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POLITICAL BEHAVIOR OF THE POOR

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the empirical evidence which supports our beliefs about the political behavior of the poor. Basically, these beliefs are (1) that the poor are politically inert, (2) that the poor do not behave in accordance with the democratic principle of rational self interest, and (3) that the poor are politically ignorant and do not know or understand about the political institutions that govern them. On the basis of a secondary analysis of existing data, these beliefs are tested and found to be without a sound empirical base. Nevertheless, these beliefs permeate the literature of social change and social action. The action strategies held by those who are acting for or with the poor to produce political change are specified and examined. The lack of relationship is commented upon and the difficulties inherent in each strategy is shown.

## POLITICAL BEHAVIOR OF THE POOR

Man, says Aristotle, is a political animal. The poor man is a particular type of political animal; he is more than normally influenced by the decisions of government but less than normally influential in the making of these decisions. At the very minimum, democratic political theory is concerned with the way in which ordinary citizens seek to influence public policy.<sup>1</sup> The poor, however, are not ordinary citizens and, while political scientists have turned the full glare of their analytical spotlights on the more than ordinary citizens,<sup>2</sup> there has been significantly less attention paid to the characteristics and modes of political behavior of the less than ordinary, or noninfluential, citizens. Agger and Ostrum, in their study of political participation in a small community, found that 132 of 260 respondents could accurately be described as "non-participants" in the political process. In addition to not voting, they showed a tendency to be alienated from the community in which they lived and did not read the newspapers or come into contact with the officialdom of their community. As could be expected, they had the lowest education and the lowest average incomes of any category. There were a few respondents with low incomes and high involvement and a still smaller number of persons with high incomes and minimal involvement.<sup>3</sup> Levin, in his study, *The Alienated Voter*, found the non-participant to be either apathetic toward, alienated from, or disorganized

in relation to the political system in which he lives. Banfield found, in his study of the Italian peasant of Montegrando, that the poor peasant was too caught up in the process of meeting the daily problems of life to pay much attention to the political processes. A close examination of the scanty literature of the noninfluential citizen reveals that the findings do more to reflect self-fulfilled prophecies than to provide testable hypotheses.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the lack of specific attention to the characteristics of the poor, there are certain beliefs which guide our thinking about their political patterns.

- (1) The poor are politically inert and do not advocate policy revisions on their own behalf.<sup>5</sup>
- (2) The poor do not normally behave in terms of rational self-interest and, while they tend to be liberal on bread and butter issues, they are archly conservative on the more abstract issues.<sup>6</sup>
- (3) The poor are politically ignorant and do not possess sufficient information about political structures, institutions, or issues to be able to meaningfully influence public policy.<sup>7</sup>

Each of these hypotheses stands in need of direct testing based on carefully constructed interview schedules administered to both the poor and the nonpoor. Such direct confrontation of these "hypotheses" will have to await new field research. At this point, it is only possible to shed light on the questions by an examination of the limited data at hand.

*THE DEGREE OF POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT OF THE POOR*

One trouble with the assertion that the poor are politically inert is that our notion of what constitutes political participation is exceedingly fuzzy.

Prothro and Matthews have written as follows: "Political participation is many things--the old men talking politics in the shade of the crossroads country store, the housewives discussing the need for more classrooms in the local school, the farm family attending a campaign barbecue, the Negro student joining the "sit-in" demonstration at a drug store lunch counter; the union member contributing his dollar to a labor political committee--all are taking part in the daily process of democratic government."<sup>8</sup>

It is instructive to note that none of the behavior patterns indicated above are of the sort we associate with the life style of the poor. Aside from the Negro revolt in the cities and an occasional Alinsky type welfare revolt, our very images of political behavior are middle class oriented and structured.

In their study of Negro voting behavior, Matthews and Prothro created a continuum scale of political participation which ranged from not even talking politics to the holding of office or belonging to a political group. Using their data and placing respondents along the political participation scale, we can compare the degree of participation with the amount of earnings. Family income is frequently used as a variable in political behavior. But since the number of people dependent on the income is as significant as the magnitude of the income, for this analysis,

we are using per person income--the total income of the spending unit (including any nonfamily members who pool their income) divided by the number of persons dependent on that income.

A review of Table I reveals that, when per person income of the spending unit is used as the determination of the independent variable, gross patterns of political behavior do not significantly differ for the various income groupings. This does not mean that all of the income groups are equally efficient in their efforts to influence policy. It does, however, cast some doubt on our notion of the political inertia of the poor.

