Gerrymandering: When Drawing Lines Means as Much as Changing Minds

Grade Level: High School

Time Required: 45 - 80 minutes, all in class

National Geography Standards Addressed:
- **3 -** How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface
- **13 -** How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface

Objectives:
1. Students will learn Gerrymandering, a common tactic for manipulating the outcome of future elections that affects how political regions are constructed.
2. Students will practice thinking about the influence of secondary factors or context on the outcome of a decision or result of a process.
3. Students will think about democracy as a system and reconsider, challenge, or defend widely held beliefs about it.

Materials Needed:
- Black sharpies or dark colored markers or pencils (one per student)
- Print-outs or photocopies of the lesson materials including color where necessary

Procedure:
The introduction to this lesson asks students to think independently about what factors decide elections. After **two to five minutes** for independent thought, the class should come together to communally create a list of factors over the next **five to ten minutes**. Then the teacher should help students understand how to work with the Squareland scenarios (**five minutes**). Students should be given **fifteen to thirty minutes** to work with the three scenarios. Teachers should circulate during this period, helping where necessary. Afterwards, the teacher should help facilitate a whole class discussion using the discussion questions provided. Following this, the teacher should share the concepts behind Gerrymandering and its history using the information provided. This can be done through independent reading, lecture, or a combination of the two over the next **ten minutes**. Students should leave the class with a list of key terms and supplementary scenarios.
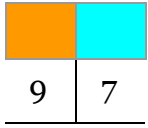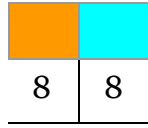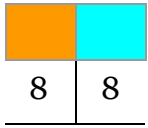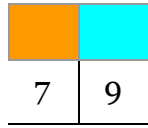
Introduction - what factors decide elections?

Politicians and political parties spend a lot of time and energy trying to convince voters to support them in elections. Aside than voters deciding who to vote for, what are some other factors that affect the outcome of elections?

Work independently on this question. See if you can list at least three other factors.

When we come back together as a group, you'll have the opportunity to contribute one or more of the factors you thought of as we build a list together.

How to work with election scenarios

In this section of our lesson, you're going to get a chance to determine where people vote! You will practice doing this for a variety of political outcomes.

First, let's go over a few terms. Imagine a **state** called Squareland. This state is broken up into **districts** whose borders are shown on our maps with darker lines. Each district must have exactly 16 **precincts**. Although in reality, each precinct would have many thousands of people in it, for the purposes of this scenario, each precinct's vote will count as a vote for one of our two parties: the Blue Party and the Orange Party.
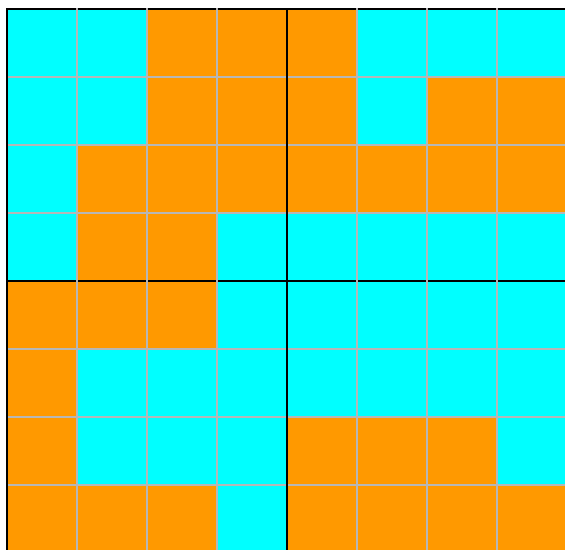
In this scenario, the Blue Party and the Orange party have exactly the same number of precincts: 32. Half of the 64 total precincts. Given this distribution and the way the districts are drawn, this gives one district to Orange, one to Blue, and two tied:

