

# **The Structure of Congressional Elections**



**September 13, 2023**

**POLS 101: American Politics & Policy**

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**Fall Semester, 2023**

**OXY** Occidental  
College

# Outline

1. Election basics
2. Electoral districts
3. Gerrymandering
4. The consequences (?) of gerrymandering

# Election Basics





# Legislative Electoral System

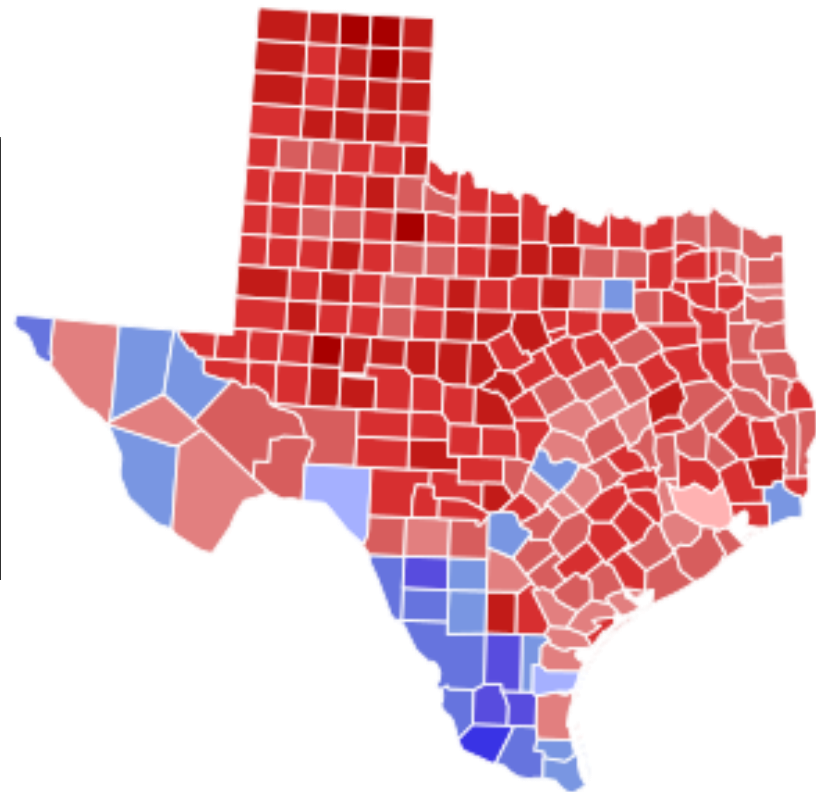
- Members of both chambers are mostly elected using a system called *first past the post* (“FPTP”)
- **Single-member districts**
- Under this system, the candidate with the most votes wins the election
- This could be well under 50% of the votes!

# A Typical FPTP Election: Texas Senate, 2012




**U.S. Senate, Texas General Election, 2012**

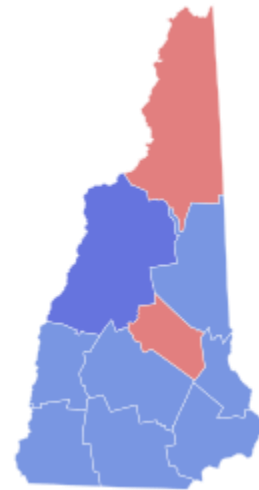
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Party	Candidate	Vote %	Votes
 Republican	✓ <b>Ted Cruz</b>	56.5%	4,440,137
 Democratic	Paul Sadler	40.6%	3,194,927
 Libertarian	John Jay Myers	2.1%	162,354
 Green	David B. Collins	0.9%	67,404
<b>Total Votes</b>			<b>7,864,822</b>






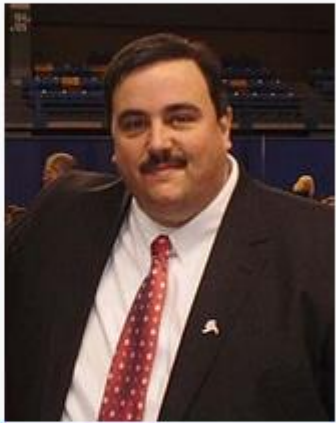
## A Typical FPTP Election: New Hampshire Senate, 2012

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
 Democratic	Maggie Hassan (incumbent)	332,193	53.50%	+5.52%
 Republican	Don Bolduc	275,928	44.43%	-3.41%
 Libertarian	Jeremy Kauffman	12,390	2.00%	+0.30%
Write-in		464	0.07%	—
Total votes		620,975	100.0%	



# A More Unusual FPTP Election

## 2010 United States Senate election in Alaska

			
← 2004	November 2, 2010		2016 →
			
Candidate	<b>Lisa Murkowski</b> (write-in)	Joe Miller	Scott McAdams
Party	Republican	Republican	Democratic
Popular vote	101,091	90,839	60,045
Percentage	39.5%	35.5%	23.5%

# There Are Exceptions!

- California, Washington, and Nebraska use two-round systems
- Georgia and Louisiana have *run-off elections* if no candidate receives 50% of the vote
  - This happened in Georgia in 2020 and 2022
- Alaska and Maine recently adopted *ranked-choice-voting* for their general elections



# Electoral Districts

# Votes and Seats

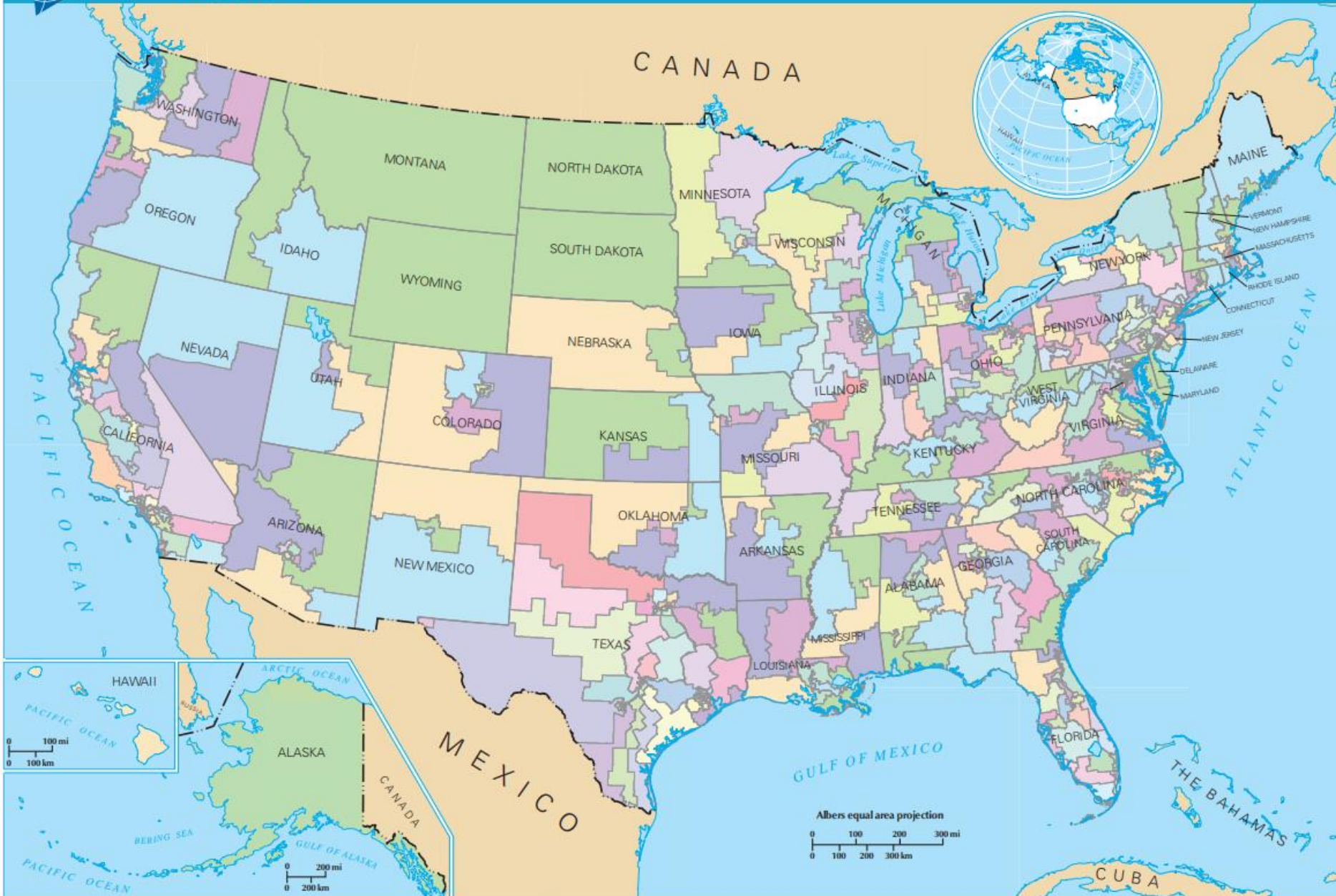
- An *electoral system* is the means by which **votes** are translated into **seats**
  - This is a shameless plug for POLS 222
- This system determines the *incentives* that members of Congress have when deciding how to represent their constituents
- Another crucial factor in determining what kinds of MCs we have is how congressional districts are drawn

