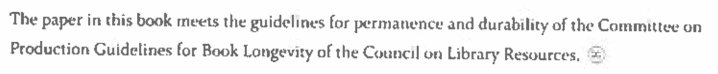
INSIDE THE Carnival

unmasking Louisiana politics

With a New Epilogue

Wayne Parent



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For my Father,

FERRIS JOSEPH PARENT

The reason I love this place

and

For my Mother,

LOUISE THOMAS PARENT
1923–1994

She would have loved this.

1. Political Culture

The Long Reputation

In the fall of 1991 a sticker reading "Vote for the Crook, It's Important" appeared on car bumpers across the state of Louisiana. The slogan referred to an eye-catching governor's race between colorful, gregarious Cajun governor Edwin Edwards, who had spent most of his third term successfully defending himself in federal court against charges of racketeering, and David Duke, a former state representative universally known for his early career as a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. The specter of these two runoff candidates contending for the highest office in the state was both entertaining and unsettling, like a dark comedy played out to the disturbance of the Louisiana public. Voters could cast their favor for either the image of David Duke gowned in Ku Klux Klan robes and speaking before a flaming cross or the mug shot of Edwin Edwards. Ten years later both Duke and Edwards were in jail. Duke pleaded guilty to mail and tax fraud charges and Edwards stood convicted of a variety of political pastimes including conspiracy, money laundering, fraud, and extortion.

The 1991 election for governor was only the latest in a series of bizarre scenes and anecdotes in Louisiana politics. The reputation for spectacular politics casts a long shadow for the people of Louisiana. Most Louisiana citizens have heard the stories of Huey Long wearing loud suits, breaking every rule of decorum in the United States Senate, and insulting President Franklin Roosevelt. They know about Earl Long's romance with the Bourbon Street stripper Blaze Starr (who, at twenty-three, was forty years younger than he), and they have seen the old newsreels of Earl screaming wildly at the legislature before he suffered a breakdown and was shipped off to a mental hospital. They also know the only story that could top this tale—how Earl maneuvered his way out of the mental hospital to return to the helm of state government. While the race between Edwards and Duke may not have surprised anyone in Louisiana, it was evidence that the political reputation of the state was not going away any time soon.

Perhaps because Louisianians are so familiar with this reputation and

the shenanigans from which it sprouts, they are usually a little more forgiving than outsiders in their appraisals of state politics. A quick glance at popular T-shirts is telling: "Louisiana: Third World and Proud of It"; "It's Not the Heat. It's the Stupidity"; and so on. Out-of-state observers are not always as charitable.

The national reputation gelled in the early part of the twentieth century as scholars joined a chorus of journalists, novelists, and politicians in isolating Louisiana politics. In his classic 1949 work *Southern Politics*, V. O. Key singled out the state for special distinction when he titled his chapter on Louisiana "The Seamy Side of Democracy," a clear reference to political corruption.[1] Fifty years later, the title to the Louisiana chapter in Alexander Lamis's *Southern Politics in the 1990s* referred to the uniqueness of politics in Louisiana with the Latin phrase *sui generis*, meaning "one of a kind."[2] There is ample evidence to support both characterizations.

The differences between Louisiana and all of the other states are legion. No other state has a French-based legal system. No other state has an election system where two Democrats or two Republicans can face each other in the final vote on general election day. No other state has had as many constitutions. No other state has such a curiously powerful governor with such curiously weak constitutional prerogatives. Add these and other features to a perhaps unparalleled record of political corruption and the end result is a state that can claim itself systematically, objectively, scientifically unique. Even though their attitudes toward the reputation may diverge, it is obvious to both Louisianians and outsiders—and to laymen and academics—that Louisiana politics is different. These genuine, concrete peculiarities raise questions about the exact nature of the state's oddity and the reasons for it. The reasons for the difference in politics between Louisiana and the other forty-nine states, however, may not be as obvious as the differences themselves.

V. O. Key's Louisiana and Beyond

In almost every category of state politics studies, from constitutions to elections, Louisiana is usually marked by an asterisk denoting a peculiarity or exception to the general rule. This trend of exception appears early in the scholarship. In 1949, V. O. Key, the most influential scholar in characterizing Louisiana, was not shy about his amazement at corruption in the state's politics: "Few would contest the proposition that

among its professional politicians of the past two decades Louisiana has had more men who have been in jail, or who should have been, than any other American state. Extortion, bribery, peculation, thievery are not rare in the annals of politics, but in the scale, variety and thoroughness of its operations the Long gang established, after the death of the Kingfish, a record unparalleled in our times."[3] Key was right. Louisiana politics is anything but normal. Yet Key was only voicing in academic circles what was becoming conventional wisdom everywhere else—and in focusing on corruption, he only scratched the surface.

The next landmark book on southern politics, written by Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, was published in 1976, after the successes of the civil rights movement and the Republican Party in the south. In *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence since 1945*, Bass and DeVries define the Louisiana culture more broadly than merely in terms of corruption: "Louisiana politics remain an exotic mixture of the populist philosophy, reawakened and perpetuated by the Longs; racism, whose intensity peaked in the 1960s, the cultural clash between the fun-loving tolerant Cajuns of French-Catholic ancestry in the south and the moralistic, Anglo-Saxon Baptists in the north; a black electorate that is growing stronger and more sophisticated; and the spicy urban culture of New Orleans and its suburbs."[4]

Tyler Bridges, a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist who worked for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, summed up the state's political culture in his 2001 book on Edwin Edwards and gambling in Louisiana:

> Louisiana is our most exotic state. It is religious and roguish, a place populated by Cajuns, Creoles, Christian Conservatives, rednecks, African Americans, and the white working-class New Orleanians known as "Yats." While northern Louisiana is mostly Protestant and conservative, southern Louisiana, settled by French Catholics, is noted for its love of good food, good music, and good times. Laissez les Bons Temps Rouler—Let the Good Times Roll—is the unofficial motto. Louisiana is rich in outrageous stories and colorful characters. It is notably poor in the realm of political ethics.[5]

Like Bass and DeVries, recent political science scholars have tended to emphasize the "exotic" volatility inherent in Louisiana culture more than the corruption, although this exoticism is normally delineated

in an anything-but-exotic way.

Although the political reputation of Louisiana is certainly a reputation for corruption, corruption is only one part of a much broader pattern of peculiarity. The constitutions, the governor's office, the legislature, the courts, the voting system, and even the local governments are immersed in a common political culture that has shaped and defined them. Viewed more broadly, the political culture of Louisiana is a culture of volatility, instability, and constant competition.

Beyond the Cliches: Political Culture as Explanation

What is the distinct political culture of Louisiana and where does it come from? Is Louisiana corrupt because Louisianians are just born that way? Is Louisiana highly competitive and participatory because of something in the water? While there may very well be something peculiar in the water, this probably yields little explanatory power for the political oddity situated between Texas and Mississippi. If the political culture in Louisiana is truly unique, there should be concrete reasons for that uniqueness. These reasons or circumstances should logically connect with the particular culture.

