The Limits of the Gerrymander: 
Examining the Impact of Redistricting on Electoral Competition and Legislative 
Polarization

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Abstract 
Redistricting is often blamed for both declining electoral competition and increasing 
partisan polarization in the U.S. Congress and most state legislatures. Using election 
returns and roll call voting collections from Congress and state legislatures, we examine 
the extent to which redistricting is actually responsible for these trends. We find first that 
redistricting has had only a modest impact, if any, on the polarization of legislative 
districts; both state and federal districts have polarized more between redistrictings than 
during them in recent decades. Additionally, legislatures in states with partisan 
redistricting schemes are roughly as polarized as those in states with court- or 
commission-drawn legislative districts. While increasing legislative polarization and 
decreasing electoral competition may be defining features of modern American politics, 
our research shows that redistricting has had only a marginal impact on either of these 
trends.

Prepared for delivery at the 2006 Conference on State Politics and Policy, 
Lubbock, Texas, May 18, 2006
Introduction

In November of 2005, California’s voters rejected an initiative that would have taken the task of redrawing the state’s legislative districts away from the state legislature and placed it into the hands of a nonpartisan commission. The Los Angeles Times endorsed the initiative in strong language, explaining the problem with the districts as drawn up by the state legislature in 2001 as follows:

The political hijacking of 2001 was so blatant that not a single one of the 153 legislative and congressional seats contested in the 2004 election changed party hands. Worse yet, scores of districts now are so solidly Republican or Democratic that only the most conservative of GOP candidates and most liberal Democrats can win them. The winner is whoever survives the party primary. This disenfranchises independents and those who would prefer to see more moderate candidates in both parties. The result is the increasing polarization of politics (L.A. Times editorial, 2005).

Although this particular reform initiative lost, dragged down by its association with an unpopular governor, the reformist sentiment remains strong across the country. Interest groups across the ideological spectrum are engaged in efforts to depoliticize the redistricting process, claiming that the partisan redistricting is largely responsible for the lack of competition in legislative elections and the increasing partisan polarization in Congress and state legislatures.

The logic used in the Times editorial above is persuasive, but are such claims empirically true? We know that electoral competition is on the decline and legislative partisanship is on the rise across the country, but how much is partisan redistricting to blame for this?
We examine this question in this paper. Using electoral returns and legislative roll call records from both Congress and state legislatures, we test whether states with partisan redistricting methods have a) less competitive elections and b) greater legislative polarization. We find both claims to be largely unsubstantiated by the evidence. There are only minimal differences in congressional election results between states with partisan and nonpartisan legislative schemes, and what few differences do exist tend to be in the opposite direction of what was predicted. We do find that state legislative elections are somewhat less competitive in states with partisan redistricting schemes, but that effect is vanishingly small compared to what occurs between redistrictings. Meanwhile, we find no evidence to suggest that partisan redistricting is causing greater legislative polarization, either in Congress or in state legislatures.

**Popular and Academic Understandings of Redistricting**

*The Popular View*

Redistricting receives much attention for the often controversial and partisan nature of the process and perceived outcomes on the American electoral system. These arguments often play out in the popular media in a way that that paints redistricting as an evil in which partisan elites and elected officials erode popular sovereignty by maliciously drawing districts in a way that increases party polarization and insulates incumbents, with the voters helplessly casting votes in races that have already been decided by the placement of district lines. As *Washington Post* writer Juliet Eilperin (2006) reports, “It's a system in which party operatives manipulate sophisticated computer software to maximum effect, shuffling voters across district boundaries to
guarantee their candidates have the best chance of winning election every two years.”

Steven Hill effectively summed up popular sentiments about the latest Congressional redistricting by saying,

The net result of this tragedy [congressional redistricting] is that most voters had their vote rendered nearly meaningless, almost as if had been stolen from them. . . . It was more like a silent burglar in the middle of the night having his way while American voters slept. As a result of this theft, hallowed notions such as “no taxation without representation” and “one person, one vote” have been drained of their vitality, reduced to empty slogans for armchair patriots. (Hill 2002: 317)

Commentators also worry about similar concerns at the state level. In Florida, St. Petersburg Times columnist Martin Dyckman expressed disgust at the state’s new maps, “Voting is pointless more than half the time, and the people seem to know it. The sorry turnout at the polls is not passive acceptance. It is passive disgust. . . You didn’t choose your legislators. They chose you” (2003: D3).

