

Landry, others pulled into redistricting orbit

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The next census, which is when the U.S. Census Bureau will determine Louisiana's population, won't be released until 2020. The subsequent redistricting process, which is when our state Legislature will redraw the lines of our elected districts based on that data, won't commence until 2021.

So there's really no reason why you would be plugged into the approaching census and redistricting session and what they mean for Louisiana's politics. But based on the amount of interest surrounding the altering of district lines and the top elected officials that the issue seems to be attracting, this is the perfect time to pay attention.

No other public official is more intertwined with redistricting than Attorney General Jeff Landry. His office is on pace to become more involved with redistricting litigation than any other state Justice Department in recent memory. With two related cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, and two others kicking up dust in Louisiana parishes, it's an early indication that next term's redistricting session at the Capitol will be super-charged.

"As the attorney general I'm involved in more redistricting cases not because I am actively seeking them, but because the litigation involving redistricting has increased," Landry tells 'LaPolitics' in an interview.

While Landry's office isn't actively working on any related legislation for the upcoming regular session, there are rumors floating around about a group of lawmakers who are interested in creating thresholds for filing redistricting litigation.

In regard to the active litigation, Landry is part of a group of attorneys general that filed a brief in the U.S. Supreme Court to rebuff claims of partisan gerrymandering that are spelled out in a case involving the Wisconsin General Assembly. The

Supremes are reviewing a federal district court's ruling that the assembly unconstitutionally drafted uneven districts to protect GOP turf.

Landry says he's worried that the Supreme Court could write a broad opinion that would in turn alter maps at not only the state level, but also the congressional level. "If this case goes the wrong way, a district like (Congressman) Cedric Richmond's could be in peril," he says.

Another case before the Supremes involves a ruling from the Pennsylvania Supreme Court that struck down a 2011 congressional map drawn by Republicans. In another brief, Landry's office argued that the decision from Pennsylvania "raises a serious federal constitutional concern."

Closer to home, there are likewise ongoing cases in St. John the Baptist and Terrebonne parishes, of which the latter was inherited by Landry's team when the attorney general took office in 2016. Landry has appealed a federal judge's ruling from last year that declared the continuation of Terrebonne's at-large court districts as a tool to disenfranchise black voters. "Trying to draw a minority-majority district down in Terrebonne is very difficult," Landry says.

The St. John the Baptist case is a class action that also targets judgeships there, he adds.

Not to be outdone, Gov. John Bel Edwards has at least part of his political fate tied into redistricting as well, although he's not taking as proactive an approach as Landry. Instead, Edwards is likely to benefit from an influx of money from national Democrats when he runs for re-election next year. While Dems certainly want to keep a politico like Edwards on its bench, they're just as interested in protecting a governor who would have veto authority over redistricting maps.

State lawmakers, too, could become part of the mix if one or more among them decide to put a redistricting issue on the ballot, in the form of a constitutional amendment. Such plays are coming together or are already headed to ballots in Ohio, Michigan, Missouri, South Dakota and Utah. The scheduled constitutional

amendment in Ohio would require the legislature there to pass redistricting plans by certain thresholds—short of that a seven-member commission would take over.

There's also a nonprofit advocacy group up and running in the Bayou State called Fair Districts Louisiana. With some initial buy-ins from both sides of the proverbial aisle, the group, in partnership with the LSU Reilly Center, has already held a summit on policies and ideas. More is being planned for the coming months and years, and we could even see other special interests established.

Nationally, that's already happening. The National Democratic Redistricting Committee is dipping its toes into Wisconsin's state-level races and targeting a total of 20 legislative chambers in 2018. It's still too early to tell whether Louisiana will be a similar target in 2019. Another player on the U.S. stage is the National Republican Redistricting Trust, which has involved itself in legislation and state races around the country.

You may not be hearing a lot about it right now, but redistricting is guaranteed to become a very hot issue here, and in very short order. You won't have to wait until 2020 or 2021, though, because the issue will be featured prominently in Louisiana elections next year—ready or not.