

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 5: Electoral Geography

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MIT

Overview

1. Logistics

2. Problems of Electoral Geography

The Electoral College

Electoral Districts

Voting Rights + Federalism

Underlying Population Patterns

Logistics

Logistics

First short paper assignment released later today (on Canvas)

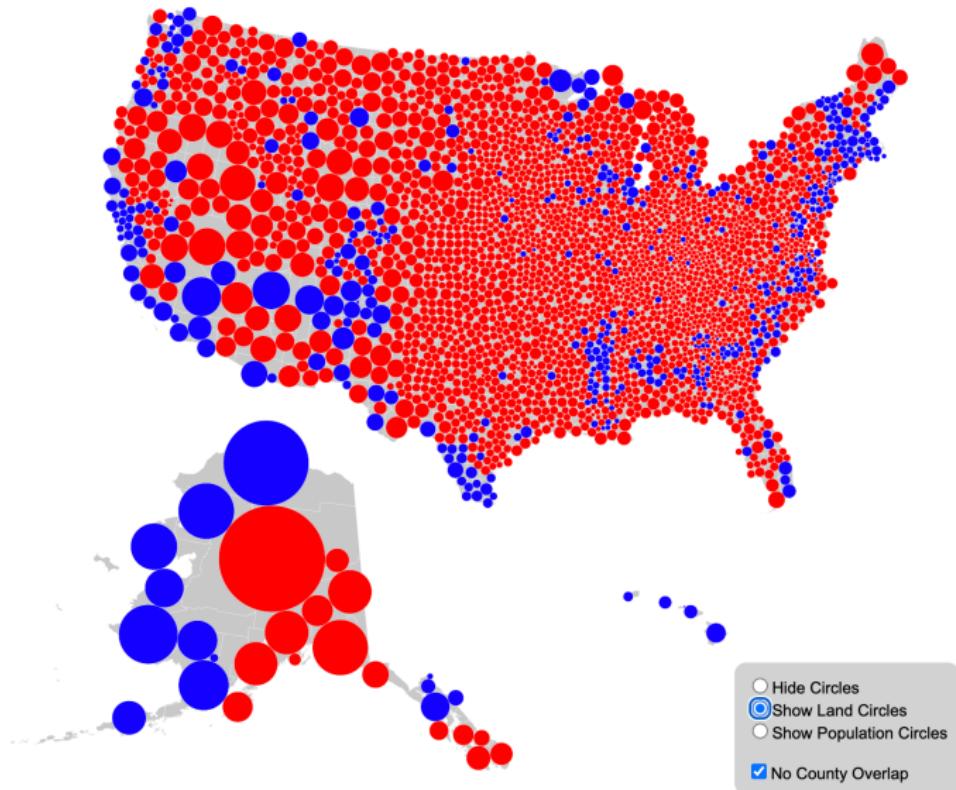
- Due **Thursday, February 24**
- Based on readings through today (Electoral Geography)

