

New approach needed for redistricting

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With many Illinois politicians focused on next year's elections, a thorny issue that raises its head every 10 years is starting to draw attention — that of redistricting.

Redistricting in Illinois is the process of redrawing boundaries for the General Assembly's legislative districts following the U.S. Census, which will be conducted next year. The process is supposed to ensure that each of Illinois' 59 state Senate and 118 state House districts contain approximately the same number of people. Because population shifts occur within the state over time, the state is required to establish new districts that reflect the most recent Census data.

The Illinois Constitution requires that districts be compact and contiguous, as well as having roughly equal populations. The federal Voting Rights Act also requires minority groups to be treated fairly in drawing legislative districts.

Nevertheless, partisan politics traditionally have tainted Illinois' redistricting processes, resulting in so-called "gerrymandering," when districts are drawn up in such a way as to give one party the advantage in electing a representative or senator from that district.

Under Illinois' current system, adopted by voters in 1970, the General Assembly and the governor are directed to draw up the districts by June 30 of the year following the census. If they fail to agree on a map, a bipartisan commission is formed, made up of four Republicans and four Democrats. If the commission also deadlocks, a lottery is held to determine the ninth member to serve as a tiebreaker. Thus, the crucial question of who will control the redistricting process usually is decided by pure luck.

Many say there are better ways to go about this process. Earlier this month, the Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee held a hearing at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where they heard alternative proposals from officials of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute. Some of these proposals deserve careful consideration.

Institute officials urged the Illinois lawmakers to consider adopting a system similar to the one used in Iowa, where a computer operated by the non-partisan legislative services agency uses fresh Census tracts to draw new lines for the legislative districts. The plan drawn up by the computer must be approved by the Legislature.

Considering the recent antics of Illinois politicians, we believe it may make sense to let a computer guide them. At the very least, our state's redistricting process needs a thorough rethinking. Let's hope the politicians who are focused on getting re-elected will take time to give it some thought.