

**LAUNDROMAT POLITICS: WHY DON'T POOR PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN
POLITICS?**

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Research Question

It has been well documented that lower income people participate much less than upper income people. My thesis examines the question of why poor people participate in politics at such low levels, if at all. For my thesis, political participation refers to voting, volunteering or contributing money to campaigns, contacting politicians, or attending political meetings. This question of why the poor do not participate in politics is important because political participants are not impartial and as long as the poor do not contribute to the political agenda it is more likely that their needs will not be addressed.

What Scholars Have Said

Traditionally, scholars have offered six explanations for why the poor do not participate in politics. They can be separated into two schools of thought. The first school argues that there is something about the poor themselves, because of their *social circumstances*, which accounts for their failure to participate. There are three explanations within this school. (1) Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone contend that a lack of material resources, such as discretionary income, education, or occupational status, hinder political participation among the poor. (2) Robert Putnam is the leader of the second sub-school, which believes that the poor do not possess the cultural resources, mainly developed through civic participation, that it takes to participate in politics. (3) Finally, Sidney Verba, David Croteau, and Paul Abramson argue in their own ways that

the poor do not develop social attitudes such as personal interest or personal efficacy that are conducive to political participation.

The second major school of thought posits that the *political system* is at fault for the low rates of participation by the poor. There are three explanations within this school as well. (1) Steven Rosenstone and Mark Hansen believe that political elites do not mobilize the poor in ways that encourage their participation. (2) Ruy Teixeira, Francis Fox Piven, and Richard Cloward contend that structural barriers inhibit or even demobilized the poor from participating in politics. (3) Finally, E.E. Shattschneider, Croteau, Abramson, and John Gaventa argue that political attitudes, such as political efficacy or trust, are cultivated within the poor which in turn leads them to abstain from participating in politics.

Research Design

My incubator to test these six theories was the poor of Appalachia. It is a region that has a history of poverty and it is also a region with which I am familiar. I used a survey in conjunction with follow-up interviews in laundromats of two counties in Southeastern Ohio where I was raised. This area was conducive with my strategy for collecting data through interviews, which demanded a level of familiarity with the culture. The surveys served to guide my interviews whose purpose was to develop stories of why those poor I talked with did not participate in politics.

Key Findings

Overwhelmingly the political attitude of alienation, which includes feelings of inefficacy and distrust, offered the strongest explanation for why the poor people I interviewed did not participate in politics. Another strong explanation was the failure of

political elites to mobilize the poor in profound ways. A lack of material resources, which resulted in less free time and more immediate needs (that must be addressed prior to participating in politics) had an effect on the poor's participation levels as well. Finally being involved in civic activities or possessing a job that is associated with political stimuli somewhat helped to explain levels of political participation. Structural barriers and social attitudes provided the weakest explanations and were discounted.

My Contribution

In the end, I identified four theories that I felt needed highlighted in explaining why the poor do not participate in politics. One argues that when the government is not responsive to the needs of the poor, political participation becomes meaningless and the poor choose to abstain from participating. The second argues that personal experiences with politics, negative and positive, shape poor people's decisions to participate. The third argues that personal constraints in conjunction with the complexity of politics create a situation where the poor are less likely to participate. The last argues that the poor fail to see their individual power in voting, and because of this failure they become alienated and abstain from participating.

My research showed that the poor in this country are not satisfied with the decisions those in politics make. Politicians and those who are more fortunate have a duty to their fellow Americans to force politics to address the needs of all those in our country. If politics were to be more inclusive, those who are alienated might become less so, feeling encouraged to participate in our celebrated democracy.

INTRODUCTION

I spent my childhood in the hills of Appalachia and have witnessed first-hand the ways in which the poor populations of this country can get left behind. My interest in participatory politics and my attachment to my home has led me to ask a question that is of great importance to participatory democrats: why do poor people not participate in politics?

It has been clearly documented that poor people participate in politics at levels wholly disproportionate to high-income people.¹ Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman and Henry Brady showed in 1999 that citizens having family incomes below \$15,000 were greatly underrepresented *in every political activity* they tested when compared to those having family incomes above \$75,000.² Their research found that the poor were half as likely to vote, go to a protest, or get in touch with government official, one-third as likely to engage in informal activity within the community or be affiliated with any political organization, and only one-tenth as likely to make a campaign donation.³

This class bias of participation is argued by many as a serious concern for the health of our democracy.⁴ In the first place, when any group, poor or otherwise, is left out of the political discourse, the democracy is less healthy than when all voices are heard.⁵

This belief is rooted in the fact that democracy is the government designed to be

¹ See for example works by Lester Milbrath, Sidney Verba, Norman Nie, Kay Schlozman, Robert Putnam, Frances Fox Piven, and Richard A. Cloward

² Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, "Civic Participation and the Equality Problem," in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, ed. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1999).

³ See Appendix page 82 for chart.

⁴ Verba, "Civic Participation and the Equality Problem."

⁵ It is worth noting that some scholars argue full participation would be dangerous to society. It is Lipset's view that not everyone is rational and reasonable with his or her participation in politics. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960).

inclusive—not run by the few, but “by the people.”⁶ Political scientist Norman Nie joined Verba in 1972 affirming this belief, “If only a few take part, there is little Democracy.”⁷

Political theorist Benjamin Barber takes this point further, arguing that the more people who contribute to the deliberation of political problems the stronger the democracy will be, because there will be greater opportunity to enlarge the debate.⁸ Verba adds that increased involvement in political activities benefits the individual as well, developing his or her capacities that in turn create better citizens and healthier communities.⁹ Walter Dean Burnham views mass participation as providing the necessary “communication between the rulers and ruled, closing to some extent the great distance which can produce popular alienation from the rulers if it is not reduced.”¹⁰

It is not only valuable when more people participate, but when people from many different backgrounds participate, including the poor. This is because “political participants are not impartial.”¹¹ Everyone has his or her own biases and those who don’t participate “go unheard.”¹² As political scientists Steven Rosenstone and Mark Hansen point out, “They do not...define the agenda, frame the issues, or affect the choices leaders make,” if they do not participate.¹³ For E.E. Shattschneider, a renowned scholar on class bias participation, “Every change in the scope of conflict has a bias,” and as long as the poor do not contribute to this “scope,” one cannot assure that their needs will be

⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Address at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania*, November 19, 1863.

⁷ Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie. *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 1.

⁸ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1984).

⁹ Verba, “Civic Participation and the Equality Problem”, 428.

¹⁰ Walter Dean Burnham, “The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter,” (1978) in *The Current Crisis in American Politics*, ed. Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 154.

¹¹ Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 235.

¹² *Ibid.*, 247.

¹³ *Ibid.*

met.¹⁴ Activist and scholar David Croteau contends this exclusion is even dangerous:

“As long as working people are largely nonparticipants in our political system, American democracy will remain a mirage whose legitimacy is, at best, in question.”¹⁵

In my attempt to identify why poor people do not participate in politics, I will review the relevant scholarly literature and identify various theories. Next, I will focus on those theories, which I believe answer this question most accurately, providing a research design for testing them by studying the poor of Appalachia. The third section will consist of my original research, beginning with a description of Appalachia’s social, political, and cultural context. Next, results and analyses of my surveys and interviews will be presented, testing the various schools of thought discussed in the literature review. Then, I will draw on my own research to introduce four theories that are especially insightful in creating a synthesized explanation for why poor people do not participate in politics. Finally, I will conclude placing my research in the context of American politics and what it means for our democracy.

¹⁴ E.E. Shattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 4.

¹⁵ David Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide: Working People and the Middle-Class Left*, (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1995), 13.

LITERATURE REVIEW

More than any other group, low-income people have consistently been found to participate the least in American politics.¹⁶ Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues were among the pioneers to provide research demonstrating this phenomenon.¹⁷ Three decades later, Sidney Verba and Norman Nie showed conclusively that the lower one's social status is, the lower one's political participation is.¹⁸ Using what they called "the standard model of social status," they proved that the poor developed civic attitudes and orientations that led them to abstain from participating.¹⁹ In recent years, scholars have showed that this inequality in political participation has become even more entrenched as campaign contributions have taken on a greater role within traditional forms of participation—creating a "Big Tilt" towards the rich.²⁰

Two distinct schools of thought have formed when trying to explain why the poor participate so much less than other social classes. The first school argues that there is something about the poor themselves, because of their *social circumstances*, which accounts for their failure to participate. They may not possess the material or cultural resources that it takes to participate. Likewise, they may not develop attitudes of civic duty, interest, or personal efficacy that are conducive to participation.

¹⁶ See for example works by Lester Milbrath, Sidney Verba, Norman Nie, Kay Schlozman, Robert Putnam, Frances Fox Piven, and Richard A. Cloward.

¹⁷ They concluded that the reason for low participation among the poor was that they had the least interest in politics. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People Choice*, (New York: Columbia University, 1948), 43. Also see Lester Milbrath, who in 1965 presented the first overview of scholarly research and theory on the class bias of participation. Lester W. Milbrath, *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?*, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965).

¹⁸ Verba, *Participation in America*, 125-137. See Appendix page 83 for their findings.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19. See Appendix page 83 for their model.

²⁰ They also commented more broadly on the class bias of participation, examining campaign hours and voting as well. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman, and Henry E. Brady, "The Big Tilt: Participatory Inequality in America," *The American Prospect*, May/June 1997.

The second major school of thought posits that the *political system* is at fault for the low rates of participation by the poor. Political elites may not have targeted them in such a way that they would participate. Additionally, legal barriers may have inhibited or even demobilized them from participating. Finally, politics, rather than social circumstances, may have cultivated attitudes within them that lead them to abstain from participating.

Social Circumstances

The first school of thought argues that there is something about the poor's social circumstances that explains their non-participation. In 1954, Berelson and his colleagues asserted, "Nonvoting is related to persistent social conditions having little to do with the candidates or issues of the moment."²¹ They concluded that party mobilization plays only a slight role in motivating people to vote and that social stimuli should be emphasized instead.²² Today, the scholarship for this school can be divided into three sub-schools. The first focuses on the lack of resources to which the poor have access. The second argues that because the poor are less involved in civic activities, they fail to develop cultural resources or social capital and are thus less prone to get involved in politics. The third and final sub-school believes that attitudes, such as apathy, lack of civic duty, and personal inefficacy, account for the poor's non-participation.

Material Resources

This sub-school of thought revolves around the idea that the poor have more immediate needs that inhibit their ability to afford to participate in political activities.

²¹ Bernard Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, *Voting*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1954), 32.

²² *Ibid.*

Anthony Downs, a political economist, writes that decisions of political participation are like any other decision, they are weighed in costs and benefits.²³ If the costs outweigh the benefits, people will not participate. For the poor, registering to vote and researching candidates are great enough costs that when placed beside the fact that voting for a certain candidate may not even improve their lives, leads many to not participate.

Contemporary scholars like Steven Rosenstone and John Hansen argue that poor people, by definition, have more immediate needs that take priority over participating in politics:

As important and interesting as politics may be, its significance pales in comparison with paying the rent, maintaining the car, keeping children in school and putting food on the table. In short for people whose resources are limited, politics is a luxury they cannot afford.²⁴

Poor people must spend their time and energy acquiring these basic necessities, which may inhibit them from volunteering on a campaign or attending a local political meeting.²⁵

Today, having money does not only allow one the privileges of putting one's time and energy into other realms like participating in politics, money, itself, is also a form of participation—and an increasingly popular form. In their 1995 book *Voice and Equality*, Sidney Verba and his colleagues provide evidence that as financial contributions have increased as a mode of participation, lower-income people participate less and less when compared to the participation levels of the rich.²⁶ They put in words what is obvious, "It

²³ Anthony Downs, "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy," (1957) in *The Political Economy: Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy*, eds. Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1984).

²⁴ Rosenstone, *Mobilization*, 13.

²⁵ This school of thought is consistent with Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs," a theory he developed in the 1940s. He contends that more immediate material needs must *always* be met first before pursuing other goals. For political application of this theory, see Jeanne N. Knutson, *The Human Basis of the Polity: A Psychological Study of Political Men*. (Aldine & Atherton, 1972) and Stanley A. Renshon, *Psychological Needs and Political Behavior: A Theory of Personality and Political Efficacy*, (The Free Press, 1974).

²⁶ Verba. *Voice and Equality*. See also Verba. "Civic Participation and the Equality Problem," 436.

is impossible to contribute to a campaign or other political cause without some discretionary income.”²⁷

Furthermore, they address the issue of free time and its connection with political participation and the poor. They write, “It is impossible to write a letter to a public official, attend community meetings, or work in a campaign without the free time to do so.”²⁸ This argument is based on the assumption that people have limited time and that those with more immediate needs are forced to spend that time on those needs before participating in politics.

The consensus among scholars today, however, is that more free time does not necessarily lead to greater political participation. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady find that those with the most free time are those of the lowest socioeconomic status, and yet it is they who participate the least.²⁹ Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone write in 1980 that there is little evidence that free time is a determinant in participation levels: “There is no support for the argument that people with higher status vote more because they have more free time for nonessentials like talking about politics, registering, and voting.”³⁰

For them, farmers and the unemployed represent two models that provide evidence for their argument. Farmers, who work longer hours than other occupations, voted at high rates as of 1980, and the unemployed who “have the most free time on their

²⁷ Verba, *Voice and Equality*, 289.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ They contend that while one might guess “the rich would have more free time because they can hire others...to do what most people have to do for themselves,” it also makes sense to “expect the rich to have less free time because they accumulated their wealth by working long hours.” Verba. “Civic Participation and the Equality Problem,” 436.

³⁰ Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1980), 28.

hands” were less likely to vote than those of full employment.³¹ Robert Putnam adds to this theory, providing evidence that at least in a broader context of civil, not political, involvement, “People who report the heaviest time pressure are *more* likely, not less likely, to participate in community projects, to attend church and club meetings, to follow politics...and the like.”³² Most scholars do acknowledge that it does take time to participate in politics, but that free time does not inevitably translate into greater participation.

Education is the other material resource that scholars have traditionally pointed to as a determinant of political participation. They have shown that the less educated one is, the less likely they are to take part in politics, and it is well documented that the least educated tend to be poor.³³ Verba and Nie show this in their research in 1972, which found that those with the lowest levels of education were the most over-represented in “the inactives” in American politics.³⁴

The unchallenged leaders of this sub-school are Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone, who argue that education has the greatest single explanatory power in determining who will vote, because it greatly reduces the costs of participating in politics.³⁵ They contend that education is a resource that gives people skills “necessary

³¹ Ibid.

³² Putnam also asserts that these findings do not mean that working longer hours and having less free time causes greater participation. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 191.

³³ Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Vote*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), 251-254. Three years later, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba showed a similar finding in their comparative analysis examining five Western countries. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, (Little, Brown and Company, 1965).

³⁴ Verba. *Participation in America*, 97.

³⁵ Wolfinger, *Who Votes?*, 8.

for processing political information and making political decisions.”³⁶ These cognitive skills facilitate political learning: “Schooling increases one’s capacity for understanding and working with complex, abstract and intangible subjects...like politics.”³⁷

Finally, occupational status has been viewed as an indicator of political participation. Lester Milbrath argues that because the poor are most often working jobs with less “political stimuli” they are less likely to participate.³⁸ “White collar” or professional jobs are more likely to have employees with higher intellects, creating an atmosphere where political discussions occur more often. Also these jobs are more likely to have “higher than average stakes in government policy...and roles on the job that carry over to public service.”³⁹ Wolfinger and Rosentone posit that higher occupational status could lead to “superordinate work relationships...that is generalized to high feelings of political efficacy.”⁴⁰ Recently, scholars like Sidney Verba have downplayed the explanatory value of occupational status, although it still stands as a material resource.⁴¹

Cultural Resources

The second sub-school is related to the first in that it is also concerned with a lack of resources. However, this sub-school emphasizes cultural, rather than material, resources. David Croteau writes of this theory using the term “cultural tools,” which describes interpersonal skills and “feelings of entitlement” that fail to develop among

³⁶ Ibid., 36. They also believed that education develops attitudes of civic duty, imparts moral pressures to participate in politics, and provides experience to deal with bureaucratic requirements.

³⁷ Wolfinger, *Who Votes?*, 18.

³⁸ Milbrath, *Political Participation*, 124-128.

³⁹ Mibrath, *Political Participation*, 125.

⁴⁰ However, their data proved that education was more of an indicator than occupation. Wolfinger, *Who Votes?*, 27.

