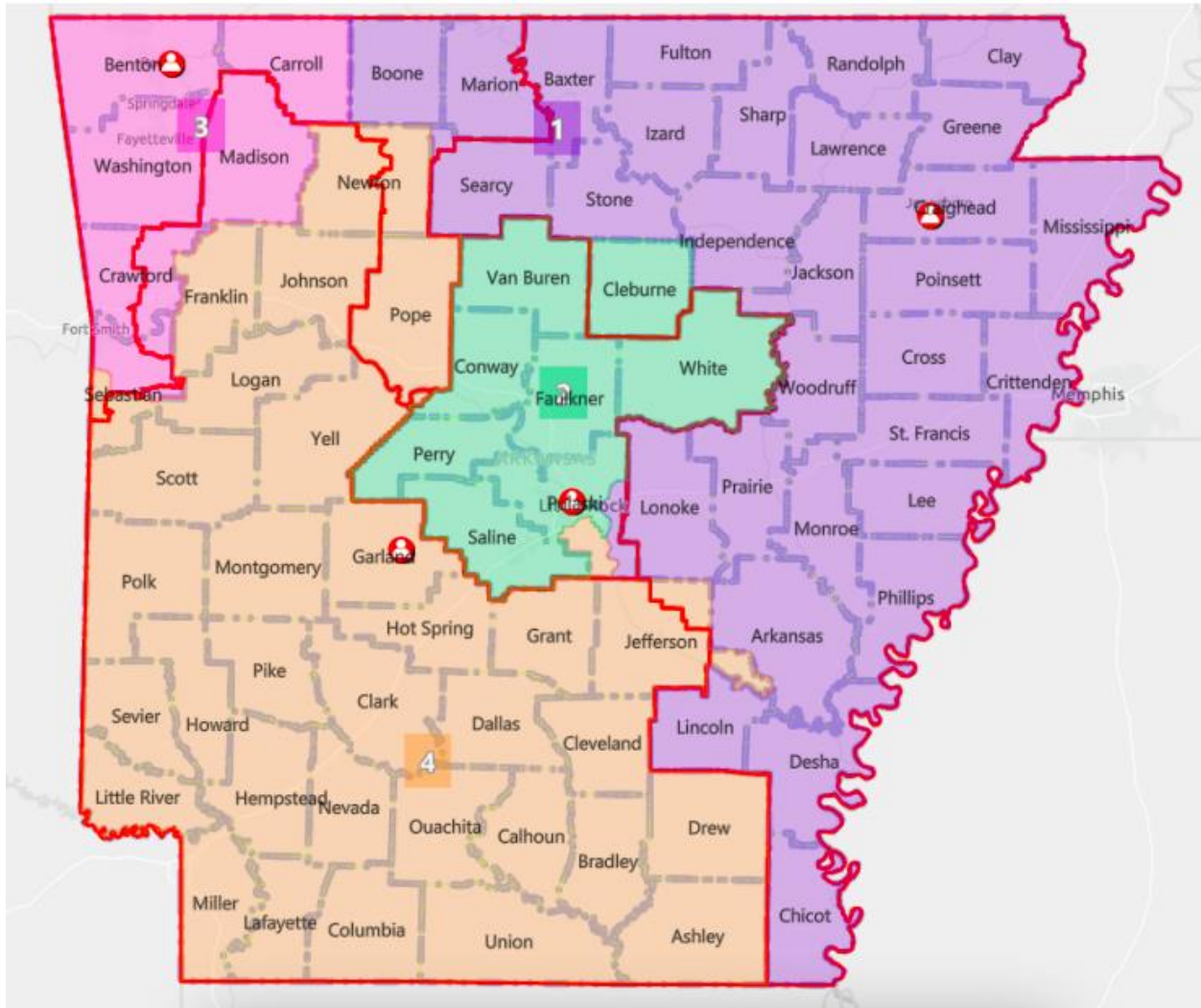


“A textbook case of cracking”: Activists strive to overturn congressional redistricting maps



The new congressional maps split both Pulaski and Sebastian counties. The map moves 14 majority Black voting precincts from the 2nd District to the 1st and 4th districts. (Map courtesy of the Arkansas House of Representatives)

The map’s critics warn it dilutes minority voices and strips access to needed resources.

Four maps in and four hours past the Oct. 4. deadline, Rep. Nelda Speaks (R-Mountain Home) filed her final congressional map, splitting Pulaski County among three districts.

Despite being overdue, the bill passed the legislature and went to Republican governor Asa Hutchinson’s office, where it became law without his signature.

As redistricting occurs across the country following the 2020 census, Republicans in Arkansas targeted Pulaski County, which votes heavily Democratic owing to its large Black population.

Arkansas voted Democratic until 2010, when white voters began to turn to the Republican Party. Republicans now represent all four of Arkansas's congressional districts. This year marks the first time since Reconstruction that a Republican-controlled legislature oversaw redistricting.

“It was a classic case of racial gerrymandering, a textbook case of cracking,” said Debrah Mitchell, president of the [Arkansas Democratic Black Caucus](#), a group that helps elect Black Democrats. Cracking diminishes a minority group's voting power by dividing it into multiple districts.

