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Gerrymandered America

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Introduction

Every democracy draws lines. We carve the map into districts and then ask those boundaries to translate millions of voices into a few hundred seats. Yet the geometry of those lines is never neutral; it is infused with decisions about who counts, what communities belong together, and how power should be distributed. Gerrymandered America examines how these choices are made, who makes them, and why the shapes on a map can amplify or mute entire constituencies. This book argues that representation is not merely tallied at the ballot box; it is engineered in the quiet rooms where maps are designed.

The story of redistricting is both technical and human. It involves census blocks, contiguity constraints, and optimization routines—but also neighborhoods, languages, and histories that do not fit neatly into a spreadsheet. Over the last generation, the tools of mapmaking have grown astonishingly sophisticated. Geographic information systems, voter files, and bespoke software allow operatives to test thousands of hypothetical maps in minutes, stress-testing coalitions and entrenching advantage. At the same time, citizens have begun to use many of these same tools to push back, hosting community “mapathons,” building open datasets, and challenging maps in court with statistical evidence once confined to graduate seminars.

Because lines on a map are ultimately legal lines, this book also follows the doctrine that governs them. Courts have wrestled with the difference between permissible politics and unconstitutional discrimination, with the meaning of “one person, one vote,” and with how to protect minority representation without freezing it in time. We trace the arc from early malapportionment cases to modern rulings that have both opened doors for reform and, at times, closed federal avenues for relief. Along the way, we explore the evolving role of state constitutions, which increasingly serve as guardrails when federal law leaves gaps.

To move beyond slogans, we need ways to measure fairness. The middle chapters introduce the leading metrics—efficiency gap, partisan bias, mean-median difference, competitiveness indices—and explain in plain language what each captures, what it misses, and how litigants and commissions use them. We demystify algorithmic approaches as well: heuristic search, simulated annealing, Markov chain Monte Carlo ensembles. Rather than treating these as black boxes, we open them up, showing how assumptions about compactness, respect for political subdivisions, and communities of interest shape outputs as much as the code itself.

Yet maps are not just math and law; they are lived experience. A district boundary can split a school community, bury a tribal nation’s concerns under distant priorities, or

dilute a city's influence across a ring of suburbs. We surface these on-the-ground consequences through case studies and voices from organizers, local officials, and residents who confronted the power of the line firsthand. Their stories reveal why process matters—why transparent hearings, accessible data, and meaningful participation can change outcomes even when the legal standards are narrow.

Finally, this book is unapologetically practical. Each chapter closes with actionable steps: how to file effective public comments, what data to gather for community maps, how to evaluate proposed metrics, and which policy levers—independent commissions, clearer state constitutional standards, prison reallocation, open-source tooling—are most likely to yield fairer outcomes. The concluding roadmap synthesizes these tools into a reform agenda that citizens, legislators, and courts can realistically adopt.

Gerrymandered America does not promise perfect maps; no such thing exists. But it does promise comprehension and agency. By illuminating the mechanics—legal, technical, and political—that govern district design, it equips readers to recognize manipulation, to demand better processes, and to help build a representative system that honors both people and place. The power drawn into districts belongs to all of us; this book is an invitation to claim it.

CHAPTER ONE: The Geometry of Power: A Primer on District Design

At its heart, redistricting is about geometry. Simple shapes on a map—squares, rectangles, squiggles, and sometimes truly bizarre amoebic forms—are the foundational units of representative democracy. These aren't just arbitrary lines; they are the invisible fences that corral voters into groups, determining whose votes count collectively and whose are scattered to the political winds. Understanding the basic mechanics of how these lines are drawn is the first step toward grasping the profound impact they have on power. It's a bit like learning the rules of chess before attempting to play a grandmaster; you need to know what a pawn does before you can appreciate the intricate strategies of the endgame.

Imagine a state, any state, as a blank canvas. Now, the task is to divide that canvas into a set number of districts, each designed to elect one representative. For congressional districts, this number is determined by the decennial census, which dictates how many seats each state gets in the U.S. House of Representatives. For state legislative districts, the number is fixed by the state's own constitution or statutes. The goal, at least ostensibly, is to create districts with roughly equal populations, adhering to the "one person, one vote" principle, which we'll delve into more deeply in Chapter 4. But beyond population equality, what other rules apply? And how do these rules, or the absence thereof, open the door to manipulation?

The most fundamental concept is contiguity. Simply put, a district must be a single, unbroken piece of land. You can't have a district composed of two separate islands, for instance, unless it's an actual island district. This seems like common sense, a basic geographical constraint to ensure that all parts of a district are physically connected. Yet, even this seemingly straightforward rule can have its nuances. A district connected by a single point, like the corners of two squares touching, might technically be contiguous but still create a highly disjointed community. Overpasses, bridges, and narrow strips of land can all be used to maintain contiguity while stretching a district across disparate areas, a tactic often employed to link favorable voting blocs.

Another common principle, often enshrined in state law or judicial precedent, is compactness. The idea here is that districts should be reasonably geographically compact, avoiding bizarre, sprawling shapes. Think of a circle or a square as perfectly compact. A long, skinny serpentine district, by contrast, would be considered far from compact. The rationale behind compactness is that it tends to group people who live near each other, fostering a sense of shared community and making it easier for

representatives to serve their constituents. It also makes it harder for mapmakers to cherry-pick voters from far-flung areas to create a partisan advantage.

