



# Advocacy

## ADVISORY

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### SPECIAL EDITION: STATE ELECTION UPDATES

CHRISTUS Health has monitored recent state-wide elections in Louisiana, Texas and Utah. Indeed, the month of November produced a variety of state ballots across the nation that have also been watched carefully in Washington, where Congress and the Bush administration have been locked in a showdown over federal spending on the Children's Health Insurance Program. State races may also be a predictor of major issues of importance to voters that will again surface in the 2008 national elections. Surveys of voters have already indicated that health care and related issues are of primary importance as the national electorate looks to the 2008 general elections.

#### LOUISIANA

The election of Bobby Jindal as the new governor of Louisiana moves that state further into the Republican camp, potentially indicating a rough political season for Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu in 2008. The voters of Louisiana chose Jindal in the primary election, avoiding a run-off, and many political observers believe this indicates the current conservative mood of the state. However, in legislative elections, the returns were more mixed. The Democrats will maintain control of the state House and Senate, with 53 of the 105 seats in the House; Republicans will hold 50 plus two independents. Republicans have not had control of the state Legislature in Louisiana since 1878, and many had hoped to pull out a majority this year.

While Louisiana has periodically elected Republican governors since the late 1970s, when Jindal takes the office in January, it will mark the first time since Reconstruction that a majority of the state's top three officials belong to that party. Landrieu's Republican colleague in the U.S. Senate, David Vitter, easily claimed his seat in 2004 by also winning an outright majority in the primary election. Some political observers note the significance of Vitter's victory may lie in the fact that this political phenomenon occurred before Hurricane Katrina displaced a large portion of the Louisiana electorate to other states – a population that overwhelmingly tended to vote Democratic. While the full political impact of the population shifts resulting from the 2005 storms are still being determined, it is clear that the Republican party in Louisiana is stronger than before.

These shifting political demographics will undoubtedly come into play during next year's general election, when Sen. Landrieu is likely to face off against John Kennedy, a former Democrat who recently changed his party affiliation to Republican. Earlier this year, Kennedy indicated the reason for his change in party affiliation was attributed to the Democrats' left-leaning shift on social and cultural issues. Moreover, state Democrats have been beset by scandals and poor election results. Gov. Kathleen Blanco decided to not seek re-election after a seemingly sluggish response to effects of two devastating hurricanes in 2005 and months of negative media coverage scrutinizing her administration. Conversely, Republicans also suffered some embarrassment earlier this year when Sen. Vitter revealed he had been unfaithful in his marriage, yet after a flurry of negative media reports, political fallout for the Republican senator seemed fleeting.

Others have pointed to the strong performance of Sen. Landrieu's brother, Louisiana Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu, who claimed re-election this season, as a sign that the Democratic party will continue to assert its statewide influence. This may soon be tested, as Jindal's election to the governor's office opens up one of the most traditionally Republican House seats in the nation – the suburban New Orleans district gave 71 percent of its

vote to George W. Bush in 2004. Additionally, Jindal was re-elected with 88 percent of the vote in 2005, the highest re-election total of any Republican in the United States. The special election for his U.S. House seat would be the first election in Louisiana with candidates running in separate primaries. Previously, candidates from all parties ran together, and if no one received more than 50% of the vote, the top two finishers would head to a runoff. While registered Democrats still outnumber Republicans in the state two to one, voters have recently shown themselves willing to back conservative candidates, regardless of party affiliation.

There is a great deal of focus on Jindal during this time of transition, as Louisiana voters await more specific plans related to the former U.S. Congressman's election promise of ethics reform and attention to the state's health care crisis. The governor-elect has already appointed a health care transition committee that met recently to discuss the possible options for providing coverage for the 25% of Louisiana citizens that are presently without insurance. Jindal's insurance plan includes allowing individuals and small businesses to pool to buy insurance to get cheaper rates. It also encourages use of private insurance to cover more of the state's uninsured instead of reliance on the state-run program.

In the only state-wide run-off election, Democrat Buddy Caldwell defeated Republican Royal Alexander for the office of Attorney General, with 67 percent of the vote. Royal was only able to secure majorities in two parishes in the state – Caddo Parish and nearby Bossier Parish, according to results from the Secretary of State's office. In north Louisiana, a closely watched state Senate race for District 37 yielded an important Republican victory for Dr. B.L. "Buddy" Shaw, who defeated a popular Democratic contender, Billy Montgomery. In another close race between two Democrats, state Rep. Yvonne Dorsey edged Baton Rouge attorney Jason DeCuir by 93 votes to take the Senate District 14 seat. Dorsey was term-limited from seeking re-election in her previously held seat in the Louisiana House.

