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Upfront

Services For Votes **Study shows machine politics' role in welfare**

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Services for Votes

Study shows machine politics' role in welfare

Are all needy communities treated equally under the U.S. welfare system?

Not necessarily, according to a new study published in the April *American Sociological Review*, which suggests privatized welfare has created powerful political blocs that use their clout to win disproportionate amounts of government money.

Most public assistance in the United States consists of cash payments given directly to needy individuals or families. But about 20 percent of federal funds are distributed through state and local organizations.

Nicole Marwell, author of the study and assistant professor of sociology and Latino studies at Columbia University, spent 15 months volunteering at different government-funded community-based organizations (CBOs) in poor urban neighborhoods. She concluded that, unlike individual recipients who tend to play a passive role in the welfare system, these CBOs were effective political machines. Many were able to maneuver government money to their neighborhoods through a sophisticated system that sometimes looked like a “services for votes” exchange, she found.

For example, they may provide critical support to the politicians who can secure coveted government-housing contracts. CBOs often functioned as the liaison between voters and elected officials, providing a center for both campaign visits and the distribution of government-funded services. Many CBOs also sponsored highly effective get-out-the-vote drives.

One CBO that Marwell studied, the Lindale Center for Service (LCS), a federally funded low-income housing group in New York City, maintained such close ties with its local state assemblyman, Tony Rodriguez, that it even shut its offices on election days so that staff could spend the day helping Rodriguez get out the vote. It was typically able to deliver about 3,000 votes in a district that usually turned out just 5,000 voters, Marwell found.

LCS became known as such a key player in city and state elections that it became a campaign stop for Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Governor George Pataki. “Clearly, LCS and Rodriguez have the attention of important players in the wider political environment,” wrote Marwell.

LCS’s political hustle seemed to pay off. While most communities were happy to win even a single low-income housing contract, LCS secured multiple contracts throughout the 1990s. The group opened its third low-income housing structure in 1997, and won a government contract to run its own legal-assistance program three years later.

Yet Marwell is careful to note that LCS’s activities, like other CBOs she studied, were not improper. “These groups are prohibited from engaging in partisan political activity,” she explained in an interview, referring to the laws governing the nonprofit status of CBOs. “They followed the letter of the law, but this law has a lot of flexibility.”

Marwell said she was more concerned that less-politicized communities may be missing out on limited government funds because they did not have clout with elected officials. “Because of the rationing of these services, there are a lot of people who are not getting them,” she said. “For me, that’s the real problem.”

—Andrea Orr