The Southern Negro: 1952

In its own way the South has long been the key to American politics, although it's influence has fluctuated. This year it is once again a major battleground in the fight for electoral votes. At both national conventions the South was the center of attention. Since then both candidates have stressed its importance, General Eisenhower hoping to break the solid South, Governor Stevenson to preserve it intact for the Democrats.

Both parties, however, seem to think of the South solely in terms of white voters; have in effect been bidding for the support of the white South. At the same time each is acutely aware of the importance of the Northern Negro vote. Accordingly each has sought to work out platform formulas and campaign appeals which will make it possible to win both the Southern white vote and the Northern Negro vote, for the party that bids too high for the support of the white South is likely to alienate the Northern Negro, and vice versa. Preoccupation with this dilemma has obscured another factor in the equation which may well prove to be decisive—the Southern Negro vote.

In our view the emergence of a significant Negro vote in the Southern states will prove to be one of the major political developments of this decade. The forward movement of the New Deal was checked in 1938 by Roosevelt's gallant but unsuccessful attempt to purge Senator George, Roosevelt had found that his victories usually carried into Congress, and into key committee chairmanships, the high-seniority Southerners who were the most implacable enemies of his program. Since the late 1930's, as the Washington Post has pointed-out (August 24, 1952), "no Administration has had any real control over the Senate. . . . That control has rested with a coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats." But great changes have occurred in the South, and the New Deal may win in this decade the campaign that Roosevelt launched in 1938. And the force that may eventually upset the Dixiecrat-Republican coalition in Congress and bring a new vitality to the politics of the South is the Southern Negro vote.

The importance of the Northern Negro vote is generally recognized. In the key Northern states, where the difference between the Democratic and Republican vote is rarely more than 500,000, Negro ballots can be decisive in a close Presidential election. In the West, too, the Negro vote must now be reckoned with. In 1940 only 170,706 Negroes were living in the Western states; today the number would be closer to 600,000. As shown by a study of local precinct returns, the Negro vote accounted for President Truman's slight margin of victory in California in 1948. Migration to the North and West has been the principal means by which Southern Negroes have won the ballot, though since the Supreme Court's 1944 decision invalidating the white primary many who stayed home have also been voting.

In the South, where politics are in a state of flux, the Negro has won a strong strategic position. The wedge that Roosevelt attempted to drive between the Dixiecrats and the New Deal Democrats is now firmly imbedded. In nearly every state the Democrats are split from top to bottom, from the statehouse machines to the county courthouse rings. Everywhere the same bitter struggle for power is being waged between the older tidewater politicians, acting as the surrogates of Republican big business, and the "regular," or New Deal, Democrats. By a curious irony, the Negro's fight for the ballot has taken the form of an attempt to enter the Democratic primary. Thus Southern Negroes are coming to hold the balance of power between the Dixiecrats and the New Deal Democrats.

Other political cleavages in the South have given additional weight to the Negro vote. For example, the Dixiecrat leaders, who are basically economic conservatives, find themselves increasingly in conflict with the Dixiecrat rank and file, which is made up of race-crazy, intractable elements, prone to violence. To the extent that the bourbons indulge the taste of their underlings for dynamite bombings, they run the risk of driving the more moderate whites into the camp of the New Deal Democrats. The rough stuff of former years has become
risky these days: witness the recent kidnaping convictions in North Carolina. Indeed, the switch from lynchings to dynamite bombings as a technique of intimidation is directly related to the circumstance that lynchings are much more dangerous—to the lynchers—than they used to be. Since 1949 there have been only seven lynchings in the South but more than fifty dynamite bombings.

In 1948 four Southern states bolted the Democratic Party; this year the Dixiecrats are more cautious. To be sure, they are still around. As one Southern leader puts it, "They're like water moccasins—they're still under the log." For one thing, General Eisenhower is the type of Republican nominee they could publicly support if necessary; in several states the Democratic Party organizations have all but urged voting for Eisenhower. But there is another reason for their embittered frustration. Post-convention surveys show that Southern Negroes, by and large, will vote for Stevenson and Sparkman despite their lack of enthusiasm for Sparkman. Furthermore, an Associated Press survey of twelve Southern states indicates that in an extremely close race the outcome in several of them could conceivably be determined by the Negro vote. In Virginia, Florida, and Texas, the states in which the Republicans have the best chance, Negroes will vote in considerable numbers.

In nearly every Southern state a new industrial or managerial middle class, living chiefly in urban centers and largely recruited from the North, will vote Republican and is trying to build "real" Republican organizations. Thus the corrupt vest-pocket Republican machines and their "post-office" henchmen are being replaced, here and there, by organizations staffed by young Republicans of the country-club and service-club variety. Today the Southern Negro is a major factor in the Democratic Party; tomorrow he may hold the balance of power between the parties.

Finally there are serious divisions in the Southern Negro voting organizations which almost universally function outside the Democratic Party. The college-educated leaders of a younger generation have split with the venal old-style politicos. Formerly the Negro vote, in those areas where Negroes voted, was often manipulated by white factions. Let Virginia Durr, one of the early leaders in the movement to eliminate the poll tax in the Southern states, describe what has been happening:

Today there is one very significant change in the picture. The Negro vote in the South is not being used by any white faction, it is not for sale by corrupt bosses, it is not a manipulated vote. It is today an independent force, controlled and united behind Negro leaders. These leaders are educated men, professional men, men of courage and conviction. Their names are well known in their states, and command respect, as they are known to be both incorruptible and intelligent. . . . They are middle-class men with middle-class points of view. . . . They know that in America's desire and effort to win the allegiance of the Asiatic and African peoples, its Achilles' heel is its treatment of the Negro. They also know it is votes that count, and they are the spearhead of the campaign to get out the Negro vote. . . . So far this crusade is confined to the small upper group of Negroes in the South; that is its weakness. The overwhelming mass of Southern Negroes simply do not have the time, the money, or the knowledge to become voters; but above all they do not see the importance of being voters. This is the job to be done: arouse the great body of Southern Negroes to the importance of voting. For the time being it looks as if the Negro vote in the South would only be large enough to be used for bargaining purposes, but that will mean a great deal.

