

GERRYMANDERING: Creating Maps With A Purpose

In early 2021, the Washington Map Society hosted a fascinating meeting featuring two speakers who gave complimentary presentations on the practice of gerrymandering, and the sophisticated computer tools that are used today. They were very timely talks, as every ten year census results in the redistribution of representatives based on the population, which leads to districts being redrawn across the United States. These presentations are available for viewing by WMS members in the members only section of this website.

Using maps and words, this brief feature will describe the origin and some basic principles of Gerrymandering.



In 1812, Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry signed a bill that redrew some voting districts to benefit his party. One odd-looking district wrapped around the city of Boston in the shape of a salamander. Political satirists dubbed the new district the 'Gerry-mander', describing it in newspaper articles like the one above, as well as turning the map on its side, like the one to the right from the Boston Gazette. Since then, this strategy has become a staple of U.S. politics as state legislators redraw voting blocs with purposeful creativity that has evolved into the use of very high-powered mathematical models. The two predominant approaches to gerrymandering are often referred to as packing and cracking. In packing, legislators from the party drawing the map try to pack likely opposition voters into as few political districts as possible. Cracking divides supporters of the rival party into several districts, reducing their ability to elect a representative, and ensuring victory for the party in power. The Supreme Court historically has not intervened, as long as districts meet four criteria: they are continuous; they are compact; they contain roughly the same number of people; and they give minority groups a chance to

elect their own representatives in accordance with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the 1986 case *Davis v. Bandemer*, the court agreed that it had the power to intervene in cases of partisan gerrymandering, but it declined to do so because it lacked a clear measure to indicate when this had occurred.

Here are the maps with boundaries of two actual districts in the USA, established in 2011 after the census of 2010. Clearly, mapmaking with a purpose.



Committee for Economic Development, 2017