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Interview with Mrs Brownie Ledbetter, Little Rock, Arkansas, June 17, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter De Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: First I'd like you to tell us a little about your background in politics here and what roles you are playing and have played.

Ledbetter: Well, let's see.

J.B.: Let me ask you first about the women's movement.

Ledbetter: That's recent with me.

J.B.: Okay.

Ledbetter: Been involved for 15 years, here. And you know party politics in Arkansas. It's not much party; it's mostly candidates. Trying to change that but it's an upstream battle. I guess the first campaign I was ever involved in was Sen Fulbright's in '62. I'd been involved in the racial crisis here. My husband was stationed in the army, in Germany, during '57, during the heat of it. But when we returned there was still a good bit of

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Walter De Vries: Are you a native of Arkansas?

Ledbetter: Yeah.

W.D.V.: He is, too?

Ledbetter: Yeah. And I got involved in that. And that's where I learned to do most of what I've done<sup>until</sup>/recently, which is political organization. I learned it in the precincts and wards in the black area when we were fighting the segregationist thing in schools. And so that was, I suppose, my basic experience involving human relations one way or the other. Worked with a group called American Women since 1963, which is a group of volunteers, basically. They

speak in various groups. Become a lot more sophisticated here now because we've been federally funded since '71 in one way or another to do, hopefully, attitudinal change. Which is somewhat immeasurable. But I've been back and forth in those two realms, politics and human relations. And also church, traditional kind of activity for women. Then in '62 I worked for the Senator prior to that. But in '64 my husband ran. '68 who'd I work for. Gosh, I don't know. But some Democratic candidate every election since '62, primary and general. And I've [worked?] state committee since '68. Re-elected each time. Got interested in the women's movement. . . .

W.D.V.: Did you go to the national convention?

Ledbetter: Yes. I was a delegate.

W.D.V.: In '68 and '72?

Ledbetter: In '68 I was an alternate. And in '72 I was a delegate.

W.D.V.: Were you on the national committee?

Ledbetter: No. But I was on the credentials committee, the infamous-- that's where I met you, right? I first got interested in the women's movement--is that relevant?--by going to a women's education for delegates election meeting in Nashville, where Bella <sup>A624</sup> [X] spoke. Eight of us went up from here to hear about . Got very

turned on about that. Refused to run for delegate prior to that time. Then we had a lot of politics and some right heavy slate making here. And I busted the slate. It's a political term.

Anyway, busted the slate

at the state convention in in my Congressional district. And then the governor [?] and Charlie Gore, Arch really, appointed me to the credentials committee when Mary House couldn't go. So I went on up to Washington for that session. That was quite a mind

blower because I guess, what, there were six or eight of us that didn't vote consistently pro or anti McGovern the whole time. And there was a lot of pressure on those of us that did some switching. I've always been interested in party politics. I've always been interested in anything that involves more people in the process. Originally, of course, my interest was just anybody, and then I got hung up on the civil rights thing. Blacks. And from there I went into the participation of women. Long believed that party politics is something that would help the South in the sense of having a party that really functioned.

W.D.V.: In that 15 years you've been involved the growth in terms of number of women that have participated and in terms of their position and relative importance of their positions in the party in this state. When did it really start to turn?

Ledbetter: I think in '72.

W.D.V.: Not until then?

J.B.: How many women in the legislature?

Ledbetter: Three.

J.B.: Three?

Ledbetter: Lost one. She's running for judge and won. There's a Republican woman running for her seat. Don't know how she'll do. That will be in the general election. Lost a senator. Dorothy Allen. No one else filed.

W.D.V.: But there's really no period of growth in that until '72?

Ledbetter: There's bound to be some, but nothing you can measure.

W.D.V.: the blacks have told us about their participation. Is there any kind of relationship there?

Ledbetter: Well, you know, it's just subjective kind of judgment on my part. I haven't done a study or anything. But I really believe it's

because the party's not functional. We had a little spurt of two party stuff when Rockefeller came in. Those of us who thought of ourselves as Democrats, kind of make us acceptable to the Democratic party, frankly. I remember in '68. Cal had run for office by that time as a Democrat. Had written Gov Faubus and said he would like to go to the convention and never got a response. There was no party structure as such that you could make those kind of appeals to. There was a state committee but it was traditionally the [Ho.] of the governor and didn't function --still are-- much. And there were separate county/Democratic committees that did their own thing. There was a gap between the two. There was no real organizational operation of the party. Then when Rockefeller came in they became a Republican threat. People like us were more welcome in the Democratic party. [Unclear.]

W.D.V.: So Rockefeller as well as his administration opened up the Democratic party for both women and blacks?

Ledbetter: I think so.

W.D.V.: That a fair assertion?

Ledbetter: Yes. I don't think we were conscious of it opening up for women necessarily. Just who wanted to get involved got more involved. Just more open at that time, you know.

W.D.V.: [Nothing] happened until 1972, is that what you're saying?

Ledbetter: Well, it began in 1968. The Faubus. . . . I mean, after all, 12 years of Faubus, and the governor sat on the party really.

Always had. I mean that was the tradition here.

J.B.: Had anybody in Washington taken any interest in the party? In the Congressional delegation?

Ledbetter: No. When they ran they would all run together as the Democratic team. And we're for a Democrat from the White House to the court

house. Fulbright is the only one I'm aware of--you know, giving my bias-- who ever really pushed us and tried to *[Do anything]* in any way in support of the national ticket. I do think we've done differently than a lot of other southern states in support of the national ticket, which we've always done. Instead of spinning off and going through the business that some states have gone through of not putting the national party on the ticket and varying degrees of that. In '64, through Fulbright's efforts came down here. I worked with him at that time. To go public on Democratic headquarters for Johnson-Humphrey. And that was an attempt really to keep Faubus from publically coming out for Goldwater. Some of the other southern governors were trying to do . And we set up the only organization that there was for him nationally. It seemed to me, you know, that kind of interest/only in the national party just every now and then. We've always been pretty or thought of ourselves .

