



M U L T I S T A T E

[W.Va. lobbyist Puccio crosses political streams to advise Democrat Manchin, Republican Justice](#)

Larry Puccio has been walking a political tightrope.

His path crosses influence, access, politics, loyalty, friendship and no small degree of personal finance against the backdrop of a West Virginia that is transitioning from longtime Democratic dominance toward Republican power.

He is a lobbyist, former state Democratic Party chairman and ex-chief of staff for Joe Manchin when he was governor. But this political season, Puccio pushed for the re-election of Gov. Jim Justice, a Republican who first won office as a Democrat.

Puccio's efforts were very different from Manchin, who very publicly said Justice should be defeated.

On social media, Puccio's social media status would be, "It's complicated."

But Puccio says the political position he occupies is relatively simple.

"It wasn't hard for me because I've always been a person when I wake up in the morning, I'm going to support who I think is best for the state and best for our country," Puccio said last week after being called on the telephone right as he sat down for a meal at Muriale's, a much-loved Italian restaurant near his home in Marion County.

"If you look at the results of this election, major numbers of Democrats voted for Jim Justice, so I would have to think those felt it was fine."

The next question was about what Manchin must think about that.

Manchin and Puccio helped the billionaire owner of The Greenbrier win the governor's race as a Democrat in 2016. "We all made that decision to help Jim Justice," Manchin said last week. "Larry went and really kind of ran the campaign."

The twist came a half-year into Justice's term when he declared himself a Republican onstage with President Trump at a Huntington rally.

Manchin weighed running for governor himself this time to try to knock off Justice but ultimately decided against it. [Manchin's criticism](#) focused on Justice's work habits: "He just won't work. Doesn't show up."

The senator supported the Democratic candidate, Ben Salango. [Justice's response](#): "It's grandstanding while running Ben Salango's campaign and it is exactly what Joe Manchin has been since Day 1, a politician."

So the politics got rough, but Puccio and Manchin say their longstanding relationship remains strong.

"Joe and I are very close. I think the world of Joe. I hope you print that. I've always been supportive of Joe Manchin. Joe knows me and I know Joe. Joe knows that I believe in my heart the right thing is to support Governor Justice," Puccio said.

"We would never end a friendship over who we believe is the right person to support."

Manchin, whose own phone call was patched through last week while he was out on the road, agreed. He says he told Puccio, "You've got to do what you've got to do buddy."

"He's my dear friend. So it can't get personal. If you do that then it must not have been much of a friendship."

Not everyone is buying all that.

"It was kind of ironic his best friend was against Justice," said Roman Prezioso, a Democrat from Marion County who is retiring as minority leader of the state Senate.

Prezioso added, "I know those guys are friends. I've talked to Joe about it. I said, 'Well how could Larry if he's your best friend, how can he support your worst enemy?'"

Nick Casey is also a former Democratic Party chairman and Manchin ally. He was briefly Justice's chief of staff until Justice switched parties and fired him.

"I look at it as, it is what it is," Casey said on the telephone.

That's all Casey would publicly say.

Puccio the West Virginia Democrat

Puccio has a long and prominent history with Manchin and with the Democratic Party in West Virginia.

Before politics, he was a commercial and residential real estate appraiser in Marion County, where Manchin grew up. Manchin said he's known his longtime ally since Puccio was 13 or 14 years old.

As young men, "We both had to be salespeople in order to survive. Larry was selling cars and organs and I was selling furniture and rugs," Manchin said.

During Manchin's political life, Puccio has been there every step. "As long as I've been in politics, Larry's been with me. He had those good instincts," Manchin said.

"Larry sees very clearly. Larry can eliminate the political B.S. that goes on. Larry's been able to go through that like a knife through butter."

Puccio served as Manchin's chief of staff when he was secretary of state from 2001 to 2005. Manchin was elected governor in 2005 and Puccio came along, continuing as chief of staff.

When Manchin left the Governor's Office for the U.S. Senate, Puccio succeeded Casey as chairman of the Democratic Party from 2010 to 2015. He [stepped down](#) to become chairman of Manchin's Country Roads PAC.

During those years, Puccio built up a prominent lobbying role, establishing a relationship with Justice as a lobbyist for The Greenbrier, the historic resort owned by Justice's family.

