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Louisiana Legislature sends congressional map with one majority-Black district to governor's desk

BY BLAKE PATERSON | STAFF WRITER
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A large flock of black-bellied whistling ducks take flight in the shadows of the Louisiana State Capitol at sunset on Capitol Lake, Wednesday, January 19, 2022, in Baton Rouge, La.

STAFF PHOTO BY HILARY SCHEINUK

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EXHIBIT
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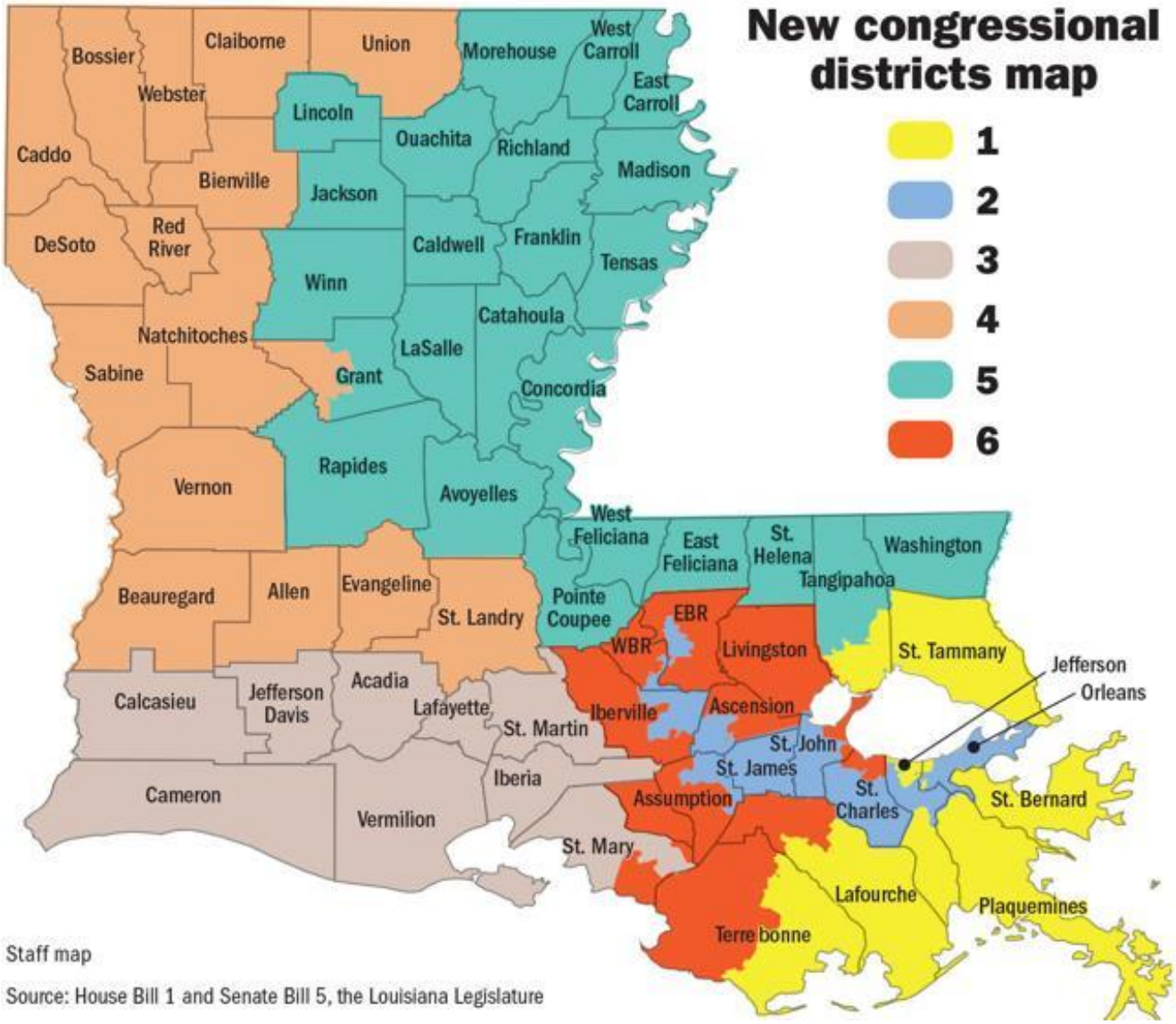
Republicans in the Louisiana Legislature approved two, identical congressional maps on Friday that maintain the status quo of a single majority-Black district while nibbling along the edges of the existing boundaries.

The proposals — House Bill 1 and Senate Bill 5 — were drawn to protect incumbents and would all but guarantee Louisiana sends five Republicans and one Democrat to the U.S. House of Representatives in the congressional midterms this fall.

Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, has 20 days to sign, veto or allow the legislation to become law without his signature. The governor previously called the proposals "problematic" but has otherwise remained mum on whether he'd reject the bills.

During floor debates Friday, Democratic lawmakers in both chambers argued that the Republican-backed proposals violate Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act for failing to draw a second majority-Black district.



Given that nearly one-third of Louisiana's population is Black, they argued it's only fair that two of the six congressional districts be

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drawn to allow Black voters to elect their candidate of choice.

"People who look like me are ignored repeatedly," said state Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, a Black Democrat from New Orleans. "Why is that White people only get to be represented fairly?"

A coalition of civil rights groups have threatened to sue Louisiana over the map if it becomes law. Under existing Supreme Court jurisprudence, if the Black population is "sufficiently large and geographically compact" to support another majority-Black district, that district must be drawn.

Over the course of the three-week redistricting session, Democrats introduced more than a dozen proposals showing how a second-majority Black district could be drawn. None made it out of committee.

