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INCREASE AND IMPACT:

Black Participation in Southern Electoral
Politics During the First Half of 1984

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voter education project report

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A VEP Research Dept. Essay

by Brian Sherman, Ph. D., Research Director
K. Farouk Brimah, Asst. Research Director

Voter Education Project
52 Fairlie St., N.W., Suite 360
Atlanta, GA 30303

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K. Farouk Brimah

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There is nothing like further verification of your main hypothesis while you are preparing your report. The first draft of this essay opened with the sentence "During the past two years, there has been an exponential increase in the amount of attention paid to black participation in the American electoral process." As we were working on it, a reporter from the Washington Post called to ask us first about actual increases in black registration since the last election, and second our assessment of Tip O'Neill's estimate of the number of new black registrants. Both reporters and politicians are far more interested in black voter participation than they have ever been. And if the reporters and politicians are interested, it means the public, or at least that part of the public which pays attention to what is going on in this country, is also interested.

We told the reporter that a reasonable estimate is that there will be a net increase of one million blacks registered between the November '82 and November '84 elections in the eleven southern states covered by the Voter Education Project (VEP). He asked about figures for the rest of the country. We told him that we have found nobody who systematically compiles registration figures by race for the states outside the South so the best we could do was make some assumptions and use them to make a rough estimate of a net increase of another one million in

black registration outside the South since November, 1982.

At VEP we do the research which tracks registration figures in the eleven southern states. This is a time-consuming and tedious job. Six of the eleven states do not compile their official registration figures by race, and we have had to develop our own methodologies for acquiring the necessary data and analyzing it.

There are fewer difficulties in acquiring the registration data from the states which do register by race, but even their data is problematic in some instances, and we have to make additional efforts to verify and update the registration data we acquire.

We supply the registration data to anyone who requests it. This includes not only reporters who call VEP, but also other organizations, and to the Statistical Abstract of the United States, published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

VEP is most well known for its assistance to local registration drives. As noted in Citizen Participation's 1982 election issue (September/October, 1982), VEP was one of the earliest groups to begin all-out registration efforts of blacks in the South. Since VEP's inception, it has assisted in well over 1800 local registration drives. VEP's activities usually involve providing local community groups with organizational, educational, financial and technical assistance.

As one VEP field coordinator reported earlier this year, "It

has become a lot easier to register blacks." He was referring to the fact that blacks have seemed more eager to register than they had been in previous years. The registration figures confirm this. The anticipated net increase in black registration of one million between the '82 and '84 elections would be the largest net increase to have occurred in the South in any two-year period between general elections.

The increase of one million, from an estimated 4,302,000 to an estimated 5,302,000 would represent a 23.4% net increase in black registration between the two elections. This is the largest between-elections percentage increase since the period between the 1964 and 1966 elections. During that span black registration increased by 24.2%, but the increase in absolute numbers was smaller (524,000) than the anticipated increase between '82 and '84.

The one million increase contrasts strikingly with the much smaller net increase in black registration in the eleven southern states between 1980 and 1982. The net increase for that two year period was only 48,000 (1.1%). The largest increase in the 1970's was between 1972 and 1974, when black registration increased by 372,000 (10.7%).

The accelerated gains in black registration in the eleven southern states indicates a sharp increase in black participation in the electoral process. We will mention briefly some of the factors which have led to the increase and then look at some of

the factors which have led to the increase and then look at some of their effects on elections, particularly the presidential primaries in the six southern states which held them this year.

Two factors which account for increased black participation are the increased prominence of blacks on the ballot and the perception by blacks that current elected officials, especially at the national level, are, in many instances, less responsive to black concerns than their predecessors had been. The number of black elected officials has risen steadily during the past two decades. For the most part, however, these officials have been elected in small (and to the general public) obscure southern jurisdictions and in cities which the white middle class and economic infrastructure had begun to abandon.

The campaign and victory of Harold Washington in the Democratic mayoralty primary in Chicago in 1983 symbolized a quantum jump in black participation. National prominence was given to black participation in an election struggle in a city which whites had not completely abandoned. Washington's subsequent election as mayor of Chicago was different because he was perceived neither as a victor who had won by default of white abandonment of the city nor as a captive of white downtown economic and "good government" interests.

Black perceptions that the Reagan administration was antipathetic to their concerns and needs began soon after he

took office. Both on symbolic and on meat and potatoes issues the administration's actions were seen as continually opposed to the interests of blacks. On economic issues, the Black Congressional Caucus responded early with an alternative budget to Reaganomics, but they received little support from their House colleagues. Matters were somewhat different with the extension of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1982. Reagan's initial opposition to and subsequent waffling on extension of the VRA crystallized for many blacks his administration's lack of sympathy and misunderstanding of their experience of being denied full opportunity to participate in the political arena.

Throughout the struggle in 1981 to generate and coordinate effective efforts to maintain the VRA, many activists, both black and white, perceived they were struggling against a president and conservative Senate who might succeed in their intentions to weaken the act. The struggle, however, turned out to be much more successful than most had anticipated. After months of testimony, a strengthened Voting Rights Act passed the House by a lopsided margin. Surprisingly, with its strength intact, the VRA extension passed the Senate in 1982 with only the most negative diehards (nine of them) voting against it.

The pessimism about the prospects of the VRA's renewal had been realistic. Participation in the successful struggle, however, generated momentum and energy which carried over into election campaigns and local battles to use the strengthened VRA

against such barriers to the election of blacks as at-large elections.

The renewal of the Voting Rights Act and the election of Harold Washington were among the most important factors in creating the socioemotional context in which Jesse Jackson's campaign flourished. To many blacks, Jackson symbolized the possibility that their electoral participation would be meaningful. For others, both black and white, Jackson's campaign crystallized and clarified the movement toward more widespread black participation already begun by the election of Washington and others and by extension of the Voting Rights Act.

