

# Race and Suffrage Today

January 1953

"IN any future history of suffrage in the South, the decade of the 1940's will probably be known as the time of an awakening among Negroes and of a change of attitude by many whites toward Negro participation in this phase of government." So began *Race and Suffrage Since 1940*, a study prepared for the Southern Regional Council in 1948 by the late Dr. Luther P. Jackson

The claim seems an understatement from the vantage point of today. Faced with the tedious and long-range task of achieving full enfranchisement in every part of the region, we can see even more clearly how far and how fast Negro suffrage advanced in the Forties. In 1940, Southern Negroes who had got past the barriers of poll taxes, qualification tests, and unfriendly election officials numbered about 250,000—and most of these had been able to vote only in meaningless general elections. Then, as now, the all-important decisions in the one-party South were made in the Democratic primaries. For practical purposes, the Negro was completely disfranchised.

There was nothing new about this dismal state of affairs; it had existed for a generation. But the complacency with which Negroes had once accepted it was rapidly giving way in 1940 to a new determination. The onset of World War II with its emphasis on democratic values lent added force to the demand for full citizenship, and also did much to prepare the white South for the impending change.

The great achievement which followed was a triumph, in law, for a free ballot unhampered by racial restrictions. As a result, Negro registration in the Southern states climbed to more than a million, bringing in its wake substantial gains in public facilities and an improved political climate in many urban areas.

But those who rejoiced in the early victories have been sobered by the vexing problems which have persisted. There are still broad stretches of the South where Negroes can vote only with great difficulty, or not at all. And, even where the right to vote is secure, ignorance and apathy—those age-old enemies of popular government—seriously impede the Negro's civic progress.

The following discriminatory tactics, cited by Dr. Jackson, are still to be found in parts of the South:

- (1) Requiring Negro applicants to produce one or more white character witnesses.
- (2) Applying severe property qualifications and requiring only Negro applicants to show property-tax receipts.
- (3) Strictly enforcing literacy tests against Negro applicants.
- (4) Putting unreasonable questions on the Constitution to Negro applicants.