News Coverage on Public Information

A diverse group of watchdogs

[Jimmy Vielkind](#) [1] [2] [2] [2] [2]
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ALBANY — Former prosecutors and businessmen, a retired senator and a district attorney will make up the state's new government ethics watchdog group.

Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#) [4] and legislative leaders announced the 14 members of the [Joint Commission on Public Ethics](#) [5] late Monday. The JCOPE was created in an ethics bill signed over the summer that replaced the[Commission on Public Integrity](#) [6] and expanded financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.

The announcement came on the last possible day, just after the close of business hours. Legislative leaders appointed eight members of the commission, but the appointments were all announced in a single statement from Cuomo's office.

The governor tapped Westchester County District Attorney [Janet DiFiore](#) [7], a Republican, to lead the board, which has yet to meet. Cuomo also appointed his former lieutenant when he served as attorney general, Mitra Hormozi, who had been leading the COPI, as well as [Daniel Horwitz](#) [8], a former assistant district attorney in Manhattan. Horwitz subsequently worked as a partner at the law firm of [Lanker & Carragher](#) [9], where he helped defend Wall Street scam artist [Bernard Madoff](#) [10].

JCOPE "is an independent monitor that will aggressively investigate corruption and help maintain integrity in state government," Cuomo said in the release. "I am confident that under the

leadership of Chair DiFiore and the other board members, the commission will be the toughest ethics enforcer in our state's history."

Indeed, some outside observers pointed to the prosecutorial presence on the board as an expression of Cuomo's vision for a more proactive body.

"It sounds as if he did get diversity by both geography and gender," said Barbara Bartoletti [11], legislative director for the League of Women Voters [12]. "He wanted to make this a deterrent as much as he could, and I think he sees prosecutors as having that background, that can alternately investigate and threaten."

The legislative leaders turned toward more experienced Albany hands.

Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos [13] named former colleague Sen. Mary Lou Rath [14] of Erie County. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver [15] named Pat Bulgaro [16], who formerly sat on the now-defunct Ethics Commission [17].

The new law specified that none of the appointees could be or have been registered lobbyists, legislators or agency commissioners within the past three years. JCOPE will have the power to investigate both members of executive branch agencies and the Legislature, but because of its structure the governor as well as Assembly Democrats [18] and Senate Republicans have the power to veto any potential investigation — a clause in the new law good-government groups acknowledged was far from ideal. But they were optimistic Monday.

"As attorney general, Gov. Cuomo was as aggressive about pursuing consumer fraud as he was about policing public integrity, within the narrow limits of his office," said Susan Lerner [19], executive director of Common Cause NY. "By placing a prosecutor at the helm of the newly created JCOPE, it's clear that the commission is well-armed in the effort to provide rigorous ethics oversight of the executive and New York state. This is a pivotal step toward real reform."

Assembly Minority Leader Brian Kolb [20], R-Canandaigua, nominated David Renzi [21], a Watertown attorney who unsuccessfully ran for the state Senate in 2008 against Darrel Aubertine [22], who after his 2010 loss was named commissioner of the Department of Agriculture and Markets [23].

Senate Minority Leader John Sampson [24], D-Brooklyn, named Ravi Batra [25] to the new commission.

He has a colorful past, serving as a law firm partner to ex-Assemblyman Clarence Norman [26], who was convicted of taking illegal campaign contributions as leader of the Kings County Democratic Committee [27]. Batra also defended ex-Sen. Ada Smith [28], D-Queens, against assault charges lodged in connection with the lawmaker allegedly throwing coffee in an aide's face.

Batra sent journalists a stack of recommendation letters in support of his candidacy, including missives from Reps. Eliot Engel [29] and Gary Ackerman [30] as well as ex-Manhattan District

Attorney [Robert Morgenthau](http://...) [31]. "I am confident that my appointment, Mr. Ravi Batra, will help bring integrity back to the halls of our Capitol," Sampson said in a statement.

It's unclear when the commissioners will meet. Their first order of business will be to appoint an executive director to run its day-to-day tasks related to investigations and the compilation of required disclosure filings.

The COPI has been in a state of suspended animation since Cuomo signed the ethics bill in August. About a dozen staffers are left, but several — including Executive Director [Barry Ginsberg](http://...) [32] — remain on the payroll. It's unclear on whose authority, but Cuomo's spokesman [Josh Vlasto](http://...) [33] said they would remain "under the board's direction until the chair makes further notice."

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