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## For Democrats, corruption arrest is one more barrier to control of the State Senate

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ALBANY — There are many more Democrats than Republicans in New York State. There are even more Democrats than Republicans in the State Senate.

But the seemingly unending string of indictments of Senate Democrats is making it more difficult for the party to win control of the legislative chamber, which it does not lead despite having a numerical majority.

The arrest on Monday of Senator John L. Sampson of Brooklyn, who was charged with embezzlement and other crimes, was the second time in barely a month that a former leader of the Senate Democratic caucus was accused of corruption by federal prosecutors. The senator whom Mr. Sampson succeeded in 2009 as Democratic leader, Malcolm A. Smith of Queens, was charged last month with trying to bribe his way onto the ballot for mayor of New York City.

“The Republicans are going to ram this down the Democrats’ throats,” said Douglas Muzzio, a professor of public affairs at Baruch College. “The indictees may be stupid, but you, the voters, are not stupid. You’re going to return these folks and their ilk to power?”

The latest scandal does not have immediate implications for the balance of power in Albany; Republicans currently share control of the Senate in a coalition with four breakaway Democrats, and lawmakers are not up for re-election for 18 months. Democrats also insist the accused lawmakers are vestiges of a leadership group that they have already moved past — they voted in December to oust Mr. Sampson as their leader, and Mr. Smith defected to the breakaway faction of lawmakers.

But his arrest is another embarrassment for the scandal-plagued Senate Democratic caucus, and it appears likely to provide additional ammunition to Republicans, who have argued in past campaigns that Democrats cannot be trusted to run the chamber.

Before Mr. Smith and Mr. Sampson, a parade of colleagues have run afoul of the law in recent years, for offenses including stealing taxpayer money to pay for takeout sushi (Pedro Espada Jr., a former majority leader) and shopping trips (Shirley L. Huntley, who was revealed last week to have made secret recordings of other public officials at the behest of prosecutors).

Republican senators are unsympathetic in private, and their spokesman, Scott Reif, observed wryly, “While the Senate Democrats said they had cleaned up their conference, the latest arrest of one of their New York City members shows they may still have some work to do.”

Jessica Proud, a Republican political strategist, said the latest scandals would be particularly damaging for Democrats seeking re-election upstate and in the Hudson Valley, who even before the arrests were seen as vulnerable to challenges.

“This is a huge black eye for them, and they’ve been unable to get out from under it no matter who their leadership is,” Ms. Proud said of the caucus’s propensity for scandals. “Senate Republicans were able to effectively use this against them in reclaiming the majority in 2010, and these latest arrests will allow them to continue that narrative.”

It is not clear, however, the extent to which voters are inclined to continue punishing Democratic candidates for the corruption of some of their party's elected officials. Even with the taint of past scandals, Senate Democrats performed strongly in the November elections. And the Senate Democratic caucus now is quite different from the one in 2009, when a leadership coup made the chamber a public laughingstock; 12 of the 26 members of the current Democratic caucus were elected to the Senate in 2010 or later.

On Monday, after Mr. Sampson's arrest, there was a mix of anger and agita among the newer members of the Democratic conference, with a sense that the indictment of Mr. Sampson, like a big gulp of bitter medicine, could be an unpleasant but ultimately beneficial moment.

"It tastes really bad, but you trust the physician," Senator Brad Hoylman, a 47-year-old freshman lawmaker from Manhattan, said, adding that he thought the arrest could be a "positive step forward for the entire chamber."

Many newly elected Democrats were trying to find the bright side when they returned to the Capitol this week, pointing out that many of those arrested this year were from a previous era of dysfunction and dirty dealings in Albany.

"These were not current members of the brain trust," Mr. Hoylman said. "And if there are future indictments, I wouldn't be surprised if it was other members outside the fold."

Another freshman Democrat, Senator George S. Latimer of Westchester County, said, "The institution needs the cleansing process." But he added, "I wish it could happen in one cathartic movement."

That said, Mr. Latimer added that a talking cure would not be enough.

"It's not going to go away by saying, 'Oh, we've turned a corner,'" he said. "And then the next one will come out in three weeks."

Senator Terry Gipson, a freshman Democrat whose district runs along the east side of the Hudson River north of New York City, echoed that, putting some of the blame for corruption on "idle time" and long tenures in Albany. To that end, he said, he planned this week to propose term limits for legislators, a suggestion that has found little support in the capital over the years.

"If there is a silver lining to this, it's that we are finally purging our government of the bad apples and letting the cream rise to the top," Mr. Gipson said. "Which I think is what is happening."

The arrest of Mr. Sampson was not bad news for all Democrats. Some had conspicuously kept their distance from him — most notably Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who did not even campaign for Democrats to take over the Senate last fall.

"There was a tremendous amount of second-guessing about the administration's unwillingness to embrace John Sampson and the Democratic caucus's leadership throughout the first two years of the administration," said Steven M. Cohen, Mr. Cuomo's former top aide. "Maybe people now understand that there's something more important than a party label."

Mr. Sampson's arrest also offered some vindication for Senator Jeffrey D. Klein, a Bronx Democrat who defected from the Democratic caucus in 2011, asserting that he had lost confidence in Mr. Sampson's leadership. Mr. Klein and three other breakaway Democrats now share control of the Senate with the Republican caucus. But they, too, have been touched by scandal: Mr. Klein recruited Mr. Smith to join his group in December, only to expel him from the group after he was charged with corruption.

While accusations of misconduct by Democrats have been much in the news lately, in recent years, several Republican senators have also been embroiled in corruption scandals.

Seymour P. Lachman, a former Democratic state senator, on Tuesday reviewed a photograph of his Senate colleagues from about a decade ago that he now has in his office at Wagner College, where he directs the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform.

Mr. Lachman counted about a dozen who had gone to prison or had been charged, including the majority leader at the time, Joseph L. Bruno, a Republican who is facing a second trial on fraud charges. Mr. Lachman said that New Yorkers should be embarrassed and that their lawmakers in Albany needed to address the problem seriously.

“It’s like a serial novel, or a le Carré mystery,” he said. “Who’s next?”