

District protectionism: Public opinion on race, partisanship, and redistricting change

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Redistricting
Gerrymandering
Representation
Race
Partisanship
District protectionism

ABSTRACT

What do people value in redistricting? This paper presents three original survey experiments to examine public attitudes toward redistricting, including partisan gerrymandering, majority–minority districts, and traditional criteria such as compactness and contiguity. The experiments provide evidence consistent with an orientation I term ‘district protectionism’: a tendency to prefer minimal changes to existing districts – maintaining existing boundaries, compositions, and electoral configurations. Respondents value continuity alongside compactness, such that gains in compactness do not increase support when they require changes to existing boundaries. The experiments highlight divergent views on race-conscious redistricting, with notably lower levels of support for majority-Latino districts than for majority-Black districts. Although respondents broadly reject partisan gerrymandering in the abstract, they also display significant partisan asymmetries and evidence consistent with loss aversion. As reformers seek to engage more citizens with redistricting, protectionism may interact with partisan self-interest to constrain efforts to redraw boundaries, revise partisan configurations, or expand opportunities for communities of color to elect preferred representatives.

What do ordinary people want in redistricting, and how do they resolve conflicts between competing values? Redistricting debates are often framed as a struggle over how much maps should change. Reformers call for more competitive, representative, and responsive districts, while others emphasize the value of stability, continuity, and preserving existing representational relationships. Yet, despite the centrality of this tension, we know surprisingly little about how ordinary citizens think about redistricting and whether they prefer transformational change or minimal disruption.

American citizens today are more engaged than ever before in the redistricting process. Initiatives transfer the line drawing authority from state legislatures to independent commissions, expanding opportunities for public participation. More than 28 percent of congressional seats were drawn by independent redistricting commissions in the 2020 cycle, up from 17 percent in the 2010 cycle and just four percent in the 2000 cycle – with ordinary people drawing district lines in states such as Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Michigan, and Washington, and increased opportunities for public testimony and invited submissions in many legislature-led processes too. More than 30,000 ordinary people contributed to the California Citizens Redistricting Commission’s work in both the 2010 and 2020 cycles, and over 11.5 million Californians voted on the mid-cycle redistricting initiative in 2025.

Redistricting is vitally important for every citizen because it determines the shape and composition of districts that elect the people’s representatives. In the United States – unlike countries such as France, where redistricting is less frequent, or Canada, where it is largely technocratic – the redistricting process is often partisan and racialized. As computing power enables mapmakers to design electoral outcomes with increasing precision, debates over what constitutes fair representation have intensified. The redistricting conflicts of 2025–6 – including Texas’s mid-cycle gerrymander, California’s voter-endorsed response, and additional partisan gerrymanders in states such as Florida, Missouri, Virginia, and North Carolina – illustrate the stakes of map drawing for partisan and racial representation. Every cycle triggers millions of dollars worth of legal challenges alleging that maps are improperly drawn and must change (McFadden, 2021) – but this mid-cycle redistricting “arms race”, coupled with the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision invalidating a race-conscious redistricting remedy in *Louisiana v. Callais* 608 U.S. (2026), accelerated the transition to a political environment in which partisan advantage is explicitly defended as a legitimate redistricting criterion, alongside traditional criteria such as contiguity or compactness (Schneer, 2026). In opposition to these partisan gerrymanders, reformers seek to undo structural biases, enhance electoral competition, and ensure adequate representation for historically marginalized groups, goals

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2026.103101>

Received 4 November 2025; Received in revised form 21 May 2026; Accepted 26 May 2026

Available online 2 June 2026

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which also often require substantial changes to existing district maps (Burden and Snyder, 2021; Yablon, 2022; Andre et al., 2023).

Yet there are principled reasons to *limit* redistricting change. Altering district boundaries can disrupt representational ties between constituents and elected officials, increase voter confusion, and reduce political engagement (Niemi et al., 1986; McKee, 2008; Hayes and McKee, 2009; Winburn and Wagner, 2010; Bowen, 2014). Civil rights organizations defend existing majority–minority districts against changes that could dilute minority voting power. Traditional districting principles – such as preserving communities of interest, respecting jurisdictional boundaries, and protecting district cores – typically favor continuity over transformation (Piltch, 2025). In some states, mapmakers explicitly adopt minimal-change criteria, requiring that new districts resemble prior ones as closely as possible (Butler and Cain, 1991; Barabas and Jerit, 2004; Hackett, 2025, 2026). In efforts to combat partisan gerrymandering, maintaining geographical stability could be viewed as a legitimate and desirable objective, or as a ‘natural’ good in its own right (Monmonier, 2001).

These competing considerations raise a fundamental question: do ordinary citizens prefer redistricting that transforms existing maps – or preserves them? Existing research suggests that citizens value procedural fairness while also responding to partisan and group interests. This paper argues that citizens often exhibit what I term *district protectionism*: a preference for stability, continuity, and minimal change in redistricting. District protectionism is not reducible to a general status quo bias, but instead captures specific preferences over the spatial, partisan, racial, and incumbency characteristics of districts.

To examine these preferences, I field three original survey experiments to test how citizens weigh competing values in redistricting. The first evaluates support for a broad set of redistricting values, the second examines preferences over concrete map features, and the third investigates the psychological foundations of responses to change versus continuity. Across these experiments, I find evidence that voters tend to favor preserving existing district arrangements, even when doing so conflicts with other widely endorsed principles. At the same time, these preferences are conditioned by partisan self-interest: respondents penalize districting outcomes that advantage the opposing party, but do not consistently reward outcomes that advantage their own party relative to the status quo. This asymmetry indicates that preferences for continuity and existing arrangements persist within partisan groups and interact with, rather than simply collapse into, partisan motivations.

The findings suggest that increased public participation in redistricting may not necessarily transform outcomes. Instead, citizen input may sustain, rather than alter, existing district configurations, reflecting a broader preference for continuity in the electoral landscape. By theorizing and experimentally testing district protectionism, this paper contributes to our understanding of how ordinary people evaluate democratic institutions and the trade-offs inherent in redistricting.

1. Public attitudes to redistricting

District protectionism is a preference for minimal-change redistricting: the belief that new maps should be as similar as possible to old ones. Minimal-change approaches may reflect a desire to minimize the uncertainty inherent in redistricting (Yoshinaka and Murphy, 2011). Insights from prospect theory show that individuals exhibit loss aversion and endowment effects, overvaluing existing arrangements and fearing disruption to established relationships (Tversky and Kahneman, 1979; Levy, 1992). These orientations imply that voters may be reluctant to alter incumbent-constituent ties or familiar district configurations. More broadly, reference dependence, diminishing sensitivity, and probability weighting suggest that individuals evaluate redistricting outcomes relative to the status quo, perceive large changes as disproportionately costly, and overweight even small risks of losing valued representation (Barberis, 2013; Mercer, 2005).

Transforming district maps could impose informational and participatory costs. Changes to district maps may disrupt the

constituent-representative link, increase confusion, and raise the costs of political engagement (Curiel and Steelman, 2018; Hood and McKee, 2010; Hayes and McKee, 2009). These effects are particularly pronounced for complex, low-information domains such as redistricting (Fougere et al., 2010), where multiple conflicting criteria must be balanced against one another (Hayes, 2024). Citizen commissioners and less experienced actors typically struggle to translate formal rules into map-drawing decisions (Cain and Hopkins, 2002). Consistent with these considerations, voters express general opposition to gerrymandering and mid-cycle redistricting (Kruzel, 2021; Greenfield and Booker, 2025), yet their preferences are not always internally consistent: they oppose partisan manipulation in the abstract while favoring co-partisan representation in practice (McKee et al., 2022; Williamson and Justwan, 2025). Voters are inclined to support the status quo in the presence of individual-specific uncertainty (Fernandez and Rodrik, 1991).

Generally, we might expect voters to favor minimizing redistricting change *as an end in itself*, and not merely as a means to an end, due to a reluctance to disrupt existing representational relationships and a psychological aversion to uncertainty. Voters may prefer minimal change approaches because they are enmeshed in representational relationships that persist through time. They may value the disproportionate legislative effectiveness of long-serving representatives (Taylor, 2019) (although polls indicate that an overwhelming majority of adults favor *limiting* the number of terms that members of Congress are allowed to serve (Nadeem, 2023)). These psychological orientations suggest a baseline tendency toward stability in redistricting preferences. However, this tendency alone does not fully account for how citizens evaluate redistricting choices. Preferences over redistricting are not formed in a vacuum: they are shaped by competing normative commitments and instrumental considerations that can either reinforce or counteract baseline orientations.

Much redistricting research focuses on how voters evaluate redistricting institutions rather than district features themselves. Individuals who feel well-represented by their member of Congress – or who live in states with an independent redistricting commission – are more satisfied with their state’s redistricting procedures and less likely to support changes (McLaughlin et al., 2024). There is conflicting evidence about whether independent redistricting commissions cause voters to view the redistricting process as fair (Panagopoulos, 2013; Williamson and Justwan, 2025). Confidence in the redistricting process appears to depend not only on procedures but also on state legislative professionalism and party control of state government (VanderMolen and Milyo, 2016).

