



# M U L T I S T A T E

## [Arrest for Campaign Crimes Is Latest of Many Controversies for Ex-Florida Sen. Frank Artiles](#) (Florida)

Former Republican Florida state senator Frank Artiles surrendered himself to Miami-Dade County authorities this morning after a police raid on his home. The ex-lawmaker is accused of several campaign-finance felonies stemming from his alleged interference in the 2020 state senate election.

Jail records show Artiles was booked into the Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center just before 2 p.m.

The criminal charges come after local news outlets, including the Miami Herald and WPLG Local 10, found Artiles had likely planted Alex Rodriguez, a shell candidate with no party affiliation, in the state senate race in District 37 last year. [The district](#) covers much of the City of Miami and South Miami-Dade County. Alex Rodriguez shares a surname with incumbent Democrat Jose Javier Rodriguez, a coincidence many believe was intended to confuse voters.

Jose Javier Rodriguez eventually lost to Republican challenger Ileana Garcia by only 32 votes after a manual recount.

[According to reporting by the Herald](#) , Artiles boasted about planting Alex Rodriguez in the race while at an election-night party at an Orlando-area Irish pub.

Officers with the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office Public Corruption Task Force raided Artiles' Palmetto Bay home on Monday. According to the [search warrant](#), Artiles paid Alex Rodriguez, an acquaintance of his, nearly \$45,000 with the purpose of siphoning votes from Jose Javier Rodriguez.

Alex Rodriguez, who provided testimony to investigators that helped build the case against Artiles, also faces criminal charges related to his candidacy.

Known as one of Florida's brashest lawmakers, Artiles has a [reputation for controversy](#) that ultimately led to his unceremonious exit from the state legislature in 2017.

During a [caustic rant](#) that included calling a fellow lawmaker a "pussy" and two Tallahassee lobbyists "faggots," Artiles called six white lawmakers the N-word in front of some of his Black colleagues in the legislature. His use of the racist slur led to intense backlash, including a petition with [4,000 signatures](#) calling for his resignation.

Artiles eventually did resign, but not before reporters found he had been paying [Playboy and Hooters models thousands of dollars](#) for "consulting" services.

But those were far from Artiles' only controversies while in office. In 2010, local blogger Elaine de Valle of Political Cortadito found him living outside his district, in violation of Florida law. He [admitted to the violation](#) but did not face criminal charges.

Artiles was also famously [accused of punching a college student](#) at a Tallahassee bar in 2015. Although Artiles denied the accusation, the student corroborated the story to the media. The senator defended himself by claiming if he had punched someone, they would've been in the hospital.

The Republican was also known for pushing a number of controversial bills, including [a transgender bathroom bill](#) and a measure that would prevent doctors from asking their patients [if they owned guns](#).

Since leaving office, Artiles has been working as a political lobbyist.

### [South Carolina corruption turned over to GOP prosecutor](#) (South Carolina)

South Carolina's attorney general has sent four unresolved Statehouse corruption cases to a Republican prosecutor in Spartanburg County to handle.

The state Supreme Court ruled in January that a Democratic prosecutor, David Pascoe of Orangeburg, exceeded his authority by continuing his investigation into Statehouse corruption beyond the few cases Attorney General Alan Wilson gave him because of a possible conflict of interest.

The justices left it to Wilson to decide what to do. He gave the cases to an assistant, who in a letter this week asked Seventh Circuit Solicitor Barry Barnette to take over the four remaining cases.

The cases include perjury and obstruction of justice charges against political consultant Richard Quinn Sr. Authorities said he lied to a state grand jury during the investigation.

Wilson used Quinn for political work for years. Quinn's son, former state Rep. Richard Quinn Jr., pleaded guilty to misconduct in office and was sentenced to probation for taking \$4 million in money from lobbyists and doing their bidding for the Quinns' consulting business.

