Community Voices: New State Voting Districts In Final Stages

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Carroy “Cuf” Ferguson and Kevin C. Peterson

Last week the Massachusetts Legislature produced redistricting legislation that will forever change the direction of state politics for blacks, Latinos and Asians. By this time next year, the number of state house elected officials of color can increase by 100 percent, from 10 to 20 members. And communities of color will be well positioned to elect a person of color to the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time in the history of the state.

The historic redistricting legislation, now in its final phases on Beacon Hill, was profoundly influenced by the work of black-led organizations and activists across the state. Using a collaborative process, the Massachusetts Black Empowerment Coalition (MBEC) and the New Democracy Coalition (NDC) produced the following toward bringing about this historic redistricting bill:

• Conducted more than 70 community meetings in Boston and across the state in such cities as Brockton, Springfield, Randolph and Cambridge. At these meetings, real community-based engagement was sought from residents who were uncompromised by political affiliations or funding enticements.

• Met with the redistricting leadership on Beacon Hill more than six times to convey the vision of the community regarding redistricting and how a revamped statewide map would vastly support building political clout for minority voters. MBEC and NDC also met three times with the black and Latino Caucus to solicit their support for a new redistricting map.

• MBEC and NDC presented the first statewide redistricting plan by any grassroots, black-led organization in the history of the Commonwealth. The plan called for an increase of 10 new majority-minority seats in the Massachusetts.
MBEC and NDC engaged a variety of community based organizations, including the Boston Ten Point Coalition, The NAACP, The Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, The College of Public and Community Service at UMass Boston, EPOCA, The Statewide Clergy for Unity, The Charles Hamilton Institute at Harvard Law School, The Center for Church and Prison and many others.

It is important to note that this success comes on the heels of disappointments in the wake of the conviction of two major and popular elected officials in the black community. And, we believe that this historic moment can be used to revive community politics and set in motion a political master plan for the future of communities of color across the state.

Some may ask what does this apparent victory in the redistricting process mean in a practical sense for the black, Latino and Asian communities? What are the future and potential real effects of the change in the political culture?

Two immediate benefits come to mind. First, with a stronger black and Latino collective in place in the Legislature, disadvantaged communities can better leverage political power. This will have an immediate effect on legislation that impacts the poor, such as education laws, anti-violence legislation and the allocation of funding for disadvantaged communities.

Second, after the redistricting process, communities of color will be potentially better organized. Through working closely with representatives and state senators on issues that impact them, disadvantaged communities stand to reap the benefits of coordinated efforts and a shared community vision.

While we pause to take a victory lap for the legislation, which is bound to pass the Legislature and receive Gov. Deval Patrick’s signature, we must continue to push for a state Senate seat for the black community in Boston. At present, the two majority-minority Senate seats in Boston are insufficient because they are organized in such ways that they do not allow the black community to elect a person from their historically disenfranchised class. The black community’s vote in both districts is essentially diluted by powerful white voting blocs. This must change.

In light of the current situation, we call for the Legislature to utilize an open Boston state Senate seat in Boston (left open by the recent resignation of Steve Tolman in Boston) to create an open Senate seat in the black community.

Secondly, we urge the redistricting committee to create a stronger majority-minority congressional district. We urge that in the redistricting plan set to go before the governor, that the black communities be united in the city of Boston and that the boundaries of the present majority minority district congressional be extended into Milton, Randolph and possibly Brockton. This would give minority voters more power.

While we celebrate the victories won thus far and produced by black leadership on this issue, there is still much for which to fight. Through collaborative efforts, we can and we must do better.

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