We can project the results of future elections in by showing which party's representative will win in each district:

| 1	2
3	4
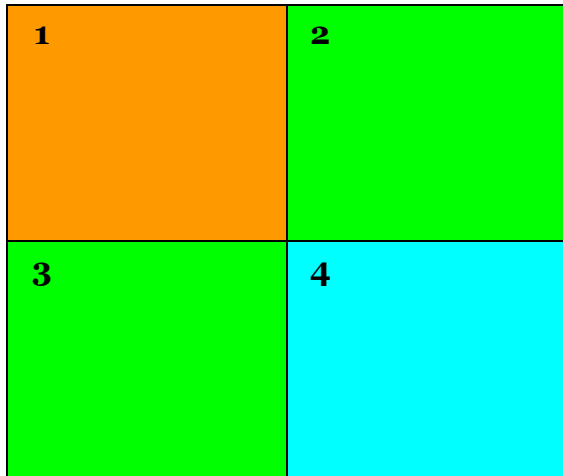
Total District Count:		1		1	(Tie)	2

Before you start redrawing some districts, here are the rules:
1. Districts must always have 16 precincts.
2. Districts must be contiguous - all the precincts must share at least one edge (no connecting by corners).
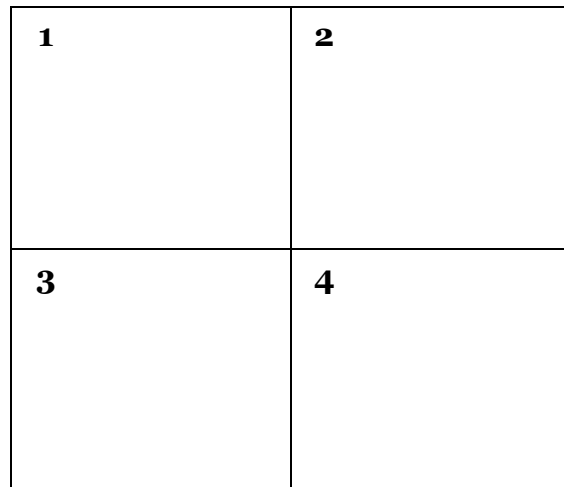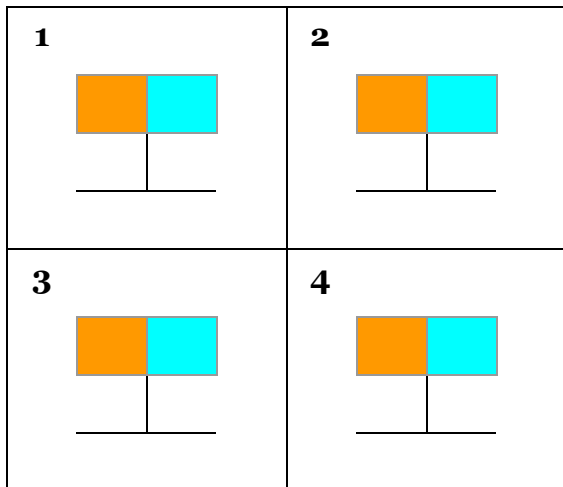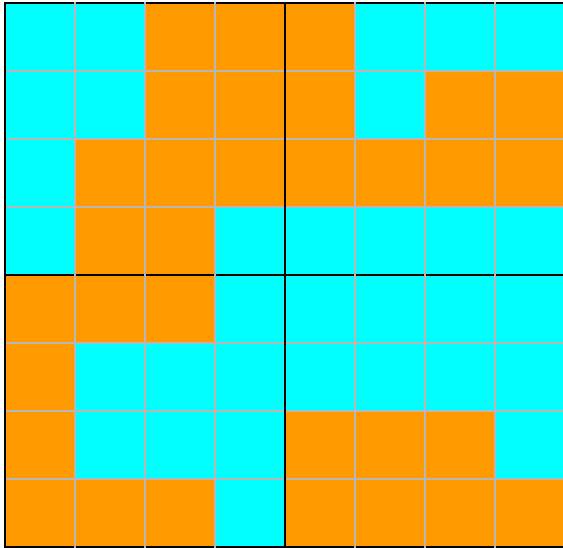
Squareland Scenario 1

