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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

KATRINA'S POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS

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Now that the post Katrina clean up and rebuilding are underway, what are the political implications caused by the population disruptions throughout the Greater New Orleans area? Will the legislature consider reapportionment? Will the state lose a Congressman? Are statewide incumbents in trouble? Let's take a look.

There are presently legislative districts in New Orleans East, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines that are sparsely populated and may well be for some time. A number of legislative districts in Baton Rouge and Lafayette have doubled in recent weeks. What are the options?

State and federal laws require that all legislative and congressional districts be reapportioned "at least" once every 10 years. But the timeframe is not locked in the law. The legislature, in its wisdom, can reshuffle these districts at any time. Since it is becoming clearer that many residents of the flood ravaged area will never return, should a new reapportionment take place in the 2006 legislative session? Some legislators would like to see the powerbase in the legislature shift more towards Baton Rouge.

The problem with any such effort is getting accurate numbers. How do you put together a data base that makes sense? Traditionally, federal census figures are used; but the next census is not until 2011. Some states use voting lists. The trouble here is that thousands of evacuees are still registered in the impacted areas, even though they have moved permanently. It will take years for registrars of voters to clean up the records.

Until recently, Hawaii conducted its own census; but cost becomes a big factor. With the state and city begging for every dollar they can get, many will argue it's not worth the millions involved to complete a current Louisiana census. So the present hodge-podge of legislative districts will stay as is, at least for the present. But in six years, look for a major change in these same districts, favoring Baton Rouge, the north shore, and Acadiana.

How about Congressional districts? Same problem of accurate numbers here. Louisiana came close to losing a member of Congress when the

last census was conducted in 2001. Look for nothing to happen right away, but a big push is expected when new population figures become available, to eliminate the Second Congressional District presently held by Congressman Bill Jefferson. New Orleans will more than likely end up in a reconfigured district that will include St. Bernard, Plaquemines, and a portion of Jefferson Parishes.

Also look for a major effort from the Republican Congressional members in Louisiana to spread out more white voters in both the First District as well as the Third. Incumbent Congressman Charlie Melancon took his south Louisiana district by the skin of his teeth. A little gerrymandering could make his future re-election all the more difficult.

How about the statewide elected officials? There are some political prognosticators who think many of the traditional Democratic voters who have evacuated may never come back. Several current statewide elected officials lost a strong majority of parishes throughout the state in the last gubernatorial election, but still were elected because of overwhelming majorities rolled up in Orleans. So if many Democratic voters have moved from the New Orleans area elsewhere, doesn't that give a strong Republican candidate an edge? Maybe. But this assumes that both white and more conservative voters who also left the greater New Orleans area will be going back.

Living in Baton Rouge, I have been amazed at the number of successful business men and women who have said they will not return. They have leased office space long-term, and bought houses throughout the Baton Rouge area. So a strong white flight could also be taking place. It's too early to see if the voter balance is a washout. But there is still such a possibility.

The more immediate problem for statewide officials, both in Baton Rouge and in Washington, is how existing voters will judge their performance post-Katrina. These voters are, for the time being, mad at everyone, from the President to the Governor and on down the line.

Every statewide official, both in Washington and in Baton Rouge, has influence and authority over a number of aspects of the clean-up and rebuilding. Some have come away with egg on their faces and are under the gun to do more than just hold press conferences. You can bet numerous challengers in 2007 will make leadership during a time of crisis a major campaign issue.

.Judgment day begins next year with Congressional races and a special election for Secretary of State. And it is less than two years away

when qualifications begin for the gubernatorial race that includes all statewides based in Baton Rouge, With term limits forcing many legislators into retirement, and an angry electorate passing judgment, we could be on the verge of wiping the slate clean.

Any number of people can handle the day-in, day-out responsibilities of the state's major office holders. How these officials are judged in a crisis mode will determine who will still be around in years to come.

just wished Katrina had only hit the United Nations building, nothing else, just had flooded them out, and I wouldn't have rescued them." --[Bill O'Reilly](#), on his radio show.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at [Politicsla.com](#), and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus ready his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbornla.com>.

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