[New York Times](http://www.redistrictinginamerica.org/redistrictingnews/entry/2011/07/14/new-york-times-latinos-surge-but-may-not-win-equal-political-clout)

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LAS VEGAS — The population of Latinos has exploded here, and they want their voices heard not just in the halls of schools like [Clark High](http://ccsd.net/schools/acc_pdfs_2010/551.pdf) or on the growing number of Spanish-language radio stations, but also in Congress.

The [swelling ranks of Latinos here](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/32000.html) are a big reason Nevada will win a new seat in Washington. And so, as part of the once-a-decade redistricting process, leaders here are sketching out a new Congressional district that would give Latino neighborhoods more sway over their representation in Washington.

But that simple goal is turning out to be anything but. The efforts are complicated by the many ways people interpret laws governing redistricting. Politicians are also using the redistricting battles to advance their own agendas — ones that often have nothing to do with the Latino population.

Now, Nevada’s new Congressional map is in the hands of a judge, who announced plans on Tuesday to appoint a panel of special masters to tackle the matter, after party leaders here clashed over vexing questions.

How many of the residents of a new district should be Latino? What will it all mean for Democratic candidates? For Republican candidates? For the ethnic makeup of the state’s other three Congressional districts? For individual incumbents?

“There is consensus about one thing: that one of these districts is going to give the best opportunity yet for Latinos to elect a candidate of their choice, and that puts us in a very pivotal position,” said Andres Ramirez, a political consultant and leader of the Nevada Latino Redistricting Coalition. The group has drawn its own map — a very different one from that proposed by the state’s Republicans, but also different from the ones offered by the Democrats.

“Latinos have become the political football this year,” Mr. Ramirez said.

The [remarkable growth of Latinos nationwide](http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb11-cn146.html) — they accounted for more than half the nation’s population jump in the past 10 years and now make up more than 16 percent of the population — means that similar political calculations, debates and legal considerations are playing out across the country, much as they did in decades past with the shifting population of African-Americans.

Political parties are keenly aware of the stakes. In the last presidential election, surveys showed that Latino voters leaned toward the Democratic Party, which hopes to hold on to this increasingly powerful bloc, even as Republicans in some places are working hard to woo Latinos to their side. …

Still, Mr. Saenz said, the verdict will not be in on how much political force Latinos will gain until skirmishes like the one now in Nevada’s courts are settled. “What we know for sure is that getting control of districts to which you are entitled means someone else relinquishing political power,” he said. “And that’s the rub.”

With deadlines approaching to finish the new maps before next year’s elections, battles are heating up around the country….

The legal disputes are based on the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/v/voting_rights_act_1965/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier), aimed at banning discrimination against racial and other groups.

Some states with histories of such problems must get explicit approval from the United States attorney general or the Federal District Court in Washington for changes that affect voting, but others, like Nevada, fall into a murkier realm in which all sides seem to interpret the Voting Rights Act, which calls in certain circumstances for minority-dominated districts, in ways that might propel the map they most desire.

Here in Nevada, Democrats, who control the State Legislature, have drawn a new Congressional map that includes a district where Latinos would make up 37 percent of the residents, and two other districts in which Latino residents would make up about a quarter of the population. Under their plan, three of the state’s four districts would be dominated by registered Democrats, while Republicans could keep one.

But Brian Sandoval, the Republican governor, vetoed the Democrats’ plans, arguing that they violated the Voting Rights Act by not establishing a district with a Latino majority even though, the governor said, “such a district can clearly and simply be drawn.”

The state’s Republicans have offered their own plan — one in which Republican residents would control two of the four Congressional seats, and Democrats the other two. In one of the Democratically controlled districts, Latino residents would make up just over 50 percent of the residents — giving them, in essence, their own seat; the other districts would include far fewer Latinos.

If Republicans would appear to be trying to defend the power of Latinos here, not everyone here interprets it that way. Republicans do not do particularly well in Nevada with Latinos, who were credited with coming out in force in 2010 for Senator Harry Reid, the Democratic leader whose re-election had once appeared in jeopardy, and with helping Barack Obama win Nevada in 2008. Governor Sandoval, who is himself Latino, received support from only about a third of Latino voters last fall, exit polls showed.

Democrats say the Republicans’ efforts to create a Latino district result in one that is not just oddly shaped but that also fails to include a majority of Latinos of voting age (as opposed to residents of all ages). The Democrats say the proposed map fails to meet the tests required by the Voting Rights Act and ultimately dilutes the voices of Latinos in the state’s other districts.

“They say we’re packing,” said Daniel Stewart, a lawyer for the Republicans, referring to the practice (part of the lexicon in the world of redistricting) of stuffing minority groups into single districts. “We say they’re cracking,” he said, of claims that the Democrats are splitting up Latinos to dilute their strength.

For Latinos here, groups seem to be forming by the week, and new maps are emerging along with them.

Alex Garza, a businessman and a member of a new organization Hispanics for Fair Representation, said he leaned toward a map that would ensure a single district with a majority of Latinos, something close, he said, to the Republicans’ plan.

“To dilute our voting power right now is kind of shooting ourselves in the foot,” he said. “We finally have not just a seat at the table but we can direct the conversation — so we should.”

Vicenta Montoya, the chairwoman of the Si Se Puede Latino Democratic Caucus, described both parties’ maps as flawed, but said the Republicans’ was worse.

“They have taken this very paternalistic position of: ‘We know what’s best for you. And if we stick every Maria and Juan in a single district, you’ll get a candidate,’ ” she said.

Ms. Montoya’s imagined map: one Congressional district with a higher percentage of Latino residents than the Democrats have pressed for, but also Latino residents spread through other districts.

“I’d like to be able to go to three representatives who are going to listen to me,” she said. “Why not?”