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FRANCES FOX PIVEN
RICHARD CLOWARDFrom *Why Americans Still Don't Vote*

This is not the first book that Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have written on voting—or more precisely, nonvoting—among the American public. More than a decade after writing Why Americans Don't Vote, the authors observe that many Americans still don't vote, despite reforms such as the 1993 National Voter Registration Act—"motor voter." The reasons behind nonvoting go deeper than ease of registration, Piven and Cloward believe. Many potential voters, especially people with low incomes and from minority groups, don't participate because they are alienated from the entire political process. As activists in the Human Service Employees Registration and Voter Education program, Piven and Cloward place blame on politicians who have failed to capture the attention and allegiance of America's unrepresented millions.

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT AN electoral reform project called Human SERVE (Human Service Employees Registration and Voter Education), which we initiated in 1983. Our purpose was to make voter registration available in welfare and unemployment offices, and in private sector agencies such as day care and family planning. The book discusses the ideas that informed the project, the complex dynamics of the reform effort itself, and the outcome.

We undertook the project because it was clear by 1980 that a Republican/business/Christian Right coalition was coming to power and that the New Deal and Great Society programs—which have always been of central interest to us—were seriously threatened. At the same time, registration and voting levels among the recipient constituencies of these programs were low and falling. We thought it might be possible to raise voting levels through registration reform and thus strengthen resistance to the attack on entitlements.

In the late 1980s, a national voting rights coalition of civil rights, good government, labor, and religious groups took up this strategy of registration reform, and persuaded Democrats in Congress (joined by

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several Republicans) to pass the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, which a Democratic president signed in May of that year. The Act required that, beginning in 1995, voter registration be made available in AFDC, Food Stamps, Medicaid, and WIC agencies and in agencies serving disabled Americans. It also required that people be allowed to register when they get or renew driver's licenses. It was this last provision that gave the Act its tag name "motor voter." The states were also required to permit people to register by mail, and the Federal Election Commission was ordered to design a mail form that the states were required to use if they failed to design their own. With this reform, historic barriers to voter registration that had kept voting down among blacks and many poor whites in the South and among many in the northern industrial working class were largely abolished. . . .

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 a 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 underrepresents those who have less. . . .

Three conditions made the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 possible. One was the growth of an influential national voting rights coalition committed to making government agency registration the law of the land.

A second condition was the rapid spread of motor voter programs in the states. When the NVRA was enacted in 1993, twenty-nine states had motor voter programs. Most were just starting up and had registered few people. Still, it mattered in the congressional debates that more than half the states had opted for this reform. John L. Sousa, chief counsel of the Senate committee that had jurisdiction over voter registration, would later say, "We wanted this voter registration reform bill to reflect what's already happening in the states." When the National Voter Registration Act came up for consideration in the early 1990s, *Washington Post* political columnist David Broder remarked that "by building on the State experience, its sponsors have done something that is all too rare in Washington: They allowed the design to be field-tested before taking it national."

The third condition explaining why reform succeeded is ironic. Neither party thought that voter registration reform would change electoral outcomes. One report after another appeared in the 1980s concluding that nonvoters were "carbon copies" of voters. It was not self-evident that the Democrats would benefit more; greater voting for the Democrats by the poor and minorities could potentially be offset by higher voting for the Republicans by young people.

This political situation was altogether different from the circumstances preceding the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Then, the endangered southern Democratic political leadership fought tooth and nail to prevent the enfranchising of blacks, since new black voters would undermine the apartheid basis of the "Southern Democracy." It took massive turbulence—civil disobedience campaigns in the South and civil disorder in the northern cities—to force national Democratic leaders to override southern opposition. But nothing like that was necessary to win voter registration reform three decades later. . . .

The NVRA reforms produced an unprecedented increase in voter registration. Turnout, however, did not rise. . . .

. . . Four years into the NVRA system, turnout had fallen another 2.8 percentage points, from 38.8 percent in 1994 to 36 percent in 1998. Moreover, "Southern turnout dropped 3.6 points to 30.5 percent, a larger drop than the rest of the nation." Florida and Kentucky reported that as

few as 20 percent of those registered in public assistance agencies went to the polls. In sum, more accessible registration procedures did not increase voting rates.

