhao** both channeled money to Trump family businesses and paid over \$1 million to lobbyists on issues including "executive relief," according to lobbying disclosures. One lobbyist, a close friend of Donald Trump Jr., personally pressed Trump on Zhao's pardon during an Oval Office meeting, which was granted in October 2025.
- **Tim Leiweke**, whose company donated \$250,000 to Trump's inauguration, received a pardon in December 2025 after his lawyer, Trump ally Trey Gowdy, pressed the president for leniency during a round of golf at Mar-a-Lago. Other white-collar defendants soon began reaching out to Gowdy for help securing pardons.
- **Julio Herrera Velutini**, who was pardoned in January 2026 for bribery-related charges after channeling \$3.5 million into Trump's super PAC, also hired close Trump allies: First, the banker hired former Trump lawyer Christopher Kise to represent him in legal proceedings, and Kise, in turn, hired the Trump-tied lobbying firm Ballard Partners "on behalf of Bancredito Holding Corporation," the banker's financial institution at the heart of the bribery scandal. Ballard was paid \$600,000 to lobby the White House in the final quarter of 2025, and Trump issued the pardons shortly thereafter.

One former federal prosecutor told the New York Times that "defense attorneys are telling us they can't get their clients to take good or reasonable plea offers because they felt they're better off spending their money on a political donation, drawing Trump's attention, and getting the case dismissed or going to trial and getting a pardon."

In 2025, lobbying firms reported nearly \$5.2 million in payments from clients seeking clemency from Trump — about eight times more than was disclosed in 2024 from

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Trump's repeated abuses of the pardon power did not just reward allies — they created a market for pardons, where influence and access matter far more than justice or merit.

Preventing a Justice System Based on Loyalty Over Law

By rewarding donors and political allies and excusing public corruption — while simultaneously targeting perceived opponents — the president is creating a two-tiered system of justice.

On one tier are donors, loyalists and those willing to commit crimes in Trump's name. They enjoy a degree of immunity unprecedented in modern American politics. On the other tier are critics and political opponents, who face intensified scrutiny, political targeting and the threat of selective prosecution.

When it comes to the pardon power, we need commitments and reforms that ensure clemency decisions are guided by merit and justice, not money or loyalty. These should include:

1. Restoring the traditional DOJ-led clemency process

The president should commit to awarding pardons based on recommendations from career staff in the Office of the Pardon Attorney, provided those recommendations are made pursuant to the DOJ's pardon guidelines. Americans should demand that this president — and all future presidents — use clemency carefully, as a corrective to an imperfect justice system, rather than as a tool to reward political allies and financial supporters.

2. Protecting independent agencies and pursue civil enforcement

The presidential pardon power extends only to criminal violations of federal law; independent agencies can still demand civil accountability for legal violations. Campaign Legal Center has urged one such agency, the Federal Election Commission (FEC), to pursue civil campaign finance investigations against former elected officials

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independent even as the Trump administration asserts expansive control over them.

3. Continue enforcing state law

The president's pardon power cannot be used to grant clemency for those convicted of breaking state criminal laws.

Officials in states like Arizona and Wisconsin have continued to pursue charges arising from the 2020 fake elector scheme, and Colorado has rejected Trump's pressure to free Tina Peters, the former clerk convicted of tampering with voting machines. States must not be influenced by the president's pressure campaigns.

4. Strengthening transparency and congressional oversight

The president has broad constitutional pardon power, but Congress can demand more oversight.

Congress could enact legislation requiring detailed explanations for every pardon; mandating disclosure of gifts or political contributions received from pardon recipients; and tightening the disclosure rules around private lobbying for clemency. These reforms are well within Congress's constitutional authority as a co-equal branch of government, and they would go a long way in ensuring the pardon power does not remain a tool for political corruption.

Campaign Legal Center Is Protecting the Rule of Law

Using the presidential pardon power for personal and political gain directly threatens the rule of law by sending an alarming message to Americans that the justice system does not work the same for them as it does for those with access to power. Trump's brazen abuse of this executive power is one example of this administration's broader attack on the rule of law.

But, despite his best efforts, Trump cannot unilaterally exercise his will across government without meeting fierce resistance from those working to uphold the rule

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BRENDAN FISCHER *Brendan leads a team dedicated to uncovering and countering campaign finance violations, ethics abuses and threats to free and fair elections.*

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