

Racial demagoguery mars New Orleans mayoral election

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After a campaign consisting largely of demagogic name-calling and appeals to racial solidarity, two candidates emerged from the April 22 New Orleans mayoral election and will contest a runoff on May 20. Mayor Ray Nagin led the field with 38 percent of the vote, while his top opponent, Mitch Landrieu, lieutenant-governor of Louisiana, received 29 percent.

The voting pattern in Saturday's first round was sharply polarized along racial lines, with Nagin, who is black, winning every majority-black precinct by heavy margins, while losing white-majority precincts to Landrieu or a second white candidate, Ron Forman, chief executive of the Audubon Nature Institute, which runs the local zoo and aquarium. Forman, a first-time candidate, had the backing of much of the city's business establishment, which backed Nagin in 2002.

The election campaign was dominated by the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed much of the city and left two-thirds of the residents still dispersed across the country, eight months after the city's levee system crumbled. The election, originally scheduled for February 4, was postponed ten weeks to give more time to organize the vote and for residents to return or make arrangements for absentee voting.

In the end, about 110,000 people cast ballots out of nearly 300,000 registered to vote, down significantly from the 135,000 who voted in 2002. There was a disproportionate decline in the number of black voters, who were more likely to be displaced by the post-hurricane flooding. More than 16,000 absentee ballots were cast, most of them by New Orleanians still living in Houston, Atlanta, Baton Rouge and other southern cities.

While the election was nominally non-partisan, the major candidates represented factions of the Democratic and Republican parties. Landrieu is the scion of a Democratic political dynasty: his father was mayor of New Orleans and his sister Mary is a US senator. Forman was the favorite of the largely Republican downtown business interests.

Nagin has straddled the two parties. While nominally a Democrat, in 2003 he endorsed the Republican candidate for governor, Bobby Jindal, against the eventual Democratic winner, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco. A former executive of a cable television company, Nagin has voiced sympathy for right-wing economic nostrums like cutting taxes on corporations and deregulation.

In the wake of Katrina, however, Nagin embraced racial demagoguery in order to appeal to black voters. He seized on the

openly racist sentiments voiced by sections of the business establishment and the Bush administration, including suggestions that New Orleans should be rebuilt with a different population—i.e., excluding many of the poor black residents who comprised the majority before the storm.

One New Orleans millionaire, Jimmy Reiss, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that he favored rebuilding the city “in a completely different way ... demographically.” Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson, who is himself black, told the press last fall, “New Orleans is not going to be black as it was for a long time, if ever again.” The implication of both statements was that the poverty and social decay exposed by the impact of Katrina were somehow the fault of the city's black majority.

Nagin's racial demagoguery was even cruder, notably his pledge, at a celebration of Martin Luther King Day in January, that New Orleans would remain “a chocolate city.” At a campaign appearance among displaced New Orleans residents in Houston, he told his largely black audience that among his 23 challengers, “very few of them look like us.” Nagin suggested that since the city's black voters were disproportionately displaced by Katrina—the two hardest hit areas of the city were the Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East, both heavily black—the participation of so many white candidates was a “power play of sorts.”

This theme—that Nagin was the “black” candidate under siege by “whites”—was taken up by local black ministers and prominent national Democratic Party figures like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who held a rally in the city April 1 calling the facilities for out-of-state voting grossly inadequate and suggesting that even holding the election constituted a violation of the Voting Rights Act.

Nagin's posturing as the candidate of the most oppressed section of the population is a cynical fraud. When he was first elected mayor in 2002, he was the most right-wing of the main candidates, heavily backed by corporate interests to whom he promised a more efficient and business-friendly city administration. He won the runoff in 2002 over a more liberal black opponent, Richard Pennington, who carried nearly every majority-black precinct, while Nagin swept the same white-majority precincts that he lost heavily four years later.

In the current election campaign, Nagin has combined tacit racial appeals with declarations of continued fidelity to the right-wing corporate agenda. At a public meeting in the wealthy Lakeview neighborhood, one of the worst-hit areas in Katrina, Nagin

declared, “I’m a property rights person.” After remaining largely silent about Landrieu before the April 22 vote, he began his runoff campaign by criticizing him from the right, saying that in Landrieu’s years in the state legislature, “He doesn’t have a good business-friendly record.”

