

# THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF CLASS? THE CASE OF THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT OF 1993

**Richard Cloward, Ph.D., Professor, Columbia University School of Social Work,  
and Frances Fox-Piven, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Graduate School and University  
Center, City University of New York.**

*When it became clear after the 1980 election that Republicans and many Democrats would try to dismantle much of the welfare state, the authors tried to organize resistance among human service workers. This effort helped, a decade later, to bring about an outcome that could not have been further from their minds initially – the national Voter Registration Act of 1993.*

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We interpreted the attack on the welfare state as class aggression. Provoked by intensifying international competition, rising inflation, and declining profits in the closing years of the Vietnam War, business began exerting itself to raise profits and lower costs, especially labor costs. Part of this campaign was waged in the workplace: to break unions, to lower wages, and to restructure work from full-time to part-time without benefits. Part of it was waged in politics: to roll back costly health and safety, consumer and environmental regulations; to redistribute taxes downward; and to remilitarize as part of an escalating contest with the Soviet Union for domination of the Third World. Part of it was waged in the financial markets where elites turned to speculation, including looting industrial assets by loading up businesses with leveraged-buy-out debt, and in time they would loot the banking system.

Of particular concern to us, the income-protections provided by the welfare state came under attack. We were not altogether surprised. Although European and American theories of welfare state origins, development, and growth are evolutionary, we had a more cyclical view. We saw contraction, as well as expansion. The struggle to institutionalize the idea of social provision did not follow a simple linear progression; victories were often followed by defeats. To our minds, periods of expansion and contraction expressed shifts in the balance of power between people and their rulers. A social contract won by the poor, and broken at first chance by their rulers; a class compromise

won, and betrayed. What we saw were accommodations between the rich and poor forged and re-forged in a continuing process of conflict.

Above all else, we were struck by how closely the history of the origins and expansion of social provision were associated with popular upheaval. Dislocating economic changes produced spreading destitution, often followed by riots in agricultural districts or in city streets, and at a later historical stage when workers had won the franchise, by volatility at the polls. In the United States in the 1930s, with the economy in collapse, the Great Depression gave rise to the greatest movement of the unemployed in American history, and to an even greater wave of industrial strikes, all in the context of the convulsive realignment of the political parties in the 1932 election. As a result of shifts at the polls and tumult in the streets, the social welfare foundations of the New Deal were laid: federal emergency relief, pensions for the elderly, unemployment insurance and disability compensation, aid to the blind and to dependent children, and subsidies for public housing.

The expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s was also owed to tumult. Southern agricultural modernization after World War II, accompanied by catastrophic hardship and massive rural-to-urban displacement, gave rise to the postwar Black movement for civil and social welfare rights. By the 1960s, spreading civil disobedience in the South and civil disorder in the northern cities won Blacks the franchise and toppled the southern caste system. And

even as Blacks entered the Democratic Party, segregationist Whites deserted it, first for neopopulist electoral movements, and later for the Republican Party. Once again, in response to shifts at the polls and tumult in the streets, social welfare legislation gushed forth from the Congress under the banner of Great Society: Social Security benefits were raised; the Aid to Families and Dependent Children (AFDC) rolls quadrupled; nutritional programs such as food stamps and high protein diets for pregnant women were added; health programs, such as Medicare and Medicaid developed; a host of new housing programs were enacted, as were massive subsidies to public schools in high poverty districts; anti-poverty community action programs were funded which enabled poorer people to organize to press their interests, usually in concert with new legal services programs, and so forth. We were also struck by how little academic attention had been paid to the role of tumult. There would have been few victories in the 1930s and 1960s without labor strikes, unemployed marches, civil disobedience, and riots. Little of this was noticed by social welfare historians, who were taken more with the notion of elite benevolence. Moreover, victories were often won all at once: the main New Deal programs originated between 1933 and 1935 and the main Great Society programs between 1963 and 1965. The chance for victories, it appeared, coincided with the height of popular protest.

The question for us after 1980 was how far people could be pushed down before they resisted. Would mass protest break out? Among industrial workers? Among minorities? Among students? Or among human service workers and social program beneficiaries – the unemployed, welfare recipients, the disabled? There was much pessimism about that question, given the temper of the times. The rich were on the attack, but there was quiet among those being battered. It was a one-sided class war.

Still, no one can be sure when protest is possible. Organizers look for potential signs of discontent; they try to imagine ways of stirring people to action, see what happens, and go on from there, if only to another failed effort. That means organizers have an occupational bias

toward optimistic analyses and interpretations of the instigating potential of socioeconomic and political changes. And why not? Why shouldn't they be biased? One doesn't have to be a sociologist of knowledge to understand that factors of one kind or another – whether cultural, structural, or idiosyncratic – always tilt analyses in ways not determined by data. No analyst “rises above the mores” is how William Graham Sumner put the point. So why not deliberately adopt a bias which points toward political possibilities? It gives hope, and encourages people to act on their grievances.

It is also well to remember that mass unrest and protest are rarely anticipated. No one – not academics, nor pollsters, nor pundits – predicted the outbreak of the decade-long direct-action phase of the Southern civil rights movement, beginning with the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Since social theory is so abstract and ambiguous, with so little predictive power, there is good reason for organizers to keep testing the waters.

We in fact thought protest was possible in the 1980s. All the of the major classical traditions in explanation of political unrest gave reason to believe that people would fight back, since all of the socio-economic and cultural changes said to be predictive of protest appeared to be present. It was as if Durkheim were lurking behind the data, and Marx, and Weber, too. We thought there had been similar concatenations in the 1930s and 1960s. Durkheim could be seen in massive violations of economic expectations during the Great Depression, and again during the postwar modernizing process that eliminated most traditional agricultural work in the South where the Black labor force was centered, and still again in the new class war initiated by Reagan's election.

