

Poor in Wealth, Poor in Turnout: A Look at the Dynamics of Poverty and Voting in America (publication version)

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Review of the Literature:

For my topic of research, the dynamics of poverty and voting in America, I used a vast number of sources in an attempt to produce the most accurate and broad discussion possible.

The sources I believe to be the most reliable were: 1) the scholarly works (Friedman; Raskin), which were purely scientific and did not include political biases, but rather examined the facts from as neutral a point of view as possible; 2) the government reports (DeNavas-Walt; Dept. of Commerce; Dept. of Labor, McNeil), which also appeared to be politically neutral and created in a scientific fashion. These two types of sources mainly provided statistics on voting and poverty numbers through charts and graphs.

The next set of sources came from less reliable media (“Election”; Loughlin; Wetherell), but still were purely observational and not opinionated. They came from online news sites, so they cannot be considered as academic as the first set, but the type of articles they are leaves little for the author’s own opinion. They also weren’t intentionally targeting a specific political party or ideology.

The following set of sources hint of bias in the way they present their information, but the information itself seems scientific (Cervantes; Drum; Piven). These sources integrate some liberal opinions of the information into the material; however, they give seemingly accurate facts.

“America,” James, and Wicker make up the next group of sources, which aren’t necessarily biased, but are more opinionated than factual. Facts are provided, but the authors’ ideas play a large part in these works. They are fairly neutral politically, however, and look at government more as a whole; both political parties are criticized at some points.

The next sources are liberally biased (“Dem dilemma”; Griffs; Palast; Sood). The reader must consider exaggerations and exclusions of certain facts. Though Democrats are knocked for some things, liberal policy is expounded and defended while conservatives/Republicans are usually portrayed as the bad guys in government.

The last category of sources includes “The Poor” and Project Vote, both websites of organizations touting their own successes. Instead of believing that that all of the advancements they’ve claimed to have done are truthful and positive, the reader must be skeptical and cannot be sure that their statistics were garnered scientifically.

Discussion:

In *The Working Poor*, David Shipler reports that in the 2000 presidential election, “three quarters of those with family incomes over \$75,000 voted . . . [while] a mere 38 percent of those whose households took in less than \$10,000 [voted]” (287). These sorts of figures were not an anomaly. In the six presidential elections from 1980 to 2000, the average voter turnout of people in the bottom fifth of the income quintiles was 53 percent, while the top fifth averaged over 80 percent (Cervantes). The average household in the bottom fifth had an income under \$11,500 during each election year, while the top fifth averaged an income close to \$118,000 (McNeil). The 2004 election was no different, with 55 percent of the votes cast by people with incomes of \$50,000 and up (“Election”). That means over half of the votes cast were by a group that controls 70 percent of the nation’s wealth (McNeil). In every election since 1964, when these statistics were first recorded, the South has had a lower voter turnout than the other three major regions (Dept. of Commerce). The South has also consistently had the highest poverty rate of the four regions (DeNavas-Walt 7). On average, there is a twenty-five to thirty percentage-point gap between the turnouts of the lowest and highest income quintiles in the United States (Cervantes).

Though it is clear to see that the poor generally don't vote, the reason for this is not clear. It has been suggested that just being poor in a country of extreme wealth impairs one's chances of voting. An essay on "democratizing" the U.S. political system reports:

Inequality in economic power distorts the democratic process. In a system where money controls politics, the concerns of poor people, particularly people of color, are not adequately addressed. People who are struggling to survive often do not have the time, education, or resources to fully participate in the political process (James).

Education seems to be a major factor. Less than 40 percent of citizens without a high school degree voted in the 2000 election, compared with an 80 percent turnout for those with an advanced degree (Dept. of Commerce). The percentages rise with more education. A connection to poverty can be drawn when considering that over 13 percent of workers without a high school degree are in poverty, compared with only about 1 percent of workers with a college degree (Dept. of Labor). It should be noted these statistics concern only workers, and not the unemployed. If that large a percentage of employed individuals without a high school education are in poverty, one can imagine how it is for their unemployed counterparts. The correlation between education and voting is clear; as a United States census report "Voting and Registration" noted, "Those with a high school education or less were more likely than those with more education to respond that they were not interested in the election or felt their vote would not make a difference" (Dept. of Commerce 211).

Even more significant among the poor is the feeling that their vote may not be counted. Claims of voting irregularities, true or not, often keep the poor away from the polls (Palast). A large bloc of poor Americans disenfranchise themselves out of the fear of being disenfranchised. A lack of education plays a significant role here. Unaware of their voting rights, many poor and homeless people will not once register to vote in their life, never mind actually cast a ballot. A popular belief is that a homeless person will be turned away at the polls. In actuality, a home is not necessary to vote—a fact most Americans are not aware of (Sood).