J.B.: Let me ask you this question. Not for attribution but I think it's important and we were discussing it earlier. About the evolution of black vote.

[Discussion interrupted.]

Ledbetter: I got off. There's some other question that I didn't get on to.

W.D.V.: I wanted to ~~say~~ with that women's participation. Because you say that in 1972 there were five women in the state legislature. Is that right? Four?

Ledbetter: Three.

W.D.V.: Okay. Four blacks. You have the same thing now. Blacks that ran against whites this time all were defeated. Was the same thing

true of women who ran in the primaries this time? Were the women who ran this time defeated?

Ledbetter: We didn't have that many women--

W.D.V.: As challengers now?

Ledbetter: when she was defeated. We had one other. We didn't do very well.

W.D.V.: Is 1972 the first time women were elected to the state legislature?

Ledbetter: Oh no, no.

W.D.V.: That was the first time blacks were elected.

Ledbetter: Yes it was.

W.D.V.: When were women first elected?

Ledbetter: Oh, off and on there've been women on. There've been women who took their husband's seat.

J.B.: You had the first woman Senator.

Ledbetter: That's right, right here from Arkansas.

W.D.V.: But is this the most ?

Ledbetter: I think there have probably been more at other times.

W.D.V.: Well, what in terms of party leadership, whatever that means, state organization, county committees? Has there been an increase?

Ledbetter: There's been an increase. We have two women who are county chairpersons out of 75 chairmen and that's all. And that's a new thing. We've never had that before.

W.D.V.: What about state central committee?

Ledbetter: We're supposed to have 25% but I don't think so, as far as I can count. That's what the . Members of

state committee? What's holding me up here is the consciousness of just placing women because they are women did not arrive

until '72.

W.D.V.: What I'm getting at, did the Democratic party, because of the Rockefeller <sup>[threat]</sup>, administration and both campaigns open up for both blacks and women?

Ledbetter: It did. But--

W.D.V.: Is that an overstatement?

Ledbetter: In the sense of women, it is. It opened up for women because it was an opening generally.

W.D.V.: Okay.

Ledbetter: It opened up for blacks and we were more conscious of the fact of it opening up for blacks. We had to make an effort in the Democratic party to support <sup>court</sup> black participation because we were competing with . And that's a fair statement. Because it became more open, women got more involved.

W.D.V.: Okay. Do you think the Bumpers' administration has been significantly sensitive to appointing women?

Ledbetter: No, no.

W.D.V.: Why not?

Ledbetter: Well, I think that--

W.D.V.: I'm thinking of the polls, Jack, where more women supported Bumpers than in the case of Faubus. His support came in from more females than males. The reverse is true--

J.B.: But I'm not sure of your question, myself. Are you asking her why, in her opinion, it hasn't, or why she thinks he didn't do it?

W.D.V.: I'm asking both.

Ledbetter: Well, I'll answer the last one. I think Dale thinks he is willing to do that. He has certainly given me more of an opportunity than any other governor. And several women, like Diane Kincaid, like

Myra Rogers, like Sheila Anthony. All of us however worked for his [opponent?], which should be fairly significant. You know, I think he wants to do. . . . He has a hang up about qualified women. If he could just find enough qualified women. We've all submitted to the caucus and to the governor's commission on the status of women and through various women's groups, lists and lists of women that could be appointed. There is a study, which you all should have, that the council on human relations did, of the participation of blacks and women in the state. Have you all seen it?

W.D.V.: No.

Ledbetter: I've got that thing at my office.

W.D.V.: Now the council on human relations is a ?

Ledbetter:

And they show that there are more women in this administration, in the state and the commission [and] agency positions. But at lower levels. There are fewer blacks than in Rockefeller's administration.

W.D.V.: Maybe we should tell you in a parenthetical aside what Wilkins told us yesterday. more blacks than women

Ledbetter: I think he probably will. He'd love to. I don't think he's very conscious of

W.D.V.: On that score how do you think you'll fare with Pryor?

Ledbetter: Better. I think David has a. . . . You know, speaking of two guys personally. Both of whom I know. I'm talking about them personally, now, not in terms of their performance from outside because

. I think David's a little more aware of what ~~he~~<sup>w</sup>e mean by involvement. Dale's still got some pretty heavy stereotypes about women.

J.B.: And blacks?

Ledbetter: He's trying, though.

W.D.V.: Is there any kind of a working alliance between the women's groups and the blacks?

Ledbetter: Neither group is very structured, frankly. But most of us that are feminists and have been working with black organizations through the years, too.

W.D.V.: Has there been a positive growth in terms of women's groups?

Ledbetter: Oh yeah.

W.D.V.: How are you perceived by the typical female voter in the state?

Ledbetter: [I don't know whether we are?] We have a membership of about 275. Caucus. The governor's commission on the status of women under Dale, who appointed Diane Kincaid. Did five regional meetings with issues of interest to women. And they were extremely well attended. 500, 600 women would come. We've had a number of caucus conventions, speakers in. We are a coalition and we worked to pass that and failed. And we generally draw, with any meeting, around 300 women.

W.D.V.: How do you compare to other southern states? Do you know?

Ledbetter: A little better.

W.D.V.: A little better?

Ledbetter: Well, I know about Alabama, I know about Georgia. Florida probably does better than we do. South Carolina doesn't do very well at all. North Carolina, they've got a stronger group than we have. Tennessee they've got a stronger group.

But they have a much stronger group than we have here. Caucus, women's caucus.

J.B.: This a bi-partisan women's caucus?

Ledbetter: Yes.

W.D.V.: Are there very many Republicans in it?

Ledbetter: Yes, uhuh.

W.D.V.: Judy Petty?

