



# PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

## There's No Crying in Redistricting

*W.D. McInturff*

Republicans captured 49.4% of the two-party vote for Congress in 2012, yet won 54% of the seats in the House.

This gap between the Republican vote and the seats they won is on the high side, but certainly not without precedent over the past 40 years.

The 1970s and 1980s congressional elections were held with maps drawn to provide Democrats a significant partisan cushion. The following table looks at notable years in elections held under the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990 maps.

During the Reagan sweep in 1980, Republicans essentially broke even in terms of the two-party vote cast (49%), yet were only able to win 44% of the seats...the same type five point gap being bemoaned today.

Similarly, there was an especially large gap between the Republican percentage of the vote in 1990 versus the percentage of seats won (46% of the vote, 38% of the seats).

The same table demonstrates the 1990s redistricting lines worked reasonably well, meaning there was a close approximation of the votes cast and the seats won.

*Republican Results Under Different Decade Redistricting Lines*

Year	GOP % of Two Party Vote	% Seats Won	# of House Seats
<b>1972</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>1980</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>1984</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>1986</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>1990</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>1994</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>230</b>
<b>1998</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>221</b>

Source: Office of the Clerk—United States House of Representatives

The following table shows the elections held under the post-2000 redistricting lines and once again reflects a comfortable majority yielded a majority of the seats in the House. The Democrats' significant advantage in 2008 and the Republican sweep in 2010 helped maximize each party's seats during those cycles.

*Results Under Post-2000 Redistricting Lines*

	Year	% of Two Party Vote	% Seats Won	# of House Seats
<b>GOP</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>229</b>
	<b>2004</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>232</b>
<b>DEM</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>233</b>
	<b>2008</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>GOP</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>242</b>

Source: Office of the Clerk—United States House of Representatives

The comparable figures for 2012 certainly do suggest the current lines have an inherent Republican advantage. But, for every mention of Republican congressional advantages in states like Michigan, Ohio, or Pennsylvania, one needs to remember the impact redistricting had on Republican prospects in California, Illinois, and New York.

*Results Under Post-2010 Redistricting Lines\**

	Year	% of Two Party Vote	% Seats Won	# of House Seats
<b>GOP</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>234</b>

**+7%<sup>^</sup>**

**Estimated Democratic Popular Vote Margin Needed to win the House**

\*Source: The Cook Political Report

^Source: Ian Millhiser, Center for American Progress

My other observations having spent a fair amount of time looking at the issue of votes cast versus seats held are:

- 1) It takes more than one point to make a trend. Redistricting lines are best evaluated not after one election, but after two or three.
- 2) Comfortable majorities tend to produce a majority – when a party starts getting something like 53% of the national vote cast, it is very hard for the other party to hold the majority in Congress.
- 3) National “landslides” at the House level occur when something like eight out of ten campaigns that are within 1000 or 2000 votes all tilt toward one party. In other words, that “comfortable majority” of 53%, mentioned above, starts tilting a very high percentage of swing seats in the direction of one party.

If you began your career as a Republican trying to win the House in the 1970s and 1980s, you would adopt, as I do, the borrowed adage “there’s no crying in redistricting.” I do not recall a series of commentators weeping then about the huge structural advantage the Democrats had drawn for themselves, and having missed that opportunity, now is not the time for lamentation.

Finally, having said that, there is a legitimate public policy discussion about the merits of there being a relationship between the votes cast by the American electorate and the composition of the House. Don’t worry. Forty years of data suggest if a party is able to convince a comfortable majority of Americans to vote for their congressional candidates, they will be rewarded with a majority of the House. As always, though, a relative tie goes to the existing party in power.