

First proposed in 1966 and named after [Columbia University](#) sociologists Richard Andrew Cloward and his wife [Frances Fox Piven](#) (both longtime members of the [Democratic Socialists of America](#), where Piven today is an honorary chair), the "Cloward-Piven Strategy" seeks to hasten the fall of capitalism by overloading the government bureaucracy with a flood of impossible demands, thus pushing society into crisis and economic collapse.

Inspired by the August 1965 riots in the black district of Watts in Los Angeles (which erupted after police had used batons to subdue a black man suspected of drunk driving), Cloward and Piven published an article titled "[The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty](#)" in the May 2, 1966 issue of [The Nation](#). Following its publication, *The Nation* sold an unprecedented 30,000 reprints. Activists were abuzz over the so-called "crisis strategy" or "Cloward-Piven Strategy," as it came to be called. Many were eager to put it into effect.

In their 1966 article, Cloward and Piven charged that the ruling classes used welfare to weaken the poor; that by providing a social safety net, the rich doused the fires of rebellion. Poor people can advance only when "the rest of society is afraid of them," Cloward told [The New York Times](#) on September 27, 1970. Rather than placating the poor with government hand-outs, wrote Cloward and Piven, activists should work to sabotage and destroy the welfare system; the collapse of the welfare state would ignite a political and financial crisis that would rock the nation; poor people would rise in revolt; only then would "the rest of society" accept their demands.

The key to sparking this rebellion would be to expose the inadequacy of the welfare state. Cloward-Piven's early promoters cited radical organizer [Saul Alinsky](#) as their inspiration. "Make the enemy live up to their (sic) own book of rules," Alinsky wrote in his 1971 book *Rules for Radicals*. When pressed to honor every word of every law and statute, every Judaeo-Christian moral tenet, and every implicit promise of the liberal social contract, human agencies inevitably fall short. The system's failure to "live up" to its rule book can then be used to discredit it altogether, and to replace the capitalist "rule book" with a socialist one.

The authors noted that the number of Americans subsisting on welfare -- about 8 million, at the time -- probably represented less than half the number who were technically eligible for full benefits. They proposed a "massive drive to recruit the poor *onto* the welfare rolls." Cloward and Piven calculated that persuading even a fraction of potential welfare recipients to demand their entitlements would bankrupt the system. The result, they predicted, would be "a profound financial and political crisis" that would unleash "powerful forces ... for major economic reform at the national level."

Their article called for "cadres of aggressive organizers" to use "demonstrations to create a climate of militancy." Intimidated by threats of black violence, politicians would appeal to the federal government for help. Carefully orchestrated media campaigns, carried out by friendly, leftwing journalists, would float the idea of "a federal program of income redistribution," in the form of a guaranteed living income for all -- working and non-working people alike. Local officials would clutch at this idea like drowning men to a lifeline. They would apply pressure on Washington to implement it. With every major city erupting into chaos, Washington would have to act.

This was an example of what are commonly called Trojan Horse movements -- mass movements whose outward purpose seems to be providing material help to the downtrodden, but whose real objective is to draft poor people into service as revolutionary foot soldiers; to mobilize poor people *en masse* to overwhelm government agencies with a flood of demands beyond the capacity of those agencies to meet. The flood of demands was calculated to break the budget, jam the bureaucratic gears into gridlock, and bring the system crashing down. Fear, turmoil, violence and economic collapse would accompany such a breakdown -- providing perfect conditions for fostering radical change. That was the theory.

Cloward and Piven recruited a militant black organizer named George Wiley to lead their new movement. The three met in January 1966, at a radical organizers' meeting in Syracuse, New York called the "Poor People's War Council on Poverty." Wiley listened to the Cloward-Piven plan with interest. That same month, he launched his own activist group, the Poverty Rights Action Center, headquartered in Washington DC. In a calculated show of militancy, he sported dashikis, jeans, battered shoes, and a newly grown Afro. Regarding the Cloward-Piven strategy, Wiley told one audience:

"[A] a lot of us have been hampered in our thinking about the potential here by our own middle-class backgrounds -- and I think most activists basically come out of middle-class backgrounds -- and were oriented toward people having to work, and that we have to get as many people as possible off the welfare rolls.... [However] I think that this [Cloward-Piven] strategy is going to catch on and be very important in the time ahead."