Marx's emphasis on “immiseration” echoed Durkheim in this respect, but he also emphasized the importance of solidarities among affected groups, the importance of socially-structured capacities by the aggrieved to organize. This line of thinking was resurrected and greatly advanced in the post-1960s period by analysts loosely grouped in the “resource mobilization” school, led by Charles Tilly. Those who are dispersed in

everyday life have little capacity for protest; those who are organized in everyday life may have much capacity. These collective capacities, in turn, vary with large-scale social changes which sometimes aggregate people, and sometimes desegregate them. Economic concentration during industrialization, reflected in a trend toward larger firm sizes, ultimately aggregated huge numbers of workers in mass production facilities, yielded them the capacity to organize – to unionize, to strike, and to form labor-based political parties. Agricultural modernization drove Blacks off the land in the American South, especially during and following World War II, concentrating them in the central cities when they constructed the institutional infrastructure, not least churches with mass memberships, which made large scale collective protest possible – boycotts, civil disobedience, and riots.

In like manner, the rise of health, welfare, and education institutions aggregated tens of millions of human service workers and beneficiaries. The welfare state concentrated the service labor force no less than factories concentrated by the industrial labor force. It brought service workers together in state bureaucracies or in state-subsidized agencies in the private sector. In turn, worker organizations formed, some of them membership organizations composed of teachers, social workers, public health workers, and day care workers, including unions. National organizations of agencies offering similar services also formed, whether of family service agencies, family planning agencies, or childcare agencies. Client organizations formed among the elderly, the disabled, the unemployed, welfare recipients, and others. By the usual measures of structural density and interconnectedness, the welfare state produced more interlaced organizations and associations than one could shake a stick at. It is the state, in short, that gives human service workers and beneficiaries the incentives and resources to mobilize. Like industrial workers and Blacks before them, we thought human service workers and beneficiaries also had large-scale collective capabilities; they too, could mobilize.

For us, it was Weber's lasting insight – that human behavior cannot be understood

except as a reflection of people's subjective interpretations of their world – that gave most reason for cautious optimism that protest would break out. We thought people had developed firmly held standards of economic justice, coupled with equally firm popular convictions about the responsibility of the state to enforce those standards. The idea of state social provision had thus become culturally embedded, and durable. In other words, the state had come to parallel the market as an arena of class conflict.

The fight-back potential of the welfare state loomed large in our thinking. Traditional left wing analyses root working-class power in the modes and relations of production – much emphasis on unions and union-based political parties, for example, as the vehicles by which labor rights and social welfare rights were won. But the social programs themselves represent a vast new complex of institutions – federal, state, and local, both public and voluntary – that bring various categories of citizens into regular interaction with the state, whether the unemployed, or single-mothers, or the elderly, or the staff who serve them. After all, the American welfare state, which developed later and was smaller than in European states, had nevertheless reached similar scale in the wake of the turbulent 1960s. Here were a new set of institutions, political institutions, funded by revenues representing a significant part of the gross national product, on which the well-being of tens of millions of people depended. These millions were not organized primarily at the point of production. They were organized at the point of politics. It is the state that defines them as social categories, entitles them, and enters into political relations with them. With the rise of the welfare state, in other words, we thought that the “modes and relations of production” had come to be paralleled by what we began calling the “modes and relations of politics.” In brief, we thought the welfare state itself would become the locus of resistance, the staging ground for protest.

Of course, elite propaganda in the post-1960s period emphasized that the economy was in the grip of transcendent market forces, immutable market forces, and global market

forces. People would just have to hunker down, make do with less (and ignore statistics showing that the rich were getting richer). Despite the skillfully articulated naturalistic rhetoric of globalization in which this neo-laissez-faire ideology was framed, we thought that people would see through it, that they would understand how this doctrine masked the myriad ways state policy was being restructured to protect and promote the interests of the well-off during what was a time of economic decline. It seemed to us, in sum, that there was a good chance that people would recognize that elites were taking away their economic rights, not the Invisible Hand.

Since the sociological Gods of protest seemed all to be smiling, we predicted in 1982 in *The Nation* magazine that the United States was entering "A New Age of Protest" which could stave off the elite assault, and in the same year we published *The New Class War*, to say that human service workers could and should resist. We also tried our hand at organizing. We invented an organization called the Emergency Campaign to Save Human Services, recruited a graduating Columbia University School of Social Work student, Kenneth Grossinger, to staff it, and appealed to the New York City social welfare community to join in demonstrating against social program cuts. This effort was a disaster (although no fault of Ken's; he performed admirably, just as he is now performing admirably as a senior organizer for the Service Employees International Union). Few people showed up at demonstrations, and we had some bad luck. Painful as it is to recall, we'll give a single example.

When the National Conference of Christians and Jews announced that Reagan would be the recipient of its annual Humanitarian Award during a gala dinner in March 1992 at the hotel Hilton on Fifth Avenue at 57<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, we thought we had been handed a golden opportunity for staging a protest demonstration, and we spread the word through social welfare networks. When we set a meeting with the police to work out arrangements for the demonstration, representative of the All People's Congress was present, since they had applied for a permit

to demonstrate on Fifth Avenue, (New York) directly in front of the hotel. We agreed to stage our picketing a block down the street.

The All People's Congress is a congeries of two-dozen sectarian groups on the extreme left, many identified with Third World revolutionary struggles, each with about 20 members, all of whom will assemble to demonstrate anywhere, anytime, within 24 hours of being summoned by a phone call. And they know how to put on one hell of a demonstration. Moreover, we had sort of forgotten how rough sectarians can play. We scheduled a press conference a few days before the event, and got in the press daybook. When we convened, there was no press. Someone had called the daybook early that morning to cancel our press conference. So there we were – academics, union leaders, social welfare executives, clergy, and one unidentified person whom we knew to be from All People's Congress who didn't seem in the least surprised by the lack of press – all of us in borrowed office space on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street across from the New York Times, and no reporters. People like Mitchell I. Ginsberg, Professor Emeritus and Dean, Columbia University School of Social Work, helped cover our humiliation by making brief speeches about the injustice of the social program cuts, and Reverend William Sloan Coffin of Riverside Church led us in a rendering of "We Shall Overcome."

