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New Jersey's behind the curve in ethics and reform

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New Jersey government has more ethics than it knows what to do with.

Even before last week's round-up of politicians and their associates on corruption charges, activists and academic were pushing to streamline the state's multi-player system for protecting the public trust.

Despite the arrests, which included two legislators, some observers credit Gov. Jon Corzine and state Senate President Richard Codey for toughening state ethics rules

in Trenton. Democrats point to a string of steps Corzine has taken to fight corruption in Trenton, such as tightening restrictions on pay-to-play in state government. But [Republicans are still critical](#). Many observers said large loopholes remain at many levels of government.

In New Jersey, a welter of committees, boards, commissions and agencies all have something to say about ethics. But none have the final word.

"You're not even sure who's regulating what half the time," said Harry Pozzycki, a founder of the Center for Civic Responsibility, whose Citizens Campaign has pushed for bans on "pay to play," the tradition of awarding public contracts to political contributors.

"It's confusing for the citizens," said Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute, and the author of a new study on state ethics ([PDF AVAILABLE HERE](#)).

"Other states have what I call an integrated ethics program, which applies to everybody," Reed said.

But in New Jersey, "if you enter 'ethics' on the state website, you get the State Ethics Commission," which applies only to state government, she said.

Election questions may go to the state Election Law Enforcement Commission. County or local or school issues may go to the state Local Finance Board, to local commissions or simply fall through the cracks.

"Money is where it starts," said former state Sen. William Schluter, who serves on the State Ethics Commission. "Forty-one other states prohibit corporations from giving money to candidates, but not New Jersey."

Even where controls exist, the state is falling behind. The Local Finance Board is part of the state Department of Community Affairs. It consists of powerful political players, former DCA directors, former gubernatorial and legislative chiefs of staff. Much of its work entails high-profile issues, such as taking over the finances of debt-ridden Hoboken.

Yet the LFB is also the backstop for ethics questions from around the state, handling complaints from the majority of towns and counties that lack their own ethics boards, and appeals from those that have them.

"The whole issue of staff I think is important, because the (DCA) Division of Local Government Services has been decimated," Reed said. "There's one person in that office who works on ethics."

The Local Finance Board has a [backlog of cases and seldom finds violations of ethical codes](#).

New Jerseyans who hunt the state website will not find another group intended to improve ethical oversight. Last September, Corzine issued an executive order establishing a task force on local government ethics. But then, silence. Activists said they do not know what happened to it.

Reed, who has just been through a round of meetings with administration officials and legislators about her report, said the task force did not come up.

Corzine's office did not respond to a question about the status of the group. His executive order is available [here](#).

Schluter, a Republican gerrymandered out of a seat because of his independent streak, said he could support ELEC retaining control over election finances, but other ethical issues "should all come under one commission."

"There should be one standard, and the members should be independently appointed, by a panel of ex-judges or something, so you don't just have the usual political sidekicks," Schluter said.

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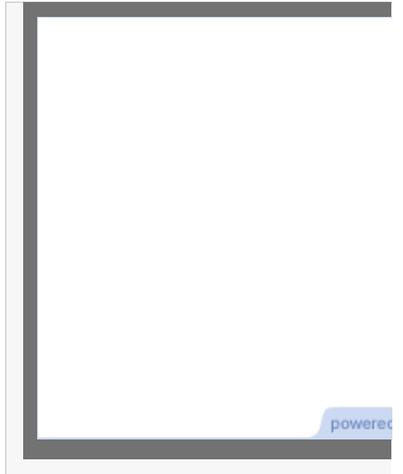
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