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Voters break the levee boards' spell

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Jarvis DeBerry

The Wicked Witch of the West getting drenched with a bucket of water. Little Red Riding Hood's Big Bad Wolf eviscerated, then filled with stones. The Orleans Parish Levee Board and its neighboring counterparts getting walloped at the polls by those who've seen them at work.

Sometimes fairy tales do come true. Eighteen months ago, who could have predicted that the politically connected, favor-dispensing, asset-acquiring, levees-ignoring local levee boards would be kicked out? Not kicked out with grace, mind you, but Bruce Lee-ed, Pelé-ed, Thomas Dempsey-ed out of their place of prominence and influence. Eight of every 10 Louisianians who went to the polls Saturday voted to reject the status quo and reduced the number of levee boards in this immediate region from umpteen to two. Let's assume that some voters far away from here didn't understand the ballot language and were inclined to support the measure solely because it was on the ballot. Ignorance was certainly not the case for voters in or around New Orleans. Folks here know how little the local levee boards did to keep us protected from encroaching water. Still, who would have predicted that the once indomitable politburo of patronage would only be able to rustle up 1,840 New Orleans voters?

If winning 54 percent or so of votes constitutes a landslide, then clearly the word isn't strong enough to describe a situation where 94 percent of New Orleanians favored kicking the bums out.

When Sen. Walter Boasso first proposed merging the boards, there was such a hue and cry that one might have been fooled into thinking that there was actually some measurable support, not just support but love of the local levee boards and their performance.

But that myth was dispelled Saturday. So few votes went to the losing side that we can only conclude that nobody liked the way the levee boards were structured except the board members themselves, the politicians who placed them there and, maybe, the spouses of the above.

Everybody else endorsed the sentiment of those local signs that feature an arrow pointing at the waterline on a building. "I've had it up to here with the levee boards," they read. It would be a shame if the population's activism waned now because there's still quite a bit of reform to tackle. Next month, the assessors will be telling us the same thing that supporters of the current levee boards told us: that we aren't smart enough to know what's best for us and that a system that keeps them in power actually helps us. The truth is, though, that the assessors' tendency to undervalue property robs the city's treasury of much needed money. Their overemphasis on a home's sales price allows people who bought their homes long ago to get by paying little, even as recent buyers pay much more. Sure, it's possible that a single assessor could be just as lackadaisical about fair assessments as the group of seven has historically been. Even so, that doesn't change the fact that we have six assessors, six salaries and six benefit packages too many.

The assessors system we have now doesn't benefit us any more than levee boards whose jurisdictions correspond to parish lines. That said, one would be foolish to assume that most of the assessors will go down as easily as their counterparts on the levee boards. They'll tell us that unless we keep them in place we'll be sorry. They'll do everything they can to exploit the population's fear of higher taxes. They'll be sure not to argue that we all have an obligation to do our part to help our city flourish and that doing our part includes paying our fair share.

They will do their best to intimidate. But we've just defeated one group of entrenched politicos. Who's to say we can't defeat another?

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