

Edwards lighter with veto pen than prior governors

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BATON ROUGE — In his first two years in office, Gov. John Bel Edwards has used his veto pen more sparingly than his recent predecessors, scrapping 11 bills that have reached his desk and canceling dozens of provisions and projects in budget bills with his line-item veto authority.

But when he's struck down legislation, the Democratic governor has followed the trend of those who came before him, with his political foes far more likely to see their bills rejected than his legislative allies.

Provisions stripped from the state operating budget this year were spending directions added by GOP legislators with whom Edwards repeatedly clashes over finances. The governor also jettisoned eight bills from the regular legislative session, all but one sponsored by House lawmakers regularly at odds with Edwards on taxes, spending and other issues.

The other bill — sponsored by Rep. Katrina Jackson, a Monroe Democrat and Edwards ally — was killed at Jackson's request because the proposal to rename an elementary school building was no longer needed after the Monroe City School Board took similar action on its own.

Rep. Nancy Landry, a Lafayette Republican who saw one of her bills rejected by the governor, took to Twitter last week to slam Edwards for the vetoes. In multiple postings, Landry accused the governor of putting "politics over priorities" so he could "punish" the bill sponsors.

An Edwards spokesman defended the vetoes.

"The governor has the constitutional authority to veto legislation, and his decisions were based on principle," Richard Carbo, the governor's deputy chief of staff, said in a statement. "The bills he has chosen to veto were poorly drafted, had implementation challenges or were unworkable for the state."

Edwards said Landry's bill, which would have allowed for sharing of certain student information between the state education department and people conducting research on college campuses, had language that conflicted with another law.

Of course, determining whether a proposal has language issues or is workable for the state is largely in the eye of the beholder.

Louisiana's governors have long used their vetoes to show displeasure with individual lawmakers and to express their own political philosophies. And year after year, lawmakers have criticized vetoes as petty politics, out-of-step governing and payback.

But on average in his first two years in office, Edwards is using that power at a lesser pace than Republican former Govs. Bobby Jindal and Mike Foster and Democratic former Gov. Kathleen Blanco did over their two decades in the top job.

Blanco and Foster averaged about 10 bill vetoes a year during their tenure, with Blanco rejecting 43 measures during her one term and Foster killing 77 bills during his eight years. Jindal averaged more than 16 vetoes a year during two terms, canceling 130 bills that reached his desk.

That doesn't count use of their line-item veto across budget bills.

Jindal had a particularly heavy veto pen in his first term, striking down 81 bills in legislative sessions held from 2008 through 2011. In his first year, he refused 31 measures, including a legislative pay raise he previously said he would allow to become law. He also infuriated lawmakers when he removed \$16 million of their pet projects from the budget, stripping the money through more than 250 line-item vetoes.

This year, the most high-profile measure rejected by Edwards came from Alexandria, Rep. Lance Harris, the chairman of the House Republican Delegation who repeatedly has clashed with Edwards on financial policies.

Edwards vetoed Harris' bill aimed at protecting controversial speakers' appearances at Louisiana colleges and calling on campuses to penalize students who disrupt them. The governor described the bill as a "solution in search of a problem." He said the First Amendment already offers such protections and Harris' proposal would be an unnecessary burden on campuses.

Harris said his bill was a response to university decisions in other states to shut down appearances from speakers amid demonstrations and threats of violence. He said he heard "absolutely zero" concerns from the governor's office about the bill.

If any irritated lawmakers hope to override one of Edwards' vetoes,

they face long odds. Lawmakers have never agreed to hold a veto override session since the current Louisiana Constitution was adopted in 1974.