A chilling thought is that some of Poor America's fears may very well be true. A study on voter disenfranchisement concluded:

Characteristics that predict rates of disenfranchisement [included] the percentage of the population that is Black ... the population density ... median income, education level, and partisan affiliation ... [All were] significant in predicting rates of intimidation, machine problems, identification problems, and absentee ballot problems [in the 2004 Presidential election]. (Friedman)

The 2000 and 2004 election irregularities received much press. However, the term "irregularity" is misleading, as they seem to be very regular throughout history. As *New York Times* reporter Tom Wicker said in the 1970s:

All National elections follow the same pattern. One reason for it is that the poor and disadvantaged tend to be uninformed about legal requirements, mistrustful of the law, skeptical about politics and politicians and frequently nomadic. But another is that registration laws—literacy tests, for example—often had been designed precisely to exclude them as undesirable.

Even without literacy tests, many barriers exist blocking the vote for the poor and uneducated. Many have claimed that the 2000 and 2004 elections' famous malfunctioning punch-card voting machines were strategically placed in areas with high numbers of poor minorities. Gerrymandering was also said to have occurred to divide up the bloc of poor minority voters that do go to the polls. This has statistical effects—instead of making up a large percentage of one district, they make up a smaller percentage of several—as well as psychological effects. The division of "majority-black districts" has led to less minority nominees (Raskin). Because poor minorities are much more willing to come out and vote for minority candidates, the failure to produce the latter results in a lower poor minority turnout.

Voter registration seems to be key in combating Poor America's undersized presence at the polls, as historically over 85 percent of poor people who were registered have gone on to vote. In the impoverished South, a difference of less than eleven percentage points separates the amount of people registered from the amount who went on to vote in the last nine elections. The problem is the low level of registration (Dept. of Commerce).

A number of organizations have attempted to curb this problem, such as Project Vote, which claims to have "registered more than four million voters from low-income and minority neighborhoods," since the program began in 1982. For the 2004 election, Project Vote says it registered over one million new voters, and in 2000, increased low-income turnout by 24 percent. Its strategy includes connecting voting to local issues, door-to-door in-person contact, hiring staff from within the target community, supplying trained poll workers, and continued involvement in local matters (Project Vote). The Community Voting Project touts similar figures, claiming it increased voter participation by 6 percent in 2000 and has registered over 147,000 low-income and minority citizens. Their strategy consists of careful targeting, repeated contact, and a consistent message ("The Poor"). The National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Low Income Housing Coalition participate in the National Low Income and Homeless Voter Registration Day with shelters and other nonprofit groups. With the motto "You Don't Need a Home to Vote," the groups work to empower low income and homeless people across the country with a say in government (Sood). Assuming that the successes that all of these organizations tout are truthful, one solution to the American poor's lackluster voting attendance is persistent contact. Perhaps if the poor realize that a good portion of the population cares about them voting, then they will begin to believe that their voices and opinions do matter, and more importantly, that they themselves matter.

However, voting alone isn't enough for the poor if they do not vote in their interest. According to some political experts, a large number of poor people in Midwestern and Western states are fooled into voting for tax breaks for the rich and other initiatives that either do not help their lives or make them worse. Author Thomas Frank notes that the Democratic Party does not appeal to many in blue-collar America, as Democrats appear "arrogant and out of touch the moment the discussion shifts to values." Frank says the "very upper-middle-class flavor to liberalism . . . [is] bound to rub average people the wrong way," so the "average" poor person votes Republican ("Dem dilemma"). One journalist found in interviews with residents of the white rural south that Republican support has come about the following way:

Southern demagogues have managed to blame the "other"—mainly blacks or Yankees—for the sorry state of poor and average whites, while they quietly curried favor for corporations and wealthy families. Now, Zell Miller and George Bush blame "liberals," . . . many churches have . . . substituted Christ's message of social justice for the self-help gospel of personal wealth—together with a big emphasis on casting stones at others . . . with the vitriol of rightwing news outlets and a well-funded political machine designed to advance the special interests of corporations. (Griffs)

The journalist also reports that liberals' support of things such as removing the Ten Commandments and prayer out of school, abortion, and gay marriage are signs of immorality. Liberals' consistent support of minority groups is seen as a disregard for white working people. The most startling fact reported is that some poor people in the South are aware that they are better off financially voting for Democrats, but feel they're trading off values for money (Griffs). Conversely, another study shows that the poor consistently vote Democrat in every state. In poor states, the rich are much more prone to vote Republican than the poor. But in high-income states, though the rich are still more likely to vote for Republicans, the difference is quite small (Drum).

