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California governor unveils voting lines plan to counter Texas Republicans

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BBC News



Reuters

California's Democratic governor has unveiled a high-stakes plan to redraw voting lines in America's most populous state, in order to counter similar efforts by Republicans in Texas.

Gavin Newsom called for a special election to be held in November, in which voters would be asked to approve lawmakers redrawing congressional districts before

national midterms in 2026.

He billed the move as an emergency measure in response to a Donald Trump-backed plan in Texas, which could see the Republicans pick up five more seats in the finely-balanced House.

It is the latest development in a gerrymandering fight that runs the risk of setting off a political arms race for control of the US Congress.

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The governor - whose term in office ends next year and is rumoured to have presidential ambitions - said it would neutralise an attempt by Trump and other Republicans to "rig the system".

"We're working through a very transparent, temporary and public process," Newsom said.

"We're putting the maps on the ballot and we're giving the power to the people."

He continued: "We have got to recognise the cards that we have been dealt and we have got to meet fire with fire."

Newsom's proposal would see California retain its current congressional maps if Texas and other states pulled out of any changes.

The tit-for-tat move seeks to cancel out projected gains by Republicans in Texas if the state approves a redistricting effort sought by Trump and the state's governor Greg Abbott.

Republicans in Texas have so far been blocked from approving new maps, as Democratic lawmakers have physically left the state, denying its legislative body the two-thirds attendance it needs to proceed with a vote.

Abbott has threatened to arrest the Democrats, who are staying in Illinois, and said he would call continuous special sessions of the state's legislature until the proposal passes.



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Like other states, California typically redraws congressional districts once a decade when new population data is released by the US Census. California convenes a commission of independent citizens to do so.

The proposal in Texas to make changes mid-decade has triggered a nationwide political row, as the changes could give Republicans an easier path to keep control of the US House of Representatives and prevent challenges from Democrats that they'd face under current political maps. If Democrats gain control of the House, it could block much of Trump's legislative agenda.

Gerrymandering - the redrawing of electoral boundaries to favour a political party - has been carried out by both Democrats and Republicans across the US for decades, and is legal as long as it does not amount to racial discrimination, the Supreme Court has ruled.

Trump has said Texas is "entitled" to redraw maps and called on the FBI to put pressure on the state's Democrats to return home, paving the way for a vote.

Some are expected to return to the state as early as this weekend, saying they feel their cross-country relocation has helped generate more attention on the issue nationally.

According to US media, some made the decision to return after seeing California's plans to counter Texas's new maps.

Democrats in California - which elected 43 Democrats and nine Republicans at the last election - have not published a detailed new map, or indicated exactly how many extra seats they would envision winning under the changes. The newly redrawn political boundaries would be released in a map in the coming days, the governor said.

Newsom announced his plan - which he dubbed the Election Rigging Response Act - with a coalition of Democratic leaders. He also called for new federal standards to prevent political meddling in voting boundaries.

It is unclear if California's voters will approve Newsom's plan. Earlier this week, a Politico-Citrin Center Possibility Lab survey suggested Californians support retaining its independent districting system.

Only 36% of respondents backed returning congressional redistricting authority to state lawmakers.

Speaking to Fox on Thursday, Trump called Newsom "an incompetent governor".

He also said he was considering encouraging Florida Governor Ron DeSantis to redraw districts in the state, so that Republicans could win more seats there.

The president said other states had drawn "ridiculous" voting districts that are shaped like "rattlesnakes".

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