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On the Trail

On the Trail, an occasional column by St. Louis Public Radio political reporter Jason Rosenbaum, takes an analytical look at politics and policy across Missouri.

Missouri Republicans learn that redrawing congressional lines isn't so easy

St. Louis Public Radio | By [Jason Rosenbaum](#)

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Brian Munoz / St. Louis Public Radio

Senate President Pro Tem Cindy O'Laughlin, R-Shelbina, during a special session on Sept. 10 at the state Capitol in Jefferson City.

Republicans in the Missouri legislature passed a new congressional map last month as part of a national GOP strategy to prevent Democrats from taking control of the U.S. House.

But a looming referendum could derail plans to implement new congressional lines aimed at ousting Democratic Congressman Emanuel Cleaver — even if voters approve the map in November 2026.

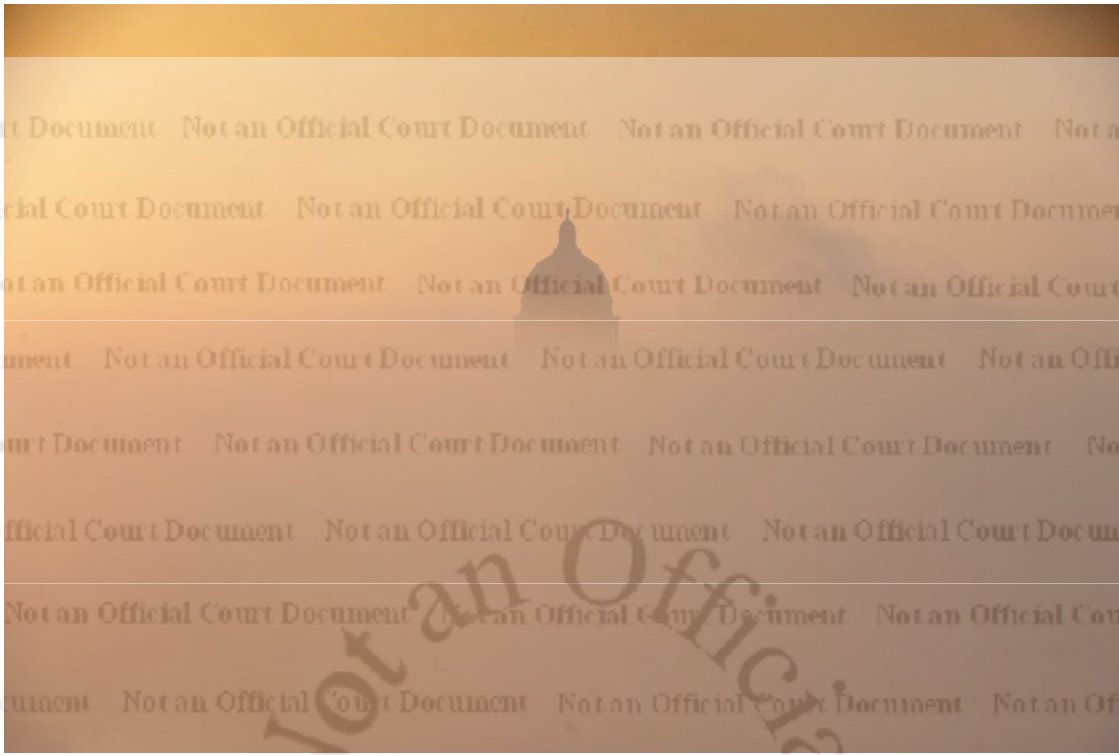
Since the map passed, redistricting foes have filed a flurry of lawsuits and started collecting signatures to let voters decide on the plan in the November 2026 election cycle. While it is hypothetically possible for the legislature to move the referendum, Missouri Republicans are recognizing that the statewide vote may torpedo any hope of having the lines in place for the 2026 elections.

And while Republican statewide officials are trying to throw up legal and procedural roadblocks, Democratic lawmakers and GOP legislators who declined to support the redistricting plan say this highly contentious chapter in Missouri's political history showcases the pitfalls of acceding to pressure from President Donald Trump and his administration.

