What’s up with the Louisiana Senate?

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On April 12, 2016, Gov. John Bel Edwards issued a press release with this headline: “Senate Approves the Louisiana Equal Pay Act.”

Almost two years later—on the evening of Tuesday, March 27—the same governor distributed another press release about the same body of legislators with these words in the header: “Senate Votes Against Equal Pay Legislation.”

Adding insult to injury, the Senate likewise rejected a minimum wage bill on the same day last week that, like equal pay, was a top policy priority for Edwards. The votes came after months of grumbling by mostly GOP senators about the presumption that the Senate has always been and will continue to be the backstop for the sitting governor.

In private conversations, a couple of these senators have said they can no longer be guaranteed votes for the Edwards administration. They don’t feel like they’ve gained anything by being in the administration’s corner during the first half of the term—and they’re not alone. Simply put, the governor doesn’t have the same kind of brick-and-mortar promises to toss around as his predecessors.

Last week’s floor votes on the minimum wage and equal pay bills also followed on the heels of the first special session of the year, which hosted some minor but notable alterations to Senate politics. That’s when the Senate Republican Delegation was reorganized, the Black Caucus took some rather independent stances and rank-and-file senators quietly complained about being excluded from high-level negotiations.

One or two frustrated chairmen even threatened to go rogue by blowing up key House bills during 2018’s introductory special session. As you may know, those key bills never showed up due to inaction by the House, which has its own set of problems.

These Senate-specific factors, however, didn’t necessarily sway last week’s votes on minimum wage and equal pay. But they may be part of a larger storyline—one that has corners of the Senate grasping for more independence and becoming anchored by ideology.

Or, and this should surprise no one, maybe last week’s votes were fueled by election politics.
While the Senate GOP delegation has indeed reorganized, it’s only a structural change for right now. That much was evident when there were no policy statements issued last week, as the House delegation has increasingly done this term via video statements and press releases. There was also no agreement by Republican senators to vote in the same fashion on the equal pay and minimum wage bills.

What we may have witnessed instead was a handful of those senators switching their votes in an effort to move further to the right. If the Senate and the House are certain of anything, if there’s one thing they can agree on, it’s that re-election season is right around the corner.

Special interests like the Louisiana Family Forum and the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry are actively tracking votes ahead of releasing their regular scorecards (presumably) for the 2019 election cycle. And more than a few senators (and representatives) want passing grades.

The 2020-2024 term of the Louisiana Senate is going to be an eye-opener. Most politicos at the Capitol suspect the next term will deposit in the Senate many of the same challenges plaguing the House. There will likely be more Republican members that lean hard to the right, possibly a Senate president who’s elected independently of the governor’s wishes and senators staking out positions on the extreme ends of the political spectrum.

Whether some of that is beginning to surface now, in the middle of the term, is an important question to ask. If the answer arrives back in the affirmative, if the Senate is already showing its fault lines, then how much these political shifts will influence the next 33 months is another good question.

Then again, it may all be much ado about nothing. Perhaps the Senate will maintain its old form. Maybe we’re just seeing a series of unrelated events in the upper chamber.

One hurdle to reading the tea leaves is that we haven’t seen the Senate in action lately. To be more direct, it hasn’t tackled any significant tax or budget issues in quite some time. That’s because, rather than debating and passing the big bills, senators have been stuck staring at each other while waiting for something, anything, to break through the bottleneck in the House.

In fact, the resulting wait-and-see environment, coupled with poor morale and dark moods, may be prompting these perceived shifts and factors in the Senate more than anything else. And like the Senate has been doing with the House this term, we’ll just have to wait and see if that’s the case.