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Profile in Public Integrity:

Ann Ravel

Former Chair, Federal Election Commission



Ann M. Ravel was nominated to the [Federal Election Commission](#) (FEC) by President Barack Obama on June 21, 2013. After her appointment received the unanimous consent of the United States Senate, Ms. Ravel joined the Commission on October 25, 2013. She served as Chair of the Commission for 2015 and Vice Chair for 2014 before leaving in 2017. Previously, Ms. Ravel served as Chair of the [California Fair Political Practices Commission](#) (FPPC), to which Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. appointed her. Before joining the FPPC, Ms. Ravel served as Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Torts and Consumer Litigation in the Civil Division of the United States Department of Justice. Ms. Ravel also worked as an attorney in the Santa Clara County Counsel's Office, ultimately serving as the appointed County Counsel from 1998 until 2009. Ms. Ravel is currently a lecturer at Boalt Hall School of Law at UC Berkeley.

In your long and distinguished ethics oversight career, you have chaired both the FPPC and the FEC. What accomplishments are you most proud of in each of those jobs?

Working in agencies dedicated to the ideal of public service and ensuring that the public has trust and confidence in government is incredibly rewarding. I consider the work in ethics agencies to be consumer protection – the public's expectation that government is working for the people and their interests, and not for the self-interest of the officials or employees, is our mandate.

While at the FPPC, I began a project to streamline unclear regulations to make them understandable in order for all officials to comply without having to hire a lawyer to explain the rules. I was also proud of a case in which the FPPC took immediate legal action to find the source of a large "Dark Money" contribution in California, so that voters would be informed about who was trying to sway the election. This case was very rewarding. We fulfilled our mission on a very important matter, did not delay, and in only a few weeks were able to obtain an order from the California Supreme Court requiring disclosure.

The FEC is a much more challenging environment than the FPPC, due to deadlocks on the Commission which meant that major violations of campaign finance law went unpunished. But I am fortunate to have been able to call attention to this dysfunction at a very important Federal agency. This resulted in greater awareness of a little known agency, and sparked reform legislation. I am very proud, also, of my efforts which resulted in the US Digital Service working with FEC staff to overhaul the website to provide more user friendly campaign finance information.

What were the most prominent obstacles you faced while at the FPPC and the FEC? In dealing with these challenges, what insights have you gained that could benefit other ethics oversight bodies?

The issues at the FPPC and the FEC were very different. The FPPC is a relatively small agency, and at the time I was there, the budget constraints were severe. However, my goal was to improve the agency's website to be able to provide more information to the public. The FPPC was the repository of important financial interest forms filed by public officials, but they were not easily accessible. So I turned to a technology for public service groups, Code for America, hoping to engage a fellow to work with the Agency to improve the site. But because of outmoded contracting laws, this was stymied. Instead, I worked with Code for America to sponsor a hackathon to create a way

to provide important information on our site about gifts received by State Judges. My advice from this experience – try all avenues, be persistent but gracious, and talk to all who might be allies for your cause.

The FEC, naturally, was more challenging. Despite the frustrations at the Commission level, though, the employees were extremely dedicated to the work. It is important to recognize the staff for the work that they do under trying circumstances. These jobs are not easy, and good employee relations and management are crucial to accomplishing the goals of an ethics agency. Furthermore, since I chose the path of publicizing the stalemates, it was important to be open with the press. The press can be a very important ally.

One of your main projects as the Chair of the FPPC was to establish the States Unified Network (SUN) Center, a nonpartisan group of state and local jurisdictions promoting transparency in campaign finance. How do you think this group has impacted campaign finance regulations?

The SUN Center brought together ethics officers from around the country, in both red and blue states, to share information, discuss issues of mutual concern, house a repository for local laws, regulations and other documents to assist us in our work. We also anticipated eventually being able to use enforcement information to aid in enforcement throughout the country because, of course, in campaign finance, money crosses state lines.

In your career of working to create and enforce campaign finance laws, you have turned to technology to improve governance, including creating a mobile phone application to track gifts received by public officials. Moving forward, how do you think technology and data can help combat government corruption?

Technology and data are helpful tools for ethics agencies. Technology enables the amassing of data, the ability to see trends and connections, and to seek out information that is available on the internet in order to help prove a case or pursue an investigation. Most ethics agencies also have a duty to educate the regulated community, and to provide transparency about their work to the public. Technology and social media are excellent ways to do this. Technology can help the regulated community to comply with the law and the reporting requirements, as well. Additionally, technology can make it easier for the public to use the agency's data in order to enable them to provide tips about potential violators.

What advice do you have for CAPI and our community in helping to identify and deter corruption in government?

Being public facing is crucial for an ethics agency. Most agencies have limited resources and therefore rely on complaints to ferret out corruption or violations of the law. Because of this, the public is an ally in the effort, and it is essential to use the internet, public meetings, the press, and other avenues to make your agency and what it does known.