"When you nationalize what we normally do here in Missouri ... and then you let somebody else do that, in this case the president's administration, you're going to have screw-ups," said Senate Minority Leader Doug Beck, D-St. Louis County. "They're not going to know all the laws of Missouri and what we go through."

Despite the uncertainty, other Republicans say they have no regrets about pushing the highly contentious congressional redrawing forward — even with the Democratic counterattack casting doubt if the proposal will go into effect.

"You can't bring a knife to a gunfight. And I think that's why people ultimately said, 'Well, we need to at least try to do whatever we can to maintain the majority now,'" said Senate President Pro Tem Cindy O'Laughlin, R-Shelbina. "The people in Washington in the Democrat Party are radicals, and it's very frightening to the majority of people in Missouri to think about that."



Tristen Rouse / St. Louis Public Radio

Fog rises off the Missouri River in front of the state Capitol on the morning of Jan. 3, 2024, in Jefferson City.

Roots of a referendum

Missouri became the second Republican-leaning state to redraw its congressional lines this year. It happened after Trump pressured Texas to redraw its map — which prompted California to place a measure before voters that could create more Democratic seats. Other states could soon revisit their congressional seats in the coming months.

"I wish I hadn't had to vote for it, but I don't regret my vote," said Rep. Jim Murphy, R-south St. Louis County. "I see what other states have done, and it's appalling. Tit for tat is not a good way to run a state, or a country for that matter. But unfortunately, it's the environment."

The origins of Missouri Republicans' redistricting complications are in the vote count in the House and Senate.

Since Missouri Republicans hold commanding majorities in both chambers, the legislature was able to break through Democratic opposition and send the map to Kehoe in September. Because there weren't enough House or Senate votes to make the new map go into effect right away, the plan was subject to a referendum.

Are Missouri Republicans haunted by redistricting bid? Some have regrets, others hold strong

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The group People Not Politicians said it's already collected 100,000 signatures in roughly a month — which bodes well for the effort to collect more than 106,000 signatures in six of the state's eight congressional districts. If People Not Politicians collects enough signatures, the map cannot take effect unless voters approve the measure in a statewide election in November 2026. That would mean the current districts would remain in place during next year's elections.

Rep. Bryant Wolfen, R-Ste. Genevieve, who voted against the redistricting plan, said he didn't know that a referendum on the new lines was possible before the special session. He said, "I guarantee the majority of the caucus did not as well."

"I think just given how fast all this was kind of rushed through and, honestly, we weren't really prepared a whole lot coming in," Wolfen said.

Unlike with proposed constitutional amendments, only the General Assembly, and not the governor, has the power to move the date of a referendum. That happened in 2018 when lawmakers shifted a vote on right-to-work legislation from November to August.

But in order for the map to go into effect before filing closes for the 2026 election, lawmakers would have to make the referendum occur before March 31. Not only is it rare for statewide contests to occur in any month besides August or November, state law says that there needs to be notice of an election 10 weeks before it's held. That makes it basically impossible for the legislature to move the referendum to March — even at the very beginning of the legislative session.

Even if it was possible, legislative leaders aren't wild about the idea of moving the referendum date — especially since they say the map could get voted down in a low-turnout election in which redistricting foes are more energized than redistricting proponents.

"I always prefer a larger-turnout election, because it gives you a better feel for what the citizens of Missouri as a whole are thinking," said House Speaker Pro Tem Chad Perkins, R-Bowling Green. "Why would you do it in March or April, when you get 15% or 16% turnout, when you could do it later on that year and get 60% turnout? I think November is probably a better option."



Annelise Hanshaw / Missouri Independent

Missouri Secretary of State Denny Hoskins speaks to reporters in May 2024 during his time as a state senator.

‘We are in a lot of new territory’

With the stakes of just securing the referendum signatures so high, Secretary of State Denny Hoskins and Attorney General Catherine Hanaway are placing roadblocks to prevent the measure from getting to voters.

Hoskins approved the referendum for circulation but said that any signatures gathered before mid-October won’t count toward the final tally.

