

Gerrymandering whiplash

Quantifying the practical costs of the forever redistricting wars on American voters

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This publication is available online at:
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The complete data and analysis, as well as a more detailed version of our methodology, are publicly visible on GitHub [here](#).

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Executive summary

In 2025 and 2026, spurred by President Donald Trump's push for maximalist partisan gerrymandering in Republican-controlled states and the Supreme Court's gutting of the Voting Rights Act, a modern record of nine states re-drew their congressional districts. Two others, Virginia and Missouri, tried but were struck down by state courts.

This practice of off-cycle re-gerrymandering is set to continue, with Maryland, New York, and other states likely to join the fray before the 2028 elections. The United States may see near-perpetual maximalist gerrymandering, with many or even most states redistricting more than once a decade. But while the impacts of this "gerrymandering war" are usually discussed in partisan and political terms — which party benefits? — the significant costs for voters and their representation are often ignored.

This paper finds that 34.8 million people — about one in 10 Americans — were reassigned to a different congressional district between 2024 and 2026. Additionally, one in five Americans now votes in a district that is meaningfully different from the last election (defined by more than a quarter of the electorate being new). The link between representative and constituent is a significant bond, one that is effectively severed each time a voter gets re-gerrymandered. We discuss the various downsides of this whiplash, from voter confusion to diminished electoral accountability.

However, perennial gerrymandering whiplash is not inevitable. The conclusion of this paper considers how various electoral reforms — and in particular, moving to proportional representation for the House of Representatives — could not only prevent this sort of endless re-gerrymandering, but also ensure that most voters are consistently represented across decades, even as competitive elections shift who is in power.

Background

In the 19th century, particularly the period between Reconstruction and the realignment of 1896, politics was highly polarized between two national parties, and those stakes meant that mid-decade redistricting was [commonplace](#) in the United States. In one 14-year stretch between 1878 and 1892, Ohio [redrew](#) its congressional maps seven times. Before 1900, gerrymandering was in many states a constant, all-consuming effort.

That chaotic period gave way to a strong norm against such mid-decade redistricting, in favor of a more stable and democratically legitimate approach to reapportionment. In the past 50 years, only two states had [voluntarily redrawn](#) their congressional maps mid-cycle: Texas in 2003, and Georgia in 2005. (Additionally, [California redrew their maps in 1983](#) after a voter referendum). Increasing polarization made gerrymandering a feature of modern politics, but until 2025, these gerrymanders were still mostly happening on a 10-year cycle in response to the Census.

That changed in 2025, when President Trump began pressuring states across the country to redistrict out of the normal cycle. The first state to do this was Texas, which passed new maps in the summer of 2025. From there, a cascading series of states began changing their maps — including Florida, California, Tennessee, North Carolina, Ohio, Alabama, Louisiana, and Utah. (In Utah, the successful redistricting pushes happened through the courts, while in Ohio the new map was predicated on a state requirement to do so.) Two others, Virginia and Missouri, came close but were struck down by state courts.

In most cases — Utah and Ohio were arguably exceptions — these maps were drawn to maximize partisan advantage. The “[redistricting wars](#),” as they’ve come to be known, ensured that whichever party controlled state government in each of these states could draw district lines that would create as many districts from the same party as possible.

“ Unfortunately, the United States may be returning to the dynamic last seen in the 19th Century, in which many — if not most — congressional maps are redrawn every election or two.”

Additionally, this new trend back towards constant re-gerrymandering appears to only just be beginning. Officials in [Georgia](#), [Washington](#), [Colorado](#), [New York](#), [Maryland](#), [Virginia](#), and [New Jersey](#) all have hinted at or explored pre-2028 redraws.

This gerrymandering wave was boosted by the Supreme Court's decision to gut the Voting Rights Act in *Louisiana v. Callais*, which opened the door to dismantling opportunity districts for minority populations in service of partisan gerrymandering. However, the decision came too close to the 2026 election for all but the most brazen state actors to take advantage of it. Many states still have the opportunity to gerrymander before 2028 even if they did not manage to do so in time for 2026. Some states that redistricted in 2026 — such as Alabama, Tennessee, and Louisiana — may do so again before the next election.