However, "compactness" is a slippery term. There's no single, universally accepted mathematical definition, and various metrics exist to quantify it. Is it about the perimeter-to-area ratio? The dispersion of voters from the district's center? The number of concave boundaries? The lack of a clear standard leaves room for interpretation and, once again, for strategic manipulation. A district might appear somewhat compact on a large scale but, upon closer inspection, could have numerous jagged edges and protrusions designed to include or exclude specific neighborhoods. We'll explore these quantitative measures in detail in Chapter 11, but for now, it's important to recognize that "compactness" is often in the eye of the beholder, or more accurately, the eye of the mapmaker with a political agenda.

Beyond contiguity and compactness, redistricting often involves respecting existing political subdivisions, such as county and city lines. The logic here is that these established boundaries often reflect existing communities of interest, shared services, and local identities. Splitting a county into multiple districts can disrupt local governance and dilute the political power of that county as a whole. Many state constitutions or statutes explicitly prioritize keeping counties, cities, and towns intact where possible. This can be a significant constraint on mapmakers, as carving up a densely populated county into perfectly population-equal districts while preserving compactness can be a spatial puzzle of epic proportions.

The challenge intensifies when a county's population far exceeds or falls short of the ideal district population. A large county might need to be divided into several districts, while a sparsely populated one might need to be combined with parts of neighboring counties to reach the required population threshold. When these divisions occur, the focus shifts to minimizing the number of splits. For example, a map that divides a county into two districts by a single line is generally preferred over one that shatters it into multiple fragments, each appended to different adjacent counties. This principle aims to reduce confusion for voters and maintain the integrity of local political units.

Another key consideration, albeit one often contentious, is the concept of "communities of interest." This refers to groups of people who share common social, economic, or cultural interests and who would benefit from being grouped into the same district to ensure their voices are heard collectively. This could include urban neighborhoods with shared transportation concerns, rural areas dependent on a particular industry, or ethnic enclaves with distinct cultural needs. Identifying and defining these communities, however, is far from straightforward. What one group considers a community of interest, another might see as a thinly veiled attempt to pack or crack a particular demographic group. We'll dedicate Chapter 7 to the complexities of identifying and integrating communities of interest into the redistricting process, highlighting how this often becomes a battleground for

competing political and social priorities.

The practicalities of district design also extend to what's known as "nesting." In many states, legislative districts are nested within congressional districts, meaning that a congressional district might contain two or more state senate districts, which in turn might contain two or more state house districts. This hierarchical structure can simplify mapmaking to some extent, as boundaries drawn for higher-level districts can then serve as outer limits for lower-level ones. However, it also means that decisions made at the congressional level can have cascading effects on state legislative maps, sometimes forcing awkward configurations at the local level to maintain population equality within the nested structure.

While these principles—contiguity, compactness, respecting political subdivisions, and considering communities of interest—form the theoretical bedrock of fair redistricting, the reality is often far more complex and politically charged. Mapmakers, whether they are legislators, independent commissioners, or court-appointed masters, rarely operate in a vacuum. They are influenced by political data, legal precedents, demographic shifts, and, inevitably, partisan ambitions. The seemingly innocuous lines on a map become powerful conduits for channeling votes and consolidating power, transforming the abstract geometry of district design into the concrete reality of who governs and whose interests are represented.

Consider the role of geography itself. Natural features like rivers, mountains, and coastlines can act as powerful, immutable boundaries, simplifying some aspects of mapmaking while complicating others. A river might serve as a clear, uncontroversial line for a district, but what happens when a community straddles that river? Artificial boundaries, like major highways or railroad tracks, can also serve as convenient dividing lines, but they too can dissect neighborhoods and disrupt established social connections. The mapmaker's art, therefore, is not just about drawing lines, but about understanding the human and natural landscape those lines traverse.

The interplay between these various principles—population equality, contiguity, compactness, political subdivisions, and communities of interest—creates a delicate balancing act. Often, optimizing for one principle means compromising on another. For instance, perfectly equalizing populations across districts might necessitate splitting more counties or creating less compact shapes. Respecting existing city limits might lead to districts with slightly larger population deviations. The choices made in prioritizing these criteria are often deeply political, reflecting underlying agendas and desired outcomes.

It's also crucial to distinguish between mandatory criteria and aspirational goals. Some rules, like population equality for congressional districts, are strict constitutional requirements. Others, like aiming for highly compact districts, might be statutory preferences or best practices, but with more flexibility in their application.

Understanding this hierarchy of rules is essential for anyone trying to decipher why a particular district looks the way it does, or why a legal challenge might succeed or fail. A map might survive a court challenge if it meets the mandatory criteria, even if it falls short on some of the aspirational ones, especially if the court views those aspirations as secondary to political considerations.

The mechanics of drawing these lines have also evolved dramatically over time. In earlier eras, mapmaking was a laborious process involving physical maps, pencils, and rulers. Today, it's a sophisticated digital enterprise, powered by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software that can layer vast amounts of data onto a map. This includes not just population counts from the census, but also detailed demographic breakdowns, voter registration data, past election results, and even information about individual housing units. This technological revolution, which we'll explore in depth in Chapter 8, has made mapmaking both more precise and, in the wrong hands, more potent as a tool for political manipulation.

This introductory exploration of district design is merely the tip of the iceberg. Each of these principles—contiguity, compactness, political subdivisions, and communities of interest—has a rich history of legal interpretation, political exploitation, and ongoing debate. They are the language of redistricting, and fluency in this language is critical for anyone hoping to understand the complex narrative of "Gerrymandered America." As we move through the subsequent chapters, we will delve into the historical context, the legal battles, the algorithmic tools, and the grassroots efforts that constantly reshape these seemingly simple lines, revealing how they are, in fact, the very geometry of power.

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