After a series of mass marches and rallies by welfare recipients in June 1966, Wiley declared "the birth of a movement" -- the Welfare Rights Movement.

Cloward and Piven publicly outlined their strategy at the Second

Annual [Socialist Scholars Conference](#), held in September 1966 at New York City's Hotel Commodore. To read an eyewitness account of their presentation, [click here](#).

In the summer of 1967, Ralph Wiley founded the [National Welfare Rights Organization](#) (NWRO). His tactics closely followed the recommendations set out in Cloward and Piven's article. His followers invaded welfare offices across the United States -- often violently -- bullying social workers and loudly demanding every penny to which the law "entitled" them. By 1969, NWRO claimed a dues-paying membership of 22,500 families, with 523 chapters across the nation.

Regarding Wiley's tactics, *The New York Times* commented on September 27, 1970, "There have been sit-ins in legislative chambers, including a United States Senate committee hearing, mass demonstrations of several thousand welfare recipients, school boycotts, picket lines, mounted police, tear gas, arrests - and, on occasion, rock-throwing, smashed glass doors, overturned desks, scattered papers and ripped-out phones."

These methods proved effective. "The flooding succeeded beyond Wiley's wildest dreams," wrote Sol Stern in the *City Journal*. "From 1965 to 1974, the number of households on welfare soared from 4.3 million to 10.8 million, despite mostly flush economic times. By the early 1970s, one person was on the welfare rolls in New York City for every two working in the city's private economy."

The National Welfare Rights Organization pushed for a "guaranteed living income," as prescribed by Cloward and Piven, which it defined, in 1968, as \$5,500 per year for every American family with four children. The following year the NWRO raised its demand to \$6,500. Though Wiley never made headway with his demand for a living income, the tens of billions of dollars in welfare entitlements that he and his followers managed to squeeze from state and local governments came very close to sinking the economy, just as Cloward and Piven had predicted.

In their 1966 article, Cloward and Piven had given special attention to New York City, whose masses of urban poor, leftist intelligentsia and free-spending politicians rendered it uniquely vulnerable to the strategy they proposed. At the time, NYC welfare agencies were paying about \$20 million per year in "special grants." Cloward and Piven estimated that they could "multiply these expenditures tenfold or more," draining an additional \$180 million annually from the city coffers.

New York City's arch-liberal mayor John Lindsay, newly elected in November

1966, capitulated to Wiley's every demand. An appeaser by nature, Lindsay sought to calm racial tensions by taking "walking tours" through Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, and other troubled areas of the city. This made for good photo-ops, but failed to mollify Wiley's cadres and the masses they mobilized, who wanted cash. "The violence of the [welfare rights] movement was frightening," recalls Lindsay budget aid Charles Morris. Black militants laid siege to City Hall, bearing signs saying "No Money, No Peace."

Lindsay answered these provocations with ever-more-generous programs of appeasement in the form of welfare dollars. New York's welfare rolls had been growing by 12% per year already before Lindsay took office. The rate jumped to 50% annually in 1966. During Lindsay's first term of office, welfare spending in New York City more than doubled, from \$400 million to \$1 billion annually. Outlays for the poor consumed 28% of the city's budget by 1970. "By the early 1970s, one person was on the welfare rolls in New York City for every two working in the city's private economy," Sol Stern wrote in the *City Journal*.

As a direct result of its massive welfare spending, New York City was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1975. The entire state of New York nearly went down with it. The Cloward-Piven strategy had proved its effectiveness.

Crucial to Wiley's success was the cooperation of radical sympathizers inside the federal government, who supplied Wiley's movement with grants, training, and logistical assistance, channeled through federal War on Poverty programs such as VISTA's.

The Cloward-Piven strategy depended on surprise. Once society recovered from the initial shock, the backlash began. New York's welfare crisis horrified America, giving rise to a reform movement which culminated in "the end of welfare as we know it" -- the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which imposed time limits on federal welfare, along with strict eligibility and work requirements.