Redraw the districts so that Orange is a majority in as many districts as possible. Blue and Orange start out with an even number of precincts and districts. Can you make things better for Orange?
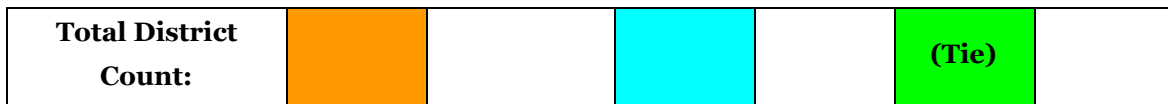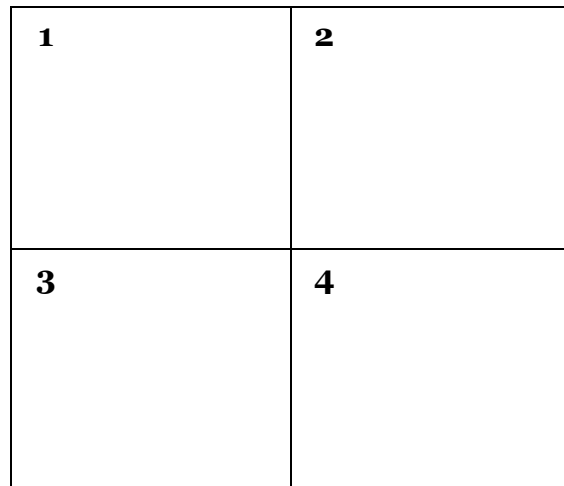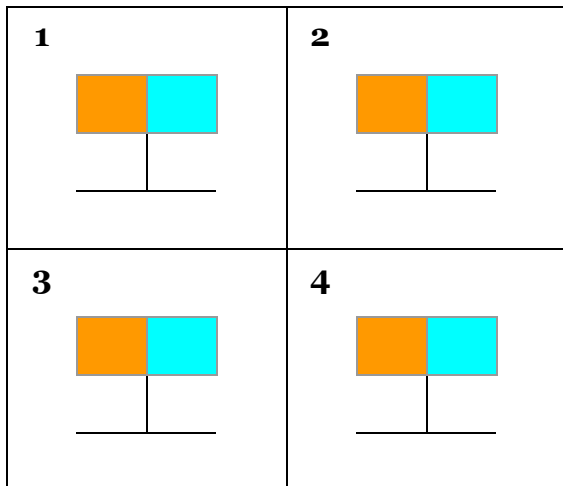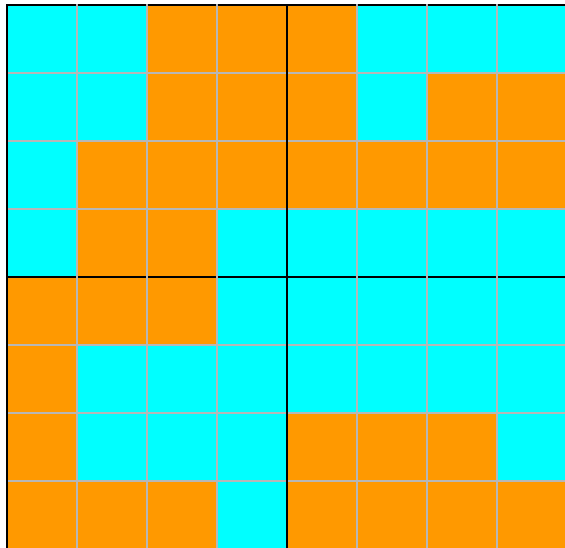
Squareland Scenario 2

Now redraw the districts so that Blue is a majority in as many districts as possible. Blue and Orange start out with an even number of precincts and districts. Can you make things better for Blue now?

1	2	1	2
3	4	3	4

Total District Count:				(Tie)	

Squareland Scenario 3

Here is a map where the Orange Party is a clear majority (43 of 64 precincts, close to 66% of the electorate) and the other is a clear minority (21 or 64 precincts, close to 33%). Today, because of the concentration of Blue voters on the right side of the map, they are in control of two of the four districts. Redraw the district lines to reduce the power of the Blue Party. Can you win all four districts?

