

Electoral Origins of Partisan Polarization in Congress: Debunking the Myth

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The state of American politics is increasingly colored by partisan polarization: the two major political parties have grown ideologically more unified internally and farther apart from each other.¹ As the two parties' policy preferences diverge further from each other at the elite level, it naturally becomes more difficult for the two to work together. With the shrinking rank of ideological moderates, "the possibilities of bipartisan negotiation and compromise diminish."² Today the two parties clash with each other more often and more strenuously and vigorously than recent history in Washington and in state capitals. Party-based conflicts, policy stagnation, and paralysis inspired by party competition seem to have become the norm in the early twenty-first century.

The idea of partisan polarization and its potentially adverse effect on democracy has been a popular topic of discussion in recent years. Today there is no shortage of elected officials and observers bemoaning the polarized state of politics. President George W. Bush has repeatedly complained about the "poisoned and polarized atmosphere"³ in Congress and remarked the biggest disappointment from his first term was "how partisan the town (Washington) is."⁴ In the 2004 vice presidential debate, Vice President Dick Cheney lamented "(w)e used to be able to do more together on a bipartisan basis than seems possible these days. I'm not sure exactly why."⁵ In the same debate, Democratic candidate John Edwards rhetorically asked, "(h)ave you ever seen America more divided?" The verdict among scholars has been equally pessimistic. Politics in America today is characterized by a "growing ideological polarization between the two major political parties.... A healthy degree of party unity among Democrats and Republicans has deteriorated into bitter partisan warfare."⁶ There is a widely shared scholarly consensus that "... American politics indisputably has changed"⁷ toward more party division in the last few decades.

Polarized Congress

Nowhere is the increase in partisan polarization more evident than in the United States Congress. The two party caucuses in Congress have become more ideologically unified, respectively, and more divergent from one another since the late 1960s. In the last few decades, "the Congressional wings of both parties have grown further apart."⁸ The rank of ideological moderates or "cross-pressured" members (conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans) has been shrinking rapidly. The "four-party politics" (liberal Democrats, conservative Democrats, liberal Republicans, conservative Republicans)⁹ that existed until the mid twentieth century have been replaced by the two ideologically cohesive parties in Congress: liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans.

More concretely, each of the two party caucuses in Congress is more united in voting today and votes against each other more often than before. The number and proportion of "party unity" votes in which a majority of one party votes in opposition to a majority of the other party has increased. Individual members' "party unity" score, which measures the proportion of the "party unity" votes on which the member voted along with the majority of his or her party colleagues, has also been rising. As members of the two parties move farther apart, the ideological distance between the two party caucuses measured by roll call based scores, such as the ones developed by Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal,¹⁰ has increased in the House and the Senate. The ideological middle is nearly empty in Congress today.

Origins of Polarized Congress

Not surprisingly, what is behind the increasing polarization in Congress has received a great amount of scholarly attention. One significant source of the partisan polarization is well known: political and societal changes in the South since the 1960s have realigned voters and elites in the former Confederate states, leading to the demise of conservative Southern Democrats and the emergence of conservative Southern Republicans in Congress. The polarization that has taken place in Congress since the late 1960s, however, cannot be explained entirely by Southern realignment. House members and senators from the non-South region have also diverged along the party line. Polarized politics is more than a regional phenomenon.

According to one *general* explanation that has been offered, politics has polarized primarily because the political party apparatuses have been “hijacked” by ideologically extreme, committed “amateur” party activists.¹¹ Another explanation contends that as national party organizations grew in influence over candidate selection and recruitment, each party’s candidate pools became “more uniformly anchored in the ideological base of the party.”¹² This was particularly true for the Republicans after the party was taken over by the more conservative wing of the party after 1964 and with the activation and mobilization of conservative grass roots groups in the party.

