



A CASE STUDY

Unearthing the Hidden History of the Voter Education Project (VEP)

Historian Evan Faulkenbury on discovering secret links in the civil rights movement. Learn how he used primary source materials from History Vault to research his book "Poll Power: The Voter Education Project and the Movement for the Ballot in the American South".



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Without money, the civil rights movement in the American South would have struggled to sustain itself. We do not often think of dollars and cents when it comes to the black freedom movement—or any social movement—but without financial resources, movements cannot last long enough to enact lasting changes to society.

For my book *Poll Power: The Voter Education Project and the Movement for the Ballot in the American South*, I followed the advice of historian Charles Eagles who wrote in 2000 that civil rights scholars should follow the money and see where it leads.

As a historian, I have always been fascinated by the inner-workings of organizations, and by following the civil rights movement's money trail, I came across the Voter Education Project (VEP). What I discovered shocked me. The VEP is not well-known today—nor was it famous during the 1960s—because its leaders deliberately kept their work in the shadows.

They did so, I later learned, to keep the VEP out of the crosshairs of conservatives who felt threatened by African American political power. By following the money, I found a hidden history of the civil rights movement—the clandestine role of the VEP in funding, bolstering, and empowering thousands of grassroots black activists across the American South during the 1960s.

What was the VEP and what did it do?

The VEP wasn't an impersonal corporation, but a collective of civil rights leaders working to fight Jim Crow at the ballot box. The VEP's leaders were Wiley Branton, Vernon Jordan and John Lewis, and it worked with familiar leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Farmer, as well as grassroots activists across the South. The VEP functioned inside the Southern Regional Council, a progressive non-profit in Atlanta, Georgia that worked to improve race relations.

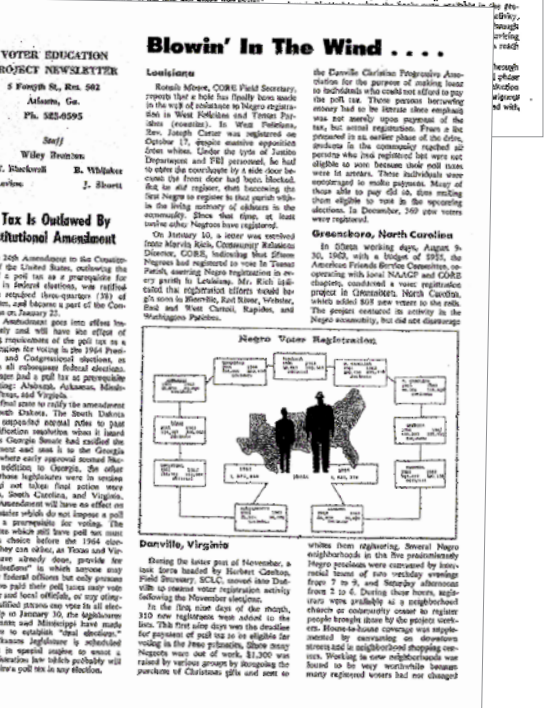
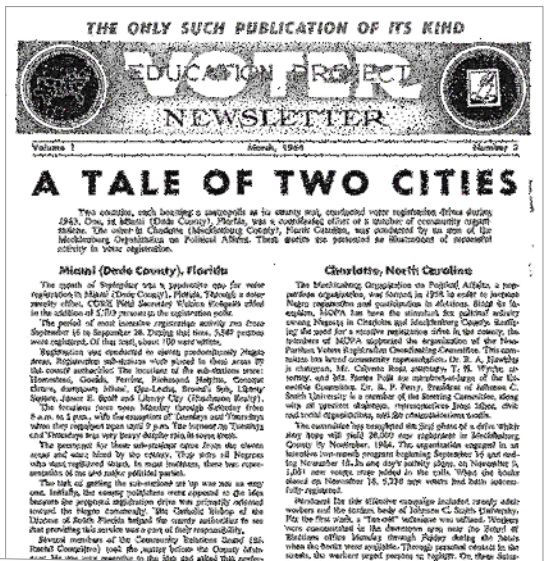
Starting after John F. Kennedy's presidential victory, the VEP began forming when liberal philanthropists reached out to government officials and civil rights activists to ask if they could provide money for black southerners to register to vote. After a year of planning, the VEP launched in March 1962. The VEP empowered grassroots activists working with the Big 5 (CORE, SNCC, SCLC, NAACP, and the National Urban League), along with scores of local independent groups working to register their communities to vote. Between 1962 and 1964, the VEP sponsored 129 voter campaigns, spent over \$855,000, and registered approximately 688,000 black southerners—all before the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The VEP not only helped with registration, but it also collected data from across eleven southern states to document disfranchisement. Because of its efforts, the VEP helped pave the path toward the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The VEP re-started in 1966 to assist newly enfranchised African Americans to seize local political power in places across the American South. In 1969, conservatives placed tax restrictions on the VEP, but it adapted as best it could and lasted until 1992.

