2. A Brief History of Voter Turnout

I don't want everyone to vote; our leverage in the election quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.

Conservative activist Paul Weyrich, director of the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, speaking at a 1980 fundraiser for Ronald Reagan[1]

Winning the Vote

The history of voting in America is a lot more action-packed than textbooks imply. It involves a series of revolutions in the way we think about political participation. Often these were real revolutions, filled with battles and bloodshed and strong ideas on both sides about right and wrong. Today, we think of the universal franchise, or right to vote, as a fait accompli, something we've always had and always will. To the contrary, our idea of a universal voting right is a relatively new concept.

Forgive me if I use a little bit of this chapter to go over old history. I was never taught it well in school. Instead, I spent years listening to history as a recitation of dates. But political history is a series of thrusts and parries in an ongoing duel between leaders who try to consolidate powers in the hands of the few and people who believe in democracy for the many.

Let's start with the American Revolution. According to the textbooks, a group of freedom-seeking pilgrims came to the Americas and overthrew the tyranny of British taxation. True, America was created in 1776 as an experiment in freedom and democracy. But the franchise, or right to vote, was far from universal. It only extended to white, landowning males, who openly distrusted the ability of poorer men (let alone women or people of African descent) to make political decisions. During the 1800s, a variety of political movements and protests overthrew property, religious, and literacy requirements that blocked male voters. In some states, even men who were not citizens could vote.

Women only received the right to vote in 1920, less than a hundred years ago. African-Americans technically received the right to vote with the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, after the Civil War. But it took

the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to break down a wall of legal barriers (and a pattern of violence) that blocked the black vote. All of these changes came about because people didn't sit around and wait: they put their lives on the line to achieve change.

Perhaps we in the United States felt smug because we were the leaders of the democracy pack. Most European nations were even slower to give their citizens the right to vote. For example, compare the United Kingdom and America during the nineteenth century. In the United States in 1848, 2.9 million men cast their votes for the presidency. This reflected 13 percent of the total population and 73 percent of eligible voters.[2] In 1832 and 1867, the British added small landholders to the list of the wealthy and privileged who could vote. But even after 1867, only 16 percent of British men, or roughly 8 percent of the total British population, had the right to vote. British women only gained the same rights to vote as men in 1928. (For further comparison, Switzerland, which now has a higher percentage of female legislators than the United States, only granted women the right to vote in 1971!) In other words, even in Western democracies, the vote is not something which has been given, but which the people consistently fought for.

And how did Americans go about getting the vote? It usually involved a large portion of protest and an equally generous amount of behind-the-scenes negotiating. In 1842, a Rhode Island state legislator named Thomas Dorr led a ragged insurgency of poor citizens to protest the requirement that voters be landowners. After all, our Declaration of Independence said "All men are created equal." Dorr (who was a landowner) and his non-landowning supporters wanted to put some substance behind the words. They commandeered a couple of cannons—which failed to fire. Dorr served time in prison for the insurrection. But gradually, states yielded to pressure to drop the requirement on owning property.

The suffragist movement put women in a position to exercise their voting rights. In 1848, women organized the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. In 1890, Wyoming gave women the vote; Colorado followed three years later. But a decade after Washington State's decision, most American women still could not vote. A suffragist named Alice Paul helped organize protests in front of the White House, for which the women were jailed. President Woodrow Wilson eventually endorsed a suffrage amendment. Finally, after two-thirds of states ratified the

Nineteenth Amendment, all American women gained the right to vote in 1920.

The struggle of African-Americans to vote is remarkable because it has been waged at least twice and continues today. People of African descent were barred from voting when America was founded. Then, after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, African-Americans gained the right to vote by constitutional amendment. Next, that right was effectively taken away when hostile politicians and racist activists waged a campaign of legal barriers and violence. The civil rights movement led politicians to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which protected not only the black vote but all voters.

