

Redrawing Democracy: The Supreme Court’s Texas Map Ruling and the Future of Racial Equality in Voting

By: Maya Frazier

When the Supreme Court of the United States allowed Texas to implement a newly drawn congressional map that a lower court found diluted the voting power of Black and Latino communities¹, it did more than resolve a single redistricting fight, it signaled a judicial tolerance for maps that entrench racial and partisan advantage at precisely the moment when demographic change should be translating into political power. On December 4, 2025, the Court’s order reinstating the map came as the nation faces the 2026 midterms, and analysts estimate the new lines could shift as many as five House seats toward Republicans — a concrete effect on representation and on which communities’ voices will matter in Congress.²

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) and a decade of SCOTUS decisions have steadily narrowed courts’ willingness to police laws and practices that produce racially disparate effects. Section 2 of the VRA — the principal tool for litigating vote-dilution claims — permits plaintiffs to challenge maps that deny minorities an equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice³. But since the *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) decision removed the VRA’s preclearance

¹ *League of United Latin Citizens v. Abbott*, U.S. District Court, W.D. Texas, El Paso Division; Eleanor Klibanoff, *Federal court blocks Texas from using new congressional gerrymander in 2026 midterms*, TEXAS TRIBUNE(Nov. 18, 2025), <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/11/18/texas-redistricting-ruling-lawsuit-el-paso-court-2026-midterms/>.

² Amy Howe, *Supreme Court Allows Texas to Use Redistricting Map Challenged as Racially Discriminatory*, SCOTUSBLOG (Dec. 4, 2025), <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/12/supreme-court-allows-texas-to-use-redistricting-map-challenged-as-racially-discriminatory/>; *LULAC v. Abbott*.

³ Voting Rights Act of 1965 § 2, 52 U.S.C. § 10301 (2018).

regime, and subsequent rulings (such as *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*) further tightened standards for challengers, winning Section 2 claims has become more difficult.⁴ The cumulative effect: states can more easily defend racially consequential redistricting choices, and litigants face heightened evidentiary and doctrinal hurdles.

Texas's demographic story makes this legal posture particularly consequential. The state's population has grown quickly in recent years — led in large part by Latino communities in urban and suburban counties, yet disparities persist between demographic shifts and political outcomes.⁵ Under the newly reinstated map, White voters remain overrepresented relative to the overall population share, and minority-majority districts have been reconfigured in ways critics say reduce minority influence.⁶ Lines on a map, in other words, become the mechanism by which demographic growth either becomes political representation — or gets walled off from it.

The Court's order in *LULAC v. Abbott* also illustrates two broader trends. First, litigation over redistricting is shifting from straightforward inquiries into discriminatory intent to procedural disputes about timing and election administration — a dynamic that often benefits mapmakers seeking to avoid disruption to electoral calendars. In its brief, unsigned order, the Court emphasized that the lower court had “improperly inserted itself into an active primary campaign,” effectively prioritizing electoral stability over resolution of complex racial-gerrymandering claims.⁷ This posture raises the cost for courts to enjoin maps, and places a premium on speed and deference to state processes.

⁴ See *Shelby County, Ala. v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529, 530 (2013); *Brnovich v. Democratic Nat'l Convention*, 594 U.S. 647, 648 (2021).

⁵ Texas Population Estimates and Projections 2024, TEXAS DEMOGRAPHIC CENTER (2024), <https://demographics.texas.gov/Visualizations/2024/Estimates2024/> .

⁶ Adam Wren, *Texas Redistricting Map Heads to Supreme Court*, *Wash. Post* (Dec. 4, 2025), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/12/04/texas-redistricting-map-supreme-court/>.