With the recent success of and controversy over the mid-decade Texas Congressional map, the worst fears of these commentators seem to ring true. U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay openly expressed his reasons for pushing the Republican controlled Texas legislature to re-open the process in 2003: “I’m the majority leader, and we want more seats” (Halbfinger 2003). The resulting fiasco in Texas with Democratic legislators twice fleeing the state and the Republican gains in the 2004 election highlight the politically explosive issue and the importance political elites place in the process. A famous quote by Newt Gingrich sums up the popular view of the process, “Redistricting
is everything” (Nichols 1998). Gingrich, in fact, has become a recent convert to the cause of redistricting reform, complaining that Democrats get to rip off the public in the states where they control and protect their incumbents, and we get to rip off the public in the states we control and protect our incumbents, so the public gets ripped off in both circumstances…. In the long run, there's a downward spiral of isolation (quoted in Eilperin 2006).

This popular view accuses redistricting of producing safe districts that feature uncompetitive and often uncontested elections, leading to high voter apathy and low turnout.

**The Academic View**

While the popular view of redistricting is decidedly negative, the academic view is mixed. Early research focused on questions of who benefited in the move towards the one-person/one-vote districting (i.e. Baker 1967; Dixon 1968; Erikson 1972) and of the translations of votes into seats in terms of gerrymandering and the incumbency effect (i.e. Ferejohn 1977; Tufte 1973). In the 1980s a major shift was towards looking at the partisan effects of redistricting in areas such as the swing ratio (i.e. Abramowitz 1983; Niemi 1985), predicting partisan disputes (i.e. Born 1985; Cain and Campagna 1987), and the seats gained by the party controlling the remapping (i.e. Born 1985; Cain 1984; 1985). While the 1990s saw many of these same types of studies (i.e. Gelman and King 1994; Kousser 1996; Niemi and Winsky 1992), the focus both by scholars and the courts moved towards racial districting and the creation of majority-minority districts (i.e. Epstein and O’Halloran 1999; Lublin 1997; Lublin and Voss 2000; Swain 1993).
Despite substantial research, no definitive answer exists to the question of the electoral consequences of redistricting. Findings are wide-ranging, from suggestions that redistricting has little or no systematic influence on electoral outcomes and competition to arguments that redistricting does indeed shape elections and the partisan majorities produced. Some scholars find the party in control produces sizable effects on the degree of partisan bias in the electoral system (Born 1985; Erikson 1972; Niemi and Winsky 1992). Others, meanwhile, find small and insignificant effects on party fortunes (Campagna and Grofman 1990; Ferejohn 1977; Glazer, Grofman and Robbins 1987; Rush 2000).

Polarization

Since the 1970s, party polarization in Congress has clearly increased (Jacobson 2000), leaving scholars to try to explain why this has happened. Two prominent theories have emerged to explain this increased polarization. One theory focuses on changes at the elite level and generally argues that changes in Congressional rules and procedures have allowed the parties to focus on more partisan agendas that have led to greater polarization (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Roberts and Smith 2003). A second theory focuses on the electoral arena and specifically the decline in competition in House races (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). These studies suggest the decline in competitive House races comes from an increased polarization in the electorate due to more homogeneous districts. The main argument suggests that voters have sorted themselves into more homogeneous districts simply by moving into neighborhoods with others who think as they do (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003; Stonecash, Brewer, and
Mariani 2003; Oppenheimer 2005). This theory has spawned no shortage of media stories describing the differences between “Red America” and “Blue America” (see, for example, Brooks 2001).

Interestingly, despite the popular assertion that partisan redistricting is a leading culprit in uncompetitive elections and party polarization, the two streams of research have not had much overlap. While some scholars in both areas come to the same general conclusions of decreased electoral competition and increased incumbency advantages, until recently little research had directly tested for the link between redistricting and polarization. Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning (2006) find no evidence for redistricting inducing polarization as they argue almost all change in district partisanship has occurred mid-decade between redistricting cycles. They argue the decline in competition stems from a shift in the partisan composition of House districts independent of redistricting and the inability of challengers to compete financially with incumbents. Carson et. al. (2004) examine the influence of district change on increased party polarization in Congress and find that redistricting does play a role in this polarization. They argue that incumbents representing new districts become more extreme in their voting patterns compared to new legislators or those incumbents representing continuous districts. This finding is echoed by McDonald (1999), who determines that redistricting has played an important role in carving up more extreme districts, which elect more extreme legislators.

