

B69

### Minority representation in Congress

TO THE EDITOR:

Professor Carol M. Swain's critique of our work, including *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990*, and her musings on recent Supreme Court redistricting cases contain several errors and misinterpretations ("The Supreme Court's Rulings on Congressional Districts Could Benefit Minority Voters," Opinion, September 27).

Swain makes three arguments. Two attempt to assure African Americans that the status of their voting rights has never been better: first, because recent Supreme Court decisions on legislative redistricting do not portend a significant decrease in majority-black districts; second, because, in any event, black candidates are increasingly able to win election in majority-white districts. The third argument, which renders the first two redundant, is that blacks should be less concerned with electing candidates of their own race and more concerned with electing white Democrats.

Regarding the long-term effects of *Shaw v. Reno* (1993) and its progeny, many experienced voting-rights lawyers believe these decisions have seriously weakened almost three decades of federal jurisprudence entitling minority voters, when they can prove in court that their votes have been diluted by white bloc voting, to a remedy in the form of majority-minority districts.

On the question of how easy it is

for black candidates to win in majority-white constituencies, we distinguish the degree of racial polarization in the 11-state South from that elsewhere. The title of our book indicates that our focus is on the South. Virtually all of Swain's counterexamples to our finding that black candidates have great difficulty winning in majority-white districts come from non-Southern states.

Moreover, in characterizing as majority-white the racial composition of Congressional districts and other constituencies, Swain often ignores the presence of Hispanic voters who, combined with blacks, constitute a majority. Hispanic loyalty to Democrats in most locales has meant that districts where blacks are only a plurality, but where blacks plus Hispanics are a majority, tend to elect black Democrats. In such districts, African Americans are sufficiently numerous to control the Democratic Party primary, and Hispanic voters support the winner of that primary. We have made this point repeatedly to Swain, but she largely ignores it.

The most serious weakness of her analysis, however, is that her conclusions rely on a few carefully chosen examples rather than on comprehensive quantitative analysis of black office-holding on a state-by-state basis, of the sort found in our book and in the more recent articles she criticizes. Her anecdotal approach causes her to overlook facts such as the following:

In the 1980s, not a single black was elected to Congress from a Southern district composed of a majority of non-Hispanic whites. To date, the same is true for the 1990s.

In the 1980s, of the approximately 1,500 majority-white legislative districts in Southern states, 1 per cent elected a black legislator. . . .

The pattern of white refusal to elect black state representatives in the South has not changed in the 1990s. . . . We do not relish these findings. Quite the contrary, as old-fashioned liberals who believe that people should be judged by their character, not their color, we find them dismaying. But the best evidence to date supports them.

Having exaggerated the prospects of black candidates in white constituencies, Swain then virtually dismisses the importance of this issue by suggesting that the interests of African Americans would be better served by the election of fewer blacks and more white Democrats, if the result is a larger Democratic contingent in government. However, she provides no discussion of the trade-offs of this strategy, or of who should make this choice for black voters.

In the period since passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, when Af-

rican Americans have finally, after great struggle and sacrifice, been able to vote throughout the South, they have typically been used as "filler people" in majority-white districts, to shore up the election chances of white Democrats. Is this limited role the primary one to which black voters should be encouraged to aspire in the 21st century? We do not believe so.

CHANDLER DAVIDSON  
Professor of Sociology  
Chair  
Department of Sociology  
Rice University  
Houston

BERNARD GROFMAN  
Professor of Political Science  
University of California at Irvine  
Irvine, Cal.