

MEMORANDUM
from the
SOUTHERN REGIONAL COUNCIL
(for discussion August 23, 1961)

The Southern Regional Council is considering, along with other principal civil rights organizations, a joint and large effort to increase voter registration in the South. Without abandoning other programs, these organizations are contemplating an expansion of their activity in this field, and a close coordination of work toward the goal of greatly enlarged registration and voter turnout. This memorandum embodies the Council's opinions regarding the desirability of such an effort, and an indication of the role the Council might be able to fill.

Obstacles to Success

At this stage of consideration, it is well to hold clearly in mind the practical difficulties. There are many, but perhaps they come under six main categories. Discussion of them occupied a large part of the July 28 meeting.

(1) An intensified registration drive will, at least in some parts of the South, intensify the opposition. The weight of official and economic power can be expected to contend against it, with methods ranging from the ingenious to the crude, and probably including the brutal. (2) Citizen indifference, a product of tradition and disillusion, will be a drag on any effort. (3) spurts in Negro registration have usually occurred when some dramatic incident, issue, or candidacy arouses the people. Unless the drive happens to coincide with a local or statewide fever of interest, its path is uphill all the way. (4) Registration campaigning, in the absence of dramatic causes, is hard, grubby, tiring, unspectacular, frequently discouraging. (5) Feasible ways of harnessing several national and regional organizations into a common plan and direction are hard to come by. At least as difficult is the enlistment of local groups and the mobilizing of volunteer manpower. (6) Money -- and regarding this no comment is necessary.

The Value at Stake

Tough as the obstacles are, they seem to SRC worth an attack. Voting is no panacea, nor even the ultimate weapon against discrimination. An enlarged electorate is so important, however, that if a means can be found to combine organizational energies with each other and with money, no other civil rights goal has equal claims on our efforts. Moreover, an enlarged electorate is needed now, and not at some long-off date. As we see it, there are four values that increased voting in the South would immeasurably help to realize. Only a quick mention of each is required.

(1) Increased Negro political power is negotiable into civil rights gains in all fields. Because southern politicians are in fact the product of typically small -- and easily controlled -- white electorates, expansion of white registration can also be helpful in getting a different type political representation. (2) An enlarged electorate is necessary if the South finally is to become a democracy, and the people of the South are to enjoy the dignity of members of a democracy. (3) The politics of the South will have to become responsive to the interests of Negroes, or else Negroes will justifiably lose trust in political processes. (4) Free and full participation of Negroes in southern elections, and the consequent respect which Negro citizens will be accorded, may be the surest means of ending or at least decreasing southern preoccupation with race and the racial prejudice that grows from that.

The Role of the Southern Regional Council

If the principal organizations decide to join forces in a registration drive, the Council would be prepared to offer help in several ways.

(1) SRC is affiliated with Councils on Human Relations in 10 states and about 60 localities. We would hope these could provide some manpower and administrative service, and

SRC would endeavor to secure their cooperation. These state and local groups are of varying strength. There are several which are soundly enough organized and based to be able to assume important roles: these would include, for example, the local Councils on Human Relations in Alexandria, Arlington County, Fairfax County, and Lynchburg (Va.); Savannah (Ga.); Charlotte (N.C.); Nashville and Oak Ridge (Tenn.)*; Austin and Houston (Tex.). The South Carolina Council on Human Relations, because of its strong Negro representation, might also be useful. Local councils in Richmond and Norfolk (Va.); Gainesville, Jacksonville, and Daytona Beach (Fla.); Atlanta (Ga.); Memphis (Tenn.); and Little Rock (Ark.) are examples of councils which might be of valuable secondary support.

(2) SRC is prepared to put its research resources fully behind a registration campaign.

(3) Over the years, SRC has developed skills and contacts in press relations which may be of advantage.

(4) SRC can, under mutually agreeable arrangements, provide administrative services. Because we have tax exemption, the July 28 meeting discussed the possibility that SRC might fill a central administrative role in a united campaign. Although any outline of a mode of organization can be, at this time, merely tentative, the following paragraphs describe one basis on which SRC could accept this function.

A POSSIBLE PLAN

1. In a venture of this sort, the manner of launching is of first importance. There should be a public announcement made under auspicious circumstances and coupled with

*The group in Nashville is known as the Community Relations Conference; that in Oak Ridge, which is not formally affiliated with SRC, is the Community Relations Council.

a call to mass action. There would be tremendous stimulus if the call could obtain the prompt endorsement of the President, and if he stated that increased voting was a national objective.