Puccio worked as senior adviser to Justice's 2016 campaign, [led the transition team](#) when Justice took office, then served as senior [adviser to Manchin](#)'s 2018 re-election campaign for U.S. Senate.

When Justice was up for re-election this year, Puccio was on board to help, despite the governor's party switch.

He [resigned](#) from the Democratic Executive Committee after making a \$2,800 donation to the Republican's campaign during a fundraiser at the Wonder Bar in Clarksburg.

The Justice campaign said it was glad to have Puccio.

"Larry Puccio and Governor Justice have been close friends for many years, and Larry has decades of experience in politics and government in West Virginia," stated Roman Stauffer, Justice's campaign manager who is also active with the state GOP.

"He is a tremendous resource and provided advice, which helped guide our campaign to a record-setting victory on Election Day."

Puccio described his role with the Justice campaign as informal.

"I volunteered time, as I did two years ago to Joe," he said.

"When there was anything I put my two cents in. Many times my opinion was liked. Many times they thought my opinion wasn't the right direction or wouldn't work. I just have been around this for a long time, and I offered an opinion. When it can be used, that's great. When it can't be, I appreciate that too."

Manchin acknowledged, "I wish he hadn't helped Jim as much as he did."

Prezioso suspects the role was central to the re-election effort.

"He ran the campaign. He ran the Justice campaign. He lobbies for The Greenbrier. That's all fact," Prezioso said. "Justice has made him a lot of money. He had an allegiance."

Late this past election cycle, Puccio briefly took a public role, appearing on MetroNews' "Talkline" [to assess](#) Justice's polling margin. "We are pleased. We are excited," he said on statewide radio. "More important than the big lead is the confidence people have in the governor, and it's high."

That prompted a rebuke from the current Democratic Party chairwoman, Belinda Biafore, Puccio's successor as party chief and another Marion County native. Right after Puccio's radio appearance, Biafore had a statement emailed to reporters.

She said, "I am disappointed in former West Virginia Democratic Party Chair Larry Puccio for being a part of Governor Jim Justice's campaign team. It's disheartening for Democrats in West Virginia who worked alongside Mr. Puccio for so long to see him be a spokesperson for Jim Justice who turned his back on them."

Puccio said he still considers himself a Democrat.

"I've always been a moderate. I'm registered Democrat. I've always been a moderate Democrat. I believe in governing from the middle as much as possible," he said.

"I consider myself — and I hope you print this — always doing in my heart what I believe is the right thing for West Virginia. More than trying to make a decision when I wake up to think like a Democrat or a Republican or an independent. I try to make good decisions for West Virginia."

State Senator Paul Hardesty, a longtime Democrat from Logan, said he made a similar decision. Hardesty, who opted to leave the Senate this year, served as vice chairman of the Justice campaign's finance committee.

"I got scrutinized for that myself," said Hardesty, a former lobbyist who also represented Justice properties.

"Governor Justice was a friend. Just because he switched parties don't mean I'm going to stop being his friend. I think Larry felt the same way."

Puccio's value to the Justice campaign is clear, Hardesty said. "I think he's one of the most brilliant political minds and tacticians that I've ever been around."

Prezioso, who said he hasn't spoken with Puccio for months, doubts Puccio will remain involved with the Democratic Party's organization.

"I don't think he'll be involved with the Democratic Party any more. Once you make a statement like that, you're all in. I think he's all in," Prezioso said.

"You probably can't blame the guy. He's got the governor's ear."

Larry Puccio, lobbyist

More than one person interviewed for this story said Puccio was open about having financial incentives to maintain his relationship with Justice.

Manchin said Puccio explained to him, “Joe if you’re not going to run in 2020 then I’m going to be with Jim because we started there. And he says, ‘I do lobbying; I work for him.’”

Puccio’s [lobbying activity](#) has been active, prominent and, by all appearances, lucrative.

He does lobby for [The Greenbrier](#), as well as Southern Coal Corp., part of the Justice family’s coal holdings.

He lobbies for FirstEnergy, the power company with a significant presence in West Virginia homes and politics. FirstEnergy associates [donated thousands](#) of dollars to Justice’s re-election campaign. Salango contended that merited a [longer look](#) after federal allegations of [influence buying](#) emerged in neighboring Ohio.

