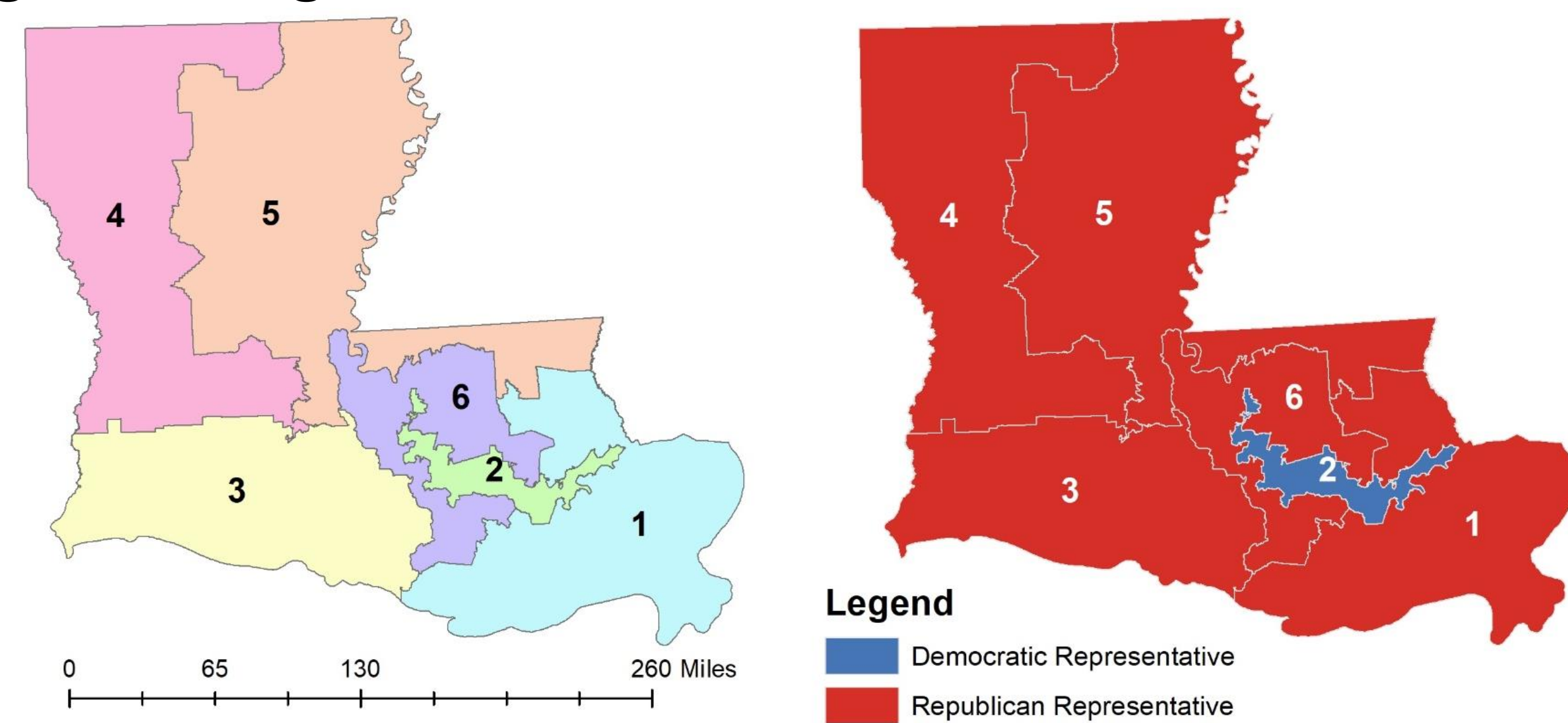


Figure 1 Congressional Districts in Louisiana



Background

Gerrymandering, or drawing congressional districts so as to manipulate electoral outcomes, is a practice almost universally reviled in the United States, but finding a solution to undo political meddling is not nearly as easy as Americans hope. There are two primary strategies for gerrymandering: (1) Packing is the practice of concentrating as many voters of a particular group (whether that group be designated by race, income, political tendency) into as few districts as possible to limit the number of representatives of the respective party in that state; (2) Cracking is the practice of spreading voters of a particular type among many districts in order to dilute their influence and deny them a voting bloc in any particular district. Some packing is necessary in order to create majority-minority districts—those in which members of a single minority group make up a majority of the voting-age population—especially in states where racial minorities make up a significant portion of the population. In fact, drawing district lines by solely following other administrative boundaries like county lines can be a violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Clearly, there is no single panacea for gerrymandering that does not bring its own tradeoffs. Districting must ultimately prioritize one of four characteristics, while sacrificing the other three to some extent: (1) Protecting the rights of minority voters; (2) Preserving administrative boundaries to keep the district compact; (3) Reflecting the political views of the overall state population; (4) Promoting highly competitive elections.

Research Question

Given the lawsuit filed in June 2018 by black voters and the National Redistricting Foundation claiming that Louisiana’s congressional districts violated the Voting Rights Act, and given the Republican control of redistricting after the 2010 census, what is the evidence of gerrymandering in Louisiana, and what are the implications of gerrymandering for the minority vote?