A central tension in this literature concerns the meaning of fairness. Procedural understandings of fairness focus on the process by which maps are drawn and the level and quality of public input, while outcome-based understandings focus on the goals of redistricting. Many reformers seek ‘fair maps’, but we do not know what voters understand by ‘fairness’. Minimizing changes to existing maps might protect an equitable arrangement or entrench an unjust one. Experimental research demonstrates that elites can influence what the public considers “fair” using inapplicable principles or appealing to negative partisanship (McCarthy, 2023). Citizens follow elite cues and prioritize rules that benefit their own party in elections (Lenz, 2012).

Citizens are motivated by a combination of good governance principles and group-based interests, but these goals may be achieved through either minimizing changes to existing maps, or transforming them. Surveys indicate that voters are just as instrumental as elites in their approach to redistricting: statewide and district-level ‘representational losers’ vote for non-partisan redistricting reforms in ballot issue contests, whereas electoral winners oppose such reforms (Tolbert et al., 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2024). Some experimental research finds that people prefer to share their district with co-partisans rather than preserving communities or attending to local jurisdictional boundaries (Winburn et al., 2017); yet other experiments find that most citizens prefer fair electoral institutions at the expense of partisan interest when the choice is made explicit (McCarthy, 2022). Surveys from one state – South

Carolina – indicate that partisanship drives opinion on redistricting, although Blacks have distinct and circumspect views of the redistricting process (Cooper et al., 2024). Blacks place great weight upon the value of co-racial descriptive representation (Tate, 2004).

Attitudes toward comprehensive electoral reform show large majorities favor modernizing and updating election laws, yet these attitudes are still colored by partisanship (Coll et al., 2022). Partisan voters seek electoral reforms that advantage their own side, even when they believe these reforms to be unfair (Biggers, 2019; Biggers and Bowler, 2022). Priming fairness considerations in experimental settings reduces, but does not eliminate, the effect of partisan self-interest in voters' evaluations (Biggers and Bowler, 2023). Yet other experiments show that actors hold and pursue electoral reform objectives that are motivated by core values and not immediately partisan in nature (Virgin, 2023). Polls from 2017 and 2019 show over 70 percent of voters from both major parties support measures to limit partisan gerrymandering, even if it means fewer seats for their own party (Campaign Legal Center, 2019; Groft, 2017). In 2018, voters in Ohio approved a constitutional amendment banning partisan gerrymandering with 75 percent of the vote. In 2025, more than 300,000 voters in Missouri signed in favor of a veto referendum on the state's mid-cycle partisan gerrymander (Fisher, 2025). Polling during 2025 showed widespread opposition to mid-cycle redistricting (Greenfield and Booker, 2025). Republicans in Indiana's Senate who opposed a mid-cycle gerrymander that year cited "overwhelming feedback" from constituents as a key factor in their decision (Davies and Smith, 2025).

Under polarized conditions, we might expect support for partisan gerrymandering to grow, but there is significant opposition to aggressive, rather than defensive, redistricting changes. In polls fielded during the mid-cycle redistricting wars of 2025, a bare majority of both Republicans (52%) and Democrats (54%) said they would support re-drawing congressional districts to "gain a midterm advantage" for their party. Yet more people supported efforts simply to maintain the partisan balance of power overall than to make additional gains. Much larger numbers of Democrats (68%) and even Republicans (57%) said they would support a redraw to "neutralize the other party" (Doherty, 2025). This asymmetry is consistent with loss aversion and reinforces the expectation that preventing partisan loss is a more powerful incentive than partisan gain (McLaughlin, 2025).

The literature yields conflicting expectations about public preferences in redistricting. Citizens appear to balance competing considerations of fairness and partisan interest, but existing research does not establish whether they generally favor transforming existing district maps or preserving them. Much existing empirical work focuses on institutions, procedures, or abstract principles, leaving open the question of how individuals evaluate concrete trade-offs between change and continuity in district design. The concept of district protectionism provides a way to synthesize these insights.

2. District protectionism

The concatenation of attitudes I term 'district protectionism' can be contrasted with *district reformism*: the belief that maps should be overhauled during – and perhaps even between – redistricting cycles, whether to correct partisan biases or vote dilution in existing maps; disrupt incumbents and bolster electoral competition; or pursue gerrymanders that advantage particular racial or partisan groups. Pursuing district protectionism, by contrast, involves limiting change to the spatial, partisan, racial, or incumbent characteristics of a district. These components are analytically distinct: individual protectionists may subscribe to all, some, or just one of these forms of protectionism.

Spatial protectionism is the desire to protect existing district geography: its size, shape, boundaries, and position in space. Space matters in politics because territorially-defined districts typically contain one or more specific communities of interest that are geographically and historically rooted in particular places. Judges, politicians, advocates and

the public utilize the 'eyeball test' – i.e., they scan the visual qualities of the district – in making initial determinations about possible gerrymanders, drawing upon a common intuitive understanding of compactness (Kaufman et al., 2021; Duchin, 2018; Engstrom, 2002). Redistricting is 'one area in which appearances do matter' (O'Connor, 1993, p. 647). Voters often rely on visible heuristics – such as district shapes – to assess the fairness of maps (Williamson and Justwan, 2025). Spatial protectionists seek to preserve the spatial appearance of districts from cycle to cycle.

Partisan protectionism, by contrast, concerns the electoral composition of the district rather than its spatial qualities. This form of protectionism seeks to minimize changes to a district's existing partisan balance, a goal which might be secured either by spatial protectionism – keeping an incumbent's district geographically intact – or, occasionally, by spatial reformism – scooping in additional clusters of partisans from distant areas to counterbalance partisan shifts within the district since the last redistricting cycle (Desposato and Petrocik, 2003; Cain, 1985). As partisan polarization deepens, voters' partisan and racial identities are increasingly intertwined such that partisan protectionism may also involve *racial protectionism*: the desire to preserve a district's existing racial balance. However, these concepts are analytically distinct. In practice, racial and partisan protectionism are less closely related in many non-southern districts where levels of racially polarized voting are lower (Kuriwaki et al., 2023).

Although spatial, racial, and partisan protectionism often involve shielding incumbent legislators from electoral risk, the concept of *incumbent protectionism* is also distinct. The unit of protection is not a party, place, or group identity, but a person: the individual currently representing the district (Henderson et al., 2018; Silverberg, 1995). Incumbent protectionism is not reducible to partisan protectionism because partisans might protect long-serving incumbents even against their party's broader interests (for instance, as occurred in California's 2000 cycle) (Merl, 2002), and because greater safety typically follows from higher electoral inefficiency (Cain, 1985). Voters generally like their incumbents; surveys show that only around a quarter of voters say that most members of Congress deserve re-election, but majorities say that their *own* representative deserves re-election (Jones, 2024).

Citizens may prefer minimal change because they attach value to particular features of existing districts – such as their spatial configuration, partisan balance, or group representation. District protectionism specifies *which dimensions of the status quo* individuals seek to preserve, rather than simply positing a generalized resistance to change. Its forms are analytically separable – an individual might support spatial stability but favor partisan reform, or support changes to racial balance but resist incumbent displacement. Moreover, voters might have different preferences for how their own district should be drawn versus how districts should be drawn statewide. A voter will likely know more about his or her own district than about the state as a whole, which might mean additional impetus to keep the district intact to preserve valuable incumbent relationships, or reduced uncertainty about the likely impact of redistricting (and thus support for change).

I focus on the spatial, racial, partisan and incumbent forms of protectionism because they capture distinct voter logics: districts preserve local geography, maintain a particular partisan balance and racial composition, and retain representatives with whom voters are familiar. Each type of protectionism is salient in contemporary political conflict and corresponds to core, manipulable attributes of districts, which mapmakers consider when drawing lines. Other goals – such as preserving communities of interest or political subdivisions – might also be seen as forms of protectionism, but these aims are not clearly distinct from racial or spatial protectionism so they are more naturally understood as sub-types of these core categories. In some states, the desire to limit gerrymandering, promote 'fairness', or support one's own racial or partisan group might require a commitment to minimizing changes to existing districts; in other states, these same goals may best be promoted by transforming existing maps. In California in 2025, voters approved a ballot initiative to

change the state's district map to counterbalance a Texas gerrymander. Hence voters used reformist means within their state to pursue a protectionist end overall: maintaining the same partisan balance nationwide as before.

Whether grounded in a desire for representational continuity or psychological aversion to uncertainty, district protectionism reflects a deep resistance to disruption in the electoral landscape. Do citizens seek to preserve existing district lines, or are they open to, or even eager for, change? In the following section, I examine how these tendencies manifest in experimental settings, allowing us to disentangle status quo preservation from partisan gain-seeking.