It will not be long before the great mass of Southern Negroes recognize the importance of voting. In community after community, state after state, the New Deal, or regular, Democrats find themselves subject to convergent pressures—from new Republican competition, from the Dixiecrats, from Negro voters. If they are to obtain key committee chairmanships in Congress and control federal patronage in their own states, the New Deal Democrats realize that the party must win nationally, which means that it must be able to carry the Negro vote in the North and West. This realization, as well as the logic of the local political situation, dictates the wisdom of capturing the Southern Negro vote as a means of offsetting a possible defection of white Democrats to the Dixiecrats.

Once committed to this strategy, however, the New Deal Democrats must encourage greater Negro registration. As this increases, they can afford to take a bolder line on civil rights. Today they voice this line only in conversation in the North; tomorrow they may be voicing it publicly in the South. Already they are beginning to grant minor concessions to their Negro constituents: street paving, more street lights, better housing and health services, better schools. Every concession is another demonstration to the Negroes of why it is important to vote. The tempo of enfranchisement is also directly related to the number of Negroes voting; the larger the number of Negroes who register, the easier it becomes for others.

NEGROES have been spurred to fight for the ballot by their grim determination to end segregation in the public schools. The weapon they must use is the lawsuit, and lawsuits imply organization. The trial of the famous Clarendon County, South Carolina, suit in the spring of 1951, to determine the legality of segregated public schools, was an outstanding event in the history of Southern race relations. Hundreds of Negroes lined up outside the courthouse hours before court convened so that they might hear Thurgood Marshall cross-examine
white school officials and present expert testimony demolishing the myth of white supremacy.

Carter Wesley of the Houston Informer has written:

Take it any way you like, you will find that the gains Negroes have made in education have meant more to Negroes themselves, and have affected the whites more, than any other gains. Everywhere the Dixiecrat is aroused over the education question. The significance of the Negro's gain in education does not lie in the schools that have been opened; it lies in the fact that the Negro has pushed into a field or a plane where the white man must accept him as an equal, and it lies also in the fact that the field is open permanently.

Of the major barriers to the Southern Negro's enfranchisement only the "white primary" has been removed, and vestiges of that remain despite the Supreme Court decision. Five states still exact a poll tax. And the refusal to reapportion representation in state legislatures—no Southern state has been reapportioned since 1910—continues to make possible a seniority system that is used to control state legislatures as effectively as it does Congressional committees. In Georgia the county-unit system still gives two-thirds of the votes to one-third of the population in certain counties. The South's archaic form of county government persists unchanged. In the 100 counties of Virginia, the 159 of Georgia, and the 254 of Texas tight little ruling coteries are intact despite the fact that half of their functions as job holders have been abolished.

Social change will finally engulf these anachronisms. With cotton no longer king, the South cannot much longer remain solid. Hence the time is ripe for an all-out assault on segregation, and this must start with the fight to register the Negro voter. Negro suffrage will end Negro segregation, for segregation is simply an elaborate scheme by which the ballot has been denied to the Southern Negro despite constitutional guaranties which entitle him to it. Nor will a one-party South long survive when the majority of Southern Negroes vote. Today two-thirds of the total Negro vote is cast by the one-third of the Negro population that lives in the North and West. When Negroes are able to vote in the South in the same ratio as they now vote in the North and West, the liberal movement may experience another upsurge similar to the New Deal.

The Negro Vote in the South: 1952


definition

BY HENRY LEE MOON

SOUTHERN Negro leaders, long excluded from effective participation in politics, are trying to raise to 2,000,000 the number of Southern Negroes qualified to vote in the Presidential election in November. This will be more than double the number registered to vote in the 1950 elections. Since nearly 6,000,000 Negroes should vote in the South, the goal is unbecomingly modest. Nevertheless, in view of existing conditions, its attainment would introduce an important new factor into American politics.

The hope of the Southern Negro to play a larger role in the politics of the region stems from the outlawing of the iniquitous "white primary" by the United States Supreme Court in April, 1944. This historic decision opened the way to mass Negro voting in the South for the first time since the collapse of Reconstruction. Reactionary elements rallied of course to resist its implementation in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, The South Carolina legislature, on the demand of Governor Olin Johnston, eliminated all references to the primary from the statute book in a move designed to permit the Democratic Party of the state to formulate and enforce its own rules as a private lily-white club. This subterfuge was scotched by Federal Judge J. Watkins Waring in a notable decision handed down on July 12, 1947. The redoubtable South Carolinian, repudiating the mores of his native state, affirmed the right of Negroes to participate in "the only material and realistic elections" held in the state and excoriated the trick by which the politicians had sought to subvert the Constitution.

The white primary was the most effective and discriminatory disfranchising instrument devised by the white supremacists. The poll tax kept more whites than Negroes away from the ballot box; a steadily increasing number of Negro citizens were able to pay it. Likewise, more and more Negroes could pass the literacy tests when fairly administered. But the color test was one they could not meet.

Although total disfranchisement of the Southern Negro was never achieved, there was ample justification for Albert Bushnell Hart's observation in 1906 that "in the essential quality of a vote that may go to convert a minority into a majority, the Negroes have for years been hopelessly disfranchised." In 1940 Ralph J. Bunche

HENRY LEE MOON, director of public relations for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, is the author of "Balance of Power: The Negro Vote."

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