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ELECTIONS GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

New maps were supposed to give Virginia's black voters more power. Tuesday's elections suggest it worked.



By MARIE ALBIGES
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | NOV 09, 2019



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Alex Askew, left, and Clinton Jenkins were elected to the House of Delegates in districts that were redrawn to include more black voters.

The redrawn House of Delegates districts that resulted in four Democrats being elected in previously Republican-held seats on Tuesday were supposed to be about more than partisanship.

The new legislative map **was drawn earlier this year** to equalize votes so that African Americans would be able to elect who they wanted, rather than be stuck in a district originally drawn to dilute their votes, as federal courts ruled happened when Virginia Republicans created legislative maps in 2011.

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So did it work?

With the help of six candidates who flipped GOP seats, Democrats are now in the majority. Three black candidates — Clinton Jenkins in the Suffolk-centered 76th House District, Alex Askew in Virginia Beach's 85th House District and Josh Cole in Fredericksburg's 28th House District — will replace white lawmakers. Two of them, Jenkins and Cole, flipped GOP seats.

Four out of the six flipped seats were redrawn as part of the court mandate to fix the racial gerrymandering, and in each of the four redrawn districts, more black voters were added.

Republican Del. Chris Jones, who led the redrawing of the lines in 2011 and represents the 76th District, was one of the white lawmakers ousted by a black candidate. Jones, who spent two decades in office, was one of the state's most powerful lawmakers, having led the House Appropriations Committee.

[Previous coverage: Republican powerhouse Chris Jones falls to Clinton Jenkins in newly redrawn district »](#)

Del. Chris Jones, who chairs the House Appropriations Committee, talks about the proposed budget on Thursday, March 23, 2017. (Steve Earley)

Another black lawmaker, Don Scott, replaces Matthew James in Portsmouth's

9th District. James, who is also black, stepped down earlier this year to take a job

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“Many people predicted that unpacking these districts would help Democrats, and I think the election bore that out,” said Rebecca Green, who teaches election law at the College of William & Mary.

In the current political climate, African Americans tend to vote for a Democrat, but without digging into the racial makeup of each of the voters who cast ballots in the redrawn districts, it's hard to say how much influence the new map had on Tuesday's election, Green said.

What the election did show is Virginians were given more equal footing to elect their candidate of choice, said Michael Li of the Brennan Center for Justice.

“What the old maps did is put the thumb on the scale and make it really hard for you to elect the candidates that you want,” he said. “Now there's a fair shot, if African Americans agree on somebody, that their candidate of choice will win.”

When the legislature redrew the maps after the 2010 census, it applied a minimum 55% black voting age population requirement to the districts in question. In doing so, the courts said, legislators shifted groups of voters in and out of districts primarily based on their race, which is illegal.

Take House District 76 in Suffolk. In the 2011 maps, African Americans comprised 26% of the district that was held by a white Republican, according to the Virginia Public Access Project.

Now, African Americans make up 45% of the district, and on Tuesday the voters elected a black candidate there. The parts of Suffolk that were added to the 76th voted overwhelmingly for Jenkins, who said he thinks the maps did what they were

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Clinton Jenkins, a newly elected Democrat representing Virginia's 76th House District, speaks about his victory at his office on Friday, Nov. 8, 2019, in Suffolk, Va. (Kaitlin McKeown/Virginia Media)

“People initially just looked at Mr. Jenkins and said, ‘You must be crazy’” to run against Jones, said Cynthia Dawns, a political consultant who worked on Jenkins’ campaign. It took some explaining for people to understand that in the redrawn district, he had a real shot at winning, she said.

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In House District 66, Democrat Sheila Bynum-Coleman, who is black, received the most votes in areas that were added to the new map, especially in the northern parts of Chesterfield. She ultimately lost to the incumbent, Speaker of the House Kirk Cox. The African American population grew by 16% in that district.

“The outcome (of the election) certainly looks more like Virginia,” Li said.

Republicans had a different take on the effect of the maps. Majority Leader Todd Gilbert said in a statement on Tuesday night that “liberal judicial gerrymandering” heavily influenced the election; and Cox maintained throughout the election that his district was targeted during the redrawing.

Pro-gun-rights groups and anti-abortion groups also partially blamed the Republicans’ loss on redistricting.

“While this election was supposed to be a referendum on gun control, it appears to have had much more to do with recent court redistricting, which turned six Republican districts into blue-leaning districts,” the Virginia Citizens Defense League said in an email to its members Thursday.

Two black candidates ran as Republicans in Richmond and Northern Virginia and

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Henrico Democrat who leads the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus.

He said the General Assembly now has an opportunity to focus on getting rid of inequities in K-12 education and universities, the criminal justice system, health care and pay.

Li and Green said the new map wasn't the only reason Democrats took the majority — after all, the party only needed two seats to become the majority, and two flipped seats came from districts that weren't redrawn.

Other contributing factors include voter turnout, the electability of a candidate, how suited they are to represent a community and the political atmosphere during an election, Li said.

The other, perhaps unintended effect of the redrawn map was how much more competitive the districts became. Thirty House seats and 11 Senate seats were uncontested this year, compared to 62 House seats and 17 Senate seats in 2015, the last time the entire General Assembly was up for election.

“Reformers will tell you that when you stop gerrymandering, you'll get more competitive districts as a natural byproduct,” Green said, adding the gerrymandered maps are often drawn to protect incumbents.

Without applying the map to multiple elections, it'll be hard to see what effect the changed districts truly had on African American voters' ability to elect a candidate of their choice, Li said.

Next year, Democrats will control redistricting and a new map will be drawn for the next round of House elections in 2021.

Bagby said this was “just the start” of fair maps in Virginia.

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“I can't wait to see how we address the challenges related to gerrymandering holistically,” he said, pointing out the majority of Virginia's House districts weren't changed in this year's redistricting.

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Bagby and several other black lawmakers didn't support the Republican proposal, saying it didn't do enough to protect African American voters from being excluded. He also had concerns about any commission-drawn maps going to the Virginia Supreme Court — where judges have been elected by the GOP-led legislature — if the General Assembly can't agree on one.

“We are going into this redistricting with blacks being empowered more than they have ever been empowered in the history of the commonwealth,” he said. “I’m not going to make it easy for them to give that power away because it’s not the power of the electeds, it’s the power of those people that we just worked so hard for to make sure their voices are heard.”

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Marie Albiges



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