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Ideas for curbing corruption in Illinois, over time

By Jim Nowlan

As readers might surmise from reading the news about Illinois, our state is arguably embedded in a political culture (patterns of behavior) of corruption (unearned personal gain at public expense). This doesn't mean that everyone in the Prairie State is corrupt, but that there is a learned disposition among too many of us that if we have a chance to take advantage of government, we might as well do so, as everyone else would do so in the same situation.

I have some ideas that could transform our disposition, but as with any cultural change, it will take time. After all, ingrained habits are hard to break.

Political cultures vary. For example, uncontrollably nice Iowans would scrunch their noses in horror at the bribery and abuse of government power that we brush off as just the way too many Illinois politicians operate.

Corruption has been part of our culture since political candidates on the Illinois frontier treated neighbors to rum and vittles in return for their votes. Later, as recently arrived, hyphenated-Americans in Chicago were shunned from legitimate business by the WASPs who arrived earlier, many turned to politics for careers in which they could do well while doing good.

Things have indeed gotten better on the corruption front in Illinois.

Some personal context: In the 1940s, my Uncle John Sanner was a house painter and GOP chair in tiny Stark County. The Republican governor offered him a "state job," which sounded better than lugging heavy wood extension ladders from house to house. Uncle John started receiving

pay checks, but he had no instructions as to where to report for work. Upon inquiry he was told: “Oh, you don’t have to report for work.” He had a “ghost payroller” job, which he decided to turn down. There is less of that today.

Another uncle of mine was a state rep and weekly newspaper publisher. He received \$5,000 for “public relations” services from the janitorial account of state Auditor of Public Accounts Orville Hodge (1953-56), who was later convicted of embezzling \$6 million from the state. There is less of that today as well.

Maybe worse, however, the following: When I was teaching politics at the U. of I. in Urbana in the 2000s, I asked my senior-level students across a number of different classes, many of whom were headed for law school, if they would offer an indirect bribe to get an older sibling out of a job-squelching DUI. About two out of three in every class said Yes, “As that’s what others would do,” and, “The brother is in a really tough bind.”

I asked a professor friend in Iowa to ask his students the same. Two out of three rejected the offer.

Whether it was political legend Paul Powell in deep southern Illinois, where many folks didn’t have two nickels to rub together, or political “bigshots” in Chicago’s working-class neighborhoods, residents have often looked up to these people for their ability to get things done—jobs, licenses without examination, road contracts, insider deals, whatever. And under the table money has often been the grease to get things done.

So, how do we become Iowans, at least when it comes to political culture and ethics?

Changing culture is difficult but can be done, over time. Look at our behavior on drinking-and-driving as well as smoking. We’re doing a lot less of both. Laws played a part in this, as with

lowered alcohol limits for drivers and higher taxes on smokes. Yet maybe even more important, neither is “cool” anymore. When I was in college, both were indeed cool among my social set, if you can believe it, the things to do.

Two important, illuminating books point the way to culture change. In “Nudge,” by high-toned law professors Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, the authors say society can be cajoled, nudged into better behavior by tapping our better instincts.

I like their illustration of the Texas Department of Transportation marketing theme of a few years back: “Don’t Mess with Texas.” These billboards appealed to Texan pride, which is huge, and dramatically reduced unsightly roadside waste. Maybe: “Illinois corruption corrupts our democracy.”

The other book is “Behave,” by Stanford neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky, who explores our human brain and why we do what we do, both good and bad. In his dense yet lively read, Sapolsky points out, among much else, that humans are wired to behave so as to achieve higher status among our group.

So, we need to convince folks that the neighborhood political “big shot” is not to be looked up to. Instead, he is a dirtbag, because his actions may from time to time taint our beloved democracy and constitution. Instead, the course to be admired is the ethical one.

Civics recently became a course required for graduation from Illinois high schools. If we use it to paint corruption as behavior about as appealing as pond scum, youngsters may seek ways other than bribery to help a brother get out of trouble.