

A black House district pushed

Time is right, lawmakers say

By Chad Day, Charlie Frago

February 22, 2011

A heavily black, overwhelmingly Democratic district should be on the table when the Legislature redraws boundary lines in the state's four Congressional seats, say several prominent black lawmakers.

Lawmakers in charge of congressional redistricting say that crafting a majority-minority district would probably be impossible, but one that is about 40 percent black and includes some combination of the Delta, south Arkansas and Jefferson and Pulaski counties could be created.

Currently, blacks make up less than a quarter of the residents in each of the state's congressional districts.

It's time to give black residents - 15 percent of the state's population - more say at the ballot box, said state Rep. Darrin Williams, D-Little Rock.

"African-Americans have been the most loyal members of the Democratic Party," he said. "They should be listened to. They should be respected. And they should expect similar loyalty from the party." State Sen. Joyce Elliott, who lost the race for the 2nd Congressional District seat to Tim Griffin, a Republican, in November, said a safe Democratic seat should be seriously considered.

"Let's not forget that one already exists for Republicans. The 3rd District is a safe Republican seat; no such thing exists for Democrats," said Elliott, D-Little Rock.

Elliott's loss wasn't the only Democratic defeat. U.S. Rep. Rick Crawford defeated Democrat Chad Causey in the 1st District, accelerating a historic shift. Before November, the state's delegation had been three to one in Democrats' favor - now U.S. Rep. Mike Ross in the 4th District covering south Arkansas is the lone Democrat left in the House delegation.

U.S. Rep. Steve Womack won easily in the 3rd District to succeed John Boozman, who won a U.S. Senate seat. Republicans have held the congressional seat in the GOP stronghold of Northwest Arkansas since 1967.

The Legislator's Black Caucus hasn't discussed the matter formally yet, but opinion "is about as unanimous as it can be," said state Rep. Hank Wilkins IV, a Pine Bluff Democrat.

Wilkins pointed out that Arkansas is the only Southern state that has never elected a black candidate to Congress.

"I really think it's time for it to happen. Unfortunately, we haven't had a strong push from either party to make that happen. The time is right and I hope we'll have support from both Democratic and Republican parties. ... It's the right thing to do for Arkansas," Wilkins said.

Wilkins, like Elliott and Williams, is a member of the Black Caucus.

One powerful Republican, state Sen. Gilbert Baker of Conway, said he is open to the idea of a strongly black congressional district.

"I'm very interested in hearing from the Black Caucus on that. To be honest, I'd like to know their feelings. I've had very limited interaction with them on that. I'd be open, but I'd want to hear from them first, to hear those thoughts," said Baker, vice chairman of the Senate State Agencies and Governmental Affairs.

The Legislature has 15 black members out of 133 lawmakers.

Traditionally, sitting congressmen have played a major role in how district lines are drawn. Ross, the longest-serving member of the state's congressional delegation, easily coasted to a seventh-term in the sprawling 4th District in November.

Protecting his seat will be high on the list, say some Democrats.

"A key question will be Ross," said Jay Barth, a Hendrix College political scientist.

Ross could probably hold his seat even if the 4th District was changed to decrease its black population - currently at 24 percent - at least for one cycle, Barth said.

Ross is widely expected to run for governor in 2014.

Baker, the Senate Republican, said it would make the most sense to create a strongly black district by extending the 4th's present boundaries into the Delta counties of the 1st District.

Ross didn't return a phone call requesting comment.

Academic experts on redistricting say recently released census numbers show it's possible to create a near-majority black district if the state is willing to split county lines.

Arkansas, Iowa and West Virginia are the only states that draw congressional district lines to conform with county lines.

Baker said he is committed to splitting county lines to avoid a lawsuit and preserve the principle of "one person, one vote." Pearl Ford Dowe, an assistant professor of political science at the

University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, said the census figures show the current district lines marginalize the political influence of Arkansas' black population.

"I think we do have a situation of disenfranchisement within the congressional delegation," she said.

"There's not even a percentage that is significant enough to even influence not just the actual turnout but even the policy initiatives of the representatives," she said.

The 4th has the highest percentage of blacks at 24.2 percent. The 2nd is 21 percent black and the 1st is 16.5 percent black. The 3rd is just 2 percent black.

John Logan, a professor of sociology at Brown University in Providence, R.I., who studies levels of segregation nationwide, said Arkansas' congressional map lines show a tendency to balance out larger black populations with larger white populations.

"It's almost as though the intention had been to try to even out the congressional districts by race rather than to create a district that would have a predominantly or near-majority black population," he said.

For example, because the 2nd District includes the whole city of Little Rock, it "takes a very large share of the state's black population and places it in a district that won't be nearly majority black," he said.

Logan said he sees similar patterns in the 1st and 4th districts.

While it would be difficult to draw a black-majority district, Logan said, one that is nearly 40 percent black is possible if the state chooses not to adhere to county lines when redrawing.

"It looks like you can get 300,000 African-Americans into a district, but 350,000 is very tough," he said.

Each congressional district ideally would represent 728,979.5 people, or a quarter of the state's 2,915,918 population, when redistricting is complete.

"These are all political decisions, but the question is: What is the intention? And if the intention is to provide a more direct political representation to the black population and if that were the goal, there is a way to move in that direction," Logan said.

Hal Bass, a Ouachita Baptist University political scientist and Clark County election official, cautioned against betting on a wholesale revamp of district lines, observing that usually congressional maps change by "nibbles" rather than sweeping changes.

"Redistricting tends to be incremental rather than transformative," Bass said.

A computer glitch has slowed work on redrawing lines in the Legislature, but work should restart late this week, said state Rep. Clark Hall, D-Marvell, the chairman of the House State Agencies and Governmental Affairs committee.

Lots of competing interests, including "a few in D.C.," will want to have a say in the process, Hall said, but the map will be drawn by Arkansas lawmakers.

"We have to remember what we're doing is a five-election cycle, not a one-election cycle," Hall said Monday. "The well-being of the state is what we have to be interested in, not what somebody's own personal ego may have today."