# No contest: Redistricting strategies are making elections less meaningful

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When Americans go to the polls in November to select their representatives in Congress, this great exercise in democracy will be tarnished by the fact that in most cases the outcome is virtually predetermined. This year only 36 of the 435 contests for the House of Representatives are regarded as competitive—meaning that either the Republican or the Democrat has a reasonable chance to win. Over 90 percent of all seats are “safe” for one party or the other.

The number of competitive races has dropped sharply in the past decade or so. A study by the Cook Political Report estimates that there were 40 to 45 competitive races in 2002—a drop from about 150 in 1992.

Behind the decline in contested seats lies the politics of redistricting—which is done by state legislatures after every ten-year census—and the rise of sophisticated computer mapping. Software now provides block-by-block data on things like party registration, voting patterns and ethnic makeup. This information allows the party in power to fashion legislative districts that guarantee electoral control, however improbable the district’s resulting shape.

This strategy is not new, of course. (It was the salamander-shaped district created in 1811 under Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry that provoked the term “gerrymandered.”) But the modern execution of the strategy has become more precise and the political battles more ferocious.

For example, after the 2000 census, the Republican legislature in Pennsylvania redrew districts in such a way that 12 of the state’s 19 districts were solidly Republican even though Democratic votes for Congress outnumbered Republican votes and even though the state had gone for Gore over Bush. The Democrats contested the redistricting but the courts declined to intervene.

Besides making elections perfunctory, the loss of electoral competition has made Congress a more insulated and polarized institution. The body envisioned by the founders as most in touch with public opinion has become removed from it.

Snug in their safe districts, members know that their political futures depend more on loyalty to party than on legislative accomplishment. Therefore they have little incentive to reach across the aisle to get things done—that would only blur their identification with the party. Besides, they can expect their toughest election battle to come in the primary, in which their ideological purity will be tested, rather than in the general election, in which they might need to moderate their views. This phenomenon helps explain why, though the country is evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, it's the moderates in Congress who have been marginalized.

Is there anything to be done? Some states have assigned redistricting to bipartisan commissions. Iowa, while keeping the task within the legislature, has mandated that redistricting be done according to principles of compactness, contiguity, community interest and respect for local governmental boundaries. (Interestingly, four of Iowa's five congressional districts were competitive in 2002.)

Redistricting can never be completely detached from partisan politics. But it needs to be done in a way that makes political contests and political debate more meaningful, not less.