

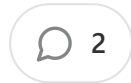
THE BELLWETHER

Don't be a dummy about 2026 gerrymandering

Some on the left are wish-casting that Republicans' newly-drawn congressional maps states like Texas and Missouri will turn into "dummymanders"



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What's on tap



Today's newsletter features:

Opening Bell: Must-read items about elections and politics.

The Frontrunner: Democrats are hoping that some of the new Republican-draw congressional maps will backfire for the GOP and produce gains for Democrats. That's unlikely.

Around the Corner: Upcoming elections we're tracking at DDHQ.

Editor's note: This is the last DDHQ newsletter of 2025. We will be back in action on Jan. 5, 2026. Have a great holiday season and a happy New Year!



Opening Bell

Must-read items about elections and politics.

- Vice President JD Vance continues to consolidate support on the right for his certain presidential run in 2028. **Last week, Erika Kirk, the wife of the late Charlie Kirk, [endorsed Vance for president](#).** The move signals Vance's likely support from the influential Turning Point USA organization, which has established itself as a key player in conservative politics.
- It turns out Republican Rep. Elise Stefanik [won't be running for anything in 2026](#). **On Friday, she announced her withdrawal from New York's race for governor** and said she would not seek reelection in her House district. Having lost out on becoming ambassador to the United Nations, Stefanik had telegraphed a New York gubernatorial bid for months before entering the race formally in November. But in the wake of Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman's [gubernatorial bid](#) and no word about an endorsement from President Donald Trump, Stefanik decided to leave politics — at least for right now. (Trump [endorsed Blakeman](#) after Stefanik's exit.)

- **Please subscribe [to our Polling Memo!](#)** The weekly writeup, which will now out on Tuesdays, features key trends based on [DDHQ's polling averages](#). If you're already a subscriber to The Bellwether, you can receive the memo in your inbox by [clicking on your account settings](#) and opt to receive the Poll Memo (see the below).

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The Frontrunner



Don't be a dummy about 2026 gerrymandering

Quick summary:

- *Republicans have redrawn four congressional maps so far in 2025-26, and some Democrats are hoping that the changes might backfire on the GOP. However, 10 of the seats in question are sufficiently Republican-leaning and consistent in voting for Republican candidates that Democrats are unlikely to actually make substantive gains in those states.*
- *Moreover, most of the new red-leaning seats drawn by the GOP will more likely not go for Republicans. On the whole, many of these new, formerly Democratic seats have a partisan lean of around R+10 or more, and the opposition party (Democrats this year) only won about 1 in 10 such seats in midterms from 2002 to 2022. All in all, the best Democrats can hope for is to limit their losses in these states.*

Amid the ongoing [mid-decade redistricting fight](#), some have expressed hope that the new map might backfire on the side that reconfigured a state's congressional lines. In particular, Democrats [have latched](#) on to [the idea](#) that Republican remaps in Texas, Ohio, Missouri, and North Carolina could prove to be "[dummymanders](#)" —

gerrymandered maps [that produce unexpected losses](#) for the party that drew the the argument goes, because Republican mapmakers shifted GOP votes from solid Republican seats into targeted Democratic-held ones, this could make some lighter red seats more vulnerable. This especially could be plausible in 2026, when the party out of power (Democrats) could make major midterm gains.

This is true...in theory. However, partisan cartographers have access to reams of electoral data to help determine how much they can weaken a favorable district without greatly increasing the risk of losing that seat. They can “stress test” what electoral conditions might threaten control by looking at the worst-case scenario for their party. And in our highly-polarized political era, gerrymanders can prove more impregnable because of how hard it is for a party to flip a district that leans even somewhat toward the other party.

Looking through the four new Republican-drawn maps, Democrats will likely fail to convert any into dummymanders. Just five of 51 Republican-controlled seats in the states lean fewer than 10 points to the right of the country. Additionally, the new maps made eight Democratic-held seats R+10 or redder. Recent midterms suggest the presidential party can hope to flip perhaps 1 in 10 seats that lean 10 to 20 points from it in a midterm. So, even if Democrats manage to capture a GOP-held seat on two, Republicans stand a good chance of making net gains on each map. Further, a review of recent electoral results on these maps show most lighter-red Republican seats sit in a “bend, but don’t break” zone.

