



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Congressional Redistricting: Understanding How the Lines are Drawn

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Congressional Redistricting Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: United States Government.

Duration: 1 class session

Description: This lesson provides an overview of U.S. Congressional districts, how and when they are drawn, and who draws them. Students will practice drawing districts for their state and learn about political issues related to redistricting.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14A, 14B, 14D

Objectives:

1. Understand how Congressional districts are divided among the fifty states.
2. Understand the requirement for redistricting.
3. Understand when and how districts are redrawn.
4. Learn about potential abuses of redistricting power and the advantages conferred to incumbent representatives through redistricting.

Materials:

1. Blank map of your state (one per student)
2. Population density map of your state (one per student)
3. Overhead projector
4. Overhead map of current Congressional districts for your state
5. Overhead of gerrymandering diagram (attached)
6. Blank gerrymandering diagram (one per student)

Instruction and Activities:

Lecture

The United States House of Representatives is composed of 435 Representatives from the fifty states. Each state is entitled to a minimum of one Representative. The remaining 385 Representatives are divided among the states proportionally, based upon state population. The number of representatives assigned to each state is recalculated every ten years based on population data from the national census. As populations grow and shift, some states will gain representatives while others will lose representatives when the recalculations are made each

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decade. Once the recalculation of the number of representatives per state is made, each state redraws its own congressional districts to reflect the population changes. This redrawing of the boundaries of congressional districts is called “redistricting.” Each state has the power to determine how it will draw its congressional districts, subject to a federal requirement mandating that each congressional district be as equal as possible in terms of population.

Activity #1: Draw Congressional Districts

Pass out the blank maps of your state to each student. Inform students of the number of congressional districts, and thus the number of representatives, for your state. Instruct students that they are responsible for drawing the state’s districts and have the students draw lines on their maps to divide the state into the appropriate number of districts. Allow five minutes for this activity.

Return to Lecture

In most states, the State Legislature has the authority to create and implement the redistricting plan. In some states (Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, New Jersey, Washington, and Iowa), the authority to create and implement the redistricting plan is given to an independent bipartisan or nonpartisan commission. Seven other states (Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming) avoid the issue of redistricting altogether because their populations are so low that they are only apportioned one Congressional Representative for the whole state. In many states, partisan politics plays an enormous role in the redistricting process. When partisanship is obvious in the redistricting process, a manipulative process known as “gerrymandering” often comes into play. By definition, gerrymandering is the division of an area into political units so as to give special advantages to one group over others. There are two major strategies involved in gerrymandering: **packing** and **cracking**. “Packing” is putting as many voters of a single type into one district in order to minimize their influence in other districts. “Cracking” is spreading out voters of a single type among numerous districts such that they will always be in the minority within any given district. The strategies are often combined, resulting in the opposition party having a fewer "safe" seats, while the majority party retains more seats for itself.

Activity #2: Gerrymandering

See the attached diagrams illustrating gerrymandering. The diagrams are composed of a grid (or map) of ones and zeros. Each digit represents one person (or an equal number of persons) with a certain characteristic. For example, the ones might represent Republicans and the zeros Democrats (or vice versa). The diagram represents a state with four Congressional districts drawn with equal numbers of ones and zeros in each district. Now distribute copies of the basic map/grid of ones and zeros to the students. Ask them to try to draw four gerrymandered districts, favoring either the ones or the zeros. Students should try to draw boundary lines to give their selected “party” the advantage in three of the four districts. In order to be successful, a combination of packing and cracking must be used. Allow five minutes for this activity. After the students are finished, show the example diagram of gerrymandered districts.

Return to Lecture

Gerrymandering may be used to the advantage or disadvantage of particular constituents in a district. Those advantaged or disadvantaged may be members of a racial, religious, or class minority group. Gerrymandering often works in favor of the party in control of the State Legislature at the time of redistricting. The initial idea behind gerrymandering was to create districts of common voter interest. It has since evolved into a highly precise science involving advanced statistics and computers to assist in the determination of where district boundaries should be best placed for the advantage of the majority party. Using census data as well as data collected by private marketing and political research groups, the redistricting process is increasingly complex. However, in an era of internet accessibility, lay people can even draw districts online.

