

What Caused the 2013 Government Shutdown? Redistricting



By [Brian Frydenborg](#) October 17, 2013

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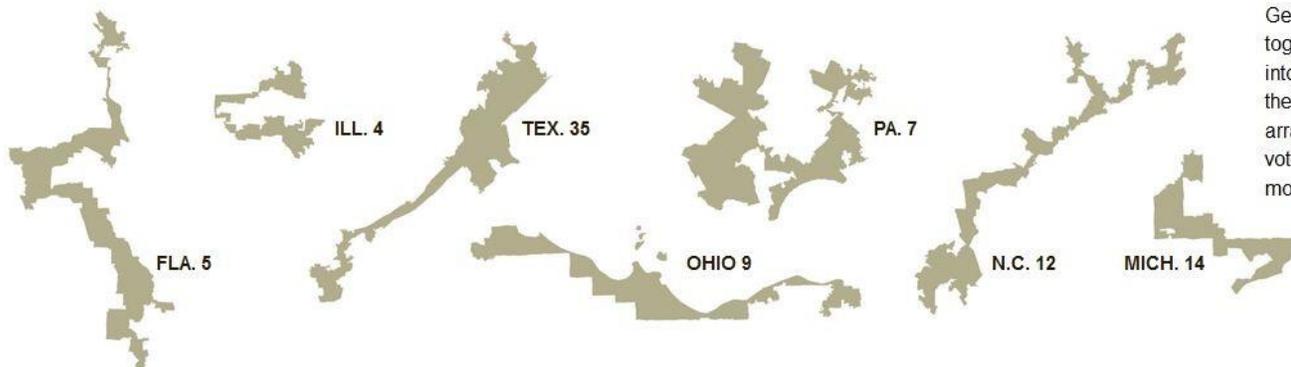
Image Credit: [Daily Show/Comedy Central](#)

Why has the House of Representatives become [more dysfunctional](#) than the Senate over this past year? The shift, now at its most obvious with the

current self-inflicted shutdown and debt ceiling crisis, is because of the political insanity of the Republican Tea Party South and the increase in partisanship related to Congressional redistricting. A few years ago, the dominant [talk](#) of our government's [dysfunction](#) centered on [how](#) the Senate was [broken](#), largely due to [record levels](#) of partisanship and the [unprecedented](#), serial [abuse](#) of the [filibuster](#) by [Republicans](#). But now, those days seem almost quaint.

Firstly, let's look at the modern South, [heart](#) of the Tea Party and Obama-hate. The South today inspires no region [but itself](#) and has more in common with itself and less in common with the entire rest of the country than any other region. Its extreme politics even [work against](#) the socio-economic interests of Southerners themselves. Reconstruction in the South after the Civil War saw our government [fail miserably](#) — a grand, noble national agenda [sabotaged](#) and derailed by Southern extremists with disastrous [long-term](#) consequences. As a [new generation](#) of Southern politicians [rises to power](#) with a not dissimilar aim of stymieing any effort at getting the South on track with the rest of the U.S., we can only watch with horror as the South not only continues to retard its own progress, but also that of the whole nation.

Exhibit A: The House, with its Tea Party-inflicted disaster on America's body politic that is our shutdown/debt ceiling crisis. [Less than half](#) of Republicans approve of their own party's actions, Americans [overall](#) see [Republicans](#) as [more extreme](#) and blame [them](#) way [more](#) than Democrats, and Republicans and the [Tea Party](#) have hit [all-time](#) (or near all-time) favorability [lows](#). Along with the Senate, the House has grown increasingly partisan and polarized in recent years, breaking all [previous records](#).



Gerrymandering strings together one side's voters into a few districts, reducing their influence. It also arranges the other side's voters to get closer but more numerous wins.

All the well-intentioned moves to increase legislative transparency have actually accelerated this, too, as [getting rid](#) of earmarks destroyed both a [key method](#) of [deal-making](#) and a key component of party leaders' [leverage](#) over their caucuses. Opening the doors of [smoke-filled backrooms](#) has also meant that battles are increasingly theatrical instead of practical, fought not privately in person, but publicly across airwaves. Theoretically, this would be a good thing, but now comes the impact of redistricting.

In recent years, many districts have become increasingly non-diverse [partisan echo chambers](#). Republicans were successful at manipulating [redistricting](#) — adjusting the boundaries of districts [every 10 years](#) in response to population changes tracked by the census — to [favor themselves](#). Yet because many of these Congressional seats are so homogeneous and safe from the opposing party, those who win them don't depend on favors from party leaders. Such a decentralized party has much more room for [extremists](#), beholden only to their [mutant districts](#) no matter how [polarizing or unpopular](#) their behavior is [outside of them](#).

