**The Politics of Change:**

**The Rise and Fall of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.**

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**To my family, and to those who continue**

**to make the road we walk.**

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**List of Abbreviations**

**ASCS** Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service

**CDGM** Child Development Group of Mississippi

**COFO** Council of Federated Organizations

**CORE** Committee of Racial Equality

**MAP** Mississippi Action for Progress

**MDC** Mississippi Democratic Conference

**MDP** Mississippi Democratic Party

**MFDP, FDP** Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

**NAACP** National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

**SRC** Southern Regional Council

**SCLC** Southern Christian Leadership Conference

**SNCC** Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

**VEP** Voter Education Project

**Introduction: Political Memory**

Robert Clark’s grandfather passed down the family’s tale of citizenship gained and revoked. In communal settings, the generational elder shared with his family and friends his story of emancipation. William Clark spoke of his life as an enslaved child in Mississippi and the excitement he felt “when the Yankees came” and “how proud” he and his peers were “because they were free.” Robert Clark, who would become the first black legislator in Mississippi since Reconstruction, listened to, and in adulthood often publicly referred to, his family’s orally preserved story of freedom gained. He contrasted the emancipation memory nurtured by the descendants of enslaved Mississippians with what he determined to be an unfinished agenda. On the campaign trail in 1967, Robert Clark reminded his supporters, “Emancipation is still not here.” Despite the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965, and the consequent nod to a federally protected vote, the political power of black Mississippians remained contentious a century after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, and the ratification of the thirteenth amendment. Robert Clark determined that in the face of continued white opposition, and with the federal recognition of the universal franchise, black Mississippians had to go to the polls and cast their ballots.[[1]](#footnote-0)

Robert Clark’s reluctance to embrace the concept of complete emancipation stemmed from his own experience with limited economic opportunity and widespread political disenfranchisement as well as another story of Reconstruction and its violent end that his grandfather recounted at family gatherings. Like many black Mississippians, the Clark family cultivated a memory of Reconstruction that differed from academic accounts of the period. The Clarks remembered Reconstruction as a time “in Mississippi when they had Negroes in lots of offices.” Over the years, William Clark reminded his family that he had been a leader in the county Republican Party and that a black sheriff had policed the county where he lived during Reconstruction. That period of black political participation in his community ended, however, when white men raided the town of Clinton in 1875.[[2]](#footnote-1) According to family legend, the black sheriff and other black residents returned fire, but they were eventually overwhelmed by white terrorism. As a result of his long friendship with a white man, William Clark escaped physical harm. His friend, shooting over (rather than at) Clark’s head, provided cover for his relocation to another Mississippi county.[[3]](#footnote-2) Over a century later, Robert Clark attributed the violent retaliation directed towards his grandfather and the black residents of Clinton to white fear of black ballots. “Only when we were taking the thing over,” Clark explained his understanding of black political participation in the 1870s, “did the shooting begin and Paw had to run.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

Robert Clark’s reference to “taking things over” does not align with the actual influence of black voters and the election of black public officials during Reconstruction, but it connotes the powerful memory of Reconstruction governments that black Mississippians informally nurtured through the middle of the twentieth century. While white academics, and consequently white Americans, codified a rendering of Reconstruction that belittled black political acumen, black Mississippians created a parallel narrative. Protected in homes, fraternal organizations, and segregated schools, African Americans shared a story much like that of the Clark family. Amidst state sanctioned disenfranchisement, white terrorism, and economic exploitation, Reconstruction was heralded as a moment of hope and possibility, a period when black Mississippians exercised power and influence in their communities.

In reality, black voters and black elected officials did not exercise unbridled political power during Reconstruction. Although almost ninety seven percent of the black voting age population in Mississippi had been registered to vote, white elected officials, who formed coalition governments with black leaders, dominated all levels of government except in the town of Natchez.[[5]](#footnote-4) Mississippi voters did, however, elect two black senators to represent them in Washington. A black representative served as speaker of the state legislature, and voters elected a black Secretary of State and Lieutenant Governor. Fifteen black sheriffs also won elective office during Reconstruction. As a result, one third of the state’s black population lived for a time in counties with black leadership in law enforcement.[[6]](#footnote-5) The ten year period from 1865 to 1875 would represent what one historian termed the “golden age” of black political participation in Mississippi.[[7]](#footnote-6) Regardless of number or extent of influence, the black political leadership during the Reconstruction Era served as the lone political memory of black Mississippians.

Twenty years after the nation ratified the fifteenth amendment, which guaranteed the vote to all male citizens of the United States, Mississippi’s 1890 constitution codified the disenfranchisement of black men. While race was not mentioned in the document, the introduction of a myriad of qualifications signaled the very real end to black political participation in Mississippi. In addition to outlining rigid residency requirements and mandating payment of a poll tax, the new laws required that voter applicants demonstrate understanding of a passage of the state constitution selected at the discretion of the county registrar. Because both black and white Mississippians lacked adequate schooling at the turn of the century, the real power of the understanding clause rested in the subjectivity of white supremacists. County registrars regularly passed white applicants, ignoring the understanding requirement, but failed black applicants based on technicalities. Two years after the passage of the new state constitution, less than six percent of the black voting age population in Mississippi remained registered to vote. These numbers fluctuated over the course of the next seventy-five years but never exceeded ten percent of the black voting age population and never reached a level where black voters could exercise real strength on Election Day in any municipality beyond the all black town of Mound Bayou.[[8]](#footnote-7)

During this nadir of black political involvement, small pockets of black professionals, independent landowners, and business operators worked steadily within a semi-underground network of resistors, drawn from the traditional elite and economically independent entrepreneurs. Their concentrated organizing efforts relied on the informal networks of the educated and economically independent. This small demographic, expanded a bit upon the return of World War II veterans, primarily sought the vote as a means of recognizing their leadership and exceptionality within the black community not as a universal right. They were limited by the confines of white supremacy as well as their own belief in hierarchical class structure. While in another era and in another place, these, primarily, men would be deemed moderate social conservatives, in Mississippi, in the first half of the twentieth century their actions were bold and, perhaps, radical.

Their actions were regularly met with terror. When these early agitators formed Voter’s Leagues, they sought members only among their closest acquaintances. While the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) served as the public face for change in the country, in Mississippi, it was an underground organization, requiring secret meetings and anonymous memberships. Many communities established local political organizations rather than claim the name of the NAACP. Through this quiet organizing, barbers and beauticians and storekeepers and café owners attempted to increase the number of black registered voters among economically independent black Mississippians.[[9]](#footnote-8) In the postwar era, George Lee had been the first black registered voter in his county. After encouraging others to register, he was ordered to remove his name from the registration list. Lee was shot and killed as he drove down the central business district in the Delta town of Belzoni. Lamar Smith was killed on the courthouse steps in Brookhaven, Mississippi. He had urged black voters to participate in the upcoming Democratic primary.[[10]](#footnote-9) Both men were killed in the climate of backlash created by the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision, which set the stage for the integration of primary and secondary schools.

Despite this steady commitment to black enfranchisement by local leaders, by 1960, ninety three percent of the black voting age population, predominated by low wage laborers who relied on white employers for their survival, remained unregistered. The United States Commission on Civil Rights, a federally sanctioned investigative committee, reported in 1961 that at least thirty five of Mississippi’s eight two counties severely discriminated with regard to the franchise. In thirteen counties no black Mississippians were registered to vote. In five of these counties, black residents comprised the majority of the voting age population.[[11]](#footnote-10) Community folklore on Reconstruction, like the stories passed down through the Clark family, not actual involvement in twentieth century political culture, provided the lasting memory of black political participation throughout black Mississippi.

Founded in 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) offered a venue for a more diverse constituency of black Mississippians to begin to imagine themselves out of political, economic, and social disenfranchisement.[[12]](#footnote-11) This organization emerged from the student led Civil Rights Movement, and its agenda broadened claims for the vote and redefined the possibilities for leadership in black communities. It sought membership among laborers and tenant farmers, men and women, young and old. Its ideology rested in the belief that everyone, not just the traditional elite, white or black, should have a say in how their communities functioned. As the organization expanded, it not only sought voters among the state’s laborers but also candidates for political office. The MFDP’s vision for political participation threatened not only white Mississippians, wedded to their inherited privilege and power, but also the traditional black elite.

The story of black Mississippians entering the political apparatus is a story of individuals denied any institutional membership aside that of the local church and thrust into low wage work, who became community organizers, political delegates, and meeting goers. Mobilized by fulltime movement organizers, many of whom were native Mississippians, they transformed local churches into meeting halls and black owned storefronts into campaign headquarters. Theirs is the story of farm workers, domestics, and college students, who after years of organizing in their local communities and demanding the nation’s attention, became voters, independent candidates, and elected officials. Their stories, retold through oral histories, in newspaper articles, and movement propaganda, demonstrate how the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party encouraged a broad cross section of black Mississippians to begin to think and act politically following nearly a century of mass disenfranchisement.

In April of 1964, after three years of grassroots political mobilization, movement organizers officially named the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to serve as the institutional home for grassroots black political action in Mississippi. The MFDP funneled nascent political energy into a dissident institution, created a parallel political infrastructure through which black Mississippians could practice exercising political and organizational power for the first time in three generations, supported county initiated campaigns aimed at addressing the most immediate social and economic needs within rural black communities, and ushered the first wave of black candidates into political office. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party became the primary vehicle through which black Mississippians came to think of themselves as political actors in the years immediately preceding and following the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965.

This study is divided into seven distinct parts. Each part represents a compilation of chronologically and thematically placed vignettes and personality studies as a means to uncover the lived experience of implementing voting rights in Mississippi. In the first chapter, I argue that freedom workers, inspired by black Mississippians, funneled nascent political activity into a parallel political party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In 1962, political organizers working under the umbrella organization the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition among the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), launched the congressional campaign of R.L.T. Smith. This formal political exercise inspired a mock election -- the Freedom Vote. In the Fall of 1963, eighty thousand black Mississippians cast ballots in that parallel election, which offered alternative candidates to the Democratic nominees for governor and lieutenant governor. Immediately following the election, disenfranchised black voters began referring informally to a freedom party. In April 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was named. It would serve as the institutional home for the state’s voting rights activities in the summer of 1964.

The next chapter explores the task of shepherding black Mississippians into the political process during the summer of 1964 as they prepared to challenge the seating of the all white delegation of the Mississippi Democratic Party to the National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. During the summer, the MFDP erected a parallel political infrastructure, orchestrating meetings from the precinct to the statewide level, which made the possibility of participating in national politics available to a broad cross section of black Mississippians. In chapter three and four, I examine the MFDP’s two national challenges: the experience of Freedom Democrats at the Democratic National Convention and the Congressional Challenge, which was launched in January 1965. I explore the pragmatic decisions of national political figures, civil rights organizations, and black Mississippians as the MFDP grappled with the compromises offered by national leadership in both situations.

In a fifth chapter, I explore the difficulty the MFDP faced in establishing itself as a solely political organization in rural and impoverished communities. Confronted with a nonexistent black electorate, but expecting the passage of a federal voting law, the MFDP struggled with how to encourage political education while addressing the basic needs of the state’s underemployed and undereducated future black electorate who desired access to economic resources and public facilities in addition to the vote. In the next chapter, I introduce the incursions black professionals and white moderates began to make into the newly opened oppositional space that resulted from the MFDP’s two national challenges. A conflict emerged between the black leadership of the NAACP and the MFDP in local campaigns. A similar conflict arose around which organizational entity, the Mississippi Democratic Conference (MDC) or the MFDP, would represent black Mississippians as they continued to challenge the legitimacy of the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party. The Democratic National Committee had promised to recognize a biracial delegation from Mississippi in 1968. The question emerged over who would lead that coalition.

The MFDP ushered the first wave of black candidates into political office. The seventh chapter chronicles the MFDP as a formal political party. Buttressed by an increasing number of black voters, the immediate effect of the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the MFDP financed and supported black candidates in local elections. Resulting from a combination of inadequate political education among the new electorate, limited resources, and a concerted campaign of fraud and intimidation waged by white Mississippians, many MFDP backed candidates failed to gain election. The chapter highlights the MFDP backed candidates in Sunflower County, a locality that possessed a black majority but within which black candidates failed to gain election, exploring the complex considerations in black voter choice. In 1967, the MFDP experienced electoral success. Kermit Stanton gained a seat on the Bolivar County Board of Supervisors, and Robert Clark became the first black legislator in Mississippi since Reconstruction.

The final chapter outlines the MFDP’s attempt to maintain a controlling interest in a newly emerging biracial coalition while waging important legal actions to ensure that black Mississippians gained access to a meaningful ballot. Ultimately, the Loyalists, a coalition dominated by politically connected white moderates and black professionals, became the biracial face of an integrated Mississippi Democratic Party in 1976. The political establishment had no room for the political upstarts they termed “militants” who belonged to the MFDP. The grassroots electorate that had been politicized by the MFDP, however, served as the political base for the reorganized Mississippi Democratic Party in the post civil rights period.

Although the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party did not replace the Mississippi Democratic Party it inspired the political imagination of black Mississippians beyond its institutional limitations. Emerging from the youth oriented Civil Rights Movement, the MFDP served to transport black Mississippians from utter disenfranchisement to a place where they could begin to imagine political participation, replacing Reconstruction as the most immediate memory of expansive and liberatory black politics.

During discussions over how to most effectively use the vote, Freedom Democrats often referred to their community-nurtured memory of Reconstruction. One new voter reminded her peers, “The Negroes that served and did these things [during Reconstruction] didn’t have fancy college educations.” She attributed their success to “mother wit.” They “knew what was right.”[[13]](#footnote-12) Another Freedom Democrat, reflecting on the legacy of the MFDP, made a similar assessment of those who ultimately provided for the successful integration of the Mississippi Democratic Party. “It was the so-called dumb people,” Jodie Stafford told his grandson in an interview. “Up from the grassroots, they call it.”[[14]](#footnote-13) A century after the passage of the fifteenth amendment, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and its grassroots mobilization expanded the possibilities for the state’s black electorate and ushered it into an integrated Democratic Party while creating a new memory of black political inclusion.

**Chapter 1: Political Beginnings**

He knew he would not win, but he agreed to run just the same. At the end of 1961, when civil rights organizers began looking for a black candidate to run for a seat in the United States Congress, Reverend R. L. T. Smith assented. Smith had already established a pattern for challenging black political exclusion in Mississippi. He registered to vote in 1925. He had long been a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). And, he had formulated his own theory on the need to exercise individual resistance. Smith summarized the success of his own acts of defiance in the years preceding the mass movement of the 1960s. He insisted, “I found out that the white man is scared to death of a black man who won’t run from him.” A white man might call a black man who spoke up “a fool,” but “he won’t mess with him” if he recognizes his target had no plans to flee. Smith’s rhetorical bravado and insistence on the need for taking personal stands against the dehumanizing and belittling aspects of the Jim Crow South strengthened his potential as an oppositional candidate in the one party state of Mississippi.[[15]](#footnote-14)

In Mississippi, like much of the South, the Democratic primary substituted for the general election. Smith, a Baptist minister, grocer, and former postal worker, agreed to run as the civil rights candidate against the incumbent John Bell Williams in the June 1962 Democratic primary. He and Merrill Lindsey, a civil rights backed candidate in the second congressional district, would serve as the first black candidates for Congress since Reconstruction. Lindsey challenged incumbents Frank Smith and Jamie Whitten in the newly combined second district. R.L.T. Smith and John Bell Williams would vie to represent the third congressional district in the United States Congress, which Williams had represented since 1947. Williams’ regular election as a Democratic representative rested on the mass disenfranchisement of his black constituents. The third congressional district, which encompassed the capital city of Jackson, consisted of 460,000 Mississippians, slightly more than half of whom identified as white. The near equal size of the district’s black and white population, however, was overshadowed by the political preference of white voters. The one hundred thousand white registered voters significantly outnumbered the slightly more than five thousand black registered voters in the district.[[16]](#footnote-15)

In 1960, throughout the state of Mississippi, less than seven percent of the black voting age population was registered to vote. The United States Commission on Civil Rights, a federally funded investigative agency, reported in 1961 that at least thirty five of Mississippi’s eight two counties severely discriminated with regard to the franchise. In thirteen counties no black Mississippians were registered to vote. In five of these counties, black residents comprised the majority of the voting age population.[[17]](#footnote-16) As a result of the low percentage of black registered voters and their low rates of participation on election day, the political choices of black Mississippians went largely unrecorded. Within these circumstances, R.L.T. Smith’s candidacy was more symbolic than viable.

Fear, fueled by memories of violent retaliation, also helped to keep the small number of black registered voters home from the polls on election day. In 1955, George Lee had been the first black registered voter in his Delta county. After encouraging others to register, he was ordered to remove his name from the registration list. Lee refused and was shot and killed as he drove down the central business district in the town of Belzoni. On a Saturday afternoon in the same year, Lamar Smith was killed on the courthouse steps in southwestern Mississippi. He had urged black voters to participate in the upcoming Democratic primary.[[18]](#footnote-17) A year before Smith’s campaign, Herbert Lee, a founding member of the Amite County NAACP, had been killed by a state legislator. He had been working with young organizers on registering black voters.[[19]](#footnote-18) R.L.T. Smith echoed the concern that extended from collective memories like these when he commented on one county in the third district as a particularly “rough spot for a black man.” There, he warned that “you bet not breathe out loud like you wanted to be free” or you would be taking a risk.[[20]](#footnote-19)

Smith’s willingness to stand as a candidate despite the possibility of violence and retaliation stemmed from a life of cultivated defiance supported through economic independence. Smith had worked for the United States Postal Service. He described his employment as one of relative privilege. While most black Mississippians worked as low wage laborers, Smith had gained employment in one of the few salaried fields that did not rely on local white support. To work for the post office was regarded as a “big job for a black man” because the salary was paid regularly and because it was a federal job that was protected from what Smith termed “white trickery and black trickery.”[[21]](#footnote-20) Although he was retired when he ran for Congress, Smith likely received a federal pension in addition to running a small business. His grocery store served Jackson’s black community and, as a result, was insulated from the most severe forms of economic intimidation.[[22]](#footnote-21)

Smith’s economic independence was further secured by his family’s long history of land ownership. Like his position at the post office, Smith’s land holdings did not accord wealth but rather provided a level of autonomy, which protected his family from the unpredictability of white aggression. Smith lived with his wife and their children on land that his family had owned since emancipation.[[23]](#footnote-22) While Smith contended that as a child his family’s land ownership kept them, “just a notch ahead of sharecroppers,” this independence from the whims of local whites must have afforded the family a bit more economic flexibility than renters would have experienced.[[24]](#footnote-23) Black workers who leased homes or land could be displaced at the whim of white owners. The Smith family’s legacy as land owners clearly nurtured in Smith both the desire to question and the nominal financial means and opportunity by which to take action.

Smith’s independence, based on family land and a federal job, enabled his membership in the state NAACP during a period in which this civil rights organization was considered subversive by most white Mississippians. Although the NAACP came to be derided as a moderate force for change during the later years of the Civil Rights Movement, in rural Mississippi communities of the 1950s, NAACP membership was dangerous. One Mississippi NAACP member described the secretive nature of organizing in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His chapter of the NAACP kept no formal records and alternated meeting places in order that no single home drew suspicion.[[25]](#footnote-24) The limited civil rights network developed through membership in the NAACP and other local efforts to expand the political rights of black Mississippians brought Smith into association with others who slowly and tediously organized to produce fissures in the state’s intransigent political system.

Smith’s economic independence and commitment to black political rights marked him as a potential candidate for Congress, but Smith came to be named a civil rights candidate because he was available and willing. “Look, why don’t we run the first Negro?’” Bill Higgs, a white Mississippi lawyer and civil rights ally, asked Bob Moses, the lead organizer of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi. After sharing his idea with Moses, Higgs began brainstorming potential candidates among the small community of outspoken agitators. First Higgs approached Medgar Evers, the state NAACP field secretary, about contesting John Bell Williams’ congressional seat. Evers declined but suggested Bob Smith. The younger Smith claimed too many obligations. He recommended his father, the Reverend R. L. T. Smith. When approached, Reverend Smith answered, “Why yea, I don’t see why not.”[[26]](#footnote-25)

So it came to pass that the Reverend R. L. T. Smith posed regally -- wearing a well-tailored suit and hat and carrying a briefcase in his hand – for the cover of the first issue of the *Mississippi Free Press*. In that instant, he became the most available symbol for black political rights in Mississippi since the Reconstruction Era. For black Mississippians, most denied the vote for three generations, Smith’s entry into politics was unprecedented. In endorsing his candidacy, the *Free Press* contended that Smith’s campaign represented the first effort by a black candidate to run for a major office in Mississippi in the twentieth century. The paper, the most recent attempt to establish a dissident organ to serve as a clearinghouse for political actions around the state, shared the important facts of Smith’s life with its readership -- his occupation, marital status, and proclivity to read both the *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Constitution*. The stately photograph and listed attributes presented Smith as a reliable and upstanding member of Mississippi’s black community.[[27]](#footnote-26)

The implicit risk of a black candidate announcing his plans to run for Congress in Mississippi marked Smith’s action as radical, but Smith was a political moderate, who possessed the credentials of middle class leadership. He was a family man and business owner, a registered voter and member of the NAACP, and a consumer of national news. With Smith as a candidate, the small pool of black voters in Mississippi’s third congressional district saw a reflection of themselves. Like Smith, they shared the limited circumstances available to black Mississippians, but many also knew a level of insulation denied the state’s large agricultural workforce. Smith’s confidence, projected through his image on the front page of the *Free Press*, inspired voters to take the risk involved in casting a ballot and offered the unregistered the opportunity to imagine themselves as potential members of a political community represented by well cultivated political leaders.

While Smith looked like a candidate, his campaign manager Bob Moses understood that “there was no chance of winning. There was no chance of polling any voters; no one was registered.” Instead, campaign workers viewed the political race as an organizing tool. Smith’s candidacy in the third district, combined with Merrill Lindsey’s campaign in the second district, could network isolated dissidents toward a singular objective. Those men and women would encourage the already registered to exercise their vote on election day and begin to inform the state’s black laboring population about the potential power available in political action, creating a statewide atmosphere for change.[[28]](#footnote-27)

Smith’s campaign was not entirely public in nature. Fear of violent retribution dissuaded campaign strategists from organizing mass gatherings to acquaint voters with Smith. Generally, a campaign stop amounted to a private meeting with a local dissident in a black owned café. There, Moses or Smith distributed campaign materials to the local leader secretly, under the table. They, in turn, shared the news of Smith’s candidacy with individuals in their community.[[29]](#footnote-28) On one occasion, in Claiborne County, twenty men attended a clandestine meeting to learn about the Smith campaign. News of the meeting reached the white community, and the voters encountered fifty local white men upon arrival. At the next meeting, only three Smith supporters attended.[[30]](#footnote-29) Openly supporting a black political candidate, whether a registered voter or not, was cause for white retaliation.

Because public campaigning remained dangerous, both the Smith and Lindsey campaigns utilized radio and television advertisements to reach voters. One week after announcing Smith’s candidacy for Congress, the *Free Press* printed an advertisement for Smith’s scheduled appearance on a Jackson television station.[[31]](#footnote-30) Smith’s appearance on television was not a foregone conclusion, however. Financial realities limited the use of media, and some stations refused to sell air time to black candidates. While WJTV offered to sell the Smith campaign six spots, it could only afford three. After the first broadcast, however, the station received threats and canceled all future appearances. The station manager feared that if Smith went on the air again their “two bodies will be found floating in the Pearl River” that ran through Jackson.

While WJTV had initially agreed to run the Smith advertisements, the city’s other television station, WLBT articulated a “flat refusal” to broadcast Smith’s advertisements. Eventually the Smith campaign appealed to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). This battle required the circuitous influence of Eleanor Roosevelt, who called Attorney General Robert Kennedy. John Bell Williams, Smith’s opponent, served on a key subcommittee that regulated the FCC and was a high-ranking member of the Commerce Committee. Ultimately, with the assistance of national supporters, Reverend Smith made two appearances on each local television station.[[32]](#footnote-31) Merrill Lindsey was also able to utilize media outlets. Lindsey’s opponent Frank Smith remarked that while he did not watch the television piece, he heard from others that Lindsey had performed “mighty good.”[[33]](#footnote-32)

Both candidates won important support from black voters. Amidst the climate of fear and intimidation, however, some black voters chose to abstain and others cast their ballots for a white candidate. With five thousand black registered voters in the third congressional district, Smith garnered 2,853 votes in Democratic primary. In ten Jackson precincts Smith won majorities.[[34]](#footnote-33) In Claiborne County, thirteen of the seventeen black registered voters cast ballots for Smith. Throughout the district, two thirds of the black registered voters had participated in the election and cast their ballots for R.L.T. Smith.[[35]](#footnote-34) In the second district race, Merrill Lindsey won just under two thousand votes. In Washington County, 447 voters cast their ballots for Lindsey.[[36]](#footnote-35) The two men had proven that black candidates could gain a place on the ballot and address voters on television. Black candidates would not begin to win elections for another few years.

The two campaigns served as the necessary catalyst for what would become one of the most extensive political protests in the nation. Many attribute the idea for the formation of an oppositional political party a few years after the Smith campaign to Bob Moses. Moses termed the campaign a form of “consciousness raising.” Following the Democratic primary, civil rights organizers began to think about how to use the electoral process as a stage to demand black political rights, but Moses admitted that “no one believed it was coming as soon as it came.”[[37]](#footnote-36) During the Smith for Congress campaign Moses began to focus on what constituted a political party, how it would look, and who would comprise its base. According to Moses, the Smith campaign raised “all those questions which had never really been real questions for me before.”[[38]](#footnote-37) The campaign experience not only served to open the possibilities for black Mississippians who had little experience with either traditional or oppositional politics but also for full time organizers like Bob Moses.

Bob Moses confused Charles McLaurin. Born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, McLaurin joined the movement after hearing Martin Luther King, Jr. speak on the living conditions of agricultural laborers in the Delta. A college student, he began working with the young organizers of SNCC. When he first met Bob Moses, McLaurin was surprised by Moses’ appearance. His small stature did not align with the stories circulating throughout the movement. McLaurin had expected Moses to be a “big, burly man with a big stick,” but when they met, McLaurin realized that Moses “wasn’t going to whoop nobody, physically” and worried that if Moses was going “to lead us in the war,” then “we have lost.” McLaurin, however, quickly learned why a legend had formed around the image of Bob Moses. He was a master organizer and excelled at “[j]ust basic getting people together.” In discussions, Moses expressed a genuine respect for people’s ideas. Amidst slow organizing campaigns, he modeled a commitment to the tedium of door to door canvassing and creating tiny fissures in the segregationist state.[[39]](#footnote-38)

Bob Moses was one of the few movement organizers who inspired native Mississippians, young and old, and civil rights organizers, white and black. His quiet leadership welcomed the contributions of those who were just beginning to formulate their ideas for change as well as individuals who were longtime dissenters. Amzie Moore, a World War II veteran and NAACP member in Cleveland, Mississippi, characterized Moses as his “idea of an educated man.”[[40]](#footnote-39) Howard Zinn, a white professor at Atlanta’s Spellman College and an adult advisor to SNCC, described Moses, as someone “who looks at you directly out of large tranquil eyes, who talks slowly, quietly, whose calm as he stands looking down a street in Mississippi is that of a mountain studying the sea.”[[41]](#footnote-40) Moses, to his own reluctance, became a symbol in the Mississippi movement. A young man, he was able to gain respect from both his peers and elders. A New Yorker, few black Mississippians viewed him as an intrusive outsider.

Unlike most of the organizers in the Mississippi movement, Bob Moses was a northerner. He was born and raised in the black community of Harlem, New York. Following high school graduation, however, Moses had been immersed in white culture. He attended Hamilton College, enrolled in a graduate program at Harvard University, and taught at an elite private high school in New York City. Inspired by the college student sit-ins, which began in February 1960 at North Carolina A&T University, Moses pledged to dedicate himself to the southern freedom struggle. In the summer of 1960, Moses joined the Atlanta office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Intrigued by the energy emitted from the corner of the office where SNCC worked, he asked how he could help.[[42]](#footnote-41)

Ella Baker, who served as the SCLC advisor to SNCC but who had developed southern chapters of the NAACP during the 1950s, sent Moses on a tour of the South to determine the needs of local organizers. In Mississippi, Moses met with Amzie Moore. Moore, like R.L.T. Smith and other early dissenters, exercised independence from the white controlled economy. He worked part time for the post office and owned a service station. He had directed the Cleveland chapter of the NAACP since 1955. During their first visit, Moore “schooled” Moses on the history of organizing in Mississippi. He identified isolated dissidents and shared the stories of local campaigns. Then he accompanied Moses to local churches. Moses addressed the rural parishioners and shared news from the southern movement. “There’s something coming,” he assured them. Then he instructed them, “Get ready.” His statements were met with a few “amens.” Moore invited Moses to return and bring with him the young organizers of SNCC. Together they could launch a grassroots voter registration campaign in Mississippi.[[43]](#footnote-42)

Moses left Mississippi to complete the final year of his teaching contract at Horace Mann High School in New York City, but he returned within a year. During his absence, news of his visit had traveled throughout the state. Based on a SNCC press release, *Jet* magazine announced that SNCC had sent a voter registration team into Mississippi. Pike County NAACP president C.C. Bryant wrote Amzie Moore and asked that he send voter registration workers to southwest Mississippi. When Moses returned the following summer, Amzie Moore’s hometown of Cleveland was not ready to support a major registration campaign, and Moore sent Moses to Bryant. C.C. Bryant worked for the railroad and received his paycheck from the national office in Chicago. He also ran a barbershop out of his home. As he cut hair, Bryant shared his collection of black newspapers and news of the freedom movement with his customers. In McComb, local independent business owners like Bryant pooled their resources and provided Moses with a place to sleep, an office within which to hold citizenship classes, and seed money for the campaign. With the assistance of Bryant and other black service providers in McComb, Moses began his campaign to increase black voter registration in Pike County.[[44]](#footnote-43)

While in McComb, Moses developed a model for organizing. His philosophy borrowed heavily from his discussions with longtime organizer Ella Baker. It prioritized indigenous leadership, operating under the assumption that local people did not need figureheads to outline their needs for them. Given the space to articulate grievances, local people would shape local movements. In Mississippi, Moses cultivated the strengths of emerging dissenters while accepting the intellectual and material resources of veteran agitators. In McComb, when Moses approached a house, he first asked if the individual knew C.C. Bryant in order to demonstrate his connection to the local community. Then he asked them to share their concerns and invited them to register to vote. Over time, a few individuals agreed to travel to the courthouse with him, but often his offer was refused. As he continued the slow work of canvassing, Moses attracted the interest of young people. A few joined the movement as full time workers and became SNCC field secretaries, assuring a monthly stipend to fund their work.[[45]](#footnote-44)

Over time, Moses was joined by other SNCC organizers, who following the model he had established in McComb, tapped into pre-existing leadership structures in local communities and supported indigenous movements with outside resources and full time labor. At Rust College, a Methodist funded black college in Holly Springs, students and local dissenters had organized a speaker’s bureau and staged campus demonstrations to address their most immediate needs but had lacked strategy and resources. When Frank Smith arrived in 1962, he brought his experience from the Atlanta student movement, a SNCC car, and access to a national network of resistors.[[46]](#footnote-45) Similarly when Amzie Moore and Bob Moses dropped off Charles McLaurin and Charles Cobb, a Howard University student, in Sunflower County, they brought the two young men to the home of Rebecca and Joe McDonald. The McDonalds were retired farm workers and had been excluded from NAACP organizing, but their children and a few other community members had attended SCLC sponsored citizenship classes. The couple had requested help in organizing a voter registration campaign in Ruleville. They needed transportation and ideas on sustaining commitment in the face of white intransigence.[[47]](#footnote-46)

Two young men just out of high school were Moses’ first recruits in McComb. They both had been dissenters before they met Moses but had lacked an organized outlet to express their grievances. Until he met Bob Moses, Curtis Hayes would walk out into the woods and “hit trees and pretend they were white folks.”[[48]](#footnote-47) Hollis Watkins had become involved in civil rights activities in high school but possessed no real organizational affiliation. He termed his informal work, “getting after the man that was doing you wrong.” Although he was born and raised in Mississippi, Hollis Watkins was living in California when the Freedom Riders reached Mississippi in 1961. The violent response of white Mississippians to the nonviolent demonstrators angered Watkins. He left the West to return to the South, integrating an estimated twelve bus terminals along the way. Soon after he made it back to Mississippi, Watkins joined Curtis Hayes in looking for Martin Luther King, Jr., who was rumored to be in town. They met Bob Moses, postponed college, and began working full time in the emerging movement.[[49]](#footnote-48)

By the summer of 1964, twenty five to thirty young Mississippians had become full time civil rights workers. These young people shared modest beginnings, were deeply tied to their Mississippi roots, and had generally expressed a curiosity in organized dissent or politics during their youth. Willie Peacock was a student leader and activist at Rust College before he became a SNCC field secretary. Sam Block, an important organizer in Greenwood, had been mentored by Amzie Moore.[[50]](#footnote-49) Lawrence Guyot, a Tougaloo College student born along the Gulf Coast, descended from a politically active family. His uncle chaired the county Republican Party.[[51]](#footnote-50) Charles McLaurin was born in Jackson and witnessed his grandmother’s individual acts of defiance to the limits of segregation.[[52]](#footnote-51) Leslie Burl McLemore described himself as a high school activist and later chaired the Rust College chapter of the NAACP.[[53]](#footnote-52) These young men were joined by the Ladner sisters. Joyce and Dorie Ladner grew up in Hattiesburg, joined the NAACP youth councils organized by Medgar Evers, and were mentored by local resistors Clyde Kennard and Vernon Dahmer.[[54]](#footnote-53)

As the young workers moved into rural communities across Mississippi, Bob Moses observed that they began to view themselves “as some kind of unit.”[[55]](#footnote-54) Dorie Ladner proudly wrote of a “Band of Brothers,” young people like herself and older Mississippians like Amzie Moore and the McDonalds, who came together to attack segregation and disenfranchisement in Mississippi during the first half of the 1960s:

Come gather round people while I tell you of a tale

About a Band of Brothers who worked in Mississippi, a living hell.

They were ninety nine in number

Some old, some very young

And from each of their mouths a song was sung. [[56]](#footnote-55)

These organizers became foot soldiers committed to altering the world from which they had emerged. Unified by their shared Mississippi heritage and the sense of purpose that extended from their voter registration work, Bob Moses concluded they were driven by the shared goal of making “some sense out of living in Mississippi.”[[57]](#footnote-56)

Although SNCC organizers were energized by the enthusiasm of young Mississippians, the developing network of local dissenters, and a commitment to cultivating a broad grassroots movement, few new voters were registered. National trends, however, influenced the direction of organizing in Mississippi, leading to the creation of a well funded coalition to encourage voter registration. Following the 1960 election, President John F. Kennedy recognized how important black voters were becoming to the election of Democratic presidential candidates. He hoped to increase the influence of black Democrats by channeling money for voter registration into the southern movement. The Voter Education Project (VEP) was created to receive funding from the Taconic Foundation and disperse it throughout the South.[[58]](#footnote-57)

In Mississippi, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition among national civil rights organizations, was resurrected to serve as a nonpartisan clearinghouse for voting rights activities. Originally, COFO had been created to provide a united black response to the white violence directed at the Freedom Riders. In 1962, COFO served as a “convenient vehicle” for VEP funded voting rights activities among the NAACP, SNCC, Congress of Racial Equality, and SCLC.[[59]](#footnote-58) Lawrence Guyot described the leadership as “very clear.” Aaron Henry, the state president of the NAACP, was the “publicity man, the front man.” Bob Moses served as the field director, and CORE’s Dave Dennis assisted him.[[60]](#footnote-59) Moses, who had recruited students to organize among Mississippi’s laboring population, and Dennis, whose influence had been established in Madison County, determined COFO’s programmatic focus.[[61]](#footnote-60)

Full time COFO workers, generally SNCC and CORE trained field secretaries, fanned out across the state. Building upon Moses model of movement development, they drew on informal leadership networks, and began holding community meetings. “What usually happened,” explained Bob Moses, “you had a place, or a church where a group of people met . . . and began to get a sense of themselves as a people in a community in that county, say, who were willing to take a stand and take some risk around this voting.” At COFO sponsored meetings, dissidents from neighboring counties began to “hook-up” and began planning joint meetings.[[62]](#footnote-61) As the movement began to take hold in Leflore County in the Delta, dissidents from other counties began visiting the strategy sessions. On one occasion, Hartman Turnbow and Ralthus Hayes traveled from their homes in Holmes County to observe the Greenwood movement in Leflore County. They invited organizers to assist them in developing a movement in Holmes County.[[63]](#footnote-62)

Hartman Turnbow lived on seventy acres of land he owned just along the edge of Mississippi’s delta and threatened to fire back should his life, his family, or his property be threatened. “Every what the Mississippi white man pose with,” Turnbow contended, “he got to be met with.” “If he pose with a smile, meet him with a smile, and if he pose with a gun, meet him with a gun.” Though popular myth memorializes the sit-ins staged by black college students, well dressed and polite, as white youth and their parents unwilling to recognize both the inefficiency and inhumanity of Jim Crow squeezed an array of condiments on their heads, others chose not to sit in quiet defiance in the face of white bigotry. Like many other residents of the rural South, Hartman Turnbow rejected the well discussed strategy of nonviolence.[[64]](#footnote-63)

Hartman Turnbow lived in the small farming community of Mileston in Holmes County, Mississippi. He and his neighbors owned their land. Most had amassed the acreage as the result of federal land programs offered in the 1940s. They held tightly to this symbol of their independence that girded them from the whims of white supremacy. Although these self-sufficient farmers relied little on Holmes County’s white population for meeting their basic needs, at the end of the year they yielded but tiny surpluses. Their land, its crops and livestock, however, served as an important buffer from the day-to-day harassment that faced black Mississippians who did not own their land or support themselves through independent business but rather relied on the white controlled economy of rural Mississippi.[[65]](#footnote-64)

As Hartman Turnbow understood it, before COFO workers helped to organize the Holmes County movement, no black person in that county or in the state had even thought about registering to vote. As to politics and voting, Turnbow explained that until he visited the Greenwood movement he “hadn’t never did it and hadn’t never heard anything ‘bout it, so I just wasn’t too interested in it.” Turnbow’s assumption that no black voters were registered in Mississippi spoke to the hard work the single party state -- dominated by large landowners and a few industrial giants -- put into ensuring that black laborers remain pliable, dependent, and ignorant of traditional processes of power.[[66]](#footnote-65)

While a small group of black Mississippians had, in fact, registered to vote in mid century Mississippi, the vast majority of black Mississippians not only remained unregistered but also lacked the most fundamental knowledge of the political system. For many black Mississippians at the middle of the twentieth century, political education was virtually nonexistent. Formal schooling was limited. When the children of black laborers did attend class, civics was omitted from the curriculum. One member of the Holmes County movement insisted he and his colleagues would have registered to vote without the support of movement organizers, but the outside help accelerated their efforts. Robert Cooper Howard contended that the full time civil rights workers had the “backin’” of national civil rights organizations as well as a “lawyer from the president’s office.”[[67]](#footnote-66) While some black Mississippians viewed government and politics as white folks’ business, others, like Hartman Turnbow and his neighbors, took advantage of movement resources and seized the opportunity to become voters and gain basic political knowledge.

Over time, the organizing in Holmes County evolved into regular Wednesday meetings at the Jerusalem Church in Mileston.[[68]](#footnote-67) With the assistance of Annell Ponder a teacher with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, organizers offered local people citizenship classes. Some adult students were taught to read and write in these evening classes. Others, who already possessed basic literacy skills, learned to fill out voter registration forms. In April 1963, a group of fourteen men and women who had been attending the regular Wednesday meetings decided they were ready to travel to Lexington, the county seat, and take the voter registration test.[[69]](#footnote-68)

The group caravanned into town and parked on its outskirts in order to cause as little disruption as possible. Instead of walking in a crowd and giving Sheriff Andrew Smith cause to arrest them or hassle them for “huddlin’,” they walked towards the courthouse in pairs with a short distance between each twosome. As the group neared the courthouse, Sheriff Smith met them with a tirade of curses and accusations. As Smith went to hit SNCC organizer John Ball with his billy club, Hartman Turnbow stepped in his path, emboldened by the weeks of meeting and planning. “Mr. Smith,” he declared, “we only come to vote . . . to *redish*.” Smith paused and then ordered the prospective applicants to wait beneath a tree on the courthouse grounds. He followed them and asked, “All right now, who will be first?”[[70]](#footnote-69)

As Turnbow worried that others would rather retreat than tell Sheriff Smith directly that they would be the first to register, he stepped away from the crowd of men and women standing under the tree. “Me, Hartman Turnbow,” he stated, “will be first.” While Reverend J.J. Russell, another prospective applicant, remembered John Daniel Wesley as first, Turnbow as second, and himself third, it is clear that these men and women bravely challenged the traditional systems of power and control buttressed by their group solidarity as they stood vulnerable under a shady tree on the courthouse lawn.[[71]](#footnote-70) Regardless of the order of application, Hartman Turnbow was among, what came to be memorialized as the “first fourteen,” to walk into the Lexington courthouse and inform the circuit clerk that he intended to register to vote.[[72]](#footnote-71)

Facing myriad yet unarticulated challenges as he walked alone toward the courthouse that day, Turnbow made sure not to provide the sheriff with any reason to harass him further. He stepped away from Sheriff Smith and moved carefully along the edge of the curb to the main walk, then into the courthouse and the registrar’s office, a room not often visited by black county residents. Turnbow informed the woman watching the office, as he had Sheriff Smith a few moments earlier, “I come to redish to vote.” The circuit clerk Henry McClellan was not in the office, and Turnbow was forced to wait. With still no sign of the registrar, Turnbow joined his colleagues for lunch outside the courthouse and waited another hour for the office to reopen. When Turnbow returned, McClellan methodically took down the voter books and offered an application to Turnbow. After he completed his application, the others in his group entered the courthouse, one at a time, and asked to register.[[73]](#footnote-72)

As the process was a long one of slow moving and hard questions, word of the mass registration spread. Turnbow described people “climbin’ up on cars and lookin’ at us just like we’uz somethin’ out the zoo.” But registering to vote in Holmes County in the spring of 1963 was much more than participating in a sideshow. Although the residents of the Holmes County town of Mileston were inured from excessive intimidation because they lived on and worked their own land, repercussions came quickly. “I was the first one that said I want to redish to vote,” remembered Turnbow, “and I’uz the first one got my house bombed.”[[74]](#footnote-73)

This house bombing became the fodder of legend. The night after he registered to vote, someone, unhappy with Hartman Turnbow’s attempt to exercise full citizenship, fired a .45 into the Turnbow home and firebombed the house as he and his wife and daughter slept. According to Turnbow, his family ran out of the house right into two white men in their yard. Thrown by the presence of Sweets Turnbow and her daughter, the white men in the yard were unable to prevent Hartman Turnbow from escaping his home. Turnbow followed his family into the yard, his rifle tucked into his shoulder. The white men in his yard began firing at Turnbow. Not a man of nonviolence, he returned fire.[[75]](#footnote-74)

Reverend J.J. Russell, who had also filled out a registration application that day, furthered the legend of Hartman Turnbow. “And the man whirled and ran, and Turnbow steady shooting, the moon shinin’ like day,” described Russell of the events that evening. The vigilantes fled, and the Turnbows extinguished the fire burning their home. According to Russell, one of the white men who had been on the Turnbow property died a short while later. The hospital reported that he died of a heart attack rather than wounds from the crossfire. To admit the death of a white man to the violent resistance of one of the state’s subservient laboring class would have acknowledged a break in expected codes of behavior. To cede that it was natural causes would have lessened the legend of Hartman Turnbow among his peers.[[76]](#footnote-75)

Although the full time movement workers were encouraged by a growing network of dissenters and the bold actions taken by individuals like Hartman Turnbow and the “first fourteen” in Holmes County, there were few concrete gains. Between 1961 and 1963, an estimated eighty five thousand black Mississippians attempted to register to vote but only seven hundred succeeded.[[77]](#footnote-76) A mass movement had not taken hold. Hollis Watkins remembered that often “the number of people that actually came to the mass meeting were not massive.”[[78]](#footnote-77) Bob Moses described the increased number of student organizers as the “only thing that was visible” in the first years of the Mississippi movement.[[79]](#footnote-78) Motivated by their work with COFO and frustrated by the languid support of national civil rights leaders and the federal government, organizers searched for alternative strategies to encourage political participation.

“Greetings from the Harassed Henry Headquarters!” wrote Joan Bowman to SNCC advisor and Spellman professor Howard Zinn.[[80]](#footnote-79) In the fall of 1963, COFO decided to formally challenge the political process in Mississippi. Organizers chose not to recruit a black candidate to run in the Democratic primary because black Mississippians remained unregistered. Instead, COFO arranged for a parallel election. During the summer, organizers piloted the idea during the Democratic primary. They mobilized black residents of the Delta to cast mock ballots for the Democratic nominees for governor. The protest vote demonstrated that black Mississippians would vote if they were permitted. Building on the success of the Delta Freedom Vote, organizers planned for a statewide parallel election to coincide with the November general election. This time COFO ran its own candidates. Aaron Henry, the state president of the NAACP, ran as the civil rights endorsed candidate for governor. Edwin King, a white minister who served as the chaplain at Tougaloo College, joined the ticket as the candidate for lieutenant governor. Organizers hoped that two hundred thousand black Mississippians would cast protest ballots in the Freedom Vote. Their ballots would list the names of Henry and King in addition to the Democratic and Republican candidates.[[81]](#footnote-80)

Aaron Henry had been a long time resistor. After serving in World War II, he entered a pharmaceutical program at Xavier University. He returned to Mississippi and opened a pharmacy in Clarksdale in partnership with a white business operator. His pharmacy served as a safe place, free from white eyes, which nurtured the incipient Movement. “I suspect,” theorized Henry about the negligible intimidation he experienced, “that it was because I had been able to remain totally without obligation to any member of the white community.”[[82]](#footnote-81) In 1962, Aaron Henry had managed the congressional campaign of his brother-in-law, Merrill Lindsey. A year and a half later, he was willing to project himself as the most public face of the movement for black political rights in Mississippi. Although his primary organizational affiliation was with the NAACP, like Amzie Moore and many others involved in the early Mississippi movement, organizational allegiances were not the primary issue for Henry. Rather, he was concerned with broadening the political possibilities available to black Mississippians. Aaron Henry hoped that the Freedom Vote would give the “unregistered Negro a feeling of *somebodyness* in casting a vote.”[[83]](#footnote-82)

Edwin King had been born and raised a segregationist in Vicksburg. While still in high school, he experienced a transformative moment. A tornado struck Vicksburg in 1953 and destroyed the city’s black neighborhood but left the white residential area largely unscathed. The disparity between the damage in the two communities demonstrated to King that separate was not equal as he had long believed.[[84]](#footnote-83) King attended Millsaps College in Jackson and slowly became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. By 1960, King’s parents were forced to leave the state because of their son’s outspokenness on black rights.[[85]](#footnote-84) At the time of the Freedom Vote, King was working at Tougaloo College, a Methodist supported black college on the outskirts of Jackson. Already an active proponent of black rights, King’s decision to run for lieutenant governor further marked him as a target. “If you see Ed King now,” suggested Madison County organizer Annie Devine, “. . . it shows what it meant for him to be out in front in the Movement.” Hit by a stone, King’s scarred jaw displayed the repercussions of his decision. On campaign posters, formal photographs showed the bandages that protected his injury.[[86]](#footnote-85)

The movement, still in its infancy, lacked the established means for selecting candidates. Although Bob Moses and SNCC espoused the tenets of participatory democracy, a statewide structure did not yet exist which could provide a venue to decide on candidates. Reflecting on the decision making process, Moses identified the first requirement for selecting a candidate quite pragmatically. The candidate needed to appeal to the full time workers because “if the staff wasn’t willing to do it there was nobody who would do it.” Once the staff compiled a short list, the candidates had to agree. Bob Moses explained pointedly, “It wasn’t as if you had a choice of a lot of different people who would run.”[[87]](#footnote-86) Like the drafting of R. L. T. Smith before them, Henry and King were chosen from a small and informal pool of candidates. Madison County organizer Annie Devine understood others’ fear because as she explained “there was enough in King and Henry’s running . . . to let people know even if you did it, you’re going to suffer. And people just weren’t ready.”[[88]](#footnote-87) She did not become officially involved in the movement for another year.

At the same meeting where Aaron Henry was chosen to serve as the movement’s gubernatorial candidate, organizers agreed on a platform for the Freedom Vote. The platform, drafted by full time organizers, critiqued the treatment of black Mississippians and offered proposals for the future. Movement workers had more thoroughly considered these political issues and debated political theory in the intellectual incubator of the Movement. Edwin King contended that the document represented “an excellent expression of the thinking of the staff -- mostly SNCC -- that prepared it and of the adult Black people, -- the most active civil rights leaders in their local communities -- who enthusiastically voted their approval of it.” The language, however, was “more sophisticated and militant” than that used by most black Mississippians, who in late 1963 remained largely “untouched” by the Civil Rights Movement.[[89]](#footnote-88) Although a small group of organizers had planned the Freedom Vote, selected candidates, and authored a platform, the political exercise expressed the unspoken grievances and expectations of black Mississippians. King conceded that the Freedom Vote campaign “caught on so rapidly because the people were ready” to challenge white Mississippians hold on the political process. [[90]](#footnote-89)

Accustomed to being ignored by candidates during the election season, black Mississippians expressed excitement about the upcoming Freedom Vote. National organizations had long characterized Mississippi as too difficult to organize; SNCC had resisted. During the Freedom Vote, young organizers realized that they too maintained many of these assumptions. “We still were saying most of the state is off bounds and the people aren’t ready,” remembered Ed King. He countered, however, “They were ready.”[[91]](#footnote-90) Originally COFO workers had delayed organizing some counties, determining that they were too dangerous or lacked established leadership networks. Organizers learned that they “were far more open” than they had anticipated. Churches that had refused to host civil rights meetings sought information about the Freedom Vote. Local people called the Henry campaign headquarters and asked, “Why isn’t somebody coming here?” Black Mississippians mobilized around independent black candidates and the mock election, and “there was no problem in convincing people that they should vote for the ‘third’ party,” according to King. As election day neared, Ed King remarked, protest voters began “to use their own phrase” to refer to the Freedom Vote. “This new term was ‘Freedom Party.’”[[92]](#footnote-91)

“Of course the SNCC staff is running the campaign,” explained Freedom Vote worker Joan Bowman. Bob Moses worked as the campaign manager. Mike Sayer of SNCC assisted him.[[93]](#footnote-92) Former oppositional candidate and NAACP member R. L. T. Smith chaired the finance committee, but he shared duties with Moses and David Dennis. Allard Lowenstein and Henry Briggs also sat on this committee. Charles Evers, the NAACP’s Mississippi field secretary, oversaw the Speakers’ Bureau.[[94]](#footnote-93) The district managers were all SNCC and CORE workers. Frank Smith, a SNCC field secretary who had assisted the Rust College movement, managed the first congressional district. Greenwood SNCC organizer Sam Block and SCLC’s Annel Ponder oversaw the second congressional district. Dennis was in charge of the third district. Mateo Suarez, a CORE field secretary, worked the fourth. And Lawrence Guyot, a SNCC field secretary and native of the Gulf Coast, organized for the Freedom Vote in that area of the state, its fifth congressional district.[[95]](#footnote-94)

While everyone agreed that organizational affiliations needed to be overlooked in order to strengthen Mississippi’s oppositional voice, hostility concerning the distinct identities of each coalition organization remained. Full time COFO workers, who identified with SNCC’s emphasis on establishing models of participatory democracy and cultivating indigenous leadership among the state’s laboring population, did not trust the NAACP membership of black professionals. Although NAACP membership had marked individuals as resistors in the postwar era, it rested primarily in the small black middle class, who supported an expansion of black political rights but did not applaud attempts to expand beyond traditional leadership. Whereas SNCC field secretaries had donned the overalls of farm laborers and committed to full days of canvassing rural communities, administering evening classes, and hosting mass meetings, Edwin King diminished the quiet activism of NAACP members. He labeled them “professional people who had made a donation at a ‘Freedom Tea’ or in the annual ‘Miss NAACP’ or ‘Mother-of-the-year’ fundraising affairs.” Additionally, he worried that “major middle class” leaders, who belonged to both the NAACP and COFO, like Aaron Henry, Charles Evers, and R. L. T. Smith, wished to moderate the more expansive political expectations of SNCC and CORE workers. [[96]](#footnote-95)

The NAACP had served as the primary civil rights organization in Mississippi in the postwar era, but saw its influence ebb with the Freedom Vote. Previously, the NAACP had not organized mass campaigns but rather counted its strength in membership numbers. Individuals paid dues to the national organization to establish local solvency and help fund national campaigns. Although it initiated few direct actions, the NAACP was deemed subversive by white Mississippians in the pre-civil rights era. School districts fired teachers. Vigilante groups killed outspoken dissenters. Before his murder in the Spring of 1963, Medgar Evers, the state field secretary of the NAACP, had sought to expand the movement, developing youth chapters and collaborating with SNCC organizers. With Evers’ assassination, his brother Charles assumed leadership of the state NAACP and expressed less interest in working with the COFO coalition. Ed King dismissed Charles Evers as “not very relevant” to the Freedom Vote. COFO workers informed him of activities and “let him speak,” but he was largely uninvolved.[[97]](#footnote-96)

SNCC and CORE workers tended to be full time activists with youthful enthusiasm and determination, who levied a more systemic critique of black exclusion. Their energy and commitment to developing indigenous leaders mobilized a broader cross section of black Mississippians. These laborers had expressed individual defiance but had felt ignored by the middle class NAACP members in their communities. Fannie Lou Hamer, who would become one of the most recognizable faces in the Mississippi movement, came to exemplify the latent leadership in Mississippi’s rural communities. She had worked as a sharecropper and timekeeper on a white owned plantation in the Delta. As a timekeeper she acted as a supervisor among cotton choppers, demonstrating informal but untapped leadership. She attended her first mass meeting in 1962, volunteered to attempt to register, and joined the movement as a full time worker when her employer evicted her from his land.[[98]](#footnote-97)

The 1963 Freedom Vote elevated the mistrust in the working relationship between the NAACP and SNCC. The small black electorate in Mississippi rested among social conservatives, who refused to support the freedom movement, and economically independent business operators and landowners, who had quietly, but aggressively, worked to expand the voter rolls over the preceding decade. Few laborers, whose economic security remained dependent on white employers, were registered to vote. Organizers of the Freedom Vote asked registered voters to cast their ballots for Aaron Henry in both the freedom election and the general election. In Mississippi, however, votes for write in candidates were not counted. Black voters viewed this suggestion as wasting their vote. The state’s black registered voters would likely make a pragmatic choice. They would vote for Aaron Henry at church on Sunday and for Republican Rubel Phillips on Election Day.[[99]](#footnote-98)

The differences between the Mississippi NAACP and the Freedom Vote campaign reached a climax on the eve of the election. The NAACP met in Biloxi for its state convention. The timing of this event angered campaign workers. With local leaders away from their communities so close to the election weekend, organizers feared that voter turnout would be significantly reduced. Despite the frustration of campaign workers, Allard Lowenstein argued that “nobody had included these people.” Despite the NAACP’s membership in COFO and Aaron Henry’s presence on the ticket, Lowenstein charged that SNCC and CORE had purposely kept NAACP members out of the operational structure of the campaign. Bob Moses, the campaign’s director, had not organized in communities that lacked full time civil rights workers. Many of these counties possessed a strong NAACP base, and residents felt rebuffed. Lowenstein contended that younger activists, who imagined a political movement comprised of laborers, worried that “conservative forces would take over the party.” It would lose its vitality and cater to an “establishment kind of Negro, the Uncle Tom kind of Negro.” This fear had informed their organizing.[[100]](#footnote-99)

Aaron Henry addressed the gathering and enlisted the support of his fellow NAACP members. While he spoke, Henry crafted a “very tightrope position,” according to Lowenstein. He did not want to “alienate SNCC,” but he sought to expand participation in the Freedom Vote. Together Lowenstein and Henry made “impassioned appeals for everybody to work for the freedom ticket” and vote for Henry and King. When they concluded their remarks, they were greeted with cheers. Although some NAACP members may have felt pushed aside in the earlier phase of organizing, the convention, according to Lowenstein, was “clearly for the Freedom ticket.” The energy and excitement surrounding the upcoming Freedom Vote was too overwhelming. According to Lowenstein, “in Mississippi, even the Uncle Toms were for the Freedom Party.”[[101]](#footnote-100) It stood as testament to the closed nature of Mississippi politics that black Mississippians, across the economic and political spectrum, united around the Freedom Vote.

Galvanized by Allard Lowenstein and inspired by the stoic figures they listened to at campus forums, Stanford and Yale students volunteered to assist in the Freedom Vote. The students and the disenfranchised Mississippians came from what amounted to opposite ends of the social and economic spectrum. When he addressed Stanford students, Lowenstein confirmed their perception that Mississippi is the “most egregious part of America, the most egregious travesty of the things we say we believe in,” but then he contended that because the students represented “the most privileged part of America” they should assist the Freedom Vote.[[102]](#footnote-101) Lowenstein reminded the students, “Mississippi is not a foreign country in our midst –it’s the foreign part of all of us in our midst.”[[103]](#footnote-102) Lowenstein’s directed recruitment drew approximately one hundred volunteers, primarily white Stanford and Yale students, to assist on the Freedom Vote during their Fall breaks.

The travelogue of one unnamed Yale volunteer highlights the difficulties that arose over this short period of collaborative organizing. Initially the volunteer romanticized the work and his destination. While in Mississippi, he grew frustrated by the minutiae of his tasks, but sporadic moments of energy and coordinated action reinvigorated him and other campaign workers. Upon his return to school, he reconciled his early, less nuanced, ideas of civil rights work with more critical thoughts of organizing and a fuller grasp of the daunting challenge facing Mississippi’s full-time civil rights organizers.

Initially the Yale volunteer expressed a sense of righteousness, America needed to come clean on its promises, and he would assist in this self-correction. He “motored” through the nation’s capitol, absorbing the symbolism of the national monuments to freedom, justice, and equality. “Our feelings,” he explained of his motivations, “were as trite as that.” He meditated on the writings of black authors he had read as he described the “flat dusty land and the incredible shanties of the sharecroppers,” the effects of drought that made the “ground looked sick,” and the bits of cotton that littered the roadside. In his characterization of the land, peppered with the mythic poverty of its inhabitants, he overlooked the mechanisms of abuse, discrimination, and intimidation that maintained this intellectualized poetry of squalor. Upon reaching Mississippi, he was shocked to observe the suspicion directed at his out of state license plate, especially, he noted, “when I think of Virginia as still Southern.”[[104]](#footnote-103)

Upon his arrival in Hattiesburg, the volunteer was confronted with the complicated process of organizing an integrated movement in the segregated South. He was unable to find the COFO Freedom House, and called his local contact, Mrs. Woods, an independent business owner who rented COFO an office. He learned that “the SNCC office had left and that there was a town ordinance forbidding whites in the Negro section of town and vice versa.” Faced with the dilemma of where to sleep that night, he called the Freedom House in Jackson. Excited by the newsworthiness of a white volunteer stranded in a rural Mississippi community, they gave him the phone number of a New York radio station. He was instructed to tell them that the police had removed him, a Yale student, from the Negro section of town. Whether organizers were trying to stir the feelings of northern sympathizers or it was simply a misunderstanding, the volunteer explained this scenario to be untrue. He was told to stay in a white hotel for the night. He would find the movement in the morning.[[105]](#footnote-104)

When he finally joined the campaign, the volunteer’s enthusiasm began to fade. The work of assisting an underfinanced political campaign was “staggering.” The volunteers were viewed as support staff and often were delegated menial and finite tasks. They had little sense of long term goals and limited involvement in long range projects. The hard work of canvassing required perseverance with little immediate pay-off. “If you’ve ever sold Christmas wreathes or newspapers,” he complained, “you know the feeling, the urge to skip the next house and the need to stop at every one.” While canvassing he started to pick up clues about those with whom he talked, which highlighted the obstacles to organizing, small things “like noticing that the woman is reading the Free Press newspaper upside down.” He noted that another Yale volunteer began to show “the strain of the frustration of the unknown.” Additionally, the constant fear of arrest added an unrelenting stress.[[106]](#footnote-105) Volunteers desired the rush of making change immediately. They had not come to Mississippi to stuff envelopes.

