How high the bar?

Is the integrity of the bench threatened when judicial races become more political?
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I continue to have an interest in what people generally call “negative advertising.” Two years ago, I tracked ads run by the gubernatorial candidates and the legislative candidates in targeted races. Later I wrote a three-page essay about the pros and cons of such political communication.

We have no statewide Illinois races this year, but some targeted legislative races are generating plenty of heat. So I encourage you once again to send me copies of fliers or mailers that are negative in nature, particularly those that attack opponents. Send them to me in care of Illinois Issues, U15, P.O. Box 19243, Springfield, IL 62794-9243.

Kilchen is all Jamieson has a new book out with some conclusions that might surprise you. It’s called Everything You Think You Know About Politics ... And Why You’re Wrong. Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has been tracking political advertisements for years.

She writes about media bias, the value of debates and her conclusion, contrary to that of many scholars, that negative advertising does not depress voter turnout. It’s a debatable point, to be sure.

It’s always been my belief that not all “negative” political communication is bad. Candidates have to distinguish themselves from their opponents, and one way to do that is to compare character, experience and positions. What is an anathema, in my view, is candidates resorting to lies, distortions and partial truths that misrepresent themselves or their opponents.

One point Jamieson raises is that the amount of distorted or misleading ads in the 1996 presidential election increased substantially over what was printed and broadcast in 1992. I hope the trend does not get even worse this year.

Everybody Hates Political Ads Except Your Local Television Station.” So blames an ad run by the Alliance for Better Campaigns, which is trying to convince television stations to devote more time to serious news coverage of political campaigns in their communities. The irony is that a number of incumbent officials are not eager to spend a lot of time on free television answering questions. They prefer to spend money on carefully scripted ads so Is the problem the TV stations or the candidates? Or both? Check out www.greedytv.org for more information.
Who is winning the presidential debates? Scholars say the voters are

by Peggy Boyer Long

W e went to press with this October issue just as the two major presidential candidates were settling on dates, places and formats for their nationally televised debates. It’s likely that the first of these critical election-year events will be held by us the time you sit down to read Illinois Issues. So we can’t pretend to know who “won” and who “lost” the initial matchup. A nd that’s just fine with us. A s a monthly, we face the challenge, and considerable luxury, of assessing campaigns from a more studied perspective.

Of course, we urge you to watch all of the debates. That’s because, contrary to prevailing wisdom, they can provide important information about candidates and policy questions. Scholars conclude that viewers of these quadrennial dramas are quite capable of gleaning what they need. They can, and do, screen out much of the distracting punditry. A nd they can, and do, make up or even change their minds. This, despite the fact that in some quarters that debates are too scripted and too spum to have meaning.

K athleen Hall Jamieson is one who believes they do have meaning. She is a political communications scholar who served on a 1986 task force that spurred creation of the Commission on Presidential Debates. A nd she argues that while debates do not usually determine the outcome of a presidential campaign, viewers’ knowledge of the candidates and the issues does improve. This is not the case for nonviewers. Jamieson directs the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and she has become, possibly to her surprise, one of those much-sought-after after-campaign pundits who writes so much about. Nevertheless, her conclusions are well-grounded in numbers.

In 1996, the center replicated the findings of a 1992 post-debate study conducted by other scholars that found a 30 percent improvement in viewers’ knowledge. “The reason is simple,” she writes in her latest book, Everything You Think You Know About Politics ... And Why You’re Wrong. “Debates contain extended amounts of issue and biographical information delivered in head-to-head fashion that invites comparison and contrast. A nd all of this occurs in a climate in which the people with whom we come into even casual contact feel comfortable asking what we thought of a debate. This sort of context — which is in some ways akin to a resist talk about the Superbowl the Friday before and the Monday after — involves the sort of conversation in which information learned is moved from short- to long-term memory.”

But Jamieson posts another reason why even highly educated voters gain knowledge from debate viewing: “M ore than half of the twelve (issue) positions (covered in the debate) were either unreported or underreported from September 1 through October 9, 1996.” A nd she takes the networks to task for announcing the “winners” and “losers” in post-instant debate surveys. How, she asks rhetorically, do they locate and interview a national random survey of voters so quickly? Is her answer that they don’t really. Individuals are contacted in advance and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed after the debate. More important, those individuals are chosen in a random sample weighted to reflect candidates’ predebate standings in the polls. Thus, those samples are not a random selection drawn from the universe of all those who watched the debate. A nd because Jamieson notes, “extended forms of communication reinforce existing dispositions, those who favored the front-runner are likely to judge that person the winner,” barring a major flub by that candidate. In general, she concludes, “the way to increase the likelihood of ‘winning’ a presidential general-election debate is to be ahead in the published polls on which the sampling frame for the debate is based.”

We couldn’t resist checking a number of Jamieson’s conclusions while preparing this issue. Her center has conducted studies, as well, on the impact of paid television ads on candidates. “Initial results,” she reports, “suggest that viewers of these quadrennial events gained more from debate viewing than from political ads.” A nd on whether elections actually matter. No surprise, she concludes that they do.
Do polls displace more thorough reports on issues? Critics answer yes

by Burney Simpson

It's flattering to be asked for an opinion. While it may be rare for a friend, relative or colleague to inquire, “What do you think?” businesses that ask us questions and gather information on our tastes and what we think about social issues have been multiplying, too. And the media have been covering those numbers thoroughly throughout what has come to seem like a never-ending campaign season.

But during the past few elections, there has been a growing scholarly backlash to the attention political polls get from the media. As the increasingly numerous critics contend they displace more thorough reports on the issues. And that politicians, fearful of negative numbers, have lost the ability to lead.

“We've gone overboard,” says former U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, who now heads the Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University. “Candidates do polls to decide their positions. That's anything but leadership.”

In recent years, legitimate surveys have gotten a black eye from “push polling,” a campaign strategy of pretending to conduct an unbiased survey. The push poll is hired by a candidate to manipulate voters into suspicions about the opposition. By the time the “survey” is over, a candidate's reputation has been trashed.

Professional pollsters acknowledge the complaints about their business. Indeed, there are several trade organizations that watch for and condemn questionable practices. But political surveyors insist news consumers take polls for what they are — a snapshot of opinion on the day they were conducted. And representatives of the media argue poll stories are a legitimate part of campaign coverage. If the daily news is the first draft of history and politics are snapshots, can we call a story about a poll a draft of a snapshot?

A recent election heats up, it may be points behind. The volunteers and the money dried up every time a poll ran because people pay so much attention to them,” says Poshardt, a Downstate Democrat.

In two polls conducted in August and October of that year, the Tribune reported Poshardt leading by 5 percentage points behind the eventual winner, Republican Gov. George Ryan. The pollster had begun the campaign more than four months earlier but had been down by less than 3 percentage points, a statistical tie. “We got more money in the last week. It was too late to even spend it,” recalls Poshardt.

Randy ended up winning by less than 4 percentage points.

The Tribune reported Poshardt's surge may have been due to voters rallying around Democratic candidates as President Bill Clinton faced Republican-led impeachment hearings. And pollsters can't predict a last-minute turnaround. And the voters who usually throw a monkey-wrench into the works are the undecideds.

One well-known mistake in predicting election results was the Tribune's embarrassing headline in 1948 that Thomas E. Dewey had beaten Harry Truman for president. Polls can be wrong.

And for all the complaints, polls are nothing new in American politics.

Do polls displace more thorough reports on issues? Critics answer yes. What do you think?
ALIEN MARAUDERS I

Scientists can't stop gypsy moth invasion

Residents of Lake County north of Chicago were the first to spot the small, odd-looking caterpillar. It had five pairs of blue spots and six pairs of red spots. And lots of hair. That was in 1996. A short time later, oaks started losing their leaves and neighbors of hair. That was in 1996. A short time later, oaks started losing their leaves and neighbors watched as entire stands of trees went bare.

And if other Illinoisans haven't seen this caterpillar yet, they will. The larvae of the gypsy moth is on the move. Officials say they can only hope to slow it down.

In an effort to do just that, the Illinois Department of Agriculture that Chinese aphid, but downstate is still at risk

A Soybean-eating aphid that earlier this summer had been bested by strong rains, fungus and hungry ladybugs in Illinois' northern counties has made a resurgence in several downstate counties. This summer the destructive new pest from China gave some farmers and University of Illinois researchers a moment of panic when it was found in 13 counties north of I-80. But the aphids and the damage they can do to soybean plants were stowed by swarms and the most recent reports confirmed infestations in Indiana and Ohio. Though natural predators have caused aphid populations to crash dramatically, that's not the end for this newest exotic bug because it can overwinter on buckthorn, a woody shrub that is also an invading species. So scientists are trying to learn as much as they can about this newest transplant from outside U.S. borders. As they did with the Asian long-horned beetle, scientists have quickly

had to determine just what the nearly microscopic green bug is and how much damage it can do to Illinois crops. A scientist identified it as Aphis glycines, an aphid that has caused considerable damage to Chinese soybean crops. However, the pest is so exotic that references to it are almost entirely written in Chinese. University of Illinois entomologist Kevin Steffey, who helped identify and track the invader, says the latest survey shows it to be much more widely distributed than originally thought. "A lot of entomologists and plant pathologists are planning to learn as much as we can about the soybean aphid before the 2001 growing season," he says. "Although the soybean aphid is a new pest for us, we want to be prepared for whatever it may bring next year."

