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Commentary

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana

Mapping the Future

The first in a three-part series looking at Louisiana's redistricting special session

Louisiana lawmakers are planning a three-week February special session to redraw the state's major political district maps, a once-a-decade effort to account for population changes as reflected in the latest U.S. Census data.

The session will begin Feb. 1 at 5 p.m. and must end no later than 6 p.m. on Feb. 20.

The redistricting process will determine how people are represented in state government and Congress. The maps will decide which political parties carry the most sway in Louisiana and who writes state and federal laws, sets utility rates and crafts education policy for public schools.

Why do we need redistricting?

States redesign their political maps every 10 years with the release of new Census data to equally distribute their residents among districts, as required under federal and state laws.

In Louisiana, the Legislature will rework the districts for the U.S. House, state Senate, state House, the Public Service Commission and the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Lawmakers also have included the Louisiana Supreme Court districts in the agenda for the special session, though it's unclear if they'll find enough consensus to pass new court maps since they aren't required to redraw them.

Districts for local school boards, police juries, city councils and other elected municipal bodies are drawn by local officials, who often hire consultants to assist with the task.

What's in the Census data?

Louisiana continued to struggle over the last decade with largely stagnant population growth.

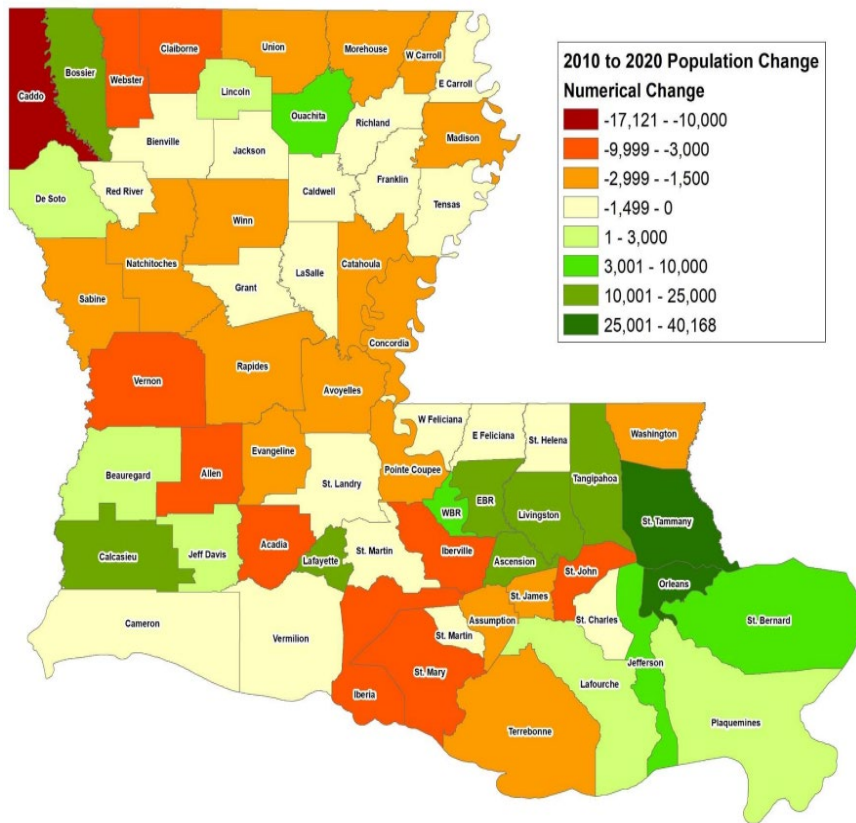
The state had more than 4.6 million residents in the 2020 Census, an anemic growth rate of 2.7%. That fell far below the national average growth of 7.4% and the Southern regional average of 10.2%. In the South, only Mississippi – which lost population -- had slower growth than Louisiana.

