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The numbers from Louisiana add up chillingly Duke's claim on white vote shows depth of discontent

By Paul West
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NEW ORLEANS — NEW ORLEANS -- For the first day in a month, Louisianans could breathe easily yesterday. David Duke would not be their next governor after all.

But behind the lopsided returns in Saturday's election lay a sobering fact: A majority of the state's white voters -- about 55 percent -- had cast their ballots for the former Klansman and neo-Nazi.

Despite an unprecedented and wildly successful negative ad campaign aimed at stopping him, Mr. Duke got 75,000 more votes than he received in his U.S. Senate bid last year.

Although he lost by 61 percent to 39 percent Saturday, he received a majority of the Republican vote and 40 percent of the white Democratic vote, according to a network TV exit poll.

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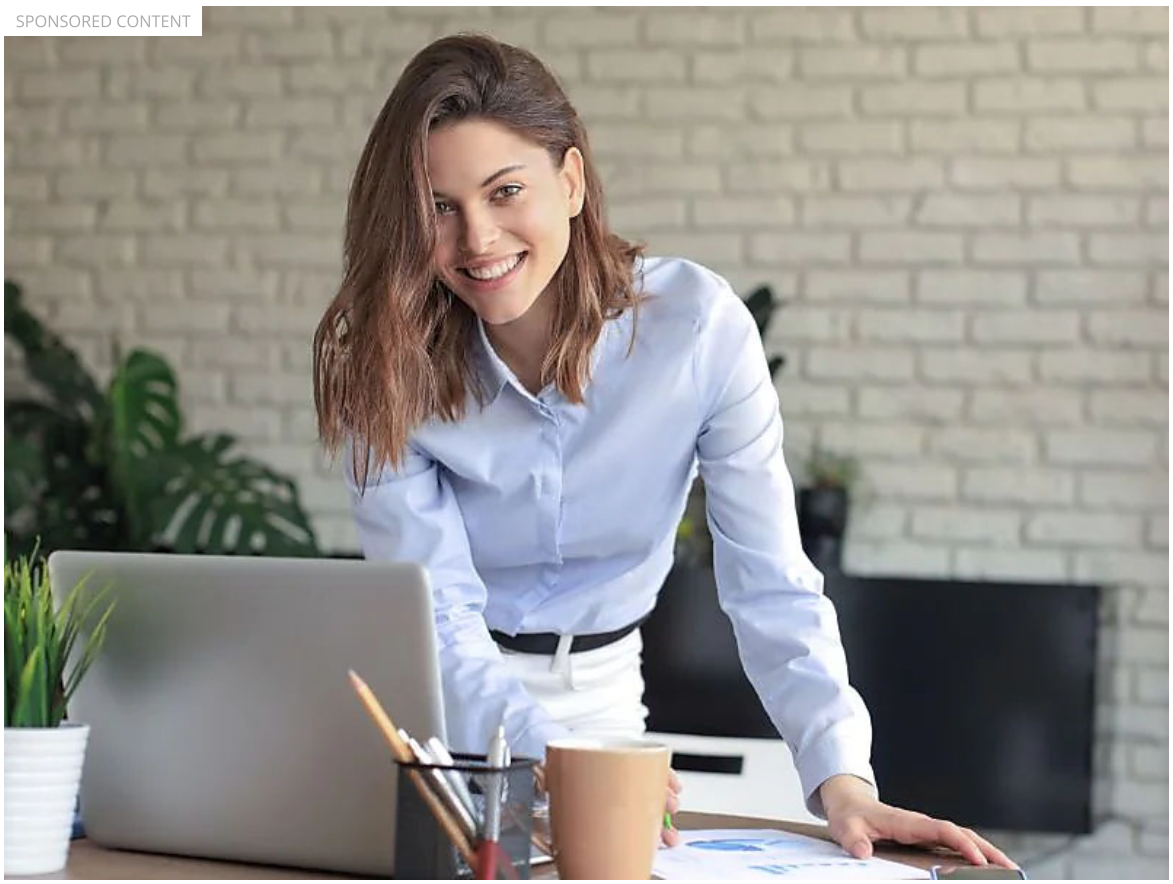

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That so many had been willing to overlook his hate-filled past was in part a reflection of their low regard for Gov.-elect Edwin W. Edwards, who was seen as corrupt by three out of five Louisiana voters, according to polls.