Ledbetter: She's running against Wilbur Mills.

W.D.V.: Yeah, we interviewed her.

Ledbetter: Did you? She's on our policy council. Was the chair of this Congressional district caucus.

W.D.V.: Are there very many Republicans?

Ledbetter: Let me think. We have about six or seven women, Republican women, on policy council now. The national committee woman, Leona Troxal, who's running for lieutenant governor. Judy.

Couple of county chairwomen. It's predominantly Democratic. The state is. But we have some strong Republican women who do stay involved.

J.B.: Do you see more women running for office after this year?

Ledbetter: Yeah, I think, you know. . . . national caucus so I've got a little bit different perspective. It's. . . I don't know if it's relevant to your book. It's a very diverse group. It's enormous. We're at 100 different stages of development. I think the thing we need the most. . . . We're in kind of a transition between a network with 37,000 people on mailing lists. Just a structured political organization.

J.B.: Any sort of regional caucus?

Ledbetter: No, we have not done that. And we will be meeting at a convention simply to talk about structure and our problems in Wichita this month. And something like that may grow out of it.

W.D.V.: Is there any reason for women in the South to organize by region?

Ledbetter: At this point I don't really think so. I think we need to do a lot of local things. I think we need to get involved ourselves at the county level. School board office and those kinds of things. And to get involved in local issues. That's where we're needed, that's where our level of understanding is about at if you can generalize. We've got some women who are very involved, some women who are very expert, and many women who are not. We've got. . . . I guess the [biggest war?] probably within the caucus are people like me who are political activists. Trying not to be derogatory here. People who are more ideologically inclined. I'm a pretty strong ideologue myself but I'm also a practical politician. And it's very hard. That's the biggest friction.

J.B.: What I was getting at, when you serve in a national women's caucus do you see any regional differences. That that would suggest that the southern women ought to organize separately in regional. . .

Ledbetter: Oh no. No, no. I do not. I find that. . . I guess this year, this past year, in Wisconsin with women, in Illinois with women, New Mexico, Denver, and in Tennessee. And it was the same, almost everywhere. Very interesting. The same kind of interest, the same kind of problems.

W.D.V.: Are there mobility differences? In other words is social mobility more difficult in the South than in the North? About getting elected to public office.

Ledbetter: Oh yeah.

W.D.V.: organization.

Ledbetter: It's more the party. Whatever the strongest party is, the most [typical?] the women are. In other words, from state to state. . . . I worked on the McCloskey thing here, you know, when we were fighting

[Unclear]

Every state I went to, if there was a strong Republican party there then there was a large participation of women. Even as candidates in the Democratic party. Or the reverse depending on. . . . Which were good stomping horses.

W.D.V.: In other words the minority party tends to [unclear].

Ledbetter: To be a little more open.

W.D.V.: candidates.

Ledbetter: Well sure. Well, you know you're not going to have much of a chance against a strong candidate, so. . . .

W.D.V.: Does that work in the South?

Ledbetter: The Republicans have more. . . . Well, I wasn't here.

W.D.V.: The Republican party produces more women candidates?

Ledbetter: Oh yeah.

J.B.: Four of the five women legislators in South Carolina are Republican.

Ledbetter: Sure.

W.D.V.: That only works for women. Doesn't work for blacks.

Ledbetter: Oh, it does here. There were more Republican black candidates the last time. Not this time. When the Republican party was still. . . .

W.D.V.: Yeah, but that's a Rockefeller. . .

Ledbetter: That is. . .

W.D.V.: None of them got elected.

Ledbetter: That is indeed. Well, I've understood, I don't know this to be true, that in other states the Republican party's kind of out to save the Democratic party. We did not have that here. That is one difference.

W.D.V.: No, but that's atypical in the South.

Ledbetter: Yes. So is our Republican party.

J.B.: In the 11 states we're looking at, how would you rate the women's caucus in each of those states, in terms of development?

Ledbetter: I think in Tennessee

Have you been to Tennessee?

J.B.: Not yet.

Ledbetter: You've got to talk to Carlene Waller. I'm sure you'll hear her name.

J.B.: Where is she from?

Ledbetter: Nashville.

W.D.V.: You'd rank that as the strongest?

Ledbetter: I don't know. . .

W.D.V.: I don't know, I think what Jack was asking was to order the states by the strongest, most effective women's caucus in politics.

Ledbetter: Maybe Florida.

J.B.: Put it this way. Let's use a scale from one to ten. Ten is the strongest, one is the weakest. You just sort of rank them. All right, Virginia.

Ledbetter: [Unclear] I'd say four, three.

J.B.: North Carolina.

Ledbetter: Six, seven.

J.B.: South Carolina.

Ledbetter: Two or three.

J.B.: Georgia.

Ledbetter: Three. Four maybe.

J.B.: Tennessee.

Ledbetter: Five, six. In one end of the state, you know, it's very heavy. I don't know. . . the Memphis bunch.

J.B.: Florida.

Ledbetter: They ran an awful lot of candidates. Now I haven't been into that state. I've talked to Mickey Vale a lot and I talk to different ones that represent Florida a lot at the national meetings. Seemed pretty good. What did I do for North Carolina?

J.B.: Six or seven.

Ledbetter: I would say eight.

J.B.: Eight for Florida. Alabama.

Ledbetter: Republican women do well there. They ran an awful lot of women for legislature in Alabama. Highest number. And for Congress. Good heavens, they have women candidates. Oh, probably four or five.

J.B.: Mississippi. Two?

Ledbetter: Two. Except for Pat there ain't much there.

J.B.: Louisiana.

Ledbetter: Oh, two or three.

J.B.: Texas.

Ledbetter: Oh, very strong.

I'd have to give them nine.

J.B.: Nine for Texas.

Ledbetter: They got

J.B.: And Arkansas.

Ledbetter: I guess we'd get around four or five.

