Members of Congress, state legislators, and many city council and school board members are elected by people grouped into districts. At least once per decade—usually after the Census—those districts are redrawn. Why? People move. Families grow. The lines are adjusted to ensure that each district has about the same number of people and, as a result, that each person has an equal say in the government, as required by the Constitution.

But redistricting isn’t simple. Even with equal populations, districts can be drawn to give some people more voting power than others. Redistricting can determine who wins an election. It also affects who controls school boards, city councils, state legislatures, Congress, and other governing bodies.

Ultimately, redistricting impacts which laws get passed and which don’t. In other words, it affects all of us.

In 1960, the largest state district in California had 422 times more people than the smallest state district. That was before the Supreme Court ruled that political districts must have roughly equal populations. Today, there are about 700,000 people in each Congressional District.

In 1992, several Los Angeles neighborhoods were severely damaged due to social unrest, including a one-square-mile area known as Koreatown. When Koreatown residents asked their elected officials for help with recovery efforts, each representative claimed that the area was part of another official’s district. In fact, the district map fractured Koreatown into four City Council Districts and five State Assembly Districts, which made it easy for each representative to deflect responsibility for the community.
Who draws the lines?

Each state decides who draws the lines. In most states, the line drawers are politicians along with hired consultants. Incumbents—elected officials already in office—have an incentive to create districts that are likely to reelect them, sometimes preventing real communities from being represented.

Often, state legislators draw the map, which can be vetoed by the governor. Some states have special commissions that advise legislators on drawing the map, or that serve as backup mapmakers if the legislature deadlocks. A few states have independent commissions so that politicians and public officials can’t draw their own districts.

Some states try to prevent a single political party from controlling the process. Some don’t, and this can give the party in power a big advantage. In other states, politicians from both parties simply work together to swap voters and draw districts that keep their reelection ‘safe.’

No other democratic nation allows self-interested legislators to draw the lines of the districts in which they run for office.

A ‘good’ redistricting process helps communities secure meaningful representation.

Many states consider ‘communities of interest’ when drawing their districts. That’s just a term for groups of people who share common social, cultural, racial, economic, geographic, or other concerns. These groups are likely to have similar legislative concerns as well, and that means they can benefit from common representation in the government. This goes much deeper than Republican or Democrat. A district of farmers, say, and a district of city dwellers will probably elect representatives that reflect differing histories, priorities, and aspirations.

Other redistricting goals—like keeping a district compact or within county borders—are usually proxies for keeping communities intact. A good redistricting process will be open and transparent, allowing communities to ask questions and give input. This participation is important, since communities are the basic units of well-designed districts.

A ‘bad’ redistricting process takes place behind closed doors, often at the expense of communities.

Community borders are sometimes ignored to create districts that increase the odds that specific politicians or parties will win or lose, or that all incumbents will enjoy ‘safe’ districts. This is commonly referred to as ‘gerrymandering,’ and it comes in a few different forms, including these:

- **Cracking Communities**
  - so they can’t elect their own representative.
- **Packing Partisans**
  - into one district so the other party wins adjacent districts.
- **Eliminating Incumbents**
  - by drawing two into one district. Only one can win!
- **Eliminating Challengers**
  - by drawing them out of the district.

FORSALE

In 2000, 30 of California’s 32 Democratic members of Congress each paid $20,000 to the consultant in charge of creating California’s redistricting plan to have him custom-design their districts to protect their seats. ‘Twenty thousand is nothing to keep your seat ... if my colleagues are smart, they’ll pay their $20,000 and the consultant will draw the district they can win in. Those who refused to pay? God help them,’ explained one legislator.

Good?

Bad?
People sometimes associate gerrymandering with odd-shaped districts. But sometimes there are good reasons that districts are oddly shaped. Communities (including minority communities protected by the Voting Rights Act), geography, and municipal boundaries don’t always form neat shapes. And sometimes there are so many members of one political party in an area that no combination of districts could create strong competition between parties. (Plus, redistricting is only one factor among many that determine political competition.)

The First, fast, fair, and legal political competition can create the same problems as gerrymandering—sometimes intentionally. For example, slicing the country into a neat grid would inextricably split communities and break up voters in ways that benefit one party or another. There might be greater competition in a district with an uneven mix of farmers and city dwellers—but that still might not lead to meaningful representation for those communities. Gerrymandering is one political fix for the symptoms of gerrymandering. Use the next section as a guide for navigating your state’s redistricting process. Learn about the concrete steps people around the country are taking to make redistricting better.

NOW, you can work to create better districts

Get involved! Hold the line drawers accountable by paying attention and speaking up. If you do, they will be more likely to address community interests and less able to manipulate the process to their own advantage. This is true no matter what redistricting process your state uses. Here are a few ways to get involved.