# Legislative Election Basics

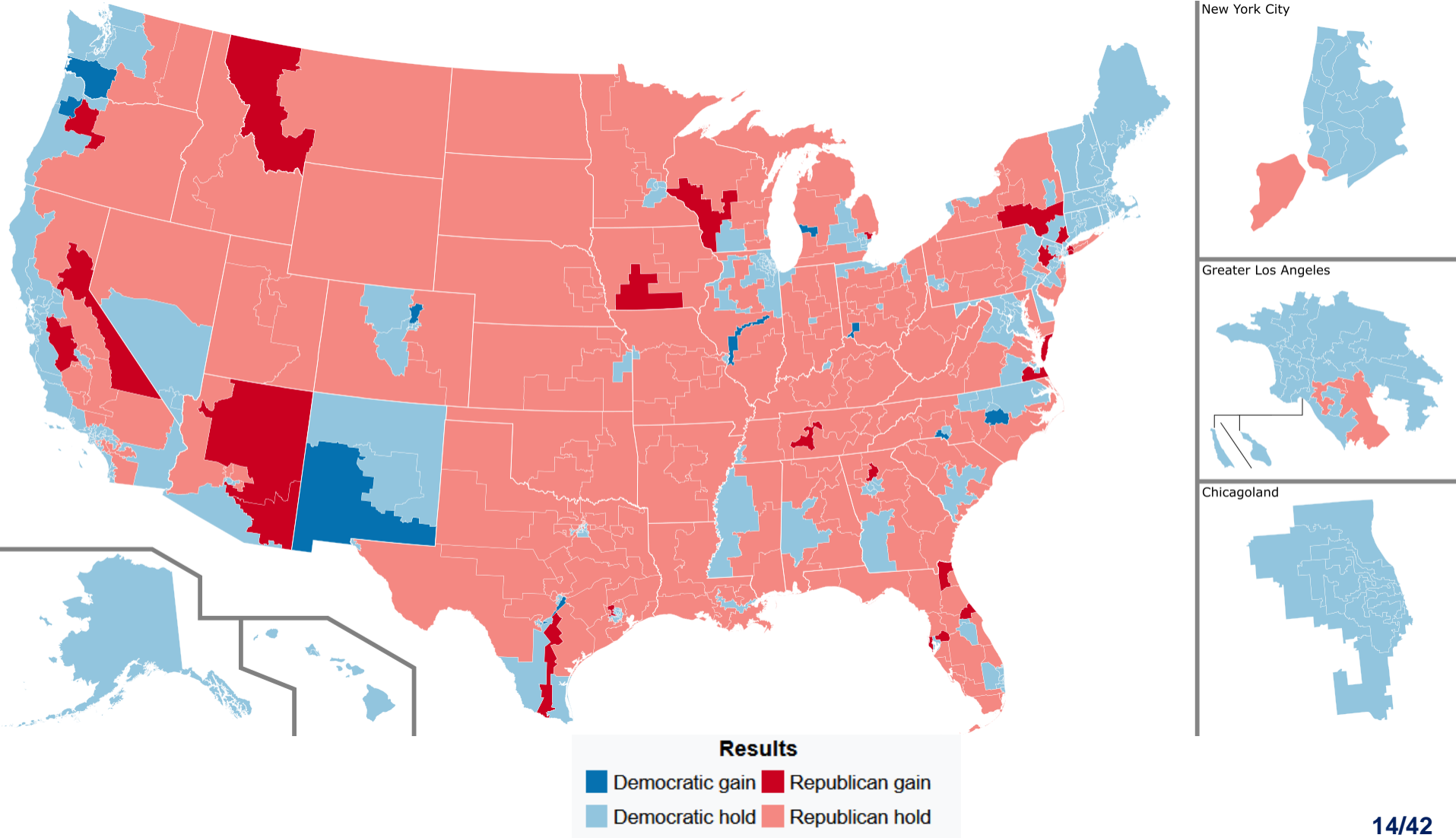
- House of Representatives
  - Elected in single-seat districts of about 760,000 people each
  - Districts are redrawn every census (every decade)
  - Two-year terms
- The Senate
  - Members elected statewide
  - Two members per state
  - Six-year terms (staggered)
- So, what is a Senate “electoral district”?

# Single-Member Districts

- Congressional elections exclusively use majoritarian **single-member districts**
- How does this reinforce the Madisonian design?
- Members are highly incentivized to cater to the factional preferences of their district
- What are some possible downsides of this electoral system?

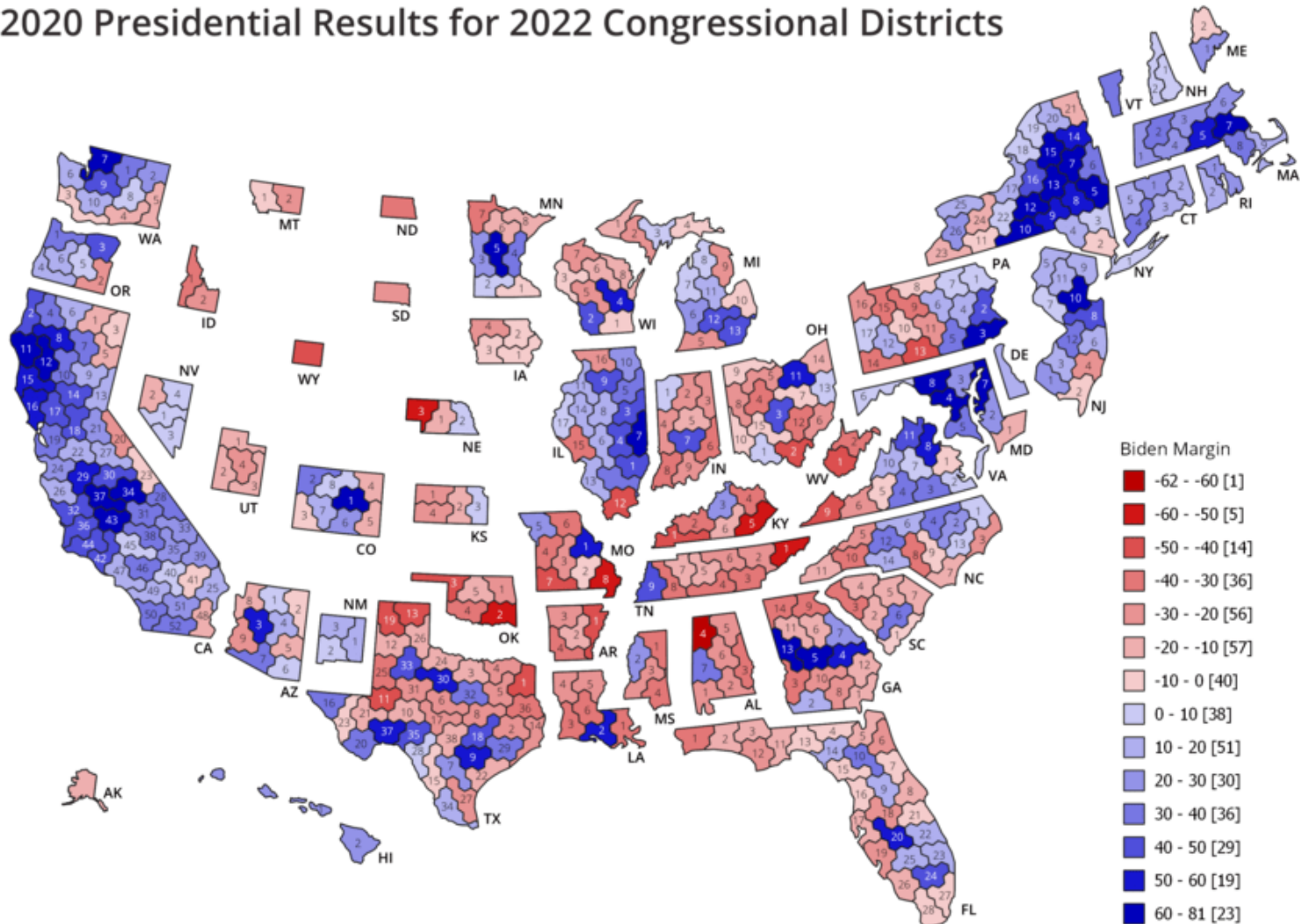


# 2022 House Districts





## 2020 Presidential Results for 2022 Congressional Districts



With the same area for each district (and representative), this cartogram allows small, dense urban districts to be seen, but at the expense of geographic accuracy. Files available at <https://dkel.ec/map>

Data source: Daily Kos Elections, <https://dkel.ec/data>



# Apportionment

- **Apportionment** is the process of dividing a country (or state) into electoral districts
- After every census, Congress allocates a number of House seats to each state, according to its population
- House apportionment happened this year
- After seats are apportioned, districts must be drawn
- Congress does NOT draw its own districts – this is left up to the states



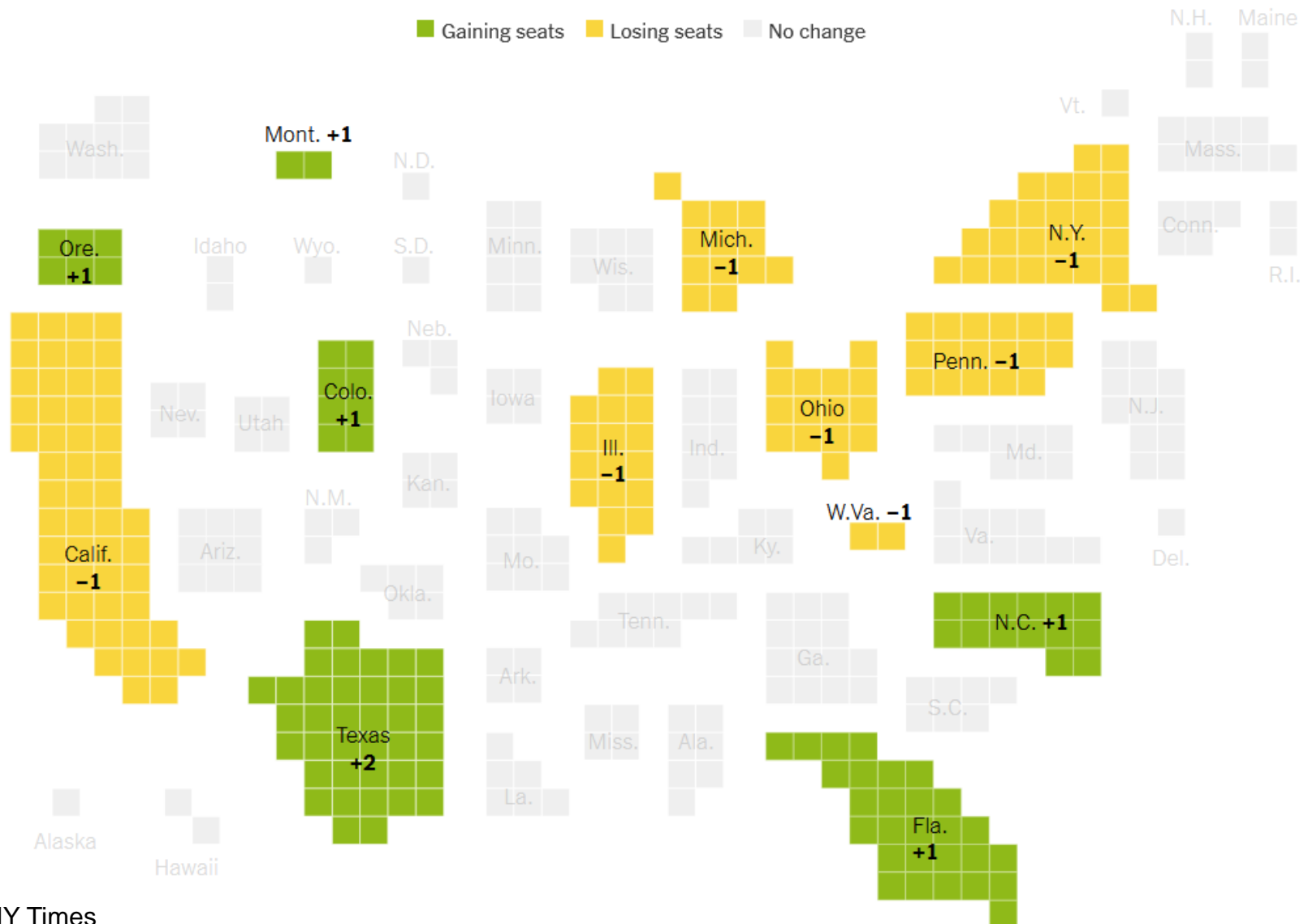
## After 2010, the South/Southwest Gained Seats, the Midwest Lost Seats