The VEP remained discreet during its entire existence, but it played a vital role within the civil rights movement.



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Historian Evan Faulkenbury on researching his book *Poll Power*

Without ProQuest History Vault, my book on the VEP would have been incomplete. In total, I drew on six collections from within the ProQuest History Vault: the Claude A. Barnett Papers, the SCLC Papers, the NAACP Papers, the A. Philip Randolph Papers, the Bayard Rustin Papers, and the President's Committee on Civil Rights Files from the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library. These papers can be researched on-site at archives across the country, but I never would have been able to get to them all, much less find every instance where the VEP existed in their records.

Let me back up and tell the story of my project. Much of my research occurred early on within the VEP Organizational Records at the Atlanta University Center, through the Southern Regional Council Papers on microfilm, and at various archives where men and women who had worked with the VEP had kept related materials.

From the bulk of my research, I pieced together much of the story, but large gaps remained. Since the VEP operated largely incognito, many details were unavailable in the archives. And since not many knew about the VEP, oral histories also lacked specifics. At the same time, however, I knew that the VEP had a wide impact, and that it was likely that materials were scattered in archives across the country. The problem was finding them. I couldn't visit every place in hopes of running across VEP materials, so I resigned myself to telling as full a story as I could, knowing that other historians would fill in gaps in the coming years.

But during my last year of graduate school, my university library purchased ProQuest History Vault, and it immediately opened new research possibilities for my work.

Extraordinary insights from ProQuest History Vault

One of its best features is the ability to search across the entire database.

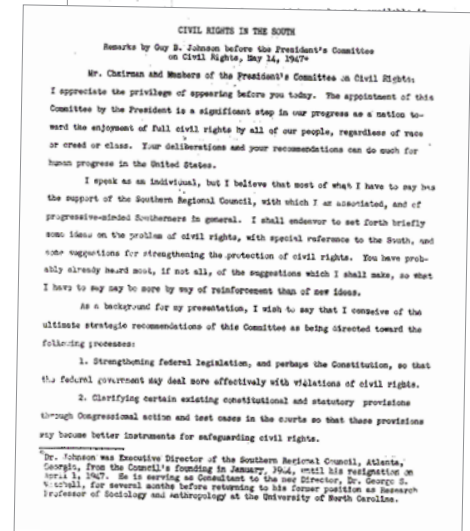
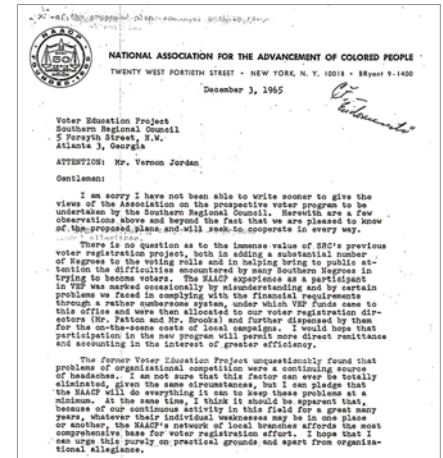
I would not have known to search for materials within the A. Philip Randolph Papers, for example, for Randolph was uninvolved in the VEP. And yet, through my keyword search, VEP-related materials popped up in his collection.

Right now, a simple keyword search for "Voter Education Project" turns up 111 matches. For each, a fully-searchable PDF can be opened and explored. In some, there's only one match for the VEP, but in others, there are dozens. Furthermore, I found many references to activities of civil rights leaders before the VEP even started, sources that helped me trace how exactly the VEP came about. Searching the ProQuest History Vault in this way brought new stories and sources to my attention that ultimately enriched my book.

One new source I discovered through the ProQuest History Vault clarified how Martin Luther King Jr.'s inchoate SCLC emerged after the Montgomery bus boycott to envision how the next great step of the civil rights movement should be dismantling voting barriers.

