

## MEDIA MOMENT MINI: Gerrymandering

**Time Needed:** 1 Class Period

**Lesson Objectives:** The student will be able to...

**Materials:**

- Student worksheets
- Projection master
- Newspapers, student internet access,  
-OR- a classroom computer and projector with internet access

- Define gerrymandering
- Explain how gerrymandering is used to create a political advantage
- Explain the impact of the media on monitoring and influencing government and the public sphere
- Recognize the media acting in its roles as gatekeeper, agenda setter, and watchdog

**Handouts:**

- Starter Activity (1/2 page; class set)
- Reading (2 pages; class set)
- Activity (1 page; class set)

***For more on the media, visit iCivics' Media and Influence unit.***

## Step by Step

- ANTICIPATE** the lesson by having students complete the Redistricting starter activity. Use the projection master to display a correct solution(s). Debrief by asking students to discuss the challenges of districting.
- DISTRIBUTE** the reading to the class.
- READ** Side A with the class, pausing to discuss. Alternatively, have students read in groups or independently.
- DISPLAY** the projection master to ensure students understand "packing" and "cracking".
- CHECK** for understanding by asking: What is gerrymandering? Explain "packing" and "cracking". Why do safe seat districts consistently elect candidates of the same party to office? If you were elected in a gerrymandered district, would you work to change gerrymandering once elected? Why or why not?
- TRANSITION** to Side B.
- TELL** students that Side B will teach them about the media's role as gatekeeper, agenda setter, and watchdog.
- READ** Side B with the class, pausing to discuss.

### **NEWS LITERACY ACTIVITY** (INDIVIDUAL OR PAIRED)

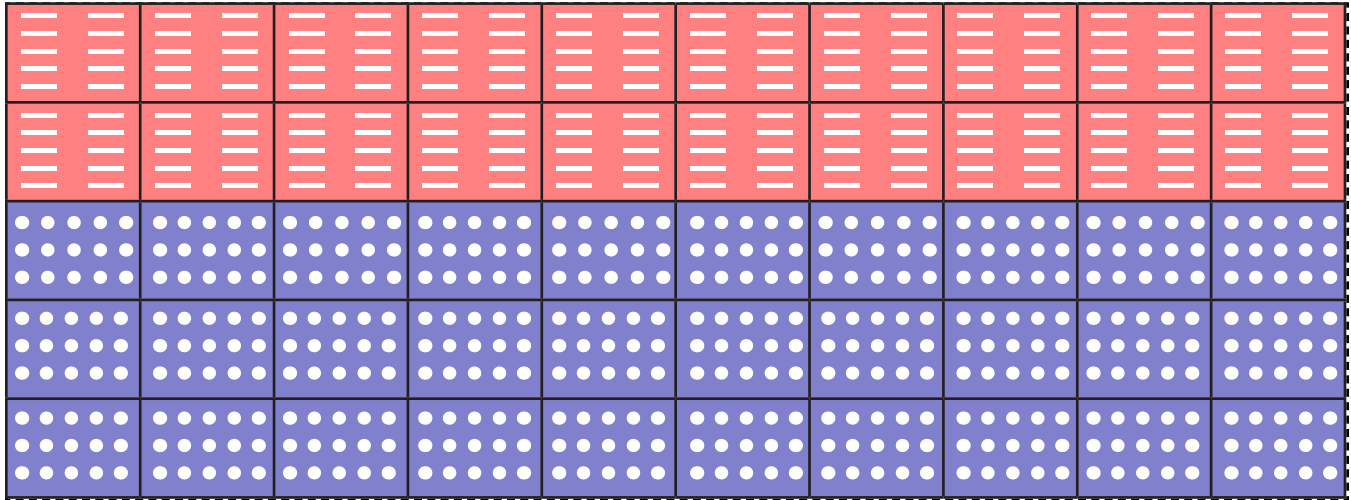
- ASSIGN** students to explore a print newspaper, news website, or watch a news program. Arrange for technology and internet access as needed for this activity.
- DISTRIBUTE** the News Watch activity page to the class.
- ASSIGN** students to complete the activity independently or in pairs. To enrich this lesson, you may choose to assign each student a different news medium and/or provider, and invite students compare coverage with one or more students. If students notice that some stories made it through the gate of one media outlet and not through another, ask them to consider why this might be.
- CLOSE** by asking students to discuss their answers to the question: Why do you think the media's roles as gatekeeper, agenda setter, and watchdog are important in a democratic society?

