

Study: 'Carved-out' voters often struggle at ballot box

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The age-old practice of dividing congressional districts evenly by population speaks to such American ideals as fairness and equality. But when a county's residents are carved into separate districts simply to maintain that numerical parity, many end up struggling at the ballot box, a new study finds.

In a first-of-its-kind national analysis of voting behavior, political scientists Michael Wagner and Jonathan Winburn examined the electoral consequences of redistricting on natural "communities of interest." Most notably, they found that voters who had been carved into new districts that mainly covered areas outside their home counties knew far less about their new House candidates than voters who weren't redistricted.

In fact, the redistricted voters with low levels of [political knowledge](#) were only half as likely than voters in their former home district to even be able to name their congressperson or their congressperson's challenger in an upcoming [election](#). Redistricted voters with high political knowledge were only two-thirds as likely as voters in their former district to name their representative.

That's a huge informational disadvantage, the study asserts, and can lead to big problems in the [voting booth](#).

"The fact that people living in this 'short end of the split' are just as likely to cast a congressional ballot as anyone else, given their informational disadvantage, results in a vote about as random as buying a

sealed 'mystery' bag of groceries - sure, they picked something, but they don't know quite what it is until they get home," said Wagner, assistant professor of [political science](#) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"Consequently, there are real questions about the quality of representation these people are likely to receive through no fault of their own."

The researchers suggest that in some instances of redistricting - which will begin again next year after U.S. House seats are reapportioned across the nation following the 2010 Census - it would be better to focus first on preserving communities of interest, then on population equity.

The study, which appears in the current issue of the journal *Political Research Quarterly*, combined Geographic Information System technology with American National Election Studies survey responses from 1994-2002. This unique method allowed researchers to visualize data in maps and charts that revealed relationships, patterns and trends.

"Media markets do not split up counties, which means that local media tend to focus on the lawmakers that make up the bulk of the market and ignore those who represent only a fraction of their readers or viewers," Wagner said. "This makes it harder for people living in districts outside of their community of interest to know who their congressperson is, let alone hold them accountable for their actions in Washington."

"We think that the political mapmakers should work harder to keep these natural communities intact."

The congressional districts in the United States have long operated under the philosophy of "one person, one vote" - the allocation of the nation's 435 House districts on the basis of population so that the voting power of each voter is as equal as possible to that of any other voter.

Once the number of seats is assigned to each state, it is up to state legislatures to redraw new congressional districts. The average size of a congressional district based on the 2000 Census was roughly 650,000.

The study found that while voters in the "short end of the split" are less informed on their home district, they do tend to otherwise behave similarly at the ballot box as voters drawn into districts containing their natural community of interest. They showed up to vote in comparable rates and, though armed with very little information about their congressional race, did not vote a straight partisan ticket.

UNL's Wagner and Winburn, of the University of Mississippi, said more research was planned to fully examine what those particular findings may ultimately mean for the health of democracy in America.

"We were surprised that voters drawn out of their natural community of interest chose not to leave the congressional portion of their ballot blank, but we were amazed that voters didn't rely on their party identification to guide their vote in these circumstances. Voters in the short end of the split were not more likely to vote down the party line," Wagner said.

"That's encouraging on one hand, but on the other, we are forced to wonder, if not their political party, what are they basing their vote on, and what ramifications can that have on democracy?"

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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