Top 10 Power Brokers in Redistricting

These Are the Members Who Will Cut Deals or Determine Which of Their Colleagues’ Seats Will Stay or Go

By Shira Toeplitz
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It’s not always the most visible Members on Capitol Hill who have the biggest pull back home in Congressional redistricting battles.

True, some of the most powerful Members in this cycle’s redistricting battles are some of the biggest names in the Capitol, wielding influence over their state delegations, caucuses and even, in some cases, the entire House.

For instance, Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) is the unquestioned leader of the Buckeye State delegation and also has incredible influence over local lawmakers back home.

But other key Members when it comes to redistricting are among the more obscure in the House. They stay out of the national spotlight but carry strong relationships with state lawmakers and therefore have major pull when it comes to redrawing the lines for their colleagues. Unassuming Rep. Jerry Costello, for example, is the clear redistricting leader among Illinois Democrats.

“I would say there are two types of Members. One would be someone in leadership — the leader, the Whip or a committee chair — that is going to be somebody of clout who state lawmakers will respond to,” said Chris Perkins, a Republican pollster who drew the new House map on behalf of former Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) in 2003. “The second type is somebody who came from the state legislative body and has the relationships and the knowledge of the process built in. They know what buttons to push at the state level.”

Influence, of course, is a relative concept when it comes to Congress’ own power to redraw its districts. After all, Members theoretically are not supposed to draw their own seats. Moreover, some states have nonpartisan commissions in charge of redrawing the lines — effectively shutting any elected officials, local or federal, out of the process.
But that doesn’t mean Members don’t have a seat at the redistricting table. In the vast majority of states, the state legislatures still draw the new districts and the governor has veto power over the new Congressional maps.

“Very few of them are going to draw their own districts. But generally, state legislators are curious about what Members of Congress think about the districts they’re going to conceive,” said Mark Gersh, CEO of NCEC Services Inc. and a Democratic redistricting expert.

These influential Members also tend to be powerful among their own delegations, often because they have reputations as being a congenial go-between in the delegation.

“It’s also a matter of how respected they are and how influential they are in the Congress,” Gersh added. “Well-liked is important, but competence is also important.”

Moreover, when it comes to redistricting, the most influential Members in the delegation are that way because they hold safe districts — and therefore have nothing to lose in discussions compared with their colleagues in competitive seats.

Accordingly, this list was created with the idea that Members can influence the redistricting process back home in several ways and with a focus on the states that have a lot of seats at risk of changing parties this cycle.

California: Rep. Mike Thompson (D)

For decades, California Democrats have wielded incredible control over redistricting because of their cozy relationships with the state Legislature, even hiring Rep. Howard Berman’s brother, consultant Michael Berman, to help them keep their seats. That’s about to change now that the new 14-member Citizens Redistricting Commission has taken over the process — and the results have the potential to be extremely messy. While Members theoretically are now helpless in influencing the process, someone is going to have to clean up the mess among colleagues after the map is done. Enter Thompson, who is charged with managing redistricting for the House Democratic Caucus. Nowhere is that task more complicated and complex than in his home state, where Democrats must hold their advantage in the Congressional delegation to make up for other anticipated losses around the country — even as Democratic-held areas in Los Angeles are losing population and some of the party’s recently won House seats in the Bay Area have the potential to be drastically altered.

Florida: Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R)

With two new seats at stake, Florida is the second-biggest redistricting prize in the country for Republicans, who control the governor’s mansion and both legislative chambers. The passage of the Fair Districts Florida ballot initiative last year may threaten to mess with local lawmakers’ plans to draw several new seats for Republicans in 2012 by requiring lawmakers to draw “compact” districts. Nonetheless, Republicans still have more power in drawing the new lines than anyone besides the courts — and Diaz-Balart, a veteran of the redistricting process, has emerged as a clear leader in the delegation on this issue. Diaz-Balart had a heavy hand in drawing South Florida districts at the end of his 14-year run as a state lawmaker. And given his Hispanic background, his connections to Florida’s fastest-growing ethnic community will be key in finding good GOP candidates to run in new majority-Hispanic districts. Finally, he has already proved he’s willing to fight: Diaz-Balart, along with Rep. Corrine Brown (D), filed a lawsuit last year in federal court to protest the state’s new Fair Districts Florida redistricting law.
Georgia: Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (R)
Seat change: +1

