

Electoral Geography

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. **Define** electoral system.
2. **Distinguish** between reapportionment and redistricting.

In a representative democracy, voters elect legislators whose duty is to develop and implement public policy on behalf of their constituents. The set of procedures used to convert the votes cast in an election into the seats won by a party or candidate is referred to as an **electoral system**. *Electoral geographers* study the spatial aspects of electoral systems, voting districts, and election results.

Several different electoral systems are used in the world, but they can be classified into two main systems: the majority-plurality system and the proportional system. With *majority-plurality representation* (also called geographic representation), the person who receives a majority or plurality of the votes is elected and represents all of the voters in an electoral district. Majority-plurality systems create single-member electoral districts that are territorially defined. In general, the majority-plurality system is commonly associated with countries that have two dominant political parties, as in the United States.

In contrast, with *proportional representation* (also called party-political representation) multiple representatives can be elected. When proportional representation is used, voters choose from among political parties rather than individual candidates. After the votes are tallied, legislative seats are divided on a proportional basis. For example, a party receiving 30% of the votes would receive 30% of the legislative seats. The proportional system is widely used in Europe.

Reapportionment and Redistricting

reapportionment

The process of allocating legislative seats among voting districts so that each legislator represents approximately the same number of people.

For majority-plurality representation to be equitable, voting districts should have approximately the same number of people. **Reapportionment** becomes necessary because, over time, the population of a state can change. For example, in the U.S. House of

3. **Explain** gerrymandering.

Representatives, there are 435 seats for congressional representatives, and according to the U.S. Constitution, these seats must be apportioned or divided as equitably as possible among the 50 states according to their population. Indeed, the U.S. Constitution requires that the government conduct a census of the population every 10 years. Because of demographic change during the 1990s, Oklahoma lost one legislative seat while Arizona gained two in the reapportionment that took place following the 2000 U.S. Census.

Reapportionment is often followed by **redistricting** (Figure 7.18). Three criteria, established by the Supreme Court, guide the redistricting process. Congressional districts: (1) are to have equal population; (2) to be contiguous and compact; and (3) are to respect the boundaries of other administrative units such as counties or parishes. Redistricting is the responsibility of each state and is usually carried out by the state legislature. As a result, redistricting often becomes a contentious exercise that is influenced by party politics.

redistricting

Redrawing the boundaries of voting districts usually as a result of population change.

Gerrymandering

Reapportionment and redistricting are intended to ensure equal representation on the basis of population in the House of Representatives. They are also supposed to treat political parties, as well as racial and ethnic minorities, equally. But legislators are well aware that how the boundaries of congressional districts are drawn can influence the outcome of elections. As a result, the redistricting process regularly raises concerns about **gerrymandering**.

Electoral geographers recognize two basic gerrymandering techniques: excess vote gerrymandering

gerrymandering

The process of manipulating voting district boundaries to give an advantage to a particular political party or group.

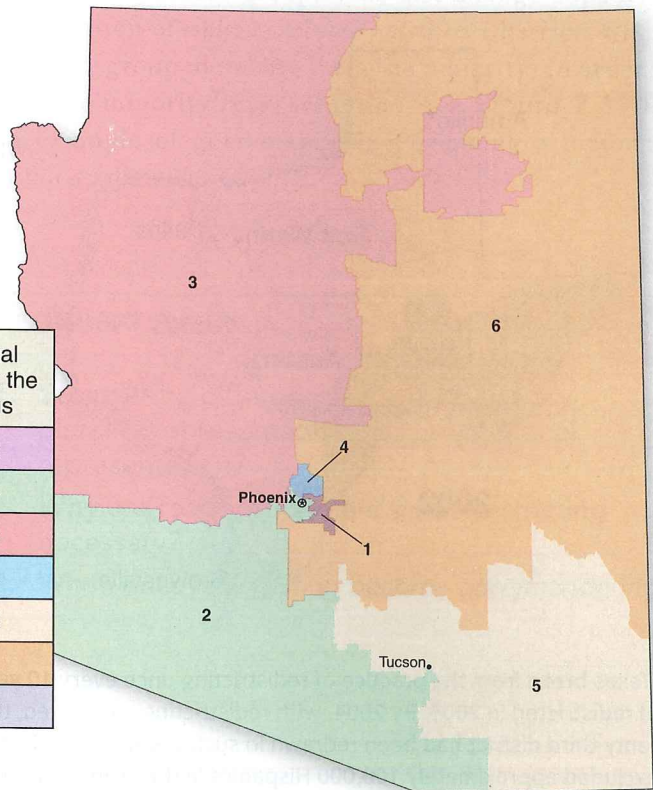
Reapportionment and redistricting in the United States • Figure 7.18

