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Commentary

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana

Mapping the Future: The Key Debates

The second in a three-part series looking at Louisiana’s redistricting special session. Missed the first installment? You can find that [one here](#).

Louisiana’s February special session on redistricting will see lawmakers trying to protect themselves and other incumbents, angling for more partisan power and deciding whether to expand the number of elected positions available to minority groups.

Many of the debates aren’t new, but they are drawing more public scrutiny as the importance of the map work has gained stronger attention over the last decade.

The redistricting session could be complicated by worsening partisanship and the often-rancorous relationship between Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards and the House and Senate’s Republican leadership. Meanwhile, outside groups already are threatening lawsuits if they don’t see districts drawn in a way they prefer.

The largest theme heading into the session – scheduled to start Feb. 1 and end no later than Feb. 20 – centers on whether lawmakers will maintain, shrink or increase the number of majority-minority districts across political bodies to account for Louisiana’s growing diversity.

One-third of Louisiana’s more than 4.6 million people are Black, and more than 40% of state residents identify as minorities, according to the latest Census data. The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana believes legislators should acknowledge the state’s diverse population and draw districts that give people of color more opportunities to win election to office.

State and federal laws, along with court rulings, govern the redistricting process. Maps can’t be considered discriminatory, and they face a tougher level of legal scrutiny if they are considered racial gerrymandering. Oddly shaped districts that appear aimed at helping one party or race could draw closer inspections in court. Districts should try to maintain communities of interest, though people will have different concepts of what that means and who’s included.

Here are some of the top debates heading into session:

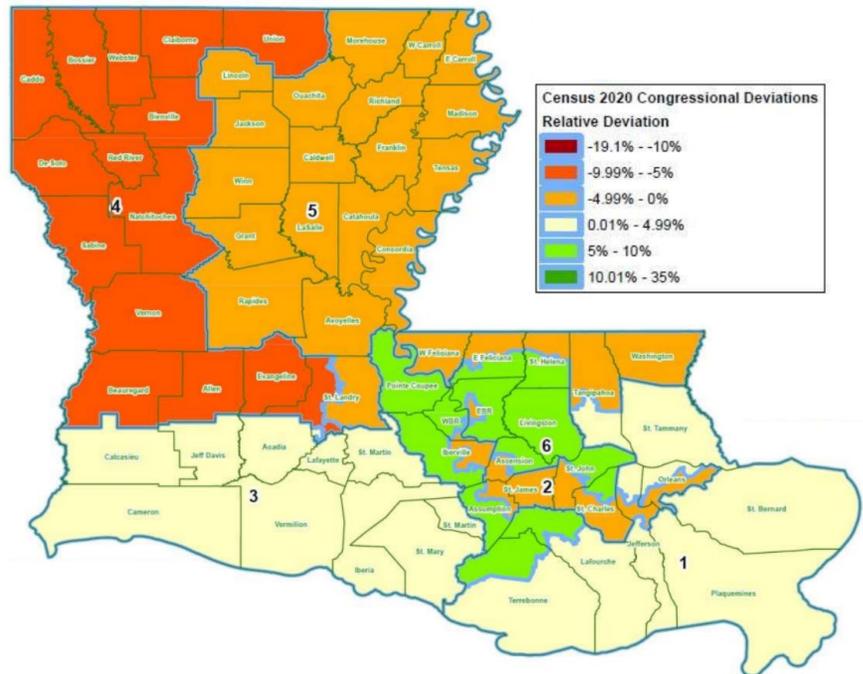
Congress

Most public interest in Louisiana’s political maps at legislative hearings around the state has focused on the [six U.S. House seats](#), particularly a push from civil rights organizations and other outside groups to create another majority-minority district.

Congressional Malapportionment

Louisiana has a majority-Black congressional district centered in New Orleans and stretching up the Mississippi River into Baton Rouge and five districts favoring Republicans. Edwards supports addition of a second majority-minority district, which could oust a GOP incumbent. But the governor hasn't said if he'd veto a map that doesn't contain two majority-Black districts.

Another key question centers on whether lawmakers will maintain two north Louisiana-based congressional districts as the region keeps losing residents. The 4th and 5th Districts combined are 85,000 people short of the ideal population for the districts.



