

# Political Participation of the Urban Poor

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*Although exploring the political participation of the poor is of paramount significance in the current social policy and welfare environment, the dearth of quantitative, in-depth analysis speaks to the difficulty of conducting research revolving around the political participation of impoverished citizens. In an attempt to gain a fuller understanding of political participation among the urban poor, we investigated variations in economic hardship, political attitudes, and interactions with government agents of a sample of 462 low-income men and women in one of the poorest congressional districts in the country. By working from a theoretical perspective that allowed us to understand better how urban poverty affects the willingness to participate in the political system, we uncovered important nuances and differences in factors that affected political behavior among citizens living in poverty. Our data revealed two central findings: First, material resources and the demographic attributes usually associated with a propensity to participate politically drove political activism even among urban poor respondents. Second, and more importantly, severe economic hardship, as well as formative contact with government agents whom citizens living in urban poverty routinely face, served as significant experiences that bolstered the willingness to participate in the political system. Ultimately, we conclude that the decision to participate in the political system cannot be divorced from the very specific manner in which citizens encounter government.*

Recent U.S. census data revealed that 36.5 million Americans, 13.7% of the total United States population, live in poverty. A staggering 44.3% of female-headed families with children are poor and, among children under eighteen, 20.5% (14.5 million children) live at or below the poverty level (Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives 1998: H1298). In the last twenty years, urban poverty has increased by 27.3% (H1310). Citizens living in poverty are, perhaps, more directly affected by government policies than are members of other socioeconomic strata. Impoverished citizens' daily circumstances and well being tend to be linked to government programs in areas ranging from housing and food stamps, to childcare and health care. Despite their direct connection with government policy, citizens living in poverty are substantially less likely to vote or engage in other traditional political activities (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; see also Soss 1999). This poses a serious concern, as empirical studies consistently find that individuals best represent their own interests. Even the "secondary advocacy" of organizations and groups that represent broad public interests of citizens with few political resources often fails to substitute for direct political participation (Erikson and Wright 1986; Piven and Cloward 1989; Schlozman and Verba 1979; Verba, et al. 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Some scholars associate greater political participation from the poor, for instance, with higher levels of welfare spending (Hill and Leighley 1992; Piven and Cloward 1989). Conversely, Piven and Cloward (1997:267) attribute "two decades of relative quiescence by the poor and working class" to one of the key reasons Congress managed to pass the 1996

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welfare reform legislation that imposes strict time limits and work requirements on public assistance recipients.<sup>1</sup>

While political participation of citizens living in poverty appears to be essential to fair representation within the political system, most political participation literature indicates that those living in poverty lack the myriad material and social resources that motivate participation (Cohen and Dawson 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Although such models provide broad and compelling explanations for the lower levels of participation among the general population of the poor, these analyses often do not explain variations in levels of participation *within* the population of poor citizens, a minority of whom *do* participate. Our study attempts to help fill this void in the literature by offering an in-depth examination of the political behavior of citizens living in urban poverty. Ultimately, we argue that severe economic hardship, as well as formative contact with government agents whom citizens living in urban poverty routinely face, serve as significant experiences that bolster the willingness to participate in the political system.

### Explaining Lower Levels of Political Participation Among the Poor

Analyses that explain low levels of political participation among poor citizens take many shapes. Conservatives argue that receiving government assistance fosters dependency and decreases personal motivation—traits that are not likely to lead to the entrepreneurial spirit needed to undertake acts of political participation (Mead 1997). Others suggest that government assistance serves as a lifeline for many poor citizens and thus, suppresses any anger or resentment that might inspire political participation (Edelman 1964). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) landmark Citizen Participation Study, however, offers perhaps the most thorough and compelling explanation for citizen political engagement. Using data gathered from a large national sample, they developed a "Civic Voluntarism Model" to explain individual political participation. The model takes into account not only class and status hierarchies that generally define socioeconomic status, but also rational choice theories that specify how and why individuals decide to participate in politics. The authors suggest that low-income citizens often do not have the financial resources, free time, civic skills, or level of engagement necessary to participate effectively or be recruited for political action by public officials, candidates, and political activists (see also Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). All political activities require an input of either time or money, but certain activities, such as contacting a public official or working on a campaign, also require certain "civic skills" that can be acquired in various non-political settings, but when applied to politics, can allow for more meaningful and effective participation. Because impoverished citizens are "so poorly endowed with these participatory factors," they have become "a very inactive group" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:398; see also Gant and Lyons 1993). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady do note that individuals are more likely to participate in the political system when they are motivated by personal needs, such as jobs, housing, health care, and neighborhood crime. Ultimately, though, resources are more indicative of patterns of political participation than are the issues around which citizens might participate. This conclusion has become the touch point for almost all investigations of political participation.

1. This does not, necessarily, suggest that higher levels of political participation by low-income citizens would have prevented welfare reform legislation. According to a 1996 CBS News poll, 65% of Americans with annual incomes of less than \$15,000 favored limiting a person's lifetime eligibility for welfare to a maximum of five years (Roper Center for Public Opinion 1998). In 1997, after the welfare reform legislation passed, 61% of Americans with annual incomes below \$15,000 still supported such limits (ICR Research Survey Group 1997). In terms of work requirements, Farkas, et al. (1996:19) found that 77% of welfare recipients (in a small focus group) believed that job training was essential to welfare reform and that the cornerstone of such efforts should be moving from welfare to work. Thus, more political participation by the poor might have affected the implementation, if not the goals, of the 1996 welfare reform.

In terms of understanding political participation among the poor, however, the conclusion that the poor lack politically relevant resources is limited in two ways. First, although the Citizen Participation Study includes “means-tested benefits” and “economic hardship” (the degree to which respondents struggle to sustain financial stability) variables, it focuses primarily on comparing levels of political activism between those who have resources and those who do not. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995:220) define “advantaged citizens” as those with at least some college education and annual family incomes exceeding \$50,000; the “disadvantaged” have no college education and annual family incomes below \$20,000. With such a broad category of disadvantaged citizens, the model cannot explain participatory differences *within* a population endowed with few resources. In fact, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady even note that when low-income citizens, the majority of whom suffer from a scarcity of political resources, do engage in political activities, they are often just as active as wealthier participants.

The second limitation of the Citizen Participation Study is that it does not assess the impact of interaction with government agents, interactions that are particularly relevant for citizens living in poverty (Soss 1999). Scholars who study the effects of political alienation and political learning suggest that citizens’ attitudes and orientations toward government and political participation cannot be divorced from their experiences with policies that affect their lives (Katz, et al. 1975; Pateman 1970; Schneider and Ingram 1993, 1997; Soss 1999). More specifically, a number of studies suggest that citizen interaction with “street-level” bureaucrats, or low-level government officials, is critically important in the formation of political attitudes (Coulter 1988; Lipsky 1980; Sharp 1980, 1984). Recently, Soss (1999) found that AFDC recipients tend to hold low levels of external political efficacy, at least in part, because they form their attitudes and impressions about the overall political system based on their experiences with navigating the welfare system and interacting with social service workers. He explains:

When clients think about government, their [welfare] program experiences provide the handiest and most reliable points of reference. When they think about whether their own political demands can be effective, civics book images of democracy pale next to the vivid impressions of how welfare agencies respond to clients (376).

This conclusion effectively begins to explore how perceptions and interactions with specific aspects of government may affect welfare recipients’ political participation.

