

POLITICS

# Can newly drawn districts in San Diego County protect minorities' voting blocs?



A poll worker peeled off stickers to hand out to voters at a San Diego polling station y in 2018. (John Gibbins/San Diego Union-Tribune)

## The San Diego County Redistricting Commission considers minority voting rights as it prepares draft maps of new supervisorial boundaries

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San Diego — How do you protect minority voting blocs while redrawing political districts?

The San Diego County Independent Redistricting Commission considered that question at a meeting Thursday, where it discussed “racial polarization” in San Diego voting trends.

The 14-member independent commission is supposed to adjust San Diego County’s supervisorial district boundaries to accommodate population growth and demographic changes.

One of its key mandates is ensuring minority communities are represented in districts that preserve their ability to elect candidates they prefer.

“These initial discussions will help the (Independent Redistricting Commission) meet its requirements under the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court and the Voting Rights Act,” said Chair David Bame. “The IRC remains firmly committed to ensuring that draft maps are in compliance with all these requirements.”

David Bame, Chair of the San Diego Independent Redistricting Commission, and former U.S. diplomat. (Courtesy )

On Thursday the commission heard from Christian Grose, a political science professor at the University of Southern California, and Natalie Masuoka, chair of UCLA's department of Asian American Studies.

They analyzed a decade of San Diego voting data to look for patterns in “racially polarized voting,” which refers to elections in which one racial group regularly votes for one candidate and the other group regularly favors a different candidate.

“We examined Supervisor elections from 2012 to 2020 and statewide elections over the past decade within only San Diego County,” the professors stated in a report to the commission. “There is evidence of racially polarized voting in San Diego County between Latino voters and non-Hispanic white voters; and between Asian American voters and non-Hispanic white voters.”

As the commissioners redraw district boundaries, they said, they have to be wary of “cracking” voting blocs by splitting minority voting power across districts, Grose said. They also must avoid “packing” districts in a manner that places too many minority voters in one region, potentially limiting their ability to elect candidates of choice in other districts.

“If you overpack one district with minority candidates, that could be minority vote dilution,” Grose said. “But you also don’t want to spread out too much.”

Oceanside Mayor Esther Sanchez called into the meeting during public comment and said the countywide findings mirror issues seen locally in city elections.

“What I saw (in the county data) reflects what I have been seeing with regard to the (State Route) 78 corridor between Oceanside and Escondido,” Sanchez said. “There is a growing Latino community that has had a very difficult time electing Latino candidates.”

That began to change recently, after civil rights lawsuits forced several cities to hold district elections. Latina councilwomen were elected to seats in Escondido, Vista and San Marcos, while Sanchez holds office in Oceanside.

Sanchez said she still sees gaps in Latino representation and hopes the new county boundaries will correct that.

“I am really urging members to look at North County, and hope that we can come up with district lines to allow the voting rights of the Latino community to be honored,” Sanchez said.

Commission member Barbara Hansen said commissioners should also look at how Latino- or Asian-majority voting districts would affect White voters in those communities. And they should consider groups of refugees and immigrants who are listed as White on the census but identify with distinct cultural, religious or linguistic minorities, she said.

“In the immigrant community some people are marked as White, but are from the Middle East or are White non-Christian,” she said. “This data really doesn’t help us to identify them as a group. We heard from Latinas that the White population drowned out their vote, but we never heard from the White voters about how they felt about being in a majority Latino district. I feel that those are issues that require us to look a little beyond the census data.”

Bruce Adelson, a Maryland-based election law attorney who spoke as an expert before the panel, said the role of Arab-Americans is an evolving part of demographic research.

“Arab-American is not a census category,” he said. “It could well be in 10 years, but it isn’t now. In response to concerns from people in the community we looked beyond the census, to look at where these populations are and get an idea of how they vote and how to protect their rights under the Voting Rights Act.”

On Thursday the commission also reviewed what it called “springboard maps” that show conceptual schemes for potential districts. They were intended as a starting point for draft maps which will be released next week.

And commissioners looked at a proposed map by a member of the public, through an online mapping tool offered on the commission website.

The commission also directed its demographic contractor, FLO Analytics, to return with draft maps that use a horizontal district concept.

They called for maps that would create a border district that does not include Point Loma and Coronado; a coastal district running from Coronado and Point Loma to Carlsbad, east to State Route 805; and a North County district along the State Route 78 corridor from Escondido to Oceanside, including Camp Pendleton and back country communities of Fallbrook, Bonsall and Valley Center.

In a separate motion commissioners asked for a map that did not include a separate coastal district.

The commission will review the draft maps at its next meeting on Oct. 21, and will vote on a final county map on Dec. 15, Bame said.

Unlike previous redistricting efforts, the decision by the independent commission will be final and not subject to a vote by the Board of Supervisors.

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