## TEXAS

Texas voters recently went to the polls facing an array of sixteen total propositions and various local bond proposals. The lack of statewide office elections led some observers to predict overall voter apathy and poor turnout, but the growing discontent over the state's growing debt and issues such as school taxes, toll roads, and lawmaker accountability did prompt many to visit the polls. Of the sixteen amendments on the ballot, all passed, some of them with wide margins. Interestingly, voters concerned with the state's debt nevertheless overwhelming passed measures that represent a burst of new spending. Indeed, the only amendment that received significant attention from both the press and the general public was Proposition 15, which authorized \$3 billion in tax-backed bonds for cancer research. It was actively promoted by native Texan Lance Armstrong, Gov. Rick Perry, and former Comptroller John Sharp, augmented with strong support from various cancer activist groups. A number of state conservatives opposed the measure, because they feared addition to the state's already cumbersome debt load and in, some cases, fear that the money could potentially be used for embryonic stem cell research testing, a claim that the Governor strongly denied.

Cancer researchers are enthusiastic about the \$3 billion in research bonds to augment their work over the next ten years. The issue was affirmed by 60 percent of Texas voters, approaching a mandate for this type of spending. The new cancer funding will likely be divided among basic cellular research, better diagnostics for early tumor detection, improved screening and prevention, and clinical trials of new cancer medications.

On tax-related matters, Texans approved a ten percent limit on property appraisal increases, a property tax exemption for severely disabled military veterans and another property tax exemption on vehicles used by small business owners. Significantly, about 85 percent of voters supported a proposition requiring state lawmakers to record how they vote on final passage of bills and resolutions, excluding ceremonial measures. Furthermore, the proposition requires that recorded votes must be publicly available on the Internet. Texas has been one of only ten states in the United States that allowed legislators to pass bills on voice votes, without any record of how any one individual lawmaker actually voted. Political reforming groups have responded positively to the news, citing the passage of this measure as the first real attempt at accountability for legislators charged with representing the citizens of their districts. The measure attracted many bipartisan supporters, including approximately 200 civic organizations and political advocacy groups.

More than three-fourths of Texas school districts that sought voter approval to hike their property tax rates were successful, paving the way for other school districts across the state to consider their own tax elections next year. A total of 92 school districts across Texas convinced voters that their schools' financial needs outweighed a large portion of the property tax relief voted in by the Texas Legislature and approved by Gov. Rick Perry last year. In most of these districts, voters gave back approximately 40 percent of the property tax reduction they would have received this year under the school finance reform law. That legislation – passed in response to an order from the Texas Supreme Court – traded lower school property taxes for higher taxes on businesses and smokers.

## UTAH

In Utah, voters on Election Day expressed a resounding negative response to school vouchers. More than 60 percent of voters refused to ratify a bill passed earlier by the state legislature. It would have provided taxpayer-funded vouchers for each government school student, ranging from \$500 to \$3,000, depending on family income. Students currently in private schools, unless they came from low-income families, would have been ineligible. This represented the latest setback for the school-voucher movement and the tenth time since 1972 that vouchers or education tax credits have been defeated in public balloting. Indeed, the Utah referendum followed defeats in Michigan and California in 2000. Vouchers advocates insist that the money would have gone to needy parents interested in bettering the education opportunities for their children, but opponents seemed to have motivated by fear of further draining the state coffers.

Political observers note that rarely do Utah voters so overwhelming reject their ideas. However, the national implications of the Utah vote are what genuinely interest those observers, who predict that the full impact of this may not be felt until the 2008 elections, when those who fought for the voucher plan will seek re-election to their seats. The public sentiment expressed in this referendum could hardly be more clear, nor could the seeming disconnect existing between voters and their elected representation. Not only did the voucher plan fail in every one of Utah's 29 counties, but an analysis by the *Salt Lake Tribune* shows it failed in nearly every district represented by the most ardent supporters of the measure in the state legislature. Recognizing the political peril posed by the rejection of the voucher plan, legislators took the unprecedented step of creating a political issues committee, known as the Informed Voter Project, aimed at educating voters further on the issues of vouchers. The anti-voucher coalition, Utahns for Public Schools, has vowed to not disband but be further involved in party caucus meetings and the 2008 election.

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