# CONGRESSIONAL SEATS

2010  
OFFICIAL RESULTS



## 2020 Continues This Trend



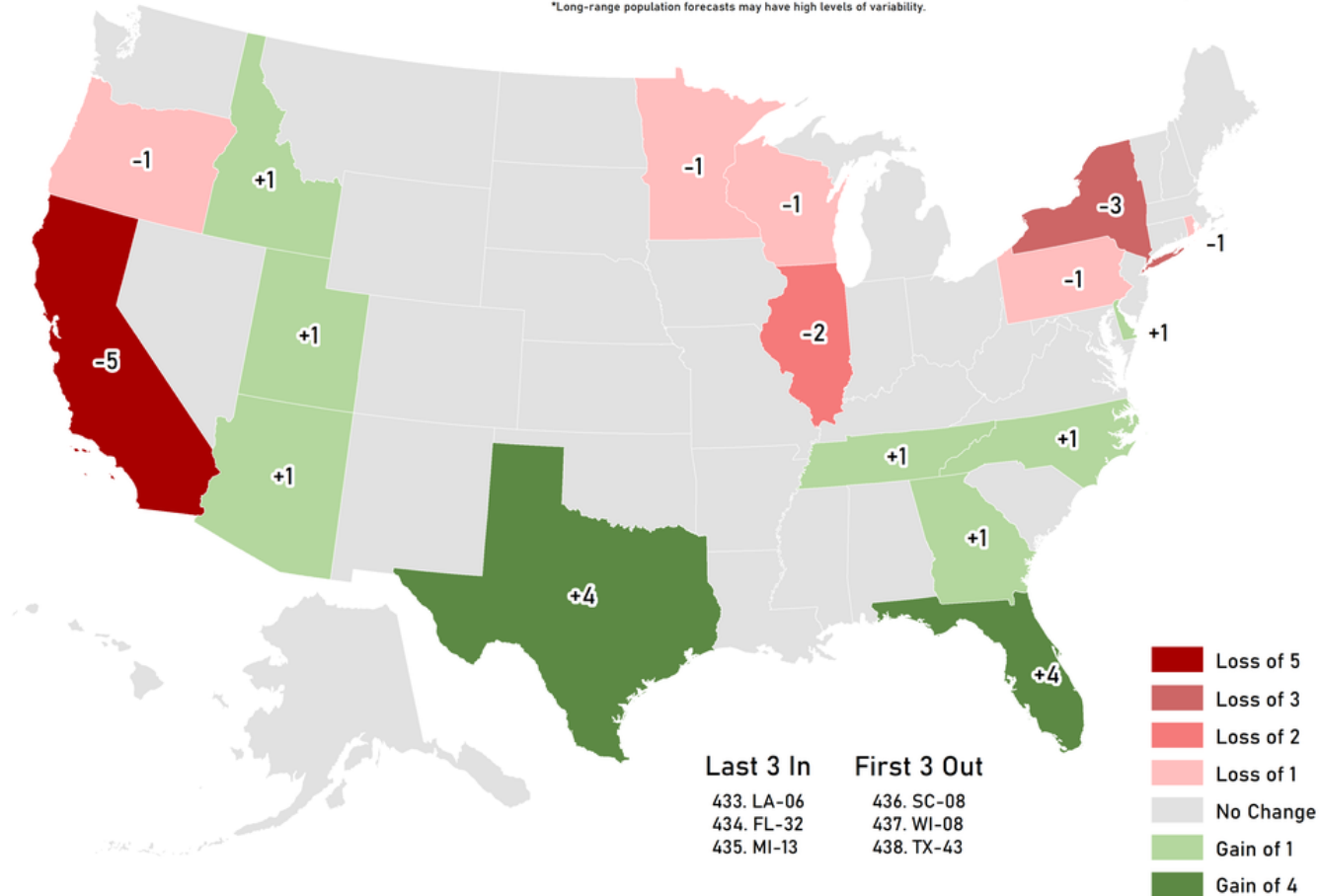
# 2030 Will Likely Supercharge It

## 2030 Apportionment Forecast

Apportionment Based on 2022 Population Estimates\*

\*Long-range population forecasts may have high levels of variability.

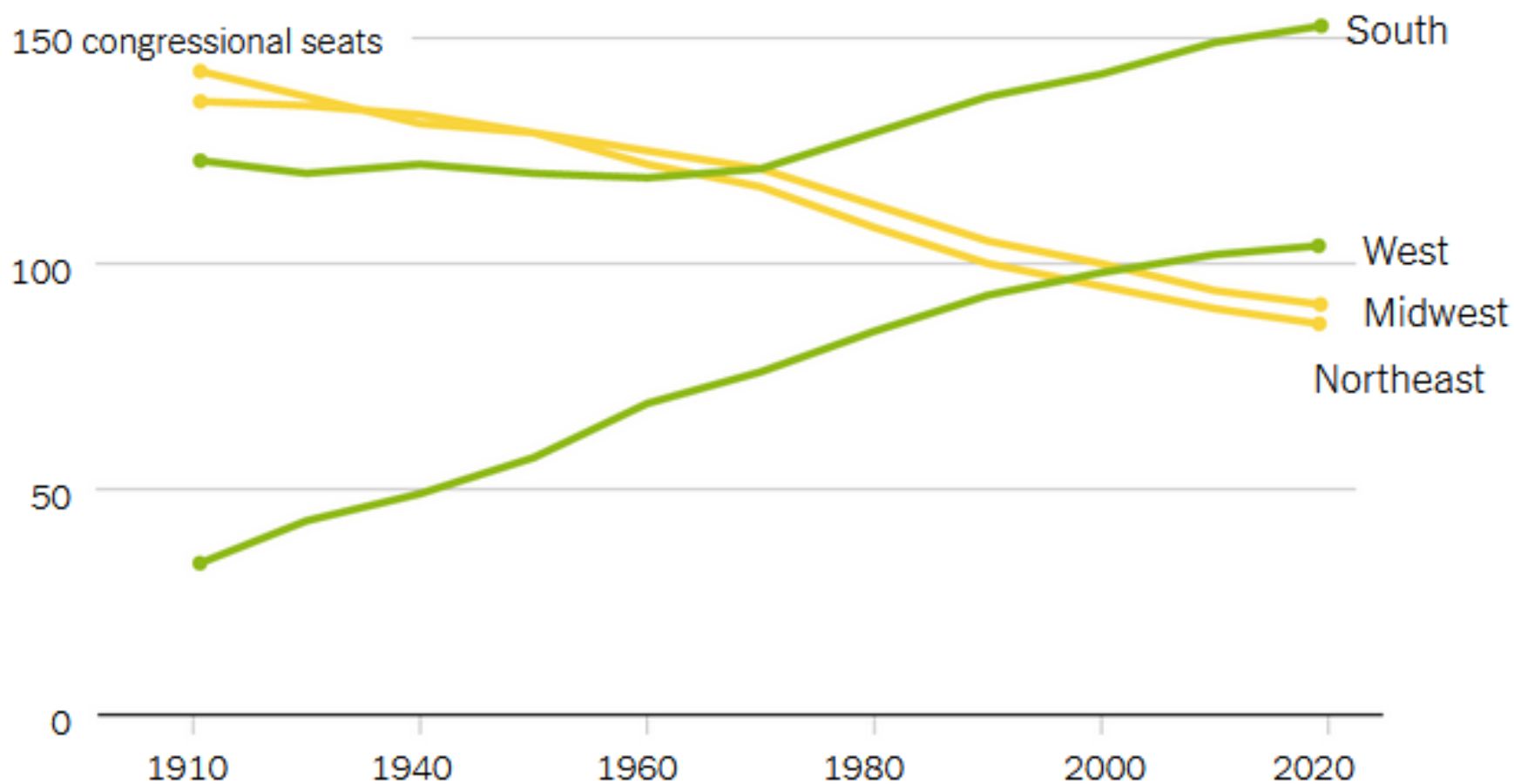
**The American  
Redistricting  
Project**



