The Alabama Democratic Conference: History and Development up to the 1980s
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The Alabama Democratic Conference was organized in 1960 to support the presidential ticket of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. The veteran activist and ADC's state field director, Jerome A. Gray recalled the origins of ADC saying, "the way the old-timers tell it, there was a guy named Louis Martin" who worked closely with those would founded ADC.[1] Martin was a journalist and was highly respected as the "godfather of black politics," serving as a Kennedy campaign operative. The Kennedy campaign charged Louis Martin with the task of organizing all southern black leaders and political activists. As a result of his efforts a meeting was held in the summer of 1960 at the famous Paschal's Restaurant. Paschal's was a meeting place for "the black bourgeoisie" and became a frequent location for strategic meetings of civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the final months before the November general election polls indicated that Kennedy and Nixon were running neck-and-neck. At the Atlanta meeting "Martin challenged all the southern black Democrats who came to go back to their respective states and to organize and turn out the black vote."[2] Since this was before the Voting Rights Act, the number of black voters across the South was proportionally very low. A host of schemes and legal obstacles were keeping the overwhelming majority of African Americans in the South from registering to vote. In fact, "Alabama was at the heart of the resistance to minority voting rights. Only 19 percent of the black voting-age population was

[1] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[2] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.

registered" prior to the Voting Rights Act, which was "the lowest proportion in the South except for Mississippi."[3]

ADC coalesced around the political activism of the 1960 campaign drawing from a network of local black political organizations that had been founded in the earlier years of the twentieth century. In various counties across Alabama, black people organized "voters' leagues, civic leagues, improvement associations that were in place."[4] These groups provided the men and women who went to Atlanta for Martin's meeting. One such group was the Etowah County Voters' League, also known as the Citizen Improvement League.[5] Chairman of the League Q. D. Adams wrote that the organization was formed in 1938 "for the purposes of encouraging and assisting our citizens in getting involved in the electoral process and exercising the right to vote for the community's best interest."[6] Adams was one of the six founders of the ADC in 1960 and was highly regarded as a "griot and political philosopher."[7] After the *Smith v. Allwright* decision in 1944, the all-white primary elections, which were established by "Redeemers" and "Bourbons" in southern politics in the early twentieth century, were outlawed. Many of the political organizations, such as the Etowah County Voters' League, formed either before or after this decision to challenge the injustice of disfranchisement. A number of African American "veterans, educators, and civic leaders led these organizations that tested" the barriers of

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[3] McCrary, Peyton, Jerome A. Gray, Edward Still, and Huey L. Perry. Alabama. In *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990*, ed. Chandler Davidson and Bernard Grofman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 38.
[4] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[5] Statement of introduction to the organization by Chairman Q. D. Adams, Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 1: folder 6, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.
[6] Statement of introduction to the organization by Chairman Q. D. Adams, Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 1: folder 6, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.
[7] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.

disfranchisement while educating black Alabamians about the political process. These organizations were critical to the rapid rise and organization of the ADC.[8]

Another founder of the ADC, Arthur Shores from Birmingham was a respected black attorney was the first chairman of the ADC as well as the first black city councilman in Birmingham. Shores was "the dean of black lawyers in the state, and he was the lawyer who tried to get Autherine Lucy admitted to the University of Alabama" in 1955-1956.[9]

Rufus Lewis from Montgomery also helped found the ADC and later became the third chairman. Lewis was a businessman who operated a funeral home, had been a coach at Alabama State University and was also a librarian, receiving his training at Fisk University. At the outset Lewis and ADC leaders on two things: first, they worked to "connect the loose association of all the different county groups and organizations" such as the Etowah County Voters' League to the statewide ADC.[10] Second, "they focused on voter registration."[11] ADC worked to get as many African Americans registered as possible. It was "Rufus Lewis, who was known as the guru when it came to voter registration, education, and mobilization. But the thing that was so remarkable: every person that he registered to vote or made contact with trying to get them to vote, he kept an index card on them. His index card file is phenomenal, and all that goes back to his training as a librarian."[12] Gray fondly remembers Lewis's persistence, "he would go a country mile to try to get a new voter."[13] He organized and led citizenship schools and classes for college students and others to emphasize the importance of participation in the political process. Also, Lewis owned and operated a nightclub in Montgomery called the Citizens' Club.

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[8] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[9] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[10] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[11] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[12] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[13] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.