W.D.V.: So you see Texas, Florida and North Carolina as the strongest. Why? Is that because of the leadership or individual rank and file.

Ledbetter: Yeah. And in Texas they've got, across the board, some strong folks. Of course they had, you know, Sissy to pull around in the beginning. And they had some other issues. But they've got more organized individual caucuses. Even for the size of that state. Than any of the rest of us. Yeah, I think they would be the first ones.

I say that, not knowing much about the structure of the group at all. Simply. . . well, there's the number of women they ran. You know, I've not been in there. I don't know. There are four or five very strong women that I've worked with from there. I'm mostly talking about

and from reading newsletters for women and individuals that I've worked with. They're strong leaders.

W.D.V.: When a politician tells you that he's willing to appoint women as long as they are qualified women, what does that mean. What does that mean to women?

Ledbetter: Well, it's just kind of an unnecessary thing. I've forgotten, somebody said it, he went to a certain legislator and said "She was very ~~hung~~ up about running." The legislator was to be sure that she was qualified. She was a lawyer and she worked very hard at it. And then after she served in the legislature a while she wondered why in the world there weren't more qualified men.

W.D.V.: Is it a covert. . .

Ledbetter: I think so. It's okay to have women as long as they're qualified. We have the same thing with blacks. It's okay to have blacks as long as they're qualified. I don't notice a lot of qualifications being applied. . . . It's a question of not being deterred about it if it's a white man. You know, that's never attached to a phrase. It's never a part of a phrase, we'll take men if they're qualified. You know, it's not relevant, really. [Bass and De Vries had discussion between themselves while Ledbetter talks.] It's a discriminatory phrase that people don't realize. You know, they're unconscious about it. You did ask earlier about my role. I started out, you know, as a volunteer. I started out doing the things that nobody else did. As I look back in retrospect. I was just eager and

always loved politics. And my husband was interested in it. I felt, growing up here, that there was damn little diversity, if any. All you had was . . . There was no diversity of ideas, there was no diversity of religion. . . . You know. And if you were interested in that, and for some reason I was. I learned better by comparing my thought or belief over against somebody who disagreed. That's always appealed to me. About the only place you could find any kind of diversity is in politics. The political arena in the South. I mean at least there were different points of view about how things got done. It may only have been pro and anti race. It may only have been pro and anti national government. But there was some, you know, diversity. I was also interested, as I said before, in participation, more people getting involved. So I started out, I can see in retrospect, doing what nobody else would do. Organizing volunteers. Getting people to go door to door. Which I had learned in the racial crisis or the aftermath of that. My late involvement in that. How to organize a precinct was unheard of here. What you did if you were in Democratic politics or any other was you rented a couple of rooms or floor if you had the money or were running state wide at the Marriott. And you got a couple of WATS phones and some desks. And you got some bumper stickers and some yard signs. Folks came in and you said "Here's the stuff." You know, and that was literally all that there was. So it was like a new thing and I became something of an expert at organizing people to go door to door. This sort of thing. And that's how I got involved, through my campaign work, in the . . . things. And I remember in '68, when I, with one other woman, was the chair of the volunteers for Fulbright, we had to call it volunteers because it was somewhat threatening. Precinct organization was such a new thing. Why do we

need to do this? Why do we need to do a lot of phoning? Why do we need to go door to door? And I'd go in to train people in local counties to do this kind of outreach. And it was just a whole new thing. That's how I got involved in that. And then with the governor. . . pricked up pretty much. And since that time I've done everything. This one, for Senator, I worked with all the advertising and all the copying. Just was an inside campaign person that dealt with the agencies. . . .

W.D.V.: Who ran that Fulbright campaign?

Ledbetter: [Laughter.]

W.D.V.: That's the second time we've heard that.

Ledbetter: [Laughter.] Bill .

W.D.V.: Nobody, it was Charlie Nobody. We heard that yesterday.

Ledbetter: That's the truth. It was very frustrating experience.

W.D.V.: Did that result in no strategy?

Ledbetter: Oh we had one, just hardly anybody conformed to it. The thing that makes the Senator the very tough candidate/<sup>is</sup>that he is going to do his own thing regardless. . . .

J.B.: Would it have mattered?

Ledbetter: I don't know. How do you know?

J.B.: Why did he race?

Ledbetter: Well, he's a very controversial guy. We're a very paranoid state. Even though we haven't agreed with him he has been somebody we've been proud of. He's been an international figure. There's an old theory that I think is probably true: that we want the governor to be like us, but anybody we send out we don't want to put that foot forward when we go out of the state. The interesting proof of that to me in that in '64. . . '68 it would have been. . . '62 when Faubus was at the height of his popularity really. He wanted very much to run

against Fulbright. Run for Senate. And it just. . . the word came back no. Just couldn't do it. The governor was governor; and Senator was Senator; and they were two different things. [Something about change.]

W.D.V.: Let's go back to that theory. . .

Ledbetter: That's paranoia?

W.D.V.: . . . that we want them like us if they stay in the state and we want them a little different if they go outside the state.

Ledbetter: . . . we're ashamed, but we are.

W.D.V.: Is that a myth? Or do people actually articulate this?

Ledbetter: No, I don't think people articulate it. But I think it's very strong. It was a strong strain in the ~~gears~~ <sup>polls</sup> that we had, even this time.

W.D.V.: I was going to ask you, did the polls show. . .?

Ledbetter: Yeah. . . Even the 60-30 thing, which we knew from the beginning. 57% of the folks felt that the state would have been better served if the governor had remained governor and the Senator the Senator. Very interesting. And they were proud, there was an enormous percentage that were proud of Fulbright's claim. Even hard core Bumpers voters or Bumpers supporters were proud of the Senator. They disagreed with him. But really, we are one of the poorer states, as you know. We were paranoid really before the Civil War. We just had a hey day back there. We had this thing back for Bob Burns. I remember as a kid the whole Bob Burns thing. And then the racial crisis added to that. And we haven't been determined to be what we are in that sense. I mean, been kind of But I think the reason the Senator's always been re-elected is wanting to not take a strong position, and two, we were proud of the ~~claim~~, acclaim that we received. And when you get somebody that you can still

be proud of that runs against him,  
troversial.

