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Mapping the Future: Redistricting Do-Over

Congressional map redrawn, election system changed in short special session

Gov. Jeff Landry launched his first special session in office with a lengthy to-do list. Lawmakers gave him the congressional map he preferred and a portion of the election system redesign he desired. The rest of the agenda ended up on the cutting room floor, with the ideas likely to reappear in future legislative sessions.

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana believes the outcome across the five-day special session was probably best for Louisiana's citizens.

Lawmakers needed to rework the congressional map to meet the orders of a federal court requiring the creation of a second majority-Black district. They agreed to a partially closed primary system but pushed back the start date until 2026, to give elections officials time to work out the details. And the rest of the items on Landry's list, none of which had urgent timelines, will wait until later sessions, to give voters and taxpayers more time to participate in the discussion and lawmakers more time to scrutinize the ideas.

Many of the proposals Louisiana's governor wants to pursue, such as changes to the state Supreme Court, may be worthwhile recommendations when properly vetted and thoroughly debated in public – rather than in a short special session called in the first week of a new administration. Landry has two upcoming sessions, a special session planned to begin in mid-February and a three-month regular session starting in March, to reintroduce the ideas.

But transparency and accountability should be the hallmarks of those debates, not an afterthought or ignored altogether.

Four Sessions of Congressional Map Debate

Louisiana lawmakers have debated the district lines for the state's six U.S. House seats across four different legislative sessions since 2022.

States must redesign their political maps every decade with the release of new U.S. Census data, to account for population changes and equally distribute their residents among elected districts as required under federal and state laws.

The continued debate over the congressional map stems from a disagreement and litigation in federal court about whether Louisiana needed to create a second majority-Black district.

Civil rights groups, however, successfully challenged the congressional districts as a violation of the federal Voting Rights Act. Under an order from U.S. District Judge Shelly Dick, lawmakers had until Jan. 30 to draw a new map that contains two majority-Black congressional districts or risk the judge drawing one for them.



The map passed by the House and Senate last week and signed into law Monday by Landry keeps the majority-Black 2nd District seat held by Democratic U.S. Rep. Troy Carter based in the New Orleans region. It creates a second majority-Black 6th District stretching from Baton Rouge through Alexandria and up to Shreveport, heavily redesigning the district seat currently held by Republican U.S. Rep. Garret Graves.

The Black voting-age population is 51% in the redrawn 2nd District and nearly 54% for the new 6th District configuration.

The other four districts were reworked to accommodate the new majority-minority district while protecting the core of districts represented by Louisiana's two Republican leaders: U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson in the 4th District and U.S. House Majority Leader Steve Scalise in the 1st District.

The 3rd District seat held by Republican U.S. Rep. Clay Higgins and the 5th District seat held by Republican U.S. Rep. Julia Letlow also faced adjustments to make the numbers work. Avoyelles, Calcasieu, Ouachita and Rapides are among the parishes that will be newly split among two congressional districts, and several parishes will be moved to new districts.

The new map will next be reviewed by the federal judge before it could take effect for the congressional elections set for November. Lawmakers agreed to spend \$1.4 million to send mailed notifications to voters about the changes to their congressional districts if the new map is used this fall. Meanwhile, threats are percolating of a new lawsuit challenging the redrawn map as a racial gerrymander.

Louisiana Supreme Court District Redesign Stalls

Senators refused to pass a Landry-backed effort to rework the Louisiana Supreme Court's seven districts amid concerns about transparency and about the map offered by most of the high court's justices.

Five of the justices proposed a map that would create a second majority-minority seat in response to ongoing federal litigation challenging the current districts as discriminatory against minorities. They said they hoped redesigning the layout would resolve the lawsuit. But they crafted the map in secret, sidelined Chief Justice John Weimer in the process and called on lawmakers to adopt the proposal without change.