1	2
3	4

| Total District Count: | | Orange | | Cyan | | (Tie) | |
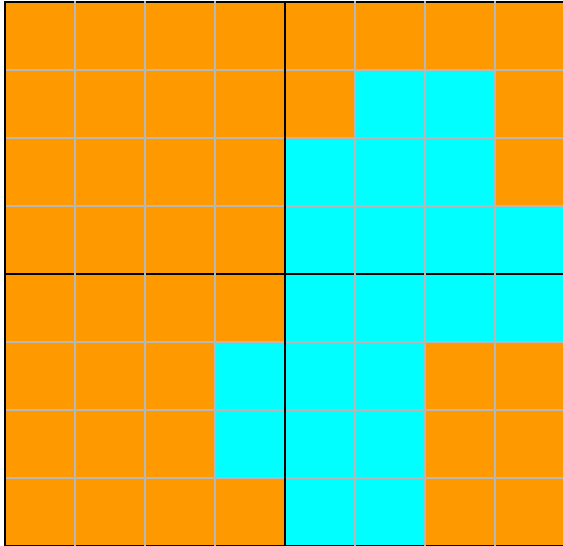
Discussion Questions

What tactics did you use in redrawing the district lines in Squareland? Were you surprised by anything? If so, what?

How has this experience changed your beliefs about democracy?

Voting districts must contain the same number of voters as every other voting district. As population shifts from one area to another, redistricting becomes necessary. What system would you suggest for redistricting if you wanted to avoid biasing future elections? What rules would you make?

What is Gerrymandering?

The United States Congress is made up of two bodies, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each one is filled with elected representatives. There are 100 Senators -- two from each state. This number stays the same, regardless of how many people live in the state. California, with a population close to 40 million gets the same number of Senators as the least populous state, Wyoming, which has just over half a million people. The House of Representatives works differently. Like the Senate, it always has the same number of elected officials, but unlike the Senate, in the house, these are divided up among the states based on population. Of the 435 representatives, California gets 53 and Wyoming, just one.

As you can imagine, people move around within the United States and into it from outside of the country. This changes the population of all states and of states relative to each other. Periodically, the number of Representatives per state is recalculated. This process is called **reapportionment.** This happens every ten years following the U.S. Census which collects official population counts for states among many other things. One example of this was when Massachusetts went from 10 to 9 Representatives after the 2010 census.

When reapportionment happens, it forces the redrawing of district lines. This is called **redistricting.** Massachusetts had to be divided into nine congressional districts instead of ten. One of the rules of redistricting is that every district must have the same number of people in it. Why? If two districts have different populations, then the people in the district with more people will theoretically have less of a meaningful voice in their government. Imagine a scenario where one district has ten people in it and one ten thousand but both get to elect a Representative to congress. Which would you rather vote in? Which would give you more influence?

Redistricting must happen when there is reapportionment, but it may also happen at other times, either to adjust to population shifts between districts, or for other reasons. The process of redistricting is very political. Although it is done differently from state to state, it usually involves a committee that is shaped by what political party is in power. As we'll experience for ourselves soon, how district lines are drawn matters a lot for the result of future elections.

 When redistricting is done intentionally to shape the result of future elections, it is called **Gerrymandering**. Gerrymandering is a political tactic with a long history in this

country. It was named after a Massachusetts governor, Elbridge Gerry, in 1812. Although he was probably not the first politician to use the strategy, when he used it to reshape the state senate districts, one of the resulting districts, the South Essex district, had a particularly funny shape. A local newspaper decided it looked like a salamander and ran a political cartoon criticizing Gerry:

From Governor Gerry's name and the word salamander was born the term gerrymander. Over time, the hard G of Gerry's name evolved into the soft G that you hear in the pronunciation of gerrymander today.

Since 1812, gerrymandering has been used by many political groups all over the country. Although it has been done particularly effectively by Republicans at the congressional level since 2000, they are not the first nor will be the last group to increase their power through use of the tactic. Despite attempts to slow or stop its use, Gerrymandering remains a strong tactic today. In fact, thanks to computer modeling and hyperlocal targeting, we may be entering a new golden age of Gerrymandering.

