

# THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the United States House of Representatives is to represent the interests of the people and elevate knowledgeable, community voices in each district. When the country was founded, the U.S. Constitution stipulated that the number of U.S. representatives in the House should be re-apportioned based on the results of the decennial census. Originally, the founding fathers intended a ratio of one representative for every 30,000 people. As the country's population grew, the government added more representatives to the House, and then re-apportioned them based on state populations.

In 1929, after failing to re-apportion Congress following the 1920 census, the House introduced the Permanent Apportionment Act. This Act, among other things, capped the number of House representatives at 435 members, permanently. As the population increased three-fold over the next 90 years, the number of representatives remained the same. Today the average House member represents 747,000 constituents – a significant difference from the 30,000 that the founders intended.

Such a large constituency makes it difficult for a representative to understand all of the issues in his or her district, and effectively legislate in the best interest for each community. It can be argued that the sheer size of each congressional district has diluted the voices of individual constituents. There are also arguments against growing the House of Representatives, fearing an unwieldy, cumbersome legislative body and accompanying costs. As district sizes have grown, more residents are finding themselves trapped in gerrymandered districts. Gerrymandering occurs when congressional or state districts are purposefully drawn to give a political party or group an advantage in elections. These tactics are surprisingly simple, especially with the amount of voter data available today. When partisan state legislatures draw districts without checks and balances, it creates situations where representatives choose their constituents, rather than constituents choosing their representatives.

## MATERIALS

### Part 1

- Student Worksheets 1–2: Primary Source Summaries
- Debate research sources (links and documents provided)

### Part 2

- Student Worksheet 3

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### CONCEPT

As a result of U.S. population growth, each House member now represents more people, leading to diminished representation for citizens. Gerrymandering further skews representation in Congress.

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Explain how population growth in the U.S. has affected individual representation in the U.S. House of Representatives.
- Summarize primary sources to gain an understanding of the original purpose of the House of Representatives.
- Debate, citing evidence, whether the U.S. government should increase the number of House members in response to population growth.

### SUBJECTS

Social Studies, Government (General and AP), U.S. History (General and AP), English Language Arts

### SKILLS

Reading and analyzing data in primary sources, debating, public speaking, defending a position using evidence

### METHOD

After analyzing primary and secondary sources, students debate increasing the number of members in the U.S. House of Representatives, then gerrymander simulated districts.

# PART 1: DEBATE – A BIGGER HOUSE?

## PROCEDURE

1. Choose three students to be debate moderators. These students are not part of a team.
2. Divide the rest of the class into two equal teams and decide which group will argue for (proposition), and which team will argue against (opposition), the following statement:

The United States government should increase the number of U.S. Representatives to reflect the population growth over the past century.

3. Distribute Student Worksheet 1 and other proposition team sources to each student on the Proposition Team. Distribute Student Worksheet 2 and other opposition team sources to each student on the Opposition Team.

### Debate Research Sources for the Proposition Team:

Primary Source: Federalist No. 55 & 56 (excerpts provided on Worksheet 1)

Article: "[America Needs a Bigger House](#)" – New York Times Opinion

Article: "[US Population Keeps Growing, but House of Representatives is Same Size as in Taft Era](#)" – Pew Research Center

### Debate Research Sources for the Opposition Team:

Primary Source: "Wants No Increase of House Members" by John Q. Tilson – New York Times, February 3, 1929 (excerpts provided on Worksheet 2)

Article: "A Bigger House is a Bad Idea" – Bloomberg Opinion (provided)

