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Chris Christie and Jerry Jones

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Chris Christie and Jerry Jones: What Comes Next?

An expert overview of the on-going controversy over New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's acceptance of outside gifts.



February 17, 2015

Who is Chris Christie?

Christie is the Republican Governor of New Jersey. He previously served as the US Attorney for the District of New Jersey from 2002 to 2008. He is a likely contender in the 2016 presidential race.

What is the controversy?

Christie's penchant for accepting luxury perks, paid for by groups who arguably have significant interests in his decisions as Governor, was highlighted in a New York Times article on February 2, 2015. Questionable gifts include: travel on Sheldon Adelson's private plane, a 2012 trade mission partly funded by a group of businesses (Choose N.J.) barred from donating to the Governor directly by pay-to-play laws, and an extravagant family vacation paid for by the King of Jordan with hotel costs estimated at \$30,000.¹

Christie also recently accepted tens of thousands of dollars' worth of private plane travel and tickets from Jerry Jones, billionaire owner of the Dallas Cowboys. While these kinds of gifts are, unfortunately, commonplace in state governments, the sheer volume has raised serious questions about undisclosed conflicts of interest.²

Wait, is that legal?

It would not be legal if Christie were a federal employee. However, soon after taking office as the Governor in 2010 Christie signed Executive Order 24, which reaffirmed the Governor's ability to take unlimited gifts from "relatives or personal friends" and to have travel and related expenses paid for by foreign governments and non-profits.³ Thus, the gifts detailed above are technically legal, although they give the impression of undue influence.

Christie's acceptance of free flights and tickets from Jerry Jones, however, may have exposed a conflict of interest. If Christie and Jones are personal friends, as his staff claims, the tickets and travel given by Jones are legal under Executive Order 24.⁴ Claiming a personal relationship, however, calls into question whether Christie was biased in Jones's favor in the 2013 decision to award a lucrative contract to operate the observation deck of One World Trade Center to Legends Hospitality, part-owned by Jones.⁵

Christie has claimed that he met Jones after awarding the contract, but previous public remarks contradict this contention.⁶ If Christie did have an existing relationship with Jones prior to his public support of Legends Hospitality's bid, it may constitute an undisclosed conflict of interest. Whether or not there was a prior relationship, Jones's significant business interests with the state of New Jersey gives at least the appearance of impropriety to Christie's acceptance of lavish gifts from Jones.

What happens next?

The Co-Chairs of the legislative committee investigating the Port Authority in the wake of the "Bridgewater" scandal have implied that they may look into Christie's relationship with Jones.⁷ Good government groups, notably the American Legal Defense Fund, have filed complaints with the State Ethics Commission.⁸

If the State Ethics Commission investigates and finds that the relationship constitutes an illegal conflict of interest, by Christie's own "Code of Conduct of the Governor" included in Executive Order 24, it would "constitute good cause for [his] removal from employment or office."⁹

What changes might this lead to? Broadly, these allegations highlight glaring holes in oversight of the conduct of public officials in New Jersey. The term "personal friend" is so vague that it can be applied to justify any type of gift, regardless of the giving individual's business with the state. Public outcry over the current scandal may prompt the legislature to close loopholes in ethics regulation, particularly with respect to gifts and disclosure of potential conflicts of interest.

1: Kate Zernike, Chris Christie Shows Fondness for Luxury Benefits When Other Pay the Bill, NYT, Feb. 2, 2015. 2: Amanda Macias, Dallas Cowboys Owner Jerry Jones Paid for Chris Christie's trip to the Playoff Game, Business Insider, Jan. 6, 2015. 3: NJ Executive Order 24 4: Ashley Killough, Timeline: Chris Christie and Jerry Jones and why you should care, CNN, Jan. 17, 2015. 5: Press release Governors Cuomo and Christie Announce Selection...Operate One World Trade Center Observation Deck, Mar. 19, 2013. 6: Killough, supra. 7: NJ Lawmakers Discuss Possible Ethics Investigation of Christie Due to Relationship with Cowboys Owner, CBS NY, Jan. 7, 2015. 8: Brad Woodhouse, Complaint Against Governor Chris Christie, American Legal Defense Fund, Jan. 6, 2015. 9: NJ Executive Order 24 Photo: EPA/Larry Smith.