



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Freedom Summer campaign for African American voting rights in Mississippi, 1964

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

June

1964

to: August

1964

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Mississippi*

Location Description: *activity concentrated throughout the state in all five US congressional districts, but less activity in congressional district 3, in southwestern Mississippi (the most dangerous area).*

Goals:

To register African American voters, as well as raise awareness and garner press attention of the inequalities faced by African American's in Mississippi through the use of white Northern volunteers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 017. Mock elections › Volunteers canvassed black neighborhoods, registering blacks to vote in a mock election. A new political party was also created to support this mock election.
- 063. Social disobedience
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Freedom Schools

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 063. Social disobedience
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Freedom Schools

Methods in 4th segment:

- 063. Social disobedience
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Freedom Schools

Methods in 5th segment:

- 063. Social disobedience
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Freedom Schools

Methods in 6th segment:

- 017. Mock elections › Volunteers canvassed black neighborhoods, registering blacks to vote in a mock election. A new political party was also created to support this mock election.
- 063. Social disobedience
- 162. Sit-in › Freedom Democratic Party delegates sat-in during democratic national convention
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Freedom Schools

Notes on Methods:

During the first segment, volunteers for the campaign were being trained in Ohio, thus, there are no associated methods, though the campaign had, at this point, started.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members and volunteers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

SNCC led the campaign in 4/5 Mississippi congressional districts and Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE) of the 5th, Bob Moses is credited as the strategist of Freedom Summer

Partners:

CORE was the main partner, but the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP) were also partners, though they played less of a direct role in Freedom Summer

External allies:

The National Council of Churches (NCC) aided in training the mostly Northern volunteers, but played less of a role after that.

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- CORE

- NAACP
- NCC
- SCLC
- SNCC
- trained volunteers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 weeks*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mississippi State Democratic party, White Citizens Council, Ku Klux Klan, Mississippi State Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Endemic free-lance violence against the Freedom Summer workers and volunteers occurred. 80 workers were beaten and 3 were murdered, mostly on the part of the Ku Klux Klan and individuals, though there is evidence to suggest that some of the violence was performed by Mississippi law enforcement officials as well

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Though the number of Freedom Summer volunteers stayed relatively consistent throughout the summer, growth was achieved through the increase of support for Freedom Summer in the north

By 1964, a handful of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field workers had endured three years of continued repression as they challenged Mississippi's racial discrimination. Only 6.7% of black Mississippians were registered to vote in 1962, the lowest percent in the country. In 1963 SNCC's Mississippi operation was facing a stalemate. Since arriving in 1961 they had few concrete victories to show for their hard and dangerous work in the state. They had gotten few people to attempt to register, and even fewer were successful.

One problem was SNCC's inability to generate the type of publicity that Martin Luther King, Jr. had so effectively used in gaining supportive federal action. The absence of federal support hampered SNCC's work in Mississippi. There were 150

instances of violence and intimidation since SNCC had started its work in the state and not one attracted a vigorous federal response. Voter registration of black people wasn't working and campaigns like sit-ins at lunch counters were highly dangerous.

With these obstacles in mind, SNCC organized a "Freedom Vote" campaign, a mock election among black Mississippians that would take place at the same time as the regular elections of November 1963. The goal was to show the desire of blacks to participate in the electoral process, and hopefully gain SNCC some national publicity. 100 white Northern college students came as volunteers to help with the campaign, canvassing black neighborhoods, registering black voters, and staging the mock election itself. The program was a success; 80,000 blacks registered to vote in the mock election. SNCC's use of white college students, who gave valuable labor and brought favorable publicity, became the impetus for a campaign the next year. Then SNCC workers called it "the Summer Project;" we now know it as Freedom Summer 1964.

Freedom Summer's fundamental goal was to help African Americans gain their voting rights. The use of Northern volunteers would "focus national attention on Mississippi as a means of forcing federal intervention in the state" (McAdam, 39). SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and others recruited 600 volunteers, most of them privileged, white college students. The National Council of Churches organized two one-week training sessions at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The training included nonviolent self-defense and how to work courageously in a nonviolent movement.

Civil rights workers trained the volunteers to work alongside SNCC field staff to register blacks to vote and teach in "Freedom Schools" -- SNCC's effort to counter the obvious inequalities and insidious political messages inherent in the system. Volunteers would also assist at black community centers.

The capitol city of Jackson, Mississippi, beefed up its police force with shotguns, tear gas, and a tank in preparation for Freedom Summer. The rage and resentment sparked among white segregationists when word of the "Summer Project" leaked out illustrate how much opposition African American's attempting to affirm their rights as citizens faced, and just how impressive Freedom Summer was as a nonviolent campaign. Mississippi newspapers warned of an invasion from the north while Governor Johnson denounced the "invaders" and their "dastardly scheme." "We are going to see that law and order is maintained," he said, "and maintained Mississippi style."