3. Three redistricting experiments

I conducted three experiments on a 7448-person sample of U.S. residents through the polling firm Survation, including an oversample of Black and Latino respondents.¹ The design was pre-registered (including experimental hypotheses, script, questions, and analysis plan) on July 3, 2024, and the experiments were administered between July 24 and August 8, 2024. The three experiments were part of the same bespoke survey, so all respondents took all three experiments. To avoid priming, the order of the *Proposals* and *Preservation* experiments was randomized, while *Principles* always appeared last. In this paper I present the experiments in reverse order – *Principles*, *Proposals*, and *Preservation*, from the most abstract task to the most concrete.²

The experiments necessarily abstract from the information-rich environments that characterize some high-profile redistricting cycles. This design choice allows identification of baseline evaluative tendencies absent elite cueing or state-specific partisan narratives. In real-world contexts, media coverage and political messaging may amplify these preferences. But since attribute manipulations mirror realistic map changes, scenarios, and principles discussed in debates over redistricting, the findings likely capture underlying orientations that political actors can activate, reinforce, or contest during actual reform debates. The three pre-registered experiments test the fundamentals of district protectionism: the relative importance of status quo preferences in the abstract and in concrete cases, and the psychological bases of protectionism. Each experiment probes different aspects of the relationship between redistricting change and citizen attitudes.

The *Principles* experiment compares the abstract redistricting principles that mapmakers often weigh against one another – such as racial fairness, partisanship, and incumbency – and examines which values people prioritize when forced to choose between them. In redistricting, trade-offs are absolutely necessary (Niemi and Deegan, 1978). Establishing one form of 'fairness' typically means sacrificing other standards of fairness because redistricting principles are often in conflict (McKee et al., 2022). Courts themselves have endorsed conflicting principles across cases: for instance, race-conscious vs. color-blind redistricting, or fostering competition vs. protecting incumbents. Voters hate partisan gerrymandering but prefer co-partisan representation (McKee et al., 2022). There are complexities and contradictions within the minimal-change orientation toward redistricting too. These values may align – for example, when minimizing spatial change preserves an incumbent and a district's racial or partisan composition – or come into conflict. *Principles* distinguishes between values that are intrinsically opposed (e.g., favoring one party vs. neutrality) and those that may or may not conflict in practice (e.g., independent commissions vs. citizen input).

The *Proposals* experiment moves from abstract values to concrete map features, asking respondents to evaluate redistricting plans that vary in shape, racial composition, and partisan balance – similar to

visuals used in public consultations. It probes spatial protectionism (bizarre vs. compact shapes, and whether they change), racial protectionism (whether the white population share shifts), incumbent protectionism (varying district competitiveness), and partisan protectionism (shifts favoring Democrats or Republicans vs. no change).

The *Preservation* experiment explores the psychology behind preferences for continuity in redistricting through a redistricting vignette inspired by *Allen v. Milligan* (2023), where the Supreme Court rejected Alabama's minimal-change map. While protectionism can stem from political or legal motivations, *Preservation* isolates a deeper status quo bias. By holding map features constant except for the degree of change, the experiment shows that respondents tend to view low-change processes more favorably – even when the outcomes remain the same.

The next section outlines hypotheses, design details, and results. Collectively, the three experiments indicate that preferences for continuity in redistricting – whether motivated by racial, partisan, incumbent, or spatial considerations – are a central influence on attitudes.

3.1. Principles experiment: how do people evaluate redistricting principles?

The *Principles* experiment establishes the broad contours of public opinion on the principles mapmakers should follow when redistricting. Every value in the list has been endorsed by a court, listed in state constitutions and redistricting guidelines, or put into practice by mapmakers. The values comprise institution-selecting regulations (who draws the lines, e.g., by independent commission), process-based regulations (criteria for drawing lines, e.g., ensuring districts are contiguous), and outcome-based regulations (goals of line-drawing, e.g., increasing the number of majority-minority districts) (Cox, 2004). There are spatial principles – such as avoiding bizarre district shapes or crossing county, city, or town boundaries – partisan principles – such as helping Democrats or Republicans win more seats, or avoiding favoring any political party – incumbency principles – such as avoiding pairing incumbents – and racial principles – such as ensuring there are enough majority-Black or majority-Latino districts, or not using any information on race to draw districts.³

Principles probes public attitudes toward district protectionism in both direct and indirect ways. The values include the principle of spatial protectionism itself ('Minimize changes to existing district shapes') and also principles that tend to support spatial protectionism, such as attention to existing local jurisdictional boundaries ('Do not cross county, city, or town boundaries').⁴ In this pairwise comparison, respondents were shown pairs of values drawn randomly from a list of 17. This exercise was repeated seven times, so respondents saw seven separate pairs of values. As values were drawn randomly each time, each pair was independent of the others and some individual values may have been repeated in different pairings for certain respondents.⁵

³ The pairwise comparison does not include the principle of one-person-one-vote because this criterion is strictly and universally applied within all states. This overriding principle constrains mapmakers and limits all secondary goals at which mapmakers might aim (Bowen, 2014). The pairwise comparison does include broadly accepted principles such as contiguity, however, because these principles have not been applied so consistently – for instance, there are districts of questionable contiguity which stretch across water with no connecting bridge or connect only at a point (McDonald, 2007).

⁴ Attention to existing jurisdictional boundaries tends to promote spatial protectionism, even though spatial protectionism in some heavily gerrymandered states, such as North Carolina, may involve protecting fragmented, bizarrely-shaped districts that cross local boundaries (Douglass, 1994). In most states, the familiarity of local jurisdictional boundaries, path-dependent respect for historical political subdivisions, long-standing relationships between representatives and constituents, and administrative simplicity of aligning district boundaries with city or county lines are all reasons to maintain the spatial qualities of existing districts (Bowen, 2014; Bickerton and Graham, 2020).

⁵ By asking citizens to evaluate two values at a time, the pairwise approach limits cognitive effort and mimics the redistricting process for some citizen

¹ See Appendix for Survation documentation.

² The experimental samples are balanced on observable characteristics. I report the frequency of values and levels shown, and proportion of respondents with various characteristics in each treatment arm of the vignette, in the Appendix Tables A1 (Principles), A5 (Proposals), A10 and A11 (Preservation).

In each case respondents were asked which value should be prioritized in drawing new congressional districts in their state. Following the Hainmueller and Hopkins approach (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015) there was a forced choice question ('Which value do you think should be prioritized in drawing new congressional district maps in your state?') followed by two questions about how respondents felt about value A and value B separately. Respondents were free to return any response on the five-point scale (strongly approve, approve, neutral, disapprove, strongly disapprove) for each value, so they could approve or disapprove of any or all values. Since each respondent saw seven randomly chosen pairs, I obtained 105,332 individual assessments of specific redistricting values.

The *Principles* task did not include extended explanations or normative justifications for the principles. This design choice was intentional: the goal was to capture respondents' evaluations of commonly invoked redistricting principles as they are currently understood, rather than under conditions of extensive civic instruction. While many Americans have limited knowledge of redistricting law and doctrine, these principles are nonetheless routinely invoked by elites, courts, and reform advocates. The experiment therefore captures how respondents prioritize these principles based on their existing mental models, rather than under idealized assumptions of full information.

Given low levels of respondent knowledge, I expected respondents to show protectionist tendencies: indicating preferences for minimizing changes to existing district shapes, endorsing traditional redistricting principles, and limiting the use of racial or partisan information in drawing districts. Respondents were expected to reject redistricting principles that require greater activity on the part of mapmakers, such as helping specific parties win more seats, manipulating the competitiveness of the districts, or racial redistricting to combat vote dilution.

H1 (MINIMAL CHANGE): Respondents prefer minimizing changes to existing district shapes rather than making districts electorally safer or more competitive.

I construct an overall ranking of the redistricting values and use a Bradley-Terry model to predict the outcomes of pairwise comparisons and test the minimal change hypothesis. The model assumes that each item has a latent score and the probability of one item being preferred over another is based on these scores. For any two items i and j , the Bradley-Terry model posits that the probability of i being preferred over j is:

$$P(i \text{ is preferred over } j) = \frac{\theta_i}{\theta_i + \theta_j}$$

where θ_i and θ_j represent the strength parameters for items i and j , respectively. Bradley-Terry, which models forced-choice data and accounts for the intensity of a preference, is the most appropriate way to analyze this pairwise comparison because it is statistically efficient, can handle intransitive preferences and multiple comparisons from the same respondent, and incorporates co-variables for subgroup analysis. I run the Bradley-Terry models for both the full sample and for Republican and Democratic respondents separately. In the appendix section A3.3 I explore further the relationships between respondent race and partisan affiliation and their redistricting values, and show how these respondent characteristics condition responses.

3.2. Principles results

The Bradley-Terry model results highlight broad public support for principles associated with district protectionism: commitment to minimal spatial change (*H1*), most traditional districting principles,

commissioners in local redistricting efforts. Cain and Hopkins note that when weighing redistricting options, voters usually focus on just a handful of factors rather than considering everything at once. They point to San Francisco as an example, where an effort to rank plans through a detailed scoring system based on multiple criteria ultimately failed to gain traction (Cain and Hopkins, 2002).

and color-blind redistricting, and low levels of support for partisan gerrymandering. It also shows important differences between public attitudes toward these values. Respondents value preserving local boundaries even when this does not produce geometrically compact districts. Respondents judge ensuring there are enough majority-Black districts around the middle of the pack, statistically indistinguishable from the priority given to increasing electoral competitiveness, avoiding incumbent pairing, and avoiding bizarre district shapes (Fig. 1). However, they are substantially more supportive of majority-Black districts than they are of majority-Latino districts, which are rejected almost as often as helping Democrats or Republicans directly.⁶ These diverging preferences for different race-conscious redistricting principles may reflect the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, views about the relative deservingness and disadvantage of different racial and ethnic groups, or the volume or prominence of vote dilution lawsuits brought by the NAACP on behalf of African Americans.