Why? A formidable body of evidence and opinion predicted that what Arend Lijphart calls "voter-friendly" registration rules lead to higher turnout levels. In fact, we think the procedures of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) should over time bring us close to the automatic voter registration procedures that characterize European politics, which Powell concluded could boost turnout by 14 percentage points. More recently, in 1992, Ruy Teixeira conducted an exhaustive review of the American data and reported that, while voter registration barriers could not explain the recent declines in turnout, they nevertheless remained the most costly feature of the voting act in the United States. He concluded that the reduction of these costs was the single most credible reform that would increase turnout, by 8 to 15 percentage points. Comparisons of turnout in states with the least restrictive registration arrangements and in other states yield similar estimates of a potential increase of from 9 to 15 percentage points. So why have the expectations implicit in these arguments so far been disappointed? Why the continuing fall in turnout, rising registration rates notwithstanding?

Most studies of voter turnout attempt to disaggregate the effects of registration barriers and an array of other influences. If registration barriers are less significant in depressing turnout, then other factors must be more significant. Consistent with the traditional emphasis on social-psychological explanations, the usual approach has been to scrutinize changes in the capacities and attitudes of individual voters in the search for the factors contributing to the demobilization of the electorate. All else being equal, some changes in the characteristics of voters are expected to raise turnout while other factors depress turnout. Thus the growing numbers of young people in the electorate, who have traditionally voted less, at least in the United States, should depress turnout. But rising educational levels should increase turnout, at least in the United States. All this is familiar. The new variable proposed by recent analyses is that lower turnout seems to be associated with the fact that Americans are less embedded in social networks that encourage participation. Teixeira, for example, emphasizes "a substantial decline in social connectedness" through family and church.

The perspective on the causes of low turnout . . . reveals the limits of attempts to disaggregate the impact of particular variables on voter turnout. The effects of legal and procedural barriers are closely intertwined with

the political factors that draw people to the ballot box, and especially with the strategies the political parties employ to attract or pull voters to the polls. Moreover, the barriers and political appeals and strategies together go far to determine which individual-level variables are related to turnout. When issue and cultural appeals resonate with the electorate, contests are tight, and the parties work to get the vote out, then legal and procedural barriers matter much less—as in the big cities in the years immediately after the introduction of voter registration barriers at the beginning of the century. And under these conditions, the relationship between turnout and education and income evaporates. To put the matter clearly, hotly contested elections about intensely felt issues still draw voters, and when they do, the impact of barriers dwindles, and so do differentials in turnout that can be ascribed to individual-level social and psychological traits. Rosenstone and Hansen point to the mayoral election in Chicago in 1983 when the nomination of Harold Washington raised black turnout by 17 percentage points, despite a restrictive voter registration system, because the keenly felt issue in the election was racial ascendance in the city's political regime.

But when political appeals lose their salience and party efforts to bring people to the polls slacken, as they did in the wake of progressive-era party reforms, voter registration barriers loom much larger, class-related disparities in voting widen, and so should the impact of such individual traits as education, income, or social connectedness. Moreover, the pattern of nonparticipation that is initially constructed by the interplay of barriers and party indifference tends to reproduce itself over time. Party operatives assume, even naturalize, low participation rates, and hence tend to take the absence of the marginalized for granted in fashioning appeals and mobilizing strategies. In time the attitudes of the marginalized come to reflect their disaffection with a party system that pays them little heed.

Thus, the most provocative data reported in recent studies purporting to account for declining turnout describe dramatic changes in attitudes toward politics over the past three decades. "Americans," say Rosenstone and Hansen, "have lost their confidence in the effectiveness of their actions." They have also lost their attachment to electoral politics: Americans are less satisfied with the electoral choices offered them and, indeed, had less good to say even about the parties and candidates they favored than they had in the 1960s. Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde also emphasize the erosion of party loyalties and a declining belief in the responsiveness of politicians to voter influence. And Teixeira reports consistent findings.

Changes in political attitudes are of course changes in individual-level traits, but since the traits at issue are attitudes toward politics, and since

they have changed so rapidly, it seems reasonable to suspect that the broader political system is implicated. If turnout is falling because of declining party loyalties or lowered feelings of political efficacy, something is probably going on in the larger environment of American politics.

