The effects of the proposed NC congressional districting maps on electoral competitiveness

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Political scientists are interested in assessing legislative districting proposals according to various criteria, and one of the most important criteria is the effect on electoral competitiveness. Political scientists are interested in assessing the degree of electoral competitiveness for several reasons. Voters generally benefit from competitive elections, insofar as competitiveness is correlated with higher rates of voter turnout and information. Competitive elections also enhance political accountability, by increasing the likelihood that legislators are attentive to constituents' concerns and take account of these concerns in the votes they cast.

In view of the importance of electoral competitiveness, political scientists are naturally drawn to assess the likely effects on competitiveness of the proposed North Carolina congressional district plan[1] in comparison with the current congressional district plan.[2] It is possible to investigate the extent to which the proposed plans would increase the electoral competitiveness of the 13 districts.

Competitiveness of the current map

It is important to begin by assessing the degree of electoral competitiveness of the current congressional map during the period from 2002-2010. There are several ways of assessing electoral competitiveness. One leading approach is to rely on the Cook Political Report, which is widely viewed as the leading independent analysis of congressional competitiveness. The Cook Report provides periodic analyses in each electoral season of the degree to which the 435 House races are viewed as competitive. Races are arrayed into four categories: Solid for one party, Likely for one party, Leaning toward one party, and Tossups, with the Solid category comprising completely uncompetitive races and the Likely category comprising races that "are not considered competitive at this point but have the potential to become engaged," and the Leaning and Tossup categories comprising races that are actually competitive. A review of the Cook Report final ratings for 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010 indicates that four NC districts were included in the competitive (Leaning or Tossup) categories in the final ratings in at least one of

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[1] All data taken from:
http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gis/randr07/District_Plans/PlanPage_DB_2011.asp?Plan=Rucho-Lewis_Congress_1&Body=Congress.
[2] All data taken from:
http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gis/randr07/District_Plans/PlanPage_DB_2011.asp?Plan=Congress_ZeroDeviation&Body=Congress.

these elections[3]: the 2nd (Lean in 2010), the 7th (Tossup in 2010), the 8th (Lean in 2002, Tossup in 2008 and 2010), and the 11th (Lean in 2004, Tossup in 2006, and Lean in 2010). If one expands the definition of competitiveness to also take account of races that appeared in the Likely category, one would find two other districts: the 13th in 2002, and the 5th in 2008, in addition to the already noted 8th in 2006. In short, when using the Cook Political Report ratings as one measure of competitiveness, during the previous decade under the current congressional district map, one could conclude that four districts were at any time competitive, and two others were at one point considered potentially but not actually competitive.

A second approach to assessing the electoral competitiveness of the current map is to analyze the actual outcome of North Carolina congressional elections during the past decade. A key question concerns the degree to which congressional districts actually underwent a change in party control during the past decade. Three districts fall in this category.[4] Proceeding in chronological order: the 11th began the decade as a Republican-held district but turned Democratic in 2006 and remains Democratic; the 8th began the decade as a Republican-held district but turned Democratic in 2008 and remains Democratic; and the 2nd began the decade as a Democratic-held district but turned Republican in 2010.

In short, and to sum up this review of the electoral competitiveness of the current congressional map during the past decade, by one measure (actual change in party control) three districts were competitive[5] and by another measure (inclusion on the Cook Report's final ratings as a Lean or a Tossup district) a total of four districts were actually competitive,[6] and another two districts were potentially but not actually competitive.[7]

Competitiveness of the proposed map

In turning to advance some conclusions about electoral competitiveness under the proposed congressional district map in comparison with the current map, it becomes necessary to rely on a different set of measures. Given that we are well over a year away from the 2012 election and so we of course do not have the final Cook Report predictions or the actual outcome of the elections, and given that the maps are at this point at the proposal rather than the enactment stage, it is necessary to turn to other measures to gauge electoral competitiveness.

