

Just before 2011, the House GOP had gone seven years without a single black member. Soon, it could have three.

Michael Williams, a former Texas railroad commissioner who worked in the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, recently dropped his Senate bid to run for a newly created congressional district based in Arlington. The Texas redistricting map is not yet finalized, as it awaits approval from the Justice Department, and Williams faces a fierce nominating contest against former Texas Secretary of State Roger Williams in what party insiders are handicapping as one of the most competitive congressional primaries in the country.

"It's going to be very competitive," said Mike Baselice, a longtime Texas GOP pollster. "You've got two very active candidates who got themselves out in front of voters while they were still running for U.S. Senate. They both have good Republican credentials, and they both have a good [fundraising] start. What remains to be seen is how they'll differentiate their candidacies for the voters."

But if he emerges, the GOP-friendly seat should be his for the taking.

Last year, Reps. Tim Scott (R-S.C.) and Allen West (R-Fla.) won congressional seats, becoming the first black Republicans in Congress since 2003. If Michael Williams wins and West survives what is sure to be a tough Democratic challenge, there will be more black Republicans in the House than at any time since Reconstruction. Almost all of the rising black political figures play down the issue of race, but they've proven handy messengers for their party against a black president, inoculating the GOP from some of the charges of racism that marred the early days of the tea party movement. Witness Michael Steele's rise to become the first black chairman of the Republican National Committee, Scott's quick ascension to the ranks of caucus leadership and the bull market for black media personalities with harsh words for Obama.

"They've always been there," Steele said of the party's black rank and file. "Every election cycle, they're the go-to in trying to show the party's diversity, whether as candidates or activists. But now, with an African-American president, they tend to get more attention."

Republican Party strategists have sought to frame the uptick in black candidates as a natural result of black voters moving beyond civil rights issues. But black voters still back Democrats in overwhelming numbers. Black Republicans who have been successful have done so in largely white districts — both Scott and West represent constituencies that are about 75 percent white. And efforts at black recruitment have almost always involved finding prominent black conservatives in dark-red districts packed with white voters. The new Texas district is more diverse, with white voters making up about 54 percent.

The real political value of more black representation in the party comes in terms of making the case against the first black president.

"It's a more fair dialogue to have," said Joe Watkins, a longtime political strategist who worked in the first Bush administration.

"There's a recognition that we have a great message, we just need a different set of messengers than we have," said ex-Virginia Rep. Tom Davis, a former chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

West and Scott have proved to be different lawmakers stylistically, with West sticking to an unyielding conservative tone while Scott has been a valuable messenger for House Speaker John Boehner as a member of party leadership. The two split on joining the Congressional Black Caucus, with West signing on even as he decried the caucus as a "monolithic voice." Scott opted against membership. But both have helped press the case against Obama.

Democrats are not impressed by a few nonwhite faces. They say Republican policies are still hostile toward minority constituencies — and that the GOP is still laced with racially insensitive undertones. More than a few quickly point to the Obama impersonator who was escorted offstage when he made racially charged comments at last month's Republican Leadership Conference.

"There is no rise in black conservatism," said Rep. Emanuel Cleaver (D-Mo.), chairman of the CBC. "We've always had about 5 percent of African-Americans who are Republicans, and that hasn't changed. ... The good news is that white conservatives will vote for a black person, but he or she must be extremely conservative to win."

Williams, for his part, said it was far too early to speculate what kind of lawmaker he would be, if elected. His service in two administrations and a decade in statewide elected office suggest he would more closely resemble Scott, who was a longtime local official. West, a retired Army officer, was largely a political neophyte when elected.

Williams said he doesn't anticipate race being a major factor in his congressional campaign.

"Running in an area that's predominantly white is not new to me," he said about the new district, which is also 23 percent Hispanic and 17 percent black.

Party hands insist that a larger political shift is coming, that an increase in black Republican voters will follow the rise of black Republican candidates and officials, even if it takes until after an Obama presidency.

"The movement toward Republicans, or at least away from the Democrats, is way overdue," longtime strategist Frank Donatelli said. "It's unnatural for one diverse group like African-Americans to vote for one party for so long. That era is coming to an end. As long as concerns about civil rights are being replaced with concerns about economic opportunity, that bodes well for conservatives and Republicans."