The Missing Middle: Why Median-Voter Theory Can't Save Democrats from Singing the Boll-Weevil Blues

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Racial redistricting decimated the southern congressional districts once represented by centrist Democrats. Electoral maps drawn in the 1990s instead helped polarize the South's congressional delegation into a mixture of minority Democrats and right-wing Republicans, creating a more favorable environment for conservative legislation. The median-voter approach offered by Ken Shotts misses this phenomenon, primarily because neither his statistical model nor his formal model incorporates the sharp rightward shift in the House median that followed the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress. As a result, his models completely discount gains made by hard-right Republicans at the expense of moderate Democrats.

The American electoral system of winner-take-all districts downplays minority interests because voting majorities generally receive a disproportionate share of legislative seats. Numerous public policy solutions are available to lawmakers wishing to compensate for the system's majoritarian tendency. In the instance of racial and ethnic minorities, the preferred policy has been racial redistricting, the intentional creation of electoral districts in which minority groups can elect their candidates of choice.

Empirical evidence strongly suggests that creative map making undermines the African-American policy interests it is supposed to promote.[1] Scholars pursue varying routes to this conclusion, but our own publications outline the following rough indictment against racial redistricting's policy effectiveness:

1. African Americans (as well as non-Cuban Latinos) tend to support candidates who are liberal Democrats. Stripping them out of adjacent districts to create

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[1] Like Shotts, we restrict the discussion to roll-call votes in the U.S. House. We recognize that racial redistricting may enhance minority representation in other venues or in other ways (Voss 1999).

a majority-black stronghold should aid conservative Republicans in sur-rounding areas (Lublin 1997a, 1997b; Lublin and Voss 2000b).

2. Creative map makers sometimes draw electoral unit borders that minimize the impact of racial redistricting—for example, by pulling the minorities from districts that are already Republican or by drawing lines that protect Democratic incumbents (Lublin 1997a; Lublin and Voss 1998). However, such idiosyncratic opportunities will not appear systematically enough to alter the conservative, Republican tendency of the policy (Lublin and Voss 1998, 2000b; Voss and Lublin 2001). Black voters are too dispersed geographically, particularly in the South, to allow much flexibility in electoral maps—especially because the U.S. Supreme Court has shown a distaste for convoluted district borders. And Republican districts usually contain few black voters (Lublin 1997b).

3. White voting behavior also undercuts the effectiveness of racial redistricting. If whites exhibited a conservative backlash against minority populations in their neighborhoods, electoral units, or counties, then racial redistricting would not undermine minority preferences. Pulling black voters out of a district would increase the probability that whites remaining behind would support liberal Democrats (Lublin and Voss 2000b). But whites do not embrace conservatism as minorities become more numerous (Voss 1996, 2001; Voss and Lublin 2001; Voss and Miller 2001). Democratic mapmakers generally cannot increase their party's pool of white voters at the same time that they protect or expand the election of minorities.

4. In part because white Democrats and white liberals appear most frequently near minority populations, the effect of shifting around white and minority voters is not linear. Nor does the strongest effect appear where ethnic groups reach majority status. Rather, a sharp break occurs somewhere around 40% black; representatives usually are much more liberal in electoral units above that mark than they are below it (Lublin 1997a). The probability of a Democratic victory changes sharply at an even lower minority density (Lublin and Voss 2000b). Redistricting to create majority-black districts packs many more liberal Democrats into a district than is necessary to assure either a Democratic or a liberal victory.

5. The end result? The 1990s round of racial redistricting cost the Democratic Party a net 11 seats by the 104th Congress (Lublin and Voss 2000a) as well as seats in every southern state legislature, and it probably cost the Democrats control of two or three legislative chambers in the South (Lublin and Voss 2000b). As a public policy, racial redistricting hampers the issue representation of black voters.

Reality vs. the Formal Model

Ken Shotts contradicts this "perverse effects" argument. He offers a tempting fantasy to activists and policy makers, a promise that they may have their cake

and eat it, too. Isolating high numbers of minority voters in a few electoral units and leaving them with little voice elsewhere in the electorate is harmless, he assures them. No tradeoffs are necessary, at least in conservative states, when promoting minority representation. Rather, according to his glowing endorsement, packing minority voters shifts legislatures in a *liberal* direction.

The tidy fashion in which Shotts explains away conventional wisdom on racial redistricting may make his study seem too good to be true. It is. The formal model Shotts sketches does not recognize either the constraints or the opportunities faced by actual mapmakers. For example, he assumes that white voters in a state are evenly distributed and, aside from random variation, that all are the same—which is the basis of his conclusion that conservative states *only* elect conservative candidates unless minorities have their own preserves. Real voting behavior does not work this way. Even states that are ideologically distinct will feature significant geographical variation in white voting behavior, which is known to the local experts.

