**Politics of Change:** The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Emergence of a Black Political Voice in Mississippi

**Table of Contents**

Introduction 9

Chapter 1 Political Beginnings 16

Chapter 2 A Political Becoming 65

Chapter 3 The National Stage: The Convention Challenge

101

Chapter 4 The National Stage: The Congressional Challenge

128

Chapter 5 Contested Terrain 153

Chapter 6 Freedom Politics: The 1966 and 1967 Elections

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | | 188 |
| Chapter 7 | Coalition Politics | 249 |
| Conclusion |  | 310 |
| Bibliography |  | 318 |

To my family, and to those who continue to make the road we walk.

# 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

# Acknowledgements

I came to this project from two directions. First, as a young white woman who came of age in post civil rights Washington, DC. Frank Smith, who in young adulthood worked as an organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi’s Marshall County, represented my local ward on the city council. I chanted, “Mary and Barry,” with youthful excitement, as former SNCC chair Marion Barry was inaugurated as our city’s mayor. Walter Fauntroy, an aide to Dr. King, was the District’s non-voting delegate to Congress. Additionally, I was raised within a community of artists and activists, radicalized by the anti-war and civil rights movements, who resided outside the bounds of the federal city and made deliberate decisions about how to raise their children in an integrated world beyond what they had personally known – an attempt at their own beloved community. The legacy of the southern freedom struggle and the movements that it inspired surrounded me as I came of age in what was then the Chocolate City of Washington, DC.

This context shaped me personally and intellectually as I became driven by the question of how ordinary people create change. Reading about the student sit-in movement in an eleventh grade history textbook, I was inspired by how students, not much older than myself, had demanded access to fuller opportunities. In college, when exploring a research topic, I chose SNCC. Charles Payne and John Dittmer, who had just published their incredible works on the Mississippi movement, opened my eyes to a world of grassroots organizing -- where college- aged organizers, the descendants of those first sit-inners, worked alongside community elders to create fissures in the segregationist state -- and informed my undergraduate research on the role

of white organizers in SNCC and, later, my examination of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

The second impetus for this monograph extends from more recent events. When I began this study, I recognized that the federal protection of black rights was never secure and concluded with a discussion of the increasing incarceration rates and, consequent, disenfranchisement among black Americans. Since then, Barack Obama, though not a descendent of the black American South but the son of a white American and black Kenyan, was elected the nation’s first black president, creating a momentary feeling of jubilee among many who had long fought for the advancement of black rights and a more equitable society. In the last few years, influenced by Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, the increase in voter ID laws, and court decisions signaling federal abandonment of black political rights, I have come to see the nomenclature of the “Second Reconstruction” differently. Previously reading that phrase as a hopeful reassertion of a renewed, and increasing, protection of black rights, its utterance today strikes me as an acknowledgment of the temporal nature of change, which may, in fact, come to an end just as new possibilities of a more egalitarian future seemed within reach.

While detailing the story of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party -- the working people who encompassed it and the hard fought battles to ensure access to meaningful political power -- and the implementation of the Voting Rights Act was always important, the current historical moment heightens the need to remember. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party built on generations old memories of political involvement, specifically those from the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War, and a semi-underground network to organize a grassroots effort among one of the most politically excluded populations in the United States.

They, in turn, created the space for a broad swath of black Mississippians to enter the political process and expanded the very notion of what stood as politics. With voting rights once again threatened, the story of Freedom Democrats becomes even more salient.

I am grateful to the mentors and colleagues who have been part of my intellectual becoming. From my first teachers at the Columbia Road Children’s Center, a bilingual multicultural child care center, that presented me with early role models and friends across race and ethnicity and those in the District of Columbia Public Schools who nurtured in me a love of learning and of learning history. Ms. Hines taught me to read; Mrs. Lawson made me feel smart; Ms. Mostoller inspired an interest in history; Ms. McCarthy nurtured my questioning; and Mr. Martel introduced me to the student sit-in movement and the skills of writing a research paper. My professors at Barnard College helped me transition to the world of the intellect, in particular Jonathan Reider and Rosalind Rosenberg. My mentors at UC Berkeley shepherded me into the academy: Leon Litwack, Waldo Martin, and Ula Taylor. I was lucky to meet a cohort of graduate students who sustained me in my writing, thinking, and general progress — Chris Agee, Antoinette Chevalier, Marisa Fuentes, David Johnson, Chris Myers Asch, Tim Rose, Bill Scott, Asali Solomon, and Tuyen Tran.

The many people I have met along the way have been generous in their sharing of resources, introductions to others, and identification of errors in my understanding and narrative. Librarians and archivist at Tougaloo College, Mississippi State University, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, University of Mississippi, and University of Southern Mississippi welcomed my questions, helped me sort through materials, and were generous in their retrieval of documents. Leslie Burl McLemore served as an important early ally and

inspired this study through his own doctoral study of the MFDP, and Mike Miller has served as an important recent champion, ensuring the ultimate completion of this manuscript. Finally, I wish to thank the many people who opened their homes, memories, and personal collections to me, not all of which could make it into this text. I can only hope to have done partial justice to the important story you made.

Introduction: The Guarding of Freedom

Robert Clark’s grandfather passed down his family’s story of citizenship gained and revoked. In communal settings, the generational elder shared his personal 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, in 1967, was elected the first black legislator in Mississippi since Reconstruction, through a coalition based solidly among members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, listened and, in adulthood, regularly referred to his family’s story of freedom gained. This orally shared history mirrored the stories that circulated among other black families in Mississippi between the revocation of the franchise in the late nineteenth century and the onset of mass organizing in the early 1960s when memory, rather than formal participation, was the political space available to most black Mississippians.

Clark, unlike academics, who qualified the success of Reconstruction, remembered the years following the Civil War as a time “in Mississippi when they had Negroes in lots of offices,” but he also acknowledged the very real limits to black political power. The elder Clark had been a leader in the county Republican Party during the window of opportunity created by Reconstruction. However, in 1875, white men raided the town of Clinton in a challenge to black leadership in the area. 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 resident, William Clark escaped physical harm. His friend, shooting over (rather than at) Clark’s head, provided cover for his relocation to another Mississippi county. As a civil rights era candidate, 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, “did the shooting begin and Paw had to run.” On the campaign trail in 1967, two years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and nearly a century after his grandfather was forced to flee his hometown, Robert Clark shared this story to remind his supporters that, despite the passage of a new federal law, “Emancipation is still not here.” Electing him would mark an important success but would not be the end of the struggle.1

Twenty years after the nation ratified the fifteenth amendment, which guaranteed the vote to all male citizens of the United States, and fifteen years after the raids in Clinton and other Mississippi communities that targeted black leaders, Mississippi’s 1890 constitution formally codified the disenfranchisement of black men. By 1892, 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 political strength on Election Day in any municipality beyond the all black town of Mound Bayou.2

During this nadir of black political access in Mississippi, small pockets of black professionals, independent landowners, and small business owners worked steadily, amid a semi- underground network of resistors -- drawn from members of the traditional elite (doctors, lawyers, and landowners) and economically independent entrepreneurs (grocers, cafe owners, beauticians and barbers, and funeral home operators). This small group of relative elites expanded a bit upon the return of World War II veterans who benefitted from membership in

1. Campbell, *Robert G. Clark’s Journey to the House*, 64; Remarks made at a 1967 Holmes County FDP meeting quoted in Sue Lorenzi, “The 1960s Holmes County, Mississippi Civil Rights Movement,” 8-9, in possession of the author.
2. Neil McMillen, *Dark* Journey*: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*, 36, 42-44.

national networks, expanded world views, and increased, though still unequal, opportunity through the GI Bill. Generally, these dissenters sought the vote as a means of formalizing their leadership within the black community, not as a universal right to include the state’s large black population of agricultural workers, day laborers, and domestics. Their definition of leadership was limited by their own belief in a hierarchical class structure that access to the franchise and the state-sanctioned participation in the political process would further codify.

In another era and in another place, many of these, primarily, men may have been deemed moderate social conservatives. Bayard Rustin, an advisor to Dr. King and long time dissenter, highlighted this contradiction in the months leading up to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. He contended:

I believe the Negro's struggle for equality in America is essentially revolutionary. While most Negroes—in their hearts—unquestionably seek only to enjoy the fruits of American society as it now exists, their quest cannot *objectively* be satisfied within the framework of existing political and economic relations.3

In Mississippi, in the first half of the twentieth century, when more than ninety percent of the state’s black population lacked access to the vote, their actions were bold and, perhaps, even revolutionary, as Rustin suggests. Regardless of their individual political ideologies, their collective efforts and nascent statewide network laid the groundwork for the mass-based organizing that took place in the 1960s. These efforts identified access to the vote as a key lever for change and, for a moment, served as a unifying focus for a broad coalition among black Mississippians.

1. Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Commentary*, 1 February 1965.

As participants in the black resistance movement, buoyed by the activism of World War II veterans and the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, worked to increase the number of black registered voters, their actions were increasingly met with escalating levels of intimidation.4 Citizens’ Councils were founded among city leaders, and the state funded the

Sovereignty Commission to monitor black organizing and wage a publicity campaign to counter growing national attention to the rising demand for black rights. These white supremacist organizations established a framework that encouraged increasingly brazen acts of violence in response to black organizing. George Lee, a grocery store owner and minister, had been the first black registered voter in his county. In the wake of the *Brown* decision, Lee encouraged others to register. Consequently, he was ordered to remove his own name from the registration list. When these pressures failed to slow Lee’s activism, he was shot and killed as he drove down the central business district in the Delta town of Belzoni. Lamar Smith, a farmer and veteran of WWI, was killed on the courthouse steps in Brookhaven, Mississippi as he accompanied registered voters to

request absentee ballots.5

While the most severe consequence of this heightened resistance was

death, the threat of physical violence and economic harassment, combined with regular surveillance, weighed on the state’s most active dissidents, and by the end of the 1950s, many had left the state in order to protect themselves and their families.6

Although registration numbers increased a bit between the end of World War II and the

*Brown* decision, repression and violence once again decreased the voter rolls. In 1961, the

1. See John Dittmer, *Local People* (Urbana: 1995); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley: 1995).
2. “M is for Mississippi and Murder,” National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1955, 4-5; For a full discussion of white opposition to civil rights in Mississippi, see Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: 2007).
3. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 40.

Mississippi Advisory Council to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, a federally sanctioned bi-racial investigative committee, reported 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 those counties, dominated by large agricultural interests, black residents comprised the majority of the voting age population.7

In the same year that the Commission released its findings, organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), launched a year earlier to serve as an organizational home for the sit-in movement taking hold among black college students, began working in Mississippi. These early organizers connected with older resistors, recruited a cadre of college-aged Mississippians, and leveraged their access to national networks and resources in order to initiate a mass-based voter registration campaign. After three years of steady organizing, in April1964, movement leaders officially named the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to serve as the institutional home for grassroots black political action in Mississippi.

During less than a decade, the MFDP established a parallel political infrastructure through which black Mississippians practiced exercising political and organizational power for the first time in three generations, supported locally initiated campaigns aimed at addressing the most immediate needs within rural black communities, ushered the first wave of black candidates into political office, and forced the integration of the previously all white Mississippi Democratic Party. In the years immediately preceding and following the passage of the Voting Rights Act in

7United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Voting: 1961 United States Commission on Civil Rights Report*, volume 1, 1961, 32, 272-275.

August 1965, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party became the primary vehicle through which black Mississippians came to imagine themselves as political actors and practice the art of politics.

Historians and movement participants have completed extensive studies of the black freedom struggle in Mississippi. These monographs serve as a model of scholarship in examining the long civil rights movement, which recognizes the traditional window of study, 1954 to 1965, as a false demarcation bound by federal interventions that overlook the ongoing organized and informal resistance to white supremacy and the hard work of implementing federal law. Few, however, explore the MFDP beyond its challenge to the seating of Mississippi’s all white delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1964.

John Dittmer’s *Local People*, which lays the foundation for much of the later work on Mississippi, outlines the broad scope of organizing in civil rights era Mississippi and ensured that the slow and steady work of World War II veterans was incorporated into tellings of how change happened. Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* elevated the words of ordinary people and deepened academic understanding through his model of a county-based study of changemaking.8 Payne’s work on Leflore County inspired the next generation of scholars, including J. Todd Moye’s work on Sunflower County, Emilye Crosby’s examination of Claiborne County, and Francoise Hamlin’s study of Coahoma County.9 These monographs have been augmented by a number of personal memoirs authored by white civil rights workers, most notably Sue Sojourner’s recently published *Thunder of Freedom*, and academic and trade biographies of local people, including Aaron Henry, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Winson Hudson.10

Although the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party did not, and perhaps could not,

replace the Mississippi Democratic Party, it inspired the political imagination of black Mississippians beyond its institutional limitations. The MFDP served to transport a wide swath of black Mississippians from utter disenfranchisement to a place where they could begin to imagine political participation, ultimately replacing Reconstruction as the most immediate memory of expansive and libratory black politics -- even as newly enfranchised voters entered the traditional political machinery and became the base of an integrated Democratic Party.

8John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (University of Illinois Press: 1994); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California Press: 1995).

9 J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide:Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (University of North Carolina Press: 2004); Emilye Crosby, *A Little Tast of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (University of North Carolina: 2005; Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (The New Press: 2008); Francoise Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (University of North Carolina: 2012).

10Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (University Press of Mississippi: 2000); Winson Hudson and Constance Curry, *Mississippi Harmony: Memoirs of a Freedom Fighter* (Palgrave McMillan: 2002); Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom: Black Freedom and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi* (University Press of Kentucky: 2013); Robert P. Moses and Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *radical equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Beacon Press: 2001); Chana Kai Lee, f*or freedom’s sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (University of Illinois Press: 1999).

# 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; had long been a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and 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 recognized his target refused to back down. Smith’s rhetorical bravado and insistence on the need for taking individual stands against the dehumanizing and belittling aspects of the Jim Crow South strengthened his likelihood of serving as an oppositional candidate in the one party state of Mississippi.11

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 freedom movement candidate against the incumbent John Bell Williams in the June 1962 Democratic primary. He and Merrill Lindsey, an oppositional 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 second

1. Interview with R.L.T. Smith, 10 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 2, 9.

district, which encompassed much of the state’s black agricultural laborers who resided in a number of black majority counties. 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.

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 overwhelmed 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.12 result of the low percentage of black registered voters, the political choices of black

As a

Mississippians went largely unrecorded and had little influence on political outcomes. Within this context, R.L.T. Smith’s candidacy was more symbolic than viable.

While the black residents of the third congressional district varied from those in the state’s Delta region, fear and stories of violence and intimidation conspired to keep the small number of black registered voters home from the polls on election day. Just two months before Smith announced his candidacy, Herbert Lee, a founding member of the Amite County NAACP, had been killed following a verbal disagreement with a state legislator. Lee had partnered with

freedom workers to register black voters in his community.13

R.L.T. Smith echoed the concern

that extended from recent and more remote memories like these when he commented on one county in the third district, in perhaps euphemistic terms, as a particularly “rough spot for a black

1. *Mississippi Free Press*, 23 December 1961.
2. Robert Moses with Charles Cobb, *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Boston: 2001), 49-51.

man.” There, he warned, harkening back to generation-old memories of late nineteenth century “redemption”, as well as the increase in retaliatory violence following the *Brown* decision, that “you bet not breathe out loud like you wanted to be free.”14

Smith’s willingness to stand as a candidate despite the possibility of violent retaliation from upholders of segregation and white supremacy stemmed from a life of cultivated defiance supported through economic independence. While many black Mississippians worked as low wage laborers, dependent on white employers, Smith benefitted from one of the few salaried fields available to black workers that did not rely on local white support – the United States Postal Service. 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 federally protected position freed from what

Smith termed “white trickery and black trickery.”15

Although he was retired when he ran for

Congress, Smith likely received a pension in addition to running his own business. His independent grocery store served Jackson’s black community and, as a result, was insulated from the most severe forms of economic intimidation.16

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

1. Interview with R.L.T. Smith, 10 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 24; *The Nation*, 17 May 1965.
2. Interview with R.L.T. Smith, 10 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 2, 11-12.
3. Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 30 September 2003.

since emancipation.17

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 social and economic flexibility than renters would have

experienced.18

Black workers who leased homes or land could be displaced at the whim of white

owners. The Smith family’s legacy of land ownership secured in Smith both the ability 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, facilitated his membership in the state NAACP during a period in which this civil rights organization was considered subversive by upholders of segregation and white supremacy in Mississippi. Although the NAACP came to be derided as a moderate force for change during the later years of the freedom struggle, in post-*Brown* Mississippi, NAACP membership was dangerous. One Mississippi NAACP member in describing the semi-underground nature of organizing in the late 1950s and early 1960s reported that his chapter kept no formal records and alternated meeting places in order that no single home drew suspicion.19

Smith’s economic independence and commitment to black political rights, particularly for those who shared the trappings of mainstream success, marked him as a potential candidate for Congress, but he 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 in

1. *Mississippi Free Press,* 16 December 1961.
2. Interview with R.L.T. Smith, 10 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 5.
3. Interview with J.C. Fairly, Charles Phillips, and Mamie Lee Phillips, 24 June 1998, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, [http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/fairley.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/fairley.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).

Mississippi. After sharing his idea with Moses, Higgs began brainstorming potential candidates among the small community of outspoken agitators in the third congressional district. First Higgs approached Medgar Evers, the state’s 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. When approached, Reverend Smith answered, “Why yea, I don’t see why not.”20 This process of recruitment and persuasion would

be a regular feature throughout the pre-Voting Rights period, often trumping ideological commitments to democratic decision making.

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 public symbol for black political rights in Mississippi since the Reconstruction Era. In endorsing his candidacy, the *Free Press* contended, without hyperbole, that Smith’s 1961 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 Smith's qualifications for leadership with its readership -- occupation, marital status, and proclivity to read both the *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Constitution*. The stately photograph and itemized credentials presented Smith as a respected and upstanding member of Mississippi’s black community.21

20William Higgs interview with Anne Romaine, January 1967, “The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Through August 1964,” Master’s Thesis, University of Virginia, 1970, 282-283. Anne Romaine’s thesis is a collection of oral histories she conducted in 1966 and 1968. I am indebted to these interviews with key participants and framers of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

1. *Mississippi Free Press*, 16 December 1961.

Positioning himself as a candidate for Congress in pre-civil rights Mississippi marked Smith’s action as radical, but Smith was a political moderate, who possessed the characteristics of traditional 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 and their aspirations for creating political opportunities for qualified candidates of all races. 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 and saw themselves as the natural leaders of the poor and working class. Smith’s confidence, projected through his image on the front page of the *Free Press*, inspired black registered voters to cast a ballot for someone who embodied their values while offering the unregistered the opportunity to imagine themselves as members of a community represented by well qualified political leaders.

While Smith looked like a candidate, his campaign manager, SNCC’s Bob Moses, who was just gaining a foothold among the state’s dissidents, recognized 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, would serve to strengthen the state’s network of isolated dissidents toward a singular objective. The already activated would encourage the small number of registered voters to vote for a black candidate rather than casting a ballot for the white candidate least hostile to black rights.22

1. Robert Moses interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 55-57.

Although Smith had officially qualified as a candidate, his 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 establishment. There, Moses or Smith passed campaign materials secretly, under the table. The local leader, in turn, shared the news of

Smith’s candidacy among registered voters in the community.23

On one occasion, in Claiborne

County, twenty men attended a clandestine meeting to learn more about the Smith campaign. News of the meeting reached members of the white community. Consequently, the members of Claiborne County’s black dissident community encountered fifty local white men upon arrival at the scheduled meeting. At the next meeting, only three Smith supporters attended.24

Because public campaigning remained dangerous, both the Smith and Lindsey campaigns sought to use 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.25

Smith’s appearance on television was not a

foregone conclusion, however. Financial realities limited the use of media, and some stations refused to sell airtime to a black candidate. While WJTV offered to sell the Smith six spots, the campaign 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.

1. Interview with Robert Moses, 30 September 2003, Jackson, Mississippi.

24 Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi*

(University of North Carolina Press: 2005),79.

25*Mississippi Free Press*, 23 December 1961.

While WJTV had initially agreed to run the Smith advertisements, the city’s other television station, WLBT articulated a “flat refusal” to broadcast these ads. 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. Although 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, with the assistance of national supporters, Reverend Smith ultimately made two appearances on each local television

station.26

Merrill Lindsey was also able to utilize media outlets. Lindsey’s opponent Frank

Smith, deemed one of the more “moderate” representatives from Mississippi, remarked that while he did not watch the television piece, he heard from others that Lindsey had performed “mighty good.”27

Both candidates won important support from black voters. They did not, however, earn all of the ballots cast by black voters. Amidst the climate of fear and intimidation, and indecision about the value of their vote, some black voters abstained while others cast their ballots for the incumbent. 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 a majority of all ballots cast.28 In the second district race, Merrill Lindsey won just under two thousand

votes.29

The two men had proven that black candidates could gain a place on the ballot and

26 Bill Higgs interview with Anne Romaine, January 1967, 284; *The Reporter*, 17 January 1963.

27 Frank Smith, *Congressman from Mississippi* (New York: 1964), 298.

28Harry Holloway, *Politics of the Southern Negro: From Exclusion to Big City Organization* (New York: 1969), 42.

29 Smith, *Congressman from Mississippi*, 298-299.

address voters through television advertisements. Their campaigns also highlighted the very concrete need to increase the number of black registered voters.

Following the 1962 Democratic primary, civil rights organizers began to think about how to use the electoral process as a stage to demand black political rights. During the “Smith for Congress” campaign Bob Moses began to think about 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 mebefore.”30

But as to the

actual outcomes of the Smith and Lindsey congressional campaigns, Moses saw them as a form of “consciousness raising.” In the end, these two campaigns served as the necessary catalyst for what would become one of the most extensive political protests in the nation, and one that Moses conceded that “no one believed . . . was coming as soon as it came.”31

30Robert Moses interview Anne Romaine, September 1966, 56.

1. Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 30 September 2003.

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 and being introduced to Diane Nash, a freedom rider and veteran of the Nashville movement. A college student, McClaurin began working with the young organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had emerged from the student sit-in movement launched in 1960. When he first met Bob Moses, McLaurin was unimpressed 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 developed around Bob Moses, a man who excelled at “basic getting people together.”32

Bob Moses was one of the few movement organizers who inspired native Mississippians, young and old, and outside 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.”33 Howard Zinn, a white professor at Atlanta’s Spelman 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

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, August 17, 1995, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 42-44. Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 90-92.
2. Interview with Amzie Moore, 1977, Civil Rights Documentation Project, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.

mountain studying the sea.”34

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.35

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), Martin Luther King, Jr.’s organization. Intrigued by the energy emitted from the corner of the office where SNCC worked, he asked how he could help.36

Ella Baker, who served as the SCLC advisor to SNCC had developed southern chapters of the NAACP during the 1950s. She 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, the height of white backlash to what many white southerners deemed the federal intrusion of the *Brown* decision. During their first conversation, Moore “schooled”

1. Howard Zinn’s *The New Abolitionists* quoted in Howard Zinn, *You Can’t be Still on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (Boston: 1994), 69-70.
2. Note about Steptoe being reluctant to have Moses take the lead in COFO.
3. Moses with Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 35.

Moses on the history of organizing in Mississippi. He mapped the location of isolated dissidents and shared the stories of past campaigns. Then he accompanied Moses to local churches. Moses addressed the rural parishioners and shared news from the broader 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.37

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 underground dissident network of the state. Additionally, *Jet* magazine had picked up a SNCC press release and announced that the organization’s young leaders had sent a voter registration team into Mississippi. Pike County NAACP president C.C. Bryant wrote Amzie Moore and asked that he send the SNCC workers to southwest Mississippi. When Moses returned the following summer, Moore had deemed his hometown of Cleveland unready to support a major registration campaign, and instead, he sent Moses to meet with Bryant.

With the assistance of Bryant and other black business owners in McComb, Moses launched a campaign to increase black voter registration in Pike County. 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.

C.C. Bryant worked for the railroad and received his paycheck from the national office in

1. Moses with Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 38-41.

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. While working with Bryant in McComb, Moses developed a model for organizing. His philosophy borrowed heavily from his discussions with Ella Baker. It prioritized indigenous leadership, operating under the assumption that local people did not need figureheads or outsiders to outline their needs for them. Given the space to articulate grievances, local people would shape local movements.38

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.39

Over time, Moses was joined by other SNCC organizers, who following the model he had established in McComb, tapping into pre-existing leadership structures in local communities and supporting 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

38 Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 44-46; Interview with Joe Martin,1 November 1995, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, [http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/martin.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/martin.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).

1. Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 44-46.

had lacked strategy and resources. When SNCC organizer Frank Smith arrived in 1962, he brought his experience from the Atlanta student movement, a car, and access to a national

network of supporters.40

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, a small agricultural town. They needed transportation and ideas on sustaining commitment in the face of white intransigence.41

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.”42

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 freedom riders, working to integrate interstate bus travel, reached Mississippi in 1961. The violent response of white Mississippians to the nonviolent demonstrators fueled Watkins’ anger. 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

1. Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003. 41 Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003. 42 *New York Times*, 19 September 1994.

