

This is an interview with George Esser, Director of the Regional Council, conducted in Atlanta, Georgia on May 2, 1974 by Jack Bass and Walter De Vries. Transcribed by Sarah Geer.

Jack Bass: I just wanted to ask you a little bit about that little note I wrote to you, thing commenting on a potential coalition that may be forming in the South. What do you see? Where do you see it going?

George Esser: It's hard to define those things, but I believe the coalitions both are possible and that we see evidence different ways. And I think that what's happened in Raleigh and what's happened in Petersburg and what's happening in the Georgia governor's race are all examples that. . . . There's a lot more shifting of votes, a lot more ad hoc relationships than, certainly, there were six to eight years ago. The very fact that you discover that the black vote is going to break two or three ways here I think is an example. You see a lot more of that than you saw several years ago now. Which means that, well, in this state, looking at the Georgia governor's race, it's interesting that the different candidates are picking different issues, which means that they're looking for coalitions, much more than it was, say, four years ago or eight years ago, here in this very same state. So that I think that there will be much more. . . . That we'll see many. . . the impact of different combinations more frequently in

the future than we have in the past. Because, really, up until two to four years ago, in most cases the black vote was - in most races - pretty much of a unit, and like in North Carolina, well, you tended to have a breakout of the liberal vote, the moderate vote and the segregationist vote. I don't think it's going that way as much any more. The very fact of the tactics of Wallace right now is interesting to me. I think that he's not succeeding in every case, but, you know, the fact he's going out to seek not only the white. . . I mean, not only the black vote, but concentrating on issues he never concentrated on before. He's an interesting fellow.

J.B.: Which issues are you speaking of?

Esser: Well, he's putting a lot more emphasis on some of the human service programs. Of course, he had to. He was put in a position where he had to follow these court decisions. He was. . . I don't think we've adequately reported the extent to which the Alabama state government was under the gun from court decisions. But it seems to me he's been putting a lot more emphasis on reaching black groups and relatively poor groups in terms of this year's gubernatorial race coming up here. And he's got he's bought some blacks.

He's bought Johnny Ford, he's bought Joe . Don't think

Johnny Ford's going to be able to deliver any votes, but *[the national publicity will]* help him.

J.B.: Are they forced to discuss those issues because race is an open issue ?

Esser:

~~Ellis:~~ Well, up until recently. . . well, I don't know. I think race as a surface issue is rapidly receding. But I think that there're a lot

of symbols that're used in place of race. And I don't think that they are as universal as race was ten years ago, but I don't. . . four years ago it was law and order. Still have a lot of talk by southern politicians about welfare. And what they're really talking about is black problems. Certainly race is not nearly so much an issue it was.

J.B.: ;How about busing?

Esser: Ten or five or. . . We haven't gotten any talk on busing. The moment you mention busing, a friend of mine from Florida told me that Askew was running 75-25 - this was late last fall - against the probable Republican candidate. But that that Republican candidate, if he used busing, Askew's '72 statements on busing, he could probably close the gap fairly quickly. Busing is still an issue here. There's no question. . . I mean in the South, there's no question about it. But it isn't an issue. . . . It's an issue in this town. It's an issue in the big cities that haven't had de-segregation. In the rural areas it may still be an emotional issue, but it's not a practical issue, because you've got basically de-segregation in most of the rural areas.

J.B.: It's not a practical issue but even in the rural areas there is still a direct racial appeal? I mean, the word is clearly understood in those terms, isn't it?

Esser: Clearly understood. I guess what I'm saying is that I don't see race in its explicit terms as an issue, but as we get closer and closer to the election, you know, there'll be. . . whatever the state, there'll be more ways that you can discern what the racial appeal is. Because there will be a racial appeal. Because that's a proven vote here.

But it'll be raised in some. . . . It'll be masked in some way. Not that it'll be difficult for you to pick it out, but it'll be masked.

J.B.: Still think it's the way to get elected?

