

Institute for Public Policy
and Economic Analysis

**The Redistricting Process in
Washington State**

By:
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With this latest monograph from the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis, I welcome you to Eastern Washington University. I hope this research will inform your knowledge of the Inland Northwest. Efforts like this Institute monograph series are manifestations of this University's commitment to serve the region. I applaud the initiative of Eastern's Board of Trustees to launch this Institute.

Teaching remains our core mission at Eastern Washington University. Increasingly, teaching and research are interwoven. Our faculty members stay professionally current when publishing in peer-reviewed journals. These achievements, in turn, allow them to better convey the evolving knowledge base of our academic disciplines.

Our students receive an enhanced education if their classroom experience is informed by the content and enthusiasm of their professor's research. Increasingly, we ask students to conduct research projects of their own. Whether conducting their own projects or assisting professors, our students acquire a richer learning experience through research.

Research for academic journals is not the only area our faculty members target, however. Our University also asks its faculty to engage the communities and region from which we draw our students. This research provides a greater sense of place and a commitment by our faculty to it. It also translates academic methods and findings into a broader, and ultimately more relevant, arena: the lives of the residents of the Inland Northwest.

The overarching goal of the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Analysis is to serve the region by translating knowledge. It does this through a variety of activities, including this series, annual economic forecasts, contract research and the Community Indicators Initiative. I invite you to explore its web site (www.ewu.edu/policyinstitute) to learn more.

I have tremendous optimism that by collaborating with EWU's faculty, staff and partners, I will continue to ensure our institution will be anchored into the daily course of life throughout the Inland Northwest. During these difficult economic times, our collective future depends on an educated and informed citizenry. Helping our region reach higher levels of knowledge is something this University can and will do.

My office and that of the Institute director welcome all comments on how we might better serve.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rodolfo Arévalo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rodolfo Arévalo, PhD
President

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Executive Summary

Every ten years, as a result of the census, each state is required to redraw the legislative lines for both their state legislative and Congressional districts. This process has captured the imagination of politicians, academics, journalists and others who believe the political process can be manipulated by drawing lines on a map in a certain way. This notion of drawing political lines for the political benefit of one group – gerrymandering—has been cited as the root cause of a whole host of political ills including the lack of turnover among elected officials, decline in voter turnout, increased political cynicism among citizens and political polarization among elected officials. In the state of Washington, however, there are restrictions which limit the ability of political actors to manipulate the redistricting process.

Since 1990, Washington State has used a five person, bipartisan redistricting commission to draw the Congressional and legislative boundaries. Designed to ensure that neither of the major political parties has an unfair advantage, the commission – which has two Democrats, two Republicans, and a fifth, non-voting member chosen by the other four member – has certain requirements which it must follow. First, the federal courts have held that congressional districts must have as close to equal population as possible, which, with modern mapping technologies effectively means the districts, must have the same population. Additionally, while the U.S. Supreme Court did not explicitly state the same holds true for state legislative districts, the Court appears to be encouraging equal population as well for those districts.

Additionally, the Court has held that redistricting cannot be used to break up the political power of a racial or ethnic minority which lives in the same community.

Furthermore, the state requires that the Redistricting Commission draw the boundaries in the state to be as compact as possible, follow previously established political boundaries (such as county or city lines), and be as politically competitive as possible. It is important to note that these three state requirements might not always be possible and that, at times, they may be contradictory. For example, in recent decades it has become apparent that people are living in politically distinct neighborhoods with Democrats living in Democratic neighborhoods and Republicans living in Republican neighborhoods. With this phenomenon, it might be challenging to make politically competitive districts which are also compact. In addition, because certain political parties tend to do better in some regions of the state, it might not be possible to always create politically competitive districts.

Despite these challenges, it appears that the 2001 Redistricting Commission did attempt to follow these three directives and, while there is no uniform metric of success, appears to have generally succeeded. At the Congressional level, most of the districts are relatively compact – especially when considering that the equal population requirement forces some districts to be geographically large. In those districts that are less compact, it is because the district is following previously created political or natural boundaries. Likewise, many of the legislative and a few of the congressional districts are politically competitive – and in

many cases where the districts are not exceptionally competitive, it appears to be a result of the politics of the region rather than mischief in the redistricting processes. For example, many of the most uncompetitive districts were found in the city of Seattle or rural eastern Washington, where each party has a distinct numerical advantage. Finally, in many instances districts do keep political entities whole and follow already created city, county, or natural boundaries.

While there are numerous ways in which the redistricting process in 2011 may occur, there are some outcomes which will clearly happen. First, due to the federal law of equal population, one Congressional district must cross the Cascades and represent a sizable portion of both eastern and western Washington, composed of about 153,000 people from eastern Washington and lightly more than 500,000 people from western Washington. In addition, there have been certain parts of the state which have grown faster over the past ten years, while other parts of the state have not grown rapidly.

Those places which grew more rapidly – including areas in southeastern unincorporated Pierce County, Spanaway and parts of Fort Lewis; Issaquah and North Bend; Snohomish County east of Everett; the Vancouver suburbs, including Camas and Battle Ground; and Walla Walla generally have trended Republican. Districts now representing these areas will shrink, implying an increase of representation in the Legislature.

The slowest growing districts are in major cities or in the first ring of suburbs surrounding those cities. The 28th legislative district in Tacoma (University Place and parts of Fort Lewis), which was the only district in Washington to lose population, and another district in Tacoma were among the slowest growing. The other three low population growth districts were found in central Spokane; Vashon Island and West Seattle; and one representing Lake Forest Park and Shoreline, just north of Seattle, all of which have trended towards the Democrats. Districts now representing these areas will necessarily grow, implying a diminution of influence in the Legislature for existing residents.