

OUT OF THE STORM: THE LEAGUE AND THE ELECTION



By Linda Mather Walker

This is an account of the League of Women Voters of New Orleans (LWVNO) activities during and the year following Hurricane Katrina from my perspective as president of the New Orleans League. Much of this story will be colored with my personal experience simply because I was deeply involved and I am unable to be objective. Supplementing my memory was a trove of materials saved from that year. These included newspaper clippings, letters, and reports written for LWVUS and the membership, and paper copies of emails. Post-Katrina was an intense, emotional, but productive period during which the League membership valiantly served New Orleans and saved the LWVNO.

AUGUST 26, 2005

It was a hot and humid New Orleans summer night with heavy cloud cover as my family exited the Morial Convention Center by the Mississippi River after a taping of the "Wheel of Fortune" with Pat Sajak and Vanna White. It was beyond our imagination that the site would become infamous with stranded evacuees a few days later. During the summer the LWVNO board had been holding regular meetings thinking we had the entire 2005-2006 League year planned out. We had even begun a vision plan for long range planning. The August newsletter had gone out promoting a kick-off potluck supper planned for August 30th at the Community Unitarian Universalist Church. Carol Deville, a member of the national League of Women Voters (LWVUS) nominating committee, was to be the speaker. On Wednesday, September 14th Dr. Darin Prockop was to speak on stem cell research at the University of New Orleans, and on October 22nd a Terrebone Bay/LUMCON field trip including a boat ride was planned. The calendar was complete through June 2006, or so we thought.

We were rudely awakened Saturday morning, August 27th with the news that hurricane Katrina had turned toward New Orleans and the nearby Mississippi coast. By that night the meeting planned for August 30th was postponed, and League members, with the rest of the city, were preparing to evacuate or ride out the storm. It was assumed that the evacuation would be temporary, and we would all be back in two or three days. My family with my daughter's friend, a dog and a turtle left in two vehicles at 6 a.m. on August 28th, headed to a cousin's home in Kingwood, Texas. The normal five or six hour trip took eighteen hours.

After a few hours of sleep, we awoke on August 29th to learn that, while the hurricane had bypassed New Orleans, the flood walls that protected the city from the waters of Lake Pontchartrain had broken at the Industrial Canal and flood waters were sweeping away the buildings and many of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. The flood walls on the canals leading to Lake Pontchartrain also gave way and an avalanche of brackish water flowed into the city for three days until the flood reached St. Charles Avenue and the edge of the Garden District. Eighty percent of the city on the East Bank was under water. The Community Unitarian Universalist

Church was flooded with ten feet of water as was the University of New Orleans. Only a few areas of high ground and about a ten block wide strip along the Mississippi River levee were spared.

After a few days it was obvious that none of us, who had evacuated would be returning soon. After a week in Kingwood, our family split up. My daughter and her daughter went to Amarillo, Texas to stay with her sister's family. My granddaughter enrolled in school there with her cousins. The friend flew to Ohio. My husband and I went to Crockett, Texas, where we rented a furnished cabin on Houston County Lake for a two month stay. There I was able to set up my computer with dial up internet and begin searching for New Orleans League members and reaching out to the LWVUS.

SEPTEMBER, 2005

The impact on our New Orleans League membership soon became clear. While I did not hear any reports of storm-related deaths among our members, analysis of the flood maps showed that nearly 70 percent of LWVNO members had been subject to significant flooding, their homes a total or near total loss. In addition, many of the unflooded homes sustained wind damage. I estimated that, out of the 173 members, only a

little over 50 could likely return to the city in the foreseeable future.

Personal stories of League members began to emerge. A few brave, well organized souls remained, such as Althea Lawes, a retired school teacher and great-grandmother who lived on the West Bank. She had stayed and went on to provide assistance to the City Council. Althea and Jane Jurik were seen on CNN along with City Councilwoman Jackie Clarkson welcoming the residents of the Algiers neighborhood back to the city. One member's husband, who had stayed because he was recovering from prostate surgery, was rescued and reunited with his wife after spending several days in an attic to escape the flood waters. After having been picked up by a neighbor and rushed from their cabin on the Mississippi Coast, Mildred Fossier and her friend spent five days in lawn chairs in a shelter before she was located by a niece. Mildred, over 90 years old, and her friend stayed several months in a senior living facility in Atlanta before returning home.

Our capable young secretary, Stacey LaFleur, and her fireman husband evacuated to Seattle. He was so traumatized from the experience of rescue operations and the lawlessness he encountered

that he could not return. Barbara LaFleur, Stacey's mom and LWVNO 1st vice-president found a job teaching in Kiln, MS and lived in a FEMA trailer. Joan Sullivan, LWVNO board member, and her husband evacuated to the Washington, D.C. area. He was in treatment for cancer at the time of the storm. I contacted LWVUS in Washington D.C. and asked them to reach out to Joan and provide support. Initially the entire membership was scattered across the United States. Anna Pleasonton was the exception; she was with a nephew in Lima, Peru.

Marcia St. Martin, League Member and the Executive Director of the Sewerage and Water Board, was the unsung heroine of the immediate recovery of the city. First, knowing the impending impact of the flood waters, she sent an emergency petition to the Department of Environmental Quality requesting permission to dump the contents of the sewerage treatment plant directly into the Mississippi River to prevent the raw sewerage from permeating the flood waters that filled the city. The Corps of Engineers estimated that their pumps would take until December to empty the city of flood water. Marcia brought back the employees who operated the storm water drainage system. They used the 100 year old

pumps to pump the flood water back into Lake Pontchartrain. The city was emptied of water in three weeks. During this entire period, Marcia's home was under water, and she slept on the floor of her downtown office to be on call.