When the scheduled night came, we were the ones who were overcome. The All People's Congress had a flatbed truck that stretched almost all the way across Fifth Avenue. They erected a scaffold on it to support a platform that gave the feeling, in the semi-darkness, that their speakers were suspended above the street, a heavenly host bearing Marxist tablets. And their sound equipment was so superb that their speakers' voices echoed down the Fifth Avenue canyons, drowning us out, although that mattered little. Our flatbed truck, rented in Brooklyn, was two hours late, having gotten snarled up on the way to Manhattan in the traffic jams in the wake of Reagan's cavalcade. By the time we got the sound system set up, most of our constituents, who were not numerous to begin with, had

wandered up the street to where the action was. After we got the sound set up, we discovered we were missing a ladder to mount the truck. So we hoisted the speakers up. As for attendance, the demonstration up the block drew three or four thousand, including many passersby; on our corner, there were at best 300. Putting aside our bad luck in staging this particular demonstration, we read its failure – and the poor attendance at several other demonstrations we staged, one of them on Wall Street jointly with the National People's Action (the housing activists) – to mean that human service workers were not ready to protest.

We were in a quandary. Then we had a fortuitous encounter. In June 1982, the Food Research Action Center (FRAC) convened a national meeting of grassroots organizers. FRAC is an outgrowth of the anti-poverty legal services program, specializing in promoting Food Stamps and related nutritional programs. Organizers gave reports on projects in different parts of the country to resist cuts in welfare state programs. Welfare rights organizing in one place, public housing tenant organizing in another place, and so on. The descriptions and discussions were spirited, but none of the projects struck us as having the potential for achieving the scale and power that would be required to turn back the assault on the welfare state.

But then, over lunch, Sanford Newman, a former anti-poverty legal services attorney, demonstrated how a new organization he had formed called Project Vote! was recruiting, training, and equipping volunteers with clipboards to register people to vote on the lines in unemployment and welfare offices, or on the lines at check-cashing facilities where vouchers were exchanged for Food Stamps, or on the lines at ghetto churches where federal surplus cheese was passed out. Because of the way these human service programs aggregated people on lines or in waiting rooms, the Project Vote strategy was far more efficient than traditional door-knocking drives, and was already being adopted by others in the voter registration community. Ken Grossinger subsequently rounded up a dozen Columbia University students who registered 1,800 people in four hours on federal surplus cheese

lines at a church in Harlem, and got a full-page picture and story in the New York Daily News.

Even so, we saw the limitation of Newman's strategy immediately: too few volunteer canvassers to create a major electoral impact. Roughly sixty million people, or forty percent of all eligible voters, were unregistered; two out of three of them resided in households with incomes below the median, so that many millions were social program beneficiaries. The problem was enlarged because people change residence so frequently, constantly replenishing the pool of unregistered voters. To our minds, a problem of such scale required a solution of commensurate scale.

We thought we saw the solution: mobilize the workers of the welfare state to register their clients. We were dazzled by the sheer magnitude of electoral mobilization from the bottom that seemed possible. The growth of the welfare state linked workers in their interviewing cubicles with the constituency to be mobilized: hundreds of thousands of workers, millions of unregistered clients, all connected through institutions in which they had common material interests. Doubling as voter registrars, human service workers could mobilize an electoral defense of the welfare state. We also thought it likely that human service workers could be persuaded to do it (an assumption that proved wrong).

Over the summer of 1982, we wrote a draft of a paper called "Toward a Class Based Realignment in American Politics: A Movement Strategy," which we presented for comment to a small group of top agency executives and social welfare academics in the fall. Richard, after a Chinese lunch, opened the meeting by reading from his fortune cookie: "The project you are starting will succeed." To some participants, that sounded like false prophecy, but others were encouraging, so we decided to roll the electoral dice. In early December we sent out a call for a series of meetings to plan a month-long mass voter registration campaign in June 1983 in New York City. As things turned out, it was a happening.

During the winter and spring, labor leaders and liberal Democratic politicians came to meeting after meeting, and so did both leading

social agency executives and rank and file social workers, day care workers, family planning workers, and settlement house workers. As word spread, people began to appear from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Grey Panthers, and the Student Public Interest Research Group. We planned a dual approach during the month of June: hundreds of volunteers would go into welfare and unemployment waiting rooms and sign people up on lines; and hundreds of social agencies would make voter registration services available at reception or intake desks. James Farmer, former director of the Congress of Racial Equality, delivered a rousing speech at the kickoff rally in the NYU Law School auditorium, and by the end of the month, 6,000 people had been registered. Of great interest to us 2,500 had been registered by staff voluntary agencies, just enough to give us hope that we might be right that human service workers could be motivated to register their clients.

In the summer of 1983, we went national, incorporating a new organization called Human Service Employees Registration and Voter Education, or Human SERVE. We obtained the necessary clearances from the Internal Revenue Service to raise tax-deductible funds specifically for voter registration. Hulbert James, and old friend from civil rights and welfare days, signed on as the first executive director. Foundations supplied financial support, staff were hired, and field offices were set up in a dozen key industrial states. And we recruited a board of directors from among the presidents and directors of national human service associations: Arthur Katz, Council on Social Work Education; John E. Hansan, National Association of Social Workers; Marion F. Langer, American Orthopsychiatric Association; Anthony Robbins, American Public Health Association, Sara-Alyce Wright, national YWCW; Linda Davidoff, national Planned Parenthood Federation; and George A. Brager, Dean of the Columbia School of Social Work (who let Human SERVE squat in two offices). They in turn ran stories and editorials in their newsletters about the legitimacy and importance of doing voter registration routinely in voluntary social

agencies, and they set up all sorts of speaking arrangements for us at national conferences and with their local chapters. The two of us personally telephoned every graduate dean of social work in the country, and many undergraduate directors, to describe the idea and to ask that they sponsor community wide meetings of faculty, students, and agency personnel.

