



September 1987

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### Recommended Citation

Colby, Ira (1987) "Registering the Poor to Vote: Lessons from the 1984 General Election," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol14/iss3/3>

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# REGISTERING THE POOR TO VOTE: LESSONS FROM THE 1984 GENERAL ELECTION

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*Voter registration and educational programs for the poor and moderate income groups were a dominant political strategy embraced by a number of social welfare organizations during the 1984 general election. This article reviews one such project that registered 4,124 individuals and implemented a follow-up survey of 500 new registrants. Based on the survey, the author identifies a number of voting and nonvoting behaviors that should be considered in future voter registration and education projects. The author also identifies critical policy issues that impede voter participation among the poor.*

## INTRODUCTION

Voter registration and education is a political strategy whose goal is to broaden the electoral support for particular issues and candidates. Piven and Cloward challenged the social welfare community to adopt voter registration in the 1984 Presidential primaries and general election as a mechanism to empower the poor in the political process (Piven and Cloward, 1983, 3–14). A number of human service organizations including the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, the American Public Health Association, and the American Public Welfare Association, responded to Piven's and Cloward's call by making voter registration a high priority during the election year (Livingston, 1–3; Piven and Cloward, 1985, 583).

This paper, based on the results of a low-income voter

registration project conducted by undergraduate social work students from the University of Texas-Arlington, examines voting beliefs among new registrants, identifies their voting and nonvoting trends, and concludes with recommendations to strengthen the political impact of the poor and near poor.<sup>1</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

BSW students in two community organization classes developed a series of voter registration projects that registered 4,124 individuals. Utilizing 1980 census tract data, low-to-moderate income neighborhoods were identified and targeted for registration. Project registrants were asked to complete a follow-up information sheet of which 3,696 (89.62 percent) were returned.<sup>2</sup> Of this number, 756 (20.46 percent) were deleted from further study due to a lack of phone numbers or illegible handwriting, leaving 2,940 individuals for follow-up purposes.

The students conceptualized voter education as a significant political activity to increase voting rates. An "Adopt-A-Registrant" program was proposed to and implemented by the Tarrant County League of Women Voters, Fort Worth, Texas, which met the educational goals of the project. Each League volunteer was provided names of five or six registrants to contact. Couples, who registered at the same time, were telephoned by two different League members to ensure that each person was contacted by the project rather than through a spouse, friend, or significant other. The purposes of the League's calls were to (a) encourage individuals to vote, (b) provide names, phone numbers, and/or addresses of local registrar offices for particular problems (i.e., lost voting card), (c) provide addresses of the polling place, and, finally, (d) share League information, if requested, concerning candidates and referenda items. Prior to the phone calls, the new registrants were randomly placed into one of three groups: Control Group A and Experimental Groups B and C. Members of Group A were not telephoned by League members; Group B was contacted once while Group C was telephoned on two separate occasions. Initial contact with Groups B and C was made two to three weeks prior to the election with the second call to Group

C placed the evening immediately preceding the Presidential election.

A random sample without replacement of 500 registrants was selected and a telephone call survey administered during a three day period following the November election.<sup>3</sup> The survey, modeled on the instrument utilized by the Texas Secretary of State's office, was pretested in the 1984 Texas May Primary with a sample of 156 voters (Peterson). The final data were coded and analyzed through a Statistical Analysis computer format.

## FINDINGS

### Voter Participation

Of those registered, 72.65 percent were female and 27.35 percent were male. The predominance of women was anticipated given that the the majority of the poor and near-poor are female. The percentage of those who voted was below the county's (73.92 percent) and national (87.75 percent) figures: 73.50 percent of the new registrants voted in the November election (U.S. Bureau of the Census). Women voted more frequently than men - 76.08 percent compared to 66.67 percent.

Of those voting, 34.50 percent labeled themselves as "liberal" while 30.23 percent felt they were "conservative" (See Table 1). Among nonvoters, the percentage of those classifying themselves as liberal or conservative was lower, while the "moderate" rating received the highest ranking (54.84 percent).

Women viewed themselves as being more liberal than did men - 34.51 percent compared to 22.91 percent. Conversely, males tended to be more conservative than women - 37.50 percent to 24.70 percent (See Table 1).