The other cases involve the sentencing of former South Carolina Sen. John Courson of Columbia, who pleaded guilty in 2018 to misconduct for using thousands of dollars of political contributions for personal use; and misconduct trials against former Reps. Tracy Edge of North Myrtle Beach and Jim Harrison of Columbia. All are Republicans and worked with the Quinns.

The state Supreme Court took the cases away from Pascoe in a sharply divided 3-2 ruling that said the Orangeburg prosecutor should not have continued a State Grand Jury probe of corruption beyond specific lawmakers whom the attorney general asked Pascoe's office to prosecute.

The Statehouse corruption investigation began seven years ago as an investigation into ex-House Speaker Bobby Harrell, who pleaded guilty to spending campaign money on personal expenses. He was sentenced to probation.

The two-page letter turning the cases over to Barnette offered to pay any hotel or travel costs for the new prosecutor. But Chief Deputy Attorney General W. Jeffrey Young also included a warning.

"In the event your investigation or review of the case leads to new charges against new defendants, please advise this Office on the matter so that we may decide how to proceed," Young wrote.

### **[The Hawaii Capitol Is Closed To The Public, But Some Lobbyists Still Have Entree](#)**

Some Hawaii lawmakers have hosted in-person meetings with lobbyists, business leaders and government officials even while the State Capitol has been closed to the public for the 2021 legislative session.

The public has been barred from entering the Capitol building since March 2020, when Sen. Clarence Nishihara tested positive for COVID-19 after a trip to Las Vegas.

At the start of the session, constituents were again banned from entering the Capitol and visiting offices and committee rooms. Instead, they testified remotely to legislative committees. However some individuals, including [registered lobbyists](#), have been able to gain an audience with lawmakers in their offices after scheduling appointments.

Legislative leaders maintain that lawmakers are still meeting with constituents in the community and outside the office. Senate President Ron Kouchi and House Speaker Scott Saiki have both said that individual lawmakers determine who can get into the Capitol building.

“If people can meet with lawmakers at the Capitol, it defeats the purpose of having a closed Capitol,” said Sandy Ma, executive director of the good-government group Common Cause Hawaii. “We understand it should be safe for people working there. But people are going in and it’s not just for needed work to be done.”

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Capitol 3floor Homeless Solutions Briefing.

The State Capitol’s once bustling hallways are now quiet without members of the public. But lobbyists and other officials have still been able to meet in person with lawmakers.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Civil Beat asked the state for a list of individuals who had been granted access to the Capitol in January and February. The request was forwarded to House Speaker Scott Saiki's office, which said staff only started keeping track of visits in February.

There were more than 200 visits to the Capitol in February, according to sign-in sheets provided by Saiki's office. Civil Beat was able to identify 14 lobbyists, who accounted for 33 of those visits. Representatives from the business community made up another dozen or so visits.

State officials, such as some of Gov. David Ige's cabinet members, also made trips to the Capitol, as did former governors Ben Cayetano and Neil Abercrombie. The sign-in sheets also include sign-language interpreters to assist with press conferences, as well as local media and camera crews who cover those press conferences and interview Ige and lawmakers.

Workers to service printers, computers, water coolers and elevators were also among those allowed in.

### *Lobbyists Visit A Closed Capitol*

Face-to-face contact is paramount for lobbyists and other political operatives.

[Emmanuel Zibakalam](#), who represents the Hawaii Crop Improvement Association among other clients, had nine in-person meetings with lawmakers in February. That's the most of any lobbyist who paid a visit last month.

Capitol sign-in sheets show he met with House Majority Leader Della Au Belatti and Reps. Sean Quinlan, Chris Todd, Dan Holt and Cedric Gates. Four of Zibakalam's meetings were with Quinlan, the chairman of the House Economic Development Committee.

In February, the committee heard numerous measures on taxes, gambling, housing, business assistance, energy and broadband.

