Driving for Dollars

They Say It's Not Vote Buying, But in Some Parts Of Acadiana, You Just Can't Get Elected Without Hiring a Whole Lot of People to Drive Voters To the Polls.

By Richard Baudouin

SITTIG'S OPPOSITION TO HAULING has been building for four years. During Sittig's 1987 re-election campaign, a supporter came to his office in a panic and told him they were being outbid in a certain precinct for haulers. The drivers wanted $100 per car, half in cash, half by check. Sittig refused to join the bidding.

After the election, Sittig checked the vote in that precinct and found that he had beaten his opponent there, even without the services of the hauler. That's when he began to question the effectiveness of the practice.

But Sittig really became disgusted after the 1990 fall elections when tens of thousands of dollars were spent on hauling in Eunice. It was a particularly torrid political year, even for Eunice, with hotly contested elections for mayor, city judge, and city council. Contestants for U.S. Senator and district attorney were also on the ballot.

Competition for drivers was fierce as candidates sought to gain an edge over each other. "On election day, it was hard to find a rider who wasn't hired," says state district attorney candidate Earl Taylor.

In the city judge's race, for example, incumbent and eventual winner Lynette Feucht hired 143 drivers at a cost of $7,120, according to a report filed with the Louisiana Campaign Finance Office. Her opponent, Assistant District Attorney Jack Burson, nearly doubled that amount with 245 drivers for an outlay of $12,600. Payments range from $25 to $100. One individual was paid $400 for coordinating drivers in the Swords area.

District attorney candidates Morgan Goudeau (who won) and Taylor were also pouring money into the election, though not nearly as much as the judicial candidates. Goudeau's report shows expenditures of $5,600 for drivers parishwide, though none had Eunice addresses. Taylor spent $3,970 for 79 drivers, 21 of whom were in Eunice. Mayoral candidate Joubert had only 22 drivers on his payroll at a cost of $1,100 for his first primary campaign against Hubert "Kutch" Rougeau and J.B. Veillon. But he and Rougeau went toe-to-toe in the general election. Joubert hired 71 election day workers at a cost of $8,000, while Rougeau paid $4,800 to 73 drivers. Joubert won narrowly.

A candidate was spending $10,000 on vote buying when it was legal. Now he's paying $10,000 for vote hauling.

Drivers are routinely hired for elections in Lafayette Parish, as well. Sittig, who has hired his share of drivers during past elections, says the problem is getting worse. "Every election that comes along, there's more and more people that want their cars hired," he says.

Sixteenth Judicial District Attorney Bernie Boudreaux says, "It's almost a requirement in politics now that the various factions go out and get the vote and bring it to the polls."

There is nothing illegal about hauling, as long as no one is actually paid in return for a vote. Under current law, a campaign can hire someone to transport voters to the polls, but the payment must be made by check, the driver's social security number must be recorded and a list of drivers filed with the campaign finance office.

Sittig's bill, which was scheduled to be heard in the House and Governmental Affairs Committee on April 24, would put an end to the practice. It prohibits any candidate, campaign committee or political action group from giving or receiving money for the purpose of "conveying" voters to the polls, whether on election day or during absentee ballots. Violations could be punished by a fine of up to $1,000 and a year in jail.

Sittig's bill is already generating support among elected officials in the Eunice area. The St. Landry Municipal Association endorsed the measure and both Mayor Joubert and his entire City Council have lent their support.
For example, in last fall’s first primary, “I really think [haraulating is] not needed,” says Joubert. “We do not need to hire a massive amount of cars to transport voters.”

The mayor contends that the practice is, in many cases, a waste of money. “People rent their cars and then they go fishing,” says Joubert.

A campaign will generally give drivers a ballot or flyers with the candidate’s name and number to pass out to the people they pick up. But there are no guarantees that the drivers will distribute the material or that the passengers will vote correctly. Asks Sittig: “How many of these people … vote[c] the way the hauler wants them to vote?”

For example, Mitchell Gaspard says he did not hand out any literature to the 10 or so people he drove to the polls for Burson and Joubert. Nor did he ask them to vote for his candidates. “That’s their business. It’s up to them,” says Gaspard.

How often does vote hauling, which is legal, degenerate into vote buying, which is not? Sittig thinks there is very little actual exchange of cash for consideration in the voting booth.

“I really don’t think that people that are being hauled are being paid,” says Sittig. “In my area, I don’t think there is real vote buying going on. I don’t think there are people receiving $5 and $10 to go vote.”

District Attorney Boudreaux agrees that most elections are run honestly and suspects that there’s “very, very little” vote buying taking place in elections today.

Still, he says that vote hauling creates an environment in which illegal election activity can take place. “If a candidate is want to pay, he’s got a built-in system to accommodate that,” says Boudreaux. “The ability to influence how they vote is potentially there.”

And Boudreaux says the potential for fraud is particularly strong when voters are transported to the polls for absentee balloting.

Absentee voting is often conducted in a very informal fashion in a registrar of voter’s office and secrecy is not strict. Nor is there anything wrong with a voter showing someone his ballot. Thus, a driver who brings a voter to the courthouse to cast an absentee ballot has an opportunity to see which candidates the passengers will vote for. Thus, a driver who brings a voter to the courthouse to cast an absentee ballot has an opportunity to see which candidates the passengers will vote for.

Nothing is said to the passengers. The matter has been turned over to the district attorney for review. Assistant District Attorney Phil Haney, who is handling the case, was out of the country and could not be reached for comment.

Boudreaux supports Sittig’s bill in concept. “I think it’s an excellent law. It reduces the potential for wrongdoing and there would not be the suggestion that anything untoward is going on,” says Boudreaux.

An argument can be made, furthermore, that the current system of hauling is merely a glorified form of vote buying. Sittig says that when a candidate hires a driver his real intent is to obtain the support of that individual and encourage him to influence his wife, children and other close relatives. “You’re not buying the vote, you’re buying the family,” he says.

For example, in last fall’s first primary election in Eunice, 6,566 voters went to the polls (including rural areas that vote in the city judge’s race). Using the conservative

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"People rent their cars and then they go fishing," says Eunice

Curtis Mayor Joubert

Sittig is optimistic that his bill will pass the Legislature this session. He has already received the support of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry. A number of members of the House and Governmental Affairs Committee have signed on as co-authors.

But passing the Legislature will not assure that the measure goes into effect. Assistant Attorney General Ken Dejean says the law will have to be reviewed by the U.S. Department of Justice to see if it conforms to the principles of the Voting Rights Act. Justice Department lawyers will review whether the law would decrease turnout of black voters, because providing transportation is especially prevalent in the minority community.

Both Sittig and Joubert argue that outlawing the practice of hauling will not have an impact on voter participation. Joubert points out that voters get to the polls to vote in presidential elections though there are rarely any drivers on the road giving rides.

But driver Gaspard thinks outlaws. But driver Gaspard thinks outlaws hauling will mean some voters will stay at home on election day. “It will stop some of your old people from getting there,” he says. “They don’t drive any more.”

Sittig hopes that civic clubs will take on voter transportation as a community project to assist elderly, poor and handicapped citizens who truly cannot get to the polling places on election day.

Linus Bertrand, who drove for the first and last time in the fall election, says he supports Sittig’s bill. “I think it’s a good idea," says Bertrand.

And if his family members truly can’t find a way to vote, says Bertrand, "They can call me and I’ll bring them for nothing."