The VEP Research Department's analysis of this year's presidential primaries in the South indicates the significance of black participation not only for Jackson's campaign, but also for the relative strength of the white candidates. Walter Mondale especially benefitted from black votes. It could be argued that black votes enabled him to win crucial victories over Gary Hart and other white candidates at times when his status as frontrunner was jeopardized.

We present highlights of all six southern presidential primaries. We compare black and white turnout rates, and we contrast the support given by blacks and by whites to the various candidates. Our analysis is based upon estimates we have made using the official returns from selected precincts. The mean number of precincts used in each state is approximately 200.

Every precinct was either predominantly black or predominantly white ("Predominantly" refers to precincts whose registered voters are 90% or more black or 90% or more white).

Three of the six southern primaries were held on March 13, dubbed "Super Tuesday" by the press. It may be recalled that Mondale at this point, having suffered setbacks in New Hampshire and Maine, was in danger of losing his frontrunner status and his momentum. It was deemed necessary for him to win at least two victories that day to remain a viable candidate. Alabama and Georgia gave him those two victories.

Mondale would have won Alabama without black support; black voters, however, enabled him to win by a convincing margin over Gary Hart. Mondale beat Hart by an overall margin of better than 3:2 (34% to 21%), but, according to VEP projections, his margin among white voters was only 6:5 (36% to 30%). Black voters, on the other hand, went decisively for Mondale over Hart by more than 8:1 (33% to 4%), according to VEP projections.

Mondale would not, on the other hand, have won Georgia without black support. He got 30% of the overall vote to Hart's 27%. Hart, however, came in first among white voters by a substantial margin; he won 38% of the white vote, compared to 28% for Mondale, according to VEP projections. Mondale, in contrast, received eight times as much of the black vote in Georgia as did Hart (32% for Mondale, 4% for Hart).

In both Georgia and Alabama, blacks currently comprise about 22% of each state's registered voters. On Super Tuesday, however, blacks accounted for over 30% of the votes cast in both states (31% in Alabama, 33% in Georgia according to VEP estimates) because the proportion of registered blacks who voted was significantly larger than the proportion of registered whites who voted.

Of the six southern states which held primaries, Mondale did poorest vis-a-vis Hart in Florida. He got only 32% of the total vote compared with Hart's 39%. One factor accounting for this outcome is that blacks in Florida comprise a smaller proportion of the registered voters than they do in any of the other five southern presidential primary states. According to VEP estimates, Mondale came in third among white voters, behind both Hart and John Glenn. On the other hand, he beat Hart once again by better than 8 to 1 among black voters. Mondale's margin over Glenn among black voters was an overwhelming 67 to 1. These figures are all estimates by the VEP Research Department. As in the other states, the black turnout rate in Florida was higher than the white turnout rate (39% for blacks, 31% for whites, according to VEP estimates).

Black participation on Super Tuesday was also crucial for Jesse Jackson's candidacy. Jackson had to get at least 20% of the total vote in at least one primary that day in order for his campaign to qualify for badly needed federal funds. He passed

that milestone in Georgia where he got 21% of the total vote. He did so by receiving 62% of the black vote and 5% of the white vote.

Jackson would have fallen below the 20% criterion if black participation hadn't significantly exceeded white participation. Had the proportion of white registered voters who came to the polls equalled the proportion of black registered voters who came, and if they continued to distribute their votes in the same proportion to all the candidates as those who voted on March 13 did, Jackson would have received only 17.7% of the total vote, according to VEP estimates. He would not have qualified for the federal funds, and his campaign could not have developed as well as it did.

Jackson received a respectable portion of the total vote in Alabama (19%) and Florida (12%) because a greater percentage of the registered blacks than of the registered whites voted in each state. Jackson received a majority of the black vote but less than 5% of the white vote in both states.

The other three southern presidential primaries took place during the first days of May. Trends in black participation observed on Super Tuesday accelerated in Tennessee (May 1), Louisiana (May 5), and North Carolina (May 8). The margin between the black turnout rate and the white turnout rate increased. In North Carolina, 46% of the registered blacks voted, compared with only 29% of the registered whites. In Tennessee the black turnout

rate was more than double the white turnout rate (22% to 10%), and in Louisiana, the black turnout rate more than tripled the white turnout rate (29% to 9%). These figures are VEP estimates.

The higher rate of black participation in these states gave a big boost to Jackson, and was significant for Mondale's resistance to Hart's challenge to his frontrunner status. Jackson got over 75% of the black vote in each of these three states according to VEP estimates. This enabled him to win Louisiana and gain a significant portion of the delegates in Tennessee (25%) and North Carolina (17%, though he received 25% of the ballots cast).

While Mondale's share of the black vote was less than it was on Super Tuesday, it was still a number of times greater than Hart's share (almost five times greater in Louisiana, more than seven times greater in Tennessee, and just about fifteen times greater in North Carolina, all according to VEP estimates).

Black support was most crucial for Mondale in North Carolina. According to VEP estimates, Mondale and Hart received about the same percentage of the white vote in North Carolina (our closest estimate is that Hart edged Mondale by 39.8% to 39.7% among whites), but his black support provided Mondale with an overall winning margin of 5% (35% for Mondale, 30% for Hart).

Our data document the impact of increased black participation in the electoral process. Blacks continue to

register, they are voting for candidates whom they perceive as responsive to their concerns, and enough of them are doing so to have significant effects on election results of national importance.

voter education project, inc. 52 fairlie street, n.w., atlanta, georgia 30303