

Six Basic Elements

By Garry S. Shay

The Six Basic Elements are often referred to in reviewing actions taken by State and Local Democratic Parties. Just recently, the Compliance Review Commission (CRC) of the California Democratic Party reviewed actions taken by the a County Democratic Party in removing certain elected members of its Central Committee. The CRC found these actions to be improper, basing its decision in large part on the notice requirements of the Six Basic Elements. These elements are found in the Bylaws of the California Democratic Party, Article X, General Policies.

The Six Basic Elements:

- 1) prohibit discrimination on the grounds of race, color, creed, national origin, sex, age, religion, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, persons with disabilities as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 or economic status;
- 2) require that all public meetings at all levels of the Democratic Party be open to all members of the Party;
- 3) prohibit tests for membership in, or any oaths of loyalty to, the Party [which results in discrimination];
- 4) require that the time, place and agendas of all public meetings of the Party on all levels be publicized fully to assure timely notice to all interested persons and that a full description of the legal and practical procedures for selection of Democratic Party Officers and representatives on all levels be publicized in such fashion that all prospective and current members of the Democratic Party will be fully and adequately informed of the pertinent procedures in time to participate in each selection procedure at all levels;
- 5) require that all meetings must be held in accessible and sufficiently large rooms to accommodate all interested persons; and, finally,
- 6) implore the Democratic Party, on all levels, to support the broadest possible registration without discrimination.

The Six Basic Elements have a very tumultuous history in the Democratic Party. To understand their importance, one must journey back nearly forty years to Mississippi, in 1964, where Fannie Lou Hamer fought for an open Mississippi Democratic Party.

The daughter of Mississippi sharecroppers in Montgomery County, Fannie Lou Hamer was born on October 6, 1917. Hamer became involved in the civil rights movement when she volunteered to attempt to register to vote in 1962. Hamer continually risked her life because of her civil rights activism. Hamer helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, to challenge the seating of the all white Mississippi Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention. This credentials challenge, led to a resolution that at future conventions no delegations would be seated from states where the right to vote was denied because of race. The convention also created the McGovern- Fraser commission to respond to these concerns. The commission established several criteria by which a state party could choose a fair and representative delegation. Hamer's voice, along with others, led to an integrated Mississippi delegation in 1968 and the eventual adoption of the "Six Basic Elements" which govern the Democratic Party today.

This Commission concluded that a major problem faced by the Party was that rank-and-file Party members had been under-represented at its Convention, and that the Party should find methods which would guarantee every American who claims a stake in the Democratic Party the opportunity to make his or her judgment felt in the presidential nominating process. Among the commission's recommendations was that the process be brought out of the proverbial smoke-filled rooms, so that Democratic voters themselves would choose the nominee. The Commission stressed that Party nominating procedures should be as open and accessible as possible to all persons who wished to join the Party.

Its guidelines for delegate selection, produced in 1970, were thereafter the basis for the revision of party rules in substantially all states. Perhaps the most important result of the McGovern-Fraser Commission experience was the demonstration that the parties can take national action that can be enforced on the state and local parties, as was the case most recently in the decision of the CDP Compliance Review Commission noted above.