

The Gerrymander Scandal

Americans will go to the polls a year from this week in the quaint belief that they will be electing a new Congress. But the real story is that nearly all of those races have already been decided – by politicians in backrooms and long before anyone even votes.

The reason is the bipartisan scandal known as redistricting, or more colorfully as the "gerrymander." That is the process by which state politicians sit down every 10 years to carve up Congressional districts. This time they're doing it with an even more blatant mix than usual of partisanship and incumbent protection. The result is that perhaps only 30 of 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives will even be competitive next year.

The process is turning American democracy on its head. The House was supposed to be the legislative body closest to the people, the one built to reflect swift changes in the popular will. But nowadays the Senate is more to popular opinion, despite six year terms, because no one has yet figured out how to gerrymander an entire state.

Gerrymanders have been part of American history at least since the term was coined in 1812. But today politicians use computer data bases to build districts so precise in their demographics that they resemble bugs splattered on a windshield. The line drawers know enough about party registration to divide people on different sides of the same street.

This year, as usual, both parties are on the scandal. But because Republicans have more House incumbents, and more governors, they're likely to get the partisan advantage, creating perhaps a dozen new safe GOP seats. Michael Barone, author of the Almanac of American Politics, says the way redistricting is going "will make it next to impossible for the Democrats to retake the House." This may be good for Republicans, but it's bad for democracy. A year ago more than 20% of the entire House had no major party challenger. George W. Bush won Florida by only 537 votes, but 10 of the 21 Florida House incumbents ran unopposed.

Gerrymanders, can produce effective disenfranchisement. Witness the scam Republicans pulled off this year in Utah to defeat the state's Democratic Congressman, Jim Matheson. The state's GOP legislature carved up his urban Salt Lake City district and mixed city neighborhoods with 14 rural counties. The GOP plan moved 684,000 people from one district to another, while competing plans moved fewer than one-tenth as many. Democrats won 41% of the vote in House races in Utah last year, but next year they'll struggle to get even one of the state's three House seats. (See the maps.)

And that's not the worst. In Michigan, which Al Gore carried by five percentage points, a GOP gerrymander has stuffed six Democratic incumbents into only three seats. The likely result is that a nine-to-seven Democratic majority delegation will become a nine-to-six GOP majority. In a burst of candor, one of the stuffed Democrats, Representative Jim Barcia, admitted that "If the shoe were on the other foot, we would be doing the same thing."

And Democrats did precisely that in Georgia, pushing four GOP incumbents into two districts and creating four ungainly new Atlanta districts tilted toward Democrats. Stu Rothenberg of Roll Call newspaper says Georgia's legislature should be "publicly humiliated" for its brazen line drawing. One new district has four strange peninsulas that resemble in turn: Long Island, Cape Cod, Malaysia and the genie from the movie "Aladdin."

It's tempting to say "that's politics" and assume that the partisanship balances out over time. But that can be a very long time. Meanwhile, the public will is stymied, fewer elections are competitive and more and more Americans decide not to vote at all. What's the point in voting if you know the outcome in advance?

We know that courts or bipartisan "commissions" don't always do a better job than politicians in the messy work of redistricting. But both Canada and Britain appoint boundary commissions that somehow are universally respected by all parties and create far more competitive seats. This year in the U.S., both Iowa and Arizona used nonpartisan bodies to draw compact districts, with much success.

That was the model Ronald Reagan had in mind when he warned Americans in 1989 about the "conflict of interest" legislators have in drawing their own districts. He said gerrymandering would remain a "national scandal" so long as the public was uninformed about how it renders many elections meaningless.

Mr. Reagan's sensible voice has been stilled, so we hope other leaders will take up the call. Perhaps former

Congressional leaders without a stake in the process can help. The sad truth is that incumbents and party hacks are using this year*s gerrymanders to fix next year*s elections in advance. It*s no consolation that this time around the smarter, more brazen hacks are Republicans.

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