Louisiana's northern and rural parishes continued to shed residents over the last decade, while people moved to cities and their suburbs in the southern part of the state. The New Orleans region, the Baton Rouge suburbs and Calcasieu Parish saw among the largest resident gains, though the numbers in southwestern Louisiana don't reflect Hurricane Laura's impacts. Orleans Parish continued to rebound from population losses caused by 2005's Hurricane Katrina.

Nineteen of Louisiana’s 64 parishes grew from 2010 through 2020, while 45 parishes lost residents, according to the Census data. Louisiana’s largest parish is East Baton Rouge, followed by Jefferson, Orleans, St. Tammany, Lafayette, Caddo and Calcasieu parishes.

Statewide, Louisiana grew more diverse.

People who identify as white made up 57% of state residents in the 2020 Census data, compared to just under 63% a decade earlier. Louisiana’s Black population held steady at about one-third of residents, while those who identify as Hispanic grew from about 4% of the population in 2010 to nearly 7% in the latest data. Other minority groups also saw growth.



What’s different from 2010?

In the most significant change from the last redistricting cycle, the U.S. Supreme Court ended a requirement under the 1965 Voting Rights Act that Louisiana and certain other states must receive preclearance for their district designs from the U.S. Department of Justice to ensure the maps don’t discriminate in places with a history of inequitable treatment of minority groups.

Louisiana also has divided government, with a majority-Republican Legislature and a Democratic governor that could complicate the ability to reach a deal. Lawmakers will be trying to avoid the veto pen of Gov. John Bel Edwards because even if they vote as a bloc, Republicans don’t have enough votes in the House to override a gubernatorial veto.

If lawmakers and Edwards can’t come to terms, or if they can’t get enough votes to override an Edwards veto for specific maps, the redistricting debates could spill into the regular legislative session, or lawmakers could run the risk of seeing a court draw some districts.

Unlike the state’s last redistricting cycle, lawmakers won’t have to shrink the congressional map to fewer districts. Louisiana lost its seventh congressional seat a decade ago because of its slow population growth, but the state will maintain all six U.S. House seats this time.

Meanwhile, between term limits and legislative exits, the House and Senate have fewer members with experience in redistricting, leaving them more reliant on their staff and outside experts for guidance.

In the next publication, PAR will be reviewing the major issues and decision points for lawmakers and citizens. The last installment will finish with recommendations for a fairer, more transparent process.

How to get involved or follow along

Because of the amount and type of data involved, redistricting can be a daunting matter for citizens to follow. Fortunately, technology has made this an easier task. Below are some resources that allow you to dive more deeply into the data and even design and submit your own maps.

More detailed population data is available on the Census website at:

<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2020-population-and-housing-state-data.html>.

Information on racial and ethnic diversity data by state is available at:

<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-in-the-united-states-2010-and-2020-census.html>.

The House and Senate Governmental Affairs Committees, which take the lead on redistricting work, have held nine “roadshow” meetings around Louisiana to receive public comments about the maps. Video of those meetings, comments submitted via email and documents prepared by legislative staff are online: https://redist.legis.la.gov/default_Meetings.

The Legislature has posted a PowerPoint detailing key redistricting terms and laws, along with a breakdown of Louisiana’s latest Census data:

https://redist.legis.la.gov/2020_Files/MtgFiles/PowerPoint.pdf.

Want to take a hand at drawing your own maps? You can check out Dave’s Redistricting:

<https://davesredistricting.org/maps#state::LA>.

Want to submit your own redistricting proposals to the Legislature for consideration? The House and Senate require those maps to be submitted electronically in a comma-delimited block equivalency file, a format available on public redistricting websites. More details on the requirements for those submissions are posted online: https://redist.legis.la.gov/default_RedistCriteria.

Contact information for the House and Senate Governmental Affairs Committees are listed at the bottom of this page if you need more information for map submissions:

<https://redist.legis.la.gov/default>.

Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana | For more information please contact:
Dr. Steven Procopio, President, 225-926-8414 ext. 221 steven@parlouisiana.org