

In New Jersey, Redistricting Helped Most Incumbents Win Big

Often a swing state, New Jersey is now divided into congressional districts that are even more purely red or blue than before.



By Tracey Tully

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New Jersey has often prided itself on being a swing state, a place where voters were willing to hopscotch between parties, swapping Democrats for Republicans, and vice versa, from one election to the next.

But Tuesday's election made clear just how deftly the new congressional district map had exploited the national partisan divide, and, in the process, marginalized the state's historically centrist core.

Every congressional race in New Jersey except two — and likely just one, by the time all mail ballots are counted in the Fifth Congressional District — was won by double-digit margins. That's because the new map created some districts that were safer than ever for Democrats and some that were safer than ever for Republicans.

Two years ago, Representative Jeff Van Drew, a Republican from the southern Jersey Shore, won by less than six percentage points as he defended his seat against a former teacher who had married into the Kennedy political dynasty. This year, he dispatched a strong but underfunded Democratic opponent by 24 points.

Representative Mikie Sherrill, a so-called blue-dog Democrat, won by seven percentage points in 2020. This year, that gap grew to 17.

Often, when districts are so gerrymandered for one party or the other, the real losers are constituents, said John Froomjian, the executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

"It gives these legislators, these congressmen and women, no real reason to worry about the center," Professor Froomjian said. "And even less reason to listen to the opposite party."

In New Jersey, just a single district was drawn in such a way to hurt the incumbent. The Seventh Congressional District, now represented by Tom Malinowski, a Democrat, was rejiggered to include more Republican-leaning communities. Speaking to supporters at an election night party early Wednesday, Mr. Malinowski, who lost re-election, expressed blunt scorn for last year's redistricting process that left him stranded.

New Jersey's blue seats got bluer. And red seats got redder.

"Is it good for democracy?" Mr. Malinowski said in an interview after conceding his race Wednesday morning to the Republican challenger, Tom Kean Jr.

"No."

Mr. Malinowski stressed that he supported Democrats' willingness to use partisan gerrymandering at least as well as Republicans, who have used it to their advantage.

"I'm not arguing for unilateral disarmament," he said. "But the country would be better off if there were more highly contestable districts like mine in red states — and in blue states."

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The Associated Press called the race for Mr. Kean, who was ahead by about 4.6 percentage points, Wednesday evening, a lead Mr. Malinowski said was likely to narrow as additional mail ballots were counted.

New Jersey uses a bipartisan redistricting commission to redraw its congressional map every 10 years to reflect population changes in the census. Last year, it turned to a tiebreaker, appointed by the courts, for a final ruling. The tiebreaker chose a map that was sculpted by the Democrats and also offered the state's two seated Republican congressmen easier pathways to re-election.

During the 2018 midterm election, held during former President Donald J. Trump's term, Democrats in New Jersey flipped four seats that had been held by Republicans, temporarily leaving the state with a single Republican member of Congress.

In January, the partisan split in the House is expected to be nine Democrats and three Republicans, with two Democratic senators.

One of the Republicans to lose his seat in 2018 was Leonard Lance, whom Mr. Malinowski beat to win a first term in Washington.

Mr. Lance, who was elected five times in the swing district, said last year's redistricting process, which he believed was skewed in the Democrats' favor, has now baked in a bias that, statewide, has robbed Republicans of an equitable voice in Washington.

"I am critical of the final map," he said, "because I do not think it takes into consideration the views of the people of New Jersey as a whole."

Professor Froomjian said the issue largely transcended party.

"This incentive of pushing everyone into safe districts and into their comfort zone is bad for democracy," he said.

Mr. Van Drew, a former Democratic state lawmaker, joined the Republican Party in 2019 after pledging "undying support" for Mr. Trump, who then came to his district for a large rally.

His Democratic opponent on Tuesday, Tim Alexander, a civil rights lawyer, lost big — a "shellacking," he called it.

He said he entered the race only after being convinced it was winnable. And he said he was unwilling to blame the results on the new shape of the district alone.

“The tribalism and the divide in Washington is gross. It’s destructive,” he said.

But he said turnout was abysmal in counties where he needed to perform well.

“It really boiled down to voter turnout,” he said, adding, “I’m the candidate. The failure is mine. I’m not looking for anybody to blame.”

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