Sources: Wikipedia, the United States Constitution, U.S. Government: Democracy in Action, American Government: Continuity and Change

Key Terms

Gerrymandering is the drawing of voting district lines to gain an advantage in future elections.

Cracking is one common Gerrymandering tactic in which one voting bloc is split into many districts so that it is a majority in none.

Breaking is another common Gerrymandering tactic in which one voting bloc is concentrated into a single district to reduce their influence on other districts.

A Voting bloc is a group of voters expected to vote similarly in elections based on shared concerns, characteristics, or affiliations.

Bipartisan Gerrymandering is when both of the two major political parties work together to favor all incumbents.

Partisan Gerrymandering is when one party controls the drawing of voting districts and works to favor their party in future elections.
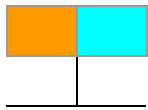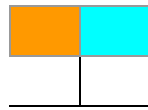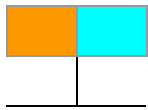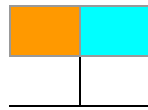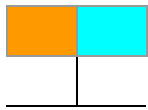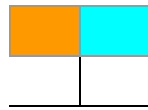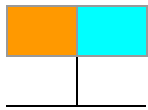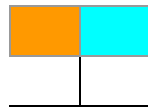
Reapportionment is when a shift in population between states or other areas requires changing the number of districts within one of the areas.

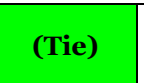**Redistricting** is the division of an area into voting districts.

Supplementary Squareland Scenario

Try a larger map! Work for the Blue Party or the Orange Party. Aim for the most districts controlled or for the most "safe" districts of at least 10-6 or better.
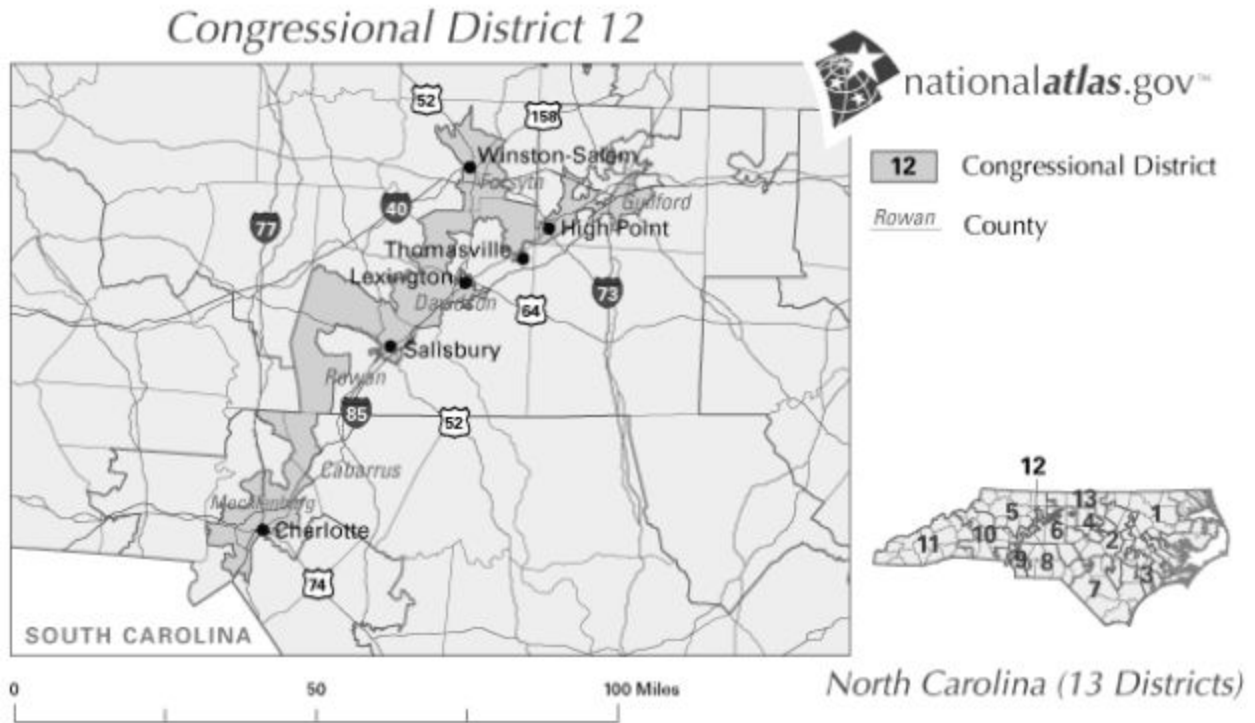
1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8

