# What Is Gerrymandering, Why Is It Important?

*By Kelly Jean Kelly*  
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"Gerrymander" is an old word for an idea that is still important today in the United States.

The term was first used in 1812 by an artist who made pictures for a newspaper. The artist wanted to call attention to a strangely-shaped voting area in the state of Massachusetts. The area looked like an animal: a salamander, to be exact. It had a strange shape because Massachusetts officials made it that way to help the political party of the state's governor, Elbridge Gerry. So the newspaper called the area a "Gerry-mander."

Over time, many people exchanged the hard "g" for a soft "g." Today, creating a voting area for the purpose of helping a political party is commonly called "gerrymandering." The issue remains in the news because politicians have a chance to re-create voting districts every 10 years, after the nation's population is counted.

In most states, officials from the majority party change the boundaries of voting districts after the count is completed. Each area must have about the same number of people. But officials can group similar voters together. Or they can split up groups of like-minded voters to limit their power.

Critics of gerrymandering argue that the way a voting district is mapped strongly influences which party wins a race, especially races for the U.S. Congress. They say the custom is not democratic – it puts the interests of political parties over those of voters.

Some politicians defend the practice – especially when they are in the majority. They say gerrymandering is legal, part of the political process or not really an important issue. They also say the Constitution gives the power to create voting areas to state lawmakers.

Once again, critics object. They say the courts, including the Supreme Court, could and should step in.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Kelly Jean Kelly wrote this story for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

# US Census Decides How Many Lawmakers to Send to Congress

*By Kelly Jean Kelly*  
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The United States Congress is supposed to represent the U.S. population. Yet the number of people who live in the country keeps changing.

So every 10 years, on years that end with a zero, the federal government organizes a nationwide census. That is, the government counts up the people who live in the U.S. and its territories.

**FILE - An envelope contains a 2018 census test letter.**

Census workers also ask questions to help officials better understand the kind of people who live in each home or household. Questions include **residents'**ages, their ethnic group or groups, and what kind of place they live in: a house, apartment building or other kind of home.

Individuals' answers are kept private for 72 years. But the general information is widely shared.

For example, everyday Americans can get the number for the total U.S. population. They can learn what percent of Americans are children or older adults; male or female; African-American, white, native, Latino or mixed.

They can find out about how many people are immigrants or speak a language other than English. They can get an idea of how much money the average household earns, and how many people have completed high school, college or advanced degree programs.

This and other information helps the government make decisions related to housing, schools, budgets and other issues. The information also helps identify how many lawmakers an area will send to the U.S. House of Representatives. After a Census, some areas gain seats; others lose them.

The Census is such an important part of the country's record-keeping, it is required by law. The Constitution-writers required a Census count, beginning in 1790. Today, anyone who does not provide answers can be charged up to $5,000.

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