



## Gerrymandering: How Do We Make Sure Voting Is Representative?

Uses Vote Worthy Part 1 Segment 2 [Listen](#)

You may also want to play MaryLynn Collins' question about redistricting from Vote Worthy Episode 3 (starting at 18:30)

### Background Reading

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 is 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](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.”

### Discussion Questions

1. Go to the Congressional Districts Map at the [govtrack.us](https://govtrack.us) website (<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/map>) and zoom in on Kentucky to locate Kentucky’s 3rd Voting District. How big is it in size compared to the other voting districts in Kentucky? Knowing that voting districts are drawn to give fair representation to a districts’ population, why do you think the geographic size of this district is so small.
2. The government is made up of the Legislative, Judicial, and Executive branches, which have checks and balances to ensure power is shared among them. In Kentucky, the state legislature creates voting districts which are voted on by the legislative branch. However, both the executive branch and the judicial branch have checks on this power. Knowing what you do of the function of these branches, what are some ways they might check the power of the legislative branch to create voting districts as they like?
3. Through gerrymandering, sometimes politicians create districts that lean very sharply toward one political party or the other. What kind of candidates are likely to be successful within this kind of voting district?
4. Based on what you heard and read about gerrymandering, how do you think this problem might contribute to the high level of political polarization we see in American politics recently?

### Key Vocabulary

**19th Amendment:** ratified August 18, 1920, the amendment to the U.S. Constitution granting women the right to vote

**absentee ballot:** a ballot completed and cast (or mailed in) before an election by a voter who is unable to be present at the polls

**early voting:** a process to allow voters to cast their ballots before a scheduled election day

**gerrymandering:** drawing the boundaries of an electoral district to favor one party or class

**polarization:** division into two sharply contrasting groups

**political platform:** a candidate or political party's statement of principles, goals and stands on issues

**voting bloc:** a group of voters whose common concern or concerns around certain issues are so strong that it tends to dominate their voting decisions, causing them to vote together in elections

**suffrage:** the legal right to vote in elections

### Suggested Activity

After reading the background, listening to the podcast, and discussing the questions, ask students (individually or in small groups) to carefully examine the hypothetical graphic of 50 people shown on the left side of Encyclopedia Britannica's gerrymandering article: (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/gerrymandering>). Show them just the first part of the graphic that shows 50 people, 60% orange and 40% purple. Cover or block the right side of the image that shows examples of fair and gerrymandered districts.

Ask students to try and fairly divide up the population of 50 into five voting districts in as many ways as they can. Remind them that, in the case of voting districts, "fair" means that districts are not drawn in a way that undercuts the political voice of their populations. For example, if 40% of a population is Democrat and 60% is Republican, "fair" voting districts would usually result in 3 Republican representatives and 2 Democratic representatives. So three of the "districts" they draw should be dominated by orange voters and two by purple voters.

Now, ask them to gerrymander this bloc of voters, to create unfair voting districts that give too much representation to the orange or too much representation to the purple.

Allow individuals or small groups to show and explain the different ways they constructed their voting districts. Allow the class to discuss how cooperation and conflict within groups of people results in the creation of our current system of voting districts.

### Evaluation Criteria for Student Work

Students may draw their districts in a variety of configurations as long as their work displays understanding of the idea and reality of gerrymandering during the discussion. Individually or in small groups, they are able to create both a "fair" and "unfair" example of a voting district.

### Suggested Supplemental Sources

- Britannica Encyclopedia article on gerrymandering: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gerrymandering>
- Annenberg Guide to the U.S. Constitution: [www.annenbergclassroom.org/constitution/](http://www.annenbergclassroom.org/constitution/)
- "Gerry-mander" cartoon at the National Museum of American History: [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_509530](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_509530)

- Kentucky information at Ballotpedia website:  
[https://ballotpedia.org/Redistricting\\_in\\_Kentucky](https://ballotpedia.org/Redistricting_in_Kentucky)

## **Kentucky Academic Standards**

### **Social Studies**

#### **HS.G.HI.1**

Analyze how the forces of cooperation and conflict within and among people, nations and empires influence the division and control of Earth's surface and resources.

#### **HS.C.CP.1**

Explain how the U.S. Constitution embodies the principles of rule of law, popular sovereignty, republicanism, federalism, separation of powers and checks and balances to promote general welfare.

***Resource created by Katie Booth, N.B.T.C.***