

# Drawing the Line on District Competition

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In “Don’t Blame Redistricting for Uncompetitive Elections” in this issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning (2006) argue that redistricting is not responsible for the decline in the number of competitive districts, defined as a district with a near balance of partisanship. Further, the authors claim that non-partisan redistricting institutions are not correlated with the number of competitive districts. The relationship between redistricting institutions and competitive districts is of importance not only to academics who study redistricting and elections, but also to policy makers and reformers who advocate redistricting reform. If these claims are true, then policymakers are expending much misguided effort to enact redistricting reform to treat the greater problem of the decline of electoral competition in recent U.S. congressional elections.

Contrary to the authors’ claims, other scholars theorize (Owen and Grofman 1988) and find (Swain, Borrelli, and Reed 1998; Cain, MacDonald, and McDonald 2004) that redistricting tends to reduce the number of competitive congressional districts. Furthermore, the authors claim that nine non-partisan redistricting institutions existed in 2001, whereas McDonald (2004) identifies only two such institutions, in Arizona and Iowa. Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning’s findings are a consequence of measurement issues. More valid measures of district competitiveness and redistricting institutions find that redistricting does have an effect on the number of competitive congressional districts and, as a case study of redistricting institutions in Arizona illustrates, the choice of redistricting institutions and criteria does indeed affect the number of competitive districts.

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## Measuring and Evaluating Changes in the Number of Competitive Districts

An examination of Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning’s research reveals that their finding is dependent on their measurement of a competitive district. The authors “classified House districts as safe or competitive based on the major party vote in the most recent presidential election” within a district. The presidential vote is then “normalized” by subtracting the mean of the nationwide vote.<sup>1</sup> This operationalization essentially measures the margin of victory between the two major party presidential candidates within a congressional district. Where the margin of victory is less than five percentage points, that district is labeled as competitive.

The authors use the 1988 presidential election to measure the competitiveness of the 1990 districts, and use the 1992 presidential election to measure the competitiveness of the 1992 districts. There is an important difference between these two elections. The first was a two-way contest between George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, while the second was a three-way contest between Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot. Perot received 18.9% of the vote and as a consequence pulled down the margin of victory between Bush and Clinton by as much as seven percentage points by one estimate (Lacy and Burden 1999). The increase in the number of competitive districts between 1990 and 1992, as measured by Abramowitz et al., is thus an artifact of comparing the 1988 presidential election to the 1992 presidential election. Furthermore, the authors overstate the decline in the number of competitive districts between 1992 and 2000, and thus overstate the effect of the changing political landscape in the 1990s on district competitiveness.

More valid measures of district competitiveness exist. One simple method to avoid the confounding influence of Perot’s presence is to analyze other election results within the same districts, such as the 1988 presidential vote within the 1992 districts. If Perot presents no confounding effect, then the measurement of competitive districts in 1992 by either measure should be the same. Map drawers use compilation of election results prior to redistricting to forecast the effect of alter-

native maps, and thus, as a byproduct, this measure more accurately probes the intent of those involved in redistricting.

A method proposed by Gelman and King (1994a) uses regression analysis to correspond presidential vote and congressional election results while controlling for other factors, such as incumbency, quality of candidates, and money raised. The method is used by scholars (Cox and Katz 1999; Gelman and King 1994b; Gronke and Wilson 1999; Swain, Borrelli, and Reed 1998) and has been accepted in redistricting court cases in Alaska, Arizona, Michigan, Ohio, and Texas, among others, to evaluate partisan effects and district competitiveness of proposed redistricting plans.

The results of the three approaches are presented in Table 1. Two ranges of competitive districts are displayed, a 45–55% range and a tighter, 48–52% range. Districts in the tight range are counted in the wide range. For the normalized presidential vote, most approximate election data are provided to Abramowitz, et al. and to myself by Gary Jacobson.<sup>2</sup> For normalized presidential vote for the most recent election prior to redistricting, data are drawn from the *Almanac of American Politics*. The regression results underpinning Gelman and King’s measures are reported in Table 2.<sup>3</sup>

Using the normalized presidential vote in the most recent presidential election prior to a redistricting or Gelman and King’s method, the number of competitive districts declined between 1990 and 1992. This comports with findings by Swain, Borrelli, and Reed (1998) who find a decrease of 17 districts within a 48–52% range using a regression method similar to Gelman and King. That two different methods, and an independent analysis by other scholars, find different results casts doubt on Abramowitz et al.’s conclusions that redistricting has no effect on district competitiveness.

