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Poverty and Electoral Power

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The poverty of the American underclass cannot be overcome by any single strategy. But surely it will not be reduced without new government interventions in education, training, employment, housing, and social welfare. That raises the question of how the electoral power—especially electoral power exercised by the underclass itself—can be mobilized to win new public policies.

Only about half of Americans will go to the polls in November 1988, compared with turnout levels between 75% and 95% in other western democracies. Since it is the poorly-educated who vote least, Americans generally attribute low voting to inadequate civic or political education. But why then do the less-educated vote almost as much as the better-educated in other major democracies?

High turnout is encouraged in other countries because citizens are placed on registration lists automatically when they come of age, or they are registered periodically by government-sponsored door-to-door canvasses. In the United States, by contrast, it is up to each citizen to figure out how and where to register, and that may not be an easy matter, especially for poorer and minority people. As a result, only 61% of those eligible are registered; upwards of 70 million are not, and 2 out of 3 of them are below the median income. (Elections officials claim that 75% are registered, but they base this figure on local lists which are clogged with the names of millions of people who have died, or who are counted twice because they moved and reregistered elsewhere.)

Furthermore, the US Census Bureau reports that people “overwhelmingly go to the polls” *once they are registered*. In 1984, 88% of registrants voted, including 78% of those with eighth grade education or less.

It is also worth remembering that Americans had the highest rate of voting in the world in the 19th century, despite low education levels. But that was before politicians created voter registration requirements. Turnout plummeted at the beginning of the 20th century, when poll taxes, literacy tests, and longterm residency requirements were introduced. At the same time, voter registration offices were opened in county seats where citizens had to prove that they met these qualifications to officials who were often intimidating and hostile.

With blacks and most poor whites disenfranchised in the South, southern presidential turnout fell from an average of 67% in the latter half of the 19th century to a low of 19% in 1924 (and it did not rise appreciably until the post-World War II struggle for voting rights). Literacy tests and obstructive registration procedures also reduced northern presidential turnout from an average of 83% in the elections of the late 19th century to 55% in the early 1920s. Indeed, fourteen northern states were using literacy tests as late as 1970, when they were outlawed by amendments to the Voting rights Act.

A good many commentators claim that registration procedures are more liberal than ever before. True, poll taxes and literacy tests are gone. But outside of the South, the main reform in registration procedures consists of allowing people to register by mail. This reform is more apparent than real because provision is rarely made for the wide distribution of the postcard forms so that people can get ready access to them. States with mail-in systems do not have higher registration levels because people may still have to travel to a county seat, or to a downtown office in a central city simply to register.

Not only has voter registration not been liberalized to the extent claimed by many commentators, but the political parties are less likely than in the past to provide “hands on” assistance with registration procedures. National political campaigns run as media events do not put voter registration cards in people hands. The local party infrastructure created during the new

Deal to help people hurdle registration barriers has decayed. For example, the shrinking industrial unions are no longer capable of reaching many unregistered workers, especially the low-wage nonunionized workers in the vast and growing service sector. Many of the traditional big-city parties persist more to organize graft than to organize voters, or they refuse to mobilize potential black and Hispanic voters for fear of fueling racial challenges. In other words, without local organizations to help people sign up, registration barriers become more telling, gradually driving turnout down.

What continues to be astonishing about the United States, in short, is the resistance to making it convenient to register to vote. Many politicians argue that registering shouldn't be easy, that people ought to earn the privilege. But the voter registration system is supposed to be a method of *listing* eligible voters, not of weeding out those whom politicians consider undeserving. In effect, restrictions on times and places for voter registration are the functional equivalents of earlier property and literacy qualifications.

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Registration barriers are not the only reason that turnout is low, nor were they the only reason that turnout fell in the first place. With voting by the have-nots restricted in the early 20th century, party organizers turned away from the candidates, the policies, and the campaign language that would attract them. This marked a major difference with the course of political development in other industrial democracies where labor parties emerged which articulated the interests of working-class people, and mobilized them to vote. The tendency of poorer and minority people to abstain from voting in the United States because of registration restrictions has thus been reinforced by their marginalization from the political culture. This may explain much about the relative lack of class-consciousness among American workers. The labor parties of Europe were agents of class socialization, but the American parties were not forced to give form and voice to a distinctive class politics. This was especially true in the South, given the virtually total disenfranchisement of blacks and poor whites.

Even the celebrated New Deal party was not a party of working people in the same sense as the labor parties of Europe because it was based on an absurd coalition. Northern industrial workers who favored union rights and social programs were joined with better-off southern whites who favored right-to-work laws and generally opposed social welfare protections. Naturally enough, southern Democrats elected to the Congress readily joined with northern Republicans, and the resulting conservative alliance dominated post-war policy. The New Deal party, in short, was divided against itself, and against working people.