Louisiana has peculiar politics because of the state's distinct political culture; Louisiana has a distinct political culture because of a unique arrangement of immigration patterns and geographical characteristics that have influenced the state's historical development. Significant works on political culture, including Alexis de Tocqueville's groundbreaking work on American political culture, associate these factors with the development of a political heritage.[6] Immigration patterns will be the factor I stress the most in this study, because that factor has had the most lasting impact in the state. Louisiana is the home of three distinct groups of immigrants: northern Europeans, Africans, and southern Europeans. Their coexistence, as much as the individual character of each group, has had a most profound effect on the Louisiana culture, and by extension, on Louisiana politics.

While a unique pattern of immigration provides the centerpiece for understanding Louisiana politics, the geography of the state plays a supporting role. Louisiana is situated in a region of enormous natural benefit. First, it is located at the mouth of the Mississippi River, where New Orleans has become the largest inland port in the country. Second, the

state possesses great natural resources. The discovery of oil in the beginning of the twentieth century added to and exaggerated some already existing characteristics of the Louisiana political culture.

Taken together, these attributes provide the groundwork for defining the unique culture that produces such a unique brand of politics. All are of course intertwined but for the sake of clarity will be discussed separately.

Sources of Political Culture

De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* describes the sources of political culture and is one particularly relevant work that manages to be both fascinating and rigorous. Even though it was written in 1848, it remains arguably the best-known and most respected book on American political culture. The explanation that de Tocqueville provides will be taught in hundreds of history and political science courses every semester well into the twenty-first century.

De Tocqueville perceives a single overarching American political culture. He argues that American political culture is unlike any in the rest of the world. According to his explanation, America is a nation of possessive individualists where the concern for the individual and individual material possessions is paramount. De Tocqueville's reasoning has withstood the test of time and is used today to help explain things like the fact that McDonald's, Starbucks, and Nike are in every corner of the earth, or why there is an almost visceral revulsion when the word socialism is voiced in America.

De Tocqueville not only describes the culture, he explains the reasons for it. He ascribes the uniqueness of the American political culture to three concrete historical circumstances. First, the people who settled and dominated the founding of America were opportunists from abroad. Second, Americans form an individualistic culture because of the geography of the place—isolated from the rest of the world. Third, the abundant resources of the land allow for individual prosperity. The people and the geography form the basis for the political culture.

The result? A culture "obsessed with freedom"—rugged individualists who move from place to place and exploit the seemingly endless natural resources.[7] These opportunists were isolated from the rest of the world, so they could set up a government designed to keep the people from getting in each other's way. The general model that de Tocqueville formu-

lates, connecting historical circumstances to political culture, has led to several sound studies of the American political culture. It is difficult to use a full, rich, ambitious masterpiece like de Tocqueville's work as a model for this study of Louisiana; however, de Tocqueville's logic—that the circumstances of a place define a political culture—is too suitable and too useful to ignore.

From People to Politics

Another often-referenced study is Daniel Elazar's *American Federalism: A View from the States*, which examines variations in political cultures *within* the United States.[8] This work is a helpful complement to de Tocqueville's because it examines characteristics that differentiate cultures on a smaller scale. While de Tocqueville sought to explain the uniqueness of the whole of American culture, Elazar sought to explain regional variations within that culture. Why do states differ? His work is grounded in the idea that cultural differences *within the United States* are due to different immigration patterns in the various states.

Like de Tocqueville's discussion of the people who immigrated to America and eventually formed the United States government, Elazar's argument is that political cultures within the states are determined by attitudinal baggage carried with the people who moved into those states. He finds that states can be roughly grouped into three categories, based on the people who settled them. Cecil Eubanks, in a chapter on southern culture in a book on southern politics,[9] presents a clear summary of the three Elazar categories that can be briefly quoted here.

The first set of state cultures was established by English Puritans who "brought their moralistic political culture with them as they moved westward from New England across New York into northern Pennsylvania, Ohio, and most of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa, establishing, along with their Scandinavian counterparts, a greater New England." The second group of American state cultures derived from non-Puritan English immigrants and German settlers who "occupied the middle states in the colonies and migrated into southern Pennsylvania and central Ohio, as well as Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, reinforced by immigrants from western Europe." These settlers brought with them a highly individualistic culture, much like the one de Tocqueville describes as the dominant American culture. The third group involves states closer to Louisiana: "The

southern colonies were settled by an Old World landed gentry, intent on perpetuation of a plantation slave system at the exclusion not only of slaves, but of individual small property holders. These inhabitants of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia moved westward into Alabama and Mississippi, taking their traditional culture with them. *Louisiana, which was settled by the French, shared this same political culture.*"[10]

Eubanks continues with a summary of the predominant southern political culture: "As its name implies, the traditionalistic political culture looks to the past, a pre-industrial past, of strong social and family bonds. Government has an important role in this culture, the maintenance of traditional order; but citizen participation is limited to a paternalistic elite."[11] A starting point, then, is to examine the whole of Louisiana as part of the traditionalistic culture that Elazar says characterizes all of the states in the American South.

Way Down South

To many observers, whether residents or outsiders, Louisiana is first and foremost a southern state. Even though most of its notoriety—and much of the remainder of this discussion—focuses on how Louisiana differs from other states in the South, the distinctiveness of the Louisiana culture in the United States begins with the fact that it is one of only eleven states that bear all of the pride, scars, and other psychological and physical baggage of a southern traditionalistic culture. Louisiana is one of the five southern states—the Deep South states—where these characteristics are magnified and are most persisting. Indeed, much of Louisiana was settled by an old world landed gentry from Europe bringing a traditionalistic culture intent on preserving itself. Although the political culture in Louisiana is much more complex than simply that fact, it is a logical place to begin. Any understanding of Louisiana must start by lining it up especially with its Deep South neighbors Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, as well as the other seven states that composed the Confederacy. Louisiana is, after all, way down south.

As a distinct region in the United States, the South exhibits a different kind of politics from that of its northern and western neighbors. Indeed, in important ways, the South has a political culture unheard of throughout the rest of the nation. But the people of the South, and the people of Louisiana, bear another important element to their cultural her-

itage. The most renowned southern historian of our time, C. Vann Woodward, portrays the South in inimitable words that are hard to ignore. He examines and explains the rebellion, revolution, frustration and resentment that characterize southern politics, all of which can be found in the politics of Louisiana. Woodward sums up this southern predicament in his classic book *The Burden of Southern History:*

> For the inescapable facts of history were that the South had repeatedly met with frustration and failure. It had learned that it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to all the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them. It had learned to accommodate itself to conditions that it swore it would never accept, and it had learned the taste left in the mouth by the swallowing of one's own words. It had learned to live for long decades in quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission. For the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America—though it is shared by nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia—the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction.[12]

The South's distinctiveness begins well before these historical developments, as Elazar indicates, in the traditionalistic culture brought to the region by those who settled there. The impact of this traditionalistic culture in most of the South has been wide-ranging, especially when it is combined with the effects of the Civil War on the same people in the same region. There are two standard reference works on southern culture that, like Elazar, view the settlement by old world landed gentry, trying to preserve an agrarian culture, as the key to understanding the South. Both, of course, are also cognizant of the impact of the Civil War.

