
LaPolitics Extra

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By John Maginnis

Reform Side Sweeps BESE Runoffs

GOP, Democrats split legislative races

Supporters of sweeping changes in K-12 education won more than they thought was possible two months ago, after candidates they backed convincingly won all three BESE runoffs.

Incumbent Chas Roemer, challenger Kira Orange Jones and education newcomer Carolyn Hill all received more than 55 percent of votes. Along with three members elected in the primary and three appointed by the governor, supporters of Gov. Jindal's agenda now hold nine of 11 BESE seats. In addition, member Walter Lee, who was unopposed, has signaled his willingness to back the governor's choice for a new superintendent, John White, the current head of the Recovery School District.

The winners were all backed by the Alliance for Better Classrooms, the PAC formed by businessman Lane Grigsby, which spent close to \$1 million on mailers and TV ads in this election cycle. The GOP Victory Fund, formed by the governor, also spent \$1 million in the BESE primaries and runoffs, including \$400,000 for Roemer alone.

The election results are a major blow to the Coalition for Public Education, comprised of organizations for teachers, superintendents and school board members, who opposed the rapid expansion of charter schools and the Jindal-backed policy of linking teacher evaluations to student test scores.

At the time of qualifying, both Orange Jones and Hill were considered decided long shots in their respective minority districts. Orange Jones got an early push from New Orleans education reformer Leslie Jacobs, while Hill, without outside support, led a primary field of four in the Baton Rouge-based district before ABC got behind her.

Tarver Wins in Comeback Bid

Sen. Lydia Jackson, D-Shreveport, became the only incumbent senator defeated this cycle, and Greg Tarver became the only ex-senator to win a comeback bid, as the latter won a heated race by five points. Tarver credited his support in the rural area of the parish, where a Republican ran well in the primary and then endorsed the challenger. GOP Sheriff Steve Prator also backed Tarver, despite that the Democrat had been indicted, then acquitted, in the 2000 riverboat racketeering trial in which Edwin Edwards was convicted.

Jackson, who took Tarver's place in 2003, was an outspoken critic of the Jindal administration, while Tarver pledged to work with the governor.

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(SENATE RACES, Continued)

Other comeback kids did not fare so well. Ex-Sen. and Opelousas Mayor Don Cravins was soundly beaten in his city's precincts and lost to incumbent Sen. Elbert Guillory, 56-44 percent. Sen. David Vitter personally backed conservative Democrat Guillory.

Sen. John Smith, R-Leesville, easily turned back ex-Sen. James David Cain, 59-41 percent. Gov. Jindal took a personal interest by running attack ads on Cain after the challenger criticized the governor's endorsement of Smith.

GOP, Democrats Split Runoffs, Claim Victory

Of the nine House runoffs matching candidates of different parties, Republicans won four, Democrats won four and an independent won one. Not surprisingly, both parties claim success.

With the Republican tide moving against them all year through party switches, Democrats at least held their own in the elections, even after the GOP controlled redistricting and vastly outspent its rivals. On the eve of the runoffs, Republican organizers were confident they would win six of eight contests against Democrats and independents and held out hope of a sweep. Instead, they got an even split. Overall, Republicans improved their current House majority by one seat, to 58, with Democrats holding 45 and independents two.

Democrats held onto three open seats when Gene Reynolds beat Jerri Ray de Pingre in Webster Parish, Stephen Ortego upset St. Landry Parish President Don Menard and Terry Landry beat independent Eric Martin in the new minority seat in Acadiana. Also, Democrat Kenny Cox of Mansfield ousted GOP Rep. Rick Nowlin of Natchitoches in a redrawn minority seat.

Republicans took over a Democratic district in St. Bernard Parish when Ray Garofalo thumped Chad Lauga. They held an open seat in the Felicianas when Kenny Havard beat Ken Dawson, as well as one moved in redistricting from the New Orleans area to the River Parishes with Clay Schexnayder's win over Kevin Hull.

Rep. Billy Chandler, R-Jena, lost to independent Terry Brown after Chandler, originally elected as a Democrat, switched parties this year.

The parties also traded two River Parish seats whose demographics had been flipped in reapportionment. Greg Miller topped Ram Ramachandran and Randal Gaines beat independent Russ Wise.

Revenge of Jaguar Nation

The only incumbent House Democrat to lose was Rep. Rickey Hardy, D-Lafayette, which, to alums of Southern University, was a sweet as a rare football win for the Jaguars this season. Vincent Pierre won, 53-47 percent, with help from Southern backers statewide, who were angered that Hardy was the only Black Caucus member to support the failed bill to merge UNO and SUNO.

Every Vote Does Count

Billye Burns of Monroe learned that old axiom the hard way, losing to Marcus Hunter by three votes, 1,984-1,981, in the House race with the lightest turnout. Hunter reclaimed the seat that was held by his father Willie Hunter, who was term limited in 2007.

For Ms. Burns, a trip to the parish registrar's office will reveal the names of all her good friends, for now anyway, who did not vote.

Vacation Week

With the elections over, LaPolitics Weekly will take off Thanksgiving week and return on December 2.