

Open Memo on Congressional Districting Draft Plans in Utah

The Princeton Gerrymandering Project

November 8, 2021
Report PGP-2021-105

A report from the



**Princeton
Gerrymandering
Project**

DEBUGGING DEMOCRACY

Princeton University, Green Hall, Washington Road, Princeton, NJ 08542

gerrymander.princeton.edu

To: Interested Parties in Utah
From: Helen Brewer, Adam Podowitz-Thomas, Ari Goldbloom-Helzner, and Sam Wang
for The Princeton Gerrymandering Project
Re: Congressional districting draft plans
Date: November 8, 2021

The Princeton Gerrymandering Project has now analyzed the impacts of both the Utah Legislative Redistricting Committee’s legislative and Congressional maps, as well as the maps proposed by the Utah Independent Redistricting Commission. Our analysis relies on estimates of likely voting patterns over the coming decade, analysis of traditional redistricting priorities, and on extensive computer simulation of one million potential Congressional maps that respect Utah’s political geography. These metrics form a comprehensive “dashboard” of results that take a comprehensive view of the map.

In this memo we describe those metrics, as well as the concepts of competition and of communities of interest,¹ and how these approaches help illuminate the larger picture of fair districting in Utah.

Why a report card is not enough

Although our metrics are based on highly accurate methods, we issue a caution regarding their use to the exclusion of the details of the map. In any map, small shifts in a single district can dramatically affect that district’s tendency. In the current national political climate, such effects are naturally interpreted in terms of partisanship. But a key concept in fair districting is not just the partisan outcome, but the question of whether competition is present, and whether communities are fairly represented.

We discovered that public reaction to our “report cards” tended to obscure important details of competition and community. Our standardized approach to setting a grading curve is best suited for maps containing five or more districts. In lower-population states such as Utah, unique local situations are a far more important gauge of a map’s fairness. For similar reasons, when we scored Iowa and Arkansas, two states with four-seat delegations, we gave metrics but not grades. To bring our approach in Utah into conformance with those states, we have taken down the report card grades for the Congressional Report Cards in Utah, allowing readers to focus on the key issues of competition and community. Our report cards on legislative maps remain as is, with both grades and quantitative scores.

Values of fair mapping: Geography, competition, and community preservation

In Utah, the treatment of Salt Lake City and its communities of interest has a significant influence on partisan competitiveness, preservation of geographic boundaries, and ultimately, fair representation.² The Utah Independent Redistricting Commission submitted three Congressional maps to the Legislative Redistricting Committee, all of which differed significantly in their treatment of the Salt Lake City area compared to the Legislature’s draft map. These differences reveal that the different plans take very

¹ Utah Code § 20A-20-302(5) requires that the Independent Redistricting Commission define and preserve Communities of Interest “to the extent practicable.”

² Utah Code § 20A-20-302(4)-(5) requires that the Commission’s maps create districts that are contiguous, “reasonably compact,” and that “minimiz[e] the division of municipalities and counties,” among other things.

different approaches to reflecting the composition and preferences of Utah voters. These differences have important practical implications.

The Legislature's map violates traditional principles of compactness

The Legislature's draft map violates the traditional principle of keeping counties whole where possible. It splits more counties than any of the Commission's maps. In terms of compactness, the legislature and Commission maps are comparable with the exception of the Commission's Orange 3 map, which is significantly more compact than the others. The Orange 3 map has an average Reock score of 0.544 which is considerably better than the other two commission plans and the legislative plan, whose scores are between 0.441 and 0.456.

Much of the splitting centers on Salt Lake City. The Legislature's draft map splits the Salt Lake City area into each of Utah's four Congressional districts, which stretch out across the state to encompass a combination of rural and urban areas. This practice is known to professional redistricters as "cracking," since the Salt Lake City community is cracked into four parts, each of which is deprived of political power. In contrast, the Commission's maps keep the Salt Lake City area largely whole within one district.

