

Louisiana Politics

Election to Shape

Demos' Fate

By **BILL LYNCH**
(States-Item Bureau)

BATON ROUGE — The course Louisiana's Democratic party will follow in next year's national political arena probably is being decided today in the governor's race when voters place the outcome in the hands of one man.

The State Democratic Central Committee is responsible for guiding the party's course of action in the state and there will be 117 members elected to that body to do just that. But in actual practice there is one man—and that is the governor—who exerts the final influence.

It is almost certain that Gov. John McKeithen will be sitting in his same chair again next year. He is expected to win overwhelmingly renomination in the first primary today.

Members of the State Central Committee will be elected today and at a run-off election Dec. 16. Prior to 1964, party candidates were named in the first primary with the high men winning. But now a majority vote is required for election to the committee.



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This year's race for committee posts is different in two respects — the makeup of the committee has been revised and increased from 105 to 117 members. The other change is the increased attention being paid the importance of the committee by candidates.

VOTERS MAY NOT realize it yet, but conservative and loyalist factions are well aware that who winds up on the central committee could determine the outcome of the presidential race in Louisiana next year.

In some of the urban areas, candidates have lined up in blocs of pro-Wallace conservatives or as loyalists, rather than running singly.

In the past there has been a hard core of about 40 votes each for the conservative and loyalist factions, with some 25 swing votes that could go either way. It is the swing vote faction which gives the governor his wedge in controlling the committee action,

usually. Governors don't have absolute power on the committee, but their voices have been pretty large in the past.

Gov. McKeithen sat out the Democratic National Party convention three years ago, but the former Gov. George Wallace of Alabama pulled down from getting into the general election. The situation may be different this year, if Wallace does decide to attempt to get on the ballot along with the Democratic and Republican party nominees.

MCKEITHEN HAD no great decision to make on the issue in 1964, but he may be forced to take a stand next year—provided he is returned to office today as expected.

With a second term mandate, McKeithen will be the most powerful political figure Louisiana has had since Huey Long rose to power. That swing vote on the central committee will more than likely jump to his bidding.

It is extremely unlikely that either the strong conservatives or the loyalists will get a clear-cut majority — 59 in this case — for control of the committee without the governor's support.

There is a resolution in good standing adopted last year by the present committee calling for a primary election

of presidential electors in 1968 at the same time as the congressional primaries. The normal procedure in the past has been for the central committee to name a slate of electors to go on the ballot under its traditional emblem of the rooster.

THIS HAS BEEN a quadrennial fight — who will get the rooster emblem — the loyalist slate or the dissident conservatives who are against the national party candidates?

Establishing a party primary to choose the elector slate would pit President Johnson against Wallace in a head and head fight that doesn't at this time look too good for the President. The national party candidates could still get a slate of electors on the ballot in the general election if they lost the primary, but would have to use some other emblem such as the donkey, which is the national party emblem.

It would take a petition of 1,000 signatures to get on the ballot then — a law that was passed in 1948 to permit President Harry Truman to get on the Louisiana ballot after the central committee took away the rooster and gave it to a States' Rights team.

The party primary resolution was pushed through by Leander Perez, Plaquemines Parish political boss, who has been a leader of conservative forces in the central committee dating back to the President Roosevelt era.

This resolution could have been repealed probably when the loyalist forces gained control of the central committee this year and elected Edward Carmouche, Lake Charles attorney, as chairman. However, Carmouche decided to let the issue lie, aware that the new committee to be elected today and Dec. 16 would chart its own course, anyway.

THE MEANING OF the current primary races for the central committee probably won't be known until the new group takes office shortly after the second primary. The election of a chairman may well be the tipoff as to which side will have control of the party machinery.

Even this may not be conclusive though, for as the national campaign begins to move into focus, changing events and pressures may easily alter the situation. The governor may find the committee's power to manipulate the national election in the state a powerful bargaining lever.