

Editorial: Don't forget State legislators' to-do list should include reform of redistricting process

Sunday, August 19, 2007 3:51 AM
The Columbus Dispatch

Now that the General Assembly is done soaking up praise for the remarkable bipartisan cooperation that brought about the least-rancorous budget process in recent memory, lawmakers should move on to another equally important job: improving the way legislative districts are drawn.

Ohioans have known for years that an improvement is needed, and the time is right for it.

The state needs it because gerrymandered legislative districts unfairly favor the party in power when the districts are drawn. This can give the dominant party an edge even when voters are moving toward the other party. This helped Republicans hold a majority in the state legislature even as they were swept from all but one nonjudicial statewide office and lost an Ohio seat in the U.S. Senate in the 2006 election.

Whichever party holds at least two of three offices -- governor, auditor and secretary of state -- has a majority on the State Apportionment Board and the upper hand in drawing new state legislative districts, which occurs after each U.S. census.

Democrats, who hold the offices of governor and secretary of state, might like to keep the present system in place, in the hopes of redrawing districts in a way to give themselves the sort of legislative majority enjoyed by Republicans for the past 16 years.

Anticipation of victories in 2006 might have been behind the Democrats' failure to back a reasonable reform plan put forth by Republicans. The plan called for a seven-member independent board to redraw districts. Selection of board members would be done in a manner to ensure bipartisan agreement.

The failure of that reform was an example of putting political strategy ahead of what's best for Ohio.

That could be bad strategy because Ohio's statewide offices will be up for grabs again in 2010, before census data are complete. Democrats' hold on the Apportionment Board could slip away before district lines are drawn again.

That uncertainty is why now is the time for both parties to support making the redistricting process as impartial as possible. More important, they should back it because it would lead to better state government.

No system for drawing districts will be perfect. While a competitive split between registered Democrats and Republicans is desirable, competitiveness shouldn't be an overriding goal because it can result in bizarrely shaped districts that ignore and destroy natural communities of interest.

Some areas typically vote heavily Republican and some are predominantly Democratic, but voters' affiliations can change over time. A more meaningful way to draw lines is to keep together natural communities of interest such as counties, cities and school districts.

Republican and Democratic leaders in the Statehouse owe it to Ohioans to deliver this badly needed reform.

