SECURING THE BALLOT: SNCC, MFDP, POLITICAL POWER, AND THE MEANING OF THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN FREEDOM SUMMER

A Syllabus by the SNCC Legacy Project

Prepared by: Bedou Alagrua, Felicia Denand, and Joshua Myers

July 16-August 1, 2024

The People’s Forum, NYC
320 W 37th St, New York, NY 10018

“The way Gloster Current talked about the people from Mississippi and the people from Alabama … who were the heart and soul of the Movement, it gave one the sense that the people that he was referring to were much more trouble than they were worth. Mr. Current viewed the people from Mississippi and Alabama as disruptive of the kind of relationship that he wanted to establish with those who were in political and economic power. The meeting gave us a sense that — because there was not much disagreement with him — those who were in the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement in many respects wanted to cut out the heart and soul of the Movement. When Gloster Current said, cut away the underbrush, he was trying to make the Movement a much more respectable, a Movement that could fit much more into the status quo. In that meeting, the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement showed itself to be the most accommodating to the forces that were antithetical to its own interests.”

- Courtland Cox

Course Description

As early as 1868, political organizers realized the power of Black electoral politics and its potential impact to determine political outcomes in the United States. For almost one hundred years, that realization led to large-scale attempts to suppress the Black vote. To forestall that suppression, activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee alongside local communities in Mississippi and Alabama and several other states waged a successful battle to force the federal government to protect Black people’s voting rights—formally enshrined in the Fifteenth Amendment. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the result of grassroots efforts and organizing on the ground that not only exposed the evils of voter suppression but imagined strategic ways to utilize the ballot to achieve some semblance of political power. This was crystallized in the strategy of Freedom Summer. In 1964, the momentum of organizing for voting rights eventuated in a summer where students and organizers traveled to Mississippi to demonstrate what real democracy would
look like in a state where Black people were excluded from that practice. The challenge and peril of that moment are what made federal legislation possible. And this was an opening that made possible the rise of Black elected officials and encouraged Black participation in formal politics and grassroots political organizing on a national scale, such as the National Black Political Assembly, vehicles designed to deepen the political power achieved by the ballot. Together with direct action organizing and the struggle for Black Power, the work of activists in Mississippi are critical to understanding SNCC’s historic impact on life in the United States and in the world.

**Primary Sources:**

- [www.sncelegacyproject.org](http://www.sncelegacyproject.org) - The SNCC Legacy Project's Digital Movement Platform, created in 2022.
- [www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org) - the website of the Civil Rights Movement Archive, Inc.

**Books:**


**Format:**

We have tailored this course to be delivered in multiple ways. Firstly, the modality can be either virtual or in-person. Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, it can be delivered in both the traditional lecture format and the seminar discussion format, as well as in non-traditional, flipped classroom formats. The teaching notes provide suggestions and recommendations tailored to the course material covered that week. In addition, we have added suggested media and other resources that can be folded into the course delivery. We believe that each course leader should use the methods that are most appropriate to the students engaged in these courses. This method should enable students to reach a clear understanding and appreciation of the “SNCC Way”--not only its approach to organizing, but its approach to pedagogy. This too is movement-building.
Schedule

July 16 – The Mississippi Plan: Reconstruction and the Suppression of Black Rights

facilitated by Josh Myers

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: What are the historical roots of Black voter participation in Mississippi? How have these concerns been structured by Black political struggle and the requirements of labor and capital? What was the Mississippi Plan? What did it mean for the possibilities for Reconstruction in the state? How did it lead to the moments that characterized the 1960s evolution of Black political struggle?

Readings and Resources:


Other Resources:


July 17 – SNCC and the Rationale for Voter Registration

facilitated by Josh Myers
Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: How did SNCC first engage the question of organizing around voter registration? How did the origins of the debate continue earlier dilemmas? What was new about the 1960s iteration of the debate? What were the connections between SNCC's earlier movements around direct action and voter registration? How did the Freedom Riders engage this question? What were the contexts in Mississippi driving the decision to turn toward questions of the vote? How was this influenced by national concerns? What was the Voter Education Project and its role in the SNCC decision-making apparatus?

Readings and Resources:

- Bob Parris Moses, Interview by Anne Romaine, Highlander Center, Civil Rights Movement Archive [https://www.crmvet.org/nars/66_moses.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/nars/66_moses.pdf) (Via: Crmvet)
- Hollis Watkins, Interview by Eyes on the Prize, 1985, [http://repository.wustl.edu/concern/videos/c821gm479](http://repository.wustl.edu/concern/videos/c821gm479) (Via: SNCC DMP)
- Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 103-31.

