

# **Public Testimony to the Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee**

**Presented by Valerie F. Leonard, Founder, Nonprofit Utopia, LLC**  
**August 28, 2021**

Good afternoon. My name is Valerie Leonard. First of all, I thank Senate President Harmon, Senator Aquino and Senator Sims and the Senate Redistricting Committee for ensuring that we could have a hearing on Chicago's West Side. We appreciate your taking the time from your extremely busy schedules to listen to our concerns. We want to let you know that we appreciate your staff's outreach efforts to ensure that as many people who wanted the opportunity to voice their concerns could do so. Finally, we appreciate the fact that North Lawndale was essentially kept intact under the current redistricting plan.

I am the Founder of Nonprofit Utopia, the ideal community for emerging nonprofit leaders who want to build their own leadership skills while building the capacity of their organizations to make a positive impact on their clients and communities. Our membership includes nonprofit leaders from around Chicago, including the West, South and North sides; other states and abroad. Our mission is to develop the next generation of ethical nonprofit leaders, with a vision to train 50,000 people by 2033. This is achieved through consulting, coaching, an online community, livestreamed videos and podcasting.

We are convening Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting to engage Black leaders around the State of Illinois to provide education on redistricting and to engage them in the process. We have provided workshops on the redistricting process and how to navigate [ilga.gov](http://ilga.gov) and the Senate and House redistricting websites.

Nonprofit Utopia and Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting have hosted a number of meetings for our members to provide education on a number of topics, including the state and federal voting rights acts and proposed changes; the redistricting process; developing public testimony, etc. We are also hosting the Census Bureau to facilitate a workshop on navigating [Census.gov](http://Census.gov); creating data sets and understanding reapportionment.

I am a CoFounder of the Lawndale Alliance, a neighborhood association of local residents who come together on an ad hoc basis to address issues of concern to the community through grassroots community organizing, advocacy and community outreach. We were part of a statewide, multi-cultural coalition of grassroots organizations, facilitated by UCCRO, who came together to develop proposals to optimize opportunities for minorities around the State of Illinois to select candidates of their choice. Our map proposal provided more majority-minority districts than any other proposal in the state of Illinois. We are collaborating again this year to work on a Unity Map.

I am here to share some of the concerns Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting has regarding the redistricting process and respectfully request that you take the following into consideration as you amend the map that was enacted in June.

1. Michael Li and Laura Royden, researchers with the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, published a white paper, *Minority Representation: No Conflict With Fair Maps* in 2017. The report summarized their evidence-based study of whether or not creating majority minority districts resulted in political bias in redistricting plans. In so doing, they studied political outcomes in states with more than six majority minority Congressional districts. They found that
  - *The first decades of this century show no correlation between minority-majority districts consistently high rates of partisan bias. In fact, in several states partisan bias actually declined.*
  - *On the other hand, there is evidence from this decade that creating new majority-minority districts could, in fact, help reduce the high partisan bias in some of this decade's maps, particularly in states with racially polarized voting. Similarly, there is evidence from at least one state this decade and several states in earlier decades that undoing racial gerrymandering can materially improve partisan fairness levels.*

The data for Illinois indicated that the State's 2011 redistricting plan resulted in effectively neutralizing partisan bias from the State's political boundaries. In decades past, the State experienced significant Republican party bias, due primarily to "incumbent protection plans" negotiated between Democrats and Republicans (when Michael Madigan was Speaker of the House).

It should be noted that in 2011, under Speaker Madigan's leadership, that the State of Illinois was very intentional in creating political district maps that optimized minorities' ability to elect candidates of choice. This was also the year that the United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations (UCCRO) proposed its first Unity Map. The Unity Map was developed by a multi-cultural statewide coalition of community leaders from the Black, Latino and Muslim communities, and optimized opportunities for minority communities around the state to elect candidates of choice. The 2011 Illinois redistricting plan included many of the recommendations from UCCRO's mapping proposals. It is our

hope that the State can utilize lessons learned from that process to develop fair maps in 2021.

2. There are some who believe that the redistricting plan is unconstitutional because it relies upon ACS data and not the actual Census. Neither the federal government, nor the Illinois Constitution mandates that the U. S. Census data be used to draw districts for state, county, municipal government or school districts. Furthermore, the Illinois Constitution already provides that redistricting plans must be amended if they are found to be drawn in a manner that makes them noncompliant with state or federal laws, including the Voting Rights Act. We believe, based on a review of the data and current news reports, that the current redistricting plan will be amended pursuant to the process outlined in the Illinois Constitution.

Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting never had a problem with the use of ACS data, but with the boundaries themselves. We believe that the drawing of the boundary lines in the current redistricting plan were driven by factors other than preserving the voting rights of Illinois citizens in general, and Black people in particular. It is those factors—even more so than the use of ACS data--that resulted in the egregious results we are starting to see in the Legislature's redistricting plan.