And then we went on the campaign trail. On days we were not teaching, we ran around the country, madly, to any school of social work or public health or planned parenthood or social work chapter that would listen to us, sometimes speaking eight to ten times in three or four states over two or three days, all the while proclaiming that human service workers had it in their hands to change American politics, and to save the welfare state. "Make voter registration a community service offered by your agencies," we said. "Do it at reception desks, during intake, while you interview. Make it a routine, a regular procedure, all year around." Richard had a favorite peroration (Frances thought it was a little too much) that summed things up: "You can change politics without even leaving your offices. You can save the welfare state from where you sit, 9:00 to 5:00. You don't have to go to demonstrations, you don't have to sit-in, you don't have to get arrested, you don't have to go to jail. All you have to do is register your clients to vote!"

Our audiences often seemed dumbstruck. Sometimes they erupted as if here was something human service workers could do, hopefully with agency sanction, that might make a difference to the fate of the welfare state.

Alas. To make a long story short, after many meetings and speeches, little happened.

Agencies probably registered three or four hundred thousand, not three or four hundred million. The failure of the social agency campaign jolted us (Richard especially; Frances had been more skeptical from the outset). Major streams of theory suggested that it would work. Social agency workers, including those with MSWs, were part of a new service sector proletariat – low paid and little honored, their lot not so different than that of industrial workers before the New Deal and mass

unionization. They had every rational reason to fight back. With the women's movement gaining strength in this period, it was also acutely disappointing that women social workers paid no heed, defending neither themselves nor the women and children whom they served. It was their livelihood that was under attack, and the worth of the service roles which women have always performed.

Academic ways of thinking about the origins of insurgent behavior left us unprepared for the fact that there was no protest. Indeed, no large scale protests over declining economic conditions emerged among any major constituencies during the entire decade of the 1980s, nor even in the long recession beginning in 1990. What was on to make of that? Useless Durkheim? Useless Marx? Useless Weber? Don't count on intensified deprivations; don't count on social capacities; don't count on people's social ideas. Well, who knows? The question of when people do or do not protest is still unsettled.

Following our failure to mobilize the voluntary sector in 1984, we would have closed Human SERVE, except that we were already working on another idea about how to get welfare state beneficiaries registered to vote. The recessionary 1982 midterm elections made us think of it. Facing unemployment higher than anytime since the Great Depression, blue-collar and minority people swamped the polls, enlarging the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives by another twenty-six votes, and electing Democratic governors in New Mexico, Ohio, New York, and Texas.

Pundits read the returns as meaning that the 1984 presidential election outcome would likely be determined by an upsurge of what the Congressional Quarterly called "have-not" voters. Republicans were alarmed. Conservative analysts warned that the Democrats would exploit their advantage by mounting registration drives among the less-well-off, and that the Republicans had better start registering millions of upscale citizens or they would be trampled at the polls by the rabble. It was an incredible moment: analysts and activists everywhere were beginning to say that voter registration was the key to Reagan's fate, to the future of American

politics. What all the furor meant to us is that the one-sided class war could become two-sided at least at the polls.

In this atmosphere, we kept thinking about those new Democratic governors: Anaya in New Mexico (the first Hispanic governor); Celeste in Ohio (formerly with the Peace Corps); Cuomo in New York (who got huge Black and Hispanic pluralities); and White in Texas (where Hispanic turnout was up sharply, all of it was going to the Democrats). We thought they had an incentive to expand the electorate from the bottom – among welfare recipients, the unemployed, the working poor on the Food Stamp rolls, and among assorted have-not groups. The question was how?

Could the governors do anything to make voter registration easier, more available? At first glance, it didn't appear so. State constitutions vest legislatures with control over voter registration arrangements, and legislatures are dominated by rural and suburban representatives who are not sympathetic to the sorts of people who show up on the lines in welfare and unemployment agencies. Since voter registration arrangements are the gateway to the voting booth, we could not imagine that the typical legislature would authorize employees in agencies serving the poor and minorities, as part of their regular duties, to register people. "There are no Republicans on the welfare lines," one high Republican official announced. Voter registration arrangements have always been an important reflection of party competition: the more cumbersome and intimidating the procedures, the less competitive the party that depends mainly on votes from the lower half of the class structure. To compete more effectively, in other words, Democrats in the big industrial states needed a way of circumventing legislatures.

We thought we saw what they could do. They could issue executive orders – gubernatorial executive orders, county executive orders, mayoral orders – directing that citizens be registered to vote during the intake/application process in various state, county and municipal agencies. State welfare and unemployment agencies interested us most because they reach large numbers of those

who are less likely to be registered. We consulted with Arthur Eisenberg at the New York Civil Liberties Union, and concluded that executive orders might well survive the inevitable court challenges by state Republican parties. The courts might hold that governors, county executives and mayors were simply making access to voter registration widely available to citizens, that such executive action did not infringe on legislative prerogatives, and that no state constitutional conflicts over the 'separation of powers' were raised.

Who better to initiate this idea than the four new Democratic governors? Human SERVE state organizers set about forming statewide coalitions of unions, civil rights groups, religious, social welfare, and voting rights activists to pressure the governors. To make a long story short, all four issued orders, with much fanfare in the press. And then the political fireworks began.

It was like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The first order was issued in Texas in March 1984; the other three states acted by the beginning of summer. The media quickly filled with predictions that the outcome of the 1984 election might be determined by voter registration in welfare and unemployment offices. In the outcry, Anaya was shot down both by the Republicans and by the conservative wing of his own party (which he had bested at the polls), and he cancelled the order. State Republican parties sued in New York and Ohio (but the courts ruled that there was no separation of powers problem, as we had hoped). The Michigan legislature passed a bill explicitly prohibiting state agencies from cooperating with Human SERVE. The Reagan administration threatened to cut off federal grants-in-aid, on the ground that the Hatch Act would be violated if human service workers registered citizens in the course of their regular duties, and got into a rhetorical shooting match with Celeste, Cuomo, and White. Congress, fearful that the national publicity generated by the conflict between the Reagan administration and governors might make it appear that politicians don't want people to vote, passed a ballot-waving resolution praising democracy and urging every citizen to go to the polls, and the Reagan administration withdrew its threat to

the governors.

