



HORRY COUNTY DEMOCRATIC PARTY

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ETHICS IN SOUTH CAROLINA POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

South Carolina needs more sunshine and fresh air.

This is not a complaint about the weather, but how one-party rule in South Carolina has led to rampant political corruption, rules that help keep the public in the dark on important policy decisions, and higher costs for the state's residents.

One Party Rule in SC Equals:

- **Loose Ethics Law**
- **Wide-Spread Public Corruption**
- **Cost Overruns and Bankruptcies draining taxpayer pockets**

The Republican Party has enjoyed an almost absolute monopoly in the South Carolina Legislature, the Governor's Office, Horry County Council and other local government councils for many years. The GOP has used this monopoly to game the system to its advantage, leaving the voters to pay. Some Republican leaders have flat-out broken the law to enrich themselves. By letting the fox guard the hen house, Republican officials have robbed our state and its residents' of wealth, spirit and reputation.

Political corruption in S.C. is so bad a special prosecutor had to be appointed to weed out the law breakers. The long evolving probe by special prosecutor David Pascoe into S.C. Statehouse corruption has,

so far, secured guilty pleas and resignations from four Republican members of the S.C. Legislature.

Among the S.C. political elite who have pled guilty and resigned are a former Republican House speaker, two former Republican House majority leaders, and a former Republican Senate president pro tempore.

The guilty pleas entered by these four former legislators covered multiple counts of misconduct in office, criminal conspiracy, misusing campaign accounts for personal benefit, and perjury. Charges from the special prosecutor are still pending against two other S.C. Republican legislators.

The Pascoe probe is helping to expose how the state's political power structure is milking the system of hundreds of thousands of dollars by skirting the



state's loose ethic laws. It has brought to light how one-party rule and the influx of a tremendous amount of money with few rules on how it can be col-

lected and spent, can poison our politics and remove governmental decisions away from the people.

Impact on South Carolinians

This one-party rule in South Carolina has not come without significant costs to state residents.

The V.C. Summer nuclear construction project was

finally abandoned in July 2017 after years of the Republican legislature turning a blind eye to cost overruns and construction delays. A total of \$9 Billion was spent on this failed project, which will never deliver a kilowatt of power.

About 18 percent of the typical SCE&G customer’s power bill –or \$27 a month – has gone to pay some of this project’s debt. In June 2018 Republicans in the legislature agreed to delay until December (after the elections) the State Public Service Commission’s decision on who – SCE&G’s shareholders, its customers, or both – must foot the bill for the billions of dollars left in unpaid construction debt.

Not every Republican official in the state is corrupt. But since Republicans have controlled—for decades—every major government council in the state and in Horry County, all Republicans must answer for policies that tighten their grip on power by diminishing the rights of residents.

Republican officials have so little respect for the voters, they think nothing of conducting their “public” meetings at times when most working people have little or no chance of attending.

Consider the weekday 6:00 PM start times for the Horry County Council and Horry County School Board meetings as a case in point.

If you live at the far ends of the county and put in a full day’s work, driving to Conway to attend these meetings on time is nearly impossible.

The inconsiderate scheduling of these meetings means that many residents have little chance to attend, to fully understand the issues, and to question board members and councilmen in a public setting where it is difficult to avoid answering questions.

Unbelievably, the Republican-controlled Horry

County School Board, despite voter outrage, voted in 2017 to give themselves a pay increase of 66 percent. This self-indulgence made them the highest paid school board members in South Carolina. Conveniently, the votes for the pay increase came in a pair of “special called” meetings, rather than in regularly scheduled monthly board meetings that tend to draw a bigger public audience.

State Integrity Investigation 2015		
(Conducted by The Center for Public Integrity to Assess the Systems in Place to Deter Corruption in State Government)		
	Grade	Ranking Among 50 States
Overall South Carolina Score	D Minus	36th
Public Access to Information	F	44 th
<i>Political Financing</i>	F	37 th
Electoral Oversight	D Minus	30 th
<i>Executive Accountability</i>	D Minus	27 th
Legislative Accountability	F	40 th
<i>Judicial Accountability</i>	F	25 th
State Budget Processes	C Minus	36 th
<i>State Civil Service Management</i>	D Minus	26 th
Procurement	D	31 st
<i>Internal Auditing</i>	B	8 th
Lobbying Disclosure	D Plus	18 th
<i>Ethics Enforcement Agencies</i>	F	25 th
State Pension Fund Management	D	24 th

What’s the Bottom Line?