Puccio lobbies [for two prominent](#) sports betting operators, FanDuel and DraftKings. The Greenbrier has a private casino [that’s home](#) to a FanDuel sportsbook.

[He represented](#) Major League Baseball and the NBA when West Virginia allowed and regulated sports betting, although he doesn’t list those accounts any more.

Puccio lobbies for Thompson Construction, which received [most of the contract work](#) to provide homes to state residents who lost their homes in a devastating 2016 flood. The state has received criticism over the pace of the effort, but [state records show](#) Thompson bringing in \$24.5 million this year and \$18.9 million last year.

He lobbies for Frontier Communications, which continues to [receive scrutiny](#) over broadband speed, reliability and reach in a state that sorely needs it.

He lobbies for UnitedHealthcare, a [major insurer](#) in West Virginia.

And he did lobby for Google but [then filed a termination](#) notice this past May 15, just a few months before [the state announced](#) an \$8 million contract with Google Cloud for digital productivity services for 22,000 executive branch workers. Microsoft called foul last week because it just signed a renewed contract for similar services a few months ago.

Those contracts, the relationships and the influence are worth a lot. By riding the political winner, a lobbyist can ensure open doors and connected phone calls.

Prezioso bluntly suggested access was the main factor in supporting the sitting governor.

“I guess Larry puts money before friendship,” he said.

Past and future Puccio

Mike Caputo, a passionate Democrat and union mine worker from Marion County, has known Puccio since the 1970s. Puccio sang lead in a band, “Sassy,” with Caputo’s brother as the drummer.

“Larry had the voice of an angel, I kid you not,” Caputo said.

Caputo was a state delegate representing Marion County for years. When he ran for Senate this year, narrowly winning in a Republican wave, Puccio guided his campaign.

“Larry was very helpful to me, quite frankly. He helped me with messaging and helped me craft our campaign,” said Caputo, who was among Puccio’s small group at Muriale’s last week. (He had a chopped salad.)

“We talked about my campaign. We didn’t talk about other campaigns. We didn’t talk about the governor’s.”

Just the same, Caputo wished Puccio’s political advice was exclusive to Democrats. He noted, though, that the only Republican that Puccio has pushed for is Justice.

Caputo said he doesn’t blame Puccio for going to bat for the governor.

“I guess if you look back through his history, when else has he been in the corner of a Republican other than this time?” Caputo asked. “For most of his career, he has supported Democrats. This one time, he switched to help a Republican.”

Asked last week whether he’ll continue working for Justice as the governor heads into his second term, Puccio left it open. He said they haven’t had that conversation yet.

“I continue to communicate with the governor often and talk with him. I think it will be soon that he will explain to me the direction he’d like to go and what he’d like to accomplish,” Puccio said. “We have not had that conversation at this point, I can tell you.”

Somehow, he said, he’d like to continue supporting both Justice and Manchin.

“They really want to do great things. There’s a lot of people in West Virginia who want to do great things. I support any and all of them,” Puccio said.

“We can make a better West Virginia.”

Manchin said if it ever comes down to it, Puccio is with him.

“One thousand percent,” Manchin said. “Larry and I will always be together.”

[Newsom's cozy ties with top lobbyist showcased by French Laundry dinner party](#)

Not every political operative can celebrate their 50th birthday with the governor of America’s most populous state during a pandemic.

Not every political operative is Jason Kinney.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom is weathering a ferocious backlash for his decision to attend a celebration for Kinney on Nov. 6 at the French Laundry, a bucket list-level dining icon in Napa County. After the private dinner was exposed by the [San Francisco Chronicle](#), Newsom said that while the outdoor meal did not violate coronavirus restrictions, he showed poor judgment in attending. He reiterated that point in a public apology on Monday, saying it went against the spirit of state rules as coronavirus cases surge across California.

While the meal amplified criticism of Newsom’s coronavirus management, with the governor parrying accusations of hypocrisy, it also cast a brighter spotlight on Kinney and the dual clout he wields in the insular world of California politics.

