



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Congressional Redistricting **What is redistricting and why does it matter?** **A Moderated Discussion**

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Congressional Redistricting II A Moderated Discussion

Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: United States Government, State Government.

Duration: 1 class session

Description: This lesson provides an overview of the redistricting process through a moderated discussion of what redistricting is, why redistricting matters, and how the process takes place in Illinois.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14C, 14D; 16A, 16B; 18B.

Objectives:

1. Understand the concept of redistricting and why it matters.
2. Discuss various considerations during redistricting and how these may be used to political advantage by those in the majority.
3. Learn about the specific process of redistricting in Illinois.

Materials:

Blackboard with chalk or whiteboard with marker

Instruction and Activities:

I. Redistricting - What is It?

Ask, "What do you think redistricting is?"

A: Elicit answers.

- Hopefully one student will bring up the concept that after the most recent Census results are in, representative districts must be re-sized so that they each have roughly the same number of people; this means that the number of representatives that a state has in the legislature will change based on how the state's (or the nation's) population shifts, as measured by the census each decade.
- Definition: **Redistricting** is the process of redrawing the lines of legislative districts.
 - Note: Representatives at all levels of government, including local government, such as the school board or the city council, may be elected from districts, and those districts will also be re-drawn periodically to reflect population shifts.

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Ask, “Does anyone know the meaning of the term ‘apportionment’ or ‘reapportionment?’”

A: Elicit answers:

- Hopefully at least one student will understand that “**apportionment**” is the process of allocating seats in a legislature among the various states; “**reapportionment**” is the process every ten years of reallocating the number of seats in the legislature due to each state, based on the latest population figures.

Ask, “What are other considerations besides ‘proportion’ that you think might matter when redrawing a district?”

A: Answers include:

- **Contiguity:** the concept that each district must have contiguous boundaries
 - Definition: A **contiguous** district is simply a district where you can travel from any point in the district to any other point in the district without crossing the district boundary. In other words, all parts of the district connect to each other.
 - A student will likely come up with this, although you may have to prod by asking them about “boundaries.”
 - Think about geometry: a shape in geometry has a contiguous boundary; otherwise it would become two or more shapes!
 - Ask students if they think that contiguity is an important consideration in their estimation. Elicit answers.
- **Compactness:** the concept that each district should have a fairly regular shape
 - It is doubtful that a student will offer this concept, especially because of the conflicting ways in which experts understand it.
 - Ask students if they think that compactness, or having a fairly regular shape among districts, is an important consideration in their estimation. Elicit answers.
- **Gerrymandering:**
 - A student might come up with this as an answer to the question of what other considerations are important when redistricting.
 - Even if a student does not come up with “gerrymandering” per se, they may come up with the idea that lines are drawn for **political gain**. Ultimately, every attempt to draw district lines has a political impact; gerrymandering is a conscious process to increase the likelihood of a particular political result.
 - Definition: gerrymandering refers to the manipulation of district lines to affect political power.
 - “**Partisan gerrymandering**” occurs when the political party in control of the line drawing process draws districts to favor itself and limit opportunities for the opposition party.
 - As a point of interest, you may explain to students that the term “gerrymander” hails from the efforts of an early United States Vice-President, Elbridge Gerry, who served under President James Madison. He attempted to control the political landscape by signing a redistricting plan that ensured his party’s domination in the senate of his home state of Massachusetts; ironically, his redistricting plan failed

to achieve his desired goal. The resulting map was caricatured by a political cartoonist to resemble a ferocious looking salamander, and the term “gerrymander” was born.

II. Why does redistricting matter?

Ask, “Why do you think redistricting matters?”

A: Elicit answers.