Activity #3: Draw Congressional Districts

Display a map of current Congressional districts in your states on the overhead projector.

Follow-up Questions:

Are any of the districts oddly shaped? Which ones? Why do you think that is?
Why are some districts smaller or larger?
Are there any districts that you would draw differently?

After the discussion, pass out the maps displaying population density in your state to each student. Remind the students about the total number of districts they need to draw. Then have them redraw the districts keeping in mind the population density. Have the students estimate districts of equal population, without actually calculating the number of people in each district. Allow ten minutes for this activity.

Follow-up Questions:

Are your proposed districts similar to or different from the actual Congressional districts in your state?
Do you think the actual districts boundaries are drawn the way they are for particular reasons?

Optional Lecture

Districts can be created or gerrymandered in a number of ways. Districts can be drawn not only to benefit or silence a political party, but also to ensure incumbency or to benefit or silence minority racial groups.

Persons already holding office, known as incumbents, can effectively protect their incumbency through redistricting. This type of gerrymandering is sometimes implemented by two incumbents sharing adjoining districts. These two incumbents will draw their two districts in such a manner as to include favorable voters in their districts, while sending any unfavorable voters to other districts. Gerrymandering by incumbents results in elections which are not very competitive because the district boundaries are specifically drawn to favor the incumbents' reelection to office. Noncompetitive elections created by incumbent-gerrymandered districts are

dangerous to the democratic system: instead of presenting voters with viable choices between candidates, these elections almost always result in the retention of the incumbent by design.

Racial gerrymandering can be used either to benefit or to silence racial groups. Political voices of a minority group can be silenced by the majority party using cracking to spread out minority voters through numerous districts, essentially silencing their political voice by dilution. On the other hand, packing can be used to create one or two districts that contain a significant majority of a racial group. In fact, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (which was extended in 1982 and in 2007) *requires* special districts drawn on racial lines to ensure that minority racial groups have an effective political voice. However, the problem with using packing to create one or two districts that contain a majority of a racial group is that the group's political voice will then be concentrated in only one or two districts. So, while their voices will be heard within that district, it may be difficult to garner support from other districts for any type of reform or legislation favored by the racial group. An additional problem with racial group majority districts is that, because voting rates within racial minority populations tend to be lower than within non-minority populations, the majority racial group districts must essentially have a super-majority (at least 2/3) of the particular racial group in order to "out-vote" any non-racial group members voting in that district.

The main danger and result of all types of gerrymandering is that districts are purposefully drawn to be noncompetitive. Noncompetitive districts may limit the number of candidates who might reasonably consider entering political races in those districts; they may not account for demographic changes in the district within the ten years before the next redistricting; and they may silence voices or political ideas that differ from the current officeholder's point of view. Noncompetitive districts are in complete opposition to the notion of the ideal system of government envisioned by the Founders of our nation. Our system of government was created to ensure that the majority would rule without silencing any minority groups. The effect of gerrymandering and noncompetitive elections is in fact to silence minority voices. The democratic system can only work effectively when the voters have meaningful choices among candidates in competitive elections through which to assert their political voices and votes.

Certain techniques can be used in redistricting to create competitive elections and competitive districts. Some of these techniques include **contiguity** (ensuring that all parts of the district are geographically connected, thus ensuring that the district representative can better serve all the constituents); **compactness** (ensuring that the district is as geographically compact as possible, not for example, thinly stretched out over hundreds of miles, again resulting in better service to constituents); and creating districts of **equal population** (there is already a requirement for equal population districts, though some deviation is allowed if a compelling state interest is involved). Additionally, states could adopt a "competitive requirement," which would mandate competitive districts, as long as there was no interference with other redistricting requirements. A combination of these techniques in the redistricting process would go a long way toward ensuring more competitive elections.

Further, certain election processes could be changed to create more competitive elections. Examples of changes that could be made include: creating multi-member districts for statewide offices, in which a district would elect more than one representative; ensuring that both majority

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and minority political voices are heard; instituting term limits, both to reduce the impact of incumbent gerrymandering as well as to bring in new voices after a certain number of terms; and having open primary elections, as opposed to closed primaries. Illinois currently has closed primaries, where only persons who declare to be part of one of the political parties may vote for that party's candidates and decide which candidate will be placed on the ballot representing that party for the general election. Open primaries would allow voters from any party to vote in any political party's primary election in order to choose which candidate will receive that party's nomination for the general election. The effect of open primaries would be that primary election candidates would aim to appeal to all voters, not just voters from that candidate's party, in order to get nominated for the general election. Open primaries would likely result in the selection of more moderate candidates (as opposed to candidates who are staunchly part of one major political party or the other), providing voters with more choices when voting.

