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Candidates address ethics reform issue

Editor's note: Sixth in a series on the positions of major candidates for governor on issues facing the state.

Foster Campbell says that while strong government ethics laws are important, the issue would not be his top priority if he is elected governor.

"There are a lot more important things, like tax relief and coastal protection," said Campbell, a Democratic Public Service commissioner from north Louisiana.

Republican candidate U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, on the other hand, has made strengthening state ethics laws the cornerstone of his campaign. He promises he would call a special legislative session devoted to ethics soon after his inauguration.

"Louisiana consistently ranks at the bottom of all these good-government lists," Jindal said. "I think we have to move. It's one of the first, most important messages we can send to the rest of the country."

The leading candidates for governor — Campbell, Jindal, Democratic state Sen. Walter Boasso and New Orleans area businessman John Georges, who is not affiliated with any party — place different levels of importance on ethics reform.

But many in the business community argue it should be the pre-eminent issue for candidates in all of the races on the Oct. 20 ballot.

LA Ethics 1 and Blueprint Louisiana are two business groups pressuring candidates to change the state's corrupt image.

One proposal is to make public officials disclose their personal finances.

During last summer's legislative session, Boasso voted for a version of disclosure that was far more detailed and included more elected officials than what LA Ethics 1 sought. The bill ultimately died in the Legislature.

Georges said he supports Blueprint Louisiana's proposal for a more general disclosure of the financial dealings of elected officials and lobbyists.

Jindal has a 31-point ethics plan. His proposal includes laws to stop business relationships between elected officials and government agencies and to expose potential conflicts-of-interest between an official's private life and public duties.

As a member of the Public Service Commission, which regulates utilities, Campbell successfully pushed several ethics proposals. One put tighter regulations on what lobbyists spend to entertain commissioners, and another halted the practice of utilities employing family members of commissioners.

Campbell said that as governor, he would propose a law requiring candidates to disclose the businesses and professions of their campaign contributors. Many states and the federal government require that information on campaign finance reports, but Louisiana does not.

Since many donations are solicited through individual companies and trade associations, the disclosure of professions and employers can give taxpayers a clearer idea of how the seemingly individual contributions are bundled together, Campbell said.

“I want to be as clear as possible where the money is coming from,” Campbell said.

Next year, legislation is likely to be pushed that would require some or all elected officials and candidates to publicly disclose their private business dealings.

Boasso, Campbell, Georges and Jindal are all on board with the idea. But they differ on who else should be covered and on the level of detail to require.

Campbell said personal financial disclosure statements should be filed by all statewide elected officials, legislators, candidates for those offices and major cabinet heads.

“I don’t know so much about local officials,” he said. “I don’t think you would get people to run for office — like police jury, city council, school boards — with the requirement. I’m not saying I wouldn’t do that. I’ll have to look at it and think about it.”

Lawmakers who sponsored the financial-disclosure legislation that failed in the most recent session say the bill was doomed when it was amended to include local officials.

Georges said he favors disclosure by all elected officials, candidates and their spouses, whether statewide or local.

Boasso said he’s for “glass pockets across-the-board.”

At a minimum, Boasso said, he wants legislators and all statewide elected and cabinet-level officials included.

But he said he would also like to see local officials covered by the law.

“I think everybody who wants to get involved in the public eye should be willing to expose their relation to people and to government agencies they do business with,” he said.

Jindal said he wants all statewide officials, legislators and their next-of-kin to file personal financial disclosure statements annually, as well as cabinet-level officials and agency heads.

Jindal said the rules should definitely apply to the spouses and children of elected officials.

Jindal said he favors including local officials, “but I don’t want to kill the bill for legislators and state officials.”

The candidates differ on how specific the financial information should be.

Campbell said all statewide officials and legislators should fill out the form now required for the governor and candidates for that office. Reporting of income, assets, liabilities and other finances is done in six financial ranges, topping out at \$250,000 or more.

"I want to see how much you are worth this year, next year. People ought to know how your assets increase," Campbell said.

Jindal said the form he fills out as a congressman is much more specific and he would push to mandate at least that level of detail for all statewide elected officials and legislators.

Members of Congress report in 10 ranges starting at below \$1,000 and ending at above \$5 million.

The requirements include how much money the officials make and the source of that income, as well as whom they owe and how much.

Boasso voted to impose the congressional limits when the state Senate handled a disclosure bill earlier this year. He said he continues to favor that level of disclosure.

Georges called the governor's disclosure form "an embarrassment," but said he wouldn't change it. Georges said he provided far more extensive financial data when applying for a gambling license.

"For a gaming license, they know every source of income and how much," he said.

Statewide officials and candidates for those jobs should be required to fill out the same disclosure statements as the governor does now, Georges said.

"I'm for less of a standard on legislators than for the governor," he added.

Jindal and Georges said they would seek more disclosure on what lobbyists spend as they try to influence officials.

Jindal said lobbyists should be forced to provide more-detailed information about whom they work for, what issues they handle and how much they spend — something LA Ethics 1 pushed last session.

Campbell said he will try to limit lobbyist access to legislators when they are debating issues on the House and Senate floors.

Jindal said he wants to prohibit legislators and state elected officials from doing business with the state.

Georges said he wants to stop candidates for state and legislative office from accepting campaign contributions from people seeking government contracts or from those who already have contracts.