Such organic changes within what Morris Fiorina calls the “political class,” elites in political parties and interest groups, are no doubt an important source of polarized Congress. Scholars, however, have also found evidence that strongly indicates *elections matter* to the political and ideological orientations of members of Congress: there is a powerful “electoral connection”¹³ between the representative and the constituency. The initial emergence of partisan polarization in the House in the early 1970s is illustrative of the power of such connection. Scholars trace the origin of the polarized House to exogenous electoral forces, namely the constituency changes in the 1970s: each party’s electoral base has respectively become more ideologically cohesive due to the enfranchisement of African American voters and the subsequent realignment in the South. As the Democratic support base became more liberal and the Republican more conservative, the two groups started electing more liberal Democrats and more conservative Republicans, respectively, to the House.¹⁴

There can be a number of ways in which elections and voters could potentially influence the political and ideological orientations of members of Congress. The aim of this article is to take a close look at one popular explanation that has been offered for the polarized Congress: skewed House districts caused most notably by redistricting. Redistricting, which follows decennial Census, has attracted controversies in recent years for several reasons. Most recently, the idea that connects redistricting to the ideological polarization among House members has become widely accepted within the media and advocacy group circles in recent years.

This article first summarizes the arguments of the redistricting thesis and examines its empirical validity using congressional and election data.

Gerrymandering War

The United States Constitution mandates the House of Representatives to be the most *representative* body of all the branches of the federal government, most immediately and intimately connected with the people. The population based, numerically equal representation required by the Constitution and court decisions have made the reapportionment and redistricting a massive decennial exercise rife with controversies, acrimonious disputes, and numerous lawsuits.¹⁵ Following the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Baker v. Carr* (1962), the redistricting part in particular has become the lightning rod for criticisms from all corners. Republicans have blamed Democrat-led redistricting in many states for systematic partisan advantage for Democrats in House elections.¹⁶ The “bipartisan” redistricting, in which the two parties’ officials collude to protect each party’s incumbents, has been accused also of increasing the incumbent advantage at the polls.

More recently, two developments in particular have made the redistricting process a modern day political Goliath that reform minded civic groups and editorial writers love to hate.¹⁷ First, aided by fast advancing computing and data mining capabilities, state officials in charge of redrawing district lines can now carve out districts with greater precision today. The “inexact science” of drawing politically convenient districts is becoming less inexact. Second, Texas Republicans, led by then House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, broke away from the traditional once-a-decade norm for redistricting and successfully engineered a highly controversial “re-redistricting” in 2004. The short-term partisan gain for the Republicans was not trivial: *five* Texas congressional districts moved from Democratic to Republican column after the 2004 election. It also intensified the partisan acrimony in Texas and the nation’s capital, and perhaps more

importantly left open a possibility that the Texas case will trigger retributions by the Democrats and counter-retribution by the Republicans in other states—which could amount to a never-ending redistricting cycle.¹⁸ “... (T)he specter of continuous redistricting wars looms.”¹⁹

The Redistricting Thesis

The redistricting as it is practiced today hurts democracy, according to editorialists and voting rights advocacy groups, because it “puts the interests of political parties ahead of the voters”²⁰ and takes competition out of politics. By packing like-minded voters into the same district to protect incumbents, the critics charge, redistricting creates politically homogeneous districts leaning heavily toward one party or the other. The two most worrisome consequences of such internally cohesive and homogeneous districts are the lack of turnover in congressional membership and the “centrifugal force” that encourages more extreme House membership, as the detractors see it.

The two symptoms are, if the proponents of this *redistricting thesis* are correct, intimately related. A *Washington Post* editorial summarized the argument as “(t)he redistricting triggered periodically by the census has become an opportunity for party leaders to create *politically homogenous* districts that ensure incumbents’ reelection and remove incumbents’ incentive to represent the *political center*.”²¹ The “incumbent protection racket” is in itself offensive and “scandalous,” but it must be condemned even more forcefully, according to the editorial, for the potentially greater evil that it inadvertently creates: ideologically more extreme, polarized House membership.