Most Americans to this day have never heard of Cloward and Piven. But New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attempted to expose them in the late 1990s. As his drive for welfare reform gained momentum, Giuliani accused the militant scholars by name, citing their 1966 manifesto as evidence that they had engaged in deliberate economic sabotage. "This wasn't an accident," Giuliani charged in a July 20, 1998 speech. "It wasn't an atmospheric thing, it wasn't supernatural. This is the result of policies and programs designed to have the maximum number of people get on welfare."

In a January 2011 article in the *Nation* magazine, Frances Fox Piven would

reflect upon the elements that had helped make the welfare-rights movement successful in the 1960s:

"[B]efore people can mobilize for collective action, they have to develop a proud and angry identity and a set of claims that go with that identity. They have to go from being hurt and ashamed to being angry and indignant. Welfare moms in the 1960s did this by naming themselves 'mothers' instead of 'recipients,'"

In the same 2011 article, Piven noted that "protesters need targets, preferably local and accessible ones capable of making some kind of response to angry demands."

After the welfare-rights movement had run its course by the mid-1970s, Cloward and Piven never again revealed their intentions as candidly as they had in their 1966 article. Even so, their activism in subsequent years continued to rely on the tactic of overloading the system. When the public caught on to their welfare scheme, Cloward and Piven simply moved on, applying pressure to other sectors of the bureaucracy, wherever they detected weakness.

In 1982, partisans of the Cloward-Piven strategy founded a new "Voting Rights Movement," which purported to take up the unfinished work of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Cloward and Piven despised America's electoral system every bit as much as they despised its welfare system, and for much the same reason. They believed that welfare checks and voting rights were mere bones tossed to the poor to keep them docile. The poor did not need welfare checks and ballots, they argued. The poor needed revolution.

In their 1977 book, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, Cloward and Piven asserted that the "electoral process" actually served the interests of the ruling classes, providing a safety valve to drain away the anger of the poor. The authors wrote that "as long as lower-class groups abided by the norms governing the electoral-representative system, they would have little influence.... [I]t is usually when unrest among the lower classes breaks out of the confines of electoral procedures that the poor may have some influence," as when poor people engage in "strikes," "riots," "crime," "incendiarism," "massive school truancy," "worker absenteeism," "rent defaults," and other forms of "mass defiance" and "institutional disruption."

In 1981, Cloward and Piven wrote that poor people lose power "when leaders try to turn movements into electoral organizations." That is because the "capability of the poor" to effect change lies "in the vulnerability of

societal institutions to disruption, and not in the susceptibility of these institutions to transformation through the votes of the poor."

To advance their radical agenda, Cloward and Piven focused more intently on transforming the Democratic Party rather than the Republican Party. Because Democrats professed to represent the lower classes, many poor people believed they could get what they wanted by voting Democrat. Thus their energies would be channeled into useless "voter activity," rather than strikes, riots, "incendiarism" and the like.

Ten years earlier, when Cloward and Piven determined that the welfare state was acting as a safety valve for the establishment, they resolved to destroy the welfare state. The method of destruction they chose was drawn from the teachings of Saul Alinsky: "Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules." And so they did, challenging the welfare state to pay out every penny to every person theoretically entitled to it. Alinsky called this sort of tactic "mass jujitsu" – using "the strength of the enemy against itself. Now Cloward and Piven concluded that the Democratic Party was also acting as a safety valve for the establishment. Thus they would try to force Democrats to "live up to their own book of rules" -- i.e., if the Democrats say they represent the poor, let them prove it.

Cloward and Piven presented their plan in a December 1982 article titled, "A Movement Strategy to Transform the Democratic Party," published in the left-wing journal *Social Policy*. They sought to do to the voting system what they had previously done to the welfare system. They would flood the polls with millions of new voters, drawn from the angry ranks of the underclass, all belligerent and demanding their voting rights. The result would be a catastrophic disruption of America's electoral system, the authors predicted.

