

**Neal G.
Lineback**



GERRY WHO?

Gerrymandering is a major political issue today, just as it was in 1812 when the practice was first named. To “gerrymander” is to draw a voting district’s boundaries to advantage a certain political group. Although this practice is patently illegal, politicians do it and are frequently challenged for it. In 1962, the Supreme Court ruled that citizens could challenge voting districts unequal in their representation. Most of those challenged so far have had incredibly bizarre geographic shapes.

Gerrymandering, as a term, first originated when Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry pushed a bill through the legislature in 1812 dividing the state into voting districts. He sought unfair political advantage for his party by strategically grouping his opponent party’s supporters, the Federalists, in just a few districts. Thus, the Federalists would win with landslide in their districts, but not be able to muster a majority in the others, giving Gov. Gerry’s party the advantage.

One of Gov. Gerry’s new districts had a bizarre elongated shape like a salamander. Hence, the Federalists named the practice, “gerrymander,” after the governor and the animal.

Most redistricting cases involve reap-

portioning of congressional seats following each decennial census. For example, when a state’s population growth warrants adding another congressional seat, a new district must be drawn from the old districts.

Traditionally, new congressional districts were designed by redistricting committees composed of congressional delegations and legislators, often using maps, overlays and colored pencils. More recently, sophisticated geographic information systems are being used. Now numerous geographically detailed physical, social, economic and political variables can be used in redrawing the lines down to the city block level. Control still remains in the hands of politicians, however.

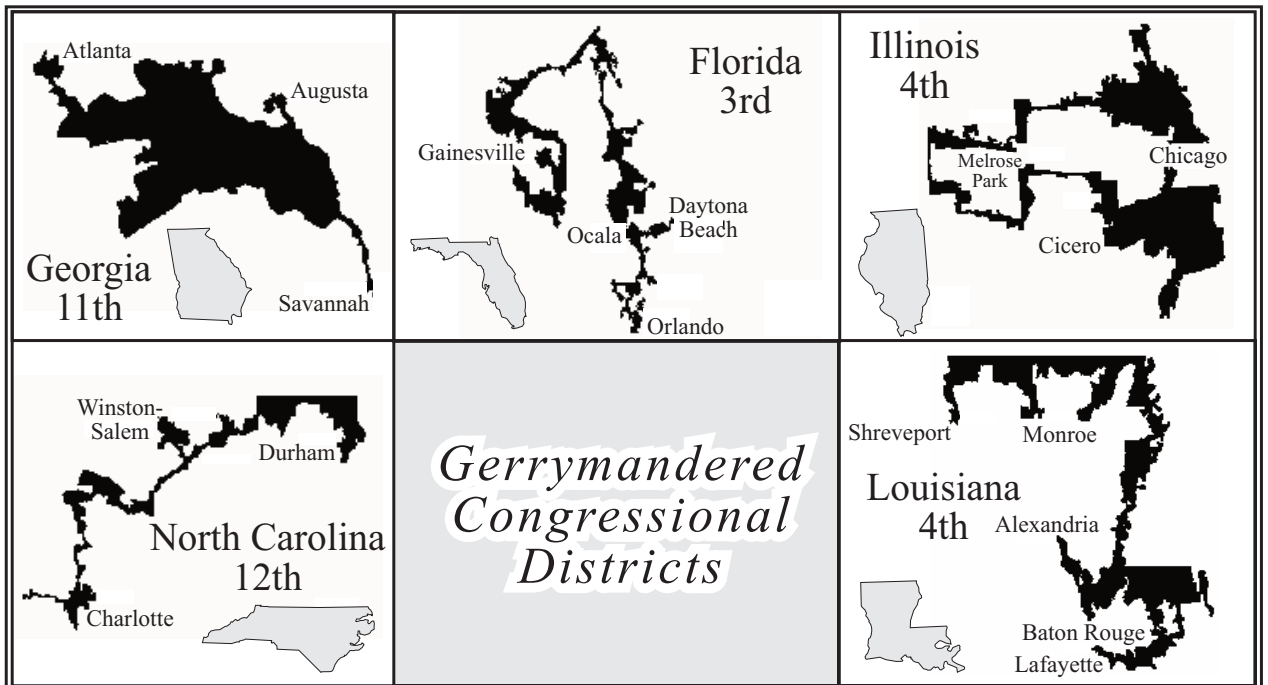
Many of the recent court cases have involved racial gerrymandering. This often has involved efforts to develop new districts that might elect more minority congressional representatives. Most have been honorable exercises, but some redistricting efforts have been so absurd as to appear obviously flawed. North Carolina’s 12th District, Georgia’s 11th, Florida’s 3rd, Illinois’ 4th and Louisiana’s

Court rejected it for the third time.

Justice Sandra O’Conner wrote, “(Racial gerrymandering) reinforces the perception that members of the same racial group—regardless of their age, education, economic status, or the community in which they live—think alike, share the same political interests, and will prefer the same candidates at the polls. (Therefore)...a racial gerrymander may exacerbate the very patterns of racial bloc voting that majority-minority districting is sometimes said to counteract.”

Similar problems occur in each of the other districts: Georgia’s 11th runs from Atlanta to coastal Savannah; Florida’s horseshoe-shaped 3rd was deemed a “race-based” district; Illinois’ “ear muff-shaped” 4th was a Hispanic district, and Louisiana’s “Z-shaped” 4th zigzagged through 28 parishes and five major cities.

A Minnesota website provides more detail on this interesting political geography issue (www.senate.leg.state.mn.us). Gerrymandering remains a hot news item as politicians try to obtain minority representation in their parties without drawing bizarre congressional districts that



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Source: <http://www.senate.leg.state.mn.us/departments/scr/redist/red907.htm>

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4th are examples, most of which have been struck down by the courts.

North Carolina’s 12th District has received the most attention. Called the “I-85 district,” it follows Interstate 85 for 160 miles (257 km), often no wider than the highway, but gerrymandering right and left to pick up predominantly African-American populations. The Supreme

worsen patterns of racial bloc voting.

And that is Geography in the News, Feb. 26, 1999.

(The author is a Professor of Geography at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC. ASU political geographer, Professor Roger Winsor, provided assistance.) #471