NEW ORLEANS — ***Politics*** and race are both factors in a [*pending court challenge*](https://apnews.com/article/louisiana-congressional-map-black-districts-10b7a1feb7c6af6bb84b8dfccdcb1fbd) of Louisiana's new congressional maps. How much weight each carries is a major question before three federal judges whose ruling could affect the balance of power in the next Congress.

At issue is a congressional map that was approved this year with the backing of the state's new governor, Jeff Landry — to the consternation of at least some of his fellow Republicans.

The map creates a new mostly Black congressional district in Louisiana, at the expense of a white Republican incumbent, Rep. Garret Graves, who backed another Republican in the governor's election last fall. Given voting patterns in Louisiana, a mostly Black district would be more likely to send a Democrat to Congress.

Twelve self-described non-African American voters argued in a lawsuit that the new mostly Black district constitutes illegal “textbook racial gerrymandering.”

Not so, argue the new map's backers. ***Politics***, they argue, was the major influence in drawing the new district boundary lines. They say the new map protects most incumbents and draws together Black populations in a way that will comply with the federal Voting Rights Act, giving Louisiana, which is roughly one-third Black, a second majority Black district among six.

They also pointed to Republican backers of the plan, who said during legislative debates in January that they wanted to safeguard four GOP-held House districts, including those of House Speaker Mike Johnson and Majority Leader Steve Scalise.

That the new map put Graves in political peril by placing him in the new mostly Black district is further evidence race wasn't the sole motivating factor, the map's backers said in briefs and in testimony last week at a hearing in Shreveport.

“We all know that one of the main reasons it was drawn the way it was, was because Gov. Jeff Landry wants to get rid of Congressman Graves,” state Rep. Mandie Landry, a New Orleans Democrat who testified at the hearing, said in a [*social media post*](https://www.instagram.com/votelandry/reel/C5muJEDtmCv/). Landry is no relation to the governor.

State Sen. Cleo Fields, a Black Democrat from the Baton Rouge area who served in Congress in the 1990s, has already declared his candidacy in the newly configured district.

Whatever the three judges decide will likely be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. It's unclear when the judges will rule, but time is growing short. State election officials say they need to know the configuration of the districts by May 15 to prepare for the fall elections.

The controversy in Louisiana, as in other states, arose because new government district boundary lines are redrawn by legislatures every 10 years to account for population shifts reflected in census data. Louisiana’s Republican-dominated Legislature drew a new map in 2022 that, despite some boundary shifts, was favorable to all six current incumbents: five white Republicans and a Black Democrat. Then-Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, vetoed the map but the majority-Republican Legislature overrode the veto, leading to a court challenge filed in Baton Rouge.

In June 2022, Baton Rouge-based U.S. District Judge Shelly Dick issued an injunction against the map, saying challengers would likely win their suit claiming it violated the Voting Rights Act. As the case was appealed, the U.S. Supreme Court issued an unexpected ruling in June that favored Black voters in a congressional [*redistricting case in Alabama*](https://apnews.com/article/supreme-court-redistricting-race-voting-rights-alabama-af0d789ec7498625d344c0a4327367fe).

Dick sided with challengers who said the 2022 map packed a significant number of voters in one district — District 2 which stretches from New Orleans to the Baton Rouge area — while “cracking” the remaining Black population by apportioning it to other mostly white districts.

In November, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals gave the state a January deadline for drawing a new congressional district. Landry, who was the state's attorney general when he was elected to succeed the term-limited Edwards, called a special session to redraw the map, saying the Legislature should do it rather than a federal judge.

The new map does not resemble the sample maps that supporters of a new majority Black district had suggested earlier, which would have created a new district largely covering the northeastern part of the state.

The new mostly Black district crosses the state diagonally, linking Shreveport in the northwest to parts of the Baton Rouge area in the southeast. And while its backers hail the creation of a new majority Black district, the plaintiffs say it results in “explicit, racial segregation of voters.”

The judges hearing the case are U.S. District Judges David Joseph and Robert Summerhays, both nominated to the court by former President Donald Trump; and Judge Carl Stewart of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, nominated by former Democratic President Bill Clinton.

The judges have given no indication when they will rule. “We're going to have to know soon,” Mandie Landry said, citing the upcoming elections.