

# Cloward–Piven strategy

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The **Cloward–Piven strategy** is a political strategy outlined in 1966 by American sociologists and political activists Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven that called for overloading the U.S. public welfare system in order to precipitate a crisis that would lead to a replacement of the welfare system with a national system of "a guaranteed annual income and thus an end to poverty". Cloward and Piven were a married couple who were both professors at the Columbia University School of Social Work. The strategy was formulated in a May 1966 article in the liberal<sup>[1]</sup> magazine *The Nation* titled "The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty".<sup>[2]</sup>

The two stated that many Americans who were eligible for welfare were not receiving benefits, and that a welfare enrollment drive would strain local budgets, precipitating a crisis at the state and local levels that would be a wake-up call for the federal government, particularly the Democratic Party. There would also be side consequences of this strategy, according to Cloward and Piven. These would include: easing the plight of the poor in the short-term (through their participation in the welfare system); shoring up support for the national Democratic Party-then splintered by pluralistic interests (through its cultivation of poor and minority constituencies by implementing a national "solution" to poverty); and relieving local governments of the financially and politically onerous burdens of public welfare (through a national "solution" to poverty).

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## The strategy

Cloward and Piven's article is focused on forcing the Democratic Party, which in 1966 controlled the presidency and both houses of the United States Congress, to take federal action to help the poor. They stated that full enrollment of those eligible for welfare "would produce bureaucratic disruption in welfare agencies and fiscal disruption in local and state governments" that would "deepen existing divisions among elements in the big-city Democratic coalition: the remaining white middle class, the working-class ethnic groups and the growing minority poor. To avoid a further weakening of that historic coalition, a national Democratic administration would be constrained to advance a federal solution to poverty that would override local welfare failures, local class and racial conflicts and local revenue dilemmas."<sup>[3]</sup> They wrote:

“ The ultimate objective of this strategy—to wipe out poverty by establishing a guaranteed annual income—will be questioned by some. Because the ideal of individual social and economic mobility has deep roots, even activists seem reluctant to call for national programs to eliminate poverty by the outright redistribution of income.<sup>[3]</sup> ”

Michael Reisch and Janice Andrews wrote that Cloward and Piven "proposed to create a crisis in the current welfare system – by exploiting the gap between welfare law and practice – that would ultimately bring about its collapse and replace it with a system of guaranteed annual income. They hoped to accomplish this end by informing the poor of their rights to welfare assistance, encouraging them to apply for benefits and, in effect, overloading an already overburdened bureaucracy."<sup>[4]</sup>

### Focus on Democrats

The authors pinned their hopes on creating disruption within the Democratic Party. "Conservative Republicans are always ready to declaim the evils of public welfare, and they would probably be the first to raise a hue and cry. But deeper and politically more telling conflicts would take place within the Democratic coalition," they

wrote. "Whites – both working class ethnic groups and many in the middle class – would be aroused against the ghetto poor, while liberal groups, which until recently have been comforted by the notion that the poor are few... would probably support the movement. Group conflict, spelling political crisis for the local party apparatus, would thus become acute as welfare rolls mounted and the strains on local budgets became more severe."<sup>[5]</sup>

## Reception and criticism

Howard Phillips, chairman of The Conservative Caucus, was quoted in 1982 as saying that the strategy could be effective because "Great Society programs had created a vast army of full-time liberal activists whose salaries are paid from the taxes of conservative working people."<sup>[6]</sup>

Liberal commentator Michael Tomasky, writing about the strategy in the 1990s and again in 2011, called it "wrongheaded and self-defeating", writing: "It apparently didn't occur to [Cloward and Piven] that the system would just regard rabble-rousing black people as a phenomenon to be ignored or quashed."<sup>[7]</sup>

## Impact of the strategy

In papers published in 1971 and 1977, Cloward and Piven argued that mass unrest in the United States, especially between 1964 and 1969, did lead to a massive expansion of welfare rolls, though not to the guaranteed-income program that they had hoped for.<sup>[8]</sup> Political scientist Robert Albritton disagreed, writing in 1979 that the data did not support this thesis; he offered an alternative explanation for the rise in welfare caseloads.

In his 2006 book *Winning the Race*, political commentator John McWhorter attributed the rise in the welfare state after the 1960s to the Cloward–Piven strategy, but wrote about it negatively, stating that the strategy "created generations of black people for whom working for a living is an abstraction."<sup>[9]</sup>

According to historian Robert E. Weir in 2007, "Although the strategy helped to boost recipient numbers between 1966 and 1975, the revolution its proponents envisioned never transpired."<sup>[10]</sup>

Some commentators have blamed the Cloward–Piven strategy for the near-bankruptcy of New York City in 1975.<sup>[11][12]</sup>

Conservative commentator Glenn Beck referred to the Cloward-Piven Strategy often on his Fox News television show, *Glenn Beck*, during its run from 2009 to 2011, reiterating his opinion that it had helped to inspire President Barack Obama's economic policy. On February 18, 2010, for example, Beck said, "you've got total destruction of wealth coming ... It's the final phase of the Cloward-Piven strategy, which is collapse the system."<sup>[13]</sup>

Richard Kim, writing in 2010 in *The Nation* (in which the original essay appeared), called such assertions "a reactionary paranoid fantasy ..." but says that "the left's gut reaction upon hearing of it--to laugh it off as a Scooby-Doo comic mystery--does nothing to blunt its appeal or limit its impact."<sup>[14]</sup> *The Nation* later stated that Beck blames the "Cloward-Piven Strategy" for "the financial crisis of 2008, healthcare reform, Obama's election and massive voter fraud" and has resulted in the posting of much violent and threatening rhetoric by users on Beck's website, including death threats against Frances Fox Piven.<sup>[15]</sup> For her part, Piven vigorously continues to defend the original idea, calling its conservative interpretation "lunatic".<sup>[16]</sup>

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