**MEDIA MOMENT MINI: Gerrymandering**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Redistricting.** The results of the 2020 census are in, and your state legislature has tasked you with the job of redrawing the district boundaries. Create five districts with equal amounts of people. Each square represents one person. But wait! Can you draw a map that assures the RED (LINES) party will have an advantage over the blue (dots) party?

- Rules:
- Each district must contain equal amounts of people
  - Districts must be contiguous—that means no splitting, or breaking up, a district!

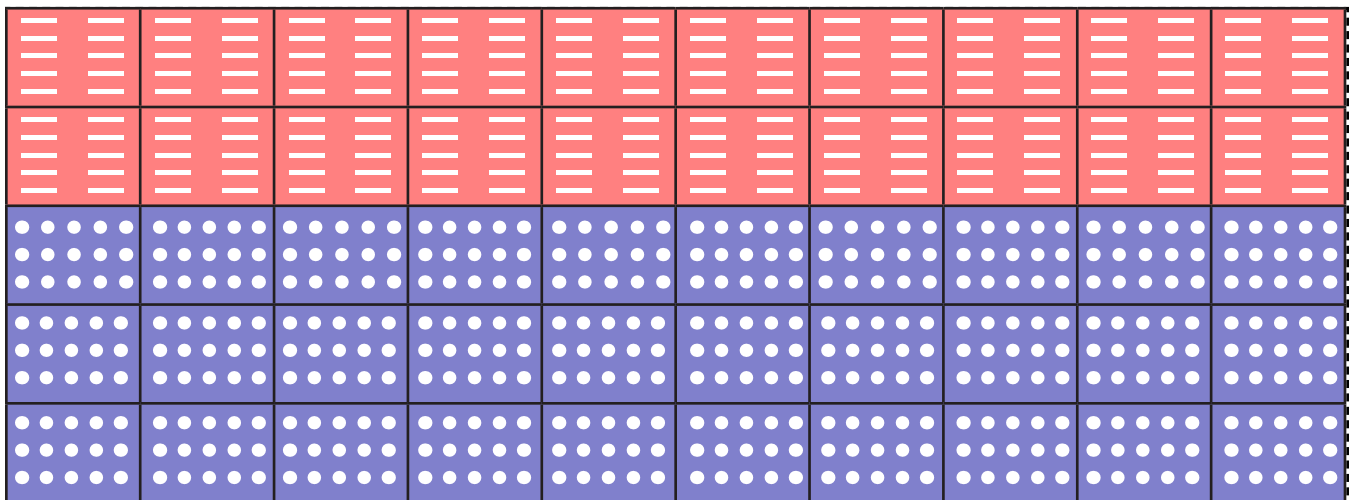


**MEDIA MOMENT MINI: Gerrymandering**

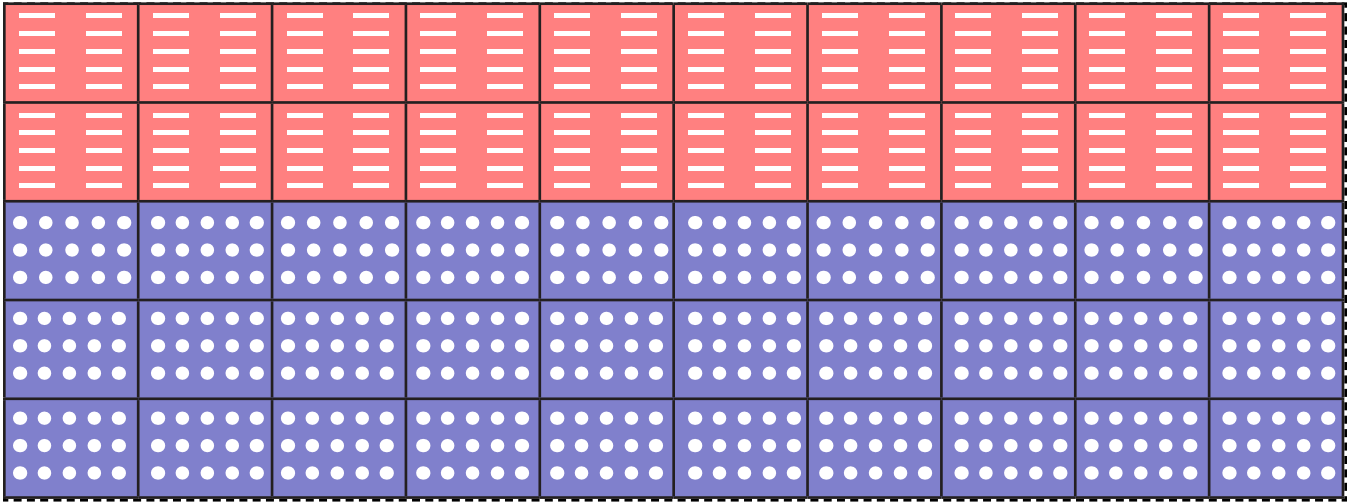
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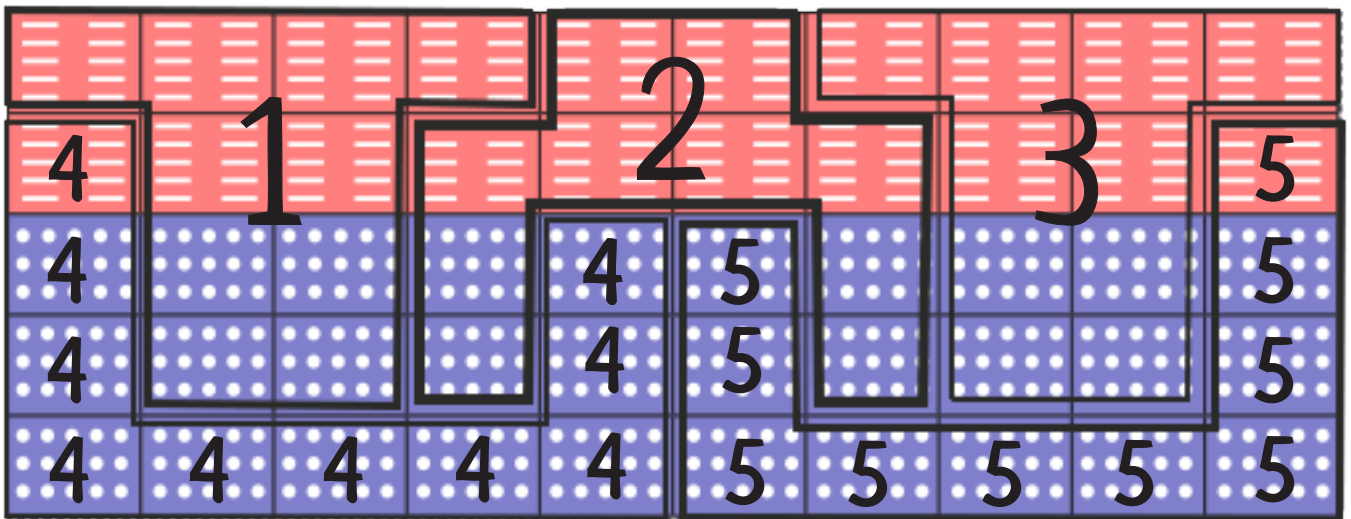
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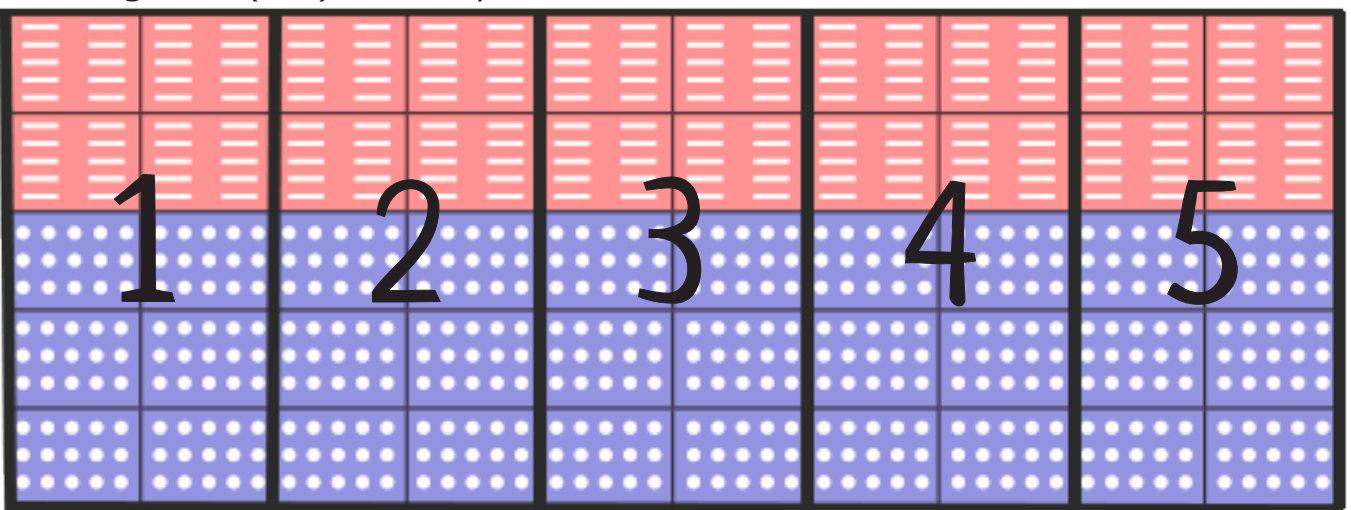
# Redistricting