Fig. 1 displays the Bradley-Terry results. Higher values indicate stronger support. Negative values are not disliked in an absolute sense, but are less preferred relative to the average value in the set. Fig. 1 shows the ranking for the full sample (on the left), and stratified by partisanship (middle and right).⁷

Certain redistricting principles often (though not always) require greater levels of redistricting change – for instance, maximizing partisan gains ('Help Republicans/Democrats win more seats') or carving out new majority-minority districts ('Ensure there are enough majority-Black/Latino districts') typically requires high-change redistricting cycles. Principles that typically require substantial change consistently rank lower (Fig. 1). Partisan gerrymandering is overwhelmingly rejected. As expected, the stratified Bradley-Terry results in Fig. 1 show strong partisan directional effects on partisan gerrymandering. Opposite party gerrymanders are strongly opposed, but co-partisan gerrymanders are not strongly welcomed, consistent with loss aversion to opposing party gains (McLaughlin, 2025). There is no evidence here to support a desire for partisan maximization. Efforts to make seats safer or more electorally competitive do not attract much support either ('make election results more predictable' ranked 15th and 'make election results less predictable' 12th).

Other redistricting principles typically involve limiting changes to existing district shapes (e.g., 'Make sure all parts of the district are connected'; 'Do not cross county, city, or town boundaries'). These low-change principles are broadly supported, particularly among Republican respondents as the stratified plots show. While minimizing changes to district shapes is not the most highly ranked principle overall, it is preferred to principles that explicitly aim at engineering electoral competitiveness or partisan advantage. Several other highly ranked principles – including contiguity and preservation of political subdivisions – similarly emphasize stability and boundary protection. 'Do not use race to draw districts' is positive for all groups, although it is stronger for Republicans. Lower support for principles requiring substantial change is consistent with a general orientation toward *district protectionism*: minimizing changes to the status quo. Partisan effects are present, but there is a strong cross-party procedural consensus around citizen involvement, avoiding arbitrary manipulation, and preserving certain spatial qualities in maps. Together, these results suggest that voters prioritize district continuity and coherence over active redistricting.⁸

It is notable that 'neutral' is the modal response for many individual principles (Appendix Table A3). This likely reflects the low

⁶ The phrase 'enough majority-Black (or Latino) districts' is designed to reflect language used in public debate and media coverage of recent redistricting cases (e.g., (Fowler, 2023)). I do not imply that the public uses legal standards such as *Gingles* or understands vote dilution jurisprudence. Rather, this item captures public support for race-conscious mapmaking *in general terms*, not doctrinal thresholds or remedies.

⁷ See Appendix Figure A3 for relative preference scores stratified by race and ethnicity.

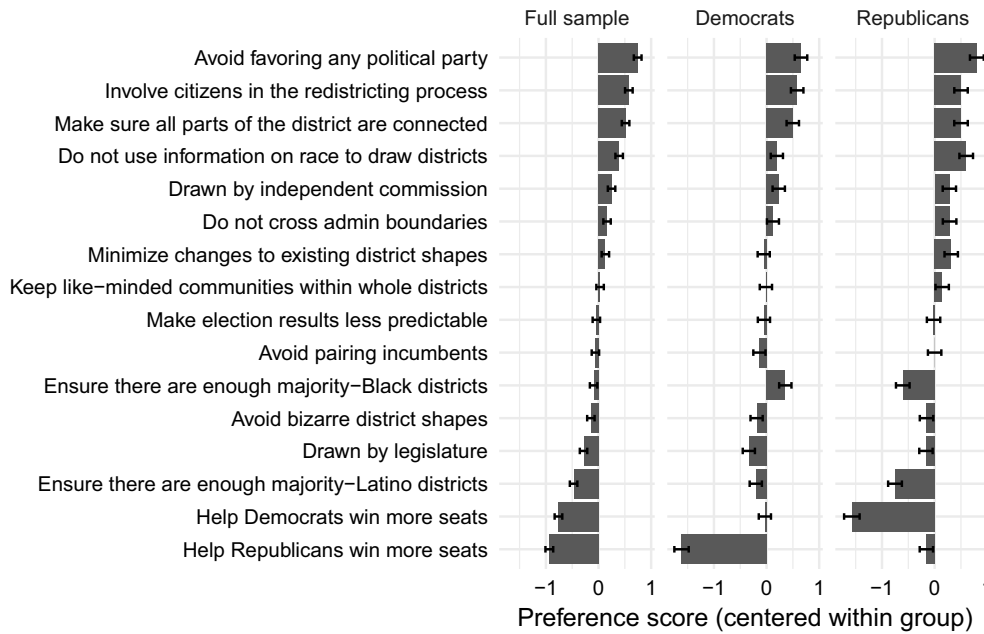


Fig. 1. Relative preference scores for redistricting values. The model estimates a latent preference for each principle based on all pairwise comparisons across respondents. All principle pairings and their order were randomized at the respondent level. Points represent estimated preference scores from a Bradley-Terry model of pairwise comparisons between redistricting principles. Higher values indicate greater relative support for a particular value. Reported results are unweighted. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals for the Bradley-Terry log-ability scores, clustered by respondent. See Appendix Table A2 for Bradley-Terry model results.

salience and technical nature of redistricting rules, which most citizens rarely encounter directly. However, neutrality does not imply the absence of structure. The Bradley-Terry estimates reveal consistent relative ordering across principles, with systematic differentiation between traditional districting principles (which in many instances imply low-change redistricting) and explicitly partisan interventions.

In practice, some redistricting principles interact with existing maps in complex ways. In states that have previously been gerrymandered, ensuring contiguity or avoiding benefiting specific parties would require more substantial redistricting. The Principles experiment asked respondents to evaluate principles abstractly, without reference to a specific state or baseline map. This design isolates voters’ intrinsic preferences for the principles themselves, rather than their feasibility or the magnitude of change required in a particular real-world context. As such, the observed preference for principles such as contiguity, keeping like-minded communities whole, preserving existing subdivision boundaries, and minimizing changes to district shapes should be interpreted as a general orientation toward district continuity and stability, not a statement about the specific level of effort these principles would entail in any given jurisdiction.

Principles shows how people rank redistricting values in the abstract. In the *Proposals* experiment I ask people to assess concrete redistricting proposals featuring a variety of spatial, racial, and partisan attributes, and they are offered a status quo option explicitly. How much do people care about spatial continuity and electoral, racial, and partisan continuity in redistricting?

3.3. *Proposals* experiment: how do people assess redistricting proposals?

The *Proposals* experiment employs a fully randomized conjoint design. In *Proposals*, respondents assessed proposals for a new congressional district, with six attributes: (1) a visualization of the shape of the

⁸ See the Appendix Figure A2 and Table A3 for the proportions of ‘strongly approve’, ‘approve’, ‘neutral’, ‘disapprove’, and ‘strongly disapprove’ responses to each individual value.

old and new district (a bizarre shape that stays bizarre; a bizarre shape that becomes compact; a compact shape that stays compact; a compact shape that becomes bizarre); (2) who draws the district (legislature or independent commission)⁹; (3) expert consultation in closed hearings vs. public consultation in open hearings; (4) partisan composition (proportion of Republicans/Democrats increases, or partisan balance stays the same); (5) electoral competitiveness (election results become more/less predictable, or electoral competitiveness stays the same)¹⁰; (6) racial composition (proportion of whites increases/decreases, or racial balance stays the same).

Respondents saw four combinations sequentially, one for each set of district shapes, so that every respondent saw each of the four district shape combinations once. The order of the shape combinations was randomized. Levels for attributes 2–6 were randomized each time, allowing estimation of Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) which capture the causal effect of each attribute level on the probability of endorsing the proposal. The attributes are mutually independent: attributes of interest were not restricted to take on specific levels depending on the values of the other attributes. The experiment began with the two framing sentences, identical for each combination:

⁹ I compare legislatures with commissions, which are at the heart of contemporary redistricting debates. While courts also draw districts – typically as a remedy when the legislative process fails – I did not include courts in the design because court-drawn plans are generally perceived not as a preferred method but as a sign that the process has broken down. Including courts as an option may have conflated attitudes toward legal neutrality with cues about institutional failure. The parsimonious design also means that I do not distinguish types of legislative control (e.g., partisan trifectas vs. divided government), a distinction that future work could fruitfully explore.

¹⁰ I use the phrase ‘election results become more/less predictable’ rather than invoking competitiveness explicitly, for the same reason that McDonald and Tolbert avoid that word in their analysis of individuals’ perceptions of electoral competition: the term may be unfamiliar and require an explanation that might introduce bias to responses (McDonald and Tolbert, 2012).

