



A Closer Look at the BGA Maps

Description

Take a look at the shapes of the districts on the BGA's congressional map, compared to the current map, adopted in 2011.

Just eyeballing the maps, you can see that the BGA districts, while certainly irregular, have fewer jagged edges or jutting appendages.

(Text continues below maps)

Downstate districts (that is, outside the Chicago area), are simpler on the BGA map because the task at hand was simpler. There was no need to bust cities into pieces in order to sort Democrats from Republicans â?? because partisan voting history was not a factor in drawing the maps.

The districts respect municipal borders, follow natural geographic features like rivers or the Chicago lakefront, and preserve common interests, such as commerce (agriculture, manufacturing or transportation, for example) or urban/rural lifestyle. [You can read detailed explanations of the districtsâ?? unifying characteristics here.](#)

The 2011 districts have boundaries that in many cases can be explained only as deliberate partisan engineering. Rockford — which had been in a single congressional district on every map since 1850 — was busted into two districts. Collinsville, population 22,000, was split into three, as was the Metro St. Louis area. Peoria, Bloomington-Normal and Springfield all were divided, though BGA mapmakers had no trouble keeping them intact.

Packing, cracking and other dirty tricks

Packing minimizes the impact of a targeted group of voters by containing them in as few districts as possible.

Cracking is the opposite of packing. Targeted voters are scattered into several districts so they can't hold a majority in any of them.

Stacking is concentrating a targeted group in one district, but just short of enough to win.

Hijacking is carving an incumbent's home out of his or her district.

Kidnapping (sometimes called double-bunking) ropes two incumbents, usually of the same party, in a single district, forcing them to run against each other.

In general, the more misshapen the boundaries, the less compact the district. One metric by which to evaluate compactness is the Polsby-Popper Test, which assigns a value between 0 and 1, with 1 the most compact. The BGA's districts have an average Polsby-Popper score of 0.263, while the districts drawn by Illinois lawmakers in 2011 scored an average of 0.166.

Drawing compact districts was harder in the urban/suburban Chicago region. A densely populated area means smaller districts, complicating the boundaries needed to keep communities intact.

Like the lawmakers who drew the 2011 maps, the BGA mapmakers worked to preserve African-American representation by drawing three elongated South and South Suburban districts instead of two more compact districts. Because of continuing population losses in African-American communities, the BGA's districts extend even farther into the suburbs than those on the 2011 map. On both maps, those squiggly boundaries in turn affected the boundaries of adjoining districts.

The current 4th Congressional District's tortured shape is actually what might be considered a "good" gerrymander. It was drawn to connect two large Latino populations, creating a majority Latino district. That population has increased enough that our mapmakers were able to bust it in two, creating a majority district and a Latino "influence" district. Eliminating the so-called "earmuff" simplified some of the other boundaries in the Chicago metro area. But maximizing the Latino

population in the new “influence” district resulted in the least compact district on our map.

A “good” gerrymander

Illinois Congressional District 4 “the famous “earmuff” “ is an example of a gerrymander designed to promote minority representation. It was drawn after federal courts ordered the creation of a majority Latino district encompassing two strongly Latino areas in Chicago and its western suburbs.

Mapmakers drew a district in which the northern portion, mostly Puerto Rican, and the southern portion, mostly Mexican-American, are connected only by a strip of Interstate 294 on the west.

The Latino population now is large enough that BGA mapmakers were able to break up the earmuff, creating one likely Latino district and one Latino “influence” district.

Overall, though, the BGA districts got much better Polsby-Popper scores for compactness than the current districts.

And yet the BGA maps would not upend the partisan breakdown in the Illinois congressional delegation. There are 10 likely Democratic districts on our map, two likely Republican districts, and five toss-ups. Illinois is currently represented by 13 Democrats and five Republicans. (Due to population loss, Illinois is likely to lose at least one congressional seat after the 2020 Census, so the BGA map includes 17 districts instead of the current 18.)

Like the 2011 map, the BGA's map is blind to partisan history and would almost certainly elect mostly Democrats.

They just wouldn't be the same Democrats.

