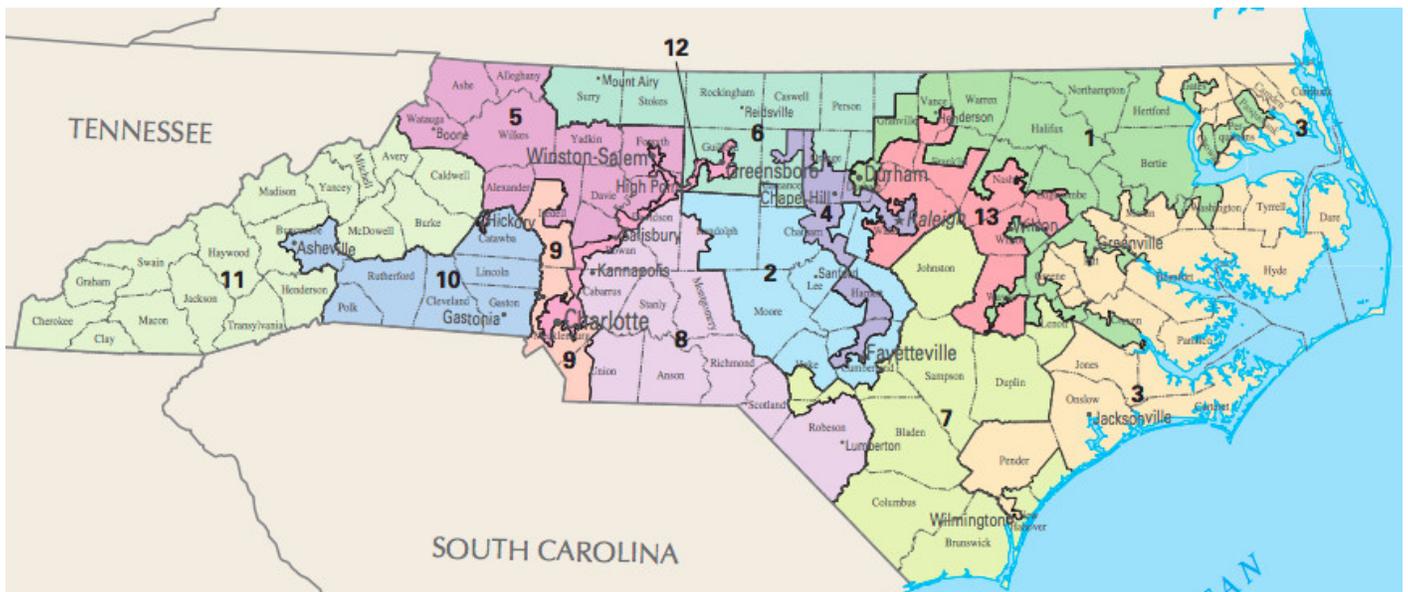


# Andrew Proko, "What is Gerrymandering and Why Does It Matter?" Vox, November 14, 2018

In the US, every state elects a certain number of people to the House of Representatives — a number that's based on the Census count of the state's population. North Carolina, for instance, elects 13 House members. So North Carolina has to be divided into 13 congressional districts with roughly equal populations. The process is called gerrymandering, and in most US states, it is controlled by the majority party in the state legislature.

Partisan gerrymandering occurs when this map-drawing process is intentionally used to benefit a particular political party — to help that party win more seats, or more easily protect the ones it has. The goal is to create many districts that will elect members of one party, and only a few that will elect members of the opposite party. You can see North Carolina's Congressional district map below:



You'll notice that's not a very clean map. It's full of bizarre shapes, weird outcroppings and sharp turns. That's no accident. The map was drawn by North Carolina's Republicans, and it did its job. Though Democrats won around the same amount of votes Republicans in the state's 2018 House races, the GOP hung on to an unchanged 10-3 majority in the state's congressional delegation. Not a single seat flipped.

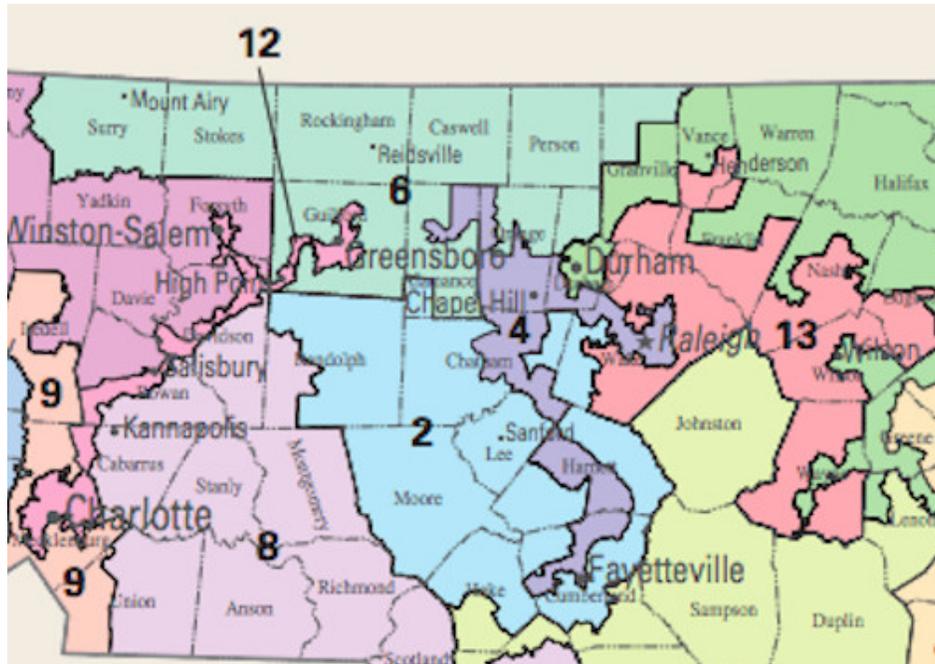
Gerrymandering can affect any legislative body that has to have districts drawn — which includes both the US House of Representatives, and every state legislature. Both parties have tended to do it when the opportunities arise. And since political power is at stake, fights over redistricting are often quite intense.

