

NATIONAL

Voters Challenge State Redistricting Plan for Black Majorities

RALEIGH (AP) — States that drew new congressional districts before the 1992 elections to help give minorities more voting power will be watching a lawsuit challenging such districts in North Carolina.

A group of white voters is asking a panel of federal judges to throw out North Carolina's redistricting plan, which created two districts containing black majorities. Testimony begins today.

"It's immaterial if North Carolina winds up with 12 black congressmen," Duke law professor Robinson Everett, who's leading the challenge, said last week. "All we're asking is that it be done in a constitutional way."

If Everett's group succeeds, the entire map outlining North Carolina's congressional districts may have to be redrawn.

The decision also could jeopardize so-called "majority-minority" districts in other states, where about two dozen new districts were drawn prior to the elections to create black or Hispanic majorities.

Everett said a quota system should not be used to draw congressional districts because it spawns "a race-classified electoral process."

"A quota system works

against everybody, white or black," he said in a telephone interview last week.

"It works against the whites in the 12th and 1st districts and the blacks in the other 10 districts," he said. "It creates districts where voters are polarized on the basis of race."

An attorney for the state acknowledged that the districts aren't pretty, but serve the interests of the black majorities that live in them.

"Beauty is only skin deep," said Eddie Speas, an assistant attorney general. "Rather than the visual appearance, the focus ought to be on who we have in the district and what interests they might have."

Voters in the 12th District, which stretches through several Piedmont cities, have urban interests, while residents of the 1st District in eastern North Carolina are concerned with rural issues, he said.

The current map was drawn after the 1990 census, which allowed North Carolina to increase its congressional delegation from 11 to 12 seats in the House.

The General Assembly first drew a plan that included one black-majority district. But the U.S. Jus-

tice Department rejected it, saying the state's 22 percent black population lacked proper representation.

The Justice Department must approve changes under the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

State lawmakers redrew the map, and with the Justice Department's approval, created two black-majority districts.

In November 1992, Eva Clayton and Mel Watt were elected from those districts to become the first blacks representing North Carolina in Congress since the Reconstruction period near the turn of the century.

The white voters from Durham filed their lawsuit in March 1992, saying the redistricting plan amounted to unlawful "racial gerrymandering."

It was thrown out in a lower court and then reinstated last year by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"Racial classifications of any sort pose the risk of lasting harm to our society," Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote for the court. "Racial gerrymandering, even for remedial purposes... demands close judicial scrutiny."

The decision appeared to state close scrutiny should be applied by

courts when the districts drawn are "so bizarre" they appear to be "unexplainable on grounds other than race."

The 12th District stretches 160 miles from Gastonia to Durham, hugging the thin line of Interstate 85. At one point, the district is so narrow that drivers in the northbound lanes are in the 12th District, while drivers in the southbound lanes are in the 6th District.

Speas argues that the state merely followed the charge of the Justice Department.

"The federal law requires that race be taken into account," he said. "Our position is that taking federal law into account is not a violation of federal law."

Watt said Everett is trying to live in the past.

"My position is that minorities have not been able to be elected — because of the racially polarized history of elections — in 90 years," he said. "Anybody who would suggest that that kind of tradition is more important than democratic representation doesn't understand the principles on which democracy is based."

Both sides have strong supporters. The state Republican Party

has joined Everett's group in the lawsuit, saying that redistricting was designed to protect incumbent Democrats as well as elect minority candidates.

The Justice Department and the NAACP are supporting the state.

Both sides agree on at least one thing — whoever loses will appeal, which means it may be up to the Supreme Court.

The trial is expected to last about a week.

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Wrong Raid Leads to Death of Retired Minister

BOSTON (AP) — The city's police commissioner apologized for a bungled drug raid that led to the death of a retired minister.

But that might not be enough to satisfy the family of the Rev. Accelyne Williams, who suffered a heart attack after he was handcuffed by officers raiding the wrong apartment Friday.

"The family is going to be looking for much more than an apology," said John Drewery, the family's lawyer.

A 13-member police SWAT team burst into Williams' second-floor apartment, toting rifles and wearing bulletproof vests and shields. Police now say they were looking for an apartment on the third floor of the building.

Officers chased Williams into a bedroom and handcuffed him. Williams struggled, then collapsed. Preliminary autopsy results Saturday said he died of heart failure.

Police Commissioner Paul Evans apologized publicly about Williams' death. On Sunday, he and Mayor Thomas Menino quietly attended services at a Baptist church in the area.

"We wanted to be out in the community and putting the healing process in place," Menino said after the service at Dorchester Temple Baptist Church. "A mistake was

made and we're going to heal those mistakes."

Menino backed Evans' decision to apologize to the victim's relatives, even though it could strip the city of any legal defense in the case of a wrongful death lawsuit by Williams' family.

"He pledged when he was wrong, he will admit it," Menino said. "That's the sign of a true leader."

Drewery would not say whether Williams' widow, Mary, had decided to sue.

The Rev. Bruce Wall, a pas-

tor at the church, said Menino and Evans had asked to attend. He told them they would be welcome as long as they were not accompanied by television crews.

"This is the first time I've ever seen a mayor and police commissioner come out front and apologize," said Wall.

NAACP's Benjamin Chavis Daughter Dies

DURHAM (AP) — Natalie Michele Chavis, daughter of NAACP executive director Benjamin Chavis, died Monday after a prolonged battle with liver disease.

Ms. Chavis, who was 26, died at Duke University Hospital. She was the eldest of six children.

Funeral services are scheduled for today at 1 p.m. at St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church in Oxford. Burial will follow in the Chavis family cemetery in Oxford.

In lieu of flowers, contributions can be sent to the Natalie Michele Chavis Scholarship Fund for Youths, in care of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's national office in Baltimore.

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