Not that many House races will be truly competitive

First, let’s look at recent midterms to consider what sort of seats Democrats could realistically flip in 2026 (or Republicans, for that matter). Without considering incumbency, I calculated the lean of every House seat based on the last presidential election and which party carried it in midterms from 2006 through 2022. This more easily allows for comparisons over time by rating how left- or right-leaning a seat is relative to the presidential vote in the district compared with the nation as a whole. For instance, a seat that Donald Trump carried by 10 percentage points in 2020 would have had

partisan lean of about R+6 in the 2022 midterms because Joe Biden led the national popular vote by nearly 4.5 points.

Now, it's true that the party outside the White House is more likely to flip seats than the party in the White House. However, that edge quickly runs up against the limits of partisanship. The seats won by the opposition party that lean toward the president's party mostly lean somewhere between 0 and 5 points toward the party in the White House. The opposition party won 53% of seats that leaned 0 to 5 points toward the president's party between 2006 and 2022, a 37% of those that leaned 5 to 10 points in that direction. Beyond that though the opposition party won a hair more than 10% of the seats that leaned 10 to 20 points toward the president's party, and almost no seats beyond that.

Seats with a 10+ lean mostly go for favored party

Share of seats won by president's or opposition party in midterms by how much seats leaned toward each party based on the previous presidential election, 2006-2022

	President's party	Opposition party
Pres. 30+	99%	
Pres. 25-30	98%	
Pres. 20-25	98%	
Pres. 15-20	89%	11%
Pres. 10-15	88%	12%
Pres. 5-10	63%	37%
Pres. 0-5	47%	53%
Opp. 0-5	26%	74%
Opp. 5-10	10%	90%
Opp. 10-15	7%	93%
Opp. 15-20	98%	
Opp. 20-25	99%	
Opp. 25-30	98%	
Opp. 30+	100%	

The partisan lean of a seat is based on how much more Democratic or Republican the seat voted than the national popular vote for president. The data is reconfigured to represent the lean based on the president's and opposition parties. The president's party is the party that held the White House in a midterm, while the opposition party is the other party.

Source: Gary Jacobson, *The Downballot*, Almanac of American Politics

Among seats that leaned somewhat toward the opposition party, that side retained most of them. Overall, the president's party won 24% of seats that leaned 0 to 5 points toward the opposition party, 10% of those that leaned 5 to 10 points in that direction, and 7% of those that leaned 10 to 15 points. Anything more advantageous for the opposition party almost never went for the president's party.

To be sure, an especially strong incumbent can help a party hold onto an unfavorable district. And the specific conditions of every election can provide unexpected opportunities for the underdog side, such as a major scandal affecting the incumbent party's candidate.

This helps explain some of the more unusual cases, like the opposition party winning a seat that leaned more than 20 points toward the president's party. The last such case came in 2018, when longtime Democratic Rep. Collin Peterson won reelection in Minnesota's 7th District, an R+33 seat. However, partisan realities finally came for [Blue Dog Democrat](#) in 2020 when [he lost](#) to now-Rep. Michelle Fischbach, his GC opponent. In 2006, Democrat Nick Lampson [won Texas's 22nd District](#), an R+27 seat which was vacant after the resignation of scandal-ridden former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. Republicans [were unable to replace DeLay](#) on the ballot, so Lampson won in part because he only faced Republican write-in opponents. In 2020, facing a Republican who actually was on the ballot, [Lampson met defeat](#).

Outside of these cases, though, the chart above confirms that most of the action in the 2026 midterms — as with most elections these days — takes place between the 10-year partisan lean lines. And if we applied the share of seats won in each partisan lean category from 2006 to 2022 to the conditions of the 2026 map, Democrats would win a fairly snappy majority. Multiplying the percentages won by the presidential and opposition party by the seats in each partisan lean category, Democrats would end up with 226 seats, compared to the GOP's 209 — which would amount to a 11-seat gain for Democrats in the 2026 midterms.

Dems would gain small edge if 2026 followed the 2006 to 2022 trend

Hypothetical seats won by each party in each partisan lean category if the 2026 results matched the results won by the president and opposition parties from 2006-22

	Democratic (226)	Republican (209)
Rep 30+	61 60	
Rep 25-30	24 24	
Rep 20-25	35 34	
Rep 15-20	34 4 30	
Rep 10-15	34 4 30	
Rep 5-10	20 7 13	
Rep 0-5	14 7 7	
Dem 0-5	22 16	6
Dem 5-10	32 29	3
Dem 10-15	21 19	
Dem 15-20	19 19	
Dem 20-25	23 23	
Dem 25-30	15 15	
Dem 30+	81 81	

The partisan lean of a seat is based on how much more Democratic or Republican the seat voted than the national popular vote for president. This analysis accounts for newly-drawn maps in California, Texas, Ohio, North Carolina, Missouri, and Utah.

