Drawing the Line on District Competition: A Rejoinder

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In "Drawing the Line on District Competition," Michael McDonald (2006) challenges our conclusion that redistricting is not responsible for declining competition in House elections. McDonald claims that this conclusion is incorrect largely because our measure of district partisanship in 1992 is flawed. According to McDonald, using the normalized 1992 major party presidential vote as a measure of House district partisanship in 1992 seriously overstates the competitiveness of House districts in that year because of the impact of the vote for Ross Perot. McDonald recommends instead using the 1988 presidential vote to measure district partisanship in 1992, or using a procedure developed by Gelman and King (1994a) to estimate the partisan bias of House districts. With either of these methods, McDonald claims that a significant proportion of the decline in competitive districts between 1990 and 2002 was caused by redistricting. In addition, contrary to our finding that nonpartisan redistricting commissions have failed to produce increased competition in House elections, McDonald claims that nonpartisan redistricting in Arizona provides a positive example of what can be accomplished by nonpartisan redistricting commissions elsewhere.

We believe that all of these claims are erroneous. In fact, the evidence presented by McDonald based on the Gelman-King procedure for estimating the partisan bias of House districts actually supports our conclusion that redistricting was not a significant factor in the decline of competitive House districts between 1990 and 2002.

Before reviewing the evidence, however, we want to emphasize that our conclusions are supported by other studies that have examined the consequences of partisan redistricting for competition. While McDonald implies that previous research in this area has consistently found negative effects of redistricting on competition, this is not the case.

Studies of both the 1971–1972 and 1981–1982 rounds of redistricting concluded that partisan redistricting had either neutral or positive effects on competition. Based on their examination of the 1971–1972 redistricting cycle, Glazer, Grofman, and Robbins (1987) found that redistricting produced "minimal change" in competition. Incumbents did not benefit at the expense of challengers and the main effect of redistricting was to increase competition when incumbents were forced to run against each other. Gopoian and West (1984) found evidence of increased competition as a result of the 1981–1982 round of redistricting because "leaders appeared to trade security for seats in their redistricting decisions" (1080).

Redistricting often leads to increased competition because partisans drawing district lines face a fundamental tension between incumbent protection and maximizing their party's electoral potential. More often than not, the only way to shift marginal districts toward the majority party is to cut the safety margins of majority party incumbents by moving reliable partisans out of their districts. As Gelman and King (1994b) explain, "incumbents are often forced to give up votes (hence electoral safety) in order to increase the number of legislative seats their party is likely to capture" (541). They conclude that, "far from being a scourge on the political system in need of major reforms, legislative redistricting has invigorated American representative democracy" (554).

The Evidence

1. Our conclusions are based on evidence from three different redistricting cycles, not just the 1991–1992 cycle. Our finding that there was no significant decrease in the competitiveness of House districts between 1990 and 1992 is consistent with our findings for the 1981–1982 redistricting cycle and the 2001–2002 redistricting cycle. In fact, the 2001–2002 redistricting cycle has been the subject of the most commentary about the impact of redistricting on competition because of the increased use of computerized databases and mapmaking programs by state legislatures. However, we find no significant change in the numbers of safe or competitive districts between 2000 and 2002.

2. McDonald's claim that Ross Perot's candidacy reduced Bill Clinton's margin of victory over George H. W. Bush in 1992 "by as much as seven percentage points" (91) is highly questionable. This conclusion is based on one study of the impact of Perot's candidacy (Lacy and Burden 1999). It is not supported by any other research on the 1992 presidential election. In fact, the only other published study of the impact of Perot's candidacy found that he took more votes from Bush than from Clinton (Alvarez and Nagler 1995).

Based on evidence from both the American National Election Studies and national exit polls, it appears highly unlikely that Perot's candidacy significantly reduced Clinton's margin of victory over Bush. According to the 1992 National Exit Poll, when Perot voters were asked to name their second choice candidate, those who expressed a preference divided almost evenly between Clinton and Bush. Based on these results, Perot's candidacy had no impact on Clinton's margin over Bush. Nor is there any evidence that Perot's candidacy caused a disproportionate surge in Republican

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

turnout. In fact, according to NES data, the difference in turnout between Republican and Democratic identifiers was smaller in 1992 than in any presidential election since 1952. In addition, national exit poll data show no significant shift in the partisan composition of the electorate between 1988 and 1992.

