

EVIDENCE BRIEF · RECORD THROUGH SEPTEMBER 8, 2026

PRESIDENTIAL CLEMENCY: WHAT THE NUMBERS ACTUALLY MEAN

Obama, Biden and Trump compared by the same standards—including review, public scrutiny, access indicators, possible legal implications and evidence limits.

THE SHORT ANSWER

Totals do not measure merit, fairness, safety or corruption. Obama's main initiative used published criteria and individualized screening, with documented implementation failures. Biden delivered the largest and widest variety of categorical actions, while final-batch review and family pardons created transparency and conflict concerns. Among the cases reviewed here, Trump combined genuine reform cases with the most documented political, personal and paid-access indicators. The project has not completed a balanced sample capable of estimating comparative misconduct.

This is a comparative public-record analysis—not a criminal finding, court judgment or official determination that a grant was proper, improper, corrupt or deserved.

Comparable counts—and their limits

President / period	Named DOJ actions	What the total hides
Obama, 2009–2017	212 pardons 1,715 commutations	Drug-sentence initiative dominated; 504 life sentences commuted.
Biden, 2021–2025	80 pardon entries 4,165 commutations	Large batches plus proclamations with overlapping or estimated beneficiary counts.
Trump, both terms through cutoff	403 active named grants* ~1,980+ identified coverage*	Ongoing second term plus January 6 and election-related group actions; superseded warrants excluded.

*Trump’s named total and people-covered estimate combine a completed first term with an ongoing second term through the cutoff. Broad groups and named rows are different units.

Index reconciliation: the searchable DOJ tables contain 1,903 Obama rows, 4,220 Biden rows and 403 active Trump rows. The Obama and Biden gaps from official grant statistics are disclosed rather than treated as unnamed people; four superseded Trump amended-warrant versions are excluded.

A commutation normally shortens punishment while leaving the conviction intact. A pardon does not equal acquittal, and a proclamation’s estimated coverage is not a verified count of released people.

The expanded category map

The categories overlap. They organize legal effect, process and accountability; they are not additional people to add to the totals.

Category	What it measures
Drug-sentence relief	Major policy use by Obama and Biden; smaller individual Trump cases.
COVID home confinement	Biden formalized relief for about 1,499 people already serving at home.
Death row to life	Biden changed 37 death sentences to life without parole; no releases.
Marijuana proclamations	Federal/D.C. possession relief; not ordinary state convictions or automatic expungement.
Military consensual conduct	Categorical pardon for covered historic Article 125 conduct; administrative corrections may remain.
Relatives pardoned	Biden: six relatives. Trump: Charles Kushner. Direct conflict indicators; no payment finding.
January 6	Trump: broad defendant relief. Biden: preventive protection for investigators and witnesses.
2020-election allies	Trump protected an identified political network from covered federal exposure; state cases unaffected.
Other preventive pardons	Protection before charge or conviction; not proof of guilt or innocence.
Political/family connections	Access can be documented without proving causation or illegality.
Prisoner exchanges	Diplomatic reciprocal release, judged by recovery, proportionality and security.
Documented DOJ review	Advisory but important to consistency, auditability and equal access.
Serious or violent cases	Legal effect matters: pardon, reduced term, life without parole and release are not equivalent.
Public scrutiny	Attributed criticism and support—not official judgment.

Category	What it measures
Pay-to-play evidence	Separate indicators, evidence of an exchange and proven findings.
Possible legal implications	Case-specific bribery, obstruction, witness, finance or disclosure questions.
Evidence status	Clearly documented, partially documented or insufficient public information.

Obama: structured review with capacity failures

The 2014 Clemency Initiative used public criteria aimed at federal prisoners who would likely receive substantially shorter sentences under newer law or policy. It emphasized low-level, nonviolent conduct, ten years served, limited criminal history, good prison conduct and no demonstrated violence.

What supports the record

- Petition-centered, individualized review and published criteria.
- 1,715 commutations, including 504 people serving life sentences; convictions generally remained.
- Policy fit centered on documented sentencing disparities rather than personal access.

What draws scrutiny

- The DOJ Inspector General documented coordination, guidance and capacity failures.
- A large backlog left many petitions unresolved and similarly situated applicants with unequal timing.
- Exceptional non-drug grants, including Chelsea Manning, Oscar López Rivera and James Cartwright, generated separate criticism.

Evidence and legal finding

Official oversight supports the process criticism. The reviewed record does not show a broad payment-for-clemency pattern. Delay and exceptional judgment are accountability issues, not proof of bribery or illegality.

Finding: Obama's main initiative provides the strongest evidence of structured individualized screening among the three records, but its execution was slow and incomplete.

Biden: broad policy relief with review and family conflicts

Biden's record combined individual grants, large commutation batches, marijuana and military proclamations, death-row commutations, preventive pardons and six family pardons.

Policy impact

- 2,490 final drug commutations addressed older drug penalties and enhancements.
- About 1,499 home-confinement commutations gave finality to people already living under supervision.
- Thirty-seven death sentences became life without parole; no recipient was released.
- Marijuana and military proclamations supplied categorical record relief with important federal/state and administrative limits.