Esser: Well, it isn't the way to get elected straight, you know, I don't think. The very fact that there is a growing feeling in this state that Maddox is not a shoo-in is evidence that it isn't the only way to get elected. Of course, Maddox is a figure who is somewhat different from a lot of other figures. . . from a lot of other politicians. And he's driven away a lot of support, not only by colorful defense of the southern way of life, but also he's driven away a lot of support by the way he handled the senate last session. His association with a group of power brokers. But I would say it's between. . . . I don't think that most southern states are. . . I would say this. A candidate who makes it clear where he stands on the racial issue, and still deals with some of the issues that affect most other people, is going to be stronger than anyone who comes in who tries to make it a straight-forward clean campaign. Because there is. . . . The South has still got very deep roots in racism. It's being reflected in different ways, but they are there. You know, I like the fact that you don't have it as an open issue, but I went up to. . . . I went back to Washington with Andy one weekend last year. We had to go to a meeting together. And they had just passed the vote on. . . some vote in the House of Representatives that I think was related to busing. And he. . . I. . . he was as low as I've ever seen him, because he realized

But he said the House was a shambles in that whole situation. Should hear and listen to them on TV, to the Georgia General Assembly.

I tried to, frequently, this winter before I went to bed, the education TV station re-broadcast a lot of it. Astounding how clearly the out and out racist rhetoric, that the newspapers didn't generally report, but when you listen to what they were saying, there was no question about where they were coming from. Now, how the politician decides he's going to approach that issue, in terms of getting votes. . . . I guess that what I'm saying is I've seen that in the process of change, and we haven't gotten along far enough in this election, to determine how it's going to be reflected. Which politician is going to come out using that as an issue, and whether they're all going to leave that issue to Maddox in the first primary. Which they may do. Well, I don't know about the minor candidates, but, I mean, Gambrell, Busby, Lance and Rowan may leave that to Maddox in the first primary. I haven't been following enough of the South Carolina gubernatorial or the North Carolina senatorial to know, but. . . . You all have been seeing it a lot more closely at hand than I have. And I would say that the black leadership has, in the past two months, . . . are hopeful but not confident that there's a real. . . that there's any real shift. And John Lewis, who is very disturbed that there seems to be a breaking away, not only on the part of Ford, but on the part of some other lower level black leadership in Alabama, to Wallace. That's why he came out. . . that's why he went down and made the strong statement. So far, there's nothing like that in. . . . I don't think there's anything like that in Mississippi. Your problem states are still the deep southern states, or the Deep South areas of a state like this, rather than. . . certainly Atlanta is not a big problem in that respect.

J.B.: Are you saying that people's attitudes have basically not changed?

Esser: Well, I'm saying that there is. . . they're in the process of changing, but they haven't changed as much as we would like to think they have. I think that's what I would say. Now, the press, media, do not report nearly as much of the racist attitudes as they used to. And as I say, I think you see a real shift toward the use of symbols rather than outright racial arguments in *[political]* campaigns. But I think there's still a very deep. . . there's still some very deep antagonisms in this region, tending to be more in the rural areas than in the urban areas. So we're

making progress, but we're making it slowly.

J.B.: Is your feeling about the rural areas just based on an intuitive hunch, or is it something based more on having been out there and talked to people in the counties.

Esser: Well, it's been talking to people, listening to those rural Georgia legislators. And, you know, they weren't holding back. They were quite explicit. Talking to people who are working in rural areas. But I wouldn't say that I. . . that my impressions are in any sort of a. . . any sort of a. . . . I haven't been out that much. You've been out much more than I have. More of my impressions from talking to people. . .

J.B.: Well, we haven't. . . . It's hard for us to get out in the rural areas a whole heck of a lot. It's a limited time we have when we go into. . . .

Esser: And we had a group of thirty-five community organization leaders from across the region here . And, you know, they are

very clear, they don't have any confidence in any political leader in the region that they have seen. I mean, statewide political leader who they would accept. And if. . . . On the other hand, when you look, you know. . . . It's interesting, when you look at the acceptance in Alabama and South Carolina, after much effort to avoid the law, but they're both having to go to single member districts in the election of the General Assembly this year, and that's going to be significant. In Alabama, it's going to mean a fairly significant shift in representation.

J.B.: In South Carolina, it's going to mean a substantial increase in black legislators. Percentage-wise, I mean five or six more instead of three. It's also likely to result in a substantial increase in Republican legislators.

Esser: Well, in this state there will probably be six to eight new black legislators. New. . . additional districts where blacks will be elected. But that's still no. . . . They're not about to have a majority anywhere.

J.B.: How do you view North Carolina now, from a distance?

Esser: Over-rated.

