

State Government



Above: Criticized when it was first built, the Sunshine Bridge is now recognized as an economic asset.

As you read, look for:

- the policies of the governors of this period,
- the reason why the state needed a new constitution, and
- vocabulary terms **code of ethics** and **sunshine law**.

The 1960s and 1970s were turbulent years for Louisiana and the rest of the southern states. Desegregation brought conflict to Louisiana and overshadowed almost everything else.

Civil Rights Era Governors

In spite of the difficult times, the state's governors led the state toward progress in other ways.

Jimmie Davis

Jimmie Davis had first served as governor during World War II. In 1959, he campaigned on the accomplishments of his first term. He talked about harmony and unity, and his campaign slogan was "Jimmie Davis never raised your taxes." But low taxes would not solve the problems or ease the turmoil facing the state in the 1960s.

Governor Davis planned several projects to benefit Louisiana's future. One of these was a new bridge across the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. When the bridge was built, it connected cane fields on one side of the river to cane fields on the other side. Critics claimed it was a waste of state money. Today that bridge connects industry on both sides of the river. Named the "Sunshine Bridge" after Davis's song "You Are My Sunshine," it is now recognized as an economic asset.

Other construction projects completed during Davis's term were the Toledo Bend Dam and the present governor's mansion. The dam and lake at Toledo Bend provide electricity and recreation for both Louisiana and

Lagniappe

The Toledo Bend Reservoir is the largest manmade body of water in the South and the fifth largest in surface acres (205,000 acres) in the United States.

Texas. The elaborate plantation-style governor’s mansion includes eighteen bathrooms, a fact often mentioned by the critics who thought the old mansion was quite adequate.

The quality of state government was improved with a written code of ethics. The **code of ethics** described the standards for conducting state business. The new position of legislative auditor was created to formally examine state spending.

One scandal during Governor Davis’s term led to another improvement. The Baker Bank scandal involved the investment of state funds. A bank in the town of Baker in East Baton Rouge Parish received state funds for deposit. The state accounts benefited the bank rather than the state. After that information was made public, the legislature passed laws to require the proper investment of state funds not immediately needed to pay expenses.

John McKeithen

John McKeithen took over the governor’s office in 1964. McKeithen described himself as a country lawyer from Columbia in Caldwell Parish. He was the first candidate to use television effectively. He ended each television ad by repeating his campaign slogan—“Won’t you ‘hep’ me?”—in his North Louisiana drawl.

This skilled campaigner learned about Louisiana politics as a legislator when Earl Long was governor. McKeithen shared some of the Longs’ social views but did not copy their dictatorlike behavior. During the McKeithen years, the legislature was much more independent than the Longs would ever have allowed.

Governor McKeithen brought progress to state government. The ethics codes were made stronger. The governor also changed the way the state made purchases. A central purchasing system saved money and was more efficient.

Governor McKeithen also worked hard to improve the state’s economy. Businesses came to Louisiana because the governor traveled around the country promoting the state. Tourism became a focus of economic development. Advertisements invited people to come to Louisiana, and a separate state agency was established to promote tourism.

John McKeithen was so popular during his first term that people wanted him to continue as governor. At the time, however, the state constitution did not allow the governor to run for reelection. In 1966, the voters approved a constitutional amendment to change this restriction.

The voters gave McKeithen 80 percent of the votes in the 1967 governor’s race. Despite this strong vote of confidence, Governor McKeithen soon ran into problems in his second term. The expensive Superdome project and labor



Above: As governor, John McKeithen supported reform measures and worked hard to improve the state’s economy.



Top: Governor McKeithen, seen here with the Cub Scouts, was the first in the twentieth century to succeed himself. **Above:** Edwin Edwards was a popular governor during his first term and was re-elected in 1975.

problems brought criticism. The Superdome in New Orleans was projected to cost \$31.5 million, but it ended up costing more than ten times that amount—\$362 million.

Governor McKeithen faced problems as labor union strikes led to violence that brought negative publicity to the state. In 1967, *Life* magazine said the state's labor problems were linked to organized crime. An investigation into these claims found no criminal activity.