TABLE I  
Political Participation by Per Person Income Within  
Spending Unit (In %)\*

	Poverty Less than \$500**	Deprivation \$501-1500**	Comfort \$1501**
Never talks politics	1.8	3.5	1.1
Talks politics	8.6	8.7	11.0
Talks politics and votes	42.3	42.9	43.9
Talks politics, votes, and takes part in campaigns	42.0	40.8	38.5
Talks, votes, cam- paigns, and holds office or belongs to a political group	<u>5.2</u>	<u>4.1</u>	<u>5.5</u>
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N 385	N 196	N 91

\*Respondents are randomly sampled white residents of the 11 southern states.

\*\*Family income per person.

*POLITICAL IRRATIONALITY OF THE POOR*

It is a fundamental tenet of Madisonian democracy that all groups contend in the political arena on the basis of intelligent self interest. Only in this fashion can the invisible hand of the democratic polity guide a society to rational and wise policy. If any group defaults by inaction or unique behavior then the total polity becomes, to that extent, dysfunctional. It is widely held that the poor do not behave responsibly, particularly with reference to the rationality of their response to specific proposals. When respondents were placed in a Guttman Matrix on the basis of their responses to four specific bread and butter issues-- job guarantees, public utilities, federal aid to education, and medical care the following results occurred.

TABLE 2

Degree of Political Liberalism by Per Person  
Income of Spending Unit (In %)

	Poverty	Deprivation	Comfort
Strong liberal	8.0	11.1	6.0
Weak liberal	25.3	12.3	12.0
Moderate	23.0	35.1	28.9
Weak conservative	21.7	24.0	21.7
Strong conservative	<u>24.0</u>	<u>17.5</u>	<u>31.3</u>
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N 313	N 171	N 83
			P=.01



It can be seen from Table 2 that the poor are, indeed, slightly more liberal on bread and butter issues than are their more economically comfortable fellow citizens. The poor do not display the kind of irrational attachment to bread and butter issues which some of the normative literature suggests. In fact the statistical differences can be explained, in part, by the fact that the poor tend rather strongly to move in both directions away from a moderate position. Thus, they are distributed more evenly along the political spectrum whereas the economically comfortable are skewed to the right.

#### *THE POLITICAL IGNORANCE OF THE POOR*

It has been suggested in the normative literature of political science and in the accounts of various practicing social workers that the poor do not possess sufficient factual information to have an important effect on the policies made on their behalf.<sup>9</sup> When this notion is tested via use of the Matthews and Prothro data, it can be seen (Table 3) that the amount of political information is strongly associated with the income groupings. Further, as one moves from poverty to comfort on the income scale, the likelihood of possessing a higher degree of political information is dramatically increased.

The purpose of this section of the paper has been to test, as closely as a secondary analysis allows, some of the basic beliefs we hold about the political behavior of the poor.

- (1) The poor are politically inert.
- (2) The poor do not behave in accordance with the democratic principle of rational self interest.
- (3) The poor are politically ignorant.

TABLE 3

Amount of Political Information by Per Person  
Income of the Spending Unit (In %)

<i>N</i> Correct Responses to Political Infor- mation Questions	Poverty	Deprivation	Comfort
0	3.1	2.0	.0
1	2.1	1.0	.0
2	6.8	2.5	4.3
3	13.8	5.1	3.2
4	22.9	34.2	21.3
5	29.3	35.2	38.3
6	15.3	10.7	21.3
7	<u>6.7</u>	<u>9.2</u>	<u>11.7</u>
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0
	<i>N</i> 385	<i>N</i> 196	<i>N</i> 94

74.2
89.3
92.6

Only the third belief was clearly confirmed, and even here the juxtaposition of empirical facts is not strong enough to confirm the hypothesis.

In contrast to this hard data, Matthews and Prothro had a question on their survey that went like this: "Suppose you had a child who had to cross a busy street in order to get to school. There is no school guard assigned to the corner and one day a child is hit and seriously hurt. Do you think there is anything you could do? What?" This question was asked of 137 respondents in Nashville, Tennessee in a separate

study.<sup>10</sup> The answers to the question could be ordered by the economic status of the respondent. Upper-income respondents answered in terms of access to political decision makers; middle-income respondents answered in terms of the political process, and, tragically, the poor tended to answer in nonpolitical terms. The rich said simply "I'd call \_\_\_\_\_" and they give the proper name of a police, school, or other government, officer. The well-off spoke in terms of organizations with power: P.T.A., political party, civic improvement groups, etc. One middle-class housewife spoke in glowing terms of how she would organize a baby carriage brigade to block traffic until there was a guard at the corner. According to the interviewer the mother stopped her account and asked her young son if there was a guard at the boulevard; when he told her there was one, she appeared disappointed at the lost opportunity to flex political muscles. The poorest respondents did not respond in political terms but in personal terms. "I'd walk my child across that street." Occasionally they saw the problem as a group problem requiring an organizational response. "I'd walk the children on Monday, have Mary do it on Tuesday, Sally on Wednesday, etc." Only rarely did they perceive the problem in both organizational and political terms, or even in political terms individually.