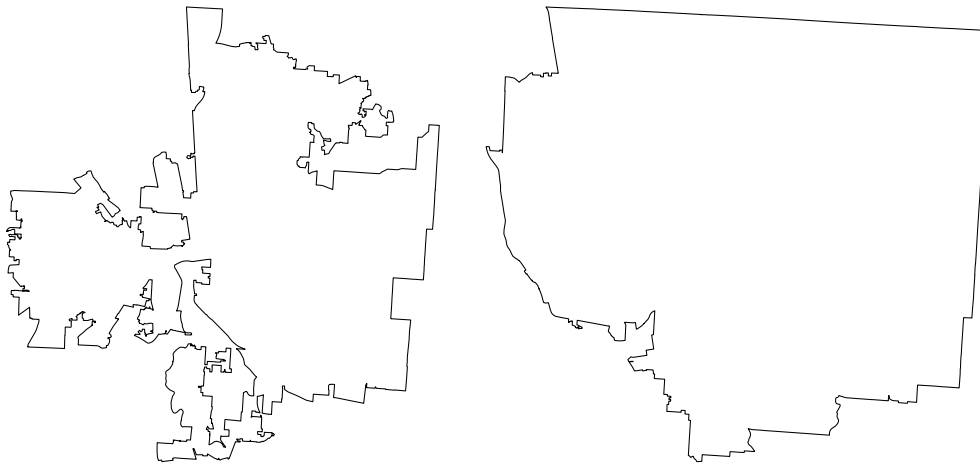


Fig. 2. Ohio's Third District, 117th and 118th Congresses.

Table 1
All attributes and levels for Proposals experiment.

Attribute	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Drawn by Consultation	Legislature Public views consulted in open hearings. Public can submit maps.	Independent commission Expert views consulted in closed hearings. Experts can submit maps.	
Partisan composition	District becomes more Democratic leaning.	District becomes more Republican leaning.	Partisan balance stays the same
Electoral competitiveness	Election results become more predictable.	Election results become less predictable.	Electoral competitiveness stays the same.
Racial composition	Proportion of white voters increases.	Proportion of white voters decreases.	Racial balance stays the same.

Congressional district boundaries must be redrawn every decade after the Census population counts are released. Imagine this proposal for your district.

Respondents were told ‘The old and new maps look like this:’ and shown two district shapes. I visualized district shapes using Congressional District shapefiles for the 117th and the 118th Congresses: the Congresses that sat immediately prior to and after the 2020 redistricting cycle. The district shape in *Proposals* is a real district: Ohio’s 3rd District, chosen because it underwent one of the largest increases in compactness (which I calculated using Polsby-Popper scores) from one Congress to the next (Fig. 2).

The bizarre shape is the district’s shape prior to the 2020 cycle; the compact shape is the district’s shape after the 2020 cycle (Fig. 2). In the *Proposals* experiment, shape change went both ways: from compact to bizarre, or from bizarre to compact. Ohio’s 3rd District in the 2020 cycle represents a relatively large change in compactness, but it is by no means the only district to experience that magnitude of change in a single cycle. Texas’s 16th District, for example, became dramatically less compact in the same cycle. A district with a relatively large shape change was selected to maximize the strength of the treatment while preserving external validity: real districts can and do change this much in a single cycle. The district shape was kept deliberately simple with no identifying labels or markers indicating towns, cities, or topographical features. The district boundaries were indicated by a simple black line, leaving the rest of the shape plain white. Eliminating all district features except the boundary minimized the (slim) risk that a respondent would recognize the district (just 16 of the 7448 respondents reside in Ohio’s 3rd District) and reduced the risk of cognitive overload for respondents dealing with six different attributes.

In addition to the district shapes, respondents were shown a table giving the five other attributes and their levels. For each district proposal, respondents were presented with one set of attributes. The levels of these attributes were randomized to take on one of either two levels (drawn by; consultation) or three levels (partisan composition; electoral competitiveness; racial composition) each time, as shown in Table 1.¹¹ For each proposal, respondents were asked whether the proposal should be adopted (Yes/No binary response) and whether it is ‘a fair or unfair map-drawing process’ with a five-point Likert response scale (Very fair/ Fair/ Neutral/ Unfair/ Very unfair).

Proposals test whether people prioritize district protectionism over changes – to increase or decrease the district’s electoral competitiveness, alter its partisan or racial balance, or mutate into a more bizarre or compact shape. I hypothesize that respondents favor spatial protectionism – the preservation of the old district shape, whether that shape is compact or bizarre – but I also expect that the compact district shape is preferred over the bizarre shape because the compact shape seems simpler, more rational, and perhaps less likely to be gerrymandered (although no wording was included to cue respondents to think in terms of gerrymandering). Bizarre shapes are implicitly understood to be gerrymandered, even if there is no explicit cue.

¹¹ This parsimonious, relatively low-information setting reflects how many citizens engage with redistricting in practice. As Cain and Hopkins observe, citizen commissioners often operate with limited knowledge and are frequently guided by brief memos that simplify complex trade-offs (Cain and Hopkins, 2002). A more immersive or extended simulation would risk respondent fatigue. The goal here is not to replicate the full complexity of redistricting deliberations, but to isolate and estimate how ordinary people respond to trade-offs they are frequently asked to judge without expert support.

H2 (SPATIAL PROTECTIONISM): *The compact-to-compact district and bizarre-to-bizarre district are more likely to be accepted than the bizarre-to-compact or compact-to-bizarre districts.*

Unusual district shapes have historically been used as indicators of intentional redistricting strategies, stretching back to the original ‘Gerrymander’ of 1812. Recent research has detected a common understanding of compactness (Kaufman et al., 2021). Just as judges utilize ‘the eyeball test’ in their consideration of gerrymandering claims, ordinary citizens can form impressions based on visual cues.

In addition to spatial protectionism, I hypothesize that respondents prefer to maintain other elements of the district status quo: in other words, that they embrace racial and partisan protectionism and reject redistricting changes that alter the racial, partisan, and electoral balance of the district.

H3 (DISTRICT PROTECTIONISM): *Proposals that do not change a district’s racial composition, partisan composition, or electoral competition, are more likely to be accepted than proposals that do change these racial, partisan, and electoral characteristics.*

I use a linear probability model with respondent-clustered standard errors. This approach accounts for the fact that each respondent saw multiple conjoint profiles. Consistent with (Franco et al., 2017), reported results are unweighted.

3.4. Proposals results

Overall, respondents display consistent preference for minimizing changes to district characteristics: maintaining the same racial and partisan balance and making no changes to the district’s electoral competitiveness – although *Proposals* results indicate that partisan self-interest does interact with protectionism: partisans strongly oppose proposals that would disadvantage their party, but display no strong preference for proposals that advantage their party compared to minimizing disruption to existing district conditions. Fig. 3 reports AMCE estimates from the linear probability model with respondent-clustered standard errors.¹² Coefficients represent the change in the probability of endorsing a proposal relative to the omitted baseline level for each attribute.

District shape is crucial, in two ways: as expected respondents prefer the same or greater compactness over bizarre shapes, but they also show a strong preference for no change to the district shape, even if that means preserving a bizarre shape. Loss of compactness is judged negatively, perhaps because growing spatial bizarreness provides a visual gerrymandering cue, but districts that do not change at all (preserving either compactness or bizarreness) are statistically significantly more likely to be endorsed by respondents than districts that do change from compact to bizarre (Fig. 3). The district that gains compactness (bizarre to compact) is no more likely to be endorsed than the district that remains bizarre (bizarre to bizarre). These patterns are consistent with *spatial protectionism*, meaning respondents prefer preserving the existing district shape. Holding other factors constant, a district retaining the same compact shape has a 72 percent chance of endorsement, while a district that changes from compact to bizarre has just a 54 percent chance of endorsement. Districts that remain bizarre or change from bizarre to compact, have a 67 percent chance of endorsement.

To illustrate the cumulative implications of these effects, consider two stylized profiles at opposite ends of the attribute distribution. A district drawn by an independent commission with public input, which remains stable in shape, racial balance, partisan balance, and electoral competitiveness, has a 75 percent chance of endorsement. By contrast, a bizarrely-shaped district drawn by a legislature in an expert-led process, which makes the district more Republican, whiter, and less competitive

¹² See Appendix Figure A4 for predicted changes in support by respondent partisanship and district partisan balance.

in elections, has a 40 percent chance of endorsement. Importantly, individual attribute effects are more modest in magnitude; no single change produces a shift of this size.

As Fig. 3 shows, the impact of district shapes is greater than either partisan or racial factors in determining whether respondents endorse or reject the proposed district.¹³ Overall, respondents do not want the partisan or racial balance of a district to change, or for the district competitiveness to change (in other words, they endorse partisan, racial, and incumbent protectionism), but they *really* do not want the district to change shape or become less compact. These findings align with the so-called ‘eyeball test’, which is often used in legal and public assessments of compactness.

Do respondents’ partisan affiliations and racial identities affect their acceptance of district proposals? I stratify the sample by respondent partisanship and run the same model on Republican and Democratic respondents as shown in Fig. 4. Partisan self-interest is clearly evident but asymmetrical: partisans are loss-averse. They oppose proposals that would result in a gain for the other party, but there is no statistically significant difference between the likelihood that a Republican respondent accepts a district that results in gains for Republicans and the likelihood that he or she accepts a district which maintains the same partisan balance. Likewise for Democratic respondents facing proposals that would either maintain the partisan balance or skew the district Democratic. These findings align with existing experimental research and polling which suggest that preventing partisan loss is a more powerful incentive than partisan gain (McLaughlin, 2025; Doherty, 2025). Examining the other conjoint attributes shows striking similarities between partisans: both Republican and Democratic respondents favor compact maps and prefer to preserve the existing district shape, level of electoral competition, and racial balance (Fig. 4).