The "cracking" of Salt Lake City eliminates political competition and divides a major community

The Commission's maps all include one Democratic-leaning Congressional district in the Salt Lake City area, while the Legislature's map splits Salt Lake City, rendering no Democratic seats. None of the maps include districts within our competitive band of 7 percentage points. The Legislature's map has four safe Republican seats that suppress competition. However, the Democratic-leaning seat in the Commission's maps could become reasonably competitive depending on the context of the election, and could be made more so with minor modification.

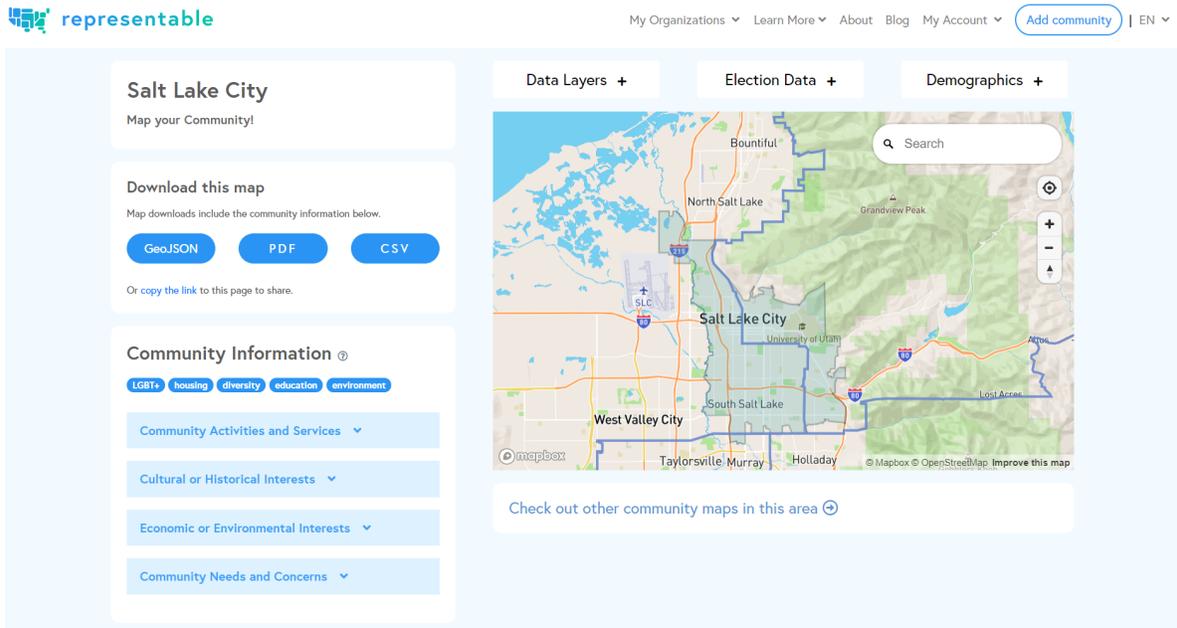
Importantly, based on public input gathered through the community-input organization Representable.org, as well as other channels for citizen comment, the Salt Lake City area constitutes an important community of interest (COI) that residents of the area have emphasized should be split as few times as necessary to comply with equal population requirements. Indeed, the Commission's maps demonstrate that such preservation is possible.

Maintaining or Dividing Communities of Interest?

