

August 31, 1956

TO: Mr. Harold Fleming, Executive Director
Southern Regional Council

RE: Summary of Laurens County Interviews and Findings About Negro Participation
in Politics

FROM: Dr. B. R. Brazeal, Dean and Professor of Economics, Morehouse College,
Investigator

I. The Voting Pattern For Negroes: Laurens County with Dublin as the county-seat, is located near the center of the state. It is one of the largest counties in physical size and also with its population of 53,606 with 40.2% being Negroes. In 1954 there were 12,230 white persons registered as compared to 2,201 Negroes. Negro registration was 15.2% of the total Negro population. To have had this number of Negroes on the registration lists was a remarkable achievement considering the toll taken in the 1948 purge of Negro registrants. At that time the number of registered Negro voters in Laurens County was 2,250. After the purge only 785 Negroes were registered. The white registrants were not "bothered" at all. Negro registrants were sent notices to appear before the registrar, who struck many names for various reasons, mainly on alleged inability to interpret properly parts of the United States Constitution. Those who were sent notices but did not report were automatically disqualified without any further consideration.

This procedure lowered the morale of the registrants who were purged and those who were not. Yet, some were appreciative of the fact that they had broken the pattern of almost complete exclusion at the time of the United States Supreme Court's refusal to review the Primus E. King (Chapman v. King) case as ruled on by the United States Circuit Court of Appeals on March 6, 1946. These rulings supported Judge Hoyt T. Davis' decision against Georgia's white primary provided by the Neill Primary Law of 1917.

Bolstered by those court rulings, some prominent and well-educated Negroes in Dublin made an effort to register and were denied the right to do so. This refusal was backed by the complete authority of the sheriff. This sheriff was a controversial figure, particularly after rural Negro and white laborers were arrested when they met with C.I.O. organizers in an effort to form a union.

Eventually, some of the sheriff's fiscal and administrative policies alienated some of his white supporters, among whom was influential State Senator Hershel Lovett. This resulted in the creation of the Gay Faction (the sheriff was Carlus Gay) and the Lovett Faction in Laurens County politics. Both factions "eyed" the Negro registrants who, on April 23, 1956, numbered approximately 2,201. The leaders of both factions sought to work through a prominent Negro business man, H. H. Dudley, in their efforts to get to the Negro voters. Dudley finally decided to go with the Gay faction much to the dismay of the Lovett faction. This was a difficult decision for Dudley to make because he had been a fellow-member of Lovett's in the Dublin Chamber of Commerce for 20 years. Lovett told Dudley he was making a mistake in turning his back on some of the most prominent persons in

Laurens County. Dudley pointed out that Negroes had supported this group but had not gotten anything or any recognition in return. The incumbent mayor and sheriff, supported by the City Council, decided that \$350,000 would be spent in running sewage and water mains in Negro neighborhoods and Jefferson Street, the main street for Negroes, was to be paved.

Plans were perfected to get more Negroes registered. "The sheriff knew that the best white people had turned against him" and he was advised to help get more Negroes registered. He was advised to talk with the Tax Commissioner "to get him to agree to slaken up everything" for prospective Negro registrants as he had for whites. As a matter of fact, a few Negroes were permitted to register who marked an X in signing their names. When criticism developed because of this practice the following answer was given: "If they make an X mark to get money out of the bank and if they give in their taxes by making a mark, then they should be permitted to register by making a mark." Later, facts will be given about how the number of Negro registrants increased by 1,550 in fourteen days.

All persons regardless of race go to the same places to register in Laurens County. With the election machinery in the county under the control of the sheriff there is no distinction in voting places or ballot boxes for Negro and white voters. In the city of Dublin the whites vote at the Court House while the Negroes are voting at the City Hall. Negroes work at the polls for their racial group, along with some white persons. Since separate ballot boxes are kept for Negroes they can be and are usually accused of bloc voting when the election returns are made known. One of the Negro political leaders answered this charge. "Why are Negroes bloc voters," said he, "and whites are not" although in this section whites consistently bloc vote, for the Democratic Party, against Civil Rights, and for most of their Congressmen?