After a few days in Mississippi, he “met SNCC.” That evening, while assembling campaign folders, Aaron Henry, accompanied by Bob Moses, walked into the Hattiesburg office for a radio broadcast. The volunteer concluded that the workers “ceased to be a separate unit doing individual busy work” and gained a directed enthusiasm for the campaign. The celebrity of Henry, the gubernatorial candidate, and Moses, the mythic organizer, transformed the energies of volunteers. When Al Lowenstein appeared in the office another evening, he brought with him “excited momentum.” One volunteer suggested they put aside their collating tasks and channel their newfound energy into a night time canvassing campaign. More seasoned COFO workers counseled against canvassing after dark but ultimately relented to the pleading of the volunteers. Their hubris ignored the practical considerations essential to running a bi-racial campaign in Mississippi. These were stories, however, that could be re-told in Yale and Stanford dorm rooms upon their return.[[107]](#footnote-106)

The volunteer’s stay in Mississippi had complicated his feelings about the movement. There existed a fine line between serving a community and disturbing the delicate balance black Mississippians and their advocates maintained for day to day survival. This caution often confused volunteers who witnessed “a crying need for manpower” and bristled at their tedious assignments. Meeting Bob Moses and Aaron Henry enthused the volunteer, but he also felt underused. Before his arrival, the volunteer had idealized “a group of oppressed people merely waiting for the time and means and direction to act.” Following his weeklong stay in Mississippi, his feelings were tempered by the “human aspirations” of local people and organizers that stood “along-side humanistic feelings.” He conceded that while “ambition” and “selfishness” did not motivate all of the civil rights workers, he suspected that some organizers “aspire[d] to be ‘Messiahs’ and leaders.” This he noted just as he returned home “to catch the Fall and football games and college work.”[[108]](#footnote-107)

Before the Freedom Vote, the term “mass meeting” had been a misnomer as gatherings remained small. Many ministers had refused to open their churches to the movement. In Hattiesburg, momentum shifted on the evening of 29 October 1963, just two days before voting was to begin. Flyers advertised a rally for the Aaron Henry campaign for governor. The *Hattiesburg American*, the area’s white newspaper, reported that two hundred black residents and six or seven white Yale students attended the campaign rally at the Masonic Temple on Mobile Street. White residents of Hattiesburg “for the main part, ignored it.” This event, however, was not for them. The newspaper noted that a “hundred or more Negroes stood outside in the street watching the lighted windows and listening to the speeches and the singing and stomping and clapping.” Despite the enthusiasm of participants, the event did not lack tension. The city’s leadership worried about crowd control. Police patrol cars waited in the street in case officers needed to “preserve order.” Firefighters stood by “in case the single exit upstairs room should catch fire.” Sirens, the paper reported, were “sounded frequently,” and “one heard the barking of trained police dogs in the cars in the street.” City leaders deemed the precautions necessary. [[109]](#footnote-108)

Organizers too enjoyed the drama of the evening. They counted eight hundred of Hattiesburg’s black residents crowded onto Mobile Street and into the Masonic Temple. Lawrence Guyot, who served as the lead organizer in the area, described the event as “beautifully set.” Fire trucks crowded the street. Police stood by in anticipation. Local journalists covered the rally, and Henry supporters overflowed into the street. Local activist Johnnie Mae Walker estimated that as many people stood outside the building as fit inside of it. Gubernatorial candidate Aaron Henry “gave a rousing speech,” according to Guyot.[[110]](#footnote-109) On this day, black Hattiesburg felt free to assemble, enjoy themselves, and stand in the face of their white neighbors, employers, and law enforcement. A few days later, most would cast ballots for the first time.

The Freedom Vote made political action accessible to a huge number of black Mississippians for the first time since Reconstruction. The candidacies of R.L.T. Smith and Merrill Lindsey had been limited to two congressional districts with only the state’s small number of black registered voters participating. With the Freedom Vote, the unregistered voted. Local people had learned about the vote through radio and church announcements, campaign materials posted in their communities, and regular canvassing by full time civil rights workers. Rust College student and SNCC organizer Leslie Burl McLemore returned to his community in northern DeSoto County for the election. Assisted by a Stanford student, he had traveled door to door, informing black residents of the upcoming election. During the Freedom Vote, they set up a ballot box at the end of an alley and waited for voters.[[111]](#footnote-110)

The disenfranchised voted. Beginning October 31 and ending on November 2, black Mississippians cast freedom ballots at Baptist churches and beauty salons, cafes and auto repair shops, grocery stores and funeral homes. The voters were black men and women, rural and urban, all Mississippians. Most were unregistered. Organizers drove rural voters to the polls. Polling sites were deliberately placed in neutral locations. Fifty thousand ballots were disseminated to voters in more dangerous parts of the state. To protect the identity of those voters, the ballots were sent back unsigned. Each voter chose between Aaron Henry, Democrat Paul B. Johnson, and, for the first time in many elections, a Republican, Rubel Phillips. Theirs was a protest vote, disparaged by *Newsweek* as a “Make-Believe Vote.” Their participation demonstrated that, if given the opportunity, black Mississippians would vote, and their numbers could, potentially, influence elections.[[112]](#footnote-111)

For many future black political leaders, the Freedom Vote served as their first experience with formal political action. Annie Devine, a Freedom Democratic candidate for United States Congress in 1964, did not officially canvas for the Aaron Henry campaign. “We weren’t organized then” in Madison County she explained, “but we worked for him.” While Devine sold insurance in the black community of Canton, she carried insurance policies as well as campaign materials in her bag. “As I went from door to door,” remarked Devine, “I told people about the freedom registration and got votes for him.”[[113]](#footnote-112) Similarly Robert Clark, who would become the first black legislator since Reconstruction, was not actively involved with the Civil Rights Movement when he participated in the Freedom Vote. One of his students brought freedom ballots to school. In order to avoid suspension, she exercised great caution. She hid the ballots, sharing them only with those she suspected to be sympathetic to the Freedom Vote. Robert Clark marked one of her ballots. Years later, he remembered proudly, “First time I voted, I voted in the freedom election.”[[114]](#footnote-113)

After the three days of voting ended, Henry supporters were invited to the Masonic Temple for a victory rally and vote counting party. Flyers advertised entertainment, refreshments, and big band music. Aaron Henry and Ed King were joined by other movement luminaries: James Forman and John Lewis of SNCC; Myrlie Evers, the wife of recently slain activist Medgar Evers; Bob Gore of CORE; and SCLC organizer James Bevel.[[115]](#footnote-114) While organizers had hoped to tally two hundred thousand votes for the freedom candidates, Aaron Henry and Reverend Edwin King, eighty thousand Mississippians voted in the oppositional election which, according to Henry “they knew they could not win.”[[116]](#footnote-115) Because in Mississippi write-in votes invalidated a ballot unless one of the official candidates died before the election, no exact count could be determined for official votes cast for the Henry/King ticket in the general election. In Clarksdale, Henry’s hometown, it was rumored that election officials tallied nearly six hundred votes for Henry and King. Henry recalled that after the initial announcement “then there were no more reports.”[[117]](#footnote-116) In the general election, Paul Johnson had triumphed, but Republican challenger Rubel Philips garnered just under forty percent of the vote. Aaron Henry emerged as the overwhelming choice of freedom voters.[[118]](#footnote-117)

Organizers, candidates, and supporters disagreed over the success of the campaign. All agreed that the Freedom Vote altered the political climate in Mississippi. Ed King was excited that COFO had organized in new areas during the election. He contended that votes were cast in all of Mississippi’s eight two counties.[[119]](#footnote-118) Allard Lowenstein tempered attempts to inflate the success of the campaign and countered that it “really wasn’t run in an awful lot of counties.”[[120]](#footnote-119) Bob Moses acknowledged that in some areas only a handful of votes were cast, but he was overwhelmed with the symbolic power of black Mississippians voting. “The message of freedom,” he assured supporters, “has now been heard in every part of Mississippi because you took it there.” He insisted that in towns where only a few votes had been cast “the whisper of freedom” had begun to spread. He concluded that “history was being made” with the Freedom Vote.[[121]](#footnote-120) Lawrence Guyot agreed. “This election,” he boasted, “has accomplished the purpose we have set out to achieve. We now have a local grass roots political organization throughout the state of Mississippi.”[[122]](#footnote-121)

Black freedom voters and white registered voters demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the Mississippi Democratic Party in 1963. Thirty eight percent of registered voters had selected Republican Rubel Phillips over Democrat Paul Johnson. Black Mississippians had registered their desire to participate in the political process. While less than five thousand voters had cast ballots for R.L.T. Smith and Merrill Lindsey a year and a half earlier, in the Freedom Vote, eighty thousand black Mississippians recorded a political choice. Many voted for the first time.

At the March on Washington in August 1963, John Lewis had laid bare the inconsistencies of the Democratic Party, reminding demonstrators that “the party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland.” He asked the quarter of a million people assembled on the national mall, “Where is our party?”[[123]](#footnote-122) Less than a year after Lewis’ address and six months after the Freedom Vote, black Mississippians launched an alternative to the all white Mississippi Democratic Party. The new party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), evolved organically from the Aaron Henry and Edwin King candidacies. The Freedom Vote cemented the Mississippi movement’s focus on political action. Unable to participate in the Mississippi Democratic Party, civil rights organizers desired to introduce black Mississippians to “some form of political activity.”[[124]](#footnote-123)

Following the Freedom Vote, organizers returned to the communities they had mobilized for the election and observed a new level of enthusiasm for the freedom movement. In Sunflower County a rally was held in early January. Black protestors gathered at the county courthouse and made claims to public space with newfound confidence. An organizer led the protesters as he carried an American flag and announced brazenly that the flag and the courthouse belonged to all of Sunflower County’s citizens. Demonstrators sat lazily on the courthouse steps “as if they were at a picnic.” Although the protestors were “all prepared to go to jail,” the police exercised restraint and made no arrests. Black restaurateurs passed out free sandwiches. As the day ended, two hundred and fifty people stood picketing outside the courthouse. They sang freedom songs and shouted “Uhuru,” the Swahili word for “freedom.”[[125]](#footnote-124)

Following the rally in Indianola, Freedom Days were held regularly around the state. In addition to canvassing communities and chaperoning small groups of voter applicants to register, organizers mobilized large numbers of black residents to demonstrate at county courthouses. In late January, Lawrence Guyot and others in Hattiesburg organized a Freedom Day to continue the local momentum of the Freedom Vote. Leaders from across the state joined the local action. Aaron Henry came from Clarksdale. Fannie Lou Hamer traveled from her home in Ruleville. Amzie Moore came from Cleveland. Annie Devine visited from Canton. Charles Evers joined the event. National civil rights figures also attended. SNCC leaders James Forman and John Lewis flew in from Atlanta. Robert Stone of the National Council of Churches brought ministers from across the nation to the demonstration. Following the success of the Hattiesburg event, a Freedom Day was held in Canton a month later. In March, Greenwood organizers staged another Freedom Day. With no concrete organizing goal, the monthly Freedom Days emerged as the “sharpest” programmatic focus to come out of the freedom election, according to SNCC organizer Mendy Samstein.[[126]](#footnote-125)

Statewide COFO meetings, like that in which participants had decided to run Aaron Henry for governor, also continued into the Spring. Local organizations continued to send representatives to the monthly meetings. At these gatherings, local leaders discussed program planning, interacted with full time civil rights workers, and began to view themselves as a united statewide network. It was in these meetings that local leaders “got some identity” as members of a Mississippi movement, explained Bob Moses. In April, the meeting took on a new form. Rather than COFO, for the first time, it “was called the FDP,” remembered Samstein.[[127]](#footnote-126)

On 26 April, two hundred local leaders from across Mississippi met in Jackson for the monthly statewide COFO meeting. On this occasion, they formally established the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Mendy Samstein described the April meeting as “partly a workshop, partly a convention.” Aaron Henry chaired the proceedings. Then participants broke into precinct groupings, and a fifteen member temporary executive committee was elected. The new governing body included three representatives from each congressional district. Those assembled chose Lawrence Guyot, over Aaron Henry and Leslie Burl McLemore, to serve as the MFDP’s first chair. They then drafted a platform and principles for the newly named oppositional political party.[[128]](#footnote-127)

Lawrence Guyot was a SNCC field secretary and political science student at Tougaloo College. His family had experienced relative privilege along the state’s Gulf Coast, where the black population was small and the economy did not rely on black labor. He joined SNCC as COFO prepared for the Freedom Vote and quickly became a lead organizer for Aaron Henry in Hattiesburg. Following the election, Guyot had proven himself as a key strategist in planning the Hattiesburg Freedom Day. The older dissenters who he had worked with propelled him into a more prominent position at the April meeting. Guyot acknowledged that he was elected chair because he had the support of Victoria Jackson Gray and Peggy Jean Connor, both of Hattiesburg, and Annie Devine. “They know me,” explained Guyot, “because I worked for them.” Displaying a bit of the bravado that would upset some fellow organizers in the later years of the movement, Guyot exclaimed, “I beat out Aaron Henry.”[[129]](#footnote-128) At the same time, overwhelmed and humbled by his nomination and selection as chair, he admitted, “. . . I’ll never forget that.”[[130]](#footnote-129) Guyot’s selection over Henry ensured that the new party would maintain strong ties to the youth movement.

At the April meeting, Freedom Democrats also drafted a statement of platform and principles. It positioned the MFDP within the region’s Christian heritage and endorsed the National Democratic Party. The statement began, “With all humility we ask the guidance of Almighty God in these difficult times.” It applauded the 1960 Democratic Party platform and endorsed the ideals “embodied” in the recently passed Civil Rights Act. It supported collective bargaining and the Supreme Court’s school desegregation mandate. The new party pledged to work toward equal opportunity in employment and impartial voter registration. The MFDP endorsed the Kennedy administration’s work on civil rights and placed itself squarely within the rhetoric of the nation’s democratic promise.[[131]](#footnote-130)

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, led by Lawrence Guyot, emerged as an indigenous answer to black disenfranchisement in Mississippi. It developed organically, descending from R.L.T. Smith’s campaign, COFO, and the Freedom Vote. Asked to speak directly to the creation of the MFDP, Mendy Samstein contended, “I don’t think there should be too much emphasis on the actual name FDP.” For Samstein, the MFDP, unnamed in Fall 1963, was the body that recruited Aaron Henry to run for governor. “The fact that somebody slapped four little letters in to it in April,” insisted Samstein, “is just a relatively unimportant thing I think.”[[132]](#footnote-131) Madison County dissident Annie Devine agreed that the MFDP was merely a new appellation for the ongoing political organizing in Mississippi. Initially in Madison County, organizing was channeled through “the COFO group until the Freedom Democratic Party was organized,” Devine explained her sense of civil rights organizing in her community.[[133]](#footnote-132) One replaced the other in the minds of community organizers. Naming was less important.

The primary difference between COFO and the MFDP was structural. COFO had served as a coalition of national organizations working on voter registration in Mississippi. With the naming of the MFDP, black Mississippians claimed membership in a statewide oppositional political party. Before, local people, through their membership in a civic league or a local NAACP chapter, received funding from COFO to increase the number of black registered voters. In April 1964, black Mississippians began to develop county chapters of the MFDP. Freedom Democrats would not only register voters, but they also would run freedom candidates in mock and official elections and challenge the exclusionary practices of the all white Mississippi Democratic Party. During the next few months, the MFDP would position itself as the primary vehicle through which black Mississippians could practice political participation. The MFDP would demand inclusion into the political process and present itself as an alternative to the Mississippi Democratic Party.

**Chapter 2: A Political Becoming**

Lawrence Guyot, the newly named chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, telephoned Charles McLaurin at Amzie Moore’s house and instructed him to pick up Fannie Lou Hamer the next morning. She was going to run as a freedom candidate against Representative Jamie Whitten in the Democratic primary to represent the second congressional district in the United States House of Representatives, and Guyot needed her. This human chain that linked Moore to McLaurin and Guyot and then to Hamer, apparent by the Spring of 1964, embodied the important networking that had developed over the previous two years. Guyot and McLaurin were both college age Mississippians who had joined the formal Movement upon their introduction to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Prior to SNCC’s arrival in Mississippi and its successful organizing of students and young adults, it was unlikely that Amzie Moore, an independent business owner, and Fannie Lou Hamer, an agricultural worker, would have found themselves in the same company.

McLaurin and Guyot linked these two movement icons. Fannie Lou Hamer had spent her life on the plantation. She had little formal schooling, but when she was introduced to SNCC in 1962, Hamer had risen to the position of “trust and honor” in her community, according to Lawrence Guyot, working as a timekeeper on the Marlowe plantation.[[134]](#footnote-133) She supervised cotton pickers and choppers and served as a liaison between black workers and their planter boss.[[135]](#footnote-134) While Charles McLaurin had initially dismissed Amzie Moore as “One of them what we call old middle-class Negroes,” McLaurin and the other young civil rights workers quickly learned of Moore’s long commitment to resisting Mississippi’s segregationist state.[[136]](#footnote-135) Moore, a World War II veteran and longtime NAACP member, owned a service station where he refused to place “white” and “colored” signs above the restroom doors.[[137]](#footnote-136) Since returning from the war, he had worked amid a semi-underground network of veterans and financially independent business owners like himself, individuals he termed “morale boosters.”[[138]](#footnote-137) Together they had erected a framework in which a larger freedom movement could take seed. Through their quiet and steady organizing in the postwar era, these men and women served as outposts in rural communities across the state.[[139]](#footnote-138)

When SNCC field secretary Bob Moses arrived in Mississippi in 1961, he recruited a cadre of Mississippi born college age resistors and connected them to Moore and his peers. These young freedom workers relied on the resources and information of older veterans and small business owners but focused their efforts on organizing a more diverse population, represented by agricultural workers like Fannie Lou Hamer. Generally one individual or a family would invite a SNCC field worker to help them organize in their community. These local people served as point people in the local effort to register black voters. They informed the young workers of local power relationships, introduced them to receptive members of the black community, and provided them with a place to stay and food to eat. Charles McLaurin and Lawrence Guyot, both members of this corps of young organizers, served as important intermediaries between economically protected black Mississippians like Moore and the landless poor represented by Hamer.[[140]](#footnote-139)

Guyot and McLaurin were both native Mississippians who had joined the SNCC effort as college students. They emerged, however, from two distinct black communities. Guyot had lived with his family on the Gulf Coast of the state before attending Tougaloo College, a private Methodist college just outside of Jackson. In his hometown of Pass Christian, racial violence was less common and there existed a history of black political participation. In fact, Guyot’s great uncle had long chaired the Republican Party in the county. Before meeting his classmates from the Delta, Guyot admitted he was not aware of the severely limited political and economic options facing the large population of black undereducated manual laborers in the northwest region of the state.[[141]](#footnote-140)

Charles McLaurin had been raised in the heart of Jackson’s black community. When he first learned of the civil rights organizing campaigns in the state, McLaurin was a student at the publicly funded Jackson State College. As a child, his mother moved the family from home to home within the limited confines of the center city. Despite the transience caused by poverty, McLaurin found stability in his extended family, describing his maternal grandmother’s steady defiance of white demands as particularly inspiring. When he was a child, McLaurin’s grandmother shared with him the stories of important black historical figures: Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and W.E.B. DuBois. She also regularly resisted the limits of segregation. In one instance, while running a café on the outskirts of Jackson, she had refused to post a “colored only” sign and served black, as well as white, road workers. On another occasion, faced with the overwhelming need to relieve herself in a building with restrooms marked “white,” she asked McLaurin to stand guard as she used the segregated facilities. In serving an integrated clientele and using bathrooms intended only for white patrons, McLaurin’s grandmother’s behavior set an example for defiance as she challenged the strictly segregated, yet sometimes permeable world, of Mississippi Jim Crow. Although McLaurin was raised amid economic instability in Jackson, like Guyot he was shocked when he learned of living conditions for black agricultural workers in the Delta.[[142]](#footnote-141) As Lawrence Guyot and Charles McLaurin entered adulthood, they learned that while their lives had been circumscribed by race, they had little experience with the extreme social and economic dependence that faced black Delta laborers.

Hamer and McLaurin first met in 1962. Two years later, they considered themselves a team. SNCC organizers had first sent McLaurin to find Fannie Lou Hamer when they learned that she had been evicted from her Ruleville home following an attempt to register to vote. McLaurin found her at the home of a friend and ferried her to the Tougaloo College campus where she was introduced to Bob Moses and the SNCC organization. When McLaurin arrived, Hamer appeared as if she had been waiting for him. “She told me the same thing at that time,” remarked McLaurin, “that she told me when I picked her up to be a candidate for Congress.” She instructed him to take a seat; she would be right with him. That first time, as they drove to the Tougaloo campus from the Delta, Hamer’s chatter filled the unfamiliar air between them. McLaurin listened while he drove. Two years later, as they traveled the same route, they both talked. No longer strangers, they served as important confidantes to one another.[[143]](#footnote-142)

Upon arriving in Jackson, Hamer and McLaurin entered the Secretary of State’s office, a room rarely visited by black Mississippians, and declared Hamer’s candidacy for the United States Congress. As they entered the room, the two, former farm worker and college student, now both fulltime movement organizers, were met with curious stares, ordered to fill out long forms, and then asked for a five hundred dollar check. “Mrs. Hamer,” McLaurin cautioned, “We can’t go through with this.” When he saw that the form asked for the name of her campaign manager, McLaurin went to phone Lawrence Guyot for guidance. “There’s no need to call him,” Hamer insisted. “The campaign manager is here.” McLaurin looked around and asked incredulously, “Where is he, Mrs. Hamer?” Laughing, she informed him, “You’re it.” While explaining that they would share the political journey of preparing for the June Democratic primary, Hamer admitted to McLaurin, “You know as much about being a campaign manager as I know about running for Congress.” [[144]](#footnote-143)

Fannie Lou Hamer’s candidacy arose in the congressional election cycle immediately following that in which R.L.T. Smith and Merrill Lindsey had run. The political landscape, still quite hostile, had changed dramatically over the course of the previous year and a half. Smith’s campaign had relied primarily on secret networks and word of mouth for publicity. In preparation for the 1964 Democratic primary races, the Civil Rights Movement ran candidates in three of the state’s five congressional districts and for one senate seat. They opened satellite offices, campaigned openly in black communities, and broadcast their messages through local media. In addition to Fannie Lou Hamer’s candidacy in the second congressional district, Victoria Jackson Gray, a Hattiesburg businesswoman, challenged the state’s junior senator, John Stennis. James Houston, a seventy four year old retired machinist and long time dissenter from Vicksburg, challenged Representative John Bell Williams in the third congressional district.[[145]](#footnote-144) Reverend John Campbell opposed Representative William Colmer in the fifth congressional district**.** [[146]](#footnote-145)

It is unclear whether civil rights organizers purposely selected a dissident ticket comprised of two male and two female candidates. While Freedom Democrat Annie Devine argued that women performed more public roles during the Civil Rights Movement because they experienced less retribution, prominent female activists placed themselves, their families, and supporters in jeopardy.[[147]](#footnote-146) Victoria Jackson Gray’s husband worked for the city of Hattiesburg. When he saw his son participating in a picket line on Freedom Day, he joined in the demonstration. The next day he was fired.[[148]](#footnote-147) Similarly, the day after Fannie Lou Hamer qualified to run for Congress, her husband was fired from his job at a cotton mill. As Hamer became more active in the freedom movement, the wife of her former employer sent word through an informal grapevine. She warned a friend of Hamer, “She thinks she’s a big woman now, but she’ll be killed.”[[149]](#footnote-148) SNCC organizer Mary King speculated that white Mississippians may have found Hamer’s candidacy even more threatening because she lacked formal schooling and had labored in agriculture. On one occasion, law enforcement officers harassed two COFO workers who were assisting on Hamer’s congressional campaign and charged, “You must be connected with that Fannie.” They proceeded to inform the civil rights organizers, “We don’t have any nigger politics in Ruleville.”[[150]](#footnote-149) Whether male or female, positioning oneself as the public face of the movement placed organizers and candidates, their families, and supporters at risk.

In late March, Fannie Lou Hamer kicked off her campaign for the United States Congress in her hometown of Ruleville.[[151]](#footnote-150) During the campaign Hamer and McLaurin, now candidate and campaign manager, stormed the Delta counties that encompassed the second congressional district. Not flush with funding for their oppositional campaign, the pair often bought a loaf of bread and a package of bologna for lunch. Hamer made sandwiches while McLaurin drove. They ate the sandwiches and sometimes shared a red pop as they headed to scheduled campaign appearances. At each stop, the MFDP provided Hamer and McLaurin with background on the local community, its leadership and organizing history, and supplied them with printed literature to distribute. Hamer spoke, and sometimes McLaurin also addressed those assembled. They then passed the plate, collecting ten, fifteen, twenty dollars to supplement the campaign war chest. Hamer and McLaurin held onto the cash. It would buy gas and more bologna sandwiches and red pop. They reported the donations along with a list of contact names to the Jackson MFDP office. Each stop created the opportunity to introduce new community members to the Movement and provide rudimentary tutoring in the political process.[[152]](#footnote-151)

As Hamer presented herself as a candidate at political meetings throughout the second congressional district, McLaurin identified an important distinction between them. The MFDP office provided the team with canned speeches that encouraged Hamer to move beyond the personal experiences and biblical references she relied on as the basis for her stump speeches. Although Hamer read over the campaign materials Lawrence Guyot sent to her from the central office in Jackson, she did not read from them. “By the time it’s over,” McLaurin remembered, “it’s balled up in her hand or on the podium.” “It was in her,” remarked McLaurin, countering, “It wasn’t in me.” Hamer had little formal schooling, and McLaurin had attended Jackson State College. Despite his academic experience, McLaurin could not fathom speaking to an audience “without back up.” He described his delivery as “strong as anything I had in my pocket or in my hand.” Conversely, he watched in admiration as Hamer spoke from her heart and her faith. “Her back up,” McLaurin learned, “was God,” making it unshakable.[[153]](#footnote-152) SNCC office manager Jane Stembridge concurred with McLaurin’s assessment. She contended that Hamer’s presentations were so compelling because she “knows *she is good*.”[[154]](#footnote-153)

Hamer’s gift was in her ability to share her story of lifelong labor, movement transformation, and divine faith in the possibility for change, not in presenting a nuanced critique of the Delta’s economic structure or the Mississippi Democratic Party’s stranglehold on the political process. Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Yale law student when she worked with the MFDP, described Hamer as an “unbelievable brilliant orator and conceptualizer,” who was able to “put her finger on something” that others “had felt but she had said.”[[155]](#footnote-154) Those in the audience knew Hamer’s experience of sharecropping and violence, poverty and resourcefulness, hope and failure. They listened to her story, which mirrored aspects of their own, and then signed freedom registration forms, promised to travel to the courthouse and register or share with their friends and neighbors what they had learned about the new political movement crossing the state.[[156]](#footnote-155)

Victoria Jackson Gray, who challenged John Stennis’ Senate seat, was a more formally educated candidate than Fannie Lou Hamer. While Delta fieldworkers saw a bit of themselves and their daily struggles reflected in Hamer, Gray served as an example of someone potential black voters could fantasize about becoming. For black Mississippians, denied education and opportunity, Gray offered the possibility of middle class inclusion. Gray had spent one year of her youth in Detroit and attended Wilberforce University in Ohio. As an army wife, she had lived in various parts of the United States and outside of the country. Within her Palmer’s Crossing community, she experienced relative mobility as an independent business owner.[[157]](#footnote-156) L.C. Dorsey, a young mother and displaced farm worker from the Delta, recalled her first impression of Gray. “I didn’t even ever think I could aspire to be like her,” admitted Dorsey, who later earned a Ph.D. in social work. “She was everything that you wanted to be. She was very attractive, she was articulate, and she just seemed like she had so much life about her.”[[158]](#footnote-157) A purveyor of beauty products, she carried herself with the air of a pageant queen.[[159]](#footnote-158) Young women stood in awe of her, and young men dreamed of dating someone like “Miss Vicky Gray.”[[160]](#footnote-159)

Unlike Fannie Lou Hamer, who because of her limited access to information and human networks had been absent from the previous decade’s formal organizing, Victoria Jackson Gray, a formally educated entrepreneur, participated in local empowerment efforts before SNCC organizers arrived in the Hattiesburg area. Gray conducted Southern Christian Leadership Conference citizenship classes in addition to participating actively in the Methodist Church. Gray’s business shielded her from economic reprisals and prepared a number of black women for economic opportunities beyond the limited scope of domestic and day labor. When she eventually left her career as a businesswoman to work in the Movement full time, Gray transferred her enterprise to her former employees.[[161]](#footnote-160)

Earlier in her career, Victoria Jackson Gray had worked as a schoolteacher in the segregated schools in Palmer’s Crossing. When Gray began instructing her students in Negro history, school officials threatened her with dismissal. “So she walked out of the classroom and hasn’t been back yet,” remarked Sandy Leigh, the SNCC field director in Hattiesburg, with obvious awe. Whether legend or fact, the story served as part of the myth of Victoria Jackson Gray. Leigh concluded the story as it had been passed down to him through community lore, “Didn’t pick up her paycheck even.”[[162]](#footnote-161) Uncomfortable with this larger than life rendering, Gray characterized the same incident with a more general statement that she always left situations when they became “unacceptable or intolerable.”[[163]](#footnote-162)

Victoria Jackson Gray’s grandfather had instilled in the family the imperative of maintaining economic self sufficiency. He would counsel the family, “Don’t work out,” serving as domestics or yard laborers. But it was not until Gray became an active freedom worker that she fully comprehended his insistent counsel for economic independence. When SNCC’s field secretaries began organizing in Hattiesburg, Gray had already carved out an important business niche in the black community and lived on land owned by her family. As the supplier of cosmetics to black women, she escaped many of the controls white Mississippians exercised over the state’s black residents. Just before the movement came to Hattiesburg, however, Gray had sought a loan from a local bank in order to expand her business. While the banker conceded that Gray had formulated a solid business plan, he urged her to save the money over time rather than secure a loan. The white business community limited her opportunities for economic advancement. Despite such examples of obstructionism, Gray argued that white resistors, aside from burning down her home, had little recourse for retaliation against her economic success and civil rights activities.[[164]](#footnote-163)

Victoria Jackson Gray had wholly embraced the youth Movement when it first entered the Hattiesburg area, but she exercised a bit more hesitancy when she was later approached about becoming a political candidate. When two of SNCC’s young field secretaries, Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins, both reared in southwest Mississippi, ventured into Hattiesburg in 1962, local people sent the two young men to Vicky Gray, a self-described “misfit.”[[165]](#footnote-164) Gray immediately introduced them to her church leadership and connected them to sympathetic community members. Two years later, when movement organizers suggested that Gray challenge John Stennis’ Senate seat, her first response was “Of course not.” She reconsidered, and like R.L.T. Smith before her, answered, “Why not?”[[166]](#footnote-165) Despite her initial uncertainty, Gray recognized that the struggle to attain black political rights would require a few individuals to publicly present themselves as candidates and run for political office.

To avoid the obstructionist tactics of state officials, Gray waited until just before the official deadline to file her paperwork. Matt Suarez, a young CORE staff member working in the COFO coalition, assisted Gray with her campaign in the same manner that Charles McLaurin supported Fannie Lou Hamer. Gray and Suarez traveled throughout the state making public appearances and establishing satellite campaign offices. At a campaign stop in Jackson, Gray addressed supporters at the Farish Street Baptist Church. She urged them to register to vote, asked that they halt demonstrations during the campaign, and shared her desire to run campaign advertisements on local television stations. Former candidate R.L.T. Smith responded with a pledge of twenty five dollars, and Charles Evers endorsed the campaign.[[167]](#footnote-166)

Despite an earnest attempt at campaigning, Gray, Hamer, and the two other freedom candidates lost their bids to become the Democratic nominees in the general election. The number of black registered voters remained too small to influence the outcomes of elections. In the June primary, Gray polled 4,703 votes in contrast to the 173,774 votes received by her opponent, incumbent Senator John Stennis. Just over six hundred Delta voters selected Fannie Lou Hamer when presented with the choice between Hamer and Representative Jamie Whitten in the second congressional district contest. James Houston and Reverend John Cameron lost with similar margins in the third and fifth congressional districts.[[168]](#footnote-167) Despite the lopsided electoral returns, the newly launched Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, by running candidates in the Democratic Party, argued that it had embarked on “a very real effort to work within the framework of the Democratic Party.”[[169]](#footnote-168) Gray, Hamer, Houston, and Cameron had waged a public campaign against black disenfranchisement. Although black voters remained unregistered, black candidates had formally challenged white incumbents in nearly all of the year’s major electoral races.

After many internal discussions, the Council of Federated Organizations decided to invite volunteers to work in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. Popularly remembered as Freedom Summer, nearly one thousand northern college students, teachers, health workers, and ministers volunteered to work with the COFO sponsored summer project. Building upon the experience with Yale students in the Freedom Vote, the volunteers, the vast majority of whom were white, would assist local people and full time movement organizers in registering black voters, establishing freedom schools, and implanting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party throughout the state. The summer project, which would include establishing precinct, county, and state conventions to parallel those administered by the Mississippi Democratic Party, would culminate in a pilgrimage to the national Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. At the convention, the MFDP would make claim to the seats held by the all white state’s rights delegation, historically recognized by the national Democratic Party. The presence of nearly one thousand white middle class volunteers would provide the necessary human labor to complete the summer long task as well as draw national and international media attention to the disenfranchisement of black Mississippians.

Many white Mississippians came to describe the summer project as a northern “invasion” and expressed either little interest or outright hostility.[[170]](#footnote-169) A month after COFO announced its plans, Mississippi lawmakers passed a number of new laws aimed at limiting the effectiveness of the summer project. The legislature outlawed boycotts, forbid the picketing of public buildings, authorized the hiring of more law enforcement officers, and prohibited the establishment of freedom schools.[[171]](#footnote-170) Mississippi Secretary of State Hebert Ladner also initiated a lawsuit against the MFDP. He argued that only one political party, the Mississippi Democratic Party, could use “Democrat” in its name.[[172]](#footnote-171)Bob Moses remarked on the lack of “curiosity” white Mississippians expressed about the summer project, testifying to the pervasiveness of what University of Mississippi history professor James Silver termed “the closed society.” During the summer, Moses recalled that only one white Mississippian asked to meet and talk with him about COFO and the MFDP.[[173]](#footnote-172)

While state lawmakers and law enforcement prepared to derail the summer project, COFO organizers began the process of establishing name recognition for the new party within the state’s black communities. Following the Freedom Vote, local people had spoken loosely of a freedom party. With the advent of the MFDP, it became important to import the name “Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party” into the state’s black communities. One summer volunteer recalled his method for publicizing the MFDP in Hattiesburg. One day he posted the letter “M.” A week later, he placed an “F.” Each week, he prominently displayed a new letter. Finally, he posted “MFDP,” followed shortly by “Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.”[[174]](#footnote-173) Although local excitement following the Freedom Vote had energized organizers to think about naming a formal oppositional party, the generally termed “freedom party” had to be replaced with the nomenclature of the new body: the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

The MFDP published written tracts, which utilized simple language to address the very real concerns of black Mississippians who lacked the most basic levels of political education. First, the freedom party characterized itself as a political party that “welcomes everybody” while advocating for the broadly defined “Freedom of the Negro people.” The literature then outlined the more immediate and specific goal of the new party: the summer long process of developing a biracial alternative to the Mississippi Democratic Party. The new institution prepared to challenge the seating of the Mississippi Regulars, members of the all white Mississippi Democratic Party, at what the MFDP termed for its supporters the national “meeting” of the Democratic Party, the Democratic National Convention to be held in Atlantic City, New Jersey. [[175]](#footnote-174)

In concert with local organizers, summer volunteers canvassed communities, encouraging voter registration. Freedom Democrat Winson Hudson theorized that in order to organize a community “you got to have one somebody.” “And then that one somebody,” she explained, “got to get them three other somebodies.”[[176]](#footnote-175) Early and outspoken resistors served as block captains, overseeing the local organizing campaigns and encouraging their more hesitant neighbors to participate in the new political party. Young volunteers assisted the block captains in recruiting new participants.[[177]](#footnote-176) Local FDP leaders urged their neighbors to attend political meetings and movement run freedom schools.[[178]](#footnote-177) Local people, however, continued to fear the registration process because of its unfamiliarity, the bias of the registrar, and the possibility of retribution. In COFO sponsored Freedom Schools, summer volunteers attempted to counter the fears of local people through role playing and practice with the registration form.[[179]](#footnote-178)

With most black Mississippians unregistered, the MFDP also encouraged unofficial freedom registration. These simple forms required only that the registrant live in Mississippi and be at least twenty one years old. William Simpson, the founder of the Citizens Council, disparaged the freedom registration, arguing that “the objective of this student invasion was to eliminate all qualifications.”[[180]](#footnote-179) Civil rights organizers responded to critics, both within and outside the movement, that in lessoning the requirements for voting more people would become acquainted with the political process. Despite the elimination of many of the hurdles imbedded in the official application, encouraging registration, even for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, remained difficult. One woman, who had made nine unsuccessful attempts to register over three years, broke down in tears upon being approached by volunteers. Another summer volunteer commented that many local people grew “instinctively apprehensive of the word ‘registration’”[[181]](#footnote-180) Madison County Freedom Democrat Annie Devine noted that the basic goal for the summer, rather than to substantially increase the number of official or freedom registrants, was to get local people “ready to want to vote.”[[182]](#footnote-181)

With a summer goal of registering 100,000 Mississippians in the freedom party, one volunteer noted in a letter home that “scarcely half” that amount of registration forms had been turned into the Jackson office as the summer project neared an end.[[183]](#footnote-182) The summer project had been slow to get up and running, and local projects had focused on a number of initiatives in addition to freedom registrations. As the summer came to a close, all of the movement resources were refocused on the Atlantic City challenge. Canvassers registered local people in the freedom party, and organizers prepared registered voters to attend Mississippi Democratic Party sponsored precinct meetings.

The all white Mississippi Democratic Party scheduled its precinct meetings for 16 June 1964. The MFDP organized groups of black registered voters to attend these meetings. If allowed to participate, they would attempt to nominate black delegates and urge those assembled to vote on a loyalty resolution. The oath they planned to present had been authored in 1952, four years after the Dixiecrats, members of the Southern wing of the Democratic Party, walked out of the 1948 Democratic Convention in protest of the inclusion of a civil rights plank in the national party platform. Expecting little success in gaining the selection of black delegates at the official precinct meetings, the MFDP planned its own precinct, county, and district meetings to parallel those administered by the MDP.

Local political organizing – volunteer canvassing, community meetings, and freedom registrations -- would culminate in August at the MFDP’s inaugural state convention in Jackson. At each preliminary meeting, participants would choose representatives to travel to the next convention, eventually selecting sixty six delegates, augmented by a national committeeman and committeewoman, to travel to Atlantic City and challenge the seating of the state’s all white delegation. Additionally, an office in Washington, DC was established to assist with the challenge. The MFDP had just over two months to develop local organizations and create the necessary infrastructure for its bid to supplant the Mississippi Regulars at the Democratic Convention.[[184]](#footnote-183)

R.L.T. Smith, accompanied by other black registered voters, arrived at the Greyhound bus station in Jackson, where a Democratic Party precinct meeting was scheduled to be held. Determined to participate in the precinct meeting that would send delegates to county Democratic meetings, the black voters at this Jackson precinct remarked that they received “no particular reaction from whites” upon their arrival. As the meeting came to order, the chairperson announced that as a time saving strategy he had privately selected three people to serve as delegates. Smith asked that the nomination process be opened up to discussion. His request upset the normal workings of the meeting, and the atmosphere grew “noisy” as white voters debated among themselves how to proceed. Freedom Democrats described the chair as “arbitrary in his respect.” When Smith began to assert himself and push for black representation among the delegates, the chair turned to him and asked familiarly, “What’s on your mind, R.L.?” In the end, the chair permitted the black voters to nominate one delegate for consideration. The nomination was more symbolic than effectual. The white participants who maintained a numerical majority proceeded to vote for the preselected white delegates.[[185]](#footnote-184)

Before the meeting disbanded, Smith again attempted to grab the attention of the group. He raised his voice above all the chatter and announced, “simply by talking louder than everybody else,” that he would like to first read and then vote on a resolution that would pledge loyalty to the National Democratic Party and its candidates. Smith managed to gain enough support from the white participants to allow for a reading of the resolution. The final vote, 24 to 6 to table the resolution, reflected the racial composition of the meeting, leading the precinct chair to conclude, “I suppose they all voted for it and we all voted against it.” Although Smith forced the MFDP’s issues into discussion, nominating one black delegate for consideration and insisting on a vote on the loyalty resolution, the eventual outcome departed little from traditional scripts, and he left the meeting “irate,” according to black voters who had accompanied him to the meeting.[[186]](#footnote-185)

Like R.L.T. Smith in Jackson, black Mississippians who had registered at their county courthouses attempted to attend the precinct meetings administered by the state Democratic Party in their communities. The MFDP described these meetings, scheduled to be held across the state at 10 a.m. on 16 June 1964, as a “microcosm” of how black Mississippians were historically excluded from the political process. Many locations did not hold formal meetings. If the number of black voters rivaled that of white voters, “the white people invariably turned to trickery and deceit,” according to MFDP executive committee member Aaron Henry. In these instances, local Democratic Party leaders delayed meetings until white voters outnumbered black voters or announced that delegates had been chosen prior to the meeting. If their numbers did not threaten the outcome of the meeting, black Mississippians were allowed to participate. In the summer of 1964, some white Mississippians were willing to allow the illusion of black participation. In nearly all of the meetings that Freedom Democrats attended, however, black voters were denied active participation in the decision making process.[[187]](#footnote-186)

Each community chose whether to send black representatives to the regular precinct meetings or plan for shadow meetings. In areas that held a significant number of black registered voters and the possibility of a less hostile white community, black voters attended the Democratic Party precinct meetings.[[188]](#footnote-187) At one Jackson precinct meeting, black voters outnumbered white voters. Together they decided to elect one black and one white delegate to share representation of the precinct’s one vote. The black voters in attendance, however, did not attempt to introduce the loyalty resolution because they feared it might be perceived as “impolite.”[[189]](#footnote-188) In Greenville, biracial meetings selected integrated delegations, and one precinct accepted the loyalty resolution. Freedom Democrats warned observers who might be swayed by the moderation of Greenville that the city was as “representative of Mississippi in regard to race relations as a rose in a weed patch.”[[190]](#footnote-189) While the receptivity of some white residents of Jackson and Greenville to measured black political participation serves as an important reminder that blanket descriptions of white racism require nuanced readings, black voters exercised very little actual political power in Democratic Party sponsored precinct meetings across the state.

More commonly, black participants faced resistance. Precinct meeting locations were kept quiet. Black voters complained that they had not tried to participate in precinct meetings before because they had not heard of them. When they did attend, however, black voters learned that the system was “very lax.” Delegates were selected informally, and few people participated in the meetings. At one Clarksdale precinct, the temporary chair quickly gathered the white voters under a tree. He informed them that he had already selected a secretary and delegate and wished them on their way concluding, “That’s all folks. See you in four years.” In Hattiesburg, the local Democratic chair refused to initiate a vote on the loyalty resolution because he determined “that it was not of a local nature,” a term regularly employed to describe any initiative that did not emerge directly from the county or municipality.[[191]](#footnote-190) In another precinct, a white banker declared, “I will not stay where there are Negroes.” The black voters were then asked to leave. Intimidated, they did. In Batesville, black voters initially outnumbered white voters. The chair waited until more white voters arrived before he began the meeting.[[192]](#footnote-191)

The sudden demand by black Mississippians to participate in what long had been informal political meetings among lifelong acquaintances increased tensions between black and white Mississippians. On numerous occasions, white voters locked the doors to meeting rooms, quickly disbanded, or changed locations. When faced with these situations, black voters, who had been prepared by their local FDP organizations, held their own meetings outside of the buildings where the official meetings had been scheduled to take place.[[193]](#footnote-192) In Neshoba County, where three civil rights workers would be murdered just days after the official precinct meetings were held across the state, one black resident submitted a sworn affidavit, insisting that it would be impossible to participate in precinct elections “without suffering great economic and physical harm.”[[194]](#footnote-193)

Unable to garner delegates in the official precinct elections, Freedom Democrats administered their own precinct, county, and district conventions in the middle of July. They attempted to print announcements for the public meetings in local newspapers as required by law. The Greenwood *Commonwealth* and Meridian *Star* refused to print the notices. One MFDP staffer in Greenwood relayed to the Jackson office that the *Commonwealth*’s general manager had responded in “go to hell terms” when local organizers submitted the advertisement.[[195]](#footnote-194) A radio station initially had agreed to air the MFDP’s meetings announcement but later determined that the notice might “incite a riot.”[[196]](#footnote-195) The Hattiesburg *American*, Sharkey County newspaper, Vicksburg *Evening Post*, *Delta Democrat Times*, Pascagoula *Chronicle*, and Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* all printed the public notices that described the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as a “Political Party for all Persons.”[[197]](#footnote-196) The decision made by some white newspaper owners illustrates the complex dance that took place between local custom and federal law. As movement organizers challenged century long disenfranchisement, they waged their battle according to federal regulations. Despite their opposition to black political participation, some white media outlets bowed to the force of law.

At parallel meetings, held at churches and auditoriums in black neighborhoods, rather than ad hoc on courthouse and school lawns as many had been when excluded from the all white meetings, the MFDP began the process of selecting a protest delegation to travel to Atlantic City. During the summer, the MFDP conducted workshops on how to facilitate precinct meetings, increased organizing efforts for freedom registrations, and ensured that the newly formed party and political apparatus felt like a “real organization.” In Vicksburg, excitement about the “New Thing” spread as the local FDP held mass meetings and block parties as part of its get out the vote effort. In Greenwood, the MFDP decorated a hall with political and campaign posters, and participants wore official badges. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at another Greenwood precinct.[[198]](#footnote-197) Despite the enthusiasm surrounding the meetings, the process of building a parallel political process, still required significant risk on the part of local people. One elderly Warren County resident who attended an FDP precinct meeting had a cross burned on his lawn, was struck on the head with a gun, and counseled not to participate in any future political meetings.[[199]](#footnote-198) Although white residents attempted to disrupt the alternative meetings, twenty six counties held precinct meetings and three thousand five hundred black Mississippians participated.[[200]](#footnote-199)

A week after the MFDP held its precinct meetings, thirty five counties held MFDP sponsored county conventions.[[201]](#footnote-200) In Moss Point, a volunteer described many who had never spoken publicly as giving the “greatest speeches.” In Greenville, Stokely Carmichael, a SNCC field secretary and former Howard University student, opened the Leflore County meeting. One participant, enthused by the energy of the meeting, exclaimed, “I’m whipped up in this like a mess, and I must say it’s the best mess that ever I saw in my life.”[[202]](#footnote-201) In Warren County, however, one summer worker noted that the Old Guard of black professionals dominated the meeting and “slyly siphoned off” the grassroots leadership that the MFDP had spent the summer cultivating. “We had forgotten,” he admitted, “that machinery is quickly formed even in something as new as the FDP and our defenses were down.”[[203]](#footnote-202) SNCC chair James Forman addressed the Warren County convention and cited his concern that class differences would distract the new party. Forman emphasized that while “Warren County Negroes” from Vicksburg experienced more economic and political opportunity than black farm workers in the Delta, they were “little better off than other Mississippi Negroes.”[[204]](#footnote-203) In his speech, Forman worked to forestall the diversification of the movement. At least until the MFDP delegates reached Atlantic City, they would remain united around general claims of access to the vote, a goal that could ally black professionals and agricultural laborers alike.

A week after the county conventions, delegates met at district conventions. The second district caucus met at an old theatre in the black community of Greenville. Unita Blackwell attended from rural Issaquena County, an overwhelmingly black Delta county where even the county seat remained unincorporated. When she was young, Blackwell’s father “spoke up” and was forced to flee the state, and her grandmother had always been a “reader,” setting an example for her own adult resistance and curiosity. Blackwell, however, had only recently joined the movement and had little organizational experience beyond her work as a Sunday school teacher. She knew, however, that her God “didn’t intend” for her to remain “under the feet of white people.”[[205]](#footnote-204) After witnessing COFO director Bob Moses confront a county sheriff, Blackwell had thought, “Well, I can,” but when Stokeley Carmichael encouraged her to call the second district convention to order, Blackwell shuddered. Despite training and modeling from the full-time civil rights workers, she lacked confidence in her organizational skills. “We didn’t know how to nominate,” she admitted years later. “We didn’t know how to do anything.” For Blackwell and her rural peers who were denied access to every institution aside from the local church, participation in the electoral process was as “brand new as a child recognizing that they can walk.”[[206]](#footnote-205)

Understanding the need to encourage active participation of local people unfamiliar and uncomfortable with exercising political power, Carmichael prodded Blackwell. “This meeting will come to order,” he whispered, and she repeated. Next he told her to hit on something. She did. Blackwell then announced to the fellow delegates why they were all there -- to elect representatives from the second congressional district to travel to the state convention in Jackson. Carmichael then assumed leadership of the meeting. Blackwell stepped away relieved, and Carmichael pursued the nascent organization’s predetermined agenda. While opponents may have described Carmichael’s prompts to Blackwell as manipulation, for Blackwell the experience of speaking before her peers in a public capacity was new, causing both fear and pride. “I just hadn’t even been before that many people trying to share something I had just learned about myself,” explained Blackwell.[[207]](#footnote-206) However, her bold, though perhaps shaky, step served to inspire others. Freedom Democrat L.C. Dorsey, in retrospect, laughed at Blackwell’s first attempt at political leadership and remarked, “I could see myself being Unita.”[[208]](#footnote-207)

Although Blackwell and other newly organized Mississippians expressed uncertainty with the political process, like a child recognizing the increased mobility in walking, rural delegates quickly picked up the political maneuvering inherent to delegate selection. In Greenville, at the second district meeting, one summer volunteer described participants who made speeches “in the interminable style of every candidate in history.” Freedom Democrats were drawn into “finicky disagreements” and were “furiously politicking” throughout the hall as they negotiated the final delegate selection. Another volunteer at the convention described participants “straight out of tarpaper shacks” wearing a “(borrowed) suit for the first time” and “disenfranchised for three generations, without a living memory of political power” immersed in the contentious process of delegate selection. Despite the political inexperience of the freedom registrants, the summer worker determined that the delegates chose the four “best people” to represent the second district at the state convention.[[209]](#footnote-208)

In the third district, rural workers, who had been politicized through their involvement with COFO, challenged the traditional leadership of Jackson’s black professionals. Freedom Democrats Edwin King and Emma Sanders described the formation of voting blocs. Delegates from rural counties crafted political deals. They lobbied their colleagues that “these persons are good workers and top workers – if you go for these then I’ll go for you.” Sanders argued that political practices, learned in church meetings or informal negotiating and sharpened in mass meetings, led to the selection of “the militant type” to represent the third district at the state convention.[[210]](#footnote-209) In contrast, one summer volunteer described the architects of the fourth district caucus as an “aware, sophisticated group.” Because the organizers, like Carmichael’s mentoring of Blackwell, saw the caucus as a “learning event,” the “extreme lack of sophistication on the part of the delegates was, for now, unimportant,” according to the volunteer.[[211]](#footnote-210) Following the district conventions, all of the selected delegates traveled to Jackson for the MFDP state convention.

The state convention bore little resemblance to what they would encounter in Atlantic City. Organizers carefully choreographed an event that celebrated participation in the parallel process while also replicating rituals of a traditional political convention. While the event’s planners had draped the Masonic Hall in red, white, and blue crepe paper, they had also affixed posters from the freedom movement to the walls. Folding chairs were placed beneath handmade signs announcing the name of each Mississippi county. While in the past Amite, Sunflower, and Tallahatchie Counties had evoked painful memories of “where this one was shot, where this one was beaten, where civil rights workers feared for their lives the minute they arrived,” one summer volunteer noted that at the state convention, the posting of these county names “meant people are voting from there.”[[212]](#footnote-211)

Aaron Henry called the convention to order. Ella Baker, who had shepherded SNCC into existence and who now oversaw the national MFDP office in Washington, DC, and Joseph Rauh, the MFDP’s legal counsel for the convention challenge, addressed the crowd of three hundred delegates. Baker, seasoned by decades of struggle, shared “strong and sometimes angry” thoughts concerning the great tasks that still lay ahead.[[213]](#footnote-212) Rauh spoke optimistically about the challenge and hinted that important liberal leaders such as Walter Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers, would support the dissident delegation.[[214]](#footnote-213) Following the formal speeches, the movement revelry began. Participants chanted, “Freedom!” and sang the songs of their struggle. Delegates began, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round,” as they paraded around the room, holding their county signs, American flags, and freedom banners aloft.[[215]](#footnote-214)

Even before the state convention began, Allard Lowenstein and Joseph Rauh encouraged MFDP strategists to think pragmatically about the final composition of the delegation. Lowenstein, a college administrator and civil rights ally who had recruited student volunteers to assist with the Freedom Vote, and Rauh, the general counsel for the United Auto Workers, understood the complexity inherent to negotiation and political maneuvering. While the young organizers of SNCC had encouraged the development of indigenous leadership and participatory democracy, the two Democratic Party insiders counseled the MFDP to reach out to middle class professionals as well as manual laborers and full time organizers. COFO, largely staffed by SNCC organizers whose natural constituency lay in youth activists and semi independent laborers and farmers, understood this to mean: “include R.L.T. and Evers types, as well as Moses, Guyot, others of that type.” Lowenstein and Rauh countered, however, that if the MFDP presented a “big unity show” the mainstream press and national leaders would pay more attention to their petition.[[216]](#footnote-215) Although the final delegation had “a couple of white ringers,” Rauh conceded that it was primarily a “black party;” the inclusion of a broader spectrum of black Mississippians would lend legitimacy to the MFDP’s claims.[[217]](#footnote-216)

Movement strategists, led by Bob Moses and the executive leadership of the MFDP and SNCC, were swayed by Lowenstein and Rauh’s counsel. While ensuring that outspoken movement organizers and local people were well represented in the delegation, the MFDP engineered a diverse delegation. Leaders outlined delegate selection in a manner that ensured geographic, economic, and age diversity. Leslie McLemore, a recent graduate of Rust College and vice chair of the MFDP, recalled taking part in a meeting with Bob Moses, Hollis Watkins, and James Forman. Watkins, who had been Moses’ first young recruit to the Mississippi freedom movement, wanted to serve as a delegate. Because there was significant representation from the fourth district, Moses argued that McLemore served as a more strategic delegate choice, representing both SNCC interests and underrepresented DeSoto County in the north of the state.[[218]](#footnote-217)

Recruiting traditional leaders from Mississippi’s black communities, ministers and college educated professionals, proved more challenging. Many of Mississippi’s old guard had spurned early invitations by the young COFO organizers, and others felt they had been snubbed during the summer long organizing campaign. COFO, overwhelmingly staffed by SNCC, had chafed at the measured resistance of the black middle class. In preparation for the summer project, COFO had outlined the grassroots movement’s development in Mississippi counties. In its county assessments, the youthful field secretaries spoke derisively of the less dramatic stances taken by the state’s historic black leadership and, rather than buttress, looked to work around these individuals and their organizational leadership. In contrast, they cited as exciting and energized those counties with strong cadres of teenage workers who partnered with adult leaders who were themselves newly politicized through the grassroots movement.[[219]](#footnote-218)

In areas with an established professional class, COFO tended to characterize the leadership as conservative, often levying the dismissive term “Uncle Tom.” Freedom Democrat Hollis Watkins recalled lyrics from a freedom song, which highlighted the youth workers’ skepticism toward graduated support. “They tell me in Mississippi, no neutral have we met,” Watkins sang, borrowing the words of an old labor song. “You will either be a freedom fighter or a Tom for [former Governor] Ross Barnett,” he intoned, placing the song clearly within the Mississippi struggle. The song then questioned, “Which side are you on?”[[220]](#footnote-219) In general, SNCC workers determined the measured resistance and qualified support of black professionals to be on the wrong side of the freedom struggle.

COFO organizers denounced the cautious perspectives of black professionals in favor of the more strident stances of independent business and land owners. In both Bolivar and Hinds County, COFO identified ways to organize outside of traditional leadership circles. The all black town of Mound Bayou rested in Bolivar County. COFO termed its professional leadership as more conservative but “generally hostile to whites.” Young workers speculated that “the leadership can be circumvented and the local people reached.” The NAACP was strong in Hinds County, which housed the capital city of Jackson. There, too, strategists suggested organizing a community base in order to overwhelm the county’s established leadership in addition to developing relationships with receptive NAACP members.[[221]](#footnote-220) Freedom Democrat Edwin King later reflected that these men and women were not collaborators with the segregationist state or “Toms.” Rather, they favored “steps toward change” compared to the more radical calls for the redistribution of economic wealth and political power, which COFO advocated among the state’s laboring population.[[222]](#footnote-221)

At the same time that the MFDP admitted the political need for a more diverse delegate pool, black professionals, who either had been overlooked or showed initial disdain for the grassroots movement, sought to join the political campaign. As the momentum for the convention challenge grew, some members of the black middle class decided to ignore differences in long term goals or organizational style for the opportunity to participate in an important political moment. Throughout the delegate selection process, however, they were forced to defer to the untraditional leadership cultivated during the summer’s grassroots campaign. “These people,” admitted Edwin King, “had never been told ‘no’ by other Negroes . . . .” They were accustomed to being asked to help negotiate relationships, serve as a buffer between the white and black communities, and direct decision making in the black community. “When they had to ask to be included,” King surmised, “this must have been humiliating.”[[223]](#footnote-222) Freedom Democrat Sidney Alexander welcomed black professionals into the movement but reinforced his important role. “I still join hands with them when they came in,” Alexander explained of the tardy participation of black professionals in the formation of the MFDP, “because I was the one set-up the convention in Sharkey County.”[[224]](#footnote-223)

The final MFDP delegation of forty four delegates and twenty two alternates represented a cross section of black Mississippi. R.L.T. Smith’s nomination became ensnared in the struggle between urban and rural interests in the third district, and he declined his selection as an alternate. Convention participants, however, selected Merrill Lindsey who had also run as a freedom candidate in 1962 to serve as a delegate. Young organizers like Leslie McLemore and Charles McLaurin represented their home districts. Veteran dissidents like E.W. Steptoe, who was one of Bob Moses’ first contacts in Mississippi, and J.C. Fairly, a longtime NAACP organizer from Hattiesburg, served as delegates. Individuals such as Holmes County farmer Hartman Turnbow and agricultural laborer Unita Blackwell, who were politicized when they met the youth movement, also gained seats as delegates. The delegates selected former freedom candidate Aaron Henry to chair the delegation. His running mate in the Freedom Vote, Edwin King, served as national committeeman. Three women also led the delegation. Senatorial candidate Victoria Jackson Gray served as national committeewoman; Fannie Lou Hamer acted as vice-chair of the delegation; and Canton organizer Annie Devine, emerging as an important leader in the MFDP, was elected secretary of the delegation. Lawrence Guyot did not join the delegation as it traveled to Mississippi. Instead, he was jailed in Hattiesburg.[[225]](#footnote-224)

Governor Paul Johnson called to order the state convention of the Mississippi Democratic Party. Outside black protestors picketed. Inside, the band played “Dixie.” A number of the 244 delegates had arrived in cars marked with “Goldwater for President” bumper stickers, revealing their preference for the Republican candidate. Despite the trappings of an unabashed gathering of state’s rights and segregation advocates, the emergence of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to challenge the state Democratic Party’s nearly universal control of candidate selection and political appointments created an atmosphere of wariness at the 1964 meeting. Delegates understood that they had to make pragmatic decisions in order to avoid federal interference in what had long existed as an unmolested one party state. Fear of federal oversight did not preclude an invocation, which offered that the “segregated way is the Christian way” and thanked God for the “extremists who made our nation.” Mississippi Democrats did not waver in their selection of Judge Thomas Brady, the author of the Black Monday statement decrying the *Brown* school desegregation decision, as temporary chair of the proceedings.[[226]](#footnote-225)

When Governor Johnson addressed the delegates, however, he reminded them to exercise caution. “I would like to throw away what I have written and really speak,” Johnson informed his peers in a confessional tone, “but I know that with conditions what they are at the state and national level, I had better hang close to my script.” Johnson reminded the audience, “Our business here is deadly serious.” The preceding year of steady organizing, which had led to the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the inundation of one thousand volunteers into Mississippi’s rural communities for the summer, had altered the state’s political landscape. Black Mississippians remained unregistered, but white Mississippians knew that their words and actions were being monitored by northern and international journalists and politicians with renewed vigilance.[[227]](#footnote-226)

Four years earlier white Mississippians would have deemed it incredible to envision a national call to open the state’s political process to all Mississippi residents. In 1960, the same convening of Mississippi Democrats had rejected and opposed the platform of the national party and its candidates. The delegates to that year’s state Democratic Convention had emphasized in their platform the existence of segregation “for the best interest of both races. . . .” Like most southern Democrats, they resisted implementation of the *Brown* decision. Mississippi Democrats formalized their condemnation of the Supreme Court’s decision as an “unwarranted invasion of the rights of sovereign states.” In 1960, they had concluded with confidence that the Mississippi Democratic Party stood “with feet firmly planted on the solid foundation of the Constitution of the United States, pure Americanism, and the traditional Southern Way of Life.”[[228]](#footnote-227)

As recently as the Fall of 1963, Paul Johnson had campaigned unabashedly using racist and state’s rights rhetoric in his quest for the governor’s seat. He had impressed upon his audiences that the state party was “not subservient to any national party.” Although civil rights organizers had run a parallel election that pitted freedom candidate Aaron Henry against him, Johnson had found little reason to temper his public addresses. He criticized the federal protection of black rights, arguing that both the national Republican and Democratic Parties had “moved towards socialism as they catered to organized ‘have-not’ minorities” while “ignoring the great, silent, unorganized majority of decent, responsible citizens” of the United States.[[229]](#footnote-228)

The intense organizing that had occurred in the eight months since the gubernatorial election steadily drew national attention to the mass disenfranchisement of black Mississippians. Finally, during the late summer of 1964, the nation had begun to fix its gaze on the near century long abandonment of black political rights in Mississippi. In the summer of 1964, Governor Johnson and the state political apparatus chose to take a more pragmatic rhetorical approach while outlining a deliberately nonthreatening strategy at the August convention. Johnson implored the delegates to participate in “calm, restrained deliberation” and use “our heads instead of our vocal chords” in order to prevent the proceedings from being “magnified and twisted by skillful propagandists unfriendly to Mississippi and everything she stands for.” To avoid punitive measures from the national Democratic Party, the delegates to the state convention postponed until after the national convention the election of electors for President.[[230]](#footnote-229)

To evade controversy, the participants in the local delegate selection began selecting lesser known, although not always less controversial, individuals to represent them at the state convention in Jackson. As early as delegate selection at the Hinds County convention, the *Delta Democrat Times*, the state’s most moderate white daily, observed that long time political operatives had been replaced by “a combination of John Birch-Citizens Council professional types” that refused to support Lyndon Johnson for president. The delegates displayed “not a pretense of party loyalty,” according to the observer.[[231]](#footnote-230) At the state convention, a similar delegation of individuals who lacked significant name recognition would be chosen. This time, in preparation for the challenge being readied for Atlantic City, more attention would be paid to controversial organizational affiliations. Governor Johnson chastened Mississippi Democrats to “select carefully, a dependable, mature, level-headed group” to represent them at the national convention.[[232]](#footnote-231)

Freedom Democrats had prepared to meet “the lion in his den,” but in 1964, none of the state’s leading politicians were named delegates to the convention.[[233]](#footnote-232) In previous years the Mississippi delegation had been comprised of congressmen and senators. Early in the summer, the Jackson COFO office had directed workers to “find out if you can” the names of “compromising organizations” to which former delegates belonged, “notorious acquaintances” they maintained, and whether they had exercised retribution against black employees who engaged in civil rights activities. Researchers also compiled public statements made by the state’s leading politicians over the preceding year and a half in order to highlight their disloyalty to the national party and hostility to black political participation.[[234]](#footnote-233) In 1964, however, The Mississippi Democratic Party, which described itself as defenders of segregation and state’s rights, would claim its seats on the convention floor, but none of the state’s leading politicians would lend their image to the public challenge. Only two members of the state executive committee traveled to Atlantic City. Instead, Freedom Democrats challenged what Aaron Henry termed a “Joe Dokes” delegation.[[235]](#footnote-234)

**Chapter 3: The National Stage**

“For, for, what’s the problem?” stuttered Hartman Turnbow.[[236]](#footnote-235) Turnbow was reacting to the deceleration of the bus that was transporting him, the sixty five other freedom delegates, and their families and supporters to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City.

