

Concerns — and Campaign Plans — Mount As Chicago Remap Battle Drags On

February 3, 2022



As Black and Latino politicians continue to struggle for power on the Chicago City Council, the likelihood of a citywide referendum — followed by an expensive and lengthy court battle — grows along with political tensions.

New boundaries for the city's 50 wards are being redrawn based on the 2020 census, leaving the potential for political winners and losers who could change the city's political dynamic. They are also planting the seeds for what one powerful alderwoman says could be a \$40 million legal fight over the fate of just one seat.

Read More From the Newsroom

[PolitiFact](#)

Fact-check: No, Chicago's Jobless Rate in 2021 Was Not Better Than 'Any Large American City'

January 31, 2022



"Forty million dollars is a bunch of money," said Ald. Michelle Harris, 8th, a member of the Black Caucus and head of the council's Rules Committee. It "is a citywide facade program, not a citywide legal battle (fund). A fraction of this would give every citizen in Chicago PPE. ... Every citizen in Chicago could have one mask free.

"But we're going to give it to attorneys to fight over the fact that you won't be able to get one ward?"

While remaps happen every 10 years, this redrawing of council boundaries has the potential to be one of the most significant in recent memory because it is happening at a critical juncture in Chicago's political history. The decades-old political machine dominated by the Daley family and powerful white aldermen, such as now-indicted Ald. Ed Burke, is slipping away, leaving the decisions this year to have even more potential impact.

"The Latino Caucus is trying to get the power they think they deserve now," said Dick Simpson, a former alderman and longtime political science professor at the University of Illinois Chicago.

"It's always easier to go up from a number than to go down," Simpson added. "The more seats you have now, the better positioned you are for battle" during the next remap fight.

One seat but not two

Every decade, the national census count prompts council members to rejigger the ward map, and a boom over the past decade in the Latino population is at the center of the debate. By contrast, the number of Black residents calling the city home has fallen. The two council caucuses representing Black and Latino residents are digging in their heels.