Examining the data uncontaminated by the 1992 election, I agree with Abramowitz et al.’s assertion that a significant “change in district partisanship has occurred between redistricting cycles.” However, they overstate their findings since they inflate the 1992 number of competitive districts. Indeed, using either alternative methods, 62% of the reduction in the number of competitive districts in the 45–55% range between

**Table 1**  
**Number of Competitive Districts, 1970–2002, by Three Operationalizations**

Competitiveness Range	Year					
	1980	1982	1990	1992	2000	2002
Normalized Presidential Vote, Most Approximate Election <i>Source: Gary Jacobson</i>						
45–55%	174	165	151	154	123	116
48–52%	70	72	63	73	51	38
Normalized Presidential Vote, Most Recent Election Prior to Redistricting <i>Source: Almanac of American Politics</i>						
45–55%	169	171	150	146	122	111
48–52%	69	79	61	58	53	38
Gelman and King Method <i>Source: Author's calculations</i>						
45–55%	331	328	332	311	247	231
48–52%	167	168	161	145	102	91

**Table 2**  
**Gelman and King Prediction Model for Partisanship of Congressional Districts**

Variable	Years		
	1978–1980	1988–1990	1998–2000
Constant	.319 (.138)**	.302 (.015)**	.240 (.016)**
% Democrat Two-Party Presidential Vote	.414 (.030)**	.447 (.031)**	.520 (.028)**
Incumbent	.117 (.005)**	.109 (.007)**	.089 (.007)**
Quality Challenger	.039 (.007)**	.034 (.008)**	.036 (.007)**
Spending	.004 (.000)**	.003 (.001)**	.003 (.000)**
South	-.001 (.008)	.022 (.007)**	.015 (.008)*
Northeast	-.018 (.008)**	-.014 (.008)*	-.003 (.008)
Observations	743	700	705
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.791	.804	.801

*Note: \*p < .10 \*\*p < .05, standard errors of coefficients in parentheses.*

1990 and 2002 occurred mid-decade between 1992 and 2000. Within the tighter 48–52% range, 22% (using normalized presidential vote) or 61% (using Gelman and King's method) of the decline occurred mid-decade. A more proper conclusion is that both redistricting and underlying changes in the geographic distribution of partisans are contributing to the decline in the number of competitive districts.

### Redistricting Institutions and District Competitiveness

The methods by which redistricting occurs and the rules that redistricting

operates under constrain the drawing of competitive districts, too. Consider Illinois' 17<sup>th</sup> congressional district. Congress members Dennis Hastert (R) and Daniel Lipinski (D) forged a bipartisan compromise, adopted by the divided state government, that provided safety for all incumbents except David Phelps, a downstate Democrat who was cut out of his district to accommodate Illinois' loss of a seat to apportionment. Phelps' district was split between the new districts represented by Republicans in formerly neighboring districts, Tim Johnson and John Shimkus, to ensure that Phelps would not seriously contest these seats. But, to make certain these districts did

not incorporate too many Democrats to enable a successful challenge, the 17<sup>th</sup> district, represented by Lane Evans (D), was snaked through the middle of the state, several hundred miles, to take in union families around Decatur. The resulting 17<sup>th</sup> district would warm Elbridge Gerry's heart, as it literally cuts a block-wide swath of parks and strip malls through the center of Springfield without picking up appreciable population on its way to Decatur. Shimkus defeated Phelps by 55–45%. This example of an overt incumbent protection map violates the traditional redistricting principal of compactness and illustrates that just about any district map can be produced, even one that maximizes the number of competitive districts, if there is a political imperative to do so.