An analysis of the election returns made by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* detailed some aspects to the racial polarization. Nagin won 66 percent of the black votes and barely 6 percent of white votes, down from 90 percent in 2002. Two conservative white candidates, Forman and Rob Couhig, divided the bulk of the vote in white precincts with Landrieu. But Landrieu actually won roughly equal numbers of votes in white and black precincts.

On Monday, Forman endorsed Landrieu in the runoff, an action which seems calculated to intensify racial polarization. By conventional standards Nagin is closer politically to Forman than Landrieu. Both Forman and Nagin have criticized the lieutenant governor as a supporter of higher taxes and government spending, echoing the political propaganda of the Bush administration.

Forman’s endorsement signals a decision by the city’s business establishment that Nagin has become too polarizing a figure and must be removed, even if Landrieu’s past support for higher public spending is held against him. In the past two months, Forman and Landrieu each raised \$2 million in campaign contributions, while Nagin’s campaign could collect only \$200,000, as his corporate backers largely defected.

Landrieu has hastened to disavow any connection to liberalism, citing his support from both business and union officials, and saying he wants to “represent the center” in a way “that does not polarize or divide anyone.”

He couched his criticism of Nagin in a conservative tone, saying, “We want somebody who understands and respects the legislative process of both the City Council and the Legislature, and can speak to the business community locally, statewide and nationally...”

At end of the day, we want somebody who’s going to help restore our national credibility.”

While all the major candidates espouse one or another version of right-wing pro-capitalist policies, the conditions of life for the vast majority of the population of New Orleans and for millions displaced by Hurricane Katrina remain dire, and the federal, state and local governments have completely failed to address the most elementary requirements for rebuilding the city.

According to a report issued last week by the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University and the Children’s Health Fund, based on face-to-face interviews with hundreds of families still living in trailers and hotels, 34 percent of children displaced by Katrina suffer from conditions like asthma, anxiety and behavioral problems, compared to 25 percent before the storm. Fourteen percent of children had gone without prescribed medication, up from 2 percent before the storm, and nearly a quarter of school-aged children were not enrolled in school or had missed substantial periods of time in the month before their families were surveyed.

Storm families had moved an average of 3.5 times since last August; 44 percent were living without health insurance, and 37 percent described their health in negative terms, compared 10

percent before Katrina. The authors of the study declared, “Children and families who have been displaced by the hurricanes are being pushed further toward the edge.”

Nearly eight months after the storm, there are still no trailers providing emergency housing in the Lower Ninth Ward, because gas and drinkable water are unavailable. Many cities and parishes (counties) in southern Louisiana are refusing to allow the installation of more trailers by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), claiming they are overloaded with refugees.

A report issued by the Government Accountability Office April 20 found that while the federal Small Business Administration claims to have approved more than \$8.3 billion in loans to over 120,000 small businesses, homeowners and renters, only \$336 million has actually reached disaster victims and 70 percent of all applications have been rejected. The head of the SBA resigned immediately after the report’s release.

Housing Secretary Alphonso Jackson weighed in Monday with another vicious attack on the poorest of the poor, declaring that if public housing was to be restored in New Orleans, “only the best residents” of the now-destroyed housing projects should be allowed into new developments, which will be targeted to “mixed-income” groups rather than the poor. Speaking to a white reporter, Jackson, who is black, observed, “If you said this, they would say you were a racist.”

Meanwhile there has been little progress on preparations to meet what could be an even greater disaster—the upcoming hurricane season, which begins in June. Neither the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana nor FEMA has completed plans for the mass evacuations that would be necessary in the event of another large hurricane striking the weakened coastal defenses of southern Louisiana.

According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, “The federal government has refused to commit to any specific requests for help with evacuations and emergency shelters. This week, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff refused to pledge support for specific requests, and said private institutions in flood zones must take responsibility for evacuating occupants.” The last comment was a reference to nursing homes, hospitals and other facilities with large populations of vulnerable people.



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