The redistricting thesis contends that skewed districts produce more extreme representatives because if “the majority of districts are controlled by one party or the other, the eventual winner is really chosen in primaries dominated by Democratic leftists or Republican right-wingers who prefer head banging to compromise.”²² This reasoning seems to be widely shared among analysts and practitioners. Thomas Mann (2005) writes, “(m)any observers and participants believe redistricting fuels this polarization, by creating safe seats in which incumbents have strong incentives to reflect the views of their party’s most extreme supporters—i.e., those active in primary elections—and little reason to reach out to swing voters.”²³ Once elected, incumbents can ignore swing voters even more because in skewed districts “the main worry for incumbents is often not a general election, but a primary.”²⁴ When threatened electorally, “Republicans are more likely to move to the right, and Democrats to the left, to protect themselves.”²⁵

Is the Redistricting to Blame? An Empirical Look

The central tenet of the redistricting thesis, therefore, is that the redistricting in recent decades has produced less competition in House elections *and* more polarized House membership. On one hand, there is the presumed cause, the manipulation of district lines stemming from the partisan or “bipartisan” redistricting process following the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses. On the other, there are two supposed “effects” of redistricting: declining competition in House races and greater polarization among House members. As previously noted, there is ample evidence that demonstrates the House membership has polarized. It is also true that the number of competitive House races has been declining steadily.²⁶ Is the redistricting, however, really responsible for the two observed phenomena? Most importantly for our purpose, does redistricting produce more ideologically extreme representatives?

As it relates to partisan polarization among House members, the redistricting thesis can be translated into several empirical expectations.

1. Fewer competitive districts: The last three redistricting cycles (the 1980s, 1990s, 2000) increased the number of highly uncompetitive House districts and decreased the competitive ones.

2. District-member fit: For the redistricting thesis to be valid, there must be a general relationship between the characteristics of the district and the ideological orientation of the House member who represents it. The more conservative the district, the more conservative the representative would be, for example.

3. Competition-moderation connection: This is a reverse of the second expectation: we expect House members representing highly competitive districts to converge ideologically regardless of their party affiliation. Some of the highly competitive districts elect Democrats and some others Republicans, and they should cluster together ideologically if the central assumption of the redistricting thesis that the underlying district characteristics drive House member’s ideological orientation is correct.

The competitiveness of House districts, in this case, must be measured *independently* from the House candidates’ electoral performance. With the growth of incumbent advantage,²⁷ House incumbents’ vote share is very often highly

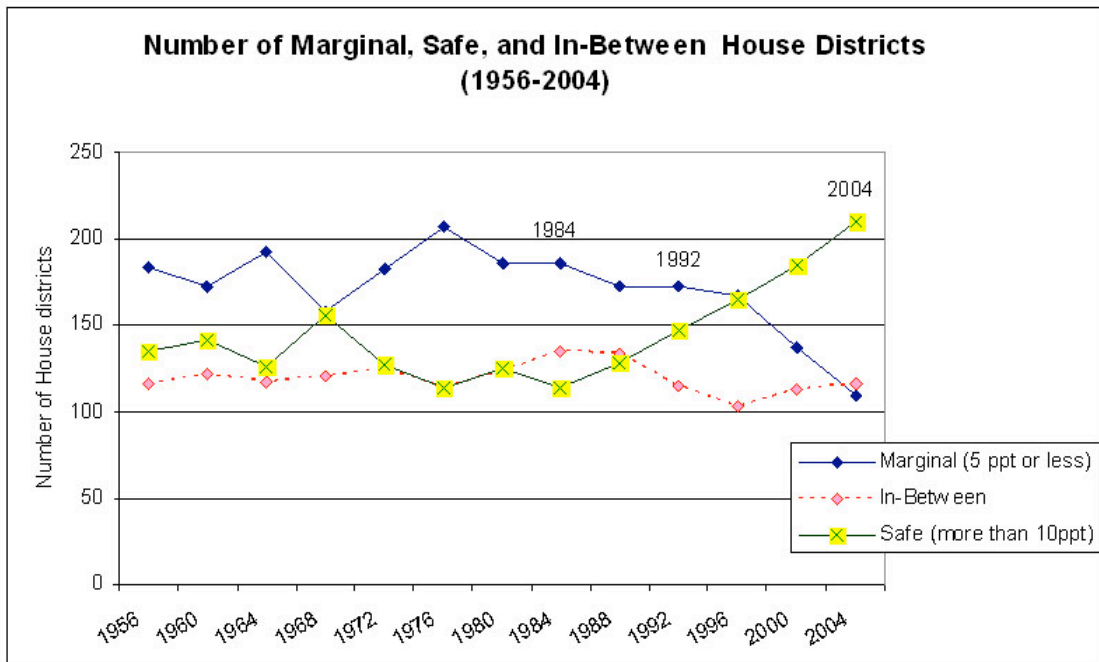
inflated. Instead, the district’s presidential vote, the most commonly used measure of congressional districts’ underlying partisan orientation, will be used.

