

The Downfalls of Gerrymandering

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ABSTRACT

While many in the United States and abroad are aware of the exceedingly harsh climate of US politics, there is a different sort of partisan battle that may impact American voters much more than fiery speeches: the practice of gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is, in a simple sense, the redrawing of state districts to give one party an advantage over another. Though a majority of politicians and news sources alike paint gerrymandering as an issue of partisan politics, few have looked into the impact of such practices on citizens themselves, along with the extent they transcend party lines. In this paper, I reviewed literature from the Brennan Center for Justice, along with PBS News Transcripts and court documents from US and state Supreme courts. In addition, I reviewed state district maps from the partisan state of California, along with research on independent commissions and state action regarding gerrymandering. The findings indicate that, whilst gerrymandering is widespread in swing states, the practice is prevalent in both swing and partisan states. Additionally, independent commissions, despite not having an impact on state partisanship, are still a potential solution to combat gerrymandering due to their potential to increase voter satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1776, America has touted itself as a fair and equal country, as the land of immigrants, the land of the free and the home of the brave. It has won wars, solved global political disputes, and instigated revolutions against autocratic systems. In simpler terms, America's success as a world power isn't simply due to chance, but tangible success and labor over time.

Any learner of history has seen the effects that a government has on a country. Autocracies and monarchies have remained symbols of the past for good reason. In a modern age of equity, equality, and prosperity, it seems that the world has, to some extent, embraced the idea of democracy and justice. We see this not only in what is circulated through society, but through the power invested into citizens by their democracies, and the citizens value in such democratic systems. A 2022 study by the Pew Research Center has shown that 69% of Americans believed that it was very important to vote to be a good member of society.² From an audience perspective, it is abundantly clear that Americans value their right to vote. There are multiple Amendments enacted to protect voter rights, simply because said right is integral to the integrity of a democratic system's ability to properly function. The "one man, one vote" ideal serves as

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proof to the wider American consensus that this right to choose and all the power along with it, is essential in protecting their own well being.

Yet, behind the curtain and the stage, there lies a dark truth about the system Americans hold to such value. Redistricting is a process originally created to protect democracy by changing maps every 10 years, and the National Conference of State Legislatures has defined it as “The redrawing or revision of boundaries for representational districts.”³ Yet, abuse is found in this system of equality as politicians and others in power redraw district lines in order to guaranteeing their own success. This is to the detriment of the people they are meant to serve. This is called gerrymandering.

In this paper, I will discuss the history and ethics of gerrymandering, analyze three case studies based on the districts and level of gerrymandering, and finally come to important conclusions. Does gerrymandering reduce voter representation in government? And how can gerrymandering affect voter trust?

METHODS

In simpler terms, gerrymandering is defined by the Campaign Legal Center as “The manipulation of the mapmaking process for personal gain.”⁴ This definition on its own brings up a plethora of additional questions. Such as what mapmaking has to do with elections, how it works, and why it is generally considered harmful by the media.

I am comparing three different US states in a literature review specifically because there are a multitude of factors that can affect election outputs, such as primary elections or voting restrictions. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the effects of gerrymandering itself and how it is prevalent in these states.

In the United States, states are divided into a certain number of districts. Since the US utilizes the Electoral College to decide Presidential elections, each district counts for one vote in the Electoral College, and the candidate who manages to get at least 270 votes is declared president. In this sense, the American people do not directly vote for their president; someone else does. This makes redistricting a core pillar of the ‘democraticness’ of an election; a gerrymandered district could prove unrepresentative of the people it’s meant to represent, and undermine the citizen’s power to vote along with it.

Every 10 years, these districts are revised and redrawn by the state legislature to account for population growth or loss. Often, legislators choose to redraw maps around specific groups of people, dodging the opposing voters like the plague and turning them into the minority to guarantee success for their party. This is gerrymandering.

This is deeply undemocratic for several reasons. It undermines the rights of opposing voters by turning them into the minority. This result is described by Julia Kirschenbaum and Michael Li for the Brennan Center for Justice as “rather than voters choosing their representatives, gerrymandering empowers

politicians to choose their voters. This tends to occur especially when line drawing is left to legislatures, and one political party controls the process, as has become increasingly common.”⁵

Simply put, gerrymandering ensures that one party will be the victor no matter how hard they try or how well they do. It limits the voting power of voters in the minority, packing them into bubbles where their needs and wants will not be satisfied for the goals and gains of an opposing party. This means that in practice, the system is rigged; the politicians control how the votes are distributed, yet they are the same people who must earn those votes to win the seats in order to rig the system all over again.