I know a man who has no foe

His name is Mr. Turnbow

The bus driver had slowed upon seeing the highway lined with people and crates blocking the road. While organizers on the bus calmed the other passengers, the driver continued slowing down to avoid colliding with the objects in the road. Upon seeing the obstructions blocking the path of the bus, Hartman Turnbow and his wife, Sweets, pulled out their pistols to suggest a possible solution.

He is about five feet six

Every time you see him he has a gun or a brick.

Another passenger, a young woman, sat behind the driver and placed a crabapple switch alongside the driver’s throat. She instructed him to drive straight through the roadblock. Turnbow and his wife, both armed, flanked the young woman.

If you want to keep your head

Then you’d better not come tripping around his bed.[[237]](#footnote-236)

Compelled by his passengers, the driver led his bus past the blockade and on toward Atlantic City.[[238]](#footnote-237)

The standoff on a Mississippi highway culminated a summer’s worth of harassment and intimidation. In Sunflower, Lauderdale, and Madison Counties, MFDP queries for precinct maps had been ignored. Newspapers refused to publish notices of movement sponsored precinct meetings. Following mass meetings, participants were arrested and harassed regularly. A truck carrying freedom registrations had been stopped. Highway Patrol officers jailed and beat two of the vehicle’s occupants. The other two had been told to walk back to Jackson.[[239]](#footnote-238) In Canton, a church used for civil rights meetings had been bombed. In Tallahatchie County an estimated one hundred armed white residents, joined by cars and trucks displaying guns, gathered outside the courthouse as a group of twenty four black voter applicants entered the building. A black registrant in Holly Springs had been thrown off his land, denied credit, and had his water turned off. James Cheney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, a native black Mississippian, a white CORE worker, and a white summer volunteer, respectively, had been killed.[[240]](#footnote-239)

Having avoided the last of Mississippi’s attempts to prevent the MFDP challenge, the delegation made its way to Atlantic City. There the delegates met with members of the MFDP’s Washington, DC office who had arrived a week earlier to lay the groundwork for the challenge. Leslie McLemore, vice-chair of the MFDP; Frank Smith, who had organized Rust College students in Marshall County; Walter Tillow, a white union organizer and SNCC worker; and Ella Baker, a long time NAACP and SCLC organizer, had overseen the MFDP operation in the nation’s capital. They had worked behind the scenes for months. In January, they began investigating procedures and assembling materials. In May, the national headquarters officially opened. The four staff members had spent the summer months lobbying state delegations on behalf of the MFDP challenge. Walter Tillow had traveled to the state conventions in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota to present the claims of the MFDP. Frank Smith lobbied the Connecticut, New York, California, and Colorado delegations. Leslie McLemore served as an advance person at the convention, meeting with local civil rights organizations. When the staff from the national office arrived in Atlantic City, Tillow estimated that they had gained the endorsement of eleven state delegations. Both Tillow and McLemore remarked that the summer’s organizing and lobbying became real as they watched black Mississippians descend from the bus as delegates.[[241]](#footnote-240)

As the Mississippi delegates stepped off the bus in Atlantic City, they dropped their bags at the Gem Motel where they would sleep as many as could fit to a room and went straight to work assisting the staff from the national office. Some delegates formed lobbying pairs, fanning out to the hotels where the other state delegations were headquartered and to the convention hall.[[242]](#footnote-241) Joyce Ladner, a Mississippi college student and full time movement worker, accompanied Hartman and Sweets Turnbow, independent farmers from Holmes County, as they met with Edith Green, a member of Congress from Oregon and a key ally in the convention’s credentials committee meetings.[[243]](#footnote-242) Other members of the delegation, joined by national supporters and Mississippians who had made the journey in solidarity, stood in vigil on the boardwalk. Their numbers ranged from one hundred to a couple thousand.[[244]](#footnote-243) Demonstrators carried signs that read, “Ain’t No Freedom in Mississippi.” “Democracy or police rule? Which Side are you on?” and “We are Freedom Delegates.”[[245]](#footnote-244) They held placards with the faces of Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerner, who had been abducted and killed by Mississippi law enforcement officers two months earlier and whose bodies recently had been found buried in a construction dam. They rallied around a car, studded with American flags and Christian crosses, that had been burned by white vigilantes.[[246]](#footnote-245)

The question to be decided at the Democratic National Convention, as outlined by the MFDP’s legal team, rested “not simply in which of two groups wear shiny badges” but rather encouraged the national Democratic Party to recognize black political rights. They argued that the protest delegation must be seated “under any standard relating to fairness and good faith.”[[247]](#footnote-246) The MFDP pointed out that the Mississippi Democratic Party dominated each governmental branch. With one exception, all of the state senators and representatives belonged to the Democratic Party. The MFDP delegates claim rested in their desire to become active participants in the political process. In Mississippi, that required membership in the Mississippi Democratic Party.

The dissidents and their lawyers contended that the state’s electoral process was designed to be “hopelessly formidable” to black Mississippians. Every registrar in the state was white. No black Mississippian had held a state office since 1892. Less than seven percent of the eligible black population of Mississippi was registered to vote, amounting to fewer than thirty thousand voters. As a result, the half million white registered voters overwhelmed black voter choice on election day. In addition to citing statistics, in its claim, the MFDP included the findings of the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the federally mandated United States Commission on Civil Rights, which had concluded that “terror hangs over the Negro in Mississippi.”[[248]](#footnote-247) Black Mississippians wanted to vote, without demands from the Democratic Party and the federal government to register black votes, white Mississippians would continue to monopolize the political process and exercise retaliatory violence.

The MFDP, unaware of the degree of the administration’s hostility to their claim, hoped to leave the credentials committee with enough supportive delegates to bring a minority report to the convention floor. Freedom Democrats and their supporters needed to convince ten percent of the one hundred and eight member credentials committee, eleven of its members, to file a minority report on behalf of the MFDP’s insurgent delegation. In the convention hall, they then would lobby eight state delegations to urge a roll call vote on the seating of the Freedom Democrats.[[249]](#footnote-248) The committee met for three days over the question. Two members of each state delegation sat on the committee.

Joseph Rauh presented the MFDP’s case. Representatives from both delegations testified. National luminaries such as Martin Luther King, Jr., who had just traveled through Mississippi on behalf of the MFDP, also weighed in on the question. During his testimony, Dr. King turned to the Freedom Democrats and admonished the committee, “You cannot imagine the anguish and suffering they have gone through to get to this point.”[[250]](#footnote-249) During his short stay in Mississippi, King had witnessed the steady harassment levied on freedom workers and movement supporters. While he spoke at one Mississippi church, a low flying plane had littered the grounds with flyers in support of the Ku Klux Klan.[[251]](#footnote-250)

Although Pennsylvania Governor David Lawrence chaired the credentials committee, the DNC appointed Walter Mondale, the young attorney general from Minnesota, to keep the challenge off the convention floor. Mondale chaired the special subcommittee created to determine which delegates should represent Mississippi at the convention. “They wanted to get seated,” Mondale explained the singular focus of the Freedom Democrats. “That’s what they knew.”[[252]](#footnote-251) The Freedom Democrats had not realized, however, that in challenging the Mississippi Regulars they threatened what Lawrence Guyot came to characterize as “Lyndon’s convention.”[[253]](#footnote-252) President Lyndon Johnson refused to let his convention serve as the event where the southern wing, which formed an uneasy alliance with their northern counterparts, finally broke their century long membership in the Democratic Party. Although Johnson acknowledged privately that the Regulars “oughtn’t be seated” because the state “wouldn’t let those nigras vote,” he refused to “run off” fourteen border states, who he suspected would follow the South, by seating the oppositional delegation.[[254]](#footnote-253) Although it was generally understood that the Deep South would vote for Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, Johnson expected to gain some support from voters in border states.[[255]](#footnote-254)

“Girl, you reckon I ought to tell it,” Fannie Lou Hamer asked Unita Blackwell. Blackwell urged Hamer, “Tell it.”[[256]](#footnote-255) Both Hamer and Blackwell had emerged from Mississippi’s vast Delta. Before the credentials committee, Hamer, emboldened by Blackwell and others in the delegation, steadied by faith, and believing in American traditions of justice and equality determined to speak beyond euphemisms and share the details of being black in the Mississippi Delta. Hamer relayed her own story of trying to gain the vote in Mississippi. She had shared the same story many times before with sympathetic audiences on barnstorming tours of the North and prospective voter applicants in rural Mississippi towns. This time, however, before the glare of television cameras and national politicians, Hamer’s stump speech, in which she described the economic and physical violence she experienced in attempting to register to vote and assist others in registering to vote, gained new weight.[[257]](#footnote-256) Fannie Lou Hamer, a stout middle aged woman who had known little more than farm labor, economic hardship, and political exclusion before she became a full time political organizer two years earlier, calmly recounted to the delegates seated in front of her how she and seventeen others traveled the twenty-six miles to the county seat of Indianola in August 1962.[[258]](#footnote-257)

That day only two in the contingent were allowed to take the registration test. While returning from the courthouse, highway patrolmen stopped the bus and charged the driver with driving a bus the wrong color. Although the yellow school bus they traveled in had been long used to carry agricultural workers to the fields, on that day law enforcement officials determined the vehicle illegal to transport anyone other than schoolchildren. When Hamer finally arrived home, the news of her attempt to register had reached her employer. He instructed Hamer to remove her name from the application list because, as he told her, “We are not ready for that in Mississippi.” Hamer then recounted how she responded to him that she had registered for herself and not for him. That night would be her last on the plantation. Hamer explained to the delegates that she was evicted from her home and forced to stay with friends, leading her to become a full time organizer. [[259]](#footnote-258)

Hamer then spoke plainly about the beating she and three other civil rights workers received in the Winona jail. Returning from a voter registration workshop, a small group determined to integrate the restaurant at the rest stop they visited. Hamer, not among the group of protestors, became embroiled in the situation when police began to harass and eventually arrest the demonstrators. When she demanded to know why the other women were being taken into custody, police placed Hamer under arrest as well. The four women were taken to the Winona jail and savagely beaten by other prisoners who were compelled to assist in the assault by their jailers and rewarded with a pint of whiskey. By the time it was Hamer’s turn to be beaten, the Winona police had learned of her outspokenness in her hometown of Ruleville and declared, “We are going to make you wish you were dead.” Laying face down on a cot, Hamer was beaten until both she and her assaulters were exhausted. [[260]](#footnote-259)

As she ended her testimony before the members of the credentials committee, Fannie Lou Hamer reminded the delegates that the atrocities committed against her resulted from her simple desire to vote. She charged the members of the committee, “If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America.” The lessons on constitutional rights and the power of the vote taught to her by the SNCC field secretaries had inspired Hamer to become a full time organizer. Like many other black Mississippians who had lived in isolated communities across the state, Hamer had believed that the nation had not known of her plight. She maintained a faith in America and expected that once Freedom Democrats revealed the horrors of disenfranchisement and the white supremacist state the national Democratic Party would seat them.[[261]](#footnote-260)

As Hamer spoke of the harassment she faced in attempting to expand Mississippi’s black electorate, the President of the United States staged a photo opportunity. In order to preempt the nationally telecast proceedings and Hamer’s testimony, Lyndon Johnson invited Lady Bird Johnson to delay a trip to the podiatrist and take a walk on the White House grounds.[[262]](#footnote-261) Fannie Lou Hamer heard someone signal the news cameras to stop filming her and cut to the convention floor. Although Hamer had spoken to the typical experience of black voter registrants in Mississippi, she concluded that “the world was hearing too much.”[[263]](#footnote-262) Walter Mondale, the thirty six year old Attorney General of Minnesota, conceded that the “stakes had been raised” after the testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer.[[264]](#footnote-263) Her emotional story, deeply embedded in her faith in democratic procedures and the rule of law, shared the limitations that lay within national myths of equality.

Four months after the inception of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as the political arm of COFO, the special subcommittee met in what its chair Walter Mondale described as a “crowded, steamy room” to discuss the challenge to the credentials of the regular Mississippi delegation.[[265]](#footnote-264) In a private conversation with President Johnson, UAW president Walter Reuther, who Joseph Rauh had expected to serve as an important ally in the challenge, predicted that by publicly announcing the establishment of a subcommittee to handle the question of who would represent Mississippi “then the thing will get lost in the shuffle of the business of the convention.”[[266]](#footnote-265) The subcommittee’s job was to delay a vote, keeping it off the convention floor.

Minnesota Attorney General Walter Mondale was entrusted with the task of “keeping the convention from blowing apart.” Although Mondale remained intent on carrying out the administration’s wishes, he later expressed regret for his complicit silence as Lyndon Johnson “walked a thin line at times between hardball and over-the-line tactics,” making use of both surveillance and blackmail. Not content with relying solely on the subcommittee to obstruct the MFDP’s claim, President Johnson ordered twenty seven FBI agents and paid informants to report on the Freedom Democrats during the convention.[[267]](#footnote-266) In addition, Johnson bullied UAW president Walter Reuther with promises of interceding on behalf of his union’s workers who were engaged in a bitter labor dispute and promised to name Hubert Humphrey to the vice presidency. Johnson reminded Reuther that there was “not a damn vote” to be gained by seating the Freedom Democrats.[[268]](#footnote-267)

In exchange for the vice-presidency, President Johnson had forced Hubert Humphrey, a leading proponent for civil rights on Capitol Hill, aided by Reuther, to negotiate a settlement between the two delegations that would not anger the white South. Two weeks before the convention, Johnson badgered Reuther, “If you and Hubert Humphrey have got any leadership, you’d get Joe Rauh off that damn television.” A week later, Humphrey informed Johnson that he had been “working the devil” out of Joseph Rauh to no avail.[[269]](#footnote-268) Despite his multi pronged approach to neutralizing the freedom delegation, Johnson insisted that no one be informed that he was “making [Humphrey] do this.” Johnson maintained that if he was ever asked about the agreement, he would insist, “I never heard of it. It’s your proposal.”[[270]](#footnote-269)

With the vice presidency in the balance, Johnson succeeded in cornering many national civil rights advocates. They gambled that having Humphrey in the White House would outweigh any benefits that would come with the seating of the MFDP delegation. Johnson had warned Roy Wilkins, president of the NAACP, in the days leading up to the convention that to many white southerners naming Humphrey would be “almost like naming the Freedom Party” to the vice presidency.[[271]](#footnote-270) For Walter Mondale, Humphrey’s protégé, the “excitement” he felt about the possibility of a Humphrey vice-presidency became “central to everything I did at the convention.”[[272]](#footnote-271) Reportedly, two influential black delegates, Frank Reeves, the national committeeperson from the District of Columbia, and Charles Diggs, a congressional representative from Michigan, relayed information provided to them by Freedom Democrats to the White House.[[273]](#footnote-272) “You had the whole Democratic political machine, the President, the whole White House, and the whole labor movement,” marveled Joseph Rauh in an assessment of the convention, “all trying to stop a few little Mississippi Negroes and me from making a little stink at the Democratic Convention.”[[274]](#footnote-273)

Despite the machinations of the Johnson administration, the MFDP also found important supporters who refused to acquiesce to the administration’s pressure. Edith Green, a member of Congress from Oregon, was the most ardent ally of the MFDP on the credentials committee. Green argued that the MFDP’s legal team had provided “absolutely indisputable” evidence that white Mississippians had excluded black Mississippians from the political process.[[275]](#footnote-274) She suggested a settlement that would require each member of the regular and freedom delegations to pledge loyalty to the national Democratic party. According to Green’s plan, those who agreed, regardless of affiliation, would be seated.[[276]](#footnote-275)

Edith Green observed the curious tactics of the administration and counseled less seasoned MFDP organizers and delegates against underestimating the administration’s desire to block the challenge. In one instance, Green, unwilling to trust anyone’s motives, withstood queries from both Joseph Rauh, the MFDP’s lawyer, and Representative Charles Diggs to share the names of sympathetic delegates on the subcommittee.[[277]](#footnote-276) Although Green refused to divulge the list, others eventually succumbed to the benign questioning from assumed allies who, in turn, shared the names with the administration. In a meeting between Charles Diggs and Bob Moses and Courtland Cox, a SNCC field secretary, Cox, despite warnings from Green and Moses, revealed the list of cooperative delegates to Diggs. Cox had trusted that Diggs, one of the few black members of Congress and a public ally of the MFDP, was working for the best interests of the oppositional delegation. Diggs, however, had defined his interests as better aligned with the administration and a Humphrey vice-presidency.[[278]](#footnote-277)

Armed with these names, the administration used what one staff member of the Freedom Democratic Party termed “curious methods of persuasion” to reverse the intended votes. A black delegate who worked for the mayor of New York City was told that federal grants would disappear if she voted for the seating of the Freedom Democrats.[[279]](#footnote-278) One MFDP staff member attributed her refusal to sign the final minority report to the administration’s “arm twisting.”[[280]](#footnote-279) Vera Cason, a California delegate to the committee, was informed that her husband would lose a judgeship if she continued to support the MFDP. While in Atlantic City, Cason had met regularly with Annie Devine and Fannie Lou Hamer and “didn’t have any questions about what is right or wrong, she knew it was right,” according to one SNCC field secretary.[[281]](#footnote-280) Joseph Rauh recalled that President Johnson called California Governor Pat Brown and “beat the living daylights” out of him for permitting the California delegation to pass a resolution in support of the MFDP. In turn, Brown pressured Cason to reverse her committee vote. Although a delegate from the “Canal Zone” was told he would lose his job if he supported the oppositional delegation, he concluded, reported Rauh, “Oh, to hell with my job” and maintained his support for the MFDP.[[282]](#footnote-281)

Most of the MFDP’s early allies on the committee were unable to withstand the administration’s pressure. While they had initially supported the MFDP’s principled argument of equal access to the political process, ultimately politics won out. At the end of the three day session, only eight committee members voted to support the MFDP’s petition, less than the eleven needed to bring a minority report to the convention floor. Ultimately the California delegation, which had voted at its state convention to support the seating of the MFDP, passed a resolution supporting a compromise.[[283]](#footnote-282) The final supporters represented a geographically rag tag group from the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Canal Zone, with only a few supportive delegates from the continental United States. The two New York delegates and the two California delegates rescinded their support. None of the black delegates signed the minority report. In the end, Joseph Rauh lamented that there was “just nothing left.”[[284]](#footnote-283) He contended that what had been a “beautiful and marvelous operation” with broad national support had become a “shabby thing” only able to claim the support of delegates representing regions that exercised little political influence themselves.[[285]](#footnote-284)

Although the national media outlets fixed their pens and lenses on the credentials committee, SNCC organizer Mendy Samstein argued that “nothing was happening in that Credentials Committee. Everything was happening outside of it . . . .”[[286]](#footnote-285) Walter Mondale agreed that the real negotiating was occuring between administration officials and national civil rights and liberal leaders as they shuttled back and forth between meetings, “trying to find and sell a solution that would keep this issue from exploding on the convention floor.”[[287]](#footnote-286) Mostly, Freedom Democrats, who had testified, stood in vigil on the boardwalk, and lobbied sympathetic state delegations, characterized the back room negotiations as meetings where “the big niggers talk to the big niggers.”[[288]](#footnote-287) The elected leadership of the MFDP, Edwin King, Aaron Henry, and Fannie Lou Hamer; the party’s key organizers, like Bob Moses; and the leaders of national civil rights organizations, not its delegation of day laborers, farmers, and professionals, met with the liberal establishment and advisors to the administration to work out a compromise.

Fannie Lou Hamer as vice-chair of the delegation attended the early negotiation meetings. While her testimony before the credentials committee had drawn national attention, Edwin King chastened that “to deal with her in the smoke-filled rooms,” where the power brokering really took place, was another story entirely. Unlike other less formally educated Freedom Democrats, who felt overwhelmed by the political maneuvering of more experienced and formally educated national leadership, Hamer angrily challenged national civil rights leaders and politicians.[[289]](#footnote-288) Taking offense at offers of compromise, on one occasion Hamer asked Hubert Humphrey, “Mr. Humphrey do you mean to tell me that your position is more important than Mississippi’s four hundred thousand black lives?”[[290]](#footnote-289) To Hamer, who bore the physical scars of attempting to vote, the possibility of a Humphrey vice presidency did not lessen her more immediate goal of walking freely into the Sunflower County courthouse and registering to vote.

As the private negotiations continued, the administration excluded Hamer from the meetings.[[291]](#footnote-290) Bayard Rustin invited Edwin King to represent the MFDP for a final closed door meeting. Rustin, at the behest of Walter Reuther, instructed King to bring Aaron Henry, not Fannie Lou Hamer, hoping to reduce the most outspoken critics of a compromise to a “microscopic faction.”[[292]](#footnote-291) In the final negotiations Freedom Democrats Edwin King, Aaron Henry, and Bob Moses confronted the coordinated opposition of Hubert Humphrey, Walter Reuther, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and Bayard Rustin.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wavered between principled support of the MFDP and the right of black Mississippians to have unencumbered access to the political process and pragmatic acceptance of a liberal national coalition. Earlier in the week, King had argued before the credentials committee, “If you value your party, if you value your nation, if you value the democratic process, you must recognize the Freedom party delegation.”[[293]](#footnote-292) Walter Reuther complained privately to President Johnson that King was being influenced “by a bunch of young people who were so emotional that you can’t reach him.”[[294]](#footnote-293) Similarly, Georgia Senator Richard Russell warned Johnson that he had heard King on the radio as he addressed demonstrators on the boardwalk. Russell characterized King’s speech as “openly threatening” to the administration.[[295]](#footnote-294) In the meeting, however, King wrestled with whether or not to use his political capital in support of the MFDP.

Recognizing King’s hesitancy in renouncing the demands of the MFDP, Walter Reuther turned to him and prodded him to “remember who pays for you.” Edwin King described the nation’s most recognizable civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “humbled” and “humiliated” as Reuther, one of Edwin King’s “heroes,” itemized the amounts of organizational funding given to King and the SCLC by northern unions and liberals.[[296]](#footnote-295) Confronted with Reuther’s blatant enumeration of monies received, Martin Luther King, Jr. was forced to concede that his prominence rested on the continued support of the nation’s liberal establishment. King, who had stood on the boardwalk with the oppositional delegation and shouted “Seat the Freedom Democratic Party” and campaigned in Mississippi’s rural communities, lost his autonomy during the high level negotiations.[[297]](#footnote-296)

King was not the only national luminary to buckle under pressure from the liberal establishment and the Johnson administration. Bob Moses learned that Bayard Rustin who had always maintained an independent political base had become dependent on national liberal leaders for financial support in the summer of 1964. Before the convention, Rustin had been promised an appointment to oversee the newly established A. Philip Randolph Foundation. Rustin’s new position rested on the support of liberal leaders and labor unions and influenced his support of the MFDP challenge. During the preparations for the summer project, Bayard Rustin had promised to assist the MFDP in their challenge. As the MFDP prepared for the Democratic National Convention, Rustin counseled Moses against staging direct actions if the Mississippi Regulars were seated and urged Freedom Democrats not to “wreck the event.” At the convention, Rustin identified his interests more aligned with the “greater coalition” of liberal leaders, according to SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman.[[298]](#footnote-297) Moses realized that while the MFDP had done an incredible job of organizing a grassroots political movement in Mississippi upon reaching Atlantic City they had lost all of their key national supporters.

At the final meeting with Aaron Henry, Edwin King, Bob Moses and national civil rights leaders, the administration’s representatives presented the points of its compromise to the three Mississippi advocates and instructed them to force their delegation to accept it.[[299]](#footnote-298) The administration’s compromise allotted two at large seats to the MFDP delegation, pledged to establish a Special Equal Rights Committee to ensure that all future state delegations were chosen by racially integrated state parties, included an agreement to seat the Freedom Democrats as honored guests, and required members of the Regular Mississippi and Alabama delegations to take loyalty oaths.[[300]](#footnote-299) The administration selected Aaron Henry, who they identified as “quite intelligent” and “more reasonable than some,” and Edwin King to represent a biracial Mississippi on the convention floor.[[301]](#footnote-300)

When the three MFDP representatives at the meeting bristled at the pre-selection of delegates, the voices of the administration mocked, “What kind of leaders are you if your people won’t do what you tell them?”[[302]](#footnote-301) Humphrey characterized Moses, who extolled membership rather than leadership driven organizing, as the “boss of the delegation,” and insisted that he arrange for the acceptance of the compromise.[[303]](#footnote-302) Humphrey later admitted to Walter Jenkins, special assistant to the President, that despite his being “a hell of a good salesman,” walking into the “lion’s den” and pulling “all the heartstrings,” he had made “no headway” with the freedom delegation. The MFDP representatives refused to accept a compromise without first sharing it with the entire delegation of Freedom Democrats.[[304]](#footnote-303) Before the meeting disbanded, Walter Mondale announced publicly that the MFDP had accepted the administration’s compromise of two at large seats. Movement leaders rushed to the church where the Freedom Democratic delegates were waiting to explain that they had agreed to nothing.[[305]](#footnote-304)

While Bob Moses, Aaron Henry, and Edwin King were secluded in a private meeting, Freedom Democrats waited in an Atlantic City church and learned from a media broadcast that their leaders had accepted the administration’s compromise. Upon their arrival at the church, Moses, Henry, and King assured the delegation that they had refused to accept a compromise without first deliberating with the delegation. The tone taken by Humphrey and Reuther in the meeting had already angered Moses. He saw the public statement as a further reflection of the administration’s unwillingness to negotiate in good faith. Unable to convince the MFDP’s representatives to agree to the compromise, the administration misinformed media outlets of an agreement. A compromise had not been reached. While public sentiment and attention may have shifted with the announcement, the delegates still had an opportunity to vote to accept or reject the administration’s offer.[[306]](#footnote-305)

Each civil rights leader stood up and offered their recommendation to the delegation. Bayard Rustin differentiated between “protest and politics,” contending that with the convention challenge the MFDP had entered the realm of politics. This new arena required compromise.[[307]](#footnote-306) NAACP director Roy Wilkins had always expressed cautious support of the MFDP and counseled the delegation, “[Y]ou all done prove your point.”[[308]](#footnote-307) According to SNCC field secretary Ivanhoe Donaldson, Martin Luther King addressed the delegation with a “wishy washy” speech. King expressed his confidence in a Humphrey vice-presidency and shared with the delegates Humphrey’s promise that there would be a “new day in Mississippi if you accept this proposal.”[[309]](#footnote-308) While Donaldson remarked that James Farmer, the national director of CORE, “threw his hands up and was unable to deal with the situation,” Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine both remembered that Farmer instructed the Freedom Democrats that if they refused the compromise they would have to return to Mississippi and establish a viable third party. James Forman remembered Farmer’s as a “decent statement.”[[310]](#footnote-309)

After nearly everyone else had spoken, Bob Moses addressed the delegation. Previously, Moses had hidden his preferences. Annie Devine observed that in planning meetings Moses “sat back and watched and waited” and “might have hoped and prayed” but did not instruct delegates in decision making. Moses was more concerned with the process of decision making than its immediate outcomes. He believed that individuals closest to the problems in their lives had the ability and the right to formulate strategies to address their most critical needs. During the delegation’s final deliberations in Atlantic City, Moses was unable to remain silent. He worried that national luminaries would sway the delegates to accept a compromise that would circumvent the delegation’s internal decision making processes.[[311]](#footnote-310)

Aaron Henry also noted the change in Moses’ behavior at the church. Henry speculated that Freedom Democrats felt not only betrayed by the administration but also that “their leaders, including Moses himself, had been in on the double-crossing.”[[312]](#footnote-311) Aaron Henry contended that Moses misused his influence. Rather than wait for a time when “calmer heads might prevail,” he had addressed the delegates when “[e]motions were pitched high.”[[313]](#footnote-312) When delivered to delegates who were angered by the administration’s bad faith negotiations, Moses’ statements may have appealed to starker realities, good and bad, right and wrong, rather than the potential for long term political gain.

Upset by the unilateral negotiations at the hotel, Moses addressed the freedom delegation and “tore King up,” according to MFDP attorney Bill Higgs. Moses urged the delegation to reject the compromise. He refused to endorse the naming of two college educated delegates to represent a diverse delegation of farmers and day laborers, who were regularly denied access to every level of power in their communities. The acceptance of two at large seats would not reorient the Democratic Party, a possibility only if the Party recognized “the existence of a whole group of people . . . who form the underclass of this country.” Upon the completion of Moses’ remarks, Higgs observed that the proponents of the compromise “knew the jig was up.” Moses, who advocated group based decision making and grew uncomfortable when delegates elevated his opinion, refused to let the political maneuvering of Atlantic City overwhelm the primary demands of the delegates for equal access and political representation for all Mississippians. Awed by the presentation, Higgs compared Moses’ words to “listening to the Lord.”[[314]](#footnote-313)

Moses’ statement alone may have ensured the delegates’ collective opposition to the compromise, but his SNCC allies refused to let the moment of renunciation slip away and lobbied the delegates as the other speakers addressed the gathering. Leslie McLemore remembered that while Coretta Scott King addressed the delegation, SNCC organizer Dona Richards moved throughout the church sanctuary and whispered down each pew, “Reject the compromise.” McLemore insisted that he did not need Richards to tell him what to think. While McLemore was impressed by the weight of the black leadership assembled before him, he would not support the compromise.[[315]](#footnote-314) Similarly Unita Blackwell chided both Roy Wilkins and Aaron Henry’s support of the compromise. She questioned Henry’s personal interest, describing him as “swallowin and gruntin” because “he wanted to be head nigger in charge and all this kind of stuff, leader and what have you.”[[316]](#footnote-315)

The national Democrats had proven themselves unwilling to stand up for the principles of full political participation. For Blackwell and others, a promise to seat a racially integrated delegation at the next convention did not address their most immediate circumstances upon returning to rural Mississippi communities after participating in the dissident delegation. Fannie Lou Hamer agreed. “We come on back home,” Hamer contended, “and go right on up the first tree that we get to because, you know, that’s what they were going to do to us.” “What had we gained?” Hamer asked rhetorically.[[317]](#footnote-316) In communities where lynching remained a very salient threat, a token gesture offered by the national administration would do little to protect black Mississippians from extralegal violence, economic retaliation, and physical harassment upon their return.

Not everyone in the delegation maintained the same perspective as McLemore, Blackwell, and Hamer. Initially, Charles McLaurin, Hamer’s support person, was less skeptical of the compromise. Describing himself as a “little fellow from down here in Mississippi, way up here in Atlantic City,” McLaurin’s visit to the Democratic Convention had transformed his world. He was a young man who had partied, demonstrated on the boardwalk, ridden in jitneys and shuttles, watched Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor perform, and sailed on a yacht. “I ain’t never been to none of this, man,” he admitted sheepishly. Then Hamer brought him “back to Earth,” reminding McLaurin of the MFDP’s primary goal of dismantling the all white Democratic Party in Mississippi. As he had the day he and Hamer declared her congressional candidacy at the state house in Jackson, McLaurin remained overwhelmed by Hamer’s ability to believe in impossibilities and withstand pressures from opponents.[[318]](#footnote-317)

Class distinctions also revealed themselves as the delegation debated whether to accept the compromise. Many of the black professionals, who had joined the MFDP late in the summer, understood the national significance of the compromise and were not willing to defy civil rights luminaries and the Johnson Administration. Dr. Aaron Shirley, who Fannie Lou Hamer described as a “tall bourgeois from down there [in] Vicksburg,” endorsed the compromise.[[319]](#footnote-318) Charles Young, a cosmetics manufacturer from Meridian, chastised the delegation that “we got to get this thing together, now you all must come along.”[[320]](#footnote-319) Middle class professionals recognized that the compromise, with a commitment to seat a biracial delegation in 1968, would create a crack in the Mississippi Democratic Party. Individuals like themselves, who possessed many of the skills of negotiation and compromise, could enter through that fissure as the representatives of black Mississippians.

When Hamer and a few others vocally challenged the recommendations from traditional leaders (black professionals, directors of national organizations, and members of the administration), Hollis Watkins extolled the newfound ability of local people to respond adamantly, “No, I don’t care what you say, I will not go along with you,” to those individuals who just a few years earlier would have assumed decision making powers without discussion.[[321]](#footnote-320) When Bayard Rustin impressed upon Freedom Democrats that politics required compromise, Holmes County Freedom Democrat Hartman Turnbow responded, "Uh-huh, but there ain't going to be no compromise.”[[322]](#footnote-321) Unita Blackwell insisted proudly that “they had done decided they going to take the compromise, but the little folks told them no.” Blackwell concluded, “We didn’t have anything to compromise with, you know, nothing but our lives and so on.”[[323]](#footnote-322) SNCC’s office manager Jane Stembridge extolled the rejection of traditional leadership in a poem. She wrote that “the revolutionary element remained in tact” as delegates said, “no, sir (for emphasis) we didn’t come for no two seats since all of us is tired.”[[324]](#footnote-323) For Watkins that moment of renunciation was “real, real exciting” because it revealed that grassroots leadership had “come into its own and was willing and ready and prepared to make decisions for themselves.”[[325]](#footnote-324)

In the end, both the Mississippi Regulars and the Mississippi Freedom Democrats rejected the administration’s compromise of two at large seats. Delivering the official statement for the Regulars, a white Hattiesburg lawyer condemned as a “blind oath” the requirement to pledge loyalty to the national Democratic ticket. He characterized the MFDP as an “outside pressure group,” and argued that the MDP did not abandon the national party. Rather, he contended, “It left us.” Governor Paul Johnson announced from Jackson that “Mississippi’s debt to the national Democratic party is now paid.” Three Regulars did pledge their loyalty to the national ticket and occupied the seats reserved for the Mississippi delegation until they were joined by Freedom Democrats.[[326]](#footnote-325)

Sympathetic delegates from other delegations loaned their credentials to members of the dissident delegation. Freedom Democrats wore badges that read “California,” “Guest,” and “Alternate,” and they assumed the seats abandoned by the Mississippi Regulars.[[327]](#footnote-326) One summer volunteer donned the red, white, and blue vest of the Young Citizens for Johnson and ushered Freedom Democrats onto the convention floor. He remarked, “I felt like the Mata Hari and the French Resistance and the Underground Railroad all rolled into one” as he escorted black farmers and day laborers onto the convention.[[328]](#footnote-327) Freedom Democrat Hazel Palmer began a slow and steady rendition of “We Shall Overcome,” and sympathetic delegates chanted “Freedom Now.”[[329]](#footnote-328) As he stood on the convention floor, Bob Moses overheard one black Mississippian remark, “Felt like I was about to become an American.”[[330]](#footnote-329)

Many of the full time COFO organizers reacted with frustration to the administration’s refusal to seat the Freedom Democrats despite overwhelming evidence that black Mississippians had been denied access to the political process. The administration’s desire to name two college educated delegates to serve as public symbols of reconciliation further angered many SNCC and CORE workers and left them disillusioned with two party politics. One movement poet wrote, with a bit of artistic license, of the response of organizers to the compromise, “Moses is drinking [a]nd Forman’s in bed.” For Freedom Democrats, who the young poet described as having “gone right,” however, Atlantic City signaled the beginning of their entry into the political process. They would return to their communities and begin anew the registration of voters and the recruitment of candidates for political office.[[331]](#footnote-330)

Aaron Henry had taken his seat on the convention floor under the sign that read “Mississippi,” wearing a suit jacket adorned with competing buttons. One read, “L.B.J.” Another, the SNCC button, displayed two hands clasping, one black and one white. The final button was larger. It declared, “Free Mississippi – All the Way with L.B.J.”[[332]](#footnote-331) Freedom Democrats would return to Mississippi and campaign for Johnson. Freedom Democrat Mary Lane knew that she would “go back home and have to tell a lie” by encouraging black Mississippians to support Lyndon Johnson for president. Although Lane admitted that the compromise of two at large seats for Aaron Henry and Ed King left her and others in the delegation wanting, they did not share that with those they encouraged to vote for Johnson. Throughout the Fall, county FDPs held voter registration classes and passed out sample ballots. They instructed local people on how to fold the ballots, mark them, and select Lyndon Johnson as their candidate for President of the United States. Lane described staff meetings, however, as a “different sort of thing.” There, Freedom Democrats would get “all flared up” as they discussed the shenanigans of Johnson they had witnessed in Atlantic City. The next day at public meetings, however, they would tell local people, “[T]his is the man to vote for.”[[333]](#footnote-332) The MFDP had decided to pursue their claim as the true Democrats in Mississippi. Although registered as Democrats, white voters would select Republican nominee Barry Goldwater. Freedom Democrats would campaign for Johnson.

At the September executive committee meeting, Freedom Democrats officially endorsed Lyndon Johnson’s candidacy. They requested materials from the national committee and opened a campaign headquarters in Mississippi counties.[[334]](#footnote-333) Six weeks later, at a recently constructed community center in Holmes County, Henry Reeves, Benton County FDP chair, introduced a motion to challenge the seating of Mississippi’s congressional delegation to the United States House of Representatives. Holmes County Freedom Democrat Hartman Turnbow seconded the motion.[[335]](#footnote-334)

The MFDP would attempt to run independent candidates in the general election. Freedom Democrats expected that the movement sponsored candidates would have poor showings in the general election as a result of political maneuvering and the continued under-registration of black Mississippians. In preparation for an electoral defeat, Freedom Democrats planned to collect evidence to support a future claim that Mississippi’s national representatives had been unfairly elected and should be unseated. They once again would stage a mock election in order to register the choice of black voters. The national Democratic Party had refused to recognize the MFDP at Atlantic City. Perhaps they would support the removal of the state’s congressional delegation from the United States House of Representatives.[[336]](#footnote-335)

Both Victoria Jackson Gray and Fannie Lou Hamer had been able to secure their names on the primary ballots because they had surprised state workers with their applications. For the general election, county registrars were ready; they refused to certify petition names. When the petitions were submitted to Secretary of State Hebert Ladner, he contended that they did not contain the proper number of signatures. Unable to qualify candidates as independents, the MFDP readied for another freedom election. Fannie Lou Hamer once again ran for the second congressional district seat. Victoria Jackson Gray, who had contested John Stennis for the Democratic nomination for Senator, ran in the fifth congressional district. In the freedom election, Aaron Henry challenged Stennis’ senate seat. Canton organizer Annie Devine joined the now veteran candidates on the freedom ballot. She sought the fourth congressional district seat.[[337]](#footnote-336)

All of the candidates were full time political organizers, responsible for the economic support of their families, and native Mississippians. The MFDP admitted that freedom candidates did “not know much legal things.” In its literature, the MFDP countered, that the candidates “have lived the way we have all their lives.” While the MFDP cited the candidates’ collective commitment to black political rights as qualification to “talk for us” in Congress and the Senate, the candidates represented the diversity of freedom workers.[[338]](#footnote-337) Hamer, a SNCC field secretary and former farm laborer; Henry, the state NAACP president and pharmacist; and Gray, an independent businesswoman who had worked with both SNCC and SCLC before joining the MFDP, were all seasoned oppositional candidates, having run in previous elections. Despite the national NAACP’s tepid support for the MFDP following the convention challenge, Henry continued to maintain ties with the MFDP through the fall election.

Annie Devine represented the slowly expanding pool of potential candidates. Devine had lived in Canton since she was a toddler and sold insurance for a black owned company. As a single mother and businesswoman, she joined the COFO staff full time in 1964. Like Gray, Devine possessed some college training, but she always stressed her very simple life and undervalued her abilities as an organizer in her community.[[339]](#footnote-338) Devine had served an important role in Madison County, where one CORE worker termed her a “county diplomat.” She quietly organized in the county, serving as a bridge between student workers, moonshine activists, and supportive small business owners.[[340]](#footnote-339) Devine had long supported the movement but expressed reluctance in becoming a full time organizer. She recognized that in declaring her candidacy she became a publicly recognizable figure in the freedom struggle, which amounted to putting “her life out there.”[[341]](#footnote-340)

On the same day that the Federal Bureau of Investigations announced the arrests of law enforcement officers and local men involved in the killing of three civil rights workers in Neshoba County during the summer, New York lawyer William Kunstler met with Annie Devine, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Victoria Jackson Gray to discuss the MFDP’s planned challenge to the seating of the state’s congressional delegation to the United States House of Representatives. Kunstler, joined by New Jersey attorney Morton Stavis and Ben Smith, a Tulane trained white New Orleans lawyer, replaced Joseph Rauh as the MFDP’s legal team. They were affiliated with the National Lawyers Guild and perceived as practitioners of radical politics who possessed communist sympathies. One SNCC field secretary recalled that during the summer project the NAACP had refused support from the National Lawyer’s Guild. Bob Moses had insisted that redbaiting was irrelevant to the civil rights struggle.[[342]](#footnote-341)

Kunstler, Stavis, and Smith contended that Hebert Ladner, Mississippi Secretary of State, had refused to place the names of MFDP candidates on the November ballot although they had followed the appropriate guidelines.[[343]](#footnote-342) Victoria Jackson Gray had submitted the required petitions to the secretary of state, but Ladner had rejected her application. He informed Gray that county circuit clerks had to approve the signatures of the signers who resided within their jurisdiction before she could file them with the state election commission. When Gray received this information, she had five days to meet the state’s deadline. She attempted to fulfill the requirements as set out by the secretary of state’s office, but she was met with more obstructionism. In Forrest County, the circuit clerk required Gray to rearrange the names according to precinct. She complied, but when Gray returned at the agreed upon time to pick up the petitions, less than one fifth of the names had been certified.[[344]](#footnote-343) Fannie Lou Hamer encountered similar tactics. As a SNCC field secretary traveled to Jackson with signatures endorsing Hamer’s candidacy in the second congressional district, he was pulled over by a Highway Patrol officer, arrested for “some type of disorderly conduct,” and relieved of the petitions.[[345]](#footnote-344)

Unlike the previous Freedom Vote, which had received little attention from white Mississippians, the 1964 election brought repercussions to supporters. A year earlier, hostile white Mississippians had paid little attention to the Freedom Vote organized by civil rights workers among the state’s black population.[[346]](#footnote-345) In 1964, however, businesses that displayed freedom posters were attacked during the election. Rocks were thrown into James King’s restaurant in Ruleville because he had placed posters for the national Democratic and freedom candidates in his windows. Gunshots, fired through the window, riddled the campaign posters.[[347]](#footnote-346) Mrs. Willis Barnett’s café in Itta Bena was burned. [[348]](#footnote-347) Freedom workers, canvassing for the Lyndon Johnson for President campaign, were arrested for “criminal syndicalism” while passing out registration leaflets, detained while distributing Lyndon Johnson campaign literature in downtown Jackson, and jailed on false traffic charges.[[349]](#footnote-348)

Voting took place over a series of days at the end of October and into November. Like the previous year’s mock election, northern volunteers traveled South to assist with the parallel election. Black voters cast protest ballots for Congress, the Senate, and President of the United States in over sixty percent of the state’s eight two counties.[[350]](#footnote-349) Like the previous year’s freedom election, voters cast their freedom ballots in cafes and beauty parlors, churches and auto repair shops, grocery stores and funeral homes. Some people voted in cars newly termed “Votemobiles.” Others, who lived in areas deemed too dangerous, mailed their ballots into the Jackson MFDP headquarters. The final tally counted over sixty three thousand votes for Lyndon Johnson, fifty thousand more than he received in the Mississippi general election. All of the freedom candidates outpolled the official Democratic candidates in the parallel election. None of the vote totals, however, rivaled the number of ballots cast for the Democratic and Republican nominees for Congress in the general election.[[351]](#footnote-350)

In an ironic turn of events, Freedom Democrats were invited to attend President Johnson’s inaugural balls. Following the election, Mike Thelwell, who oversaw the MFDP’s Washington office, had read about the plans for the upcoming inauguration in the newspaper. Thelwell called the White House and reported that the MFDP had been the only organized entity in Mississippi to campaign for Lyndon Johnson re-election. Yet, Freedom Democrats had received no tickets to the upcoming festivities. Thelwell forgot about the exchange until he received a phone call from Holmes County Freedom Democrat Hartman Turnbow. Turnbow announced that he had just received a “*big* envelope” in the mail. Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Jackson Gray, Annie Devine, Ed King, E. W. Steptoe, and Aaron Henry among others also received invitations. The MFDP used the majority of its financial resources to send the invited guests to the inauguration. Hartman Turnbow hoped to be at the same ball as Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson in order to ask Mrs. Johnson to dance.[[352]](#footnote-351)

William Kunstler and the freedom candidates decided that although the MFDP had only run candidates in three of the five congressional districts the MFDP’s claim would challenge the seating of the entire five member delegation. While the 1963 freedom election had illustrated the desire of black Mississippians to exercise political power, the returns from the 1964 freedom and general elections highlighted the distinct political choices of black voters. The legal team would amass evidence, which would prove that county registrars refused to validate petition signatures, the Secretary of State denied candidate applications, and black voters overwhelmingly supported Lyndon Johnson and the freedom candidates in the parallel election.[[353]](#footnote-352)

In addition to their claims that the state had prevented the three women from qualifying as independent candidates and that black Mississippians, if allowed to vote, would select the national Democratic party candidates, MFDP legal team also argued that Mississippi’s congressional delegation was not loyal to the Democratic Party. Representative John Bell Williams had publicly endorsed Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater. The MFDP cited studies published by liberal think tanks that rated the voting records of members of Congress. Representative William Colmer voted with the national party nineteen percent of the time. Representative Jamie Whitten voted most often with the Democratic Party, thirty one percent of the time. The voting patterns for all House Democrats averaged seventy six percent loyalty to the national party’s directives.[[354]](#footnote-353)

The MFDP’s legal team filed the congressional challenge on 5 December 1964 under Title 2 of the United States Code, section 201, which stated that the House of Representatives “shall be composed of members chosen . . . by the people . . . .”[[355]](#footnote-354) Legal volunteers and MFDP staff systematically collected and organized materials on voting and political participation from the previous three election cycles. They catalogued the information according to congressional districts and further delineated reported abuses, differentiating among economic intimidation, terror or violence, unlawful harassment, and general arrests by law enforcement officials. Once the materials were organized by staff members, law students read through the evidence to determine which research explicitly addressed the claim that elected officials lay complicit in disenfranchising black Mississippians.[[356]](#footnote-355) A Harvard University law student identified the necessary legal precedent, contending that there was “no question” that the House had “ample” power under the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to consider the seating of the Mississippi elected representatives.[[357]](#footnote-356) Black Mississippians accounted for forty percent of the state’s population but only five percent of its eligible voters.[[358]](#footnote-357) The MFDP maintained, “We Didn’t Vote-They Cannot Stay in Congress.”[[359]](#footnote-358)

The congressional challenge had alienated some members of the liberal coalition. Initially the MFDP had employed loose language when announcing their plans. Freedom Democrats spoke of replacing the regular delegation with Annie Devine, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Victoria Jackson Gray. Because the names of the three freedom candidates had not appeared on the ballot in the general election, the NAACP and the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) cautioned against statements urging that the freedom candidates assume the seats of Mississippi’s representatives. As the MFDP began to the mount the challenge, it moderated its claims, calling only for the unseating of the members of Congress from Mississippi.

The NAACP and ADA, however, maintained their distance from the challenge. Just after the MFDP announced its plans, Walter Fauntroy, an aide to Martin Luther King, Jr., reported to Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP that King endorsed the congressional challenge. Mitchell counseled, “He must not have read the papers or he wouldn’t have said that.”[[360]](#footnote-359) While the NAACP appeared to be gauging the political expediency of the challenge, the ADA worried that conservative interest groups would one day employ the same tactics as the Freedom Democrats with “dangerous implications.” The ADA argued that the freedom ballot was not an official ballot. As a result, Leon Shull, national director of the ADA, argued that no legal precedent existed to support the MFDP’s claims. Shull agreed that Freedom Democrats had an “undeniable moral and emotional basis [for] their claim” but worried that “some day an emotional but immoral claim might equally sweep the nation.”[[361]](#footnote-360)

As members of Congress walked through underground tunnels from their offices to the Capitol on the opening day of the 1965 congressional session, they were confronted with the silent stares of black Mississippians. Freedom Democrats and their supporters stood ten feet apart along the corridor. They held no signs. Rather, they presented their hard worked bodies and plaintive faces as evidence of the disenfranchisement that had ensured the election of Mississippi’s delegation to the House of Representatives.[[362]](#footnote-361) They hoped that their physical presence, funded by fish fries and community fundraising drives, would persuade the nation’s representatives to vote against the seating of Mississippi’s congressional delegation.[[363]](#footnote-362)

While members of Congress voted on whether to seat the five congressmen from Mississippi, the same dissidents moved outside and waited in silent vigil across the street from the Capitol.[[364]](#footnote-363) Passersby expressed mixed emotions as they encountered the protestors. Some smiled. Some frowned. Some whispered, “Good luck.” Others turned their heads dramatically or muttered under their breath. Despite some negative reactions, one Freedom Democrat remarked that they continued to stand “quietly and bravely” in vigil, sometimes erupting in song. While the Capitol police watched the demonstrators as “wolves watched sheep in the fold” in order to ensure they did not enter the Capitol, a Virginia segregationist, costumed in black face and a tail, walked into the main gallery as the challenge was being considered and yelled, “Ise a freedom democratic party. Seat me!”[[365]](#footnote-364)

In the Capitol, Representative William Ryan, a New York City Democrat, who had been the first member of Congress to denounce the war in Vietnam, introduced a “Fairness Resolution” to delay the swearing in of the Mississippi delegation until the challenge was resolved.[[366]](#footnote-365) As he presented his objection, to the “astonishment” of the MFDP’s legal defense team, nearly fifty members of Congress rose in solidarity.[[367]](#footnote-366) Ryan and his colleagues had been convinced by the physical evidence of black Mississippians, and Ryan offered to serve as the MFDP’s chief ally on the Hill.

Standing before his colleagues, Ryan outlined the systematic disenfranchisement that had emptied black Mississippians from the voter rolls following the demise of the state’s Reconstruction government.[[368]](#footnote-367) Ryan argued that the seventy five year reign of state sanctioned disenfranchisement, protected by every layer of Mississippi’s bureaucracy, from senator to circuit clerk, marked the election of the Representatives-elect from Mississippi “illegal and void.” Although Ryan presumed that a contingent of his colleagues might characterize the unseating of Mississippi’s congressional delegation as “unpleasant” and vote against the MFDP’s petition, he insisted that to support the Mississippi delegation was “to refrain from upholding the essence of our democracy.” In Mississippi, nearly seventy percent of eligible white voters were registered. Following intensive voter registration campaigns of the previous few years, just fewer than seven percent of eligible black voters found their names in the registration books.[[369]](#footnote-368) Black Mississippians had not participated in the election of the Mississippi representatives.

Following Ryan’s statement, Oklahoma Representative Carl Albert offered a resolution to seat the congressmen from Mississippi. The MFDP’s legal team, as well as the attorneys representing the challenged members of Congress, expressed surprise at the number of dissenting voters. Buoyed by an incoming class of activist representatives, more members of Congress than William Kunstler had expected defied the Johnson administration and voted against the seating of Mississippi’s congressional delegation.[[370]](#footnote-369) The MFDP had gained the support of the black members of Congress as well as a large percentage of the liberal coalition.[[371]](#footnote-370) As the vote transpired, James Coleman, former Mississippi governor and legal counsel to the four challenged Democratic representatives, sat with a copy of the notice of contest flipped over as he tallied the count with penciled hash marks and appeared, according to Kunstler, “visibly worried as the nays began to pile up.”[[372]](#footnote-371) Southern commentator William Minor reported that the “seriousness of the situation” of black disenfranchisement became apparent as one third of the members of Congress voted “without any evidence” to unseat Mississippi’s representatives.[[373]](#footnote-372) Despite Ryan’s resolution and the unexpected support of many members of Congress, the MFDP was unable to garner enough support to unseat the Representative-elects from Mississippi. The House agreed to temporarily seat the Mississippi delegation by a vote of 276 to 149 until an investigation could be completed.[[374]](#footnote-373)

Under a contested election statute, the MFDP legal team challenged the right of Mississippi’s congressmen to represent the state’s population. Congressional guidelines established procedures for settling the complaint. The entire inquiry would occupy nearly half of the elected representatives’ two year terms. The MFDP initiated the process by recording a formal challenge within thirty days of the certification of the election results. The challenged representatives then had thirty days to rebut the charges. The Mississippi congressional delegation declined. With the help of an extensive volunteer corps of lawyers and court reporters, the MFDP collected testimony over a forty day period. Utilizing federal subpoena power, hostile witnesses were forced to testify. The contestants were given ten days to accumulate rebuttal testimony. Again, they declined. All of the evidence was presented to Ralph Roberts, the Clerk of the United States House of Representatives. In the late spring of 1965, Roberts determined which depositions to print and distribute to the House Subcommittee on Elections and Privileges, comprised of six southern Democrats and three Republicans and charged with presenting a recommendation to the full House of Representatives.[[375]](#footnote-374)

The state’s political apparatus united against the MFDP’s claim. Governor Paul Johnson urged white Mississippians to avoid violence “for the next six months at least.”[[376]](#footnote-375) One Mississippi newspaper argued that “even the outside chance of a Freedom Party victory must be opposed at every level of influence.”[[377]](#footnote-376) The Sovereignty Commission offered its services in helping to defend the representatives against the challenge. One member of the commission, Hayden Campbell, wrote to Governor Johnson that he viewed the matter as “so serious and so important.” Campbell argued that the large number of volunteer lawyers assisting the FDP provided “conclusive evidence that some organization is putting up tremendous sums of money in a vile effort to destroy our state” and that the Sovereignty Commission should counter with financial support to defray the cost of opposing these “efforts to rob a sovereign state of its duly elected members of Congress.” [[378]](#footnote-377) Senators James Eastland and John Stennis charged that communists were inciting a “Negro revolution” in Mississippi and linked the MFDP and its legal team to the Communist Party.[[379]](#footnote-378) Despite the coordinated resistance, the representatives were required to submit to the legal inquiry.

The MFDP served members of the congressional delegation as well as former and current high level officials with subpoenas, requiring them to testify before hostile black audiences. When Will Palmer delivered a subpoena to former Governor Ross Barnett, the housekeeper quickly slammed the door. Freedom Democrats hand delivered Erle Johnston, the state director of the Sovereignty Commission, his subpoena as he sat in his office in the state capitol. Johnston recalled that in addition to a subpoena, the courier handed him three dollars “for expenses.” Johnston, uncomfortable with a black messenger not only serving him with a subpoena but also handing him a few dollars, declined. Compelled to accept the small payment, Johnston placed the money in the “office coffee fund.”[[380]](#footnote-379) Contested Representative John Bell Williams was on twenty four hour leave from a hospital stay when he found the notice of contest lying in front of his house.[[381]](#footnote-380) Other subpoenas were left with the wives of elected officials or domestics at their homes.[[382]](#footnote-381)

Relenting to federal enforcement powers, white political officials abided by the requirements of the challenge. William Kunstler contended that the January 4 vote had “thoroughly frightened” former Governor James Coleman. Wishing to avoid charges of obstructionism, Coleman helped the MFDP legal team find notaries in rural areas of the state. Despite this assistance, Coleman continued to view Kunstler as an adversary, characterizing him as “very rabid and very hard to deal with.”[[383]](#footnote-382) The two quarreled over the location of public hearings. Ultimately the bulk of the proceedings took place in the state’s most populous locales: Columbus, Natchez, Jackson, and Hattiesburg. Kunstler, however, insisted that the hearings be held in black churches because black Mississippians viewed county courthouses and municipal buildings as hostile locations. Uncomfortable with state officers testifying in a “Negro building,” Coleman arranged for the depositions of elected officials to take place in the federal building in Jackson.[[384]](#footnote-383)

Over the course of three days, MFDP lawyers deposed many of Mississippi’s leading politicians before their nonvoting black constituencies. While MFDP lawyer Morton Stavis questioned Attorney General Joe Patterson, black Mississippians seized upon the unique opportunity. Stavis asked Patterson what he had done to encourage black political participation. When Patterson responded candidly, “I haven’t done anything,” black observers in the room met his statement with claps and boos. They cheered this moment of rhetorical defeat while deriding Patterson’s political record on black rights. At one point during the hearings, thirty young MFDP supporters entered the room. James Coleman insisted that they lock the door to keep out other onlookers. The hearings were not being held “for the entertainment of a local audience,” according to Coleman. “These people,” as he termed the observers, “have no interest in this.” Buttressed by this rare instance of the federal protection of black rights in Mississippi, MFDP legal counsel Morton Stavis retorted, “We will not tolerate the exclusion of any citizen of Mississippi” and continued with the deposition.[[385]](#footnote-384)

In addition to questioning elected officials, the MFDP deposed black Mississippians. Local people shared their ignored stories and made claims to public spaces. They testified to the terror and intimidation they confronted when they attempted to register or vote in Mississippi and to the general condition of black Mississippians.[[386]](#footnote-385) Reverend J. F. McCree, a Madison County Freedom Democrat, testified that despite official claims that black Mississippians received fair treatment in the registrar’s office he had searched for years for a “satisfied Negro.” McCree conceded that he had been unable to find one. When asked if she was a registered voter, Freedom Democrat Laura Graham responded, “This is as far as I have got. Never have voted in my life, never have.” When asked if she knew of black voters in her area, she responded, “Not nary one as I knows of.” During her testimony, Graham displayed a resolve which seemed strengthened by her association with the freedom movement. “We may lose somebody, or we may keep them all alive,” she publicly testified, “but we are going to run through with it as far as we possibly can; going to hold on.”[[387]](#footnote-386) Assisted by over one hundred legal volunteers from around the nation, the MFDP deposed four hundred witnesses, both hostile and friendly, eventually filling two bushel baskets, which held twelve thousand pages of testimony. Congressional procedures allowed for the challenged congressmen to take rebuttal testimonies. They refused. Rather, they hoped that the publicity would die down during the several month long investigation.[[388]](#footnote-387)

During the eight month investigation, the Johnson administration worked to stall the challenge while the President and Congress authored what would become the Voting Rights Act. Popular memory hails the Voting Rights Act as one of the most important legislative victories for black rights, establishing a federally protected franchise. Freedom Democrats, who had been waging a nearly year long challenge to illustrate the lack of black voting rights, contended that while the Voting Rights Act was important, the new law did not ensure immediate access to the franchise. Fannie Lou Hamer, who had spent the previous three years as a full time movement organizer, viewed the new law less optimistically than most. She described the law as a “way of choking off the challenge and all this talk about Selma, Ala. and Louisiana is getting the issue out of Mississippi.”[[389]](#footnote-388) Freedom Democrats had placed the issue of black voting rights before the nation, but peaceful demonstrations in Selma, met by violent police action, had prioritized the passage of a federal voting law before the Mississippi challenge could be settled. In preparation for passage of the Voting Rights Act, the Johnson Administration met with one hundred black leaders. The largest delegation was from Mississippi. It had no representatives from MFDP. Six weeks before the challenge was decided, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law.[[390]](#footnote-389)

In early June, the House clerk, Ralph Roberts, agreed to print nearly all of the depositions collected by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Ten days later, Roberts called the MFDP’s lawyers to inform them that the depositions did not comply with provisions of Title 2. Many of the depositions had not been signed by witnesses. In an apparent act of goodwill, the challenge’s legal team had been told by James Coleman and B.B McLendon, the lawyers representing the Mississippi congressional delegation, that they did not need to be “sticklers” and they would not require these signatures. Coleman and McLendon had insisted that the depositions include only the oath and signature of the court reporter present. When the claim reached the House, however, McLendon, the lone Republican in the delegation and Prentiss Walker’s attorney, assured Roberts that “any stipulations and agreements” that the lawyers had made “would not be binding upon” Roberts in his “official capacity” as clerk of the House of Representatives. Roberts knew that the challenge did not have “White House approval,” and William Kunstler argued that Roberts “seized upon” the letter from McLendon to justify the printing delay. Later in the month, after extensive lobbying, Roberts printed the record in its entirety for the deciding Subcommittee on Elections. In early July, he made the depositions available to the entire Congress.[[391]](#footnote-390)

Supporters of the MFDP and the congressional challenge understood the limitations of the Voting Rights Act. The American Civil Liberties Union continued to support the Mississippi challenge despite the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In a letter to Lawrence Guyot, Alan Reitman, the ACLU Associate Director, argued, “What is at stake . . . is nothing less than the integrity of representative government.” Writing after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, Reitman insisted that the new federal law did not preclude a decision on the challenge. “What is before the House,” he argued emphatically, “is the validity of the elections of November 1964, elections in which state action deprived virtually the entire Negro population of Mississippi of the ballot, and as a result of which Congressmen purporting to represent the people of Mississippi are seated in the House.”[[392]](#footnote-391) Reitman’s statements addressed concerns among movement allies that Congress would be less willing to defy President Johnson and support the unseating of Mississippi’s congressional representatives. Instead, they would rely on the new voting law to monitor future elections. The MFDP and its supporters wanted to rectify past elections.