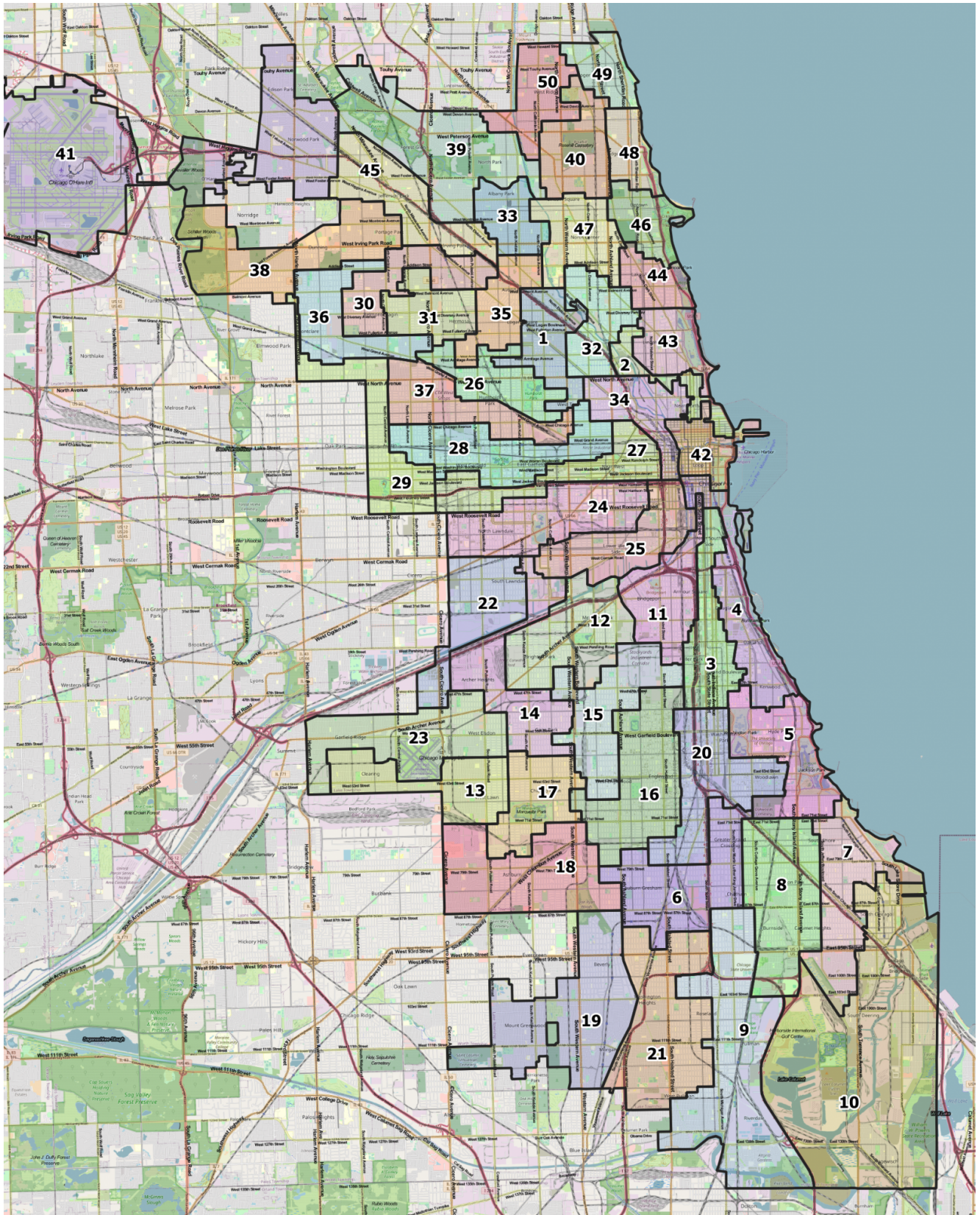
A group of Latino council members and their allies say the number of wards represented by a majority of voters who identify as Latino should rise to 15 from 13, enough to match the more than 40,000 additional Latinos living in Chicago compared to 10 years ago.

Most of the city's Black council members are willing to concede one seat — but not two.

In the middle are the 18 white council members, who expect the number of seats they control to stay the same. The only thing on which all three sides agree is the need for the city's first-ever ward with a majority of voters of Asian descent.

The two entrenched sides have been bickering over their proposals for months, and if they don't reach an agreement by mid May, the issue is scheduled to go to the city's voters in a referendum.

"We're still continuing to try to negotiate," said Ald. Gilbert Villegas, 36th, chair of the Latino Caucus. "But a negotiation has to have two sides that are willing to compromise. ... Right now, we feel that compromise has only been one-sided."



The proposed ward remap presented by the council's Latino Caucus. (Provided by Frank Calabrese)

