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LOUISIANA'S UNIQUE "FREE-FOR-ALL" OPEN PRIMARY

by

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November 22, 1991

Would the outcome of the recent gubernatorial election have been different if Louisiana operated under its previous closed party primary system rather than the open primary? Possibly not. Edwards would have been the Democratic nominee in a runoff, but the Republican nominee might have been Roemer (endorsed by the national Republican Party) or Holloway (endorsed by the state Republican Party) instead of maverick Republican Duke.

Louisiana switched to an open primary in 1975. Democratic candidates argued that it would reduce the cost--money and battle scars--of two Democratic primary elections before the Democratic nominee faced a Republican candidate in a third election. In the 1971 gubernatorial election--the last closed party primary--there were 17 Democratic candidates, a runoff between the two top Democrats (Edwards and Johnston) and a general election between Edwards and Treen--the Republican nominee who won a rare Republican primary in which only 10,571 votes were cast.

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Democrats expected the open primary would result in two Democrats facing each other in a runoff but that has happened only once. In the first open primary gubernatorial election in 1975, incumbent Governor Edwards won handily in the primary, defeating five other candidates.

The 1979 gubernatorial election, the first significant test of the open primary, resulted in a runoff between Democrat Lambert and Republican Treen. Treen won--the first Louisiana Republican governor since Civil War days. This election was one of the most expensive nonpresidential elections ever held. Six major candidates spent more than \$20 million.

Two Democrats--Edwards and Roemer--did face each other in the 1987 gubernatorial election. Edwards withdrew from a runoff. In the 1991 gubernatorial election, Democrat Edwards defeated Republican Duke in a runoff.

The open primary has encouraged more people to register as Republican. Under the "closed party primary," those not registering as a Democrat were, in effect, disenfranchised because victory in a Democratic primary usually was tantamount to election. The proportion of registered voters who register as Republican has grown from three percent in 1975 to 18 percent in 1991. Even so, if voters followed their party affiliation, the 18 percent registered Republicans could not elect their candidates. Republicans who win obviously are helped by crossover Democrats and Independents.

Louisiana's open primary system has had a variety of impacts--some anticipated and others not. It has:

--Eliminated the costly two party primaries and a third runoff election.

--Strengthened rather than hurt the Republican Party in its chances to win offices.

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--Weakened the role of political parties in selecting their nominees and working to get them elected. In the open primary, all candidates appear on a single ballot, with their party affiliation shown. Voters, regardless of their party affiliation, can vote for candidates of their choice.

The open primary has made it difficult for moderate, middle-of-the-road candidates to make a runoff election, much less win. Since 1979, the two candidates perceived to be the most liberal and the most conservative have faced each other in a runoff, while candidates thought to be more moderate have split the remaining votes. Only time will tell if this impact of Louisiana's open primary continues in future gubernatorial elections.

Party Affiliation of Louisiana Registered Voters
(Percent of Total)

<u>Year of</u> <u>Gubernatorial Election</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Republican</u>	<u>Other</u>
1975	95.2	2.9	1.8
1979	89.9	5.1	5.0
1983	83.5	9.1	7.4
1987	77.4	14.0	8.6
1991	72.9	18.3	8.8

Gubernatorial Election Results Under Open Primary

1975	Edwards*--no runoff
1979	Treen* v. Lambert
1983	Edwards* v. Treen
1987	Edwards v. Roemer*--no runoff
1991	Edwards* v. Duke

* Winner.