While some members of Congress argued that the new federal law lessened the need to unseat Mississippi’s representatives, Representative William Ryan, supportive members of Congress, and the nation’s leading civil rights organizations demanded that the challenge receive a full hearing.[[393]](#footnote-392) Ryan and thirty other members of Congress announced their plans to force the challenge to the House floor on 21 September 1965 if the House Administration Committee continued to delay its recommendations on the challenge. Ryan cited over forty previous occasions when the House of Representatives set aside election returns when it was determined that black voters had been excluded from the political process.[[394]](#footnote-393) All of the leading national civil rights organizations (absent the NAACP, who refused to defy the Johnson administration and viewed the MFDP’s challenge as too extreme) and eighteen other national organizations reiterated their support for the challenge.[[395]](#footnote-394) They urged Congress to vote on whether or not the members of Congress from Mississippi should be seated.

Four days later, the Mississippi congressional delegation submitted their response to the MFDP claim in the form of an order to dismiss the challenge. Rather than address the MFDP’s primary claim that new elections should be held to allow for the participation of black voters, the representatives argued that because the MFDP contestants had not appeared on the ballot, they had no legal basis to challenge the seats held by the Regulars. Representative William Colmer termed the MFDP a “self styled” political party, basing its claims on elections “tantamount to straw votes.” [[396]](#footnote-395) The representatives cited official election returns as evidence of the voter mandate that had sent them to Washington, DC. Four of the five members of Mississippi’s congressional election had run unopposed in the general election. The representatives did not address the incidents of terror, harassment, and institutionalized intimidation that Freedom Democrats contended prevented black voters from exercising the franchise in the November 1964 elections.[[397]](#footnote-396)

A week before Representative Ryan’s deadline of the third week of September, and nine months after the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party initiated the congressional challenge, the Subcommittee on Elections met over two days to hold formal hearings. The testimony highlighted the disparity in the ballots cast for the members of Mississippi’s congressional delegation and the freedom candidates. Mississippi’s congressional delegation relied on the returns from the Democratic primary and general election as the basis of its evidence. In the Democratic primary, Fannie Lou Hamer had run against Jamie Whitten and received only 621 votes. In the fall mock election she received over 33,000 votes, less than half of Whitten’s vote total in the legally sanctioned election. Prentiss Walker, the lone Republican in the delegation, had challenged incumbent Arthur Winstead in the November election, receiving nearly seven thousand more votes than his opponent in that contest. Annie Devine had only participated in the mock election, receiving just over nine thousand votes. Victoria Jackson Gray had run against John Stennis in the Democratic primary. In the freedom election she received just over ten thousand votes against William Colmer.[[398]](#footnote-397)

None of the members of the Mississippi congressional delegation admitted to the widespread exclusion of black voters from the electoral process. Unwilling to acknowledge the significance of an underregistered black population, Representative Thomas Abernethy argued that in filing the challenge the MFDP did not want Mississippi “to have a voice” in the House of Representatives.[[399]](#footnote-398) Mississippi Attorney General J.T. Patterson termed it “unfortunate” that the representatives “were forced to go through the harassment and haranguing they did to defend themselves against something that was nothing at all to start with.”[[400]](#footnote-399) In her testimony, Freedom Democrat Annie Devine reminded Representative Prentiss Walker, who she had contested in the freedom election, to acknowledge that fifty six thousand people in the fourth congressional district “had nothing to do with his election.”[[401]](#footnote-400) Similarly, another MFDP witness pleaded to the committee on behalf of black Mississippians. “We have heard them say, ‘My State,’” he testified. “We want them to say ‘Our State.’”[[402]](#footnote-401) The MFDP argued that the five representatives from Mississippi had received such wide margins of victory, four running unopposed on the official ballot, because the name’s of black candidates had been omitted from the general election and black voters had been systematically disenfranchised. Mississippi’s black voting age population had been unable to register its political choice on Election Day.

On 17 September 1965, the challenge came before the full House of Representatives. The Administration Committee recommended that the claim be dismissed because Victoria Jackson Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Annie Devine had not appeared on the official ballot. They lacked the legal position to challenge the official candidates in the general election. The committee suggested that the House of Representatives watch for future electoral discrimination under the new terms of the Voting Rights Act. The final vote totaled 228 to 143 against the unseating. Under pressure from both the majority and minority leaders, the House omitted a statement that read the five Mississippi representatives “are entitled to their seats.”[[403]](#footnote-402)

The profundity of the ten month challenge to Mississippi’s representatives was lost on no one. Fannie Lou Hamer remarked that the final results had unnerved Mississippi’s highest officials. “They were shaking in their boots,” she later boasted to the MFDP executive committee, “stripped of all their manhood.”[[404]](#footnote-403) Just three years after she first registered to vote, Victoria Gray Jackson had run for Senate and challenged the seating of her state’s national representatives. She insisted, “There was not one single doubt in my mind that we had a right to be there.”[[405]](#footnote-404) Three black women had insisted that black votes, which had never determined the election’s of Mississippi’s white male leadership, be counted.

While Thomas Abernethy termed the “so-called contest” the work of individuals who “were from outside the state, are skilled, experienced, and high-powered practitioners of chaos and confusion,” it was a gathering of a couple hundred black Mississippi farmers and domestics, small business owners and sharecroppers, unemployed and undereducated, who stood outside the Capitol in support of the challenge as they had eight months earlier.[[406]](#footnote-405) One Freedom Democrat who worked as a pulpwood cutter earning thirty five dollars a week “when I’m lucky” expected to lose his job upon his return. He made the trip “because somebody needs to take a chance.” “I’ve got 10 heads of children,” he explained. “I don’t want them kicked around like I’ve been.”[[407]](#footnote-406) Freedom Democrat Mildred Cosey was less hopeful. When she learned the results of the congressional vote, Cosey cried. “What’s going to keep you from crying,” she asked when pressed about her tears. “You have tried every means for justice inside the state,” she responded, outlining in broad terms the long process of the challenge. “So you go to the nation’s capitol, and you loose [sic]. Then you ask yourself where to turn, and you can’t find an answer.”[[408]](#footnote-407)

After the vote, the contestants and their lawyers joined the vigil outside the Capitol. Fannie Lou Hamer stepped onto a low wall and addressed her supporters. Like Mildred Cosey, she cried. “I’m not crying for myself,” Hamer assured those assembled before her. “I’m crying for America.” Hamer blamed the complicity of national representatives for the near universal disenfranchisement of black Mississippians. “We not only have been robbed, killed, and murdered in Mississippi,” she argued, echoing Cosey’s dissatisfaction, “we have also been robbed in America.” She insisted that the members of Congress who voted against the unseating continued to “condone what’s going on in Mississippi.”[[409]](#footnote-408)

Lawrence Guyot agreed with Hamer’s assessment. He noted that the “bitter lesson” of the challenge was learning that “the very institutions and men whom we petitioned for relief are very deeply implicated in the crimes committed daily against us.” Freedom Democrats had organized a second national campaign, which forced the nation to acknowledge the widespread disenfranchisement in Mississippi. They spent months collecting evidence, testified to the institutionalized discrimination that blanketed the state’s political process, registered to vote, and cast freedom ballots. Two thirds of the House of Representatives chose to count only the votes of registered voters. The ballots of black voters would remain uncounted until the coming election season. Guyot pledged that the MFDP would return to Mississippi and continue to register the state’s black voting age population, run black candidates, and elect them to political office. “We do not regard either our lives or our constitutional rights,” Guyot declared, “as negotiable items.” Referring to the concessions made at Atlantic City and the solace expected to be found in the Voting Rights Act, Guyot insisted, “We have nothing left to compromise away.”[[410]](#footnote-409) He pledged to return to Mississippi and “tear it apart limb by limb.”[[411]](#footnote-410)

**Chapter 4: An Indigenous Organization**

The chair called the meeting to order. “Will someone please give us a song?” he asked. A volunteer in attendance remarked that freedom songs that had been shared so “spiritedly” a year earlier were sung “listlessly” in the summer of 1965. A prayer followed the song, and then the minutes from the previous meeting and a report from the treasurer were read aloud. The chair raised issues for discussion, relaying information from other organizations in the state. While representing a majority of participants, women did not speak publicly often. Dissenters generally presented their critiques in a “mild and tentative” tone. After a brief discussion of new business, the meeting was adjourned with the collective singing of “We Shall Overcome” and a final prayer. The meeting of the Panola County Freedom Democratic Party resembled a church service, the only previous organizational experience for many black Mississippians. An individual leader, county FDP chair Robert Miles, directed the proceedings as a minister would a Sunday worship service. By the summer of 1965, the meetings had begun to take on a feeling of rote, according to one outside observer.[[412]](#footnote-411)

The Panola County FDP offers a window into local organizing in Mississippi in the year following the summer project. County leadership differed from its membership. Many leaders had been actively involved in voting rights efforts even before the youth movement mobilized the state. They owned land or small businesses. Some of the membership hailed from plantations, but agricultural workers dependent on white employment continued to express fear of the freedom movement in late 1965. Additionally, some middle class leaders expressed hesitancy in organizing among the state’s undereducated laboring population.[[413]](#footnote-412)

Despite organizational claims to establishing a venue for active participation from diverse segments of Mississippi’s black community, in Panola County, more established families led. Robert Miles and C.J. Williams, both independent farmers, served as the primary leaders of the FDP. The two men shared the county leadership with Connie Bell, a beautician whose business relied on support from a black clientele, and two sharecropping families, the Nelsons and the Blacks, who organized among the county’s plantation workers. Robert Miles’ selection as county chair descended from his early leadership in the local voter’s league, which he helped found in 1959. By the summer of 1965, he had consolidated his leadership in a number of the area’s civil rights efforts. In addition to chairing the county FDP, he also chaired the community Head Start committee, the farmer’s co-op, and served as secretary of the West Camp Voter’s League.[[414]](#footnote-413)

The Williams family was actively involved in many aspects of the movement as well. C.J. Williams had demonstrated leadership as a deacon in his church before he managed the county FDP accounts. His wife, Cordie Mae Williams, served as the secretary of the county FDP. The couple’s two high school aged children were active movement participants. The Williams were not as economically secure as the Miles family, but they had more than most. In contrast to the Miles family, who owned one hundred and forty acres of land, two trucks, a tractor, and a combine, the Williams family owned eighty acres, which they farmed with a tractor and a pair of mules. Their home had electricity but lacked plumbing.[[415]](#footnote-414)

The Miles and Williams families were not the wealthiest black farming families in the county. Those families did not participate in the formal organizing campaigns. The Miles and Williams families, however, occupied what one white student volunteer described as the “middle middle class,” relative to the county’s large agricultural workforce as opposed to national income averages. Their resulting economic position offered relief from the most blatant repercussions of white hostility to black activism, but it did not render them immune.[[416]](#footnote-415) Following his first attempt to vote in 1959, white insurers had cancelled all of Robert Miles’ policies. In the summer of 1964, the Miles family home was bombed on two occasions and shot at several more. In the summer of 1965, supporters guarded the structure.[[417]](#footnote-416)

The leadership of the Panola County FDP was active in the church. There they had practiced and honed organizational skills. Although few ministers served as key movement leaders, church members were able to gain access to the church facilities and hold weekly meetings. One Panola County church reflected both the conservatism of the minister and the prevalence of movement propaganda. The walls were adorned with images of a white Jesus as well as movement posters that urged churchgoers to “Register to Vote” and work to “Give them a Future in Mississippi.” In addition to providing a space to practice organizational skills and offer new political ideas, churches also served as one of the few meeting places for rural black residents who spent the week dispersed throughout the county. To ensure a high turnout at FDP meetings, upcoming events were announced during Sunday services, and meetings were regularly held “after it’s passed a Sunday” in order to spread word at weekly church services.[[418]](#footnote-417)

Although the MFDP emerged from the participatory democracy model of SNCC, state chair Lawrence Guyot, widely regarded as an impressive organizer, utilized a more centralized leadership style as he balanced the need for local grassroots organizing with the MFDP’s desire to become a viable political party in Mississippi. In the summer of 1965, white volunteers, enamored with the quiet leadership of SNCC’s Bob Moses and others, began to deride Guyot as a “political boss.” The MFDP, as illustrated through the manner of Guyot and some county chairs, no longer matched volunteer visions of an indigenous movement based on models of participatory democracy.[[419]](#footnote-418)

At the MFDP’s second district convention in the summer of 1965, one volunteer working in Panola County criticized Guyot’s presentation. She remarked that Guyot told “the people” what “the people” would do at the upcoming state convention. Later, participants were charged with selecting delegates and devising a convention constitution. As soon as Guyot suggested a solution, a delegate moved to accept Guyot’s decision. With little discussion, it was agreed upon.[[420]](#footnote-419) The district convention was not a planning meeting but a rally of sorts. Guyot’s rhetorical approach may have been strategic. The MFDP was immersed in the congressional challenge, and with the passage of the Voting Rights Act approaching, the prospects for a successful challenge were not high. Guyot’s address could have served to inspire Freedom Democrats towards unifying future goals, making them feel part of a larger movement.

The county organization of the MFDP shared many similarities with the top down decision making of the church and reflected the social deference borrowed from rigid black/white relations rather than ideals of participatory democracy. In theory, county chairs like Robert Miles served as members of the MFDP Executive Committee. Their presence would ensure a united political vision across the state as well as provide a venue for county chairs to share the concerns of their members. The reality of organizing among Mississippi’s rural communities, however, was quite different. Distance and expense prevented many county chairs from attending meetings. As a result, Annie Devine, Victoria Jackson Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, Lawrence Guyot, and members of the Jackson FDP were most active in setting organizational priorities. Without the voices of county leadership present, the central meetings often prioritized national considerations over local organizing goals and reduced the emotional investment of county leaders in the committee’s decisions.[[421]](#footnote-420)

The proceedings at the second district convention mirrored a similar phenomenon as that observed at Panola County FDP meetings. Rather than participate in state level decision making, Robert Miles often shared information as it had been relayed to him and then directed local efforts according to local needs rather than state mandates. Local people deferred to more entrenched leadership. Initiatives were determined by Miles and a few other Freedom Democrats, who were the primary shapers of the Panola County FDP agenda. The same individuals served on committees. When individuals were nominated for a leadership position, there was little opposition. Few alternatives were offered, and no one voiced dissent. Once an individual was nominated, they, in turn, nominated the person who nominated them. At the 1965 district convention, only one plantation worker was nominated. He had demonstrated leadership in the county Mississippi Free Labor Union, a collective launched by the Delta Ministry to address the labor concerns of agricultural workers.[[422]](#footnote-421)

While a few plantation families organized in their communities, they did not generally speak up at the county meetings. In Panola County, it was more likely that the FDP rank and file would express its burgeoning political awareness at the weekly literacy classes. The students were typical of individuals the MFDP hoped to recruit into the movement, organize around the need for social change, and register to vote as Democrats. Because of the demands of agricultural labor, they lacked formal education and access to community institutions. Volunteer teachers, excited by theories of democratic inclusion, amplified instruction of basic reading and writing skills by encouraging adult students to think critically about their social and economic conditions. During one class, students described their home state. “Mississippi is the worst place in the world,” they agreed and described it as the “toughest place we have for colored people.” The adult students blamed both black and white Mississippians. They contended that the “colored people didn’t understand what was good for them” while acknowledging that “[c]olored people work hard and don’t get enough for it.” The literacy classes, not the county meetings, provided a venue for the less formally trained to express their emerging political identity.[[423]](#footnote-422)

Throughout 1965, the number of fulltime movement workers declined. The primary state-level leadership of the organization, rested in the older black Mississippians who had exercised leadership earlier in the decade as members of the NAACP or as SCLC citizenship school teachers like Victoria Jackson Gray. They collaborated with college age Mississippians like Lawrence Guyot who blossomed under the mentorship of the field secretaries employed by SNCC and the CORE. The MFDP’s county leadership like Robert Miles primarily rested in the farmers and independent business owners who exercised some economic independence in their rural communities and who had spearheaded early improvement efforts. Laborers, who had little experience with formal organizations or political activity in the years prior to the Freedom Vote and the convention challenge and who relied on white employers, served as the organization’s membership and emergent leadership.[[424]](#footnote-423) Throughout 1965, the MFDP struggled with how to define itself as a political party in communities where local people needed not only an organizational home in which to practice exercising political power but also an organizational body to assist them in procuring federal assistance, gaining access to employment, and enrolling their children in integrated schools.[[425]](#footnote-424)

“Freedom” permeated the black communities of Mississippi and seeped into the lexicon of young people. For over a year Mississippi’s rural counties had been inundated with civil rights organizers: young out of state activists representing national organizations, college age Mississippians who found focus in civil rights work, older community members who had been part of the subterranean web of resistance, the state’s laboring population, and white college age volunteers from the North. Although much of the MFDP’s internal energies focused on the Congressional Challenge during the first half of 1965 and the droves of volunteers diminished following the summer of massive organizing, the climate of resistance permeated isolated pockets of the state that had served as centers of organizing the summer before.[[426]](#footnote-425)

The energy of revolt that climaxed in the summer of 1964 influenced the thoughts, language, and decisions of high school students, bursting with the confidence of adolescence and bristling against the limitations always present but now compounded as they considered their own imminent crossing into adulthood. Inspired by the black and white college students who had mobilized the adults in their communities around demands for political access and nurtured by parents, newly politicized by the movement, they staged their own challenges. These high school students were the children of Freedom Democrats. Students not only demonstrated for the adult Movement’s demands but also fought to remedy their most immediate concerns: individual rights of self-expression, an end to corporal punishment, and the integration of schools. The activism of their families around the vote encouraged their own articulation of the specific grievances of their uniquely precarious position in the community.[[427]](#footnote-426)

Throughout the state, young people built upon civil rights networks to stage local actions. They demanded that their community leaders, members of the state’s small black professional class, address the needs facing them as the children of the community’s laborers. In Issaquena County, initial protests against the limits to free speech in their schools blossomed into broad based critiques of segregated, inferior, and overcrowded schools.[[428]](#footnote-427) In Sunflower County, student demonstrators, led by the county FDP chair, walked out of George Washington Carver Elementary School and Gentry High School in solidarity with the Issaquena County boycott. After one week, two thousand students were reported to be “out.” In Magnolia, students agitated for access to the franchise. They held signs that read “literacy tests must go,” “ballots not bombs,” “out with Jim Crow laws.” Emboldened, they sang, “Aint afraid of nobody cause I want my freedom.”[[429]](#footnote-428) As the United States government compelled southern school boards to implement desegregation in order to receive federal funding, Karel Weissberg, a northern volunteer, identified school integration as the “main thing” in the Panola County community where she worked.[[430]](#footnote-429) Similarly, in a late July meeting, the Tippah County FDP’s discussed whether to boycott the school and determined that “everyone was for it.”[[431]](#footnote-430) In the Fall of 1965, Mississippi would begin its “Freedom of Choice” program. Each year integrating a few grade levels with a few black students.[[432]](#footnote-431)

In Issaquena County, a student led boycott began when the black high school principal forbade students to wear SNCC buttons to school. Borrowing protest techniques from the larger movement, the students first tried to negotiate. Then they demonstrated. Next they created a parallel institution. Finally, they grappled with both the complexities presented and the possibilities available in effecting change. Describing what had led to the Issaquena County school boycott, one protesting student composed a variation of “It Isn’t Nice,” utilizing the same melodic cadences prevalent in the protest song of the adult led Civil Rights Movement. She published her song as the boycotting students debated the success of their action amidst internal disagreements over whether or not to return to the county high school for the 1965 fall semester.[[433]](#footnote-432)

It isn’t nice, it isn’t nice

I told you once, I told you twice,

But if that’s Freedom price,

We don’t mind.

We don’t mind, no, no, no,

We don’t mind.

The controversy had begun in the last week of January 1965 when Rebecca Merrill, a nineteen-year-old Issaquena County resident and COFO worker, distributed SNCC buttons emblazoned with the image of white and black clasping hands to her classmates. On occasion, student activists pressured their less political classmates to don the pin. Hoping to thwart the disagreement, their teacher sent the quarrelling students to the principal’s office. Principal O.E. Jordan attested to being more concerned with the disruption to normal school business than the conflict over the students’ conflict. He questioned the two students about the pervasiveness of the pins throughout the school. He sent them to canvas classrooms. If students with buttons were found, he insisted that they report to the office. Thirty students filed into the office and were instructed by the principal that they could wear pins to school, but not the SNCC pin. They were causing too much conflict among students.[[434]](#footnote-433)

Although Jordan’s personal political beliefs were obscured by the larger controversy, as a school principal, he had gained access to a select position among the county’s black population of agricultural laborers. His esteemed position placed him precariously between the demands of the county’s white leadership and the needs of his black students. Jordan, one of a small number of black professionals in the county, understood the potential danger to the students, his professional future, and school funding should the news of the prevalence of pins at the high school reach the county’s white administrators. The presence of students adorned with civil rights pins could mark the school as a center of organizing, establishing it as a target for economic and physical retaliation from the county’s white controlled school board.[[435]](#footnote-434)

It isn’t nice to disobey Jordan

When he tells you to disobey

Freedom. There are nice ways of

Doing it, but the nice ways always fail.

The students, frustrated with Jordan’s caution and angered by what they perceived as his “Uncle Tom”-like behavior, met over the weekend to discuss what to do next. They decided not to acquiesce to the principal’s demand. They wore their pins to school. Again, the principal called those wearing the SNCC pin into his office. This time, however, they could not fit. Nearly two hundred students had worn the pin in defiance of the principal’s demand. The students refused to take off the SNCC button. The principal relented and ordered them to return to class. Upon returning to their classrooms, the teachers, whose employment also rested on the benevolence of the white school superintendent, also expressed concern over the growing political controversy.[[436]](#footnote-435) They refused to let the students return to their classrooms if they were wearing the political buttons. In school districts where hiring and firing lay in the hands of white elected school board officials, black educators feared losing their salaried positions. Hoping to stem the controversy and ease the teachers’ nervousness, Jordan cancelled classes in order to hold a meeting with the school’s staff. He then returned to the students who he had assembled in the school’s auditorium.[[437]](#footnote-436)

Emboldened by their numbers and the unique situation, the protesting students chose this opportunity to ask the principal pointed questions. They wondered how he would feel if his children were treated as they were, beaten with a wooden paddle as punishment by the school’s administrator in charge of discipline, Junior Norris. They asked why no black citizens sat on the school board. And they asked him if he was a registered voter. They called him an “Uncle Tom.” Their questions reflected the great divide between black professionals who had quietly agitated for civic and professional opportunities and the mass of the area’s laboring population who, ignored for so long, now responded angrily to the perceived prudence of middle class members of the black community.[[438]](#footnote-437)

It isn’t nice for Jr. Norris to

Beat the kids for wearing pins.

There are nice ways of doing it,

but the nice ways always fail.

The following day, Tuesday, nearly four hundred students defiantly wore the SNCC buttons to school. Speaking from his own cautiousness, or that of the white leadership that ensured his employment, the principal cited a code that authorized him to suspend or expel students for disrupting school activities. Attempting to intimidate the protesting students into obedience, Jordan threatened the demonstrators with suspension and dramatically waved their school records in the air, contending that all except fifty of the protesting students were in jeopardy of failing their classes. The students refused to relent to the principal’s scare tactics, and the next day over three hundred students continued to wear SNCC pins to school. Unable persuade the students to cease wearing the controversial political buttons, Principal Jordan suspended the demonstrators. As they left the building, the students reported that Jordan smugly waved “Bye” as the two hundred suspended students boarded their buses for home. In this increasing struggle for power, both the students and the school’s leadership had become firmly entrenched in what they deemed nonnegotiable sides.[[439]](#footnote-438)

It isn’t nice for Mr. Jordan to

throw the kids out of school,

There are nice ways of doing it

but the nice ways always fail.

That night the students and their parents, led by Unita and Jeremiah Blackwell and other members of the county FDP, met to discuss the mass suspension and the stipulations with which the principal required the students to comply in order to return to school. The principal insisted that the students promise not to participate in civil rights activities, citing the wearing of political buttons as active participation in the Civil Rights Movement. He also forbade the students to work for COFO, join the county FDP or the Mississippi Student Union. They could not hold mass meetings or go in groups to the courthouse to assist individuals who were registering to vote. The parents of the suspended students determined these restrictions to be unfair and pledged to support their children in a boycott of the county high school. Following the parent meeting, seven hundred students remained home from school. The same day, the county’s all white school board refused to meet with the parents of the suspended students.[[440]](#footnote-439)

It isn’t nice for Mr. Jordan to

call the High Sheriff and Patrolman,

when the parents went to

see him about the kids out of school.[[441]](#footnote-440)

The suspended students remained out of school for much of the semester, attending the civil rights affiliated Freedom School instead. COFO workers had established the freedom school model during the 1964 summer project to advance critical thinking, augment traditional classroom instruction, infuse the curriculum with African American history, and educate community members in the basics of both civic education and revolutionary theory. Six months after the summer project ended, the suspended students, their parents, and local organizers resurrected this model when establishing a learning community outside of the local high school. At the Freedom School, housed in a Baptist church outside Mayersville, the suspended students were taught basic skills as well as, according to one student, “how to be a better fighter in the Movement.”[[442]](#footnote-441)

As the new academic year approached, the suspended high school students debated in the newsletter of the Mississippi Student Union, an emerging organization for young people actively engaged in the questions of integration and equal access, whether they should return to school for the Fall semester. One student, K.D. Stewart worried that if the protesting students remained outside the county school system they would be excluded from the county’s belated implementation of the *Brown v. Board of Education*school integration decision that was to begin with the fall term. Stewart feared that the students who had not joined the boycott would ridicule the suspended students for their bold actions, but he argued that any gains towards improving the quality of instruction and student rights rested with the more vocal and insistent student agitators. According to Stewart, not going back equaled running away. Rather than reject the traditional school system, Stewart urged the young dissenters to return and reap the benefits of integrated education while tutoring their peers in resistance.[[443]](#footnote-442)

The hesitancy expressed by these activist students over whether to re-enter the county school system mirrored issues that emerged in the broader movement. In their debate over whether to maintain their principled position or accept a compromise and participate in the initial step of change, the gradual integration of the county high school, the boycotting students questioned what segment of Mississippi’s black population would benefit from the gains made by agitators. Stewart worried that he and the other young protestors would be deemed “troublemakers” and therefore overlooked as white school officials sought less insistent students who would be pleased simply with access to previously all white institutions and cause the least amount of disruption. Like their parents who had chanted and sang, boycotted and struck, registered and petitioned to vote, although the instigators of change, these student agitators would be considered disruptive forces as school integration began.[[444]](#footnote-443)

In the early June heat of 1965, nearly five hundred people affiliated with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party assembled at the squat cinder block building that housed the Morningstar Church in Jackson’s black neighborhood. Serious and determined, these black Mississippians, representing counties from across the state, and their white allies defiantly walked in pairs down the sidewalk towards downtown Jackson and the state capitol for the first time since the assassination of state NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers two years earlier. As the protestors neared the Sun ‘N Sands Motel, just a few blocks from the capitol building, Police Captain Ray approached MFDP chair Lawrence Guyot and asked him if he had a permit to parade. He did not. Ray asked if he had applied for one. No, he had not. Ray ordered the protestors to disperse, or they would be arrested. The demonstrators refused to move, and the police began taking them into custody. As the number of arrested protestors began to exceed the capacity of the county jail, they were sent to the state fairgrounds in downtown Jackson. There they were detained in the buildings traditionally used to house fair exhibits.[[445]](#footnote-444)

MFDP chair Lawrence Guyot insisted on the primacy of political action, but without a registered electorate the MFDP’s vision of itself as a viable political party stalled. While continuing to encourage voter registration and political education workshops, the MFDP also relied on traditional movement tactics, like those employed by the Issaquena County student boycotters, to arouse public sentiment and gain national media attention. When the state legislature convened in special session to liberalize state voting requirements, Guyot mobilized county FDP members to picket at the state capitol. Hundreds of Freedom Democrats, summer volunteers, and allies from the state’s civil rights network traveled to Jackson to protest the special session of the legislature called by Governor Paul Johnson and to challenge the legality of this governmental body elected by the state’s white voters.[[446]](#footnote-445)

The governor and state legislators had hoped to quickly and quietly revise the state constitution in anticipation of the passage of the Voting Rights Act later in the summer. They authored a referendum that would reduce or omit the most blatantly discriminatory state voting laws in an effort to avoid the punitive measures of federal registrars and federal oversight expected to be included in the new law. If the legislature succeeded in its goals for the special session, Mississippi would no longer require potential voters to interpret a section of the state constitution selected by the county registrar and would reduce the number of questions on the registration form. With the interpretation provision of the voter test, county registrars had exercised broad subjective power in determining who would become a state voter and who would not. Legislators also considered requiring all voters to prove their literacy. This new provision would reduce the white voting population by removing white Mississippians who lacked basic reading skills from voter rolls while maintaining low rates of black voter registration. Measures such as these would strengthen the state’s argument that the restrictive voting laws in Mississippi maintained an educated and informed electorate, rather than discouraged and denied black registrants.[[447]](#footnote-446)

The state’s new strategy troubled the MFDP. Voting rights organizers worried that the state’s last minute effort to liberalize voting laws would appease the federal government and further delay the widespread registration of black Mississippians. Black Mississippians and their allies needed the state’s elected officials to remain intransigent. The MFDP expected that with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, federal oversight and the deployment of federal registrars, Mississippi would incur its most severe restrictions, dramatically increasing the black vote. With recently passed provisions making Mississippi’s registration procedures less explicitly discriminatory, the state could evade the punitive aspects of a federal voting law.[[448]](#footnote-447)

Governor Paul Johnson’s call for the special legislative session coincided with the Mississippi Supreme Court’s overruling of a two-year ban on demonstrations in Hinds County, home of the state capital, Jackson. Hoping to eliminate the street demonstrations that arose in response to the assassination of the state’s NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, the state court had banned mass mobilizations in the Summer of 1963. Two years later, the court ruled that while the lower court’s ruling had been necessary in 1963 due to “imminent, perilous and dangerous circumstances,” the current situation in the state was less heightened and “relative peace and quiet prevailed” in Jackson. The confluence of the end of the moratorium on demonstrations in the state capital and the convening of a special legislative session created the perfect opportunity for Freedom Democrats to picket the capitol building in Jackson.[[449]](#footnote-448)

One week after the Mississippi Supreme Court lifted the ban on street demonstrations, the MFDP mobilized its membership, urging them to converge on Jackson. The demonstrations and subsequent detainments continued for two weeks. Those detained ranged from agricultural workers and domestics to national civil rights leaders and their representatives. With ranks needing to be reinforced, James Forman, executive secretary of SNCC; Charles Evers, state field secretary of the NAACP; and more than seventy “cotton choppers” from Cleveland, Mississippi joined the protests in Jackson. Although the demonstrations also included the mostly white summer volunteers who had just arrived in the state to assist with voter registration and canvassing, Freedom Democrats from across Mississippi constituted the majority of demonstrators. The MFDP reported that participants traveled from thirty-five of Mississippi’s eighty-two counties with very few demonstrators from out of state. Over the course of this two-week period of MFDP led demonstrations, police arrested over one thousand demonstrators. With the massive arrests, the focus of the MFDP’s protest shifted from drawing attention to the special legislative session to publicizing the police brutality and mass detainment of peaceful demonstrators.[[450]](#footnote-449)

In the first days of detainment, the fairgrounds functioned as an oppositional community where dissenters shared strategy and strengthened political education. At the “Fairgrounds Motel,” as demonstrators ironically termed their detention facility, police separated men and women into two buildings traditionally used to display fair exhibits. After the detainees attempted to integrate themselves, police not only segregated those arrested according to gender but also according to race. March leaders and white women were taken to the city jail. Police hoped that by separating the demonstration’s organizers from the mass of protestors, the spirit of those detained would ebb. As the prisoners’ confinement continued for several days, some of those detained at the fairgrounds lost their enthusiasm for the protest, but many demonstrators, in the face of constant harassment, continued to support the call for action in Jackson.[[451]](#footnote-450)

The detainees testified to the “typical” treatment at the fairgrounds in sworn affidavits. They found themselves harassed by food workers, police, and medical staff. In the first two days of demonstrations, thirty people were treated at the University Medical Center for injuries. Those responsible for feeding the detainees, prisoners from the city jail, either over or under salted the meals, making them inedible. Police did not provide enough mattresses for prisoners, and the mattresses furnished to the detainees were removed during the day, allowing nowhere to sit comfortably. Of the two doctors provided to assist with medical care, one regularly insulted the detainees.[[452]](#footnote-451)

Maggie Gordon traveled to the demonstrations from Holmes County and was arrested while participating in the march to the capitol. Like numerous others, she was assaulted by the police at the state fairgrounds and harassed by city officials upon her return home. A larger woman, she was ordered by the police to rise from where she sat in the exhibition hall at the fairgrounds. Not responding quickly enough to the command, the police grabbed and pushed her. Gordon was not wearing underwear because she had washed it and set it out to dry. Slowed by her size and modesty, Gordon was rough handled by the police. When she managed to stand up, the police “pulled and stretched me and tore my clothes off me.” Once standing, she defended herself against the physical attack, throwing her fists and a round of expletives. After a lengthy exchange, the police overpowered Gordon and moved her to the Jackson jail, placing her in a solitary cell. Upon returning to Holmes County, Gordon’s house was set on fire. That same night, rather than investigate the arson, police arrested Gordon for selling mortgaged property.[[453]](#footnote-452)

Freedom Democrats released information about the police abuse in Jackson to national newspapers. The Jackson police denied using excessive force against the demonstrators and threatened to sue the MFDP for misrepresenting the situation in the press. With the help of the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC), the MFDP collected over sixty-five signed statements like that of Maggie Gordon, which attested to the harsh treatment levied against the demonstrators who were detained at the fairgrounds. MFDP brutality complaints ranged from allegations that police beat and kicked a pregnant Pike County woman to complaints that male prisoners were assaulted and forced to pass through a police gauntlet. Alvin Bronstein, director of the Mississippi LCDC, divulged that top police officials had admitted privately to him that there was “a lot of friction” between police and protestors during the weeks of demonstrations.[[454]](#footnote-453)

Although the leadership of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party hoped that the national press would treat the Jackson demonstrations with the same noteworthiness as they did the police actions in Selma earlier that Spring, other events had begun to supplant civil rights demonstrations on the nation’s front pages. Congress was debating the passage of the Voting Rights Act. The MFDP’s own congressional challenge was still being waged. And, the Vietnam War was escalating. The MFDP noted that initially the *New York Times* reported on the Jackson detainments, and its reporter appeared everywhere for three days, submitting, “scrupulously fair reports” to his office. Yet, according to Freedom Democrats, news of the Vietnam War saturated the newspaper’s front pages and the reports on Mississippi were “buried somewhere in a morass of print” in the interior of the first section. Although the detention facility at the fairgrounds continued to fill and the treatment levied against those arrested worsened, Jackson would not serve as a national catalyst for change as the violence in Selma had. One summer volunteer, who had been arrested during the demonstrations, shared news of the continued detainments with her northern supporters. She feared that with a “news blackout” they would never learn of the abuse police were directing towards peaceful protestors in Jackson.[[455]](#footnote-454)

First they prayed. Then they wrangled over their political endorsements. They exalted their God who would “touch us with the divine finger of inspiration” as they seized this moment to participate in government. Although they acknowledged “still droopin’ in the darkness of fear,” they knew this to be both a “day of courage” and a “day of militancy.” Paying respect to those who had risked so much to ensure the possibility of a franchise, they intoned, “Amen,” and began in song. The Freedom Democrats of Panola County then turned the meeting over to their chair, Robert Miles. Five hundred Freedom Democrats had gathered at the West Camp Church to learn how to fill out ballots and listen to the county FDP’s recommendations for the next day’s election. They would have to vote on a ballot referendum and to replace a recently deceased state senator. This would stand as one of the first elections following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, just a week after the new federal measure was signed into law.[[456]](#footnote-455)

Despite the June demonstrations in Jackson, the state legislature had met in special session to revise Mississippi’s voting laws. State residents were expected to vote on the legislature’s referendum that would reduce the number of questions on the voter registration application from twenty one to six. Although the MFDP had protested the meeting of the legislature as an illegal act, the state executive committee determined that it would seem odd for black Mississippians to endorse the maintenance of conservative voting requirements. Publicly, the MFDP termed the change “political redemption,” and Lawrence Guyot urged Freedom Democrats to vote “yes” on the referendum.[[457]](#footnote-456) Privately, the MFDP believed that if black Mississippians supported the referendum white voters, who were split over the issue, would vote against it. This would leave Mississippi with one of the harshest voting requirements in the nation, increasing the possibility for successful litigation against the state while ensuring the implementation of the most punitive measures of the Voting Rights Act.[[458]](#footnote-457)

In Panola County, Freedom Democrats met to discuss whether to vote for or against what they termed “the change.” As the Panola County Freedom Democrats debated their endorsement of the referendum, county leaders counseled those in attendance to set aside emotion and vote with “reason and common sense.” The leadership worried that Panola County Freedom Democrats would resist voting for the referendum because they had been recruited by the state office to join the demonstrations in Jackson against the legislative session. While a few Freedom Democrats opposed endorsing the referendum, most of the participants, influenced by county leaders, chose the more pragmatic course of backing the referendum. Supporters of the referendum argued that while it was clear that the legislature hoped to escape the most punitive measures of the Voting Rights Act the reality of a six-question exam would translate into a greater number of black registered voters.[[459]](#footnote-458)

After Panola County FDP chair Robert Miles endorsed the referendum, Clara Lawson stood up to question his choice. Earlier in the summer, Lawson’s mother had been one of twenty Panola County residents to participate in the MFDP’s protests in Jackson. She had believed that the legislators were acting illegally when they drew up the referendum because black voters had not participated in their election, and she had been jailed. Lawson and her husband had paid one hundred dollars for her mother’s bail. Clara Lawson refused to support a referendum that she and her family had earlier protested. Repackaging the June demonstrations, county leaders attempted to convince Lawson that they had protested the need for a permit to demonstrate not the legislature’s actions. Finally, they criticized her for “confusing the people,” and with few dissenters, the Panola County Freedom Democrats followed the direction of their leadership and voted to endorse the change to the registration form. [[460]](#footnote-459)

Following discussions on the referendum, the new voters discussed which candidate to endorse for state senate. A local legislator had died, and his position needed to be filled. Freedom Democrat LaOvida Glover had privately asked Robert Miles to consider her as a candidate, but he had turned her down. Because there were not enough black voters to determine elections in Panola County, Miles chose not to run a black candidate for the post.[[461]](#footnote-460) As a result, there were no candidates on the ballot, black or white, who openly endorsed civil rights or courted black voters. Clara Lawson, again dissenting, informed her peers that she would not vote for a candidate because none of the candidates for state senator represented her interests. The county leadership agreed that there were no friendly candidates on the ballot, but they argued that black voters should demonstrate their potential electoral strength by uniting behind one candidate.[[462]](#footnote-461)

Freedom Democrats spent the rest of the meeting debating which of the segregationist candidates to endorse. They had invited each of the contenders to address the gathering. One had agreed to come, another had declined, and the final two had remained noncommittal. Ultimately, none of the candidates for state senator sought the endorsement of the Panola County FDP. Lacking information with which to make a decision, Freedom Democrats relied on anecdotal evidence. One Freedom Democrat relayed to the group that when he had contacted one of the candidates for office the candidate had informed him that black votes “would go unappreciated.” Attempting to positively spin one of the other choices, another Freedom Democrat pointed out that one of the remaining candidates had never publicly uttered “anti-Negro” sentiments and had “cordially” refused to speak at the meeting. Freedom Democrats noted that one of the other candidates, a registered Democrat, had supported Republican Barry Goldwater in the previous year’s presidential election. With no candidate vying for their votes, Panola County Freedom Democrats were at a loss over how to exercise their influence among a field of segregationists.[[463]](#footnote-462)

As the debate continued, one Freedom Democrat drew a parallel to the 1964 presidential election. He argued that when Barry Goldwater ran against Lyndon Johnson, Freedom Democrats understood that Goldwater “wasn’t for us.” While Johnson had not exhibited unequivocal support for black rights, without a civil rights candidate he was considered to be “our next best friend,” according to this strategist. He summed up his analysis with the elementary conclusion, “And we had to vote for him.” This Panola County Freedom Democrat lobbied the county organization to endorse a candidate to serve as the “next best friend,” or least offensive candidate, of black voters until the county FDP was better equipped to run one of “our own friends” for public office.[[464]](#footnote-463)

One observer at the meeting grew frustrated as he listened to the discussions concerning the county FDP’s endorsements of both the referendum and a legislative candidate. Eugene Turitz, a white volunteer, contended that one of the most vocal and persuasive participants in the meeting was considered by county Freedom Democrats to be an “Uncle Tom” who shared information from the county meetings with members of the white community. C.J. Williams, who managed the COFO bank account and whose wife served as the county FDP secretary, was one of few dissenters who stood up and criticized this individual’s endorsement. Despite the objection made by Williams, most Freedom Democrats in attendance continued to listen to the individual they privately described as a collaborator with segregationists.[[465]](#footnote-464)

In this mid August meeting of the Panola County Freedom Democratic Party, novice voters within an emerging political machine wrestled with the pragmatic decisions of politics. Discussions over the referendum and which segregationist candidate to support blurred the lines of political absolutes and raised important questions about strategic voting, utilizing effective bloc voting, and endorsing white candidates with no clear agenda on civil rights. As an outsider, Turitz was baffled by the mild dissent expressed in the meeting. He had understood the summer demonstrations to be against the meeting of the legislature and silently questioned the MFDP’s changing position. Only two Freedom Democrats publicly defied the county endorsement and shared that they would not vote for the change to the voter registration test. Only Clara Lawson insisted that she would not spend her vote on a segregationist candidate.[[466]](#footnote-465)

Once discussions over the county organization’s endorsement of a position on the referendum and a local candidate for legislator concluded, Panola County Freedom Democrats turned to the fundamentals of casting ballots. Facilitators warned first time voters of the anxiety they might experience as they traveled to polling stations, which were generally located in white areas of the county. In addition, voters were instructed to take their time and read the directions on the ballot. Many of the ballots of black voters had been disqualified during the Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) elections the preceding year because they had been marked incorrectly. On the next day’s ballot, voters were reminded to place only two marks: one for the change to a six-question voter registration exam and one for their choice of candidate for the state legislature. Expressing his unfamiliarity with the process, one Freedom Democrat asked how he should fold the ballot. He was informed that white voters had no universal folding method. The Panola County Freedom Democrats concluded that folding the ballot as one would a letter should suffice.[[467]](#footnote-466)

Although, Rice Pritchard, a white Mississippian who operated both a cotton gin and lumberyard, employed twenty-five black workers, he expected that none of them would vote. “My people aren’t registered,” he insisted in the Spring of 1965,” – I don’t fool with any of those smart niggers.” Implying the subservience he expected from his employees, Pritchard admitted, “But if any of them did I’d sure call them in and ask them what they mean.” Roger Weston, a black field hand in Tallahatchie County, echoed the uncertainty Pritchard’s comments were intended to encourage. “Maybe I could register and nothing would happen,” he conceded. “Maybe my boss wouldn’t fire me. Maybe no one would burn my house, throw me in the river or shoot through my door.” After delineating the possibility of escaping retaliation, Weston concluded, “But I expect they would, so I haven’t registered and don’t intend to.”[[468]](#footnote-467) Just two months after Rice Pritchard and Roger Weston were interviewed, the Voting Rights Act was signed into law. The immediate results were incredibly tangible. In the Fall following the passage of the new law, voter rolls increased significantly. The number of black registered voters in Mississippi doubled from twenty eight thousand to fifty seven thousand by the end of October.[[469]](#footnote-468)

When SNCC researchers closely examined the new registration figures, however, they urged celebrants to temper their enthusiasm. Although “significant gains” in voter registration had been made, they were “concentrated in a few areas” -- nine counties with federal registrars, the larger cities of Natchez and Vicksburg, and along the “relatively ‘liberal’ Gulf Coast,” a region of the state with a small black population as well as a significant tourist industry. The counties where federal registrars had worked since the August passage of the Voting Rights Act accounted for nearly half of the twofold increase. Half of the remaining fifteen thousand new registrants lived in Natchez, Vicksburg, and along the Gulf Coast. The remaining seven thousand newly registered black Mississippians resided in the state’s sixty-three other counties. To ensure that the implementation of the voting law expand to the majority of Mississippi’s counties and into the Delta where most black Mississippians lived, voting rights advocates needed to continue to actively organize among Mississippians potential black electorate.[[470]](#footnote-469)

Not only did the new law create numerical change, but also it rearranged customs of subservience and deference. White Mississippians feared that as black Mississippians secured access to the ballot and other methods of institutional change they would demonstrate a new defiance. The comments of Odie Rose illuminate the newly expressed freedom of black voter registrants. On the day he registered to vote, Odie Rose, a Freedom Democrat from Benton County, walked out of the courthouse amidst white folks milling around the county square. In the Spring of 1964, when Hartman Turnbow and other Holmes County farmers had attempted to register to vote, they were met outside the courthouse by the county sheriff. A year and a half later, Odie Rose walked in and out of the courthouse unmolested. Aware that white observers knew that he had just registered, Rose insisted that he did not worry about their stares. He exclaimed, “I felt big . . . . I felt like I owned that courthouse that day.” His rhetorical claims evidenced a new sense of physical and spatial control.[[471]](#footnote-470)

Because the Voting Rights Act reoriented the relationship of black Mississippians to governmental institutions, Mississippi’s elected officials discouraged the application of the new law. Although the Voting Rights Act provided for the registration of illiterate citizens, most county registrars refused to register black citizens who lacked basic reading skills. In an affidavit filed with the Justice Department, an attorney assisting the MFDP complained that state Attorney General Joseph Patterson had advised county registrars to overlook the simpler requirements in the federal voting law. Despite his own opposition to the federal protection of black rights, Patterson ultimately forwarded a memorandum to county registrars, instructing them to use the simpler registration form mandated by the federal government. Although Patterson directed registrars to use the federal application form, he provided them with ample cause to delay, cautioning that they may have to discontinue receiving applications until they acquired the new form.[[472]](#footnote-471)

County registrars, who were also hostile to the new law, suspected that Mississippi’s state officials would not discipline them if they refused to implement the federal law. They ignored the simpler federal requirements. When the registrar in Harrison County met with MFDP block captains to discuss voter registration under the Voting Rights Act, he refused to agree to register prospective voters who could not read or write. In addition to ignoring the federal requirements, when Freedom Democrats requested that he open his office on Saturdays or during lunch hours to better accommodate working people, he refused. Although he believed in the supremacy of state over federal law, the registrar argued that he levied his registration practices fairly. Dissatisfied with the registrar’s response to their demands, Freedom Democrats petitioned the United States Attorney General to send federal registrars to Harrison County.[[473]](#footnote-472)

Similarly, county registrars continued to demand payment of a poll tax. The Voting Rights Act failed to eliminate poll taxes in state elections. Although the Justice Department pursued federal court cases in an effort to universally outlaw the poll tax, the requirement continued to be employed as an impediment against black voters. A week after the passage of the Voting Rights Act passed, Panola County resident Audrey Johnson attempted to vote in the special election for state senator. The election managers informed Johnson that they had no record of her having paid her poll tax. When Johnson complained to the circuit clerk, he asked why she cared so much about voting. Johnson replied that it was her right. Ultimately, the clerk complied. His assistance, however, was coupled with paternalistic language that had defined black-white relations in the state. “Come on, gal, we’ll get the vote through,” he told Johnson. She voted but complained to the county FDP about the harassment. Johnson noted that prior to the *Brown* decision the county tax assessor would simply added the poll tax to the property tax. Then the county stopped asking for it. This new procedure had ensured that black voters would have more difficulty casting their ballots until the federal courts outlawed the use of poll taxes to determine voter eligibility.[[474]](#footnote-473)

In addition to the reluctance expressed by Mississippi’s elected officials to enforce the new voting provisions, white Mississippians directed violence and intimidation against black political organizers. Police arrested a SNCC organizer in the Cleveland courthouse when he accompanied a group of registrants in October 1965. They charged him with disturbing the peace. A week earlier, Freedom Democrat Unita Blackwell reported that twelve crosses had been set afire across Sharkey and Issaquena Counties. The first, standing nearly six feet tall, was burned on her lawn. Another was placed prominently on a levee so that a greater number of residents could see it ablaze in the distance. Another cross was set in front of a church that housed the community’s Head Start program and hosted the local FDP meetings. Two hours after Blackwell reported the burning crosses to the sheriff, he arrived and asked if she had set the structures afire.[[475]](#footnote-474)

Although black Mississippians like Odie Rose and Audrey Johnson expressed both pride and determination in registering their political choices, Freedom Democrats found it difficult to encourage registration among black Mississippians who remained tied to plantation dominated economies. Like Rice Pritchard who insisted he did not “fool with any of those smart niggers,” employers throughout the state exerted pressure on their laboring force not to register.[[476]](#footnote-475) In counties where black workers labored in agriculture for white growers, if federal registrars were not present, the planters functioned as law enforcement with their workers. Some employers tried to “freeze out” workers by evicting them. A plantation owner in Rolling Fork displaced four families, forcing them to live with friends and relatives. The families all had been active in the local FDP. The small town interconnectedness of many plantation counties also slowed registration. In Sharkey County, the sheriff and his brother owned large agricultural interests. When workers they employed attempted to register at the county courthouse, the registrar reported their names to the sheriff. It remained a daunting task to counteract the generational dependence and survival mechanisms of economically dependent black Mississippians who understood the multifaceted interconnectedness of white supremacy.[[477]](#footnote-476)

Because so many obstacles to black voter registration remained after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the MFDP led campaigns to demonstrate the need for federal oversight in all of Mississippi’s counties. The state executive committee informed county FDPs of the correct procedures and number of affidavits needed to prove continued discrimination. Local leaders collected affidavits attesting to particular instances of intimidation and harassment of prospective registrants. By the end of October 1965, the Justice Department had sent federal registrars into six additional counties in Mississippi. The MFDP hoped to build momentum in communities with a federal presence. Organizers concentrated their energies in the fifteen Mississippi counties with federal registrars. Federal workers, however, did not guarantee the swift registration of black voter applicants.[[478]](#footnote-477)

County registrars continued to find ways to circumvent the new requirements. When Bolivar County received federal registrars, fifty MFDP workers initiated a comprehensive voter registration campaign in the county. Bolivar County was the second poorest county in Mississippi and eighth poorest county in the nation. Sixty eight percent of the county’s population was black. In the small communities that dotted Bolivar County, however, the survival of black Mississippians relied on the paternalism and benevolence of white employers or benefactors. A sixty-year-old Bolivar County sharecropper feared being seen with MFDP workers. When asked when he might register at the courthouse, he mused, “Perhaps, some day, perhaps I’ll go . . . regist.” Canvassing the county’s rural plantations, Freedom Democrats encountered many laborers like this aging sharecropper who expressed reluctance in registering to vote. Gradually, as more registrants successfully filed voter applications, momentum built in the county. This success, however, accelerated an agreement between county and federal officials. When the Bolivar County registrar agreed to register illiterate voters, the federal registrar departed the county. Black voter registration began to decline, and the excitement of organizing in Bolivar County dissipated.[[479]](#footnote-478)

Freedom Democrats began to cut their political teeth in the fall elections of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS). The August passage of the Voting Rights Act prevented the mass participation of black voters in the 1965 off year elections. Instead, the MFDP focused on gaining seats for black farmers on local agricultural boards. The ASCS elections had historically excluded black farmers. Once elected to county boards, white farmers determined cotton and other federally controlled crop allotments, administered federal loans, and distributed government benefits and subsidies.[[480]](#footnote-479) Recruited and encouraged by the MFDP, black farmers had attempted to participate in the previous year’s ASCS elections, but white poll watchers had utilized the same tactics of harassment and intimidation as they did in the primaries and precinct elections administered by the Democratic Party. In one instance, former Governor Ross Barnett stood outside the polling station in Madison County as voters chose their farm board representatives. Terming himself a “public-minded” citizen, he explained to an inquirer that he came only to watch, not to vote. Although the wives of farmers were deemed ineligible if their name did not appear on the land deed, the wives of white farmers were allowed to vote in large numbers in that year’s elections in order to counteract the increased participation of black farmers.[[481]](#footnote-480)

For the 1965 elections, the MFDP pledged to monitor the elections and run a stronger slate of black candidates to serve on county farm boards. To minimize intimidation, the federal government authorized farmers to submit their ballots by mail. This reform would alleviate the person-to-person harassment that could emerge as a black farmer walked into a white owned storefront to vote. The Department of Agriculture also approved the presence of poll watchers.[[482]](#footnote-481)

White farmers refused to sit idly as the Freedom Democrats and their allies attempted to reorient the ASCS elections and gain more seats for black farmers on the agricultural committees. In order to disrupt bloc voting by black farmers, white landowners recruited less politically active black farmers to challenge the FDP-backed candidates. Although many of the planter-sponsored black candidates had refused to participate openly in civil rights activity, they were not necessarily collaborators with segregationists. On several occasions, their names were placed on the ballot without their knowledge. Because the inclusion of these candidates often followed the submission of more outspoken black farmers, the candidacies were announced after the official deadline had passed. By including more than one black candidate on the ballot, white farmers hoped that black voters would split their vote. With both black candidates receiving black votes, white farmers would retain control of the county farm boards.[[483]](#footnote-482)

The MFDP initiated organizing increased the participation of black farmers and farm workers in the ASCS elections. In1964, black farmers ran for seats on agricultural committees in fourteen counties. One year later, candidates ran in twenty-three counties.[[484]](#footnote-483) The MFDP’s mobilization for the ASCS elections also included political education workshops to prepare both voters and candidates for the election. To support novice candidates and develop voter knowledge, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party held a retreat at Mount Beulah, a center for civil rights organizing, to discuss the upcoming ASCS elections. Participants learned the mechanics of how the ASCS functioned and how it could benefit black farmers.[[485]](#footnote-484)

At Mount Beulah, Freedom Democrats networked with activists from across the state and began to imagine themselves as political participants. The remarks of Gertrude McMillen, a member of the Clay County delegation to the workshop, reveal her attempt to articulate newly learned political ideas as well as her delight in attending a weekend retreat. Upon her return, she enumerated all of the new information she had gained and shared it with fellow dissidents. First she explained what federal resources were available to black farmers. She had attended a meeting where “we was talking on farm program and how the FHA loan and it is to help the small farm to get a loan to help make a crop and get fertilizer and so on.” Just as important as the strategy sessions was the novelty of being valued by more seasoned organizers. She spoke glowingly of the event itself. “The people treat us so nice,” McMillen remarked. She then praised the beef stew (“o boy it was good”), coffee, and fruit cocktail. McMillen’s trip to Mount Beulah was part of her political becoming. She was treated as important, networked with others, and experienced a short-lived reprieve from the monotony and hard work of her daily life.[[486]](#footnote-485)

Although Gertrude McMillen and ten other representatives from Clay County attended the retreat, comprehensive political education could not combat the widespread harassment that confronted candidates and organizers when they returned home. The Clay County FDP initially petitioned to have twenty-six of its endorsed candidates on the ballot, but only five ran for office. The five candidates all feared reprisals and received threats, but they continued to present their names to Clay County farmers. As Election Day neared, three more of the candidates removed their names from the ballot. Two admitted it was because of pressure from opponents. The ASCS office disqualified the other. Once farmers received their ballots in the mail, the Clay County FDP, like its Panola County counterpart had in August, conducted last minute political education meetings throughout the county “to tell people how to mark their ballots and who are their candidates.”[[487]](#footnote-486)

Following the elections in early December, the MFDP charged in its newsletter, “Whites Use Same Tricks, TAKE ASCS Elections.” Over two hundred MFDP backed candidates had run for ASCS positions in twenty counties. Despite extensive political education, mail in ballots, and the presence of poll watchers, election irregularities and harassment continued. Just over ten of the FDP endorsed candidates were elected to ASCS boards. As they had been in the previous year’s ASCS election, the wives of black farmers were more aggressively questioned about their right to vote than their white counterparts. Some black farmers did not receive ballots in the mail and were forced to travel to the county ASCS office where they were insulted by white farmers. In Amite County, which had nearly one thousand more black farmers than white farmers and where a black landowner had never served on the county ASCS board, election workers for black candidates were run off the road. A Clay County FDP backed candidate was instructed that if she won she should not take office. On the night before the election, one candidate’s home burned to the ground. In Issaquena County, the sheriff visited one candidate and advised him not to run because the sheriff’s brother wanted the seat. In the delta town of Itta Bena, two homes and a business near the FDP office burned. In Bolivar County crosses were set afire.[[488]](#footnote-487)

Reeling from its defeat at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City and the congressional challenge, as 1965 came to a close, the MFDP grappled with how to assist Mississippi’s black communities in meeting their most basic needs and gaining elementary political education while establishing itself as the potential successor to the state’s all white Democratic Party. The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service elections served as a trial run for the MFDP, its county chapters, and its oppositional candidates. While few MFDP supported candidates succeeded in gaining seats on county ASCS boards, the MFDP had developed political education workshops and suggested the possibility that black laborers could serve as viable candidates for local office. It also provided an institutional home for a broad cross section of black Mississippians to imagine themselves and their neighbors as future officeholders.[[489]](#footnote-488)

**Chapter 5: Contested Terrain**

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had demonstrated the potential power of black ballots. As it became clear that Congress would authorize the Voting Rights Act, an alternative venue for black voters emerged. A summer earlier, the MFDP had been the only political option available to black Mississippians. In the months following the convention challenge, the state’s labor leader and its most visible civil rights leader launched the Mississippi Democratic Conference (MDC). Claude Ramsey, president of the Mississippi AFL-CIO, and Charles Evers, the NAACP’s state field secretary, formed a coalition of black professionals and white moderates. These two men expected that a biracial alliance between relative elites would have greater appeal to national Democratic Party operatives than a disproportionately black organization comprised of the political outsiders and agitators of the MFDP. In the late Spring of 1965, while planning for the MDC, Ramsey and Evers ignored the most active civil rights organizations with broad constituencies across the state in favor of black professionals, nationally connected white Mississippians, and propertied white interests who had begun to recognize the limitations of the MDP’s intransigent position.

Fulfilling a fraternal pact, Charles Evers had returned to Mississippi following the assassination of his brother Medgar in 1963. Although the two men had embarked on different paths towards personal advancement in their adult years, they had pledged themselves to the care of the other and the dismantling of the social and economic limitations placed on black Americans. While Medgar Evers had demonstrated a commitment to the legalistic campaigns of the NAACP, serving as its field secretary in the state and cultivating a movement that lay in the shadows of black enterprise. Charles Evers had gone North chasing a dollar and women. He described a life in Chicago where he accumulated capital “running women” and administering a “policy business” of numbers and gambling. When Byron de la Beckwith shot and killed his brother, Charles Evers abandoned the quick dollar, which often funded his brother’s initiatives at home, and returned to resume Medgar’s work with the NAACP.[[490]](#footnote-489)

Charles Evers, however, did not attempt to replicate his brother’s work. While Medgar had begun to collaborate with the young organizers of SNCC and CORE in the months before his death, Charles avoided the cooperative campaigns of COFO. Although local NAACP leaders participated in the state-wide civil rights coalition, Evers sparingly joined its campaigns and expressed little patience with the tedium of grassroots organizing, which had become the domain of college students. While county NAACP presidents worked in collaboration with the young organizers and the national organization supplied funding to COFO, Evers spurned the development of a cohesive state-wide coalition and began to establish himself in early 1965 as an individual powerbroker. Over the course of the coming years, he would serve as an important intermediary between newly emerging federal poverty funds, national Democratic leadership, and his black constituency in the southwest corner of the state. As the MDC presented itself as a political alternative to both the MFDP and the Mississippi Democratic Party, Evers positioned himself as a Ramsey ally and the titular leader of black Mississippians.[[491]](#footnote-490)

Although Freedom Democrats had always expressed a wariness of Charles Evers, his political alliance with Claude Ramsey surprised them. Freedom Democrats characterized Ramsey’s leadership in the new coalition as political opportunism. He sought to profit from an expanded black electorate and direct a transformed Mississippi Democratic Party. Yet, Ramsey had never demonstrated a commitment to black political and civil rights, and his union had done little to support the cause of black laborers in Mississippi. Freedom Democrat Susie Ruffin criticized the union local in her hometown. Before it became politically inefficient to exploit racial divisions, labor leaders had relied upon segregationist shorthand during its campaigns. In Laurel, rather than represent all laborers and outline shared economic grievances, the union had supported a strike initiated by white workers who opposed the promotion of black employees. Another Freedom Democrat characterized the Mississippi AFL-CIO as a consortium of craft unions that remained “whiter than lilies after the rain,” complaining that the union had failed to organize the state’s black cotton choppers who received three dollars a day in compensation for their labor.[[492]](#footnote-491) Unlike Freedom Democrats, who expressed frustration with the incursions into the newly opened political space, Evers recognized that Ramsey’s political coalition needed black membership, and it was not interested in working with the MFDP.

