

THE DOMINANCE OF PARTISANSHIP IN WINNER-TAKE-ALL HOUSE ELECTIONS

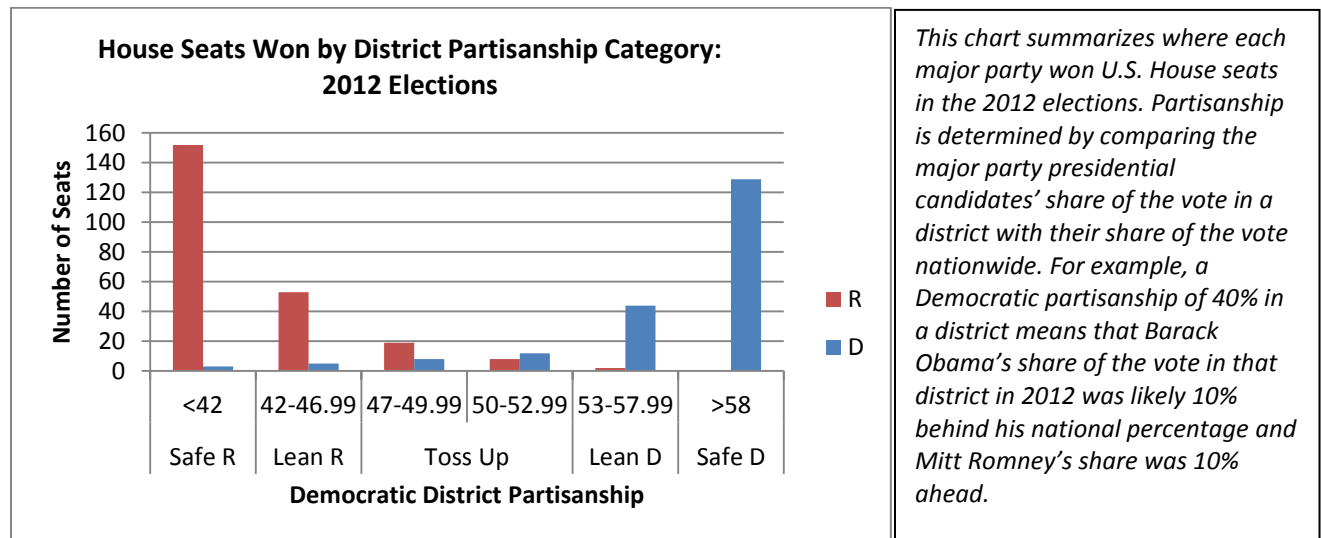
Spotlighted Facts:

- **Partisanship's predictive power**
 - Districts with a representative of the same party as their partisanship lean: **409** (up from **342** in 1997)
 - Districts with a representative of the opposite party as their partisanship lean: **26** (down from **93** in 1997)
- **Small band of potentially competitive districts in 2012**
 - Seats picked up by Democrats in the 201 districts with a Democratic partisanship less than 46%: **0**
 - Seats picked up by Republicans in the 275 districts with a Democratic partisanship greater than 42.3%: **0**
 - Districts within competitiveness band (47%-53%): **47** (11% of all districts)
- **Advantage of longtime incumbents**
 - Of the 27 incumbents first elected in the 1980's, 24 won re-election in 2012 by a margin greater than 20%. The other three won by at least 10%.
- **The paucity of voter choice in U.S. House Elections**
 - Average two-party victory margin in 2012 U.S. House elections: **36.4%** (that is, the average race was won **68.2% to 31.8%**)
 - Rate of re-election for House incumbents, 1996-2012: **95%**
- **Partisan bias of district partisanship**
 - Districts favoring Democrats in nationally even year: **195** (was **196** in 1996)
 - Districts favoring Republicans in nationally even year: **240** (was **239** in 1996)

FairVote grounds its analysis of congressional elections in district partisanship. In 1997, we developed our definition of district partisanship for the first edition of our biennial *Monopoly Politics* series. After reporting on *Monopoly Politics*, congressional election analyst Charlie Cook adapted our methodology to create his now-ubiquitous partisan voting index, or PVI. Our basic approach is the same: partisanship is determined by comparing the major party presidential candidates' shares of the vote in a district with their share of the vote nationwide. Cook's PVI measure is based on relative results in a district compared to the nation in the past two presidential elections, while FairVote determines partisanship based solely

on the most recent election. In both Cook’s PVI and FairVote’s PVI, the closer the presidential race outcome in the district is to the national popular vote outcome, the closer the district’s partisanship will be to an even division between the parties.