* * * *

Congress is now holding hearings on the Universal Voter Registration Act of 1988. Among other things, the bill would require that all federal agencies, and all federally-assisted state and local agencies, offer voter registration services to the public, thus making voter registration the single most widely available service offered by government. But the bill's prospects are not good.

One reason is that business, which finances the parties, is hardly likely to go along with an increase in have-not voting at a time when it is pressing Congress to cut the social programs. Party opposition is another reason. Most Republicans fear that higher voting by poorer and minority people would benefit the Democrats, even endangering their hold on the presidency. They prefer the present voter registration system because they can manipulate it to their advantage with money. Together with the Christian Right, the Republican Party has been spending millions of dollars to expand registration among conservatives and higher income whites. As for the Democrats, most probably would not favor expenditures for voter registration even if their party had the money to spend. An upsurge of have-not and minority voting would disrupt the balance of voter blocs within the Democratic party, eroding support among some groups and strengthening among other groups (as Jesse Jackson's campaign suggests).

Finally, incumbency is a major source of opposition, as

Jimmy Carter explained after his voter registration reform bill went down to defeat in 1977: "The more senior and more influential members of the Congress have very safe districts. To have a 25 or 30% increase in unpredictable new voters is something they don't relish."

Nevertheless, the Democratic party is not monolithic. A number of Democrats at the state, county, and city levels depend on minority votes. Think only of black mayors. And there is a simple, cheap, and fraud-free way by which they can act to override traditional barriers to voter registration. They can permit government employees to ask people who apply for services whether they would like to register to vote. State, county and municipal legislatures can create such voter registration programs by enacting legislation; governors, county executives and mayors can create them by issuing executive orders.

Sixteen states now have "Motor Voter" programs which allow people to register to vote in motor vehicle offices; 12 states also now allow people to register in state welfare and unemployment offices. Some of these programs resulted from legislation and others from gubernatorial executive orders. Big city councils and mayors are also acting. Registration services are now available in municipal agencies in Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, Austin, Atlanta, Birmingham, Washington, D.C., and New York.

In other words, the agency-based reform strategy takes advantage of the oft-noted decentralized and fragmented character of the American state. It is a strategy that can be tailored to exploit the numerous openings provided by the different levels of government and by the overlapping powers of the legislative and executive branches. If registration services cannot be won at one level or by one branch, they might be won at another level or by the other branch. When state legislatures balk, for example, then perhaps county or municipal legislatures will act; or perhaps it is governors, county executives, or mayors who will act. Big city black and Hispanic mayors could, by themselves, produce millions of new registrants among poorer and minority people. A mayoralty approach is even

feasible in the South where most legislatures and governors would not want access to registration widened, but where the growing number of black mayors might.

We should also note that agency-based registration is resulting from law-suits. As a result of a consent decree negotiated by the NAACP Education and Legal Defense Fund Inc., the state of Arkansas is establishing registration services in agencies throughout the state. And a suit taken by the Southern California chapter of ACLU in Los Angeles, now on appeal before the highest state court, may result in a judgment upholding the orders of the lower courts that the county's 20,000 health and welfare workers must offer to register their clients to vote.

Most of these developments were stimulated by the state-by-state organizing, lobbying, and collaborative litigation efforts of an organization with which we are associated called Human SERVE. What makes Human SERVE voter registration reform successes significant is that it is only a small staff organization with virtually no political resources. The very fact that it has had so many successes suggests there are indeed politicians at the state and local level who have an incentive to expand the electorate from the bottom. And if influential national organizations with stakes in voting rights—such as civil rights, voter registration, public interest, women, social welfare, and religious groups—were now to join in bringing pressure to bear on state and local officials, much larger advances could be made. The climate of legitimacy is already favorable: most national bodies of public officials have already endorsed this strategy, including the National Association of Secretaries of State, and associations of both mayors and cities, and of both black and Hispanic officials.

Finally, there is a relationship between raising the local registration levels and ultimately winning national reform. If a massive rise in the local registration rolls were to occur, congressional Democrats would no longer have much reason to resist enacting comprehensive national reform—to do so would merely ratify what had already largely occurred. Given greatly increased registration levels, the main effect of national legislation would be to bring recalcitrant states into line, and

to institutionalize the process of sustaining high levels of voter registration over time.

Of course, no one can be sure that millions of poorer and minority nonvoters would go to the polls if registration procedures were reformed, or that they would vote differently than better-off whites. What is certain is that there is a good deal of opposition to finding out. Otherwise, national political leaders would have long since reformed the registration system in the sure confidence that nothing would change. So there is some reason to think that mobilizing greater electoral power at the bottom of our society might result in policies to help overcome poverty.

