

Spring 5-10-2020

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Melanie Cain
cainm@bgsu.edu

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Bowling Green State University

Trust, Political Participation, and Poverty:
The Effects of Socioeconomic Class on Political Behavior

Melanie Cain

PPEL 4800H

Michael Weber

May 8, 2020

As the 2020 presidential election looms closer, many Americans are considering their opinions, and in some cases whether or not they will vote at all. While overall voter turnout generally hovers between 50 percent and 60 percent in the 21st century (Fair Vote), some populations see vastly different turnout. One of these populations is the low-income population, who have low turnout in elections and overall low political participation. While some may believe that this is due to low-income citizens not having an interest in politics, one key reason may be the levels of trust in the government that these populations show. However, I believe that the biggest contributing factor to low political participation for those living in poverty is voter suppression. Since the level of trust and rates of political participation are not strongly linked in most cases, the likelihood of voter suppression being the primary factor keeping low-income citizens from casting ballots is high, and this suppression targets a vulnerable community that relies on the outcomes of elections for day-to-day necessities.

The definition of trust in government that I am using for this paper comes from Tom W. G. van der Meer, who states that trust is “Citizens’ support for political institutions such as government and parliament in the face of uncertainty about or vulnerability to the actions of these institutions.” Using this definition, trust can be seen through whether or not citizens have faith in their government to act in the best interest of the people it governs. In the United States, only 17 percent of people believe the federal government will “do what is right” with the answers “just about always” or “most of the time,” and the rates of these answers have been generally declining for nearly a decade (Pew Research Center). While this statistic alone may not give a full picture of the political landscape, it is clear that with such low levels of trust, the overall level of declining trust is not tied to a specific party or demographic; Pew Research Center even shows the levels by party, race, and generation, and although the numbers are

different, they show the same general trend of overall declining trust since 2001. Trust in government, or political trust, is seen to be related to the state of the economy, perceptions of corruption and inequality, feelings of social insurance, media, association participation, and the perception of high rates of immigration (Vallier, 18-22). Based on these factors, it is not out of the ordinary to then relate this to the low rates of trust in American citizens based on the current political landscape, particularly while heading towards the 2020 election.

The definition of participation in politics that I am using is an aggregate of definitions from multiple sources, since none of them fully stated what I consider participation by themselves. The definition I have synthesized is “politically motivated actions such as voting in elections, participating in protests, contributing to a political campaign, contacting politicians to attempt to influence their decisions, voting in local, state, or federal elections, or attempting to influence the political beliefs of others.” Many sources defined political participation with only voting behaviors, but I think the definition should include actions meant to influence political action outside of voting. With this definition, even those who are disenfranchised such as minors or felons in the United States can still participate in political behaviors. Most studies, however, focus on voting, so many statistics are based on voter behavior. In the 2016 election, 60.1 percent of the voting population cast a ballot (Fair Vote). As stated previously, this is fairly normal for presidential elections. While this number is somewhat low for the general population, it should be noted that some demographics vote at higher rates than others.

Finally, in the definition of poverty that I am using for this paper, I have opted not to use a specific number. While on a federal level, there is a threshold number used to define poverty, I feel that this does not accurately represent the lived experiences of those in poverty and does not accurately encompass poverty in the way it is discussed in this paper. Therefore, I am borrowing

a definition from James Chen, who states that “Poverty is a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living.

Poverty means that the income level from employment is so low that basic human needs can't be met.” I feel that this definition allows for nuance in the way that the same income can have different standards of living based on the area the individual is living in, while the threshold numbers from the United States Census and the United States Department of Health and Human Services do not show this themselves and only act as a national cutoff. However, because of the nature of this definition, the number of Americans living in this state is difficult to judge. While 78 percent of American workers are “living paycheck-to-paycheck” (Friedman), this does not necessarily mean that they are struggling to meet essential needs, only struggling to meet their standard of living. Therefore, I cannot give an accurate number that would satisfy this requirement based on my research.

