

NATION

# LA City Council racism scandal shows ugly side of creating political maps. Can redistricting reform help?



**Bill Keveney**  
USA TODAY

Published 5:12 a.m. ET Oct. 18, 2022



**Former Los Angeles City Council President Nury Martinez resigned as a member.**

## Nury Martinez resigns from Los Angeles City Council following racist comments leak

Nury Martinez resigned from the Los Angeles City Council following leaked audio that revealed racist comments made during a redistricting meeting. *Claire Hardwick, USA TODAY*

### Key Points

- The scandal surrounding racist remarks made by Los Angeles City Council members also highlights weaknesses in the city's redistricting process that could lead to reform.
- Race and ethnicity are longstanding considerations in political redistricting in Los Angeles and other U.S. cities, but seeing the process only as a zero-sum game can be divisive.

A [secretly recorded conversation](#) between Latino city leaders in Los Angeles that created a [national furor over racist comments](#) has also highlighted tensions between communities of color fighting for scarce resources and power in the redistricting process that takes place in cities across the nation every 10 years.

The 2021 discussion among three L.A. City Council members and a county labor official, leaked online earlier this month and first reported last week by the Los Angeles Times, drew condemnation for racist remarks disparaging Black people. The recording also shined a light on potential weaknesses in L.A.'s redistricting process, including the self-interested power council members have to approve their own district lines, and led to calls for redistricting reform.

The scandal, still simmering in L.A., has spurred an investigation by California's attorney general, protests that continued over the weekend and continuing demand for the resignation of two other council members, Gil Cedillo and Kevin de León, who were stripped of their council committee assignments Monday.

Redistricting, conducted after each decennial census, requires states and cities across the country to redraw political boundaries based on population changes. The process has historically been a rough-and-tumble affair between competing factions, going back more than a century when growing Irish and Italian immigrant groups fought for representation.



A secret recording of Los Angeles City Council leaders making racist remarks about Black people and other disparaging comments during a 2021 discussion of council redistricting has led to the resignation of council president Nury Martinez, calls for the ouster of two of her colleagues and continuing protests. Some say it could lead to reform of the city's troubled redistricting process. *Robert Hanashiro, Robert Hanashiro-USA TODAY*

Today, huge growth in the Latino population and smaller but more accelerated increases among Asian Americans, along with a rise in people of multi-ethnic and multi-racial backgrounds, have changed the political dynamics in Los Angeles and other major cities, including New York and Chicago. Greater representation for those communities would likely come at the expense of more established white and Black voting groups trying to maintain their political power.

Recent redistricting processes featured a contentious competition for seats between Black and Latino communities in Chicago while ethnic political rivalries could play out in New York City, some of it surrounding the rising Asian American population in Queens, said Michael Li, senior counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University School of Law.

"Jockeying for power among ethnic groups is a very common thing in redistricting around the country, particularly in areas where the populations are changing. ... That's true in New York. It's true in Chicago. It's true in Dallas," he said. "It's a very elbow-y process."

The L.A. leaders' conversation went well beyond that, both in the racist slurs and the unusually specific talk about the financial assets within districts and protection of incumbents' seats, which could constitute violations of federal and state voting rights laws, said Christian Grose, professor of political science and public policy at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

The leaked audio centered on a larger discussion about redistricting. The leaders discussed expanding Latino political power in the city to reflect population growth but then went beyond that to discuss how to draw districts to protect them and their council allies; how to apportion major financial assets, such as a large brewery, to bolster council members' power; and the enduring political clout of L.A.'s much smaller Black population.

Council president Nury Martinez, who has since resigned, referred to a white councilmember's Black son as a "changuito," or little monkey. The conversation also included disparaging remarks about people of Oaxacan heritage and poked fun of the spelling of Armenian nicknames, among other insults.

"There's a good, positive case to be made for increasing Latino representation on the City Council. ... This is not the way to do it," Grose said.

Grose favors reform that would take away council members' self-interested authority to draw their own districts via an independent redistricting commission along the lines of the state panel that now shape boundaries for California's congressional and state legislative districts. A number of states have established such panels, but members of many state and municipal legislative bodies around the country still draw lines that affect their own elections.

