



## Piecing It Together

By Jeremy Alford

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What's racially divided, increasingly unpredictable and red and blue all over? Based on last week's historic elections that propped up both Republicans and Democrats, it's Louisiana's new political landscape.

"They're all crooks," the elderly Martin Letulier of Lafayette says from the Mudd Street Fire Station polling place on election day. "But I always vote."

Letulier remembers way back in the day — when campaign speeches were delivered from the back of produce trucks and sections of the daily newspaper were still printed in French, when it usually took a pocket full of dough to win an election in Lafayette Parish. It might sound similar to the way things shake out today, but there is one notable divergence in the way political expenditures were handled locally just 40 years ago. If you wanted to win, even place really, the man to talk to was "Coozan" Dudley LeBlanc — known as much then for his Hadacol concoction, which made him a millionaire, as his political conniving, which proved just as lucrative.

In his book *From Huey Long to Hadacol*, author Floyd Martin Clay pulled no punches: "It is now openly conceded by many politicians that one had to approach Dudley with cash in hand when a local election was at stake, and he is alleged to have worked out a regular scale of endorsement, ranging from \$50 for an insignificant post to \$500 for a midrange post, and open-end negotiations for state support." Even Earl Long wasn't exempt from paying Coozan's fees. After one particularly heated election, Uncle Earl supposedly exclaimed, "Hell, you can't buy LeBlanc; you can only rent him."

It's a reputation Louisiana may never shake.

While political payoffs now come in different forms, it is a bit easier to get elected in Lafayette Parish these days. Just ask Bob Robira.

"All my hippies buddies from the sixties are Republicans now," Robira said after emerging from the voting booth last week. "I don't know what happened to them."

Last week's highly-publicized elections are proof. Just like in other recent contests, Lafayette voters toed the party line, selecting GOP candidates all around. John McCain for president. John Kennedy for the U.S. Senate. Charles Boustany in the 7th Congressional District. This is Bush Country, where people clean their guns on Saturdays, go to church on Sundays and avoid any inkling of liberal thought the rest of the week. To be certain, it's beyond trending Republican; it is Republican — as red as crawfish from the Atchafalaya Basin. Longtime Democrats like Robira were hoping last week that Lafayette was ready to

“rattle the cage” again in 2008. “I didn’t vote for a long time after the Nixon landslide in ’72,” he said. “It was discouraging.”

If you’ve been watching the larger voting inclinations of the Deep South, you might think Louisiana as a whole is following suit, but that’s not entirely true. Just look east down Interstate 10 to East Baton Rouge Parish, which fell to President-elect Barack Obama, an unmistakable Democrat, despite the stronghold that President Bush has enjoyed over the home of Mike the Tiger for the past eight years. But on the same day last week, East Baton Rouge voters also elected Republican Bill Cassidy in the 6th Congressional District race. Of course, that contest hosted two other candidates chasing the same black Democratic vote, but it’s a contradiction that still has hacks and flacks scratching their heads.

Obama’s win was indeed historic, but his strides in Louisiana are marked with asterisks. For starters, he only managed to carry 38 percent of the Bayou State last week. There were hopes that Obama would grab a larger share. Former congressman and state Sen. Cleo Fields came close to notching the same percentage (36) in 1995 in his gubernatorial bid against Mike Foster. It’s certainly a positive sign that Louisiana is inching slowly away from racially-charged politics, but there are still sobering facts to suggest Louisiana remains what it always was. For instance, Obama made inroads in places like Baton Rouge, but he was unable to capture any of the parishes that David Duke won in the 1991 “Race From Hell” against Edwin Edwards.

That makes Louisiana not quite red and barely blue — really, it’s more of a bright purple. The end-run analysis may be that Louisiana is more divided than ever, a trend mirrored throughout the South last week. In all, 21 million southerners voted for Republican John McCain, compared to the 18.6 million votes cast for Obama. Back in Louisiana, McCain swept 54 parishes, of which 28 also voted overwhelmingly in many cases for incumbent U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, a New Orleans Democrat.

Pearson Cross, an assistant professor of political science at UL Lafayette, says Louisiana’s mysterious voting patterns find their home in the state populist political past, refined and perpetuated by the likes of Dudley LeBlanc and Earl Long. Religion also continues to separate the Catholic south from the Protestant north, and personalities, more so than party, are the real draws on the ballots. All of it showed up last week in Louisiana’s mixed bag of election results. “The only concrete trend to point to is that voters are divided,” Cross says. “And the divide is over political loyalty to some extent, but it’s not a trend that tracks national patterns. It doesn’t appeal to people who want to fit things neatly into a little box. It’s just the messy reality of politics all over Louisiana.”

Despite McCain’s huge lead in Louisiana, black voters remain a major force statewide, particularly in New Orleans. In contrast to dire predictions of a “Katrina effect” in the wake of the 2005 storms, Landrieu swept her Big Easy base with her biggest margin of victory ever. She carried New Orleans by nearly 86,000 votes and trounced Kennedy by almost 120,000 statewide. “The fact is that there was an opposite effect,” Landrieu says. “People came back, and we came together.” That declaration, however, was only half-hearted. There were still 50,000 fewer votes cast in Orleans Parish last week compared to the 2004 presidential contest. As such, rumors are already swirling that Landrieu may be about to begin her final term.

