

California Democrats Await Fallout After 3 Are Caught Up in Scandals

By NORIMITSU ONISHI APRIL 3, 2014

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State Senator Leland Yee of San Francisco is accused of conspiring to traffic in arms from the Philippines and taking bribes. Credit Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

SACRAMENTO — One state senator was charged with conspiring to traffic in arms from the Philippines, and taking bribes from undercover F.B.I. agents including one who posed as a marijuana dealer. Another was accused of taking bribes from federal agents impersonating Hollywood film executives. And a third was convicted of perjury and voter fraud after lying about where he lived when he ran for office.

All three are Democratic state senators from California, and their recent legal problems have brought rare bad news to a party that has come to thoroughly dominate politics in this state but now looks besieged by high-profile corruption cases.

The State Senate voted last Friday to suspend all three men, after the arms trafficking and bribery charges against Senator Leland Yee of San Francisco were made public. Party leaders, however, citing due process, have refused to cast them out, even as Gov. Jerry Brown, also a Democrat, called on the men to resign.

In one sign that the party is aware of the scandals' potential political fallout, Darrell Steinberg, the Senate's president pro tem and majority leader, canceled a planned fund-raiser scheduled for this weekend amid

concerns about the appearance of Democrats being seen playing golf with lobbyists.



Ron Calderon, a Los Angeles-area lawmaker, was indicted on charges that he accepted cash and gifts in exchange for favors. CreditRich Pedroncelli/Associated Press

Though there is little chance that Democrats will lose control of the Legislature in November, the suspensions provide ammunition to beleaguered Republicans eyeing close elections in swing districts. The recent string of corruption cases has led Democrats to struggle with how best to discipline the men and keep Republicans from using the scandals to gain political traction.

“One is an anomaly, two is a coincidence, but three?” Mr. Steinberg said, hinting at the broader meaning of the suspensions before last Friday’s vote.

Republicans said the scandal could provide an opportunity for them. “When three members from the same party suffer, it’s possible people look at things through a different metric,” said Bob Huff, a Republican and the Senate minority leader. “It might disenfranchise a lot of voters who feel that we are all corrupt. But that may make a difference in a few of our tight seats, absolutely.”

[Mr. Yee was arrested last week](#) after becoming ensnared in a wide-ranging federal corruption investigation that initially focused on organized crime figures in San Francisco’s Chinatown. According to the F.B.I.’s 137-page affidavit, Mr. Yee, desperate to retire \$70,000 in campaign debt from a failed run for mayor of San Francisco in 2011, accepted tens of thousands of dollars in bribes from undercover agents posing as businessmen seeking to influence marijuana legislation or buy large quantities of firearms.

After his arrest, Mr. Yee dropped out of the race for California secretary of state; his lawyer said that he would plead not guilty.

His troubles followed those of two Democrats from the Los Angeles area. [Ron Calderon](#), whose district includes parts of Los Angeles and East L.A., was indicted in February on charges that he accepted \$100,000 in bribes and gifts in exchange for pushing legislation that would benefit various groups. He is also accused of directing an undercover F.B.I. agent posing as a film industry executive to donate tens of thousands of dollars to a private organization controlled by his brother, Thomas Calderon, a former Democratic state assemblyman. The lawmaker has pleaded not guilty.

In January, [Rod Wright](#) was convicted on eight felony counts of perjury and voter fraud. A Los Angeles jury found him guilty of lying about the location of his home when he ran for office in 2008. California law requires candidates to live in the district they represent. He is scheduled to be sentenced in May, but is expected to appeal.



Rod Wright, from Inglewood, was convicted on eight felony counts of perjury and voter fraud. He is expected to appeal. CreditRich Pedroncelli/Associated Press

The Democratic-controlled Senate at first dealt leniently with Mr. Wright and Mr. Calderon, allowing them to take paid leaves of absence from the Legislature. Their departure cost the Democrats their two-thirds supermajority in the chamber.

But last Friday, two days after Mr. Yee's arrest, the Senate voted to suspend all three men — the first time any member has been suspended in the chamber's history. The suspensions bar them from engaging in legislative affairs but allow them to receive their salaries.

Critics described the suspensions as slaps on the wrist meant to minimize the scandals' political fallout and called instead for expulsion. For Democrats looking at the forthcoming primaries and general elections, the expulsion process would draw unnecessary attention, especially to Mr. Calderon and Mr. Yee, who must give up their seats at the end of the year anyway because of term limits.

“We are expecting low voter turnout in the primaries and general elections, which means that you have an electorate that is smaller and more tuned in to the news and issues surfacing in state politics, and so it may end up having an impact on races at the local level,” said Mark Baldassare, president of the Public Policy Institute of California.

Joel Anderson, a Republican state senator from San Diego, voted against the suspensions because he favors expulsion. The suspensions, he said, amounted to “paid holidays.”

“I believe the Democrats are out of touch with the citizens,” he said. “Until they have an open and honest debate on whether the senators should be expelled, I think there’s going to be a dark cloud over the Democrat Party.”

Steve Boilard, executive director of the Center for California Studies at California State University, Sacramento, said the scandals may accelerate a trend in which losses for Democrats amount to gains not for Republicans but for independents.

“I wonder if that’s the real beneficiary is of these kinds of scandals — independents,” he said.