The South's Democratic mapmakers once exhibited a highly self-interested ability to use this contextual knowledge. They balanced white and black Democrats into diverse electoral units that encouraged biracial coalitions. They divided up conservative voters so that they were unlikely to define the median in most districts.[2] They counted on the advantages of incumbency and built districts to protect their sitting members of Congress. However, the 1990s push for majority-minority districts forcibly reoriented mapping priorities. Creating new minority districts, as well as protecting those that had suffered population loss, often required uniting the populations of numerous small cities and carving heavily minority precincts out of several other legislative districts. The voters left behind were the South's most Republican and they dominated the new surrounding districts.

Yet partisanship plays no role in Shotts' analysis. Shotts assumes that the balance of Republicans and Democrats does not matter, despite the increasing party polarization that numerous scholars have observed in Congress. He also ignores variation in ideology. What matters is who appears in the middle, nothing more, nothing less. Someone who falls to the left of the median is a "liberal," someone to the right a "conservative," and that is all Shotts wants to know. We suspect few scholars embrace this reductionist model of congressional behavior. Congress divides its membership and structures its decision making in many ways; getting legislation past these numerous hurdles requires far more than simple majority support.

Of course, we understand that a model necessarily simplifies the real world. Nor do we have sufficient space here to trace the impact of particular modeling assumptions. But Shotts systematically neglects much of what really takes place

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[2] Contrary to Shotts, savvy political leaders know much more about the individual geographical areas in their domain than simply the racial makeup. We have heard instances of legislators demanding specific precincts, let alone whole towns, because of who happened to live there.

in the states as they struggle to enhance legislative diversity. We do not doubt that the formal model he presents would apply to a world in which voters varied randomly across their states, mapmakers knew nothing about that variation, party affiliation did nothing to constrain elite or mass political behavior, race was the sole criterion determining the shape of electoral maps, and voters outside the South changed their preferences only in convenient ways. That world does not exist, though, which is why his model contradicts what specialists know.

Formal models usually come accompanied by the assumption that political actors behave rationally. People know their own interests and act to promote those interests within the bounds of the knowledge and resources available to them. If so, the activist community has pronounced its verdict on the costs of racial redistricting. Republicans fight hard to pack minorities into majority-minority districts; Democrats fight hard against them. Even many minority activists have abandoned strong claims for majority-black districts, contenting themselves with more varied electorates in which minority voters can exercise substantial influence. This should have been a warning to Shotts that something was wrong. It seems ironic that a formal modeler has so little faith in the wisdom or rationality of self-interested practitioners.

Reality vs. the Statistical Model

If the formal model Shotts presents is excessively simple, the statistical model he offers to defend it strays even more from what really happens after racial redistricting. The specification and measurement decisions partly mimic the formal model's false assumptions. Party appears nowhere (except, strangely, as a proxy for ideology). Contextual variation within states plays no role. Indeed, Shotts tosses out a potentially rich data source, aggregating individual-level behavior to create less informative state figures and eliminating most of the variation in legislator ideology.

Perhaps most troubling, given that Shotts wishes to work within an excessively parsimonious median-voter model of Congress, is that he does not grapple directly with the House's sharp shift rightward when the GOP gained 58 seats.[3] That historic event showed how vulnerable the House median is to national partisan tides. The broader electoral context determines not just the median itself, but also how dramatically it can swing in a direction unfavorable to minority interests. The median carries talismanic status for Shotts, yet he allows it to float around unobserved in his statistical analysis. The national partisan disposition also swings around loosely and invisibly. So much information is lost, ultimately, that the statistical model has created its own rosy conclusions.

The best way to illustrate how Shotts misinterprets his data is to describe what really happened and then consider how his statistical model (mis)characterizes

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[3] Shotts does mention Republican growth, but only to separate it conceptually from the effects of redistricting. His argument on that score is unpersuasive.

that reality. Racial redistricting decimated centrist southerners in Congress, the "boll-weevil Democrats" (review, for example, his first figure). This missing center polarized Congress.[4] It represented a conscious choice by policy makers, a decision that racial and ethnic divisions in society would be mediated within legislative chambers rather than through ballot-box coalitions. Some of the region's moderates would have lost regardless of racial redistricting, of course, simply because white southerners shifted their allegiance toward the Republican Party in 1994.[5] However, 10 southern seats switched to the GOP because of close contests in which minority voters who had been packed into adjacent districts would have made up the difference (Lublin and Voss 2000a).

