

Who will end up winners, losers in redistricting?

By TOM BALDWIN • STAFF WRITER • July 25, 2010

Do you know who your congressman is?

Many New Jerseyans don't. And those who do may have to learn all over again very soon. The 2010 Census is triggering the re-drawing of voting districts, as it does every 10 years, and that represents a political challenge for the state.

New Jersey might lose a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, further muddying any understanding about which of the state's members of Congress, and lawmakers at the state level, represent which municipalities.

For New Jersey, there is added drama. Unlike other states, New Jersey holds odd-year elections. So, with the census data materializing after the first of 2011, New Jersey needs to have its state legislative districts drawn by springtime for the June primary election.

"It's certainly a condensed timetable," said Republican State Committee Chairman Jay Webber, an assemblyman from Morris County, who predicted the job would be finished on time.

"There is a large number of New Jersey people who do not know who their congressional representative is," said U.S. Rep. Rush Holt, D-N.J. "It makes it hard from the residents' point of view."

"Yes, we may lose a district," said Rep. Leonard Lance, R-N.J., pointing to census projections in 2007 and 2008, where northern, urban areas of the state did not grow as fast as some other areas.

"It's a strong possibility," said Ernest Reock, professor emeritus in the Center for Government Services at Rutgers. "Our population has been growing less than the rest of the country."

Is a particular district at risk? "No way you can predict," said Reock, noting the 2010 census determines the number of districts a state will receive, and the state then draws the lines.

Reock said a district could be losing population, but the redrawing process could add a few growing municipalities that preserve the seat for an incumbent. Or a fast-growing district could be divided among two or three incumbents.

Said Ingrid Reed, a political analyst who recently retired from the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, "Even if we don't lose a seat, there will be a different configuration. That will create uncertainty."

The potential loss of a congressional seat isn't to be taken lightly. "It is bad because it means you have less representation in Congress," said Rep. Frank Pallone, D-N.J. "There is one less person out there making the case for funding."

Every 10 years the U.S. Census Bureau does the head count for the nation and then assigns each state the number of seats it will have in the 435-member House of Representatives for the ensuing decade.

The states then draw up their own congressional and state-legislative maps, a mandate that can be fraught with partisan politics.

"It becomes a mad scramble — musical chairs," said Democratic State Committee Chairman and Assemblyman John Wisniewski, D-Middlesex. "Nobody wants to lose a seat when the music stops."

Today New Jersey has 13 congressional districts, represented by eight Democrats and five Republicans.

Who does the redistricting? And who decides which congressman might have to bow out?

For the congressional seats, and for picking which congressman must vanish if the state loses a seat, there is the New Jersey Redistricting Commission.

The commission has 13 members, 12 appointed by party and legislative leaders. The 13th member, called the "public" or "independent" member, is selected by a vote of the other members. If they can't agree, the state Supreme Court names the public member.

For the state's 40 legislative districts for the Senate and Assembly, an 11-member Apportionment Commission draws the boundaries. The chairpersons of the Democratic and Republican parties select five candidates apiece. If they can't agree on a plan, the chief justice of the state Supreme Court, Stuart Rabner, will select a tie-breaking 11th member. "Of course they never do agree," said Reock.

The job on the state level involves creating districts with an average population of about 217,000 people, give or take 10 percent. That must be done by early April, with the census data coming out in January.

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