The executive orders were too late to have any effect on the election. But Human SERVE couldn't have bought the publicity at any price. All of a sudden, voting rights activists were debating the merits of something called "agency-based" voter registration, and politicians in both parties and at different levels of government were exchanging political epithets over it. It certainly helped our fundraising (which has averaged about \$500,000 annually during the life of this project, mostly in grants from foundations.)

This initial success gave us reason to think that traditional ideas in political science about competition as the force that drives parties to expand the electorate should inform our efforts after 1984. We could exploit the rising criticism – for example, by Jess Jackson's Rainbow Coalition – that the Democratic Party was too oriented toward the suburban vote, and not enough oriented toward expanding its social base by reaching down in the class structure. Consequently, we adopted an agency-based executive order" strategy, and Human SERVE field staff worked to spread the idea and form supporting coalitions in the states.

The strategy didn't work out very well, although not for lack of executive orders.

Orders got issued, dozens of them, a few even by liberal Republicans – some by governors, some by mayors, including Black mayors, including by Black mayors in Atlanta, Birmingham, and Los Angeles. But one could wrap fish with these orders, for all the people they got registered. Public officials staged signing ceremonies with a great flourish: they draped themselves in the Flag; they delivered speeches sounding like the Founding Fathers. And all the while, cameras rolled. But then they didn't follow through to implementation. All rhetoric, no registration. Another disappointment.

So much for party competition. Our experience in dozens of states proved how weak it is.

We would summarize its usefulness as a guiding principle in organizing this way: Republicans are adamantly opposed to any reforms that would raise turnout rates at the bottom. Democrats, for their part, are



lukewarm toward such reforms. New York, where we spent more time and money than in any other state, is a case in point. It is the center of the foundation world, the center of the media, the center (we thought) of political liberalism. We were certain that Governor Cuomo, and Mayor Dinkins after he was elected in New York City in 1989, would implement human service registration. Between 1986-88, our funding proposals had a prominent section predicting a voter registration paradise in "SHOWCASE NEW YORK." Year by year, Louise Altman, the second of Human SERVE's two associate directors and New York organizer did what legislative organizers do. She organized statewide coalitions and importuned the Governor, who issued a second and better executive order, with the appropriate press announcements, this time in 1988, but he again failed to implement it. She staged public forums and arranged testimony, and rebutted opponents of reform at official hearings. She worked with the media to expose New York's archaic election practices ("as bad as in Mississippi"), and helped prepare law suits to expose them. Hard work, year after year, and to very little avail. The Senate Republicans did not want multitudes of poorer people registered to vote, especially those in New York City.

In any event, it became apparent by 1987 or 1988 that we needed legislation, not executive orders, legislation that could be enforced by the threat of litigation. We turned to this task with trepidation, fearing that legislatures would pass "motor voter" programs but not programs to register people in welfare and unemployment agencies. When Human SERVE started out in 1983, several states already had operating motor voter systems; the earliest of them had been started in Michigan in 1976 by Richard Austin, the first Black elected Secretary of State in the country. But at first we had no interest in motor voter; data from the U.S. Department of Transportation showed that the constituencies which were underregistered – poorer people and minorities – were also less likely to be on the drivers license rolls: big-city dwellers were less likely, and inner-city minority women were least likely. Human SERVE asked its contacts in the New

York City Human Resources Administration to conduct a drivers license survey in several public welfare waiting rooms. In the Schermerhorn Center (Brooklyn), which sees 600 clients daily, 500 adults were questioned: only eleven reported having drivers' licenses. In the Waverly Center (Manhattan, New York, New York), which sees 900 clients daily, 700 were questioned: 8 said they were licensed.

In any case, Human SERVE staff began haunting the conferences of governors, secretaries of state, county officials, mayors, and Black legislators, distributing literature and inveigling themselves onto panels where they talked up voter registration reform. Then it was back to their offices and to the telephones to follow up with the contacts made. Human SERVE spent \$50,000 a year on travel and telephones. And, of course, statewide coalitions were formed to pressure legislatures.

After four or five years of working the legislative halls all over the country, we had fantastic success, at least with motor voter. By 1989, some 30 states had started some sort of motor voter system. But no matter how much we talked about fairness to non-drivers who tended to be poor, to be minorities, and to be women, we could not get legislatures to include welfare and unemployment agencies in their voter registration reform bills. Only one state did, and that was thanks to the legislative organizing work of a Carleton College political science professor and grassroots organizer named Paul Wellstone who formed a Human SERVE chapter in Minnesota (and went on to win election to the U.S. Senate in 1990, a chamber over which he presided on the day the final federal bill was passed in May 1993). Overall, we had won a reform that we didn't care about, and lost the one we did care about.

First Human SERVE failed to get social program beneficiaries registered through the voluntary sector; then it failed to get them registered with executive orders; and it failed again with state legislation. The only chance left was Congress. By this curious process, we became advocates of national voter reform. We couldn't have imagined that back in 1982 and 1983. Nor could we have imagined then that national reform would succeed 10 years later. And we certainly would not have

thought that motor voter programs, which we initially spurned, would turn out to be the key to getting human service beneficiaries registered to vote.

Federal legislation of any kind seemed like a long shot indeed. Chances were that Congress would do nothing, or would at best pass motor voter legislation without human service agencies; and even if, by some fortuitous combination of circumstances, it turned out to be possible to find 60 votes to break Republican filibusters in the Senate so that a comprehensive bill could be passed, Bush, elected in 1988, would wield the veto pen. In any case, the key question was whether Congressional Democrats wanted to expand their political base from below and would fight for a comprehensive bill, as their counterparts in the states had not. It was party competition theories to the test again.

