

# Protect the Public's Trust: New watchdog report: Biden activists get an ethics pass

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Today, government watchdog Protect the Public's Trust issued a [report](#) analyzing the increasing reliance by the Biden Administration on ethics waivers for former activists to advance their policy agenda. The organization's [Ethics Waiver Tracker](#) is the premiere database for tracking waivers handed out to political appointees. PPT has been able to obtain many of these waivers only after suing the federal agencies for withholding the documents and, in some cases, hiding the existence of the waivers from the public's view.

Among the most shocking waivers is the one handed out to the senior official now handling a controversial and high-profile issue over California's emission standards at the Department of Transportation (DOT). Dr. Steven Cliff's full-throated [waiver](#) has allowed him to work on all aspects of the Environmental Protection Agency and DOT National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration's [SAFE](#) Rules and related litigation just months after being a key figure in the regulatory and legal fight to reverse the former administration's policy. While the waiver has received virtually no attention it represents one of the most startling exemptions from federal ethics rules, allowing an official to essentially "switch sides" and participate in a matter in which he came to the federal government with a clear and established position, rather than as an objective official representing the American public. Critics have described the California exemption at the center of the dispute as enabling the left-leaning state to set nationwide emissions policy for cars and trucks, imbuing tremendous political and financial benefits for the state's policymakers.

Additional findings highlighted in the report include:

- The volume of ethics waivers handed out to Biden appointees has occurred at a pace in which the total is likely to soon exceed the number from the Trump Administration (more than 65 Biden waivers in the first 18 months vs. 73 Trump waivers in the first 33 months, according to data from the Office of Government Ethics and a similar waiver tracking project in operation during those 33 months).
- Career ethics officials are facing an unusually strained environment where activists and lobbyists are being hired for positions in which their potential conflicts of interest are known and prominent, which then require waivers in order to function in their jobs and avoid putting the ethics officials in the position of vetoing presidential appointments; and
- Waivers for activists are the rule, rather than the exception, with powerful positions being filled with long-time activists on administration priorities, whose past connections and advocacy in these areas requires exemptions from ethics laws and pledges.

***“Waivers can help ensure the American public benefits from having the most highly-qualified people serving in the Federal government,” said Michael Chamberlain, Director of Protect the Public’s Trust. “But many of the waivers we are seeing - mostly after suing the agencies to hand them over - are quite concerning. Not only are they approaching record numbers, the justifications can be quite circular. Activists are seemingly hired because of their conflicted relationships and then ethics officials are forced to grant waivers allowing them to continue leveraging those relationships in order to perform their jobs. This is hardly serving the American people in an ethical and transparent way. It’s also placing tremendous undue pressure on career ethics officials to hand these activists a free pass lest the Biden policy agenda suffer.”***