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## La. ethics reform draws praise

Gov. Bobby Jindal, take a bow.

Since the special legislative session on ethics reform called by the governor, Louisiana has zoomed into the top five among states with the strongest ethics and transparency laws. The Better Government Association-Alpert Integrity index recently ranked Louisiana, along with New Jersey, Rhode Island, Hawaii and Washington, as the states most committed to ethics at the highest level.

BGA ranks the states in five areas of law: open records, whistleblower protections, campaign finance, open meetings and conflicts of interest.

"These laws are representative of a state's responsiveness to its citizens, and its commitment to maintaining ethics in government," said BGA Executive Director Jay Stewart. "Just as the fifty states compete to see which one is the most business-friendly, they should also compete over their respective commitment to governmental integrity."

Reaching that high level for integrity is remarkable. Louisiana's shabby rankings in the past reflect that use of public office for private gain has long been deeply entrenched. It reaches back to the time of French rule in the Louisiana colony. The conduct even of Bienville, the "Father of Louisiana," will not stand close scrutiny. Greed and corruption born under French rule flourished under Spanish domination. It has cast a dark shadow over Louisiana ever since.

BGA is not the only organization to praise Louisiana's stronger ethics laws and increased integrity in government. In February, the Center for Public Integrity, a non-profit, good-government organization, said Jindal's promises of a gold standard in ethics reform have been fulfilled.

The disclosure law passed in Jindal's special session on ethics is the toughest in the history of the state. It requires statewide officeholders, some appointed officials, legislators and local or district politicians representing more than 5,000 people to make public information about their sources of income, investment activities, other assets, liabilities, property holdings and business affiliations.

We have lived too long with the widely held belief that ours is a backward state and a benchmark by which corruption in other parts of the country can be measured. The *Wall Street Journal* casually slammed the state's image once in a report - oddly enough - on another state. The headline read "Louisiana North: Why New Jersey is a Pit of Corruption."

It is time to erase that reputation as a banana republic - earned over decades of blatant, wide-open misuse of public office. It will not be easy to hold on to the reforms brought about by the Jindal administration. The responsibility for protecting and enforcing statutes that assure governmental integrity rests with the voters of Louisiana. An unyielding commitment is needed from all of us if we are to maintain this new standing - and reap the benefits from it.

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