There are multiple ways to gerrymander yourself to victory. Malapportionment, the redrawing of districts to vary in population sizes, effectively dilutes the voting power of voters. Partisan and racial Gerrymandering, on the other hand, alienates voters based on race or political views to guarantee victory.

Based on the existing literature presented thus far, it seems that Gerrymandering has served to increase polarization by disenfranchising voters. To dig deeper into this trend, this paper will be looking at two comparative literature review between two swing states, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and the other a case study between the democratically partisan state of California, to test the following hypothesis:

H1: Gerrymandering negatively impacts US voters by reducing citizen representation in government.

In addition, I will conduct a literature review exploring how gerrymandering affects the outcomes of elections to test the following hypothesis:

H2: Independent voting commissions positively impact voter satisfaction and reduce gerrymandering.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Case Study #1: Pennsylvania & Wisconsin

A swing state is a state where the voting populations between Democrats and Republicans are more evenly split. For this reason, the demographics often switch between elections, causing them to “swing” between blue and red.

For this very reason, swing states have become the coveted prize in every election, being fought over by politicians every four years for the extra points that will push them over the finish line. This review will look at how partisan challenges to redistricting occur, and how deeply it can affect voters.

Swing States are especially important to review for this paper because they would (theoretically) be the most vulnerable to gerrymandering due to their important role in deciding nationwide elections. Even changing a few districts in a swing state could swing it to another side, making the voter demographics and district borders a coveted prize in any election.

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The most egregious case of this is the swing state of Pennsylvania, where a group of Democratic voters sued to invalidate the 2011 districting maps due to the unconstitutional nature of the gerrymandering. The judge found that, despite significant statistics proving that partisan politics played a significant role in the redistricting process, “none of these features of the map could be explained as necessitated by the electoral geography and demography of the state, though he suggested the possibility that consideration such as incumbency protection might have mattered.” and that the partisan gerrymandering did not violate the Constitution. In a more basic sense, the judge found evidence of a problem but was unable to find anything in the Pennsylvania Constitution that would prohibit it as 1) gerrymandering is generally hard to identify because it is often based on qualitative analysis, and 2) it is even harder to write into law because gerrymandering is in the interest of partisan majorities in legislative positions of government.

In response, the plaintiffs applied for a stay, but the Pennsylvania Supreme Court denied it. Months later, members of Pennsylvania’s legislature filed a petition for certiorari at the U.S. Supreme Court, appealing the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s decision to adopt a remedial map. On October 29, the Supreme Court denied their petition for certiorari.⁷

Alternatively, the swing state of Wisconsin recently managed to subvert all expectations by managing to pass bipartisan redistricting maps in 2024. According to a PBS News Transcript, severe gerrymandering had ensured that the state’s majority representatives were all Republicans, despite the state being won by the Democrat Barack Obama in the 2012 Presidential Election. “President Obama carried the state for a second time, and the party won 174,000 more votes for the state assembly than Republicans. But that didn't mean Democrats got control of the state assembly. Republicans wound up with 60 of the 99 seats, some 61 percent of the seats, after winning only 49 percent of the votes.”⁸

There have been multiple attempts to subvert partisan gerrymandering in Wisconsin. One notable effort was by William Willford, who sued the Wisconsin Legislature to prevent unfairly gerrymandered district maps from being put into legislation. The case eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled against the Wisconsin Democrats for their lack of a stake in the case. In the majority opinion of the court, Chief Justice Roberts said, “Certain of the plaintiffs before us alleged that they had such a personal stake in this case, but never followed up with the requisite proof. The District Court and this Court, therefore, lack the power to resolve their claims. We vacate the judgment and remand the case for further proceedings, in the course of which those plaintiffs may attempt to demonstrate standing in accord with the analysis in this opinion.”⁹

In the majority opinion, the court did determine some level of ruling about the level of gerrymandering: “A redistricting map violates the First Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment if it (1) is intended to place a severe impediment on the effectiveness of the votes of individual citizens based on their political affiliation, (2) has that effect, and (3) cannot be justified on other, legitimate legislative grounds” and that “asymmetry alone is not a reliable measure of unconstitutional partisanship.” Roberts cited multiple other Supreme Court Cases, referencing the fact that the Plaintiffs had not adequately provided concrete evidence and that the plaintiffs had come to the court with a case of political interests instead of showing how the gerrymandering of Wisconsin

Republicans had infringed on their rights, stating, “this Court is not responsible for vindicating generalized partisan preferences. The Court’s constitutionally prescribed role is to vindicate the individual rights of the people appearing before it.” (Roberts, 21)] . Despite this motion, the court did not dismiss the case and referred it back to the District Court to allow the plaintiffs to “prove concrete and particularized injuries using evidence—unlike the bulk of the evidence presented thus far—that would tend to demonstrate a burden on their individual votes.”

