

About Louisiana and the Huey Long Era

BOURBON DEMOCRATS IN LOUISIANA

The end of Reconstruction brought about great changes in Louisiana politics. After 1877, political control of the state shifted from Radical Republicans to Bourbon Democrats. Bourbon Democrats generally believed in weak government, low taxes, and white supremacy (the belief that white people constitute a superior race and should therefore dominate society, typically to the exclusion or detriment of other racial and ethnic groups). They cut property taxes for the wealthy while reducing the money spent on public schools and on programs to improve the lives of ordinary citizens. Cutting spending on education, Bourbon Democrats reasoned, would ensure a steady supply of cheap farm labor. They feared that an educated populace would choose to do other, better-paying jobs.

The Bourbon Democrats took their name from the reactionary Bourbon Dynasty of France, who had attempted to reverse the French Revolution and restore aristocratic political and social privilege and power. The term *Bourbon Democrat* came to describe conservative Democrats who wanted to undo Reconstruction and restore the pre-Civil War South and its domination by wealthy, upper-class whites.

Corruption, the Lottery, and the Constitution of 1879

In 1868, Louisiana granted a twenty-five-year charter to the Louisiana Lottery Company, a private organization, to generate revenue for the state. With only about 7 percent of the company's revenue coming from within the state, the Louisiana Lottery Company quickly became one of the largest businesses in the United States. However, the only benefit Louisiana received was a small annual payment of about \$40,000; the lottery company itself generated millions of dollars in profits. But the lottery company gained great influence in the state by contributing large sums of money to various charities as well as to elected officials—both Democrats and Republicans. These “contributions” (or bribes, as critics called them) kept potential opponents to Bourbonism from acting against Bourbon policies.

Despite the power of the lottery company, legislation outlawing its operation passed in both houses of the Louisiana legislature in 1878 and 1879 and was signed into law by Governor Francis T. Nicholls, who wanted to end the lottery's role in promoting bribery. Hoping to protect their lucrative business, lottery officials pushed for a convention to draft a new state constitution renewing the lottery's charter. Lottery supporters also used the new constitution to reduce the governor's term by one year. In effect, Nicholls was punished for fighting the lottery by being forced out of office early.

The Constitution of 1879 also increased the governor's power and decreased the power of the legislature. Property taxes were lowered. Guarantees of equal rights and free access to public places—rights established in the Constitution of 1868—were removed, as were articles outlawing discrimination in public education and segregated schools. African American men retained the right to vote, though with restrictions that made voting more difficult for them—as well as for poor white men. These changes were in line with the goals of Bourbon Democrats.

Opposition to Bourbonism

The scandals surrounding the Louisiana Lottery Company and the subsequent ouster of Francis Nicholls led to the formation of a group of Reform Democrats. Though they shared the Bourbons' segregationist beliefs, they did oppose the lottery company's power over the state. Louisiana sugar planters also stopped supporting Bourbon Democrats, preferring instead the protectionist policies of the Republican Party. A third opposing

group emerged in the early 1890s when Louisiana farmers, tired of Bourbon policies toward small landowners, abandoned the Democratic Party in favor of the populist Farmer's Union.

With the help of Reform Democrats and some Republicans and sugar planters, Francis Nicholls won the Democratic nomination for governor of Louisiana in 1888, defeating Governor Samuel McEnery, a Bourbon Democrat. An angry McEnery threatened to allow African Americans to freely vote in the upcoming election—which would have resulted in the election of a Republican governor. Nicholls made a bargain to appoint McEnery to the state supreme court in exchange for McEnery calling off his threat. After Congress asserted federal authority over state lotteries in 1890, based on their use of the mail, and began to impose regulations, Nicholls and his supporters were finally able to shut down the Louisiana Lottery Company.

The Election of 1896 and Constitution of 1898

In 1896, Republican sugar planters and the populist Farmer's Union supported John Pharr in the Louisiana governor's race. This coalition of Republicans and populists hoped to end Democratic control of the state—and they almost succeeded. Pharr lost the election to the Democratic candidate by only two thousand votes.

This result frightened Louisiana Democrats—both Bourbons and Reformers. These groups worked together to suppress the populist Farmer's Union, which promoted bi-racial cooperation, and to retain the Democratic Party's stranglehold on power. To achieve their goal, they called for another constitutional convention that would create a document that would truly disenfranchise African Americans once and for all. The resulting Constitution of 1898 put into place literacy requirements, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses that prevented all but a tiny fraction of African Americans in Louisiana from voting.

INDUSTRY IN LOUISIANA

Timber

Louisiana's timber industry peaked between 1880 and 1920. From 1900 to 1920, the state was one of America's top three timber-producing states. Several factors combined to boost the timber industry in Louisiana: large tracts of forest available for purchase at low prices, growing nationwide demand for lumber, the depletion of forests in the Northeast and Midwest, and railroads that made transport of lumber easy and efficient. Lumber companies harvested pine from many areas around the state and cypress from the southern swamps.

When the timber boom began in Louisiana, about 75 percent of the state was covered in forest. By the 1920s, it is estimated that 70 percent of Louisiana's pine forest had been cut and most of the lumber mills had closed. Some reforestation efforts were already underway by then, led mainly by lumberman Henry Hardtner, an early pioneer in reforestation and sustained-yield forestry. In the 1920s, the Louisiana Division of Forestry purchased land in the central part of the state to practice and teach timber management. The U.S. Forest Service bought ten thousand acres in Natchitoches Parish to create the Kisatchie National Forest in 1930. The timber industry continues to exist in Louisiana today, particularly in the central and northern parts of the state. Trees are, in fact, the state's number one agricultural product.