The [redistricting bill](#), authored by Speaks and Sen. Jane English (R-North Little Rock), leaves the bulk of Pulaski County's twin cities, Little Rock and North Little Rock, in the 2nd Congressional District. But predominantly Black communities south of Interstate 30 in Little Rock were moved to the 4th Congressional District. Cleburne County, the state's fourth whitest county at 92.9% white, moved from the 1st District to the 2nd.

Arkansas's 2nd Congressional District had a Black population of 174,467. The map passed on Oct. 13 [reduced that number by 21,000, dividing them between the 1st and 4th Districts](#).

Speaks and English did not respond to multiple interview requests.

Background on the District

Pulaski County is the state's largest and most Democratic county. The [2020 census results](#) show Pulaski is now just under half white and 36% Black, with 14.1% of the county's population identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, Native American or Asian. The state's population is 70.2% white.

Of the state's four congressional districts, only the 2nd District is competitive. Still, it leans red. Republicans running in the 2nd District consistently lose Pulaski County, but win Saline, Faulkner and White counties by more than they lost Pulaski. In 2018, Republican Rep. French Hill won 55.4% of the vote. State Sen. Joyce Elliott (D-Little Rock) received 44.6% of the vote, [according to Ballotpedia](#).

Arkansas voters tend to split “65/35” in Republicans' favor, according to John Brummett, an opinion columnist for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. The margin of victory for Republicans in Pulaski County is significantly lower than statewide margins. Former President Donald Trump won Arkansas in 2020 with 62.4% of the vote, [according to the Arkansas Secretary of State website](#).

The 2nd District is “conceivably—remotely, but conceivably—losable,” Brummett said.

Elliott, however, said it will be a long time before the 2nd District becomes competitive.

“What is the fear?” Elliott asked.

The Governor's View

Critics decried the map as an obvious attempt to make a red district even redder.

Hutchinson said he worried about the map's impact on minority populations during a press conference. He did not veto the bill, he said, out of respect for legislators and the political process.

The governor's decision not to sign the bill allows opponents to mount legal challenges and bypasses his relatively weak veto power. In Arkansas, a simple majority in the legislature can overturn a veto.

Before becoming governor, Hutchinson served as counsel on a case with the NAACP challenging a congressional redistricting bill passed in 1990. [The court decided](#) the map did not violate the Voting Rights Act in that case.

“This is so blatant, so in your face...the chances a federal judge looks at this and sees something illegal I think are high,” Mitchell said.

Let the Voters Decide

Mitchell is not relying on a federal judge to invalidate the map. The [Arkansas Democratic Black Caucus](#) has initiated a veto referendum to allow voters to overturn the new map. Mitchell said even some conservatives signed the petition to place the referendum on the ballot.

The map's supporters argue it is fair because each of the four districts will have approximately a quarter of Arkansas's population. To them, dividing Pulaski County makes sense, given its location in the middle of the state.

But redistricted Black voters “won't have any power in the district they're in now,” Elliot said.

Critics expressed confusion at why the map moved Black voters to other districts, while bringing into the district White voters from Cleburne County.

“It makes no sense,” Brummett said.

The map also creates problems surrounding access to federal resources, according to James Miller, a former special assistant to Democratic governor Mike Beebe who participated in the state redistricting process in 2011. Pulaski County officials will have to work with three different congressional offices to get money and other support, Miller said.

“If we get hit by a flood or by a tornado and we have to go through three different offices to get support, that would delay everything,” Mitchell said. “It could be disastrous.”

Hutchinson's former chief of staff Michael Lamoureux, however, disagreed.

“It can be a good thing to split a county, because then you have more people who are accountable to you,” Lamoureux said.

Lamoureux said it was possible to draw a map without splitting counties, but “you have to forget all other considerations.”

Thirty-two maps were proposed. Nine did not split any counties, including an earlier map Speaks submitted.

“If you look at those maps, that argument falls to the wayside completely,” said Kwami Abdul-Bey, a redistricting cartographer with [Arkansas Fair and Equitable Mapping Awareness, Planning and Action Team](#), a group that tries to prevent gerrymandering.

Democratic candidate for secretary of state and former Pulaski County election commissioner Josh Price also objected to the map [in a statement](#) which read in part:

“It damages Arkansas’s economic development efforts by creating more red tape and tangled bureaucracy when working with the federal government and various business entities.”

Price added it would likely depress voter turnout in a state that already has the lowest voter registration and voter turnout in the country.

“It’s like shooting yourself in the foot,” said Lorice Evans, an organizer with [Indivisible Little Rock and Central Arkansas](#), a group that helps register and educate voters.

Brummett takes a simpler view in explaining the new map.

“The current ruling Republicans in the Arkansas Legislature are spiteful.”

Source List

James Miller, former special assistant to Governor Mike Beebe
(501) 831-2544

Debrah Mitchell, president of the Arkansas Democratic Black Caucus
(501) 425-8974

Kwami Abdul-Bey, redistricting cartographer
(501) 442-7377

Loriee Evans, organizer with Indivisible Little Rock and Central Arkansas
(501) 681-8677

Michael Lamoureux, former chief of staff to Governor Asa Hutchinson
(479) 886-2277

Joyce Elliott, state senator from Little Rock
(501) 626-3037

John Brummett, columnist for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
(501) 912-0007

Josh Price, Democratic candidate for Secretary of State

Asa Hutchinson, Governor