

DISTRICTS ON THE MOVE: EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE OF PARTISANSHIP CONSISTENCY

Spotlighted Facts

- **Unchanging Partisanship in most House Districts**
 - Current districts where partisanship changed more than 3% between the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections (using same district lines): **93 (21%)**
 - Districts where partisanship changed more than 5%: **30 (7%)**
 - Districts where partisanship changed more than 10%: **0**
- **Rising District Polarization Supports “Big Sort” Thesis**
 - Districts where partisanship moved toward majority party in the 2012 election (thereby making it safer for that party): **286 (66%)**
 - Districts where partisanship moved toward minority party (thereby making it less safe): **149 (34%)**
 - Of the **30** districts that changed more than 5%, **26** shifted toward the party already in the majority
- **Latino Districts Becoming More Democratic**
 - Total districts moving toward Democrats by at least 3% in the 2012 Election: **51**
 - Number of those districts with at least 30% Latino voting-age population (VAP): **27** (including **17** where Latinos are a majority of VAP)
 - Percentage of the nation’s 24 Latino majority districts where partisanship moved toward Democrats: **96% (23 of 24)**

A district’s *partisanship* – that is, how that district voted for president in the last presidential election relative to the candidates’ national averages – is a highly effective tool for projecting the outcomes of congressional elections. Often referred to as a “partisan voting index,” partisanship is the most powerful predictive tool for House races for two reasons. First, voters tend to vote for the same party’s candidates for both Congress and President, particularly in recent elections. Second, the partisanship of most districts remain very consistent from election to election.

In other words, the United States is developing what analysts of parliamentary democracies call a “uniform swing” – that is, as the national vote share of a given major party’s presidential nominee changes, the vote share of the party’s congressional candidates change correspondingly in each district. Between the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, for instance, 342 (79%) of our current congressional districts had partisanship that did not shift by more than 3% toward either Republicans or Democrats (using current district lines with the 2008 results). Even with demographic changes and a

different Republican presidential nominee, only 30 districts (7% of the total) shifted by more than 5% in their partisanship, only three changed by more than 8%, and not a single district's partisanship changed by more than 10%.

% Partisanship Change, 2008 - 2012	Number of Districts	Aggregate Districts (Percent of House)
<1%	149	149 (34.3%)
1-2%	112	261 (60.0%)
2-3%	81	342 (78.6%)
3-4%	37	379 (87.1%)
4-5%	26	405 (93.1%)
5-8%	27	432 (99.3%)
8-10%	3	435 (100.0%)
>10%	0	435 (100.0%)

While FairVote has reliably used its partisanship metric to project congressional outcomes since its first *Monopoly Politics* report was released in July 1997, partisanship is more consistent now than ever. Between the Bush vs. Kerry presidential election in 2004 and the McCain vs. Obama election in 2008, 187 districts shifted by more than 3% – that's 94 more than between 2008 and 2012. More than twice as many districts (79) shifted by more than 5% from 2004-2008, and 12 districts experienced large partisanship swings of more than 10%.

The greater consistency between the last two elections can be explained in part by the fact that Barack Obama was a candidate in both cases. But even between George W. Bush's two elections in 2000 and 2004, 165 districts shifted by more than 3% (excluding Texas, which was redistricted during that period) and 65 by more than 5%. The same pattern is found in states. For example, from 1960 to 1984, an average of more than 19 states shifted their partisanship by 5% or more from one presidential election to the next. In the four presidential elections from 1984 to 2000, that average declined to just over eight. In the three presidential elections from 2004 to 2012, an average of only three states shifted their partisanship by more than 5%. All this suggests that partisanship is becoming increasingly rigid and unlikely to change in the next election.

Given that just 47 current districts have a partisanship in the "competitive" range of 47-53% and only 10 candidates won in 2012 in districts that favored the other party by more than 53%, unchanging

partisanship makes it inevitable that we will have another round of largely uncompetitive elections in 2014.