Edwin Edwards

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally enforced the constitutional right of African Americans to vote. For the first time, no obstacles kept them from voting. Long lines at the polls included many first-time voters who were more than sixty-five years old. These new voters changed Louisiana's elections. Now, candidates campaigned to win black votes instead of campaigning against their right to vote. In 1971, Edwin Edwards was the first governor to be elected with the support of the African American community.

Edwards also had the strong backing of another group. Despite his English-sounding name, Edwards is a Cajun from Marksville in Avoyelles Parish. After graduating from LSU Law School, he moved to Crowley in Acadia Parish. Edwards reached his Cajun supporters by speaking to them in French.

Governor Edwards began his first term with a broad base of support. He appointed a number of blacks and women to high-level state jobs. These two groups had not been included in positions of power before. He also emphasized social programs. More money was spent on public hospitals that provide care for the needy. Welfare benefits were increased. Vocational schools, parks, and tourism also benefited.

These expanded programs were paid for with the money from a tax change. The severance tax on oil was increased by 30 percent, and the natural gas tax was raised 50 percent. The method for determining the amount of tax owed was also changed. The severance tax was now based on the value of the resource instead of on the volume or

Lagniappe

Before serving as governor, Edwin Edwards had been elected to the Crowley City Council, the state senate, and the U.S. Congress.



amount removed. Before this change, tax revenues did not increase if the price of oil or gas went up. This tax change and the rising price of oil in the 1970s meant that Louisiana received much more money from severance taxes.

In 1975, Governor Edwards was reelected with strong Democratic support. The social programs of his first term made him a popular candidate. The people were satisfied because the Louisiana economy was strong.

Several governmental reforms were enacted during his second term. One law required that all government meetings be open to the public. This is called the **sunshine law** because the meetings cannot be held in secret and must be “open to the light.” Another law was passed to stop people from holding more than one government office or job.

Labor violence in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to a right-to-work law in 1977. Workers would not have to join a labor union. Business organizations said that the unions were pushing wages too high and hurting the economy. Union supporters said working conditions and wages would be unfair to workers without the protection of labor unions. Soon after the law passed, labor unions lost much of their power in the state.

The 1974 Constitution

By the early 1970s, Louisiana needed a new constitution. The constitution written in 1921 had been amended 536 times and had so many volumes that it filled a shelf 5 feet long. One critic had described it as a “patchwork of deals . . . containing endless trivia.” Finally, the voters refused to pass any more amendments. The legislators realized that a new constitution had to be written.

Above: In 1971, Edwin Edwards campaigned on a promise to rewrite the state’s constitution. He kept that promise, and the constitutional convention convened in 1973.



Above: Ernest Morial celebrates his election as mayor of New Orleans in 1977. He was the first African American elected to that office. In 1967, he had been the first African American to be elected to the legislature since the end of Reconstruction.

Edwin Edwards had campaigned in 1971 for a new constitution. He said, "The present constitution is an impediment to progress. We need a new constitution to get our state moving in a new direction."

A constitutional convention met in Baton Rouge in 1973. The delegates developed a much improved constitution. The new constitution recognized the rights of all citizens. But the delegates could not agree to eliminate some of the details. Governor Edwards said that if they had stopped after the completion of the bill of rights and the three articles on the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches, they would have had a "beautiful document."

The 1974 constitution had been written by delegates elected by the people. Then, for the first time since the constitution of 1879, the people voted directly to ratify the constitution.

African American Elected Officials

In 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision in the *Baker v. Carr* case. In the ruling, the Court stated that voting districts must be fairly based on population. Voting districts had to be re-apportioned (redrawn) so that all voters were equally represented.

After those changes, African Americans had a voice in Louisiana elections. Since the 1970s, more African Americans have been elected to local and state offices.

The first African American to be elected to the legislature in the twentieth century was Ernest Morial from New Orleans. He was elected in 1967 and served until he became a judge. His seat was then held by the first African American woman in the state legislature, Dorothy Mae Taylor. Morial went on to be elected the first African American mayor of New Orleans in 1977.

Check for Understanding ✓

1. Name two construction projects completed while Jimmie Davis was governor.
2. What did Governor McKeithen do to improve the state's economy?
3. What two groups helped elect Edwin Edwards?
4. What major tax change was made while Edwin Edwards was governor?
5. Who wrote the 1974 state constitution?
6. What was the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in its *Baker v. Carr* decision?