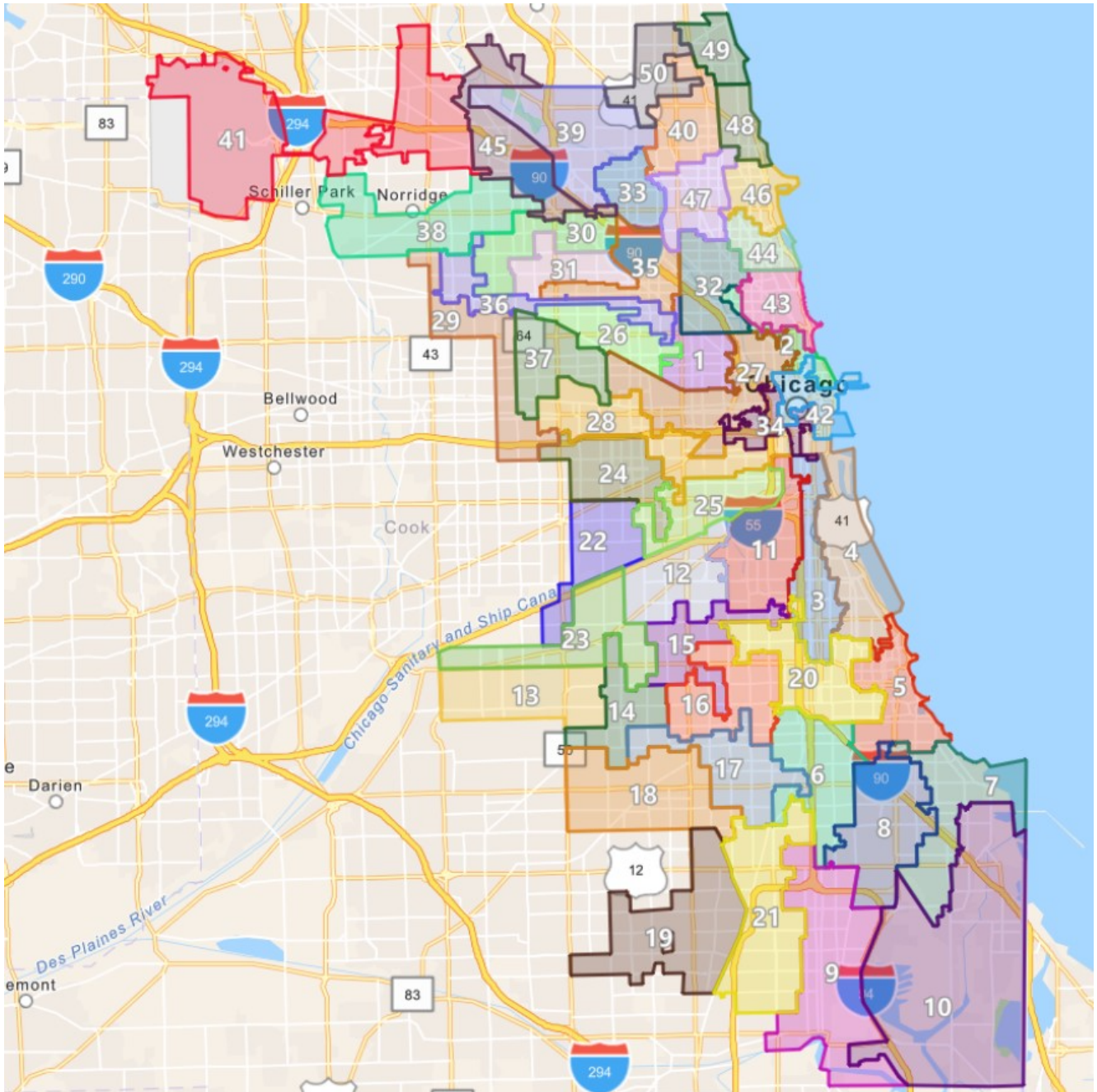
Villegas and others in the caucus insist the census supports their proposed map.

Census figures released in 2020 show the Latino population jumped from 778,862 in 2010 to 819,518, and now comprise a little over 30% of Chicago's 2.7 million

residents, which would equal 15 seats.

The Latino Caucus crafted a map that creates those 15 majority-Latino wards, and its leaders say they won't budge for anything less.

The alternative is a map crafted by Harris' Rules Committee, which supports 14 majority-Latino wards, up one from the current map.



The proposed ward remap from the council's Rules Committee. (Provided by Eileen Boyce/Rules Committee)

Readying for a referendum fight, the Latino Caucus filed its map with the city's clerk in early December. A third group, the independent Chicago Advisory Redistricting Commission, also submitted its version of a map that creates 15

majority-African American wards, 14 majority-Latino wards, as well as two wards with a Latino population over 45%. That independent map would need the support of 10 aldermen to be part of the referendum question.

Simpson was an adviser to that independent advisory group.

Villegas said it likely would cost more than \$100,000 for his side to wage a political campaign to persuade voters. He's skeptical of the Rules Committee process since Harris' failed attempt to defeat opponents of her map by lowering the number of votes needed to pass it, according to [the Chicago Sun-Times](#).