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.43

Within a few years, 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. Lawrence Guyot, a Tougaloo College student born along the more liberal Gulf Coast, descended from a politically active family; his uncle chaired the county Republican Party. Charles McLaurin was born in Jackson and witnessed his grandmother’s individual acts of defiance to the limits of segregation. Leslie Burl McLemore described himself as a high school activist and later chaired the Rust College chapter of the NAACP. These young men were joined by the Ladner sisters, who had grown up in Hattiesburg, joined the NAACP youth councils organized by Medgar Evers, and were mentored by local resistors Clyde Kennard and Vernon Dahmer.44

As the young workers moved into rural communities across Mississippi, Bob Moses observed that they began to view themselves “as some kind of unit.”45 Dorie Ladner proudly

wrote of a “Band of Brothers,” young people like herself and older Mississippians like Amzie

1. Interview with Hollis Watkins, 5 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 1-2.
2. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 63-64; 44 Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004; 44 Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003; 44 Interview with Leslie Burl

McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 3 October 2003.

1. Robert Moses interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 53-54.

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. 46

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.”47

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 had actually been registered. National trends, however, influenced the direction of organizing in Mississippi, leading to the creation of steadily 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, and reduce the movement’s reliance on the direct action campaigns of the freedom riders, 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.48

1. Dorie Ladner, “Band of Brothers,” 22 December 1964, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History .
2. Robert Moses interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 53-54.
3. Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South*, New York: 1983, 228-230.

In Mississippi, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition among national civil rights organizations working in the state, was resurrected to serve as a nonpartisan clearinghouse for voting rights activities. Originally, COFO had been created to provide an organizational home for a united black response to the white violence directed at the freedom riders arriving in the state. When VEP funding became available in 1962, COFO served as a “convenient vehicle” to administer funding for voting rights activities conducted among the

NAACP, SNCC, Congress of Racial Equality, and SCLC.49

Working within the coalition,

Lawrence Guyot, affiliated with SNCC, described the leadership as “very clear.” Aaron Henry, the state president of the NAACP, was the “publicity man, the front man.” SNCC’s Bob Moses served as the field director, and CORE’s Dave Dennis, a young organizer from New Orleans,

assisted him.50

Moses, who had recruited students to organize among Mississippi’s laboring

population, and Dennis, whose influence had been established in Madison County, not the NAACP, largely determined COFO’s programmatic focus.51

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 these COFO-sponsored

1. “What is COFO?,” undated, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers.
2. Lawrence Guyot with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 88.
3. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (London: 1990), 148.

meetings, dissidents from neighboring counties began to “hook-up” and began planning joint

meetings.52

As the movement began to take hold in Leflore County in the Delta, dissidents from

other counties began visiting the strategy sessions. On a few occasions, Hartman Turnbow, an independent farmer who was new to organized political action, Alma Mitchell Carnegie, and Ralthus Hayes, who been involved in the pre-*Brown* resistance efforts, traveled from their homes in Holmes County to observe a meeting in Leflore County. Inspired, they invited COFO organizers to assist them in developing a movement in Holmes County.53

1. Robert Moses interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 59.
2. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004; Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi* (University Press of Kentucky: 2013), 24, 38, 98.

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 accepted only the strategic use of nonviolence.54

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, and hey 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.55

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

1. Interview with Hartman Turnbow included in Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 266. A number of recent books have explored the strategic use of nonviolence to counter the dominant narrative of a universally nonviolent movement.
2. Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 10.

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 rhetorical hyperbole acknowledged the very real limits to black political participation and 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 formal processes of power.56

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 fundamental knowledge of the political system. Formal schooling was limited by the demands of agricultural seasons. When the children of black laborers did attend class, civics was omitted from the curriculum. This lack of knowledge, however, did not equate with a lack of desire. 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 from COFO- organizers accelerated their efforts. Full time civil rights workers had the “backin’” of national

civil rights organizations as well as a “lawyer from the president’s office.”57

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 increase their basic political knowledge and, ultimately, register as voters.

1. Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 260.
2. Interview with Robert Cooper Howard, Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 99.

Following the visits to Leflore County, regular organizing began to take seed in Holmes

County. Over time, a core group of men and women began leading weekly meetings.58

With the

assistance of Annell Ponder, a teacher with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, local leaders began conducting regular citizenship classes. Some adult students were taught to read and write in these evening classes. Others, who already possessed basic literacy skills, were introduced to the voter registration form. In April 1963, a group of fourteen men and women who had been attending the Wednesday movement meetings decided to travel as a group to Lexington, the county seat, and take the voter registration test.59

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?”60

1. Interview with Rev. J. J. Russell and Mrs. Erma Russell, Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center,

*Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 27.

1. Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 261; Interview with Rev. J. J. Russell and Mrs. Erma Russell, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 23.
2. Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 261. For a full discussion of the Holmes County movement see Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi* (University Press of Kentucky: 2013.

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 others remember John Daniel Wesley as first, Turnbow as second and Ralthus Hayes suggested Turnbow had been “exaggerating a bit,” 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.61

Regardless of the order of application, Hartman Turnbow

was among, what came to be memorialized as the “first fourteen,” who walked into the Lexington courthouse and informed the circuit clerk that they intended to register to vote.62

Facing myriad yet unarticulated challenges as he walked 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. After lunch, McClellan methodically took down the voter books and offered an application to Turnbow. Following his registration to attempt, the others in the group entered the courthouse, one at a

1. Interview with Rev. J. J. Russell and Mrs. Erma Russell, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 23, Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom*, 39.
2. Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner, “The 1960s Holmes County, Mississippi Civil Rights Movement,” 1989, in the possession of the author.

time, and asked to register. It took four days for all of the first fourteen to complete their applications to vote.63

As the process was a long one of slow moving and hard questions, word of the mass registration spread in both the black and white communities. In preparation for the day, a number of white residents had been deputized, and black Mississippians turned out to witness the curiosity. The Justice Department, too, had been called in to observe. 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.”

This house bombing, like memories of the first fourteen, 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, who was known for storytelling, 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 the fire in his home. When Turnbow joined his family in the yard, his rifle tucked into his shoulder, the white men began firing at Turnbow. Not a man of nonviolence, he returned fire.64

1. Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 261-262; Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom*, 34.
2. Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 262-263.

Reverend J.J. Russell, another member of the “first fourteen”, 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. Among movement participants, to cede that it was natural causes would have lessened the legend of Hartman Turnbow among his peers.65

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 limited gains during these early voter registration campaigns. Between 1961 and 1963, an estimated eighty five thousand black residents of

Mississippi attempted to register to vote; only seven hundred succeeded.66

A mass movement

had failed to take hold. Hollis Watkins remembered that often “the number of people that

actually came to the mass meeting were not massive.”67

Bob Moses described the increased

number of student organizers as the “only thing that was visible” in the first years of the

1. Interview with Rev. J. J. Russell and Mrs. Erma Russell, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 25.
2. Meeting of the MFDP Executive Committee, Greenville, MS, 3 November 1965, SNCC Papers.

67 Interview with Hollis Watkins, 23 October 1996, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).

Mississippi movement.68

Motivated by their work with COFO and frustrated by the languid

support of national civil rights leaders and the federal government to pressure state and municipal gatekeepers, organizers explored alternative strategies to increase pressure on the political process in Mississippi .

68 Robert Moses interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 65.

“Greetings from the Harassed Henry Headquarters!” wrote Joan Bowman to SNCC

advisor and Spelman professor Howard Zinn.69

In the fall of 1963, COFO decided to formally

challenge political exclusion in Mississippi. Because most black Mississippians remained unregistered, organizers chose not to recruit another black candidate to run in the Democratic primary. Instead, COFO planned for a parallel election. During the summer’s Democratic primary, organizers piloted this idea. They mobilized black residents of the Delta to cast mock ballots for the Democratic candidates for governor. The protest vote demonstrated that black Mississippians, though unregistered, would vote if provided the opportunity.

Building on the success of the Delta Freedom Vote, which had been conducted on a smaller scale, organizers planned for a statewide parallel election to coincide with the November general election. This time, rather than present a choice among the official candidates as it had during the primary, COFO ran its own candidates. Aaron Henry, the state president of the NAACP, ran as the freedom movement’s 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 alongside those of the Democratic and Republican candidates for governor and lieutenant governor.70

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 the Delta town of Clarksdale in partnership with a white entrepreneur. His

69Letter to Howard Zinn from Joan Bowman, 15 October 1963, SNCC Papers.

70 *Mississippi Free Press*, 10 August 1963.

pharmacy served as a safe space, free from white eyes, that nurtured the freedom 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.”71 Like R.L.T. Smith and the residents of Mileston, he possessed the nominal security to resist.

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 older activists involved in the Mississippi movement, organizational allegiances were not the primary issue for Henry. Rather, he was concerned with broadening political access for black Mississippians. Aaron Henry hoped that the Freedom Vote would give the “unregistered Negro a feeling of *somebodyness* in casting a vote.”72

Edwin King, the freedom movement’s candidate for lieutenant governor, had been born and raised a segregationist in Vicksburg. While still in high school, he experienced a transformative moment. A tornado struck Vicksburg and destroyed the city’s black neighborhood; the white residential area had remained largely unscathed. The disparity between the damage in the two communities drove home to King that separate, as he had been led to believe, was not

equal.73

King attended Millsaps College in Jackson and gradually became involved in civil

rights activities. By 1960, King’s parents were forced to leave the state because of their son’s

71Aaron Henry and Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 116.

72*Newsweek*, 28 October 1963, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

1. Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: 1997), 118.

outspokenness on black rights.74

At the time of the Freedom Vote, King was working at

Tougaloo College, a Methodist supported black college, and movement center, on the outskirts of Jackson.

Although Bob Moses and SNCC espoused the tenets of participatory democracy, a statewide movement did not yet exist which could support an apparatus to decide on candidates. Reflecting on the decision making process, Moses pragmatically described the process of selecting a candidate. The candidate needed to appeal to full time organizers 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 accept. Bob Moses explained pointedly, “It wasn’t as if you had a choice

of a lot of different people who would run.”75

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.”76 She did not become formally involved in the freedom

movement for another year.

At the same meeting where Aaron Henry was selected 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 a more equitable future. Movement workers had more thoroughly considered these political issues

1. Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 124.

75Robert Moses interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 67.

76 Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 239.

and debated political theory in the intellectual incubator of the Movement. As a result, 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, he countered, was “more sophisticated and militant” than that used by most black Mississippians, who in late 1963 remained largely “untouched” by the freedom struggle.77 That being said, 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. 78 Although a small group of organizers had planned the Freedom Vote, selected candidates, and authored a platform, the political exercise manifested the unspoken grievances and expectations of a broad cross-section of black Mississippians.

Accustomed to being ignored by candidates during the election season, black Mississippians, from surprisingly remote corners of the state, expressed excitement about the upcoming Freedom Vote. National organizations had long characterized Mississippi as too difficult to organize; SNCC, in theory, had resisted by sending organizers to the state. Originally COFO workers had delayed organizing in some counties, determining that they were too dangerous or lacked established leadership networks. “We still were saying most of the state is off bounds and the people aren’t ready,” remembered Ed King, but he quickly learned, “They were ready.”79 Churches that had refused to host mass meetings sought information about the

77Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

78Interview with Edwin King, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 19.

79Interview with Edwin King, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 19.

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,” many of whom had never voted before, “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.’”80

80Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

“Of course the SNCC staff is running the campaign,” explained Freedom Vote worker Joan Bowman. As he had during the Smith for Congress campaign, Bob Moses worked as the

campaign manager. Mike Sayer of SNCC assisted him.81

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, a dean at Stanford University who had met Henry through their work with the National Students Association, also sat on this committee. Charles Evers, the NAACP’s Mississippi field secretary, oversaw the Speakers’ Bureau.82 The district

managers were all full time SNCC and CORE organizers. 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 Annell Ponder oversaw the second congressional district. Dennis was in charge of the third district. Mateo Suarez, a CORE field secretary, led 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.83

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

81Letter to Howard Zinn from Joan Bowman, 15 October 1963, SNCC Papers.

82 Letter to the President of the United States and Attorney General, Fall 1963, SNCC Papers.

83Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

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 always endorse attempts to expand beyond traditional leadership. 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 who had donned the overalls of farm laborers and committed to full days of canvassing rural communities, administering evening voter education classes, and hosting mass meetings among the working poor. 84

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. 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 locally, 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 in Mississippi, 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

1. Papers of Edwin King, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

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.85

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.86

The 1963 Freedom Vote made more apparent the mistrust 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. Organizers of the Freedom Vote asked registered voters to cast their ballots, sure signs of privilege, for Aaron Henry in both the freedom election and the general election. In Mississippi, however, votes for write -in candidates went unrecorded. The state’s black registered

1. Interview with Edwin King, 30 October 1995, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 20-21.
2. For discussions on Fannie Lou Hamer, see Chana Kai Lee, *for freedom’s sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*

(Urbana: 1999); Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: 1994).

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.87

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. Organizers feared that voter turnout would be significantly reduced with local leaders away from their communities so close to the election weekend. Despite this expressed frustration, Allard Lowenstein contended that “nobody had included these people.” 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 mass 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.”88

Gubernatorial candidate Aaron Henry went to Biloxi and addressed the gathering. While he spoke, Henry crafted a “very tightrope position,” according to Lowenstein. He did not want to “alienate SNCC,” but he sought to get NAACP members behind 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 amidst COFO’s

1. Papers of Edwin King, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
2. Allard Lowenstein interview with Anne Romaine, March 1967, 133-135.

attempt to expand organizing, those at the convention, according to Lowenstein, were “clearly for the Freedom ticket.” The energy and excitement surrounding the upcoming Freedom Vote had become too overwhelming. According to Lowenstein, “in Mississippi, even the Uncle Toms

were for the Freedom Party.”89

It stood as testament to the closed nature of Mississippi politics

that black Mississippians, across the economic and political spectrum, united in support of the Freedom Vote.

1. Allard Lowenstein interview with Anne Romaine, March 1967, 133-135.

Galvanized by Allard Lowenstein and inspired by the stoic figures that came to speak at campus forums, students from Stanford and Yale 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.90 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.”91

Lowenstein’s recruitment efforts 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

1. Allard Lowenstein, “Mississippi: A Foreign Country in our Midst?” Address, Stanford University, 2 October 1963 included in Gregory Stone and Douglas Lowenstein, editors, *Lowenstein: Acts of Courage and Belief* (New York: 1983), 25.
2. Lowenstein, *Lowenstein: Acts of Courage and Belief* , 35.

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.”92

Upon his arrival in Hattiesburg, in Mississippi’s fifth district, 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 the contact number he had been provided, that of a black 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 provided 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

1. Writings of a Freedom Vote volunteer, “October 18, 1963-October 23, 1963,” SNCC Papers, 1-5.

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.93

When he finally joined the campaign, the volunteer’s enthusiasm began to fade. The work of assisting an under-financed political campaign was “staggering.” The volunteers were viewed as support staff and often were delegated menial and finite tasks. They had little sense of overarching 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.94

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 characterized that moment as when 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 already mythic organizer, transformed the energies of volunteers. When Al Lowenstein appeared in the office on another

1. Writings of a Freedom Vote volunteer, “October 18, 1963-October 23, 1963,” SNCC Papers, 4.
2. Writings of a Freedom Vote volunteer, “October 18, 1963-October 23, 1963,” SNCC Papers, 5, 8.

evening, he brought with him “excited momentum.” One volunteer suggested they put aside their collating tasks and head out for a night time canvassing shift. More seasoned COFO workers raised safety concerns but ultimately relented to the pleading of the volunteers. While their hubris ignored the practical considerations essential to running a bi-racial campaign in Mississippi, these were stories that could be re-told in Yale and Stanford dorm rooms.95

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.”96

1. Writings of a Freedom Vote volunteer, “October 18, 1963-October 23, 1963,” SNCC Papers, 7, 10.
2. Writings of a Freedom Vote volunteer, “October 18, 1963-October 23, 1963,” SNCC Papers, 7-11.

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, distributed in the black community, had 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 expressed by those in attendance, the event did not lack tension. Police patrol cars stood by in case officers needed to “preserve order.” Firefighters were ready “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. 97

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 district, 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.

97 *Hattiesburg American*, 30 October 1963, Jan Hillegas Collection.

Gubernatorial candidate Aaron Henry “gave a rousing speech,” according to Guyot.98

On this

day, black Hattiesburg felt free to assemble, revel in being a part of something bigger than 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.99

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, and in an alleyway in DeSoto County. The voters were black men and women, rural and urban. Most were unregistered. Organizers drove rural voters to the polls. Polling sites were deliberately placed in non-threatening locations. Fifty thousand ballots were disseminated to voters in the most dangerous parts of the state. To protect the identity of those

1. Lawrence Guyot interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 85-86; Interview with Johnnie Mae Walker, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, New York Times Oral History Program, Stanford Project South Oral History Collection, Radio KZSU, 1965 (Glen Rock, NJ: 1975).
2. Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003.

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, characterized by *Newsweek* as a “Make-Believe Vote,” but warranting news coverage nonetheless. Their participation demonstrated that, if given the opportunity, black Mississippians would vote, and their numbers had the potential to influence elections.100

For many future black political leaders, participation in the Freedom Vote served as their first experience with formal political action. Annie Devine, who would serve as a Freedom Democratic candidate for the United States Congress a year later, 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.”101 Similarly Robert Clark, who, in 1967, would become the first black legislator since Reconstruction, was not actively involved with the freedom struggle when he cast his vote in the freedom election. One of his students had 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.”102

100*Newsweek*, 28 October 1963, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

1. Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 237.
2. Interview with Robert Clark, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University, 18 February 1991, 25.

After the three days of voting ended, Henry supporters were invited to the Masonic Temple in Jackson for a vote counting party and victory rally. Flyers advertised entertainment, refreshments, and big band music. Aaron Henry and Ed King were joined by movement luminaries: James Forman and John Lewis of SNCC; Myrlie Evers, the widow of activist Medgar Evers; and SCLC organizer James Bevel, who had been an architect of the Birmingham

children’s campaign.103

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.” Because in Mississippi write-in votes invalidated a ballot unless one of the official candidates died before the election, no exact count of official votes cast for the Henry/King ticket in the general election could be determined. In Clarksdale, Henry’s hometown, it was rumored that election officials tallied nearly six hundred votes for Henry and King, but Henry contended that

after the initial announcement “then there were no more reports.”10 In the general election, Democrat Paul

Johnson had triumphed, but his Republican challenger Philips garnered just under forty percent of the vote. Aaron Henry emerged as the overwhelming choice of freedom voters.105

Organizers, candidates, and supporters disagreed over the success of the campaign. All agreed, however, that the Freedom Vote altered the political landscape in Mississippi. Ed King was excited that COFO had organized in new areas during the election. He boasted that votes were cast in all

of Mississippi’s eight two counties.106

Allard Lowenstein tempered attempts to inflate the

1. Freedom Vote Victory Rally flyer, SNCC Papers.
2. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 160-161.

105 Holloway, *The Politics of the Southern Negro*, 45.

1. Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

success of the campaign and countered that it “really wasn’t run in an awful lot of counties.”107 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 and concluded that “history was being made.”108

Lawrence Guyot

agreed. “This election,” he exclaimed, “has accomplished the purpose we have set out to achieve. We now have a local grass roots political organization throughout the state of Mississippi.”109

In 1963, both black freedom voters and white registered voters had demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the Mississippi Democratic Party. Thirty eight percent of registered voters had selected Republican Rubel Phillips over Democrat Paul Johnson. 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. Most had cast ballots for the first time.

1. Allard Lowenstein interview with Anne Romaine, March 1967, 133.
2. Bob Moses quoted in Edwin King manuscript, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 11.
3. Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

At the March on Washington, just a few months before the Freedom Vote, SNCC’s national chair John Lewis had laid bare the inconsistencies of the Democratic Party, reminding demonstrators that “the party of [John] Kennedy is also the party of [of Mississippi’s segregationist Senator James] Eastland.” He asked

the quarter of a million people assembled on the national mall, “Where is our party?”110

Less

than a year after Lewis’ address and six months after the Freedom Vote, black Mississippians launched an alternative to the Mississippi Democratic Party. The Freedom Vote had cemented the Mississippi movement’s focus on political action and evolved organically into the naming of an oppositional political party — the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

Following the Freedom Vote, organizers returned to the communities they had mobilized for the election and observed a new level of interest in 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.”111

Following the rally in Indianola, Freedom Days were held regularly across the state. In late January, Lawrence Guyot and others in Hattiesburg organized a Freedom Day to continue

1. John Lewis quoted at the March on Washington, Patt Waters and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: The Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York: 1967), xv.
2. Letter to Clay from Liz, 9 January 1964, SNCC Papers.

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. SNCC leaders James Forman and John Lewis flew in from Atlanta. Robert Stone of the National Council of Churches recruited ministers from across the nation. And, the NACCP’s Charles Evers joined the demonstration. Following the success of the Hattiesburg event, a Freedom Day was held in Canton. In March, Greenwood organizers staged another Freedom Day. According to SNCC organizer Mendy Samstein, the monthly Freedom Days emerged as the “sharpest” programmatic focus to emerge from the freedom election.112

Statewide COFO meetings, like that in which participants had decided to run Aaron Henry for governor, also continued into the spring. Local organizations sent 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, remembered Samstein, for the first time, it “was called the FDP.”113

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

1. Sandy Leigh interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 105, 108; Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 142-143.
2. Robert Moses interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 70; Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine , September 1966, 154, 145.

into precinct groupings, and a fifteen member temporary executive committee was elected. Lawrence Guyot was chosen to serve as the MFDP’s first chair. They then drafted a platform and principles for the newly named oppositional political party.114

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 exclusively 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 of Canton. “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.”115

At the same

time, overwhelmed and humbled by his nomination and selection as chair, he admitted, “. . . I’ll

never forget that.”116

Guyot’s selection over Henry ensured that the new party would maintain

strong ties to the youth movement.

In addition to selected a leader, Freedom Democrats also drafted a statement of platform and principles. It positioned the MFDP within the region’s Christian heritage and aligned itself with

1. Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 159; Appendix C, “The F.D.P. and the Convention Challenge,” undated, SNCC Papers; Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2005.
2. Caryn Carter, “Lawrence Guyot: An Oral History,” 11 December 2000.

116 Lawrence Guyot interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 95.

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.117

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.”118

Madison County dissident Annie Devine agreed that the MFDP was a new

Name, and organizational base, for the political activism that had been expanding 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.119

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

117 Platform and Principles of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 1964, SNCC Papers.

1. Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966, 157-158.
2. Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 238.

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. During the next few months, the MFDP would position itself as the primary vehicle through which black Mississippians could practice political participation. Freedom Democrats would not only register voters, but they also would run freedom candidates in parallel and official elections and challenge the exclusionary practices of the white supremacist Mississippi Democratic Party. It 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. Guyot wanted her 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. This human chain that linked Moore to McLaurin and Guyot and then to Hamer, apparent by the Spring of 1964, embodied the important network that had been enlarged and strengthened over the previous two years. Guyot and McLaurin were both college age Mississippians who had officially joined the freedom struggle 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 collaborating on the same initiatives.

McLaurin and Guyot linked these two movement icons. Fannie Lou Hamer had spent her life on the plantation. She had little formal schooling, but by the time she was introduced to SNCC in 1962, Hamer had risen to a position of “trust and honor” in her community, according

to Lawrence Guyot, working as a timekeeper on the Marlowe plantation.120

She supervised

cotton pickers and choppers and served as a liaison between the black workers and their planter

boss.121

While Charles McLaurin had initially dismissed Amzie Moore as “[o]ne of them what

1. Interview with Lawrence Guyot included in Hampton and Fayer, Editors, *Voices of Freedom*, 178.
2. Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, “Mississippi Becomes a Democracy,” Soundprint Media Center, Inc., 2003.

we call old middle-class Negroes,” McLaurin and the other young civil rights workers quickly

learned of Moore’s extensive experience resisting Mississippi’s segregationist state.122

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.123

He had worked amid a semi-

underground network of veterans and financially independent business owners like himself, individuals he termed “morale boosters” in the days before a widespread movement took seed.124 Through their quiet and steady organizing in the postwar era, these men and women represented loosely connected outposts in rural communities across the state.125

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 basic accommodations. Charles McLaurin and Lawrence

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

123 Interview with Charles Cobb, 21 October 1996, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// avatar.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/cobb.htm (accessed 29 April 2005).

1. Amzie Moore speech, late 1964 or early 1965, included in Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement,* (New York: 1987), 482.
2. More in depth discussions of post World War II organizing in Mississippi can be found in John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana:1995) and Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: 1996).

