

The Gavin Newsom Circle of Corruption

Across nearly three decades in politics, the governor has assembled a roster of criminal connections.

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avin Newsom is reportedly under federal investigation. Last week, the California governor released a recorded statement claiming that federal agents are combing through records as part of an inquiry targeting him and his wife. “In recent days,” Newsom said, “federal agents have knocked on the doors of friends and former employees—not because they found a crime, [but] because they’re simply trying to find one.”

As federal agents examine Newsom’s connections, we decided to do the same. We reviewed records dating back to his tenure as mayor of San Francisco. They reveal that, over nearly three decades in politics, Newsom has amassed a network of appointees, employees, and associates implicated in a range of ethical violations and criminal offenses—including, in some cases, serious felonies.

Newsom has suggested he wants to improve California’s culture of self-dealing. Last year, his spokesperson said that “the governor expects all public servants to uphold the highest standards of integrity.” Our review reveals that, in fact, Newsom has surrounded himself with corruption and criminals.

This is Gavin Newsom’s circle of corruption.

Dana Williamson

Governor Newsom appointed Dana Williamson, a “bareknuckle political brawler,” as chief of staff in January 2023. Less than two years later, she left the governor’s office after becoming the subject of a federal corruption probe. Last month, she pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bank and wire fraud, among other charges.

Williamson was involved in multiple corrupt schemes that began before she joined Newsom’s office. In one, prosecutors say, she and two others conspired to drain \$225,000 from a dormant campaign account belonging to Xavier Becerra. In another, Williamson claimed bogus business expenses worth \$1.7 million, which she used to purchase luxury vacations and “private jet travel.”

She also faced a charge stemming from the investigation itself. Last month, Williamson pleaded guilty to having made false statements to federal agents. The DOJ reported that Williamson had hoped to

distract the FBI from her criminal conduct by, among other things, concealing her “involvement in passing information to former clients . . . to give them an advantage in litigation against the state.”

According to one Democratic consultant, Williamson operated “like a mafia boss.”

London Breed

Newsom served as San Francisco mayor from 2004 to 2011. One of his most enduring “accomplishments” was boosting the political career of London Breed, the future city mayor who proceeded to commit multiple ethics violations and is reportedly under federal scrutiny for alleged corruption.

Newsom repeatedly promoted Breed. In 2005, he appointed her to the city’s Redevelopment Agency Commission. In 2010, he named her to a post at San Francisco’s Fire Commission. These appointments likely helped Breed win San Francisco’s 2018 mayoral election.

As mayor, Breed presided over the creation of the city’s racialist “Dream Keeper Initiative” and a range of scandals. In 2021, she was ensnared in a scandal of her own after San Francisco’s Ethics Commission fined her nearly \$23,000 for “Violating Campaign Finance, Ethics, and Gift Laws.”

The commission published a press release detailing some of the violations. In one case, from 2018, Breed had referenced her title as “Mayor” when asking Governor Jerry Brown to commute her brother’s prison sentence. In another, from 2019, she accepted gifts from a subordinate, Mohammed Nuru, who was later convicted of fraud.

Breed’s troubles may not be over. Last month, the *San Francisco Standard* reported that the FBI is “looking into” whether she appointed billionaire Stephen Sherrill to a Board of Supervisors seat in hopes of securing employment from Sherrill’s former boss, Michael Bloomberg. She has denied the allegations.

Mohammed Nuru

Mohammed Nuru was a public works official under Mayor Newsom. For years, Nuru was a major figure in city politics, exercising “substantial power and influence over” San Francisco’s “business and policy, including its public contracts, permits, and construction projects.”

In 2020, Nuru was arrested for his role in a massive bribery and corruption scandal. He had orchestrated a bribe-and-kickback racket spanning more than a decade, exercising his political power in exchange for cash and gifts. In 2022, Nuru pleaded guilty to federal charges and was sentenced to seven years in prison.