Thus, the Tea Party is not currently just a grassroots movement but a solid caucus in Congress. And since they came to power often by challenging [relatively "moderate"](#) when compared to Tea-Party traditional Republicans, they can drag the rest of their party with them with [threats](#) of

being “[primaried](#)” — losing a [long-held seat](#) to a [more extreme](#) challenger — hanging over the heads non-Tea-Partiers. Unlike Senators, who still need to win a variety of constituencies, House candidates can focus on [narrow](#) demographics. These people were [not elected](#) to [compromise](#), and they’re [staying true](#) to their [promises](#).

LOPSIDED RESULTS

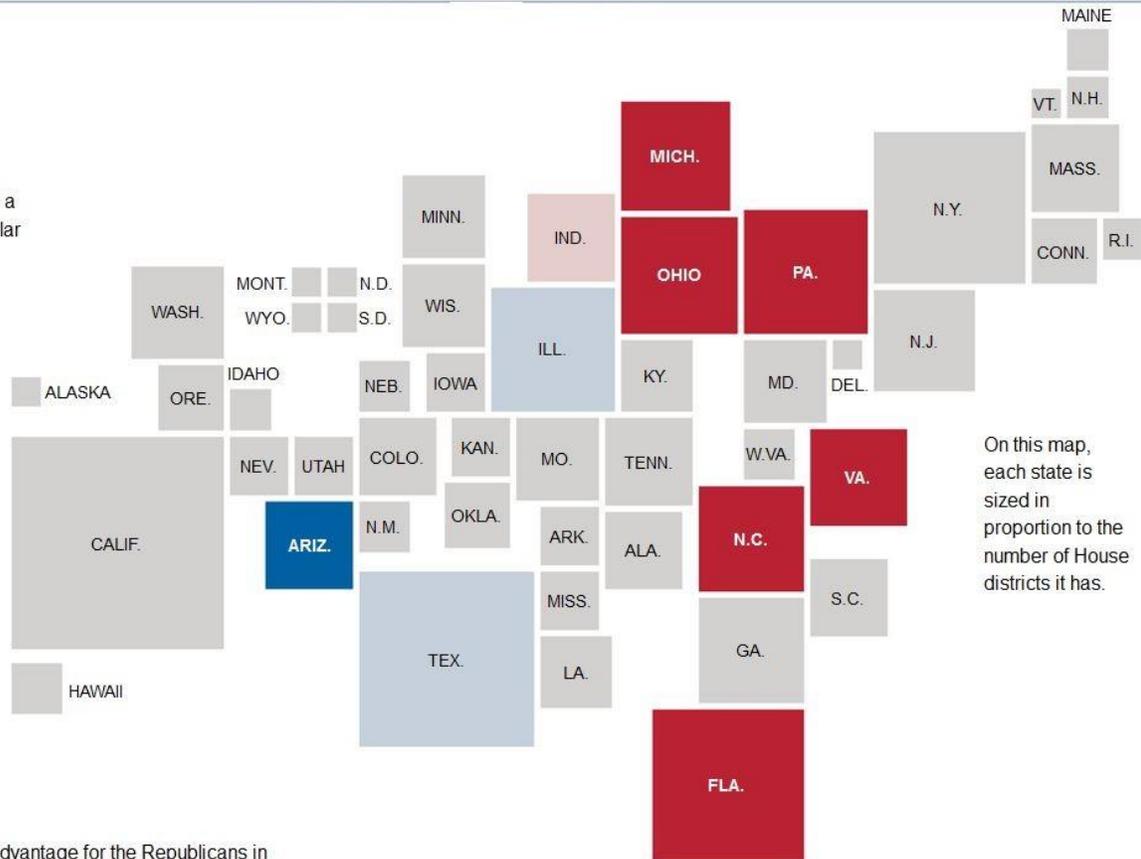
In the 2012 election, seven states had a severe imbalance between their popular vote and the party makeup of their House delegations; three others had moderate imbalances.

SEVERE IMBALANCE IN FAVOR OF:

- REPUBLICANS
- DEMOCRATS

MODERATE IMBALANCE IN FAVOR OF:

- REPUBLICANS
- DEMOCRATS



On this map, each state is sized in proportion to the number of House districts it has.

THE MISMATCH

In the 10 imbalanced states, a small advantage for the Republicans in vote totals yielded a disproportionately large share of House seats.