In this article, we work from a theoretical perspective that allows us to combine the insights of recent research regarding both political participation and urban poverty. In order to combat the first limitation of the existing literature, we explore the extent to which traditional demographic and socioeconomic factors may politically mobilize a sample of impoverished citizens. We also assess the manner in which varying degrees of economic hardship affect a sample living in poverty. Because every member of our sample suffered from economic hardship, our examination provides a more in-depth understanding of traditional indicators of political participation within this subgroup.

Following our analysis of the participatory consequences of traditional demographic factors and economic hardship, we turn to the role of political learning. Massey, Gross, and Shibuya (1994) suggest that conditions of poverty in inner cities create living environments of a distinctly harsh character. Specifically, they note that the urban poor live amongst a “concentration of crime, violence, welfare dependency, family disruption, and educational failure” (426; see also Wilson 1991; Massey and Kanaiaupuni 1993). Accordingly, we attempt to uncover the political consequences of frequent interactions with government agents with whom citizens living in high levels of contextual poverty are likely to come into contact. We turn first to interactions with social service workers. While Soss’ (1999) study is certainly a highly instructive first step, it is based on a very small sample (25) of welfare recipients. Furthermore, the study examines only the effects of contact with social service workers. We might speculate that other experiences with government agents also affect an urban poor population’s propensity to participate. Cohen and Dawson (1993:291), for instance, suggest that at the highest

levels of neighborhood poverty, the probability of viewing crime as a serious problem, as well as being a crime victim, increases substantially. Because the probability of citizen contact with police officers rises with rates of contextual poverty, interactions with police officers also merit exploration when attempting to understand the political positioning of those living in poverty. Thus, we explore police contact as a political learning experience because a number of studies have demonstrated that the effects of personal experiences with governmental authorities are based on evaluations of the justice of those experiences (Lind and Tyler 1988; see also Tyler and Folger 1980). By employing quantitative indicators to capture interactions with government agents, we uncover important nuances and differences in factors that affect political behavior *among* citizens living in poverty.

### Research Methods and the Sample

Our research aims to probe more deeply into the lives and experiences of the urban poor to gain a fuller understanding of how severe poverty, as well as the interactions with government associated with a life of poverty, affect men and women's willingness to engage in political activism. We attempted to gather a quantifiable sample of citizens living in urban poverty and employed research methods that would allow us to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of why some members in poor communities participate, while others do not. After all, the lack of an in-depth analysis of political participation among citizens living near the poverty level is exacerbated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of poor citizens *do not* participate. Because the number of poor respondents who engage in acts of political participation tends to be extremely small, broad, national samples often fail to allow for meaningful statistical comparisons within the subgroup of impoverished citizens. As Sniderman (1993:238) notes, national general population samples are ill suited for the study of rare behavior.

Amassing a sample of respondents, however, posed a number of methodological problems (see Appendix A for a specific discussion of the survey methods employed). The lack of quantitative research that focuses specifically on the urban poor speaks to the difficulty of compiling a sample of citizens who live in difficult economic and social circumstances. Ultimately, through a network of workforce development programs in the South Bronx of New York, we surveyed 462 men and women. We conducted interviews using an extended set of open-ended questions with roughly one hundred individuals in our 462-member sample. Table 1, which illustrates the demographics of the sample, reveals that our pool was comprised primarily of individuals who are ordinarily blended into the lowest percentile of income groups living in the United States. Our sample provides the unique opportunity to explore the political behavior of a group of citizens whom empirical studies often overlook.

Before proceeding with our analysis, we must acknowledge two important characteristics of our sample. First, the sample is composed almost entirely of racial and ethnic minorities. A substantial body of literature has documented racial differences in terms of factors that motivate political participation. Some scholars find that race-based cultural beliefs do not always conform to "American" political culture's high regard for participating in the electoral process (see de la Garza and DeSipio 1996). Other research finds that different rates of political participation among citizens of different races may depend on the race of the candidate for electoral office (Tate 1991; see also Bobo and Gilliam 1990). In terms of sample generalizability, this is not especially problematic; recent census data revealed that 64% of the urban poor identify as African American or Latino (Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives 1998:H9). To some extent, therefore, because the majority of the urban poor do come from minority backgrounds, the study of urban poverty, in and of itself, takes into account at least part of the role race may play in influencing attitudes, behaviors, and levels of political engagement.

**Table 1 • Demographics of the South Bronx Urban Poor Sample**

	%
Sex	
Female	74
Male	26
Race	
African American	51
Latino/a	40
White	3
Asian	1
Other	5
Religion	
Catholic	46
Protestant	29
Pentecostal	8
Islamic	2
Other/None	15
Education	
Did not complete high school	51
High school graduate	25
Attended some college	23
4-year college graduate	1
Employment	
Currently on welfare	74
Currently employed	20
Yearly household income (from employment)	
\$0–\$8,000	67
\$8,001–\$17,000	16
\$17,001–\$25,000	10
Over \$25,000	6
Party affiliation	
Democrat	91
Republican	6
Independent/other	4
Mean age of sample	37.7 yrs.
N	462

## Note:

Party Affiliation percentages are based only on the 332 respondents who were registered voters.

The second important characteristic among our respondents is that they may be more politically active and aware than a general sample of those living in poverty in the United States. We drew members of our sample from workforce development programs that emphasize welfare advocacy and political participation. In New York City, the Human Resources Administration requires welfare recipients to report to Work Experience Program assignments. The assignments typically fall into what we deem two categories: workfare assignments and workforce development programs. Workfare positions often involve sanitation and maintenance work. Men and women called to report for these positions are required to work a certain number of hours each week, based on the public assistance cash grant they receive. They are offered no training or education. Workforce development programs, on the other hand, are educationally or vocationally based. A certain number of hours per week are

devoted to training program participants for positions in certain fields; culinary arts, clerical skills, and computer training programs are common. Participants are placed in internships, where they can practice the skills they learn in the classroom. These workforce development programs allow men and women more opportunities to interact with one another, discuss barriers to employment, address issues of welfare reform, and subsequently, acquire politically relevant civic skills.

We stress, however, that respondents' levels of political activism might be higher than those of an overall population of the urban poor *as a result of* participation in workforce development programs and not because of characteristics that might have led men and women to select into these programs. More than 74% of sample respondents were mandated to attend these programs, so there is little selection bias in terms of voluntary versus mandatory participation. Further, we uncovered no statistically significant differences in terms of political activism between the "voluntary" and "mandatory" sub-samples. We also included in the survey instrument, a question about participation in community, civic, political, and religious organizations *apart from* workforce development programs, so as to gauge more accurately respondents' levels of civic skills and community involvement.

In order to measure political participation in our sample, we created two categories of activism: "voters" and "political participants." Voters are those members of the sample who said they were registered to vote, voted in the 1996 presidential election, and could recall the candidate for whom they voted. Political participants are those members of the sample who met the "voter" standard and also engaged in more than one other political act in the preceding three years.<sup>2</sup> "Other political acts" included attending a protest or rally, participating in the boycott of a product, contacting an elected official, and contributing money or time to a political campaign. Table 2 provides a comparison of the participatory habits for members of our sample with both a National Election Study (NES) citizen sample and an NES sub-sample of the urban poor.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, our respondents were less likely than Americans, in general, but more likely than a national sample of the urban poor, to be registered voters. Despite the fact that most members of our sample *could* cast a ballot (74% were registered to vote), only 62% voted in the presidential election; our respondents were less likely than both the overall national sample (77%) and the national sample of the urban poor (66%) to vote in 1996. The explanation for lower levels of voting, but higher levels of registration, most likely results from two basic phenomena: 1) Once welfare reform legislation passed in December 1996, many of the workforce development programs from which we drew our respondents began to include voter registration in the curricula; 2) President Clinton's Motor Voter Law permits citizens to register to vote not only at the Department of Motor Vehicles, but also at public assistance offices.

