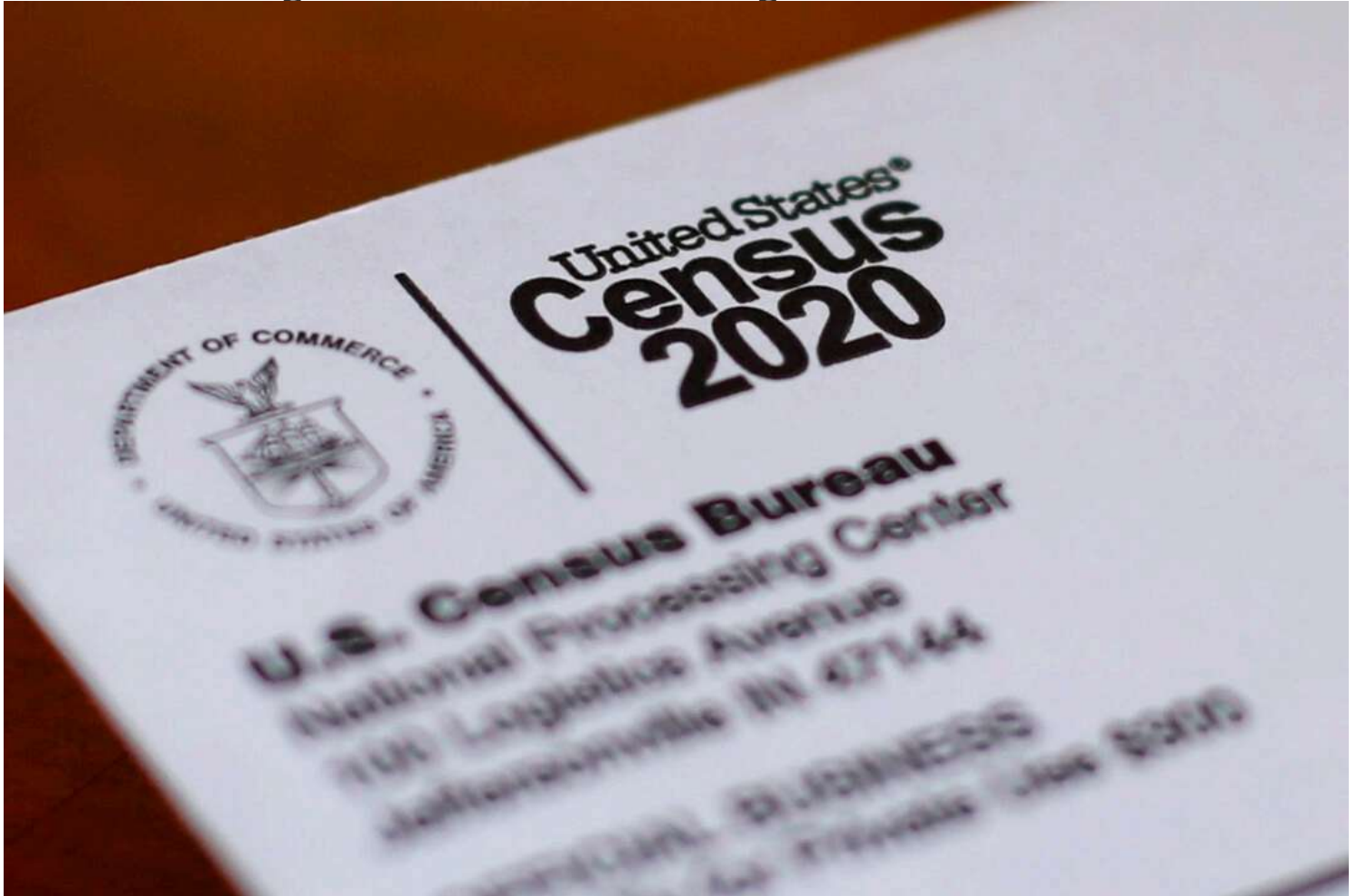


Redistricting: What's Old Is New Again



This April 5, 2020, photo shows an envelope containing a 2020 census letter mailed to a U.S. resident in Detroit. Paul Sancya/File via AP



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Commentary

Redistricting is a political process run by politicians for electoral ends.