Despite the emergence of the MFDP as the most recognizable black political organization in Mississippi, Ramsey and Evers did not invite any representatives of the MFDP to the Mississippi Democratic Conference’s first plenary session. Rather, they invited individuals whom Freedom Democrats derisively termed the “so-called” black leadership of Mississippi.[[493]](#footnote-492) While black professionals had developed creative ways to individually resist the dehumanizing intricacies of Jim Crow, they had remained largely bystanders during the previous years’ most public battles against segregation and mass disenfranchisement. Some had joined the MFDP’s convention challenge late in the summer of 1964. Others had avoided completely the mass based organizing campaigns, which had drawn national attention to the apartheid system in Mississippi. Generally, black professionals had chosen to take more cautious and private stances during the most volatile of Mississippi’s civil rights struggles. Rather than counting their black membership among the more outspoken Freedom Democrats, the MDC aligned itself with black professionals, long tutored in the ways of white folks, who demonstrated a visual alternative to the Mississippi Democratic Party, without upsetting traditional class stratification.

Three months after the inception of the Mississippi Democratic Conference, over one hundred people, one fifth of whom were black, met at the Hotel Heidelberg in downtown Jackson. Although leadership posts were awarded on a biracial basis, Freedom Democrats, excluded from the meeting, insisted that the first gathering of the MDC was dominated by white voices. Evers and Ramsey had invited the participants. Robert Oswald, a white resident of Pascagoula, was elected to chair the new body. Charles Young, a black cosmetics manufacturer from Meridian, was chosen as co-chair. Former oppositional candidate R. L. T. Smith was elected treasurer.[[494]](#footnote-493)

The most vocal criticisms of the MDC were levied by the new leadership that had been cultivated by COFO and the MFDP. Annie Devine and Susie Ruffin both emerged as outspoken examples of grassroots leadership during the preceding year’s more inclusive organizing campaigns. In contrast to the MFDP’s vision of a political party built upon the idea of participatory democracy and comprised of black decision makers, the black presence in the MDC, according to Freedom Democrats, amounted to little more than “some scraps for the few and tokens for the masses.” [[495]](#footnote-494) Annie Devine characterized the inaugural meeting as “their little show.”[[496]](#footnote-495) Unwilling to accept the pragmatic choices of black professionals, Susie Ruffin termed the twenty seven black delegates to the MDC plenary session “high traitors to their race.”[[497]](#footnote-496) Ramsey and Evers had ignored the most vocal critics within the black community in order to establish a biracial coalition that more closely mirrored the composition of national Democratic leadership.

The question, as articulated by one Freedom Democrat, became whether the black professionals invited by the MDC possessed “impotent leadership which lacks followers,” or as traditional leaders and members of the professional class, they would tap into the desire of black Mississippians to appoint those who they perceived to know more to lead them.[[498]](#footnote-497) One summer volunteer’s experience portended the success of the MDC’s strategy to circumvent less trained leadership. In Panola County, class distinctions permeated county FDP meetings. Although the largest black landowners in Panola County had abstained from the mass based organizing campaigns, the FDP was led by less affluent members of the black community who maintained a certain level of economic independence. A few plantation workers were leaders in their communities, but they rarely challenged the pronouncements of their social betters at county FDP meetings. The membership, in turn, generally supported the endorsements made by county leadership.[[499]](#footnote-498) The MDC offered a more traditional model of leadership to black Mississippians.

Freedom Democrats were not the only observers to dispute the legitimacy of the black membership of the MDC. The Sovereignty Commission, a state sponsored surveillance agency directed at disrupting civil rights activities in Mississippi, also commented on who the MDC chose to invite and exclude. In a memo to the state attorney general, Erle Johnston, the director of the Sovereignty Commission, described as “questionable” some of the MDC’s newly anointed leadership. While Freedom Democrats derided the inclusion of these individuals, Johnston rejoiced. He suggested that the state’s representatives, burdened by the congressional challenge, “capitalize on this situation” to discredit the MFDP’s claims to representing black Mississippians. Johnston’s recommendation was bolstered when he learned that a staff member of the Democratic National Committee had “encouraged” the creation of the Mississippi Democratic Conference. He took this as a sign that national Democrats had “little respect for the Freedom Democratic Party” and would not assist the MFDP in battling allegations made by the Sovereignty Commission.[[500]](#footnote-499) White moderates and segregationists both could present the MFDP as a foil to their respective political interests.

Freedom Democrats drew on inherited memories of Reconstruction in their arguments against the MDC’s recruitment of black professionals. Collectively they characterized Reconstruction as a period of black political control that was overwhelmed by white political interests, first through coalition governments and ultimately through a return to white political supremacy. Unwilling to acknowledge the pragmatic need for establishing a biracial political organization, Freedom Democrat Susie Ruffin, who Lawrence Guyot later described as a “semi toothless woman” who “expressed her opinion everywhere, anytime, anywhere, to anyone,” argued that black Mississippians were about to commit the same mistake they had made in the late nineteenth century. While Ruffin could appreciate why national Democratic Party operatives preferred a more moderate alternative to the MFDP, she could not understand why black professionals would choose to ally with individuals who had not publicly advocated for black rights before the passage of a federal voting law appeared imminent. She insisted that black Mississippians should have learned from the earlier period in biracial democracy not to trust the intentions of white Mississippians.[[501]](#footnote-500)

As in Reconstruction when black voters exercised unprecedented political power, Ruffin suspected that the MFDP offered anew the possibility for black political influence. Ruffin charged that white political operatives in Mississippi feared that “they will be left out on a limb that is being hacked from the political tree” if they remained allied with the MDP and the MFDP remained unchallenged as the representative of black Mississippians and their political preferences. Ruffin concluded that white moderates in the MDC were using black professionals as pawns “so that when the limb falls they will land on a cushion of black people’s heads and bury them for 3 or 4 hundred more years.”[[502]](#footnote-501) The more politically palatable MDC would ensure that neither the MDP nor the MFDP triumphed.

Although Ruffin prioritized race based alliances and lambasted black professionals for joining the MDC, she conceded that the MFDP had been unable to create an efficient and well run state organization. The MFDP office in Jackson was often in a state of disarray, and middle class professionals might view the MFDP as a “mess.” For Ruffin, however, the symbolic power of the MFDP outweighed its inability to manage the day to day operation of a political party. According to Ruffin, the MFDP had “shaken the very foundation” of the Democratic Party, creating the space for black political involvement. Rather than spurn Freedom Democrats, Ruffin hoped that black professionals would join the MFDP, strengthening its reputation as a “real political organization.” Although the MFDP struggled to sustain itself as a formal statewide organization, for Ruffin, the organization’s history in Mississippi was paramount.[[503]](#footnote-502) The membership of black professionals could increase the MFDP’s standing as a viable political option.

Despite claims of political absolutism, the MFDP also recognized that it needed to recruit black professionals. Members of the executive committee attempted to set aside past grievances and recruit previously suspicious members of the black community. Some Freedom Democrats, however, continued to employ caustic language in their membership appeals. “So why stay behind,” began one Freedom Democrat, employing expansive rhetoric, “when the MFDP has got room foreveryone [sic] regardless of race, creed, or color.” Unable to maintain the welcoming tone, the recruiter threatened, “So you teachers will do well to join the Party NOW, and also quit signing the Loyalty oath that is imposed on you by the State of Mississippi.” Freedom Democrats, drawn from a pool of vocal dissenters, further ostracized black professionals with their demanding and angry language.[[504]](#footnote-503)

Although individual Freedom Democrats regularly criticized the MDC, the MFDP took no formal position on the MDC until August 1965. That summer, an “undeclared war” erupted between Freedom Democrats and the MDC. The charter of the historically segregationist Young Democrats had been revoked in the wake of the convention challenge, and individuals identified with the MFDP and the MDC vied to gain a new charter from the national organization. A meeting in the summer of 1965 grew increasingly polarized. Outside assessments described Charles Evers as “one of the chief behind-the-scenes manipulators” to weaken the influence of Freedom Democrats while the MFDP faction was characterized as “anti anybody that wears a suit of clothes . . . . comes in clean . . . combs his hair.”[[505]](#footnote-504)

Frustrated by the MFDP’s last minute efforts to increase their voting strength, Hodding Carter III, a MDC aligned Young Democrat, urged “all true Democrats” to join him in walking out. During a morning session, Freedom Democrats had lacked the numbers to elect sympathetic representatives. At the lunch break, Freedom Democrats recruited high school students to join the afternoon proceedings. With their numbers augmented, the MFDP faction attempted to “clean house” and re-elect officers. The NAACP-MDC faction refused to acquiesce to the MFDP’s call for new elections and exited the convention. The MDC initiated walk out at the Young Democrats convention led to the MFDP’s official renunciation of the moderate coalition and formalized the split between the evolving coalition of black professionals and white moderates led by Charles Evers and Freedom Democrats.[[506]](#footnote-505) In response to the formation of new political organizations, Freedom Democrat John Brown exclaimed to his readership, “So now the race is on. Everyone is trying to find the ‘Uncle Tom’, the ‘good nigger’, who will help him get out the Negro vote.”[[507]](#footnote-506)

In the middle of a late August day, fifty three year old George Metcalfe, a shipping clerk and president of the local NAACP branch, started his car, igniting a bomb hidden beneath his hood. He suffered broken limbs, lacerations, and damage to one eye, but he survived. While Metcalfe recuperated in Jefferson Davis Hospital, Natchez’s black residents threatened to retaliate. They recently had been mobilized by MFDP workers, and Metcalfe, despite his NAACP affiliation, was their leader. In the wake of the Natchez bombing, the *New York Times* reported that hundreds of “angry, armed Negroes swarmed the street . . . threatening revenge.” The explosion initiated a months long conflict not only between the black and white residents of Natchez but also between the MFDP and the NAACP. The two organizations sparred over which would direct the Natchez movement and negotiate with white officials.[[508]](#footnote-507)

Although Natchez was known nationally for its antebellum mansions and storied bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, the old structures masked poverty and social tension. An observer noted not the stately homes but the “shacks dot[ting] the hillsides haphazardly in the manner of Latin-American barrios.” In addition to claiming an impoverished black population, the area was also home to the Grand Dragons of the Ku Klux Klan. In a SNCC report, researchers argued that because the city’s population reflected a slight black majority, 12,354 black residents compared to 11,437 white residents, “the white population felt an im[m]inent threat” with the increased political organization in the Summer of 1965. The concerns of white residents, reinforced by the presence of extralegal associations, combined with the growing potential of a black electorate led to vigilante violence in Natchez.[[509]](#footnote-508) In the Spring of 1965, a white resident of Natchez claimed that black residents were “all armed and we are sitting on the verge of a race war.”[[510]](#footnote-509)

As a vocal dissident, George Metcalfe had been unable to find many allies in Natchez. When the area’s ministerial leadership refused to assist him with voter registration drives, Metcalfe sought support from Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party organizers Dorie Ladner and Bill Ware. During the summer of 1965, Metcalfe and the young MFDP workers, seasoned by the monotony of daily canvassing, traveled throughout black Natchez recruiting potential voter registrants and organizing mass meetings. Later in the summer, resistance had begun to thaw. Early in the campaign, every church that they approached refused to open its sanctuary to a mass meeting. After their initial organizing, the MFDP and George Metcalfe convinced the pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church to host a meeting in his sanctuary. When the MFDP organizers and some eight hundred local people arrived at the church, they found the doors locked. The pastor had changed his mind. It was rumored that the chief of police had hinted that if the meeting took place the church’s mortgage would be revoked.[[511]](#footnote-510)

In an attempt to loosen the climate of fear, the MFDP and George Metcalfe’s initial campaign targeted traditional leadership in the black community. They invited national leaders to Natchez to initiate pray-ins. These actions would inspire black church officers to open their buildings to the movement. A week after the pastor of the Macedonia Baptist Church refused to open his sanctuary to the voter registration workers, the MFDP held a meeting on the steps of another Natchez church. Two hundred people stood outside Zion AME Church to listen to John Lewis, former SNCC chair, as he extolled the importance of registering to vote. As the mass of participants listened attentively to Lewis’ speech, twenty Ku Klux Klan members “heckled and jeered” them from across the road. Activism and voting did not go unnoticed in Natchez.[[512]](#footnote-511) Two months later, as the participation in local meetings and the number of black voters on the registration rolls increased so too did white vigilante violence. The harassment culminated in the bombing of George Metcalfe’s car.

The violence against Metcalfe created the opportunity to stage a massive organizing campaign, which would bring national attention to the violence incurred in voter registration. Although Freedom Democrats had worked in collaboration with Metcalfe, the president of the local chapter of the NAACP, for the previous two months, Charles Evers, the state NAACP field secretary, had been absent from the organizing. Following the bombing, Evers joined the Natchez movement. His arrival shifted attention away from the MFDP’s grassroots strategy. Both local people and the city’s white leadership began to address Evers and a committee of black professional men as the premier brokers for black Natchez. Although Metcalfe and the MFDP had organized throughout the summer, the movement had not fully taken root in the county’s black communities. MFDP organizers decided to look for a way to collaborate with Evers while continuing to build a mass based movement in Natchez.[[513]](#footnote-512)

Amidst the power struggle with Evers, FDP organizers found themselves targeted by the police. A week after the Metcalfe car bombing, police arrested six Freedom Democrats, charging them with violating the city’s newly imposed curfew. An outside observer determined that the arrests “crippled” the FDP’s efforts to mobilize Natchez’s black community and lent support to Evers’ “more cautious advice.” With their strongest organizers in jail, the MFDP lacked the human power to canvas communities, mobilize potential demonstrators, or negotiate with the city’s political and economic leadership. Additionally, with the MFDP marginalized as risktakers, affiliation with Evers offered the possibility of protection from local harassment.[[514]](#footnote-513)

As demonstrations in Natchez continued throughout the Fall, the MFDP and NAACP worked with and against each other. By early November, MFDP organizers understood their leverage in the community to be waning. In a letter to Charles Evers they indirectly acknowledged their shrinking influence in the Natchez movement and expressed a desire to avoid a “struggle for power or popularity.” MFDP representatives suggested developing a shared political agenda in the “best interest” of the local movement. The signers, Alberta Watkins, Clarence Bridgewater, Posey Lombard, and Dorie Ladner, made five requests of Evers. The MFDP would provide a speaker to all organizing meetings. At joint sessions, the MFDP and the NAACP would both collect dues. A MFDP representative would always be present and would preside over some of the meetings. Finally, the NAACP and MFDP would decide jointly on movement actions. Together they would invite Martin Luther King, Jr. to visit Natchez.[[515]](#footnote-514)

The MFDP organizers differentiated between the two organizations. “As you know,” they wrote Evers, “the NAACP is a *Civil Rights Organization* and the MFDP is a *Political Party*.” “Both,” they suggested, “have something to offer.” Ideally the NAACP would work collaboratively with the MFDP, and the two organizations would orchestrate direct action campaigns and register black voters to exert power through the Mississippi Democratic Party. Although local people tended to move into and out of each organization and each organization claimed distinct organizing goals, the desire to maintain spheres of influence often overshadowed attempts at coalition work. Charles Evers, seasoned by his role in the Mississippi Democratic Conference, perceived the MFDP as a competitor in the grab to direct a new black electorate. The MFDP’s attempt to negotiate a deal with Evers, who was beginning to establish himself as a political alternative to the MFDP, bore little success.[[516]](#footnote-515)

Following a summer of knocking on the doors in black Natchez, the MFDP found itself marginalized within its own movement. Organizers, experienced in the tedium of developing grassroots political campaigns, had encouraged the black residents of Natchez to travel to the courthouse and vote and persuaded the local ministerial leadership to open up its houses of worship to the movement. With the Metcalfe bombing, Natchez emerged as a location with the potential to draw national attention to Mississippi once again. The possibility of increasing his influence in the state drew Charles Evers to the area. His presence transformed the movement and overshadowed the day-to-day organizing of the Freedom Democrats. A week after the bombing, the national media had already begun to describe Evers as the leader of the Natchez movement, dismissing the MFDP as a “group of young militants.”[[517]](#footnote-516) Two months after the Metcalfe bombing, an investigator with the Sovereignty Commission reported that Freedom Democrat Bill Ware was trying to reclaim leadership in the Natchez Movement and “push the Evers-backed movement as far in the background as possible.”[[518]](#footnote-517)

Charles Evers’ first attempt at assuming the leadership mantle in Natchez began when he and a group of black men, presented twelve demands to Mayor John Nosser and the Board of Aldermen. They demanded that local officials formally denounce the Ku Klux Klan, desegregate the public schools, hire black police officers, hire an equal number of black and white employees in the public and private sectors, and desegregate all public facilities.[[519]](#footnote-518) The mayor and Board delayed for a week and ultimately refused to meet the demands. When the decision was announced, five hundred black residents of Natchez stood outside George Metcalfe’s home. In response to the Board’s decision, one young man complained, “It’s the same thing, over and over. They’ll go on till they kill somebody else.” Sensing the growing frustration among the crowd, Evers cautioned, “We can’t win with violence.” A man in the crowd retorted, “We can’t win anyway.” Black Natchez had put faith in Evers’ ability to win concessions from the local white controlled government. The mayor and Board of Alderman’s refusal left many Evers supporters dissatisfied.[[520]](#footnote-519)

In an attempt to direct the anger of black residents, Evers proposed initiating an economic boycott of white owned Natchez businesses and staging mass demonstrations to draw national attention to the conflict. He invited Andrew Young, executive director of Martin Luther King’s Southern Conference Leadership Conference, to visit Natchez and assess whether the area could support a “full-scale civil rights movement.” Upon his arrival, Young informed a crowd of seven hundred people, “The report I’m going to take back is, there’s some bad white folks over here.” “Dr. King,” he assured them, “will be glad to hear that.” Young and King recognized the importance of violent outbursts in drawing federal attention to southern abuses. The injuries to George Metcalfe and the board’s intransigence could inspire the black and white photographs and newsreels that attracted northern sympathies. “It was bad white folks in Birmingham that gave us the Civil Rights Bill,” Young reminded those assembled. “It was bad white folks . . . that gave us the right to vote,” he intoned. Young suggested that King could direct a movement in Natchez that would lead to the passage of a federal law making the killing of civil rights workers a federal crime. Ultimately, King did not lead a national campaign in Natchez. The celebrity of Young’s appearance, however, strengthened Evers’ new leadership in the area, and he called for mass demonstrations. Throughout the Fall, Evers and the MFDP clashed over when to initiate and when to cease the protests.[[521]](#footnote-520)

Young’s visit, combined with the continued presence of Charles Evers and the MFDP, worried state officials. To prevent widespread demonstrations and retaliatory white violence, Governor Paul Johnson deployed six hundred and fifty National Guard troops and dozens of highway patrol officers to Natchez. They were charged with maintaining order and stymieing attempts to demonstrate. Rather than challenging the armed tanks with placards and chants, civil rights leaders cancelled plans for a protest march. This decision, made primarily by Evers, was “criticized sharply” by what a journalist termed “the militants.” With this unilateral decision, Evers assumed his position as the director of the Natchez movement. MFDP organizers found themselves unable to redirect protest energies and were forced follow Evers’ lead.[[522]](#footnote-521)

The National Guard officers left Natchez four days after they arrived. Calm, however, did not return to Natchez. Evers and a committee of local black men resumed street demonstrations, increasing tensions between black and white residents. The protest drew one thousand demonstrators, and the police, according to one observer, grew “angry and frustrated,” offering little protection. Police looked on but did not respond when one protestor was “run down” by a white driver. Freedom Democrat Bill Ware and two others were arrested. The Chancery Court attempted to halt the protests, authorizing a city council resolution which had outlawed street demonstrations, picketing, and boycotts by either the KKK or civil rights supporters. The protest marches and boycotts of downtown businesses, however, continued in defiance of the court order.[[523]](#footnote-522)

During the first week of demonstrations, nearly six hundred protestors were arrested. Almost half of those arrested were taken by bus to the state prison at Parchman two hundred miles from Natchez. Abuse began with their arrests. Guards “slapped, kicked, insulted and threatened” Charles Horwitz of the Delta Ministry as he walked off the bus and entered the prison. Once inside, the detainees were forced to drink large quantities of laxatives. If they refused, they were beaten. Freedom Democrat Posey Lombard reported that prison guards awoke her and the other female prisoners and forced them to ingest even more of the liquid laxative. Unable to control their bowels, and lacking sanitary tissue, the prisoners used bread and biscuits to clean themselves. Those arrested were crowded into prison cells with fewer beds than people. Many slept on cold cement floors. Others slept on beds with no mattresses.[[524]](#footnote-523)

While Horwitz, Lombard, and the other arrested demonstrators remained in custody, Charles Evers called for a moratorium on the Natchez demonstrations. The MFDP feared ending the demonstrations. The black community was “aroused and mobilized,” and it would be difficult to re-ignite the mass protests. The boycotts had proven a success, and Freedom Democrats had hoped that the momentum of the demonstrations and the expanded participation could be directed toward a “serious and meaningful” political challenge. The boycott had effectively mobilized black Natchez, and the demonstrations had disrupted commercial activities. The operator of four downtown businesses, Mayor Nosser reported that his sales had been reduced twenty five to fifty percent since the boycott began. Evers ignored the objections of Freedom Democrats, called for an end to demonstrations in Natchez, and submitted revised demands to city officials.[[525]](#footnote-524)

The city remained unwilling to negotiate, and Evers resumed the street demonstrations and boycott. A federal court order had interceded on behalf of the protestors. It demanded that arrests cease. Protected by the federal decision, protestors moved freely throughout the Natchez business district. They walked two by two through the six-block stretch of downtown Natchez. Mississippi Grand Dragon of the United Klans of America, E.L. McDaniel stood across the street and watched. After the demonstration, protestors returned downtown. They silently walked through white owned stores, but they made no purchases. The court order had protected the protestors from arrest and quelled retaliation, but it also reduced the possibility for a newsworthy conflict. Evers again called off future demonstrations, supporting, instead, the continuation of the boycott.[[526]](#footnote-525)

Under pressure from local merchants who registered declining sales, city officials agreed to the revised list of demands. The three month long boycott ended. Local officials assured black residents that they would gain a “major voice in city affairs.” The MFDP remained dissatisfied with the agreement. Again, Freedom Democrats criticized Evers’ unilateral decision making. Two weeks after Evers declared an end to the boycott of downtown merchants, the MFDP endorsed a Black Christmas campaign. Freedom Democrats declared it “shameful” for any black residents of Natchez to purchase holiday gifts from the white merchants of Natchez. Evers refused to support the MFDP’s call to continue the boycott. He claimed that the major conflict between city leaders and black residents had been resolved. Black shoppers should return to Natchez.[[527]](#footnote-526)

While city officials had conceded to Evers demands, they had done nothing to alleviate continued antagonisms between white and black residents. Two weeks before Christmas, white consumers staged a “shop-in” to help storeowners recover losses suffered during the Evers led boycott. During the event, a caravan of cars displaying Confederate flags drove down Natchez’s central business district. Two black teenagers held United States flags as they “counter-picketed.” Klan members assaulted them. A fourteen year old was arrested and jailed by the police. In response to the violence, the NAACP and MFDP reinstated the boycott of downtown merchants. Evers insisted, “The merchants can’t make an agreement with us and then stand by and see us beaten down in the streets and not do anything.” Black shoppers refused to make purchases in downtown Natchez during the 1965 holiday season.[[528]](#footnote-527)

The struggle between Freedom Democrats and Charles Evers over the direction of the Natchez movement distorted public understandings of its evolution. When the white business community ceded to the demands of Natchez’s black community, Bill Minor, a columnist for the New Orleans *Times Picayune,* proclaimed that the NAACP “scored an impressive civil rights victory in Natchez.” He dismissed the early organizing of the MFDP and described the NAACP as an organization “challenging Jim Crow in court even before more militant groups were organized for action in the state . . . .”[[529]](#footnote-528) Charles Evers contributed to this rendering. Describing the Natchez movement, Evers stated matter-of-factly, “I organized and ran the boycott.” In his autobiography, throughout six pages of discussion on the campaign, Evers failed to mention the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which had laid the groundwork for the boycott.[[530]](#footnote-529)

Members of the Natchez black community, however, remembered a more complicated history of the movement. Adams County resident Philip West agreed with Minor that “the NAACP won.” He disagreed with Minor’s assessment that the NAACP had initiated the movement in Natchez. West described his own political education. “I’ve learned also that COFO was the first civil rights organization in Adams County,” he told an interviewer. West argued that because the NAACP had greater ties to the “power structure” it was able to circumvent the MFDP while privileging its early groundwork in the area. “So the thing for people to do,” concluded West, “was to try and discredit COFO and SNCC in order that the NAACP would be in the forefront together with those persons who may have been involved, who may have political connections with the structure.”[[531]](#footnote-530) West’s memory speaks to the re-emergence of middle class leaders who joined with Evers at a moment of greater possibility. While the MFDP had worked with George Metcalfe to organize among the county’s laborers, ministers and black professionals had avoided the early movement.

Although the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the most immediate descendent of COFO began the work of voter registration and canvassing across the Adams County’s black communities in the summer of 1965, the NAACP under the direction of Charles Evers usurped the mantle of leadership in the Natchez struggle. In Natchez and across the state, as the necessity for biracial agreements and leadership emerged, Freedom Democrats became increasingly marginalized as militants. They were perceived as young organizers with extreme demands. The NAACP, represented by Evers, emerged as a more pleasant bedfellow for white negotiators and traditional black leadership.

Despite the public rendering of Charles Evers as the leader of the Natchez demonstrations, the MFDP continued its grassroots organizing among Natchez youth. In November, Dorie Ladner, Bill Ware, and Posey Lombard collaborated with Victoria Jackson Gray on a political education workshop. Students imagined a new Natchez in 1975. The young people described Adams County as completely integrated where all people were respected and looked upon “as men.” Together they mapped out the important deadlines for the coming year: the final date to register to vote, run for office, payment of the poll tax, and to challenge results of elections. They published their account and asked for more submissions to be sent to either the FDP or NAACP office in Natchez. Regardless of the power struggle among organizers, some people refused to draw distinctions between the two organizations.[[532]](#footnote-531)

John D. Shaw, a twenty three year old resident of McComb, Mississippi was killed while serving in Vietnam. Shaw had participated in a SNCC supported school walk out four years before his death, and two men affiliated with the MFDP, Joe Martin and Clint Hopson, authored a political tract to bring attention to the irony of Shaw’s death. Shaw had assisted the United States in its global war against communism, but he lived amidst social, economic, and political inequality in Mississippi. Distributing the brashly worded leaflet throughout the McComb area, the two dissidents questioned the participation of black men in the United States armed forces. While their statement may not have drawn much attention if it had been distributed only in the McComb area, the tract was also published in the MFDP’s statewide newsletter. The comments fueled opponents during a period when the state Executive Committee, focused on the congressional challenge, was attempting to project an image of respectable dissent.[[533]](#footnote-532)

Shaw had died for his country but had never exercised the franchise. On the night following John Shaw’s funeral, Joe Martin, a former classmate of Shaw’s, experienced even greater levels of grief when he reflected that the church where the funeral was held could have been bombed during an earlier spree of racist violence that had swept the area. "How could you feel justified going there to defend the North Vietnamese from communism?” Martin asked a group of freedom school students who he had accompanied to a viewing of Shaw’s body. “Who defends you from racism?" Fueled by this exchange, Martin, Hopson, and the students collaborated on a political tract. In the document, they highlighted inconsistencies between the foreign and domestic policies of the United States government.[[534]](#footnote-533) They encouraged “Black-, Brown- and Red-skinned People” to ignore their draft notices and urged their families to support acts of political resistance. Placing the Civil Rights Movement within the framework of international anti-colonial discussions, they speculated that people of color throughout the world viewed Black American GIs as traitors in the global struggle for liberation. Rather than enlist in the United Sates armed forces or comply with their draft notifications, black Americans, they argued, needed to commit to the struggle for civil rights.[[535]](#footnote-534)

The Mississippi American Legion responded immediately to this incendiary leaflet. The group drafted a resolution, which called for a federal investigation of the MFDP and charged that the remarks constituted treason. Members sent copies of the resolution to President Johnson, the Justice Department, the Department of Defense, and Mississippi’s national representatives in the House and Senate. When informed of the leaflet and its contents, Representative Prentiss Walker, who was embroiled in the congressional challenge, expressed disgust with the unpatriotic statements authored by Freedom Democrats. He situated the controversy within the ongoing conflict between southern states and the federal government over black rights. “They have gone too far,” he penned angrily, “and it will be interesting to see if the federal authorities in dealing with racial matters are capable of handling draft dodgers.”[[536]](#footnote-535)

MFDP chair Lawrence Guyot struggled with how to extricate the Executive Committee from the controversy. There were few outspoken dissenters of the Vietnam War in the summer of 1965, and Guyot feared that the congressional challenge would lose some national allies.[[537]](#footnote-536) He, however, did not want to silence locally generated critiques of federal policies. Instead, he distanced himself and the organization from the anti-war statements made by supporters, but not members, of the MFDP. Joe Martin had been active in civil rights demonstrations, but Guyot argued that Martin had not officially joined the MFDP. Volunteer Clint Hopson served as a support worker, not a Freedom Democrat or policy maker. Guyot characterized the actions of Martin and Hopson as imprudent, but he supported the newsletter’s right to print the statements. With few available news outlets, the MFDP’s newsletter provided black Mississippians with access to diverse information and viewpoints.[[538]](#footnote-537)

As the national press used the controversy over the leaflet to further discredit the MFDP as a radical organization with extremist demands, Guyot presented the MFDP as a traditional organization of dissidents. In its coverage of the controversy, the *New York Times* labeled the MFDP a black-led and dominated group that was “militantly pro civil-rights.” Guyot countered that Freedom Democrats sought access to two party politics, not an overthrow of the American political system. National media conflated the MFDP with the youth movement, which had begun to articulate more radical goals following the Atlantic City convention. Many SNCC field secretaries, however, derided the MFDP’s continued attempts to work within the Democratic Party. “I find it fantastic,” Guyot argued in defense of Freedom Democrats, “that the most patriotic people in this country would have their patriotism questioned.” While a transfer of affiliation to the MFDP would radically change the racial and social composition of the Mississippi Democratic Party, Freedom Democrats, unlike many of its early SNCC supporters, had supported both the Johnson administration and the national Democratic Party despite the hostility they both expressed during the convention challenge.[[539]](#footnote-538)

A loosely tied organization with adherents near and far claiming loyalty, the MFDP’s executive leadership wrestled with how to encourage critical assessments while maintaining credibility as a burgeoning political party. As black Mississippians began to question their immediate situation, some began to draw global parallels. In the November issue of the MFDP newsletter, Issaquena County resident Ruthie Reed submitted a commentary on the war. Her column echoed the arguments made in the McComb statement. She questioned the participation of black men in the United States military. “Maybe the white man has a right” to be in Vietnam, Reed concluded, “but I do know that the Negroes don’t have any business over there because how in the world can the Negroes fight for anything for someone else when they don’t have it themselves?” Although the newsletter’s editor printed Reed’s column, a disclaimer explained that the issues raised in the article did not necessarily reflect the thinking of the MFDP or the newsletter.[[540]](#footnote-539)

A few weeks after the newsletter published Reed’s column, an individual identifying himself as a member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party spoke at a New York City peace rally. When Jan Goodman, a staff member in the MFDP’s Washington, DC office, learned of the event, she grew concerned that the organization’s national image would be sullied by controversy, detracting from the MFDP’s larger political aims. “Once again the MFDP and Viet Nam rears its ugly head . . . .,” grumbled Goodman. She contended that the MFDP was already maligned by a “sufficient number of subjects that bring attacks from our opposition and Evans and Novak,” and did not need former summer volunteers “wandering cross country espousing their personal beliefs in the name of the ‘peoples.’”[[541]](#footnote-540)

The MFDP’s central leadership could not evade the question of Vietnam for much longer. A month after the New York City rally, the MFDP executive committee began to draft an organizational position on the war. In their discussions, they attempted to balance their own opposition of the United States in Vietnam with an understanding that local people might disapprove of an anti-war statement. Although specific community members like McComb resident Joe Martin and Issaquena County resident Ruthie Reed questioned the drafting of black soldiers to fight in Vietnam, many of the MFDP rank and file in Mississippi’s rural communities had little knowledge of international political concerns. Often the summer volunteers had served as a liaison between the questions of local people and information. At a typing class in the summer of 1965, one student asked, “Why are we fighting in Viet Nam?” With the departure of many volunteers, access to outside information became more difficult.[[542]](#footnote-541)

Local people and northern volunteers alike questioned the involvement of the United States in Vietnam. By early 1966, members of the state leadership had become increasingly anti-war themselves, but they had delayed drafting an organization position on the war. In the rural counties of Mississippi, where the MFDP counted the majority of its membership, political organizers had waged an intense campaign to provide black Mississippians with basic political education: knowledge of the available power in local politics, access to federal bureaucracies, and gaining and exercising the vote. Members of the state leadership proposed augmenting the information they shared with Freedom Democrats, now armed with elementary political knowledge, to include discussions on United States foreign policy.[[543]](#footnote-542)

Ed King suggested that the MFDP infuse their political education classes with discussions on foreign policy and invite Staughton Lynd, Herbert Aptheker, or Tom Hayden to conduct county workshops on the Vietnam War. These sessions would provide local people with more information from which they could formulate individual opinions. Although King preferred that any formal statement made by the MFDP parallel his own opposition to the Vietnam War, he understood that if the MFDP was to be an organ of the people it had to reflect the views of its members who had been raised in the small towns of Mississippi. “We have to say,” King reminded his peers on the committee, “what the people in Miss. feel.”[[544]](#footnote-543)

Before the executive committee was able to infuse their ongoing political education workshops with more information on foreign policy, news of the MFDP’s invitation to prominent leftist speakers was made public. Senator James Eastland, denounced the MFDP. He termed Herbert Aptheker a “notorious Communist” and attempted to use the information to further discredit Freedom Democrats.[[545]](#footnote-544) Eastland’s attacks represented part of a larger campaign to marginalize the MFDP as social radicals and political extremists.

“They wanted receipts,” explained Head Start director Tom Levin. Within eight days of the dispersal of poverty funds to the state, Senator John Stennis, Mississippi’s junior senator, ordered an investigation into improper spending. In Mississippi, descendents of the freedom movement were the first to design programs, apply for federal funding, and staff the new programs in President Johnson’s newly launched war on poverty. Mississippi’s white political leadership had feared the influx of federal funding into agencies controlled by black Mississippians and their allies and attempted to delay the legislation that funded the national poverty programs. Then they held up the dispersal of funds to Mississippi. When the monies finally were approved, Stennis, in an attempt to discredit the new program, levied allegations against the state’s Head Start program. He pointed to financial discrepancies and linked the federal poverty programs in Mississippi to civil rights organizing. Although the MFDP had no formal relationship to the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), the organizational home for Mississippi’s Head Start program, the new initiatives employed many Freedom Democrats and provided services to poor black Mississippians, the organization’s primary constituency.[[546]](#footnote-545)

The potential for an economically independent electorate, influenced by civil rights organizations, more than organizational mismanagement encouraged the Stennis inquiry. The civil rights community had taken the lead in filing grant proposals and navigating the often complicated road within the national bureaucracy of poverty programs. Individuals empowered through membership in the MFDP, political demonstrations organized by COFO, and work with the Delta Ministry, a project launched by the National Council of Churches following Freedom Summer, saw CDGM as a way to expand the availability of resources in rural communities, which lacked opportunities outside the white controlled economy. The state program was administered by Tom Levin, who had strong movement connections, and it was staffed by a number of movement veterans. Stennis’ demand for receipts and proper accounting stemmed from an understanding that federally protected jobs for black Mississippians would disrupt traditional patterns of economic and political dependence throughout the rural state.[[547]](#footnote-546)

A number of Stennis’ charges were correct. County FDPs often initiated the dispersal of federal funds. They had become familiar with federal bureaucracies and assumed prominent roles as federal contact people in their rural communities. In Panola County, the Head Start program was particularly insular. County FDP chair Robert Miles also chaired the Head Start committee. One volunteer criticized the concentrated leadership and explained that Miles constituted the “entire committee.” He was solely responsible for the hiring of staff, arranging food and facilities, entering payroll, arranging for transportation and health examinations for children. His wife assisted with payroll, and one of the teacher aides helped organize health certificates. In Panola County, all but one of the teacher aides hired to work in Headstart were members of the county FDP.[[548]](#footnote-547) Ken Scudder, a white volunteer in Benton County agreed with this assessment. He described CDGM as a “SNCC front.”[[549]](#footnote-548) In some communities, CDGM became an outlet through which local Freedom Democrats could consolidate their influence.

By July 1965, eighty communities in Mississippi had formed local boards and signed up with CDGM. Because the poverty programs reflected the national movement to include the poor and people of color in a more expansive notion of an American Dream, the new programs did not tap into traditional networks of leadership. In the past, white Mississippians had guarded federal monies, deciding how to allocate them within the white and black communities. If money was earmarked for black recipients, white leaders carefully selected individuals in the black community they found most amenable. In communities where professionally trained service providers would historically be hired to run these new programs, former low wage workers, who had been the most insistent in demanding an expansion of rights and opportunities, instead were hired to implement libratory pedagogy into preschool classrooms. Community members who had sharpened their organizational skills registering their neighbors to vote taught three and four year olds to sing “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn me Round.”[[550]](#footnote-549)

Although Senator John Stennis publicly linked the MFDP to the new poverty programs and many county FDPs did control local programs, the Executive Committee questioned whether or not the organization should become actively involved with the poverty programs. While the infusion of federal funding could help local people meet their basic survival needs, the new programs distracted county FDP leaders from a formal political agenda. Although, one state leader of the Freedom Democratic Party contended, “We’re not even interested in it,” she understood that local people were drawn to the new programs. She questioned how to balance what the MFDP saw as its primary focus, erecting an alternative political party, with the concrete needs and desires of local people. “I mean you can’t tell the local people to forget about the money,” admitted this Freedom Democrat, even though the FDP considered the poverty programs “not important in the long run.”[[551]](#footnote-550) The poverty programs provided many local people with their first opportunity for salaried employment, young children with academic training, and outlets for black distributors and suppliers of goods. Rather than supervise local poverty programs, the Washington, DC office suggested that the MFDP lobby on behalf of black community members, ensuring the fair implementation of the poverty programs.[[552]](#footnote-551)

Soon after the dispersal of federal money, a broad range of individuals plotted to direct state recipient agencies. As the boards became increasingly institutionalized, the presence of movement voices declined. Early meetings in Jackson had included an equal number of black and white participants on the planning board, but white Mississippians dominated the membership of the final board. Only one member, R.L.T. Smith, possessed any civil rights background. Smith’s membership on this committee and in the Mississippi Democratic Conference, however, overshadowed his experience as a civil rights candidate three years earlier. Confused by Smith’s participation on the moderate board, one Freeedom Democrat complained, “I don’t know what happened to him, but he sure ain’t leading me now.” [[553]](#footnote-552) While Smith had served as a symbol for black political rights in 1962, his priorities had never been aligned with the mass based model offered by SNCC and the MFDP, and he served as a black representative on the moderate board.

In Jackson, the poverty board relied on traditional roles of deference. According to Freedom Democrats, the implied sentiment to “let your leaders handle this” mirrored the MDC’s coalition of black and white professionals. When a man aligned with the MFDP expressed a desire to postpone seating a board that did not reflect a cross section of the state, others in attendance counseled him against further delays. A dissident who had lived with so little for so long, the man countered that “[w]e have been poor for over three hundred years, and can wait a little longer.” Lacking allies, discussion on his challenge to alter the composition of the board quickly ended.[[554]](#footnote-553)

If R.L.T. Smith, a social conservative and business owner, represented the most progressive membership of the board, there were others who were more closely tied to Mississippi’s segregationist past. Freedom Democrats and their supporters reported that two of the white representatives on the newly formed Jackson board campaigned extensively for Governor Paul Johnson’s election. While serving on the CDGM board, one of these men also represented a local restaurant against the NAACP’s demand that it integrate. Freedom Democrats also contended that members of the Hederman family, which owned the major newspaper outlet in Jackson, participated on the board. The *Clarion Ledger* served as a mouthpiece for the state’s segregationist agenda throughout the civil rights struggles, often printing stories suggested by the Sovereignty Commission.[[555]](#footnote-554)

Six months after the battle over leadership in Jackson, Carroll County organizers faced a more extreme scramble for power. Segregationists gained positions on the district steering committee, and the county FDP debated whether or not to immerse itself in the district wide struggle over the direction of the poverty program. In early May 1966, the white directors of the Carroll County Board appointed Legrone Nunley to serve as District Director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps. This position would allow him to control the dispersal of funds over a six county area. Nunley served as deputy sheriff in Carroll County and constable of Carrollton, and Freedom Democrats considered him to be one of the “worst harassers and head beaters in the County.” As a result of pressure from the FDP, Nunley’s assignment was revoked. [[556]](#footnote-555)

Although the lobbying by the county Freedom Democratic Party led to the dismissal of Nunley, backing the Carroll County CDGM was not without controversy in the black community. The CDGM had established three early childhood education centers in the county, but black teachers recruited members of the FDP’s core constituency towards the Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP) program, a more traditional educational model that provided for less community involvement. With the county split between MAP, which would be staffed by certified teachers, and CDGM advocates, Freedom Democrats faced a dilemma. While the county FDP leadership supported active community involvement and the participatory model utilized by CDGM, many of the party’s members respected the black teachers in the community. Some deferred to professional educators and questioned the ability of uncertified teachers to instruct young children.[[557]](#footnote-556)

While Freedom Democrats and their allies observed the increasing influence of formally trained educators and administrators, Senator Stennis targeted CDGM, exploiting personnel overlaps between the poverty programs and civil rights organizations. Citing a conflict of interest, Stennis ordered Sargent Shriver, the director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), to conduct an investigation into the CDGM. Under pressure, the OEO rescinded funding of the CDGM projects, and teachers worked for the first half of 1966 without pay or a contract. In late April 1966, the OEO finally approved a budget for CDGM. In return, the group agreed to move its headquarters from Mount Beulah, a former college campus used as headquarters for civil rights organizations, hire an experienced administrator, and work with an accountant. The OEO also required CDGM to add three middle class white and black members to its board of directors, which previously was dominated by poor people and individuals with civil rights backgrounds. The OEO allotted CDGM a six month budget to fund one hundred and twenty five early childhood education centers, which would prepare nine thousand students in twenty-eight Mississippi counties for elementary school. The decision was met by charges of “shocked,” “inconceivable,” and “remarkably poor judgment” by Mississippi’s leading national representatives. [[558]](#footnote-557)

The Stennis inquiry accelerated the creation of alternative boards to administer the poverty programs in Mississippi. One activist alleged that similar to the creation of the Mississippi Democratic Conference “to sell the black vote,” national political operatives encouraged an overlapping set of state residents to form the Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP) to counter the civil rights influenced CDGM. Douglass Wynn, a white Mississippi Democrat, led the alternative organization. In an effort to add legitimacy to the new coalition, and reportedly pressured by leading politicians, NAACP chair Roy Wilkins urged state NAACP state president Aaron Henry to join the MAP leadership team. In turn, Henry recruited Charles Young and R.L.T. Smith. Civil rights activists argued that control of poverty funds would be given to those individuals who would guarantee the state’s black vote to the Democratic Party. Convinced that the Democratic National Committee encouraged the creation of MAP in order to influence votes, the civil rights activist charged that “they are using our children as political footballs: to give poor people money and then throw our new votes around where they want to.”[[559]](#footnote-558) A year and a half after the first federal poverty funds entered the state, Ruleville organizer Fannie Lou Hamer termed the programs a “sham” and insisted that “nothing in the world is so unjust as this Poverty Program in Mississippi.”[[560]](#footnote-559)

**Chapter 6: Local Politics**

In what one observer termed a “modified version of the New England town meeting,” Clay County voters, black and white, convened in a school auditorium to nominate candidates to serve as school board trustee. Rising to her feet, amidst the other black voters who sat segregated from their white counterparts, Odiera Holliday, a factory worker and former teacher, looked straight ahead, ignored the hostile white faces, and nominated Charles Graves. A farmer and Freedom Democrat, Graves accepted her nomination. In the seven months since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the number of black registered voters in Clay County had nearly equaled the number of white registered voters. At the county election meeting in March 1966, however, white voters significantly outnumbered black voters. Because of the numerical superiority of white voters, when Graves, a recently registered black voter, walked into the meeting, he had no illusions that he would depart as the newly elected trustee of the school board. The low turnout of black voters, however, did not stop either Odiera Holliday from nominating Graves for the position or his acceptance of her nomination. Nominated to serve as school board trustee, Graves became one of the first black candidates for public office in Mississippi in the months following the passage of the Voting Rights Act.[[561]](#footnote-560)

Although the number of black registered voters across the state had increased in the year following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, obstacles to voting remained. White Mississippians, expressing their fear of black ballots, regularly challenged attempts made by black Mississippians to organize for upcoming elections. In the summer of 1966, civil rights organizations reported that a “reign of terror” swept the state, rivaling any in Mississippi’s history. In Shubuta, movement organizers announced that the city and county police, aided by one white bystander, assaulted thirty black residents as they marched to City Hall. Rev. J.C. Killingsworth, a local FDP leader, suffered severe bodily harm: lacerations to the back of his head, a fractured rib, and other injuries. In McDowell, the FDP office was burned down.[[562]](#footnote-561) A few months earlier, in preparation for the 1966 election cycle, the local newspaper in Clay County directed advertisements towards its white readers, urging these veteran voters to attend the county election meeting and support white candidates. They hoped to neutralize the black vote.[[563]](#footnote-562)

As MFDP chair Lawrence Guyot had argued following the congressional challenge, the Voting Rights Act sanctioned the legal space for black voters to exercise the franchise. It did not, however, protect new voters from the practical challenge of defying white community members, who deemed the casting of ballots by black laborers an act of defiance. On Election Day in Clay County, five hundred white residents attended the nomination meeting for school board trustee. Assisted by car pools, but still fighting fear, forty black residents took part in one of the first publicly integrated political meetings in the state. Despite their small numbers at the nominating meeting, Clay County’s black voters, led by Graves and Holliday, challenged an archaic political order through their sheer physical presence.[[564]](#footnote-563)

Members of Clay County’s political establishment began the meeting without explicitly acknowledging the revolutionary change that the Voting Rights Act had facilitated. Because white voters outnumbered black voters at the meeting, they had little to fear in terms of a black candidate winning the Democratic nomination. With their numerical majority, Clay County’s white voters selected A. M. Edwards, a local lawyer, to chair the meeting. When Edwards called for nominations for school board trustee, Holliday nominated Graves. Graves’ candidacy challenged that of a white farmer. As chair, Edwards appointed sixteen white voters to serve as election officials. A black woman in attendance asked that black voters serve on the election committee. She worried that the presence of white onlookers would influence the balloting of some of the black voters. Her suggestion also articulated the intention of the county’s black population to fully participate in the day’s election. Edwards ignored her request, but he and the other white residents in attendance must have recognized the defiance embedded in her challenge.[[565]](#footnote-564)

With two accepted nominees, one white and one black, and five auxiliary police officers flanking the entrance to the auditorium, secret balloting began. After three hours of voting, the sixteen members of the recently constituted election committee announced that the white incumbent had, indeed, won the election. In this rural county, one hundred and thirty miles from Jackson, Charles Graves was defeated 590 to 46. As he left the school building, Graves, who had not progressed beyond the fourth grade in school, stressed that he was not educationally qualified for the position of school board trustee. He had not accepted the nomination to win the election. Rather, he believed it important that a black resident of Clay County serve as a candidate. “But no one else would stand up,” Graves explained. “Someone,” he insisted, “has to get this voting thing started.” Charles Graves defined himself as a pioneer rather than as a politician. Because of the public stance he had taken, Graves expected that a candidate who possessed more traditional qualifications would run in the future.[[566]](#footnote-565)

Political organizers counseled against the “jump up and run” phenomenon of candidate selection that led to the nomination of Charles Graves.[[567]](#footnote-566) In the rural counties of Mississippi, where federal law could not eliminate the fear of economic reprisals and physical intimidation, however, few black residents were willing to volunteer as candidates. Faced with participating in local elections that only offered a choice between white candidates, local dissenters preferred to nominate a black candidate to serve as a symbol of black defiance and remind white voters of the potential for black political participation. These informal and spontaneous decisions often led to the nominating of longstanding risk takers, who lacked formal educational training, as the first candidates for political office. The first black candidates often had actively participated in the Movement. They had served on the front lines of the battle to broaden the political space won over the preceding years through the congressional candidacy of R. L. T. Smith, the Freedom Vote, and the seating challenges at Atlantic City and before the United States Congress. Through their candidacies they hoped to accelerate the integration of black Mississippians into the electoral process and serve notice to white community members that black voters intended to participate fully in local political affairs.[[568]](#footnote-567)

When the Freedom Democratic delegates to the 1964 Democratic convention rejected the compromise offered to them, James Farmer, the national director of the Congress of Racial Equality, urged them to return to Mississippi and build a third party movement. In rejecting the “symbolic” offering of two at large seats at the national convention, Farmer understood the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to be renouncing its claims to the Democratic Party. Two years later, both Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine remarked on the prescience of Farmer’s comments. “But, you know,” Hamer reflected, “it didn’t hit, what he was saying at the time, but it was almost like it’s really happening now.” Devine agreed. She recounted Farmer’s instructions as “never more true than they are right now.”[[569]](#footnote-568) As the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party entered 1966, it began to define itself as an oppositional party. It ran candidates both in the Democratic primary and as independents in the general election, presenting itself as the only political structure available to the state’s black laboring population.

Lacking a well coordinated state infrastructure and possessing little practical knowledge of how to establish a political party within a community denied political training, the MFDP understood the 1966 elections to serve as a new form of protest. The number of registered voters in Mississippi had increased tremendously but had not reached a level in which black candidates, particularly black activist candidates, could succeed in defeating white opponents. The possibility did exist, however, for dissident candidates to illustrate the potential strength of the black electorate in affecting electoral outcomes. Like the MFDP sponsored freedom elections that had been conducted in 1963 and 1964, the 1966 election cycle offered another opportunity for symbolic voting for outspoken oppositional candidates. Unlike the freedom elections where black Mississippians registered their choice in mock elections, in 1966, their votes were official, an unmistakable sign of a viable black electorate that continued to increase exponentially on a monthly basis. In addition to supporting black candidates in local elections, like that in which candidates like Charles Graves participated, Freedom Democrats ran oppositional candidates in the five congressional districts and for the United States Senate.

The Freedom Democratic candidates for the United States House of Representatives and Senate hailed from the party’s most immediate organizing circles: a civil rights supporter, county FDP chairs, the state chair, a former freedom candidate, and a local Freedom Democrat. Clifton Whitley, the chaplain at Rust College, a private black college in Holly Springs, ran for a seat in the Senate against longtime incumbent James Eastland. Clinton Collier, co-chair of the Neshoba County FDP, sought the seat vacated by Representative Prentiss Walker, who announced he too would challenge James Eastland. Ralthus Hayes, the chair of the Holmes County FDP who with Hartman Turnbow had invited rights workers to his area four years earlier, opposed Representative Jamie Whitten, who had served in the House since 1941. State FDP chair Lawrence Guyot challenged Representative William Colmer, a thirty three year veteran of the House of Representatives. Edwin King, the 1963 freedom candidate for lieutenant governor, challenged John Bell Williams, who had been stripped of his seniority by the Democratic Party during the congressional challenge. Dock Drummond, a seventy six year old plumber from Kosciusko, opposed Thomas Abernethy, who had represented the first congressional district for twenty three years. [[570]](#footnote-569) All of the candidates were male, replacing the triumvirate of female candidates who had waged the congressional challenge with a more traditional face of public leadership.

These men were dissenters. They all had been active advocates for the freedom movement in their communities, establishing the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party as a viable outlet for black political organizing. They sought black votes, and they did not tone down their oppositional rhetoric. The six men declared their allegiance to the Civil Rights Movement and outlined common agendas for meeting the social, economic, and political needs of black Mississippians. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” they collectively pledged, “that all men are created equal, even in the state of Mississippi . . . which stands for the principles of White Supremacy, Separation of the Races and the resulting, ‘Separate but unequal’ life.”[[571]](#footnote-570) Holmes County Freedom Democratic chair Ralthus Hayes, who sought to represent the second congressional district, proclaimed, “I AM AN ACTIVE FREEDOM WORKER.” He campaigned for Medicare for all ages, integration of hospitals, an increase in minimum wage, and an extension of Head Start. He urged the federal government to redirect funding from the Vietnam War towards poverty programs.[[572]](#footnote-571)

Clifton Whitley, in his campaign against Senator James Eastland, also positioned himself as a protest candidate. In his campaign literature, Whitley attested to his active involvement in the Civil Rights Movement for nearly a decade and noted his role as a MFDP delegate to the Atlantic City convention.[[573]](#footnote-572) Like Ralthus Hayes, he opposed the military escalation in Vietnam. While attending a Washington, DC peace rally, Whitley prepared to share his view on the war with the protestors. He argued that the United States was “engaged in an illegal war in support of unpopular, unrepresentative Saigon regimes against what seems to be the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese people.”[[574]](#footnote-573) While James Eastland spoke to a meeting of the Citizens’ Council, an organization of white professionals established in the days immediately following the *Brown* decision and dedicated to the maintenance of segregation, Clifton Whitley pledged to campaign among the agricultural workers who labored on the plantations of the Delta.[[575]](#footnote-574) The candidacies of these men, as represented through the platforms and comments of Hayes and Whitley, diverged strikingly from campaigns where white candidates regularly employed racist and state’s rights rhetoric.

The outspoken and public nature of the post Voting Rights Act MFDP candidates contrasted sharply with the quiet candidacy of R.L.T. Smith four years earlier. Clinton Collier, who sought Prentiss Walker’s seat in the House of Representatives, doubted he would win, but that did not slow his campaigning. He spoke at mass meetings and rallies, issued press statements, and held fundraisers. “Just like they usually campaign,” Collier remarked when asked to describe his candidacy. “We went around, you know, and made speeches.”[[576]](#footnote-575) Similarly Clifton Whitley challenged James Eastland to a televised debate.[[577]](#footnote-576) In turn, Eastland acknowledged Whitley’s candidacy, and the influence of the MFDP in Mississippi’s black communities, when he linked the MFDP and other civil rights organizations to the Communist Party. Whitley did not retreat from Eastland’s charges. He countered that Eastland found these organizations threatening because they were “controlled by Negro poor people and not by white racists.” A Korean War veteran and dean of a Methodist backed black college, Whitley asked rhetorically, “Am I a ‘communist’ too?”[[578]](#footnote-577)

Although Clinton Collier insisted that he campaigned in the same manner as white incumbents and challengers, his candidacy was not without repercussions. Collier, a Methodist minister, possessed traditional credentials. He was a college educated activist, who had served in World War II and attended Tougaloo and Jackson State Colleges and Howard University. He taught math in Neshoba County until 1964 when he lost his job as a result of his civil rights activity. As a candidate, Collier did not slow his protests. In the middle of April, Collier refused to leave the “whites only” area of a cafeteria and was assaulted by white opponents of black rights. He received stitches for the injuries suffered in the attack. Over the course of his campaign, Collier was “harassed and beaten” several times, reported the MFDP.[[579]](#footnote-578) One supporter urged national news outlets to focus on the significance of the Collier campaign. “The very name of a man from notorious Philadelphia, Mississippi running for Congress,” remarked this supporter, “is remarkable and newsworthy in itself, I think.”[[580]](#footnote-579)

After waging a formal campaign against the white incumbents for Congress and Senate, the Freedom Democrats waited for Election Day results. To ensure that Mississippi’s election officials followed federal guidelines, two hundred federal observers fanned out across Mississippi and visited polling places during the June Democratic primary. A contingent of United States Representatives also traveled to the state to observe the elections. While federal statisticians estimated that the previous year’s total of thirty thousand black registered voters increased by one hundred thousand voters in 1966, black voters continued to face difficulties at the polls. New voters complained of not finding their names on the list of registered voters. In some counties, white poll managers limited the ability of black poll watchers to perform their duties, requiring them to stand five hundred feet from the polling locations. Despite garnering thousands of votes, none of the major Freedom Democratic candidates threatened the election of a white candidate. They all lost by significant totals in the Democratic primary.[[581]](#footnote-580)

Although few black candidates advanced from the Democratic primary, the 1966 elections scared white Mississippians. Clinton Collier placed third in the contest for Representative Prentiss Walker’s vacated seat, Collier argued that he altered the political climate. Because no candidate won a majority, a run off was required. One of Collier’s opponents asked Collier to direct black voters towards his candidacy in the election. “I didn’t though,” Collier laughed. “But you know he came to me.”[[582]](#footnote-581) In the June primary, Clifton Whitley outpolled James Eastland in two black majority counties – Claiborne and Jefferson Counties. The day after the primary, a state senator from Claiborne County, reintroduced a bill to allow the state legislature to consolidate counties, an attempt to dilute the electoral strength of counties with black voter majorities. The bill had long been tabled in the legislature, but following the June primary, state lawmakers passed a county consolidation bill. A few months later, the state’s voter’s passed it in referendum.[[583]](#footnote-582)

A black electorate, collapsed in the political imagination of white Mississippians as the MFDP, upset Mississippi’s one party political system, which had been united, at least rhetorically, in white racism. Following the June primary, A.L. Hopkins, an investigator with the Sovereignty Commission, reported that although no MFDP candidates won election in the primary, they received an “alarming number of votes.” Hopkins suggested that there was a “very good probability that in the next state-wide election that there will be many Negroes and F.D.P. candidates,” and he warned against counties that gained black voting majorities amid “white apathy.” He argued that if the “situation in Mississippi remains the same,” and civil rights organizations continue transporting black voters to the polls in black majority counties and vote in a united front as they did in Jefferson and Claiborne Counties, “they can elect the candidate of their choice.” Hopkins predicted that black voters could “also have a tremendous effect on the election” of white officials.[[584]](#footnote-583) The Sovereignty Commission’s assessment of the 1966 Democratic primary expressed the new fear and misunderstanding concerning the black electorate. With black voters participating in two party politics, the commission and its investigators presented the MFDP as a foil to the interests of white voters.

