

## New Jersey's parties both fall short on blacks, Latinos

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By **Tom Moran/ The Star-Ledger**

Republicans in New Jersey don't have a single African-American or Latino in the state Legislature. Their governor has none in his inner circle and he has removed the only African-American from the state Supreme Court.

On the whole, their record on minority representation is somewhere between bad and awful.

But every 10 years, they wake up — as dependably as the cicada emerging from its long hibernation. Suddenly, they care.

The reason is simple: Every decade, the political map is redrawn based on new census data. And every decade, Republicans try to concentrate minority voters into as few districts as possible, typically in urban areas.

They say their intention is noble, to ensure that blacks and Latinos finally win more seats.

But it has the effect of “bleaching” the nearby suburban swing districts, leaving them whiter than ever, and giving Republicans a boost in the fight for control of the Legislature.

The beauty is that some Latinos and African-Americans support this strategy because they believe it gives their candidates a better shot to win seats.

“To provide opportunities for Latinos, we have to create some majority Latino districts,” says Martin Perez of the Latino Leadership Alliance.

But let's not just pick on Republicans. Because the Democratic machines that control the slate of candidates are mostly controlled by white men who have a keen affinity for their own kind as well.

Take Camden. When the African-American senator representing Camden resigned last year, the South Jersey machine boss George Norcross knew just what to do: He put his brother, Donald, in the seat.

And when a seat opened in District 36 in North Jersey, which is nearly half minority, the bosses chose Kevin Ryan, a white man, to join the other two white men who represent the district.

“We thought about the most qualified person from Essex County,” says County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo Jr.

In the Senate, several cities with big minority populations are represented by white Democrats, like Ray Lesniak in Elizabeth and John Girgenti in Paterson.



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Alan Rosenthal, professor of public policy at the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers University, talks about the legislative redistricting commission.

"When I first was elected, the district was mostly white," Lesniak says. "What am I supposed to do, tell voters to stop voting for me?"

When these senators are replaced, chances are good they will be replaced by blacks or Latinos. They are dinosaurs, and as a matter of evolution, they will die off.

On the whole, Democrats are light years ahead of Republicans. One in three of their state legislators is black or Latino, and they can reasonably defend the Norcross and Ryan appointments.

Norcross is the senator, but his Assembly running mates are black and Latino. And while the District 36 slate is all-white, the rest of Essex County's delegation has a healthy racial mix.

Still, 10 years ago, Democrats won the fight over the political map and spread minority voters out into suburban districts. They predicted that minorities would advance, and that simply hasn't happened.

Blacks hold 12 percent of the legislative seats, close to their 14 percent of the state's population. But Latinos hold just 6 percent of the seats, despite being 18 percent of the population.

"Both sides have to do better," says Republican Bill Palatucci, a confidante of the governor who is leading this fight over the map. "Since Gov. Kean left office, my party's record on diversity is nothing to write home about. I'm not saying we're 100 percent right. But neither are they."

The job of sorting this out will fall to Rutgers professor Alan Rosenthal, who was a consensus choice. He is trying to nudge the two sides together before his April 3 deadline. But if history is any guide, he will have to make the final call himself.

Republicans are asking for bigger changes, according to several sources. They want to build five districts in which either Latinos or African-Americans make up a majority. And they take every chance to put two Democrats in the same district, forcing a death fight among incumbents.

If they get their way, Gov. Chris Christie might get a chance to throw off the Democratic shackles and govern as he sees fit, with an obedient Legislature of his own party.

So watch this one closely. Because if that happens, the past year in New Jersey may be remembered only as Christie's warm-up act. *Tom Moran may be reached at [tmoran@starledger.com](mailto:tmoran@starledger.com) or (973) 392-5728.*

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