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[3] The final ratings for these years are archived at the following site: http://cookpolitical.com/node/7695.
[4] One should note that the 13th district was created for the 2002 election, and has been a Democratic-held district throughout the decade.
[5] The 2nd, 8th, and 11th districts.
[6] The 2nd, 7th, 8th, and 11th districts. To review: the difference between the actual party-change and Cook Report lists is the addition of the 7th district to the second list.
[7] To review: the 5th and 13th districts were considered potentially competitive by the Cook Report in 2008 and 2002 respectively.

One approach that has at times been employed is to assess voting registration in the district and focus on the gap between Republican and Democratic registration and identify whether this gap in party voting registration would be reduced under the proposed map in comparison with the current map.[8] By this measure, under the proposed map the gap between the percentage of registered Republicans and Democrats would be reduced in eight districts: the 2nd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 13th. When one also takes account of incumbency, which plays a critical role in House elections, it becomes possible to approach the question in a more detailed fashion: by asking to what degree the proposed map would alter the gap in party registration in such a way as to increase the chance during the next decade that the district could be won by the party that does not currently hold the district. According to this measure, the proposed map would increase the possibility that eight districts would be winnable by the party not currently holding the district: the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 13th. Of these districts, the 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 10th are currently held by Republicans; the 7th, 8th, 11th, and 13th are currently held by Democrats.

A second approach, which is particularly important in southern states where there has generally been a lag between voter registration and actual voting behavior (in the sense that voters have remained registered with one party even though they consistently vote for another party), is to examine the actual voting behavior of the district. Voting data is available for recent presidential elections and other state-wide elections including the senate, governor, and other executive officials. The challenge is that none of these match up directly with voting behavior in House elections. That is, voters in North Carolina, no less than in other states, tend to behave differently in presidential, gubernatorial, Senate, and House races, and of these elections House races are most influenced by the incumbency factor. Nevertheless, voting behavior in presidential elections can be viewed as the most useful piece of information in terms of assessing electoral competitiveness.

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[8] The changes in the size of the gaps in party registration percentages under the new map would be as follows: 1st: increased by .78 percentage points, 2nd: reduced by 18.76 percentage points, 3rd: increased by 12.74 percentage points, 4th: increased by 14.73 percentage points, 5th: reduced by 3.76 percentage points, 6th: reduced, albeit in an amount that requires some explanation, in that an 11.61 percentage point current Republican advantage would change to a 1.16 percentage point Democratic advantage under the proposed map (such that the absolute value of the gap would be reduced by 10.45 percentage points), 7th: reduced by 10.57 percentage points, 8th: reduced by 7.31 percentage points, 9th: increased by 3.78 percentage points, 10th: reduced, albeit in an amount that requires some explanation, in that a 6.70 percentage point current Republican advantage would change to a 3.78 percentage point Democratic advantage under the proposed map (such as the absolute value of the gap would be reduced by 2.92 percentage points), 11th: reduced, but again in an amount that requires some explanation, in that a 6.89 percentage point current Democratic advantage would change to a 1.19 percentage point Republican advantage under the proposed map (such that the absolute value of the gap would be reduced by 5.70 percentage points), 12th: increased by 10.52 percentage points, 13th: reduced by 20.47 percentage points.

Accordingly, and given that the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates were separated by less than a percentage point in the 2008 presidential election in North Carolina, the percent of voters who sided with John McCain versus Barack Obama can be seen as useful, albeit far from determinative, in assessing the degree to which the proposed congressional district map would increase or reduce the competitiveness of the district. That is, one approach is to simply measure to what degree the proposed map reduces the gap between the Obama and McCain vote in comparison with the gap seen in the current map for each district.[9] By this measure, the gap in 2008 presidential voting behavior would be reduced in five districts: the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 10th, and 13th. When one also takes account of incumbency, which plays a critical role in House elections, it becomes possible to approach the question in a more detailed fashion: by asking to what degree the proposed map would alter the gap between the Obama and McCain vote in such a way that would increase the chance during the next decade that the district could be won by the party that does not currently hold the district. According to this measure, the proposed map would increase the possibility that eight districts would be winnable by the party not currently holding the district: the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 13th. As noted above, the 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 10th are currently held by Republicans; the 7th, 8th, 11th, and 13th are currently held by Democrats.