Ironically, motor voter programs were key to the passage of National Voter Registration Act. They constituted a precedent – that enrolling the electorate is a legitimate state function, and the way to do it is through a spectrum of government agencies. The civil rights struggle and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (including subsequent amendments), by outlawing literacy tests and other practices, stopped government from preventing people from registering. Human SERVE argued that a new principle was emerging: that government should have an affirmative obligation to enroll the eligible electorate, and that making voter registration an integral part of application processes in state agencies was the way to do it. The fact that there were so many motor voter programs by the late 1980s made that claim credible. It robbed Congressional opponents of objections on states rights' grounds, since federal legislation would simply nationalize an innovation that had become widespread among the states. More and more, we used motor voter as the case in point to argue for a federal bill. Our studies showed that motor voter was cheap - \$0.25 per registrant in most states; it would be just as cheap in other agencies. It was fraud-free, since getting drivers licenses requires proof of identity, residence and age, and it would be doubly fraud-free in human service agencies

where people must document their identity, age, sex, occupation, family status, and much else about who they are before benefits are granted.

Consequently, we made the case to a coalition of national civil rights, civic, labor, social welfare, disability, and religious organizations that they should push Congress to support a comprehensive motor voter/agency-based voter registration reform bill. To make another long story short, it was this coalition that negotiated a bill with the Democratic Congressional leadership, and that helped carry the bill to final passage. The key issue, especially in the Senate, was whether human service agencies (AFDC, Food Stamps, Medicaid, WIC, and unemployment) should be included in the motor voter bill. This was almost entirely a partisan issue, since social program recipients, being heavily minorities, could be expected to vote more Democratic than Republican. It was thus touch and go whether human services agencies would be included. The civil rights groups were key. They made plain that they wanted human service agencies included; without pressure from the civil rights community, key southern Democrats would not have supported human service agency registration. The civil rights groups were also crucial in persuading three liberal Senate Republicans to join 57 Democrats to shut off filibusters. The first three cloture motions, in 1990 and 1991, failed to muster 60 votes. However, 60 votes were cast to override a filibuster in 1992, and an inclusive bill went to President Bush who vetoed it – on the eve of Independence Day when everyone was preparing cookouts. A year later, in the Spring of 1993, an inclusive bill survived another filibuster by exactly 60 votes, this time after 11 days, and by then there was a Democrat in the White House to sign it.

Both of us got to stand behind President Clinton at the White House signing. When he shook our hands, he gave us two of the 18 pens he had used. As we stepped off the platform toward the audience, we gave one to Human SERVE's associate director, Jo-Ann Chasnow, whose considerable organizing efforts at the state and federal levels were no small reason why there was a federal bill to



### WHITE HOUSE SIGNING OF THE NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT, MAY 20, 1993

sign and celebrate at all. A year later, the National Association of Secretaries of State, at their annual conference, made an award to Human SERVE for its work on reform, but it was also Jo-Anne whom they intended to honor. They said that “she is a tireless worker in the vineyard of Democracy,” and “She deserves to hold the award and smile at the ceremony with a feeling of satisfaction and achievement.”

If properly implemented by the states, registration levels will be more than 60 percent. The large majority will be registered in drivers’ license agencies, and the rest in human service agencies.

The main defect of the federal legislation is that it permits looser administrative

arrangements for registering voters in human service agencies than in driver agencies. The NVRA language pertaining to drivers license agencies virtually forces them to use what Human SERVE had for years been advocating for all relevant state agencies: single/combined forms, the top part to get or renew a drivers’ license, or to apply for human service benefits, and the bottom part to register to vote. The language governing human service agencies is more permissive, and could lead to less routinized voter registration procedures; a lot of people could be missed. Looser federal language means, politically, that the fight for a routinized system of voter registration in the United States has been shifted back again to

state legislators, and to AFDC, Food Stamp, Medicaid, and WIC administrators. This does not necessarily mean, however, that there will be another endless, endless, fight over voter registration arrangements. It does not necessarily mean that it will be a replay of a century-long political struggle in the states in which representatives of rural and small town dwellers, this time joined by suburban representatives, try again to design registration arrangements that will keep voting lower in the cities, the locale earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the immigrant industrial working class and now largely of minorities who make up much of the service working class.

This time around, the voter registration fight at the state level will be played out within much narrower political parameters, parameters set by the NVRA on the one side and by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on the other. In a sense, state officials are in a vise. The NVRA requires that states establish new voter registration arrangements; if they design arrangements in human service agencies that are much looser than in drivers' license agencies, then they can be charged with racial discrimination under the Voting Rights Act.

Louise Altman worked to tighten the vise in New York. After the NVRA passed, there was some danger the New York State Legislature would not act by the deadline, or that they would write strong driver language and weak human service language, thus creating a racially discriminatory system. Louise remobilized the statewide coalition, and she raised the threat that legal defense organizations would file voting rights suits. The Community Service Society of New York (whose general counsel, Jaun Cartegena, serves as board president of Human Serve) made this threat real to legislators by actually filing notice of a suit. And Louise got the New York City bar association to issue a letter strongly implying that New York State had no legal grounds to resist implementing the NVRA. The Republicans, in short, could be made to look responsible for deliberately obstructing the rights of minorities.

The night before the legislature adjourned, the Senate Republicans finally capitulated and adopted the model legislative language

advocated by Human SERVE, including single/combined forms all around. Several days later, the New York Times said editorially (7/6/94) that one of the "few noteworthy accomplishments" of the legislative session was "a voter registration bill significantly better than the one required by the new federal law." And if implementation goes as well, especially by the state department of social services, it will indeed be SHOWCASE NEW YORK!

Perhaps it is too optimistic to conclude that state officials are in a vise, but that is the assumption which Human SERVE is making, at this writing. By the time this article is published, a conference organized by Human SERVE of litigating organizations in the civil liberties and civil rights community will have met to plan suits and threaten state officials in recalcitrant States.

Still, if there is a dominant impression we have after beating the voter registration bushes for more than a decade, it is that barely anyone thinks universal registration will in fact matter. Few academic electoral analysts do, few analysts in the media, few leaders in civil rights, or in good government organizations, or in business and labor. The night of the Presidential signing, the big news on television was that Bill and Hillary tied up the Los Angeles runway in Air Force One getting customized haircuts.

