

What is the Link between the Census and Redistricting in New Jersey?

Every 10 years, the Census must count all people living in the United States: children and seniors, citizens and residents, voters and non-voters. These official numbers are used to determine how to redraw Congressional district and state legislative district boundaries to reflect changes in population. Each newly drawn district must contain roughly the same number of residents. In New Jersey, the two major political party leaders appoint members to two separate commissions – one to draw the boundaries of the 12 congressional districts and one to draw the boundaries of the 40 state legislative districts. Each of these commissions typically holds several public hearings but the decision is ultimately up to the commissions themselves. If the two sides cannot agree, a “tie breaker” is appointed by the State Supreme Court. Historically, public input has had only limited impact on the redistricting process.

Why Should Nonprofits Get Involved in Advocating for Fair Redistricting?

Today, it is estimated that almost half of all New Jersey residents (46%) are people of color, a number increased substantially since the previous Census in 2010. However, New Jersey’s elected representatives do not yet show the same levels of diversity. When district boundaries are drawn fairly, residents can exercise their power to elect leaders who will better represent and reflect their communities. This is particularly important for communities of color. When these communities are slivered into multiple districts, it is less likely they can elect leaders who listen to and represent their interests. When communities are kept intact, they are better able to use their voice and collective influence to make sure the issues important to them are heard. New Jersey’s nonprofits can lead the charge to ensure that these community interests are factored into the redistricting process so that the state’s elected leaders are better positioned to be responsive to community needs.

How Can Nonprofits Contribute to Fair Redistricting in New Jersey?

1. Nonprofits can educate themselves and their communities about why redistricting matters. The more residents know, the more they can influence the process.
2. Nonprofits can work together in coalition to make sure the communities they serve are seen and heard throughout the redistricting process. The coalition could:
 - educate the public and media about the importance of the “tie-breaker” commissioners’ role as an advocate for the non-partisan interests of the general public;
 - advocate for the commissions’ by-laws to require meaningful public input; and
 - influence the map-drawing process itself – by drawing and submitting neighborhood maps designed to show the locations of communities of interest and to keep these communities intact, and by commenting on the strengths or weaknesses of the commissions’ proposed maps.

As a voice for New Jersey’s many and diverse communities – and a correction to the self-interest of the political parties – nonprofits can keep public focus on the urgency for all New Jerseyans, especially communities of color, to be represented in new districts that reflect how our state has changed.

Will You Join Us?

Contact Kiki Jamieson, The Fund for New Jersey (kjamieson@fundfornj.org) to join or learn more.