FairVote’s simple measure of a district’s underlying partisanship in federal elections is an extremely powerful tool for projecting which party will win that district in a given election. Indeed, district partisanship is a more potent predictor of electoral outcomes than any nonpartisan factor such as incumbent voting records or amount of campaign money spent. The chart below provides an overview of the predictive power of partisanship.



FairVote’s 2012 election analysis underscores our politics’ sharp partisan divide, one that now permeates American elections from presidential down to state and local races. It also illustrates our system’s extreme susceptibility to partisan gerrymandering as a result of winner-take-all voting rules. In U.S. House elections today, the only category of districts which either major party can win in any substantial numbers are those within 3% of an even 50-50 partisanship. Today, only 47 of the 435 U.S. House districts fall into this category. As the 2012 election results clearly demonstrate, even a slight advantage in district partisanship gives a significant advantage to the candidate of the advantaged party.

After two consecutive House elections in which Democrats had the national advantage – gaining 31 seats to take over the House in 2006 and 24 additional seats in 2008, often by necessity in Republican partisan territory – Republicans reversed their partisan gains in 2010. They won their largest majority since 1949, earning 242 seats to the Democrats’ 193 seats. The 2012 election saw this Republican majority recede slightly, as Democrats gained eight seats for a total of 201 to the Republicans’ 234. However, the prevalence of districts with a Republican partisan lean means that the Republican majority remains at a near-historic level despite Democratic candidates earning more than 1.5 million more votes than Republicans in House races nationally in 2012. The partisan bias inherent in the current congressional map is extreme: in a nationally even year in which all districts had open seat elections, Republicans would be favored to win 240 seats while Democrats would only be favored to win 195.

Democratic gains in 2012 were not randomly distributed among different levels of district partisanship. Democrats overwhelmingly took seats from Republicans in districts with a Democratic-leaning partisanship. Despite the broad success for Democrats in the 2012 elections and the benefit of a winning presidential candidate on the same ticket, the party picked up only three new seats in districts with less than 47% Democratic partisanship: Pete Gallego’s from TX-23 (46.8% Democratic partisanship), Ann Kirkpatrick’s AZ-1 (46.8% Democratic partisanship), and Patrick Murphy’s FL-18 (46% Democratic partisanship). Democrats did not win a single new seat in the 201 most Republican districts, just as Republicans did not win a single new seat in the 167 most Democratic districts.

Below are two charts illustrating the effect of district partisanship on the two major parties’ ability to win seats. The first represents 2012 – a relatively static year when the underlying preference for Democrats was 52% to 48% and Democrats picked up eight seats. The second is from 2010, a Republican wave year when the underlying preference for Republicans was 54% to 46% and Republicans picked up 64 seats. The extent to which partisanship explains these different outcomes is striking; Democrats in 2012 did even better in their partisanship “turf” than did Republicans in 2010, but picked up far fewer seats because of the greater number of Republican-leaning districts.

