

*Political Pseudo-Science:
Carol M. Swain, Academic Objectivity, and the
Nature of Political Science*

Samuel Brenner
Monday, November 18, 2002
Political Science 207: African American Political Development
Marion Orr

“The Woodrow Wilson prize is awarded annually for the best book on government, politics, or international affairs. The award is sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation at Princeton University. It carries a cash prize of \$5,000.”

-The Woodrow Wilson Foundation

Writing in a concurring opinion to the Supreme Court’s decision on *Johnson v. De Grandy* in 1994, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy cited a new and controversial work to support his argument. “The assumption that majority minority districts elect only minority representatives, or that majority white districts elect only white representatives,” Kennedy declared, “is false as an empirical matter. See . . . C. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*, ch. 6 (1993).”¹ Kennedy’s use of this work did not necessarily demonstrate his wholesale acceptance of the book’s argument – his citation was brief and was directly solely at establishing a matter of empirical fact, that majority districts might elect non-whites and that majority-minority districts might elect non-minorities – but was nonetheless quite significant. This work that Kennedy cited went on to win a number of prestigious awards, including the 1994 Woodrow Wilson prize for “the best book published in the United States during the prior year on government, politics or international affairs,” the 1995 D. B. Hardeman Prize of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation for the best scholarly work on the United States Congress during a biennial period, and the V.O. Key Award of the Southern Political Science Association for the best book published on Southern politics.²

Carol M. Swain’s *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African American Interests in Congress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, 1995) is a well-written,

¹ Justice Kennedy, concurring opinion (June 30, 1994) in BOLLEY JOHNSON, SPEAKER OF THE FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, et al., APPELLANTS 92-519 v. MIGUEL De GRANDY et al. MIGUEL De GRANDY, et al., APPELLANTS 92-593, on appeals from the United States District Court from the Northern District of Florida, June 30, 1994.

² Carol M. Swain’s resume, available at <http://law.vanderbilt.edu/faculty/swain.pdf>. On this resume Swain mistakenly writes that her work was cited by both Justices Kennedy and Souter, when in fact it was only cited by Justice Kennedy.

engaging, and interesting analysis of how African Americans are represented in Congress and of whether the existence of majority-minority districts (districts in which a majority of the voting-eligible population is comprised of minority voters) ensures African Americans effective representation. Using a modified form of the “soak and poke” methodology made famous by Richard F. Fenno, Jr., the author of the noted *Home Style: House Members in their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), Swain examines the political careers and legislative actions of some of the 25 black representatives in the 100th and 101st Congresses (1987-1988 and 1988-1989). Focusing on four types of districts – “historically black,” “newly-black,” “heterogeneous,” and “majority-white” – Swain asks how well the black representatives in these districts represented the interests of their constituents and concludes that African Americans might be better served by white representatives than by black representatives, and that African Americans would certainly be better served by representatives not elected from majority-minority districts. “In this book,” she explains, “I examine what is distinctive about black representation of blacks, how white members of Congress fit into the picture, and how black representation can be increased.” (ix)

Black Faces, Black Interests was published at an opportune time: in the early 1990s several important cases on the legality and constitutionality of creating majority-minority districts were making their way to the United States Supreme Court. In this book, Swain raises critical questions about whether these kinds of districts are even necessary to ensure the effective representation of minority interests in the American political system. How are blacks represented? Can African Americans be represented by non-African Americans? Can whites be represented by blacks? Can minorities truly be elected in majority districts? Most importantly and centrally: do black representatives from majority-minority districts represent black interests

more effectively than representatives from majority districts? By questioning the basic assumptions of those who argue that blacks need “safe” majority-minority districts in order to ensure that they are represented on the national scene, Swain places herself directly in the middle of one of the most important debates on the role of race in American politics in the past fifty years.

Despite the vital importance of the questions Swain raises, however, and despite the fact that she was one of the first political scientists to study the effectiveness and importance of majority-minority districts, Swain’s flawed research methods, personal and political biases, and deceptive, pseudo-scientific analysis tragically and fatally wound *Black Faces, Black Interests*, and turn what should have been a powerful and important work of political science into a flawed and objectionable piece of partisan rhetoric. Ultimately, Swain’s work is one that belongs on the editorial page of a newspaper – not in the pantheon of great works of political science.