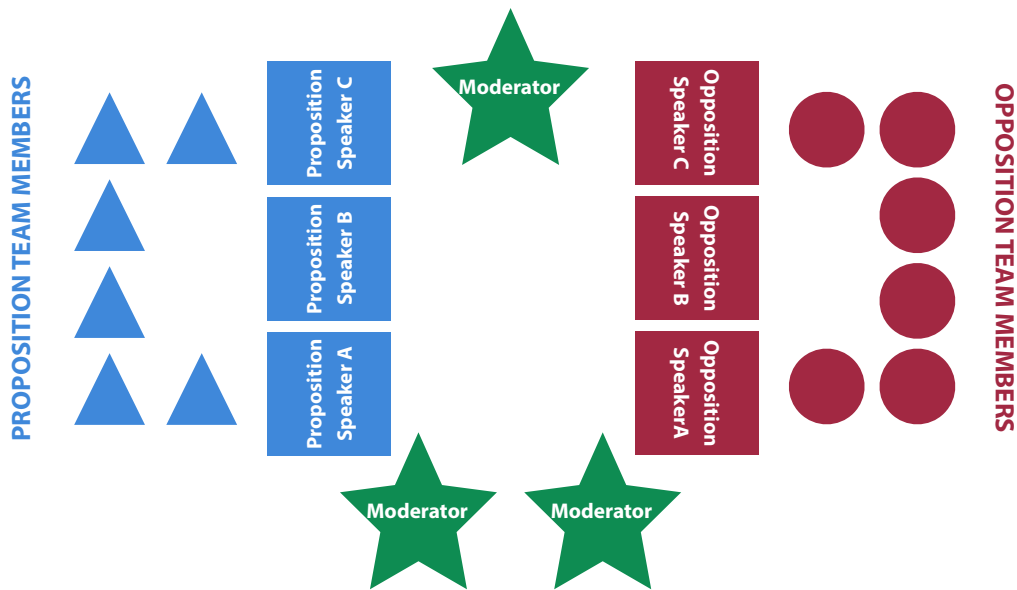
Article: "[A Bigger House Won't Heal Congress](#)" – National Review

4. Allow students time to read the provided articles and summarize their primary source by completing their Worksheet.
5. Once each team examines their evidence and constructs their arguments, they nominate three students to speak for their team. Each speaker is responsible for a separate piece of the debate: opening statement, main argument, or rebuttal. All students will have an opportunity to cross-examine the other side. Make clear that students should have concrete and evidence-backed claims or plans.
6. Set up the classroom so that the three speakers on each team are facing the rest of the class. See the stage layout on page 3.
7. Set the rules of the debate clearly and display the following schedule. Then begin the debate.

Time	Team: Proposition	Team: Opposition
2 Min	Student A: Opening Statement	Student A: Opening Statement
4 Min	Student B: Main Argument	Student B: Main Argument
4 Min	All students: Cross Examination	All students: Cross Examination
3 Min	Student C: Rebuttal/ Closing*	Student C: Rebuttal/ Closing

\* Students arguing on the opposition give their rebuttal/closing before students arguing for proposition.





8. After the debate, moderators convene to decide which team used evidence to develop the stronger claim. Once moderators reach a decision, they should report the outcome to the class, along with a summary of the reasoning on which they based their decision.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which pieces of supporting evidence from the research had the strongest impact on the final decision? Why?

*Answers will vary.*

2. Was the decision reached by the moderators fair in your opinion?

*Answers will vary.*

3. What are some of the repercussions of capping the number of House representatives at 435 regardless of current and future population growth?

*The population of each district will continue to grow. The more populous a district becomes, the less weight each voice within the district carries. Representatives are expected to understand the local issues and unique problems of their districts, which becomes more difficult with more people.*

4. What are the downsides to following the founders' suggestion of a 1:30,000 ratio of representatives to citizens given the current population?

*Following the founder's ratio would result in roughly 11,000 members in the U.S. House of Representatives – far too many people to effectively legislate.*



## PART 2: GERRYMANDERING

The term “gerrymander” refers to the deliberate manipulation of state and congressional districts to disadvantage, or benefit a particular group or party. “Gerrymander” first appeared in the Boston Gazette on March 26, 1812 as a reaction to the re-drawing of Massachusetts state senate election districts to benefit Governor Elbridge Gerry’s political party, the Democratic-Republicans, alongside this creative illustration.