True to his passion for electoral participation Lewis mandated that to "become a member of the Citizens' Club you had to register to vote if you had not done so already."[14] Prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Lewis was one of ADC's leading advocates for black voter registration. He led a number of county-wide voter registration drives in Montgomery County and taught other activists across Alabama how to organize and conduct campaigns for registration. In a 1961 letter to supporters of African American citizenship rights he noted that the first "County-Wide Registration Drive" was a success, and called on recipients to build on that success.[15] In the letter he offered practical advice and reminded his readers "Many persons doing just a little: but each doing well his or her assignment will accomplish much."[16] Lewis brought to the ADC a long personal history of advocating for black political influence. He had in the 1950s led numerous "Voter's Instruction Clinics" which educated potential African American voters how to navigate the tricky process of passing qualifying examinations and paying poll taxes among other things. But the message of these clinics remained a theme for ADC through the present: if a person wants to be a "first class citizen" he or she must be a voter.[17]

Gray also recalls that even when Lewis's was aging and suffering from Alzheimer's disease that he still remembered the importance of voting and political activism. "I'll never forget," said Gray, "on his either 91st or 92nd birthday, some of the young Democrats wanted to do something for him on his birthday. And so Dr. Gwen Patton, the archivist, who was one of the people who Lewis mentored, arranged for us to go and be there on his birthday. But his mind

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[14] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[15] Letter from Rufus A. Lewis, April 9, 1961. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 15, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[16] Letter from Rufus A. Lewis, April 9, 1961. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 15, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[17] Invitation to a Voter's Instruction Clinic. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 15, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

was going. And I'll never forget, Dr. Patton asked him, 'Coach, why should these young people become voters?' And he just kind of perked up and said, 'So they can have some influence.'"

Also among the founders was a college professor, Dr. C.T. Gomillion, of the Tuskegee Institute. He was the first treasurer of the ADC and "helped to organize a lot of the county organizations of ADC."[18] Dr. Gomillion was the lead plaintiff in the *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* case in 1960. This case was tried by the renowned black attorney Fred Gray and it was appealed to the Supreme Court. Gomillion and his associates in the Tuskegee Civic Association sued the white supremacist Mayor Lightfoot of Tuskegee for his gerrymandering of city council districts in an effort to deny blacks their "citizenship rights" "guaranteed by the Fifteenth Amendment."[19] This was one of the first redistricting cases that considered the issue of racist motivations in the constructing of electoral district lines. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Gomillion and the plaintiffs that their voting rights had been abridged by an intentional gerrymander. This was a major decision as the Court took into consideration the "'inevitable effect' of legislation."[20] It was also important because "it set a precedent for the Court's negating a political boundary fixed by a state."[21] The *Gomillion* case laid the groundwork for overturning "malapportioned legislative districts" in the cases *Baker v. Carr* (1962) and *Reynolds v. Sims* (1964). Collectively these court rulings began to impetus for legislative reapportionment that "ended the rural dominance of state governments in the South."[22] From an early age Gomillion's motto was "Keep Everlastingly At It."[23] That motto, according to Gray, sums up "the mission of ADC politically—just staying at it, just chipping away at the barriers and obstacles to black voter

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[18] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[19] Jeff Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 118.
[20] Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 124.
[21] Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 124.
[22] Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 124.
[23] Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 31.

participation and representation in the state of Alabama. Even though in the early days of the Voting Rights Act you had organizations like SCLC, which got more attention because of King's presence, behind the scenes these men and women of ADC were doing the difficult work at the local level."[24]

Gray also recalls that ADC founders were a "diverse group" representing urban and rural Alabama as well as differing geographic locations across the state. Beulah Johnson, an educator in Tuskegee, was the lone woman among the founders of ADC. Johnson was a close associate Mobile labor leader, Isom Clemon, who also was a founder of ADC who remained very active and was someone who commanded respect when he spoke at meetings. These six political activists—Shores, Adams, Lewis, Gomillion, Johnson, and Clemon were the founders and "early leadership team of ADC."[25] The leaders were, according to Gray, "like circuit riders. They went into counties and met with leaders of different voters' leagues and civic associations to incorporate these organizations into the ADC."[26]

The history of the ADC attests to the tenacity, cleverness, and vision of the political activists who gave their energies and talents to the organization. Once the Supreme Court illegalized the whites only primary, white leaders in Alabama adjusted their tactics and devised a new scheme to limit black political participation. "After the white primary was struck down, Alabama's white politicians came up with the Boswell Amendment that required those desiring to register to vote to interpret the Constitution—it was almost a literacy test since you had to

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[24] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005. Also in a phone conversation Mr. Gray recalled ADC activist Maggie Bozeman, who testified before the House subcommittee in Montgomery in 1981. She was known for reminding people that "you've got to do it locally" instead of waiting for national organizations or the federal government to secure political equality. Jerome A. Gray, phone conversation, 14 March 2011.

[25] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.

