

Extension of Remarks



Legislative Studies Section



American Political Science Association



July 2004, Vol. 27, No. 2

Redistricting and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections: Editor's Introduction

Sean Kelly
Niagara University

*... instead of voters choosing their politicians,
politicians actually choose their voters.*
-- Douglas J. Amy (2002)

The 2004 election cycle presents political scientists with a paradox. Every indication at this point is that the presidential race will be very competitive. By contrast the vast majority of races for the U.S. House are *already decided*. The partisan division in the House is relatively close; the Republicans hold 228 seats and the Democrats (including the one independent who caucuses with the Democrats) hold 207 seats, it would take a swing of only 11 seats to the Democrats to produce a majority in the House but most observers do not give either party much of a chance to gain a significant number of seats. According to most observers the chances of the Democrats seizing the majority is nil. Respected political forecaster Charlie Cook rates 13 of the 435 House races as "toss ups" – nine of these are currently Democratic seats and four are currently Republican seats.¹ Democrats would have to win 11 of those 13 races to achieve majority status, or score some big wins in Republican leaning districts; either scenario is highly unlikely. Congressional Quarterly currently

rates 30 races as "highly competitive" (CQWR 2004, 1464-1465).

In this issue of *Extension of Remarks* five talented congressional scholars analyze the *lack* of competition in U.S. House elections. Congressional elections specialists have generally centered on the incumbent advantage as the primary suspect for the death of competition in House elections. The first two essays seek to redefine, or outright question, the singular focus on the incumbency advantage. Mark Wrighton examines competition as a function of uncontested House seats. Uncontested House seats in which voters do not have a choice between two competitors, by definition, lack competition; Wrighton examines significant changes in the number and partisan complexion of these types of races and raises important questions about what these races mean for the quality of electoral democracy. Jeff Stonecash incorporates these uncontested races into his analysis and makes the case that the focus on the incumbency advantage has distracted congressional scholars from fundamental political changes that have resulted in increased Republican success prior to 1994, and Republican dominance in House elections, in an aggregate sense, since that watershed election.

Taken together these two essays make a strong case for closer examine local conditions in congressional elections. Research on the

¹ Cook Political Report House Race Charts, www.cookpolitical.com accessed May 28, 2004 and July 2, 2004.

incumbency effect quickly dispensed of arguments that focused attention on congressional districting in the states as a cause of incumbency success in House elections. Recent events in states like Texas and Colorado, among other states, suggest that political maneuvering aimed at creating safe partisan districts has dominated the efforts of state and federal partisans. Republicans in Texas redrew the political map in 2004, two years after the 2002 redistricting plan was approved, to create more Republican friendly districts; the Republican Party may gain five seats in the House as a result of the new districts. Republicans in Colorado sought to reopen the districting process in 2004 to do likewise before they were stopped by the state's Supreme Court. Anecdotal evidence from many other states suggests that state political parties have sought to create districts that favor their candidates.

Erik Engstrom takes a look at redistricting in Ohio and Lara Brown analyzes redistricting in California. In both cases they argue that redistricting has limited the level of competition in those state's House elections. One of the interesting assertions of both authors is that there has been a shift in strategy on part of partisans in the states. Increasingly the parties are seeking to protect their incumbents by concentrating their partisans in congressional districts; the result is that neither party has many opportunities to increase their overall seat counts in the House. Where the political parties used to distribute their partisans in such a way that the party was competitive in a large number of seats, the parties have become more conservative seeking to protect the seats that they already have. As Brown argues this strategy has disturbing consequences for the overall interests of the political parties.

Also disturbing are the implications for the quality of American electoral democracy. As Larry Butler considers in his concluding

essay, with most House seats well insulated from partisan swings, Senate seats may provide the only competitive elections in many states. Furthermore, given that most House members do not need to concern themselves with taking "extreme" positions on issues – after all, as Amy suggests they have chosen constituents that are consistent with members' existing political beliefs – the House as an institution has become *less* responsive to shifts in macro public opinion. These electoral developments have undermined the Founders' expectation that the House would reflect broad public opinion by handing that distinction to the Senate.

REFERENCES

Amy, Douglas J. 2002. *New Choices/Real Voices: How Proportional Representation Elections Could Revitalize American Democracy*, 2nd Edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

CQWR (2004). "Handful of House Races Will Determine House Control." *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 62(25) 1464-1465.