

HOW TO DRAW THE LINES — STEP BY STEP

1. Figure out about how big each district should be. Take the total number of people living in the state, from the latest census numbers. Divide by the number of districts in the state, to get the average population. Each congressional district has to have almost exactly that average number of residents. State legislative or local districts can have a little more variation: some states allow up to 10% variation between the largest and smallest districts, and some have constraints that are a bit tighter (check state law to be sure).
2. Look for districts to ensure compliance with the Voting Rights Act. Look for populations of racial or language minorities that are relatively close together, where minority voters would vote for a different candidate than most of the majority population, if given the choice. If there are enough minority voters to make up a majority in a reasonably compact district, make sure not to dilute that population's voting power — either by “cracking” them into several districts or by over-“packing” them into one district that dilutes their power elsewhere.

If you are in an area covered by section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, you also must make sure that your plan, intentionally or not, doesn't leave minority voters worse off than they would otherwise be. Lay the old district lines on top of a map with the most current demographic information from the census, and figure out the districts where minority populations, voting together, could effectively control the outcome of the election. Your new plan has to have at least as many districts where minority voters have the opportunity to elect their chosen candidates.

3. Look to the requirements of state law. Each state has different rules for how to draw districts, both for the state legislature and for Congress. Districts generally have to be contiguous, with all parts of the district physically adjacent. Most states also require that districts are reasonably compact, and ask that lines (at least for state legislatures) try to follow political boundaries like counties or cities or political precincts. Many states ask redistricting bodies to consider communities of interest, so that voters with a common legislative interest have representatives they can hold accountable to them. So find your state laws, and see what they ask you to take into account. And ask around to find out where the boundaries of substantial communities are located, so that you can draw lines with an eye to ensuring coherent and cohesive representation.
4. Draw away. The next step is to actually start drawing. Commercial software is available that helps with this process, to figure out how many residents with what demographics are within any given set of boundary lines, recalculated as you change the boundaries. Some states — and some civic organizations — may have licensed versions of this software for public use, and free public open-source software for redistricting is on the near horizon.
5. Ask for feedback. Get feedback from the public, both before draft maps are offered, and after you have a proposal but before the map is final. The lines proposed may well have unanticipated consequences, and it may be possible to accommodate many constituent concerns about these consequences (leading to happier voters) without sacrificing the interests behind the proposed districts.