

THE NEGRO VOTE

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I

THE sudden shift of the Negro vote in the North and the Border States from traditionally Republican to strongly Democratic, in the historical clock-tick of four years, presents a phenomenon without parallel in American political history. 'Turn Abraham Lincoln's picture to the wall,' an influential Negro editor proclaimed during the 1934 Congressional campaign; and that slogan, widely embraced by the race, fairly epitomizes the guiding impulse of the mass conversion. No other extensive group, bloc, or sectional vote in the United States ever switched so fast. Political conviction normally moves more like warm tar.

In this year's scattered local elections, the Negro vote has been drifting perceptibly from its hasty New Deal moorings. But the movement has been ragged and spotted. Concentrated in the larger cities, this vote is dominated notoriously by local patronage machines. With a casting of political accounts for seven years, there are nevertheless distinct rumblings in the Negro wards, reminiscent of the first ominous cracklings from an ice jam in a spring freshet.

Chicago's Second Ward carries a median registration of approximately 55,000, more than 93 per cent of which are Negro votes. In 1932, the Republicans got 74.6 per cent of the vote in this ward. By 1936, the Republican vote had dropped to 55.8 per cent, and in 1938 to 55.2 per cent. In the 1939 mayoralty election, the Republican can-

didate got but 44 per cent. Third Ward results, embracing a somewhat smaller percentage of Negro ballots, reflected the same general trend. Here the Republican vote dropped from 79.3 per cent in 1932 to 55.3 in 1936, to 44.5 in 1938, and to 41.6 in 1939.

These figures summarize the general movement in all the metropolitan areas of the North. In Harlem, the percentage of conversion was not so marked, because Tammany Hall long had paid particular attention to the Negro vote, had assisted Afro-Americans in setting up their own precinct clubs, and consistently had awarded a reasonable share of City Hall patronage to key men in the race wards. The general movement to the New Deal, therefore, merely changed the Harlem picture from 50-50 Republican to approximately 60-40 Democratic. But, with this single exception, the Chicago figures present the whole story — for Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Baltimore, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

Applying the Chicago conversion percentages to the total Negro registration in the North and Border States (2,250,000), we arrive at a shift of 700,000 votes from the Republican to the Democratic side, largely concentrated in the seven states of New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. After deducting 15 per cent for non-voters on the poll books (the experience in Negro wards of both Chicago and Pittsburgh), the net shift amounts

to 600,000 votes. This movement, then, explains perhaps 1,200,000 votes in President Roosevelt's 1936 majority of 10,797,090.

Reputable political commentators are agreed unanimously that Harry A. Hopkins really turned Lincoln's picture to the wall. This judgment was confirmed in the 1940 National Conference on the Problems of the Negro, which reported that federal relief, on averages, reached one third of the population in the Negro areas of the North, as against one fifth of the population in all other areas of the same states. It was this federal manna, as the Negro editor was at pains to explain in 1934, which justified the race in a tentative experiment with the two-party system. The long, hateful shadows of Jim Crow fell athwart the movement; but there is no impulse to social experiment quite so compelling as prolonged unemployment. And Mr. Hopkins's readiness to see this cosmic compulsion among the blacks harnessed firmly to the New Deal glory-wagon is at least no reflection upon the horse-and-buggy humanitarianism of the Great Emancipator. Republican predilections among the Negroes withstood the depression, but the faith was not sufficiently robust to withstand the moral erosion of political relief.

II

Preliminary reports from the 1940 census show that the Negro registration in the 'voting states' totals about 2,250,000. New York and Pennsylvania vote approximately 300,000 each; Illinois, 250,000; Ohio, 220,000; New Jersey, 145,000; Michigan, 130,000; Indiana, 80,000. The total Negro vote in New England is a little less than 65,000; Delaware, 25,000; Kansas, 48,000. This leaves roundly 700,000 in the Border States — Maryland, 180,000; Missouri, 165,000; Kentucky, 140,000; West Virginia, 75,000; Oklahoma, 105,000. Although Tennessee often is listed with the Border States, she is a part of the Solid

South when classified by election machinery and laws.

