

## Redistricting Matters: Small changes in the boundary lines mean huge electoral effects

Our Prisoners of the Census project, addresses the political impact of the Census Bureau’s policy of counting prisoners where they are incarcerated, not at home. In some cases, a large population is transferred to prison towns, but the potential impact of prisoner miscount can be large even when the number of prisoners transferred is small.

This example will illustrate how small changes in district boundary lines - even without errors in the underlying Census data — can determine which party or group controls the government. If the underlying Census data is distorted, the potential impact could be far larger.

For this exercise, we’ll use an imaginary territory with 25 residents, 15 “O” voters and 10 “X” voters. (See top image.) (You can assign the X’s and O’s political parties, if that makes it easier.)

In a territory-wide race for Governor or Mayor where the whole territory participates, the candidate backed by the O’s would probably win. But what about elections for a five-seat legislature, where each legislator represents an individual district with one-fifth of the territory’s population? The answer depends on how the districts are divided.

In real life, district boundary lines are redrawn after each federal Census, usually by the political party with majority power. Our example assumes that a Census has just taken place.

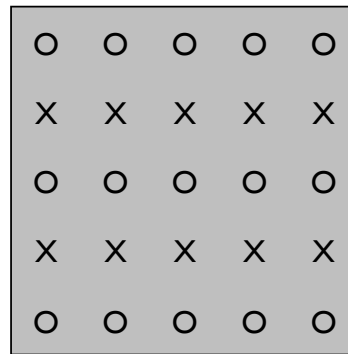
The remaining images on this page illustrate three possible ways to divide the districts and their resulting outcomes. Compare the next two images, labeled “Packing” and “Cracking.” The differences in the district boundaries appear subtle, but results are radically different. The final image reflects a fairer way to draw the districts: there is still an “O” majority, but the X’s and O’s are proportionally represented throughout the territory.

In real life, political and ethnic populations are not evenly distributed throughout a territory. In addition, legislators have considerable flexibility in how the boundary lines can be drawn. For example, legislators have some discretion to make districts deviate slightly from population requirements. This deviation from the principle of strict population equality makes additional outcomes possible.

Furthermore, when the underlying Census data is faulty — for example, data that counts tens of thousands of urban prisoners in rural towns - redistricting is even less likely to result in a democratic reflection of the territory.

*This factsheet originally appeared as a post on the Prisoners of the Census blog. It is inspired by and draws some text from the Center for Voting and Democracy’s interactive Redistricting Wheel (<http://www.fairvote.org/wheel>). For the original articles and links to more information, see <http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/redistricting101.html>*

Total population in territory equals 25.

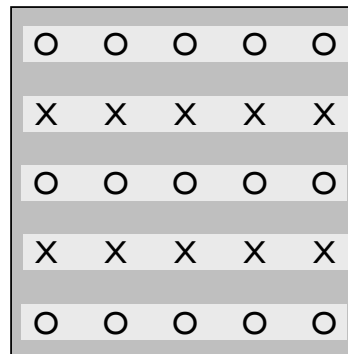


O type equals 15 or 60%.

X type equals 10 or 40%.

### Five Districts

Created to virtually guarantee an expected result.  
(Known as “Packing”)

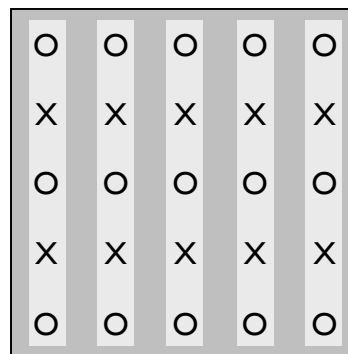


O type wins in three districts (60%).

X type wins in two districts (40%).

### Five Districts

Created to unfairly favor the predominant type.  
(Known as “Cracking”)

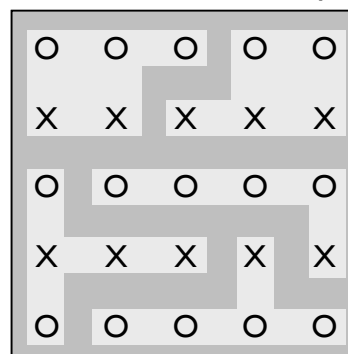


O type likely wins in five districts (100%).

X type likely wins in no districts (0%).

### Five Districts

Created to reflect proportionate types, but allows for healthy competition.



O type likely wins in three districts (60%).

X type likely wins in two districts (40%).

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