House Republicans have tasked Westmoreland with overseeing redistricting for their entire caucus for good reason. Westmoreland has extensive experience with mapmaking in his home state, which redrew the Congressional boundaries twice in the past decade. At least three seats are at stake for Republicans, who will likely attempt to draw a safe GOP seat in the new 14th district, shore up GOP margins in the district of freshman Rep. Austin Scott (R) and move more Republicans into Democratic Rep. John Barrow’s competitive district. No one in the Georgia delegation has relationships with the in-state redistricting players like Westmoreland. He is a former state House Minority Leader and is close with Gov. Nathan Deal (R), his former House colleague whom he endorsed early in a crowded GOP primary last year. As governor, Deal will have veto power over the final map submitted to the Justice Department for approval. What’s more, former Westmoreland aide Bryan Tyson has been hired by the state Legislature and will be heavily involved in drawing the new maps. Tyson was also very involved in the 2005 GOP-led redrawing of Congressional boundaries.

Illinois: Rep. Jerry Costello (D)
Seat change: -1

He doesn’t have the highest-profile personality in the delegation, but make no mistake: Costello is leading the charge over how to redraw the lines in one of the few states where Democrats control the redistricting process. After losing four seats to Republicans last cycle, Democrats will attempt to win three to five back through mapmaking. Costello is the dean of the state’s delegation, but he has something even bigger in his corner: a good relationship with state Speaker Michael Madigan, who has nearly infinite control over Springfield lawmakers charged with making the new maps. Costello is also a team player, willing to give up parts of heavily Democratic districts to help his colleagues. One Illinois Democratic aide dubbed him the delegation’s redistricting “quarterback.” In fact, his low-key nature likely plays in his favor. In a delegation with big personalities such as Democratic Reps. Jesse Jackson Jr., Jan Schakowsky and Luis Gutierrez, it helps to have a mellow Member such as Costello brokering the final deal.

Maryland: Rep. Steny Hoyer (D)
Seat change: 0

In addition to his leadership role in the House Democratic Caucus, Hoyer still carries a lot of weight with state lawmakers in Annapolis. He served in the state Senate for more than a decade, including as that chamber’s president for three years in the 1970s. Lucky for Hoyer, local politicians live long lives in the Old Line State — and many of his relationships within the House and Senate are still intact. The redistricting stakes in Maryland are small but meaningful for Democrats. It is one of the few states where Democrats control the redistricting process, and the party has the opportunity to pick up one or two seats at the expense of freshman Rep. Andy Harris (R) and, perhaps, longtime Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (R). Make no mistake, Rep. Chris Van Hollen, a former Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee chairman and veteran of the state Legislature, is still a major player in local politics. Hoyer, however, is closer to state Senate President Mike Miller, who will ultimately guide his chamber to draw the new maps.

New York: Rep. Steve Israel (D)
Seat change: -2

You can’t say Israel didn’t know what he was signing up for when he took the reins of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee this cycle. But as head of House Democrats’ campaign arm, one of Israel’s biggest headaches is not in Washington, D.C. — but back home in New York. Every district in the Empire State is lacking the requisite population for a post-2012 Congressional district, which means no seat will be left untouched next year. Fortunately for Israel, the bulk of the population loss is upstate, where Republicans made big gains last cycle. Those districts will likely be affected the most, which puts Israel in the driver’s seat in the delegation in determining which Republican-held seat will get eliminated and which Democratic district can be made safer. However, given the population loss in the state, it’s...
also extremely likely that the second district eliminated will come out of the downstate area, where Democrats control many of the seats. Especially if state lawmakers threaten to draw a Member-vs.-Member race among suburban or urban Democrats, Israel will be in a tough spot trying to strike a deal to save his colleagues.