**Electoral Competition**
Concern with low levels of electoral competition in congressional elections is marked for many scholars by David Mayhew’s observation that marginal (competitive) districts were vanishing (1974). Scholars’ explanations for the decline in competition from the post WWII years into the 1970s was lodged solidly with the development of the “personal vote” and changes in the advertising, service, and pork activities of members of Congress (Fiorina 1977; Fiorina 1989) wholly unrelated to the party system in Congress. It was during this period that Mayhew offered that consideration of parties was not central to an effective theory of congressional behavior (Mayhew 1974). The hypothesis that redistricting played a role in the decreased competition for U.S. House seats was considered and soundly rejected (Ferejohn 1977). That is, decreased competitiveness of congressional elections was intimately tied up with the growth of the incumbency advantage, but was seen to have little or nothing to do with either the behavior of parties in Congress or processes of drawing congressional district lines.

The connection between competition and legislative polarization is evident, however, in explanations of the strength of the parties in Congress (Brady, Cooper et al. 1979; Cooper and Brady 1981; Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995; Aldrich, Berger et al. 2002; Cooper and Young 2002). These accounts see the strength of parties in Congress as a function of members’ preferences. Stronger parties emerge to the extent that the parties are internally homogeneous and strongly differentiated from each other. Stronger leadership is likely to emerge from strongly differentiated parties with the outcome being passage of the majority party’s programs and high levels of polarization in roll call voting.
Both the Cooper and Brady and the Aldrich and Rohde perspectives – the latter under the label “conditional party government” – posit that these differentiated parties have their bases in the configuration of constituency preferences. Where the two parties’ sets of constituencies are highly divergent in their policy preferences, they will send to Congress party teams whose policy goals are equally or more divergent. In the modern era, probably the largest contributing factor to the current polarization is the conversion of the conservative and once solid Democratic South to one of the bases of Republican strength and ideological conservatism in the House (Rohde 1991).

Here is where redistricting may play a role in promoting less competition and greater ideological polarization. Whether the goal of the line-drawers is partisan advantage or racial homogeneity, redistricting will almost invariably involve packing like-minded voters together.\(^1\) The result is districts that are more homogeneously liberal and conservative than the districts from which they were created.

The possible impact here of redistricting is on the viability of the minority candidate. In an era in which the parties have clear ideological identities, districts that are decidedly lopsided in terms of partisans and policy preferences make it nearly impossible for the minority candidates to appeal to a majority of voters. Put simply, the median voter is unmistakably closer to one of the parties and the outcome is not competitive.\(^2\)

\(^1\) In racial gerrymandering, done to increase the number of elected officials who are racial minorities, the resulting “majority-minority” districts are generally overwhelmingly Democratic and liberal, while the surrounding districts are “bleached,” leaving them white, conservative and often safely Republican (Cameron, Epstein et al. 1996; Lublin 1997).

\(^2\) The normative implications of this are not that simple. Obviously, accountability in a district is compromised if a party’s control of that district is unassailable. However, as Brunell and Buchler (2006) observe, homogenous, one-party districts allow elected officials to represent their districts better, and residents of such districts are generally more positive on their representatives and on democracy in general.
Redistricting Strategies and Expectations

Our argument to this point is that there is a common wisdom and some academic reasoning that leads to the hypotheses that redistricting is a cause of decreased electoral competition for legislative seats in the U.S. legislatures, and simultaneously is a significant factor in the increased polarization of the legislative parties. We believe the common wisdom is based on an overly simplistic view of the redistricting process, that the expectations one should reasonably have from redistricting are much more qualified and contingent than the popular perspective reviewed at the outset of this paper. To make this case we briefly review the array of procedures used in redistricting. This will set up differences among the states we use below in testing the general hypotheses.

State legislatures have traditionally had the responsibility of drawing congressional and state legislative districts after each decennial census. In recent decades, various states have experimented with alternatives to legislative redrawings. Some have been part of reformist attempts to depoliticize the process, while others have been efforts to satisfy Supreme Court standards for representation and non-discrimination. The major variations employed are as follows:

1. **Legislative redistricting** – This is the traditional method. Both houses of the state legislature must agree on a plan, with the governor usually holding veto power. The party in power will often seek to maximize the number of seats for its party. Sometimes, the party in power will attempt to protect all incumbents, thus avoiding fights with the minority party. (This is especially useful when the governor is of a different party than the legislative majority.)
2. **Partisan commission** – The legislative majority appoints the majority of the members to a commission to draft a redistricting plan. This is only used in state legislative redistricting and only for some states. In several states, these commissions serve as a backup method in case the legislature cannot complete the process.

3. **Bipartisan commission** – Equal numbers of partisans are selected for a commission which will draw up new districts. The members then select a chair to oversee the process and, in most cases, to hold the tiebreaking vote.

