



## Independent Districting and Districts Plus: A Powerful Reform Combination *An Analysis by FairVote, March 2013*

Michigan's current process for drawing district lines results in highly problematic outcomes. Consider these failures in the 2012 elections to the state's House of Representatives:

- **Lack of Accountability:** Michigan voters in November 2012 sent a clear message about the leadership they wanted in the Michigan House of Representatives, with Democratic nominees for the House winning 54% of the two-party vote. But they won only 46% of seats, allowing a party that had been rejected at the polls to stay in power.
- **Lack of Voter Choice:** Of Michigan's 110 districts, only 23 were won by less than 10%. Most voters have no real chance to change their representatives.
- **Lack of Geographic Cohesion:** Many of Michigan's districts are gerrymandered such that district lines split communities and lack geographic cohesion.
- **Polarization:** Michigan's representation is highly polarized by region. That polarization is reflected in how the legislature functions.

How Michigan draws its legislative districts contributes directly to these problems, with elected officials having the power to help their friends and hurt their enemies through gerrymandering. In 2011, for example, Republicans were in complete control of the redistricting process, and drew plans that reflected their party's interests. But while establishing independent redistricting would be an obvious improvement over partisan gerrymandering, on its own it would not correct the problems so dramatically demonstrated in the 2012 elections.

### The Value of Districts Plus

The Districts Plus system would make independent redistricting more powerful, resulting in:

- **Clear Accountability:** The party that wins the most votes always wins the most seats.
- **Meaningful Elections:** Every district would be meaningfully contested in every election.
- **Geographic Cohesion:** Governed by traditional redistricting criteria such as maintaining communities of interest, geographic compactness and upholding the Voting Rights Act, an independent redistricting commission would draw the district map.

Proven in elections around the world in nations such as Germany, Districts Plus preserves the current system in which most representatives are elected from single-member districts. It adds "accountability seats" to the legislature in order to ensure that when one party's candidates get the most votes, that party will win the most seats. As a result, every contest in every district will be meaningful in every election. Parties will have an incentive to field strong candidates in every district, no matter how imbalanced that district may be.

## How Accountability Seats Work: Summary

Here is an example of how to establish Districts Plus in elections to the Michigan House of Representatives. The ratio of local districts to accountability seat districts could vary.

**Step 1: Elect most representatives from local districts:** Most representatives would be elected from local legislative districts, just as they are now. The total number of local districts would be reduced, with the remaining seats used to ensure accountability. In this analysis, we work with an example based on 88 local districts (down from 110) and 22 accountability districts.

**Step 2: Nominate candidates from newly-created accountability seat districts:** Each of the 22 accountability districts would be comprised of four local districts. Candidates for each accountability district would be nominated in primaries. Those candidates would not be on the November ballot, as votes in local districts determine who wins accountability seats.

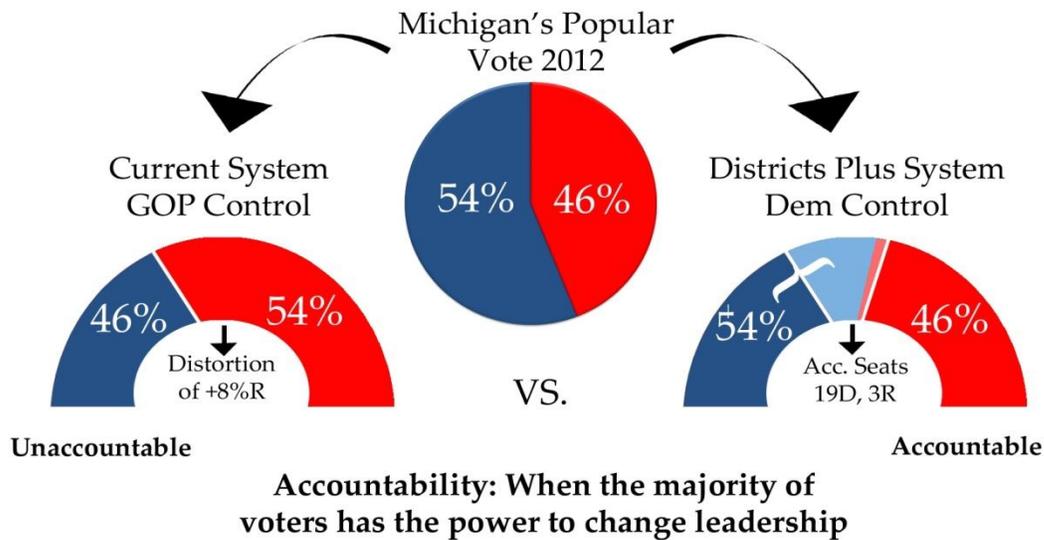
**Step 3: Award accountability seats to ensure the legislature fairly reflects Michigan's voters:** The 22 accountability seats would be filled by nominees from each of the accountability districts. The total percentage of the vote for each party's nominees in the 88 local districts would determine what percentage of all 110 seats each party should win. If a party's house candidates won 50% of the vote, for example, then they should earn 55 of 110 house seats. If that party's candidates had won 43 local districts, then it would earn 12 accountability seats. To earn seats, a party would need to surpass a minimum threshold of statewide support.

