

Running Against the Computer;

Stephen Solarz and the Technician-Designed Congressional District

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By Richard Minitzer

THE DEFEAT of Rep. Stephen Solarz in the New York Democratic primary last week surprised many observers. While the press was quick to attribute the loss to Solarz's 743 House Bank overdrafts and his decision to run in a six-way race in the newly drawn and predominantly Hispanic 12th District, Solarz faced a third hurdle -- a computer.

That's because the New York congressional districts were drawn by computer junkies using a special program that manipulates new census information. The result is an electronic gerrymander so precise it can tell who lives on each side of the street. "It would have been very difficult for a mere human hand to draw that map," said a spokesman for Solarz.

The district that Solarz chose to run in snakes through Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan. Districts had to be redrawn when declining population forced New York to reduce its House delegation from 34 to 31 and to satisfy the Voting Rights Act, which requires increased minority representation.

Every 10 years census teams scour the country to count the population and change the political calculus. Census data is tabulated, sorted and stored in a huge computer data base -- enough dots of data to paint a pointillist portrait of America.

The census data are used by state lawmakers -- and lately, the Justice Department and the courts -- to sculpt congressional districts and win elections for their favorites. Each of the 435 districts is drawn with an eye toward age, income, race and a host of other factors -- classic gerrymandering as old as the Republic. What's changed is that now aggressive consultants using new technology are using that data base to transform the politics of the 1990s. In a sense, our political future is being written by unelected computer demographers.

Whoever controls that process has enormous power to influence Congress and the national debate. "The way you draw a district line can determine whether you elect a white, a black, a Republican or a Democrat. And depending on that election, the constituency could be well represented or poorly represented," says William McGee, an expert on high-tech redistricting.

With so much at stake, state lawmakers are turning to a new generation of high-tech demographers, who use sophisticated programs to redraw America's political map. Computerized 1990 Census data is combined with an electronic map called TIGR, or "Tiger" by hackers, which stands for "topographically integrated geographic referencing" and coding system. Developed by the U.S. Geological Survey, Tiger breaks down the entire population into city-block-sized units and is precise enough to tell analysts who live on the right and the left sides of each street. Before

Tiger, this information, if it existed at all, was hidden in rows of numbers on computer spreadsheets. Now, new programs allow researchers to see the information displayed graphically, color-coded on topographical maps.

More and more decision-makers are unleashing Tiger to give them a competitive edge. For years, companies such as Arby's, Marshalls and General Motors, have used Tiger to decide where to site their next plant or store. Nowadays, executives rely on computer maps showing everything from traffic patterns and land prices to electrical grids and population growth.

It was only a matter of time before politicians got into the act. The Census sells these electronic maps for \$ 250 per compact disk -- the bigger the state, the more disks required to map it. "Some states go for as little as \$ 500," says Barbara Harris, a geographic information specialist at the U.S. Census. With more than 1,000 customers already buying 1990 Census data, Tiger's highly-detailed electronic picture of the electorate is fast becoming a favorite tool for a new generation of political consultants.

Once one side starts to analyze and manipulate Tiger information to create districts that favor their clients, everyone must. After all, the only way for one group to balance the effects of another's computer map is to create one of its own -- and fast. The result is a set of competing data bases and political maps.

And many more maps. Florida might have had a half-dozen proposed plans for new congressional districts in 1980, but it had over one thousand in 1991, said Dale A. Tibbitts, director of computer services at nonpartisan Election Data Services. And that makes it harder for the press and the public to criticize gerrymandering -- until it's too late.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution thought of congressional districts as small communities, places where people were within a day's horse ride or so of their congressman. Fair representation amounted to what lawyers call "physical propinquity" or compactness. Not today. "There's no federal requirement for compactness," says Tibbitts, pointing to a map the size of a car hood. It shows a proposed district that begins in northwestern Florida near the Georgia border, snakes through Jacksonville, reaches into Tallahassee and dangles a long tendril "all the way to Disney World in Orlando," says Tibbitts.

Districts once were supposed to conform to some idea of community. Today that notion is vanishing in the haze of electronic age. "We're moving from an idea the framers had in mind to an idea that the computer had in mind," said Michael Barone, editor of the biannual "Almanac of American Politics," in a recent TV interview.

Texas State Sen. Eddie Bernice Johnson, the chairman of the redistricting committee, "drew a district for herself that looks like a DNA molecule diagram that spins throughout [Dallas] county," added Barone. A political map of North Carolina is a crazy-quilt of zig-zagging, overlapping, unnatural shapes designed to reelect incumbent politicians. But some districts are still gerrymandered the old-fashioned way -- by hand: Witness Northern Virginia's new 11th District, which looks like a battered crab and wanders through Fairfax and eastern Prince Williams counties.

Illinois' 4th District is a textbook case of digital gerrymandering. Designed pursuant to a federal court order, the district connects two predominantly Hispanic areas in an elongated, crushed C-shape. In the hollow of the C-shape is Rep. Cardiss Collins (D), representing a mostly black constituency. To join the two Hispanic areas more directly would "cut Collins off from her base," explains Tibbitts. More is going on than mere gerrymandering. Citing the Voting Rights Act, a 1965 statute that is supposed to guarantee fair representation for all voters, the Justice Department, minority groups and some cynical Republicans have joined hands to draw congressional districts to elect more minorities -- making other districts whiter in the process. Often they've had to rely on computer models to challenge proposed districts.

But even court-sanctioned, computer-created districts don't guarantee the election of more minorities. "I've seen maps on the state [representative] level, in places like New York City, that are 60 to 70 percent minority that would elect white congressman," says Kimball W. Brace, president of Election Data Services.

There is also the fear that computerized reapportionment might lead to subtler gerrymandering. That would make it harder for racial or political minorities to challenge the designs of state lawmakers in the courts.

Of course, this is only a taste of what could be coming next. While political parties have long targeted voters by Zip Codes, that is considered crude by today's standards. Some say politicians have just discovered what marketers have known for years: People are largely a sum of their appetites. Much can be revealed about you by knowing how many bottles of mineral water you drink, what kind of car you drive, what catalogues you get in the mail and so on. Class in America depends not so much on how much you have, but on how you spend it.

"It may end that we'll have mailing-list democracy so you can have a district that maximizes blacks, a district that maximizes Common Cause members, a district that maximizes Human Events subscribers or purchasers of Dr. Pepper," says Barone. "I exaggerate, but I don't know how much so."

Mailing-list democracy? The congressman from Hammacher-Schlemmer? Call it what you like, it may have claimed its first victim in Steve Solarz.