U.S House Elections in 2012: The Dominant Role of Partisanship in Outcomes

Table: Number of winners by party and candidate status / Democratic partisanship, 0 - 100

	<42	42-47	47-50	50-53	53-58	>58
All Seats						
R (234)	152	53	19	8	2	0
D (201)	3	5	8	12	44	129
Total (435)	155	58	27	20	46	129
Incumbents Winners						
R (201)	125	49	18	8	1	0
D (154)	3	2	5	3	29	112
Total (355)	128	51	23	11	30	112
Challengers Who Defeated An Incumbent*						
R (4)	4	0	0	0	0	0
D (16)	0	2	2	6	6	0
Total (20)	4	2	2	6	6	0
Won An Open Seat						
R (29)	23	4	1	0	1	0
D (31)	0	1	1	3	9	17
Total (60)	23	5	2	3	10	17

* Four incumbents defeated another incumbent in the general election and are not included in this number

U.S House Elections in 2010: The Dominant Role of Partisanship in Outcomes

Table: Number of winners by party and candidate status / Democratic Partisanship, 0 - 100

	<41	41-44	45-50	51-55	56-59	>59
All Seats						
R (242)	105	48	66	22	1	0
D (193)	5	5	8	28	35	112
Total (435)	110	53	74	50	36	112
All Incumbents						
R (153)	74	37	33	9	0	0
D (183)	5	5	7	27	34	105
Total (336)	79	42	40	36	34	105
Defeated An Incumbent						
R (52)	10	8	24	10	0	0
D (2)	0	0	0	0	0	2
Total (54)	10	8	24	10	0	2
Won An Open Seat						
R (37)	21	3	9	3	1	0
D (8)	0	0	1	1	1	5
Total (45)	21	3	10	4	2	5

Partisanship of Districts, Incumbency and Open Seats

Congressional districts were even more polarized in 2012 than they were in the midterm elections in 2010. In 2010, 256 House districts (134 Republican and 122 Democratic districts) had a partisan tilt of greater than 58% to 42% for one of the major parties. In 2012, the number of highly partisan districts increased to 284 (155 Republican and 129 Democratic), with thirteen of these newly safe districts produced in the recent round of redistricting. Unsurprisingly, elections in the many highly partisan districts in 2012 were rarely competitive: Democrats won all 129 districts that had a greater than 58% Democratic partisanship, and Republicans won 152 of 155 districts that were more than 58% Republican, with only three long-term Democratic incumbents keeping their seats in strongly-Republican districts.

The correlation between district partisanship and party label of the winning candidate was evident even in districts that less obviously favored one party. Before the 2010 midterm elections, there were 44 Democratic incumbents running in Republican-leaning districts that had a partisanship of more than 53% Republican. Only 12 of the 44 were re-elected. Of those 12 survivors, just five remain in Congress after the 2012 elections. Three newly-elected Democrats joined their ranks, but none in a district with a partisanship of more than 54% Republican. Republican incumbents were even less successful in

Democratic-leaning districts; only one of the seven Republican incumbents running in districts that were at least 53% Democratic was re-elected in 2012.

The importance of partisanship persisted in open seats as well, where it nearly always predicted the outcome of the election. Democrats won 29 of the 30 open seats in districts with greater than 50% Democratic partisanship, and Republicans won 28 of the 30 open seats in districts with less than 50% Democratic partisanship.

Entrenched Incumbents and the Incumbency Bump: Making Safe Seats Even Safer

Incumbents who first won election in 2008, 2010 or 2012 won their seats on average by narrower margins than more entrenched, long-term incumbents. That is because incumbents typically earn a “bump” in their vote totals of 4% to 8% over what a generic nominee of their party would likely receive in an open seat, translating into a victory margin gain of 8% to 16%. Considering that almost all incumbents are running in districts that already favor their party, incumbency bumps put many of these districts entirely out of reach.

The incumbency advantage stems from incumbents’ greater name recognition, past campaigning in the district, more experienced campaign operations, and voters having benefited from constituent services. All of those advantages get stronger over time, meaning that an incumbent who has served in Congress for decades will tend to get a more significant incumbency bump than a freshman.

As this chart shows, of the 39 incumbents in 2012 who had first been elected before 1990, all but one were re-elected, 36 had comfortable margins of victory of 10% or more, and 32 won by landslides of more than 20%. Of the 94 incumbents first elected in 2010, however, 12 lost, and 13 more experienced relatively competitive races.