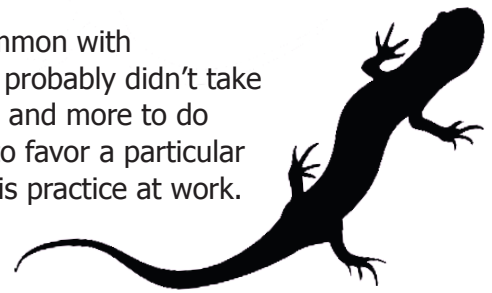
**Packing** - Red (lines) wins



**Cracking** - Blue (dots) wins every district

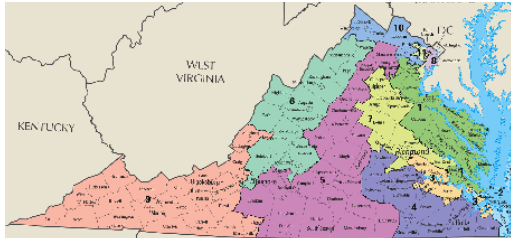


If you're wondering what the House of Representatives has in common with salamanders, save the guess about spirit animals. (Your legislator probably didn't take that quiz.) The answer has less to do with magical animal wisdom and more to do with voting and districts. When congressional districts are drawn to favor a particular political party, it's called **gerrymandering**. Let's take a look at this practice at work.



**The District Factor**

How many representatives does your state send to the House? 53? 18? 1? (States with just one representative don't worry about gerrymandering, and you'll see why.) If you're in Virginia, you send 11. But a single Virginian doesn't cast a vote for each of those members.



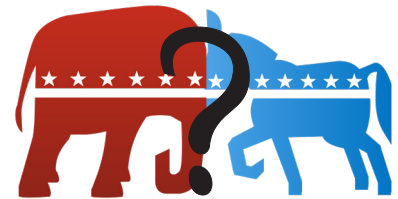
*Virginia's Congressional Districts  
113th Congress (January 2013–January 2015)  
Source: nationalatlas.gov*

In states with more than one representative, representatives are elected in single member districts. Each state is sectioned into districts with equal populations. Capturing the same amount of people in every district makes sure that densely packed urban areas have the same amount of voting power as rural areas with lots of land and fewer people—this is what it means to have **one-person, one-vote**. Everyone's vote is supposed to count equally. We elect one representative per district. Each representative serves roughly 700,000 people.

