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Louisiana Vote Getter

John Julian McKeithen



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Talented at cutting opponents down to size.

A LAWYER, farmer and former legislative wheel horse, Gov. John Julian McKeithen of Louisiana has earned a reputation as one of the most successful vote-getters in his state. He justified the reputation again on Saturday when, despite racial problems, crime investigations and feuds within his party, the 49-year-old follower of the late Gov. Earl K. Long easily won renomination in the Democratic primary and, since there is no Republican nominee, an assurance of re-election.

Man in the News

Governor McKeithen has been changing positions on major issues since he was first elected in 1964. Observers noted, for example, that he undertook conciliatory action when racial pressures were on and made segregationist gestures when the pressures were off.

Tall and sandy haired, the Governor is a good stump speaker in the tradition of Governor Long, whose protégé he was. Still, he shows anger when visitors charge him with playing politics or not taking a firm position on a subject.

"I'm not trying to run the Governor's office like a popularity contest," he once told a newsman.

Picked as Floor Leader

Mr. McKeithen was an unknown country legislator when Governor Long selected him in 1948 as a floor leader in the state Legislature.

"He told me not to worry—I'd get on all right, and I guess I did," he later recalled.

Four years later, Mr. Mc-

Keithen ran for Lieutenant Governor on a ticket backed by Mr. Long. Political experts said at the time that he was by far the top stump speaker and showed a talent for cutting his opponents down to size. However, the ticket was defeated.

In 1954, Mr. McKeithen ran for the Louisiana Public Service Commission, which administers the state's public utilities, and won easily.

Mr. McKeithen won his first term as Governor in one of the biggest surprises in the state's political history. In a field of 10 candidates that included Representative Gillis Long, a distant cousin of Senator Russell B. Long, he won the support of many Long followers. He finished second in the primary, 140,000 votes behind DeLesseps S. Morrison, the former Mayor of New Orleans.

Mr. McKeithen entered the second primary, charging that Mr. Morrison, who had served in the Kennedy Administration as Ambassador to the Organization of American States, had received the Negro bloc vote on orders from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

He won the primary by 50,000 votes.

Since then, however, Mr. McKeithen has switched back and forth on civil rights issues. Last August, for instance, he had 650 National Guardsmen protect Negroes during a march through Ku Klux Klan country toward Baton Rouge. Yet, on other occasions he has warned Negro leaders that they would be jailed if they demonstrated in the streets.

The Governor has also

made strenuous efforts to attract new industry to the state.

When Mr. McKeithen was born on May 28, 1918, on a farm in Grayson, La., his parents hoped that he would become a Methodist minister. Instead, he turned to law, winning his degree at Louisiana State University. He set up practice in Columbia, a small town of northern Louisiana.

He now lives in a large ranch house on a 2,000-acre farm in that area with his wife Marjorie, and six children—two sons and four daughters. In his spare time, he likes to hunt, fish and swim.

The McKeithens are regular attendants at the Columbia Methodist Church, where Mr. McKeithen showed up bright and early the day after his first nomination four years ago "to thank God for making me Governor."