Some states have adopted non-partisan institutions that operate under a set of constraints designed to reduce gerrymandering and increase the number of competitive districts. Abramowitz et al. contend that the nine non-partisan redistricting institutions they identify do not produce competitive districts. McDonald (2004) analyzes the membership and procedural rules of all redistricting institutions, but finds only that the institutions of Arizona and Iowa are non-partisan. Reconciling these findings is difficult since Abramowitz et al. do not list the non-partisan commissions that they studied, but since only nine states use a commission at some stage of the congressional redistricting process, Abramowitz et al. apparently count all commissions as non-partisan.<sup>4</sup> This is simply wrong. Some commissions have an unequal number of partisans, adopt a map on a majority vote, and thus tend to produce partisan gerrymanders. Others are bipartisan commissions that require a super-majority vote to adopt maps. These commissions tend to produce bipartisan gerrymanders that protect incumbents of both political parties, and thus result in the worst outcome for competitive districts (Butler and Cain 1992; McDonald 2004).

Many hold Iowa's system as an exemplar for reform because it tends to produce competitive elections by mismatching Republican incumbents in Democratic leaning districts. However, Arizona's commission is regarded by many in the reform community as the model for redistricting reform. Reform efforts following the Arizona model are underway in California, Florida, Massachusetts, Ohio, and the United States Congress. From a policy perspective, then, the claim that non-partisan redistricting institutions fail to produce competitive districts needs to be evaluated fully. I do so through a case study of the Arizona commission.

The model for redistricting reform includes a combination of commissioners with weak partisan attachments and a strict criteria that regulates the conditions under which a commission must operate. In 2000, Arizona voters passed Proposition 106, which established the Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission. The commission is “independent” in that members are selected by a method that minimizes their political attachments by excluding persons who hold office, lobby the government, or intend to run for office in the districts that they draw. The commission also must draw districts with respect to a list of neutral criteria including equal population, contiguity, compactness, and respect for the Voting Rights Act. Additionally, the commission is required to respect communities of interest and to favor the drawing of competitive districts.

I had a unique opportunity to observe and participate in Arizona’s redistricting process, as I evaluated district competitiveness for the commission. Using Gelman and King’s method, I defined a competitive congressional and, as a matter of coincidence, a state legislative district as one with a district partisanship between 46.5 and 53.5%, a 7 percentage point range.<sup>5</sup> Election results validated this method. All of the state legislative districts I labeled as competitive had split partisan outcomes in 2002 (Arizona elects two state House members and one Senator from the same district), and the one congressional district I determined competitive was widely labeled as competitive in 2002 and again in 2004 by independent political observers, such as *Congressional Quarterly* and *The Cook Political Report*.

In ensuing litigation over the state legislative districts and under judicial order, I drew districts that favored competitiveness. This latter court action provides a unique opportunity to observe how drawing competitive districts conflicts with other redistricting goals that the Arizona commission was required to address.

The possibility for drawing competitive districts is first constrained by the overall partisanship of the state. At the time of redistricting, Republicans enjoyed a 43.9 to 37.9%, or 5.3 percentage point, advantage in partisan registration. As Niemi and Deegan (1978) formally

show, if the number of competitive districts is maximized, then the resulting plan is biased in favor of the minority party. This explains why a Democratic activist was the primary financier of the campaign supporting Proposition 106 (Davenport 1999). I was first ordered to draw a plan that maximized the number of competitive districts with the only constraints being contiguity and equal population. By stretching and contorting districts, much like Illinois’ current congressional map, I drew 23 competitive state legislative districts out of 30 districts.

Next, another consultant to the commission was ordered to adjust these districts to respect the Voting Rights Act and communities of interest as defined by the commission, which resulted in a map with five competitive districts. The commission then ordered us to work together to readjust the lines for competitiveness. We presented a map to the commission that provided 10 competitive districts, if the commission was willing to split some communities of interest. Under court order to produce a map with at least seven competitive districts, the commission ultimately adopted a map with seven competitive districts that reduced splits of communities of interest.<sup>6</sup>

This exercise illuminates four important points. First, rules that govern a commission constrain the number of competitive districts it can draw. Second, in a partisan unbalanced state it is impossible to draw all districts to be competitive; but even still, it is possible to draw many competitive districts if there is an imperative to do so. Third, drawing heavily Democratic majority-minority Voting Rights Act districts in a Republican state reduces the possibility of drawing competitive districts in the remainder. Finally, accommodating communities of interest, being almost by definition a community with a shared political interest, conflicts with the goal of drawing competitive districts.

