

2019 Gubernatorial Candidate Survey

A voter information initiative of
The Council for A Better Louisiana
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Candidate Profile

Candidate Name: Congressman Ralph Abraham

Campaign Website: www.abrahamforgovernor.com

Campaign E-mail: lionel@lr3.com

Hometown: Alto Party Affiliation: Republican

Current Job: United States Congressman

Professional Experience: Veteran, Veterinarian, Physician, Pilot, Congressman

Political Experience: United States Congress, 5th District of Louisiana, 2015-present

Education:

Louisiana State University (undergraduate)
LSU-Shreveport Health Sciences Center (medical school)

Image and Leadership

1. What is one thing that distinguishes you from other candidates in the race?

Proven conservative leadership.

2. Please list what you believe are the three most critical factors that are holding Louisiana back from moving forward and reaching our full potential.
 - A lack of leadership in the Governor's Mansion.
 - A belief from our current governor that growing State government is more important than growing the economy.
 - A failure to prioritize important issues critical to improving the quality of life and opportunities for economic growth in Louisiana, including transportation infrastructure, early childhood education and a fairer, more competitive tax system.

Listed below are several traits of effective leaders. All are good traits, but please indicate in ranked order the three qualities that best define your leadership style and will show voters the most important leadership qualities you will bring to the governor's office.

- a. ___ Visionary – Looks beyond today's situation to the future's possibilities. Addresses short-term problems in the context of the big picture. Thinks about where we should be tomorrow, but also where we need to be ten years from now.
 - b. _ Innovative – Challenges and questions the status quo. Has the desire to try new things, and the ability to make them happen.
 - c. 2 Willing to Take Risks – Not afraid to move out in front. Willing to take – and defend – unpopular positions when they are right. Searches for challenging opportunities. Bold enough to experiment and make real changes to improve conditions in Louisiana. Learns from accompanying mistakes.
 - d. 1 Listens and Brings People Together – Listens to citizens and legislators. Asks questions. Brings together diverse groups and helps them find common ground necessary to solve problems and move the state forward.
 - e. ___ Doesn't Micromanage – Surrounds him or herself with good people. Doesn't try to do everything alone. Provides direction but delegates authority, allowing others to perform their jobs while ensuring that they remain accountable.
 - f. 3 Finishes the Job – Has the ability and resolve to “stay the course” even in the face of adverse circumstances. Doesn't give up easily. Keeps working for positive change despite the pressure of powerful entrenched interests who benefit from the status quo. Committed to producing measurable results.
 - g. ___ Other:
3. List three outcomes you would use to measure your success in your coming four-year-term as governor.
- Louisiana will create more good-quality, high-paying jobs and support the jobs we already have.
 - Louisiana students will not only graduate high school but will also graduate equipped with the right knowledge and skills to obtain a good-paying job.
 - Louisiana will identify and implement sustainable solutions for improving and maintaining Louisiana's crumbling transportation infrastructure.

Transportation / Infrastructure

4. Louisiana continues to have a serious problem with safety and maintenance of roads, congestion in high-growth areas, and other infrastructure needs. Besides the \$14 billion maintenance and safety backlog there is also a priority list of billions of dollars of new mega-projects. At the same time, 2019 is the first year that Louisiana did not have sufficient recurring revenues to meet its federal match. Tolling and public-private partnerships are possible mechanisms to raise additional revenues, but options there are limited because of relatively low traffic counts and only certain kinds of projects lend

themselves to these approaches. Given these issues, what approach would you take, if any, to improve Louisiana's infrastructure?

Louisiana absolutely has to increase its investment in transportation infrastructure, not only to relieve congestion and ensure we have safe roads for our families to drive on, but also to support economic development and commerce that moves through our state. Infrastructure also includes critical drainage systems across the state that have not been prioritized.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet to solving Louisiana's massive \$14 billion transportation backlog. My approach will be to utilize multiple solutions that, together, will help get Louisiana moving in the right direction after years of inadequate investment. First, I will ensure Louisiana is using existing streams of revenue wisely. DOTD officials admit there is essentially no oversight of their budget. They treat the Transportation Trust Fund as if it is self-generated revenue, when in fact it is taxpayer money. The TTF, or at least portions of it, should be moved into the State General Fund to ensure the Legislature has proper oversight of how DOTD is spending taxpayer money.

I will also start on Day 1 scrubbing the DOTD budget to identify opportunities for greater efficiency and opportunities where privatization might make more sense than government implementation.

I will also work to identify areas where public-private partnerships can work. Recognizing that P3s may not work for all projects, I do believe there are some projects where it is feasible to engage private parties who are willing to invest in Louisiana.

