

Analysis

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US electoral map bias may worsen

The US Supreme Court's ruling that federal judges have no power to police partisan gerrymandering - the practice of manipulating electoral district boundaries for political gain - likely will embolden politicians to pursue more extreme efforts free from the fear of judicial interference, experts said. "We'll see more states doing more bad stuff," said University of California at Irvine election law expert Rick Hasen. The court's 5-4 decision on Thursday, powered by its conservative majority in a ruling authored by Chief Justice John Roberts, to close federal courthouse doors to partisan gerrymandering legal challenges shifts the focus of countering electoral map bias to the states.

Election reformers now face a limited menu of options, all of which face potential obstacles: voter ballot initiatives, lawsuits filed in state courts and congressional legislation. "The hope from the reform groups was that you would just be able to wave a wand over the entire country and fix all the gerrymanders," said Michael McDonald, a University of Florida expert on US elections. "Roberts said the battle that was in the states will stay in the states."

The geographical boundaries of US House of Representatives and state legislative districts across the country are redrawn to reflect population changes measured by the census conducted by the federal government each decade. The next census is in 2020. In most states, redistricting is done by the party in power. Gerrymandering is carried out by configuring districts in a way that packs as many like-minded voters as possible into a small number of districts and distributing the rest in other districts too thinly to form a majority.

President Donald Trump's fellow Republicans have been the primary beneficiaries of gerrymandering since the last round of redistricting following the 2010 census, though Democrats have engaged in the practice as well. Hasen said he expects more Democratic-led legislatures to engage in the practice in light of the ruling. "I think there will be a lot of pressure on Democrats who may have held back to do so, because this has national implications," Hasen said.

The court ruled in cases from North Carolina and Maryland. In addition to ensuring that voters from those states will cast ballots in the 2020 election under the same electoral maps that were challenged, Thursday's ruling also hurts plaintiffs in Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin who have sued in federal courts, saying their voting power had been curtailed by gerrymandering. In the longer run, countering gerrymandering will fall back to state legislatures, courts and voters themselves. Outside groups are drawing battle lines.

"We'll continue to fight against map manipulation using every tool that is at our disposal," said former US Attorney General Eric Holder, whose National Democratic Redistricting Committee is backed by former President Barack Obama, a Democrat, and former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican. "But even without no federal guardrail on gerrymandering, this fight is far from over."

The National Republican Redistricting Trust said it would oppose any effort to take away legislators' authority. "This is not the end of our fight," former Wisconsin Republican Governor Scott Walker, the group's fundraising chairman, said in a statement. "The battle to protect our country from Barack Obama and Eric Holder's plan to hijack our elections now moves to the states."

In recent years, voters in several states, including Colorado and Michigan, have approved ballot measures creating independent commissions to handle the post-census process of redrawing electoral districts. About a quarter of US states have given a commission either full or partial authority in redistricting. Efforts already are underway in several states, including Arkansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma, to launch similar ballot initiatives next year.

Election law expert Nicholas Stephanopoulos, a University of Chicago law professor, said only about half of states allow ballot initiatives. Reformers also could file challenges to gerrymandered maps in state courts, whose authority under state law is unaffected by the Supreme Court's decision.

Next month, a North Carolina court will hold a trial in a case brought by advocates who claim Republican-drawn districts violate the state constitution, a dispute likely to be resolved by the state's top court. Nine of the state's 13 US House seats are currently held by Republicans, even though Democrats lost the total statewide vote last year by only 2 percent. A new election has been called for one seat because of election fraud.

Legal experts have said the state's high court, which has six Democrats among its seven justices, could follow in the footsteps of Pennsylvania's Supreme Court, which in 2018 threw out a Republican-created map and commissioned an independent expert to draw new lines. Democrats there won half of the state's 18 House seats in 2018, after holding only five seats under the old map. — Reuters

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North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump cross south of the Military Demarcation Line that divides North and South Korea, after Trump briefly stepped over to the northern side, in the Joint Security Area (JSA) of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized zone (DMZ) yesterday. — AFP

Trump-Kim III: Publicity stunt or leap for peace?

Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un's meeting in the Korean Demilitarized Zone produced a barrage of headlines and images, but left analysts questioning whether it was a small step for publicity or a giant leap for peace. The impromptu encounter saw Trump briefly crossing over the demarcation line - becoming the first sitting US president to step into Pyongyang's territory. It came months after their second summit in Hanoi broke down over what the nuclear-armed North would be willing to give up in exchange for sanctions relief.