Source: The Downballot, Dave's Redistricting App

Remember, this is a hypothetical based on recent electoral trends and the current congressional map. It certainly may not play out this way next November! Moreo would be easy to nitpick with some of these numbers, like the idea that Democrats might win an R+30 or so seat when they currently hold zero such seats. On the flip side, it's hard to imagine Republicans — the White House party — winning three that have a D+5 to D+10 lean in when they only currently hold one such seat. As this is when the particulars of each race will matter. But the broad takeaway is that going to be difficult for either party to win much beyond the 10 yard lines, though Democrats' recent electoral performances — and past midterm results — suggest could make the occasional breakthrough in slightly redder seats.

The new GOP-drawn maps

This brings us to the seat-by-seat situation in the four states that have new Republican-drawn congressional maps — and why those new lines are unlikely to turn into dummy mandates. Based on the broad trends in the 2006-to-2022 period, I focus on the seats that could be at least remotely competitive in 2026. This includes a look at the electoral results in statewide elections from 2016 to 2024 in each seat, which in most cases shows consistent Republican dominance in most of the seats the GOP holds or is targeting.

Texas

Texas Republicans drew their [state's new congressional lines](#) with the goal of flipping five Democratic-held seats. They did this by further reddening two already GOP-leaning seats in South Texas and reconfiguring the lines in the Dallas-Forth Worth, Houston, and Austin-San Antonio regions to convert three safely Democratic seats to red turf. Three of the five targeted seats have a partisan lean of about R+9, while the other two are R+16 or redder. Considering Republicans already control 25 seats in Texas, these lines make it very likely that they will gain at least some ground in 2026.

The potentially interesting seats in Texas

Texas's new congressional districts, the incumbent running in each, and the district's partisan lean based on the 2024 presidential election result

New CD	Incumbent	2024 Lean
—	8 Dem. seats at least:	D+15
34	Vicente Gonzalez (D)	R+8.6
28	Henry Cuellar (D)	R+8.9
35	OPEN (New)	R+9.0
23	Tony Gonzales (R)	R+13.3
24	Beth Van Duyne (R)	R+14.6
32	OPEN (New)	R+16.2
15	Monica De La Cruz (R)	R+16.4
9	OPEN (New)	R+18.4
38	OPEN (Hunt, R)	R+19.4
27	Michael Cloud (R)	R+19.7
—	20 Rep. seats at least:	R+20

Source: Dave's Redistricting App

Now, recent statewide election results paint a rosier picture for Democrats in South Texas, but also show why it will be challenging for them to turn this map into a dummysmunder. Across 14 selected statewide elections from 2016 to 2024, Repul carried the 28th and 34th districts defended by Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar and Vicente Gonzalez on fewer than half of all occasions. In particular, Cuellar's seat had a strong Democratic track record, only flipping into the GOP column in the 2016 presidential and U.S. Senate contests.

South Texas is the main Lone Star question

Texas's potentially competitive 2026 seats with the party expected the win based on the mapmakers' designs, that party's worst margin in recent statewide races, and the share of selected statewide elec (2016-24) in which it carried the seat

New CD	Incumbent	Win	Expected party	
			Worst marg.	ca
28	Henry Cuellar (D)	R	D+36	
34	Vicente Gonzalez (D)	R	D+13	
15	Monica De La Cruz (R)	R	D+14	
9	OPEN (New)	R	D+1	
35	OPEN (New)	R	R+0.3	
23	Tony Gonzales (R)	R	R+4	
24	Beth Van Duyne (R)	R	R+11	
32	OPEN (New)	R	R+9	
38	OPEN (Hunt, R)	R	R+16	
27	Michael Cloud (R)	R	R+16	

14 statewide elections included in analysis: President (2016, 2020, 2024); U.S. Senate (2018, 2020, 2024); Governor (2018, 2022); Lt. Governor (2018, 2022); Attorney General (2018, 2022); Treasurer (2022); Comptroller (2018).