J.B.: We had one quote from ^{Guy's 1/10/74} Farrell Geller (?), and he said the further you get from North Carolina, the more progressive it looks.

Esser: In some ways, but, well, I have found. . . .

J.B.: Well, he meant in the reverse sense, though. You're being detached, but the nearer you get to it and see it, the less progressive you find it.

Esser: No, I think North Carolina has not kept pace.

J.B.: Why, though? To what do you attribute that?

Esser: Well, here you're getting into. . . . It's hard to say. I think one of the factors, without question, without saying why it is, but I think the decline of the University as sort of the conscience of the state in producing a really unusual type of leadership for the state has hurt the state. And I feel there was a period from 1915 to 1950 when, for some reason, the leadership or whatever. . . an unusual leadership appeared from out of the University of North Carolina. Those people who were most conservative were. . . certainly they were less racist than their counterparts in the rest of the South. At that time, the quality of state and local government in both North Carolina and Virginia was. . . well, it was relatively honest. I don't mean it was relatively forward, but it was relatively honest. Whereas in the deep southern states, it was a lot of [outright] corruption in the political leadership of each state. Well, these states have changed. The quality of. . . . I think you can chart a very distinct change in the quality of administrations, the kind of people who are in state government across the South. The states that have really had problems are cleaning them out. And not all of them are cleaned out, but you've got Florida all of a sudden moving up, in a ten year period, from one of the worst state governments in the country to one of the best. It's not only Reuben Askew. It's also the strength of a group of legislators. You've got Louisiana undergoing, in some part, its first major re-organization since Huey Long days, directed in part at raising the quality of administration. And I'm saying that only to say that North Carolina is probably no different in the quality of its state administrations than it always has been, but it doesn't come through by

as much as it used to, because the other states have caught up to it or drawn ahead.

J.B.: I have a theory on that, and I'd like. . . I'd just like to get your reaction. My theory is that during the sixties, early to middle sixties, during the period of real confrontation in the South, where the real confrontation occurred, for the most part, was in the deeper South. There was not a whole lot of it in North Carolina. North Carolina was almost bypassed. The sit-ins in Greensboro, but you really didn't have the more direct confrontations that took place in the deeper South. And, as a result, the deeper South has reacted. . . once the reaction came in what we would consider a more positive stance, but probably there was more reaction in those states to those events.

Esser: Well, I think that's. . . . I think that that is true, of the strength of the civil rights movement in North Carolina. That there was never a civil rights movement in North Carolina as strong as it was in those areas where SCLC and SNCC were operating. It never was. There were confrontations, but they tended to be in the cities, so that the strength of the black vote and the strength of black leadership is not as strong in North Carolina today, relatively speaking, than it was fifteen years ago. In terms of the leadership of the rest of the state, obviously the absence of a strong civil rights movement has meant that there hasn't been that kind of reaction. On the other hand, North Carolina's got the highest number. . . second highest number of black officials in local government in the country. Which indicates an acceptance. There are more. . . . I think you ought to look into this. I think that there are more black elected officials in North Carolina

than in any other state, serving in predominantly white communities. Which means that there's . . . which is another measure that there was never a real confrontation and that things didn't split much on racial lines. In terms of general leadership, I think that the thing to remember is that, for a variety of reasons, North Carolina had governors who were almost accidents in terms of their image. And that they were really. . . that the governors beginning with Kerr Scott and ending with Terry Sanford were all really ahead of the state. But there's never been a "liberal" vote, or whatever that means, that's more than 30, 35 per cent. Terry Sanford was elected because there were four candidates in the primary. If there'd only been three, he might not have even gotten in the run-off. If he'd gotten in the run-off, he might have lost. That's what happened to Rich Preyer in '64, when there were three candidates. Terry had to run. . . .

J.B.: necessary on the race issue, right?
Plus Seawell was still left of Terry on the race issue, wasn't he?
Esser: Oh, in some ways. But he was a much. . . he was, on the other hand, he was a much more conservative philosophically, than Terry. Seawell had to get a lot of liberal support. He might have gotten a little black support.

J.B.: Yeah, but he took the stigma away from Terry.