⁴¹ Verba, *Participation in America*.

poor people:⁴² These interpersonal skills—like communicating one’s thoughts clearly—are unlikely to be cultivated in lower class atmospheres where schooling is less rigorous and the work place may not demand any form of public speaking.⁴³ Lack of feelings of entitlement are cultivated by experiences of failure that occur more often in lower class atmospheres and produce fatalistic expectations:

Part of growing up in the working class is learning that workers are the people who get “screwed” by the wealthy and powerful. Instead of entitlement, workers often develop a sense of fatalism about this state of affairs. They learn to expect things to be unjust and are usually not surprised to hear of systemic injustices or corruption...lead[ing] to profoundly pessimistic evaluations of the political system.⁴⁴

Robert Putnam uses the term “social capital” to describe the cultural resources one acquires through “networks of community engagement,” like involvement in civic activities.⁴⁵ Putnam views “social capital” as creating an attitude “that fosters norms of reciprocity that [in turn] encourage attention to other’s welfare.”⁴⁶ This creation of norms of reciprocity helps people to see how their “fates are linked” with others.⁴⁷ Through being involved with one’s extended family, a Sunday school class, or civic organizations a sense of community is formed.⁴⁸ Putnam contends that this community is not formed as well in low-income environments: “People with lower incomes [as well as] those who feel financially strapped are much less engaged in all forms of social and community life than those who are better off.”⁴⁹ And the less one feels integrated into the civic society,

⁴² Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*, 137.

⁴³ Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*, 140.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19-21. Also Verba and Nie touch on this subject in 1972, when they write that active “affiliation even with manifestly nonpolitical organizations will be associated with a gain in political participation rates.” Verba, *Participation in America*, 199.

⁴⁶ Putnam. *Bowling Alone*, 117.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

the less one is willing to participate politically.⁵⁰ Furthermore, because the poor are less involved in civic society, they are less likely to have social ties that aid participation. Putnam explains that the poor are often the most isolated and “held back, not merely because they tend to be financially and educationally deprived, but also because they are relatively poor in social ties that can provide a ‘hand up’.”⁵¹

Putnam’s focus on civic involvement linked to increasing political participation is challenged in a study conducted by two journalists Jack Doppelt and Ellen Shearer.⁵² Though they do not attack Putnam’s theory directly, their study offers evidence refuting the claim that when people are more involved in civic society, they are more likely to participate politically. Their study surveyed nonvoters across the country, looking for characteristic trends of those who abstain from participating in our country’s simplest form of political participation. They found that the largest percentage—30 percent—of nonvoters were also the most involved in civic society. In fact, Doppelt and Shearer label them “the doers” because they tended to be so involved in community and volunteer groups, even when deciding to abstain from voting.⁵³ They were involved in everything from their children’s schools to volunteering to raise money for charity groups like Red Cross.⁵⁴ In contrast, the group that was the least likely to be involved in civic activities was also the smallest group of nonvoters at 12 percent.⁵⁵ This study subtly challenges Putnam’s theory that civic involvement translates into higher levels of political participation.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁵¹ Putnam. *Bowling Alone*, 219.

⁵² Jack C. Doppelt and Ellen Shearer, *Nonvoters: America’s No-Shows*, (California: Sage Publications, 1999).

⁵³ Ibid., 43-88.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 26. As Putnam predicts this group who is the least involved in civic activities is the poorest as well.

Attitudes Shaped by Social Circumstances

In contrast to the argument that resources hinder one's participation, the third school believes that attitudes determine whether or not one participates in politics. While more recently scholars argue that the political realm influences attitudes, the traditional view has been that attitudes that lead to non-participation are formed solely by social influences. Sidney Verba and Norman Nie articulate this idea clearest when they write, "Social circumstances generate sets of attitudes conducive to or inhibitory of political participation."⁵⁶ Four decades ago, Seymour Lipsett hypothesized that lower-class individuals are "likely to have been exposed to punishment, lack of love, and a general atmosphere of tension and aggression since early childhood—all experiences which tend to produce...political authoritarianism."⁵⁷ Contemporary scholars are skeptical about some of Lipset's claims, but they follow him in acknowledging the connection between social circumstances and political behaviors.⁵⁸

Attitudes of apathy or indifference are highlighted in the literature when scholars attempt to explain political nonparticipation, especially voting. Most scholars see apathy as a result from the political system not motivating people to participate—nonvoters are deliberately without interest because of something within politics, a theory will be addressed in a later section.⁵⁹ David Croteau, however, sees apathy as rooted in social circumstances. Although apathy has not been proven to be related to social status, Croteau finds that this indifferent attitude is cultivated by the fact that many poor "really

⁵⁶ Verba, *Participation in America*, 19.

⁵⁷ Lipset, *Political Man*, 114.

⁵⁸ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Still Don't Vote: And Why Politicians Want It That Way*, (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 4.

⁵⁹ Lazarsfeld, *The People Choice*, 46.

don't think about it."⁶⁰ They are unconcerned about politics because they have more immediate needs to attend to, he writes. They view it as irrelevant to their lives, just as many non-poor do, and in doing so are apathetic.

Margaret Conway provides another understanding within this sub-school. She posits that social circumstances "affect social roles that people play, influencing both the expectations [they] apply to others and...to themselves."⁶¹ For example, poor people may believe that it is accepted in society—in fact expected by society—that they do not participate in politics; so they abstain.⁶² Similarly, in 1964, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba write that an attitude of civic obligation must exist in order for participation to occur.⁶³ This feeling of civic duty, as it is often referred to, is an example of an expectation that people apply to themselves. Some citizens believe participation is a civic duty and others do not. In 1972, Verba joins Norman Nie to confirm through their research that, in fact, those of lower social status do not develop civic orientations like feelings of civic duty as much as those of higher social status.⁶⁴

Additionally, Verba and Nie argue that a feeling of personal inefficacy is created by social circumstances and that this inefficacy leads to decreased participation.⁶⁵ David Croteau's research in 1995 supports this theory. He found that the poor perceive themselves "to be 'average' or 'regular' people who, almost by definition, are incapable of effecting change."⁶⁶ Angus Campbell, thirty years earlier, writes of a similar view: "To some people politics is a distant and complex realm that is beyond the power of the

⁶⁰ Croteau. *Politics and the Class Divide*, 102.

⁶¹ Margaret M. Conway, *Political Participation in the United States*, (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1991), 16.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Almond. *The Civic Culture*.

⁶⁴ Verba. *Participation in America*, 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Croteau. *Politics and the Class Divide*, 73.

common citizen to affect, whereas to others the affairs of government can be...influenced by individual citizens.”⁶⁷

Paul Abramson in 1983 wrote an influential book showing personal inefficacy and its connection to participation. He writes that when people have low feelings of self-confidence, as many lower social status people do, they are more likely to have feelings of political ineffectiveness.⁶⁸ This relationship is touched on by Croteau as well.⁶⁹ He writes that working class people feel they have little control over areas of their lives outside the private sphere of family and home. For many, even work is out of their control. What results is a focus inward. One interviewee expressed it well: “You do your work, you pay your bills, you hope it all turns out okay.”⁷⁰

Political System

The second major school of thought posits that the *political system* is primarily responsible for the low rates of participation by the poor. Some scholars believe that political elites and parties do not mobilize specific populations, such as the poor, and as a result those populations do not participate in politics. Other scholars argue that legal barriers such as registration requirements discourage participation among the poor and have even created a political culture that demobilizes the poor. The final sub-school is that politics develops attitudes, such as satisfaction or alienation, in people that lead them to abstain from participating.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *The American Voter*, 104.

⁶⁸ Paul R. Abramson, *Political Attitudes in America: Formation and Change*. (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1983), 155.

⁶⁹ Croteau. *Politics and the Class Divide*, 156-60.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

Political mobilization

The first sub-school blames politics for not mobilizing or targeting the poor. Mobilization may take either simple or profound forms. An example of a simple form is when a politician contacts a citizen through mail or in person. Its adherents believe that people do participate because they are not asked to by those in politics.⁷¹ Profound mobilization encompasses the idea that politicians, parties, or political ideas do not address issues necessary to stimulate mass participation by the poor. Its adherents believe politics may not be directed towards certain groups of people and so they abstain from participating.

Martin Shefter and Jack Nagel are two scholars who argue that political mobilization is an explanation for why people do not participate in politics, though neither draws conclusions about the poor specifically.⁷² Their arguments are simply that the political parties and elites do not just provide cues to voters about who to vote for, but actually stimulate participation by actively seeking to organize participants:

While spontaneous popular action warms the heart of any good democrat, a moment's reflection shows that people initiate little of what we normally call participation... Acts of participation are stimulated by elites—if not by the government, then by parties, interests groups, agitators, and organizers.⁷³

Steven Rosenstone and Mark Hansen, both influenced by Shefter and Nagel, argue that not only do political elites mobilize people, but that they strategically target specific groups and avoid others, especially the poor.⁷⁴ This strategic mobilization is one

⁷¹ Verba. "Civic Participation and the Equality Problem," 430. They use the term "nobody asked."

⁷² Martin Shefter, "Political Parties, Political Mobilization and Political Demobilization" in *The Political Economy: Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy*, eds. Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1984). Jack Nagel, *Participation*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987).

⁷³ Nagel, *Participation*, 3-4.

⁷⁴ Rosenstone, *Mobilization*.

grounded in rationality: Because political elites have scarce resources, “they want to get the most effective number of people involved with the least amount of effort,” so that their “goals of gaining political advantages” will be successful.⁷⁵ This rational inevitably creates a class bias in their efforts to mobilize.⁷⁶ Rosenstone and Hansen explain this class bias by showing there are four groups that are the prime targets of elites: (1) people elites know; (2) people who are well positioned in social networks; (3) people who are influential in politics; (4) and people who are likely to participate.⁷⁷ All of these groups tend to be the more economically advantaged, they argue.⁷⁸ This theory can be applied to simple and profound forms of mobilization. Political elites contact the poor the least, as they show in their research, and political elites may also structure their platforms around issues that do not relate to low-class needs.⁷⁹

Steven Shier’s contribution to the field is that he believes political parties and elites in the past did mobilize more inclusively and that only recently has there been a shift to “exclusive activation.”⁸⁰ This is due to the decline in the power of political parties. For Shier, Rosenstone and Hansen fail to explain the more active participation that was occurring early in the century. He explains that parties were mobilizing machines in the past, “broadcast[ing] to the masses,” but because of party decline, the political realm has become exclusive. Contemporary politics has shifted to a “target[ing] of [specific] portions of the public to become active in elections, demonstrations, and

⁷⁵ Rosenstone, *Mobilization*, 241.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Rosenstone, *Mobilization*, 31.

⁷⁸ The advantaged are better known to political leaders because they travel in the same social circles; they have more power in decisions; they have more resources and receive more rewards from politics and so are thus more likely to respond. Ibid.

⁷⁹ See also Verba, “Civic Participation and the Equality Problem.”

⁸⁰ Steven E. Schier, *By Invitation Only: The Rise of Exclusive Politics in the United States*, (Pittsburgh, P.A.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

lobbying.”⁸¹ He posits that as parties declined in their effectiveness to mobilize people, a sophisticated electorate who could handle the increased costs of participating in politics, such as time and information, emerged as the most likely participants. Political elites responded to these likely participants by using their activation strategies that are skewed towards targeting the upper classes.⁸²

Walter Dean Burnham addresses the profound mobilization theory by arguing that if politicians spoke to class-based issues, or in other words issues that the poor could relate to, they would participate more.⁸³ The failure of the development of an “organized socialist mass movement which could mobilize lower-class voters” explains why the poor do not participate, in his view.⁸⁴ His argument is grounded in history: He believes economic elites pushed for electoral reforms in the early 20th century that blocked the development of a class-based party, both by weakening their base of support because of preliminary hurdles like registration and by making party competition less desirable with the introduction of the direct primary.⁸⁵ As a result, “two non-competitive party hegemonies” were created, leaving little space for class-based politics.⁸⁶ More importantly, as parties were weakened through legislative reforms their ability to mobilize citizens declined.⁸⁷

Thomas Patterson adds to the profound mobilization field by arguing that issues today are not simple and clear-cut and the poor have a more difficult time placing themselves within the entanglement of issues and thus decide rather than try to figure

⁸¹ Schier, *By Invitation Only*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 7-88.

⁸³ Burnham, “The Appearance and Disappearance.” See also Verba, *Participation in America*, 340.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁸⁵ Burnham, “The Appearance and Disappearance,” 138-9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁸⁷ See also Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North 1865-1928*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1986.

them out they will just not participate.⁸⁸ He argues that by the end of the 1970s political parties completed a shift from focusing on large, clear-cut issues along economic lines to presenting multiple-issue agendas along social issue lines.⁸⁹ While lower classes were mobilized during the New Deal Era, the increase of the size of the middle class thereafter created a society where more citizens could afford to focus on a broader range of interests, mostly social issues. Thus, parties responded by shifting their attention to these multiple social issues and “settled into a pattern...of interest group politics.”⁹⁰ Party platforms then “became promissory notes to special interests” instead of “declarations of broad goals and principles.”⁹¹ Patterson argues that this shift by the parties has affected the lower classes because neither party offers them clear-cut stances and thus they do not participate: “In the absence of a large issue that divides the parties on a continuing basis...people—especially those of lower education and income—may conclude that the parties differ in marginal, bewildering, or unsatisfactory ways.”⁹²

This scholarship shows the creation of a tragic cycle, when it comes to the poor: The poor do not participate because they or their needs are not targeted, and they are not targeted because (of the risk that) they are least likely to participate.

Structural Barriers

Some scholars argue that voting laws, specifically registration requirements, place a greater burden on the poor than on other populations, discouraging them to participate.

Before the 19th century, there were no requirements of citizen registration, but by the

⁸⁸ Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* Patterson is not the first scholar to assert this theory. See also David Broder, *The Party's Over: The Failure of Politics in America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 46.

1920s, reformers began to push for these requirements. Today all states have some sort of registration law. The scholarship in this field is split into two sections. The first argues that these laws pose additional costs to participating, so much of a cost that the poor abstain from participating. In other words, these laws act as a barrier. The second section expands this argument by contending that registration laws have actually changed the political culture, whereby politics fails to target and appeal to the interests of the poor in such a manner that the poor see little encouragement to participate.

In 1960, E.E. Shattschneider was one of the first scholars to focus on the “rules” of political participation: “The rules of the game determine the requirements of success...[and] whoever decides [those rules] decides who gets in the game.”⁹³ For Shattschneider, the poor have traditionally not decided those rules and have thus been excluded from the game of participation.

Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone expand on Shattschneider’s theory, writing that “procedural tape,” like registration requirements, limits the participation of the uneducated who have the least skills of overcoming these requirements.⁹⁴ The uneducated, who are most likely poor, are also least the likely to have the “ability to handle the humdrum bureaucratic requirements of registering and voting.”⁹⁵ They argue that if registration laws in 1972 were less hindbersome, voter turnout would have been about 9 percentage points higher, with most of the increase coming from the lower classes.⁹⁶

⁹³ Shattschneider, 72, 105.

⁹⁴ Wolfinger. *Who Votes?*.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

Ruy Teixeira followed Wolfinger and Rosenstone by contending in 1992 that the registration system is more burdensome for the poor because they lack the skills and energy needed to go about registering and finding the correct polling place.⁹⁷ This raises the costs of voting on the poor, leading to a collective action problem for the lower classes, whereby poor people opt to avoid the costs of voting.

Expanding on this theory that registration laws are responsible for less participation among the poor because they pose additional costs is a theory proposed by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. They contend that not only do these laws pose additional costs, they have, in fact, historically altered the political culture itself, demobilizing the lowest portion of the country the most.⁹⁸

For them, registration laws were introduced as strategic demobilizing mechanisms by economic elites who had begun to become threatened by a political culture that was resisting laissez-faire economics.⁹⁹ When restricted voters stopped voting, parties responded by shying away from the issues that would have motivated these people:

As the levels of voter participation among working people gradually eroded, weakened parties were all the more likely to turn away from the issues and campaign stratagems needed to mobilize lower-class support...As the links between local parties and the working class became attenuated, party appeals based on class identity and class interests gradually disappeared...with the result that the marginalization of working-class voters from electoral politics...was reinforced.¹⁰⁰

A political culture was then created, where “appeals that resonated with the identity and interests of [the poor]” disappeared and “the benefits of voting shrank.” The poor’s tendency to abstain was then reinforced by political elites who failed to target them. As Piven and Cloward sum up, “Procedural barriers did not simply restrict voting, but by

⁹⁷ Ruy Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 1992).

⁹⁸ **Piven, *Why Americans Still Don't Vote*, 27.**

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

restricting voting, they altered the subsequent campaign calculus of the political parties.”¹⁰¹ This theory, while similar to Rosenstone and Hansen’s mobilization theory, is more profound in its causal approach that registration requirements led to the initial abstention of the poor in politics that was then reinforced by political elites who failed to mobilize them by recruiting or appealing to their needs.