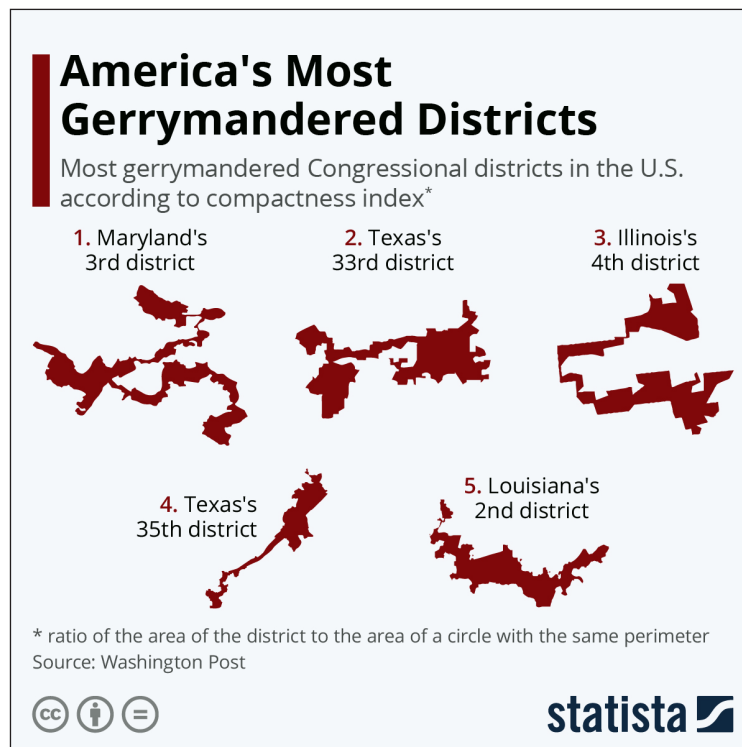
Since 1812, gerrymandering has only become more egregious, resulting in dozens of court cases that argue the state legislatures purposely drew district boundaries to influence election results for their party. Gerrymandering is one of the most pervasive tactics politicians use to skew state elections.

Typically, a state’s own legislature approves state and federal redistricting every ten years, following the decennial census. Since the state legislatures often have the most to gain from their own party remaining in power, politicians use various methods to keep their majority. Only six states – Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, and Washington – use entirely non-partisan committees to draw and approve state and federal districts.



## PROCEDURE

1. Introduce gerrymandered districts to the class by displaying the image below of gerrymandered districts and ask students to describe their shapes.



America's Most Gerrymandered Districts, Statista, <https://www.statista.com/chart/21313/most-gerrymandered-districts-us/>



2. Distribute Student Worksheet 3 to each student. Explain that they will play the role of district mapmakers for different state legislatures following the decennial census.
3. Students should follow the directions on the Worksheet in order to sway election results towards either the Democratic Party (blue) or Republican Party (red). Explain the two methods of gerrymandering:

**“cracking”** separates groups of people whose similar voting habits would likely lead to electing a representative of a certain political party.

**“packing”** combines groups of similar voters – regardless of location – into the same district so their votes do not influence election results in more than one district.

4. Allow students time to complete the Worksheet.

### Answers to Student Worksheet 3

See Answer Key

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Were you able to manipulate the party majority in districts depending on how you drew the district boundaries? Explain.

*Yes. By packing (keeping together) or cracking (separating) groups of similar voters within a district, it is easy to influence which party is in the majority and manipulate the outcome of elections.*

2. How does gerrymandering affect elections?

*Gerrymandering can allow a majority party to win more seats than otherwise would be expected based on the total votes cast for its candidates.*

3. Why is gerrymandering often described as undemocratic?

*When a political party controls how districts are drawn, they can control the outcome of future elections. This strategy results in representatives choosing their voters, rather than voters choosing their representatives.*

4. How could the United States end partisan gerrymandering?

*The United States could require state governments to appoint independent, third-party commissions to redistrict state and congressional districts following the decennial census.*

## ASSESSMENT

Students use their knowledge of apportionment and gerrymandering to complete one of the following writing prompts:

- Write a letter to the editor of the New York Times arguing that the United States should increase the number of members in the House of Representatives to reflect the size of the population.
- Write a letter to the editor of the New York Times arguing that the United States should not increase the number of members of the House of Representatives, regardless of population size.
- Write a letter to the editor of the New York Times explaining the dangers of gerrymandering. Be sure to include suggestions on the best way to re-district.



## FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Have students visit [www.redistrictinggame.org](http://www.redistrictinggame.org) to explore the different types of gerrymandering, and what happens when new districts are added to a state in this online simulation. Students will try their hand at drawing equal congressional districts that must pass a vote in the state legislature, clear the governor's desk, and hold up to challenges in court.



# THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE

## STUDENT WORKSHEET 1: PRIMARY SOURCE SUMMARIES

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Below are excerpts from the Federalist Papers written by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison on February 15, 1788. After each excerpt, summarize the main idea.**

THE number of which the House of Representatives is to consist, forms another and a very interesting point of view, under which this branch of the federal legislature may be contemplated.

Scarce any article, indeed, in the whole Constitution seems to be rendered more worthy of attention, by the weight of character and the apparent force of argument with which it has been assailed.

The charges exhibited against it are, first, that so small a number of representatives will be an unsafe depository of the public interests; secondly, that they will not possess a proper knowledge of the local circumstances of their numerous constituents; thirdly, that they will be taken from that class of citizens which will sympathize least with the feelings of the mass of the people, and be most likely to aim at a permanent elevation of the few on the depression of the many; fourthly, that defective as the number will be in the first instance, it will be more and more disproportionate, by the increase of the people, and the obstacles which will prevent a correspondent increase of the representatives. In general it may be remarked on this subject, that no political problem is less susceptible of a precise solution than that which relates to the number most convenient for a representative legislature; nor is there any point on which the policy of the several States is more at variance, whether we compare their legislative assemblies directly with each other, or consider the proportions which they respectively bear to the number of their constituents. *[Excerpt from Federalist No. 55]*

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It is said in the first place, that so small a number cannot be safely trusted with so much power. The number of which this branch of the legislature is to consist, at the outset of the government, will be sixty five. Within three years a census is to be taken, when the number may be augmented to one for every thirty thousand inhabitants; and within every successive period of ten years the census is to be renewed, and augmentations may continue to be made under the above limitation. It will not be thought an extravagant conjecture that the first census will, at the rate of one for every thirty thousand, raise the number of representatives to at least one hundred. Estimating the negroes in the proportion of three fifths, it can scarcely be doubted that the population of the United States will by that time, if it does not already, amount to three millions. At the expiration of twenty-five years, according to the computed rate of increase, the number of representatives will amount to two hundred, and of fifty years, to four hundred. This is a number which, I presume, will put an end to all fears arising from the smallness of the body. *[Excerpt from Federalist No. 55]*

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THE SECOND charge against the House of Representatives is, that it will be too small to possess a due knowledge of the interests of its constituents. As this objection evidently proceeds from a comparison of the proposed number of representatives with the great extent of the United States, the number of their inhabitants, and the diversity of their interests, without taking into view at the same time the circumstances which will distinguish the Congress from other legislative bodies, the best answer that can be given to it will be a brief explanation of these peculiarities. It is a sound and important principle that the representative ought to be acquainted with the interests and circumstances of his constituents. *[Excerpt from Federalist No. 56]*

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At present some of the States are little more than a society of husbandmen. Few of them have made much progress in those branches of industry which give a variety and complexity to the affairs of a nation. These, however, will in all of them be the fruits of a more advanced population, and will require, on the part of each State, a fuller representation. The foresight of the convention has accordingly taken care that the progress of population may be accompanied with a proper increase of the representative branch of the government. *[Excerpt from Federalist No. 56]*

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With all these concessions, two hundred and seventy-nine persons only will be the depository of the safety, interest, and happiness of eight millions that is to say, there will be one representative only to maintain the rights and explain the situation OF TWENTY-EIGHT THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED AND SEVENTY constituents, in an assembly exposed to the whole force of executive influence, and extending its authority to every object of legislation within a nation whose affairs are in the highest degree diversified and complicated. Yet it is very certain, not only that a valuable portion of freedom has been preserved under all these circumstances, but that the defects in the British code are chargeable, in a very small proportion, on the ignorance of the legislature concerning the circumstances of the people. Allowing to this case the weight which is due to it, and comparing it with that of the House of Representatives as above explained it seems to give the fullest assurance, that a representative for every THIRTY THOUSAND INHABITANTS will render the latter both a safe and competent guardian of the interests which will be confided to it. *[Excerpt from Federalist No. 56]*

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# THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE

## STUDENT WORKSHEET 2: PRIMARY SOURCE SUMMARIES

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Below are excerpts from the a 1929 New York Times article “Wants No Increase of House Members” written by the Republican Leader of the House of Representatives, John Q Tilson. After each excerpt, summarize the main idea.**

### Avoiding Larger Membership

The fundamental reason for the failure to reapportion after the 1920 census was because of the consideration the bill that passed the House at that time. In this the House was only copying the bad example set by previous Congresses following the census for the last five decennial periods in attempting to fix the size of the house so as to prevent the States from losing any part of their representation. After the ninth census the membership of the House was increased from 243 to 293; after the tenth census to 332; after the eleventh census to 357; after the twelfth to 391, and after the thirteenth census (1910) to 435.

The veteran Representative and Senator Theodore E. Burton on December 15th last, for the second time left the House to enter the Senate. In his farewell remarks he warned the House against further increases in its membership. He referred to the three occasions during his service in congress when the size of the House was increased in order to prevent certain states losing representation and reminding us on each of these occasions the increase was made with the distinct promise that the membership should not be increased again.

After the changes in the seating arrangements in the House made necessary by the addition of nearly fifty members following the 1910 census had been carried out and the inevitable effects of an increasingly unwieldly body began to make themselves felt, a decided sentiment against further increase began to make itself felt both in and out of Congress so that the proposed increase following the 1920 census was not generally acceptable, and this was the real cause for the failure to reapportion at that time. An additional reason or excuse advanced at the time was that the census taken early in 1920, so soon after the great disturbance caused by the war, did not accurately reflect the permanent distribution of the population as between rural and urban communities. This, however, of itself would not have sufficient to prevent reapportionment had it not been for the firmly grounded and growing sentiment against growing increase in the size of the House.

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It is argued that the number of representatives should keep pace with the increase in population, so that a member of Congress would always represent about the same number of people. Such a proposal is neither sound nor predictable. If this policy had been followed from the first census down to the present time we would should now have a House of Representatives numbering between three and four thousand members which would be a grotesque absurdity.

Others argue that the membership of the House should increase rapidly enough at least to take care of the additional members from the most rapidly growing states, so that no state should ever lose in the number of its representatives. During the last fifty years this argument has prevailed in almost every instance. The difficulty is that the different in the rate of growth between some of the older states and some of the newer and more rapidly growing states is so great that the house would need to be enlarged by about fifty members every ten years in order to take up the increase. Such an increase every ten years would be, in my judgement, little short of a public calamity.

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### House Too Large Now

The House should not be further increased. It is already too large. If it were practicable to reduce it considerably under 400 I should favor it, but this is not practicable. It is a difficult task to prevent it growing larger, and if the pending bill should fail in the Senate I doubt whether it would be possible to prevent an increase in membership in case there should be reapportionment at all.

Many of those who have watched and studied the growing difficulties of an increasingly unwieldy membership are determined not to be a party to a further increase if it can be prevented; and many prefer no reapportionment at all if this is the only alternative. Either result would be a great misfortune, and yet this is the dilemma that may confront Congress in case the decennial census period should again pass without previous legislation. When the 1930 census shall have been taken and it is figured out just the number of representatives each state will lose under a reapportionment, it will be far more difficult than it now is to secure legislation having this result. The pending bill if enacted into law would cure the effects of inaction, but only by the sound judgement of the next Congress prevailing over personal interest and state pride can the further increase in the House be prevented in case any action whatever is taken.

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The examples of foreign Parliamentary bodies are cited in favor of a larger membership. It is true that most parliaments of the world are larger than our House of Representatives and many countries have relatively larger legislative bodies as measured by total population. The composition of most of these bodies, however, and the nature of the function they serve in government are so different from our own congress that there is practically no analogy. In the British House of Commons there are 650 members, but their system of government is so different from our own that no criterion for comparison exists. The rank and file of the members of that body attend only on extraordinary occasions. The heads of several executive departments are also the leaders in Parliament and practically control all legislation. A quorum in the House of Commons is one-hundred, while forty is a quorum in the Committee of the Whole. Less than one- third of the total membership could find seats if by any unforeseen chance they should all happen to visit Parliament House at one time.

The French Chamber of Deputies is in no accurate sense comparable with the House of Representatives. It functions quite differently. Its large membership is made up of many different party blocs which on most occasions are voted en masse by their respective leaders without the necessity of the presence of individual members.

