



# Packing and cracking

## Pennsylvania legislators abuse redistricting to secure power

Every 10 years after the census, new maps are drawn around the country to designate state legislative and congressional districts. This process is necessary to ensure that representation in government reflects population changes.

In an ideal world, districts would be delineated by impartial parties. Each district would contain roughly the same number of people in contiguous areas conforming to existing municipal and geographical boundaries. In rural areas, districts would be larger because the population is spread out. In more densely populated urban areas, the districts would be smaller. Elected officials for the districts would represent communities bound by location, local economies, local governance and all the other factors that define a region.



**KEVIN O'NEILL**  
*InSites*

Some states have independent commissions to draw districts in a fair manner that respects community bonds. Pennsylvania does not. We allow self-interested legislators to draw districts that help them stay in office and preserve power for the majority party. Instead of elected officials being chosen by communities with common interests, legislators cherry pick voters who share their ideology and gerrymander them into districts that defy any sense of community.

**Fairdistrictspa.com** is the website of a nonpartisan coalition

working since 2016 to bring fairness and transparency to the process. Founders of Fair Districts PA include the League of Women Voters, Common Cause Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Council of Churches and others. It is supported by mostly small-dollar donations and doesn't accept money from political action committees or political parties. The site seeks to raise awareness of Pennsylvania's bad redistricting policies, educate people about better ways to do it and encourage citizens to demand the legislature makes needed changes.

The site is divided into three main sections. The first one, *The Problem*, explains what's wrong with Pennsylvania's current laws. It details how incumbents use the process for personal and party gain while harming the interests of citizens. The section

dives into the history of gerrymandering and the problems it creates. There are maps showing how districts have been transformed over the years using high-tech data gathering and map-drawing software. What started as compact, contiguous parcels have become farcical shapes that bend and wind their way around to pack districts with desirable voters or crack blocks of undesirable voters.

The next section, *How We'll Fix It*, offers solutions to create a better system. It lists criteria that should be used to create fair districts. It champions legislation that has been introduced to fix the problem. It talks about the work done so far to address the issues and touts some of the progress made so far.

The third section, *Take Action*, details ways you can get

involved. There's a petition you can sign and contact information for legislators. There are local groups you can join and information on passing local resolutions. You can find speakers to explain the issue to your group, and there's coaching on how to write and speak effectively on the issue to influence lawmakers.

The site is nicely designed and easy to navigate. Some of the information is out of date, but there's also current updates on events and activities. The redistricting process is happening now. There's no better time to let your voice be heard if you want to help make government work for the people instead of for itself.

**KEVIN O'NEILL** is a staff artist for The Times-Tribune. Share your favorite websites with him at [koneill@timeshamrock.com](mailto:koneill@timeshamrock.com).