



CASE STUDY

Utah Adds Citizen Input

Utah State Legislature successfully implements Esri Redistricting for citizen involvement and draws districts based on constituent-made district maps.

The last time Utah needed to redraw its congressional district boundaries, technology was just beginning to catch up to a need that had existed since the redistricting process first started. Utah was a pioneer in the use of the web to open a process that had repeatedly bred mistrust.

The Challenge

Redrawing representative districts is a contentious process fraught with political acrimony. Nevertheless, U.S. states must examine and potentially redraw their congressional districts after each U.S. census. Because of the political stakes, the process regularly leads to allegations of unfairness. For the latest redistricting, the State Legislature of Utah Joint Redistricting Committee took a novel step toward mitigating such criticism through education by increasing the visibility of the process and raising awareness among its citizens. The redistricting process would reveal the intricacies involved and the genuine obstacles to finding a satisfactory solution for everyone.

The Solution

Utah took advantage of technology to offer citizens an unprecedented opportunity to participate in the process. Using the Esri Redistricting solution, the committee provided an online redistricting tool for the public to create and submit statewide redistricting plans. The committee used that online access, plus a companion website for comments, to augment the 17 public meetings held throughout the state.

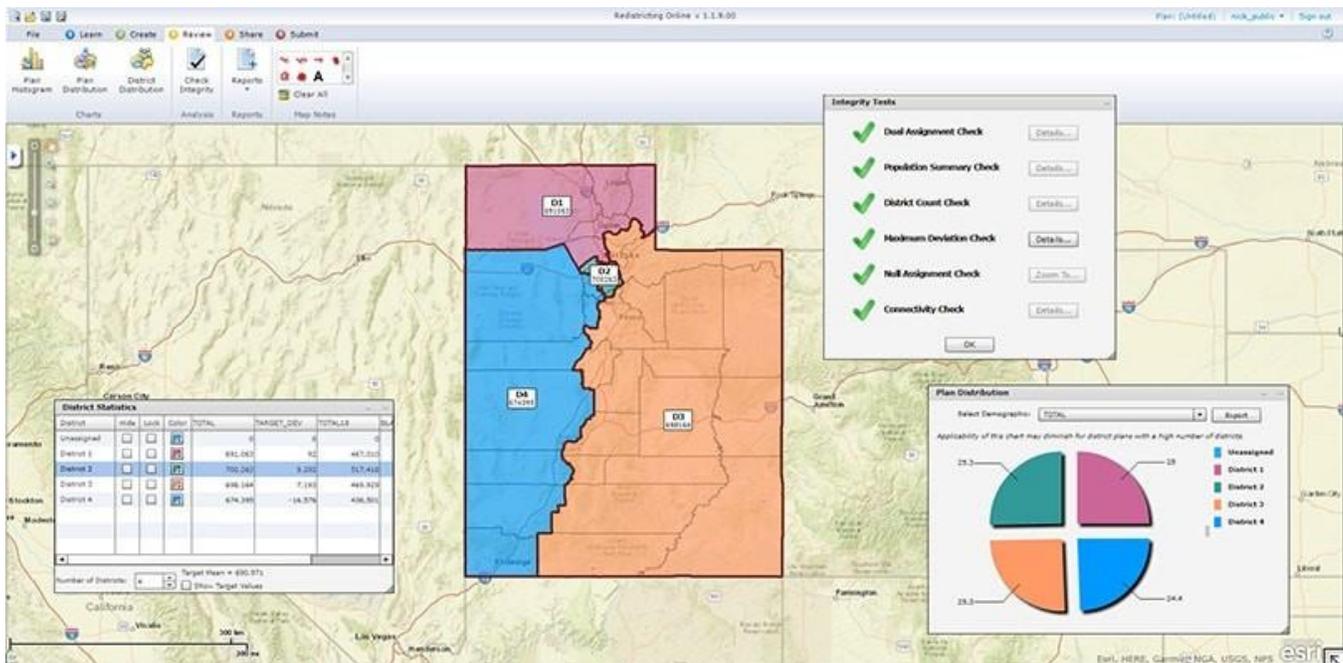
Citizens could not only map out their own redistricting solutions, but they could also create groups and share and modify their plans before submitting and discussing them with the committee. "If someone who created a plan came to a public hearing, we could bring it up, and they could discuss it and make arguments for it," said Jerry Howe, managing policy analyst for the State of Utah Legislature. The online tool allowed citizens to create maps for congressional, legislative, and state school board districts. Esri also provided desktop software for legislative analysts and legislators along with another back-office redistricting application.

Before the 2011 redistricting effort, online district mapping tools weren't available. It wasn't until late in the planning of its redistricting effort did the committee see the Esri Redistricting software demonstrated and decided to incorporate it. Legislative staff worked with Esri to customize the solution slightly for Utah's specific requirements. Later, they created a companion website to allow the public to explain their plans and comment on others.



The Results

Even though the redistricting process was not free of disagreements, the 2011 effort provided unparalleled visibility and access. Because of that, Howe said, participants not only gained insight into the process, but the legislature received a wide variety of options to consider. "The plans they drew were helpful," Howe said. "There was a plan for the state school board drawn by a member of the public that, with some minor modifications, was adopted." After the legislature adopted redistricting plans, two headlines read 'Lawmakers endorse citizen map for new school board boundaries' and 'Lawmakers endorse Logan resident's map for school board boundaries'.



The online tool required users to create a user name and password before drawing a plan. One thousand users registered, and 323 plans were submitted. Of those, 271 met the criteria for completeness. The legislative redistricting committee opened the process to members of the media and let them use the desktop tool to create plans.

Howe has since spoken about Utah's experience at the 2017 National Conference of State Legislatures Legislative Summit in Boston.

The public participation that Utah received was really beneficial to the overall redistricting process. I think the public and the media understood the problem better after using the Esri tool. It eliminated some criticism that was unfounded."

Jerry Howe

Managing Policy Analyst, State of Utah Legislature