

Understanding Gerrymandering in Electoral Politics: A Normative Approach



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Abstract: *This study delves into the historical origins and pervasive nature of gerrymandering in electoral politics. Gerrymandering involves various tactics such as 'packing' and 'cracking,' disproportionately favoring one party while minimizing opposition representation. The concentration of redistricting control within state legislatures raises concerns about fair representation and potential long-term political dominance. Technological advancements have increased the precision of gerrymandering, amplifying concerns about abuse. Incumbent politicians exploit gerrymandering to secure 'safe' seats, impacting election competitiveness and democratic representation. Factors like race and ethnicity further complicate gerrymandering, prompting legal scrutiny and efforts to establish safeguards. The absence of independent oversight and legal ambiguities exacerbate the issue, necessitating advocacy for explicit guidelines. Gerrymandering's impact on voter confidence, competitiveness, and minority representation underscores its threat to democratic principles. Addressing gerrymandering is imperative for sustaining public trust, upholding electoral integrity, and revitalizing the competitive nature of elections.*

Keywords: Gerrymandering, Origin of Gerrymandering, Factors of Gerrymandering, Effects of Gerrymandering, Electoral Politics.

1. Introduction

The origin of the term "gerrymander" can be traced back to 1812 when Elbridge Gerry, then the governor of Massachusetts, approved the creation of a state senate district with a shape so peculiar that it caught the attention of critics. To convey their disapproval of the district's contorted boundaries, combining the governor's name with the word "salamander" seemed fitting. This inventive terminology encapsulated both the disapproval of the political maneuvering by Governor Gerry and the perceived resemblance of the district to a salamander. Thus, the term "gerrymander"

entered the political lexicon, capturing the essence of manipulating electoral districts for political advantage, a practice that would persist throughout American political history (Goudreault, 2009).

Gerrymandering is the manipulation of electoral district boundaries for political advantage. This practice involves drawing the boundaries of electoral districts in a way that disproportionately benefits a particular political party or group. The goal is often to maximize the representation of one's own party while minimizing the representation of opposing parties. Gerrymandering can take various forms,

such as "packing" voters of a certain political persuasion into a few districts to concentrate their influence or "cracking" a cohesive voting bloc to disperse its influence across multiple districts. The term "gerrymandering" is a portmanteau of the name Elbridge Gerry, a U.S. politician, and "salamander" due to the distorted shape of an electoral district he approved in 1812 during his tenure as governor of Massachusetts. Gerrymandering can undermine the principles of fairness and equal representation in democratic elections. Efforts to address gerrymandering often involve reforms to ensure a more impartial and transparent redistricting process (Grofman, 2004)

2. CAUSES OF GERRYMANDERING

Gerrymandering arises from a combination of political, legal, and demographic factors. Here are some of the key causes:

2.1 Partisan politics:

Partisan politics plays a central role in the genesis of gerrymandering, as political parties strive to secure and perpetuate a strategic edge in electoral contests. The party in power, typically holding the responsibility for redrawing district boundaries, employs gerrymandering as a tactical tool to manipulate the electoral landscape in its favor. This strategic advantage is pursued by concentrating the voters aligned with the opposition into a limited number of districts, a practice known as "packing," while dispersing the party's own supporters across multiple districts, referred to as "cracking." The underlying motive is to create a political map that maximizes the party's representation and minimizes the electoral prospects of rival parties. This practice not only distorts the principle of fair representation but also underscores the complex interplay between politics, power dynamics, and the shaping of electoral landscapes in a democratic system (Grofman, 2004)

2.2 Redistricting Process Control

The issue of gerrymandering is often compounded by the concentration of control over the redistricting process within state legislatures. The responsibility for redrawing

electoral district boundaries primarily rests with these legislative bodies, and when one political party gains substantial influence within the legislature or secures control of the governor's office, it is presented with a tempting opportunity to shape districts in a manner that favors its candidates. This concentrated control enables the party in power to wield considerable influence over the electoral landscape, potentially distorting the democratic principle of fair representation. The extent to which political power is concentrated in a single party's hands can significantly impact the impartiality of the redistricting process, leading to concerns about the manipulation of boundaries to maximize partisan advantage and secure long-term political dominance. Efforts to address this issue often involve calls for more transparent, impartial, and inclusive redistricting processes to mitigate the impact of partisan control on electoral fairness.

2.3 Census Data and Technology

The nexus of gerrymandering and technological advancements is evident in the utilization of sophisticated mapping tools and detailed census data during the redistricting process. The accessibility of advanced technology has provided those tasked with redrawing electoral boundaries unprecedented tools to engage in precise and effective gerrymandering. With the aid of cutting-edge mapping software, political parties can analyze voter demographics and voting patterns with a remarkable level of accuracy. This granular understanding allows them to strategically manipulate district lines to concentrate or disperse voter blocs, thereby influencing electoral outcomes. The intersection of census data and technology has not only heightened the precision of gerrymandering but has also amplified concerns about the potential abuse of this capability, emphasizing the need for regulatory measures and safeguards to ensure a fair and equitable redistricting process.