Though voting anomalies can occur for partisan reasons, one could propose that politicians in general do not wish for the poor to vote. It is quite obvious why Republicans do not wish for the poor

to vote, as a majority of the poor votes Democratic. According to the piece “Why Americans Don’t Vote,” the Democrats would not want to involve the poor, either:

Democrats are more a confederation of individual entrepreneurs than an organized party. Moreover, most of these entrepreneurs are doing quite well; a substantial majority of elected positions below the presidential level are controlled by Democrats who are regularly reelected and so see no need to expand the electorate; indeed, they have good reason to want to keep things as they are. The presidency doesn’t matter nearly as much to this establishment of incumbents than reign over the Congress and state and local governments. (Piven viii)

When reviewing Poor America’s problem with voting, it is necessary to look at government as a whole, and not at the separate parties. Neither has made significant efforts to get the poor involved in the voting process—perhaps for personal financial reasons, or the fact that the way things are is a lot simpler. A small electorate is easier to control. If a great number more people go to the polls, then there are that many more people to whom politicians need to answer and satisfy. More money will be needed to be spent on elections in order to reach more people. The very fact that these people are poor is good reason for politicians not to want them to vote. These people will demand different types of legislation than candidates currently run on. Politicians would then have to choose between pleasing the poor and possibly alienating the rest of America or pleasing the rest of America and alienating the poor. Either way, they run the risk of not being reelected.

It is likely the poor will push for massive social reform, which will not be easy work for the legislature. Such reform also hurts those in Congress personally, considering that in 2003, forty senators were millionaires. Members of the two houses are paid an annual salary of \$154,700, with those in leadership positions earning \$171,900 (Loughlin). Social reform is not needed by anyone else in government, either. A Center for Public Integrity article reports:

The average net worth of the individual members of the Bush cabinet, including the President and Vice President, was between \$9.3 and \$27.3 million [and] ... the average net worth of the top 100 members of the Bush administration was somewhere between \$3.7 million and nearly \$12 million. (Wetherell)

If the poor were to vote and expect changes in the distribution of wealth in the United States, a lot of people in government may have to make sacrifices. Needless to say, keeping the poor away from the polls simplifies things for politicians. This could explain why there is not a great effort on the part of government to encourage the poor to vote. They are left an untouched bloc, immense but dangerous. Their stories are reserved for stump speeches and seemingly abandoned once the voting process they did not partake in is complete.

Voting is all the poor can do to help themselves, as running for political office has become out of the question. A report entitled “Race, Poverty and the ‘Wealth Primary’” states that in 1996, “forces vying for state power spent a breathtaking \$2.6 billion ... U.S. Senate seats were taken by candidates who spent, on average, more than \$4 million, and the average House seat went to a candidate who spent more than \$650,000.” The report adds that 90 percent of House seats were retained by incumbents, “who use the combination of the partisan gerrymander, franking (free postage) and PAC contributions to squeeze out competition. Incumbent or not, the big spender won in nine out of ten races.” The presence of big money in campaigns has all but outlawed poor people from running for office. With “a record number of millionaires (over 100) now serv[ing] in Congress ... the citizen without wealth or access to it has as much chance of winning the Lotto as a seat in Congress. We have essentially reestablished wealth and property qualifications for political leadership” (Raskin).

There is even reason to believe that the poor can simply no longer be part of politics altogether, including voting. Money controls who runs for office in contemporary times; even if candidates are voted in by the population, their wealth is what put them in position to run. As the “Wealth Primary” report states:

In cash-driven politics, there is no need to charge the poor to vote because they will never find anyone they want to vote for anyway. Like a high filing fee but much more effective, the wealth primary screens out candidates (and parties) who do not have personal wealth or political affinity with those who do. It has not taken long for the poor to figure out the system on their own and to stop voting. (Raskin)

Democrats and Republicans alike get a majority of their funds from less than 1 percent of the population, who have “upscale zip codes around Wall Street, Washington and Hollywood [and who] yield more in campaign contributions than do the dozen poorest states combined” (Raskin). These facts suggest that donors have a more profound effect on politics than voters, the principal donors, of course, being corporations.

Despite the oligarchic aspects of this country, it is still a democracy. Politicians cannot fully disregard numbers, and numbers is perhaps the one thing the poor have many of. Around 40 million Americans are living in poverty with 45 million uninsured. These Americans make up 12.5 percent and 15.6 percent respectively of the country’s entire population, large enough blocs to significantly have an impact if they make their voices heard (“America”). Failing to vote, however, allows politicians to ignore the poor. Especially in the cases of U.S. Representatives who serve for just two years at a time, politicians spend a good portion of their time preparing for reelection, so naturally the people who cast votes are who they are going to try to please while in office. People with money already have an advantage as they can donate money to campaigns; by not voting, poor America is giving politicians even more reason to believe they do not matter.

If American democracy holds true, the impoverished people of the United States can make a change in their lives by exercising their constitutional right to vote, a right that their historic counterparts fought a revolution for 230 years ago. Much of the fault for their lack of support in government falls on the poor themselves by not voting. However, many Americans who are financially comfortable continue to vote for tax breaks that help only themselves, rather than for legislation that would help those less fortunate. It may be ignorance or more likely apathy, but many well-off Americans are not willing to make personal sacrifices when it comes to government policies—despite the fact that such sacrifices could drastically improve living conditions for the impoverished. This leaves the burden on the poor to help themselves, something they have yet to do. Education is a key to getting the poor involved, but not just traditional schooling; education of voting rights is what will produce results. Poor people know what they need to improve their life; it is just a matter of sharing that knowledge with their government.

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