The relationship between an individual's trust in government and their participation in politics is somewhat debated. It may be easy to assume that if an individual does not trust their government, they are less likely to participate in politics. However, research does not seem to support this, and it is unclear if there is any connection. Some studies show that those who have high levels of trust and low levels of trust do not have different rates when it comes to voting, but those with high levels of trust participate in politics through other methods at higher rates (Levi and Stoker, 487). One explanation for this may come from political efficacy being the defining characteristic, not trust itself. Political efficacy, or the belief that a vote can influence political systems, seems to be independent from the trust in the government to do the right thing, and those with low trust may still vote if they have high political efficacy (Levi and Stoker, 488). It has also been generally shown that higher political efficacy correlates with higher political

participation (Schulz). With these statistics in mind, it can be shown that one of the key components to raising political participation is to raise political efficacy, not necessarily raise the level of trust in the government, and that trust and participation may not have a close link.

Although it has been shown that trust in the government is generally low, those living in poverty may trust the government even less than the general population. Only 13 percent of those with an income below \$30,000 per year have high trust in the government (Raine and Perrin). Despite some low-income citizens relying on welfare, this demographic has lower trust in the government. This relationship may itself even be related to why low-income citizens have low trust in the government. For example, if assistance was denied to someone who needed assistance but was above the threshold, this could lead to lower trust in the government to provide aid to others who need it. Individuals with low trust also have lower trust in other citizens to “Do what they can to help those in need” as well as other related issues than those with high trust in the government (Raine and Perrin), which could lead to having lower trust in the government as well. The relationship between low-income status and trust could have unclear political ramifications itself.

The relationship between participation in politics and poverty is shown to be very strongly connected. The relationship between income and political beliefs are fairly widely studied, and with that comes studies of the participation in politics by income. Overall, most studies agree that those living in poverty have far lower participation in politics than those who are not. In the 2012 election, 61.8 percent of the general population voted (Census) while only 47 percent of low-income citizens did (Weeks). While this is only indicative of voting habits, it can be generally assumed that voting is the most common method of political participation, so if only 47 percent of low-income citizens voted in the 2012 election, this can be used as a benchmark for

overall lower rates of participation. Additionally, in the 2010 midterms, 41.8 percent of the general population voted (Stewart), while only 25 percent of low-income citizens voted (Weeks). While the gap here is similar to that of the general election, it is a striking example of low participation from low-income citizens. Only a quarter of the demographic had their opinions heard in the midterms, and since the demographic is a minority of the population, it is likely that these opinions were drowned out. In addition to voting, only two percent of low-income individuals participate in political campaigns (Weeks). The reasons for this are likely that low-income citizens cannot afford to donate to political campaigns, and therefore they are not sought after to participate, since in the eyes of those running the campaigns, they are not contributing. Therefore, the easiest way for low-income citizens to participate is to vote, and as shown, these citizens vote at lower rates than the general population.

As shown through these statistics, income levels, trust, and political participation intersect in a troubling way. Those living in poverty have low levels of trust and low rates of participation. However, trust and participation are not strongly correlated without political efficacy, so it can be assumed that those living in poverty also feel as though their votes do not influence outcomes, which is somewhat supported by research (Schulz, 4). This does not seem to fully explain the differences in levels of participation, however, because research does not show that it is a major factor. This means there is a factor not being taken into account in this relationship.

The relationship between trust in government, political participation, and poverty results in exposing a flaw in the political system as it stands. Those living in poverty often rely on government assistance such as Medicaid and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) among others, but as I have shown, the same populations have low trust in the

government when it comes to having their interests in mind while being vulnerable to the decisions the government makes. These populations are also less likely to vote due to a combination of voter suppression and low perceptions of political efficacy. Despite being vulnerable to decisions made on whether to fund or defund government programs made to benefit impoverished citizens, these citizens may be unable to vote or see no use in voting. The opinions on those that need the programs are not being heard because the United States political system is not made with impoverished people in mind. The system both historically and currently allows for voter suppression through multiple means as well as relying on majority opinion, which makes minority populations and their opinions less likely to have their needs met. As shown previously, impoverished populations are also less likely to participate in other political activities such as participating in campaigns, often because of campaigns preferring upper- or middle-class participants.

