

[Lawsuits coming over voting districts](#) (Charlotte Observer – November 3, 2011)

By Jim Morrill

The latest in a long history of legal battles over North Carolina voting districts starts today with the first of two legal challenges to the state's new voting plans. A group of Democratic activists, including some from Mecklenburg County, is expected to file suit today in Wake County Superior Court. A coalition of groups including the NAACP and the N.C. League of Women Voters plans to file Friday. The suits come on the heels of the U.S. Justice Department's approval of the plans that redraw legislative and congressional voting districts for the next decade. The districts were the first in a century drawn by a Republican-controlled legislature. Most analysts say they give the GOP an electoral edge. North Carolina has fought legal battles over voting districts since 1981. Several cases have wound up in the U.S. Supreme Court. At one point, no congressional district in the country had been litigated as much as the 12th District, represented by Charlotte Democrat **Mel Watt**. Republicans also are confident of beating back the latest challenges. "They have a very high hurdle to (leap)," said Rep. David Lewis, a Harnett County Republican who chaired the House redistricting committee. "If the lawsuits are at all like the debate and some of the inflammatory rhetoric that's been falsely lobbed at the plans, I don't think they will get very far." Republicans say Tuesday's federal approval validates their claim that the districts are fair and legal. It also puts Democrats in the unusual position of opposing plans sanctioned by the Obama administration. Today's suit is expected to focus on issues such as split precincts and counties. Democrats say 1.8 million North Carolinians live in precincts split between districts in the state House plan; an additional 1.3 million in the Senate plan. They're expected to argue the 49 counties split under the House plan run afoul of judicial interpretations of the state constitution. They'll also argue that new districts violate "communities of interest," one benchmark of redistricting. Dottie Coplon lives in southeast Charlotte, not far from Union County. Next year she and her neighbors will find themselves in the same Senate district with people in the far north corner of Mecklenburg County. She'll be one of the Democratic plaintiffs in today's suit. "I don't know what this area really has in common with Davidson and Lake Norman," she said. Even Democratic U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan weighed in. "The North Carolina General Assembly is overreaching," she said in a statement. "This latest flight from moderation should trouble North Carolinians of all political persuasions." State Democratic Chair David Parker said by approving the plans under the Voting Rights Act, the Justice Department looked at the "fairly narrow question" of protecting minority voting strength, not at other issues governed by the state constitution. Despite the Justice Department's action, state NAACP President William Barber said GOP mapmakers and their consultants "cut out the heart of black political power." He's part of a lawsuit organized by the Southern Coalition for Social Justice. Another party to that suit is the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Lewis said critics are misguided. "The Voting Rights Act was designed to protect the

rights of minorities, not to guarantee continued Democratic control of the state legislature," he said. "I'm sure the courts are going to see it in the way it was intended to be, that we've drawn maps that protect the rights of minority voters."