OPINION // COMMENTARY

Republicans are seeking to create a durable gerrymander in Texas

Short-term tactical gains in Texas could ultimately yield a race to the bottom, where both parties engage in tit-for-tat extreme partisan gerrymanders.

By **Maxwell Palmer**, **Benjamin Schneer**, **Tyler Simko**, *For the Express-News*

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Many seats remain empty during the session in the House Chamber at the Capitol in Austin, Tuesday. A quorum was not present after most Democratic state representatives left Texas to block a vote on a Republican plan for Congressional redistricting.

What does Gov. Greg Abbott's mid-cycle redistricting mean for Texas voters?

Spurred by President Donald Trump, the Texas Legislature is redrawing the state's congressional districts, with the publicly stated goal of increasing the number of Republicans elected to Congress.

If successful — at the moment, Democrats have left the state and broken quorum — it could help the Republican Party keep control of the House of Representatives after the 2026 midterm elections.

But the move also may carry undesirable political risks for Texas Republicans. Incumbent members of Congress will have their districts sliced up, losing constituents with whom they have built relationships to other districts. Or the map may overreach or even backfire, leading some Republican incumbents to lose their seats next election.

As researchers who study elections and redistricting, we have analyzed the proposed congressional map to understand how it will affect congressional elections and representation in Texas.

First, we find that the proposed plan is extremely biased in favor of Republicans. Our estimates suggest the proposed map will probably yield Texas Republicans an additional three to five congressional seats in 2026 — an increase above and beyond the current Texas map, already estimated to be the largest gerrymander in the country.

In a fair, nonpartisan Texas map, researchers from the ALARM Project, which focuses on political inequality, estimate Democrats could expect to win around 17

seats. We find the proposed plan could lead to half as many Democratic seats as would be expected under a fair plan.

These changes come largely from manipulating voters in Democratic-leaning districts in Houston, Austin and San Antonio. The proposed plan's most significant changes make previously competitive or Democratic-leaning districts into Republican-leaning or even safe Republican territory.
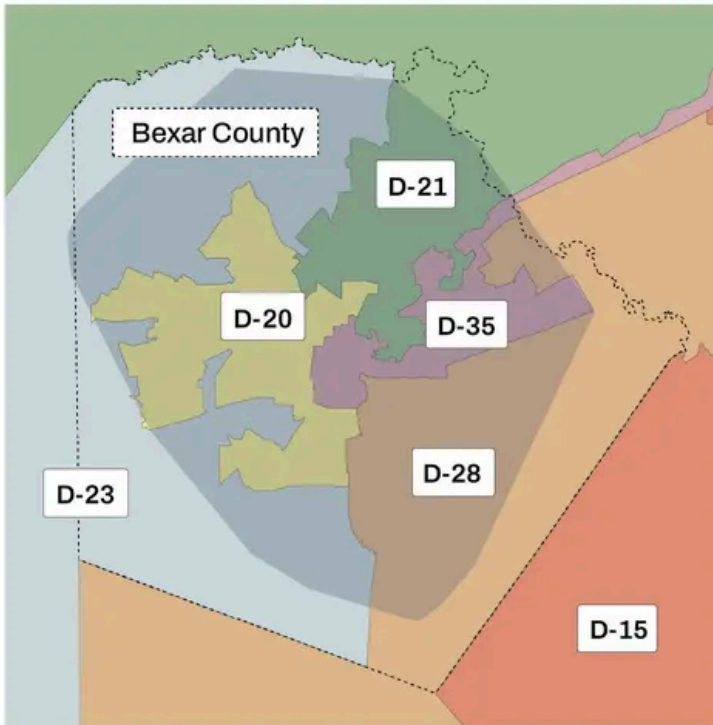
In San Antonio, Congressional District 35, represented by Democrat Greg Casar, goes from a 2026 forecast of 72% generic Democratic vote share (fourth-highest in the state) to 47% (ninth-highest in state).

Congressional District 28, represented by Henry Cuellar, despite exhibiting a slight Republican lean in statewide elections, goes from 47% forecasted generic Democratic vote share to 42%.

These changes would occur because the new District 35 would expand south to absorb San Antonio's suburbs, while the redrawn District 28 would no longer meaningfully reach into greater San Antonio, meaning that congressional representation in the city goes from five members to four.