Attitudes Shaped by the Political System

The final sub-school contends that attitudes created by the political realm—and not the individual’s social circumstances—explain why poor people do not participate in politics. Piven and Cloward reflect this theory when they write, “Everyone would agree that attitudinal or demographic predispositions can be offset by more intense political stimuli.”¹⁰² This statement implies that politics can create attitudes and influence decisions about whether or not one participates. In the literature, there are two fields in which this theory is traditionally discussed. The first argues that citizens are satisfied with the ways in which politics addresses their needs and thus they abstain from participating, free-riding instead. The second field argues that citizens are not satisfied but alienated from politics, either because they feel inefficacious, distrustful, or are not satisfied with the alternatives they have to choose among. The scholars in this field believe that the poor do not see politics as appealing enough to get involved because their involvement would not be meaningful to their lives.

In 1936, Francis Wilson was the first scholar to articulate the theory that non-participation reflects satisfaction when he wrote, “In a society in which only fifty percent of the electorate participates it is clear that politics does satisfy in a way the desire of the

¹⁰¹ Piven, *Why Americans Still Don’t Vote*, 29.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 40.

mass of the individuals in the state.”¹⁰³ Hans Eulau followed Wilson by contending in 1956 in his article “The Politics of Happiness” that nonvoting is “a tactic expression of satisfaction with the status quo.”¹⁰⁴ These are conclusions based on the belief that if people were truly dissatisfied they would attempt to change that dissatisfaction through action; therefore, no action inevitably means no dissatisfaction.¹⁰⁵

Most scholars, however, dismiss this theory as an explanation for nonparticipation. In 1978, Water Burnham argues that the satisfaction theory is of little relevance “unsupported by history.”¹⁰⁶ David Croteau writes, “It takes only a short time speaking with working people to dismiss any pretense that workers are quiescent because of their satisfaction with the political status quo.” And Piven and Cloward make their stance known when they say the main problem with the contentment theory is that “no one has offered an adequate explanation of why this “politics of happiness” is consistently concentrated amongst the least well off.”¹⁰⁷

The second field of scholarship—that of alienation—is more commonly found in this sub-school. Paul Abramson wrote one of the more influential books about alienation in which he focuses on two components: political efficacy and distrust.¹⁰⁸ He argues that political *inefficacy* refers to attitudes created by a government that is unresponsiveness to

¹⁰³ Francis G. Wilson, “The Inactive Electorate and Social Revolution,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 1936, 76.

¹⁰⁴ Hans Eulau, “The Politics of Happiness,” *Antioch Review*, 1956. Today, this theory is still shared by columnists in the media. In 1998 David Shribman of the *Boston Globe* referred to nonvoting as “hapathy,” a combination of apathy and happiness. A year earlier Robert Kapan argued in *Atlantic Monthly* that “apathy, after all, often means that the political situation is healthy enough to be ignored.” Also see George F. Will, “In Defense of Nonvoters,” *Newsweek*, October 10, 1983.

¹⁰⁵ See also Seymour Lipset’s work.

¹⁰⁶ Burnham, “The Appearance and Disappearance of the American Voter,” 122.

¹⁰⁷ Piven. *Why American’s Still Don’t Vote*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Abramson, *Political Attitudes in America*.

one's political participation.¹⁰⁹ He sees this attitude most often occurring among the poor because of "their political-reality" where they experience less political power than advantaged groups.¹¹⁰ Also a social-deprivation theory is employed, arguing that the poor often have feelings of low self-confidence because they have experienced so many failures in their life and "as a result [they] feel politically inefficacious."¹¹¹

David Croteau found that through his interviews, one of the main reasons people gave for not voting was that the "government does not respond to voters."¹¹² He writes that for many working class people, the recognition of "the important influence of campaign money and special interests" motivates their sense of inefficacy as well.¹¹³

Abramson's chapters on distrust are less explanatory for the poor specifically. He refers to a study by Donald Stokes in 1962 that found that "levels of political trust do not differ much along social class lines."¹¹⁴ That evidence may be outdated today, because the levels of distrust have risen so greatly since Stokes' time. In a 1997 book, *Why People Don't Trust Government*, there is no mention that distrust is drawn along social class lines.¹¹⁵ However, distrust is still an explanation for why poor people do not participate, just as much as it is an explanation for why people in general do not participate.

A 1999 study conducted by Jack Doppelt and Ellen Shearer found that among nonvoters the "most pessimistic" and the "hardest core" were the poorest and the least

¹⁰⁹ Abramson, *Political Attitudes in America*, 144.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155-160.

¹¹² Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*, 100..

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Abramson, *Political Attitudes in America*, 195. See also Donald Stokes, "Popular Evaluations of Government: An Empirical Assessment," in *Ethics and Bigness*, eds. Harlan Cleveland and Harold D. Lasswell, (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1962), 61-72.

¹¹⁵ Joseph S. Nye Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King. *Why People Don't Trust Government*. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997).

educated.¹¹⁶ They labeled this group the “alienateds,” because of their entrenched alienation from the political system.¹¹⁷ Four years earlier, in *Voice and Equality*, Verba and his colleagues wrote of alienation as an adequate explanation for why participation has not increased in America when education levels have so much:

It is customary to explain this trend in terms of voter alienation. That is, counteracting the effects of rising levels of education and other changes such as less stringent residency requirements is the overwhelming impact of distrust and cynicism.¹¹⁸

The source of such feelings, for them, is a feeling that politics does not allow poor people’s voices to be heard, paralleling the inefficacy theory Abramson lays out.

E.E. Shattschneider in 1960 poses that one reason the poor might be alienated from politics is that they feel there are not choices in politics that represent their needs and concerns. In *The Semisovereign People*, he gives what he calls “a realist’s view of democracy” that blames political institutions for the abstention of the lower classes:

It is profoundly characteristic of the behavior of the more fortunate strata of the community that responsibility for widespread nonparticipation is attributed wholly to the ignorance, indifference and shiftlessness of the people. This has always been the rationalization used to justify the exclusion of the lower classes from any political system. There is a better explanation. Abstention reflects the suppression of the options and alternatives that reflect the needs of the nonparticipants.¹¹⁹

Shattschneider makes the argument that people participate when they feel they have a stake in the participation, when their issues are being addressed. He does not fault the individual for not acquiring this attitude; instead, he blames politics, because as he writes, “Whoever decides what the game is about decides also who can get into the game.”¹²⁰ If

¹¹⁶ Doppelt. *Non-Voters*, 38-40.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Verba. *Voice and Equality*, 530-1.

¹¹⁹ Shattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 105.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

the lower classes cannot do anything about changing the game, “one thing they may do is stop voting.”¹²¹ Shattschneider claims that nonparticipation is in actuality a “boycott of the political system.”¹²²

John Gaventa, agrees with Shattschneider in his critique that the political system suppresses alternatives for the poor. His theory is deeper, however. Gaventa argues that within the context of participation the introduction of issues and actions are suppressed—fail to even arise—because of a created sense of powerlessness. He believes that the powerless, the poor in this case, do not even recognize their options of creating change or rebellion. Their powerlessness is formed by those in power through the use of myths, information control, and laws that maintain non-participation. It creates a situation where they are not even conscience that their troubles *should* be challenged, that alternatives should exist.¹²³

The scholarship within this field of alienation examines inefficacy, distrust, and suppression of alternatives as answers to the question of why the poor do not participate in politics. David Croteau summarizes this field succinctly, when he writes, “politics must be made more appealing and meaningful to the poor.”¹²⁴ If the poor feel that their participation would make a difference, they would participate. But if they feel their participation is useless, they will, as Shattschneider writes, “boycott” the system by abstaining from participating.

¹²¹ Shattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 105.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 109.

¹²³ John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 21-32.

¹²⁴ Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*, 133.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Hypotheses

I intend to test six theories from the literature review using surveys and interviews. Three hypotheses are related to social circumstances: (1) The first argues that because poor people lack material resources, such as income, education, and occupational status, they do not participate in politics. (2) The second argues that because poor people lack cultural resources of civic involvement and awareness they do not participate. (3) The third argues that attitudes of apathy or personal inefficacy develop in poor people because of their social circumstance causing them to abstain from participating in politics.

Three additional hypotheses are related to the political system: (4) The first argues that poor people do not participate in politics because political elites or parties do not mobilize them, either by not communicating with them or by not addressing their needs. (5) The second argues that structural barriers of registration requirements that affect poor people disproportionately cause them not to participate. (6) The third argues that attitudes of satisfaction or alienation develop in poor people because of the political system causing them to abstain from participating in politics.

Definition of Concepts

In understanding these six hypotheses, it is necessary to define a few concepts. A definition of “the poor” is as important as any. While officially the United States government uses an income line to determine who is poor, I will employ additional

observable indicators for my definition.¹²⁵ The scholarship in the field of political participation has typically used two methods, in addition to specific income levels, when defining the poor. They base their definition on a broader term called socioeconomic status (SES). In 1948 Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues measured SES qualitatively, assessing interviewee's homes, possessions, appearance, and manner of speech.¹²⁶ This can be used most appropriately in an interview setting, where the interviewer uses his or her own judgments. Lazarsfeld also uses quantitative measures such as income, education, and occupation to measure who is poor. This "objective" method—"defining class operationally"—has become the norm among scholars.¹²⁷ The most renowned scholars using the big three (income, education, and occupation) are Sidney Verba and Norman Nie who use them as their baseline model for determining socioeconomic status.¹²⁸

It is also important to note that many scholars steer away from using the term "the poor." Instead, they use terms such as low-income, working class, or lower social status. Some use specific income levels as the government does, when referring to the poor.¹²⁹ For the purpose of this study, I will employ "the poor" or "poor people" for simplicity's sake. I will determine whether someone is poor during my research by using both qualitative and objective methods. I will do this by ascribing people's occupational status, their background history (like whether they had ever received government assistance

¹²⁵ For information on how the specific poverty threshold is determined see Gordon M. Fisher, "The Development and History of the Poverty Thresholds," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 55, No. 4, Winter 1992, 3-14. Today, the poverty threshold for a single individual is \$9,573; for a family of four with two adults, the threshold is \$18,660.

¹²⁶ Lazarsfeld, *The People Choice*. Columbia University Press, 17.

¹²⁷ Campbell. *The American Voter*, 188.

¹²⁸ Verba, *Participation in America*.

¹²⁹ Doppelt uses under \$30,000 a year. Doppelt, *Nonvoters*. Verba uses under \$15,000 a year. Verba, *Participation in America*.

such as food stamps, subsidized housing, or health benefits), and in some cases their income levels.

Political participation is a second term requiring definition. Margaret Conway concisely defines it as “the attempt to influence the structure of government, the selection of government authorities, or policies of government.”¹³⁰ Others write of political participation as a “mechanism by which citizens can communicate information about their interests, preferences, and needs—and generate pressure to respond.”¹³¹ Both of these descriptions suffice as adequate understandings of political participation with which most scholars would agree.

In terms of modes of political participation, voting is the most recognized of all forms. Because it is easily quantifiable, much of the literature regarding political participation has focused on voting. However, some scholars argue, “It is incomplete and misleading to understand citizen participation solely through the vote.”¹³² Where this argument has risen, scholars have included attending political meetings, signing petitions, volunteering for campaigns, contributing money to politicians, and contacting politicians as additional and vital forms of evaluating participation.¹³³ All of these forms of participation will be tested in my research.

Data Collection

My strategy for testing these hypotheses is one modeled after Jack Doppelt and Ellen Shearer, among others.¹³⁴ In their 1999 book *Nonvoters*, they surveyed potential

¹³⁰ Conway, *Political Participation*, 3.

¹³¹ Verba, “Civic Participation and the Equality Problem.”

¹³² Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹³³ See Sidney Verba, *Participation in America*. And Milbrath, *Political Participation*.

¹³⁴ Doppelt, *Nonvoters*. David Croteau uses a similar method though his is more focused on interviews. He worked at a paper mill, interviewing those he worked with. Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*. Also

interviewees to target nonvoters. In the surveys, they asked them questions concerning their different levels of participation as well as their attitudes towards politics. Then they followed up those surveys with semi-structured interviews. The interviews allowed them to draw connections between their levels of participation and their attitudes and life experiences.

I conducted my research by surveying and interviewing clients of the laundromats of both Athens and Meigs Counties in Southeastern Ohio. Laundromats were ideal spaces to conduct this type of research. Unlike food pantries, low-income grocery stores, or even the welfare department, laundromats are not obvious destinations for poor people; yet, they are public spaces that poor people are more apt to use. Conducting research at a laundromat allowed me to identify/target poor people without making them feel like I was targeting them. In addition the activity of doing laundry entails a lot of waiting or mindlessly folding clothes, an excellent opportunity for interviews. The laundromat setting offered a way to target low-income people without seeming obtrusive; it was a public space where I could best spend my limited time and interview many people; and there was lots of time to talk with them about their lives and politics as they waited for their laundry.

The survey method I used was two-fold. I used a short survey and long survey.¹³⁵ The short, one page, survey was used because it was not realistic to expect people in a laundromat to take the time and energy to fill out three pages of questions. This survey focused on voter registration (an attempt to reach those who did not vote because they

John Gilliom who did research in the same county I did, used an interview strategy to capture the ways in which the welfare poor cheat the system so that they can make more money. John Gilliom, *Overseers of the Poor: Surveillance, Resistance, and the Limits of Privacy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

¹³⁵ See Appendix pages 90-92 for examples of both.

were not registered), social and political attitudes, and political mobilization. These will be detailed in the next paragraph. Of the 37 total respondents who completed my surveys, only 8 completed the short survey and nothing else.

The longer, two-page survey was completed by the remaining 29 respondents during the follow-up interviews. It tested all six of my hypotheses: material resources, cultural resources, social attitudes, political mobilization, structural barriers, and political attitudes. The survey's purpose was to aide me in seeing which theories I should explore further and which theories I could disregard. Questions of income levels, education levels, and occupation statuses were covered in the material resource section. Questions of civic participation (such as membership in an organization) and political awareness (such as reading the newspaper, watching a news program, or talking about politics with friends) were covered in the cultural resources section. Questions of apathy, civic duty, and personal inefficacy were covered in the social attitudes section. Questions of whether politicians had ever contacted them or had ever talked about issues that related to their lives were covered in the political mobilization section. Questions of the effects of registration requirements were covered in the structural barriers section. Questions of satisfaction and alienation (such as distrust and political inefficacy) were covered in the political attitudes section. Additionally, the surveys asked questions of political participation levels and demographics.

The follow-up interviews served as an in-depth method to gain a clearer picture of the explanations that arose from the surveys. Using the surveys as a structure, most interviews began with a conversation about their childhood, where they grew up, what their parents did, whether they graduated high school, and what sort of jobs they had

worked in their lives. An oral history began to develop that would aid me in evaluating to what extent they had lived poor and what kinds of experiences from their social circumstances might have influenced their participation levels. Next, I asked questions about their levels of political participation and then allowed them to pose why they thought they (or others they knew) did not participate in politics. Questions relating to my six hypotheses were addressed as well. Finally new explanations were explored as they emerged.

Most interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Some were recorded, although most involved me taking notes and then recording the notes into a journal directly following the interview, elaborating on specific points.

Case Selection

Unlike Doppelt and Shearer, I cannot survey and interview a sample of the entire country. Instead, I must select a specific case to study. I chose the region of Appalachia in order to conduct my research. This area has been singled-out in our recent history as a case where poverty thrives.¹³⁶ Officially, it stretches from southern New York to Alabama and Mississippi.¹³⁷ Eastern Kentucky is considered central Appalachia and has some of the most distressed counties.¹³⁸ Southeastern Ohio has its share of poverty as well and is the area in which I chose to do my case study. I selected two counties, Meigs and Athens, to conduct my surveys and interviews. These counties lie adjacent to each other, just across the Ohio River from West Virginia. They both have poverty rates well above state and national averages. The 2000 census showed that Meigs County's poverty

¹³⁶ Most notable during Kennedy and then Johnson's War on poverty that used Appalachia as a base model.

¹³⁷ According to the Appalachian Regional Commission.

¹³⁸ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 356.

rate was 19.8% and Athens' was 27.4%.¹³⁹ These are compared to Ohio's 10.6% and the United States' average of 12.4%.¹⁴⁰

Besides the fact that this area is suited for my study because of its high levels of poverty, I selected it because of its convenience. It is the area where I was born and lived for 18 years. I went to school there and served in these communities. I am familiar with the culture and customs, with the language and people. My knowledge of Appalachia and Southeastern Ohio is conducive with my strategy for collecting data through interviews, which demands some level of familiarity with the culture.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ 2000 Census Data.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ On a more practical level, I planned to return home for winter break from college and it was convenient that over that time period I could conduct my interviews without other distractions and after my literature review was complete.

CASE STUDY

Background on Appalachia

This section will examine the region of Appalachia more closely. Definitions will be examined both for the region broadly and for Southeastern Ohio specifically. Depictions of cultural and social representations will be presented and historical narratives will be drawn upon. The economic landscape will be explored, as well as the political involvement of the communities within Appalachia. Simply put, a context will be laid out so that the research presented in the next section can be understood more fully.