Illinois grows 14.4 percent of the nation's soybean crop each year. Last year's harvest was worth $2.2 billion.

Bealey Scottel
Decatur bracres for bailout from the Firestone investigation

As the Justice Department and Congress probe who knew what when in the Bridgestone/Firestone tire recall, all roads in this intensifying national story appear to lead to Illinois.

The D'ecatur plant where many of the company's 6.5 million recalled tires were manufactured has emerged as a focal point in the investigation into how faulty tires played a role in at least 103 traffic fatalities and more than 400 injuries. It's an enviable position for D'ecatur's residents, but unfortunately a familiar one. Though much of the latest detail to the central Illinois community suffered labor strife and last fall's local school board endorsed a nonpartisan system, the Firestone investigation has drawn national attention after it expelled six black high school students for fighting at a football game. This time, the attention is on the city's fourth-largest employer, and the jobs of 2,100 Bridgestone/Firestone employees hang in the balance.

"We're just praying for the best and preparing for the worst. That's what we're doing," said D'ecatur Mayor Terry Howley. "I think that company is going to be hard-pressed to be in business a year from now from the financial impact that is going to have on them."

The crus of the safety problems revolve around tread that separates from some of Bridgestone/Firestone's tires, rotating at high rates of speed and causes drivers to lose control. Most of the unsafe tires were on Ford Explorer sport utility vehicles.

Dozens of lawsuits against the company and Ford Motor Co. already have emerged, and some could be consolidated in the federal court district based in East St. Louis.

In late August, attorneys involved in some of the approximately 80 lawsuits came to D'ecatur to interview four former Bridgestone/Firestone employees about plant practices prior to the recall. The retirees told the lawyers they were required to use outdated rubber to make tires, some were never inspected and the quality work at the plant suffered under the strain of mandatory 12-hour shifts. Congress also has weighed in on the matter by holding hearings that zeroed in on whether Bridgestone/Firestone and Ford lied and covered up the problem long before it was publicly disclosed last spring by a Houston television station and subsequently by the Chicago Sun-Times.


"It's really a discussion with insiders;" said Shimkus. "I think that was -- what we really out of our hands, it's just praying for the best and preparing for the worst."

"But for Firestone, as news keeps coming out, it looks like maybe they've been aware for a long time. If that turns out to be the case, this could be disastrous for them.," said Dave McKinney, Statehouse bureau chief, Chicago Sun-Times.
Census regulations a boon for rural economies

Small communities throughout Illinois will collect millions of dollars in federal benefits over the next decade because more than 42,000 prisoners are being counted in the 2000 census in the towns where they are incarcerated.

Under federal regulations, Illinois inmates are considered residents of the small municipalities, not of their home towns. As a result, prisoners often increase a town’s population dramatically.

Census tussles help determine federal and state funding for education, health care, transportation and other public services. Further, prison inmates lower the per capita income of a city, making it eligible for even more federal dollars, including funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

But little, if any, of those funds go directly to prisoners, U.S. Census Bureau officials say. It would be stretching to make an argument that there’s a direct benefit to the prisoners themselves,” says Ed G ore, assistant division chief for field programs for the bureau. A according to G ore, the only benefit to inmates is “better infrastructure” such as roads and sewers in the communities where the nearby prisons are located.

The 27 Illinois cities with nearby state prisons, however, celebrate the cash windfall or other, indirect advantages a prison brings to town. (Eight of those towns have not annexed prisons)

“It enabled a small community to lift itself up by the bootstraps,” says Thomas Denton Jr., economic development coordinator for Pinckneyville, a community near the southern end of the state. “In the last three years, we’ve had $435 million of capital investment in our city limits [because of construction of the prison].”

Construction of infrastructure necessary for the Pinckneyville Correctional Center, which opened in 1998, helped that community move forward with the development of two industrial parks, which, in turn, led to the creation of 1,500 jobs.

There are other benefits, as well. Pinckneyville has a population of about 6,000, including more than 2,000 prison inmates. It receives approximately $200,000 annually in additional revenue due to that population, according to D. Ert. Usher.

While other small towns see similar benefits to having a prison within city limits, Cook County will lose nearly $88 million because its residents make up almost 63 percent of Illinois’ inmate population statewide. According to data from the state Department of Corrections, while Illinois inmates spend an average of 1.8 years behind bars, most return to their hometowns after their release.

“Those folks should be counted in the home cities,” argues Diane Williams, president and chief executive officer of the Safer Foundation, a Chicago nonprofit that provides services to former inmates and prisoners in work-release programs.

“That’s where they’re going to spend their preponderance of those 10 years [covered by the census].”

But Gore counters that it’s not technically feasible to count people in their hometowns. The census, meant to provide a snapshot of the nation’s population, is designed to count people where they are spending most of their days at the time of the census.

Most town officials agree prisoners don’t impose additional local operating costs. And the extra dollars generated through the prison population are usually earmarked for infrastructure and general city operating expenses.

However, some note the state realizes a return, too. “We spend a portion of it on the facilities. We take care of the outside area,” says Frank Erickson, mayor of Chester, the southern Illinois community where the Menard Correctional Center is located.

Chester’s population increased from 5,400 to 8,200 when the prison was annexed a few years ago. And the city expects to get more than $300,000 each year in added revenue due to the prison population, Erickson says.

The city of Pontiac, a community in the north central section of the state with a 1990 population of 11,428, also spends much of its extra federal funding on infrastructure improvement around the local prison. Robert K. Arls, city administrator, says the town receives $120,000 annually because of the 1,500 inmates housed at Pontiac Correctional Center.

The prison is Pontiac’s second-largest employer, with 900 workers. “Number one, [the prisons] are a major, major employer and a major employer. They’re pretty well insulated from economic downturn,” K Arls says.

Still, some cities don’t attempt to use the added census funds to improve areas near the prison. “It’s for the city to use, not the Department of Corrections,” says Donal L. Randich, mayor of Crest Hill, home to Stateville Correctional Center in Will County near Joliet. Nearly 20 percent of Crest Hill’s population of more than 13,300 lives in the prison. As a result, the city realizes approximately $270,000 annually because of the prison’s residents, Randich says.

The additional census funds, coupled with employment opportunities and other advantages — the prisons are generally the largest water and sewer customers in town — have encouraged other cities to woo the Department of Corrections.

Stephen Turner, economic development coordinator for Taylorville in central Illinois, says his city would receive more than $120,000 annually if it annexed the nearby Taylorville Correctional Center.

The extra dollars, however, are numerous other pluses to being less than a mile from a state penitentiary. M ost of the prison guards live in town, and prison work crews are used for city construction and cleanup, Turner says. Taylorville sells the prison water at twice the city rate.

But the prospect of added revenue has ignited discussion about reappportionment of the nation’s 435 U.S. representatives. The state legislature would then draw new congressional district maps within its borders. A nd Charles N. H weeler III, who previews this state’s reap for the A lmanac of Illinois Politics — 2000, published by the U numbery of Illinois at Springfield’s Institute for Public Affairs, notes Illinois is in jeopardy of losing one seat.

The projection rests on a study by E lection Data Services Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm. According to Wheeler, the EDS analysis, based on state-by-state population estimates for 1999 released by the Census Bureau in late December, shows that if Congress were reapportioned on the basis of the estimates, Illinois would fall 39,898 residents short of holding its 20th seat.

Shortly before the beginning of the new year, the Census Bureau will deliver the country’s decennial headcount to the president. That will set in motion a reappportionment of the nation’s 435 U.S. representatives. The state legislature then would draw new congressional district maps within its borders. And Charles N. H weeler III, who previews this state’s reap for the A lmanac of Illinois Politics — 2000, published by the U numbery of Illinois at Springfield’s Institute for Public Affairs, notes Illinois is in jeopardy of losing one seat.

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Judicial races are becoming more like other campaigns. Does that threaten the integrity of the bench?

Analysis by Aaron Chambers

Criminal Appeals Court Judge Pam Baschab went for votes the old-fashioned way. When she ran for chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court last spring, she walked from one end of the state to the other.

In Alabama, as in most states, stand for election. So Baschab, just like a nonjudicial candidate, hit the road and met voters. The walk, in and of itself, may not seem unusual in a judicial campaign. But Baschab’s walk wasn’t just for votes.

“My campaign was out there on the public,” she says. “It was a trial run to see how people would react.”

Spending can be an important factor in his race. But Baschab’s walk wasn’t just for votes.

“I was a pilgrimage against the money,” she says. “It was a trial run to see how people would react.”

DuPage County Circuit Judge Bonnie M. Wheaton had a similar protest in mind when she ran for the Illinois Supreme Court last spring. She spent $14.000 of her own money on her campaign, she says, to highlight the hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions her opponents were taking.

“I think people support their judges,” she says. “I think they want to know that their judge is fair, that their judge is independent.”

The judges’ messages resonated with their own campaigns and, to some extent, in the media. But elsewhere, they apparently fell flat.

These two judges lost their high court campaigns, and neither of their races deterred other judicial candidates from raising and spending millions of dollars.

Still, their efforts highlight what reformers argue is the single greatest threat to the independence of the courts: Judicial candidates have become more like other political candidates. They raise increasing amounts of money — much of it from lawyers, businesses and other special interests — to wage television ad campaigns, some of which engage in public debate on controversial issues.

There is no proving, of course, that campaign contributions to judges are political contributions for that matter, color their decisions while in office. A nd reasonable people within the legal community can and do disagree about whether the bench is tarnished when some justices take to the airwaves in the heat of a campaign to argue policy questions. But on one point there is plenty of evidence.

