

Piven, F. F. & Cloward, R. A. (2000). *Why Americans still don't vote and why politicians want it that way*. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 2 – 17.

The right to vote is the core symbol of democratic politics. Of course, the vote itself is meaningless unless citizens have other rights, such as the right to speak, write, and assemble; unless opposition parties can compete for power by offering alternative programs, cultural appeals, and leaders; and unless diverse popular groupings can gain some recognition by the parties. And democratic arrangements that guarantee formal equality through the universal franchise are inevitably compromised by sharp social and economic inequalities. Nevertheless, the right to vote is the feature of the democratic polity that makes all other political rights significant. "The electorate occupies, at least in the mystique of [democratic] orders, the position of the principal organ of governance,"

Americans generally take for granted that ours is the very model of democracy. Our leaders regularly proclaim the United States to be the world's leading democracy and assert that other nations should measure their progress by the extent to which they develop electoral arrangements that match our own. At the core of this self-congratulation is the belief that the right to vote is firmly established here. But in fact the United States is the only major democratic nation in which the less-well-off, as well as the young and minorities, are substantially underrepresented in the electorate. Only about half of the eligible population votes in presidential elections, and far fewer vote in off-year elections. As a result, the United States ranks at the bottom in turnout compared with other major democracies. Moreover, those who vote are different in politically important respects from those who do not. Voters are better off and better educated, and nonvoters are poorer and less well educated. Modest shifts from time to time notwithstanding, this has been true for most of the twentieth century and has actually worsened in the last three decades. In sum, the active American electorate overrepresents those who have more and under-represents those who have less.

Despite the central role that political scientists typically assign to electoral processes in shaping politics, some scholars deny that important political consequences follow from the constriction of the electorate. In one variant of this argument, nonvoting is defined as a kind of voting, a tacit expression of satisfaction with the political status quo. Since many people abstain and are apparently satisfied, the size of the non-voting population actually demonstrates the strength of the American democracy. Of course, no one has offered an adequate explanation of why this "politics of happiness" is consistently concentrated among the least well-off.

Another variant of the no-problem position asserts that mass abstention contributes to the health of a democratic polity not because it is a mark of satisfaction but because it reduces conflict and provides political leaders with the latitude they require for responsible governance. A functioning democracy, the argument goes, requires a balance between participation and non-participation, between involvement and noninvolvement. The "crisis of democracy" theorists of the 1970s, for example, reasoned that an "excess" of participation endangered democratic institutions by "overloading" them with demands, especially economic demands. This rather Olympian view of the democratic "functions" of nonvoting fails, of course, to deal with the decidedly undemocratic consequences of muffling the demands of some groups in the polity and not others.

A bolder but kindred argument fastens on the characteristics of nonvoters—especially their presumed extremism and volatility—to explain why their abstention is healthy for the polity. To cite a classic example, [Seymour Martin Lipset points to evidence that nonvoters are more likely to have antidemocratic attitudes. Similarly, George Will, writing "In Defense of Nonvoting," says that "the fundamental human right" is not to the franchise but "to good government"; he points to the high turnouts in the late Weimar Republic as evidence of the dangers of increased voter participation, an example often favored by those who make this argument. Will's point of view is reminiscent of the arguments of nineteenth-century reformers who proposed various methods of *reducing* turnout—by introducing property qualifications on the vote, for example—in order to improve the quality of the electorate. Consider, for example, the New York Times in 1878: "It would

be a great gain if people could be made to understand distinctly that the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness involves, to be sure, the right to good government, but not the right to take part, either immediately or indirectly, in the management of the state."

The Contested Vote

American history has been marked by sharp contests over the question of who may vote, the conditions under which they may vote, or just which state offices they may vote for, and how much some votes will weigh in relation to other votes. These questions were hard fought because they were a crucial dimension of struggles for political advantage.