These classic books are W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, published in 1941, and *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, published in 1930 by a group of authors who called themselves simply "Twelve Southerners."[13] Both works have been the subject of several scholarly seminars and colloquia. Indeed, both have been revisited as the subjects of published fifty-year retrospectives. They provide nice contrasts and together allow a fairly complete portrayal of the scholarship on southern culture.

The Cash book is the most biting. It makes some southerners furious. To Cash, the key to understanding the South is the relationship between the landed aristocracy (former plantation owners, other large landowners) and poorer white people, tenant farmers and otherwise. He sees the upper classes as cynically creating a bond with lower-income white people by emphasizing their shared culture and fueling the fires of racism by contrasting them with their black counterparts—in effect saying, "You may be poor, but most important, you're white." This strategy keeps poor white tenant farmers from joining with former slave tenant farmers to work together for rights, privileges, and better working conditions. United, poorer whites and blacks would be a potent political and social force. Divided along racial lines, especially with poor whites bonding psychologically with upper-class whites, the social and economic order can be preserved and those who dominate society can remain in place.

To make matters worse, these landed gentry who controlled southern society are filled with guilt about slavery, are clinging to a lost cause and falsely romanticizing their past glories. By design, they serve as role models to the masses of poorer whites. The result, according to Cash, is a "Savage Ideal"—a southern character defined by the guilt-ridden aristocracy and copied by the impoverished, uneducated, manipulated white masses. Cash does not indulge in southern polite distance when he concludes his book with this description of southern culture:

> Proud, brave, honorable by its lights, courteous, personally generous, loyal, swift to act, often too swift, but signally effective, sometimes terrible, in its actions—such was the South at its best. And such at its best it remains today, despite the great falling away in some of its virtues. Violence, intolerance, aversion and suspicion toward new ideas, an incapacity for analysis, an inclination to act from feeling rather than from thought, an exaggerated individualism and a too narrow concept of social responsibility, attachment to fictions and false values, above all too great attachment to racial values and a tendency to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values, sentimentality and a lack of realism—these have been its characteristic vices in the past. And, despite changes for the better, they remain its characteristic vices today.[14]

This is certainly not a view of the South that most white southerners

would find appealing or accurate. Yet if Cash was criticized for several aspects of his monumental work, his ideas resonated and became one cornerstone of the definition of white southern culture. The hallmarks—violence, intolerance, racism, and holding on to the status quo—remain accepted stereotypes of southern whites.

On the other hand, *I'll Take My Stand* offers a characterization of the South that is much more palatable to most white southerners. The authors were mainly literary scholars at Vanderbilt University reacting to the industrialization and modernization of the South. The most prominent member of the group was Robert Penn Warren who spent some of his career at Louisiana State University and was the author of the novel *All the King's Men*—a book normally interpreted as a thinly veiled reference to the career of Louisiana's Huey Long.

I'll Take My Stand defines southern culture in terms of adamant agrarianism. These writers emphasize that the southern agrarian way of life is superior to industrialized, modern society because it upholds traditional values, especially religious values, and it allows labor to be fulfilling rather than assembly-line monotony. Industrialization drives the need for consumption, which in turn leads to the primacy of commercial interests over all other values. Family relationships and friendships are overwhelmed by the need for money and become dictated and defined by commercial interests rather than more nurturing, caring "family values." In the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, George Tindall encapsulates the Twelve Southerners' version of southern culture in Donald Davidson's words, "family, bloodkinship, clanship, folkways, custom, community."[15]

Yet the state that boasts of Bourbon Street and so readily embraces gambling as a tool for economic development makes an odd fit with the traditionalistic culture of the South. This convoluted relationship between Louisiana culture and southern "Dixie" culture is symbolized in some clever historical ironies that bear mentioning. While many Louisianians are aware that their most famous politician, Huey Long, was the son of an abolitionist, the ultimate irony to most die-hard Confederates in Louisiana concerns the most infamous United States general in the Civil War, William Tecumseh Sherman. Sherman, whose troops burned their way from Atlanta to the Atlantic, became a symbol of the Union army's destruction of the South. In fact, even Georgia's tourist website notes: "If the question was asked, 'Who was and still is the most hated and despised man

in the history of Georgia,' the response would be William Tecumseh Sherman. From the onset of hostilities in the Atlanta Campaign on May 6, 1864 and the March to the Sea ending two days before Christmas 1864 with him capturing Savannah, no one created more destruction. As a result of his successful campaign in Georgia, the Confederacy was split in two and deprived of much needed supplies, ending the war quickly with a Union victory."[16] In Louisiana, however, William Tecumseh Sherman is also known as the first president of Louisiana State University. Louisiana's uneasy relationship with the Confederacy is symbolized by that and much more.

Oddly enough, the name "Dixie," the most endearing term for the South, may well have some unseemly Louisiana roots. Despite its use by southern traditionalists who pride themselves on family values, it may well have found its origin in the French name for the amount of money needed to hire a prostitute in the least "southern" of cities in the Deep South, New Orleans. One dictionary explains it this way: "Ten dollar notes issued by the Citizens Bank of Louisiana before the Civil War bore the French 'dix,' ten, on the reverse side and were consequently known as 'dixes' or 'dixies'. Hence Louisiana and eventually the South in general came to be known as the land of 'dixies' or 'dixies land.'"[17] Although this particular explanation of the origin of the word *Dixie* is widespread, it is not at all conclusive and remains controversial.

Behind these anecdotal ironies linger cultural distinctions. Louisiana's political culture includes many of the attributes of most political cultures in the southern part of the United States, but important differences remain. Elazar's lumping together of Louisiana with all of the other southern states, while understandable, is a bit misleading. Louisiana may fall primarily into the traditionalistic culture, inasmuch as it is southern, but Louisiana experienced much more complicated immigration patterns than most southern states. Although Elazar combines the French Bourbon immigrants in south Louisiana with the northern European immigrants in central and north Louisiana in a single political culture, a distinction exists between the two and is worth examining.

The People: Northern European Louisianians

Unquestionably, the southernness of Louisiana runs throughout the state, from Lake Providence in the far northeast corner to Marsh

Island, where Louisiana blurs into the Gulf of Mexico. Even so, north Louisiana most readily and vividly fits the standard of southern culture. In many ways north Louisiana can be viewed as the most southern part of the state, blending well with the rest of the Deep South. In the northern piney hills around Ruston one feels culturally closer to Mississippi than to fellow Louisianians living along Bayou Teche. From politics to food, north Louisiana seems more like a southern state than does the French coast. It is more chicken-fried steak and barbeque than jambalaya and etouffée.

The immigration patterns in north Louisiana produced a political culture much like that found in most of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Patterns of immigration of people from northern European ancestry, including many Scottish and Irish immigrants, define much of north Louisiana. These patterns occur throughout the American South and provide the basis for its traditionalistic political culture.

