5 Ways to Tilt an Election

By MICHAEL COOPER

IT was a gerrymander too ambitious for its own good.

When Pennsylvania lost two seats in Congress to the booming Sun Belt in 2000, the Republicans who controlled state government redrew the map of Congressional districts to pack Republican voters into as many districts as possible.

At first, the strategy worked. In the next election, the state's delegation shifted to 12 Republicans and 7 Democrats, from 11 Republicans and 10 Democrats. Furious Democrats challenged the new map but the Supreme Court upheld it.

Instead of drawing, say, 11 Republican districts with comfortable margins of Republican voters, party strategists had tried to draw 12 or 13 Republican districts, but with slimmer margins. As it turned out, those margins were a bit too narrow, and, by 2006, Democrats had won those districts. The state now has 12 Democratic and just 7 Republican districts, the reverse of what the Republican gerrymander originally accomplished. "They took a risk, and it backfired," said Edward G. Rendell, Pennsylvania's Democratic governor.

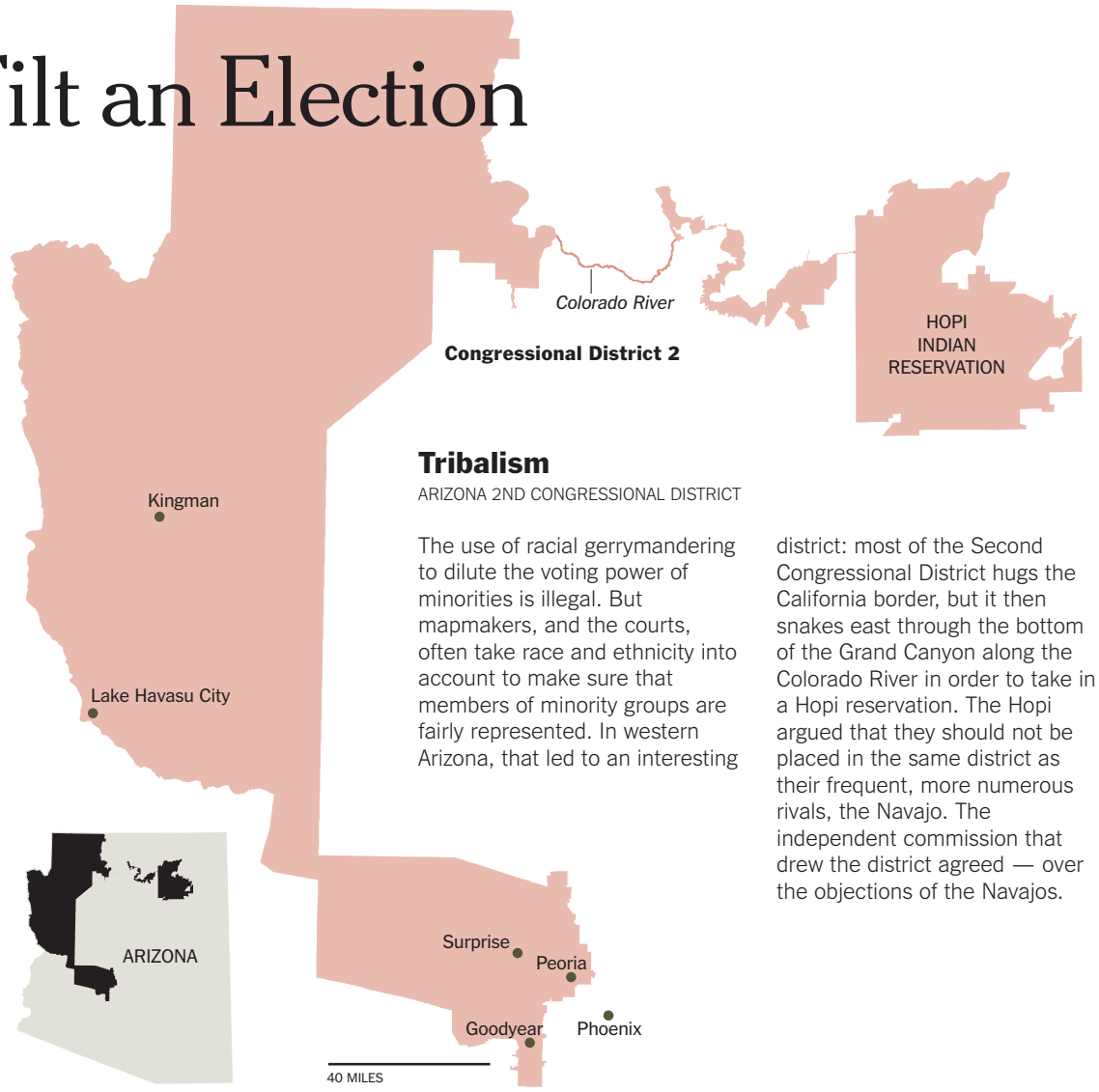
Now, with the 2010 census complete, Democrats and Republicans across the country are preparing for another once-a-decade exercise in creative cartography. To gain the upper hand in the next redistricting, Pennsylvania Republicans are fighting to win back the governor's mansion and the state's House of Representatives. Independent analysts say a Republican surge in statehouses around the nation could leave them with the power to redraw as many as 25 Congressional seats in their favor.

