

Hasty Redistricting of a County Legislature

Boone v. Nassau County Legislature
(Joanna Seybert, E.D.N.Y. 2:11-cv-2712)

On the day before a period of collecting ballot-petition signatures for a county-legislature election, voters filed a federal complaint challenging new district lines. The district judge held preliminary-injunction hearings during the following week, but the state high court's nullification of the district lines mooted the federal case.

Subject: District lines. *Topics:* Malapportionment; matters for state courts; section 2 discrimination; case assignment; getting on the ballot; class action.

Four voters filed a federal class-action complaint in the Eastern District of New York's Central Islip's courthouse on June 6, 2011, alleging that new district lines for Nassau County's legislature violated the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment and section 2 of the Voting Rights Act.¹ The plaintiffs drew the court's attention to the urgency of the action by pointing out that the period to collect ballot-petition signatures would begin on the following day.²

Judge Joanna Seybert received the case file a little after 2:00 p.m. and held a hearing at 3:15.³ It was not clear whether ballot petitions for legislative elections would be based on old district lines or new district lines.⁴

When they filed their complaint, the plaintiffs noted that the case was related to a 1991 action resolved by Judge Arthur D. Spatt in 1994.⁵ A September 24, 1991, complaint by eight Nassau County voters challenged the modified weighted-voting scheme for Nassau County's board of supervisors, which consisted of two representatives from Hempstead, the largest municipality, and one from each of the other four municipalities in the county.⁶ The board's 108 votes were allocated approximately according to the municipalities' populations, adjusted for the sake of each supervisor's "mathematical

1. Complaint, *Boone v. Nassau Cty. Legislature*, No. 2:11-cv-2712 (E.D.N.Y. June 6, 2011), D.E. 1 [hereinafter *Boone Complaint*]; see Voting Rights Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 89-110, § 2, 79 Stat. 437, 437, *as amended*, 52 U.S.C. § 10301; see also *Dorsett v. County of Nassau*, 732 F.3d 157, 159 (2d Cir. 2013).

2. *Boone Complaint*, *supra* note 1, at 17–18; Transcript at 12, *Boone*, No. 2:11-cv-2712 (E.D.N.Y. June 6, 2011, filed July 24, 2014), D.E. 69 [hereinafter *Boone Transcript*].

3. *Boone Transcript*, *supra* note 2, at 1, 12.

4. *Id.* at 12–16.

5. Notice of Related Case, *Boone*, No. 2:11-cv-2712 (E.D.N.Y. June 6, 2011), D.E. 6; see Docket Sheet, *Jackson v. Nassau Cty. Bd. of Supervisors*, No. 9:91-cv-3720 (E.D.N.Y. Sept. 24, 1991) [hereinafter *Jackson Docket Sheet*].

Judge Spatt died on June 12, 2020. Federal Judicial Center Biographical Directory of Article III Federal Judges [hereinafter FJC Biographical Directory], www.fjc.gov/history/judges.

6. *Jackson v. Nassau Cty. Bd. of Supervisors*, 818 F. Supp. 509, 510–11 (E.D.N.Y. 1993); *Jackson Docket Sheet*, *supra* note 5 (D.E. 1).

possibility of his casting a decisive vote on a particular matter.”⁷ Denying the defendants’ motion for summary judgment on April 14, 1993, Judge Spatt concluded that the scheme violated the principle of one person, one vote.⁸ On August 2, 1994, the supervisors agreed to a new districting plan that would be submitted to voters in a November referendum, so the special master appointed by Judge Spatt to draft a plan ceased work.⁹ On November 8, Nassau County voters approved the transition from a six-member board of supervisors to a 19-member legislature.¹⁰

At her June 6, 2011, hearing, Judge Seybert informed the parties,

My chambers has conferenced with Judge Spatt’s chambers with respect to the prior case, and the determination has been made that it is not a related case. Clearly the passage of time and the different issues involved do not warrant that it be related to it and that’s already been gone into.¹¹

Judge Seybert conducted a preliminary-injunction hearing on June 13, 14, 15, 16, and 20, 2011, and then referred the matter to Magistrate Judge Arlene R. Lindsay.¹²

Parallel litigation in state court mooted the federal litigation. State Supreme Court Justice Steven M. Jaeger issued a temporary restraining order against enforcement of the new districts on May 31, 2014.¹³ Appellate Division Justice Joseph Covello stayed the injunction on June 2.¹⁴ Justice Jaeger determined on July 21, 2011, that the legislature could not “immediately adjust the nineteen County legislative districts for the 2011 general election.”¹⁵ The appellate division reversed this decision on August 9.¹⁶ On August 30, New York’s court of appeals determined that according to county law the

7. *Jackson*, 818 F. Supp. at 524–26. The municipalities’ population shares in the county were 56%, 23%, 17%, 2.6%, and 1.9%; their supervisors’ votes were fifty-eight, twenty-two, fifteen, seven, and six, respectively. *Id.* at 524–25.

8. *Id.* at 535.

9. *Jackson v. Nassau Cty. Bd. of Supervisors*, 157 F.R.D. 612, 616 (E.D.N.Y. 1994).

10. *See Federal Judge Praises Vote on Nassau Charter*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 11, 1994, at B5; *Voters Favor Plan to Create a Legislature*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 9, 1994, at B12 (reporting also, “Each new county legislator will serve part-time, be elected to two-year terms and receive a yearly salary of \$39,500.”).

11. *Boone* Transcript, *supra* note 2, at 7.