... [W]e argued that the correlation of such individual-level attributes as education with turnout was misleading; that it did not reflect the direct impact of education on participation but the tilt of party appeals and strategies away from the less educated and worse-off, and toward the more educated and better-off. The decline in political efficacy and increase in political alienation, and the impact of these attitudes on turnout, suggests a further elaboration of the relationship between individual-level attributes and politics. The political system not only selectively mobilizes people according to their class-related attributes, but it also creates the attributes that depress turnout. On both these counts, the statistical evidence on the bearing of individual attributes on turnout points the finger of blame at the performance of the American political parties.

This... is not the place to begin an examination of the features of recent American electoral politics that are increasing various measures of political alienation. The much discussed and debated decline of party organization (at least in the Democratic party), the flood of special interest money pouring into the campaigns, the growing presence of the K Street lobbyists, the gap between the issues Americans say are important and the national legislative agenda, the increasing complexity of policy initiatives riddled with pork barrel giveaways—all of these probably contribute to growing public cynicism. Perhaps the rise of neoliberalism as the current ideological orthodoxy also turns people away from electoral politics, if only because it argues the futility of government intervention in a world dominated by markets, especially international markets. In short, the political parties and their interest-group allies are constructing a political environment that is demobilizing the American electorate, lowered barriers notwithstanding.

The very success of this development may even help to explain why the business opposition to government agency registration we initially anticipated never materialized. In the late nineteenth century, at least some business interests treated the shape and scale of electoral participation by the lower strata. But on the eve of the twenty-first century, the big automobile companies readily conceded Election Day as a paid holiday to unionized auto workers. Predictably, Republican party leaders railed at the contract concession, as they had railed at the NVRA. But General Motors, Ford, and Daimler Chrysler, the world's three largest auto compa-

ries, were unfazed. Perhaps electoral politics has evolved to the stage where money, advertising, and special-interest lobbies, together with the dampening effect on democratic aspirations of neoliberal ideology, have combined to neutralize the age-old class threat posed by an enfranchised population.

It followed from our perspective on the closely interbraided causes of low turnout that we did not think voter registration would have its most important effects on turnout directly. True, accessible voter registration procedures would lower the costs, in rational-choice terms, of the voting act, and Human SERVE's public relations material emphasized that if registration barriers were eliminated, millions of new voters could flock to the polls. But we personally did not believe that the mere fact of lower costs was likely to draw people to the polls in large numbers. Rather, . . . our hope was that once rates of registration rose among low income and minority citizens, this pool of newly available voters would attract at least some entrepreneurial politicians who would then begin to raise the issues and organize the get-out-the-vote efforts that would bring new voters to the polls.

That has yet to happen. In fact, however logical such recruitment efforts might seem from a narrow focus on electoral incentives, the century-long reliance of the American parties on electoral demobilization . . . suggests that it may never happen. So does our own very limited success in trying to make allies, even of politicians who were likely to benefit at the polls. Some Democratic governors issued executive orders to be sure, but then declined to implement them. Even when state legislatures controlled by Democrats mandated motor voter, they refused to include social agencies as registration sites. Our successes at initiating registration in some municipal agencies were typically short-lived, when we stopped prodding, registration flagged or ceased. . . .

The moral seems to us clear. The scale and shape of the active electorate can determine electoral outcomes. But left to themselves, the parties are unlikely to work to expand participation. Perhaps part of the reason is simply that politicians have come to absorb the conventional wisdom that ascribes nonparticipation to the individual traits of voters. More likely, they mouth such explanations for comfort. Indeed, party competition is more likely to take the form of strategies to demobilize sectors of the electorate, than of strategies to expand it. . . .

In sum, we think it possible that the NVRA and the pool of potential voters it is creating might yet matter in American politics. If it does, it is not likely to be because the dynamic of electoral competition itself prods the major parties to reach out to new voters. It is more likely to

be because a new surge of protest, perhaps accompanied by the rise of minor parties and the electoral cleavages that both movements and minor parties threaten, forces political leaders to make the programmatic and cultural appeals, and undertake the voter recruitment, that will reach out to the tens of millions of Americans who now remain beyond the pale of electoral politics.