Other Resources:


Teaching Notes:

- A lecture could center the origins of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It might develop a narrative on the evolution of the organization’s work in Mississippi, showing how local conditions there led to fertile ground for organizing work.
- Seminar participants might be drawn to the question of direct action versus voter registration. Discussion leaders would lean on the first-person narratives to assess how much this binary affected the organization and whether or not it has been overwrought in movement histories.
- Within a flipped format, the course could stage a debate between those who advocated a voter registration strategy in Mississippi and those who issued caution. The debate might clarify the real stakes involved in the decisions that SNCC organizers actually made.

July 18 – Freedom Summer: Toward an Idea and Concept

facilitated by Josh Myers

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: How did the idea of Freedom Summer emerge? What were the principal debates concerning the efficacy of the idea? How were they resolved? What were its initial goals and objectives? How did the organizers imagine the tactics and strategies that might lead to success? How did they understand the dangers? Develop ways to mitigate them?
Readings and Resources:

- Minutes from Staff Meeting to Discuss Freedom Summer, January 24, 1964, Civil Rights Movement Archive, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6401_sncc_min.pdf (Via: crmvet)
- Dittmer, Local People, 215-241.

Other Resources:

- Doug McAdam, Freedom Summer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)

July 23 – Local Stories and Local Peoples: Sunflower and Leflore County, Sam Block and Fannie Lou Hamer

facilitated by Bedour Alagraa

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: How might we understand the unique conditions facing Black people in the Mississippi Delta? What are the historical contexts driving those conditions? What were the vehicles that Black folk created in order to address them? How did SNCC begin to penetrate the Delta and tap into this ongoing work? What were the implications for achieving success in the Delta? What were some of the organizational tensions here? How were they resolved?

Readings and Resources:

- Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 132-79.
- Dittmer, Local People, 116-42.

Other Resources:

July 24 – The Emergence of the Council of Federated Organizations and the Freedom Vote of 1963

facilitated by Bedour Alagraa

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: What are the origins of the Council of Federated Organizations? How did SNCC’s organizing develop in tandem with and in struggle with other organizations during this period? What advantages did SNCC accrue vis-à-vis other civil rights movement formations in Mississippi? What were the contexts driving the development of the Freedom Vote of 1963? How was it organized? What were its goals?

Readings and Resources:

- Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 291-98.
- Dittmer, Local People, 170-207.

Other Resources:


facilitated by Bedour Alagraa

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: Who was Ella Baker and how did she influence the organizing approaches taken by SNCC in general and during Freedom Summer in particular? How did the idea of Freedom Schools emerge and what was its significance to the overall success of the summer project? What did SNCC activists learn from the organizing tradition as it was applied in Mississippi? What are the organizing lessons that might be generated from these histories today?
Readings and Resources:

- Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 236-64.
- Dittmer, Local People, 252-65.

July 30 – Freedom Summer, Local Stories: Organizing Jackson and the Founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

facilitated by Felicia Denand

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: What was the role of Jackson-based movements in the development of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party? How did the local political scene and movement elders use the city as a base for organizing during the summer project? Who were the central figures involved in this work? What was the role of historically Black colleges in the city? What advantages and disadvantages did Jackson movement work present?

Readings and Resources:

- Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 284-316.
Other Resources:


July 31 – Violence and the Meaning of Self-Defense in Mississippi’s Freedom Summer
facilitated by Felicia Denand

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: How did the Black community and SNCC activists understand the significance of the murders of Herbert Lee, Medgar Evers, and Louis Allen? How did the local conditions contribute to the philosophies of self-defense within and among Black Mississippi communities? How did this relate to SNCC activists and the idea of nonviolence? What was the national significance of the “Mississippi Burning” case and the disappearance of the civil rights workers—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney? How did Black communities react to the burnings of churches and other Black physical spaces?

Readings and Resources:

- Dittmer, Local People, 242-52.

Other Resources:

August 1 – On The Promises and Disappointments of the Atlantic City Challenge
facilitated by Felicia Denand

Discussion Questions and Dilemmas: What was the strategy of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in the run-up to the Democratic National Convention? How did these strategies play out in the context of the convention in Atlantic City? What was the response of the Democratic Party establishment? How did it relate to the old guard of the civil rights movement? How did SNCC and the MFDP challenge that leadership? What were the outcomes of that challenge? How did it relate to the larger traditions of Black self-activity and self-determination?

Readings and Resources:

- Dittmer, Local People, 272-302.

Other Resources:

Victoria Gray Adams
Appendix: Reading List


Hartford, Bruce., Troublemaker: Memories of the Freedom Movement (San Francisco: Westwind Writers, 2019).


Copyright © SNCC Legacy Project December 2022 Washington, DC. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part by any means of electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the proper written permission of the Publisher.