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Ethics changes get high marks

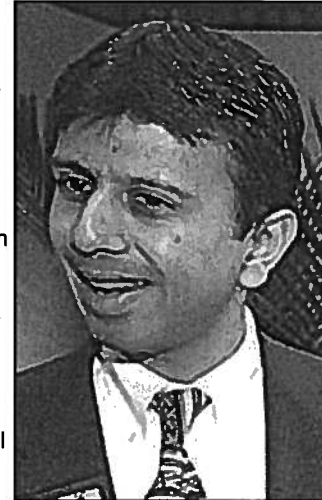
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BATON ROUGE - The close of the special session on ethics reform was barely two days old when a national watchdog group's report declared that Louisiana's financial-disclosure laws have gone from among the worst to "on par with the nation's best."

Gov. Bobby Jindal often cited rankings compiled by the organization, the Center for Public Integrity during his run for governor last year and again throughout this month's session. CPI, which is often criticized for leaning more toward the left on policy issues, is a nonprofit media organization that produces investigative reports on public officials and governmental issues.

When reviewing the financial-disclosure law the Legislature finally adopted earlier this week, CPI calculated that Louisiana would score a 99 out of a possible 100 on its survey used to rank the nation's best disclosure scores. In 2006, Louisiana's score in the same survey was 43, which sank it to the bottom fifth of all U.S. states. Jindal's advisors openly admit to using CPI's judging criteria to help mold Louisiana's new disclosure law. But an article published Thursday by the organization says Jindal reached beyond CPI's baseline standards.

"The new law includes provisions that do not earn points in (CPI's) rankings," writes researcher Sarah Laskow. "One, for example, requires public officials to disclose loans and other liabilities of more than \$10,000."



Bobby Jindal

Under current law, legislators are only required to file annual reports detailing income from gaming interests or government contracts. The administration's new law, which takes effect in January of 2009, will require complete financial disclosure, from income and property to investments and other holdings.

It's not clear what ranking Louisiana might get when the entire CPI survey is updated, but the governor said this week he is hopeful for the top spot.

He also said the Better Government Association was in the process of revising their listings as well.

While the news sheds a positive light on Jindal and his first attempt at building a policy agenda, there has likewise been a share of negative reaction. Most notably, the governor surprised many of his political stockholders when he opposed legislation during the session that would have moved many of his own executive records into public view.

The move was stunning to some, in part, because of Jindal's penchant for rankings – and due to the fact that Louisiana ranks dead last in access to gubernatorial records, according to the nonpartisan Citizen Access Project. Alabama, which bested Louisiana in a bidding war last year to lure a German steel mill, tops the list.

The Baton Rouge-based Public Affairs Research Council, a think-tank and advocacy group that monitors the activities of state government, referred to the failure of the legislation as "ugly" in its session wrap-up report, which was released Wednesday. PAR also questioned why the governor's office even enjoys such a general exception from Louisiana's public records laws.

"Only weak justification has ever been given for the general exception, and this resistance seems particularly inappropriate considering the new governor's promotion of more transparency in government," the report states.

Blueprint Louisiana, which is supported by an assemblage of businessmen seeking reform in several areas of government, also released its post-session commentary this week. It largely praises Jindal's administration for its successes, but also points out that there's more to reform than ethics.

"So where do we go from here? For Blueprint, we continue to work diligently on the other parts of our reform agenda -

education, workforce development, health care, transportation and coastal issues."

PAR offered up a similar conclusion: "The concentrated dose of ethics reform enacted this session should be treated as a start on the path from better to great."

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