

To: American Politics DCSI  
From: Tyler Swartzell

## **Gerrymandering and Polarization**

**Summary:** The media and the electorate often cite gerrymandering (partisan redistricting) as a culprit for the perceived increase of polarization, partisan representation, and a decrease in electoral competitiveness in today's political climate. Indeed, polarization has risen sharply over the past half-century (Barber, McCarty, 2015); however, there seems to be a general consensus among contemporary political scientists that gerrymandering contributes little to the overall level of partisan polarization. Nevertheless, political scientists disagree on different solutions to legislative redistricting, such as independent commissions or state and federal courts. In *Evenwel v. Abbott* (2016), the creation and use of independent commissions was ruled constitutional when voted on via ballot initiative. In general, the Supreme Court has not ruled definitively on whether partisan gerrymandering is constitutional. Moreover, the court has not agreed on a specific metric to measure a district's level of gerrymandering. However, the court is set to hear oral arguments on partisan gerrymandering cases in North Carolina and Maryland this session, which could set precedent on both issues.

**The gerrymander and polarization:** As previously mentioned, there appears to be a general understanding among political scientists that gerrymandering has little impact on the growing polarization in American politics and that this topic is incredibly nuanced (Masket, Winburn Wright, 2012). With this scholarly consensus, a lot of the debate between political scientists is whether legislative redistricting versus redistricting by an independent commission or by the courts contributes more to partisan polarization. The conclusions have been mixed.

- Pro Legislative redistricting
  - Masket, Winburn, and Wright conclude that redistricting by court or independent commission seem to contribute more to partisan polarization, while states with legislative redistricting have experienced a slight decrease in partisan polarization at the state legislature level (2016).
  - In another study by Masket, Winburn, and Wright, the authors concede that American state and federal legislatures have become more polarized, in addition to decreasing electoral competition. However, the authors conclude partisan redistricting has little impact on either of these concessions (2006).
  - Some pundits and scholars now believe that voters are engaging in "sorting". This is the idea that voters are moving into districts with others who have similar political viewpoints to their own (Tam Cho, Gimpel & Hui, 2013). A popular example for this is the shift of the American South from Democratic to solidly Republican. The "sorting" theory shifts blame from partisan redistricting to the American electorate.
- Against Legislative redistricting
  - Grainger, in 2010, came up with a different conclusion. By studying the state of California, a state that has used a combination of both legislative and independent-panel redistricting, Grainger concluded that there is "support for

the claim that the type of redistricting is, in fact, associated with changes in polarization. These findings suggest that legislative redistricting (relative to panel-drawn redistricting) increases polarization in the legislature.”

**Broader effects of gerrymandering:** Gerrymandering goes beyond polarization by impacting areas in the electoral environment. Often cited by pundits, politicians, the media, and some scholars is the decrease in electoral competitiveness and the increase in partisanship.

- Electoral competitiveness
  - While gerrymandering has contributed some to a decrease in electoral competitiveness, particularly in congressional and state elections, “gerrymandering has little to no effect on the partisan outcome of congressional elections”, and in the grand scheme of the electoral environment, gerrymandering’s impact is quite small (Chen, Cottrell, 2016).
- Partisanship
  - A popular view is that gerrymandering has led to the increase of partisan polarization in Congress. In effect, this leads to partisan gridlock of legislative agendas. According to the Pew Research Center, the passage of substantive and nonceremonial bills have decreased in recent decades (DeSilver, 2019). This gridlock can be seen by the increase of funding-related government shutdowns, two of which have been under President Trump. However, there is a much more likely answer to partisanship instead of gerrymandering.
  - The United States Senate has become much more polarized. If gerrymandering has a large impact on polarization in America, a casual observer of politics would see a difference in the partisan polarization between the Senate, whom have no districts, and the House and state legislatures, however, this is not the case (Persily, 2015). The author and contributor write that the Senate has become much more polarized, and its use of the filibuster and cloture have risen dramatically in recent decades. To end debate on a topic (cloture), a vote of 60 senators is required. This makes it harder to pass legislation in an increasingly polarized Senate, essentially requiring 60 votes, instead of 51, for passage.

**Conclusion:** Gerrymandering has very real and serious implications on the United States. While the evidence of gerrymandering’s effects on polarization seem to be small, that does not diminish its importance in electoral politics. Gerrymandering continues to influence electoral competitiveness, and which party may pick up a particular seat. Moreover, gerrymandering has a few different solutions such as independent commissions and court redistricting, although the evidence for their effectiveness is mixed. Gerrymandering continues to be a very salient topic in American politics regarding polarization, yet the discussion is misguided.

## References

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