

“Let’s Talk Gerrymandering,” by Dr. Chris Jones

Since gerrymandering has been in the news lately, let’s talk about it.

Gerrymandering is a way that some politicians try to win elections by changing the voting maps. It’s not about getting more votes—it’s about drawing the lines in a way that helps their team win, even if fewer people vote for them.

In every state, people are divided into areas called districts. Each district picks one leader to represent them. These maps are supposed to be fair. But sometimes, they’re not. Instead of letting voters choose their leaders, gerrymandering lets leaders choose their voters. This is what Texas is attempting to do, but I’ll talk more about redistricting in a later column.

There are two main tricks politicians use to gerrymander: **Packing** and **Cracking**.

One trick is called **packing**. That means they take a group of people who usually vote the same way and squish them all into one district. That way, those voters can only help pick one leader—even though they could have helped pick more if they were spread out.

Here’s a way to think about it: imagine you and your best friend go to a buffet that charges money by the plate. Instead of paying for two plates, you load up one plate with food for both of you. It’s allowed, but it’s not really fair. You’re gaming the system to get more for yourself. That’s what packing does—it loads up one district with all the voters from one group, so the other districts are easier to win.

The other trick is called **cracking**. That’s when a group of voters is split up into many districts, so their voices get weaker in each one. Imagine you and four friends want to play a team game. Together, you’re strong and could win. But someone splits you up, putting each of you on a different team. Now none of your teams win. Your group was strong, but it got broken apart. That’s what cracking does to voters—it breaks up their power.

A real example of cracking happened in Arkansas. In 2021, lawmakers split Little Rock—the capital city—into three separate voting districts. They intentionally pulled voters out of Little Rock (most Black voters) and scattered them into districts where their votes would become diluted. The goal wasn't to reflect the people—it was to **weaken the people's power**. They took what had been a competitive seat and turned it into what they think is a safe seat for one party and one person.

Politicians gerrymander because it helps them stay in power. Even if they don't get the most votes in a state, clever map drawing lets them win more seats. It's like playing a game where you get to choose the rules and the scoreboard.

This isn't fair to voters. It makes some votes count more than others. It takes power away from certain communities. And it means elections don't always reflect what most people actually want.

Let's be clear...that seat, and every seat in Congress, belongs to the people. Elected officials are just borrowing it. It's not theirs to keep. When politicians redraw maps to protect themselves, they're acting like they **own** something that's only **on loan**. Voters should always be the ones who decide who sits in that chair—not the other way around.

The good news is that there are things we can do. We can learn how maps are drawn in our state. We can demand fair rules and support using independent people—not politicians—to make the maps. We can pay attention to how leaders are chosen. And we can vote!

Voting is how we speak up. Gerrymandering turns down the volume for some people and turns it way up for others. If we want elections to be fair, the maps must be fair too. That's how we make sure everyone's voice matters.

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