Gerrymandering Background

The term "gerrymandering" comes from the combination of "Gerry," who was the governor of Massachusetts from 1810–1812, and "mander," short for "salamander." In 1812 Gov. Elbridge Gerry's administration passed a law allowing for the rearranging of district boundaries to ensure the reelection of the incumbent senators. One of these boundaries happened to be in a shape that resembled a salamander.



In a gerrymandered district, boundaries are set in such a

way that may include or exclude certain voting demographics, such as locations that are heavily populated with a certain class or ethnic group that typically vote for the same party. Certain "oddly" shaped districts are likely to have been gerrymandered. For example, look at the map of California showing the Congressional Districts for the 112th Congress.

Take a look at District 20, for example. The long, oddly-shaped hooks that extend at various points in the district look suspiciously as if the districts were gerrymandered. It is important to note, however, that sometimes districts may appear to be gerrymandered because of their odd shape, but this may be due to geographical features, such as boundaries being drawn along rivers or mountains. Other districts may be "randomly" drawn to avoid conflicts with neighboring Native American tribal land.

Scores may be calculated, using various algorithms, to determine whether or not a district is considered "gerrymandered." These scores are on a scale from 0–1, with 0 being considered gerrymandered, and is characterized by having extremely uneven, twisty borders and 1 being considered "compact" or not gerrymandered. Keeping in mind that some districts with a score of 0 may not necessarily be gerrymandered (with the above reasons given), the scores may be considered a "first step" to determining whether or not a district is actually gerrymandered.

