

TEXAS VS LOUISIANA

A comparison of the Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives and their Louisiana counterparts offers an important illustration of how traditions and norms matters in the exercise of political power. Both the Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives and the Speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives are elected by the members of their respective chambers, and both are typically elected by a unanimous vote. Both Speakers assign bills to committees, preside over debates, and interpret the rules of their respective chambers. Despite the formal similarities of both Speakers, the Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives is among the three most powerful people in Austin and exerts tremendous influence over legislation. Their Louisiana counterpart is quite different.

Beginning with the governorship of Huey Long, 1928 to 1932, the governor has announced his or her preference for the Speaker position, and the membership of the Louisiana House of Representatives has elected that person by unanimous or near unanimous vote. This ability of the governor to pick the Speaker is not written into any of the state constitutions, including the current Louisiana Constitution (1974). However, this informal ability to pick the Speaker enhances the power of the governor tremendously, a power that is reinforced by the fact that the house votes for the Speaker in Louisiana only once every four years, coinciding with the governor's inauguration. The election occurs in a two-day, extraordinary session held in January following an election; the session is called the "Organizational Session." The Speaker, once elected, presides at the regular sessions of the legislature that begin in March of every year. In addition, the governor typically assigns members of the Louisiana House of Representatives to standing committees, which the Speaker then officially carries out. Interestingly, this pattern of the governor's control over the Speaker in Louisiana historically continued even under divided government—for example, Republican David Treen (1980–1984) selected the Speaker for a Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, while Democrat Kathleen Blanco (2004–2008) chose the Speaker for a Republican-controlled chamber.

This informal tradition in Louisiana came to an end after the election of John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, in November 2015. Edwards, a former member of the Louisiana House of Representatives, won election over his Republican rival, David Vitter. Vitter, a U.S. senator from Louisiana, faced a significant backlash in public opinion over his ethics, including a link to a prostitution scandal. Concerns over Vitter's ethics were so intense that another Republican candidate for governor, Jay Dardenne, endorsed Edwards rather than his fellow Republican. When the Republican-controlled Louisiana House of Representatives met in January 2016 for its Organizational Session, newly inaugurated governor Edwards wanted Walt Leger III, a Democrat from New Orleans, to become Speaker, but instead of a unanimous vote, four candidates were nominated.ⁱ Ledger, a fellow centrist Democrat, won the most votes but fell short of a majority. Under the rules of the House, when no candidate receives a majority on the initial

vote, a runoff occurs between the top two candidates. However, the second-place candidate Cameron Henry, a Republican from Metairie, withdrew from the election, and Taylor Barras, a former Democrat from New Iberia but since 2011 a Republican, became the other candidate. Barras and Henry had campaigned heavily within the Republican caucus of the Louisiana House of Representatives the night before.ⁱⁱ The results of the election appear next.

Speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives Election, 2016				
Candidate	First Round		Second Round	
	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent
Walt Leger III	49	46.7%	49	46.7%
Cameron Henry	28	26.7%		
Taylor Barras	26	24.8%	56	53.3%
Neil Abramson	2	1.9%		

Source: House of Representatives of the State of Louisiana. *Official Journal*, January 11, 2016, (Baton Rouge, La.: Clerk of the House), p. 3.

Thus, the Louisiana House of Representatives rejected the governor's choice for Speaker for the first time since the 1920s, almost a century of tradition. Several Republican members stated that the rejection of Leger was simply an attempt by the house to regain some control over its own affairs. Republicans, including now Speaker Barras, indicated the governor's ability to influence committee assignments would also end.ⁱⁱⁱ In an interesting twist, Leger was reelected to his prior position as **Speaker pro tempore**; Leger will continue to serve in the place of the Speaker when Barras is not in the chamber.^{iv} Whether or not this rejection signaled a new era for Louisiana's state government is unknown.

THINKING Critically:

- ★ Why do political scientists examine the informal norms and traditions that occur in politics?
- ★ How is the selection of the Speaker in Louisiana similar to that of Texas?
- ★ How is the selection different?
- ★ How do the informal traditions of the selection of the Speaker in Louisiana enhance the governor's power?

i. The last contested race for Speaker occurred in 1984.

ii. Mark Ballard, "In Rarely Seen Twist, Last-Minute Candidate Taylor Barras Selected Louisiana House Speaker," (Baton Rouge) *Advocate*, January 11, 2016, <http://theadvocate.com/news/legislature/14535608-171/taylor-barras-elected-speaker> (accessed July 6, 2016).

iii. Ibid.

iv. House of Representatives of Louisiana. 2016. *Official Journal*. January 11, 2016 (Baton Rouge, La.: Clerk of the House): 3.