

Testimony of Dr. Maria Teresa Feliciano, President
Dominican American National Roundtable
before
RHODE ISLAND REAPPORTIONMENT COMMISSION
December, 2011

Good Evening Co-Chairs Representative Stephen R. Ucci and Senator Michael J. McCaffrey, Members of the Commission

On behalf of the Dominican American National Roundtable, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this Committee regarding the redistricting of Rhode Island Legislature.

The Dominican American National Roundtable is a national organization founded in 1997 with the mission of representing and advocating for the educational, economic and civil rights of the over 2 million Dominicans in the United States, including the large population of Dominicans in Rhode Island. We very much appreciate your time, and we very much appreciate your service. We know this is a political process. We know this is a complicated political process, and we know you give much of your time to have this done.

We understand the task at hand is Rhode Island's constitutional process of redistricting to reflect the results of the US 2010 Census. State and Federal law require that if the differences in populations between the various districts are too large, then a redrawing of the district boundaries must take place. The data shows that to be the case in Rhode Island. State and Federal law also require that this process must take place complying with the one-person, one-vote requirements for fair representation in any legislative body across the country; while observing pertinent civil rights law, voting rights law, the concern that all residents of the state of Rhode Island be properly represented, providing minorities with appropriate representation, and keeping communities of interest together.

Back in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson went before an extraordinary joint session of Congress to urge speedy passage of an effective voting rights bill. "I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy," Johnson began. "I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause."

"Their cause must be our cause, too," Johnson said. On Aug. 6, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law.

In carrying out your mission, we would like you to consider the following:

In a democracy, the principle of one person-one vote is a sacred concept. If the principle is to apply in Rhode Island, then ensuring a greater voice for Latinos in the halls of power is one of the greatest tests facing this Commission.

The new Rhode Island's legislative map must reflect the state's changing demographics.

According to the 2010 US Census, in 2010, there were 50.5 million Hispanics in the United States, composing 16 percent of the total population. Latinos increased by 15.2 million (or 43%) between 2000 and 2010, which accounted for over half of the total population growth that occurred in the U.S. over the past 10 years.

The Census Bureau release specifically looked at the populations of Rhode Island, South Carolina, West Virginia, Michigan, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Maine and the District of Columbia – all which show explosive demographic growth of Latinos. In Rhode Island the Latino population grew to 130,655 according to US Census 2000, making up 13% of the state's total population. Providence alone is home to 70,000.

Back in 1995, it was predicted that Rhode Island would lose one congressional seat based on population decrease trends. Due to the increase in Latino population, it didn't. In 2000 again, predictions were that Rhode Island would lose one seat. Upon release of the 2010 Census figures regarding the growth of Latino population, it didn't. The Kimbel Brace projections are similar for 2020, but as the state of Rhode Island embraces its immigrant population and provides for its representation and participation, that prediction will also fall short.

The emergence of Latinos as the largest minority in the state, as per the 2010 Census, requires the creation of Majority Latino Districts or Latino Opportunity Districts that will allow us to elect candidates of our choice in numbers commensurate with our population.

There is undisputed lack of Latino representation in the Rhode Island Legislature. 13% of the population should occupy 13% of the legislative seats. In Rhode Island that would mean 10 out of the 75 House of Representatives seats, and 4 out of the 38 Senatorial seats. There are currently one senate seat and two house seats occupied by Latinos.

We propose one congressional district that will comprise 20.0% (up from 10.9%), Latino population, and will contain the entire city of Providence, a community of interest; five Senatorial districts containing 55.5% (CD-2), 49.4%(CD-5), 49.3% (CD-6), 51.2% (CD-7), and 49.6% (CD-16), respectively; and eight Representative districts containing 50.3% (LD-7), 53.2% (LD-8), 56.0%(LD-9), 57.3% (LD-10), 58.7% (LD-11), 51.3% (LD-12), 54.3% (LD-13), and 63.9% (LD-56), respectively.

These maps would afford this Commission the opportunity to add one congressional district, three additional senate districts, and – Representative districts with substantial Latino population to elect candidates of their choice, and thus complying with the Voting Rights Act.

This Commission should consider creating Legislative Districts in the areas we highlighted, as they create opportunities to reflect the population, and increase participation in the electoral process.

In a democracy, the principle of one person, one vote is a sacred concept. It should apply in Rhode Island, ensuring a greater voice for Latinos in the halls of power.

We look forward to working with the Committee to contribute in your effort to make sure that Rhode Island achieves a fair and constitutional redistricting.

Thank you,

Maria Teresa Feliciano, President
Dominican American National Roundtable

About DANR

The Dominican-American National Roundtable (DANR) is a non-partisan, non-profit corporation seeking to bring together the different voices of all people of Dominican origin in the United States. DANR is a national forum for analysis, planning, and action to advance the educational, economic, legal, social, cultural, and political interests of Dominican Americans. It aims to ensure for U. S. Dominicans the full exercise of the rights and freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution of the United States of America. With those objectives in mind, DANR is committed to enriching the quality of life in the United States by highlighting the contributions of Dominicans to the larger American society.