www.TheARP.org

## The Trend

**Congressional seats in each region**

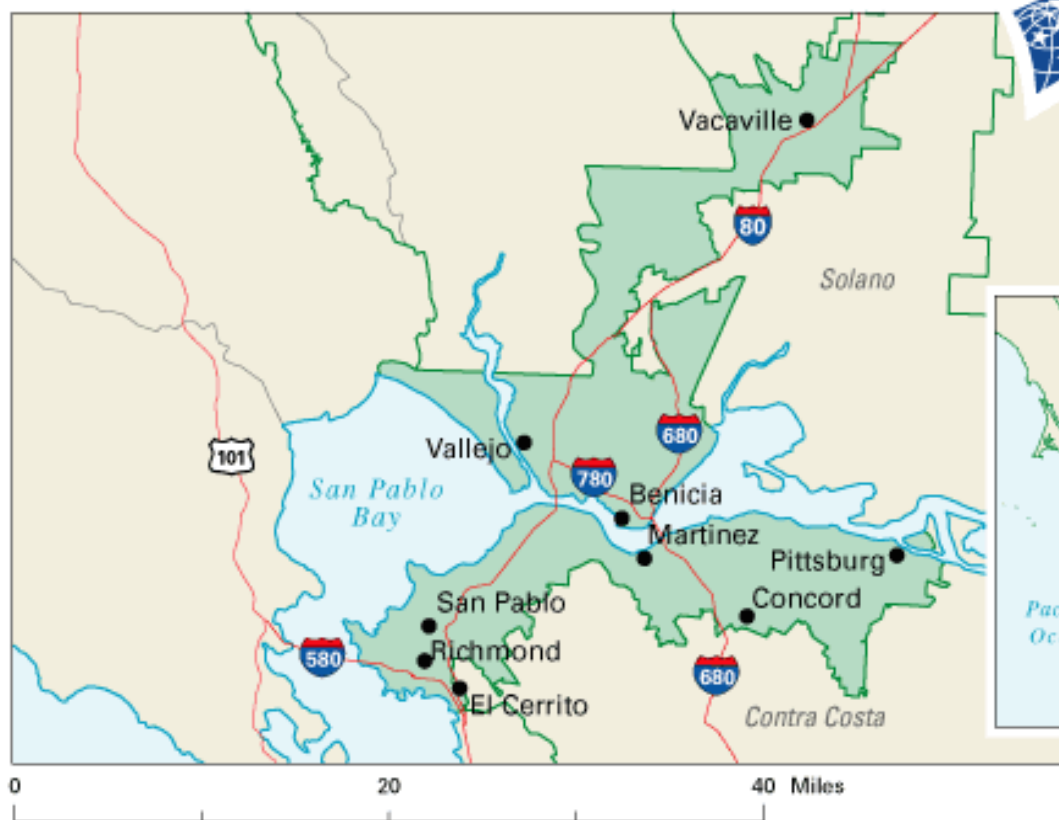


# Redistricting Rules

- Districts are drawn either by the state legislature or by a non-partisan commission
- But there are a number of limitations on how congressional districts are drawn:
  - Districts must have only one representative (by law)
  - Districts must the same population (*Baker v. Carr*, *Wesberry v. Sanders*)
  - Districts must be contiguous and compact (*Reynolds v. Sims*, 1964)
- Most of these are intuitive