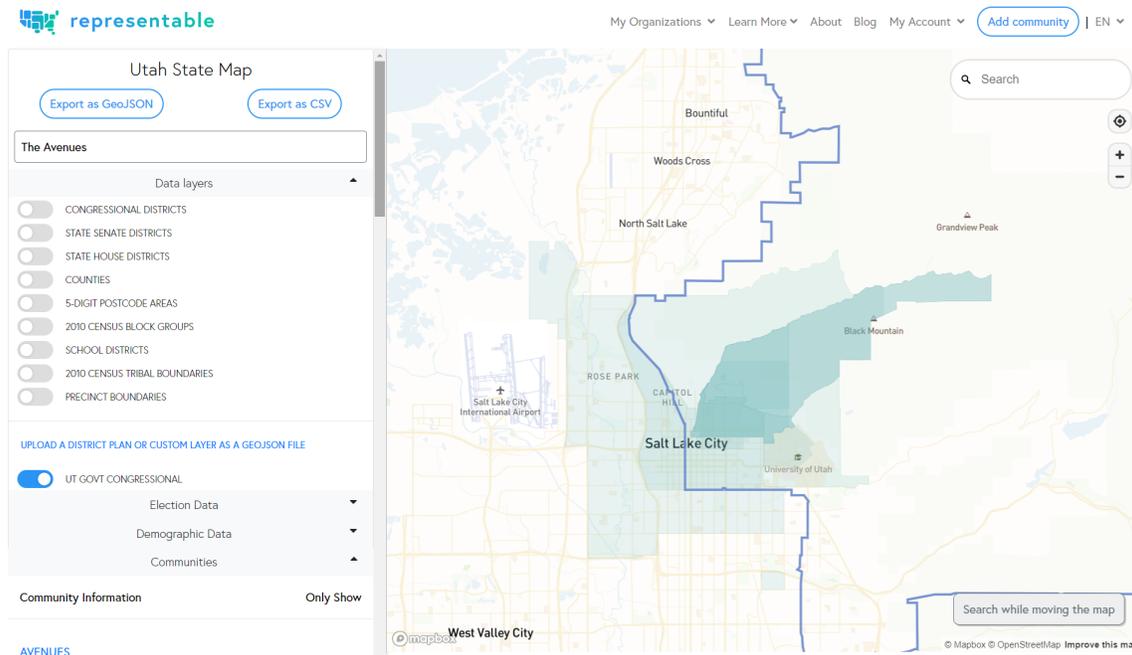
Utah law requires that the Independent Redistricting Commission define and preserve Communities of Interest (COIs) "to the extent practicable." Utah Code § 20A-20-302(5). Keeping COIs intact in a redistricting plan helps ensure that communities of people with similar concerns and interests have a fair opportunity to make their voices heard and have their interests represented in Congress. The Utah Independent Redistricting Commission carefully considered public input about COIs and drew its maps accordingly. In contrast, the Legislature's maps appear not to have considered COIs during the mapmaking process.

Specifically, the Legislature's proposed map splits more COIs than the current Congressional lines, splitting 144 COIs that recorded their maps using Representable.org. Indeed, the Legislature's proposed map also splits more COIs than any of the maps proposed by the Commission, and has twice as many splits as the best Commission map, the Orange 3 proposal.

In one example, a citizen describes [Salt Lake City](#) as sharing a unified interest in education, library systems, and other government services, as well as concerns with air pollution issues and ethnic diversity. In the legislature’s proposed map, Salt Lake City would be split into two east-west halves between Congressional Districts 1 and 2 as seen in the image below. Such a split makes it harder for these residents to advocate for their needs. Salt Lake City is not split by the Commission’s Orange 3 proposal.



More specific communities are also split. Several comments identified a community of interest within Salt Lake City known as [The Avenues](#). The Avenues encompass the University of Utah, the airport, and historical areas. The Legislature’s proposed congressional map splits The Avenues, as seen in the map below. The Commission’s Orange 3 proposal keeps The Avenues largely whole.



These are only two examples of the numerous communities of interest in the Salt Lake City area that have been identified by Utahns and split by the Legislature's proposed Congressional maps.

This comment on the use of quantitative metrics is available [here](#). Specific dashboards displaying quantitative metrics for both the Utah Independent Redistricting Commission's and the Legislature's proposed Congressional and State Legislative maps can all be accessed from [this list](#) of our Scored Utah Maps. Please contact our National Coordinator Jason Rhode at jrhode@princeton.edu with any questions.