LONG DOLED OUT WATERMELONS

Vote Buying Not New In Louisiana

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - Louisiana politicians have been indirectly buying votes for decades - legally - without having to hand out $5 bills on the streets, says Commissioner of Elections Doug Fowler, the dean of statewide elected officials.

Fowler, the dean of elected statewide officials, is retiring this year at the age of 72. He says he's naturally upset about the vote buying scandal in Vernon Parish and an investigation of purchased votes in St. Landry Parish.

"But, I don't think that kind of vote buying is widespread at this point," said Fowler in a recent interview.

He added that he's worried about what might happen in the future with governor's races costing most candidates at least $2 million each.

"In the old days, a candidate didn't have to pass out cash to get votes," said Fowler.

"Politics was more fun then," he sighed. "I don't like what's happening now. We're fast approaching the day and age when the man who's got the money gets the office and if a fellow wants to be governor and he's worth $10 million, he'll buy his way in."

The late Gov. Earl Long doled out watermelons and hams to get votes and he did it openly, said Fowler, who got his political start in 1952 with "Mr. Earl."

"Those watermelons and hams didn't cost that much," he added. "We'd give two bits or less and get 'em a hundred or so at the time.

"We might have 500 watermelons and 200 hams at rallies and have mobs of people, swarms of people."

But those people weren't told they had to vote for Mr. Earl. I imagine many of them did."

Fowler noted that "long before my time" candidates would pay the $2 poll tax for people to make sure they would register to vote.

"That wasn't called vote buying," he said. "A candidate would go to the sheriff's office and pay the tax for a man, his wife, a daughter and so on. That wasn't illegal."

The poll tax was stricken in 1934 - the same year the Legislature amended the 1899 vote buying law to prohibit persons from accepting "anything of value" to vote or to withhold a vote.

Prior to that, the law dealt only with outright purchase of a vote.

Paying the poll tax wasn't considered purchasing a vote by prosecutors.

Handing out large cash payments to political organizations also isn't illegal, but some legislators call that practice just another form of vote buying.

If a political organization decides to support a candidate, the candidate generally hands over money which supposedly is to be used for printing sample ballots, posters and the like.

Rep. Woody Jenkins of Baton Rouge calls the practice "an evil."

"The only thing I know," said Fowler, "is that elections are held by people and if people are honest, you're going to have honest elections. But, not everyone in the world is honest and that fact is not going to change."