

CIVIC DEMOCRACY IN TUSKEGEE

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CIVIC DEMOCRACY connotes a type of society in which all citizens enjoy a legal status and civic opportunities and services without restriction or limitation based on race, color, creed, or national origin. It embodies the idea of equality of opportunities and treatment in the courts of law, in government and politics, in public education and employment, and in the use of public facilities and services.

Political democracy implies, among other things, equality of opportunity to register and vote, to serve as an official at a polling place on election days, to run for public office, to hold public office if elected or appointed, to serve on the county or state executive committee of a political party, and to advance in public office on the basis of merit or seniority.

As of December 31, 1963, there was practically no civic democracy in Tuskegee or Macon County, Alabama. The civic status and opportunity of Negro citizens were obviously subordinate and inferior to those of white citizens. State laws had defined the citizenship status of Negro citizens as subordinate to that of white citizens, and had provided inferior civic opportunities. Public educational and employment opportunities for Negroes were definitely more restricted and inferior to those available to white citizens. Except for voting, there had been no participation of Negro citizens in politics. There was no Negro holding an elected or appointed official position in city or county government. On the basis of their civic status, their civic opportunities, and their treatment by white citizens, Negroes were "second-class citizens."

toward political democracy

In Tuskegee, on January 1, 1964, there were approximately 900 white and 1,000 Negro voters. In the county, including Tuskegee,

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the number of white voters was 2,900, and the number of Negro voters, 3,300. Most of the Negro voters considered themselves Democrats. Prior to 1964, the Tuskegee Civic Association had conducted civic and political education programs for Negro voters, and the Macon County Democratic Club had organized the Negro voters in the ten precincts.

Prior to the opening of the Democratic Primary campaigns, the Macon County Democratic Club invited all of the candidates—white and Negro—for county offices to participate in five public meetings in different parts of the county. Most of the candidates appeared, and informed the voters as to their conception of their qualifications for the offices they sought, and appealed for support. This was the first time in Macon County since Reconstruction that Negro and white candidates had spoken at the same meetings, and the first time that white candidates had appeared as a group in the presence of one another, and appealed to Negroes for votes.

For more than ten years, Negro citizens had been requesting the appointment of Negroes to work at the polling places on election days, but no appointment was ever made. On May 5, 1964, eight Negroes worked as poll officials, and on June 2 eight worked.

In the Primary election of May 5, two Negroes were nominated for the position of Justice of the Peace, one for membership on the County Board of Education, and one for membership on the County Board of Revenue. It is estimated that the Negroes nominated for membership on the Boards of Education and Revenue received 25 to 50 votes each from whites. In the November 3 General Election, the four Negroes nominated in the Primary were elected.

The Municipal Election was held on August 11, and the run-off election on September 15. Eight Negroes and eight whites offered themselves as candidates for the five-member City Council. The Macon County Democratic Club endorsed and supported two incumbents (white), two Negroes, and one white who had not previously held office. All five were elected. In the September 15 election, the records of the poll officials reveal that one of the Negroes elected received 89 more votes than the number of Negroes who voted, and the other one received 120 votes more than the number of Negroes voting.

Since November 1, 1964, three Negroes have been appointed to the City Planning Board, two to the City Public Housing Authority, one to the County Clinical Board, one as City Veterinarian, one as clerical

worker in City Hall, one as a technician at the City Water Works, and two as policemen.

toward educational democracy

Until 1963, the public educational system of Macon County had been racially segregated. In August of that year a Federal Court ordered the system desegregated. In September, thirteen Negro pupils were admitted to a formerly all-white high school. All of the white pupils withdrew, but the white teachers taught the Negro pupils through the first semester. By order of the State Board of Education the desegregated school was closed "for economy." The Negro pupils transferred to the other two schools for whites (at Notasulga and Shorter). All the white students withdrew, but six Negro students completed the school year at Shorter, and six at Notasulga. Three of the six who went to the Macon County High School at Notasulga were graduated, the first Negroes ever to graduate from the school. (Two of the boys are now enrolled at Auburn University, Alabama's Land Grant College "for whites." The third graduate is enrolled in Pre-Veterinary Medicine at Tuskegee Institute.)