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### **Would Require New System**

The example of other legislative bodies might be cited but, as I have said, none of them may properly serve as a criterion by which to judge or with which to compare our own House of Representatives. Do we desire our House of Representatives to develop into the character of the legislative bodies above indicated or, for that matter, any other which might be cited? Such a development would completely change our system of government.

The House of Representatives is a deliberative body. It is and is designed to be representative of the people themselves, who are the real sovereigns under our system of government. Each member here is in fact, as in theory, equal in power and equal in responsibility, except, as one member or another may be clothed by his colleagues with temporary power or authority for the public good or for the convenience of all, and then entirely subject always to the will of a majority of the House. The entire membership of the House, theoretically and actually, participates in legislation, and it is to be hoped that the House will never become so large as to make this difficult or impossible.

Upon the demand of any one Member of the House of Representative more than one half the entire membership must be present before the most trifling item of business may be transacted. If it were not for this wholesome provision of the Constitution it is quite probably that we too should find a smaller attendance even upon roll calls than is now the case. The present tendency is that as the House increases in size the percentage of habitual absenteeism also increases. It would be far better to have a smaller total membership with a higher percentage of regular attendance.

Worst of all, there is an element of justification for the absence of members during the sessions of the House in the fact that even with the present size of the House there is considerable difficulty in understandingly transacting business if the entire membership is actually present. The limit has been reached in the size of the House, so that further increase in membership means either less efficiency or, worse still, a gradual but complete change in the character of the function to be performed by the House. It is not a good time in the history of our political development for such a change. It can be prevented, or at any rate stopped where it is now by fixing for the time being the limit of membership where it now is, and this the bill now pending in the Senate will make certain. It is to be hoped that nothing may prevent its passage by that body before the end of the present congress.

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# A BIGGER HOUSE IS A BAD IDEA

**Enlarging the legislature won't fix its deep-seated problems. It could even worsen them.**

By Jonathan Bernstein (Bloomberg Opinion)

November 13, 2018, 6:30 AM EST



It's big enough. Photographer: Win McNamee/Getty Images

The New York Times has been editorializing about the benefits of a larger House of Representatives. I'm not convinced.

To be sure, the idea has some intuitive appeal. Keeping the House the same size over the past century, even as the U.S. population has skyrocketed, certainly seems like it would've weakened representation somewhat, since House districts are now much larger. Perhaps more seats and smaller districts would strengthen representation, reduce knee-jerk partisan polarization and encourage more competitive elections.

But in reality there's simply no way to restore the kind of ratio that the Framers envisioned for a nation of more than 300 million. The Times wants to go from the current 435 House seats up to 539. But that would still leave districts far too large for a representative to really know most of his or her constituents. As for competitiveness, that's a question of districting, not size. There's no inherent reason that a 10-seat Colorado would have more competitive districts than a seven-seat Colorado. As David Lazer argues, smaller districts would also tend to be more homogeneous, which could actually end up increasing polarization.

Making matters worse, enlarging the House would tend to dilute the influence of individual members — which is the chamber's main problem to begin with. The less individuals in Congress can expect to have any efficacy, the more they'll wind up simply being votes for the party leadership to round up. The constant struggle in the House is between centralization and decentralization, and right now centralization through the party is dominant. A larger House would almost certainly tend toward even more centralization, weaker individual members and more polarization. Those tendencies would only be magnified by the multi-member districts the Times recommends.

## A BIGGER HOUSE IS A BAD IDEA (page 2)

Two further things are at stake here. One is the concept of representation. For the Times, it's static: Constituents have preferences, elections should transmit those preferences to Washington and then legislators should vote as instructed. But if we view representation as a process, we should want members who represent individual districts, make promises, act on them in office and then return home to explain their actions. That, in turn, requires members who can really act while in office, not just record their partisan preferences. It requires a balance between centralization and decentralization that strengthens individuals.

That balance is also crucial for the House itself. Only through a strong committee system, in which the chairs of committees and subcommittees advance their own agendas, can the House restore itself as a strong chamber. The over-centralized House is weak because all it can reflect is either the majority party or (worse) the whims of the speaker and the small circle of leadership. Instead of thriving on the energy and skills of all its members, a centralized House tends to stagnate.