Lastly, I will look for additional related sources of revenue that could be dedicated to transportation, such as fees on electric vehicles and vehicle registration fees and/or vehicle sales taxes. I remain open to considering an increased gas tax and/or one that is indexed to inflation, but only after we have considered and exhausted the other options mentioned here. The gas tax should not be the first or the only solution to this massive problem.

Business / Job Growth

5. While Louisiana generally has a below average tax burden, our business climate is seen as somewhat non-competitive based on rankings by independent media outlets such as Forbes and CNBC. What steps would you take as governor to improve Louisiana's business climate?

My plan on this issue is two-fold. First, we must create a more competitive tax environment for our businesses. Right now, Louisiana has the highest corporate tax rates in the South. My goal is to create a broader base and to lower overall rates across the board. I will also phase out or eliminate completely the corporate franchise tax. It is an antiquated tax that very few other states impose, and it brings in very little revenue for the state. All the while, it makes us less economically competitive when competing for business.

Second, we must create a fairer, more predictable legal climate. Businesses are being driven out of our state because the cost of doing business is high and unpredictable due in large part to our

overly litigious business environment. Major industries such as trucking, logging, and petrochemical are hurting the most. Not only are their vehicle insurance costs nearly double the national average, but they also face a much higher risk of being sued in Louisiana since our litigation rates are well above national averages. We must implement common-sense solutions such as preventing judge shopping, ensuring that plaintiffs cannot double recover for medical costs, repealing Louisiana's unique direct action law, and making sure that judges and juries have access to all relevant information when making decisions about liability.

6. Louisiana, like many states, has significant workforce needs and studies indicate that both now and in the future Louisiana citizens do not have the needed training and skills to meet the workforce needs of a changing economy. As governor, what would you do to meet the growing workforce needs that are impacting Louisiana employers?

Workforce needs are the number one concern of growing companies. My strategy would be to foster impactful partnerships in the business and education communities so that we can ensure our students are graduating with the knowledge and skills companies actually need.

First, we must invest more heavily in dual enrollment options for students in Louisiana to obtain college credit and career training while still in high school. Data shows that these programs are effective in helping students obtain employment. The return on investment is high, yet still there has not been enough investment.

Second, we must utilize incentives and programs such as FastStart to work closely with companies who want to do business in Louisiana to ensure they have the resources they need to deliver their product or service.

We also have to recognize that incumbent worker training and upskilling Louisiana's workforce is not only important for companies who need knowledgeable employees, but it's the right thing to do for our citizens striving to improve their quality of life for their families. I would look to expand the incumbent worker training program and increase the number of approved training providers and certification programs in Louisiana.

Finally, we need more opportunities that make it affordable and practical for parents to go back to school and complete a degree or certification. A small investment in helping these individuals get a least some credential or certification and helping them connect with employers would have a high return on investment. Another critical aspect of this particular solution involves improving access to affordable childcare and early childhood education. Waiting lists for the Child Care Assistance Program are long, which means many parents simply cannot go back to school because they must stay home to care for their children. A stronger investment in early childhood education and child care, coupled with more opportunities for under-educated parents to obtain some certification or degree will help connect these individuals with employment.

Higher Education

7. Higher education in Louisiana has been cut by more than \$800 million since 2009. Though many of these cuts have been mitigated by higher tuition and fees there has been only minimal state reinvestment in postsecondary education the last couple of years – a stark contrast from what has been seen in most other states. What is your view on providing additional funding to higher education, and do you have any priorities for where additional funding should go?

Greater investment in higher education will be a priority during my administration. This includes investment in our Community and Technical College System, as well as investment in traditional two and four-year research universities. That being said, the landscape of higher education is changing across the country. Today's students do not necessarily all come straight from high school, and listening to lectures in a physical classroom is not the only way students can learn. Louisiana should invest in innovative programs that will help our higher ed providers reach a greater number of students and equip them with the skills they need to acquire a job in today's rapidly changing, technology driven economy. This includes greater investment in distance learning opportunities.

We must also explore options for making higher education more affordable for anyone who wants to access it, not just students coming out of high school. There are many available sources of funding available already for programs like this to help student and families, but there is too little coordination of the funds to target specific outcomes. I will work to utilize every resource possible to remove obstacles for any individual who seeks to enhance their education and obtain employment.

8. The Louisiana Board of Regents has set an ambitious goal of boosting the state postsecondary education attainment rate from the current level of about 44% to 60% by 2030. That means significantly more of our citizens will need post-secondary training. Complicating this is the fact that college costs have risen considerably in recent years, Louisiana has the nation's second-highest poverty rate, and needs-based financial aid is limited for recent high school graduates and almost non-existent for working-age adults. As governor, what policies would you support to increase the level of education attainment in our state?

