

## Why You Need to Care About Redistricting Reform: Part One

Sandra Slifer, April 2009

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana (PAR) released a new report in February that outlined our current redistricting process and recommended some basic reforms. The initial reaction to the report by some leading legislators was that redistricting is a political activity that should be performed by politicians. PAR is recommending redistricting be performed by an independent appointed commission and that all of the meetings, documents, and communications shall follow the open meetings law as well as being available and archived on the commission's web site. These are suggestions that are echoed by other nonpartisan government organizations across the country including the League of Women Voters, Fair Vote, Common Cause, Americans for Redistricting Reform, The Campaign Legal Center, and leading academics.

Before you go all "glazy-eyed" on me here, just read a few quotations about redistricting,

"[Democrats] get to rip off the public in the states where they control and protect their incumbents, and [Republicans] get to rip off the public in the states [where they] control and protect [their] incumbents, so the public gets ripped off in both circumstances. In the long run, there's a downward spiral of isolation." *Newt Gingrich, former House Speaker*

"Here is a telling statistic: 153 of California's congressional and legislative seats were up in the last election and not one changed parties. What kind of democracy is that?" *Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, 2005 State of the State Address*

"Even in [James] Madison's day, the practice of gerrymandering for partisan advantage was familiar. In the late seventeen-eighties, there were claims that Patrick Henry had tried to gerrymander Madison himself out of the First Congress." *Jeffrey Toobin, Journalist*

"In a very real sense, gerrymandering amounts to stuffing the ballot box BEFORE the election...Unfortunately, there's no little blue pill on the market for our systemic "Electile Dysfunction" problem." *Matthew Cossolotto, Fair Vote*

Referring to the 2003 redistricting map, "This is the most aggressive map I have ever seen. This has a real national impact that should assure that Republicans keep the House no matter the national mood." *Joby Fortson, former aide to Rep. Joe Barton, Texas*

After reading this last quote, some of you are probably thinking, 'wait a minute, Republicans didn't keep the House; redistricting didn't matter since Democrats took the House in 2006. The system works fine and let's just move on. Redistricting is a political thing and the politicians are going to get their own way anyway. And besides, there's no such thing as an independent commission.'

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Redistricting typically takes place after the Census. The next Census period begins on April 1, 2010. The information will be collected for the rest of the year. The data must be presented to the President of the United States no later than December 31, 2010 and forwarded to the state governors, legislatures, and redistricting commissions no later than April 1, 2011. Only three states, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Louisiana are scheduled to have state-wide elections in 2011. Here in Louisiana, **qualifying for state legislative and St. Tammany Parish Council offices is scheduled to begin on September 6.**

During this five month period, the redistricting process must be completed and approved by the Justice Department. Incumbents whose districts remain relatively intact will have even more of an advantage over challengers. Due to the shifts in population, incumbents may find that their districts have been eliminated or even combined with other

districts. All candidates for these offices will have a very short amount of time to plan their strategies, raise money, and get their message out to the voters. During the 1990 Census, the election for the Police Jury in St. Tammany was postponed until March 1992 so that the redistricting plan could be completed and approved.

*The first step everyone can and must take is to fill out and send in their Census forms when they receive them. An accurate Census is the best way for us to begin the process of reapportionment. Even before Katrina and Rita changed the population patterns, Louisiana wasn't growing as fast as other states and was projected to lose a Congressional House seat in the 2012 elections. There seems to be near-unanimous agreement that we will have just six Congressional House seats. Because the Census is the cornerstone of redistricting, LWVST has signed up to partner with the U.S. Census Bureau to do what we can to publicize the importance of the Census and you'll be reading more about the Census in future articles.*

Before we discuss the reforms in greater detail, here are some terms that are commonly used.

### **Redistricting Definitions**

**Apportionment** is the process of allocating seats in a legislature.

**Reapportionment** divides up the seats based on population shifts, generally using Census data.

**Redistricting** is the process used to select the voters in each district.

**Gerrymandering** occurs when the lines are drawn to achieve a particular outcome (partisan advantage, protecting incumbents, etc.).

**Packing** refers to a district that is concentrated with like-minded voters thus reducing their impact in other districts.

**Cracking** refers to the practice of dividing like-minded voters among many districts assuring they will not influence the outcome. It typically occurs in conjunction with packing.

Since pictures are worth a thousand words, I've included a couple of them that help us better understand some of the terminology and concepts. We've all heard the word 'gerrymander' and most of us know it has something to do with the way political districts are determined. I had no idea that its origins went back to the early 1800's and that it referred to the shape of district.

The drawings that resemble modern art show the effects of packing, cracking, and gerrymandering. The number and location of the dots don't change in the four pictures. The only thing that changes is the way the lines are drawn dividing up the dots. Now, imagine what this process would look like if the number and locations of the dots had changed and the lines are being redrawn and that's what redistricting is all about.