[26] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.

prove you could read and understand the Constitution."[27] This sort of action was nothing new. It was a pattern in the Deep South, and Gray recalls numerous instances and stories from black Alabamians who have experienced the obstinate white political leaders—as soon as the law is changed to favor political equality "then here they come with something else."[28]

The fact that the Kennedy-Johnson ticket took 5 of Alabama's 11 electoral votes in 1960 was a shot in the arm to the ADC. ADC members had worked hard to turn out as many black voters were registered in Alabama for that election year. This victory "jump-started the statewide organization." Building on the momentum from the 1960 election, "one of the first things that they began to work on was to try to become officially a part of the Alabama Democratic Party."[29] This was crucial to strengthening the political efficacy of the ADC as the blacks still were not allowed to be participants in the Alabama Democratic Party, and therefore not able to serve as delegates to the national conventions. In 1964 once ADC members were allowed to officially become part of and be present at state Democratic Party meetings and functions one of the first things they advocated for was ridding the party logo of the racist slogan "White Supremacy for the Right." Replacing that slogan with the support of ADC members was the new motto: "Democrats for the Right."[30] "It was almost like removing the Confederate flag, Gray recalled. "Alabama Democratic Party Chairman Bob Vance and his faction supported their move to get rid of the racist slogan of the Democratic Party. And then gradually blacks began to

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[27] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[28] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005. Also see the persistence of white political leaders in Mississippi in reasserting disenfranchisement in Frank Parker's *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi after 1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
[29] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[30] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005. Also see pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery. Sample Alabama Ballots from election years prior to1966 clearly have the "White Supremacy for the Right" slogan displayed on the party emblem heading the column with Democratic Party candidates. Thereafter, the new slogan "Democrats for the Right" replaced the racist message. Collected sample ballots from 1950s-1980s. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 2, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

actually go to the national convention and be delegates and began to feel that they were players."[31] Vance was a progressive leader for the Alabama Democratic Party, embracing the civil rights movement and hoping the make his political party the state's leader in following the recently enacted Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The *Southern Courier* pointed out the significance of Vance speaking to the semi-annual convention of the ADC in 1966. At this meeting, which was held in Montgomery, Vance had taken a bold step for a white Alabama political leader: he was "the first chairman of the Alabama Democratic Executive Committee ever to speak to a Negro audience."[32] Vance assured ADC members at the convention that the Democratic Party "excluded no one" and declared, "The time is past when you take one message to one group of people and another message to another group."[33] At the convention, ADC members participated in sessions on topics including "How to Organize Negro Democrats on County, Municipal, and Precinct Levels," "How to Stimulate and Facilitate Effective Voting in Primary [and] General Elections," "How to Get Out the Vote," and "Developing, Organizing, and Executing a Program of Political Education in Cities and Rural Areas."[34]

It was not until 1968 that Alabama sent its first black delegates to the Democratic National Convention Joe Reed and Arthur Shores. The Alabama Democratic Party was in transition from the late 1960s through the 1980s. In 1968 there were two factions in the Party. "You had the old Wallace types, thugs, who were trying to keep blacks out of the party structure. And then you had Chairman Vance, who went on to become a federal judge, who was pushing

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[31] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[32] Roberta Reisig, "ADCI Doesn't Mention You-Know-Who," *Southern Courier*, October 15-16, 1966. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[33] Roberta Reisig, "ADCI Doesn't Mention You-Know-Who," *Southern Courier*, October 15-16, 1966. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[34] Typed draft of agenda for the Alabama Democratic Conference semi-annual meeting, October 8-9, 1966. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

for more democracy and liberalization and participation in the party."[35] Chairman Vance secretly recruited two white Democrats to run as delegates in their congressional districts and after these two men won, they resigned their delegate slots, leaving them to be filled by appointment of the party chairman. "And Bob Vance appointed Arthur Shores to one of the slots and Joe Reed to the other slot," making them the first black delegates to the DNC in 1968.[36]

On the national level it was Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 who shed light on the fact that black people in the Deep South were denied official access to state Democratic Party organizations and, therefore, were not afforded the opportunity to serve as delegates to the Democratic National Convention.[37] During the 1964 election in Alabama, in an effort to block black voters from playing a part in selecting the Alabama delegates to the Democratic National Convention, some party leaders orchestrated the selection of "independent electors." These "independent electors" did not plan to pledge support for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket, and almost all of them were hostile to the Johnson Administration's support of the Civil Rights of 1964. The ADC protested the seating of the "independent electors" and sent a resolution to DNC officials requesting that a new slate of delegates that supported the national party and presidential ticket be seated in the place of the "independent electors." The ADC called their slate the "good-faith Alabama delegates" who were prepared to represent the state "in the event that the elected 38 Alabama delegates are refused seating or fail

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[35] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.
[36] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005. List of Alabama Delegates to the Democratic National Convention in 1968. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[37] Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 155-196.

to be seated as authentic Democrats committed to support the presidential ticket of the Democratic National Convention."[38]

