

## NEWS

# Get Ready for Redistricting Via Zoom

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Michele Silverthorn takes part in a census training at the Jackie Robinson YMCA before coronavirus restrictions went into place. / Photo courtesy of the Count Me 2020 Coalition and CeCe Cantón

Communities across San Diego will undergo a once-in-a-decade process to redraw their political boundaries in 2021 that will require unprecedented input from residents throughout the county.

In 2011, during the last round of redistricting, only the state and city of San Diego had independent redistricting commissions. The San Diego County Board of Supervisors handled the county's map, and most other jurisdictions throughout the county held at-large elections.

But in the past decade, many jurisdictions – from cities to school districts to fire districts – have shifted to district elections and now will be drawing their lines, said Doug Johnson, president of National Demographics Corp. San Diego County also has an independent redistricting commission for the first time.

Redistricting is the process of redrawing district boundaries to ensure equal voter representation. Independent redistricting commissions are made up of citizens who are supposed to ensure that political interests don't drive the drawing of the maps. Though commissions vary in their exact makeup and procedures, generally they work with a staff that either they hire or that the jurisdiction provides to get public input on the maps and help finalize them. The county of San Diego, Escondido and Chula Vista will all have independent redistricting commissions for the first time.

"The number of jurisdictions looking for input will be exponentially higher," Johnson said.

The pandemic is also going to have an impact on the process, shifting most hearings to an online-only platform and delaying the release of census data necessary to drawing new district maps.

"The big question mark is when we'll get the census data," Johnson said.

It's impossible to know what communities may be facing changes in their district lines without that data. The data could show that certain districts have gained or lost enough people that their boundaries need to change. Part of a city council district, for example, that has grown may need to become part of another district that is too small.

It seems clear that census data isn't going to be available by the March 31 statutory deadline, Johnson said.

In the best-case scenario, the data will be released in mid- to late-April to states, then California will be making an adjustment to the data, by moving people incarcerated in state prisons to be counted in their hometowns and removing those incarcerated in federal facilities in the state from the respective county. That could mean that data will be ready to use in local jurisdictions throughout the state at some point in May.

But there are also some pending issues that could even further delay the data, like a legal fight over a last-minute schedule change that [cut census counting a month short](#), another lawsuit that alleges that census workers were [pressured to falsify data](#) and a challenge to President Donald Trump's [plan to exclude people living in the country illegally from the population count](#) used to allot states' seats in the House of Representatives.

If a judge or the incoming Biden administration decide to require more rigorous data processing that would require sending people back out into the field to ask additional questions, that would add another couples of months before data gets to states.

California has already requested the ability to push its deadline to have its district maps done to Dec. 15, 2021.

Typically, Johnson said, there will be first rounds with multiple maps that get public input, then those maps will be finetuned and narrowed until the adoption of the final map. In some jurisdictions, maps need to be released 30 days before the final deadline to be subject to a potential referendum because of local ordinances.

In 2011, the maps were finalized in August.

The delayed timing could become an issue with county registrars who need to have districts set in time for the June 2022 primary, said Evan McLaughlin, vice president of Redistricting Partners.

“Typically the filing deadline is March for the June primary,” McLaughlin said. “We need to know where the lines are.”

Jeanine Erikat, a community organizer for the Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans, has other concerns over the census data and how it will impact line-drawing and representation for certain communities, particularly Arab, Southwest Asian, Middle Eastern and Northern African communities who [have previously been counted as White](#) by the census, and Black refugee populations who are counted as African Americans. In San Diego, which has large communities of these groups, that way of counting certain communities could have impacts that bleed into the redistricting process.

Independent redistricting commissions have largely been seated already.

The state commission has hired an executive director and is staffing up for the process, McLaughlin said.

At the county level, legal counsel was hired even before the commission was seated, said Erikat. The county commission is being pushed to have requests for proposals for line-drawers out soon and hire them in February, a timeline that is more rushed than that at the state level, she said. Since the commission is made up of normal people, not experts or professional map-drawers, they work with a staff or consultants who do have that experience, while ensuring that all necessary laws and community input is taken into account.

Despite the delays, the public still will have several months to give their input – both before and after the data is released.

“You don’t need census data to be able to get community input that this community should be together because of cultural or socioeconomic reasons,” McLaughlin said.

The pandemic will also impact how the public can give input in the process. The switch to a virtual platform for meetings and trainings could be a good thing that allows for increased engagement, but it might introduce its own issues.

Johnson noted that 10 years ago, San Diego was a model for public participation because it used a mapping tool that allowed residents to create their own maps. Now those tools are much better and easier to use – and people are getting more comfortable with Zoom and other online tools because of the pandemic.

It also will be easier for many people to give their allotted three minutes of public comment virtually, while they can be at home during the rest of the meeting doing other things, rather than spending hours waiting.

“On the downside is [reliable] internet access,” Johnson said. He hopes some of the work school districts and others have been doing to bridge the digital divide during the pandemic may help. “It’s still not a balanced playing field. There are advantages and disadvantages to doing everything online,” he said.

Erikat said her organization is continuing to monitor whether the online meetings will be comparable to in-person processes as the county starts to seek community input. Virtual settings can also make certain factors like language translation more difficult.

“For people who have disabilities or couldn’t go to meetings because parking was expensive or they had other responsibilities, having virtual hearings can make it easier,” Erikat said. “But the challenges come with people who don’t have stable internet or other technology issues. Those

often happen in communities of color, rural communities and other communities with socioeconomic issues.”

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