Go back to 2011, and it becomes apparent how deeply this decision hurt Wisconsin Democrats. According to “The Gerrymander Has Been Slayed: Wisconsinites Get Fair Maps for 2024 Election” by Adam Ginsberg for the Campaign Legal Center, “Back in 2011, Wisconsin Republican lawmakers signed secrecy agreements and drew new district lines behind closed doors to ensure one-party control of the Legislature.”¹⁰ This resulted in years of decision-making in which the Republican majority controlled decisions taken in Congress, whilst the Democrats watched, unable to do anything to change it. Despite being in the minority of % votes, Republicans still controlled the state.

The 2011 map has since been known as one of the most successful instances of partisan gerrymandering, with the case *Gill V. Whitford* being just one of the many examples. Worse, despite Wisconsin requiring that districts cannot have detached pieces, “the Legislature’s maps, over two-thirds of Wisconsinites lived in noncontiguous senate or assembly districts” (Ginsberg), which would violate the constitution. This ultimately would reduce the weight of each Wisconsinite vote, by allowing political figures to place them in specifically drawn districts designed to dilute voting power.

Years later, after *Gill V. Whitford*, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled in *Clarke V. Wisconsin Elections Commission* that the district maps violated the Wisconsin Constitution due to the noncontiguous district maps. Because of this, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers proposed fair districting maps that were passed by the state legislature and signed into law, ending the partisan gerrymandering that had plagued Wisconsinites for years.

Case Study #2: California

The antithesis to the Swing state is a solid blue or red state. In simpler terms, a partisan state is a state that has consistently shown one majority political leaning, and does not typically change political majorities in nationwide presidential elections. Due to these reasons, it is essential to look at a partisan state to look at whether or not gerrymandering can still exist in a partisan state, and whether or not independent commissions can properly mitigate such issues. This example is also being chosen in order to evaluate how partisan states react to gerrymandering overall.

The most well known case of a majority state is the State of California. According to statistics from Ballotpedia, California has voted Democratic 50% of the time since 1900, and 100% of the time since 2000.¹¹ Since study by the Public Policy Institute of California found that 46.2% of California voters are registered Democrats, in stark contrast to a mere 24.7% of Republicans.¹²

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Despite the Democratic majorities and consistent Democratic leaning of the California populace, California has seemingly gained monumental success in terms of voting rights and voter protections. More specifically, California is one of only eight states in the US that has an independent commission to draw district maps. The commission, which was established in 2008, is “a ballot measure to take redistricting power away from the Legislature for State Assembly and Senate districts. In 2010, voters added congressional redistricting to the commission’s duties.”¹³ The members of the commission are selected by three independent members from the state, who choose 40 members who are either Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. The pool is eventually whittled down to 8 (who are chosen randomly) before the final six are chosen from the remaining three pools (2 from each).

To vote on a map, the commission must gain at least 3 votes from each section of the political aisle before the map can be voted into law. This process ensures that all maps are at least somewhat fair and attempts to mediate a range of party interests through non-majoritarian based decisionmaking.

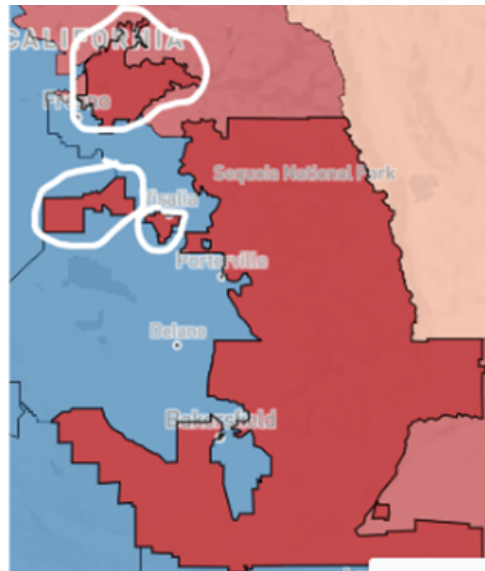


Figure 1: California’s District 13 (dark red) is shown here with detached sections (circled in red) and jagged edges- typical signs of partisan gerrymandering. Image screenshot from The Gerrymandering Project Redistricting Report Card California 2021 Final Commission Congressional - Enacted Accessed 11/30/2024

