

# POLITICAL ETHICS AND VOTER UNEASE?: INTERVIEW WITH SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET

**Public Perspective:** There seems to be a common wisdom that the public sees politicians in general and Congress in particular right now as ranking low on standards of personal ethics, as being less concerned with the public's business than with their own private interests. Is there in fact a decline in politicians' ethical standards, or are people simply paying more attention to problems present all along?

**Seymour Martin Lipset:** It's much more the latter. By comparative historical standards, there's probably less corruption today than there used to be in the United States. In most of the 19th century and at least until World War I, political machines engaged in the buying and selling of political office and other sorts of outright corruption. Ethical violations on that scale are much more difficult and more likely to be exposed today.

What if we compare current conditions only to those in the recent past—the years since World War II? Here, I'm afraid, one must conclude that corruption and immorality in the larger society have been on the increase. It's not a coincidence that the period from World War II on to the recent recession has also seen the most extensive upward mobility—of “get rich quick,” “from rags to riches”—in U.S. history. The Horatio Alger myth is more true today, in terms of people becoming millionaires and billionaires, than in times past.

We've benefited from a combination of the tremendous expansion of higher education that occurred at the end of World War II, the postwar prosperity, onto the change in the occupation structure which is still continuing. The decline in manual labor and increase in white collar and particularly highly technical jobs—positions which require a college education—have made for more upward mobility than was ever true before in America. This has been a period of prosperity not just for white males, but also for many women

who have entered the labor force, and for blacks, who have seen a great deal of upward movement into the middle class.

Capitalism with a free market rides on Adam Smith's belief that everybody benefits by everyone pursuing his self-interest. Positively, this is called “self-interest,” but put another way it's “greed.” In a sense, the whole logic of a get-rich-quick society is one of greed. It's no surprise that this leads to corruption on Capitol Hill, on Wall Street, and in less frequently noted places such as universities. Obviously no one has the hard data on this, but my guess is that politicians as a group are no worse than academics or businessmen.

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**PP:** So the political sphere is just one of many areas corrupted by unethical practices?

**SML:** It's one among many. The reason for the emphasis on politics is the media. Politicians and the government have great news value. There are many more journalists watching and reporting political dealings than there are journalists covering academe, business, or other areas. There are many thousands of journalists in Washington, and hundreds in the state capitals, whose full-time jobs are to find the dirt—at least to uncover error.

Although politicians are in the news much more than people from other sectors, it's still the nature of a competitive

society, particularly the American one, to emphasize getting ahead over staying clean. We honor all the Rockefellers and Carnegies who made millions by bending rules. Corruption and law violating are inherent in an open, competitive society. In some ways, the more open, genuinely meritocratic and competitive it is, the more of this you can expect.

European societies are all post-feudal, and they have more of a tradition tied in with honor, inherited status, and family. Everyone at the top knows each other, have gone to the same universities, and the like. So the mechanisms of social control are more operative, and on the whole corruption and scandals are weaker in those countries than they are in this one.

The American system is competitive, highly individualistic, and anti-statist, rooted in the national ideology from the Revolution on. Again, I would refer to Adam Smith's old idea that the society benefits if everybody pursues his self-interest. Americans believe this, and our system is premised on Smith's logic more than is any other society. There's no class tradition of a privileged aristocracy pursuing the public interest; no *noblesse oblige*. Americans assume that the public interest comes out of pursuit of private interests.

In our individualistic polity, every congressman and senator is on his own. We have the weakest party system of any industrial democracy, and in this context every private interest lobbies individual congressmen. Other countries have a parliamentary system with unified government, and parties have disciplinary power over their members.

Thus in Canada or Britain it makes no sense to lobby a member from Toronto or Liverpool, because the decisions are going to be made at the level of the cabinet and the party leadership. Regardless of what a particular representative thinks, he

has to vote most of the time with his party. Hence, lobbying is much weaker in these countries, and when you lobby it's only at the level of the top officials. Individual politicians are not subject to the kinds of pressures to raise money from local interest groups, as American politicians are.

**PP:** In addition to the economic dimension of this question of ethics and the national mood, there's also the whole issue of personal, especially sexual, morality. To what extent might these be related? Also, did people pay attention to the personal lives of their politicians to the same degree earlier in American history?

**SML:** They're related in the sense that the same media expose people for accepting bribes or for having affairs. A sexual immorality case feeds into the same disdain and loss of confidence in Congress or politics that economic scandals do. Still, the dynamic of sexual morality issues is really very different. Since the Sixties there's been a tremendous change in favor of a more latitudinarian attitude towards sexual behavior. We accept single mothers, homosexuality, all kinds of freedom in sexual behavior which we didn't before. This has happened not only here but to a considerable extent all around the developed world. Yet at the same time, there is a much sharper lookout for sexual immorality in the conduct of powerful men in politics, academe, and elsewhere.

The contradiction relates to the growth of feminism. On one hand there's more acceptance of various kinds of sexual behavior that used to be frowned on or ignored; on the other hand, the feminists have raised the issue of men exploiting women sexually, and hence a lot of things which men did before the Sixties without getting into trouble are minefields today.

A number of prominent politicians—Franklin Roosevelt, Jack Kennedy, Warren Harding and others—had mistresses which the press knew of, but they were never exposed. Today they would be, and in fact are.