“We are in a lot of new territory, with a referendum, with redistricting mid-census and things like that,” Hoskins said in an interview earlier this month. “I believe that based on the Missouri Constitution as well as Missouri state law, that we are in the right and we’re going to protect the Missouri Constitution.”

People Not Politicians officials strongly disagree with that contention and plan to fight to prevent 100,000 signatures from being tossed out.

“Missouri politicians continue to try to confuse, intimidate and, frankly, silence us. Specifically the attorney general and secretary of state have been deliberately confusing the initiative petition process and the referendum process,” said People Not Politicians Executive Director Richard von Glahn. “These are frankly deliberate misrepresentations by elected officials who should know better.”

In addition to defending the redrawn map against several lawsuits in court, Hanaway is asking a federal court to bar People Not Politicians from pursuing its referendum. Among other arguments, she contends that putting the map up for a vote is unconstitutional.

A statement from her office says that the "Missouri Constitution and the U.S. Constitution vests the authority for congressional redistricting in the General Assembly, not activist organizations funded by outside interests."

"Attorney General Hanaway is upholding the U.S. Constitution by ensuring that Missouri's redistricting process remains in the hands of the officials chosen by Missouri voters," the statement from her office says. "The Office will continue fighting to protect the integrity of Missouri's elections and preserve the rule of law against efforts to usurp the power of the people's representatives."

Chuck Hatfield, an attorney for People Not Politicians, said Hanaway's lawsuit papers over a 1916 Supreme Court decision that upheld a bid to place a redistricting plan up for a referendum. He and other People Not Politicians officials note that Missourians have voted before on a redistricting plan, in a referendum in 1922.

Hatfield also said Hanaway's lawsuit uses dissents from Supreme Court justices to make its arguments, which are not binding precedent. That, he said, cuts at Hanaway's argument that only the General Assembly can delegate its power over redistricting.

"The law in the United States right now, according to the United States Supreme Court, is that the people have the right to take back congressional redistricting completely," Hatfield said. "In Arizona, they took away the right of the legislature to draw the lines at all. It was done by a citizen commission. A majority of the United States Supreme Court said that did not violate [the U.S. Constitution's Elections Clause]. There is a dissent that objects to that and says that it would violate that. But that's not the law today."

Republican political consultant John Hancock said Hanaway's argument is plausible. But he added that redistricting opponents are arguing that the Missouri Constitution doesn't explicitly authorize lawmakers to redraw districts in the middle of the decade — which is fairly similar to Hanaway's contention in trying to prevent a referendum.

He said it's likely that legal and procedural disagreements over the new map won't be resolved anytime soon.

"I'll be surprised if come filing in February, if this thing is resolved in such a way that the new lines are governing," Hancock said.



Brian Munoz / St. Louis Public Radio

Rep. Bryant Wolfin, R-Ste. Genevieve, voted against a plan to redraw the state's congressional districts.

Any regrets?

Wolfen said that the complications over implementing the redistricting plan should give pause to other states considering redrawing their maps, like Indiana and Kansas.

In particular, Wolfen said the issue showcases the dangers of letting a state legislature effectively take orders from the federal government — even if the executive branch has similar political aims as the state legislative majority.

“We are sovereign states. We are independent states. We are allowed to be able to voice our own opinions, and we certainly do not have to pander to what they need at the federal level,” Wolfen said.

O’Laughlin said nobody should be surprised that Democrats are pushing back against the redistricting plan — especially with so much on the line during the 2026 election cycle.

She said she has no regrets about pushing the map through the Senate, which involved using a procedural move called the previous question to end a Democratic filibuster.

“People understand that the number of representatives that you have in Washington can make a huge difference,” O’Laughlin said. “I guess I don’t have to remind you, or really anybody listening

to this, that in the current environment everything is war. So I'm not surprised when shots start getting fired."

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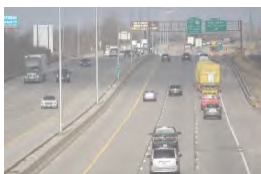
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