For two months, residents were not allowed to return to the city. The exception was a short window in October to allow residents to determine the status of their property. The River Road was the only open access to New Orleans. Both electrical power and gas were unavailable and water quality was an issue.

BEHIND THE SCENES IN BATON ROUGE

Even though my cell phone and e-mail were active, Jean Armstrong, then president of the LWVLA and a resident of Baton Rouge, took it upon herself to begin making decisions regarding New Orleans without consulting any of us in LWWNO. She contacted Al Ater, the Louisiana Secretary of State (SOS), to express her belief that New Orleans would not be able to hold upcoming municipal primary elections scheduled for February 2006. Ms. Armstrong was supposed to notify us that Secretary Ater's office wanted LWWNO to be represented on a task force concerning the status

of elections and voting in Orleans Parish, but she did not reach out to us.

Ms. Armstrong also contacted other Leagues throughout the country, urging them to find any New Orleans members and evacuees in their areas and re-register them to vote locally. In addition, she started a fund raising campaign, Bucks 4 Books, in the name of the League without approval from the LWVUS Education Fund. Any money raised was to go to school districts that had absorbed displaced New Orleans students. This was in violation of League policy that did not allow raising money for any entity other than the League. Jean also advocated sending the monies Louisiana allocated to each student each school year to whatever school district enrolled the evacuated students, regardless of whether it was in-state or out-of-state. I learned of her actions through messages from other Leagues in Louisiana.

On September 9th, I sent an e-mail to Jennifer Marusak in the SOS office to let Secretary Ater know I was available via e-mail. I also sent a list of concerns that I felt Secretary Ater should be addressing. The primary concern was: would scattered citizens be able to participate fully in the election process and be assured their votes would

be counted? Citizens needed to receive information on how to obtain and vote by absentee ballots. The SOS office needed to be able to determine if citizens had established a new residence and registered to vote elsewhere. Also, would the absentee voting process need to be changed by the legislature? Given the flood damage, what was the condition of the voting machines and would new polling sites need to be set up? I recommended setting up new, consolidated polling sites in central locations with ample parking. But would the state legislature be willing to make the needed changes in time for the scheduled February primary?

OCTOBER, 2005

On October 6th, I sent the first e-mail reaching out to League members informing them that:

- LWVNO was making plans to re-connect starting in January.
- The Secretary of State's office had requested LWVNO participate in a post hurricane task force meeting on Thursday, October 13th at 10:00 a.m. at the State Capital concerning the status of the upcoming municipal elections and voting.

- The LWWUS had agreed to waive national dues, our Per Member Payments (PMPs) for the 2005-2006 year.
- The California League donated website services until 2007 at no cost.
- Audrey Evans, the LWWNO office manager and longtime member, had checked the status of our 4th floor LWWNO office at 1200 Loyola Ave. The first floor had received nine inches of water and the basement was flooded. There was still a moldy odor and no air conditioning, but one elevator was working and the phone and power were on.

No LWWNO member was available to attend the October 13th SOS task force meeting so I reached out to Mary Bennett Lindsey, a St. Tammany League member, and asked her to go on our behalf. Mary reported back:

- If the municipal election had to be held in February, 2006, as scheduled then voter notification and education was the prime concern.
- State Rep. Peppi Brunneau stated that local elections had to be held as scheduled since the New Orleans Mayor's term is

determined in the City Charter and not by state law.

- A federal judge and the U.S. Justice Department would have to approve any change in election plans.
- Libraries nation-wide would be willing to help by offering internet access to the Louisiana SOS's website, which would provide election information to evacuees.
- It would be necessary to consolidate precincts and establish new polling sites.
- The New Orleans Clerk of Criminal Court would need additional, trained election commissioners to man the polls.
- Jean Armstrong advocated for Nat Bankston, a Baton Rouge political operative, to be in charge of finding election commissioners. She also continued to insist that it would be impossible to hold the elections in February, 2006.

MORE FROM THE LWVLA PRESIDENT

On October 13th, Jeanette Seneca, Elections Manager for LWVUS, sent a message to Jean Armstrong stating that LWVNO had the primary responsibility for local elections and that LWVLA did not have that authority.

On November 1st, Ms. Armstrong received an email from the Seattle LWV president requesting that LWVNO become a sister League to Seattle LWV and asking about funds they had raised on behalf of the New Orleans League and LWVLA. Mary Bennett Lindsey learned the Seattle League had raised \$1,800. Seattle asked Ms. Armstrong if LWVNO had received the money. I received an email from Jean Armstrong on November 3rd informing me that the Seattle League had requested to become a sister League with LWVNO, but she did not mention the donated funds.

I sent a message to LWVLA president Jean Armstrong asking her to cease soliciting other Leagues and informing her that LWVNO would disseminate candidate information. I requested that any funds she received be directed to the League of Women Voters Education Fund on behalf of LWVNO to be used to create public service announcements and to print candidate information. No mention of the \$1,800.

LWVNO ACTIONS

Two months after Katrina, New Orleans was re-opened for citizens to return. The city was patrolled by the National Guard. There were limited hours at the Post Office, which was

guarded. Kinko's was the only place to have copies made, fax or perform other office tasks. Kinko's had limited hours. Groceries were limited. If a restaurant attempted to open, it was paper plates and plastic forks. Because all public schools were closed, there were no children. In addition the city was strangely quiet since the birds and squirrels had disappeared in the storm.

Still it was a relief to come home when the city opened on November 1st, even if we no longer had a refrigerator. Our granddaughter remained in Amarillo, while our daughter began doing her own home repairs. She had roof damage and water leakage. I soon discovered that I was the only LWVNO board member left with an intact house. Even though we had wind damage, our house had not flooded since we lived on Valence Street between Magazine Street and the Mississippi River, on the rim of the bowl that defines the geography of New Orleans.