Nearly 1/3 of our population doesn't have a high school degree. Another nearly 20% graduated from high school but stopped there. Another 10-15% started college or community college but never finished. This data reveals there is no single solution to increasing educational attainment in our State. And at the outset, we have to recognize that not every student will want to or should follow the same path to a career. We need a greater investment in dual enrollment opportunities for our high school students so that those who want to enter the workforce sooner can exit high school with at least some college credits and career certificate under their belt. We also need to work with our higher education institutions to improve innovative programs that can allow more students to access college courses at a more affordable cost. Additionally, for many of our most disadvantaged Louisiana citizens who have been out of school for some time but desire to further their education, we must develop solutions that allow them to do that, while also

taking care of their families and working to find a job that will be there when they have the required certification or degree.

Finally, new investment into education, from PreK-12 all the way to higher ed and workforce initiatives must be coordinated. Investing into new programs in a piecemeal fashion without any coherent plan will not work.

K-12 Education

9. In many national circles, Louisiana receives high marks for its education policies in areas such as school accountability, academic standards, quality assessments, quality rating system for early education centers, and its strategies for improving achievement for economically disadvantaged students through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. In looking at Louisiana's broad array of education policies, in general terms, tell us which of Louisiana's education policies you like or dislike and are there any you would seek to change or protect?

As I look at the many policies and programs that affect our PreK-12 students, the policies we should be focusing on are those that will directly improve student outcomes and outputs. More and more, government is not only asking teachers to do too much, but is also burdening them with far too many mandates and rules. My goal will be to recruit and retain the very best teachers for our students and to get the State out of the way as much as possible so that those teachers can do their jobs. I want to empower our teachers, not hold them back.

Unlike John Bel Edwards, I would support legislation like HB 343 and 344 from the 2018 legislative session that would strengthen the Teacher Bill of Rights by giving them the freedom to use the curriculum they believe fits their students, the right to high-quality professional development opportunities and protect them from being coerced into participating in political activities and joining unions against their will.

The certified teacher shortage issue is at a critical point, especially in rural areas. I strongly support programs that provide opportunities for high school students to earn college credits towards becoming a classroom teacher. One of our recent state teachers of the year is leading that charge in Louisiana, and we're already seeing some positive outcomes in terms of more high school students wanting to enter the teaching profession. My administration would provide the support needed to expand this initiative to all corners of the state.

We must also loosen restrictions on retired teachers wanting to re-enter the profession without sacrificing their earned benefits. In many critical shortage areas, district superintendents and school principals would love to welcome back retired teachers, and the experience they have would greatly benefit our students. My plan would cut through bureaucratic red tape and put more experienced and highly qualified teachers in classrooms while decreasing the retirement debt hanging over our heads, creating a win-win-win for districts, teachers and students.

I will also support continued investment in and growth of our school choice programs in Louisiana. More detail about my positions on school choice is contained in Answer #10.

Finally, one of the biggest issues holding back greater investment in our PreK-12 students is TRSL pension liability. Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, which I believe is the most important ingredient of achieving good educational outcomes, will not be possible without fixing the pension problem. For every 30.4 cents that districts pay into TRSL, 26.2 cents goes directly to paying off pension debt. At the same time, the system is continuing to rack up new debt. Our current system also puts Louisiana at a serious disadvantage in recruiting high-talent teachers in today's job market. Teachers receive very few retirement benefits unless they stay on the job for 20 years or more. In today's mobile economy, that simply isn't competitive. Although Governor Edwards claims to be implementing changes that will help Louisiana attract and keep highly qualified and effective teachers, he has killed pension reform efforts at every turn.

10. Public school "choice" covers a range of options: charter schools, the student scholarship program, course choice, Jump Start, STEM options, dual enrollment and language immersion. Please describe your position on choice in public education, specifically, what kind, if any, you would support, increase, or oppose.

I support a robust, coordinated, statewide school choice plan for Louisiana families. Louisiana's multiple school choice programs, including charter schools and the scholarship program, have produced positive results. Our accountability system is among the toughest in the country, and schools receiving our scholarship students are closing the achievement gap faster than traditional public schools. Most important, families are happy.

Despite these proven results, Governor Edwards is determined to decrease school choice options for Louisiana families. Even worse, he has suggested that his plan to dismantle Louisiana's charter school system includes forcing charter schools to participate in the TRSL retirement system. It is beyond belief that he would force charter schools that are improving student outcomes to join a flawed system that is already underfunded and holding back our traditional public schools from spending more money on recruiting quality teachers and investing directly in students.