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.126

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 college 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 agricultural workers in the northwest region of the state.127

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, who was a graduate of the Tuskeegee Institute, shared with him the stories of

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003; Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003.
2. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/guyot.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/guyot.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005); Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.

important black historical figures -- Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and

W.E.B. DuBois. In addition to sharing this libratory curriculum with McLaurin, she also modeled creative means for challenging the limits of segregation. In one instance, while running a café on the outskirts of Jackson, she 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 facilities 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. 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.128

Fannie Lou Hamer and Charles 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. 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. When, upon Guyot’s directive, McLaurin arrived in two years later, 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

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003; Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 90-91.

to be a candidate for Congress.” She instructed him to take a seat; she would be right with him. This time, as they traveled the same route from the Delta to Jackson, they both talked. No longer strangers, they served as important confidantes to one another.129

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, a former agricultural worker and college student turned full time 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 Guyot for guidance. “There’s no need to call him,” Hamer beckoned. “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.” 130

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 few years. Smith’s campaign had relied primarily on secret networks and word of mouth among the state’s small group of black registered voters. During the 1964 Democratic primary races, when the freedom

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.

130 Interview with Charles McLaurin, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

movement ran candidates in three of the state’s five congressional districts and for one of the state’s seats in the US Senate, satellite offices were established; candidates campaigned actively in black communities; and campaign messages were broadcast openly through local media.

In addition to Fannie Lou Hamer’s candidacy in the second congressional district, 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, and Reverend John Campbell opposed Representative William Colmer in the fifth congressional district**.** Victoria Jackson Gray, a Hattiesburg businesswoman, challenged the state’s junior senator, John Stennis.131

It is unclear whether civil rights organizers purposely selected a dissident ticket comprised of two male and two female candidates in the manner that Aaron Henry and Ed King had represented a racially integrated ticket during the Freedom Vote. While Freedom Democrat Annie Devine argued that women performed more public roles during this period because they experienced less retribution, female activists, nonetheless, placed themselves and their families

in jeopardy.132

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.133

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

1. *Hinds County FDP News*, 21 July 1967; Len Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End: The Story of the Mississippi Civil Rights Project of 1964* (New York: 1965 , Reprint Ed. 1992), 159.
2. Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966.
3. Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, Greenwood, Mississippi, 12 September 2003.

grapevine. She warned a friend of Hamer, “She thinks she’s a big woman now, but she’ll be killed.”134 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,” a sharecropper town in Sunflower County. SNCC organizer Mary King speculated that white Mississippians may have found Hamer’s candidacy even more threatening than those of earlier freedom candidates because she lacked formal schooling and possessed few

traditional credentials.135

Whether male or female, positioning oneself as the public face of the

movement was a calculated risk.

1. Quoted in Lee, *for freedom’s sake*, 67.
2. King, *Freedom Song*, 336.

In late March 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer kicked off her campaign for the United States

Congress in her hometown of Ruleville.136

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 new contact names to the Jackson MFDP office. Each stop created the opportunity to introduce new community members to the freedom struggle and provide rudimentary tutoring in the political process.137

As Hamer presented herself as a candidate at political meetings throughout the second congressional district, McLaurin began more aware of an important distinction between the two of 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 familiarized herself with the campaign materials Lawrence

1. Press release, 15 April 1964, SNCC Papers.
2. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003; Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 160.

Guyot sent her from the central office, she did not read from them. “By the time it’s over,” McLaurin explained, “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 training, McLaurin could not fathom speaking to an audience “without back up.” He described his own public speaking as “strong as anything I had in my pocket or in my hand.” Conversely, he watched in astonishment as Hamer spoke from her heart and her faith. “Her back up,” McLaurin learned, “was God,” making it

unshakable.138

SNCC office manager Jane Stembridge agreed with McLaurin’s assessment. She

contended that Hamer’s presentations were so compelling because she “knows *she is good*.”139

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 an academic 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.”140

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 to vote, or shared what they

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.
2. Jane Stembridge quoted in King, *Freedom Song*, 351.
3. Quoted in Lynne Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement, from 1830-1970*, (New York: 2001), 255.

had learned about the new political movement crossing the state with their friends and neighbors.141

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 many 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 abroad. Within her Palmer’s Crossing community,

she experienced relative mobility as an independent business owner.142

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.”143

A purveyor of beauty products, she

carried herself with the air of a pageant queen.144

Young women stood in awe of her, and young

men dreamed of dating someone like “Miss Vicky Gray.”145

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003; Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 160.
2. Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, “Mississippi Becomes a Democracy;” Unedited transcript, “Let the Circle Be Unbroken,” Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, April 14-16, 1988; Interview with Hardy Frye, Berkeley, California, 2 December 2004.
3. Interview with L.C. Dorsey, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 65.

144 Kunstler, William, *Deep in My Heart* (New York: 1966), 326-327.

1. Interview with L.C. Dorsey, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 65; Remarks made by Leslie Burl McLemore, Fannie Lou Hamer Conference, Mississippi Valley State University, 12 September 2003.

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 enter the freedom movement full time, Gray transferred her enterprise to her former employees.146

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, SNCC’s field director in Hattiesburg, with obvious awe. Leigh concluded the story as it had been passed down to him through community

lore, “Didn’t pick up her paycheck even.”147

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.”148 Whether legend or fact, the story

served as part of the steely myth of Victoria Jackson Gray.

Victoria Jackson Gray’s grandfather had instilled in the family the imperative of maintaining economic self sufficiency. He would counsel, “Don’t work out,” a euphemism for

1. Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, Greenwood, Mississippi, 12 September 2003.

147 Sandy Leigh interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966.

1. Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, Greenwood, MS, 12 September 2003.

working as domestics or yard laborers. But it was not until Gray became an active freedom worker that she more fully understood 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. 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 movement work.149

Victoria Jackson Gray had wholly embraced the youth Movement when it first entered the Hattiesburg area and she was approached by Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins, both young organizers reared in southwest Mississippi. Gray immediately introduced them to her church leadership and connected them to sympathetic community members. She exercised a bit more hesitancy when she was later approached about becoming a political candidate. 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, came to answer, “Why not?”150

1. Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, Greenwood, Mississippi, 12 September 2003.
2. Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, Greenwood, Mississippi, 12 September 2003.

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 NAACP president Charles Evers endorsed her candidacy.151

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 still remained too small to influence the outcomes of elections. In the June primary, Gray polled just under five thousand 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 a 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.152

Despite the

lopsided electoral returns, the newly launched Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, by running candidates in the official primaries of the Democratic Party, had embarked on “a very

1. Report, Jackson, Mississippi, 5 May 1964, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. *Mississippi Free Press*, 11 April 1964.

real effort to work within the framework of the Democratic Party.”153 Although black voters

remained unregistered, Gray, Hamer, Houston, and Cameron had waged yet another public campaign against black disenfranchisement, this time within the official machinery of the state’s Democratic Party.

153 Joseph Rauh, Eleanor K. Holmes, and H. Miles Jaffe, Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the consideration of the Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention, Delegates to the Democratic Convention, 1964,14-15.

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, assisted local people and full time movement organizers in registering black voters and establishing freedom schools, which provided an enriched Afrocentric curriculum to black children across the state. The summer project also included establishing a parallel political structure — precinct, county, and state conventions — which would culminate in a pilgrimage to the national Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. At the convention, the MFDP would lay claim to the seats held by the all-white state’s rights delegation, represented by the Mississippi Democratic Party. The presence of the nearly one thousand white middle class volunteers was a tactical choice, providing necessary human labor to complete the summer long task as well as draw national and international media attention to the political exclusion of black Mississippians.

Many white Mississippians came to describe the summer project as a northern “invasion”

and expressed either little interest or outright hostility.154

Bob Moses noted a lack of “curiosity”

among white Mississippians. During the summer, Moses recalled that only one white Mississippian asked to meet and talk with him about COFO and the MFDP.155 Despite this

general disinterest, a month after COFO announced its plans, Mississippi lawmakers passed a

1. Interview with William Simmons included in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 187.
2. Text of Robert Moses’ recollection included in King, *Freedom Song*, 435; Refer to James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (Harcourt, Brace &World, Inc.: 1963) for a broader discussion of the maintenance of segregation through the curbing of intellectual curiosity.

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.156 Mississippi

Secretary of State Hebert Ladner also initiated a lawsuit against the MFDP. He maintained that only one political party, the Mississippi Democratic Party, could use “Democrat” in its name.157

While state lawmakers and law enforcement prepared to derail the summer project, COFO organizers began the process of increasing name recognition for the new party across 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 formally introduce 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.” In week four, he posted “MFDP,” followed next by

“Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.”158

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 – in order to establish more formal affiliations.

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

156 Lawrence Guyot and Mike Thelwell, “Toward Independent Political Power,” *Freedomways*, third quarter 1966, 123.

1. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 173.
2. Umoja Kwanguva (William D. Jones), Mississippi Freedom Summer Project Volunteers Twenty-fifth Anniversary Reunion Journal: 1964-1989, Queens College, New York, 43.

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.159

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.”160

Once lead organizers recruited among their

networks of neighbors and friends, in COFO-sponsored freedom schools, which provided alternative curriculum to school-aged children, summer volunteers worked to reduce barriers to

registering through role playing and practice with the registration form among adults.161

Local

people, however, continued to fear the official registration process because of its unfamiliarity, the hostility of white registrars, and the possibility of retribution.

With most black Mississippians unlikely to successfully register with hostile registrars, the MFDP simultaneously encouraged unofficial freedom registration. These simplified forms, which would serve as a model for later motor-voter type registrations, required only that the

1. Information Sheet on the Freedom Party, Erle Johnston Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.
2. Interview with Winson Hudson, Tom Dent Collection, Tougaloo College.
3. Letter from Kitty Weissberg to Friends, 7 August 1965, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg.

registrant live in Mississippi and be at least twenty one years old. William Simpson, a leader of the White Citizens’ Council, and opponent of the freedom movement, disparaged the these registrations, arguing that “the objective of this student invasion was to eliminate all qualifications” to voting.162

Despite the elimination of many of the hurdles imbedded in the official application, encouraging registration, even for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, remained difficult. Civil rights organizers responded to critics, both within and outside the movement, that in lessoning the requirements for voting more people would be introduced to the mechanics of the political process. However, after three years of extensive organizing, many had grown fatigued. One woman, who had made nine unsuccessful attempts to register, broke down in tears upon being approached by volunteers. Another summer volunteer commented that many local people

had grown “instinctively apprehensive of the word ‘registration’”163

To this end, 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.”164

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.165

The summer project had

been slow to get up and running, and local projects had focused on a number of initiatives in

1. Interview with William Simpson included in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 187.
2. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 244-246.
3. Interview with Annie Devine, 17 December 1976, Tom Dent Collection, Tougaloo College.
4. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 246.

addition to freedom registrations. As the summer came to a close, and the Democratic Convention loomed, movement resources were refocused on the Atlantic City challenge. Volunteers and organizers registered local people in the freedom party and 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. These meetings were the first step in the process of selecting delegates for the national Democratic Convention and, in previous years, had been more a formality than a democratic exercise. As part of its convention challenge, the MFDP organized groups of black registered voters to attend these meetings. If allowed to participate, Freedom Democrat-aligned voters attempted to nominate black delegates and introduce a loyalty resolution. The oath they presented had been authored in 1952, in response to the actions of the Dixiecrats, members of the Southern wing of the Democratic Party who walked out of the 1948 Democratic Convention in protest of the inclusion of a civil rights plank in the national party platform.

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. 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 for discussion. His request upset the normal workings of the meeting, or the chair’s strategy for handling the new participation, and the atmosphere grew “noisy” as white voters debated among themselves how to proceed.

Amidst these discussions, 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.,” using an informal mode of address to both assert traditional hierarchies but also acknowledge the personal relationships that traversed the walls of the Jim Crow South. In the end, the chair permitted the assembled black voters to nominate one delegate of their choosing for consideration. The nomination was more symbolic than effectual as the white participants, who maintained a numerical majority, proceeded to vote for the preselected white delegates.166

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, like that for the delegates, 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 a 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 the black voters who had accompanied him.167

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

1. “Mississippi: How Negro Democrats Fared (Part I),” Paul B. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.
2. “Mississippi: How Negro Democrats Fared (Part I),” Paul B. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.

in their communities. The MFDP described these meetings, scheduled across the state for 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 in attendance did not threaten outcomes, black Mississippians were allowed to participate, creating the illusion of black participation. 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 nearly all of the meetings that Freedom Democrat-aligned voters attended, however, black voters were denied meaningful participation in the decision making process.168

In areas that held a significant number of black registered voters and the possibility of a

less hostile white community, black voters experienced limited success.169

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, sensing the limits of white goodwill, did not attempt to introduce the loyalty

resolution because they feared it might be perceived as “impolite.”170

In Greenville, biracial

meetings selected integrated delegations, and one precinct voted in favor of 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

1. Aaron Henry, Letter to supporters with regard to 1964 precinct elections, Paul B. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi; Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 162.
2. Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966.
3. Quoted in King, *Freedom Song*, 339.

in a weed patch.”171

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, particularly as the voices of black voters were increasingly outnumbered at county-wide meetings.

More commonly, black participants faced resistance. Precinct meeting locations were not publicly disclosed. Black voters complained that they had not tried to participate in precinct meetings before because they had not heard of them. When they were able to attend, 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.”172

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.173

The sudden demand by black Mississippians to participate in what long had been informal political meetings increased tensions between black and white Mississippians. On

171*National Guardian*, undated, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; “Mississippi: How Negro Democrats Fared (Part I),” 16 June 1964, Paul B. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi; King, *Freedom Song*, 339.

1. “Mississippi: How Negro Democrats Fared (Part I),” 16 June 1964, Paul B. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.
2. King, *Freedom Song*, 338.

numerous occasions, white voters locked the doors to meeting rooms, quickly disbanded, or changed locations. In Neshoba County, where three civil rights workers would be murdered just days after the Democratic-sponsored 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.”174

Anticipating few successes in gaining the selection of black delegates at the official precinct meetings, the MFDP held its own precinct, county, and district meetings to select an oppositional delegation for the challenge. At each preliminary meeting, participants chose representatives to travel to the next, eventually selecting sixty six delegates, augmented by a national committeeman and committeewoman, at a state convention in Jackson who would travel to Atlantic City and challenge the seating of the state’s official delegation.

As movement organizers challenged century-long disenfranchisement, they continued to wage their campaign according to federal regulations. As required by law, they attempted to print announcements for the parallel public meetings in local newspapers. One MFDP staffer in Greenwood relayed to the Jackson office that the local newspaper’s general manager had

responded in “go to hell terms” when local organizers submitted the advertisement.175

A radio

station initially had agreed to air the MFDP’s announcement but later claimed that the notice

might “incite a riot.”176

The Hattiesburg *American*, Sharkey County newspaper, Vicksburg

*Evening Post*, *Delta Democrat Times*, Pascagoula *Chronicle*, and Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* all

174 Joseph Rauh, et al. Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the consideration of the Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention, Delegates to the Democratic Convention, 1964, 11-13.

1. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 253.
2. Memo to MFDP staff, SNCC Papers.

printed the public notices that described the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as a

“Political Party for all Persons.”177

The decision made by some white newspaper owners

illustrates the complex dance required in implementing federal law; despite a general climate of 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. Famed civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at

another Greenwood precinct.178

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.179

Although white residents

attempted to disrupt the alternative meetings, twenty six counties held precinct meetings and 3500 black Mississippians participated.180

1. Copies of printed announcements, SNCC Papers.
2. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 246-247.
3. Vicksburg *Citizens Appeal*, 22 August 1964, SNCC Papers.
4. Rauh et al., Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the consideration of the Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention, Delegates to the Democratic Convention, 1964, 16.

A week after the precinct meetings, thirty five counties held MFDP-sponsored county

conventions.181

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.”182

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.”183

SNCC chair James Forman addressed the Warren

County convention and cited his concern that class differences would distract the new party. He emphasized that while “Warren County Negroes” from Vicksburg experienced more economic and political opportunity than black agricultural workers in the Delta, they were “little better off

than other Mississippi Negroes.”184

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 low wage workers alike.

1. Rauh et al., Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the consideration of the Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention, Delegates to the Democratic Convention, 1964, 16.
2. Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (Virginia: 1990), 189.
3. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 249.
4. *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 22 August 1964, Edwin King Papers, Archives, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College.

A week after the county conventions, delegates convened 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.” While her parents actions set an example for her own adult resistance and curiosity, Blackwell had only recently joined the movement and had little organizational experience beyond her work as a Sunday school teacher. Based on her faith, however, she, similarly to the certainty that Fannie Lou Hamer also expressed, knew that her God “didn’t intend” for her to remain “under the feet

of white people.”185

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 began questioning her ability to lead. “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.”186

Understanding the need to encourage the 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

1. *New York Times*, 1 January 2000.

186Interview with Unita Blackwell included in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 180; Interview with Unita Blackwell, Mayersville, Mississippi, 24 September 2003; Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

-- to elect representatives from the second congressional district to travel to the MFDP’s state convention in Jackson. Carmichael then assumed the formal 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.187

However, her bold,

though perhaps shaky, step served to inspire others. Freedom Democrat L.C. Dorsey, who stood in awe of Victoria Jackson Gray, laughed when recalling Blackwell’s first attempt at political leadership and remarked, “I could see myself being Unita.”188

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

1. Interview with Unita Blackwell, Mayersville, Mississippi, 24 September 2003; Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
2. Interview with L.C. Dorsey, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Tougaloo College.

registrants, the summer worker determined that the delegates chose the four “best people” to represent the second district at the state convention.189

In the third district, which included Jackson, rural workers, who had been politicized through their involvement with COFO, challenged the capital city’s traditional leadership of black professionals. Freedom Democrats Edwin King and Emma Sanders described the formation of voting blocs as rural delegates crafted political deals. They lobbied their colleagues, “[T]hese persons are good workers and top workers – if you go for these then I’ll go for you.” Sanders observed that the practicing of political behavior, learned in church meetings or informal negotiations and sharpened in mass meetings, had led to the selection of “the militant

type” to represent the third district at the state convention.190

One summer volunteer described

the architects of the fourth district caucus, which included Holmes County, as a particularly

“aware, sophisticated group.”191 met in Jackson.

Following the district conventions, all of the selected delegates

At the state convention, organizers carefully choreographed an event that integrated movement politics with the 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. Aaron Henry called the convention to order. Ella Baker, who had shepherded SNCC into existence and who now oversaw the national

1. Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 200.

190Edwin King interview with Anne Romaine, August 1966; Interview with Emma Sanders, 8 July 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

1. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 249.

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.192

Rauh spoke optimistically about the challenge and hinted that important liberal leaders

such as Walter Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers, would lend public support to

the dissident delegation.193

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.194

1. *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 22 August 1964, SNCC Papers.
2. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 250-251.
3. *National Guardian*, undated, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Even before the state convention began, Allard Lowenstein and Joseph Rauh encouraged MFDP strategists to think pragmatically about the final composition of the delegation. Although the final delegation had “a couple of white ringers,” like Edwin King, Rauh conceded that the MFDP was primarily a “black party.” With little hope for a racially diverse delegation, he believed the inclusion of a broader spectrum of black Mississippians would lend greater legitimacy to the MFDP’s claims.195 The younger staffers understood this to mean they should

“include R.L.T. and Evers types, as well as Moses, Guyot, others of that type.” Lowenstein and Rauh counseled that if the MFDP presented a “big unity show”, in the pragmatic way that they had invited white college students to volunteer during the summer, the mainstream press and national party leaders would pay more attention to their petition.196

Recruiting traditional leaders from Mississippi’s black communities, ministers and college educated professionals, proved more challenging. COFO, overwhelmingly staffed by SNCC, had chafed at the measured resistance of the black middle class. COFO organizers had largely denounced the cautious perspectives of black professionals in favor of the more strident stances of independent business and landowners. 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

1. Interview with Joseph Rauh included in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 196.
2. Casey Hayden to Jackson FDP, “Notes on conversation with Al Lowenstein,” 15 July 1964, SNCC Papers.

community base in order to overwhelm the county’s established leadership in addition to

developing relationships with receptive NAACP members.197

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.198

At the same time that the MFDP admitted the political need for a more diverse delegate pool, black professionals, who either had been circumvented or showed initial disdain for the grassroots movement, sought to join the political campaign. Throughout the delegate selection process, however, these traditional elites 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.”199

Freedom Democrat Sidney Alexander

welcomed black professionals into the movement but reinforced his role through his retelling of the process. “I still join hands with them when they came in,” Alexander explained of the belated participation of black professionals in the formation of the MFDP, “because I was the one set-up the convention in Sharkey County.”200

1. “Mississippi Handbook for Political Programs,” 1964, SNCC Papers.
2. Edwin King interview with Anne Romaine, August 1966.
3. Edwin King interview with Anne Romaine, August 1966.
4. Interview with Sidney Alexander, 11 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

In the end, the final MFDP delegation of forty four delegates and twenty two alternates represented a cross-section of black Mississippi. While 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 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 Annie Devine, emerging as an important leader in Canton, was elected secretary of the delegation. MFDP chair Lawrence Guyot did not join the delegation as it traveled to Mississippi. Instead, he was jailed in Hattiesburg.201

1. List of delegates, Paul B. Johnson Papers, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.

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.202

When Governor Johnson addressed the delegates, however, he reminded those assembled 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

1. Notes from the Mississippi State Democratic Convention, 28 July 1964, SNCC Papers; *New York Times*, 29 July 1964.

landscape. Black Mississippians remained unregistered, but white Mississippians knew that their words and actions were being monitored with increased vigilance.203

In 1960, the same convening of Mississippi Democrats had rejected 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 railed against the *Brown* decision. Mississippi Democrats formalized their condemnation of the Supreme Court’s decision as an “unwarranted invasion of the rights of sovereign states.” And, 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.”204

As recently as the Fall of 1963, Paul Johnson had invoked 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.” 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. 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. 205

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.

1. Notes from the Mississippi State Democratic Convention, 28 July 1964, SNCC Papers.
2. Excerpts from the 1960 Mississippi Democratic Party platform, 30 June 1960, SNCC Papers.
3. Paul Johnson campaign literature, 1963, SNCC Papers.

And, 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. Consequently, Governor Johnson and the state political apparatus chose to take a more pragmatic rhetorical approach while outlining a deliberately nonthreatening strategy at the 1964 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.206

Like the MFDP, the Mississippi Democrats thought pragmatically about delegate selection. Participants in previous meetings had selected 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.207

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 was paid to controversial organizational affiliations. Governor

1. Address by Paul B. Johnson, State Democratic Convention, 28 July 1964, SNCC Papers.
2. *Delta Democrat Times*, Greenville, Mississippi, 28 June 1964, SNCC Papers.

Johnson chastened Mississippi Democrats to “select carefully, a dependable, mature, level- headed group” to represent them in Atlantic City.208

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.209

In previous years the

Mississippi delegation had been comprised of members of Congress and US 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.210

In 1964, however, the

Mississippi Democratic Party would seek to 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 Democratic executive committee traveled to Atlantic City. Instead, Freedom Democrats challenged what Aaron Henry termed a “Joe Dokes” delegation.211

1. Paul B. Johnson address, Mississippi Democratic Party convention, 28 July 1964, SNCC Papers.
2. Walter Tillow interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966.
3. *New York Times*, 27 July 1964.
4. Interview with Aaron Henry, Lyndon Johnson Oral History Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Interview with James Eastland, Lyndon Johnson Oral History Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Memo to FDP workers concerning 1964 convention, SNCC Papers.

Chapter 3: The National Stage: The Convention Challenge

“For, for, what’s the problem?” stuttered Hartman Turnbow.212

Turnbow was reacting to

the deceleration of the bus that was transporting him, the sixty seven 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 to reduce his speed in order 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.213

212 Interview with Unita Blackwell, Mayersville, Mississippi, 24 September 2003; Interview with Unita Blackwell, “Mississippi Becomes a Democracy.” Wazir (Willie) Peacock also remarks on an attempt by white segregationists to stop the bus of Freedom Democrats. He disagrees with Blackwell’s assessment, describing the confrontation upon their return from Atlantic City. Mississippi & MFDP, A discussion, April, May, June, July 2004, posted on <http://www.crmvet.org/>(accessed 13 December 2004).

1. Lorenzo Wesley, “Mr. Turnbow,” *The Mileston Minute*, 27 July 1964, SNCC Papers.

Compelled by his passengers, the driver led the bus past the blockade and on toward Atlantic City.214

The standoff on a Mississippi highway culminated a summer’s worth of obstructionism, harassment and intimidation, and violent retaliation. 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.215

In Canton, a church used for civil rights meetings was 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 Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, a native black Mississippian, a white CORE worker, and a white summer volunteer, respectively, had been killed.216

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.

1. Interview with Unita Blackwell, Mayersville, Mississippi, 24 September 2003; Interview with Unita Blackwell, “Mississippi Becomes a Democracy.”

215 Rauh et al., Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the consideration of the Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention, Delegates to the Democratic Convention, 1964, 17-18.

1. List of incidents in response to 1964 voter registration activity, Supplemental testimony of Aaron Henry, Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Volume I, Voting, Jackson, Mississippi, 16-20 February 1965, 264-268.