Using the normalized 1988 presidential vote rather than the normalized 1992 presidential vote to measure the competitiveness of House districts does produce a slightly lower estimate of the number of marginal House districts in 1992: 148 rather than 164. However, when we use the normalized 1988 presidential vote to measure the change in the competitiveness of House districts between 1990 and 1992, as McDonald recommends, we again find no significant effect of redistricting: the number of districts classified as marginal actually increases from 146 in 1990 to 148 in 1992.

It is not surprising that using the normalized 1988 presidential vote produces results that are almost identical to those obtained by using the normalized 1992 presidential vote. The correlation (Pearson's r) between these two variables is .95. Moreover, the .70 correlation between the 1992 Democratic presidential vote and the 1992 Democratic House vote is identical to the .70 correlation between the 1988 Democratic presidential vote and the 1992 Democratic House vote. There is no evidence of any attenuation due to the Perot vote in 1992.

3. Most importantly, McDonald's own estimates of the number of competitive House districts based on the Gelman-King procedure do not support his conclusion that redistricting accounted for a significant share of the decline in competitive districts between 1990 and 2002. According to McDonald's Table 1, using the 45–55% standard for competitive districts, there was an average decline of 16.0 competitive districts per non-redistricting election cycle between 1990 and 2002 compared with an average decline of 18.5 competitive districts during the two redistricting cycles. Similarly, using the 48–52% standard for competitive districts, there was an average decline of 10.8 competitive districts per non-redistricting election cycle compared with an average decline of 13.5 competitive districts during the two redistricting cycles.

McDonald attributes the entire decline in competitive districts during a redistricting cycle to the effects of redistricting. But this assumes that no decline would have occurred in the absence of redistricting, which is clearly unrealistic. According to McDonald's data, the number of competitive districts declined by almost as much during non-redistricting cycles as it did during redistricting cycles. Regardless of whether one uses the 45–55% standard or the 48–52% standard for identifying competitive districts, the decline in competitive districts between 1990 and 2002 that can be attributed to redistricting was approximately five districts. According to the Gelman-King estimates presented by McDonald, between 1990 and 2002 there was a decline of 101 districts in the 45–55% range and 70 districts in the 48–52% range. Therefore, *based on McDonald's data, redistricting was responsible for only 5% of the overall decline in districts in the 45–55% range and 7% of the overall decline in districts in the 48–52% range. Over 90% of the decline in competitive districts between 1990 and 2002 was caused by underlying changes in the geographic distribution of partisans rather than redistricting.*

4. McDonald's claim that Arizona provides a model of what can be accomplished by a truly nonpartisan redistricting commission is not supported by the results of the 2001–2002 round of redistricting or by recent elections in that state. Before redistricting, three of Arizona's six House districts were classified as marginal based on the results of the 2000 presidential election—the difference between George W. Bush and Al Gore was less than 10 percentage points. After redistricting, only two of Arizona's eight House districts were classified as marginal. The average difference between the winning and losing presidential candidate in Arizona House districts increased from 12.2 percentage points in 2000 to 14.8 percentage points in 2002. By this measure, Arizona's House districts were less competitive after redistricting than before. Moreover, in the 2002 and 2004 elections, 15 of Arizona's 16 House contests were decided by a margin of more than 20 percentage points. Not one incumbent was defeated or even seriously challenged. The experience of Arizona should give pause to anyone who believes that shifting control of redistricting from state legislatures to nonpartisan redistricting commissions will result in increased competition (Hill 2005).

Conclusion

Much of the evidence presented by McDonald concerning the detrimental effects of partisan redistricting and the potential benefits of redistricting reform consists of anecdotes based on his personal experiences as a consultant to various pro-reform groups. It is difficult to evaluate the internal or external validity of such anecdotal evidence. However, we believe that the statistical evidence presented in our study, based on thousands of House elections over 13 election cycles and three separate redistricting cycles, clearly demonstrates that redistricting has had little or no impact on the overall competitiveness of House elections. Moreover, we believe that the statistical evidence presented by McDonald supports the same conclusion.

Our purpose here is not to defend partisan control of redistricting. There is no question that partisan gerrymandering can produce a short-term electoral advantage for the party that draws the lines (Abramowitz 1983; Niemi and Abramowitz 1994; Gelman and King 1994b). This clearly happened in several states during the 2001–2002 round of redistricting with Republicans being the main beneficiaries (Jacobson 2005). We wish Michael McDonald success in his efforts to undo the results of partisan gerrymandering in Ohio and other states. However, given the increasing partisan polarization of the American electorate and the increasing financial advantage of incumbents in congressional elections, we do not believe that shifting responsibility for redistricting from state legislatures to nonpartisan commissions will result in a significant increase in competition in House elections.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506060197 Published online by Cambridge University Press