Esser: Took the stigma away from Terry, in that process, but on the other hand, if. . . only if it had been Seawell or Larkins, instead of Seawell and Larkins, there's a strong possibility that Seawell or Larkins would have beaten Lake out of the runoff figures. That's what happened in '64. But when you've got Lake in there, and you were. . . .

you've got polarized candidates, a lot of the Seawell-Larkins went to Terry rather than Lake. Same thing that happened in the Kerr Scott vote. Kerr Scott was a really good example of a man who got elected on old populist principles. The branch head boys But this gave North Carolina. . . and Luther Hodges, who was not a great liberal, but he was a very decent man, and he did pretty good things. This gave North Carolina an image that was better than the quality of the state as a whole. And a lot of people didn't realize that, you know, the accidents of things, that it could have been a governor Larkins or a Governor Lake. Or. . . . Who was Kerr Scott's. . . Charles S. Johnson. The kind of leadership that was there enhanced North Carolina's reputation more than, probably, it merited. Same thing is true today with the University. The University is a fine university, but it is not a leader in the sense that it was under Frank Graham. Doesn't set the tone. . . it doesn't set goals, it doesn't seek to be, not only today, but under Frank Graham and his predecessors, the University was always setting goals for the state.

J.B.: And for the region.

Esser: And for the region. Well, they've alost all interest in the region that is fashionable today.

W.D.V.: Can we talk about the region for a bit? In the period from '48 through '74, what are the basic changes that have occured within the South as a region?

Esser: Well, the biggest change that. . . the translation from. . . one of the biggest changes is, I guess the two biggest changes. One's the

end of segregation, and the other's the translation from agriculture as the dominant economy to manufacturing. Everything else flows from that.

W.D.V.: How is it distinctive from the rest of the country now that segregation has ended and it's moved into an industrialized economy?

Esser: Well, it is significant from the rest of the country only in the. . . in the. . . . It isn't nearly as different from the rest of the country as it was then. It is. . . I guess the difference is mainly in the existence of by-products of that shift. I mean, of the old system. That you have a higher proportion of. . . you still have a much higher proportion of poverty. You have a lower proportion of education, a higher proportion of health defects. Those sorts of things are really carry-overs from the old South. There is still, I think, more. . . for the region, there is more of a sense of. . . a subjective sense of regional identification than in most regions. I don't think it's. . . . You know, I don't think it is in the major sense of identification, but there is the fact that it's growing faster economically and that it has not grown. . . we had not, with the exception of Florida. . . that it has not grown rapidly, gives the region as region an opportunity to do some things better than other regions have done. Everything isn't set in concrete ways, but it's getting there mighty goddamn fast. But obviously the South is much more a part of the nation today than it was twenty-five years ago. Much more like. And it's much more like the rest of the nation in another way, because gradually the population of the South is getting. . .

it's changing in terms of in-migration of people. Of this city. . . it'd be interesting to take a sample of this city. The. . . and see where people come from. Certainly a much higher proportion of those people living in Atlanta today come from other parts of the country than did fifteen years ago. It's really not a southern city in the same sense it was fifteen years ago. It's more of a national city. Because the industries, the businesses, the sales forces bring people. W.D.V.: Where are those changes occurring? Would it make any sense in ten years or twenty years to talk about southern politics as being different from western politics or New England politics or midwestern? Southern politics, you know, starting with V. O. Key's hypothesis, is based on race.

Esser: Yeah, well, I think that we're going to. . . if we follow the trends of the last ten years, that the differences are going to disappear more and more. There'll be less regional identification, less. . . that race will be less of a factor, that there will be much less distinctive about the region than there is today, or particularly than there was in 1957, and more than in 1948. In those years there's. . . you've just seen tremendous changes. And they happened almost, in some ways, without you realizing it. One of the things I've found interesting is when I came here, trying to , is how little real research had been done about the South in terms of really understanding some, from the racial point of view, but looking at another point of view, a lot of things you would have thought that somebody would have. . . if it had regional characteristics, would have looked at. You would think that a lot of research has been done, but it simply hasn't. There wasn't

a good understanding of. . . . You know, we had to do simple things like a demographic analysis, which we're getting out now.

except for what the census has done.

W.D.V.: Are the demographics different from the rest of the country?

Esser: They're still different. The South is still. . . you know, there are seesaws. The South is still below the national average on almost. . . . It's different from the national average.

W.D.V.: You mean socio-economic differences.

Esser: Yeah.

W.D.V.: But as the South continues to industrialize. . . .

Esser: You're changing that. It's gradually approaching the national average, but it's still distinctly different from the national average.

