

LOUISIANA SPOTLIGHT

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Redistricting sparks fights

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The redrawing of district lines can be among the most arcane topics for Capitol outsiders. Inside the Capitol, it can be among the most heated debates and the most personal, deciding someone's political survival.

Though the upcoming redistricting session for lawmakers is still months away, in early 2011, it's already ranking legislators, and the arguments are spilling out into the regular session — especially in the House.

The political districts are redrawn every 10 years with the release of new census data. The Legislature decides lines for its own seats and the state's U.S. House seats, among other elected districts. This time is expected to be particularly contentious, because of post-Hurricane Katrina population shifts and because Louisiana is predicted to lose one of its seven congressional seats. "It's going to be the most agonizing, difficult process we're going to go through for the remainder of the term, or at least tied up there with the budget," said House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown.

Tucker has caused part of the initial agonizing. His shake-up earlier this session of the House committee that will help lead the state's redistricting efforts created a lopsided committee makeup that heavily favors Republicans — and that has led to repeated complaints from Democrats.

Displeased after a legislative leadership battle, Tucker removed two Democrats from the House and Governmental Affairs Committee and replaced them with two Republicans. That leaves the 19-member committee with 12 Republicans, six Democrats and one independent. That's nowhere close to the divide of the House, which has 50 Republicans, 50 Democrats and three independents. The House will have 52 Democrats after two special elections fill vacancies.



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"We've got to have fairness in the process," said Rep. John Bel Edwards, D-Amite, chairman of the House Democratic Caucus. "It seems to me like there's anything but balance."

Tucker said he wants to add two more seats to the committee, and he'd like to give both those seats to black Democrats, but that still won't align the panel to match the House membership.

Meanwhile, the arguments are spilling onto the House floor. When U.S. Department of Justice officials came to speak to lawmakers, concerns about the partisan divide were part of the discussion in the House. Changes to districts must get approval from the Justice Department to ensure compliance with the federal Voting Rights Act.

Thomas Perez, assistant U.S. attorney general for the Office of Civil Rights, said the Justice Department doesn't usually look at decisions about committee composition. Instead, he said the department considers whether the plans are free of discrimination. That's a point Tucker has raised repeatedly to argue the committee doesn't need to be evenly divided. Perez also told lawmakers to submit any information they think might be relevant to the department's decision — and several Democrats made it clear the committee makeup will be part of the information they'll be sending along.

In addition, Tucker's committee shuffling has raised the ire of the panel's chairman, Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston. "I'm concerned that a committee that I've been appointed chairman of has been turned upside down right under my nose and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it," Gallot said on the House floor.

In a heated exchange with the chairman he appointed, Tucker argued the lawmakers on the House and Governmental Affairs Committee are fair and smart, and that should be enough to address concerns.

And the census data to be used for redistricting isn't even complete. If there were any questions about whether the 2011 redistricting special session could avoid being marred by anger and mistrust, the debates of this session should have answered them.

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