Oil and Gas

As the timber industry declined in Louisiana, an even bigger economic boom began. In 1901, the first successful oil well in the state was drilled near the southwestern town of Jennings. Additional discoveries of oil in the northern part of the state launched a boom in the early 1900s. Later discoveries of southern oil fields kept the boom going. By the 1920s, it was discovered that the entire Gulf Coast contained pools of oil and gas.

Sophisticated technology, in combination with the increasing mechanization of America—and in particular the growing popularity of the automobile—fueled the industry’s growth. The industry continues to be a major player in Louisiana’s economy, consistently ranking among the nation’s top producers of oil and gas.

MISSISSIPPI RIVER FLOOD OF 1927

It is estimated that the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 put up to seventeen million acres (68,800 square kilometers) underwater. In some areas the water was up to thirty feet (about nine meters) deep. The flood reached its peak in April 1927, but the waters did not subside until July or August. In Louisiana alone, ten thousand square miles (25,900 square kilometers) were underwater.

From Illinois to Louisiana, up to one million people were flooded out of their homes, and the death toll is estimated to have been between 250 and 500 people—though the deaths of many African Americans likely went unreported. The flood caused more than \$400 million in losses including destroyed crops, drowned livestock, and damage to more than ninety thousand businesses and over one hundred sixty thousand homes.

Then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover broke many promises to people in the aftermath of the flood. African Americans suffered greatly due to the racial abuse and discrimination they faced in refugee camps overseen by the federal government. This resulted in millions of African Americans shifting their political loyalties from the Republican to the Democratic Party. The flood was also a push factor contributing to the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to northern cities. In addition, the flood forced Americans to reconsider the role of the federal government in times of natural and economic disasters.

HUEY LONG

The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 had one other important effect. It gave Louisiana politician Huey Long an opportunity to grow his influence in the state. Long was championed by the largely poor, rural victims of the flood, who had been neglected by business and government leaders. His apparent sympathy for “common people” propelled him to the governorship of Louisiana in 1928.

Huey Long was born in the small rural community of Winnfield, Louisiana, on August 30, 1893. Winnfield was a stronghold of populism—a political philosophy that supported the rights and power of the common people. In 1912, a majority of Winn Parish voters cast their ballots for the Socialist candidate for president. Both populists and socialists believed that wealth was distributed unfairly in the country, and Long grew up absorbing these ideas.

After a stint as a traveling salesman, Long entered politics in 1918 when he won election to the Louisiana Railroad Commission by promising to lower freight rates for farmers to transport their goods. He used his position to oppose utility rate increases and oil pipeline monopolies, strengthening his reputation as a champion of the poor. In 1922, he became chairman of the state’s Public Service Commission and successfully sued the Cumberland Telephone Company for raising its rates unfairly. Two years later, in 1924, he ran for governor for the first time but was unsuccessful.

Huey Long ran again in the next gubernatorial election in 1928. A strong orator, he used the new medium of radio to speak to Louisiana voters as well as broadcasting his messages from trucks with sound systems. He established personal connections to everyday voters by traveling throughout the state, giving over six hundred campaign speeches, and mailing out thousands of flyers detailing his populist agenda: free health care, free education, lower property taxes, and improved infrastructure. Long’s strategy worked. He was elected governor by a comfortable margin.

As Louisiana Governor

As governor, Long replaced conservative Bourbon Democrats with his own supporters at all levels of government. He authorized programs that largely benefited his poor, rural constituents. His administration established public schools statewide, with free busing and textbooks. Thousands of miles of roads and hundreds of new bridges were built under his leadership. He helped eliminate the poll tax and pushed for property tax relief.

Long was not without his critics, who accused him of cronyism and called his methods “dictatorial.” He tried to suppress public criticism of his policies. He used the state militia inappropriately, sometimes declaring martial law in cities that did not fall into line with his wishes. As time went on, he dominated the state legislature and forced it to pass bills that increased his personal power. After Long tried to impose new taxes on oil companies, and on Standard Oil in particular, Standard’s allies in the Louisiana legislature attempted to impeach Long on charges ranging from corruption to public profanity. Long’s popularity and political connections enabled him to evade the charges, and the impeachment failed.

As U.S. Senator—Share Our Wealth

Buoyed by his popularity with the voters, and with presidential aspirations, Long ran for and was elected to the U.S. Senate. Before departing, he maneuvered to oust the lieutenant governor, a political enemy, so that one of Long’s cronies could succeed him in office. In January 1932, Long resigned as governor and took up his duties as a U.S. senator, beginning by attacking President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal policies and promoting his own Share Our Wealth program with the motto “Every Man a King.” Long proposed to end the Great Depression through a series of populist measures such as government confiscation of any personal income exceeding one million dollars annually, free college education and vocational training, and a guaranteed annual income of two thousand dollars for every American family.

The Share Our Wealth program was very popular, particularly in rural areas of poor states. In spring 1935, a private poll showed that Long could win up to four million votes in the next presidential election. However, Huey Long did not live to see that election. On September 8, 1935, Long was shot by the son-in-law of a political opponent, whose career he had attempted to end. He died two days later.