With the total Negro vote thus distributed, it is easy to demonstrate that in no state was that bloc decisive in the 1936 presidential election. Some commentators suggest that the Hopkins mobilization of the Negro vote alone explained Democratic victories in such Republican strongholds as Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan. But Mr. Roosevelt's 1936 majority in Pennsylvania was 700,000 votes. If the entire eligible Negro vote had been cast and had moved to a man from the Republican to the Democratic column, there would still be an item of 100,000 votes to explain. Precinct reports from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh indicate that a maximum of 75 per cent of the Negro vote actually was recorded at the polls; and this vote was split roughly 70-30. On this basis, Mr. Roosevelt received approximately 160,000 Negro votes in Pennsylvania, about 60,000 of which would have been Democratic in any event. Thus, of a 700,000 Democratic majority, only 100,000 is explained by the intense cultivation of the Negro vote in the Democratic campaign.

The same story is told in the Illinois precinct returns. Roosevelt carried the state by 712,000, including a Negro vote of 175,000, of which 40,000 were Democratic in previous elections. Recognizing the transfer of perhaps 140,000 votes from the Republican to the Democratic side, there remains a Roosevelt majority of 432,000. Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan tell the same story. In no state was the Negro vote *decisive*. Political relief pressure had the effect only of swelling the Democratic majority to percentages previously unknown in these normally Republican strongholds.

The overall mathematics of this picture are simple. It is impossible to demonstrate how less than 2,000,000 votes scattered throughout eighteen states could have been a decisive factor in a Democratic majority of almost

9,000,000 in those states. Theoretically, the Negro vote may be extracted from the 1936 picture, or it may be credited entirely to the Republicans, and Mr. Roosevelt still would have carried the same states, save Kansas.

The historical significance of this analysis is that in fundamental shifts of political attitude and feeling the Negro vote in the North now moves with the general tide rather than as an isolated bloc. On this basis, 1940 may be expected to disclose a large return of this vote to the Republican fold, entirely apart from issues and policies of peculiar concern to the race. Dr. George Gallup's recent reports appear to sustain this interpretation of the figures from three general elections.

Further evidence that the Negro vote tends currently to divide on party lines approximately in proportion to every other voting group is found in the 1938 results in the First Illinois Congressional District, which embraces practically the entire Negro voting population of Chicago. Each party nominated a Negro candidate for the House seat. The Democrat won 30,207 to 26,396, giving a Republican minority of 46.7 per cent. This was very close to the consolidated Republican percentage for the state's twenty-five Congressional Districts, fifteen of which were won by Democrats and ten by Republicans.

Broadly speaking, therefore, the net result of the New Deal mobilization has been to shift the Negro vote pattern from 75-25 Republican to 60-40 Democratic. Thus, the Negro in the North is now a cog in the fixed two-party system.

III

Political leadership among Negroes divides roughly into two types, the first of which, the recognized professional group, includes educators, clergymen, trained social scientists, lawyers, and doctors. This leadership moves through education, organized social enterprises,

legal procedures, and systematic welfare work.

The second group may well be described as the political mercenaries — editors who are sustained in off years by advertisements for hair glosses and intimate proprietary medicines, and whose sheets usually are for sale to the highest bidder in campaign season. There are notable exceptions among Negro editors, but they only prove the rule.

Beneath this layer of editorial politicians, whose general pattern of operations closely resembles that which still flourishes in Mexico and Central America, are found the professional ward and precinct heavy men, the bruiser-bosses, who owe their livelihood entirely to patronage and the secondary forms of racketeering which are the concomitant of machine politics in all metropolitan areas of the United States.