**Step 4: Elect accountability seats with nominees in accountability districts where that party's local district candidates ran well:** The party that earns the most accountability seats would fill those seats with nominees from the accountability districts in which the party's local district candidates ran the best. Other parties winning accountability seats would fill their seats the same way, although skipping over any accountability districts already represented.

### How Districts Plus Makes Legislatures Accountable: The 2012 Election Example

In the 2012 election, 54% of Michigan's voters voted for Democratic candidates for the state legislature. Yet Democrats won only 46% of the seats, with Republicans winning 54% and the majority in the House. District Plus would have completely eliminated this distortion.

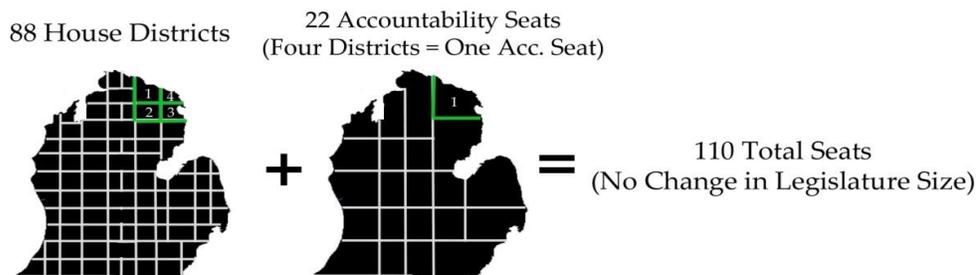
Assuming Democrats and Republicans received the same share of the 88 local districts as won in the 110 local districts in 2012, Democrats would have won 40 seats and Republicans 48 seats. To win 54% of representation in the house, Democrats would need 59 of 110 seats. Thus, they would earn 19 accountability seats to add to their 40 local district winners. Deserving a total of 51 seats, Republicans would add three accountability seats to their 48 local district winners.



Michigan's House of Representatives has 110 local districts, each electing one representative. Under Districts Plus, the number of local districts would decrease to 88, with 22 accountability seats.<sup>1</sup> These accountability seats would ensure that Michigan would never again have a wrong-winner election in which one party receives the most votes, but does not win the most seats.

**How to Create Accountability Districts:** There would be four times as many district seats (88) as accountability seats (22) under the Districts Plus plan. Thus, each accountability seat would come from an accountability district composed of four house districts.

Where do accountability seats come from?