The longtime California Democratic politics fixer has had a hand in both winning campaigns and influencing policy. He was chief speechwriter for Gov. Gray Davis, served for years as a senior strategist for Senate Democrats and has long counseled Newsom politically. He continues to

advise Newsom on politics even as his lucrative, newly launched lobbying firm works on bills that could land on Newsom's desk.

Kinney is not the first California political operative to blur the line between politics and policy. The doors between campaigns, administrations and Sacramento's lobbying corps have long swung open for people with contacts and experience to leverage.

"He's got some deep roots in government. Like any successful lobbyist, he uses those to his advantage because he's smart," said Steve Maviglio, a Democratic operative who has also worked both for the California government and for the interest groups that seek to sway it. "Any special interest hires the best talent they can get and that was the decision they made with Jason."

The governor and Kinney have a relationship extending back decades. In apologizing for attending, Newsom referred to Kinney on Monday as "a friend that I have known for almost 20 years."

But the fact that Kinney, a registered lobbyist, got an intimate audience with Newsom immediately raised questions about conflicts of interest. Newsom said he paid for his meal, so it did not qualify as a lobbying payment.

"Newsom's got to bend over backwards and not give him any favors," said Bob Stern, the architect of California's campaign finance laws. "People are going to be watching what Newsom does in terms of Kinney clients now."

While Kinney worked on Newsom's transition team and has continued to counsel the governor, he has also launched a lobbying shop, Axiom Advisors, whose client list included major California players that spend heavily to influence state policy. Axiom reaped \$10.9 million worth of lobbying work in 2019-20, the first legislative session during which Newsom was governor.

Some of Axiom's clients highlight Kinney's overlapping roles. Kidney dialysis firms DaVita and Fresenius paid Axiom \$475,000 this session. During the same period, Kinney earned \$90,000 from the California Democratic Party, which spent money to pass a labor-backed initiative regulating kidney dialysis. DaVita and Fresenius were the measure's principal opponents.

Not all Axiom clients are major corporations; some are just desperate to get through to the governor for survival. Theme parks have been trying to get the governor's ear this year to reopen attractions during coronavirus. Three smaller amusement park operators — Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, San Diego Coaster Co., and Santa Monica Amusements — hired Axiom on Oct. 1, right as Newsom officials were discussing reopening rules. The state ultimately issued guidelines

last month that allowed the Boardwalk and other smaller parks to operate, though the recent coronavirus surge has forced the closure of rides again.

The single most remunerative client for Axiom in the last two years has been Marathon Petroleum, giving Kinney's firm \$525,000 worth of business. Marathon is a member of a powerful oil industry organization that battled proposals to ban hydraulic fracturing; Newsom called on the Legislature earlier this year to send him a fracking ban.

“The thing that is so powerful about this luxury dinner story is that Newsom also risked the lives of Californians by violating his own Covid recommendations to party with the same oil lobbyist,” said Kassie Siegel, director of the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Center, which is planning a lawsuit over the state's issuance of oil and gas well permits. “There's just so many ways that ordinary people are suffering such incredible pain,” she added, “and it just shows his hypocrisy to be partying with an oil lobbyist in the middle of this. It's just inexcusable.”

This would not be the first time Kinney has faced scrutiny over his work. In 2013, the California Fair Political Practices Commission fined Kinney \$12,000 for failing to disclose lobbying activity despite having communicated with lawmakers on behalf of a developer.

After Kinney served as a spokesperson for Proposition 64, the 2016 Newsom-championed ballot initiative to legalize recreational cannabis use, prominent cannabis companies hired Kinney's political firm. Some critics assailed it as an example of cashing in on insider influence, with cannabis companies more likely to patronize Kinney given his connections to the future governor.

An Axiom spokesperson for Kinney did not comment for this story.

Despite wide condemnations of Newsom's presence at the dinner, several lobbyists and strategists said Kinney could still reap the benefits. Conflict-of-interest concerns aside, the episode demonstrates that Kinney retains Newsom's ear during a time of extremely limited in-person access to people in power. The buzz this weekend among lobbyists was how Kinney couldn't have asked for better advertising of his close ties to Newsom.

“All publicity is good publicity,” Maviglio said, and reporting on the dinner “revealed his presence in Newsom's inner circle. That is very important to many interests in Sacramento. I worked with Jason for five years, and he's had a lot of negative stories on him, and he seems to be doing quite well.”