Harris insists her process is a fair one, and most council members who've gone through it have "not been offended."

"I just kind of resent the fact that I feel like the Latinos are being the crybabies," she said. "I'm not messing with folks, I'm not saying, 'Kill your project.' ... I'm not the crybaby in the group."

"If 15 people can hold 35 people hostage because they simply aren't getting 100% of what they want, they're having a temper tantrum — and the taxpayers are going to be the ones paying for it," Harris said.

While the Latino population has increased, the city's Black residents have declined by more than 84,000 to 788,000, compared to more than 872,000 in 2010. The map drawn by Harris' committee, and supported by the Black Caucus, allows for 17 wards with a majority of Black voters — one less than the current map.

Ald. Jason C. Ervin, 28th, the head of the Black Caucus, said giving up two wards would violate the Voting Rights Act of 1968, disenfranchising Black voters who still make up 29% of the city's population.

Harris said she's disappointed in how she's been treated by a Latino Caucus that has "never wanted to concede — they only have demands."

"You've got a loaf of bread, talking about you're hungry, but you've got a loaf of bread under your arm, and you're not even acknowledging that loaf," she said.

‘Depends on how much grudge there is’

Both sides say they are still negotiating and hope to avert a protracted battle, including a citywide referendum. But with only one seat in the balance, room for a compromise seems doubtful.

The last time voters weighed in on a citywide ward map, the 1992 vote was rendered moot by a federal court battle that lasted six years and cost taxpayers \$20 million in legal bills.

With that history as a guide, a federal judge — or an appellate panel — could once again make the final decision.

Harris has repeatedly estimated the legal costs for such a battle this time around could reach \$40 million. Experts interviewed by the Better Government Association were split on the likelihood of a 1992 repeat.

“It’s slightly more likely because if it does go to referendum, ... it means the voters will have decided, rather than the aldermen themselves,” said Jim Lewis, a senior research specialist at the University of Illinois Chicago’s Great Cities Institute.

“So I think it makes it a little more likely that one of the groups will sue somebody,” he said. “It kind of depends on how much grudge there is.”

Allan Lichtman, a history professor at American University who was called to testify by the Rules Committee as an expert witness in the redistricting process, said he doesn’t think there’s a legal issue for the courts to decide.

“In terms of the Voting Rights Act, there’s no distinction between the two plans,” he said. “I don’t see the basis for a voting rights challenge here — they’re expensive, time-consuming and the city has plenty of problems of its own.

“It would not be a benefit to the city for feuding members to engage in expensive, protracted litigation.”

Robert Vargas, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, said a referendum is likely, but court intervention is “doubtful.”

Vargas said courts have typically given local authorities flexibility in redistricting

decisions, only intervening in cases with “really egregious forms of disenfranchisement.”

“What’s really up for debate in the two maps is ... one seat” and who will lose it, Vargas said.

“I really doubt a judge would look at that and say, ‘Oh, this has a huge effect on either of these communities,’” he added. “There are instances of this kind of disenfranchisement happening right now in places like Texas, and the (U.S.) Department of Justice is currently litigating. ... Sure, I think a court case might arise, but I have really high doubts that it’s actually going to yield the intended outcomes for the folks filing the lawsuit.”

Lightfoot still on the sidelines

Mayor Lori Lightfoot has stayed out of the war of the wards, urging council members to figure out a solution to avoid a referendum.

But even in victory, there are no guarantees.

On the current city council, for example, there are several council members who represent wards with voter demographics different from their own race or ethnicity.

Burke, Ald. Susan Sadlowski Garza, 10th, and Ald. Marty Quinn, 13th, for instance, represent majority-Latino wards, while Matt Martin, 47th, who is Black, represents a ward with a majority-white population.

Currently, the council has 20 Black members, 12 Latino and 18 who are white, despite a ward map that was drawn in 2010 with 13 wards with a majority of Latino voters and 18 with a majority of Black voters.