## ... But What does Contiguous Mean?

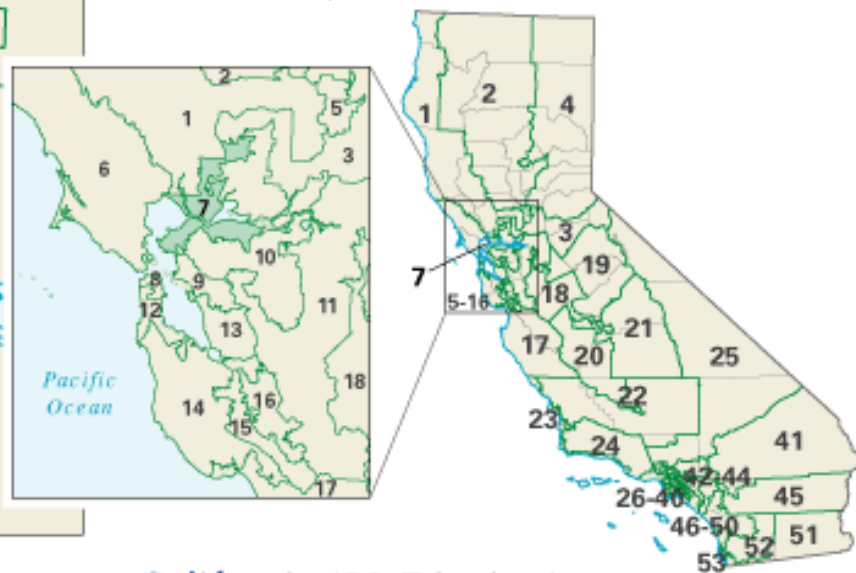
### *Congressional District 7*



nationalatlas.gov™

**7** Congressional District

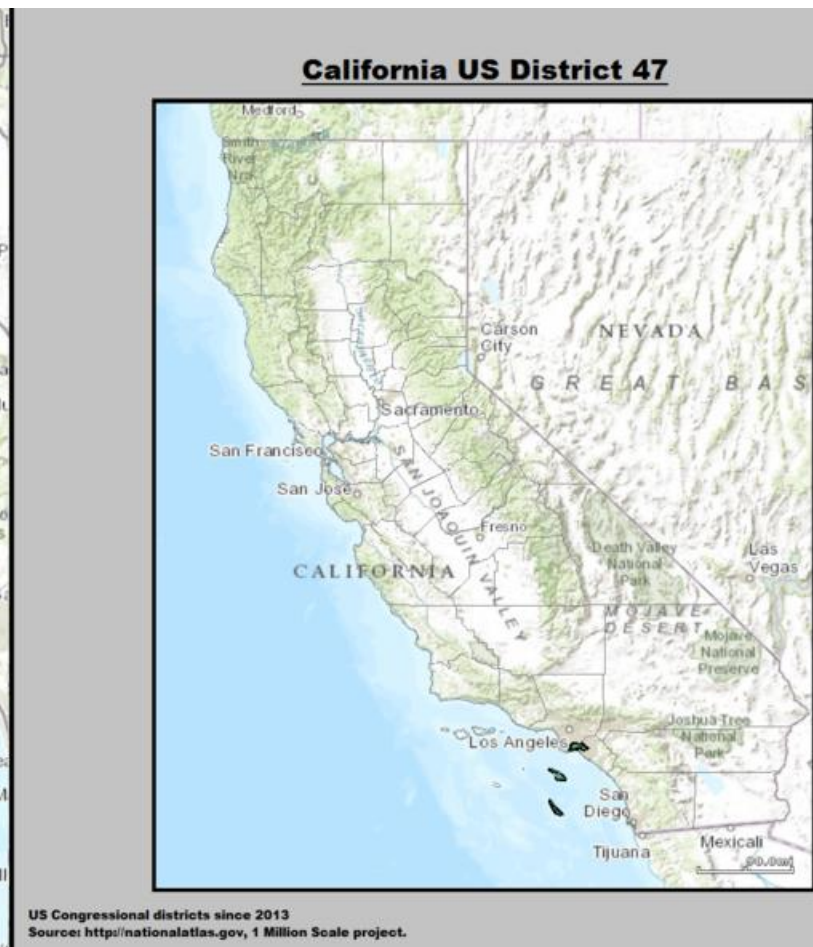
Solano County



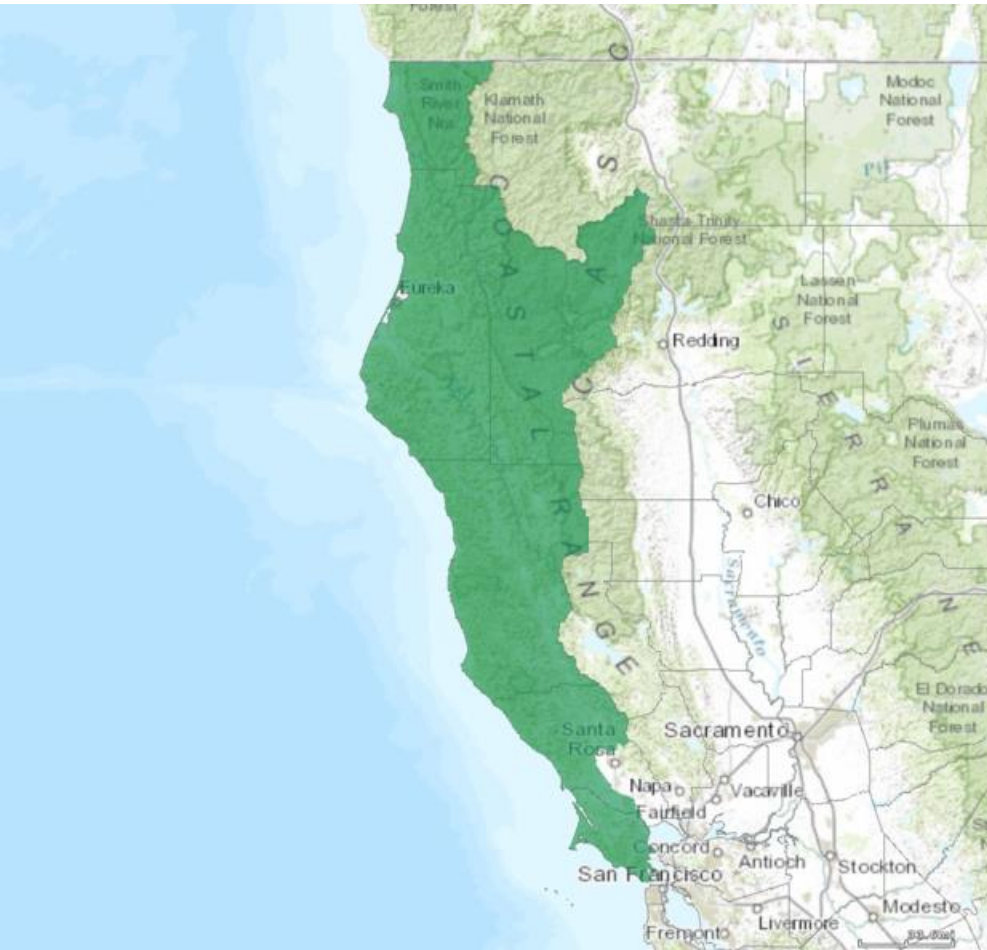
*California (53 Districts)*



# Contiguous?



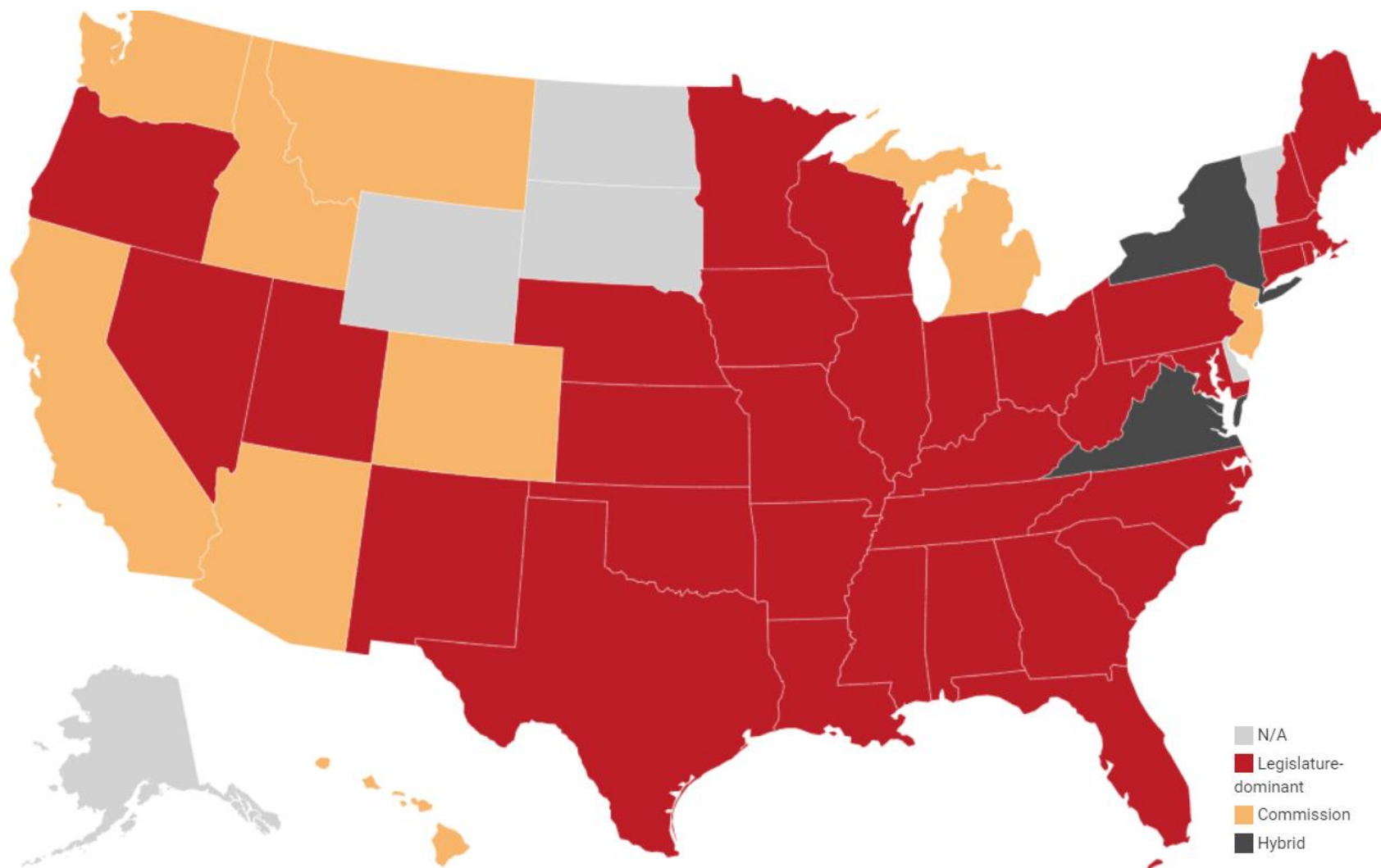
## Or Compact?



US Congressional districts since 2013  
Source: <http://nationalatlas.gov>, 1 Million Scale project.



## Redistricting Methods Vary By State



# Redistricting Varies a Lot by State!



# Gerrymandering

# Gerrymandering

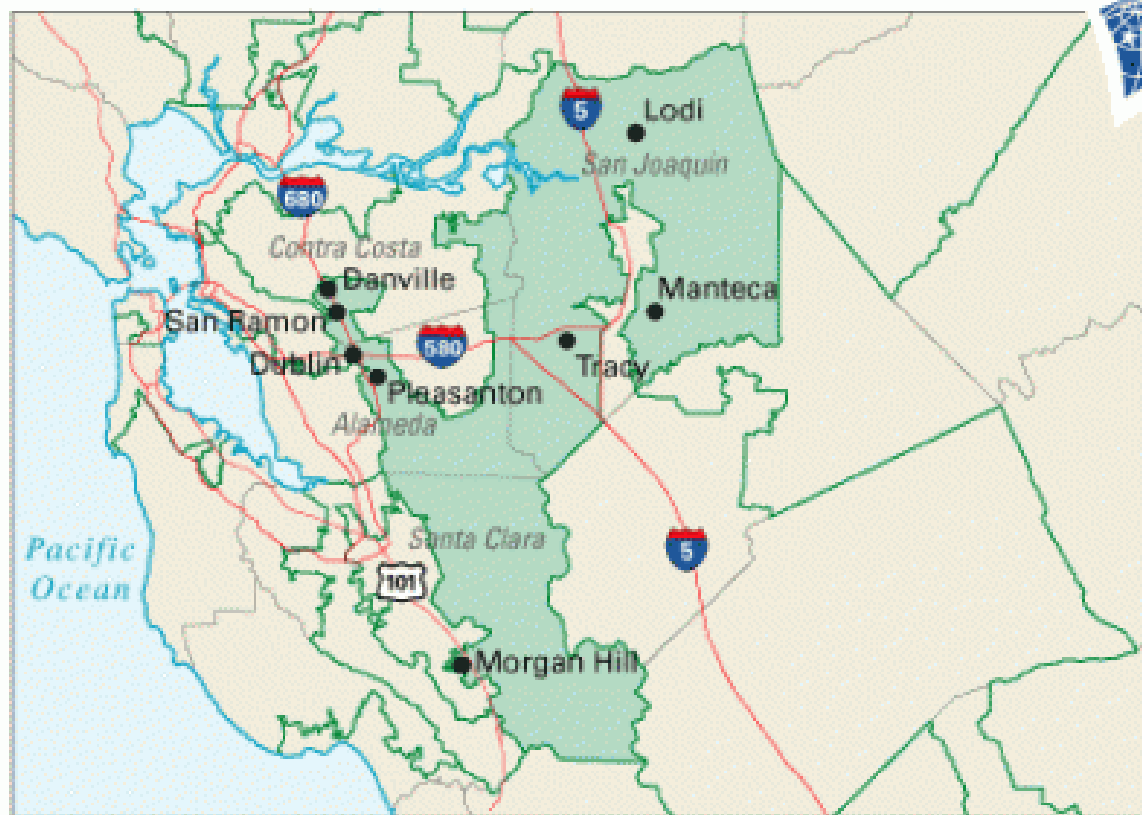
- Districts are drawn either by the state legislature or by a non-partisan commission
- In states where state legislatures do the drawing, the possibility for manipulation is large
- This is called **gerrymandering**, and it can take many forms:
  - Pro-incumbent
  - Partisan
  - Racial