But in twenty years. . . .

J.B.: It's different, also, isn't it, as to black people in rural areas?

Esser: Yeah, well it's. . . it's different. Rural areas are significant in two ways. One is that you have, what, 90 something per cent of the rural black poor who live in the South. But the other is that the South is also the major area where a majority. . . where 48 per cent of the poor live in the rural areas. Now, in significant parts of the South, that's black. I mean, that's white. You know, the Ozarks, mid Tennessee, the Appalachians, some parts of North Carolina. That's white poor, not black poor. But in the middle west, by contrast, where you've got. . . you don't have nearly as high a proportion of rural poverty as opposed to all poverty, as you do in the South.

J.B.: Has anybody analyzed the data on Atlanta to determine whether or not the population from between 1907 (?) to 1960 is significantly different

in terms of where people came from?

Esser: There has been that done, and I could. . . have you seen the. . . Lucy and Gretchen in our library could guide you to this. There are two people who have looked at it. One is the Southern Regional Demographic Group.

J.B.: At Oak Ridge?

Esser: Yeah. The migration patterns in several southern states. And Everett Lee at the University of Georgia over here. For example, every. . . one study is related to a very interesting five year period from '62 to '67. Let's see if I can remember exactly what this was. It was a question of how many people there were per job

In effect, there was little turn-over in the 180,000 at the low wage end of the scale. But at the high wage end of the scale, there were two and a half times as many people holding those jobs in a five year period. Just a continual turn-over. Most of them from outside the state. People coming in to take the job, and people leaving the South and going outside, going away.

J.B.: Right. I understand that, but my question is to the actual. . . is that just a changing of "outsiders" from. . . sort of a constant changing of "outsiders," or was this an expansion in percentage of "outsiders?"

Esser: I can't tell you, but I would tell you that you ought to look at that Oak Ridge data, and you ought to talk to Everett Lee. I think that. . . I mean, my feeling is that it's true. There are a higher proportion of non-southerners in Atlanta today than there were ten or fifteen years ago.

J.B.: When you talk about Atlanta, are you talking about ?

Esser: the metropolitan area.

J.B.: The five counties?

Esser: Yeah. Cause you go out in Cobb and that place. . . you know, that's pretty many subdivisions.

J.B.: Almost everyone we've talked to says that Atlanta is not a southern city, and yet you keep hearing other people saying that all the people who live out in those suburbs, a heck of a lot of them are people who came from rural Georgia, and small towns.

Esser: Some of them are, but a lot of them. . . .

J.B.: And that's what I was just wondering. Has anybody really analyzed the data carefully on that?

Esser: No. I just can't. . . as I say, if there's anyone that's likely to, it's Everett Lee at the University of Georgia. I think that there is one point that is significant. A lot of people have left Atlanta. A lot of them were from rural Georgia or Atlanta. They've left Atlanta, left south-west Atlanta for the suburbs. All those white suburbs in south-west Atlanta, built in the sixties, are now black suburbs. The change that took place *[there in]* just about five years. But I don't find, you know. . . that's something that ought to be probed. Some of the evidence I've seen. . . I mean, this again is subjective evidence. The people who come in to Atlanta from outside are just as likely or more likely to go out into the all white suburbs as the. . . actually, in south-west Atlanta today, you'll find that the white. . . the resident white population, which makes it a mixed, integrated area, are people who have always lived

in the suburbs. Georgia's got. . . you know, they only had that one Republican congressman left. He's one of the most conservative Republicans in the House, *[and lives in DeKalb]* county. Then Blackburn is just unbelievably conservative.

J.B.: He's not much more conservative than the rest of the Republican congressmen from the South, with one or two exceptions.

Esser: With one or two. . . . Well, yeah. Maybe so.

J.B.: He's sort of a typical southern Republican congressman.

Esser: Of course, I think that's one point I don't know how to evaluate.

But the Republican party in the South is a different Republican party in many ways, with the exception of the leadership that comes out of the traditional Republican areas, in western North Carolina or south-western Virginia. The Holtons and the Holshousers and people like that. But the Republican party, in so many ways, is the refuge of a lot of the old conservative but affluent vote. They've just left the Democratic party *[looking for a]* refuge of more segregation.

Which has meant that the image of the Republican party, with some exceptions, has been quite different, it seems to me, in the South than it has in intensely competitive parts of the rest of the country.

