

Questions for the candidates

Gov. John Bel Edwards and Baton Rouge businessman Eddie Rispone will meet for their first - and likely only - head-to-head debate on Oct. 30 ([Louisiana Public Broadcasting from 7-8 p.m.](#)). As such, it may be the last chance voters have to hear directly from the candidates about how they propose to deal with the issues facing Louisiana.

While all Louisianans have a stake in state government decisions, they matter particularly to families that are struggling to afford basic needs. In that vein, the Louisiana Budget Project has developed some questions for the candidates on the issues affecting low-income families.

State budget: The next governor will very likely have to [deal with an economic recession](#). That means revenue for the state will decline, and the demand for services such as public education, health care and social services will rise. The budget surpluses of today could very quickly become the shortfalls of tomorrow. Meanwhile, financial analysts say that Louisiana is [among the worst-prepared states](#) for a future recession, due to the repeated raids on the state's rainy-day fund over the past decade.

- As governor, how would you approach these budget shortfalls and ensure that public services are preserved? Should the state take a balanced approach that includes new revenues along with targeted cuts? Or would you rely on one-time revenues and budget cuts as the only way to balance the budget?
- Only [about 12% of the state budget](#) consists of discretionary general fund dollars, which is where the governor and Legislature are forced to make cuts during fiscal downturns. More than 85% of these discretionary dollars go to health care, higher education and social services. If forced to make cuts during a downturn, which programs would you target and why?

Taxes: The 2018 sales-tax compromise helped stabilize Louisiana's budget and paved the way for only the second teacher pay raise in a decade. But Louisiana's tax structure is the [14th most unfair](#) in the country. Louisiana [ranks 4th in the nation](#) for income inequality, and incomes in Louisiana are more unequal after state and local taxes are collected than before. Louisiana's income tax revenues also rise and fall when tax laws change in Washington, DC, due to our [unorthodox federal income-tax deduction](#).

- Do you support uncoupling Louisiana's tax structure from the federal government's by eliminating the federal income-tax deduction for individuals and corporations? If so, would your plan be similar to the recommendation of the [Task Force on Structural Changes in Budget and Tax Reform](#) or some other way?

- How will you revamp Louisiana’s tax structure to ensure that it doesn’t increase income inequality?

Wages: Louisiana is [one of only five states](#) without a state-level minimum wage, and workers here are paid [some of the lowest wages](#) in the nation. Louisiana also was the first state to pass a law that prohibits cities and parishes from deciding wage and benefits levels on their own. Because of this, many workers in Louisiana have not shared in the state’s economic recovery over the past few years and continue to struggle to afford basic necessities: Louisiana’s food insecurity rate is [among the highest in the nation](#), with many of the state’s working families forced to choose between keeping food on the table and paying their rent or mortgage.

- Do you support establishing a state minimum wage above the federal minimum, and allowing the minimum wage to grow over time by indexing it to inflation?
- Should cities and parishes have the right to establish minimum wage and benefit levels that suit their local economic needs?

Health care: Louisiana’s uninsured rate [has dropped to 8%](#), the lowest rate in state history and a rate below the national average. The state’s uninsured rate for children is even lower, at [just 3%](#), a figure also below the 5% national average. And Louisiana’s uninsured rates are dropping at a time when the national uninsured rate is rising for children and adults.

- How will your administration ensure that these coverage gains are preserved and that Louisiana doesn’t backslide?
- If you support a “freeze” in Medicaid enrollment, how will you ensure that people who are eligible for coverage because of their income or health status gets the services they need?

K-12 Education: Much of the debate over public education in Louisiana has focused on the growth of charter schools, and the private-school voucher program. But the vast majority of public school children in Louisiana still attend traditional public schools. In those schools, teachers are paid below their Southern peers despite a pay raise this year.

- Will it be a priority for your administration to ensure that teachers are paid at the Southern regional average?
- How will you ensure that more resources are directed to districts and schools where they are needed the most, and that teachers have incentives to teach in the most troubled schools?

Higher education: Tuition at Louisiana’s public colleges and universities has [more than doubled](#) since 2008, and Louisiana has cut more state support for higher education than all but one other state over that time. While students on TOPS are largely protected from these cuts, it’s a different story for nontraditional students, students from low-income families and those who are pursuing degrees on a part-time basis while working or raising families. While the budget for TOPS scholarships continues to rise with tuition, the funding for Go Grants has largely been stagnant.

- How can we make education more affordable for children from poor families and adults who are going back to school or seeking to earn the skills that can get them a better job?
- What changes would you make to the TOPS and Go Grants programs to ensure that low-income and nontraditional students have a chance to complete their degrees without excessive debt burdens?

Racial Equity: Everyone wants the opportunity to build a good life for themselves and their families, but people of color in Louisiana often face substantial barriers to opportunity. The average black household in our state has [less than one-fifth](#) of the wealth owned by the average white household, and earns [only 63%](#) of the average white household's income. Black families in Louisiana have fewer resources to pay for a college education, to weather a financial emergency or plan for the future. And 43% of the state's black children and 30% of Latinx children grow up in families [earning incomes below the federal poverty line](#).

- What would your administration do to address the persistent wealth gaps that hold back many Louisiana families of color?
- Would you support policies to strengthen protections against wage discrimination and to end pay secrecy, in which employers prohibit or discourage their employees from discussing their pay with their colleagues?