Before ADC members knew they would in fact have African American delegates representing Alabama at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, they had a plan in place to send representative "observers." The *Alabama Journal* reported in the summer of 1967 that ADC had announced its plan to send some of its members to observe the proceedings at the Convention if they had no elected delegates.[39] The *Journal* interpreted the ADC announcement to be "a subtle warning to the traditional Loyalist Democrats the Alabama Negroes are ready to strike out on their own and form an authentic political party if they are not brought forthwith into the fold of the regular Democratic Party," adding that "such as step would not be difficult, since ADCI is already structured as a party."[40] As noted in the article, the ADC and black political leaders clearly preferred to work within the Alabama Democratic Party structure and desired to have African Americans chosen as delegates through a legitimate selection process. The *Journal* predicted that "the regular Democrats [in Alabama] aren't bold enough to make such a step in such emotional times." The Alabama Democratic Party was certainly at this time in the midst of transition and turmoil. The article discussed the recent battles within the state party organization between party "Loyalists" like Bob Vance and others who supported the National Democratic Party platform and "States' Righters" who supported keeping the white supremacy language on the party logo and were admirers of George Wallace.[41] In 1968, the ADC went on to adopt a

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[38] Position Statement of the Alabama Democratic Conference, submitted to the Democratic National Committee, August 11, 1964. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[39] "A Sounding Into Politics," *Alabama Journal*, July 10, 1967. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[40] "A Sounding Into Politics," *Alabama Journal*, July 10, 1967. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[41] "A Sounding Into Politics," *Alabama Journal*, July 10, 1967. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

resolution, similar to the one they sent to the DNC in 1964, requesting that the Convention would make it "an absolute condition" that only those delegates who "affirm they will abide by the results of the convention and support the national nominee" could be seated.[42]

The experience of the 1968 election and battle over delegates had proven to be a critical turning point in the relationship between the Alabama Democratic Party and the Alabama Democratic Conference. Following the election, party chairman Vance pledged to the ADC chairman Rufus Lewis to reconsider the structure "of the Party from top to bottom in January of 1969."[43] Vance explained that "[o]ne of the most acute problems is insuring that the Party is representative." He hoped with Lewis's and ADC's help to build a party that would include "a broad representative cross section of all citizens."[44]

Once the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had been enacted, ADC activists led the grassroots efforts to register black voters.[45] By 1967, 52 percent of eligible African Americans in Alabama were registered to vote, more than doubling the percentage of registered black voters in 1964.[46] As ADC chairman in the years after the Voting Rights Act, Rufus Lewis reminded fellow activists that "we have not arrived nor are we satisfied with: 1. 51% Negro registered voters; 2. Low percentage of voter turnout at the polls; 3. Lack of unity in our voting—neutralizing or

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[42] Letter from the Resolutions Committee of the Alabama Democratic Conference to Mr. John M. Bailey, Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, July 24, 1968. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[43] Letter to Rufus A. Lewis from Robert S. Vance, December 6, 1968. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[44] Letter to Rufus A. Lewis from Robert S. Vance, December 6, 1968. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[45] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.

[46] McCrary, Peyton, Jerome A. Gray, Edward Still, and Huey L. Perry. Alabama. In *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990*, ed. Chandler Davidson and Bernard Grofman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 38.

cancelling our strength."[47] Also as ADC chairman when elections were nearing, Lewis would send out notices and deliver radio messages emphasizing the importance of voting. Lewis said, "For many years the right to vote appeared to be reserved to a select few and registration seems to be almost impossible. These weaknesses have been eliminated to a great extent and the future belongs to those who participate in it, which is to say that voting is not just a privilege but an obligation." [48] Lewis's memory of the recent past drove him to never be satisfied even when significant gains had been made. In the 1950s, he held meetings at the night club he operated, The Citizens' Club. In a notice for one of those meetings in 1954 Lewis warned that "[w]e are faced with problems that need immediate attention. The White Citizens council had threaten[ed] the rights, freedom and even the very life of every Negro in the South. Any Negro with the courage to speak up for his own rights is threaten[ed] to be denied a job, credit . . . We have practically not voice in the operation of our government. Our elected officials turn a deaf ear to our plea for justice."[49] In this notice, Lewis was emphasizing issues that would shape his vision for political activism for the rest of his life: "We can organize for our wellbeing. Let us not stand idly by and let ourselves be slowly strangle[d] to death. We must increase our voting strength and participate more actively in our government. Let us with faith in ourselves and faith in our people stand together and fight for that which we know is right as God has given us to see the right."[50] Lewis knew had bad things had been prior 1960s and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, and he worked tirelessly to make sure Alabama did not revert back to the injustices of the past.