Zibakalam declined to say what issues he is advocating for this session. He said he likes to mix in-person visits with virtual meetings with lawmakers.

"We just try to advocate the best we can. It really depends on people's preferences and what the rules are," Zibakalam said.

Pono Chong, a former lawmaker and lobbyist for the Chamber of Commerce Hawaii, also made multiple visits to the Capitol.

Chong met with Sen. Brian Taniguchi the day the Senate Labor, Culture and the Arts Committee voted to [advance a minimum wage](#) proposal. The Chamber of Commerce has voiced opposition to wage increases over worries that such raises could tank business already reeling from the pandemic.

The minimum wage proposal now appears dead in the House. Chong couldn't be reached for this story.

Chong also logged visits with House Speaker Scott Saiki a day after the Senate committee vote, as well as another meeting with Kouchi on Feb. 18, the eve of a key legislative deadline.

Two legislative deadlines around Feb. 11 and Feb. 19 were a popular time for lobbyists to visit lawmakers. Those are the dates when dozens of bills either survive and advance through session or drop off without getting to another committee hearing.

The team from [Capitol Consultants of Hawaii](#), one of the state's largest lobbying firms, met with House Finance Chairwoman Sylvia Luke on Feb. 19, the day scores of measures would be sent to Luke's committee.

Capitol Consultants represents more than [50 clients](#) this session, including large corporations like Airbnb, Pfizer and Hawaiian Telcom.

Bruce Coppa, president of Capitol Consultants, said he couldn't recall what was discussed in his meeting with Luke.

The group of lobbyists who met with lawmakers in the State Capitol in February are just a small fraction of the hundreds of individuals registered to lobby government officials.

The [law defines](#) a lobbyist as anyone who is paid to influence legislation or administrative actions and who spends at least five hours a month doing so.

In a normal legislative session, the Capitol hallways are packed with lobbyists and other advocates. Information is traded near the doorways to committee rooms. Deals are hammered out on the railings overlooking the rotunda.

A quick word with a committee chair after a hearing might provide valuable information, and give individuals a chance to influence policy.

But many of those tools have been removed this session, with limited access to the State Capitol. Even those granted entry must head directly to their meeting place and then leave. They aren't allowed to wander door to door. And they can't schmooze in the hallways.

The pandemic has changed the way lobbyists go about their business.

Zibakalam, of Pacific Business Advocates, said that while in-person meetings makes advocacy easier, lobbyists such as himself have had to adapt to meeting remotely.

Coppa said that while livestreamed hearings have made listening for bill amendments easier, not having daily access to the State Capitol and being able to catch committee chairs after votes to talk over some of those amendments has made the job more difficult.

"You don't have that interaction. And you try to call them — good luck. You've got to make appointments with these people now," Coppa said.

### *Who Gets Access?*

Since the legislative session began, Ma — the Common Cause director and a [registered lobbyist](#) who met with lawmakers last year and in January — has been raising concerns about special interest groups gaining access to lawmakers that would otherwise be unavailable to the public.

In an interview Monday, Ma said she stopped visiting the Capitol when she "realized the hypocrisy of the idea."

Ma acknowledged that constituents are still able to meet lawmakers outside the Capitol building, but believes in-person meetings with lawmakers in their offices raises an issue of unfair access.

The in-person visits during a pandemic highlight a divide between those who have political connections and those who don't.

"Not everyone is going to be saying, 'Can I meet with you at your office?' They'll hear it's closed and take that at face value," Ma said.

At a Civil Beat panel discussion in January, Saiki said that members of the House were instructed not to hold in-person meetings.

“The building is closed to non-legislators and non-legislative staff,” Saiki said in January.

He said that lobbyists would not be allowed to enter the building, and added that House members were asked to only hold remote meetings or make phone calls.

Asked how guests were able to meet in person after those instructions were given, Saiki now says that the situation with COVID-19 has changed.

