



Hope fading for GOP gains in La. Legislature

By Jan Moller, Special to Stateline.org

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The 2007 election season couldn't have started out much more promising for Republicans in Louisiana, a state that has remained a Democratic stronghold in an era of GOP dominance in the rest of the Deep South.

Republican U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal was heavily favored to win the governorship held by outgoing Democrat Kathleen Blanco. And the term-limits law pushed through by U.S. Sen. David Vitter (R-La.) when he was a state legislator in 1995 was finally kicking in, affecting about half the seats in the House and Senate.

If ever there was a year when Republicans had a chance to claim a majority in either chamber — a first since Reconstruction — this was it. To help the cause, Vitter formed a political action committee, the Louisiana Committee for a Republican Majority, to pour money into targeted races.

Now, Jindal is heading to the governor's mansion, having been spared a runoff by winning 54 percent of the vote in Louisiana's all-party primary Oct. 20. But the GOP's plan to extend that dominance to the Legislature appears to be falling short of its initial expectations.

As the Nov. 17 runoff approaches, Democrats are assured of retaining at least 22 seats for a majority in the 39-member Senate, while four seats are still up for grabs by either party. (There are also five all-Democratic runoffs and one all-Republican contest on the ballot.)

The 105-member House remains in play, but most analysts predict the Democrats will retain a slim majority. Heading into Saturday's runoff, Democrats are assured of holding 45 seats and Republicans 42.

Analysts credit the Democrats' success in recruiting conservative candidates for districts that were carried by President Bush in 2004 and Louisiana's longstanding proclivity for disregarding party labels in local and state elections.

In the House, the partisan makeup will be decided in 16 races that pit a Democrat against a Republican, and one in which a Democrat faces an independent who usually votes with

Republicans. The GOP needs to win 11 of those races to earn a majority. Another 22 runoffs are intra-party contests that will have no effect on the partisan makeup.

Still, the prospect of a Democratic Legislature doesn't necessarily spell trouble for Louisiana's new Republican governor because of a unique state tradition that gives governors great sway in the selection of House speaker and Senate president.

The Legislature is an independent branch of government, and Jindal said he is prepared to respect the right of the House and Senate to pick its own leadership. But the governor-elect also reserved the right to get involved if the selection process bogs down, and history suggests the matter won't be solved without some input from the new administration.

"I suspect he may be rethinking" his vow not to get involved in the leadership races, said Jim Brandt, president of the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana.

Or, as political analyst John Maginnis put it in *The Times-Picayune*: "Until he (Jindal) gets involved, deadlocks in both houses are assured, given the multiple candidates and the desire of many members to ingratiate themselves to the new governor. With or without meddling from Jindal, there is a good chance the next House speaker will be a Republican even if Democrats retain a slim House majority. Several conservative Democrats likely could be persuaded to cross party lines to vote for a GOP speaker, especially if Jindal signals a preference. The speaker, in turn, is widely expected to appoint members of both parties to committee chairmanships and other leadership posts.

"It's not necessarily a Republican majority, but it's a conservative majority," said Pearson Cross, a professor of political science at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. "I think Bobby Jindal will find them willing and able to play ball, and I think they will be amenable to his direction."

If Jindal's agenda should run aground, chances are it will happen in the Senate. While term limits will usher more than three dozen new members into the House, some of the veterans being forced from the lower chamber by term limits are simply walking across the hall to the Senate.

The House members who have moved up to the Senate include several longtime Democratic stalwarts, such as 36-year-veteran John Alario, who represents a blue-collar New Orleans suburb and has served as a floor leader under several Democratic governors, including Edwin Edwards. With a reputation as a consummate dealmaker, Alario is expected to seek a leadership post in the Senate, though he is not among the handful of lawmakers who are vying for the presidency.

The state GOP did itself no favors when it decided to pour money and resources into trying to defeat Alario's Senate bid in a race he still ended up winning easily with 62 percent of the primary vote on Oct. 20.

“The Senate is just an incredible roadblock, especially after they (Republicans) infuriated Alario to the point that they did,” said Elliott Stonecipher, a Shreveport, La., demographer and political analyst.

The first big test for Jindal, a 36-year-old policy wunderkind, will be a special session on ethics reform that the governor-elect has promised to call shortly after his Jan. 14 inauguration. Convinced that Louisiana’s well-earned reputation for corruption is keeping the state from attracting investment and newcomers the way other Southern states have in recent years, Jindal wants stronger financial-disclosure requirements for legislators and lobbyists and a ban on elected officials receiving state contracts.

Lawmakers managed to kill a much softer disclosure bill during the 2007 session, but expectations are that Jindal will be successful because he campaigned heavily on ethics reform and new governors traditionally enjoy a honeymoon period when their agendas are given great deference.

A study by the nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity examining the quality of states’ 2004 financial-disclosure laws ranked Louisiana 44th out of 47 states that require disclosure filings.

After the special session comes the nuts and bolts of daily governing and crafting a budget. But here again, Jindal enters from a position of strength, having inherited a \$1 billion budget surplus and a state economy that is booming thanks to sky-high energy prices and a flood of post-Katrina rebuilding dollars.

“The good news, from his standpoint, is he starts out from a much stronger fiscal posture than other governors traditionally have,” said Brandt, who serves as an unpaid adviser on fiscal matters to the Jindal transition team.

But that aside, a more fundamental question is whether Louisiana’s unique political culture of bipartisanship can remain intact. For generations, debates at the Capitol have been far more likely to break down along regional or racial lines than the partisan tit-for-tat that dominates many statehouses. That began to change during Blanco’s administration, as the GOP inched closer to parity and controversial votes frequently broke down along party lines.

Jindal insists that he would like to see a return to the age of bipartisanship, calling it one of the few things that Louisiana has gotten right over the years. But many fear that the age of Washington, D.C.-style partisanship, symbolized by Vitter’s PAC and similar fund-raising efforts on the part of Democrats, is here to stay.

“I think bipartisanship in Louisiana is really, if not at an end, certainly close to an end,” said Cross, the political science professor. “We’re heading towards increased partisan animosity and strife in this state, Mr. Jindal’s statements notwithstanding.”

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