

# REDISTRICTING IN ALASKA



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## WHAT IS REDISTRICTING? AND WHY SHOULD ALASKA NATIVES PARTICIPATE?

**Redistricting is the redrawing of the geographic lines that divide districts for representation of people in the state legislature and other government bodies.** It is required by the U.S. Constitution. Redistricting usually takes place every ten years, after the United States conducts a census to determine how many people live in each state. This guide is focused on the statewide redistricting of the Alaska Legislature, including the Alaska State Senate and Alaska State House.

By redrawing these district lines every ten years, redistricting takes into account where populations have increased or decreased. The main goal of redistricting is to ensure that all districts have approximately the same number of people. This protects the constitutional right to have a vote that is equal to any other person's vote.

**It is crucial that Alaska Natives have a strong voice in redistricting to protect their ability to elect candidates of their choice. The legislative maps created this year will be used for the next ten years. How can your community participate in this process? How can you ensure that your political power is protected? This guide explains the redistricting process and how we can all participate.**

## WHY IS REDISTRICTING IMPORTANT?

**Redistricting matters because it controls access to political representation.** It influences who runs for office and who is elected. Elected representatives make many decisions that influence our daily lives, from acknowledging tribal sovereignty to protecting the land and resources. Residents of a district should be able to hold their representative accountable and be sure that their representative is truly representing the interests of the people.

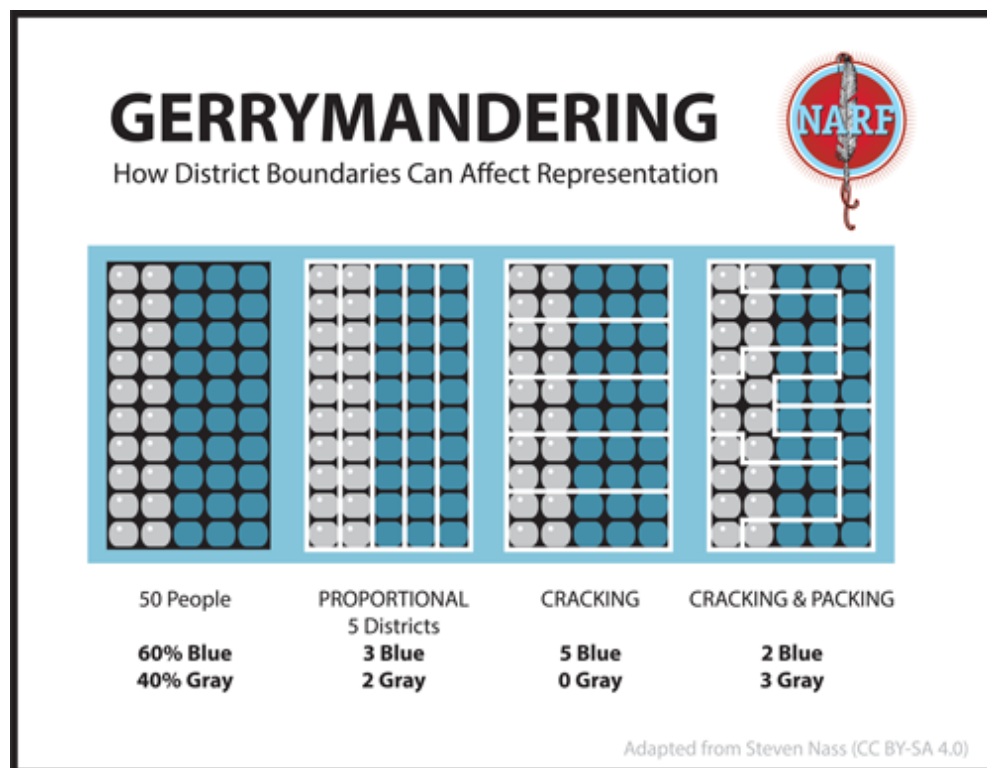
The U.S. Constitution requires that electoral districts have roughly equal populations. This requirement ensures that each person's vote is worth the same as any other person's. Because populations change over time, districts must be redrawn to reflect those changes. Otherwise, the voting power of a particular community would be diluted. For example, one state legislator might represent 40,000 people, while another represents only 25,000. The people in the smaller district would have disproportionately more representation, making the system unfair.



