



# Guide to Best Practices in Districting

1. *Introduction*
2. *Maximizing Public Participation through Extensive and Multi-Lingual Public Outreach*
3. *Maximizing Public Participation through Frequent, Accessible, Stand-Alone Hearings*
4. *Budgeting to Enable Robust Outreach and Accessible Hearings*

**Jonathan Stein**  
**Voting Rights Staff Attorney and Program Manager**  
**Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus**

This document was adapted with permission from  
the ACLU of California's Best Practices Guide



## Introduction

Some political jurisdictions move from at-large elections to district elections willingly. Others move when pushed to do so because of a California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) lawsuit or the threat of a CVRA lawsuit. Regardless of *why* a jurisdiction undergoes a “districting” process, the lessons on *how* remain the same. Active participation by all of a jurisdiction’s communities in a transition to district elections is critical to the transition’s success. Robust public participation will result in a district map that better reflects a jurisdiction’s diverse communities and neighborhoods. It will increase public faith in the final district lines. It will make a jurisdiction’s residents feel invested in their local government. And it will minimize after-the-fact claims by the public of exclusion, bias, and closed-door decision-making.

Interest in the districting process will likely grow slowly. Community leaders and those engaged in city politics can be counted on to be present at early hearings, but everyday residents may only attend later hearings after interest and “buzz” has been building for a number of weeks or even months. Even after regular community members do become interested, they may have difficulty understanding the complexities of districting or may have difficulty attending hearings because of job and family commitments.

And yet, many districting processes move very quickly. To ensure that some communities are not left behind, it is *essential* that a jurisdiction use best practices to maximize public participation and that a jurisdiction do so in a way that is urgent and well-funded. Below, we suggest tactics and lessons learned from various jurisdictions that have undergone districting processes.

## Maximizing Public Participation through Extensive and Multi-Lingual Public Outreach

- ❖ ***Create outreach/publicity materials and distribute them in a variety of formats.*** To maximize the number of residents who are informed about the districting process, a jurisdiction should produce outreach/publicity materials and distribute them as widely as possible. A successful district map-drawing body (whether it is a city council, a school board, or some independent body) will hear from all of the communities and neighborhoods within a jurisdiction’s limits, regardless of their language abilities, resources, or previous levels of engagement in local politics. The map-drawing body should spread the word about its work in local newspapers in various languages, at meetings of local community groups, in multi-lingual robo-calls, on digital marquees at local schools, in flyers sent home with school children, and so on. Simply publicizing the process on the jurisdiction’s website and in a small number of newsletters and community newspapers is not enough.
- ❖ ***Ensure that outreach/publicity materials are distributed in multiple languages.*** A jurisdiction should prepare outreach/publicity materials in a variety of languages so that word about districting spreads to all of the jurisdiction’s language communities. If staff employed by the political jurisdiction don’t feel confident they know all of the language communities present, the Census Bureau’s American Fact Finder tool can provide data on the languages spoken in homes in the jurisdiction. A jurisdiction should translate outreach/publicity materials into all relevant languages – using a professional, court-certified translator to translate a simple flyer is exceedingly affordable. Translated materials should be shared with civic and cultural organizations, posted online, and sent to ethnic news media sources, including print, web, and radio outlets. Ideally, translated materials should be shared with leaders from the relevant language communities before they are released publicly to make sure the materials are accurate and culturally competent.