For just about every Democratic district altered to ensure election of a liberal minority representative, another was handed to the GOP. As Table 1 shows, these new Republicans were very conservative. Even the most conservative district before redistricting (North Carolina 2) returned a NOMINATE score of .06; afterward, the most liberal district (Florida 22) featured a much more conservative .33. The shift within individual districts was even sharper, averaging .54 in the conservative direction coming out of a Congress whose NOMINATE scores had a standard deviation of only .38.

The combined result of voter realignment and racial redistricting was to shift the South's congressional delegation sharply rightward relative to the rest of the country. Before redistricting, the South's median House member was only slightly more conservative (−.06) than the nation's as a whole (−.12). By 1996, the South deviated by twice as much (.35 vs. .22) because the moderates were gone. They were not available after 1994 to help Democrats recapture the House or to pull the House median back toward the center. Rather, between the 104th and 105th Congress, the Democratic party picked up 8 seats, leaving it only 11 seats away from congressional control, yet the House median did not budge.

What effect would the decision to replace two moderate Democrats with one liberal, minority Democrat and one right-wing Republican have on the House median, the statistic to which Shotts ascribes so much importance and around which he builds his dependent variable? That would depend upon how the rest of the nation happened to vote. If the overall House were liberal, then replacing moderates with conservatives would make no difference, but replacing them with

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[4] The standard deviation of House NOMINATE scores increased over the period, but the biggest jumps appeared in the two years when racial redistricting affected the political system: 1992 and 1994. Nor would an ideological shift among voters necessarily explain this result, since a simple move in ideology that was constant across districts would not have changed the relative position of each member. Rather, the middle disappeared because, contrary to Shotts, redistricting took from moderates the minority voters who had once anchored them in place. The House was more susceptible to partisan change.

[5] It is worth noting, though, that voting behavior can respond to district borders (Lublin and Voss 1998, 2000a). Also, judging from state legislative data that contained more variation than congressional data, the partisan shift was not constant. It did not appear in the sort of minority-influence districts that redistricting depleted (Lublin and Voss 2000b).

TABLE 1

Districts Won or Lost by Democrats Due to Racial Redistricting

	Percent Black		Percent Latino		Margin		Democrat's Nominate		Republican's Nominate		Nominate Change
	1990	1992	1990	1992	Votes	Percent					
Districts Lost by Democrats in 1992											
Alabama 2	32	24	0	1	3,571	1	Wallace Jr.	−.098	Everett	.440	.538
Alabama 6	37	9	0	1	20,537	7	Erdreich	−.030	Bachus	.460	.490
Florida 4	28	6	2	3	32,352	14	Hair	−.040	Fowler	.370	.410
Florida 22	26	3	7	13	36,775	15	Margolis	−.211	Shaw	.325	.536
Georgia 1	32	23	2	2	28,124	16	Christmas	−.103	Kingston	.440	.543
Georgia 3	35	18	2	1	19,836	10	Ray	.040	Collins	.520	.480
Georgia 4	25	12	3	3	2,976	2	Steinberg	−.103	Linder	.490	.593
Districts Lost by Democrats in 1994											
Illinois 5	10	1	42	13	12,263	10	Rostenkowski	−.280	Flanagan	.310	.590
New Jersey 8	15	13	20	18	1,833	1	Klein	−.280	Martini	.170	.450
North Carolina 2	40	22	0	1	17,085	12	Moore	.060	Funderburk	.540	.480
North Carolina 3	26	21	2	2	7,451	4	Lancaster	−.090	Jones	.560	.650
North Carolina 4	19	20	1	1	1,215	1	Price	−.265	Heineman	.390	.655
District Won by Democrats in 1992											
Virginia 3	*	65	*	1	96,652	58	Scott	−.410	Jenkins	.366	−.776

Note: Each percentage point of the *vote* that switches parties actually alters the *vote margin* by two percentage points. Nominate score is first dimension score. For all Republicans, the score reported is the score for that Congress. For Democrats who lost election, the score reported is their score from the previous Congress. For Florida 4 and North Carolina 2, the score reported for the Democrat was for the Democrat who served in the previous Congress (Bennett in Florida 4, Valentine in North Carolina 2). For Alabama 2, Florida 22, Georgia 1, and Georgia 4, the score reported is the average for white Democrats from that state in that Congress. For Virginia 3, the score for the Republican is the average for White Republicans in the state. Democrats later recovered two of the North Carolina seats lost in 1994.

liberals would move the median leftward. If the House overall were conservative, then replacing moderates with liberals would make no difference, but replacing them with conservatives would move the median rightward. The only theoretically general claim is that, wherever the median happens to be, racial redistricting would pump up how much it varied over time.