Source: Dave's Redistricting App

Moreover, if South Texas were to revert toward Democrats to some extent, it might open an opportunity in the 15th District, defended by Republican Rep. Monica D Cruz. Another heavily Latino seat, the district voted for Trump in 2020 and 2024, did support many Democratic contenders in the 2018 midterm blue wave. The or

other seat that broke for the Democrats in some statewide races was the new 9th District around Houston, but an R+18 seat will be extremely difficult for Democrats to flip.

Beyond those four, Republicans carried every seat, including the new 35th District in every statewide race we looked at between 2016 and 2024. That suggests that the GOP will likely be able to rely on the consistent partisan roots of most of these seats to keep them in Republican hands or allow the party to capture them, as intended by the new map. For Democrats to actually make net gains will require them to pull off [inside straight](#) — and then some.

Ohio

Ohio is distinct among the four states because the GOP redraw involved something of a compromise. Set to redistrict because of a 2018 constitutional amendment, the Republican-led state government [offered Democrats a deal](#) rather than pursue a maximally aggressive approach. The arrangement left Democratic Rep. Marcy Kaptur in an even tougher position, as her northwest Ohio seat now has an R+9 lean, and it made Democratic Rep. Greg Landsman's Cincinnati-based seat a light shade of purple. However, the agreement gave Democratic Rep. Emilia Sykes a somewhat more favorable Akron-based seat than she currently holds.

The potentially interesting seats in Ohio

Ohio's new congressional districts, the incumbent running in each, and the district's partisan lean based on the 2024 presidential election result

New CD	Incumbent	2024 Lean
—	2 Dem. seats at least:	D+40
13	Emilia Sykes (D)	D+4.8
1	Greg Landsman (D)	R+1.1
10	Mike Turner (R)	R+6.3
15	Mike Carey (R)	R+8.5
9	Marcy Kaptur (D)	R+9.1
7	Max Miller (R)	R+9.6
8	Warren Davidson (R)	R+14.1
14	Dave Joyce (R)	R+18.9
—	5 Rep. seats at least:	R+20

Source: Dave's Redistricting App

Beyond those seats, Democrats might have reason to hope that a blue wave environment could give them a shot at some seats in Ohio. Three Republican-held seats have a partisan lean between R+6 and 10, a zone that has sometimes proved winnable for the out party in a midterm. Such an environment would almost certainly result in a Landsman victory while also likely preserving Kapture despite redder lean of her seat, somewhat akin to the South Texas Democratic incumbent

Yet a look at the recent statewide elections in Ohio illustrates the tall task facing Democrats to turn this map into a dummysmaller. Outside of the Sykes and Landsman seats, most other seats in this group have voted for a Democrat just one time going back to 2016: former Sen. Sherrod Brown in his 2018 reelection campaign.

GOP has carried 90%+ of Ohio races in most seats

Ohio's potentially competitive 2026 seats with the party expected the win based on the mapmakers' c that party's worst margin in recent statewide races, and the share of selected statewide elections (20 in which it carried the seat

New CD	Incumbent	Win	Worst marg.	Expected party
13	Emilia Sykes (D)	D	R+11	
1	Greg Landsman (D)	R	D+5	
10	Mike Turner (R)	R	D+4	
15	Mike Carey (R)	R	D+5	
9	Marcy Kaptur (D)	R	D+13	
7	Max Miller (R)	R	D+5	
14	Dave Joyce (R)	R	D+4	
8	Warren Davidson (R)	R	R+8	

14 statewide elections included in analysis: President (2016, 2020, 2024); U.S. Senate (2016, 2018, 2022, 2024); Governor (2018, 2022); Attorney General (2018, 2022); Secretary of State (2022); Auditor (2022); Treasurer (2022)

Source: Dave's Redistricting App

The 2026 cycle will offer an interesting test because Brown is running in the spec election for Ohio's other Senate seat. But in his 2024 defeat, Brown's populist app was insufficient to carry a single one of those redder seats, even after he won all them save the 8th District in 2018.

Missouri

In Missouri, Republicans [redrew the congressional map](#) to turn the formerly blue District around Kansas City into a solidly red seat (R+17). In doing this, the map "[cracked](#)" Kansas City mainly across the 4th and 5th Districts, throwing blue turf i much redder territory to neutralize its electoral sway. As a result, the new map ha three seats that are between R+17 and R+20, and three others that are R+20 or redder. The other GOP-held seat, Rep. Ann Wagner's 2nd District outside of St. L about R+10.