The tinsel flow of federal relief funds through the routine channels of political patronage since 1934 has tended to give this last group predominant influence among the Negro people. In the words of the Chicago Better Government Association, in its 1939 report on the Second Ward: 'The relief situation probably has had more to do with the falling off of the Republican vote in this ward than any other factor. It is believed, too, that the policy racket, which obviously is protected, has had some bearing on the change in the vote.' This report named one important Republican leader, a former alderman, who 'went over openly to the Kelly-Nash machine in the '39 election and carried all his crowd with him.' Moving to the Third Ward, the report continued: 'Relief conditions are about the same as in the Second Ward, and here, too, the policy racket has its influence.' The report named a leader who formerly had served in Congress as a Republican, concluding, 'There have been many rumors afloat as to his relationships with the Democratic organization.'

Illustrative of the whole system of re-

lief patronage is the letter written under date of November 3, 1939, by Arthur W. Mitchell, Negro Democratic Congressman from the First Illinois District, to an applicant seeking WPA work.

'It is an unbroken rule of the Democratic organization in Chicago,' the letter runs, 'that each person seeking help from his Congressman must first get a letter from his ward committeeman requesting the Congressman to take care of the matter. I must, therefore, insist that you get a letter from your committeeman first, and then I shall be very glad to do everything in my power to help you.'

Among reputable Negro leaders there is growing disillusionment concerning the long-term impact of New Deal policies upon inter-race relations. Specifically, they mention discrimination against Negroes in the distribution of federal subsidies for education, housing, public health, and for elimination of farm tenancy. They charge that Negroes, by various devices, practically have been excluded from the higher brackets of the federal civil service. They recall many eloquent campaign promises by New Deal lieutenants that a federal anti-lynching bill would be enacted.

Detailed analyses of these problems were presented before the Second National Conference on the Problems of the Negro, in Washington, January 12-14, 1939, under the auspices of the National Youth Administration. The conferences were held in the auditorium of the Department of Labor, presided over by Mary McLeod Bethune, Director of the Division of Negro Affairs in the NYA. Mrs. Roosevelt, a principal sponsor of the NYA program, addressed the group on January 12.

The discussions developed that in the fiscal year 1938-1939 the Federal Government allocated \$3,374,474 for vocational education in the eighteen states embracing the largest Negro populations. In these states Negroes make 21

per cent of the total population, but the Negro schools therein got only \$324,490, or 9.6 per cent of the federal subsidy. This means that the Negro schools received only 45 per cent of their 'proportion' on a population basis.

Federal contributions amounted to \$294 for each white teacher in these states, against \$131 for each Negro teacher. Calculated on a per capita basis for pupils, the federal contribution amounted to \$7.87 for whites and \$4.42 for Negroes.

'Thus,' said the report, 'the more federal money the South gets for vocational education, the less, proportionately, is spent on vocational education for Negroes.'

Greater disproportions were revealed in the distribution of federal funds for vocational rehabilitation. This program for the fiscal year 1935-1936 rehabilitated 3402 persons in the seventeen states having the largest Negro populations. In these states the Negroes make 21.5 per cent of the population. Negroes rehabilitated under the federal program were 273, or 8 per cent of the total.

In the special educational services of the Department of Agriculture's extension program, the conference reported 3734 beneficiaries in sixteen Southern States as of February 1937. Although the Negro population of these states was 24.2 per cent of the total, the Negro beneficiaries of the agricultural program were 488, or 13 per cent of the total. Throughout the same states there was one county agent for every 1455 farms in those counties where the agent was white. But the Negro county agents had an average of 3607 farms each. Total federal and state expenditures for agricultural education in these sixteen states for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1937, were \$13,044,286. The direct expenditures on Negro projects were \$804,657, or 6.2 per cent of the total. This total represents 25.6 per cent of a proportionate share on a population basis.

Special subsidies for agricultural research and scientific inquiry aggregated \$1,440,000 for the fiscal year 1935-1936 in the seventeen Negro states. 'All went to white colleges; none to Negro,' the conference report observed.