The United States was the first nation in the world in which the franchise began to be widely distributed, a historical achievement that helps to explain the democratic hubris we display to this day. That achievement occurred at a time when the hopes of peasants, artisans, and the urban poor everywhere in the West were fired by the essential democratic idea, the idea that if ordinary people had the right to participate in the selection of state leaders, their grievances would be acted upon. That hope was surely overstated, as were the fears of the propertied classes that the extension of the vote would give the "poor and ignorant majority" the power to "bring about a more equitable distribution of the good things of this world." Nevertheless, the large possibilities associated with democracy help to explain why the right of ordinary people to vote was sharply contested. And if the franchise was ceded earlier in the United States, it was because post-Revolutionary elites had less ability to resist popular demands. The common men who had fought the Revolution were still armed and still insurgent. Moreover, having severed their connection with England, American men of property were unprotected by the majesty and military forces of a traditional state apparatus.

The political institutions that developed in the context of an expanded suffrage did not remedy many popular grievances. Still, a state influenced by political parties and elections did not merely replicate traditional patterns of class domination either. It also reflected in some measure the new social compact embodied in the franchise. Contenders for rulership now needed votes, and that fact altered the dynamics of power, modestly most of the time, more sharply some of the time, as we will point out in the pages that follow. In the early nineteenth century, the electoral arrangements that forced leaders to bid for popular support led to the gradual elimination of property, religious, and literacy qualifications on the franchise and to the expansion of the number of government posts whose occupants had to stand for election. By the 1830s, virtually all white men could vote. And, for a brief period after the Civil War, black men could as well. As the century wore on and the political parties developed systematic patronage operations to win elections, wide voting rights meant that common people received at least a share of the largesse, distributed in the form of Civil War pensions, friendly interventions with the courts or city agencies, and sometimes county or municipal poor relief—a reflection, if somewhat dim, of the electoral compact.

But at the beginning of the twentieth century, a series of changes in American electoral arrangements—such as the reintroduction of literacy tests and poll taxes, the invention of cumbersome voter registration requirements, and the subsequent withering of party efforts to mobilize those who were confronted by these barriers—sharply reduced voting by the northern immigrant working class and virtually eliminated voting by blacks and poor whites in the South. By World War I, turnout rates had fallen to half the eligible electorate and, despite some rises and dips, they have never recovered.

The purging of lower-strata voters from the electorate occurred at precisely that time in our history when the possibilities of democratic electoral politics had begun to enlarge. Indeed, we think it occurred *because* the possibilities of popular influence were expanding. First, as the economy industrialized and nationalized, government intervened more, so that at least in principle, the vote bore on a wide range of issues that were crucial to economic elites. Of course, government policies had always played a pivotal role in economic development: policies on tariff and currency, slavery, immigration and welfare, internal improvements, and the subsidization of the railroads had all shaped the course of American development. But as the twentieth century began,

the scale and penetration of government activity, especially regulatory activity, grew rapidly. It grew even more rapidly during the Great Depression.

Second, government's expanding role in the economy came to influence popular political ideas, and popular organizational capacities, in ways that suggested a new potential for popular struggle and electoral mobilization. Thus, a more pervasively and transparently interventionist state undermined the old laissez-faire idea that economy and polity necessarily belonged to separate spheres and encouraged the twentieth-century idea that political rights include economic rights, particularly the right to protection by government from the worst instabilities and predations of the market.

Expanded state activities created new solidarities that became the basis for political action, including action in electoral politics. For example, government protection of the right to collective bargaining, ceded in response to mass strikes, reinforced the idea that workers had rights, promoted the unionization of millions of industrial workers, and made possible a large role for unions in electoral politics; Social Security reinforced the idea that government was responsible for economic well-being and promoted the organization of millions of "seniors" and the disabled; increased expenditures on social services nourished the growth of a voluntary sector that contracted to provide these services; and the enormous expansion of public programs gave rise to a vast network of public employee organizations, which were naturally keenly interested in electoral politics and had the organizational capacity to express that interest. In other words, new and expanded state activities gave rise to new political understandings and new political forces, and to the possibility that these new understandings and forces would become an influence in electoral politics.

