



A New Look For The South?

Race and Ideology in Louisiana's Election

By Paul E. Teed

For some time now, political analysts have closely followed the dramatic decline of Democratic Party strength in the formerly "Solid South." The most recent manifestation of this sea-change in American politics, however, can be found in the story of this year's Louisiana gubernatorial race. While the Pelican State's bizarre political history is often cited as an exception to mainstream American trends, this year's contest places Louisiana firmly within the political revolution that is transforming the South as a whole. The landslide victory of conservative Republican Mike Foster over his Democratic opponent, US Congressman Cleo Fields, in the November 18 run-off election, and the disarray that now reigns within the Louisiana Democratic Party reflect a long term problem for Democrats in the state. In light of recent developments, it seems difficult to argue with Foster's post-victory observation that "this is a New South ... we are going to look different in the future."¹

The October Primary

Although Foster's victory over Fields had been widely predicted, early analyses of the 1995 gubernatorial race had expected neither candidate to get past the open primary held on October 21. The state's open primary system pits candidates of both parties against each other, with the two top finishers then meeting face-to face in a run-off election. With this year's vote split between sixteen candidates, any one candidate with over 20% in the primary stood a very good chance of making the November 18 run-off. Until the final week, most polls had suggested that former Governor Buddy Roemer would face off against Mary Landrieu, the Democratic state treasurer. Both benefited from extensive name recognition and

well-funded campaigns. With roughly 30% of the electorate undecided, however, at least five candidates were given a legitimate chance to make the run-off.

The late surge of Fields and Foster resulted from a variety of factors. First, Fields targeted the African American population of the state almost exclusively, acting primarily through the organization of voter registration drives. Since African Americans make up over a third of Louisiana's population, Fields (the only black candidate in the race)

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remained confident that his strategy would provide a high enough percentage to vault him over Landrieu and into the run-off. In fact, Fields finished as the top vote-getter in eighteen parishes with high concentrations of African American voters in the northwestern and south-central part of the state. Although Landrieu's liberal message had traditionally done well in parishes with a high black population, she proved unable to crack Field's control in key black areas outside her home base of New Orleans.

Foster's emergence as the front-runner stemmed in part from his ability to fashion an image as a political outsider in a state where rumors of cronyism and gambling interest kick-backs have

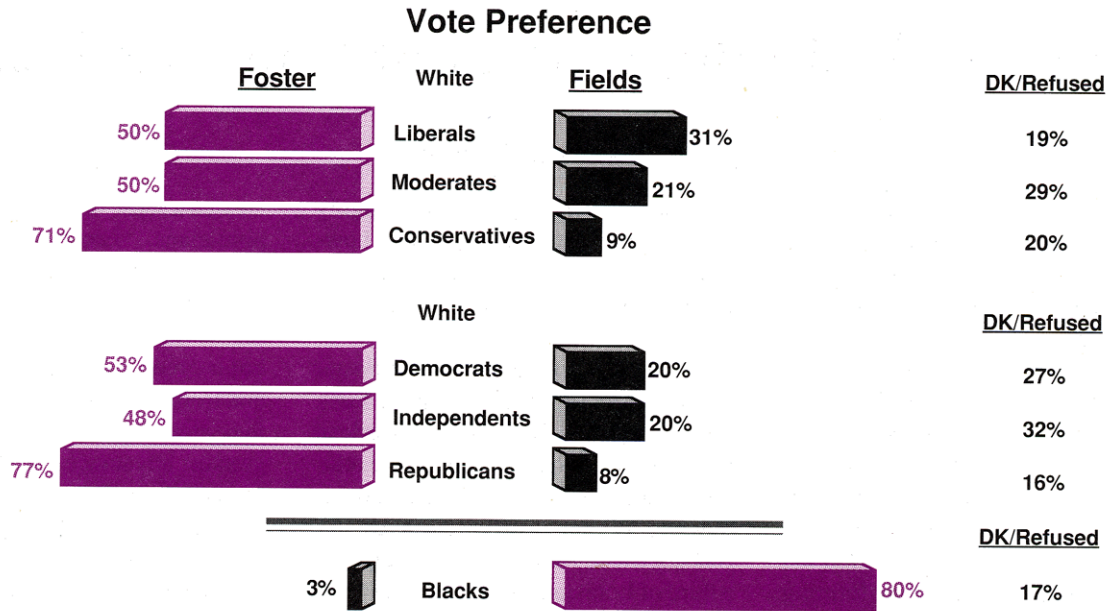
created a sense of distrust for traditional politicians. Emphasizing his private business life rather than his experience in the State Senate, Foster pulled conservatives away from Roemer, who could not overcome a mixed record as governor from 1988 to 1992. Foster's ideological position, however, proved his greatest advantage. Although a recent convert to the Republican Party, Foster heartily endorsed the Republican "Contract With America," emphasized his Christian values, and promised to repeal the state's affirmative action programs and gun-control laws. In the weeks leading to the primary, Foster became the major conservative candidate in the race and steadily eroded what proved to be soft support for Buddy Roemer. In East Baton Rouge parish, for instance, where Roemer had done very well among white voters in his two previous bids for governor, Foster captured 28% to Roemer's 18%.