The report on farm tenancy continued the discrimination indictment: 'We note, also, that not a single Negro has been appointed on a State or County Advisory Board, and it is these boards which have the power to curb or abolish racial discrimination.'

The conference emphasized that 54.6 per cent of all the Negroes gainfully employed in the United States are beyond the scope of the Social Security Act, which does not apply to agricultural workers or domestic servants. Among employed Negro women, 85 per cent are engaged in domestic service.

One of the most vexatious problems of federal administration arises in the matter of race segregation within projects sponsored or supported by the Federal Housing Administration and the United States Housing Authority. 'This conference notes with alarm and vigorously condemns,' the report said, 'the attitude of certain federal agencies, such as the Federal Housing Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority, in requiring segregation in federal financed projects, where, in many instances, Negro and white Americans have lived together in amity for generations. We insist that this establishment of patterns of segregation be speedily eliminated.'

When the AAA cotton curtailment program took some 15,000,000 acres out of production, Negro share-croppers were the first to be deprived of their wretched livelihood. A Department of Agriculture survey in 1936 reported that roundly 1,000,000 persons throughout the Cotton Belt thus were driven from their established employment in the fields, gins, seed mills, storage houses, the trucking companies, railroads, and wharves. Some of this government-made unemployment was absorbed for

a time by WPA and associated activities. Later, as relief demands increased, Negroes were the first to be lopped off the rolls. The net result is a new class of unemployed — landless, practically nomadic Negro laborers, unwanted in their accustomed lines, and untrained for general participation in the increasing industrial migration to the South. Those who have connections in the North are moving to the larger cities. They arrive often in an incredible state of destitution, only to be sucked quickly into the new horror and humiliation of political relief and vanishing opportunities for work.

IV

After five years, the larger truths of economics began to appear, even to that leadership group which has been described as the mercenaries. In the 1939 state, city, and borough elections throughout Ohio, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Indiana, there was a marked decrease in the Negro Democratic vote. In 1936, for example, President Roosevelt carried the 20th, 24th, 30th, and 44th Wards of Philadelphia by more than 5000 votes each. In the November judicial elections of '39, the Republicans again carried the 20th, 30th, and 44th, and lost the 24th by only 92 votes, in a total of more than 19,000. In Cleveland, Negro wards elected two Republican aldermen and placed a Negro woman on the Board of Education. These results, when analyzed percentagewise, parallel closely the general national tide against the economic merry-go-round of New Dealism, as reckoned from the consolidated mayoralty count for 1939.

For the most part, this revulsion among Northern Negroes flows from a growing realization that relief is at best but a palliative. A study of the plight of the Chicago Negro by Dr. Fred Eastman, of the Chicago Theological Seminary, published in March 1940, reported that 'more than half of the Chicago Negro population is jobless.' Economic

and social conditions in the Negro areas were found to be growing steadily more demoralizing. A summary of the report concludes: 'Approximately 115,000, or 57 per cent, of the 200,000 or more Negroes on the South Side of Chicago are unemployed. Of these, about 75,000 are receiving direct relief; 20,000 more receive their means of existence through WPA projects. More than one third of the young people, fifteen to twenty-four, are jobless. In general, the opportunities for employment of Negroes seem to be diminishing. They have to struggle against much race discrimination. They are given the hardest and most dangerous jobs, receive the lowest wages, and are most likely to be dismissed in slack times.'

While these progressively more deplorable conditions operate to increase temporarily the power and influence of the relief dispensers, they tend at the same time to restore the influence of the more reputable Negro leaders, who have been warning for years that mass deliverance of the race vote to any party solely on the basis of benefits received could lead ultimately but to a new form of enslavement. By these processes, the Negro population is moving slowly to a practical understanding and appreciation of the fundamental significance of the American two-party tradition. As one influential Negro clergyman put it to me in Chicago, 'Our people are growing sour on the New Deal. It's an everlastin' botheration and it gets us nowhere.'