Responses to the racial attributes factor reveal patterns consistent with a color-blind approach for respondents of all races.¹⁴ The district whose racial composition does not change is statistically significantly more likely to be endorsed than the district whose white population decreased (that is, respondents favor *racial protectionism*: the principle that mapmakers should not alter district racial composition). The Voting Rights Act constrains mapmakers to avoid diluting the votes of communities of color. In practice, racial gerrymanders might include either decreasing or increasing the number of non-white voters in a district (cracking them by dispersing them among neighboring districts or packing them into a supermajority–minority district). I address these questions of minority vote dilution directly in the *Preservation* experiment.

3.5. Preservation experiment: how do people evaluate protectionist and reformist redistricting approaches?

The *Principles* and *Proposals* experiments revealed that voters tend to favor protectionist principles when choosing among abstract principles and evaluating concrete redistricting proposals. But how do voters evaluate district protectionism versus reformism when the notion of fairness toward racial minorities is violated? How do they react when they are forced to confront the consequences of mapmakers’ actions – or inaction – instead of merely choosing among redistricting values without explicit consideration of the downstream consequences? In the *Preservation* experiment, respondents evaluate either a protectionist or a reformist redistricting process with an identical outcome.

¹³ See Appendix Table A6 for model coefficients and Appendix Table A7 for interactions between respondent racial or partisan identities and racial or partisan changes to proposed districts. Appendix Table A8 shows interactions between respondent party, district partisan balance, and district electoral competitiveness. Appendix Table A9 displays model results for respondent assessments of the fairness of the map-making process, both with and without controls.

¹⁴ For a full model with respondent characteristics see Appendix Figure A7.

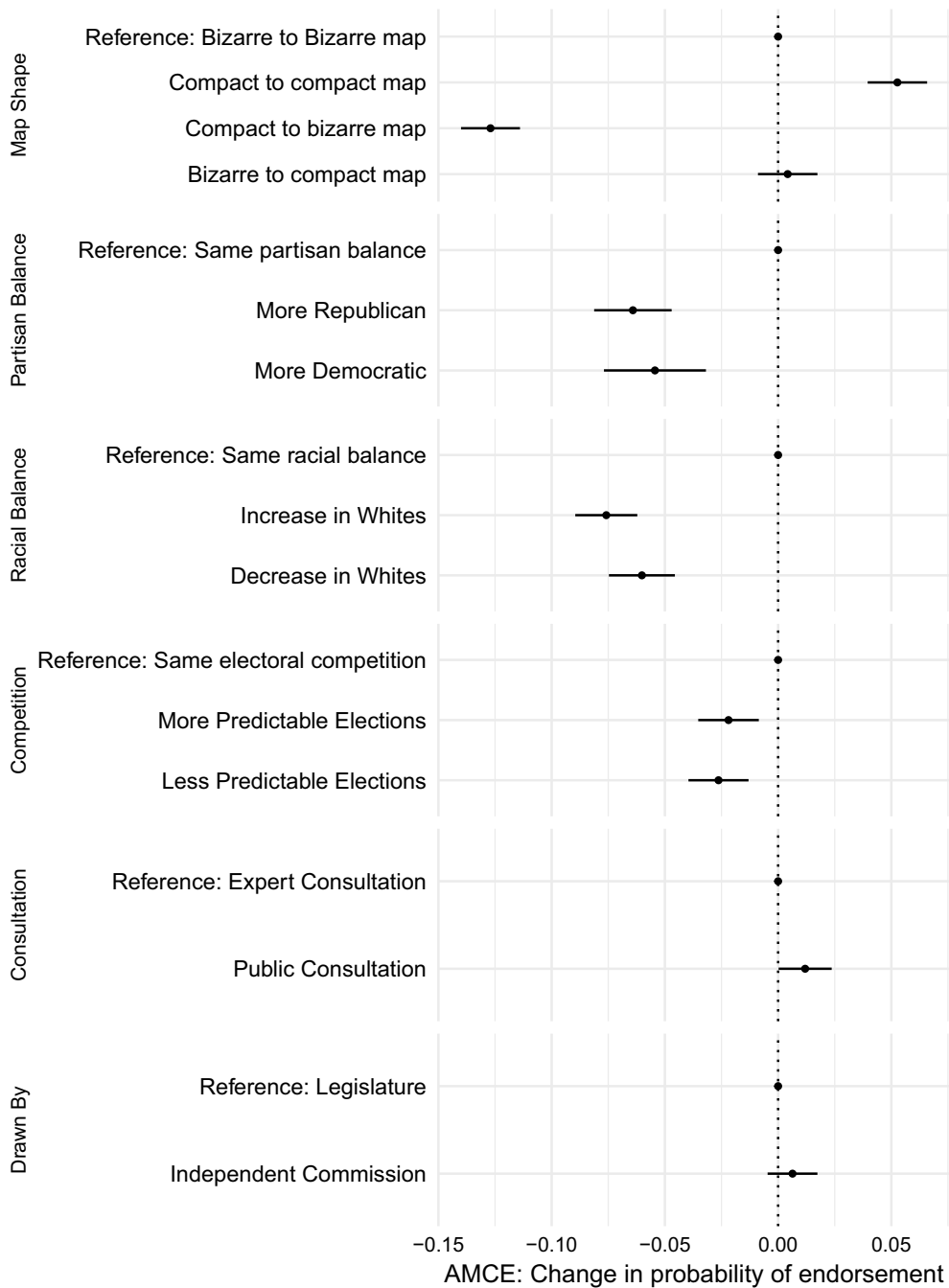


Fig. 3. Predicted changes in support for redistricting proposals by proposal characteristics. Points represent AMCEs from a linear probability model predicting endorsement of a district proposal. Attribute levels were independently randomized within respondents across six proposal characteristics. Coefficients indicate changes in the probability of endorsement relative to the omitted baseline level for each attribute. Standard errors are clustered by respondent to account for repeated evaluations. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

The *Preservation* experiment tests whether respondents evaluate allegedly discriminatory outcomes differently when they stem from no redistricting change versus change, even when the end result is the same. In *Preservation*, respondents saw one of two short (106-word) accounts of a redistricting decision and subsequent NAACP lawsuit. The vignette was designed to read like a news article with a seven-word headline. In both vignettes there was an identical NAACP complaint (that the Black population has grown but there is only one majority-Black district), and justification from a redistricting committee spokesperson (that they followed the rules around redistricting). The text read as follows:

Low-change vignette:

DISTRICT MAP UNCHANGED. NAACP FILES LEGAL CHALLENGE.

Congressional district boundaries are redrawn every ten years. In the current round of redistricting, legislators made very few changes to district boundaries. The district shapes strongly resemble the old districts. The chair of the redistricting committee said, “We followed the rules about redistricting and preserved the existing map”. The NAACP filed a lawsuit. “The Black population has grown but there