Where District Partisanship Changes – and Why

The conclusions of *Monopoly Politics 2014* are based on the assumption that the partisan preferences of congressional districts will remain at least as consistent between 2012 and 2014 as they did between 2008 and 2012. While that assumption is almost certain to prove valid in the vast majority of congressional districts, a small minority will likely shift by a few points on the partisanship spectrum. By looking at the few districts that changed significantly between 2008 and 2012, we can get some idea of the trends that might affect district partisanship in the upcoming election cycle.

Presented below are all the districts that experienced partisanship changes of at least 5% in favor of either Democrats or Republicans in 2012.

Districts with Partisanship Shifts of least 5% Toward Democrats in 2012 (constant district lines)

State	House District	2012 Democratic Partisanship	2008 Democratic Partisanship	Percent Democratic Increase	% Latino VAP	Comments
Arizona	7	70.7%	61.7%	9.02%	58%	Majority Latino in Phoenix
California	34	82.5%	75.4%	7.18%	50%	Majority Latino in Los Angeles
New Jersey	8	76.9%	70.0%	6.93%	12%	Northeast district, affected by Hurricane Sandy
New York	6	66.5%	59.9%	6.62%	47%	Long Island, affected by Hurricane Sandy
New York	5	88.8%	82.4%	6.48%	43%	Long Island, affected by Hurricane Sandy
New York	14	79.3%	72.9%	6.43%	42%	Long Island, affected by Hurricane Sandy
New York	7	87.1%	80.9%	6.28%	36%	Long Island, affected by Hurricane Sandy
Florida	27	51.4%	45.2%	6.28%	75%	3 South FL districts shifted by at least 4.8%. Potential new swing district
New Jersey	9	66.8%	60.8%	6.08%	6%	On northeast coast, affected by Hurricane Sandy
Texas	29	64.5%	58.9%	5.68%	14%	Substantial Latino population in eastern Houston
Alaska	AL	41.0%	35.6%	5.48%	5%	Loss of Sarah Palin “home state bounce” from 2008

State	House District	2012 Democratic Partisanship	2008 Democratic Partisanship	Percent Democratic Increase	% Latino VAP	Comments
California	51	68.3%	62.9%	5.48%	51%	Majority Latino in San Diego
New York	11	50.2%	44.9%	5.38%	14%	Staten Island, affected by Hurricane Sandy
Pennsylvania	1	80.8%	75.4%	5.38%	13%	Substantial Latino population in downtown Philadelphia
Florida	26	51.4%	46.2%	5.28%	69%	3 South FL districts shifted by at least 4.8%.
New York	8	87.6%	82.4%	5.23%	17%	Long Island, affected by Hurricane Sandy
Arizona	3	60.3%	55.1%	5.22%	55%	Majority Latino in Tucson
California	40	80.6%	75.4%	5.22%	73%	Majority Latino in Los Angeles
Texas	33	70.5%	65.4%	5.18%	40%	Heavily Latino in Dallas

Districts with Partisanship Shifts of at least 5% toward Republicans in 2012 (constant district lines)

State	House District	2012 Democratic Partisanship	2008 Democratic Partisanship	Percent Republican Increase	Comments
Utah	4	29.6%	38.8%	9.18%	Romney "home state" factor / Mormon influence
Utah	3	18.7%	27.4%	8.67%	Romney "home state" factor / Mormon influence
West Virginia	3	32.0%	39.7%	7.68%	Mountain area, heavily white, adjoins Kentucky-05
Utah	2	28.7%	36.3%	7.63%	Romney "home state" factor / Mormon influence
Utah	1	19.6%	27.2%	7.63%	Romney "home state" factor / Mormon influence
Illinois	15	33.2%	40.1%	6.88%	Loss of Obama "home state bounce" from 2008
Kentucky	5	22.2%	28.9%	6.68%	Mountain area, heavily white, adjoins West Virginia-03
Indiana	8	38.7%	45.1%	6.43%	Loss of Obama "next to home state" bounce from 2008
Indiana	4	36.1%	41.6%	5.48%	Loss of Obama "next to home state bounce" from 2008
Indiana	2	41.1%	46.5%	5.43%	Loss of Obama "next to home state bounce" from 2008
Indiana	3	34.7%	39.9%	5.18%	Loss of Obama "next to home state bounce" from 2008

