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Why Democrats Can't Win the House

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WASHINGTON — Republicans and Democrats are struggling for control of the Senate in this November’s midterm elections. But there is no real fight for control of the House of Representatives.

The Republicans are all but assured of retaining control of the House, despite last fall’s unpopular government shutdown and the party’s dismal ratings.

“The Republican hold on the House is the graveyard of the hopes of Democratic policy change,” says Neera Tanden, president of the liberal-leaning Center for American Progress. It has stifled not just President Obama’s agenda, but also the aspirations of his coalition of young, secular and nonwhite voters, who have represented a majority in presidential elections.

How is it possible that the Democrats, who have won the popular vote in five of the last six presidential elections, are at such a disadvantage in the House, theoretically the most representative body of government? It is the biggest paradox in American electoral politics.

Democrats often blame gerrymandering, but that’s not the whole story. More than ever, the kind of place where Americans live — metropolitan or rural — dictates their political views. The country is increasingly divided between liberal cities and close-in suburbs, on one hand, and conservative exurbs and rural areas, on the other. Even in red states, the counties containing the large cities — like Dallas, Atlanta, St. Louis and Birmingham — lean Democratic.

In presidential races, Democrats used to win by expanding their appeal beyond urban areas, particularly in the South, but Mr. Obama took a different path to victory in 2008 and 2012. He won the nation’s largest cities with more than 80 percent of the vote — margins that Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson could only have dreamed of. Mitt Romney, meanwhile, didn’t win the countryside as decisively as Mr. Obama won the big cities.



Democrats, packed into urban districts, give the G.O.P. an edge

States like Pennsylvania and Ohio illustrate the disconnect between statewide vote totals and House districts. In 2012, voters for Obama, who won these state, were concentrated in a few urban districts; the rest of the districts skewed Republican.

Pennsylvania vote, 2012

Democrats: 52% of votes, 28% of districts won by Obama

20406080%

Ohio vote, 2012

Democrats: 51% of votes, 25% of districts

20406080%

Michigan

Democrats: 54% of votes, 36% of districts

20406080%

Virginia

Dem: 51% of votes, 36% of districts

20406080%

Wisconsin

53% of votes, 38% of distr.

20406080%

Sources: National Journal (2012 Presidential Election results by congressional district)

The gap between staggering Democratic margins in cities and the somewhat smaller Republican margins in the rest of the country allows Democrats to win key states in presidential and Senate elections, like Florida and Michigan. But the expanded Democratic margins in metropolitan areas are all but wasted in the House, since most of these urban districts already voted for Democrats. The result is that Democrats have built national and statewide majorities by making Democratic-leaning congressional districts even more Democratic, not by winning new areas that might turn congressional districts from red to blue.

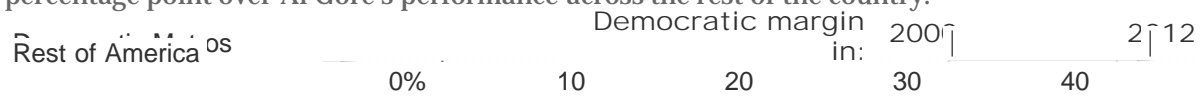
The best example may be Pennsylvania. President Obama won the state by five percentage points in 2012, thanks to a whopping 83 percent of the vote in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, where Democrats combine nearly unanimous support among nonwhite voters with large margins among young and well-educated liberals. Mr. Romney didn't win a single Pennsylvania county, let alone a district, by as much as Mr. Obama won Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The large Democratic margin in these cities allowed Mr. Obama to carry the state, but it did not translate to a majority of House districts.

The hundreds of thousands of wasted Democratic votes in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh typify the electoral challenge facing House Democrats, which has become more pronounced during the Obama years. Mr. Obama's strengths among nonwhite and young voters allowed him to build overwhelming margins in heavily populated urban areas, wasting more Democratic votes. In fact, nearly all of Mr. Obama's gains over

Al Gore's showing in 2000 came from 68 metropolitan counties that already leaned Democratic. The rest of the country, in the aggregate, barely budged.

Obama's Gains Came in Metropolitan Areas

...that already voted Democratic and already yielded Democratic districts. He gained one percentage point over Al Gore's performance across the rest of the country.



