

## Constitutional amendments headed for voter approval

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### HOW THEY FARED

With 3,948 of the state's 3,960 precincts reporting, here are results for the eight proposed constitutional amendments:

Amendment No. 1: Property tax assessment freezes for military and disabled

Freeze property tax assessments for certain military personnel and those classified permanent disabled.

For: 578,064.

Against: 274,690.

Amendment No. 2: Parish severance tax allocation

Share an additional \$100,000 of oil and gas taxes with 31 producing parishes.

For: 495,660.

Against: 345,269.

Amendment No. 3: Property tax exemption for leased medical equipment

Extend property tax exemption on leased equipment to three rural nonprofit hospitals.

For: 498,247.

Against: 337,348.

Amendment No. 4: Municipal property tax exemption for motor vehicles

Prohibits parishes from levying property taxes on vehicles. Only New Orleans levies such a tax.

For: 512,362.

Against: 329,738.

Amendment No. 5: Property tax exemption for consigned art

Exempt art held on consignment by dealers from property taxes. Only in New Orleans is the tax applied.

For: 450,317.

Against: 375,127.

Amendment No. 6: New family and juvenile judges

Give the Legislature the definite power to create new juvenile and family court judgeships.

For: 498,663.

Against: 322,339.

Amendment No. 7: Consolidation of the New Orleans assessors

Consolidates the seven assessors in office into one. The amendment must pass both statewide and within Orleans.

For: 671,604.

Against: 184,841.

Orleans: For: 46,738; Against: 21,706.

Amendment NO. 8: Central Community School System

Would create a fourth school district within East Baton Rouge Parish. Must pass both statewide and within East Baton Rouge.

For: 455,538.

Against: 374,022.

East Baton Rouge: For: 55,245; Against: 25,341.

BATON ROUGE "" All eight constitutional propositions appeared to have won ratification in Tuesday's elections, returns showed Tuesday night.

The widest margin was the 4-to-1 approval of Amendment No. 7, which consolidates the seven separate tax assessors' offices in Orleans Parish in 2010. It was passing by 70 percent in Orleans; 79 percent statewide.

The narrowest margin was the 54-46 favoring exhibit art hanging in art galleries from property taxes.

Overall, voters favored property tax exemptions, approving all four propositions that granted or reduced property taxes.

Voters agreed that certain military personnel and the disabled should have their property taxes frozen, that leased medical equipment in rural hospitals should be property tax-free, that no parish should be allowed to levy a property tax on motor vehicles and, by the narrow margin, the art for sale on consignment in art galleries should not be taxed along with the building.

In addition, voters agreed with sharing an additional state mineral taxes with the 31 producing parishes by increasing the ceiling to \$850,000 from \$750,000, approving an additional suburban school district in East Baton Rouge Parish "" bringing the number of districts to four in the capital city, clarifying that the Legislature has the power to create family and juvenile judgeships in each local judicial district that a fourth school district should be created in East Baton Rouge Parish.

The school district must also receive approval from the U. S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

"It is very unusual to have 21 amendments on the ballot with six weeks and all of them pass," said Barry Erwin, president of the non-profit Council for A Better Louisiana.

"In previous elections, it was more 'when in doubt, leave it out,' but we are not seeing that attitude among voters this year," Erwin said. "In the past, voters have been more cautious."

University of Louisiana-Lafayette political scientist Pearson Cross agreed. "They are all passing, even the ones that were bad ideas and CABL recommended against."

"The public seems to have an unlimited appetite for adding to and expanding the state constitution," Cross said. "We know where this ends up: we are going to paint ourselves into a constitutional corner, and we will probably be needing a new constitution within the next decade, if not sooner."

CABL had recommended against the special property exemption for some military, the motor vehicle tax exemption and the new East Baton Rouge Parish school district.

Jim Brandt, the president of the Louisiana Public Affairs Research Council, was perplexed.

"I am very surprised there is no sign of voter fatigue or frustration with constitutional amendments. This was not an easy group of amendments to relate to, but they are all passing.

"Does this mean voters are more trusting or simply that the subject matter was so complex that only the chronic voters bothered to cast ballots?" Brandt said. "I don't know."

In New Orleans, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans had spent \$400,000 locally to win a greater than two-to-one margin approving the consolidation of the assessors offices, a holdover from the time when there were several different municipalities within Orleans parishes.

"Tonight shows the power of the people over the politics of the past," said realtor Ruthie Frierson, a founder of the grassroots movement that has brought levee board consolidation and then turned to the assessors. "It brings hope to all of us who want to rebuild our city together. There was no racial divide over this," she said. "This sends a very clear message that we are committed to rebuilding our city."

Louisiana legislators and voters have been approving an increasing number of state constitutional amendments over the past decade.

Over the past two years, the Legislature approved the 21 propositions for this year's statewide election ballots. There were no statewide elections in 2005, so there have been a record 21 propositions put before voters this fall. That eclipsed the previous record of 20 in 1998, when three propositions were rejected.

Voters approved all 13 constitutional amendments that were on the Sept. 30 ballot, including two that both the CABL and PAR said were flawed and would require subsequent amendments to correct the problems.

No other state came close in the number of constitutional propositions. The next highest number were seven propositions each on the ballots in South Carolina and Colorado, Brandt said.

Voter anger at the number and complexity of constitutional amendments led the governor and Legislature to call the Constitutional Convention of 1973, which was a much briefer document than the multiple-volume Louisiana Constitution of 1921.

The 1921 constitution had been amended 536 times before voters began rejecting all propositions in 1970. The new constitution was adopted by voters in 1974. Since then, there have been 202 proposed amendments and voters have ratified 140, or 70 percent.

"We lead the nation in this dubious distinction of the most amendments. We have also set the national record for the number of constitutions "" 11. The average among states is two," Brandt said.