

Some claim earlier election stymies democracy

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Illinois' Feb. 2 primary election comes so soon after the holiday season, voters don't have enough time to make informed choices or even to vote at all, some candidates and experts say.

That could be a boon for incumbents, but does it stifle the democratic process? Especially, at a time when people are voting for such important offices such as Senator and Congressman at the federal level, and governor and lieutenant governor at the state level.

"The early primary does not create competition," said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "It allows for entrenched interests for people with power to retain power."

The filing deadline for petitions to be on the primary ballot was Nov. 2. Which meant candidates did not have much time to get their names and messages out. They also don't have much time to raise money. Incumbents, on the other hand, have both name recognition and, usually, more time to raise funds, Redfield said.

Primary winners face opponents from rival political parties in the November general election.

A February primary is relatively new to Illinois.

In 2007, the legislature moved the primary up to the first Tuesday in February from the third Tuesday in March to accommodate then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, who was running for president, said Rupert Borgsmiller, assistant executive director of the Illinois State Board of Elections.

'De-coupling' debate

Moving up primaries in presidential election years is common, but many states retain later non-presidential primary dates, a process called "de-coupling," Redfield said.

Illinois does not.

"States should be making decisions about the primary in terms of elections that affect their state," he said, "allowing there to be competition and maximizing participation."

As it stands now, Redfield said, the greatest advantage of early primaries goes to "people with power, money and name recognition."

Adam Kinzinger, a Manteno resident who is facing four other Republican candidates for the nomination in the 11th Congressional District, agreed.

"I think the primary this year is just too early," he said. Because of it, he has had to have a strategy that includes informing people of the election as well as his candidacy.

Gubernatorial candidate Bill Brady, a Republican, wants the primary moved to June.

"It's a horrific challenge," he said. "We are confronted with the holiday season, senior citizens who are outside of the state for the winter and potentially horrendous weather to get to the polls."

In 2008, only 29 percent of Kankakee County's nearly 65,000 registered voters cast ballots in the primary. Nine months later, 74 percent voted.

For the upcoming primary, 66,422 voters are registered in the county. Dan Hendrickson, of the Kankakee County Clerk's Office, expects just a little more than 20 percent of them will vote next month.

But, others are not so sure voters are eager to vote in non-presidential primaries.

"I've been on ballots since 1993," said U.S. Rep. Debbie Halvorson, D-Crete, "and off-year elections are always a lot less turnout."