## WHAT ABOUT GERRYMANDERING?

Even when districts have nearly equal populations, a particular map can still limit a certain group's political power. This abuse of redistricting is called *gerrymandering*. Often it is used to exclude minority communities from political power. Even in an election with one hundred percent voter turnout, gerrymandering can still prevent communities from electing their candidates of choice.

Maps often dilute votes in two ways. First, a map can “crack” minority voters into many districts, where they are only a small percentage of the population in each. This leaves them unable to elect their representative of choice, despite having enough votes to do so. In the image below, gray voters have been cracked in the third map, leaving them without control of any districts, even though they represent forty percent of the population. Second, a map might “pack” minority voters into one district, when if they were spread out in multiple districts they would have more political power. In the final map in the image below, most of the blue voters have been packed into two districts, and the rest of the blue voters have been cracked up in the other districts. This leaves the blue voters with forty percent of the districts, even though they are sixty percent of the population.



When voters are unfairly packed or cracked, even turning out every eligible voter usually will not be enough to win an election. This is why redistricting is so important. In order to prevent this sort of gerrymandering, it is necessary for Alaska Natives to participate in the redistricting process. This is our chance to create a fair system that will stay in place for the next ten years.



## WHO IS IN CHARGE OF DRAWING THE LINES?

Each state has its own rules about who is responsible for drawing new district lines. In Alaska, redistricting is done by an independent body appointed by the Governor, leaders of the Alaska Legislature, and the Chief Justice of the Alaska Supreme Court. This group is known as the Alaska Redistricting Board. This year, the five members of the board are: Melanie Bahnke (Nome), John Binkley (Fairbanks), Nicole Borromeo (Anchorage), Bethany Marcum (Anchorage), and E. Budd Simpson (Juneau). Binkley was chosen by the other members as the chair of the Board. In order to adopt a new map, three of the five Board members must vote in favor of the map. The Board's website is [www.akredistrict.org](http://www.akredistrict.org) and more information is available there. You can also sign up to receive email updates from the Board through their website.

Even though these officials make the final decisions, you can still help shape the decision-making process. The Board will hold public hearings, giving you a chance to voice your opinion on draft maps or even submit a proposed map of your own. The Board has a map-drawing tool available on its website: [www.akredistrict.org/create](http://www.akredistrict.org/create). NARF has prepared information about other map-drawing programs at: <https://vote.narf.org/redistricting/mapping-software/>.

Participating in this process will ensure your community has a chance to be heard, and help build a record that will be important if there are lawsuits about the map that the Board eventually draws.

## WHEN DOES REDISTRICTING HAPPEN?

**Redistricting takes place every ten years after the Census is completed.** The 2020 Census results were released on August 12, 2021. This is later than normal; the COVID-19 pandemic interfered with the decennial census and has delayed the process of reporting the Census results.

From the date that the official Census numbers are published, the Alaska Redistricting Board has thirty days to draft a proposed map for Alaska's legislative districts. They will then release that proposal to the public. The Board is allowed to release multiple proposals at that point if they decide to do so.

After the Board releases its draft map(s), it is required to hold additional public hearings to get feedback from Alaskans. This will take place in Fall 2021. The Board must issue its final maps within ninety days of the Census data being published. Assuming those maps are not challenged in court, they will be used for the first time in the 2022 statewide elections.

## WHAT ARE THE RULES FOR DRAWING THE LINES?

Alaska's Constitution establishes some rules for how lines can be drawn in redistricting. When drawing your own maps, make sure to comply with these guidelines.

- The ideal size for a state House district is determined by dividing the total population of the state by forty, the number of members in the Alaska State House. Given Alaska's population of 733,391, the ideal House district size is 18,335. Each House district should have **a population as near as practicable** to that ideal size. Generally, more variation is allowed in rural districts and less in urban districts. This is because it is easier to draw districts of the exact same size when people live close together. For example, a map shouldn't divide a small village in two just to achieve population equality.



