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Guidance Concerning Redistricting Under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act; Notice

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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AGENCY: Office of the Assistant Attorney General, Civil Rights Division, Department of Justice.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: The Attorney General has delegated responsibility and authority for determinations under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act to the Assistant Attorney General, Civil Rights Division, who finds that, in view of recent legislation and judicial decisions, it is appropriate to issue guidance concerning the review of redistricting plans submitted to the Attorney General for review pursuant to Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

T. Christian Herren, Jr., Chief, Voting Section, Civil Rights Division, United States Department of Justice, Washington, DC 20530, (202) 514-1416.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, 42 U.S.C.

1973c, requires jurisdictions identified in Section 4 of the Act to obtain a determination from either the Attorney General or the United States District Court for the District of Columbia that any change affecting voting which they seek to enforce does not have a discriminatory purpose and will not have a discriminatory effect.

Beginning in 2011, these covered jurisdictions will begin to seek review under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of redistricting plans based on the 2010 Census. Based on past experience, the overwhelming majority of the covered jurisdictions will submit their redistricting plans to the Attorney General. This guidance is not legally binding; rather, it is intended only to provide assistance to jurisdictions covered by the preclearance requirements of Section 5.

Guidance Concerning Redistricting Under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, 42 U.S.C. 1973c

Following release of the 2010 Census data, the Department of Justice expects to receive several thousand submissions of redistricting plans for review pursuant to Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. The Civil Rights Division has received numerous requests for guidance similar to that it issued prior to the 2000 Census redistricting cycle concerning the procedures and standards that will be applied during review of these redistricting plans. 67 FR 5411 (January 18, 2001). In addition,

in 2006, Congress reauthorized the Section 5 review requirement and refined its definition of some substantive standards for compliance with Section 5. In view of these developments, issuing revised guidance is appropriate.

The "Procedures for the Administration of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act," 28 CFR Part 51, provide detailed information about the Section 5 review process. Copies of these Procedures are available upon request and through the Voting Section Web site (<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting>). This document is meant to provide additional guidance with regard to current issues of interest. Citations to judicial decisions are provided to assist the reader but are not intended to be comprehensive. The following discussion provides supplemental guidance concerning the following topics:

- The Scope of Section 5 Review;
- The Section 5 Benchmark;
- Analysis of Plans (discriminatory purpose and retrogressive effect);
- Alternatives to Retrogressive Plans;
- Use of 2010 Census Data.

The Scope of Section 5 Review

Under Section 5, a covered jurisdiction has the burden of establishing that a proposed redistricting plan "neither has the purpose nor will have the effect of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race or color, or in contravention of the guarantees set forth in [Section 4(f)(2) of the Act]" (i.e., membership in a language minority group defined in the Act). 42 U.S.C. 1973c(a). A plan has a discriminatory effect under the statute if, when compared to the benchmark plan, the submitting jurisdiction cannot establish that it does not result in a "retrogression in the position of racial minorities with respect to their effective exercise of the electoral franchise." *Beer v. United States*, 425 U.S. 125, 141 (1976).

If the proposed redistricting plan is submitted to the Department of Justice for administrative review, and the Attorney General determines that the jurisdiction has failed to show the absence of any discriminatory purpose or retrogressive effect of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race, color or membership in a language minority group defined in the Act, the Attorney General will interpose an objection. If, in the alternative, the jurisdiction seeks a declaratory judgment from the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, that court will utilize the identical standard

to determine whether to grant the request; i.e., whether the jurisdiction has established that the plan is free from discriminatory purpose or retrogressive effect. Absent administrative preclearance from the Attorney General or a successful declaratory judgment action in the district court, the jurisdiction may not implement its proposed redistricting plan.

The Attorney General may not interpose an objection to a redistricting plan on the grounds that it violates the one-person one-vote principle, on the grounds that it violates *Shaw v. Reno*, 509 U.S. 630 (1993), or on the grounds that it violates Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. The same standard applies in a declaratory judgment action. Therefore, jurisdictions should not regard a determination of compliance with Section 5 as preventing subsequent legal challenges to that plan under other statutes by the Department of Justice or by private plaintiffs. 42 U.S.C. 1973c(a); 28 CFR 51.49.

