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The sovereign salamander

2017 was absolutely transcendent.

I was a wide-eyed high school junior, embarking upon my first political endeavor: an internship with Chris Hurst, a candidate for the Virginia House of Delegates.

Every week we would drive through the suburban empire of Blacksburg, Virginia, canvassing from house to house. Election season permeates my memories — colorful pamphlets, autumn rain and faded jeans. [Joseph Yost](#) was the cat and we were the mouse. Nov. 7 was chasing us, and we were sprinting.

Canvassing was unnerving. For every handful of doors knocked there would be one slammed in my face and another closing with nasty remarks. The campaign manager regularly expressed his frustration to me. He was anxious, and for good reason — our district had been heavily gerrymandered around parts of Virginia Tech’s campus to nullify the students’ votes, hence its “[salamander](#)” shape. This meant Hurst and his team had to deal with a considerable Republican majority, a daunting challenge for someone new to politics.

Against many odds, Hurst won. He has since gone on to win his first reelection and is nearing the end of his second term. It may have been a monumental victory for the Democratic party, but for me that election signaled the beginning of my disillusionment with partisan politics.

Why did this election piss me off so much? Well, part of it has to do with the fact that local Republicans decided my home district would be salamander-shaped, and nobody questioned it.

Tens of thousands of Americans fall victim to nullified votes at the hands of partisan gerrymandering [every election](#). We've foolishly settled for a biased system that blatantly denies voters fair representation in Congress.

Some play off gerrymandering, the biased manipulation of electoral boundaries to aid a particular side, as inevitable collateral damage. But I see this as an apathetic excuse for something that is, to put it bluntly, an avoidable load of partisan crap. The only reason we haven't come to a collective solution is that those who create our legislative solutions benefit from gerrymandering. This is where the problem lies: Gerrymandering is not simply a partisan issue, but an institutional one.

The origin of gerrymandering lies way back, to the first two-party feud in the United States: the Federalist Party and the Democratic-Republican Party. Elbridge Gerry, who at the time was the governor of Massachusetts, signed an infamous redistricting bill that gave way to the decrepit electoral system we have today. It successfully led to a sweeping win by the Democratic-Republicans in the [1812 election](#), with a disproportionate amount of electoral votes compared to the popular vote.

Does this sound familiar? [It should](#). But the solution to this headache isn't as straightforward as you'd expect.

In a perfect world, we would opt for a more objective approach to apportionment similar to [Australia](#), where the Australian Electoral Commission has final jurisdiction over boundaries but political parties and individuals can submit comments for review. But

we haven't opted for a similar system because the practice of gerrymandering is deeply ingrained in the two-party system. It's a package deal.

Growing up in the midst of a political battlefield, I was numb to the unnecessary evils that my community faced. Now that I'm in California, I can see the stark contrast between the broken system I lived in then and the bandaged system I live in now. While electoral politics are inherently dysfunctional, there are ways to lend a crutch to the crippled institution, as California achieved with its [2008 and 2010](#) gerrymandering ballot initiatives.

Many of us want to pretend that the American war over politics has a clear-cut "good" or "bad" side — that it's as simple as declaring one party inherently virtuous and the other corrupt. The truth is, both parties are complacent in the injustices we face, and voting isn't going to fix our problems if our system of voting is the problem in the first place.

One distinction that's important to acknowledge is that it's not the Republican party alone that's disenfranchising voters; the Democratic party also needs to be held accountable. In 2019, Maryland's [sixth district](#) was brought to the national spotlight after a group of Republican voters claimed it had been unconstitutionally gerrymandered with partisan influence.

My home state of Virginia is constantly experiencing a similar political turmoil. In Oct. 2019, Democrats took control of the [state legislature](#) with the promise of "fairness in the electoral system." But in reality, this was about control of the state legislature, and consequently, control over whether Virginia would lean red or blue. It's not the votes that determine the outcome of an election, it's who controls the state legislature.

These are just two of *many* instances. Salamanders infest Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, and nobody bats an eye.

Gerrymandering is no new ordeal to the Supreme Court. It's dealt with many cases surrounding the same controversy, taking definite stances on [racial gerrymandering](#) — but partisan gerrymandering remains a no man's land. It's because of this skimpiness that we must lobby for more explicit action on a federal level. The initiative must come from grassroots momentum.

The city of Berkeley's [Redistricting Commission](#) could be used as a model, in which an independent body has jurisdiction over most of the process. Ultimately, the goal is to push partisan influence out of the electoral process and, right after an entire upheaval of our electoral system, independent commissions are the way to go.

We need to bring gerrymandering to the spotlight and emphasize local coalitions to combat inconsistencies in the legislative process. We cannot simply rely on our legislators to fix the problem for us because doing so would be a forfeit of their power. Instead, we must exercise the principle that this country was founded on: A country by the people for the people.

November comes around and the memories of this election come flooding back to me out of nowhere. I crave the feeling of election season nostalgia, but not the frustration that comes along with it. My newfound consciousness has only deepened this political frustration; now I'm even more heated than before. When the outcome of an election is in the hands of legislators rather than the very people it is meant to serve, it's clear the system is broken.

Don't settle for a salamander.

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