What draws scrutiny

- Reporting found 258 of the final 2,490 drug recipients had ordinary DOJ recommendations; alternative White House screening still occurred.
- The 'nonviolent' description did not fit every full offense record.
- Hunter Biden's broad pardon and five preventive family pardons created direct personal conflicts and reversed prior public assurances.

Evidence and legal finding

The family relationship proves preferential access and personal interest, not bribery. The reviewed record identifies no payment-for-pardon evidence. Batch-review criticism does not prove that no screening occurred or that most recipients were dangerous.

Finding: Biden achieved the greatest policy-based reach, but transparency and confidence vary sharply by batch and were weakest around the final drug review and family grants.

Trump: reform, political access and financial indicators

Trump's record includes defensible sentence-correction cases, including Alice Marie Johnson, alongside clemency for campaign aides, relatives, political allies, January 6 defendants, election-related actors and serious fraud, corruption, violence and trafficking cases.

Process and access

- A Lawfare review of the first 94 grants found seven with Pardon Attorney recommendations and at least 84 with a personal or political connection under its methodology.
- The sample documents an access pattern; it is not an exact rate for every Trump grant.
- Second-term group actions broadened federal liability relief for January 6 defendants and election allies.

Reported financial/access indicators

- Trevor Milton and his wife donated more than \$1.8 million to a Trump reelection fund shortly before the 2024 election; he was pardoned in 2025.
- Joseph Schwartz paid \$960,000 to outside lobbyists seeking clemency before his 2025 pardon; the White House disputed that those lobbyists drove the decision.
- AP reported business ties between Binance and a Trump-family crypto venture before Changpeng Zhao's pardon.

Evidence and legal finding

These facts are circumstantial indicators of access, timing or financial conflict. The reviewed sources do not establish an agreement exchanging value for any pardon, and no blanket court or DOJ finding says the pardons were purchased.

Finding: Among the cases reviewed, Trump has the most documented political/personal access and the clearest reported financial indicators. The sample is not balanced or complete, and the merits and legality of each grant remain case-specific.

How to evaluate pay-to-play or a quid pro quo

1 • Indicator

A donation, business relationship, paid lobbyist, family tie, political alliance, unusual timing, success fee, private access or departure from normal review. An indicator justifies scrutiny but does not prove a crime.

2 • Evidence of an exchange

Communications, testimony, financial records or conduct linking a thing of value to an agreed pardon or other official act. Timing and association alone are generally insufficient.

3 • Potential law

Depending on the facts, federal bribery, obstruction, witness tampering, campaign-finance, lobbying-disclosure or foreign-agent laws might be examined. Listing a possible law does not mean its elements were met.

4 • Official status

Distinguish a reported fact, allegation, opened investigation, criminal charge, agency conclusion and final court judgment. Each carries a different evidentiary weight.

Presidential-immunity limit

The pardon power is a core constitutional authority, and current Supreme Court doctrine restricts prosecution and evidentiary use involving official acts. Whether surrounding private conduct—such as accepting a payment—could be prosecuted is a distinct, unresolved and fact-specific question.

A potentially corrupt process would not automatically answer whether an issued pardon remains legally effective. Impeachment, state jurisdiction, civil claims and offenses outside the warrant are separate questions.

Practical, institutional and evidentiary impact

Practical effect

Obama's record primarily shortened individually screened drug sentences. Biden combined large sentence reductions, permanent life terms replacing death, categorical record relief and preventive protection. Trump combined individual relief, releases and broad election-related liability protection.

Institutional effect

Obama demonstrated both the value and capacity limits of published petition criteria. Biden expanded categorical clemency while reducing individualized transparency in major batches and creating direct family conflicts. Trump expanded direct White House selection and politically connected routes to clemency.

Evidence confidence

- Clearly documented: official records establish recipient, offense, sentence, warrant and legal effect.
- Partially documented: the grant is official, but individualized rationale, review pathway, final beneficiary count or connection evidence is incomplete.
- Insufficient public information: available records do not support a firm conclusion about motive, dangerousness, rehabilitation or a corrupt bargain.

Same-standard conclusion

No administration should be judged by raw totals alone. Apply the same tests: legal effect, policy fit, review, exceptions, victims, access, money, transparency and evidence limits.

Overall finding: Obama's main initiative was structured but under-resourced; Biden used the largest and widest variety of categorical actions but had uneven review transparency and direct family conflicts; among cases reviewed, Trump combined genuine reform with the most documented political/access indicators. The current sample cannot estimate comparative misconduct prevalence.

What the searchable record adds

The online index contains 6,526 active official named DOJ rows plus separately labeled analytical and group-action records. Superseded warrant versions are excluded. Every result includes:

- Recipient, corrected date, overlapping offense tags, raw offense, district, original punishment and legal effect.
- Connection label, review pathway, stated rationale and documented concern.
- Automated triage signal and the rule that triggered it.
- A separate review method and the basis for assigning it.
- Separate offense/victim, process, political/family and financial/paid-access indicators.
- Quid pro quo / pay-to-play evidence status.
- Possible legal consequence and evidence confidence.
- Attached links, unresolved questions and change-history status.