Methodology and Argument

Swain’s methodology and argument are admirably clear and straightforward: after defining what is meant by “representation,” Swain examines case studies of black representatives in historically black districts, newly black districts, heterogeneous districts, and majority-white districts, in each case asking how well representatives in these districts truly represent their constituents. Black congressmen from historically black districts, she finds, are not required to answer to their constituents, while those from heterogeneous and majority-white districts are held to much higher standards. In order to achieve true and effective representation, then, Swain concludes, African Americans must *not* be segregated into majority-minority districts, but should instead participate in voting coalitions in heterogeneous and majority-white districts.

In addressing “representation,” Swain employ’s Hanna Pitkin’s (formerly Professor of Political Science at UC-Berkeley) definition in distinguishing between “descriptive representation,” which is the statistical correspondence of the demographic characteristic of representatives with those of their constituents, and “substantive representation,” which she defines as the correspondence between representatives’ goals and those of their constituents. (5) Swain further defines descriptive representation for African Americans as “representation by black officeholders,” but notes that substantive representation does not depend solely upon racial or ethnic characteristics. “The extent and quality of substantive representation,” she explains, “can be determined by examining the responsiveness of the representative to his or her constituency.” (5)

Swain suggests that understanding how well African Americans are substantively represented is difficult because African Americans are not monolithic and it is hard to accurately define and gauge “black interests”. Still, she argues, there are identifiable trends: “Broad patterns of objective circumstances and subjective orientations characterize American blacks, and striking differences continue to exist between black and white Americans well over a century after abolition and a quarter of a century after the enactment of civil rights legislation.” (7) Black interests, Swain concludes, can be understood as consisting of “objective interests,” which are interests related to clear, empirical disparities in legal rights, employment opportunity, and economic prospects, on the one hand and “subjective interests,” what African Americans “actually think and want,” on the other. (10) In order to measure whether African Americans are being represented Swain uses measures of representative voting from the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) and the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (COPE), as well as

two measures that she has created herself: the “Alternative Civil Rights Index” (ACRI) and the “Alternative Redistributive Index” (ARI).

Swain uses this data to explain that black interests in Congress are actually represented by Democrats as a whole. “Black interests on Capitol Hill,” she writes, “at least as measured by the policy congruence between representatives and his or her black population, are better looked after by the Democratic congressional party.” (19) The logic of such an assertion, she implies, is inescapable: black interests are represented by Democrats, and therefore blacks need not elect blacks in order to guarantee voting support for black issues. White Democrats, Swain explains, appear to represent blacks as well as black Democrats. Black interests would best be served, then, Swain concludes, not necessarily by the election of black representatives but instead simply by the election of more Democrats. To bolster this point, she presents in her second chapter more information on the increasing resemblance between black representative interest positions and Democrat interest positions. “Black representatives,” she concludes, “are increasingly becoming more like white liberal Democrats.” (44)

Swain’s work is of course not limited to discussing whether Democrats in general or blacks would provide the most support to black interests in Congress. “This is not to say that voting on issues is the only way members of Congress can represent their constituents,” she explains. “Black representation means more than policy congruence between black interests and roll-call votes.” (19) While she thus goes on to address specific case studies – the meat of her work – Swain has within the first few pages of her analysis already taken a swipe at proponents of majority-minority districts. If any Democrat is equally able to support black interests during roll-call voting, she implies, then African Americans should not even *want* majority-minority districts – unless *non-issue oriented* African American interests can only be represented by

African American representative of districts that are overwhelmingly populated by African Americans.

With this explanation, and with an additional short chapter on the history of African Americans “on the Hill,” Swain launches into the main part of her work: case studies of twelve different African American representatives in four kinds of districts. In short examinations of these politicians Swain reaches some general conclusions about representatives in different types of districts. Representatives from historically black districts, she explains after examining George Crockett and William Gray, vary enormously in style, goals and temperament, but are marked by the seeming safety of their seats; “[these representatives] become complacent, not consulting their constituents as frequently as representatives from other kinds of districts do.”