So what are the tricks of the trade? Why do so many districts end up as misshapen Rorschach inkblots with nicknames like "the Earmuff," "the Flying Giraffe," or, in the case of a State Senate district in upstate New York, "Abraham Lincoln Riding on a Vacuum Cleaner"?

Both parties rely on sophisticated computer programs, savvy political operatives and election lawyers to push their maps through the frequent court challenges. But the basic principles of gerrymandering — known to the pros as "packing" and "cracking" — are simple, and used often.

Tribalism

ARIZONA 2ND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

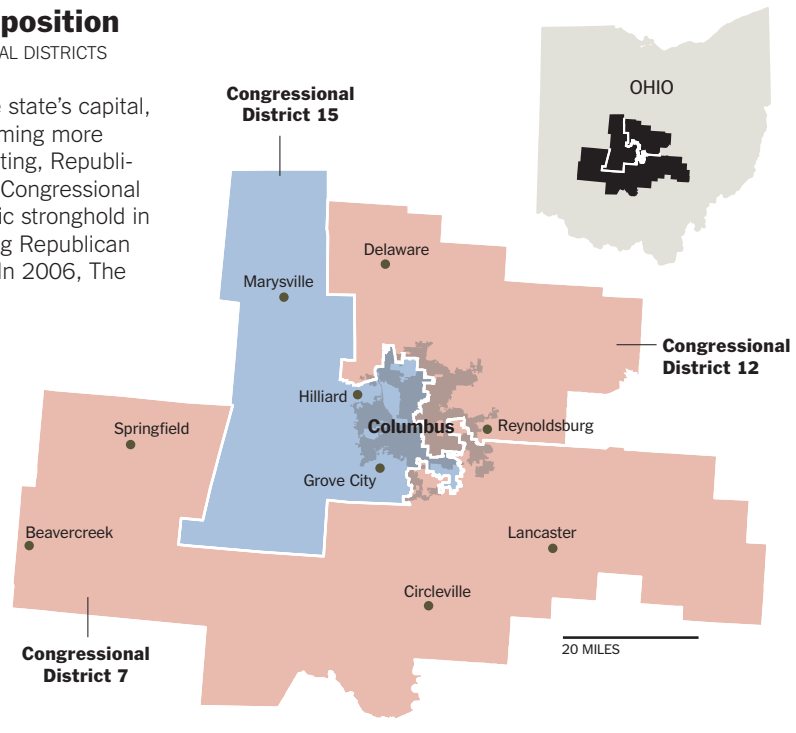


The use of racial gerrymandering to dilute the voting power of minorities is illegal. But mapmakers, and the courts, often take race and ethnicity into account to make sure that members of minority groups are fairly represented. In western Arizona, that led to an interesting district: most of the Second Congressional District hugs the California border, but it then snakes east through the bottom of the Grand Canyon along the Colorado River in order to take in a Hopi reservation. The Hopi argued that they should not be placed in the same district as their frequent, more numerous rivals, the Navajo. The independent commission that drew the district agreed — over the objections of the Navajos.

