Introduction

The most recent Star-Ledger/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll (conducted February 1 – 4, 2005) demonstrates that “eliminating corruption among elected officials” is voters’ top priority this year. Although voter concern about corruption is hardly surprising – years of political scandal in New Jersey have brought the issue to the forefront of political debate – the public’s views about the scope of the corruption problem, its consequences, and how it can be credibly addressed are less well understood.

To help gain some more insight into public opinion on this issue, we recently asked 12 registered voters to come to the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University for a guided, two-hour discussion about corruption in New Jersey. The discussion was designed to address four main questions:

• What do voters mean when they say corruption is a problem in New Jersey?

• Who or what is considered most at fault for these problems?

• What are the primary consequences of corruption for the state?

• What constitutes a credible plan for eliminating or minimizing the problem?

The focus group was conducted on March 16, 2005, with a randomly selected group of 12 registered voters of varying partisan affiliations, professions, ages, and backgrounds. All participants were from Central New Jersey (primarily Middlesex, Monmouth, and Mercer counties). It is important to note that, although the group lends valuable insight into voters’ opinions and perceptions, the findings presented here should not be considered to be representative of registered voters in New Jersey (or any other specific segment of the electorate); they simply reflect the perceptions and attitudes of the voters who participated in the group.
Defining the ‘Corruption Problem’

Although corruption is not seen as new (or unique) to New Jersey, the voters we spoke to believe that the current corruption problem in New Jersey represents a serious crisis in the history of the state.

- Voters believe that the balance of the New Jersey political establishment operates primarily in its own self-interest and is more than willing to lie and manipulate to advance that self-interest. “We’ve lost our sense of right and wrong.”

- The most commonly cited forms of corruption in New Jersey – patronage and nepotism – are thought to be more prevalent today than at any other time in recent memory. “It’s like Tammany Hall all over again.”

- Politicians, government officials, and party leaders from both major parties and at all levels of government (local, county, state) are prone to lining their own pockets at the expense of average New Jerseyans. “You can’t just throw the bums out; they’re all bums.”

The perceived nature and scope of corruption in New Jersey makes it particularly difficult for politicians to credibly ‘sell’ a solution to corruption to voters. The default assumption is that politicians are the source, not the solution to the corruption problems facing New Jersey.

What’s the matter with corruption?

Voters believe that corruption poses a grave danger to New Jersey, adversely affecting everything from the cost of living to the integrity of the democratic process.

- “It’s costing us all more money.” Voters see a direct, causal relationship between ‘insider deals’ and an inefficient state government that produces wasteful spending, high taxes, poor schools, and an unnecessarily elevated cost of living.

- “Corruption weakens us.” There is a general perception that a “culture of corruption” makes it easier for terrorists to operate in New Jersey (e.g., obtaining fake ID’s) and contributes to a climate in which criminal behavior is both implicitly and explicitly endorsed.

- “People are leaving, businesses are leaving, and no new businesses are coming.” Corruption and its impact on the state’s fiscal health and reputation is thought to discourage new businesses from coming to the New Jersey, encourage existing businesses to behave irresponsibly, and drive out skilled young people who can’t afford the cost of living.

- “Corruption is an assault on democracy.” Voters express strong concern that politicians’ ability to avoid accountability and bend/break the rules ultimately erodes democracy in the state.
In this environment, politicians and elected officials in New Jersey are particularly vulnerable to allegations of corruption. Unlike voters in states with lower levels of awareness and concern about corruption, voters in New Jersey are easily able to ‘connect the dots’ and identify the link between corruption and a wide range of negative outcomes – from their ‘pocketbook’ to the health and well-being of the state as a whole.

Can it be fixed?

Despite the pervasiveness of political scandal in New Jersey, voters nevertheless express some optimism that policy change can reduce corruption. They believe that the key to successfully doing so is to give ‘the people’ more control and oversight over elected officials by:

- Enacting policies that will punish officials when they violate the law. There is strong support for a citizen watchdog group with the power to impose economic sanctions on government officials who break the rules. “If you get caught doing something wrong — you lose it all.”

- Restraining the power of officials in office by (a) making it easier to recall those who have violated the public trust; and (b) putting key issues and decisions (e.g., government spending; salaries of government officials) directly in the hands of voters in the form of referendum votes.

- Limiting the presence and influence of ‘career politicians,’ politically connected insiders, and independently wealthy candidates by (a) imposing term limits on elected officials; and (b) enacting campaign finance reform. “We want someone that doesn’t have a lot of money, like us, and who has also been kicked around.”

The fact that voters believe that there are specific steps that can be taken to address a wide-ranging problem like corruption presents an enormous opportunity for the political establishment in New Jersey to respond to a fundamental concern of their constituents. To be sure, voters will be watching to see whether they choose to do so.

Although there is support for these measures, voters do recognize that reform will be tough to achieve. In addition to the difficulty of enacting policies that make elected officials more accountable to the people, other barriers to a clean and transparent government must be addressed.

- The people – Much of the electorate is thought to be either too lazy or too busy to pay adequate attention to what’s going on in government.

- Human nature – Voters believe that once politicians and elected officials gain power, they are subject to a strong temptation to put their own interests ahead of those of the public, no matter what the potential costs of doing so. “Power corrupts.”

- The media – There is a perceived inability or unwillingness on the part of the media to aggressively and thoroughly investigate corruption and scandal. “The media is slanted and has an agenda so people are getting more garbage.”
About the Study

This study is the first in a series of in-depth examinations of key issues facing the New Jersey public. It was co-sponsored by the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling and the Rutgers Ethics Initiative (a joint program developed by The Prudential Business Ethics Center and the Eagleton Institute of Politics). For more information about the study, please contact Jeffrey Levine, Director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling at 732-932-9384 (ext. 240) or jeffrey.levine@rutgers.edu.