

John Maginnis

April 30 2008

Democrats Brace for November Revolt

The state Democratic Party's hopes this fall of winning two congressional seats long held by Republicans could be dashed by a potential crippling revolt within its base.

If Barack Obama wins the presidential nomination, Democratic candidates in Louisiana and other states could be swept into office by a massive African-American turnout. Yet some black legislators here have their own ideas about who should ride Sen. Obama's wave.

Sen. Lydia Jackson of Shreveport, in the 4th District, and Rep. Michael Jackson of Baton Rouge, in the 6th District, say they are considering running for Congress in the fall as independents. As such, they would go directly onto the November ballot without having to survive one or two Democratic primaries against better-funded white candidates.

Democrats in the 7th Congressional District haven't found a challenger to Congressman Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, and might not if Sen. Don Cravins Jr., D-Opelousas, also goes the independent route. "We're just thinking about it," he said. "but it kind of makes sense."

African-American voters comprise 31 percent of the 4th District, 30 percent of the 6th and 24 percent of the 7th.

The damaging effects on Democrats might be felt as early as in this Saturday's special election in the 6th District.

Michael Jackson, who lost in the Democratic runoff, is running television commercials not to endorse his party's nominee Don Cazayoux but to declare to supporters that he is running again in the fall. He told me he intends to seek the full term whether or not Cazayoux wins the special election, which is less likely without a strong black vote that Jackson is doing nothing to encourage.

Jackson sees little point in running again as a Democrat, since local and Washington contributors overwhelmingly favored Cazayoux in the primary and the runoff.

"Why endure the primary process when they (white candidates) have the advantage?" he said. "Why not make it one run?"

Cravins, who saw his father fail to get established Democratic support in a 2004 congressional race, sees little point in trying to do the same. If he can't get the financial and organizational support of Washington Democrats, said Cravins, "Then I don't need their political baggage, because I'm pro-life and pro-gun."

What so threatens the historic alliance within the state Democratic Party is a law passed last year that was supposed to strengthen both major parties. The return to party primaries for federal elections only was designed to make it easier for Democrats and Republicans to settle on consensus candidates before facing each other in the general election. But the new law also

offered a short cut for independents to qualify directly for the general election.

Combined with the independent candidate strategy, Obama's candidacy offers an historic opportunity for higher office that black politicians realistically have not had before and might not get again for awhile.

They are not alone in seeing the possibilities. Republicans are pinching themselves at the prospect of a Democratic split handing victory to them, even with less than 50 percent of the vote. There will be no runoff after the general election in November, even if no one wins a majority.

The legislators acknowledge that their candidacies could cause the Democrats to lose elections that could otherwise be won. They see that as no less fair than their ambitions being limited by their skin color.

Democratic leaders would point to Obama's success as proof that qualified African-Americans can succeed in party primaries. But, lately, he has struggled to win over blue-collar and rural white voters from Sen. Hillary Clinton. Exit polling in the Pennsylvania primary showed that voting along racial lines is not confined to the South.

And Louisiana's black independent movement might not be confined to the House. If Democrats in the 4th and 6th fail to win seats long held by Republicans, nothing is lost. But in the upcoming U.S. Senate race, it would be far more serious for Sen. Mary Landrieu should former state Sen. Cleo Fields or some other well-known African-American chooses to qualify as an independent.

The potential Democratic nightmare could be an unintended consequence of the return to party primaries. Or maybe not. After all, Cleo wrote the law.