The Section 5 "Benchmark"

As noted, under Section 5, a jurisdiction's proposed redistricting plan is compared to the "benchmark" plan to determine whether the use of the new plan would result in a retrogressive effect. The "benchmark" against which a new plan is compared is the last legally enforceable redistricting plan in force or effect. *Riley v. Kennedy*, 553 U.S. 406 (2008); 28 CFR 51.54(b)(1). Generally, the most recent plan to have received Section 5 preclearance or to have been drawn by a Federal court is the last legally enforceable redistricting plan for Section 5 purposes. When a jurisdiction has received Section 5 preclearance for a new redistricting plan, or a Federal court has drawn a new plan and ordered it into effect, that plan replaces the last legally enforceable plan as the Section 5 benchmark. *McDaniel v. Sanchez*, 452 U.S. 130 (1981); *Texas v. United States*, 785 F. Supp. 201 (D.D.C. 1992); *Mississippi v. Smith*, 541 F. Supp. 1329, 1333 (D.D.C. 1982), appeal dismissed, 461 U.S. 912 (1983).

A plan found to be unconstitutional by a Federal court under the principles of *Shaw v. Reno* and its progeny cannot serve as the Section 5 benchmark. *Abrams v. Johnson*, 521 U.S. 74 (1997), and in such circumstances, the benchmark for Section 5 purposes will be the last legally enforceable plan predating the unconstitutional plan. Absent such a finding of unconstitutionality under *Shaw* by a Federal court, the last legally enforceable plan will serve as the benchmark for Section 5 review. Therefore, the question of whether the

benchmark plan is constitutional will not be considered during the Department's Section 5 review.

Analysis of Plans

As noted above, there are two necessary components to the analysis of whether a proposed redistricting plan meets the Section 5 standard. The first is a determination that the jurisdiction has met its burden of establishing that the plan was adopted free of any discriminatory purpose. The second is a determination that the jurisdiction has met its burden of establishing that the proposed plan will not have a retrogressive effect.

Discriminatory Purpose

Section 5 precludes implementation of a change affecting voting that has the purpose of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race or color, or membership in a language minority group defined in the Act. The 2006 amendments provide that the term "purpose" in Section 5 includes "any discriminatory purpose," and is not limited to a purpose to regress, as was the case after the Supreme Court's decision in *Reno v. Bossier Parish* ("Bossier II"), 528 U.S. 320 (2000). The Department will examine the circumstances surrounding the submitting authority's adoption of a submitted voting change, such as a redistricting plan, to determine whether direct or circumstantial evidence exists of any discriminatory purpose of denying or abridging the right to vote on account of race or color, or membership in a language minority group defined in the Act.

Direct evidence detailing a discriminatory purpose may be gleaned from the public statements of members of the adopting body or others who may have played a significant role in the process. *Busbee v. Smith*, 549 F. Supp. 494, 508 (D.D.C. 1982), *aff'd*, 459 U.S. 1166 (1983). The Department will also evaluate whether there are instances where the invidious element may be missing, but the underlying motivation is nonetheless intentionally discriminatory. In the *Garza* case, Judge Kozinski provided the clearest example:

Assume you are an anglo homeowner who lives in an all-white neighborhood. Suppose, also, that you harbor no ill feelings toward minorities. Suppose further, however, that some of your neighbors persuade you that having an integrated neighborhood would lower property values and that you stand to lose a lot of money on your home. On the basis of that belief, you join a pact not to sell your house to minorities. Have you engaged in intentional racial and ethnic discrimination? Of course you have. Your personal feelings toward minorities don't

matter; what matters is that you intentionally look actions calculated to keep them out of your neighborhood.

Garza and United States v. County of Los Angeles, 918 F.2d 763, 778 n.1 (9th Cir. 1990) (Kozinski, J., concurring and dissenting in part), *cert. denied*, 498 U.S. 1028 (1991).

In determining whether there is sufficient circumstantial evidence to conclude that the jurisdiction has not established the absence of the prohibited discriminatory purpose, the Attorney General will be guided by the Supreme Court's illustrative, but not exhaustive, list of those "subjects for proper inquiry in determining whether racially discriminatory intent existed," outlined in *Village of Arlington Heights v. Metropolitan Housing Development Corp.*, 429 U.S. 252, 268 (1977). In that case, the Court, noting that such an undertaking presupposes a "sensitive inquiry," identified certain areas to be reviewed in making this determination: (1) The impact of the decision; (2) the historical background of the decision, particularly if it reveals a series of decisions undertaken with discriminatory intent; (3) the sequence of events leading up to the decision; (4) whether the challenged decision departs, either procedurally or substantively, from the normal practice; and (5) contemporaneous statements and viewpoints held by the decision-makers. *Id.* at 266-68.

