

When More Is Better

July 1, 2020

On Monday, we considered how to get better representation in Congress for the 700,000 folks residing in our nation's capital city, Washington, D.C.

Today, let's tackle how the rest of us get any semblance of representation. We are sliced up into 435 congressional districts, each comprised of roughly 700,000 people electing a "representative" supposedly doing our business in Washington.

Are they doing our business?

The nearly universal and long-standing public disapproval of Congress answers that question.*

As the framers of the Constitution saw it, Congress would be the first and most powerful branch of government, as it would be closest to the people.

It may seem paradoxical, but it isn't: citizens will wield more power when there are more representatives in Congress.

The original idea was to create in members of Congress a "fidelity to their constituents," James Madison wrote in Federalist No. 57, which "would be found very insufficient without the restraint of frequent elections. Hence . . . the House of Representatives is so constituted as to support



in the members an habitual recollection of their dependence on the people."

Madison goes on to say that congresspeople "will be compelled to anticipate the moment when their power is to cease."

Yet well-funded congressional incumbents sporting 90 percent-plus re-election rates cycle after cycle, decade after decade — serving 20 and 30 and 50-plus years — cannot plausibly feel either compelled or dependent.

Looming large over the problem? Huge population districts.

The more voters in a district, the more expansive and expensive campaigns must be . . . and the bigger the need for help from special interests . . . and the more powerful those groups' influence.

Conversely, the smaller a district is, the more influence constituents individually have on their representative.

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This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.

* In April, after sending stimulus checks to the entire country, Congress did more than double its approval rating, though it is still seen unfavorably by a lopsided two-to-one margin.