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Politico

The data needed to redraw Pennsylvania's political districts is more than five months behind schedule, raising concerns among advocates for fair maps that

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state lawmakers could use the delay to fast-track the redistricting process and make it less transparent.

The U.S. Census Bureau announced Friday that [it can't release the population figures](#) needed for redistricting [until Sept. 30](#), citing setbacks in collecting responses to questionnaires during the coronavirus pandemic. That means state lawmakers can't begin the [once-in-a-decade drawing](#) of Pennsylvania's legislative and congressional lines in earnest until September. The shortened timeline could also put the 2022 primary election at risk of being delayed.

Carol Kuniholm — chairperson of Fair Districts PA, a nonprofit group advocating for redistricting reform — said she's concerned lawmakers will use the delay as an excuse to limit transparency and public input, which has been minimal in previous decades. In December 2011, Republican lawmakers revealed and passed a new congressional map in less than two weeks. That map was later [overturned by the state Supreme Court](#), which called it a partisan gerrymander that diluted Democrats' votes "in order to give the party in power a lasting electoral advantage."

Pennsylvania is expected to lose a congressional seat this year — raising the stakes even higher — and Republicans who control how that map is drawn must get Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf's approval. The legislative political lines, meanwhile, can determine which party controls the General Assembly and dictates policy-making decisions for the next decade. Kuniholm's group wants lawmakers to pass a bill [requiring more public hearings](#) and citizen involvement in the process. "There's no reason why they can't be collecting public comments even before the data comes out, then hold regional mapping events over Zoom," she said, adding once the data is released, lawmakers should hold regional meetings to allow the public to weigh in on the proposed maps. "That's all completely doable in the time frame they have if they plan ahead and they commit to doing a transparent public process," she said.

As a general rule, the maps must be completed before candidates can start filing to run in the 2022 primary, as they'll need to know whether they live within the new district's boundaries and gather ballot petition signatures from people who live in that district. Pennsylvania's primary filing deadline is March 9, 2022, which gives lawmakers only six months — compared to the year they had last decade — to create and approve the maps. Ben Williams, an elections and redistricting policy specialist at the National Conference of State Legislatures, wrote that [states can push candidate filing deadlines back](#) to give lawmakers more time to complete maps, or ask courts to push back any legislative or constitutional deadlines associated with redistricting.

Primary election dates could also be changed, Williams wrote. Last year, Wolf [delayed Pennsylvania's primary election by 35 days](#), citing the dangers of the coronavirus pandemic. Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman (R., Centre) told the Associated Press on Friday that lawmakers [may have to consider postponing the May 17, 2022 primary](#) "if the data comes in so late." Kuniholm said she thinks lawmakers can get the maps drawn without having to delay primaries or hold elections under the old maps — something her organization would argue against. "If they have the data by the end of September, good maps can be drawn quickly and be available for public feedback," she said. "Drawing a map to capture all the predicted data and really gerrymander it precisely can be more time-consuming." Khalif Ali, executive director of Common Cause Pennsylvania, said he would accept delaying the primary if it meant giving the public more time to provide input. "Any changes of the schedule should not come at the expense of opportunities for the public to submit testimony" or respond to the proposed maps, he said.

Pennsylvania faced a similar dilemma in 2012, when the state Supreme Court [invalidated the legislative map](#) drawn by a commission of the General Assembly's top lawmakers. As a result, Republicans [asked](#) the court to delay the April 24 primary. Instead, elections that year were held based on the previous decade's maps while the commission worked on a new one, which

wasn't [approved until May 2013](#). Senate Minority Leader Jay Costa (D., Allegheny), one of four legislative caucus leaders who make up the Legislative Reapportionment Commission, said the process will likely be "compressed" in November, December, and January. "It will be a tight timeline given the constraints we have right now," he said Friday [during a virtual meeting with the National Democratic Redistricting Committee](#). "It makes our work a little harder, but that's OK by me."

He said his biggest concern was ensuring the population count was accurate, even if that means the data is delayed. "We also have to be cognizant of the fact that we want to give people an opportunity to witness the process that we participate in as reapportionment commission members, an opportunity to have input into what the maps look like, an opportunity to understand what we're trying to achieve as we put those maps out there for consideration, and an opportunity for the matters to go to court if necessary," he said. Senate Majority Leader Kim Ward (R., Westmoreland) said her caucus would "explore all options to ensure we meet our constitutional duties in this process." The House and Senate State Government committees have [scheduled a Feb. 24 public hearing](#) on what the data delay means for Pennsylvania. – **Spotlight PA**

Frontier Communications is raising its sneaky "Internet Infrastructure Surcharge" from \$4 to \$7 later this month, widening the gap between its advertised broadband prices and the actual prices customers pay.

Telecom providers love to advertise low rates and then sock customers with bigger bills by charging separate fees for things that are part of the core service. In cable TV, that means customers see one advertised rate for a bundle of channels and then pay way more after the addition of "Broadcast TV" and "Regional Sports Network" fees that supposedly cover the costs of certain channels that are part of the bundle. With Frontier Internet service, customers pay the advertised rate for Internet service and then get hit with fees including the Internet Infrastructure Surcharge. While some fees cover costs that providers must pay to the government, the Internet Infrastructure Surcharge is decidedly not one of them. In its [list of fees](#), Frontier describes the surcharge as follows:

Internet Infrastructure Surcharge—This is a Frontier-assessed surcharge, not a government surcharge. It supports maintenance and other costs associated with our network infrastructure and your continued access to high speed Internet service. As a result of increased Internet traffic and usage, including bandwidth, demand for services, and other requirements that impact our Internet network infrastructure we impose this charge on our internet customers.