, Very con-

W.D.V.: That would suggest that this state suffers from some kind of political paranoia.

Ledbetter: I buy that.

WD.V.: You do buy that?

Ledbetter: I certainly do. We're a very bunch and we've always been that way. I think we're very, very low in our own self concept. I really do.

W.D.V.: Low in self esteem. Based on what? Because of the low ranking in terms of social and economic indicators? Or what?

Ledbetter: Just the whole mythology. Clear back from Bob Burns. In my memory of going North and somebody saying "Oh, you have shoes. Are they from Arkansas?" That whole. . . . And we are oversensitive about it, I think.

[Very low, laughing discussion--unintelligible.]

W.D.V.: Arkansas has voted 23 out of 23 times for the Democratic candidate.

Ledbetter: No.

J.B.: 1876 through 1964.

Ledbetter: Right.

W.D.V.: The only southern state that did that.

Ledbetter: That's right. And even in '48, with three candidates. We could have gone Dixiecrat. We didn't do it. Very significant.

W.D.V.: Yeah, why is the state so yellow dog Democrat, even in presidential. . . .?

Ledbetter: We really aren't. I think we have a. . . . Has anybody not quoted to you Dr Alexander, the old political scientist, the fable he

did. He's been dead some time now. Very colorful guy. One of my favorite stories about the party and that yellow dog thing is that some kid was in his class from out of state, up North or something. Early in the semester he raised his hand and said "Dr Alexander, how do you become a Democrat in Arkansas?" And he said "Well, son, you go out early in the morning on your porch and you look up at the sky and you say "God, I'm [temporary?]" That's all." [Laughter.] And I think that, that really sums it up. No structure, no party registration. And I thought of it as terri--. . . . I've just done a survey for our affirmative action program of the party members that you can identify. And since we don't have registration you can only identify the county committee members and state committee members and officials that are Democrats. Overwhelmingly in favor of party registration. Overwhelmingly terrified to try it for fear that nobody would vote in the primary. But we have just never really got organized. Even with that little. . .

W.D.V.: Isn't that a paradox in a state that prides itself on being more Democratic than others.

Ledbetter: But we're not.

W.D.V.: But you look at voting behavior and you look at your state legislature.

Ledbetter: Yeah.

W.D.V.: Forget about the president in the last years.

Ledbetter: Okay.

W.D.V.: State wide officers and look at the legislature. You've got one Republican in each house. Now where in the South do you have a situation like that? Louisiana, maybe. They got more than that, don't they?

Ledbetter: But they don't vote for the party, they vote for the person.  
See, it's not a party thing.

W.D.V.: But my point is. . .

Ledbetter: That they have the person--

W.D.V.: Why the fear to register as Democrats? Why wouldn't the party put through a registration law?

Ledbetter: Well, when we changed the voter registration procedures in '64, we did it as a bipartisan, blue ribbon, big whingee-ding type thing. And I think the governor felt very strongly, when we talked about the new rule, when I went to see him two or three months ago, four, five months ago, whatever it was. When I got dubbed to do the affirmative action thing in the party. There was a feeling that it would be going back on the trust of the people because we had clearly said on voter registration that you would be free to vote anyway you like. And I've held some affirmative action workshops around the state and invariably I have to explain to participants that it would only apply to primaries and not to the general election. I think we've had a long fear, which was heightened in the Faubus years, of somebody finding out how you voted and you'd lose your job. The ballots are numbers. They still are. We've only got 11 counties where there are voting machines.

J.B.: The ballots are numbered?

Ledbetter: Oh yeah. The ballots are numbered. It's a voting system. The ballots are numbered and there's a rip off--you know, a little perforated thing--that you pull off and put in another box. It's a terribly complicated thing and I doubt if anybody would look up how anybody voted. But there's still a lot of the fear, particularly in the rural areas, somebody might check on how you vote. I think that's pretty much going. And my hope is that we really can deal with the

idea of party registration. I think there's two factors that keep us from having a strong party. One is that the county chairman has the full responsibility of running the primary. Funding it, the whole bloody thing, you know, in the county, in each county. And that's got to be changed. There's an overwhelming sentiment I hope, there is in the party, according to my survey, for some state funds, public funds, for primary elections. Which we've not had before.

J.B.: How about for the state to run the primary?

Ledbetter: I think it would be marvelous, but there's some feeling--

W.D.V.: What do you mean when you say you want a strong state party organization?

Ledbetter: Well, I'm weird. I want it in the terms of an open process. I want it in terms of more participation by people on precinct level even. Most counties don't even have precincts. Where we can get people involved at least on the lower level. Really.

W.D.V.: Doing what?

Ledbetter: Running for office, for one thing. Getting interested in local problems for another thing.

W.D.V.: Let me lay this on you. We talked to somebody, said don't you want to make the party stronger in Arkansas? And the response was "What for?" The Republicans have one member in the house, the general assembly, one in the house, one in the senate. And one Congressman. We don't want to be any. . . weaker than we are.

Ledbetter: You see, what they mean by strong party and what I mean by strong party are two different things. What they mean is what Dr. Alexander described.

W.D.V.: Well, what they mean is they don't want. . . the fear is that if you build a party organization, whatever that means, that one man will

somehow get control of it and you go back to machine politics.