There has been a decline in public respect for the judiciary that stems from this increasingly political election process.

There’s no question, either, that judicial campaigns are getting more expensive. This year, candidates for the bench in several states broke previous spending records. In Ohio, as much as $12 million is expected to be spent in the battle for a single Supreme Court seat. Candidates in that state are limited by a high court rule on how much they can spend, but the rule doesn’t restrict spending by political action committees.

The spending hasn’t gotten that high in Illinois. Still, records are broken every year this time when three candidates for the Illinois Supreme Court spent more than $1 million each, and a fourth spent almost that much. The $580,000 spent in 1992 by Chief Justice Moses opposed by his opponent were broken.

The Illinois Supreme Court spent more than $600,000 this year on 19 primary races. (Both parties fielded candidates in only one of the races.)

In a few Democratic races for one countywide vacancy, candidates spent a combined total of more than $460,000, which is believed to be a record amount spent on a circuit court race. Chicago lawyer Joyce M. Murphy won the race. Mr. Lin L. Gohar, who was second, spent nearly $284,000.

The increasing role of money in judicial races has garnered the most attention from the media and numerous task forces studying judicial election reform, but that’s not the only trend in judicial campaigning. Candidates for the bench in some jurisdictions also are raising issues, even taking stances on such questions as abortion, a move many in the legal community believe could compromise objectivity on the bench. Indeed, in states where races have traditionally been nonpartisan, political parties have begun assuming a greater role in getting judges elected, helping to fuel the debate on judicial independence.

And that brings us back to the Baschab and Wheaton races. Those campaigns brought national attention not only to concerns about campaign cash but to concerns about how judicial candidates were running their campaigns.

Illinois Supreme Court Justice S. Louis Raftery, who also lost in his race, failing to capture a third term, summed up the issue in a different way.

“The problem is not that people spend too much money on campaigns,” he said. “The problem is that people spend too much money on campaigns.”

But in a different way, the issue is how much money is spent. And the problem is how much money is spent.

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Illinois Issues
October 2000

Proponents of the elective system counter that any alternative, including “merit” selection, or appointment of judges, would be no less political. At least with elections, that line of reasoning goes, candidates can market their credentials to the public. “It’s a free society, and an elected public can run and present their credentials,” says Illinois’ Chief Justice Harrison. “However, that doesn’t mean that it’s going to be a lot less political," he says. "We have some other group or person deciding who the judges are going to be. I would rather have it with the people.”

Still, pressure for some judicial campaign reform is building. This coming December, the chief justices of the 13 largest states with judicial elections are expected to meet in Chicago to discuss the issue. The meeting, which is being coordinated by the National Advisory Council for State Courts, will include representatives of California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin.

"For the meantime, the Colorado County Judicial Advisory Council, a body that studies problems in the judicial system and makes recommendations for change, announced in August that it had formed a special task force to provide voluntary guidelines for judicial candidates. The task force, formed to help candidates run professional and ethical campaigns, also plans to establish a hot line for candidates with questions.

An Illinois State Bar Association committee also is looking at the behavior of judicial candidates.

Three other committees, funded by the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, were launched last May to examine whether campaign contributions from judges affect the judicial system and whether the judicial campaign funding system can be reformed.

One of those committees, formed by the American Bar Association, the Chicago Council of Lawyers and the University of Illinois at Springfield, notes that some judges may be "designed to satisfy voters' desire to play a role in selection without risking improper political influence on the decision of who occupies judicial positions. Candidates for retention run unopposed on the ballot and voters simply choose whether to reelect them. Several states use that system.

Meanwhile, 17 states require some judges who are initially appointed to the bench to run for re-election to the commission to run for retention. Through retention races are officially uncontested, in recent years some of those races have attracted big money. Three California Supreme Court justices were ousted in 1986 after grass-roots organizations spent about $7 million opposing retention. And in Illinois this year, Supreme Court Justice Charles E. Freeman may face an anti-retention campaign following controversial judicial appointments he made in Cook County.

The American Judicature Society was most critical of the public primary system, which was introduced in 1913, shortly after that nonpartisan group was formed. Today, according to the judiciary society, 15 judicial candidates run for election at some level of the court system. Thirteen of those states have a partisan system, the system that some judicial experts believe has attracted the most attention. Another 18 hold officially nonpartisan elections, though political parties endorse judicial candidates, and in the other states judicial races are linked to partisan political operations. Several states fall into more than one category because the way they use different levels of the court system are selected varies. Illinois uses a modified electoral system, Kansas uses a direct primary system, and the state Supreme Court candidates in this state run in contested, partisan elections for their first terms. Judges who are elected for their first term must win their party's primary election. Those candidates who are initially appointed to the bench are not required to disqualify for the primary. They may face an anti-retention campaign if they fail to win the primary.

But what that aspiring judicial candidates would operate well above the bottom line of acceptable contributions. "So what we're going to do," says Robert P. Cummins, former chair of the inquiry board, now a partner with the Chicago firm of Cummins & Cronin LLC, "is to articulate the criteria for what political contributions are acceptable."

Efforts to reform the judicial election system rest on the assumption that money has a corrupting influence, but whether one can or can't articulate a view of a particular subject, then I think we're in trouble." But we get what we pay for. And as long as judges are elected, candidates for the bench are going to have to do what they have to do to win.

Aaron Chambers is a Statehouse reporter for the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin.

This story and the two that follow were partially funded by a grant from the Joyce Foundation through The Sunshine Project of the Center of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. The story and the project have funded other stories about campaign finance in Illinois, including “The hour tops,” a project in which Cummins and Cronin will coordinate with the Illinois State Bar Association.

The Retention election, a device designed to satisfy voters' desire to play a role in selection without risking improper political influence on the decision of who occupies judicial positions. Candidates for retention run unopposed on the ballot and voters simply choose whether to reelect them. Several states use that system.
$460,000, which is believed to be a three competitors spent about of Judge Joan M. Corboy, Leavitt and primary races earlier this year won March 21 primary races raised in an unsuccessful bid last spring to the Illinois State Board of Elections.

In the race to fill the countywide County.

The victors in races for circuit and "The problem is [that] to spend the money, you have to raise it," says Marcella C. Lipinski (D) campaign finance their campaigns, judges. But critics charge such fundraising can lead to the appearance of a conflict of interest because most of the contributions come from lawyers.

"I do not think judges or judicial candidates should have to solicit money, primarily from lawyers, to finance their campaigns," argues Timothy Eaton, a Chicago lawyer and president-elect of the Illinois State Bar Association. "Whether or not those lawyers actually appear before the judges, it certainly gives the public the appearance of impropriety."

Campaign units spent more than the rising level of spending in circuit races. They highlight the often-personal relationships between contributors and candidates. "I do not think the public is concerned about the funding of Cook County circuit court races." The candidates and contributors have to explain why they did not reject contributions from lawyers and law firms, which many judges say are not fair and impartial.

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Judicious spending

Lawyers put the most money into judicial campaigns. But that could change as labor unions, business organizations and other special interest groups put more dollars into those races.

by Aaron Chambers

Illinois has joined the club. When three candidates for the Illinois Supreme Court spent $1 million in their primaries this year, and a fourth

spent nearly that much, this state took its place next to such states as California and Texas, where millions of dollars have rolled into high court races for nearly two decades.


The $580,000 Chief Justice M. Oswe W. Harrington spent in 1992 on his primary and general election races was the previous record, says Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. The $447,631 spent by Justice James H. Eiple in the same year was the record spent on a general election race alone. Five candidates

for the high court seat won by Justice Mary A. G. M. Om in 1992 spent a combined $804,000. By way of comparison, the campaign waged by Supreme Court Justice Benjamin K. M. Iler in the 1980s was thought to be expensive. He spent $255,258 on both the primary and general elections in 1984. M. Iler, a Springfield Republican, won the seat.

Three open seats on the state’s high court, and a growing interest in judicial races, are credited for this year’s cash rush. Most of that money has been spent on television advertising, other forms of media and political consultants.

Whatever the reason for the rise in spending, some experts predict the tabs for Illinois judicial races are likely to go even higher. A fter all, Texas, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Alabama have had million-dollar high court races for years. Illinois’ high court races can be expected to join the trend.

“If he costs of all campaigns have skyrocketed,” says Jim Collins, executive director of the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association.

“If one thing works for a given team, they all will try to do it,” says A. L. Zimmer, general counsel to the State Board of Election. “So the contest becomes more intense. People

Illinois Issues
October 2000
magazine, a nonpartisan
Power play for Illinois

A trio of races in this state could help tip the partisan
balance in Congress. The national political parties
are sending plenty of campaign cash

by Lucio Guerrero

Illustration by Mike Cramer

Ron Faucheux, editor-in-chief of
Power Play for Illinois

The Almanac of American Politics 2000, published by
The National Journal, calls this race

because both major parties believe they have a good chance
to capture that independent-minded vote.

The district’s 20-year incumbent, John Porter of Wilmette, a moderate
Republican, surprised supporters when he announced
his retirement. Running for his seat is Keliwerth Republican
Mark Steven K irk, who was once Porter’s chief of staff, and
Highland Park Democrat Lauren Beth Cash, a stateepresentative and longtime local activist.