Because all of the other elected LWVNO board members were displaced, I called members who were in town and created an ad hoc board. It consisted of Dorothy Smith, who was living temporarily in Metairie and acted as treasurer, Marian Bourgeois, Ann Duffy, and Ann Pettit. Ann

Pettit lost her home and had relocated to Carrollton, TX, but she moved in with my husband and me so she could help. We also included Ellen Miclette, a friend of Ann Duffy's. She immediately became a League member and part of the working board. Ellen came from Minnesota and had experience staging debates for that state's governor's races. We began bi-weekly board meetings at Marian Bourgeois' home.

Since LWVUS forgave our national dues for 2005-2006, the board decided to not collect dues at the local level either. At the time LWVUS had a rule that you could no longer be a member of a local league if you lived elsewhere. We asked to have that rule waived. Our members were all over the United States. Some would never return. The LWVUS agreed to this change in policy.

We started a dialogue with Secretary Ater and the SOS office's public relations person.

We reached out to Clerk of Criminal Court Kimberly Williamson Butler to offer assistance. In Orleans Parish the Clerk of Criminal Court was in charge of election polling places. Ms. Butler reported:

- Of the city's 442 precinct polling sites 295 were damaged by Katrina and unusable.

- Most of the 2,300 registered poll workers had not checked in with the Clerk's office.
- The Clerk's office on the second floor of the courthouse was unflooded and the regular staff was back.
- Some of the voting machines were lost, but most were operable.

Dorothy Smith, Ann Duffy and I along with Ms Butler met with Louis Keller, Orleans Parish Registrar of Voters, to discuss what was needed for the municipal election. We learned that the Registrar's office was fully staffed and unflooded, but the budget had been cut by a third. Other jurisdictions would have to supply additional staff to handle the increase in absentee ballots.

NOVEMBER, 2005

Secretary Ater held a press conference in New Orleans the first week in November and asked for a special session of the legislature to enact laws which would consolidate voting precincts into central locations, allow for commissioners who lived outside precinct lines to work the polls, provide additional funds and loosen restrictions for voting by mail. Neither Kimberly Williamson Butler, the Clerk of Criminal Court who supervises polling

places in Orleans Parish, nor Louis Keller, the Registrar of Voters, were at the press conference. I saw the notice in the local paper that morning and rushed to hear the announcement. I met Secretary Ater after the press conference and told him the League would help and take on providing candidate information.

On November 6th Governor Kathleen Blanco called an Extraordinary Session of the Louisiana legislature to discuss changes in absentee voting and other election needs. The Louisiana Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs began hearings on difficulties facing the affected parishes in regard to voting. Secretary Ater emphasized that Orleans, St. Bernard, Jefferson, Plaquemines, Cameron and Vermillion Parishes all had displaced citizens and suffered damaged polling sites and a loss of voting machines. Cameron and Vermillion Parishes were affected due to Hurricane Rita, which hit southwest Louisiana a month after Katrina. Under those conditions and without legislative action, it was impossible to hold either the scheduled Orleans spring municipal elections or the state-wide elections scheduled for fall 2006.

A federal law suit (Docket # 05-5519 in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana)

was filed by three displaced African American residents of Orleans Parish under the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and the National Voter Registration Act. They asked that state officials be prevented from purging or removing displaced New Orleans citizens from the voter registration rolls. They also asked that the state provide access to polling sites and provide expanded means for absentee voting. They further asked that the Red Cross, FEMA and other entities provide lists of evacuees to state election officials. Also, that FEMA provide the current addresses and contact information for former New Orleans residents, including postal change of addresses. Furthermore, New Orleans voters should be allowed to show alternative forms of identification to vote, including applications for relief from FEMA or the Red Cross so long as it showed their former New Orleans address.

There was grave concern among displaced African American New Orleanians that they would be disenfranchised from participating in New Orleans government. The Metropolitan Organization in Houston, which was made up of churches, labor unions, schools and other groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), announced plans to

register as many as 10,000 evacuees to cast ballots in New Orleans and to charter a bus to carry residents to New Orleans for elections. Other cities from Atlanta to Knoxville initiated their own efforts to promote voter participation for the New Orleans citizens.

On November 17th the *New York Times* published a front page article expressing a very negative view about holding elections in New Orleans. It really made me angry. I sent a letter to the editor of the *Times* that was published on November 22nd. In effect I said, "If they can hold elections in Iraq and Afghanistan, we can have them, too."

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

An extraordinary session of the state legislature met November 6-22, 2005. I attended the two legislative hearings along with Clerk of Criminal Court Kimberly Williamson Butler. Although she had been elected to the office, she was inexperienced and did not know how to deal with an unusual election situation. Luckily, she had an experienced staff. We lobbied the legislature for consolidated polling sites, loosening up absentee voting and soliciting new commissioners. I assured the state senators that the League would assist with the election.

Senate Bill 89 was sent to Governor Blanco on November 23, 2005. Act 40 (SB 89) was signed and went into effect December 6, 2005. After Act 40 was passed, Governor Kathleen Blanco, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice, announced the revised 2006 Municipal Election dates:

Qualifying:

March 1st – 3rd

Deadline to Register to vote in the Primary:

March 22nd

Request for mail in ballots:

February 21 – April 18

Dead line to return mail-in ballot:

April 21

Primary election:

April 22nd

Deadline to register to vote in the general election: April 19th

Request for mail-in ballots:

March 21 – May 16th

Deadline to return mail-in ballot:

May 19

General election:
May 20

There was strong feeling among the citizens, both those in the city and the evacuees who intended to return, that the mayoral and City Council elections should be held as soon as possible to allow for permanent recovery planning and initiatives.

