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The ReDistricting Game: Teaching Congressional Gerrymandering through an Online Simulation Game

Emily Juckett and Joseph R. Feinberg

“It used to be that the idea was, once every two years voters elected their representatives, and now, instead, it’s every ten years the representatives choose their constituents.”

—Pamela Karlan, quoted in *The New Yorker* (March 6, 2006)¹

The impact of the 2010 Census in conjunction with the outcome of the mid-term elections in November has the potential to alter the American political landscape in a significant way. After the elections, incumbents and newly elected state-level officials will analyze data from the Census to redraw the district lines for the 435 members of the House of Representatives, a process that is, in many ways, famously political. Senator John Cornyn (R-Tex.) is quoted as saying, “You can’t take politics out of politics, and there is nothing more political than redistricting.”²

Many of the newly elected governors and state legislatures will continue a redistricting practice that became notorious approximately 200 years ago. The process we call gerrymandering became known as such after Elbridge Gerry, who was governor of Massachusetts from 1810 to 1812, signed a map into law that included a uniquely shaped district that appeared to resemble a salamander. The district was nicknamed “gerrymander,” which now describes the “intentional

manipulation of district boundaries for individual or partisan gain.”³ A few states have passed laws making it more difficult for the political parties in power to draw gerrymandered districts, but the majority of states have not instituted these safeguards.

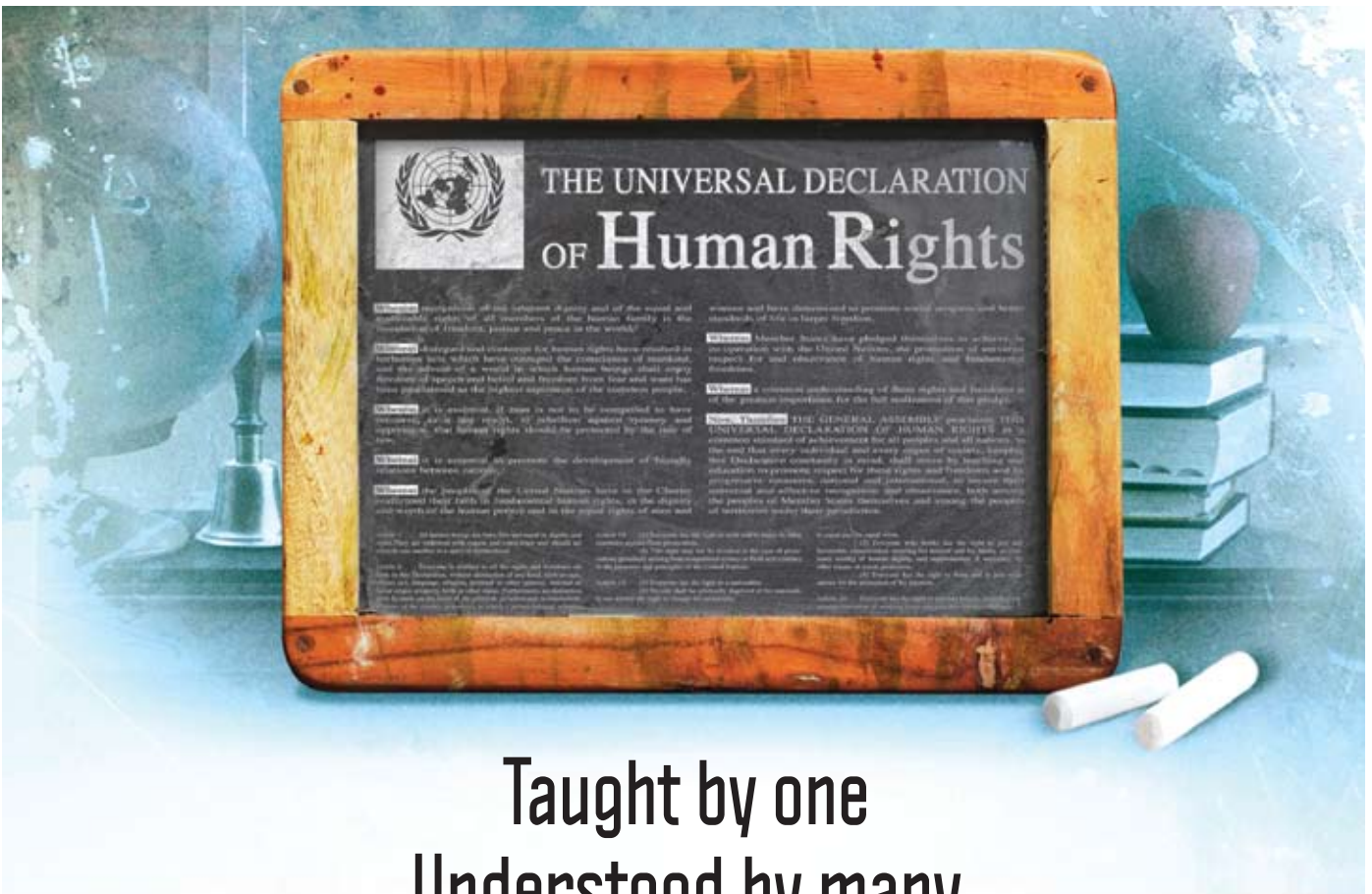
Battles over district lines between Democrats and Republicans will likely make headlines when new lawmakers take office and is sure to be the subject of media scrutiny and citizen concern. Chris Satullo, news director for WHYY, calls the redistricting process, “The fine dark art of drawing the lines of political districts” to benefit incumbents and the party currently in power.⁴ It is important that student citizens learn about and evaluate the practice of drawing favorable district lines, because the impact of these local and regional decisions have important ramifications for the entire nation.

