

4 ways YOU can make an impact on gerrymandering and redistricting

Once an obscure bureaucratic process, redistricting has recently moved to the forefront of American political consciousness. We've come to recognize that based on how districts are drawn, not everyone ends up with equitable access and representation in Congress and state legislatures. But awareness of the problem only gets us so far. The pervasiveness of gerrymandered districts can be traced down to the leadership and laws of each individual state. You may be thinking, "With a problem so complex, what power do I have to make a difference?" You have much more power than you think. When it comes to redistricting, geospatial understanding is critical. It's a perspective that redistricting officials sorely need, but often lack. You do not have to be a GIS expert to contribute that powerful perspective. These are your districts, they will be your representatives, and you deserve to be at the table.

If you have 15 minutes you can:

Locate your districts on a map

Start with your own congressional and state legislative districts and look at the neighborhoods and areas that have and have not been included. Do you notice any patterns or boundaries that seem unnatural? If the district weaves in and out of specific areas on purpose, you may be living in what is considered a gerrymandered district.

RESOURCES: Find your congressional district using [GovTrack](#) ■ Use the [Princeton Gerrymandering Project](#) to check if your state passes or fails common statistical tests showing gerrymandering ■ Explore state targets from the [National Democratic Redistricting Committee](#)

NOW WHAT? If you've learned something noteworthy about the shape or boundaries of your district, share that with some colleagues or friends. Many people acknowledge gerrymandering as a problem in general but don't know what a gerrymandered district looks like, nor do they realize they might be living in one. Your critique of a map may spark interest for others to learn more.

If you have 30 minutes you can:

Find out who draws the maps

The districts into which we are grouped affect every member of the general public. These districts are set by the states, but who exactly draws the lines? Each state tackles redistricting differently and in order to get involved, you must first understand the process and the opportunities for public comment. Bringing a multitude of voices to the table to share unique input is a critical step toward more equitable outcomes.

RESOURCES: Use [Ballotpedia's](#) state-by-state redistricting procedures ■ Check the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) list of [state redistricting websites](#) ■ Read the [Brennan Center for Justice](#) guide.

NOW WHAT? See when your state's redistricting officials are meeting next, and when they will be seeking public comment on new districts. Make a plan to participate. While some of this information may not be available until early 2021, now is the time to envision yourself there. Digging into the details and sharing your plan to be involved can help hold officials accountable to make the process transparent.

If you have 45 minutes you can:

Explore your state's criteria

While the U.S. Constitution and federal law require the population to be apportioned into congressional districts as equally as practicable, much remaining criteria is left to the states. Research what your state requires when a new district is drawn. Some states require that a district be compact and contiguous, while other states have few codified criteria at all. Check to see if there were any ballot measures passed in the recent election that changed your state's redistricting criteria or process.

RESOURCES: Check this [NCSL redistricting criteria list](#) or read their [PDF brief](#) ■ Review a student exercise from [Draw the Lines PA](#) ■ See projections favoring different criteria and parties with FiveThirtyEight's [Atlas of Redistricting](#)

NOW WHAT? Once you understand what's required and prohibited, take another look at your own district maps. Certain elements, such as compactness, can be judged objectively with the help of mathematical models. But many other requirements end up being subjectively fulfilled. Assess your state and congressional districts under these criteria and see if you think they pass the tests. If you're familiar with the geographies of your state, try to determine if some of these requirements have been overlooked or ignored in prior years.

If you have 1 hour you can:

Create a district on your own

Several different tools for drawing district lines are available online at no cost, and you do not have to be a GIS expert to try them out. If you know of questionable districts in your state, try redrawing those boundaries. Use this exercise to develop a critical eye for why certain areas may or may not be included in a district drawn by your state, and remember this when the redrawn maps are open for public comment in 2021.

RESOURCES: Use the [Districtr](#) tool to draw your own boundaries and compare demographics ■ Create a free account with [DistrictBuilder](#) to use their open source tool ■ Start a free trial to try redistricting through [Esri](#)

NOW WHAT? You know your community better than anyone. You understand the critical relationships between people, where they are, and how they are grouped. Now that you're equipped with information on the process, the chance to make a difference is well within reach. It is up to you to get involved, stay engaged, and utilize your knowledge and skills as an act of public service to bring competence and transparency to 2021 redistricting.



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Developed by the American Association of Geographers (AAG) with the help of a template from GeoCivics at UCCS. To learn more about this guide or to work with the AAG on related topics, please contact Michelle Kinzer, mkinzer@aag.org