

Congressional Districts Need to Reflect Competitiveness

A Column

by

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October 14, 2021

When the Montana Districting and Apportionment Commission adopted criteria and goals for dividing Montana into two Congressional Districts it included a goal of considering competitiveness in its decision-making. That made sense, for history is very clear: Montana, over the years, has been competitive between the two major parties.

It is easy to look at the most recent election results of 2020 and declare that Montana is not a competitive state politically. But a landslide of sorts in one election does not define the state permanently. Our history is replete with cases where the results of an election suggest the demise of the losing party, only to have that party emerge from the ashes like a Phoenix in subsequent elections.

Montana does have a record of consistently casting its presidential ballots for the Republican. Since Democrat Lyndon Johnson won Montana in 1964, 57 years ago, only once has a Democratic presidential candidate prevailed here. In 1992 Bill Clinton won the state over incumbent George H.W. Bush. However, Clinton's narrow plurality victory at 37% was influenced by the presence of Independent H. Ross Perot on the ballot. Montana was Perot's second best state at 26%, and most analysts feel that a preponderance of those votes would have gone for Bush had Perot not been on the ballot.

But in our top purely Montana race, that for Governor, over the last 70 years the race has been evenly divided. From 1952 -1968 we had 16 years of Republican governors, followed by 20 years of Democratic governors from 1968 through 1980, followed by 16 years of Republican governors from 1988 through 2004, and then 16 years of Democratic governors from 2004 through 2020. The election of a Republican in 2020 may start another of those runs, but the story of our gubernatorial election in the last 70 years tilts slightly Democratic, 36 years to 32 years. "Competitive" might be the word.

Usually in the Tier B races in Montana, the statewide office holders other than Governor and Lt. Governor, there is usually a mix of winners from both parties. However, sometimes there is a sweep, like the Republicans in 2020. But it was only a few years ago in 2008 that the Democrats swept all Tier B statewide races. Again, the word competitive comes to mind.

As far as our statewide vote for US Senator, since the popular election of Senators (prior to 1916 they were selected by the legislature), Montana has had Democratic Senators 87% of the time, Republican 13%. Yet in the last 40 years since 1980, Democrats have filled the Senate seats 72% of the time, the GOP 28% -- a little more

balanced than before. It is easy to see Democrats as more than competitive in when it comes to US Senate seats.

As far as US House of Representative races are concerned, in the fifty years between 1944 and 1994 when we had 2 Congressional Districts, the First Congressional District was held by a Democrat for 46 years, compared to 4 years by a Republican. The Second District tilted Republican – 38 years to 12 years for Democrats. Overall, statewide, Democrats had the edge 58 years to 42 years. Was there “one party” dominance? No. While tilting Democratic, you can easily use the word “competitive.”

So, if the Apportionment Commission is looking for new Congressional District boundaries that give some consideration to “competitiveness,” they need to look at the boundaries suggested by the Democratic members of the Commission, all of which include competitiveness. I particularly like Map 11 with one competitive district and one highly Republican. All the Republican maps create two absolutely Republican districts. Not a hint of competitiveness, which is Montana’s history. In fact, one could argue that all the maps presented by the Republican members of the Commission are non-competitive and likely violate the first goal adopted by the commission that “no plan may be drawn to unduly favor a political party.”

History is a good teacher, if we are willing to listen. History tells us that Montana is a competitive state between Democrats and Republicans and the Montana Districting and Apportionment Commission would do well to factor that competitiveness into its decision-making and select Plan 11.

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