The legislature approved a number of measures to expedite voting that are still in effect today. One was to remove the requirement that, in order to vote absentee, you must first vote in person after you initially registered. The previous restrictions limiting the reasons for obtaining an absentee ballot were removed. These changes have been a plus for all Louisiana voters going forward as well as first time voters at college, who want to participate in their home town elections.

FEMA agreed to mail registration and information on absentee voting to the evacuees, but they would not agree to release their names and addresses to the SOS office. They cited privacy concerns. Also FEMA ruled that the election information to be mailed out could not include candidate information.

DECEMBER, 2005

LWWVNO members Ann Duffy, Ellen Miclette, Marian Bourgeois and I met with the City Council on two different occasions and sent two letters urging them to determine the relocated polling sites. The City Charter gave the Council that authority, although in the past they merely approved the list of polling sites the Clerk of Criminal Court presented. We asked the Council to assume their legal responsibility. Finally, after the first of the year the district councilmembers took on this task.

In December we were able to determine that 56 active members of the League were present in the city out of the original 173 members we had in August 2005. We held our first general meeting at the home of Norma Freiberg in early December. While it was not a holiday party, it was well attended by neighborhood people as well as League members. We discussed our plans going forward. One was to help with the elections, and two was to get our membership up and functioning.

Carnival Cruise Line docked two of their ships at the Port of New Orleans. One provided housing for the police and firemen. The second housed the

municipal workers, Sewerage and Water Board workers and the staff of the Regional Transit Authority. Rosalind Blanco Cook, league member and RTA staff spent long hours piecing together a bus, streetcar and ferry system.

On a personal note my family happily welcomed my granddaughter back. She returned to her parochial school which had recently reopened uptown. We were also pleased that my brother and nephew drove down and delivered a refrigerator to us that we had purchased while staying in Texas.

JANUARY, 2006

Over the holidays more of our members returned. The board planned and held a reunion party to welcome everyone back on January 29th. We were able to use the club room and catering at the New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club uptown. Ordinarily, only members could use the club house. However, because their membership had not returned, the club welcomed our money to help keep their doors open. The mood was both sentimental and joyous. It felt like the spirit of the League was back. The tables were filled with sixty members plus assorted spouses. As a whimsical touch, Marian Bourgeois placed bowls of brown and blue M&M's on the

tables to represent the blue tarps seen on many rooftops and the speech Mayor Nagin made about New Orleans being a “chocolate city.” We put together a printed roster of the total membership, including the folks who were still displaced.

LWVNO GOES INTO ACTION MODE

Once the election dates were set, LWVNO went into high gear. Ellen Miclette and Joel Myers undertook arranging candidate forums and debates. Joel had been our point person for debates previously. We formed partnerships with other civic organizations; the Greater New Orleans Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, the Urban League, ACORN, and the Young Leadership Council.

One of the biggest things Secretary Al Ater asked us to do was to recruit election commissioners. We put out flyers and contacted other groups. The Clerk’s office scheduled training sessions, not expecting very many people. Over 900 local volunteers showed up for training to be commissioners and commissioners in charge. This greatly relieved the state from having to furnish an entire cadre of commissioners from other parishes. The Clerk’s office and staff were totally

overwhelmed with the local response. They were speechless.

Ann Pettit moved back to Carrollton, TX, where she worked long distance with the California League to construct the LWVNO website and post a voting guide with candidate information. Once the LWVNO website was launched, we began seeing requests for information. We applied to and received from the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF) money to develop and print flyers for voter information. We also began talks with Dr. Mary Blue, professor of communications at Loyola University, about creating PSA's for the television stations.

COX cable announced a set-aside of \$8 million for in-kind Public Service Announcements (PSA's) on all their stations. I asked them to air the announcements on registration and voting instructions during prime time viewing hours. Councilmembers Oliver Thomas and Renee Gill-Pratt agreed. FOX news was also asked to air PSA's.

The Federal Government, through FEMA, agreed to share the expense of printing absentee ballot information. The Secretary of State's office would draft the material and FEMA would mail the packets.

Through the LWVUS President's List Serv we were able to provide election information and the link to our website to the national network of leagues. By this time we had commitments to share the information to their communities from Houston, Dallas, Memphis, Detroit, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Florida, Illinois, Seattle and California.

FEBRUARY, 2006

LWVNO faced a housing problem. On February 15th, management notified us that the building containing our office was being closed due to irreparable damage from flooding in the basement and first floor. Although our office was unharmed, the old building equipment could no longer be repaired. The maintenance man who took care of the old mechanics had fallen dead of a heart attack. We needed to find a new home.

The League prepared for qualifying occurring the first of March. Ann Duffy's dining room table became the work site to create packets and hand print posters. We knew that using the internet would be a new experience for many candidates. It was necessary for candidate instructions to be explicit in order to gather their information and answers to questions. Their information would be

a free campaign opportunity available to the public and the media.

MARCH, 2006

From March 1st through March 3rd, the Clerk of Criminal District Court temporarily moved their office from the District Court to the Convention Center so candidates for the 2006 Municipal Election could qualify by filing their Notice of Candidacy and paying their filing fee. The Recorder of Mortgages, Desiree Charbonnet, also moved the property records to the Convention Center to allow citizens and attorneys to research the records for proof of ownership. She had the only local government computer set-up with dedicated links to state government in Baton Rouge. This allowed the candidates direct contact with the Secretary of State's office.

During this period, a dozen LWVNO volunteers manned a table at the door of the Convention Center. League volunteers were bundled in coats since there was an unusual cold spell and a blast of cold air hit us every time the door opened. The volunteers handed candidates packets of information on how to submit their bios and answer questions for the League's proposed on-line Voters Guide to candidates. Our position at the

front door became the unofficial information table for candidates. One hundred and eleven candidates qualified to run for various local offices. One hundred and four of them submitted information for the LWVNO's online Voter's Guide.

