The Public Mapping Project
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The Public Mapping Project: How Public Participation Can Revolutionize Redistricting.

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Conclusion

Our conception of public mapping is a natural extension of the democratic ideal of self-governance, whereby the government is responsive to the will of the people. Normally, the public pushes and pulls the levers of democracy through their participation in elections. When elected representatives subvert the electoral machinery so as to perpetuate their continued election, the will of the people is subverted and a democracy slides toward despotism. Active public participation in government policy making serves as a check on those in power. In the abstract, our approach is not novel. John Stuart Mill argued in his 1859 essay, “On Liberty,” how the people can protect themselves from the government’s infringement of their liberties: “It is indispensable, therefore, that the means should exist, independently of the government, of forming such ability, and furnishing it with the opportunities and experience necessary for a correct judgment of great practical affairs.”

Mill’s successors have implemented public participation spanning a wide range of policy areas, from coastal resource management to defense policy. The public mapping project seeks to expand the range to include redistricting. Politicians have enjoyed a veil of complexity—embodied by data and software—that effectively shuts the public out of the important task of redistricting. The result has been a gerrymandered gruel offered as the only dish on the menu. But there are
many more choices, practically an infinite number. Rather than accepting what politicians serve, we seek to empower the public to generate their own recipes. Through our efforts we observe that given the proper tools, even novices can create masterpieces.

The public can develop ideas that impel a response from redistricting authorities. Our greatest success occurred in Minneapolis, where local community groups used the District Builder redistricting software to express their representation needs to a local city redistricting commission. The commission adopted their ideas, and the result was the creation of districts that fostered the election of the first Somali and Latino candidates to the city council. Similar successes, perhaps with not as significant an effect, occurred in Western states during their congressional redistricting processes. Redistricting authorities ignore the public at their peril, for comparison maps drawn by the public allow courts to evaluate when politicians have subverted the law for private or partisan gain. Pennsylvania politicians learned this lesson the hard way when the state Supreme Court threw out the state legislative maps, in part due to the existence of a redistricting plan created by a piano teacher.

We estimate the number of legal congressional and state legislative redistricting plans drawn by individuals or non-government organizations increased by about two orders of magnitude following the 2010 Census, compared to the previous decade. We expect the rise of public mapping to further
increase after the 2020 Census. The software tools and data are more ubiquitous, state reforms have mandated that redistricting authorities listen to the public, and—compared to a decade ago—ongoing reform efforts, court actions, and larger organizations are stimulating public interest. We intend to continue our contribution to public mapping in the United States and abroad. Best of all, we know that our work can continue even without us, for our work is enshrined in open-source repositories available to all.