



THE VIEW

Issue #12

June 15, 2009

SUMMER ENTERTAINMENT: A LOOK AT THE CENSUS NUMBERS

BY

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What does one do at an institute of government when the hot hazy days of summer arrive?

In addition to attending a variety of educational meetings one might liven things up by looking at numbers. Perhaps this is why government institute types pick up pejorative labels like “policy wonk” or “bean counters”. If one is inclined to look down the road only a few short months an examination of the projected census numbers do indeed have a bearing on the current political climate in Mississippi and more importantly how that picture is destined to change significantly. Of immediate concern are the changes that will come to the makeup of the Mississippi Legislature. As far as reapportionment of Congress is concerned, we appear to be safe for 2010. However, if current trends continue Mississippi may be faced with the loss of yet another congressional seat by 2020.

As has been discussed in this space before, redistricting of the Mississippi Legislature has been, until the most recent decennial censuses, a fairly docile exercise. Each house would put together its plan and with the expected amount of grousing swap it with the other house for approval of resolutions redrawing the lines of the Senate and House districts. This is done by resolution. Thus, the Governor has no veto power over the plans. This approach was carried out with a minimum of rancor back in the days when the governor was a Democrat and the overwhelming majority of the House and Senate were also Democrats. One need only observe the current budget standoff to understand that Mississippi is now thoroughly a two-party state. The fact that the Senate tends toward the Republican agenda and the Democratic approach holds serve in the House puts a premium on how those two ends of the capital are organized. There are certain principles based on the tale of the numbers that are for the most part set in concrete.

By census time the population in Mississippi should be right at 3,000,000. This would mean that based on established laws that require virtually equal districts a district for the election of a member of the Mississippi House must have just short of 25,000 in population. That figure for a Senate seat would be just over 57,000. Census projections have recently appeared for the 2008 leading up to the actual count for 2010.

What do they tell us about the political fight down the road? First of all, the projections have the population of Mississippi growing at a 3.3% rate since the 2000 census as compared to a 8.0% clip for the nation as a whole. There will be more about that on another day. When examining the data that will impact the makeup of the legislature there are some revealing shifts. A total of 39 counties in Mississippi stand to lose population if the census projections are accurate. A look at the biggest gainers and the biggest losers is quite instructive. All of the top 10 biggest losers percentage-wise are either Mississippi Delta counties or counties farther south along the Mississippi River. They range from a 27.1% decrease in Issaquena County to an 8.8% loss in Adams County. These counties have the highest African-American population in the state and the highest concentration of Democratic legislators in Jackson.

On the flip side, the counties that are the seven largest gainers are mirror opposites of the loser counties. Three of the top four, DeSoto, Madison, and Rankin are consistently the most Republican leaning counties in Mississippi and that would be as expected since these are typical Republican strongholds as the more affluent suburban areas around larger cities. Lamar County is the other county in the top 4, and it also has characteristics similar to the others as a suburb of the rapidly growing Hattiesburg area. Interestingly, the remaining three counties in the 2008 high growth projected counties are Pearl River, Stone, and George which have seen tremendous growth since Hurricane Katrina. Many of the remaining counties that have lost population are the more rural counties in Mississippi.

So, at this point, what do these numbers mean? First the lines are already being drawn in the battle of the respective parties to save seats for the partisan debates ahead. The Democrats by virtue of their majority position should have somewhat the upper hand, at least as far as the House is concerned. But the census numbers are clearly working against the Democrats on their home turf. The 44% population increase in DeSoto County makes it the 32nd fastest growing county in the nation, and in Mississippi that is seemingly a big gain for the Republicans. Thus, as things currently appear the numbers alone would portend a shift in several districts from Democratic leaning to Republican leaning. But there are many options for reconfiguration that could minimize Republican gains or minimize Democratic losses depending on your point of view. If the current philosophical battles over the budget are any indication, the war to come over the partisan makeup of the legislature for the decade of 2011 to 2021 will be one for the ages.



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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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