

Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?

Study Background

In the run-up to the 2008 presidential race and in the aftermath of the 2006 Congressional elections that saw the Democrats assume control of the U.S. House and Senate, many pundits and scholars have blamed increasing levels of partisan conflict and polarization in Congress on the effects of gerrymandering - the redrawing of Congressional district boundaries to influence the outcomes of elections, which takes place every ten years with the national census. Advocates of the redistricting hypothesis assert that increasingly sophisticated techniques are used to redraw Congressional district lines, resulting in increasingly homogeneous districts and thus providing an “incumbency protection” plan.

Partisan differences in voting behavior of members of the U.S. House and Senate have grown dramatically since the 1970s to levels not seen since the first part of the 20th century, while American politics have witnessed historically low levels of competition in congressional elections. This is especially true of elections to the U.S. House, where 99% of incumbent members standing for reelection were successful in the 2002 and 2004 elections. In the swing to the Democrats in 2006, no individual Democrats were defeated and even 89% percent of standing Republicans were reelected.

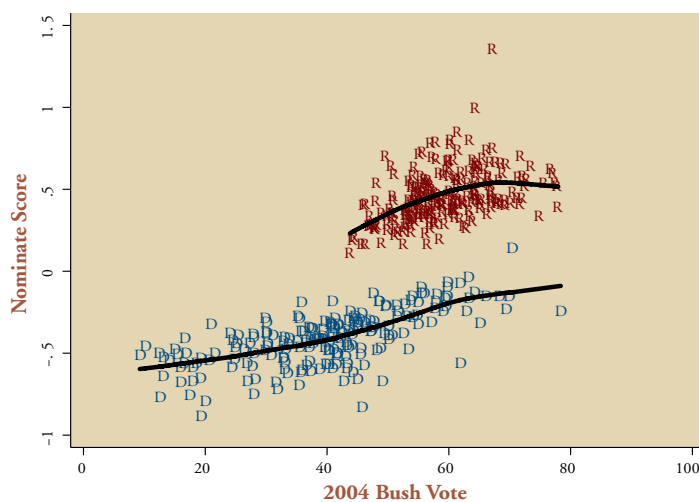


Figure shows the DW-NOMINATE scores of House members from 2003-2004 plotted against the district vote for George Bush in 2004. Polarization due to sorting is reflected by the fact that Democrats are more likely to win districts with low Bush votes and Republicans are more likely to win districts with high Bush votes. Intra-district divergence is reflected in the difference in the scores of Democrats and Republicans representing districts with the same level of Bush support.

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Given the conjunction of these two patterns, it seems natural for observers to conclude that the increased polarization of Congress is a direct result of the increasing ease of reelection. Presumably in an era of declining competition politicians no longer feel the need to reach out to moderate and independent voters to win elections. Instead, analysts argue, politicians are free to pander to their ideological and partisan base. Politicians who do not pander may face primary challenges by ideologically purer candidates. For example, in the 2004 Pennsylvania primary Republican moderate Arlen Specter was unsuccessfully challenged by a conservative candidate sponsored by the Club for Growth. In the 2006 Connecticut primary Democratic moderate Joe Lieberman was successfully challenged by anti-war candidate Ned Lamont.

Despite the conventional wisdom that incumbency-protection gerrymanders have exacerbated partisanship and polarization in the U.S. House, there has been remarkably little systematic study of the issue. But in a recent study titled, “Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?” authors Nolan McCarty, a Professor of Politics and Public Affairs and Associate Dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, Keith Poole, a Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, and Howard Rosenthal, a Professor of Politics at New York University, investigate the link between increased polarization, declining competition and congressional redistricting.

Study Methodology

In the study the authors note that there are two major components of polarization evident in the U.S. Congress: *sorting*, that is, how voters are sorted into districts; and *intra-district divergence*, the differences in voting records between Republicans and Democrats within the same district.

