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Republicans Are Convicted in Ohio Bribery Scheme

Defense claimed that actions were permissible under Citizens United decision and other rulings

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Former Republican Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder and former state GOP chairman Matt Borges were convicted Thursday in federal court for participating in a pay-to-play bribery scheme with an energy company that wanted a state bailout.

The racketeering-conspiracy convictions came as a result of what officials called the [biggest political-corruption](#) case in state history. Each man could face as much as 20 years in prison.

The defense argued during the seven-week trial that the energy-company money amounted to ordinary political donations, and Mr. Householder said he backed the bailout as a matter of good policy. Mr. Householder will “most certainly pursue an appeal,” his attorney Steve Bradley said. An attorney for Mr. Borges couldn’t immediately be reached for comment.

Beginning in 2018, Akron-based FirstEnergy Corp. secretly funneled more than \$60 million through Generation Now and other nonprofits connected to Mr. Householder as it pursued a \$1.3 billion state bailout of its two failing nuclear plants.

Prosecutors said the scheme included helping Mr. Householder elect friendly Republican lawmakers who then made him House speaker. The bailout legislation passed and was signed into law by Republican Gov. Mike DeWine.

Prosecutors and ethics advocates say the Ohio case illustrates the perils of undisclosed spending through nonprofits, which have multiplied after money-in-politics decisions by the Supreme Court, including in [the 2010 Citizens United case](#). Without the federal investigation—which included wiretaps, office raids, document seizures and cooperating witnesses—Ohioans would never have known the role FirstEnergy played in obtaining its own bailout, they say.

FirstEnergy entered a deferred prosecution agreement in 2021, paid a [\\$230 million fine](#) and has been working with investigators. The company said it used nonprofits “to conceal payments for the benefit of public officials and in return for official action.”

Two other political aides pleaded guilty and testified against Messrs. Householder and Borges in the federal courthouse in Cincinnati. Generation Now, led by Mr. Householder's top political aide, also pleaded guilty and acknowledged its real purpose was to take undisclosed donations from FirstEnergy and use them to benefit Mr. Householder and others.

After federal authorities revealed their probe in July 2020, the Akron-based company fired Chief Executive Chuck Jones and two other executives. The Ohio legislature [voted to expel](#) Mr. Householder and that year also repealed FirstEnergy's bailout.

"FirstEnergy is the poster child of the risks and damage a company faces from ill-considered political spending," said Bruce Freed, president of the Center for Political Accountability, a Washington group that pushes companies to disclose more about their financing of political efforts. "It is a prime example of why companies need to get control over their political spending."