Proposed redistricting impact on San Antonio

Current congressional district map

Proposed congressional district map
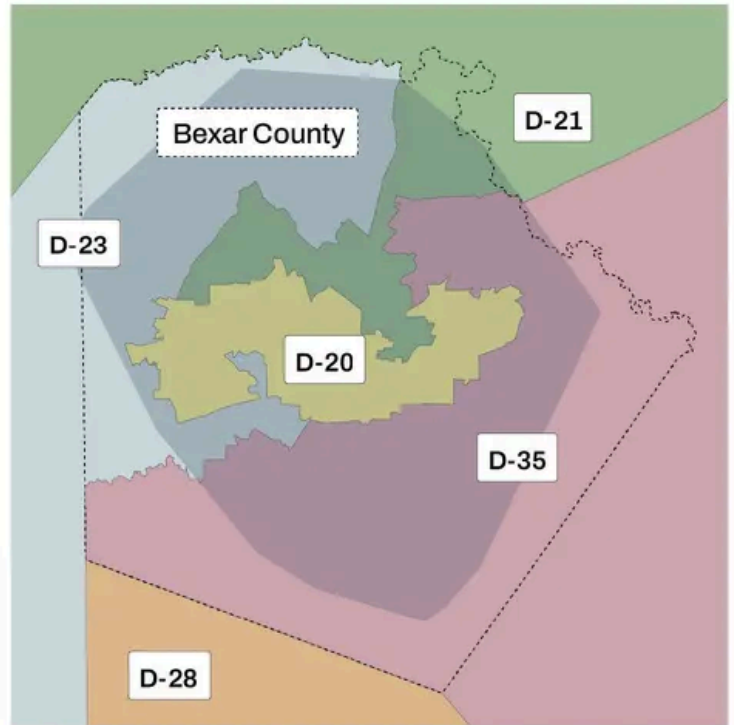
The GOP's proposed Congressional redistricting plan makes previously competitive or Democratic-leaning districts into Republican-leaning or even safe Republican territory. In San Antonio, for example, District 35 goes from a 2026 forecast of 72% generic Democratic to 47%. Republican-leaning District 28, currently represented by Henry Cuellar-D, drops from 47% forecasted generic Democratic vote share to 42%. The map below shows how District 28 no longer meaningfully reaches into greater San Antonio (the shaded area), meaning the city's representation drops from 5 seats to 4.

Courtesy Tyler Simko

Second, the plan is unresponsive to changes in voter preferences. Even if Democrats increase their statewide congressional election vote in 2026, they will still likely win fewer seats than in 2024. Only a sea-change election would yield meaningful Democratic congressional seat gains.

This map approaches what we have termed a "durable" gerrymander, meaning Republicans will retain an unfair partisan advantage across most possible changes in voters' preferences.

Overall, the immediate electoral risks for Texas Republicans may be low, but calling this special session nonetheless incurs significant costs for Texas voters. Contested, fair elections are a bedrock principle of a functioning democracy. If political parties gerrymander to eliminate the possibility of future victories for their opposition no matter the shifts in voter sentiment, this core principle is violated.

If mid-cycle redistricting becomes a national, tit-for-tat strategy with both parties engaging in extreme gerrymandering, Republicans may ultimately stand to lose more seats than they will gain. For example, research estimates that Democrats could gain up to nine seats in California if they pursue a Texas-style gerrymander.

People protest mid-decade redistricting at the Texas Capitol last month. Short-term tactical gains in Texas could ultimately yield a race to the bottom, where both parties engage in tit-for-tat extreme partisan gerrymanders.

Eric Gay/Associated Press

The great irony of this gambit is that it may finally push Democrats to abandon fair redistricting principles, which historically have ceded congressional seats and political power to the GOP. Since Democratic-leaning states have imposed greater limits on partisan gerrymandering in the past, they also have more to gain by eliminating these constraints.

While drastic changes in state constitutions are unlikely to happen by 2026, future changes such as repealing fair redistricting laws and abandoning independent commissions for the 2030s redistricting cycle would most likely produce dramatic gains in congressional seats for Democrats.

This outcome presents a mix of irony and tragedy for everyone involved. Short-term tactical gains in Texas could ultimately yield a race to the bottom, where both parties engage in tit-for-tat extreme partisan gerrymanders. The result would be not just a shift in the partisan balance of Congress but a systemic loss of responsiveness and accountability.

 Forecasting elections, and gaming out hypothetical moves and countermoves by the parties is, of course, an uncertain exercise — and none of this may come to pass — but the one certainty is that either way, American voters will lose.

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