4. **Judicial redistricting** – A panel of current or retired judges will draw up legislative districts.

There are interesting variations on all of these. For example, Iowa’s districts are drawn up by legislative staff and voted on by the legislature. However, the staff may not use voter party registration statistics or the addresses of incumbents in drawing districts. Nonetheless, all state plans may be grouped into the four above categories. The first two categories are generally seen as partisan schemes, while the latter two are usually considered neutral or bipartisan efforts.

This yields a first expectation, that whatever the effects of partisan motivated redistricting, they should be greater in states using one of the partisan schemes and less in the states with nonpartisan redistricting.

The hypothesis that redistricting will lead to more homogeneous, safer districts can be expected to hold for only certain limited conditions. If the districts in a state prior to redistricting are internally heterogeneous and competitive, then redistricting for
partisan, incumbent or racial safety will all lead to changing the composition of the districts toward greater homogeneity. For example, as soon as the majority party changes lines to gather their supporters in sufficient numbers to have a good probability of winning, the remaining districts must have larger concentrations of the minority party. Now the key for the majority party would be to build its districts to the point where they have sufficiently high probabilities of winning, while concentrating the minority party sympathizers into fewer districts with even greater winning margins. What may be accomplished in practice is often limited by actual distribution of partisans across the geography of the states and various constitutional provisions such as requirements for contiguity, compactness, or respecting existing jurisdictional boundaries.

More often, the districts are quite varied in the balance of partisans. When this is the case, the same redistricting goals may yield less homogeneous, more competitive parties. Consider a majority party with a slim margin in seats but several incumbents in exceedingly safe districts. The optimal strategy here is to sacrifice some of those incumbents’ large margins and draw lines in currently competitive districts to increase the likelihood of winning additional seats. Especially if those partisans are moved into a district with an opposition incumbent, the resulting districts would both be more competitive than before the redrawing, but with the majority party having a greater change of winning more seats.

There is an obvious tension here between incumbents, who are “unsafe at any margin” (Mann 1978) and value large safety cushions, and party leaders, who prefer additional seats to ensure continued control of the chamber. We expect the balance of this tradeoff to be conditioned by the size of the majority edge in the chamber. If the
majority has a slim seat advantage then the leadership would have a strong incentive to pull down incumbents’ margins to win more seats. However, if the majority party is assured of continued dominance, then there is less cost to allowing an incumbent gerrymander all around. Legislators of both parties would be happier and the majority remains confident of being able to deliver on its policy program.

If there is an incumbent gerrymander, we would expect a pattern of movement toward less competitive districts. Our point, then, is a simple one. The initial hypothesis that partisan gerrymanders lead to less competition and greater homogeneity within districts is only true in cases where most of the districts are already reasonably competitive. However, to the extent that the districts are already safe for one party, the outcomes of an effective partisan gerrymander are just as likely to lead to more balanced and competitive districts.

**Methods**

While previous attempts to assess the effects of redistricting generally focus on just one legislature, we employ a variety of datasets. After all, redistricting affects state legislators at least as much as it affects members of Congress. Therefore, we look not only at congressional elections, but also state legislative elections. We also look at legislative polarization by examining roll call datasets from Congress as well as those from various state legislatures.

**Electoral Competitiveness**
The first question we address is whether partisan redistricting is reducing competitiveness in legislative elections across the country. Of course, we do not dispute that legislative elections have become less competitive in recent decades. Recent congressional elections have returned upwards of 98% of incumbents to their seats, and current Congressional Quarterly forecasts designate only 29 of the nation’s 435 congressional districts as being either “leaning” or having “no clear favorite.”¹³ The question is: How much has redistricting contributed to this decline in competition?

One place to start is to look at recent congressional elections.⁴ If legislative redistricting is, in fact, responsible for much of the decline in competition, then we would expect to see candidates’ victory margins in states with legislative redistricting grow larger during redistricting periods than in states with other redistricting plans. Figure 1 examines that trend by plotting out victory margins for both open-seat races and races with incumbents in them since 1992, broken down by the type of redistricting method employed in the 2000-02 cycle.

Figure 1

As this figure shows, victory margins for incumbents have been rising generally in all types of states since the early 1990s, although there was a slight decline in all types between 2002 and 2004. The states with districts drawn up by legislatures do not stand out as unusually protective of their incumbents.