(72) This portrayal of African American representatives from historically black districts as foolish, unresponsive, and vaguely corrupt is vital to Swain’s larger argument: if, as she maintains, such representatives do *not* represent blacks as well as do representatives from other kinds of districts, then the establishment of such overwhelmingly black districts will represent a step back in actual representation rather than a step forward.

In contrast to the unresponsive representatives of historically black districts, Swain argues, are representatives of newly-black districts, who must work hard to maintain winning coalitions because white voters tend to be the swing voters in such areas, and perhaps representatives of heterogeneous districts. “[The representatives of newly-black districts] have,” she concludes without citations or evidence other than four case studies, “worked much harder than the typical black representative from an historically black district.” (97) Swain maintains that the performance of representatives Mike Espy and John Lewis has shown that black politicians from newly-black districts are preferable to politicians from historically black

districts; “[their performances] have shown that black politicians can represent the needs of their white constituents without neglected the needs of blacks in their districts.” (97) Representatives from heterogeneous districts, she adds, while not under the same sort of pressure to represent African Americans as representatives from newly-black districts, are nonetheless effective and responsive. In describing these representatives, Swain is quite openly impressed: “Dymally,” she writes, “understands, fights for[blacks] . . . his empathy and personal concern for refugees has [*sic*] clearly affected his political style . . . his is a mission of education and advocacy.” (115) Crockett and Gray did not, in Swain’s eyes, have “missions.” Instead, Crockett and Gray were taking advantage of the safety of their seats to not work hard, to hold conventional opinions, and to diminish black representation.

It is in her chapter on majority-white districts that Swain finally hits her stride. Black representatives from historically black districts, she has been arguing, have not been as consistently impressive as representatives from newly-black or heterogeneous districts. What blacks should realize, she explains now, is that the only true way to increase black representation is to elect more black representatives from white districts. “The election of black representatives from majority white districts has increased black representation throughout America,” she writes. (140) Representatives of such districts, she adds, such as Alan Wheat, Ron Dellums, and Andrew Young, seem to represent progressives of all races. “Black representation in Congress,” she concludes forcefully in what can be understood to be the single overriding point of her work, “will not increase substantially as long as blacks heed the conventional wisdom that they need districts with black majorities to win office. This belief results in weaker candidates . . .” (141)

With this statement Swain has essentially accomplished the primary goal of her work: to demonstrate that for blacks to increase their representation in the United States they must begin

to elect more blacks from majority-white districts. Swain includes a section on “White Representatives,” in which she demonstrates that whites can and do represent black interests in both minority and majority black districts, but with the conclusion to her section on “Black Representatives” Swain has presented the data that will support her final conclusions. These conclusions she sums up in chapter 10: *The Future of Black Congressional Representation*. Six conclusions can be drawn from this work and this data, Swain maintains: first, creating newly black districts will not significantly increase black representation, as such districts cannot be expanded give the current distribution of African Americans throughout the country. Second, and most importantly, increased black representation from majority-white districts is possible. Third, ‘packing’ black voters diminishes the overall representation of blacks. Fourth, whites (such as Lindy Boggs and Peter Rodino) can represent the interests of blacks. Fifth, blacks can represent the interests of whites. Sixth, descriptive representation has its own value – for “although a white representative can ‘think, act, and talk black,’ he or she can never *be* black.” (217) Swain’s main conclusion, it is clear, is the same as was hinted at in the second chapter and was stated at the end of the second section: if blacks wish to increase their representation, they must shun proponents of creating majority-minority districts and work to elect blacks from majority-white districts.