# Gerrymandering



# Pro-Incumbent Gerrymanders Protect Both Parties

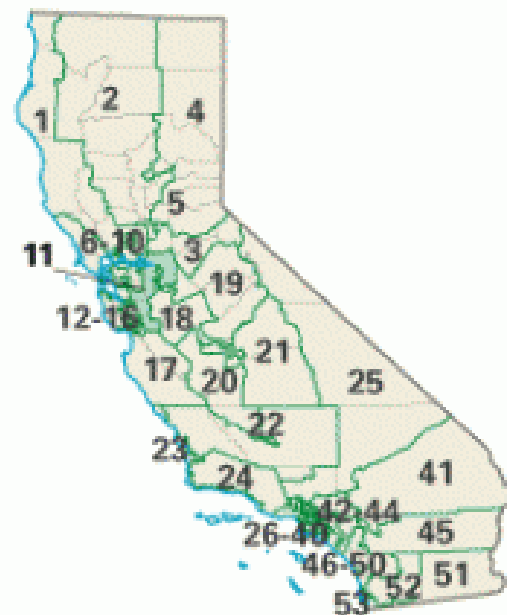
## Congressional District 11



nationalatlas.gov™

**11** Congressional District

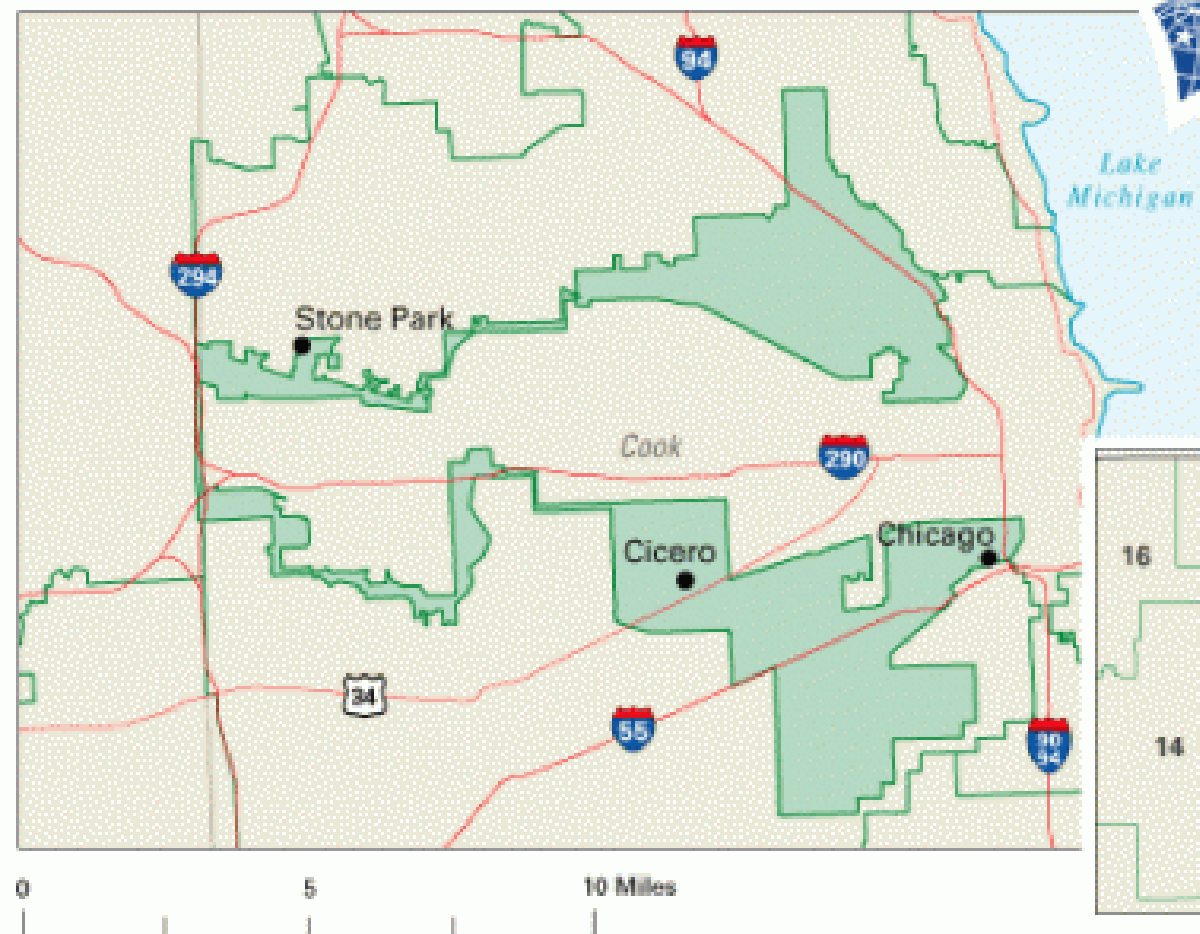
*San Joaquin* County



*California (53 Districts)*

# Racial Gerrymandering Can Be to Enhance Minority Voting Power...

## Congressional District 4



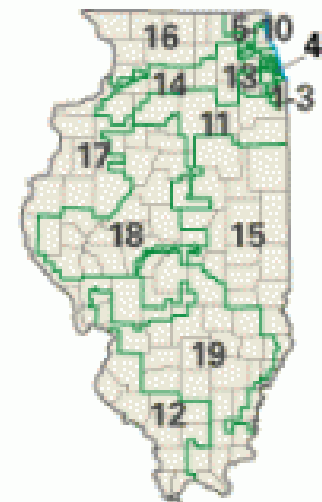
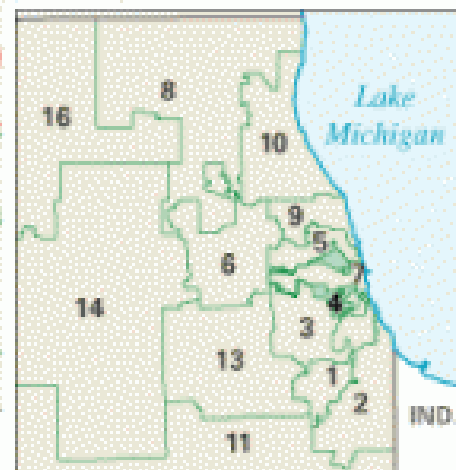
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Congressional District

Cook

County



*Illinois  
(19 Districts)*

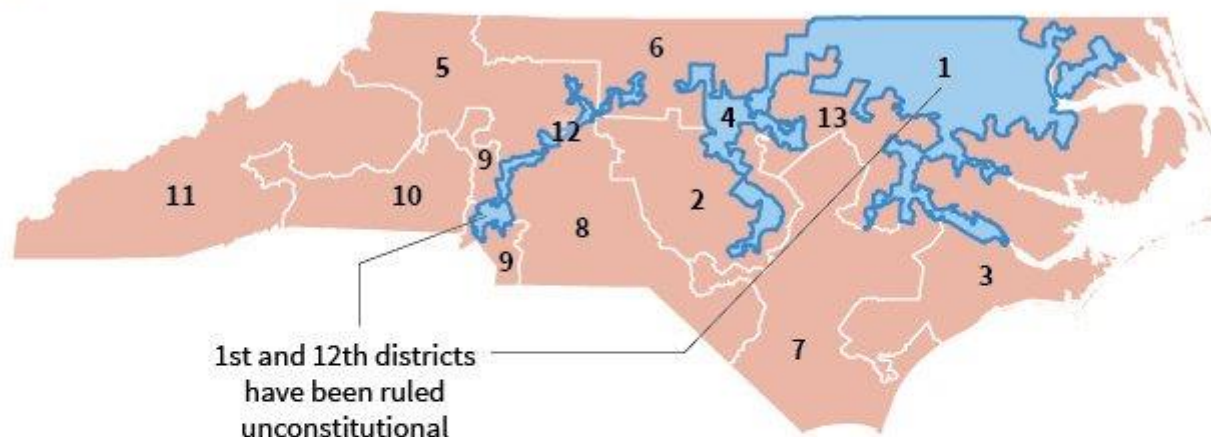


# ...Or Suppress It

## Racial Gerrymandering In North Carolina

North Carolina congressional districts

■ Held by Democrats ■ Held by Republicans

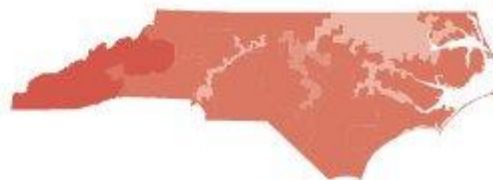


Percent of population by congressional district that is white or black alone (non-Hispanic)

■ 0-20%  
■ 20-40%  
■ 40-60%  
■ 60-80%  
■ 80-100%

WHITE ALONE

BLACK ALONE



Source: Census Bureau

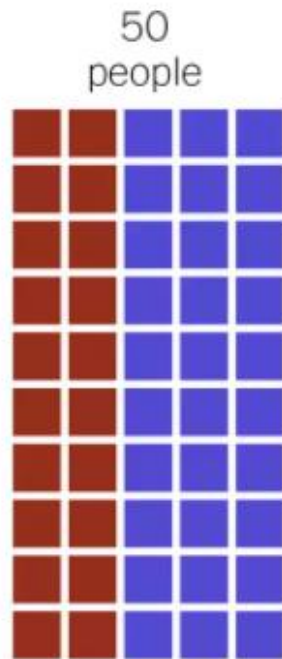
The Huffington Post



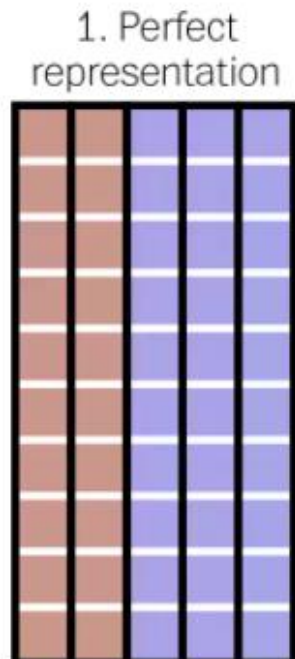
# Partisan Gerrymandering is the Most Common