There is less consistency across state type when examining open-seat races. Yet it is clearly not the states with legislature-drawn districts that are particularly noncompetitive. Indeed, states with legislature-drawn districts actually saw a slight

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⁴ Data on congressional elections was made available by Gary Jacobson, HR4604.
decline in victory margins for open seat races during the redistricting of 2000-02. States with bipartisan commissions drawing up their districts saw an increase in victory margins during that same time period.

A regression analysis of the district changes between 2000 and 2002 helps bring the precise effects of redistricting into sharper focus. In Table 1, we use the victory margins in 2002 as the dependent variable, and use the margins in 2000 as a control. We also control for whether there is an incumbent in the race, the district’s vote for president in 2000 (in case Democratic-leaning districts were more or less likely to be dramatically redrawn), and the district’s ideological extremism (in case more partisan districts were more or less likely to be redrawn).

Table 1

The key independent variables, for our purposes, are the dummy variables of judicial redistricting and commission redistricting schemes. The effect of a legislative scheme is theoretically included in the constant. Thus the dummy variables should indicate whether there is a statistically significant difference in the growth of victory margins based on redistricting type. There is not. Judicial redistricting states experienced a slightly smaller decline in election margins relative to legislative redistricting states, and bipartisan commission redistricting states actually became less competitive relative to legislative redistricting states. Neither of those results remotely approached levels of statistical significance.

Instead of focusing on victory margins, we can examine presidential voting within districts, something that is more robust to candidate-specific effects in congressional races. We do this in Figure 2, which charts the difference in Democratic presidential
voting between districts held by Republicans and districts held by Democrats. As can be seen, all types of states have seen their congressional districts steadily polarizing since the early 1990s. There is no meaningful difference between the states based on how districts are redrawn. And all types of states saw their districts polarize between 2000 and 2002, even if those states employing nonpartisan redistricting schemes sought to minimize that.

**Figure 2**

Perhaps the best measure of competitiveness is whether a district changes partisan hands after a redistricting. This again provides no evidence for the notion that legislative redistrictings are more protecting of incumbents. Of the 10 congressional districts that changed partisan hands in 2002, eight were in states in which the state legislature draws the districts. The remaining two were in court-drawn district states.

There is, of course, a confounding factor in any study of state legislatures redrawing districts: divided government. That is, a divided state government (meaning either that each party controls one of the statehouses or that one controls the legislature while the other controls the executive branch) might not be able agree on new district lines if they only benefited one party. Such a state would be more likely to simply draw up an incumbent protection scheme, making everyone’s seats safer. On the other hand, a state government under unified party control would likely redraw districts in such a way as to maximize the number of seats that party can win. This would *not* make districts safer, but would instead tend to make most districts slightly more marginal, as majority-party voters were removed from safe districts to make moderate districts more winnable.

**Table 2**
Table 2 examines the effect of divided government on states with legislature-drawn districts, using the same controls utilized in Table 1. Districts in states with divided party control during the 2002 redistricting cycle are coded as 1, others are coded as zero. The resulting coefficient is in the expected direction: states under divided control saw victory margins increase by roughly a point more than those under unified control. However, this effect is small, considering that most incumbents won by more than 30 points, and falls far short of statistical significance.

In sum, there is little evidence that partisan redistricting is making congressional districts less competitive. But what of state legislative districts? We can compare states that utilize different redistricting schemes to see if all their districts have been polarizing in recent years, or if there are important differences.

Table 3 shows victory margins in contested state legislative races for several states of differing redistricting approaches. While we do not yet have legislative election results for all 99 state legislatures, the data employed here do allow for a representative range of cases. (A list of the states used appears in the appendix.)

Table 3

Interestingly, the table does show that candidates in states with partisan redistricting schemes are winning by greater margins than those in states with nonpartisan redistricting schemes. Incumbents in states with legislative- and partisan commission-drawn districts won by 26 and 30 point margins, respectively, while those in bipartisan commission- and court-drawn districts won by only 21 and 23 point margins, respectively. Similarly, open-seat races in states with partisan redistricting schemes were settled by margins roughly five points greater than those in states with nonpartisan
schemes. This provides some evidence that partisan redistricting is making state legislative elections less competitive.

A regression analysis confirms this finding. Table 4 features the results of a regression equation that uses state legislative victory margins in 2002 as the dependent variable, with the margin in 2000, the presence of an incumbent, and district extremism and ideology as statistical controls. There are dummy variables for bipartisan commission states, partisan commission states, and court drawn plans. The null condition is thus legislative redistricting.