Critique and Analysis

Black Faces, Black Interests raises critical questions, but is fatally flawed as a serious work of political science both by shortcomings in Swain’s scientific methodology and style of analysis and also by her slanted, biased presentation of facts and events. The shortcomings in methodology and analysis are particularly striking and critical – so much so that even if we accept Swain’s rendition of facts and events at face value we are forced to conclude that her

work is of extremely limited scientific use. Despite Swain's attempt to use Fenno's "soak and poke" methodology – and indeed despite her remarks that Fenno himself "has been especially supportive of this project" (xi) – *Black Faces, Black Interests* has all of the flaws of *Home Style* with very few of the redeeming details. While Swain's inclusion of case studies allows readers to grasp context along with descriptions of representative styles *Black Faces, Black Interests* addresses a different question than that it claims to answer, tests the wrong population, relies upon survey results seemingly gathered in an unscientific manner, and – most importantly – is too specific to allow generalization.

The most obvious problem with this work is that Swain appears to answer an entirely different question in this work than the one she initially phrases. "How," she asks at the very beginning, "do the members of the House of Representatives represent the interests of African Americans?" (ix) The question she truly addresses in this work, however, is how *black* members of the House of Representatives represent the interests of African Americans – a related but different issue. While Swain does entitle a section of her work "White Representatives," she *in total* describes four white representatives: two representatives (Robin Talon and Tim Valentine) of "minority-black" districts and two representatives (Lindy Boggs and Peter Rodino) of majority-black districts. Through her definition of "minority-black" districts, moreover, Swain discounts African Americans in any district in which African Americans make up less than 35% of the voting population.

Black Faces, Black Interests – a fascinating title – is thus not really about how African Americans are represented in Congress, but rather about how African Americans *represent* in Congress. Swain even admits as much in what is probably the most telling part of her work, her appendix on Research Methods. "Field research," she explains, "enabled me to gather individual

perspectives on the ways politicians represent blacks. When I arranged my trips, I first mailed a letter to each black member of Congress and requested permission to travel with him or her . . .”

(246) Given the fact that many African Americans live in districts with less than a 35% black voting population and that Swain’s data is almost entirely restricted to how black politicians represent their constituents, it is enormously troubling that Swain uses this data to reach conclusions about how African Americans *as a group* are represented in Congress. She has not done the work to answer this question – and by claiming that she has and by concluding that clearly “whites can represent the interests of blacks” (211) Swain has gone too far, and has weakened the strength of her entire argument.

A related problem with Swain’s work is that she has tested the wrong population. In order to answer truly the question of how African Americans are represented in Congress, she should focus on the great numbers of white representatives who represent districts with negligible African American populations. In order to demonstrate either that African Americans are being represented or are not being represented, she needs to show whether or not representatives whose constituencies include between 1% and 35% African Americans are supporting black interests. It is possible that Swain believes that she has disposed of this issue by concluding in her second chapter that “Black interests will best be served by the election of more Democrats.” (19) Still, it is remarkable that in designing her case studies Swain ignored entirely the great majority of those who represent African Americans – those who represent very *few* African Americans.

Perhaps most problematically for what is ostensibly a work of political science, *Black Faces, Black Interests* seems to rely both upon survey data gathered in an unscientific fashion and upon biased (or at least unjustified) case-study selection. Completely apart from the

question of whether Fenno's "soak and poke" method is useful and effective as well as at least semi-scientific – and I think a good case can be made that it is all three – it seems clear that those employing this methodology should not be entirely free to simply "absorb" data. Political *scientists* employing this methodology should at least make an effort to standardize survey questions and methods of measurement. Put another way: if Swain is gathering data in order to compare several congressional styles and several congressmen, it seems clear that she should at least measure them on the same scale and with the same guidelines. Unfortunately, it does not seem that she has taken any steps to standardize either her measurements or her survey questions. Again, Swain's own appendix on Research Methods – hidden at the end of the work and not discussed in the body of her text at all – is particularly revealing: after describing the *types* of questions she asked (though not including a list of questions), Swain off-handedly notes that "not every representative was asked every question." (246) "Representatives varied, of course, in their enthusiasm for my project," she explains, "and I had a greater rapport with some interviewees than with others." (246)