But while the enlarged role of government and the new popular ideas and solidarities that resulted created the possibility that electoral politics would become a major arena for the expression of working- and lower-class interests, that possibility was only partly realized. One reason was that vast numbers of those who might have been at the vortex of electoral discontents were, for all practical purposes, effectively disenfranchised at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Western Europe, the pattern was virtually reversed. There working-class men were enfranchised at the beginning of the twentieth century, and their enfranchisement led to the emergence of labor or socialist or social democratic parties that articulated working class interests and ultimately exerted considerable influence on the policies and political culture of their nations. In the United States, by contrast, the partial disenfranchisement of working people during the same period helps explain why no comparable labor-based political party developed here, and why public policy and political culture remained more narrowly individualistic and property-oriented.

The costs of exclusion were also indirect, for exclusion helped to sustain the distinctive southern system. Southern states had been especially aggressive in promulgating legal and administrative barriers to the vote, arrangements that of course disfranchised blacks, and most poor whites as well, and ensured that the quasi-feudal plantation system and the regular use of terror on which it depended would remain unchallenged within the South. But the consequences went beyond the South to the nation as a whole. Southern representatives always wielded great influence in national politics, largely as a result of the terms of the sectional compromise through which a nation had been formed in 1789. The compromise not only guaranteed the "states' rights" through which the southern section managed their own affairs before the Civil War, and afterwards as well. It also laid out the several arrangements that guaranteed the South enduring predominance in national politics, including the three-fifths rule, which weighted slaves, a form of property, in allocating representation in the Congress, and a system of allocating representation to the states in the electoral college and in the Senate without regard to population. After the Civil War, and especially after the election of 1896, party competition disappeared from the South, and the subsequent disfranchisement of blacks and poor whites made its reemergence unlikely, with the consequence that unfailingly reelected southern congressmen gained the seniority that permitted them to dominate congressional committees.

If the peculiar development of the South was made possible by disfranchisement, southern representatives used their large influence in national government to steadfastly resist any federal

policies that threatened the southern system. In particular, they vigorously resisted the labor and welfare policies that might have nourished the development of working-class politics during the New Deal and thereafter, as a matter of sectional and class interest and also as a matter of ideology. National welfare and labor policies were weakened as a result, and, even then, southern states were often granted exemption from coverage, with the further consequence that the South with its low wages and draconian labor discipline became—and remains today—a haven for industries eager to escape from the unionized workforces and more liberal state policies in the non-South.

The South also illustrates the important political consequences that followed from the expansion of the franchise. Consider, for example, the impact of the Twenty-fourth Amendment of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which together eliminated poll taxes, literacy tests, and voter-registration obstructions that had kept blacks and many poor whites from the polls. In the aftermath of these reforms, both black and white voter participation rose sharply, and as it did, state and local policies became less discriminatory. More important, once politicians had to face blacks at the polls, the age-old use of violence against blacks, which had been the linchpin of southern apartheid, declined sharply, signaling the inevitable transformation of the southern system.

We do not mean by these comments to overstate the importance of the ballot. Voters have limited ability to affect policy, and that limited influence is tempered by other influences. In the United States, a weak party system penetrated by moneyed interest groups and a strong laissez-faire culture were and are constraints on the political influence of the less-well-off, no matter the shape of the electorate. Nevertheless, a full complement of lower-strata voters would have at least moderated the distinctively harsh features of American capitalist development in the twentieth century. Corporate predations against workers and consumers probably would have been curbed more effectively. Enlarged electoral influence from the bottom might have blocked public policies that weakened unions and inhibited their ability to organize. And an effectively enfranchised working class almost surely would have prodded political leaders to initiate social welfare protections earlier and to provide more comprehensive coverage in a pattern more nearly resembling that of Western Europe. Not least important, the enfranchisement of blacks and poor whites would have prevented the restoration of the caste labor system in the South after Reconstruction and the development of a one-party system whose oligarchical leaders wielded enormous power in national politics for most of the twentieth century. The influence of the South, in turn, effectively countered what influence the working-class electorate in the North, its strength reduced by disfranchisement, was able to exert. And finally, the exclusion from electoral politics of large sectors of the working class, as well as the rural poor of the South, precluded the emergence of a political party that could have stimulated greater class consciousness among American workers and the poor by articulating their interests and cultural orientations. In other words, the distinctive pattern of American political development at least partly stems from the fact that the United States was not a democracy, in the elementary sense of an effective universal suffrage, during the twentieth century.