## Conclusion

Using alternative measurement, redistricting is shown to reduce the number of competitive congressional districts, contrary to Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning’s assertion. I also find the au-

thors overstate the 1990s mid-decade decline in the number of competitive districts, though I agree that underlying geographic realignment is contributing to this decline. Our divergent findings turn on the measurement of what constituted a competitive district in 1992. Abramowitz et al. use the three-way presidential election of 1992 to measure 1992 district competitiveness; I use the 1988 presidential election. The confounding effect Ross Perot had on the 1992 presidential margin of victory provides a strong argument in favor of measuring using the 1988 presidential election.

My experience as a consultant to the Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission demonstrates that it is possible to draw a large proportion of competitive districts, even in an unbalanced partisan state, if there is a political imperative to do so. An initiative proposed by Reform Ohio Now is particularly interesting since it places drawing competitive districts third in importance behind contiguity and equal population (Ohio is not covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act). From my experience in Arizona, I believe that such a redistricting institution in a competitive state like Ohio should produce a large proportion of competitive districts.

As we look forward to reform efforts underway in California, Florida, Massachusetts, and Ohio, among other states, criteria that include drawing competitive districts will figure prominently into adoption of initiatives. The public shares the appetite of reformers to establish commissions that will draw competitive districts. A RDD survey commissioned by Colorado Common Cause found that 70% of 503 respondents favored a commission that “would be encouraged to create competitive districts that do not favor either major political party.”

Perhaps the proof will be in the pudding. With so few competitive districts now and few neutral redistricting institutions, it is difficult to measure the contemporary effect of redistricting institutions on competitive districts and of competitive districts on elections. If reform efforts are successful, then political scientists will have a larger number of competitive districts to examine in future studies of redistricting and electoral politics.

## Notes

1. In the analysis that follows, I add back 50% to conceptualize competitiveness ranges around 50% two-party vote, rather than deviations around 0%.

2. I replicate the 2000 number provided by Abramowitz et al. in their text, but am unable to replicate their 2002 number (I calculate 111 competitive districts whereas they report 116). I

have chosen to present the 2002 number as it appears in their text. For the remaining scoring, 1980–1992, Abramowitz et al. provide only an illustrative chart, which makes replication

difficult, but the numbers are close to how they appear in the chart. I note that I use the 1984 presidential election to measure district competitiveness in 1982. I have further calculated a tighter range of 48–52% from Jacobson's data directly.

3. The dependent variable is the congressional election results for the two years prior to a redistricting. Uncontested seats are excluded. Independent variables include the percent of two-party presidential vote ("un-normalized"), incumbency (coded "1" for a Democrat, "-1" for a Republican, and "0" for an open seat), challenger quality (coded "1" for a Democrat, "-1" for a Republican, and "0" for neither), spending (defined as the natural log of the Democratic minus Republican spending), and two regional dummy variables.

Note that the Gelman and King method scores more districts as competitive than the other methods. The partisanship or competitive-

ness of districts using their method is essentially measured through the slope of the coefficient on the presidential vote within a district and mean shifts encapsulated in the constant and any other fixed effects in the model. (Incumbency and other campaign specific effects are removed by setting their regression coefficients to zero.) Table 2 reports the coefficient on presidential vote is less than one, about .5, and thus more districts fall within a given competitiveness range than when using the normalized presidential vote.

Gelman and King's method more accurately translates the presidential vote into congressional election outcomes. The method does not assume a 1:1 relationship, and by analyzing specific years the relationship is allowed to vary over time, as measured through the coefficients on presidential vote, constant, and fixed effects, and the standard error of the estimate. This avoids arbitrarily fixing a competitive range at 45–55%,

which is a matter of convenience in presenting measures in incremental ranges, starting with the first studies of electoral competition (Mayhew 1974; Tuft 1973), and more accurately measures changes within a redistricting decade. For simplicity and consistency, I present Gelman and King's results using the same intervals as Abramowitz et al. Judging by the regression coefficients, the Gelman and King 48–52% range is most approximate to the normalized presidential vote 45–55% range.

4. Iowa uses non-partisan staff, not a commission. It is unknown if Abramowitz et al. count Iowa as a commission state.

5. This range has been adopted in some proposed California redistricting initiatives.

6. The map was never used and the case, *Minority Coalition for Fair Redistricting v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission*, at the time of this writing has been remanded from an appeals court to the district court.

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