Marginal vs. Safe Districts

Figure 1 plots the number of “marginal,” “in-between,” and “safe” House districts in presidential election years (1956–2004) according to that year’s presidential election results in the district. A district is “marginal” or highly competitive if the Democratic presidential candidate’s share of the two-party vote in the district is within 5 percentage points of the national average. Since presidential election results in a given district could fluctuate greatly from year to year due to campaign and candidate specific effects, deviation from the national average in the Democrat’s vote share is used to allow comparison across time.²⁸ A district would be “safe” or non-competitive for one of the two parties if the *presidential margin* (the difference in the Democratic presidential candidate’s vote share between the district and the national average, absolute value) is greater than 10 percentage points. In “in-between” districts, the margin is between 5 and 10 points.

In the 2004 presidential election, for example, Democrat John Kerry received approximately 49 percent of the two-party popular vote for president. “Marginal” districts in 2004 therefore would be those where Kerry’s vote share was between 44 and 54 percent in the district. “Safe” districts are those in which Kerry received less than 39 percent or more than 59 percent of the two-party vote.

Figure 1



Districts are categorized according to the “presidential margin” from that year’s presidential election. Presidential margin is defined as the absolute difference in the Democratic candidate’s vote share (share of 2-party vote) between the district and the national average.

Figure 1 indicates that contrary to the popular claims associated with the redistricting thesis, post-redistricting presidential election years (1984, 1992, 2004) did not produce a distinctive departure in the pattern of district competitiveness from the previous pre-redistricting years. The number of “marginal” districts did decline in 2004 and the “safe” districts

increased in 1992 and 2004; however, Figure 1 suggests both are part of the longer, secular decline in the underlying competitiveness of House districts since the mid 1980s. The number of “marginal” districts did not change at all in 1992. These figures are inconsistent with the prediction that “we would expect to see a substantial decrease in the number of marginal districts and a substantial increase in the number of safe districts immediately after each recent redistricting cycle” if the redistricting thesis were correct.²⁹ Overall, House districts are rapidly becoming less competitive in terms of their partisan composition,³⁰ but the increase in “safe” districts in 1988, 1996, and 2000 cannot be explained by redistricting for the most part.

Tracking the mean *presidential margin* from 1956 to 2004 confirms the patterns found in Figure 1. If redistricting indeed creates a jump in highly skewed, uncompetitive districts and a drop in competitive ones, the average presidential margin would increase in the year following redistricting. The mean presidential margin by district, however, has been steadily increasing, rather than spike in 1984, 1992 and 2004. The *secular* decline in general competitiveness is again clear. Redistricting explains only a portion, if at all, of the substantial increase in uncompetitive districts and consequent decrease in evenly balanced ones in terms of underlying partisan orientations.

District-Member Fit

District-member fit and *Competition-moderation* expectations are examined together since the two represent both sides of the same coin. If the redistricting thesis is correct, districts dominated by one party would elect a House member of that party who is located farther on the ideological scale. Conversely, House members representing highly competitive districts would be ideologically moderate because they must be responsive to more heterogeneous constituencies. To examine the relationship between the district partisanship and the member orientation, Figures 2 and 3 compare the spatial distribution of the House district’s presidential vote (the Democrat’s share of the two-party vote) and the House incumbent’s ideological orientation (DW-Nominate Score, 1st dimension) in the 91st Congress (1969–1970) and the 108th Congress (2003–2004).³¹

The DW-Nominate score assigns a unique value on the liberal-conservative scale to each member of Congress based on all roll call votes taken in each Congress.³² Positive values indicate conservatism, negative values liberalism.