2.4 Safe Seats and Incumbency Protection

The phenomenon of gerrymandering intersects with the political strategy of creating "safe" seats, particularly as a means of protecting incumbent politicians from electoral challenges.

Incumbents, irrespective of party affiliation, frequently engage in the practice of influencing district boundaries to ensure a clear advantage for their party within a specific constituency. This approach, known as gerrymandering, is employed by both major political parties to safeguard the reelection prospects of incumbents by manipulating the demographic composition of districts. By crafting districts that overwhelmingly favor their party, politicians aim to reduce the risk of facing competitive elections, thus fortifying their incumbency. This practice has implications not only for the competitive nature of elections but also for the overall health of democratic representation, as it can contribute to the entrenchment of political power and limit the diversity of voices within legislative bodies. Efforts to address this issue often involve advocating for redistricting reforms that prioritize fairness, competitiveness, and a more representative democratic process (Bekaert, 2020).

2.5 Racial and Ethnic Considerations

Gerrymandering, at times, intersects with considerations of race and ethnicity, introducing a troubling dimension to the manipulation of electoral district boundaries. In certain instances, political actors engage in the practice of gerrymandering by either concentrating minority voters into a small number of districts, a tactic known as "packing," or dispersing them across multiple districts, termed as "cracking." The objective of such maneuvers is to influence the political power and representation of racial and ethnic minorities. By packing minority voters into a few districts, the impact of their collective vote may be confined to a limited number of representatives, potentially limiting their overall influence. Conversely, cracking seeks to dilute the voting strength of minority communities by dispersing them across various districts, making it challenging for them to elect candidates of their choice. This form of gerrymandering raises significant concerns about the potential infringement on the voting rights of minority populations and has prompted legal scrutiny and efforts to establish safeguards against discriminatory redistricting practices (Justice, 2023).

2.6 Lack of Independent Redistricting

The absence of independent oversight in the redistricting process poses a substantial risk of gerrymandering, as it places the responsibility solely in the hands of elected officials. Without external checks and balances, there is a heightened potential for self-interested politicians to manipulate district boundaries to their advantage, free from accountability. When the very individuals who stand to benefit from gerrymandering are entrusted with drawing electoral maps, the temptation to shape districts in ways that favor their party or personal interests becomes more pronounced. Independent redistricting commissions or other mechanisms outside the direct control of partisan actors are often advocated as remedies to mitigate this risk. Such independent oversight is seen as crucial not only for ensuring fairness in representation but also for upholding the fundamental principles of democracy by safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process from undue manipulation and partisan influence (Gans, 2020).

2.7 Political Polarization

The rise in political polarization has emerged as a contributing factor to the prevalence of gerrymandering, as political parties seek to solidify their ideological strongholds through strategic manipulation of electoral districts. In the face of heightened ideological divisions, parties may be inclined to draw district boundaries that favor extreme positions to secure unwavering support from their voter base, especially in primary elections. This deliberate effort to create districts with a homogeneous political leaning can result in representatives who are more ideologically extreme, further exacerbating political polarization within legislative bodies. The pursuit of safe seats aligned with specific ideologies becomes a priority, reinforcing the challenges of fostering compromise and bipartisan cooperation. As a consequence, addressing gerrymandering in the context of political polarization is not only crucial for promoting fair representation but also for mitigating the broader impact of deepening political divisions on the functioning of

democratic institutions (Justice B. C., 2020).

2.8 Legal Ambiguities

The persistence of gerrymandering is often exacerbated by legal ambiguities surrounding its evaluation, as the absence of clear and consistent standards creates challenges in holding redistricting practices accountable. Courts, tasked with overseeing the constitutionality of district maps, have grappled with the complex task of defining definitive criteria for when political considerations in redistricting cross constitutional boundaries. The lack of a universally accepted legal framework has allowed for a degree of subjectivity and variation in judicial decisions, making it difficult to establish a standardized approach to combat gerrymandering. This legal uncertainty has, in turn, provided room for partisan actors to exploit loopholes or engage in strategic manipulation without clear repercussions. The ongoing efforts to address gerrymandering often involve advocacy for more explicit legal guidelines and precedents to ensure a fair and transparent redistricting process that aligns with the principles of representative democracy (Wasserman, 2020).

Efforts to address gerrymandering often involve reforms to the redistricting process, such as the establishment of independent redistricting commissions, transparency requirements, and adherence to principles like compactness and contiguity. These measures aim to reduce the impact of partisan interests and promote fair and representative electoral districts (Wasserman, 2020).