Table 2 also provides preliminary evidence that alternative environments may foster political awareness and the acquisition of civic skills to compensate for the lower levels of income and education that typically leave the poor at a disadvantage. Many low-income citizens have the necessary attributes for participation in an organization, but tend not to be

2. In developing our measure of political participation, we experimented with a number of different approaches. We ran logistic regression equations with each individual type of participation (e.g., attend a protest, contact a public official) as the dependent variable. We also utilized an ordered dependent variable that measured the number of different acts of participation in which a respondent engaged. Ultimately, we based our results on the measure we felt best represented the general findings and successfully captured whether the respondent had engaged in a reasonable level of political participation in the preceding three years.

3. We must note that the comparison in Table 2 between our sample and the national samples is imperfect. The questions regarding acts of political participation are framed differently among the samples. In the South Bronx sample, acts of participation refer to the past three years. In the NES samples, acts of participation were framed in reference to the 1996 national election. Thus, the participation rates of the national sample might have been higher if the questions referred to participation more generally. Nevertheless, the NES is the most recent measure of national participation and, therefore, the most appropriate comparison. In both the NES and our sample, respondents self-reported acts of political participation; accordingly, the percentages represent inflated levels of political activism.

**Table 2 • Voting Behavior and Political Participation of the Urban Poor**

	South Bronx Urban Poor Sample (%)	NES Samples	
		National Urban Poor Sample (%)	Complete National Sample (%)
<b>Voting behavior</b>			
Currently registered to vote	74	67	88
Voted in 1996 presidential election	62	66	77
Considered a "voter"	41	59	71
<b>Other forms of political participation</b>			
Participated in a protest or rally	18	4	6
Contacted a public official	15	25	34
Participated in a boycott	11	n/a	n/a
Worked for a candidate	0	2	3
Gave money to a party, candidate, or issue group	0	7	13
Carried or wore a political button, sign, or sticker	1	9	10
Considered a "political participant"	13	n/a	n/a
<b>N</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>1,714</b>

**Notes:**

A "voter" voted in 1996, could identify his/her party registration, and could name the candidate for whom he/she voted for President. A "political participant" is a voter who also engaged in more than one non-voting political activity in the last three years. The national sample data is drawn from the 1996 National Election Study (Miller, et al., 1996); the national urban poor sample is the subset of the 1996 NES sample respondents who had incomes that fell below the poverty level and who lived in cities with populations over 200,000. The "Contacted a Public Official" variable data is from the Citizen Participation Study (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:190).

located in the economic institutions that facilitate the interaction and organization (Piven and Cloward 1997:278). Cohen and Dawson (1993:291) found that living in a neighborhood with over 30% poverty had a "chilling or isolating effect" on the organizations to which citizens belonged. Our data suggest that workforce development programs may provide participants with an opportunity to acquire the educational, employment, and interpersonal skills that work together to boost political activism.

Anecdotal evidence from our respondents bolsters the notion that workforce development programs may account for heightened levels of political activism of various types. As one respondent explained, "I didn't vote in 1996 because I was not registered. Then I registered through my vocational training program. So, I can vote next time." Trips to public hearings, protests, and rallies are also not unusual. One woman explained:

I never voted or did anything before I started coming here. But they got me registered to vote and then we all started to talk to councilmen about the problems with childcare. I even wrote a letter to the City Council about how I could not get childcare vouchers. I never would have done that before.

Other program participants noted that they "learned to lobby" and "found out who to contact when there's a problem." Workforce development programs seemed to enhance the inclina-

4. Research corroborates the growing trend of incorporating opportunities for the acquisition of civic skills into workforce development programs. A mixed strategy of a quick employment philosophy combined with substantial use of skill development leads to an increased likelihood of employability and job retention among welfare recipients (Freedman, et al. 1996; Friedlander and Burtless 1995; Hamilton, et al. 1997; Strawn 1998; Walker 1997).

tion for political participation, as they not only imparted to participants the necessary civic skills to engage, but also facilitated the actual engagement.<sup>4</sup> We must realize, however, that political engagement is sporadic; we cannot know if it instills in respondents the notion that they should engage in political activities outside of the program.

Overall, though, members of our urban poor sample still engaged in the types of political activities previous research has associated with low-income individuals. Members of our sample did not initiate contact with public officials nearly as often as did the complete national sample (15% and 34% respectively), probably because “contacting” requires a higher level of political skill, thereby placing the poor at a disadvantage. Similarly, due to educational limitations and political inexperience, the men and women in this sample had not worked for candidates. Respondents also lacked the financial capacity to donate money to campaigns, and lived in neighborhoods where solicitors might not request campaign contributions (see Cohen and Dawson 1993:297). And our data validate the suggestion that protest is the political activity of choice for many low-income citizens (Piven and Cloward 1997:267). Eighteen percent of respondents attended protests and rallies involving causes ranging from police brutality, to welfare reform, to poor public schools.

### Political Participation Among the Urban Poor

As previously mentioned, the Citizen Participation Study is the most comprehensive study of political participation. Thus, we wanted to analyze whether the variables that have an impact on political participation among the general population were also significant within a sample of poor citizens. The use of traditional measures even within a rare sub-sample is a common practice of those who study political behavior (see Cohen and Dawson 1993:289). To begin our analysis of participation among the poor, we ran two logistic regression equations. The first equation employed “voters” as the dependent variable; the second equation employed our category of “political participants.” Within each of the equations, we included independent variables to assess the impact of traditional factors on political participation, as well as an economic hardship variable, and variables to assess the political learning effects of contact with social service workers and police officers.

To test the expectation that socioeconomic status (SES) and material resources play a role in levels of participation (e.g., Conway 1991; Teixeira 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), even within a poor sample, we included five demographic variables: age, sex, education, income, and race (for a full description of the variable coding, see Appendix B).<sup>5</sup> For men and women living in poverty, however, extreme levels of economic hardship are often overlooked when income is classified on a traditional scale. Thus, we also included in our equations an “economic hardship” variable that highlights the degree to which respondents struggled to sustain economic stability. We tested the impact of civic skills by including three institutional affiliations: church, group membership (in addition to participation in a workforce development program), and work. We also tested the relationship between political participation and political ideology, efficacy, and knowledge, since previous researchers have found these to be significant correlates (e.g., Goren 1997; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Zaller 1992).

5. The regression equations do not include welfare status or religion because of multicollinearity problems. Because ninety-five percent of unemployed respondents received public assistance, a welfare variable was virtually the same as an employment status variable. We omitted a religion variable because of the overlap with race. The forty percent of the sample that identified itself as Latino was almost entirely Catholic; the great majority of African Americans self-identified as Protestant. It is also important to note that we did not encounter a multicollinearity problem with income and education; respondents' levels of education varied more than did their levels of income. Because the income levels of all of our respondents were low (by research design), men and women without high school diplomas were just as likely to earn no money from employment as were men and women with some level of college education.