Central Illinois also is losing a congressional incumbent in the 15th
district. The race to replace retiring Tom
Ewing, a Pontiac
Republican who was elected in 1991, promises to be close. The candidates are
normal Democrat Frank.
Michaels “Mike” Keleher Jr., an
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In northwest Illinois’ 17th district, incumbent U.S. Rep. Lane
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### Campaign 2000

**highly competitive** because Evans’ previous two wins were tight and because the demographics of the district continue to shift, away from the Democrats. The almanac calls Evans “one of the most vulnerable incumbents in the country.”

But the parties consider the race in the 10th key.

That district is wealthier and better educated than the average district in the nation and has a larger Latino population, but in 1992 they backed Republican Evans, who is seeking his 10th term in the House.

Evans, who is seeking his 10th term in the House, has drawn some big bucks. The candidates say that the race is one of the most competitive races in the nation: the debate over the need to reform Social Security and Medicare and improve access to prescription drugs.

The 10th straddles Lake and Cook counties, starting in the picturesque lakefront city of Wilmette and continuing north along Lake Michigan’s shores to the Waukegan Airport. The 10th continues westward toward Wheeling, Arlington Heights and Vernon Hills. The district’s communities are predominately white, but in 1992 they backed Republican Evans, who is seeking his 10th term in the House.

The 10th primary, as if it is what it is. And that is one of the most competitive races in the country.”

And in last spring’s primary, two Republicans raised $1 million each — almost $2 million — for not doing more to prevent gun violence. He would, for instance, require background checks for sales at gun shows and establish harsher penalties for those who buy guns for felons.

Still, the candidates say while national parties consider the race in the 10th key, they consider the district’s voters’ views on farm commodities and machinery, the specifics of trade policy, most recently over granting China permanent normal trade status.

Still, Evans has been popular with farm organizations, receiving the 1999 “Friend to the Farmer Award” from the American Corn Growers Association. He backed federal legislation that calls for replacing petroleum-based methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE) with ethanol, which can be made from corn.

Agriculture facing the lowest prices in decades, increased ethanol production is one of the most effective ways to increase domestic demand for grain, boost farm income and create jobs,” Evans told a House subcommittee.

But these candidates differ on the specific proposals to reform. Baker believes reducing restrictions on trade with China will be a boon for farmers in the district.

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A third Illinois congressional race is attracting national attention. The 17th District lies in the northwestern area of the state, in which the GOP is hoping to keep the third time will be a charm in the state’s Congressional delegation — and help shift party control in Congress itself.

That puts this state in the spotlight. Still, the candidates say while national parties consider the race in the 10th key, they consider the district’s voters’ views on farm commodities and machinery, the specifics of trade policy, most recently over granting China permanent normal trade status.

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Analysis

POLITICAL STUDIES

We get more information about the presidential candidates from paid ads and less from arm's-length political campaign coverage. That may not be as bad as it seems.

by John Carpenter

Here it is, decision time again in America. We've all feverishly studied the presidential candidates and are poised to make another informed selection. Leadership of the free world is at stake, so we've done our homework. We've heard their positions on the major issues. We've sized up their answers to tough questions, looking for clues as to how they'll handle a crisis. We've shushed everyone in the family room and carefully listened to their ads, weighing their credibility and lining up their positions against our own. And we've considered their backgrounds, voting records and affiliations, looked them in the eye as best we can to take their measure. Or maybe we haven't. Strike that. We haven't.

The truth is, if history holds, most of us made up our minds long before the campaign began, based our decision on long-held party affiliations and general political leanings — sort of a lifetime of political research. Political scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson notes that the category of "early decider" in presidential elections ranges from a low of 54 percent in 1992 to a high of 79 percent in 1956. Veteran presidential political strategists use this rough rule of thumb: Each party's candidate claims about 40 percent of the vote, with the remaining 20 percent of the voters "in play" in any one year.

Still, even those of us who are long-time Republicans or Democrats like to think we go through some kind of decision-making process before we vote. And, certainly, the true "swing" voters in any race do. But the very pertinent question raised in two studies out this year is this: Where are we getting our information?

The answer isn't pretty, at least on first reading. We increasingly get our information about presidential candidates from paid ads, which he says are a "reasonably nifty sound bites trumpeting the usurpation of political discourse by those with the deep pockets needed for political ads, the full story is far less simple and certainly less dire. Let's begin with a simple fact. Political advertising is up. This means the power of money is up, because advertising is expensive. And the prospect of free television time for political candidates — the Holy Grail for those who would level the economic playing field of politics — is being thumped on the head by a $600 million club. That's the amount of money television stations are expected to take in this election cycle in return for running paid political ads. It's also a number the television industry's powerful lobbying arm, the National Association of Broadcasters, is feverishly trying to protect. (They protect it, of course, by giving money to politicians who are eager to accept the money so they can run more ads.) Illinois' own Tribune Company earned $25 million — 2 percent of its revenue — from political ads in 1998. It's no wonder Dennis Fitzsimmons, president of the broadcasting unit at the Trib, was quoted earlier this year as calling free-time proposals "not realistic."

Meanwhile, most network news operations, where studies consistently show most Americans get their news, are covering politics less and less, meaning they are covering it worse and worse. (That's alarming in light of a finding by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press that 65 percent of Americans consider television their most trusted source of information.) Reformers had suggested that TV stations cover politics for at least five minutes a night for the 30 days leading up to an election. But a study by the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania found that the vast majority of stations surveyed in 11 cities in the 30 days leading up to presidential primaries this year aired an average of only 39 seconds of political coverage per night. Three of 19 monitored — the study covered stations in New York and Los Angeles, as well as primary battleground Iowa and New Hampshire — devoted an average of about four minutes per night to politics. The rest could spare less than a minute.

No where was this more obvious than in coverage of this year's national party conventions. To be sure, they lacked the drama of olden times, when beefy cigar-chomping in smoke-filled halls tallied ballot after ballot into the wee hours before naming a standard bearer. But that drama is in the distant past. Loyola University political science professor Alan Gitelson argues the networks' claim that the lack of air time was because the conventions have become slick partisan packages is "absurd" and a smoke screen for their abdication of civic duty. "This is their time to talk to us," Gitelson says of the major parties. "It is their time to talk to us about where they stand and who they are."

If the conventions are too slick and disingenuous, Gitelson says, the public is perfectly capable of detecting that and allowing for it when they make their decision. Likewise, the public is able to do this with political ads, which he says are a "reasonably
Illinois Issues, that studies reporter. advertisements contained a greater and build up the advertisee. suggests, are simply directed at an advertising as if it were the plague, one in the same heads and political scholars called problem, of course, is that many so-
most found the pure attack version contrast version responsible, while played two versions of a hypothetical
they are. Jamieson and her researchers accountable when they know who perpetrator accountable. disapprove of the attack to hold the makes it possible for those who identify sponsoring candidates, which negative impact by linking from not doing as much good to
good forum in which individuals can learn about candidates.” Indeed, K athleen H all Jamieson, director of the A nnenberg C enter, argues in her new book Everything Y ou T hink Y ou K now About P olitics … A nd Why Y ou’ re W rong that studies reveal a public well-equipped to evaluate political ads. While the cable television screaming heads and political soundbites — often one in the same — decry negative advertising as if it were the plague, Jamieson argues that policy-oriented attack and contrast ads are often most informative, with contrast ads being the best. A ttack ads, as the moniker suggests, are simply directed at an opponent. Contrast ads, meanwhile, cast the opponent in a negative light and build up the advertisee.

“Our analysis showed that attack advertisements contained a greater percentage of policy words than did advocacy or contrast ads,” Jamieson writes, adding that contrast ads are nevertheless “superior to those that simply attack” because “the ads identify sponsoring candidates, which makes it possible for those who disapprove of the attack to hold the perpetrat or accountable.”

And viewers do hold perpetrators accountable when they know who they are. Jamieson and her researchers played two versions of a hypothetical ad to a subject group. M ost found the contrast version responsible, while most found the pure attack version irresponsible. Presumably, this would lead them to have a negative opinion of the person the ad wished to have a positive opinion about. One problem, of course, is that many so-called “issue” ads these days, whether pure attack or contrast, are from neither candidates. They are from special interest groups and there are a lot of them. By Labor Day this year, more than $114 million already had been spent on issue ads, according to Jamieson’s group. A nd more than 40 percent of these ads were pure attack, coming from such well-known groups as the N ational R ifle A ssociation and the S ierra C lub, as well as those with more nebulous names, including the T raditional Values Coalition and the C ommittee for G ood C ommon S ense. “Because issue advocacy ads are not subject to disclosure requirements, the press and public do not necessarily know who is funding the campaign or how much is being spent,” Jamieson said in a statement earlier this year announcing the group’s find ings. “At the same time, funders can camoufl age their actual agenda behind an innocuous group label, making it difficult for the public to assess the group’s motives and credibility.”

Steve Brown, press secretary for Illinois H ouse Speaker (and state D emocratic P arty chairman) M ichael A digan, agrees ads are on the rise and that “there has been a continuing shrinkage in news media interest in campaigns.”

This is unfortunate, Brown says, because positive media coverage is still far more effective than good advertising, indicating that media reports still hold sway with voters. The problem is that the television media have cut back so much that they may have crossed the line from not doing as much good to having a negative impact by linking coverage too much to polling data. C onsider the example of 1996. W hile no one is suggesting Bob D ole had much chance against Bill Clinton in 1996, that campaign is worth noting. Jamieson wonders whether strategic, poll-oriented politi cal coverage becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, notes that “with a single exception, the major polls dramatically underestimated D ole’s likely percent of the vote.”