Within 24 hours after their initial arrival into Mississippi -- during the second week of training in Ohio -- SNCC worker James Chaney and volunteers Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner went to investigate a church bombing near Philadelphia, Mississippi. They were detained for a traffic violation, released into the evening, then beaten and killed.

The message was quickly sent to the Ohio training, where the participants were stunned. SNCC workers and other trainers assisted the hundreds of volunteers to find the courage to get on buses and follow their comrades to Mississippi.

This episode of violence garnered the most media attention. However, during the campaign there were 80 workers beaten, 1,000 arrests as well as 37 churches bombed or burned. The campaign couldn't turn to the police in Mississippi for help because they were often shown to be involved. Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price had coordinated the kidnapping and murder of Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner. Nonetheless, the wave of repression failed to achieve its objective of shutting down Freedom Summer; in fact, it stimulated more support and even some cautious Federal intervention.

Though voting rights were essential components to this campaign, and US civil rights in general, the SNCC staff realized that the oppression of Mississippi's black population depended on more than restricted access to the polls. In 1964, Mississippi's educational expenditures were as follows: \$81.64 spent on every white student and only \$21.77 spent on every black student.

The curriculum was also carefully controlled, state textbooks extolled the "southern way of life" and no mention was made of the achievements of black Americans. Freedom schools attempted not only to counter the obvious inequalities in the Mississippi school system, but also bring attention to the fact that these inequalities existed. The schools taught academic courses, such as remedial reading and math as well as science, language, and even dance and debate, established student-run newspapers and plays, and taught courses in black history and the history and philosophy of the civil rights movement.

Freedom schools were a huge success not only in terms of popularity – the project staff had hoped to attract 1,000 students and 3,000-3500 ended up attending — but also because of the determination the students showed in receiving a fair and equal education. In McComb, Mississippi, 75 students showed up for classes the morning after a bomb leveled the church that had been serving as their school. Class was held on the lawn outside. Freedom Schools became a model for future social programs like Head Start, as well as alternative educational institutions.

But the campaign's main goal was to increase voter participation among Mississippi blacks. The state's Democratic Party was effectively closed to blacks, so just registering black voters would be ineffective. Fieldworkers had two parallel tasks as they canvassed black neighborhoods. Firstly, they sought to convince blacks to register to vote in the official election by going to the courthouse, and secondly, they sought to persuade them to register to vote in another mock election (very similar to the 1963 "Freedom Vote" campaign).

During this time 17,000 blacks made the trip to the courthouse to register to vote—though only 1600 were eventually allowed to register by the state. Civil rights organizations regarded this as a major step towards the democratization of voting in Mississippi. The well-publicized voter registration drive brought national attention to the subject of black disenfranchisement, and helped lead to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, federal legislation that outlawed tactics Southern states had used to prevent blacks from voting.

Another success was the amount of publicity given the campaign thanks to the skillful use of press by SNCC's communication department, exactly as they had hoped. A previously underrepresented problem in the national media, the Freedom Summer campaign gained almost continuous national exposure for the issues of racial segregation and inequality in the Deep South.

One of Freedom Summer's triumphs was the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, growing out of the mock election. 80,000 black Mississippians joined the party and elected a slate of 68 delegates to the national Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City, NJ.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenged the seating of the all white delegates of the state's Democratic Party, confronting the convention with two delegations claiming the same seats. Due to an intense speech in Atlantic City by MFDP's Fannie Lou Hamer, television viewers in many states sent messages to their delegates urging their support for seating the MFDP. Protesters on the Atlantic City boardwalk picketed outside the convention center, urging the seating of the MFDP instead of the segregationist white Mississippi Democrats.

Democratic President Lyndon Baines Johnson was in the meantime putting pressure on the Convention's credentials committee not to seat the MFDP; the Southern states in 1964 were both segregationist and Democratic Party strongholds, and Johnson didn't want to risk their support for his re-election.

The compromise offered to the MFDP was two of the seats in the Mississippi delegation and a promise to ban any group guilty of discrimination from future conventions.

In response to this offer, all but 4 of the white Mississippi Democratic Party members walked out. MFDP turned down the compromise saying the credentials committee "can't just issue two seats at large for a moral issue." To back up their words the MFDP occupied the seats that were vacated by the other Mississippi Democratic Party members; the national Democratic Party leadership had them removed from the building.

While the MFDP did not take the place of the white Democratic Party for Mississippi in 1964, its action led to a future ban against seating delegations chosen through racial discrimination. After a summer of education, voter registration, beatings and killings, the MFDP's confrontation of the national Democratic Party brought Freedom Summer to a dramatic close.

Research Notes

Influences:

Freedom Summer was influenced by the Freedom Vote Campaign, a mock election that took place during November of 1963. Freedom Summer also influenced its participants greatly, such that many of the white volunteers who previously had little activist experience went on to have activist careers

Sources:

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