12. Minutes, *Boone v. Nassau Cty. Legislature*, No. 2:11-cv-2712 (E.D.N.Y. June 13 through 16 and 20, 2011), D.E. 11, 21, 23, 25, 31; *see* Minutes, *id.* (June 20, 2011), D.E. 30; *see also* Amended Complaint, *id.* (June 23, 2011), D.E. 37.

13. Order, *Yatauro v. Mangano*, No. 6898/2011 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. May 31, 2014), *filed as* Ex. K, Proposed Order to Show Cause, *Yatauro v. Mangano*, No. 2:11-cv-3079 (E.D.N.Y. June 30, 2011), D.E. 2 [hereinafter *Yatauro* Proposed Order to Show Cause]; *see Boone* Transcript, *supra* note 2, at 8.

14. Order, *Yatauro*, No. 6898/2011 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. App. Div. June 2, 2011), *filed as* Ex. L, *Yatauro* Proposed Order to Show Cause, *supra* note 13; *see Boone* Transcript, *supra* note 2, at 7–8.

15. *Yatauro v. Mangano*, 32 Misc. 3d 838, 927 N.Y.S.2d 868 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 2011); *see* Opinion, *Yatauro*, No. 2:11-cv-3079 (E.D.N.Y. July 1, 2011), D.E. 5, 2011 WL 2610562 (remanding the action following the county’s attempted removal to federal court).

16. *Yatauro v. Mangano*, 87 A.D.3d 582, 928 N.Y.S.2d 561 (N.Y. App. Div. 2011).

new district lines could not go into effect until the 2013 election to afford a period of commission and public review.¹⁷

Judge Seybert administratively closed her case on September 23, 2011.¹⁸ On March 5, 2013, Nassau County's legislature passed a new districting plan.¹⁹

On November 23, 2011, an attorney who represented the plaintiffs in Judge Seybert's case filed a federal complaint against Nassau County officials alleging wrongful retaliation for the attorney's representing plaintiffs in actions against the county, including Judge Seybert's case.²⁰ In particular, the complaint alleged spiteful delay by the county legislature in voting on settlements in two of the attorney's earlier cases.²¹ On October 18, 2013, the court of appeals affirmed Judge Sandra J. Feuerstein's dismissal of the retaliation action "[b]ecause we find that Plaintiffs had no right to have the settlement approved at all, much less by a certain date."²²

17. *Yatauro v. Mangano*, 17 N.Y.3d 420, 955 N.E.2d 343, 931 N.Y.S.2d 36 (2011).

18. Order, *Boone v. Nassau Cty. Legislature*, No. 2:11-cv-2712 (E.D.N.Y. Sept. 23, 2011), D.E. 65.

19. Letter, *id.* (Mar. 15, 2013), D.E. 67.

20. Complaint, *Dorsett v. County of Nassau*, No. 2:11-cv-5748 (E.D.N.Y. Nov. 23, 2011), D.E. 1; *see* Amended Complaint, *id.* (Dec. 22, 2011), D.E. 6; *see also* Notice of Related Case, *Boone*, No. 2:11-cv-2712 (E.D.N.Y. Nov. 28, 2011), D.E. 66.

21. *Dorsett v. County of Nassau*, 732 F.3d 157, 159–60 (2d Cir. 2013).

22. *Id.* at 159–60 (noting that since the action was filed one settlement was approved and the other was not), *aff'g* Opinion, *Dorsett*, No. 2:11-cv-5748 (E.D.N.Y. Nov. 23, 2011), D.E. 39, 2013 WL 272796.

A December 18, 2003, employment action against the county, Complaint, *Williams v. County of Nassau*, No. 2:03-cv-6337 (E.D.N.Y. Dec. 18, 2003), D.E. 1; *see* Docket Sheet, *id.* (Dec. 18, 2003) (amended complaint, D.E. 17), resulted in a settlement rejected in 2012 by the county legislature, *Dorsett*, 732 F.3d at 160, but the case was nevertheless brought to resolution in 2014 by settlement, Letter, *Williams*, No. 2:03-cv-6337 (E.D.N.Y. July 10, 2014), D.E. 225. *See Williams v. County of Nassau*, 779 F. Supp. 2d 276 (E.D.N.Y. 2011) (dismissing a co-plaintiff's claim), *aff'd*, 581 F. App'x 56 (2d Cir. 2014), *cert. denied*, 576 U.S. 1004 (2015).

A March 19, 2010, wrongful-death action against the county and its police department, Complaint, *Dorsett v. County of Nassau*, No. 2:10-cv-1258 (E.D.N.Y. Mar. 19, 2010), D.E. 1, resulted in a \$7.7 million settlement approved in 2012 by the county legislature, *Newsday LLC v. County of Nassau*, 730 F.3d 156, 160 (2d Cir. 2013) (affirming a protective order for an internal-affairs report and reversing the sealing of a transcript of contempt proceedings against a member of the county legislature who divulged facts stated in the report); *Dorsett v. County of Nassau*, 289 F.R.D. 54, 62 (E.D.N.Y. 2012) (noting modification of the protective order to facilitate review by the county legislature of the settlement agreement); *Dorsett v. County of Nassau*, 800 F. Supp. 2d 453 (E.D.N.Y. 2011) (noting a July 20, 2011, statement of settlement and affirming the magistrate judge's protective order), *aff'g* 762 F. Supp. 2d 500 (E.D.N.Y. 2011); *Dorsett*, 732 F.3d at 160.

Judge Feuerstein died on April 9, 2021. FJC Biographical Directory, *supra* note 5.