Problems of Electoral Geography

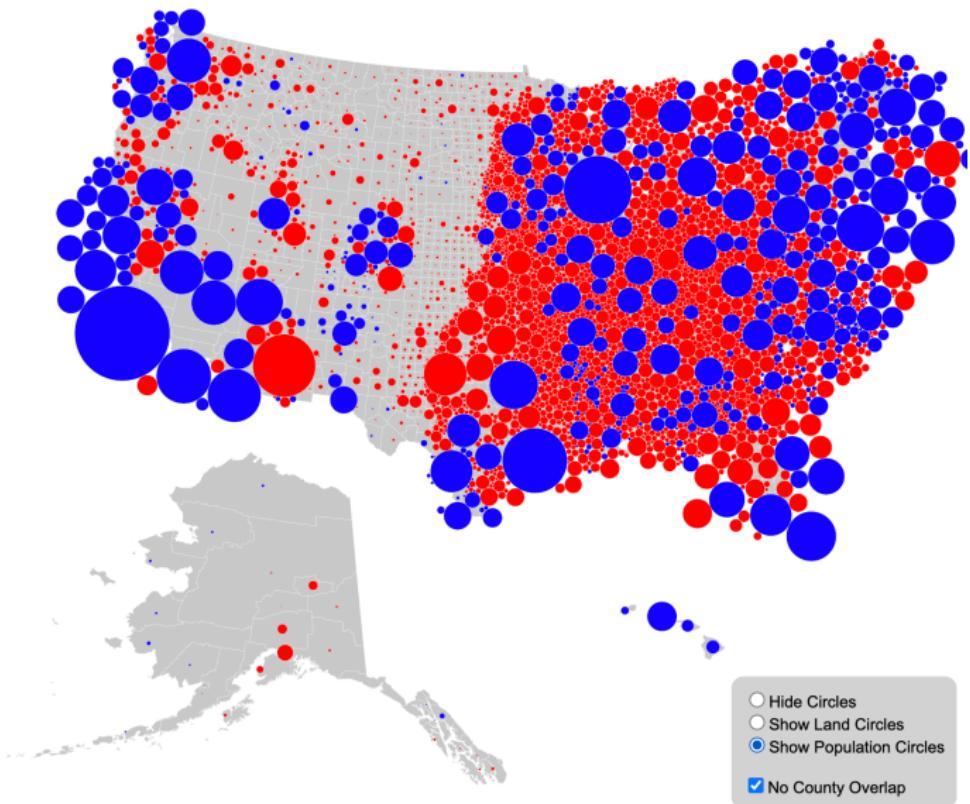
Problems of Electoral Geography

The Electoral College

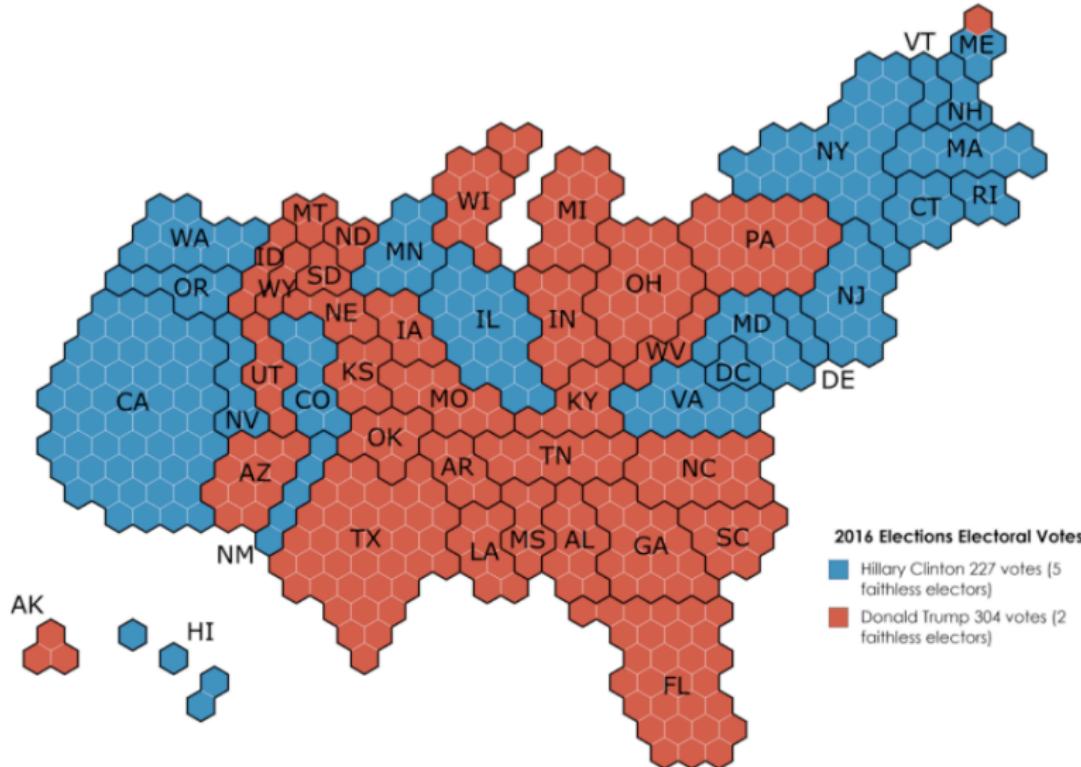
2016 Presidential Vote by County



2016 Presidential Vote by County, Population-Scaled



The Electoral College



How Much Does Your Vote Count?

Voting weight across states

To find the relative weight of a vote in each state, I divided each state's electoral votes by the total number of ballots cast, and then divided again by the fraction of an electoral college vote accorded the average American voter. Battleground states are listed in bold italics.

	STATES	ELECTORAL VOTES	▼ VOTE WEIGHT	% TURNOUT
1	Wyoming	3	2.97	59.4%
2	District of Columbia	3	2.45	60.2%
3	Vermont	3	2.42	63.5%
4	Alaska	3	2.39	61.3%
5	Hawaii	4	2.37	41.7%
6	North Dakota	3	2.21	59.1%
7	Rhode Island	4	2.19	59.0%
8	South Dakota	3	2.06	58.5%
9	West Virginia	5	1.78	49.9%
10	Delaware	3	1.72	63.7%

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STATES	ELECTORAL VOTES	▲ VOTE WEIGHT	% TURNOUT
1 Florida	29	0.78	64.5%