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The grim logic of constant redistricting

Three dynamics encourage ongoing, mid-decade redistricting:

- ✓ **Gerrymandering is a time-bound phenomenon.** As voter preferences shift over time, the effectiveness of gerrymandered maps will fade. Maps that deliver a clear partisan advantage in one election will not necessarily hold up a decade later. Redrawing maps more regularly will likely be more effective at locking in consistent partisan advantage than gerrymandering once every decade.
- ✓ **The two-party doom loop of redistricting.** Now that both the Republican and Democratic parties have embraced gerrymandering as a political strategy, the logic of escalation implies a trend towards maximalist redistricting. Even if regular re-draws may produce diminishing returns, neither party wants to risk being the one that fails to maximize their advantage.
- ✓ **Partisan gerrymandering has a margin of error.** In the past, partisan gerrymanders have usually included a buffer to protect the party in power from elections that swing against them (otherwise, gerrymanders can quickly become “[dummymanders](#)”). But if map-makers only need to account for possible election results six months in the future — instead of six years — they can be much more aggressive with their gerrymandering. Redrawing more regularly with greater confidence about likely election results allows for narrower margins.

In other words, Donald Trump may have started the “forever redistricting wars” — but they are likely to long outlast him. The net effect of these changes on the partisan outcome of future elections is still uncertain, but the impacts on voters are already clear.

Findings

By evaluating block-level census data of the nine states that were redistricted between 2024 and 2026, we find that **34.8 million people — about one in 10 Americans — were reassigned to a new congressional district for the upcoming election**. In the nine states that redistricted, 26.3 percent of voters — one in four — are in a new district.

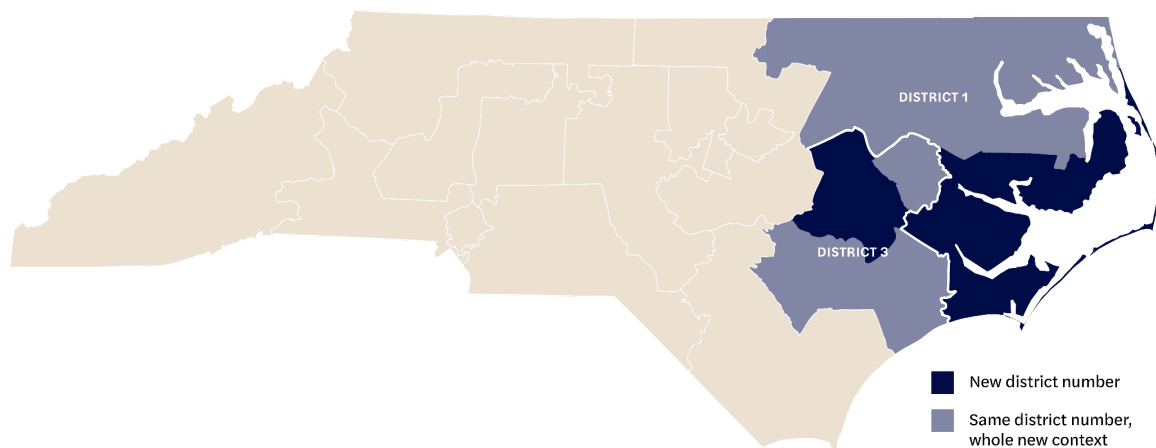
	Population reassigned (2020 census)	Percent reassigned
Texas	10,448,258	35.8%
California	9,214,062	23.3%
Florida	6,265,306	29.1%
Tennessee	2,400,948	34.7%
Utah	2,260,487	69.1%
Louisiana	1,497,479	32.2%
Ohio	1,478,290	12.5%
Alabama	660,496	13.1%
North Carolina	543,381	5.2%
Total	34,768,707	26.3% (of nine states) 10.5% (of national)

These figures reflect our estimate, based on the 2020 Census, of the total number of voters who were moved into a new congressional district due to the new maps. They do not take into account voters who relocated to another district between 2020 and 2026. (We believe this to be relatively small; for reference, [about 2 percent](#) of Americans move from one state to another each year.)

But the total impact of redistricting turns out to be both larger and more complicated than this top-line number suggests.

As an example, consider North Carolina's 1st and 3rd congressional districts, below. Many voters in these two districts were *not* moved to a different-numbered district by the re-gerrymandering. The northern part of the 1st district and the southern part of the 3rd district were unchanged. However, because the districts *overall* changed substantially, even these voters are now effectively voting in a totally new electoral context. Counting how many voters were moved to a different-numbered district isn't enough — a proper measurement needs to consider the continuity of each district before and after the boundaries are redrawn.

