

Weakened Blanco probably hurt most by do-nothing session

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BATON ROUGE -- When you strike out, you just don't look good.

While there's no poll data showing who got smeared the worst by the do-nothing special session of the Louisiana Legislature earlier this month, most analysts believe Gov. Kathleen Blanco will get the most blame.

"My feeling is that she got hurt more because the failure followed rare, rare unanimity of opinion from newspapers, good government groups and others that the session should not even be held," said demographer Elliott Stonecipher, of Shreveport. "So it appears that interested parties -- but not Kathleen Blanco and her staff -- saw how this would go."

The lesson of the session is that the minority -- Republicans this year, but potentially Democrats after the 2007 elections -- can block a governor from achieving anything that needs a two-thirds majority.

In this instance, House Republicans, joined by two Democrats, voted solidly against lifting the little-noticed constitutional cap on the growth of state spending, denying Blanco the two-thirds vote she needed to spend the state's nearly \$2 billion financial windfall. That caused most of her agenda to fail.

Neither Stonecipher nor others contacted for this story said they envisioned the day when the Louisiana Legislature would adjourn leaving \$250 million in tax relief bills -- including measures restoring deductions on state income tax for mortgage interest and charitable contributions -- sitting on the table, unapproved.

"What you saw is how 40 people, a minority, called the shots," Stonecipher said.

"After the '07 election, if there is a Republican majority, Democrats will be in the same position."

One factor that Stonecipher believes led more people than usual to pay attention to the special session is more people were going to be directly affected, either through the tax relief or pay raise proposals. "That's another reason she's hurt more," Stonecipher said.

University of Louisiana-Lafayette political scientist Pearson Cross said he believes it is a major setback for Blanco, who made a reference to the session as a "Waterloo," or loss for her.

"Blanco, by calling the session, had more to lose than did Republicans who wouldn't allow her to spend the surplus," Cross said. "It is harder to get back on the winning side when you are already down in public perception."

Survey USA's monthly polling has shown Blanco's approval rating post-Katrina as around 40 percent, but never higher than 44 percent, Stonecipher pointed out.

Both Blanco and the Legislature share responsibility for what happened, said Jim Brandt, head of the Public Affairs Research Council, the private, nonprofit think tank.

"The session was ill-planned, ill-conceived and ill-timed," Brandt said, all of those falling on Blanco's shoulders. "However, there was certainly an elevated level of partisanship which contributed to the failure of the session."

Brandt said partisanship in itself is a healthy presentation of differing views. "But in this instance, there was a lot of personal agendas and looking forward to next year's elections," he said. "There is enough blame to go around."

Council for A Better Louisiana President Barry Erwin said the session was doomed before it began.

"It was a session called very quickly. You had the president of the Senate saying we shouldn't have it. You had good government groups like CABL saying you don't need it, and you also had this extra little catch that to spend all this money, you needed a two-thirds vote."

Not spending the money during a hastily called special session might be a good thing, Erwin said, as it will give everyone more time to consider how best to invest the \$2 billion windfall.

"We still have \$11 billion in unmet highway construction needs, about the same in retirement debt and at least \$14 billion in coastal restoration needs," Erwin said. "The point is if we want off the bottom of these lists, we need to address some of these problems, and we're not going to do it for free."

State Sen. Robert Barham, R-Oak Ridge, said he thinks a little bit of blame will spread over everyone.

"Whenever you have a session that is a total failure, there is enough blame that everyone can share in it," Barham said.

But most people he talks with blames Blanco more, Barham said.

"Most of the people really didn't want us down there (in Baton Rouge)," Barham said. "A Christmas session just looks funny. PAR, CABL, LABI (the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, the state's largest business lobbying organization) and all the major newspaper editorials were saying, 'Do not spend the money but step back and take a look at it,'" Barham said. "That should have been a signal to the administration."

State Sen. Lydia Jackson, D-Shreveport, doesn't believe too many people were really paying close attention.

"Most citizens were preoccupied with Christmas and holiday activity that they were not paying attention to the nonactivity that was going on in Baton Rouge, which is probably why we got away with doing nothing," Jackson said.

"We all look bad. I think the public looks for results and neither the governor nor the Legislature produced anything of any significance in their lives."