

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BLACK BALLOTS

By Gerald Horne, Esq.

1981 is not an election year but events are taking place now that could affect for years to come the political landscape. Quite correctly, much attention has been focused on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, scheduled to expire next year. The act is widely viewed as one of the most effective civil rights laws and gives federal protection to minority voters in all or parts of those states that have histories of discrimination. Most of the southern states are included but so is New York — which has the largest black population in the country.

Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina now heads the Senate Judiciary Committee. He favors repeal or alteration of the act to remove federal control over local affairs on "states' rights" grounds. One would think that the Civil War decided for all time the "right" of states to treat their citizens as they pleased within their borders but like a perennial weed it sprouts in every political season. Still, the battle over the Voting Rights Act may be the most important struggle this year.

But that's not all. "When it rains, it pours", and 1980 was a census year. Thus reapportionments of city councils, state legislatures, congressional districts, etc., are all the rage this year. Already,

"gerrymandering" has caught on like a virus; oblong sized districts, salamander sized districts, shaping any sized districts as long as they dilute or deprive black voting power is the rule. New York State has over 2.4 million blacks, a million or more than second place California, and a hefty percentage of those are in New York City. Some estimate that there is a black and Hispanic majority there but you'd never know it from looking at the City Council. The proposed "reapportionment" based on the 1980 census would severely worsen the situation.

Not only states with substantial black populations such as Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Illinois, Pennsylvania, etc., can be reapportioned. Take Oregon for example, a state not known for a large number of black citizens. As Calvin Henry, head of the Oregon Assembly for Black Affairs (OABA), put it: "In 1970, many people felt that the community was divided up so that there was almost no chance for a black to be nominated or elected," to a state legislative seat.

This year they're not taking any chances. "We are urging the black community to come forth on this. Write to representatives. . . . Once the die is cast, we don't have any right to complain."

The NAACP has not been derelict here. The Southeast Regional Office of the NAACP has established a regional legislative reapportionment monitoring committee that will watch-dog the process in the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. NAACP field staff in these states will coordinate this monitoring effort. NAACP state conferences are establishing special political action task forces to insure that the NAACP point of view is made known during the public hearings and debates that are a part of the reapportionment process in the various states.

Those in other states should emulate the NAACP effort. Organized Baptists and Methodists, Coalition of Black Trade Union Chapters, PTA's etc., should at least spark letter-writing campaigns and testify at public sessions.

The Voting Rights Act has impact on reapportionment. It also reaches other political maneuvers. Earlier this year a controversy erupted in Virginia — a state with a heavily black population — when the Democratic

Party moved to switch from the more democratic primary system to the more elitist convention system in selecting nominees, representatives and leaders. Rev. Curtis Harris of the Virginia Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) put his finger on the issue: "That plan would lock the door on blacks ever running for one of the top three positions in the state."

Most blacks in Virginia, — and elsewhere — vote Democratic and all are upset over this plan that would serve to dilute black representation in Norfolk, Richmond, Petersburg, Portsmouth and other

pockets of black voting strength. The NAACP and SCLC attempted to invoke the Voting Rights Act because the party's delegate allocation formula gave white suburbs proportionately more delegates than inner cities, heavily populated with blacks.

The consensus in Virginia was that the Democrats "were trying to shut out as many people as possible from having a crack at the group's inner workings." But virtually any state with blacks could be substituted for Virginia and the pattern would remain the same. Unfortunately, though most blacks in robot-like

fashion troop to the polls and pull the Democratic lever, few are aware of what goes on in a party that counts neanderthals such as Senator James East and George Wallace in its ranks.

Rev. L.P. Watson, president of the Norfolk branch of the NAACP, has said cogently, "Just because a person is black doesn't mean he has to be a Democrat. We should not put all the eggs into one political basket."

And this does not mean putting eggs in Reagan's and Jesse Helms' baskets either: though on budget cut and tax cut votes the Democrats have echoed their GOP counterparts'

not so hidden agenda to cut out government spending on everything except the Pentagon. At the recent critical Democratic National Committee meeting in Denver this trend was reaffirmed. What happened in Virginia was replicated on the national level as the number of delegates at the crucial mid-term meeting in 1982 was slashed from 1,600 to 900. Like Virginia, it will mean less black input but Charles T. Manatt, the wheeler-dealer banker who heads the Democratic Party could care less. He doesn't realize that their me-too mimicking of the GOP won't get them anywhere.