Ledbetter: You see, one man has had control, traditionally, because we haven't had a real organization. Because the state committee is simply appointed by the governor. In fact they may be divvied up with the Congressional candidates that were elected that time. I mean literally, we just sat down and said. . . . Well, I got on in '68 because of my work for Fulbright. Got on in '70 because of my work with Bumpers. You know. Each guy decides who the committee will be and it's done. And nobody objected to that. And none of those men were horribly oppressive. Except possibly Faubus. It was just the system and the way it worked. And the state committee did nothing, really, except in time of general election.

W.D.V.: Well, you might ask, why should the committee do anything?

Ledbetter: Because more people need to be. . .

W.D.V.: People to be candidates, or what?

Ledbetter: I think so. And do some workshops. And get people to understand what the process is.

W.D.V.: Why would the committee, which in a sense is controlled by the incumbents, what to generate more opposition?

Ledbetter: Well, it doesn't.

W.D.V.: Isn't that unrealistic to hope that. . . .?

Ledbetter: Yes. [Laughter.] I'm always going up Niagara. That's just me. I'm sorry. There is an extraordinary lack of competence in this state. We need good people.

W.D.V.: Okay, but the committee is never going to do that itself.

[Unclear discussion between all three.]

Ledbetter: I'll have to admit. I'm a system person. [Unclear short discussion.]

W.D.V.: go very high in the party and they say "Well, look--

Ledbetter: Oh sure.

W.D.V.: --we've got candidates now." We win everything.

Ledbetter: Ask who we is?

W.D.V.: We are the incumbents.

Ledbetter: The candidates in this country have had the party by the tail. The party has . Those ridiculous fights we go through at national conventions over the platform are utterly absurd. Nobody runs on the damn platform. Means absolutely nothing. We have no--

W.D.V.: Means even less here.

Ledbetter: Of course. We have no. . . . And yet we had a few party falls over the platform. Would you believe that? We have no real discussion of issues locally. One of the reasons we are so out of it, in my opinion, or so unaware of what's happening nationally and still somewhat paranoid about what the national party is doing, is because we don't know. We're not up on it. We're not involved in it.

I did four Congressional district workshops for the party. We didn't have much of a turn out. 35-40 folks. But they were fascinated and they got terribly involved. And I just went [over] some of the local issues, like party registration, like public money for primaries, like campaign financing. And they all had opinions and were delighted to be able to voice them. There's no place, there's no way to discuss issues. There is no forum for it. Maybe that's naive but I do feel like if you ask people, damn it, they might get involved.

W.D.V.: I don't understand all this. I just believe you. Yes.

Ledbetter: [Laughter.]

W.D.V.: Just say to you that the people who are in office, you're

exempt from all possible .

Ledbetter: That may be.

W.D.V.: I mean you hold everything. What more is there to hold?

[Discussion--unclear.] What other test is there for a political party?

Ledbetter: [Unclear.]

W.D.V.: No, that's not the test.

Ledbetter: It's my test.

W.D.V.: The test is how many [something about offices]

and from that test, it's the most successful party in the country. Isn't it?

Ledbetter: Well, we got to get rid of that Republican up in the first, second Congressional district.

W.D.V.: We had a nifty talk with Clinton on that.

Ledbetter: Isn't he cute [?]

W.D.V.: We met with Orval Faubus for three hours--

Ledbetter: Oh boy.

W.D.V.: --then we went over to see Clinton.

Ledbetter: Fascinating.

W.D.V.: See, I was George Romney's executive assistant for ~~km~~ six years.

Ledbetter: Were you really?

W.D.V.: So I knew Faubus. So, if we can get back, the test is how many offices you hold. If you base this on the Arkansas Democratic party--

Ledbetter: That's your test. That's not my test.

W.D.V.: I'm saying the practical, political test. And if you measure Arkansas against that, it has performed better than any other party of the country from what I can see.

Ledbetter: This is not my test. My test is people who function responsively

in their own local government unit, whatever that may be. And we haven't got any.

W.D.V.: Then you move from a quantitative test to a test.

Ledbetter: Yeah.

W.D.V.: And your judgment is that the people who are in office are not performing, or don't perform the way they ought to perform.

Ledbetter: It's just that we need everybody we can get to do the things we're lacking, and we're lacking one hell of a lot.

W.D.V.: Yeah, but the incumbents are not going to encourage reform of the system that elects them.

Ledbetter: That's true. But I had 16 candidates ask me to organize their precincts last time. you know, if you get involved.

The thing about Arkansas which I tried to tell Rockefeller--

W.D.V.: I'm not trying to be depressing.

Ledbetter: I understand.

W.D.V.: I'm just saying that when you look at the other southern states or, indeed, the nation and at the test for success in politics in winning elected office and then look at this party in this state. . . . I mean, on a ten point scale, what are you going to give it?

Ledbetter: Let me turn that around. And look at what has this party done for this state? Answer me that? We're 48th or 49th.

W.D.V.: I'm not arguing that, at all.

Ledbetter: [Laughter.] I just think that government needs to be improved, you know. And I think that one of the most important things is the party structure of some kind. We're in all kinds of transition right now. I don't know what the Kansas City thing is going to do. The party. Probably damn little. But, it's interesting. If we don't begin, at some point, to have a level of issue debate or some involvement or some

training ground for people coming up. . . . I mean to me that results in Watergate. I know that's an oversimplification. But there is a candidate, a tube, and an individual. There is nothing inbetween. There is no place to find out for yourself except through the press. There's no place to have your own participation in that process. If you're Joe Blow. . . .

W.D.V.: I think you've just killed your own .

Ledbetter: How. [Very plaintively.]

W.D.V.: Because you had party organization. You had a party in this state. And you still don't have that connecting link at all. As a matter of fact--

Ledbetter: We don't really have a party!

W.D.V.: So then why strengthen your party?

Ledbetter: We've never really had a strong party.

W.D.V.: The parties haven't acted responsible anyway.

Ledbetter: I agree. But what kind of organization are you going to set up in which every citizen who are not interested in going all the way to Little Rock. . .