These 30 districts reveal several interesting trends that can help anticipate future partisanship changes. Some shifts are primarily based on the identity of the candidates. The first fact that jumps out of the Republican data is the significant boost that Mitt Romney received from the large Mormon population in Utah, a state where Romney also had a high profile for his role in the 2002 Winter Olympics. Utah's four congressional districts were all among the five districts that moved most toward Republicans in 2012. Those districts will almost certainly regress to their mean partisanship in 2014 and 2016, although they will remain well out of reach for Democrats.

Similarly, Hawaii's two districts, which experienced the largest movement toward Democrats from 2004 to 2008 (because Barack Obama grew up there), are also likely to return to their historical norms in coming elections. Obama's 2008 bump in Illinois (where he had just served as a U.S. Senator) and adjacent Indiana already began to fade in 2012, accounting for five of the 11 districts that saw the greatest increase in Republican partisanship. Meanwhile, several districts in coastal New York and New Jersey became more Democratic in 2012, likely because of good will toward the incumbent President Obama after his handling of the Hurricane Sandy crisis just weeks before the election.

Other trends may be less transitory. One pattern that emerges in both charts is the fact that nearly all districts that changed significantly in partisanship shifted *in the direction of the party that they already favored*. That includes nine of the ten districts shifting at least 5.5% toward Democrats and all 11 of the districts that shifted at least 5% toward Republicans. As a result, most of these districts are becoming more polarized and promise to be even less competitive in future congressional elections.

That pattern – associated Bill Bishop's "Big Sort" thesis – is true of most congressional districts, not just those that changed significantly. Only 34% of all districts moved in the direction of the minority party in the district. Thus, nearly two-thirds of districts are becoming more polarized and less likely to give voters a meaningful choice for Congress in a winner-take-all system. As a result of these shifts, there will be six fewer districts with a balanced partisanship (47%-53%) in the 2014 elections.

Two exceptions to this trend in the districts shifting at least 5% in partisanship are Florida's 26th and 27th districts. Represented by long-time Latino Republican incumbents, both districts shifted from leaning Republican in the 2008 election to slightly favoring Democrats in 2012. These districts illustrate another trend among districts that became more Democratic: Latino voters voted more for Barack Obama in 2012 than for any Democrat in recent history. Consequently, most of the districts with partisanship that shifted toward Democrats in 2012 are heavily populated by Latinos. Three of the top ten Democratic-trending districts (including the top two) are majority Latino, while four others are at least 30% Latino. Again, the pattern holds throughout all heavily Latino congressional districts. Of the 42 districts with at least 30% Latino voting age populations, all but four moved toward Democrats in 2012.

Whether Democrats can maintain this surge in Latino support will be a major indicator of their success in 2014 and 2016. It is difficult to predict what will happen to the partisanship of the Latino districts that became more Democratic in 2012. They may regress to a more Republican mean, continue trending toward Democrats, or settle into their current partisanship level. We can say, though, that these Latino

districts are disproportionately likely to see major swings in their partisanship compared to the average district, and projections for heavily Latino districts should be treated with more caution as a result.

Implications

The findings of this analysis indicate that three primary factors altered district partisanship between 2008 and 2012 and may continue to do so in the future: the affinity of certain states for particular presidential candidates regardless of party, the movement of Latino voters toward Democrats, and the overall trend of districts toward their current majority party. However, none of these factors significantly mitigates the predictive value of partisanship for the 2014 congressional elections, as the vast majority of districts did not experience a major partisanship change in the last election cycle.

The moving districts discussed here are, by and large, the exceptions that prove the rule of partisanship constancy. For both Democratic and Republican-shifting districts, the biggest movers are explainable by major political trends and events, such as Hurricane Sandy, Mitt Romney's strong appeal to Mormons, and the Republican alienation of Latino voters. There are no cases of large partisanship swings without apparent cause, and the rarity of such causes underscores the static, uncompetitive nature of most congressional elections.