But for now, she’s still the state’s top Democrat. Moreover, she is now the senior member of Louisiana’s congressional delegation — if you discount Congressman Bill Jefferson, the New Orleans Democrat facing federal corruption charges — and maybe the most powerful. Landrieu holds a seat on the influential Appropriations Committee, and she’s in line to potentially take over the Small Business

Committee in light of news last week that its chairman, Sen. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, was stepping down. Additionally, as key player on the Homeland Security Committee, she'll likely have an open line to the Obama administration on issues involving FEMA.

As for her clout back home, a new political base could be emerging for Landrieu, which would put any and all rumors of a final term to rest. Landrieu was able to capitalize on a new bloc of black Democratic votes last week in Caddo Parish, where she won by a margin of more than 19,000. Democrats have been cultivating the Caddo region in far northwestern Louisiana for two years. In 2006, Landrieu and other Democrats poured cash into the area to help former state Rep. Cedric Glover become mayor of Shreveport, laying a foundation for this year and future efforts.

Landrieu's political action committee donated \$2,500 toward Glover's effort in 2006, and the state party spent more than \$30,000 on election day alone, paying 75 workers \$50 or more each to get people to the polls. Buses transported many voters, and thousands of advertising dollars were spent on urban radio stations. That formula has worked in New Orleans for generations and more recently in Baton Rouge. "But I had never seen it on this scale in Shreveport [like it was in 2006]," says Shreveport demographer and political analyst Elliot Stonecipher, who started pointing to the trend before anyone else. "Landrieu rolled up her sleeves and went in there and made it happen. Only she could do that. It was vintage Mary Landrieu."

Acadiana was viewed as a swing region in the U.S. Senate race, and in the end it was a nearly even division. Landrieu won five of the Cajun Heartland's parishes, including Evangeline, Iberia, St. Landry, St. Martin and St. Mary. Kennedy captured three, including vote-rich Lafayette, Acadia and Vermilion. From that breakdown alone, Landrieu might appear the victor in Acadiana, but once the votes are tabulated, Kennedy appeared on top by a mere 46 votes. For Landrieu, it was enough just to hold her own and turn other regions into battlegrounds.

Overall turnout in Acadiana was higher in each parish than the statewide turnout of 67.1 percent, according to a precinct sampling analysis by GCR & Associates of New Orleans. The highest percentages were seen in Evangeline (71.5) and Lafayette (70.1). Still, the figures are significantly less than the turnout generated by the 1991 Duke-Edwards race, when more than 78 percent of voters in Lafayette went to the polls. Neighboring parishes mirrored those highs.

Another oddity from Acadiana last week is in the 7th Congressional District, where state Sen. Don Cravins, an Opelousas Democrat, failed in overtaking incumbent GOP Congressman Charles Boustany of Lafayette. In Cravins' home parish of St. Landry, the Democrat received roughly 18,000 votes to Boustany's 20,000 — an embarrassing loss. Coincidentally, Obama racked up about 20,000 votes in St. Landry as well, also outpacing Cravins, whose campaign was confident it would be riding the coattails of the Democratic nominee to Washington, D.C.

So, what happened? Sources close to the Louisiana Democratic Party believe the Obama Bounce candidates were relying on statewide never materialized. Black voters turned out in record numbers to vote early, but once the cable networks started handing Obama the presidency in the days leading up to Nov. 4, those who had not voted just stayed home and waited for the victory speech. "The pollsters overestimated the impact Obama was going to have, too," the operative suggests. That would explain the poll released by the Louisiana Democratic Party last month that had Cravins leading Boustany by one percentage point.

In all, less than 2 million votes were cast in Louisiana for the 2008 presidential race, which closely mirrors the votes cast in the Bayou State for the 2004 battle for the White House. For a race that promised to break all previous records, it certainly was a disappointment. But the increasing number of contradictory trends cannot be ignored. Last week, 28 parishes voted for a Republican president and a Democratic senator — almost as many went straight Republican. Based on the GCR analysis, Landrieu received about 34 percent of the total white vote, and Obama received half.

It can get confusing, trying to figure it all out. But just remember, Louisiana might look red on the surface, but there's just enough blue to change the tint. "This all means, going forward, that despite some Katrina effect, Democrats remain competitive statewide and, with a moderate candidate, maintain a slight upper hand," independent political journalist John Maginnis wrote in last week's edition of the Political Fax Weekly.

One final element of mystery from last week's ballot involves how voters treated the state's seven constitutional amendments. Voters approved only three. Those amendments will impose new term limits for certain board and commission members; require extra notice in advance of a special legislative session; and allow temporary successors to be appointed for legislators deployed to active military duty. The early ballot data indicated to some degree that voter fatigue and apathy regarding the issues were key culprits, says Jim Brandt, president of the Public Affairs Research Council, a Baton Rouge-based think-tank.

For instance, the number of people casting votes on each of the seven proposals shows a steady decline from the first to the last. More than 100,000 additional voters weighed in on amendment No. 1 than on amendment No. 7. And not only do the results indicate voter drop-off from the first to the last amendment, but they also indicate that more than 300,000 voters statewide likely chose not to weigh in on the amendments at all. "This result is somewhat surprising considering that voters have approved all but one of the 30 amendment proposals in the five elections since 2004," says Brandt.

For all the heightened interest in the presidential race, voters quickly lost interest in much of the "down ballot" items. It's doubtful that even a payoff to Dudley LeBlanc could have generated more interest, but you never know. Without question, analysts and political scientists will ponder the meaning of it all for years, from the contradictory voting patterns in the presidential and Senate races to the apathy over the proposed amendments. But for now, the only sure thing is that the 2008 election is one that no one in Louisiana or elsewhere will soon forget.