

Redistricting revolutionary

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A neighbor who lives four doors away in the Garden District is running for the School Board. But I can't cast a ballot for this candidate.

He does yard work, chats with folks and plays with his children within sight of my house (but outside the presence of TV cameras and 20-somethings readily available to "spin" what he says.)

Despite the close proximity of our homes, I live in a different voting district. The lines were drawn a decade ago so that a handful of houses jut like a peninsula into another precinct. Consequently, a few homes on the south side of the street vote for different public officials on all levels.

I've teased state Rep. Steve Carter, a Republican, that he needs a laparoscope to find our little polyp in his district. State Rep. Michael Jackson, No Party-Baton Rouge, represents neighbors across and down the street.

The truth is neither legislator relies on this midcity neighborhood for his votes. Most of the population in Carter's 68th District is along either side of Perkins Road from midcity out roughly to the Country Club of Louisiana. Jackson's 61st District lies primarily on either side of North Foster Dri-

ve from midcity to Hollywood Street.

State Rep. Rick Gallot says he and the House committee he chairs want to address neighborhoods, like the Garden District, whose voices have been minimized by splitting voters on electoral maps.

"Unless there's some reason why that line is drawn," said the Ruston Democrat last week, "then I think the neighborhood should be whole."

Gallot's House Governmental Affairs Committee will play a major role in redrawing the lines from which Louisiana will elect local, state and federal officials for the next 10 years.

Redistricting is the reason why state races around the country this fall are more important than the far more publicized elections for federal office, say professional political experts, such as columnists like Lou Cannon, analysts like Stuart Rothenberg, and scholars like the University of Virginia's Larry J. Sabato. If their predictions prove accurate, and the Republi-

cans pick up a majority of the nation's governorships and the legislative assemblies, then the GOP would have power that far exceeds whoever wins November's congressional elections.

The experts point out that the decennial exercise to redraw district lines to match population shifts is controlled by those in power on a state level, officials who, to quote *The New York Times* last week, "often try to gerrymander districts to help themselves and their parties win more elections."

Louisiana doesn't start re-electing legislators until next year. While twice as many Louisiana voters are registered as Democrats as Republicans, Republicans win most federal and statewide elections. Party affiliation won't play as big a role in Louisiana's redistricting calculus as it will in other states, Gallot said.

The overriding element is the state's history of racism, which requires the U.S. Justice Department to approve any new electoral maps, he says. Federal civil rights lawyers want to ensure that black voters are not divided in such a way as to allow elected officials to ignore their wants, he says.

The electoral sea change on the state level is going unnoticed as the

nation's voters focus instead on the horse races for the U.S. Congress.

Sit in the audience, for instance, of a candidate forum for the 3rd Congressional District. The impact of Louisiana's budget problems on the area's economic health takes a backseat to debate over which candidate hates illegal immigrants more.

When Louisiana legislators convene again, they will have to balance spending with far less revenues than last year. Gov. Bobby Jindal already has promised to veto a budget that is balanced with more taxes, or presumably by postponing implementation of tax breaks passed during a more-flush time. That means some people in the Garden District are going to lose their state government jobs.

Carter generally backs the governor. Jackson's support is not as frequent.

This is why redistricting is important. Carter and Jackson will have far more say over who among their districts works — and who does not — than, say, the people sneaking into the United States.

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Political Horizons