Before the June primary, Whitley, Drummond, Hayes, King, Collier, and Guyot had pledged that if they failed to win the Democratic nomination they would not endorse “segregationist candidates,” promising to run as independents in the general election.[[585]](#footnote-584) State lawmakers, however, drafted new legislation to limit the possibility of the names of Freedom Democratic candidates appearing on the general election ballot. Shortly after the election, the legislature passed new election requirements, increasing the number of petition signatures necessary to qualify as an independent candidate. Individuals running for a statewide office, as Clifton Whitley hoped to do, would require ten thousand, rather than one thousand signatures, from registered voters. Candidates for congressional offices would have to collect two thousand, instead of two hundred, signatures on their petitions. The state also argued that candidates who had voted in a primary election could not run as independents. By increasing the requirements for candidacy, it would become more difficult for the MFDP’s black oppositional candidates to gain a place on the ballot.[[586]](#footnote-585)

Freedom Democrats, in *Whitley v. Johnson*, sued the state of Mississippi. They argued that the Court’s interpretation of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act should broaden to include not only changes made by hostile legislatures to voter requirements but also alterations to candidate qualifications. Ultimately, a federal judicial decision deemed the new legislation invalid and permitted the MFDP backed candidates for the House and Senate to appear on the November ballot as independents.[[587]](#footnote-586) The court, however, levied only a provisional ruling. While Clifton Whitley and the other MFDP candidates would run in the general election, *Whitley v. Johnson* would continue to travel through the federal courts for three more years.[[588]](#footnote-587)

Although District Judge Harold Cox insisted that the federal decision amounted to “throwing mud at Mississippi,” it also aided the reelection campaign of James Eastland.[[589]](#footnote-588) Presumably black voters would cast their ballots in the general election for Clifton Whitley, the black candidate for Senate, rather than in support of Eastland’s white challenger, Representative Prentiss Walker. On the campaign trail, the two candidates sparred over who was least friendly to their black constituents. Walker linked Eastland to the Kennedys, passing out literature that depicted Eastland and Robert Kennedy shaking hands.[[590]](#footnote-589) In turn, Eastland accused Walker of supporting a black Mississippian’s application to the United States Air Force Academy.[[591]](#footnote-590) Although both of the white candidates tried to link their opponent to more liberal race policy, some strategists, argued pragmatically that Walker, who movement supporters characterized as a “redneck chicken farmer,” would cause less harm to black Mississippians. James Eastland chaired the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee. As a first term senator, Prentiss Walker would wield little influence. Black voters had to decide, according to one black activist, whether to “play power politics or vote for the Negro candidates.”[[592]](#footnote-591)

Freedom Democrats could not devise a coherent political agenda. In the days before the general election, the MFDP and its allies met to discuss the prospects for the coming election. They worried that with the movement becoming “more and more fragmented” and the congressional races not adequately organized, the election could hurt the Mississippi movement for black political rights. County FDP chapters continued to support “jump up and run” candidates. Their campaigns lacked widespread mobilization and organizing. The major campaigns for the House and Senate remained under funded and unorganized. Ground campaigns had not been fully developed in movement counties. Rather than put together a last minute push for the coming election, movement strategists opted to plan for a massive campaign in the next year’s elections. They agreed that any decision to work in preparation for the coming week’s election was a “personal one – people may or may not do so” and concluded that it would be “necessary to have a unified approach” in 1967.[[593]](#footnote-592)

Movement organizations failed to systematically prepare the state’s black voters for the 1966 general election. Black voters faced regular intimidation, and black candidates lacked well coordinated support from voters and organizers. In Clay County, a plantation store served as a polling place. Prior to the election, the plantation owner had threatened to shoot any black resident who tried to vote at his store. Despite the presence of black candidates on the ballot, of the fifty five black registered voters in that precinct, only one voted. Edwin King complained that polling places in Jackson were located in white churches and schools, facilities that regularly denied entrance to black Mississippians.[[594]](#footnote-593) In Holmes County, black poll watchers were directed to remain twenty feet from the balloting and forced to stand throughout the day. When the votes were tallied in Durant, white election officials refused to read them aloud, eliminating the ability of black observers to determine the veracity of each ballot choice.[[595]](#footnote-594)

Despite white hostility to black voting and the lack of a unified movement push, Freedom Democratic candidates fielded votes in numbers unimaginable just a few years earlier. Erle Johnston, the director of the State Sovereignty Commission, reported that the MFDP won 61,000 votes compared to the regular Democrats’ 400,000 votes in the 1966 general election.[[596]](#footnote-595) In Carroll County, Virginia Jackson Gray had received one vote when she ran for Congress in 1964. Two years later, Dock Drummond received nearly seven hundred votes. In Jefferson County, where R.L.T. Smith had received four votes in his 1962 contest, Emma Sanders, who had replaced Edwin King as the MFDP candidate on the November ballot, received over fifteen hundred votes. In Holmes County, where no one had cast a ballot for oppositional candidate Merrill Lindsey in 1962, over two thousand voters supported Clifton Whitley in his contest against James Eastland.[[597]](#footnote-596) Outside of the black governed town of Mound Bayou, however, only one black candidate won election in 1966. Robert Williams won a school board race in Jefferson County.[[598]](#footnote-597)

“I admit,” Malcolm Warren told the assembled Freedom Democrats, “that nothing much has been done for you in the past.” While Warren, a white supervisor in Hinds County, ran for reelection in an area in which black residents represented seventy percent of the beat’s population, during previous election cycles the black population remained largely unregistered. The Voting Rights Acts had increased the number of black registered voters, and the 1966 election returns demonstrated that black voters would participate in the electoral process. Consequently, prior to the 1967 Democratic primary, Malcolm Warren scheduled a campaign stop with local Freedom Democrats. Not content with a symbolic visit, Freedom Democrats peppered Warren with questions on his record in office. Lizzie Richardson asked him about federally funded food stamps, which the MFDP supported. Warren responded candidly, “I voted against them.” Questioned about Head Start, Warren conceded, “I don’t know much about it.”[[599]](#footnote-598) Previously, Malcolm Warren and other white incumbents relied on the mass disenfranchisement of their black constituencies, seeking support only among white voters. In 1967, white candidates began courting black voters. The Hinds County FDP reported Warren’s campaign visit, perhaps with a bit of hyperbole, but in full recognition of its unprecedence, as the first time a white candidate presented himself to black voters in Mississippi since Reconstruction.[[600]](#footnote-599)

In the previous year’s elections, black voters had demonstrated their potential political power as a voting bloc. If they voted together, black voters could elect black candidates or serve as a swing vote, determining which white candidate triumphed. By 1967, over seventeen thousand black residents of Hinds County had registered to vote.[[601]](#footnote-600) Malcolm Warren and other white candidates, who had long represented majority black geographic areas, learned from the 1966 elections that their black constituents would indeed cast ballots. Black voters jostled over which candidates would receive black votes.

While the MFDP Executive Committee and many Freedom Democrats outlined a “vote black” strategy, some newly registered black voters, when identified by white community members as possible intermediaries between black and white political interests, sought to exercise new found political leverage. “We have people,” remarked one Hinds County Freedom Democrat, “who love the white man because now for the first time that white man is courting his vote.”[[602]](#footnote-601) A former chair of the Hinds County FDP endorsed the white police chief for constable. Politically astute, the sheriff had sought the support of the former chair, hoping that it would lead to an invitation to speak before the county FDP where he could gain the group’s endorsement. Similarly, a FDP precinct captain had invited Malcolm Warren to speak to the county FDP membership.[[603]](#footnote-602) Freedom Democrats accused one black candidate of promising his votes to a white candidate. He assured his supporters that he was “in this race to win,” not to gain political influence with white politicians. Most black voters responded to overtures from white candidates with a general cautiousness, but the complicated history of caste in Mississippi left some black voters supporting white candidates who had endorsed segregation in previous elections. The pragmatic responses of some Freedom Democrats illustrated the potential for diverse vote choices within the black electorate.[[604]](#footnote-603)

While some Freedom Democrats flexed their new found political muscle by serving as emissaries for white candidates in the black community, other Freedom Democrats expressed concern for the qualifications of black candidates. They worried about the leadership experience of black candidates and the difficult task of governing in white dominated institutions. Unwilling to support black candidates they deemed unable to win, these Freedom Democrats lent pragmatic endorsements to white candidates. One Hinds County Freedom Democrat encouraged his peers to wait four years before running black candidates. He concluded that if one black supervisor served on a county board with four white supervisors, “the Negro will be left tapping his shoes and scratching his head.” He hypothesized that one black supervisor would be unable to direct services to the black community and would anger the white supervisors who would, in turn, “close up the money and the road jobs.”[[605]](#footnote-604) He argued that the patronage gained by influencing the election of white supervisors outweighed the symbolism of electing one black member to the board of supervisors. He preferred to wait to elect black supervisors until the black community could organize itself effectively and significantly reorient the racial membership of the county board of supervisors.

Hinds County Freedom Democrats fervently debated the viability of black candidates. Supporters of black candidates admonished the “naysayers” to remember the important legacy of black Reconstruction leaders. Systematically excluded from political participation since the redrafting of Mississippi’s constitution in 1890, the most salient memory of black political leadership and voting rested in the twenty year reign of Reconstruction governments.[[606]](#footnote-605) “The Negroes that served and did these things didn’t have fancy college educations,” insisted one Freedom Democrat who supported running a black candidate for supervisor. “They had mother wit, and knew what was right.”[[607]](#footnote-606) Since the turn of century, black Mississippians had been universally excluded from all forms of political participation. Although a few members of the black community were able to hone leadership skills in black fraternal organizations and churches, pre-civil rights era Mississippi offered few avenues for black Mississippians to develop organizational skills. Issaquena County Freedom Democrat Unita Blackwell admitted that local people who had joined the movement a few years earlier had “worked hard,” but “we still ain’t figured all of it out yet” when the Voting Rights act passed.[[608]](#footnote-607) The Hinds County FDP acknowledged the veracity of the claims made by some opponents that “we have not had experience in the political area” but countered that “we will never have experience if we are unable to elect a person to Office.” While one Hinds County Freedom Democrat termed it “shameful if a Negro be elected and then make a fool of himself,” the county FDP agreed to run a black candidate for the board of supervisors.[[609]](#footnote-608)

The Hinds County FDP called on the county’s black voters to support black candidates with their vote and through financial support. In rural jurisdictions with small voter populations, a few ballots dictated the outcome of elections. If a handful of black voters chose white candidates, the possibility of black electoral success decreased significantly. “Cause you know there’s a few blacks that just going to vote for that white man cause they feel like” they are more qualified, one freedom worker admitted. She understood what would come to be termed the “60% rule.” In order to successfully compete in elections, the MFDP had to ensure more than a simple majority among its supporters. Black voters had to constitute at least sixty percent of the voting electorate.[[610]](#footnote-609) Most black voters would tie their interests to black candidates, but some black voters, enough to influence elections, would knowingly, or unwittingly, select white candidates.[[611]](#footnote-610)

Because the success of black candidates rested on the turnout of black voters, Freedom Democrats attempted to offset the defection of black voters with aggressive canvassing in black communities. Black residents who had remained outside the freedom movement, however, bristled at the insistence of Freedom Democrats that they register to vote and select movement candidates. In Rankin County, a group of black residents retreated when Freedom Democrats approached them about registering to vote. A minister, annoyed by the persistence of Freedom Democrats, informed one canvasser, “Next time you come for me bring a gun.” A deacon, expressing his belief in the futility of voting, maintained, “I’m going to register with God.” [[612]](#footnote-611) One Terry voter explained his hesitancy to a canvasser, “Son, about two men own this whole town and I ain’t nearly ‘bout ready to get my house bombed.” Hostility to the freedom movement, combined with experiences of life long dependence, economic uncertainty, low literacy levels, and fear of retaliation, contributed to the reluctance some black Mississippians expressed towards participating in the political process despite the passage of a federal voting law.[[613]](#footnote-612)

While some voters shied away from the civil rights candidates of the Freedom Democratic Party because they enjoyed being courted by white candidates, advocated pragmatic endorsements, or feared upsetting white community members by voting, a contingent of Freedom Democrats opted to vote along strictly racial lines. They voted only for black candidates. These dissidents argued that because no white voters would cast their ballots for black candidates, black voters must also exercise their franchise as a unanimous bloc. Holmes County Freedom Democrat Hartman Turnbow urged supporters that the “only qualification for office is a Black skin and a heart to do unto others as you would have them do unto you: a Qualified Heart.”[[614]](#footnote-613) One black voter in Madison County argued that “whites have been bloc-voting all along.” He insisted that “Negroes should bloc-vote and vote black.” This contingent of black voters argued that casting ballots as a united interest group along racial lines, would more quickly demonstrate the power of the black electorate, forcing white elected officials to address the concerns of their black constituencies.[[615]](#footnote-614)

When Charles McLaurin first became involved in organized civil rights activities, it was the story of the Delta that intrigued him. McLaurin was not an outside agitator. He was a Mississippian. McLaurin, however, was a product of Jackson, living in economic instability amongst a cross section of the capital city’s black community. In 1961, Charles McLaurin and some of his friends attended a civil rights meeting at the Masonic Temple in Jackson. That evening, they listened as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Southern Christian Leadership Conference leaders described the mass of undereducated and underemployed black agricultural workers that represented a significant population majority in the delta region of the state. The Delta, a sixteen county area in the northwest corner of Mississippi, supported one of the most lucrative cotton economies in the world, in addition to housing one of the poorest populations in the nation. After hearing King speak, McLaurin became convinced that change would come to Mississippi if voting rights workers fanned out across the Delta and registered the region’s unskilled agricultural workers. In his naiveté, McLaurin estimated that the registration effort would take a few weeks, maybe a few months.[[616]](#footnote-615)

The vast cotton fields of the Delta had required populations to settle in small towns throughout the region, readily available as a labor pool. White residents of the Delta lived, primarily, in county seats. Black laborers, two thirds of the region’s population, resided in small towns, many of which were unincorporated, dispersed throughout each county. Delta resident Fannie Lou Hamer joked, “You can drive through those towns and not even know you’ve passed them.”[[617]](#footnote-616) Despite the wealth of plantation owners, who received large government farm subsidies and returned significant profits as a result of their underpaid labor force, for most of its inhabitants, Hamer described the Delta as “one of the hard-core poverty areas of the nation.”[[618]](#footnote-617) In 1960, Americans earned an average of $2,247 while the median annual income for black residents of the Delta was just under five hundred dollars.[[619]](#footnote-618) The mechanization of agricultural work over the proceeding years only worsened the economic situation of the region’s black workers, who found few avenues for employment outside of the cotton industry. By 1967, mechanization had reduced the need for manual labor to three months of the year. Political organizers estimated that the annual income of black agricultural laborers had nearly halved in the intervening years. Unable to meet their basic needs through employment, black laborers relied on a complex combination of survival skills, paternalism, and federal commodities programs.[[620]](#footnote-619)

In the six years since he had first heard Dr. King speak of the Delta, Charles McLaurin had worked as a full time organizer with SNCC, and then the MFDP, registering black Mississippians to vote. In 1967, armed with a federal court decision, he canvassed Delta backroads, encouraging newly registered black voters to participate in special elections for mayor and the board of alderman in two Delta towns. In the year and a half following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the large black populations that labored on Delta plantations had been registered in numbers large enough to challenge the electoral supremacy of their white employers. An MFDP initiated lawsuit resulted in a court order to hold new elections for municipal offices in the Delta towns of Sunflower and Moorhead in Sunflower County, home to both Senator James Eastland and Freedom Democrat Fannie Lou Hamer.[[621]](#footnote-620) Reflecting on the court mandated special elections, McLaurin remarked that in Sunflower, where a black voter majority existed, “We had the numbers.” McLaurin predicted optimistically that black voters would select black candidates. “And we now had a town,” McLaurin imagined himself describing Sunflower in the days following the special election. Governed by black elected officials, Sunflower would become an outpost for the MFDP’s political activities across Mississippi.[[622]](#footnote-621)

The massive organizing drive resulted from a suit filed by Fannie Lou Hamer and a handful of other plaintiffs, on behalf of black Sunflower County voters, against county registrar Cecil Campbell. On April 8, 1965 the federal district court of northern Mississippi found a “pattern and practice” of racial discrimination by the registrar in Sunflower County. In *Hamer v*. *Campbell*, the court forced Cecil Campbell to register black voters at the same pace as he registered white voters. In the three weeks following the court order, over three hundred new black voters were registered.[[623]](#footnote-622) Despite the court ruling, municipal elections in Moorhead and Sunflower were scheduled for early June. Mississippi required voters to have registered four months prior to an election and pay a poll tax for two years before participating in elections. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the scheduled elections, arguing that the court, in its April decision, had acknowledged that the registrar had inhibited the registration of black voters. The June primary for municipal positions did not allow enough time for the newly registered voters to meet all of the state requirements for participating in elections.[[624]](#footnote-623)

Nearly one year later, in March 1966, the United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals did what the United States Congress had been unwilling to do in the MFDP’s congressional challenge. It ordered new elections. The court found the 1965 municipal elections in Sunflower City and five other localities invalid. These municipalities would have to hold special elections for mayor and members of the board of alderman.[[625]](#footnote-624) SNCC staffer Elizabeth Sutherland wrote in a memo to Victoria Jackson Gray, the MFDP’s Washington staff director and former freedom candidate, on the importance of the court’s decision. Sutherland cheered the Sunflower decision as having given the Voting Rights Act “teeth.”[[626]](#footnote-625) Although the state of Mississippi appealed the decision, the Supreme Court refused to hear arguments.

With new elections to be held in the Spring of 1967, the MFDP began intensive organizing, drawing on state and national allies, for the new elections to be held in Moorhead and Sunflower, and white opponents initiated campaigns to dissuade black voters from participating in the election of FDP backed candidates. “Nothing has changed in Mississippi,” remarked Fannie Lou Hamer a year and a half after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. “Our people expect harm. . . . They expect to go hungry, lose what few jobs they have and get cut off from welfare funds,” Hamer told a national audience, “because they want to run for office and support other Negroes who run.”[[627]](#footnote-626) Hamer alleged that on the night that the MFDP first filed suit against the scheduled municipal elections in Sunflower in 1965, three houses were burned.[[628]](#footnote-627) At a planning meeting in Sunflower a year later, organizers contended that one hundred people attended but only three had jobs the next morning.[[629]](#footnote-628) As the special elections neared, Hamer reiterated that the only black Mississippians registered were “the ones who have gone through a living hell to get registered.”[[630]](#footnote-629)

Not only were the livelihoods of individuals and their families at stake, the local political establishment, the Sovereignty Commission and black conservative voices worked steadily to discredit the MFDP’s efforts in the Sunflower elections. Although forced by the court order to register black voters and hold new elections, Sunflower’s white officials employed new tactics to stymie the campaigns of black candidates. The *Freedom Information Service*, a statewide news outlet for progressive causes, reported that town clerks in both Sunflower and Moorhead had initially indicated to movement supported candidates that they did not have to certify their petitions before they submitted them to the election commission. Had candidates followed the advice of the town clerks and not their lawyers, they could have been disqualified from their respective races.[[631]](#footnote-630)

The Sovereignty Commission proposed an editorial for the *Jackson Daily News*, linking the MFDP to the Communist Party. Having learned that Fannie Lou Hamer had been interviewed by the *National Guardian*, the Sovereignty Commission resurrected evidence that linked MFDP supporter Carl Braden to the Communist Party. Erle Johnston, the director of the Sovereignty Commission, wrote to his assistant, “We will take this information and see if it can be exploited into a news story without the Sovereignty Commission being mentioned.”[[632]](#footnote-631) Johnston hoped that the inflammatory story would be picked up and placed on the wire service. In its idea for an article, the Commission cited two publications alleging that the attorneys assisting the MFDP on the Sunflower elections had been associated with the Communist Party or “Communist-front” organizations.[[633]](#footnote-632)

While Mississippi had not been kind to its black residents, most working as manual laborers in rural areas, a small group of black professionals navigated a more complicated world of separation. The *Jackson Advocate*, the most established black newspaper in the capital city, by no means represented the state’s black community. The paper’s readership rested primarily in white northerners, who received the newspaper as part of the Sovereignty Commission’s propaganda campaign, not black Mississippians. Its owner, Percy Greene, steered a delicate relationship with white leaders. He was financially supported by the Sovereignty Commission and white business owners who advertised on the newspaper’s pages. In its reporting, the *Jackson Advocate* rendered MFDP leadership as illegitimate, objected to its membership, and resisted its attempts to establish a grassroots political movement in the state. Through its rhetorical opposition to the MFDP, the *Jackson Advocate*’s reporters and editors presented an alternative face of black Mississippi, one that white politicians could present to northern critics as evidence of black-white cooperation.[[634]](#footnote-633)

In the days leading up to the Sunflower election, the *Jackson Advocate* weighed in on the contest. One columnist paralleled the possibility of black elected officials in Sunflower to the election of black politicians during Reconstruction. Unlike Freedom Democrats who lauded this period of biracial rule as the pinnacle of black political involvement, this element of black conservatism characterized Reconstruction as “grievous for Negroes.” The columnist rendered the post emancipation period as one in which northern white economic interests exploited the recently won freedom of black men and women. Concerned that history was repeating itself, the author invoked loaded language from the earlier era. Misrepresenting the MFDP’s leadership as outside agitators who hoped to encourage “violence and blood,” he termed them “carpetbaggers.”[[635]](#footnote-634)

“The Political Crisis in Sunflower,” as the *Jackson Advocate* termed the call for new elections, appeared to be “only a short step” from the racial violence the newspaper and its supporters perceived as the “main purpose” of MFDP leaders.[[636]](#footnote-635) This most conservative element of middle class professionals argued that the MFDP had initiated “pin-pricking law suits” and endorsed black candidates who would only serve to exacerbate differences between white and black Mississippians “when the Negroes greatest need is friendly cooperation and goodwill from the White people of the state.”[[637]](#footnote-636) Citing the integration of the State Democratic Executive Committee in Georgia, the *Jackson Advocate* argued that the Mississippi Democratic Party should be similarly integrated from the top down. Rather than establish an alternative party with membership drawing from dirt farmers, domestics, and agricultural workers, the conservative elements represented by the *Jackson Advocate* reasserted the need for the formally trained to be the first to enter politics.[[638]](#footnote-637)

Facing significant opposition from white political and economic leaders in Sunflower and Moorhead, the state surveillance agency, and elements of the black middle class, the MFDP sought national allies to assist it in this important electoral contest. In the summer of 1966, the National Committee for Free Elections in Sunflower County, Mississippi was established. Its membership ranged from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Harry Belafonte and from Senator Eugene McCarthy to Stokely Carmichael. Fifteen representatives in the United States Congress endorsed the committee. These individuals used their names and spheres of influence to focus national attention on the tiny towns in Sunflower County.[[639]](#footnote-638) Seven months after the creation of the committee, twelve members of the House of Representatives urged Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to appoint more federal registrars to Mississippi.[[640]](#footnote-639) Pressure from national leaders increased the possibility for electoral success in Mississippi by creating enthusiasm for the election, providing important resources, and discouraging obstructionism, allowing black voters the freedom to vote for black candidates.

Lawrence Guyot termed twenty one year old Otis Brown “charismatic,” a “true believer,” and “fearless.”[[641]](#footnote-640) As the FDP backed candidate for mayor of Sunflower City, Brown had to embody all of those traits in his campaign to unseat three term incumbent W.L. Patterson. While Patterson employed paternalist tactics, campaigning among those he termed “good niggers,” Brown, a former volunteer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and county FDP chair at the time of the election, imagined a City Hall where black workers assisted white supervisors and white support staff deferred to black management. During the previous few years, as others had reduced their involvement with the freedom movement, Brown contended that he worked “night and days on trying to organized [sic] the people.”[[642]](#footnote-641) Like the state wide MFDP races the year earlier, Otis Brown ran as a freedom candidate, and the MFDP, assisted by a national support committee, directed its energies and resources towards his campaign.

The election in Sunflower overshadowed that in Moorhead. In Sunflower, black voters outnumbered white voters and political networks were more established. In early March, there were 351 black registered voters in Moorhead. Eighty five percent of those eligible to register had registered. Despite the high percentage of black registered voters, white registered voters outnumbered black registered voters by more than two hundred.[[643]](#footnote-642) While the black population of Moorhead was too small to determine the outcome of a municipal wide contest, in Sunflower, black registered voters held a numerical advantage over white registered voters. There, over two hundred black voters had been registered by early March, representing ninety five percent of the town’s black voting age population. This high rate of voter registration also represented a numerical majority in Sunflower where one hundred and seventy white voters were registered.[[644]](#footnote-643) The distribution of registered voters in Sunflower required white candidates to seek black votes and black candidates to guard against the defection of black voters. Based on the number of black registered voters in Sunflower City, Otis Brown, assisted by the organizational support of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, posed a serious challenge to the white incumbent for mayor.

The MFDP, as the organizational home for black political activity in Moorhead and Sunflower, established a parallel political process in each community. Voters attended political education workshops and participated in a formal nominating process. In Sunflower, the MFDP oversaw a primary to select candidates, a first for black voters in the area. Five local women served as poll officials, ensuring that voters observed the rules and conventions for casting a valid ballot.[[645]](#footnote-644) Otis Brown ran unopposed as the FDP nominee in the March 15 primary. Local people also selected five candidates for alderman, two of whom were women.[[646]](#footnote-645) In Moorhead, no primary was held because only one individual offered to run for each position. Although one movement newspaper admitted that the FDP candidates in Moorhead “cannot expect to win,” Jimmy Lee Douglas, the freedom movement’s candidate for mayor, and the four candidates for city council, kicked off the election season with a large rally.[[647]](#footnote-646)

In both Moorhead and Sunflower, organizers developed block captain systems to ensure candidate contact with every voter. In their discussions with voters, the MFDP endorsed candidates shared their platforms. They spoke beyond the more general demands for “freedom,” which had served as a rhetorical catch all phrase in the earlier years of the movement. Freedom candidates pledged to integrate schools, improve books and instruction, reduce class size, and institute compulsory school attendance. In addition, the candidates determined to improve the maintenance of roads in black residential areas, build sewers and erect street lights, begin trash collections, and construct recreation areas. The candidates also spoke to the desire to improve employment opportunities for agricultural laborers and displaced workers. They announced that they would recruit new industry and apply for federal job training programs.[[648]](#footnote-647)

In addition to the extensive campaign work of local people and national supporters of black voting rights, the MFDP utilized all of its resources in the state during the Sunflower elections. “We brought the whole FDP operation into Sunflower,” remarked Charles McLaurin, “and put forth our best effort.”[[649]](#footnote-648) State chair Lawrence Guyot traveled to Sunflower County several days a week to work on the campaign.[[650]](#footnote-649) One Sunflower resident remembered the creative methods Charles McLaurin and Joseph Harris used to create excitement around the election. The voter described a vehicle (“I don’t know whether it was a truck or what.”) that McLaurin and Harris decorated in lights and outfitted with a music system. The two freedom workers drove the vehicle throughout Sunflower to encourage voter registration and participation in the election.[[651]](#footnote-650) “We registered every black person in that town eligible to register,” McLaurin stated proudly. “And we got them ready.”[[652]](#footnote-651)

In the week preceding the special elections, the FDP operation in Sunflower and Moorhead built upon the excitement that had been generated. Candidates invited voters to a number of political events. Freedom Democrats oversaw mock precinct elections to ensure that new voters were comfortable with the voting process. To simulate the mechanics of election day, MFDP workers offered only as much assistance as would be provided at official polling sites. On the Sunday before the election, voters in Moorhead gathered at a church to rally for the candidates. On the eve of the election, the MFDP scheduled the Free Southern Theatre to perform, and mass rallies were arranged for both Moorhead and Sunflower City.[[653]](#footnote-652)

Black voters, previously ignored, became active political actors in the Sunflower elections. Acknowledging that a black voter majority did, in fact, exist in Sunflower City, W. L. Patterson, the mayoral incumbent, diverged from traditional campaign practices. He sought the black vote. Patterson, however, qualified his need to receive black votes, insisting that he had not campaigned among “radical Negro voters.”[[654]](#footnote-653) William Minor, the Mississippi correspondent to the New Orleans *Times Picayune,* who served as one of the few white southern journalist to present favorable reporting on civil rights campaigns, identified a new electoral climate in which “it apparently no longer is a cardinal sin to ask for Negro votes, as long as such votes are necessary for whites to stay in power.” [[655]](#footnote-654)

As the election neared, Charles McLaurin watched as “the money came.”[[656]](#footnote-655) McLaurin accused a moderate coalition of Democrats of approaching some black voters with arguments of loyalty. They contended that since these voters had registered as Democrats they should vote for the Democratic candidate rather than the FDP backed independent candidates.[[657]](#footnote-656) “A few people took some money,” complained McLaurin, “and voted how the white man wanted.”[[658]](#footnote-657) Some black voters accepted small payments and voted as their patrons encouraged them. Others were swayed by the ideology of the freedom movement and pride in black candidates. A contingent of voters determined that Otis Brown and his colleagues on the ticket lacked the qualifications and experience necessary for holding office; they chose the incumbents. Black voters, courted by movement and establishment candidates, made personal decisions about which candidate could best meet their needs. That candidate was not always black.

Although no violence was reported, local officials created a hostile atmosphere for the election. Black residents received flyers written by white community members warning, “Your homes and property are at stake.” “If you are smart,” they furthered, relying on the traditional paternalistic tone of the region, “you will not be misled by paid racial agitators who would promise you everything and give you nothing but misery if they succeed in fooling you into following their leadership.”[[659]](#footnote-658) On election day, election officials reneged on a verbal commitment to allow Freedom Democrat Joseph Harris to act as a poll official.[[660]](#footnote-659) Edwin King doubted that every black voter who needed assistance would have asked for help even if Harris had been allowed to perform his role. First black voters would have to overcome their fear in asking a white poll watcher for assistance. Then, King contended that they would be pressured into selecting a white candidate, intentionally misled, or cast a ballot that would later be disqualified for irregularity.[[661]](#footnote-660) Additionally, the polling places were located in public buildings. In rural Delta communities, black residents were historically denied full access to these facilities. In Sunflower, as black voters waited outside City Hall, white voters were ushered ahead of them.[[662]](#footnote-661)

The vote count in Sunflower surprised everyone. More black than white voters cast ballots on election day, but none of the black candidates won election. Approximately fifty black voters must have selected W.L. Patterson over Otis Brown, who was outpolled by seventy one votes. After his reelection, Patterson conceded that he had received a “few more votes than I expected.” [[663]](#footnote-662) While white politicians had feared that black voters would vote in a bloc, it was the white voters in Sunflower who voted unanimously for white candidates. “The simple fact,” according to William Minor, “was that some Negroes – more than enough to provide the winning margin – voted for the white candidates rather than the Negro candidates.” Although black voters outnumbered white voters at the polls in Sunflower on 2 May 1967, black voters did not unite behind the black candidates for office. All of the white voters in Sunflower voted on election day. They all voted for the white candidates.[[664]](#footnote-663) When the ballots in both the Sunflower and Moorhead elections were counted, none of the FDP backed candidates had won.

Analysts from all quarters were quick to assess the MFDP’s electoral defeat in Sunflower. J.B. Romine, Jr., one of the white incumbents for alderman who won reelection, attributed the recent outspokenness of some black residents to the influence of outside agitators. While Charles McLaurin and Lawrence Guyot were both native Mississippians, in Mississippi, one’s home county defined them. McLaurin and Guyot grew up in Jackson and on the Gulf Coast, respectively, not in the Delta. “I think we have enough sensible Negroes in this community,” Romine explained his circumscribed notion of home, “to realize these foreigners are not the ones to lead them in their politics.” Romine predicted that black candidates eventually would be elected in Sunflower, but they would not be FDP candidates whose “caliber” he expected black voters questioned.[[665]](#footnote-664) William Minor shared Romine’s conclusion. He surmised that a partial answer to the electoral results lay in the fact that a “good many Negro citizens are not ‘moved’ by the ‘movement’ run by young radicals.”[[666]](#footnote-665) Before the national press, NAACP leader Charles Evers concurred with such assessments. Evers argued that black voters in Sunflower determined that the MFDP candidates could “hardly read or write” and lacked the necessary skills to succeed in office.[[667]](#footnote-666)

Freedom Democrats disregarded the election analysis offered by their opponents. Instead, they concluded that black voters had feared casting their ballots for black candidates. Charles McLaurin characterized the election as “stolen,” regarding it as a “crushing blow” to black electoral hopes.[[668]](#footnote-667) Lawrence Guyot concluded, “You can teach people how to organize, how to think, how to use information, but you can’t teach courage.”[[669]](#footnote-668) Guyot, and the MFDP operation in Sunflower, had assumed that black voters would vote solely according to race. In their preparations, political organizers overlooked the well honed survival skills of Delta residents. Some black voters did not trust the movement, and others feared that white employers would learn of their vote choice. Although the black voters of Sunflower had verbally committed to endorsing the freedom candidates, enough black voters cast their ballots for the white candidates to determine who won the election. In elections like the one held in Sunflower, Charles McLaurin found the situation even more disheartening “because the potential was there.”[[670]](#footnote-669)

The electoral loss in Sunflower took an emotional toll on organizers. The MFDP had spent nearly two years preparing the residents of Sunflower and Moorhead for the special elections. After the ballots had been tallied, Lawrence Guyot spoke angrily to a crowd of Sunflower FDP supporters. He shared what he had learned from the outcome of the special election. The MFDP, according to Guyot’s constantly evolving political philosophy, needed to “stay the hell out of the goddamn Democratic Party.” A Hinds County Freedom Democrat, who had assisted with the Sunflower elections, silently agreed. In his written assessment of the election, he quoted Guyot, who had concluded that the black voters of Sunflower City had been “raped” by self styled “good people” who continue to “keep the poor in chains.” Sharing his own frustration, the Hinds County Freedom Democrat wrote, “We’ve been fooling around with the Democratic and Republican parties so long ‘til we don’t know what Freedom is any more.”[[671]](#footnote-670) Young organizers had joined the movement to gain political rights, believing that once black voters gained access to a federally protected ballot they would use it to support black candidates. Black Mississippians, however, did not act uniformly.

Although Charles McLaurin described Lawrence Guyot’s reaction as “devastation,” Guyot determined to continue organizing in Mississippi’s black communities. Just after the election, he called for a regional political meeting to be held the following week. He invited three representatives from each Delta county to travel to Holmes County in order to discuss plans for future political campaigns. [[672]](#footnote-671) When asked to reflect on an emotional and electoral blow like that which had occurred in Sunflower, Guyot responded without hesitation, “You keep organizing there and you keep organizing beyond.”[[673]](#footnote-672) Determined to facilitate black electoral success, the MFDP ran candidates in Sunflower and across the state in the 1967 general election. In the November elections, Otis Brown again ran for office, this time as an FDP backed independent for supervisor. He shared the Sunflower FDP slate with two other candidates.[[674]](#footnote-673)

“Burn, baby, burn,” screamed a headline from the Hinds County FDP’s newsletter. Rapidly becoming one of the most outspoken and radical county chapters, the Hinds County Freedom Democratic Party printed instructions in its newsletter on how to assemble a Molotov cocktail. White Mississippians seized upon this incident to further marginalize Freedom Democrats as radical agitators advocating black power, a term used to discredit the aims of a number of black led organizations during the late 1960s. As the MFDP continued to plan for the November general election, Lawrence Guyot distanced the state executive committee from the provocative article, but he refused to denounce it. Guyot released a statement to the national press, asserting that county chapters were free to publish what they liked and did not always represent the state executive committee.[[675]](#footnote-674)

The newsletter fueled MFDP opposition, and the organization’s critics seized upon the document as further evidence that Freedom Democrats were hoping to ignite racial tensions. In Mississippi, white constituents sent copies to their representatives in Congress and the Jackson *Clarion Ledger* printed angry critiques of the newsletter.[[676]](#footnote-675) In Washington, James Eastland, inspired by the Hinds County illustration and the presence of Freedom Democrats at the National Conference for New Politics, described Freedom Democrats as “provocateurs” who were “working hand and glove with the Communist Party, U.S. A.” to disrupt the two party system.[[677]](#footnote-676) He ordered an investigation into the party.[[678]](#footnote-677)

Not only did white segregationists view black political participation as extremism, but also the party’s commitment to grassroots organizing and indigenous leadership created an atmosphere in which autonomous county chapters initiated campaigns that conflicted with the agenda of the Executive Committee. Despite its overarching goal of integrating black Mississippians into the political process, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was a movement organization. Movement strategists identified traditional politics as an important venue for black advancement. County FDPs, however, took on different personas. Some chapters, like the participants in the Issaquena County school boycott, focused on expanding social service options in the black community. Others, like the Holmes County Freedom Democrats, ran formal political candidates. The Hinds County FDP formulated a race-based critique of Mississippi politics.

Hinds County emerged as one of the most politically radical FDP chapters. The state capital, Jackson, was located in Hinds County and was the only real city in the overwhelmingly rural state. The urban leadership of the Hinds County Freedom Democratic Party, in contrast to Freedom Democrats in the Delta or hill country, made use of nationalist rhetoric similar to that which was appearing in other urban areas in the late 1960s.[[679]](#footnote-678) With its printed instructions on how to assemble a small explosive included in its newsletter, the Hinds County FDP incited, rather than mollified, the state’s white residents and moderate black residents.

Soon after this controversy arose, the Hinds County FDP clashed with the state executive committee over its decision to endorse a gubernatorial candidate in the general election. In the primary, the MFDP had refused to endorse a candidate for governor. At a movement sponsored rally prior to the Democratic Party in August, the organization endorsed black candidates for state representative and supervisor. The Hinds County FDP supported the state executive committee’s decision not to endorse a gubernatorial candidate, insisting that “[n]one of the state candidates . . . have said anything to deserve our support or our vote.”[[680]](#footnote-679)

While some white voters hailed, or condemned, State Treasurer William Winter as a moderate, one Freedom Democrat argued, “Even the so-called good white man – William Winter is talking like a Junior Bilbo,” referring to Theodore Bilbo, the longtime segregationist senator from Mississippi. Freedom Democrats distinguished between Winter, who espoused more liberal economic policy but failed to completely distance himself from the traditional segregationist campaign rhetoric, and Jimmy Swan, a self described segregationist candidate. County leaders characterized Winter as using coded language that, while racist, was not incendiary. “I will stop riots anywhere in Mississippi,” the Hinds County FDP insisted as a statement likely to be made by Winter. Swan, on the other hand, used much more blatantly racist language. They attributed a statement like “I will stop them nigger communists from rioting in Mississippi” to him. While Winter might represent a more progressive future for white Mississippians, the Hinds County FDP determined that the distinctions were “not important for black people.”[[681]](#footnote-680)

With the race for the Democratic nomination spread across five candidates, no gubernatorial candidate garnered a majority in the primary. White Mississippians split their vote between the less reactionary rhetoric of William Winter and Representative John Bell Williams, who represented a continuation of the segregationist commitment of the state Democratic Party. Although many black Mississippians only voted for black candidates, those who voted for a gubernatorial candidate overwhelmingly supported Winter. Forced to participate in a run-off with Winter, John Bell Williams gathered the segregationist vote, which had been split during the primary, around his campaign. Employing fear tactics in his campaign advertisements, Williams warned white voters, “IF WILLLIAM WINTER IS ELECTED GOVERNOR, then politicians in Mississippi in the future will think they have to court the negroes to get elected, as they do in Northern States and THE MINORITY WILL RUN MISSISSIPPI.”[[682]](#footnote-681) At campaign stops, Williams passed out flyers, which showed Winter addressing an integrated audience.[[683]](#footnote-682)

Despite the allegations made by John Bell Williams, Winter had done little to attract black voters. During the primary, he sought votes from members of the Citizens Council, sharing that as a “fifth generation Mississippian whose grandfather rode with Forrest, I was born a segregationist and raised a segregationist.”[[684]](#footnote-683) In the run-off, however, John Bell Williams exploited the primary election returns, which revealed that over eighty percent of black voters who selected a gubernatorial candidate had preferred Winter to Williams. The segregationist vote, dispersed in the primary, coalesced around Williams’ candidacy, and Winter lost the Democratic nomination.[[685]](#footnote-684) One political analyst blamed black voters for this “Setback in Mississippi.” Arguing that black voters accounted for one third of the electorate, he charged that many had refrained from choosing between Williams and Winter.[[686]](#footnote-685) Whether black Mississippians selected a candidate in the Democratic primary or the run-off, it became clear that they were becoming an important electorate whose votes, courted or renounced, could influence political outcomes.

With the field whittled to two candidates in the general election, the MFDP Executive Committee departed from its earlier strategy and encouraged black voters to cast their ballots for the candidate that it deemed the least offensive. Voters had to choose between John Bell Williams, who the national Democratic Party had stripped of congressional seniority because he had supported Republican Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential race, and the Republican nominee Rubel Phillips, a Jackson lawyer. While Phillips had espoused the same racist rhetoric as his Democratic opponent in his first race for the governor’s seat four years earlier, in1967, Philips spoke more moderately. He cited the need to establish a “two-way street in human relations” and contended that the Mississippi Democratic Party had positioned itself “against the United States and all humanity.”[[687]](#footnote-686) Philips’ candidacy offered the possibility of developing a two party political system in Mississippi. The MFDP endorsed Phillips.[[688]](#footnote-687)

While one political commentator suggested that Phillips, by steering away from race baiting language, offered “a sort of refuge for the Negroes, the moderates and also the people who are creating a force in national politics,” the MFDP endorsement angered both Phillips and many Freedom Democrats.[[689]](#footnote-688) Phillips charged that a “payoff” was made to have the MFDP throw its support behind him. Asserting that Democratic strategists had engineered the endorsement, Phillips termed the MFDP’s support as a “kiss-of-death endorsement in a frantic attempt to forestall the advent of true conservatism and constructive change in this state.” Unwilling to associate his campaign with black militancy, Phillips termed Guyot and the MFDP a “radical, irresponsible element.” He insisted that his administration would usher in a period of “progress, peace and harmony” in which the MFDP’s “tactics of anarchy and civil strife would fail.” Like William Winter, Phillips understood that an endorsement from the state’s most visible organization for black rights would dissuade white voters from supporting his candidacy.[[690]](#footnote-689)

The Hinds County FDP refused to endorse any white candidates and chafed at the state executive committee’s endorsement of Phillips. “I don’t know what they’re doing,” argued Hinds County chair R.L. Bolden, “but we are supporting one candidate only, Alfred Rhodes for legislator.”[[691]](#footnote-690) The county newsletter, perhaps taking its lead from the chair or directing its chair’s decision, screamed in a headline just before the general election, “VOTE BLACK, VOTE RHODES ONLY.” Discussing the governor’s race, and whether to vote for Phillips, the editor’s responded, “Hell, no!” In a political cartoon that depicted two monkeys laughing and hugging, the artist’s caption read, “Where is the difference?” If the choice was between two unsettling choices, the Hinds County FDP, as it had in the Democratic primary, would urge its membership not to vote for governor.[[692]](#footnote-691)

John Bell Williams won the governor’s seat. Political analysts estimated that only half of the black registered voters participated in his election.[[693]](#footnote-692) Nearly two hundred thousand black Mississippians had registered to vote, and five counties possessed black voting majorities.[[694]](#footnote-693) In 1967, more than one hundred black candidates qualified for Mississippi elections. More than a quarter of the state’s eighty-two counties ran black candidates.[[695]](#footnote-694) Black Mississippians succeeded in electing twenty two black candidates into political office across the state. Four black supervisors and one state representative would represent black constituencies beyond the municipal level.[[696]](#footnote-695) While black voters, may not have voted for governor, they did vote for black candidates.

Field workers prayed for rain on election day. With the cotton soggy, they would not have to pick the last vestiges of the crop as it hung on the countless plants that dotted the Delta, and it would be easier to find time to travel to the polls and vote. Although much of the cotton harvesting across the Mississippi Delta had been replaced by machines, the landowners in Bolivar County had called for handpicking on election day. Underemployed agricultural laborers would work because they depended on any supplemental income. Coupled with the rare call for cotton pickers, local administrators of the federal food program announced that food stamps, which were usually sold on Mondays and Wednesdays, would be sold on Tuesday, election day. Voting rights organizers countered these potential disruptions with as much organization and political mobilization as they could muster. They hoped that the plans of white segregationists, like the call for hand pickers and the sale of food stamps, would backfire. Perhaps black voters, concentrated in central locations, would inspire each other to vote in the face of opposition.[[697]](#footnote-696)

In Bolivar County, the FDP and Delta Ministry assisted Kermit Stanton, an auto mechanic and Freedom Democrat, in his campaign for a seat on the county board of supervisors. The special election in Sunflower six months earlier had taught these organizers that a black voting majority did not ensure electoral success. Like Sunflower County, Bolivar County’s Beat 3, the section of the county that Stanton hoped to represent, possessed a black voter majority. The county’s black voters outnumbered their white counterparts three to one. Additionally, Mound Bayou, an all black town with black elected leadership, comprised part of Stanton’s beat.[[698]](#footnote-697) “But you gotta understand that if a black man if it’s 50/50 it’s hard,” remarked Leake County Freedom Democrat Winson Hudson on the probability of electing black candidates, “you just got to be 60%.” “Cause you know,” she admitted, “there’s a few blacks that just going to vote for that white man cause they feel like” it. Hudson acknowledged that “just a few[,] two or three percent” of black voters, would select white candidates.[[699]](#footnote-698) In small jurisdictions, a few votes determined elections. Organizers expected that the black voting majority in Bolivar County and the political experience of the residents of Mound Bayou, combined with a strong local movement community, would counter the pressure white residents put on black voters to either select white candidates or not vote at all.

As election day neared, voting rights organizers invited volunteers to assist with the election. Thirty lawyers and twice as many law students, sponsored by the National Committee for Free Elections in Mississippi, served as observers in the state’s elections.[[700]](#footnote-699) Ted Weiss, a lawyer from New York City, was one of the many volunteers to travel to Mississippi and supervise the elections. The MFDP stationed Weiss in Bolivar County to help guard against “difficult problems,” which Weiss identified as a euphemism for “vote stealing.” During his day and a half visit to Mississippi, Weiss faced the intractability of the white establishment and its veneer of civility, the intensive planning of voting rights workers, and the constant sense of siege provoked by unending surveillance and attempts at disruption.[[701]](#footnote-700)

The presence of national observers did not protect Kermit Stanton’s campaign from election day difficulties. Strategists had planned to use Stanton’s home as the communication center. The effort to remain networked was stymied by technological malfunctions. Stanton’s phone had been working intermittently the previous day, but on election day, the service failed completely. At the precincts, black voters encountered the hostile white residents of Bolivar County. When literate black voters, sympathetic to the Stanton candidacy, pretended that they could not read, white poll watchers misdirected voter choice.[[702]](#footnote-701) Police arrested twelve vote workers as they passed out sample ballots, charging them with littering and detaining them for most of the day.[[703]](#footnote-702) As black voters filed into one polling station, four white men sat in a car and watched. When they recognized a voter, they recorded the voter’s name on a list. Another land owner took photographs of vote workers. At another polling location, a white plantation owner threatened a teenage vote worker that his family would be evicted “unless he gets the hell out of there.” Weiss, a resident of New York City’s Upper West Side, noted that “guns seem to be the order of the day,” in easy reach of anybody white or black.[[704]](#footnote-703)

Teenagers and adults over forty constituted an overwhelming number of voting rights workers. Economic reprisals would have the least effect on these two demographics. Similarly, the voters were overwhelmingly over fifty and female. Weiss described these older women as fearless. “They aren’t about to be intimidated by anybody,” he observed. When Weiss learned that one of the white men keeping track of voter participation was a local banker, he theorized that this quiet intimidation had the effect of keeping men and young adults, individuals responsible for their families’ well being, away from the polls.[[705]](#footnote-704) Hattiesburg Freedom Democrat Victoria Jackson Gray characterized herself as a “strange creature” in the freedom movement because she was in her thirties. The low wages earned by black workers required all family members to contribute to the household budget, limiting the involvement of primary breadwinners in the movement.[[706]](#footnote-705)

In addition to the complex personal and economic relationships between black and white Mississippians and blatant intimidation, geography hampered political involvement. With white plantation owners calling for hand picking on election day, black agricultural workers were dispersed across the county. In Bolivar County, voter turnout slowed over lunch. Canvassers traveled the county’s dusty roads to plantations where black voters labored. Unlike in New York City, where voters might only have to walk a few blocks to cast their vote, agricultural laborers had to leave rural plantations and drive many miles to town centers. In order for some workers in Bolivar County to cast their votes, a few of the visiting law students replaced the day laborers in the fields so that they could travel to the poll stations.[[707]](#footnote-706)

Just after the polls closed, Stanton’s supporters learned that in the all black town of Mound Bayou Stanton won ninety percent of the vote, 236 to 24, from one of the voting machines. By 11 p.m., the paper ballots in Alligator had been tallied. Stanton lost 81 to 44. Optimistic that the second voting machine in Mound Bayou would represent a similar majority to the first, vote watchers anticipated a Stanton win. Ultimately, the votes in Mound Bayou guaranteed Stanton’s election.[[708]](#footnote-707) The MFDP and Delta Ministry had mobilized enough black voters in Bolivar County to overcome fear and intimidation and had chosen a candidate whom black voters were willing to support. In turn, the black voters of Bolivar County elected Kermit Stanton to represent them on the county Board of Supervisors.

While the black voters of Bolivar County accomplished the task of electing Kermit Stanton to represent them, following his election, Stanton faced the challenge of defining effective leadership in an adversarial environment. Owen Brooks, a Delta Ministry worker who served as one of the chief advisors to Stanton’s campaign, attested to the difficulties Stanton would encounter upon becoming a supervisor. “We had actually got him elected,” Owen Brooks reflected, “but he had to serve.” A mechanic when elected, he had lost his previous job after assisting in a school boycott. Stanton assumed his new position as county supervisor as an activist turned politician. He joined the board as its lone black member amidst a hostile fraternity of white powerholders. Untutored in the machinations of politics, Stanton had to learn while doing, imitating the actions of his peers, while representing a new constituency whose demands had been historically overlooked. “You had to learn,” insisted Brooks, “but you also had to be different.”[[709]](#footnote-708)

Stanton’s election to the Bolivar County board of supervisors mirrored that of other oppositional candidates. Like the MFDP candidates in the 1966 elections, many of the first black elected officials had been politicized through their activism and organizing. They were not students of traditional politics. The small class of black elected officials following the 1967 elections shared the predicament of establishing themselves as effective representatives while surrounded by white defenders of segregation. Griffin McLaurin, who was also elected in 1967, served as constable. Surrounded by white officials, McLaurin deemed his tenure in office ineffective. He admitted that “mostly I had the title, but serving as a constable like I should have, I didn’t get a chance to do that.” Like Stanton, McLaurin had been a dissident in his community and struggled with how to work collegially with the same people who had asked him, “Boy what y’all want?” when he had gone to register a few years earlier.[[710]](#footnote-709)

Robert Clark was not on the buses that caravanned to Atlantic City in 1964. He was in Michigan attending graduate school. He represented this first generation of black politicians who had not stood on the picket lines and participated in boycotts but had lived a life in quiet defiance of the southern social order. Clark descended from a long line of men who participated in the fullest level of political activity allowed their generation. His grandfather had chaired the Hinds County Republican Party. As the brief window of black political participation in Mississippi closed, Clark’s grandfather, harassed by the white leadership in Hinds County, moved to Holmes County.[[711]](#footnote-710) A generation later, Clark’s father registered to vote, a step that a growing though still limited number of black Mississippians were willing to take in the postwar period. When the opportunity arose for Robert Clark to enter politics, he seized it. He had cast his first vote in the 1963 Freedom Vote. Four years after the protest vote, he campaigned for a seat in the legislature.[[712]](#footnote-711)

While Kermit Stanton’s election is more typical of Freedom Democratic candidates, Robert Clark’s successful election to the Mississippi legislature served as the greatest success story of the 1967 elections for the MFDP and its allies. A thirty-seven year-old schoolteacher, Clark ran as an FDP-backed independent and based his campaign in the FDP stronghold of Holmes County. In 1966, Clark had wanted to run for school superintendent in order to authorize an adult education program. That year, the position of superintendent was made an appointive office to protect it for white authority. Unable to campaign for superintendent, in 1967, Clark ran for legislator against J. P. Love. Love had introduced the bill that made the position of school superintendent appointed.[[713]](#footnote-712) Love’s election, like that of many of the state’s legislators, rested upon the disenfranchisement of his black constituents. Love had been elected to the legislature at a time when less than one percent of eligible black voters in Holmes County were registered to vote. Before the Voting Rights Act, twenty black residents out of nearly nine thousand potential black registrants were registered in Holmes County. During that same period of black disenfranchisement, the number of white registered voters outnumbered the actual population of white eligible voters in the county.[[714]](#footnote-713)

An instructor and an athletic coach at a local junior college, Clark served as a unifying candidate for the new black voting majority in the county. As an educator, he already occupied a position of leadership within the community. Lawrence Guyot explained that Robert Clark “had been running long before we had the vote.” As a coach and a referee, he remembered the names of his players over the years, facts about their families, and statistics from their playing years. “He’s not a politician,” argued Guyot. “He’s the coach . . . . imagine that kind of base.”[[715]](#footnote-714) Walter Bruce, a carpenter and Holmes County Freedom Democrat, remembered that most schoolteachers, a segment of the black population that had been cautious in publicly endorsing civil rights, supported Clark’s candidacy. When asked to consider why Robert Clark served as an ideal candidate, Walter Bruce simply replied, “You could see it in him.” [[716]](#footnote-715) Clark positioned himself so that more conservative individuals could disassociate him from more radical segments of the Freedom Movement. At the same time, Clark utilized the established civil rights network to facilitate his candidacy. Professionals and laborers alike viewed Clark as their candidate.

While candidates in other Mississippi counties fell victim to graft and coercion, the well-coordinated Holmes County FDP office ensured Clark’s successful election. Many of the newly registered black voters of Holmes County, unlike the day laborers of the Delta, owned and farmed their own land, protecting them from economic and social intimidation. They had bought tracts of land in the 1930s through a federal program that divided white owned plantations into working farms. Ralthus Hayes, a Holmes County resident who ran for Congress in 1966, owned 114 acres of farmland in the county. He explained that “the movement is as strong as it is” in Holmes County because of the large number of independent farmers who did not rely on white employment.[[717]](#footnote-716) They were able to support each others basic needs and protect their isolated community from white violence. These independent farmers comprised the membership and leadership of the county FDP. They were supported by two white full time volunteers, who staffed the FDP office in Lexington from 1964 through 1969.[[718]](#footnote-717)

“A lot of other people got credit for it,” admitted Guyot, “but we did it.”[[719]](#footnote-718) Bee Jenkins, a Holmes County Freedom Democrat agreed. “We did,” she boasted. “We got him elected.” During the Clark campaign, Jenkins canvassed throughout the rural county. She encouraged the unregistered to register and the registered to vote. Jenkins pointed out that in addition to her own efforts, Freedom Democrats canvassed for Robert Clark throughout Holmes County’s hill and Delta regions. Walter Bruce worked in Durant, Georgia Clark in West, and Reverend Whitaker and John D. Wesley in the Delta. “And in Ebenezer,” she explained, “we had blacks working in that area.”[[720]](#footnote-719)

Though strengthened by Clark’s position in the community, the hard work of the county FDP organization, and a black voter majority in the county, Clark’s campaign confronted tremendous opposition from Holmes County’s white residents. A particularly dramatic scene developed in the town of Ebenezer. There, the white citizens of Holmes County, surprised by the new visibility of black political organizing, would walk up to black voters and threaten, “Ya’ll are so crazy about Robert Clark. What’s gonna happen if he doesn’t be around for ya’ll to vote for him?” Determined to elect Robert Clark, the accosted residents reminded their questioners that the harming of Clark would surely result in retaliation. And, just to be clear, they explained, “Ain’t gonna be none of them poor white folk. . . . It’s gonna be some of ya’lls sons and ya’lls daughters.” They warned, “So ya’ll better not let nothing happen to him.”[[721]](#footnote-720)

When Robert Clark learned that Holmes County’s white residents circulated rumors that he and his supporters would be seriously harmed on election night, he placed phone calls to both the FBI and the Justice Department and asked for protection. Because no incident had yet to occur, Clark’s pleas to federal officials fell on deaf ears. When he asked plainly, “Well, what if I get killed?” officials assured him, “Well, we’ll look into it.” With no guarantees of protection from federal authorities, Clark called on the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party to ensure a fair election. He told them, “There’s going to be some trouble down here at Ebenezer and we need reinforcements.”[[722]](#footnote-721)

As election day settled into night, the white residents of Holmes County assembled at the top of a parking lot outside of the polling station in Ebenezer. A short while later, Clark’s supporters arrived and filled the lower end of the same area. Clark estimated that over one hundred of his supporters formed a counter army to Holmes County’s defenders of the white vote that night. Around the time that these two sides assembled in the parking lot outside the polling station, Curtis “Ollie” Hoover, a white law student, headed into the building as a Clark observer. Exerting the nearly century of unchecked white authority, a county bailiff approached Hoover, knocked him down, and pinned him to the ground. This time was different. Around him, Clark heard the bolts of about fifteen to twenty of his community supporters’ rifles slide into place. Not wanting the situation to escalate further, Clark moved between Hoover and the bailiff and the armed men, imploring, “Don’t shoot.” One of his armed supporters, shrouded by night, asked Clark what he suggested they do, as they refused to watch idly as the bailiff continued to beat on Hoover. Clark stepped aside. Then, according to Clark, a group of men “moved in and, you know, roughed him up, tell the truth, and got him off the guy and sent him in.”[[723]](#footnote-722) Clark was their candidate, and they would make sure that black voters could participate in fair elections.

As Hoover walked into the polling station, freed from the bailiff’s hold, the sheriff ordered Clark’s supporters to leave the area. Raised among black independent landowners and energized by the movement, the men retorted, “This is home,” arguing that they were not breaking any laws and would remain. In a show of authority, the sheriff threatened to “lock ya’ll up.” The crowd refused to retreat and countered, “Well, let’s go.” They dropped their rifles and threw them into Clark’s car, urging him to, “Take care of our guns for us Coach.” Taunting the sheriff, they asked, “Where’re we gonna ride? Where’re we gonna ride?” They went in the front, back, and on top of his car. Upset, the sheriff insisted that they get out. Mockingly, they answered, “We thought we were gonna have a place to sleep tonight.” The sheriff saw that his plan for diffusing the situation by threat of mass arrest would not work. Needing to disperse the crowd of both white and black armed men, he negotiated a compromise. One car of white men left the parking lot followed by a car filled with black men until the area was nearly cleared. Clark insisted, “But three car loads of us are gonna stay here until this counting is over.”[[724]](#footnote-723)

If the showdown at Ebenezer was any indication of white hostility to black political participation, Robert Clark and his FDP supporters understood the county’s white leadership would do anything in their power to steal the election from the county’s black voters, and they remained vigilant until all of the votes were counted. Former Holmes County FDP chair Reverend J.J. Russell declared proudly, “Had to stay up late to do it, but we did it.” According to Russell, election officials had collected a box of ballots from Tchula, a small town in Holmes County. Russell remembered how the ballot boxes would seemingly disappear before all of the votes had been counted. Clark’s supporters made sure the ballots were tabulated. Russell explained, “And them votes what was in that box-they was gonna do away with ‘em and take out what they wanted . . . . But they didn’t move that box, and we counted all those votes, and he got in there.”[[725]](#footnote-724)

“We ran him,” boasted Lawrence Guyot of Robert Clark’s victory. “He was in a county where we were the dominant political force.”[[726]](#footnote-725) The Hinds County FDP did ensure the victory of Robert Clark. Freedom Democrats volunteered as poll watchers, security, and grassroots workers. Robert Clark, however, served as a perfect candidate, bridging the interests of both professionals and laborers. Many FDP candidates had been unable to unite their local black communities and were not buttressed by a county organization as well coordinated as that in Holmes County. Although over one hundred black candidates ran in 1967, only twenty two won election. Many relied on local FDP chapters during their campaigns, but a significant number of black officials were elected in the southwest region of the state where Charles Evers was shoring up a strong political base. Six candidates gained constable positions. Four black county supervisors, including Kermit Stanton, were elected to office. Robert Clark was the most high profile black candidate to gain election. In January 1968, he entered the legislature as the state’s lone black state lawmaker.[[727]](#footnote-726)

**Chapter 7; Losing Ground**

James Jolliff watched over a friend’s tavern. When officials from the Alcohol Beverage Control board entered the café, Jolliff asked the men for a warrant. They placed him under arrest.[[728]](#footnote-727) A few months earlier, Jolliff, an outspoken twenty six year old former radio announcer and newspaper reporter, had been elected to the Board of Supervisors in Wilkinson County, a county he characterized as not having elected a black public official, not even a “Negro dog-catcher” since Reconstruction.[[729]](#footnote-728) Upon his election, Jolliff, the president of the county NAACP, refused to distance himself from his movement background, publicly thanking the MFDP, NAACP, and Delta Ministry for supporting his campaign. He levied contentious charges, alleging that the local Democratic Party had selected black poll managers, who he labeled “Uncle Toms,” in order to present the face of a racially integrated and fair polling station to federal observers.[[730]](#footnote-729) He immediately suggested new ways for local government to meet the needs of black community members, demanding an expansion of free lunch programs in public schools, increased hiring of black police officers, improvement in the treatment of prisoners, and repair of detention facilities.[[731]](#footnote-730) Jolliff conceded that as the only black representative on the five member board the other supervisors would often outvote him. Jolliff, however, remained unfazed. He cared only to report back to his constituents, “This is the way *your* supervisor voted, the one *you* elected.”[[732]](#footnote-731) Jolliff’s strident public comments presaged a contentious relationship with his colleagues on the board and white residents of the county who opposed the expansion of black political rights.

Three months after taking office, James Jolliff was removed from his position as supervisor. He had been charged with obstructing justice when he had asked ABC officials for a warrant as they entered his friend’s tavern. Ten white residents and two black residents of Wilkinson County determined Jolliff’s guilt, and the judge levied a two year suspended sentence and fined Jolliff five hundred dollars. Faced with a vacancy on the five member Board of Supervisors, the remaining members appointed a black resident to assume Jolliff’s seat until a special election could be held.[[733]](#footnote-732) Undaunted by the legal harassment, Jolliff filed to run in the special election against those who wished to succeed him.[[734]](#footnote-733) Initially refused a place on the new ballot, the state Supreme Court delayed the special election until Jolliff’s appeal could be decided.[[735]](#footnote-734) Ultimately, the Court ruled that Jolliff had acted within his rights when he asked for a search warrant. Nearly a year after his election to the Wilkinson County Board of Supervisors, Jolliff returned to office.[[736]](#footnote-735)

James Jolliff was not the only black official to face harassment upon election in the Fall of 1967. The day after he was sworn in as a member of the Bolivar County Board of Supervisors, Kermit Stanton discovered a well punctured black voodoo doll in his mailbox.[[737]](#footnote-736) On the first day of the legislative session, newly elected state Representative Robert Clark watched what might be described as a game of musical chairs as his colleagues in the statehouse refused to occupy the chair next to him.[[738]](#footnote-737) After William Matt Ross was elected supervisor in Claiborne County, opponents learned that he had been convicted of petty larceny twenty years earlier and challenged his qualifications.[[739]](#footnote-738) Evan Doss was elected tax assessor in Claiborne County. Doss refused to help two white men who had cut in line. He was put in jail.[[740]](#footnote-739) By early 1968, the harassment of recently elected officials confirmed that even winning election, still infrequent and difficult for black political aspirants, did not guarantee the unmolested exercise of political power.

