

Redistricting: Overview

What is redistricting and why is it done?

Redistricting is the process used by governments to redraw political district boundaries. Redistricting applies to all levels of government where district elections are held, including the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures, city councils, school boards, county boards, judicial, water districts, and more.

Redistricting is based on the idea of “one person, one vote”, which makes sure that each of our voices can be represented fairly, by creating districts that have the same number of people. Census data that is collected every ten years is used to draw new maps to account for the ways that populations have changed and moved across the states and districts.

Why is it important?

How district lines are drawn influences who runs for public office and who is elected. Elected representatives make decisions that are important to our lives, from ensuring safe schools to adopting immigration policies. Who lives in a district can influence whether elected officials feel obligated to respond to a community’s needs. The district boundaries are in place for the next ten years, and their policy impacts can last well beyond that.

Why should I be involved?

Redistricting has been used at times to exclude communities from political power. By fully participating in and monitoring the upcoming redistricting process, underrepresented communities, such as African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans will have the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice and voice their needs and interests. District boundaries are generally drawn once every 10 years, so this process has long-term effects on community representation.

Who is in charge of redistricting?

In most states, the state or local government is responsible for redistricting. Most state legislatures are responsible for drawing congressional districts and state legislative districts. Local governments are responsible for redistricting their own districts. Increasingly, states and local areas are using some form of commission to carry out redistricting responsibilities. Commissions are smaller groups of people that are often not elected officials. In some places, the process is not always transparent, so it is important to become familiar and pay attention to which process your area uses. Contact your elected officials to get the most updated information.

When does redistricting take place?

The census happens in the year 2020. Redistricting typically takes place one year later. States and local areas will have their own timelines for redrawing districts, based on when they get their census data and when the next set of elections are scheduled. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the US Census Bureau pushed back its data release deadline several months later to July 31, 2021. This change could have a significant effect on the timeline and process used to draw new maps. While most redistricting processes begin in 2021, communities can begin getting organized now. Getting ready includes building coalitions and collecting community data and stories to inform the official process.

How Gerrymandering Hurts Minority Communities: A Deluge of Problems for a Divided Watts

On November 12, 2003, a freak storm dumped over 5 inches of rain and hail on Watts, a neighborhood of Los Angeles, overwhelming storm drains and flooding the community. Over 150 buildings and homes were heavily damaged, over 50,000 people lost power, and about 6,000 people sought aid from the county's emergency center. Firefighters reported rescuing over 100 people from waist-deep waters. Many people had lost everything; mattresses, clothes, cars, even refrigerators. However, the government was slow to aid the people. FEMA refused to act when California's then-Governor Gray Davis declared a state of emergency (six days after the flood).

Watts is divided into **three** Congressional Districts (35, 37, and 39) and **three** State Senate districts (25, 27, and 30).

Romulo Rivera, former Congressional staffer: *“At the time of the 2003 flood, I remember our office trying to be very responsive, but there was a lot of ping-ponging of constituents between elected representatives. Residents weren't sure who actually was their member of Congress. Watts is cut into three different Congressional and state Senate districts. Residents who live on the same street may live in different districts. There was a lot of unnecessary frustration for constituents during a difficult time. **This would have never happened if all of Watts belonged to one district.**”*

Los Angeles Times, 11/17/2003, “Storm Victims Face Long Wait for Aid” (5 days after the storm): *“We need someone to help,” said Gloria Papillion, who like many of her neighbors expressed frustration that aid workers have not yet come to their cul-de-sac. Several said they had gone to the relief center and waited in line for hours, but said they had been unable to get the information they needed about what to do.*

Watts is a historically black community in Southern Los Angeles with a large Latino population. The community has long suffered from high rates of poverty and crime. Watts has the lowest household income of any Los Angeles community (\$17,987), and violent crime is nearly 300% the city average.

What would the response have been if this neighborhood were in a single district?

Adapted from Common Cause