2026 North Carolina District Map (120th Congress)



We therefore define a *materially different* district as one where more than a quarter of the electorate changed since 2024, regardless of whether the district number changed. Look again at those voters in the northern part of North Carolina's 1st district. Not only has their district number changed, but a large fraction of their fellow constituents are newcomers from district. Functionally, it's a brand new district.

Under this measure, 18.5 percent of voters — **just under one in five Americans** — are in a materially different district. And in the 10 states which redistricted, 46.3 percent — nearly half — of voters are in a materially different district.

Finally, in more practical terms, we can observe the disruption of gerrymandering whiplash in the number of incumbent lawmakers now running for re-election in new districts. We count at least **eight incumbents across redistricted states currently running in a new congressional district** (Al Green, Greg Casar, Ken Calvert, Kevin Kiley, Ami Bera, Blake Moore, Celeste Maloy, and Mike Kennedy). This also does not include early retirements from redistricting (like Steve Cohen, Burgess Owens, Marc Veasey, and Lloyd Doggett) or multiple incumbents forced into the same district (like Young Kim and Ken Calvert).

Implications

At first glance, the consequences of this spreading gerrymandering whiplash may not seem particularly onerous. After all, relatively few Americans are able to name their congressional district number without looking it up. Many may not immediately notice that they're in a new congressional district until they open their ballot.

However, the practical consequences of gerrymandering whiplash are considerably more severe than they may appear.

Experts have consistently highlighted a wide variety of negative impacts of redistricting on voters. For instance, Danny Hayes and Seth C. McKee have [found](#) that redistricting significantly lowers voter participation. Seth C. McKee, Enrijeta Shino, and Daniel A. Smith similarly [find](#) that redistricting has negative effects on constituent-representative relationships. And Antoine Yoshinaka and Chad Murphy [find](#) that redistricting creates substantial instability between elections, especially for opposing-party incumbents.

Overall, the gerrymandering whiplash we see today has six main potential consequences:

- **Severed electoral accountability and representation.** Representative democracy is founded on a relationship between a constituent and their elected officials. Elected leaders running for reelection are meant to be evaluated, at least in part, based on the job they did in office. When a person's representative changes like this, voters no longer have any reference point with which to evaluate their candidates. Instead, they are starting the cycle of representation all over again. And, if this kind of regular redistricting becomes more common between cycles, it's easy to imagine that some voters will have a new representative, one that has never even appeared on their ballot before, almost every cycle.
- **Ballot confusion and default to partisanship.** Because these new districts were drawn in the months before elections are held, many voters will find unfamiliar names on their ballot. This kind of confusion only increases reflexive partisanship on the part of voters and elected officials.
- **More difficult election administration, including potential errors.** Redistricting on tight timelines puts enormous pressure on election officials, who have to produce many new permutations of ballots — not to mention complex logistics around polling places, processes, and staffing — with little time to test or rehearse. This inevitably results in, at best, confusion, and, at worst, mistakes.
- **Difficulty of political organizing.** Organizing at the district level relies on pulling together the same group of people cycle after cycle. If voters are being shunted around by their elected leaders every two or four years, creating sustainable momentum becomes nearly

impossible. Instead, every new redistricting cycle means that organizers, regardless of what they're advocating for, have to start again at square one.

- **Lack of an ongoing relationship with representatives.** The House of Representatives was designed, in the Constitution, to be the body of Congress that was closest to the people. That relationship has already been atomized because [the size of the House has remained fixed](#) as the population has grown, but constant redistricting will only make the problem worse. House members are meant to be the voice of their district in Congress, but if every cycle brings with it a totally new district with many different people in it, that relationship between constituent and representative breaks down.
- **Voter apathy and disengagement.** All of the issues enumerated above are eventually going to further the belief of some voters that elections aren't worth the trouble. If a voter is shunted from district to district every two or four years, they will begin to feel like their elected leaders are choosing them, not the other way around. Gerrymandered districts are designed to be predictably uncompetitive, and that's a dynamic that (understandably) makes regular voters feel like their voice isn't being heard.

Solutions

Constant re-gerrymandering whiplash is *not* inevitable. Congress could turn to various solutions to try to return to the status quo before the redistricting wars. However, most of these have serious shortcomings.