Increasing the number of L.A. council seats could provide benefits too, Grose said. Before Martinez's resignation last week, Latino members held only four of the 15 seats in a city where the group constitutes nearly half the population. With more seats – New York has 51, Chicago 50 – each one becomes a little less precious and there's more room to try to balance representation levels between groups, he said.



Los Angeles City Council President Nury Martinez resigned last week after she was heard making racist remarks about another council member's Black son and other bigoted comments in a secret recording leaked online earlier this month. AP

The L.A. scandal may indirectly accelerate the movement toward redistricting reform, said Raphael Sonenshein, executive director of the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles.

Since the recording was released, "almost every interest in L.A. politics, inside and outside government, is calling for creating an independent commission for redistricting so this never happens again," he said. "I think that's almost inevitably going to happen now."

Redistricting, by its nature, can be an especially divisive issue, Sonenshein said. Unlike the minimum wage or affordable housing, in which coalitions can be built across racial, socioeconomic and generational lines, redistricting potentially exposes raw rivalries between identity groups vying for a limited number of seats, he said.

The L.A. conversation crudely revealed a view of politics as a zero-sum fight between racial and ethnic groups, a winner-or-loser binary evidenced in cities throughout the country that can more likely stimulate division than connection, said University of Chicago sociology professor Robert Vargas.

"You have some that view this as a zero-sum game of Blacks vs. Latinos and then you have some that are trying to build multiracial coalitions based in a particular class identity," Vargas said, pointing to Chicago socialists who have forged multiracial, working-class coalitions in the nation's third-largest city.

The anti-Blackness apparent in the Latino leaders' comments has roots that pre-date the United States, going back to the colonial history of slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean, said Fordham Law School professor Tanya Katerí Hernández, author of "Racial Innocence: Unmasking Latino Anti-Black Bias and the Struggle for Equality." Martinez's bigoted comments about people of Oaxacan heritage, who trace their roots to an area in southern Mexico that has strong Indigenous and Black ties, reflects that sentiment, she said.

People understandably want to see themselves reflected in their political representatives, which can include an understanding of a group's issues as well as heritage, but they also can connect with other racial and ethnic groups over shared views on healthcare, schools and other common issues, she said.



Protestors demonstrate outside City Hall, calling for the resignations of L.A. City Council members Kevin de León and Gil Cedillo in the wake of a leaked audio recording on Oct. 12, 2022, in Los Angeles, California. L.A. City Council President Nury Martínez resigned in the aftermath of the release of the profanity-laced recording, which revealed racist comments amid a discussion of city redistricting. *Mario Tama, Getty Images*

Latino population growth often comes in or near traditionally Black neighborhoods based on many years of white segregationist policies, she said. That creates greater opportunity for connection – or conflict.

"The problem is that often the racial attitudes of a group vis-à-vis others can hinder the recognition of those political commonalities," said Hernández, adding that the many racial backgrounds embodied by people of Latino identity contradict the false idea of a racial binary involving Latino and Black communities.

In efforts to gain representation in cities, "people of color have been trying to use the redistricting process to combat very entrenched, white racial-bloc voting that has existed for a long time," she said. "And so, when Latinos and other people of color seek to enter into that space, they have to be able to navigate that pre-existing and longstanding outgrowth from the white supremacist structure."

If progress is to be made, more attention needs to be paid to opportunities for cooperation across racial and ethnic lines, said Veronica Terriquez, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center.

She pointed to an issue-oriented "Black-brown alliance" in South Los Angeles, which is unified in recommendations on the distribution of city resources, as well as an Asian-Latino coalition in the San Gabriel Valley, an area located east of downtown Los Angeles, that finds common ground over language access and immigrant rights.

Reprinted from the article available at:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/10/18/la-city-council-racist-recording-spurs-redistricting-reform-debate/1049088002/>

Terriquez sees hope in the overwhelming condemnation of the L.A. leaders' bigoted comments, including by Latino leaders, and in the rising political generation's ability to build bridges between groups.

"In Los Angeles and (nearby) Orange County, you see diverse coalitions across ethnicity and race," she said. "I think that the younger generation tends to form coalitions that are more inclusive."