- House districts should be **contiguous**. This means that every part of the district must be physically touching or bordering. However, contiguous districts can include open sea.
- House districts should be **compact**. This means that districts should have a small perimeter in comparison to the area they include and map makers should avoid “bizarre” lines, especially unnecessary appendages. However, strangely shaped districts often result from Alaska’s geography and population distribution. Therefore, compactness is usually judged in comparison to other possible and proposed maps.
- House districts should contain a **relatively integrated socio-economic area**. This refers to groups of people who have economic and social interactions, connections through transportation like ferries or air routes, historic links, shared fishing or hunting areas, shared healthcare services, or shared sources of news.
- Maps may consider **local government boundaries**, like neighborhoods or community council borders. But considering these boundaries is optional, not required.
- Senate districts are created by combining two neighboring House districts. This means there will be twenty Senate districts. Each Senate district should have a population close to the ideal size of 36,670.
- Districts must provide for **fair representation**. This means that the Board cannot intentionally discriminate against a borough or any other “politically salient class” by limiting their ability to cast an equally effective vote.

In addition to these Alaska-specific rules, the federal government sets rules that every state must follow for redistricting. If any of these requirements comes into conflict with a state requirement, the federal rule takes priority. When drawing a map, the Board has to first draw lines based on the state rules and then make any changes necessary to comply with the federal rules.

- **One person, one vote**—Districts must have roughly equal populations. This applies to congressional districts, state legislative districts, local school board districts, and more. However, this requirement doesn’t mean that every district must have the exact same number of people. Under federal law, state and local plans may have districts with up to ten percent variations in population. In many cases, the state equal population requirement is stricter than this federal requirement.
- **Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act**—This law prohibits redistricting plans that dilute the power of a person’s vote due to their race or ethnicity. A map violates this law if Alaska Natives have less opportunity than other voters to elect representatives of their choice. In order for this rule to apply, the Alaska Native voters must live relatively close together, they must generally support the same candidates, and they must have enough people to be a majority of eligible voters in at least one district. When considering whether it is possible to draw a majority-Native district, determine the percentage of voting-age people who are Native, not just the overall percentage of Native people in the district. Fifty percent of the total population may not be enough.





When these requirements are met, Alaska Natives may be entitled to a district in which they have an opportunity to elect their candidate of choice. This is called a “majority-minority district.” Make sure to factor in registration and turnout rates when you are considering how many Native voters need to live in a district in order for them to have equal opportunities to elect candidates. This number could be lower than fifty percent if some non-Native voters usually support the Native-preferred candidate, or it could be considerably higher if Native turnout and registration rates are lower than average.

NARF can help you determine whether this legal protection applies to you and whether a potential district would be an effective Native-majority district. Contact [vote@narf.org](mailto:vote@narf.org).

## HOW CAN I PARTICIPATE?

Even though the Alaska Redistricting Board is in charge of making final decisions on new legislative district lines, everyone can and should participate in this process. Tribes, individuals, and groups can tell officials how they think the district lines should be drawn. The timeline to participate in the redistricting process will be very short, so we encourage everyone to jump in and lend your voice to the process. If you are Alaska Native or work for, or on behalf of, Alaska Native interests, the First Alaskans Institute has been hosting an Alaska Native Redistricting Working Group providing presentations and discussions to prepare for the redistricting process. Reach out to them to learn more at [anpc@firstalaskans.org](mailto:anpc@firstalaskans.org) or by calling (907) 677-1700.

Alaska requires the Redistricting Board to hold public hearings on its draft map(s). Make sure to attend (either in person or virtually) and explain why proper representation is so important to your community. You can even create your own draft maps and share those with the Board.

You can also organize your community. Find others who are interested in redistricting and educate your neighbors about why this process is important. You can work together to define your community and help decide who should be in your district.

Tools to help you at every step of the process are available at <https://vote.narf.org/redistricting/>.

If Alaska Natives come together and make their voices heard, this can help ensure that the redistricting process is fair and that the maps used to elect our state representatives protect Native political power.

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<https://vote.narf.org/redistricting> [vote@narf.org](mailto:vote@narf.org)



**First Alaskans Institute**

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