In addition to these traditional indicators of political participation, the equations also include political learning variables. The citizens we surveyed reported extensive interaction with both social service workers and police officers. Roughly 93% of our sample acknowledged ever receiving public assistance and 70% of those with whom we spoke currently received assistance (see Table 1). In terms of the police, 55% of our respondents reported direct contact with police; over 80% reported having a friend or relative who had direct contact with the police in the last three years. We defined police contact very generally, with any incident in which citizens directly spoke or interacted with police officers qualifying as "contact." We tested whether respondents' experiences with social service workers and the police affected the inclination to engage in political participation. Further, by including whether respondents' parents and/or grandparents ever received public assistance, we assessed multi-generational effects of poverty as well.

Essentially, the regression equations tested within our urban poor sample a model similar to that employed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), coupled with social learning variables that may enrich our understanding of motivations for political participation among the

**Table 3 • Political Participation Among the Urban Poor: Traditional Indicators, Economic Hardship, and Political Learning Measures**

	<i>Voter Coef. (Std. Err.)</i>	<i>Political Participant Coef. (Std. Err.)</i>
<b>Economic hardship and demographics</b>		
Sex (female)	.87 (.29)**	1.25 (.51)*
Age	.02 (.01)	.05 (.02)*
Education	.34 (.07)**	.08 (.10)
Income	-.16 (.15)	.46 (.20)*
African American	.50 (.24)*	-.22 (.42)
Economic hardship	.20 (.09)*	.39 (.15)*
<b>Forums for learning civic skills</b>		
Attends religious services	.14 (.11)	-.15 (.17)
Group membership	1.07 (.38)**	2.50 (.53)**
Employment status	.61 (.35)	-.07 (.58)
<b>Political attitudes</b>		
Political ideology (liberal)	-.37 (.25)	.13 (.40)
Political efficacy	.03 (.26)	.47 (.47)
Political knowledge	.04 (.09)	.53 (.14)**
<b>Political learning indicators</b>		
Welfare history	-.38 (.22)	-.12 (.37)
Quality of experience with social service workers	.40 (.17)*	.98 (.30)**
Quality of experience with the police	-.07 (.33)	-1.88 (.52)**
Constant	-5.32 (1.30)**	-5.29 (1.43)**
Log likelihood	455.41	465.58
N	390	390

Notes:

Dependent variables are coded 0 and 1. A "voter" voted in 1996, could identify his/her party registration, and could name the candidate for whom he/she voted for President. A "political participant" is a voter who also engaged in more than one non-voting political activity in the last three years, such as writing a letter to a public official, participating in a product boycott, raising a complaint directly with a public official, or attending a political rally or protest. Chi-square test, \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

urban poor. Table 3 reveals a complex calculus of significant factors that affected respondents' likelihood to vote and participate politically.

### **Traditional Indicators of Political Participation: Demographics, SES, and Political Attitudes**

We begin our analysis of the factors influencing political participation with a brief examination of SES and demographic characteristics. The regression coefficients in Table 3 suggest that, even among a poor population, variations in demographics and material resources are important for understanding levels of political engagement. In the cases of education, income, age, and race, our findings do not differ from data emerging from general population comparisons in broader studies of political participation. Additional years of education, even among low levels of schooling, and higher incomes, even near the poverty level, appeared to bolster the likelihood of citizen political engagement (see Lipset and Schneider 1987; Teixeira 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Age was also a positive correlate of voting and political participation within our sample, perhaps because older citizens tend to be more established in the community (see Conway 1991; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba and Nie 1972). Finally, Table 3 indicates that African American respondents were more likely than Latinos to vote, a finding that may be attributed to language barriers among Latino respondents (see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:306).

Alternatively, gender did not generate the participatory effects broader population studies predict. Women in this sample were more likely than men both to vote and to participate in other political activities. Research typically finds men more likely than women to engage politically, since males tend to hold higher-paying jobs and higher levels of education (e.g., Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994:968). In our sample, however, men and women were employed in roughly equal proportions and there was no statistically significant difference in their levels of education. A possible explanation for the difference is that the women in the sample may have been more beholden to government policies than men (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Childcare, food stamps, and neighborhood crime may have disparately affected the women in the sample, since women tend to be the primary caretakers of children (Galinsky and Bond 1996; Glenn 1985; McGlen and O'Connor 1998; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Perhaps we do not see this trend in national samples because income and education differences between men and women prevail.

Turning to civic skills, our results confirm broader studies' findings that membership in volunteer groups, such as women's organizations and community boards, increases the likelihood that a respondent will participate politically (see Baumgartner and Walker 1988). Both the educative and mobilization effects of membership in civic organizations increase their political value. Unlike research that finds certain work environments to stimulate political conversations and provide opportunities for political participation, however, our data suggest that employment status was not a significant variable in the calculus that spurred political action among the urban poor (see Peterson 1990). Similarly, despite the fact that some researchers conclude that churches, particularly the Black church, are critical in the transmission of political attitudes and the facilitation of opportunities to acquire civic skills, church attendance did not generate a positive participatory effect among our respondents, or serve as a political resource (Cohen and Dawson 1993; Dawson, Brown, and Allen 1990; Harris 1999).

Variations in political knowledge, ideology, and efficacy also did not affect the urban poor in the same way they have been found to affect broader populations. The regression coefficients in Table 3 indicate that only positive variations in political knowledge served as a politicizing agent among this sample. It appears that a heightened level of knowledge about the current political climate may have spurred some poor citizens to increased levels of political activism, although such knowledge did not seem important for driving respondents to the

polls. Unlike research that suggests that individuals with a strong party identification are more likely to vote, rally, write letters to the government, and lobby politicians (e.g., Budge, Crew, and Fairlie 1976; Dalton 1988; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978), our findings indicate that strong partisanship and ideology did not factor into the calculus that spurred political participation.

Overall, traditional indicators of political participation provide a relatively rich picture of the characteristics that lead to participation within a sample of poor citizens; many of the demographic and SES variables are important motivators of participation even among the urban poor. Perhaps the most striking finding emerging from the traditional indicators of political participation, however, *contrasts* with the conclusions of previous research. Unlike scholarship that concludes, at least on a general level, that increased economic hardship suppresses political activism (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), Table 3 reveals that respondents in the most dire of economic circumstances were *more* likely to be political participants. Because this finding counters what might be expected from previous research, we discuss economic hardship below, as part of our analysis of the manner in which specific circumstances associated with a life of urban poverty affect the propensity to engage the political system.

### **Severe Economic Hardship and Political Learning: The Effects of Urban Poverty on Political Participation**

Analogous to the manner in which the effects of intense hardship warrant further exploration, poor citizens' interactions with government also merit attention. In this section, we consider three factors—severe economic hardship, contact with social service workers, and contact with police officers—to shed further light on the political participation of the urban poor.