Shotts can defend racial redistricting only because he ignores the contingent nature of the House median. The coefficient on his variable of interest, a mere .47, means that liberal minorities replaced people to the right of the median voter less than half the time.[6] Yet even this mixed result is deceptive. Shotts gets it only because Democrats enjoyed a strong majority in Congress until 1994. Moderate Democrats helped define the median and even trailed in a conservative direction to define the buffer between that median and the Republican party. A Virginia Democrat helped define the median in the 100th Congress; 5 more southerners appeared in the next 11 slots just to the right. The 101st included 2 southern Democrats at the median and 9 of the 11 members just to the right of it. Southern Democrats continued to define the middle in the next two sessions of Congress. Given where the median happened to fall, Shotts can count moderate Democrats as indistinguishable from hard-right Republicans and claim that redistricting liberalized the House. But the "conservatives" getting replaced are not really all that conservative, and neither the South nor the House shows much of a leftward shift in 1992.

And then the Republicans take the House in 1994. Would the sacrificed Democrats have been "conservatives" in the new House? Not at all. Of the 10 southern districts sacrificed to the GOP because they lost minority voters—mostly "conservative" in the Democratic Congress—not one would have appeared to the right of the *new* House median (unless the member had changed roll-call voting behavior to an extraordinary extent). We can consider the effect of shifting the new House median left 10 people, as though those moderates had never been sacrificed. A 10-person shift leftward drops the NOMINATE median by .05 for the 104th Congress (which is relatively large since a 10-person shift would have dropped the score by only .02 before the 1990s redistricting round). The effect would have been even stronger in the 105th; a 10-person move leftward shifts the median from a Republican, Leach of Iowa (.21), to a conservative Democrat, Goode of Virginia (.13). It would be going too far to say that racial redistricting prevented Democrats from controlling Congress. But it is clear that racial redistricting gave the House median more latitude to move rightward; the median legislator would be more liberal with a handful of those missing moderates still in place.

Redistricting also clearly buffered the conservative House leadership. The 10 Republicans who replaced moderate Democrats because of racial redistricting

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[6] The other half of the time, liberal minorities replaced people who were already "liberal," which means the policy failed to liberalize the House as often as it succeeded even in the terms Shotts defends.

have turned out to be extremely conservative. Under the Shotts model, of course, their extreme conservatism makes no difference; his approach treats them as indistinguishable from 10 middle-of-the-road representatives. In reality, however, a legislative process that demands more than simple majorities will produce more conservative results. Just to take one obvious example, a presidential veto requires only one-third of the House to uphold. Of the 10 southern Republicans helped into the 104th Congress by redistricting, 8 of them numbered among the 142 most conservative House members, raising the difficulties faced by a center-left coalition trying to create a supermajority.

Simply subdividing the Shotts sample confirms the critical importance of where the median happens to appear. If one analyzes only the two post-1994 Congresses included in his data set, to isolate the effect of interstate variation in majority-minority districts, the coefficient on the key variable (fraction majority-minority) shifts from positive to negative.[7] Liberals appeared less often in states with more majority-minority districts. In other words, racial redistricting interacted with Republican gains to hurt minority representation—even with a dependent variable based on the median legislator.

Lumping African Americans and Latinos together, meanwhile, obscures key differences among minority groups (cf. Lublin 1999). Not only were Latinos less overwhelmingly Democratic than African Americans,[8] they voted at relatively low rates compared to blacks or whites, so Latino majority districts were often "rotten boroughs" in which relatively few voters elected a liberal Democratic House member. Majority Latino districts simply did not hurt the Democrats much; they should not be used to disguise the costs of creating majority-black districts. If one considers African-American and non-Cuban Latino districts separately, states with a larger fraction of black-majority districts contributed an especially conservative pressure on the House median.[9]

In sum, racial redistricting not only failed to mitigate the 1994 shift toward conservative congressional candidates, it amplified the trend by replacing numerous centrist Democrats with right-wing Republicans. Shotts misses this common-sense result because he anchors his study to a chamber median (itself influenced by redistricting), while ignoring both its movement and its potential variance. All his naïve model supports is a counterfactual: if voters nationally had shifted leftward rather than rightward in 1994, then racial redistricting would have assured that the South's boll-weevil Democrats were not around to temper the trend. This counterfactual may matter in future elections, but it is not much consolation to blacks currently represented by the congressional minority. It hardly serves as a ringing endorsement of the public policy.

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[7] The new coefficient is $-.68$ with a standard error of .73 ($p = .37$).