Every state is divided into congressional districts, with each represented by a single congressman. To ensure equality among a state's districts, each representative is to speak for an equal number of people. If the population of a voting district changes, redistricting may become necessary to create districts of equal population. Arizona provides a good example of the reapportionment and redistricting processes.

1 In the 1990 census, Arizona had 3,665,228 people.

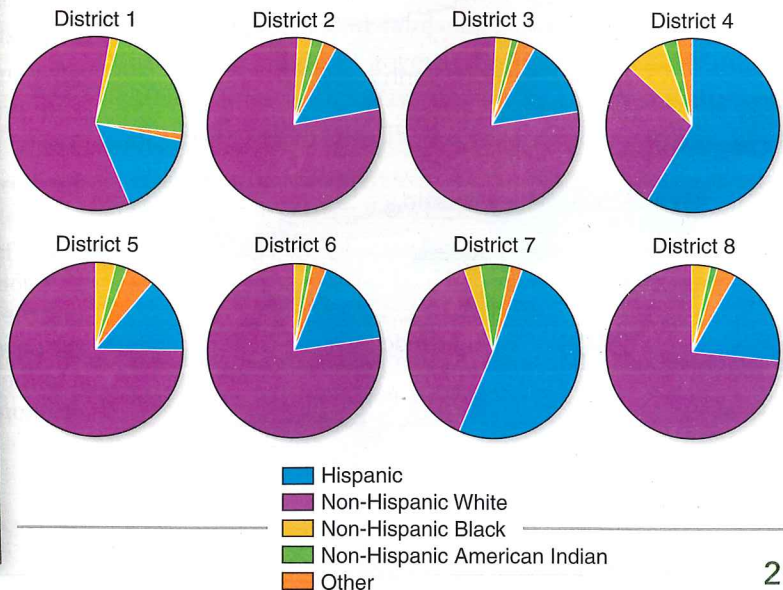
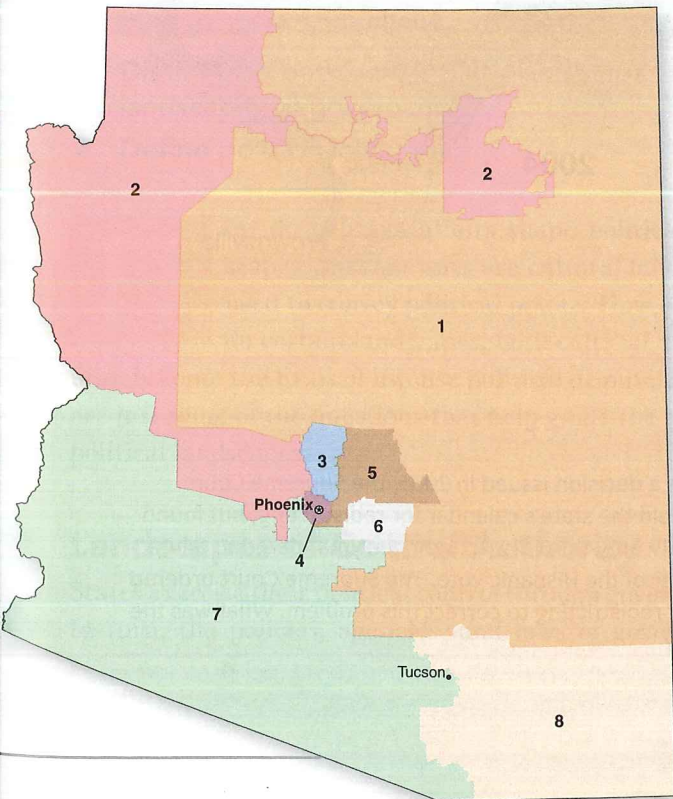
The map shows the six congressional districts that were created following the 1990 census. They had equal populations of 610,871 people at the time. But the 2000 census (table) reveals how each district's population grew and how unequally distributed the state's population had become in only 10 years. (Sources: Map: Congressional Directory, 1997. Data: Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission.)