Representatives of the U.S. Election Commission visited the Secretary of State's office in Baton Rouge to check on the process and the changes requested. Garcia Hillman, one of the commissioners, asked for a private meeting with the LWVNO membership to determine the status of election planning in New Orleans. Primarily, she wanted to know how we felt about the Secretary of State's office, the city government, the Clerk's office, the Registrar of Voters and the current situation in general. We met at the home of Ann Dulugos, with about 20 Leaguers sitting on the floor of her tiny living room freely sharing their opinions with the Commissioner Hillman.

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATE FORUM EVER

On March 16th, we held the most successful mayoral forum ever in New Orleans. It was organized and led by Joel Myers and Ellen Miclette in conjunction with our co-sponsoring civic

organizations. Temple Sinai opened its massive doors to a crowd of at least 1000 citizens eager to learn what the future leaders of the city could offer.

There was a green room with refreshments for the candidates, information packets for the media and helpful volunteers at every door. Norman Robinson, news anchor for Station 6, a NBC affiliate, was the moderator. Volunteers gave out index cards to audience members who raised their hands. They wrote their questions on the cards and these were handed to a committee that consolidated the questions and passed them on Robinson. The forum was broadcast live on WWNO NPR radio and over their website for the displaced citizens. It was also broadcast by MSNBC and C-SPAN. Of the 23 candidates who had qualified for the office of mayor, 21 participated. The questions were alternated among the candidates. Each candidate was able to articulate a position and offer a rebuttal in addition to making a closing statement. WWNO replayed the forum on the radio several times in the following days.

The national media, both television and print, seemed mesmerized by the situation in New Orleans. The Associated Press had a reporter at all

the election related events. The mayoral forum turned out to be a major turning point for the return of New Orleans. It showed the national media that we were having an election and that citizens were intending to return.

In the meantime there was a lot of activity going on in Houston, Atlanta and other cities to let displaced New Orleanians know what was going on and to register them to vote absentee. The SOS office, in preparation for the April primary election, set up satellite voting stations for early voting in 10 other communities throughout Louisiana. These were heavily utilized.

LWVLA DRAMA CONTINUES

Kay Maxwell, national president of LWVUS, responded to communications from Jean Armstrong, president of the LWVLA, asking her to cease communicating with other Leagues throughout the United States without going through the weekly LWVUS President's Update. The Update was the vehicle for reaching all Leagues. Through further communication, Armstrong was asked to stop injecting herself into the decisions being made by the Secretary of State and LWVNO because issues related to the municipal elections in New Orleans were local and

not the concern of the state League. I sent a letter to Ms. Armstrong explaining why all the offices on the ballot were local even though they were considered branches of the state government. In February, Ms. Armstrong with the Baton Rouge League held a “Reclaiming the Ballot” event in Baton Rouge without informing the New Orleans League or any other League in Louisiana. The negative information resulting from this event had repercussions in the national media as reflected in a March 6, 2006 article in the *Washington Post*.

The LWVLA Council met Sunday March 26th at the State Archives building in Baton Rouge. The Council meeting is held every two years, alternating with the LWVLA state convention, and is attended by the LWVLA board and the local league presidents. At the Council meeting, during my time to report the activities of the LWVNO, I confronted Ms. Armstrong about the donation of \$1,800 from the Seattle League. After a contentious discussion in front of the other League presidents, she finally agreed to send LWVNO \$900, half the donation. It was money we sorely needed, because we were not collecting dues from our members for the year.

LWVNO AND THE APRIL ELECTION

In the first week in April, I moderated a rather rowdy debate for the Council District B race at the Touro Synagogue. Thirteen neighborhood associations joined to sponsor the debate. The mood reflected the strong feelings throughout the city.

LWVNO printed flyers with absentee voting instructions, a link to the LWVNO website, a list of offices on the April ballot, instructions on how to early vote and as much other information as we could include. Fifteen thousand copies were distributed to the few open libraries, FEMA offices and the lobbies of public buildings. Our flyers were passed out to local and displaced citizens by the Urban League.

We worked with Dr. Mary Blue and her students at Loyola University to film two PSA's to air on local television stations. We convinced the Clerk of Criminal Court, Ms. Butler, to loan the students two voting machines to use in the commercials. Later we learned that we had violated the law by removing the voting machines from the warehouse! During the campaign, TV commercials for candidates for New Orleans offices were aired in Texas and Atlanta, but the PSA's, which aired on

all the local TV stations, were the only TV messages with non-partisan information. The production of the two PSA's was valued at nearly \$5,000, funds which the Loyola Communications department donated.

One PSA informed voters about the LWVNO on-line candidate guide. The second PSA told voters how to find their polling sites. It was very important to tell local citizens how to find the locations of their new consolidated polling sites. This information was available on the GeauxVote website created by the Secretary of State's website.

The largest consolidated polling site was at the University of New Orleans, which took care of thousands of voters. The few voters who had returned to New Orleans East voted at the voting machine warehouse on Chef Menteur. Other sites throughout the rest of Orleans Parish included the school cafeteria at Xavier Prep High School and the Cabrini High School. In all, there were 28 super-polling sites throughout the city. League members along with other members of the public took the training and served as commissioners.

Early voting for the April 22nd election took place at the Registrar's office at City Hall. The lines to vote early filled the downstairs hall and out the door.

Athea Lawes helped guide those early voters on how to vote on the computers. The consolidated polling sites and early voting processes were well received by the public.

In addition to voting in Orleans Parish, displaced citizens voted by absentee ballot or at one of the satellite stations. As an example, the evacuees in the Dallas area could vote in Shreveport for the New Orleans municipal election. Another provision in Act 40 allowed displaced citizens to send their vote by fax, in order to make certain their vote was received on time without relying on the U.S. mail, which was still sporadic. Everyone who voted absentee in the April primary election automatically received a mail in ballot for the May 20th run-off election.

