

WHY REDISTRICTING MATTERS

Members of Congress, state legislators, and many city council and school board members are elected from districts. At least once per decade, the district lines are redrawn, block by block.

The way that district lines are drawn **puts voters together in groups** — some voters are kept together in one district and others are separated into different districts. And in our system, whichever group has more votes within a district usually decides which representative wins.

For example, a district composed mostly of farmers is likely to elect a representative who will fight for farmers' interests, but a district composed mostly of city dwellers may elect a representative with different priorities. Similarly, districts drawn with large populations of the same race, or language, or political party are more likely to elect representatives with the same characteristics.

The way the lines are drawn can **keep a community together or split it apart**, changing whether it has representatives who feel responsible for its concerns. The way the lines are drawn can **impact who wins** an election. Ultimately, the way the lines are drawn can change who controls the governing body, and can **change which policies get passed into law**.

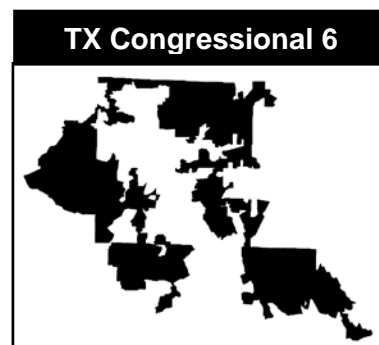
This can lead to serious problems:

- **Letting Politicians Choose Their Voters.** Under California's old redistricting system, after the 2000 census, Republicans and Democrats effectively decided to **keep the incumbents of both parties safe** from effective challenges.

Many incumbents each paid a consultant at least \$20,000 to have their districts custom-designed, with enough friendly voters to make it extremely likely that they would win the election. As one member of Congress explained: "Twenty thousand is nothing to keep your seat. I spend \$2 million (campaigning) every year. If my colleagues are smart, they'll pay their \$20,000, and [our consultant] will draw the district they can win in. Those who have refused to pay? God help them."¹ In the next election, **every single incumbent**, Republican and Democrat, won by more than 20% ... except for the one who won by 19%.

- **Packing Partisans.** In 1991, Texas Democrats crammed loyal Texan Republican voters into a district that spanned hundreds of miles, taking small slivers of land from five counties. By **packing pockets of Republican voters** into districts like the one on the right, Democrats could give themselves a better chance in the districts next door.

In 1992, Republicans and Democrats each won about 49% of Texas' statewide vote ... but under the Democratic redistricting plan, Democrats won 70% of the state's Congressional races.



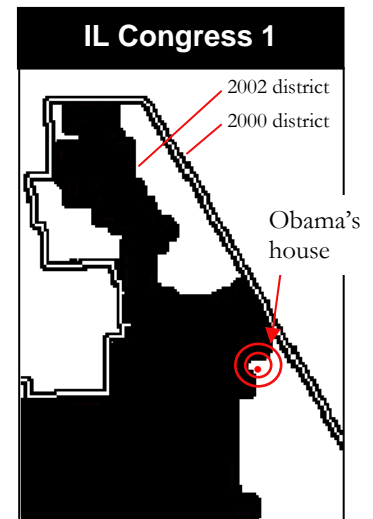
¹ H. Quach & D. Bunis, *All Bow to Redistrict Architect*, Orange County Register, Aug. 26, 2001, at A1.

- **Eliminating Incumbents.** After the 2000 elections in Virginia, the Republicans who controlled the redistricting process targeted Richard Cranwell, the leader of the Democrats in the state house, who had represented his constituents for 29 years. They **surgically carved his house out of the district he had represented**, and drew it into the district of his 22-year colleague, Democrat Chip Woodrum. Woodrum’s district looked like it had a tiny grasping hand reaching out to grab Cranwell’s home.

Rather than run against the hometown favorite in an unfamiliar district, Cranwell decided not to run for reelection.

- **Eliminating Challengers.** In the 2000 primary for an Illinois congressional seat, state Senator Barack Obama threw together a hasty campaign against a sympathetic incumbent, and won more than 30% of the vote. Though Obama lost, his campaign set the stage for a stronger showing in a potential rematch.

When Illinois redrew its districts, the state legislators deferred to incumbent members of Congress, including the incumbent whom Obama challenged. When the redistricting was done, **the block around Obama’s house was carved out of the district.**



- **Diluting Minority Votes.** After Democrats controlled Texas redistricting in the 1990s, Republicans took charge in 2003. The redistricting battles were so fierce that Democratic legislators actually fled to Oklahoma and New Mexico in an attempt to prevent the legislature from meeting to draw lines.

Part of the resulting plan attempted to protect an incumbent who had lost the support of most of his Latino constituents. Latinos had recently become the majority of the eligible population in the district, and would have been able to control the next election. The legislature drew lines to move about 100,000 Latino voters out of the district, replacing them with voters more likely to support the incumbent. As the Supreme Court put it, **“the State took away the Latinos’ opportunity because Latinos were about to exercise it.”**²

- **Splitting Communities.** In 1992, race riots in Los Angeles took a heavy financial toll on businesses in many neighborhoods, including the area known as Koreatown. When residents of Koreatown appealed to their elected representatives for assistance with the cleanup and recovery effort, however, each of their purported representatives claimed that the area was really a part of some other official’s district.

The redistricting map, it turned out, **fractured Koreatown – an area of barely over one square mile – into four City Council districts and five state Assembly districts.** As a result, no legislator felt responsible to the Asian-American community.

² *League of United Latin American Citizens v. Perry*, 548 U.S. 399, 440 (2006).