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[47] Handwritten notes of Rufus Lewis emphasizing the need for continued local voter registration and organization efforts. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 5, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[48] Message from Rufus A. Lewis, President of the Alabama Democratic Conference. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 5, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[49] Notice for meeting at the Citizens' Club, December, 1954. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 5, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[50] Notice for meeting at the Citizens' Club, December, 1954. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 5, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

In some counties virtually all blacks were still denied access to the ballot. This occurred in many places but was particularly the case in black-majority counties of West Alabama, such as Greene County and Lowndes County.[51] So as Gray explains, in 1968 "blacks created their own democratic party, the National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA). This was organized by John Cashin, and that's how the first black elected official in Greene County got elected under the NDPA banner, not the Democratic Party banner."[52] Even though the Voting Rights Act was national law and required strict oversight of areas with racially unjust histories, malevolent whites in Alabama still found ways to circumvent the law. An especially contentious climate existed in counties in which whites found themselves in a numerical minority to blacks as many white Democratic committee officials would not allow blacks to register to vote or qualify as Democratic candidates under the Democratic banner.

Through the years between the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the 1980s, leaders like Rufus Lewis built on a long tradition of black activism and self-politics to train ADC members to serve as voter registration block captains as well as educating people how to approach voter registration at the house-by-house level. Also, ADC produced guides for organizing a precinct for voter turnout with the slogan "Nothing Beats Pavement Pounding" as well as instructions for applying for Voter Education Project grants.[53] Lewis wrote the blue print for many of the voter registration and mobilization efforts that ADC helped coordinate in the 1960s and 1970s. Lewis put together organizational tools and instructional guides for activists who helped to mobilize voters at the block level and precinct level. For all precinct organizers

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[51] For an excellent recent study of black self-politics and the movement for democracy in which African Americans created the Lowndes County Freedom Organization see Hasan Jefferies, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[52] Jerome A. Gray, interview by author, tape recording, Montgomery, AL, 17 March 2005.

[53] Voting Rights Movement Guides for Block and Precinct Captains. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 20, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

he provided a concise set of rules, which he titled "Climb To Victory": "1. Call a general meeting; 2. Call together Precinct Leaders and campaign aides and stir them into action; 3. Instruct them thoroughly in laws governing registering and voting; 4. Win votes with facts. Keep workers equipped with facts on issues; 5. Hold campaign schools for instruction; 6. Start Precinct Leaders on systematic plan for door-to-door canvass; 7. Hold regular meetings with precinct leaders, and send regular reposts to State Leader; 8. Call general meeting to outline plans for Election Day; 9. The goal: Every voter in your precinct registered and at the polls on Election Day."[54] In these guides, Lewis emphasized that "elections are won in the precincts."[55]

Voting rights advocacy was central to ADC's mission since its inception. The quest for voting and freedom rights was one that was lived out with religious zeal among political activists of the ADC. A flyer to promote African American voter registration in Montgomery during the early 1960s encourages potential registrants that Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. says that "Freedom beings at the BALLOT BOX" and that President Kennedy ensures that all U.S. citizens have the right to vote and the federal government will "back up that right." On the back of one of the flyers are various scripture verses written down by Rufus Lewis. Verses from Job 3:7 and 30:3 and Psalms 107:4 about struggles through a dark, barren, parched desert must have spoken to the long and arduous struggle for equality in voting rights. But Psalm 68:6 reminded Lewis and others advocates for fairness that God "bringeth out those which are bound in chains, but the rebellious live in dry land." And Mark 1:35 offered the example of Jesus taking time to go to a quiet place and pray early in the morning, knowing that his day would be filled with trials.[56]

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[54] "Climb To Victory" guide for precinct leaders. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 5, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[55] Guide for "The Precinct Worker and Registration" and "Duties of the County Leader." Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 5, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[56] Flyer announcing voter registration dates. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 2, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

Also, small cards of encouragement were given by ADC activists to those desiring voting rights with a variation on a familiar poem: "I sought my soul but my soul I could not see/ I sought my God, but my God eluded me/ I sought my (VOTE) and found all three."[57]

Churches had been, at least since the post-Reconstruction era and in some cases since the days of slavery, centers of black autonomy and places where African American leaders could flourish.[58] Churches were often the sites of meetings for political activism and churches even helped to organize voting rights advocacy. In the early 1960s, the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Birmingham served as the site of mass meetings and guest speakers sponsored by ADC. Voting rights advocates would come together at these meetings and sing favorite hymns, patriotic songs, and "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as well as listening to performances by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights Choir. Also, at these meetings would be scripture readings as well as speeches from ministers and political activists and politicians.[59] In 1968, the Montgomery County branch of the ADC led efforts to organize a local "Get-Out-The-Vote Drive" for Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey's bid for president. This was part of a national campaign that black churches were promoting. Bishop George R. Baber of the African Methodist Episcopal Church planned the drive in coordination with the Democratic National Committee, and it reached out to over 5,000 churches that would include about 9 million African Americans. Baber believed that voting allowed African Americans to

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[57] Leaflets given out at political meetings. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 2, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[58] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 88-95; 111; 282-285; 612.

