Limit voting rights in 3 easy steps. (And how to teach your students about it.) Gerrymandering 101.

historytech.wordpress.com/2022/06/03/so-you-want-to-limit-someones-voting-rights-or-maybe-just-want-your-kids-to-know-more-about-it-gerrymandering-101/

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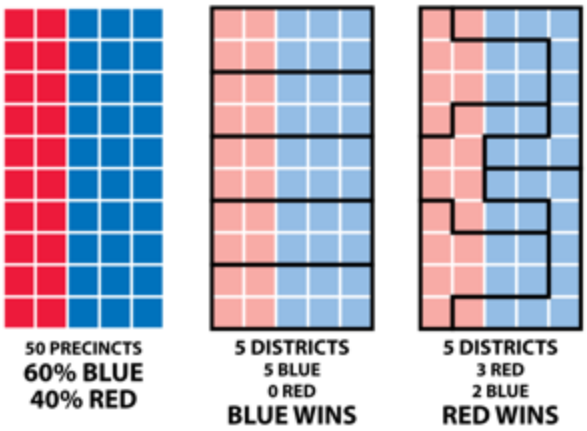


It's as American as apple pie. We've been finding ways to re-organize voting districts to our advantage for years. Heck, the Kansas legislature just did it.

But I don't think we spend enough time having kids explore the whole gerrymandering thing as part of our government / civics engagement instruction. And I don't think enough of us or our students truly understand the power that redistricting can have on the democratic process.

> "As a mapmaker, I can have more impact on an election than a campaign. More of an impact than a candidate. When, I as a mapmaker, have more of an impact on an election than the voters, the system is out of whack."
>
> David Winston
> Republican redistricting consultant following 1990 Census

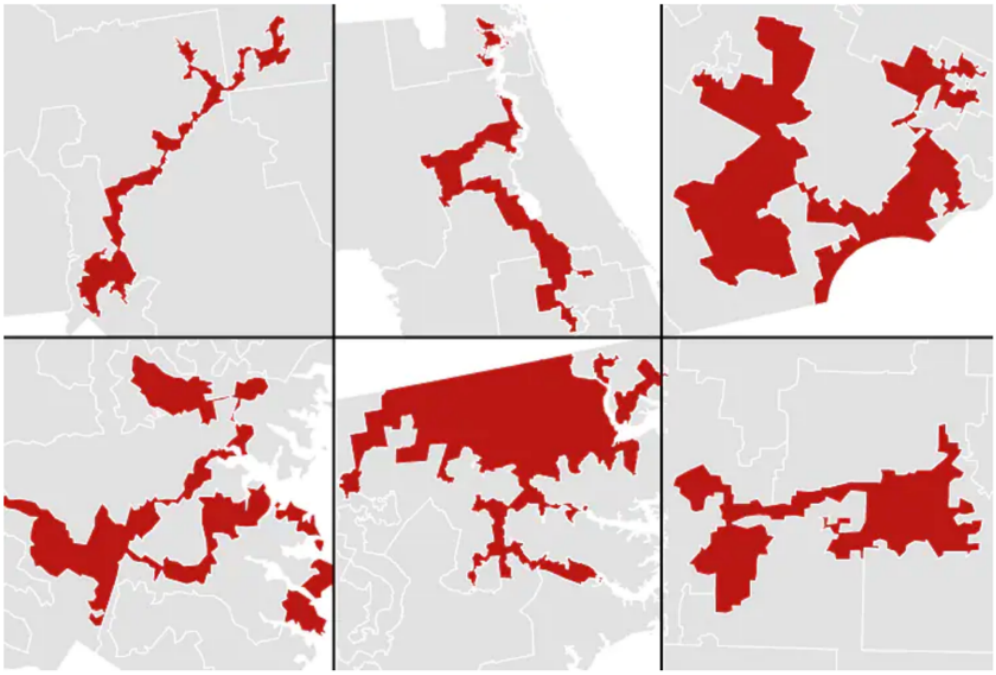
Quick primer. Gerrymandering is the legislative act of creating voting maps that favor your particular political party. And according to a Wired article from a few years ago, it usually involves one of two different tools:

- **Packing** is when you take all the voters who hate you and cram them into one congressional district. This means that you will get blown out in that district but you'll have a better chance of winning the others.

- The reverse of that is **cracking**. You take an area that is clearly never going to love you or your party's candidates and break it into chunks and attach those chunks to districts where you hold a clear majority of voters. The haters get so spread out that their impact has no bearing on the election. (Cracking is what's happening right now in Kansas. The new map splits the city of Lawrence between two other districts with one including areas all the way on the Colorado border. FYI – Lawrence is an island of University of Kansas blue in a state sea of red.)

Redrawing congressional voting districts to ensure that a specific political party retains or gains an unfair advantage during an election is a great way to ***look*** democratic while actually screwing over huge numbers of voters. Parties and state legislators have been doing it for years.

Here's what it can look like:



This sort of funny business is obviously not good for a political system that prides itself on equality, fairness and one person / one vote. The problem? It's relatively easy to do and much more difficult to prove and reverse.

Multiple groups have gone to court to try and overturn gerrymandered districts over the years. But they've always lost . . . because it's hard to prove how *much* a map has been gerrymandered.