Returns in the last general election in Laurens County reveal that Negro voters weilded the balance of power in the election of several important candidates. On the other hand, they divided their votes so as to reduce the strength of charges that they voted in a bloc. The Negro vote in Dublin, where a distinction was made in tabulating the votes on a racial basis, was split 552 as against 561 for the Clerk of Courts. The sheriff would have lost if 1,142 Negro votes in Dublin and 170 in Buckeye (where only Negroes live) had not been cast for him. There were other Negro voters in other sections of Laurens County but they were not racially differentiated. Only 62 Negro city votes went to the sheriff's opponent and he received 75 in Buckeye. The incumbent sheriff would have received 4,664 votes as against 4,742 for his opponent had it not been for Negro voters. His opponent received 1,987 votes from whites in Dublin as against his 1,702. White and Negro voters in Laurens County favored the incumbent tax commissioner by 1,853 and 961 votes respectively. Buckeye's voters favored the tax commissioner 140 to 93. Negro voters supported the City Court Solicitor candidate who lost with 829 votes in Dublin, 145 in Buckeye as against 283 votes for his opponent in Dublin and 93 in Buckeye. Votes by Negroes were divided among the candidates for coroner as follows in Dublin - 345, 67, 158, and 170 - with most of this support going to the successful candidate. In Buckeye the votes were divided as follows - 47, 108, 14 and 30. The candidate who receive a majority of Buckeye's votes ran third on the ticket. Negro and white voters did not seem to have much interest in the race for county school superintendent judging by the relatively few votes cast by each group for the competing candidates. Both racial groups voted heavily for the judge of City

Court, county-treasurer, and ordinary even though they were unopposed. The Mayor of Dublin, though not up for re-election, has never been elected by more than a plurality of 600 votes. Negro voters can more than off-set this one way or another.

II. Socio-Economic Factors: Except in a very few places Negroes in Dublin never have had sewage and running water. A few years back they did get electricity but still do not have any street lights to speak of. "Negroes have been paying taxes for sewage for years" but have had almost none. Very few Negroes in Laurens County ever have had bath tubs, indoor toilets or telephones. This situation is changing as they become able to install these facilities. They appreciate the value of voting, which recently resulted in their getting sewage and water mains. Further, the entire community will benefit because sanitation standards can be raised.

They hope to get more paved streets to follow the paving of Jefferson Street, which is their main residential street. Also, they hope to get parks, playgrounds a swimming pool and other community improvements. "Negroes (in Dublin) have not been inclined to want Negro policemen." They have heard "about how hard Negro policemen have been on their rackets, et cetera" in Macon, Atlanta and Savannah and "this has not pleased them." Police brutality has decreased. The mayor has instructed policemen not to strike anyone they arrest unless necessary. As police brutality decreases as a result of political pressure by Negroes, they are inclined to feel more secure as they press for more citizenship rights.

Many Negroes in Laurens County have been land and property owners for years. Some affiliated with the Republican Party. Years ago they had drugstores, grocery stores, undertaking businesses, a farmers' cooperative store in downtown Dublin, and other forms of businesses. There were skilled building craftsmen and farm owners, a few school teachers and doctors. The first six letter carriers were all Negroes (now there are none) and they were among those few persons who sent their children off to high school and college. Thus, Negroes in Laurens County have a political and economic heritage - though somewhat limited - and were fairly well-prepared to heed the call of their present political leaders, who fortunately have some economic independence in that they do not work for white employers.

There is a reasonably active chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. in Laurens County. However, it did not appear to have any official connection with efforts to increase Negro registration last spring. One of the Negro political leaders said while being interviewed that the N.A.A.C.P. was necessary to prod the white man from time to time. On the other hand, he felt that in view of the white man's present antagonism toward the N.A.A.C.P. that some phases of racial progress could be fostered without its aid.

As more Negroes registered, two of their main leaders - H. H. Dudley and The Rev. C. H. Harris - were put on the county jury. There was much discussion among the Court House whites, as well as others, as to whether these two members would sit in the balcony where other Negroes sat or downstairs with the rest of their fellow jurors. These two Negro members agreed that they would go to jail rather than sit in the balcony. Once in jail they were not to seek bond. The minister was to work with the people in jail in a ministerial capacity. The other person was to make appeals to Negroes to register and vote. However, this type of

action did not prove to be necessary. Although the sheriff told them that "some people don't want you here" they understood that he did not object. However, a candidate for a judge's post tried to relieve them of jury duty but they did not want to be relieved. This man is now in the race for the post of judge and Negroes are not going to support him. There was an encouraging angle to these two Negroes' experiences as jurors. Dublin's most distinguished and oldest member of the bar came over to welcome them as jurors and congratulated them on being willing "to serve your county" in this capacity.

