Redistricting and Electoral Competition: Some Historical Evidence

Erik Engstrom
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Have the last few rounds of redistricting finally brought an end to marginal congressional districts? This is one of the 'front-burner' questions occupying students of congressional elections and has lead to much debate. Some have argued, echoing Tufte (1973), that modern redistricting has been captured by House incumbents who demand, and receive, safe congressional districts. Combined with the constraints imposed by the Voting Rights Act and 'one-person, one-vote' standards, this line of literature lays much of the blame for declining competitiveness at the feet of redistricting (e.g. Cox and Katz 2002; Hirsch 2003; Carson and Crespin 2004). Another strand of the literature, argues that redistricting as a causal explanation for reducing competition has more bark than bite (e.g. Ferejohn 1977; Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart 2000; Oppenheimer 2005). According to this line of thought, factors such as incumbency, modern residential patterns (e.g. the increasing partisan homogeneity of cities and suburbs), and fluctuating party loyalty strongly outweigh any independent effect that incumbent-friendly gerrymandering may have.

My purpose in this brief essay is to address this debate by providing some historical perspective on redistricting and its impact on electoral competition. I am currently engaged in an extensive analysis of the causes and consequences of strategic redistricting in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In this era before court ordered redistricting, state legislatures enjoyed wide latitude in determining both when and how to redraw congressional districts. Analyzing redistricting plans and their electoral results from 1840 to 1940, I find that districting practices across states and over time systematically shaped the competitiveness of congressional elections, the partisan composition of congressional delegations, and, on occasion, decided party control of the House of Representatives (Engstrom 2003; Engstrom and Kernell 2004).

One of the major differences between modern redistricting and this earlier era is the nature of redistricting plans drawn by state legislators. I have found that in the 19th century when a single party was in charge of creating congressional districts they were much more likely than their modern counterparts to draw competitive congressional districts in an attempt to maximize the number of seats their party could win on election day. Parties controlling the districting process would craft dispersal gerrymanders in which the redistricting party spread "one's opponent's strength in such a way as to deny it majority control of as many districts as possible" (Owen and Grofman 1988: 6). This stands in contrast to the 'concentration gerrymander' – packing opponents into districts where they will win by inefficiently large margins – which is the

strategy typically followed in the modern period.

As an illustration of the differences between redistricting then and now, consider the case of Ohio. Specifically, I want to consider the congressional district plans drawn by the Ohio state legislature for the election of 1882 to those for the 2002 election. This is a valuable comparison because the two rounds of redistricting share many common features. First, in both cases the Republicans had unified control of the redistricting process.[1] Second, the division of the statewide vote was roughly the same in both cases. In 1880, the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote was 47.6 and in 2000 it was 48.2. So, in both eras, heading into the redistricting cycle the state as a whole was very competitive.

Yet, when we turn our attention to the actual congressional districts that were drawn, some stark differences appear. To compare the two redistricting plans, I use the presidential vote from 1880 and 2000 respectively, and aggregate this vote into the new congressional districts. In 1880, for example, I used the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote by county. Since Ohio's congressional districts in this era were comprised of one or more whole counties, I was then able to aggregate the presidential vote into the newly created congressional districts by consulting historical district maps (Martis 1982).[2] For the 2000 cycle the task was much easier. The *Almanac of*

American Politics (2004) reports the 2000 presidential vote aggregated into the new districts that were created for the 2002 election. Thus, for both eras I have a general exogenous measure of the underlying competitiveness of congressional districts.

The results of this exercise are presented in Table 1. I have listed the two-party presidential vote by district for the two plans. At the bottom of the table are summary statistics. One can clearly see the rather dramatic differences between the two districting plans. In the 1882 redistricting plan the average district margin was 4.5 percent while in 2002 the average district margin was a much larger 16.5 percent. Similarly, simply counting the number of districts that had a two-party vote between 45 and 55 percent we again find major differences. In 1882 nearly half of Ohio's twenty-one districts (11 out of 21) would be considered marginal.[3] By contrast, in 2002 only 38.8 percent fall into the marginal range (7 out of 18). So, here we have a comparison where many of the surface features are the same: a single party controlling the districting process and healthy competition at the statewide level. Yet, the congressional districts drawn by state legislators in the two eras produced two starkly different results.

