

About the Census

The Census and Redistricting

After the census, states and local jurisdictions redraw election districts to have equal or close to equal populations.¹ Population is usually based on all persons counted in the census, regardless of age or citizenship.

What law provides redistricting data to states?

Public Law 94-171 directs the United States Census Bureau to provide re-districting data needed by the 50 states to redraw districts for the United States Congress and state legislatures. Following the 2010 census, the Census Bureau must send this data to the governor and legislature in each state by April 1st, 2011.

What census data is used to redraw districts?

The census creates special redistricting data charts with four tables of data. Two of these tables display total population, and are the building blocks of new districts. These charts contain data for higher level units such as states, cities and towns, as well as lower level units such as census tracts and block units, etc.

The other two tables display voting age population. This data is used to assess the number of actual potential voters in districts, and is often used in voting rights cases. Census questionnaire responses on race and Hispanic ethnicity supply figures for all four of these tables.

Who does the redistricting?

In most states, legislators draw the lines. This results in a kind of reverse democracy: officeholders choose their voters before voters get to choose them! This controversial process allows the party in power to draw "safe" districts that give their candidates an increased chance of winning. Arizona and a few states use a different method. California will use a multipartisan and independent commission for the first time for 2011 redistricting.

When do the new district lines take effect?

The new district lines will generally start being used in 2012, though the jurisdictions that hold elections in odd years may start as early as fall of 2011.

Sources

Census 2000 Redistricting Data (P.L. 94-171) Summary File – www.census.gov/support/PLData.html

National Conference of State Legislatures Redistricting Page – <http://www.ncsl.org/Default.aspx?TabID=746&tabs=1116,115,788#788>

¹States must draw their Congressional districts with exactly equal population. States and local jurisdictions draw their state legislative and local districts to within a standard of plus or minus 5% of the mean of total population divided by the number of districts.

4 phases of redistricting (most states)

Phase 1: Delivery

In early 2011 the Census Bureau starts sending data to states. By statute, last data must arrive by April 1, 2011.

Phase 2: Maps

In April 2011, the map drawing starts. If offered at all, public hearings can begin by late spring. Most states try to complete maps by the end of legislative session in 2011.

Phase 3: Seeking approval

If legislatures or commissions don't draw in time, courts step in. Groups can also sue for possible voting rights violations.

Phase 4: Meeting the deadline

Redistricting has to be complete before filing deadline for the state's primary, generally in 2012