The map that advanced Friday packs Black voters into the Second District, stretching from New Orleans East to north Baton Rouge. The seat is currently represented by U.S. Rep. Troy Carter, D-New Orleans.

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"The fact is that this map does not comply with the Voting Rights Act," said state Rep. Royce Duplessis, D-New Orleans.

In a statement following adjournment, Edwards said he'd examine the bills closely to determine whether they are "reasonable, fair, and in line with the Voting Rights Act," adding that the maps should reflect the growth of the Black population.

The Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus in their own statement urged Edwards to veto the bills, saying the legislation clearly violates the Voting Rights Act.

House Democratic leader Sam Jenkins, D-Shreveport, also called on Edwards to veto the maps, saying they "aggressively and illegally suppress the voice of minority Louisianans."

Republican map-drawers have repeatedly maintained that their proposal is in line with federal law.

State Sen. Sharon Hewitt, a Slidell Republican who sponsored Senate Bill 5, said Friday there was insufficient evidence that a Black-preferred candidate would win if a second majority-Black district were drawn.

GOP legislative leaders worked behind closed doors in the hours leading up to Friday's vote to iron out differences between competing House and Senate plans. Hewitt said they decided to send "two identical bills to the governor in a show of unity."

The resulting compromise keeps all of Union Parish in the Fourth Congressional District, represented by U.S. Rep. Mike Johnson, R-Benton. Most of Rapides Parish would stay in the Fifth District, represented by U.S. Rep. Julia Letlow, R-Start.

To keep the district populations as equal as practicable — as required by federal law — lawmakers opted to split Grant Parish between the Fourth and Fifth districts.

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State Rep. Gabe Firment, a Republican who represents Grant Parish, chastised legislative leaders for splitting the parish up without first consulting with him.

"I just feel like this was done in the dark of night," Firment said in a floor speech. "It stinks to high heaven if you ask me."

Exiting the House chamber upon adjournment, Firment said he "hates" the map and hopes Edwards vetoes it. In a brief interview, he said he'd "seriously consider" voting with Democrats to sustain the governor's veto if the Legislature attempted an override.

Firment was one of three House Republicans to join Democrats in voting against the maps. House Republican leader Blake Miguez, R-Erath, and state Rep. Beryl Amedee, R-Gray,

said they couldn't support a map that split St. Martin and St. Mary parishes between two congressional districts.

Lawmakers took two votes on the congressional maps Friday. Both chambers voted in the morning to amend their counterpart's proposal to make the bills identical. Those bills then returned to their chamber of origin for concurrence in the afternoon.

Senate Bill 5 won final passage in the House in a 64-31 vote, and House Bill 1, sponsored by House Speaker Clay Schexnayder, R-Gonzales, earned final passage in the Senate in 27-10 vote.

State Rep. Francis Thompson, D-Vidalia, was the lone Democrat to support the Republican-backed map. Thompson, who is White, represents a district that overwhelmingly voted for Donald Trump in 2020. He said a second Black-majority seat would imperil U.S. Rep. Julia Letlow, R-Start, who lives in his parish.

State Rep. C. Travis Johnson, D-Vidalia, voted alongside Democrats in opposing the map. The Vice Chair of the Louisiana Democratic Party

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faced heat from both his colleagues and state party officials for voting alongside Republicans for an earlier version of the map.

The proposal approved Friday mirrors the existing district boundaries with a few minor changes. Point Coupee, East Feliciana and St. Helena parishes would be moved into the Fifth District. St. Landry Parish, which is currently split between three congressional districts, would be kept whole in the Fourth District.

Voting for House congressional redistricting bill (27): President Cortez, Sens Abraham, Allain, Bernard, Cathey, Cloud, Connick, Fesi, Foil, Henry, Hensgens, Hewitt, Lambert, McMath, Milligan, F. Mills, R. Mills, Mizell, Morris, Peacock, Pope, Reese, Stine, Talbot, Ward, White and Womack.

Voting against HB1 (10): Sens Barrow, Boudreaux, Carter, Fields, Harris, Jackson, Luneau, Peterson, Price and Smith.

Not Voting (2): Sens Bouie and Tarver.

Voting for Senate congressional redistricting maps (64): Speaker Schexnayder, Reps Bacala, Bagley, Beaullieu, Bishop, Bourriaque, Butler, Carrier, Coussan, Crews, Davis, Deshotel, DeVillier, DuBuisson, Echols, Edmonds, Edmonston, Emerson, Farnum, Fontenot, Freiberg, Frieman, Garofalo, Geymann, Goudeau, Harris, Hilferty, Hodges, Hollis, Horton, Huval, Illg, M. Johnson, Kerner, Mack, Magee, Marino, McCormick, McFarland, McKnight, McMahen, G. Miller, Mincey, Muscarello, Nelson, Orgeron, C. Owen, Pressly, Riser, Romero, Schamerhorn, Seabaugh, St. Blanc, Stagni, Stefanski, Tarver, Thomas, Thompson, Turner, Villio, Wheat, White, Wright and Zeringue.

Voting against SB5 (31): Reps Adams, Amedee, Boyd, Brass, Brown, Bryant, Carpenter, R. Carter, W. Carter, Cormier, Cox, Duplessis, Firment, Fisher, Freeman, Gaines, Glover,

Hughes, Jefferson, Jenkins, T. Johnson, LaCombe, Landry, Larvadain, Lyons, Miguez, D. Miller, Newell, Phelps, Pierre and Selders.

Not Voting on SB5 (9): Reps Gadberry, Green, Ivey, Jordan, Marcelle, Moore, R. Owen, Schlegel and Willard.

Staff writer Tyler Bridges contributed to this report.

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