For the practitioner, Jonathan Rauh’s very compelling article, “Predicting Political Influence on State Ethics Commissions: Of Course We Are Ethical—Nudge Nudge, Wink Wink,” provides perspective on and understanding of the nature of ethics commissions and their inherent limitations. It also reveals to a larger audience some uncomfortable truths that many of us in the world of government ethics already know: state ethics commissions are primary compliance organizations that come into existence after scandals to appease public sentiment. According to Rauh, their mandates “generally are not well defined and usually target popular notions of corruption, such as quid pro quo, while failing to address more nuanced indicators of corruption, such as strong financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.” Rauh is on point when he notes that, generally, public attention to ethics commissions quickly fades once the scandal subsides, thus reducing the commission’s mission and effectiveness.

Rauh also correctly identifies the paradox that commissions are created by the very legislatures or executive branches that they are asked to oversee. Thus, there is an incentive for the legislative body to take steps to ensure that the ethics commission is not too successful or threatening to the body that created it. Rauh identifies such steps as appointing commissioners who have strong ties to the political establishment or are otherwise nonthreatening, providing the commission with limited investigative authority, and providing insufficient funding or personnel. He depicts most ethics commissions as “a palliative for public distrust” and notes that elected officials are more likely to create and empower ethics commissions when they do not perceive them as a serious threat.

Rauh does not limit himself to the restraining power of legislatures on the authority of ethics commissions. Certainly, the recent example of Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York interfering with his state’s ethics authority reinforces Rauh’s argument that ethics commissions cannot bite the hands that feed them.

Much of the article addresses the authority and process for appointing ethics commissioners, which varies from state to state in terms of which body makes appointments and which gets to confirm. Against this background, Rauh proposes several theories on predicting political influence on state ethics commissions. One of those is the locus of the appointment power. Rauh argues that where there is greater centralization of appointment (limited oversight of the appointment), those making the appointments will have more political influence over their appointees. He also notes that the power to remove a commissioner may also be a “potent weapon” to keep ethics commissioners under control.

Rauh proposes several other somewhat speculative theories on measuring the effectiveness of ethics commissions. For example, he uses the salary of the legislature compared with the average salary in the state to determine whether the legislator is incurring a cost by his or her service. Studies have shown that poorer citizens who run for office have more incentive to behave honestly because they have a higher incentive to keep their positions, while wealthier legislators have the financial ability to absorb the costs of any fines.

Another barometer for assessing the independence and effectiveness of an ethics commission is the prevalence of corruption convictions. The premise is that where there are convictions, there is a strong and independent ethics commission. But Rauh correctly notes that it is difficult to draw such a conclusion. For example, most corruption convictions stem from federal investigations. In fact, the intervention of a federal authority may be more indicative of an ineffective ethics commission.

Rauh looks at other variables to assess effectiveness. For example, he proposes considering the budget of an ethics commission against the number of individuals under its jurisdiction, as well as the budget compared to the number of activities tasked to the commission. He also suggests that more professional
credentials for appointment to its ethics commission (former judges) and where the executive and legislature have limited appointment authority.

Nonetheless, when all is said and done, the fact remains from Rauh's initial assessment that ethics commissions have limited authority and are more often created to momentarily appease the public after scandal. Noble efforts such as Rauh's to predict effectiveness and political influence must confront this reality.

Rauh accepts the limitations of his model and the need for further research. However, he makes some salient points, especially with regard to appointment powers and, for example, Wisconsin, which has

**Public Administration Review** is now introducing podcasts alongside many of its articles, providing listeners a chance to learn more about the article and the authors.