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. And, both Tillow and McLemore remarked that their summer of national organizing and lobbying became real as they watched black Mississippians descend from the bus as oppositional delegates.217

When 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.218

Joyce Ladner, a Mississippi college student and full-time movement worker,

accompanied Hartman and Sweets Turnbow, independent farmers from Holmes County, as they

1. Walter Tillow interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966; Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003; Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, “Mississippi Becomes a Democracy;” Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 160-163.
2. *New York Times*, 9 July 1964.

met with Edith Green, a member of Congress from Oregon and a key ally in the convention’s credentials committee meetings.219

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.220

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.”221

They held placards with the faces of Chaney, 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.222

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 if the national Democratic Party would acknowledge the near universal exclusion of black Mississippians from Democratic Party and therefore the political process. The Mississippi Democratic Party dominated each governmental branch. With one exception, all of the state senators and representatives belonged to the Democratic Party. 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

1. Joyce Ladner recollection posted on the SNCC ListServ, 21 August 2004.
2. *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 1964.
3. Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 240-241.

222Jo Freeman, photographs, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 1864, <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/> mfdp64.html (accessed 22 March 2004); King, *Freedom Song*, 343.

choice on election day. In addition to these statistics, 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.”223

The MFDP’s

lawyers argued that based on the evidence the protest delegation must be seated “under any standard relating to fairness and good faith.”224

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.225

The

committee met for three days over the question. The MFDP, unaware of the efforts being made by the Johnson administration to stymie their claim, hoped to leave the credentials committee with enough supportive delegates to bring a minority report to the convention floor.

Although Pennsylvania Governor David Lawrence chaired the credentials committee, Walter Mondale, the young attorney general from Minnesota, was charged with keeping the challenge off the convention floor. Mondale chaired the special subcommittee created to determine a compromise between the two competing delegations from Mississippi. “They wanted to get seated,” Mondale explained the singular focus of the Freedom Democrats. “That’s

1. Rauh et al., Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the consideration of the Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention, Delegates to the Democratic Convention, 1964, 5-10.
2. Rauh et al., Brief submitted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for the consideration of the Credentials Subcommittee of the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention, Delegates to the Democratic Convention, 1964, 1, 60-61.
3. *New York Times*, 9 July 1964.

what they knew.”226

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.”227

President Lyndon Johnson refused to let his convention serve as the moment

when the southern wing, which formed an uneasy alliance with its 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 Deep

South, by seating the oppositional delegation.228

While he knew the Deep South delegates would

vote for Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, Johnson expected to gain some support from voters in border states.

1. Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966.
2. Lawrence Guyot, “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.
3. Michael Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, (New York: 1997), 535, 511.

*New York Times*, 26 August 1964; King, *Freedom Song*, 348.

“Girl, you reckon I ought to tell it,” Fannie Lou Hamer asked Unita Blackwell.

Blackwell urged Hamer, “Tell it.”229

Both Hamer and Blackwell had emerged from Mississippi’s

vast Delta. Before the credentials committee, Hamer, emboldened by delegates like Blackwell, steadied by faith, and believing in American traditions of justice and equality determined to speak beyond euphemisms and share the details of being a black woman in the Mississippi Delta. Before a national office, Hamer would relay her own story of trying to gain the vote in Mississippi.

She had shared this story many times before, with sympathetic audiences on barnstorming tours of the North and with prospective voter applicants in rural Mississippi towns. This time, however, before the glare of television cameras and delegates from across the country, 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.230

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 to try to register to vote.231

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

1. Interview with Unita Blackwell, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Special Collections, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi.
2. Interview with Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003.
3. Transcript of Fannie Lou Hamer testimony before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, August 1964, <http://democracy.soundprint.org/FLHTestimony.php>(accessed 28 June 2004).

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 her to remove her name from the application list because, as he told Hamer, “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, marking the start of her career as a full time organizer. 232

Hamer then spoke plainly about the beating she and three other civil rights workers received in the Winona, Mississippi. Returning from a voter registration workshop, a small group made an impromptu decision to integrate the restaurant at the rest stop they were passing through. 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 role in the

1. Transcript of Fannie Lou Hamer testimony before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, August 1964, [http://democracy.soundprint.org/FLHTestimony.php,](http://democracy.soundprint.org/FLHTestimony.php) (accessed 28 June 2004).

movement 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. 233

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 join the freedom movement. 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.234

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.235

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.236

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

1. Transcript of Fannie Lou Hamer testimony before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, August 1964, [http://democracy.soundprint.org/FLHTestimony.php,](http://democracy.soundprint.org/FLHTestimony.php) (accessed 28 June 2004).
2. Transcript of Fannie Lou Hamer testimony before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, August 1964, [http://democracy.soundprint.org/FLHTestimony.php,](http://democracy.soundprint.org/FLHTestimony.php) (accessed 28 June 2004).

235 Mondale, Walter, “Atlantic City Revisited: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the 1964 Democratic National Convention,” 7, 11 February 2000, Fifty Years: The Mondale Lectures on Public Service, Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

1. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 525.

typical experience of black voter registrants in Mississippi, she concluded that “the world was

hearing too much.”237

Her emotional story, deeply embedded in her faith in democratic

procedures and the rule of law, illuminated the limitations that undergirded national myths of equality.

1. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer, 14 April 1972, University of Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/hamer.htm,](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/hamer.htm) (accessed 28 June 2004).

Minnesota Attorney General Walter Mondale was entrusted with the task of “keeping the convention from blowing apart” and chaired a special subcommittee to prevent support from the credentials committee, which would lead to a floor vote. 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.238

In addition, Walter

Reuther, who Joseph Rauh had expected to be a strong ally of the MFDP’s claims, supported the president’s effort, contingent upon a promise to intercede on behalf of UAW members engaged in a bitter labor dispute and a commitment to name Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, a strong voice for labor and civil rights, as his running mate. In case those commitments weren’t enough, Johnson reminded Reuther that there was “not a damn vote” to be gained by seating the Freedom Democrats.239 Similarly, for Walter Mondale, Hubert Humphrey’s protégé, the

“excitement” he felt about the possibility of a Humphrey vice-presidency became “central to everything I did at the convention.”240

In exchange for the vice-presidency, Hubert Humphrey and his allies worked to negotiate a settlement between the two delegations that would not provoke a walkout of the white South. Two weeks before the convention, Johnson had needled Reuther, “If you and Hubert Humphrey have got any leadership, you’d get Joe Rauh off that damn television.” A week later, Humphrey

1. Walter Mondale, “Atlantic City Revisited.”
2. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 510.
3. Walter Mondale, “Atlantic City Revisited.”

informed Johnson that he had been “working the devil” out of Joseph Rauh to no avail.241 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.”242

With a Humphrey nomination hanging in the balance, Johnson also succeeded in cornering many national civil rights advocates. They gambled that having Humphrey in the White House would outweigh the immediate success of seating the MFDP delegation. In the days leading up to the convention, Johnson had explained to Roy Wilkins, president of the NAACP, that to many white southerners the naming Humphrey as his running mate would be “almost like naming the Freedom Party.”243 Under similar pressure, two influential black

delegates, Frank Reeves, the national committeeperson from the District of Columbia, and Charles Diggs, a congressional representative from Michigan, reportedly relayed information

provided to them by Freedom Democrats to the White House.244

“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.”245 In

1. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 515.
2. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 535.
3. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 517.
4. William Higgs interview with Anne Romaine, January 1967; Ivanhoe Donaldson interview with Anne Romaine, March 1967; Aaron Henry and Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 194.
5. Joseph Rauh interview with Anne Romaine, June 1967. Joseph Rauh, not only represented the MFDP at the convention but also served as general counsel for the UAW. By the end of the convention, Reuther alleged that Rauh was “perfectly willing to break” with the Freedom Democrats. Rauh, however, cautioned Reuther that without his presence the administration would lack an intermediary with the protest delegation. Beschloss, editor *Taking Charge*, 523.

the end, as historian John Dittmer concluded, the administration’s efforts culminated in a “Watergate that worked.”246

Despite the machinations of the Johnson administration, the MFDP also found a few key supporters who withstood the administration’s pressure. Edith Green, a member of Congress from Oregon, was the MFDP’s most ardent ally 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.247

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, loyal delegates from both delegations could be seated.248

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, refused queries from both Joseph Rauh, the MFDP’s lawyer, and Representative Charles Diggs to share the

names of sympathetic delegates on the subcommittee.249

Although Green had refused to divulge

the list, others eventually succumbed to seemingly benign queries from assumed allies who, in turn, passed the names to 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, shared the list of cooperative delegates to Diggs. Cox had trusted that Diggs, one of the

1. Dittmer, *Local People*, 292.
2. Interview with Edith Green, 21 February 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
3. Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 172.
4. Walter Tillow interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966.

few black members of Congress and a public ally of the MFDP, was working toward the same goals of the oppositional delegation. Diggs, however, had defined his interests as more closely aligned with the administration and a Humphrey vice-presidency.250

Armed with the names of supporters, the administration used what one staff member of the Freedom Democratic Party termed “curious methods of persuasion” to reverse the promised 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.251

One MFDP staff

member attributed her refusal to sign the final minority report to the administration’s “arm

twisting.”252

Virna Canson, a California delegate to the committee, was informed that her

husband would not be selected for a judgeship if she continued to support the MFDP’s bid. While in Atlantic City, Canson 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.253

After President Johnson called California Governor Pat Brown and

“beat the living daylights” out of him, according to Joseph Rauh, for permitting the California delegation to pass a resolution in support of the MFDP, Brown pressured Canson to reverse her

committee vote.254

Ultimately the California delegation, which had voted at its state convention

to support the seating of the MFDP, passed a resolution supporting the administration’s proposal

1. Lawrence Guyot, “Atlantic City Revisited;” James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle and London: 1985), 388; Interview with Courtland Cox included in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 199.
2. Lawrence Guyot, “Atlantic City Revisited.”
3. Walter Tillow interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966.
4. Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966.
5. Interview with Joseph Rauh, Lyndon Johnson Oral History Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Joseph Rauh interview with Anne Romaine, June 1967.

of seating the Mississippi Regulars and providing two at-large seats for representatives of the Freedom Democrats.255

At the end of the three day session, only eight committee members voted to support the MFDP’s petition, three less than the eleven needed to bring a minority report to the convention floor. 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. Although a delegate from the “Canal Zone” was told he would lose his job if he supported the oppositional delegation, he concluded, according to Rauh, “Oh, to hell with my

job” and maintained his support for the MFDP.256

The New York and California delegates, who

had stood with the MFDP prior to the arm twisting of the administration, rescinded their support. None of the black delegates to the committee signed the minority report. In the end, Joseph

Rauh lamented that there was “just nothing left.”257

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.258

1. *Los Angeles Times*, 26 August 1964.
2. Interview with Joseph Rauh, Lyndon Johnson Oral History Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Joseph Rauh interview with Anne Romaine, June 1967.
3. Joseph Rauh interview with Anne Romaine, June 1967.
4. Interview with Joseph Rauh, Lyndon Johnson Oral History Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

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 . . . .”259

Walter Mondale agreed

that the real negotiating was occurring 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.”260

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, who stood vigil on the boardwalk and lobbied delegates, met with the liberal establishment and advisors to the administration to work out an agreement.

As vice-chair of the delegation, Fannie Lou Hamer attended the early negotiation meetings. While her measured, though impassioned, testimony before the credentials committee had drawn national attention, (rebroadcast after being pre-empted by the administration), 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 was not cowed by the weight of civil rights leaders

and politicians.261

Unswayed by the administration’s offer, on one occasion Hamer asked Hubert

1. Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966.
2. Walter Mondale, “Atlantic City Revisited.”
3. Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Humphrey, “Mr. Humphrey do you mean to tell me that your position is more important than

Mississippi’s four hundred thousand black lives?”262

To Hamer, who bore the physical scars of

attempting to vote, recounted in her testimony before the credentials committee, the possibility of a Humphrey vice-presidency did not overwhelm her more immediate goal of walking freely into the Sunflower County courthouse and registering to vote.

As the discussions between national leadership and the MFDP continued, Hamer was

deliberately excluded from the meetings.263

Bayard Rustin, at the behest of Walter Reuther,

invited Edwin King to represent the MFDP at a final closed door meeting. Rustin, in turn, instructed King to bring Aaron Henry, rather than Fannie Lou Hamer, hoping to reduce the most

outspoken critics of the administration’s proposal to a “microscopic faction.”264

In this final

meeting, Freedom Democrats Edwin King, Aaron Henry, and MFDP-architect Bob Moses confronted the coordinated opposition of civil rights pragmatists Hubert Humphrey, Walter Reuther, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and, surprisingly, Bayard Rustin.

Bob Moses learned that Bayard Rustin, who had always maintained an independent political base, had recently become more dependent on national liberal leaders for financial support. Prior to the convention, Rustin had been promised an appointment to oversee the newly established A. Philip Randolph Institute. Rustin’s new position rested on the financial backing of liberal leaders and labor unions and, in turn, influenced his support for the MFDP challenge. During the preparations for the summer project, Bayard Rustin had promised to assist the MFDP

1. King, *Freedom Song*, 347.
2. Edwin King, “Atlantic City Revisited;” Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
3. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 534.

in their challenge and had been present at its state convention. However, ass the MFDP the Democratic National Convention neared, 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 as more aligned with the “greater coalition” of liberal leaders, according to SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman.265

Amidst this coalescing of national civil rights leadership around the administration’s goals, Martin Luther King, Jr. wavered between principled support of the MFDP and pragmatic acceptance of the increased possibility for a stronger liberal national coalition should Hubert Humphrey gain the vice presidency. 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.”266

Walter Reuther worried 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.”267

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.268

In this final

meeting, however, King, who had been acting as more of a free agent, wrestled with whether to spend his political capital in support of the MFDP.

Recognizing King’s hesitancy in distancing himself from the MFDP’s demands, Walter Reuther prodded King to “remember who pays for you.” Edwin King remembered the feelings

1. Quoted in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 389-392; Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 30 September 2003.
2. *New York Times*, 23 August 1964.
3. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 523.
4. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 524.

as he witnessed one of his heroes, Reuther, strong-arme another — itemizing the funding given

to King and the SCLC by northern unions and Democrats.269

Confronted with Reuther’s explicit

enumeration of monies received, Martin Luther King, Jr. was forced to concede that the expansiveness of his work rested on the continued support of the nation’s liberal establishment. King, who had stood on the boardwalk with the oppositional delegation, shouted —“Seat the Freedom Democratic Party,” and campaigned in Mississippi’s rural communities, was reminded of the limits to his autonomy during this high level meeting.270

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 final proposal to the three

Mississippi advocates and pressured them to accept it.271

The administration’s offer would allot

two at-large seats to the MFDP delegation, a pledge to establish a Special Equal Rights Committee to ensure that all future state delegations were chosen by racially integrated state parties, and include an agreement to seat the Freedom Democrats at this year’s convention as

honored guests.272

The administration selected Aaron Henry, who they identified as “quite

intelligent” and “more reasonable than some,” and Edwin King to serve as the at-large delegates, providing a biracial professional face to the challenge on the convention floor.273

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

1. Edwin King, “Atlantic City Revisited.”
2. Walter Tillow interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966; Mendy Samstein interview with Anne Romaine, September 1966; Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 30 September 2003.
3. Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 30 September 2003.
4. *New York Times*, 28 August 1964; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 395.
5. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 526.

won’t do what you tell them?”274

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 administration’s proposal.275

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 during the week’s meetings. The MFDP representatives refused to accept the administration’s proposal without bringing it before the entire delegation of

Freedom Democrats for a vote.276

As this private meeting disbanded, it was announced publicly

that the credentials committee had approved the administration’s offer of two at-large seats. The delegation’s leaders rushed to the church where the Freedom Democrats were waiting to explain that the credentials committee had voted, but they had, in fact, agreed to nothing. While public sentiment and attention may have assumed a mutually agreed to resolution with the announcement from the credential committee, the delegates still had an opportunity to decide whether to accept the decision.

At the church, the nation’s most recognizable civil rights leadership took turns offering 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.277

NAACP director Roy Wilkins had always

274 Edwin King, “Atlantic City Revisited.”

1. Edwin King interview with Anne Romaine, August 1966; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 388.
2. Beschloss, editor, *Taking Charge*, 526.
3. Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 392. Much of the deliberations at Atlantic City, perhaps because they have relied on personal testimony, have blurred the timeline of events. Lisa Anderson Todd, who was a volunteer at the 1964 convention, has worked to create a more accurate sequence. Her work is forthcoming.

expressed cautious support of the MFDP and counseled the delegation, “[Y]ou all done prove

your point.”278

According to SNCC field secretary Ivanhoe Donaldson, Martin Luther King

addressed the delegation with a “wishy washy” speech, refusing to go fully on the record in support of the delegation’s demands. King expressed his confidence in Hubert Humphrey, who had promised that there would be a “new day in Mississippi if you accept this proposal,” but he also addressed the very real reasons why the delegation might choose to distance itself from the

credentials committee’s decision.279

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 informed the Freedom Democrats that if they refused to support the administration’s decision they would have to return to Mississippi and establish a viable third party. James Forman remembered Farmer’s as a “decent statement.”280

After nearly everyone else had spoken, Bob Moses addressed the delegation. Previously, Moses had obscured his personal preferences. Annie Devine observed that in planning meetings Moses “sat back and watched and waited” and “might have hoped and prayed” but did not direct delegates towards his conclusions. 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, however, Moses was unable to keep

278Interview with Roy Wilkins, 5 May 1970, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

1. Paraphrased in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 392.
2. Ivanhoe Donaldson interview with Anne Romaine, March 1967; Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer, 9 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 393.

his opinions to himself as he worried that the implied authority of national luminaries would circumvent the delegation’s internal decision-making processes.281

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 publicly disavow the decision of the credentials committee. 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 claiming 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 grew uncomfortable when delegates deferred to his opinion, refused to let the political maneuvering of Atlantic City overwhelm the immediate demands of the delegates for equal access and political representation for all Mississippians. Overwhelmed by the presentation, Higgs compared Moses’ words to “listening to the Lord.”282

The national Democrats had proven themselves unwilling to stand up for the principles of full political participation. A promise to seat a racially integrated delegation at the next convention did not address the most immediate circumstances Freedom Democrats would face upon returning to rural Mississippi communities after participating in the dissident delegation. “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

1. Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966.
2. Moses with Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 82-83; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 393; William Higgs interview with Anne Romaine, January 1967; Leslie McLemore also spoke of Moses’ persuasiveness in an interview with the author, Interview Leslie Burl McLemore, Jackson Mississippi, 1 October 2003.

asked rhetorically.283 Similarly Unita Blackwell chided both Roy Wilkins and Aaron Henry’s

support of the compromise, concluding “We didn’t have anything to compromise with, you

know, nothing but our lives and so on.”284

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 Hamer and Blackwell. Initially, Charles McLaurin 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 reoriented 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 continued to be awed by Hamer’s ability to believe in impossibilities and withstand coordinated pressure from opponents.285

Class distinctions also revealed themselves as the delegation and its supporters debated whether to accept the compromise. Many of the black professionals, who had joined the

1. Fannie Lou Hamer interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966.

284Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Delta Oral History Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

MFDP’s effort late in the summer, understood the long term significance of the committee’s decision 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 committee’s decision.286

Charles Young, a cosmetics manufacturer

from Meridian, chastised the delegation that “we got to get this thing together, now you all must

come along.”287

Middle class professionals recognized that the offer, with a commitment to seat

a biracial delegation in 1968, would create a crack in the Mississippi Democratic Party. Individuals like themselves, who possessed traditional credentials, could enter through that fissure as the official voice 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.288 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.”289

Unita Blackwell insisted proudly that “they had done decided they

1. Fannie Lou Hamer interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966. Emma Sanders 8 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
2. Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
3. Interview with Hollis Watkins, 23 October 1996, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).
4. Wazir (Willie) Peacock quoting Turnbow’s response, “Mississippi & MFDP,” a discussion, April, May, June, July 2004, posted on <http://www.crmvet.org/>(accessed 4 February 2014).

going to take the compromise, but the little folks told them no.”290

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.”291

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.”292

In the end, both the Mississippi Regulars and the Mississippi Freedom Democrats rejected the the decision of the credentials committee. The MFDP refused to occupy the two at- large seats reserved for Aaron Henry and Edwin King. 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 had not abandoned the national party. Rather, he countered, “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 who found their way to the convention floor with the help of sympathetic delegates.293

290Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

1. Jane Stembridge poem included in King, *Freedom Song*, 350.
2. Interview with Hollis Watkins, 23 October 1996, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/watkins.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).
3. *New York Times*, 26 August 1964.

Freedom Democrats wore badges that read “California,” “Guest,” and “Alternate” as they

assumed the seats left vacant by the Regulars.294

One summer volunteer donned the red, white,

and blue vest of the Young Citizens for Johnson and ushered Freedom Democrats to the abandoned seats. 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 floor.295

Freedom Democrat Hazel Palmer began a slow and steady rendition of “We

Shall Overcome,” and nearby delegates chanted “Freedom Now.”296

As he stood on the

convention floor, Bob Moses overheard one black Mississippian remark, “Felt like I was about to become an American.”297

Atlantic City highlighted not only the growing divisions within the delegation of black Mississippians but also between Freedom Democrats and the SNCC organizers who had inspired them. Many of the full time 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 decision to name two college educated delegates to serve as public symbols of reconciliation further angered many SNCC and CORE workers. Jane Stembridge wrote, with a bit of artistic license, of the response of organizers,“Moses is drinking [a]nd Forman’s in bed.” For Freedom Democrats, however, who Stembridge described as having “gone right,” Atlantic City signaled the beginning of their entry

1. Interview with William Scott, 29 October 2000, Holly Springs Interviews, McCain Memorial Library, University of Southern Mississippi.
2. Sutherland Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*, 258; *New York Times*, 26 August 1964; *New York Times*, 30 August 1964.
3. *New York Times*, 26 August 1964; Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 163.
4. Interview with Robert Moses, “Mississippi Becomes a Democracy.”

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.298

1. Poem included in King, *Freedom Song*, 441-442; King, *Freedom Song*, 349.

Chapter 4: The National Stage: The Congressional Challenge

Aaron Henry had taken his seat on the convention floor in Atlantic City 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 clasped hands, one black and one white. The

third button was larger. It declared, “Free Mississippi – All the Way with L.B.J.”299

Despite the

obstructionist tactics used by the administration, Freedom Democrats returned to Mississippi and campaigned for Lyndon Johnson’s re-election. Freedom Democrat Mary Lane knew that she would “go back home and have to tell a lie” and encourage black Mississippians to vote for Johnson. Throughout the Fall, county FDP offices held voter registration classes and passed out sample ballots. They instructed local people on how on everything from the folding and marking of ballots to why they should select Lyndon Johnson for President of the United States on their ballots. Freedom Democrats, like the buttons, on Henry’s coat, would continue to straddle the line between protest and politics.

The MFDP had decided to pursue their claim as the true Democrats in Mississippi and that meant campaigning for the Democratic incumbent for president, Lyndon Johnson, who had railroaded their challenge in Atlantic City. At their September executive committee meeting, Freedom Democrats officially endorsed Johnson’s candidacy. They requested materials from the national committee and opened campaign offices in Mississippi counties.300 Because most

registered Democrats would select Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, the MFDP’s public

1. *New York Times*, 26 August 1964.
2. Minutes of the Executive Committee, 13 September 1964, SNCC Papers.

support of Johnson positioned it as the only Mississippi entity in line with the national party’s candidates and platform.

Six weeks after the executive committee endorsed Lyndon Johnson for president, 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.301

If white Mississippians were going to continue to vote

Republican on the national ticket but fill Democratic seats for state-wide office, the MFDP would challenge their right to control the state’s claims to the Democratic Party. Unable to gain a place on the ballot as independents, the MFDP would once again host a parallel election. This second Freedom Vote would provide further evidence, to be used in a second national challenge, that black voters would participate in the electoral process if registered and would make different political choices than white voters.

Both Victoria Jackson Gray and Fannie Lou Hamer had been able to secure their names on the Democratic primary ballots because they had surprised state workers with their applications. For the general election, county registrars were ready, and they refused to certify insurgent candidates’ petitions. When the forms were submitted to Secretary of State Hebert Ladner, he contended that they did not contain the proper number of signatures. Unable to qualify its candidates as independents, the MFDP readied for another freedom election. In the parallel election, Fannie Lou Hamer once again ran to represent the second congressional district. Victoria Jackson Gray, who had contested John Stennis for the Democratic nomination

1. *Student Voice*, 28 October 1964, SNCC Papers.

for Senate in the Democratic primary, ran to represent the fifth. Aaron Henry replaced her in the freedom election, challenging Stennis’ senate seat. Canton organizer Annie Devine joined the now veteran oppositional candidates on the freedom ballot. She sought the fourth congressional district seat.302

All of the candidates were full time political organizers. Despite their established position as leaders in the movement, the MFDP employed campaign rhetoric to reduce the perceived distinctions between freedom candidates and freedom voters. The MFDP contended that freedom candidates did “not know much legal things” and that the candidates “have lived the way we have all their lives.” Their collective commitment to black political rights served as qualification to “talk for us” in Congress and the Senate.