### Registrant Education

The project hypothesized that contact with new registrants would increase voter turnout and as the number of contacts increased there would be a rise in voter participation. The independent variable, the number of phone contacts, increased

TABLE 1

POLITICAL IDENTIFICATION BY SEX AND VOTING STATUS			
MALE	Liberal %	Moderate %	Conservative %
Vote	15.62	22.92	28.12
No Vote	7.29	16.67	9.38
TOTAL	22.91	39.59	37.50
FEMALE	Liberal %	Moderate %	Conservative %
Vote	29.02	27.06	20.00
No Vote	5.49	13.73	4.70
TOTAL	34.51	40.79	24.70

with each experimental group to determine what changes, if any, occurred with the dependent variable, voter participation rates.

Group A, which received no phone contacts, voted 57.02 percent while the voting rates of those groups contacted were both approximately 1.4 times as large as the noncontact group: Group B, which was phoned once, reported that 83.61 percent voted while group C's voting rate, with two phone contacts, was 81.66 percent (See Table 2).

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF TELEPHONE  
CONTACTS AND VOTING RATES

Contacts	Voted For President	
	Yes %	No %
0	57.02	42.98
1	83.61	16.39
2	81.66	18.34

## Mobility Among New Registrants

An unexpectedly large percentage of new registrants, 24.20 percent, had changed their residences or were unable to be contacted at the time of the survey: 7.8 percent had moved, 14.0 percent of the phones were disconnected, and 2.4 percent were wrong numbers. The May 1984 pretest was unable to reach 14.70 percent of the registrants for similar reasons. Between May and November, those unable to be contacted increased by 9.50 percent.

A total of 70 phones were disconnected and a random telephone contact of 30 names through the telephone company's information service was made to determine if the missing registrants remained in the geographic area. However, none of the individuals were located using the telephone area code as the contact boundary.

### Why Not Vote?

Those voting were asked to identify strategies they felt would increase the voting percentage while nonvoters were asked why they didn't vote. Responses were categorized into two groups - internal (items the individual has control over) and external (items beyond the control of the individual).

A contrast emerged between the two groups: the nonvoter identified internal variables for not participating in the election while voters perceived external issues as the primary barrier to increased voter participation. Nonvoters identified internal variables 60.87 percent compared to 39.12 percent for external reasons (See Table 3). The internal statement I DIDN'T WANT TO VOTE was the most frequently identified item among nonvoters, 22.83 percent, while the external statement I WAS UNABLE TO FIND THE POLLS was the least frequent response, 2.18 percent.

Those not contacted also identified I DIDN'T WANT TO VOTE as the primary reason for not voting, though the internal statement I COULDN'T DECIDE ON THE ISSUES was the second most frequently rated answer, 19.23 percent.

Nonvoting women in general identified internal reasons but they rated the external variable I WAS WORKING much

TABLE 3  
WHY PEOPLE DON'T VOTE BY SEX

Reason	Male %	Female %
<i>Internal</i>		
Didn't want to	14.13	8.70
Was too busy	4.35	9.78
Forgot	3.26	6.52
Issues not important	0.00	14.13
<i>External</i>		
Was working	5.43	13.04
Medical reasons	2.17	7.61
Out of town	3.26	2.17
Couldn't find the polls	1.09	1.09
Couldn't get a ride	1.09	2.17

higher than nonvoting males - 13.04 percent to 5.43 percent. Nonvoting males, on the other hand, claimed their decision was by personal choice. Approximately 14 percent of the nonvoting males "Didn't want to vote," which is more than three times the rate of any other variable for this cohort.

Voters rated the external statement PROVIDE TRANSPORTATION TO THE POLLS highest at 27.91 percent. Transportation, however, was the least important issue to the nonvoter - only 2.18 percent reported this as a problem area (See Table 4).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR REGISTRATION/EDUCATION PROJECTS

The social welfare community embraced voter registration/education as a vehicle to involve society's historically politically disenfranchised members in reshaping the nation's social agenda. It is impossible to determine the exact number of persons who were registered and voted as a result of these national efforts.<sup>4</sup> Further, it is equally as difficult to substantiate the impact made by these new voters in the 1984 general

