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'Light load' on ballot

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Four constitutional changes up to voters Oct. 20

BATON ROUGE (AP) — After years of loading up ballots with proposed constitutional changes, lawmakers were a bit more restrained in what they're sending to voters for the Oct. 20 election — four constitutional amendment proposals.

That's far fewer than the 21 approved by voters last year.

"This will be a light load this year for the voters to figure out," said Jim Brandt, president of the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council.

Lawmakers wrapped up their regular legislative session last week, a session focused mainly on budget and financial matters since the state had a record surplus for spending. The money limited the debate of constitutional changes and other items, said Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana.

"I think there was so much money on the table this year, people saw dollar signs in their eyes ... and everything else was a distraction," Erwin said.

The four proposals sent to voters were legislation to:

- Expand the property tax exemption to include consigned jewelry. Voters last year approved a measure to exclude works of art from property taxes.
- Prohibit lawmakers from reducing the "supplemental pay" the state pays to local police and firefighters. The pay is expected to go from \$300 to \$425 a month when Gov. Kathleen Blanco signs the state's operating budget.
- Expand the supplemental pay rolls to include firefighters and police officers employed by port authorities. It would apply to 44 police officers and 10 firefighters at the Port of New Orleans and 14 police officers at the Port of Lake Charles.
- Require the Legislature to provide a financing stream for future benefits for the state's retirement systems when it approves new retirement benefits. The liability of any new benefits must be paid off within 10 years.

The proposals were approved by at least a two-thirds vote of the Legislature and now must be ratified by a majority of voters for passage.

