

SNCC Western Regional Conference

VOTER REGISTRATION - Workshop Report, Sunday

For the past four years, this has been one of the main focuses of SNCC efforts. From the point of view of volunteers, it is probably one of the hardest (in physical terms) and most frustrating jobs. It involves working on your own, in unfamiliar and perhaps new territory, out in the heat, etc.

The main work is canvassing - talking to people who have more (and more immediate) reasons not to vote than to vote in terms of their day to day lives. The key principle in talking to people is relating to them on their own terms. You have to be honest, and you have to talk about things they are interested in. This means talking about the rain and the cotton crop, about children and their chances of education and a decent life, about the open sewer and unpaved road in the Negro section of town. Most important, and most difficult, it means convincing him that the almost incredible risks involved in registering to vote or signing up in the Freedom Democratic Party have some bearing in the long run in solving these immediate problems. You can't make great promises, you can't tell him that he is not facing harassment and threats to his work, home, family, even his life. But you can and must tell him that until he and his neighbors do take that long walk to the courthouse, there is absolutely no chance for his children to get that education in any real sense, and there is almost as little chance of improvement in the roads.

You will have to return again and again and again, for what you are doing is gradually becoming a part of the community in which you are working. No one will trust you the first time. You will be something between a demigod and a symbol of terror, fear, and meddling. You will have to expect irrelevant excuses, and you will have to have answers. You will have to explain that in a very real sense tomorrow and the next day are too late - they have been for 100 years. You will have to remember that you are not coming with the answers. You are there to serve as a catalyst in the development of indigenous community leadership.

Each community is different and must be approached on the basis of observations made locally - what are the problems, where are the social centers, who are the contacts who can spread word - high school students are such contacts, or perhaps the owner of a popular Negro restaurant who is forced to close earlier than his white counterparts - there are no rules.

You are in effect building relationships within the community. In doing this, you must respect the people you deal with, their beliefs, their traditions, their fears, their needs. You cannot superimpose your philosophy on them. For instance, this might mean that in a religious community (and they all are) you will have to go to church and genuinely participate in the service, even though in private you may be agnostic. On an even touchier subject, you have to be able to draw the line between your tactical and/or personal commitment to non-violence and the right of every local individual to protect his home and family.

As a volunteer, you can expect a rigorous, demanding, highly regimented life. You will have to look at every action in terms of its organizational effectiveness. You will have to forego almost completely your personal wishes even in areas that most of us like to think are entirely private - this is especially true of girls. You will have to be particularly careful to avoid unnecessary provocations that may result in jailing or fines.

All of Mississippi is a tough area to work in, but some parts are worse than others. In the northeast delta region, SNCC did some sort of work in each of the 22 counties, so there is a lot of information available. This is cotton country and part of the so-called black belt - the Negro population averages about 65% of the total population. In the northeast, the Negro population is considerably less; this is industrialized country, essentially an extension of Appalachia. The southwest is tough - Amite county with the town of Liberty is reputed to be the worst in the state. No voter registration has been done here; a freedom school was bombed last summer. The southwest is less tough, since it contains tourist areas and a consequently greater amount of interstate traffic. Yet Menosha county, where Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman were killed, is here. The southern part of the state is a Klan stronghold, and the Society for the Preservation of the White Race was formed there.

This kind of characterization is misleading, though. For example, the town of Greensborough would seem to be easy since it has a fairly large Negro middle class. But this middle class, because they feel they have their standing to lose, opposes and is most resistant to the movement. Here you will encounter the "Booker T." argument - that the Negro must first make himself worthy and voting rights will then come of themselves. This is one of the most frustrating things to work with, since one of the chief encouragements - and one of the very few - is the usual attitude of welcome from local Negroes.

The voter registration test that every prospective voter has to take is four pages long and, in questions 1 through 17, is mainly factual information. Questions 18, 19, and 20, requiring that the registrant copy and paraphrase a section of the state constitution and that he give a definition of the obligations and duties of a good citizen are the problem. (COFO's answer to 20 is that a good citizen obeys all laws, pays all taxes, and votes in every election.) Court cases have been won (in Penola and Batesville) eliminating these three questions, and a case (U.S. vs. Mississippi) is now pending before the State Supreme Court to make this applicable throughout Mississippi.

The question of factually correct answers is not the issue. The registrar (white) has absolute discretion in the decision of pass-or-fail, and there is no appeal. Further, he can delay his answer for up to six weeks, during which time, by local statute, the applicant's name is printed in the local paper. Any registered voter can challenge the right of an applicant to become a voter on the basis of moral character - a very wide category. And this exposure leaves him open to reprisals in his job, his household goods bought on credit, his welfare check, his home, his physical safety.

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