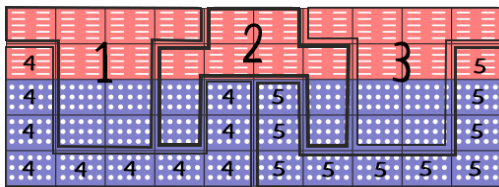
**It's in the Bag!**

So where do we mark the boundary lines for these equally populated districts? Good question. Here's another: Which political party would you want to win the majority of your state's House seats? In a state whose districts have been gerrymandered, state legislatures draw congressional districts in a way that gives one political party an advantage over the other. How do they do this? By **"packing"** voters who tend to vote one way into just a few of the state's districts. This decreases the chance of those voters changing the outcome of elections in several districts. They can also draw maps that crack districts. **"Cracking"** involves dividing like voters across multiple districts until they're

Which party gets the advantage?



*Usually, the one that's controlling the legislative branch at the time of the U.S. Census. That's because in most states, state legislatures draw and approve district lines.*



*Packing blue (dots) voters across Districts 4 & 5 ensures a red (lines) victory.*

outnumbered by a majority of voters who will vote the opposite way. The results: illogically drawn districts at times resembling the shape of a salamander, a sea horse, or a fire-breathing dragon. When it comes to party affiliation, these gerrymandered districts can create **safe seats**—districts that tend to always elect a Republican or a Democrat no matter who that candidate is.

**What's the Big Deal?**

In a gerrymandered district everyone's vote isn't really being counted as equally as others because that district has been predesigned for the majority to outweigh the minority. You're probably wondering if gerrymandering is okay. How could this manipulation go unchecked? Why doesn't Congress do something? If you owed your seat and your party's political control over the budget and legislative agenda to gerrymandering, would you be so eager to write a bill against it? Remember, you'll probably lose next year's election if you do. People like to win. And let's face it: It can be hard to get someone to give up even a little bit of power. Proving partisan gerrymandering in court can be difficult. To date, the Supreme Court has not ruled the practice unconstitutional.

**The Media’s Role**

If the media didn’t cover stories like gerrymandering, would the public even know what gerrymandering is? Well, yes. It’s not like the media is the *only* source of information. Some people do an excellent job of looking into issues for themselves and staying informed. But the greater public is much more likely to know about an issue if (and when) it’s receiving media attention.



**Gate Keeper**

For most of us, paying attention to the media is how we stay informed about what’s going on in the government and in the world around us. But as a citizen, it’s important for you to realize that there are many serious events and issues you will never hear about on the news. That’s because the media plays a role when it comes to public influence. In its role as **gatekeeper**, the media decides which stories and issues are important enough to receive public attention—and which aren’t. An hour long news broadcast can’t cover every issue that there is. And a limited staff running a news website can’t either. Each news outlet has its own criteria for deciding which stories get through the gate and into the public eye. And for the most part, those decisions are based in some way on *business* (views and revenue) and *bias* (opening the gate for some stories instead of others).



**Agenda Setter**

Because of its role as gatekeeper, the media is largely responsible for deciding what society discusses in the public sphere. That means the media also determines which issues are on the *public agenda*, which is the to-do list of issues the public agrees are a priority. An issue won’t get on the public agenda unless it is being discussed in the public sphere, and it won’t be discussed in the public sphere if nobody has heard about it. If you’re noticing that your friends and family all seem to be talking about and weighing in on the same issue lately, it’s probably because it’s receiving a good amount of media attention.

**Watchdog**

As a **watchdog**, the media helps us hold our government and those in power accountable. By placing stories in front of us that expose and alert us to wrongdoing, misconduct, or inequity, the media keeps us informed when something is happening that shouldn’t. Scandal. (*Gasp!*) Corruption. (*You’re Kidding.*) Injustice. (*What?!*) If it’s happening, the media will be reporting.

In fact, the term gerrymander owes its name not just to the Massachusetts governor, Elbridge Gerry, who signed the bill allowing the strategically drawn districts to go into effect, but also to the *Boston Gazette*. In 1812, the paper published a story with a drawing that made the district map look like a winged, mythical creature. The story was satire, which means it used humor and sarcasm to poke fun at what Governor Gerry had allowed. But entertainment aside, the story also informed the public about how the new district boundaries purposefully gave Gerry’s political party a clear electoral advantage.



*"The Gerry-mander: a New Species of Monster" Boston Gazette, March 26, 1812 Source: Library of Congress*