Definitions

Many scholars have found great difficulty in formulating a definition of Appalachia. In their preface to *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, Bruce Ergood and Bruce Kuhre point this out:

After a long search we have concluded that if there is an Appalachia it is a varied thing, and no single handle will serve very well. The geographic area has been defined, redefined and will undoubtedly be redefined again. The economy of the area is both industrial *and* extractive, as well as agricultural [and now service orientated]. The people are rural *and* urban, some poor, some very adequately provided for...[And] they exhibit many regional characteristics which vary greatly from northeast Mississippi to near Albany, New York.¹⁴²

Though Appalachia may be difficult to pin down, there are several popular definitions that aid in understanding its collective identity amidst these various nuances. The Appalachian Regional Commission, an agency created during President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, presents the most basic definition. It defines Appalachia as a 406-

¹⁴² Bruce Ergood and Bruce Kuhre, *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, (Kendall/Hunt, Third Edition, 1976), vii.

county region, spanning parts of thirteen states.¹⁴³ The central core region is described as including Eastern Kentucky and all but the northern most parts of West Virginia.¹⁴⁴

This geographical definition is limited in its usefulness to those desiring a view of the region as culturally and socially distinct in America. As Karl Raitz and Richard Ulack point out, “Appalachia [can also be] described as a region of mountains, coal mining, poverty, unique culture, tourism, welfarism, isolation, and subsistence agriculture.”¹⁴⁵

John Gaventa adds that the people of Appalachia are bound together by a distinctive blend of folk and mining culture...representing an often overlooked segment of the ‘other America’—the primarily white and rural, lower and working class.”¹⁴⁶

This region is distinct demographically. Its population increases are much less than national averages—between 1980 and 1990 its population rose a mere 1.6 percent compared to the national increase of 9.8 percent.¹⁴⁷ Its people are to a significant degree Anglo-Saxon—in 1990 Appalachia was 93% white.¹⁴⁸ Its poverty levels, although on the whole are only marginally more than national averages, are extreme in specific areas.¹⁴⁹ In 1970, Central Appalachia had a poverty rate that was more than two and a half times that of the national average (34% compared to 13.3%). In the 1990s, this number has shrunk, yet it remains nearly twice the national average.¹⁵⁰ In addition to these

¹⁴³ See Appendix page 84 for map.

¹⁴⁴ Williams, *Appalachia*, 13.

¹⁴⁵ Karl B. Raitz and Richard Ulack, “Regional Definitions,” in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Bruce Ergood and Bruce Kuhre, (Kendall/Hunt, Third Edition, 1976), 10.

¹⁴⁶ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 34.

¹⁴⁷ Richard Couto, “Appalachia,” in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Phillip J. Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney, (Kendall/Hunt, Fourth Edition, 2002), 5.

¹⁴⁸ When disregarding the portions of Alabama, South Carolina, and Mississippi, the remaining Appalachian states are 96% white. *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ In 1970 those below the poverty line in Appalachia were 3% greater than the national average and in 1990 1.5% greater. ¹⁴⁹ Richard Couto, “Poverty,” in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Phillip J. Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney, (Kendall/Hunt, Fourth Edition, 2002), 218.

¹⁵⁰ Appalachia’s central region had 25.3% of its population below the poverty line in 1990. See Appendix page 85.

characteristics, Appalachia is described by many as possessing “shared indexes of...poor health, inadequate housing and substandard education,” all contributing to the image and reality of a region ‘left behind.’¹⁵¹

Southeastern Ohio positions itself within this greater region of Appalachia because of its cultural and geographic characteristics. John Gilliom, a political science professor at Ohio University located in Athens, Ohio where I conducted much of my research, writes of his experience with Appalachia Ohio:

Southeastern Ohio is often called “the other Ohio.” Its geography, its forests, its small farms, and its abandoned coal mines make it far more similar to its close neighbors of eastern Kentucky and western West Virginia than the state lines would have us think. Falling into the federal government’s Appalachian region, the area continues to suffer under the forms of endemic rural poverty and underdevelopment that have marked the region since the nineteenth century.¹⁵²

This ‘other Ohio’ is the region I targeted for my research. Specifically, I examined Athens and Meigs Counties, adjacent counties bordering the Ohio River and northern West Virginia.

These two counties have similar characteristics to that of the core region.¹⁵³ Racially, neither county is diverse, reflecting the trend in the broader region.¹⁵⁴ In terms of poverty, the rates in Meigs and Athens counties have averaged roughly 20% in the past thirty years, compared to state and national averages that have measured between 11% and 13%.¹⁵⁵ Today Meigs County’s poverty rate is nearly 20%, while Athens’ is 27%.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ People’s Appalachian Research Collective, “Why Study Appalachia,” in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Bruce Ergood and Bruce Kuhre, (Kendall/Hunt, Third Edition, 1976), 5.

¹⁵² Gilliom, *Overseers of the Poor*, 44.

¹⁵³ See Appendix page 85.

¹⁵⁴ Meigs County is 98% white and Athens County is 93.5% white, according to the 2000 census.

¹⁵⁵ In 1989, Athens County had 30% below the poverty line. Census data.

¹⁵⁶ 2000 Census Data.

Additionally, Meigs and Athens counties have higher percentages of people on food stamps than the Ohio average of 7%, 15% and 10% respectively.¹⁵⁷

Regarding education levels, Athens County meet national averages, although it must be understood that the core of Athens County is a university and my research was in the surrounding areas that would have had much lower levels of education. Meigs County is much less educated, with 10% fewer graduates from high school than national and state averages, at 64%. Even more revealing is the fact that only 7.3% of Meigs County's population had Bachelor degrees, compared to Ohio's average of 17% and the national average of 20%.

Social and Cultural Representations

Appalachia is known for its hillbilly stereotypes—from representations in the comics of “Snuffy Smith” and Li'l Abner to those on television in “Green Acres” and “The Beverly Hillbillies”.¹⁵⁸ Images of ignorance, feuding families, trailer-trash, illiteracy, alcoholism, and impoverished living conditions are just a few negative stereotypes evoked when the term hillbilly is used.¹⁵⁹ In recent decades, Appalachian scholars have attempted to challenge these stereotypes by confronting the images presented in the media and contrasting them with legitimate research showing the culture of this region.¹⁶⁰ The former director of The Berea College Appalachian Center, Loyal Jones, spent three decades researching the positive representations of these “mountain people.” His observations include the sense of humility, modesty, and reluctance to

¹⁵⁷ Public Assistance Report. Issued by Ohio Jobs and Family Services 2003.

¹⁵⁸ Allen W. Batteau, *The Invention of Appalachia*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1990), 7.

¹⁵⁹ Ergood, *Appalachia*, 1.

¹⁶⁰ For good sources see Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1999). Also J.W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

confront others that the people of this region possess.¹⁶¹ There is also a strong sense of independence and familism that most argue is part of the culture that has persisted for years.¹⁶² In the part of the region I studied, these stereotypes, both positive and negative, continue to function among the people living there.

A History

The most current comprehensive history was written by John Alexander Williams of Appalachian State University in 2002, and it is from his book that a majority of this narrative is taken. Williams begins by examining the indigenous Indians who inhabited the mountains and hills of Appalachia prior to the frontiersmen's arrival.¹⁶³ The Adena, and other mound building tribes, lived predominantly in Southeastern Ohio during this time. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, settlers from the East began to build homes and raise families in Ohio, Kentucky, and what is now West Virginia. The most famous settler, and to this day one of the more positive figures of Appalachia, was Daniel Boone. By 1775, Boone was "widely recognized by frontiersmen...[as] 'an excellent woodsman,'" who was consistently sent on "missions...to spy out good land." Soon after, in 1788, the first settlement in Ohio was founded, just north of Boone country, in the southeastern Ohio River town called Marietta.¹⁶⁴

John Gaventa describes the nature of Appalachia at this time as one "founded upon a determination for independence, based upon a relationship to nature and to the

¹⁶¹ Loyal Jones, "Some Observations," in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Phillip J. Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney, (Kendall/Hunt, Fourth Edition, 2002), 155-160.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 157. See also Williams, *Appalachia*, 322. For one of the first empirical studies see James Brown, *Beech Creek: A Study of a Kentucky Mountain Neighborhood*, (Berea: Berea College Press, 1988).

¹⁶³ Of these indigenous Indians, the Cherokee were the most prominent.

¹⁶⁴ Williams. *Appalachia*, 71

land.”¹⁶⁵ And as families attempted to avoid industrialization into the mid-nineteenth century, most settlers were involved in a farm-and-forest economy, where “families settled next to each other, kinship became a key to social organization, [and] though some families were more prosperous than others, land resources were abundant and more or less equally divided.”¹⁶⁶

Times were hard nonetheless. As Williams points out, there were many struggles amidst the Appalachian settler’s life, from land warrants to Indian warfare:

The deleterious effect of land speculation, the commodification of land through the issuance of treasury and military warrants...the shifting tides of settlement caused by the intermittent nature of Indian warfare, the inconsistency of state policies in the taxation of land: All...led to shingled claims and to the legal procedures by which thousands of actual residents were later forced to transfer the ownership of their land and/or the rights to the [natural resources] under it to nonresident corporations in the industrial era.¹⁶⁷

Gaventa adds to Williams’ depiction by explaining that as metropolis regions in other parts of the country began to develop, economic demands for resources increased and in “this search for cheap resources, the...Appalachias—bypassed by the forces of expansion for almost 100 years—began to be viewed with a new [and appealing] eye.”¹⁶⁸ Soon after, land began to be acquired by outsiders to the region. Gaventa argues this was done many times through a voluntary selling of land to developers from ignorant mountaineers who did not realize the value of the land they were selling: “To them there seemed to be plenty of land for everybody...since land was plentiful, folks would just take what money was offered and move on to the next mountain.”¹⁶⁹ What was created was a development of social stratification and absenteeism, where ownership of the land and its resources

¹⁶⁵ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 48.

¹⁶⁶ Williams, *Appalachia*, 92. See also Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 50.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76

¹⁶⁸ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 51-52.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 53. Those who did not move were forced to, in many cases, and even burned out of their homes.

served as “the basis of the distribution of wealth and power in the region.”¹⁷⁰ Williams writes, “Landlessness in Appalachian states [during this time] ranged from 51 percent in western Virginia to 36 percent in eastern Kentucky, while absentee ownership of land ranged from 93 percent in the West Virginia to 33 percent in western Maryland.”¹⁷¹

In 1843, explorer Charles Lanman picked up on the beginnings of the inequalities that would mark this region for years to come. “[They] are ignorant,” he wrote, “so far as book-learning is concerned. But they are well-supplied with common sense, and are industrious enough to deserve better success than the most of them enjoy.”¹⁷²

Cynthia Duncan writes that after the Civil War Appalachia was drawn out of its “relatively isolated family-based” economy of subsistence farms and into the national “industrial wage economy.”¹⁷³ This was due mainly to the realization of the profit to be gained in exploiting the region’s natural resources. And because of the introduction of the rail, described by Williams as the “foremost...element that transformed Appalachian life,” this exploitation could thrive.¹⁷⁴ Duncan writes, “For families in the mountains, this meant trading the uncertainty and hardships of making a livelihood with small farms for the uncertainty and vulnerability of seeking work in a volatile and oppressive industry,” mainly coal mining.¹⁷⁵

The “coal fields” (a clever though inaccurate agricultural metaphor) were located across the map of Appalachia. The rolling hills of the Ohio valley were no exception, and

¹⁷⁰ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 55.

¹⁷¹ Williams, *Appalachia*, 92.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Cynthia M. Duncan, *Rural Poverty in America*, (Westport, CT: Auburn House, 1992), 111.

¹⁷⁴ With rail, inevitably came industry, writes Williams. The small market town in Martinsburg, West Virginia demonstrates this fact “when the B&O located its shops there... it became an industrial town...acquiring woolen factories, flour mills, and other agricultural processing industries as well as a [large numbers] of railroad workers.” Williams, *Appalachia*, 229-236.

¹⁷⁵ Duncan, *Rural Poverty in America*, 111.

in fact, from the Ohio valley up to the Pittsburgh region laid the most valuable form of coal, bituminous.¹⁷⁶ Coal was such a part of this landscape—to this day Appalachia’s legacy—that mountain novelist Jesse Stuart defined Appalachia by its coal in 1972, saying “Appalachia is *anywhere* there is coal underground.”¹⁷⁷ While Appalachia’s resources, particularly this “black gold of the energy era” generated tremendous wealth, its people “rarely owned and scarcely benefited from [its] wealth.”¹⁷⁸ The region has been described as a “region of poverty amidst riches; a place of glaring inequalities--”and its greatest trademark, coal, is at the foundation of its inequalities.¹⁷⁹

These inequalities greatedened with the beginning of the Great Depression.¹⁸⁰ Soon after, President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the New Deal programs, highlighting Appalachia as one of the most needy regions. He referred to its people as “forgotten...by the American people,” and in need of national assistance, which was to be provided by government jobs popularly labeled “alphabet agencies” because their names were acronyms.¹⁸¹

Although these programs helped, their successes were marginal because the inequalities created by these power relationships were deeper than government jobs could solve. The coal mining system is described by some as having a colonizing effect on the region because of its incredible control over the economy and thus people’s livelihood.¹⁸² By the 1960s, the extent of poverty was immense due to this exploitation by the mining

¹⁷⁶ Williams, *Appalachia*, 254

¹⁷⁷ Bruce Ergood, “Toward a Definition of Appalachia,” in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Bruce Ergood and Bruce Kuhre, (Kendall/Hunt, Third Edition, 1976), 39.

¹⁷⁸ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 35.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Williams, *Appalachia*.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 304, 315.

¹⁸² Helen Matthews Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Donald Askins, *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, (Boon, N.C.: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978).

industry and the lack of economic growth in other sectors. The poverty was so severe that it inspired/forced President Johnson's War on Poverty. John F. Kennedy, before him, got a glimpse of this poverty when campaigning heavily in West Virginia during the primary and then election of 1960. After Kennedy's death, fulfilling his mission of alleviating poverty became a national obligation.¹⁸³ Allen Batteau, a cultural anthropologist, describes the atmosphere during the War on Poverty:

More than any other single work, it immediately shaped perceptions of Appalachia for the American public in the 1960s. It highlighted destitution and the dilapidated public facilities that accompany civic decay...It created a tension between Appalachia poverty and American abundance, a tension that galvanized politicians for more than a decade.¹⁸⁴

In addition to the awareness of Appalachia's poverty was the creation of concrete governmental agencies to address these problems. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the Office of Economic Opportunity were introduced to tackle poverty from the top down and the bottom up.¹⁸⁵

The top down approach put emphasis on metro growth in hopes of benefiting the entire region economically. Infrastructures, including advanced highway networks, were developed to connect cities to cities. What resulted was a 'New Appalachia,' as the ARC termed it, which "resembled the development in the rest of the United States."¹⁸⁶ There were motels, fast food chains and regional malls scattered at strategic points along the highways—the K-Marts, Krogers, McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chickens thrived on this approach.¹⁸⁷ By the 1980s "Appalachia [was] indeed becoming essentially like the

¹⁸³ Batteau, *The Invention of Appalachia*, 160.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸⁵ Williams, *Appalachia*, 334-342

¹⁸⁶ Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 215.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

rest of the nation,” as Richard Drake writes, “*except, of course, it [was] dependent on those it franchis[ed] from.*”¹⁸⁸

The bottom up approach sought to reform education, adding many “vo-tech” schools to the region that focused on trade skills, as well as introducing Head Start for pre-kindergarteners.¹⁸⁹ This strategy also involved an explosion of “community organizers,” many of who were VISTA volunteers (Volunteers in Service to America) trying to confront poverty through political actions.¹⁹⁰

Both of these approaches deserve some credit, given that poverty levels have declined in Appalachia since the 1960s. Although as I pointed out earlier, poverty is still thriving in the region. Furthermore, with the shift from the industrial age to the technological age and with increasing environmental regulations, the coal industry has declined. For example, the number of miners in West Virginia shrank from more than 150,000 in 1945 to just over 17,000 in 1999.¹⁹¹ Finally, with the introduction of NAFTA, out-sourcing of factory jobs to Mexico has become a normal occurrence.

The latest transformation of the Appalachian economy began in the 1980s and focuses on tourism and “back office” jobs. Sally Ward Maggard describes these “back office” jobs as “decentralized production sites housing operations of service and manufacturing companies,” like data entry and processing, telemarketing, and price-rate assembly. The employers of these jobs target desperate job seekers who are willing to work for low hourly wages.¹⁹² The tourism economy, while offering some jobs relating to

¹⁸⁸ Drake, *A History of Appalachia*, 215.