In 1967, nearly one hundred black candidates entered the Democratic primary or ran as independent candidates. In the general election, four black candidates had been elected to serve on their county Board of Supervisors. Supervisors received and controlled state funding for road work in their beat, providing the opportunity to set budgets and hire workers. They also exercised influence on appointments and commissions.[[741]](#footnote-740) The four black supervisors were joined by a handful of newly elected black officials, including one coroner, one chancery clerk, nine justices of the peace, and one state legislator.[[742]](#footnote-741) As the first cohort of black public officials in post Voting Rights Act Mississippi, they would face significant challenges during their tenure in office. They would have to develop strategies to assist them in negotiating relationships with their white colleagues and hostile white community members, all while representing the distinct needs of black Mississippians. Black elected officials would have to determine how hard to push and when not to push at all.

Representative Robert Clark chose to underplay protest politics in the statehouse. His long career in the statehouse would exhibit his desire to make change and represent the interests of black Mississippians while developing important relationships with his white colleagues. As the election day confrontation in Ebenezer illustrated, white Mississippians had employed fraud and intimidation in an effort to undermine Clark’s initial legislative campaign. His seating would be no less contentious, but Clark searched for ways to be perceived as a conciliator, not an agitator. At a MFDP meeting in Canton one month after his election, Freedom Democrats proposed staging a picket at the Capitol in support of Clark’s seating. Robert Clark opposed the idea; he did not want to be perceived as a protest candidate but rather as a legislator. It was decided that the MFDP would station a few demonstrators outside the statehouse “as a show of protest against any move to deny Clark his seat,” but plans for a mass protest were abandoned.[[743]](#footnote-742)

Clark’s pragmatism surprised some of his white colleagues. “Well, I think Bob Clark's presence allayed a lot of fears that there was not going to just be a single-mindedness of any black that got in the legislature,” explained State Representative James Simpson. Simpson, beginning his second term when Clark was first elected, noted in retrospect, “If ever anyone ever won his place with quiet assurance and dignity, Robert Clark did.” For Simpson this meant not agitating from the statehouse. “We all knew that he had access to whatever media he wanted,” explained Simpson. He argued that Clark could have contacted national television networks to report that he “had a threat on my life last night. I got boycotted on this. I was left out of this.’”[[744]](#footnote-743) On most days, Clark simply carried on the business of legislating, representing the concerns of his constituents in Holmes County and black Mississippians, in general, and ignored the sometimes subtle and often not so subtle resistance of his colleagues and opponents.

Despite Robert Clark’s preference for politics over protest, his presence immediately redefined the physical space in the capitol. State Representative James Simpson recalled one of the “more embarrassing moments of my tenure in the house” was when the new legislators were to be assigned seats in the house chamber. Traditionally, seats were selected based on seniority. After the incumbent representatives claimed their seats for the legislative session, first term legislators selected seats. Every time Robert Clark chose a seat, however, the legislator in the shared desk exercised the “option of moving.” Simpson recalled that the episode of musical chairs lasted for less than fifteen minutes, but it seemed to go on “interminably.” Finally, seating assignments were resolved when the Speaker of the House agreed to share a desk with Clark. Because the Speaker did not generally claim a seat on the house floor, Clark sat at a double desk by himself during his first term in office.[[745]](#footnote-744)

In addition to the changes their physical presence inspired, the election of black public officials created new avenues of access to government services for black Mississippians. Like James Jolliff’s rhetorical commitment to the unmet needs of the black residents of Wilkinson County, black politicians throughout the state injected the concerns of a previously ignored constituency into governmental conversations. When newly elected Bolivar County Supervisor Kermit Stanton accompanied a few welfare recipients with complaints to the local social services office, Stanton exclaimed, “It was like a new day had dawned.” Upon learning that Stanton was a county supervisor, the white welfare officials quickly attended to the needs of his constituents.[[746]](#footnote-745)

In his first days in office, newly elected legislator Robert Clark suggested sponsoring bills that would provide tenure to public school teachers after three years of employment and standardizing principal salaries.[[747]](#footnote-746) While these initiatives would not be perceived as radical measures in other parts of the country, the prospect of providing economic security to educators who previously could be dismissed at the whim of white controlled school districts was an important innovation. Many black public servants had feared participating in the freedom struggle because their activism could jeopardize their employment. As black candidates gained office, they created, through their sheer physical presence, the possibility for government to begin to meet the basic needs of the state’s black residents.

Aside from his own legislative initiatives, Clark regularly cast the only vote of dissent on previously routine measures. In June of his first session in the legislature, Clark was the only state lawmaker to vote against public funding for the private academies that had been founded in order to continue to educate white students in segregated facilities after the *Brown* decision mandated the integration of public school enrollments.[[748]](#footnote-747) Robert Clark, by raising seemingly harmless initiatives and by refusing to vote pro forma to fund private academies, altered the atmosphere of the previously all white statehouse.

Clark’s presence in the statehouse, in combination with increased black voter registration, also led other legislators to begin to attend to the interests of black constituents in their home districts. Just as Hinds County Supervisor Malcolm Warren had to rethink his position on food stamps when he met with Freedom Democrats, Representative James Simpson noticed that legislators from districts with high concentrations of black residents “became more sensitive to black issues” as a result of Clark’s election. Simpson termed Head Start, equal employment opportunity, “that sort of thing,” as being incorporated into public discussion during Clark’s first legislative session. Whether this new debate resulted from Clark’s physical presence in the statehouse or the rapid registration of black voters, Simpson could not decide. Regardless of the inspiration, Simpson concluded that white legislators “became more responsive to their constituency back home” following the 1967 election.[[749]](#footnote-748)

In addition to speaking up for a previously ignored constituency, black elected officials provided black Mississippians with an emotional connection to government for the first time in nearly three generations. Supervisor Kermit Stanton noted that his constituents in Bolivar County carried themselves with “greater assurance and pride” in the days following his election.[[750]](#footnote-749) A political organizer acknowledged that as the only black representative in the statehouse, “every black citizen in the state of Mississippi,” not just the people of Holmes County, considered Robert Clark “their representative.”[[751]](#footnote-750) A black voter recalled that she first met Robert Clark on a campaign stop in the Fall of 1967. She peppered him with questions, asking what he would do for her once in office. Admitting that his isolation in the legislature would limit his effectiveness, Clark responded, “I can’t promise you anything.” Anything, he added, “Except hope.” Reflecting on Clark’s career in the state house, she acknowledged, “He brought us hope.”[[752]](#footnote-751) Although black officials exerted little real influence as result of their minority status in white dominated government institutions, they altered longstanding codes of behavior and created the tiniest of fissures in the white controlled one party state and created new possibilities for black Mississippians to begin imaging themselves as political actors.

“Rev. R.L.T. Smith runs for Congress,” shouted a movement newspaper just as another dissident outlet had six years earlier. John Bell Williams, Smith’s opponent in his previous campaign, had vacated his congressional seat upon his election as governor of Mississippi, creating the need for a special election in February 1968. In 1962, civil rights organizers, part of a semi-underground network, had approached Smith privately, asking him if he would consider running for Congress. Six years later, Charles Evers called a meeting to determine whether black Mississippians should run a candidate. If they agreed, a black candidate needed to be chosen quickly, and the ensuing campaign had to be launched. Evers, who had called the meeting, declined a nomination. Smith was then nominated. He outpolled Hinds County Freedom Democrat Alfred Rhodes, who had recently lost his bid for the legislature during the fall general election, by just three votes. Once again Rev. R.L.T. Smith would run for Congress in the third congressional district. He would run against six white candidates who represented the spectrum of segregationist thought.[[753]](#footnote-752) The district encompassed twelve counties, including the capital city of Jackson, and claimed the second largest total of black registered voters in the state.[[754]](#footnote-753) Six years of steady organizing and the passage of the Voting Rights Act presented the first opportunity to run a viable black candidate for Congress.

A week after accepting the freedom movement’s nomination, Smith announced that he was too ill to run. Charles Evers, who had argued a week earlier that more could be accomplished through organizing than by serving in Congress, agreed to replace Smith as the civil rights community’s candidate on the ballot.[[755]](#footnote-754) At a plenary meeting, fifty five people, representing eight counties in the third congressional district, endorsed Evers as their candidate. Although Evers would become a perennial candidate in post civil rights Mississippi, this was his first electoral contest.

In an effort to further unite the black vote, Evers selected MFDP chair Lawrence Guyot to serve as his campaign manager. Hinds County Freedom Democrat Alfred Rhodes, who initially had sought the civil rights community’s endorsement, headed the campaign’s public relations arm; Freedom Democrat R. L. Bolden was designated the “research and idea man”; and former freedom candidate Edwin King coordinated Evers’ speaking engagements.[[756]](#footnote-755) With Guyot serving as campaign manager, the MFDP, despite expressing reservations over Evers’ candidacy, was assured a voice in an Evers campaign platform drafted by committee. MFDP representatives on the committee to elect Charles Evers were able to include statements opposing the Vietnam War, criticisms of county consolidation plans, which the state legislature had begun to introduce as a means of diluting the expanding black vote, provisions on fair housing practices, and calls for improved health and welfare programs.[[757]](#footnote-756)

The presence of so many Freedom Democrats in the Evers campaign, however, did not signal reconciliation within the civil rights community in Mississippi. Evers dismissed many MFDP leaders as “racists and camera seekers,” but he considered Lawrence Guyot a person who possessed a “good political head” and who had “happily paid the price,” withstanding violent attacks and charges against his character, for civil rights.[[758]](#footnote-757) In turn, Guyot understood that Evers “respected my political thinking and my political ability.”[[759]](#footnote-758) Delta Ministry worker Harry Bowie, a black minister who had traveled from New Jersey to Mississippi in 1964, aligned more closely with the MFDP but organized for the Evers campaign. A few months after the election, Bowie described his “strong disagreement” with Evers but explained that he committed to work for his election “just because he is a black man.” “We don’t have the luxury yet,” Bowie described the essentialist nature of politics in late 1960s Mississippi, “of picking and choosing which black folks we support for political office.”[[760]](#footnote-759) The possibility of electing a black Mississippian to the United States House of Representatives required contending interests in the civil rights community to discard their particular agendas.

The MFDP was equally pragmatic in its endorsement of Evers. MFDP Executive Committee member Annie Devine was the most vocal critic of the Evers candidacy. She regularly voiced the distrust that many Freedom Democrats felt towards Evers. Devine distinguished between supporting the “policy and technique” of the Mississippi NAACP and the MFDP’s potential endorsement of Evers as a candidate.[[761]](#footnote-760) Even as campaign manager, Lawrence Guyot had no illusions about Charles Evers’ character. “He was a hustler,” Guyot said of Evers. “I wasn’t a hustler.” Desiring to increase the number of black elected officials and inspire newly registered black voters, however, Guyot refused to become embroiled in a “purity question” about whether or not to actively work with and support Evers’ candidacy. For Guyot, the campaign was an opportunity. “Here’s a chance,” Guyot remarked judiciously, “for two groups who don’t usually work together to work together.” Through the campaign the MFDP and NAACP could galvanize both their political bases behind one black candidate.[[762]](#footnote-761)

In addition to their reservations regarding the political goals of Charles Evers and the NAACP, Freedom Democrats also privately questioned the viability of Evers’ candidacy. Before Charles Evers called a meeting to discuss recruiting a black candidate to assume John Bell Williams’ vacated seat, members of the MFDP Executive Committee had met with Ross Moore. Moore was a white professor who had taught for forty years at Millsaps College, a white liberal arts college in Jackson. Freedom Democrats speculated that Moore could tap into an important network of former students who were dispersed throughout the third district. [[763]](#footnote-762)

While Moore had been sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement, the MFDP suspected that white voters would not dismiss him as a radical who catered to black interests. Freedom Democrats wagered that Moore, through his student network, would emerge as one of the top vote getters in the special election. In a run off between the top two contenders, which was required if one candidate failed to gain a majority of votes, the MFDP predicted that the white vote would split. The MFDP could galvanize its base of black voters behind Moore’s candidacy, adding to his vote total. When Evers called an impromptu meeting of black organizers in the state, he preempted this potential strategy of running a progressive white candidate with black electoral support. Although the MFDP believed a black candidate could not yet win election in the third congressional district, it determined to support Smith, and then Evers, as candidates for Congress.[[764]](#footnote-763)

Ultimately, the MFDP Executive Committee endorsed Evers’ congressional candidacy in an 11 to 1 vote.[[765]](#footnote-764) Edwin King explained the MFDP’s endorsement. “We always had the line,” reflected King, “that we can’t be the ones to break anything that looks united in the black community.”[[766]](#footnote-765) If Evers was going to run for Congress, the MFDP would mobilize the black electorate behind his candidacy. A few months after the election, Annie Devine, Evers’ most outspoken critic on the MFDP Executive Committee, and presumably its one dissenting voter, expressed her hesitation in endorsing Evers. “I didn’t go along” with the Guyot/Evers alliance “because I didn’t think it meant anything.” For Devine, herself a part of the grassroots organizing that developed in the preceding years, to “find the steps and make the ladder,” organizing a base for political action, was “just as important as being an elected official.”[[767]](#footnote-766) For Devine and other critics, the Evers campaign prioritized personality politics and neglected the long range goal of mobilizing local people towards political action. The MFDP, however, determined it must endorse Evers for Congress.

Charles Evers campaigned among white and black voters, proclaiming, “Evers for Everybody.” A true political maverick, Evers later concluded that even at that time his political and economic philosophy overlapped with the priorities of white voters more than “most of them knew.” Evers endorsed free enterprise, respected hard work, and was “as proud of Mississippi as they were.”[[768]](#footnote-767) Despite proclaiming his agreement with many of the political priorities of white voters, Evers knew that most white Mississippians were unwilling to vote for a black candidate. He would draw his supporters from the pool of newly registered black voters, and he campaigned actively in rural parts of the third district where the district’s black residents lived.[[769]](#footnote-768) Black voters, who had first voted in the freedom elections and for MFDP sponsored candidates, served as the political base of the Evers campaign. In early 1968, few white voters would cast their ballots for a black candidate.

Despite his membership in the biracial Mississippi Democratic Conference (MDC), described by one observer as a “carefully patched together coalition,” Evers received no public endorsement from his white political allies. Charles Ramsey, state president of the AFL-CIO and a co-founder with Evers of the MDC, refused to publicly align his labor union with the campaign. Ramsey argued that his silence assisted the Evers campaign because he refrained from endorsing any of the congressional candidates, black or white.[[770]](#footnote-769) Although Ramsey expressed a desire to work in coalition with black Mississippians, Evers feared that for many white moderates it would never be the right time for a black candidate to run for a major political office. Despite these public silences, however, Evers suspected that he would receive votes from some white moderates who “just haven’t got the guts” to publicly endorse his congressional candidacy.[[771]](#footnote-770)

White moderates characterized their political choices more pragmatically. In Mississippi, a candidate had to receive a majority of votes cast in a primary or special election. With seven candidates vying to represent the third congressional district, it was unlikely that any one candidate would win a clear majority. Without a majority winner, a run off would be forced. White moderates worried that black voters united around Evers’ candidacy would ensure his success as one of the top vote getters in the special election. They recognized, however, that the white vote would be dispersed among the remaining candidates, and they feared that a plurality of white voters would select the most strident segregationist in the field. In a contest between Evers and a white candidate, predicted to be a staunch segregationist, white moderates assumed that white voter choice, split in the initial contest, would coalesce around the lone white candidate in the run off. A contingent of white moderates would throw their votes behind the least outspoken segregationist candidate and hope that he progressed to the run off.[[772]](#footnote-771)

Some white political operatives also feared a low turn out among black voters on election day. If black voters did not cast ballots in significant numbers, Evers would lose his political credibility and weaken the emerging moderate coalition’s claim to representing black and white Mississippians. Evers was an important member of the biracial coalition of moderate political thought because he could be identified as the public leader of black Mississippi voters. One white moderate, speaking for others of his political bent, worried that if Evers was “badly beaten he may be destroyed,” and the coalition would lose the “only guy who can deliver the black vote.” Once Evers declared his candidacy, some white moderates concluded that if Evers lost the run off by a handful of votes he would lose his “prestige” and doubted that he would be able to exercise “some bargaining power” with the remaining white candidates.[[773]](#footnote-772) White moderates preferred to protect the image of Evers as a titular leader outside the realm of electoral politics. A substantial loss would tarnish this projected image.

Most black voters would vote black. More progressive segments of the black community, dominated by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and Delta Ministry, had determined to ignore previous disagreements with Evers during the campaign. Instead, movement organizations became outspoken proponents of Evers’ candidacy. Espousing the newfound rhetorical unity, Hinds County Freedom Democrats boasted to their subscribers, “He knows our needs because he is part of us.”[[774]](#footnote-773) As the state field secretary of the NAACP, Evers also held greater appeal among black professionals than less formally trained MFDP candidates may have during the previous elections cycles. They too would choose Charles Evers. Although Charles Evers appealed to a cross section of black Mississippians, the complicated and nuanced world of segregated communities prevented some black Mississippians from publicly supporting his campaign.

To most white Mississippians, an Evers candidacy was no different than that of a Freedom Democrat. A confrontation between Evers supporters, college administrators, and law enforcement at Alcorn A & M College, a publicly funded black college, illustrated how risky it remained to publicly support black candidates for political office. As a state institution, Alcorn’s administration steered away from political controversy and discouraged political organizing on campus. A year earlier an Alcorn instructor had been fired, but later reinstated, for supporting black political candidates. Two years earlier, a student protest led by Evers had been crushed. During the Spring of 1968, students whispered among themselves that the college president’s wife had torn down “Evers for Congress” posters that she found affixed to trees planted on the campus. Strains of administrative conservatism and student rebellion, like those which emerged on northern campuses, collided at Alcorn in the winter of 1968.[[775]](#footnote-774)

Despite the administration’s hostility to political organizing, some Alcorn students, many of whom had come of age in and around the freedom movement, expressed an interest in the Evers campaign. In the weeks leading up to the special election, two Alcorn students, Parcell Rials and James Bishop, entered a school dormitory without identification. Frustrated with the intransigence of the buildings’ security officers, Bishop, in a show of bravado, handed one officer an “Evers for Congress” card. The inquiring security officers accused the two students of campaigning for Evers on campus and ushered them to the college president’s home. President Boyd declared flippantly that Bishop looked “like one of Evers right hand men . . . .” “[Y]ou probably get corns from marching for him,” Boyd jeered. The next day the Alcorn administration suspended the students, and police escorted them from the campus. As other students learned of the events, they challenged the school’s heavy-handed response. One hundred highway patrol officers, who administrators had called in to quell the unrest, erected roadblocks around the campus. The officers fired tear gas into a dormitory and forced students outside. During the altercation, six students were shot.[[776]](#footnote-775)

Despite the hostility of white Mississippians and black conservatives to the Evers campaign, black Mississippians united around Charles Evers’ candidacy. On election day, Evers outpolled his six opponents, garnering thirty percent of the popular vote.[[777]](#footnote-776) Supporters, however, could not celebrate for long. Without a clear majority of votes, Evers readied for a run off on March 12 against the runner up in the special election, Charles Griffin, a long time special assistant to outgoing Representative John Bell Williams. The second election required Evers supporters to wage another organizing campaign across the district and ensure that black voters return to the polls just two weeks after the previous election. In addition to the inherent difficulty in mobilizing voters to return to the polls, political organizers worried that new voters would misread the ballots, confuse two candidates who shared the same first name, and cast their votes for Charles Griffin rather than Charles Evers. Campaign workers reminded voters that Charles Evers’ name would appear above that of Charles Griffin on the official ballot.[[778]](#footnote-777)

Evers’ opponents largely had ignored his candidacy in the special election because they determined that any of the white candidates could defeat him in a run off.[[779]](#footnote-778) In the second election, the political climate became much more contentious. All of the white candidates from the special election encouraged their supporters to vote for the remaining white candidate Charles Griffin. White employers fired black workers who expressed support for Evers. White Mississippians threatened retaliation if Evers supporters refused to remove campaign stickers from their cars. Highway patrol officers stopped one Evers supporter and fined him for placing a campaign poster on his front windshield, a driving hazard that was common practice among white voters throughout the state.[[780]](#footnote-779) One white voter offered Evers fifty thousand dollars to drop out of the race. “You’ve got the wrong man,” Evers boasted when he shared the anecdote with supporters. “My price is beating Griffin.” Faced with threats of violence, Evers recruited armed supporters to stand guard outside of his Jackson home.[[781]](#footnote-780)

Black voters again turned out to vote for Charles Evers. Some voted on their own volition. Others felt compelled by the persuasiveness of campaign organizers. Just a few days before the run off, the Hinds County FDP reminded its subscribers, “MFDP BACKS EVERS 100%.”[[782]](#footnote-781) In Jackson, Evers chose a more aggressive tactic. While the Evers campaign had pledged to assist voters in traveling to their precincts, Evers also instructed black cab drivers to carry only his supporters to the polls. Evers estimated that eighty five percent of all registered voters in the third district voted in the run off. Nearly all of the black voters chose Evers.[[783]](#footnote-782) In rural Hinds County, the MFDP calculated that eighty percent of the registered black voters cast their ballots for Evers.[[784]](#footnote-783) Charles Evers, however, received few white votes and lost by forty thousand votes to Charles Griffin.[[785]](#footnote-784)

Charles Evers’ defeat in the run off, after winning a plurality in the first election, was emblematic of one of the new challenges facing black candidates. Political organizers quickly learned that the run off process reduced the number of successful black candidates throughout the state. When Roosevelt Sias, an Issaquena County Freedom Democrat, ran for supervisor, he won forty four more votes than his closest challenger.[[786]](#footnote-785) In the run off between the two men, Sias lost by forty six votes.[[787]](#footnote-786) Similarly, two black candidates in Natchez lost their bids to sit on the city council in run offs.[[788]](#footnote-787) In Panola County, Freedom Democrat Robert Miles lost to the former sheriff in a run off for supervisor.[[789]](#footnote-788) White voters, split during the primary, coalesced around the remaining white candidate in the run off.

A united white electorate was not the only explanation for the losses incurred by black candidates in run off elections. In the Fall of 1968, movement organizers asked impatiently, “WHY DIDN’T PEOPLE VOTE IN THE RUNOFFS?”[[790]](#footnote-789) Answers varied. Novice voters did not always understand the need to vote more than once. Campaign workers had a difficult time with “get out the vote” efforts just a few weeks after an election. White employers and residents exerted more exacting pressure on economically dependent black voters between the two elections. To counter these impediments, Holmes County Freedom Democrats chose to run all of their candidates as independents. Black voters would only need to vote in the general election where the white vote could split between white Democratic and Republican candidates, allowing the independent to win with a plurality.[[791]](#footnote-790) The MFDP Executive Committee, however, never drafted a singular policy on whether to run as independents in the general election or in Democratic primaries.

Despite his loss to Charles Griffin, the pragmatic Evers made the most of his initial foray into electoral politics. At a rally before supporters on election night, Evers declared that black Mississippians had “just become a political force” in the state.[[792]](#footnote-791) He then proceeded to demonstrate that newly won power. Shortly after conceding defeat, Evers surprised Griffin at his campaign headquarters. He walked up to Griffin, shook his hand, and offered to help.[[793]](#footnote-792) Evers knew that his position in Mississippi politics had changed. “[T]hat hand,” Evers and Griffin both understood, “had forty thousand votes in it.” Reflecting on his campaign, Evers contended that white politicians “didn’t care a damn about civil rights, but they cared about votes.”[[794]](#footnote-793) Evers had proven what many white candidates had begun to suspect --black voters could significantly influence electoral contests. Both black and white political operatives looked for new ways to influence that voting bloc. Charles Evers’ showing in the election had secured his place as a political leader and negotiator of the black vote.

Four years after Annie Devine, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Victoria Jackson Gray had challenged the seating of the state’s congressional delegation, the civil rights community again ran candidates for Congress in the Democratic primary. While the *Delta Democrat Times* of Greenville had not endorsed Charles Evers, the newspaper recommended Delta Ministry worker Thelma Barnes for Congress. The MFDP touted the endorsement as the first time a white daily publicly supported a black candidate for public office.[[795]](#footnote-794) Barnes, who had gained important skills in the freedom movement, relied on the civil rights community in her bid to unseat Abernethy. She recruited Freedom Democrat Joseph Harris, who had served as a lead organizer in the special elections in the town of Sunflower, to serve as her campaign manager.[[796]](#footnote-795) In addition to Barnes, Clarence Hall, an employee with the Child Development Group of Mississippi, ran in the fourth congressional district, and J. C. Killingsworth, a Freedom Democrat from the fifth district, also declared their candidacies against incumbent representatives. The MFDP had not formulated a uniform policy as to whether black candidates should run in the Democratic primary or as independents. In a state where the Democratic Party continued to dominate the political process, the three dissident candidates opted to run in the summer primary.[[797]](#footnote-796)

The Mississippi legislature’s response to the Voting Rights Act altered the political landscape of the Delta district Thelma Barnes vied to represent. By 1968, federal law facilitated the registration of nearly sixty percent of eligible black Mississippians. Many of these new voters resided in the second congressional district, which included the black agricultural workers of the Delta.[[798]](#footnote-797) In 1966, the Mississippi legislature dismantled the majority black second congressional district in the Delta. Former second district resident and Freedom Democrat Fannie Lou Hamer joked, “I went to bed in the Second District and I woke up in the First District.”[[799]](#footnote-798) The state legislature had divided the second congressional district, redistributing its black majority counties into three congressional districts.[[800]](#footnote-799) Redistricting also forced the re-registration of voters.[[801]](#footnote-800) Fear of the potential influence of a newly enfranchised black electorate hastened redistricting.

The Delta’s black population had sent the state’s last black representative, Republican James Lynch, to Washington. Since the demise of the Reconstruction government, white Democratic politicians had entrenched their power in this region where the unregistered black population overwhelmingly outnumbered their white counterparts. For generations, Barnes’ home county, Washington County, had rested in the second congressional district. Seventeen of the twenty four counties encompassed in the historically defined second district possessed black voting age populations that numbered over fifty percent. In six counties, black residents represented thirty four to forty nine percent of eligible voters. Only two counties in the original second district possessed significant white voting age majorities.[[802]](#footnote-801) In dismantling the historic second district, the state legislature maintained a black population majority while eliminating a black voting majority in the new second congressional district. They hoped that this change would go unchallenged by federal observers.

Instead, the MFDP filed suit against the state of Mississippi, insisting that federally monitored redistricting take into account a “strict population basis” that lay in accordance with the “one man – one vote” intention of the Voting Rights Act.[[803]](#footnote-802) The MFDP argued against the establishment of “irrational, invidious, discriminatory and unequal districts” which conspired to dilute the black vote. Freedom Democrats sought reapportionment by a federal court, not the state legislature, which possessed no black members when redistricting began.[[804]](#footnote-803) A federal court determined that Mississippi must follow the one man one vote intention of the Voting Rights Act, but ultimately, the Supreme Court authorized the Mississippi Reapportionment plan, which assured an all white congressional delegation.[[805]](#footnote-804)

A longtime resident of Greenville in the historically defined second congressional district, Thelma Barnes sought to represent the newly constructed first congressional district in the United States Congress. In challenging Thomas Abernethy, a twenty six year veteran of the House of Representatives, Barnes, like Charles Evers, sought votes from both white and black voters. “Let us build a Mississippi where people will want to stay,” she appealed to the entire electorate, “and those who want to come home will have something to come to.” In order to establish a welcoming social and economic environment for the residents of the first congressional district, Barnes sought to improve the public schools by applying for more Head Start funding, requiring compulsory student attendance, and providing access to free school lunches. She proposed expanding job training programs, broadening food stamp coverage, and increasing the minimum wage. Her candidacy created tremendous voter excitement. In the month after she announced her candidacy, thirteen hundred new voters in the district were registered.[[806]](#footnote-805)

The increase in black voter registration did not portend electoral success. Thelma Barnes lost her race for Congress. In the primary, Barnes tallied thirteen thousand votes while her opponent won forty six thousand votes. Although Abernethy soundly defeated Barnes, she received more than double the number of votes that Dock Drummond received as the freedom candidate in the first congressional district two years earlier.[[807]](#footnote-806) Her vote total represented both a significant increase in the number of black registered voters in the Delta as well as an increase in the number of counties with significant black populations in the redesigned district. When Drummond ran for the first congressional seat, the district was comprised of only two counties with majority black voting age populations. When Barnes ran in the newly outlined district, it consisted of six majority black voting age counties, five of which had previously been contained in the second congressional district.[[808]](#footnote-807)

In the fourth and fifth congressional districts, the vote totals for the black challengers differed little from those received two years earlier.[[809]](#footnote-808) The fifth congressional district maintained the same historic boundaries and contained no counties with majority black voting age populations. The legislature had significantly expanded the fourth congressional district, however. In 1966, it incorporated five new Delta counties.[[810]](#footnote-809) Some political organizers attributed the low vote count to voter confusion. Fannie Lou Hamer, who had been a candidate for the Senate, was disqualified and her name was removed from the ballot. Some voters believed that the names of all black candidates had been removed.Legislative chicanery and organizational disarray, combined with a cautious and newly formed black electorate, reduced the power of the ballots cast by black voters.

The son of a moderate Delta newspaper owner, Hodding Carter III sharpened his political teeth as a Young Democrat. Carter had lived a privileged life in the Delta town of Greenville. Although he graduated from Greenville High School, Hodding Carter III also attended Exeter Academy and Princeton and Harvard Universities. His father published Greenville’s daily, the *Delta Democrat Times*. While many people praised Carter’s father, a Pulitzer Prize winner for his editorials against racist violence, as a free thinker amidst the Delta stronghold of segregationist thought, Carter admitted that his father encouraged “decency and rights” but had not strayed far from the language of segregation. Carter described himself as more progressive than his father but demurred that unlike his father he was “freed by my time” to speak openly about the need for racial reconciliation.[[811]](#footnote-810) Hodding Carter III would become an important leader in the rising biracial coalition between black and white moderate political thinkers, rejecting the activist inclination of Freedom Democrats while recognizing the infeasibility of the all white Mississippi Democratic Party. He entered Mississippi’s political life at the moment of its greatest realignment in the twentieth century.

While he may have been more outspoken on issues of racial equality than his father, Hodding Carter III was not a radical, an activist, or an organizer. Harry Bowie, a Delta Ministry worker and MFDP ally, distinguished between Carter and Edwin King, one of the MFDP’s few white founding members. Unlike King who had been violently attacked as a result of his outspoken commitment to black rights, Carter emerged as a political operator during a period that Bowie described as a “safer time to make a move.”[[812]](#footnote-811) Carter had not participated in the major civil rights battles earlier in the decade, when the risks had been greater. Although he acknowledged that civil rights pioneers produced the “elbow to the left” that made biracial coalition building a possibility, Carter described himself as “ambivalent” towards the 1964 summer project. He expressed relief that he had not been approached about the 1963 Freedom Vote and that he had never been asked to join the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as they planned for the Atlantic City challenge.[[813]](#footnote-812)

Hodding Carter III was a moderate who hoped to build a viable biracial coalition to challenge the Mississippi Democratic Party. The MFDP’s convention challenge had increased the likelihood that an integrated delegation would be seated at the next National Democratic Convention. Immediately after the Atlantic City convention, moderate coalitions, encouraged by the Democratic National Committee, had begun forming in Mississippi. The inception of the Mississippi Democratic Conference coincided with attempts to gain a national charter for a state chapter of the Young Democrats. While allies of the MFDP and the NAACP battled over the leadership of the Young Democratic coalition, another political option emerged. Incorporating much of the leadership of the MDC and the moderate leadership of the Young Democrats, the Loyalists prepared to mount a challenge to the Regulars, historic members of the Mississippi Democratic Party, at the 1968 Democratic Convention in the same manner that the MFDP had four years earlier. In Mississippi, they would compile lists of political abuses and black disenfranchisement, attempt to participate in the meetings sponsored by the Regulars, and, if necessary, initiate parallel meetings to select a shadow delegation. In Chicago, the Loyalist delegates would offer themselves as an alternative to the Freedom Democrats and the Regulars. Hodding Carter III joined Charles Evers and former freedom candidate Aaron Henry as key members of the coalition’s biracial leadership team.

Although the MFDP had pledged its loyalty to the national Democratic Party when it presented its claim at the 1964 Democratic Convention, Carter suspected that the MFDP’s movement origins and overwhelming membership among black laborers hampered its claims to assume leadership of the Democratic Party machinery in Mississippi. Similarly, Carter dismissed Freedom Democrats, who he described as “highly ideological” activists who employed the “rhetoric of the sixties about power to the people, participatory democracy, [and] the notion that you could do it without a leadership structure,” as contrary to an institutionalized political party. In his personal assessment of the MFDP, Carter not only concluded that the tactics and language of the MFDP threatened the national Democratic Party, but he also contended that the established black leadership, professionals and business owners, in Mississippi found the MFDP “unorthodox” while white Mississippians, like himself, felt their tactics imprudent and not what they “ought to do.”[[814]](#footnote-813) Carter doubted that the National Democratic Party would support an independent challenge by Freedom Democrats, but he welcomed the MFDP as a member organization within the Loyalist coalition. With the MFDP serving as a participating organization, the Loyalist coalition could claim the membership of the state’s black voters while moderating the most extreme elements of its leadership.

By 1968, Aaron Henry, who had allied with the MFDP in its earlier challenges around general calls for access to the vote, allied with Carter and the Loyalists. He distinguished between the coalition’s aims and the protest party’s goals. Henry, a college educated pharmacist and small business owner, agreed with Carter that most black Mississippians, even those first organized by the MFDP, did not want to dismantle the middle class “but rather to join it and be like them, to share in the comforts offered by that status.” While in Atlantic City, Henry observed the “first concrete evidence” of this conflict between the goals of black Mississippians and young organizers. There, Henry described SNCC workers, who provided organizational support at the convention, as “angrier than most of the other MFDP delegates” over the administration’s compromise and tactics.[[815]](#footnote-814)

Despite the fact that the MFDP’s membership and leadership overwhelmingly hailed from Mississippi, Henry criticized the disproportionate influence of outside organizers among Freedom Democrats. He argued that college educated northern black organizers had introduced a “new breed of radical thinking” into Mississippi’s black communities. According to Henry, architects of the MFDP described the “political and economic systems of this country [as] no good” and insisted that the “systems had to be replaced before any progress could be made and before any acceptable society could be attained.” Henry countered that the broader political and economic critiques offered by the MFDP Executive Committee had not galvanized black Mississippians. Rather, he believed that organizers had convinced naïve black laborers that with access to the ballot they could reach storied, yet unrealistic, heights in politics. Henry charged that this language did not address the practical needs of black Mississippians. Rather, it spoke to broader, and less realistic, political goals.[[816]](#footnote-815)

While both Carter and Henry criticized what they characterized as the increasing sectarianism of the MFDP leadership, Freedom Democrats would provide the electoral base for a biracial Democratic Party in Mississippi. Carter conceded that the Loyalists were “entirely different” than their national counterparts. In Mississippi, unlike in other states with viable two party systems, any alternative to the Regulars would “automatically be a majority black organization,” admitted Carter.[[817]](#footnote-816) The state’s black voters had been politicized through the freedom movement, cast their first ballots in the 1963 Freedom Votes, and campaigned for MFDP candidates to serve as the first black elected officials in their communities. These Mississippians, excluded by the Regulars, would cast their votes for black and white candidates offered by alternative coalitions.

While some white Mississippians expressed relief when presented with an option outside of the one party segregationist plank of the Mississippi Democrats, most white voters would continue to ally with the Regulars. As demonstrated in the 1964 presidential race, most white Mississippians refused to vote for national Democratic candidates. In that year’s freedom election, black Mississippians had selected national Democratic candidates. In that race, Lyndon Johnson gained more votes in the shadow election administered by the MFDP than in the Mississippi general election. White Mississippians, the majority of whom were registered Democrats, chose Republican Barry Goldwater. Even fewer white Mississippians, as evidenced by Charles Evers’ congressional campaign, were willing to vote for black candidates. The Loyalists focused their energies on organizing the twenty plus counties with significant black populations.[[818]](#footnote-817)

The difference between the Loyalists and the Freedom Democrats would not be their political base but rather their leadership. Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine represented the new leadership cultivated by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Largely excluded from traditional means of power as a result of their gender and economic station, individuals like Hamer and Devine had been sought after by the young organizers of SNCC and CORE, who recognized their strengths as community leaders and risk takers. As the oppositional political activity in Mississippi became more institutionalized, Hamer and Devine saw their influence, as representatives of the MFDP, and the political energy of the freedom movement, decline as moderate organizers such as Aaron Henry and Hodding Carter assumed leadership of the Loyalists.

While the Loyalist leadership was split evenly between black and white Mississippians, Hamer estimated that only ten to fifteen percent of the Loyalist coalition’s members were white. She understood that if the Loyalist leadership mirrored the actual percentage of the coalition’s black supporters it would have been “too much” for individuals like Carter, who were unaccustomed to working in predominately black institutions.[[819]](#footnote-818) Annie Devine agreed that white moderates, like Carter, were not “quite willing to give black people the right of way.”[[820]](#footnote-819) Kenneth Dean, who chaired the Mississippi Council on Human Relations, described Carter’s involvement with the Young Democrats similarly. “If they didn’t control it,” remarked Dean, “they didn’t want to cooperate.”[[821]](#footnote-820)

To the moderates who comprised the Loyalist coalition, an integrated Mississippi Democratic Party would possess biracial leadership but rely on black voters. Hodding Carter bristled at arguments made by black organizers that “the white man always ends up dominating,” believing that the coalition’s commitment to distributing leadership posts evenly between black and white representatives served as evidence that white members were willing to share power. Instead, Carter contended that Freedom Democrats had “won more points” within the Loyalist coalition when compared to their actual influence in the state. Describing himself as “more interested” than the MFDP “in a unified, compromised delegation,” Carter aligned himself with individuals who shared his primary goal of “throwing out the regulars” rather than those who he presumed wished to assert their particular political agenda. Carter contended that as a biracial alternative to the Regulars the Loyalists would appeal to national Democrats more than the Freedom Democrats.[[822]](#footnote-821)

“I really got screwed in that meeting,” fumed Lawrence Guyot upon exiting a plenary session with Aaron Henry, Charles Evers, Hodding Carter, and Robert Clark.[[823]](#footnote-822) Guyot’s frustration grew from the rock and the hard place between which he found himself as state chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in a meeting with black and white political leaders who expected to establish a permanent body to replace the Mississippi Democratic Party. The Loyalist leaders sought Guyot’s cooperation with the coalition because the MFDP remained a powerful symbol from the 1964 Democratic Convention. Guyot, however, had to balance his participation in the coalition with the wariness many members of his executive committee and the state’s progressive community held towards the Loyalists. In negotiation sessions, Guyot worked diligently to balance the interests of Freedom Democrats while recognizing the need for compromise. He knew that agreements, which may have been hard scrabble compromises, once publicly distilled to the essential components, could be perceived as the result of bargaining weakness on the part of the MFDP or his own lack of commitment to his membership base. The decision over whether to join the coalition not only revealed the heterogeneity within the freedom movement but also the growing divisions within the MFDP.[[824]](#footnote-823)

Splintered by the emerging moderate coalition, state sponsored surveillance, diversification of goals following the passage of federal law, and fatigue from years of organizing, the MFDP Executive Committee, especially Lawrence Guyot, received some of its harshest criticisms from within the movement. Why would the MFDP join with those who had opposed it just a few years earlier critics wondered. A “money move” was the most simplistic answer offered by disapproving Freedom Democrats.[[825]](#footnote-824) A movement newspaper reported that Guyot had joined Aaron Henry, Hodding Carter III, and Charles Evers at a New York City cocktail party, insinuating a desire to fraternize with as well as cater to northern financial interests.[[826]](#footnote-825) Executive committee member Annie Devine shared this cynicism. She argued that joining the coalition was a public relations move to assuage national funders and supporters. “And I want you folk to get together,” Devine characterized the thinking of white liberal supporters of the southern Civil Rights Movement. “You must learn to work together,” she mocked.[[827]](#footnote-826) Devine’s colleague George Raymond, CORE’s lead organizer in Madison County, levied some of the sharpest attacks against Guyot. He insisted that joining the coalition was “Guyot’s little thing,” charging that “Guyot can be bought.”[[828]](#footnote-827)

The decision over whether to join the Loyalists rested in a question of who should lead black Mississippians. In private conversations at Atlantic City, Aaron Henry had impressed upon some of the more vocal and protest oriented Freedom Democrats that they “had better listen to the leaders” and accept the offer of two at large seats. Four years later, when discussing whether or not Freedom Democrats should join the coalition, Fannie Lou Hamer was no less willing to compromise with “middle class people, who already got jobs, [and] don’t represent nobody.”[[829]](#footnote-828) Similarly, Annie Devine, cautious from years of organizing and guarding vivid memories of the compromises of 1964 and 1965, also registered her concern about joining with the Loyalists. “It seems like it is a trick bag,” she remarked wearily, “and I’m wondering who’s caught up in that bag[. Is] everyone caught up in that bag.”[[830]](#footnote-829) Another Freedom Democrat noted, “All of a sudden . . . white folks begin to like Negroes” when access to political machinery relied upon representing the black electorate.[[831]](#footnote-830) In his mind, the courting of Freedom Democrats by the Loyalists differed little from previously racist spouting white candidates wooing black voters, as had become a new practice during the last two election seasons.

Dissenting voices from within the movement argued that the MFDP needed to refocus its energies on building an indigenous political movement rather than directing its waning energies towards another national challenge. Madison County organizer George Raymond charged that the MFDP had strayed from its earlier ideals of building a grassroots movement. He derided the MFDP’s top down leadership, which he argued made decisions based on national concerns rather than the needs of local people, and he criticized the MFDP’s inability to fully implement a political education program throughout the state.[[832]](#footnote-831) The *Freedom Information Service*, a news outlet for movement activities, also regularly castigated the MFDP in its pages. While chronicling the MFDP’s decision making process of whether to join with the Loyalists, the *FIS* pointed to the MFDP’s lack of programs, inability to hold regular meetings, and ineffective state leadership.[[833]](#footnote-832) For many within the movement, the MFDP had failed to maintain its focus on grassroots political development, and they questioned why it would lend its name and direct its dwindling resources to the coalition.

Guyot countered these criticisms with political pragmatism. He argued that the MFDP had to join with the Loyalists in order to keep the interests of a broad cross section of black Mississippians alive in the Democratic Party. Following the defeat of FDP candidates in the Sunflower elections, Guyot had lambasted the Democratic Party and endorsed independent black politics. In late 1967, Guyot revised his earlier statements and argued that the MFDP must take over the Mississippi Democratic Party simply because it was the “ANIMAL THAT RUNS THE STATE.” In Atlantic City Freedom Democrats had learned that political power decided political outcomes. Black Mississippians needed political power. In Mississippi, like much of the South, that power rested in the Democratic Party. “Unless and until we become the Democratic Party in the state,” Guyot came to believe, “the elections in the state will continue to be a farce.” Positioned within a nationally sanctioned political party, he argued that the MFDP could more effectively support the campaigns of black candidates.[[834]](#footnote-833)

Despite internal disagreements, in September 1967, the MFDP announced that it would join the Loyalist coalition. The MFDP, in concert with the NAACP, Young Democrats, Mississippi Labor Council, Masons, teachers, and independent white moderates, would ally in staging a second convention challenge. Movement strategists viewed the MFDP’s final decision as politically practical, but it had required difficult discussions among committed Freedom Democrats. Owen Brooks chided one former Freedom Democrat who, while recalling the events of 1968, had collapsed her memory of the MFDP with those of the Loyalists. “No, we had to beg some of the FDP outstanding individuals to join” the Loyalist coalition Owens reminded her.[[835]](#footnote-834) In the end, Executive Committee member Annie Devine stated simply that the MFDP “felt they had no choice.”[[836]](#footnote-835) Rather than mount their own challenge, they would join the better financed and more connected Loyalists who would ascend to the national stage, borrowing heavily from the political memory of the Freedom Democrats four years earlier.

In return for lending their name, an important symbol from the Atlantic City convention challenge, the MFDP insisted on full representation on the Loyalist steering committee, input into the development of the coalition’s platform, and control of a portion of delegate selection. The final Loyalist delegation would be split evenly between black and white representatives and according to organizational affiliation. The MFDP, “fighting not to be used,” according to Harry Bowie, would control the selection of half of the black delegates in the final delegation, amounting to a quarter of the entire delegation. Charles Evers and Aaron Henry, representing the NAACP, would control the other half. Additionally, at the national convention, each member of the coalition would be permitted to vote according to its own interests.[[837]](#footnote-836)

No member organization fully trusted the others, and the appellation “Loyal Democrats” strained to hold competing interest groups together. Edwin King editorialized in his notes from a Loyalist committee meeting that Evers was “seen first as NA[ACP] leader” rather than a Loyalist just as the Freedom Democrats were seen as representing their own organizational interests. Dock Drummond, who had run as a an MFDP candidate two years earlier, identified himself as NAACP as the convention neared, “let there be no doubt about it,” but argued that if the MFDP could organize some districts where the NAACP was not as strong then they should be encouraged. Another participant pointed out that it was a “mistake” to try and hang on to organizational identities. “We are loyal Dems.,” he insisted. Charles Evers conceded, “That’s right-that’s right – Not Meth\Baptists\not FDP\not NAACP-just Loyal Dems.”[[838]](#footnote-837) At least temporarily, the disparate groups would unite around the singular goal of unseating the regulars at the Democratic convention in Chicago.

Freedom Democrats had meticulously presented their case in 1964. They had run a parallel delegate selection process and amassed two three drawer file cabinets filled with evidence of voting abuses, widespread disenfranchisement, and hostility to black political participation in Mississippi. Armed with a pledge from national Democrats to seat a biracial delegation in 1968, Freedom Democrats contended that there was little need to accumulate new evidence on the persistence of voting violations. Rather than attempt to attend and be denied entrance to the meetings orchestrated by the Mississippi Democratic Party, the MFDP argued that the Loyalists should direct their organizational energy toward the selection of an alternate delegation that would challenge the Regulars at the Democratic Convention in Chicago.

The reluctance of the MFDP leadership to participate in the amassing of evidence increased tension within the coalition. Aaron Henry termed it a “problem” when Lawrence Guyot refused to mobilize Freedom Democrats to participate in the Mississippi Democratic Party sponsored precinct meetings. Despite his annoyance with the desire of the Loyalists to attend meetings that would surely exclude black participation, Guyot did not dissuade Freedom Democrats from attending. Rather, Henry admitted that Guyot “just decided to leave it alone.” Anticipating the criticisms that would be made by national Democrats, Aaron Henry, questioned the validity of any MFDP claim of discrimination if “you don’t even go and knock on the door and ask to get in” and document that the Regulars rescheduled meetings, barred black entrance, or ignored the participation of black voters.[[839]](#footnote-838) Other critics, from within the movement, however, responded that the MFDP had taken no official stance on participating in Democratic Party sponsored meetings not because it felt that discrimination had already been proven four years earlier but simply because its Executive Committee had not met.[[840]](#footnote-839) Either stemming from reluctance to accumulate anew evidence of voter discrimination and disenfranchisement or simple lack of organization, the MFDP did not encourage black voters to participate in precinct meetings in the summer of 1968.

Like the Freedom Democrats four years earlier, the Loyalists easily accumulated evidence attesting to the Regulars’ hostility to black political participation in their meetings. Flavous Hutchinson, a white Loyalist from Starkville, attended a Regular precinct meeting, which was split nearly evenly between white and black attendees. Hutchinson nominated Douglas Connor, a black doctor, to serve as a delegate to the county convention. The vote tied twice before white Democrats convinced one voter to change sides.[[841]](#footnote-840) At a Hinds County precinct, black voters outnumbered white voters. A white participant, rumored to be a member of Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, transported the untallied votes to the courthouse. Upon arrival, it was determined that the delegation was all white.[[842]](#footnote-841) Fannie Lou Hamer filed an affidavit documenting the secrecy in which her local precinct election was conducted. Hamer, a well known political activist in Sunflower County, sat at home while the local Democratic Party met. She learned of the meeting when friends, who had visited in town, told her “some kind of meeting between the Toms and the whites was going on.” Hamer theorized that precinct leaders had attempted to meet federal regulations for black participation by extending invitations to a select group of black residents rather than issuing a public call, which would have allowed for more outspoken and politically active black residents like herself to attend.[[843]](#footnote-842)

Lacking the organizational groundwork laid by the MFDP and faced with the hostility of the Regulars, few black delegates selected in precinct meeting were named delegates at county and district conventions. In Madison County district lines were redrawn to couple a heavily populated white residential area with that of a black community in hopes of overwhelming black votes. Both Madison County’s West Ward and Flora precinct meetings sent black delegates to the county convention. At that meeting, an all white delegate pool was selected. Two black delegates from Forrest County were later defeated at the district meeting. At one Leflore County precinct meeting, black participants, buttressed by a few white allies, represented a numerical majority. Rather than vote for an all-black delegation, they strategically voted on delegates, alternating the nomination of one black delegate with that of one white delegate. In white majority precincts in the county, similar concessions were not made. Upon reaching the county convention, which was dominated by white delegates, the votes cast by the compromise delegation from the South East Greenwood precinct were overwhelmed by racial bloc voting.[[844]](#footnote-843)

Black voters had little effect on the regular workings of the Democratic Party meetings. In all, one hundred and forty black delegates were selected at precinct meetings administered by the Mississippi Democratic Party. Only fifty seven black delegates participated in state and district meetings. Scott and Washington Counties were the only two of Mississippi’s eighty two county Democratic Parties to pledge loyalty to the national Democratic Party and its platform. Hinds County, rather than vote against the loyalty measure, opted not to initiate a vote. Black voters filed complaints in nearly half of all counties reporting that they were either denied participation or the local Democratic Party did not follow procedures at precinct or county elections.[[845]](#footnote-844) Ultimately, the MFDP spearheaded the collecting of affidavits. Complaints were filed from seventy nine of the state’s eighty two counties.[[846]](#footnote-845) Hodding Carter concluded that “it was clear that the regulars had screwed blacks all over the state.”[[847]](#footnote-846)

While the MFDP remained on the periphery during the Loyalist attempts to participate in the meetings of the Mississippi Democratic Party, Freedom Democrats were essential to the success of the Loyalist sponsored selection meetings. In 1964, community lore of black Reconstruction governments was the most salient political memory for most black Mississippians. By the summer of 1968, black Mississippians had witnessed the Freedom Vote, the naming of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, two national challenges, and the running of black candidates for political office. Delta Ministry worker Harry Bowie contended that the shared experience in Atlantic City, combined with participation in the local political races of the preceding years, put black Mississippians in a “stronger position” than they had been four years earlier. The Atlantic City challenge had been the first experience with political culture for many delegates and freedom voters, and they had learned as they did. By 1968, however, Bowie observed that “the guy who sometimes doesn’t read and write too well . . . tends to be politically aware in ways that surprise you.” As a result of these earlier political experiences, when organized to participate in the Loyalist led parallel process, many black voters expressed greater political savvy. They often identified themselves as Freedom Democrats.[[848]](#footnote-847)

Although the MFDP’s decision to join the second convention challenge came quite late in the process, Freedom Democrats were ready. Harry Bowie noted that throughout the Loyalist sponsored district caucuses the MFDP exercised an “amazing degree of strength” during delegate selection. Freedom Democrats demonstrated their skill in running meetings and selecting candidates. They expressed knowledge of what occurred at political conventions, and they understood what constituted a convention challenge. Bowie explained that it was “[old] line FDP people” who dominated the second and fourth district meetings. He contended that in the third and fifth district, where the NAACP was strongest, Freedom Democrats functioned as swing voters, defeating many of Evers’ delegates.[[849]](#footnote-848) The Loyalists had institutionalized their leadership on a national level but had not organized an electoral base. The wide turnout of black Mississippians who identified as Freedom Democrats buttressed the MFDP’s position in the coalition as the dissident delegates prepared for the state convention.

The emergence of a new cohort of white Mississippians from Hinds County also strengthened the MFDP’s position in the coalition. As the Loyalists began their parallel meetings in Jackson, white college students vied to become delegates. In 1964, nearly one thousand white college students had encouraged black Mississippians to join the MFDP’s efforts. Most of them had traveled from elite northern colleges and universities to volunteer in Mississippi for the summer. Four years later, a small contingent of white students from Mississippi’s colleges and universities expressed a new radicalism. This small contingent of white college students denounced the nation’s involvement in Vietnam, and they expressed concern with the infringement of black rights.[[850]](#footnote-849)

The students’ presence, however, created a dilemma for the Loyalists who had worked out a complex formula for delegate selection in order to ensure the proportional representation of all coalition members in the final delegation. Hodding Carter admitted that the leadership team had made “arbitrary decisions” in selecting delegates that did “not reflect actual votes” but reflected the influence of member organizations.[[851]](#footnote-850) For “‘book-keeping’ purposes” many of the white students from Hinds County, who shared the more radical critique of the student led and worker dominated freedom movement, were assigned to delegate spaces allotted to MFDP delegates.[[852]](#footnote-851)

Over two thousand Mississippi voters attended Loyalist sponsored precinct meetings. Attendance varied from county to county. In Jackson County, seven voters held a meeting. In Wilkinson County, two hundred and fifty dissidents attended.[[853]](#footnote-852) One Loyalist recalled that after putting up posters and reserving a church for the meeting “a pretty nice crowd” with a “whole lot of spirit” attended.[[854]](#footnote-853) The Loyalists also incorporated strategies pioneered by the Freedom Democrats to get out the vote. Recognizing that its support lay in the state’s black laboring population, meetings were held in the evenings to accommodate working people.[[855]](#footnote-854) The MFDP had made room for the Loyalist coalition. With the orchestrating of parallel meetings, Loyalists made room for the Freedom Democrats, the black voters who would become the base for an integrated Mississippi Democratic Party.

Like he had four years earlier, Aaron Henry called together a convention of challengers at the Masonic Temple in Jackson. With leadership ties to both the previous challenge and the new coalition, he had been selected to serve as a unifying figure. After Henry opened the convention, a series of predetermined speakers, mostly white and all part of the national political network, addressed the delegates. Walter Mondale, one of the MFDP’s adversaries in Atlantic City, represented Hubert Humphrey. Other national representatives read statements from the Kennedy family, Eugene McCarthy, and the Young Democratic Clubs of America. Longtime civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin, who had encouraged the MFDP to distinguish between protest and politics four years earlier, promised to lead a walkout if the Loyalists were not seated.[[856]](#footnote-855) Joseph Rauh, who the MFDP had replaced with the more radical legal advisors of William Kunstler, Morton Stavis, and Ben Smith during the congressional challenge and of whose actions many Freedom Democrats had grown suspicious in Atlantic City, returned to represent the claims of the dissident delegation from Mississippi.[[857]](#footnote-856)

The presence of national luminaries lent a strain of legitimacy to the proceedings, but the tenuous coalition strained to hold together contending interests. Despite attempts to engineer delegate selection before the state convention, disagreements over the democratic process and delegate and leadership choices continued. In a show of egalitarianism and goodwill, Aaron Henry, acting as chair, had declared that anyone could speak, even if they were unfamiliar with parliamentary procedures. When delegates continued to raise questions from the floor, Henry determined that there was no longer time for “points of privilege.” Loyalist critic John Buffington then attempted to disrupt the proceedings.[[858]](#footnote-857)

Finally the county delegations presented themselves before the entire convention. Credentials were presented without contest from all of the participating counties except Sunflower County. Two delegations from Sunflower County presented themselves to the convention. In addition to the Loyalist delegation led by Freedom Democrat Joseph Harris, the Sunflower Regulars, joined by a few black delegates, sought credentials. “[I]n view of the history of past discrimination” the credentials committee recognized the Harris led delegation, but the committee “commended” the desire of the Sunflower Regulars to express loyalty to the national party. In a show of compromise, which resembled that offered the Freedom Democrats in Atlantic City, the committee allotted the Regulars five at large votes. Like the MFDP when faced with a similar offer four years earlier, they refused.[[859]](#footnote-858)

Once the credentials were received from participating counties, the convention’s attention began the process of choosing leaders for the delegation. The nominating committee had agreed to endorse the selection of Representative Robert Clark as national committeeman.[[860]](#footnote-859) As the state’s highest ranking black elected official, Clark would serve as an important political representative before the national credentials committee. Following the presentation of Representative Robert Clark to the assembled delegates, Rev. Allen Johnson nominated Charles Evers, who had apparently prepared in advanced for the nomination. Confetti dropped from the ceiling and a Rock n Roll band began playing near the stage, hinting, according to one Freedom Democrat in attendance, at the emergence of something “as close to a machine as you get.” [[861]](#footnote-860) Flavous Hutchinson, a white Loyalist, supported Evers over Clark, believing that Evers was more representative of the moderate coalition. Hutchinson also acknowledged, however, that “after they got through with the rock music the spirit of the convention was pretty much in support of Evers.”[[862]](#footnote-861) The theatrical staging of Evers’ nomination had swung delegate momentum in his direction.

