

Gerrymandering: Background Information

Every ten years, the U.S. government conducts a census to measure the U.S. population. The census is mandated by Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution. The data collected by the census determines the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives. The next census in 2020 will require counting approximately 330 million people and will determine how the U.S. population has shifted within the country. Once this data is collected, states may be required to redraw their voting district maps—a process called redistricting.

The process for redistricting varies by state. According to the Brookings Institution:

- Thirty-seven states allow the state legislature to draw legislative districts (some with the aid of an advisory or backup commission). This means that if one political party controls the state house, it also controls the redistricting process.
- Four states (Arizona, California, Idaho, and Washington) use an independent commission to draw legislative districts. This is how most democracies in the world determine electoral districts.
- Two states (Hawai'i and New Jersey) use a political commission.
- Seven states (Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming) only have one Congressional district each, so they do not draw boundaries for the House of Representatives, but they do for state legislative districts.

The process of redistricting can become politicized, particularly when state legislatures are in charge of the process. Gerrymandering is an

effort to draw the boundaries of a congressional or legislative district in order to benefit either a particular political party (partisan gerrymandering) or a particular racial or ethnic group (racial gerrymandering).

Although the Constitution says that legislative districts should have roughly equal populations, those districts can be configured in different ways. Politicians use sophisticated computer models to redraw legislative districts and may use different methods to try to gain an advantage, but the most common are:

- “packing”—trying to group as many members of the opposing party or certain racial/ethnic groups into one district as possible;
- “cracking”—splitting members of the opposing party or certain racial/ethnic groups into various districts so they will not make up a majority in any of them.

An example from one state may help to illustrate the impact of gerrymandering on the political system. Even though the population of North Carolina is nearly evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, ten of the thirteen seats in the U.S. House of Representatives for North Carolina are held by Republicans. This is in large part because of how district lines were drawn when Republicans controlled the redistricting process.

To be clear, both Republicans and Democrats engage in gerrymandering. It can play a significant role in determining the outcomes of elections. While gerrymandering is not new, recent court challenges and citizen action seek to ensure that elections do not favor one political party and that constituents are represented fairly.

It is your turn to try redistricting!

Drawing District Maps

The U.S. Constitution specifies that representation in the House of Representatives be proportional. States with large populations like California have more representatives (fifty-three) than states with small populations like Maine (two). Within each state, electoral districts should contain roughly equal numbers of people in each district. Voters in each Congressional district elect one representative to the U.S. House of Representatives.

In this hypothetical example, imagine a U.S. state that has fifty people in it: twenty people who belong to the yellow party and thirty people who belong to the purple party. How might you divide people into five Congressional districts?

Instructions: Look at the example below on the left, then try to create one district map that fairly represents voters and one that unfairly benefits one political party. Each district should have ten squares in it so that representation remains equal. Get creative!

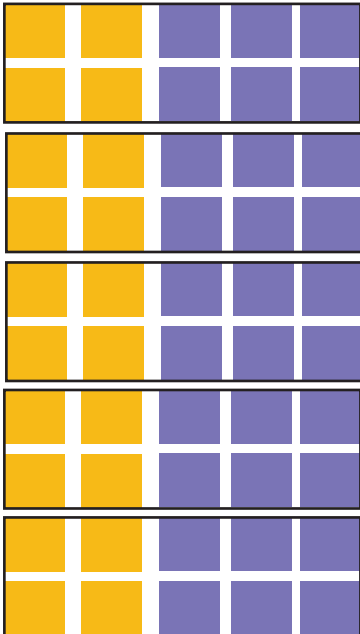
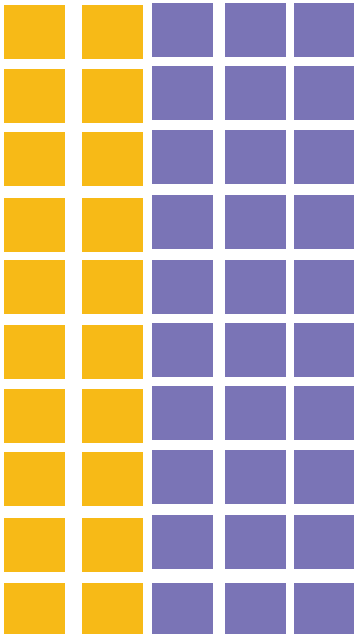
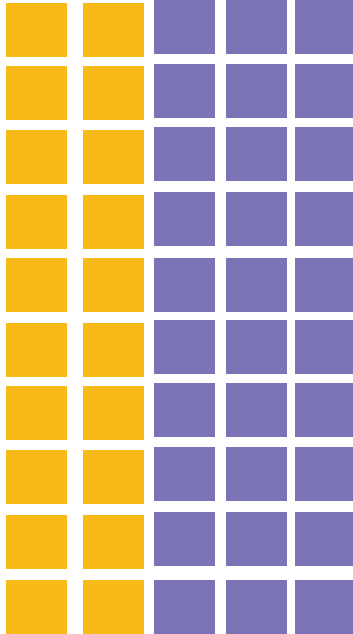
State District Map Example	State District Map 1	State District Map 2
		

Image adapted from <https://img.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/files/2015/03/gerry.png&w=1484>

<p>Example:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Equal representation (ten people) in each district 2. One party has a majority in each district 3. House of Representatives would gain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 members representing majority purple districts 	<p>For your examples, consider:</p> <p>Do you have equal representation (ten people) in each district?</p> <p>Does one party have a majority in each district?</p> <p>How many members of each party would join the House of Representatives?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many members representing majority yellow districts? • How many members representing majority purple districts?
---	---

Discuss: Which of these district maps is most representative of the people living within it?