

Volume 35, issue 2, November 2025

US politics

Redistricting: what is it and why does it matter?

Events in Texas and California in 2025 have brought the issue of redistricting into the media spotlight, but what is it, and why is it important?

What is redistricting?

The US Congress is made of up two houses – the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House of Representatives contains 435 voting members, each elected in a congressional district; in the UK we call this a constituency. The Senate contains 100 members, and each state has two senators. While senators therefore represent an entire state, House members represent a district. These districts are determined roughly by population, with each state having a minimum of one House member. However, populations move, and for this reason it is sometimes necessary to move the boundaries of a district to ensure they contain a roughly equal population size.

Why redistrict?

The principle of members of the House of Representatives representing areas of roughly equal population is inferred in Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution, and then more explicitly stated in Amendment 14:

‘Representatives shall be apportioned among the several States according to their respective numbers, counting the whole number of persons in each State...’.

The 1929 Reapportionment Act established the federal legal principle that redistricting must take place following a census. The census takes place every 10 years in years ending in a ‘0’. Some states allow mid-decade districting. These principles were ruled on in two key 1960s Supreme Court cases:

- *Baker v Carr* (1962), which established that redistricting was something the courts could pass judgement on.
- *Wesberry v Sanders* (1964), which established that districts for the US House of Representatives should contain a roughly equal population size.

In passing these cases, the Supreme Court was upholding the principle of ‘one person, one vote’, trying to ensure the equal representation of the US population in the House of Representatives.

Gaining political advantage

In most states redistricting is carried out by the state legislatures. It is usually passed as a regular law and can be subject to a veto by the governor. A few states use independent commissions to carry out redistricting, while others require supermajorities for legislation to pass. These, however, are in the

minority. The redistricting process can easily become party political. The party that controls the state legislature in a particular state may choose to redraw the boundaries to give them a political advantage. The way in which the districts are drawn can dramatically change the outcome of an election (see <https://tinyurl.com/y96xzejv> for an example of a redrawn map). This tactical redrawing is known as **gerrymandering**: the manipulation of district boundaries to favour a political party. The phrase itself originates from Governor Gerry of Massachusetts, whose redistricting of 1812 was said to create a map that resembled a salamander; hence, 'Gerrymander'.

Exam tip: Do not use 'redistricting' and 'gerrymandering' as synonyms. Redistricting is a process designed to ensure the principle is upheld of 'one person, one vote', and is broadly neutral. Gerrymandering is the manipulation of redistricting to give a result that favours one party unfairly over another.

Recent cases of gerrymandering

Gerrymandering has long been a problem in the USA, but in the last few years some key cases have made headlines.

Alabama

In 2021, the Republican-controlled Alabama state legislature redrew the state's congressional districts. The black population had increased to about one-quarter of the state population, but the redistricting plans diluted the influence of black voters. The Supreme Court decided in 2023 that the plans were unconstitutional, violating the Voting Rights Act 1965, and ordered that the map be redrawn to include two black-majority districts. Subsequent court cases in 2025 upheld these revised maps, although Republican state legislators have said they may appeal again to the Supreme Court.

North Carolina

In 2022, following disagreements over gerrymandering and a court ruling that allowed political redistricting, Republican legislators in North Carolina redrew the districts and effectively changed the balance from a 7–7 split of Democrat- and Republican-dominated districts to a 4–10 split in favour of the Republicans. In the 2024 elections, Democrats won 46% of the state's vote in North Carolina, but only 29% of the seats.

Texas

In 2025, the Texas state legislature took the relatively unusual step of 'mid-decade' redistricting. It voted entirely along party lines for maps that would dilute the influence of black and Latin American voters, while reducing the majority in five Democrat-held seats. This led to retaliatory measures from the state of California, among others, who threatened to redistrict its own state to favour the Democrats, to offset any impact of Texas's redistricting.

Why does this matter?

Redistricting, or more accurately gerrymandering, has long been a concern. However, the volume and nature of gerrymandering cases in the last few years have raised particular concerns:

- The dilution of the influence of voters on the basis of race or ethnicity, undermining the Voting Rights Act 1965.
- The growth of hyper-partisanship, and using redistricting as a way to ensure political dominance of one party in the US Congress.

- The role of the courts, and especially the Supreme Court, on these maps. Justices have been drawn into political decision-making, raising questions about their political leanings.
- The location of political power in the USA. The Founding Fathers created a Constitution of checks and balances and federalism to limit the power of government, but with President Trump pressing for gerrymandering that would return a Republican majority in Congress in the 2026 midterms, the success of these limits are being tested.

The issue of the Texas redistricting, and proposed retaliatory redistricting by California and other states, is very much a live issue. A good understanding of this process and the associated concerns is useful when writing essays on Congressional elections, but also on the US Constitution (federalism, checks and balances), the US President (power), the Supreme Court (role, politicisation) and Congress (party balance).

Student tasks

- What does the redistricting process suggest about the relationship between states and federal government?
- Why is congressional redistricting a potential concern for the congressional election cycle?

Links

Look at Princeton University's 'Gerrymandering Project' (<https://gerrymander.princeton.edu/>), which produces a report card on each state regarding the political fairness of its congressional districts.

Sarra Jenkins is a teacher of politics, and an author and presenter of A-level politics materials.

This resource is part of POLITICS REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: www.hachettelearning.com/politicsreview