

What Redistricting Means for Texas

State legislatures are mandated to undertake redistricting every ten years, when the U.S. Census results are released. The 2010 Census results will be released in 2011, at which point state lawmakers will be required to redraw the borders of the districts they represent.

The political stakes involved in redistricting can be enormous because changes to a district's shape can unseat previously untouchable officials or can provide excellent job security to an incumbent for several election cycles.

As the Texas redistricting in 2003 demonstrated, state legislators are not necessarily forbidden from redrawing districts more than once a decade. In 2003, conflicts over maps resulted in Democratic senators and representatives fleeing the state in order to avoid participating in a controversial redistricting plan driven by Republicans. Even in 2001, the GOP controlled Legislative Redistricting Board sought to maximize Republican gains at the expense of Democratic incumbents.

The 2010 Census is expected to show huge population gains in Texas. Projections indicate that the state could receive four additional U.S. congressional districts, which will increase both U.S. House representation and presidential electoral votes respectively. In state House districts, Central Texas is slated to gain more seats at the expense of rural East and West Texas. These changes will likely lead to a fight over how district maps are redrawn.

If the Texas House and Senate cannot agree on a redistricting plan, then authority passes on to the Legislative Redistricting Board, which is a five-member body comprising of the lieutenant governor, House speaker, attorney general, state comptroller, and land commissioner. Currently all five positions are held by Republicans. However, the results of the 2010 elections could change the Board's membership. Another consideration is that the Voting Rights Act requires the approval, of either the Department of Justice or a panel of three federal judges, for any changes to districts in Texas. Should state officials be unable to create an acceptable redistricting plan, then the new maps will be drawn up in federal court.