

California Redistricting Preserves Black Voice in State Politics

By Marqueece Harris-Dawson

For years, political pundits and sectors of the media have reported with barely contained glee on the supposed decline of California's black population. There has been much speculation about how the demographic changes will lead to a decline in black political leadership. Proponents of this viewpoint saw this year's redistricting process as a golden opportunity to spin the narrative into permanent changes in political boundaries that would lead to the disenfranchisement of black voters. If these black districts were eliminated, it would be nearly impossible to get them back.

The blows came from all directions. The media led with sensational predictions about African Americans ending up losers in the process. The *Los Angeles Times* quoted a member of the Redistricting Commission saying, "It's very hard for people to accept changing demographics." The message between the lines being, "Their time is over."

Early in the process, a group of African Americans from Democratic Representative Maxine Waters' district testified before the Commission. They were promptly accused of being Waters' "political operatives" by one Republican commission member who, without offering any evidence to support this claim, urged the other commissioners to disregard their testimony. District residents of all backgrounds, races, and ethnicities had testified that day, but this was the only group singled out for discrimination.

Hawthorne-by-the Beach

Other shenanigans included a declaration by the Mayor of Hawthorne that his landlocked city should be grouped with its more affluent coastal neighbors to the West. Such a grouping would have disturbed the delicate balance of the black population in Southeast Los Angeles County and dealt a drastic blow to black representation. The move was a direct attack on Rep. Waters' district and not surprisingly, conservative members of the Commission ran with the bizarre "Hawthorne is a beach city" mantra.

Fortunately, a coalition of black leaders and community organizations came together early in the process to form the African American Redistricting Collaborative (AARC), which was able to anticipate the attacks, mobi-

lize communities, and engage attorneys to provide a legal basis for our position.

Ultimately, all of the current black districts in California were preserved. Additionally, new State Senate and Assembly districts were formed where an African American candidate can run competitively. The Redistricting Commission listened to our collective voices and approved a final map that preserves black political representation.

Redistricting by Committee Risky For Blacks

As we celebrate these accomplishments, it is important to step back and reflect on what this victory was all about. Blacks typically side with issues of equality and have reliably provided the bedrock of progressive coalitions. Redistricting is an inherently progressive activity—if done honestly. The concept revolves around shifting power to reflect population concentrations.

We must not forget, however, that a majority of California voters supported Props 11 and 20, which authorized the creation of the Commission and tasked it—instead of the legislature—with redrawing congressional boundaries because of concerns over political corruption and influence. This has not been the experience, historically, from the perspective of African Americans, who have trusted their elected officials to do right by them. So, although we won this round, redistricting via a randomly appointed citizen's commission—which, by default draws an intellectual crowd with technology access and resources—is a risky game at best for the increasingly dispersed black community. ■