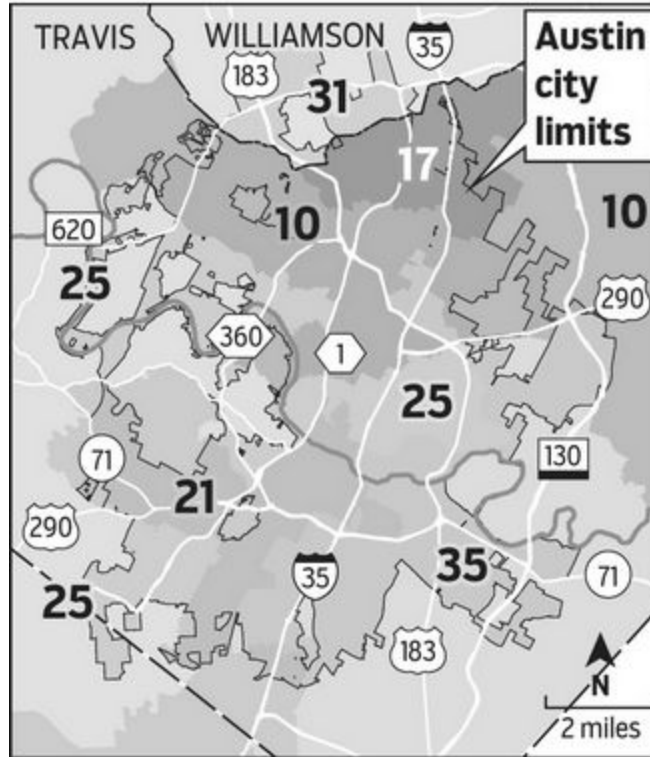| Total District Count:			(Tie)	

Real Life Examples

See if you can identify whether each of these is an example of cracking or breaking. Whose voice is being minimized? Whose maximized?
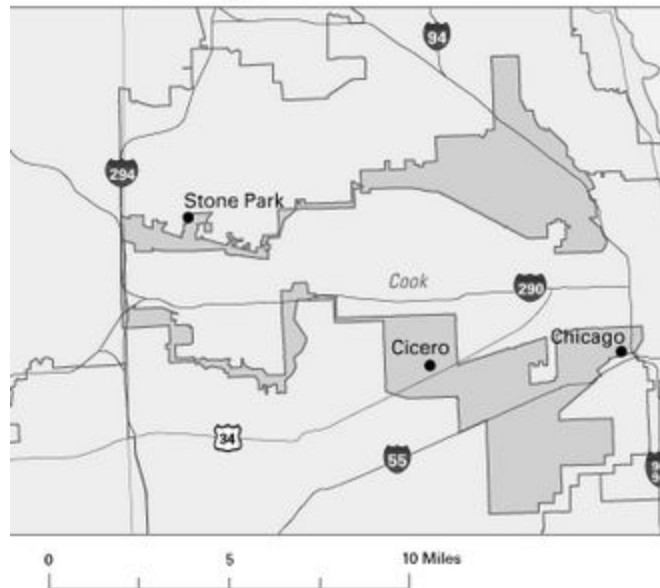

Source: Wikipedia

Austin's U.S. House districts

TRAVIS   WILLIAMSON   35
183
31
Austin city limits
17
620   10
10
25
290
360   1
25
71
130
21
71
290
25   35
35
183

N
2 miles

Source: Texas Legislative Council

Congressional District 4

94
294
Stone Park
Cook   290
Cicero   Chicago
34
55
90 94

0   5   10 Miles

Source: Wikipedia

Gerrymandering Lesson • Ezra Fischer • Summer 2016 • Geography in the Curriculum