WASHINGTON — Florida's 3rd Congressional District looks like someone crushed a giant bug in the Ocala National Forest, splattering north to Jacksonville and south to Orlando.

It's a finely tuned mess that U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown helped create nearly 20 years ago by forming an unlikely alliance with Republicans in a bitter fight driven by racial tension.

Brown became one of three history-making African-Americans elected to Congress from Florida in 1992 and has relied on the district's concentration of black voters to keep her in office.

She hails it as a triumph for equality.

But others have come to view the bizarrely shaped 3rd District as a glaring exhibit of everything wrong with redistricting, the once-a-decade redrawing of legislative and congressional voting lines to match population changes.

In November, Florida voters overwhelmingly approved constitutional amendments that prohibit legislators from gerrymandering districts to benefit a particular party or incumbent.

The Fair Districts measures are supposed to foster a makeup of elected officials that resembles the state's nearly evenly split electorate. Republicans tried to keep them off the ballot but failed. Now they are suing to stop them from taking effect before redistricting in 2012.

So is Brown.

"Our communities have fought too hard, for too long, to take this giant step backward to our state's Jim Crow days," she said of the suit, filed less than 24 hours after the polls closed.

Brown's role has angered many fellow Democrats and longtime allies, who view it as a selfish act that jeopardizes a
chance for reform.

"It's really sad. She is just plain wrong," said Howard Simon, executive director of the ACLU of Florida.

"I like Corrine," said Leon Russell, an NAACP leader who has worked on election issues. "But I wish she hadn't done this. I don't think you should frustrate the process purely on basis of your self-interest, no matter who you are."

Mostly Democrats fret over how bad things have become. Republicans now have veto-proof majorities in the Legislature and control 19 of 25 congressional seats.

"Things are completely out of whack in Florida," said U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa. "We're a 50-50 state. We swing national elections. The Fair Districts is needed, and I don't think anyone should be trying to fight it."

Brown said she's only trying to preserve what minorities fought hard for.

"I'm not saying it's not a problem. But don't put the problem on African-Americans," she said while knocking Democrats for fielding weak candidates around the state and having a weak ground game.

Brash as she is determined, Brown prides herself on the hundreds of millions in tax dollars she has brought home in local project funding. Her slogan: "Corrine delivers."

But she also has been a steady source of controversy, with numerous embarrassing episodes and ethical scrapes. A House panel once investigated whether she improperly took gifts from an African millionaire she pressured the Clinton administration to free from prison.

Time and again, Brown returns to Washington with decisive victories. How she got there is a political drama of ambition, power and race.

•••

In the early 1990s, Democrats were the Republicans of today — dominating the Legislature. The congressional delegation was nearly even: 10 Republicans, 9 Democrats.

But more and more Republicans had moved to Florida in the 1980s and the party sensed opportunity.

As the redistricting fight got under way, Washington lawyer Benjamin Ginsberg showed up in Tallahassee to plot an aggressive Republican strategy that was being replicated across the South.

Ginsberg later jokingly called it Project Ratf---, a nod to Watergate-era political trickery.

The plan called for joining forces with black lawmakers to press for districts packed with minority voters.

Tension was already mounting. Black lawmakers like Brown, then a state representative from Jacksonville, complained that white Democrats were carving out advantages for themselves (and they did) and retaliating against dissenters.

One black lawmaker said he was threatened that he would never hold a leadership position. Brown accused leaders of killing a housing bill that would hurt poor people.

In the end, some black lawmakers sided with the party and some sided with the GOP, which was pushing for more black seats.

"The whole idea was to drive a wedge into the Democratic Party along racial lines," said Peter Wallace, a former legislator from St. Petersburg who oversaw the House redistricting effort. "And it was very effective."

•••
Republicans said they wanted to bring more blacks into the party. But their labor carried another benefit: By packing black voters into "majority-minority" districts, the surrounding districts became only more Republican. It's called "bleaching."

Eventually, the whole mess ended up in court. Brown joined a lawsuit alleging the proposed districts were drawn to protect white Democrats at the expense of blacks and Hispanics.

The battle ended with a panel of federal judges artfully drawing three minority congressional districts.

In addition to Brown, Alcee Hastings of Miramar and Carrie Meek of Miami became the first black members of Congress from Florida since Reconstruction.

Overall, the number of black lawmakers in the U.S. House jumped to a record 39, an increase of 50 percent, with most gains in the South.

But the effect in those states was to further solidify GOP strongholds. By 1994, Republicans had taken control of the House, at least partly due to their redistricting efforts.

