Districts Plus

2014 POLICY GUIDE

State Policy August 2014

Districts Plus increases legislature leadership accountability by ensuring that if a party's candidates receive more than 50% of the votes, they will receive more than 50% of the legislative seats.

The Problem: When a state legislature is elected in districts, the districts have the potential to skew the overall partisan vote. For example, in Michigan in 2012, Democratic state house candidates received 54% of the two-party state house vote, yet won 46% of seats. New Jersey Republicans won a majority of votes in state assembly races in 2013, but won only 40% of seats. Such disconnects undermine the accountability of chamber leaders.

Efforts to better ensure a connection between seats and votes is quite difficult, particularly when seeking to uphold other reasonable redistricting criteria like compactness and upholding the Voting Rights Act. Furthermore, district plans nearly always will result in most districts having enough of a lean toward one party that general elections are not meaningfully contested.

The Solution: Under Districts Plus, most representatives are still elected from districts, but the overall statewide vote received by a party's candidates is aggregated, and then extra "accountability seats" are awarded to ensure fair representation. Every vote in every district will have an impact on control of the legislature; parties will have incentives to field and support candidates in every district no matter how lopsided they are.

Here's one way it could work: The overall size of a chamber does not need to change. If a chamber today has 100 seats, it might go to 80 traditional districts and 20 accountability districts. Then, voters could vote both for their district representative and for their accountability seat representative. If a party's district nominees won 37of 80 seats, but that party's accountability candidates won 54% of votes overall, then its 17 accountability candidates who did best would win, giving it 54% of overall seats. A minimum share of accountability seat support like 5% could be required to earn seats.

Success Stories: Districts Plus is not used in the United States, but many cities combine districts with at-large seats. International uses of Districts Plus include Germany, New Zealand, and Scotland.

Key Facts

Variations of Districts Plus are widely used internationally, including legislative elections in Germany, New Zealand, and Scotland.

Many major cities have a mix of district and at-large seats, including Denver, Houston, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.

Fiscal Impact

Little to none. Depending on how it is implemented, there may be an additional office on the primary and/or general election ballot, but this should not affect costs. Because it is not necessary to increase the size of the legislature under Districts Plus, the state does not need to pay for any additional salaries. States may want to conduct voter education campaigns to ensure that voters know how the accountability seats are elected.

Related Reforms

- Ranked Choice Voting to Elect Legislatures
- Independent Redistricting
- Reasonable Ballot Access

Part Two Resources

- Model statute