

## Gerrymandered Districts versus Democracy

Here's an issue no established politician wants to talk about: redistricting, commonly known as gerrymandering. The reason is simple: job security. You see, it's easier for them to choose their voters than to risk letting the voters choose them—good for them, terrible for our democracy.

If you have asked the question, "Why have our politics become so angry and bitterly partisan?" this is a significant part of your answer. According to the Cooke Political Report, out of 435 seats in the House of Representatives, only 22 are considered "toss-up," i.e. either party could reasonably be expected to win; just two of those are in Texas.

Gerrymandering has been around since the earliest days of the republic. The difference now is that incumbents, who of course draw the districts, have computer-designed algorithms to ensure their victory. Wouldn't you like to choose your boss?

What this means for our democracy is that the only competition in most districts comes from either the far right or the far left. If all viable candidates in a particular district are from the same party, the extremists in that party call the shots. If a representative is too compromising, they can bring them back in line simply by threatening to "primary" them. (The fact that this noun has become a verb should tell you something.) As a result, it becomes more advantageous than ever before to demonize the other side and less necessary to offer actual plans for improvement. Moderates don't have a chance, even though most Americans still identify their own politics as "moderate."

Gerrymandering also narrows the range of discussion about every issue. In almost all districts, the dominant party has taken a firm party stand on every issue, and those who deviate are not just misguided--they are evil. The assumption is so strong that candidates from the rival party can't win that they can't get money or volunteers to launch serious challenges or even discuss pressing issues from another perspective. Problems we should be able to debate on a reasonable basis—education, health care, jobs, the environment, crime, immigration, guns, internet accessibility, college affordability, and now even a deadly virus—have become partisan battlefields. We all agree that we want to live in a healthy, economically booming, educated, safe, unpolluted, connected society, but we can no longer engage one another civilly about how to achieve our common goals.

Not only that, on a national scale, voters in red districts hate those in blue districts and vice versa, so our country becomes more and more divided.

Our fellow Americans have become the enemy, making violent encounters increasingly likely.

If only we could force politicians to come out from behind their computer screens and discuss this, we could solve the problem. The same computers that draw "secure" districts could draw competitive ones, and a politically independent commission could finalize borders. Some states have already adopted this method. I can't imagine how politicians could defend the status quo if they actually had to discuss it. Just ask your representative to explain this and see what happens. We claim to value competition in every other arena; why not in our politics?