

May 1965

I would like to raise with the SNCC staff a number of questions around the vote. In addition, I will give what I consider possible and workable solutions.

- Do we really want to register people to vote?
- Are we concerned about the forces that we are working against using the Negro and the vote to their own advantage?
(after voting rights have been at least partially secured by the new voting legislation)
- Is voter registration still a useful organizing tool?
- Can voter registration be used as part of an organizing program for independent political action?
- Are we interested in independent political action?
- Does voter registration still raise important issues for the American public?
- Can we use the proposed voting legislation to our advantage?

The big question is: Are we concerned enough to develop programs around the vote and related political issues. I for one am.

Let me point out from the very beginning that I don't think that the vote is the end-all or the be-all. But it can be a beginning. Moreover, the vote is something, at present, that "local people" see as a means of solving some of their problems.

I think that they (local people) want to get the sheriff off their backs -- to get the corrupt and unrepresentative mayor out of office -- to get better housing -- to get better streets -- to get better jobs (I could go on and on). How then can we develop a program to meet these expressed needs and at the same time a program that goes beyond politics as they exist in the country today?

We know that in many areas of the South the poverty programs (regardless of what we think about them), the MDTA (Manpower Development Training Act), federal aid to education, and other token federal programs will be administered by city and county officials. Also we know that city officials plan and okay public housing, urban renewal, surplus food allotments, and so forth. If the people most

page 2 ON PROGRAMS...

affected are not a part of that structure or are not able to influence that structure, then these kinds of programs are totally lost to Negroes or they are tokenly given to them.

Moreover, these kinds of programs -- federal aid programs -- whether we like it or not, have meaning for the local people. They believe that these programs can bring about meaningful change (and ~~kk~~ they can to some extent) in their lives. For example a large number of Negroes are participating in the Child Development Program for Mississippi in which they (Negroes) have helped to sign up 4,000 young Mississippi kids across the state for that million dollar~~x~~ program. Memphis is another example. There a large number of poor Negroes are working very diligently in a 2 million dollar Operation Headstart program. (A program where pre-school kids participate in reading workshops, receive free medical and dental care and a number of other social services).

CAN WE THEN USE THESE PROGRAMS? I think we can do so to bring about some change and at the same time let the local people and the country find out that these programs are not nearly adequate.

Are there other reasons why we should program around the vote? Yes, and here are some:

Whether we think it is strong enough or not there will be a voting bill passed this year. I think that local people will be looking to that bill in order to get registered. More than likely it will enable a significant number of Negroes to be registered. Now we know from our experience in the South that any kind of voting bill -- even one that allows illiterates to vote -- which does not contain provisions that would protect people when they go to register or to vote from intimidation is no good. The present bill does not and more than likely will not contain such provisions. Even if criminal penalties

are included we know that all white juries don't convict white people for violating the civil rights of Negroes. We also know that in many areas of the South when the bill passes that there will be terror and intimidation.

For, in fact, in 1870 during Reconstruction when there were no literacy tests, no poll taxes, no other barriers to voting there was large scale intimidation. Groups such as the Klu Klux Klan and white night riders, bombed homes and beat and murdered Negroes. That was temporarily stopped after introduction of literacy tests, poll taxes and other barriers that made it no longer necessary to rely solely on violence.

There is certainly no reason to believe that the same thing ^{will} ~~did~~ not occur after the passage of the voting bill. We saw last year in Mississippi a great deal of intimidation, burnings, bombings and killings. Therefore we might as well get ready for that. There is no question about it.

In addition, we know that there are forces in the country -- including the Democratic Party -- some labor unions, and in some instances the church people -- and, in fact, President Johnson himself -- who would like very much for the Negro vote to be delivered to the Democratic Party. We know, too, that the Democratic Party passed a resolution at the 1964 National convention in Atlantic City requiring all delegations to be integrated by 1968. In many deep South states it would be very easy to include one or two Negroes of the traditional kind -- the more conservative leaders -- ~~and~~ the regular party structure. Then the Democratic Party will be able to project to the whole nation that it is integrated. But in reality it will not give power to Negroes or give them a vehicle in which to help them to solve their problems.