- A student might repeat the information that was already discussed in the introduction, such as stating that redistricting is important because of reapportionment after the Census.
- Ask, “What kind of issues in your life or your family’s life do you think might be affected by redistricting?”
 - Students may struggle with this because redistricting seems far removed from their daily lives. The answers to this question will likely be varied and should reflect the broad public policy issues that may be dinner table conversation at some of the students’ homes.
 - Examples include: taxation; school policy decisions; and city ordinances that affect students, such as curfew and where students can skateboard.
- Ask, “Who do you think is responsible for redistricting?”
 - Students might offer a generic response of “government officials.” Press students to get to the heart of the matter, “who controls redistricting?”
 - There is not just one model for the process by which redistricting may take place. Some models favor control by public officials who are already in office, and other models put the power in the residents’ hands by forming **non-partisan commissions** (a redistricting planning body that has no official political affiliation).
- Ask, “What kind of issues in a public official’s life, whether a local city council person or a United States Senator, might matter to them when they are in control of re-drawing the lines?”
 - Hopefully students will be able to immediately identify political gains that public officials could obtain by controlling the redistricting process.
 - **Eliminating Incumbents or Challengers:** Some public officials will literally carve districts to exclude the streets on which homes of their challengers or those of incumbents from the opposing party are located.
 - **Letting Politicians Choose Their Voters:** Just like districts can be drawn around particular politicians, they can also be drawn around particular voters. Tools exist to predict which voters may vote for incumbents and which may vote for favored challengers and these tools may be utilized by those who are redrawing the lines.
 - This might not be as apparent to students as the “Eliminating Incumbents or Challengers” notion.
 - **Diluting the Votes of Minorities or Splitting Communities:** This might be more palpable to students who are savvy about minority representation in government

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bodies. Also, the introduction topic of “contiguity” may prod students to come up with the “splitting communities” concept.

- Ask, “Why might those in control of redistricting want to dilute minority votes or split communities?”
 - Again, the answer is “for political gain.”

III. Redistricting In Illinois

To make the abstract a bit more concrete, describe the redistricting process in Illinois:

- In Illinois, the redistricting process is set forth in the Illinois Constitution, and the process overwhelmingly favors the current majority political party if it controls both the Executive and the Legislature.
 - In the event that members of the General Assembly cannot agree on a redistricting map by a mere simple majority, when the Executive and the Legislature have opposing party control, the General Assembly must convene a Redistricting Committee.
 - The Redistricting Committee is comprised of eight people, four chosen from each political party, and is charged with drawing and approving a map.
 - If the Redistricting Committee fails in its efforts, each political party names one representative, one of whom is randomly selected by the Illinois Secretary of State to be the ninth member of the Redistricting Commission, thereby ultimately allowing one political party to control the process.
 - This random tie-breaker provision was supposed to provide incentive for political parties to work together in achieving consensus on a map; however, in the last three redistricting cycles, Illinois’ legislative districts were **literally left to a game of chance**.
 - In the 2011 redistricting cycle, because the Executive and Legislature were both controlled by the Democratic Party, the tie-breaker provision was not needed.

Ask, “What do you think of the Illinois redistricting process?”

A: Elicit answers.

Ask, “How do you think lines should be drawn?”

A: Elicit answers.

Ask, “Besides partisan concerns, what other considerations do you think that the process of redistricting should take into account?”

A: Elicit answers.

- Hopefully, at least one student will come to the conclusion that “everything is politics” and any “interest” might seek political representation or political participation.
- Definition: **Communities of Interest**: This concept is loosely defined but essentially describes a group of people concentrated in a geographic area who share similar priorities, whether social, cultural, ethnic, economic, religious, or political.

- In a few states, the directive to preserve communities of interest is made explicit in their redistricting process.
- Ask, “Why might communities of interest want to be kept intact within a district?”
 - Some people believe that it is best to keep communities of interest whole, so that each community of interest can have a chance to have its own legislator looking out for its interest in the legislature, and so that individual legislators feel particularly responsible to serve the community of interest.
- Ask students if they can identify communities of interest in their neighborhoods. Elicit answers.

Ask students what they envision would be elements of a fair redistricting process.

Wrap up by saying that although there is no one way to go about redistricting, students can always advocate for reform that incorporates the elements they deem to be fair for a redistricting process.

Supplemental Activity

Have students do research into where their state representatives live and how close their homes are to the district boundaries or how “safe” they are by being located in an interior area of an existing district. A map, pushpins, and a marker to denote districts, if not already included on the map, form a fine display of the potential ramifications of redistricting.