The politics of the closing decades of the twentieth century also illustrate the pivotal role of a skewed electorate. Numerous commentators have pointed out that beginning in the 1970s and continuing through the 1980s and 1990s, American corporations mobilized for politics with a focus and determination rare in the American experience. True, large corporations had always maintained a political presence to guard their particular firm and sector interests in legislative and bureaucratic spheres. However, the economic instabilities of the 1970s and the sagging and uncertain profits that resulted spurred business leaders to coordinate their efforts and to develop a broad legislative program calling for tax and regulatory rollbacks, cuts in spending on social programs, a tougher stance toward unions, and increases in military spending. The scale of this agenda demanded a new and broad-ranging political mobilization, including the creation of an extensive infrastructure of business associations, policy institutes, and think tanks that functioned as lobbying and public relations organizations.

During the same years that business leaders were organizing to break the constraints of post-World War II public policies, and especially the constraints of the regulatory and social policy expansion of the 1960s, the Christian Right movement was emerging. The movement was also a reaction to the politics of the 1960s, albeit less to the public policies of the decade than to the cultural assaults on traditional sexual and family mores with which the sixties movements were associated. This late-twentieth-century revival movement turned out to be, at least during the 1970s and 1980s, an opportunity for newly politicized corporate leaders. Business organization and money are of course themselves formidable political resources, especially when campaign contributions are coordinated to achieve party influence as they began to be in the 1970s. But elections are ultimately won by voters at the polls, and the Christian Right provided the foot soldiers—the activists and many of the voters—who brought a business-backed Republican party to power.

These several developments came together in the election of 1980, shortly before the reform efforts recounted here began. Reagan's victory was made possible by the coordination of business campaign contributions on the one hand, and on the other the voter registration and mobilization efforts of the growing Christian Right with a network of fundamentalist churches at its base. However achieved, the election made it possible for the new Republican-business-fundamentalist alliance to claim that their agenda was in fact demanded by the American people. Among other things, Reagan was said to have tapped deep popular resentments against the public policies that were singled out for attack, as well as vast popular support for tax cuts and a military buildup. In fact, postelection polls showed that Reagan won not because of his campaign broadsides against big government but because of popular discontent with the Carter administration's policies, especially anger over high unemployment. Americans believe that presidents are responsible for the state of the economy, and by that criterion, Carter had failed.

But the truncated electorate may have mattered even more than the formidable corporate campaign mobilization, the surge of activism among Christian fundamentalists, and Carter's failure to manage the "political business" cycle. The underrepresentation of working and poor people, whose living standards were the target of much of the business program, helped to explain the weakness of political opposition to the Reagan administration's agenda during the 1980 campaign and thereafter. Elections were being won in the teeth of public opposition to the programmatic goals of the victors, and one reason was simply that the electorate did not represent the public. The 1980 evidence was clearcut. Polls showed that voters tilted toward Reagan by 52 percent over Carter's 38 percent. But nonvoters, who were nearly as numerous, tilted toward Carter by 51 percent over 37 percent. In a close study of that particular election, Petrocik concluded that the "margin for Ronald Reagan in 1980 was made possible by a failure of prospective Carter voters to turn out on election day."

To be sure, over the course of the next decade and more, a dominant conservative regime did succeed in promoting a conservative swing in public opinion and in the Democratic party. Nevertheless, fast-forward to 1994, the year of another historic victory, the takeover of the House of Representatives by the same Republican-business-fundamentalist coalition, with the fundamentalists now even more prominent and more assertive. The data repeat the pattern of 1980: while the Democrats won only 47 percent of the actual vote, they scored 58 percent among non-voters, according to the National Election Studies, a percentage-point spread sufficient to throw the election to them. In a definitive study of that election, Joel Lefkowitz concludes that "Republicans won, then, not because more potential voters preferred their party, but because more of those who preferred Republicans voted." In sum, nonvoting is important not merely for the intellectual queries it suggests but for its role in patterning American politics.

