

VOTER REGISTRATION: A MEANS TO COMMUNITY POLITICAL POWER

A new federal voting rights bill has been passed by the Senate, and a similar bill will soon be passed by the House. When the final compromise version of this bill is signed by the President, many of the specific obstacles to Negro voter registration in the South will be either modified or removed. Consequently, it is the opinion of CORE that further attempts to register voters under the old laws would not be useful, and that actual registration of new voters should await passage of the new Act.

However, since voter registration work involves much more than taking potential voters to the registrar, and since work on voter registration is not meaningful unless it is done as part of a broader program of community organization and political development, much can be done while awaiting the passage of the Act, sometime in the middle of the summer.

Since the new Act will involve many changes in registration procedures, CORE field workers should keep informed of the provisions of the new Act, of the steps taken by local officials to comply with the new Act, and steps which may be taken by state governments to circumvent the provisions of the Act by lawsuits or other means.

A voter on the rolls who doesn't use his vote effectively is of little use in the civil rights struggle. And the most rapid and efficient registration of large numbers of Negroes in a community, so that they can use their votes to change the power structure of that community, is achieved only when registration is part of a general program of community political organization and education. The CORE workers' job is to help build a meaningful Negro political structure, of which registered voters are only a part.

Consequently, registration projects should begin with the discovery of local political leaders, and of presently functioning civic organizations in the Negro community. Their underlying principles and their militancy, more than the number of members in any one organization, will determine which organization CORE chooses to work most closely with, if there is a choice. Ideally, CORE should be working for an existing organization, at least formally. This is most important when workers begin contacting members of the community.

To begin a voter registration project, the CORE workers will need to have available personnel to do canvassing, an assembly place for voter's clinics and meetings, and transportation if the Negro community is large or scattered. In areas where harassment may occur during canvassing, thought may have to be given to protection of canvassers.

Canvassing should consist, not merely of an attempt to locate, interest and train unregistered members of the community, but a more general survey of the community which can accomplish several goals at once. Citizens should be approached by Negro or interracial

teams, if at all possible, sufficiently small in size (2 or 3) that they will not intimidate the community member, who introduce themselves as affiliated with the local sponsoring civic organization, an organization more likely to be known to the community residents than is CORE. Canvassers should attempt to elicit the individual's own opinions on his community, its needs, problems and structure, and his own specific complaints of discrimination. They should try to discover those areas in which the individual would become active in effecting changes. They should locate potential leaders at both adult and youth levels, those who could be active on a community-wide level, and those with less experience or confidence who would be willing to serve as leaders on a block level. Thus the survey will provide data needed to determine which community programs will involve large numbers of people, and knowledge of the local residents who can carry out these programs.

Canvassing must be learned by doing; however, in general the CORE WORKER CONDUCTS INTERVIEWS MORE BY LISTENING THAN BY ASKING QUESTIONS. He tries to involve the interviewee in conversation in those areas of greatest personal concern and emotional involvement. He tries to making voting and the development of the Negro voting potential, meaningful in terms of these personal needs and concerns of the citizen. When an individual expresses interest in action, the CORE worker attempts to get specific commitments from him, to attend a meeting or a voter's clinic or even to join the worker in canvassing. A community survey form should be filled out while canvassing, with record of the name and address of every individual visited. Full notes on each individual should be made during and after each house visit. In general, it is best to take a few notes as possible in the presence of the interviewee in order not to constrict his flow of conversation. Houses at which no one is home should be returned to at a later date.

Success in canvassing is not measured by the number of individuals contacted in a day. The worker should stay as long as he needs with each individual. Remember that the person whom you are interviewing has washed the dirty linen of the white community for a long time: he knows a great deal more than he is telling you.

While canvassing proceeds, the CORE worker should set up a voter registration clinic, to be run concurrently with canvassing during the day if enough local interest exists and enough staff are available, or in the evening. Transportation and babysitting arrangements may have to be made to allow some people to attend the clinic. In some cases, training may have to be done in the home, or on the job during off hours, rather than at a central assembly place. The voters' clinic consists primarily of training in the correct method of filling out the registration form for the particular parish or county, and taking the constitutional test, if one is required. Workers must have copies of these forms, and be familiar with registration procedures.

However, the opportunity to educate people in political action at voters' clinics should not be passed up, especially with those who

seem to have leadership potential or strong motivation for action. At the clinic, many people may also appear who for one reason or another (such as illiteracy) cannot qualify to vote. The CORE workers will have to weigh whether or not they should spend time with those people, after making their legal situation clear to them. Since the workers are aiming at community support and large turn-outs in political activities, as well as successful registration, they may consider some of their time well spend on people who have high motivation, as they may be able to serve the movement in other ways than by voting.

Various other types of meetings will occur during the voter registration project. The canvassers are best organized by short sessions before and after the day's canvassing, at which their movements can be planned in advance, and the materials they have gathered collected and coordinated. CORE volunteers must be urged to write up any useful information they have gathered on projects, areas of discrimination, etc., at the end of each day. Longer sessions every few days or so are useful, especially in the early phase of canvassing, in discussing problems met in interviewing and perfecting canvassing techniques.

In addition, the training of future canvassers from the local community should be undertaken, either at the voter's clinics, in special meetings, or by taking out local volunteers to accompany CORE workers during canvassing. Local students are useful for this job, as they most often have the free time and energy to devote to it, but adults should not be overlooked.

Naturally, mass meetings to explain the purpose of CORE's projects and to engender enthusiasm in the community will be held, in cooperation with CORE's sponsoring organization, if there is one. Canvassers can urge citizens to attend such meetings, and gain their support for any other mass actions, during their daily visits.

Once sufficient surveying has been done to uncover potential leadership and promising areas of project interest, the CORE workers should begin to encourage the formation of block organizations, using the lists of interested individuals gathered during canvassing. Thus, block organizations should ideally begin to develop in sections of the community as they are covered by the canvassers. Workers will of course allow block organizations to decide on the areas of change they wish to tackle, but will assist them in coordinating their efforts with other blocks, and in choosing effective means to their goals.

The final stage in the voter registration project is, of course, getting people to the registrar, and eventually to the polls. CORE workers should find out what they can about the behavior and attitudes of the registrar. They should plan registration visits carefully, sending reasonably well-trained potential voters. Transportation may have to be arranged to get people to and from the Registrar's Office and the polls. Detailed information must be kept on each potential registrant, so that it can be used to invoke intervention of Federal

registrars if discrimination occurs.

In summary, a voter registration campaign serves many functions, if effective. Besides locating and training potential voters for registration, it uncovers the community needs and conditions which must be known in order for a priority of action programs to be devised. It locates various levels of leadership and followership in the community, and lays the groundwork for grass roots organization of block and area political units. Finally, it serves as a means of educating the community on the means available to them to effect change: the summer project, local political organizations and activities, CORE, and the civil rights movement in general.