Obviously there are a number of differences between the two eras that I have not taken into account here. For starters, the nomination system, ballot laws, and incumbency all differ dramatically between the two eras. Fully addressing these considerations, and how they might affect the strategic calculations of mapmakers, is beyond the scope of this essay. Moreover, I have only reported results for one state and two plans. Yet, I believe the comparison between Ohio in the two eras is nevertheless suggestive of the

[1] In 2001-2002, Republicans in Ohio held both the state legislature and the governors' office. Because the legislature failed to act before January 2002, under the state constitution they needed a 2/3 majority in both houses for a new law to take effect in 2002. Thus, the Republicans had to gain the votes of a handful of Democrats. Nevertheless, the plan was considered a Republican gerrymander (see Barone and Cohen 2003: 1246).

[2] I have found evidence that this was standard practice for politicians of the 19th century. They would take the most recent election results in forecasting the partisan make-up of new district lines.

[3] This is a conservative estimate. If one were to round off then districts 16,17,18 and 20 would also make the cut increasing the total number to 15 (or 71 percent).

potential impact that redistricting can have on electoral competition.

Table 1: Comparing Redistricting Plans in Ohio, 1882 and 2002

District	Vote in New Congressional Districts, 1882	Vote in New Congressional Districts, 2002
1	47.5%	47.4%
2	48.9%	35.1%
3	48.3%	46.4%
4	60.7%	36.1%
5	57.8%	38.5%
6	49.8%	48.9%
7	47.5%	42.7%
8	44.2%	37.1%
9	47.6%	57.3%
10	50.1%	55.8%
11	44.1%	81.4%
12	48.4%	47.4%
13	54.4%	54.6%
14	45.0%	45.8%
15	47.9%	45.8%
16	55.1%	44.2%
17	44.9%	63.1%
18	44.5%	42.7%
19	30.7%	---
20	44.7%	---
21	42.6%	---
Avg. Dem. Percentage	47.9%	48.4%
Avg. Margin	4.8%	16.5%
Percent of Districts Between 45% & 55%	52% (11/21)	39% (7/18)

Note: The numbers in columns 1 and 2 are the two-party percentage of the district level presidential vote with the exception of Districts 1 and 2 in 1882. Both of these districts were in Hamilton County which prevented identifying the presidential vote since I do not have precinct level data for this particular election. Since these two districts were essentially unchanged from 1880, I report the congressional vote in 1880 for these districts.

REFERENCES

Ansolabehere, Stephen, James Snyder, and Charles Stewart. 2000. "Old Voters, New Voters, and the Personal Vote: Using Redistricting to Measure the Incumbency Advantage." *American Journal of Political Science* 44: 17-34.

Barone, Michael and Richard E. Cohen. 2004. *The Almanac of American Politics, 2004.* Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group.

Carson, Jamie L. and Michael Crespin. 2004. "The Effect of State Redistricting Methods on Electoral Competition in United States House Races." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* (Forthcoming).

Cox, Gary W. and Jonathan Katz. 2002. *Elbridge Gerry's Salamander: The Electoral Consequences of the Reapportionment Revolution.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Engstrom, Erik J. 2003. "How Party Competition Constructs Democracy: Strategic Redistricting and American Electoral Development." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of California, San Diego.

Engstrom, Erik J. and Samuel Kernell. 2004. "Manufactured Responsiveness: State Electoral Laws and the Impact of Presidential Election on U.S. House Elections, 1840-1940." UCSD Manuscript.

Ferejohn, John. 1977. "On the Decline of Competitive Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 71: 166-176.

Hirsch, Sam. 2003. "The United States House of Unrepresentatives: What Wrong in the Latest Round of Congressional Redistricting." *Election Law Journal.* 2: 179-216.

Martis, Kenneth. *The Historical Atlas of United States Congressional Districts, 1789-1983.* New York: Free Press.

Oppenheimer, Bruce. 2005 (forthcoming). "Deep Red and Blue Congressional

Districts: The Causes and Consequences of Declining Party Competition." In *Congress Reconsidered*, 8th ed., ed. Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.

Owen, Guillermo and Bernard Grofman. 1988. "Optimal Partisan Gerrymandering." *Political Geography Quarterly* 7:5-22.

Tufte, Edward R. 1973. "The Relationship Between Votes and Seats in Two-Party Systems." *American Political Science Review* 67: 540-554.