

Jerry DeMuth  
1943 West Chase Ave.  
Chicago, Illinois  
60626

[1967 or later]

The U.S. Supreme Court's approval of Mississippi's reapportionment of congressional districts March 27 shows that "smart racism" pays.

Last year Mississippi, knowing that violence or discriminatory voter registration tests could no longer be used to prevent Negroes from voting, redrew the boundaries of the state's five congressional districts. Population was not equal in the districts and the state was under federal court order to reapportion under the Supreme Court's "one man-one vote" decision. So that state not only made the five equal in population. It also used the reapportion order to spread the Negro population over more districts.

One district had a 60 percent majority. Under the new plan, the first congressional district has a Negro majority of 50.6 per cent. However, whites are the majority in the population over 21.

Three other districts contain 47.7, 45.4 and 43.1 per cent Negroes respectively. The fifth, along the Gulf coast, has only 23.7 per cent Negroes.

After this move was made, less than two months before the state's primary, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, a leader in the Freedom Democratic Party, commented, "I went to bed in the second district and woke up in the same bed in the first. The white folks 'round here can mess you up without you even knowing about it."

Mississippi assemblymen did a good job of messing up the Negroes by acting with restraint so that their actions would have some legal respectability. This is what saved them from a negative Supreme Court decision.

The new redistricting had been approved on April 8 when a compromise bill was passed after three months of discussion in the state senate and house.

In the house a redistricting plan had been passed which established five new districts, each with a white majority. The old second congressional district, in which Mrs. Hamer resided, and which had a Negro majority, was chopped up. This bill met some opposition.

Rep. Clyde Burns, of Alcorn, said the bill "had a little too much discrimination."

He and other state representatives feared such a bill would be thrown out in the courts.

"The Senate bill is in much better shape to present to the courts," Rep. Thomas McClellan, of Clay, successfully predicted. "You're just walking in the face of defeat if you pass the House version."

Sen. William Burgin, of Columbus, said of one amendment:

"While this amendment would successfully gerrymander the Negro vote, it would, in my opinion, result in the loss of all our congressmen."

According to the Delta Democrat Times of February 15, 1966, Sen. Burgin "warned that the Freedom Democratic Party, unsuccessful in a 1964 attempt to unseat the delegation, 'can take this same contest back to the House of Representatives and this time they will have a constitutional basis for it.'"

So the bill that was finally passed created five congressional districts with a Negro population majority in only one and white voting age majorities in all five. ~~Some legislative changes~~

Before redistricting, Negroes had had a voting-age majority in one district.

The new plan was immediately challenged in the courts by the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC) of the American Civil Liberties Union. On Sept. 30, LCDC lost when a three-judge federal panel approved the plan. The group had charged that the legislature had "chosen the racial gerrymander as the best means of preserving white supremacy in the future."

Now the Supreme Court has upheld that decision and Negro voting efforts have been partly nullified.