

Right To Vote Their Problem, Leaders Say

This is the second in a series of articles on "The Negro In Peoria." In this article, Mr. Conner discusses the Negro in politics.

J. S. A. M. 4-9-57
By BILL CONNER

If you were to guess about Negro advancement in politics and government, you would have to predict that the first steps would come on the local or community level and work upwards. It doesn't work that way.

Appearances of Negroes in government were first on the federal and diplomatic planes and gradually worked down through Congress to state Legislatures. Very few are found in county and city government positions.

Peoria in the last primary election saw four Negroes run for city posts. Harry Sepsus, a candidate for the Council, polled more than 1,300 votes.

Of his candidacy, Sepsus said, "I was disappointed but not discouraged at the outcome."

He is president of the Peoria chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and naturally is active in the civic, social and religious affairs of his people.

"I was only sorry that the people didn't get to vote on the real issues like excessive taxes," Sepsus said. "They . . . the real issues . . . were covered up by argument over the type of city government."

Sepsus, a checker-packer at Caterpillar, continued, "I just couldn't get to the people. There must be about 6,000 eligible Negro voters, but I imagine that only 25 per cent of them voted. I know in my own precinct, only 200 of 450 voted in the primary."

Sepsus expressed the opinion that Negroes vote independently and not as a bloc.

"IT DOESN'T MATTER whether they voted for me or not, but they should have voted," was his statement. "There is just a spirit of lethargy among them in politics."

Last fall the Federation of Negro Organizations held its first meeting here, but hasn't met since. According to Negro leaders there was propaganda against it because it selected a committee for political education.

The Negro populace, specially that part of it which is more recently arrived from the Southern states, badly needs education in the use of the right to vote, but the Federation will wait until after the April elections to hold another meeting and plan a program.

This need for political education is recognized, but it takes some time to erase the fear which many of the recent arrivals have brought with them from the South. There are also hints of pressure brought to bear against Negro voters in the form of threats of job losses.

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