The Obama campaign was the first to fully embrace a diverse metropolitan coalition. He unabashedly campaigned on social issues, like gay rights and funding for contraception, that past Democratic candidates would have tiptoed around for fear of alienating more conservative, rural voters. This helped him run up votes in cities, but ensured cataclysmic losses in formerly Democratic stretches of West Texas and West Virginia, where restrictions on gun ownership and mining, and support for gay marriage and immigration reform, are deeply unpopular.

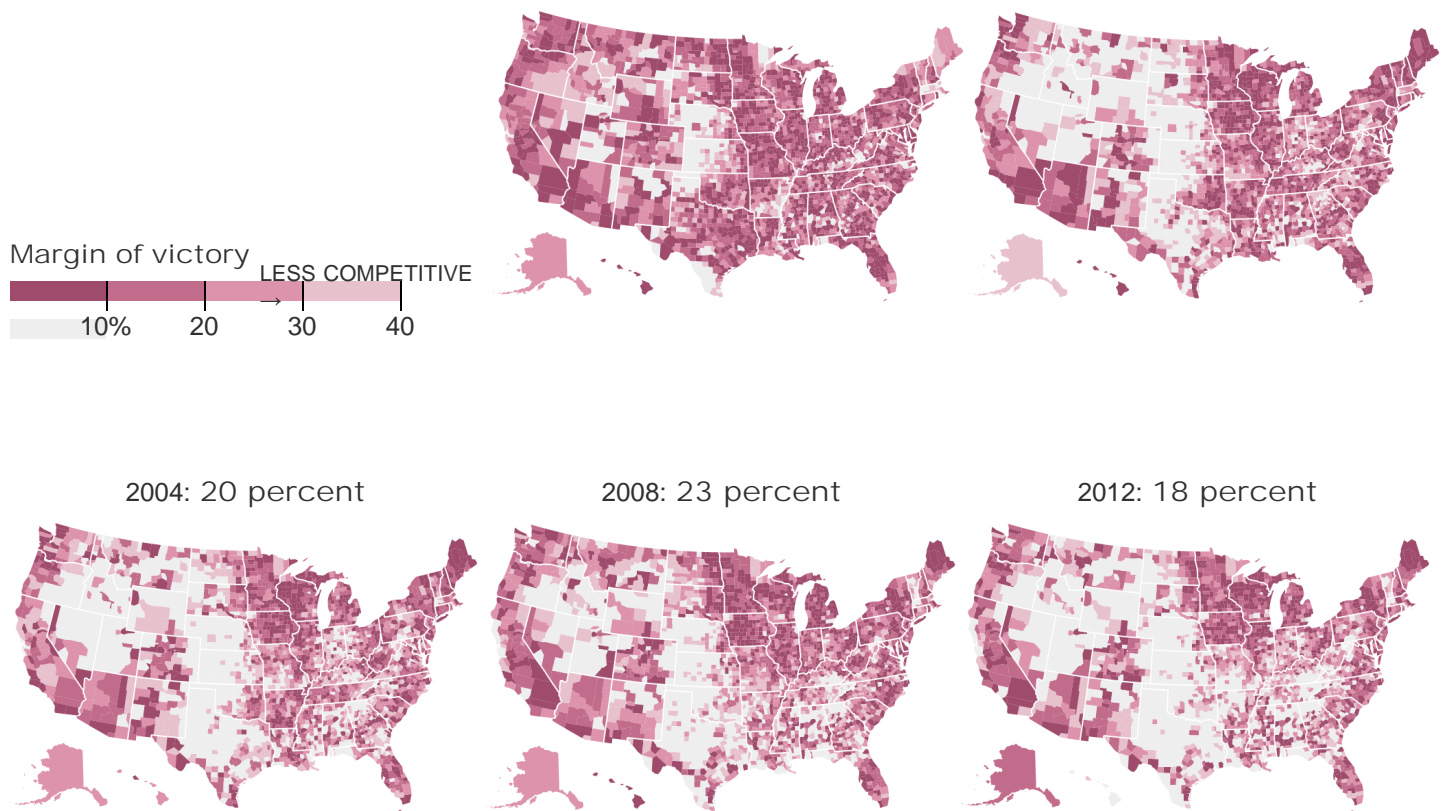
Most of those once reliably Democratic areas voted for George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, but the outcome was close enough for Democratic congressional candidates to overcome the party's modest disadvantage. These Democrats, often referred to as the Blue Dogs, allowed the party to avoid its wasted-vote problem in the 2006 congressional elections, when it retook control of the House.