“In the campaign’s final days, major media polls had Clinton defeating D ole by margins much higher than his eventual eight-point victory. One, a CBS/77 hee Y ork T imes, showed Clinton an 18-point advantage. H ad reporters known that the likely vote was much closer than the polls indicated, would [issue] coverage have increased and strategic [horse-race] coverage of D ole decreased, and with these changes, would D ole’s prospects have changed?”

As an aside, Jamieson notes that Clinton, in 1996, ran far more attack ads than D ole, though the taciturn D ole was perceived as the attacker in that campaign. E ven the presidential debates — by any measure one of the best chances to evaluate candidates — are covered in the wrong that studies lost rather than what was said and what it could mean for the country, though Jamieson says debates remain one of the most widely used tools for voters to gather information about candidates. N ewspapers are not immune to this criticism, of course. T hey can be justified as attractive to the drama of the horse race as the networks. B ut just as CNN does a better job of political coverage thanks mainly to the amount of time it can give to stories, so too do the national dailies have the advantage of space.

It should be said, too, that the F ew center has come up with another discouraging statistic. Only 15 percent of Americans actually go through the effort of looking for campaign news; 83 percent typically come across such information by happenstance.

The flip side of this gloomy picture, of course, is that the increasingly fragmented media world is a candy shop for political junkies. Voters with computers are mouse clicks and literally seconds away from Web sites crammed with useful information about candidates and their views. A nd voters with cable can get both C-Span on television, allowing them to fall asleep on the couch to a G eorge W . Bush stump speech in an E lks lodge in Oklahoma, or to an A I G town meeting in upstate Pennsylvania. T he bottom line is this: Ads may be crowding out news, but the situation is far from hopeless. Though good, substantive news may no longer be abundant on the mainstream television news stations, it’s there in spades on cable networks and on the Internet, not to mention in the major national newspapers.

So relax. A nd vote.

John Carpenter is a freelance writer and former Chicago Sun-Times and D aily H erald reporter. by Kristy K ennedy

The presidential campaigns are looking to Illinois Latinovoters who could help push them over the top in this close national race

Maria Teresa Galvan made her way to the front of the line at the ollot train depot to get a quick word with Texas G ov. G eorge W. Bush. “Los votantes L atinos le gus t a n Bush,” she told the R epublican. ( L atino voters like Bush.)

The presidential candidate cupped his hand to G alvan’s ear and whispered his response. B ush’s words thrilled G alvan, mostly because they were in Spanish. “Y vamos a ganar.” ( A nd we’re going to win.)

For her husband, Joseph Galvan, the chairman of the Ill inois Hispanic Republican A ssociation, the moment ham mered home how important L atinos are in this presidential election.

In fact, never before have Latino voters, in Illinois and across the country, received so much attention. That’s because their numbers are rising everywhere, in the population count and at the polls. H ispanics now make up 11.7 percent of the U.S. population (10.5 percent in Illinois), and census projections indicate that L atinos will become the nation’s largest minority group within the next five years. F urther, H ispanics accounted for 5.2 percent of the national voter turnout in November 1998, and that number is projected to grow to 7 percent in 2000, accord ing to a study by the research arm of U nion Communications Inc, the nation’s largest Spanish language broadcasting company.

L ast summer, the Republican and D emocratic conventions prominently featured L atinos and booked Spanish language music acts. B ush and V ice President A l Gore made speeches in Spanish and have Spanish-language Web sites.

A n G alvan, the first Hispanic from Illinois tapped as an at-large delegate to the Republican N ational Convention, is giddy with all the attention he’s receiving.

When Bush kicked off his “Change the Tone” campaign in Illinois after the convention, Galvan was one of three people to meet the presidential candidate at the airport. F or that matter, such important Illinois Republicans as S enate P resident J ames “P ate” Phillip of Wood D ale and H ouse M inority L eader L ee D aniels of E lmhurst planned meetings with G alvan to talk strategy.

“It means they are taking us seriously and that the guy (Bush) is genuine. I don’t think you would have had this 20 or even 10 years ago, but you have it...
Illinois Democrats are looking to register 150,000 new Latino voters in the Chicago area by the mid-October registration deadline, says Peter Giangreco, a Chicago political consultant who is a senior adviser to the Gore-Lieberman campaign. "There are a couple of key states in which voter registration drives are underway in some suburban communities and in downtown state areas with heavy Latino populations," he says.

Giangreco refers to the Latino vote as "an economic and community asset." He says that Gore and Lieberman have made Latino issues a "real part of their campaign." Giangreco says that Latinos have been targeted by both Bush and Gore. "For instance, some articles portrayed Gore as pandering to Cubans on his Elan Gonzalez story," he says. "I think he thought it would benefit him," Giangreco says. "The vast majority of Ameicans and Latino Americans feel that this is my son, not my father." He also says that Hispanics see through Gore's "often-made remark that his first grandchild was born on the Fourth of July and he hopes his next is born on Cinco de Mayo." "What's up with that? What do they have to do with influence education? It's cute, but people want to go beyond this," he says.

Giangreco says that Democrats plan to "have an army of people" going door to door in Chicago and suburbs with concentrations of Latinos, at NOrth Chicago, Elgin and Aurora. Democrats plan to put up a good fight for the Latino vote in Illinois, says Gilberto Ocañas, campaign senior coordinator for the Democratic National Committee's Latino Coordinated Campaign. "The task in Illinois will be to increase the turnout of Hispanics. We have a whole target of swing states, and Illinois is the largest of those states and has the largest number of Latinos. It is key," Ocañas says.

That party's activists will begin by targeting community leaders and the media to get out the vote. "Illinois is one of the states that have the largest number of Latinos. It is key," Ocañas says.

"I think some of America has to get over a demographic denial that some how Latinos will go away. That is a big test is this year. They have to be where we are five or 10 years from now," says Rudy Lopez, the national field director for the Chicago Chapter of the Latino Leadership Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group that promotes Latino civic participation.

State Rep. William Delgado of Chicago says he and other elected Latino Democrats will be working on "phone banking" and "Get Out the Vote" programs in this election. "Above all, those already involved in the political process have to contact Hispanics and using their Hispanic neighborhoods as bases to make contact with and talk about how this election and the issues affect them," says Delgado. "It will be important for us to keep in mind that a lot of people aren't going to be out to vote. That is the only way we are going to increase the Latino vote in Illinois," Delgado says.
In that morally improving book *Silas Marner*, often force-fed to schoolchildren, author George Eliot observed that “nothing is so good as it seems beforehand.” It’s one of those admonitions, easily ignored but mockingly self-evident in hindsight, that might be embodied and framed (as people of another age were fond of doing) by agricultural forecasters and policy-makers.

Hanging that insight on a few walls in the nation’s capital might prompt some humility as we wind into a fifth year under the federal “Freedom to Farm” law that deregulated agriculture after six decades of federal acreage-limiting schemes. Conceived in 1996 during the halcyon days of high market prices, the law was promoted as the best route to farm prosperity by enabling farmers to supply the hungry of an increasingly affluent world.

If federal farm subsidies were set at a few billion dollars a year, about two-thirds of past levels, and farmers gained broad power to switch from crop to crop to pursue profits, reality, sadly, has not lived up to expectations, confusing the dominant theory that for 15 years has steadily reduced the federal role in agriculture and given greater sway to the free market to determine financial success.

“Economic turmoil in East Asia, Latin America and Russia in the mid-1990s took the edge off the appetite for U.S. farm exports, while a rare sustained run of good weather built up a global grain glut. The record-large U.S. corn and soybean crops forecast for this fall seem sure to bring a fourth year of sour domestic grain prices and renewed demands to rewrite the farm law long before it expires in 2002.”

“Obviously, you’re talking about very depressed farm income levels,” says Illinois Farm Bureau President Ron Warfield of Gibson City. True, they weren’t for the billions of dollars in farm bailouts approved by Congress since late 1998. That’s an important distinction in this state, Illinois, perennially competing with Iowa as the top corn and soybean state, grows about 17 percent of the U.S. output, second only to Iowa in production and can price U.S. goods out of the world market. Exports account for roughly 25 cents of each dollar in farm income.

No comprehensive suggestion for a replacement of “Freedom to Farm” has surfaced, let alone gained more than scattered support. Deregulators initially fought for higher crop supports but this year largely let the debate in Congress revolve around the size of the bailout. In the final weeks before the election, they are using the taunt “Freedom to Fail” to win over disgruntled farmers. A Nd Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore routine-ly criticizes the 1996 law as seriously flawed without being overly specific about fixing it.

For their part, Republicans, who sponsored “Freedom to Farm,” regard the bailouts as preferable to changing a law they see as the best way to position relentlessly productive U.S. farmers to benefit from food demand that will grow more rapidly overseas than in the stable U.S. market. Like D democrats, they are willing to look at alterations that would mean more money for farmers when prices are low.

“It’s hard for me to see a better alternative out there that’s workable politically and other ways,” says Bob Peterson, leader of a farm and business coalition that was an early “Freedom to Farm” supporter. “The hard answer is we have to be patient and have faith in markets, that they will work.”

In such a highly charged political environment, even a commonly suggested farm-law “fix,” creation of a “counter-cyclical” mechanism to increase farm income when yields fall, remains an abstraction. To some extent, Bob Stallman, the president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, said in late summer, there has been no decision to wait until lawmakers are ready to act. A worthy idea can be chewed to death if supporters are too specific too early.