The six 1990 congressional districts	Their unequal populations in the 2000 census
1	829,492
2	773,824
3	997,565
4	735,344
5	793,256
6	1,001,151
Total	5,130,632



2 By the 2000 census, Arizona's population had sharply increased by 40%, to 5,130,632.

As a result of this growth, the state gained two House seats through reapportionment. Because the state's population growth was spatially uneven, Arizona needed to redistrict. Each of the newly created congressional districts contained 641,329 people. Although each congressional district has the same number of people, it's important to recognize that each district's ethnic composition may be very different, as the pie charts reveal. (Sources: Map: Congressional Directory, 1997. Chart data: Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission.)



Gerrymandering in Texas • Figure 7.19

These maps show the Twenty-third Congressional District of Texas in 2002, 2004, and 2006.



a. The Twenty-third Congressional District was a majority-minority district (55% Hispanic, 41% White, 4% Other) in 2002.

b. Texas broke from the practice of redistricting once every 10 years and redistricted in 2003. By 2004, with redistricting completed, the Twenty-third district had been redrawn in such a way, shown here, that it excluded approximately 100,000 Hispanics in the vicinity of Laredo and created a district much more likely to elect a Republican. Lawsuits challenged the constitutionality of these actions.



c. In a decision issued in 2006, the Supreme Court upheld the state's calendar for redistricting, but found that the Twenty-third district was gerrymandered to dilute the power of the Hispanic vote. The Supreme Court ordered a further redistricting to correct this problem. What was the solution?

and wasted vote gerrymandering. The *excess vote technique* creates a few electoral districts in which support for the opposition forms a strong majority. In these districts, excess voting occurs because many more votes are cast than are needed to win the election. Although the opposition wins overwhelmingly in these few districts, it does not secure majority control and may lose seats in other districts. In contrast, the *wasted vote technique* disperses support for the opposition so that the opposition loses by a slim margin, say, 45–55%, or 40–60%. “Wasted votes” are the votes recorded for the losing candidate. When the support for the opposition draws heavily from racial or ethnic minorities, it is easy to see how these two gerrymandering techniques make it possible to create voting districts that diminish the effectiveness of the minority vote.

To try to prevent this from happening, the Voting Rights Act was amended in two important ways in the 1980s. First, it prohibited gerrymandering that dilutes minority voting power. Second, it stipulated that there

may be some circumstances in which it is necessary to create voting districts that concentrate the strength of a specific minority group. This last change supported the creation of *majority-minority districts* (districts where minority group members form the majority) in order to improve minority representation. See **Figure 7.19** for an example of gerrymandering involving a majority-minority district.

CONCEPT CHECK



1. **What** is the difference between majority-plurality representation and proportional representation?
2. **Why** are reapportionment and redistricting necessary?
3. **When** does redistricting become gerrymandering?

Political Landscapes

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. **Explain** what a landscape of central authority is.
2. **Distinguish** between security landscapes and landscapes of governance.
3. **Define** political iconography.

How do political affairs shape political landscapes? In what ways are cultural landscapes used to convey political power? How and why do certain landscapes, both cultural and natural, become the focus of intense political disputes? These are just some of the questions that help guide the study of political landscapes.

Landscapes of Central Authority

States exercise their political control through government. In turn, the policies, agencies, and laws of government

affect the look of cities and towns as well as the countryside. When governments fund the design and construction of infrastructure including railroads, sewage, irrigation, or power facilities, they are creating landscapes of central authority. If you drive on a U.S. interstate to get to school or work, that interstate is part of a transportation network and landscape of central authority created by the federal government largely as a result of the 1956 Federal Highway Act. We can also see the stamp of central authority in the landscape of Egypt’s Aswan High Dam, a major source of hydroelectric power for the entire country.

Landscapes of central authority are important because they contribute to the process of state-building. For example, they may help connect different parts of a country while reinforcing the power and significance of the central government.