Choose or Chosen? An Interactive Exploration of Congressional District Boundaries

Steven M. Roets
Yale University

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Choose or Chosen?
An Interactive Exploration of Congressional District Boundaries

Senior Project in Art: Painting and Printmaking
Steven Matthew Roets
Advisor: Molly Zuckerman-Hartung
There are many boundaries that are obvious – marked by rivers, walls, or signs. But there are others that are hidden in plain sight and are slyly changed every decade. These boundaries determine our decision-makers, influencing the political process in every imaginable way.

Every ten years, congressional districts are redrawn to reflect changes in population – a process known as redistricting. Redistricting is a political process, which in most states is controlled by the majority party in the legislature. The resulting districts determine the citizens that will together elect a Member of Congress for five elections.

A series of Supreme Court cases in the early 1960s, including *Baker v. Carr* (1962) and *Wesberry v. Sanders* (1964), solidified the principle of “one person, one vote.” Before this time, congressional districts had often remained unchanged for decades, creating massively unequal representation, typically under-representing urban areas. In the decades since, congressional districts have been redrawn after every census to ensure approximately equal population. While a step in the right direction, this does not mean that representation has been fair. Because redistricting is a political process, legislators can choose who is in what district, solidifying their own party’s hold on power. Instead of voters choosing politicians, politicians choose voters. This is known as Gerrymandering.

Hanging from the hooks on the wall are a series of congressional district maps. The maps on black fabric are the decennial congressional districts for the Upper Midwest from 1963 to the present day. The maps on white fabric represent hypothetical congressional districts using various methods of redistricting. On the floor is a map showing the current partisan political representation in Congress.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Years (Black)</th>
<th>Methods (White)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>1963-1972</td>
<td>Compactness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>1973-1982</td>
<td>Dilution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>1983-1992</td>
<td>Political Boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>1993-2002</td>
<td>Preserve Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>2003-2012</td>
<td>Cracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>2013-present</td>
<td>Tacking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grab the maps. Layer them on top of each other. See how they have changed over time and how they compare.

The previous text was my gallery statement for the art installation which served as my Art Senior Project. I made a series of geographically accurate maps of congressional districts since the 1960s for Wisconsin and adjacent states in the Upper Midwest. Through layering these maps, viewers could compare how district boundaries changed over time and see the direct
impact of gerrymandering. In addition, I made a second map for each year which exaggerated the redistricting or gerrymandering tactic that seemed to be most obviously employed in that decade’s redistricting. My installation was designed to engage the viewer in a conversation about redistricting and gerrymandering. Through layering and manipulating the maps I made, the viewer could actually see how redistricting really does impact the political system.

Through the use of materials, I also explored my relationship to gender roles and the distinction between gallery art and family crafts (sewing, embroidery, quilting, etc.). I have included images of the installation below. If interested, I also have a video of myself discussing the work. Questions can be directed to either steven.roets@yale.edu or steven.m.roets@gmail.com.