North Carolina: Rep. Patrick McHenry (R)
Seat change: 0

Although this state is not losing any seats, Republicans have a lot to gain in the Tar Heel State. That’s because the GOP left quite a bit of low-hanging fruit — otherwise known as winnable districts — here in 2010, when Democrats for the most part staved off the Republican tidal wave. Democratic Reps. Larry Kissell, David Price, Brad Miller, Heath Shuler and Mike McIntyre won re-election — and almost all of them are surrounded by GOP-dominated areas. But the likelihood that all will survive in 2012 is slim because Republicans control the redistricting process and the Democratic governor has no veto power. McHenry and Rep. Virginia Foxx are the two House Republicans most active in local politics, and they literally have seats at the table. Both former state lawmakers attend state party planning meetings that some of their GOP colleagues frequently skip. However, McHenry boasts an edge because he is particularly active with the National Republican Congressional Committee, where the deputy political director is a former McHenry aide and has been specifically tasked with overseeing North Carolina this cycle.

Ohio: Rep. John Boehner (R)
Seat change: -2

If House Republicans have elected him as the most powerful Member on Capitol Hill, just imagine how low-ranking state Representatives from Akron to Zanesville feel when they get a call from the Speaker. Although Boehner typically shies away from big plays in local politics, he and his staff are closely watching the redistricting situation in Ohio, which is slated to lose two seats this cycle. Because of dramatic population loss in the Cleveland area, at least one of the eliminated seats will most likely come from a Democratic-held seat in northeastern Ohio. The big question is, from which part of the state will the second seat eliminated come? There’s increasing likelihood that a freshman Republican will have to fall on the sword. What’s more, with Republicans in control of the redistricting process, they will likely want to shore up the districts of the five freshman Republicans in the Buckeye State. Not only is it going to be Boehner’s call as to which of the five will get a safer district, he’s also going to have to make the call on which Member of his freshman class will be on the chopping block.

Pennsylvania: Rep. Bill Shuster (R)
Seat change: -1

Keystone State Republicans are not only aiming to pit two Democrats against each other in one district, but they also want to shore up the competitive GOP-leaning seats in southeastern Pennsylvania. Although Shuster is not the dean of the delegation, state Republicans say there’s no question that he’s a major broker between Washington, D.C., and the state capital — acting as a go-between among his GOP colleagues as they begin the extended mapmaking process in the state. Shuster also has some skin in this game. With a matchup between southwestern Pennsylvania Reps. Jason Altmire (D) and Mark Critz (D) almost a foregone conclusion, Shuster does not want any part of Democrat-heavy nearby Johnstown to end up in his staunchly GOP district. But while Shuster may be the unofficial leader, he’s not the only one trying to influence the redistricting game: The delegation’s dean, Rep. Joe Pitts (R), still has some say in the matter, and GOP Reps. Charlie Dent and Jim Gerlach, both of whom have survived tough races in their southeastern swing districts, have deep ties to state lawmakers from their 10-plus years serving in the state Legislature.

Texas: Rep. Pete Sessions (R)
Seat change: +4
Ten years ago there was no question who was in charge of redistricting in the Lone Star State. But since the departure of former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R), there’s been a major redistricting power vacuum in the state that boasts the biggest prize in the country: four new seats. The result is a power struggle among three big-name Republicans: Sessions and Reps. Lamar Smith and Joe Barton. Smith was initially tapped by his colleagues to lead the redistricting charge because of his close ties to the state Speaker and his chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee (key because the Justice Department must clear the Texas map). But Smith’s influence has waned since his public scrap with Barton, who accused him of not being aggressive enough on behalf of the GOP in his mapmaking requests. Sessions is no stranger to redistricting battles after the DeLay-led redraw in 2004, when he was pitted against then-Rep. Martin Frost (D) and won. That race, plus his experience with the process and amicable reputation within the delegation, makes him the key power player. Not to mention he’s in charge of the National Republican Congressional Committee in this redistricting cycle.
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