



Salamanders and Politics

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

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

Background Reading



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

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it important for all residents in a state to take part in the federal census? Why or why not?
2. Gerrymandering is sometimes described as the process that allows politicians to choose their voters instead of voters choosing their politicians. What does that mean?
3. In some states redistricting is done by an independent, bipartisan commission instead of by the state legislature. Do you think that is a good idea? Why or why not?

Key Vocabulary

census: a complete counting of a population and recording of specific information. In the United States, an official census is legally mandated by the Constitution to take place every ten years. The results determine, among other things, the apportionment of seats in the U.S. House or Representatives.

contiguous: connecting without a break

cracking the vote: drawing district lines so that like-minded voters are split into multiple districts to dilute their voting power

gerrymander: to divide an area into election districts in order to give an advantage to one political party.

partisan: prejudiced in favor of a specific cause or political party

packing the vote: drawing district lines so that like-minded voters are packed into as few districts as possible

Teaching Tips

- Although gerrymandering plays a decisive role in elections, the process and its impact are often ignored or misunderstood. You can help your students explore the concept of gerrymandering by having them draw “district lines” to separate an imaginary state into five districts using the accompanying tables (or ones you design yourself). You could print the tables and have students color in the districts, but it is much less frustrating to do the coloring on a computer, where it is easy to change colors. (Samples of possible gerrymandered configurations are provided.) Letting students work in small groups allows them to collaborate and to check one another’s work. If students cannot use the computer to do this they can use markers or colored dots to indicate the districts.
- Absolute accuracy in creating gerrymandered districts is not the central focus of this lesson. Rather, the intent is to let students explore how gerrymandering can change the outcome of elections. You might use the discussion questions both before and after the activity to see if students have new insights after experimenting with gerrymandering.

Suggested Activities

Activity One

Toward the end of segment 2 of the first Vote Worthy podcast, Margie Charasika, President of the Louisville League of Women Voters, talks about her hope that the Kentucky legislature will get more citizen input on the process of redistricting in 2021 by establishing a nonpartisan advisory committee. To help students understand why she thinks this is so important to our democratic process, lead them in trying their hand at redistricting in ways that result in fair representation and in ways that result in unfair representation. In the second Vote Worthy podcast, law professor Joshua Douglas and KET producer Renee Shaw continue to discuss redistricting and ways to reduce gerrymandering.

After students listen to the podcast, divide the class into small groups and distribute three copies of the **Slice and Dice the Vote blank form** to each student or have them download the table to their computers. Ask them to complete questions on the form as a group. Let each group share their results with the class. If they are having trouble getting started, project one of the sample completed tables in the **Slice and Dice Samples form** and discuss it.

If time permits, follow the same procedure with the Pack the Vote and Crack the Vote tables, using the **Pack the Vote blank form** and **Pack the Vote Samples form** and the **Crack the Vote blank form** and the **Crack the Vote Samples form**. You might have half of the groups working

on packing while the others work on cracking. Have them share their results with the class, including their reflections on how the different configurations could completely change the number of congressmen from each party who represent the state in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Activity Two

The Kentucky League of Women Voters is advocating for fairer districting in Kentucky in 2021. You can find out more about this effort at the [League of Women Voters of Kentucky website](#). (Information will also be posted at the [Kentucky Fair Maps Coalition](#).)

Have students review the information and ask them if they think that most citizens understand the process of redistricting and how important the role of district maps is in elections. What actions could they take as a class to educate voters about this important issue? Break into small groups to discuss possible activities. Ask each group to make a presentation to the class about their idea. If possible, follow through on one or more of the ideas.

Kentucky Academic Standards

Social Studies

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.

HS.C.PR.2 Analyze the role of elections, bureaucracy, political parties, interest groups and media in shaping public policy.

HS.C.I.CC.2 Engage in disciplinary thinking and construct arguments, explanations or public communications relevant to meaningful and/or investigative questions in civics.

HS.C.I.CC.3 Engage in disciplinary thinking and apply appropriate evidence to propose a solution or design an action plan relevant to compelling and/or supportive questions in civics.

Reading and Writing Literacy Practices

- Recognize that text is anything that communicates a message.
- Employ, develop and refine schema to understand and create text.
- Utilize receptive and expressive language arts to better understand self, others and the world.
- Engage in specialized, discipline-specific literacy practices.
- Apply high level cognitive processes to think deeply and critically about text.

Reading Guiding Principles

- Students will integrate and evaluate content presented in print/non-print forms of text found in diverse media and formats.

- Students will compose informative and explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.
- Students will use a variety of strategies to determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases, consulting reference material when appropriate.
- Students will acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening in order to be transition ready.

Resource created by Judy Sizemore