

Ruining the House

By David J. Garrow

WHEN THE ATLANTA Constitution's framers created Congress, they imagined

that the House of Representatives would be the country's most popularly responsive national institution. The Senate — slow, deliberative, elite — would serve as a counterweight to the more emotional House.

Judging from last week's elections, it is the House that has become uncompetitive, sclerotic and immune to change. The culprit is the gerrymandering of Congressional districts. If reform is not enacted soon, democratic choice will be sapped out of the House altogether.

In New Jersey, only one of 13 Congressional races was won with less than 60 percent of the vote. In New York State, it was only three of 29, while in Ohio it was only three of 18. In California, only Gary Condit's House seat was considered up for grabs; of the state's other 52 seats, 49 of them were won by a candidate who received 60 percent or more of the vote. Of Florida's 25 Congressional seats, only two were decided by anything closer than 60-40, notwithstanding a competitive race for governor. In Illinois only two of 19 races were tighter than 60-40. Michigan featured just two Congressional contests out of 15 that were closer than 60-40, while its gubernatorial winner won by only 51 percent of the vote. This pattern was seen all over the country.

The final tally was depressing indeed: only 39 of 435 House races were won with less than 55 percent of the vote. Even of the 49 races not involving an incumbent, 35 were won with 55 percent of the vote or more. Yet at the same time, real political competition

was occurring just a few ballot lines away in the nation's gubernatorial elections and in many Senate races.

Why? Because those races could not be manipulated by redistricting to ensure a particular outcome. In 36 gubernatorial contests, only three were won by upward of 60 percent of the vote (in Colorado, Nebraska and Nevada) and 23 of the 36 races were won with less than 55 percent of the vote. Indeed, 20 of the 36 statehouses shifted from one party to another.

While 14 Senate races were won with more than 60 percent of the vote, another 14 of those 34 seats were won with under 55 percent.

The tenor of House politics — divisive and largely resistant to bipartisan compromise — is one consequence of gerrymandering. More competitive races would attract more voter interest and possibly make the

Gerrymandering and the decay of democracy.

House a body less dominated by partisan motives. There is one solution: control over redistricting must be taken away from politicians whose goal is to minimize competitive democratic elections and maximize the number of safe seats for their party. Currently a dozen states include some element of nonpartisanship in their redistricting process, but only a few of them, like Iowa, actually place some incumbents in competitive districts.

Perhaps maximizing the number of Americans whose Congressional votes might make a real difference in a House race will require judicial intervention. In any case, voters need to demand an alternative to a system that has turned the people's House into a place where competition doesn't much exist. □

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