

# Leading California Democrat sentenced to five years in prison for corruption

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Former California State Senator Leland Yee, a San Francisco Bay Area Democrat, was sentenced Wednesday by a federal judge to five years in prison for political corruption.

Yee was arrested on March 26, 2014 by the FBI on charges related to public corruption and gun trafficking. On July 1, 2015, Yee pleaded guilty to felony racketeering involving money laundering, public corruption and bribery, and his sentencing was continued to this week.

In his plea agreement, Yee admitted that he traded his political influence for bribes, typically offered by undercover FBI agents posing as potential campaign contributors. Yee, among other things, admitted he agreed to influence legislation for would-be medical marijuana businesses in California, an NFL team owner trying to exempt pro athletes from the state's workers' compensation laws, and a fictitious software firm, set up as an FBI sting, seeking government technology contracts.

Yee was ensnared by an FBI investigation that spanned several years and led to the convictions of Raymond "Shrimp Boy" Chow, a reputed Chinatown mobster, Keith Jackson, a former school board president and fundraiser for Yee, and others.

Jackson received a nine-year sentence. Chow faces a life term when he is sentenced next month.

Yee also faced charges involving his involvement in attempting to arrange an illegal international arms deal through the Philippines. According to an affidavit by FBI agent Emmanuel V. Pascua, Yee discussed helping the agent get weapons worth \$500,000 to \$2.5 million, including shoulder-fired missiles, and explained the entire process of acquiring them from a Muslim separatist group in the Philippines and bringing them to the US. The state senator was seeking to cash in on this

arms deal, while making a name for himself in state politics as an advocate of gun control.

Yee began his political career in 1988 when he won a seat to the San Francisco United School Board. In 1996, he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and in 2002 to the State Assembly. By 2004, he became the first Asian-American to be appointed speaker pro tempore, which made him the second-highest-ranking Democrat of the California State Assembly. Due to term limits, Yee had to leave the State Assembly and was elected to the State Senate in 2006. Again facing term limits, Yee had begun to campaign for the office of Secretary of State, California's chief election officer, at the time of his arrest.

Prosecutor Susan Badger alleged that Yee was "desperate for money" in part to finance his statewide campaign as well as the need to retire the debt incurred in his unsuccessful campaign for San Francisco mayor.

US District Judge Charles Breyer told Yee that "indicating your vote was for sale" was "a serious violation of the public trust."

Breyer also told Yee his participation in the gun-running scheme was hypocritical and "inexplicable," since he publicly favored gun control. "The answer is money. You did it for money for the perpetuation of power. That to me is the most venal thing."

Yee's conviction follows the January 28, 2014, conviction of Democratic State Senator Roderick Wright, who was found guilty of committing voter fraud and perjury for falsely claiming residence in his impoverished district including Inglewood and south Los Angeles, when he actually lived in affluent Baldwin Hills.

In addition, State Senator Ronald Calderon, a Democrat from Montebello, an eastern suburb of Los

Angeles, is scheduled to begin his federal public corruption trial in May on 24 felony counts, including accepting nearly \$100,000 in bribes.

When Yee, Wright, and Calderon were all charged in 2014 of these separate crimes, it brought to 7 percent the proportion of the California Senate under indictment. The forced resignations of these state senators cost Democrats their supermajority in the legislature and prompted a series of “reforms.”

The State Senate adopted resolutions that year to ban members from fundraising during the last month of the legislative session and the month leading up to a budget vote, when business interests are especially active in trying to influence legislation.

The resolutions also required the Senate Rules Committee to appoint an ethics ombudsman to accept allegations of wrongdoing and protect whistle-blowers from retaliation.

Looking back on those changes, State Senator Joel Anderson, a Republican from San Diego, described them Wednesday as mere “window dressing for a culture of corruption.”

“Sadly, all of the Senate reforms would not have prevented today’s verdict,” Anderson said.

Gov. Jerry Brown, Senate leader Kevin de León and many other top Democrats declined to comment on the sentencing, which ends a case that was an embarrassment to party officials. De León recently said Yee’s guilty plea “turns the page on one of the darker chapters of the Senate’s history.”

Rather than turning the page, the criminal conduct of Yee and his political colleagues serves to demonstrate that the Democratic Party, which dominates the legislature of the nation’s most populous state, is just as corrupted and controlled by big-money interests as the Republicans.



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