

Historical Perspectives on Gerrymandering

May 16, 2024, at 9:00 a.m. ET
Rayburn House Office Building Room 2060

Key to Party Politics

- Gerrymandering dates to the dawn of the republic, a time when electoral practices (like all political practices) were unstable, unsettled, ever-changing, and varied state to state. The term was coined in 1812, when Jeffersonian Republicans in Massachusetts, the party of Governor Elbridge Gerry, restructured districts to bolster their party in a state that had long leaned Federalist.
- From the beginning, the concept and reality of districts was fluid. There is nothing predetermined about congressional districts; they have been debated in size and shape from the start. In many early elections, districts, as we now define them, played no role at all. The Constitution doesn't specify how states should select their representatives, so states were free to do as they chose. Although Congress could overrule their decisions, it offered little guidance.
- From the 1790s through the 1840s, states varied in how they did or didn't use districts in elections. Some states used a statewide "general ticket," where voters could pick their designated preferred candidates from a candidate list. Others used districts to elect candidates, but this required drawing district lines. Towns or counties didn't divide automatically into equally sized groups of 30,000 residents, the prescribed number of constituents per representative. State governments were left to their own devices to create districts of roughly equal size.
- Member districts, from election to election, followed the tides of party politics; anywhere that districts were in play, gerrymandering soon followed, particularly with the rise of organized party politics. Its use intensified after the Apportionment Act of 1842 that mandated single-member districts. From that point on, gerrymandering became key to electoral politics, flourishing in times of extreme partisanship, and fueling it in the process.
- Fluid, powerful, and blatantly partisan, gerrymandering has long been condemned as corrupt, and for good reason. It stabs at the kind of

faith in free and fair elections that lies at the heart of democratic governance.

Redistricting: A Case Study of Southern Politics

- One-party rule and the politics of race and class
- *Baker v. Carr*
- Gerrymandering in Texas
- Gerrymandering in Georgia
- Redistricting and the minority vote

Redistricting Reform: What It Can and Cannot Do

- Reform will only have limited effects on polarization.
- Reform will not eliminate the influence of politics of districting.
- Reform can diminish gap between the House and public opinion.
- Reform can generate more competition which is healthy for a democracy.
- Reform can create incentives for more civic participation in elections.

Participant Biographies

Joanne B. Freeman, Class of 1954 Professor of History and American Studies at Yale University, specializes in early American politics and political culture. Her focus on political violence and polarization has made her work particularly relevant in recent years. Freeman's award-winning first book, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, studied political combat on the national stage in the founding era. Her most recent book, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War*, explores physically violent clashes in the House and Senate chambers and how they shaped and savaged the nation. She is also the editor of *Alexander Hamilton: Writings* and *The Essential Hamilton* and hosts a weekly webcast, "History Matters." She has published in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The Atlantic*, among others, and is a frequent commentator on MSNBC.

Nancy Beck Young is the John and Rebecca Moores Professor of History at University of Houston, chair of the Department of History, and associate director of the Center for Public History. She is co-director of the Sharing Stories from 1977 project. She has authored five books, including *Two Suns of the Southwest: Lyndon Johnson, Barry Goldwater, and the 1964 Battle between Liberalism and Conservatism*; *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II*; and *Wright Patman: Populism, Liberalism, and the American Dream*. She is currently working on two book projects: a biography of John Nance Garner and a book about the idea of the first lady. She comments on public policy and politics for media outlets such as *NPR* and the *New York Times*.

Julian E. Zelizer is the Malcolm Stevenson Forbes, Class of 1941 Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton University, a CNN Political Analyst, and a regular guest on *NPR's Here and Now*. He is the award-winning author and editor of 25 books. His most recent books are *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A Life of Radical Amazement*, *The Presidency of Donald J. Trump: A First Historical Assessment*, and *Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Lies and Legends About Our Past*, which he co-edited. He is currently working on a book about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the 1964 Democratic Convention. In July 2024, NYU Press will publish his new co-edited book, *Our Nation at Risk: Election Security as a National Security Issue*.

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