Follow-up Questions:

Should gerrymandering be allowed?

Is it acceptable or even necessary to utilize gerrymandering to ensure fairness (such as through the Voting Rights Act)?

Which of the techniques for creating districts or amending election processes do you think would be most successful in creating competitive elections? Why?

Which techniques would be least effective in creating competitive elections? Why?

Supplemental Activity:

Discussion:

Considering what you now know about gerrymandering, are there any districts in your state that seem to be gerrymandered? What do you think about this? Is it fair?

If you could develop a redistricting plan, would you gerrymander the districts? Why or why not?

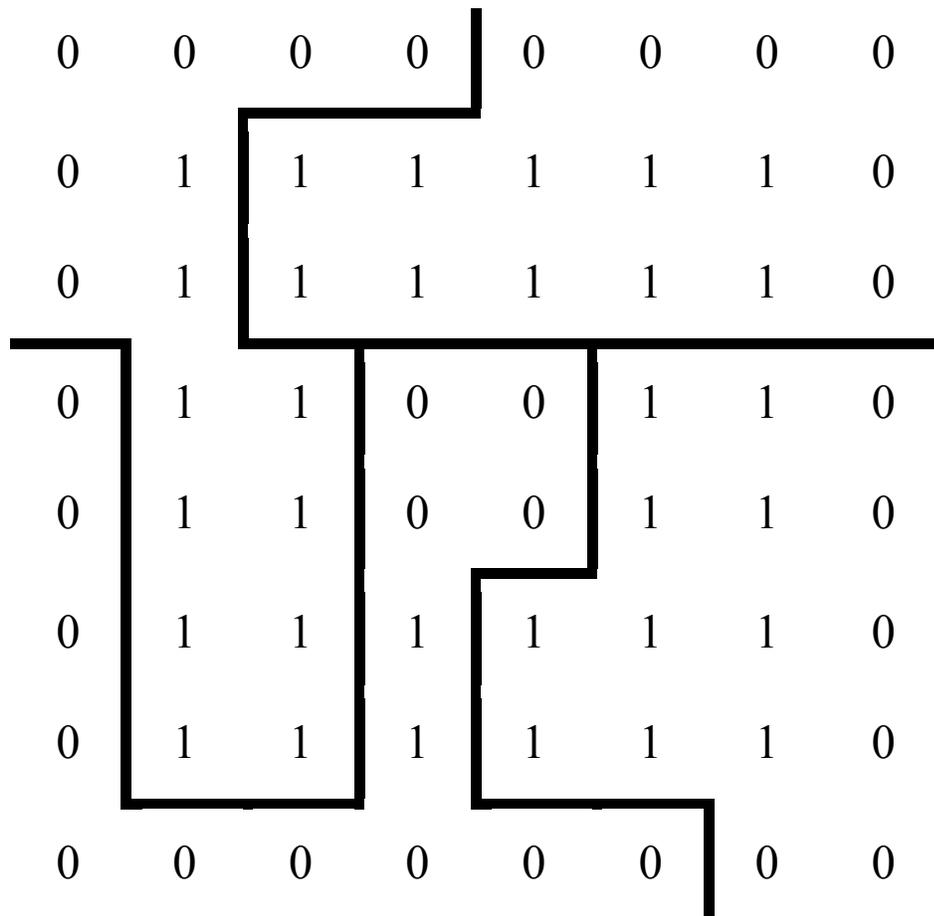
Are you aware that gerrymandering is widely used by both major parties in the U.S.?

Did you know that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that it is legal for a State legislature to redistrict at any time they desire, not just after a census as has been traditional? (See: *League of United Latin American Citizens v. Perry, Governor of Texas*).

Example of a non-gerrymandered distribution of districts:

0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Example of a gerrymandered distribution of districts:



Blank grid for division into districts as instructed:

0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0