A **ban on mid-decade redistricting** — such as the one [proposed by](#) Rep. Kevin Kiley (R-CA), one of the redistricted incumbents — would slow the underlying march towards maximum gerrymandering. But it would not otherwise shift the incentives. A **mandate for independent redistricting commissions** or a **statutory ban on partisan gerrymandering** would be more useful, but both remain vulnerable to breakdowns in practice (especially if one or both parties are not fully committed to ending gerrymandering).

Additionally, solutions that attempt to prevent gerrymandering while still relying on single-member districts will inevitably fall short for reasons of simple geography. As Grant Tudor, Farbod Faraji, and Cyrena Kokolis write in [“When Maps Don’t Matter: How proportional representation can end the redistricting wars”](#):

Even in states where the maps are not intentionally gerrymandered, single-member districts can lead to markedly nonproportional electoral outcomes. This is due to **geographic sorting** — the way voters supporting different parties are distributed across a region. When like-minded voters are concentrated geographically, it makes it easier to carry a particular district. But if they are widely dispersed it can be impossible to win a majority anywhere.

In the long term, the most effective and permanent solution would be to move to a system of multi-member districts and proportional representation. Unlike gerrymandering bans or independent redistricting, proportional representation systems prevent gerrymandering mathematically, not just legally.

As Tudor, Faraji, and Kokolis [explain](#), this happens because of two features of how multi-member districts and proportional representation work:

1. **Proportional systems minimize “wasted votes” — the raw material of gerrymandering.** Proportional systems use multi-member districts instead of single-member districts and allocate seats in proportion to votes received. This minimizes the wasted votes that make packing and cracking possible. Votes contribute to representation regardless of where those casting them are geographically concentrated, dramatically impairing the ability of district boundaries — or the party drawing them — to distort electoral outcomes.
2. **Manipulating multiparty landscapes is too complex.** Proportional representation also tends to foster multiparty competition, since the threshold

of support needed to win any one seat is reduced. With more parties contesting elections, would-be gerrymanderers are deprived of the predictable two-party landscape that makes electoral engineering easier.

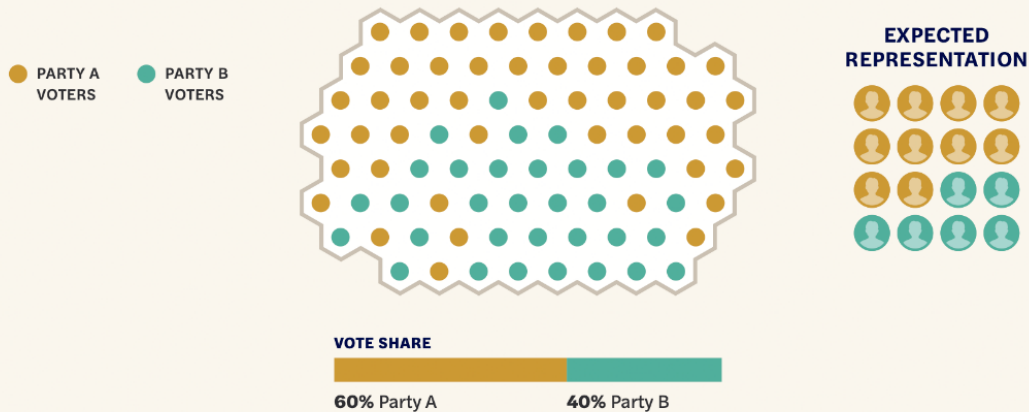
Proportional representation is uniquely suited to this problem because it effectively fosters representative stability instead of disruption. Because multi-member districts cultivate electoral competition across larger geographic areas, that means any individual voter has the opportunity to be [meaningfully represented](#) across multiple elections, and even across decades, regardless of political trends.

The lower threshold for representation means that a given community, party, constituency, or demographic group is likely to still be represented, regardless of what happens. Even if district lines are moved or political fortunes shift dramatically — representation doesn't have to.

