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North Texas set to gain Hispanic district

by Chris Luna

The U.S. Census Bureau released population estimates last month, confirming that Texas continues to grow at a fast rate. In fact, Texas gained more residents – 483,542 – than any other state from July 1, 2007, to July 1, 2008. This growth allowed Texas to claim title to the third-fastest growth percentage, behind only Utah and Arizona.

Equally important is the demographic makeup of that growth. Nationwide, the number of Hispanics rose by 1.4 million over the period to be the fastest-growing minority group. Texas accounted for the largest numerical increase in the total number of Hispanics, ahead of both California and Florida.

So what does this mean to the Lone Star State and North Texas? Simple: More congressional seats.

According to a report by the political consulting firm Election Data Services Inc., the increasing number of Texans will give our state the fastest-growing delegation in Congress. If congressional seats were awarded based on the 2008 census estimates, Texas would gain three U.S. House seats. If you consider the population projections through 2010, Texas would gain four.

Two of the state's fastest-growing areas, in general and with respect to Hispanics, are Dallas and Houston. In all likelihood, each of those areas will pick up a new congressional seat after the 2010 census. And the responsibility to draw the new boundaries again will fall to the Texas Legislature.

One political scientist has already said that if Republicans maintain control of both houses in Austin after the 2010 elections, their smartest move would be to maintain Republican incumbent districts while creating new seats in growing Hispanic areas, including the Houston and Dallas areas.

As a result of this explosive growth, the population in Texas congressional districts will increase from about 650,000 to 700,000. The Texas State Data Center and Office of the State Demographer estimate that as of July 2007, there were more than 919,000 Hispanics in Dallas County and more than 450,000 Hispanics in Tarrant County.

Based on these figures, it should be relatively easy to create a compact congressional district in North Texas with a majority-Hispanic-citizen voting-age population.

And we should learn from the past. In 2006, it was the redistricting of a Hispanic congressional district that resulted in the Supreme Court concluding that the redrawn district weakened the voting strength of Hispanics. In that case, the Texas Legislature had approved a redistricting plan that diluted Hispanic voting strength in the 23rd Congressional District from more than 57 percent of the voting age population to just 46 percent.

In LULAC vs. Perry, the Supreme Court determined that such action in creating the "new" 23rd District violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Additionally, any redistricting plan adopted by a Republican-controlled Texas Legislature that attempts to dilute Hispanic voting would likely not receive pre-clearance approval by a re-invigorated civil rights division in an Obama Justice Department.

Texas is poised to be the biggest winner after the 2010 census and the ensuing congressional reapportionment. As the Texas Legislature prepares to meet in Austin tomorrow, lawmakers need to begin planning for the best way to create a congressional district with Hispanic opportunities in North Texas.

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