Redistricting: Home to Roost

How Republicans' Gerrymandering Efforts May Have Backfired
By JEANNE CUMMINGS
November 10, 2006; Page A6

WASHINGTON -- Gerrymandering was supposed to cement Republican control of the House of Representatives, offering incumbents a wall of re-election protection even as public opinion turned sharply against them. Instead, the party's strategy of recrafting district boundaries may have backfired, contributing to the defeats of several lawmakers and the party's fall from power.

The reason: Republican leaders may have overreached and created so many Republican-leaning districts that they spread their core supporters too thinly. That left their incumbents vulnerable to the type of backlash from traditionally Republican-leaning independent voters that unfolded this week.

That helps to explain why three of four Republican incumbents in the Philadelphia area were beaten this week, while the remaining incumbent hung on by just a few thousand votes. In Florida, meanwhile, state lawmakers had shifted some Republican voters from the secure district of former Rep. Mark Foley in an attempt to shore up the re-election chances of Rep. Clay Shaw without risking the Foley seat. Instead, Democrats took both. In Texas, former Majority Leader Tom DeLay's decision to transfer thousands of stalwart Republican voters from his district in 2004 to boost a neighboring seat heightened the burden on the write-in candidate trying to hold Mr. DeLay's seat. She lost it.

"The trade-off in redistricting is between safety and maximizing the numbers," says Alan I. Abramowitz, a political scientist at Emory University in Atlanta. "You can't do both," Redistricting, the traditionally once-a-decade process of redrawing of House districts to adjust to population trends, has always been a contentious procedure. But Republicans, under the leadership of Mr. DeLay, took the opportunity to use it as a reward or punishment to new heights in 2002.
In so doing, Republicans created two new vulnerabilities: the dangerous dilution of core voters and the nurturing of a sense of invulnerability that contributes to corruption and scandal.

"You can do a little thing wrong and, if you were in a district where you might be punished, you probably wouldn't do the little thing," says Michael P. McDonald, a redistricting expert at George Mason University. Today, he said, most House districts aren't in jeopardy unless "you take a bribe for a vote and you are thrown into jail for it."

The drive to maximize seats was seen by Republicans as a matter of survival. Democrats regained ground every cycle after the 1994 Republican takeover. By 2000, the Republican majority had shrunk to 221 seats from 231 in 1994. Democrats, aligned with the chamber's one independent, needed just six seats to retake control in 2002. So Mr. DeLay and House Speaker Dennis Hastert turned to their allies in the statehouses to redraw congressional district boundaries to erase Democratic seats and give Republicans new ones. "We wish to encourage you in these efforts, as they play a crucial role in maintaining a Republican majority," the two leaders wrote in a letter to Pennsylvania lawmakers.

There are three weapons to employ in redistricting. "Packing" involves concentrating a group of voters, such as African-Americans, in one district. "Cracking" means splitting up a group of voters to diminish their influence. "Pairing" forces two incumbents into the same district. Pennsylvania lawmakers used them all.

Philadelphia's urban voters were packed into Democratic seats, making them bluer than before. Since the state was losing two seats because of a population decline in the 2000 census, six incumbents were paired. That meant four Democrats were left to fight over two seats. And one Democrat was forced to run against an incumbent Republican in a district that favored the Republican.

Then, the legislators employed the supercomputers at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University to carve up the Philadelphia suburbs. The goal: make four Republican seats by cracking apart any Democratic strongholds left outside the city.

One of those districts, the sixth, starts at the city line and moves west to pick up several suburbs. Then it turns back east to capture conservative Chester County. And then it
Republican Remap

Pennsylvania's Sixth Congressional District, before and after the most recent redistricting. The district is represented by Rep. Jim Gerlach, a Republican, who narrowly defeated his Democratic opponent, Lois Murphy, this week.

- **Demographic characteristics of the former sixth district**
  - Median household income: $40,135

- **Demographic characteristics of the new sixth district**
  - Median household income: $62,189

"If you look at the Pennsylvania map, it's ugly," says Sam Hirsch, an attorney who argued against the constitutionality of the map before the U.S. Supreme Court. Democrats lost that case 5-4.

After the Pennsylvania redistricting, the partisan make-up of the state's House delegation shifted to 12 Republicans and seven Democrats from a pre-redistricting breakdown of 10 Democrats and 11 Republicans. That meant the balance of the state's delegation shifted from one that was split roughly evenly to one in which Republicans had a five-seat edge.

In 2002 the fruits of the work in Pennsylvania -- as well as similar efforts in Ohio, Michigan and Florida -- were clear when the Republicans' U.S. House majority widened to 229-204. Mr. DeLay wasn't done, though. The next year, he pushed through a new congressional map in Texas...
that produced another net gain of five Republican seats in the Lone Star state. By 2004, his House majority had grown to 232-202. While Republicans lauded their Texas coup, pro-Democratic union leaders at the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, across the street from the White House, pored over the 2004 presidential and congressional results. They began to put together a pattern: Republican-held House seats where Democrat John Kerry narrowly won or lost also included high concentrations of union members.

In the summer of 2005, they created a target list for the 2006 campaign. The Philadelphia suburban seats of Mr. Gerlach, Rep. Curt Weldon and Rep. Melissa Hart were on it. Combined, the lawmakers’ districts are home to 182,000 union members. With direct-mail literature and telephone calls, the labor leaders attacked the incumbents for their stands on Social Security and a host of other issues working their way through Congress.

Meanwhile, MoveOn.org, the liberal online group, was working through similar calculations. They put Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick on their target sheet. He won two years ago by 1,500 votes. MoveOn members made 102,000 telephone calls to inconsistent Democratic voters urging them to get out on Election Day. Its members donated $90,000 to his opponent's campaign.

On Tuesday, Mr. Fitzpatrick lost 50.3% to 49.7%. Ms. Hart lost 52% to 48%. Mr. Weldon, who also was stung by late disclosure of a federal investigation of his actions, lost 57% to 43%. Mr. Gerlach, the last Republican standing whose district was custom-made for him, is ahead amid final vote counting, 50.5% to 49.5%

"If Republicans had been a little less aggressive, they could have won several of those seats. If they gave the Democrats one more seat, they could have shored up by several percentage points the other seats," says Nathaniel Persily, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

That isn't to say all the Republicans’ 2002 redistricting plans went awry. Ohio lawmakers were more conservative than the Pennsylvanians. Before redistricting, their House delegation had 11 Republicans and eight Democrats. Like Pennsylvania, they lost two
seats because of population losses. Statehouse Republicans took those two seats from the Democrats. But they only added one Republican seat, creating a partisan delegation split of 12-6.
That is one reason why today several of their incumbents are still hanging on. The state was besieged with scandals and Democrats easily won the governorship and the senate race. Seven of the state's 12 Republican incumbents were on watch lists. But Democrats only have pocketed three of them. Two incumbents were re-elected and two more are clinging to their seats, albeit with tiny margins.