#### ***The Political Mobilization of Economic Hardship***

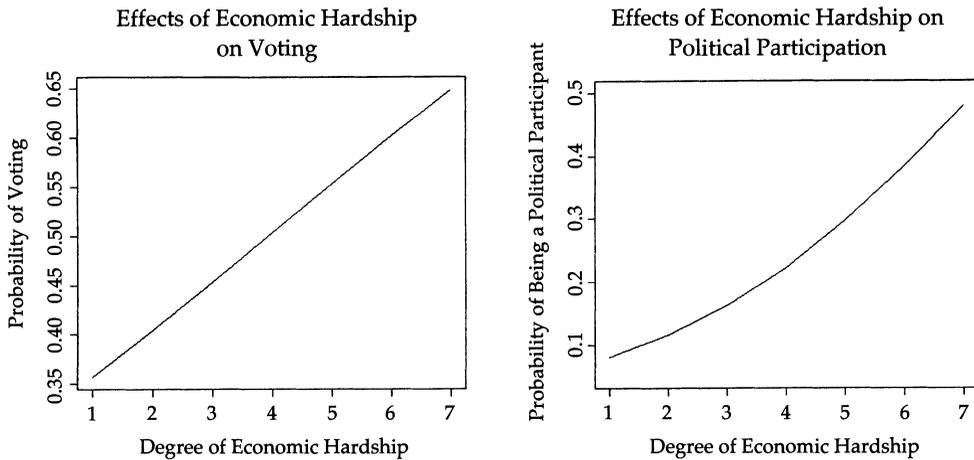
As mentioned previously, a higher degree of economic hardship appears to increase a respondent's compulsion to become active to combat poverty and the conditions it carries with it. For an "average member" of the sample, the independent effect of an increase in the level of economic hardship from which a respondent suffered increased the probability of being a voter by nearly 34%.<sup>6</sup> A move from the minimum to maximum degree of economic hardship boosted the likelihood of being a political participant by as much as 42% (see Figure 1).

The qualitative responses to our survey questions illustrate how a brush with total destitution and the most desperate of circumstances may mobilize citizens. One male respondent noted, for example:

When I couldn't make ends meet or find a job, that was one thing. When my son couldn't get the [medical] tests he needed, that was something else. I knew I needed to do something. He was sick and I couldn't afford to get him well. That's not fair.

As a result, he explained that he votes in all of the local elections, hoping that he will be able to elect politicians who "care about the plight of the poor." A young mother commented that as her economic position became increasingly precarious, she, too, was driven to act:

6. The "average" respondent was coded as follows (please refer to Appendix B for an explanation of the coding): sex = 1, age = 37, education = 11, income = 1, African American = 1, economic hardship = 2, attends religious services = 4, group membership = 0, employment status = 0, political ideology = 2.8, political efficacy = .55, political knowledge = 1, welfare history = 1, quality of experience with social service workers = 2, quality of experience with the police = 0.



**Figure 1 • Participatory Consequences of Economic Hardship**

First it was food stamps, then Medicaid and cash assistance. Then I needed to move because I could not pay the rent. New people need to be elected—people who notice that things are getting worse for us.

Another respondent explained:

I was getting almost nothing from welfare. I couldn't find childcare, so I couldn't get a job. And then they cut my food stamps. I wrote a letter to Governor Pataki and I went to a rally in Albany about childcare for people who get welfare. We have to tell the people in power what's wrong or else it'll never change.

Several survey respondents succinctly summarized the manner in which hardship and voting overlapped in their lives:

We have to vote if we want better things in our lives.

If we don't vote, we don't count. That's been the problem.

Voting is a way for us to express our opinions about poverty.

The 10% of respondents who lived with an extended family member or friend, which indicates an increased likelihood of having to live in cramped conditions in order to be able to pay the rent, were also more likely to be voters. "If my children are going to have a better life than I do," a female respondent speculated, "then they need a place to live where there's room to walk around. To get that, we need serious changes in government."

The struggle to find employment also appears to influence political participation. Only 29% of the members of our sample recalled ever holding a job for more than one year, suggesting that searching for a job is an almost perpetual activity. Seventy-one percent of the 112 respondents who answered the open-ended question, "If you could ask the government to do one thing to improve your life, what would it be?," named a job. One woman stated that she was "not asking to be rich. I just want to put food on the table." Others echoed this sentiment with comments such as, "It feels like there's one hundred people for every job" and "Without education, you can't find a minimum wage paying job, let alone a quality one." A male respondent assessed his job search as "the worst part of [his] life." He explained:

In order to make it today, it feels like you need three jobs. But it's impossible to get even one. The real problem is education. The government only gives you the minimum. Advanced schooling is expensive and the poor can't afford it. The government's keeping us from getting good jobs. Maybe a new mayor will help. Until the next election, I'll just fill out more applications.

Another unemployed citizen wondered, "If there are as many jobs out there as the government says, then why are there also so many people who can't pay the rent? We need to point out these things to elected officials."

Further, anticipating the unfamiliarity of a life without welfare also seemed to spark levels of political activism among our survey respondents. One woman concisely explained, "I've been on welfare my whole life. I'm scared now. What's going to happen when they cut me off? I'll sign any petition and go to any meeting to keep my benefits, at least until I find a job." Another stated that she called the welfare office before they could contact her and asked to be assigned to a vocational training program. She assessed her situation this way:

Welfare is going to end very soon and I'm still going to need help supporting my children. Getting a new mayor and governor might help. But I also need to get the skills that will help me get a job. I need a program that's going to give me skills to earn a living.

Essentially, men and women suffering from extreme economic hardship tended to view political engagement as an activity through which new government officials might be able to initiate better economic policies for the poor. Respondents' comments about the importance of "doing something" to address poverty reinforce Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995:398) suggestion that having a direct stake in a policy may have a stronger impact on an individual's likelihood to participate politically around that issue. They explain that receiving welfare seems to boost issue-based political activity with respect to concerns about basic human needs. Our findings suggest that it is not mere receipt of public assistance, but rather, the financial struggles respondents face, that may account for increased political activity. After all, the coefficients in Table 3 suggest that, even controlling for welfare history, which is not a significant predictor of political activity, economic hardship is statistically related to both voting and additional forms of political participation. Thus, our finding provides some evidence of the causal mechanism at work in Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) conclusion that receiving means-tested benefits might increase political activism around basic human needs issues.

### *Political Learning and the Welfare Experience*

The first area of government interaction on which we focused concentrated on experiences with the welfare system. Similar to Soss' (1999) compelling evidence that the lessons citizens learn while dealing with welfare and social service workers influence their attitudes about the political system, we also found in our sample a tendency for respondents to relate their experiences with public assistance to impressions of government. The regression coefficients in Table 3 indicate that learning experiences from being on welfare affected political participation among our urban poor respondents. Among our sample, the degree to which social service workers treated respondents fairly, with respect, and in a competent manner each served as a statistically significant predictor of the overall quality of the welfare experience the respondent reported (regression results not shown). Our quantitative indicator of welfare participation experiences empirically substantiates Soss' (1999) suggestion that political action is a product of participants' positive evaluations of their welfare program experiences.

While Soss (1999) has been one of the only scholars to attempt to link the responsiveness of the welfare system to political participation, others have argued that citizens are more likely to participate when they view government as responsive (see Conway 1991; Danigelis 1978;

**Table 4 • South Bronx Urban Poor Sample's Attitudes Toward Social Service Workers and the Police**

	<i>Percentage Responding "Usually"</i>
Social service workers treat people fairly. (426)	20
Social service workers treat people with respect. (428)	21
Social service workers help the people they serve. (392)	24
Would feel confident dealing with social service workers again. (424)	16
The police treat people fairly. (442)	26
The police treat people with respect. (444)	33
The police protect people. (404)	17
Would feel confident dealing with the police again. (435)	16

Note:

The remaining responses to each question were divided between those who responded "sometimes" and "rarely." Sample size in parentheses.