One of the strongest arguments against partisan redistricting is that it allows incumbents to draw their own districts essentially choosing their voters, instead of the other way around.

The party that has the upper hand can manipulate the boundaries not just to favor its own incumbents, but to punish its adversaries.

In Illinois, Democrats control both houses of the General Assembly and the governor's mansion, so Republicans are effectively shut out of redistricting. Nationwide, Democrats have one-party control in 14 states while Republicans have the same advantage in 22 states.

Illinois Democrats didn't just draw the 2011 maps to favor Democrats. They drew them to disadvantage Republicans specific Republicans.

The current 5th congressional district, for example, begins at Chicago's lakefront and meanders west all the way to Hinsdale, where it loops around the home of former Republican Rep. Judy Biggert. Elected seven times to represent a West Suburban district, Biggert found herself tucked into a Chicago-centric district with Democrat Mike Quigley. Her old district was splintered into six pieces. Biggert eventually decided to run in the new 11th district, which included nearly half of her old constituents. She lost to Democrat Bill Foster.

Republican Bob Dold's Kenilworth home was sliced out of his 10th district, placing him just inside Democrat Jan Schakowsky's 9th district. Dold ran in the 10th anyway, but lost to Democrat Brad Schneider. Republican freshmen Randy Hultgren and Joe Walsh found themselves in the same district. Adam Kinzinger, a Will County Republican, was roped into a district with eight-term Democrat Jesse Jackson Jr. Kinzinger liked his chances better in the new 16th district, where he unseated 10-term Republican Don Manzullo.

This sort of manipulation was apparent in the General Assembly maps, too.

In more than a dozen districts, two or even three Republican incumbents were corralled together, forcing them to run against each other or drop out. Senate GOP leader Christine Radogno, for example, found herself in the same district as GOP Sen. Ron Sandack. Republican Reps. Dennis Reboletti, Chris Nybo and Patti Bellock all ended up in the same district. Only four districts included two sitting Democratic lawmakers despite those lopsided Democratic majorities in both chambers.

The pairings were not accidental, in other words.

Republicans have done the same, given the chance. After they drew the maps in 1991, the GOP briefly held majorities in both chambers, demoting House Speaker Michael Madigan to minority leader for two years. (Except for 1995-96, Madigan has been speaker continuously since 1983.) Republicans accomplished this by forcing Democratic incumbents to run against each other or by mapping them into safe Republican districts with popular incumbents.

The BGA maps were drawn without regard for where incumbents live. Their addresses were plotted only after the lines had been drawn.

That's when things can start to feel personal. Eight sitting representatives are paired in four separate districts on our congressional map: Democrats Mike Quigley and Jan Schakowsky would compete in one district. Democrats Danny Davis and Bobby Rush would be together in another. Republicans Rodney Davis and Michael Bost would battle it out Downstate. In the Chicago suburbs, Democrats Bill Foster and Lauren Underwood would be in the same district.

Incumbents would also be scrambled in the General Assembly: 25 Senators (eight Republicans and 17 Democrats) and 45 House members (17 Republicans and 28 Democrats) would find themselves in a district with another incumbent, sometimes two. That's more than twice the number who were doubled up under the 2011 map. The partisan breakdown, though, is much closer to proportional.

There would be 25 open districts in the House and 15 in the Senate.

What's more remarkable: The level of disruption telegraphed by the BGA maps, drawn without regard for the addresses of incumbents? Or the degree to which previous maps selectively disadvantaged Republicans, while protecting most Democrats, by carefully constructing districts around their homes?

There's nothing wrong with incumbency, as long as it's earned. But partisan gerrymandering produces legislative maps whose electoral outcomes are all but assured. In Illinois and elsewhere, this results in a disturbing number of uncontested races.

Democracy works better when we have competitive elections, with multiple candidates working to earn voters' support instead of entrenched incumbents coasting to victory unopposed.

The matchups on the BGA maps are a random result of a redistricting process that did not account for incumbency or voting patterns. The current maps are a product of partisan mischief.

Whose interests are prioritized by the current system? The answer, obviously, is not Illinois voters.

Questions? Email us at fairmaps@bettergov.org

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