

By the Numbers

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The first results of the 2010 census released on December 21, 2010 show that Alabama's population grew by 7.5 percent between 2000 and 2010, compared to the national growth rate of 9.7 percent.

Population is power. States with smaller populations have fewer seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and those with more people have more seats.

Actually, the primary reason for conducting the census of the United States is to apportion the members of the House among the 50 states. As a result, the census data play an important role in the geographic distribution of power in the United States.

The number of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives has changed over time as a result of population growth. Today, there are 435 seats, the same number the U.S. Congress constituted in 1913.

How is the apportionment done and why do census data matter? Every 10 years a census is carried out as mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. The total population resulting from the decennial census is then used to apportion the seats in the House.

According to the 2010 census, the current apportionment population is 309,183,463. This figure was divided by the 435 seats to determine the number of representatives per state. Based on this formula, each member of the House of Representatives now represents a population of about 710,767.

Since Alabama's 2010 census apportionment population is 4,802,982, it will have seven seats in the House, the same number since 1970. Among our neighbors, Georgia and Florida gained one and two seats respectively, whereas Mississippi and Tennessee did not register any change in their numbers of seats.

Why does it matter? Well, the number of seats that a state has in the U.S. House of Representatives is a vital factor in terms of the allocation of federal resources and elections. After the release of the aggregate state counts, the Census Bureau is now giving states detailed data so they can undertake redistricting, which can be one of the most contentious endeavors for state lawmakers.

Simply put, redistricting is the process of redrawing legislative and congressional district lines following the decennial Census. The goal is to draw lines so that new districts are of roughly equal population.

Article IX, Sections 197 through 200 of the Constitution of Alabama requires the Legislature to redistrict the state during the first session after official completion of each decennial census of the United States. Once completed, the redistricting plan will go through the same process as any other bill.

This practice is critical because members of the U.S. Congress and state legislators are elected from districts. During this process, a community can be kept together or split apart, thus changing the political configuration of the area.

The purpose of redistricting is to reflect changes in population size. However, some intentional and unintended power shifts can occur. For example, if the new line divides a predominantly Democrat or predominantly Republican area into two different districts, then the electoral population may change. Such a change may affect the way we elect our political leaders in the next 10 years.

This year's redistricting is particularly important as we approach the 2012 election year.

The ultimate goal is to re-divide, reassign, and redraw lines so Alabama citizens get fair representation in their political systems; therefore, this year's redistricting is crucial. Unless it is done with good will and transparency, the results of the 2011 redistricting can be challenged.

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