Newsom's ties to Nuru predate his mayoralty. Nuru had reportedly volunteered on Newsom's first mayoral campaign while serving in city government. In 2003, Nuru allegedly helped orchestrate a coercive voting scheme through the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG), a city-funded nonprofit under contract with his department.

The alleged scheme involved coercion. In January 2004, nine SLUG street cleaners spoke to the *San Francisco Chronicle* and claimed that Nuru pulled them off work to campaign door-to-door. Four workers said that SLUG "crew chiefs" requested their voting receipts. "I felt like I was in another country, like it was some kind of dictatorship," one said.

Newsom won a narrow runoff. He received roughly 25,600 more absentee votes than his opponent—the same ballot type that nine workers alleged they were coerced into casting for Newsom. San Francisco's city attorney later confirmed that SLUG had misused city funds to influence an election, and the nonprofit was barred from receiving future city contracts.

Nuru claimed at the time that he never pressured anyone. A Newsom spokesman at the time reportedly "said that Nuru had served as a campaign volunteer but that the new mayor had no knowledge of the allegations or the investigation."

"For at least twelve years, Nuru shook down contractors eager for City business, trading his authority and influence for millions of dollars in cash, construction work, travel, meals, and gifts," U.S. Attorney Stephanie Hinds said in a statement after Nuru's sentencing. "His abhorrent conduct erodes the public's trust in its government, and this case demonstrates the justice system can and will punish corrupt public officials."

Walter Wong

Newsom and Nuru are both reportedly connected to a man named Walter Wong. In 2020, the Department of Justice announced that Wong had been charged with multiple fraud-related counts. In 2020, he reportedly pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud. As part of a settlement, Wong and his companies agreed to repay the city nearly \$1.5 million for contracts and grants "awarded through a rigged process."

Wong, one of San Francisco's "most well-known permit expeditors," apparently helped clients push their applications through the city's byzantine bureaucracy. In 2008, Wong began a longstanding "corrupt relationship" with Nuru. The "permit expeditor" would funnel envelopes to Nuru containing as much as \$5,000 in cash and bribed him with more than \$260,000 worth of construction labor and materials—all in exchange for contracting favors from Nuru.

Newsom's reported connection to Wong stems from a business venture. In 2003, a report emerged that Newsom's company, PlumpJack Development Fund, had invested in a partnership called Ecker-Folsom, which hired Wong. Newsom claimed that he was unaware of the hire at the time, and in

2004, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that he had “never used an expeditor” in any of his projects in which he was “proactively engaged.”

By 2010, however, Newsom had apparently changed his mind on using expeditors. In an interview in *Forbes*, Newsom described how he eased the path for Chinese solar companies to invest in San Francisco. “We have public-private transaction teams, so that you have one person to meet and you will never have to deal with the bureaucracy,” Newsom said. “We will carry your permits through the entire bureaucracy. We’ve got workforce incentives, payroll tax exemptions, and other enterprise support incentives from the state of California, and we’ll pull all of them together for you.”

Tom Girardi

In 2019, Newsom appointed Tom Girardi, a high-profile trial attorney, to his 111-member Judicial Selection Advisory Committee. Within about a year, Girardi’s unraveling began: he was accused of embezzlement in 2020, disbarred in 2022, and found guilty in 2024 of four counts of wire fraud. The Department of Justice says he embezzled tens of millions of dollars.

“Tom Girardi built celebrity status and lured in victims by falsely portraying himself as a ‘Champion of Justice,’” said United States Attorney Martin Estrada. “In reality, he was a Robin-Hood-in-reverse, stealing from the needy to support . . . a lavish, Hollywood lifestyle.”

It was a spectacular fall from grace for the litigator who claimed once to have dined with President Bill Clinton. Last year, Girardi, now in poor health, was sentenced to more than seven years in prison and ordered to pay more than \$2 million in restitution.

Melahat Rafiei

In 2021, Governor Newsom appointed Melahat Rafiei, a one-time state Democratic Party official, to the Orange County Fair Board. Four years later, Rafiei was sentenced to six months in jail and fined \$10,000 for attempted wire fraud. As part of her plea deal, she reportedly admitted, despite not being charged, that she tried to bribe two local officials “for favorable cannabis legislation.”

