

LESSON PLAN – What Is Gerrymandering?

Subject: What is Gerrymandering?

Grade Level: 6-8

Standards:

USG.2.4 Explain the history and provide examples of foundational ideas of American government embedded in the Founding-Era documents such as: natural rights philosophy, social contract, popular sovereignty, constitutionalism, representative democracy, political factions, federalism, and individual rights.

USG.2.8 Explain the history and provide historical and contemporary examples of fundamental principles and values of American political and civic life, including liberty, security, the common good, justice, equality, law and order, rights of individuals, diversity, popular sovereignty, and representative democracy.

USG.3.7 Explain the relationships among branches of the United States government and Indiana government, which involve separation and sharing of powers as a means to limited government.

USG.3.13 Explain the electoral process in terms of election laws and election systems on the national, state, and local level.

USG.3.15 Examine the progression of political parties and their ideologies and the broad political spectrum in the American governmental system and analyze their functions in elections and government at national, state, and local levels of the federal system.

USG.5.7 Explain how citizens in the United States participate in public elections as voters and supporters of candidates for public office.

Materials Needed:

Students will need access to:

A computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone

Paper and pen/pencil

Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to define gerrymandering.
- Students will be able to explain how gerrymandering may impact votes.
- Students will be able to name two states that do not use gerrymandering.
- Students will be able to name two states that do use gerrymandering.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

We have been learning about how elections occur, equal rights, and disenfranchisement. Another component of this is gerrymandering. It is an unusual word. What does it mean?

Definition of Gerrymandering according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary:

“The practice of dividing or arranging a territorial unit into election districts in a way that gives one political party an unfair advantage in elections.”

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gerrymandering>

Let’s learn more about how this practice started and why it continues.

Body of Lesson:

Watch the following video done by Dr. Terri Jett from Butler University.

Simple Civics video on What is Gerrymandering?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voo3Pyp4Nnc>

How did gerrymandering start?

When the United States was first formed, the voting districts usually followed the county lines. In 1812, this changed.

Elbridge Gerry was one of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence. He was then elected governor of Massachusetts in 1810. He did not like the competition that the other political party was giving him and his party. He signed a new law into effect that changed the borders of the voting districts to favor his party. The new districts had very unusual shapes. This of course angered the other party.

How does gerrymandering work?

There are several ways to divide voting districts to benefit one group or another. The two most common ways are known as *cracking* and *packing*.

LESSON PLAN – What Is Gerrymandering?

Cracking splits groups of people who are similar (so splitting people who lean toward one political party) and puts them in multiple different districts. This divides and weakens their voting strength.

Packing does just the opposite. When packing is used, people look at the maps of voters and which political party they prefer. These people are all put into one district. This makes it easier for them to elect the person from their preferred political party.

Gerrymandering often results in decreasing the political power of some, while increasing the political power of others. Minority groups are often negatively affected by this practice. This also makes some people feel that their vote does not count.

In 2019 the Supreme Court made a decision that the use of gerrymandering is something that each state should decide. As a result, we have a variety of practices used by states. States must redraw the voting district lines every ten years after the census is complete. Ideally, the states should follow the principle of One Person = One Vote. Gerrymandering can diminish this.

How are states drawing voting districts?

Some states use independent commissions to draw the new voting districts. These commissions do not prefer any political party. Hawaii, California, Washington, Idaho, Arizona, and New Jersey use this method.

Iowa prohibits the drawing of irregularly shaped districts. Iowa also prohibits drawing a district that splits up a community. This is a non-partisan approach.

Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alaska, Delaware, and Vermont do not redraw the districts. They have small populations and have only one district in the state.

Colorado, Missouri, and Michigan are trying to pass laws that will use a non-partisan approach to the drawing of voting districts. They have not yet been successful in getting these laws passed.

All other states use gerrymandering to draw districts. There are some very unusual looking districts. The link to the map below shows the Indiana State House Districts as of 2021.

Indiana State House Districts 2021

<https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/INDIANA-STATE-HOUSE-2021-BIRD2.pdf>

LESSON PLAN – What Is Gerrymandering?

The map in the link below shows the Federal Congressional districts for the 2020 election.

<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/map>

Class activities

If class is in person, randomly assign students to a fake political party (the purple party, the yellow party). Have students move around the room to show the two types of gerrymandering (cracking and packing). When students are in a group, have them vote on a topic (perhaps “should lunch break be longer” or something equally non-threatening). Then have them move to a different district set up and vote again to see if the gerrymandering impacted the results of the vote.

Class discussion:

Have the class answer the following questions in group discussions, in a paper to submit, or in small groups.

1. Does gerrymandering reflect the ideals of the Constitution of the United States? Why or why not?
2. Should gerrymandering be legal?
3. How would you divide the state into voting districts? Why did you make this selection?

Summary/Closure

Gerrymandering is used by both major political parties, and it is used in most of the states in our country. Some states have moved away from this practice and use independent commissions to draw election districts. The Supreme Court determined that each state should make their own laws about election districts.

Extension Activities

For more information on the history of gerrymandering, use this link to *How Gerrymandering Began in the US* by History.com.

<https://www.history.com/news/gerrymandering-origins-voting>

For a more detailed explanation of gerrymandering, the Brennan Center for Justice website is a reliable source.

Gerrymandering Explained

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/gerrymandering-explained>

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