Anglo-Americans settled in Louisiana, particularly north Louisiana, in increasing numbers throughout the early 1800s. Outnumbered seven to one by Franco-Americans in 1806, by 1830 Anglo-Americans had cut the gap to two to one. These settlers continued to surge into the state and in the mid-1840s they began to outnumber Franco-Americans. They brought with them the culture of the southern United States, Protestant religion, and a political mentality that distinguished them markedly from their French predecessors. Cultural variation brought political distrust: "Not surprisingly, this migration of Anglo-Americans into Louisiana, and the political challenge that these newcomers offered to the hegemony of the previously dominant ethnic group, resulted in the growth of distrust, hostility, and ethnocultural conflict between French and Anglo-Americans which was often manifest in the political arena."[18]

The People: African Louisianians

The most prominent demographic characteristic of all of the five states of the Deep South is the proportion of citizens with African ancestry. The percentage of African Americans in the United States is 13. According to the 2000 Census, five of the six states with the largest proportions of African Americans are Deep South states—Mississippi with 36 percent, Louisiana with 32 percent, South Carolina with 30 percent, Georgia with 29 percent, and Alabama with 26 percent. (The one non–

Deep South state of the six was Maryland, with 28 percent.) Even though southern blacks vary tremendously in several socioeconomic traits, black culture in Louisiana is probably the most politically self-conscious.

When prominent historian Lisa Baker described New Orleans in her landmark work on school desegregation in the city, she said that "its family tree looked like no other in the United States" and referred to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's comment that in spirit New Orleans is "the most African city in the United States."[19] They were probably right.

Just as African roots are obvious in New Orleans, they can be seen and felt in rural areas as well. As map 1-A (Appendix 1) shows, the African American population in Louisiana is most concentrated in Orleans Parish and in rural parishes along the Mississippi River Delta. In addition to Orleans, the Louisiana parishes with the largest percentage of African Americans are East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas in northeast Louisiana and St. James and St. Helena in the southeast, all rural places.

Since the term "immigration pattern" is not appropriate for the arrival of most African Americans to Louisiana and the South, a brief history of the slow emergence of blacks as a force in Louisiana and southern politics is necessary. The African American culture in Louisiana is a product of a totally independent set of circumstances than the European immigration patterns.

Outside New Orleans and a community of Franco-Africans associated with Melrose Plantation near Natchitoches, black history in Louisiana is mostly the same as black history in the remainder of the South. In New Orleans, however, a black Creole population had a major impact on the culture of the city. The term Creole itself is controversial. Sometimes it is used to denote only French and Spanish mixtures.[20] More often, however, it refers to people in New Orleans who "traced their origins to eighteenth-century unions of French and Spanish settlers with indigenous Indian women, African slaves, and black refugees from later political upheavals in the Caribbean."[21] Unlike most American blacks, Creoles were normally Catholic, spoke mostly French, and enjoyed much more financial success than most of slave society precisely because many Creoles were not themselves slaves.[22] Despite the restrictions on black society by the Louisiana government, black Creoles in New Orleans thrived. Most of the rest of the black population in Louisiana, however, experienced the same hardships and indignities that blacks faced in the remainder of the South.

Charles Grenier summarizes the experiences of blacks in Louisiana and the South since the Civil War as follows:

> Louisiana's history is typical of the Deep South states for the period under investigation. American blacks were given the vote when slavery was abolished after the Civil War during the reconstruction program of 1867. Federally designated military rulers supervised the registration of over 700,000 blacks, slightly more than the number of whites registered at that time. . . . Three years later the U.S. Congress passed the 14th and 15th amendments to the constitution, specifying that the right to vote, "shall not be denied . . . on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude." These amendments provided a constitutional basis for a central political authority in the matter of universal suffrage, but it left the states almost totally free to regulate political parties, elections and suffrage.
>
> Consequently, the various southern states began passing laws aimed specifically at the disqualification of the black electorate, with such requirements as literacy tests, good-character tests, poll taxes, property qualifications, and civil understanding tests. The counterrevolution against the abolitionists also included the formation of a single party political system, the Southern Democratic Party, which became the absolute ruling party in the region. This led to the development of the most formidable barrier of all, the so-called white primary. Southern Democrats moved to disallow blacks as members, rationalized by a series of statutory revisions at the state level. Since nomination by the Democratic party was tantamount to election, debarment from the nominating process was the equivalent of disenfranchisement. Statewide rules at the county and city committee level restricted the black to nonpartisan and special elections where his Republican vote was a mere gesture. Louisiana remained a one-party system up until 1980, with the election of the first Republican governor in 100 years.
>
> Superimposed on this quasi-legal political structure were the forces of physical coercion, fear, political apathy, economic coercion, discrimination, and the lack of political organization, among other things, all acting to curtail black political participation. By 1900 the black vote in the South had virtually disappeared. In 1930 the black population in Louisiana was around 50 percent and only one percent were registered to vote. In 1980, 30 percent of the population was black and 70 percent of them were registered. The re-enfranchisement process began in the late 1940s with the Supreme Court invalidation of the white primary, and culminated with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Voting Rights Act departed from the pattern set by the 1957, 1960, and 1964 Civil Rights Acts which depended almost entirely upon private litigation, by providing for direct federal action to enable blacks to register and vote. The Act suspended literacy tests and other discriminatory voter registration tests. Federal Examiners were assigned to the various states to supervise registration in problem counties. And federal observers were assigned to monitor elections in counties where examiners served under the Act.[23]

The African American political culture in Louisiana is a durable culture of abiding black consciousness and unity as a result of two centuries of continuous, institutional, deep-rooted, and calculated discrimination. Understandably, this culture is not defined by social conservatism or social liberalism. Instead the African American political culture, currently, is unified by a lack of trust of the majority political establishment and a desire and need to advance the group as a whole.

While blacks are dominant players in several cities and key players in several states, the impact of African Americans in Louisiana's political culture may well be more powerful than in any other state. Blacks are more urban in Louisiana than in other southern states where their numbers and proportions are the highest. They are therefore more active and empowered than in other Deep South states. A longstanding established black middle class in New Orleans serves to accentuate the already raised political activism. Indeed, in 1860 the black population in New Orleans was split closely between 13,000 slaves and 11,000 free blacks.[24] Although the free black population was increasingly constrained as the Civil War neared, a considerable black middle class had begun to develop very early in Louisiana's history.

The impact of an empowered African American electorate, after decades of frustration, can have a snowball effect. When black candidate "Dutch" Morial was elected mayor in majority white New Orleans in 1977, black voter registration skyrocketed.[25] By the end of the twentieth century African American voter registration and participation in Louisiana

was almost the same as white participation and registration.[26] Although no African American has yet been elected to statewide office, African Americans are a relatively cohesive, significant force in Louisiana politics and are one of the three major broad ethnic groups whose interaction forms the basis of Louisiana's political culture.

The People: Southern European Louisianians

When the Creole French candidate for the U.S. Senate, Charles Gayarré, won in 1835, one commentator made the following note: "We have raised up in our Louisiana politics an element unknown in other states—an element difficult to manage or estimate its effect—I mean Creolism—a kind of national native feeling—principally operating on moderate natives of French origin."[27] Indeed, perhaps more than any other characteristic, the French-based culture of south Louisiana skews Louisiana's fit with the American South.

