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Legislators Raise Pay, and a Governor Pays the Price

By ADAM NOSSITER
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NEW ORLEANS — The reformist image of Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#), considered by Republicans a top potential vice-presidential choice, has recently taken a beating after Mr. Jindal refused to veto a sizable pay increase that [Louisiana](#) legislators voted for themselves this month.

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Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican, came into office this year on a vow to "prohibit legislators from giving themselves pay raises."

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The increase would more than double the salary of the part-time legislators effective July 8, to \$37,500 from \$16,800, with considerably more money available once expenses are added in. It has touched a nerve in this impoverished state.

Conservative talk-radio show hosts and bloggers have denounced it, newspaper editorials have inveighed against it — The Times-Picayune of New Orleans called the increase "greedy" and its main proponent "shameless" — and the legislators themselves received floods of e-mail messages from angry constituents.

More confounding to many citizens here than the action by the lawmakers is the inaction of Governor Jindal, who came into office this year with promises to overhaul Louisiana's reputation for dubious ethics.

During his election campaign, he vowed to prohibit legislative pay raises. Once elected, he quickly pushed through a package of measures increasing the Legislature's transparency and stamping out conflicts of interest, basking in the subsequent glow of his image as a youthful [Ivy League](#) reformer doing battle in a shady subtropical outpost.


That image and his solid standing with the religious right helped propel Mr. Jindal, a 37-year-old former Rhodes scholar, into the front ranks of Senator [John McCain](#)'s possible running-mate choices. But now some conservative critics are saying the pay-increase episode demonstrates weakness as well as Mr. Jindal's unreadiness for the prime time of the vice presidency.

"This pay raise is devastating him," said Moon Griffon, a conservative talk-radio host with a wide following in northern Louisiana, the most Republican and evangelical part of the state. "I've gotten over 5,000 e-mails from people who say they voted for him, and who say they would never vote for him again."

Mr. Griffon added, "People don't like hypocrisy, and they like somebody with guts."

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The legislative session ended Monday, and Mr. Jindal now has two weeks to veto the pay increase, though he has given no indication that he will do so.

Even while denouncing the money lawmakers are giving themselves, the governor has tried to depict the matter as an internal legislative affair that does not require his meddling.

"I will keep my pledge to let them govern themselves," the governor said in a statement last week after the State Senate passed the increase, backing off a rejection of the raise, though he also said he was "very sorry" about it. Editorialists and radio show hosts have since had a field day juxtaposing that "pledge" to the Legislature with the promise Mr. Jindal made when he was running last fall to "prohibit legislators from giving themselves pay raises."

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, an independent good-government research organization in Baton Rouge, said voters did not appreciate a broken pledge.

"It puts a real dent in any sort of reform credential of either the governor or the Legislature," Mr. Brandt said.

That theme of perceived weakness is echoed by other political experts.

"No matter where I go, they certainly are disappointed, and they are using some very unkind words related to his spine," said Bernie Pinsonat, a pollster in Baton Rouge. "It's pretty ferocious." He added, "I'm quite positive his base is very upset with him."

The legislators have not had a base pay increase since 1980 and complain that with the governor frequently calling them into special session, their job is no longer part-time. The increase would put salaries in the upper tier for similar part-time legislatures, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Mr. Brandt agreed that some sort of modest raise could be justified — an independent commission recommended a 12 percent increase several years ago — but said the 123 percent rise, with additional increases pegged to inflation, was "problematic."

Mr. Jindal's strategy was apparently based on a desire not to jeopardize the other elements he won in his legislative wish list, like a voucher program for private schools in New Orleans, or restoring spending cuts made by fiscal conservatives in the Capitol.

"He was not about to give the Legislature any excuse to block his reform agenda," said the governor's spokeswoman, Melissa Sellers, adding: "The governor has opposed the legislative pay increase loudly every step of the way."

But the furor over the pay raise has put in the shadows the rest of his program, and other bills pushed by conservatives sympathetic to him, like one the Legislature overwhelmingly approved allowing science teachers to use "supplemental" material that critics say is merely a stalking-horse for teaching creationism.

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