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KATRINA'S AFTERMATH

Political Landscape May Shift on Displaced Voters

■ The party makeup of districts in Louisiana may hinge on which evacuees return or are able to cast absentee ballots, experts say.

By Johanna Neuman and Richard B. Schmitt, Times Staff Writers

WASHINGTON — Government officials and legal experts have begun wrestling with an intriguing question posed by the evacuation of New Orleans: What happens to the politics of a region when a significant part of the electorate suddenly disappears?

The migration of hundreds of thousands of people from this urban center, many of them low-income and black, could have a dramatic effect on the political makeup of a state delicately balanced between the two major parties. If most of the evacuees choose not to return, Katrina's political legacy could be that it made Louisiana a more Republican state.

How Katrina may have rewritten the political map of New Orleans and of Louisiana is just one of many questions the Gulf states are pondering in the aftermath of a natural disaster of such scope that it may have permanently altered the region's demographics and economy.

Civil rights groups are focused on keeping track of Louisiana's displaced black voters and on ensuring that they can continue to vote in the districts they left behind until they make a decision to permanently resettle elsewhere.

Ernest Johnson, head of the Louisiana NAACP, called Friday for Congress to pass emergency legislation to extend special protections of the Voting Rights Act that expire in 2007. The law is meant to ensure access to the polls for black voters.

Johnson says the hurricane has potentially disenfranchised 1.5 million voters, many of them black.

"A lot of voters have been displaced, and they could be out of their voting jurisdiction, with toxins in the water, for a year or more," Johnson said. The expiring provision of the law requires jurisdictions in 15 states to clear changes in election laws with the Justice Department to ensure the changes do not disadvantage minority groups.

"We were going to fight for the extension anyway. Now, we want to move up the debate, to talk about this in 2005 instead of 2007, so we do not have to worry," Johnson said. The provision, he said, would protect voters as precincts are moved and absentee ballots are mailed.

It is still impossible to know how many evacuees will choose to make new homes outside the Gulf Coast and how many will return to rebuild. In a briefing Thursday to a Senate oversight committee, a senior Federal Emergency Management Agency official said the agency thought it would need to find at least temporary housing for 450,000 families.

More than half of the New Orleans evacuees initially landed in solidly Republican Texas. Their presence is expected to trigger no immediate political change in the Republican stronghold. But if enough choose to stay, they could accelerate the growing minority influence in the state, where whites recently lost their majority status, said Charlie Cook, an independent political analyst and, as a Shreveport native, a lifelong student of Louisiana politics.

"Other than the Oakies leaving the Dust Bowl, I can't think of any other time in American history where this many people have just up and moved," he said. "We're all starting to wonder what the long-term political consequences

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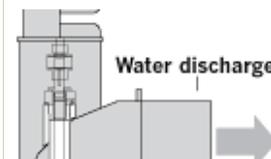


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will be in terms of demographics and voting trends."

Unlike the migration of Oklahomans during the Great Depression, which lasted for years, this shift of population — whose consequences could be lasting — occurred over a few days.

One immediate casualty may be Louisiana's unusual political culture.

In the jargon of political consultants, Louisiana is a "pink state." After voting twice for President Clinton, the state voted twice for President George W. Bush. It recently elected its first Republican U.S. senator since Reconstruction — David Vitter.

But unlike its solid red-state Republican neighbors, in Louisiana social and cultural issues have been less important, Cook said. The state's particular blend of cultures — which includes the mix of French Canadians, Spaniards and Creoles who settled its southern region — distinguishes it from Mississippi and Alabama. Its sizable Catholic population has resisted the evangelical agenda that resonates with much of the South. Louisianans tend to concentrate on economic issues, Cook said.

New Orleans was the hub of that political culture, which was heavily African American and Democratic. What no one knows is what the city will be if and when it is rebuilt.

"Those who landed in Rhode Island or Utah, I doubt will stay," and may well head back to their hometown, Cook said. "But those in Baton Rouge, Shreveport, Dallas or Houston are more likely to stay because it is not such an alien culture. And of those who come back, what will the mix be? More African Americans? More whites? You could argue either way."

Johnson, the Louisiana NAACP leader, said he was hoping that evacuees, once relocated, would contact their local National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People chapters so that the Louisiana branch could reestablish contact.

"The thing I'm worried about is getting New Orleans people back to New Orleans," he said.

Legal and political experts said that if enough evacuees chose not to return, the state Legislature, which has the authority to redraw congressional districts, could take that step — a move that could realign power in Louisiana. Any redistricting, however, would be subject to Justice Department approval and would undoubtedly face a court fight.

"There could no doubt be party advantage associated with it," Richard Engstrom, a voting rights expert at the University of New Orleans, said of the storm. "If you could reduce the amount of representation of the city of New Orleans, certainly in the state Legislature, that could create more Republican seats in the suburbs."

For now, not many in Washington are eager to talk about questions that sound the slightest bit partisan. Most are fearful that it would look unseemly to talk politics while their constituents are without food, electricity, clothing, housing and even the comfort of their families.

But political upheaval is already the second wave of Katrina's destruction. Rep. William J. Jefferson (D-La.), whose district, which includes New Orleans, was virtually leveled by the hurricane and floods, now has constituents living in other states.

"If Orleans Parish completely empties out and a lot of people don't move back — poor people especially — then the population of his district will go down, and [there will be] a disproportionate loss of black population," said Edward

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Still, a lawyer in Birmingham, Ala., who specializes in voting rights. "Poor people who don't own any property are less likely to come back. If every person who left and didn't come back was black, he could lose 230,000 from his district."

In Jefferson's 2nd District, which is more than 60% black, that would represent a loss of about one-third of the population.

Such a drop in black voters could inspire a challenge from a white candidate, Still said.

Steven J. Mulroy, a professor at University of Memphis law school, said displaced New Orleans voters should be permitted to cast absentee ballots as long as they continued to consider the city their home.

The Justice Department would have to approve any changes state and local officials made in election procedures that might make voting more difficult, such as moving the location of polling places or attaching new requirements on the timing for filing absentee ballots, said Mulroy, who once was a lawyer in the department's voting rights section.

But some civil rights groups say the Justice Department in recent years has permitted changes in local rules that have hurt minority voters. They worry that the trend does not bode well for the New Orleans electorate.

For instance, with the Justice Department's blessing, some states have adopted stricter voter identification procedures, ostensibly to weed out fraud at the polls. But studies have shown that such laws sometimes prevent minority voters — who are less likely to have proper identification — from voting.

"The modern trend in this country is to make it more difficult to vote," said Laughlin McDonald, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union voting rights project. "If people insist on taking that stand [in Louisiana], then a lot of these folks are not going to be allowed to vote."

The many unanswered questions, some academics said, illustrate how disaster planners have given surprisingly little thought to how the exercise of such a fundamental right might be affected in emergencies.

"The issue about how to hold elections after a catastrophe is one the country is only starting to grapple with," said Richard Hasen, an elections-law expert at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles.

Although the focus of the relief effort is for now necessarily on preserving life, Hasen said, "at some point, we have to think about the democratic processes and making sure the people who live there are adequately represented."

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Times staff writer Fay Fiore contributed to this report.

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