

The Cloward-Piven Strategy

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First proposed in 1966 and named after [Columbia University](#) sociologists Richard Andrew Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, 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 an African American 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 1989 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. In the summer of 1967, 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," writes Sol Stern in the *City Journal*. "From 1965 to 1974, the number of single-parent 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."

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.

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. Both Cloward and Piven attended the White House signing of the bill as guests of [President Clinton](#).

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 1997 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."

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. Like [ACORN](#), the organization that spear-headed this campaign, the new "voting rights" movement was led by veterans of George Wiley's welfare rights crusade. Its flagship organizations 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 A. 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 Bill Clinton ultimately signed in 1993. The Motor-Voter bill is largely responsible for swamping the voter rolls with "dead wood" -- 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.

The new "voting rights" coalition combines mass voter registration drives -- typically featuring high levels of fraud -- with systematic intimidation of election officials in the form of frivolous lawsuits, unfounded charges of "racism" and "disenfranchisement," and "direct action" (street protests, violent or otherwise). Just as they swamped America's welfare offices in the 1960s, Cloward-Piven devotees now seek to overwhelm the nation's understaffed and poorly policed electoral system. Their tactics set the stage for the Florida recount crisis of 2000, and have introduced a level of fear, tension and foreboding to U.S. elections heretofore encountered mainly in Third World countries.

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.