During the summer of 1964, some Negro and white parents conferred periodically on how best to proceed in order to secure the successful reopening of the Tuskegee Public School in September. The County School Board employed a new Superintendent of Schools and a new Principal of the Tuskegee Public School. In September, the school was reopened on a desegregated basis, with fourteen Negro children being enrolled. During the first semester, several of them have been on the Academic Honor Roll; some won prizes in the poster contest; several were participants on the special program in observance of American Education Week.

The local press has been somewhat successful in its efforts to interpret to citizens the nature and significance of the changing situation, and to encourage citizens and officials to behave responsibly.

toward economic democracy

Progress in this area has been slow. As mentioned previously, eight Negroes worked at the election polls in the Democratic Primary Elections, and, also, during the General Election in November, and earned the official daily wage. The two City Councilmen receive a regular monthly salary, and so does the member of the County Board of Revenue. The member of the Board of Education receives a small

sum for every meeting attended. The two Justices of the Peace receive fees for their services. Regular salaries are paid to the clerical worker, the technician at the Water Works, and to the two policemen.

In the area of private enterprise, a beginning has been made. In the central business district, the white proprietor of a department store employs a Negro sales clerk, and another merchant employs two as part-time weekend saleswomen.

Although there has been no desegregation of the traditional business or commercial organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, some Negro and white businessmen are now in the process of organizing an interracial organization of businessmen. The Greater Tuskegee Merchants' Association is the name chosen for the group.

toward social democracy

In the technical meaning of social democracy, there has been none. There has been no advance toward desegregation in the purely informal or formal social, interpersonal areas. But there has been some action on an interracial basis which was more generalized than those incidents classified as political, educational, and economic. For example, the City of Tuskegee entered a float in the Home-Coming Parade of Tuskegee Institute, and city officials—white and Negro—sat in the reviewing stand. This was a "first." Later in the year, an interracial committee was responsible for the City's Christmas decorations. During the first half of 1964, an interracial group of approximately fifteen met informally in monthly sessions to share ideas on topics of interest. Late in the year, there was organized an interracial Committee for a Greater Tuskegee, which group meets monthly.

During 1964, there was more active participation of white citizens in the Tuskegee Civic Association than during any previous year, and there was some participation of whites in the reactivation of the Tuskegee Branch of the NAACP. On the other hand, there has been no desegregation of any social, semi-social, or community organization which has been functioning as an "all-white" group. There has been limited participation of whites in the East Alabama District of the Alabama Council of Human Relations.

toward religious democracy

Practically no progress has been made in this area of living. There has been no invitation from the white churches to Negro Christians to participate in any religious service or activity. During the past

year, a few white women participated in the observance of the World Day of Prayer, which activity was initiated and executed by Negro church women. On Race Relations Sunday, there was no exchange of pulpits between Negro and white ministers, although some whites attended a service in a Negro church. One white minister participated in a variety of interracial activities, but in the role of a citizen rather than that of a clergyman. (He is no longer serving in the Tuskegee Community.)

socio-cultural change

Socio-cultural change in any society is usually the consequence of the operation of a complex of factors. For more than twenty years the Tuskegee Civic Association operated on the idea that in Tuskegee and Macon County, the civic status and opportunities of Negro citizens—an index of the quality of civic democracy—could best be raised and increased, respectively, through intelligent political action. So, for a score of years, the TCA concentrated on political education, utilizing a variety of community and governmental resources in the efforts. While the TCA recognized the importance of beliefs, feelings, and attitudes in the process of socio-cultural change, it worked to change behavior, believing that if citizens behaved democratically or fairly, the civic opportunities and status of Negroes would increase and rise, and beliefs, feelings, and attitudes would tend to change, and “improve.” It is believed that the rate of socio-cultural progress toward civic democracy in Tuskegee and Macon County during the next few years will depend largely upon the quality of political action and local governmental administration.