[59] Programs of Mass Meetings sponsored by the Alabama Democratic Conference. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

speak out on the "great moral issues where the scriptures shed light."[60] This get-out-the-vote drive, which was organized at the local level by people across the nation, such as ADC members, was the result of a meeting with of African American church leaders from various denominations with Vice President Humphrey. At this meeting "black churches of America called on their white brethren to help them turn back the tide of racism."[61]

In Montgomery, as in other places around Alabama, the "Negro bloc vote" had become a major factor in political campaigns and elections by the late 1960s. According to one Montgomery journalist, local politicians walked a fine line in an effort to get the support of black voters and groups like ADC, while not alienating white voters who expressed resentment at African Americans voting and uniting behind particular candidates.[62] When white voters inquired about who had the "Negro vote" "the office seeker always says his opponent has it 'in the bag.' It's a game of 'seek and hide.'"[63] At this time, the Ku Klux Klan still had an active organization in Montgomery that was active in politics. Interestingly, one black leader told the *Independent* that "[e]very white candidate we talk with says his opponent has the Ku Klux Klan support."[64] Noting that "the number of Negro votes in Montgomery County has more than doubled" since the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the article explained that collectively blacks could determine the outcomes of elections for many local offices.[65] Also this article pointed out that due to the number of complaints filed with the Justice Department

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[60] Montgomery County Democratic Conference News Release, "Black Churches Lead Mass Get-Out-The-Vote Drive for HHH." Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 2, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[61] Montgomery County Democratic Conference New Release, "Black Churches Lead Mass Get-Out-The-Vote Drive for HHH." Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 2, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[62] Joe Azbell, "Mechanics of the Negro Vote Explained," *The Montgomery Independent*, June 5, 1969. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[63] Joe Azbell, "Mechanics of the Negro Vote Explained," *The Montgomery Independent*, June 5, 1969. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[64] Joe Azbell, "Mechanics of the Negro Vote Explained," *The Montgomery Independent*, June 5, 1969. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[65] Joe Azbell, "Mechanics of the Negro Vote Explained," *The Montgomery Independent*, June 5, 1969. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

regarding potential violations of the Voting Rights Act, federal registrars had taken over the county's voter registration process. According to the article, the "mechanics" of the "Negro vote bloc" were structured into the following "system:" first, registration; second, the "20 to 25 man" screening committee that "studies the background of the candidate and meets with him in a secret session" (previously, the writer notes, screening and questioning had been done in public with media coverage present); third, "a slate" of candidates is selected; fourth, marked ballots are printed and distributed to black voters; fifth, precinct captains help get-out-the-vote on election day and keep lists to contact voters who have failed to show up after the first several hours of voting.[66] The voting "bloc" was led locally by four major leaders: Rufus Lewis, E. D. Nixon, Idessa Williams, and James Flowers. Lewis was, of course, not only chairman of the ADC at the time but was a seasoned veteran in voter registration and mobilization efforts. Lewis and Nixon led differing factions within the African American community. Many blacks in Alabama felt bewildered and alienated in a political system in which the right to vote was guaranteed but this guarantee did not mean that blacks could elect black office holders or representatives to the Alabama Democratic Party Executive Committee or delegates to the Democratic National Convention. In response to what was perceived by many as an unwillingness of the Alabama Democratic Party to welcome black voters and support issues of concern to African Americans, some blacks created their own party organizations: the Alabama Independent Democratic Party (AIDP), which Lewis was affiliated with and the National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA), created by John Cashin, which E. D. Nixon supported.

Black Alabamians were faced with difficult choices as state and local Democratic candidates often still advocated "states' rights" platforms that were often slogans for anti-civil

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[66] Joe Azbell, "Mechanics of the Negro Vote Explained," *The Montgomery Independent*, June 5, 1969. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 2, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

rights and the reassertion of white supremacy in the political order. Rufus Lewis guided the ADC through the thorny issues regarding whether ADC members should support all Democrats once the nomination process was over. Virtually all black leaders in Alabama were advocating that African Americans vote; they had fought too hard and too long not to exercise the franchise. Yet, in 1966 black Alabamians found themselves in a quandary with Lurleen Wallace, the wife of the ardent segregationist Governor George Wallace, as the Democratic Party nominee for governor. One black leader asked, "What will you tell your children and grandchildren—that you voted them back into slavery or you have them a chance for freedom? What shall it be—the White Rooster [former white supremacist symbol for the Alabama Democratic Party] or freedom?"[67] Some black leaders debated the difficult decision between supporting the Republican or the Independent candidates for governor, both of whom were white. Since the ADC was officially affiliated with the Democratic Party, the media pressed Lewis on the issue of supporting Lurleen Wallace. Lewis told reporters that it should "not necessarily" be assumed that ADC members would vote for every nominee of the Alabama Democratic Party.[68] "We have not been approached by any of the major politicians," Lewis explained. "They may be taking us for granted. And they know we're in a bit of a predicament as to choices—there's no great choice for us."[69] In frustration, the SCLC state director, Albert Turner, explained that there were in reality "no Democrats in Alabama," the only political party in the state was the party of whites and white supremacy.[70] In 1969 and 1970 Alabama Democratic Party Chairman Bob