¹⁸⁹ Williams, *Appalachia*, 335.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹⁹² Sally Ward Maggard, “From Farm to Coal Camp to Back Office and McDonald’s: Living in the Midst of Appalachia’s Latest Transformation,” in *Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present*, eds. Phillip J. Obermiller and Michael E. Maloney, (Kendall/Hunt, Fourth Edition, 2002), 255.

the natural environment that many tourist seek to enjoy, is “clearly related” to service oriented jobs that “serve” outsiders in eating and drinking places, amusement services, and lodging.¹⁹³ Williams argues that like the mining economy of the past, the tourism economy has its own colonial nature, where this sort of development “represents the loss of local control over a community’s resources and future.”¹⁹⁴

Finally the fixture of WalMart is worth mentioning. This business has changed small close-knit communities into warehouse shopping centers. Five years ago there was not a single WalMart in Meigs and Athens counties; today there are four within an hour drive. And as Williams writes, “WalMart now has more employees in West Virginia than any coal company.”¹⁹⁵

Political Involvement

United States Senator Daniel Moynihan wrote a book in 1969 describing community action before the War on Poverty. His discovery was that while Appalachia faced glaring inequalities, the people had not challenged the power structures:

The American poor [in West Virginia] were not only invisible, in Michael Harrington’s phrase, but they were also silent...[There was] an industrial workforce whose numbers had been reduced by nearly two-thirds in the course of the decade, but with hardly a sound of protest. The miners were desperately poor, shockingly unemployed, but neither radical nor in any significant way restive.”¹⁹⁶

While there had been some militant coal miners’ movements in the 1920s and 1930s, political involvement in Appalachia up until the 1970s was in “quiescence,” as Gaventa points out.¹⁹⁷ Stephen Fisher’s *Fighting Back in Appalachia* contends that grassroots

¹⁹³ Maggard,, “From Farm to Coal Camp,” 256.

¹⁹⁴ Williams, *Appalachia*, 391.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 345-6

¹⁹⁶ Daniel P. Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, (New York: Free Press, 1969), 24-5.

¹⁹⁷ Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 36.

community organizing exploded after the War on Poverty and continues today.¹⁹⁸

Williams argues that many of these organizers are “neonatives” from east coast who are unfamiliar with Appalachia but who are concerned with issues of the poor and the environment. Whether Appalachians or outsiders are becoming political involved, there is a clear sense from Fisher’s book that the region is experiencing an increase in political involvement, although it is inadequate to argue that “rebellion” is in full force as Gaventa might like to see.

Summary

Appalachia is characterized by its rural landscape dotted with metro areas, its hardworking yet often negatively depicted people, its coal economy of the past, its service industry and WalMarts of the present, and its legacy that it was once a place “forgotten...by the American people.” Whether it is still forgotten is left for others to debate. What is known is that endemic poverty persists in the region and the people there seem to have little power of changing this. Next, I will present my empirical research in an attempt to discover why the poor people of Appalachia do not seek political participation to change this situation.

Survey Results and Analysis

Demographics

There were thirty-seven surveys completed. However, only twenty-nine respondents filled out demographic questions. Of the twenty-nine respondents, the female to male ratio was almost identical. There were two respondents who identified as non-

¹⁹⁸ Fisher points out that in 1983 there were sixty-two local citizen groups active in eastern Kentucky alone. Stephen L. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1993), 13.

white, reflective of the region at large. The respondents ranged in ages from 19 to 70 and were dispersed fairly evenly among my age ranges. This demographic of age helped to explain why people do not participate in politics generally. Of the thirteen respondents who were 45 years or older, eleven had voted; of the sixteen respondents who were younger than 45 years old, only four had voted. These results mirror America in general and while age is not a characteristic specific to the poor, it is somewhat of an indicator of political participation.¹⁹⁹

Sex

Male	Female	Total
14	15	29

Race

White	Black	Other	Total
27	1	1	29

Age

18-29	30-44	45-64	65 +	Total
7	9	8	5	29

Levels of political participation

Political participation among those surveyed was weak at best. Of the thirty-one respondents that I could determine participation levels, only three could be labeled as strong participators, because they were involved in political activities beyond simply voting. Seven more had voted in both the 2002 and 2000 election (making 10 total). Six others voted in one of those elections. The remaining fifteen abstained from even the simplest form of political participation, voting. Although, more than half of my respondents had voted in the last four years, less than one-third were regular voters and less than one-tenth were politically involved beyond voting. Of those who went

¹⁹⁹ Demographics of education, income, and occupation will be discussed in the material resources section.

beyond voting, only one had ever contributed money to a political cause.²⁰⁰ These results demonstrate that the poor do participate politically at low levels.

Voting

	Yes	No	Total
Total voted	16	15	31
Voted in 2002	12	19	31
Voted in 2000	14	17	31
Voted in both	10		31

Likelihood of voting in 2004

Definitely	Probably	Probably Not	Definitely Not	Total
10	5	9	7	31

Other Forms of Political Participation

Any	Contact	Attend	Sign	Volunteer	Contribute	Total	Blank
3	3	2	2	2	1	27	2

Social Circumstances

Material resources

Income, education, and occupation represented the major components of the material resource theory. While income levels did vary, they were held constant because all respondents were considered to be poor.²⁰¹

Education levels were somewhat explanatory. Only two of the respondents had graduated from college and both were voters. Only three others had attended some college, two of them voters. These findings demonstrate that the poor are less educated. Also, it shows that with college experience, the poor might be more likely to vote. However, my research refutes an argument by scholars in the past that as the society

²⁰⁰ Three had contacted a politician, and two had attended a meeting, volunteered for a political party, or signed a petition.

²⁰¹ There were three respondents, additional to the thirty-seven, who were determined to be beyond poor and thus eliminated from the research early on.

becomes more high school educated, participation will increase.²⁰² More than four-fifths of my respondents had graduated from high school and yet of those who had *only* graduated high school, more than half did not vote (10). It is important to note that those who did not finish high school were much less likely to participate. These results demonstrate that low levels of education are adequate indicators of political participation levels, as long as a high school diploma is considered a low level of education.

An attitude related to education—that of the complexity of politics—was inconclusive in providing an answer to my question. Most respondents did not believe politics was too complicated for them to navigate (26 of 35), and yet most respondents had relatively low levels of education. For some, admitting politics is too complicated for them is difficult and thus this question will be explored in depth in the interviews.

Occupational status was also somewhat explanatory. Of those who were currently working or retired, more than two-thirds had voted (11 of 15). Of the remaining fourteen who were unemployed, one-third had voted (5 of 14). These results show that while working increases the likelihood that one will participate, it is not a complete indicator.

Income

Under \$10,000	\$10-20,000	\$20-30,000	\$30-50,000	\$50-75,000	Above \$75,000	Total
9	4	9	6	1	0	29

Education

Some high school	Graduated high school	Some College	Graduated College	Total
5	19	3	2	29

	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Blank
Politics too complicated	2	7	15	11	35	2

²⁰² Wolfinger, *Who Votes?*.

Occupational status

Unemployed	Working	Retired	Total
14	12	3	29

Cultural resources

A majority of my respondents were involved in civic activities. Of the fifteen who were involved, two-thirds of them had participated politically, as Putnam's theory would predict.²⁰³ Additionally, of the fourteen remaining respondents, only slightly more than one-third voted (5). These results demonstrate that as one is more involved in civic affairs, one is more likely to become involved political. It is important to recognize that none of these respondents were to a great extent involved politically; I am only measuring participation by the fact that they voted irregularly.

As to the explanation that poor people are less aware of politics than others and are thus less likely to participate in politics, my survey demonstrated this to be true to some extent. It showed that the majority of my respondents had very few conversations about politics (22 of 28). Only six said they talk about politics several times a week and none talk about the subject everyday. Also, very few follow the news daily (3).²⁰⁴ These results indicate that if the poor were more aware of politics, maybe they would be more likely to participate.

Civic Participation

Any	Club/organization	Union	PTA	Church	Non Profit	Other	Total
15	1	1	0	4	10	0	29

Awareness

	Less than several times a week	Several times a week	Everyday	Total	Blank

²⁰³ The interviews showed that 4 of the 5 respondents who did not participate in politics, and yet were civically involved, were working off their food stamps at a non-profit and were alienated with the system.

²⁰⁴ Newspaper reading was a little higher, however the survey failed to distinguish between reading the sports page, the classifieds, or the news sections. That would be addressed in the interviews.

Talk about politics	22	6	0	28	1
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	6-7 times a week	4-5 times a week	2-3 times a week	1 time a week	None	Total	Blank
Read newspaper	3	6	8	6	4	26	3
Watch TV news	3	3	10	2	8	26	3

Attitudes shaped by Social Circumstance

There were four questions that addressed the theory of social attitudes. One covered the feeling of apathy. Those who said they were not interested in politics did not participate politically, supporting David Croteau's findings (13 of 14). However, there were many respondents who said they were mostly or strongly interested in politics and yet did not participate *regularly* (10 of 23). These findings show that it makes sense to assume that if one is not interested in politics, one is less likely to participate. They neglect to show whether their apathy is a result of feeling alienated from politics, which will be addressed in the interview section.

The second question covered the feeling of inadequacy that was touched on in the material resources section. It asked if those surveyed agreed that politics and government was too complicated for them to understand. Most disagreed, saying politics was not that complicated (26 of 35).

The third question asked whether one felt it was his or her civic duty to vote. In other words were they predisposed, because of their social environment, to believe participating in politics was valued? The results were inconclusive. On the one hand, those who felt it was not their duty, likewise did not vote. On the other hand, those who felt it was their duty, voted on the whole, *although not regularly*.²⁰⁵ Sixty percent responded that it is one's civic duty to vote and yet only one-third of those surveyed

²⁰⁵ All but one voter felt it was one's civic duty.

voted regularly. This shows that believing it is one's duty does not mean one will vote. And furthermore possessing a believe that it is one's civic duty to vote does not translate into a belief that it is one's civic duty to participate more broadly in politics.

The last question addressed personal efficacy, asking whether respondents felt success in life was determined by forces outside their control. The results were inclusive. While seventy percent felt they did have control over their lives (26 of 37), only one-third participated regularly. This indicates that a feeling of personal efficacy may not translate to a feeling of control over the political realm, because so many did not vote. However, of the eleven that believed success was outside of their control, only three participated, demonstrating that when one does not feel personal efficacy they are less likely to vote.

Apathy

	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Blank
Interested	5	18	3	11	37	0

Social Attitudes

	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Blank
Too complicated	2	7	15	11	35	2
Civic duty	9	13	2	13	37	0
Success outside control	7	4	13	13	37	0

Summary of Social Circumstances

Social attitudes did not offer a strong explanation for why poor people do not participate in politics. Attitudes of civic duty and personal efficacy did not translate into regular political participation. Additionally, apathy and a belief that politics is too complicated were inconclusive as explanations. Education, occupational status, age, and involvement in civic activities did serve as pieces of the puzzle of why the poor do not

participate. The more education one has, the fact that one is working, the older one is, and the more involved one is in civic activities, the more likely one is to participate, at least to vote.

Political System

Political mobilization

The survey addressed both simple and profound political mobilization. Questions of whether the respondent had received mail or been contacted by politicians covered the simple form. Most had received mail (26 of 41), though few had been contacted by politicians. These findings that many had received mail and yet overall few had participated refute Rosenstone and Hansen’s argument that if politicians would reach out to the poor, poor people would be more likely to reach back.²⁰⁶ However, few were contacted in other ways by politicians and few participated, evidence that supports their argument. Finally, of those who participate, many had received mail (9 of 16) or had been contacted by politicians (6 of 16). These findings demonstrate that simple mobilization can increase one’s likelihood of voting, although it is not a complete indicator.

Finally, the survey asked whether local or national politicians talked about issues that related to poor people’s lives, an attempt to address more profound mobilization. A majority answered that politicians did not talk about issues that related to their lives (16 and 14 of 29). This fact supports the argument that if politicians talked about issues relating to the poor, it might increase the likelihood that they would participate.

Simple

	Yes	No	Total	Can’t say
Received mail	26	15	41	0
Contacted by local	9	28	37	0

²⁰⁶ The interviews will examine how personal and positive these mobilization tactics were.

Contacted by national.	0	37	37	0
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Profound

	Yes	No	Total	Can't say
Issues relate locally	7	16	29	6
Issues relate nationally	11	14	29	4

Structural Barriers

Fourteen respondents (of thirty-seven total) said they were not registered to vote.²⁰⁷ Almost all of these fourteen said the reason they were not registered was because they “Don’t care much about politics,” rather than they “Don’t know how to register.” Piven and Cloward’s argument of the cultural ramifications of registration requirements might explain this result, showing that while structural barriers are a hassle to voting, it is that they have created a culture of alienation where even if people were registered they would not see any use in voting.

Registered

	Yes	No	Total
Registered	21	14	37

Why not registered?

Don't know how to	Don't care much about politics	Jury list	Other	Total
1	12	1	0	14

Attitudes shaped by the Political System

Political attitudes have two components: satisfaction and alienation. Satisfaction was addressed in the survey by asking whether respondents felt the country was generally going in the right direction. Only 1 person out of 29 answered that question in the affirmative, refuting this theory conclusively.

²⁰⁷ I was unable to test whether six (who were registered) had voted regularly or at all because they only filled out the short survey. Thus for some of my research I used thirty-one and not thirty-seven as my baseline (29 plus 2 who were not registered).

Alienation was much more explanatory in answering why poor people do not participate in politics. It tested political efficacy (related to government responsiveness) and distrust. Overwhelming respondents did not feel a sense of political efficacy: that politicians don't care what people like them think; that elections don't make the government pay attention; that it doesn't make a difference who is elected (things go on just as they did before)²⁰⁸; and that issues in Washington don't affect them personally. However, most respondents did believe that people like them had a say about what the government does. This last question is crucial to political efficacy; however because of the way the question is worded many took it to mean that they *should* have a say in what the government does (shown in the interview section).

Distrust in government was just as conclusive. Most believed that politicians were crooked and that they could not trust government to do what is right. Overwhelmingly respondents felt that the government is run by a few big interests and not for the benefit of all people and that the government wastes a lot of tax dollars. These results suggest that poor people are alienated from politics and that therefore participation is not meaningful to lives.

Satisfaction

	Right direction	Wrong direction	Total	Can't Say
Is the country going in the...	1	26	29	2

Alienation

POLITICAL EFFICACY	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Blank
Don't care	17	11	8	1	37	0
Election force attention	11	15	4	5	35	2

²⁰⁸ This could reflect a disappointment in politicians and political parties in not offering the poor an alternative that matches their needs and interests—a profound political mobilization argument as well.

Makes no difference	16	10	6	5	37	
Washington no affect	12	10	7	6	35	2
Don't have say	8	6	12	10	36	1

DISTRUST	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Blank
Distrust	11	7	11	5	34	3
Big interests	21	9	4	1	35	2
Wastes taxes	20	6	6	2	34	3
Crooked	14	6	13	1	34	3

Summary of Political System

Structural barriers and the political attitude that one is satisfied with politics did not offer strong explanations for why poor people do not participate in politics. Neither did simple political mobilization, whose results were inconclusive. Profound political mobilization and a feeling of alienation did serve as pieces of the puzzle for why the poor do not participate in politics. If politicians talked about issues that related to the poor, and if poor people felt a greater sense of political efficacy and trust of the government, poor people would be more likely to participate in politics.

Interview Results and Analysis

The surveys revealed that material resources, cultural resources, profound political mobilization and political attitudes were all pieces of the puzzle of why poor people do not participate in politics. Of the 37 surveys completed, I was able to conduct 29 follow-up interviews to test these explanations, as well as those that were discounted. The interviews, though guided by the structure of the survey, overwhelmingly became a conversation about political mobilization and the political attitudes of alienation and inefficacy.

Demographics

The demographic of age was shown to be somewhat explanatory in the survey section. Although, I did not explore this in my interviews with any type of question, one interviewee acknowledged that maybe if she were older she would vote. Cassy, 22, said that some of her friends' parents voted and that "maybe that was because it meant more to be involved in politics when you get older." Age is an important characteristic to keep in mind, though it is not specific to answering why poor people, in general, do not participate because it is not a characteristic specific to the poor.

Levels of political participation

The survey showed that six of my respondents had only voted in one of the last two elections, a sign of irregularity. When I explored this fact in the interviews, I found that those six were not loyal to voting at all. Alfred, 55, had voted for the first time in 2002. He was encouraged by his girlfriend and doubted he would continue voting. Others said they had been on and off the registration rolls in the past because they did not vote regularly.²⁰⁹ For instance, Dave voted "only when [he] felt comfortable about the candidate," and because he got down on himself often for making mistakes, he voted rarely. Also, Patsy and George had only voted because there was an initiative on the ballot that would have outlawed smoking in public spaces.

Of the remaining ten voters, only three had done anything politically beyond voting. One had contacted a representative and that was it. The other two had been very politically active since they were young, both working for political parties. These results support the literature that poor people participate very little in politics.