V

Finally, recent Democratic domination of national affairs has contributed nothing to the political status of the Southern Negro in return for his vastly lowered economic position. A decision of the Federal Circuit Court of Appeals at Richmond, on June 18, 1940, decreed payment of equal salaries to Negro and white teachers in Virginia schools; but continued attempts to open the primaries

of the Solid South to tax-paying Negroes have been blocked, as have all efforts to uproot the discriminatory poll-tax laws inherited from the travails of Reconstruction.

Efforts of the Federal Government to police the Southern States directly in relation to the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing equal suffrage, produced at last a reign of violence and terror which once more threatened destruction of the Union. Gradually, in the period 1875-1900, federal policy shifted from direct enforcement to mere judicial check upon state election laws. In this period, the doctrine of state's rights was tacitly revitalized, but always within the limitation that no state law in direct conflict with the guarantee of equal franchise should receive federal sanction in the courts. Under this dispensation the poll tax became the favorite device to circumvent Negro domination. These laws generally required presentation of the poll-tax receipt at the voting booth, often six months to a year after date of the actual tax payment. Since the laws were general in application, they did not violate the federal guarantees of the Fifteenth Amendment against discrimination. Unaware that their poll-tax receipts would be required at the voting booths, the Negroes were careless about them and thereby lost their votes.

The poll tax was written into the Tennessee Constitution in 1870. Eleven other states adopted the provision, either in their election laws or in constitutional revisions. Florida was the last to amend her Constitution in this regard, in 1885.

North Carolina expunged the poll tax from her constitution in 1920, but the Legislature has not yet revised the Election Code to conform to this amendment. Under Huey Long, Louisiana repealed the poll tax by a constitutional amendment in 1934. Florida modified that portion of her election code in 1937, but other local conditions still militate against Negro registration.

Another favorite device of disfranchisement was the so-called 'Grandfather Clause.' In framing election laws, provision was made that anyone eligible to vote as of a certain year — the year stipulated being always in the slave era — should be eligible for permanent registration as a voter. The next clause of the act extended eligibility to all descendants of persons qualified to vote in the slave days. By these provisions of law the only qualified voters were those whose grandfathers had been eligible in the same state. This device, however, soon was held unconstitutional, as in conflict with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and so gradually fell into discard, although it still is carried in the election laws of several states.

Other states disqualified voters for certain crimes, an act held constitutional in that it was not a discrimination on the basis of race, although in practice it disfranchised many more Negroes than whites. The same result followed in relation to all educational qualifications.

Many of these devices were weakened by the celebrated Chinese Laundry Case (118 U. S. 356), in which the Supreme Court decided, in 1885, that discriminatory *administration* of state election laws was in effect the same as discriminatory legislation. This decision appeased the moral-legalists of the North by placing the stamp of federal disavowal upon discriminatory laws and procedures within the states. In practical effect, however, it left the Negro in the South in a situation which accorded him the vote only when he could command it by individual legal action. The net result was the general disfranchisement of the Negro throughout the Solid South. As Dr. Charles S. Mangum, Jr., concludes in his scholarly work, *The Legal Status of the Negro*, prejudice and fear conspired for total disfranchisement. 'With white politicians in charge of the polls and the election machinery, a fair administration of these laws was practically impossible.

The average election official was of the opinion he had been given a mandate by the people to exclude the Negro from the polls entirely and acted accordingly, with no regard for the intelligence of the particular Negro who came before him to qualify. The more conscientious whites deplored these conditions, but thought that even this was better than the return to the former state. The Negroes themselves suffered from apathy or else fear of what might happen to them if they demanded a fairer deal. Such fear had been engendered by race riots, notably those which occurred at the time when the disfranchising amendments were adopted, and was the result of the threatening gestures of the whites to adopt again the methods of the Ku Klux Klan' (p. 393).

