HOW TO GERRYMANDER: THE CLASSIC EXAMPLE

A deformed or lopsided district is not always due to political shenanigans. In a few cases, the apparent gerrymandering can be forgiven, because it's following natural geographic features — coastlines, mountain ranges, rivers — or pre-existing zigzagging political divisions, such as state borders or city limits. But in every instance where the lines follow no natural contour, you can rest assured they were drawn to benefit the party in power.

This well-known example clearly illustrates in the simplest terms just how nefarious and effective gerrymandering can be. There are various versions of this "gerrymandering prototype" to be found in books and online, but none of the ones I surveyed had clear illustrations or intelligible explanations, so I've taken it upon myself to start from scratch and create my own illustrations and annotations.


Sample population distribution: each symbol represents a voter in a generic state.

In the illustration to the left you see an outlined state. The new census shows that it has 15 residents, scattered equally throughout the territory; 9 of them are consistent voters for the "redstar" party, represented by red stars; 6 of them are "greendot" party voters, represented by green dots. The time has come for redistricting, and your job is to carve up the state into three congressional districts each containing exactly five voters. What do you do?

Option 1: Well, a 9-to-6 split in the electorate means that the state is 60% redstar and 40% greendot. So if your goal was to be as fair and evenhanded as possible, you'd draw the district lines as shown in the illustration at the upper right: you'd end up with two districts which were majority redstar, and one district that was majority greendot, and thus the voters of the state overall would get fairly true representation of their political views in Congress. (In this example, District 1 would have a 3-to-2 redstar majority, District 2 would have a 3-to-2 greendot majority, and District 3 would have a 4-to-1 redstar majority.)
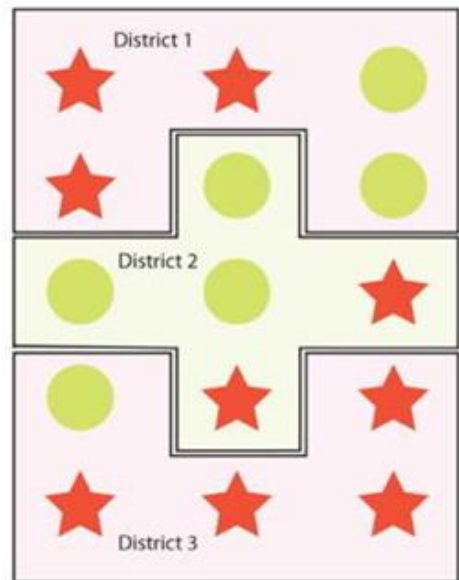
Option 1: A fair and evenhanded redistricting.

But what if you were a partisan redstar politician? Your goal would not be to have fair redistricting; your goal would be to shut out your opponents as ruthlessly as possible. And thus we turn to the next possibility - majority gerrymandering.
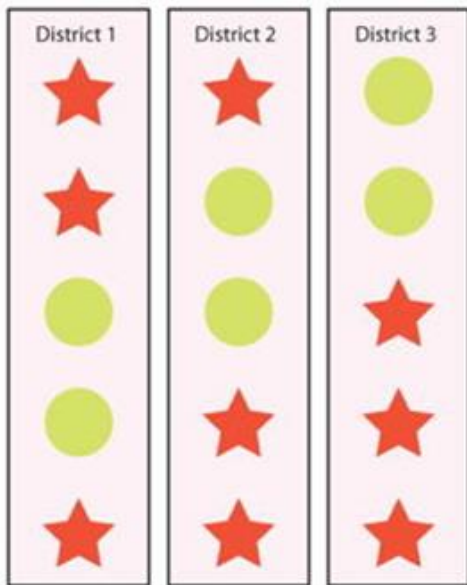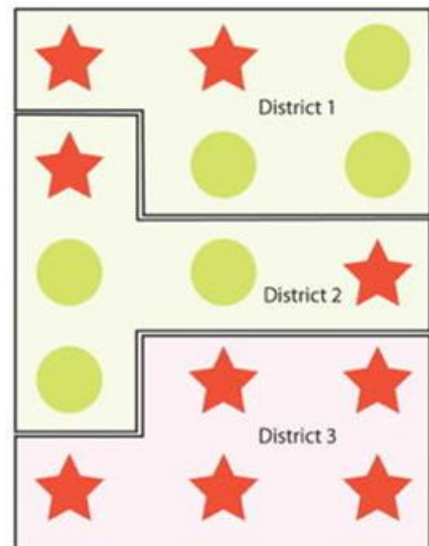

Option 2: Majority gerrymandering to ensure complete electoral dominance.

Option 2: If your goal was to ensure that your redstar party won as many seats as possible in upcoming elections, you'd attempt to create districts in which redstar voters had a slim majority in every single district. So you could gerrymander the boundaries to look like they do in the illustration at the lower left. In this example, each and every district has been purposely designed to have a 3-to-2 redstar majority, and the end result would be that all three districts would elect redstar representatives, and the 40% of the population who are greendot voters would be disenfranchised — no elected official would represent their views.

And lastly: What if you were an incumbent greendot politician looking at the new census map aghast, noting that demographic shifts had now given the opposition redstar party a 60/40 advantage among voters. What would you do? More precisely, what would you do if you were really, really evil, like the typical politician? Why, you'd resort to the most diabolical form of redistricting - minority gerrymandering.

Option 3: Behold the horrors of what gerrymandering can do. In this final option, shown in the lower right illustration, the greendot party, despite having only 40% of the vote, has managed to draw the districting lines in such a way that they end up with a two-to-one advantage in congress! The greendot redistricters achieved this feat by shunting as many redstar voters as possible into a lopsided "electoral ghetto," in which District 3 has a solid 5-0 redstar majority; this soaks up and wastes most of the redstar voting power, leaving the greendot party with a 3-to-2 advantage in Districts 1 and 2.

Clear? This is gerrymandering in a nutshell. And once you've mastered it, you're ready to become a politician and thwart the will of the voters.

Option 3: Gerrymandering designed to ensure over-representation for the smaller party.