PAR supports redrawing Supreme Court districts that haven't been reworked in more than 25 years and that don't reflect the state's growing diversity. While courts have decided that judicial branch seats aren't legally bound to the one-man, one-vote principle, large population disparities among current districts give voters who elect the justices varying levels of influence depending on where they live.

However, the approach [taken by the five justices defied transparency](#).

Though the House voted to support the redistricting proposal favored by those justices and Landry, the Senate rightfully slowed down the debate to give the public more time to participate and review the map. The Supreme Court has no immediate federal judge's directive to redraw its districts.

Senate President Cameron Henry said he expects lawmakers to debate the high court redesign in one of the next two upcoming legislative sessions, so Louisiana's citizens can engage in the discussion. That's the stronger, more defensible approach. The issue deserves a robust debate, particularly when it will heavily rework the district configuration.

New Closed Primary System to Start in 2026

Beyond the new congressional map, lawmakers also agreed to Landry's push to create a closed primary system in Louisiana – though the Senate significantly scaled back the legislation from Landry's original proposal.

The change will cost anywhere from \$31 million to \$47 million across the first three election cycles in which it is used from 2026 through 2028, according to a nonpartisan legislative financial analysis of the bill. Millions of dollars in additional costs are expected to be added to each election cycle that features the closed primaries.

PAR believes partisan primaries [provide little benefit to the public](#). They carry a higher cost to the state treasury and a confusion risk for voters used to the current system, particularly for the nearly 28% of voters who aren't registered Republicans or Democrats. Though the Senate improved the legislation, those concerns remain.

The final version of the bill, signed Monday by Landry, will create a closed party primary system for elections for Congress, the Louisiana Supreme Court, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Public Service Commission.

Senators removed statewide, state legislative and other judicial seats from the bill so those elections will continue under the open primary system Louisiana currently uses, known as a "jungle primary," where all candidates regardless of party run against each other on the ballot.

The Senate also pushed the start date of the closed primary system until 2026 after the Secretary of State's Office raised concerns about the speed of enactment.

In one of the more significant changes to the bill, senators refused to let the political parties determine whether to allow voters unaffiliated with a party to participate in the primary. Instead, no-party voters will get to decide in which party primary they want to vote. They will only be allowed to vote in one party's primary for that election, not both.

Research provided by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana. For more information, please call 225-926-8414 or visit www.parlouisiana.org.

Voters affiliated with a political party other than the Democratic or Republican parties won't be allowed to cast ballots in the primaries at all. They will only be able to vote in the general election.

For candidates interested in the races that will start using closed primaries in two years, they will have two paths to reach the general election, depending on their party affiliation:

- Candidates who are registered with a political party recognized by the state (currently only the Republican and Democratic parties meet the criteria) will run in that party's primary. The candidates must either pay qualifying fees or get 1,000 signatures on a nominating petition to sign up to run in the primary. Then, to become the party nominee, a candidate must receive more than 50% of the vote in the party's primary. If no candidate tops 50% of the vote in the first primary election, the top two vote-getters will face each other in a runoff to determine who advances to the general election.
- Candidates who aren't registered with a political party recognized by the state (such as candidates with the Libertarian or Green parties or who aren't affiliated with any party) will bypass the primaries and go straight to the general election to compete against the party nominees. But they have a more limited path to get on the ballot. They won't be able to pay qualifying fees. Instead, they must get 1,000 signatures on a petition from voters who aren't Democrats or Republicans.

Pathways exist in state law for other parties beyond Democrats and Republicans to gain official recognition, if a candidate from another party receives 5% of the Louisiana vote in a statewide or presidential election.

What Comes Next

If the congressional map redesign is upheld in federal court, it should be used for the fall election cycle. But new litigation could be filed challenging the latest district configuration.

Other proposals included in the governor's special session agenda that didn't reach his desk (such as a new Supreme Court map, changes to the court's financing, the method of selecting the state's chief justice and campaign finance changes) are expected to reappear for future debates.

PAR hopes those debates will happen with a heavy focus on public participation, transparency and government accountability.