Movements and Electoral Participation

With their voting numbers depleted and without a labor party, whatever influence poor and working-class people have exerted in American politics has depended mainly on the emergence of mass insurgency. Protest movements dramatized the issues that parties detached from a lower

class base could ignore, galvanized broad public attention to those issues, and threatened to cause the dissensus that parties dependent on broad coalitions feared. In *Poor People's Movements* (1977), we argued that it was when political discontent among the lower classes "breaks out of the confines of electoral procedures that the poor may have some influences." Our view, in brief was that working-class people sometimes exercised power when they mobilized in mass defiance, breaking the rules that governed their participation in the institutions of a densely interdependent society. As evidence for this thesis, we summoned our studies of the role of protest movements of the 1930s and 1960s in winning major reforms. Consistently, the virtual absence of large-scale protest during the 1980s made it possible to initiate domestic policies that dramatically increased the bias of public policy against working-class and lower-class groups.

But the electoral context matters, nevertheless, for it is a crucial influence on the emergence and success of movements in contemporary democracies. This point needs a little explaining, because movements and voting are sometimes treated simply as conflicting and alternative forms of political expression. The bearing of each on the other is, however, multifaceted; some aspects of electoral politics undermine movements, as many observers have emphasized. But other aspects of electoral politics are crucial to the growth and success of movements.

On the one hand, there are features of a vigorous and inclusive electoral politics that tend to suppress collective protest. Electoral arrangements promulgate powerful meanings and rituals which define and limit the appropriate forms of political action. The very availability of the vote and the ritual of the periodic election are like magnets attracting and channeling popular political impulses. Other forms of collective action, and especially defiant collective action, are discredited precisely because voting and electioneering are presumably available as the normative ways to act on political discontent. In addition to constraining the forms of popular political action, the electoral system tends to restrict the goals of popular politics, and even the orientations of popular political culture, to the political alternatives generated by the dominant parties. Further, involvement in electoral politics can weaken the solidarities which undergird political movements, a development which takes its most extreme form under clientelist or machine modes of appealing to voters. And finally, electoral political institutions can seduce people away from any kind of oppositional politics. People are hypnotized by the circuses of election campaigns, while their leaders are enticed by the multiple opportunities to gain positions in the electoral representative system. In short, involvement in electoral politics can channel people away from movement politics....

However, we think the bearing of electoral politics on movement politics is more complex and multifaceted than these simple oppositions suggest. Electoral politics also constitutes the principal environment of contemporary movements, and aspects of that environment nurture rather than suppress movements. After all, the idea of popular rights associated with democratic electoral arrangements encourages the belief that change is possible, and by the efforts of ordinary people. This is the implication of the very core democratic idea, the idea that ordinary people have the right to participate in governance by choosing their rulers. Furthermore, movements may also gain protection from electoral politics, since the anticipation of adverse voter reactions often restrains state leaders from resorting to repression as a way of dealing with political defiance.

Some electoral conditions are more conducive to movements than others. Movements tend to arise when electoral alignments become unstable, usually as a result of changes in the larger society that generate new discontents or stimulate new aspirations and thus undermine established party alliances. Electoral volatility is particularly associated with large-scale economic change, especially change that generates widespread hardship. When the allegiance of key voter blocs can no longer be taken for granted, contenders are likely to raise the stakes in electoral contests by employing campaign rhetoric that acknowledges grievances and gives voice to demands as a way of building majorities. In other words, movements are more likely to emerge when a climate of political possibility has been created and communicated through the electoral system.

Movements also win what they win largely as a result of their impact on electoral politics. The issues raised when masses of people become defiant sometimes break the grip of ruling groups on political interpretations so that new definitions of social reality, and new definitions of the possible

and just, can be advanced. In turn, these issues and understandings, raised and communicated by masses of defiant people, activate and politicize voters and sometimes attract new voters to the polls who alter electoral calculations. It is in fact mainly by their ability to galvanize and polarize voters, with the result that electoral coalitions fragment or threaten to fragment, that protest movements score gains in electoral-representative systems. When political leaders issue new rhetorical appeals to attract or hold voters or go on to make policy concessions, it is to cope with threats of electoral defection and cleavage or to rebuild coalitions when faced with the threat or reality of electoral defections. In this way, the electoral system not only protects and nourishes movements but also yields them leverage on state leaders. The influence of voters is also enhanced, for movements activate electoral constituencies and make their allegiance conditional on policy responses. In short, the life course of contemporary movements can be understood only in relation to the electoral environment in which they emerge and on which they have an impact.