Most often, we only hear about redistricting in the years ending in -0, -1 or -2. The population statistics used to redraw our state and federal legislative districts result from the federal Census conducted every decade. It's a constitutional duty, under Article I, Section, that the Census is conducted in the year ending in -0 (though the pandemic did delay the 2020 Census).

State legislatures receive this Census information late in the -0 year and spend the following year redrawing their districts. Then the new districts come online in elections in the year ending in -2.

So, if we normally only hear about this process in those specific years, why are we hearing it now, in a year ending in -5?

The short answer is because national Republicans are worried about losing their slim majority in the U.S. House. This is magnified by the fact that most often the party in power (Republicans) lose seats in Congress in the midterm elections, like the one we will conduct next year.

The GOP thinks it would be an excellent idea to conduct a mid-decade redraw in Republican states such as Texas and Missouri to create more GOP seats—a buffer to the inevitable losses that the party will suffer elsewhere in the 2026 midterms.

In Texas, the state Senate's GOP majority recently passed a new congressional map that would net Republicans an additional 5 to 6 seats there. It was set to pass in their state House, and then be signed into law by GOP Gov. Greg Abbott.

But last week, more than 50 Democratic members of the Texas House left the state—fled, as many conservative outlets mocked—to deny their House a quorum. As a result, it could not conduct any official business, thereby (temporarily) delaying the new maps' debutante ball.

Eventually, those scattered Texas state House Democrats will need to return to their homes and lives ... and jobs. For now, they're all doing cable TV hits, spreading the word to keep up their spirits and to encourage and pressure some Democrat-run states (New York and California) to conduct mid-decade redraws of their own. Under court order, New York already had to redo their congressional districts a few years ago, which helped the GOP pick up a few seats in 2022, many of which they promptly gave back in 2024 after another redraw there.

Normally I would next write that such a mid-decade redraw could not happen here in Pennsylvania, as we have divided government—a GOP state Senate with a Democratic state House and governor.

But former Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf and the then-newish Democratic majority on the state Supreme Court did just that in 2018—later in the 10-year cycle than we now find ourselves—even though the GOP controlled the entire state Legislature. The forced 2018 redraw flipped four of the state's GOP congressional seats to blue (Districts 4, 5, 6, and 7), only one of which (the 7th) Republicans have won back—and that took six years.

Even worse, the redraw also changed most of the numbers of our congressional districts. For example, Bucks County, where I grew up, had since the late 1800s been the 8th congressional district. But in 2018 that was changed to the 1st congressional district by the court-imposed redraw.

And as much as Pennsylvania Republicans protested, Wolf and the Democrats knew their new majority on the state Supreme Court would backstop their redistricting efforts. No national Democrats complained about Democrats' redraw, which was still happening as petition season began. To get on the ballot here, candidates at all levels need to gather petition signatures from members of their own party—anywhere from 10 signatures up to 2,000, depending on the office.

I had a client who had already started running in a congressional seat in mid-2017, who then lo and behold (in a year ending in -8!), found himself in another seat altogether a few months later. It's hard to put together a campaign, or even decide whether to run, when one doesn't even know which district they will be in for a campaign.

Nationally, Democrats picked up 40 House seats in that 2018 election—Trump's midterm election—and took back the House. And we all remember what happened next: the first of what turned out to be two presidential impeachments (which always begin in the House).

That's why Team Trump is so eager to redraw seats this year in GOP-friendly states—to (potentially) stave off a Democratic takeover of the lower chamber in next year's midterms.

Who says government can't do anything quickly?

The trends in Texas are mostly moving in the GOP's favor, so their new map, in a state controlled entirely by Republicans, is just a sneak peak of things to come. And the existing Democratic gerrymanders in states such as Illinois, Maryland, and California are much more egregious than what those Lone Star Republicans are attempting.

So, no new maps here in the Keystone State, but there will be new maps in Texas and probably a few others in the 44 states with more than one House district. Taken together, all this will slightly increase the so-so odds of the GOP keeping the House.

There are no angels or saints to be found in any redistricting process. It's just the nature of the beast. We're just getting an unexpected rerun of the process.

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