

Political Participation

THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION report of the Civil Rights Commission is another milestone in the Commission's long record of "telling it like it is." Just when most people were beginning to congratulate themselves on the huge success of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in taking discrimination out of the electoral process, along comes the Commission and knocks this complacent assumption into the proverbial cocked hat. The Commission's report on the civil rights health of our political system reads no better than "improving but still far from good".

The 1965 Voting Rights Act, following upon the demands of the civil rights groups for direct Federal registration of Negroes, has been a very real success in facilitating registration and voting. More than half the Negroes of voting age, the Commission reports, are now registered in every Southern State. Those who remember witnesses for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party telling the Credentials Committee of the 1964 Democratic National Convention that only 6 percent of the Negroes in Mississippi were registered, can rejoice in the fact that today the figure is 60 percent. And this increase in registration of Negroes in the Southern States has brought with it more Negroes elected to office and more recognition of Negro interests by political office holders generally.

But, as always in the civil rights field, the road ahead looms as long and as rocky as the road that has already been traveled. Precisely because Negro registration has been so successful, new roadblocks to political participation throughout the South have been thrown up at every available point. The Negro vote has been diluted by switching to at-large elections and by redrawing election district lines, thus diminishing the influence that would otherwise be drawn from concentrations of Negro voting strength. Negroes have been prevented from obtaining office by such stratagems as extending the incumbent's term, abolishing the office, raising filing fees, withholding information,

and the like. Negro poll watchers have been excluded from polling places and even out-and-out frauds against Negro candidates have not been unknown. While the worst offenders, of course, are the usual culprits of Mississippi and Alabama, the Commission's findings cover other Southern States as well.

It is in the area of participation within the Democratic and Republican Party structure that Negro progress has been most disappointing. Thus, the Commission reports that out of the approximately 1,700 persons who served on the State party executive committees in the 10 Southern States last year, only about 10 or less than .6 percent were Negroes. While the situation is undoubtedly somewhat better on some county party executive committees in some of these States, no Negro served on any county executive committee in Mississippi last year. Inclusion, not exclusion, may be the rule of the major political parties in most of the Nation, but it certainly has no application to Negroes in the old Confederacy.

The Civil Rights Commission put the blame for this deplorable state of affairs just where it belongs—upon the national political parties—and recommends stern action on their part. The Commission proposes that the national parties require their State organizations, as a precondition to the seating of delegations at the national conventions, to eliminate all vestiges of discrimination at every level of party activity, to publicize all meetings, procedures, and qualifications for office within the party, and to take affirmative steps to open activities to all party members regardless of race. In so doing, the Commission has proposed a new direction in party discipline over State units. Instead of insisting that delegations to the national conventions be integrated, which has been the area of conflict in the past, the Commission is saying that the State and local parties must themselves be integrated before their delegations can be seated at the convention.

In this respect, an analogy might be drawn to the recent struggle over representation at the forthcoming Olympic Games. Initially South Africa was to be received at the 1968 games as long as it sent an integrated delegation of athletes. Now, however, South African athletes are not to be accepted at all because of the apartheid policies at home. So here the Commission is saying that delegations from State political parties which discriminate against Negroes at home should not be admitted to the national conventions no matter how much they dress up their delegations to the conventions. And, of course, the Commission is right in its broad proposal. The State delegation to the national convention is only the part of the iceberg

that is above water. What really counts is what the party is doing back home and it belies any contention of racial integrity on the part of a national political party to recognize State organizations which discriminate against Negroes.

Actually, this is the position which the Democratic National Convention appears to have taken in 1964 as a result of the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. It will be recalled that the Freedom Party's challenge resulted in the ouster of the regular lily-white Mississippi delegation and the offer of seats to Aaron Henry and Rev. Ed King, two of the leaders of the Freedom Party delegation. But the challenge also evoked a change in the permanent rules of the Convention that State parties sending delegates to future Democratic conventions assure to all persons the right "to participate fully in party affairs" regardless of race, color, creed, or national origin. Since the issue had arisen in the context of the color of the State delegation not of the State party, this pledge of full participation in party affairs may have been more by accident than design and it will be up to future conventions to decide.

Actually, however, mere exclusions of delegations sent by offending State parties is only the beginning. The thing that really matters is the filling of the seats of the excluded delegates with Negroes and their local white allies. Thus, the regular Mississippi delegates made it perfectly clear all over the Democratic National Convention in 1964 that they did not give a tinker's damn about what happened to them, but they were determined not to have their seats filled by the Freedom Party delegation. Indeed, it was reliably reported during that Convention struggle that Governors John A. Connally and Carl Sanders told President Lyndon B. Johnson that the other Southern delegations did not care about the exclusion of the regular Mississippi delegation, but they would all take a walk if the contesting Negroes were seated.

This is, of course, "practical" Southern politics. Exclusion from the national convention does not affect control of the local party; indeed, standing up to the national party has only too often been "good for home consumption." But if a rival group is seated and thus given recognition by the national party, this might indeed affect local party control back home. Who is included at the national convention may well be more important than who is excluded.

A step in the right direction was taken by the Special Equal Rights Committee of the Democratic National Committee last year. This Special Committee was appointed pursuant to the mandate of the 1964

Convention; its report, adopted by the Democratic National Committee, provides that if any State delegation is not "broadly representative of the Democrats of the State", their seats will be declared vacant and the Credentials Committee should "fill those seats with a delegation broadly representative of the Democrats of that State." Despite the fact that this pledge is couched in terms of the composition of the delegation not the actions of the State party, if the Democratic National Convention lives up to its pledge in Chicago in August, a very important step will have been taken toward reforming the State Democratic parties of the South.

Less is known about the plans of the Republican Party for their coming convention in Miami. There has, of course, been less attention over the years to the integrated or segregated nature of the delegations to the Republican national conventions coming from the States of the South. In part at least this flowed from the absence of a strong Republican Party in many Southern States. But now that this situation is changing, equal interest may soon be focused on this issue at Republican conventions. Roy Wilkins, Chairman of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, recently addressed a letter to Republican Chairman Ray Bliss as well as Democratic Chairman John Bailey asking about their plans for the seating or unseating of delegations which do not adequately represent the black minority in their State parties. As of the time this article was being prepared, neither Chairman had responded despite the imposing strength of the Leadership Conference which represents more than 100 civil rights, labor, religious, civic, fraternal, and other organizations. No doubt neither Chairman has finally determined the course he and his party will follow this summer on this most touchy issue.

In the last analysis, political parties care about votes not issues, even issues as important as civil rights. Thus, if the Commission's report and recommendations are ever to be fully implemented, this can only flow from the pressure of those who feel themselves civil rights Democrats and those who feel themselves civil rights Republicans. The chance for adoption of the Commission's recommendations depends upon millions of party members letting their party leaders know that this is an issue with which they cannot safely trifle. □

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