Despite the measures taken to ensure partisan fairness, the results have not proven as favorable as they seem. One look at California district maps, and it becomes increasingly clear that the commission has not managed to prevent gerrymandering. California has a B grade on the Princeton Gerrymandering Report Card, and to dig deeper, it has an F metric of Competitiveness. Whilst competitiveness on its own is not an indicator of gerrymandering (again, California voters have overwhelmingly chosen Democratic Presidential candidates ever since they voted for George H.W. Bush in the 1988 election, implying that partisan state voter decisions are also determined by political ideology³), the maps show clear signs of gerrymandering. There are detached sections of multiple districts, most notably District 13 (as shown in Figure 1), which has a whopping three detached sections (circled in white). The district has a 36.31% Democrat voter share and a 63.69% Republican voter share¹⁴.

In contrast, the Democratic-majority District 50 (represented by Figure 2) contains similar levels of gerrymandering at levels that could be arguably more severe than District 13. District 50's map shows clear signs of gerrymandering; it has one detached section and a long trail often called 'the tapeworm.' District 50's majority leans largely Democratic, with a Democratic share of 69.9% and a Republican share of 30.1%.

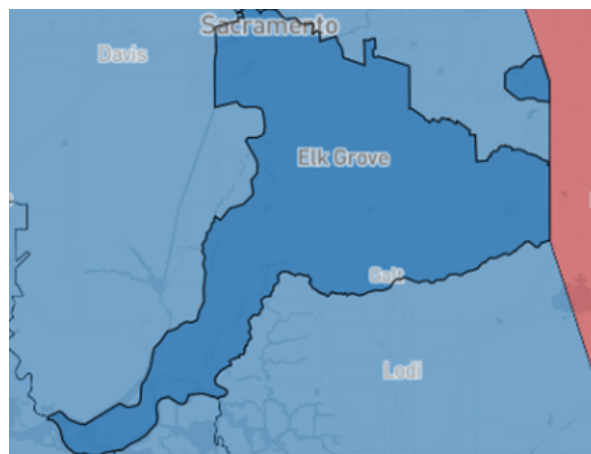


Figure 2: California's District 50 (dark blue) is shown with a 'tapeworm' to the left and a detached section. This district has a significant Democratic majority. Image screenshot from The Gerrymandering Project Redistricting Report Card California 2021 Final Commission Congressional - Enacted Accessed 11/30/2024

Whilst a B grade isn't the worst grade, note that the majority of US States (19/50) had an A grade, 7/50 had a B grade, 4/50 had a C grade, 13/50 had an F grade, and 7/50 had insufficient data and had no grade. In addition, Pennsylvania, one of the most notoriously competitive swing states, also had a B grade. Pennsylvania, one of the few swing states that were major players of the 2024 election, had the same grade as California, which voted overwhelmingly Blue since 1988.

In that sense, if Pennsylvania, a swing state, can have a B grade, then California should similarly take into account the significance of *its* B grade, as it is considered a highly partisan state. In this case, it calls into question the reliability of the matter of what 'partisan' truly means. Is California truly a partisan state, a home for liberals overwhelmingly, or is it simply gerrymandered in a way that makes it appear that way?

In the same sense, if that is true, then it calls into question what other states have been unfairly gerrymandered to produce some sort of partisan result. Whilst partisan states benefit greatly from the individual ideologies of their citizens, it would be an overestimation to suggest that partisan gerrymandering is impossible even in 'safe' states where a majority of citizens swing one way.

The counterfactual scenario here is that, without an independent commission, such powers of districting would be placed in the hands of a state-controlled committee, who's partisan sway could greatly influence the outcomes of district maps. This increased transparency allows for greater accountability if gerrymandering were to actually occur, and prevents the kinds of partisan battles that often occur behind closed doors.