Our Legislature currently has the responsibility of redrawing the Congressional House seats, Louisiana House and Senate seats, State Supreme Court, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and the Public Service Commission (PSC). The Parish Councils and municipal governments will be redrawing council districts and the School Boards will be redrawing their districts. Most of the meetings take place behind closed doors and only a very small number of citizens are even aware of the public meetings that are held to take public comment on the new maps.

Next month, I'll be discussing the reforms that are being proposed by PAR and other national organizations to reform the redistricting process.

For those of you who would like to hear more about PAR's proposal and redistricting, the League's Annual Meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, April 22 at La Provence Restaurant. Our guest speaker is Elliott Stonecipher and he will be

discussing PAR's Redistricting proposal. Mr. Stonecipher has been a frequent guest on the Garland Robinette show on WWL 870AM radio. He is the President and owner of Evets Management Services, Inc., a full-service opinion research and marketing consulting firm founded in 1980. During his career he has been involved in various roles in over 200 political campaigns at the local, state and national level. In addition to political campaign services, Mr. Stonecipher's firm provides political campaign services and serves commercial clients with opinion research, strategic and marketing planning, and geo-demographic studies. Reservations are required and advance payment is preferred (LWVST Members-\$35 and Guests-\$40). For more information, please visit our web site at [www.lwvst.info](http://www.lwvst.info) or contact Jeannine Meeds at 626-8464 or [jeanninemeeds@gmail.com](mailto:jeanninemeeds@gmail.com).



### Origins of the word 'Gerrymander'

Printed in 1812, this political cartoon illustrates the electoral districts drawn by the [Massachusetts](#) legislature to favor the incumbent [Democratic-Republican](#) party candidates of Governor Elbridge Gerry over the [Federalists](#), from which the term gerrymander is derived. The cartoon depicts the bizarre shape of a district in [Essex County, Massachusetts](#) as a [dragon](#). The painter, Gilbert Stuart, likened it to a salamander, and the editor, Benjamin Russel, advised "**Better say a Gerrymander.**" The name stuck.

**How Gerrymandering can influence electoral results on a [non-proportional system](#).**

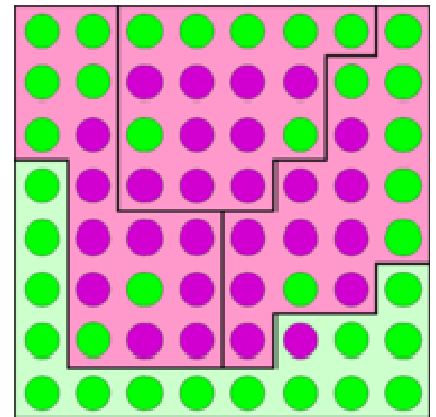
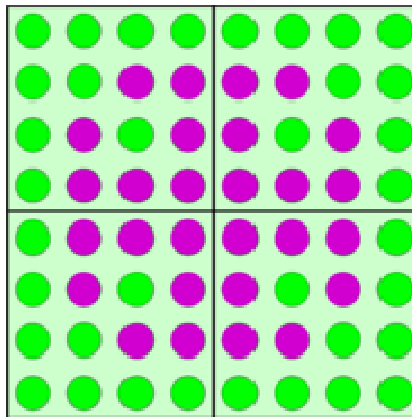
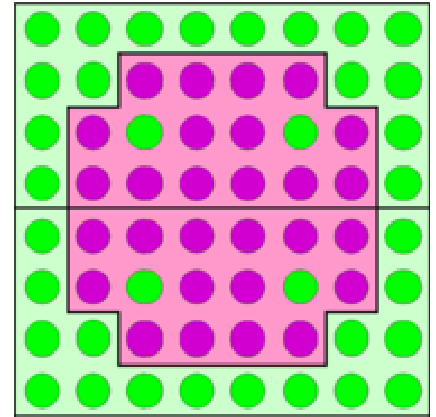
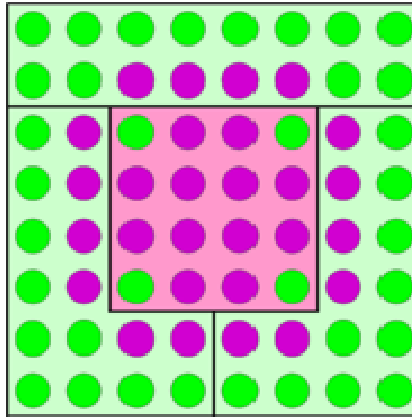
Example is for a state with four districts and a 36:28 Green (G) party majority.

**Top left:** Magenta (M) party wins the urban district, while G party wins the three rural/suburban districts — the result expresses and enhances the fact that G is the state-wide majority party. (Example of packing)

**Top right:** by redesigning the four districts, there is a 2:2 tie, with G dominating the two new rural districts and M dominating the two new urban/suburban districts — closer to proportionality, but masking the fact that G is the state-wide majority party.

**Bottom left:** Creating four mixed-type districts can yield a 4:0 win to G — a disproportional result considering the state-wide reality. (Example of cracking)

**Bottom right:** With classical Gerrymandering techniques it is even possible to ensure a 1:3 win to the state-wide minority M party



All pictures and captions from Wikipedia