Social studies students may not easily notice or quickly grasp the significance of gerrymandered district lines. By arming students with knowledge and encourag-

ing them to make their voices heard in the political realm, social studies teachers have a unique opportunity to ensure that students discover the power in writing a letter to members of Congress, calling state legislatures, or participating in town hall meetings with fellow citizens. Most students ignore not only the census results but changes in congressional representation and shifts in the balance of political power. However, contemporary instructional methods, such as the digital simulation game described in this article, can make such issues more relevant to students and may encourage them to become more active citizens.

The ReDistricting Game

The ReDistricting Game is an online simulation game that engages learners in the redistricting process and spotlights the problem of gerrymandering districts in the United States.⁵ Hands-on simulation games such as this one can motivate students to think at higher levels and master key concepts. The concept of redistricting does not automatically lend



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1. Source: Amnesty International Report 2009

United for Human Rights
HumanRights.com

itself to a fascinating learning experience for students. It is difficult for students to relate to the intricacies of redrawing congressional districts, let alone understand the political nature of the process. The ReDistricting Game makes the concept of gerrymandering relevant with student participants taking the role of a politician. As Norm Ornstein, of the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute noted, “It is not easy to make the redistricting process understandable—and near-miraculous to be able to do so in a highly entertaining way.”⁶ Through the simulated experience, game players explore solutions to relevant redistricting issues, while witnessing firsthand the consequences of altering districts. If there is limited access to computers or the Internet, we strongly recommend teaching about gerrymandering by using the simulation activity created by Steve Lapham in *Middle Level Learning*.⁷

Student Responses

In order to gain greater insight into student reactions to The ReDistricting Game and its associated web content, 28 students in a 12th grade honors American government class were asked to reflect on their experience with the game. Initially, they were instructed to explore The ReDistricting Game as a way to experience the process of drawing district lines from the perspective of a politician. Prior to this experience, the class briefly learned about gerrymandering and redistricting as part of a larger lecture, spending about 15 minutes examining the main parts of the processes and the relevant pressures on politicians. The class was given two class periods in the library and time at home to work through the website, play at least three rounds of the game, and explore a world where they have to make decisions from the perspective of a politician.

The simulation quickly puts students into the driver’s seat of redistricting, showing them how the simple task of drawing lines on a map can quickly lead to unfair gerrymandering practices. By

experiencing the simulated pressure of the situation, students learn more about political decision making and how our government functions. The ReDistricting website also offers students a chance to research contemporary gerrymandering issues throughout the nation, connecting them with current events and linking the topic to local challenges as well. As they worked through the game and website, students were asked to record their experiences and respond to a series of questions about the website (See Student Assignment Sheet for The ReDistricting Game on p. 280–281).

During the class time provided, student reactions varied. Some students were initially frustrated with the overwhelming amount of information on the website, but students took wildly different approaches to the task. Several students took the time to read through background information provided by the website, and located in several convenient places, before beginning the game; some read only the background for the first round of the game; and some skipped the background completely and jumped straight into the first scenario. The differing approaches did not seem to affect student success in the game.

As students worked to manipulate the district lines to accommodate the various needs of the scenarios, they had a variety of strategies. Some tried to make honest districts, some tried to make the most outlandish gerrymanders allowed, and one even tried to gerrymander animal shapes into his schemes—and succeeded three out of four times! Student reactions to the game were also divergent. As they worked, some were fixated, some grew frustrated, and some just focused on completing the task for the assignment grade.

The written responses from students revealed how they felt during the experience. Inexperienced gamers seemed to be the most frustrated. A Robotics Team member, who plays first-person shooter games on a regular basis, was also frustrated by the game because it

failed to challenge his particular game skills. What was interesting was that students who approached the game as a puzzle tended to think that the game was easier and had more success. Those who saw the experience as a school task struggled more to find meaning and to learn from the game.

Students in this class were accustomed to the traditional teacher-centered learning, primarily through lecture format. This affected their answers about the use of the game in the classroom. While in their oral responses to their teacher, most students noted that the game was fun and useful, their written reflections tended to praise the portions of the website that offered vocabulary terms and information about legislation that would be useful when studying for a test. Several said that without this information, the game would be less useful when preparing for a test or quiz, yet they still claimed to learn from the game.

