

Gerrymandering

The Civil War Over Public Policy

by Jim Tarbell

Civil war rages over who makes public policy in the United States. From climate change, inequality and social issues to corporate and imperial power, it is a war with many fronts and few morals. Our electoral process that selects the policy makers is the central battleground. Which candidates run for office; how elections are financed; who votes; who counts the votes; and whose votes count the most determine the result

Voter suppression, vote rigging and gerrymandering make up the major weapons on this battlefield and they are used without moral restraint. Wealthy, white, land-owning males have used all these techniques to maintain their power and oppress the poor, non-white citizens of this country for over 200 years. One of their original strategies was to group voters into particular districts to favor the election of their preferred policy makers. The specific strategy is to put a bare majority of your voters in as many districts as possible and squeeze the opposing voters into as few districts as possible.

Elbridge Gerry, scion of a wealthy merchant family, collaborated in this technique in 1812 as the Governor of Massachusetts when he signed oddly shaped voter precincts into law, including one that looked like a salamander, thus spawning the term gerrymander. Many politicians have used that strategy to win elections throughout our national history. But a decade ago, the Republican Party took it to a new level. Using new, computer mapping technology, they undertook a national gerrymandering project that took control of most of our country's statehouses and the US House of Representatives.

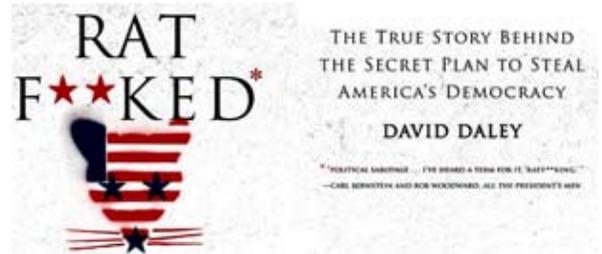
The Republican State Leadership Committee (RSLC) headed up this project that became known as REDMAP, the Redistricting Majority Project. They succeeded in taking over the legislatures in 20 states in 2010 and then used their control of the redistricting process in those states to create enough Republican-majority Congressional districts nationwide so that they could control Congress. They called it a "firewall" and predicted it would guarantee their control of Congress for a decade.

That prediction became a reality in 2012 when they won a 33-seat majority in the House of Representatives even though Democratic candidates collected 1.7 million more votes nationally. Ben Ginsburg, the perennial Republican legal goon, called it "Project Ratfuck." That title is due to the dubious strategy

undertaken in the most competitive districts where, two weeks before the election, thousand of voters began receiving daily political mailers with fallacious information about Democratic incumbents that doomed their re-election and helped deliver the 33-seat majority to the Republicans in 2013.

Rachel Maddow on MSNBC has pointed out that, beyond taking control of Congress, the Republican-dominated state legislatures could start changing electoral rules around how Electoral College votes could be redistributed to favor the Republican presidential candidate. She calculated that if they had done this for the 2012 election that Mitt Romney would have won the presidency with 280 Electoral College votes to 258 for Obama, even though Obama won five million more popular votes.

Citizens have to bring this battlefield of our public policy civil war to an end. The solution is to create non-partisan, redistricting committees to redraw the congressional districts each decade after the census results are known. Arizona, California, New Jersey, Washington, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana and Iowa already have non-partisan redistricting processes for creating congressional districts. All other states should join them and leave the outcome of the civil war up to the voters.



From the cover of David Daley's book on how corporations and the Republican State Leadership Committee colluded to perpetuate elite rule.

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Corporate Financing of REDMAP

In 2010, "In the aftermath of *Citizens United*, the Republican State Leadership Committee (RSLC) raised nearly \$30 million. (Altria, the parent company of Philip Morris, contributed \$1.4 million; Reynolds American, owner of R. J. Reynolds and the American Snuff Company, kicked in another \$1.3 million.) Many of the contributions—roughly eighteen million dollars worth—were received just weeks before Election Day," according to Elizabeth Kolbert in the *New Yorker*. The *New York Times* pointed out that financing REDMAP was a "nationwide quest for cash... that would provide checks from dozens of out-of-state corporations, among them Exxon Mobil, Google, Facebook and Altria... Rich Robinson, the head of the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, a watchdog group, said he believed the transactions were designed in part to allow Michigan businesses, which could not give directly ... to exchange their contributions for money from out-of-state donors, who could legally donate. 'It appeared to be a currency swap to obfuscate the actual sources of money,' Mr. Robinson said. 'I had never seen anything like this before, particularly at this scale'."

According to Ari Berman writing in *The Nation*, The RSLC attracted six and seven-figure donations from the likes of the US Chamber of Commerce, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, the Karl Rove-founded American Crossroads, and the American Justice Partnership, a conservative legal group that has been a partner of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a corporate-based conservative advocacy group."