W.D.V.: That's another one of the basic changes that occurred in the last twenty-five years, the nature of the Republican party.

Esser: It's changed, but it doesn't mean the nature of the voter has necessarily changed, in that you still don't have. . . in some parts of the South, the Republican party is, you know, it's a re-shuffling of party labels on the part of a lot of individuals. But there isn't, and I think that's probably in the long run helpful. But it still hasn't

made. . . . The Republican party, it seems to me, hasn't benefitted from real local, statewide competition. That's the advantage of Holshouser winning, or of Holton winning, or of Dunn winning. But what happens in the long run? Tennessee's probably more competitive, today, on more levels, than any other. . . than Virginia and North Carolina. That is, the party as a party, at all levels of politics. There's a lot of the DeKalb County voters for Blackburn will vote in the Democratic primary again this year. They're still registered Democrats.

J.B.: They don't register, actually, in Georgia?

Esser: Some of them don't register. Yeah, well, that's right. You don't register to. . . . I've never been here during a primary.

J.B.: You decide which primary you want to vote in and. . . .

Esser: I keep thinking of North Carolina.

J.B.: Do you feel that there is a difference between the South and the rest of the country, in terms of racial attitudes based on the idea that, you know, the old tradition of the South, blacks and whites were together more as individuals, had more individual relationships. . . .

Esser: Has that been an advantage?

J.B.: Has that resulted in a distinction in racial attitudes in the North and the South?

Esser: Well, to some extent, I think. It's not only the fact that it's was on an individual basis that there's a. . . . Rural areas, where there were fewer people involved as opposed to the ghettos of the north.

J.B.: Well, on a personal basis, more?

Esser: Well, I think it's more that, yeah, there is some difference there.

But the fact that you still see more people in the smaller cities, rural areas, I mean, that there is a more personal relationship other than, you know, you go to New York or Washington, Newark, to areas of great isolation, you know, from one area to another. There's one other factor I think is important about the South, and politically I don't know how to put it in, but Walter ought to be sensitive to it. That is there's no. . . there's very little ethnic population down here.

[except in] isolated places, little spots here and there.

The white population in the South is 95 per cent or more northern and western European. Practically no Poles, Italians, Hungarians, Slavs, anywhere in the South, except where they may have migrated in the last ten years.

J.B.: To what extent to you consider religious fundamentalism a political factor in the South?

Esser: Still can't buy a drink in North Carolina. I use that as a symbol.

W.D.V.: That's right. It went down two to one.

Esser: I think religious fundamentalism, of which. . . . You see, this is one of the points I'm making. If the white population of the South had also had some ethnic diversity, there would not have been as much of the. . . of this cultural unity, religious and cultural, that you find in the South. The Baptist Church is still the major institutional force in the South. The Methodist Church is second. In a given situation, they can, you know. . . it doesn't mean they're going to it. But still. . . and it's not as important as it was twenty years ago. But it's still, I think, the major institutional force in the South, to the extent they want to try to make it.

J.B.: How much of Lester Maddox's appeal is based on race, and how

much on his religious orientation?

Esser: You've got to recognize that at that level of the religion that they're merged.

J.B.: It's the merger of the two that makes him such a potent force, right?

Esser: Because, you see, fundamentally, ^{they} / have no problem about the racial attitude. The Bible, as they read it, proved they were right. And that's why the church was no real force for change in the South. And that goes. . . and you can go all the way back to the pre-Civil War days to find where that was worked out and rationalized.

J.B.: To defend slavery?

Esser: To rationalize slavery, and it's just continued.

J.B.: To what extent is the removal of race as an overt political issue a result of the Voting Rights Act and voting by blacks on a large scale?

Esser: In some parts of the South, it is a very significant force. Where the black vote is the swing vote. Which tends to be in city elections. And until recently, the statewide elections. And it would seem to me that it was really having an impact on, and therefore had an impact on the response of political candidates, was the vote for governor. That's where it. . . it didn't tend to hit the congressional races nearly as hard. Didn't tend to hit, for some reason, the senatorial races nearly as hard. But in North Carolina, Terry Sanford was elected by the black vote. I mean, the difference between the Republican vote and the Democratic vote was obviously the black vote. Same in South Carolina. Look at the West-Watson race.

J.B.: West-Watson. You can look at Hollins-Parker. You can look at McNair - ~~Ellis~~ ^gJoe Rogers.

