Friday, October 27, 2023

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| imageAdvertisement**Judge tosses Georgia's political maps**Rules state's districts are discriminatory, must be redrawn by Dec. 8**Jeff Amy and Kate Brumback**ASSOCIATED PRESSATLANTA – A federal judge ruled Thursday that some of Georgia's congressional, state Senate and state House districts were drawn in a racially discriminatory manner, ordering the state to draw an additional Black-majority congressional district.U.S. District Judge Steve Jones, in a 516-page order, also ordered the state to draw two new Black-majority districts in Georgia's 56-member state Senate and five new Black-majority districts in its 180-member state House.Jones ordered Georgia's Republican majority General Assembly and governor to fix the maps by Dec. 8, saying he would redraw districts if lawmakers did not. Hours after the ruling, Gov. Brian Kemp issued a call for a special session to begin Nov. 29 to redraw congressional and legislative districts, although a spokesperson said that is a scheduling decision and doesn't mean the Republican opposes an appeal.Jones' ruling follows an eight-day September trial in which the plaintiffs argued that Black voters are still fighting opposition from white voters and need federal help to get a fair shot, while the state argued court intervention on behalf of Black voters wasn't needed."Georgia has made great strides since 1965 toward equality in voting," Jones wrote. "However, the evidence before this court shows that Georgia has not reached the point where the political process has equal openness and equal opportunity for everyone."The Georgia case is part of a wave of litigation after the U.S. Supreme Court earlier this year stood behind its interpretation of the Voting Rights Act, rejecting a challenge to the law by Alabama.Courts in Alabama and Florida ruled recently that Republican-led legislatures had unfairly diluted the voting power of Black residents. Legal challenges to congressional districts are also ongoing in Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Utah.Jones wrote that he would not allow the 2024 elections to be conducted using districts he has found to be "unlawful." That would require a special session, as lawmakers aren't scheduled to meet again until January.Jones' order explicitly anticipates an appeal by the state, and such an appeal could slow down that schedule, and maybe even let the maps be used again next year. The U.S. Supreme Court has previously ruled that judges shouldn't require changes to districts too close to an election.A spokesperson for Republican Attorney General Chris Carr, whose office defended the plans in court, declined comment, saying lawyers were still reading the ruling. Other Republicans want to keep fighting."The majority party went to great lengths to draw maps that were legal, fair, compact, and kept communities of interest together," state Senate Republicans led by Majority Leader Steve Gooch of Dahlonega said in a statement. "Obviously we strongly disagree with the ruling and expect that all legal options will be explored to maintain the maps as passed by the legislature."A new map could shift one of Georgia's 14 congressional seats from Republican to Democratic control. GOP lawmakers redrew the congressional map from an 8-6 Republican majority to a 9-5 Republican majority in 2021. Jones ruled that lawmakers could not eliminate minority opportunity districts elsewhere when they redraw maps."I applaud the district court's decision ordering Georgia to draw maps compliant with the Voting Rights Act," said state Senate Minority Leader Gloria Butler, a Stone Mountain Democrat. "We are eager to help pass fairer maps that comply with federal law."Orders to draw new legislative districts could narrow Republican majorities in the state House, where the GOP has a 102-78 edge, and in the state Senate, with a 33-23 edge.Jones wrote that he conducted a "thorough and sifting review" of the evidence in the case before concluding that Georgia violated the Voting Rights Act in enacting the current congressional and legislative maps.The judge wrote that despite the fact that all of the state's population increase between 2010 and 2020 was attributable to growth among nonwhite populations, the number of congressional and state Senate districts with a Black majority remained the same.Jones wrote in a footnote that his order "in no way states or implies that the General Assembly or Georgia Republicans are racist." The Voting Rights Act does not require him to find that the challenged maps were passed to discriminate against Black voters or that the Legislature is racist, he wrote. "Nothing in this order should be construed to indicate otherwise."Advertisement**Georgia state Sen. John Kennedy, R-Macon, introduces a map of state Senate districts at the Georgia Capitol in Atlanta in 2021. A federal judge ordered the state to draw two new Black-majority districts in Georgia's 56-member Senate.**HYOSUB SHIN/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION VIA AP FILECopyright © 2023 Democrat and Chronicle 10/27/2023Powered by TECNAVIA |
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