I will invest in growing our existing school choice programs, as well as improving their reach and effectiveness. Today, the majority of school choice exists within school districts. I will seek to remove district borders for school choice and encourage competition among schools with a goal of producing even better results.

11. High-quality early education programs have been shown to help children succeed in school, especially children considered at-risk. Much has been done in Louisiana to coordinate early care and education efforts around the state and give parents a better understanding of the quality of various programs that receive public funding. The biggest missing piece has been funding for children birth to age three. If elected what would you propose in your executive budget with regard to funding for early care and education over the next four years?

According to data from the Louisiana Department of Education, fewer than 1/3 of all 3-year-olds have access to early childhood services, and fewer than 15% of children age 0-2 have access to services. Those numbers are tragic considering we know that over 90% of brain development occurs before the age of 5. It is also bad for our economy since many of these children have parents who could be and want to be working or going to school but simply can't because they have no affordable child care options.

I plan to make a much larger funding commitment to early childhood education and child care than Governor Edwards has made. Funding must be sufficient not only to cover all children currently on the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) waiting list, but also to fund those who are authorized and eligible but not utilizing CCAP. We also must increase reimbursement rates for CCAP even more to ensure that we have-quality providers and teachers watching and educating our youngest children.

Finally, as Governor, I will work closely with local governments, business communities and other organizations to ensure that each community has a coherent early childhood strategy in place that tracks our overall state goals of improving both access to seats and quality of seats.

Fiscal Responsibility / Tax Structure

13. There are some who believe we should maintain the degree of budget stability Louisiana is experiencing now and as revenues grow, as naturally occurs in an expanding economy, those funds should be used to invest in things such as early education, higher education or other areas that they feel are important for Louisiana. There are others that believe that as the economy expands and revenues grow with it, taxes should be cut to keep state spending from increasing. Understanding there may be middle ground between these two positions, generally speaking, where do you stand on this issue?

I disagree with the proposition that our state leaders must choose between investing in important priorities like early childhood education and healthcare on the one hand, and lowering taxes and keeping state spending in check on the other. I believe the State, starting with its Governor and the Legislature, has a moral duty to use taxpayer dollars efficiently and wisely. This means adequately investing in important priorities like those that you list, but it also means ensuring that the State is not wasting taxpayer money or, even worse, using it fraudulently. I believe firmly that taxes in Louisiana can be lowered, while still investing appropriate dollars in what should be (but have not been) the State's top priorities, including infrastructure and early childhood education. Unlike our current governor, I do not believe that increasing taxes to expand government is the solution to improving the quality of life in Louisiana and improving our economic outlook. The solution is allowing our hard-working citizens to keep more money in their pockets and to put that money back into the economy, not into the State's coffers.

14. In recent years there has been much discussion about whether Louisiana's tax structure needs to be updated to improve the state's competitiveness. Much of this arose from a report issued by the Legislature's Task Force on Structural Changes in Budget and Tax

Policy that was released in 2017. Generally speaking, what are your views on Louisiana's current tax structure and as governor would you undertake a comprehensive effort to change Louisiana's tax structure, or do you think that major revisions are not necessary at this time?

Louisiana's tax structure needs significant reform, across the board. Our income tax rates are among the highest in the South. Our corporate tax rates are by far the highest in the South. And our sales tax rate is the second highest in the nation. These high rates discourage families from moving to Louisiana, and they discourage businesses from investing and growing in Louisiana. What's worse is that despite these high rates, in many cases we get very little bang for buck because our tax base has been eroded by exemptions and deductions. The system isn't fair, and it's volatile. Our tax system is also far too complex. Families and businesses should not need a fleet of tax accountants and attorneys to file their tax return.

My strategy for comprehensive tax reform will be to create a fairer, less complex system with lower rates. On the income tax side, I will seek to eliminate the deduction for federal income taxes paid, and lower rates. The State's fiscal outlook should not depend on changes at the federal level, good or bad. I will also phase out or eliminate the franchise tax completely. It is a complicated, antiquated tax that very few other states use, and it puts Louisiana at a disadvantage when competing for business. Our exorbitantly high, regressive sales tax must also be lowered, and exemptions that were temporarily suspended should be permanently suspended.