King 1997; Piven and Cloward 1997). A member of our sample who "never had a problem" with a caseworker succinctly phrased this relationship: "If I had a problem with housing or any other political issue, I would have no problem contacting someone in government. The people I deal with are always helpful." In fact, confidence in social service workers bolstered an "average" respondent's probability of being a voter by more than 19% and the probability of being a political participant by as much as 20%.

Considering that only 4% of our respondents thought the welfare system "worked very well," however, the political learning that occurred through contact with welfare workers was often politically demobilizing (see Table 4). Respondents' interaction with the welfare system was often viewed as "degrading," "embarrassing," and "demeaning." The complicated navigation, bureaucratic hurdles, and intrusive treatment associated with public assistance disillusioned citizens about government and suggested that bad experiences with the welfare system transcended into other facets of government. As one woman asserted:

I know all there is to know about government from the welfare workers. Bureaucracy makes it almost impossible to get benefits smoothly and to get fair treatment. Bureaucracy will also make it impossible for poor people to be heard everywhere else in the political system.

Another welfare recipient commented: "Being on welfare is like being a hostage to a very complicated government. It's like running in circles. I'm going to keep that circle as small as possible—the welfare workers are all I can handle." And the following comments shed further light on the difficulty of navigating the welfare system:

Caseworkers are never available when I need them.

The workers never have time to see me.

It's almost impossible to ask a question or get an appointment.

They send you from one person to the next. No one knows how to help you. No one tells you what you're entitled to get. And supervisors are also no help. It makes you want to just never go back, never deal with government workers again. They're incompetent.

In each case, the respondents clearly related the welfare system to the rest of the government.

While it is important to confirm that welfare experiences often serve as vehicles for political learning, it is also essential to note that being socialized amidst public assistance did not seem to affect political engagement. For many members of our sample, impressions of welfare were derived from multi-generational experiences with the system. Forty-five percent of the sample had parents who received public assistance; more than 10% stated that their grand-

parents also received welfare at some time. Yet these respondents were no more likely to be repelled by the treatment they received or the perpetual complications they may have suffered than were respondents who have been part of the system for a much shorter period of time. In other words, interaction with the welfare system, whether brief or long-term, appeared to generate similar consequences for political engagement among our urban poor sample. This is especially important because it supports the proposition that even infrequent, recent interactions are sufficient to affect political participation.

These results offer a more nuanced view of the general conclusion that welfare is “such a demeaning and demoralizing experience. . . that recipients of means-tested benefits naturally have low rates of [political] activity” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:398). The demeaning and demobilizing experience does not automatically accompany the public assistance check; rather, our findings suggest that direct, personal interaction with social service workers accounts for the depressed likelihood of political engagement.

### *Political Learning and Contact with Police Officers*

The second central finding emerging from the political learning variables in Table 3 involves contact with the police. Citizens living in urban areas are more likely to see and be aware of a police presence (Massey, Gross, and Shibuya 1994). Urban areas have long been identified with criminal activity and, as a result, many cities, including the South Bronx, have developed regular street patrols. Not only is the variable important to examine simply because the urban poor routinely encounter police officers, but it is also extremely pertinent to our analysis because, in open-ended questions, many respondents associated police officers with government. Several respondents explained that the mayor “used the police” to carry out his objectives. And other men and women in the sample referred to the “tight connection” between the New York Police Department and the mayor’s administration. One particular quotation from a male respondent succinctly illustrated this connection:

The police get their directives from the government. In cities like this, that means that most people have their only real contact with government in hostile confrontations with the police. And in neighborhoods like this, the police think we’re all criminals.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, unlike the manner in which positive experiences with social service workers increased the likelihood that a citizen would vote and participate politically, Table 3 indicates that *negative* experiences with the police seemed to spur political activism among the men and women in this sample. Negative attitudes toward the police appeared to be derived from the feelings that police officers did not treat people fairly and showed little respect toward citizens living in the South Bronx. Moreover, bad experiences with the police provoked respondents to act much more so than did negative contact with social service workers. Regardless of the level of economic hardship or the quality of a respondent’s experience with a social service worker, a negative police encounter notably increased the predicted probability of political participation. More specifically, for an average respondent, a negative encounter with the police increased the likelihood of being a political participant by 15%.

7. We should note that some of our research occurred during the highly publicized atmosphere surrounding two charges of police misconduct against the New York Police Department. The first was the beating and rape of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima, by two police officers in a Brooklyn police station. The other was the murder of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed West African immigrant who was shot by four undercover officers in a hail of forty-one bullets in the South Bronx. Originally, we were concerned that the high profile nature of these cases might skew citizens’ attitudes toward the police, more so than would any direct contact the respondents had with the police. In the course of our interviews, however, respondents made very little mention of either case; rather, they tended to recount specific incidents they had with the police. Thus, we are confident that direct police interaction resulted in important political learning experiences for members of our sample.

Answers to questions about how the police could increase citizens' trust shed light on why bad experiences with the system may work to encourage participation. Of 119 men and women who answered an open-ended question about police conduct in the South Bronx, 114 respondents did not believe that "the police were currently doing a sufficient job" (also see bottom of Table 4). Accusations of racism, police brutality, harassment, and corruption were commonplace. Almost 10% of this sub-sample mentioned literal physical battery they or a family member suffered at the hands of the police. Eighty-nine percent of the sample respondents contended that police brutality was among the nation's largest problems.

Negative impressions of the police were rooted in both race and poverty. African American citizens in the sample were the most outspoken in condemning police activity. This is not surprising considering that a growing body of literature has found that, when compared to other racial groups, African Americans are far less trusting of the police (see Fox and Van Sickle 2001). The race variable in Table 3, however, was not significant and a comparison of African American and Latino attitudes toward the police revealed no statistically significant differences.<sup>8</sup> For the most part, respondents of each racial group contended that law enforcement officials were not "community oriented" and did not care about "protecting people in the ghetto." More than 75% of the men and women interviewed noted that the officers they saw in the neighborhood needed "sensitivity training" and "education about working with poor people" and minority groups. Other respondents assessed the police presence in their communities as dangerous and intimidating:

They [the police] throw whoever they want around. They'll beat anyone up—no questions asked.

They don't treat people fairly—well, that is—they don't treat minorities fairly.

The police are supposed to enforce the law, but they are the first to break it.

They have badges to break the law.

One man who has lived in the area his entire life summarized:

There are probably some good policemen out there. We just don't get them in these neighborhoods. We get White police officers who assault Black youth, even if they've never even been in trouble with the law. Insider traders go to luxury prisons for a little while. I walk down the street, doing nothing wrong, and risk getting bullets in my body and locked up for life.

Another explained, "I'm Black—which means that they hate me. They're going to look for me to do something wrong. Plain and simple."

Several parents agreed with these statements, further noting that the police were particularly unqualified to deal with misguided and underprivileged youth. Visibly upset, a woman recalled her most recent experience with the police:

They arrested my son because they thought he beat up someone in the park. They brutalized him in the police car on the way to the precinct. They never asked him any questions. . . . He kept telling them there was a mistake and they just kept hurting him more. Eventually, they let him go. But it doesn't matter; they'll pick him up again. And what am I supposed to do? Report it to the police?