But the 680,000 Duke votes were also the most chilling measure yet of the discontent raging among working-class whites.

"Perhaps the messenger was rejected in this state of Louisiana, but the message wasn't," Mr. Duke said yesterday. "The people believe in what I believe. The polls all show that."

With the presidential race about to begin in earnest, both parties are urgently trying to come to grips with the white anger and distrust that has nurtured Mr. Duke's political rise.

How Mr. Duke figures into the unfolding battle for alienated white voters is not yet clear, but he is sure to try.

His term as a state legislator expires in January, and he said yesterday that he hoped to become a national spokesman for the anti-government ideas he has been espousing in his campaigns. He also said he had not ruled out a 1992 presidential run.

On election night, Mr. Duke indicated that he might throw his support to conservative columnist Patrick J. Buchanan in New Hampshire's Republican presidential primary next February. Local Republicans believe that his first move will be a takeover of the Louisiana Republican Party organization.

Whatever tack he takes is likely to receive national attention, to the considerable displeasure of the man who defeated him.

"Looky here, enough is enough," Mr. Edwards said yesterday after being informed by one of the TV networks that it was more interested in having Mr. Duke on its Sunday talk show. "Look, I'm the guy who got elected," he protested.

Yesterday, Mr. Edwards and other politicians in both parties were attempting to write Mr. Duke's political obituary.

But at the same time they scrambled to convey to Duke voters that they understood their concerns.

Vice President Dan Quayle noted that Mr. Duke's agenda of "anti-big government, get-out-of-my-pocketbook, cut my taxes, put welfare people back to work [is] a very popular message."

But Mr. Quayle said on ABC that Mr. Duke has been "thoroughly defeated" because the people of Louisiana have "seen through" him.

Sen. John B. Breaux, D-La., warned that Duke-like candidates would emerge "in every other state unless politicians and elected officials offer programs to respond to the concerns that he's raising."

Mr. Breaux heads the Democratic Leadership Council, a centrist group that wants to lure working-class whites back to the Democratic Party with ideas that address their frustrations.

"Middle-class Americans . . . think government doesn't serve their needs. They're concerned about government programs that spend more than we can afford, and they want somebody to address it," the senator said. "David Duke has raised some important questions."

Mr. Edwards tried to reassure white Louisianans that he, too, had heard their cry, while also criticizing the racial scapegoating at the heart of the Duke message.

"America needs to be on guard," the governor-elect said at a news conference.

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"Unfortunately, when times are bad, it is possible for people to prey upon the fears and frustration and anger of some. . . . Our solutions do not lie in making things worse for those who are already in bad shape. Our solutions lie in making things better for everybody."

Mr. Duke's candidacy has embarrassed President Bush and the Republicans and raised the specter of a third-party challenge by Mr. Duke that could hurt the president's re-election chances, analysts say.

Mr. Edwards suggested in his post-election session with reporters that Mr. Duke may have unwittingly forced the GOP to end its successful use of racially polarizing issues.

In recent decades, Republican presidential candidates have switched millions of white voters to the GOP, particularly in the South, at least in part by stressing quotas, school busing, crime and other issues that subtly play on racial fears. Mr. Duke has linked these issues explicitly to racism in the minds of many Americans, including some Republicans.

"The Ronald Reagans and the George Bushes, [who] set the stage for this, in a more subtle, a more distinguished way, realize the error they have made," said Mr. Edwards. "I think the days of Willie Horton are behind us. Hopefully, the nation has learned that."

Vote breakdown

According to voter surveys conducted by Voter Research and Surveys, these are some of the patterns in Saturday's election:

Edwin W. Edwards

* Received 75 percent of the votes of those who voted in the primary for Republican Gov. Charles E. "Buddy" Roemer III.

* Received 51 percent of the votes of whites with family incomes from $50,000 to $74,999 and 66 percent of those with incomes $75,000 and over.

* Received 63 percent of women's votes and 59 percent of men's.

David E. Duke

* Received 56 percent of the vote of whites with family incomes under $15,000, 63 percent of those making from $15,000 to $29,999, and 60 percent of those making from $30,000 to $49,999.

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