Gerrymandering in Today's Single-Member Districts

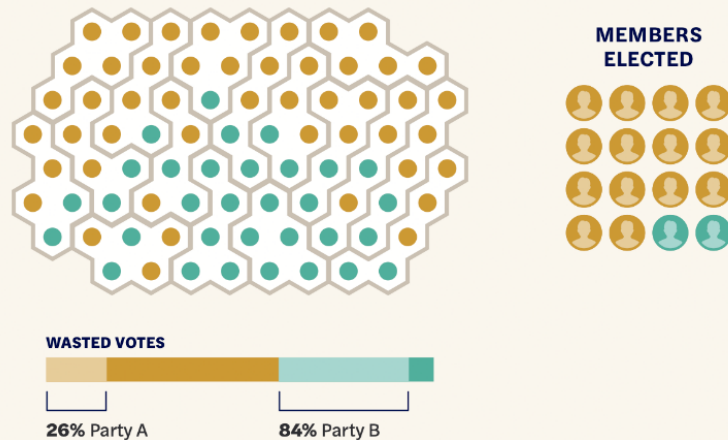
The Mapmaker's Advantage

Let's say 60% of voters in a state typically vote for Party A and 40% vote for Party B. The state elects 16 lawmakers, so we'd expect ten members from Party A and six from Party B. But if Party A is in charge of drawing district lines, they can significantly shift those numbers.



The Result

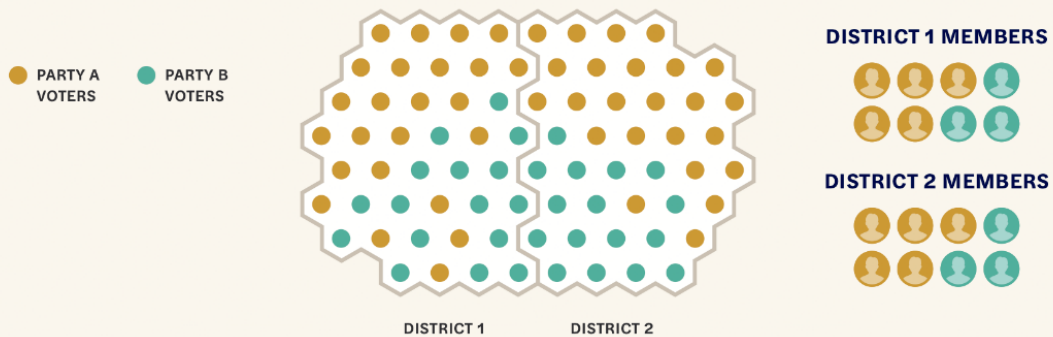
Using both “cracking” and “packing” to draw 16 single-member districts, Party A is able to limit Party B's representation to just two seats. The vast majority of Party B's votes are wasted in this gerrymandered map.



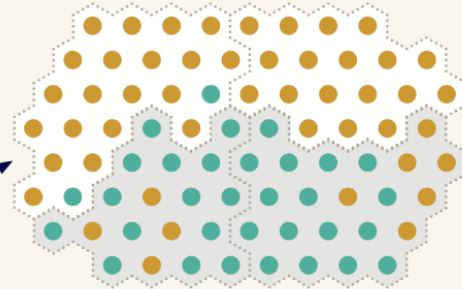
How Gerrymandering Fails Under Proportional Representation

The Attempt

Imagine a state elects its lawmakers proportionally with eight-member districts. Party A receives 60% of votes in both Districts 1 and 2, so it holds five seats in each. But Party A wants to redistrict to maximize its seats.



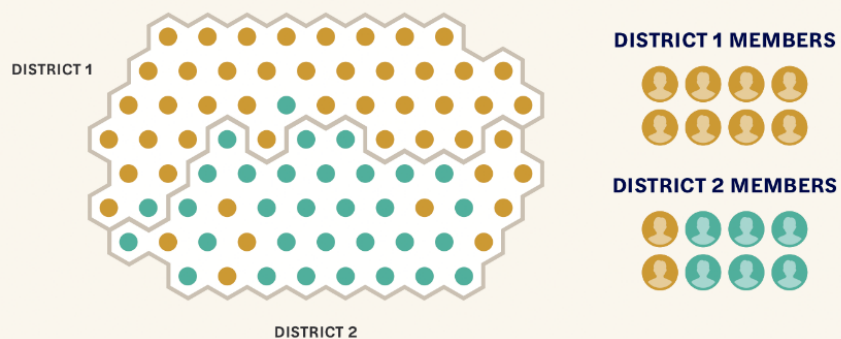
Party A's mapmakers redraw District 1 lines to exclude almost all of Party B's voters ...



... and swap them for more Party A support from District 2.

The Result

Party A gains three seats in the new District 1, but this is offset by the three seats lost in District 2. Party B's representation has simply moved along with its voters.





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