According to a study by the Brennan Center for Justice, "the strength and independence of the selection process was, by far, the most important determinant of a commission's success". In majoritarian redistricting commissions with members chosen by politicians, voters were found to be more distrustful and satisfied¹⁵. This means that the limited success of California's redistricting commission is due to its independence and the satisfaction it gives voters. According to a survey done by the Public Policy Institute of California, around 72% of likely California voters have likened the independent commission as "a good thing", meaning that redistricting commissions, when independent and consensus based, contribute to higher levels of voter satisfaction¹⁶

Overall, whilst ideological partisanship can drive voter decisions in less contested states such as California, they can still result in 'tapeworm' districts and create gerrymandering opportunities. However, independent commissions can mitigate voter trust issues by increasing voter satisfaction and ensuring maps are voted on in ways that encourage bipartisan consensus.

THE DOWNFALLS OF GERRYMANDERING

As stated above, gerrymandering has historically been hard to legally control. In general, gerrymandering is primarily characterized by illogical shapes of districts and detached district sections.

However, if we are to consider gerrymandering illegal or bring it up in legal discussion, it is important to consider its downfalls and discuss why it is an issue.

At first glance, this is a simple question to answer. After all, what answer to this question can't go beyond 'Oh, our votes are being taken away, and it's unconstitutional'?

Yet, that's exactly what prevented the plaintiffs in *Gill V. Whitford* from being successful. The very fact that the plaintiffs in said case had no personal stake, and the case was brought up as a partisan issue. Despite the court finding potential evidence of partisan redistricting, the case was still overruled due to the lack of litigation against the practice. Gerrymandering is an inherently *political* issue with political consequences. In turn, such election related-issues have great consequences towards trust in government.

As stated in the Introduction, the right to vote has been touted as one of the most fundamental rights in the Constitution. There are three amendments, the 15th, the 19th, and the 26th, that protect voters' right to vote. The nation's founders and the generations succeeding them had a deep personal attachment to the idea of personal say because that is what Americans had escaped to cement their rights. Voting is the response the American founders had to the British Monarchy's tyranny.

Indeed, it is arguable to say that gerrymandering is a relatively unknown issue. In the current media, the true meaning of gerrymandering has been obscured; the word comes to mean only three things: that the enemy is doing something illegal, they are doing something unfair, and we must stop them at all costs. Because of this, few people seem to know what gerrymandering is. This, in turn, creates an irony that cannot be overstated; the word gerrymandering now only applies to an opposition that the speaker must vilify.

Since America has been increasingly more polarized over the years, gerrymandering may be another contributing factor to the US's polarization epidemic. A 2014 Pew Study, "Political Polarization in the American Public," showed that a growing number of conservatives and liberals say that "Most of my friends share my political views" (63% Republican, 49% Democrat). Additionally, a growing population of voters on both sides has expressed unfavorable views of the opposing side (79% Democrat, 83% Republican).¹⁷

However, if that is true, then what stops partisan politicians from gerrymandering all they want? Wouldn't it logically become a finger-pointing contest from one party to the next?

According to Rob Richie, Sean Theriault, and Grant Scherer, "Does Gerrymandering Increase Polarization?", "Add in our low rates of representation for women and how racial minorities may lose ground in Congress, and we have a toxic mix of conditions that threaten our republic. It's no wonder that so many disillusioned Americans feel the system is rigged against them."¹⁸