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[67] "Nov. 8 Nears - - Political Plots Thicken," *The Southern Courier*, October 22-23, 1966. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[68] "Nov. 8 Nears - - Political Plots Thicken," *The Southern Courier*, October 22-23, 1966. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[69] "Nov. 8 Nears - - Political Plots Thicken," *The Southern Courier*, October 22-23, 1966. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[70] "Nov. 8 Nears - - Political Plots Thicken," *The Southern Courier*, October 22-23, 1966. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 30, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

Vance worked with Lewis and ADC leaders to allow for black representation within the Party organization and to fully welcome the ideas and support of African Americans.

By 1970, the Alabama Democratic Conference had emerged as a major political player within the Democratic Party of Alabama and in a number of counties across the state. In that year, Joe L. Reed became the fourth ADC chairman, a position he still holds today.[71] Reed was a graduate of Alabama State College and one of the leaders of the sit-ins in the snack bar of the Montgomery County, Alabama Courthouse in 1960. 1970 was a critical year as the governor's race as well as all state constitutional officers would be on the ballot that year. Reed and ADC leaders began making public endorsements of political candidates, which was determined by screening committees of the ADC. Also, they adopted a rule that "a candidate must appear in person" before the ADC screening committee to be considered for an endorsement by the organization.[72] With the establishment of the screening committees, ADC Chairman Reed proclaimed, "We're going to decide who's the winner in every state office."[73] Reed said the ADC had a plan to get about 300,000 black voters to the polls for the Democratic primary election.[74] The goal of the ADC was to support a candidate who could win but not any candidate would do. Candidates who received ADC endorsements would "have to give recognition that Negroes are involved in the mainstream," explained Reed while adding, "I'm unwilling to sit at

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[71] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.

[72] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.

[73] "Joe Reed Says Negro Vote Will Decide Winner of Every Alabama State Office," *The Alabama Journal*, April 25, 1970.

[74] "Joe Reed Says Negro Vote Will Decide Winner of Every Alabama State Office," *The Alabama Journal*, April 25, 1970.

the table and deal with George Wallace under any circumstances."[75] Through their endorsement, which was publicized by a "statewide guide ballot," ADC helped elect Bill Baxley to the state Attorney General position and Howell Heflin to Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. As Attorney General, Baxley led efforts to reopen and try the unresolved murders of blacks and supporters of racial equality from the civil rights era. Most notably, Baxley helped to prosecute the murderers from the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham that killed four young girls in 1963. Chief Justice Heflin, the nephew of white supremacist and race-baiting Alabama political leader "Cotton Tom" Heflin, was later elected U.S. Senator with ADC support. As U.S. Senator, Heflin supported civil rights legislation as well as the appointment of the first black federal judges in Alabama, Judge U.W. Clemon and Judge Myron Thompson.[76] Also in 1970, ADC supported the successful campaigns of Fred Gray and Thomas Reed to the Alabama Legislature. Gray and Reed were the first blacks since Reconstruction to serve in the state legislative body.[77] Reed had been the state president of the NAACP and Gray was an attorney who had led legal battles over civil rights in Alabama's Federal Middle District Court, beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott.[78]

In 1972, the ADC had a standoff with John Cashin and proponents of the NDPA. In his frustration at the failure of the Alabama Democratic Party to address issues of concern to black

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[75] "Joe Reed Says Negro Vote Will Decide Winner of Every Alabama State Office," *The Alabama Journal*, April 25, 1970.
[76] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.
[77] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.
[78] "Color Lines Fall in Alabama Legislature," *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

voters, Cashin began advocating that blacks boycott the primary elections of the Party.[79] Calling Cashin a "black George Wallace," Reed exclaimed, "Black people marched 50 miles from Selma to Montgomery to dramatize the need for the nation to open the polling places to blacks in 1965. It was only during the 1940's that black people couldn't vote in the primaries and I'm not going to stand idly by and allow John Cashin or any other pseudo leader to keep black folks from the polls on election day."[80] Cashin who, according to Reed and the ADC, had a miniscule following of perhaps 1500 people that could not possibly speak for average Alabama blacks. Reed argued that Cashin, "a rich Huntsville dentist who lives in the white community and drives a Rolls Royce," was out-of-touch with the interests of African Americans.[81] By the early to mid-1970s, most politically active blacks in Alabama viewed the ADC as the organization on the forefront of securing political power and expanding the influence of black citizens.

