

# GOP's Redistricting Plans Impede Latino Representation in Texas

By Khalil Abdullah

**T**he surge in Latino population has made it possible for Texas, the state with the second largest Congressional block, to add four new seats to its current total of 32. Florida, too, gets two additional seats for the same reason. But it will not be easy for Latinos to turn this into political clout.

According to Luis Figueroa, legislative staff attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), bad case law requires ethnic communities to demonstrate a critical mass of voting age population—a high hurdle to cross in Texas where a large percentage of the Latino community is under the age of 18. “We also have a significant non-citizen population,” Figueroa points out.

“We don't talk about that enough in the media,” says Greg Wyeth, senior redistricting initiative consultant at Outreach Strategists. The public discourse on low Latino voter turnout usually turns into a blame game rather than a dispassionate analysis of the numbers.

In Nueces County, which has three Latino-dominant House districts, the legislature's plan eliminated the smallest one, packing those voters into other districts. Such voter dilution tactics can violate Sections II and V of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), says Figueroa. States must seek permission from the Department of Justice (DOJ) before changing voting procedures or district maps—especially if the changes make voting conditions worse for groups covered by the statute. The DOJ has ruled that Texas can move forward with its senate and state board of education maps, but has not granted permission to move on the congressional map. Texas is challenging the ruling, setting the stage for yet another acrimonious chapter in the state's redistricting history.

Caroll Robinson, a law professor at Texas Southern University, says that the goal of the Texas Anglo-Republican dominated political system is to hold the status quo, which is consistent with the state's Con-

federate-era history of obstructing minority rights. Even the DOJ-approved plans for the state senate and board of education, upon close examination, are weighted toward that objective. But, Robinson contends, minorities need to get out of their silos and find means to cooperate to achieve parity in political empowerment.

His vision is shared by Rogene G. Calvert, director of the Texas Asian American Redistricting Initiative. Although the Asian American community is still small, under the VRA, they are a “community of interest,” with shared languages and cultural affinities. And they have achieved electoral success at the city council level in Houston by working with other ethnic communities. “Coalition politics is going to be the wave of the future,” Calvert says, “where we minorities work together more, so that we can elect candidates of our choice.”

What makes coalition politics critical is that housing patterns are changing. As communities become more integrated and ethnic populations more diffuse, it will be difficult to achieve the 50 percent concentration required to create a district that reflects a group's numerical dominance. But the goal, Robinson points out, is to provide communities with the opportunity to elect a candidate of their choice, not necessarily a candidate from their own ethnic group.

“Demographics [are] on our side,” says Robinson. “Somewhere between now and mid-decade, if we do the things we need to do in terms of voter participation, voter education, voter registration, we have the ability to win some of these districts outright—and redistricting will take care of itself.” ■