In Florida, the GOP's 1992 strategy helped give birth to Charlie Crist, who took a newly drawn state Senate seat, ending the longtime career of liberal Democrat Helen Gordon Davis of Tampa.

His victory helped end a 128-year reign of Democrats in the Senate. The chamber was deadlocked at an even 20-20. Two years later, the Republicans took over and two years after that, the GOP claimed the House.

They never looked back.

Russell of the NAACP was involved in redistricting and blames Democratic leaders for not getting more engaged as their caucus splintered.

"They missed the boat," he said. "The Republicans came along and offered more minority districts."

Wallace conceded, "I don't think we were fully prepared for what hit us.

"The whole experience was pretty ugly," he added. "One thing I can say is Corrine hasn't wavered in this. She has been consistent.

"It's important to have African-American representation. But taken to an extreme, the drawing of heavily African-American districts has done great harm to the Democratic Party. You can see it so plainly."

In 1995, the U.S. Supreme Court changed the rules for redistricting, saying race could not be a predominant factor in drawing the boundaries. A year later, a federal panel said Brown's rambling district was illegally drawn to elect a black candidate.

One judge compared it with "something lifted from a Rorschach ink blot."

The district was pared back, covering nine counties instead of 14. But while the black voting-age population slipped to 42.3 percent, the portion of registered Democrats fell only 3 points to 71.5 percent.

... Now it could change again.

The Fair Districts' measures state that no district shall be drawn "with the intent to favor or disfavor a political party or an incumbent." Lawmakers would have to draw compact and contiguous districts, preferably following the boundaries of cities and counties.

And the measures say districts shall not deny minorities the ability to "elect representatives of their choice."
Even so, Brown feels threatened. Republicans are, too. If the district is "unpacked" it could spread Democratic voters to surrounding congressional districts, making them somewhat more competitive.

In her lawsuit, joined by Republican U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart of Miami (and later the GOP-led Florida House), Brown argues that Florida voters can't change standards for congressional district-drawing because it is governed by the U.S. Constitution.

The plaintiffs also allege the measure violates the Voting Rights Act, which requires lawmakers to weigh incumbency to ensure that already-elected minority legislators remain in power.

Fair Districts backers say the claims are baseless, pointing to the language protecting minorities.

"They're struggling to find a legal theory," said Dan Gelber, a former state senator who is general counsel for the coalition.

Brown's lawyer, Stephen Cody, said the minority protection criteria could get trumped by the others. He cited a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that minorities do not have a guaranteed right to have minority plurality districts drawn (which is what the Brown and Hastings seats are).

"Believe me, I don't think anything would make her happier than to have a U.S. House that was majority Democratic again," Cody said. "But I don't think she's willing to sacrifice the representation of African-Americans in Florida to make that happen. They shouldn't have to bear that burden solely."

Alex Leary can be reached at leary@sptimes.com. Follow him on Twitter @learyspt.

---

**Time line | Redistricting**

**Nov. 2, 2010:** Florida voters overwhelmingly (63 percent) pass Fair Districts amendments banning the drawing of legislative and congressional districts to benefit a political party or incumbent.

**Nov. 3.:** U.S. Reps. Corrine Brown, D-Jacksonville, and Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, file a lawsuit challenging the amendments. Florida House Speaker Dean Cannon, who unsuccessfully tried to scuttle the redistricting amendments in the courts and at the ballot box, later intervenes on behalf of the suit, saying the new redistricting standards violate the U.S. Constitution.

**June 2011:** The Legislature will begin public hearings across the state on redistricting.

**July 2011:** Oral arguments in the lawsuit are scheduled to be heard in federal court in Miami.

**January 2012:** Legislative session convenes, two months earlier than usual, to take up redistricting.

**June 2012:** Legislature releases final district lines.

---

**Fast facts**

**Reapportionment and redistricting**

**Reapportionment:** Every 10 years the U.S. Census Bureau conducts a "resident population" count across the country, which is used to determine the number of seats in Congress. This is known as reapportionment and as a result of the 2010 census, Florida will gain 2 U.S. House seats in 2012 for 27 overall.

Florida began with just four seats a century ago and picked up more each decade. In 1960, the state had 12 House members. By 2000 it had reached the current 25, of which Republicans hold an overwhelming 19.

**Redistricting:** The reshaping of the political boundaries falls on the state Legislature in what is known as...
redistricting. It has been a cut-throat political process with both parties jostling for an advantage. Florida voters in November approved constitutional amendments requiring the drawing of compact districts, not the jigsaw boundaries of the past that were designed to benefit one party.