



Background Reading for Gerrymandering

The United States has a Representative Democracy. Not all citizens serve in Congress, instead, we vote for people to represent our views through their public service as our Representatives and Senators. U.S. Senators are elected from the whole state — every person in the state casts a vote for the person they prefer. However, the U.S. House of Representatives are elected from geopolitical units called voting districts. When Americans go to the polls, they each cast a ballot as part of a voting district. At the national (federal) level, each state is broken up into these districts, with a goal of fairly providing representation to the population living there. Every ten years, after the U.S. national census occurs and the population is recounted, these districts must be redrawn, to ensure continued fairness.

In most states, the state legislature draws and votes on the district lines. Article 1 Section 4 of the Constitution states, “The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof...” In many states, a committee is formed by the state legislature to research and, as needed, redraw the boundaries. The new voting districts are usually approved just like a normal bill, by being voted on and passing through the state House and state Senate. In Kentucky, this process begins again in 2021.

But often, the placement of these voting district boundaries are a source of disagreement. If one political party has a large majority within the legislature, it can try to draw voting districts that favor their candidates and political party. Drawing voting districts in a way that favors one group or political party is called gerrymandering.

This problem is not new. In fact, the word “gerrymander” is named after Elbridge Gerry, a signer of the Declaration of Independence who used his political influence as the Governor of Massachusetts to redraw Congressional voting districts to favor his political party. A newspaper cartoonist of the period said one of the districts was shaped so strangely that it looked like a salamander, or “Gerry-mander,” in the words of the cartoonist. (https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_509530)

Segment 2 of Episode 1 of the Vote Worthy podcast focuses on voting rights, from celebrating women gaining their right to vote through the 19th Amendment to worries about voter suppression, especially through “diluting” the votes of citizens by intentionally separating voting blocs into different districts so that many common voices are split. Citizens need to take the issue of gerrymandering seriously so that, as the podcast states, “the public elects their politicians and not the politicians electing the voters.”