There is broad historical confirmation for this aspect of the relationship between movements and electoral politics. In the 1930s, striking industrial workers were able to force a wavering New Deal administration to support government protection for collective bargaining. The strike movement had so antagonized business groups as to eliminate any possibility that the New Deal could recover their support, and it also threatened to put at risk the votes of the working class, on which the New Deal depended. Similarly, in the 1950s and 1960s, the southern civil rights movement forced national Democratic leaders to throw their weight behind legislation that would dismantle the southern caste system and strike down the procedures by which blacks and most poor whites had been disfranchised. The reason is that the civil rights movement simultaneously precipitated defections among southern whites to the Republican party and jeopardized the votes of growing numbers of blacks in the cities of the border states and the North.

Thus, while a vigorous electoral politics probably dampens the tendency to protest, electoral politics is nevertheless also critical to movement success. When we wrote *Poor People's Movements* (1977) it was in part to specify¹ some of the ways in which this was so, if only because earlier analyses of protest movements tended to ignore their electoral environment. But there was one major feature of the American electoral system with which we did not deal. We did not call attention to the distinctive pattern of lower-strata exclusion in the United States or explore its implications for the emergence and evolution of protest movements.

How, then, did the twentieth-century history of massive nonvoting by poorer and minority people bear on the fate of movements in American politics? At first glance, one might expect large-scale nonvoting to reduce the effectiveness of the electoral system in absorbing discontent and suppressing movements. However, the methods by which people are made into nonvoters matter. When whole categories of people are denied the vote as a matter of acknowledged state policy—as southern blacks were—their exclusion may well strengthen their collective identity, provoke their indignation, and legitimate defiant forms of political action. But in the United States, the formal right to the franchise has been virtually universal, a condition much celebrated in the political culture. Only those who are aliens, felons, not yet of age, or undomiciled are denied the vote as a matter of acknowledged policy. At the same time, the effectiveness of the franchise for the bottom strata has been reduced by the failure of the parties to make the appeals and deploy the outreach strategies that would mobilize these voters and by residual procedural obstructions embedded in the voting process. This pattern of demobilization and obstruction was selective in that it was more likely to reduce voting by the poor and unlettered than by the better-off and educated. Still, entire categories of the population were not legally denied the franchise, and the administrative methods by which the exercise of the franchise is impeded remained obscure and indeed seemed to be the fault of the nonvoters themselves, of their apathy or poor education. Under these circumstances, the *idea* that voting and elections provided the means for acting on political grievances remains largely intact, even though the means were not in fact available to tens of millions of people. The demobilization of large sectors of the American electorate was thus secured at less cost to the legitimacy of electoral processes as the prescribed avenue for political change than would otherwise have been the case.

At the same time, the constriction of the electorate weakened the complementarities between electoral politics and protest movements. The interactions between movements and the electoral context that encouraged the growth of movements and sometimes led to movement victories depended on the existence of voter constituencies inclined to be responsive to the appeals of protesters. Thus protests from below were more likely to arise in the first place when contenders for office were forced to employ rhetoric that appealed to less-well-off voters and thus gave courage to the potential protesters. Such movements were more likely to grow when they were at least somewhat safe from the threat of state repression because political leaders were constrained by fear of adverse reactions by working-class or lower-class or minority voters. Finally, protesters were more likely to win when the issues they raised stirred support among significant numbers of these voters, threatening to lead to voter defections. The complementary dynamic between movements and electoral politics thus depended both on the composition and orientation of movements and on the composition and orientation of significant blocs in the electorate. In other words, the sharp under-representation of poor and minority people in the American electorate created an electoral environment that also weakened their ability to act politically through movements. This is another important way in which massive nonvoting has shaped American politics.