

Right-wing Democrat wins governorship in Louisiana

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Conservative Democrat John Bel Edwards won the November 21 runoff election for governor of Louisiana, defeating Republican US senator David Vitter by a margin of 56 percent to 44 percent. Turnout was only 40 percent, but this low figure represented a slight increase over the primary election held October 24.

Vitter was heavily favored when he entered the gubernatorial race early this year, with a huge financial advantage over Republican rivals and given the low standing in polls for the Democratic Party, which had not won a statewide contest in Louisiana since 2008.

Under Louisiana's unique "jungle primary" system, the top two candidates in the primary vote, regardless of party, go forward to the runoff. With only one Democrat, Edwards, in the race, the bulk of the election campaign consisted of three Republicans attacking each other.

Vitter spent the bulk of his war chest smearing his two Republican opponents as closet liberals or corrupt, and they replied with attacks recalling Vitter's involvement in a 2007 prostitution scandal involved a Washington, D.C., call-girl ring.

Edwards ran a low-key, right-wing campaign in the primary, citing his record as a graduate of West Point and an Army Ranger (1988-1996) and his family background as the son and grandson of sheriffs in rural Tangipahoa Parish. (He is not related to former governor Edwin Edwards, a Democrat who served two terms and went to prison on corruption charges.) One brother is the current sheriff of Tangipahoa Parish, and another brother is a local police chief.

A state legislator since 2008 and the current head of the Democratic caucus, Edwards is a conservative Catholic, opposed to abortion and gay marriage, but backed expansion of Medicaid under the Obama health care program, which had been blocked by the current Republican governor, Bobby Jindal. He was also aligned with teachers' unions in opposition to the expansion of

charter schools and school vouchers.

The Democrat highlighted endorsement from police groups like the Louisiana Sheriffs Association and the Louisiana State Troopers Association, as well as key Republican state and local officials, including Newell Normand, sheriff of Jefferson Parish, which comprises the western suburbs of New Orleans and is the state's second largest jurisdiction.

Edwards led the primary with 40 percent of the vote, while the three Republicans divided 57 percent. Vitter was the second-place finisher, with 23 percent, followed by public service commissioner Scott Angelle, with 19 percent, and Lieutenant Governor Jay Dardenne, with 15 percent.

In the four weeks between the primary and the runoff, Edwards capitalized on the divisions in the Republican Party, running attack ads against Vitter related to the prostitution scandal, while one defeated Republican, Dardenne, endorsed him, and the other, Angelle, declared his neutrality.

With polls showing a sizable lead for the Democrat, Vitter responded with a wave of attack ads in the last week focused on the Paris terrorist attacks, suggesting that the Obama administration was sponsoring an "invasion" of Louisiana by Syrian refugees, which Edwards would support. Edwards declared his own opposition to housing Syrian refugees in the state (there are a total of 14).

The popular hatred of Jindal, who has a 20 percent approval rating in polls, was a significant factor in the outcome of the race, with Edwards claiming that Vitter would represent a "Jindal third term." The state faces a \$500 million budget deficit, even after massive cuts in spending for education and health care. Jindal waged an abortive campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, which he abandoned the week before the gubernatorial runoff vote.

Compared to the primary, voter turnout rose sharply in

the runoff election in both New Orleans and Baton Rouge, while it dropped by a similar amount in the rural, heavily Republican northern half of the state.

Addressing supporters and the media after his election victory, Edwards pledged to conduct a bipartisan administration, naming both Republicans and Democrats to his transition team. Both houses of the state legislature are under Republican control, and the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor defeated his Democratic opponent by a margin of 55 to 45 percent.

Edwards said he would call the legislature into special session in February to deal with the current \$500 million budget deficit and a projected \$1 billion budget gap for the 2016-2017 fiscal year. He gave no details about how the deficit would be resolved.

The governor-elect appeared to back off from the only substantive policy difference with the Republicans raised during the campaign, the question of expansion of Medicaid. While he reiterated his pledge to issue an executive order to accept the expansion of Medicaid provided for under the Obama health care reform, he said that funding the state share of the expansion might be delayed because of a “difference of opinion” in the legislature.

“We are going to expand the Medicaid program in Louisiana,” he said. “We’re going to do it as soon as we possibly can and as responsibly as we possibly can.” As many as a quarter of million people in Louisiana could be affected by the measure. Edwards emphasized the fiscal crisis, saying, “The budget is going to be about \$1.2 billion short: that has to be our first priority.”

In the wake of Edwards’s victory, the chairman of the state Democratic Party, Karen Carter Petersen, declared that his right-wing program would be the basis for rebuilding the party in the state. “He’s lived his values,” she said, referring to his military background and anti-abortion stance. “We’ve worked to rebuild and rebrand the party from the bottom up,” she said.



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