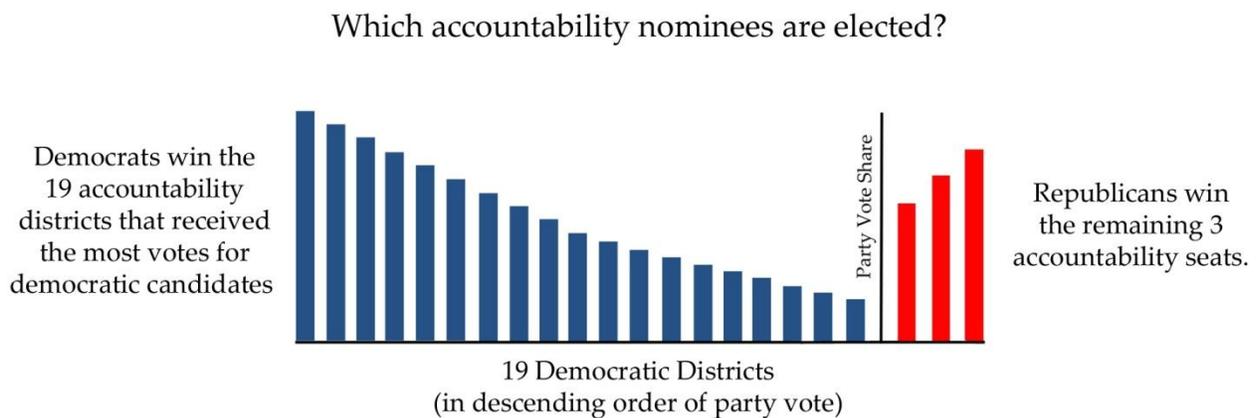


<sup>1</sup> Another option would establish 100 local districts and 10 accountability seats, with one accountability seat for each 10 local districts. This structure would not necessarily guarantee a fully reflective legislature, but would provide an *accountable* legislature—that is, a party receiving a majority of votes would be very likely to win a majority of seats, even if not necessarily a proportional share of seats.

**How Accountability Candidates Would Be Elected:** Voters in each accountability district would vote in primaries for one accountability district nominee. Each party would nominate a candidate in the 22 accountability districts.

After the general election, the 22 accountability seats would be allocated among all parties who won more than a certain share of the statewide vote. Parties would win accountability seats in order to provide a fair reflection of that party's support.<sup>2</sup>

Particular accountability seat nominees would be elected as follows: the party that is most under-represented in the local district elections will receive its share of accountability seats first. Its first accountability seat would be elected from the accountability district in which that party's four local district nominees received their largest collective share of the vote. The second seat would be elected from the accountability district in which that party's four local district nominees received the second largest share, and so on.



Once all seats are assigned to the party that suffered from distortion, the remaining accountability seats would be assigned to the other parties to provide a fair reflection of their vote. If an accountability district already has a representative, the party would skip to the next district in order of its vote share that has yet to elect a representative.

Ultimately, each accountability district would have one representative. The legislature overall would accurately reflect voter preferences among parties.

<sup>2</sup> One common threshold for earning accountability seats is five percent. Nations using that threshold include New Zealand and Germany.

## **How Districts Plus Would Transform Elections, But Minimally Change the Ballot**

The Districts Plus system would transform elections, but have a very minimal effect on the voting experience. In fact, voters who participate only in the general election would not notice any change in the act of voting.

Voters in party primaries would do something new: they would cast one vote to nominate a candidate for their accountability district, who would be elected to the legislature if their party were allocated that accountability district after the general election.

By far the biggest difference for voters would be that every Michigan voter would always be able to affect who runs the state House of Representatives. Most voters will inevitably be stuck in uncompetitive districts that are guaranteed to elect a candidate from one party in election after election, but everyone's vote would matter in every election with Districts Plus. Parties would have a strong incentive to nominate and support credible candidates in every district, as every vote in every district would go matter in determining which party earns the most seats.

These changes would likely increase voter turnout throughout Michigan and the quality of candidates and campaigns.

## **How Districts Plus Would Affect Independent Redistricting**

Districts Plus would be an excellent complement to any independent redistricting process. A commission would not need to pay attention to any criteria relating to partisan competition within districts or statewide. It instead could focus on traditional redistricting criteria such as seeking compactness, maintaining county lines, nesting districts within state senate and congressional districts and upholding the Voting Rights Act.

Redistricting would become a much less controversial and difficult process under Districts Plus, as the drawing of district lines would have no partisan ramifications. The Districts Plus system outlined here would empower independent redistricting commissions to guarantee competitive elections and accountable leadership in Michigan.