Mass disenfranchisement had united black Mississippians around the singular issue of access to the vote, and the freedom candidates, while hailing from the leadership of the movement, represented the diverse backgrounds of the movement. Fannie Lou Hamer, a SNCC field secretary, had been a full time farm laborer just a few years before. Aaron Henry represented the most likely leader as the state NAACP president and a pharmacist. Victoria Jackson Gray, an independent businesswoman who had worked with both SNCC and SCLC before becoming an MFDP candidate, had not exercised formal leadership outside of her church prior to her work with the movement. Aaron Henry’s primary affiliation rested with the state NAACP. The other three candidates located their organizational home with SNCC and CORE. All three continued to use the MFDP as the political umbrella through which to challenge the all- white Democratic Party.

1. William Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, (New York: 1966), 325-326.

Annie Devine was a first-time candidate who represented the slowly expanding pool of potential leaders. Devine had lived in Canton, the capital of Madison County, just north of Jackson, since she was a toddler, and in adulthood, she sold insurance for a black-owned company. 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 spoke in understated terms of her influence.303

One CORE worker characterized her work as

that of a “county diplomat.” She served as an important bridge between student workers,

moonshine activists, and supportive small business owners.304

Devine had long supported the

movement but expressed reluctance in positioning herself as a full time organizer. She recognized that in declaring her candidacy she became a publicly recognizable figure in the freedom struggle, which she feared amounted to putting “her life out there.”305

A year earlier, with the movement still operating in a semi-underground nature, hostile white Mississippians had paid little attention to the Freedom Vote and the campaigns of Aaron Henry and Ed King. In 1964, however, businesses that displayed campaign materials were targeted. Rocks were thrown into a restaurant in Ruleville because the owner had placed posters for the national Democratic and freedom candidates in his windows. Gunshots, fired through the

window, riddled the campaign posters.306

A black owned café associated with the movement in

1. *Student Voice*, 28 October 1964, SNCC Papers; Interview with Annie Devine, Tom Dent Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
2. Matt Suarez quoted in Olson, *Freedom’s Daughter*, 252; Interview with Rims Barber, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003.
3. Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966.
4. Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 181.

Itta Bena was burned. 307

Freedom workers, canvassing for the Lyndon Johnson for President

campaign, were arrested for “criminal syndicalism” while passing out registration forms, detained while distributing Lyndon Johnson campaign literature in downtown Jackson, and jailed on false traffic charges.308

Freedom voting, as it had the previous year, 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.309

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.” The MFDP again made concessions for those living in areas deemed too dangerous, they mailed their ballots directly to 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. As in previous elections, none of the vote totals, rivaled the number of ballots cast for the Democratic and Republican nominees for Congress in the state-sanctioned election.310

1. Pamphlet on the Congressional Challenge, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. Holt, *The Summer that Didn’t End*, 179-181.
3. Steve Max, “The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party: Background and Recent Events,” 1965, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg.
4. 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.

Despite their losses in the state elections, Freedom Democrats were on the winning side of the national ticket and 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 inauguration in the newspaper. He called the White House and reported that although the MFDP had led the “Johnson for President” campaign in Mississippi, Freedom Democrats had not received tickets to the upcoming celebration. Thelwell forgot about the exchange until he received a phone call from Holmes County Freedom Democrat Hartman Turnbow. Turnbow 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.311

1. King, *Freedom Song*, 352-353.

While the freedom candidates may not have known much about “legal things” as their campaign materials suggested, through the national civil rights network and the increased spotlight on Mississippi that followed the convention challenge, they were connected to a strong legal team. 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 the 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 second national challenge. Kunstler, joined by his law partner Arthur Kinoy, New Jersey attorney Morton Stavis, and Ben Smith, a New Orleans lawyer, replaced Joseph Rauh as the MFDP’s legal team. Unlike Rauh, who represented the Democratic establishment, these lawyers were affiliated with the National Lawyers Guild, a progressive alternative to the American Bar Association that’s membership was characterized by opponents as practitioners of radical politics who possessed communist sympathies.312

The legal team, for what came to be termed the congressional challenge, contended that the Mississippi Secretary of State had refused to place the names of MFDP candidates on the November ballot although they had followed the appropriate requirements and, under a contested

election statute, were therefore should not be seated until new elections were held.313

Victoria

Jackson Gray had submitted the required petitions, but Hebert Ladner had rejected her application, informing her that county circuit clerks were required to approve the signatures of the voters who resided within their jurisdiction before they could be submitted to the state

1. Mendy Samstein, SNCC Listserv, 25 August 2004.
2. Pamphlet on the Congressional Challenge, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

election commission. Gray received this directive five days before the state’s submission deadline. When she attempted to fulfill the mandate, she was met with more obstructionism. In Forrest County, the circuit clerk required Gray to order 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.314

The Hamer campaign also encountered obstructionism.

As a SNCC field secretary traveled to Jackson with signatures in support of her candidacy, he was pulled over by a highway patrol officer, arrested for “some type of disorderly conduct,” and relieved of the petitions.315

William Kunstler and the freedom candidates decided that although the MFDP had only run candidates in three of the five congressional districts the MFDP would challenge the legitimacy of the entire five member delegation. The legal team would amass additional evidence proving that county registrars refused to validate petition signatures, the Secretary of State improperly denied the candidate applications, and black voters made different choices than white voters, overwhelmingly supporting Lyndon Johnson and the freedom candidates in the parallel election, that went unrecorded through official vote counts. While the 1963 freedom election had illustrated the desire of black Mississippians to exercise political power, the congressional challenge highlighted the distinct political choices of black voters illustrated through the general

1. 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.
2. Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 61.

and freedom election returns. Evidence of obstructionism illustrated the inability of black voters to exercise their choice.316

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 . . . .”317

Purely by the numbers, black

Mississippians accounted for forty percent of the state’s population but only five percent of its

eligible voters.318

In addition to registration data, legal volunteers and the MFDP staff compiled

evidence on electoral abuse from the previous three election cycles, catalogued according to congressional districts, which differentiated among economic intimidation, terror or violence,

unlawful harassment, and general arrests by law enforcement officials.319

A Harvard University

law student volunteering on the challenge had 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.320 The MFDP maintained, “We Didn’t Vote-They Cannot Stay in Congress.”321

The congressional challenge further alienated some members of the national liberal establishment when it initially employed loose language – speaking of replacing Mississippi’s

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Max, “The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” Collection of Karel Weissberg.
4. Memorandum from Benjamin Smith to Lawrence Guyot, 29 September 1964, SNCC Papers.
5. 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.
6. MFDP flyer, “Come to Washington to Support the Challenge,” September 1965, Collection of Karel Weissberg.

elected congressional delegation with the freedom candidates rather than simply unseating the current delegation and ordering new elections. The NAACP and Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) maintained their distance from the challenge. Again, Martin Luther King, Jr. positioned himself outside of the more establishment voices. Just after the MFDP announced its plans, his aide, Walter Fauntroy, reported to the NAACP’s Clarence Mitchell that King was planning to endorse the congressional challenge. Mitchell countered, “He must not have read the

papers or he wouldn’t have said that.”322

While the NAACP appeared to be gauging the political

expediency of the challenge, which lacked the backing of the Democratic establishment, the ADA worried that conservative interest groups would one day employ the same tactics with “dangerous implications.” The ADA argued that the freedom ballot was not an official ballot. Leon Shull, national director of the ADA, 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.”323

1. Drew Pearson column, 30 December 1964, SNCC Papers.
2. 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.

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.324

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.325

While members of Congress voted on whether to seat the five members of Congress from Mississippi, Freedom Democrats moved outside and stood in silent vigil across the street from

the Capitol.326

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 a few 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

324 *Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 1990.

325 Jewett, Richard, “Mississippi Field Report,” 19 January 1965, Jan Hillegas Collection.

1. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 334; Richard Jewett, “Mississippi Field Report,” 19 January 1965, Jan Hillegas Collection.

and adorned with a tail, walked into the main gallery as the challenge was being considered and yelled, “Ise a freedom democratic party. Seat me!”327

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 and was part of an insurgent caucus of younger members, introduced a “Fairness Resolution” to delay the swearing in of

Mississippi’s delegation until the challenge was resolved.328

As he presented his objection, to the

“astonishment” of the MFDP’s legal defense team, nearly fifty members of Congress rose in solidarity.329

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 Era governments.330

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

1. 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.
2. King, *Freedom Song*, 353.
3. “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.
4. “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.

essence of our democracy.” In Mississippi, nearly seventy percent of eligible white voters were registered. Following the 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.331 Black Mississippians had not participated in the election of Mississippi’s representatives to Congress.

When Oklahoma Representative Carl Albert countered with 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. The MFDP had gained the support of the black members of Congress as well as a large percentage of

the liberal coalition.332

Buoyed by an incoming class of activist representatives, more members

of Congress than the MFDP’s lead counsel William Kunstler had expected defied the Johnson administration and voted against the seating of Mississippi’s congressional delegation.333

As the vote transpired, James Coleman, former Mississippi governor and legal counsel to the four Democratic members of the Mississippi delegation, 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.”334

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

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation* (Washington, DC: 1968), 246.
2. *Jackson Daily News*, 3 January 1965, SNCC Papers.
3. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 334-5; King, *Freedom Song*. 354.
4. 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.

Mississippi’s representatives.335

Despite the unexpected support of many members of Congress,

the MFDP was unable to garner enough votes 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.336

Congressional guidelines established procedures for settling the complaint. The entire inquiry would occupy nearly half of the representatives’ two year terms. The MFDP had 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.) The compiled evidence would be presented to the Clerk of the United States House of Representatives. In the late spring of 1965, he would determine which depositions to print and distribute to the House Subcommittee on Elections and Privileges, comprised of six southern Democrats and three Republicans charged with presenting a recommendation to the full House of Representatives.337

1. *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.
2. *New York Times*, 20 January 1965.
3. *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.

The state’s political apparatus took the MFDP’s claim seriously. Governor Paul Johnson

urged white Mississippians to avoid violence “for the next six months at least.”338

One

Mississippi newspaper argued that “even the outside chance of a Freedom Party victory must be

opposed at every level of influence.”339

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.” 340

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.341

Flipping long held hierarchies, the MFDP served members of the congressional delegation as well as former and current state 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

1. 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.
2. Reprinted from Tupelo newspaper, February 1965, SNCC Papers.
3. 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.
4. *Jackson Daily News*, 4 February 1965, SNCC Papers.

office in the state capitol. Johnston recalled that in addition to a subpoena, the courier handed him three dollars “for expenses.” Uncomfortable with a black messenger not only serving him with a subpoena but also handing him a few dollars, Johnston declined. Compelled to accept the

small payment, Johnston placed the money in the “office coffee fund.”342

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.343

Other subpoenas were left with the

wives of elected officials or domestics at their homes.344 Ultimately the bulk of the proceedings

took place in the state’s most populous locales: Columbus, Natchez, Jackson, and Hattiesburg, and James Coleman arranged for the depositions of elected officials to take place in the federal building in Jackson rather than in a “Negro building” as William Kunstler had hoped.345

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. Patterson responded, “I haven’t done anything,” provoking claps and boos among the black observers in the room. They cheered this moment of rhetorical defeat and derided Patterson’s political record on black rights, all while asserting their own claims to newly occupied spaces. At one point during the hearings, thirty young MFDP supporters entered the room. Coleman

1. Erle Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant Years* (Lake Harbor: 1990), 264.
2. Testimony of John Bell Williams, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional Record*, 13-14 September 1965, 46.
3. Report on issued subpoenas, SNCC Papers.

345 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.

insisted that the door be locked to keep out additional onlookers. The hearings were not being held “for the entertainment of a local audience,” he said. “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.346

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 being black in Mississippi.347

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,” and he conceded that he had been unable to find one. When asked if she was a registered voter, 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 that 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.”348

Assisted by over one hundred legal volunteers from around the nation, the MFDP deposed four hundred witnesses, both hostile and friendly, amounting to twelve thousand pages

1. *New York Times*, 30 January 1965; Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 340.
2. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 341.
3. Testimony of witnesses for Congressional Challenge, 1965, Hillegas Collection.

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.349

During the eight month investigation, the Johnson administration, like it had in Atlantic City, worked to stall the challenge while the President and Congress authored what would become the Voting Rights Act. Freedom Democrats, who had been waging a nearly year long challenge to illustrate the lack of protection for 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 passage of a new with pessimism. 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.”350

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 resolved. 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.351

1. 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.
2. James Coleman letter to Erle Johnston, 12 September 1988, Erle Johnston Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi; *New York Times*, 25 April 1965.

351 Lawrence Guyot and Mike Thelwell, “Toward Independent Political Power,” *Freedomways*, third quarter 1966, 253.

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, he 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 attorney for Prentiss Walker, the lone Republican in the delegation, 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 a 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, the depositions were shared with the entire Congress.352

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.353

Ryan and thirty other members of Congress announced their plans to force the

1. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart*, 343-344; *New York Times*, 20 June 1965; Drew Pearson, *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, 25 August 1965, SNCC Papers.
2. King, *Freedom Song*, 357.

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.354

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.355

They urged Congress to vote on whether or not the

members of Congress from Mississippi should be seated and new elections ordered.

The MFDP and its allies 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, 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.” 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

1. 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.
2. 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.

elections. Reitman agreed,“What is at stake . . . is nothing less than the integrity of representative government.”356

Following congressional procedures, 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 argument 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 official 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.” 357

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 and freedom candidates from gaining a place on the ballot.358

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, when MFDP candidates had been listed on the ballot, and the general election, when they had failed to qualify, as the basis of its evidence. In the

1. Copy of letter of support to Lawrence Guyot written by Alan Reitman, Associate Director, ACLU, SNCC Papers.
2. Testimony of William Colmer, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 30.
3. Emergency Memo to all MFDP Members, “Challenge Calendar of Events Leading up to the Challenge,” SNCC Papers.

Democratic primary, Fannie Lou Hamer had run against Jamie Whitten and received only 621 votes. In the freedom 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 freedom vote, receiving just over nine thousand votes. Victoria Jackson Gray, who had run against John Stennis in the Democratic primary, received just over ten thousand votes when she ran against Representative William Colmer in the freedom election.359

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.360

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.”361

In her testimony, Freedom

Democrat Annie Devine pressed Representative Prentiss Walker, who had been her opponent in the freedom election, to acknowledge that fifty six thousand people in the fourth congressional

district “had nothing to do with his election.”362

Similarly, another MFDP witness pleaded to the

1. Max, “we shall overcome,” 5, Personal Collection of Karel Weissberg.
2. Testimony of Thomas Abernethy, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 40.
3. *Jackson Daily News*, 15 September 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
4. Testimony of Annie Devine, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 55.

committee on behalf of black Mississippians. “We have heard them say, ‘My State,’” he

testified. “We want them to say ‘Our State.’”363

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. Consequently, the three women 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, however, 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.”364

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.”365

Just three years after she first registered to vote,

1. Testimony of Rev. Allen Johnson, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration, *Congressional* Record, 13-14 September 1965, 58.
2. *New York Times*, 18 September 1965.
3. Meeting of the MFDP Executive Committee, Washington, DC, 18 September 1965, SNCC Papers.

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.”366

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.367

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.”368

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.”369

1. Victoria Jackson Gray quoted in Olson, *Freedom’s Daughters*, 385.
2. *Jackson Daily News*, 15 September 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
3. “They Risk Their Lives for Freedom,” uncited, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
4. Quoted in *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 4 October 1965, Edwin King Collection, Archives, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College.

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.”370

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. 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.”371 Mississippi and “tear it apart limb by limb.”372

He pledged to return to

1. *New York Times*, 18 September 1965.
2. Statement by Lawrence Guyot, Campus Newsletter, 1 October 1965, SNCC Papers.
3. *New York Times*, 18 September 1965.

Chapter 5: Contested Terrain

Although its two national challenges had failed, or revealed how deeply the national political structure was implicated in Mississippi politics, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had demonstrates the potential power of black ballots but was increasingly finding itself marginalized as “radical” or “militant”. A summer earlier, the MFDP had been the only political option available to black Mississippians, but noting new opportunities for amassing political power, in the months following the convention challenge, the state’s most prominent 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 among black professionals, white moderates, and the most pragmatically minded white segregationist voters. Ramsey and Evers expected that a biracial alliance between relative elites would have greater appeal to national Democratic Party operatives than a overwhelmingly black organization comprised of the political outsiders and agitators of the MFDP.

Fulfilling a fraternal pact, Charles Evers had returned to Mississippi following the assassination of his brother Medgar. 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 had helped to fund his brother’s initiatives at home, and returned to assume Medgar’s role with the NAACP.373

Charles Evers, however, did not attempt to merely continue 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 kept his distance from the collaborative campaigns of COFO. Although local NAACP leaders, and state president Aaron Henry, participated in the state-wide civil rights coalition, Evers expressed little patience with the tedium of grassroots organizing and worked to establish himself as an individual powerbroker. 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.374

Although Freedom Democrats had always expressed a wariness of Charles Evers, his political alliance with Claude Ramsey took them by surprise. Freedom Democrats characterized Ramsey’s leadership in the new coalition as political opportunism. While Ramsey sought to benefit from an expanding black electorate and direct a transformed Mississippi Democratic Party, taking advantage of an opening created by the MFDP’s organizing and two national challenges, he had never demonstrated a commitment to black political and civil rights, and his labor union had done little to support the cause of black workers. Freedom Democrat Susie Ruffin criticized the union local in her hometown where labor leaders had relied upon

1. Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have no Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (New York: 1997), 100-101.
2. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003.

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.375

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.376 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 segregationist 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

1. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

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.377

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.” 378

Annie Devine characterized the inaugural meeting as “their little

show.”379

Unwilling to accept the pragmatic choices of black professionals, Susie Ruffin termed

1. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
3. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

the twenty seven black delegates to the MDC plenary session “high traitors to their race.”380 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 more conventional desire to appoint those possessing traditional credentials, and therefore perceived to know more, to lead.381

These same dynamics were beginning to emerge within the county FDP chapters. A 1965 summer volunteer in Panola County noted that class distinctions permeated local meetings. The largest black landowners in Panola County had abstained from the mass based organizing campaigns, but the FDP was led by 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.382 The emerging MDC offered a more traditional model of leadership to black Mississippians, counter to the MFDP, which straddled traditional and radical politics as it sought to bring new voters and candidates into the Democratic Party. Scholar Hasan Kwame Jeffries noted this

1. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
3. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 69.

dilemma in his study of political organizing in Alabama, concluding, ”Like most democratic projects, freedom politics was hard to keep alive."383

Freedom Democrats were not the only observers to dispute the legitimacy of the black membership of the MDC. The Sovereignty Commission, the 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 black leadership. While Freedom Democrats derided the inclusion of these individuals, Johnston rejoiced. He suggested that the state’s national 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.384

White moderates and segregationists both could present the MFDP

as a foil to their respective political interests.

With the emergence of the MDC, Freedom Democrats drew parallels to the loss of black political power during Reconstruction. 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

1. Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 244.
2. Erle Johnston to J.T. Patteson, 19 July 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

acknowledge the pragmatic need for establishing a biracial political organization, Freedom Democrat Susie Ruffin argued that black Mississippians were about to commit the same mistake their ancestors 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.385

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.”386 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 acknowledged that the MFDP had not yet established an efficiently run state organization. The MFDP office in Jackson was often in a state of disarray, and she conceded that 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

1. 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.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

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.387

Increased membership from black professionals would increase the MFDP’s

standing as a viable political option.

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 and served to highlight the power struggle emerging over control of the black electorate. 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. Outside assessments described Charles Evers as “one of the chief behind-the-scenes manipulators” who worked to weaken the influence of Freedom Democrats at the convention while the MFDP faction was characterized as “anti anybody that wears a suit of clothes . . . . comes in clean . . . combs his hair.”388 Following the meeting, 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.”389

1. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

388 “WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE YOUNG DEMOCRATS?” 1967, SNCC Papers; *New York Times*, 16 August

1965.

1. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 28 July 1965, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

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.390

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.391

In the Spring of 1965, a

1. *New York Times*, 29 August 1965.
2. *New York Times*, 3 September 1965; “Report form Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers.

white resident of Natchez claimed that black residents were “all armed and we are sitting on the verge of a race war.”392

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 MFDP 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. Early in the campaign, every church that Ladner and Ware approached had refused to open its sanctuary to a mass meeting. Ultimately, 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.393

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 stage pray-ins and 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, 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.

1. *New York Times*, 29 August 1965.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 5 June 1965.

As the mass of participants listened attentively to Lewis’ speech, twenty Ku Klux Klan members

“heckled and jeered” them from across the road.394

Activism and voting did not go unnoticed in

Natchez. 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 and the organization leading the mobilization. While 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 and its grassroots strategy as 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.395

Amidst the power struggle with Evers, Freedom Democrats found themselves targeted by the police. A week after the Metcalfe car bombing, police arrested six Freedom Democrats and charged them with violating the city’s newly imposed curfew. An outside observer determined

394*Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 5 June 1965.

1. “Black Natchez,” (Center for Documentary Films: 1966); Letter to Charles Evers from MFDP representatives of Adams County, 2 November 1965, SNCC Papers.

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, the arrests further marginalized the MFDP and its tactics as potentially reckless, and affiliation with Evers offered the symbolic possibility of protection from official harassment.396

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. The possibility of increasing his influence in the state drew Charles Evers to the area, and 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.”397

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.”398

Charles Evers’ first attempt at assuming the leadership mantle in Natchez began when he and a group of black professional men, presented twelve demands to Mayor John Nosser and the Board of Aldermen. They demanded that local officials formally denounce the Ku Klux Klan,

1. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965.
2. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965.
3. Report, 10 October 1965, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

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.399

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 in solidarity 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, and the mayor and Board of Alderman’s refusal had left many Evers supporters dissatisfied.400

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 conflicts in drawing federal attention to southern abuses. The injuries to George Metcalfe and the board’s intransigence could fill the black and white photographs and newsreels that attracted northern sympathies. “It was bad white folks in Birmingham that gave

1. “Report form Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers.
2. *New York Times*, 3 September 1965; “Black Natchez.”

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.401

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 to follow Evers’ lead.402

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,”

1. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965.
2. *New York Times*, 4 September 1965.

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.403

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.404

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

1. New York Times, 13 October 1965.
2. *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.

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.405

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, demanding that arrests cease. Protected by the judicial 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 demonstrations, supporting, instead, the continuation of the boycott.406

Under pressure from local merchants who registered declining sales, city officials agreed to the revised list of demands. The three month long boycott ended, and local officials assured

1. “Report form Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers; *New York Times*, 13 October 1965.
2. *New York Times*, 13 October 1965; *New York Times*, 17 October 1965.

black residents that they would gain a “major voice in city affairs.” The MFDP remained dissatisfied with the agreement and, again, 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. According to Evers, black shoppers should return to Natchez.407

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 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. 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.408

The emergence of Charles Evers as the titular leader 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*

1. *New York Times*, 4 December 1965; *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965; *New York Times*, 25 December 1965.

*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 . . . .”409

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, through its organizing with George Metcalfe, had created the flashpoint that led to mass demonstrations and the boycott.410

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, however, 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.”411

West’s memory speaks to the re-

emergence of middle class leaders who joined with Evers at a moment of greater possibility.

1. Minor, Bill, “NAACP Carves Out a Single Role,” undated, Minor Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
2. Evers, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story*, 183-189.
3. Interview with Philip West, 18 September 1980, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/west.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/west.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).

While the MFDP, conflated in West’s account as COFO and SNCC, had worked with George Metcalfe to organize among the county’s laborers, ministers and black professionals had avoided the early movement. After the bombing of Metcalfe’s car, new possibilities for brokering with white political leaders emerged, traditional leaders, in conjunction with Charles Evers, moved into that space.

Although the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the political arm of COFO and SNCC, began the work of voter registration and canvassing across 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”. On the other hand, 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, declaration of candidacy, payment of the poll tax, and filing of challenges to election results. 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

organizational leaders, the day to day work of organizing black communities blurred the distinctions between organizations.412

1. “The Young People’s Voices,” FDP/SCLC workshop, Mt. Beulah, Mississippi, November 1965, SNCC Papers.

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 shared only in the McComb area, the tract was included in the MFDP’s statewide newsletter. The article fueled opponents during a period when the state Executive Committee, focused on the congressional challenge, was attempting to project an image of respectable dissent.413

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.414

They encouraged “Black-,

1. *New York Times*, 3 August 1965.

414 Interview with Joe Martin, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, [**http://www.lib.usm.edu/**](http://www.lib.usm.edu/)

**%7Espcol/crda/oh/martin.htm** (accessed 29 April 2005).

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 black freedom struggle.415

The Mississippi American Legion responded immediately to the 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 and 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.”416

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

415 *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).

1. *New York Times*, 3 August 1965.

1965, and Guyot feared that the congressional challenge would lose national allies.417

He,

however, did not want to silence locally generated critiques of federal policies and injustice. 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, which, with few available news outlets, provided black Mississippians with access to diverse information and viewpoints that countered the segregationist voices of the state’s mainstream media.418

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. Ironically, while the 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 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

1. 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.
2. *New York Times*, 4 August 1965.

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.419

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 an independent organization seeking to be regarded as the home of the Democratic Party in Mississippi.

