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Kronberg: Texas redistricting, by the numbers, is a high stakes bet in a shifting political landscape

Trump's declining poll numbers including dramatic drops in his approval among independent voters combined with likely high Democratic voter intensity could spell trouble for Republicans especially if they overreach with new maps

Texas is once again at the center of a high stakes redistricting battle – a scenario reminiscent of past political maneuvers but now unfolding under significantly different conditions.

This latest effort to redraw Congressional lines in 2025, driven by a desire to secure additional Republican seats in Washington, carries a distinct air of desperation and faces a political environment far more volatile than previous attempts.

The 2003 mid-decade redistricting orchestrated by then-**U.S. House** Majority Leader **Tom DeLay** certainly ignited controversy. Crucially, in 2003 **George W. Bush** occupied the **White House** and remained popular in Texas, which likely muted public outcry. Furthermore, the **Voting Rights Act** stood un-eviscerated by the **Supreme Court**. Its pre-clearance requirement under **Section 5**, though later struck down by **Shelby County v. Holder in 2013**, imposed a significant constraint on Republican mapmakers compelling them to ensure the new districts did not diminish the voting power of minority groups.

This legal hurdle, no longer present, gives Republicans a freer hand today though challenges under **Section 2** of the VRA and the **14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause** remain.

To say the political landscape has dramatically shifted might be an understatement.

The upcoming 2026 midterm election, much like the 2018 midterms, is poised to once again be a referendum on **Donald Trump**. In the 2018, "first Trump midterm," Republicans indeed lost two critical congressional seats in Texas.

Lizzie Fletcher unseated Republican incumbent **John Culberson** in Texas's 7th Congressional District (Houston), winning with 52.5% of the vote to Culberson's 47.5% despite it being a 12+ R district. Simultaneously, **Colin Allred** defeated Republican incumbent **Pete Sessions** in Texas's 32nd Congressional District (Dallas), securing 52.3%

of the vote compared to Sessions' 45.8%. These losses underscored the vulnerability of even long-held Republican districts in a high-intensity Democratic environment.

In the 2024 presidential cycle, Democratic turnout saw a surprising and serious dip, suggesting that the margins for Republican congressional candidates in competitive races with Democrats were somewhat inflated. However, at present, President Trump's popularity appears to be facing headwinds, particularly among independent voters. As of this month, polling indicates President Trump's approval rating among independent voters stands at 36.5%.

While historically Democrats tend to underperform in midterms compared to presidential years, the 2018 election demonstrated that this isn't always the case, and the upcoming election could see much higher Democratic voter intensity than their opposition.

Adding to the complexity is a potentially messy **US Senate** race. While self-identified Democrats are dramatically fewer than Republicans in the state, a competitive statewide contest could further energize the Democratic base.

Economic factors also play a crucial role.

While the broader economy may be booming, it's not clear that working and middle-class Texans will be feeling the benefits in their daily lives, particularly concerning grocery prices and general affordability. Affordability was a central issue in the last election and it's likely to remain so. Additionally, increased funding for **ICE** and potentially more draconian enforcement efforts could become a significant drag on Republicans, undermining what has been a winning issue for the GOP. The polling right now suggests a steady erosion of public support for massive deportation roundups.

Here's the crucial nut of the situation: In 2024, there were approximately 20 competitive races between a Republican congressional incumbent and a Democratic challenger. The average Republican winning margin in these contests was around 64.24%. Notably, only six Republicans in those competitive races won by more than 65%. Given the surprising drop in Democratic participation, it's not unreasonable to presume that the Democratic dip in 2024 might have "inflated" Republican congressional candidates by an estimated 3 to 5 percentage points. Historically, a district with a 57% partisan lean is considered potentially winnable by the opposing party in an unusual election year.

Examples from the past illustrate this volatility.

In 2008, **Barack Obama**'s coattails helped Democrats here achieve a significant gain in the **Texas House**, narrowing the Republican majority to 76 Republicans and 74 Democrats. Similarly, in the 2018 election, Democrats surprised many by gaining 12 seats in the Texas House. And even in hardcore Republican Colin County, Republican **Matt Shaheen** won by only about 400 votes against a no name Democrat with no money.

The bottom line for Texas Republicans is that attempting to draw an additional five Republican Congressional seats at this juncture, despite population growth that increasingly

favors minority groups, may be a gamble that reeks of desperation. Given the shifting political currents, potential for high Democratic intensity, and the historical vulnerability of even seemingly safe districts, such an aggressive redistricting effort carries the significant potential for not only failing to achieve its intended gains but also leading to net Republican losses.

And just to add a little more confusion to the matter, it is worth noting that the 2021 redistricting maps are still under litigation.

It is difficult to see how the current effort at redrawing maps would pass court muster in time for the December filing deadline. An even worse case would be postponing the filing deadline and the March primary, which has historically created additional difficulties for incumbents.

Who knows what the final product will look like, but it is a high-stakes gamble regardless of your political persuasion.

By Harvey Kronberg

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