In the April 22nd mayoral primary race, Mitch Landrieu, the Lieutenant Governor, and Ray Nagin, the New Orleans mayor, became the candidates for the May run-off election. One of the articles in the *New York Times* was very complimentary about the fact that the primary election was conducted in what they termed “a very gentlemanly manner.” They seemed surprised. We were not surprised.

MAY, 2006

The aftermath of Katrina brought forth a report on comprehensive planning by the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region. Led by prominent civic leader, King Milling, they held meetings for several months. The Council solicited the support of and sponsorship by all the established civic organizations. LWVNO signed on as a co-sponsor. Released in early May the end product was a large document titled the “Forward New Orleans 100 Day Report.” It targeted rebuilding the business base and promoting development. It addressed various city government issues. Filling the City Inspector General position, creating a Master Plan with force of law and restricting the City Council’s ability to override the planning commission were some of the elements. There was concern in the business community about the lack of workers in the city. Returning residents lined up at the hearings asking for housing. In one of their public meetings, Joel Myers forcibly pointed out the lack of child care facilities to the Council. However, the 100 Day plan did not address childcare or housing, both of which affected the return of workers.

The League and our co-sponsors went on to host a second mayoral debate on May 11th at Loyola University in Nunemaker Hall. The hall was filled to capacity with 400 in attendance. The debate was moderated by John Snell, the news anchor for FOX 9, WVUE. For the first hour it was broadcast live by FOX and NPR WWNO radio. After the broadcast, the debate continued for another hour and a half. ACORN brought in two buses filled with New Orleans voters from Houston and San Antonio to attend the forum and to early vote the next day. ACORN filmed the forum as part of a documentary. Current mayor, Ray Nagin, claimed the “Forward New Orleans 100 Day Report” would be his plan for restoring services and economic recovery for the city. News services with registered reporters at the debate included the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, Reuters, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Times-Picayune*, *Gambit Weekly*, *City Business* and *Bayou Buzz*.

Mayor Ray Nagin won the mayoral run-off in the general election on May 20th. More citizens, 113,591 in all, voted in the general election than the 108,348 that voted in the April primary. It seemed that this municipal election signified more than selecting leadership for the city. Secretary Al Ater reported that a larger number of evacuees voted in

the run-off than in the primary: 8,400 voted absentee and another 2,000 early voted at the satellite polling sites. It proved to the world that even a massive flood and tragedy would not keep citizens from returning.

Because it exposed existing unnecessary obstacles to voting, this unusual election cycle triggered some changes in our state laws regarding early voting and absentee voting. It also accelerated the reform of the antiquated tax assessor system and pushed consolidation of offices, such as moving the Recorder of Mortgages into the office of the Clerk of Civil District Court.

Post-Katrina was a crash course in computer and internet literacy for New Orleans citizens. Texting was the first skill picked up, even with flip phones, because of the loss of cell phone towers and bandwidth. Then to deal with acquiring information and dealing with a myriad of forms, other skills were utilized. LWFNO launched a website with candidate information on March 17th and, by the finish of the general election in May, the site received 26,349 requests for information from the public and the news media. This was significant for a population that was just becoming familiar with using the internet for information.

LEAGUE LIFE GOING FORWARD

JUNE, 2006

In June, 2006, LWVNO had located 131 of our 173 original members. Forty of those 131 were still out of town. Over the course of the election cycle we picked up 15 new members because of the publicity.

LWVNO had to move out of our home on 234 Loyola Avenue, suite 421. Fortunately, the Waldemer Nelson Engineering Building at 1215 Prytania Street was open. They graciously cleared out a large storage room, put in new carpet, painted the walls and welcomed us with a minimum of rent. Rm. 224 has been our home to this day. Two of our new members, Jean Rice and Barbara Ballard, with their husbands did the physical work of moving our desks, file cabinets, book shelves and chairs.

After the move to the new office Jean McLaughlin, past president of the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma, sent us a personal donation of \$1,500. It was immediately used to purchase a desk top computer and a printer.

LWVNO held the 2006 annual meeting on June 3rd at the New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club. Dr. Sandra

Wilson, the new Registrar of Voters, and her staff were guests of honor. Stephanie Grace, *Times-Picayune* reporter was the speaker. Lea Young was elected the in-coming president.

The role LWVNO played in the post-Katrina New Orleans municipal elections was monumental. The experience of the League, the Secretary of State, the state legislature and local election officials wrote a new chapter for the practice of democracy. The local and displaced citizens had the will and drive to participate, but it took extraordinary measures to bring about the elections.

Compiled and written by Linda Mather Walker

Published by LWVNO, July 29, 2023

New Orleans, Louisiana



Addendum

January 21, 2006

LWVNO UP-DATE ON NEW ORLEANS MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Several events this week brought us closer to definitive dates for the New Orleans municipal elections.

On Wednesday, Secretary of State, Al Ater, told U.S. District Judge Ivan Lemelle that it would be feasible to hold the primary election April 22nd. The Judge warned that if the state had not set a date by this next week he is prepared to order the election on that schedule.

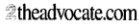
On Thursday, January 19, at the end of a long day's docket, the City Council finally voted unanimously in favor of a resolution establishing the consolidation of polling sites in the city. This was the third Council meeting on the resolution. The first resolution passed two weeks ago was rejected by a joint hearing of the state senate and house committees on governmental affairs. The Council was told to redo the consolidation by areas and neighborhoods, rather than wards and precincts.

