

Time for a new approach to redistricting: Embrace the Unity Maps

By Lurie Daniel Favors, Esq.

Daily News Op Ed | Jan 26, 2022 at 5:00 am

After the breakdown of the state's Independent Redistricting Commission (IRC), the Democratic-dominated state Legislature is about to draw its own maps. While their maps will most likely strengthen that party's hold on the state Assembly and Senate and U.S. Congress in our state, the question remains whether or not they will also reflect the electoral strength of diverse New York communities and if they will protect those groups that are protected by the Voting Rights Act.

It doesn't need to be this way. The Legislature can and should pass maps drawn by a coalition of nonprofits that are intended to keep communities together and maximize their democratic participation rights. Those maps, [the Unity Maps](#), should be the basis for redistricting.

The problem began on Jan. 3, when the IRC submitted dueling Republican and Democratic versions of redistricting maps for the state Senate, Assembly and Congress. Those maps failed to uphold the protections afforded to Black, Latino and Asian voters under the Voting Rights Act and needlessly diluted voting power in minority communities.

Thankfully, the Senate and Assembly rejected the IRC's plans outright. On Monday, the IRC publicly announced that the commission won't complete a revised set of maps. Now that drawing new district lines falls to the Legislature, the Unity Maps are the best way forward.

The redistricting process is one of the most important steps in our democracy. The way that district lines are drawn can either strengthen or diminish the voting power of entire communities. For decades, diverse "communities of interest" — groups of people with common policy concerns — suffered the harm caused by poorly drawn districts. Communities of interest living in diverse neighborhoods bore the brunt of biased and politically stilted redistricting, leading to generations of poverty, underfunded schools, libraries, hospitals, transportation options, affordable housing, economic divestment and more. During the height of the pandemic, community health centers in unfairly drawn districts were overrun because of chronic underfunding and lack of prioritization.

The Unity Map Coalition, which includes the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College, CUNY, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund and LatinoJustice PRLDEF, was formed in the last redistricting cycle to fight against

redistricting processes that far too often diminish the voting strength diverse communities of interest. Our maps are based on Census data and informed by the city's communities of interest. They provide accurate reflections of demographic changes in our city's population and exclude partisan political calculations from the redistricting process.

The coalition drew and submitted maps that preserve communities of interest and comply with the U.S. and New York State Constitutions and the Voting Rights Act — unlike either set of the maps submitted by the IRC, and almost certainly unlike the maps sure to be approved by the Assembly and Senate.

For example, the Plan B Senate Map, proposed by Republicans, reduced the number of majority-minority New York City state Senate districts — despite the fact that the city's population growth has been driven exclusively by communities of color.

The Democratic maps were similarly flawed. The Plan A Assembly map failed to respect historic neighborhood lines in communities like Bedford-Stuyvesant, North Crown Heights and Ocean Hill. The Plan A Senate map failed to preserve communities of interest for people of African descent in areas like Southeast Queens, Crown Heights, Flatbush and East Flatbush.

In the Plan A congressional map, the congressional districts that contain large communities of interest of people of African descent, unnecessarily diluted Black voting strength. Similar disparities also exist for Senate and Assembly districts under Plan A.

The Unity Maps respect the historic lines that keep neighborhoods intact, preserve communities of interest and fulfill the Voting Rights Act mandates. They ensure the city's diverse communities receive their fair share of voting power and electoral representation. By mapping for demographic growth, preserving communities and unifying communities of interest that were historically divided, the Unity Maps avoid the zero-sum political process which pits diverse communities against one another. By failing to produce maps to send to the Legislature for review, the IRC shifted the responsibility for drawing new district lines to the Senate and Assembly. The Unity Maps set the standard for an equitable outcome. They are the bar beneath which there can be no slippage.

Daniel Favors is executive director of the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College, a member of the Unity Maps Coalition.