Expanding the House is thus a recipe for the parliamentarization of Congress. If we want to reduce polarization, we should return some independence to committees and subcommittees. Some of them would stay strongly partisan, but some might explore the possibility of coalitions that could give minority-party members a stake in compromise.

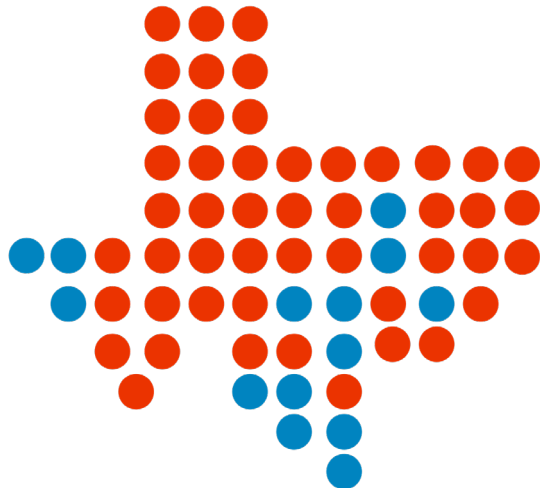
I don't think there's anything magical in the current makeup of 435 seats. If the House was functioning well, I'd be open to adding a few dozen new members. But given where we are now, it sure seems like a bad idea to me.

# THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE

## STUDENT WORKSHEET 3

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

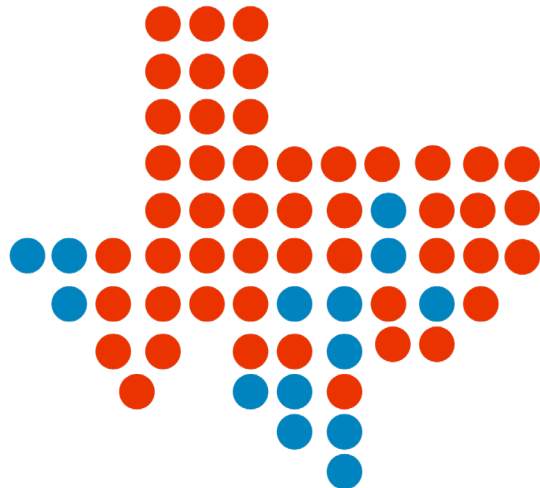
1. Texas: Create seven equally sized districts containing nine population groups. Gerrymander the groups of voter populations so that two districts are majority blue safe seats, and five are majority red safe seats.



Method of gerrymandering:

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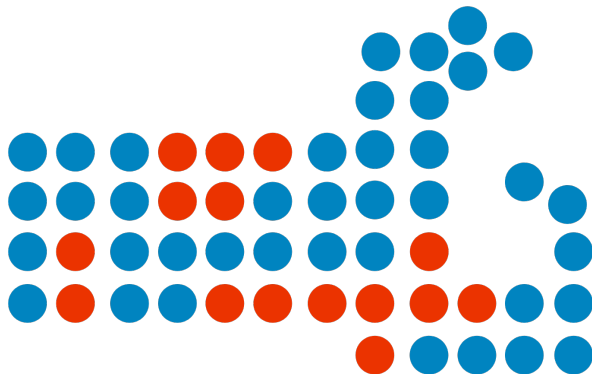
2. Texas: Create seven equally sized districts containing nine population groups. Gerrymander the groups of voter populations so that zero districts are majority blue safe seats, and seven are majority red safe seats.



Method of gerrymandering:

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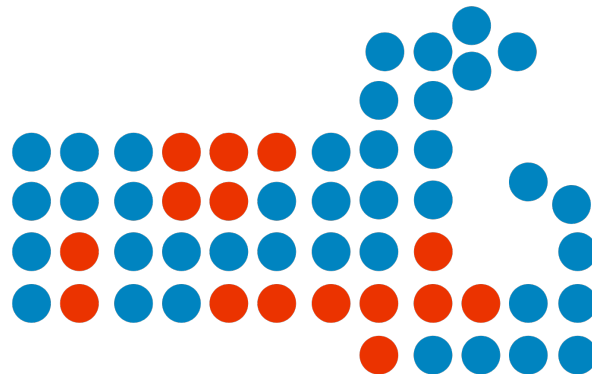
3. Massachusetts: Create six equally sized districts containing nine population groups. Gerrymander the groups of voter populations so that six districts are majority blue safe seats, and zero are majority red safe seats.



