

Brodie: SCOTUS Decision Simplifies Alaska Redistricting

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Tuesday the U.S. Supreme Court struck down parts of the Voting Rights Act, which guaranteed minorities fair access to the polls. The Alaska Redistricting Board was especially interested in hearing the ruling, as it has a direct bearing on how the state's political boundaries will be re-drawn. Alaska had been required under the act to have its redistricting plan approved by the U.S. Justice Department to ensure it met the Voting Rights Act requirements.

The board's Bob Brodie, of Kodiak, says the ruling will make the job easier.

"Yes, I believe it does. Before we had to do some pretty intricate calculations on the districts that we were supposed to have for the Native areas. That they had a certain amount of voting age population and were able to elect a candidate of their choice. So if in fact they've thrown all that out, then we don't have to worry about preclearance by the Justice Department, we don't have to worry about percentage of voting populations, we will just draw the districts based on one-person one-vote and try to make them as compact and efficient as possible."

The Voting Rights Act was applied in Alaska to keep largely Native rural districts from becoming too diluted by combining them with largely white urban areas. Brodie thinks Native districts will be affected.

"Our voters rights consultant said we needed five effective Native districts in our previous plan, and if that's out the window, then they could come up with five, they could come up with four. It just depends on what criteria is applied to them. So I think in the future it's going to be very difficult for rural areas to perhaps be represented."

Brodie said he thinks the issue is more rural, and has more in common with rural areas in the Lower 48, whether the residents are Native American or not.

"As the population migrates and as the population gets larger, the districts in rural Alaska get gigantic, huge and cover along distance. And so where 20 years ago there were six or seven legislators from rural Alaska, and many of them Native, this year there were only five districts in rural Alaska, and so in 2020 you know there might only be four. I don't know so much if we can label it a Native thing, but it's certainly a rural thing that is common all across the country."

The redistricting board has about a dozen plans to examine — seven are from the board itself, and the rest submitted by others. Brodie says there are many different ways Kodiak could be apportioned.

"The majority of the house plans stay the same, taking us over to Cordova and Yakutat. There are one or two versions where we go back and go up into Bristol Bay, as we did before, as options. And then, a number of the proposed Senate pairings would be us with the Lower Kenai again, or perhaps us with Bristol Bay and the Chain."

The Alaska Redistricting Board will meet in Anchorage starting on Friday, and then bring the redistricting plans on the road for review and input by residents.