By tradition we also know that most Negroes will go directly into the Democratic Party. And, we know that other civil rights organizations such as the NAACP have registered people on a non-partisa basis but have not stressed a great deal of political independence or militancy. Memphis is an example of this. In this city the traditional voter registration drives have been carried on largely by the NAACP and by and large 80% of the Negroes ~~wxx~~ are registered as Democrats or always vote Democratic. After the machine has selected candidates it needs only to get out the vote on election day. This is typical.

It is important for people -- for SNCC -- to realize that at this very moment other people in the country are getting money and people together to register thousands of Negroes into the regular political parties. (For example, the NAACP has a summer program that involves bringing 1,000 people into Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina to register Negroes. Also the National Democratic Party is mustering people and money for a summer thrust in the South; then, too, labor unions spend millions of dollars yearly on voter registration -- and will certainly funnel some of this money South. We know very well if they do (and they are capable of doing so) that our ability to organize people the way we think they should be organized will be made 100 times more difficult. Also local people themselves will be in the political soup of tokenism.

We in SNCC then have to ask ourselves a very serious question. Is this what we want to happen? I for one think not. Therefore we cannot ignore the voting bill nor ~~w~~ can we ignore other motion in the communities where we work. We have to be concerned about people who are poor and hungry and about Negro (as well as white) leadership in their community which ignores and/or manipulates them.

We have to try not to let happen ~~wxxxxxx~~ in the South what has happened in the North, ie. (that is) big political machines -- white

page 5 ON PROGRAMS...

and black -- imposing their wills upon the people.

In addition, we have to realistically face the problem of what is really going to happen to Negroes once the voting bill is passed in terms of terror and intimidation. We know that this is ~~xxx~~ the white man's last stand and regardless of what anybody else says, including President Johnson, it is not only going to be the KKK that is going to support these desperate efforts -- it is going to be the entire white power structure -- particularly in the Black Belt areas of the country. This terror is going to come whether we are in there organizing or not. This will be particularly true in those areas where local people themselves take the initiative to organize.

Then one has to ask himself: How does one minimize terror and how does one protect the vote after it is gotten? Let us deal with terror first.

We have seen in Selma and other places across the South that the federal ~~xx~~ government seldom moves when Negroes are getting arrested, beaten or killed. Mississippi and Alabama (Jimmy Lee Jackson) have proven that. Mississippi and Alabama also prove something else -- that the country reacts -- gets upset -- when people are in motion and white people are getting jailed, and beaten ~~xx~~ or killed. ~~Wxxx~~

We also know that the eyes of the nation only open when there is a crisis. We know, too, that only when there is a crisis or confrontation that we get semi-meaningful legislation or that we get our basic demands listened to and perhaps some of them met (Birmingham - civil rights bill; Mississippi murders -- some degree of federal presence in increased FBI forces; Selma -- proposed voting bill, 1965). It is my belief that we could indeed have forced a stronger voting bill -- with a provision for new elections -- if we had continued the momentum of the Selma campaign and had stimulated other motion during March

page 6 ON PROGRAMS...

and April across the South -- motion designed to point up the inadequacies in that bill. Instead we depended only upon our supporters in the North to lobby for free elections.

HOW CAN SNCC DEAL WITH THIS?

1. MOTION ACROSS THE SOUTH. We should have workers in hundreds of Black Belt counties and large Southern cities organizing people to go to the courthouse, to attempt to register, and to file the 20 complaints that are presently necessary under the voting bill in order to get the federal referee appointed. This accomplishes two things. First, it provides us with a focus for a beginning to organize independent political groups. Second, it provides us with a program which publicly and nationally points to the inadequacies of the voting bill (not only will terror result which we surely don't want but also it is my contention that the bill ~~xxxxxx~~ does not provide for enforcement of the simple act of registration (meaning that the government cannot go through all the paper work, court work and administrative work to get the machinery moving to really register people across the South or to provide protection from intimidation)).

