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# Commentary

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana

## Mapping the Future: Recommendations for Redistricting

The third in a three-part series looking at Louisiana’s redistricting special session, which starts Feb. 1 and must end by Feb. 20. Missed the first two installments? You can find them [online here](#) and [here](#).

When Louisiana lawmakers gather next week to open their redistricting special session, they’ll have a tight timeline to draw new maps and tricky politics to navigate. They’ll be grappling with competing demands, intense scrutiny and outside pressures.

With no bills prefiled so far, the public has little idea of which direction lawmakers might take in redesigning district lines for the U.S. House, state Senate, state House, Public Service Commission, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Louisiana Supreme Court.

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana believes the remapping work should be done with a focus on public participation and transparency.

### A Transparent Process

Lawmakers have done an admirable job of offering the public an opportunity to understand and comment on the redistricting work ahead of the special session. They’ve held “roadshow” hearings around the state to hear from the public and explain the complicated mapping process. They’ve accepted outside map submissions. And their staff has created [a comprehensive website](#) with detailed Census data and legal information.

That spirit of openness should carry into the session.

The House and Senate should take seriously the public comments and hours of testimony they’ve received, rather than default to simply protecting incumbent officials, political parties and their personal allies. Inclusivity should be a primary goal of the session.

Lawmakers should release corresponding maps with each proposed change to district lines. If a lawmaker offers a substantive amendment that heavily reworks the districts in a bill, the new map and changes should be released 24 hours ahead of a committee vote, so legislators and the public have time to digest and comment. While that idea is understandably less workable during House and Senate floor votes, it shouldn’t be a difficult task for committee debates.

Legislative leaders and some caucuses and delegations have enlisted outside guidance to help with the mapping work. They should be open and upfront about the demographers, law firms and consultants they've hired outside of the regular legislative staff to aid in designing districts and defending those districts against possible lawsuits.

There's nothing wrong with using outside experience to assist with redistricting – if lawmakers publicly release information about what contracts are involved, which people have influence and whether tax dollars are paying them.

Meanwhile, Gov. John Bel Edwards needs to be more public and direct about what he'd like to see from the redistricting session.

Edwards has broadly described some current maps as unfair. He's said he'd like to see a second majority-Black congressional district and a third majority-minority district in the elected BESE seats. But he hasn't outlined what types of maps he'd veto, and legislative leaders said they're received few specifics on what district lines he prefers beyond the general public statements.

Because Republicans in the Legislature don't have enough members to override a gubernatorial veto on their own, the Democratic governor will play an integral role in determining which maps can become law.

Understandably, the governor will need flexibility to negotiate with lawmakers over specific proposals during the session. But if he provides the Legislature and the public with clear boundaries about what will guide his decision-making, that could improve the chances of having a successful redistricting session, rather than a pile of vetoes.

Edwards has been assertive about certain legislative issues over his two terms, demonstrating an ability to help shape the outcome of an agenda. He should acknowledge a similar approach is needed in the important task of redistricting.

## **A Fair Process**

Fairness, particularly in redistricting, can be difficult to define and can spur widespread disagreement. PAR won't offer specific ideas for how the final maps should look, but lawmakers should seek to encourage voter participation in the redesigned districts and should avoid disenfranchising voters because of their race or political party affiliation.

The House and Senate should acknowledge Louisiana's growing diversity, with more than 40% of the state's 4.6 million residents identifying as minorities in the latest Census data, including one-third who are Black. Redesigned maps should offer more opportunities, not less, for people of color to win election to office.

While the seven state Supreme Court districts don't require a redesign, lawmakers should make a good-faith effort to rework the lines for the first time in 25 years. The districts vary significantly in how many residents each contains, with as few as 477,000 people in the New Orleans-based district and nearly 839,000 people living in the Baton Rouge-based district.

Courts have decided that judicial branch seats aren't legally bound to the one-man, one-vote principle. But Louisiana has elected Supreme Court justices. Population disparities among the high court's districts give voters different levels of influence depending on where they live. Districts with larger numbers of residents dilute voters' decision-making when compared to districts with fewer residents.

PAR knows the redistricting work will be a personal and tough task for lawmakers. They need to take care to ensure a public already deeply cynical about politics doesn't view the process as shadowy and tainted.

## PAR's Redistricting Recommendations

1. Take public testimony seriously
2. Give public time to digest map proposals
3. Disclose outside redistricting consultants
4. Need parameters from the governor
5. Draw maps that encourage voter participation
6. Acknowledge Louisiana's growing diversity
7. Rework Louisiana Supreme Court districts

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