

TESTIMONY OF NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL MEMBER OSWALD FELIZ TO THE NEW YORK STATE INDEPENDENT REDISTRICTING COMMISSION

December 6, 2021

My name is Oswald Feliz and I am a New York City Council Member representing District 15 in the Bronx. I thank the Commission for the opportunity to deliver my testimony on the impactful process of redistricting.

One of the core tenets taken up by this Commission is to ensure the equitable representation of all New Yorkers while taking into consideration the historical demographic composition of the districts being redrawn. To this end, I would like to highlight the neighborhoods and communities that I proudly represent in the Bronx and emphasize the importance of maintaining fair representation of my constituents on the congressional level given their unique socio-economic background with the current district lines.

The proposed redistricting that would have the lines of congressional district 13 moved further north into the Bronx would fundamentally alter the demographics of the district. My constituents in congressional district 13, namely the residents of Bedford Park, Kingsbridge, Fordham, and Norwood, are socioeconomically similar to the rest of the congressional district in Inwood, Washington Heights, and Spanish Harlem. In these parts of the Bronx, the median household income is \$36,472, over 30% live under the poverty line, over 60% are Spanish speaking, and only about 15% have had the opportunity to complete higher education.

These same neighborhoods I represent, however, do not align with the socio-economic nor with the cultural background found in Riverdale and Fieldston where the proposed lines would extend to. In those communities, the median household income is \$15,000 higher, 20% live under the poverty line, only 41% speak Spanish and nearly a quarter have achieved higher education. Furthermore, the disparities between these communities are exacerbated when you consider the current 16th congressional district that shares as a whole congruence with the people of Riverdale and Fieldston.

In the 16th congressional district, the median household income is \$74,799, less than 10% live under the poverty line and over 40% have reached higher education. This is in stark contrast to the current 13th congressional district wherein the median household income is \$46,298, nearly 20% live under the poverty line, and about a third of its people have completed higher education.

Of equal importance to the matter at hand is the cultural background of the communities I represent. Having been born and raised in Kingsbridge in a Dominican household, I am a living testimony to the ubiquity of Latin culture in the Bronx. Not only does the Bronx have the most Latinos out of any county in the state, but we are proud of our status as the only majority Latino county. A cornerstone to this cultural preeminence is the Dominican community; the Bronx is home to the largest Dominican population in the United States, numbering 338,450. After the political and economic upheaval in 1961,

many Dominicans whose professions ranged from professors to middle-class workers came to the US. The Dominican immigrant population started at 12,000 and has grown to over a million. Most recently, over 40% of those immigrants are living in NY, and approximately 47% of Dominican immigrants living in NY in 2019 are living in the Bronx. Dominicans increasingly become citizens and 44% of Dominicans in the NY metro area were born in the U.S while 32% because of naturalization. This is the history of those who live in council district 15, and each person here has their individual story that comes together to make up this community. When I think about the people of the Bronx, the people I was elected to serve, it is clear to me that the 13th congressional district, as it stands, is the best delineation to serve their unique needs as a community. It effectively encompasses the working class along with the strong Dominican cultural enclave in such a way that ensures their voices will be heard and their issues addressed.

As a representative of some of the most impoverished, underemployed, undereducated, and marginalized neighborhoods in the nation, it is imperative that my constituents' federal representation not be diluted by incorporating demographics that not only live vastly different lives culturally but also live vastly different lives in their material conditions. It is paramount that the underserved people of the Bronx have a voice in Congress that is accountable to them as a cohesive community, much as I am accountable to them in the New York City Council. If we allow our most vulnerable to be enveloped into more affluent district lines I fear that their needs will be diluted and lost in the surplus that surrounds them. Suddenly factoids about living below the poverty line and access to higher education become less concerning and less urgency will be placed on these issues as time passes, macro analysis will ignore the importance of hyperlocal realities of needs and resources, all of which hinges on proper representation by those whose attention will not be divided among vastly different demands.

I wholeheartedly implore the Commission to take the lived experience of my constituents to heart in your decisions over the proposed district lines. In order to build momentum in Congress to address the issues of low income communities, we need districts that are at once made up of and accountable to the working poor. To alter the district lines in the proposed manner would be to softly bury the voices of those in need among the wealthier.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Oswald Feliz". The signature is stylized with large, looping letters and a prominent initial "O".

New York City Council Member Oswald Feliz, District 15