Harris said those stats undermine the Latino Caucus’ demand for more wards because candidates have shown they can get elected in wards regardless of their race.

Ervin, chair of the Black Caucus, accused the Latino Caucus of wanting to “hold everybody hostage.”

“We’re only asking for what we’re due; they’re asking for what they’re due plus some, and they want to take ours in the process but won’t go across the aisle to deal with another community,” Ervin said, adding it’s “sad” the Latino Caucus has “pitted themselves against us,” rather than their other white colleagues.



Ald. Harris speaks with Ald. Gilbert Villegas, 36th, chair of the Latino Caucus. (Don Vincent/The Daily Line)

Villegas said the Latino Caucus isn’t pitting itself against anyone, and must pursue all the Latino seats possible to avoid diluting that demographic’s voting power. The Rules Committee map “puts us in a position that, we feel, is not reflective of the city.”

“The Latino population has grown for the second decade in a row. To not take that into consideration in the reapportionment of the wards is something that I’m not prepared to let happen again, given that we did not capitalize on the seats the last decade.

“If the coalition map wins, I think you’ll see an opportunity for more Latinos and more African Americans to be elected as council members,” Villegas said. “When you’re talking about a \$16.4 billion budget, the more people of color who are at the table having the ability to put forward recommendations for how that should

be appropriated, the better.”

Ervin said the Black Caucus has made some preliminary estimates for a referendum campaign, and the group is currently in the process of putting funding and programming together in case the process is placed in the hands of voters.

Ervin wouldn't say how much the campaign might cost. But he said, with redistricting being a mystifying topic and the primary election pushed back, there would definitely be a focus on educating city residents, so “they can understand what's at stake.”

“We have to come to a conclusion one way or another, or the city residents will do that,” Ervin said. “Right now, the case is poised for referendum — there is a map filed, there is a referendum scheduled because a map has been filed. The question is will a second map be found.”

The death of the machine

Vargas, the University of Chicago sociology professor, said lack of a strong central powerbase within the local Democratic Party has prompted a new power struggle.

“Having a new state speaker, having a new mayor, seeing the downfall of some of these old key players like Burke, although they're not entirely down yet, just shows how the whole structure and organization of the Democratic Party is much more in flux than it has ever been,” he said.

In the past, relationships between the council, the mayor, the state legislature and the governor were more “cohesive,” he said. Redistricting was run by mayoral allies such as Burke and former Ald. Dick Mell, council members who could lean on people to get what they wanted.

“It requires different means to resolve (issues),” Vargas said. “In the case of redistricting, it's looking like that will be a referendum.”

Simpson agreed, saying a power vacuum enables the infighting that used to take place behind the scenes to happen front and center.

Unlike mayors of the past, Lightfoot doesn't have a "rubber-stamp" city council. That's a key reason for the mayor's reluctance to wade into the controversy.

"No matter which side she would pick, or what she would do, she would likely create permanent opponents on her other legislation," he said.

UIC's Lewis isn't convinced the fighting this time around is related to political shifts and pointed to intra-council squabbles during previous remap processes.

"There've been times where there just wasn't anyone who could pull together interests that were very different, as the Latino interest is this time," Lewis said.

A new map, whether by referendum or compromise, will likely bring few changes in policy. Most of the fallout will affect individual council members the most — especially those whose wards are moving to new neighborhoods altogether.

Villegas said "democracy is always an ugly process, and it gets messy sometimes." But he hopes his colleagues will be able to move forward after the process is over and work together.

"Will feelings be hurt? Yes," Villegas said. "But do I feel that it's beyond a point where colleagues have to understand what's in the best interest of the people? I would hope not because we're elected to do a job there, and the job we're supposed to do is making sure that we're representing our respective wards and residents of the city of Chicago."

Ervin said the ramifications of the new map will likely stem from the "lasting impacts of these conversations," talks that could make governing more difficult in the future.

"Relationships have been damaged," he said. "I think it will create a much harsher and much different climate in the city council than there has been in the past."