

## RED AND BLUE NATION? CHARACTERISTICS AND CAUSES OF AMERICA'S POLARIZED POLITICS

(Brookings, December 2006)

### Polarizing the House of Representatives: How Much Does Gerrymandering Matter?

An oft-cited reason for the climate of hostility between Democrats and Republicans in Washington is that gerrymandering—the political manipulation of legislative boundaries for partisan advantage or to protect incumbents—has helped to fill the Congress with politicians who operate at the ideological poles of their parties.

According to this story, gerrymandering leads to a loss of competitiveness in congressional districts, which in turn fuels political polarization. Skillfully redrawn districts produce safe districts for incumbents who, faced with no significant challengers, have few incentives to accommodate the views of the opposition. Alternatively, the line drawing process creates districts in which the voters of one party form an overwhelming majority, with the result that candidates worry more about the party primary (whose electorate is often skewed to the party's ideological pole) than the general election.



But is gerrymandering really a root cause of today's political polarization? This is the question taken up by Thomas E. Mann in his chapter in the forthcoming book, *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics* (Brookings, December 2006).

Despite the plausibility of a link between gerrymandering and polarization, Mann finds persuasive evidence that redistricting has played no more than a minor role in the recent decrease in the number of competitive districts. The main causes are, in his view, the increasing sorting of voters into political parties based of their ideological positions, residential decisions in which voters chose to live among like-minded partisans, and increasingly consistent party-line voting. In other words, the decrease in competitiveness is more a product of voter attitudes and decisions than gerrymandering.

Similarly, Mann is doubtful of the link between competitiveness and polarization. Examining the roll-call voting records of the 108th Congress (elected in 2002), Mann finds an uncertain relationship between members' ideological positions and measurements of the competitiveness of their districts. But one striking fact emerges regardless of the measure of electoral safety—the almost total ideological separation of the parties in the 108th Congress. What this implies is that factors other than gerrymandering are responsible for much of today's polarization in the House of Representatives.

With the weight of scholarly evidence suggesting that gerrymandering plays only a modest role in causing political polarization, Mann is doubtful that redistricting reform—putting the line drawing process in the hands of an independent commission, for instance—can do much by itself to moderate today's partisan politics. Instead, a combination of electoral reforms and a return to respect for the traditional rules and norms of the Congress may be better places to start.

*Thomas E. Mann is the W. Averell Harriman Chair, senior fellow, in the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies program. His chapter on the role of gerrymandering as a contributing factor in the polarization of U.S. politics will be published by the Brookings Institution Press in the forthcoming Red and Blue Nation: Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics (Brookings, December 2006), edited by Pietro S. Nivola of the Brookings Institution and David W. Brady of the Hoover Institution. Red and Blue Nation? is a project sponsored by The Brookings Institution and Hoover Institution.*

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Written by Richard Walker.

Richard Walker is the managing editor of *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics* (Brookings, December 2006)