Figure 2. House Member’s Ideological Location by District Presidential Vote (91st Congress, 1969-1970)

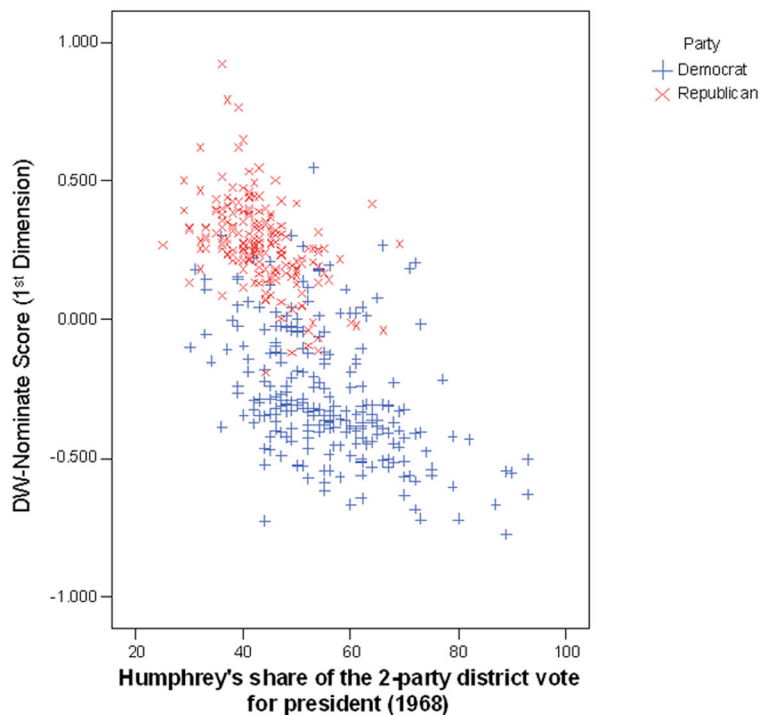
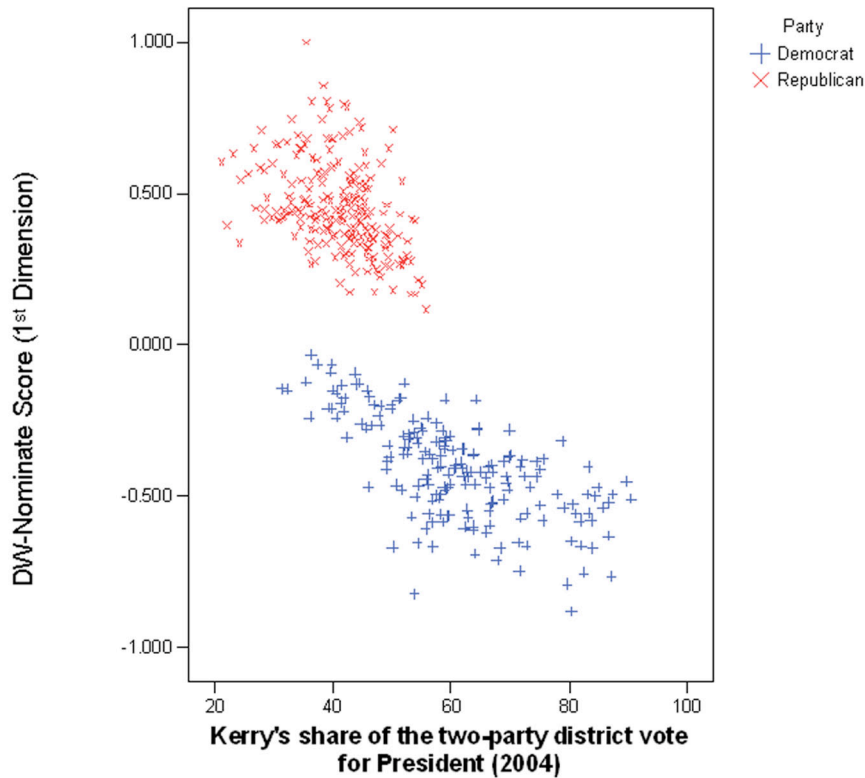