The single fact that a jurisdiction's proposed redistricting plan does not contain the maximum possible number of districts in which minority group members are a majority of the population or have the ability to elect candidates of choice to office, does not mandate that the Attorney General interpose an objection based on a failure to demonstrate the absence of a discriminatory purpose. Rather, the Attorney General will base the determination on a review of the plan in its entirety.

Retrogressive Effect

An analysis of whether the jurisdiction has met its burden of establishing that the proposed plan would not result in a discriminatory or "retrogressive" effect starts with a basic comparison of the benchmark and proposed plans at issue, using updated census data in each. Thus, the Voting Section staff loads the boundaries of the benchmark and proposed plans into the Civil Rights Division's geographic information system [GIS]. Population data are then calculated for each district in the benchmark and the proposed plans using the most recent decennial census data.

A proposed plan is retrogressive under Section 5 if its net effect would be to reduce minority voters' "effective exercise of the electoral franchise" when compared to the benchmark plan. *Beer v. United States* at 141. In 2006, Congress clarified that this means the jurisdiction must establish that its proposed redistricting plan will not have the effect of "diminishing the ability of any citizens of the United States" because of race, color, or membership in a language minority group defined in the Act, "to elect their preferred candidate of choice." 42 U.S.C. 1973c(b) & (d). In analyzing redistricting plans, the Department will follow the congressional directive of ensuring that the ability of such citizens to elect their preferred candidates of choice is protected. That ability to elect either exists or it does not in any particular circumstance.

In determining whether the ability to elect exists in the benchmark plan and whether it continues in the proposed plan, the Attorney General does not rely on any predetermined or fixed demographic percentages at any point in the assessment. Rather, in the Department's view, this determination requires a functional analysis of the electoral behavior within the particular jurisdiction or election district. As noted above, census data alone may not provide sufficient indicia of electoral behavior to make the requisite determination. Circumstances, such as differing rates of electoral participation within discrete portions of a population, may impact on the ability of voters to elect candidates of choice, even if the overall demographic data show no significant change.

Although comparison of the census population of districts in the benchmark and proposed plans is the important starting point of any Section 5 analysis, additional demographic and election data in the submission is often helpful in making the requisite Section 5 determination. 28 CFR 51.28(a). For example, census population data may not reflect significant differences in group voting behavior. Therefore, election history and voting patterns within the jurisdiction, voter registration and turnout information, and other similar information are very important to an assessment of the actual effect of a redistricting plan.

The Section 5 Procedures contain the factors that the courts have considered in deciding whether or not a redistricting plan complies with Section 5. These factors include whether minority voting strength is reduced by the proposed redistricting; whether minority concentrations are fragmented

among different districts; whether minorities are overconcentrated in one or more districts; whether alternative plans satisfying the jurisdiction's legitimate governmental interests exist, and whether they were considered; whether the proposed plan departs from objective redistricting criteria set by the submitting jurisdiction, ignores other relevant factors such as compactness and contiguity, or displays a configuration that inexplicably disregards available natural or artificial boundaries; and, whether the plan is inconsistent with the jurisdiction's stated redistricting standards. 28 CFR 51.56–59.

Alternatives to Retrogressive Plans

There may be circumstances in which the jurisdiction asserts that, because of shifts in population or other significant changes since the last redistricting (e.g., residential segregation and demographic distribution of the population within the jurisdiction, the physical geography of the jurisdiction, the jurisdiction's historical redistricting practices, political boundaries, such as cities or counties, and/or state redistricting requirements), retrogression is unavoidable. In those circumstances, the submitting jurisdiction seeking preclearance of such a plan bears the burden of demonstrating that a less-retrogressive plan cannot reasonably be drawn.

In considering whether less-retrogressive alternative plans are available, the Department of Justice looks to plans that were actually considered or drawn by the submitting jurisdiction, as well as alternative plans presented or made known to the submitting jurisdiction by interested citizens or others. In addition, the Department may develop illustrative alternative plans for use in its analysis, taking into consideration the jurisdiction's redistricting principles. If it is determined that a reasonable alternative plan exists that is non-retrogressive or less retrogressive than the submitted plan, the Attorney General will interpose an objection.