The Negro political leaders are aware of racial pressures that have been somewhat intensified because of and in spite of their increased registration and voting record. They understand that some white people resent being obligated to Negroes. Some "straws in the wind" are being watched by the Negroes. For instance, Dublin has no Negro ball players on its team this season although it had at least two last year. It is felt that racial pressure is accountable for this shift in policy as the attendance of Negroes at games when there were Negro players increased profits. This season when Negro attendance fell off, one or two white persons with an interest in the team seemed to resent the former Negro fans' attitude and accused their leaders of "leading a boycott" against the team. The next incident involved Negroes using a school which had been built for them in Brewton, which is not far from Dublin in Laurens County. After putting \$90,000 into the school building it was decided that it would be used for Negroes when it was completed although it is in an area of more white than Negro homes. When nearby white landowners complained against Negro occupancy of the school building the chairman of the State Board of Education, and the State School Building Authority, George P. Whitman, Jr. a Gov. Marvin Griffin appointee, recommended that further funds be cut off. Incidentally, this situation remained unchanged until the chairman's actions were disclosed in the Atlanta Daily World after Whitman qualified as one of the candidates for a seat in the Georgia Legislature representing Fulton County. Since Whitman (as well as all other candidates in Fulton County) is seeking Negro votes he maneuvered to have the State Board of Education, and the State School Building Authority release the money to the Brewton School with the understanding that the Laurens County Board of Education has the power to determine the policy under which it will be spent. Negro political leaders in Laurens County are watching developments before entering the controversy in an active sense.

When Negroes in Laurens County were registering in larger numbers there were whites who talked about the development of trouble between the races. This did not deter the leaders - not even the venerable Rev. C. H. Harris who is 76 years old. Another distinguished leader said: "I have already overlived my time on earth and will meet whatever they bring." Still, another said, "If they assassinate me it would set off one of the finest race riots imaginable." All this is mentioned to indicate that Negro leaders who urge their racial brethren to register and vote in many sections of Georgia (as well as in many of the other Southern states) are not performing routine functions. Quite often their lives may be at stake. Yet, knowing this they often forge ahead with their leadership. To be sure, these Laurens County Negro political leaders remembered how Isaiah Nixon, a Negro, was murdered by white men in nearby Montgomery County in 1948 because he dared to register and vote. They also remembered that the murderers were acquitted.

Anti-labor union sentiment is rampant in Laurens County. The sheriff has vigorously and successfully fought unionizing efforts. He knows now that many of

the people have turned against him on this issue. His political advisers, among whom are two or three Negroes, have advised him to switch to labor so as to gain their support. This would give him a "populist support" such as Tom Watson had in the early stages of his political career. If such a political pattern is created, it could well be the beginning of an alignment which will upset political control by county-unit minorities in Georgia.

III. Efforts to Increase Registration and Voting: When it became more apparent that the Lovett vs. Gay political factions were going to be involved in another heated election, plans were laid by each faction to get more votes of Negroes. Already 2,201 Negroes were registered as compared to 12,230 whites, thus making a combined registration of 14,431 in a total population of 53,606. Each side eyed these votes and realized also that there was much potential untapped political strength among Negroes in Laurens County. Their registration at this time was only 15.2% of their 40.2% of the total population. The Negro leader who could help influence Negro voters was approached by representatives of both sides and he decided to align his forces with the Gay faction. He and a respected minister spearheaded the formation of the "All Citizens Voters League of Laurens County." This organization held public meetings every Monday night in one of the churches. All precincts with an appreciable Negro population were organized and door to door visits were made by these workers, who were mostly Negro housewives. They were paid 50 cents for each Negro registrant whom they took to the Court House and City Hall to register. Some of the workers made as much as \$150.00 a week. These workers were also paid 50 cents for each person whom they carried to the polls to vote. Accurate records were kept of their earnings and they signed receipts when they received their pay. Nothing was paid to those persons who registered and voted. In 14 days 1,550 additional Negro registrants were listed in the registration records. This brought the total registration of Negroes to a total of 3,550 in Laurens County. This was unprecedented and generated some alarm and concern. Some influential white persons said, "we got to stop these niggers from registering." They attempted to do so and as a result some Negroes were challenged as they sought to register. H. H. Dudley, one of their influential leaders, sent The Rev. C. H. Harris, pastor of the Second African Baptist Church and president of the voters league to the registrars' offices. He was instructed not to say anything or do anything but sit down and observe what was being done to disqualify Negroes who sought to register. The purging efforts were stopped.