In this homily, and in general, the patterns of political activity and influence are incredibly complex. As Dahl writes:

Any simple theory about how American citizens influence the conduct of their government is bound to be misleading; any brief statement is even more inadequate. Nonetheless, two general conclusions seem scarcely contestable. First, differences among citizens in their resources, their skills, their incentives, their allies, and their opponents have prevented, and perhaps in some degrees always will prevent, a close approximation to perfect

equality among citizens in their influence on the conduct of government. Second, few groups in the United States who are determined to influence the government--certainly few of any groups of citizens who are organized, active, and persistent--lack the capacity and opportunity to influence some officials somewhere in the political system in order to obtain at least some of their goals.<sup>11</sup>

I would add a third: nowhere is the political task more formidable than in an effort by low-income groups to promote a relatively direct transfer of money out of the hands of the well-off majority and into the hands of the impoverished minority. To date, analysts of the process of policy making in public assistance have in numerous ways confirmed this proposition. Advocates of new schemes of income transfers whether they favor a negative income tax, a children allowance, or a guaranteed job program are fond of pointing out, as Leviton did:

The program, public assistance, has been found wanting and has been attacked not only by traditional foes of the welfare state who are disturbed by the ever increasing costs but also by liberals. In a recent volume on the welfare system, sponsored by the Industrial Relations Research Association, none of the academic contributors had a good word for public assistance programs and they found the program "niggardly," "capricious" and "anachronistic." Their views are typical of sympathetic observers of the welfare system. The obvious solution offered by new antipoverty warriors has been to wipe the slate clean and to design a new income maintenance program.<sup>12</sup>

What is not so frequently pointed out is that virtually all political analyses of the possibility of change has come to pessimistic conclusions.

It is not surprising that, facing such a bleak opportunity picture, the poor do not behave politically in the conventional way; they simply do not face a conventional political situation--their life situation is considerably more than normally dependent on the decisions of governmental actors, and their resources for influencing governmental situations are considerably less than normal, thus producing a tragic imbalance.

As Merton has shown:

When social systems have institutionalized goals and values to govern the conduct of component actors, but limit access to these goals for certain members of the society, "departures from institutional requirements" are to be expected. Similarly, if certain groups within a social system compare their share in power, wealth and status honor with that of other groups and question the legitimacy of this distribution, discontent is likely to ensue. If there exist no institutionalized provisions for the expression of such discontents, departures from what is required by the norms of the social system may occur.<sup>13</sup>

We know that people tend either to retreat from or to attack forces controlling their lives which they cannot affect and which are not inescapable. For this reason we typically find the poor either standing aloof from the political scene or engaged in what has been called "protest politics."

The well-off, when threatened by a governmental decision, usually find their own agents already in the employ of government, or they have the resources to hire their own agents, who have long experience and success in influencing governmental decisions, to press for redress of their real or imagined grievances. It is generally recognized, and not necessarily invidious, that the various factions of interests have their own agents in government--farmers have their Department of Agriculture, businessmen have commerce, and the workers have labor. It is generally believed, at least among "Doves" and liberals that the Department of Defense works at least as hard to protect the interest of the "military-industrial complex" as it does to protect the national security. Not only are there governmental actors to press for redress, there are also private actors, lawyers, and lobbyists ready for hire with an ethic which allows them to place their clients' interest above all else.

When the poor are threatened by governmental decisions, as they constantly are, they have no such ready made cadre to do battle on their behalf. As Scott and Blau<sup>14</sup> have shown, welfare officers are under as much pressure to keep cost low to satisfy taxpayers as they are to press for the demands of the poor. While there are private actors who will, for psychic rather than monetary compensation, press the demands for the poor, their commitment while deep is not always enduring and they are not paid agents of the poor in the same sense as are Lockheed's or General Dynamics' representatives. Perhaps the nearest equivalent for the poor is the National Welfare Rights Organization. But we find it often happens that skilled technicians in policy formulation will swing back and forth between employment in the Department of Labor and the AFL-CIO without serious wrench of ideological conflict, and they find the movement back and forth adds to their experience, skill, and perhaps most important, contacts of friendship and mutual respect between the organizations. To date at least there is no evidence of shifting between N.W.R.O. and H.E.W. Thus for these and other reasons too numerous to catalog, the poor are dependent on nonpoor and non-agents to press for their demands.