2012 Margin of Victory of Incumbents by Year First Elected

	Lost	<10% Margin	10-20% Margin	>20% Margin	Total
Elected Before 1980	1	2	1	8	12
Elected 1980's	0	0	3	24	27
Elected 1990's	3	4	10	83	100
Elected 2000-2009	4	11	28	98	141
Elected 2010	12	13	23	46	94
Total	20	30	65	259	374

Incumbency bumps are not as strong as they used to be, however. While incumbents received an average bump of 7.3% over their districts’ partisanship in 1998 and an average bump of 7.8% in 2000, that average declined to 4.7% in 2010 and 4.5% in 2012. The decrease in average incumbency bump illustrates voters’ decreased willingness to split their tickets and vote for an incumbent they personally like and know even if they don’t support the incumbent’s party. The trend is a further indication of the

extent to which partisanship now renders all other factors, including incumbent-specific characteristics, largely irrelevant in modern congressional elections.

The Effects of Partisanship and Implications for Reform

Highly partisan districts have broad deleterious effects on the quality of democracy in America. The U.S. House of Representatives was envisioned by the framers of the Constitution as the most representative, vibrant, and directly democratic element of American government. However, in modern American politics, extreme district partisanship and the resulting non-competitive congressional elections have created a House characterized more by polarization and partisan gridlock than by accurate representation or meaningful debate.

In the 388 House districts (89.2%) that lean noticeably towards either Republicans or Democrats (with a partisanship of at least 53% for the majority party), voters of the opposite party have little chance of electing a representative that shares their views, and representatives have little incentive to moderate their positions or rhetoric to appeal to the other party's voters. This process reinforces polarization in the House, as most representatives need only fear losing in a primary, and as a result cater only to the portion of the electorate that strongly identifies with their party, rather than promoting consensus-building and policies that might find support across ideological divides. Non-competitive elections create a disconnect between citizens and government. The key to a functioning, legitimate democracy is that elections have consequences – having more votes wins more seats and losing voter support can mean losing power. When that link is broken, representative democracy is at risk.

Low voter turnout results in part from an opinion held by some citizens that their vote won't make a difference. Unfortunately, in the vast majority of House districts, these citizens are right. The outcome of races in these districts is often a foregone conclusion. The tens of millions of voters who favor the minority party in these 388 districts (and in many of the remaining 47 districts where there is a popular long-term incumbent) have little hope of making their voices heard in Washington. This breakdown in the democratic linkage between citizens and their government undermines the legitimacy and responsiveness of our democracy.

Some analysts focus on the role of gerrymandering during redistricting in reducing the competitiveness of elections, as small changes in district partisanship can have a significant effect on the likely outcome of elections in certain districts. While redistricting has contributed to rising district partisanship, FairVote's analysis demonstrates how little an independent redistricting commission would affect the fundamentals of most U.S. House contests. Redistricting rarely changes district partisanship by more than 5% – meaning an effect on victory margin of less than 10% – but the average margin of victory in House races is over 30%. As a result, incumbents in the great majority of districts are entrenched no matter who draws the lines or how much money their challengers spend – at least as long as we maintain winner-take-all elections in which earning a plurality of the vote earns 100% of representation.

There is only one solution to the lack of voter choice and distortions in representation in U.S. House elections: the adoption of fair representation systems, or candidate-based forms of proportional representation. There is no constitutional mandate to use winner-take-all elections in single-member

districts. In fact, there is a long history of states using multi-seat “super districts” to elect Members of Congress and state legislatures, and of cities using fair voting alternatives to winner-take-all elections. Fair representation voting systems are also used, in some form, in nearly all well-established democracies around the world.

Fair voting is the only way to ensure that *every* voter in *every* state participates in a meaningful race in *every* election (at least in states with three or more House Members, which is the precondition for the use of an effective fair voting method). Even as they experience meaningfully contested elections, every voter in a fair voting election would be nearly certain to end up with a representative from each major party. Independent and minor party candidates would also be better positioned to hold the major parties accountable. We can achieve fair voting for congressional elections by simple statute – and an unbending focus on the best way to create a level playing field in our elections for “the people’s house.”

“[A legislature]...should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should feel, reason and act like them.” - John Adams, 1776