²⁰⁹ The last irregular voter was only old enough to vote in the 2002 election. She said her school had made her vote and said she didn't know if she would continue.

Social Circumstances

Material resources

It is important to note that in the interviews I determined whether my respondents were poor. Though the surveys show that some were making over \$30,000 and even \$50,000, these respondents were still poor because their families were so large.²¹⁰

The resource of income is used in Rosenstone and Hansen's argument of immediate needs that says poor people, by definition, have more immediate needs that are higher on their priority list than participating in politics. I found that twelve of the twenty-nine people interviewed were or had been at one time receiving some sort of government assistance like food stamps. And all but a handful knew someone who had, if they had not themselves. For many the excuse of immediate needs was a piece of the puzzle in explaining their lack of participation. Gary was the most explicit when talking about how his greater concerns for money took priority over participating in politics. He said as a construction worker who lives from contract to contract traveling around the country, "I got to support my wife and 5 year old, first." There is a belief underlying this that involving oneself in politics would not be a step in helping his family.

Related to immediate needs are time constraints. Although some scholars argue that the poor may have more free time, the people I spoke with proved otherwise. As young mothers trying to support a family, time constraints were a piece of the answer of nonparticipation for Virginia, Spirit, and Cassy.

Virginia, a single mom of a 3 year old in her early thirties, said she had little free time with all her daily chores—like the three loads of laundry she was doing that day. Her

²¹⁰ For example, the women who made over \$50,000 had raised 8 children and was on food stamps at times.

excuse was that there was a lot of information to learn when it came to government and “[she] just wouldn’t know where to begin.” This reflects the theory that time is a prerequisite when navigating politics, because it allows one to gain political knowledge.

Spirit, a single mom with two kids at 24, lived in section 8 housing and talked about all the work she does during her week just to keep the house in shape for her landlord’s weekly inspections. Taking care of her mom, whose health is poor, is an added time constraint.²¹¹ She is unemployed right now, after being fired from a glass factory for missing work because she had to take her 10 month old to the hospital. In addition to looking for a job, her oldest child’s Head Start program recently closed because its funding was cut, adding an extra 40 minutes to her day to drive him to the program in the next town. Human Services registered her to vote, but she never has. These immediate needs add up as part of the explanation why.

Cassy, 22, took care of three kids while her husband worked at a factory an hour away. She also worked at WalMart, which barely helped them get by. Over the top of the laundry noises, Cassy explained why she did not participate in politics: “For one I don’t have the time. Not with this crew,” pointing at two of her kids eating chicken nuggets. Like Spirit and Virginia, Cassy’s free time is valuable as she struggles everyday with her family on a low income—this is a part of the explanation of why they do not participate.

However, this notion that the poor do not have enough time to devote to politics assumes that political knowledge takes a lot of effort and time to acquire. Why do they not take cues from party affiliation or the media or vote a straight ticket? An alternative

²¹¹ Her mom has not gotten her Social Security Insurance approved yet and Spirit uses her own food stamps to shop for her family as well as her mom.

reason that will be addressed later in this section is that participating, for them, is not worth doing.²¹² If the poor saw that politics would help them make their lives better—materially or otherwise—then maybe it would be appealing enough to them so that they would make time to take party cues, listen to the sound bites or vote a straight ticket.

The resource of education was somewhat explanatory in the survey section, showing that with more education one was more likely to vote. Although graduating from high school did not increase the likelihood as much as one would expect. The feeling that politics is too complicated for the poor, a social attitude associated with levels of education, was shown through my interviews to have explanatory power (contrary to my survey results.) My interviews showed that, while many said in the survey that politics was not too complicated for them to understand, they did feel politics covered too many issues and that there was “too much information to know.” This indirectly answers the question that politics is, in fact, too complicated for them. Most acknowledged that they did not have much information on candidates and that they did not use sources (like the news) that would give them that information. Education is a way of pointing one in the right direction to find answers.

Occupational statuses played a large role in explaining nonparticipation among my interviewees. My surveys showed that those who worked were more likely to vote. My interviews showed why: the jobs they worked increased their political stimuli. One had worked with the Federal Emergency Management Agency; another had been an outreach

²¹² To illustrate, think about the capacity for sifting through sports knowledge that poor people can do—it’s appealing to them.

worker at the welfare department; six worked/volunteered at nonprofits that advocated for the poor (to pay off their welfare), and one was a union member at a mill.²¹³

Tina, a voter and grandmother of two at 40 years old, worked at the Nelsonville Family Info Center with teen mothers. She had begun by volunteering there to work off her welfare. She said that she saw that policy decisions affected the Info Center's budget cuts that directly impacted the people she was trying to help through her work and that was why she voted. She continued by acknowledging, "Everyone's vote makes a difference." For Dave Hartley, an employee of the Appalachian People's Action Coalition who worked at its used furniture store, voting "is all we've got. We all have to vote. We got to do something." These types of jobs and experiences put them in contact with political stimuli and allowed them, in some cases, to see the importance of participating; they could concretely see that politics does affect one's life and that participating has to make a difference.²¹⁴

Cultural resources

The survey showed that most of the respondents were not involved in civic activities, the major component of cultural resources. And that those who were, were more likely to participate. The section above on occupation demonstrates that when people are involved in civic activities like nonprofits or unions they are exposed to stimuli that increase the likelihood that they will participate in politics. This theory is insightful because it claims that when people are less involved in their community, they are less connected and aware of the events impacting them. This was very evident among

²¹³ It is important to note that of these six only two voted regularly and there were four more people who worked for a nonprofit and did not participate at all.

²¹⁴ It was also notable that none of the 16 participators were working at service jobs. Many were from an older generation where the economy was not as service centered. One was a coal miner, one had been in the military for years and then worked day labor jobs, and one had worked in a tire factory for years.

those I interviewed as well. None said that they had conversations about politics everyday and only one in five said they talked about politics a coupled times a week. Had they had been involved in civic activities maybe they would have at least talked and become aware of politics, if not participated in more concrete ways.

In addition, many talked about how unaware they are of politics because they do not follow current events. For some the newspaper was not in their budget. For others, they read the paper for job openings or watched the news for school closings, but they avoided the political news, reflecting what was important to their daily lives. It might be that my interviewees have not had conversations or read current events because they were not interested or alienated from politics (that is how they explained it to me).²¹⁵ However, Putnam would argue that if they had been involved in civic activities, they would have been exposed to current events and more conversations about politics, thus increasing the likelihood that they would participate.

Attitudes shaped by Social Circumstances

In the survey section, social attitudes did not offer a strong explanation for why the poor do not participate in politics, mainly because many of my respondents felt a sense of personal efficacy and yet rarely participated politically. Of the 26 respondents who said they had control over success in their life, most responded as Dave Hartley did: “Work hard and make the right decisions and you can succeed in most anything.” This feeling of personal efficacy to work hard, giving one the ability to shape one’s own life was very different from working hard to shape politics. As will be detailed in the political

²¹⁵ Many felt they could become aware, but were alienated to the point that they did not care about politics. “Yeah, I knew who I was voting for when I voted. I kept up enough,” replied Bryan who had stopped voting because “they just screw you over.” “A good-man can’t live,” he continued, “[Politicians] just care about themselves. They don’t care about anyone else. I poor man can’t live buddy.”

efficacy section, many interviewees did not feel they could have an effect on realms outside their own lives, specifically the political realm. This fact discounts personal efficacy as a strong factor in explaining why poor people do not participate in politics, and shifts the answer towards political efficacy.

The survey also showed that if one holds a belief that it is one's duty to vote, it is not necessarily an indication that they will vote regularly. The nonvoters commonly responded that voting was not anyone's civic duty, but instead a choice. Gary, a nonvoter, said, "It's a choice, at least it should be, just like any other in life." Cassy, also a nonvoter, expressed that even though she was taught it was her civic duty to vote in school, she feels now, "Either you vote or not, probably based on whether it makes a difference to your life." There were some who felt it was their civic duty to vote and yet they did not follow that duty. Those interviewees, like Cindy, were embarrassed that they did not vote, but could deal with the embarrassment giving other reasons that made them not vote. Overall, I found that if poor people believed it was their civic duty to vote, it was probably because they were already voting. And if they did not hold this belief, it was a way to justify to themselves that they did not have to feel guilty that they did not vote.

An explanation that was not explored in the surveys was a personal feeling of inadequacy that leads poor people to abstain from participating in politics. David Croteau and Paul Abramson make the argument that many poor people do not feel like they are adequate to participate in politics, processing low self-esteem. My research showed that many felt they were not "smart enough" to make a reasoned decision in the voting booth. And if they did not feel adequate enough to check a box next to a candidate, they felt

even less adequate to volunteer for one. Michelle was one such respondent who felt this inadequacy. “I really just don’t think I’m smart enough,” she told me. She said that she had a hard time knowing what words meant when she watched the news: “Like ‘deficit’ for example. When they talk about it, I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

For Virginia this feel of inadequacy almost solely explained why she did not vote. Throughout the interview, I could sense her embarrassment because she felt she did not know enough about politics. She felt inadequate in the fact that she did not know where to register. She awkwardly asked in the middle of the interview, “Where do you register to vote? I don’t even know that.” She also felt she had little if anything to contribute to politics, and could not respond to questions about taxes or if politicians’ talked about issues that might relate to her life: “I’m sorry, I just don’t know enough about this.” Finally, she expressed that she was overwhelmed with the amount of information to learn when it came to government saying, “I just wouldn’t know where to begin.”

Like Virginia, other interviewees expressed that they felt like they had nothing to contribute to politics; that they were inadequate to participate because politics needed people who were “smarter about politics.” A couple respondents answered questions with “I don’t know. I just don’t have any answers.” This response showed that because they felt inadequate to offer anything to politics, they did not get involved. David Croteau argues that this feeling is re-enforced by activists and the media who accentuate the poor’s feelings of non-comprehension.²¹⁶ If poor people felt they were adequate to participate in politics, the likelihood that they would participate would increase.

²¹⁶ He argues that the media depicts politics as complicated, and activists often attempt to educate the poor so that they will be smarter at dealing with politics. Instead, the poor should be told that their daily experiences—reflecting the difficulties in their lives—are adequate views and ideas that would contribute to politics. Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*.

Summary of Social Circumstances

Of the material resources, immediate needs and free time were the strongest explanations for why poor people do not participate in politics. Many poor people simply do not have as much free time to be involved in politics, because of other priorities. Cultural resources and occupational status overlapped in offering a somewhat strong explanation for why the poor do not participate. Both emphasized that when people are more involved in civic activities or an occupation (with political stimuli) that they acquire an awareness of politics that others do not and some see that participating makes a difference. Of the social attitudes, personal efficacy and a feeling of civic duty were not compelling explanations.²¹⁷ The feeling of inadequacy served as a strong explanation, arguing that the poor often feel they must possess more “political smarts” to be qualified to participate and so they do not participate.

Political System

Political mobilization

While the surveys showed that simple political mobilization was inconclusive in explaining why the poor do not participate in politics, the interviews showed that it is a factor. Of those who said they had received mail or had been contacted by politicians, only a couple had had any positive and meaningful conversations. Many of them had simply met someone running for office who “dropped off their card and then moved on to the next house.” If politicians talked to the poor about their needs, the likelihood that the poor would participate might increase.

²¹⁷ It was determined that while civic duty seemed to be an indicator of who would be likely vote, most respondents only answered that way because they already voted.

However, when I asked them if a politician was in my shoes—in the laundromat talking with them about their concerns and problems—would they express what they were telling me, most respondents said they would probably tell them they were not interested in politics. This reflects a deeper alienation that must be confronted first before politicians are able to just go out and talk with the poor.

In terms of profound mobilization, the greatest concern among respondents was that politicians do not know or do not care what their policies do to the poor. Politicians cannot relate to the issues of the poor and in their eyes are not attuned to the problems of poor communities. “Politicians don’t realize how what they do affects people here,” Trisha said. “So what does it matter if I participate, it’s not going to make a difference.” Dorothy, a voter who had worked for the welfare department, expressed this sentiment as well, “They pretty much benefit themselves and their class of people.”

These feelings begin to address the political attitude of inefficacy and that is because the two are related. For many, politicians did not talk about issues that related to their lives. Although the surveys showed that some respondents said politicians did, the interviews proved that many poor believe that just because politicians talked about health care or jobs, they were not trying to improve health care or jobs in any positive and concrete ways for the ones who needed it, like the poor.

Many of my interviewees believed that policy decisions in Washington did address issues that related to their lives, but only abstractly. There was a distance between the policies and its direct effect on them. In the days of machine politics, this abstraction would have been transformed into concrete material rewards that were given for

participation. Michelle said she could not even answer whether politicians talked about issues that related to her life.” In some way, I guess. I don’t know.” This was not because she was uninformed because she watched the news almost everyday. Instead, it was too abstract for her. This was common among many interviewees.

Also there were sentiments that there are no candidates who presented alternatives to the status quo. When I asked Bryan do you think it makes a difference who is elected, he said, “Well hell yeah it does, but man, they’ll screw you no matter what. I ain’t wasting my time...” This reflects that it matters who is elected, but the problem lies in that there were no alternatives that would make it matter. Shattschneider argued this when writing that poor people protest the system when they feel there is not an alternative that will represent their needs. Bryan is trying to articulate that if politicians were good at addressing the needs of the poor then it might be worthwhile to participate.

Structural Barriers

During the interviews I asked respondents if they could handle the registration requirements. Some shrugged their shoulders, and a couple said they did not know where to begin. But all of those who were not registered said that even if they were, it would not matter to them; they still would not vote for one reason or another, mostly because they were alienated.

Piven and Cloward’s findings in their motor voter push support my results. In their case, they were able to get an incredible number of citizens, poor and otherwise, registered. Yet those new potential voters were not motivated to go to the polls and vote.²¹⁸ They conclude that registration laws of the past that stood and still stand as barriers to voting among the lower classes have created a culture where political elites are

²¹⁸ Piven, *Why Americans Still Don’t Vote*, 261.

not forced to address the poor, because the poor were structurally hindered in participating in the past. This cycle occurs today. Registration laws are a burden to the poor I interviewed. But even more detrimental to poor people's participation is a culture where the poor are not being motivated to vote because they are alienated from the process.

Attitudes shaped by the Political System

The theory of satisfaction was refuted conclusively with the surveys. It is worth mentioning that the one respondent who was somewhat satisfied did not expect much from politics. Cassy said, "If they mess up than maybe I would vote. I mean we're still living right?" There was no expectation that politics could do something to improve her life.

The attitude of political alienation offered a very strong explanation for why the poor do not participate in politics. I have attempted to address this theory in relation to the other schools of thought throughout, but now I will address it directly. Most interviewees felt no stake in participating: they felt that they had no political efficacy. In other words, they did not feel that their participation in politics would make a difference, either because the government was unresponsive, because money always wins, or because that government is not in touch with the poor and their needs. They also felt little trust in the government, claiming that many politicians make empty promises. Mainly, they felt that if participating was not going to concretely make their lives better, it would benefit them more to try to control their own lives and boycott politics as Shattschneider argued 40 years ago.

Most of those who I interviewed felt that the government was unresponsive to them, or would be if they were to participate. Nonvoters (and even some voters) argued that participating would not make a difference because the government would not listen to them anyway.²¹⁹ Brian, working off his food stamps at a nonprofit, felt this way when he said, “You got to have someone who will listen first, is the way I look at it.” He had never voted and found it hard to see the use in it. Cindy, serving community service to pay for court fees, commented, “My vote probably won’t make a difference. I mean I can voice my opinion all day long but that doesn’t mean it will make a difference.” These responses reflected a fatalistic view, where things were fixed in advance so that the poor were powerless to change them. Cindy continued to tell me that even if she did vote things would not change for the better, because “I’m going to be unhappy either way it goes...everybody turns out to be bad.”

Others responded that participating in politics would not make a difference because “money always wins.” For someone who as lived much of his life in poverty, Dave Hartley did not feel politicians cared what people like him thought. “No way,” he says, “most of [them] are in it for the money. Just like your boss you work for. They want their job and they care about getting their pay check.”²²⁰ Jim Smith, in his late 60s and a truck driver for Pepsi, held this belief as well, “Money wins, what do they care... what’s the bother [in voting] it’s not going to change nothing.” Walter, who said he voted regularly, also said he learned as a kid “at the school of hard knocks...that they who have money, make the rules that dictate us poor’s lives.” Jim Ohlinger, a retired coal miner

²¹⁹ Most who voted did feel it made a difference. For example, Tina believed “everyone’s vote does [matter], they add up.”

