

Owner of N.O. firm tapped to lead state GOP

attorney Gurvich owns security company

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During the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louis Gurvich worked as a gofer for the state party, verifying that entrants to the Louisiana Superdome were properly credentialed and keeping delegates supplied with bottled water and soft drinks. "It was a piddling job," Gurvich recalled. Now he's the top man in the Louisiana Republican Party after party activists elected him to that position Saturday in Baton Rouge.

Gurvich, who owns New Orleans Private Patrol, a security firm, won 97 of the 177 votes in a first-round victory over three others: Baton Rouge-based political consultant Scott Wilfong; state Rep. Julie Emerson, of Carencro; and Charlie Buckels, a businessman in Lafayette.

The chairman raises money for the party, recruits candidates to run for office, serves as the party spokesman and serves as the state's liaison with the Republican National Committee. Gurvich will receive no salary for the position, which is for a two-year term.

"Intimidating," Gurvich said in describing his new responsibilities.

Gurvich replaces Roger Villere, owner of Villere's Florist in Metairie, who chose not to seek re-election after 14 years in the position. During his tenure, the longest in state party history, the florist played a key role in helping a blue state turn red. Universally liked for his easygoing manner, Villere has been a strong proponent of conservative social issues. He is antiabortion, pro-guns and anti-gay marriage, as well as anti-tax.

"We certainly will remember you as taking our Louisiana Republican Party to a new level, and for that we cannot thank you enough," state House Speaker Taylor Barras, R-New Iberia, told Villere in remarks that soon prompted a standing ovation from the state central committee members crowded into the House chamber in the Old State Capitol.

Republicans now hold five of six statewide elected offices and seven of the eight congressional seats, and they hold a 61-41 advantage in the state House and a 25-14 advantage in the Senate. They also hold majorities today on the Public Service Commission, which regulates

utilities, and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which sets policy for K-12 schools.

Republicans have even gained strength in Louisiana since John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, won a surprise victory in the 2015 governor's race. Since Edwards took office in January 2016, Democrats have lost one seat in the state House; John Kennedy, a Republican, was elected to the U.S. Senate; state Rep. John Schroder, a Republican, was elected to replace Kennedy as treasurer; and Republicans have gained 76,000 registered voters, while Democrats have lost 28,000.

"We've changed the entire direction of the state. We have a lot to celebrate today," Rhett Davis, a longtime party strategist, told the crowd.

The Louisiana Republican Party does face challenges. Wilfong, in making his pitch for Villere's job, said the state party is nearly \$100,000 in debt and called for the party to be more transparent in its actions.

And then there's the matter of who occupies the Governor's Mansion.

"Our new chairman's main priority will be rallying the Republican Party as we approach the 2019 gubernatorial election to support a strong conservative candidate for governor," Ryan Cross, a party activist, said in an interview.

Gurvich will face a dicey decision soon on how the party should respond to a lawsuit filed Thursday against Secretary of State Tom Schedler, a Republican. It claims he repeatedly propositioned an employee over a decade and retaliated against her after she rejected his advances. Schedler denies the accusations and has said he and the woman engaged in consensual sex.

"I don't want to comment on the situation regarding Secretary Schedler until we have all the facts," Gurvich said in an interview, adding that in the coming week he will examine what happened. "Obviously, we will not stand for any form of sexual harassment."

Gurvich, 65, said he is a third-generation Republican in Louisiana, which makes him a rare breed for a party that, two generations ago, could hold its meetings "in a telephone booth," as party officials like to joke today.

Gurvich is an attorney who bought New Orleans Private Patrol in 2003. It has about 300 employees, he said.

Gurvich has spent the past two years as the party's secretary, a job he described as "tedious." He kept the minutes and oversaw internal elections.

Gurvich is still getting the hang of being the guy out front.

After his election, well-wishers swarmed him for photos. "I gotta smile," he said.