The McComb statement was one of many that emerged as black Mississippians began to critically assess their immediate situation and 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, unlike the previous statement, a disclaimer explained that the issues raised in the article did not necessarily reflect the thinking of the MFDP or the newsletter.420

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

1. *New York Times*, 4 August 1965.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 5 November 1965, SNCC Papers.

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 again 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,” two national columnists, and did not need former summer volunteers “wandering cross country espousing their personal beliefs in the name of the ‘peoples.’”421

Local people and northern volunteers alike had begun to question 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.422

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 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

1. Letter from Jan Goodman to Gloria Mason, Friends of MFDP, New York City, 22 November 1965, SNCC Papers.
2. Minutes of FDP Statewide Convention, 2 January 1966, SNCC Papers.

any formal statement made by the MFDP parallel his own opposition to the Vietnam War, he contended 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.”423

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 again denounced the MFDP. He termed Herbert Aptheker a “notorious Communist” and attempted to use the information to further discredit Freedom Democrats.424

423 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.

1. *New York Times*, 20 January 1966.

“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, those who worked most closely with the freedom movement were the first to design programs, apply for federal funding, and staff the 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, in general, and attempted to delay the legislation that funded the national poverty programs. Once the programs were authorized, they held up the dispersal of funds to Mississippi. 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.425

The potential for an increasingly economically independent electorate and the opportunity to further marginalize the MFDP, informed by a civil rights agenda, 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 in much the same way as it had led the effort to draw federal registrars to the state. Individuals empowered through membership in the MFDP, political demonstrations organized by COFO, and work with the Delta Ministry, a project

1. *New York Times*, 10 September 1995.

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. It was also a way to ensure a more reliable income to black Mississippians, many of whom had lost their employment due to their activism. 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 and provide institutional power for the civil rights community.426

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 white and black communities. If money was earmarked for black recipients, white leaders carefully selected individuals in the black community they found most amenable. With these monies, former low wage workers, who had been the most insistent in demanding an expansion of rights and opportunities, were hired to implement liberatory pedagogy within preschool classrooms. Community members who had sharpened their organizational skills registering their neighbors to vote now taught three and four year olds to sing “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn me Round.”427

1. *New York Times*, 10 September 1995.
2. *New York Times*, 10 September 1995.

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 connectors to federal resources. 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, scheduling transportation and health examinations for children. His wife assisted with payroll. All but one of the teacher aides hired to work in Head Start were members

of the county FDP.428

Ken Scudder, a white volunteer in Benton County agreed with this

assessment. He described CDGM as a “SNCC front.”429

And, in some communities, CDGM

became an outlet through which local Freedom Democrats could consolidate their influence and reward movement workers with steady employment.

Although Senator John Stennis publicly linked the MFDP to the new poverty programs and many county FDPs did control local programs, the Executive Committee, still defining its organizational focus, questioned whether or not it 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

1. Weissberg, “A Study of the Freedom Movement in Cotton County, Mississippi,” 102-105.
2. Interview with Ken Scudder, San Francisco, California, 14 November 2004.

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.”430

The poverty programs

provided many local people with their first opportunity for salaried employment, young children with early academic preparation, and financial outlets for black distributors and suppliers of goods. Rather than supervise the local poverty programs, the Washington, DC office suggested that the MFDP lobby on behalf of black community members, ensuring their fair implementation.431

Soon after the dispersal of federal money, a broad range of individuals plotted to direct state recipient agencies in much the same manner that the Mississippi Democratic Conference had emerged in the political realm. As the planning boards became increasingly institutionalized, the presence of movement voices declined. This was especially true in the state capital Jackson, where there existed a stronger black middle class than in rural areas of the state.

Early meetings of the Jackson board had included an equal number of black and white participants, but white Mississippians dominated the membership of the final board. Only one board member, R.L.T. Smith, possessed any civil rights background, and he was less representative of the most insistent voices in the black community as he had aligned himself with the MDC rather than the MFDP. Confused by Smith’s participation on the moderate board, one Freedom Democrat complained, “I don’t know what happened to him, but he sure ain’t leading

1. 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).

431 Letter from Washington, DC office, 18 March 966, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

me now.” 432

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, a post that was perhaps more comfortable to him as well as his white colleagues.

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’s population, 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.433

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. Simultaneous to serving on the CDGM board, one of these men had 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

1. *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).
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College.

newspaper outlet in Jackson, participated on the board. The *Clarion Ledger* continued to serve as a mouthpiece for the state’s segregationist agenda, often printing stories suggested by the Sovereignty Commission.434

Six months after the battle over leadership in Jackson, Carroll County organizers faced a more extreme scramble for power when segregationists gained positions on the district steering committee. 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.435

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 support of 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

1. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 20 December 1965, Edwin King Collection, Tougaloo College.
2. Carroll County Report, 19 May 1966, SNCC Papers.

community. Some deferred to professional educators and questioned the ability of uncertified teachers to instruct young children.436

While Freedom Democrats and their allies looked to maintain control amidst the increasing influence of formally trained educators and administrators and the interest of segregationists, Senator Stennis continued his attack on 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. 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 explicit ties to the freedom movement. 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. 437

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

1. Carroll County Report, 19 May 1966, SNCC Papers.
2. *New York Times*, 7 March 1966.

Mississippi Democratic Conference “to sell the black vote,” national political operatives encouraged a similar set of state residents to form the Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP) to counter the more grassroots 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 national chair Roy Wilkins urged 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 later control the machinery that guaranteed 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, bypassing the MFDP and its influence in the political space, 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.”438

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.”439

Organizers with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and then through the COFO coalition and the organization of the MFDP had waged a steady campaign, beginning with R.L.T. Smith’s candidacy, to draw attention to black political disenfranchisement. Through the MFDP’s two national challenges, continued organizing, and the passage of federal legislation, black Mississippians, stood ready to register and vote. The activities in 1965 and

1. *The Mockingbird*, (Jackson, MS), 31 October 1966, SNCC Papers.
2. Fannie Lou Hamer interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 212.

1966 highlight how opponents overstated the influence of the MFDP so as to further marginalize it as “militant,” for traditional political brokers to assume control of the black electorate.

Chapter 6: Freedom Politics: The 1966 and 1967 Elections

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.440

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

1. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966.

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.441 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.442

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, and it demanded organized action toward its fullest implementation. 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, newly re-energized, through their sheer physical presence.443

1. “Violence in Mississippi,” August 1966, SNCC Papers.
2. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966.
3. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966.

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 requested that black voters also 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.444

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

1. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966.

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.445

Political organizers counseled against the “jump up and run” phenomenon of candidate

selection that led to the nomination of Charles Graves.446

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 freedom struggle, serving 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.447

1. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966.
2. Interview with Rims Barber, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003.
3. *New York Times*, 6 March 1966; Interview with Rims Barber, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003.

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.”448

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 a bloc voting black electorate. 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

1. Annie Devine interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 244; Fannie Lou Hamer interview with Anne Romaine, November 1966, 227.

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 again 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: veteran dissenters, county FDP chairs, the state chair, and a former freedom candidate. Clifton Whitley, the chaplain at Rust College, a private black college in Holly Springs, ran for a seat in the Senate against longtime incumbent, and outspoken segregationist, 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, participating as a first time candidate, 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. 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.449

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 aggressively sought black votes, and they did not tone down their oppositional rhetoric. The six men positioned themselves within the freedom movement and outlined a shared agenda 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.”450

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 increased minimum wage, and an extension of Head Start. He urged the federal government to redirect funding from the Vietnam War towards poverty programs.451

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 freedom movement for nearly a decade and listed his selection as a MFDP delegate to the

1. *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; Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom*, 159-162.
2. *Vicksburg Citizens Appeal*, 18 May 1966, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
3. Ralthus Hayes, campaign literature, SNCC Papers.

Atlantic City convention among his accomplishments.452

Like Ralthus Hayes, and an increasing

percentage of the nation’s dissident voices, he opposed the military escalation in Vietnam. While attending a Washington, DC peace rally, 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.”453

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.454

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 to woo white voters while also explicitly positioning themselves within the oppositional movements of the time.

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 the nature of his candidacy. “We went around, you know, and made

1. Candidates Report, 1966, SNCC Papers.
2. “Rev. Whitley to Speak at D.C. Rally,” undated, SNCC Papers.
3. Press Release, Committee to Elect Whitley, 18 May 1966, SNCC Papers.

speeches.”455

Similarly Clifton Whitley challenged James Eastland to a televised debate.456 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. Instead, 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?”457

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 leadership 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.458

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 [where freedom workers James Chaney,

1. Interview with Reverend Clinton Collier, Civil Rights Documentation Project, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, 35.
2. Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003; Press Release, Committee to Elect Whitley, 18 May 1966, SNCC Papers.
3. Press Release, 3 May 1966, SNCC Papers.
4. Candidates Report, 1966, SNCC Papers.

Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman had been killed] running for Congress,” remarked this supporter, “is remarkable and newsworthy in itself, I think.”459

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 delegation from the United States House of 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 had increased by one hundred thousand voters, 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.460

Although few black candidates advanced beyond the Democratic primary, the 1966 elections scared white Mississippians. Most significantly, Clinton Collier placed third in the wide open contest for Representative Prentiss Walker’s vacated seat in the first congressional district, and because no candidate won a majority, a run off was required. In the June primary,

1. 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 Chaney, 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.
2. *New York Times*, 7-8 June 1966.

Clifton Whitley had outpolled James Eastland in two black majority counties – Claiborne and Jefferson Counties. Although the black vote in these counties was influenced more heavily by the political will of Charles Evers than the MFDP, lacking a broad array of sympathetic candidates, black voters turned out in heavy numbers to support the Freedom Democratic ticket. The day after the primary, a state senator from Claiborne County, where Clifton Whitley had also amassed a significant number of votes in his congressional race, 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 voters, still overwhelmingly white, passed it in referendum.461

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

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 25-26.

election” of white officials.462

The Sovereignty Commission’s assessment of the 1966

Democratic primary expressed the new fear, and perhaps deliberate misrepresentation, 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. Freedom Democrats became the bogey man in the minds of white Mississippians. Over time, this characterization of the MFDP would hinder its claims to represent the black vote and position Charles Evers as the less frightening face of black Mississippi.

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 be required to submit ten thousand, rather than one thousand, signatures from registered voters. Candidates for congressional offices would have to collect two thousand, instead of the previously mandated two hundred, signatures on their petitions. The state also disqualified candidates who had voted in a primary election from running 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 as independents. Additionally, prohibiting primary voters to campaign as independents in the general election would deny black voters who wished to run as independents participation in the the elections that often mattered most, the Democratic primary.463 Freedom

Democrats, in *Whitley v. Johnson*, sued the state of Mississippi, demanding a fuller implementation of the Voting Rights Act.

1. A.L. Hopkins report, 7-9 June 1966, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 44-45.

When the Voting Rights Act had first passed, Freedom Democrats compiled evidence on obstruction to ensure that federal registrars would be sent to the state. 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 1965. 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.464

Following the 1966 election, the MFDP expanded its arguments around the implementation of the Voting Rights Act. Its lawyers asked for a reinterpretation of Section 5, which required federal pre-clearance of any changes made to voting requirements by state legislatures in the historically most discriminatory states, to include alterations to candidate qualifications. Ultimately, a federal judicial decision deemed Mississippi’s new candidate

1. “Report from Mississippi,” 29 October 1965, SNCC Papers; *MFDP News*, November 1965, SNCC Papers.

requirements invalid and permitted the MFDP-backed candidates for the House and Senate to

appear on the November ballot as independents.465

The court, however, levied only a

provisional ruling. *Whitley v. Johnson* would continue to travel through the federal courts for another three years.466

Although District Judge Harold Cox insisted that the federal decision amounted to “throwing mud at Mississippi,” the decision ultimately aided the reelection efforts of James

Eastland.467

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 Republican challenger, Representative Prentiss Walker. Unlikely to gain black votes, on the campaign trail, the two major party candidates sparred over who was least friendly to their black constituents as they vied for the white segregationist vote. Walker linked Eastland to the presumably civil rights-minded Kennedys, distributing literature that depicted Eastland and Robert Kennedy

shaking hands.468

In turn, Eastland accused Walker of endorsing a black Mississippian’s

application to the United States Air Force Academy.469

Although both of the major party

candidates tried to link their white opponent to a more liberal race policy, some civil rights strategists, argued pragmatically that Walker, who movement supporters characterized as a “redneck chicken farmer,” would cause less harm to black Mississippians. James Eastland

1. *New York Times*, 27 October 1966.
2. 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.
3. *New York Times*, 27 October 1966; *New York Times*, 2 November 1966.
4. “Let’s Look at Jim’s Record,” Race Relations Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi.
5. “Who’s Against Jim Eastland” Pamphlet, James O. Eastland Subject File, 1959-1967, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

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” who were unlikely to win.470

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 of the coming election. They worried that with the civil rights activity in the state becoming “more and more fragmented” and the congressional races not adequately organized the election could hurt the long term movement for political power. County FDP chapters continued to support “jump up and run” candidates. These campaigns lacked strategic mobilization and organizing. The major campaigns for the House and Senate remained underfunded 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 view the 1966 general election as a preparatory step towards a more thoroughly planned statewide effort in the next year’s elections when a greater number of state and county offices would be up for reelection. And, as the election neared, the MFDP’s executive committee agreed that any decision to work in preparation for the election should be a “personal one – people may or may not do so,” acknowledging that it would be “necessary to have a unified approach” in 1967.471

Lacking a an organized campaign plan from the MFDP, black candidates lacked well coordinated support from voters and organizers, and black voters faced regular intimidation that, tough later reported to federal authorities, lacked immediate intervention. In Clay County, a

1. *The Mockingbird*, 31 October 1966, SNCC Papers.
2. 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.

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 or were hostile to black Mississippians.472 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 one small town in the county, white election officials refused to read them aloud, eliminating the ability of black observers to determine the veracity of the recorded voter choice.473

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.474 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

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 118, 81-82.
2. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 90-91.
3. Erle Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant* Years, 272.

against James Eastland.475

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, where Charles Evers was building a political machine.476

1. 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.

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 218.

“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.”477 The Hinds County FDP reported Warren’s campaign visit, perhaps with a bit of hyperbole, but, in still recognition of its unprecedented nature as the first time a white candidate presented himself to black voters in Mississippi since Reconstruction.478

Previously, Malcolm Warren and other white candidates relied on the mass disenfranchisement of black residents, identifying the path to election based on white voter support. By 1967, over seventeen thousand black residents of Hinds County had registered to

vote.479

Malcolm Warren and other white candidates, running in jurisdictions with large numbers

1. 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.
2. *Hinds County FDP News*, 18 March 1967.
3. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Table 9, 244-245.

of black residents, began seeking their votes. Black voters, in turn, had to decide how they wanted, individually and collectively, to exercise their newly courted vote.

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 presented themselves as outspoken segregationists in previous elections. The MFDP Executive Committee and many individual Freedom Democrats had outlined a “vote black” strategy so as not to dilute the black vote, increasing the probability of electing black candidates, who likely would receive few, if any, white votes. However, 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 in support of white candidates. When the former chair of the Hinds County FDP endorsed the white police chief for constable, a Hinds County Freedom Democrat charged, “We have people who love the white man because now for the first time that white man is courting his vote.” In addition to gaining this individual endorsement, the sheriff hoped to speak before the county FDP and gain the group’s endorsement, or a few additional votes. One black candidate was accused of promising his votes to a white candidate if a run off was required after the primary. He assured his supporters that he was “in this race to win” and not to gain political influence with white politicians. The pragmatic responses of some Freedom Democrats illustrated the potential for diverse vote choices within the black electorate.480

While some Freedom Democrats flexed their new found political muscle by serving as emissaries for white candidates in the black community, other Freedom Democrats questioned

1. *Hinds County FDP News*, 20 May 1967, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

the ability of black candidates to lead once elected to serve in white-dominated institutions. One Hinds County Freedom Democrat cautioned 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” and may actually cause more immediate harm than good. He hypothesized that one black supervisor would be unable to increase services to the black community and would anger white supervisors who would, in turn, “close up the money and the road jobs” — part of the noblesse oblige built into

the current system.481

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 until the black community could organize itself effectively and significantly reorient the racial membership of the county board of supervisors.

In addition to concerns about the ability of black elected officials to lead, others questioned the qualifications of black candidates. Supporters of all-black slates admonished the “naysayers” to remember the important legacy of Reconstruction-era leaders.482 “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.”483

The Hinds County FDP, on the other hand, 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.”

1. *Hinds County FDP News*, 25 February 1967.
2. 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.
3. *Hinds County FDP News*, 25 February 1967.

While one Hinds County Freedom Democrat termed it “shameful if a Negro be elected and then make a fool of himself,” in the end, the county FDP decided to run a black candidate for the board of supervisors.484

In turn, the Hinds County FDP called on the county’s black voters to support black candidates with their vote. 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 would decrease 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 of black registered voters in a contested jurisdiction. To increase the likelihood of success, black voters would need to constitute at least sixty percent of the voting electorate.485 Most black voters would vote as a bloc, tying their interests to black candidates. But some black voters, enough to influence electoral outcomes, would knowingly, or unwittingly, select white candidates.486

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. This required expanding the pool of voters from active freedom workers to the

1. *Hinds County FDP News*, 13 October 1967.
2. Interview with Winson Hudson, 1 August 1979, Tom Dent Collection, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
3. 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*.

broader population. Black residents who had remained outside the freedom movement, however, bristled at the pressure applied by Freedom Democrats who pressured them to register and select movement-aligned 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 organizing around worldly matters,

maintained, “I’m going to register with God.” 487

One small town 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 lifelong dependence, low literacy levels, fear of retaliation, and personality conflicts contributed to the reluctance expressed by some black Mississippians.488

While some black 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 committed 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.”489

One black voter in Madison County insisted that “whites have been bloc-

1. *Hinds County FDP News*, 15 April 1967.

488 *Hinds County FDP News*, 21 July 1967.

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 26 May 1967.

voting all along.” He argued that “Negroes should bloc-vote and vote black.” This contingent of

black voters maintained 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.490

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 14 July 1967, Gracie Hawthorne Papers, McCain Library, Special Collections, University of Southern Mississippi.

When SNCC organizer Charles McLaurin first became involved in organized civil rights activities, it was stories from the Delta that intrigued him. McLaurin could bot be characterized as 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 had 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, had supported one of the most lucrative cotton economies in the world in addition to housing one of the poorest black 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.491

White residents of the Delta lived, primarily, in county seats or directed large landholdings. Black laborers, two thirds of the region’s population, resided in small towns, many of which were unincorporated, historically serving as bedroom communities alongside large agricultural tracts. Delta resident Fannie Lou Hamer joked, “You can drive through those towns

and not even know you’ve passed them.”492

Despite the wealth of plantation owners, who

received large government farm subsidies and returned significant profits as a result of their

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.
2. *National Guardian*, 18 March 1967, SNCC Papers.

underpaid labor force, Hamer characterized the Delta as “one of the hard-core poverty areas of

the nation.”493

In 1960, Americans earned an average of $2,247 while the median annual income

for black residents of the Delta was just under $500 dollars.494

The mechanization of agricultural

work over the proceeding years only intensified the economic situation for the region’s black workers. By 1967, mechanization had reduced the need for manual labor to three months of the year, and 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 — piecemeal employment, paternalism, and federal commodities programs.495

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 registering black Mississippians to vote and supporting the candidacy of the early freedom candidates, like those of his mentor Fannie Lou Hamer. 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. An MFDP-initiated lawsuit had resulted in a court order, which called for the holding of 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.496

Reflecting on the court-mandated special elections,

1. *National Guardian*, 18 March 1967, SNCC Papers.
2. 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).

1. Report by Mississippians United to Elect Negro Candidates, 1967, Delta Ministry Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
2. *Hamer v. Campbell*, [http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html](http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html) (accessed 21 October 2004).

McLaurin remarked that in Sunflower, where a black voter majority now existed, “We had the numbers.” McLaurin predicted optimistically that enough black voters would select black candidates to win elections. “And we now had a town,” McLaurin imagined himself describing Sunflower in the days following the special election. Governed by black elected officials, McLaurin imagined Sunflower, a small town of laborers, would become an outpost for the MFDP’s political activities across Mississippi.497

The new elections 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.498

Regularly scheduled municipal elections in Moorhead and Sunflower were to take

place in early June, just two months after the court’s determination of discrimination. Because Mississippi required voters to have registered four months prior to an election and pay a poll tax for two years prior to participating in elections, many of the newly registered voters would be disqualified from participating in the elections. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the scheduled elections, arguing that the court, in its April decision, had acknowledged that the registrar had discouraged the registration of black voters, and the

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.
2. *Hamer v. Campbell*, [http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html](http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html) (accessed 21 October 2004).

upcoming election did not allow enough time for these newly registered voters to meet all of the state requirements for participating in elections.499

In March 1966, nearly a year after the initial court order, the United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals did what the United States Congress had been unwilling to do in response to the MFDP’s congressional challenge. It ordered new elections. The court termed 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 in order to

allow the most recently registered black voters to participate.500

Although the state of

Mississippi appealed the decision, the Supreme Court refused to hear arguments. SNCC staffer Elizabeth Sutherland wrote in a memo to Victoria Jackson Gray, the MFDP’s Washington staff director and former freedom candidate, that the Sunflower decision had given the Voting Rights Act “teeth.”501

With new elections to be held in the Spring of 1967, the MFDP launched an intensive organizing campaign, drawing on state and national allies while 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

1. “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*.
2. *Hamer v. Campbell*, [http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/adams/vga038b.html](http://anna.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/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).
3. Elizabeth Sutherland to Victoria Jackson Gray, 12 April 1966, SNCC Papers.

what few jobs they have and get cut off from welfare funds,” Hamer shared with an audience, of national supporters, “because they want to run for office and support other Negroes who run.”502 Hamer alleged that on the night that the MFDP first filed suit against the scheduled municipal

elections in Sunflower, three houses were burned.503

At a planning meeting in Sunflower a year

later, organizers contended that one hundred people attended but only three had jobs the next

morning.504

As the special elections neared, Hamer concluded that despite court intervention the

region’s black electorate consisted of “the ones who have gone through a living hell to get registered.”505

Not only were the livelihoods of politically active 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 time-tested 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.506

1. *National Guardian*, 18 March 1967, SNCC Papers.
2. *New Republic*, 8 April 1967, SNCC Papers.
3. Minutes of the State Executive Committee meeting, Jackson, Mississippi, 20 March [1966?], Sovereignty Commission Files.
4. Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer, *UE News*, 20 March 1967, SNCC Papers.
5. *Freedom Information Service*, 31 March 1967.

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.”507 Johnston hoped that the inflammatory story would be picked up and placed on the wire service. In its seed 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.508

In fact, as historian J. Todd Moye notes in his study of

Sunflower County, the elections, rather than representing the most radical face of the freedom movement, served to unite the national civil rights and liberal community “at at time when black and white liberals and black radicals had little else on which they could agree.”509

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, had established a working relationship with segregationists. 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

1. Erle Johnston memo to Herman Glazier, 17 April 1967, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. 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.
3. Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 159.

reporting, the *Jackson Advocate* rendered MFDP leadership as illegitimate, objected to its membership, and critiqued 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, positioning the MFDP as a radical voice, out of touch with most black Mississippians.510

In the days leading up to the Sunflower election, the *Jackson Advocate* weighed in on the contests. One columnist, much in the way Freedom Democrats had, drew parallels between the possibility of black elected officials in Sunflower to the election of black politicians during Reconstruction. However, unlike Freedom Democrats who memorialized this period of biracial rule as the pinnacle of black political power, 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. Characterizing the MFDP’s leadership as outside agitators who hoped to encourage “violence and blood,” he labeled them “carpetbaggers.”511

“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

1. 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.
2. “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.

supporters perceived as the “main purpose” of MFDP leaders.512

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 conflicts between white and black Mississippians “when the Negroes greatest need is friendly cooperation and goodwill from

the White people of the state.”513

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 or supplant the Mississippi Democratic Party with membership drawing from dirt farmers, domestics, and agricultural workers, the conservative elements represented by the *Jackson Advocate* reasserted the need for the traditional elite, tied to the white political elite, to represent the interests of black Mississippians.514

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 took advantage of its access to national luminaries to strengthen its campaign coffers, increase visibility, and increase local support for the elections. 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 Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy to Stokely Carmichael. Fifteen representatives in the United States Congress

1. “The Political Crisis in Sunflower County,” *Jackson Advocate*, 29 April 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
2. “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.
3. “The Political Crisis in Sunflower County,” *Jackson Advocate*, 29 April 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

endorsed the committee.515

Seven months after the creation of the committee, twelve members

of the House of Representatives urged Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to increase the

number of federal registrars in Mississippi.516

These individuals used their names and spheres of

influence to focus national attention and resources on the tiny towns in Sunflower County.

1. Press Release on the formation of the National Committee for Free Elections in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 19 August 1966, SNCC Papers.
2. *Washington Post*, 17 March 1967, SNCC Papers.