2 North Carolina	15	0.8	64.8%
3 Colorado	9	0.82	69.9%
4 Ohio	18	0.83	62.8%
5 Pennsylvania	20	0.83	62.8%
6 Virginia	13	0.83	65.7%
7 Massachusetts	11	0.84	66.8%
8 Wisconsin	10	0.85	69.3%
9 Michigan	16	0.85	64.6%
10 Minnesota	10	0.86	74.1%

+ Show 41 more

How Much Does Your Vote Count?

The Electoral College benefits both big states and small states, as long as they are *battleground states*:

- 14 closely divided battleground states accounted for 97.7% of the 300 post-convention campaign events in 2008
 - Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Missouri, Colorado, North Carolina, Nevada, New Hampshire, Michigan, Indiana, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Iowa
- As a general rule, the money that presidential candidates spend closely parallels the distribution of campaign events
 - In, 2008, 99.75% of all advertising spending was in just 18 states
- The rest are “*spectator states*”

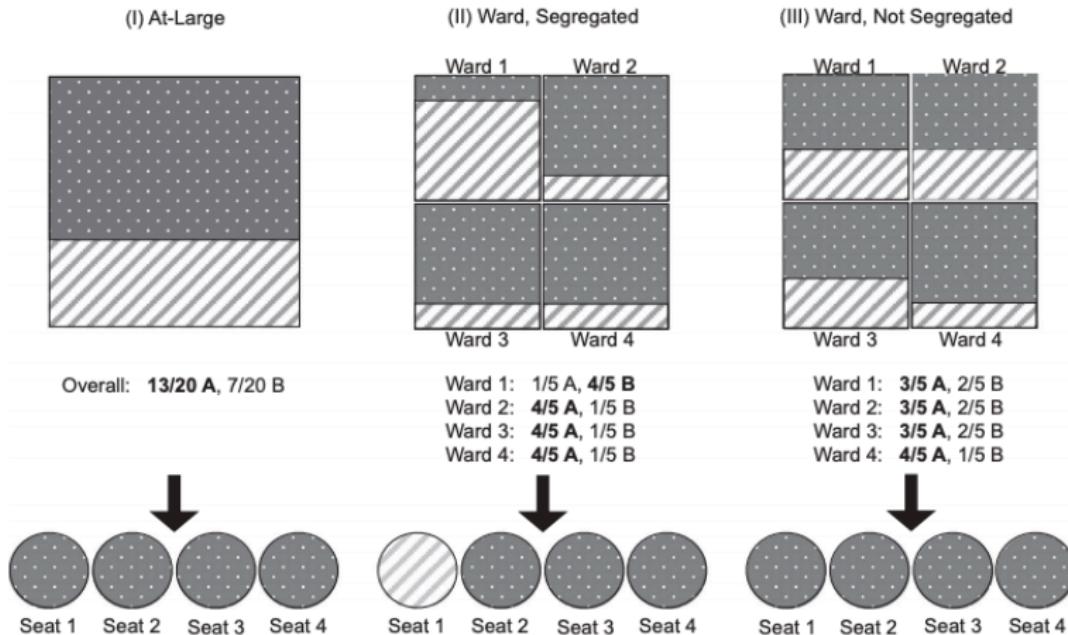
Koza et al, “Every Vote Equal: A State-Based Plan for Electing the President by National Popular Vote”