Yet widely documented instances of voter intimidation targeting African-Americans occurred in 2000, 2002, and beyond. In one example, the district attorney of Waller County, Texas, (which is predominately white) said he would prosecute students for "falsely" registering to vote in the district. The district happens to contain the predominately black Prairie View A & M University. In fact, American students have the right to vote where they go to school because plaintiffs from Prairie View A & M won a 1979 Supreme Court decision.[3]

But let's back up a bit. The first phase of black enfranchisement began after the Civil War, when, in 1866, the Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. (It was ratified in 1868.) It states: "No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." During the post–Civil War Reconstruction era, the federal government protected black voting rights. Several Southern states sent African-American legislators to Congress.

I remember walking into a small gallery in a black history museum in Selma, Alabama, near the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In March 1965, police beat and tear-gassed civil rights marchers on the bridge. The event was televised throughout the country and came to be known as Bloody Sunday. A gallery off the museum's main hall displays portraits of black, Reconstruction-era congressmen. Did these proud, dignified men understand that their participation in the United States government was a limited-time offer? Did they understand that local politicians, Klansmen, and

everyday citizens would deprive African-Americans of the right to vote and them of the ability to serve? And once they were disenfranchised, did they understand how long it would take our political system to recover from what had happened? After all, the first post-Reconstruction black senator was not elected until 1967.

With Reconstruction, the federal government pushed Southern states to give African-Americans full property and citizenship rights. But the two parties colluded in a secret compromise that ended reforms. Southern Democrats, who were mostly wealthy white planters, said they would back a Republican president. In exchange, Republicans ended Reconstruction.

Between 1876 and 1892, after the end of support for Reconstruction, an average of 60 percent of black men and 69 percent of white men in the South voted in the presidential election. By the period spanning 1900 to 1916, as the federal government ended its push to reform Southern politics, that number dropped to 2 percent of black men and 50 percent of white men. By 1924, the percentages were zero for black men and 32 percent for white men.

Not only did the end of Reconstruction disenfranchise black voters, it sharply cut down on the participation of white voters as well. The imposition of poll taxes and literacy tests blocked poor whites from voting almost as effectively as blacks.[4] In 1890, Mississippi enacted a $2 poll tax on every voter. In today's terms, that means you would have to cough up nearly $40 to vote.

Ironically, many poor whites opposed the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s although it offered them, as well as African-Americans, a greater chance at political participation. For centuries, politicians have successfully pitted poor whites and African-Americans against each other, although the two groups have many common political goals. African-Americans gained leverage in national politics from the Great Migration north in the early twentieth century, when they became a key voting block in cities like Chicago. President Harry Truman then endorsed a civil rights platform at the 1948 Democratic National Convention, and some Southern Democrats (or Dixiecrats), including Strom Thurmond, walked out of the convention. The Democratic Party was then effectively split between acquiescing to Southern white leaders and playing to a racially diverse urban electorate in the North, a schism which lingers to this day.

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which made the federal government accountable for enforcing voting rights. It was by and large a success. In Mississippi, only 5 percent of African-Americans were registered to vote in 1960. In 1968, that number rose to nearly 60 percent. [5]

Recently, however, there have been several examples of race-based voter intimidation. During the 2000 election, African-Americans were asked, illegally, for multiple forms of ID. A computer system run by a private company with Republican ties, ChoicePoint, "scrubbed" thousands of voters from the rolls. They were wrongly listed as felons and far more likely to be African-American than white.[6] Black Florida voters also complained of police roadblocks near polling places.

Florida isn't the only example of voter intimidation. In Kentucky in 2003, the Republican Party announced plans to put election-day "challengers" in fifty-nine predominately black voting precincts. Challengers are private citizens, deputized for election day, who can ask any voter who looks suspicious to sign an affidavit saying he or she is a registered voter. Most of the GOP challengers lived outside the urban areas targeted by the party.[7]

Using the Vote

Voter intimidation doesn't rate much news coverage these days. By all appearances, adult American citizens of every race, creed, and income level have the right to vote. So why do so few people exercise their rights?