CAMPAIGN HARVEST?

Record U.S. corn and soybean crops and sour domestic grain prices could boost demand for an overhaul of federal farm policy. But nothing will happen until the new president and a new Congress are ready

by Chuck Abbott

Illustration by William Crook Jr.
**PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, PRAIRIE STYLE**

The farm crisis brings out the ugly side of an agricultural community

by Maureen Foertsch McKinney

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**DEBT AND DISPOSSESSION: FARM LOSS IN AMERICA’S HEARTLAND**

by Kathryn M. Arielle Dudley

University of Chicago Press, 2000

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A sketched outlined Clinton proposal, for example, funneled up to $3.1 billion to family-size farms to bring crop revenue to 92 percent of the five-year average died quietly last spring.

"I don’t believe there’s anyone who knows where policy is headed," says Scott Irwin, a professor in the Agricultural & Consumer Economics Department at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign.

"Freedom to Farm" might survive, he says, because it is "everybody’s second-best alternative." Practicalities could channel Congress toward limited revisions in farm policy. Writing a full-spectrum second-best alternative, Irwin says, because it is knowing where ag policy is headed, he says, that farmers about payment limits and subsidies can use the certificates to redeem crop loans from the government.

"There certainly has been discussion ... and will continue to be among farmers about payment limits and targeting benefits," says agricultural economist Bob Bergland — or limit the amount of money big operators collect. The current limit of $113,000 in federal subsidies can be doubled through receipts from two affiliated farm operations or cancelled entirely through so-called commodity certificates from the agriculture department.

Farmers who are nearing the limit on subsidies can use the certificates to jump up to $65,000

Agriculture & Consumer Economics

Bergland

by then-Agriculture Secretary Bob

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Farmers who are nearing the limit on subsidies can use the certificates to jump up to $65,000 in new programs under former-President Ronald Reagan that paid farmers not to grow.

A and Tom Buus of the National Farmers Union says he believes patience with the 1996 law will expire with the elections. "I think it’s next year, definitively," he says, for rewriting "Freedom to Farm," although Congress has resisted that chore in the past three years.

As a writer Damon Runyon, king of 1920s wise-guy argot, memorably opined, the race is not always to the swift or the battle to the strong, but that’s the way to bet it. — Chuck Abbott, who counts himself as part of the agricultural diaspora, is a commodities correspondent for Reuters in Washington, D.C. He has covered U.S. food and farm policy full time since 1988 and writes an occasional column in agricultural policy. He won the top award of the North American Agricultural Journalists in 1988 for contributions to agricultural reporting.

"It’s like [people thought], How much can we beat on those people?"

"They were taking every damn thing we got."

— A Minnesota farm couple describing the forced auction of their property

looking through an anthropological lens at the aftermath of the ‘80s farm crisis, Yale professor Kathryn M. Arielle Dudley paints a disturbing portrait in her Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America’s Heartland. Contrary to such popular portrayals of farm life as the movie Country, it turns out that farmers tended to turn on each other rather than organize a protest or help a neighbor in need.

"A pioneering spirit runs deep in the hearts of those who till the land, and these settlers of the prairie have never looked kindly upon those who succumb to adversity, blame their troubles on others, or start crying for help when the going gets tough," Dudley writes.

Dudley returned to her roots for her scholarship, heading to western Minnesota to interview farmers about how they weathered the disastrous agriculture economy of the 1980s. Low interest rates and rising prices in the ’70s lured many farmers into a false sense of security. They borrowed big, and, when prices collapsed and interest rates soared in the ’80s, the losses were huge. More than 200,000 commercial farmers are estimated to have defaulted on loans by the end of the ’80s, according to Dudley. She gives the town, which happens to be one where her extended family farmed when she was young, a pseudonym: Star Prairie. But she details real events after interviewing about 50 farm families and such assorted other community members as bankers and loan agents.

A self-appointed advocate of the farmer who fled from his family in the face of financial ruin, and the one who got the cold shoulder at church after losing his farm, are true.

"For every news clip of activists protesting the forced sale of a family farm, tens of thousands of farm families avoided the spotlight, set aside court or suffered for years in silence behind closed doors," Dudley writes.

The local newspaper’s list of names, those who were delinquent on taxes, bankrupt or facing an auction or foreclosure, drew little sympathy for the troubled. The general consensus among farmers was that if someone lost the family farm they must have done something to deserve it, like getting a big new tractor or a barn worth more than the whole herd. She writes of the farmer who says the first of his neighbors to lose their farms were “hot dogs.” They had a brand new four-wheel drive pickup, and they went to Texas in the wintertime. They lived on credit cards, and I didn’t have too much compassion for them when they went broke.

That farmer’s assessment was common. When forced to pin down why some farms failed and others did not, “members of this community focused on the moral character of the individuals involved to explain what happened.”

There is plenty of talk of farmers who play keep-up-with-the-Joneses. But strangely, Dudley notes, no one admits to competing with the Joneses. Nor does anyone admit to being the Joneses.

Farm loss is a trauma, a socially rather than naturally produced one, Dudley asserts. “The erosion of human dignity that accompanies it happens at the hands of those who are your friends.”

Dudley’s reply to the interviews with the farmers who have lost their land are chilling: “All our neighbors were like flies to honey. They all wanted the land. You know they could hardly wait until it was over so they could pile in and buy the land,” says the woman Dudley calls Jane.

The woman’s husband adds, “It’s the same thing when a farmer dies — there’s somebody there to rent the land before the body’s cold, and I’m not kiddin’ ya. I mean, it is that — that tough a game.”

Tough and devastating for those who must face the loss.

“Every day you work the land,” Jane told Dudley through tears. “And when it’s taken away from you, it’s like you lose some part of your life.”
When Bryan campaigned, most Illinois farmers ran the small, diversified, nearly self-sufficient operations recalled in such books as Laura Ingalls Wilder’s children’s classic Farmer Boy. Now, the average farm is almost three times as large as it was then, and virtually every one is specialized, producing a few products for market and buying the rest at stores just like the rest of us.

When Bryan campaigned, agriculture made up very roughly a quarter of the American economy. In 1960, it was about 4 percent and in 1997, 1 percent. None of this is necessarily bad news. Many fewer farmers working slightly less land are producing more food and fiber than ever, with the rest of the economy growing even faster. On the face of it, we seem to be employing both human labor and natural resources more efficiently than in 1896. That’s good news because we have other uses for both.

As for natural resources, in February, The Nature Conservancy bought 7,500 acres of rich farmland just across the Illinois River from Havana. Instead of raising corn or...
Illinois Issues on endangered species on the natural bottomland lakes and wetlands that were there in the early 20th century. If that land had been required for food production — as it would be if we were still farming as in Bryan’s day — such a deal would have been both unthinkable and unaffordable.

Bryan’s rhetoric is now only half true, if it ever was true. What used to be a world-wide crop failure, we’d be in deeper trouble. But if we had a 100 percent urban failure, today’s farms would also be in trouble. Besides, these hypothetical apocalypses come by the dozen; a 100 percent drought of oil or a 100 percent loss of tread on all tires in use would be almost equally catastrophic. Our interdependent society is more like a woven blanket than a ball balanced on a single point.

Still, farming is revered in a way that no other industry is. “To misuse a farm,” writes Gary Wills, “is like desecrating the flag.” To curse a new subdivision or factory, on the other hand, is almost like a cry for vengeance.

In Green Bay, Wis., paper mills have been subject to stringent pollution controls, but the water still isn’t clean enough. Meanwhile, the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation is backing a pilot project in Green Bay to divert animal waste, reduce pesticide runoff and improve water quality more than additional wastewater treatment plants could. In Green Bay, Wis., paper mills have been subject to stringent pollution controls, but the water still isn’t clean enough. Meanwhile, the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation is backing a pilot project in Green Bay to divert animal waste, reduce pesticide runoff and improve water quality more than additional wastewater treatment plants could.

The farm industry itself hides behind the myth in order to fend off pollution control measures. Fortunately, the larger and fewer farms there are, the easier the logistics of regulating them will be. The need for regulation is obvious. In the September issue of The Heartland Institute’s Environment & Climate News it is reported that the American Farm Bureau uses data from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency in its defense. But even after the bureau’s careful massaging, its presentation of the numbers shows agriculture to be the sole cause of more stream miles of impaired water quality in Illinois — 15.1 percent — than any other single polluting activity.

Sprawl-fighters hide behind the myth, in some cases because it is the only myth they can sell. But even if some have an independent lifestyle can stand up to government and corporate power. But they, too, are a minority or more lately. None of us is independent in that sense — we can’t go home and live on what we grow in the back yard. Today, independence can only mean (as individuals) being resilient and having economic alternatives, and (as a society) having a strong constitutional civil liberties. That may be pleasure and satisfaction in growing enough rutabagas to last out the winter, but that doesn’t mean free from the need to touch upon zoning methods and property tax structures. But the longer-term issue of land value will necessarily emerge at the center of the dialogue on farmland.

A bout one-third of the land that comprises the six counties of the Chicago metropolitan region is farmed, according to a land use inventory performed by the Northern Illinois Planning Commission. Population increase and consequent development value of farmland: 1st, of course, a key economic reality must be addressed. Illinoisans who are concerned about keeping farmland as farmland may find the quantity of land consumption alarming. Nevertheless, the land market on the suburban fringe reflects the inherent development value of farmland. In the current market, a commercial or residential developer will pay more than 10 times what a farmer will pay for land.