Lawrence Guyot termed twenty one year old Otis Brown “charismatic,” a “true believer,”

and “fearless.”517

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, campaigned on a vision for a more egalitarian Sunflower. He 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.”518

Like the statewide MFDP races the year earlier, Otis

Brown’s candidacy was an extension of his work in the freedom movement, and the MFDP, assisted by a national support committee, directed its energies and resources towards his successful election.

The election in Sunflower overshadowed that in Moorhead. In early March, eighty five percent of the eligible black residents of Moorhead had registered. Despite the high percentage of black registered voters, white registered voters outnumbered black registered voters by more

than two hundred.519

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

1. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.
2. Letter to “Who ever this consion,” from Otis Brown, Jr., 10 February 1966, SNCC Papers.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 March 1967.

population. This high rate of voter registration also represented a numerical majority in

Sunflower where one hundred and seventy white voters were registered.520

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. This distribution of registered voters in Sunflower required white candidates to seek black votes and black candidates to guard against the defection of black voters.

The MFDP, as the organizational home for black political activity in Moorhead and Sunflower, established a parallel political process in each community that extended from what had been instituted across the state in preparation of the 1963 Freedom Vote and the 1964 convention challenge. 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 affiliated with the movement served as poll officials,

ensuring that voters observed the rules and conventions for casting a valid ballot.521

Otis Brown

had run unopposed during the FDP nominating process. Local people also selected five candidates for alderman, two of whom were women.522 The candidates were all community

leaders. Many held leadership positions in churches and fraternal organizations; a few were World War II veterans.523 In Moorhead, no nominating process was instituted because only one

individual came forward for each position. Although one movement newspaper admitted that the FDP candidates in Moorhead “cannot expect to win,” Jimmy Lee Douglas, the freedom

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 March 1967.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 24 March 1967.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 17 March 1967.
4. Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 159.

movement’s candidate for mayor, and the four candidates for city council, campaigned enthusiastically for votes.524

In both Moorhead and Sunflower, organizers developed block captain systems to ensure candidate contact with every voter. In their discussions with voters, the MFDP candidates shared their platforms. They began to outline specific grievances that had been collapsed into general demands for “freedom,” a term that had served as a rhetorical catch all in the earlier years of the movement. Education served as an important area of focus. The candidates pledged to integrate schools, improve the quality of books and instruction, reduce class size, and institute compulsory school attendance. They also addressed concerns over infrastructure. Candidates pledged to improve the maintenance of roads in black residential areas, build sewers and erect street lights, institute municipal trash collections, and construct recreation areas. The candidates also spoke to the desire to expand employment opportunities for displaced agricultural laborers and other underemployed workers. They committed to recruiting new industry and to applying for federal job training funds.525

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.”526

State chair Lawrence Guyot traveled to Sunflower County

several days a week to work on the campaign.527

One Sunflower resident remembered the

1. *The Militant*, 10 April 1967, SNCC Papers; *Freedom Information Service*, 24 March 1967.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 7 April 1967.
3. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 1 October 1967.
4. *Freedom Information Service*, 7 April 1967.

creative methods Charles McLaurin and Joseph Harris used to build momentum 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.528

“We registered every black person in that town eligible to register,” McLaurin

stated proudly. “And we got them ready.”529

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.530

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.”531

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 the freedom movement, 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.” 532

As the election neared, Charles McLaurin watched as

1. Interview with Ura Bowie, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 54.
2. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 28 April 1967.
4. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers.
5. 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.

“the money came.”533

McLaurin accused a moderate coalition of Mississippi 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.534

“A few people took some money,” complained

McLaurin, “and voted how the white man wanted.”535

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.”536

On election day, election officials reneged on a verbal

commitment to allow Freedom Democrat Joseph Harris to act as a poll official.537

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

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.
2. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 65.
3. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.

536 *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.

1. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers.

disqualified for irregularity.538

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.539

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.” 540

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. When the ballots in both the Sunflower and Moorhead elections were counted, none of the FDP candidates had won.541

1. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003. Edwin King’s concerns are substantiated by the United States Commission on Civil Rights’ assessment of the 1966 and 1967 elections in Mississippi. USCCR, *Political Participation*.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 May 1967.
3. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers.
4. 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.

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.542

Journalist 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.”543

Standing before the national press,

NAACP leader Charles Evers concurred with these 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.544

Freedom Democrats disregarded the 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.545

Lawrence Guyot concluded, “You can teach people how to organize, how to

1. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers.
2. 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.
3. *New York Post*, 3 May 1967, SNCC Papers.
4. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 31.

think, how to use information, but you can’t teach courage.”546

Guyot, and the MFDP operation

in Sunflower, had assumed that black voters would vote solely according to race and clearly identify with movement-aligned platforms. 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.”547

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 election. 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.”548

1. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.
2. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 31.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 May 1967.

Political organizers and activists had participated in 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 with a movement-aligned agenda. 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. 549

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.”550

Determined to facilitate black electoral

success, the MFDP turned its attention to run candidates in small localities like Sunflower across the state in the 1967 general election.

1. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 31; *Freedom Information Service*, 5 May 1967.
2. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.

“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 increasingly used to discredit the aims of a number of black-led organizations. 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.551

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 reactions to the newsletter.552

In Washington, Senator 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. He ordered an investigation into the party.553

1. *Clarion-Ledger*, 16 September 1967, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
2. Letters found in Charles Griffin Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
3. *New York Times Magazine*, 24 September 1967; *Congressional Record* – Senate, 22 September 1967,

26537-26539; *New York Times*, 28 October 1967.

As white segregationists continued to label the MFDP and its commitment to mass-based political participation extremist, the party continued to navigate an atmosphere in which autonomous county chapters initiated campaigns that conflicted with the political decisions of the Executive Committee. Movement strategists identified traditional politics, running independent candidates for office and challenging the legitimacy of the state Democratic Party apparatus, as an important venue for institutionalizing black political power. County FDPs, however, took on different personas. Some chapters focused on expanding social services in the black community through newly launched federal programs. Others 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.554

With its printed instructions on

how to assemble a small explosive included in its newsletter, the Hinds County FDP incited the state’s white residents and moderate black residents and once again challenged the pragmatic decisions of the state MFDP.

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. With no movement-aligned candidate running in the Democratic primary, the MFDP had refused to endorse any of the white candidates for governor. The Hinds County FDP had supported the

1. 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.

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.”555 They urged the state executive committee to stay the course for the general election.

The most contested elections in Mississippi were the Democratic primaries, and this year’s gubernatorial race had been not different. 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 segregationist senator who had represented Mississippi in the 1930s and 40s. Hinds County Freedom Democrats saw little difference 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. They, on the other hand, attributed a statement like “I will stop them nigger communists from rioting in Mississippi” to Swan. While Winter might represent a more progressive future for white Mississippians, his campaign rhetoric led the Hinds County FDP to determine that the distinctions were “not important for black people.”556

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 more moderate rhetoric of William Winter and Representative John Bell Williams,

555Rally at Mount Beulah, 8 August 1967, Charles Horwitz Papers, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Archives.

556 Rally at Mount Beulah, 8 August 1967, Charles Horwitz Papers, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Archives.

who represented the main line of the Mississippi Democratic Party. Although some black Mississippians only voted for black candidates and the Hinds County FDP had seen little difference worth noting between Winter and the other Democratic candidates, eighty percent of black voters supported Winter. Forced to participate in a run-off with Winter, John Bell Williams exploited these voter returns to unite the segregationist vote, which had been split during the primary, around his candidacy. In his campaign literature, Williams warned white voters, “IF WILLIAM 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,” and at campaign stops, Williams passed out flyers, which showed Winter addressing an integrated audience.557

Despite the returns, and 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 [Nathan Bedford] Forrest [the founder of the Ku Klux Klan], I was born a segregationist and raised a

segregationist.”558

This, however was not enough to draw white voters. The segregationist vote,

dispersed in the primary, coalesced around Williams’ candidacy, and Winter lost the Democratic nomination. 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 sat out of

557 *Indianola Enterprise-Tocsin*, 24 August 1967; 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.

558 *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.

the run off.559

Whether black Mississippians selected a candidate, and which candidate they

selected, became increasingly important. Courted or renounced, they now could seemingly influence political outcomes.

With the field whittled to two candidates, a Democrat and Republican, in the general election, the MFDP Executive Committee revised its endorsement strategy, deciding to levy and endorsement. They 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, in his 1967 campaign, Phillips had spoken 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.”560

Beyond these less caustic statements, a viable Philips candidacy offered

the possibility of developing a two party political system in Mississippi. The MFDP endorsed Phillips.561

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 a

number rank and file Freedom Democrats.562

Phillips charged that a “payoff” was made to have

1. *New York Times*, 31 August 1967.
2. *New York Times*, 4 October 1967.
3. *New York Times*, 5 November 1967.
4. *New York Times*, 5 November 1967.

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 the freedom movement, 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 and outspoken organization for black rights would dissuade white voters from supporting his candidacy.563

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.”564

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

1. *Delta Democrat Times*, 5 November 1967, Jan Hillegas Collection.
2. *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.

choices, the Hinds County FDP, as it had in the Democratic primary, would urge its membership not to vote for governor.565

John Bell Williams won the governor’s seat. Political analysts estimated that only half of

the black registered voters participated in his election.566

But there was a bigger story with

regard to the emergence of a black political voice in 1967. Across the state, nearly two hundred thousand black Mississippians had registered to vote, and five counties possessed black voting

majorities.567

In this year of the gubernatorial election, more than one hundred black candidates

had qualified to run for office in more than a quarter of the state’s eighty-two counties.568

Across

the state, black Mississippians succeeded in electing twenty two black candidates into political office. Four black supervisors and one state representative would be elected represent black constituencies beyond the municipal level. 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.569 While black voters, may not have

voted for governor, they did vote for black candidates.570

1. *Hinds County FDP News*, 3 November 1967.
2. *New York Times*, 8 November 1967.

567 Report written by Mississippians United to Elect Negro Candidates, 2, Delta Ministry Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 128-129.
2. “Election 1971: An Analysis,” Delta Ministry Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
3. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 218-219.

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 that Tuesday as well. 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 expanded sale of food stamps, would backfire. Perhaps black voters, concentrated in central locations, would inspire each other to vote in the face of continued opposition.571

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

1. 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.

beat.572

“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.573

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 national 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.574

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.575

1. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.”
2. Interview with Winson Hudson, 1 August 1979, Tom Dent Collection, Tougaloo College.
3. *New York Times*, 2 November 1967.
4. Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.”

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. Police arrested twelve vote workers as they passed out sample ballots, charging

them with littering and detaining them for most of the day.576

At their 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. 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’s family with eviction “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.577

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

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 121.

577 Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt;” United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 121; 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).

that this quiet intimidation had the effect of keeping men and young adults, individuals

responsible for their families’ economic well being, away from the polls.578

Hattiesburg

Freedom Democrat Victoria Jackson Gray characterized herself as a “strange creature” in the freedom movement because she was in her thirties. While the low wages earned by black workers required all family members to contribute to the household budget, surveillance and intimidation curtailed the involvement of primary breadwinners in the movement.579

In addition to the blatant intimidation and complex personal and economic relationships between black and white Mississippians, 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.580

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

578 Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.”

579 Interview with Victoria Gray Adams, Greenwood, Mississippi, 12 September 2003.

580 Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.”

the first, vote watchers anticipated a Stanton win. Ultimately, the final votes in Mound Bayou

guaranteed Stanton’s election.581

The MFDP and Delta Ministry, with the help of national

volunteers, and relying on the dedicated voters of Mound Bayou augmenting the votes of field hands, had both mobilized enough black voters in Bolivar County to overcome fear and intimidation and chosen a candidate whom black voters were willing to support with their ballot.

While the black voters of Bolivar County accomplished the task of electing Kermit Stanton to represent them on the county Board of Supervisors, 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,” 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 power holders. 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.”582

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

581 Weiss, “Campaigning in the Black Belt.”

582 Interview with Owen Brooks, Jackson, Mississippi, 1 October 2003.

students of traditional politics. The small, but significant, class of black elected officials following the 1967 elections shared the predicament of establishing themselves as effective representatives in a hostile environment where they were clearly outnumbered. 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.583

583 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).

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.584

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.585

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 MFDP 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

584 Interview with Robert Clark, 11 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 1.

585Interview 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.

position of school superintendent appointed.586

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.587

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 traditional 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.”588

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, Bruce simply replied, “You could see it in him.” 589

Clark

positioned himself so that more conservative individuals could disassociate him from more

586*New York Times*, 2 January 1968; Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University.

587 United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Table 9, 244-245.

588 Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.

589 Interview with Walter Bruce, 8 October 1999, Delta Oral History Project, Tougaloo College.

radical segments of the Freedom Movement. At the same time, Clark utilized the established freedom movement 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.590

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 1969.591

“A lot of other people got credit for it,” boasted Guyot, “but we did it.”592

Bee Jenkins, a

Holmes County Freedom Democrat agreed. “We did,” she explained proudly. “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

590 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.

591 Interview with Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner, Durant, MS, 18 September 2003; Sojourner, *Thunder of Freedom.*

592 Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.

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.”593

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.”594

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

593 Interview with Bee Jenkins, 17 January 2000, Delta Oral History Project, Tougaloo College.

594 Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University.

ensure a fair election. He told them, “There’s going to be some trouble down here at Ebenezer and we need reinforcements.”595

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.”596

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

595 Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University.

596 Interview with Robert Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University.

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.”597

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

597 Interview with Robert G. Clark, 18 February 1991, John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University.

what they wanted . . . . But they didn’t move that box, and we counted all those votes, and he got in there.”598

“We ran him,” explained Lawrence Guyot of Robert Clark’s victory. “He was in a

county where we were the dominant political force.”599

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, it’s first since Reconstruciton.600

598 Interview with Rev. J. J. Russell and Mrs. Erma Russell, Youth of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center,

*Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 33.

1. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.
2. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 218.

Chapter 7: Coalition Politics

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.601

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.602

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. And, he was not shy in 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.603 Upon his election, 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.604

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

1. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968.
2. *Ebony*, February 1968.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 17 November 1967.
4. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968.

voted, the one *you* elected.”605

Jolliff’s strident public comments presaged a contentious

relationship with his colleagues on the board and among 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 he stood watch at 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 another black resident to assume Jolliff’s seat

until a special election could be held.606

Undaunted by the legal harassment, Jolliff filed to run in

the special election against those who wished to succeed him.607

Initially refused a place on the

ballot, the state Supreme Court delayed the special election until Jolliff’s appeal could be

decided.608

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.609

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 voodoo doll in his mailbox.610

On the

1. *Ebony*, February 1968.
2. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968; *Freedom Information Service*, 12 April 1968.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 12 April 1968.
4. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968.
5. *Freedom Information Service*, 8 November 1968.
6. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 January 1968.

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.611

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 to serve.612

When Evan Doss, who was elected tax assessor in

Claiborne County, refused to help two white men who had cut in line, he was put in jail.613 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.

As the first cohort of black public officials in post Voting Rights Act Mississippi, these newly elected officials 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.

1. Interview with James Simpson, 11 May 1992, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 January 1968.

613 Emilye Crosby, “A Little Taste of Freedom: The African American Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi,” unpublished manuscript, 310.

Representative Robert Clark chose to underplay protest politics upon assuming office. His long career in the statehouse would illustrate his desire to work toward incremental 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 campaign for the legislature. His seating would be no less contentious, but Clark sought 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. He opposed the idea, distancing his association with the freedom movement and recasting himself as a legislator. As a compromise , the MFDP stationed a few demonstrators outside the statehouse “as a show of protest against any move to deny Clark his seat,” but plans for a mass demonstration were abandoned.614

Clark’s pragmatism surprised some of his white colleagues in the legislature. “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

1. 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.

on this. I was left out of this.’”615

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 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 chose theirs. Every time Robert Clark selected a seat, however, the legislator in the shared desk exercised the “option of moving.” Simpson recalled that the seat assignment process lasted for less than fifteen minutes, but it seemed to go on “interminably.” Finally, the issued was resolved when the Speaker of the House agreed to share a desk with Clark. Because the Speaker did not generally use his seat on the house floor, Clark sat at a double desk by himself during his first term in office.616

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 official conversations. When newly elected Bolivar County Supervisor Kermit

1. Interview with James Simpson, 11 May 1992, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).
2. Interview with James Simpson, 11 May 1992, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).

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.617

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.618

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 movement 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 sponsoring 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.619

Robert Clark, by

raising seemingly benign 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,

1. *MFDP News*, 27 November 1967.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 5 January 1968.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 7 June 1968.

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 articulate 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.620

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.621

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.”622

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

1. *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](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/simpson.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).
2. *MFDP News*, 27 November 1967.
3. Interview with Rims Barber, 21 August 1997, University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Project, http:// [www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/barber97.htm](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/barber97.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005); *Freedom Information Service*, 1 December 1967.

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.”623

Although black officials exerted little real influence as result of their

minority status in white-dominated government institutions, they altered longstanding codes of behavior, created important fissures in the white-controlled one party state, and offered new possibilities for black Mississippians to begin imaging themselves as political actors.

1. Quoted in Campbell, *Robert G. Clark’s Journey to the House*, 114.

“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.624

The district encompassed twelve counties, including the capital city

of Jackson, and claimed the second largest total of black registered voters in the state.625 years of steady organizing and the passage of the Voting Rights Act presented the first opportunity to run a viable black candidate for Congress.

Six

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.626

At a plenary meeting, fifty five people,

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 19 January 1968.
2. Evers and Szanton, *Have no Fear*, 233.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 19 January 1968.

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 freedom movement’s endorsement as a candidate, 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.627

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 ensured the inclusion of statements opposing the Vietnam War; criticisms of county consolidation plans, which the state legislature had begun to introduce as a means of diluting the increasing black vote; provisions on fair housing practices; and calls for improved health and welfare programs.628

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.629

In turn, Guyot understood that Evers “respected my

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 26 January 1968; *MFDP News*, 30 January 1968.
2. *MFDP News*, volume 2, number 6, 1968.
3. Evers and Szanton, *Have no Fear*, 233.

political thinking and my political ability.”630

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.”631

The possibility of electing a black Mississippian to the

United States House of Representatives required competing interests in the civil rights community discard their particular agendas.

Despite Guyot’s presence on the leadership team, MFDP was equally pragmatic in its endorsement of Evers. 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 as embodied by Evers and the MFDP’s potential endorsement of Evers as a

candidate.632

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,”

1. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.
2. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 6-7.
3. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 18.

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.633

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 about a run for the newly available seat. 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 and win a large percentage of the black vote. 634

While Moore had been sympathetic to the freedom 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

1. Interview with Lawrence Guyot, Washington, DC, 8 January 2004.
2. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003.

the third congressional district, it determined to support Smith, and then Evers, as a candidate for Congress.635

Ultimately, the MFDP Executive Committee endorsed Evers’ congressional candidacy in

an 11 to 1 vote.636

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.”637

If Evers was going to run for Congress, the MFDP would mobilize its base

among 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.”638

To her mind, the Evers campaign prioritized personality politics and neglected the

long range goal of mobilizing local people towards political action. Despite reservations, and the loud dissent of Devine, the MFDP, determined it must endorse Evers for Congress.

1. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003.
2. *Hinds County FDP News*, 26 February 1968; *MFDP News*, 30 January 1968.
3. Interview with Edwin King, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003.
4. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 32, 18.

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.”639

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.640

Black

voters, who had first voted in the COFO freedom elections and for MFDP-sponsored candidates, served as the political base of the Evers campaign.

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.641

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

1. Evers and Szanton, *Have no Fear*, 234.
2. *Hinds County FDP News*, 12 February 1968
3. *New York Times*, 29 February 1968.

some white moderates who “just haven’t got the guts” to publicly endorse his congressional candidacy.642

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. 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, rather than vote for Evers, would throw their votes behind the least outspoken segregationist candidate and hope that he progressed to a run off with Evers.643

Some white political operatives, who were beginning to see their political futures tied to those of a biracial coalition, conversely feared a low turnout 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 coalition’s claim to representing black political interests. 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. Once Evers declared his candidacy, some white moderates concluded that if Evers failed to be a top vote getter, even by a

1. *New York Times*, 25 February 1968.
2. *New York Times*, 25 February 1968.

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 who would remain uninterested in

white votes.644

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 radical 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, whose leadership was involved with the

campaign, boasted to their subscribers, “He knows our needs because he is part of us.”645

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 endorse black candidates for political office. As a state institution, Alcorn’s administration steered away from political controversy and discouraged

1. *New York Times*, 25 February 1968.
2. *Hinds County FDP News*, 26 February 1968.

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 1968.646

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

1. *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.

roadblocks around the campus. The officers fired tear gas into a dormitory and forced students outside. During the altercation, six students were shot.647

Despite the hostility of white Mississippians and black conservatives to the Evers campaign, black Mississippians largely united around Charles Evers’ candidacy. On election day, Evers outpolled his six opponents, garnering thirty percent of the popular vote.648 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.649

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.650

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 Charles Griffin, the remaining white

647 *MFDP News*, volume 2, number 6, 1968; Crosby, "Common Courtesy.”

1. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 8 March 1968.
3. *New York Times*, 28 February 1968.

candidate. 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.651

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.652

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%.”653

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.654 In

rural Hinds County, the MFDP calculated that eighty percent of the registered black voters cast

their ballots for Evers.655

Charles Evers, however, received few white votes and lost by forty

thousand votes to Charles Griffin.656

1. *Hinds County FDP News*, 12 March 1968.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 8 March 1968; Szanton and Evers, *Have no Fear*, 235.
3. *Hinds County FDP News*, 12 March 1968. 654 Szanton and Evers, *Have no Fear*, 236. 655 *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968.
4. *Freedom Information Service*, 22 March 1968.

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, required if no candidate one a majority in the primary, effectively 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.657

In the run off between the two top vote getters, Sias

lost by forty six votes.658 city council in run offs.659

Similarly, two black candidates in Natchez lost their bids to sit on the In Panola County, Freedom Democrat Robert Miles lost to the former

sheriff in a run off for supervisor.660

White voters, split during the primary, coalesced around the

remaining white candidate in the run off, securing the defeat of black candidates.

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.661

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.662

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

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 26 April 1968.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 24 May 1968.
4. Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
5. *MFDP News*, 5 April 1968.
6. *New York Times*, 4 August 1968.

white politicians “didn’t care a damn about civil rights, but they cared about votes.”663

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.

1. Szanton and Evers, *Have no Fear*, 237.

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 a candidate for Congress in the Democratic primary. While the *Delta Democrat Times* of Greenville had not endorsed Charles Evers a few months earlier, 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.664

Barnes, who

had gained important skills in the freedom movement, relied on the civil rights community in her bid to unseat Thomas 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.665

In addition to Barnes, Clarence Hall, an employee with the Child

Development Group of Mississippi in the fourth congressional district, and J. C. Killingsworth, a Freedom Democrat from the fifth district, also declared their candidacies against incumbent representatives. As in previous elections, 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.666

The Mississippi legislature’s response to the Voting Rights Act had altered the political landscape of the Delta district Thelma Barnes vied to represent. In 1966, the Mississippi legislature had dismantled the majority black second congressional district, which encompassed much of the Delta. The Delta’s black population had sent the state’s last black representative,

1. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 22 June 1968.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968.

666 *Freedom Information Service*, 12 April 1968.

Republican James Lynch, to Washington. Since the demise of the Reconstruction government, white Democratic politicians had amassed power in this region where the unregistered black population overwhelmingly outnumbered their white counterparts. The state legislature, anticipating an exponential increase in the number of black registered voters, had divided the second congressional district, redistributing its black majority counties into three congressional

districts.667

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.”668 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.

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.669

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 was initiated (and

maintained only one black member at this point — Robert Clark).670

While a federal court

determined that Mississippi must follow the one man one vote intention of the Voting Rights Act,

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Map No.4, 33.
2. Key List Mailing, MFDP, 2 May 1966, SNCC Papers.
3. *New York Times*, 20 October 1965.
4. *MFDP News*, November 1965.

ultimately, the Supreme Court authorized the Mississippi Reapportionment plan, ensuring the continuation of an all white congressional delegation.671

A longtime resident of Greenville, 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, leading to the registration of thirteen hundred new voters in the district.672

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 compared to the forty six thousand amassed by her opponent. 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.673

Her vote total represented both a

significant increase in the number of black registered voters in the Delta as well as an increase in

1. *New York Times*, 24 July 1966; *New York Times*, 28 March 1967.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968.
3. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 22 June 1968.

the number of counties with significant black populations in the redesigned first 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.674

In the fourth and fifth congressional districts, the vote totals for the black challengers

differed little from those received two years earlier.675

The fifth congressional district

maintained the same historic boundaries and contained no counties with majority black voting age populations. The legislature, however, had significantly expanded black voting strength in

the fourth congressional district. In 1966, it included five new Delta counties.676

Some political

organizers attributed the low vote count in the fourth district 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.

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Map No.3 and No. 4, 32-33.
2. *Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Newsletter*, 22 June 1968.
3. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, Map No.3 and No. 4, 32-33.