Robert Clark lost the vote 55 ½ to 149. Clark viewed his loss as emblematic of the changing political landscape in Mississippi. He concluded that while Freedom Democrats had “carried the matter all by themselves” and with few white allies in 1964 they had “come out with nothing” at the Loyalist convention.[[863]](#footnote-862) While Clark viewed his defeat as a symbol of the MFDP’s waning influence in the coalition, another observer cited the support Clark received from over one quarter of the delegates, a number greater than its proportion of the delegates, as elevating the voice of the MFDP within the coalition as it headed to Chicago.[[864]](#footnote-863) The selection of the remaining leaders alternated according to race and gender. Patt Derian, a white woman from Jackson who had become an advocate for school integration, joined Evers and was named national committee-woman. [[865]](#footnote-864)

Derian and Evers led a delegation of forty four delegates and twenty two alternates to the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Freedom Democrats Lawrence Guyot and Edwin King served as delegates. R.L.T. Smith, selected as an alternate in 1964, was elected as a delegate to the national convention. Bolivar County Supervisor Kermit Stanton and Representative Robert Clark joined the delegation. Joe Wroten, one of the few dissenters in the pre-civil rights Mississippi legislature served as a delegate as did former MFDP candidate Clifton Whitley. Both Fannie Lou Hamer and Hodding Carter III were selected to represent the first congressional district. Aaron Henry and planter Oscar Carr represented the second congressional district’s delegation to the national convention. Young Democrat Danny Cupit, a white student at Mississippi State University, and Freedom Democrat Al Rhodes joined the two national committee members, Evers and Derian, in representing the third district. Long time local dissenters S. T. Nero, C.C. Bryant, and E.W. Steptoe served as alternates.[[866]](#footnote-865) A few days after the convention, Unita Blackwell, who had been selected as an alternate, admitted that she was unsure of how the coalition was “gon’ turn out ‘cause these is the same folks” that asked “what in the hell was we going up yonder for in 1964 and we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.”[[867]](#footnote-866)

They were seated in Chicago. Although the Loyalists presented a well groomed, non-threatening, biracial face of Mississippi politics, their seating was not a given. The Chicago convention solidified for many Freedom Democrats what they had first witnessed in Atlantic City and then with the congressional challenge. While the tenets of democratic government and the Politics 101 lessons offered by young organizers vouched for ideals of one man/one vote and representative government, Freedom Democrats learned that decisions were made at the highest level. Then compromises were offered in exchange for votes. In Chicago, Robert Clark recalled participating in a negotiating session in which presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey stormed past Clark and strode directly toward Aaron Henry. Pointing his fingers in Henry’s face and cursing, Humphrey told Henry, “By golly, this is the last so-and-so offer I’m going to make you and you’d better take it.” Humphrey had presented Henry with another compromise: the National Democratic Committee would seat a Mississippi delegation equally split between Loyalists and Regulars. Aaron Henry refused. Ultimately, at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, national Democrats recognized the Loyalists as the only official delegation from Mississippi.[[868]](#footnote-867)

While most delegates to the Chicago convention remember it for the conflict between police and anti war protestors outside of the convention hall, most of the members of the Mississippi delegation remained singularly focused on the convention’s proceedings. Democratic dissenters sought out members of the Mississippi delegation to join a walk out and ally with the demonstrators, but Aaron Henry responded to one such request, “Man, you are crazy as hell.”[[869]](#footnote-868) Leaving the convention to join the protestors would have rendered pointless his years of organizing. Even the most radical members of the delegation determined to remain in the convention hall. At one point during the days of protests, Fannie Lou Hamer spoke to the demonstrators at an Operation PUSH rally, but she did not renounce her credentials.[[870]](#footnote-869)

Committed to the convention, the Mississippi delegates, not bound by unit rule, jostled over how they would exercise their votes. Initially, the coalition had united around the candidacy of Robert Kennedy, but upon his assassination delegates were divided over who to support for president. Freedom Democrats leaned towards anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy while others in the delegation were split between Humphrey and George McGovern. At one point, Fannie Lou Hamer, buoyed by the Loyalists’ seating at the convention, proposed nominating Edward Kennedy from the floor. She gained the support of the delegation’s leadership, but Kennedy’s entourage dissuaded Hamer from taking the stage.[[871]](#footnote-870)

Although Fannie Lou Hamer expressed pride in gaining seats at the convention, in the end she was dispirited by the lack of democratic procedures she observed while in Chicago. Experiences both inside and outside the convention led Hamer to characterize the gathering as “outrageous” because the “Peoples were left out of any real say so.” When the chair called for a voice vote on the convention floor, Hamer heard the vote lean overwhelmingly one way while the chair claimed the vote went the other. “It was just like back in Mississippi,” she concluded. “We are the same poor folks [that] we’ve always been,” Hamer admitted a year later. She hoped for a day when the Democratic Party would be controlled “by the people, with the people and for the people, instead of control[led] by a handful, with a handful and for a handful.” Hamer described Chicago as “just so much a part of Mississippi,” which led her to alternate between laughing and crying at the absurdity and tragedy of having been recognized by national Democrats.[[872]](#footnote-871)

Ultimately, the most politically active Freedom Democrats and their supporters came to view the seating of the Loyalists as a token gesture and concession for all black Americans. While the integrated Mississippi delegation was seated in 1968, Fannie Lou Hamer criticized the credentials committee’s refusal to seat insurgent delegations from Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas. She saw these protest delegations, even more so than the Loyalists, as descendants of the MFDP challenge at Atlantic City.[[873]](#footnote-872) Jack Minnis, a SNCC political strategist who had helped prepare Freedom Democrats for the 1964 convention, agreed with Hamer’s assessments. Minnis concluded that the integration of the Mississippi Democratic Party would do little to address the needs of black Mississippians and it would “merely reverse the roles” that Democrats and Republicans had “played in Mississippi since Reconstruction.”[[874]](#footnote-873) Time would prove Minnis correct as black Mississippians became registered voters and selected Democratic candidates and white Mississippians shifted their political affiliations to the Republican Party.[[875]](#footnote-874)

Despite their shared success as coalition members, the Loyalists were not the Freedom Democrats. The Loyalists, however, would be perceived as the descendants of the MFDP by individuals representing diverse interests. A year after the Chicago convention, one Freedom Democrat explained proudly in an interview, “And as you know in this past convention FDP was successful in unseating” the Mississippi Regulars.[[876]](#footnote-875) Joseph Rauh, who represented both challenging delegations, similarly collapsed the two challenges. He boasted, “We got in ’68 what we should have received in ’64, but we got it.”[[877]](#footnote-876) Jack Minnis, however, recognized the distinctiveness of the second challenge. He predicted that the challenge would have little measurable impact on the lives of most black Mississippians, men and women who he concluded would receive “precisely what they’ve been getting all along – nothing.” Minnis was not optimistic. He speculated that the Democratic Party would do little more for black Mississippians than accept their votes on election day.[[878]](#footnote-877)

The Fall of 1968 marked a major turning point for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Not only had national Democrats seated and offered their seal of approval to the Loyalists but also Lawrence Guyot, who had served as the MFDP’s state chair since its inception, stepped down because he was in poor health. While in Chicago at the Democratic Convention, a doctor warned Guyot that his body could no longer withstand the constant overwork essential to leading a statewide political organization. He decided that rather than continue to risk his health he would step down as chair and enroll in law school. Although there was some discussion of State Representative Robert Clark assuming the position of MFDP chair, and Joseph Harris served as interim chair, Guyot was ultimately replaced by Clifton Whitley, a chaplain at Rust College and former senatorial candidate. Lawrence Guyot had always weighed the politics of decisions, but he was also a product of the SNCC led freedom movement in Mississippi. Clifton Whitley, Guyot’s generational elder, had been an early ally of student dissenters on the Rust campus, but he was less tied to the activist orientation of youth driven movement organizations. Whitley would serve as the MFDP’s final leader.[[879]](#footnote-878)

Clifton Whitley was a pragmatist. Despite his ascension to the chairmanship of the MFDP in early 1969, he continued to identify as a Loyalist. Whitley viewed the MFDP broadly and saw little contradiction in his joint affiliations. A few months before he was named chair, Whitley outlined what he described as the “original concepts of the MFDP.” He argued that the MFDP provided “local people a voice in their affairs” not only through politics but also through economics and education. Whitley described the MFDP as a fluid organization that catered to the unmet needs of black Mississippians. He heralded the party as “the thing that guides my work” and proposed maintaining the MFDP’s focus beyond a strict political definition. Employing a more expansive conception of the MFDP, and thereby expanding the opportunity for local people to claim affiliation, Whitley reconciled his position as chair of Mississippi’s first congressional district as a Loyalist while leading Freedom Democrats.[[880]](#footnote-879)

Although Clifton Whitley was a life long dissenter, he was less recognized among white Mississippians. One white newspaper columnist conceded that while he did not know Whitley’s position on “political matters” he was familiar with the “radical” views of vice chair Fannie Lou Hamer. The journalist also remarked that Executive Committee member Unita Blackwell accompanied a group of demonstrators to Washington, DC where they were forcibly removed from a government office. Supported by his notion of Hamer, and the evidence of Blackwell’s recent protest, he concluded that “the Hamer woman,” rather than Whitley, “voiced the real philosophy” of the MFDP when she spoke at the party’s state convention in the Fall of 1968. There, Hamer had challenged Freedom Democrats, “It is time we went our own way -- time to change our society IN THE WAY WE SEE FIT.” The commentator charged that Hamer’s message had the “smell” of the statements made by the Black Panthers and the Revolutionary Action Movement. Undeterred by Whitley’s succession of Guyot, white journalists and politicians would discount Whitley’s leadership and reprint statements like that made by Hamer in their attempts to marginalize the MFDP’s influence in Mississippi politics.[[881]](#footnote-880)

Despite Hamer’s provocative addresses and their ability to strike fear in white segregationists, a Sovereignty Commission investigator suggested that the MFDP was “virtually dead” by June 1969.[[882]](#footnote-881) Two and a half years after he assumed the chair of the MFDP, Clifton Whitley had “de facto resigned,” according to one movement observer, and only Joseph Harris, who had helped organize the Sunflower elections four years earlier, continued to work in the central office as the office manager.[[883]](#footnote-882)

Although the MFDP’s central organization struggled to sustain itself in the years immediately following the seating of the Loyalists at the Chicago convention, the influence of Freedom Democrats permeated the state political structure. Despite gaining national recognition at Chicago, the Loyalist coalition, and its black voter base, did not gain control of the political system in Mississippi until 1976. During the intervening years, individuals who self identified as Freedom Democrats emerged as local leaders in the Loyalists’ parallel political structure. In 1972, Al Rhodes, a 1967 FDP candidate for state representative, served as the Hinds County Democratic Chair, and former Panola County FDP chair Robert Miles led the Clarksdale Mississippi Democratic Party.[[884]](#footnote-883) Two years later, former Freedom Democrats Emma Sanders and Susie Ruffin served as leaders in their district Democratic Party.[[885]](#footnote-884) The seating of the Loyalists and the disintegration of the MFDP as a viable organization in Mississippi did not mark the end of the struggle for black political rights in Mississippi.

Ten years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, former freedom candidate and Loyalist chair Aaron Henry spoke before Congress and informed its membership that reports of increased black political participation in Mississippi were “greatly exaggerated.” Henry distinguished between increased voter registration and “real power and responsibility.”[[886]](#footnote-885) The United States Commission on Civil Rights agreed with Henry’s assessment, finding that in the three years following the passage of the Voting Rights Act new barriers to “full and equal political participation” had been erected. The commission outlined efforts to dilute the vote, barriers to qualifying as candidates, treatment of black registrants and poll watchers, and establishment of appointive offices to ensure white representation. The commission also noted that physical, economic, and governmental intimidation continued throughout the South.[[887]](#footnote-886)

Of the seventy nine black candidates who qualified to run in the 1968 general election, eight candidates had been disqualified. One, Amanda Washington, was disqualified for signing “Mandy Washington” instead of “Amanda Washington” on election forms.[[888]](#footnote-887) In 1967, nine black candidates had won their races for justice of the peace. In response to the election of black candidates, local jurisdictions attempted to abolish, make appointive, or stipulate justice of the peace as a position open only to lawyers.[[889]](#footnote-888) In 1966, the state legislature passed legislation allowing county supervisors to be elected at large rather than from the county’s five beats as they had been previously. Candidates would still have to live in the beat they hoped to represent but the electorate of the entire county could cast a vote for a supervisor representing each beat. Thirteen counties switched to at large elections.[[890]](#footnote-889)

Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act had mandated federal preclearance of any changes made to voting requirements by state legislatures. Rather than make changes to voter qualifications, Mississippi lawmakers had altered the influence of voters and the ballots they cast. In addition to redistributing the black population of the second congressional district, the legislature made elective positions appointive, changed the requirements for candidacy, increased at large voting, and created multimember legislative districts. During the eight year span that preceded the merging of the Loyalists and the Regulars, the Loyalists institutionalized their national position, the Regulars attempted to render the black vote meaningless through legislative changes, and lawsuits initially introduced by Freedom Democrats continued to travel through the nation’s legal system.

The MFDP won a major legal battle when it challenged the Mississippi legislature’s alteration to the requirements for an independent candidate for office. When Clifton Whitley ran as a Freedom Democratic candidate for Senate in 1966, he had no idea that his candidacy would have long term effects on political rights in Mississippi. Following the Democratic primary in which the MFDP had run candidates in a number of major races, the Mississippi legislature, hoping to preempt the losing candidates’ ability to qualify for the general election, increased the number of signatures needed to place one’s name on the ballot as an independent candidate. Whitley and the other MFDP candidates all accumulated totals meeting the earlier requirements but not the recently mandated qualifying measures. The MFDP sued Governor Paul Johnson. The courts made a provisional decision to place the names of the freedom candidates on the ballot but refused to decide on the larger legal question, failing to create a legal precedent for future cases.[[891]](#footnote-890)

Three years later, the Supreme Court bundled a number of Mississippi cases and one Virginia case under *Whitley v. Johnson*. The Court would determine the parameters of Section 5, deciding whether its legal understanding could be expanded to include changes related to the qualifications for candidacy, shifts from district to at large voting, and the manner of selection of public officials. The Justice Department filed am *amicus curiae* brief on behalf of black Mississippians. In their statement, justice officials argued that the Mississippi legislature was “abridging the right of Negro citizens to vote by rendering ineffective their exercise of the franchise so recently achieved.” The Supreme Court ruled that Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act should be interpreted in the “broadest possible scope,” leading to the elimination of recently devised tactics to dilute the black vote. Under *Whitley* and other cases brought on behalf of black Mississippians, the state legislature retracted approximately twenty changes to state voting laws between 1966 and 1979.[[892]](#footnote-891)

Redistricting, from congressional districts to local beats, emerged as one of the most effective methods by which the influence of black voters could be reduced. Annie Devine reported that the state Democratic Party redrew district boundaries in Madison County to ensure the low representation of black delegates at the Democratic county convention in 1968, stacking three thousand voters in the predominately black West Ward of Canton and just three hundred black voters in three other precincts.[[893]](#footnote-892) In Port Gibson, the city government attempted to add land to the city limits in order to increase the white vote.[[894]](#footnote-893) In Yazoo City, the urban black population was broken up and dispersed throughout the five supervisor districts. Warren County abandoned historic voting boundaries and combined urban and rural populations in each supervisor beat. Not ten years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, which had greatly increased the number of black voters in Mississippi, civil rights lawyer Frank Parker, concluded that the newly gained franchise had been “rendered meaningless” in Mississippi as a result of redistricting and changes to voting requirements.[[895]](#footnote-894)

The MFDP’s first major legal battle had challenged the creation of multimember legislative districts in 1965. Peggy Jean Connor, a Hattiesburg Freedom Democrat, served as the lead plaintiff as *Connor v. Johnson*, which traveled through the courts for fourteen years. From 1965 to 1976, the case was used to challenge the Mississippi legislatures attempt to merge historic voting districts in order to dilute the potential influence of black voters. As a result of legislative redistricting, no black representatives joined Robert Clark in the Mississippi legislature until 1975, eight years after his first election. In that year, the courts required Hinds County to divide its jurisdictions into single member districts. Consequently, three black candidates won election in predominately black legislative districts in and around the Jackson city limits. From 1976 to 1979, the courts used the *Connor* case to further determine questions of redistricting. The Supreme Court decided in favor of Peggy Jean Connor in 1977, leading to the creation of state wide single member legislative districts. As a result of the process of redistricting, in 1979, seventeen black representatives were elected to the Mississippi legislature.[[896]](#footnote-895)

Not until 1982 were the congressional district lines in Mississippi redrawn to their traditional boundaries, restoring the historic second district in the Delta and making the election of a black member of Congress a possibility once again. Robert Clark, having served nearly fifteen years in the state legislature, challenged the incumbent representative on two occasions, in 1982 and 1984. Throughout his long tenure in the statehouse, Clark had established himself as a conciliator and believed that white Mississippians would vote for him. Charles McLaurin, who continued to live in Sunflower County, argued that Clark ignored the grassroots during his two campaigns. Relying on the small black middle class and the assumed support of white voters, Clark lost.[[897]](#footnote-896)

In 1986, Mike Espy ran for the second district congressional seat. Espy’s family ran a number of funeral homes, and he had not been an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement. During his campaign, however, he networked with community organizers, many of whom descended from the freedom movement, to mobilize black voters. He also campaigned under the expectation that he would receive no white votes.[[898]](#footnote-897) Twenty one years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, black Delta voters, in the reconstituted second district, elected Mike Espy to represent them in the United States Congress. It was the first time in one hundred years that a black Mississippian gained a congressional office.

**Conclusion: The MFDP Remembered**

“Oh, he was always moderate,” Bob Moses explained of R.L.T. Smith. Moses termed Smith’s 1962 congressional campaign a “radical” act because of the “circumstances and the danger.” Politically and socially, Moses argued, Smith was “always conservative.”[[899]](#footnote-898) Smith’s politics did not change. Mississippi did. When Smith, a long time NAACP member, was approached by young civil rights organizers to challenge John Bell Williams’ seat in the United States House of Representatives, he became the first black candidate to run for a major political office in post Reconstruction Mississippi. His risk taking inaugurated nearly a decade of strident political organizing in the state as full time movement workers identified the available power in politics. Young Mississippians, like Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, Dorie and Joyce Ladner, Charles McLaurin, and Lawrence Guyot, built upon an underground network of resistance and linked long time dissenters, like Smith, Amzie Moore, and Victoria Jackson Gray, to black laborers, like Fannie Lou Hamer and Hartman Turnbow, and students, like the Issaquena County high school boycotters.

In the midst of insistent organizing campaigns that energized students and laborers, Smith’s practical politics became derided by more strident dissenters, who had experienced less access and had less investment in the economic system than independent business owners like Smith. When the National Democratic Party recognized the Loyalists in 1968, however, black moderates, like Smith, were recruited to assume positions of leadership within the state party structure and sit on the boards of federally funded social programs. The atmosphere of activism launched by Smith’s 1962 congressional campaign receded as nationally sanctioned leaders of black Mississippians became key members of the Democratic coalition.

Once black Mississippians gained access to the vote and the state political machinery integrated, the MFDP, weakened by red baiting, organizational inefficiency, and a splintering of its membership, according to Madison County Freedom Democrat Annie Devine, “just petered out.”[[900]](#footnote-899) Following the Chicago convention, the biracial leadership team, dominated by Hodding Carter III, Aaron Henry, and Charles Evers, institutionalized its power on a national level. By 1972, the Loyalists were fully recognized by national Democrats as the Mississippi Democratic Party. Finally, in 1976, the Regulars and the Loyalists merged, uniting the political machinery for state and national Democratic campaigns. The Loyalists no longer needed the MFDP, and the MFDP was unable to sustain itself. Despite the presence of individual Freedom Democrats within the Loyalist coalition, as each year passed, the MFDP’s position as an organizational powerbroker diminished.

The MFDP had come to be both more and less than a political party. Many Freedom Democrats had moved fluidly between the NAACP, Loyalists, Delta Ministry, and federally sponsored poverty programs. At its most indigenous, it served the concrete needs and addressed the specific grievances of its membership on the community level. The MFDP stood as a clearinghouse for civil rights activities: school desegregation efforts, political redistricting, and as an intermediary between federal aid programs and local people. The MFDP also sponsored the first black candidates for political office at a time when the state Democratic Party excluded black participation and a coalition of white moderates and black professionals had yet to be institutionalized. Most importantly, it ushered a wide spectrum of black Mississippians into the political process after three generations of disenfranchisement.

When Clifton Whitley replaced Lawrence Guyot as state chair of the MFDP in early 1969, he contended that there was still a place for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. By the early 1970s, however, the dream of a statewide organization of black laboring Mississippians, supplanting the all white Mississippi Democratic Party, had passed. Freedom Democrats voted for Democratic candidates and returned to the daily task of surviving in economically blighted communities. The Voting Rights Act and the subsequent litigation by movement organizations ensured access to a ballot, but some black Mississippians, those who SNCC strategist Jack Minnis had argued would continue to be overlooked by an integrated Democratic Party, remained outside of the political process. To these individuals, the MFDP, as a symbol of grassroots mobilization and organizing for change, remained salient despite the party’s inability to sustain itself organizationally.

In the Spring of 1969, one Freedom Democrat from Panther Burn addressed his concerns to Aaron Henry, who he misidentified as a MFDP leader. James Kimble wrote to Henry, “I am the chairman of the Co. But I haven’t been very long [.]” He sought by-laws and membership cards and promised to apprise Henry of membership numbers following an upcoming meeting.[[901]](#footnote-900) A few months later, one Greenwood Freedom Democrat contended that the MFDP was the only organization in Mississippi “that gonna recognize the grassroot people.”[[902]](#footnote-901) In 1968, an Issaquena County man had relocated to Claiborne County. In his hometown of Mayersville the FDP was especially strong while in his new home of Port Gibson the NAACP and Charles Evers dominated. He founded a local chapter of the FDP because “the grassroots people. . . didn’t have a voice in the NAACP.”[[903]](#footnote-902) And, despite the dissolution of a state-wide party, Virginia Ayles McLaurin described herself as the chair of the Sunflower County FDP from 1970 through 1972.[[904]](#footnote-903) These men and women expressed a desire to participate in the political process and alter their most immediate circumstances through organized action. As the MFDP’s influence declined across the state, its memory continued to inspire those not included in the Loyalist coalition.

For nearly ten years, sometimes in strident and buoyed voices and at other times in a distant whisper, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party acted on behalf of the state’s most ignored black citizenry. Hollis Watkins challenged outside assessments that deemed inconsequential the MFDP’s ability “to get people to change how they saw the political process.” For black Mississippians, like Watkins, raised in rural communities where black residents lacked access to the vote, he understood the power gained when individuals overcame their fear in attempting to register to vote or attend a meeting sponsored by the local Democratic Party. He concluded that to inspire black voters to attend meetings where they might be regarded “harshly” and “to get them to go. That’s a great accomplishment.”[[905]](#footnote-904) From 1964 to 1968, the MFDP served as the primary organizational body to usher black Mississippians into the political process. From 1968 to 1976, when the Mississippi Democratic Party was officially integrated, the MFDP continued to serve as an important symbol despite its organizational dissolution. Today, it remains the primary memory for mass based political action in Mississippi.

There were also concrete advancements and disappointments in black political rights in Mississippi. By 1980, Mississippi elected the greatest number of black public officials in the United States, and today its voters elect the second greatest number. Bennie Thompson who ran for the Board of Supervisors in Hinds County as a Freedom Democrat now represents the second congressional district in the United States Congress. The MFDP’s first vice-chair, Leslie Burl McLemore chairs the Jackson city council. The black population in Mississippi, however, remains impoverished and is disproportionately represented in the state’s prisons. In recent discussions concerning the re-enfranchisement of felons, activists singled out Mississippi as an example of a state that denied the basic rights of citizenship to criminals who had repaid their debt to society. In Mississippi, just over one hundred of the state’s 87,000 released felons have had their voting rights returned to them.[[906]](#footnote-905) At a recent meeting of the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party, participants lamented the departure of industry, which had complained that they were unable to fill their positions with skilled workers who had graduated from the local high schools.[[907]](#footnote-906)

Amidst concerns that political power has once again diminished among black Mississippians, the MFDP has become a symbol of the potential for grassroots political activity in Mississippi’s black communities. The Holmes County FDP continues to hold monthly meetings. Until his recent retirement from the legislature, Representative Robert Clark regularly attended. Jan Hillegas, a longtime freedom worker, who arrived in Mississippi in August 1964 and never left, reported receiving a letter in the last few years from a Wilkinson County man who identified himself as a Freedom Democrat.[[908]](#footnote-907) Recently, when asked about her recollection of the MFDP, a white Democrat from Jackson responded, “Oh that’s who we are.” Today, when Mississippians (civil rights activists, opponents, or moderates) speak of the re-entry of black Mississippians into the political process, they collapse that complex process into four words: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

A number of former Freedom Democrats continue to initiate local efforts for political, economic, and social change in Mississippi. In a recent interview, Hollis Watkins, one of Bob Moses’ first college age recruits in the Mississippi movement who helped arrange the 1964 convention challenge, countered traditional assessments of the movement and its demise with the simple statement, “I’m still here.”[[909]](#footnote-908) Watkins served as a delegate for Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaign in 1988 and administers Southern Echo, a community project in Jackson dedicated to grassroots organizing on an inter-generational model. Unita Blackwell, chided by Stokely Carmichael to assume a leadership role at the MFDP’s second district convention in the summer of 1964, became the first black woman elected mayor in Mississippi. L.C. Dorsey, a displaced farm worker when she first encountered the movement, earned a Ph.D. in social work and directs the Delta Research and Cultural Institute at Mississippi Valley State University. Charles McLaurin, who organized the Sunflower elections, works for Sunflower County and sits on the board of the Sunflower County Freedom Project, an educational enrichment program that builds on the principles of the freedom movement and its history in the Delta to inspire academic excellence in the youth of Sunflower County.

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344. Testimony of Victoria Jackson Gray, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
345. Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
346. Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
347. Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
348. Pamphlet on the Congressional Challenge, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
349. Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 179-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
350. Steve Max, “The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party: Background and Recent Events,” 1965, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
351. Pamphlet on the Congressional Challenge, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Steve Max, “we shall overcome: register-vote: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, Background Information for Supportive Campaigns by Campus Groups,” (New York: 1965), 5, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
352. King, *Freedom Song*, 352-353. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
353. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 331; Aaron Henry removed his name from the challenge. Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, “Memo on Lobbying: Final Stage of Congressional Challenge,” 24 April 1965, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
354. *Student Voice*, December 1964, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
355. Memorandum from Benjamin Smith to Lawrence Guyot, 29 September 1964, SNCC Papers; Max, “The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party: Background and Recent Events,” Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
356. Memorandum from Benjamin Smith to Lawrence Guyot, 29 September 1964, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
357. Mark DeWolf Howe, Harvard School of Law, Memo on Challenge to Seating of the Mississippi Congressional Delegation, 22 December 1964, SNCC Papers; Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 330-331. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
358. Max, “The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
359. MFDP flyer, “Come to Washington to Support the Challenge,” September 1965, Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
360. Drew Pearson column, 30 December 1964, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
361. Memo from Leon Shull, National Director, Americans for Democratic Action to National Officers, National Board, and Chapter Chairmen regarding the Mississippi challenge, 19 November 1964, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
362. *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
363. Jewett, Richard, “Mississippi Field Report,” 19 January 1965, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
364. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 334; Richard Jewett, “Mississippi Field Report,” 19 January 1965, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
365. Portion of letter written by Alice Blackwell, a participant at the rally to support the Congressional Challenge, Washington, DC, January 1965, SNCC Papers; Letter to Erle Johnston from James P. Coleman regarding events in Mississippi in 1965, 12 September 1988, Papers of Erle Johnston, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
366. King, *Freedom Song*, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
367. “Statement of Congressman William F. Ryan (Dem.-Lib., NY) Concerning the Seating of the Mississippi Congressional Delegation,” 23 December 1964, Charles Griffin Collection, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
368. “Statement of Congressman William F. Ryan (Dem.-Lib., NY) Concerning the Seating of the Mississippi Congressional Delegation,” 23 December 1964, Charles Griffin Collection, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
369. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation* (Washington, DC: 1968), 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
370. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 334-5; King, *Freedom Song*. 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
371. *Jackson Daily News*, 3 January 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
372. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 334-5. In a letter to Erle Johnston concerning his recollections of the congressional challenge, James Coleman wrote that he considered much of Kunstler’s book to be “lies, which I never dignified with any notice.” Correspondence, 12 September 1988, Erle Johnston Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
373. *Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, Louisiana, 31 January 1965, quoted in Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, “Memo on Lobbying: Final Stage of Congressional Challenge,” 24 April 1965, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
374. *New York Times*, 20 January 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
375. *New York Times*, 20 January 1965; Pamphlet on Congressional Challenge, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; *New York Times*, 25 April 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
376. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 342; *Jackson Daily News*, 30 January 1965, quoted in Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, “Memo on Lobbying,” Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
377. Reprinted from Tupelo newspaper, February 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
378. Letter from Hayden Campbell, member of the state Sovereignty Commission, to Governor Paul B. Johnson, 26 January 1965, Charles Griffin Collection, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
379. *Jackson Daily News*, 4 February 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
380. Erle Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant Years* (Lake Harbor: 1990), 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
381. Testimony of John Bell Williams, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional Record*, 13-14 September 1965, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
382. Report on issued subpoenas, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
383. Letter to Erle Johnston from James P. Coleman, 12 September 1988, Papers of Erle Johnston, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi; Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
384. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 337-338; Letter to Erle Johnston from James P. Coleman regarding events in Mississippi in 1965, 12 September 1988, Papers of Erle Johnston, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
385. *New York Times*, 30 January 1965; Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
386. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
387. Testimony of witnesses for Congressional Challenge, 1965, Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
388. Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, “Memo on Lobbying,” Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg; Associated Press, unidentified newspaper, 5 April 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; *Nation,* 17 May 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
389. James Coleman letter to Erle Johnston, 12 September 1988, Erle Johnston Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi; *New York Times*, 25 April 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
390. Lawrence Guyot and Mike Thelwell, “Toward Independent Political Power,” *Freedomways*, third quarter 1966, 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
391. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 343-344; *New York Times*, 20 June 1965; Drew Pearson, *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, 25 August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
392. Copy of letter of support to Lawrence Guyot written by Alan Reitman, Associate Director, ACLU, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
393. King, *Freedom Song*, 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
394. Statement of the Congressman William F. Ryan Announcing Plans to Bring the Mississippi Challenge to the House Floor on 1 September 1965, 25 August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
395. Michael Thelwell, director of the Washington MFDP office, remarked on the challenge, “This time we did it without them,” referring to the NAACP. Quoted in King, *Freedom Song*, 355; List of supporters of the congressional challenge, September 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
396. Testimony of William Colmer, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
397. Emergency Memo to all MFDP Members, “Challenge Calendar of Events Leading up to the Challenge,” SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
398. Max, “we shall overcome,” 5, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
399. Testimony of Thomas Abernethy, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
400. *Jackson Daily News*, 15 September 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
401. Testimony of Annie Devine, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
402. Testimony of Rev. Allen Johnson, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
403. *New York Times*, 18 September 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
404. Meeting of the MFDP Executive Committee, Washington, DC, 18 September 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
405. Victoria Jackson Gray quoted in Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters*, 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
406. *Jackson Daily News*, 15 September 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
407. “They Risk Their Lives for Freedom,” uncited, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
408. Quoted in *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 4 October 1965, Edwin King Collection, Archives, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
409. *New York Times*, 18 September 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
410. Statement by Lawrence Guyot, Campus Newsletter, 1 October 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
411. *New York Times*, 18 September 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
412. Karel Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Radcliffe College, Harvard University, 1966, 70-77. Weissberg volunteered in Panola County during the summer of 1965. Her college thesis is an analysis of the county FDP based on her experience. Her portrayal of a county FDP meeting matches with copies of the minutes of the Tippah County FDP, 1965-1967, in the possession of the author from the personal collection of Gloria X. Clark. In Tippah County, the meetings opened with a prayer, the president made remarks, minutes were read, and new business was then discussed. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
413. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
414. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
415. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 46-47, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
416. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
417. *The Nation*, 17 May 1965, Karel Weissberg Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
418. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 34-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
419. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
420. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
421. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
422. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
423. Included in letter from Kitty Weissberg to Friends and Family, 7 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
424. Jewett, Richard, “Mississippi Field Report,” 19 January 1965, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
425. Minutes of the MFDP Executive Committee, Washington DC, 18 September 1965, SNCC Papers; Notes from the Fourth District Caucus, State-Wide Convention, Philadelphia, MS, 13 January 1966, SNCC Papers; Minutes of the FDP state-wide convention, Sunday, 2 January 1966, Jackson, Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson Collection, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
426. *MFDP News*, 27 February 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
427. Interview with Unita Blackwell, Mayersville, Mississippi, 24 September 2003; *MFDP News*, 27 February 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
428. *MFDP News*, 15 August 1965, Karel Weissberg Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
429. Interview with anonymous black male, Indianola, Mississippi, New York Times Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975); *MFDP News*, 27 February 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
430. Letter from Kitty Weissberg to Friends and Family, 7 August 1965, Karel Weissberg Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
431. Tippah County FDP minutes, 1965-1967, copy in possession of author, from personal collection of Gloria X. Clark. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
432. For a discussion on school integration in Mississippi, see Winson Hudson and Constance Curry, *Mississippi Harmony: Memoirs of a Freedom Fighter* (New York: 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
433. “It Isn’t Nice,” *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
434. Principal’s testimony in *Blackwell vs. Issaquena County Board of Education* included in Minion K.C. Morrison, *Black Political Mobilization: Leadership, Power & Mass Behavior* (Albany: 1987), 118; *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
435. Interview with Unita Blackwell, Mayersville, Mississippi, 24 September 2003; Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
436. Members of the Holmes County FDP remarked that only one school teacher, Bernice Montgomery, joined the civil rights organizing in the county. The Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Rural South*, 68-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
437. *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
438. Principal’s testimony in *Blackwell vs. Issaquena County Board of Education* included in Minion K.C. Morrison, *Black Political Mobilization*, 118; *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
439. *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
440. Minion K.C. Morrison, *Black Political Mobilization*, 117; *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
441. “It Isn’t Nice,” *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
442. Interview with Unita Blackwell, Mayersville, Mississippi, 24 September 2003; *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
443. *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
444. *Freedom Fighter* (Indianola MSU), August 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
445. *New York Times*, 8 June 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
446. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 7 July 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
447. *New York Times*, 18 June 1965; Kitty Weissberg letter to Friends and Family, 19 June 1965, Karel Weissberg Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
448. *New York Times*, 18 June 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
449. *New York Times*, 8 June 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
450. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 7 July 1965; *New York Times*, 24 July 1965; Kitty Weissberg letter to Friends and Family, 15 June 1965, Karel Weissberg Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
451. *New York Times*, 16 June 1965; Kitty Weissberg letter to Friends and Family, 15 June 1965, Karel Weissberg Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
452. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 7 July 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
453. Accounts of Police Treatment at Jackson Fairgrounds, SNCC Papers; *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 7 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
454. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
455. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 7 July 1965; Kitty Weissberg, Letter to Friends and Family, 4 July 1965, Karel Weissberg Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
456. Meeting: August 16, 1965, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975); Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
457. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 15 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
458. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
459. Meeting: August 16, 1965, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
460. Meeting: August 16, 1965, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975); Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
461. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
462. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
463. Meeting: August 16, 1965, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975); Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
464. Meeting: August 16, 1965, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
465. Meeting: August 16, 1965 and Interview with Eugene Turitz, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975); Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 54 and 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
466. Meeting: August 16, 1965 and Interview with Eugene Turitz, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975); Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 54 and 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
467. Meeting: August 16, 1965, Batesville, Mississippi, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
468. *Wall Street Journal*, 7 May 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
469. “Report from Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers; *MFDP News*, November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
470. “Report from Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers; *MFDP News*, November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
471. *Benton County Freedom Train*, 12 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
472. “Report from Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers; *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
473. *MFDP News*, November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
474. Affidavit of Audrey Johnson included in Kitty Weissberg letter to Family and Friends, 21 September 1965, Karel Weissberg personal collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
475. “Report from Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
476. *Wall Street Journal*, 7 May 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
477. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 5 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
478. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 5 November 1965; *MFDP News*, November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
479. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 5 November 1965; *MFDP News*, November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
480. *The People’s Voice*, Clay County Freedom Democratic Party, 1 December 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
481. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
482. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
483. *The People’s Voice*, Clay County Freedom Democratic Party, 1 December 1965, SNCC Papers; *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
484. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 5 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
485. *The People’s Voice*, Clay County Freedom Democratic Party, 1 December 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
486. *The People’s Voice*, Clay County Freedom Democratic Party, 1 December 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
487. *The People’s Voice*, Clay County Freedom Democratic Party, 1 December 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
488. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
489. Minutes of the MFDP Executive Committee, Washington DC, 18 September 1965, SNCC Papers; Notes from the Fourth District Caucus, State-Wide Convention, Philadelphia, MS, 13 January 1966, SNCC Papers; Minutes of the FDP state-wide convention, Sunday, 2 January 1966, Jackson, Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson Collection, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
490. Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have no Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (New York: 1997), 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
491. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
492. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
493. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
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495. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
496. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
497. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
498. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
499. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
500. Erle Johnston to J.T. Patteson, 19 July 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
501. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004; *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
502. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
503. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
504. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 17 March 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
505. “WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE YOUNG DEMOCRATS?” 1967, SNCC Papers; *New York Times*, 16 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
506. *Southern Courier* included in *MFDP News*, 15 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
507. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
508. *New York Times*, 29 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
509. *New York Times*, 3 September 1965; “Report form Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
510. *New York Times*, 29 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
511. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 5 June 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
512. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 5 June 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
513. “Black Natchez,” (Center for Documentary Films: 1966); Letter to Charles Evers from MFDP representatives of Adams County, 2 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
514. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
515. Letter to Charles Evers from MFDP representatives of Adams County, 2 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
516. Letter to Charles Evers from MFDP representatives of Adams County, 2 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
517. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
518. Report, 10 October 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
519. “Report form Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
520. *New York Times*, 3 September 1965; “Black Natchez.” [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
521. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
522. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
523. New York Times, 13 October 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
524. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, September 1965; *New York Times*, 13 October 1965; *MFDP News*, November 1965, SNCC Papers; “Report form Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers; The treatment of the Natchez detainees also focused attention on Parchman Penitentiary as a civil rights problem. Demonstrators initiated a federal court case, *Anderson v. Nosser*. David Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery* (New York: 1996), 237-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
525. “Report form Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers; *New York Times*, 13 October 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
526. *New York Times*, 13 October 1965; *New York Times*, 17 October 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
527. *New York Times*, 4 December 1965; *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
528. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965; *New York Times*, 25 December 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
529. Minor, Bill, “NAACP Carves Out a Single Role,” undated, Minor Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
530. Evers, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story*, 183-189. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
531. Interview with Philip West, 18 September 1980, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/west.htm> (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
532. “The Young People’s Voices,” FDP/SCLC workshop, Mt. Beaulah, Mississippi, November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
533. *New York Times*, 3 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
534. Interview with Joe Martin, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, [**http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/martin.htm**](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/martin.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
535. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; Interview with Joe Martin, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project,[**http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/martin.htm**](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/martin.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
536. *New York Times*, 3 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
537. SNCC made one of the first major denunciations of the war in January 1966. While Martin Luther King, Jr. had spoken out against the war at event at Howard University in March 1965, it was not until his April 1967 address at Riverside Church that he began to speak actively against the war. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
538. *New York Times*, 4 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
539. *New York Times*, 4 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
540. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 5 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
541. Letter from Jan Goodman to Gloria Mason, Friends of MFDP, New York City, 22 November 1965, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
542. Minutes of FDP Statewide Convention, 2 January 1966, SNCC Papers; Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 90-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
543. Minutes of FDP Statewide Convention, 2 January 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
544. Minutes of the FDP state-wide convention, Sunday, 2 January 1966, Jackson, Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson Collection, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
545. *New York Times*, 20 January 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
546. *New York Times*, 10 September 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
547. *New York Times*, 10 September 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
548. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 102-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
549. Interview with Ken Scudder, San Francisco, California, 14 November 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
550. *New York Times*, 10 September 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
551. Orientation: True Light Baptist Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, July 1965, *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
552. Letter from Washington, DC office, 18 March 966, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
553. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College; *New York Times* Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
554. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
555. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
556. Carroll County Report, 19 May 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
557. Carroll County Report, 19 May 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
558. *New York Times*, 7 March 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
559. *The Mockingbird*, (Jackson, MS), 31 October 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
560. Fannie Lou Hamer interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
561. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
562. “Violence in Mississippi,” August 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
563. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
564. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
565. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
566. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
567. Interview with Rims Barber, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
568. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966; Interview with Rims Barber, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
569. Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 244; Fannie Lou Hamer interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
570. *New York Times*, 17 May 1966; *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, 1966, Papers of Erle Johnston, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi; *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 18 May 1966, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
571. *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 18 May 1966, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
572. Ralthus Hayes, campaign literature, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
573. Candidates Report, 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
574. “Rev. Whitley to Speak at D.C. Rally,” undated, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
575. Press Release, Committee to Elect Whitley, 18 May 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
576. Interview with Reverend Clinton Collier, Civil Rights Documentation Project, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
577. Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003; Press Release, Committee to Elect Whitley, 18 May 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
578. Press Release, 3 May 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
579. Candidates Report, 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
580. Unsigned letter to Austin Scott, Associated Press, 7 May 1966, SNCC Papers. Law enforcement officers from Neshoba County conspired to kill three civil rights workers: James Cheney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in the summer of 1964. Their bodies were found buried in a construction site for a local dam two months after they disappeared. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
581. *New York Times*, 7-8 June 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
582. Interview with Reverend Clinton Collier, Civil Rights Documentation Project, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
583. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 25-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
584. A.L. Hopkins report, 7-9 June 1966, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
585. *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 18 May 1966, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
586. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
587. *New York Times*, 27 October 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
588. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation* , 44-46. Frank Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi after 1965* (Chapel Hill: 1990), 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
589. *New York Times*, 27 October 1966; *New York Times*, 2 November 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
590. “Let’s Look at Jim’s Record,” Race Relations Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
591. “Who’s Against Jim Eastland” Pamphlet, James O. Eastland Subject File, 1959-1967, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
592. *The Mockingbird*, 31 October 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
593. Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives; Report on a meeting of Community Organizers in Mississippi, Jackson Mississippi, 29 October 1966, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
594. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 118, 81-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
595. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 90-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
596. Erle Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant* Years, 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
597. Votes for Freedom Candidates in Official Elections, 1962-1966, Charles Horwitz Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. Many studies of Mississippi during the civil rights years have described the placement of Emma Sanders on the ballot as a nod to black nationalism. Edwin King, however, denies this. He insists that the decision was more informal and pragmatic. King was enrolled in graduate school outside of the state, had a young son, and was undergoing reconstructive surgeries for a facial injury he suffered in a violent attack. During the primary season, he had agreed to run in order to present an integrated ticket, but he had been able to campaign only during monthly visits to Mississippi. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 29 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
598. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
599. Each of Mississippi’s counties is divided into five beats. Supervisors, representing each beat, constitute the five member Board of Supervisors. *Edwards MFDP Black and White Hummer*, 25 January 1967, Charles Horwitz Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
600. *Hinds County FDP News*, 18 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
601. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Table 9, 244-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
602. *Hinds County FDP News*, 20 May 1967, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
603. *Hinds County FDP News*, 15 April 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
604. *Hinds County FDP News*, 20 May 1967, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
605. *Hinds County FDP News*, 25 February 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
606. While the compromise of 1877 provided Rutherford B. Hayes with the presidency in return for a federal abandonment of black rights, black Mississippians remained in isolated political offices for several years. The passage of Mississippi’s revised state constitution in 1890 marks the complete elimination of black political rights in Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
607. *Hinds County FDP News*, 25 February 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
608. Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
609. *Hinds County FDP News*, 13 October 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
610. Interview with Winson Hudson, 1 August 1979, Tom Dent Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
611. Edwin King suspected that, as a result of political inexperience, five percent of votes cast by first time black voters would go to white candidates by “pure error.” Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. Edwin King’s statements are confirmed by the United States Commission on Civil Rights’ assessment of the 1966 and 1967 elections in Mississippi. USCCR, *Political Participation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
612. *Hinds County FDP News*, 15 April 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
613. *Hinds County FDP News*, 21 July 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
614. *Freedom Information Service*, 26 May 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
615. *Freedom Information Service*, 14 July 1967, Gracie Hawthorne Papers, McCain Library, Special Collections, University of Southern Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
616. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
617. *National Guardian*, 18 March 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
618. *National Guardian*, 18 March 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
619. United States Census Report, “Income Expenditures and Wealth,” *Statistical Abstract of the Unites States, 1961,* 5. <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1961-06.pdf> (accessed 5 November 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
620. Report by Mississippians United to Elect Negro Candidates, 1967, Delta Ministry Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
621. *Hamer v. Campbell*, <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html> (accessed 21 October 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
622. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
623. *Hamer v. Campbell*, <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html> (accessed 21 October 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
624. “The Sunflower Story,” 1967, SNCC Papers. The twenty fourth amendment to the United States Constitution barred the use of a poll tax in federal elections in 1964. Not until 1966 did the Supreme Court outlaw the use of poll taxes in all elections in *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections*. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
625. *Hamer v. Campbell*, <http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html> (accessed 21 October 2004); Press Release, National Committee for Free Elections in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 19 August 1966. The American Civil Liberties Union, in its *amicus curiae* brief to the Supreme Court in *Bush v. Palm Beach County Canvassing Board* concerning the validity of elections returns in the 2000 presidential election, cited *Hamer* as an instance in which the court ruled election results should set aside due to violations of the law. Brief Amicus Curiae of the American Civil Liberties Union in Support of Respondents, <http://news.findlaw.com/cnn/docs/election2000/uscaclubrf1128.pdf> (accessed 21 September 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
626. Elizabeth Sutherland to Victoria Jackson Gray, 12 April 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
627. *National Guardian*, 18 March 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
628. *New Republic*, 8 April 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
629. Minutes of the State Executive Committee meeting, Jackson, Mississippi, 20 March [1966?], Sovereignty Commission Files. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
630. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer, *UE News*, 20 March 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
631. *Freedom Information Service*, 31 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
632. Erle Johnston memo to Herman Glazier, 17 April 1967, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
633. Sovereignty Commission article idea, Paul B. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi; Proposed editorial, April 1967, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
634. Julius E. Thompson, *The Black Press in Mississippi, 1865-*1985 (Gainesville, FL: 1993), 71; “Another Reason why Mississippi Negroes Don’t Need the Freedom Democratic Party,” *Jackson Advocate*, 17 June 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
635. “Another Reason why Mississippi Negroes Don’t Need the Freedom Democratic Party,” *Jackson Advocate*, 17 June 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
636. “The Political Crisis in Sunflower County,” *Jackson Advocate*, 29 April 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
637. “Another Reason why Mississippi Negroes Don’t Need the Freedom Democratic Party,” *Jackson Advocate*, 17 June 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
638. “The Political Crisis in Sunflower County,” *Jackson Advocate*, 29 April 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
639. Press Release on the formation of the National Committee for Free Elections in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 19 August 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
640. *Washington Post*, 17 March 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
641. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
642. Letter to “Who ever this consion,” from Otis Brown, Jr., 10 February 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
643. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
644. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
645. *Freedom Information Service*, 24 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
646. *Freedom Information Service*, 17 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
647. *The Militant*, 10 April 1967, SNCC Papers; *Freedom Information Service*, 24 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
648. *Freedom Information Service*, 7 April 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
649. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 1 October 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
650. *Freedom Information Service*, 7 April 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
651. Interview with Ura Bowie, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
652. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
653. *Freedom Information Service*, 28 April 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
654. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
655. William Minor, “Negroes’ Failure to Win Office in Delta Pondered,” *Times Picayune*, 7 May 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-654)
656. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-655)
657. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-656)
658. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-657)
659. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers. While guardians of the white vote leafleted black neighborhoods in Sunflower, official news outlets in the white community did not print any news on the special elections until the day after the election. In the county newspaper, the *Enterprise-Tocsin*, the only news of black residents of Sunflower County sporadic as it was focused on interior stories of 4-H clubs and pageant queens. When news about black residents reached the front page of the county newspaper it was to warn white residents of violent crimes perpetrated by black residents. *Indianola Enterprise-Tocsin*, 1965-1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-658)
660. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-659)
661. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. Edwin King’s statements are confirmed by the United States Commission on Civil Rights’ assessment of the 1966 and 1967 elections in Mississippi. USCCR, *Political Participation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-660)
662. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 May 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-661)
663. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-662)
664. William Minor, “Negroes’ Failure to Win Office in Delta Pondered,” *Times Picayune*, 7 May 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; *Indianola Enterprise-Tocsin*, 4 May 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-663)
665. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-664)
666. William Minor, “Negroes’ Failure to Win Office in Delta Pondered,” *Times Picayune*, 7 May 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-665)
667. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-666)
668. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-667)
669. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-668)
670. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-669)
671. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 May 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-670)
672. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 31; *Freedom Information Service*, 5 May 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-671)
673. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-672)
674. *Indianola Enterprise-Tocsin*, 19 October 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-673)
675. *Clarion-Ledger*, 16 September 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-674)
676. Letters found in Charles Griffin Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-675)
677. *New York Times Magazine*, 24 September 1967; *Congressional Record* – Senate, 22 September 1967, 26537-26539. [↑](#footnote-ref-676)
678. *New York Times*, 28 October 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-677)
679. The Hinds County FDP replaced its former logo of a donkey kicking from behind with the image of the black panther. *Freedom Information Service*, 6 October 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-678)
680. Rally at Mount Beulah, 8 August 1967, Charles Horwitz Papers, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-679)
681. Rally at Mount Beulah, 8 August 1967, Charles Horwitz Papers, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-680)
682. *Indianola Enterprise-Tocsin*, 24 August 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-681)
683. William Winter, “Atlantic City Revisited: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the 1964 Democratic National Convention,” 11 February 2000, Fifty Years: The Mondale Lectures on Public Service, Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-682)
684. *Freedom Information Service*, 28 July 1967. Winter, who would later be considered a racial conciliator, conceded that while a few white Mississippians joined with the state’s black citizens to demand equal rights, during the 1967 gubernatorial race, he was “hunkered down in a bunker, afraid to stick my head up very far.” William Winter, “Atlantic City Revisited.” William Winter finally won the governorship in 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-683)
685. *Indianola Enterprise-Tocsin*, 24 August 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-684)
686. *New York Times*, 31 August 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-685)
687. *New York Times*, 4 October 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-686)
688. *New York Times*, 5 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-687)
689. *New York Times*, 5 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-688)
690. *Delta Democrat Times*, 5 November 1967, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-689)
691. *Hinds County FDP News*, 3 November 1967. R.L. Bolden served as Hinds County FDP chair. With the public release of the Sovereignty Commission Files, however, it was learned that he worked as an informant for the state sponsored surveillance organization under the code name “Agent X.” By 1967, Hinds County Freedom Democrats sensed that their activities were being monitored. Writing in the Hinds County FDP Newsletter, Al Rhodes, urged his readers, “We must keep what we talk about in our meetings to ourselves*.” Hinds County FDP News*, 15 April 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-690)
692. *Hinds County FDP News*, 3 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-691)
693. *New York Times*, 8 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-692)
694. Report written by Mississippians United to Elect Negro Candidates, 2, Delta Ministry Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-693)
695. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-694)
696. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 218-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-695)
697. Ted Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt,” *Westside News and Free Press*, 16 November 1967, SNCC Papers; United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 121-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-696)
698. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.”  [↑](#footnote-ref-697)
699. Interview with Winson Hudson, 1 August 1979, Tom Dent Collection, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-698)
700. *New York Times*, 2 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-699)
701. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-700)
702. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.” Black Mississippians averaged six years of schooling in 1967. United States Census, “Education,” *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1967*,” 25. <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1967-03.pdf> (accessed 5 November 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-701)
703. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-702)
704. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-703)
705. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-704)
706. Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, Greenwood, Mississippi, 12 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-705)
707. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-706)
708. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.” [↑](#footnote-ref-707)
709. Interview with Owen Brooks, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-708)
710. Interview with Griffin McLaurin, 6 March 2000, Civil Rights Documentation Project, <http://www-dept.usm.edu/~mcrohb/html/transcripts/manuscript-mclaurin_griffin.shtml> (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-709)
711. Interview with Robert Clark, 11 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-710)
712. Interview with Robert G. Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University Library, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-711)
713. *New York Times*, 2 January 1968; Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-712)
714. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Table 9, 244-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-713)
715. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-714)
716. Interview with Walter Bruce, 8 October 1999, Delta Oral History Project, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-715)
717. Interview with Ralthus Hayes, 15 February 1967, quoted in United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 131; “Facts on Ralthus Hayes, F.D.P. Candidate for Congress from the 2nd District,” SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-716)
718. Interview with Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner, Durant, MS, 18 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-717)
719. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-718)
720. Interview with Bee Jenkins, 17 January 2000, Delta Oral History Project, Tougaloo College. [↑](#footnote-ref-719)
721. Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-720)
722. Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-721)
723. Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-722)
724. Interview with Robert G. Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-723)
725. Interview with Rev. J. J. Russell and Mrs. Erma Russell, Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-724)
726. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-725)
727. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-726)
728. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-727)
729. *Ebony*, February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-728)
730. *Freedom Information Service*, 17 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-729)
731. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-730)
732. *Ebony*, February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-731)
733. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968; *Freedom Information Service*, 12 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-732)
734. *Freedom Information Service*, 12 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-733)
735. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-734)
736. *Freedom Information Service*, 8 November 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-735)
737. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 January 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-736)
738. Interview with James Simpson, 11 May 1992, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm> (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-737)
739. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 January 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-738)
740. Emilye Crosby, “A Little Taste of Freedom: The African American Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi,” unpublished manuscript, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-739)
741. “Election 1971: An Analysis,” Delta Ministry Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-740)
742. *Ebony*, February 1968; United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 218-219. Some black Mississippians had served as public officials in all-black jurisdictions. The Delta town of Mound Bayou managed to maintain self government throughout the post Reconstruction Era and served as a oasis for political organization in the pre Civil Rights period. [↑](#footnote-ref-741)
743. Report to file, 18 December 1967, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archive and History. Mississippi’s public officials also counseled against protest politics. When Clark’s opponent in the election, J.P. Love considered challenging the vote count, Governor John Bell Williams warned him against creating a public controversy that would be picked up by national newspapers and federal officials as a sign of Mississippi’s intransigence. Campbell, *Robert G. Clark’s Journey to the Statehouse*,121. [↑](#footnote-ref-742)
744. Interview with James Simpson, 11 May 1992, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm> (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-743)
745. Interview with James Simpson, 11 May 1992, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm> (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-744)
746. *MFDP News*, 27 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-745)
747. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 January 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-746)
748. *Freedom Information Service*, 7 June 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-747)
749. *Hinds County FDP News*, 18 March 1967; Interview with James Simpson, 11 May 1992, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm> (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-748)
750. *MFDP News*, 27 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-749)
751. Interview with Rims Barber, 21 August 1997, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/barber97.htm> (accessed 29 April 2005); *Freedom Information Service*, 1 December 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-750)
752. Quoted in Campbell, *Robert G. Clark’s Journey to the House*,114. [↑](#footnote-ref-751)
753. *Freedom Information Service*, 19 January 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-752)
754. Evers and Szanton, *Have no Fear*, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-753)
755. *Freedom Information Service*, 19 January 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-754)
756. *Freedom Information Service*, 26 January 1968; *MFDP News*, 30 January 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-755)
757. *MFDP News*, volume 2, number 6, 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-756)
758. Evers and Szanton, *Have no Fear*, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-757)
759. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-758)
760. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-759)
761. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-760)
762. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-761)
763. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-762)
764. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-763)
765. *Hinds County FDP News*, 26 February 1968; *MFDP News*, 30 January 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-764)
766. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-765)
767. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 32, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-766)
768. Evers and Szanton, *Have no Fear*, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-767)
769. *Hinds County FDP News*, 12 February 1968 [↑](#footnote-ref-768)
770. *New York Times*, 29 February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-769)
771. *New York Times*, 25 February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-770)
772. *New York Times*, 25 February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-771)
773. *New York Times*, 25 February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-772)
774. *Hinds County FDP News*, 26 February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-773)
775. *MFDP News*, volume 2, number 6, 1968; Emilye Crosby, "Common Courtesy: The Civil Rights Movement in Claiborne County, Mississippi," Unpublished Dissertation, American Studies Program, Indiana University, December 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-774)
776. *MFDP News*, volume 2, number 6, 1968; Crosby, "Common Courtesy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-775)
777. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-776)
778. *Freedom Information Service*, 8 March 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-777)
779. *New York Times*, 28 February 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-778)
780. *Hinds County FDP News*, 12 March 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-779)
781. *Freedom Information Service*, 8 March 1968; Szanton and Evers, *Have no Fear*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-780)
782. *Hinds County FDP News*, 12 March 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-781)
783. Szanton and Evers, *Have no Fear*, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-782)
784. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-783)
785. *Freedom Information Service*, 22 March 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-784)
786. *Freedom Information Service*, 26 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-785)
787. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-786)
788. *Freedom Information Service*, 24 May 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-787)
789. Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-788)
790. *Freedom Information Service*, 22 November 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-789)
791. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 March 1967; Campbell, *Robert G. Clark’s Journey to the House*, 108-109; In 1970, the legislature passed an open primary law to reduce the potential electoral success of independent black candidates. Previously only a plurality was needed to win a general election, allowing an independent to win if he or she outpolled the Democratic and Republican nominees. With the movement of white voters to the Republican Party following the 1968 presidential election, the possibility of a black independent candidate winning increased. The open primary law adopted in 1970 placed all candidates in one primary. The top two vote getters participated in a run off. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *The Voting Rights Act: Ten Years After* (WDC: 1975), 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-790)
792. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-791)
793. *New York Times*, 4 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-792)
794. Szanton and Evers, *Have no Fear*, 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-793)
795. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 22 June 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-794)
796. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-795)
797. *Freedom Information Service*, 12 April 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-796)
798. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Table 9, 246-247; United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Voting in Mississippi*, (WDC: 1965), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-797)
799. Key List Mailing, MFDP, 2 May 1966, SNCC Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-798)
800. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Map No.4, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-799)
801. Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-800)
802. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Map No.3, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-801)
803. *New York Times*, 20 October 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-802)
804. *MFDP News*, November 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-803)
805. *New York Times*, 24 July 1966; *New York Times*, 28 March 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-804)
806. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-805)
807. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 22 June 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-806)
808. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Map No.3 and No. 4, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-807)
809. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 22 June 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-808)
810. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Map No.3 and No. 4, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-809)
811. Interview with Hodding Carter III, 23 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-810)
812. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-811)
813. Interview with Hodding Carter III, 23 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 8-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-812)
814. Interview with Hodding Carter III, William Simpson Collection, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-813)
815. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 202, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-814)
816. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 197, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-815)
817. Interview with Hodding Carter III, 23 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-816)
818. Interview with Hodding Carter III, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. This phenomenon rings true in contemporary Mississippi politics. Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour was elected in 2003. Now a member of the Republican Party, as a Democrat he campaigned for Richard Nixon in 1968. In his 2003 campaign, Barbour used coded symbols and language to attract white voters while implying that the white Democratic incumbent was reliant on the black electorate. *New York Times Magazine*, 19 October 2003. County by county representations of Mississippi voter choice in the 2004 presidential election illustrate that the Delta and southwestern regions of the state that possessed black voter majorities chose the Democratic candidate while the rest of the state voted Republican. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 November 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-817)
819. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer, 14 April 1972, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/hamer.htm> (accessed 29 April 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-818)
820. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-819)
821. Interview with Kenneth Dean, 9 June 1992, John C. Stennis Oral History Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-820)
822. Interview with Hodding Carter III, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 10-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-821)
823. Robert Clark quoting Lawrence Guyot, interview with Robert Clark, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-822)
824. *Hinds County FDP News*, 23 September 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-823)
825. Interview with Robert Cableton, 24 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-824)
826. *Freedom Information Service*, 2 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-825)
827. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-826)
828. Interview with George Raymond, 5 July 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-827)
829. Handwritten minutes, Freedom Democratic Party-Delta Ministry strategy meeting, July 1968, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-828)
830. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-829)
831. Interview with Robert Cableton, 24 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-830)
832. Interview with George Raymond, 5 July 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-831)
833. *Freedom Information Service*, 2 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-832)
834. *MFDP News*, 19 December 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-833)
835. Owen Brooks remarks are part of the interview he conducted with Louis Adams, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-834)
836. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-835)
837. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 19, 15; *Freedom Information Service*, 5 July 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-836)
838. Handwritten notes, Loyalist meeting, undated, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-837)
839. Interview with Aaron Henry, 25 September 1968, Ralph Bunch Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-838)
840. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-839)
841. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-840)
842. *Southern Patriot*, September 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-841)
843. Fannie Lou Hamer, Affidavit, 17 August 1968, Aaron Henry Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. Fannie Lou Hamer’s contention that the MDP did not want her at the meeting is probably accurate. Her ignorance of the meeting time and place are harder to explain. One movement organizer insinuated that by 1968, Hamer was more of a symbol than an active participant in the MFDP. Also, if an announcement was placed in the local paper, it was unlikely to be read by black residents who received little information from newspapers that only reported goings on in the white community. Interview with Robert Cableton, 24 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-842)
844. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party News*, 22 June 1968; “Proceedings of the South East Greenwood Precinct Convention and the Leflore County Convention,” 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Mississippi State University, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-843)
845. *Freedom Information Service*, 24 May 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-844)
846. *Southern Patriot*, September 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection; *Freedom Information Service*, 7 June 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-845)
847. Interview with Hodding Carter III, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-846)
848. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 8-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-847)
849. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunch Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 8-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-848)
850. Bill Peltz, “Mississippi,” 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-849)
851. Handwritten notes, Loyalist meeting, undated, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-850)
852. Peltz, “Mississippi,” 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-851)
853. *Freedom Information Service*, 2 August 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-852)
854. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-853)
855. *MFDP News*, 26 July 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-854)
856. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-855)
857. Loyal Democrats of Mississippi, Convention Minutes, 11 August 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-856)
858. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-857)
859. Report of the Credentials Committee, Attachment B, Minutes, Loyal Democrats of Mississippi Convention, 11 August 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-858)
860. Handwritten notes, Loyalist meeting, undated, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives; *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-859)
861. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-860)
862. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-861)
863. Interview with Robert Clark, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-862)
864. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-863)
865. Loyal Democrats of Mississippi, Convention Minutes, 11 August 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-864)
866. List of delegates, Loyalist Convention, 11 August 1968, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-865)
867. Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-866)
868. Interview with Robert Clark, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-867)
869. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-868)
870. Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: 1993), 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-869)
871. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William M. Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mississippi State University, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-870)
872. Statement of Fannie Lou Hamer, 22 May 1969, Charles Horwitz Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-871)
873. Statement of Fannie Lou Hamer, 22 May 1969, Charles Horwitz Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-872)
874. *Southern Patriot*, October 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-873)
875. Map of county by county electoral returns from the 2004 presidential election, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 November 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-874)
876. Interview with Silas McGhee, 12 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-875)
877. Interview with Joseph Rauh, Lyndon B. Johnson Oral History Collection, volume IV, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-876)
878. *Southern Patriot*, October 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-877)
879. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 December 1968; *Southern Patriot*, February 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-878)
880. *MFDP News*, 5 November 1968, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-879)
881. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, 8 January 1969, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. [↑](#footnote-ref-880)
882. Report, 6 June 1969, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-881)
883. MFDP, 1970 Folder, Jan Hillegas Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-882)
884. Aaron Henry Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-883)
885. Aaron Henry Papers , Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives . [↑](#footnote-ref-884)
886. Hearings before the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Committee of the Judiciary, House of Representatives, Ninety Fourth Congress March 1975, 653. [↑](#footnote-ref-885)
887. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, iii. [↑](#footnote-ref-886)
888. *MFDP News*, 5 November 1968, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. [↑](#footnote-ref-887)
889. *MFDP News*, 27 November 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-888)
890. Counties that switched to at large voting were ultimately required to return to beat voting. In 1971, the last at large elections for supervisor were held in Mississippi. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *The Voting Rights Act: Ten Years After*, 269-271. [↑](#footnote-ref-889)
891. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-890)
892. Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 93-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-891)
893. *MFDP News*, 22 June 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-892)
894. *Freedom Information Service*, 27 October 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-893)
895. Frank Parker, “County Redistricting in Mississippi: Case Studies in Racial Gerrymandering,” *Mississippi Law Journal*, June 1973, 404, 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-894)
896. Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 126, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-895)
897. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-896)
898. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-897)
899. Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 30 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-898)
900. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-899)
901. James Kimble, County Chair, to Aaron Henry, 10 April 1969, Aaron Henry Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-900)
902. Interview with Silas McGhee, 12 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-901)
903. Quoted in Emilye Crosby, ““A Little Taste of Freedom: The African American Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi,” unpublished manuscript, 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-902)
904. Interview with Virginia McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-903)
905. Interview with Hollis Watkins, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-904)
906. *New York Times*, 20 February 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-905)
907. Monthly meeting, Hinds County FDP, attended by the author, August 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-906)
908. Interview with Jan Hillegas, Jackson, Mississippi, September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-907)
909. Interview with Hollis Watkins, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-908)