²²⁰ He grew up surrounded by 7 brothers and sisters and has lived on food stamps. He is currently a mechanic at a poor people’s action center.

who had never voted, responded to the question of the government not being run for the benefit of all people and only for the privileged, as his father before him said, "Too many chiefs, not enough Indians." Bryan, a past voter who had become alienated, angrily told me that money and those with it would find some way of not allowing your vote to count. Even if all the poor people got together and voted, it would not make a difference, he said, because "votes ain't going to mean nothing against money." Spirit commented that "it seems to me they are just about how much money they can make for themselves." Finally, Patsy, a voter, recognized that it was those with money that are the ones that get into politics. She laughed when she said, "Imagine me running for office."

Some of those who felt alienated said it was because politicians did not address the needs of the poor, mainly because they did not know what it was like to be poor. Alfred, who had voted for the first time last year because his girlfriend encouraged him to, told me, "You know...it seems like there's that secret agenda for that person who wants to get in[to politics]. He's looking out for his family. He ain't lookin' out for you or anybody else." Trisha, at 22 making \$7.65 an hour and raising a three year old, held that politics excludes the views and the needs of the poor, and she sees no way in which that will change. "They don't know what it's like to be to deal with the issues the poor deal with," she said. In her view, politicians are usually richer people who cannot relate to the people in Athens County who are poor. She lived on public assistance for a few years and although now she makes too much money to qualify for assistance she is barley getting by:

Those on public assistance can't make it. And [I'm] not [talking about] those that go on and off it and make it out and get a good job. But the ones that can't find work and live off public assistance, count on it just to live. Politicians don't realize how what they do affects people here.

She believed this distance between politicians and the poor was true for local politicians as well, “They probably came from money as well and don’t know what it’s like just the same.” And while she believes they do not know what poor people endure, she feels powerless in changing this exclusion problem, “My little world doesn’t make a difference to 500 politicians. They seem to be in it for the money anyway.”

The sentiment that government cannot be trusted to do what is right, offering empty promises, was just as strongly felt as the ones above. Jim Smith said to me in a sarcastic tone “all politician lie to ya—promising things that they know they can’t deliver on, saying they’ll get you this program without raising taxes.” For him, politicians will do anything to try to get you to vote for them. Spirit said that even if she was registered to vote and knew who to vote for, “they all lie anyway,” and so she probably would not vote. Bryan continued to return to his catch phrase when I interviewed him: “I watch the same shit from my porch all the damn time. They say they’re going to help you out and then six months down the road they’re screwing you harder. So what the hell’s the use?” Dave Hartley and Walter both generalize and compare politicians to car salesman. They argued that politicians try to sell you the perfect car even though most of their promises fall through.

David Croteau wrote in 1995 after completing research similar to mine that attitudes of alienation, where the poor felt they could not influence politics, led them to assume an inward approach: “For most poor, ‘You do your work, you pay your bills...you hope it all turns out okay.’”²²¹ Many of my interviews expressed similar beliefs. Dave Hartley echoed this passage particularly. He takes care of what he can control and

²²¹ Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*, 169.

politics is not something of which he feels he has any control. “I don’t care a whole lot about politics cuz things ain’t goin’ good and they never have went real well. I mostly just think about what’s going on tomorrow, what’s going on today.” He says he has voted in the past, although he knows his vote is unlikely to change anything, agreeing with the survey question that things tend to go on just as they did before: “You sort of just learn to live with it and hope for the best and if you see someone who might be good, vote.” Finally he ends by telling me, “I live in a little rinky-dink place, on my little rinky-dink farm, have my little rinky-dink life, and drive my little rinky-dink car. I’m pretty much in my own cube. And there’s not a whole lot of things that [politicians] could do to *totally* ruin my life.” And that allows him to deal with the fact that he cannot influence politics, at least the way he sees it.

Summary of Political System

Simple mobilization did not offer a strong explanation for why the poor do not participate in politics, because poor people were so alienated they would not give a politician the chance to listen to their concerns. Structural barriers offered a peripheral explanation, because although registration requirements did serve as barriers to participation, many were alienated to the point that being registered would not have motivated them to vote. Profound mobilization and the attitude of alienation offered the strongest explanations. If politicians addressed and were responsive to the needs of the poor, the likelihood that poor people would participate would increase. Also if poor people felt money was not dominated by politics and that politicians could be trusted, they might participate at greater levels.

A Synthesized Explanation

The surveys and interviews attempted to address the theories presented in previous scholarship. They discounted some and confirmed others. Levels of education, occupational stimuli, and political awareness were compelling indicators of why the poor do not participate in politics. The fact that they felt politicians do not reach out to the poor, addressing their needs and issues in a concrete way, was another. Social attitudes of personal efficacy and the political attitude of satisfaction failed to be explanatory theories. Immediate needs, free time, and registration requirement did make it more difficult for the poor to participate, although they were only pieces of the puzzle.

The feeling of political alienation offered the strongest explanation for why the poor abstain from participating. This feeling was a trump card for the poor I interviewed. Some may not have had free time to “waste” on politics. But if political participation did not feel like a waste to them (if they felt it would make a difference to their lives) then they may have participated. Politicians may not have reached out to them. But it would not have mattered to many of the poor I interviewed, because they did not trust politicians in the first place and so they would not have talked to them about their needs to begin with. Some felt that there was too much information to know and it was often difficult to know who to vote for. But even if they did know the candidates they would have a hard time believing what they said and many would not be motivated to vote. Some were not registered to vote and said that they did not even know how to register. But even if they were registered and knew where to vote, they still would not vote, because it simply would not make a difference to their lives.

Next, I want to present four theories that I feel need to be highlighted in explaining why the poor do not participate in politics. Some are new ways of thinking

about this question and some are previous answers articulated in more explicit ways. One argues that when the government is not responsive to the needs of the poor, political participation becomes meaningless and the poor choose to abstain from participating. The second argues that personal experiences with politics, negative and positive, shape poor people's decisions to participate. The third argues that personal constraints in conjunction with the complexity of politics create a situation where the poor are less likely to participate. The last argues that the poor fail to see their individual power in voting, and because of this failure they become alienated and abstain from participating.

Government Responsiveness → Alienation → Participation

The first theory argues that a lack of government responsiveness creates a feeling of political alienation among the poor that leads them to abstain from participating in politics. E.E. Shattschneider is one of the prominent scholars of this theory. He believes that those in politics fail to address the needs of the poor. They are not responsive to the problems poor people endure. When poor people attempt to make their voices heard, the government fails to respond to their needs. Because of this, poor people decide there is no use in participating in politics because it will not make a difference; they become alienated. For them, not participating is their way of “boycotting” the political system.

This theory is in some sense a political mobilization argument, because if political elites targeted and listened to the poor, learning their needs, then the poor might believe that participating would make a difference in their lives. It also addresses what David Croteau argued—that political participation must be made more “appealing and

meaningful.” If the government responded to poor people’s needs, it might make political participation more meaningful to them, thus encouraging them to participate.

My interviewees’ depiction of their political alienation supported this theory completely. As was shown in the alienation section, many felt that their participation would not make a difference in improving politics and their own lives. Their responses emphasized that those with money have the power, that those in politics are distrustful and make empty promises, and that those in politics do not know what the poor endure and thus do not addressing their needs. All of these responses demonstrated a feeling of political alienation.

Personal Experience → Alienation → Participation

The second explanation that I want to highlight is evident in David Croteau’s *Politics and the Class Divide*, although it is not presented as explicitly as I think it should be. The theory stems from the belief that people make decisions based on personal experiences in their lives. When people have negative experiences with politics, in their historical memory, they generalize those experiences and make their decisions based on those generalizations.²²² These negative experiences are more prevalent for poor people than those who are better off, because the sites in their communities—of jobs being outsourced, of dilapidated buildings, of run-down roads and sidewalks, of poor performing schools, and of expensive health care costs—show them despair in ways that politics has not helped to improve their lives in the past. Nor do they have any reason to

²²² Many of the generalizations were perceptions and may have not be accurate depictions or a true reflection of politics. Nonetheless they were representative for them and created an overall feeling of alienation that made them not participate in politics.

believe that politics will. A feeling of alienation results because they do not see how politics could/is improving their lives or the lives of their poor communities.

Furthermore, those I interviewed who participated in politics and did not feel politically alienated had positive experiences with politics that contested the stereotype that politics fails to improve the lives of the poor. Melissa, a 24-year-old student at a community college, possessed a positive experience regarding U.S. Congressman Ted Strickland of her district in Athens. After a friend of hers encouraged her to call his office, he helped her get her benefits after her father died, serving as an example that challenged the notion that government is unresponsive. George, a coal miner who had just been laid off, told me of a positive experience with Congressman Strickland as well. He said Ted made him feel politicians did care about poor people like him: "He's one of the ones that might reach a little more than most politicians." Rosalie had many positive experiences that shaped her belief that participating in politics mattered. Her most impressive positive example was a letter from President Franklin Roosevelt, in which he had thanked their family for writing him about rescue boats (sent to be used in a flood) that had been hijacked by teenagers. To this day she puts up yard signs and signs petitions and "always, always votes." "I think it should be made law that everyone should vote."

Most of my interviewees did not hold these positive experiences. They offered instead a list of negative experiences with politics that alienated them. Bryan, who had worked with the Department of Transportation, referred to the tax dollars wasted in Athens County: "Dumb bastards. [The government] spends tax money on pouring blacktop in wet holes while it's raining... What kind of brains is that man. They're just

spending the tax payer's money for nothing." He is angry with the highway bureaucracy, citing it as a negative example that he pins on the government. Patsy, too, blamed the government for a negative experience with a bureaucracy. She said that the sewage line in front of her house had broke during a bad flood and tore up her front yard. After contacting FEMA multiple times and seeing nothing had ever been done to work on it, she decided the government "just does not listen to the poor."

Alfred was cynical about the government making rational decisions, speaking with no hesitation about his experiences:

I'm just going on what I've seen, you know through my lifetime. I mean shit. Here's Kennedy saying we're not really going to get involved in Vietnam and next thing you know we've wasted all those people and equipment for nothing. And alls it was, was that the military wantin' to test out the shit they got. Good place to do it. Just start a war.

He continued by pointing out "there seems like there's some secret agenda for that person who wants to get [elected]. He ain't lookin' out for you are anybody but himself." Alfred then offered this example: "I mean look at our seatbelt laws. They'll pull you over, \$75 \$100 fine. And then you got all these kids in school buses without seatbelts. See what I'm saying. A lot of bullshit man, a lot of bullshit." Spirit's negative example was that she remembered "one of the Presidents, who said he wasn't going to raise taxes and then he did." She used this example to justify her general belief that "politicians get into a routine of promising all kinds of things that they will do and then changing their minds." My interview with Brenda in a laundromat in Meigs County was completely reflective of this theory. See Appendix for her story. These negative experiences formed general sentiments that the realm of politics would not help them in their lives, resulting in feelings of alienation.

Personal Constraints + Complexity of Politics → Participation

The third theory intertwines the complexity of politics and poor people's immediate needs. Although voting, the simplest form of participation, may only take the time it takes to go to a local video store, the activities leading up to the actual vote may require much more energy. This is especially true today, as political parties have declined in their role of providing cues to citizens about whom they should vote for.²²³ Many poor people I interviewed were concerned with doing their chores, taking care of their families, and working multiple jobs, leaving politics much lower on their priority list. Voting requires that they understand the registration process, where to vote, what day to vote, and that they get off work to vote. Most importantly, voting means they must know whom they want to vote for. Many poor people do not know the candidates and what they stand for; the ballot simply is a list of names that has no significance to them and issues are not clear-cut. Party cues did not help most of my respondents because almost all who did not vote were independents.²²⁴ In order to be informed, so that they feel like they are not just dropping their pen in the air and waiting to see which candidate it lands on, they must do their homework. For many poor, this homework is an academic exercise they are not comfortable doing.

I refer to it as an academic exercise for a few reasons. One is that for most poor their education was also poor—their teachers may have been bad or they themselves may have not cared or seen the advantages in knowing how to learn about things like

²²³ Kevin Phillips argues that the media as early as the 1970s began to replace political parties in informing the public on who they should support. Kevin Phillips, *Mediocracy*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1975), v. See also Kim Ezra Shienbaum, *Beyond the Electoral Connection: A Reassessment of the Role of Voting in Contemporary American Politics*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

²²⁴ This was not presented in my survey or interview results. Of the 15 nonvoters, only 2 felt an affiliation with a political party.

politics. Their lack of education is a material and personal constraint. Alfred, during his first time voting in 2002, did not know who or what he was voting for. Patsy says she never knows who she is voting for, “I just check down that line, skipping some.” For many, “a list of names that meant nothing” to them was a common response when posing to me why they do not participate.

Individual Powerlessness → Alienation → Participation

The last theory is related to the first and is one that has not been used by scholars in the past. It argues that poor people fail to see their power in voting. Voting is the one form of power they possess and though they recognize their power in aggregates, it is difficult for them to believe they have power individually. They understand that if all the poor people of their community voted, politicians would be forced to listen to them. However, getting all the poor people to vote is an unrealistic task in their eyes. Brian said he might vote in the 2004 presidential election but he probably would not. He told me, “For us down here, I don’t think it would make that big a difference if I did vote, to be honest with ya.” This is a reflection of government responsiveness as described in the first theory. He continued by explaining that poor people’s votes would really have to add up, if they wanted to make a difference. “Like I’m only one person. There’s got to be a lot of ‘one persons.’” This sentiment of being only one person was held by many I interviewed who felt powerless individually and thus alienated from politics. The following is an exchange that shows this feeling that was held by so many that one vote cannot make a difference:

Alfred: I don’t think one person can make a difference.

Me: What about three?

Alfred: I don't think three can. If it's not in the politician's interest, his own interest, he's not going to help ya. Cuz he going to look at his family and his job first, before anybody else.

Me: Is his interest in staying in the office?

Alfred: Right.

Me: Does he get voted out of office by all the people who would vote against him. And then does that make a difference?

Alfred: What I'm saying is that that guy is going to be interested in what everybody else is interested in that moment. Politicians are only interested in getting a job, taking care of his family and he could give a fuck about you and your family.

Me: But does him getting that job RELY on the amount of people that are going to vote for him?

Alfred: I understand that, but does the people know who they are voting for anymore? No.

Alfred was not unlike many of my interviewees who would initially tell me that there is no individual power in voting, at least for the poor. After I prompted them that politicians would be forced to respond to their votes if they voted in aggregates, many agreed although hesitantly. It was too difficult for them to realistically see how to get the poor to vote in aggregates. This problem was transformed into an individual powerlessness explanation: that "because all the poor will never vote why should I, if our votes are only going to make a difference [in aggregates]."

These four theories about government responsiveness, personal experiences, personal constraints in conjunction with the complexity of politics, and individual powerlessness are especially insightful in creating a synthesized explanation for why poor people do not participate in politics.

CONCLUSION

I have invested the last six months of my life in the research before you. I was raised on a farm nestled between both Meigs and Athens counties. I have known these communities and the people who live in them for most of my life. My research is meant to help those interested in politics and the poor, in confronting political decisions that exclude the poor. I do and will always hold the belief that the realm of politics can and should help others to have better lives, especially those less fortunate. My findings in this study have shown that poor people have immediate needs that constrain their capacity to be engaged in politics as fully as others. However, politics should not be made so exclusionary that only those with money can afford to participate in it. Politicians and those who are more fortunate have a duty to their fellow Americans to force politics to address the needs of all those in our country. If politics were to be more inclusive, those who are alienated might become less so, feeling encouraged to participate in our celebrated democracy.

The year this thesis was written, many of our country's men and women were stationed in Iraq fighting so that its citizens could experience freedom. We, as Americans, love our democracy and claim it is the strongest in the world. After the events of 9/11 we stood up for our democracy—our President saying this country was stronger than ever. Only a year earlier, our democracy showed how strong it was when half of those eligible to vote chose not to. My research showed that the poor in this country are not satisfied with the decisions those in politics make. Yet those poor I interviewed were most often the ones who did not participate. Because the poor “do not...define the agenda, frame the

issues, or affect the choices leaders make,” it is unlikely politics will ever address their needs.²²⁵ In 1997, Sidney Verba and his colleagues addressed this issue in an article to

The American Prospect:

The disadvantaged are more than twice as likely—and those in families receiving means-tested benefits are more than 4 times as likely—to discuss concerns about basic human needs such as poverty, jobs, housing, and health. In contrast, the activity of the advantaged is more likely to have been inspired by economic issues such as taxes, government spending, or the budget, or by social issues such as abortion or pornography.²²⁶

In this country, a vicious cycle has been created where the poor do not participate because they are alienated with a government who will not represent their needs, demonstrating to them that their participation would not make a difference. In turn, the government will not respond to them because they do not participate and thus do not hold the politician’s job in jeopardy.

