

## **FALL STATEWIDE RACES** **CREATE LITTLE INTEREST**

**By Jim Brown**



An election to fill two statewide vacancies is a little over three weeks away, but it would be an understatement to say that the general public is not, as yet, paying much attention. Most voters have no idea a major election is just around the corner. Look for a big advertising blitz to begin for the serious candidates with money by the first of next week. But when all is said and done, a turn out of less than 40% will be about the best that can be expected.

The top spot on the September 30<sup>th</sup> ballot goes to the Secretaries of State's race, with seven candidates vying to fill the vacancy created by the untimely death of former incumbent Fox McKeithen. Right now, this race is shaping up as a three way dead heat. A reliable poll run last week shows two republicans and a democrat each receiving right at 20%, with the four minor candidates barely scratching, and almost 40% undecided. A runoff in this race is a certainty,

Republican State Senator Jay Dardenne is one of the three majors, and leads the fundraising effort with a \$785,000 war chest on hand as shown on last week's required financial report. Dardenne's game plan has been to keep a low profile and raise money. He will have solid, well funded television commercials and he certainly will have momentum blitzing into the last three weeks.

Former state Republican Party chairman Mike Francis is only showing \$160,000 on hand, but he has spent over a half a million dollars in the past three months. So far, Francis has loaned his campaign some \$600,000 as has said he will spend more of his own money in an effort to make the runoff. He will need quality TV to make the runoff.

The third top tier candidate is democratic State Senator Francis Heitmeier from New Orleans. His war chest presently stands at some \$682,000, most of which comes from his senate re-election campaign account. Since Heitmeier is the one major democrat, conventional wisdom puts him in the runoff. But no one knows for certain how many voters will turn out and from where. Heitmeier needs a black vote close to within 10% of the statewide 40% prediction to have a serious shot at a runoff spot.

Four other long-shot candidates have qualified, but none have raised any significant campaign dollars. The list includes Libertarian Rayburn Clipper, a computer

programmer from Metairie, and Republican realtor Al Leone from Metairie. Former Shreveport Police Juror Jim Crowley is also in the race, along with perennial statewide candidate Mary Chehardy, also from Metairie.

So what are the Secretary of State candidates talking about? All are preaching integrity and economic development. Job creation. Be the business voice of the state. All the candidates are harping on the same theme. Each wants to be the business development voice of the state. Will the Governor let that happen? Fat chance.

The Secretary of State does have, under current law, some business duties. But the office serves primarily in that capacity as the filer and record keeper of corporations and partnerships. How can we gently say this....a glorified clerk of court. It would take a benevolent governor to turn over business development responsibility to another statewide official.

Governors in Louisiana and most other states are reluctant to give up any authority. Lt. Governors have been trying for years to have some designated responsibility, but have met with little success. Present Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu jokingly tells audiences that he checks each day to see if the Governor is healthy. If all is well, he is free to do whatever.

The Secretary of State's job does entail much more responsibility than the Lt. Governor. But business development is not one to crow about. Yet, as stated earlier, that's the focus of all the candidates presently running. So just what should these guys (and the one woman who qualified) be talking about? Elections. And there are some real problems to deal with. Here's the list.

Voting Rights Act - Congress, in its questionable wisdom, just passed a twenty five year extension of the 1965 law that continues to tag Louisiana as a second rate state. The law punishes a handful of primarily southern states for voting rights transgressions that took place over four decades ago. And it's an understatement to say the requirements are burdensome.

Any changes in procedures surrounding the voting process must be pre-approved by the Justice Department. And I mean any. Changes in precinct boundaries, polling locations, legislative districts, ballot formats, all have to be pre-approved. If a precinct location is moved one foot, permission has to be granted. Not so in most other states. But if the law is good for the goose, it should be good for the gander. It should apply to all states or none. And every candidate for Secretary of State should take a strong stand on this important issue.

Voting Machines - All over the country, concerns are being raised over new electronic voting machines. Many critics say these machines are riddled with security leaks, and are ripe for computer hackers to change numbers without elections officials knowing anything about it. And what about backup? Many

machines in use have no paper backup to verify correct totals. Yet so far, those who seek the office to oversee this process have been mute in discussing the implications of election fraud. Louisiana has been given \$50 million in federal funds to purchase new electronic voting machines. Checks and balances should certainly be an election debate subject.

Mandatory Voting? - There are proposals being floated around in other states to make voting mandatory, saying if jury service is required, why not voting? So we now may start blaming disinterested voters for the lack of political interest, and not the candidates who shy away for hot button issues. We do not need the modest loss of freedom by requiring mandatory voting. Election expressions are a privilege, not a chore. So guys and gal, tell up how you feel about forcing us to vote.

And how about the federal requirement in Louisiana that election ballots be printed in Spanish? I thought you had to pass a test in English to become an American citizen, which is a requirement to vote in the first place. When you go to France, you speak French. When you go to Japan, you speak Japanese. When you go to Mexico you speak Spanish. So why is it that English is optional in the USA? And in Louisiana, what about French, or Vietnamese for the large gathering of Asian Americans in New Orleans? Where do you stop?

Finally, a few states are even considering setting up a lottery for those who vote, with the prize of \$ one million. Now we have to pay people to vote? Questionable idea. But let's here what the candidates think.

So what's your take potential SOSs? Sure, you want to travel around the country stirring up business. But that's not the job. One of the main duties of being the state's chief elections officer is to deal with these controversy issues. Forget the political correctness. Speak up and tell us what you really believe. We all want to know.

(Next week, an analysis of the race for Commissioner of Insurance.)

\*\*\*\*\*

Jim Brown writes a weekly column that appears each Thursday at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

Jim also hosts a daily show on Talk Radio, 1380 AM in Baton Rouge and on the web at [www.Talk1380.com](http://www.Talk1380.com) from 9:00 am until 11:00 am each weekday.

