

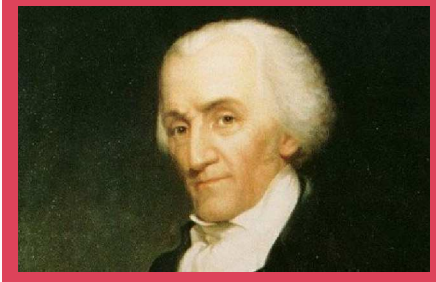
# CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

# Gerrymandering

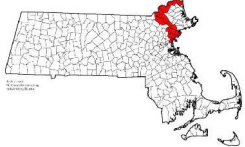
Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.

You know what is a funny word in civics? **Gerrymander**! That's right, this is a word, and it has been used since 1812. It means to exploit electoral maps for political gain, and the man behind the word's creation was **Governor Elbridge Gerry** of Massachusetts. We will return to him momentarily. Recently, the term has been making headlines associated with **events taking place in Texas and California**.

Under **Article I, Section II** of the U.S. Constitution, the United States government is required to count the U.S. population every ten years. This is so a state's representation in the United States House of Representatives can be **reapportioned** (redistributed) to the number of people who live in that state. States may gain representation if their state gains population, although since the size of the U.S. House of Representatives was capped at 435 in 1929, states may lose representation even if their population has increased between censuses. Once the number of congressional districts is reapportioned to the states, it is left to the states, specifically the state legislatures to decide how these districts will be drawn. While not common, state legislatures do not have to wait for a census and can re-draw any time, like the current example of Texas and California.



This brings us back to Elbridge Gerry. Following the 1810 Census, the state of Massachusetts gained three congressional districts, raising its total from 17 to 20. To give his political party, the Democratic-Republicans, a political advantage, Gerry supported the Massachusetts Legislature **drawing electoral maps** that favored his party over the Federalist Party. This was accomplished by drawing maps of congressional districts that included more people who supported the Democratic-Republican Party than people who supported the Federalist Party.



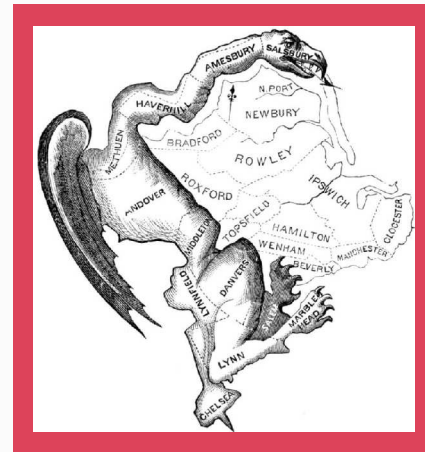
When the final map of congressional districts was revealed, one was so oddly shaped that the Boston Gazette commented that it looked like a **"salamander"** and included a political cartoon, captioned "Gerry-Mander," that depicted the oddly drawn district as a mythological creature with wings, claws, and a forked-tongue. So popular was this cartoon, that the term "gerrymander" has stuck as part of our political language.

Consequently, the practice of gerrymandering continues today. This means the political party that controls the state legislature will draw legislative district maps that benefit their party at the expense of the other.

However, there are **restrictions** put in place. The party in control of the state legislature must primarily follow these constitutional, federal and state regulations:

- ★ all congressional districts must be as equal in population as possible
- ★ that they steer clear of intentional racial discrimination when drawing these maps
- ★ that the drawn districts are compact and not overly large
- ★ that the district is contiguous in nature, meaning that the lines making up the district continuously touch one another

Both Democrats and Republicans engage in this practice, and when they do, the legislative district maps that result are intended to have more members of their party living within it than the other. Ensuring the opposing political party has more members in a single district after a gerrymander is known as **'packing'**. This is desired because it weakens the power of that party in other districts, even if it gives them an advantage in one district. Meanwhile, weakening an opposing political party by spreading the number of members across many districts is known as **'cracking'**. This will result in electoral wins for the dominant party and another voice to advocate for their policy preferences when the law-making process commences.



**To Think and To Do:** Review your state's current congressional district map. What process does your state legislature use when it redraws its legislative electoral maps? How does that process compare to your neighboring states? What do you notice about any similarities or differences your state legislature takes when drawing its legislative electoral maps?

## Learn more:

- [All About Redistricting](#), from Loyola Law School
- [Boston Gazette Printing of Original Massachusetts Congressional Maps, 1812](#), from Library of Congress
- [Historical Apportionment Data](#), from U.S. Census Bureau



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