W.D.V.: In lieu of the party organization?

Ledbetter: Yes, where theyfunction, where they can learn about government, where they can participate in their own local unit of government. Whatever kind of organization or structure can there be for that? That function ain't being met. Is it?

W.D.V.: I got to introduce you to David Broder.

Ledbetter: I have fought with David. No, I do not agree with David. You have governors. Who?

W.D.V.: [Something about David. Something about her running a bar here?] Anyway, he gave us this thing about how the party's .

Ledbetter: He's right. Right about that.

W.D.V.: So I always ask the question, okay, so what's your alternative?

Ledbetter: Yeah.

W.D.V.: And he said there is no alternative.

[End of side of tape.]

J.B.: --discuss, not for attribution, because I don't think you want it for attribution, but I just want to understand the business about the blacks and financing and how that developed.

Ledbetter: Well, other southern states had their problems about not letting blacks register. We never did it that way. We chose the other way. Which is to just vote them like cattle, really. And as I understand it, from the early days, the white manager or the plantation owner, whoever, we didn't have that many plantations here, just *[quoted]* those folks. Put them in buses or trucks, took them down and voted them. And then the leadership within the black community developed into the system where the guy went and paid, you know, got so much money from the white politician. Showed his receipts.

J.B.: Poll taxes.

Ledbetter: Yeah.

J.B.: Dollar a head.

Ledbetter: Yeah. Even had an old truck or an old car and a cow bell they used to use. Drive down through the black community and ring the bell and everybody'd hop on and they'd go vote. Hand out the receipts as they went in. And I guess the test for accountability for that system was how that precinct turned out. The white politician dealt with the black that was effective.

W.D.V.: You mean pay off after the election?

Ledbetter: No.

But you didn't use him next time.

[Unclear.] But there's a lot of room for conning in there.

And it's fascinating to watch some of these guys work. One of the few allowed leadership roles for blacks in the South, let's face it, was that kind of leadership. Not terribly moral, but where else was a guy going to go? Unless you were a preacher or a teacher and there weren't a whole lot of those. So it got to be quite an institution. And then became slightly more sophisticated as the years went on. Pretty much of what I said. . . then picks up with the big change being the. . .

J.B.: Then Rockefeller comes along and. . .

Ledbetter: The racial thing before that, before Rockefeller, the '57 crisis begun the deterioration of that. When we did form coalition here and were successful in electing all but one school board member--and that was a black-white flimflam--and some teacher, some education association participation. And out of that group of people, there are a lot of people who are now very active politically. Many of them holding office. That was the beginning of some of the reforms. Then when Rockefeller came in. The anti-Faubus group. And then a lot of those people switched and became Democrats for Rockefeller.

J.B.: But in Rockefeller's first race, didn't Faubus get a majority of the black vote?

Ledbetter: No, I don't think so.

J.B.: According to Ranchino he did.

W.D.V.: In the '64 run off.

Ledbetter: I'd have to look that up. In '64 he got a huge percentage in this county. He got 62% as I recall in one election and 64% in the other. Those may have been the two he won.

W.D.V.: But then he went to 92% in '70.

Ledbetter: Of the blacks, oh yeah. I was talking about 62 and 64 of this county. [Unclear.] We're about 18% black now. We were 26 then.

W.D.V.: Did the Fulbright people really think that strategy was going to work to buy those black votes?

Ledbetter: I didn't, and I'm Fulbright people. But we're a very diverse group as you may have noticed. I think that many of us did because

many of the Fulbright folks who were basically liberal but it was one unethical                    might work.

W.D.V.: [Something about Fulbright's campaign full of contradictions. The participants must have had a discussion as to whether it was right or wrong to do that.]

Ledbetter: No.                    never come together in any one group.

W.D.V.: Well somebody must have said we've got to decide if we want to spend \$80,000 to try to buy black votes.

Ledbetter: No.

W.D.V.: Is it right or wrong?

Ledbetter: No.

W.D.V.: Or (b) is it effective                    , which is the question I ask. Okay that's one thing.--Do you want to comment on that?

Ledbetter: There's an old tradition. Christ, you've got a lot of little secret groups. And one shouldn't know what the other is doing. And the black operation is always secret.

So that's never something where anybody. . . unless you've got a strong administrative type person, which ~~everybody~~ <sup>Fulbright</sup> is not

W.D.V.: [Unclear.]

Ledbetter: But they all came in with the returns [unclear.]

I ran the McGovern thing here in '72 and I said if there's one thing

we're not going to do, it's that ridiculous stuff.

W.D.V.: All right. All you have to do is take a black precinct and you poll it. It's not very expensive and you find out

[Interruption on tape]

[Unclear.]

Ledbetter: I do not know where it began. I think it began<sup>--it was</sup>/outside the campaign, let me tell you that.

W.D.V.: Here you've got the rational Senator. You know, one Senator's rational. campaign, where the hell it's coming from.

Ledbetter: The thing about the guy. . . . He's just amazing. He is such a contradictory person in a campaign. . . .

W.D.V.: It's as though he has a set of perceptions about Arkansas that *[have no relation to]* reality. I knew a guy like that once.

Ledbetter: [Laughter.] And who was that? Well, it's a funny thing how they get these ideas in their heads.

W.D.V.: Where do you see it going? If this were 1980 and you were looking back at Democratic politics in Arkansas. What would have happened? In terms of politics in the state.

Ledbetter: Okay, phrase that again.

W.D.V.: If this were 1980 and you were looking back, what do you think would have happened from 1974 to 1980? In Democratic state politics.

Ledbetter: What do I think would have happened if what was different?

W.D.V.: What do you think would have happened in that six year period? In the next six years?

Ledbetter: Oh. If I could I'd see us being swallowed by a giant bowl of luke warm pabulum [?]. A lot of touchy, feely politics from Jimmy Carter to Bill Waller to Dale Bumpers, who's better than they are, to the whole--

W.D.V.: What do you mean when you say that?