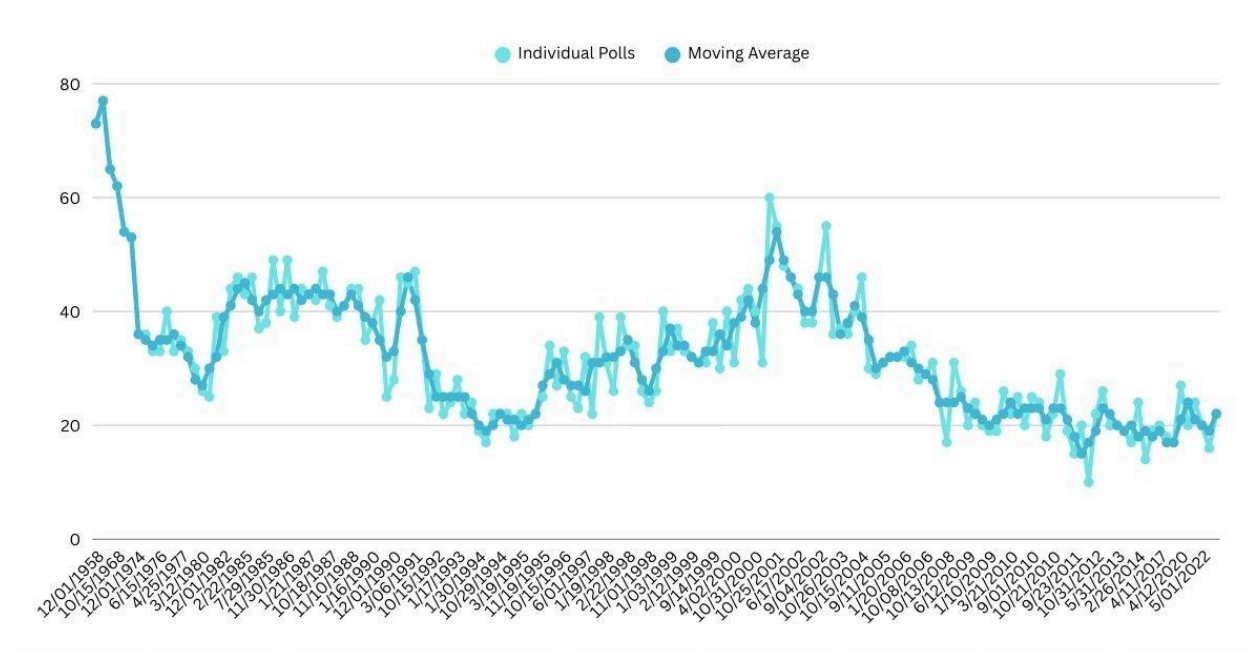


Figure 3: Graph of the level of political trust in the US Government from 1958-2024. Data taken from “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024”, *Pew Research Center*, June 24, 2024, Accessed 11/30/2024

This feeling of being set up to fail is not a new idea amongst the American public. As shown in Figure 3, public trust in the US Government has gone down drastically since the days of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1958, going from a 73% Average trust to 22% in 2024.¹⁹ This is made even worse by a 2024 study by the Partnership for Public Service, which found that a whopping 63% of Americans do not trust the government.²⁰

In this sense, it is understandable why litigation to ban gerrymandering may benefit the American populace. It is also understandable why the lack of voter protection would incentivize them to vote less. A 2023 Pew Study found that out of all three nationwide elections from 2018, 2020, and 2022, only 37% of eligible voters voted in all three, with only 8% voting in 2022.²¹

It is not reasonable to expect Americans to vote for a system they see is unrepresentative of them. It is not reasonable to expect Americans to feel comforted in their right to vote when their vote can lose weight due to gerrymandering efforts.

It is not enough for politicians to ask voters to vote anymore, and it isn’t a secret that they are also opposed to gerrymandering. Multiple former presidents, such as Ronald Reagan (Republican) and Barack Obama (Democrat), and senators from both sides have largely spoken out against gerrymandering. “That’s all we’re asking for: an end to the anti-democratic and un-American practice of gerrymandering congressional districts . . . The fact is, gerrymandering has become a national scandal,” said Ronald

Reagan. “Americans deserve better. Congressional representation should not be a political bloodsport that protects incumbents, disenfranchises legitimate interests, and allows people to achieve with surgical reappointment what they couldn’t do honestly at the ballot box,”²² Said Congressman Earl Blumenauer.

From a purely rose-tinted lens, these words seem hopeful. They support the cause of gerrymandering. However, these politicians are the ones benefiting from gerrymandering, and both parties use this to their own benefit. ‘The other party is gerrymandering, not me.’ ‘Yes, we’re gerrymandering, but we’re upholding American Democracy because the other side is evil.’ Recent partisan battles, such as Prop 50, have amassed a coalition of gerrymandering discussions in the American populace, which resulted in Texas and California gerrymandering 5 of their districts in order to mitigate ideological coalitions in the House of Representatives.

If so many politicians truly supported the end of gerrymandering, then why would there be multiple failed attempts by congressmen to pass bills to outlaw gerrymandering? In this way, gerrymandering only seems to matter when a foreign enemy is trespassing on their territory. When Gerrymandering is an issue, it is only ideologically positioned against another party. In one example, 56% of California Voters voted in favor of Prop 50, a measure that would gerrymander 5 majority-Democrat districts in response to a similar measure in Texas¹⁸, despite the state implementing an independent commission just 15 years earlier and having high satisfaction with it. As seen in the case of Gill V. Whitford, parties are unable to claim they are a ‘victim of gerrymandering’.