Long before the Census data came out it was apparent to us, while using ACS estimates, that the State's redistricting plan diluted the voting power of Blacks in Historic Representative District 9, Historic Representative District 10 and Historic Senate District 5, on Chicago's West Side. On several occasions we shared our strong concerns through oral and written testimony in public hearings sponsored by the Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee and the Illinois House Redistricting Committee.

While some of our concerns were addressed, the most serious issues of voter dilution were ignored. This, in spite of the fact that we shared data that showed it was possible to draw these districts in a manner that restored historic Black majorities to these districts. A preliminary review of the Legislature's redistricting plan within the context of the full Census data indicate that these districts were drawn to be even more diverse than the current population shifts caused them to be in 2021. Under the most recent redistricting plan, these districts have significantly larger populations than the target per district population. As a result, the voter strength in these districts is less than 1:1 as compared to the districts whose populations more closely mirror the target population size. A similar dynamic exists with Representative District 6 on Chicago's South Side. While we are still analyzing the new district boundaries within the context of the current Census data, we believe we could find more instances of effective dilution of Black voting power.

3. The manner in which the redistricting hearings were carried out gave us very little time to fully analyze the data that were available to us at the time. As a result, we were unable to make recommendations based on sound analysis. Hearings were held during working hours, with some exceptions. Generally speaking, working people who wanted to attend the hearings needed to take time off from work in order to attend or participate virtually. We are

pleased that the Legislature did accept our request to host meetings at times and locations that were more accessible.

There were problems with the public mapping portal, so many people who wanted to draw their own maps gave up before finishing. When the Legislature initially released their maps, they didn't provide sufficient details to determine things like street boundaries and population size. Requests for data and other information went unanswered. When we sent FOIA requests, the Legislature still refused our requests. This made it impossible to better understand their mapping proposals and make informed reviews and recommendations.

In spite of the less-than-ideal environment in which to provide feedback, we participated in 9 public redistricting hearings and provided oral and written testimonies and Power Point presentations when we could. The turnaround time to provide feedback for the final redistricting plans was so short (less than 24 hours in some cases) that we were not able to provide written testimony. Instead, we found ourselves "flying by the seat of our pants", providing testimony based on "back of the envelope" analyses of the data behind the maps the Legislature developed. We literally found ourselves trying to be in two redistricting hearings at the same time the day the Legislature approved their final maps.

Once we were in the hearings, we were quite disappointed to see that members of the Legislature had apparently not read any of the redistricting proposals submitted by the public, let alone listened to our repeated requests to draw the maps in a manner that would optimize opportunities for Blacks and other minority groups to elect candidates of choice.

4. We are most concerned with the reduction of the number of majority Black legislative districts in the new plan. The redistricting plan of 2011 included 16 majority Black Representative Districts and 8 majority Black Senate Districts. A 2021 redistricting plan submitted to the Legislature by the United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations (UCCRO) (into which we provided input and supported) optimized opportunities for racial and religious minorities around the State of Illinois to elect candidates of their choice. Constructed using ACS data, it included 18 Black Representative Districts and 9 Senate districts with 50% or more Black population.

The UCCRO map was verifiably drawn within the constraints of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Illinois Voting Rights Act of 2011 and the Illinois Constitution and State Code. The Legislature claimed they prepared their maps under the same constraints and developed a redistricting plan with 15 Representative districts with 50% or more Black population and 7 Senate districts with 50% or more Black population. Clearly, the Legislature's map violates the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by neglecting to draw majority Black districts when the data permits.

We respectfully request the following:

1. The Legislature ensures that the State's redistricting plan creates the optimal number of majority Black representative and senate districts. Creating new majority-minority districts could, in fact, help reduce the potential for high partisan bias in the redistricting plan.

2. You ensure that the revised redistricting plan complies with all applicable laws, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Illinois Constitution and related State Code impacting redistricting and the Illinois Voting Rights Act of 2011. This would include ensuring that the redistricting plan optimizes opportunities for Black people to elect candidates of choice.
3. You ensure that the revised redistricting plan restores the historic Black majorities in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Representative Districts and Senate District 5. An example of how this may be achieved is found in the UCCRO Redistricting plan that was submitted to the Senate and House Redistricting committees back in May. UCCRO submitted proposed boundaries and data sets to support the boundaries.
4. You ensure that the revised redistricting plan brings the historic Black Representative Districts 9 and 10 within the population variations provided by Illinois State Code and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
5. You restore Representative District 6 to its historic Black majority and ensures that the size of the District falls within the population variations provided by Illinois State Code and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
6. You review the oral and written testimony provided by Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting and other members of the public, as well as the UCCRO redistricting plan to ensure that the will of the people of Illinois is represented in whatever redistricting plan the court approves.

In closing, we thank you for your time and consideration. We would be happy to share any supplemental documents and data you might request. If you have any questions, please feel to contact me at [valeriefleonard@msn.com](mailto:valeriefleonard@msn.com) or 773-571-3886.