

The issues in the Texas redistricting

Patrick Martin
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The Republican redistricting drive in Texas is a flagrant power grab, since the current district lines were established only a year ago, by a nonpartisan panel of federal judges, based on the 2000 Census figures. Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott, a Republican, said the district boundaries could remain in force, as is customary, until the next census in 2010.

The new redistricting bill is a blatant attempt to suppress political opposition and deprive millions of state residents of any effective franchise. It takes a political technique employed by Republican-controlled legislatures elsewhere in the South—dubbed “cracking and packing”—and applies it in Texas, where Republicans won control of the state legislature last year, for the first time in 130 years.

Using detailed computerized maps tracking patterns of voting and minority residence, Republican functionaries “crack” the present congressional district boundaries and then “pack” likely Democratic voters into a relative handful of districts, leaving the bulk of the districts with smaller but safe Republican majorities.

In the case of Texas, this means taking a state with 17 Democratic and 15 Republican congressmen, and creating 10 districts that are overwhelmingly Democratic (all are majority black or Hispanic) and 22 districts that are solidly Republican (and largely exclude minority voters).

On top of the racial gerrymandering—supported by a handful of black and Hispanic Democratic politicians who have new seats carved out for themselves—the new district lines amount to a political purge of Democratic Party officeholders. Eight congressmen would find themselves living outside their own congressional district, forced either to move or to run against another incumbent: seven of these are Democrats, only one a Republican.

The new district lines include some of the extremely

convoluted shape that gave rise to the term “gerrymander” (after Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry, who in 1812 created a district so contorted that it resembled a salamander). One district reaches from Austin all the way east to the suburbs of Houston. Another stretches south from Austin 300 miles to the Mexican border.

The new redistricting plan was pushed through a House committee in an extraordinarily undemocratic fashion. Although every part of the state is affected by the redrawing of district boundaries, the Republican majority refused to hold hearings outside of Austin, the state capital.

Redistricting committee chairman Joe Crabb rejected an appeal to hold a hearing in south Texas, which is predominantly Hispanic, declaring, “The rest of us would have a very difficult time if we were out in an area—other than Austin or other English-speaking areas—to be able to have committee hearings or to be able to converse with people that did not speak English.” Only two of the committee members spoke Spanish, he said, although nearly a third of the state’s population is Spanish-speaking.

Even the hearing that was held in Austin was a sham. Crabb opened it on Thursday, continued until 2 a.m., then resumed at 6 a.m. and wrapped up the proceedings that afternoon. But on Sunday, the Republican leadership unveiled a new version of the redistricting with significant changes in the boundaries, and presented that for vote in the house without any public discussion at all.

Despite these maneuvers, hundreds of Austin residents turned out to denounce the redistricting plan, which breaks up the longstanding Austin-based district of liberal Democrat Lloyd Doggett, and divides the city and surrounding Travis County among four different congressional districts. The crowd booed references to President George Bush.

State Republican officials did not conceal their desire to punish Austin, site of the University of Texas and home to antiwar protests and other manifestations of political opposition to the Bush administration and the right-wing Texas state government. One Republican leader declared, “Who gives a f--- for the Peoples Republic of Travis County.”



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