But motion implies terror -- or at least an increase thereof. We do have a responsibility to protect local people and our own staff. How can SNCC do this?

2. NORTHERN VOLUNTEERS. As stated before they provide some form of protection. When people are arrested Congressmen and parents calling the jail constantly have more effect than local Negroes calling. Parents and friends badgering Congressmen and the Justice Department to DO SOMETHING also has the effect of moving the government further toward providing some kind of protection. In addition, Northern volunteers can help us with the organizing task. ~~xxxxx~~

I think that this program in no way destroys the concept of "let

the people decide" or the concept of "let the people make decisions for themselves" because this program is different from the white paternalism of the community center or the know-it-all attitude of some white people in the freedom schools. In this particular case we are not bringing or giving Negroes anything -- in fact, we are stimulating them to act for themselves and to demand their rights.

I WOULD PROPOSE THE FOLLOWING THINGS FOR SUMMER WORK:

1. That we expand our working areas in Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia including large cities (maybe Virginia and South Carolina)
2. That we recruit Southern Negro college students to help with the expanded organizing effort.
3. That we recruit hundreds of Northern volunteers to work with the Negro students and the staff in the South.
4. That we work with SCLC's SCOPE project where there are SCOPE units.
5. That we recruit for the MFDP's summer program in Mississippi.
6. That we recruit for the Washington lobby and make this a prerequisite for work in the South and a screening ground for potential volunteers.

The Washington lobby will consist of two ten day sessions -- June 13 to June 23 and June 24 to July 4. During these ten days students will be lobbying Congressmen on the MFDP Challenge and will be involved in an orientation to Southern problems and techniques of organizing independent political action. This means that persons coming to the South will have had a good ten day orientation session about the South, about political education, about knocking on doors and canvassing and organizing for independent political action.

Presently Tom Brown and the campus travellers are trying to recruit large numbers of Negro college students to work in the South this summer. They will hold an orientation meeting at Tuskegee from June 5 to June 11. During the last two weeks of June, then, these Negro students will be working in the field and can provide leadership along with the staff. The first group of Northerners will be used in counties where we already work.

While the second group of Northerners is in Washington the Negro college students along with some staff will have a chance to break

page 8 ON PROGRAMS...

ground in many new counties. By the beginning of July we should be able to assign Northern volunteers to some of these new areas.

WHAT WILL THE STAFF AND STUDENTS DO?

1. ORGANIZE and get the necessary complaints in order to get a federal examiner appointed. Also try to register people.
2. ORGANIZE Negroes (and if possible whites) for independent political action. People can be talked to about organizing on the ward and precinct level into independent political action groups. Not necessarily FDP in name but FDP in type. It could be the Pine Bluff Civic League or the Harmony Community Movement.
3. ORGANIZE around federal programs. a. Determine if poor Negroes are included in the poverty program (ie decision making, so forth). b. Determine if school boards that have not signed the compliance pledge for desegregation are still receiving federal funds. In addition use other federal programs to organize around.
4. ORGANIZE around any other social and political issues which concern people in a specific community.

(The above program is also not meant as a substitute for programs in current operation but merely as an addition to them).

AFTER THE SUMMER WHAT? It seems to me that independent political organization would begin to spring up across the South. Local people will have been involved in substantial numbers and in a substantial enough way that the exit of volunteers will hardly matter. In addition, we hopefully can break out of this thing where staff hang on and on in one community and in some instances take the initiative away from local people by their dependence on the staff. It also means that during the summer we will have talked about Freedom and about independent political groups -- therefore, in August or September we can have a real people's conference not with 50 or 60 people with no base but with hundreds of people who are already involved in something affecting their lives as a result of summer activity. These conferences are also important to tie the new groups together state and Southwide.

At these conferences, people can then begin to decide for themselves long range program about things which affect their lives.

(This paper is designed to be a working paper and the author welcomes all comments and suggestions)

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