

Urban Churches Working to Raise Turnout

BY MARK BALLARD | Capitol Bureau editor | [Page A01](#)
Tuesday, 12 November 2019



Group leaders discuss plans to bridge the voter turnout gap at a forum hosted by [Together Baton Rouge](#) and [Together Louisiana](#) last week at St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church in Baton Rouge. Staff photo by Bill Feig

Recent polls say Saturday's election for governor is a toss-up.

As neither candidate has been able to make significant headway among voters of the other party, the winner will be the one who gets more of his base to the polls.

Republican Eddie Rispone, an electoral neophyte with lots of money, is looking to President Donald Trump and television advertising to energize enough Republican and rural voters to pull him across the line.

Incumbent Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards hired another consultant to get his core supporters, particularly African Americans, to the polls.

But the biggest thing going for the governor doesn't really involve him.

Urban churches and progressive advocacy groups are using a newly evolved micro-targeting technique to push more lower income and black voters to cast ballots. The ministers and activists aren't so much interested in who gets the ballots, though most politicians predict Edwards will receive the lion's share. Their goal is to increase participation of a large group of voters who historically have left the electoral decision-making to wealthier voters.

While nearly 46% of the state's 2.9 million voters participated in the Oct. 12 primary, upper income voters outpaced lower income balloting by 13%.

"We were concerned about low, low turnout," said the Rev. James Barrett, of the Greater Sixty-Aid Baptist Church in Baton Rouge. "We're concerned about what it tells our elected officials about our issues."

Barrett is one of a dozen or so ministers from cities around the state who have teamed with **Together Louisiana** and the Power Coalition for Equity and Justice, two faith-based groups that advocate on government policy, to come up with a way to energize low income and black voters who didn't vote in the primary.

The Rev. Shawn Moses Anglim, pastor of the First Grace Methodist Church in Mid-City New Orleans, said when he and other ministers saw the statistics, they were concerned that such a large group of voters had abstained from picking legislative and gubernatorial leaders.

These voters represent a huge swath in a state where 75% of the state's workforce make less than the national median income.

"When major blocs of people aren't participating, that worries me," Anglim said. "We now have about 450 volunteers working 46 precincts in the city, and 6% of our list of 38,000 have voted already."

The Power Coalition for Equity and Justice, based in New Orleans but operating statewide, has been working on educating voters for some time - knocking on doors, texting voters and holding forums.

Peter Robins-Brown, the group's communications director, said for the most part, he hasn't seen the campaigns canvassing the lower income, predominantly black precincts in which the Power Coalition works.

"Lack of effort is the main thing," Robins-Brown said. When candidates do show up, "it's all about the world falling apart. Nobody talks about criminal justice or minimum wage; it's only about vote against this guy, vote for that guy. They're not giving the community a reason to care."

If the early voting statistics are any indication, their efforts are working.

New Orleans pollster Edward Chervenak noted that the 21 parishes that backed Edwards with 47% or more of the vote during the primary, increased their early vote by 34%, while in the parishes with support below 47% showed only a 29% increase in early voting.

Baton Rouge pollster John Couvillon noted the early voting numbers - 489,649 cast ballots, including 6% more black voters - gives Edwards a slight advantage. He predicts that for the first time since the 2016 presidential election, more than half the registered voters will cast ballots.

Edwards is the only Democrat elected statewide in red Louisiana. The general rule for a Democratic candidate is for 30% of the voters to be black - they tend to overwhelmingly support Democrats - and to win 30% of the white vote. In seeking a second term, Edwards received 31% of the white vote in the primary, but only about 27% of black people voted. He was about 45,000 votes shy of winning outright in the Oct. 12 primary.

Rispono, who is largely unknown outside Republican circles and spent about \$12 million of his own fortune, won a spot in the runoff with a fraction of the votes Edwards had. But the Republican candidates together polled 70,464 more votes than the incumbent. Since the primary, Rispono's chances have grown, particularly with the help of a popular president, to the point that both candidates are within polls margins of error for winning Saturday.

In a first of its kind effort, Together Louisiana and the Power Coalition combed the secretary of state's records to compare precincts with predominantly low-income voters with those whose voters had upper incomes and traditionally much higher turnouts. The groups then identified voters in 320 lower income precincts, roughly 10% of the state, who had voted in the 2016 presidential election, or since, but didn't vote in the primary. The 64,831 targeted voters were put on lists of about 30 each for a volunteer to personally and repeatedly speak directly with each one.

East Baton Rouge Parish has 60 target precincts with 15,503 voters. Orleans has 37,894 voters in 206 low-performing precincts targeted by the effort.

Edwards received 170,572 votes in Baton Rouge and New Orleans alone, but only about 43% of those voters participated.

At a Baton Rouge event last week organized by Together Louisiana, representatives of various community groups stood in a line to announce, one after another, how many volunteers they had and how many voters they would visit. Julie Hoffman, of Beth Shalom Synagogue in Baton Rouge, for instance, told the cheering audience that her temple had six volunteers who would talk to 180 voters.

Volunteers took their lists of names, addresses and phone numbers and started knocking on doors.

Morgan Clevenger, president of the Fairgrounds Triangle Neighborhood Association, was one of the volunteers in New Orleans' 7th ward.

"You have to have a conversation with them about why voting is important," Clevenger said. Many people feel their vote doesn't matter. They've voted before but haven't seen a change, so they feel that their specific vote doesn't really matter in the larger scheme of things.

"I say, 'I hear you saying my vote doesn't matter.' I say, 'If you don't vote for you, would you vote for your neighbors?'" Clevenger said. "They can get with that. It's a selfless thing. They can help someone else, and that's a good thing."

People are more receptive to someone from their own neighborhood. "What we're doing here is building a community for those who may feel left out," she said.

Email Mark Ballard at mballard@theadvocate.com.