

Ohio needs new state House and Senate maps as election deadline looms

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Ohio has no maps for state House and Senate seats just three months before candidates must file to run for them.

The Ohio Redistricting Commission, a seven-member panel tasked with drawing those maps, meets Wednesday for the first time since May 2022. It's billed as an organizational meeting to set rules and pick co-chairs, but draft maps are already floating around and a tight deadline looms.

The legislative districts used in 2022 were repeatedly ruled unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court and used only after a federal panel of judges declared them to be the only option.

Ohio's previous attempt to draw maps for its statehouse and congressional districts, which extended from August 2021 to July 2022, was panned as dysfunctional and frustrating at best and illegal and undemocratic at worst. Starting Wednesday, Ohioans will watch and see whether this new effort to redraw maps is more successful.

When is the deadline?

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, a GOP member of the commission, recently asked fellow mapmakers to hit a Sept. 22 deadline to complete new statehouse districts – just over a week after Wednesday's initial meeting. The quick turnaround could limit public input in the final maps unless commission members are diligent.

“I know that there are various drafts out there that are being worked on,” LaRose told reporters Tuesday. “My hope is that we can get maps introduced so that we can start getting public comment on those.”

Gov. Mike DeWine, another Republican member of the commission, said last week that he believes the commission can hit that Sept. 22 deadline and said it's important for them to do so. But he's not sure what the final legislative map will look like.

"It may be different," DeWine said. "I don't know how dramatic of a difference it would be."

Meanwhile, House Minority Leader Allison Russo, D-Upper Arlington, who is on the commission, said Tuesday that mid-October is a more reasonable deadline.

"I think some of it is performative," Russo said of LaRose's proposed date. "We see another effort afoot to force this artificially quick deadline to pass these maps."

Russo said time is needed to sort out all the commission's disputes, including which elections should be used to calculate the state's partisan breakdown, which averages a 10-year lookback of statewide races.

Replacing 2012 election results that included Democratic President Barack Obama and Sen. Sherrod Brown's victories with Republican DeWine's 25-percentage point win in the 2022 governor's race would increase the number of GOP seats allowed.

New dynamics among mapmakers

The commission's dynamics and membership have changed since last year. For example, the fight over who will lead the Ohio House of Representatives could infiltrate redistricting negotiations.

The Ohio House of Representatives' new leader, Speaker Jason Stephens of Kitts Hill, was elected in January with help from House Democrats over the objections of several fellow Republicans. He plans to run for speaker in 2024 and might need Democratic support again to keep the gavel.

Meanwhile, Senate President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, is expected to run for the House in 2024 because he will be term-limited in the Senate. He is mulling a bid for speaker "someday," which could set up a showdown with Stephens.

Huffman spokesman John Fortney said Tuesday: "We look forward to good faith negotiations with our colleagues under the guidance of the Ohio Constitution and free of attempts to undermine the process from Washington, D.C special interest groups."

Neither Stephens nor Huffman will sit on the commission but their proxies, Rep. Jeff LaRe, R-Violet Township, and Sen. Rob McColley, R-Napoleon, will. McColley is expected to succeed Huffman as Senate president in 2025.

Another dynamic is LaRose is running in a competitive GOP primary for the U.S. Senate, trying to win the endorsement of former President Donald Trump and fellow Republicans. In a news release from his office last week, LaRose slammed Democrats who sued over the congressional map, saying "The reality here is that allies of one political party tried to game the system by getting an outcome they wanted from the previous hyper-partisan court majority."

Meanwhile, DeWine has said Ohio politicians should get out of the mapmaking business but has stopped short of backing a proposed constitutional amendment that would give the pen to a 15-member citizens panel instead.

The threat of a constitutional amendment on redistricting could loom over as mapmakers try to craft districts that last for more than two or four years.

Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio, D-Lakewood, is the only new face on the commission, replacing Sen. Vernon Sykes, D-Akron. Antonio said she's willing to work toward passing maps that last for eight years rather than two – which would require both Democrats to vote for the plan.

"It seems like it will also be a heavy lift but I'm open to the possibility and hopeful," Antonio said. But she concedes a citizen-run process might be better, in the end. "We would all be better served by folks who are not office holders."

Reporter Haley BeMiller contributed to this article.