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Remapping is not only about race

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It will take a miracle for Louisiana to come up with political maps by April 13 that will survive the initial scrutiny of U.S. Department of Justice. And, if the miracle comes to pass, it will take a second one for nobody to sue.

With one exception, the state has not been able to redistrict on the first try since it became subject to Justice Department scrutiny under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That said, trends can be broken.

More acutely relevant today is the context in which redistricting and reapportionment are being discussed in Baton Rouge. So far, the discussion has been all about race.

The process of redrawing political boundaries requires much more than that narrow focus, starting with the shared interests of adjacent and nearby communities.

The Voting Rights Act prohibits states from imposing any "voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure ... to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color." That includes Louisiana and eight other states that fall under the "preclearance" clause in Section 5 of the act.

The landmark act spoke directly to the widespread disenfranchisement of black Americans, particularly in the South and Southwest.

The act and subsequent court decisions prohibit all actions that have a "discriminatory intent" or "discriminatory effect." To that end, the Justice Department has denied and the U.S. Supreme Court has disallowed proposed political maps because they leaned too narrowly on race.

This is noteworthy today as reapportionment for Congress and redistricting of state districts plays out nationwide and as a lawsuit awaits a ruling.

The case, Shelby County, Ala., v. Holder, challenges the constitutionality of Section 4(b) and all of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. A decision by U.S. District Judge John Bates is expected no later than April.

The suit contends that Congress in 2006 did not use sufficient evidence in its decision to extend the act for 25 years. The decision, the plaintiff charges, was based solely on evidence that is historically accurate but woefully out of date.

At a hearing in February, Bates spoke to that issue: "We're now looking at a situation where that information is at least 45 years out of date, and by the time the 2006 extension ... runs its course it will be 70 years. That wouldn't seem to be a current coverage formula, would it?"

No matter how Bates rules in this important matter, the ruling will deserve a full hearing by the Supreme Court.