In his landmark article "The Secession Election in Louisiana," historian Charles Dew begins with a striking declaration: "Of all of the states in the Lower South, Louisiana seemed the most firmly attached to the Union."[28] He points first to New Orleans:

> New Orleans, the South's largest and most cosmopolitan city, had strong ties with the upper Mississippi Valley, and her shipping and financial activities were closely associated with the major eastern ports, New York in particular. In addition, the city's business elite had a large and prominent northern-born element, and many of these influential businessmen were, at best, lukewarm to the secessionist cause. New Orleans' sizable immigrant population also displayed a notable lack of enthusiasm for secession during the 1850s. In the opinion of Senator John Slidell, the master manipulator of the state Democratic organization, the Irish and the Germans in the Crescent City were "at heart abolitionists."[29]

Dew then speaks of south Louisiana more generally as he contrasts it with the northern part of the state. "Secessionist sentiment ran strongest in the cotton parishes along the Mississippi and Red Rivers, districts characterized by large plantations and a heavy concentration of slaves. In the Delta parishes of southern Louisiana, however, the protective federal tariff on sugar tempered enthusiasm for secession."[30]

As Dew points out, the immigration patterns in New Orleans are not as obviously part of the traditionalistic southern culture as the remainder of the South. Although Dew concentrates on the differences between the agricultural economies in north and south Louisiana, immigration patterns were important as well and helped defined south Louisiana as much less of a traditional southern culture.

Many outward signs point to this less traditional, less southern culture. The celebrity of New Orleans and south Louisiana rests mainly on spicy food and music, but the cultural differences between north and south run much deeper.

Two maps of Louisiana speak volumes (see Appendix 1). Map 1-B shows parish-by-parish religious affiliation. All but four parishes are majority Catholic or majority Baptist (not just Protestant, but Baptist). The top half of the state, the "Dixie" half, is Baptist, while a triangle of parishes in the lower half is Catholic. Map 1-C shows French ancestry by parish. Again, the southern part of the state is clearly distinct.

The French ancestry of Louisiana has a variety of sources. French colonists settled in the delta along the southern portion of the Mississippi River and particularly in New Orleans. The French colony included an Old World–style traditional elite. Other European immigrants, including Spanish colonists and settlers of the so-called German Coast along the Mississippi River above New Orleans, were assimilated into the dominant French culture of the time and took on the language. However, much of the French ancestry found in south Louisiana is a result of migration of thousands of French settlers from an area called Acadia, in what is now Nova Scotia. The history of this migration is romanticized in the popular Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem *Evangeline*, which in turn is memorialized by Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site near St. Martinville. The journey of the Acadians to Louisiana was not an easy one.

In the early 1600s, colonists from France were among the first Europeans to settle in what is now North America. When England obtained possession of Nova Scotia in 1713, there were many attempts to make these people English subjects. After years of often violent resistance, thousands of French Acadians were deported in 1755. Many eventually migrated to Louisiana. By the early 1800s, thousands had made their way to the southern parishes of the state.

These immigrants brought with them a history and a view of govern-

ment unlike those of the old landed gentry in the northern part of the state, and unlike the African American history of slavery. True, the Acadian political culture was not imbued with the almost complete lack of trust inherent in an African slave culture. However, given its history of political expulsion, it was also not as traditionalistic and protective of the status quo as the northern European political culture formed by the immigrants to north Louisiana.

The political attitudinal effects of the difference in immigration patterns between north and south Louisiana Europeans is described well by David Landry and Joseph Parker: "A generally more tolerant attitude prevails throughout South Louisiana. The sale of alcoholic beverages on Sundays has never been an issue there, and gambling has never been an issue there, although it [was] illegal by state statute." Indeed, *before gambling was legalized* in the state, "According to Marc R. Gore, senior intelligence analyst with the Louisiana State Police, Criminal Intelligence Section, illegal gambling [was] the state's third largest industry, with a value of $244,695,000."[31]

The greater propensity to support gambling in the southern part of the state appeared clearly in the 1997 parish-by-parish vote on video poker. Of the thirty-one majority Catholic parishes—those that roughly define southern European south Louisiana—twenty-one voted for video poker, while of the twenty-nine majority Baptist parishes in northern European north Louisiana, only eight did so.

Greater support for various forms of gambling and more liberal views on the sale of alcohol are part of a broad pattern. As Landry and Parker note, "the contrast between North and South Louisiana was recently demonstrated by the referendum on the 1974 Constitution. The constitution lacked a prohibition against state support for parochial schools, and it contained a strongly worded provision on equal rights."[32] North Louisiana voted heavily against the constitution.

Most Louisianians would quickly recognize and acknowledge the difference in the two cultures on social issues—the more conservative "Bible Belt" north and the more liberal "Cajun" south—but the most conspicuous political difference between the northern and southern cultures may be more surprising. It is in race relations. "Largely because of the Latin tradition of tolerance, racism was rarely as intense or, one might argue, never as institutionalized in South Louisiana as it was in other parts of the South.

In the French parishes, for example, a higher percentage of blacks were registered to vote prior to the 1965 Voting Rights Act than in any other area in the South. Nor did the Ku Klux Klan find much support in South Louisiana primarily because the Klan is anti-Catholic as well as antiblack."[33]

Other, more recent writers have concluded the same thing. Stephan Caldas in his study of voting patterns in Louisiana in the 1990s concludes that south Louisiana Catholic voters were less likely than their counterparts in north Louisiana to support the racially charged rhetoric found in the David Duke campaigns. Caldas argues that in south Louisiana, Catholicism in combination with a "Latin tradition of tolerance" formed the basis for greater racial tolerance.[34]

More strong evidence of different racial attitudes between north and south Louisiana appears in a map found in Earl and Merle Black's *Politics and Society in the South*. It displays county-by-county voting percentages by blacks in the South before the 1965 Voting Rights Act.[35] Acadian south Louisiana appears as distinctly more racially tolerant than either north Louisiana or the Deep South in general.

The case for relatively relaxed racial attitudes in south Louisiana is supported not only by statistical data but in many anecdotal ways as well. The blending of these southern European Americans and African Americans politically and culturally in South Louisiana is obvious. Any observer of shades of skin color at any place where races come together—from a zydeco festival to the oil fields to the legislature—is struck by the variety of and lack of clear visible distinction between the races.

In sum, most Louisianians readily see and acknowledge the differences in social attitudes between the northern and southern parts of the state. The social and cultural liberalism of south Louisiana is most visibly reflected in alcohol and gambling issues but clearly extends to racial issues as well. It is not just the food or the music. It is an entirely different cultural heritage.

The People Form a Disorderly Democracy

Louisiana politics is a constant game of heavy competition, and the first feature of the Louisiana political culture is a disorderly, unstable democracy among three distinct, unmistakable ethnic groups shaped through early immigration patterns. The three main ethnic groups are not

significant because they define three voting blocs. They often do not. North and south Louisiana Europeans will often vote together against African Americans, as in the 1995 and 1999 elections for governor in which black candidates Cleo Fields and William Jefferson received little white support, north or south, against Mike Foster. In a *New Orleans Times-Picayune* exit poll of the 1995 race, 96 percent of black respondents said that they voted for Fields, while 84 percent of white respondents were for Foster.[36]

On the other hand, southern European and African voters will often vote mainly together, as in the political victory of Edwin Edwards over David Duke in 1991 (see map 1-D, Appendix 1). Almost as often, the groups do not neatly define three voting blocs at all, as in the cases of most of the recent elections for the U.S. Senate, including the 1996 race between Democrat Mary Landrieu and Republican "Woody" Jenkins (see map 1-E). The map of Duke-Edwards shows some concentration of the support for Duke in north Louisiana, but it also includes a few south Louisiana parishes such as Livingston, Washington, and St. Bernard. The map of the Landrieu-Jenkins election, on the other hand, shows much more dispersion of support across the state. (Of course, the fact that Jenkins won a broader spectrum of parishes than Duke seems at least partly attributable to the fact that Jenkins-Landrieu was a near dead heat, whereas Duke-Edwards was a runaway for Edwards.)