The term gerrymandering is also sometimes used to describe somewhat different redistricting scenarios. Racial gerrymandering can mean the dilution of the voting power of certain racial or demographic groups, which is usually entangled with seeking partisan advantage. And a bipartisan gerrymander is a redistricting meant to protect incumbents of both parties.

## How does gerrymandering work?

The idea behind gerrymandering is pretty simple: you pack your opponents' supporters together into very few districts. Then you make other districts relatively more balanced — but you place enough of your supporters in most of them to give you an advantage. The hoped-for result is that your party loses a few districts hugely, yet wins a majority of districts comfortably.

North Carolina is a particularly illustrative case. To understand why its congressional delegation remained 10-3 Republican despite half the votes being cast for Democrats, look at how some of the state's districts are drawn:



Pay particular attention to the long, snakelike districts — the 12th and the 4th. In defiance of geographic logic, these districts cut through most of the state and encompass multiple urban centers that aren't even close to each other. So a great deal of the state's Democratic-voting population is packed into these two districts. In all, North Carolina Republicans created three incredibly Democratic districts, and then a larger number of districts where Republicans had a somewhat smaller advantage.

This is a very successful partisan gerrymander: even in a Democratic wave year like 2018, it held up — only one race (in the 9th district) ended up being close, and the Republican even won there.

## Who actually does the gerrymandering?

Every 10 years, after the Census is taken to update population counts in each US state, the boundaries of congressional and state legislative districts are redrawn, in what's known as the redistricting process.

In most states, the new maps are drawn by the state legislature and then approved by the governor. So partisan control of each of those three political entities is crucial. If a single party controls all three, that party can usually draw whichever maps they want without giving the opposition party any say. If control is split, a compromise will usually result.

Some states, however, have alternative processes set up, instead delegating the process to a commission. The devil is in the details with these commissions — some are essentially just partisan bodies who remain under the parties' de facto control, while others are more independent entities (like California's and Arizona's) . . .

## Does gerrymandering cause political polarization?

Gerrymandering is often blamed for our political system's current polarization. The argument is that incumbents tend to be more extreme if their districts are gerrymandered, because when they're sure to win the general election, they'll focus on appealing to the more extreme members of their base in order to prevent a primary challenge. But political science research indicates that polarization has other causes as well. First of all, the Senate isn't gerrymandered at all, and it is quite polarized, too. Representatives do become somewhat

more ideologically extreme in more lopsided districts, and gerrymandering could certainly help explain this. But there's a clear gap between Democrats and Republicans in *all* districts — and gerrymandering can't explain that basic polarization.

## What is racial gerrymandering?

The US House of Representatives elects only one member from each district. Such a system can potentially make it quite hard for minority groups to gain representation. For instance, if African Americans are spread out throughout a state, they might not have sufficient numbers in any one district to elect any representatives at all.

In the past, many US states have brought about this outcome deliberately, drawing their maps to ensure whites would win every district. That's a process known as racial gerrymandering. The federal government addressed this in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which made it illegal to draw districts that intentionally dilute the voting power of a protected minority. When the courts have assessed whether certain maps do this, they tend to judge the districts by "compactness." In other words, judges assess how geographically logical the districts are, to make sure they aren't unnaturally designed to disenfranchise minority voters.

It's also possible to racially gerrymander to *benefit* minority groups, by drawing districts in unusual ways to ensure certain racial minority groups make up a majority there. Groups such as the NAACP advocate for more minority representation in Congress, and in the past, they've pushed for more majority-minority districts as a way to achieve that goal. But the courts have been skeptical of this too.

## Are there reforms that can prevent gerrymandering?

The main reason for partisan gerrymandering in the US is that in most states, redistricting is handled by self-interested politicians in state legislatures. The most commonly proposed reform would take gerrymandering out of politicians' hands entirely, and let an independent nonpartisan commission handle the job.

Several countries have found this works well. Canada, for instance, used to have a serious gerrymandering problem, but it shifted to independent commissions in the 1960s. Each province has a three-person commission whose members are usually judges, social scientists, or retired public officials. Today, most Canadian ridings [districts] are simple and uncontroversial, chunky and geometric, and usually conform to the vague borders of some existing geographic/civic region knowable to the average citizen who lives there.

Commissions elsewhere can be more controversial. Some US states have ostensible redistricting commissions, but let politicians name the appointees. Some countries have avowedly nonpartisan commissions that end up doing the parties' bidding anyway. The specific instructions of these commissions also matter, since some are charged with creating *competitive* districts that could go either way, while others are charged with ensuring representation of different groups or interests.