Problems of Electoral Geography

Electoral Districts

Another Aggregation Issue: Electoral Districts

FIGURE 1 Conversion of Votes to Seats, Wards vs. At-Large Districts



But do majority-minority districts improve minority representation?

Cameron et al., "Do Majority-Minority Districts Maximize Substantive Black Representation in Congress?"

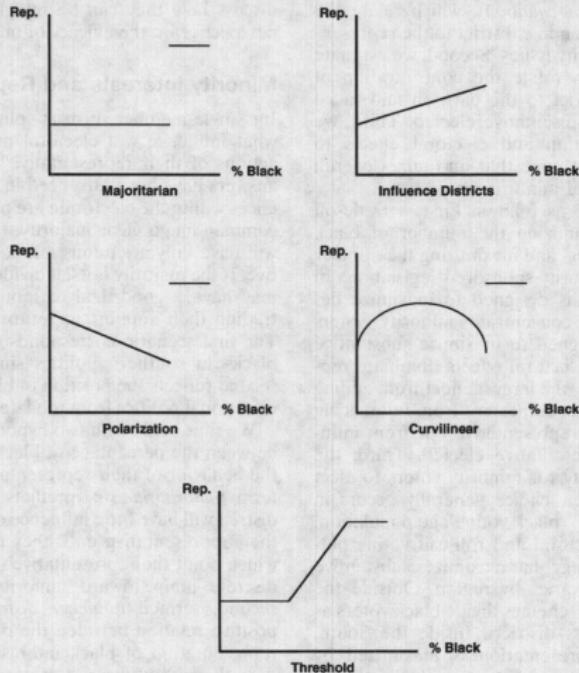
- **Help:** Guarantees a seat in office
- **Hurt:** Dilutes minority influence in other districts

Key (empirical) question: what is the relationship between the composition of a district and the behavior of its representative?

- *Majoritarianism*
- *Influence districts*
- Other possibilities...

The Shape of Representation

FIGURE 1. Hypotheses Concerning the Relation between Percentage of Black Voters and Representation of Black Interests



The Shape of Representation

Empirical approach:

1. Estimate **representation effects**: Effect of Black voting-age population (BVAP) on **representation** (support for civil rights bills)
2. Estimate **electoral effects**: Effect of BVAP on expected **partisanship and race** of representative
3. Simulate Black representation from various districting schemes

Results: substantive representation is maximized when minorities are:

- Spread out outside the South
- Just shy of majorities in the South

Problems of Electoral Geography

Voting Rights + Federalism

De facto vs. de jure voting equality

The Reconstruction Constitutional amendments ended **de jure** inequalities in access to the vote.