In addition to relying upon what is at best survey data of uncertain scientific value and is at worst data that has been somehow "washed" or otherwise interpreted by the author out of sight of her peers in political science, Swain's work also rests upon what is either unjustified or indeed biased case-selection. As she is working with an extremely limited population – African American representatives – it is surprising that Swain does not discuss and follow all of her purported subjects in the course of this book. Given the extreme and political nature of Swain's conclusions, the criteria she used to decide on which cases she should focus must automatically be called into question. Unfortunately, these criteria are not to be found in the book. While readers might theorize that Swain has chosen to focus on the congressmen who gave her the most

access, it is quite clear that this is not the case – for she notes in her appendix on research methods that William Grey III (D-PA), a critically important figure for Swain’s effort to demonstrate that African American representatives from majority-black districts are not accountable to their constituents, “was never able to find time for an interview.” (246)

How *were* these cases selected? The fact that Swain does not explain how she decided whom to follow is interesting, as it necessarily raises the question of whether these individuals are representative samples of their populations. Most noticeable in this regard are the individuals Swain chooses to represent historically black districts – and specifically George Crockett (D-MI), who according to Swain was in many ways either an extremist or a fool. Crockett, Swain writes, was a communist supporter and a defender of militants; he was almost senile by the time he was elected, she implies, and he held views that were probably far from those of the mainstream in the country. (52-54) “Crockett’s attitude toward United States foreign policy made him one of the most radical members of Congress,” Swain explains. (54) Crockett, it is clear, was not simply another run-of-the-mill congressman.

Whether Swain’s characterization of Crockett is accurate is beside the point; in describing African American representatives of African American majority districts Swain has made an effort to demonstrate that Crockett and Gray were unresponsive to their constituents and were indeed either foolish and extremist or corrupt and withdrawn. Swain drives home this point in the conclusion to her section on historically black districts. Representatives from such districts, she maintains, “appear to become complacent” and are not being held accountable by their constituents. “One of the advantages . . . of representing blacks is their shameless loyalty to incumbents,” Swain quotes an anonymous representative as saying. “You can almost get away with raping babies and be forgiven.” (73) Are Gray and Crockett representative of

representatives of historically black districts? Again, it is hard to say without seeing any of Swain's raw data, but given that in her appendix Swain identifies eleven such representatives and given that of these eleven both Crockett and Grey scored *below the mean* on voting participation, it seems clear that the question of how representative this sample is must be addressed. What is clear is that Swain has contempt for African American representatives from historically black districts – and that she is entirely willing to quote an “unnamed congressman” in an effort to make representatives from these districts seem venal, corrupt, and entirely unresponsive.

The most glaring and important weakness with the book, however, has very little to do with the questions Swain asks, with the population she surveys, or with the data she gathers; it has instead to do with the question of how broad this work and these conclusions should be. As Swain (and I) repeatedly points out, this work owes its methodology to Richard Fenno, who in 1978 produced *Home Style* after years of tracking congressmen and congresswomen through their districts and of making repeated trips to view representatives in their constituencies. In *Home Style* Fenno drew general conclusions about how representatives sought to represent their constituents; these general conclusions were valuable because Fenno had surveyed an extensive (and *representative*) number of individuals over the course of a long period of time. Swain, in contrast, bases her work on observations of somewhere between twelve and twenty-five representatives over the course of one (and perhaps two) congresses – a total of at most four years.

The question of whether this data can and should be used to reach general conclusions cannot be lightly dismissed. Swain herself discusses the limitations of her data in a section of her appendix on research methods appropriately entitled “Limitations”: “Some limitations are apparent in the research design,” she explains.

First, because this was primarily a qualitative study, focusing on a particular subset of the 100th (and 101st) Congress, it is not certain whether these findings can be generalized. The ease with which we can generalize depends, in part, on the content of the theory underlying the analysis. As yet, there is very little theoretical grounding for studies of this type, primarily because the pretheoretical ‘inductive’ style of background data gathering has not been completed by researchers. (248)

In other words, Swain herself admits that the results of her research can not be generalized without question because there is not enough theory underlying studies of this type – though indeed it is uncertain what she means by even this comment, as numerous works followed *Home Style* and as political scientists have certainly discussed whether such analyses are viable and trustworthy. What is clear is that even the author of this work was uncertain that she should generalize from her extremely limited (in terms of number of representatives studied and length of time addressed) data – but that she proceeded to generalize anyway.

