



# REDISTRICTING WITH INTEGRITY: A MATTER OF FAITH

## WHAT'S THE MATTER?

Every ten years, all U.S. states redraw the boundaries for U.S. congressional districts in order to comply with the equal protection clause of the Constitution: the mandate that each U.S. Representative's district be equally populated. States use decennial Census population data to determine districts and then redraw them using very specific block-level data. Aside from the constitutional mandate of equal population counts per district, federal law has little guidance governing this process. Likewise, most states have few rules regarding the congressional redistricting process. This has allowed abuses, namely gerrymandering, to run rampant, creating inequitable districts that are unlikely to change without reforms.

## THE VALUES OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY

As people of faith, we encourage clear values to guide the redistricting process as a means to help people be active participants in a thriving democratic community. Ultimately we look to build and foster communities of interest, with shared goals and shared concerns. This includes making sure that elected leaders live in the same area with their constituents so that they best understand the challenges and issues of the community and have a vested interest in finding solutions.

As people of faith, we want to see that the dignity of every human being is respected. In a democracy, this means people have a voice in choosing leadership and agency to improve their communities and to address barriers to the common good. Ensuring equal access to the democratic process empowers people to participate in building a better world, beginning with their own community. We believe that power is meant to serve and to be accountable to the common good. It should not be wielded in order to maintain continued control of power. Gerrymandering undermines these values in our democracy.

## THE DISTORTION OF OUR DEMOCRACY

Gerrymandering is the strategic distortion of the redistricting process to manipulate power structures and democratic input. Since there are no clear guidelines for the redistricting process state legislatures are charged with drawing their own districts and can do so according to their desired outcome. As a result, whichever party is in the majority during the year of redistricting has undue influence over how power is distributed for the next ten years of elections. Advances in large data set manipulation combined with the rise of social media has created a cottage industry that enables majority parties to draw the most sure proof district boundaries to reelect incumbents. This extreme gerrymandering has meant that many states have cycles of elections where the outcomes are a foregone conclusion; and leads voters to feel powerless because they recognize their votes are irrelevant.

This systemic problem of partisan gerrymandering has become standard practice; undermining the ideals of our democracy and fracturing communities of interest beyond recognition. For example, the League of Women

Voters sought to arrange an election forum in a district that had been gerrymandered with a border 225 miles long. It was so geographically distorted that there was no location for the forum that was easily accessible to all the voters in the district.

The manipulation of district boundaries for partisan or other discriminatory purposes is extremely harmful to communities as it is used to suppress and distort their representation. Black, Indigenous and other communities of color are amongst the hardest hit. Because of their propensity to vote along party lines, state legislatures manipulate districts by lumping neighborhoods of color together in as few districts as possible or by fracturing parts of them into different districts. The goal is to distort their representation and the power of their votes. For example, in Louisiana one district was drawn to include predominantly Black neighborhoods in northern Baton Rouge and predominantly Black neighborhoods in parts of New Orleans—cities over 80 miles apart—to ensure that there is only one safely blue U.S. district in the state.

When Republican-drawn maps in Virginia, North Carolina, and Texas were successfully challenged on the grounds that they discriminated against minority voters, Republicans defended the maps by arguing that politics, rather than race, had been the driving rationale. Evidence shows that racial gerrymandering and partisan gerrymandering are often one and the same. Either way, it is a distortion of the democratic process and undermines the ideal that every vote counts equally.

“Gerrymandering allows politicians in power to control who wins elections and takes the power away from the voting people. It uses people as pawns in partisan ways and controls how their voices are heard. Independent redistricting commissions return that power to the voters and brings their elected leaders back into the communities that they represent. **When we draw fair districts, we respect the dignity of every human being as a beloved child of God.**”

- The Rev. Heather Barta, Episcopal Priest involved in Michigan's Proposal 2 to end gerrymandering in the state.

## THE FAITHFUL RESPONSE

Citizen-led ballot proposals in many states have called for changes to redefine how the redistricting process should work. There are ways to frame and structure the redrawing of maps that create a fair, impartial and transparent process not driven by political power dynamics. In 2018, a record five states passed redistricting reform for drawing congressional and/or legislative districts. However, the formation of non-partisan, independent redistricting commissions like this may not be possible at the state level due to state rules or to resistance by those in power.

The *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* would address gerrymandering at the federal level and implement a number of other critical democracy reforms. This landmark democracy reform bill creates independent commissions in every state to conduct redistricting. The membership of these commissions consists of equal representation by Republican, Democratic, and unaffiliated or third party commissioners, thus ensuring that political interests do not drive the process.

The legislation also imposes a uniform set of rules for how districts should be drawn by outlawing partisan gerrymandering and prioritizing criteria that unifies geographically-concentrated communities with shared interests. The *For the People Act* establishes a clear set of guidelines for map-drawing rules and how to apply them, including standards for public input and transparency at certain points in the redrawing process.

State redistricting in 2021 has been delayed by COVID impacts on census data, but will begin before the end of the year. Passage of the *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* would set clear criteria and standards for states to draw fair maps. These reforms to the redistricting process, including the prohibition on partisan gerrymandering, will help create a thriving democracy that is equitable for all participants.

