



Must be a better way to handle amendments

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To those of you who exercised the privilege and responsibility of voting yesterday, we offer our gratitude. It was not an easy election for conscientious voters who are determined to cast an informed vote when they go to the polls. Learning the content and potential impact of 13 amendments was a major task. According to the Public Affairs Research Council, that was the third largest number of amendments on a single ballot since the 1974 Constitution was adopted. And on Nov. 7, citizens will be asked to vote on eight more. That, PAR says, will make 2006 the year with the largest number of proposed changes to this constitution.

We have suggested before that there may be a better way to make changes to the constitution. In light of the demand of this year's two elections, we are fully convinced that government should strongly study possible alternatives. In any election year, a study should be made of every proposed amendment with an eye toward determining whether it could be made a statute instead. We may need to go beyond that, however.

Louisiana has long had a tendency to lock into the constitution things that may not belong there. This stems in part from a lack of trust in government. When citizens are asked to approve funding for a particular purpose, they want assurance that the money will go to that purpose. Consequently, officials seek to assure approval by locking the entire matter into the constitution. That keeps legislators from re-routing the money by a simple vote.

Indicative of the consequences is the fact that, according to PAR, Louisiana leads the nation in the number of constitutions adopted "and has been among the most prolific in adopting amendments."

In 1970, there were 53 proposed amendments on the ballot. Voters finally rebelled, and all the proposals were defeated. Considering this year's amendment count, maybe it would be prudent to do a thorough study aimed at changing the system. Otherwise, we may be headed for another rebellion.

The goal of such a study should be to get back to the concept of the constitution as a relatively permanent statement of basic law, with details incorporated into statutes whenever possible. There is no benefit in setting firm principles, then making copious exceptions by amendment.

Also, an approach is needed that would prohibit the hurried approval of amendments without adequate study by the legislature. In such cases, further amendments are usually needed to undo the undesirable effects of the originals.

After facing 13 proposed amendments and looking forward to eight more in November, we believe the people of Louisiana are ready for a change in the way changes are made to the constitution.