The proposed consolidation reduces the 442 individual precincts to 82 sites, with several mega polling sites. This work was primarily done by Mr. Broussard of the staff of the Clerk of Criminal District Court, Ms Kimberly Williamson-Butler. This massive relocation and consolidation of polling sites has never been done before.

This coming Monday, January 23rd, the joint legislative committees will meet again in the New Orleans City Council Chambers to hear the revised consolidation and vote on the emergency election plan drafted by Secretary of State, Al Ater, and the state election commissioner, Angie LaPlace. After adoption by the committees, the plan must go to a mail vote by the entire state legislature. The legislature has two weeks to submit their votes. Then the plan goes to the U.S. Department Justice for review under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The U.S.D.O.J. has 60 days by law to critique the plan. However, under the circumstances, they are expected to act quickly.

Only after the Justice Department has acted, can the date be definitely confirmed. If the primary election is April 22nd, candidate qualification will be March 1st- 3rd. The run-off election will be May 20th.

This particular municipal election will be setting a precedent in the practice of American democracy. New Orleanians will be writing a new chapter for political science and history textbooks. Constitutional scholars will be debating the procedures, effects and outcomes in seminars for years to come. We are re-inventing practical democracy and the role of New Orleans League of Women Voters is integral. The issues are multi-faceted.

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 PRINT THIS

Election classes draw 500 N.O. voters

By ALLEN JOHNSON JR.
Special to The Advocate
Published: Jan 29, 2006

NEW ORLEANS — They came in droves, everyday New Orleanians — black and white, young and old — crowding into a makeshift classroom of the Jewish Community Center on Saturday morning.

By noon, more than 500 New Orleans residents had responded to a citywide plea for election commissioners to ensure voting efficiency for the April 22 municipal primary — the first election since Hurricane Katrina shattered the city five months ago.

A standing-room only crowd of applicants filled out forms, saw a training video, and received instructions on how to handle computerized voting machines.

A sample ballot added some levity, featuring “candidates” such as “A. Lincoln” for governor of Louisiana; “Louise F. Anna, Marty Graw and Jim Balaya” for lieutenant governor; and “Diamond Jim” and “Daddy Warbucks” for state treasurer.

Joe Broussard, a New Orleans resident who has been voting in elections for the past 26 years, stood slackjawed during one of three consecutive two-hour training sessions, that his boss, Clerk of Criminal Court Kimberly Williamson Butler organized along with the city’s chapter of the League of Women Voters and community activists at ACORN.

“I wasn’t expecting this many people — I’m surprised,” said Broussard, an executive assistant to Butler, the chief voting official for Orleans Parish.

“I’m really impressed,” said Lea Young, a past president of the New Orleans chapter of the League of Women Voters. “I was afraid there would only be 100 people. I’m a little disappointed to see few blacks or visibly ethnic groups. But this is democracy in action. New Orleanians are rising to the occasion.”

By the end of the day, the city doubled its number of certified voting commissioners to 1,023.

A total of 1,610 commissioners are required for the citywide election, Butler said. The state has offered to send in commissioners from other parishes to offset the shortage of hundreds of election workers in New Orleans who were displaced by Katrina.

However, Saturday’s crowds suggest New Orleanians want to run their own elections. “If we have a turnout next weekend like we did this weekend, we will be in very, very good shape,” Butler said.

Broussard said the large class sizes reflect a keen voter interest in the election. “I believe it’s a pretty good indication that voter turnout for Saturday, April 22, will be very high — I’m thinking over 40 percent.”

<http://www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt/action=cpt&title=theadvocate.com+%7C+Ne...> 1/29/2006

Mayor Ray Nagin, the seven-member City Council and other city officials, including Butler, will be on the April 22 ballot. Runoffs will be May 20. All candidates have two days to qualify for office, beginning March 1 — the day after Mardi Gras.

But there was little — if any — talk about Carnival parades at Saturday's commissioner training sessions. "This is a very critical time in New Orleans," said Ann Winston, who has been teaching in Houma since Katrina ended her tenure as principal of Crescent City Academy, a special education school in New Orleans. "This election could be a turning point for New Orleans."

Before Katrina, Winston said, she often felt helpless because of Louisiana's legacy of political corruption. "Right now, the problem is that we don't have the power in Washington to get the money we need" to rebuild, she said.

Rather than cave in to cynicism, Winston said she decided to get involved and obtain training as a voting commissioner. She suggests that national interest in the city's recovery may have sparked her activism. "I never thought that I would hear President Bush stand up and say — 'Lower Ninth Ward,'" she said.

"Katrina has energized the populace," Butler said. "And we as elected officials are going to have to get more accustomed to an engaged populace that demands to be informed."

In her 30 years as an Orleans Parish election commissioner, June Sanchez quietly admits, she has never had to chase a drunk out of a polling place.

"No, I've never encountered that," Sanchez, a devout churchgoing woman in her 70s and displaced homeowner from the Lower Ninth Ward, said.

She also said she never had to warn a candidate about campaigning within 600 feet of a polling place. Sometimes the people passing out their campaign literature get too close to the precinct, she said. "I just tell them to move on," Sanchez said. Protecting New Orleans elections from frauds, drunks, and wayward politicians are just a few of the powers and duties of a Louisiana election commissioner, according to state laws.

Sanchez attended Saturday's seminar to take an open-book test for "commissioner-in-charge," a job that pays \$150 per election and carries more responsibility. The average commissioner earns \$100 an election, and must report to his or her assigned polling place by 5:30 a.m. or be disqualified. Polls open at 6 a.m. and close at 8 p.m.

By the end of Saturday's seminar, Butler said the city had 498 new commissioners and 16 commissioners-in-charge. Sanchez said she is confident she passed. "I've been taking those tests for a long time."