3. CONSEQUENCES OF GERRYMANDERING

Gerrymandering is a practice that favors one political party over another by manipulating district boundaries. This results in an uneven distribution of seats, undermining democratic principles. It also undermines voter confidence and reduces competitiveness, particularly for minority representation. Legal challenges arise when gerrymandering violates constitutional principles. In the long term, gerrymandering can lead to one-party rule in certain regions, necessitating reforms prioritizing transparency,

fairness, and equitable representation. Here are some of the key consequences of gerrymandering (Engler, 2018).

3.1 Distorted Representation

Gerrymandering engenders distorted representation, primarily through the pursuit of partisan advantage. This practice can result in an uneven distribution of seats, disproportionately favoring one political party over another. The strategic manipulation of district boundaries allows the party in power to concentrate opposition voters in a few specific districts, a tactic known as "packing." Simultaneously, the party can disperse its own supporters across multiple districts, termed as "cracking." This deliberate shaping of electoral maps aims to secure a favorable outcome by maximizing the representation of the gerrymandering party while minimizing the impact of the opposing party. The consequence is a political landscape where the composition of legislative bodies does not accurately reflect the overall preferences of the electorate, undermining the fundamental democratic principle of fair and equitable representation for all citizens. Efforts to address this issue involve advocating for reforms that prioritize transparency, impartiality, and adherence to democratic principles in the redistricting process (Engler, 2018).

3.2 Decreased Voter Confidence

Gerrymandering has profound implications for voter confidence, as the perceived unfairness resulting from the manipulation of electoral boundaries can significantly undermine trust in the democratic process. When voters come to believe that the electoral system is skewed to favor a particular party through gerrymandering, it creates a sense of disenchantment and skepticism. Citizens may feel that their votes have been devalued or that the outcomes of elections are predetermined, eroding the foundational principles of a representative democracy. The decline in voter confidence can manifest in reduced civic engagement, lower voter turnout, and a general disillusionment with the political system. To maintain a robust and healthy democratic society, addressing gerrymandering is not only crucial for ensuring

fair representation but also for upholding the integrity of the electoral process and sustaining public trust in the democratic institutions that govern it. Efforts to combat gerrymandering often involve advocating for reforms that promote transparency, fairness, and the genuine representation of citizens' diverse voices (Aslam, 2017).

3.3 Reduced Competitiveness

Gerrymandering's impact extends to the realm of electoral competitiveness, notably through the creation of so-called "safe seats." When district boundaries are manipulated to favor incumbents, political parties can establish electoral strongholds where their candidates face minimal challenges. This lack of competitiveness has several implications, fostering a sense of complacency among elected officials who may feel secure in their positions. The reduced incentive to address constituents' concerns stems from the diminished threat of electoral turnover. In safe seats, where the outcome is essentially predetermined, elected officials may be less motivated to actively engage with their constituents, respond to diverse needs, or work towards bipartisan solutions. This dynamic not only stifles political competition but also undermines the core tenets of representative democracy by limiting the responsiveness of elected officials to the varied perspectives within their constituencies. Addressing gerrymandering is thus crucial not only for promoting fairness but also for revitalizing the competitive nature of elections, ensuring a more dynamic and responsive political landscape (Abbas, 2019).

3.4 Policy Extremism

Gerrymandering introduces a concerning dynamic in the realm of policy development by fostering an incentive for extremism. In districts shaped by gerrymandering, candidates often face a more imminent threat from primary challenges within their own party than from competitors in the general election. This heightened vulnerability to internal party dynamics can encourage candidates to adopt more extreme policy positions to appeal to the ideological base of their party, believing that a

moderate stance might expose them to greater risks in party primaries. Consequently, this incentivization of extreme positions contributes to the broader issue of political polarization. Candidates, driven by the need to secure party nominations, may eschew moderate, compromise-oriented policies, contributing to the overall polarization of political discourse. Addressing gerrymandering is therefore not only crucial for ensuring fair representation but also for fostering a political environment that encourages candidates to adopt positions reflective of a diverse range of constituents, promoting compromise and moderation in policymaking (Hamza, 2022).

3.5 Impact on Minority Representation

Gerrymandering has a significant impact on minority representation, particularly affecting racial and ethnic minorities. By strategically redrawing electoral district boundaries, this practice can dilute the political influence of minority communities in several ways. One tactic involves packing minority voters into a limited number of districts, minimizing their overall impact on representation. Conversely, cracking spreads minority voters across multiple districts, making it challenging for them to elect candidates who truly represent their interests. In some instances, gerrymandering has been found to violate the Voting Rights Act, a crucial piece of legislation designed to protect the voting rights of minority populations. By minimizing the impact of minority votes, gerrymandering hinders the election of candidates who would advocate for the concerns and priorities of minority communities. This not only compromises the principles of equal representation but also undermines the democratic ideal of ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their background, have a meaningful voice in the political process. Efforts to address gerrymandering often involve legal challenges to protect minority voting rights and promote fair and inclusive representation (Chawla, 2019).

