

challenging authority

HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE CHANGE AMERICA

FRANCES FOX PIVEN



Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America (Polemics)

By Frances Fox Piven

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Challenging Authority argues that ordinary people exercise extraordinary political courage and power in American politics when, frustrated by politics as usual, they rise up in anger and hope and defy the authorities and the status quo rules that ordinarily govern their daily lives. By doing so, they disrupt the workings of important institutions and become a force in American politics. Drawing on critical episodes in American history, Frances Fox Piven shows that it is precisely at those seismic moments when people act outside of self-restricting political norms that they become empowered to their full democratic potential.

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Bibliography

- Rank: #106469 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Rowman Littlefield Publishers
- Published on: 2008-07-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.19" h x .47" w x 6.09" l, .70 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 200 pages



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Editorial Review

Review

Challenging Authority is like a Molotov cocktail in an elegant crystal decanter. Piven deploys meticulous reasoning and wide-ranging research to show that social change comes ultimately from the disruptive actions of ordinary people?strikes, sit-ins, riots. *Challenging Authority* challenges all of us to re-think our notions of who makes history and how. It may be Piven's best work yet. (Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*)

Challenging Authority is itself a challenge to authority, contesting conventional interpretations of American history, from the Revolution to present-day protests against the interdependent global economy. It offers a compelling argument for the vital democratic role of 'disruptive power,' showing how successive phases of short-lived collective defiance culminate in progressive policy outcomes, but also how these are eroded and suppressed as democratic politics resumes its normal course. This is important reading for students of democratic politics. (Steven Lukes, New York University)

Frances Fox Piven here offers us a brilliant analysis of the interplay between popular protest and electoral politics. She challenges conventional theory as she explains, with stylistic clarity and sound historical evidence, the limitations of voting as a democratic tool and the power of disruptive action to achieve social change. (Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States* and professor emeritus of Political Science, Boston University)

Challenging Authority is a lively, timely, and illuminating account of moments of popular insurgency when those outside the mainstream have driven issues to the center of political debate. Piven has written a vivid reminder that ordinary people can change America when they find the true source of their power. Most importantly, when the people themselves rise up in anger and hope, all Americans get to witness real democracy in action. (Lani Guinier, Harvard Law School)

Frances Fox Piven has done it again! With undiminished authority, she offers a sweeping examination of disruptive movements at key moments in American history, from the revolutionary period to the present. Her examination of the relations between disruption and electoral politics underscores an implicit criticism of both 'radical' visions and academic research that isolates social movements from politics. In their place, she reveals the intricate, contradictory, but ultimately democratizing impact of disrupting established institutional routines. This penetrating analysis offers sage advice for those who are discouraged by the current reversion of democracy in these times of imperial expansion and threats to civil liberties. Thirty-five years after the publication of her seminal *Regulating the Poor*, this is vintage Piven empowered with new insights. (Sidney Tarrow, Cornell University, author of *Power in Movement* and *The New Transnational Activism*)

Frances Fox Piven has written yet another terrific book. Building on her previous work with Richard Cloward, she scales new heights in uncovering 'the dynamics of disruptive power.' Theoretically profound, yet immensely readable, with enormous comparative as well as historical range, she shows how 'the people-out-of-doors' have effected progressive policy reforms at critical junctures in American history. The practical relevance of this for politics in the USA today is clear on every page. And so are the lessons it has to teach social movement theorists as well as institutionalist political scientists and sociologists. (Leo Panitch, York University)

This quintessential Pivenesque book eloquently traces how ordinary people, whose efforts to advance their rights and interests are in normal times limited by our political system, have taken it upon themselves to correct injustices. Piven shows this to be true from the founding days of our nation and explains how and why this can continue to be so even in our new, globalized economy. (Susan Eckstein, Boston University)

Piven's book is succinct and masterful. (Stephen Lendman)

Zooming in on the American revolution, the abolitionist movement, the early twentieth-century rise of the labour movement, and the Vietnam anti-war movement, she argues that these historical intervals of protest movements wield a form of disruptive power that leads to fundamentally egalitarian democratic reform. (*International Review Of Social History*)

About the Author

Frances Fox Piven is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology at the Graduate School at the City University of New York and past president of the American Sociological Association. She is the author of several books, including *The War at Home: The Domestic Costs of Bush's Militarism* (2004) and *Why Americans Still Don't Vote: And Why Politicians Want It That Way* (2000).

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