Two separate measures

High, Medium and Low are automated triage signals based on attached fields; they do not estimate misconduct, danger or merit. Review method states how the entry was produced. Automated screening is a rules-based scan, curated analysis summarizes selected public information, and an expanded individual case audit examines official records and independent reporting for one recipient. Of 6,549 searchable entries, 6,521 are automated, 14 curated and 14 individually audited.

Search and export

The live index can be searched by every field, filtered by president, overlapping offense tag, legal effect, connection, automated triage signal and review method, and exported as CSV for independent review.

Named rows and broad groups remain separate because proclamations may overlap named grants and may lack definitive beneficiary lists.

How expanded reviews are governed

This project—not a government agency—selects records for expanded review. It makes evidence-based analytical judgments about patterns, conflicts and reasons for scrutiny. ‘Audit’ remains a research label, and those judgments are not court rulings or official investigative findings.

Common selection rules

- Family relationship or political alliance.
- Paid advocacy, major donation or business connection.
- Serious violence, public corruption, obstruction or unusual timing.
- Broad categorical relief or departure from ordinary Justice Department review.

Same-standard rule

Presidential comparisons require equivalent questions and comparable samples. Current expanded reviews are judgmentally selected, not random or balanced by president. Their frequency therefore cannot establish how often misconduct occurred in any administration.

Evidence tiers

- Official finding: a court, inspector general or authorized agency reached a documented conclusion.
- Verified fact: an official record or multiple reliable sources establish an event, payment, relationship or timing.
- Attributed reporting: a reliable source reports information outside the public case file.
- Circumstantial indicator: access, timing, money or relationships create a question but do not prove an agreement.
- Disputed or unsupported: the claim remains unresolved or is excluded pending better evidence.

Expanded-review status

- Political and investigative conflicts reviewed: Roger Stone, Paul Manafort, Michael Flynn, Stephen Bannon and Charles Kushner.
- Broad actions still requiring person-level sampling: January 6 defendants and 2020-election allies.
- Financial and paid-access cases reviewed: Trevor Milton, Joseph Schwartz and Changpeng Zhao.

Placement in the queue is not an allegation of guilt. It identifies cases where the same defined questions should be examined with additional sources.

Accountability and comparison controls

Comparable starting cohort

- Obama: Chelsea Manning, Oscar López Rivera and James Cartwright — 3 of 3 expanded reviews complete.
- Biden: Hunter Biden, Michael Conahan and Rita Crundwell — 3 of 3 expanded reviews complete.
- Trump: Trevor Milton, Joseph Schwartz and Changpeng Zhao — 3 of 3 expanded reviews complete.

Equal cohort size is only one control. These judgmentally selected cases do not share identical trigger types, so they support case-level findings—not a prevalence or corruption estimate.

Record-level source accountability

- Exact count of attached links, clearly distinguished from documents individually researched.
- Whether a court opinion, order or judgment was individually reviewed.
- Last-reviewed date and a plain description of source coverage.
- Unresolved questions separated from negative findings.
- Record-specific history beginning September 11, 2026.

Corrections

The site provides a copyable correction template requesting the record, disputed statement, proposed correction, supporting URL, reason the source changes the finding and submission date. To protect owner anonymity, the site does not expose personal contact information or collect visitor information; readers return the template through the channel where the site was shared.

Published change history

- September 11, 2026: repaired malformed batch dates, restored same-name records from distinct actions and excluded superseded warrant versions.
- September 11, 2026: replaced single offense categories with overlapping tags and reframed High/Medium/Low as automated triage signals.
- September 11, 2026: clarified attached-link counts, evidence limits and balanced-sample requirements.

Method, cautions and sources

Official records control counts, listed offenses and legal effects. Oversight reports and journalism provide attributed context about review, access, money and controversy. Categories explain composition and may overlap; they are not additional people to add to totals.

Analytical and legal conclusions

This report makes sourced analytical judgments about patterns, conflicts and reasons for scrutiny. A connection, donation, paid advocate, unusual sequence, serious offense or process departure can support such a judgment but does not by itself prove a recipient was undeserving or a grant was illegal. Expanded cases were selected judgmentally—not randomly or in balanced presidential samples—so their frequency cannot measure comparative corruption. Criminal findings remain the province of courts and authorized investigators.

Primary and supporting sources

- U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Pardon Attorney: clemency statistics and recipient tables.
- DOJ Office of Inspector General: Review of the Department’s Clemency Initiative.
- Federal Register: marijuana pardon proclamation.
- Supreme Court: Trump v. United States (presidential immunity).
- 18 U.S.C. § 201 (federal bribery statute).
- Associated Press and Reuters reporting on group actions, family pardons, serious cases and financial/access indicators.
- Lawfare review of Trump’s clemency process and connection sample.
- The Washington Post reporting on paid pardon lobbying for Joseph Schwartz.
- The Wall Street Journal reporting on DOJ concerns involving Biden’s final drug batch.

Use the live searchable index to inspect the current record and supporting links. The second Trump term remains ongoing, so totals and individual entries require dated cutoffs.