

Obama's Gerrymander

By Lois Beckett, *ProPublica*, Jan. 25, 2012,

We've been following the ways that politicians and [special interests try to influence](#) the redistricting process [for their own gain](#), often at the expense of voters.

An [article this week](#) in The New Yorker suggests that President Barack Obama's own political rise in Chicago was partially the result of gerrymandering.

As The New Yorker's [Ryan Lizza reported](#), Obama worked with a Democratic redistricting consultant to draw a state senate district tailored for him.

Lizza wrote about the incident four years ago, [detailing how](#) Obama had learned the hard way that a University of Chicago academic was not necessarily someone whom all of Chicago's African-American voters would trust.

In 1999, Obama suffered a serious defeat when he tried to take on longtime South Side Congressman Bobby Rush, who represents a district that is [more than 62 percent African-American](#).

Two years later, with the Democrats in control of Illinois redistricting, Obama was apparently able to reshape his state senate district to his own specifications, which included drawing in wealthy supporters from Chicago's Gold Coast.

Lizza [interviewed John Corrigan](#), a Chicago Democrat who worked on the 2001 redistricting process:

Corrigan remembers two things about the district that he and Obama drew. First, it retained Obama's Hyde Park base — he had managed to beat Rush in Hyde Park — then swooped upward along the lakefront and toward downtown. By the end of the final redistricting process, his new district bore little resemblance to his old one. Rather than jutting far to the west, like a long thin dagger, into a swath of poor black neighborhoods of bungalow homes, Obama's map now shot north, encompassing about half of the Loop, whose southern portion was beginning to be transformed by [developers like Tony Rezko](#) and stretched far up Michigan Avenue

and into the Gold Coast, covering much of the city's economic heart, its main retail thoroughfares, and its finest museums, parks, skyscrapers, and lakefront apartment buildings. African-Americans still were a majority, and the map contained some of the poorest sections of Chicago, but Obama's new district was wealthier, whiter, more Jewish, less blue-collar, and better educated. It also included one of the highest concentrations of Republicans in Chicago.

"It was a radical change," Corrigan said.

Lizza [wrote](#) that the gerrymandering effort "may have been the most important event in Obama's early political life" because it gave him the resources, both financial and political, to run for the U.S. Senate in 2004.

We asked both Corrigan and Obama's campaign for comment but haven't received responses.

Obama has occasionally spoken about how redistricting can cater to politicians and not voters.

"The system of redistricting in the U.S. tends to allow representatives to choose people instead of people choosing representatives," Obama [told The Hyde Park Herald in 2001](#). "It's just politics."

Obama was responding to apparent evidence that he was himself the target of a gerrymander. The Hyde Park Herald reported in 2001 that Obama's home and the home of another Rush opponent were [carefully drawn out](#) of Rush's congressional district, which would have made it harder for them to challenge him in the future.

Rush's spokesman at the time [denied](#) that the congressman had anything to do with the map lines that excluded Obama and another candidate.

"Members of Congress don't draw congressional maps," Rush's current chief of staff, Stanley Watkins, said in a statement emailed to ProPublica.