[LA Area Lawmakers Fly To Maui To Mingle With Lobbyists During The Pandemic](#)

A number of California legislators — including at least two from Southern California — [have reportedly](#) decided to wave off the state’s spiking COVID-19 numbers, and Governor Newsom’s travel advisory, to attend a conference in Hawaii with lobbyists.

Assembly members Wendy Carrillo (D-Boyle Heights) and Blanca Rubio (D-Baldwin Park) are among those apparently attending the annual Independent Voter Project event, which is typically attended by lawmakers and lobbyists.

Politico was first to [track down](#) the evidence: Carrillo [posted a tweet](#) on Sunday with a geolocation tag indicating it was sent from Kihei, Hawaii. In a recent campaign finance filing, Rubio reported spending more than \$1,600 on Hawaiian Airlines tickets.

The 2020 version of the yearly shindig is being held at a luxury hotel, the Fairmont Kea Lani in Maui. (It looks nice! You can get a room with bed and breakfast for \$639 per night.) Several major lobbying interests, including the Western States Petroleum Association, [skipped the event](#) because of non-essential travel restrictions.

Hawaii [currently requires](#) travelers to be temperature-screened at the airport and show proof of a negative COVID test within 72 hours of their flight to the islands. The incubation period for the virus is several days, and medical experts, [including the CDC](#), recommend a 14-day quarantine if you come into contact with someone who’s been infected.

Independent Voter Project’s executive director, Dan Howle [told the San Francisco Chronicle](#) that about 120 people are attending the event this year, including fewer than 20 lawmakers from Washington, Texas and California. The Independent Voter Project paid for their airfare and a five-night resort stay.

Howle told the [Los Angeles Times](#) that Rubio was the only California legislator in attendance to give him permission to confirm her presence at the conference.

[4 Former ComEd Executives, Lobbyists Indicted In Bribery Scandal; Accused Of Trying To Curry House Speaker Michael Madigan’s Favor](#)

A grand jury returned an indictment Wednesday against four former Commonwealth Edison executives and consultants, who are accused of conspiring to curry favor from Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan in advancing legislation benefiting the utility.

One of the four people indicted is a close Madigan ally.

Earlier this year, federal prosecutors accused ComEd of a yearslong bribery scheme that sought to curry Madigan's favor in advancing legislation relaxing state regulation of ComEd's rates by directing \$1.3 million in payments to the speaker's associates. ComEd acknowledged it stood to benefit by more than \$150 million from that legislation.

Madigan has not been charged with a crime and has denied any wrongdoing.

The indictment came down late Wednesday in U.S. District Court. Charged with bribery conspiracy, bribery, and willfully falsifying ComEd books and records were:

- Michael McClain, 73, who worked as a lobbyist for ComEd after a stint in the Illinois House of Representatives in the 1970s and early 1980s. McClain is a Madigan confidant;
- Anne Pramaggiore, 62, chief executive officer of ComEd from 2012 to 2018 and then a senior executive at ComEd subsidiary Exelon Corp.;
- John Hooker, 71, who served as vice president of external affairs for ComEd from 2009 to 2012 and then worked as an external lobbyist for ComEd;
- Jay Doherty, 67, owner of Jay D. Doherty & Associates, which performed consulting services for ComEd from 2011 until 2019.

The indictment accuses the defendants of using their influence to reward "Public Official A" – not specified by name as Madigan but referred to in the indictment as Speaker of the Illinois House – for about eight years beginning in 2011.

The indictment claims the four defendants conspired to influence and reward the speaker by arranging for jobs and contracts for his political allies and workers. The jobs sometimes involved little or no work, the U.S. Attorney's office said.

The defendants are also accused of creating false contracts, invoices, and other records to disguise some of the payments and get around ComEd internal controls, the U.S. Attorney's office said.

Further, the defendants are accused of making other efforts to try to influence Madigan, including having ComEd retain a law firm that was favored by the speaker, and accepting a certain number of students from the official's Chicago aldermanic ward into the ComEd internship program, prosecutors said.

Pramaggiore and McClain are also accused of working to have someone appointed to the ComEd Board of Directors at the request of the speaker and McClain.