The three groups, therefore, should not be considered voting blocs, because they have a much broader effect. These are ethnic groups with strong group consciousness and a lack of trust in other groups for extended periods of time—thus, the volatility. The existence of these three well-defined, highly self-conscious groups in Louisiana always keeps Louisiana politics unsteady and on guard. These groups keep the political footing in Louisiana as soft as its swampy terrain. More than any other characteristic of the state, they create a culture that is volatile, unsettled, and always highly competitive.

Louisiana's three major ethnic groups set this pattern for an unstable democracy early on. Well before the impact of oil and gas resources on the political culture of the state, Louisiana elites were manipulating and coercing political groups openly and obviously.

The infamous 1896 gubernatorial election is a spectacular example of a political culture in which no one group dominates, the pursuit of power is ruthless, and the victors consolidate their position—until the next com-

petitive, tumultuous election. It is a particularly instructive example because it illustrates the fluidity of the coalitions of ethnic groups and underlines the fact that it is the lack of a single enduring dominant political group that defines the volatile nature of Louisiana's democracy.

In 1896, African Americans aligned with some central and north Louisiana whites—a coalition that would occur only infrequently during the whole course of the following century. The two main candidates for governor were both from St. Mary Parish. They were John Newton Pharr and Murphy J. Foster (whose grandson would be elected governor a century later, in 1995 and 1999). Pharr's "Fusion" ticket had the support of blacks statewide and of white farmers in north Louisiana. Foster's Bourbon Democrat ticket, which had been fairly entrenched in power since Reconstruction, was losing popular support rapidly. This tenuous hold on power caused a fierce campaign against the Fusion ticket, including everything from name-calling ("John Nigger Pharr") to lynching to outrageous vote fraud. The Bourbons won. The official returns from the pro-Bourbon parishes are astounding. In Bossier, Foster received 3,464 official votes to Pharr's 58; in West Feliciana, Foster's vote total was 3,093 to Pharr's 1 vote; in East Carroll and Tensas, Foster was recorded with 2,635 and 1,968 votes while Pharr, incredibly, was recorded as receiving none.[37] Despite howls from the Fusionists, the legislature confirmed the results.

The aftermath of the election was even more telling. The Bourbon Democrats called for a constitutional convention and consolidated, for the time being, their power. Several provisions to restrict voting were written into the 1898 Constitution. The effects can be bluntly summarized: "between 1897 and 1904 white voter registration in Louisiana fell from almost 164,088 to 91,716, while black registration almost disappeared, zooming downward from 130,344 to 1,342."[38] In the spirit of Louisiana's disorderly political culture, to the victor went the spoils.

As in most of the American South, largely Celtic northern Europeans constitute a substantial part of Louisiana's political culture. But unlike in most of the remainder of the South, the position of these northern European traditionalists is not supreme in Louisiana, and the state's political culture reflects the existence of more influences. The southern Europeans, mainly French Acadians, add a second, very different point of view to the mix. Since neither the northern European nor the southern European culture is dominant, the whole culture of the state itself is unsta-

ble. Early on, by the turn of the twentieth century, Louisiana witnessed political turmoil as a result of this unstable culture.

The third group, African Americans, was allowed to participate in politics in any large-scale, systematic, enduring way only in the last fifty years. The addition of African Americans to the already unstable political culture of Louisiana allowed some openings to power unseen in other southern states where African Americans constituted a considerable numerical force. In Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, states where blacks are a politically important proportion of the population, the dominant group, northern European traditionalists, was virtually unchallenged in defining political norms. Louisiana provided a perfect opportunity for this newly empowered group to find some political voice. Political participation rates indicate that blacks in Louisiana are the most empowered group of blacks in any state in the United States. The power of this third politicocultural group in the late twentieth century intensified the existing political volatility. Therefore, one clear feature of Louisiana's democracy is instability and volatility resulting from the existence of three distinct politically conscious cultures.

Mouth of the South

To exacerbate the volatility of a political culture sprouting from three ethnic groups, the geography of Louisiana adds a further layer of instability. Louisiana's location on the Mississippi River and the state's richness of natural resources toss additional competitive interests and political possibilities into the mix.

The most visibly distinctive geographical feature of Louisiana is that the state is located where the largest river in the country meets the sea. The river strengthened the agrarian and urban economies within Louisiana. By 1860, Louisiana was the most affluent agrarian state in the United States. In 1840, New Orleans was the fourth-largest city in the nation and a leading exporter.[39] Its situation around the Gulf outlets of the Mississippi River provides Louisiana with a delta of rich alluvial soil that supported the development of a plantation economy based on rice, sugar, and cotton. Affluent planters established large slaveholding plantations in the delta, particularly in the southeastern part of the state. Although the plantation crops shifted from sugar and rice to cotton as one traveled up the Mississippi, the plantation system extended throughout the delta

from the southern to the northern part of the state, crosscutting the ethnic cleavages between Anglo-Americans in the north and French, Spanish, and Creoles in the south. However, the farther one travels from the river, the sparser plantations become. Thus the plantation system established an agrarian elite not solidly identifiable with any single ethnic group or region of the state.

In the nineteenth century, when commerce was dominated by water transport, the river also provided the state with a vast commercial bounty. The intersection of the sea and the water highway to much of the nation's interior created a bustling Old World commercial crossroad, New Orleans—the largest and most prominent city in Louisiana and indeed the single best-known feature of the state. In the early 1800s, New Orleans had become the largest city in the South and the second-largest port in America, behind New York City. New Orleans had a population that was growing rapidly and therefore changing in character constantly. The New Orleans commercial mentality was quite different from the plantation culture that prevailed in much of the rest of the state and the South.

Raymond Strother, a highly successful national Democratic strategist with deep political roots in Louisiana, once described New Orleans as "a whole 'nother country." He was right.[40] But if New Orleans is "a whole 'nother country," it is in a state full of whole 'nother countries. In other states, when a major city stands apart, politics is always divided in terms of the city versus the rest of the state. The terms are very familiar. In Illinois, the phrase that describes the state political divide is "Chicago and downstate"; in New York, it is "New York City and upstate."

In Louisiana, however, the impact of New Orleans on the state's political culture is mainly to reinforce and accentuate the already unstable nature of that culture. New Orleans does not tear the state into parts because the state was never together to begin with. The city only adds spice to an already boiling pot.

The Fuel of Competition . . .