Figure 2 2016 Presidential Election Results in Louisiana

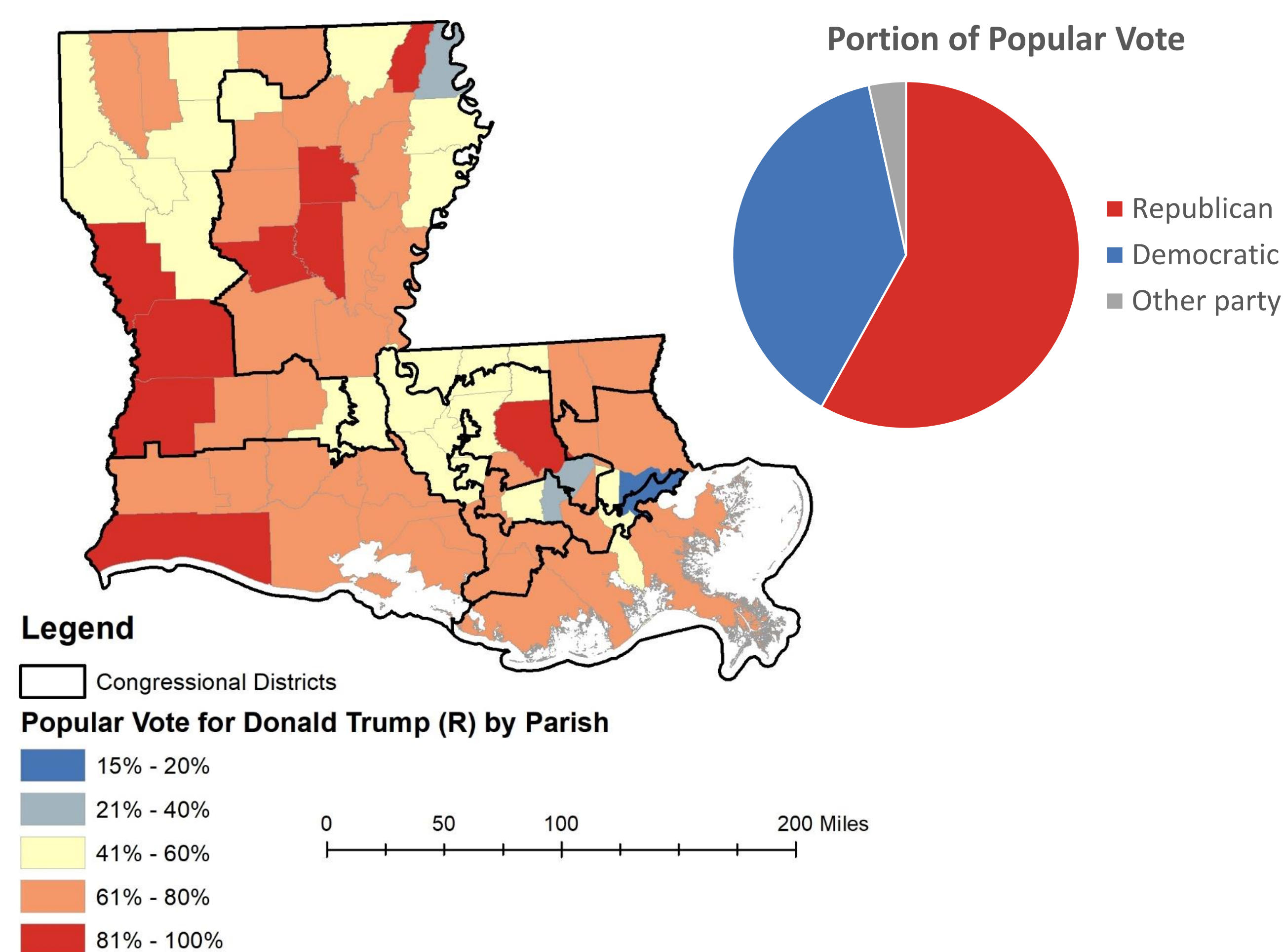
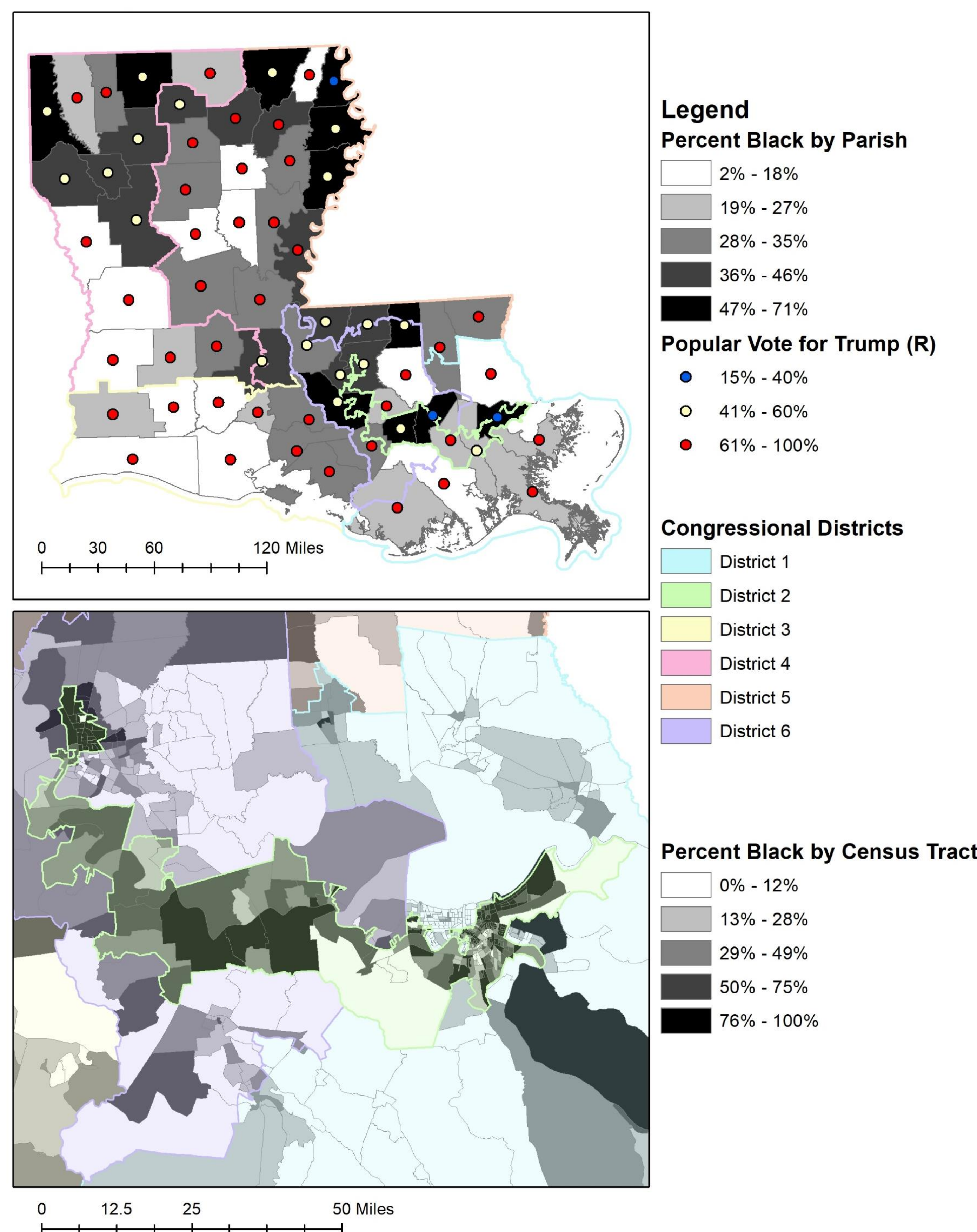