F or many residents of the Chicago metropolitan region, farm ground seems an undifferentiated run of corn and beans stretch out to the edges of suburban to Des M oines and beyond, little more than a useful way to hold land before development. Y et, many local planners, and some farmers, are beginning to assert an equal value in maintaining that land for agriculture. Such differing perspectives may make it difficult to talk about preserving farm acreage at the city’s edge. Whatever our point of view, though, we must agree it’s huge amount of land, and how it’s used will have a tremendous impact on the region’s future. With so much at stake, we should consider making farmland a prominent part of a broader discussion on land use in the region.

A broader discussion will necessarily encompass near-term policies to make farming and suburban residential life more compatible, policies that touch upon zoning methods and property tax structures. But the longer-term issue of land value will necessarily emerge at the center of the dialogue on farmland.

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Farmers should play a highly visible role in a regional dialogue on future land uses.

Kane County planners may have advanced this effort furthest with a comprehensive plan that lays out the county in three parallel bands: an urbanized zone in the older settled areas nearest the Fox River, then a transition zone of newer growing communities, with agriculture protected in the large western portion. They are proceeding with consideration of purchase of development rights from farmers to ensure that land is kept in agriculture. For now, however, the plan largely relies upon intergovernmental agreements for implementation. Sam Santell, a county planner, acknowledges that some municipal annexations will lead to development out in the agricultural areas. Nevertheless, he says, “cooperation with the municipalities has gone well, and this is critical because agriculture is such an important part of the county’s economy.”

Agriculture does indeed form an important part of the economy in the region’s rural areas. The value of farm products sold topped $340 million from more than 1,200 farms in the three counties, according to the 1997 agricultural census, the most recent available. Farms have an average property value of well over $1 million each, making up an irreplaceable part of the tax base of the rural counties while requiring far less in the way of services than residential areas. Still, there remains a strong tendency to see agriculture as a temporary land use, especially in a market where commercial or residential uses command much higher prices.

Farmers should play a highly visible role in a regional dialogue on future land uses. However, when other regional residents are called upon to discuss the value of farmland, they might ask, “What can farmland do for us?” Then the multifaceted value of farmland must be discussed.

They might consider the nutritional value of this land close to the urban core. Farmers in the region are now growing all sorts of things, not just grain for the world market, but crops for the urban market on their doorstep: fruits, pumpkins, Christmas trees, vegetables of every kind, herbs, flowers and sod. The Illinois Farm Bureau lists 85 community farm markets in the metropolitan region, all operated by local producers. Consumers’ desire to buy fresh produce directly from the land, to see where their food is coming from, is increasing and will most likely create a growing demand in future years.

Further, there is a growing recognition of the educational and recreational value of farms near the city. The many apple orchards open for picking in the fall have long brought these aspects of farm life to regional residents. And these are just a few of many potential values that must be taken into account in an informed discussion on farmland. In fact, new ideas already are being developed to integrate farmland into suburbia. Perhaps the most advanced effort is Prairie Crossing in suburban Lake County. In that development, 150 acres of agricultural land forms a farmstead and supplies a produce market. A family that lives in the development runs the farm. That farm is considered valuable open space for homeowners who like to see vistas. But it is something more: The land is worked, providing produce and recreation. If nothing else, Prairie Crossing will provoke discussion and suggest possibilities for the future integration of agriculture with other land uses.

Clearly, there are changes afoot in the region, changes that suggest new ways for suburban dwellers to coexist with farmers, and to gain value from that proximity. In this sense, the current efforts of planners and farmers to protect some farmland now are invaluable, as they will allow time for dialogue to emerge on new and creative uses of the land. And new uses may bring about the rise in farmland value that will be required for its long-term protection.

Farmland, for now the cheapest land, must be an important part of the emerging dialogue on the uses of land resources in the metropolitan region. Alan P. Ammerman is an assistant planner with the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission.

K Linea is hopeful about the possibility of achieving coexistence with the expanding urban area. “We will be here in 20 years. Farming will change in Kane County, but it will remain in some form,” she says. She sees some farm families in Kane County turning to alternative high-value crops for the urban market, enabling them to gain higher profits per acre. Families that farm 1,000 acres of corn and beans, for example, might dedicate 40 of those acres to fruits and vegetables and open a farmstand.

Tom Halat is one farmer who made a successful transition to more intensive land use for retail farm marketing. He has 240 acres on the edge of Huntley in rapidly growing southwest Kane County that previously were neither developed nor intensively farmed. Compelled by subdivisions on the horizon, he sold his 60-acre chunk of farmland to a developer and expanded his planting of orchards, vegetables and flowers. He sells from his store on a frontage road, directly to local residents, responding to a growing demand in the marketplace for fresh locally grown food.

Some county planners wish peace to coexist too, because they want to protect farmland as an economic asset. And they want growth to occur in an expected progression from urban areas outward, preventing the premature “leap” of development into agricultural areas.

Residents in the still-rural areas of McHenry County are forming township planning commissions, gaining limited ability to thwart the county’s power to change zoning to nonagricultural uses. County planners have acknowledged that some municipal annexations to the expanding urban area will lead to development out in the agricultural areas. Nevertheless, he says, “cooperation with the municipalities has gone well, and this is critical because agriculture is such an important part of the county’s economy.”

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Bishop takes the helm at state liquor commission
M ark Bishop is now the acting executive director of the Illinois Liquor Control Commission. Bishop had been the chief financial and operations officer. Bishop replaces Sam Panayotovich, a former state legislator and restaurateur, who was named executive director last year by Gov. George Ryan. Panayotovich resigned in August after reports that the liquor industry had donated money to a political action committee that he promoted. Liquor distributors, brewers and nightclub owners had given money to the South Cook PAC for its annual golf outing, according to records filed at the State Board of Elections Ull this year, Panayotovich chaired the PAC’s golf committee. The PAC was formed in 1996 to support political candidates. But the bulk of the $900,000 raised went to expenses to run the golf event. Panayotovich also had been reimbursed by the PAC for $492 he charged for wine on a 1996 trip to California. State law forbids members of the commission from accepting gifts from the industry.

In his resignation, Panayotovich said that no decisions by the commission had been affected by his involvement with the PAC or other community organizations.

Panayotovich represented Chicago’s Southeast Side in the Illinois House from 1983 to 1989. Originally a Demo- crat, he switched to the Republican Party for his last term. He ran for a seat on Chicago’s State Board of Review with the PAC. In his resignation, Panayotovich said that all decisions by the commission had been affected by his involvement with the PAC or other community organizations.

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SHIFTS AT THE TOP

Bolingbrook M ajor Roger C laar resigned from the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority board. C laar, who was appointed in 1991, stepped down after being questioned by the Chicago Sun-Times about the more than $300,000 in campaign donations he solicited from tollway vendors.

Bishop has joined the Illinois Department of Public Aid as chief of staff. He was named chancellor there this summer (see Illinois Issues, Oct. 15, 2000, page 36). Meanwhile, the Springfield campus in the midst of its second search to replace outgoing Chancellor N aomi Lynn (see Illinois Issues, June 15, 2001) page 34). The administration has begun the process of a national search for a chancellor’s replacement.

Aiken is third chancellor to leave U of I since 1999
M ichael Aiken, chancellor of the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois, will leave his post next August. The university credits him with helping to raise more than $1 billion dollars since he was appointed chancellor in 1993.

His resignation means that each of U of I campuses will have replaced its chancellor since 1999. In that year, D avid B rinkis left the Chicago campus. Sylvia M aming was named chancellor there this summer (see Illinois Issues, Oct. 15, 2000, page 36). Meanwhile, the Springfield campus is in the midst of its second search to replace outgoing Chancellor N aomi Lynn (see Illinois Issues, June 15, 2001) page 34). The administration has begun the process of a national search for a chancellor’s replacement.

Black Civil War soldier earns Congressional Medal of Honor

Thanks, in part, to the efforts of Illinois historians and legislators, A drew J ackson Smith, an ex-slave, will receive the Congressional M edal of Honor 137 years after his death at the hands of Confederate soldiery.

On November 26, 1863, at the battle of H oney Hill, South Carolina, Smith saved his regiment and the American flag from falling. One of General Logan’s 55th Illinois Infantry regiment, Smith fought throughout the battle of H oney Hill, Smith’s sergeant was killed by an artillery shell. Smith’s grandfather, Andrew Bowman, writes, “A ndrew fought the longest battle and applied them to Smith…”

The Statehouse bureau chief for The News Gazette of Champaign, a graduate of the Public Affairs Reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield, she covered local government and politics for the Elgin bureau of the Daily Herald, based in Arlington Heights. The last full-time reporter at the Capitol for The News-Gazette was M ichael H. atwood, who left in 1996.

State comptroller honors a predecessor with a fellowship program
A committee appointed by Comptroller Dan Hynes will begin reviewing applications this month for the newly established R oland W. B urris Fellowship Program. Hynes created the program to offer governmental public service experience to college students and recent graduates and provide them with careers in government. The fellowship is also a way to honor Roland Burrts, a three-term comptroller and one-term governor who was the first black in Illinois history to be elected to statewide office.