Table 4

As this regression analysis shows, states with bipartisan commissions and court drawn plans saw significantly lower election margins than those with legislature-drawn districts. The results suggest that bipartisan commissions are increasing competitiveness in the average district by over 5%. While this would not make a difference in many state legislative districts, which are often decided by 20 points or more, this 5-point change could be a significant factor in key marginal seats found throughout the states. Overall, these findings provide support for the notion that partisan redistricting is making elections less competitive.

But just how important is this effect? To get a better sense of the size of these effects, we can look to the state of California, which has experienced several types of redistrictings in recent decades. Although traditionally a legislative-redistricting state, its congressional and statehouse districts were redrawn by judges after the 1990 census.

Figure 3 shows how the state’s Assembly districts have polarized in their presidential voting patterns over the past three decades, both during and between
redistrictings. The gray bars immediately after 1980, 1990, and 2000 indicate redistricting periods. Interestingly, this graph does show polarization occurring in the expected direction; after the legislative redistrictings of 1980 and 2000, districts polarized slightly, while depolarizing somewhat after the judicial redistricting of 1990. Yet the level of polarization that occurs between redistrictings is much more significant than that which occurs during them. For example, the difference in presidential voting went from .19 to .24 between 1992 and 2000, when no redrawing had occurred. The next legislative redrawing only raised that difference to .26.

Figure 3

To summarize, we find that redistricting has little real influence on congressional elections; such elections are equally and increasingly non-competitive across different types of redistricting schemes. We find that state legislative races are somewhat less competitive in states with partisan redistricting schemes. However, this effect is small, particularly when compared to the amount of legislative polarization occurring between redistricting sessions rather than during them.

Legislative Polarization

The second set of concerns about redistricting is that it produces excessive legislative polarization. We can test this hypothesis both by examining the behavior of members of Congress and by looking at state legislatures, which vary widely in their approaches to redistricting and in their degrees of legislative partisanship. We first look at members of Congress, comparing the legislative behavior of those from states with different approaches to redistricting.
In Figure 4, we examine the 1st dimension DW-NOMINATE ideal points for U.S. House members from different types of states during the 108th Congress (2003-04). This Congress was the first elected after the 2001-02 redistrictings. The figure shows the average ideological distance from the median House member. If states employing partisan redistricting schemes are producing more polarized legislators, then those states should theoretically have members with more extreme 1st dimension ideal points.

**Figure 4**

In fact, as the figure shows, members from legislature-drawn districts are somewhat more moderate than those from states using nonpartisan redistricting methods. Legislative redistricting states produced House members with an average distance from the median House member’s DW-NOMINATE score of .41. This figure is notably smaller than those of members from court-drawn or commission-drawn districts, each with distances of .46.

What’s more, this pattern appears true in both parties, as Figure 5 shows. Among Democrats, the average DW-NOMINATE score for those from legislature-drawn districts was -.40, essentially indistinguishable from those from court-drawn districts (-.39) and notably less liberal than those from commission-drawn districts (-.43). Meanwhile, Republicans representing legislature-drawn districts had an average score of .45, making them substantially more moderate than those from court-drawn districts (.50) and commission-drawn districts (.51).

**Figure 5**

In sum, then, members of Congress from states that use partisan redistricting techniques do not appear to be any more polarized than those from other states; quite the

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5 This data made available by Poole and Rosenthal, [http://voteview.com/dwnomin.htm](http://voteview.com/dwnomin.htm).
opposite, in fact. To further examine the idea of polarization, however, we can look to legislative polarization measures from state legislatures. The Representation in American Legislatures project at Indiana University\(^6\) has collected complete roll call collections for all 99 state legislatures in the 1999-2000 session and some 53 legislatures for the 2003-04 session. (See appendix for a list of state legislatures currently available.) Although this data collection is not yet complete, there are enough cases of varying redistricting schemes to draw comparisons. That is, even if most state legislatures are currently polarizing, those with partisan redistricting schemes should theoretically have polarized more between 1999 and 2004 than those with nonpartisan redistricting schemes.

Table 5 breaks the 53 available state legislatures down by the four different redistricting schemes employed. We use three different measures of legislative polarization in this table:

1. The correlation between W-NOMINATE and party identification.
2. The distance between the average Republican’s W-NOMINATE score and the average Democrat’s W-NOMINATE score.
3. A principal components analysis combining the above two measures.