Draw your own map! You can help by drawing maps of your community that you think should be kept together. A well-designed independent commission, usually large enough to represent a state’s communities and interests, is the right size! The more community and others in the state can help draw in time, the courts step in. Most states finish by 2012 (ME and MT finish in the same the proposals, and the line drawers need to follow those rules. The media report on the time to act! There’s no single process that every state should use to draw districts, but here are some good ideas from around the country. The Voting Rights Act (VRA) is designed to ensure that the final communities and others in the state can help explain their decisions before and after the elections. Redistricting has to be complete before the filing deadline! During 2011 and 2012, states hold their primary elections. Redistricting has to be complete before the filing deadline! During 2011 and 2012, states hold their primary elections. Redistricting has to be complete before the filing deadline!

LATER, you can work to create a better redistricting process

Make the data public!

Political and demographic data should be available to the public for competition. The Voting Rights Act requires certain states to preclear changes to district maps. If officials violate these sections, advocates can and should take legal action! If, in the end, the redistricting process still breaks up communities, you may be able to take legal action. These lawsuits are complicated, but there are experts and nonprofit groups that can help—even if a minority community has been deprived of its political voice.

LATER, you can work to create a better redistricting process

Make the data public!

Political and demographic data should be available to the public for competition. This helps communities participate, and keeps redistricting accountable to the public. You know a lot just by reading this far! But you should find out a lot more about the district lines redrawn. For example, in Mississippi in 1969, districts Supervisors were drawn to work on redistricting. Find out which communities are working redistricting: Section Two of the VRA are important in eliminating discrimination against minority voters. Two provisions of the VRA are important in eliminating discrimination against minority voters: Section Two (discrimination in voting) and Section Fourteen (discrimination in voter registration). Long-term change can’t wait for 2020. There’s a window of opportunity on the redistricting process in 2011 and 2012. If you want to change the way redistricting works in your state, this is the time to act! There’s no single process that every state should use to draw districts, but here are some good ideas from around the country.

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1. **Compactness**
   Arizona's 2nd District is one of the most oddly shaped Congressional districts in the United States. What is happening here? Read on to find out.

2. **Geography**
   The one obvious geographic feature in Arizona's 2nd is the Colorado River. The river forms much of the district's western border and connects the two large chunks of land in the district. The thin, irregular shape of the district is a consequence of the river. Without the river, Arizona's 2nd would probably be one connected piece of land. Most states have a contiguity requirement like this one.

   Phoenix

3. **Communities of Interest**
   Arizona's 2nd District preserves discrete communities of interest in Arizona's sparsely populated North. The Hopi and Navajo reservations would be split by the district if not for the Hopi and the Navajo reservations. It's a funny shape, but good policy.

4. **Political Boundaries**
   The western and northern borders of the district are defined by Arizona's borders with California, Nevada, and Utah. The southern part of the district reaches through Phoenix's western suburbs. Phoenix has a lot of water in the city itself, but what's the strange expanse of land? That's the boundary of the Hopi Indian reservation, which is completely surrounded by the district.

5. **Voting Rights Act**
   Arizona is subject to Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. That is, because of a history of discriminatory voting practices, Arizona has to get preclearance from the Federal government for any changes to district lines. They must show that district lines don't have a discriminatory effect. If the city can't prove that, Arizona's 2nd District will be redrawn and potentially split into two districts.

6. **Flexibility**
   How does your district stack up? A funny shape can still make for a good district. Let's take a look at the reasons why.

   **Compactness**
   Texas's 23rd Congressional District in Texas is one of the largest in America. It is called the 'Hollywood Seat' because it is home to the highest concentration of Hollywood celebrities in the country.

   **Geography**
   The southern border of Texas's 23rd is the southern border of the United States. Mexico is on the other side of the Rio Grande. The redistricting in 2003 traded the heavily Latino and Democratic-leaning Laredo for the predominantly white and Republican-leaning San Antonio suburbs, making Republican victory more likely.

   **Political Boundaries**
   Political boundaries are defined by the states. Theовоred have fairly regular shapes. People in compact districts look nice because they account for the neighborhoods in the easternmost part of the district and the suburbs in the south. Read on to find out.

   **Communities of Interest**
   Though it's hard to tell by looking at its shape, Texas's 23rd District was gerrymandered in 2003 to split, or 'crack' the Latino community. The Republican-led redistricting in 2003 traded the heavily Latino and Democratic-leaning Laredo for the predominantly white and Republican-leaning San Antonio suburbs, making Republican victory more likely.

   **Voting Rights Act**
   In 2006, the Supreme Court declared that Texas's 23rd District violated the Voting Rights Act. Line drawers were allowed to redraw it in a way that dilutes minority voting power, and the Court heard that the line-drawing process that when it moved about 100,000 Latino votes out of the district to an adjacent district. A panel of judges ruled the district to be unconstitutional. After the Court's decision, the incumbent was defeated. Districts matter!

   **Flexibility**
   This district is predominantly Latino and one of the largest in land area in the United States. Because of the diversity of communities and constituencies, it's one of the most competitive districts.
Redistricting affects who gets elected, who controls governing bodies, and which laws get passed.

We like to think that voters choose their representatives, but in redistricting, politicians often get to choose their voters.

Use this publication to learn more about redistricting. Then you can help ensure that your elected public servants actually serve their public.

For the Census guide to redistricting data, go to: www.census.gov/rdo

Then browse some raw data at: factfinder.census.gov