

Making The Poor Visible

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

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[John Edwards](#) may be running third in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, but he has already changed the national conversation on a crucial issue. Poverty is no longer a hidden subject in American politics.

Be as skeptical of Edwards as you want to be. Yes, he has had some trouble since he joined the 3-H Club -- the \$400 haircut, building a 28,000-square-foot house and taking \$500,000 in payments from a hedge fund. Yes, he has gotten political traction among liberals out of saying endlessly that ending poverty is "the cause of my life."

Moreover, [Barack Obama](#) was right to say Wednesday that his early community organizing work shows that poverty "is not an issue I just discovered for the purposes of a campaign." For that matter, [Hillary Clinton](#) began her professional life laboring to eradicate child poverty.

The difference is that by harping on the issue, Edwards -- whatever his motivations -- has forced Democrats to abandon their fear of being seen as too focused on the needs of the poor and has thus opened political space for his rivals.

Since the late 1980s, Democrats have been obsessed with the middle class for reasons of simple math: no middle-class votes, no electoral victories.

But focusing on the middle class is one thing. Keeping the poor in the political closet is another. Must appealing to the self-interest of the middle class preclude appealing to its conscience?

Democrats have lost enormous ground by allowing a myth to take hold that [Lyndon Johnson's](#) Great Society was a failure. "In the 1960s, we waged war on poverty, and poverty won" is one of the most powerful bits of rhetoric in the conservative arsenal.

Edwards took on this falsehood directly in his speech Wednesday in Prestonsburg, Ky., at the end of his tour of impoverished regions. "We accomplished a lot," he said of LBJ's time, "civil rights laws, Medicare and Medicaid, food stamps and Head Start and Title I aid for poor schools. The Great Society and other safety-net programs have cut the number of people living in poverty in half."

Edwards understands that unless the country is given hard evidence that government can succeed, it will never embrace government-led efforts at social reform.

Yet both Edwards and Obama acknowledged the past mistakes of reformers. Edwards spoke of the failure "to recognize the importance of three things: rewarding work, creating opportunity everywhere and protecting and strengthening families."

Obama was even more pointed in his criticism of the liberal past. He spoke of "an inability of some on the left to acknowledge that the problems of absent fathers or persistent crime were indeed problems that needed to be addressed."

Quietly, a new anti-poverty consensus -- reflected in the dueling speeches Edwards and Obama gave this week -- is being born.

It stresses personal and parental responsibility while also addressing economic changes that are promoting inequality. It seeks to deal with the growing isolation of the poor, the need for early intervention in the lives of poor children and the importance of increasing the economic rewards for what is now low-wage work. Mostly out of public view, anti-poverty scholars and activists have used their time in the political wilderness to figure out what actually works.

Obama, for example, praised the comprehensive approach of the Harlem Children's Zone, developed by anti-violence activist Geoffrey Canada. It helps families from the moment a child is born. Obama also pointed to the success of programs aimed at providing new ladders for upward mobility by turning what were once considered dead-end jobs into opportunities for advancement.

Edwards put forward a pro-labor agenda to increase wages and benefits. He would also step up the recruitment of good teachers for poor children and create 1 million housing vouchers to allow "all families -- not just wealthy ones -- the freedom to move to the communities they choose."

As one of the shrewdest students of poverty has said, "the poor are politically invisible," removed as they are "from the living, emotional experience of millions upon millions of middle-class Americans."

Those words were written in 1962 by the late Michael Harrington in "The Other America," the book that helped launch the War on Poverty. In 2007, the poor are less politically invisible than they have been in a long time. That gives a new war on poverty at least a fighting chance. Edwards deserves some credit for that.

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