⁷ *Id.*

Second, the decision is likely to have a chilling, system-wide effect: if courts decline to block maps with plausible race-based harms, state legislatures may be emboldened to engage in race-conscious map-drawing cloaked in partisan justification. Across the country, civil-rights advocates fear an uptick in so-called “legal but unjust” maps (maps that nominally comply with neutral standards while disproportionately packing and cracking communities of color). The danger is not abstract: district boundaries determine which legislative majorities prevail, who gets to control budgets, how enforcement resources get allocated, and whose voices get heard — all fundamental determinants of social and economic inequality.⁸

What options remain for those seeking to challenge or mitigate the effects of the Texas decision? Litigation is not foreclosed — Section 2 challenges remain viable under the right record and theory (especially where plaintiffs can offer alternative districting plans).⁹ But the bar and path to relief are narrower and slower than many advocates hoped. Legislative reform is perhaps the clearest structural remedy. The now-reintroduced John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act (JLVRAA) aims to restore a modernized form of preclearance and strengthen federal review of changes that could adversely affect minority voters, a statutory back-stop that could blunt the effect of Court decisions like *Shelby* and the new Texas ruling.¹⁰

But given political headwinds at the federal level, state-level reforms remain especially important and potentially more immediately actionable. Independent redistricting commissions reduce partisan control over mapmaking and often result in more competitive and representative

⁸ See generally Wren, *Texas Redistricting Map Heads to Supreme Court; Texas Republicans Unveil New Redistricting Map in Push for New Lines*, THE GUARDIAN (Oct. 1, 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/01/texas-redistricting-map-republicans-gerrymandering> (explaining the potential racial consequences of gerrymandering).

⁹ VRA § 2.

¹⁰ John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2023, Pub. L. No. 118-11, 137 Stat. 22 (2023).

outcomes.¹¹ State courts and state constitutions provide additional venues for challenges: several recent victories in state courts over unfair maps underscore that federal doctrine is not the only path to meaningful redistricting reform.¹² Data transparency and public participation in map-drawing further act as tools to prevent discriminatory line-drawing.¹³

The Texas ruling should also be understood in the broader context of concurrent barriers to electoral equality. Voter-ID laws, voter-roll purges, limitations on early and mail voting, and uneven election-administration resources all interact with redistricting to shape who can vote — and whose votes translate into seats.¹⁴ The cumulative architecture can either mitigate or magnify long-standing racial and socioeconomic inequalities. When courts retreat from vigorous enforcement of anti-discrimination doctrines, those administrative and legislative tools gain increased power in shaping the composition of the electorate.¹⁵

For scholars and advocates, the moment calls for a two-track strategy: litigate aggressively where Section 2 or state constitutional protections provide a plausible path; and push hard for institution-building reforms that reduce partisan capture of redistricting: independent commissions, transparent public mapping tools, and statutory rules emphasizing geographic compactness, communities of interest, and proportionality. At the same time, legislative campaigns — even if uphill — to revive robust federal protections like the JLVRAA remain essential if we

¹¹ American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Independent Citizen Redistricting Commissions, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES (2025), <https://www.amacad.org/news/state-legislative-update-independent-citizen-redistricting-commissions>.

¹² See Yurij Rudensky, *Alaska Supreme Court Strikes Down Gerrymandered Districts*, State Court Report (May 1, 2023), <https://statecourtreport.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/alaska-supreme-court-strikes-down-gerrymandered-districts>.

¹³ See generally, Kristen Clarke & Eliza Sweren-Wright, *Principles for Transparency and Public Participation in Redistricting*, BROOKINGS (2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/principles-for-transparency-and-public-participation-in-redistricting/> (summarizing the principles for transparency in redistricting).

¹⁴ Brennan Center for Justice, Voting Laws Roundup: 2023 in Review (Jan. 18, 2024), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-2023-review>.

¹⁵ Leah Tulin & Yurij Rudensky, *The Voting Rights Act Persists, but So Do Its Adversaries*, BRENNAN CENTER (Aug. 9, 2024), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-rights-act-persists-so-do-its-adversaries>.

hope to restore effective national protection against localized practices that dilute minority representation.

Finally, the stakes are not only legal, but democratic as well. Representation matters not just for recognition of communities, but for more tangible outcomes: who gets roads, schools, public-health resources, and enforcement oversight. The Texas map decision is a stark reminder that the law of redistricting is not a hidden technicality, it is a central mechanism of political power. If courts and legislatures fail to close the gap between demographic change and political voice, the result will be a society in which the formal right to vote exists in name, but the effective power of that vote is unevenly distributed. That is the inequality at issue when lines on a map become the front line of democracy.