TABLE 4

## WHAT WILL GENERATE HIGHER VOTER RATES BY SEX AND THOSE WHO VOTED

Reason	Male %	Female %
<i>Internal</i>		
Need better issues	1.94	7.75
Find better candidates	1.16	5.81
Have fewer elections	3.10	4.26
Have the candidate meet the voter more often	.78	4.26
<i>External</i>		
More Advertising	2.71	13.71
Better publicity of the polling locations	1.16	5.81
Provide Transportation	5.43	22.48
Make voting mandatory	1.16	1.16
No idea	1.94	7.75
Other ideas	1.94	2.71

election. If the sole criterion for success was the repudiation of the Reagan administration then the registration projects were a failure; however, if these projects were to broaden the political sphere among the poor and near-poor, then the projects were a partial success.

What are the lessons of the 1984 registration/education projects? There are a number of key points this study supports for future efforts: (1) the poor tend to be more liberal than the general population with women less conservative than men; (2) contact increases voter turnout; (3) transportation to the polls is not a significant dilemma for the nonvoter; and (4) some individuals will, as a personal conviction, chose not to vote.

The study also raises important questions which require further research and collective action. First, mobility by the poor and near-poor indicates that registration strategies must contend with voter movement as a barrier that keeps people from voting. In the 1984 Presidential election only five states, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oregon, and Wisconsin, al-



lowed election day registration. Conversely, citizens in 35 states and territories were faced with a registration deadline of at least 28 days prior to the election.<sup>5</sup> Such laws clearly limit electoral participation by the poor, a highly mobile population group, and penalize their political status due to their economic circumstances.

This high mobility also mandates that low-to-moderate income neighborhoods must be recanvassed to register new residents - an area once covered will need to be reworked within a short period of time.

An equally important issue revolves around working women's access to the polls. This research found that indiscriminate use of employer compensation policy created an obstacle to the polls. In effect, low-income women were placed in a double-bind situation: on the one hand, the women's liberal identification implies support for realigning the nation's conservative social goals, but if they did vote, they feared not being paid at work. The choice of not voting is understandable and clear in the face of a low income and the threat of lost wages. Effective public policy must be developed to protect the workers' incomes when exercising their political rights.

This study verified that voter contact increases the likelihood that an individual will vote. However, this research does not show a significant difference between voting rates and the number of contacts, a finding contrary to traditional political thinking. This lack of difference is attributable to a number of external variables (such as the preponderance of political advertising, issue/candidate mailings, telephoning conducted by various interest groups) not controlled for in this study. This is a critical area for political groups: if it is determined, for instance, that one contact is sufficient then needless redundancy may be eliminated and volunteer energies can be utilized more effectively.

Finally, evaluative research is required to determine the effectiveness of a number of voter education strategies. This project utilized a telephone strategy, but alternative models exist: do literature mailings accelerate voter rates; would personal contact by candidates or their supporters increase voter

participation; what is the impact of combining literature mailings, telephoning, and personal visits in an election?

The lessons of 1984 provide an excellent opportunity to plan for future elections. The social welfare community must rethink its strategies for voter registration and education projects - the goals set forth by Piven and Cloward may be achieved if there are significant modifications in strategies and related public policies.

## NOTES

1. The American Political Science Foundation provides a brief analysis of voting patterns for each of the national elections from 1972 thru 1980. For example, see C. Anthony Broh and Charles L. Prysby, *Voting Behavior: The 1980 Election*, (1981); also, Democratic National Committee, *Voter Registration Manual*, Washington, DC: Democratic National Committee.
2. It is a violation of Texas law to take any information directly from a voter application, thus the need for a separate sign-up sheet.
3. A limitation to the telephone survey is that information is often impossible to verify and cannot be taken at face value. As a result, analysis, interpretation, and generalizability of data should integrate these design limitations. See, D.W. Fiske, "When Are Verbal Reports Veridical?" in R.A. Shweder (ed.), "Fallible Judgement in Behavioral Research," *New Directions for Methodology of Social and Behavioral Science*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980; Claire Selltiz, Lawrence S. Wrightsman, and Stuart W. Cook, *Research Methods in Social Relations*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 3rd edition, 1976, pp. 292-293.
4. Human SERVE, a national organization based on the principles of Piven and Cloward, reportedly registered 275,000 people by October, 1984.
5. States and territories requiring 28 or more days as a registration deadline include Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

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