Ledbetter: Well, nothing definite. Just a lot of we care, we love you. . . .

W.D.V.: Media? Media politics?

Ledbetter: Oh yeah.

J.B.: [Unclear.]

Ledbetter: Oh my god, yes. Help, help.

W.D.V.: Aren't you suggesting that the Arkansas voter--

Ledbetter: [Unclear.] What?

W.D.V.: Aren't you saying that the Arkansas voter can be had by media? And yet you look at some of the campaigns and the amount of money that's been spent in this state per voter on media. . . .

Ledbetter: Doesn't have to do with the money. Has to do with touching that string which to me, as I mentioned before, is basically one of alienation. I think . . . . I do not think much of him in many ways but I think he is a genius in understanding that. He's even been a shoe salesman [?] and he's damn good at it. I think he knows what we feel and I think he knows that we are alienated, that we are insecure about who we are. All of that is part and parcel of that. If you look carefully at the ads, Dale's tv appearances. . . . The interesting thing to me--and I knew it would happen--when Dale refused to debate us, was the sheer genius of his response that we do not want this campaign to turn into a public argument. Now that was sheer genius.

W.D.V.: [Something about spending his money for it?] [Or been used before.]

Ledbetter: It may have. But it works. Because we don't like it.

We've been going through controversy, conflict. We are tired. We are hanging out on this segregation thing. We have more desegregation in our public schools than any place in the nation. That's what I work in.

It is the model for what we're trying to accomplish. We don't know the answers. Some people are hanging in--

W.D.V.: You've still got Orval Faubus sitting over on that hill in Hot Springs.

Ledbetter: Thank god. Did you notice his ads. Have you looked at the. . . ? More discipline in schools. Still the anti-busing thing. Well, we're not going to deal with that because that's controversial and we don't want to talk about busing, damn it. We like it better when Dale ignores it. That's what I see, is that somehow we have to go through that same stage. It seems to me, and I oversimplify everything. . . .

W.D.V.: [Unclear.]

Ledbetter: Yeah, yeah. I knew you'd ask me that. My husband. . . we have this eternal war about this. I'd like to see us, and I thought it was possible. . .

W.D.V.: You want candidates who polarize the state?

Ledbetter: No, I do not. And that's not the only alternative. But there is a way to deal somewhat directly, it seems to me, with controversies creatively, constructively. Now let me tell you, I know that's an ideal. But in working in the schools on a local basis. I work in eight communities in '71 and '72. Little Rock and North

Little Rock under the . You know, this was an enormous conflict. We. . . you know, the pressure we've had from the feds, from outside, to make these changes. The court proceedings. The whole long struggle. We've been forced to deal with a very difficult thing. And in some cases there are individuals who are meeting it head on. Not many. But I thought maybe, through that very thing that's been our downfall and our problem all these years, with the racial situation, we might learn to deal constructively and a little more directly with

controversy. You don't have to avoid it. There are ways to deal constructively with it. But I'm sure I'm wrong. [Laughter.] I mean I'm sure that's not going to happen or we're going to go all through it all over. Nasty attitude.

W.D.V.: Maybe we ought to go ask what his side of the argument is?

Ledbetter: [Old Ed?] Well, it is an improvement, god knows. Dale is a vast improvement and his popularity is attributed--

W.D.V.: Do you think he's vice presidential material, whatever that means. Or presidential?

Ledbetter: Was going to say, what does that mean?

W.D.V.: Do you think he could be president?

Ledbetter: I don't think he's senatorial material. He may develop into that. Because I think Dale is a marvelous consensus man. I don't think that's what we need in the Senate right now.

W.D.V.: What do you mean by that?

Ledbetter: We have got 40 or more consensus people in there already.

I'd like somebody that has some perspective, national perspective.

can get up and challenge an idea or provide some leadership. Just ideas, just some substance, just some directional leadership. And that's not his thing. In my opinion.

J.B.: He's never been in a legislative role before.

Ledbetter: Well, I think he would like that role better. I've always thought so. He's genius here has been in getting this legislature to pass good legislation. But it was not legislation that he created.

W.D.V.: What's his principal weakness?

Ledbetter: Consensus. I just don't see a lot of autonomy there.

W.D.V.: Autonomy? Autonomous from what?

Ledbetter: I just don't see his kind give himself as that kind of leader. I don't see the strength. . . . Of course I've been comparing him to a Fulbright, which is my favorite. I know that. In terms of somebody that will always be at [aisle seat?]. I mean I think that the role of the Senate is vital in this country. But knowing that, I think the perspective that he's had is hard to come by in this country at this time. And it's damned hard to come by in this state. I mean this region. [Unclear.]

W.D.V.: Yeah, but you're saying that Bumpers' weakness is that he's not like Fulbright.

Ledbetter: That's right.

W.D.V.: Focus on, you know, Bumpers himself.

Ledbetter: No, I don't think he's going to lead in the sense that I understand leadership. And the nearest, handliest analogy was the Senator. But a guy who's going to look at the total perspective and see what's crucial and what we need and what can be done about that and develop a plan for doing it. I think Dale will have a good voting record. I think he will try always to do the decent thing. I think he will, as he has done here, push for what seems to him to be good legislation. But I don't think he's a creative guy that will come up with new directions. I think he will go along with them when somebody else does it. That's a problem because there's not many political leaders like that now.

W.D.V.: [Something about giant killer?]

Ledbetter: Yeah, he's a fantastic candidate. I don't. . . you know, that's an enormous achievement. [Unclear.]

W.D.V.: [Something about devil's advocate.]

Ledbetter: Oh, Dale's a good man. I do not mean to put him down.

J.B.: Does Wilbur Mills have enough opposition to even sweat over?

[End of interview.]