The potentially interesting seats in Missouri

Missouri's new congressional districts, the incumbent running in each, and the district's partisan lean in the 2024 presidential election result

New CD	Incumbent	2024 Lean
—	1 Dem. seat at least:	D+50
2	Ann Wagner (R)	R+9.9
5	Emanuel Cleaver (D)	R+16.8
3	Bob Onder (R)	R+18.5
4	Mark Alford (R)	R+19.7
—	3 Rep. seats at least:	R+20

NOTE: Opponents of Missouri's redistricting legislation are attempting to place a veto referendum on the ballot sometime in 2026 that could pause or prevent implementation of these new boundaries.

Source: Dave's Redistricting App

After the redraw, Democrats' best chance of winning a second seat in Missouri is Wagner's seat. However, the new map made her turf slightly redder than it was before. And perhaps more so than any other state, the Missouri lines look most likely to withstand most electoral environments. Republicans have carried three of them in 18 of 21 selected statewide elections since 2016, while the new 5th went for the GOP 18 of 21. The exception across all these districts was Democrat Nicole Galloway's victory in the 2018 race for state auditor, while the 5th District also narrowly voted Democratic for Senate and governor in 2016.

Missouri lines seem surest to pay off for GOP

Missouri's potentially competitive 2026 seats with the party expected the win based on the mapmake designs, that party's worst margin in recent statewide races, and the share of selected statewide elec (2016-24) in which it carried the seat

New CD	Incumbent	Win	Worst marg.	Expected party
5	Emanuel Cleaver (D)	R	D+12	
2	Ann Wagner (R)	R	D+7	
3	Bob Onder (R)	R	D+5	
4	Mark Alford (R)	R	D+2	

21 statewide elections included in analysis: President (2016, 2020, 2024); U.S. Senate (2016, 2018, 2022, 2024); Governor (2016, 2020, 2024); Lt. Governor (2016, 2020, 2024); Attorney General (2016, 2020, 2024); Secretary of State (2016, 2020, 2024); Auditor (2018, 2022)

Source: Dave's Redistricting App, state and county-level election sources

Nonetheless, Missouri does have another source of uncertainty about its new ma Earlier this month, opponents of the redistricting measure [submitted more than 300,000](#) signatures to force a referendum over the implementation of the map. S the petition effort have enough valid signatures, the state will need to hold a vot the future of the map. And if the referendum does make the ballot, it will freeze t redistricting measure until the vote happens, which has put its use in the 2026 el in doubt.

North Carolina

Lastly, we turn to North Carolina. There, the GOP-drawn redistricting plan only af the lines of two districts, the 1st and 3rd in the eastern part of the state. The map made Democratic Rep. Don Davis's 1st District notably redder, going from a seat leaned about R+2 in 2024 to about R+10 under the new lines. Davis plans to see reelection despite the change, but is clearly in a tougher spot. Still, the exchange territory between the 1st and 3rd districts resulted in the 3rd becoming less red (R+12 now), which has led Democrats to wonder if they might defeat Republican Greg Murphy.

However, Republicans have good reason to think that both seats will go red in 2026. Based on the vote in 21 statewide elections since 2016, the two districts have voted Republican more than 80% of the time. One of the exceptions was the 2024 gubernatorial race, when [the scandal-marred candidacy](#) of Republican Lt. Gov. M. Robinson resulted in an easy victory for Democratic Attorney General Josh Stein. This suggests that, barring an especially tarnished candidate, Republicans will be favored to add a seat to their column and unlikely to actually lose ground.

This tour of the Republican-drawn congressional maps shows how the new lines largely produced an array of red-leaning seats that will be difficult for Democrats to win in 2026. Even if the electoral environment proves to be very good for Team Blue, it would likely take the electoral equivalent to a 500-year flood to actually turn these maps into dummysanders. Too much has to go right for Democrats to hold onto or flip enough red-leaning seats to cause the maps to backfire. The best Democrats hope for is to limit their losses while working to make gains elsewhere, whether [newly Democratic-drawn map in California](#) or in the many districts in other states whose lines will not change before next November.



Around the Corner

- **January 31, 2026**
 - TX-18 Special Election Runoff
- **February 5, 2026**
 - NJ-11 Special Election Primary
- **April 16, 2026**
 - NJ-11 Special Election