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Louisiana Elections: The Issues Not Political Hype

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Candidates for the Legislature and statewide elected offices including governor should be pressed into clear statements of policy intent that go beyond the usual campaign chatter. A new report released by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana (PAR) will help voters ask this important question of candidates: Can you tell me not only what needs to change in this state, but how you plan to change it if you are elected and empowered to represent me?

“Questioning Candidates beyond the Platitudes” outlines a set of critical policy issues that cannot be addressed with simple answers and campaign slogans. The report distills these problems into the basic facts and explains the political challenges inherent in each solution. Sample questions are provided to help voters press candidates for specific answers. PAR hopes these questions will encourage voters to scrutinize the hopefuls to determine who has plans of action to back up their slogans and sound bites.

The elections of 2007 feature an unprecedented opportunity for a power shift in Louisiana politics. With nearly half the members of the Legislature unable to run for their current office because of term limits and a first-term governor who has chosen not to run again, voters are challenged to choose from among an unprecedented number of new faces. However, the campaigns so far are vague on many of the major issues. Less than two months before Election Day on Oct. 20, candidate platforms lack the substance and specifics necessary to demonstrate vision for Louisiana’s future.

“Hopefully, the state will elect a set of candidates capable of leading progress rather than following public opinion polls,” said PAR President Jim Brandt. “This report can help voters to make that distinction. It challenges both candidates and voters to push for more meaningful debate.”

Some factors that are currently driving what could be a major shift in political culture for Louisiana include the ongoing recovery from the storms of 2005 and a demographic shift fueled by the brain drain, aging baby boomers and the low educational attainment of the state's workforce. Solutions to these issues are neither clear nor expedient, but unless policymakers have well-developed preferences and plans in place from their first day in office, progress will be hampered.

This report covers the following topics:

1. Restructuring Tax and Spending Policies
2. Strengthening the Workforce through Educational Realignment
3. Meeting the Standards of Education Accountability
4. Funding Health Care for the Uninsured
5. Funding the Big Ticket Needs (transportation, retirement systems, coastal protection/restoration and rebuilding storm-damaged areas)

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the top issues facing Louisiana. Rather, it is a list of the most complex and difficult-to-solve problems that will require an open and ongoing dialogue among policymakers and the public to determine the best path for the state.

These five policy areas require office holders to make distinct choices from among viable options for action. While research findings are certainly available to draw upon in each of these areas, several distinct, often mutually exclusive, paths to reform are evident. Each candidate's judgment will have to come into play.

For example, it should be made clear by candidates which taxes they would propose lowering, raising and shifting and which government expenditures they would accordingly aim to increase or reduce. Do they favor toll roads or additional gas taxes to pay for the highway improvements they promote? What changes to the state's system of health care for the uninsured would they propose or oppose? How would they prioritize coastal restoration projects and secure additional state funding to begin them?

"The solutions to these problems don't come cheap, so trade-offs will have to be made. If we put more here, we have to put less there. If we cut this tax or fee, we have to raise that tax or fee," Brandt said. "Voters need to know which candidates can and cannot fill in the details of their big plans in order to take their proposals beyond campaign platitudes."

The group of officials elected this year will be positioned to develop and implement reforms that could propel Louisiana toward a brighter future. This report will enable citizens to engage in dialogue armed with the facts necessary to test candidates on the nuance and thoroughness of their promises. Encouraging honest and open debate about the state's policy options in these critical areas tops PAR's agenda for the election season.

"Questioning Candidates beyond the Platitudes" can be accessed on PAR's Web site at www.la-par.org.