

MEMORANDUM ON STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES
OF NAACP IN VOTER REGISTRATION

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People operates in every Southern state except Alabama where it is excluded through a temporary injunction secured without a hearing June 1, 1956.

The Southern states and the number of local branches: Florida 32; Georgia 16; Mississippi 21; North Carolina 88; South Carolina 31; Tennessee 12; Arkansas 12; Louisiana 13 (crippled by on-again, off-again injunction but now free to operate); Oklahoma 20; Texas 39; Maryland 16; Virginia 73; Kentucky 19.

The activity of the NAACP designed to stimulate an increase in the number of registered Negro voters goes back practically to the day of its organization. The first legal case in which the Association figured before the U. S. Supreme Court was in 1915 and involved the validity of the so-called Grandfather Cause method of disfranchising Negro voters.

In 1921 the NAACP set up voters' training classes through its branches in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Virginia and a number of Northern states to inform colored women to take advantage of the new 19th Amendment. The printed annual reports of the Association record activity on registration and voting throughout the life of the Association.

The 1957 Yearbook of the Journal of Negro Education is devoted completely to the subject "The Negro Voter in the South", and contains a state-by-state review of registration activities. It is significant that the NAACP is mentioned in practically every state report as the one organization which has carried out a voter registration campaign consistently over the years.

The voter registration campaigns took on new importance after the dramatic, all-night debate on the civil rights plank at the 1948 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. Prior to that event the Supreme Court decision in 1944 outlawed the White Primary as unconstitutional

and stimulated increased registration of Negro voters in the Southern states. Some of this increase was noticeable in the 1948 election, but the real fire was lighted by the debate in Philadelphia.

The NAACP was active in voter registration for state and national elections each year after 1948 and was assisted by a small grant from an individual interested in this phase of our program.

In 1957 the NAACP convened a conference in Atlanta of its state officials in 14 Southern states. Out of that came a South-wide voter registration committee with Kelly M. Alexander of Charlotte, North Carolina as chairman. Mr. Alexander is the president of the North Carolina State NAACP and is also a member of the National Board of Directors. A director of the campaign, John Brooks of Richmond, Virginia, was selected and an office opened in Richmond in February 1958. Mr. Brooks had been doing registration work for the Virginia State organization of the NAACP. W. C. Patton, a field secretary of the Association who had been assigned to Alabama but who was without an assignment in the face of the Alabama injunction, became a field secretary-at-large for voter registration.

Messrs. Brooks and Patton have devoted their full time to this work continuously since the beginning of 1958. It was agreed in the beginning that because of our limited resources and personnel we would work in selected urban centers only, where volunteer groups could be set up and where the return for the effort would be likely to be larger. The NAACP had an outstanding success in Memphis, Tennessee where the organization setup succeeded in adding more than 14,000 names to the rolls. It worked in other towns and cities in Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas.

All this time the Baltimore, Maryland branch of the NAACP was conducting its own voter registration campaign through a tie with the churches of that city. In a two-year period more than 100,000 new names were added in Baltimore.

Although only two men are fully engaged in voter registration, the NAACP has field secretaries in a number of Southern states and part of their work is the stimulation of registration drives by the branches in their states. Field secretaries employed by and under the direction of the National Office, function in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Arkansas, Texas-Louisiana, Mississippi. In addition a state-employed secretary who works closely with the National Office functions in Virginia.

The NAACP also has a regional office in Atlanta and another in Dallas, Texas with still a third in San Francisco.

This means that the Association has the structure and the personnel to insure that voter registration campaigns are launched and carried forward. Obviously the structure is not ideal for obtaining maximum results, but it does guarantee that the voter registration phase of the NAACP program receives attention in local communities.

Newsweek estimated last fall just prior to the Presidential election that Negro registration in the South had been increased by about 15 per cent.

The NAACP has not confined its voter registration work in the Southern states, but has stimulated its branches in Northern areas to this kind of activity in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Missouri, Minnesota, Colorado, California, New York and the New England states. Our state organization in Ohio completed an effective voter registration campaign in 1960 over the entire state.

Attached are samples of some of the material used by us over the past five years, including a cartoon book "The Street Where You Live" of which a quarter of a million copies were distributed.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES

The NAACP intends to continue its voter-registration program in the North as well as in the South. To that end

we have already announced a continuing campaign through the 1964 election and inquiries are being received from a goodly number of non-Southern branches who state that they have set up voter registration committees.

In the South a campaign is presently in progress in seven urban areas in Mississippi and will be pushed in the coming months. Renewed activity is underway in Louisiana and new efforts will be made in Texas this winter prior to the poll tax deadline of January 31, 1962.

Arthur Krock gave the NAACP credit in his New York Times column of July 9, 1961, for spearheading the campaigns which have brought the total of Negro registered voters in Virginia from about 83,000 to 125,000. Mr. Krock was interested in the possible effect of this block of voters in a tight struggle involving the reign of the Byrd machine.

With additional funds the NAACP could add to its field staff so that its branches in the various states would have the benefit of closer guidance in staging local campaigns.

Classes and clinics could be conducted where needed.

Badly-needed educational materials could be prepared to demonstrate the tie between general advancement and voting power. Spot surveys have indicated that the most popular excuse for failure to register and vote is the belief that voting has little or no bearing upon the disabilities presently suffered. Education is required.

With additional funds it would be possible to carry out a project concentrated in one state or in two or three key centers in a state, the political complexion of which would determine the political complexion of the state. If the required factors were present, such a concentrated campaign might be carried into one Congressional district. These efforts, if successful, would dramatize the whole campaign and thus stimulate areas where intensive work, perhaps, could not be carried out.

The NAACP is prepared to plug away at this unspectacular, but necessary task, allotting as much of its total budget as it can to the campaign. Because we have considerable staff in the field (in addition to the South, outlined above, we have two west of Pennsylvania and east of Denver, one in the Northeast and three on the West Coast) and a substantial number of active volunteers locally, our program produces better results than might be expected from a casual survey.

If we had more money we could do a better job. Modestly, we cite an editorial reference in the Providence, Rhode Island Journal, of July 16, 1961: "There are many areas -- first and always, voter registration and resistance to infringement of Negro voting rights -- where only the NAACP has the organization, the talent and the experience to do the job."

Submitted to the Taconic Foundation

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