## Maximizing Public Participation through Frequent, Accessible, Stand-Alone Hearings

- ❖ **Hold a large number of hearings.** The map-drawing body in a jurisdiction undergoing a districting process should hold a large number of hearings both before the drawing of draft maps and after the release of draft maps but before adoption of a final map. (The statutory minimum is two hearings in both phases of the process.) Holding a significant number of hearings will provide community members with multiple opportunities to contribute to the process and will enable them to participate even if they hear about districting late in the process. A jurisdiction should create a calendar of all hearings at the outset and place that prominently on the relevant part of the jurisdiction's website so community members who wish to participate can make a plan in advance to handle their family or job obligations (e.g. finding child care).
- ❖ **Hold hearings in a variety of locations, all of which should be accessible via public transit and for people with disabilities.** The map-drawing body should hold hearings in a diversity of locations, all of which should be accessible by public transit and ADA-compliant. The map-drawing body should avoid holding all hearings in a single location, like a city hall building. First, that does not make the hearing accessible to residents in all parts of jurisdiction, especially those who do not have ready access to a car. Second, city hall buildings are associated with government and law enforcement (especially the many city hall buildings that are co-located with a police station or even police headquarters) and are thus not considering comfortable or safe locations for many communities. Holding hearings in highly-trafficked community spaces in different parts of town maximizes accessibility.
- ❖ **Offer the public diverse hearing days and times.** Hearings on weekday evenings should be mixed with at least some hearings on weekends, to allow residents with a variety of job and family commitments to participate. Weekday hearings during business hours should never be used.
- ❖ **Create stand-alone districting hearings.** Districting is a transformative experience in a jurisdiction's political life – it merits a different kind of treatment than the jurisdiction's other business. While a routine amount of public input may be acceptable for other items on the jurisdiction's agendas, it is insufficient on a topic that is critical to the jurisdiction's political future. Embedding districting hearings in city council or school board meetings that spend several hours on other subjects inevitably reduces participation. If districting hearings must be embedded in larger meetings, the jurisdiction should give the public advance notice of exactly what time the discussion on districting will begin.
- ❖ **Provide simultaneous translations at public hearings.** To ensure hearings on districting are accessible to all of a jurisdiction's language communities, the map-drawing body should make simultaneous language translation available at hearings. In the event the jurisdiction does not already have equipment to enable simultaneous translation, the jurisdiction can purchase or rent such equipment at a reasonable price. The translation can be done by any fluent speaker of the language in question, i.e. a staff member or community volunteer. While simultaneous translation done via professional translators is ideal, it is not essential.
- ❖ **Offer members of the public the opportunity to participate even if they cannot attend a hearing.** Some residents will be unable to attend a hearing to share their perspectives. The map-drawing body should make it possible for members of the public to submit community of interest testimony or comment on draft district maps via phone, email, mail, and a dedicated webpage.

- ❖ **Build a districting webpage with a variety of functionalities.** The jurisdiction should dedicate a webpage to the districting process and make that webpage extremely easy to access from the jurisdiction’s homepage. This dedicated webpage will likely be the first place an interested community member goes to learn about the jurisdiction’s map-drawing process and about the significance of districting generally. It should include general information about districting (e.g. what it is), notice of and agendas for meetings, a calendar of future hearings, videos of past hearings, and draft maps. It should enable members of the public to submit written testimony and draft maps of their own. The jurisdiction should translate the webpage into all relevant languages in the jurisdiction or at least include a link to Google’s website translation tool.
- ❖ **Videotape all hearings and post on the districting webpage.** The jurisdiction should videotape districting hearings and post them on the webpage dedicated to districting. This may present logistical challenges when hearings are held in community spaces instead of city hall buildings. Those challenges should be planned for and budgeted for in advance. Posting video of hearings will allow residents who are unable to attend hearings to watch from their homes.

## **Budgeting to Enable Robust Outreach and Accessible Hearings**

- ❖ **Budget the money necessary to do districting right.** The primary cost a jurisdiction will incur when transitioning to district elections is the hiring of a demographer, which may cost between \$50,000-\$75,000. It is possible to think of that as a “necessary” cost (because a transition to district elections in response to a CVRA lawsuit/notice letter can’t be done without a demographer) and to think of outreach and accessibility costs as “optional” or a “luxury.” In truth, outreach and accessibility are essential if the jurisdiction wants its residents to understand and believe in the process. A jurisdiction should budget for, among other things: finding and reserving diverse hearing locations, providing translation services to the public, paying city staff to work on evenings and weekends, doing robust outreach and publicity, and creating a webpage with a number of functionalities. The jurisdiction should consider whether to hire outside contractors for some tasks and services, such as scouting meeting locations, preparing outreach materials, engaging community organizations to educate members and encourage their participation, and providing translation services.