

Reapportionment and race

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During the fray last week of the special redistricting session, Baton Rouge state Rep. Michael Jackson complained that the leading redistricting plans sweep black people into designated "minority majority" districts, leaving few black voters for the other districts, which are being drawn with overwhelmingly white majorities.



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Political Horizons

Jackson, who has no party affiliation, argued that House Bill 1 should draw the districts from which legislators will be elected over the next 10 years with less-extreme majorities. Districts with more-diverse populations would allow "cross-representation of issues and people," he said.

Nine of the dozen House seats that rely mostly on voters in East Baton Rouge Parish, as drawn in HB1, have racial majorities — white or black — of more than 70 percent. More specifically, 80 percent of the constituents of Jackson's District 61 in midcity are black. But Republican Steve Carter's House District 68, which shares a border with District 61, is only 20 percent black.

The more black voters in majority white districts — and vice versa — the more influence the district's minority population can potentially exert in elections and on the actions of those elected, Jackson said. Diversity forces lawmakers to seek solutions that cross racial lines, he said.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 requires federal approval of district maps for states, such as Louisiana, in which majority populations have created procedures, voted in blocs, or otherwise acted to deny minorities the ability to elect officials. That's the definition — much simplified — heard in testimony that Senate Secretary Glenn Koepf gave to the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee last week.

Over the years, that mandate has been translated into maintaining a specific number of districts in which minority populations — in Louisiana that means black people — compose a majority. But that's not as easy as it sounds, Koepf said. "It's not a matter of just grabbing these precincts and putting them in that district."

Most Louisiana neighborhoods, like its churches, remain segregated. Precincts tend to be overwhelmingly one race or the other.

The law requires the precincts

that make up the districts be contiguous. Building the numbers so that a district is majority black and using precincts that touch one another as building blocks often creates districts that are — in the words of Democratic state Sen. Lydia Jackson of Shreveport — "bizarrely shaped."

"This is not about who we elect, but about the people who elect," Jackson said.

Democratic State Sen. Francis Thompson, of Delhi, is a white man elected from a northeast Louisiana district that has a 67 percent majority black population. He insists, as all politicians seem to, that he represents everyone in his district regardless of their skin color.

But Thompson also says that having large segments of both populations in his district guarantees that he doesn't cater to one at the expense of the other.

"I don't think large swings does either side any good," Thompson said in an interview, agreeing that much of the nasty discourse on a national level comes from politicians elected in "Balkanized" districts with little diversity.

Consider this example: Poll after poll, regardless of the pollsters' leanings and competency, agree that few in Louisiana's black community support Gov.

Bobby Jindal. But the governor doesn't need the black community to get re-elected. So Jindal could reasonably ignore the howls when he named four white men to the Board of Regents in December.

Earlier this month, Jindal chose a black member. Still, 14 of the 15 appointed members on the board that sets policy for higher education institutions are white. This board is considering consolidating a historically black college — Southern University of New Orleans — with the historically white University of New Orleans.

On the surface, that plan has a lot of merit.

But SUNO was there when black people were forbidden to attend other universities, and it provides more programs aimed at working people trying to better their lot.

The people who use SUNO and know SUNO weren't represented when Jindal and the Regents set out to find a solution to budget problems and the school's poor graduation rates. Perhaps those voices would have provided better alternatives.

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