



**RHODE ISLAND:**

# How Distorted Districts Lead to Distorted Laws

By Liz Kennedy and Billy Corriher

October 2, 2017

The principle of “one person, one vote” requires states to redraw their election districts every 10 years in order to account for changes in population.<sup>1</sup> In most states, legislators can manipulate district boundaries to benefit their own political party.<sup>2</sup> This manipulation, called gerrymandering, weakens voters’ ability to affect election outcomes and exercise accountability over government. Distorted election districts lead to skewed representation and legislators who are less responsive to the will of the voters.

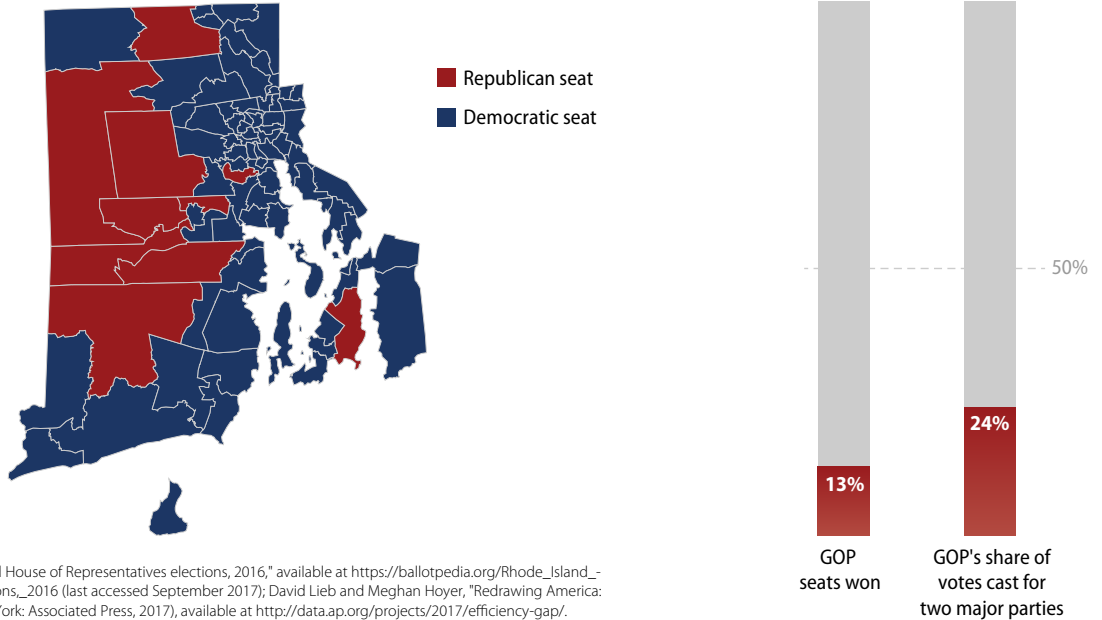
In Rhode Island, the Legislature draws districts after receiving recommendations from an 18-member commission for which the vast majority of members are appointed by the majority leaders in both houses of the state’s Legislature.<sup>3</sup> Though Gov. Lincoln Chafee was an independent, Democrats controlled both houses during the 2010 redistricting cycle.<sup>4</sup> In the 2016 election, Republicans won 35 percent of the aggregate General Assembly vote but came away with only 13 percent of seats.<sup>5</sup>

Democratic legislators in the other states discussed in a recent Center for American Progress report<sup>6</sup> supported increases in the minimum wage or opposed bans on local increases, however, the Democratic Legislature in Rhode Island pre-empted a Providence ordinance raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour for hotel workers.<sup>7</sup> One Democratic legislator said, “It’s more important it be on the state and not every city and county having their own minimum wage” because it would “cause undue hardships on businesses.”<sup>8</sup> Yet these legislators, like Republicans in the other states analyzed, are disregarding voters’ expressed policy preferences:

- **Minimum wage:** The Rhode Island Legislature passed a law prohibiting local increases in the minimum wage.<sup>9</sup> More than two-thirds of Rhode Island voters support a \$15 per hour minimum wage, according to a recent poll.<sup>10</sup>
- **Toll increases:** In 2016, the Legislature passed a law that increased tolls on trucks, even though the vast majority of voters polled preferred an alternative Republican proposal.<sup>11</sup>

**FIGURE 5**  
**Distorted districts in Rhode Island**

Almost one-quarter of voters chose Republican candidates for the Rhode Island House of Representatives in 2016, but the GOP only secured 13 percent of the seats



Sources: Ballotpedia, "Rhode Island House of Representatives elections, 2016," available at [https://ballotpedia.org/Rhode\\_Island\\_House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_elections,\\_2016](https://ballotpedia.org/Rhode_Island_House_of_Representatives_elections,_2016) (last accessed September 2017); David Lieb and Meghan Hoyer, "Redrawing America: an Efficiency Gap Analysis" (New York: Associated Press, 2017), available at <http://data.ap.org/projects/2017/efficiency-gap/>.

## Endnotes

- 1 *Reynolds v. Sims*, 377 U.S. 533 (1964).
- 2 Christopher Ingraham, "This is actually what America would look like without gerrymandering," *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2016, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/13/this-is-actually-what-america-would-look-like-without-gerrymandering/?utm\\_term=.8d2318ba5cbf](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/13/this-is-actually-what-america-would-look-like-without-gerrymandering/?utm_term=.8d2318ba5cbf).
- 3 Rose Institute of State and Local Government, Claremont McKenna College, "Redistricting: Rhode Island," available at <http://roseinstitute.org/redistricting/rhodeisland/> (last accessed September 2017).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Bruce Murphy, "The Most Gerrymandered State in America," *Urban Milwaukee*, August 6, 2015, available at <http://urbanmilwaukee.com/2015/08/06/murphys-law-the-most-gerrymandered-state-in-america/>.
- 6 Billy Corriher and Liz Kennedy, "Distorted Districts, Distorted Laws" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2017), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2017/09/19/439164/distorted-districts-distorted-laws/>.
- 7 Dave Jamieson, "Rhode Island Democrats Try To Ban Local Minimum Wages," *The Huffington Post*, June 10, 2014, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/10/rhode-island-minimum-wage\\_n\\_5481085.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/10/rhode-island-minimum-wage_n_5481085.html).
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Katherine Gregg, "Poll: Most in R.I. favor guaranteed sick leave, higher minimum wage," *Providence Journal*, April 13, 2017, available at <http://www.providencejournal.com/news/20170413/poll-most-in-ri-favor-guaranteed-sick-leave-higher-minimum-wage>.
- 11 Katherine Gregg and Patrick Anderson, "Raimondo signs Rhode Island truck toll bill," *Providence Journal*, February 11, 2016, available at <http://www.providencejournal.com/news/20160211/raimondo-signs-rhode-island-truck-toll-bill>; Katherine Gregg, "Tough sell: Poll shows more oppose than support Raimondo's truck toll plan," *Providence Journal*, January 22, 2016, available at <http://www.providencejournal.com/news/20160122/tough-sell-poll-shows-more-oppose-than-support-raimondos-truck-toll-plan>.