

Try a reorder of court with district voting

Yakima Herald
January 23, 2015

We've made the argument in the past for district voting in Yakima City Council races, for reasons that by now are familiar to those who have followed the debate: Among them, representatives can get closer to their smaller constituencies, smaller districts increase the chances of a wider diversity of viewpoints and ethnicities, candidates are more likely to bring different life experiences to the public debate and campaigns are more manageable in smaller districts. A court order is forcing Yakima to adopt a district-voting plan for the council.

In the Legislature, a move is afoot to amend the constitution to elect state Supreme Court justices by district; at present, all are elected statewide, which leads to overrepresentation by populous Western Washington. We believe what's good for the seven members of the Yakima City Council is also good for the nine members of the state Supreme Court.

The court's current makeup finds one justice from east of the Cascades: Debra Stephens of Spokane. In other words, one-fifth of the state's population claims one-ninth of the justices. As for the rest of the court, seven hail from the central Puget Sound counties of King, Pierce, Kitsap and Thurston, which hold less than half of the state's population. One comes from Clallam County on the Olympic Peninsula. That means no justices from Western Washington north of King County or south and west of Thurston County. And, of course, no one from Central Washington.

Judges are charged with rendering legal decisions according to their interpretations of the law. Life experiences affect a person's outlook that leads to those interpretations — whether it's a person's age, gender, ethnicity or upbringing in an urban, suburban or rural environment. District voting would increase the chances of a wider range of life experiences and more diverse viewpoints on the court.

This state's Court of Appeals is broken up into three districts that are not proportional in population; two are in Western Washington and one covers all the counties east of the Cascades. One idea calls for three justices from each of the districts, which would lead to Eastern Washington being overrepresented; one possible way to address that concern would be to elect two justices from each of the districts and three from anywhere in the state. There are a number of ways to achieve a district setup that's more fair than what we have now.

The Washington Policy Center reports at least 10 states have some sort of district voting for their justices. This idea would prove a move in the right direction for our state.

• Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.