Source: Joint Governmental Affairs Committee

Louisiana Legislature

Lawmakers will be redrawing the lines for their [39 state Senate seats](#) and [105 state House seats](#), to reflect population losses across northern and rural parishes and resident gains in the New Orleans region, suburban parishes around Baton Rouge and other southern parishes.

Of the 39 Senate districts, 10 have too many people after population shifts, while 15 have too few. Of the 105 House districts, 29 have too many people, and 37 have too few. Redrawing one district starts a ripple effect that impacts every other district in the complicated task.

Republicans are seeking to maintain their two-thirds supermajority in the Senate and looking for ways to pick up two more seats to reach the same benchmark in the House. Supermajority votes are needed to override gubernatorial vetoes, approve taxes and pass key budget bills.

Democrats are trying to avoid losing further clout in a Legislature where they have seen shrinking numbers that make it more difficult to win passage of their agenda items. They are trying to make some districts more competitive for their party and for people of color.

Among the rare areas of likely agreement, incumbents are seeking to craft legislative districts that protect themselves and their allies, giving them easier reelection chances. Efforts by some term-limited lawmakers to draw districts in a way that could help others with an election bid may be more controversial among House and Senate members.

Louisiana Supreme Court

Lawmakers have included the state Supreme Court seats in the special session agenda, though it's unclear if they'll be able to reach consensus on a map redesign. They face no requirement for updating [the seven districts](#), because courts have decided judicial branch seats don't fall under the one-man, one-vote principle.

New court maps would require support from two-thirds of the House and Senate to pass.

The Legislature set the current boundary lines in 1997, based on Census data from 1990, when Louisiana had 400,000 fewer state residents. Prior talk of redrawing the lines ended amid pushback from the justices and disagreement about how the districts should look.

Republican and Democratic legislators want to retry the effort because of wide population disparities across the Supreme Court districts. Nearly 477,000 people live in the New Orleans-based 7th District, but the Baton Rouge-area 5th District has nearly 839,000 residents.

Supreme Court Malapportionment

Districts	Total Pop	Ideal	Percent Deviation
1	752,775	665,393	13.13%
2	638,062	665,393	-4.11%
3	733,573	665,393	10.25%
4	586,849	665,393	-11.80%
5	838,610	665,393	26.03%
6	631,334	665,393	-5.12%
7	476,554	665,393	-28.38%

Source: Joint Governmental Affairs Committee

Black lawmakers want to create a second majority-minority Supreme Court district. Efforts to expand the court to add two districts, which supporters pushed to add a new majority-minority seat and redesign the map, fell apart in the House last year.

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

Louisiana's top K-12 education policymaking board has 11 members, but only eight represent elected districts while three are appointed by the governor. Two of the elected Board of Elementary and Secondary Education seats represent majority-minority districts.

BESE leaders have said they would like to tweak the [existing district configurations](#). Civil rights organizations are calling for creation of a third majority-minority district. Edwards supports adding another majority-Black district if the map can be drawn "in a way that is reasonable."

The 6th District representing parts of the Baton Rouge region and into Tangipahoa and Washington parishes has the largest growth in population, with nearly 49,000 people more than the ideal population of 582,000, according to legislative data. The 8th District that represents other portions of the Baton Rouge region and winds into Point Coupee, St. Landry and Avoyelles parishes lost the largest number of residents, with 58,000 too few people.

A decade ago, lawmakers didn't reach agreement on BESE district maps during their special redistricting session and negotiated a final version in their regular legislative session.

In the next publication, PAR will offer recommendations for a fair, transparent process.

Want more information?

Federal courts have issued many decisions that govern map designs. PAR has compiled links to sites that can provide more details about redistricting laws and court rulings.

The National Conference of State Legislature has a [list of significant redistricting decisions](#) from the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Brennan Center for Justice has a [redistricting court case tracker](#).

The U.S. Department of Justice provided [redistricting guidance involving the Voting Rights Act](#).

Louisiana lawmakers adopted a [joint rule with the redistricting criteria](#) the House and Senate will follow in their special session.

The Louisiana Legislature has a [comprehensive redistricting website](#) with details about the process, redistricting laws and Census data.

The Center for Urban Research at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Louisiana Progress have created a redistricting [website with some proposed maps](#) suggested by outside groups, including congressional district lines recommended by the NAACP.

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