Under the philosophical idea of “tyranny of the majority,” the majority of voters vote in their best interest, either without consideration of minorities or actively at the expense of minority interests. Through the variables I have discussed here, I think it is fair to say that the majority in the socioeconomic class structure has the ability to overtake impoverished populations within their communities. However, programs such as SNAP do exist and do have funding, so in America it is perhaps not a total tyranny. My assumption is that this has to do with the polarized political system we currently live in, where political parties are couched in virtue signaling. However, I think with higher rates of participation with upper- or middle-class voters, politicians are more likely to respond to the wants and needs of these constituents rather than the low-income constituents.

One solution to increase political participation in low-income populations is to increase political efficacy in these populations. If low-income voters feel as though their votes and collective action matter and can make a difference, there is more incentive to participate. For those living in poverty that do not receive government assistance, it is also important to show how political participation benefits them. If given incentive to participate in political activities, I believe these communities will participate more.

The biggest solution that I believe needs addressed is voter suppression. If voters that want to vote and have high levels of political efficacy are unable to vote, their participation rates will be low. Those living in poverty are often unable to contribute monetarily to campaigns and, as previously mentioned, are not contacted to participate in campaigns, so those methods of participation are not viable. While some may wish to participate in protests, they may be concerned about job security or be unable to get to protests, creating issues there. They may be unable to contact politicians due to not having reliable access to a phone or computer, or they may feel uncomfortable with contacting a politician if they do not feel confident due to less education. Therefore, voting is the most accessible form of participation, but with voter suppression, casting ballots is much more difficult. This keeps voter turnout low despite having voters that would want to vote if they had the ability. Voter suppression can come from many sources, such as voter ID laws, requiring registration well in advance of an election, voter roll purges, felony disenfranchisement, and gerrymandering (Rafei). Some of these can disproportionately affect low-income citizens. Photo IDs are not free, and at times are expensive, so low-income citizens may not be able to afford a photo ID. It may also be difficult to access methods of registration for voting in advance of the election for those without reliable transportation. Since felons can have more difficulty finding a job, they are more likely to be

living in poverty (Rabuy and Kopf), as well as low-income citizens being more likely to be incarcerated (Matthews), it is clear that felony disenfranchisement disproportionately affects low-income voters. Finally, a form of voter suppression can come even from the hours that the polls are open. If the polls are only open for working hours, low-income citizens may not be able to vote, because they may work in jobs where they are not given time off to vote and likely cannot afford to miss work to vote. The amount of time spent waiting at the polls goes hand-in-hand with this, because low-income citizens may be unable to wait in long lines to vote for the same reasons (Weeks).

One of my biggest issues in researching this topic is in defining poverty. Since so many sources use numerical data for poverty levels, it is difficult to judge the impact of phenomena for those who do not fall under the federally defined poverty threshold but are still struggling. A family in an area with a low cost of living may not struggle if they are a few thousand over the threshold, but a family in an area with a higher cost of living may struggle to put food on the table, so for the purposes of studying political activity, I think a numerical identifier does not accurately capture lived experiences. However, it does make research more difficult, and it is a little more unclear how well the results can be generalized. Another issue I faced was a lack of data for political behavior broken down by income. A large portion of data for voting was broken down by gender and race, and occasionally by generation as well, but there was surprisingly little data for income levels.

As shown in this paper, the relationship between trust in government and political participation is shown to be uncertain or only loosely connected. However, poverty is linked to both low trust in government and low rates of political participation. Due to these links, I think it would be helpful to see further studies on the political behaviors of low-income citizens. I also

think that research such as polling surveys after voting should include income in the same way that they often include gender and race. This would give a clearer picture of the opinions of specifically low-income voters that do feel enfranchised enough to vote and have the ability to vote and therefore allow for further research questions to arise.

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