Table 5

As we can see in Table 5, most changes in legislative polarization have been small and not in the expected direction. The only state legislatures that saw an increase in the correlation between ideal points and party were those in the states that use bipartisan commissions to draw districts; all other states saw modest declines in this measure of polarization. The inter-partisan difference in NOMINATE scores, meanwhile, increased by .10 in those states using bipartisan commissions, declined by .05

\(^6\) http://www.indiana.edu/~ral/
in states with legislature-drawn districts, and saw little real changes in other states. The most notable shifts were in the combined measure of legislative partisanship, but again, the major increases were in states using bipartisan commissions; states with legislature-drawn districts saw a decline in this measure.

Figure 6 pools the legislature- and partisan commission-redistricting states into a “partisan redistricting” category, and pools court- and bipartisan commission-redistricting states into a “nonpartisan redistricting” category. As before, it appears that those states with nonpartisan redistricting schemes saw more legislative polarization between 1999 and 2004 than did states with partisan redistricting schemes. This trend is constant across all three measures of legislative polarization. There is thus no evidence to justify the notion that partisan redistricting is increasing levels of legislative polarization.

**Figure 6**

**Conclusion**

Our primary conclusion is simple enough: the data for the 2002 elections and the roll call behavior from before and after redistricting do not support the argument that redistricting has been a significant factor in declines in electoral competition or the increases the ideological polarization of legislative parties. We are not arguing that this could not be the case. Indeed, we believe that if partisan or incumbent gerrymanders were executed successfully on a set of highly competitive districts, the result would be more lopsided election outcomes and a decrease in the pressures toward moderation legislators feel from their districts. The latter could be a factor in greater polarization.

But we know that competitive elections for the U.S. legislatures are the exception rather than the rule. Election margins grew through the 1970s and were largely the result
of the growth of the personal vote legislators developed. One reason for this was legislators’ service activities, which served to establish a favorable identity with voters independent of party programs and national political tides. This process was facilitated by a second factor of weakened partisan ties of the period. As the parties established new positions on race and social issues and the South began its traverse to a Republican stronghold, there was an understandable confusion among the electorate about what party labels stood for. As party cues lost their clear meaning, voters would latch onto personal information about their legislators. Since this was overwhelmingly positive, incumbents came to win with larger margins, insulated largely from national tides. The result was fewer close legislative elections.

Thus, the drop in competition preceded the polarization of congressional parties and is not associated with periods of redistricting and reapportionment. The easiest way to make this point is to simply note that the polarization of the House is mirrored by changes in the Senate, where redistricting is not an issue. The source, we believe, is to be found in the greater ideological purity of the parties’ issue positions since the 1970s. When many conservatives in the mass electorate considered themselves Democrats, it is no surprise that districts with these voters sent moderates to Congress. Similarly, during the period of party decline, there were ample numbers of moderate, even liberal, Republicans. Those voters are much rarer today, and those nominated as Republicans are consequently now rather consistently conservative.

These changes are evident in the mass electorate where, since the low point of mass partisanship in the 1970s, there has been a substantial “shaping up” of the ideological profiles of the parties (Erikson, McIver, and Wright, forthcoming). The
polarization in the electorate seems intimately associated with the fact that many more voters and constituencies are consistent in their party identifications and policy preferences. The result is primaries that consistently nominate candidates for state legislative and congressional seats who take distinctly ideological stands.

An inventory and stocktaking of all the factors that go into these constituency changes is beyond the scope of this paper, but would include party strategies, especially the Republicans’ efforts to establish themselves in the southern states, generational change, and some individual level changes as voters sort out the parties and what they stand for. The aggregate evidence is clear that electorates have polarized, and that partisanship has moved to align with ideological preferences rather than the other way around. In short, changes in the mass electorate, which underlie candidate polarization, are driven by standing ideological preferences and shifting perceptions of the parties (Erikson, McIver and Wright, forthcoming).

The low levels of competitiveness of legislative elections and the resulting insulation of shifts in voter sentiments is a valid source of concern. So too are the very high levels of partisanship evident in Congress and most of the state legislatures. These make compromise more difficult and leave a large portion of the electorate with moderate policy preferences stuck with choices that are simultaneously too liberal and too conservative. Our contribution here is quite modest: it is only to exonerate redistricting as a culprit in these processes. Competition has been down for decades and the causes of polarization are to be found in party strategies and change in voters’ partisanship as a result of those strategic decisions. We find no consistent and significant differences between partisan and nonpartisan redistrictings. The polarization appears to be a national
process that has proceeded continuously in recent years rather than taking a jump
following the drawing of new districts, and it seems to be pervasive rather than isolated to
the states where partisans have implemented partisan gerrymanders.