After around an hour of talks in Panmunjom - the "truce village" in the DMZ that has divided the peninsula since the two sides and their allies fought each other to a stalemate in 1953 - Trump emerged to say the two would begin working-level talks in the next few weeks. He also invited the North's leader to Washington "at the right time", he added. It was a more substantive outcome than many had expected after Trump issued his Twitter invitation to Kim and said the meeting could be as short as two minutes to simply "say hello".

But analysts questioned whether it would be enough to create sustainable progress in a process that has already been running for years and has regularly become bogged down. Vipin Narang, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the "reality show theatrics" of Panmunjom were worth it if they led to effective working-

level talks. "If not, then we will keep tuning into this same show for the next 15 months," he added.

While the Trump administration is adamant it wants to see North Korea give up its nuclear arsenal, Pyongyang has never publicly declared it is willing to do so, referring instead to the wider and more ambiguous "denuclearization of the Korean peninsula". The North is seeking relief from wide-ranging sanctions imposed on it over its weapons programs, and has offered to close part of its Yongbyon nuclear centre, but specialists say it has other facilities producing material for weapons. The Panmunjom meeting gave both leaders "a good reason to seek dialogue again", said Hong Min, a senior researcher at the South's state-run Korea Institute for National Unification.

'Pushes and nudges'

But Mintaro Oba, a former State Department official in the Obama administration, called it a "temporary burst of momentum". "We are engaged in a sort of 'defibrillator diplomacy' with North Korea: keeping the process alive through an occasional injection of energy, but never treating the underlying disease," Oba tweeted. How much progress the talks will make is open to question, experts say.

Since the Hanoi summit collapse, Pyongyang has accused Washington of acting in "bad faith" and given it

until the end of the year to change its approach, and last month fired short-range missiles for the first time since November 2017. In recent months Pyongyang has also slammed Trump's top aides - National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo - and demanded their removal from talks. "That could create problems," said Go Myong-hyun, an analyst at the Asan Institute of Policy Studies.

For both participants, though, the meeting had its uses. With a presidential election in the US next year, Trump's dramatic steps into North Korea will be a "useful tool" on the campaign trail, said Koo Kab-woo, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul. For its part, the North has long wanted to be treated as an equal to the US and sought to have Bill Clinton visit Pyongyang before his term expired. It will welcome yesterday's symbolism, said former CIA analyst Soo Kim.

"Kim didn't have to lift a finger to get Trump to cross the DMZ," she told AFP, even though there had been "no progress on denuclearization", and the North was continuing to advance its nuclear capabilities, test missiles and evade sanctions. The short-notice meeting fits right into Pyongyang's playbook, she said, sending a message to the North that US policy was "quite porous" and suggesting that "with subsequent pushes and nudges, Kim will get his own way". — AFP

Power cuts add to Zimbabwe's mounting woes

Zimbabwe's worsening electricity shortages mean power is often only available for a few hours in the middle of the night - forcing furniture maker Richard Benhura to start work at 11:00 pm. It is just one aspect of the country's dire economic difficulties as official inflation nears 100 percent and supplies of daily essentials such as bread and petrol regularly run short. "If you want to work, you have to be here overnight and start when the electricity comes on until it goes off around 4:00 am," Benhura, 32, told AFP as he made some wooden backrests for chairs.

At the open-air Glen View furniture market in Harare, Benhura welds steel frames for chairs and grinds off rough edges in the darkness, and then returns to do his manual woodwork in the daylight. Zimbabwe - where the economy has recently lurched into a fresh crisis - introduced rotational power cuts of up to 19 hours a day earlier this year, forcing many to do their ironing or cooking in the dead of night. For Egenia Chiwashira, a resident of the poor Harare suburb of Mbare, the outages are a grim burden. The mother of three in her 40s says she can barely afford to feed her family, let alone pay for a generator.

'We are in darkness'

"To cook porridge for my children needs electricity, also for me to prepare myself something to eat," Chiwashira said, while stoking a fire she had made outside her house to prepare supper. "We are always in darkness. It's not easy. Life in the city is tough without electricity. You have to buy firewood unlike in rural areas where you can fetch it in forests. I can't afford to buy both wood and candles, so my children cannot do their schoolwork in the evening."

Zimbabwe last month introduced rolling electricity power cuts known as "load-shedding" due to low water levels at the Kariba hydro-power station, as well as the country's crumbling power infrastructure and lack of funds to pay for energy imports. The ZESA power utility said cuts would be imposed between 5:00 am and 10:00 am and 5:00 pm and 10:00 pm, but they often last longer. "Last week we had no electricity on Friday, Saturday and Sunday," Chiwashira said. "We only got supplies back on Monday afternoon."