Amendment XIV (1868): *No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.*

Amendment XV (1870): *The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.*

“First-generation barriers to access” (de facto)

- All-white primaries
- Lengthy residency requirements
- Literacy tests + grandfather clauses
 - Exemptions for those who served in the United States or Confederate army or navy, their descendants, and anyone who had himself voted, or whose father or grandfather had voted before January 1, 1867
- Poll tax
- Felon disenfranchisement

Although African Americans outnumbered whites in Mississippi as of 1890, these provisions “*worked so well in keeping Negroes from voting... that by 1899 the percentage of qualified voters in the State who were Negroes had declined from over 50% to about 9%, and by 1954 only about 5% of the Negroes of voting age in Mississippi were registered.*” (United States v. Mississippi)

The Voting Rights Act of 1965

Section 2: Bans any “standard, practice, or procedure” that “results in a denial or abridgement of the right of any citizen to vote on account of race or color.”

The Voting Rights Act of 1965

Section 5: Established **preclearance**: Covered jurisdictions could not enact new voting rules without prior approval from Department of Justice. Covered jurisdictions:

- Jurisdiction had “test or device” restricting the opportunity to register and vote in place as of 1964
- Less than 50 percent of persons of voting age were registered to vote on November 1, 1964/voting in 1964 presidential election
- Entire states of Alabama, Alaska, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia
- Additionally, counties in four other states: Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, and North Carolina.

Set to expire after five years but renewed by Congress ever since.

Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder

Majority opinion (**Roberts**, Scalia, Kennedy, Thomas, Alito):

1. Constitutionally, states have the power to regulate elections.
2. The Voting Rights Act represents an “extraordinary departure from the traditional course of relations between the States and the Federal Government.”
3. Justified by “exceptional conditions” of discrimination and lack of other remedies
4. Those exceptional conditions are no longer in place.
 - Increases since the 1960s in Black voter registration, turnout, candidacy, serving in elected office.

Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder

Ruth Bader Ginsburg's dissent (joined by Breyer, Sotomayor, Kagan):

1. Voting discrimination still exists and preclearance was actively keeping it at bay.
 - *Jurisdictions covered by the preclearance requirement continued to submit, in large numbers, proposed changes to voting laws that the Attorney General **declined to approve**, auguring that barriers to minority voting would quickly resurface were the preclearance remedy eliminated.*
2. Specifically, **second-generation** barriers to voting: "*Efforts to reduce the impact of minority votes, in contrast to direct attempts to block access to the ballot.*"
 - Racial gerrymandering
 - At-large elections

Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder

3. The “outdated” coverage formula still corresponds to realities on the ground:

- Congress carefully reviewed preclearance jurisdictions when it reauthorized the VRA in 2006
- *“And countless witnesses, reports, and case studies documented continuing problems with voting discrimination in those jurisdictions. In light of this record, Congress had more than a reasonable basis to conclude that the existing coverage formula was not out of sync with conditions on the ground in covered areas.”*
- *“Second-generation barriers to minority voting rights have emerged in the covered jurisdictions as attempted substitutes for the first-generation barriers.”*

Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder

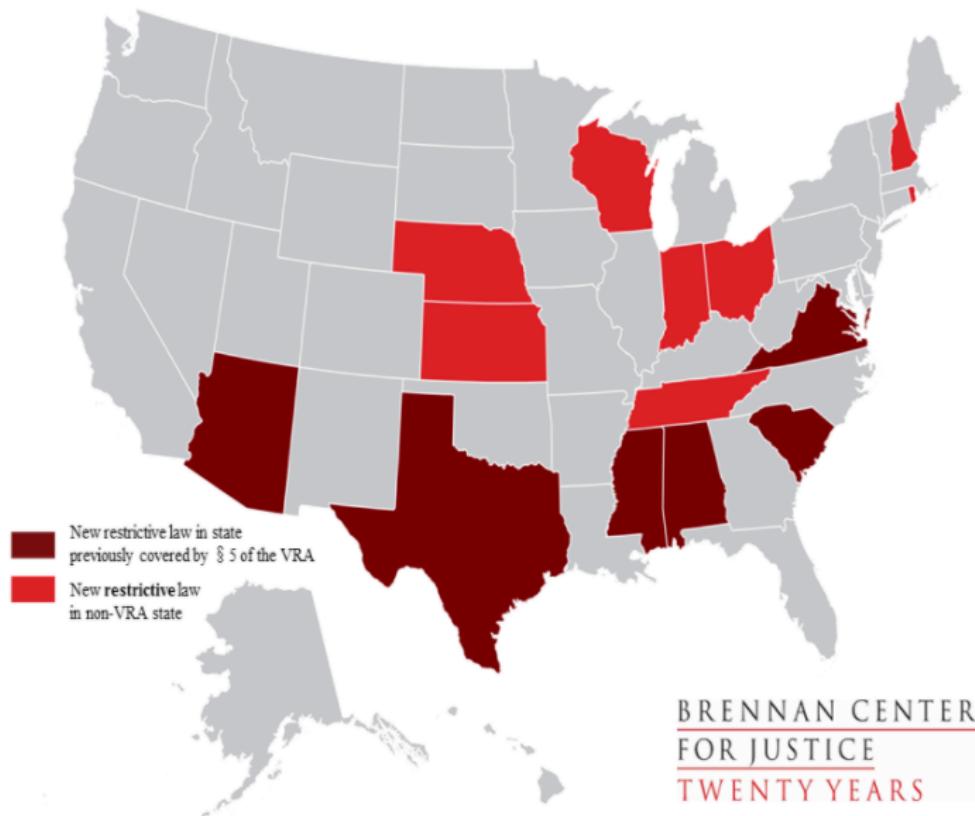
“Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.” (RBG, 2013)

Consequences of Shelby

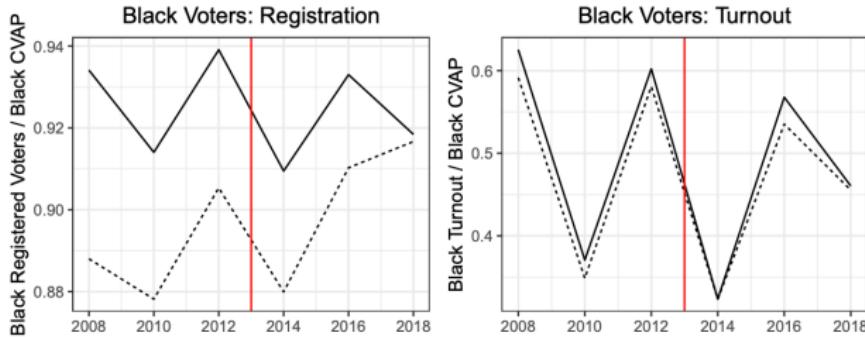
25 states have adopted more restrictive voting requirements since 2010:

1. Strict photo ID requirements (15 states)
2. Laws making it harder to register (and stay registered) (12 states)
3. Laws making it more difficult to vote early/absentee (10 states)
4. Laws making it harder to restore voting rights to people with criminal convictions (3 states)

Consequences of Shelby



Consequences of Shelby



Source: Komisarchik and White (2021)