Finally, we are not arguing that current redistricting procedures are without
consequences. We have not doubt that under some circumstances partisan, incumbent
and racial gerrymanders have skewed outcomes in favor of those in control of the
process. One of us (Winburn 2005) has argued that the worst effects of partisan
gerrymanders are easily limited by a few constitutional constraints on the maps that can
be adopted—regardless of the goals of those drawing the maps. But we do not find
evidence of any systematic impact of redistricting on electoral competition or
polarization of the parties in the legislatures.
Appendix

States used for comparison of state legislative victory margins:

Legislative States: California, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Georgia
Neutral Commissions: Idaho, Montana*, Washington
Partisan Commission: Arkansas, Ohio, Texas
Courts: Minnesota, Wisconsin

*The Montana election results are from 2004. By statute, the state did not complete legislative redistricting until after the 2002 elections.

State legislatures used for comparison of legislative partisanship (Unless otherwise listed, both houses from each state have been included.):

Alaska  Minnesota
Alabama  Missouri
Arizona  Montana
California  North Carolina
Colorado (House only)  New Hampshire (House only)
Florida  New Jersey
Georgia  New Mexico (Senate only)
Iowa  Nevada (House only)
Idaho  Oklahoma (Senate only)
Indiana  Oregon
Massachusetts (House only)  Rhode Island (Senate only)
Maryland  South Dakota
Maine  Utah
Michigan  Washington

Wisconsin
References


<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bipartisan commission redistricting</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.06)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Judicial redistricting</td>
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<td>(1.48)</td>
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<td>Winning margin in 2000</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent in race</td>
<td>12.83***</td>
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<td>(6.09)</td>
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<td>District extremism</td>
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<tr>
<td>district’s 2000 presidential vote</td>
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<td>(0.10)</td>
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<td>president in 2000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
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Dependent variable is the winning margin in the 2002 congressional elections. Cell entries are ordinary least squares coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses beneath the coefficients. Asterisks indicate statistical significance (* p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001).
Table 2 - Effect of Divided Government on Legislative Redistricting, 2002

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<td>Winning margin in 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.05)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incumbent in race</td>
<td>13.28***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.46)</td>
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<td>(Distance from median</td>
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<tr>
<td>district’s 2000 presidential vote)</td>
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<tr>
<td>District ideology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
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<td>(Democratic vote for</td>
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<td>president in 2000)</td>
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Dependent variable is the winning margin in the 2002 congressional elections for districts in states with legislature-drawn districts. Cell entries are ordinary least squares coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses beneath the coefficients. Asterisks indicate statistical significance (* p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001).
Table 3 - Victory Margins in State Legislative Races, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Draws State Legislative Districts</th>
<th>Races with incumbents</th>
<th>Open seat races</th>
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<tr>
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<td>26.11</td>
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<td>Partisan Commission</td>
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<td>21.04</td>
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<td>Courts</td>
<td>23.22</td>
<td>18.62</td>
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Table 4 - Predictors of Winning Margins in State Legislative Elections, 2002

<table>
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<td>Bipartisan Commission</td>
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<td>(1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court</td>
<td>-2.68*</td>
<td>(1.06)</td>
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<td>Winning Margin in 2000</td>
<td>.05***</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incumbent in race</td>
<td>5.32***</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
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Dependent variable is the winning margin in the 2002 state legislative elections (see appendix for a list of included states). Cell entries are ordinary least squares coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses beneath the coefficients. Asterisks indicate statistical significance (* p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001).
### Table 5 - Changes in State Legislative Partisanship between 1999 and 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Draws State Legislative Districts</th>
<th>Increase in NOMINATE/PID correlation</th>
<th>Increase in inter-partisan difference in NOMINATE scores</th>
<th>Increase in principal component of correlation and inter-partisan difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legislature</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
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<td>-0.176</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partisan Commission</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
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<td>-0.091</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bipartisan Commission</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>0.438</td>
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<td>Courts</td>
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Figure 1 - Victory Margins in Congressional Races, 1992-2004

Figure 2 – Congressional District Ideological Polarization, 1992-2004
Figure 3 - California Assembly District Polarization, 1976-2004

Figure 4 - Ideological Extremism among Members of the 108th Congress, by Redistricting Scheme
Figure 5 - NOMINATE scores for Members of the 108th Congress, by Party and Redistricting Scheme

Who Draws Congressional Districts

Bipartisan Commission

Courts

Legislature

Figure 6 - Polarization in State Legislatures between 1999 and 2004

- Increase in NOMINATE/PID correlation
- Increase in inter-partisan difference in NOMINATE scores
- Principal component of correlation & inter-partisan difference