Method of gerrymandering:

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4. Massachusetts: Create six equally sized districts containing nine population groups. Gerrymander the groups of voter populations so that three districts are majority blue safe seats, and three are majority red safe seats.



Method of gerrymandering:

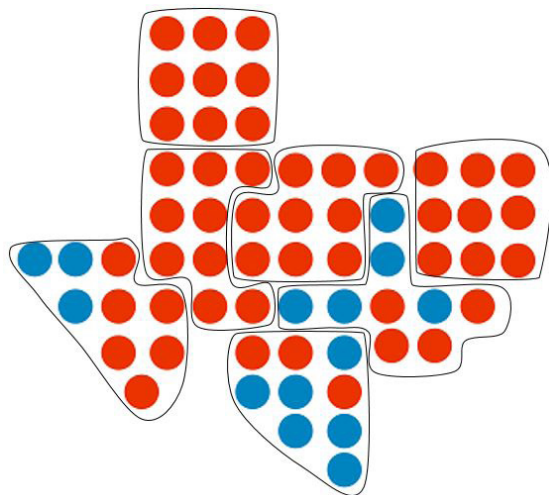
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# THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE

## STUDENT WORKSHEET 3 – ANSWER KEY

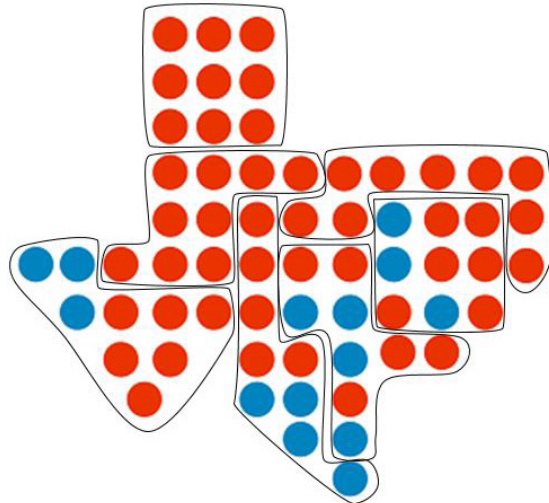
1. Sample solution



Method of gerrymandering:

*packing*

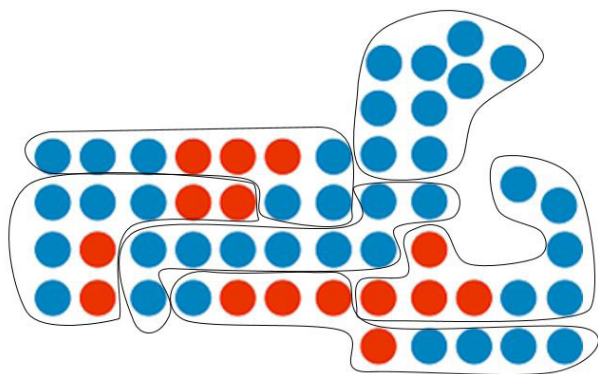
2. Sample solution



Method of gerrymandering:

*cracking*

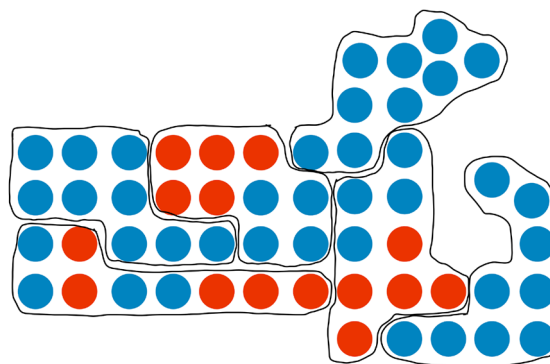
3. Sample solution



Method of gerrymandering:

*packing*

4. Sample solution



Method of gerrymandering:

*cracking*