Further research should explore the possibility that providing the poor with positive political experiences, which demonstrate that their participation will make a difference and that politics can have a positive affect on their lives, would decrease alienation and increase participation—It must be shown to be meaningful to their lives. Carol Mosley Braun, 2004 presidential candidate, said to me after I asked her why she felt the poor participate at such low levels, “Government, today, does a poor job at directly meeting the needs of the poor and so they don’t see the connection that politics and voting will help them, indirectly, get that job or better health care or better schools.” It is important to note that she says this in the midst of a country that allows jobs to be

²²⁵ Rosenstone, *Mobilization*, 247.

²²⁶ This disadvantaged were characterized as having family incomes below \$20,000 and the advantaged as having family incomes above \$50,000. Verba, “The Big Tilt.”

outsourced and that more often than not does not offer the poor adequate health care or education.

Almost a century ago, George Washington Plunkitt, the New York participatory and machine politician, told a young reporter that his political party “afforded the poor what the rich and well-off had denied them throughout history: respect.”²²⁷ He said that when a “man works in politics, he should get something out of it.”²²⁸ This emphasizes that politics and politicians are at fault for not providing a direct incentive for the poor’s political participation. If our country were serious about making its democracy the strongest in the world, it would reach out to those who are not involved showing them that the government will respond to them, thus encouraging their participation.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, nearly 250 years ago, described a government as “lost” when it creates “political apathy,” whereby citizens believe “that public decisions do not significantly affect their interests” and who hold a “disgust with the political process for failing to serve the public.”²²⁹ He contends as David Croteau does, at the end of the 20th Century, that a government that excludes, “leaves the legitimacy.... of [its] democracy...at best, in question.”²³⁰

In a well-run republic, everyone rushes to the assemblies; under a bad government not one likes to take a single step to get there, because no one takes any interest in what is being done in them, because everyone sees that the general will cannot prevail...Good laws lead to the making of better ones; bad laws bring about worse ones. The state must be counted as lost, as soon as someone says, with regard to the affairs of the state, “What do I care.”²³¹

²²⁷ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, (New York: Signet Classic, 1995), .

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²²⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “On Social Contract,” 1762, in *Rousseau’s Political Writings*, eds. Alan Ritter and Julia Conway Bondanella, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 143.

²³⁰ Croteau, *Politics and the Class Divide*, 13.

²³¹ Rousseau, “On Social Contract,” 143.

Meigs and Athens County Characteristics

Population

	Meigs	Athens	Ohio	United States
2000	23,072	62,223	11,353,140	281,421,906
1990	22,987	59,549	10,847,140	248,790,925
1980	23,641	56,399	10,757,603	226,542,199

Race

	Meigs		Athens		Ohio		United States	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
2000	98%	0.007%	58,166	1,485	9,645,453	1,301,307	211,460,626	34,658,190

Education Levels

	Meigs		Athens		Ohio		United States	
	High School Degree	Bachelor Degree	High School Degree	Bachelor Degree	High School Degree	Bachelor Degree	High School Degree	Bachelor Degree
2000								
1990	64%	7.3%	74%	2.3%	75%	17%	75%	20%
1980	55%	6.0%	68%	2.0%	67%	14%	67%	16%
1997	\$25,223	\$28,965	\$36,029	\$37,005	Median Household Income			
1989	\$17,707	\$19,169	\$28,706	\$30,056				
1979	\$12,750	\$11,839	\$17,754	\$16,841				

Percent of Population Below the Poverty Line

	Meigs	Athens	Ohio	United States
2000	19.8%	27.4%	10.6%	12.4%
1997	20.4%	19.1%	11.0%	13.3%
1989	20.3%	28.7%	12.5%	13.1%
1979	16.7%	21.6%	10.3%	12.4%

Families in Poverty in Appalachia

	1970	1980	1990
Appalachia	14.89%	10.98%	11.94%

Northern	10.38%	8.41%	10.73%
Central	30.19%	19.21%	22.18%
Southern	17.39%	12.02%	10.87%

Census data.

Three Stories of Why Poor People Do Not Participate in Politics

Brenda

Brenda, in her mid thirties, was simply alienated from politics. She didn't vote and didn't plan on it. She didn't think her voice would ever get heard "There's no use in it," she said referring to voting. "They'd only listen to ya if they was forced to, not that'll ever happen." For her, politics was corrupt and "dirty" and she cited example after example to prove her point.

Brenda lived in a trailer across the river in West Virginia but did her laundry in Meigs County. Her husband worked for the town of Mason as a water and sewer installer, though he had been on workers compensation for half a year. She had two children, one who is 6 and she takes care of and another who is older from a previous relationship and who lives with his grandmother a couple counties away. She graduated high school and has worked as a secretary for her father's taxi service, as a shelf-stocker for a shoe warehouse, and as a babysitter. She said that after all her life experiences she did not think there was anything that would get her to vote now, "I've been asked to register before many times...[but] I'm pretty much just set in my ways."

Being set in her ways comes from a perception that politics is corrupt and there is nothing she can do about it. Her husband's job interacting with the mayor and city council has developed and solidified these views. Her case is evidence that negative experiences with politics define how one views all politics and, for her, is an explanation for why she does not participate in politics.

Her first example was that her husband, Jeff, had had his salary cut by \$2/hr after returning to work last year from having surgery. I asked her if there was a reasonable explanation for this cut and she said bluntly that it was just because Jeff "always stands up to them and tells them when something they want him to do won't work." "And then they hired some fella off the street to be a boss—which is where Jeff should be," she continued to tell me. "Then soon after, they fire this guy and hire the Mayor's son in law. Now tell me that's not dirty politics."

Another example she offered to explain her disgust with politics was described as an argument between Jeff and the Mayor who had made a promise to a family to get them a sewer system that Jeff said could not realistically be installed. In the end, the sewer could not be installed. This example, while only showing how the Mayer had the wrong knowledge, represents and stands out as an image that forms her decision to stay out of politics.

Her third example was based on hearsay about the guy who had worked Jeff's job before him. He had been stealing drums of oil and gas from his job and then one day got caught. Brenda angrily said, "They didn't fire him...They gave him the option of resigning. And he didn't get jail time or anything." She claimed that it all made sense though, because he was related to the Mayor. "It's just dirty politics over there," she

concluded. This story, whether true or not, is in her memory and remains a story that helps her justify not involving herself with politics.

The last example involves the city council. Brenda explained that a family who was on the council had just passed a law stating that one could not live in a trailer in the corporation unless it was in a trailer court. She and Jeff were exempt from this law because their trailer was outside the corporation; however, she said that the family was set to profit from this law because they owned the two primary trailer courts. This was another example of corrupt politics.

At the end of the interview, I asked her why she didn't vote this Mayor out of office. She responded that they lived out of his district. And even if they lived in the town, she said she still would not vote, "It's corrupt. There's no reason to. It wouldn't change anything." Brenda was set in her ways and her ways were a feeling of political alienation.

Dave Hartley

Dave Hartley takes care of what he can control and politics is not something he feels he has much control over. He feels "the world is in terrible shape," and if he had any input into politics, "it wouldn't be like it is." "I don't care a whole lot about politics cuz things ain't goin' good and they never have went real well. I mostly just think about what's going on tomorrow, what's going on today."

Hartley, 60, does see the need to vote and has voted in the past, though rarely. He is currently registered but has had to re-register 3 times because he has had gaps where he did not vote. "We all have to vote. We got to do something. What are we supposed to do, nothing?" He says this adding that he knows it's unlikely to change anything, agreeing with the survey question that things tend to go on just as they did before, "You sort of just learn to live with it and hope for the best and if you see someone who might be good, vote."

The fact that he doesn't vote all the time and that he waits for someone who he "feels good about," is evident that he is unhappy with his choices in voting. He generalizes that politicians are like car salesman in that they try to sell you the perfect car even though most of their promises fall through.

One of his excuses for not voting is that he gets really down on himself when he "screws something up." He feels really bad when he votes for someone and they don't do what he would hope. "Like voting for the President and then he puts us in this war and runs up the debt." He feels bad that he was part of why that happened.

This feeling of choosing the wrong person reflects a sense of inadequacy that he expresses clearly when I asked him what he thinks the government should use their wasted money for, "I don't have answers for a lot of that stuff."

For someone who grew up poor, surrounded by 7 brothers and sisters, and who has lived through food stamps and who is and now has a mechanic at a poor people's action center, he doesn't think politicians care what people like him think. "No way," he says, "most of [them] are in it for the money. Just like your boss you work for. They want their job and they care about getting their pay check."

Hartley says he interested enough in politics but that he doesn't talk much about it "because it's too easy to get in fights and arguments." It's easier to get along with each other if you keep politics out of the picture, he admits. [or have his blood pressure rise

from worrying about all the problems I'll bet you'll be glad when this is over and you can get on with your life and forget this crap. This crap will ruin your life.] He says he does read the highlights in the paper, though not often and he avoids the tv news, plus he just got satellite and there are too many other good channels.

He believes that government is very important to our society and that for the most part they do "a good job of keeping us protected and keep[ing] things regulated." However he gets angry and sad when talking about how the government, in no way, is run for the benefit of the people, especially the poor. He tries not to think about "all that negative stuff," and instead "thinks about the good things in politics," like pensions and assistance and help with housing. This is his way of coping with "the sad situation" of the poor being left behind.

He doesn't participate in any other way except for voting, and he does that irregularly. Instead focusing on what he can control. "I live in a little rinky-dink place, on my little rinky-dink farm, have my little rinky-dink life, drive my little rinky-dink car. I'm pretty much in my own cube. And there's not a whole lot of things that [politicians] could do to *totally* ruin my life."

Trisha

Trisha, at 22, works hard and takes care of what she feels she can affect. Her attitude towards politics is that it excludes the views and the needs of the poor, and she sees no way in which that will change. And anyway, she cannot afford to devote her energy towards changing things when she has to take care of Cloie, her 3 year old, and work for \$7.65 an hour at a local bookstore. She has never voted or been registered and doesn't plan to, "I've been asked to register when I pick up my wic checks but I just tell them 'I'm not much into politics.'"

She thinks politicians don't truly know what it's like to deal with the issues the poor deal with. In her view, politicians are usually richer people who can't relate to the people here who are poor. She lived on public assistance for a few years and although now she makes too much money to qualify for assistance she is barley getting by:

Those on public assistance can't make it. And [I'm] not [talking about] those that go on and off it and make it out and get a good job. But the one that can't find work and live off public assistance, count on it just to live. Politicians don't realize how what they do affects people here.

She believed this distance between politicians and the poor was true for local politicians as well, "They probably came from money as well and don't know what it's like just the same." And while she believes they don't know what poor people endure, she feels powerless in changing this exclusion problem, "My little world doesn't make a difference to 500 politicians. They seem to be in it for the money anyway."

What was sad about Trisha was that she had a lot to say about the problems with politics and how they excluded the needs of the poor, and yet she said she had never really expressed her views and said she wouldn't even if a politician asked her, "I would just tell them I was interested in politics." [This reflects a problem with the mobilization theory and aptly aligns with Piven and Cloward's belief that a culture is created.] She said later that know politician has ever talked to her about her feelings on politics.

When I asked her whom she would vote for, she wasn't at first clear on which party she would support. Soon after when I asked her if she thought it made a difference

who is elected she responded, “You mean like Democrat or Republican? Yeah. I think Republicans are for the rich and democrats are more out for the poor.” Though she sees this she says that people don’t vote because honestly it doesn’t matter who wins. Politicians, for her, don’t know what it’s like to live in this part of the country, poor Appalachia, “the people are barely making it here and public assistance just isn’t enough.”

She sees the problems in her community; her mom recently got laid off from TS Trim, a car seat factory, after 15 years and is now on assistance. People she works with at the bookstore used to work at a boot factory that a year ago took its jobs to Mexico. She reads the highlights in the local papers at work and she has knowledge of current events, showing her anger about Bush’s immigration policy. She also expresses opinions on these events, firmly against outsourcing (though she wouldn’t have used that term) and the war in Iraq, “We need to worry about Americans first.” She doesn’t think politics is hard to understand and she does think she has views to offer to politics; however, she feels the cards are stacked against her having any influence in changing anything.

A Survey about Attitudes towards Politics (ONE PAGE)

1. Are you now registered to vote? Yes No

2. If no, what would you say is the main reason you're not registered?
 Don't care much about politics Don't know how to register
 Don't want to get my name on the list for jury duty Other

3. For the next part, would you strongly agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Mostly agree	Mostly disagree	Strongly disagree
a. I'm interested in following politics.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. The federal government often does a better job than people give it credit for.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. I believe it is my civic duty to vote.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. If you don't vote, you have no right to complain.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a. Most elected officials don't care what people like me think.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Politics and government are too complicated for me to understand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. It makes no real difference who is elected; things go on just as they did before.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Most issues discussed in Washington don't affect me personally.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a. I don't trust the government to do what's right.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. The government is run by a few big interests and not for the benefit of all people.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. The government wastes a lot of tax dollars.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Government officials are crooked people.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
a. Elections make the government pay attention.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Have you received mail from any political candidates in the last year? Yes No

5. Have you had been contacted by a political party or politician in the last year? Yes No

6. Do you feel politicians talk about issues that relate to your life? Yes No

Would you be willing to talk with me further about some of these questions, if you had some time in the next couple of weeks? Yes No

If yes, what's the best way to contact you? _____

Thank you so much for taking the time to help me out, Kyle Smiddie

A Survey about Political Participation (FULL)

Directions: Check one box ONLY, unless otherwise indicated

Political Participation

Structural Barriers

1. Are you now registered to vote? Yes No
2. If no, what would you say is the main reason you're not registered?
- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don't care much about politics | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know how to register |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don't want to get my name on the list for jury duty | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Participation Levels

3. Did you vote in 2002? Yes No in 2000? Yes No
4. How likely would you say it is that you will vote in the election next November in 2004?
- | | |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Definitely vote | <input type="checkbox"/> Probably not vote |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Probably vote | <input type="checkbox"/> Definitely not vote |
5. In the past 4 years, have you done any of these activities? (Check all that apply)
- Attended any political meetings or rallies
 - Signed a petition
 - Volunteered for a campaign
 - Contributed money to a political party or some other political cause
 - Contacted your congressional or state representative or senator to express your opinion on an issue
 - Contacted a local newspaper to express your opinion on an issue
 - Contacted a member of your local school board to express your opinion on an issue

Civic Participation

1. In the past four years, have you done any of these activities? (Check all that apply)
- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Been a member of a club or organization | <input type="checkbox"/> Attend church 2 times or more a month |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteered for a charity or other nonprofit organization | <input type="checkbox"/> Been a member of a union |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Been on the PTA of your local school | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Awareness of Politics

1. Generally speaking, how many days a week to you read a newspaper?
- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Six or seven times a week | <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Four or five times a week | <input type="checkbox"/> Less than once a week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Three or four times a week | |
2. Generally speaking, how many days a week do you watch a TV news program?
- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Six or seven times a week | <input type="checkbox"/> Once a week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Four or five times a week | <input type="checkbox"/> Less than once a week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Three or four times a week | |
3. Generally speaking, how often do you talk about politics and public affairs with your friends or your family?
- | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Every day | <input type="checkbox"/> Several times a week | <input type="checkbox"/> Less often than that |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|

Social and Political Attitudes

Satisfaction

1. Do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction today, or do you feel things have gotten off on the wrong track? Right Direction Wrong track

2. For the next part, would you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with the following statements?

Strongly agree

Mostly agree

Mostly disagree

Strongly disagree

Social Attitudes

- a. I'm interested in following politics.
- b. Politics and government are too complicated for me to understand.
- c. I believe it is my civic duty to vote.
- d. Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Political Attitudes

Political Efficacy

a. Most elected officials don't care what people like me think.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

b. Elections make the government pay attention.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

c. It makes no real difference who is elected; things go on just as they did before.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

d. Most issues discussed in Washington don't affect me personally.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

e. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

Distrust

- a. I don't trust the government to do what's right.
- b. The government is run by a few big interests and not for the benefit of all people.
- c. The government wastes a lot of tax dollars.
- d. Government officials are crooked people.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Political Mobilization

Simple

1. Have you received mail from any political candidates in the last year?

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
------------------------------	-----------------------------

2. Have you been contacted by a LOCAL political party or politician in the last year?

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
------------------------------	-----------------------------

3. Have you been contacted by a NATIONAL political party or politician in the last year? Yes No

Profound

4. Do you feel LOCAL politicians talk about issues that relate to your life? Yes No

5. Do you feel NATIONAL politicians talk about issues that relate to your life? Yes No

Demographics

1. Are you male female

2. What best describes your race White Black Other _____

3. Which of the following age groups are you in? 18 to 29 45 to 64
 30 to 44 65 or older

4. Are you currently working unemployed retired

5. What best describes your total family income?
 Under \$10,000 Between \$30,000 and \$50,000
 Between \$10,000 and \$20,000 Between \$50,000 and \$75,000
 Between \$20,000 and \$30,000 Over \$75,000

6. What best describes your formal education?
 Some high school Graduated high school Some college Graduated College
 Other _____

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