

# Remap may give BR votes

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## Population shifts could mean more seats at state, national level

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At first blush, U.S. Census Bureau counts released last week suggest increased political clout for Baton Rouge, say officials and analysts.

The numbers that showed East Baton Rouge Parish is now the state's most populous — along with nearly 40 percent growth in suburban Livingston

and Ascension parishes — should translate into an additional state senator, another state representative or two and perhaps a second congressional district for the Baton Rouge area, lawmakers predict.

"It's about time for us to have the numbers that New Orleans has had for years," state Rep. Mert Smiley, R-St. Amant, said Thursday shortly after the reports were released. During the

past decade, the number of people in Smiley's Ascension Parish House district nearly doubled.

"It will give us some additional votes on things we need to accomplish, such as road projects," said state Rep. Stephen Carter on Friday. The Baton Rouge Republican chairs the Capital Area Legislative Delegation, which currently has 26 members spread over nine

parishes.

Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden counsels legislators to move slowly as they rearrange the lines of the districts from which officials are elected. "We all need to sit down very quickly and begin to look at how we can get more mileage in terms of representation both in the state Legislature and in the congressional level to represent Baton Rouge in light of these

new findings," Holden said in an interview Friday.

Holden said he doesn't want to see East Baton Rouge's influence divided in a way that adds more officials but leaves the parish with a smaller voice. "You need somebody (in the U.S. Congress, for instance) who is going to encompass more of Baton Rouge instead of

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having to run to several other parishes in order to make up the vote," Holden said.

State legislators began using the raw numbers released last week to redraw electoral maps to better match where people now live. The constitutionally required decennial census counts people at the precinct level.

Between March 20 and April 13, the state Legislature will consider new maps outlining about 170 districts from which voters will elect members of congress, state representatives, state senators, state Supreme Court justices, plus members of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education as well as the state Public Service Commission.

Because Louisiana's history of discriminating against black voters, the state Legislature's plan also must be endorsed by the U.S. Department of Justice. Federal authorities are looking, among other things, to ensure Louisiana's plan does not dilute the voting strength of blacks by splitting their communities among districts with majority-white populations.

State Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, is chairman of the House and Governmental Affairs Committee that leads the redistricting effort in the lower chamber. Gallot said his committee and staff are analyzing current districts to find how far over or under current populations are in meeting the legal demographic requirements. The ideal population for a Louisiana House district is 43,174 and for a state Senate seat, 116,240.

Most officials and analysts agree with Gallot's initial assessment that New Orleans would lose seats in the state Legislature and see one of its two area congressional districts dramatically redrawn.

Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines together have lost 198,806 residents since the 2000 census, according to last week's reports. Orleans accounts for 140,845 of the resident loss.

Currently, 19 percent of the 105 seats in the Louisiana House are occupied by black representatives, while 20 percent of the 39 seats in the state Senate have black membership. The Census Bureau reports that 32 percent of Louisiana 4.5 million people are black.

House Speaker Jim Tucker expects the New Orleans area to lose three or four House seats. Black-majority districts likely will have to be carved out in other parts of the state so Louisiana ends up with the same number of minority legislators when the process is over, Tucker said.

Though the Baton Rouge area has grown, population levels in much of the rest of the state have remained a sluggish 1.5 percent — growth that has lagged far behind the national average, the census reports show.

Under the formula that ensures all 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives represent roughly the same number of constituents, the "ideal population" for each district has grown from 638,285 people to 755,562 because of the latest census.

All seven congressional districts for Louisiana have fewer people than that ideal. One of the congressional districts will be eliminated and that district's constituents will be distributed among the other congressmen.

Federal law requires that one of the districts have enough black voters to ensure a black congressman has a reasonable chance of being elected. The "minority majority" district, currently represented by U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, is 262,210 people below the ideal population.

According to the census report released last week, New Orleans has about 207,000 black people, and the district will need about 368,000 black people to qualify for "minority majority."

"You're going to have a ripple effect," said John Couvillon, a political analyst who studies demographics as JMC Enterprises in Baton Rouge. "The huge population loss coming out of Orleans means that Cedric Richmond has to get some constituents from somewhere."

Applying the numbers to the maps, along with the law that requires the districts to be contiguous, implies that Richmond's New Orleans-based 2nd U.S. Congressional District will have to link various black communities across several parishes, Couvillon said. That likely means the district will have to stretch up from New Orleans along the Mississippi River toward Baton Rouge, he said.

That's where politics will insert itself, said Elliott Stonecipher, a Shreveport political analyst who studies Census Bureau reports.

For instance, most of the blacks in Republican U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise's district live in Jefferson Parish, as does the congressman. The bulk of Scalise's 1st U.S. Congressional District constituents live in subdivisions along the north shore of Lake Ponchartrain.

For the map to work, Stonecipher said, the Jefferson Parish black communities — along with Scalise's home — need to be included in the 2nd District.

"The question is, can you get enough African Americans stopping in Donaldsonville? My analysis, so far, is you cannot," Stonecipher said. The district may have to push farther north into the Baton Rouge area.

The plan being pushed by U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, the dean of the Louisiana U.S. House delegation, squeezes the Baton Rouge area from the north by picking up enough people to fill out one of two north Louisiana congressional seats. One district — Alexander's — would drop vertically from Monroe. The other northern district proposed by the Quitman Republican would run along the western border from Shreveport toward Lake Charles. Alexander's plan would allow for a congressional district based almost totally in Baton Rouge.

Freshman Republican U.S. Rep. Jeff Landry, of New Iberia, is proposing an all-coastal congressional district from Plaquemines Parish to the Sabine River.

"It's no question it's going to be challenging," said state Senate President Joel Chaisson II, D-Destrehan.

Mark Ballard of the Capitol news bureau and Carl Redman of The Advocate contributed to this report.

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