Esser: Yeah.

J.B.: A lot of congressional races.

Esser: Until this. . . . Then, as more and more blacks got registered, and more emphasis, you know. . . . There was an opportunity which began to filter down to other levels. You would have found it much more, you know. . . . For example, someone was telling me the other day of really significant shifts in voting by Walter Flowers in the Tuscaloosa area of Alabama. That he's worried about his black constituency.

J.B.: Who's the Georgia congressman from the Augusta area?

Esser: Beau Ginn?

J.B.: No.

Esser: No. Flint? No, not. . . . Anyhow, you can see changes. Ginn, I think. He's a new congressman. Savannah.

W.D.V.: Talmadge is not a bad example.

Esser: Well, Talmadge is not a bad example, that's right. Both. . . and you see a very significant thing when. . . . what was the name of. . . ?

Legal Services Act. had to have closure, both Nunn and Talmadge voted to send the bill to the floor. It also happens that they're two. . . they aren't the only ones, obviously, but they are two southern Senators who not only have black staff members, but they really. . . their black staff members hold some clout. So they both voted. . . . They, you know. . . you wrote them and the letters they wrote back, they weasel-worded every way they could. They waited till the very last minute but when the crunch came they voted to send that bill to the floor. Well, that was

unheard of. I think Fritz did, and there were two other southern Senators out of, what, twenty-five or thirty. But that shows the impact of the black vote on both of them. They wouldn't have hesitated five years ago. But even Thurmond. . . . Incidentally, I'm told. . . you might want. . . someone told me yesterday, and you might want to go back and check it, that when John Gunther wrote Inside America, in the early. . . sometime in the forties, that he referred to Strom Thurmond as a coming young liberal. Strom, though, was one of the first southern Senators to get a black staff member. And he will, . . at one and the same time, vote against something, then make sure that his black constituents get what they have coming out of the things he's voted against. And look at the way they tore down. Shifted

J.B.: Well, I know the whole story on that.

Esser: Well, I know, but, I mean. . .

J.B.: But it's significant.

Esser: It's significant.

J.B.: Victoria called on Strom and told him. Said, "I'm calling you as a last resort." He delivered.

Esser: See, the same thing's true of a woman called Bessie Harper in Montgomery, with respect to George Wallace. She told me one day, she said, "I don't like George Wallace, but he's my governor and he controls money that I need to keep my program going." Bessie Harper has one of the best funded OIC's in the South right now.

J.B.: Victoria goes a little further with Strom. She thinks that Strom changed when those children came. It was a blessing from the Lord, and this was what kind of pushed Strom to change.

Esser: Well, I don't know about that. (Laughter.) But, you see, this

is. . . you know, I don't know. I can't. . . the problem is that, you know, sitting here and having a lot of things come across every day, talking to a lot people when things are trying to keep up to fifteen states. That's why I'm glad that you all are doing this. You see, I. . . . Neil Pierce's book was different, because he wasn't. . . . I mean, he was sort of getting a surface feel. But it's time that what you're doing is done. And I think that. . . but I think that you. . . I think you're also right in having to go, you know, deeper into the causes of why the changes. It's why politics is changing.

J.B.: What are your perceptions about the role of organized labor in southern politics?

Esser: Well, in the first place. . . .

J.B.: Did they play a significant role in those blue collar precincts that Young got fairly decent support in?

Esser: You're going to have some of Young's people there. I know that Al Care worked like hell with some of the other people working. I know that labor brought a lot of the money and help into Henry Howell's campaign. Labor's never been a force in North Carolina. Other. . . it's more of a force, I guess, in Alabama, Louisiana, than it is in the Carolinas.

J.B.: Picking up a little in South Carolina.

Esser: But, you know, labor obviously has never had the kind of role in this region that it's had in other regions. And there aren't many. . there are many candidates who were helped by labor, but at the same time, I've heard labor leaders say that some cases, they wouldn't even admit that they gave help, because the general attitude about labor in many areas is sort of like the attitude about blacks. You got some overlap

there, of course. But labor here is just a kiss of death in a statewide race. I remember Terry Sanford would never admit that he had labor support. He got plenty of money from labor, too, and he helped labor. But he would never admit it. Because it was. . . well. . . .

J.B.: We have to. . .

(End of interview.)