The announcement might take the form of a joint press release by the organizations, setting forth an intent to associate themselves in a massive registration drive. (It would be highly desirable if the sponsors could include agencies such as the AFL-CIO, National Council of Churches, American Friends Service Committee, National Y.W.C.A., etc.) Along about paragraph 4 or 5 of the release, there could be a short statement that the sponsoring agencies pledge themselves also to support Project _____, administered by the Southern Regional Council, and directed by _____; a few lines of biography of the director could follow. The press release should be accompanied by a fairly brief, carefully thought out, quietly eloquent statement describing the purpose of the drive, subscribed to by all the sponsors; this would serve, then and later, as a sort of creed or manifesto for the drive.

The announcement and call might well be followed within the next few weeks by local (and perhaps state) meetings, where the local affiliates of the sponsoring agencies together with other local organizations would commit themselves to the drive. There is, however, a risk in holding such rallies, and that is that they may in fact siphon off energy and give participants the feeling that they have already accomplished something.

2. Project _____ should have an independent office. Atlanta would seem to be the best headquarters city, because of its central location, and because of the presence there of offices of many of the sponsoring agencies. The latter factor, though, could be a disadvantage as well as an asset. Richmond, Charlotte, Nashville, and Memphis are other places which might be considered. Memphis in particular combines some interesting advantages: closeness to some of the trouble areas; a militant Negro community; a state government which probably would not harass.

3. The Project director should be Negro, a man of stature, vigor, and sagacity. He will need to have the confidence of all sponsors. These being nearly impossible qualifications, the finding of the right man will be hard.

4. To anticipate Project staff size or organization at this time is foolish. One might hazard the thought that there might well be an aide to the director for research and writing, and one for field work. We think the latter could deservedly be a student leader. There might be also 4 or 5 travelling consultants, men or women with previous experience in registration work, who would assist in planning and administering the local campaigns. A first rate administrative secretary will be needed. One or two of the staff should be white, in order to certify the desire of the drive that whites and white organizations will actively cooperate. A staff of this size and composition would represent a salary budget of approximately \$50 - 60,000. A roughly equal amount would be needed for office and travel.

5. The functions of the Project staff would be, principally:

- a. To help the sponsoring agencies and local groups allocate areas in which to work.
- b. To assist in organizing and following through on local drives.
- c. In cooperation with SRC's Atlanta office, to plan research and publications.
- d. To advise all participating agencies on public relations.
- e. To allocate funds among participating groups.

6. In allocating funds, the Project director will have to have undivided responsibility and authority except as qualified in the next two paragraphs.

7. The Project should have an Advisory Committee, composed of one leading figure from each sponsor. The Committee should meet frequently and regularly to review policies and decisions, and to advise the Project director. Good administration dictates that the Committee be advisory only. Common sense points out that unless the policies of the Project director satisfy the Committee, changes will be in order.

8. The Southern Regional Council need not control, and would not want to control, the policies of the Project except as follows:

- a. a veto over any grant of funds which would violate SRC's tax exemption charter;
- b. a withholding of any grant of funds until the recipient has insured adequate accounting of the use of the funds;
- c. appointment of Project staff: SRC recognizes, however, that Project effectiveness requires that staff have the confidence of all sponsors;
- d. supervision of administrative practices of the Project.*

9. The first task of the Project director and his staff should be a careful study and definition of the best methods for conducting registration drives in the various sections of the South. On the basis of this study, the Project director, with the advice of the Advisory Committee, should draw up a statement of policies which will guide

*The administrative load which the Project would add on SRC's Atlanta office, plus SRC's involvement in the Project's research and writing activities, would make necessary that some funds to support these functions be charged to the Project budget.

the Project in determining whether to cooperate financially and administratively with the activities of any agency or group. It is SRC's opinion that in some sections of the South, non-violent demonstrations will be among the practical methods which should be supported. Moreover, while the policy statement, once adopted, should be firmly adhered to, it is SRC's opinion that the statement should be so phrased as not to inhibit novel methods, so long as they accord with the spirit and aim of the Project.

10. It should be emphasized that success of the drive will depend not only on the sponsoring agencies, but on the support and diligent activity of local voters leagues, churches, Urban Leagues, etc. In the localities there should be a pooling of resources and a uniting of the efforts of all groups there represented -- national, regional, and local. Project _____ should help bring this about. If, however, for any reason a joint plan is not developed or carried out, the Project's consultants should be available to assist whatever agencies do move ahead.

11. It would be hoped that the initial call and subsequent state and local rallies would impart great momentum to the registration drive. Nevertheless, there will be a plenty of arduous organizational work to do before important results can be achieved. It is, therefore, SRC's belief that the Project should have a life of two years. We do not think it should continue much beyond that. Hardening of the administrative arteries sets in fast on activities of this kind, and the spirit of cooperation thins. Moreover, one of the principal goals of the Project should be the strengthening of local initiative and organizations.

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