

Thursday, September 16th, 2001
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

HURRICANES AND ELECTIONS

Hurricanes and elections don't mix. And the aftermath of a major storm can directly affect what happens on Election Day. As this is being written, Hurricane Ivan is pounding south Louisiana. And with the polls opening for a number of important elections in less than two days, outcomes can be directly affected. It will be much easier for some voters to get to the polls than for others.

A constitutional amendment voted on statewide, and number local elections including a big Mayor's race in Baton Rouge mean heavy election activity. A hurricane can sometimes determine who wins and who loses.

Back in the fall of 1965, Hurricane Betsy kept Jimmy Fitzmorris from being elected Mayor of New Orleans. I was living there then and remember it well. I had known Jimmy Fitz in my early years. He was a lifelong friend of my dad's; they started working for the Kansas City Southern Railroad at the same time back in the 1930s.

When I returned to Tulane for my final year of law school, a barn-burner of a mayor's race was taking place. Jimmy Fitz, who was on the New Orleans city council, was challenging incumbent Mayor Victor Schiro. Fitz had been endorsed by the *Times Picayune* and looked to be on his way to a solid victory. Then came Betsy.

I had spent the summer in upstate New York as director of an athletic camp and returned to New Orleans by train in early September. The train rolled in to the New Orleans station on Friday morning, September 10th, 1965; the city had just been devastated by Hurricane Betsy.

Fifty people had died and thousands of homes were destroyed. I walked from the downtown train station all the way up St. Charles Avenue, crawling over trees and telephone poles that had been knocked down and were blocking the street.

Mayor Schiro was all over television and radio, showing up everywhere throughout New Orleans, to lend a hand and calm people's fears. Anyone who suffered any type of hurricane loss received a personal letter from the mayor offering assistance. The storm gave Schiro's campaign a tremendous boost and cost Jimmy Fitz the election. In talking to me about his defeat, Fitz was stoic; he was the same way when quoted in the local press:

"To everyone who was watching the television news-and that was everyone who got his television set to work, it was (President) Lyndon Johnson and Victor Schiro, in charge of Hurricane Relief. Jimmy Fitzmorris, the 'challenger,' was nowhere to be seen. But such is politics, and after it's over, you learn to laugh it off, which I did," said Fitz.

Jimmy Fitzmorris went on to be elected Lt. Governor and just missed winning the Governor's race in 1979. So his loss worked out for him in the long run. Hopefully, this Saturday's elections won't be affected in such a manner by Ivan.

Baton Rouge Mayor's Race a Barnburner

Three candidates are taking the mayor's race in Baton Rouge right down to the wire. A poll early this week from incumbent Mayor Bobby Simpson's camp shows a three way dead heat for the lead. The results:

Sen. Kip Holden - 26%
Mayor Bobby Simpson - 25%
Rep. William Daniel - 24%

With a margin of error of 4% in the poll, any of the three could make the runoff. It will all come down to turnout. Will the storm have an effect of who votes and who doesn't? Is the LSU-Auburn game still on? Will some fans cancel their trip for the game and be here to vote? With little else on the ballot (as compared to the Presidential election in November), will less dedicated voters turnout, and which candidate does this hurt?

Lots of questions to be answered on Saturday night.

Political Endorsements – Help or Hurt?

So who's **IN** and who's **OUT** when it comes to making political endorsements? Can other officials and newspapers really make any difference in helping a candidate? A poll released last week by Vern Kennedy in the Louisiana's U.S. Senate race gives some insight.

Sen. John Breaux – **IN** 28% of potential voters would be favorably influenced by an endorsement from Louisiana's senior senator, while 12% would be unfavorably impressed. More than a 2/1 ratio means Breaux's opinion matters. This will be a plus for any candidate who Breaux actively supports in November.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco **IN** The Governor's numbers are not as strong as Breaux's (23% positive and 16% negative). But she makes a huge impact with African American females. 41% positive and 1% negative. Any candidate who could get the Governor to do a radio spot to be used on stations that attract black females would gain a big advantage. The Governor does alright with white females (22% to 16%), but her support is a negative with white males (10% positive vs. 24% negative.)

Former Gov. Mike Foster – **OUT** – Foster’s support garners more negative than positive. Where 20% of voters would react favorably to an endorsement by opinionated Mike, 23% would be negatively impressed. So there won’t be many trips for help to Oaklawn Manor Plantation this fall.

Sen. Mary Landrieu – **OUT** – A bruising re-election campaign and the President’s popularity in the state makes the junior senator’s support a minus. Her numbers for her support are 26% negative and 23% positive. However, she would be a major factor with African-American voters where her numbers are 40% plus and 5% minus.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin – **A WASH** 14% favorable and 14% unfavorable. Leave the Mayor alone to clean up after the storm.

Daily newspapers – **OUT** 15% negative and only 14% positive. The average reader ignores the editorial pages and primarily reads the obituaries, the sports page, the classifieds and the funnies. Maybe a tad of local news. That’s about it.

So, candidates, who ya gonna call? Forget Mike Foster. You’d do better with Ghostbusters!

“It is hard to imagine a more stupid or more dangerous way of making decisions than by putting those decisions in the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong.”
Thomas Sowell

“I’ve never seen the Internet. I don’t have e-mail. I just enjoy lying on the couch and reading a magazine. When people say, ‘You should visit my webpage,’ I’m always perplexed by it. Why? What do you do there?”
Novelist David Sedaris

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