#### *STRATEGIES OF NON-AGENTS*

It is perhaps an affront to the professional dignity of some social workers to be told they are not the servants of the poor; but it is clearly an historical and present truth. Social workers, at least those who work with the poor, could perhaps be classified as semi-agents for the poor, and often, because of their dual and sometimes conflicting commitments,

they have clearly done much but not enough to improve the quality of welfare policy. Generally speaking, their task has been to take god-awful policy from the legislators and translate it into a practice which is merely awful.

In their interaction with legislators, these activists have tended to utilize a limited number of political strategies. These strategies are placed in an analytical typology for purposes of examination. Clearly, these types are not mutually exclusive and ought not to be used to imply that any one activist is wholly dependent on one strategy type. The three strategies are: conflict reduction, conflict risking, and conflict creation.

#### *The "Reductionist"*

The reduction approach is typically used by "welfare bureaucrats" who never take a chance--Wilbur Cohen has been quoted as saying that he never sent a bill up to the Hill without knowing exactly how many votes it had. In this strategy, the mood of the legislature is sensitively and precisely measured. The reductionist and his aides retire to his office and, like generals planning a battle, examine a carefully chartered master plan and decide that this year they'll push for adding a new category or increasing the federal share. While there is a rational policy objective locked away in the Secretary's file, the essence of reduction is never to let these broad policy objectives become part of the public record or be the subject of public debate--thus this policy direction is highly elitist. Professor Cohen is only the master reductionist; he has many fellow practitioners. State and local welfare directors also make use of this device and they enjoy telling

academics, or at least they enjoy telling me, how they got this or that policy through the legislature or town council without a word of debate or a single dissenting vote. The entire effort is directed toward slow but steady change.

The rationale of reductionism in welfare is that the normal process of elective politics and the more or less open contest of interest groups in legislative politics is stacked against the poor. Whether measured in terms of numbers, prestige, influence, access to decision makers, or access to mass media, the poor are at an outstanding disadvantage in any attempt to play the game of politics according to the rule of Madisonian democracy which governs most of American politics. Practitioners of the art of reduction perceive of themselves as the hard headed realists, as pragmatists, but also as the only ones who have consistently delivered "the bacon" to the poor--never mind that the "bacon" they delivered usually turned out to be fatback.

#### *The "Riskers"*

The strategy of risk taking is rapidly replacing "reduction" as the preferred strategy of social workers. The practitioners of the art of risking reject the reductionist approach not so much because it is slow and ineffectual as because the reductionist approach is essentially elitist. It leaves the poor permanently powerless and dependent on the welfare bureaucrat--a condition perceived as politically and psychologically unsound.

The risk approach seeks to bring the present tensions of the current system and the values of a new approach out into the open. When used by the agency administrator, this approach is characterized by



aggressive efforts to interpret the agencies' program and to involve clients, legislators, and good government interest groups such as the League of Women Voters.

When used by settlement houses and community action centers this approach involves pressure to organize and educate the poor, and considerable effort is asserted towards altering the process of policy making in welfare. As defined by Hagstrom, this approach seeks to hit at the root cause--the powerlessness of the poor. A reading of the normative literature in community organization reveals that this approach places enormous faith in the capacity of the poor, the workings of the democratic process, and the willingness of the well-off citizen to change his stance when he is fully informed. However, journalistic accounts reveal that, to date at least, this approach has achieved policy success only on a peripheral issue where there was insignificant opposition, such as the location of the D.P.W. office or free spraying for water bugs in public housing apartments. On larger issues such as raising grant levels or changing the rate structure in public housing, policy success has been conspicuously absent. The psychological goals of changing the client's perception of self and of his capacity to act on his own behalf has met with much larger success. It should be noted however that, while a client's perception of self is improved, the policy issue is still lost--this is therapy that can prove to be expensive.

### *The Conflict Creators*

The third strategy to be discussed is conflict creation. The strategy is oriented toward creating a new tension rather than using an existing one.

Richard Cloward and Francis Piven, three and a half years ago in the pages of *The Nation*, argued for the need to produce "a welfare crisis." Cloward and Piven argued that (1) the traditional technique of advocacy by special interest groups was clearly not working; and that (2) the fundamental legislative reforms of the New Deal were not so much the result of interest group pleading as the fact that the crisis of the depression disrupted and destroyed the old regionally based coalitions underlying the pre-New Deal national parties, thus allowing the "new democratic coalition," heavily based on urban working-class groups, to pass and implement the economic reforms of the New Deal.

