

Federal judges overturn Texas redistricting maps

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Federal judges struck down redistricting maps drawn by the Texas Legislature last year, saying state lawmakers didn't follow the Voting Rights Act when they redrew boundary lines for congressional and legislative districts.

A three-judge panel in Washington, D.C., said state lawmakers crafted a map that denied fair representation to Hispanic voters in Texas and the court ruled the map "does not entitle minorities to proportional representation."

"We conclude that Texas has failed to show that any of the redistricting plan merits preclearance," according to the court ruling.

Democrats cheered the ruling as a victory; Republicans disagreed.

"The federal court has turned its back on the rights of Texas voters and has chosen to side with Attorney General Eric Holder in his politically motivated actions against Texas," Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst said. "The Texas maps both respect the rights of voters and comply with the Voting Rights Act. This flawed federal court ruling must be swiftly appealed to protect Texas from the federal government's infringing on our states' rights."

Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott was quick to respond, saying the state will appeal this ruling and fight to keep the maps as they are. At the same time, he said the general election this November will not be impacted, as the interim maps currently in place were drawn by a panel of federal judges in San Antonio.

Tarrant County Democratic Party Chairman Steve Maxwell called Tuesday's ruling "tremendous."

"The bottom line is, there was discriminatory intent ... they knew it would effectively disenfranchise minorities," Maxwell said. "This is a great thing, not just for Democrats or minorities."

"It's a good thing for all of Texas," he said. "It brings people back into the system that were shut out by what the Republicans were trying to do."

Tarrant impact

Tarrant County is one of the regions that saw the biggest impact under the new maps, as lawmakers created the 33rd Congressional District, which stretches from Fort Worth's Stockyards to Dallas' Oak Cliff neighborhood, and recrafted the 25th Congressional District, which stretches from the edges of Tarrant County to Austin.

Months of legal wrangling in three federal courtrooms, including the U.S. Supreme Court, led to a San Antonio federal court earlier this year issuing new Texas congressional and state House maps geared to get Texas through the 2012 election cycle. State Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, and state Rep. Marc Veasey, D-Fort Worth, were among those fighting the Legislature-drawn maps, saying they disenfranchised minority voters.

Tuesday's ruling likely will impact maps that will be used in 2014. The federal judges in San Antonio will be responsible for fixing the problems laid out in Tuesday's ruling. They could allow the Legislature to draw new maps.

Regarding the now-rejected maps, federal judges Tuesday concluded that "Texas has not met its burden to show that the U.S. Congressional and State House Plans will not have a retrogressive effect, and that the U.S. Congressional and State Senate Plans were not enacted with discriminatory purpose."

Any Texas redistricting maps must receive federal approval because Texas is covered in Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

"We deny Texas declaratory relief. Texas has failed to carry its burden that [the Legislature's actions] do not have the purpose or effect of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race, color, or membership in a language minority group under section 5 of the Voting Rights Act," the court ruling stated.

Abbott declared that the judges went too far, saying the "decision extends the Voting Rights Act beyond the limits intended by Congress and beyond the boundaries imposed by the Constitution."

"The Attorney General's Office will continue defending the maps enacted by the Texas Legislature and will immediately take steps to appeal this flawed decision to the U.S. Supreme Court," he said in a statement. "The Washington D.C. court's decision applies to the maps originally enacted by the Texas Legislature - so the November elections will proceed as planned under the interim maps drawn by the federal court in San Antonio."

Tarrant County Republican Party Chair Jennifer Hall is a delegate at the Republican National Convention this week and said she hasn't been able to review the ruling.

'Big decision'

"This is a really big decision and a big victory for Texas voters," said Veasey, who last month won the Democratic runoff for the 33rd Congressional District. "I'm happy that I worked as hard as I did on it. And I will continue to make sure the voting rights of voters in North Texas are protected."

Veasey faces Republican Chuck Bradley, Green Party candidate Ed Lindsay and Independent candidates Robert J. Devine and Lance "Occupy" Donohue in the November general election.

Davis praised the ruling, saying, "I am pleased with the court's decision, especially knowing that this court has agreed that those in charge in Austin were neither honest nor transparent with Texans during their overly partisan and discriminatory redistricting process. I am proud to stand up for Senate District 10 voters on this issue and will continue to fight for them."

This report includes material from Washington bureau chief Maria Recio and The Texas Tribune.

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