In addition to that, gerrymandering virtually destroys the entire point of American democracy in the first place. The American voting system was created to stop the tyranny that came with a monarch who was not elected by the people. The Constitution was written to ensure that all men were created equal, to ensure that the people of the nation would be heard. Gerrymandering merely adds another asterisk in front of the word ‘election’; politicians are *technically* elected by the people, but such technicalities serve to erase the basis under which their legitimacy stands. An election rigged by candidates is not fair. The American people were given a choice to elect whomever they please, and gerrymandering erases that right by allowing politicians to choose their voters however they please.

These are the negative consequences of what gerrymandering can cause: distrust in the American form of governance, fear and anger in the gerrymandered voter, and a loss of fairness and equality in the structure of governance. Gerrymandering, despite inherently diluting American voters, is still encouraged by some coalitions of voters in order to create a partisan ‘equalization’. But this ‘equalization’ comes at a dangerous cost. A race for amending the wrongs of an opposing party quickly becomes not a race *towards* democracy, but a race to the bottom *against* democratic principles.

THE EFFORT TO BAN GERRYMANDERING

As we have discussed above, the downfalls of gerrymandering are significant, and there have been multiple unsuccessful attempts at outlawing the practice. However, in this section, we look more at how we could successfully ban gerrymandering, starting with a bill introduced in 2024 that proposes gerrymandering reform.

The Fair Representation Act is a bill reintroduced in the Senate by Representative Don Breyer, which is currently supported by over 20 academics who signed a letter in support of the bill. The Bill has not been passed, but it is hoped that someday, American Electoral freedom will be protected.

As stated in Case Study #1, the main issue blocking gerrymandering from being prosecuted is the lack of legislation against it. Few areas in state Constitutions directly make gerrymandering illegal. Thankfully, the bill explicitly states that “—If, in action brought under section 306, the court determines that the use of multi-member or at large districts by a State, as outlined in the congressional redistricting plan of a State concerning the apportionment of Representatives resulting from a decennial census, indicates that the redistricting plan will deny or abridge the right to vote by having the effect of diminishing the ability of any citizens of the United States on account of race or color.”²³

The Act also moves to ban states from redistricting based on favoring or disadvantaging a political party, and requires the drawers of redistricting maps to use statistical analysis to decide if “the redistricting plan is statistically likely to result in partisan advantage or disadvantage on a statewide basis, the degree of any such advantage or disadvantage, and whether such advantage or disadvantage is likely to be present under a range of reasonably foreseeable electoral conditions.” The bill also allows any plaintiff to sue the state for failure to maintain the rights imbued in this act, including members of political parties and any person living in the state.

From reading this act, there are several foreseeable issues with it. Most notably, the absence of any outside entity responsible for redistricting. Despite an independent commission being a visible improvement in comparison to a legislature electing itself over and over again, there are still visible downfalls to that system as well. Namely, as proven by the California case study above, the commission did not stop gerrymandered district maps from passing in 2021. “No matter how drawn, every district line creates a tradeoff. Partisan fairness versus competitive districts. Geographic compactness versus fair access for racial minorities. And so on.”

Whilst an independent commission hasn’t proved as successful as it may appear, an independent commission is, at a base level, a conceptually improved method of combating the bigotry that generally arises in legislative redistricting plans. By ensuring that the people elected are not the people making the rules, the independent commission does, at its core, protect voters’ freedom of speech.

As Suan A. Hughes wrote in a Harvard-Kennedy article, “States have varied success in redrawing districts, but she believes a commission independent of political pull has the best interest of all citizens.”²⁴

In general, an independent commission may not be the most effective method of limiting the partisan gauntlet of gerrymandering, but it is generally the more ethical and democratic choice.

CONCERNS & LIMITATIONS

In terms of concerns and limitations, the paper also has the following drawbacks that must be looked at closely. Despite some evident findings from the case studies and literature review, some concerns could prove to be a detriment to the impact this paper has on the issue of gerrymandering.

