

Written by Kathy

Friday, 15 April 2022 22:58 - Last Updated Friday, 22 April 2022 14:28

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**Pictured is Ohio state Senator Dr. Vernon Sykes, an Akron Democrat and co-chair of the Ohio Redistricting Commission**

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**By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor-in-chief. Coleman is a former public school biology teacher and a seasoned Black political, legal and investigative reporter who trained as a reporter at the Call and Post Newspaper in Cleveland, Ohio for 17 years.**

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COLUMBUS, Ohio-For the fourth time in less than three months, the Ohio Supreme Court has struck down state House and Senate redistricting maps approved by the seven-member Republican-dominated Ohio Redistricting Commission, ruling 4-3 on Thursday that the maps are unconstitutional and that they violate anti-gerrymandering rules approved seven-years-ago by Ohio voters.

The court said that the maps are not much different than the previously three submitted sets of maps and that, again, they fail to pass constitutional muster. Simply put, the court said that the maps are drawn to make it easier for Republican candidates in Ohio state House and Senate district races to win office over Democrats, both the House and Senate currently controlled by Republicans.

The court ordered the commission, which includes Gov Mike DeWine, House Speaker Robert Cupp, and Secretary of State Frank LaRose, to approve yet another set of maps by a May 6 deadline. And it denied requests by the League of Women Voters of Ohio and other plaintiffs who filed suit against the commission for failing to abide by the court's orders to demonstrate why it should not be held in contempt of court.

"It was clear that these maps would be invalidated from the moment the majority hijacked our historically transparent process," said state Sen. Dr. Vernon Sykes of Akron, co-chair of the redistricting commission and one of only two Democrats on the commission along with House Minority Leader Allison Russo. "The Supreme Court has given us another chance and plenty of opportunities to fulfill our duty to end gerrymandering, as voters have demanded. I sincerely hope that Republicans will finally commit to bipartisanship and work with Democrats to draw maps in an open, transparent manner."

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Sykes is the only Black on the commission.

The controversy has caused a delay in what would have been a May 3 primary in Ohio that included state House and Senate district races, those races now on hold, though congressional and statewide and other races will go forward as planned, including a hotly contested gubernatorial race and a high profile U.S. Senate race.

A former lieutenant governor and the first woman elected chief justice of the court, Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor, a Republican, joined with the three Democratic justices for a fourth time to reject the controversial state House and state Senate district maps breaking ranks with fellow Republicans on the bench. The remaining three Republican justices dissented, including Justices Sharon Kennedy and Patrick DeWine, the governor's son who refuses to recuse himself from redistricting rulings while doling so from any contempt hearings that might involve his father.

Kennedy is running Justice Jennifer Brunner, a Democrat, for the chief justice seat that is open since O'Connor, notwithstanding the primary election. Per state law, O'Connor, the court's first female chief justice, could not run for reelection because she is at least 70 years of age.

Gov DeWine is also running for reelection, as is LaRose, who seeks to hold on to his secretary of state seat. Other than three seats on the state supreme court, the Republicans hold all of the statewide offices in Ohio, and have done so since 2010 when John Kasich, who went on to win a second term and was succeeded by DeWine, ousted then Democratic governor Ted Strickland from office.

The commission, which approved the maps 5-2 and along party lines, has repeatedly been accused of approving racist and unconstitutional four-year state legislative district maps by plaintiffs in lawsuits pending before the court. The maps were to take effect for four years because Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature could not agree on 10-year maps.

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The court, on Jan 12., struck down the first set of GOP drawn maps, and did the same thing for the second, third and fourth maps respectively, Thursday's Supreme Court decision the latest in what has become a redistricting maps stand-off between the commission and the Ohio Supreme Court, and more specifically Justice O'Connor.

The plaintiffs in the three lawsuits who convinced the court to reject the maps the first time around, including the League of Women Voters of Ohio and the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, say basically the same thing. They argue that the maps are unconstitutional because they are drawn to carve state legislative districts where voters collectively favor Republicans over Democratic candidates for elections to the Ohio House and Senate. This, says the plaintiffs, is blatantly racist and against the 2015 voter approved referendum that changed redistricting rules.

The court's majority opinion in which the first set of maps were deemed illegal was written by Justice Melody Stewart, a Democrat and the first Black elected to the court. A former 8th District Court of Appeals judge out of Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, Stewart's opinion on behalf of the majority says the maps the first time around disproportionately favor Republicans.

Those preferences, Stewart wrote, were 54% for Republican candidates and 46% for Democratic candidates over the past 10 years and since the last census report.

"The commission is required to attempt to draw a plan in which the statewide proportion of Republican-leaning districts to Democratic-leaning districts closely corresponds to those

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percentages,” wrote Justice Stewart. “Section 6 speaks not of desire but of direction: the commission shall attempt to achieve the standards of that section.”

The court heard oral arguments in December relative to three lawsuits that challenge the first set of Republican-approved state legislative district maps that the court rejected, controversial maps approved in commission, which is accused of approving illegally drawn maps that are racist and that favor Republican candidates for office.

Such maps determine state district boundaries for elections of state representatives and state senators in Ohio, and in a discriminatory fashion, the lawsuits say. Currently, Republicans control the Ohio House of Representatives and the Ohio Senate, which is partly why the ORC is largely Republican.

An amendment to the state constitution approved by voters in 2015 changed the way the process for drawing congressional and state legislative maps occurs and created the ORC, though districts are still drawn initially in conjunction with population dynamics in response to the U.S. Census every 10 years. The year 2020 marked 10-years since the last applicable census and, accordingly, this year is the first time that the new process that employs authority to the ORC to step in for the state legislature when a partisan conflict ensues over the maps has been put to a test.

The first lawsuit for which the state Supreme Court heard oral arguments in December was filed by the ACLU primarily on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Ohio and the A. Philip Randolph Institute and the second by the National Democratic Redistricting Committee on behalf of a group of Ohio voters. A third suit was brought by plaintiffs who say the maps dilute Black Muslim votes. It was filed by the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, the Ohio Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Ohio Environmental Council.

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All three of the lawsuits were filed in the Ohio Supreme Court and allege in large part that the ORC purposely gerrymandered the maps to help Republicans win elections over Democrats for state House and Senate races with the plaintiffs in the third lawsuit claiming also that the maps have racial implications that raise constitutional questions since a majority of Black and Muslim voters and voters of color in general are Democrats.

"OOC believes that the maps currently under scrutiny by the state's highest court are unconstitutional because of the ways they dilute the power of voters in Black, brown, immigrant, and Muslim communities through "cracking and packing," a spokesperson for the Ohio Organizing Collaborative said in a statement to [clevelandurbannews.com](http://clevelandurbannews.com) and [www.kathywraycolemanonlinenewsblog.com](http://www.kathywraycolemanonlinenewsblog.com)

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Ohio lawmakers are term-limited. State law restricts state legislators in Ohio from holding office for more than eight years, and only after a four year period out of office.