Black lawmakers see changes in inner city

WASHINGTON (AP) - Miguel Contreras recalls his anger when Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., did an ad on behalf of the white candidate and against the Hispanic candidate in the Los Angeles mayor's race in June.

"In the long run, it's going to come back to haunt her," says the Los Angeles union leader.

One reason may be that Waters' House district is one of four held by blacks but with populations that have turned from black to Hispanic majorities in the past decade.

Contreras says many Hispanics in Waters' increasingly Hispanic district in South Central Los Angeles feel she "played the race card against the Latino candidate," state Assembly Speaker Antonio Villaraigosa, who lost to City Attorney James Hahn.

"We're not seeing her address Latino issues or support Latino candidates."

Waters, a fiery liberal, disputes that. She says her office has a bilingual staff and numerous Hispanic outreach programs. "We service our constituents - all of them."

Among the 39 black members of Congress, Waters is trict jumped to 51 percent of



MAXINE WATERS

not alone in finding herself representing an ethnic population different from her own and the one that put her in office. As blacks move to the suburbs, Hispanics emerged as the biggest population in four historically black districts, the 2000 census shows.

Her colleagues immediately to the north and south - Reps. Diane Watson of Culver City and Juanita Millender-McDonald of Compton - are in the same situation, though Watson has been in office little more than

Longtime Rep. Charles
Rangel, D-N.Y., was uncontested in his last election.
Hispanics in his Harlem district jumped to 51 percent of



DIANE WATSON

the population in 2000 from 46 percent in 1990.

For Democratic Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, head of the Congressional Black Caucus, the Hispanic population in her Texas district increased to 35 percent from 17 percent.

"There's a growth of Hispanics that is altering the landscape everywhere," said Dowell Myers, a demographer at the University of Southern California.

So far, no black incumbents face Hispanic challengers in next year's election. California gains a 53rd House seat from the 2000 census. Preliminary proposals submitted by Hispanic groups would leave intact districts



JUANITA MILLENDER

represented by black lawmakers.

For one thing, analysts say, much of the Hispanic population in those districts is immigrants who are not yet citizens. Even when they become citizens, activists face the challenge of getting them registered and voting.

But eventually, says Myers, the day will come when "the weakest politicians that haven't been serving the new constituency are going to get bumped off."

The discontent in Waters' district - where the population switched to 54 percent Hispanic from 43 percent in the 1990s-illustrates the new balancing act that black law-makers face.



CHARLES RANGEL

"It requires whoever represents those districts to be conscious of the fact that their constituencies are very diverse," said Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Education Fund. "They don't represent a single constituency."

David Bositis, an analyst at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington think tank focusing on black issues, points to New Orleans as an example of demographic changes having a lagging political impact.

Long after it became a predominantly black district, the city continued to re-elect white Rep. Lindy Boggs every two years. When she retired in 1991, it elected William Jefferson as Louisiana's first black congressman since Reconstruction.

"It's a challenge but it's a challenge they can meet," Bositis said of black incumbents in newly Hispanic majority districts. "If they are good politicians, they can deal with it."

Rep. Joe Baca, a California Democrat who is Hispanic, said both groups share many issues. "We're both people of color and when it comes to civil rights, when it comes to discrimination, when it comes to employment opportunity and wages, benefits, we all continue to be at the same level - always a step behind," he said. Still, the coalition is fragile.

"While some Hispanic leaders understand the importance of cooperation and coalition building ... there are a few out there who are demagogues," complained John Mack, president of the Los Angeles Urban League, who is black. "There are some folk who have the attitude that 'you black folk have had your turn, now it's our day."

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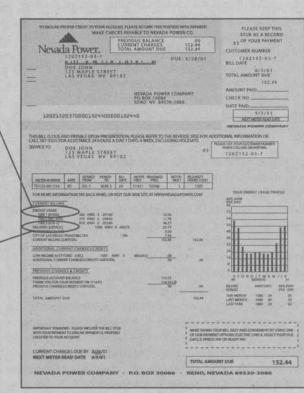
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