Discovered in the early part of the twentieth century, oil and natural gas came to dominate and lubricate Louisiana politics, encouraging and exaggerating trends of populism and corruption. Like many a third-world backwater or banana republic, Louisiana for much of the twentieth century was a one-crop economy that allowed the government to provide the un-

dereducated and impoverished population with basic needs. The abundant supply of oil and gas has had complicated effects. While it allowed the state to collect taxes from a prosperous industry, it also encouraged state politicians to be beholden to powerful interest groups. Although Texas, Oklahoma, and Alaska also had huge reserves of oil and gas, these revenue sources did not dominate their budgets and therefore their political cultures to the same extent as in Louisiana. While oil and gas extraction—as well as a rapidly growing petrochemical industry—provided well-paying jobs for a state that needed them, these jobs did not require much formal education and, therefore, education was not a high priority for state politicians. The long-term results were stunted economic development and a customary view of higher education as a luxury rather than a necessity.

An oil-and-gas-based economy was perfectly conducive to populist politics. The financially robust industry provided the money to the government through taxes; citizens working in blue-collar jobs that required only a basic education were, therefore, highly inclined to respond to a populist rhetoric of distributive politics. Populist policy was a policy of roads, bridges, and chickens in every pot. A populist education system provided the very basics for many rather than better things for the few. Free schoolbooks, free transportation to public schools, and a source of cheap, basic college education near everyone were signature programs.

All of this had an impact upon a political culture that was already volatile and fiercely, ruthlessly competitive. Huey Long was able to become the most powerful politician in the history of Louisiana, or perhaps any state, because of the combination of an existing political culture and the new opportunities provided by the petroleum industry. "Big Oil" provided rhetorical ammunition; it became the perfect, easy-to-understand "enemy of the people." It was a simple target that made a populist message resonate.

Oil and gas probably played an even more significant role in providing Louisiana (and its politicians) a tremendous source of tax revenue. Any populist politician at that moment could not only make promises to poor, frustrated rural white people, but could deliver on these promises. With the influx of oil and gas severance taxes into the state's budget, there was no need to tax the people, and politicians could behave like Santa Claus. For the average citizen it was the politics of representation with-

out taxation. The ruthless culture was already in place; oil and gas gave Huey Long not only the perfect rhetorical enemy but also the money to come through with roads, bridges, free textbooks, and a wild assortment of other populist goodies.[41]

The money that the oil and gas paid to the government may also have had the effect of strengthening racial tolerance in Louisiana. It allowed Huey Long, as it would have allowed any populist at the time, to build a power base among poorer whites. It also allowed him to distribute goods fairly freely and consistently without requiring any individual sacrifices.

This situation allowed Long to appeal solely to the economic, rather than the cultural, aspect of populist rhetoric and, therefore, not resort to racism. In bad economic times, his counterparts, notably Theodore Bilbo in Mississippi and, after a racist conversion, Tom Watson in Georgia, used racism to cement their charismatic hold on the newly politically empowered white former sharecroppers. Two factors in Long's background mitigated against this tactic. Racist rhetoric may well have been uncomfortable for the son and grandson of men who had favored the Union cause over the Confederate. Perhaps more significantly, Long was raised in Winn Parish, which opposed secession before the Civil War and was a bastion of anti-Confederate sentiment during it, provided a Louisiana powerhouse for Populist Party strength in the 1890s, and fostered a burgeoning socialist movement in the early 1900s. The class warfare, the demonizing of big business and corporate interests, the uses of government to legitimately coerce redistribution of wealth were all natural parts of his political consciousness. He was therefore more convincing perhaps because, especially at first, he may have been more genuine than many populist politicians of the day in his claimed desire to take from the rich and give to the poor.[42]

The hard-nosed winner-take-all competition that characterized Longism was in part a result of the natural resource base of the state. Without oil and gas money, the political game would not be nearly as feasible or effective.

. . . and Corruption

The abundance of oil and gas in the state may also help explain the reputation for corruption in Louisiana politics: money has been known to encourage politicians to stray from ethical purity. After all, Longism is not known only for its share-the-wealth programs. Both Huey Long's

and Earl Long's reputations for fostering corruption in politics in many ways overshadow the populist politics and programs that dominated their rhetoric.

Corruption surely existed before the discovery of oil and gas in Louisiana. Native Virginian David Boyd, who served as president of Louisiana State University during Reconstruction, claimed in 1874 that Louisianians "look upon the public as a sheep to be shorn, and office as the special fleece. Here, you know, a man who does not make all he can out of his official place is set down as a fool, or poor business manager."[43] But the vast sums of money provided by the new industry afforded the opportunity for government officials to extend this approach to office. Since they could spend on public works programs and services without having to tax individuals, the potential for corruption was enormous. Politicians could spend and spend and spend without any sense of accountability for the way the money was spent because it was not perceived as the people's money.

In this environment, if a brother-in-law or wealthy contributor made large sums of money when a bridge was built or a health service was provided because the state paid exorbitant prices, the average citizen could easily be lulled into just enjoying the benefits without worrying about the money wasted. After all, it was Texaco's money or Standard Oil's money that was being spent. One of the more notoriously flagrant examples of this attitude was that of Governor Dick Leche (1936–1939) who reportedly said, "When I took the oath of office, I didn't take any vows of poverty"—and was later imprisoned for a variety of crimes that involved stealing money from the state.[44] Leche is one of the better known of a long string of corrupt Louisiana politicians because he was caught and paid dearly for his crimes. In much of the twentieth century, Louisiana politicians indeed had the ability to be Santa Claus. They could give gifts to their citizens at what seemed to be no cost. In the process, they often seized upon the opportunity to be even more generous to themselves. Corruption was the almost inevitable result.

Dependence on a single industry like oil and gas may also have led to unethical politics in another way as well. Elected officials were so beholden to the industry for severance taxes and jobs that its lobbyists regularly engineered passage of regulations very favorable to corporate interests. By the end of the century environmentalists would decry the "deals with the

devil" that secured the benefits of jobs and money at the expense of compromising the integrity of the water and air in the state.

The legacy of abundant natural resources in Louisiana certainly adds a substantial dimension to the Louisiana political culture in the twentieth century. The revenue that it generated, coupled with an already volatile political culture, created a context that allowed for the emergence of Huey Long and his brand of populism. Long-style populism set the stage for a form of politics in Louisiana that would last well after his death. Huey's brother Earl Long was the obvious heir to the Long tradition. As lieutenant governor to Richard Leche, he became acting governor when the scandal-ridden Leche resigned in 1939, and he was elected governor outright in 1948 and again in 1956.

Since Earl's day, an embarrassing parade of elected officials have been indicted or convicted, of whom the most notorious is four-term governor Edwin Edwards, elected in 1971, 1975, 1983, and 1991. Edwards was the most instrumental in keeping the Louisiana traditions of populism and corruption alive throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century. After surviving two trials for racketeering that ended in a hung jury and an acquittal during his third term, Edwards returned five years later to serve an unprecedented fourth term with his victory over David Duke.

