



Cesar Z. Ruiz

Equal Justice Works Fellow Sponsored by the Lavan-Harris Family, Latino Justice PRLDEF

Independent Redistricting Commission Hearing

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My name is Cesar Z. Ruiz. I am an Equal Justice Works legal fellow and attorney with LatinoJustice PRLDEF, working on the New York Redistricting legal team. LatinoJustice PRLDEF is a Latinx civil rights organization that works to create a more just society by using and challenging the rule of law to secure transformative, equitable and accessible justice, by empowering our community, and by fostering leadership through advocacy and education. We have participated in New York State redistricting for the past several decades, advocating for equitable representation of the Latinx community.

I come here not only as a representative of LatinoJustice, but also as a representative of the Unity Map Coalition, a consortium of preeminent voting rights organizations representing communities of color across the city. We consist of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College (CUNY) and Latino Justice PRLDEF. Our organizations have been at the forefront of nonpartisan redistricting to protect communities of color for the last three decades. The Unity Coalition came together this past cycle to advocate on behalf of a redistricting plan for New York City that recognizes and reflects the electoral strength of New York's communities of color and ensures that the voting rights of Black, Latino, and Asian residents are protected.

Additionally, LatinoJustice PRLDEF is a member of the New York Latino Civic Engagement Coalition, which includes NALEO Educational Fund, Hispanic Federation, and Dominicanos USA, and we work together to promote civic engagement within the Latino community. We promote civic engagement by educating community members and providing resources regarding their voting rights and elections administration. We consistently engage community members by hosting events to promote access to our electoral system and democratic process, and we have a deep understanding of our communities' needs. We call for maps that protect the voting rights of our community.



The Unity Coalition has previously submitted proposed maps for drawing district lines for representation in the State Assembly. We urge you to review the decisions made by us as a collective to ensure equitable representations of our communities across New York City. Notably, while the redistricting process was tied up in partisan wrangling, the Unity Map was driven by non-partisan collaboration between New York City's preeminent Black, Asian, and Latino voting and civil rights organizations. Instead of focusing on partisan advantage, our singular focus has been ensuring the City's communities of color receive their fair proportion of voting power and electoral representation and are not pitted against one another. We understand that our strength lies in solidarity. The Unity Map should be adopted in full for New York City because it recognizes and maps for demographic growth and unification of historically divided communities of interest, unlike the Commission's proposed map.

We have particular concerns regarding specific areas of the Commission's proposed map:

Proposed Districts 86 and 78: The Commission's proposed map for District 86 shifts a large number of Latino community members into new districts, displaces a number of institutions that traditionally resided within Districts 78 and 86, and splits a crucial community redevelopment project¹ which runs alongside the waterfront into two districts. Community members see it as vital that these institutions, including Lehman College and Saint Barnabas in the 78th and the Kingsbridge Armory in the 86th, remain within districts they have traditionally resided. Disrupting these traditional boundaries would diminish these communities' ability to cultivate much needed resources, including advocacy for affordable housing and other amenities. We urge the Commission to adopt configurations similar to those proposed in our Unity ADs 61, 62 or alternatively and at a minimum as configured in the recently enacted map for ADs 86 and 78.

Proposed Districts 30, 34, 35, and 39: The Commission's proposed maps for the Queens Assembly Districts 30, 34, 35, 39 pit Latinx candidates of choice against one another, diminishing the ability of community members to meaningfully retain candidates who have championed issues impacting their communities. It does this by drawing two Latinx candidates of choice into proposed District 35. By positioning two Latinx candidates of choice against each other, the Commission is undermining the ability of Latinx community members to retain widely supported

¹ The redevelopment project is known as Fordham Landing. Under the recent enacted map, the redevelopment project and waterfront was united (*See Enacted Assembly District 86*) and under our plan it is similarly united (*See Unity Assembly District 61*).



legislative champions for their communities. Recent performance data from the 2022 election show there is consistent Latinx support for these candidates, and by pitting them against one another, the Commission is creating a very real possibility that this electorate splinters Latinx support amongst the two Latinx candidates of choice. Such a split would enable a non-Latinx candidate to potentially secure a victory with minimal Latinx support despite Latinos constituting the majority population in the district. This would harm the ability of Latinx community members to elect viable candidates of choice, further disrupting their ability to access meaningful representation in the assembly. For that reason, we urge you to adopt our proposed Assembly district configurations (Unity ADs 13, 14, 15, 16, 18 and 19). Alternatively, and at a minimum, we urge you to retain what has been enacted by the legislature in 2022 to avoid harm to the candidates of choice for communities of color.

The most recent elections saw mass voter confusion as a result of a messy and tumultuous statewide redistricting process. This confusion caused lower turnout and disproportionately impacted Latinx community members, who do not have the same level of access to basic resources and information. All changes must account for the community impact and must not further harm the ability of Latinx community members to participate in our democracy. Overall, any Commission-proposed changes to the current enacted map should be minimal in nature to ensure that voters are not displaced from their traditional districts once again.

New York needs a single unified redistricting plan which equitably benefits the interests of all New Yorkers, especially New York's historically marginalized communities of color. New York City's Black, Asian and Latino communities have been harmed by decades of gerrymandering which rigged the electoral system against us — diminishing our electoral power and resulted in the long-term neglect of our communities. While the Unity Map may not solve all of those problems, it can help empower our communities to elect candidates of their choice to advocate for their interests and bring the changes necessary to address their needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We look forward to completing this process in a timely manner and to the Commission's informed decision to adopt maps that adequately represent our communities.