



**Cesar Z. Ruiz**

Equal Justice Works Fellow Sponsored by the Lavan-Harris Family

LatinoJustice PRLDEF

NYC Redistricting Commission Hearing

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Greetings, Commissioners of the New York City Redistricting Commission. Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to testify. Redistricting is a critical component of our democracy that will determine the political representation of our great city for the next 10 years. As we know, historically members of marginalized communities have been excluded and disenfranchised by a political process that is often partisan. Our participation and that of our communities in this process is crucial.

My name is Cesar Z. Ruiz. I am an attorney and Equal Justice Works Legal Fellow sponsored by the Lavan-Harris Family at LatinoJustice PRLDEF. LatinoJustice PRLDEF is a Latinx civil rights organization that works to create a more just society by using and challenging the rule of law to secure transformative, equitable and accessible justice, by empowering our community, and by fostering leadership through advocacy and education. We have actively participated in New York City districting and mapping over the past several decades, advocating for equitable representation of the Latinx community. We are proud to join and collaborate with our Unity Coalition partners in that effort once again during this redistricting cycle.

I want to start by highlighting the immense growth of New York City's Latino community over the past 10 years. We can no longer be considered a minority of the electorate; rather, we are now a significant and decisive voting bloc that deserves the opportunity to elect candidates of our own choosing who represent the values and needs of Latinx communities. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, Latinos comprise 28.3% of New York City's total population and have added over 150,000 residents<sup>1</sup> in the past 10 years. In the Bronx we have added over 65,000 residents; in Queens, over 54,000; in Brooklyn, over 20,000; and in

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<sup>1</sup> 154,274 Latino residents to be precise. Source: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/new-york-population-change-between-census-decade.html>



Richmond County, over 15,000. In Manhattan, despite its lack of affordability and historic rates of gentrification, the Latino population decreased by only 937 residents.<sup>2</sup> This consistent growth warrants a New York City district map that is reflective of this population increase. Moving forward, I respectfully urge the Commission to consider these trends and account for them in the map-drawing process.

In addressing Latinx representation in the city council and the demographic composition of former city council, I wish to highlight a few salient points which will inevitably inform this process. At this moment, 15 City Council Members, out of 51, identify as Latino or are of Latino heritage, which approximately matches our population share of the City's total population. This representation is not by luck or happenstance. Instead, it reflects the deep commitment of our community members on the local level to elect and empower their leaders to take the oath of public office and serve their communities. Regarding the demographic breakdowns of districts, Latinos currently represent a majority in nine City Council districts and have strong pluralities in five additional districts. These districts need to be maintained where possible, given the consistent growth of the Latino community over the past ten years. Any attempts to adjust and redraw districts should endeavor to connect longstanding communities of interest, disrupting as little as possible where existing boundaries have shown an ability to elect candidates of choice for Latino community members.

In addition, we have some notes about the process. We commend the Commission on providing an opportunity for public testimony before the Commission begins the drafting process. We urge the Commission to continue to provide additional opportunities for the public to inform the Commission of community needs and community views on shaping electoral districts and political power for the next decade. This process does not work and is not meaningful unless we have a robust engagement with the community, who ultimately must live with the impact of this process.

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.* Despite this supposed decrease of population in Manhattan, we have seen a deep level of activism and community engagement in Manhattan county, which has culminated in the election of several Latino candidates of choice on the City Council level, with five individuals who identify as Latino or have Latino heritage garnering extensive support of existing Latino communities of interest. In addition, 2017 saw the election of the first Dominican-American to the House of Representatives, with overwhelming Latino community support.



With regard to New York State law's imposition of a 5% deviation limitation, we recognize that requirement adds another layer to the map-drawing process. However, this new provision cannot be used as an excuse to produce maps that harm or dilute the voting power of communities of color.

Recognizing the demographic trends and shifts in various areas throughout the city as well as the limitations on crossing boroughs, we are recommending a continued crossing between East Harlem and South Bronx (as configured in current district 8) as well as a continued crossing between Brooklyn and Queens County (as configured in current 34) connecting the communities of Williamsburg, Bushwick, and Ridgewood. The combination of these areas connects long standing Latino communities of interest that have benefitted from being paired together. Their combination has enabled them to consistently elect candidates of their choice which protect their interests and adequately represent their shared cultural, economic and social interests. We give these notes as preliminary suggestions to help guide the initial drafting process and also plan on submitting maps to help guide your drawing.

In the face of such consistent growth, the Latino community cannot accept any dilution in their ability to elect candidates of their choice. Any map drawn by the Commission must reflect what the demographic population numbers show: Latino community that is growing along with its political power, influence, and representation. I thank you for your hard work and the opportunity to testify before you. I look forward to seeing your draft maps and engaging in this vital process.