Another mother assessed the situation this way: "My son is Hispanic and he comes from a poor family. That means he increases his chances of becoming a statistic, a victim of police error." One parent referred to this paradox: "The police resolve conflict by resorting to fear and intimidation. How does giving a teenager the beating of his life teach him that violence is wrong and socially unacceptable?"

Perhaps because negative police contact infiltrated our respondents' lives so personally and deeply, the experiences promoted activism. A father of a teenager who "has run-ins with

8. Although the coefficient on the race variable is not statistically significant in terms of predicting levels of political participation, it is important to note that a race consciousness variable might have manifested stronger effects.

the police almost every day" attributed his political involvement to the unfair treatment his son received. He noted:

I attend every rally against police brutality. I go to community board meetings. And I am sure going to vote for a mayor who does not accept everything the police do. There is no reason that my son should not be able to walk down the street without getting stopped and questioned.

Another woman explained:

Every day the police beat people up for no reason. They think we're all criminals. They are supposed to protect us, but instead they hurt us. When they roughed up a neighbor for no reason, I called [Congressman] Serrano's office. Someone needs to control these cops.

Contrary to our expectation that negative experiences with the police might demobilize respondents—citizens are less likely to participate in both politics and their communities when they feel isolated from government (Cohen and Dawson 1993; Hirlinger 1992; Sharp 1980, 1984; Wilson 1991)—a group of men and women who encountered negative police interactions were, surprisingly, more compelled to participate. And the participation met the standard beyond the threshold of "voter." Although this unexpected finding certainly merits additional exploration, we offer three plausible hypotheses to account for the difference, each of which can be explored in future work.

Foremost, perhaps the men and women in the sample were not driven to act when treated poorly by social service workers because they considered the poor treatment routine and relatively harmless; the egregious conduct of the police, however, was certainly neither routine, nor harmless.

An alternative explanation involves the fact that respondents may not have taken to political activity to combat poor treatment by social service workers because the men and women in the sample feared a loss of public assistance benefits. After all, regardless of their interactions with social service workers, respondents relied on welfare checks; perhaps the product they received from the system was more important to them than the treatment they endured to receive the check. Turning to interactions with police officers, though, the only "product" respondents could potentially receive was a decreased level of crime. Because the overwhelming majority of respondents did not feel as though they benefited from this "good," they may have been more willing to use the political system to display their dissatisfaction with police conduct.

A third possible explanation for the opposite effects of negative interactions with social service workers and police officers on political participation may involve race consciousness. Schlozman and Verba (1979) suggest, for example, that poor Whites are greatly disadvantaged in terms of political activism because they lack class-consciousness comparable to African Americans' race-consciousness. Thus, when authorities poorly treat Whites, they are unlikely to protest or engage in political activities aimed to challenge government policies. Perhaps the racialized content of negative experiences with police officers, coupled with far less racialized descriptions of interactions with social service workers, account for the differences in respondents' political activism. Because race was not a statistically significant predictor of political activism, though, if race-consciousness is a factor at work, then it is also important to recognize that Latino and African American senses of racial identity may be of relatively equal strength. We are cautious in offering this speculation, though, as it assumes comparable levels of race-consciousness *across* different nationalities of the Latino population.

Unquestionably, the inclusion of some form of a racial identity/consciousness indicator could shed further light on this phenomenon, as would further investigation into respondents' attitudes about what they expect from social service workers and police officers.

## Assessing the Effects of Political Learning: Discussion and Conclusion

Ultimately, our results carry implications for both the manner in which we develop social science theories and, more importantly, for how we conceive of political arrangements in urban environments. Although we acknowledge the theoretical benefits of parsimonious models with respect to explaining political behavior, we contend that, at least from a democratic theory and political representation perspective, it is of paramount significance to understand more thoroughly the participatory behavior of the urban poor. Only a fully specified model that accounts for the distinct experiences of the urban poor (e.g., Cohen and Dawson 1993; Massey, Gross, and Shibuya 1994) can aid us in uncovering the characteristics and circumstances that deter political participation among a group in dire need of better political representation.

For this urban poor population, a model that includes the effects of interaction with government agents represents both statistical and substantive improvements over the more basic, general models typically employed to understand political participation. When we ran our model *without* the political learning variables (results not shown), we encountered a problem to which we referred earlier: broad models, based on broad populations, often cannot predict rare behavior. In other words, the traditional model did a fine job predicting the behavior of citizens who did *not* vote or engage in political activism. For voters, the model correctly predicted roughly 79% of non-voting cases; the model also correctly predicted over 97% of the cases in which individuals were not political participants. In terms of correctly predicting rare behavior, though, the traditional model did not fare as well: it predicted fewer than half of the cases in which a respondent was a voter and only 31% of the cases in which a respondent was a political participant. Perhaps this deficiency can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that the model failed to take into account the participatory consequences of interactions with government agents. When we included the political learning variables (as in Table 3), the model correctly predicted an additional 13% of cases in which respondents met the criterion of "political participant."

Although this piece of research examines the residents of only one area of one state, it opens the door for further investigation into the manner by which to explain political participation. Future research should continue to combine traditional models of political participation with theories of political learning and explore how particular life circumstances have an impact on the decision to participate. And future analyses should address the many unique, but prevalent characteristics certain demographic groups hold, as these qualities and conditions may further explain political behavior.

In addition to speaking to broad methodological concerns and future research, our findings present very distressing information about the social and political arrangements in the inner city. Our findings indicate that those who lived in the most desperate conditions, who were among the rare few to report positive interactions with social service workers, and who sustained negative experiences with the police, were the individuals most likely to engage the political system. While this finding is bleak, in that these are not the types of circumstances we want to replicate or on which we would like to rest political participation, it sheds light on the differential levels of political participation among urban poor men and women. From a policy perspective, different methods of training government agents could be politically mobilizing, especially considering that, as citizens' welfare benefits are terminated, public assistance recipients must interact with social service workers, both to appeal such terminations and to attain transitional benefits.

The same respondents who contended that contacting the government was not worth the time or the degradation were also the very men and women who tended to think that the government did not sufficiently address the national problems that are of paramount significance to an urban poor population. Fewer than 15% of the 325 men and women who

rated government performance on a host of social issues contended that the government was "doing a very good job" handling issues of homelessness and drugs. Less than 10% of the sample thought that racism was being handled "very well." And 80% of the respondents suggested that crime and unemployment were plaguing their neighborhoods. Hence, our findings lend support to the suggestion that individuals best represent their own interests (Bennett and Resnick 1990; Burnham 1987; Erikson and Wright 1986; Hill and Leighley 1992; Piven and Cloward 1989; Schlozman and Verba 1979; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Until we address the social and political institutions in urban environments, the poor will remain underrepresented in terms of policies and priorities.

### **Appendix A: Methods of Data Collection**

The lack of quantitative research that focuses on the urban poor speaks to the difficulty of compiling a sample of citizens who live in difficult economic and social circumstances. In an effort to amass a large sample of our target population, we chose the South Bronx of New York as our geographic area of study. This area comprises the neighborhoods of Highbridge, East and West Concourse, Concourse Village, Mt. Eden, and Morrisania. According to recent census data, 49.9% of the population in the South Bronx has incomes that fall below the poverty level; the latest figures indicate that 35.8% of the South Bronx population receives public assistance (Baconi and Morse 1998:6). Coupled with the welfare overhaul that has taken place in the 1990s in New York City under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's administration, we believed that the high level of contextual poverty within this community would enable us to reach out to a varied cross-section of women and men who would be willing to share their political attitudes and behaviors.

