By Congressman Earl Blumenauer and Congressman Jim Leach for The New York Times

Congressional redistricting is about as interesting as someone else's genealogy. But occasionally the subject produces headlines, as it did two months ago when Democratic members of the Texas Legislature fled to Oklahoma to avoid creating a quorum to address the issue. Their desperate maneuver failed; Republican leaders have convened a special session on redistricting and the State Legislature will continue to debate the issue today.

Despite the public perception that the drawing of legislative maps is an insider's game of no particular relevance, the health of American democracy hinges on how state officials approach the issue. If competitive elections matter — and to much of the world they are what America stands for — then redistricting also matters.

Using redistricting to gain advantage over one's opponents has been going on almost since America was founded. "Gerrymandering," the term to describe the process of creating strangely shaped legislative districts, dates back to 1812 or so, when Elbridge Gerry devised a legislative map in Massachusetts to benefit his political party's interests.

The courts have occasionally waded into this legislative thicket, principally to protect the one-person, one-vote principle but also to ensure compliance with the Voting Rights Act. But redistricting simply for partisan advantage — so long as it doesn't result in less minority representation and isn't too geographically egregious — is not generally considered grounds for court interference.

It is, however, a matter of profound importance to our system of government. A few partisans should not be allowed to manipulate the landscape of state and national politics by legislative line-drawing. But that's exactly what has happened.

Gerrymandering has become a bipartisan pastime. California Democrats produced a plan that turned a closely divided Congressional delegation (22-21) into a 28-17 Democratic advantage after the 1980 reapportionment. After the 1990 reapportionment, Georgia

Republicans were able to turn a 9-1 disadvantage into an eventual 8-3 majority. In fact, Republican control of the House, won in 1994 for the first time in 40 years, was probably due more to shrewd redistricting than to the much-publicized "Contract with America."

In the wake of the 2000 census, candidates for governor and even obscure state legislators who would have a hand in drawing new legislative boundaries received unprecedented attention. In an unusual role reversal, some members of Congress even contributed money to state campaigns and hired their own lobbyists to represent their interests in state capitols.

The effort paid off. In big states that Republicans came to control, they were able to make gains. In Michigan, incumbent Democrats were forced into races against each other. In Pennsylvania, Democratic-leaning districts were eliminated altogether. And though the 2000 presidential election made clear that Florida is evenly divided on party preferences, it sends 18 Republicans to Congress and only 7 Democrats.

Democrats, meanwhile, did their own manipulating where they could, picking up seats in Georgia, North Carolina and Maryland. Battles are now brewing in New Mexico and Oklahoma as Democratic state legislators try to tailor districts to their party's advantage — just as Republicans are trying to do in Colorado and Texas.

More than either political party, however, the real winners in the redistricting games are incumbents. Nationwide, in 2002 only eight incumbents were defeated in the general election — and four of those lost to other incumbents. On average, last year Congressional incumbents won with more than two-thirds of the vote.

One response to all this, of course, could be indifference. Political manipulation is to be expected. Besides, despite the best efforts of partisans of both parties, Congress is still almost evenly divided, with only a slight Republican tilt.

But the consequences of entrenched incumbency should concern us all. Without meaningful competition in 90 percent of all races in the House, representatives become less accountable to voters and citizens lose interest in democracy.

More subtle consequences also unfold. When control of Congress rests on the results of those 20 to 30 races that are potentially competitive, the political dialogue in these campaigns, and legislative strategies in the House, become skewed. The few competitive races become playgrounds for power brokers who specialize in expensive, divisive and manipulative campaign techniques.

In Washington, legislative initiatives are frequently distorted in an effort to keep the vulnerable few in the political cross hairs. Bills on issues like farm policy or free trade are often framed to force members to choose between constituencies — farmers and unions, for example. Bills on health care may force members to choose between doctors and lawyers.

There is also a profound problem that is not subtle at all. Primary elections in districts that are overwhelmingly Republican produce candidates generally to the right of the average Republican, while more liberal Democrats usually emerge from primaries in districts that are overwhelmingly Democratic. The political center — where most Americans are most comfortable — gets the least representation in Congress.

In short, the current system produces a House that is both more liberal and more conservative than the country at large. Members are less inclined to talk and cooperate, much less compromise. The legislative agenda is shaped more to energize the political base than to advance the common good.

It doesn't have to be this way. Iowa, which has about 1 percent of the United States population and only five representatives in the House, saw as many competitive races in the last election as California, New York and Illinois combined. (For the record, those three states account for 101 seats in the House). Iowa is so competitive largely because it has an independent redistricting commission that is prohibited from considering where incumbents live when it draws new legislative maps.

What works for Iowa could work for the nation. The formula for avoiding inequities, undue partisan advantage and political dysfunction is the creation of independent redistricting commissions. Arizona recently followed Iowa's example, and such a commission has been proposed in Texas.

These commissions offer the best hope for taking partisanship out of the redistricting process. The public should insist that candidates for governor and state legislatures favor the development of strong nonpartisan redistricting plans.

Competitive elections are essential to the American system of government. Just as antitrust laws are necessary for a strong economy, so redistricting reform is critical for a healthy democracy.

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