

Historical Notes on Elections, continued

Once voting machines were used prolifically in Louisiana, drastic changes were made in Louisiana election law to accommodate the use of voting machines. One of the most significant changes was the elimination of assistance to voters in casting a ballot. This powerful and extremely effective change abruptly stopped the practice of vote buying and selling, since the law stated that only one person would be allowed in the voting machine unless physically handicapped. To accommodate voters who are unable to read, the new election laws provided for giving each candidate a number. After the qualifying deadline, all candidates are listed in alphabetical order by office and numbers are assigned to each candidate. Today, candidates print these numbers on their election campaign paraphernalia and advertise it as a simple way to remember them in the election. The provision of not allowing assistance to voters was ruled illegal by the Federal Voting Rights section of the U. S. Justice Department, however. Today, the Elections Compliance Unit in the elections division investigates complaints of voter fraud and voting irregularities.



Following the phenomenal first primary victory by Governor Earl K. Long in 1956, the Secretary of State was stripped of custody and control of voting machines by an act of the Legislature. A new state department called the Custodian of Voting Machines was formed by the same act. James M. McLemore was appointed the first Custodian of Voting Machines by newly elected Governor Long. Mr. McLemore setup the new department and served under a special board known as the Board for Voting Machines. This board was comprised of appointees of the Governor who served at his pleasure. Their duties were limited to having an overview of the office of the Custodian of Voting Machines in the acquisition of new machines.

THREE CUSTODIANS IN FOUR YEARS

Mr. McLemore served a little more than two years, resigned and was replaced by another friend of the Governor, Mr. Drayton Boucher. Mr. Boucher left the office to allow the appointment of Douglas Fowler who was interested in seeking the elective office in the next election. The election in 1959-60 saw the appointed incumbent win a very tough race in which Governor Jimmie Davis was elected Governor for the second time.

NEW CONSTITUTION CHANGES NAME



Governor Edwin Edwards in his first term of office called for a constitutional convention to rewrite and replace the bulky State Constitution that was amended so many times

it was hard to follow. Effective January 1, 1975, a new Department of Elections and Registration was formed with voter registration added to the duties of the Custodian of Voting Machines.

Douglas Fowler, late father of former Commissioner of Elections Jerry Fowler continued in office until the election of 1979 that saw candidate Jerry Fowler win an impressive victory for a newcomer in state politics. Commissioner Fowler was re-elected five times. Prior to the October 1999 primary election, Fowler was charged in a East Baton Rouge Parish grand jury indictment with nine felony counts charging that he received kickbacks and payoffs for contracts he awarded while in office. He lost his re-election bid and on November 27, 1999 pleaded guilty to malfeasance in office and conspiracy to commit money laundering. On December 15th, he pleaded guilty in Federal court to three counts of filing false income tax returns.

In 1999, voters elected a new commissioner, Suzanne Haik-Terrell, the first woman to serve as Commissioner of Elections. Commissioner Terrell campaigned on a platform to restore integrity to the office and began by canceling numerous contracts, streamlining operations, and downsizing department spending and personnel.

ACT 451 OF THE 2001 LEGISLATURE

In the 2001 Regular Session of the Legislature, Representative Bruneau and others sponsored House Bill 18 which was enacted and became Act 451 on June 20, 2001. The act is " . . . relative to the Commissioner of Elections and the Department of Elections and Registration, and provided for the appointment in lieu of election of the Commissioner of Elections and for the merger and consolidation of the Department of Elections and Registration with the Department of State and for the transfer of such department and its powers, duties, functions, and responsibilities to the Department of State. . . ." The changes mandated by legislation were accomplished on Inauguration Day, January 12, 2004, upon the expiration of the then Commissioner of Elections term in office, and now all voter registration and elections activities are again under the direction of the Secretary of State .