In other words, the fee covers the cost of providing the Internet service that customers are already paying for in the advertised rates. If Netflix priced its video service this way, the company would advertise one price and then charge an extra fee for "streaming infrastructure" or something similar. The Internet Infrastructure Surcharge [began at \\$1.99 in 2017](#) and rose to \$3.99 [the next year](#). It's going up again this month, Frontier told customers in a message on their billing statements, [the company confirmed in a new FAQ on its website](#). "Effective February 21, 2021, the Internet Infrastructure Surcharge will increase to \$6.99," Frontier's message on customer billing statements said. (Thanks to [Stop the Cap for pointing out](#) the change.)

Frontier's advertised first-year prices [range from \\$50 to \\$80](#) a month for its fiber service, while the regular rates are \$10 higher once promotions expire. Slower DSL plans [start at \\$35 a month](#) during the first year.

"We have worked hard to keep our rates for broadband services unchanged. However, Internet use has grown significantly and so have our related costs," the company said in its new FAQ. Last year, Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson [found](#) that Frontier "fail[ed] to adequately disclose its Internet Infrastructure Surcharge fee in advertising" and forced the ISP to stop

charging the fee in the state. The settlement occurred just after Frontier sold its network in four Northwestern US states to Ziplly Fiber, and Frontier continues to charge the fee in the [25 states](#) where it still operates.

The good news is that customers on promotional rates won't have to pay the higher fee just yet. "For customers currently with a promotional rate for a specified term, the Internet Infrastructure surcharge increase does not apply until the promotional rate expires," Frontier said. Customers complained about the increase on a [DSLReports forum](#). The Frontier fee is similar to CenturyLink's "[Internet Cost Recovery Fee](#)," which [is \\$3.99 for now](#).

When contacted by Ars, a Frontier spokesperson said, "The increase applies to Frontier customers based on individual service packages and reflects increasing maintenance and other network costs, including the rapidly rising costs of supporting our customers' increased Internet traffic and usage, and consumer demand for greater bandwidth, services, and other requirements that affect our Internet network. Customers on price-lock and promotional pricing will not see this increase until their terms expire." Frontier [filed for bankruptcy in April 2020](#) and is trying to [exit bankruptcy](#) early in 2021. The ISP has a track record of [failing to invest](#) in fiber, [chronic outages](#), [poor customer service](#), and [missing broadband-deployment deadlines](#) after [taking government funding](#).

The Frontier FAQ said the Internet Infrastructure Surcharge may eventually be added to the advertised price instead of being a separate charge. "We are working to incorporate this surcharge into the price of your primary Internet service. Until this work is completed, the Internet Infrastructure Surcharge will appear as a separate line item on your bill," Frontier said. The company didn't say how long it will remain a separate charge. "The current plan is to continue to charge this surcharge as long as necessary to ensure 24x7 support of Internet access. This fee will be reviewed on a regular basis," Frontier said elsewhere in the FAQ. Frontier also said it has not "implemented price increases in the past two years," though raising the fee is in reality a price increase. – *Ars Technica*

Apple has delivered on a promise to clarify and curtail what data from users is gathered by apps. Instead of a lengthy privacy agreement in fine print that no one reads, that information now is posted in plain language under the new "App Privacy" heading in the Apple app store for people to peruse before downloading a new app. Additionally, in the spring, Apple will require many apps to ask users whether they want their information to be tracked for targeted advertising purposes — or not.

This is a forward-thinking move that allows privacy-conscious consumers to decide for themselves their level of comfort with sharing personal information. Other tech giants should follow suit. Data gathering and sharing has been going on for years. At first glance, there may seem nothing obviously nefarious about it — tech companies gather information on users and sell it to third-party marketing and advertising companies to raise revenue. These companies then use the data to target advertisements to individual users, and this is how costs to users remain low or nonexistent.

Many users don't mind and may even appreciate the practice, as such advertisements can be convenient. But plenty of individuals are uncomfortable with the custom and don't want their information shared. They are right to see that sacrificing data privacy is too high a price to pay for minor benefits. There have been too many instances in recent years of serious data breaches or more sensitive information being shared without user knowledge.

Apple's move is changing the landscape, but it is not yet known exactly what kind of impact this will have on advertising revenues. The change is voluntary for users, but surveys indicate that a majority will opt not to be tracked. Google has said it is moving away from using third-party cookies (another bit of tracking tech that benefits advertisers) in its Chrome browser. Facebook

already has proclaimed its concern that data collection ultimately will hurt small businesses, but it seems doubtful this is the platform's primary concern. Facebook and Microsoft could join Apple proactively rather than waiting to be forced by lawmakers, who at this time are setting their sights on Silicon Valley due to a variety of regulatory concerns.

In the end, tech companies should move away from collecting user data altogether and leave it to advertisers and marketing experts to do their jobs. In the meantime, Apple's change in policy is an appropriate step toward giving consumers the power to decide the measure of privacy they want — or are willing to cede. — ***Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* editorial**



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