Find this article at:
<http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/2248921.html>

<http://www.printhis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=2theadvocate.com+%7C+Ne...> 1/29/2006

2006 ORLEANS LWVNO ELECTION GUIDE
INFORMATION FOR INFORMED VOTING

IMPORTANT DATES

**APRIL 22, 2006 PRIMARY
ELECTION**

Deadline to register to vote: March 22nd

Period to request a mail ballot: February
21st through April 18th

Deadline for mail ballot to be received by
Registrar's office: April 21st

Early Voting in Person:
8:30am-4:30 pm, Mon-Thru., April 10-13
8:30am-4:30 pm, Sat., April 15

May 20, 2006 General Election

Deadline to register to vote: April 19th

Period to request a mail ballot: March 21st
through May 16th

Deadline for mail ballot to be received by
Registrar's office: May 15th

Early Voting in Person:
8:30am-4:30pm, Mon-Fri., May 8-12
8:30am-12:00 noon, Sat, May 13th

THREE WAYS TO VOTE

1) ABSENTEE BY MAIL
Request mail ballot from Secretary of
State's office:
P.O. Box 84123
Baton Rouge, LA 70811-2127

2) EARLY VOTING IN PERSON
Orleans Registrar of Voter's Office
1300 Perdido Street, or
Voted 15 only: 225 Morgan St.

**3) ELECTION DAY POLLING
SITE**

**OFFICES ON THE
BALLOT**

**MAYOR
COUNCILMEMBER-AT-LARGE-2
COUNCIL MEMBERS-5
CRIMINAL SHERIFF
CIVIL SHERIFF
CIVIL DIST. COURT CLERK
CRIMINAL DIST. COURT CLERK
CORONER
ASSESSORS-7**

**INFORMATION
SOURCES**

YOUR NEW POLLING SITE

Call Secretary of State's Office:
1-800-983-2805

or
Go to www.sos.louisiana.gov

**NON-PARTISAN CANDIDATE
INFORMATION**

Go to www.lwvno.org

MAYORAL FORUMS

Cosponsored by League of Women Voters, Natl.
Council of State Voters, from James O'Neil
Orleans, Young Leadership Council, & ACOBA

Primary: Thursday, March 16th,
7:00 pm, Temple Sinai

Run-Off: Thursday, May 11th,
7:00 pm, Loyola University

PROVIDED BY THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN
VOTERS OF NEW ORLEANS EDUCATION
FUND

ORLEANS ELECTIONS INFORMATION

ORLEANS PARISH ELECTIONS

April 22, 2006 Primary Election

Qualifying Period: March 1-3, 2006

- **Deadline to Register to Vote:** March 22, 2006
- **Period to Request a Mail Ballot:** February 21, 2006 through April 18, 2006
- **Deadline for a voted mail ballot to be received at Registrar's office:** April 21, 2006
- **Early Voting Period:**
8:30-4:30, Mon-Thru, April 10-13, 2006; and
8:30-4:30, Sat., April 15, 2006

May 20, 2006 General Election

- **Deadline to Register to Vote:** April 19, 2006
- **Period to Request a Mail Ballot:** March 21, 2006 through May 16, 2006
- **Deadline for a voted mail ballot to be received at Registrar's office:** May 19, 2006
- **Early Voting Period:**
8:30-4:30, Mon-Fri., May 8-12, 2006; and
8:30-12:00 noon, Sat., May 13, 2006

Orleans Parish Registrar of Voters

Mailing address for requesting mail ballots:

P. O. Box 94125
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9125

Physical addresses for early voting:

1300 Perdido Street, Room 1W23
New Orleans, LA 70112-2127

-OR-

Ward 15 only: 225 Morgan St., New Orleans
Telephone: 504-656-8300
Fax: 504-656-8315
E-mail: OrleansROVA@elections.state.la.us

Orleans Parish Clerk of Court

Temporary Office:
317 Magazine St.
New Orleans, LA 70130
Telephone: 504-827-3520
Fax: 504-962-5537
E-mail: clerkofcourt1@hotmail.com

Revised 2/15/06

Satellite Early Voting Locations:

Caddo Parish Registrar of Voters
525 Marshall St., Suite 103
Shreveport, LA 71101
Phone: 318-226-6661

Calcasieu Parish Registrar of Voters
1000 Ryan St., Room 7
Lake Charles, LA 70601-5250
Phone: 337-437-3572

East Baton Rouge Registrar of Voters
222 St. Louis St., Room 201
Baton Rouge, LA 70802-5860
Phone: 225-389-3940

Satellite Offices:

#1 10500 Courney Blvd., Room 203
Baton Rouge, LA 70816

#2 2250 Main St.
Baker, LA 70714

Jefferson Parish Registrar of Voters
1221 Elmwood Park Blvd. (lobby)
Harahan, LA 70123
Phone: 504-736-6191
-OR- 5001 West Bank Expressway, Suite C2
Metairie, LA 70072

Lafayette Parish Registrar of Voters
1010 Lafayette St., Suite 313
Lafayette, LA 70501-6885
Phone: 337-291-7140

Ouachita Parish Registrar of Voters
400 St. John St., Room 106
Monroe, LA 71201-7342
Phone: 318-327-1438

Rapides Parish Registrar of Voters
701 Murray St.
Alexandria, LA 71301-8099
Phone: 318-473-6770

St. Tammany Parish Registrar of Voters
701 N. Columbia St.
Covington, LA 70433
Phone: 985-809-5500

Tangipahoa Parish Registrar of Voters
Courthouse
Amite, LA 70422
Phone: 985-749-3215

Terrebonne Parish Registrar of Voters
7856 Main St., Suite 110
Houma, LA 70360
Phone: 985-873-6533



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lwwno@bellsouth.net
lwwno.org**

**Office hours
Tues, Wed and Thurs
9 am-1 pm**