



## **Case study: Cutting Corners on Redistricting**

Geography is fundamental to representative democracy in the United States. Many politicians at federal, state, county, and municipal levels are elected to represent residents of geographic areas called districts. Electoral districts are designed to contain approximately equal numbers of residents. Therefore, their boundaries must be adjusted periodically to reflect changes in population including births, deaths, and in- and out-migration. Generally, the process of redistricting occurs every 10 years, following the decennial Census of the United States.

Los Angeles is one of the largest cities in the U.S. in terms of both population (3.85 million in 2021) and geographic area (approximately 500 square miles). An elected Mayor and City Council share governing power. Each Council member represents one of 15 districts. As of 2023, they also have the power to redraw their own district boundaries.

In 2022, a leaked audio recording revealed that a small group of Council members may have conspired to influence the updates of voting district boundaries in their favor.

[This case study is factual to this point. The scenario that follows is fictional, but possible - in Los Angeles and elsewhere.]

Public outcry following the leaked audio forced some commissioners to resign, and others to renew calls for an Independent Redistricting Commission. In this context, an Independent Redistricting Commission is a bipartisan body, separate from the City Council, that voters authorize to draw electoral district boundaries. Both the State of California and the County of Los Angeles established independent Redistricting Commissions previously. Until now, the City of Los Angeles did not.

Instead, Los Angeles' City Charter established a non-independent Redistricting Commission with power only to advise Council members, who retained authority to redraw and approve district boundaries. Following the leaked audio scandal, remaining Council members called a public City Charter amendment vote to establish a truly independent Redistricting Commission. Voters overwhelmingly approved the change.

Time was short to establish the new Commission, and to put in place the technical support staff and infrastructure needed to perform the necessary GIS analysis and mapmaking and to conduct public hearings. The City quickly published a Request for Proposals for a contractor to perform the GIS support work. Prepared by a hurried staff, the RFP underestimated substantially the cost of a qualified GIS contractor's services. Consequently, individuals and groups who responded to the RFP tended to have relatively little relevant experience in GIS or redistricting. Bidders met the city's low-cost requirement by proposing small technical staffs – typically just a single GIS practitioner – and streamlined GIS workflows.

Redistricting criteria established in the California State Constitution include (in priority order): (1) Equal Population, (2) Compliance with the Voting Rights Act, (3) Contiguity, (4) Respect for City and County Boundaries, Neighborhoods, and Communities of Interest (if possible without violating preceding criteria), and, to the extent possible, (5) Compactness and (6) Nesting (in this

context, nesting of Council district boundaries within State and Federal legislative district boundaries). One competitive bidder proposed to minimize costs by limiting his redistricting analysis to the P.L. 94-171 redistricting data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau. The P.L. 94-171 summary files include data on Race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, Group Quarters Population, and Housing Occupancy Status. The bidder argued that these data, together with their corresponding geographic boundary files, are sufficient to address most of the redistricting criteria.

Communities of interest is one criterion that the P.L. 94-171 data are arguably inadequate to address. Some analysts contend that many other demographic variables – such as those included in the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey<sup>1</sup> – are required to delineate Communities of Interest (Criterion 4) authentically. The ACS produces 5-year estimates of dozens of social, economic, housing, and demographic characteristics of the U.S. population at the block group level (block groups contain a maximum of 3,000 people and 1,200 housing units). A large portion of public comments received by other independent Election Commissions claim to represent communities of interests. However, analysis of American Community Survey data, and possible spatial analysis of geocoded public comments, are sure to increase the cost of drawing district boundaries substantially.

Meanwhile, the owner of a local GIS firm with considerable relevant experience declined to submit a bid. She is concerned that the unrealistically low funding for qualified consultants to provide GIS support services may undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of the new independent Redistricting Commission. As a Certified GIS Professional (GISP), and as a resident of Los Angeles, what are her ethical obligations, and options? Should she act on her concerns? If so, how?

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Citizen Voting Age Population estimates derived from American Community Survey data are sometimes required by the U.S. Department of Justice to assure compliance with the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

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