In the historiography, this jump occurs rather suddenly with few explanations about how King's strategy evolved from boycotts to registration activism. But through my search of the SCLC Papers, I discovered agendas, working papers, and notes from a meeting in January 1957 with King and around sixty other ministers where they discussed how to channel the energy of the bus boycott into a movement for the ballot.

Meeting topics included "How can we use the bus protest to stimulate interest in voting?" and "What broad campaign in the South should be carried on to stimulate interest in and educate Negroes to register and vote?" Looking through these documents came close to finding a historian's magic bullet—they chronicled the exact evolution in thinking that I had been painstakingly trying to explain. This meeting took place years before the VEP started, but it provided crucial context to describe how King and other civil rights activists began laying the foundation for what would become the VEP as early as January 1957. Without ProQuest History Vault, I never would have discovered this link in the chain of events.



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The connection between voting rights activism and peaceful protest

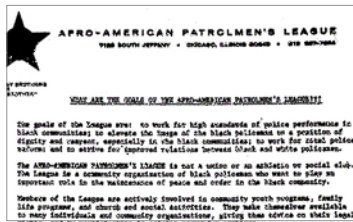
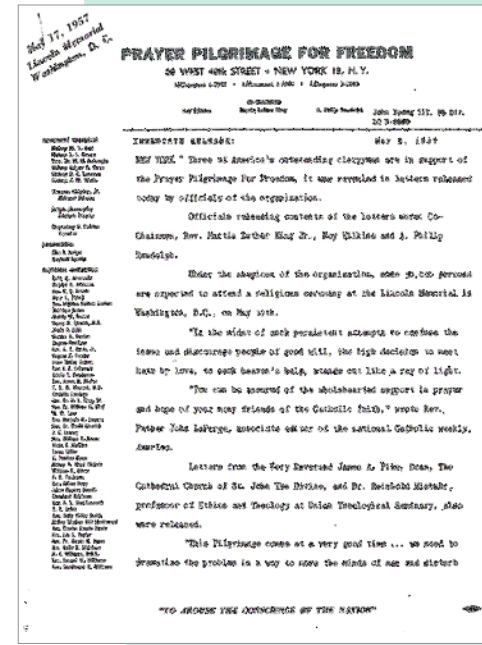
Another source that proved invaluable in laying the context for the origins of the VEP came through a search of the Bayard Rustin Papers. In May 1957, Martin Luther King Jr. and others were organizing the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, a mass rally in Washington, D.C. to protest Jim Crow segregation.

Rustin counseled King on his closing speech, suggesting to King that he link together voting rights and nonviolence. King had already started learning about nonviolence, but Rustin's intervention in his speech cemented the connection between voting rights activism and peaceful protest that would shape the course of the civil rights movement.

In notes to King, I discovered Rustin's advice that voting rights was "where action [was] demanded and where action [was] possible in the wide struggle of community organization." To my delight, through ProQuest History Vault, I had found another key piece of the puzzle that not only traced the VEP's origins, but the very philosophy that guided the movement forward into the late 1950s and 1960s.

These additional stories and sources I found through ProQuest History Vault weren't simply extraneous additions to an already complete manuscript, but rather they completed the story of how the VEP started and why voting became the hallmark goal of the civil rights movement.

Without these sources, my book would've still been published, but it would've also lacked key information. I hope future historians will continue to discover sources through the ProQuest History Vault that will enrich their scholarship.



Extraordinary insights from ProQuest History Vault

• History Vault

- African American Police League Records - New!
- Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Federal Government Records
- Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Federal Government Records, Supplement
- Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century, Organizational Records and Personal Papers, Pt 1
- Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century, Organizational Records and Personal Papers, Pt 2
- NAACP Papers: Board of Directors, Annual Conferences, Major Speeches, and National Staff Files
- NAACP Papers: Branch Department, Branch Files, and Youth Department Files
- NAACP Papers: Special Subjects
- NAACP Papers: The NAACP's Major Campaigns—Education, Voting, Housing, Employment, Armed Forces
- NAACP Papers: The NAACP's Major Campaigns—Legal Department Files
- NAACP Papers: The NAACP's Major Campaigns—Scottsboro, Anti-Lynching, Criminal Justice, Peonage, Labor, and Segregation and Discrimination Complaints and Responses

• Black Thought and Culture

- Black Studies in Video
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