Edwards says few asking for clemency

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Gov. Edwin Edwards granted clemency to 43 felons from February 1992 through May this year, far fewer than for any similar length of time in his previous administration.

Six of those actions reduced the sentences of prison inmates, including two murderers, according to records at the Secretary of State's office.

Ten clemency actions made incarcerated felons eligible for parole without reducing the lengths of their sentences.

The remaining 28 clemency actions restored rights to people who lost them due to conviction and have finished serving their sentences. One person received two pardons.

During the period, Edwards denied 13 clemency actions recommended by the state Pardon Board.

Edwards also signed off on 11 automatic rights-restoration pardons for first offenders — clemency mandated by the state constitution.

The 44 pardons and sentence reductions Edwards approved in the last 16 months are markedly fewer than the clemency actions he granted during his previous term in office.

Edwards signed 86 clemency requests during the first 10 months of his third term, which began in 1984. In 1987 — the last full calendar year of his third term — Edwards approved 181 requests.

In an interview Tuesday, Edwards cited three reasons for having granted fewer requests for clemency during this term than in the past.

Edwards said the current Pardon Board — whose members are appointed by him — is more conservative than previous boards.

Edwards, by law, can only act on recommendations from the Pardon Board.

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operators seeking licenses.

Eleven of the pardons restored rights to people convicted in federal courts. Those pardons only concern the exercise of rights within the state of Louisiana.

One pardon recipient is Robert Bodet, a former chairman of the state Board of Regents. Bodet was convicted in 1988 on a federal charge of attempting to extort $30,000 from an insurance agent doing business with the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway Commission.

A life sentence for Dowen Chelette was decreased to 30 years, which makes him immediately eligible for parole, according to parole board officials. A parole hearing is scheduled for Friday.

In 1983, Chelette was convicted of second-degree murder in Rapides Parish in connection with the shooting death of a woman during an argument. During his trial, Chelette claimed the shooting was accidental.

Another man serving life in prison, Thomas R. Spell, had his sentence reduced to 60 years, which makes him eligible for parole in 1998, according to parole board officials.

In 1980, Spell was convicted in the 1975 death of a 16-year-old Crowley boy. Spell was sentenced under the second-degree murder law in effect in 1975, which allowed lifers to be paroled after 40 years.

Edwards' other sentence reductions cut prison terms for people convicted of manslaughter, drug charges, attempted murder and armed robbery.

The bulk of the clemency actions were pardons that restored rights to criminals who have completed their sentences.

Edwards granted full rights — which include voting and bearing firearms — to 24 felons convicted of crimes ranging from drug offenses and arson to aggravated rape and attempted armed robbery.

Three of the pardons specifically denied felons the right to own or sell guns.

One of the felons denied the right to bear arms is former West Baton Rouge Police Juror Joseph W. Pattan.

In 1989, Pattan was found guilty of federal extortion and perjury charges in connection with selling his political clout to bingo hall