Democratic primaries in the Southern States now are limited generally to white voters, first because state primary elections have not been held to lie within the federal province, secondly because primary elections in certain states have been held to be functions of the political parties rather than the state. However, when Texas passed a law specifically excluding Negroes from all state primaries, the United States Supreme Court emphatically outlawed the legislation. Whereupon a law was passed limiting the primary franchise to bona fide members of the Democratic Party. The Executive Committee of the party organization then was vested with full authority to fix the qualifications of party membership. Attacks upon these devices were rejected by the federal courts in 1928 and 1930, chiefly on the ground that political parties within the states were not subject to federal supervision. In 1932, however, a new attack upon the Texas situation brought a 5-to-4 decision from the Supreme Court which held the State Democratic Committee to be an agency of the State Government and therefore subject to the Fourteenth Amendment. Finally, in 1935, the Supreme Court again held,

this time unanimously, that the Democratic Party was not an agency of the state and that primary voting qualifications thus were beyond federal supervision. Apparently this ruling arises from the peculiarities of the Texas election laws, which provide that the expenses of primary elections shall be borne by the candidates, and the ballots furnished by the party rather than by the Election Commission.

The net result of this maze of laws is that Negro voting in the South is highly selective, limited by practical application to some of the larger cities where it can be controlled by the machine. This situation prevails in marked degree in Memphis, New Orleans, Houston, and San Antonio. In isolated cases elsewhere throughout the South, educated Negroes and those owning property are permitted to vote in local elections only. Under the constant constructive pressures of the Council on Inter-Race Relations, selective Negro voting had been increasing over a period of twenty years prior to 1934. At that point a new conflict of interest between the races was presented in the grab for the federal bounties. Negro participation in local elections since has tended toward the vanishing point.

Economic dislocation inevitably entails increasing social and political pressures against submerged or minority groups. The smallest fellow in the bed usually has the least covering on cold nights. The whole post-war — or pre-war II — history of Europe illustrates the point. On a smaller stage, the same forces have been moving against the Negroes of the South over the last decade. In the race for political bounties and patronage, the administrative group has tended first to care for its own kind. As a result, the Southern Negro finds himself today in an economic, social, and political quagmire, with every effort at self-improvement in one direction frustrated by new and unanticipated

pressures flowing from the other two aspects of his unhappy plight.

One significant upshot of Dixie's dilemma has been a revived and spreading support among Southern whites for a once-forgotten movement to establish a Negro homeland in Africa, the migration to be paid for out of the United States Treasury. A measure (Senate 2231) to authorize this project was presented formally on April 24, 1940, by Senator Theodore G. Bilbo, of Mississippi. In support of the proposal, Senator Bilbo said in part: 'For the fiscal year ended June 30, 1939, the Government's expenditure for relief amounted to \$2,617,974,000. One half of that amount could be spent in providing for resettlement of the Negro in his fatherland, and the Government would save money on the transaction. If we could effect the resettlement of 5,000,000 to 8,000,000 Negroes who are now ready to go to Africa, we could solve the unemployment problem, and we would be able soon to do away with these large annual appropriations for relief. . . . Published reports reveal the happy state of many American Negroes in Liberia. These reports serve to convince one that every American Negro should covet the privilege of returning to the continent of his forefathers, to establish a home on the fertile lands of Africa, where he could live under a government of, by, and for his own people.'

Viewed in the light of today's tragic panorama of racial discriminations and forced migrations throughout Europe, the Negro homeland proposal becomes a gesture of despair, defeat, and surrender — wholly one in its primary moral motivations with Hitler's Semitic purge. Reduced to terms of parallel, the Negro problem with the Democratic Party in the South is insoluble; therefore the answer *must be* a mass repatriation.

Such, as my soundings go, are the ominous reflections which agitate the Negro thought of America today.