“There were some requests for in-person meetings. We had to weigh that with the fact that vaccinations had begun occurring at the Capitol,” Saiki said.

More than 500 legislators and their staff were vaccinated as part of the state’s phase [1b vaccine rollout](#).

Capitol visitors are required to check in through the basement lobby and pass a temperature scan. The House and Senate sergeants-at-arms verify who the individual is and wait for staff from a lawmaker’s office to escort the visitor.

Saiki said that representatives need to pre-register guests with the sergeant-at-arms before any visits. He said that while he might weigh in on whether someone should be granted a visit, the decision is mostly left up to individual lawmakers.

Kouchi described a similar process for senators, and said they ultimately decide who gets to visit.

Asked how lawmakers decide who to meet, Kouchi said of his fellow senators that, “Everyone is making their own determinations.”

“I can tell you when I return to Kauai there are people who may want to set up virtual meetings, which I do. There are persons who want to meet in person, which I do. I do leave the Capitol as well (for meetings),” Kouchi said.

Kouchi said that senators have been encouraged to meet with constituents in the community as well as at events so long as they can maintain social distancing. He said the Senate does not have guidelines on meetings since pandemic restrictions may vary by county.

Saiki also said that it's not likely the Capitol would be open to the public until at least the end of the current session in May. He and Kouchi plan to meet with Ige and state Comptroller Curt Otaguro at that time to determine when the Capitol should be reopened to the public.

### Virginia's "Wild West" Campaign Finances

This was the year when state lawmakers approved some major changes including legalization of marijuana and ending the death penalty. In other areas, however, reformers were disappointed.

The General Assembly rejected several bills designed to reform utility regulation, refused to remove special legal protections for police and retained the state's right-to-work law. They also failed to approve campaign finance reform.

When it comes to campaign contributions, some say Virginia is the wild West.

"Virginia is an anything goes state," says Stephen Spaulding, a lawyer with the clean government advocate Common Cause.

"There's really no limit on how much an individual can contribute to a candidate, and that really puts Virginia in the minority of states."

And Ivy Main, an official with the Sierra Club's Virginia chapter, thinks it could explain some surprising votes. During the last session, she says, some lawmakers proposed that consumers get refunds when they're overcharged on their electric bills. That seems a no brainer, but Main notes Dominion Energy gave nearly a million dollars in campaign contributions to candidates for the General Assembly.

"All of the utility reform bills went down to defeat as well as a bill which would have allowed consumers to buy renewable energy from any seller, and that would have really opened up the market for renewable energy."

Dominion spokesman Rayhan Daudani calls reform proposals misguided, warning similar policies led to the winter's tragic events in Texas. He said the company's political contributions are paid by shareholders on behalf of 15-thousand employees, adding that the firm is transparent and bipartisan.

The Virginia Public Access Project reports that of the 11 biggest recipients of donations from Dominion in a legislature controlled by Democrats, only one is a Republican -- Senator Tommy Norment who, by the way, owns at least \$50,000 in Dominion stock.

“In the subcommittee hearing these bills,” says the Sierra Club's Ivy Main, “Norment expressed great concern for the impact of utility reform bills on share prices for Dominion.”

Reformers also pointed to the GEO Group, a for-profit company paid \$2 million a month to manage the Lawrenceville Correctional Center. Relatives of inmates had complained about conditions there, claiming lockdowns were necessary because the prison was understaffed. Last year the fiancée of one inmate reported a brawl when problems with the plumbing put everyone on edge.

“There was at least a foot of water in the pod,” she recalls. “Tensions had been high, and they all started talking smack to each other, and apparently the violence just exploded.”

Two men ended up at VCU’s Medical Center with serious injuries, but lawmakers refused to end the state’s contract.

The GEO Group calls public criticism outrageous, baseless, and egregious -- dismissing any connection between flooding and fighting at Lawrenceville. Citing its “long-standing partnership with the Commonwealth,” GEO says it supports candidates who recognize “the important role we play.” The firm gave \$35,000 to candidates for the General Assembly last year.

