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Should Louisiana draw a second majority-Black congressional district? Here's what lawmakers proposed

Three-week redistricting session kicks off Tuesday with flurry of maps

EXHIBIT
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BY BLAKE PATERSON | STAFF WRITER
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From left, Daszia Williams, Mike Cason and Beverly Young, all from the Computer Center, go over how the new voting monitors operate that are on the upper left corner of each desk in the House of Representatives chamber, Monday Jan. 31, 2022, in Baton Rouge, La. The legislative special session on political redistricting begins at 5 p.m. on Tuesday Feb.1st.

STAFF PHOTO BY BILL FEIG

Blake
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As the Louisiana Legislature considers how to redraw the lines of election districts for the next decade, Black state lawmakers and civil rights groups are keeping tally: How many majority-Black districts does each potential map include?

That question could define the three-week redistricting effort — and any lawsuits filed over its results. It was already front and center Tuesday when lawmakers gaveled into the special session shortly after 5 p.m. Tuesday.

Republican legislative leaders and Senate Democrats offered competing plans for drawing Louisiana's six congressional districts, with varying levels of Black representation.

House Speaker Clay Schexnayder, R-Gonzales, state Sen. Sharon Hewitt, R-Slidell, and Senate President Page Cortez, R-Lafayette, each filed maps that essentially maintain the status quo, keeping Black voters packed in the 2nd Congressional District stretching from New Orleans East to north Baton Rouge.

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Meanwhile, Democrats in the state Senate banded together to co-author eight proposals that all include a second, majority-Black congressional district.

With 33% of Louisiana's population identifying as Black, Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat who has the power to veto maps, has said it's only fair that two of the state's six congressional districts include a majority of Black voters.

In January, the governor said he'd be open to a map that included just one majority-Black district if it also contained a so-called "influence district," where the proportion of

Black voters is large enough to influence the outcome of the election but less than a majority. He said such a proposal would need significant buy-in from the Legislature.

If lawmakers fail to boost the number of districts where Black voters have the opportunity to elect their candidates of choice, a coalition of civil rights groups has said Louisiana could face "costly and unnecessary litigation."

Last week, a federal court in Alabama blocked that state's congressional map after lawmakers packed Black voters into one of seven congressional districts. The three-judge panel – which included two appointees of former President Donald Trump – unanimously determined the configuration likely violated Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, the federal law that prohibits minority vote dilution. Similar challenges are unraveling in Texas and North Carolina.

But it's not just congressional districts that are at stake. Over the next three weeks, Republican majorities will craft districts for 105 state representatives, 39 state senators, 11 state school board members, five state utility regulators, and, perhaps, seven state Supreme Court justices.

Senate President Page Cortez, R-Lafayette, introduced a bill Monday to redraw Louisiana's state Senate districts, and already, it's sparking concern among civil rights groups.

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The proposal includes 11 districts where Black residents constitute a majority of voters, maintaining the same number of seats as were drawn a decade ago. But an analysis from the American Civil Liberties Union determined that Louisiana's Senate maps could be configured to include additional majority-Black districts in

Baton Rouge, Shreveport and Jefferson Parish. The fact that Cortez' map doesn't could leave it open to legal challenge.

"If it's possible to draw an additional district that gives Black voters the opportunity to elect a preferred candidate, and you don't do it, then that is likely considered discriminatory," said Chris Kaiser, advocacy director at the ACLU of Louisiana.

Reflecting shifting populations, Cortez' proposal also moves Senate District 37, which currently spans Shreveport and Bossier, to south Louisiana. The seat would represent Hammond in Tangipahoa Parish and Albany in Livingston Parish.

But the marquee battle of the three-week session will be the congressional maps. With the balance of power in Congress on the line, it's unlikely that Louisiana's Republican-led Legislature will draw two majority-Black districts without some intervention from the courts.

State Sen. Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge, introduced three maps that include two districts where Black voters constitute a slim majority. Similar proposals were filed by state Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, D-New Orleans; state Sen. Gary Smith, D-Norco; state Sen. Gerald Boudreaux, D-Lafayette; state Sen. Jay Luneau, D-Alexandria; and state Sen. Joseph Bouie, Jr., D-New Orleans.

Most of the proposals group Black voters in north Baton Rouge and north Lafayette in with delta parishes along the Mississippi River to create a majority-Black District 5.

Such a configuration would jeopardize the chance that first-term Rep. Julia Letlow, R-Start, has at getting reelected, underscoring why GOP legislative leaders aren't interested in advancing plans with two majority-Black districts.

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"It would be unconscionable for us to pass a plan with a single Black district," Fields said. "It may not pass the Legislature. But it will pass the courts."

Under many of the Senate Democrats' proposals, much of New Orleans would remain in the majority-Black District 2; south Baton Rouge would be lumped in with a north shore-based District 6; and Lakeview, Uptown and the East Bank of Jefferson Parish would be included alongside Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes in District 1.

U.S. Rep. Troy Carter, the New Orleans Democrat who represents the 2nd Congressional District, said Tuesday he'd prefer to keep north Baton Rouge, but he also wants a second minority-majority congressional district. "I don't know what the maps would look like. It's important to have two, but it's not until you get to the nitty-gritty of how the lines are drawn, what makes sense and what would pass muster" with courts, Carter said.

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The proposals put forth by Republican leaders make far fewer changes to the existing congressional seats – and maintain the status quo of one majority-Black district. Under both maps, District 5, based in northeast Louisiana, would expand to include all of Point Coupee, East Feliciana and West Feliciana parishes.

On Tuesday, the chambers swore in new members, then started reading at least 22 redistricting bills, almost all of which were filed Tuesday, that describe which precincts each bill proposed to include in the various districts for elected officials. It's the first step in the process.

Lawmakers on the Senate & Governmental Affairs Committee will take up Cortez' Senate map Wednesday at 9:30 a.m.

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