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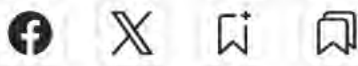
**NEWS**

## Alabama lawmakers begin task of drawing new political districts

Updated: Aug. 31, 2021, 7:39 a.m. | Published: Aug. 30, 2021, 6:01 p.m.



Maps cover a table in the reapportionment office in the Alabama State House. Lawmakers are gearing up to draw new congressional, legislative, and State Board of Education districts based on the 2020 Census.



By **Mike Cason** | [mcason@al.com](mailto:mcason@al.com)

Alabama lawmakers are preparing to draw new political districts based on the 2020 census and will start public hearings on the effort this week.

The public can participate online through Microsoft Teams. They can also attend in person. Most of the 28 hearings will be held at community colleges across the state.



The first is Wednesday at 9 a.m. at Drake State Community College in Huntsville. Three others follow on Wednesday – at Northwest Shoals Community College in Muscle Shoals at 11 a.m.; at Calhoun Community College in Tanner at 2 p.m.; and at Northeast Community College in Rainsville at 4 p.m.

The U.S. and Alabama constitutions require reapportionment after every 10-year census to keep districts approximately equal in population. Alabama lawmakers must draw new lines for seven congressional districts, eight state Board of Education districts, 35 Alabama Senate districts and 105 Alabama House districts.

The Legislature's reapportionment office received the census data needed to start the redistricting process on August 12. The information came months later than originally scheduled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alabama had already received good news in April when the Census Bureau reported that the state's overall population grew more than expected, to a tad more than 5 million, enough for the state to keep its seven congressional seats.

Lawmakers are expected to meet in special session later this year to vote on new districts. The maps must be in place in time for next year's elections, starting with the primary on May 24.

Sen. Jim McClendon, R-Springville, co-chair of the Legislature's reapportionment committee, said he does not expect a problem with the timeline unless the COVID-19 pandemic interferes with lawmakers meeting. McClendon said he has asked the governor's office to call the special session for the week of October 18 but has not received an answer.

McClendon said the numbers the reapportionment office received in August were not a surprise. Alabama's population grew about 5% overall between 2010 and 2020, but 40 of the state's 67 counties, mostly rural counties, lost population. That was especially true in the Black Belt, the region across the central part of the state named for its rich soil.

On the other hand, Baldwin, Limestone, and Lee counties all grew by 24% or more.

"They're pretty much what we expected," McClendon said. "We did see a significant reduction of population in the Black Belt areas. We expected to see an increase in north Alabama and Baldwin (county), and we did, and Lee County. So that was not a surprise.

"And basically we're following a trend that Alabama and other states have been following for decades. And that's rural areas are losing population and suburban and urban areas are gaining population."

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[Rural Alabama is shrinking fast, 2020 Census shows](#)

McClendon said work is already under way drawing preliminary lines.

"We're roughing them in," he said. "We tackled congressional first, because there's just seven of those, and that makes it easier to get fairly accurate lines. They're not absolutely the final lines."

He said the Board of Education lines would come next, followed by the Senate districts and then the House districts.

"In the meantime, we'll be conducting these public hearings around the state to try to give the opportunity for any citizen to have input into the process," McClendon said.

McClendon said the seven new congressional districts won't be drastically different than the current plan, which includes one majority Black district. That is District 7, which is about 63% Black. The other six districts are all between 7% and 29% Black. Blacks make up about 26% of Alabama's overall population.

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McClendon said all the comments made at the public hearings will be recorded by a court reporter and presented to the redistricting committee for consideration.

"If somebody says, 'I want this line to go here,' we're going to take their opinion down, but we can't commit to much of anything. Our job is to listen and hear what they have to say," McClendon said.

McClendon said the reapportionment committee would meet with legislators to discuss changes in their districts. Legislative approval is required for the new maps.

"There won't be any surprises for the candidates or for the voters," McClendon said.

"There will be some changes, obviously, there will have to be as people shift around. But they'll be recognizable."

Redistricting in Alabama has not gone smoothly in the past. Although reapportionment is required by the Constitution, the Legislature failed to do that through much of the 20th century, according to [the history of the process](#) maintained by the reapportionment office.

The plan adopted by the Legislature after the 2010 Census was challenged in court by the Alabama Legislative Black Caucus, the Alabama Democratic Conference and others who claimed it diminished the influence of Black voters by packing them into certain districts. A federal court upheld the plan. But in 2015, [the U.S. Supreme Court sent back](#) the case for reconsideration.

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A three-judge federal court ruled that 12 legislative districts had to be redrawn because of racial gerrymandering.

In response to the court ruling, lawmakers approved remedial plans in 2017 in a vote along party lines, with the Black Caucus opposed. The districts were used in the 2018 elections.

More information is available at the reapportionment office link at the Legislature's website, including this year's redistricting guidelines adopted by the Legislative committee.

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