To be sure, Republicans opposed the bill, and filibustered it time and time again, suggesting that party competition was at work. But one could make too much of that. It was mainly social program beneficiaries that Republicans worried about. Otherwise it was a time of party dealignment, of voter volatility. Older voter allegiances were breaking down, making it hard to know from one election to the next how various groups would vote. In the wake of civil rights victories in the 1960s, the once Democratic South has been giving the Republican Party some 70 percent of all White votes, including about half of the votes of poorer Whites. These southern Whites delivered the Senate to the Republicans in 1980, but they gave it back to the Democrats in 1986. Similar backing and filling could be seen among many northern blue-collar workers. This was also true of youth. The young had been supporting Republicans in this period, and some

Republicans in the House thought the motor voter bill might be a good thing because it could literally double registration levels among those 21 and under, few of whom are registered but most of whom drive. Consequently, when a bill that made motor voter mandatory (but left human service agency registration optional) came to vote in March 1990, sixty-one Republicans broke ranks to join 218 Democrats to vote for it. They were mainly younger Republicans lured by the prospect that the youth vote might become the key to their own electoral fortunes, and they were led by their party whip, Newt Gingrich. Not surprisingly, Republican support for the bill caused head-scratching among Democrats, who wondered if Republicans knew something they didn't. But as the 1990 recession deepened, and lasted, polls showed that the youth vote was unstable, and might tilt toward the Democrats in 1992 (as it did).

Clearly, party realignment had much to do with winning registration reform. The uncertainties resulting from voter volatility made it difficult to predict the impact of liberalized registration, suggesting that neither party would be much helped or hurt, except that Democrats would probably get some marginal benefit from increased registration among minorities, who are the predominant users of human services. But even the conflict over human service agencies was nothing more than a dim echo of the long struggle by Blacks to win the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which had involved a stream of civil rights protests throughout the South, and the eruption of riots among southern Whites and northern Blacks. Everyone understood what enfranchising southern Blacks meant: it would transform southern politics. It meant the end of Democratic domination in that region, and the beginning of vigorous two-party competition. But no one thought that the National Voter Registration Act would change politics. Most significant, there was no opposition from corporate America, even though motor voter could register the whole working class. (Can one imagine an automobile worker who doesn't drive?) If the business community had thought for one minute that this bill was going to imperil the Republican Party, they would have mobilized to defeat it. But

there were no expressions of concern in business publications. No concern at all. Not any. That meant reform could succeed more from a lack of opposition than from support. So the Democratic majority leader, George Mitchell, scheduled the bill for one cloture vote after another, and helped keep his members in line for a straight party vote. Two cheers for party competition! And a third cheer for party dealignment! Or perhaps it should be the other way around. One cheer for party competition, and two for dealignment.

Since so many more White working-class voters were supporting the Republican Party in this period, our preoccupation with voter registration reform was constantly challenged by critics, supporters, colleagues, and friends. It was as if class had been expunged as a force in history, at least at the polls. Under these circumstances, the question was, why were we bothering to promote registration reform?

Staff discussions at Human SERVE were filled with gallows humor. When Reagan reached all the way down to the \$12,500 household income voter in marshalling support for his 1984 landslide victory, we knew Human SERVE in a small way shared responsibility. Our volunteers had registered thousands in unemployment offices with incomes higher than that! We joked around the office that Human SERVE was like the English Colonel who dealt with morale problems among his troops who were languishing in a Japanese prison camp by putting them to work building a railroad bridge on the River Kwai, even though that would aid the enemy. It was a mighty fine bridge, and Human SERVE ran a mighty fine registration campaign.

And then there was the way Richard ducked out on implementation planning meetings, once the federal bill was passed and signed. Frances got alarmed that Richard was assuming that the implementation process would go smoothly, almost automatically; she thought the Republicans in state legislatures together with conservative Democrats would try to obstruct voter registration in human service agencies. The staff was also alarmed. In order to make it harder for state officials to delay or obstruct implementation, Human SERVE staff had begun, even before the

federal bill passed, to make field studies of processing systems in the relevant government agencies in a sample of 12 states, as the basis for a technical manual showing public officials how to incorporate voter registration, depending on whether particular agencies still do most of their paper processing by hand, or partly by computer, or whether they have fully computer interactive systems. State officials, to their astonishment, got copies of the manual in the mail just a few weeks after the bill passed, and it has been a smash hit. The Federal Elections Commission subsequently issued its own manual – having had ours in hand as a model – and ours is better. That's because Human SERVE made it a practice to learn about agency procedures, whether in human service agencies or DMVs, and because Human SERVE learned a great deal over the last ten years about the details and absurdities of state registration systems – giving us a good feel for how to incorporate voter registration in the application process for other services. Human SERVE staff are currently giving technical advice to all kinds of state officials – legislators, elections officials, associations of diver agency directors, human services department heads, and so on.

Finally, Richard explained why he had been hanging back. He confessed that he really didn't want to see implementation succeed, because the full registration of the less-well-off might supply incontrovertible evidence in future elections that we were wrong, and the critics right, that class no longer mattered in voting.

We quickly add, however, that we never thought class much mattered at the polls either, and we didn't think so when we undertook this project. We've always thought that it takes protest movements to galvanize voters around class issues. Protest movements have the capacity to communicate visions of the world that are alternatives to ruling-class propaganda, and thus to politicize voters.

Think of the politicizing effect on working-class families throughout the country when news reached them of the 1937 sit-down strike in Flint. General Motors company guards, reinforced by police using tear gas and guns, tried to keep the Women's Emergency

Brigades from delivering food and medicine to the strikers who had occupied the plant for a month. More than 1,000 workers from surrounding towns – among them a young man named Walter Reuther from the Kelsey-Hayes plant in Detroit – circled the plant in support. And circling them in turn were national guardsmen, ordered to duty by the Governor, howitzers drawn up, ready to fire. As a court-ordered deadline to evacuate the plant neared, the strikers sent out this message to the Governor:

*"We have carried on a stay-in strike for over a month in order to make General Motors Corporation obey the law and engage in collective bargaining...Unarmed as we are, the introduction of militia, sheriffs, or police with murderous weapons will mean a bloodbath of unarmed workers...We have decided to stay in the plant. We have no illusions about the sacrifices which this decision will entail. We fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us, many of us will be killed, and we take this means of making it known to our wives, to our children, to the people of Michigan, that if this result follows from the attempt to eject us, you, the Governor, are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths."*

Or think how Afro-Americans and their liberal White allies throughout the country must have reacted to the news from Birmingham, Alabama in the spring of 1963. This was the Birmingham spring of mounted police and the snapping teeth of guard dogs, of cattle-prodders and rib-cage-crushing high-power water hoses, and of mass arrests. It was also the the spring of mounting criticism of Martin Luther King and the nonviolent movement for resorting to direct action tactics, criticisms made not least by prominent Black clergy. King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," addressed to these Black clergy, set out the political and moral justification of direct action by oppressed people.