1. There is not enough discussion and not enough data.

Whilst this paper indeed presents multiple facts about redistricting and the downfalls of gerrymandering and provides statistical data to back up facts, it must be noted that gerrymandering is not significantly publicized enough to offer enough unbiased opinions. A majority of the sources in this paper were hard to find, showing a gap in the research available. Thus, there may not be sufficient data to prove all the points presented, and more secondary research is necessary regarding specific states. Significant data was missing from multiple states across the United States, thus preventing scholars from studying to what degree the results are applicable nationwide. Yes, there are maps to look at online, and there are scorecards and scholars and articles, but all of those opinions are purely subjective as its difficult to determine how these maps are drawn behind closed doors. Because of this, it is hard to provide a statistical and unbiased opinion on gerrymandering. Additionally, there are alternate factors that decrease the incentive for American voting, such as presidential primaries, poll distance, or political fatiuge.

2. The writer is biased.

As an individual who cares deeply about transparency, I must admit that my bias is inherently present in this paper. I came into this paper already opposed to gerrymandering, a practice I deemed antithetical and contrary to the fundamental basis of democracy. While I did learn more about the fundamental issues I was opposed to, I feel as though my research and my data are not enough to present a purely unbiased, rhetorical paper on gerrymandering. For that reason, I would advise any reader of this paper to take to heart the fact that all human beings are flawed, and to recognize that there is likely research available that I did not find.

3. The Research is biased.

Referring back to the first point written, there is a large gap in the data available for study. However, the data available is mostly from similar sources. The liberal think tank ‘New America,’ for example, has multiple articles surrounding gerrymandering. However, it is still to be noted that the people doing the research on a practice they deem undemocratic are inherently looking for conclusions to a question they have already answered. The issue of gerrymandering simply isn’t widely known enough to find multiple different opinions. There are multiple articles cited in this paper that are from the same source due to the

lack of diversity in opinions available, and there is still more to go in terms of the diversity in opinions with the subject of gerrymandering in mind.

CONCLUSION

These are the conclusions we have drawn based on case studies, court cases, and literature reviews. Based on the literature analyzed, this paper has looked at gerrymandering across state lines, from the swing states of Pennsylvania and Wisconsin to the partisan blues of California.

For avenues of further research, there is a gap in research and a significant lack of data that future researchers will need to fill. There are six states with missing gerrymandering statistics. Six states whose borders could be gerrymandered and whose voting rights are being ignored.

As for the hypothesis tested, the first hypothesis, referring to gerrymandering negatively impacting the representation of US voters, was tested through literature review and case studies and was proven to be true. However, the second hypothesis of independent commissions positively impacting voter satisfaction was disproven as its results are not universal. These factors may not apply to all states with independent commissions, as shown in the California case study. It was ultimately proven that, despite this fact, an independent commission is inherently the more ethical choice due to the democratic process of having multiple commission members from multiple partisan points of view. However the voter trust in independent commissions was found to heavily rely on nonpartisan decisions and a non-majoritarian voting style built upon consensus building, meaning its effects on voter satisfaction cannot be guaranteed for all states.

Gerrymandering is unethical and undemocratic, and it festers in the smallest of political wounds. A toxic smoke, one that wafts through the pipes of a house unnoticed and untamed. No matter how many ventilation systems we put in place, no matter what protections, there may still be gerrymandering in the future. But we can work to limit that impact. We can still improve the ways we deal with gerrymandering. We can see the smoke that contaminates our air, understand how it works, and call it out when we see it. There is a long way to go, but we can always do more. Americans have proven capable of finding solutions through independent commissions, and there are bills in place aimed at making gerrymandering illegal. We've seen the case in Wisconsin where voters advocated against gerrymandering, and we've seen the success it can bring. We can always strive to do better and strive to do more.

Politics is a never ending evolution of regression and progress. Will we ever be free of gerrymandering? Perhaps. And as the author of this paper, I believe we will.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Veronica-Nicolle Hera, my mentor, for teaching me about the paper-writing process. Thank you for being patient and for being open to ideas. I quite literally wouldn't be able to write this paper without you, so thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Also a great thanks to Sehej Sethi, for being so supportive and understanding and for guiding me through the publication process. You made the days of struggle feel easier, and I doubt my paper would have improved this much without you.

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Fig 1: Image screenshot from The Gerrymandering Project Redistricting Report Card California 2021 Final Commission Congressional - Enacted, Accessed 11/30/2024

Fig 2: Image screenshot from The Gerrymandering Project Redistricting Report Card California 2021 Final Commission Congressional - Enacted, Accessed 11/30/2024

Fig 3: “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024”, Pew Research Center, June 24, 2024, Accessed 11/30/2024

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