3.6

Legal and Ethical Issues

Gerrymandering gives rise to significant legal and ethical issues, with legal challenges often arising when it runs afoul of constitutional principles or laws safeguarding minority voting rights. The courts are frequently called upon to adjudicate the constitutionality of district maps, resulting in intricate and protracted legal battles. Gerrymandering that infringes upon the principles of equal representation, such as diluting the voting power of minority communities, may be subject to legal scrutiny. Challenges may revolve around allegations of partisan bias or racial discrimination, especially if the practice violates the Voting Rights Act. The complexity of these legal battles lies in the absence of a standardized legal framework for evaluating gerrymandering, leading to subjective and often contentious determinations. As a result, the legal and ethical dimensions of gerrymandering underscore the need for transparent and impartial redistricting processes that adhere to constitutional principles and protect the democratic rights of all citizens (Klarman, 2012).

3.7 Long-term Effects

The long-term effects of gerrymandering are evident in the entrenchment of partisanship, particularly contributing to the establishment of one-party rule in certain regions. As districts are manipulated to favor one political party over an extended period, the cumulative impact reinforces the dominance of that party, limiting the diversity of political representation. Gerrymandered electoral maps often result in a concentration of safe seats, making it difficult for the opposition to gain a foothold. This lack of political competition can lead to complacency among elected officials, as they operate in an environment where electoral challenges are minimized. The stifling of healthy political competition not only narrows the range of policy perspectives but also undermines the foundational principles of democracy, which thrive on the idea of a vibrant and competitive political landscape. Addressing the long-term consequences of gerrymandering involves advocating for reforms that promote fairness, transparency, and equitable representation to revitalize political diversity and competition

(Wasserman, 2020).

Effectively addressing gerrymandering necessitates a comprehensive approach, typically involving a range of reforms aimed at enhancing the integrity and fairness of the redistricting process. Independent redistricting commissions stand out as a key reform, removing the responsibility from elected officials and placing it in the hands of impartial bodies that prioritize equitable representation. Transparency in the redistricting process is another critical element, ensuring that citizens have access to the decision-making procedures and can scrutinize the development of electoral maps. Moreover, adherence to principles of compactness and contiguity in drawing district boundaries serves to discourage the manipulation of shapes for partisan advantage, promoting geographically logical and community-centered districts. These reforms collectively aim to foster a more fair, competitive, and representative electoral system, where the voice of every voter is heard and the democratic ideals of fairness and equality are upheld (Wasserman, 2020).

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the historical roots of gerrymandering trace back to Governor Elbridge Gerry's controversial district in 1812, and this practice has persisted throughout American political history. Gerrymandering, characterized by the strategic manipulation of electoral boundaries, has far-reaching implications for the democratic process. The tactics of "packing" and "cracking" employed in gerrymandering have been used to concentrate political power, reduce competitiveness, and create long-lasting partisan advantages. The concentration of control over redistricting in state legislatures exacerbates the problem, allowing the party in power to shape districts in its favor, potentially distorting fair representation. Technological advancements have enhanced the precision of gerrymandering, enabling sophisticated mapping tools to analyze voter demographics and voting patterns with great accuracy. This has raised concerns about the potential abuse of this practice and its impact on the competitive nature of elections. The influence of gerrymandering extends beyond

mere partisan advantage, affecting minority representation and raising legal and ethical concerns. By manipulating district boundaries based on factors like race and ethnicity, gerrymandering can undermine the voting rights of minority populations, leading to legal scrutiny and calls for safeguards against discriminatory redistricting practices. The absence of independent oversight in the redistricting process poses a significant risk, allowing self-interested politicians to manipulate boundaries without accountability. Efforts to address gerrymandering often advocate for independent redistricting commissions to mitigate this risk and ensure a fair and transparent process. The entrenchment of partisanship resulting from gerrymandering contributes to the establishment of one-party rule in certain regions, limiting political competition and narrowing the range of policy perspectives. The long-term effects of gerrymandering are evident in the erosion of voter confidence, reduced civic engagement, and a general disillusionment with the political system.

Addressing gerrymandering is crucial for upholding the integrity of the electoral process, sustaining public trust in democratic institutions, and promoting fair and equitable representation for all citizens. Legal reforms, independent oversight, and efforts to counteract the effects of gerrymandering on minority representation are essential steps toward fostering a more dynamic, competitive, and responsive political landscape in line with the principles of democracy.

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