## Gerrymandering, explained

Three different ways to divide 50 people into five districts

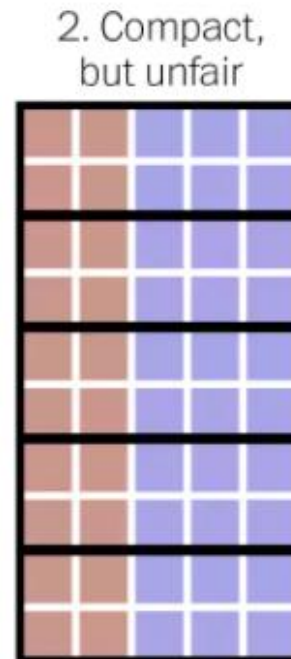


**60% blue,  
40% red**



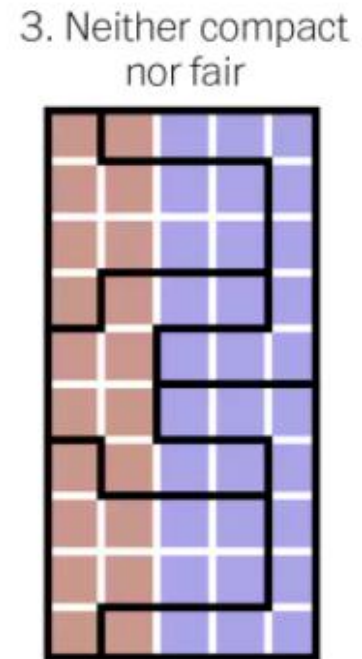
**3 blue districts,  
2 red districts**

**BLUE WINS**



**5 blue districts,  
0 red districts**

**BLUE WINS**



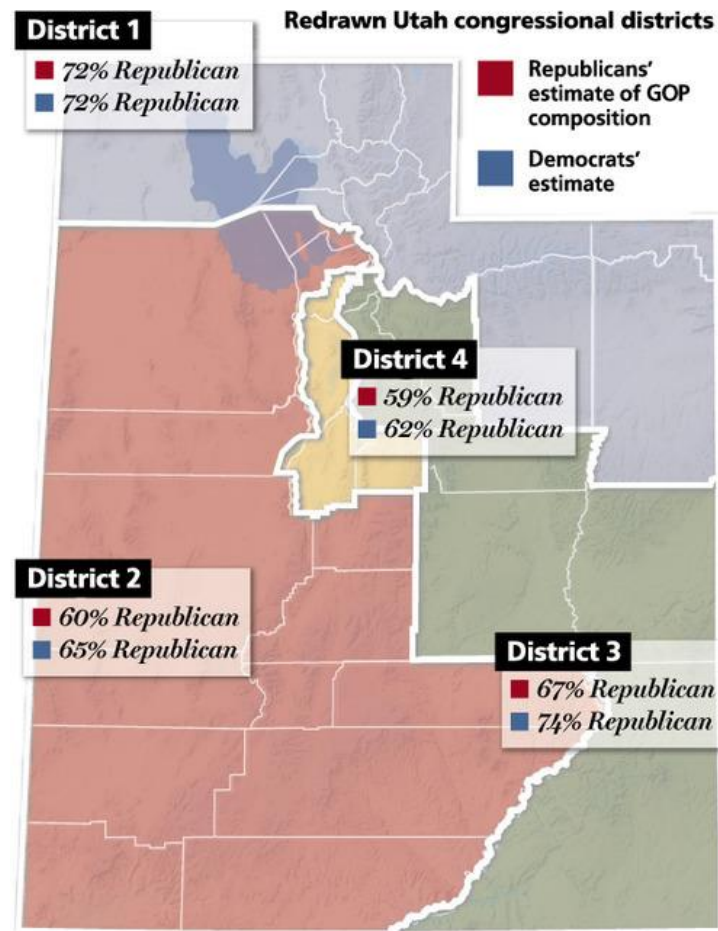
**2 blue districts,  
3 red districts**

**RED WINS**

# Utah's 2010 Redistricting

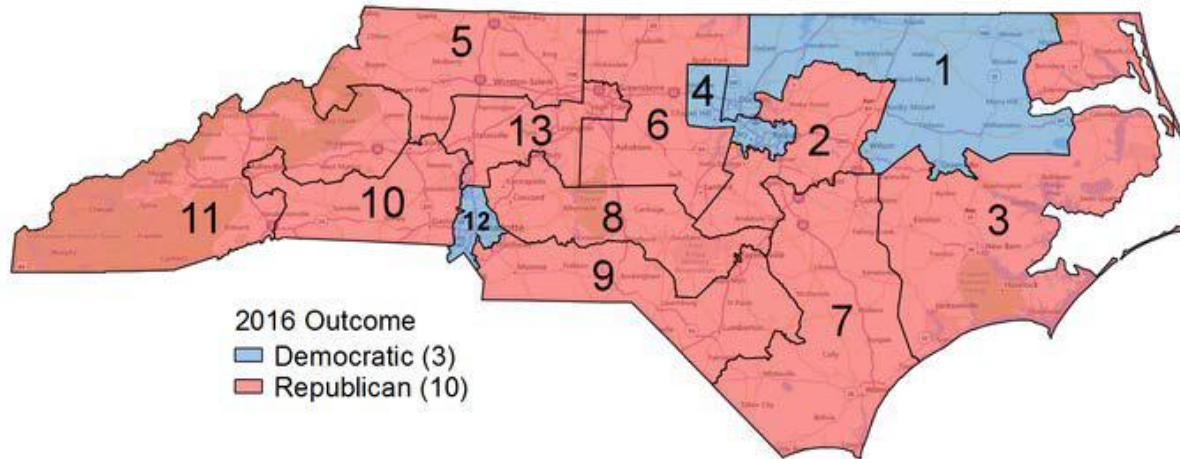
## Utah GOP weighs in on new districts

Utah Republicans dispute the Democrats' estimates of the GOP majority in each of the newly drawn congressional districts, contending that the size of the majority is smaller in three of the four districts.

