

Rules of Redistricting: Overview

Every ten years, designated decision makers redraw legislative maps to even out the population in each district. This process is known as redistricting. It is meant to ensure that every person has fair representation. How the new maps are drawn can be done in several ways depending on the rules used. The rules, or criteria, guiding a redistricting process are shaped by traditional practices, court decisions, and the priorities set by state and local governments. Some rules of redistricting like “one person, one vote” and the Voting Rights Act must be followed. Other rules, unless specifically ranked by local laws, are open to interpretation about their importance. Understanding the rules used by your local government will be important to influencing the maps.

Required Redistricting Criteria

1. **Equal Population** – Each district should have the same total population. The principle of “one person, one vote” is fundamental to our democracy, and is embedded in the U.S. Constitution. It means that every resident should have equal importance.
2. **The Voting Rights Act** – This law addresses the history of discrimination faced by communities of color by protecting them during all stages of the electoral process, including drawing maps. In redistricting, the Voting Rights Act provides protections to these communities to be able to elect candidates of their choice. **(See Rules of Redistricting: The Voting Rights Act)**

Common Redistricting Criteria

There are also several other commonly used redistricting criteria. Many areas use a combination of the following redistricting principles when drawing their maps. The criteria below may have competing mandates, however, none of these criteria are more important than the ranked, required criteria above.

- **Preserve Communities of Interest** – A community of interest is a community, neighborhood, or group of people who have common concerns and traits and would benefit from staying together in a single district. This rule is one of the most important tools a community can use to preserve their community’s ability to stay in a single district. Providing community stories and examples of historical discrimination can also provide important evidence to support Voting Rights Act claims in the future. **(See Rules of Redistricting: Communities of Interest)**
- **Be Compact** – Compactness refers to the shape of the district. It describes boundaries that are drawn closely and neatly packed together unless there are good reasons such as VRA compliance or following oddly shaped boundaries, like city boundaries or rivers.
- **Be Contiguous** – Contiguity means that the boundaries of a district are a single, uninterrupted shape.
- **Follow Existing Political Subdivisions and/or Natural Boundaries** – This means maps minimize splitting cities and counties, or crossing natural or urban boundaries (rivers, mountains, highways, etc.).

Common Redistricting Criteria (continued)

- **Respect Existing Legislative Boundaries** – This means drawing new districts as closely to the existing lines as possible or preserving the cores of prior districts.
- **Respect Incumbency** – New districts include the current elected official’s house.
- **Achieve Political Goals** – State and local districts may be drawn for political reasons, such as to ensure the success of one political party over another. This may not be explicitly stated but is commonly considered a traditional redistricting criterion.

Emerging Redistricting Criteria

Other criteria exist that are less common, including nesting state House Districts within state Senate Districts, prohibiting districts that are drawn to favor an incumbent, candidate or party, and creating politically competitive districts.