Energy minister Fortune Chasi has pledged the outages would be reduced,



A young Zimbabwean boy does his homework under candlelight in Harare on June 26, 2019. — AFP

and urged consumers to pay their bills to enable ZESA to buy more power from neighboring countries. "We will be turning the corner pretty soon," Chasi told a post-Cabinet briefing this week, adding that ZESA had just paid a \$20-million debt to neighboring South Africa. South Africa's state-owned energy company Eskom on Friday denied the money had been paid.

No post-Mugabe uplift

One of few to see an improvement in business is Simba Vuremu, a stationery shop owner who has added solar lighting units to his stock. "They are selling and selling fast," he said. After Robert Mugabe was ousted from power in 2017, many Zimbabweans hoped that their country's long economic decline would be reversed under his successor President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa promised to end the country's international isolation, attract investors and create growth that could fund the country's shattered public services.

But the economy has declined further, with shop prices rocketing at the fastest rate since hyperinflation wiped out savings and pensions ten years ago. This week, Zimbabwe in theory ended the use of US dollars and other foreign currencies that have been the official legal tender since the Zimbabwe dollar was rendered worthless in 2009. The government's surprise decision fuelled further confusion and uncertainty.

For Caution Kasi, 45, another furniture-maker in Glen View, the power cuts have only added to his worries. "We have a small petrol-powered generator which cannot run for a long time," he said. "The price of food and other things like school fees are going up and we are not getting much money because we can't deliver our goods. We have got a problem." — AFP

After decades, Japan courts controversy resuming whaling

Japanese fishermen set sail today to hunt whales commercially for the first time in more than three decades after Tokyo's controversial withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) triggered outrage from environmental groups. The planned hunts, while small and far from internationally protected waters, have also sparked anger in countries where whaling is considered outdated and harmful. But in Japan, whaling communities hailed the return of the practice, with Tokyo defending it as a tradition that should not be subject to outside interference.

For years, the issue of whaling was a diplomatic headache for Japan, which came under attack for exploiting an IWC loophole to hunt whales for "scientific" purposes. Critics accused Japan of effectively carrying out stealth whaling, saying the hunts had no scientific value, while Tokyo continued to push for permission to resume commercial whaling outright.

But last year it announced it would simply withdraw from the IWC and no longer comply with its decades-old ban on commercial killing of the ocean giants. The decision comes into effect from July 1, when a flotilla of ships that once carried out whaling for "scientific research" will set sail from the Shimonoseki port in western Japan. Elsewhere, five small whaling boats from across the country will gather in Kushiro port in northern Japan and start hunting minke for about a week in a symbolic event celebrating the resumption of the practice.

'Heart full of hope'

"We are very excited at the resumption of commercial whaling," Yoshifumi Kai, head of the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association, told AFP ahead of the departure. "My heart is full of hope," added Kai, who belongs to a fisheries cooperative in Taiji in Wakayama prefecture, an area known for both whale and dolphin hunting. Japan's decision in December to withdraw from the IWC sparked a firestorm of criticism from environmentalists and anti-whaling countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

It came after years of failed attempts by Tokyo to convince the IWC to allow it to resume commercial whaling, arguing that stocks of certain species were now sufficient to support renewed hunting. The decision means Japan will end its most provocative expeditions, in protected Antarctic waters, and instead concentrate on commercial whaling of minke and other

whales off its shores. Japan has hunted whales for centuries and the meat was a key source of protein in the immediate post-World War II years when the country was desperately poor. But consumption has declined significantly in recent decades, with much of the population saying they rarely or never eat whale meat, and activists have pressed Japan to ditch the practice.

'Path towards extinction'

Animal conservation groups from across the world sent a letter to the Group of 20 leaders meeting in the Japanese city of Osaka over the weekend urging them to call for an "immediate end to all commercial whaling". "Japan leaving the IWC and defying international law to pursue its commercial whaling ambitions is renegade, retrograde and myopic," said Kitty Block, president of Humane Society International based in the UK. "Tokyo is 'undermining its reputation for an industry whose days are so clearly numbered, to produce a product for which demand has plummeted'," she said.

But some conservationists and experts say Japan's whaling industry is already on its last legs for economic reasons, with consumption shrinking steadily and no sign of a market recovery. "What we are seeing is the beginning of the end of Japanese whaling," said Patrick Ramage, director of marine conservation at the International Fund for Animal Welfare. "Japan is quitting high-seas whaling... not yet a full stop, but that is a huge step towards the end of killing whales for their meat and other products," he said, adding he does not believe coastal whaling will survive given dwindling subsidies and consumer demand. Masayuki Komatsu, a former top Japanese negotiator at the IWC between 1991 and 2004, said Tokyo would return to the organization or risk seeing whaling die out altogether. — AFP



This picture taken on Jan 18, 2019 shows sushi using whale meat being prepared at a whale meat restaurant in Tokyo. — AFP