Mark Ridley-Thomas

During his 2018 run for governor, Newsom pledged to appoint a dedicated homelessness czar to address California’s spiraling homelessness problems. In 2019, Newsom backed away from that plan and opted to tap Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas as one of two heads on the governor’s “advisory team” on homelessness.

Newsom's selection quickly soured. In 2021, Ridley-Thomas was forced out of his L.A. position after he was indicted on federal corruption charges. Two years later, he was sentenced to 42 months in federal prison for a bribery and fraud scheme connected to his son, Sebastian Ridley-Thomas, who was fending off sexual harassment allegations.

The elder Ridley-Thomas conspired with Marilyn Louise Flynn, former dean of the University of Southern California's School of Social Work. "During the conspiracy's course," the DOJ said, Flynn admitted Sebastian to graduate school and provided "a mechanism" for Mark to funnel campaign funds to his son's nonprofit. As the DOJ put it, the elder Ridley-Thomas "knew that Flynn needed his help obtaining county contracts."

For her part, Flynn was sentenced to three years of probation—including 18 months of home confinement—and fined \$150,000.

Victor Makras and Harlan Kelly

In 2010, his last full year as mayor, Newsom appointed Victor Makras to the San Francisco Retirement Board. Three years earlier, Makras's company had made a \$5,000 payment at Newsom's request to fund the mayoral swearing-in ceremony.

More than a decade after that appointment, Makras was convicted of bank fraud and making false statements to a bank. The court slapped him with three years of probation and a \$15,200 fine for his role in fraudulently obtaining a \$1.3 million loan.

Harlan Kelly Jr., who reportedly worked as a "high-ranking official" in the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission under Mayor Newsom and stood next to him at a rally, was a co-conspirator in that scheme. In 2024, Kelly was sentenced to four years in prison after being convicted of bank fraud and other fraud-related charges, which reportedly "grew out of a years-long investigation into bribery and public corruption in San Francisco city government."

Rodrigo Santos

In 2004, Newsom promoted Rodrigo Santos, a native of Ecuador who became a prolific donor to San Francisco political figures, to serve as the president of the city's Building Inspection Commission.

Between 2012 and 2019, Santos defrauded clients out of \$775,000. In some cases, he even altered checks written to the Department of Building Inspection (DBI) to read "RoDBIgo Santos" (our emphasis) to deposit them into his personal account. In 2023, Santos was sentenced to 30 months in prison for bank fraud, honest services fraud, falsifying records, and tax evasion.

Rudolph Dwayne Jones

From 2004 through 2010, Rudolph Dwayne Jones served as Gavin Newsom’s deputy chief of staff. Across more than a decade in and around San Francisco politics, Jones functioned in various roles, including as a consultant to groups seeking city contracts.

In 2023, city officials charged Jones with bribery, misappropriation of public funds, and aiding and abetting financial conflicts of interest. Officials reportedly accused Jones of bribing another since-indicted official, Lanita Henriquez, to “steer City contracts and grants towards Jones and the entities he controls.”

After the charges were filed, city officials suspended Jones and most “affiliated entities” from bidding on or receiving city contracts. Jones and Henriquez have pleaded not guilty and are apparently awaiting trial.

In California, Newsom faces problems of his own. A state ethics body recently fined him for failing promptly to report 36 behested payments—charitable donations made at a government official’s request—that were mostly directed to the California Fire Foundation. The governor has behested millions to a nonprofit tied to his wife.

We reached out to Newsom’s office for comment on this story. In response, a communications official accused us of “stitching together decades-old connections to manufacture a make-believe scandal” and suggested that we focus instead on “President Trump’s corruption.”

California’s culture of self-dealing and corruption stretches back decades. As mayor of San Francisco and now governor, Newsom has had ample opportunity to change it. Instead, he has spent nearly three decades in politics surrounding himself with many of the people responsible. As the old saying goes, “You are the company you keep.”

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