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Thomas Hofeller, Republican Master of Political Maps, Dies at 75

By Michael Wines

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Thomas B. Hofeller, a political consultant whose mastery of redistricting strategy helped propel the Republican Party from underdog to the dominant force in state legislatures and the House of Representatives, died on Thursday at his home in Raleigh, N.C. He was 75.

The Rev. Greg Jones, the rector of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Raleigh, where a service is scheduled for Friday, confirmed the death. The political website The Hill, quoting Dale Oldham, a friend and business partner of Mr. Hofeller's, said the cause was cancer.

For most of his 48-year career, Mr. Hoffeler was little known outside the small band of government clerks, political strategists and data buffs who surfaced, cicada-like, after every decennial census to draw new political maps.

But after Republicans swept many state legislative elections in 2010, giving them control over the political maps that would be drawn after that year's census, Mr. Hofeller gained an almost mythic reputation as an architect of the party's comeback.

He was extolled — or lambasted — in magazines and books and online as a father of the Republican strategy of cementing political control by controlling redistricting, and as the Michelangelo of the modern gerrymander.

He was in fact an important element of Republican success after 2010, most notably in North Carolina, where he drew new maps for House seats that turned a 7-to-6 Democratic edge into a 10-to-3 Republican fortress. Mr. Hofeller also advised Pennsylvania Republicans in redrawing that state's House map in 2011, as well as Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, the speaker of the House.

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In 2012, the Republican Party won a 33-seat majority in the House despite collecting 1.4 million fewer votes nationally than Democratic candidates. It was only the fourth time in a century that a party won the House while losing the popular vote.

But Mr. Hofeller's most lasting impact on Republican fortunes may well date to the 1980s, early in his career, when he pursued a counterintuitive strategy to speed the party's return to power in the South. His idea was to use the centerpiece of Democratic civil-rights policy, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, to force Southern states to draw more majority-black districts.

At the time, white Democrats still dominated state legislatures and local governments in the Deep South. In meetings with local black politicians, Mr. Hofeller showed how new political boundaries could bring together African-American voters who had been divvied up among districts controlled by white Democrats.

He was an expert witness for the black plaintiffs in a 1986 Supreme Court case, *Thornburg v. Gingles*, which effectively made the creation of black-majority districts a major consideration in map-drawing.

The new districts gave blacks entree into a political system that had been closed to them — and made surrounding districts more white and more receptive to Republican candidates. Mr. Hofeller convinced black politicians that they had a common cause against white Democrats who had rigged the system against both them and Republicans, Mark Braden, a former chief counsel to the Republican National Committee, said in an interview.

"Tom played a key role across the South in the destruction of the traditional Democratic Party," said Mr. Braden, now a lawyer in the Washington office of BakerHostetler.

That view is shared by Kimball Brace, the president of the Democratic political consulting firm Election Data Services and a colleague of Mr. Hofeller's since the 1970s. "The Democrats didn't see what was coming," he said.

Thomas Brooks Hofeller was born in April 1943 in San Diego and served on a Navy destroyer in the Tonkin Gulf during the Vietnam War.

He lived for many years in Alexandria, Va., and sang tenor in the choir at the National Cathedral before retiring to North Carolina. His survivors include his wife, Kathleen Hofeller, as well as a brother and a daughter, *The Hill* reported.

A political science major — and later the holder of a Ph.D. in government — Mr. Hofeller created a computerized mapping system in the early 1970s for the California State Assembly.

He soon got a sour taste of the power a ruling party could wield when it drew political boundaries. In 1981, California Democrats proposed a new map of congressional districts that critics said set new national benchmarks for unfairness. Mr. Hofeller, by then a founder of a public-policy research institute at Claremont McKenna College in California, his alma mater, proposed an alternative set of maps, to no avail.

A year later he joined the Republican National Committee, overseeing the party's data operations. There, crunching demographic and election numbers and aiding state and local party organizations, he quickly became the national party's redistricting guru — although that title was not formally acknowledged until 1989.

“He had the granular knowledge of what a district was really like,” said Benjamin L. Ginsberg, a longtime Republican Party counsel who is now a lawyer at Jones Day in Washington. Like great composers, mathematicians and painters, he said, Mr. Hofeller elevated political mapmaking to an art — “part knowledge, part genius.”

Mr. Hofeller churned through a series of jobs in subsequent years — in the Agriculture Department and as the staff director of a House committee overseeing the census — before returning to redistricting full time in 1999, this time as a consultant for the Republican National Committee and other groups.

His résumé, submitted as evidence in a lawsuit against his work on House maps in North Carolina, stated dryly that he gave “ongoing strategic, technical and legal support to members of Congress and those involved in redistricting in all states, including plan drafting.”

David Daley, whose book “Ratf**ked” is the definitive account of Republican redistricting strategy, said Mr. Hofeller did much more than that.

“Tom Hofeller invented modern redistricting,” Mr. Daley said in an interview. “He understood before anyone the importance of state legislatures and the possibilities for long-term Republican control if the party owned every seat at the table when it came time to redistrict.”

A welter of Democratic initiatives to recapture state legislatures, including one launched after the 2016 election by President Barack Obama and his attorney general, Eric Holder, were effectively “trying to catch up to what Hofeller understood 25 years ago, and executed brilliantly,” Mr. Daley said.

Mr. Daley, like many other critics, said he viewed Mr. Hofeller's accomplishments as anti-majoritarian, if not anti-democratic. Various United States Supreme Court justices have repeatedly condemned gerrymandering as an assault on democracy, even as they vacillated over how and whether to rein it in.

Mr. Hofeller, however, appeared to view skewed maps not as a moral issue but as a practical means to a political end: electing as many Republicans as possible. When a spate of Democratic gerrymanders locked Republicans out of state offices and the House in the 1980s, he was their fierce opponent, assisting plaintiffs in a landmark Supreme Court case, *Davis v. Bandemer*, that sought to outlaw partisan gerrymanders as unconstitutional.

But later, as the leading Republican drafter of partisan maps, he became their tireless advocate, roaming the nation to educate generations of party activists in the art and importance of skillfully drawn boundaries. His PowerPoint presentation on redistricting won a reputation for what came to be called “Hofellerisms,” slides that issued sometimes-hokey advice like “Don’t get cute, remember, this IS legislation!” “Don’t reveal more than necessary” and “Emails are the tool of the devil.”

Mr. Hofeller practiced what he preached. In January 2017, deposed under oath in a federal lawsuit challenging his North Carolina House maps, he left prosecutors empty-handed when they sought evidence of the instructions state Republicans had given him.

“There were no instructions given to you in writing?” they asked.

“No,” Mr. Hofeller replied.

“There’s no paper trail against which we can evaluate your description of the instructions?”

“I don’t believe so, no.”

“But you advised them not to give you instructions in writing, to do so orally?”

“I don’t recollect that,” Mr. Hofeller said.

A three-judge panel ruled in January that Mr. Hofeller’s maps were an unconstitutional partisan gerrymander. This summer, however, the Supreme Court ordered the judges to reconsider the decision; if the case returns to the Supreme Court, as seems likely, the maps could become the basis of a historic and potentially decisive ruling.

Doris Burke contributed research.