



CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

"Staying on Freedom and Justice"

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TESTIMONY OF
THE CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
BEFORE
THE NEW YORK CITY DISTRICTING COMMISSION

October 11, 2012

at

Medgar Evers College, CUNY
Brooklyn, New York



Prepared by:
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Executive Director
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General Counsel

Good evening. My name is Joan P. Gibbs and I am the General Counsel for the Center for Law and Social Justice. The Center for Law and Social Justice (CLSJ) is a unit of Medgar Evers College of The City University of New York. Founded in 1985, the mission of CLSJ is to promote civil and human rights, and national and international understanding by providing quality advocacy, research, and advocacy training services to people of African descent, especially those in Central Brooklyn and New York City, and New Yorkers who have been marginalized or disenfranchised. CLSJ works with community organizations and groups of people of African descent and disenfranchised New Yorkers. Because of its unique combination of advocacy services from a community-based perspective, CLSJ is a focal point for progressive activity.

CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – A Major NYC Voting Rights Advocate

From its founding, CLSJ has worked to defend the voting rights of Black and other New Yorkers of color. As the Commission is well aware, the federal Voting Rights Act specifically protects the voting rights of Black New Yorkers, as well as Hispanic and Asian New Yorkers and some language minorities. Because of New York City's long history of voting discrimination, three counties in New York City: Kings, The Bronx, and Manhattan are "covered counties" under Section 5 of the Rights Act (VRA).

CLSJ has led or co-led the following historic voting rights advocacy initiatives in New York City: the **New Majority for Charter Change** (1987-1989) which successfully advocated for voting rights provisions and other equitable initiatives to be included in the new NYC Charter; the **Majority Coalition for Fair Redistricting** (1991-1992) which worked to ensure fair redistricting for people of color in NYC. CLSJ is also a founding member of the **New York Voting Rights Consortium** (1993-present) a coalition of leading local and national voting rights

1. Create equally sized districts within 10% deviation in compliance with the “One Person - One Vote” requirement of the US Constitution;
 2. Protect the voting rights of the three protected groups in NYC: Blacks, Hispanics and Asians, in compliance with Section 5 and Section 2 of the federal Voting Rights Act.
- Further, the Commission should complete its task within a **timeframe that allows for public comment TO THE COMMISSION on its Final Plan** before it is submitted to the City Council. Anything less would be making a mockery of the Commission’s pledge to have an open and transparent process which allows for real public comment. The Final Plan is the most important document that the Commission will be releasing during its tenure save for any Amended Final Plan. The Final Plan is the document that the public is waiting for and seeks to comment on. The Commission’s current schedule fails to provide for public comment of the Draft Final Plan. That is simply unacceptable.

Comments on the First Draft Plan Released by the Commission

Frankly, we are disappointed with the Commission’s Draft Plan because it both fails to fully protect the voting rights of Blacks, Latinos, Asians and language minorities under the VRA and to recognize numerous communities of interest, nor did there appear to be a major effort to protect the voting rights of the VRA protected groups within NYC.

For example, in Brooklyn the Unity Map created a new District 46 which took into account the major migration of Caribbean families into the Canarsie area over the past decade. That area is now one of the most densely populated geographic communities of Caribbean families within New York City. The Commission, in contrast, failed to recognize the potential to draw a district which would protect the voting rights of this emerging community. Instead it

Similarly, in Harlem, the Commission's Draft District 9 splits Central Harlem from West Harlem from East Harlem. Further, it removes East Harlem, including El Barrio, from a Manhattan district, and makes it as an appendage to the South Bronx.

PROTECTION OF THE VOTING RIGHTS OF BLACK NEW YORKERS

In closing, we call on the NYC Districting Commission to undertake its duties with a heightened respect for Black communities throughout the city and the voting rights of Black New Yorkers. The Center for Law and Social Justice will continue to be actively engaged in the City Council redistricting process. Needless to say, we and our colleagues in the Unity Map Coalition will serve as watchdogs during the process on behalf of Black New Yorkers.

I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The Center for Law and Social Justice looks forward to a cooperative relationship with the Commission and most importantly to a Final Plan that will show respect for the voting rights of Black, Asians and Hispanic New Yorkers.