

What's Happening to the South: Why Redistricting Matters for Community Development

What do voting rights and redistricting have to do with community development? The answer is: everything. Voting determines how capital flows, which communities receive funding, what projects move forward, and who has a voice in shaping their community.

While racial redistricting may be controversial to some, it is important to examine whether these districts were originally designed to address historic inequities such as redlining, systemic disinvestment, and the underrepresentation of Black and minority communities that were historically silenced or disproportionately harmed.

In states across the South, concerns about representation continue to emerge. In Louisiana, where the Black population is approximately 33%, debates around congressional maps have centered on representation after districts were reduced to a single majority-Black district. In Tennessee, which has a Black population of roughly 16%, the state lost its only majority-Black congressional district. Mississippi has only one Black congressional representative despite a Black population near 38%. Alabama has historically had one majority-Black district while its Black population is approximately 26.7%, and Georgia continues to face ongoing redistricting debates.

Why does this matter? Because it raises concerns about whether certain communities; particularly Black communities that make up a significant share of residents across many Southern states; are adequately represented in the political process. Redistricting typically follows census data, which is intended to reflect population shifts and migration patterns. When district boundaries are manipulated in ways that dilute representation, communities can lose political influence despite demographic growth.

In real time, many people argue that communities are losing political voice through gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is the strategic manipulation of electoral district boundaries to give a political party, group, or incumbent an unfair advantage; effectively allowing politicians to choose their voters instead of voters choosing their politicians. The concern is that communities are being mapped out of the decision-making process.

Community development cannot truly succeed if communities have little say in who leads them or how their neighborhoods are shaped. Many of these same communities have already experienced decades of marginalization and disinvestment. To some, current redistricting battles represent another example of historic inequities continuing to impact communities today.

So why should community development organizations speak about voting rights and redistricting? Because politics directly impacts housing, small business development, education, transportation, infrastructure, and access to capital. Community development

What's Happening to the South: Why Redistricting Matters for Community Development

organizations often receive grants and funding specifically to serve historically marginalized communities. If those same communities lose political representation or influence, it becomes harder to advocate for equitable investment and policy outcomes.

Access to housing, small business opportunities, quality schools, and financial resources are all shaped by political decisions. Financing institutions and community investments alone are not enough if communities cannot meaningfully access or influence those systems.

Historically, silence in moments of inequity has often allowed injustice to continue; from redlining and Black Codes to the destruction of Black communities and the long-term impacts of mass incarceration. Many of these policies shaped the economic and financial landscape of communities for generations, and community development work today is still responding to those consequences.

Ultimately, conversations about voting rights and redistricting are also conversations about representation, power, investment, and who gets to participate in shaping the future of their communities.