In a statement Thursday morning, Madigan again denied any wrongdoing, noting he has not been charged with a crime. The speaker said if anyone at ComEd sought to bribe him, “it was never made known to me.”

“If it had been known to me, it would have been profoundly unwelcome. Nothing in either this indictment or in the earlier filings by the U.S. Attorney’s Office alleges otherwise. In addition, nothing in this indictment or in the earlier filings alleges that I did anything in my official capacity related to ComEd’s legislative agenda as a result of whatever internal decisions ComEd made or didn’t make,” Madigan said in a statement.” Any such allegation would be false. If there was an attempt to influence me in my official capacity, it failed, although knowing most of the people who were charged, I doubt there was any scheme as characterized by the government.”

Madigan also defended recommending people for jobs at ComEd, saying he believes it’s part of his duty as an elected official to help qualified people find jobs.

“I have never helped someone find a job with an expectation that the person would not be asked to perform work by his or her employer. Anyone who has ever worked for or around me knows I value, above all else, hard work and dedication, whether it’s knocking on doors, collecting garbage, or representing a client,” Madigan said. “I have also never promised, implicitly or explicitly, to take any action benefiting a prospective employer if it should choose to hire a person that I recommended. Nor have I ever recommended someone for a job with an expectation or understanding that the prospective employer would hire that person to reward me for an action it believed I took. I do not inquire into an employer’s rationale for making particular hiring decisions, nor do I treat that employer differently depending on those decisions. This has been my practice for decades.”

Pramaggiore decried the charges Wednesday night through a spokesperson:

Anne Pramaggiore unequivocally rejects the government’s charges that she engaged in unlawful behavior. She agrees with Commonwealth Edison that no one at the company committed a crime.

“Throughout her distinguished career as the first female CEO of Commonwealth Edison, Ms. Pramaggiore led the complete turnaround of the utility from one of the nation’s worst performing to one of its best, driving dramatic improvements in reliability and greater value for consumers and enhancing employee engagement.

“During her tenure, Exelon and its subsidiaries, through both current and former executives, received, evaluated, and granted many requests to consider candidates who could bring appropriate and valuable services to the companies. None of these actions constitutes unlawful activity nor do they support the implication that consumer-oriented, complex energy legislation, which was negotiated over multiple years involving hundreds of stakeholders, passed as a result.

“After enduring months of baseless innuendo and misinformation, Anne Pramaggiore welcomes a full and truthful accounting of the facts in this matter. She is confident a review will reaffirm her unwavering adherence to the highest ethical standards and finally put to rest the damaging speculation that any actions she took constitute illegal activity.”

Another former ComEd executive, [Fidel Marquez](#), pleaded guilty in the bribery scheme in September. Madigan was specifically named in that case as the one whose support Marquez and other ComEd executives sought for legislation that would benefit ComEd.

Marquez, who is cooperating with the federal investigation of ComEd’s lobbying practices, pleaded guilty to a single count of conspiracy to commit bribery, which carries a maximum sentence of 5 years in prison, but federal prosecutors said they will recommend a sentence of probation only if he fully cooperates.

According to court documents, Marquez helped direct a \$37,500 payment to an unnamed company, “a substantial portion of which was intended for associates of [Madigan].”

ComEd has entered into a deferred prosecution agreement with the feds, and has agreed to pay a \$200 million fine, enact a number of reforms, and cooperate with investigators in exchange for prosecutors dropping charges in 2023 if ComEd lives up to its obligations.

[An Illinois House committee](#) is also investigating possible disciplinary action against Speaker Michael Madigan over his ties to the scandal.

Meanwhile after the election, [Gov. JB Pritzker argued](#) Republicans were able to use Madigan “as their foil” in this year’s elections and said it’s time for new leadership for the Democratic Party of Illinois.

Madigan is the only state house speaker in the U.S. who also serves as his state party’s chairman.

Pritzker said he agrees with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin that Republicans were able to use the controversies recently swirling around Madigan to their advantage on Election Day, when Illinois voters [rejected Pritzker's signature proposal to allow for a graduated income tax](#), and [voted out an Illinois Supreme Court justice](#) who has received millions of dollars in campaign cash from funds controlled by Madigan. A handful of Republican challengers also defeated Democratic incumbents in the Illinois House.