Figure 3. House Member's Ideological Location by District Presidential Vote (108th Congress, 2003-2004)



What is immediately clear from the two figures is that, first, the district partisanship *does* matter to the orientations of the representative both in the 91st and the 108th Congresses. Democratic districts are more likely to send a Democrat to the House, and a more liberal one if the district is dominated by Democrats. The reverse is true for Republicans. Secondly, the two parties' membership in the House has clearly shifted from low polarization to high polarization between the two periods. The two party caucuses have become more internally unified and have separated from each other. Is the partisan polarization in ideological orientation (Y axis) evident in the 108th Congress, however, driven by the polarization in district characteristics (X axis) as the proponents of the redistricting thesis contend? Figure 1 indicates fewer districts are located in the middle, competitive region along the district partisanship dimension in the 108th Congress than in the 91st Congress. However, when the data are presented graphically, Figure 3 makes it clear the middle region is far from empty as the redistricting thesis would imply. More importantly, Republicans and Democrats located in the middle region representing competitive districts have clearly diverged since the late 1960s.

To analyze more systematically what we observe in Figures 2 and 3, a simple OLS regression analysis predicting each representative's DW-Nominate score was run separately for the two Congresses (results not shown). Using individual House member's DW-Nominate score (1st dimension) as the dependent variable, the OLS regression assessed the *independent* effects of the two key variables that appear in Figures 2 and 3: district presidential vote and the member's party affiliation. As expected, the effects of both variables are in predicted direction and highly statistically significant in both Congresses. Holding party constant, the more conservative the district, the more conservative the representative would be. Given the similar district partisanship, Republicans are significantly more conservative than Democratic counterparts.³³

Comparing the regression results between the two Congresses is instructive. The effect of the district presidential vote on the ideological orientation of the representative remains virtually unchanged between the two periods. The relative effect of party, however, has increased dramatically. The estimated distance in ideological location between a Republican and a Democratic in the 108th Congress, holding district characteristics constant, is 0.67 compared to 0.37 in the 91st Congress on the scale of -1 to 1.³⁴ This strongly suggests that contrary to the redistricting thesis, what drives the

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partisan polarization in the House today is political parties and not the district. The two party caucuses have diverged ideologically *independent of district partisanship*. In other words, the polarization observed in the 108th Congress is *not* largely driven by the shifts in district characteristics.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates although elections and voters most likely play a role in the polarization of House members in some form, redistricting has little to do with it. House elections in the 1990s and beyond are increasingly characterized by growing incumbent advantage *and* uncompetitive districts. However, redistricting only explains a portion of the growing number of politically homogeneous and therefore uncompetitive districts. Furthermore, the analyses in this article show that although district characteristics do matter to the representative's political and ideological orientation, what is driving the polarization has more to do with the member's party affiliation than shifting district characteristics caused by redistricting and other causes.³⁵

Another major piece of evidence that cuts into the redistricting thesis is that during the same period the House members have become polarized, the senators have followed the similar pattern. In the Senate, too, the ideological distance between the two party caucuses increased in the same period and the two parties oppose each other more often.

The analyses presented above have a few implications. First, the search for the electoral origin of polarization must shift away from districts and toward the two parties. We must turn our attention to what makes Democrats and Republicans in Congress ideologically divergent *regardless* of the characteristics of the districts they represent.

Second, current efforts to reform the redistricting process to revive competition and curb polarization may well be ineffective and could bring unintended consequences. If people are increasingly sorting themselves out geographically and living close to others who share their political leaning, taking the redistricting authority away from partisan officials will do little to address the underlying problem.

