



Background Reading for Salamanders and Politics



What do salamanders have to do with politics? It all started in 1812 when Elbridge Gerry, who was the Governor of Massachusetts, signed a bill to redistrict an area around Boston. Redistricting means to draw new lines to establish the district in which people will cast their votes.

The new district gave a partisan advantage to the political party to which Gerry belonged. Instead of following natural boundaries, the new boundaries established districts so that more districts would be won by candidates in that party.

One district had such a strange shape that it was compared to a mythological salamander. A cartoonist created a drawing of the new district with wings and claws, and it was published in the *Boston Centinel*.

Making fun the shape of the district, Gerry's name was combined with the "-mander" from salamander to create a new word – gerrymander. Gerry may not have been the first politician to use redistricting as a political tool, but his name is the one that stuck, and today, gerrymandering is the practice of redrawing voting district lines to give an advantage to a particular political party.

The United States Constitution states that a census must be conducted every ten years to establish how many people live in each state. This is important for elections because the number of members of the U.S. Congress from each state is determined by the proportion of the country's population living in each state. The first Congress had only 65 members, but the number of congressmen increased as new states were added and the population grew. In 1929, Congress passed an act limiting the number of

congressmen to 435. After the census is tabulated every ten years, those 435 seats are divided among the states according to the official population count.

Each state is in charge of deciding how to establish the congressional districts within the state. The only federal laws are that congressional districts must have roughly the same number of people and that district lines cannot be drawn in order to dilute the votes of racial groups. Most states require that districts be contiguous. That means that a person could travel from any point within a district to any other point within that same district without having to cross another district.

Redistricting in most states is done by the state legislature. Whichever party has the majority in the state legislature at the time that district lines are redrawn can take advantage of their position. There are no laws that say that district lines cannot be drawn to give an advantage to a political party – which is why partisan gerrymandering is so popular.

The most widely practiced methods of gerrymandering are called cracking and packing. Cracking means to break apart concentrations of voters likely to vote for a particular political party. Packing means to clump those voters together so that they win in fewer districts. Both can result in districts with shapes as bizarre as a salamander.

Cartoon by By Elkanah Tisdale (1771-1835) (often falsely attributed to Gilbert Stuart)[1] - Originally published in the Boston Centinel, 1812., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6030613>