Cloward and Piven hoped that the flood of new voters would provoke a backlash from Democrats and Republicans alike, who would join forces to disenfranchise the unruly hordes, using such expedients as purging invalid voters from the rolls, imposing cumbersome registration procedures, stiffening residency requirements, and so forth. This voter-suppression campaign would spark "a political firestorm over democratic rights," they wrote. Voting-rights activists would descend on America's election boards and polling stations much as George Wiley's welfare warriors had flooded social-services offices. Wrote Cloward and Piven:

"By staging rallies, demonstrations, and sit-ins ... over every new restriction on registration procedures, a protest movement can dramatize the conflict.... Through conflict, the registration movement will convert registering and voting into meaningful acts of collective protest."

The expected conflict would also expose the hypocrisy of the Democratic Party, which would be "disrupted and transformed," the authors predicted. A new party would rise from the ashes of the old. Outwardly, it would preserve the forms and symbols of the old Democratic Party, but the new Democrats would be genuine partisans of the poor, dedicated to class struggle. This was the radical vision driving the Voting Rights Movement.

[ACORN](#) spearheaded this "voting rights" movement, which was led by veterans of George Wiley's welfare rights crusade. Also key to the movement were [Project Vote](#) and [Human SERVE](#), both founded in 1982. Project Vote is an ACORN front group, launched by former NWRO organizer and ACORN co-founder Zach Polett. Human SERVE was founded by Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, along with a former NWRO organizer named Hulbert James.

All three of these organizations -- ACORN, Project Vote and Human SERVE -- set to work lobbying energetically for the so-called Motor-Voter law, which President [Bill Clinton](#) ultimately signed in 1993. At the White House signing ceremony for this bill, both Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven were in attendance. The new law eliminated many controls on voter fraud, making it easy for voters to register but difficult to determine the validity of new registrations. Under the new law, states were required to provide opportunities for voter registration to any person who showed up at a government office to renew a driver's license or to apply for welfare or unemployment benefits. "Examiners were under orders not to ask anyone for identification or proof of citizenship," notes *Wall Street Journal* columnist John Fund in his book, *Stealing Elections*. "States had to permit mailing voter registrations, which allowed anyone to register without any personal contact with a registrar or election officials. Finally, states were limited in pruning 'deadwood' -- people who had died, moved, or been convicted of crimes -- from their rolls.

The Motor-Voter bill did indeed cause the voter rolls to be swamped with invalid registrations signed in the name of deceased, ineligible or non-existent people -- thus opening the door to the unprecedented levels of voter fraud and "voter disenfranchisement" claims that followed in subsequent elections during the 1990s, and culminating in the Florida recount crisis in the 2000 presidential election. On the eve of the 2000 election, in Indiana alone, state officials discovered that one in five registered voters were duplicates, deceased, or otherwise invalid.

The cloud of confusion hanging over elections serves leftist agitators well. "President Bush came to office without a clear mandate," the leftwing billionaire [George Soros](#) declared. "He was elected president by a single vote

on the Supreme Court." Once again, the "flood-the-rolls" strategy had done its work. Cloward, Piven, and their disciples had introduced a level of fear, tension, and foreboding to U.S. elections previously encountered mainly in Third World countries.

In January 2010, journalist John Fund [reported](#) that Congressman [Barney Frank](#) and U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer were preparing to unveil legislation calling for "universal voter registration," whereby any person whose name was on any federal roll at all -- be it a list of welfare recipients, food stamp recipients, unemployment compensation recipients, licensed drivers, convicted felons, property owners, etc. -- would automatically be registered to vote in political elections. Without corresponding identity-verification measures at polling places, such a law would vastly expand the pool of eligible voters, thereby multiplying the opportunities for fraudulent voters to cast ballots under other people's names.

Both the Living Wage and Voting Rights movements depend heavily on financial support from [George Soros's Open Society Institute](#) and his "[Shadow Party](#)," through whose support the Cloward-Piven strategy continues to provide a blueprint for some of the Left's most ambitious campaigns to overload, and cause the collapse of, various American institutions. Leftists such as [Barack Obama](#) euphemistically refer to this collapse as a "[fundamental transformation](#)," on the theory that society can only be improved by destroying the deeply flawed existing order and replacing it with what they view as a better alternative.

[Click here](#) to read about more recent efforts by the Left to overload the American system.

Major Resource: The Shadow Party, by David Horowitz and Richard Poe (Nashville, TN: Nelson Current, 2006), pp, 106-128.