

# Ethics reform is a hot topic in governor's race

All agree on some income disclosure

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By Bill Barrow

BATON ROUGE -- The four major candidates for governor all say they can render as fiction Earl Long's musing that "someday Louisiana is going to get good government -- and they ain't gonna like it." That might make it difficult to distinguish Republican Bobby Jindal, Democrats Walter Boasso and Foster Campbell and independent John Georges on the ever-popular issue of "ethics reform." So perhaps the best questions to ask are what kind of changes in existing laws and enforcement would constitute "good government" and which, if any, of the candidates can persuade a heretofore unwilling class of lawmakers -- and lobbyists -- to go along with potentially fundamental shifts.

The most apparent differences among the four are in their proposed tactics for realizing their proposals and their competing claims about who has the ethical and moral mettle to bring about change.

Jindal, the prohibitive favorite, has attempted to separate himself by naming the rehabilitation of Louisiana's corrupt image as his top priority.

He's promised to devote an early special session to an ethics agenda, presumably derived from a position paper he has published on the issue, though he has not unveiled specific legislation.

He said he would "hold hostage" everything else on the state's agenda -- a new budget and votes on a \$1 billion surplus -- until he wins approval for the special session agenda. "I won't let them vote on what they want to vote on," he said.

The other three major candidates dismiss Jindal campaign ads suggesting they are part of the corrupt culture and question his ability to produce change. None of the three endorsed a special session as necessary to achieve ethics overhaul.

The bottom line

More personal financial disclosure for elected officials, legislators in particular, has become the bellwether issue for self-described good government advocates in the past year.

Despite its failure during this year's regular legislative session, the idea tops the agenda of LAEthics1 and Blueprint Louisiana, both consortiums of business and civic organizations, with some overlap in the two groups. All four candidates have endorsed the idea.

Legislators currently disclose only certain income from government sources and the gaming industry, leaving Louisiana out of the mainstream nationally, according to assessments by national groups such as the Center for Public Integrity.

Both Blueprint and LAEthics1 have called for disclosure only among statewide elected officials, legislators and candidates for those offices. The gubernatorial candidates have all said the requirements should apply to Cabinet appointees as well.

Boasso voted as a state senator for a version that would have applied to all local elected officials.

That version died during this year's regular session when the House refused to go along with a last-minute compromise that excluded local authorities. Boasso and Jindal each said he could sign disclosure legislation either way. "Let's split this into two bills if necessary," Jindal said. "Let's not let legislators use that as an excuse not to have disclosure for anyone."

More from lobbyists

The civic and business groups and the major candidates all offer general support for requiring lobbyists to disclose more about their activities, including their spending on lawmakers.

Campbell goes further as the only candidate advocating that lobbyists be banned from the legislative chamber floors altogether.

He also proposes a ban on all gifts from lobbyists to legislators, a proposal similar to his failed effort on the Public Service Commission to ban commissioners from accepting gifts from regulated utilities.

Jindal wants to make lobbyists disclose their contractual terms -- with all disclosures being filed electronically so it is accessible on the Internet -- and to ban contingency fee lobbying deals based on winning. He also wants to block all lawmakers from lobbying or representing firms to state government, while also blocking contracts between the state and businesses in which lawmakers have a financial stake, though he specified in an interview that he would not intend the ban necessarily to prevent state workers, teachers or doctors who accept Medicaid from serving in elected office.

Jindal has pitched a comprehensive review of the existing exceptions to the ethics law -- there are more than 100 -- and requiring a supermajority vote for any new loopholes. Georges, who is largely financing his own campaign, trumpets that he will not knowingly accept contributions from anyone seeking a state contract. Georges doesn't go as far as Campbell in essentially calling for a "no cup of coffee" rule banning gifts for lawmakers, but he said the state should close the loophole in lobbyist gift restrictions that allow lawmakers to accept free tickets to most sporting and cultural events. Find them online

Jindal and Boasso have said, when asked, that all legislative and statewide candidates -- not just those who surpass \$50,000 in fundraising -- should file campaign finance disclosures electronically. Though the disclosures are already public, such a change would make it easier to trace the true sources and amounts of money influencing elections in Louisiana.

None of the candidates has addressed some other shortfalls in Louisiana law, at least as measured against the most stringent laws elsewhere. Most conspicuous are any proposals to change current limits or restrictions on campaign financing. For example, while Georges has sworn off contributions from potential contractors, neither he nor any of his competitors has proposed banning any candidate in the state from accepting contributions from any entity subject to regulation by the office. Currently, there are only limited restrictions associated with contributions from the insurance industry to candidates running for insurance commissioner.

No one is proposing limitations on candidates' ability to use their political action committees to support other candidates, a process that, while not as rampant in Louisiana as in some other states, allows a candidate to shield the true source of campaign funds.

All four of the major candidates have given passing reference to the need to devote more resources to enforcement. Jindal and Georges include that general commitment as a bullet point in their respective written ethics platforms, but none have attached specific dollar figures.

Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a non-partisan policy group, noted that the Legislature historically has been willing to adopt new ethics requirements without backing them with money for enforcement.

Blueprint estimates that the ethics portion of its agenda would take \$680,000 in annual investments to enforce.

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