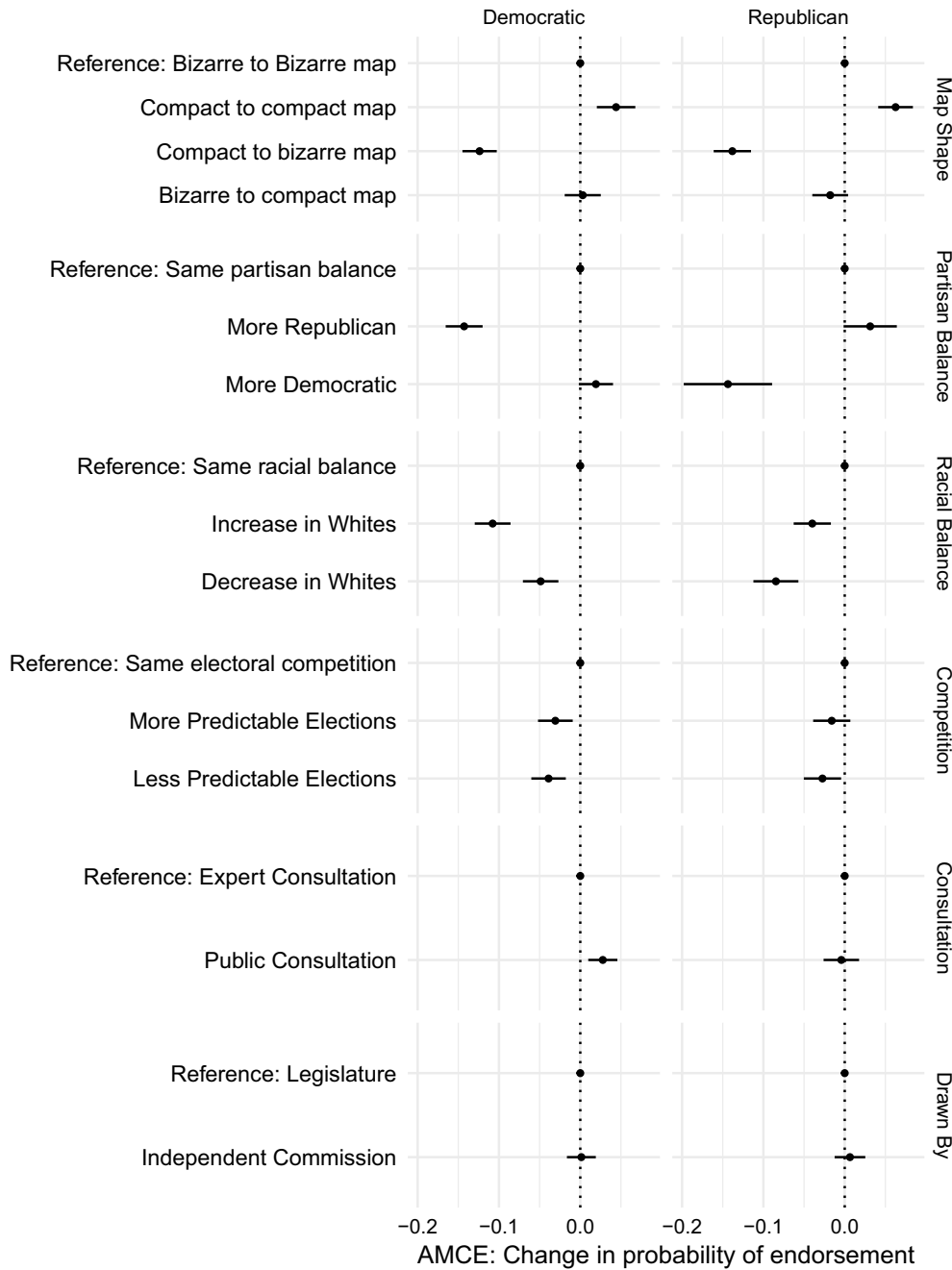


Fig. 4. Predicted changes in support for redistricting proposals by respondent partisanship. Points represent AMCEs from a linear probability model predicting endorsement of a district proposal. Attribute levels were independently randomized within respondents across six proposal characteristics. Coefficients indicate changes in the probability of endorsement relative to the omitted baseline level for each attribute. Standard errors are clustered by respondent to account for repeated evaluations. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

is only one majority-Black district. By retaining the same district boundaries, this discriminatory map denies Black voters an equal opportunity to participate in the political process”, said an NAACP spokesperson, “This new map looks exactly like the old map.”

High-change vignette:

DISTRICT MAP TRANSFORMED. NAACP FILES LEGAL CHALLENGE.

Congressional district boundaries are redrawn every ten years. In the current round of redistricting, legislators made major changes to district boundaries. The district shapes bear no resemblance to the old districts. The chair of the redistricting committee said, “We followed

the rules about redistricting and transformed the existing map”. The NAACP filed a lawsuit. “The Black population has grown but there is only one majority-Black district. By changing the district boundaries, this discriminatory map denies Black voters an equal opportunity to participate in the political process”, said an NAACP spokesperson, “This new map looks nothing like the old map.”

In the low-change condition, mapmakers were described as making ‘very few changes’ to district boundaries. In the high-change condition, mapmakers were described as making ‘major changes’ to district boundaries. The phrases ‘no change’, ‘preserved’, ‘unchanged’, and ‘strongly resemble old districts’ were used in the first vignette, and

‘major changes’, ‘transformed’, and ‘bears no resemblance to the old districts’ in the second vignette to increase the likelihood that respondents received the treatment. There was no control vignette because it is difficult to imagine what a ‘control’ would mean in this case: ‘change’ and ‘no change’ logically exhaust the available options for mapmakers. Hence the effect of the ‘change’ vignette is compared to the ‘no change’ vignette, and vice versa.

The vignette was not attributed to any actual newspaper or publication to minimize any extraneous detail that might overload respondents. There were no partisan cues or real names. The legislative spokesperson was described as ‘the chair of the redistricting committee’, and the NAACP spokesperson was also unnamed. I minimized the number of words respondents must read to maximize engagement with the task and allow the task to be undertaken easily by respondents from different backgrounds living in all parts of the United States. Respondents were asked whether they think the new map is legitimate and if this is a fair or unfair redistricting process. Responses were given on five-point Likert scales.

The complaint itself is a real one, which was recently heard by the Supreme Court. In *Allen v. Milligan* 599 U.S. _ (2023) the Court found in favor of civil rights organizations suing the State of Alabama for its failure to increase the number of majority–minority districts over a thirty-year period, even as its white population shrank. Some very politically engaged respondents might have been familiar with this case. Respondents may also have heard of cases of racial gerrymandering – deliberate manipulation of district boundaries to deny Black voters an equal opportunity to participate – such as *Alexander v. South Carolina State Conference of the NAACP* (2024), in which the Court found in favor of the State of South Carolina. Since civil rights organizations file redistricting lawsuits in large numbers every cycle, the complaint in *Preservation* closely resembles dozens of real complaints filed around the country.

In *Preservation*, a new district map is alleged to discriminate against Black voters (harmful outcome) while defendants offer a concise justification centered on procedural compliance (‘we followed the rules about redistricting’). The question was whether there would be a statistically significant difference between assessments of the legitimacy of the new map and the fairness of the redistricting process where the allegedly discriminatory outcome arises through transforming the map or preserving the existing districts.

H4 (PRESERVATION OVER TRANSFORMATION): The high-change map is more likely to be judged ‘probably illegitimate’ or ‘definitely illegitimate’, and the map-drawing process ‘unfair’ or ‘very unfair’, than the low-change map.

The experimental manipulation necessarily involves variation in the degree of district change, operationalized through boundary revision versus boundary preservation. Importantly, however, the downstream outcome is held constant across conditions: in both cases, the NAACP alleges that the resulting map fails to create an additional majority-Black district. Thus, the treatment isolates whether respondents evaluate an identical allegedly discriminatory outcome differently depending on whether it involves active change or status quo preservation.

I also expected that respondents’ descriptive characteristics and political views would affect their assessments of the legitimacy of the map and the fairness of the map-drawing process and conducted exploratory analysis of these relationships.¹⁵ Black respondents were expected to be more likely to judge the map as illegitimate and the map-drawing process as unfair than white respondents. Conservative respondents were expected to judge the map more favorably than liberals did. Politically engaged respondents were expected to be more likely to judge the map as illegitimate and the map-drawing process as unfair than disengaged respondents. I use standard OLS modelling to analyze the data, and report unweighted results (Norman, 2010; Franco et al., 2017).

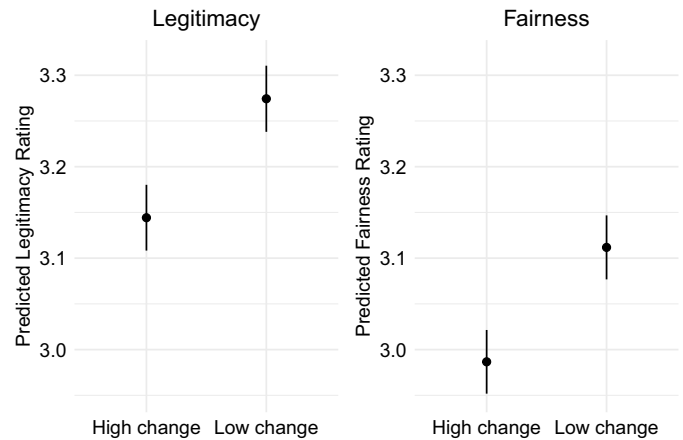


Fig. 5. Predicted legitimacy and fairness ratings by vignette condition. Points represent predicted values from OLS models estimating the effect of vignette condition (low-change vs. high-change map) on perceived legitimacy and fairness. Vignette condition was randomly assigned at the respondent level. Models do not include demographic controls; results are substantially similar when controls are included. See Appendix Table A12 for full model results for legitimacy and fairness ratings by vignette condition, with and without controls for respondent characteristics. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

3.6. Preservation results

The high-change vignette is rated statistically significantly below the low-change vignette in both legitimacy and fairness (Fig. 5). Although the absolute differences between high-change and low-change conditions are modest, the effects are highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating reliable shifts in perceptions. Since the alleged discriminatory outcome is held constant, the vignettes differ only in whether the map was actively transformed or passively preserved, producing subtle but meaningful differences in respondents’ evaluations. Responses overall are consistent with protectionism: minimizing changes to district boundaries. Fig. 5 displays the legitimacy and fairness ratings by vignette condition.

Average ratings are somewhat above the scale midpoint for both the map’s legitimacy and the process’s fairness. I report models with respondent characteristics in Appendix Table A12. Younger, Republican, and

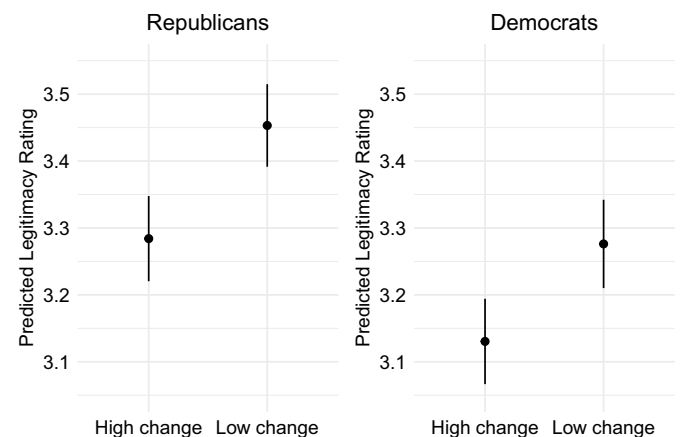


Fig. 6. Predicted legitimacy ratings by respondent partisanship and vignette condition. Points represent predicted values from OLS models estimating the effect of vignette condition (low-change vs. high-change map) on perceived legitimacy among respondents of different partisan affiliations. Vignette condition was randomly assigned at the respondent level. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

¹⁵ See Appendix Table A12.

male respondents, as well as those who pay more attention to politics, are more likely to view the maps as legitimate and the process as fair. Non-white respondents are less likely than white respondents to view the maps as legitimate.