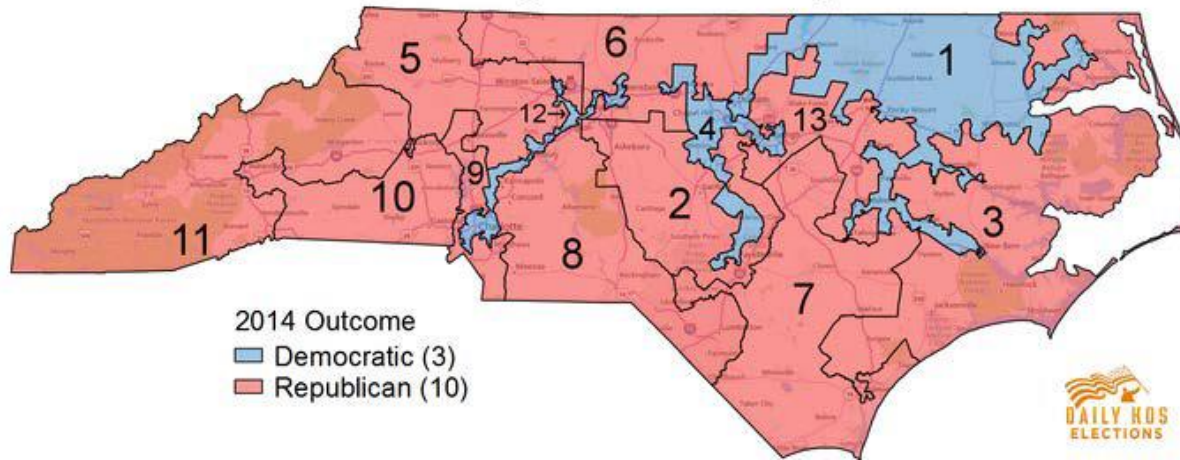


# In 2016, Republicans got 53% of the Vote and 77% of the Seats in North Carolina

North Carolina's Republican-Drawn  
2016 Congressional Gerrymander



North Carolina's Republican-Drawn  
2012-2014 Congressional Gerrymander

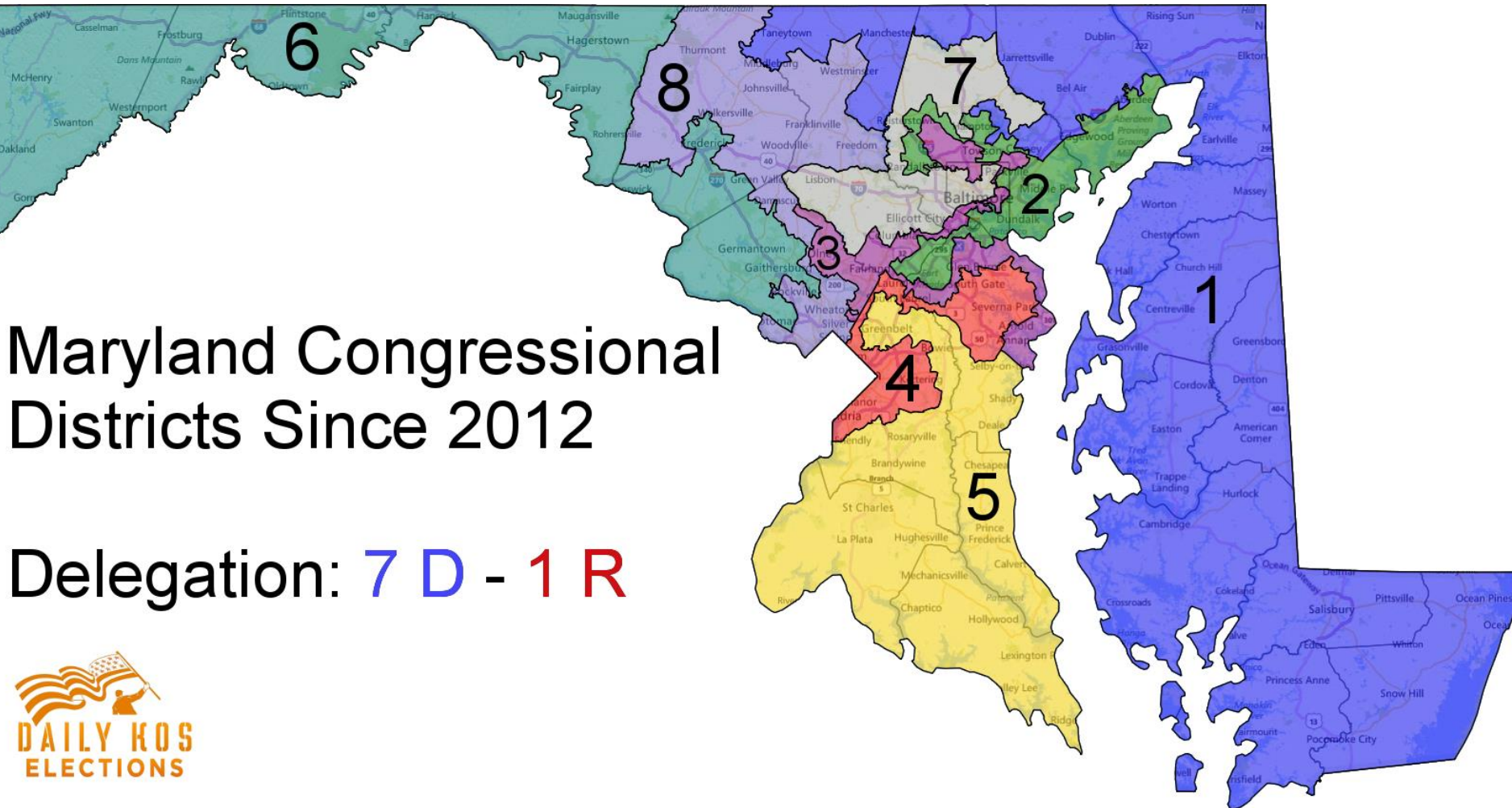




# 2018 Was a Similar Affair



# Democrats Do It Too!

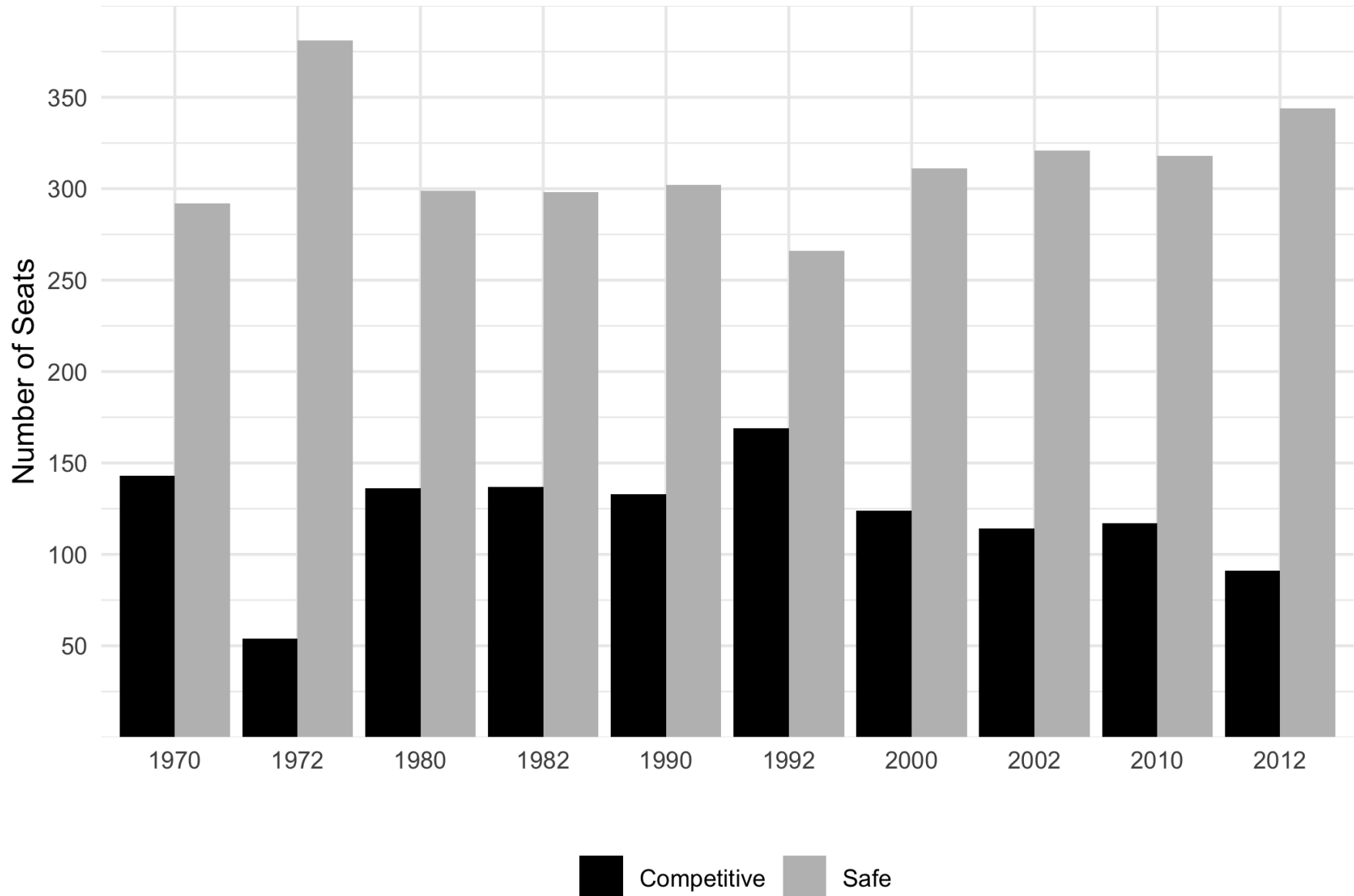


# The Consequences of Gerrymandering

# Gerrymandering

- What effect does redistricting *actually* have?
- There is widespread consensus that it give more seats at the state-level to the party that successfully wields it
- But it also gets blamed for
  - Uncompetitive elections
  - Polarization
  - Gridlock
- How well supported are these claims?
- What other explanation is there?

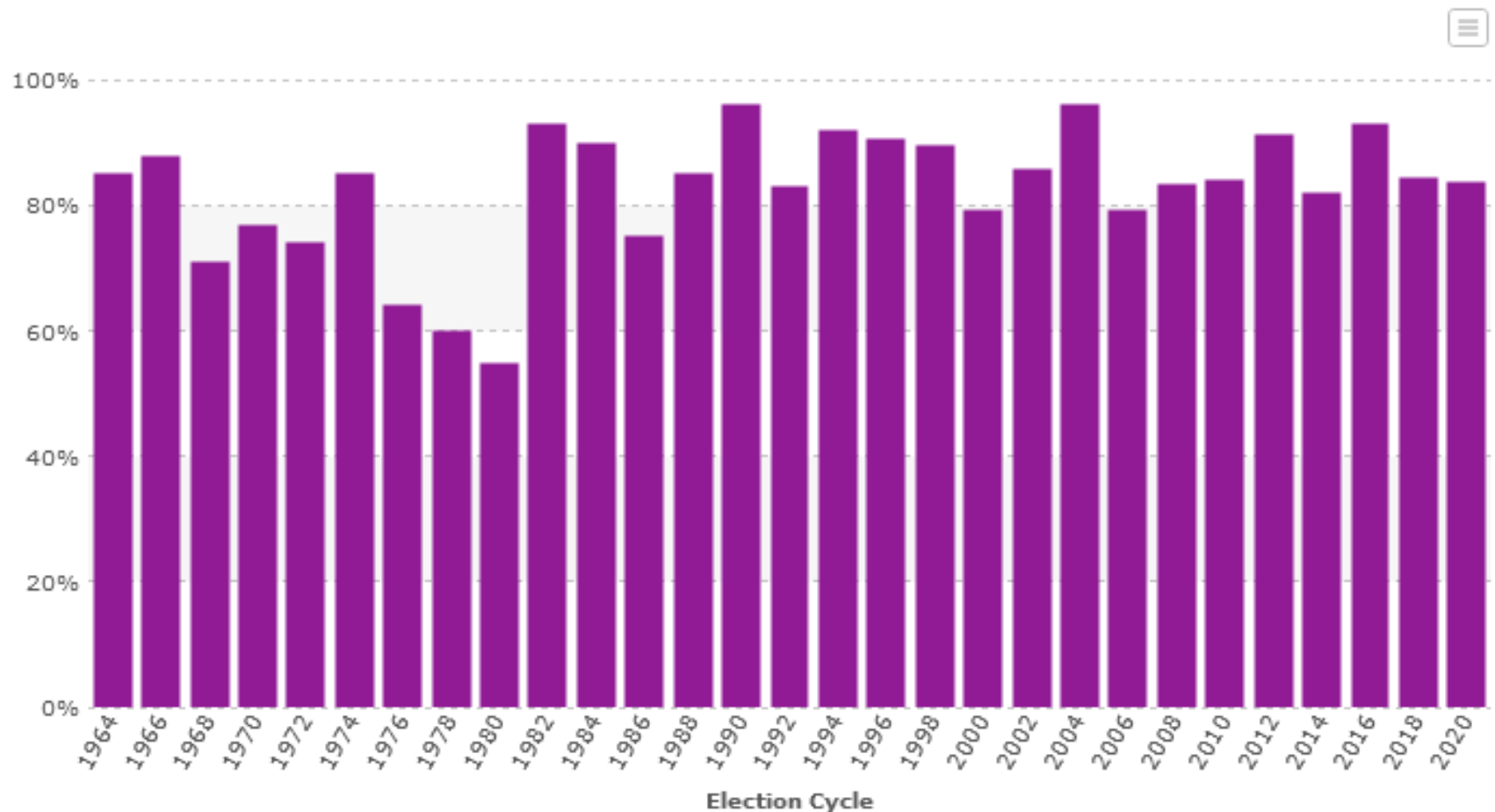
## Numbers of Safe &amp; Competitive Districts Prior &amp; After Redistricting, 1970–2012





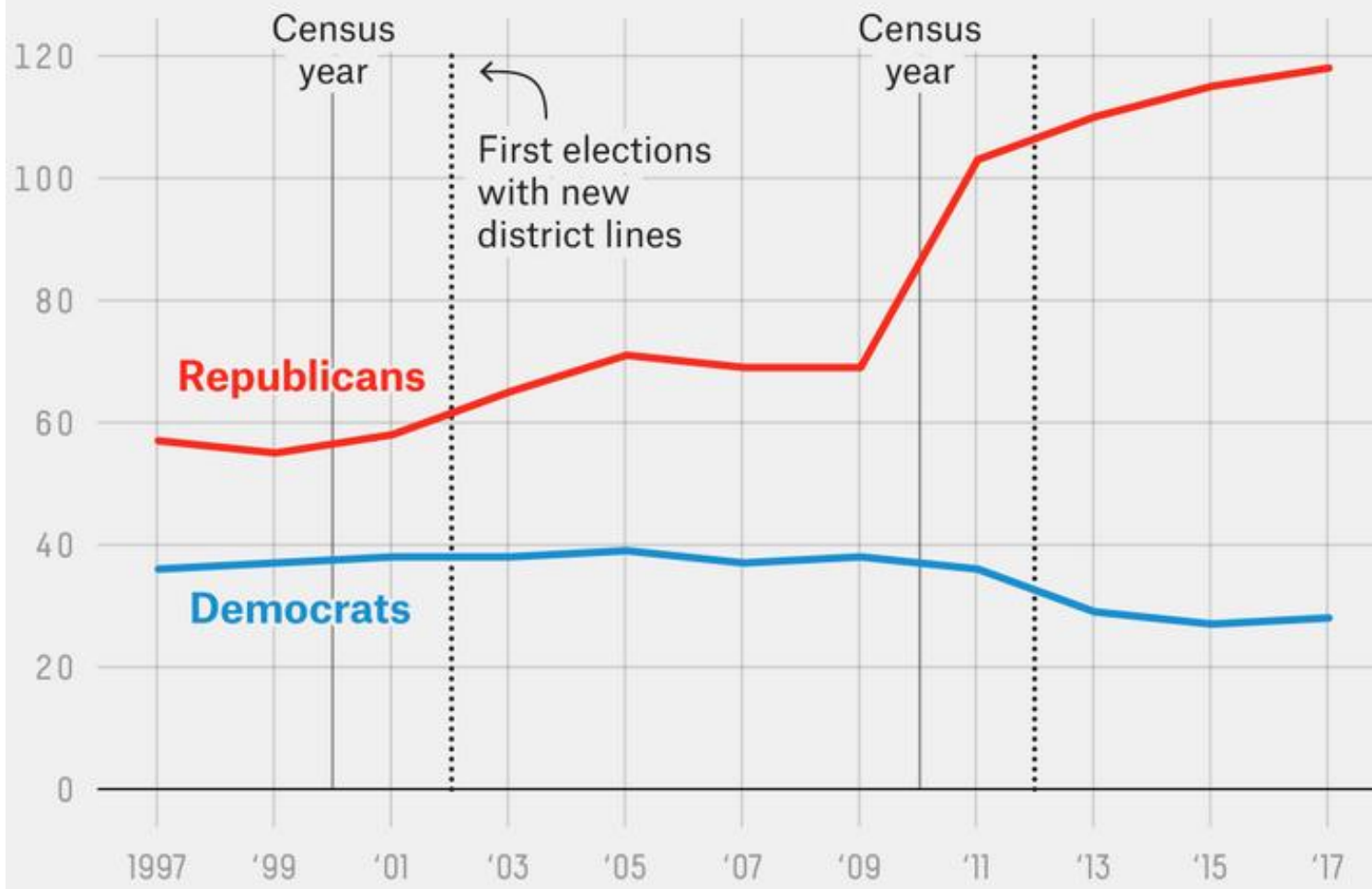
# Senate Reelection Rates Are Also High

## U.S. Senate Reelection Rates, 1964-2020



## Redistricting didn't make the U.S. House extreme

Number of extreme\* representatives, by party, at the beginning of each Congress since 1997



# Q&A