Quite apart from the general methodological and scientific flaws in Swain’s study, *Black Faces, Black Interests* is marked by biased reporting and analysis and what I think we must regard as willfully deceitful obfuscation. Swain, for instance, has a tendency to cite editorials from conservative newspapers as newspaper accounts (and thus factual reporting), to bury important data in the endnotes, to simplify some historical events, and to grant full credence to any opponents of African American representatives from historically black districts. Most obvious in this regard is Swain’s treatment of Gray. Although Gray did not grant Swain an interview or indeed much access, Swain’s analysis is clearly structured to suggest to readers that she has had full access to Gray’s staff and to his constituency. Much of what Swain says about Gray – from the fact that his nickname was “the phantom” to the “fact” that Gray was disliked by much of the African American community – is based upon information gleaned from interviews with Milton Street, an actual political opponent of Gray’s and (at the time he ran against Gray for Congress) an extremist within the African American community. Given these problems with her

description of Gray, then, it seems clear that Swain's objectivity must be questioned. Given the sorts of conclusions Swain wishes to draw in this work, such biased and obfuscatory reporting is unwarranted and extremely problematic.

At the risk of seeming to ignore the important problems of bias in Swain's work, I will not examine whether Swain obscures pertinent details in other parts of *Black Faces, Black Interests*. I do not have the detailed knowledge of the careers of Swain's subjects necessary to evaluate whether she has treated her subjects fairly, and such evaluations have already been carried out by several review authors, including Dianne M. Pinderhughes of the University of Illinois, who in the *American Political Science Review* pointed out some of the problems with Swain's depiction of Gray. What is clear from Pinderhughes' evaluation and from even a basic understanding of the career of but one of Swain's subjects is that questions over the objectivity of Swain's treatment of her subjects must be addressed. What matters far more in this analysis is the unscientific nature of this study, the flawed methodology employed throughout the work, the inexact style of analysis, and the false and misleading generalization of unrepresentative results.

Conclusion

If *Black Faces, Black Interests* is indeed a scientific study, then surely it is *bad* science; indeed, I think that Swain's work is not even worthy of the description "bad social science," but instead ought to be understood as "pseudo-science." "Pseudo-science" is defined as "an activity resembling science but based on fallacious assumptions." There is in this book no real effort to standardize survey questions, data collection techniques, or even to ensure objectivity. The results, as Swain herself admits, are biased by the simple fact that she had "a greater rapport with some interviewees than with others." (246) The true power of *Black Faces, Black Interests* in some sense lies in the fact that Swain has purported to conduct a truly scientific inquiry. Instead,

however, she has produced a work with interesting and debatable conclusions but with no real (or at least trustworthy) evidence to support her claims. This study, Swain blithely assumes, represents a scientific analysis of how African Americans are represented in Congress. As we have seen, however, this assumption is entirely flawed; at best, *Black Faces, Black Interests* represents a personal and biased analysis of that question – in short, an op-ed piece.

Carol Swain seeks to raise critical and important questions in *Black Faces, Black Interests*, and further seeks to address vital national issues through a scientific and academic study of how African Americans are represented in Congress – clearly laudable goals. Swain’s work, however, is tragically and fatally flawed by serious methodological and analytical errors and problems, and is further marked by what seem to be Swain’s personal biases. These flaws do *not* mean that Swain’s conclusions are incorrect – and indeed, as some later research such as Charles Cameron’s, David Epstein’s, and Sharon O’Halloran’s “Do Majority-Minority Districts Maximize Substantive Black Representation in Congress” (*American Political Science Review*, December 1996) has shown, at least some of her conclusions may well be correct. In that article Cameron, Epstein, and O’Halloran concluded that in order for African Americans to increase their representation they must be placed into districts that are roughly 47% black – a conclusion that matches Swain’s conclusion that African Americans must look to electing blacks in majority-white districts for increased representation. Still, that Swain’s conclusions may not be completely without merit does not rescue this work from the realm of pseudo-science. While *Black Faces, Black Interests* received many prestigious awards and much elite attention, it is, in the end, more of a disgrace to than a triumph for the intellectual study of political science.