*"You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham."*

*But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstration into being. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the White power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.*

*One day, the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with majestic sense of purpose, facing jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two year old woman in Montgomery, Alabama who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity: "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be young high school and college students, courageously and non-violently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience sake."*

In short, votes and protest reinforce one another; taken together, the combination sometimes gives subordinate groups a measure of power.

At the present time, protests by the women's movement are having a politicizing effect on the attitudes of millions of women, with the result that a gender gap in voting has developed. Having won the franchise in 1920, women voted like men for sixty years. But the divergence in 1980 foreshadowed an arresting possibility that a new mass constituency would emerge to defend the welfare state, a new group claiming rights, just as industrial workers in the 1930s and Blacks in the 1960s demanded labor and civil rights, and social welfare entitlement, and successively forced the Democratic party to champion their causes. In the process, these clamoring groups disrupted, reorganized, and reoriented the Democratic Party. That has been the fate of

the Democratic Party in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – to be constantly disrupted by insurgent masses of people. Women could easily become the next disruptive force. And the growing influence of the Christian Right in the Republican Party could actually help the process by leading many women (and their male allies) to defect to the Democratic Party, perhaps creating a new and progressive dominant national coalition. Class realignment in the 1930s, racial realignment in the 1960s, and now possibly a gender realignment. Therein lies the hope for the welfare state.

Beginning in 1982, Frances wrote articles and gave speeches before social work, public health, family planning and kindred audiences, emphasizing that the convergence of two unprecedented trends could transform American politics. One was the rapidly worsening economic condition of women, and the other their growing political independence, activism, and turnout at the polls. And she added that three out of four middle-class women who work were employed in human service occupations, and that three out of four beneficiaries were women or their children. The welfare state, in other words, is a set of institutions where women serve women. When Human SERVE tried to mobilize voluntary agency workers to register their clients in the 1983-84 period, our literature emphasized that women registering women is a way to build electoral defense of women's institutions (and it still is). In sum, it is clear that the attack on the welfare state is part of a new class war, and part of a new race war. It is also part of a gender war, a war against women, and it is getting worse.

There was turbulence in the 1930s and again in the 1960s. There will be again, perhaps this time among women. And since protest will once more politicize people, it could matter a great deal that access to the franchise will, for the first time in history, be unencumbered. That's what we all hope. Time will tell.

#### **A Closing Note on Organizing and Writing**

We have always found it very useful to write and publish in the course of organizing.

Publications enable organizers to explain their ideas, to win converts, and to obtain

resources. If the organizing project is a longer-term one, publications can be used to update progress, to explain shifts in strategy, and to maintain support. In the event that some professionals, faculty or students might want to study the Human SERVE organizing project from the perspective of our writing, we conclude with relevant publications.

### Pre-1982

We first tried to highlight tumult as an important, perhaps crucial, feature of the struggle for social provision in a series of articles in the 1960s devoted to analyzing the organizing strategies used in civil rights, rent strikes, and welfare rights. (These articles were subsequently collected and republished as a book under the title, *The Politics of Turmoil*, (Pantheon, 1974). In the same period, we wrote *Regulating the Poor* (Pantheon, 1971) which analyzed the long history of interaction of popular protest in the United States to the winning of labor and civil rights, and to the winning of social welfare entitlement.

### 1982

*The New Class War*, (Pantheon). Discusses institutional changes over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century which helped give rise to the popular belief that government should intervene in economic arrangements to guarantee minimal economic well being.

"Economic Demands, Political Rights," *Democracy*, Summer.

"The New Age of Protest," *The Nation*, April 17. Predicts protest in response to Reagan's attack on the welfare state.

### 1983

"The American Road to Democratic Socialism," *Democracy*, Summer.

"Toward a Class-based Realignment of American politics: A Movement Strategy," *Social Policy*, Winter. The first statement of the voter registration strategy.

### 1984

Piven, "Women and the State: ideology, Power and the Welfare State." In Alice Rossi, editor, *Gender and Life Course*. New York: Aldine (this was the Presidential volume

consisting of the best papers selected from the 1982 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.) This article discusses the emergence of women as a political force. In this same connection, see also Barbara Ehrenreich and Frances Fox Piven, "The Feminization of Poverty," *Dissent*, Spring.

### 1985

A two-part article on Human SERVE's experience in the period before the 1984 election: "Trying to Break Down the Barriers," and "How to Get out the Vote in 1988," *The Nation*, November 2 and November 23.

"Prospects for Voter Registration Reform: A Report on the Experiences of the Human SERVE Campaign," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (Quarterly Journal of the American Political Science Association), Summer. Expanded edition of *The New Class War*, Pantheon, with a closing chapter saying why the welfare state might fight back.

### 1988

"New Prospects for Voter Registration Reform." *Social Policy*, Winter.

"National Voter Registration Reform: How it Might Be Won." *PS: Political Science and Politics* (Quarterly Journal of the American Political Science Association), September.

*Why Americans Don't Vote*, Pantheon. A historical review of voter registration arrangements in the United States, framed by an analysis of the political purposes they served, including the way they deprived the United States of class-based political parties that developed in European countries.

### 1989

"Government Statistics and Conflicting Explanations of Nonvoting," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (Quarterly Journal of the American Political Science Association), September. Shows that voter registration barriers are more important in keeping voting down among poorer and minority people than is commonly thought, thus justifying national reform.



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