Gail L. Loin, communications director for the comptroller’s office, says the program is an effort to “foster a mentoring relationship between students and state government.” Loin also says the number of positions offered could vary from two to four, depending on budget constraints. The positions can be in either Springfield or Chicago, depending on what experiences the fellows wish to gain. “We’re trying to be as flexible as we can,” she says.

The fellowship’s one requirement is that applicants either have a bachelor’s degree or be enrolled in a bachelo’s program. The committee, which includes Burrts, will consider applications from students and recent graduates of Illinois colleges and universities.

The deadline for applications is October 15, and interviews will be held in November.

Clements reopens Statehouse bureau for Champaign paper
K ate Clements is the new Statehouse bureau chief for The News-Gazette of Champaign. A graduate of the Public Affairs Reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield, she covered local government and politics for the Elgin bureau of the Daily Herald, based in Arlington Heights. The last full-time reporter at the Capitol for The News-Gazette was Michael H. Atwood, who left in 1996.
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A.P.L.Y.: Chair, Search Committee, Illinois Issues, Human Resources Building, Room 10, University of Illinois at Springfield, P.O. Box 19243, Springfield, IL 62794-9243.

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A VIEW FROM THE SUBURBS
Madeleine Doubek

It remains difficult to keep drunken drivers off our roads

The Daily Herald found that nearly 5,400 Illinoisans had been convicted of driving drunk at least twice.

I have enough knowledge not to drink and drive,” William H. Roberts insisted to a reporter. His claim during a county jail interview as he began serving time for a drunken driving conviction. “A couple of times I’ve been drunk, but I don’t drink to the point where I’m loaded and don’t know what I’m doing.”

Roberts’ record belies his claim. A former Streamwood resident, he was convicted for driving under the influence in Illinois 17 times in seven years, giving him the worst drunken driving record in the state. And he has another five convictions in Wisconsin.

Roberts’ record may be extreme, but it is not isolated. An unprecedented study of repeat drunken drivers by the Daily Herald found that more than 160 had at least five Illinois DUI convictions. Nearly 5,400 had been convicted of driving drunk at least twice. The paper’s examination of the complete driving histories of Illinoisans with more than one drunken driving court action on their records between 1996 and 1999 turned up 11,779 with one DUI conviction and a supervision or license suspension for driving under its influence. (Illinois law allows court supervision for most first drunken driving arrests.) The numbers of repeat offenders were eye-opening in a state where the conventional wisdom is that attitudes about driving while impaired have hardened and that lawmakers are on top of the problem. After all, Illinois, unlike most states, lowered the legal intoxication limit to .08. This state has enacted 24 drunken driving-related laws in the past four years alone.

But the story beyond the numbers demonstrates just how difficult it remains to keep drunken drivers off our roads. Alcohols and others frequently drive without a valid license. An exhaustive study of 10 offenders, with five to 12 DUI convictions each, found they had 62 charges among them for driving on a suspended or revoked license and 86 drunken driving convictions.

Yet Illinois’ judges struggle with the concept of long-term lockup for driving drunk. Even these most chronic offenders regularly received jail time of only two years or less. Charges often were combined, previous convictions ignored and concurrent sentences granted for the group of chronic offenders. Maximum sentences rarely were imposed.

Consider the history of former Naperville resident K. Matinai D avis. He was arrested for drunken driving in 1995. A though he had six previous DUI convictions, he served a total of only 66 days in county jail. Davis has been arrested, convicted of DUI, jailed and returned to the streets a total of 12 times in Illinois.

Judges, including Patrick M. Gannon, the supervising judge for Cook County’s traffic court, point to studies suggesting jail time is not an effective method for stopping DUI recidivism, though victims and anti-drunk driving activists argue it sometimes is the only way to keep these offenders from driving.

The newspaper’s investigation and a series of deadly drunken driving accidents last summer prompted D. democratic Secretary of State Jesse White to propose a legislative reform package. He wants mandatory jail time and vehicle immobilization options for motorists caught driving illegally. Breathalyzer ignition devices installed more often on repeat offenders’ vehicles and increased penalties for those whose blood alcohol level is twice the legal limit or more.

GOP Gov. George Ryan echoed the concerns of legislators when he suggested immobilizing repeat offenders’ vehicles may end up penalizing or stigmatizing family members, but Susan M. O’Dwyer, the ex-wife of a multiple DUI offender, encourages that move. “A nobody living with somebody like this is going to be working full-time and using their own car,” she says. She wants dealers to stop selling cars to repeat drunken drivers.

Some anti-drunk driving activists called for a uniform system to evaluate and treat drunken drivers. Ryan, meanwhile, called for mandatory treatment or counseling. He and others also suggested it may be time to end supervision for a majority of first-time DUI offenders. Judges argue that move would clog the court system.

Defense lawyers will lobby against many of the attempts at solutions to the repeat drunken driving problem, and in the powerful liquor lobby may join them. Changing drunken driving laws never has been easy in a Capitol where drinking remains the recreation of choice for many. Will legislators, judges, lawyers, counselors and others embark on the tough search for workable solutions or choose the path of denial, like 22-time offender Roberts?

M adeleine Doubek is assistant metro editor/projects & politics for the Daily Herald.
POLITICS

School districts face budget uncertainty unless lawmakers act

by Charles N. Wheeler III

The last “G-day, mate” has echoed away from the Sydney Olympics. Fans of the White Sox and the Cardinals are looking forward to playoff baseball, perhaps even a World Series matchup. (Cub fans, as usual, are looking forward to next year.)

Illinois voters are paying closer attention to the November election, now just a few weeks away, and legislative candidates are talking about what they’d do to address concerns from abortion rights to zoning laws. Meanwhile, away from the bright lights, a small group of committed citizens is laboring to lay the groundwork for lawmakers to tackle one of the most important challenges they will face when the 92nd General Assembly takes office in January.

The 1997 law that established a new general state school aid formula expires on June 30. So a small group of citizens is laboring to lay the groundwork for lawmakers to tackle one of the most important challenges legislators will face when the 92nd General Assembly takes office in January.

The 1997 law that established a new general state school aid formula expires on June 30. So a small group of citizens is laboring to lay the groundwork for lawmakers to tackle one of the most important challenges they will face when the 92nd General Assembly takes office in January.

The task is not as simple as telling the legislature to boost the foundation level by another $100 a year in each of the next two school years. Instead, board members must grapple with some of the underlying school funding concerns that prompted the 1997 formula revisions.

Consider a couple that state schools Superintendent G. Lenn W. McGee outlined for the panel as it began work:

• A adequacy. The 1997 law says the foundation level represents “the minimum level of per-pupil financial support that should be available to provide for the basic education of each pupil in average daily attendance.” In reality, there is no one-size-fits-all number. The bare-bones cost of providing a basic education is not the same for a first-grader as it is for a high school junior. Nor will a dollar buy as much “education” in the Chicago suburbs as in southern Illinois.

• A equity. The 1997 law says the foundation level represents “the concentration of poor children in the formula, in the form of poverty grants, to school districts with significant numbers of poor children.” This year, the grants range from $800 to $2,050 for each low-income student, based on the concentration of poor children in the district. But a district with fewer than 20 percent of its students from low-income families receives no additional help, meaning a small district could lose tens of thousands of dollars in poverty grants if a middle-income family moved to town and put the kids in school.

A lower eligibility bar, as McGee proposed, would assist districts now on the 20 percent bubble. To completely preclude all-or-nothing scenarios, though, the panel might consider a sliding scale in which additional funding is available for every low-income student, with the per-pupil amount increasing as the concentration of poor children increases.

The impetus lies in a 1997 law that created a new general state aid formula, the complex calculation under which most state assistance is funneled to school districts for the amount of aid they’re entitled to under the formula, even if lawmakers haven’t appropriated enough money in a particular year to cover all the claims. Thus, for the last three years, school officials have had a much better idea of available funding, rather than waiting for lawmakers to decide how much money to allocate for education.

But both the annual increases in foundation levels and the statutory guarantee the funds will be provided are due to end June 30. Thus, school districts again will face pre-1997 budget uncertainty unless the legislature acts.

Enter the Education Funding Advisory Board. Created by the 1997 law, the board’s job is to recommend provided supplemental state aid, in the form of poverty grants, to school districts with significant numbers of poor children. This year, the grants range from $800 to $2,050 for each low-income student, based on the concentration of poor children in the district. But a district with fewer than 20 percent of its students from low-income families receives no additional help, meaning a small district could lose tens of thousands of dollars in poverty grants if a middle-income family moved to town and put the kids in school.

At the root of most school funding problems is a heavy reliance on property taxes to pay for education. Until more of the bill is picked up by other funding sources, we’ll struggle to assure adequate schooling for every child.

A more vexing question is how to measure the number of poor children in a district. Under the 1997 law, the number of low-income families is drawn from the most recent federal census, meaning that eligibility for poverty grants — and the amount going to local schools — is based on 10-year-old census data. A iterative ways to get a more current count have been suggested over the years — kids receiving free school lunches, for example, or whose families are on food stamps — without policy-makers agreeing on a new yardstick. Now the panel has to tackle the issue as part of its look at poverty grants.

Whatever figures the panel chooses, one critical element will be locking in the new levels through a continuing appropriation.

At the root of most school funding problems, of course, is Illinois’ heavy reliance on local property taxes to pay for education. Until more of the bill is picked up by other funding sources, we’ll have to continue to struggle to assure an adequate education for every child.

Charles N. Wheeler III is director of the Public Affairs Reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.