Over the years, the study authors assert, the sorting of legislators into districts has become more fine-tuned; Republicans are more likely to control conservative districts and Democrats more likely dominate liberal districts. Second, in terms of intra-district divergence, differences in voting records between the two major parties within the same district have increased.

To examine the extent of sorting and intra-district divergence the researchers compare the DW-NOMINATE score for each member of the 108th (2003-2004) House of Representatives with 2004 presidential election votes in the representatives’ respective districts. DW-NOMINATE scores are part of an independent data set which estimates the ideology or position of a legislator based on his/her roll call voting records (<http://www.voteview.com/dwnomin.htm>).

The researchers conduct this same analysis using the 107th (2001-2002) DW-NOMINATE scores for the House, which followed the 1990 redistricting. They then compare sorting and intra-district divergence for each congressional term since 1970s.

The question of whether districting itself results in increased polarization is also addressed through a series of simulation exercises in which the researchers compare actual polarization to that which would be expected under alternative districting and boundary scenarios. These scenarios create congressional districts that are not subject to deliberate political manipulation.

Study Findings

The authors find that gerrymandering has not contributed to polarization in the House.

The authors write, “Polarization is not primarily a phenomenon of how voters are sorted into districts. It is mostly the consequence of the different ways Democrats and Republicans would represent the same districts. Yes, the distribution of partisanship across districts is quite different now than it was in 1990, but most of the increase came unaided by redistricting.”

A very large fraction of the polarization in the House of Representatives is the result of within-district divergence between the voting records of Democratic and Republican members of Congress, the authors find. In other words, for a given set of constituency characteristics, a Republican representative compiles an increasingly more conservative record than a Democrat does. The gerrymandering hypothesis cannot account for this form of polarization.

Some of the increase in polarization is due to an increase in the congruence between a district’s characteristics and the party of its representative. Republicans are more likely to represent conservative districts and Democrats are more likely to represent liberal ones. Such an effect is consistent with the gerrymandering hypothesis but it is also consistent with a general geographic polarization of voters along ideological and partisan lines.

Moreover, McCarty and his co-authors find that the timing of this sorting effect is inconsistent with the gerrymandering story. It occurs in the 1980s and early 1990s, relatively early in the upswing of polarization. This is well before the most recent decline in electoral competition in the House. In particular, the larger increases in the sorting effect precede the 1994 elections when 34 Democratic incumbents were defeated and the Republicans enjoyed a 54-seat swing.

Using data for counties, the authors are able to compute the

expected polarization following various districting procedures. The difference between the actual polarization and these simulated districting procedures allow the researchers to establish estimates of the upper bound of the gerrymandering effect. This upper bound is very small and realistically can account, at most, for 10-15% of the increase in polarization since the 1970s. Because of constraints imposed by using county level data, this bound is almost certainly biased upward. But most damning, this upper bound does not increase substantially following redistricting as the gerrymandering hypothesis would suggest.

Gerrymandering may have partisan effects even if these effects do not produce increased polarization, the authors find. Using the same techniques used to study polarization, the authors find a moderate tendency for gerrymandering to have benefited the Republican party. This result is likely to reflect, as illustrated by the Tom DeLay redistricting in Texas, an increase in Republican control of state legislatures in the past two decades. Republicans may well have been able to draw most of the benefits from their political success with more traditional redistricting methods.

Moreover, the researchers note that aggressive gerrymandering makes majority party seats less safe. The Republicans may have paid a price for gerrymandering when a national tide swung to the Democrats in 2006, for example.

Policy Recommendations

McCarty and his co-authors note as a caveat to their findings, “Nothing we say should be interpreted as contentment with congressional districting as it is currently practiced. The protracted political and legal battles over the boundaries cannot help but diminish the legitimacy of American democracy. And redistricting does appear to have a negative impact on electoral competition. There are many reasons to do something about gerrymandering. But reducing polarization is not one of them.”

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For more information on DW-NOMINATE, please go to:
<http://www.voteview.com/dwnomin.htm>

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