Candidates came to mass meetings which were sponsored by the All Citizens Voters League of Laurens County. As has been indicated, several candidates were elected by the margin of the votes which Negroes cast for them. Mass meetings are now being held as the September primary date approaches "and Congressman Vinson will be present at some of these meetings."

The Dublin Courier-Herald gave news and editorial coverage to the registration drive among the Negroes of Laurens County. On April 25, 1956, a double column head said: "Negroes Flocking to Register Here." The article reported that on the previous day 79 registered at the City Hall and 110 registered in the county "and 12 whites registered." An interview with H. H. Dudley was reported in the news article. He said that Negroes were after "a greater registration so they can help put people in office that will be fair to all. We are urging that our voters be independent voters and that there will be no bloc voting".... "Our organization, headed by the ministers of the town, will seek some laws by which to

prosecute both the vote-seller and the vote-buyer." The Reverend Harris was quoted as saying: "We are trying to get our people to understand that they have a part in the civic program, and as citizens we have no motive other than we are trying to get our people to participate in civic affairs." The article concluded by saying: "According to information from City Offices, many of those who apply for registration in the city, after having qualified in the county office, are unable to write their names for registration." It was at this point that a Negro stated that if some Negroes borrowed money and paid their taxes by marking an X then they should be allowed to register and vote in the same manner.

On April 28, 1956, the Dublin Courier-Herald reported that within the "past four days" a total of 382 Negroes registered in the county and 294 in the city as against 92 whites in the county and 19 in the city. The article added that although Laurens County Negro leaders said that their campaign was local, reports were being received to the effect that Negroes were having campaigns in other states and that a Negro speaker told an audience of Negroes in Mississippi to "get the ballot box at any cost."

On April 30, 1956, The Dublin Courier-Herald carried an editorial titled, "The Business of Registration." After referring to the increasing registration of Negroes it stated that "with an adequately large number registered it is not inconceivable that in the future a Negro candidate will offer for some office in the city or county." After insisting that some elections had gone by default it was then stated that this inaction had contributed to "bad government." "If the white people of Dublin and Laurens County remain apathetic toward the election of their public officials and continue the practice of ignoring the civic duty of registration and exercise of the franchise, the time may not be too far off when our Negro voters will name the officials who run our government." At this point they were exhorted to make use of "the exercise of the franchise."

On May 2, 1956, the paper had a two column front page caption to the effect that "Whites Out-registered Negroes Yesterday" but the sub-heading modified this somewhat stating: "Negro Registrants Topped in County, But Not in City." In the county the ratio was 84 to 74 in favor of white registrants whereas it was 49 to 16 in favor of Negro registrants in the city. Negro registrants since the drive began on Monday, April 23, numbered 650 as against 206 white registrants. This same issue of the Dublin Courier-Herald carried a front page editorial titled, "Who Is Interested In Government"...."Let's look at the evidence" said the editorial writer as he deplored the relative inactivity of whites who had not registered. "The Negroes generally in Dublin and Laurens County ^{have} become sufficiently interested to organize and promote registrations. Why aren't the whites of the city and county equally as interested." The news articles and editorials never did state that the total number of white registrants far-outnumbered that of Negroes when the drive began. Actually the ratio was approximately 6 to 1 in favor of the white registrants. However, these comparisons continued until the registration books closed. According to the Negro leaders a total of 1,550 Negroes registered during their registration campaign and "this helped the cause of democracy because it spurred many good white citizens (672) to register also."

IV. Prospects: The value and potency of the Negro vote in Dublin and Laurens County can't be easily discounted. It is not likely that serious efforts will be made to reduce this vote materially. On the contrary, candidates will have to

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continue to seek it - and thus those who are elected to office are likely to pave more than one street in Negro neighborhoods; extend sewage and water mains; develop play-grounds, including a swimming pool, continue to reduce police brutality and make other community improvements which were never considered for the Negro residents before their votes became formidable.

Voting pressure by Negroes will result in an improvement in their schools, thus extending their educational opportunities. This, plus an increasing economic independence on the part of a larger group of Negro leaders, should mean more political participation for their racial group.