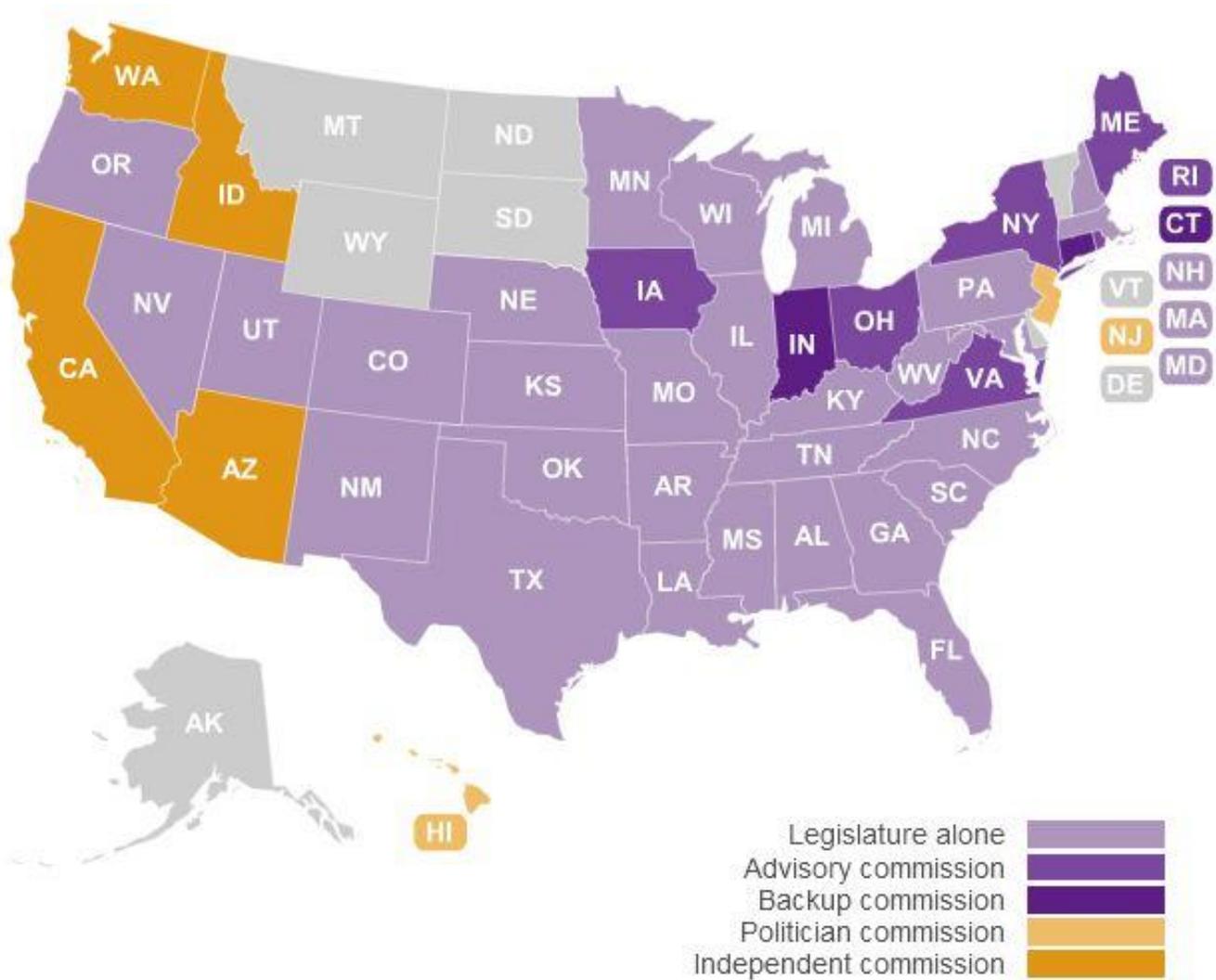
10-STATE G.O.P. VOTE ■ 7% GREATER THAN THE DEMOCRATIC VOTE

10-STATE G.O.P. DELEGATION ■ 76% MORE SEATS THAN DEMOCRATS (109 R, 62 D)

Furthermore, this redistricting has packed Republicans into homogeneous districts, while dispersing many Democrats into districts where they are not a majority but are a substantial minority. This way, instead of getting a Congressional delegation that is proportional to the balance between the parties for a state, often Republicans have a moderate-to-severe disproportionate advantage. In the 10 states with such imbalances, seven favored Republicans; across all 10, an average of a 7% vote in favor of

Republicans, translated into a [76% advantage](#) for them in the number of Congressmen sent to the House. In this way, [1.4 million more votes](#) were cast for Democrats in the 2012 House elections, and yet Republicans ended up with a 234-201 advantage in House seats.

The results include not only our current crisis but also [the world](#) questioning the [functionality](#) of our [entire political system](#).



Redistricting Institutions

Different people are in charge of drawing the district lines in different states.

Is there hope? *Maybe.* [California](#) is one of a small group of states that have independent or bipartisan [redistricting commissions](#). These states don't have an imbalance like those 10 and their delegations accurately reflect how their people voted. The only hope to restore some sense to the House would be for people to demand that their state legislators [surrender control](#) of redistricting to commissions (like California and [most democracies](#)), making this a central issue in state-level elections.

But being in the citizens' hands, I won't be holding my breath.