They proceeded to argue that today's urban party organizations have become avenues for advancement of minority political leaders rather than channels for the expression of poor and minority group interests. The strategy of crisis would expose the latent tensions between ghetto voter and urban party leadership, for it would thrust forward ghetto demands and back them with the threat of defections from those who had been loyal to "establishment liberals."

And finally, Cloward and Piven argued "a series of welfare drives in large cities would, we believe, impel action on a new federal program to distribute income, destroy the present welfare system and alleviate the abject poverty which it perpetuates."<sup>15</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS

Whether by design or otherwise, the welfare crisis is here and it does not need any further help. It is in Madison, Albany, and Pocatello;

it is present in the 33 state legislatures which have either passed, or are seriously considering, cuts in the levels of welfare grants.

The welfare crisis is present in Washington while Congress considers Nixon's Welfare Plan--a plan described by the *New York Times* "as revolutionary despite its conservative language" and by the *Washington Post* as a "conservative proposal dressed in revolutionary rhetoric."

In response to this crisis, there is general agreement that conventional strategies have failed to produce a minimally acceptable public welfare policy. But it is feared by many that protest strategies are so laden with risks that their use will leave the poor worse off than they were before the reformers came to their rescue. Thus a search for the appropriate strategy remains before us.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Since the impact of Floyd Hunter's *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953) there has been a rather full outpouring of empirical studies of the influentials. Among these is C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) which carries Hunter's thesis to the national level. A critique of this elitist thesis is found in Robert A. Dahl's "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 52, no. 2, (June 1958), pp. 463-69, and his *Who Governs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961). See also, Robert Vance, Presthus, *Men at the Top* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>3</sup>Robert E. Agger and Vincent Ostrum, "Political Participation in a Small Community," in Heinze Eulau, *et al.*, *Political Behavior*, (Glencoe: Free Press, 1956), p. 144.

<sup>4</sup>Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958), p. 164 ff.; Seymour Martin Lipset, "Social Stratification and the Analysis of American Society," in Bernard Berelson (ed.) *The Behavioral Sciences Today*, (New York: Basic Books 1963), pp. 188 ff.; George Brager, "Organizing the Unaffiliated," *Social Work*, vol. 8, no. 2, (April, 1963), pp. 34-40; Murray Burton Levin, *The Alienated Voter*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1960).

<sup>5</sup>Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Seymour Martin Lipset, *et al.*, "The Psychology of Voting: An Analysis of Political Behavior," in Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, (eds.) *Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 2, (Cambridge: Addison-Wesley, 1954) pp. 1124-1175.

<sup>6</sup>Banfield, *supra* note 4; \_\_\_\_\_ *Political Influence*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), ch. IX; Charles E. Silberman, "Up from Apathy--the Woodlawn Experiment," *Commentary*, (May 1964), pp. 51 ff.; Eveline M. Burns, "What's Wrong with Public Welfare," *Social Service Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, (June 1962), pp. 111-122; Warren C. Hagstrom, "The Power of the Poor," in Frank Reissman, *et al.*, (ed.), *Mental Health of the Poor*, (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

<sup>7</sup>Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960), p. 92 ff. It is not perfectly clear that low income families are really more liberal on bread and butter issues. There is some evidence to indicate that they are more likely to defer to "experts" on such complex questions as governmental intervention in the distribution of medical services; see U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Medical Care, Health Status and Family Income*, Series No. 10, no. 9, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1966).

<sup>8</sup>Donald Matthews and James Prothro, "Levels of Participation," (Unpublished paper, 1964), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>Edgar S. Cahn and Jean C. Cahn, "The War on Poverty: A Civilian Perspective," *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 73, (July 1964), pp. 1317-1352, see especially footnote 27, p. 1336; Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962).

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Heffernan, "Research Notes on the Conventional Political Behavior of the Poor," *Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 4, no. 2, (Spring 1969), pp. 253-259.

<sup>11</sup>Robert A. Dahl, *Pluralistic Democracy in the United States*, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967), p. 386.

<sup>12</sup>Sar A. Levitan, "Priorities in Fighting Poverty: Cash and Services," *Poverty and Human Resources Abstracts*, vol. 3, no. 4, (July-August 1968) p. 17. See also Silberman, *op. cit.*; Harrington, *op. cit.*; Edgar May, *The Wasted Americans*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), ch. IX; Ben H. Bagdikian, *In the Midst of Plenty*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), ch. I.

<sup>13</sup>As quoted in Chain Waxman, *Poverty: Power and Politics*, (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1968), p. 72.

<sup>14</sup>Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, *Formal Organizations: A Comparative Approach*, (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1962).

<sup>15</sup>Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, "The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty," Waxman, *op. cit.*