

Plastic Politics

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Ever since the dawn of the 13 colonies, New Jersey has been an epicenter of amazing social life, culture, and technology. However, this golden legacy casts a daunting shadow – the buildup of trash has accumulated more in America than anywhere else in the world. Some places, such as New York City, are even known to have dirty roads littered with debris. New Jersey faces many issues when it comes to trash as well. The state is overflowing with landfills and garbage dumps, but for some reason, trash always finds a cozy nest in the middle of the road. Over time, New Jersey has stepped up from once dealing with this issue locally to now enforcing a statewide regime surrounding its trash. Early efforts like the Recycling Enhancement Act and municipal ordinances functioned more as groundwork and experiments than as systemic solutions. It was clear that in New Jersey, the momentum for dealing with rubbish moved to outright bans. The shift from voluntary solutions to enforcing a statewide ban on trash in New Jersey helps address the issue of plastic pollution globally, putting the state at the forefront of policies dedicated to environmental reparations.

Trash has a way of polluting people's lives, not just the environment. The quality of life for an individual considerably decreases when they are living near a garbage dump running rampant with germs and disease. However extreme a case like this sounds, the Global South and other developing regions deal with problems like these daily. That's why it's so imperative for New Jersey and the rest of the Global North to find working solutions and spread them to other places that need the help.

But what do these solutions look like? Putting aside Non-Government Organizations, or NGOs, that have their own set of regulations when it comes to implementing policies, what can

governments do to minimize plastic pollution? One method is to expand on pre-existing laws that may need some work.

Over the years, New Jersey has passed several notable laws meant to minimize plastic pollution. For instance, the Recycling Enhancement Act (2008) imposed a recycling tax to help fund local recycling programs across municipalities. This law created a baseline for the state to act, allowing for future policies to build off of it. Then came the Carryout Bag Reduction Study Commission Act (2017), which created a state-level task force to investigate the impacts of single-use bags. It marked an important shift toward evidence-based policymaking in waste reduction. These then inspired further localized bans or fees on plastic bags passed by townships like Hoboken and Belmar. Despite this honest attempt to fix the issue of plastic pollution, the inconsistencies and patchy framework of each policy restricted the amount of clean-up the state could accomplish. The tipping point came in 2018, when Governor Phil Murphy vetoed a 5-cent bag fee bill, arguing it was too lenient. This rejection fueled demand for a staggering change, culminating in the Plastic Pollution Reduction Act (P.L. 2020, c.117). This law not only banned single-use plastic bags statewide but also prohibited paper bags at large grocery stores and eliminated most uses of polystyrene foam. Its boldness set a new standard nationally. Where there were once decentralized policies focused on the local level, there was now a powerful policy focused on the state's overall betterment. Additional updates in 2024 tightened these regulations further by ending key exemptions. Altogether, these laws show a steady progression from fragmented efforts to an assertive and centralized strategy.

Still, laws are only as powerful as their implementation, and many of New Jersey's plastic regulations could be refined or expanded to ensure long-term effectiveness. One clear area that could see improvement is education or awareness of issues, especially in lower-income

areas. To help other parts of the world, it is integral for US states to first help themselves. Low-income areas often see the most amount of garbage but the least amount of help. To alleviate the growing mess, raising awareness in these locations is important and will help lift the quality of life in the long term. Additionally, revising product exemption lists (such as those for certain packaging or medical plastics) could ensure more uniform reductions. Governments might also introduce incentive-based reforms, like offering subsidies for companies to adopt biodegradable packaging or refill models. While the current laws do a fair job of regulating and minimizing trash levels, they can be tweaked for an ideal society free of pesky junk.

Compared to other states, New Jersey's legislation is unusually aggressive. California, for example, bans single-use plastic bags but allows paper bags for a fee. New York also bans plastic bags but leaves much enforcement to local jurisdictions. Oregon and Colorado impose small charges on reusable or paper bags rather than banning them outright. These states often choose gradual transitions and price-based nudges. New Jersey, by contrast, takes a ban-heavy approach that standardizes expectations statewide. Therefore, New Jersey is indeed the star role for change in the US. Other states are lagging behind, sticking to ineffective decentralized policies. By following New Jersey's lead, other states can implement similar solutions to get rid of trash. This will ultimately culminate in a chain reaction, allowing for the policies to eventually reach the Global South and other developing regions.

While governments drive policy, NGOs play a crucial role in raising awareness for cleanup operations. Organizations like Clean Ocean Action, Surfrider Foundation, and The Nature Conservancy actively engage in New Jersey's coastal and urban cleanup efforts. These groups help bridge the gap between regulation and real-world impact. For instance, NGOs can conduct public awareness campaigns, educating consumers and producers about the economic

effects on the environment, and directly remove plastic waste from public spaces. They also provide critical feedback loops by studying how plastic pollution persists despite regulations. Importantly, many NGOs serve as watchdogs, tracking state and corporate accountability. Some even partner with schools and communities to foster a culture of sustainability from the ground up. By combining data collection, advocacy, and volunteerism, NGOs help widen the scope of formal environmental law in ways that legislation alone cannot.

Together, governments and NGOs formulate a dual approach to the plastic pollution crisis. The laws themselves establish the legal baseline: they outlaw certain harmful products, fund infrastructure improvements, and create penalties for noncompliance. But on their own, these laws may fall short without cultural, economic, and educational reinforcement. That's where government expansion (such as adding stronger compliance protocols and revisiting loopholes) and NGO engagement become essential. NGOs lend flexibility and trust in communities, as well as the opportunity to easily join the clean-up movement. Meanwhile, state agencies possess the power to standardize enforcement and invest in innovation. The more these groups collaborate strategically, the more effective New Jersey's model can become - not just for local environmental justice but as a blueprint for global solutions.

Plastic pollution is more than a local issue for New Jersey residents. It's a global emergency, affecting the seas, the earth, the air, and even entire ecosystems. New Jersey has taken admirable steps to confront this challenge head-on, becoming a national leader in single-use plastic regulation. But this momentum needs to go forward. Governments, NGOs, and citizens need to all do their part to help combat plastic pollution. Whether it's picking up trash during a local cleanup or passing the next generation of environmental laws, every action counts. If New Jersey—one of the most densely populated and industrialized states—can clean up its act,

it can serve as a guiding light for other states and countries in the fight against plastic waste. The future of environmental law - and by extension, the very world we live in - lies with us.

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