In addition to these changes, we must also reform the way we administer our tax system to make it fairer and less burdensome for businesses. Louisiana's current system of having a different sales tax collector in each parish and subjecting businesses to audits from multiple agencies is repetitive, overly burdensome, and is killing businesses in Louisiana, both large and small. We must move to a more centralized system. This change is also important to ensure that Louisiana and local governments are able to collect revenue from the growing number of online transactions. The system put in place by Governor Edwards is a band-aid approach that likely does not comply with current legal requirements. Moving to a more centralized system of sales tax collection and auditing will require a leader who is able to bring together both the State, the business community and local governments to craft the right solution. I am that leader and look forward to working with local officials and businesses to design a solution that improves opportunities for businesses to invest in and grow in Louisiana while also ensuring that local governments have the resources they need to provide vital services to their communities.

15. There has been much talk about the possible need for a constitutional convention, but less discussion about what parts of the constitution should be changed if a rewrite were undertaken. What is your position on a constitutional convention? Do you believe Louisiana needs a major constitutional change or not, and if so what parts of the constitution would you seek to update?

I absolutely agree that Louisiana needs major constitutional change. Comprehensive spending and tax reform cannot be accomplished without it. Article VII is the article most in need of change since it covers the bulk of our fiscal and tax systems, so that is certainly where the effort will be focused. As to a constitutional convention, my concern is that there is no guarantee that a constitutional convention can or would be limited in nature. There is conflicting legal authority

for whether the scope of a convention must be limited to the legislature's call, including a failed proposed constitutional amendment in the early 1990's that would have specifically created the limited constitutional convention option. Any attempt to call a limited convention would, at a minimum, provoke a legal challenge.

Before we look at opening up entire Constitution and putting all of the good and desirable parts of our Constitution that currently benefit Louisiana at risk, I would like the opportunity to have a new legislature enact comprehensive fiscal reform. This could be achieved through a package of constitutional amendments, or an entire re-write of Article VII offered as a single constitutional amendment. The legislature in 2020 will look much different than the legislature we have today, and I am confident that with the right leader as governor and conservative supermajority of the legislature ready to take on fiscal reform, we can accomplish changes that our current Governor has not been able to achieve.

16. Louisiana's state pension systems are currently underfunded by more than \$18 billion dollars. The state has been on a payment schedule to retire the liabilities that built up over decades of paying too little into the system. While this has been costly, it has helped reduce our debt. At the same time, while the state has been working to retire that old debt, it has been creating new debt because retirement systems have been utilizing overly-generous expectations of the rate of return on their investments. All of this comes as studies have shown that because of changing work patterns and lifestyles, few state employees or teachers stay in their jobs long enough to earn a meaningful state retirement. If elected, do you plan to pursue pension changes in the next term and, if so, what approaches would you take and what would be your goals?

Pension reform is a must. Our current retirement systems are not only bankrupting the State, but they are also bad for hard-working state employees, including our hard-working teachers. Teachers who work for 24 years or less don't receive the level of benefits paid into the system on their behalf. In fact, in order to receive full benefits from the system, teachers have to stay on the job for 40 years. Teachers who work 20 years or less receive very few benefits, yet data shows that in today's mobile economy, only 30% of teachers will stay on the job for more than 20 years. Some estimates suggest that almost half of all new teachers will not qualify for a pension at all.

Going forward, the retirement systems must be modernized to improve portability and to create better options for employees who may not want to remain in the same job for 20+ years. If we do not make these changes, Louisiana will not remain competitive in recruiting and retaining the most qualified employees and teachers. We must also start getting real about the performance of our retirement systems. For decades, the expected investment return has been unrealistic. Years and years of projecting a 7.5% return and getting a 5% return should tell us something is off. We simply cannot promise benefits that we cannot pay for.

17. In 2017 the Legislature passed a package of criminal justice reforms with the goals of lowering the state's highest-in-the-nation incarceration rate, improving outcomes for mostly non-violent offenders returning to society, and saving state dollars. What is your position on the reforms of 2017? Would you continue to implement them as governor, or do you think changes are needed? And what do you see as the next steps in this process?

I believe Governor Edwards' implementation of the Legislature's criminal justice reform package has been detrimental to public safety, primarily because the reforms were implemented far too hastily and without enough local input. His implementation of the new laws was not consistent with the intent of the Legislature. My viewpoint on this topic is not theoretical and it's not based on second-hand information. It is based on data and numerous conversations with district attorneys, sheriffs, and victims. Despite claims by the Governor that his reforms only let non-violent criminals out of jail early, there are countless cases where repeat violent offenders have been released early and committed new violent crimes, including murder and rape. That is unacceptable to me. I support efforts to save money, reduce recidivism and rehabilitate offenders to become productive members of society, but not at the expense of keeping our Louisiana citizens safe.

As Governor, I would work closely with local law enforcement officials to revise Governor Edwards' reforms so that local judges and public safety officials are not forced to release violent criminals from jail.

Staff Signature

Candidate Signature

Date

8/15/19

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