Preventing retrogression under Section 5 does not require jurisdictions to violate the one-person, one-vote principle. 52 FR 488 (Jan. 6, 1987). Similarly, preventing retrogression under Section 5 does not require jurisdictions to violate *Shaw v. Reno* and related cases.

The one-person, one-vote issue arises most commonly where substantial demographic changes have occurred in some, but not all, parts of a jurisdiction. Generally, a plan for congressional redistricting that would require a greater

overall population deviation than the submitted plan is not considered a reasonable alternative by the Department. For state legislative and local redistricting, a plan that would require significantly greater overall population deviations is not considered a reasonable alternative.

In assessing whether a less retrogressive plan can reasonably be drawn, the geographic compactness of a jurisdiction's minority population will be a factor in the Department's analysis. This analysis will include a review of the submitting jurisdiction's historical redistricting practices and district configurations to determine whether the alternative plan would (a) abandon those practices and (b) require highly unusual features to link together widely separated minority concentrations.

At the same time, compliance with Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act may require the jurisdiction to depart from strict adherence to certain of its redistricting criteria. For example, criteria that require the jurisdiction to make the least possible change to existing district boundaries, to follow county, city, or precinct boundaries, protect incumbents, preserve partisan balance, or in some cases, require a certain level of compactness of district boundaries may need to give way to some degree to avoid retrogression. In evaluating alternative or illustrative plans, the Department of Justice relies upon plans that make the least departure from a jurisdiction's stated redistricting criteria needed to prevent retrogression.

The Use of 2010 Census Data

The most current population data are used to measure both the benchmark plan and the proposed redistricting plan. 28 CFR 51.54(b)(2) (Department of Justice considers "the conditions existing at the time of the submission."); *City of Rome v. United States*, 446 U.S. 156, 186 (1980) ("most current available population data" to be used for measuring effect of annexations); *Reno v. Bossier Parish School Board*, 528 U.S. 320, 334 (2000) ("the baseline is the status quo that is proposed to be changed: If the change 'abridges the right to vote' relative to the status quo, preclearance is denied * * *").

For redistricting after the 2010 Census, the Department of Justice will, consistent with past practice, evaluate redistricting submissions using the 2010 Census population data released by the Bureau of the Census for redistricting pursuant to Public Law 94–171, 13 U.S.C. 141(c). Thus, our analysis of the proposed redistricting plans includes a review and assessment of the Public

Law 94–171 population data, even if those data are not included in the submission or were not used by the jurisdiction in drawing the plan. The failure to use the Public Law 94–171 population data in redistricting does not, by itself, constitute a reason for interposing an objection. However, unless other population data used can be shown to be more accurate and reliable than the Public Law 94–171 data, the Attorney General will consider the Public Law 94–171 data to measure the total population and voting age population within a jurisdiction for purposes of its Section 5 analysis.

As in 2000, the 2010 Census Public Law 94–171 data will include counts of persons who have identified themselves as members of more than one racial category. This reflects the October 30, 1997, decision by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to incorporate multiple-race reporting into the Federal statistical system. 62 FR 58782–58790. Likewise, on March 9, 2000, OMB issued Bulletin No. 00–02 addressing "Guidance on Aggregation and Allocation of Data on Race for Use in Civil Rights Enforcement." Part II of that Bulletin describes how such census responses will be allocated by Federal executive agencies for use in civil rights monitoring and enforcement.

The Department will follow both aggregation methods defined in Part II of the Bulletin. The Department's initial review of a plan will be based upon allocating any multiple-item response that includes white and one of the five other race categories identified in the response. Thus, the total numbers for "Black/African American," "Asian," "American Indian/Alaska Native," "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" and "Some other race" reflect the total of the single-race responses and the multiple responses in which an individual selected a minority race and white race.

The Department will then move to the second step in its application of the census data to the plan by reviewing the other multiple-race category, which is comprised of all multiple-race responses consisting of more than one minority race. Where there are significant numbers of such responses, we will, as required by both the OMB guidance and judicial opinions, allocate these responses on an iterative basis to each of the component single-race categories for analysis. *Georgia v. Ashcroft*, 539 U.S. 461, 473, n.1 (2003).

As in the past, the Department will analyze Latino voters as a separate group for purposes of enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. If there are significant numbers of responses which

report Latino and one or more minority races (for example, Latinos who list their race as Black/African-American), those responses will be allocated

alternatively to the Latino category and the minority race category.

Dated: February 3, 2011.

Thomas E. Perez,
Assistant Attorney General, Civil Rights Division.

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