[8] Indeed, Cuban Americans are overwhelmingly Republican.

[9] For the two post-1994 Congresses examined by Shotts, the coefficient on black-majority districts is $-.75$ with a standard error of .75 ($p = .34$); the coefficient on fraction non-Cuban Latino districts is 1.13 with a standard error of 1.30 ($p = .40$). Note that nowhere in our previous work have we claimed that Latino districts harmed the Democrats or reduced the number of legislative liberals.

Replicating the Lublin Analysis

Roll-call votes differ in their ideological content. As in Lublin (1997a, 118), but using actual 1990 and 1992 data, Figure 1 shows the projected change in the share of representatives who support conservative legislation in states after they create black majority districts (the Y axis). The figure distinguishes voting behavior according to where the legislation falls on the NOMINATE issue space (the X axis) and according to whether Democrats gerrymandered the electoral maps. Shotts notes that the observed House median in the years 1990–1992 was around −.1—a number that, in Lublin's figure, does not shift voting rightward under either form of gerrymander. Shotts is wrong, though, when he interprets the early 1990s results to support his conclusions.

First, Shotts confuses the median member of the House with the median location of successful legislation. The complex nature of congressional organization generally requires legislators to seek a majority greater than one vote when proposing laws. During Democratic House control, the ideological location of cherished liberal legislation, such as the National Voter Registration Act ("Motor Voter"), usually fell rightward of the median to gain enough support to win passage. As Figure 1 shows, if one moves much at all to the right from a NOMINATE score of −.1, the liberal advantage quickly dissipates and turns into deficit.

Second, one should make the obvious but critical observation that the median in the more recent 104th and 105th Congresses was around .22. At this point,

FIGURE 1

Percent Change in Number of Conservative Votes at Varying Cut Points
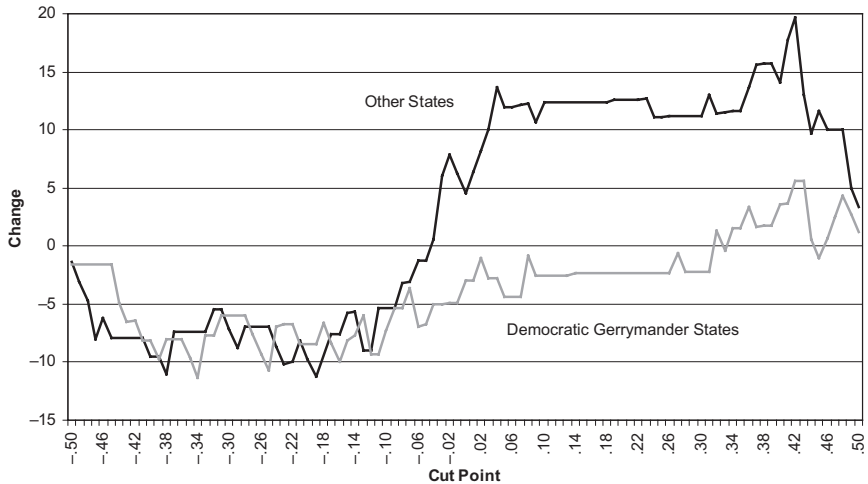
support for liberal legislation in states without Democratic gerrymanders declines—a loss for which the Democratic gerrymander states do not compensate. The results would be *even more pessimistic* with a graph created from roll-call data starting in 1994. Moreover, this analysis does not take into account that every Democratic gerrymander was invalidated by the courts or that the North Carolina gerrymander failed spectacularly. Republicans can propose fairly conservative legislation and still remain well to the left of the new House median. Only hopeless liberal causes gained significant new support after racial redistricting, at the cost of making realistic center-left legislation notably harder to pass.

Conclusion

Ken Shotts prods a literature that is often descriptive and polemical to think more formally and more theoretically about redistricting as a public policy device. To that extent, his work is a welcome corrective. However, careful readers will reject his guarantee that corralling African-American voters into their own districts enhances black representation. What really happened during the 1990s redistricting round was quite the reverse: black interests suffered as a result of this public policy. Shotts reaches sanguine conclusions only because he never digs deeply enough into his statistics to figure out which legislators disappeared from Congress as a result of racial redistricting and which legislators replaced them; nor does he compare his assumptions with what really took place within individual southern states. The 1994 Republican capture of the House appears nowhere in either his statistical or formal models—a critical oversight since the absence of moderate southern Democrats amplified the resulting ideological shift. The closer one looks at Shotts' vision of cost-free racial redistricting, the clearer it becomes that he has found nothing but a mirage.

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