

Democrats oppose new congressional map

Minority voters at center of redistricting fight

By John Fritze and Annie Linskey, The Baltimore Sun
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A chorus of Democratic officials concerned about minority voters in the Washington suburbs said Tuesday that they oppose the new congressional districts proposed by Gov. Martin O'Malley's redistricting commission, setting up a key battle as the General Assembly prepares to take up the issue.

Led by Rep. Donna F. Edwards, the African-American congresswoman from Prince George's County, the downstate Democrats say the proposed districts do not reflect the recent growth of black and Hispanic communities, particularly in Montgomery County.

See more topics »The map "is extremely problematic from a voting-rights standpoint," Edwards said in an interview.

At a news conference in Rockville, nearly two dozen local elected officials, state lawmakers and church leaders said the proposed map would dilute minority voting power by splitting black, Asian and Hispanic communities in their county into three districts. Minorities would represent a smaller percentage of voters, even though their population has grown.

Opposition to the plan has simmered quietly for more than a week, but Tuesday marked the first time that the Democrats who control Annapolis came under fire publicly from members of their own party.

While they said they want to work with O'Malley before the General Assembly meets next week to approve a map, the critics were also preparing to try to alter the proposal during the special session. If that doesn't work, they threatened to challenge the plan in court.

Minority voting rights, which are protected by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, are at the heart of most federal court challenges over redistricting.

Critics pointed out Tuesday that under the proposal, Edwards' district would no longer include Montgomery County; if incumbent members of Congress win re-election, Montgomery would not have minority representation on Capitol Hill.

But O'Malley administration officials note that the proposed congressional boundaries — which must be redrawn once a decade — maintain the state's two majority-black districts, one represented by Edwards and the other by Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Baltimore Democrat. Moreover, they say, the map opens the possibility of a third minority district, now represented by Democratic Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, as African-Americans continue to move to Southern Maryland.

Joseph C. Bryce, O'Malley's top legislative aide, said the proposed map should be viewed in a statewide context. For instance, he noted that some blacks in Anne Arundel County previously represented by a white member of Congress would now be represented by Edwards.

"We've always been mindful of protecting the interest of minority communities," he said.

And despite a growing number of elected officials raising concerns, black officials were not unified in opposition to the map. Several black leaders emerged Tuesday to say they support the efforts O'Malley made to ensure that minorities would have a voice in Washington.

"The governor did a very good job with regard to Baltimore," said Cummings, who said his district would become one of the strongest African-American seats in the country. Cummings said O'Malley listened to the concerns raised by black lawmakers in Annapolis and "that's evident in the map."

Del. Dereck E. Davis, a Prince George's County Democrat, said he is concerned that the elected officials criticizing the redrawn districts are "too caught up with incumbents and making sure their election is as easy as possible."

Davis, who is black and a member of State House leadership, said Democrats should keep their eye on the larger picture: electing more progressive voices to the House of Representatives.

That is ultimately a goal of the proposed map, which would squeeze more Democrats into the Western Maryland district held by Republican Rep. Roscoe G. Bartlett. Redrawing his district into Montgomery County makes it likely that the 10-term lawmaker would face a competitive election

in 2012 for the first time in years.

Noting that Republican-led legislatures across the country are attempting to eke out gains for the GOP, Montgomery County officials who oppose the new map said they do not begrudge the attempt to target Bartlett. But they said protecting minority voting rights should be the first priority.

The proposal, "simply ignores the most important and fundamental demographic changes that have taken place in Maryland over the last 10 years," said Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez, a Montgomery County Democrat. Minority voters, she said, "have a right to more equitable representation."

Some officials at the news conference raised the specter of a lawsuit if the proposed districts are not altered. Elbridge James, political director of the Maryland chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said his group might take action if leaders feel black voters are being disenfranchised.

James said he and other minority-rights advocates will meet with O'Malley on Wednesday.

The more immediate fight, however, will take place during next week's special session in Annapolis. Edwards and others said they are lobbying members of the Legislative Black Caucus. But state Sen. Catherine E. Pugh, chairwoman of the caucus, said the group has not taken a position on the map.

Pugh, a Baltimore Democrat, said the group's executive director is reaching out to members to informally gauge their opinions. The group will meet Saturday in Annapolis to vote on the map and determine whether they will offer amendments.

The caucus has 34 members in the House of Delegates and nine in the Senate.

Unlike most legislation, whatever redistricting measure O'Malley ultimately submits must be approved by an "extraordinary majority," or three-fifths of the members in each house, because it will be introduced as an emergency bill. The procedural move allows it to become law the day O'Malley signs it.

The higher threshold means the bill can pass in the House if 13 Democrats vote against it — assuming that all Republicans also reject it. In the Senate, the plan can lose six Democratic votes.

At least one reliable supporter — Sen. Ulysses Currie, a Prince George's Democrat — is not likely to be present for the vote because he is on trial in Baltimore on corruption charges.

Edwards, who met with O'Malley on Monday, said she believes that state lawmakers could accomplish both goals — targeting Bartlett and protecting minority voters — by making a few subtle changes.

She suggested that Bartlett's district would remain competitive if it included portions of northern Montgomery County and Democratic-leaning areas of Frederick County, a shift she said would enable her to continue to maintain a foothold in Montgomery.

"The governor has the power to satisfy what I think are Democratic values in honoring minority voters and also the political goals" of increasing the number of Democrats in the delegation, Edwards said. "I would like us to not do something that would undermine or dilute the interest of minority voters."