Attorney David Toscano, who served 14 years in the House of Delegates, says campaign donations may not buy votes, but they often purchase access, and in a legislature of part-time lawmakers with limited resources, that can be especially valuable.

“Sometimes it enters the mind of legislators. They say, ‘Oh yeah, this person’s been a very good contributor. Maybe I should take their call.’ You have to get your information wherever you can, and sometimes that comes in the form of lobbyists coming to visit with you about a piece of legislation or a perspective they have about a bill.”

So how concerned should voters be about corporate campaign contributions, and when might lawmakers be willing to regulate political donors?

*Part Two:*

During the last campaign cycle, corporations, political action committees, non-profits and individuals donated more than \$124 million to candidates for the Virginia House of Delegates and State Senate. Critics contend that warped the way lawmakers voted in 2021, but efforts to reform campaign finance in Richmond have repeatedly failed. So why are politicians reluctant to limit donations and might that change next year?

David Toscano spent 14 years in the Virginia House of Delegates and has written two books on state politics. The Democrat from Charlottesville says there's too much money in campaigns for the General Assembly.

"People have to contemplate spending upwards of over \$500,000 to a million dollars to run for a delegate seat, which is a part-time job that doesn't pay very much money," he explains. "It sort of limits the universe of people who potentially could run."

One reason he says Virginia elections attract so much money is because of their timing.

"They are all held in the off years. In other words they're not occurring at the same time as the presidential races which tend to suck up a lot of campaign contributions, and there are increasing amounts of money being spent."

But lawmakers have rejected efforts to impose some restrictions on who donates and how much.

"I tried to impose even a \$10,000 limit a couple of years ago," Toscano recalls. "It went absolutely nowhere."

It's frustrating for Brian Johns, the executive director of Virginia Organizing. That progressive group lobbied hard for utility rate reform in the last session, but members of the Senate Commerce and Labor Committee blocked proposed changes. In 2020 those same legislators accepted more than \$280,000 in campaign contributions from the state's largest power company.

"One of the key hurdles is the amount of contributions that folks are getting from Dominion," he says.

And this wasn't the first time he's been up against big bucks in the legislature.

"I remember early days in pay day lending fights, walking in and feeling outnumbered five or six to one in terms of paid lobbyists, and we've got directly affected members who have a pay day

loan out going in to try to tell their story, knowing full well that lobbyists are going to follow us and say why we shouldn't cap interest rates."

But lawmakers did, eventually, impose regulation on pay day lenders as public awareness and support grew.

"We often say we'll never have the same amount of money as our opposition, so we've got to try to organize as many people as possible," Johns says.

And Toscano points out that corporations aren't the only ones making large campaign contributions in Virginia.

"You do have interest groups that are actively engaged," he says. "The League of Conservation Voters is a great example. Planned Parenthood is another one. Groups like the hospital association, the doctors' association. You've got individual donors like Michael Bills and Sonya Smith who on the Democratic side gave over a million dollars to candidates' races in 2019."

Still Common Cause, a non-profit focused on keeping government clean, says the current system is ripe for reform. An attorney for the group, Stephen Spaulding, thinks the public is also ready.

"I think most Americans recognize that a system dominated by wealthy campaign spenders really tilts the playing field in their favor."

Even politicians may be unhappy with the current system of campaign finance.

"I think they themselves really don't like to have to go dialing for dollars – asking for big checks because of the pay-to-play culture that it appears to further," Spaulding says.

So why did Virginia's legislature again reject campaign finance reform in 2021? Former Delegate Toscano says the session was short and the issue was complicated. He believes the state needs a commission to study the issues.

In fact, the General Assembly did pass a resolution to research and report on what campaign finance reform might look like – a report that will be ready in time for the 2022 session when Toscano thinks lawmakers might finally be ready for a change.