I also stratify the sample by party (Fig. 6) and race (Appendix Figure A5) to examine the effect of high and low change map drawing processes on the likelihood that respondents of different parties and racial groups evaluate a particular map as legitimate. As Fig. 6 shows, Democrats evaluate the map as less legitimate overall than Republicans do, but the treatment effect is strikingly similar across partisan groups. Both partisans prefer low change processes to high change ones, and they do so by almost identical magnitudes.

The experimental manipulation shows that the low-change map is statistically significantly more likely to be viewed as legitimate and its map-drawing process fair compared to the high-change map, consistent with a preference for protectionism over reformism among both partisan groups, even when the outcomes are identical.

4. Discussion

District protectionism is a preference for minimal change in redistricting. It has at least four distinct forms: *spatial* (favoring stability in district boundaries, shapes, and geography), *partisan* (resisting changes to partisan composition), *racial* (preserving existing racial balances), and *incumbent* (shielding sitting representatives from electoral risk). Redistricting presents a paradox of district protectionism and reformism: redistricting can foster electoral competitiveness but also sever representational ties between constituents and their representatives (Yoshinaka and Murphy, 2011). Insofar as voters express support for values consistent with district protectionism, they may be signalling their support for protectionist goals explicitly (such as minimizing changes to district shapes), or for abstract principles of fairness (such as preserving communities of interest) that have protectionist effects in practice.

District protectionism could limit certain forms of gerrymandering that are broadly unpopular (Brennan Center, 2019) – but civil rights activists and voting rights groups increasingly warn of the risks of low-change maps. They argue that least-change approach can perpetuate partisan bias and constrain opportunities for responsive redistricting, especially in contexts of demographic change (Andre et al., 2023). In some cases, maintaining existing configurations may violate constitutional principles or block the creation of majority-minority districts that reflect population growth (Hardy, 1976). For instance, Alabama retained the same configuration for three cycles – one majority-minority district; six white – even as its non-white population approached 30% (Roberts, 2023). In Louisiana, a court found that a ‘carbon-copy’ district diluted minority votes (Dick, 2022, p. 24), while Wisconsin mapmakers sought to entrench Republican gains from a previous gerrymandering cycle (Yablon, 2022). Legislators often defend district continuity on the grounds that it allows constituents to develop lasting and meaningful relationships with their representatives, but such benefits may coincide with the preservation of existing partisan or racial arrangements, which can affect underrepresented communities (Hackett, 2026).

The resurgence of mid-cycle redistricting in advance of the 2026 midterms illustrates how district protectionism operates within a highly partisan, and polarized, environment. Republican-led efforts in Texas, Missouri, North Carolina, and Florida, and Democratic responses in California and Virginia, all reflect strategic efforts to advance partisan representation in Congress under conditions of intense polarization and narrow federal majorities. Yet elite strategic behavior does not necessarily imply that ordinary citizens prioritize partisan gain above all other considerations, and the rhetoric surrounding these partisan efforts frequently invokes themes consistent with district protectionism – preserving communities, maintaining continuity, protecting representation, or resisting perceived unfair disruption by the opposing party. For instance, Californians were urged to pass a mid-cycle gerrymander on defensive grounds – to put elections “back on a level playing

field” (Mehta, 2025) – and in Missouri, approved ballot language for the 2026 veto referendum on the mid-cycle gerrymander asked voters to approve “congressional boundaries that keep more cities and counties intact and are more compact” (Keller, 2026). The findings of this paper should not be interpreted as evidence that citizens reject partisan considerations, but rather that preferences for continuity and aversion to perceived losses coexist with partisan self-interest in shaping public attitudes toward redistricting.

In recent cases, the Supreme Court acknowledged the dilutive impact of maps that preserve existing district shapes where communities of color have driven demographic changes (Roberts, 2023; Dick, 2022), but the Court has also imposed tighter constraints on the use of race-conscious redistricting (Alito, 2026). Since Latinos account for more than half of U.S. population growth over the last decade, these communities of color are particularly vulnerable to vote dilution if district boundaries are not updated sufficiently to reflect changing racial demographics.¹⁶ Gaps in the way Black and Latino communities are viewed or presented, and lack of voter enthusiasm for the principle of ensuring enough majority-Latino districts, presage new challenges for voting rights advocates as the U.S. population diversifies. Protectionism highlights the tension between traditional geographical representation and pressures arising from demographic change. The experimental insights about public preferences in this paper indicate that minimal-change approaches are likely to encounter less resistance, which can shape how both reformers and policymakers design and present redistricting proposals.

The three experiments suggest that many respondents prefer continuity and minimal disruption, although these preferences are conditioned by partisan and racial considerations. Partisan respondents differ in their evaluation of race-conscious representation and partisan composition of districts, but there is substantial cross-party convergence on procedural features of redistricting, such as citizen involvement, traditional districting principles, and avoidance of overt partisan manipulation. These results suggest that preferences are multidimensional rather than reducible to partisan self-interest or generalized protectionism. *Principles* highlights relatively high levels of support for traditional districting principles such as contiguity, the preservation of county and city boundaries, and minimizing changes to district shapes, as well as opposition to partisan gerrymandering and support for citizen involvement. *Proposals* reveals a consistent preference for low levels of spatial change and limiting changes to electoral competitiveness and racial and partisan balance. Partisans oppose proposals that would disadvantage their party, but do not favor proposals that would advantage their party over the minimization of district change. *Preservation* shows that white voters prefer low change maps to high change ones, even when the outcome is the same. These results collectively underscore support for continuity over disruption. Partisan self-interest shapes preferences primarily through loss aversion, rather than the maximization of partisan advantage.

This paper has three implications for ongoing reform debates: First, the results suggest that redistricting changes may encounter less public resistance when they are presented as consistent with traditional and widely recognized principles such as contiguity. When ranking abstract redistricting principles, respondents support the values of contiguity, preserving sub-division boundaries and minimizing shape change. Respondents value both compactness and continuity when assessing redistricting proposals. These insights about public preferences are relevant not only for redistricting reformers seeking to engage ordinary people nationwide in the politics of redistricting, and in states where citizen commissions draw districts, but also to legislators for whom public opinion at least minimally shapes redistricting behavior (for instance,

¹⁶ To take the most extreme example of an unchanging map, Senate malapportionment is approximately one third worse now than it was at the beginning of the nation’s history, over-representing small, rural, whiter states at the expense of Blacks but particularly Latinos (Archer et al., 2024; Johnson and Miller, 2023).

in Indiana, where legislators cited “overwhelming feedback” from constituents in quashing an attempted mid-cycle gerrymander (Davies and Smith, 2025). We know that representatives respond rhetorically to their constituencies, changing their messaging if their district changes (Kaslovsky and Kistner, 2025).

Secondly, the findings highlight gaps in public awareness that may shape attitudes toward majority-Latino districts and other equity-related changes; these gaps are important in light of concerns that preserving existing maps can perpetuate partisan or racial imbalances. Race-conscious redistricting to help Blacks ranks four places higher than race-conscious redistricting to help Latinos in respondents’ assessment of abstract redistricting principles. In a legal context that increasingly constrains race-conscious redistricting, differential public support may affect which race-based claims remain politically viable. Thirdly, the tendency of respondents to prefer spatial, racial, partisan, and incumbent continuity points to the role of coalition-building in shaping the conditions under which reforms are more likely to gain support. Reformers may find that emphasizing continuity or minimizing perceived disruption helps build support across diverse constituencies and influences the extent to which reforms gain traction.

As mid-cycle redistricting upends some state maps, demand for citizens to exercise their voice in redistricting politics is growing (Solomon and Kemp, 2025). Many scholars and advocates have advanced arguments in favor of open, transparent, and participatory map-drawing processes, contrasting them with elite-driven approaches – particularly as control of Congress is balanced on a knife-edge amid growing partisan polarization and distrust in government. Like experts and legislators, ordinary people often express preferences consistent with district protectionism, particularly when evaluating changes perceived as disruptive or threatening to existing arrangements. In states where citizens have become more involved in redistricting, these preferences – shaped by loss aversion, partisan self-interest, and fairness considerations – could help determine which reforms gain traction and which are resisted, thereby influencing the racial, partisan, and spatial qualities of U.S. democracy.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Ursula Hackett reports that financial support was provided by The British Academy. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data for this article can be found online at doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2026.103101.

Data availability

Pre-registered experiment scripts, analysis plans, and hypotheses are available (anonymously) at the registration DOI listed in the Appendix.

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