In *Why Americans Still Don't Vote*, Piven and Cloward argue that nonvoters are mainly poor and working-class Americans who are largely ignored by both major political parties. The Republican Party has become heavily indebted to its big business donors. But the Democratic Party has re-aligned itself with business interests too. This means that a lot of American policies end up favoring corporations over real people. In his book *Spoiling for a Fight: Third-Party Politics in America*, Micah Sifry writes:

> Substantial numbers of Americans—in some cases majorities—support aid to poor children, cuts in corporate welfare, reductions in military spending, universal health care insurance, alternatives to the drug war, labor and environmental protections in trade agreements, tougher measures to guarantee

> clean air, water and food, a living wage, more democratic oversight of federal banking policy, burden sharing with our overseas allies, more investment in energy conservation and alternative fuels, and a comprehensive overhaul of the campaign finance system, to take some of the major issues that were not raised in the 2000 presidential election.[8]

And yet, these issues are virtual untouchables, a third-rail of politics that mainstream officials consider career suicide. Given that, many nonvoters see elections as a choice between a Democratic Party that cares little for them and a Republican Party that cares even less.

Poor and working-class voters tend to mobilize when politicians speak to their needs, and politicians usually speak to their needs only when they absolutely have to. Often, that means times of massive economic crisis. Take the rise in voting during the 1920s and 1930s. The country was in an economic depression. Americans began protesting for jobs. Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt responded with New Deal policies creating more government jobs, job relief, and the Social Security program. This era also marked the beginning of class-based divisions between Democrats and Republicans, as new poor and working-class voters began supporting the Democrats.

But that didn't last. Piven and Cloward argue that during the next forty years, the Democratic Party built new alliances with big business. They let their old labor coalitions fade away. The unions were in trouble: they didn't know what to do with new working-class and poor constituents, who tended to be women and people of color in the service industry. And the Democrats didn't seem in any hurry to reach out to these workers either. Or as Piven and Cloward put it, "The unions did little to enroll new black and Hispanic voters, or the poor and working-class women who were entering the workforce. Nor did the local Democratic parties. Instead, local officials who presided over voter registration used these procedures to maintain *a narrow and reliable electorate*. . . ."[9]

In other words, the game's been fixed. Half of voters have been shut out from the get-go, and the two parties can haggle over who's left. The most generous way to look at this is that the two parties don't know how to market

to new voters. It's as if they're only broadcasting on AM radio in a cable and Internet world.

If the two major parties aren't interested in reaching half of Americans, who will try to get them to the polls? For one, Piven and Cloward didn't just write about the problems with voting; they actually tried to solve them. The two worked on a program called Human Serve designed to register Americans through social service agencies like unemployment offices. Human Serve eventually morphed into the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), or Motor Voter bill. The NVRA allowed people to register when they got their driver's license or visited other government agencies. In 1992, President George Bush vetoed the bill, which was pushed heavily on MTV by Rock the Vote. Republicans feared that new, less affluent voters would vote Democratic. Ten months later, in the early days of his first term, President Bill Clinton signed the Motor Voter bill into law.

So what happened then? "The NVRA reforms produced an unprecedented increase in voter registration," write Piven and Cloward. "Turnout, however, did not rise."[10] In fact, between 1994 and 1998, voting fell 2.8 percentage points. Among the possible reasons: Americans are less plugged in to social networks like family and church that help mobilize voters, and Americans are disillusioned with their political choices. Or as Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen put it in their book *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, voters "have lost their confidence in the effectiveness of their actions."[11] In other words, we're so sick and tired of politics as usual that we've just given up.

Is there still hope? Could Motor Voter still bring new voters to the polls? If that happens, write Piven and Cloward:

> 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 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.[12]

Piven and Cloward identify two major factors that could reshape American politics: protest—likely coming from new activist organizations—and minor parties.

The rest of this essay examines how these two factors—protest and third-party politics—could influence American elections in 2004 and beyond. First, I lay some groundwork by examining the political events of the last four years and how they've further eroded the trust of the American public. Then, the book turns to the kind of outreach Piven and Cloward are talking about—innovative attempts to reach new voters in 2004. One of them is hip hop generation political organizing. Can it change the American electorate? And finally, how are third-party movements reshaping the political landscape?

America is at a crossroads. We can continue to content ourselves with the illusion that America is a fully participatory democracy. Or we can look for groundbreaking solutions to half the country feeling left out. The good news is that many different groups are looking for these solutions. Will millions of Americans heed their call?