In the 1970s the ADC saw its political clout expand at both the state and national level. Hubert H. Humphrey was the first presidential candidate to address the ADC in the 1972 campaign. Also in 1972, Chairman Vance of the Alabama Democratic Party worked with ADC leaders to increase the percentage of African American delegates to the Democratic National Convention to one-third. Throughout the 1970s ADC was central to the election of a number of black Alabamians to local political offices such as mayor, probate judge, sheriff, city council, county commission, and the state legislature. At the local level, ADC activists built on the 1966 election of Lucius D. Amerson as sheriff of Macon County.[82] Amerson, was the first African American sheriff in the United States, and originally he was affiliated with Cashin and the

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[79] Joe Reed, "From the President's Pen," *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[80] Joe Reed, "From the President's Pen," *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[81] Joe Reed, "From the President's Pen," *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[82] "Amerson: America's First Black Sheriff," *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

NDPA.[83] But once the Alabama Democratic Party was reformed to include African Americans in 1970, Amerson clearly aligned himself with the state Party.[84] The ADC boasted that "Alabama now has four black sheriffs" and that Amerson had "put together a biracial force of deputies that approaches law enforcement on the basis of open equality."[85] In 1974 ADC again supported black candidates for the state legislature increasing the number of African Americans in the Alabama House and Senate from 3 to 13. ADC also worked with national Democratic Party leaders and President Jimmy Carter to secure appointments of African Americans to the Democratic National Committee, and federal positions such as judges and the U.S. Marshalls.[86]

The structure and organization of the Alabama Democratic Conference was resting on a solid foundation of political successes and a well-coordinated grassroots network by 1980. The purposes of the organization were by the 1980s defined as follows: "1) to conduct regular voter registration drives and education campaigns; 2) to maintain strong political units in each county and congressional district; 3) to get more blacks elected to political office, and also whites who are responsive to the needs of blacks and poor people; 4) to monitor voting records of elected officials; 5) to screen and endorse candidates, and to prepare guide ballots; 6) to secure legislation which will provide more jobs for blacks and poor people; and 7) to advocate and advance the cause of the Democratic Party."[87] The ADC's structure facilitated vibrant local activism along with support and planning at the state-wide level. Each county in Alabama had a

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[83] "Amerson: America's First Black Sheriff," *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[84] "Amerson: America's First Black Sheriff" *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[85] "Amerson: America's First Black Sheriff" *The Black Dispatch*, July 10-13, 1972. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.
[86] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.
[87] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.

county-wide branch of the ADC. From these county units more than 200 delegates were selected to serve in the Assembly of County Delegates, which was conceived as "the supreme governing body of the ADC."[88] The Assembly elects the state officers and has the authority to modify and amend the ADC constitution and pass resolutions. Also the Assembly receives reports from ADC and other political officials and was charged with the duty of screening candidates for political office and making endorsements once the practice was initiated in 1970. The Executive Committee of the ADC is comprised of the elected state officers as well as the Standing Committee members, which are appointed by the chairman. Also serving the Executive Committee are ADC county organization chairmen, congressional district chairmen, ten elected black officials-ex officio, and ten additional members at-large. The officers of the ADC are elected for two-year terms in non-election ("odd-numbered") years.[89] The Standing Committees include the following: Voter Registration and Education; Municipal and Urban Affairs; Agriculture and Rural Affairs; State and Federal Legislation; Health Care and Social Services; Research; Women's Activity; Education; Job Opportunities; Economic Development; and Credentials.[90] Each county unit of the ADC had a Women's Caucus and ADC mandated that a "third of a county's delegates to the State Assembly must be women."[91]

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[88] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery. Constitution of the Alabama Democratic Conference, Inc. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[89] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery. Constitution of the Alabama Democratic Conference, Inc. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[90] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery. Constitution of the Alabama Democratic Conference, Inc. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

[91] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery. Constitution of the Alabama Democratic Conference , Inc. Rufus A. Lewis Papers, Box 3, Trenholm State Technical College Library, Montgomery, Alabama.

By the 1980s, the ADC had become the "official black caucus of the Democratic Party of Alabama" and held about 25 percent of seats on the state Democratic Executive Committee.[92] Also ADC was holding regular meetings at the local and state-wide levels. ADC organized two state conventions each year, and the Executive Committee met six times each year. Congressional districts held four meetings per year and the local chapters of ADC met monthly. The ADC made it clear that "[m]embership is open to any person who believes in and supports the principles and philosophy of the ADC and the Democratic Party" and that "[a]ll meetings are open to all democrats."[93] By the early 1980s when the fight to preserve the protections of the Voting Rights Act was about the begin, the ADC had a distinctive mix of seasoned political veterans and new energetic political activists that came together as an effective team for lobbying political leaders, coordinating with national civil rights organizations, and skillfully handling media opportunities.

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[92] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.

[93] Pamphlet of the Alabama Democratic Conference. "Political Strength Through Unity" (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Democratic Conference, 1988). Dr. Q. D. Adams Papers, Box 6: folder 2.2, Alabama State University Library, Montgomery.