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In *The Working Poor*, David Shipler reports that in the 2000 presidential election only 38 percent of Americans with incomes less than \$10,000 voted compared to 75 percent of those with incomes over \$75,000. (278) These sorts of statistics are not limited to 2000. In the six 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 (“Election Results”). For the bottom fifth, the average household income was under \$11,500 during each election year. The top fifth averaged an income close to \$118,000 (DeNavas-Walt, et al.). The 2004 election was no different with 55 percent of the votes cast by people with incomes of \$50,000 and up. That means over half of the votes cast were by a group that controls 70 percent of the nation’s wealth. 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. The South has also consistently had the highest poverty rate of the four regions. 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 (Cevrantes and Gluckman).

Though it is clear the poor generally don’t vote, the reasons for this are not so clear. Education seems to be biggest 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. 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. It should be noted these statistics concern only workers, and not the unemployed. As a United States census report 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.”

Even more significant among the poor than the feeling that their vote will not make a difference is the feeling their vote may not be counted. Claims of voting irregularities, true or not, often keep the poor away from the polls. A large bloc of poor Americans disenfranchise themselves out of the fear of being disenfranchised. With a mindset that their vote will just be erased after leaving, the poor avoid the polls altogether. Often, a lack of education plays a role, as poor people, especially homeless people, are unaware of their voting rights. Many people who spend their life in poverty will not ever register to vote, never mind actually cast a ballot.

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.” 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. The Community Voting Project touts similar statistics, 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 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.

Just voting isn’t enough for the poor if they do not vote in their interest, however. According to some political experts, a large number of poor people in Midwest and Western states often are fooled into voting for tax breaks for the rich and other initiatives that either do not help their lives or make their lives 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 also says there “is a very upper-middle-class flavor to liberalism . . . and that’s just

bound to rub average people the wrong way.” So, the “average” poor person votes Republican (“Dem dilemma”). However, another study shows that the poor consistently vote Democrat in every state. In poor states, the rich are more likely to vote for a 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).

Politicians listen to numbers, and numbers are perhaps the one thing the poor have many of. Education is a key, but not just traditional schooling; education of one’s voting rights is what will produce results. There’s perhaps not one poor person who does not know what is needed to improve their life; it is just a matter of sharing that knowledge with their government.

Works Cited

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