The same is true in academe. When I was a graduate student in the late Forties, there was a lot of sexual relations between male faculty and female students. Everybody knew about it . . . and no one said anything. Today a male professor who's known to do this could lose his job. It's not that sexual morality has tightened up, but that the power developed by women has changed the rules in the workplace and the political arena.

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**PP:** What's the bottom line in today's climate of opinion on political ethics? Overall, are we improving things?

**SML:** The press and the public sometimes jump on politicians too quickly over some accusation when they don't deserve it. Take the check kiting scandal: The behavior in question really wasn't corrupt or immoral. Essentially, the congressmen were doing what everybody does with a credit card. When you and I use a credit card, we get an interest-free loan for 25 days. At this bank the congressmen were getting no interest and paying no interest. When representatives issued checks for which they didn't have money in the bank, it was like paying with a credit card. Moreover, they were only borrowing from each other.

I think this could have been explained, but for reasons I don't understand there seemed to be almost no effort to do it. As soon as the story came out, the congressional leadership in effect said "Mea culpa." They accepted the media's claim that congressmen were taking money when they shouldn't have.

One of the things which contributed to the notion that this check business was corrupt was the sense that politicians as a whole are corrupt. On the one hand, the action reinforced the image, and on the other, the image helped determine the way the action was interpreted.

This attitude that politicians are a corrupt species is an old one, and politicians have learned to adapt quite well to it. If there's a period like now when it seems people are anti-politician or anti-Congress, they run against the institution. This can happen in America where we vote for the individual, not the party, but you wouldn't see it in Britain, Canada or Sweden.

**PP:** Is the suspicion and criticism we're seeing now likely to be a passing phenomenon, or is it something that will really change the shape of politics for a while?

**SML:** As William Schneider and I traced the matter in *The Confidence Gap*, the decline of confidence in institutions, political and other, began with the Vietnam war. There's nothing like a prolonged, unpopular, and unsuccessful war to undermine confidence in government, and the Vietnam war was certainly that. The second factor that determines peoples' attitudes towards government is the economy: When it goes bad, incumbent governments lose support and people show disdain for government. When the economy does well, these judgments turn around.

In the Eighties during the Reagan prosperity, for example, confidence in government went up considerably. If no major foreign policy problems develop, and if the economy goes well for some period of time, a lot of this focus on corruption, scandals, and the like which we're seeing now will die away. Just as in the past, we go through cycles.

This is the 20th anniversary of Watergate, and the newspapers are full of stories about its impact. They keep pointing out that many of the Watergate reforms haven't meant very much, and that

people have almost forgotten about the scandal. It's really the ineffectiveness of government as reflected in the economy that's disturbing people today, making them more inclined to think about ethics and corruption. If government seemed effective and the economy appeared to be working well, people would turn their attention to other matters. There's nothing around by way of political ethics concerns that reasonably full employment wouldn't cure.

**PP:** Wasn't the swift and relatively bloodless victory in the Persian Gulf supposed to do away with the Vietnam syndrome?

**SML:** We aren't suffering from the Vietnam syndrome anymore. In the last couple of years we've had the greatest success in the history of America, namely the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism. Nobody anticipated that it would vanish so quickly, or that we'd have so thorough and complete a victory. Not only that, but in the early days of the death of communism the eastern European nations all turned to the United States as the ideal country—the one which had helped bring about the breakdown of their repressive regimes, the one whose system they wanted to emulate. That should have brought feelings of exultation and victory here, like V.E. day all over again. The reason it didn't happen was the timing: We had entered into a recession, and people were more worried about themselves.

If you look at the statistics on the current recession in the United States, it's not, comparatively speaking, a very severe one, though it's lasted longer than many others. The decline in economic growth has been relatively modest. The recession hasn't been as deep here as in many European countries. Yet Americans are somehow convinced that economic problems are worse than ever before. It's terrible to be unemployed, but 7-8% unemployment isn't that high. Some European countries have higher unemployment rates and have had them for longer. So why do many people think things are worse today?

The earlier recessions tended to hit the industrial working class and poorer people hardest. This recession also affects the middle class and even the upper

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middle class, people in hi-tech jobs, and particularly the media. A lot of people working in television and newspapers have

been laid off or fear being laid off, and because of this the media have treated this recession as worse than previous ones.

The media have a pivotal role in shaping the nation's mood. They tell vast numbers of people that things are as bad now economically as they've been in decades, and then they channel the discontent this produces at the politicians in the reporting of the scandals we've talked about. The exposé role of the media, the investigative press which Watergate helped develop, has become a much more important factor than ever before. Good news is not news, bad news is news, so the media have a stake in playing up bad news. That isn't a new development, but during this recession the media played up bad news even more than earlier because, as I mentioned, this is a recession which has hit them.

The oppositional role of the media is stronger than in the past. In earlier periods it was taken for granted that the media are partisan: Papers came in partisan terms labelled as Democratic or Republican newspapers. Today the media don't discriminate. When somebody becomes prominent as a candidate of either party, major newspapers put investigative teams on them and use their resources to look for contradictions in things they have said and done at any time in their careers. Today's media feel morally and professionally bound to expose everybody.

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*Seymour Martin Lipset is the Hazel Professor of Public Policy, George Mason University*