
Gerrymandering's Dirty Hands Are Getting Dirtier/Bloomberg News.

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The redistricting fights breaking out across the US mark the culmination of a trend toward bare-knuckled politics that is producing increasingly gerrymandered maps on both sides.

[Gianni Sarra](#) saw it coming.

"I've always been interested in American politics," said Serra, a political philosopher at King's College in London. "It's a good source of moral dilemmas if you're interested in moral dilemmas."

Sarra watched with interest as the Great Redistricting War of 2025-2026 reached a new high point last week. The Florida legislature adopted a map designed to give Republicans a chance to win four more US House seats. That same day, the Supreme Court all but eliminated the use of the Voting Rights Act to ensure that racial majorities can't get gerrymandered out of fair representation, spurring Louisiana and Tennessee to do some last-minute map-making. Meanwhile, a new Virginia map drawn by Democrats got tied up in court.

Sarra anticipated what he calls "[retaliatory gerrymandering](#)" back in 2022, when he became interested in the moral dimension of drawing districts for partisan advantage. He came to it as a case study of the "[dirty hands](#)" problem — in this case, the moral dilemma of using anti-democratic ends to achieve a more democratic result.

That was years before Democratic states like California and Virginia temporarily abandoned their constitutional safeguards against mid-cycle partisan gerrymandering to respond to Republican attempts to tilt the map and secure control of the US House.

Sarra saw how partisanship and technical advancements in map-making were leading to an escalating redistricting arms race in the US, and thought it would lead to retaliatory gerrymandering after the next census in 2030. "The stakes rose much more quickly and much more chaotically than I expected," he said.

For much of the past 60 years, redistricting followed a more restrained playbook. Maps were rarely neutral, but divided government often forced bipartisan compromise, and line-drawers tended to protect incumbents of both parties. Just as important, they had to think beyond the next election — maps were built to survive a full decade of political and demographic change.

The new reality puts Democrats at a disadvantage. Democratic voters are [inefficiently concentrated](#) in dense, like-minded districts, diluting their voting power. And Democratic states like California, New York and Colorado have previously adopted redistricting reforms that tie their hands in a partisan redistricting war.

The end result is that even when Democrats have an advantage in the nationwide popular vote — they're up by almost 6 percentage points in the [RealClearPolitics average](#) of generic congressional polls — those votes don't necessarily give them more seats.

Hence the quandary: Is gerrymandering OK if it's in response to someone else gerrymandering first? Who was the aggressor, anyway? (Republicans argue that they were responding to gerrymanders in Democratic states like Illinois and Maryland; Democrats say President Donald Trump's demand that Texas provide five more Republican seats between census cycles started the current war.) Or are anti-democratic maps always bad, period? Ultimately, Sarra argues that the only thing worse than widespread, pervasive gerrymandering is asymmetric gerrymandering.

But where does it end? Serra said both parties need to acknowledge that gerrymandering is wrong and that neither side has completely clean hands. So far, though, there's no off-ramp in sight.

"I'm much more pessimistic now than I was a week ago, and I was pretty pessimistic a week ago," he said. "Eventually a lot of incumbents will be elected on the current system, and so why would they want to destroy it?"

Gerrymandering has drawn the attention of a wide array of academics — from [mathematicians](#) to [geographers](#) to [neuroscientists](#) to [physicists](#) — all looking for Solomonesque solutions to a seemingly intractable problem.

Sarra's contribution is a reminder that all those solutions have tradeoffs, and that the current cycle of tit-for-tat mapmaking is taking an increasing ethical toll. As he writes in his 2022 paper, "If a set of rules that is corrupting or incentivises and encourages abuse creates a perpetual cycle of retaliation, the costs from initially minor infractions will grow and grow."

— *Gregory Korte, Bloomberg News*