

## **We Urgently Need Redistricting Reform**

By Lee Hamilton

We can thank the computer for adding much to the convenience of modern life. One of its less-noticed contributions, though, should draw our apprehension, not our thanks: the ability of legislative incumbents to escape competitive elections. In this regard, at least, computers are helping to undermine our democracy.

I'm talking, of course, about redistricting. These days, your basic laptop can so finely parse a neighborhood, a street, even a particular house, that the people responsible for drawing new legislative districts can achieve pretty much any political complexion they wish for the districts they produce. Politicians, in other words, now get to choose their voters, rather than the other way around.

Usually, this yields one of two results: a set of districts that gives the party in power a lock on as many seats as possible; or a legislative map that protects incumbents of both parties. The result in either case is the same. Competitive elections for the U.S. House of Representatives and many state legislatures are becoming a relic of the past, and our representative democracy is seriously undermined as a result.

Perhaps the most striking example of this is California, where in 2001 Democrats and Republicans agreed that they would draw new district maps to protect the registration advantage of whichever party held the seat at the time. They did a thorough job. In the 2002 elections, only three legislative seats changed party hands. In 2004, not a single one — not one of the 53 congressional seats or 100 legislative districts — fell to the opposite party. As one political scientist in the state puts it, it was "surely the most complete and effective bipartisan gerrymander in American history."

You might wonder what's wrong with this. After all, every registered voter in a district still gets to cast a vote, and if most of them happen to prefer the incumbent, so be it.

Let's think about this from two perspectives. As a voter, would you rather live in a district in which you knew that no matter how hard you tried, your preferred candidate could never win, or in a district in which your party had a realistic — though not certain — chance of prevailing every other November? For that matter, even if you take some comfort from living in a district where you're part of a clear majority, it's hard to get very excited at election time, knowing that the conclusion is foregone. I think it's hardly an accident that as elections have grown less competitive, the interest and participation of ordinary citizens have waned.

Even more troubling, though, is the impact of current redistricting practices on the makeup of the U.S. House and of state legislatures. When a district is drawn to favor a particular party, it means that politicians running in it don't need to appeal to a cross-section of the electorate; instead, their constituency lies within their party. Not surprisingly, this means that they focus on appealing to the hard-core base of the party, and tend to be more extreme than the great mass of voters. Looking at the intense partisanship and ideological rigidity of our legislative leaders these days, ordinary Americans often wonder what happened to the political center. My response is that we redistricted it out of existence.

There is a simple solution to this, though it's not a particularly easy one: remove responsibility for redistricting from the hands of politicians. Drawing congressional and legislative lines is a state function, and in most states it still falls to state legislators and the governor to agree on a map. Several states, though, hand the job to a bipartisan commission, sometimes made up of

retired judges appointed by the legislative leaders of both parties. Following Iowa's lead, Idaho, Arizona and Alaska all switched to this method during the 1990s.

This is a heartening development. Not long ago, researchers at Claremont McKenna College in California studied election results in states where legislators do not draw the political lines. They found unambiguously that districts in these states were more politically competitive. "Looking back at the '90s," the senior researcher told the Los Angeles Times, "there are many more districts that change hands over the decade than where the legislature draws the line."

I fervently hope that this cause gains steam quickly. The U.S. House of Representatives has been known since the founding of our nation as "the people's house," but if its members come to represent only the committed activists of both political parties, it is hard to see how they can live up to the founders' expectations. Elections need to reflect public opinion as it evolves and changes over time. Political competition forces candidates to understand the needs and desires of voters, it requires them to justify and explain their positions, it offers voters a true opportunity to weigh the qualities they want in a representative, and it ensures that voters can make a choice in the marketplace of politics. A competitive election is the central avenue for our self-expression as citizens, and the legitimacy and vitality of Congress depend on it. We ought not let the convenience of incumbent lawmakers stand in its way.

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