The students’ apparent comfort with teacher-centered learning was also reflected in their responses to the question about curriculum design. Most students included in their potential lesson plans some sort of lecture element, but their designs almost all included elements of experiential learning as well. Several suggested that students give presentations to their classmates about various real-life gerrymandering situations because they learn best from teaching information to other students. Most interestingly, eight students suggested lesson plans that included a paper/pencil version of the game. This was evidently a result of several underlying emotions from students including frustration with the technology, feelings of disconnection from other classmates, and desire to learn in their typical or traditional format.

Reflections on Game Implementation

The ReDistricting Game experience is one that receives positive reviews from many sources—members of Congress, newspaper writers, and lobbyists all seem

to view the game as an effective tool to teach about the issues of gerrymandering in redistricting scenarios.⁸ The students who explored the game gave it generally positive reviews, most saying several days later that the experience was unique in their high school careers and one that should be offered to future government classes. On the unit test following the game play, students overwhelmingly answered the questions on gerrymandering and redistricting correctly. While this may be attributed to their extended exposure to the topic, we believe that the game play had a positive impact in making the information memorable. Several

students mentioned that they later played the game at home voluntarily, and were more successful a second time. One even said that she got her father interested, who forwarded a link for the game to his friends. Overall, the effects of the game exploration were significant enough for the teacher to seriously consider using the game next year.

While the game play was a successful endeavor for this class, we do not suggest that the results would be the same for all other classes or schools. However, this experience does show that game play can be a successful tool for learning. This reinforces an important point about

implementing new technology into the classroom: each student will have a different level of experience with technology and learning, and now more than ever teachers must adapt to the needs of their students.

“Here is a telling statistic: 153 of California’s congressional and legislative seats were up in the last election and not one changed parties. What kind of democracy is that?”

—California Governor
Arnold Schwarzenegger

Student Assignment Sheet for The ReDistricting Game

The Redistricting Game

Name: _____

Your task today is to explore gerrymandering while analyzing this website, www.redistrictinggame.org, for content, interest, and quality. Please answer as honestly about the experience as possible.

First, explore the website, using the chart below as a guideline:

Game	Play at least 3 “rounds” of the game, reading the “learn more” and the quotes.
Resources	Look at “How does my state do it” for several states, including GA, TX, CA, NC, and TN.
Forum	(skip this part)
About	Skim through the “Buzz” section.
Take action	(skip this—unless you want to pass the word)

“Representatives shall be apportioned among the several States...within every subsequent term of ten years...”
Article I, Section 2, Clause 3

“You can’t take politics out of politics, and there is nothing more political than redistricting,”
—Senator John Cornyn (R-TX)

Game Results: For each round, use the Squares below to show me your results. Label each with the round number, name, and goal. Shade each district a different color and label D or R by party.

Feedback: Answer the following questions based on your experience. Be thorough and honest—what you say *does* actually matter!

- Is this a *fun* game? Why or why not?
- Would you play this game on your own if it wasn't for school? Why or why not?
- Could you learn enough about gerrymandering to pass a quiz or test if you were restricted to only playing the game? Why or why not?
- Could you learn enough about gerrymandering to pass a quiz or test from exploring the whole website on your own? Why or why not?
- Which sections of the website are most helpful? Why?

- Which sections of the website are not as useful? Why?

If you were a teacher designing a lesson on gerrymandering, what would you do?

- You tell me—what's the most effective activity or combination of activities—reading a textbook, playing the game, give a lecture, do a research project, etc.—be creative but design something that students would like while they learn. If you choose to use the Redistricting Game website, you can use the whole thing or only specific parts.
- How would you assess student learning? (Test, quiz, worksheet, presentation, discussion, etc.)

Notes

1. Pamela Karlan, Kenneth and Harle Montgomery Professor of Public Interest Law at Stanford Law School, quoted in Jeffrey Toobin's "Drawing the Line:

- Will Tom DeLay's Redistricting in Texas Cost Him His Seat?", *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2006.
2. Toobin, "Drawing the Line: Will Tom DeLay's Redistricting in Texas Cost Him His Seat?"
3. From the Glossary of The Redistricting Game, created by the School of Cinematic Arts for the Annenberg Center for Communications at the University of Southern California, www.redistrictinggame.org/index.php?pg=glossary.
4. Quoted in John Oliver Mason, "Legislative Redistricting 2010, Americans for Democratic Action Forum," *The Philadelphia Jewish Voice 44* (March 2009), www.pjvoice.com/v44/44002redistrict.aspx.
5. See www.redistrictinggame.org.
6. Norm Ornstein, of the American Enterprise Institute, quoted on the home page of www.redistrictinggame.org.
7. See Lapham, S. S. (2009). "How Politicians Gerrymander." *Middle Level Learning 36*, pp. M12-M16.
8. See Buzz about The Redistricting Game, <http://redistrictinggame.blogspot.com/>

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