Cracking: Dilute the Opposition

OHIO 15TH, 12TH AND 7TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS

Franklin County, Ohio, home to the state's capital, Columbus, was growing, and becoming more Democratic. So in the last redistricting, Republicans divided the county into three Congressional districts, splitting up the Democratic stronghold in the center of the county and adding Republican areas to each district. The result? In 2006, The Columbus Dispatch reported that Franklin County's voters cast 10,000 more votes for Democratic Congressional candidates than for Republicans — but Republicans still won all three seats. In 2008, Mary Jo Kilroy, a Democrat, won in the 15th District, which contains much of Columbus. But she faces a tough re-election campaign.



One for You, One for Me

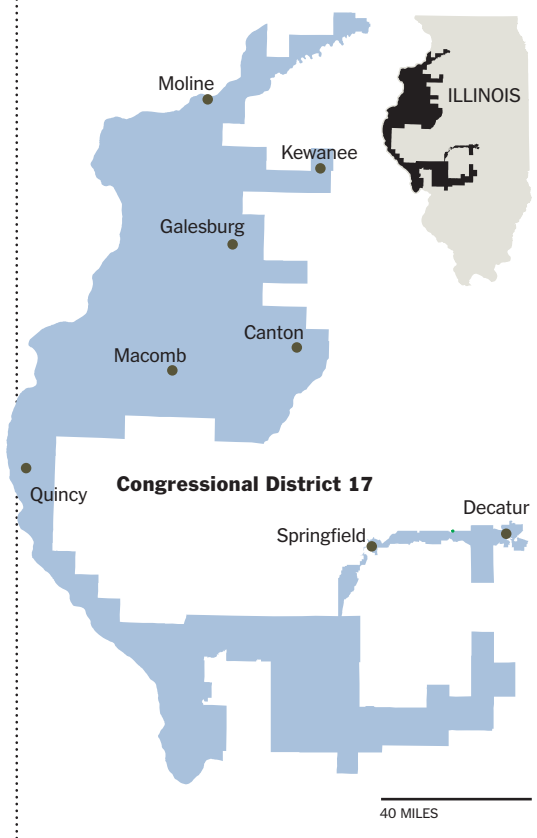
NEW YORK 28TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

States losing Congressional seats must decide which incumbent gets left without a chair. When New York lost two of its 31 House seats after the 2000 census, the state's government agreed on a compromise to protect an incumbent from each party. Two Republican lawmakers were put in a new Republican district and left to fight it out, and two Democratic incumbents were assigned to a new Democratic district. The Democratic district, the 28th, was a bit of a stretch, literally, extending from Rochester, a Democratic city, across a thin sliver of the shore of Lake Ontario, to Democratic areas in Niagara Falls and parts of Buffalo. In this case, one of the two Democrats crammed into the district retired, paving the way for Representative Louise Slaughter to win.

Eliminate the Competition

ILLINOIS 1ST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

In 2000, a little-known Illinois state senator named Barack Obama mounted a primary challenge against Representative Bobby L. Rush, a Chicago Democrat. Mr. Obama took a drubbing, getting a mere 30 percent of the vote. Still, someone took notice. The next year, under a bipartisan deal, the state's Congressional districts were redrawn to protect most of the state's incumbents — which meant that Mr. Obama's block was cut out of Mr. Rush's district (see below). As it turned out, Mr. Obama was not planning a rematch. But at least three other potential challengers were drawn out of their Illinois districts that year.



Packing: To Keep Your Voters

ILLINOIS 17TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

There is a reason this district resembles a rabbit, speeding westward on a skateboard. To enhance the Democratic incumbent's re-election prospects, officials redrew this Quad Cities district to remove some Republican areas while stretching it along a narrow band to include Democratic neighborhoods in the cities of Springfield and Decatur, 40 miles to the east. Since the district was drawn in a bipartisan deal to protect most incumbents, the Republicans drawn out of this district made neighboring districts safer for Republicans.

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