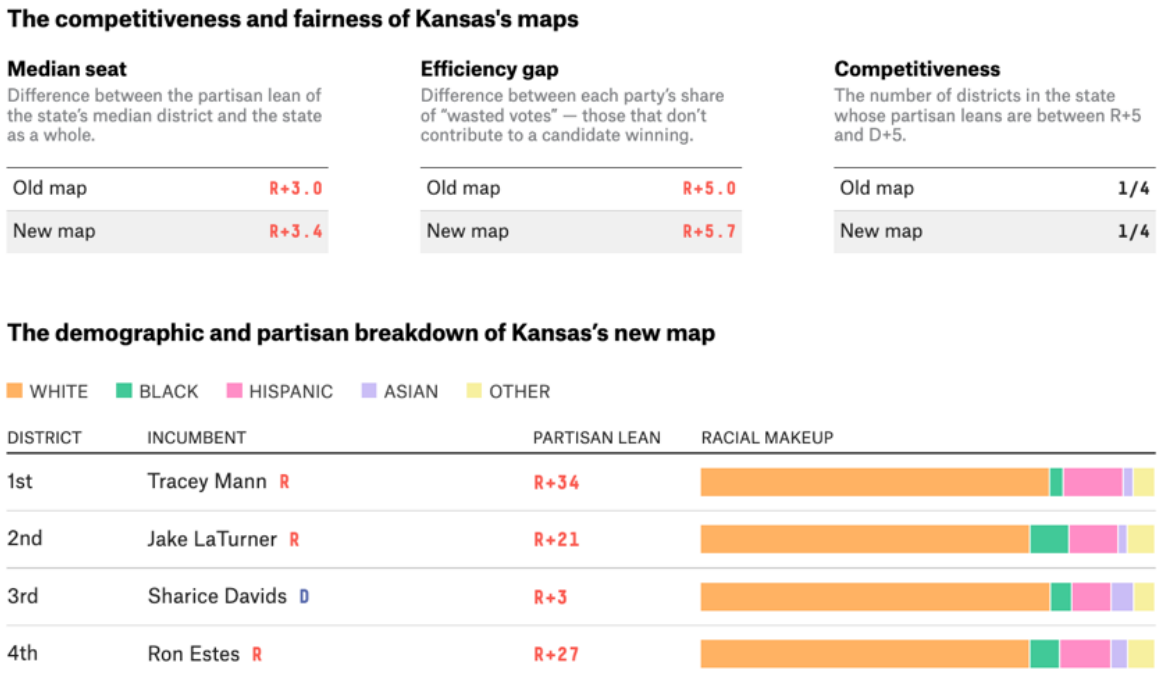
The Wired article says that's changing:

> The data age is likely to spell trouble for gerrymandering. This skulduggery relies on geometry, geography, and demographic tables, precisely the domains where math nerds can give us clarity.

Using something called the "efficiency gap," mathematicians are starting to determine the level of gerrymandering in a state, providing the courts empirical data that can protect voter rights and prevent political parties from gaining an unfair – and undemocratic – advantage.

The math nerds at FiveThirtyEight (and I use that term with affection and respect) are using the idea of the efficiency gap to break down current redistricting efforts. You can get all sorts of data by state and individual districts.

So stop what you're doing, explore the 538 site, and think for a few seconds.



How can we use these and other resources to help students understand the democratic process? Make sense of politics? The court system? And develop a sense of civic engagement in our kids? Wouldn't be cool to have our kids begin to explore the process of using census data and math and charts and graphs and civics and voter registrations and political parties and state governments to actually take part in this sort of process?

What if our kids became the "expert" witnesses? We develop a civic engagement project that has kids create legally correct congressional districts that are both "efficient" and "compact." Or we have them prepare expert witness testimony that can be used in classroom-based court cases taken from real life. Or . . .

Okay. I will admit. I still am not sure what this might look like. But we're smart. We can figure something out, right?

And I know it's already summer break for most of you. But if you're teaching civics, government, or US history, bookmark these resources for next fall:

- Stay current with the very latest court decisions on redistricting.
- The ACLU's pamphlet Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Redistricting (But Were Afraid to Ask!)

  is a wonderful place to learn about some of the basic terms and notions.
- The Public Mapping Project has redistricting software, some great basic Gerrymandering 101 resources, districting information for each state, and some handy instructional materials.
- PBS also has some helpful lessons and resources.

And if you're really just not ready to go full throttle on this, start next semester off any one of the many gerrymandering simulations that are available. There are a ton of sims that you need to bookmark:

- Start with the classic The Redistricting Game, an online version of the gerrymandering concept that's easy to learn and fun to play. You'll find five different "missions" to simulate and some basic background info.

- Move on to Hexapolis from the New York Times. They created an imaginary state, where your only mission is to gerrymander your party to power.
- Then explore Gerrymander, a simple puzzle game designed to show how gerrymandering can be used to rig an election. Draw voting districts to favor your party and win the election. Players can use the real-world strategies of packing and cracking to beat each puzzle.
- Get more serious with Districtr, a sim that uses actual districts and states.
- This simple Gerrymandering Simulation can also be useful.

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Glenn is a curriculum and integration specialist, speaker, and blogger with a passion for technology and social studies. He delivers engaging professional learning across the country with a focus on consulting, presentations, and keynotes. Find out more about Glenn and how you might learn together by going to his Work with Me page.