Problems of Electoral Geography

Underlying Population Patterns

An Introduction to Algorithmic Redistricting



The original Gerrymander: right here in Massachusetts

An Introduction to Algorithmic Redistricting

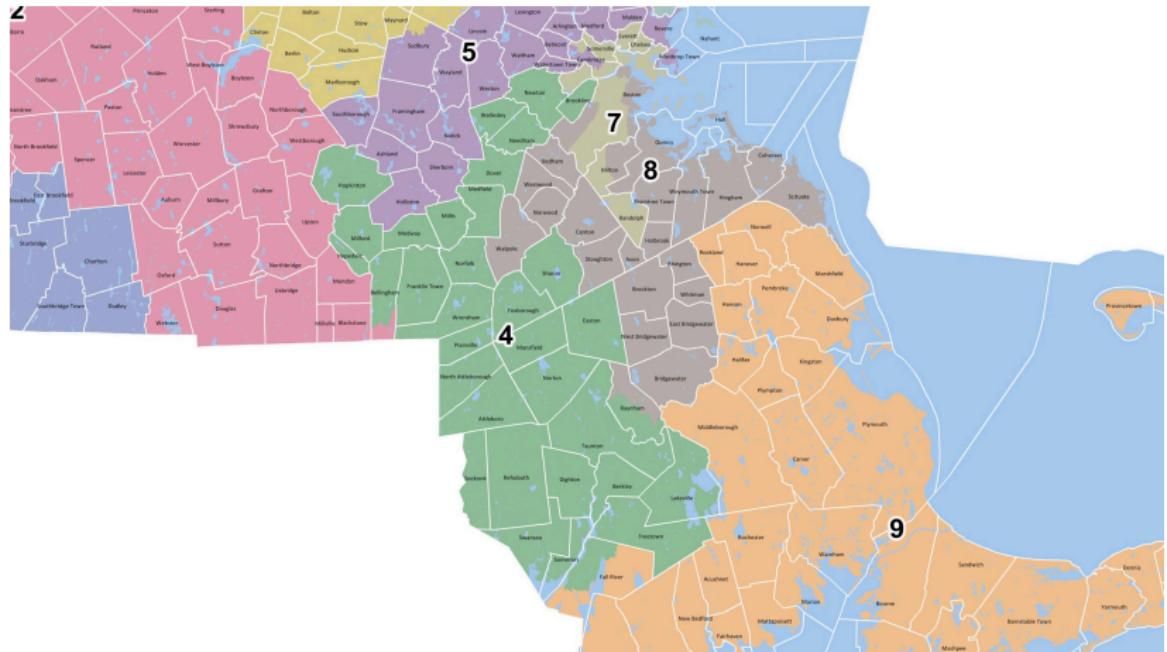
But what exactly does it *mean* for a district to be unusual or unfair?

The law requires that a district meet some conditions:

1. Equal population
2. Contiguity
3. Compactness

So we further seek a way to determine whether a district is unusual or unfair, accounting for these conditions.

Solution: Enumerate all Possible Districting Schemes?



This quickly becomes computationally infeasible.

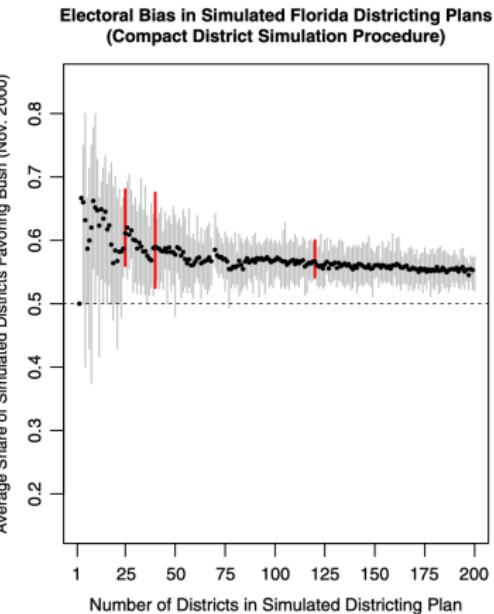
An Introduction to Algorithmic Redistricting

Enter **algorithmic redistricting**: in short, a way to **quantify** the “unusualness” or “unfairness” of a district using cutting-edge statistical and computational techniques

- Because the problem quickly becomes too big to enumerate, relies on Bayesian statistics and graph theory

A nice example here.

Chen and Rodden: “Unintentional Gerrymandering”



The Bush-Gore vote share in 2000 was exactly 50-50.