The Blue Dog Democrats were roundly defeated in the 2010 midterm elections, however, and the Republican incumbents who replaced them will be difficult to beat. Their once competitive areas now vote overwhelmingly Republican in presidential elections; there are places that voted for Mr. Gore in 2000 but supported Mr. Romney in 2012 by a margin of more than 40 points.

Today there are fewer competitive counties in presidential elections.

In 1996, 38 percent of all counties were won by a margin of less than 10 percent.

In 2000, 26 percent of all counties were won by a margin of less than 10 percent.



Sources: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections

Notes: Margin of victory is based on two-party votes.

As a result of Republican gains in these areas, the number of competitive districts has plummeted. Over all, the number of districts that voted within four points of the national margin in presidential elections, like Florida and Ohio, dropped to 29 in 2012, from 71 in 1992.

The Democrats currently stand on the edge of getting locked out of the House. The party would gain a bare majority only if it were to win Republican-held seats at the same rate that it did in 2006 or at the same rate that Republicans flipped seats in 2010. But it is unclear whether Democrats can replicate those gains, given that at least seven of the 12 Republicans who lost safely Republican districts in 2006 were implicated in corruption or other scandals. Republicans made almost all of their gains in 2010 by defeating Democrats who represented Republican-leaning areas; the G.O.P. made few inroads into Democratic-leaning districts.

For now, the best-case scenario for

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Democrats might be gaining a small majority. But even that narrow path to victory might close if the Republicans pick up a dozen seats this November, as some analysts say they might if everything breaks their way.

The role of partisan gerrymandering in all of this is hotly debated. It has indeed allowed Republicans to squeeze extra districts out of states like Michigan and Virginia, and strategically reinforce vulnerable incumbents. Those additional districts might make the difference between an insurmountable Republican advantage or a merely significant one. But gerrymandering is not responsible for the entire Republican edge in the House.

The political scientists Jowei Chen, of the University of Michigan, and Jonathan Rodden, of Stanford University, estimate that gerrymandering costs Democrats about six to eight seats in the House. Even so, “by far the most important factor contributing to the Republican advantage,” Mr. Chen says, “is the natural geographic factor of Democrats’ being overwhelmingly concentrated in these urban districts, especially in states like Michigan and Florida.”

The Declining Number of Competitive Districts

...didn't occur only because of redistricting.



Democrats would not just need another great election year, like 2006 or 2008; they would need to build a much broader coalition than the one they currently

martin braun 5 minutes ago
Unless a half of local Democrats in "red" areas switched registration to the Republican party. Then the erstwhile Democrats could vote in...

bob lesch 8 minutes ago
we need to stop making up excuses for poor governance caused by excessive outside money being directed at gerrymandering people's views.we...

Chicago1 9 minutes ago
To discount gerrymandering to this degree is disingenuous at best, dangerous at worst. Prior to 2012, the most that a winning party in the...

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To retake the House,

focus on in presidential elections. They would need to attract the voters that some liberals thought they could abandon: the conservative Democrats of the South and Appalachia, where the vanquished Blue Dogs once reigned.

The best hope for Democrats may be reclaiming some of these voters once President Obama is out of the White House. That won't be easy. The Democratic voter-registration advantage has shrunk in Appalachia, in part because many of the oldest voters, who came of age during the era when Democrats were dominant, have disappeared from the electorate. Nonetheless, many of the voters who remain are still self-identified Democrats, vote for Democrats in statewide elections and could plausibly support a conservative Democratic candidate.

A Democrat with more support than Mr. Obama in the traditionally Democratic South, like Hillary Rodham Clinton, could potentially help Democrats in these areas. But it is usually difficult for the incumbent president's party to make gains in the House in any election year. A Democratic rebound in places like West Virginia or Arkansas might be easier to imagine if a Republican wins the presidency in 2016 and struggles heading into the 2018 midterms.

Even if these places became as favorable to Democrats as they were a decade ago, it would still be a stretch to imagine the party unseating a meaningful number of Republican incumbents on fairly conservative turf. Even under ideal conditions, the Democrats of 2006 and 2008 did not defeat many Republican incumbents in the South, scandal and corruption notwithstanding.

If Democratic losses in that part of the country are irreversible, Democrats might be forced to wait for demographic and generational change to spread beyond urban centers and suburbs, giving the party a chance to build a more decisive majority. Until that happens, the long-anticipated Democratic majority has little chance of enacting the most ambitious elements of its agenda.

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