Tyler Bridges, in his book about Edwards and the history of gambling in Louisiana, *Bad Bet on the Bayou*, summed up his gubernatorial career: "Some called him the 'Last Great American Populist.' Others knew him as the 'Cajun King.' Still others called him the 'Silver Zipper.' . . . He had first moved into the Governor's Mansion in 1971, and for the next twenty-five years, he flaunted his fondness for easy cash, pretty women, and high-stakes gambling as he dominated Louisiana's politics and used his razor-sharp mind and catlike reflexes to stay one step ahead of the law."[45]

Someone once asked Edwards, "Who is the best politician you ever saw? The governor smiled and answered, "Every day when I look in the mirror . . ."[46]

Edwards may be the best-known Louisiana politician since the Longs to have been embroiled in scandal, but he is certainly not the only one. The last three state commissioners of insurance were indicted and convicted of crimes. Various other statewide officials and legislators have, all after the Long era, been indicted for, and not infrequently convicted of, a wide array of misdeeds.

But is Louisiana the most politically corrupt state in the United States? Surely other states have their own corruption problems. The answer to the question depends, of course, on how corruption is measured. In a "corruption index," is a convicted statewide-elected insurance commissioner worth the same number of "corruption points" as, say, three convicted state representatives? What if the insurance commissioner was convicted in two states? What if the insurance commissioner was part of a steady stream of indicted insurance commissioners? Does consistency count? The measurement problem notwithstanding, it is fair to state that if Louisiana is not the most corrupt state in the nation, it is certainly in the major leagues. In 1949 the noted political scientist V. O. Key called Louisiana's corruption history in the early twentieth century "a record unparalleled in our times."[47] As the narrator of the splendid 1991 documentary *Louisiana Boys: Raised on Politics* says, "If you were a politician and wanted to put another state on the other side of the confessional booth, it would be Louisiana."[48]

The long, Long legacy of a populist political culture enabled by an oil-and-petrochemical economy may not easily fade, but the economy itself has changed dramatically in recent years. In 1982 fully 41 percent of Louisiana's revenue was energy-based; a decade later, that number had dropped to only 13 percent.[49] Considering that the natural resource base in Louisiana explains much of Louisiana politics during the last hundred years, this fundamental change in economic structure may well produce a change in this aspect of the state's politics. After a few decades of functioning in this new economic context, Louisiana may simply no longer have the money to be a populist, and potentially very corrupt, state.

Constitutions and More Constitutions

For evidence of a direct impact of a volatile political culture on concrete politics, one only needs to look at the constitutional history of Louisiana. Constitutions are supposed to be the basic fundamental laws that govern governments. They represent a set of accepted principles that create the arena for political conflict. If Louisiana political history is any indication, those fundamental principles themselves are the subject of political conflict.

Louisianians cannot seem to agree on a constitution for very long—and when they did, from 1921 to 1973, they changed the constitution so many times that not only was the stability of the rules in question, but

after so many amendments amending amendments, the rules themselves probably were not even understood. The superlatives are quite telling. Louisiana has had eleven constitutions, more than any other state in the union. It has also had the longest constitution in the history of the United States. In 1973, when the present Louisiana constitution was written, the 1921 constitution had 526 amendments of the over 800 that were on placed on the state ballot for citizen approval. Louisiana constitutional history is the unstable backbone of its unstable political culture.

It May Be a Gumbo After All

Gus Weill is a prominent raconteur of Louisiana politics. He is a working campaign consultant, a television host and political commentator, and a published playwright. His political wisdom is more a wisdom of experience and insight than of charts, graphs, and the latest statistical techniques (although he may well know them). It is poetic wisdom. He describes the uniqueness of Louisiana politics metaphorically, as a poet would: "Louisiana politics is probably perceived to be different because our state is different. We inhabit here the darndest melting pot of almost any other state and our politics is a hodgepodge, this—if you'll excuse me—this gumbo of all these ingredients is almost a concoction of a mad scientist and was bound to produce something unique."[50]

Weill's intuition is sound. Louisiana politics *is* a gumbo. And there is beauty in the metaphor. Gumbo is an African word (for okra) appropriated by the French Acadians for a signature Louisiana dish that has made lots of money for the restaurants in big-city commercial New Orleans. But Louisiana's political culture is not just any mix of disparate ingredients. It is the peculiarity of the concoction—the ingredients, the proportions, and the cooking vessel itself (to stretch the metaphor much more than it should be stretched)—that explains the politics.

While Louisiana is best known as a southern state and as the home of New Orleans, those two features are only the beginning of the story. Louisiana is also a state whose culture is defined by three very distinct and conspicuous ethnic groups. North Louisiana is home to a rural American South culture. South Louisiana contains a French Acadian culture. African Americans are found throughout most of the state. All three coexist and are aware of the others' presence. All three are also aware that none dominates. It is a constantly unstable political culture. The "gumbo" is a partic-

ular kind of gumbo. It is a tripartite gumbo that never fully blends and whose only consistency is instability. In the twentieth century, the blend became more unstable because of the infusion of oil and gas severance taxes. Populist politics confronted the elite politics of the nineteenth century and the stakes were raised. Populist rhetoric raised expectations for goods and services, and therefore political conflict was about more, more, and more government spending. The fact that the revenue was not the result of direct sacrifices by most citizens created a political climate ripe for corruption as well. Politicians could spend money wastefully and even fraudulently and not be held particularly accountable by a public that was not taxed for that revenue. Fundamentally, Louisiana's political culture is characterized by volatility and disorder because of immigration patterns and geography. And because of the economics of its natural resource base, in the twentieth century, it was defined by populism and corruption as well.

2. Participation

"Politics Is the Favorite Sport"

Louisianians often talk about how they love politics. "Politics is the favorite sport down here" and "Politics is entertainment in Louisiana" are phrases that have been heard thousands of times in thousands of discussions of politics in Louisiana. According to this front-porch logic, Louisianians engage in politics more enthusiastically and vote more often than folks in any part of the country. In a state where no ethnic group dominates, where the three main ethnic groups do not trust each other, and where all are constantly maneuvering for position, there is ample motivation for stormy wide-open elections. In addition, for most of the twentieth century the state was flush with oil and gas money that could grease the wheels of campaigns. The resources were clearly there for constant, high-risk, high-return appeals to the people. This cultural combination of immigration patterns and abundant valuable resources seems like the perfect foundation for a highly participatory politics. The culture predicts it and the people believe it, but does Louisiana actually deserve bragging rights for political participation? The answer is no—and yes.

No matter how much crawfish and beer skeptical social scientists have consumed, they are quick to point out that Louisianians do not vote more than citizens of other states. In fact, in most national elections, Montana, South Dakota, and Maine top the turnout lists and Louisiana is near the national average. In the 2000 presidential election, voter turnout in Louisiana was 54 percent and ranked twenty-second in the nation. Minnesota, Maine and Wisconsin topped the list with over 65 percent turnout.

Among southern states, however, Louisiana fares much better. In fact, Louisiana ranked higher than any of the eleven states of the old Confederacy. Turnout in Mississippi was 49 percent, in Georgia it was 43 percent, in Alabama it was 50 percent, in Arkansas it was 48 percent, and in South Carolina it was 46 percent. In sum, in the 2000 presidential election Louisiana ranked well above the southern average in voter turnout, but only slightly above the national average. See table 2-A