

The Times-Picayune

Amendments get good reception from La. voters

Every one on ballot approved recently

Thursday, November 09, 2006

By Ed Anderson

BATON ROUGE -- The passage of eight amendments Tuesday brings to 21 the number of voter-made changes to the Louisiana Constitution in the past six weeks, the most in any calendar year since it was enacted in 1974, election officials said Wednesday.

The previous high for amendments ratified in one year was of 17 of 20 in two elections in 1998. Thirteen of 13 proposed amendments were passed in the Sept. 30 elections and eight of eight won voter approval Tuesday.

"I can't imagine this (streak) lasting," said Jim Brandt, president of the non-partisan, Baton Rouge-based Public Affairs Research Council, a government watchdog group. "I think it is an aberration. It is unusual. I don't have an explanation for it, but I don't see that as a trend."

The last time voters rejected a proposed constitutional change was in October 2003, when four of 15 proposals were rejected. Since then, voters have approved 26 consecutive constitutional amendments. Brandt said that since the current constitution went into effect 32 years ago, 148 of 210 proposed changes have been adopted, a rate of more than 70 percent.

The passage of the 21 amendments in the past two elections shows "there may be a little more trust and no significant opposition to any of them" except the amendments to cut the number of assessors in New Orleans from seven to one. That proposal drew organized opposition from most of the sitting assessors, though it passed Tuesday, 78 percent to 22 percent -- the largest margin of any of the proposals on Tuesday's ballot.

Lots of changes

"We are painting ourselves into a corner by adding more details to the constitution, which invites more amendments down the road to change it," Brandt said.

Bernie Pinsonat, a political consultant with Southern Media and Opinion Research of Baton Rouge, said "hot-button issues" like the consolidation of the assessors in New Orleans, the restrictions on expropriating land for public use and the merger of levee districts in southeast Louisiana have served as marquee items attracting voter support in the past two elections and helping other items get a spillover "yes" vote.

While voting for those hot-button items, he said, voters probably will cast a vote for the other proposed changes.

"People don't take the time to read" the constitutional changes, Pinsonat said. "If something is good there, they will vote 'yes' for all of them. They are taking the easy way out. . . . They have no clue as to what they voted for and why."

Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana, another governmental watchdog group, said voters are slam-dunking proposed changes to the constitution because many of the changes are benign, technical clean-up items, such as renaming a coastal restoration authority to give it jurisdiction over hurricane protection or changing the description of a state infrastructure project that is imbedded in the constitution.

"I hope it is not a trend . . . that if the Legislature passes it (a proposed constitutional amendment) by a two-thirds vote, voters feel they should just rubber-stamp it," Erwin said. "Maybe we have gotten to voting for them so that it may have become a common thing to do. . . . It shows me that when voters are given a long list of amendments that don't seem to affect them (voters) in one way or the other, they vote 'yes.'

Little consideration

"There was nothing out there that pushed their buttons to give them concerns. We might have other items on the ballot in the future" that will need more scrutiny and may get swept up into a wave of "yes" votes, he said.

Secretary of State Al Ater said that although all the amendments passed, voters did not willy-nilly approve all of them by the same vote or margin of victory, showing that voters may have voted for some and not others.

"They were picking and choosing," Ater said.

He said while the assessors amendment received the fourth-highest number of votes cast -- 837,625 -- the first proposal on the ballot, one that granted property tax breaks to military veterans, the disabled or their families, received 853,820 votes and passed 68 percent to 32 percent.

.....

Ed Anderson can be reached at eanderson@timespicayune.com or (225) 342-5810.