Conservative Message Triumphs

Foster's 26% statewide showing in the primary proved a commanding lead, with over 100,000 votes separating him from the second place finisher Fields, whose total (19%) topped Landrieu by just under 8,000 votes. In the month long campaign for the run-off election, Foster and Fields ran sedate campaigns by Louisiana standards. The most explosive issue in televised debates proved to be Foster's unwillingness to repudiate the endorsement of former Klansman and 1992 Republican gubernatorial candidate David Duke. This association never proved to be a serious liability for Foster, however, whereas Field's association with liberal politics and the Clinton administration severely damaged his appeal among the middle-class white voters whom he desperately needed to attract.



Sharp Racial Differences in the Louisiana Vote



Note: 701 Louisiana voters interviewed.

Source: Survey by the Survey Research Center at the University of New Orleans, October 26 to November 1, 1995.

In East Baton Rouge parish, for instance, Foster not only picked up the 17% of the vote that Buddy Roemer had received in the primary, but also an additional 11% who had voted for the highly conservative Democrats Phil Preis and Robert Adley. Fields received much of the 13% that Mary Landrieu had captured in October, but he still lost the parish by some 18%. Although racial factors inhibited Fields' appeal, Foster's statewide victory by over 400,000 votes (63%) also reflected his success in capturing what amounted to a conservative ideological shift among the white voters of Louisiana.

Democratic Doldrums

Perhaps the most stunning development of the final contest is the disarray and confusion that both Fields' candidacy and the steady conservative movement of the Louisiana electorate has created within the Democratic Party in the state. First, Mary Landrieu, whose white urban liberal support was absolutely crucial to Fields, never formally endorsed the Democratic candidate and failed to support his campaign in any meaningful way. Obviously embittered by the lack of support from white Democrats like Landrieu and Lt. Governor Melinda Schwegmann during the cam-

paign, Fields publicly suggested that "skin color" was a major source of the party's failure to mobilize effectively on his behalf. In fact, several analysts have pointed to racial divisions within the Democratic Party in Louisiana as a serious threat to both white and black Democratic candidates in the future. "Without the African American vote," says Louisiana political consultant Gus Weill, "it is going to be very difficult for white Democrats to be elected to a major office."²

Second, Democrats in Louisiana seem ambivalent at best about identifying themselves with a Clinton administration that is highly unpopular in an increasingly conservative state. When Vice President Al Gore appeared in the state to stump for Fields, for example, no other Democratic elected officials were willing to share the stage with him. Although Clinton won Louisiana in 1992 with 46% of the vote, anti-administration sentiment has run high ever since, and Republican congressional candidates received nearly 50% of the vote in 1994. The day after his landslide defeat, Fields acknowledged that Louisiana Democrats are badly confused and divided, and he called for a "summit" on the future of the party.

Although Foster's conservative agenda will be somewhat limited by a state legislature that is still controlled in both houses by the Democratic Party, he has clearly captured the political mood of the state and perhaps even the region. Liberal Democratic candidates like Landrieu and Fields seem to be finding less and less support for their ideological positions outside the party's core voters such as African Americans and traditional liberal Democrats. Although conservative Democrats remain a force within the politics of Louisiana and the South, Foster's experience seems to show that southern voters respond more quickly to a conservative message that is linked with the Republican Party. "I found in my campaign that you couldn't be a conservative Democrat," he said after the election. "Nobody believed you."

Endnotes:

¹ *Sunday Advocate*, Baton Rouge, LA, November 19, 1995.

² *The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, LA, November 20, 1995.



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