



Washington Post

New Texas Republican map carves Jackson Lee district and cuts off Black constituents

October 14, 2021 at 8:00 p.m. EDT

The new Texas congressional map shreds the Houston-based legislative district of Democratic Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, siphoning off thousands of her Black constituents and potentially forcing her into a primary election against her neighboring Black incumbent, Rep. Al Green (D).

Critics of the new plan say it's a racial gerrymander intended to weaken Black voices in Congress, even as it protects other incumbents.

Jackson Lee, 71, is the second-longest-serving member from the Texas delegation, having represented the 18th District for nearly three decades. Since it was won by Barbara Jordan in 1972, the first Black woman to represent the state, the boundaries have largely remained the same.

But now, Texas Republicans in charge of redistricting have advanced a map that would remove downtown Houston, with Jackson Lee's main office, two universities and the predominantly Black Third Ward neighborhood, considered the center of Black life in Houston, from the 18th District.

"I'm very hurt," Green, 74, said in an interview with The Post. "I've lived long enough to see change and progress. This is a retrogression that takes us back to a time when persons who had the authority could abuse that authority with impunity, I just hope that this is not just the case."

Republicans retain a 23-to-13 advantage over Democrats in the House delegation. Under the GOP proposal, the number of safe Republican seats would double from 11 to 22, while the number of safe Democratic seats would increase from eight to 12. One seat leans Democratic and two lean Republican. The number of toss-ups would fall from 12 to one.

Green and Jackson Lee appealed to the Texas Republicans in a Sept. 29 letter, decrying the new lines as an "act of racial discrimination." When they received word on Tuesday that the map was going before the House redistricting committee the next day, they left Washington that night to make it to Austin on Wednesday in time to testify against it.

In an interview, Jackson Lee echoed Green's heartache and said that no one has given her an explanation for why she had been drawn out of her district. "There was absolutely no response," Jackson Lee said. "This was purposeful racial gerrymandering, which is very shameful in 2021." She continued, "I am stunned, we are hurt, but we're not giving up."

Gary Bledsoe, who serves as the president of the Texas chapter of the NAACP, said Texas Republicans who control both chambers of the state legislature had "cut it up this way to engage in anti-Black activity. They weren't paired by accident. They were paired by design."

State Sen. Joan Huffman (R) and state Rep. Todd Hunter (R), who lead their respective chambers' redistricting committees, did not respond to requests for comment about the new map on Thursday.

The map has already passed the Senate. Hunter rushed passage through his committee, providing the minimum of at least 24 hours advance notice for testimony and refusing to allow amendments. Members will have a chance to offer changes when it comes to a full vote in the chamber.

"The consideration of redistricting priorities and objectives which guided the approach to redistricting included complying with all applicable law, including the Constitution, the Voting Rights Act ... preserving the cores of existing districts, creating geographically compact districts, addressing partisan considerations, protecting incumbents, and when it is possible, honoring requests made by incumbent members," Hunter said.

Huffman and Hunter have said the maps were drawn without regard to race, but Republicans also have defended the changes to the 9th and 18th districts because both remain majority non-White under the new lines. The new map increases the share of Hispanic voters in both districts.

Bledsoe said that doesn't shield them from a legal challenge under the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Both districts are deemed African American opportunity seats, so they're not allowed to change the "character" of them.

Bledsoe said the Republicans "took out the economic engine" of the 18th District and sliced up historically Black neighborhoods, while drawing a new White-majority, Republican-friendly seat north of Houston.

Green and others contend that the Republicans didn't need to force him and Jackson Lee into the same district to create a new red district, and he believes that it wasn't a political decision, but a personal one.

“Texas is consistently finding ways to abuse the process as it relates to people of color, and this appear to be the latest effort to do that,” Green said. “The evidence speaks for itself: two people of African ancestry are running out of the same district now? You can only conclude that if they didn't have to do it and they have done it, there is some intentionality.”

This is not the first attempt from Republicans at eviscerating districts represented by Black lawmakers in Texas, Bledsoe said, but a decade ago there were more safeguards. The legal avenues have narrowed since the Supreme Court in 2013 gutted Section 5 of the landmark 1965 law, which required states with a history of racial discrimination, such as Texas, to clear their proposed maps with the federal government.

In 2012, in a challenge against Texas's newly enacted [redistricting plans](#), the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ruled that the state had failed to show that the congressional maps it had drawn did 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.”

The judges wrote they were “troubled by the unchallenged evidence that the legislature removed the economic guts from the Black ability districts,” notably the 9th and 18th districts, as well as the 30th, represented by Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D), and said it led them to “infer a discriminatory purpose.” The new Texas maps were denied preclearance.

Democrats and civil rights groups have excoriated Texas Republicans over their drawing of lines that aim to shore up Republican incumbents at the expense of giving minority communities more representation.

The population boom that occurred in Texas over the last decade resulted in it being the only state to gain two new seats in Congress following the 2020 Census. The growth came almost exclusively from new non-White residents, yet the new lines do not create any additional opportunities for Latino or Black voters to elect a candidate of their choice.

Jackson Lee said of the tactics, “Silencing a voice of opposition is the most deadly aspect of democracy. I guess they thought this would be the end of her. We haven’t defeated her in all of these efforts. What else could it be? But I want them to define what it is and I’d like them to fix it.”