Endnotes

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2. Thomas Mann, "Redistricting Reform," *The National Voter*, June 1, 2005, The League of Women Voters.
3. The comment was made in reference to confirmation of judicial nominees on October 30, 2002, White House transcript.
4. The final presidential debate, October 13, 2004.
5. Vice presidential debate, October 5, 2004.
6. Mann (2005).
7. Fiorina (2004).
8. Robin Toner, "In the House at least, moderation is no virtue," *New York Times*, November 17, 2002.
9. Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher, *The President in the Legislative Arena* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
10. Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: a Political-economic History of Roll Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
11. Fiorina (2004).
12. Fleisher and Bond (2004) acknowledge, in addition to changes among the elites, changes in the behavior of voters contributed to the demise of party "non-conformists" in Congress.
13. Gary Jacobson, "Party Polarization in National Politics: The Electoral Connection" in *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era*, ed. Richard Fleisher and Jon Bond (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2000).

14. Rohde (1991), Rohde and Aldrich (2000).

15. David Butler and Bruce Cain, *Congressional Redistricting: Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992); Mark Rush, *Does Redistricting Make a Difference? Partisan Representation and Electoral Behavior* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Gary Cox and Jonathan N. Katz, *Elbridge Gerry's Salamander: the Electoral Consequences of the Reapportionment Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

16. Butler and Cain (1992) concluded that this was one of the “myths” surrounding redistricting. The research up to that point indicated “that the electoral system has little or no systematic partisan bias and that the net gains nationally from redistricting for one party over the other are very small.”

17. A number of voting rights organizations such as the League of Women Voters are actively seeking redistricting reform in a dozen or so states including Arizona and California.

18. Cragg Hines, “Take a deep breath before more remapping mayhem,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 9, 2005.

19. “Gerrymandering: A partisan war of gotcha,” *Business Week*, June 14, 2004, 65.

20. “Ending the Gerrymander Wars,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2005.

21. “A Polarized Nation?” *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2004.

22. “Gerrymandering,” *Business Week*.

23. Mann (2005), 4.

24. “Ending the Gerrymander Wars,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2005.

25. *Ibid.* A serious primary challenge, however, is extremely rare in House elections. In 2002, 63 percent of the incumbents seeking reelection had no primary challenge (uncontested, no primary opponent, or endorsed by party convention). In total, 88 percent had no contest primary or only token opposition (incumbents won 80 percent or more votes). Only 6 percent (23) of the incumbents running won 70 percent or less votes. (The figures exclude Vermont Independent Bernard Sanders and Louisiana representatives.)

26. The proportion of House districts where the winner received less than 55 percent of the two-party vote has declined from roughly 15 percent in the 1960s (average) to less than 5 percent in 2004. Competition has also declined in open seat races. In 2004, the winner received less than 55 percent of the two-party vote in 14 percent of the open seat districts.

27. Andrew Gelman and Gary King, “Estimating Incumbency Advantage without Bias,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 34 (February 1990): 1142-1164.

28. Alan Abramowitz, Brad Alexander and Matthew Gunning, “Incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections,” paper presented at the 2005 Southern Political Science Association meeting.

29. Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning (2005), 10.

30. The increase in the number of “safe” districts between 1984 and 2004 is steady and substantial (84 percent increase in the 20 year period, nearly half of the House districts were “safe” in 2004).

31. One extreme value from the 91st Congress (Iowa Republican Harold Gross) was thrown out. Vermont Independent Barnard Sanders and all Texas cases from the 108th Congress were thrown out.

32. Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

33. Results of the two key variables (presidential vote and party affiliation) remain robust when alternative specifications are applied (adding South variable or an interaction between party and presidential vote, for example).

34. Unstandardized coefficient of the party variable. These estimates come from a model that includes an interaction between the party variable and presidential vote.

35. Bruce Oppenheimer, “The Decline in Party Competitiveness at the Congressional District Level,” paper presented at the 2002 Southern Political Science Association meeting; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani (2003); Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning (2005).