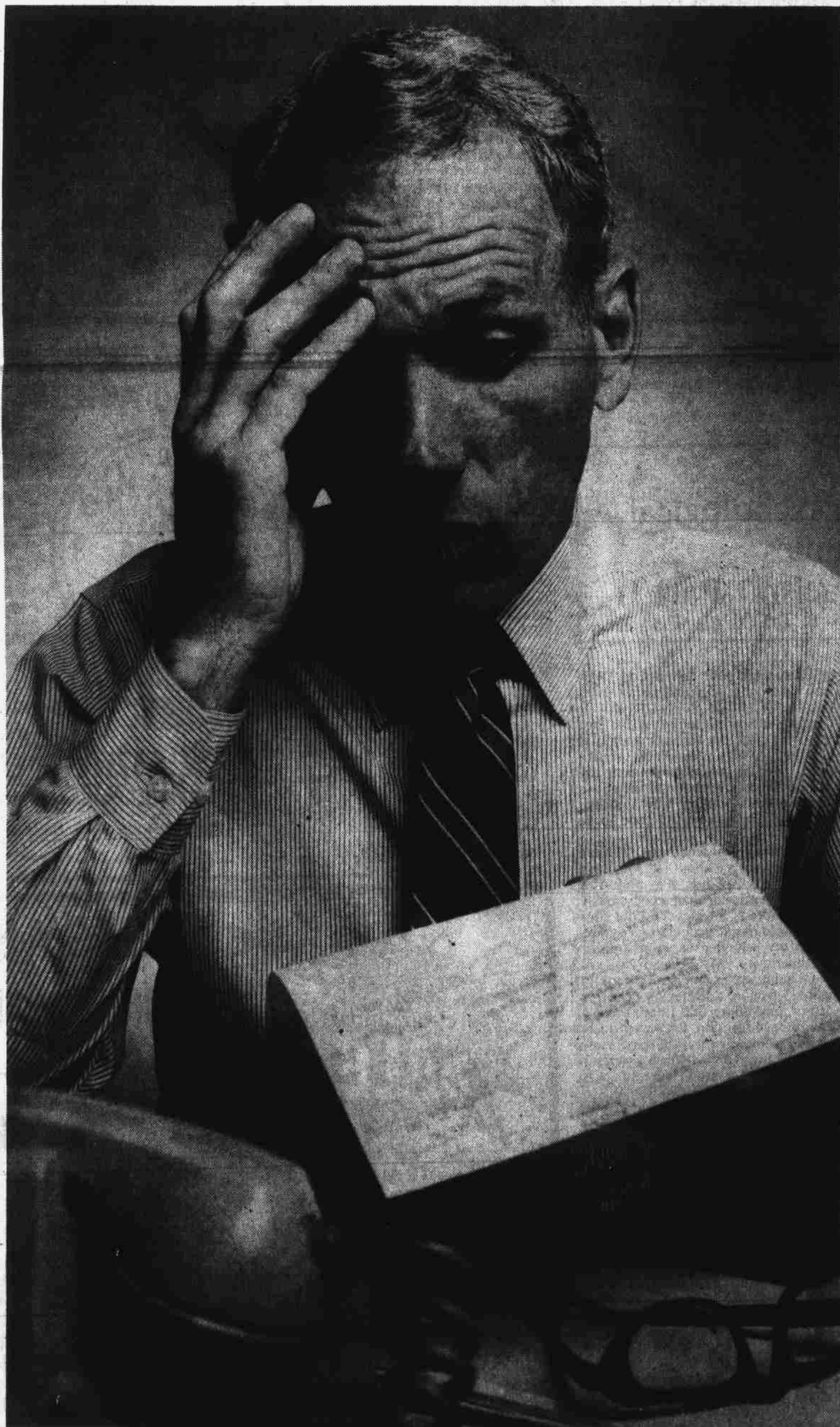
Ask Charles Evers, defeated in the city's Democratic primary in Fayette, Mississippi's mayor's race because of his support of President Reagan.

Blacks are getting fed up with this second-class treatment. In North Carolina there has been an upsurge in interest in the newly organized National Black Independent Political Party. Some object to third parties as being "impractical" but they haven't studied history. If they had they would realize that even when third parties lose, they serve to move the major parties. Most historians acknowledge

that President Truman's effort to ban segregation in the armed forces and establish a Committee on Civil Rights was in response to the threat of the Progressive Party, backed by W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson and many other influential blacks.

When blacks don't have options, it allows the Democrats to go to sleep on the Voting Rights Act and other critical areas and pacify conservative white voters. Yet, North Carolina is showing that if the Democrats want black ballots anywhere in this country, they'll have to quickly get their act together.

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