Chapter 4

Race and Southern Politics

The Special Case of Congressional Districting

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As V. O. Key noted at the outset of his monumental work on southern politics, "in its grand outlines the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro. It is at times interpreted as a politics of cotton, as a politics of free trade, as a politics of agrarian poverty, or as a politics of planter or plutocrat. Although such interpretations have a superficial validity, in the last analysis, the major peculiarities of southern politics go back to the Negro. Whatever phase of the southern political process one seeks to understand, sooner or later the trail of inquiry leads to the Negro" (Key 1949, 5). Changes since the publication of Southern Politics in State and Nation have altered much of the South's political landscape, and the race issue has taken a different form and direction as a result. It is generally safe to say, however, that the vast majority of research on southern politics over the past half century has addressed the issue of race to some extent and on some level. Herein lies the main challenge to anyone writing about the literature on race and southern politics.

First, as Richard Scher laments in his chapter on the civil rights movement and southern politics, the literature is simply too huge and scattered over too many topical areas to be reduced to the space of one chapter in one book. Race is addressed at length by most of the standard works on the evolution of southern politics during the post-World War II period, all of which have been included extensively in discussions in the other chapters: Havard (1972), Bartley and Graham (1975), Bass and DeVries (1976), Lamis (1984, 1999), Black and Black (1987, 1992,
2002), Swansbrough and Brodsky (1988), Aistrup (1994), Scher (1997), Bullock and Rozell (1998), and Lublin (2004), to name a few. Additionally, there is a large literature more narrowly focused on specific elements of race and southern politics (see, for example, Matthews and Frotho 1966; Moreland, Steed, and Baker 1987; Glaser 1996; Fenno 2000; Streb 2002). Within the electoral arena, the Praeger series on presidential elections in the South from 1984 through 2000 (Steed, Moreland, and Baker 1985; Moreland, Steed, and Baker 1991; Steed, Moreland, and Baker 1994; Moreland and Steed 1997; Steed and Moreland 2002) documented the continuing importance of race as a variable in analyzing campaign strategy and voting patterns in the region. This very partial listing does not even address those works such as Thomas and Mary Edsall’s Chain Reaction (1991), which examined southern politics and race (and the related issues of taxes and welfare) in the post-Key period within the context of national political patterns. In short, the massive literature is beyond the scope of one essay.

Second, inasmuch as the race issue extends into almost every area of southern politics, much of the key work is addressed to some degree in other chapters in this book, reviewing those works again here would be repetitious. This chapter focuses on the literature of one significant contemporary component of race and southern politics: the issue of racial redistricting (and, by extension, the issue of electoral consequences and governmental representation). This topic illustrates the continuing importance—even centrality—of race in current southern politics, and it addresses one of the key outcomes of the civil rights struggle that has been given a great deal of attention by political scientists.

**Race, Voting, and Congressional Districting**

A striking change in the racial politics of the South occurred in the post-1990 round of redistricting. The concept of racial redistricting took on a new meaning. Instead of referring to the past practice of designing districts to impede the election of African Americans, it is now used to refer to efforts to design districts to facilitate their election. Any recent study that has “racial redistricting” or a similar expression in its title no doubt deals with these affirmative efforts to include African Americans in legislative bodies, rather than exclude them.

This form of racial redistricting, like the previous one, occurs across the United States, but the attention it receives tends to be focused pri-
With party and race so entwined in the South, the partisan impact of additional majority-African-American districts has been a major issue in redistricting.

The perverse effect, at least from the African American perspective, is an increase in the election of Republicans due to the election of African Americans. This is attributed to the so-called packing of African American voters into black districts, which leaves the adjacent districts with higher percentages of whites. These "bleached" districts are viewed as especially hospitable to Republican candidates. As Byron Shafer and Richard Johnston have observed, "It has become commonplace to note that the process of creating these [majority-African-American districts in the South] is also a process of advantaging Republican candidates overall" (2001, 616–17). (Indeed, many believe, not surprisingly, that when Republicans supported new majority-minority districts, they fully intended this consequence.) The increase in Republican legislators is said in turn to produce another consequence, which is the decline in legislative support for the policy preferences of African Americans. A conservative Republican who does not include African Americans in his or her "reelection constituency" (which "contains all voters who support or might support the member"; Fennom 2003, 7) is not expected to be sensitive to African American concerns, so if the Republicans’ gains in legislative seats exceed those of African Americans, an increase in the descriptive representation of African Americans may well be at the expense of their substantive representation (see especially Lublin 1997; also Cameron, Epstein, and O’Halloran 1996). It is even common to hear that the spillover effect of the new African American districts in the South was a major cause of the Republicans’ gaining control of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2004 (see, for example, Swan 1995, 227, 232; McKee 2002, 123), something few African Americans would consider to be beneficial to them (as only about 10 percent of African Americans in the South cast their votes for Republican House candidates; see Black and Black 2002, 370–71); it is also common to hear that these districts continue to impede the electoral success of the Democratic Party in the South (see, for example, the comments of Thomas Schaller in Walsh 2005, 25).

This review of the literature addressing these partisan consequences will focus exclusively on studies concerning the U.S. House of Representatives, which constitute almost all the studies concerning this linkage (for an exception, which deals with state legislatures in the South, see Lublin and Voss 2000b). This concentration of attention on the U.S. House is no doubt driven by the deep partisan division within that body, a division that can be affected by the way House districts are drawn, especially in the South, where the growth of the Republican Party has been the greatest. Indeed, the southern focus of this literature is reinforced by the fact that all but one of the thirteen new majority-African-American U.S. House districts created following the 1990 census were established in southern states. Incidentally, the exception was the Fourth District in Maryland. As David Lublin noted, "In the North, large numbers of white Democrats live in close proximity to blacks, so racial redistricting does not usually make surrounding districts more likely to elect Republicans" (1997, 97).

A careful reading of the studies examining the relationship between the election of African Americans and Republicans reveals that this linkage tends to be exaggerated. The Republicans gained nine southern seats overall in the House in 1992, the same number of seats that southern states gained in the new apportionment based on the 1990 census. In 1994 the Republicans gained another sixteen overall, which resulted in the southern delegation to the House being, like the House itself, majority Republican (64 of 125). The extent to which these Republican gains can be "blamed" on the new African American districts is limited, however. Even authors who argue forcefully for the empirical presence of this linkage present specific findings that reveal a more modest impact (Lublin 1997; Lublin and Voss 2000a; Hill and Rae 2000; McKee 2002).

Voting Rights Districts

One might wish to attribute the change in districting practices to the recognition by white state legislators and other whites participating in the redistricting process of the benefits of more inclusive legislative bodies. But this would conflict with reality. Legal requirements, based primarily on the Voting Rights Act (VRA), were perceived to mandate an "if you can, you must" approach to the new lines. This statute—and its enforcement—was widely interpreted during the post-1990 redistricting to mean that if new majority-African-American districts could be drawn, they must be included in the plan adopted. Section 2 of the VRA, as amended in 1982, prohibits the dilution of African American voting strength through electoral arrangements, including district lines. And