Although our goal was to collect data from as varied a sample of this population as possible, several factors limited our random selection. Most notably, in order to gain access to potential respondents, we found it necessary to work with community organizations and associations that serve the poor in various capacities. We sent a research project description to the major vocational and education workforce development programs, semi-permanent housing shelters, tenants' associations, and parents' associations that serve South Bronx residents. These were: Housing Enterprises for the Less Privileged (HELP) at Morris Avenue, HELP Crotona, HELP Haven; Women in Need's programs at Ruth Fernandez House, Lee Goodwin House, and Sara Burke House; training programs at Covenant House, Highbridge Unity Center, Latino Pastoral Action Center, MOSAIC Beacon, Highbridge Woodycrest Center, Beacon of Hope House, Per Scholas, Highbridge Community Life Center, Family Learning Circle, Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (Culinary Arts Vocational Training Program, Micro-Entrepreneur Training Program, and Innovations at Work Job Readiness Program); tenants' associations at New Settlement Apartments and Urban Horizons; parents' associations in school district 9. One week after sending the research description, we contacted each program by phone. Out of the initial twenty-two inquiries, thirteen programs expressed an interest in the research, for an affirmative response rate of 59%. The populations served by the two shelters, one parents' association, one tenants' group, and nine workforce development programs that opted to participate in the study were demographically similar to one another and to the larger sample of community organizations we initially contacted. Hence, although we were not able to acquire a truly random sample of respondents, our pool represents not only the general population of the South Bronx, but also holds the more specific demographic attributes of the population from which we attempted to draw our sample.

The questionnaire was a survey with open- and closed-ended questions, all of which an individual could complete independently. Because of the personal nature and subject matter of the questions, however, we anticipated that it might be necessary for at least one primary

researcher to administer the questionnaire and remain with respondents while they completed the survey. This was confirmed during the first wave of survey distribution. We found among many potential respondents a hesitancy to discuss their economic, political, and social circumstances. Many men and women expressed distrust for us and many citizens worried that their answers to the questionnaire would be used to adjust their public assistance cases. In order to address these understandable concerns consistently and ensure anonymity, we found it necessary to administer the survey personally. Moreover, because of the length and wording of some of the questions, it was important that questions and concerns raised by respondents be addressed concisely, without impairing or influencing any answers. We also anticipated that several respondents would not be able to complete the questionnaire because of problems with literacy; we wanted to ensure that someone would be available to read the questions to these individuals and record their answers. Thus, it was necessary for the program administrators to allot us at least forty-five minutes to work with their participants in a classroom setting.

This was possible only for eleven of the thirteen programs and groups. Four of these eleven programs, however, invited us to spend full days with their participants and interview them individually throughout the day. We conducted the interviews, which lasted approximately forty-five minutes each, using an expanded version of the survey instrument. We asked for elaboration of many answers and also talked to the respondents about the subject matter. We recorded respondents' answers in their entirety and allowed respondents to look at our notes. Five of the eleven programs also invited us to conduct either interviews or administer additional questionnaires when new cycles of their programs began. These programs, which provided us with a steady stream of respondents, were representative of the programs from which we initially sought respondents.

From July 1998 to June 1999, we administered a total of 462 questionnaires in English and Spanish. While we estimate that only roughly 5% of potential respondents refused to complete the survey or undergo an interview, most men and women in the sample refused to answer at least a small portion of our questions. As a result, our regression analysis includes only 390 respondents. Thus, although we initially hoped for a larger sample, considering the atmosphere in which this research was conducted, we found a limit to the number of individuals willing to share their experiences with us.

We must acknowledge a few noteworthy differences between our sample and the South Bronx population from which we drew our respondents. In terms of race and ethnicity, over 90% of the sample was African American or Latino, which compares well to the 98% of the South Bronx population that falls into these two categories (36% African American, 62% Latino) (Baconi and Morse 1998, 5). Because our sample under-represented Latinos, our data may indicate higher levels of activism, as language barriers were less significant for our pool than they would be for the community as a whole. In fact, only 5% of our survey respondents requested Spanish questionnaires; in the Citizen Participation Study, 20% of Latino respondents opted to be interviewed in Spanish when offered the choice (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995:470). As for welfare status and family income, we deliberately chose a low-income sample, so as to understand the political inclinations and behaviors of an understudied group. Only 20% of our respondents, compared to 35% of South Bronx residents, earned income from employment (Baconi and Morse 1998:42). Finally, despite the significant portion of the South Bronx population comprised of immigrants, all of our respondents were U.S. citizens; because we sought to uncover voting behavior, we did not want to influence our results by including in the sample individuals precluded from casting a ballot because of citizenship requirements.

**Appendix B • Variable Description**

Variable	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coding
<i>Economic Hardship and Demographics</i>				
Sex	0, 1	.759	.428	Indicates whether the respondent was male (0) or female (1).
Age	18 to 76	36.8	10.7	Indicates the age of the respondent.
Education	1 to 16	11.1	2.07	Indicates the number of years of education completed by the respondent.
Income	1 to 4	1.52	.840	Indicates the respondent's household income for 1997, ranging from a low of less than \$8,000 (1) to a high of over \$25,000 (4).
African American	0, 1	.536	.499	Indicates whether the respondent was African American (1) or not (0).
Economic hardship	0 to 7	2.23	1.27	A scale based on the number of the following items respondents had to do to "make ends meet" last year: "put off medical treatment," "cut back on food," "delay paying rent and/or utilities," "work extra hours or get another job," "reduce money spent on entertainment," "borrow money," "live with relatives and/or friends." Higher values indicate greater hardship.
<i>Forums For Learning Civic Skills</i>				
Attends religious services	1 to 5	3.36	1.23	Indicates the frequency with which the respondent attends religious services, ranging from "more than weekly" (1) to "never" (5).
Group membership	0, 1	.223	.345	Indicates whether the respondent was part of any social, political, or community group (1) or not (0).
Employment status	0, 1	.174	.380	Indicates whether the respondent was currently employed (1) or not (0).
<i>Political Attitudes</i>				
Political ideology	1 to 4	2.81	.489	A scale based on the mean response to five issue statements (dealing with abortion, the balanced budget, school prayer, unemployment, and health care) with which respondents were asked to "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." Lower values indicate conservative responses (1). Higher values indicate more liberal responses (4).
Political efficacy	0 to 1	.551	.464	A scale based on whether the respondent believes "the government has his/her best interest and heart" and the degree of trust the respondent has in government. Higher numbers indicate greater levels of trust.
Political knowledge	0 to 5	1.24	1.49	A scale based on correct answers to 5 current events questions: "What party controls the House of Representatives?" "Who is the Vice President?" "Who is the Speaker of the House?" "Who is the member of Congress from your district?" and "Who is Boris Yeltsin?" Higher values indicate a greater level of political knowledge.
<i>Political Learning/Life Experiences</i>				
Welfare history	0 to 2	.476	.550	Indicates the number of generations in the respondent's family who have received public assistance.
Quality of experience with social service workers	1 to 3	2.28	.712	A scale based on whether a respondent who has had contact with a social service worker would feel "very confident" (3), "confident" (2), or "not confident" (1) dealing with a social service worker again.
Quality of experience with the police	0, 1	.156	.364	Indicates whether a respondent who has had contact with the police deemed the experience "negative" (0) or not (1).

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