

REDISTRICTING: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Individuals, watchdog groups, and advocacy organizations can and should hold redistricting bodies accountable to help ensure that the lines are drawn in the public interest. Here are a few questions to help you gauge whether the redistricting operation is working for the public good, rather than against it.

The process

- **Public input**
 - Is the census data and political data that are used to draw the lines publicly available?
 - Are there hearings before the maps are first made public, to hear from constituents about community boundaries that would yield better representation? Is input from those hearings incorporated in the draft maps?
 - Are there hearings after draft maps are produced, to get feedback about problems?
 - Is the public invited to submit full or partial plans, or to comment on drafts?
- **Transparency**
 - Do the decisionmakers meet in public to work through their redistricting decisions?
 - Is there any limit on private conversations about plans, particularly with incumbents?
 - Does the redistricting body attempt to explain why they drew the districts they did?
- **Composition**
 - Will the people who draw the lines run for office in the districts they draw?
 - Do the people who draw the lines reasonably reflect the diversity of the state or local jurisdiction, to account for different views on where the lines should be drawn?
 - Does the redistricting body have a reasonable partisan balance, or a voting rule designed to help create compromise?

The result

There is often more to a redistricting map than what first meets the eye. That is, it is often misleading to assess a map based solely on the way the districts look: there may be good reasons or bad ones behind twists and turns. Shape can sometimes be a clue to mischief, but it's very important to look beyond shape alone to see whether the public interest has been served.

- Has a sizable minority population been “cracked” or “packed”?
- Look at the communities and/or neighborhoods that the districts cut apart or keep together. If a community was split or sliced up, is there a sensible reason?
- Where do the incumbents live, and where are their prominent challengers? Was a district carved around an incumbent or challenger's house? Was territory shifted in a way that makes it much more difficult for a candidate to win an election, and if so, does that territory shift make sense for another reason?
- Given the past political preferences of voters within each district, tally up the districts that seem to give a substantial advantage to one party or another. Does the overall total reasonably reflect the political balance of the state?