

# Political boundaries will shift in San Juan Co. after racial gerrymandering ruling

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SALT LAKE CITY — Political boundaries in San Juan County will undergo a significant shift after a federal judge accepted new maps in a ruling Friday.

U.S. District Court Judge Robert Shelby accepted a series of maps drawn in a long-running lawsuit between the Navajo Nation and San Juan County alleging racial gerrymandering in school board and county commission seats. The ruling by Judge Shelby gives Native Americans demographic majorities in two of the three county commission seats, and three of the five school board seats.

U.S. Census data shows that white people only make up 47 percent of San Juan County's population. Native Americans make up 50 percent. San Juan County is the state's largest county in geographic size. The original lawsuit, filed in 2012, accused San Juan County of gerrymandering on racial lines. Gerrymandering is the practice of drawing political boundaries to favor one side. Navajo Nation Attorney General Ethel Branch accused San Juan County of operating under unconstitutional political boundaries for a decade.

Judge Shelby sided with the Navajo Nation and overruled objections by San Juan County to have a special master draw the lines. Friday's ruling accepted the special master's proposed boundaries. "It is critically important that the officials representing the citizens of San Juan County are elected under constitutional districts—not districts that have been racially gerrymandered. The County's objections do not explain how such elections would burden the County, nor does the County address the rights of its citizens to have officials elected from constitutional districts," Judge Shelby wrote, ordering special elections in 2018.

It is expected that San Juan County will appeal to the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver. The county commission said it would issue a statement on the ruling soon.

This is the second lawsuit filed against San Juan County over how it handles elections. The Navajo Human Rights Commission, backed by the ACLU of Utah, is suing the county over conducting vote-by-mail elections. Navajo is an unwritten language and the ACLU has argued that vote-by-mail not only reduces translation service but also reduces the number of polling places available.

***Read the judge's ruling here:***

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