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 where Thelma Barnes ran for her seat. Although he ultimately graduated from Greenville High School, Hodding Carter III had attended Exeter Academy for a portion of high school 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 conceded that he was “freed by my time” to speak openly about the need for racial

reconciliation.677

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 unfeasibility of an 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

1. Interview with Hodding Carter III, 23 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland- Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 3-4.

that Bowie described as a “safer time to make a move.”678

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.679

The MFDP’s convention challenge had guaranteed 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, founded by Claude Ramsey and Charles Evers, coincided with attempts to gain a national charter for a state chapter of the Young Democrats, a campaign that Carter had been a part of. Incorporating much of the leadership of the MDC and the moderate leadership of the Young Democrats, a new group, the Loyalists, prepared to mount a challenge to the Regulars, long time members of the Mississippi Democratic Party, at the 1968 Democratic Convention in the same manner that the MFDP had four years earlier. 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, where an integrated delegation from Mississippi was expected to be seated, the Loyalist delegates would

1. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 10.
2. Interview with Hodding Carter III, 23 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland- Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 8-12.

offer themselves as an alternative to both 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 ties to the freedom movement 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 the needs of 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.”680

While Carter doubted that the National

Democratic Party would support an independent challenge by Freedom Democrats, 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 mantle of the 1964 challenge and claim to represent the interests of the state’s black voters.

By 1968, Aaron Henry, who had allied with the MFDP in its earlier challenges around general calls for access to the vote, threw his lot in with with Carter and the Loyalists. He

1. Interview with Hodding Carter III, William Simpson Collection, Mississippi State University.

distinguished between the coalition’s aims and the protest party’s goals. Henry, a college graduate 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.681

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 failed to galvanize 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.682

1. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 202, 197.
2. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 197, 200.

While both Carter and Henry criticized what they characterized as the increasing sectarianism of the MFDP leadership and the disconnect between organizers and the organized, 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.683

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, dismissed by the Regulars, would cast their votes for black and white candidates offered by alternative coalitions like the Loyalists.

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 continued to ally with the Regulars and, ultimately, to move toward the development of a viable Republican Party in the state. 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 parallel 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. Consequently, the biracial

1. Interview with Hodding Carter III, 23 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland- Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 15.

leadership of the Loyalists focused their energies on organizing the twenty plus counties with significant black populations rather than seeking support among white Mississippians.684

Consequently, 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 informal 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 Mississippians, who possessed traditional credentials, 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.685

Annie Devine agreed that white

moderates, like Carter, who sought alternatives to the regulars, and to amass their own influence,

1. 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.
2. 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](http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Espcol/crda/oh/hamer.htm) (accessed 29 April 2005).

were not “quite willing to give black people the right of way.”686

Kenneth Dean, who chaired the

Mississippi Council on Human Relations, characterized Carter’s involvement with the Young Democrats similarly. “If they didn’t control it,” remarked Dean, “they didn’t want to cooperate.”687

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. In fact, 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 a particular political agenda.688

1. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 33.
2. Interview with Kenneth Dean, 9 June 1992, John C. Stennis Oral History Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 26-27.
3. Interview with Hodding Carter III, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 10-13.

“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.689

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. 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 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.690

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

1. Robert Clark quoting Lawrence Guyot, interview with Robert Clark, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 17.
2. *Hinds County FDP News*, 23 September 1967.

answer offered by disapproving Freedom Democrats.691

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.692

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 freedom movement. “You must learn to work together,” she

mocked.693

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.”694

The decision over whether to join the Loyalists highlighted class divisions that had begun to emerge four years earlier. 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.”695

Similarly, Annie Devine, cautious from years of organizing and guarding

1. Interview with Robert Cableton, 24 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 21.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 2 August 1968.
3. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 32.
4. Interview with George Raymond, 5 July 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 38.
5. Handwritten minutes, Freedom Democratic Party-Delta Ministry strategy meeting, July 1968, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

vivid memories of the disappointments of 1964 and 1965, worried, “It seems like it is a trick bag, and I’m wondering who’s caught up in that bag[. Is] everyone caught up in that bag.”696

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.697

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- wide leadership. 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.698

Lawrence 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

1. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 41.
2. Interview with George Raymond, 5 July 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 7.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 2 August 1968.

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 in Mississippi.699

Despite these internal disagreements, in September 1967, the MFDP publicly 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 and its legacy with that of the Loyalists. “No, we had to beg some of the FDP outstanding individuals to join” the Loyalist

coalition Owens reminded her, noting two distinct organizational structures.700

In the end,

Executive Committee member Annie Devine stated simply that the MFDP “felt they had no

choice.”701

Rather than mount their own challenge, they would join the better financed and more

1. *MFDP News*, 19 December 1967.
2. Owen Brooks remarks are part of the interview he conducted with Louis Adams, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives, 77.
3. Interview with Annie Devine, 29 September 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 42.

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, and followers, 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 of the Delta Ministry, which was most closely aligned with the MFDP, controlled 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, controlled the other half. Additionally, at the national convention, each member organization of the coalition would be permitted to vote according to its own interests.702

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

1. 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.

right-that’s right – Not Meth\Baptists\not FDP\not NAACP-just Loyal Dems.”703

At least

temporarily, the disparate groups would unite around the singular goal of unseating the Regulars at the Democratic convention in Chicago.

1. Handwritten notes, Loyalist meeting, undated, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

Freedom Democrats had meticulously presented their case in 1964. They had run a parallel delegate selection process and filled two large filing cabinets 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 continued to reschedule meetings, bar black

entrance, and ignore black voters.704

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

1. Interview with Aaron Henry, 25 September 1968, Ralph Bunch Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 44-45.

earlier but simply because its Executive Committee had not met.705

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 black voter to change sides.706

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 announced that the delegation’s composition would be all

white.707

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

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 May 1968.
2. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 1.

707 *Southern Patriot*, September 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection.

public call, which would have allowed for more outspoken and politically active black residents like herself to attend.708

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 legally required procedures at precinct

or county meetings.709

Ultimately, the MFDP spearheaded the collecting of affidavits.

Complaints were filed from seventy nine of the state’s eighty two counties.710

Hodding Carter

concluded that “it was clear that the regulars had screwed blacks all over the state.”711

708 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.

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 24 May 1968.
2. *Southern Patriot*, September 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection; *Freedom Information Service*, 7 June 1968.
3. Interview with Hodding Carter III, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 10-11.

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 parallel meetings sponsored by the Loyalists. In 1964, community lore of black Reconstruction governments had been the most salient political memory for most black Mississippians. By the summer of 1968, black Mississippians had witnessed the Freedom Vote, the launch 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 went. 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, and they often identified themselves as Freedom Democrats.712

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

1. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 8-14.

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.713

The Loyalists had institutionalized their

leadership on a state level but had not organized an electoral base. The wide turnout of black Mississippians who had come of age politically as Freedom Democrats strengthened 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.714

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

1. Interview with Harry Bowie, 8 August 1968, Ralph Bunch Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 8-13.
2. Bill Peltz, “Mississippi,” 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

reflected the influence of member organizations.715

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 the “black delegate” spaces allotted to MFDP delegates.716

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.717

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.718

The Loyalists also incorporated strategies pioneered by the Freedom

Democrats. Recognizing that its support lay in the state’s black laboring population, meetings

were held in the evenings to accommodate working people.719

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,

1. Handwritten notes, Loyalist meeting, undated, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
2. Peltz, “Mississippi,” 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 2 August 1965.
4. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 3.
5. *MFDP News*, 26 July 1965.

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 vice president Hubert Humphrey. Other national representatives read statements from the Kennedy family, presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy, and the Young Democratic

Clubs of America.720

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.721 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.722

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

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968.
2. Loyal Democrats of Mississippi, Convention Minutes, 11 August 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968.

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.723

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.724

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 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.” 725 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.”726

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

1. 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.
2. Handwritten notes, Loyalist meeting, undated, Edwin King Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives; *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968.
3. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968.
4. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William Simpson Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 4.

“carried the matter all by themselves” and with few white allies in 1964 they had “come out with

nothing” at the Loyalist convention.727

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 more than the one quarter of the delegates, a number greater than the MFDP’s share of the

delegates, as securing the MFDP’s voice within the coalition as it headed to Chicago.728

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. 729

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 in 1968. 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.

1. Interview with Robert Clark, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 24.
2. *Freedom Information Service*, 16 August 1968.
3. Loyal Democrats of Mississippi, Convention Minutes, 11 August 1968, Jan Lewis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

Steptoe served as alternates.730

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.”731

1. List of delegates, Loyalist Convention, 11 August 1968, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. Interview with Unita Blackwell, 10 August 1968, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 20-21.

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 had already learned that decisions were made at the highest level. In turn, 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.732

While the general public remembers the Chicago convention 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, heirs to the freedom

movement, to join a walk out and ally with the demonstrators, but Aaron Henry responded to one

1. Interview with Robert Clark, William Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, 21.

such request, “Man, you are crazy as hell.”733

Leaving the convention to join the protestors

would have rendered pointless his years of resistance. 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 outdoor rally, but she did not renounce her convention credentials.734

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 excitement that came from 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.735

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.

1. Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 205.
2. Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: 1993), 232.
3. Interview with Flavous Hutchinson, 27 November 1973, William M. Simpson Loyalist Collection, Mississippi State University, 7-8.

“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.736

Ultimately, the most politically active Freedom Democrats and their supporters came to view the seating of the Loyalists as a token gesture. 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.737

Jack Minnis, a SNCC political strategist who had helped prepare Freedom Democrats

for the 1964 convention, agreed with Hamer’s assessments. Minnis presciently stated that the seating of the Mississippi Loyalists 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.”738

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.

1. Statement of Fannie Lou Hamer, 22 May 1969, Charles Horwitz Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
2. Statement of Fannie Lou Hamer, 22 May 1969, Charles Horwitz Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.
3. *Southern Patriot*, October 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection.

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.739

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.”740

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.741

1. Interview with Silas McGhee, 12 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 5.
2. Interview with Joseph Rauh, Lyndon B. Johnson Oral History Collection, volume IV, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 21.
3. *Southern Patriot*, October 1968, Jan Hillegas Collection.

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 due to 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 an insurgent 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, Guyot was ultimately replaced by Clifton Whitley, a chaplain at Rust College and former freedom candidate. Lawrence Guyot had always weighed the politics of decisions, but he was also a product of the SNCC influenced 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.742

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 and 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”

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 10 December 1968; *Southern Patriot*, February 1969.

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.743

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 emerging black nationalist movements. Undeterred by Whitley’s succession of Guyot, white journalists and politicians would discount Whitley’s influence and reprint statements like that made by Hamer in their attempts to further marginalize the MFDP’s influence in Mississippi politics.744

Despite Hamer’s provocative addresses and their ability to strike fear in white segregationists, a Sovereignty Commission investigator suggested that the MFDP was “virtually

1. *MFDP News*, 5 November 1968, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, 8 January 1969, Cox Papers, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University.

dead” by June 1969.745

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.746

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.747

Two years later, former Freedom Democrats Emma Sanders

and Susie Ruffin served as leaders in their district Democratic Party.748

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

1. Report, 6 June 1969, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. MFDP, 1970 Folder, Jan Hillegas Collection.

747 Aaron Henry Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

748 Aaron Henry Papers , Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives .

increased voter registration and “real power and responsibility.”749

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.750

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.751

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 increase the

qualifications of candidates.752

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 would cast a vote for a supervisor representing each beat. Thirteen counties switched to at large elections.753

1. Hearings before the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Committee of the Judiciary, House of Representatives, Ninety Fourth Congress March 1975, 653.
2. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, iii.
3. *MFDP News*, 5 November 1968, Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
4. *MFDP News*, 27 November 1967.
5. 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.

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.754

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 1979.755

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.756

In Port Gibson, the city government attempted to add

1. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation*, 46.
2. Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 93-97.
3. *MFDP News*, 22 June 1968.

land to the city limits in order to increase the white vote.757

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.758

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 in *Connor v. Johnson*, which traveled through the courts for twelve years. From 1965 to 1976, the case was used to challenge the Mississippi legislature’s merging of voting districts, which housed high concentrations of black voters, in order to dilute the power of black votes. As a result of the various forms 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. In 1977, *Connor v. Johnson* reached the Supreme Court of the United Stated. The Court decided in favor of Peggy Jean Connor, leading to the creation of state-wide single member legislative districts. Two years after this court-mandated redistricting,

1. *Freedom Information Service*, 27 October 1967.
2. Frank Parker, “County Redistricting in Mississippi: Case Studies in Racial Gerrymandering,” *Mississippi Law Journal*, June 1973, 404, 418.

seventeen black representatives were elected to the Mississippi legislature.759 A legislative case,

initiated in the immediate aftermath of the passage of the Voting Rights Act, had tremendous impact on black political power more than a decade after its inception, well after the state mechanism of the MFDP continued to function.

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 to Congress a possibility. Robert Clark, having served nearly fifteen years in the state legislature, was the most obvious black candidate. Throughout his long tenure in the statehouse, Clark had established himself as a conciliator, representing the interests of the state’s black population as well as looking for points of agreement with his white colleagues. He challenged the incumbent representative on two occasions, in 1982 and 1984. Clark believed that he would gain not only black votes but also those of some white Mississippians in the second district, and he campaigned to the middle. Charles McLaurin, who continued to live in Sunflower County following his work with Fannie Lou Hamer, insisted that Clark ignored the grassroots people during his two campaigns. Relying on the small black middle class and the assumed support of white voters, Clark lost.760

In 1986, Mike Espy, too young to have been active during the height of the freedom movement, ran for the congressional seat in the second district. Espy’s family had occupied a place within the state’s black elite. His grandfather had founded the state’s first black hospital and his parents operated a chain of funeral parlors. Like Clark’s early network, which he

1. Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 126, 122.
2. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.

developed as an educator in Holmes County, these businesses provided a strong base from which

Espy launched his campaign.761

In many ways paralleling Clark’s collaboration with the Holmes

County FDP during his first race for the legislature, Espy recognized the need to partner and build on the momentum of the freedom movement. He networked with community organizers, utilized the canvassing strategies of the movement, and, most importantly, campaigned under the

assumption that he would receive no white votes.762

In turn, twenty one years after the passage

of the Voting Rights Act, black Delta voters, once again concentrated 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 seat in the United States Congress.

1. Mike Espy, “History, Art, and Archives,” The United States House of Representatives, <http://history.house.gov/> People/Detail/12872. . Accessed 28 January 2014; 761 Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.
2. Interview with Charles McLaurin, Indianola, Mississippi, 25 September 2003.

Conclusion: The MFDP Remembered

“Oh, he was always moderate,” Bob Moses explained of R.L.T. Smith, the movement’s first black candidate in Mississippi. Moses termed Smith’s 1962 congressional campaign a “radical” act because of the “circumstances and the danger.” When Smith, a long time NAACP member, was approached by members of the activist community 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 and highlighted a shared grievance among black Mississippians — access to a meaningful vote. Politically and socially,

Moses argued, Smith was “always conservative.”763

Smith’s politics didn’t change. But,

Mississippi, over the course of the proceeding decade, had.

Smith’s candidacy inaugurated nearly a decade of strident political organizing in Mississippi as full time movement workers sought to expand the available power in politics — registering voters, building a parallel political process, and organizing national challenges. Through these campaigns, young Mississippians, like Leslie McLemore, Hollis Watkins, Dorie and Joyce Ladner, Charles McLaurin, and Lawrence Guyot — energized by outside organizers like Bob Moses and Stokely Carmichael — made visible an underground network of resistors and linked long time dissenters, like Smith, Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry, and Victoria Jackson Gray, to black laborers and farmers, like Fannie Lou Hamer and Hartman Turnbow.

The era of activism, ignited by the1962 congressional campaign of R.L.T. Smith, receded as nationally sanctioned leaders of black Mississippians, possessing traditional credentials,

1. Interview with Robert Moses, Jackson, Mississippi, 30 September 2003.

became key members of the Democratic coalition. They were recruited to and began to serve as representatives of the black political voice in Mississippi. When the National Democratic Party recognized the Loyalists at the 1968 Democratic Convention, it was black moderates, like Smith, who were recruited to assume positions of leadership within the state party structure. They, too, were invited to sit on the boards of federally funded social programs, transitioning these bodies from their freedom movement origins.

Following the Chicago convention, the biracial leadership team of the Loyalists — dominated by Hodding Carter III, Aaron Henry, and Charles Evers — was able to institutionalize its power on a national level, but it took eight more years to completely assume the Regulars’ hold on the Mississippi Democratic Party. By 1972, the Loyalists were fully recognized by national Democrats as the Mississippi Democratic Party, eliminating the need for subsequent challenges to a delegation of Regulars. In 1976, the Regulars and the Loyalists merged, uniting the political machinery for state and national Democratic representation. Despite the presence of individual Freedom Democrats within the Loyalist coalition, as each year passed, the MFDP’s position as an organizational powerbroker, one which had initially controlled 25% of the coalition’s votes, diminished.

When Clifton Whitley replaced Lawrence Guyot as the 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 assuming the mantle of the Mississippi Democratic Party had passed. Freedom Democrats voted for Democratic candidates and returned to the daily task of economic survival. 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. The moment for freedom politics had passed.

Despite the practical dissolution of the MFDP, like the Reconstruction government a century earlier, it continued to serve as a symbol of grassroots mobilization and organizing for change. In 1968, an Issaquena County man relocated to Claiborne County. In his hometown of Mayersville, the FDP had been 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.”764

In the Spring of 1969, one Freedom

Democrat from the small community of Panther Burn addressed his concerns to Aaron Henry, who he misidentified as the leader of the MFDP. He 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.765

A few months later, a

Freedom Democrat from Greenwood contended that the MFDP was the only organization in

Mississippi “that gonna recognize the grassroot people.”766

And, despite the dissolution of a

state-wide apparatus, Virginia Ayles McLaurin, looking back on those days of most active organizing, described herself as the chair of the Sunflower County FDP from 1970 through

1972.767

These men and women expressed a desire to participate in the political process and alter

764 Quoted in Emilye Crosby, ““A Little Taste of Freedom: The African American Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi,” unpublished manuscript, 282.

765 James Kimble, County Chair, to Aaron Henry, 10 April 1969, Aaron Henry Papers, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

766 Interview with Silas McGhee, 12 July 1969, Ralph Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 5.

767 Interview with Virginia McLaurin, Tougaloo College, L. Zenobia Coleman Library, Archives.

their most immediate circumstances through organized political action. As the MFDP’s organizational presence declined across the state, its memory, and use as an organizing tool in local communities, continued to inspire those who lacked an active role in the Loyalist coalition and the reconstituted Mississippi Democratic Party.

Because the MFDP did not assume the machinery of the Mississippi Democratic Party, and because of the purported failure of its two national challenges, scholars have tended to overlook the longstanding influence of the MFDP. Hollis Watkins, who continues to work as an organizer in Mississippi, 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 the political process, 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.”768

There have also been concrete advancements and disappointments in black political rights in Mississippi. By 1980, Mississippi, a state that had virtually no black representatives in elected office prior to 1968, elected the greatest number of black public officials in the United States. 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. Bennie Thompson who first ran for the Board of Supervisors in Hinds County as a Freedom Democrat has represented the second congressional district in the

768 Interview with Hollis Watkins, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003.

United States Congress since 1993. In his official House biography, he describes himself as “a product of the Civil Rights movement” and highlights his work organizing voters in the

Mississippi Delta with SNCC.769

The MFDP’s first vice-chair, Leslie Burl McLemore, chaired

the Jackson city council and served as interim mayor before his retirement from politics a few years ago. In 1997, he founded the Fannie Lou Hamer Institute for Citizenship and Democracy at Jackson State University. L.C. Dorsey, a displaced farm worker when she first encountered the movement, earned a Ph.D. in social work and directed the Delta Research and Cultural Institute at Mississippi Valley State University before her recent passing. Charles McLaurin, who organized the Sunflower elections and worked closely with Fannie Lou Hamer, works for the 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.770

As many others have acknowledged, the modes of disenfranchisement have shifted in the “post-civil rights” era. The national “war on drugs” increased the number of black men incarcerated and, more recently, state legislatures and the Supreme Court have signaled a retreat

on the protection of black voting rights.771

As of 2010, just under 14% of black Mississippians

were permanently disenfranchised as a result of being convicted of crimes ranging from murder and rape to the writing of bad checks. This disenfranchisement can only be overturned through executive order from the governor or bills of suffrage in the legislature. During the period from

769 Congressman Bennie Thompson, [http://benniethompson.house.gov/index.php?](http://benniethompson.house.gov/index.php) option=com\_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=91. Accessed 28 January 2014.

770 Interview with Hollis Watkins, Jackson, Mississippi, 10 September 2003.

771 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press: 2010).

2000-2010, less than one third of one percent (.28%) of convicted felons in Mississippi,

regardless of race, had their voting rights restored.772

In June of 2013, the Supreme Court

invalidated Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, which determined the jurisdictions requiring pre clearance to voter laws based on a past history of discrimination. Following this decision, Mississippi, among other states, enacted voter identification laws, requiring all voters to show photo identification at the polls beginning with the 2014 election cycle.773

Over the course of a decade, the MFDP had come to be both more and less than a political party. During that time, many Freedom Democrats moved fluidly between the NAACP, Loyalists, Delta Ministry, and federally sponsored poverty programs. At its most indigenous, the MFDP served the concrete needs and addressed the specific grievances of its membership. It sponsored the first black candidates for political office at a time when the state Democratic Party denied black participation and a coalition of white moderates and black professionals had yet to institutionalize their political strength. And, most importantly, through rudimentary political education and widespread engagement campaigns, it ushered a broad spectrum of black Mississippians into the political process after three generations of mass disenfranchisement. In reflecting on the legacy of 1960s activist, of which the MFDP was an important piece, Hollis replied simply, “I’m still here.”

A study of black political power would not be complete without mention of the 2008 election of Barack Obama. When he was first elected, scholar Robin D.G. Kelley wondered whether Obama, himself only the third African American elected to the Senate since

772Christopher Uggen, Sarah Shannon, and Jeff Manza, “State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 2010,” *The Sentencing Project* (July 2012), <http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/> fd\_State\_Level\_Estimates\_of\_Felon\_Disen\_2010.pdf. Accessed 28 January 2014.

773 Niraj Chokshi, “Voter ID Cards are Just Months Away in Mississippi,” *Washington Post*.

Reconstruction, would be the first “freedom democrat” in the White House.774

The campaign,

both implicitly and explicitly, descended from the organizing of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In Mississippi, it was veterans of the freedom movement and their descendants who spearheaded organizing in the state. Keelan Sanders led the Mississippi Democratic Party during Obama’s first election. Sanders’ grandmother, Emma Sanders, had been a Freedom Democratic candidate in 1966.775 With the 2008 election of Barack Obama, Unita

Blackwell described a direct line between her early organizing in Mayersville and the second congressional district of Mississippi and the election of the nation’s first black president when she declared, ’‘everything I was involved in was worth it.”776

In addition to the voter base and supporters that descended from the MFDP and freedom movement, the model of organizing that Obama borrowed from his days as a community organizer in Chicago rested in a belief that mobilizing the grassroots was an effective and necessary means towards creating change. Candidate Obama identified Ella Baker, mentor to Bob Moses, as an influence on his own thinking about political mobilization. And, more practically, the campaign consulted with Marshall Ganz, who had come of age as a volunteer during the Mississippi Summer Project. Ganz launched “Camp Obama”s to network the nation’s progressive base and provide them with the necessary tools to motivate others. “It's counterintuitive," Ganz explained. Participants would complain, “I need to know all of the

774 Robin D. G. Kelley, “Into a White House Built by Black Slaves

Will Obama be the First "Freedom" Democrat?,” counterpunch (19 November 2008), <http://www.counterpunch.org/> 2008/11/19/will-obama-be-the-first-quot-freedom-quot-democrat/. Accessed 27 January 2014.

775 Laura Flanders, “A New Moment? The Grassroots and the Party, 1964 and 2008,” *Common Dreams* (8 February 2008), [http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/02/08/6926.](http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/02/08/6926) Accessed 27 January 2014.

776 “Activists: Obama’s win has roots in Mississippi,” *The Meridian Star* (5 November 2008), http:// [www.meridianstar.com/statenews/x681140945/Activists-Obama-s-win-has-roots-in-Mississippi.](http://www.meridianstar.com/statenews/x681140945/Activists-Obama-s-win-has-roots-in-Mississippi) Accessed 27

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arguments.” But, in Mississippi, he had learned that to “talk of your own experiences” is a “very

empowering thing.”777

This mode of storytelling mimicked that which Charles McLaurin had

noted about Fannie Lou Hamer during her first congressional campaign when he acknowledged her ability to speak to her own experience as a mechanism for mobilizing others. Even the Obama campaign’s “Beauty and Barber Shop Program,” which sought to reach black voters in the businesses they visited and where informal politics were discussed, emerged from an understanding, gained in Mississippi, that black entrepreneurs, who served a black clientele, were a key piece of the organizing puzzle.

777 Scott Martelle, “Famed organizer sees history in the making,” *Los Angeles Times* (15 June 2008), http:// articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/15/nation/na-ganz15. Accessed 27 June 2014.

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