South Carolina graded D Minus

Ranked 15th worst state in deterring corruption in state government.

The non-partisan Center for Public Integrity graded South Carolina “D Minus” on the systems it has in place to deter corruption in state government. This study also gave South Carolina grades of “F” for five sub-categories which measured South Carolina’s government transparency and accountability to the voters.

The study found S.C. has a particularly high “enforcement gap,” which measures the difference between what the laws say and how well they’re actually implemented. For example, S.C. law says you can’t use campaign funds to defray personal expenses.

The reality is that a former Republican House speaker pled guilty in 2014 to charges he used campaign money for personal benefit. The Center for Public Integrity also reported that “S.C. law gives citizens access to information, but legislators not only find ways to work around releasing documents, but also discourage people from requesting them – either by charging exorbitant amounts or threatening to punish people who make ‘excessive’ requests.”

South Carolina did score “among the best in the nation for its internal auditing practices – which covers both the department responsible for the annual financial audit of state agencies, and the new Office of Inspector General”, according to the Center for Public Integrity.

But the Center notes that “both ethics and elections commissions are not sufficiently funded to either perform regular audits or to initiate independent investigations. This gap – along with the state’s lack of disclosure laws – has shielded the political process from close scrutiny, and kept the status quo securely in place.”

Need for Legislative Reforms

Following the first indictments from the Pascoe probe, and be-



ing embarrassed for being singled out as one of the most corrupt states in the country, the South Carolina legislature has passed two modest changes to S.C. ethics law. One empowers a revamped, eight-member Ethics Commission to investigate allegations against legislators, who previously investigated themselves. The other requires elected officials to list the sources and type or any private income they receive, and to also list the income of their spouses and family members.

The new ethics law will allow the public to know more about where lawmakers get their private sources of income. But it is easy to see how this is not sufficient. For example, under the new law we will know, let’s say, that a legislator receives income from his public relations company that he owns. But we still would not know who his clients are and the actual sources of the legislator’s income.

The S.C. Legislature let the 2018 session expire without taking any action on many legislative proposals that would have strengthened the state’s loose ethics law. Bills that were left to die would have:

- **Required candidates for public office to more fully disclose the sources of campaign contributions, and how campaign cash is spent.**
- **Required legislators to publicly disclose the source and amount of any income they or their family members receive from contracts – including for consulting work – with special interests that lobby the legislature.**
- **Prohibited candidates from paying family members out of their campaign accounts.**
- **Required legislators who are forced out of office for committing crimes to pay for the costly special elections held to replace them.**
- **Expanded the definition of a lobbyist to include anyone hired to influence public policy through indirect communication with public officials or employees. The current law requires lobbyists to register only if they communicate directly with policymakers.**

- **Prohibited legislators from rewarding their recent campaign donors with government jobs.**
- **Required so-called “dark money” political groups who push political agendas or try to defeat candidates to reveal their donors.**

What's All This Mean?

Unfortunately, the steady trickle of public corruption indictments and guilty pleas may be only the tip of the iceberg in the Palmetto State. One-party rule in South Carolina, and the state's porous ethics laws, have created fertile ground for lawmakers to abuse the public's trust.

Horry Democrats call upon the S.C. legislature to

pass legislation to tighten ethics laws so residents know more about who is paying their lawmakers. Residents have a right to know exactly what special interests are in the front of the line asking legislators to do their bidding. The public also has a right to expect that legislators not use their campaign contributions as a personal ATM.

A rush of fresh air would also result if the Horry County Council and Board of Education would schedule their meetings later in the day – say 6:30 or 7:00 – so working people have a chance to come to the meetings and participate more fully in their government.

The hardworking taxpayers of Horry County deserve nothing less.

Contributed by David Higham

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or for more information, please contact us at
issues@horrydemocrats.org.**