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Few changes made to La. ethics enforcement

Repeated appeals from ethics board members to rewrite the state's ethics enforcement laws did little to persuade lawmakers, who instead made marginal adjustments during the recent legislative session and avoided debate about criticism that the system is too weak. Leaders of the House and Senate committees that oversee laws governing the conduct of public officials say the enforcement system doesn't need an overhaul, notwithstanding the complaints. Though Gov. Bobby Jindal's top lawyer had said the governor would push for modest revisions, the administration was largely quiet. "In the end, the Legislature's minor tweaking in this area continues to allow a substandard ethics administration system to exist and to allow the governor far too much power in the process," says the watchdog Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana. Even a proposal to study the enforcement system to determine if adjustments were needed failed to scrape through the Legislature.

The discussion hinges on laws passed in 2008 and backed by Jindal that stripped the Board of Ethics of its power to rule and gave that authority to administrative law judges, civil service employees in the executive branch. The 11-member ethics board became an investigative body only, able to levy charges and prosecute cases. Critics of Jindal who opposed that change say it gives the governor too much power, because the administrative law judges are overseen by a governor's appointee. Supporters say it prevents conflicts that occurred when the ethics board acted as prosecutor and judge.