In short, and to sum up this review of the effects on electoral competitiveness of the proposed changes (and it should be emphasized that there are other criteria by which one might evaluate redistricting proposals), there are various ways of measuring electoral competitiveness. If one focuses on party registration data, one finds that the proposed map would reduce the size of the current gap in party registration in eight districts.[10] Focusing more specifically on the number of districts in which the changes in party registration under the proposed map would increase the likelihood that the district could be won by the party not currently holding the seat, one finds that

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[9] The changes in the sizes of the gaps in the 2008 presidential vote under the proposed map are as follows: 1st: increased by 10.89 percentage points, 2nd: increased, but in an amount that requires some explanation, in that a 5.73 percentage point current Democratic advantage would be changed to an 11.88 percentage point Republican advantage (such that the absolute value of the gap would increase by 6.15 percentage points), 3rd: reduced by 11.18 percentage points, 4th: increased by 18.32 percentage points, 5th: reduced by 7.36 percentage points, 6th: reduced by 15.29 percentage points, 7th: increased by 6.37 percentage points, 8th: increased, but in an amount that requires some explanation, in that a 5.50 percentage point current Democratic advantage would be changed to an 11.66 percentage point Republican advantage (such that the absolute value of the gap would increase by 6.16 percentage points), 9th: increased by .82 percentage points, 10th: reduced by 12.69 percentage points, 11th: increased by 11.75 percentage points, 12th: increased by 15.14 percentage points, 13th: reduced, but in an amount that requires some explanation, in that an 18.63 percentage point current Democratic advantage would change to a 12.53 percentage point Republican advantage (such that the absolute value of the gap would be reduced by 6.10 percentage points).

[10] The 2nd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 13th districts.

the proposed map would have such an effect in eight districts,[11] with slight differences between these lists.[12]

If one focuses instead on voting behavior in the 2008 presidential election, one finds that the proposed map would reduce the size of the current gap in presidential voting behavior in five districts.[13] Focusing more specifically on the number of districts in which the changes in presidential voting behavior data under the proposed map would increase the likelihood that the district could be won by the party not currently holding the seat, one finds that the proposed map would have such an effect in eight districts,[14] with several districts on the latter but not the former list.[15]

The one finding that is consistent according to the two main measures, whether examining party registration or presidential voting behavior, is that the proposed map would increase the chance that a district could be won by the party not currently holding the district in the following eight districts: the 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 13th districts.

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[11] The 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 13th districts.

[12] The differences between these two lists concerning party registration are as follows: 1, the existing gap in party registration in the 3rd would actually become much larger in favor of the Democratic Party under the proposed map (and so the 3rd does not appear in the first list), but since this is a Republican-held district, such a change would actually increase the likelihood that the district would undergo a change in party control (and thus the 3rd does appear on the second list); 2, the existing gap in party registration in the 2nd in favor of the Democratic Party would be reduced significantly under the proposed map (and so the 2nd appears on the first list), but since this is a Republican-held district, such a change would actually reduce the likelihood that the district would undergo a change in party control (and thus the 2nd does not appear on the second list).

[13] The 3rd, 5th, 6th, 10th, and 13th districts.

[14] The 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th, and 13th districts.

[15] The difference between these two lists is accounted for by the fact that the existing gap in presidential voting behavior in the 7th, 8th, and 11th districts in favor of the Republican Party would actually increase under the new map (and so these three districts are not included on the first list), but such changes would increase the likelihood that the district would undergo a change in party control (and thus these three districts are included on the second list).