

OPINION

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Voters must make redistricting a priority

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While state leaders try to figure out this year's budget and prepare themselves for a 2010 election season, it's easy for some significant issues to be overlooked.

One issue that voters should make sure is addressed is a Constitutional amendment to change the way political districts are drawn after a census.

The census, of course, also will occur in 2010, and shortly after the numbers are counted, the state's dysfunctional system will kick in unless changes are made.

The process, if you can call it that with a straight face, is outlined in Article 4, Section 3 of the Illinois Constitution. Basically, if one party is in charge of both houses in the legislature and the governor's office, that party decides how the boundaries are drawn. If the General Assembly can't agree, the issue then goes to a special commission, and the ultimate decision actually could be made with a coin flip.

That's the process, but not exactly how things are done. In 2000, for instance, members of the two parties got together and basically divided up the state so as many incumbents as possible would be protected. That's why the 17th Congressional District looks something like a lobster claw, stretching from the Quad-Cities to Decatur. It's also why Decatur has the questionable honor of being represented by three congressmen.

Finally, it's also the reason there are so few contested races for state representative, state Senate or Congress. Most elected officials are in "protected" districts, which means re-election is almost ensured.

Gov. Pat Quinn's Illinois Reform Commission addressed the issue, saying the current system is "rife with unfairness, inefficiency and self-interest." The commission went on to say it "deprives Illinois voters of fair representation."

State Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon, has introduced a Constitutional amendment that would require the state to use an independent, nonpartisan Redistricting Consulting Firm to draw maps for the state House, Senate and U.S. House. The amendment would force the maps to be drawn in a way that decreases the

number of boundaries crossing county or municipal boundaries and would encourage districts that are compact and contiguous.

Just as important is what would not be considered: the residency of incumbents, political affiliation of registered voters and previous election results.

The General Assembly can place this issue on the November 2010 ballot, although experience tells us that the state's legislative bodies usually act in their own self-interest.

The voters also can put the issue on the ballot through the petition process.

The issue is an important one and could do a lot to make state government more responsive to citizens. If the General Assembly doesn't act responsibly, Illinois citizens should make sure this issue is on the 2010 ballot.