Figure 3 Congressional Districts and Race in Louisiana



Methodology

In these maps I considered each of the four priorities of districting while looking at politics, race, and existing administrative borders in Louisiana. First, Figure 1 displays the shapes of Louisiana’s six congressional districts and the political party of each representative; visual evidence of gerrymandering should be apparent from this map alone.

Second, I used the results of the 2016 presidential election as an indicator of the political leanings of the Louisiana populace. Figure 2 displays the dominant political party (or the existence of competitive politics) in each parish (Louisiana’s county equivalent), against the borders of the six congressional districts. This map is accompanied by a chart of the overall popular vote in Louisiana, of which approximately 60 percent and 40 percent went to Donald Trump (R) and Hillary Clinton (D), respectively.

Figure 3 uses US census data to display race in Louisiana, where one third of the total population is black American. I first map the racial makeup and political leanings of each parish against the six district borders. I then zoom into the primary suspect of gerrymandering by race and politics, District 2, which connects the major urban centers of New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and map the black population by census tract.

Finally, Figure 4 zooms even further into New Orleans at the border of Districts 1 and 2, where I compared the congressional district lines with preexisting parish lines to indicate in which places the district line splits parishes rather than following the parish line, creating less compact districts and dividing communities into separate districts.

Findings

An analysis of the maps presents evidence of both packing and cracking used to increase the power of the Republican vote, indicative of gerrymandering by the Republicans that led the redistricting. In Figure 2, liberal voters appear to be clustered in the northwest and northeast corners of the state, as well as in the parishes surrounding the urban centers of New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Additionally, the number of liberal voters appears to be positively correlated with the percent population of black Americans as in Figure 3. Cracking is most evident in Districts 4 and 5, where the black and liberal vote in the northern corners of the state is diluted by districting these parishes together with those possessing a high percentage of Republican and white voters. The black and liberal voters in the urban centers are packed into a single serpentine district connecting the two cities. In fact, zooming in reveals the precision used in drawing the district to include the tracts with a higher percentage of black Americans, with the district line even drawn precisely between the sections of New Orleans with the highest white and black populations.

What results is a state with five Republican and one Democratic district. However, if we expect the districts to reflect the overall vote (represented in the chart in Figure 2), the Democrats should then control two districts. Gerrymandering has successfully diluted the liberal vote and contained it to a single district, minimizing the political power of a group that represents approximately 40 percent of the overall state population. Moreover, these districts were evidently drawn with little regard to compactness, especially in the case of District 2. In my creation of Figure 2, I found 25 distinct instances of the district line dividing parishes. One example is highlighted in Figure 4, where an odd peninsula was drawn to extend District 2 to envelope a specific neighborhood: a tract home to a population that is 70 percent black.

Conclusion

The tactics used in gerrymandering are not meddlesome by nature. In fact, packing is required to some extent to maximize the number of minority-majority districts to protect the black vote or to create the two liberal-leaning districts needed to reflect the approximately 40 percent Democratic popular vote. What constitutes blatant political gerrymandering for one political party, however, is what we observe in Louisiana: the combination of both packing and cracking to minimize the voting power of a specific demographic. Gerrymandering can be used to even the playing field and empower minority voters, though this will come at the cost of less compact districts, dividing neighborhoods and communities. Given the tradeoff between equity and compactness, there is no sole ideal method of redistricting. The only prudent policy recommendation in this case is to permit the tools of gerrymandering, but to put them in the hands of an independent electoral commission, rather than left to the devices of whichever political regime happens to be in power.

Figure 4 Gerrymandering in New Orleans

