Corporate and anti-poverty interests in concert?

By Steve Thorngate
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Ezra Klein's work at the *Washington Post* is indispensable; he brings much insight to the task of making domestic policy accessible to those of us who only follow it part time. But I'm not buying this one:

> There's a tendency among some on the left and, with the "libertarian populists," some on the right, to portray the interests of corporate American and the interests of low-income Americans as directly opposed to each other. That's not true. They can conflict, of course — it's easy enough to imagine a proposal to raise taxes on corporations in order to fund a low-income tax cut — but they're not always in tension. Sometimes they're even in concert.

Sometimes, sure. As in, a stronger overall economy is good—or at least can be—for everyone. But Klein's examples are not macroeconomic trends but major pieces of legislation, and they don't really show a lack of conflict between corporate interests and those of the poor.

He starts with Obamacare, pointing out that the law represents a heap of new spending on health insurance for the poor—bought from corporations that are very happy to sell it. Everybody wins!

Of course, if health-care reform simply reflected the interests of the poor, we'd have a national health plan, paid for by progressive taxation and available to all free of charge. But that isn't politically feasible, so we got Obamacare instead—a set of compromises painstakingly constructed to be progressive enough to get some votes and friendly enough to (some) corporate interests to get others. Passing it was a tremendous accomplishment precisely because the interests at the table were so at odds. On the whole, both corporations and anti-poverty advocates wanted to pass it—but their interests were certainly in tension.

Then Klein moves on to the farm bill, the traditional politics of which he aptly describes: "Big Ag gets the votes of members of Congress who care about food stamps and food stamps get the votes of members who want to subsidize Big Ag."

But again, that’s a legislative vehicle for compromise, not a case of actual shared interests. Corporate interests are at best indifferent to food stamps. And Big Ag subsidies are bad for poor people! They hurt small farmers and the rural communities where they live. They contribute to the public health menace that is cheap American food.

In short, both Obamacare and the (existing) farm bill help the poor, but both could help them more if they didn’t have to hold this goal in tension with corporate interests. They may be legislative triumphs of creative compromise, but they aren’t examples of corporate and anti-poverty interests in concert.

Klein also suggests that anti-poverty advocates recently have more political power than we might think. See Larry Bartels on that one:

> Millions of people in the bottom tier of the working class have lost, on average, ***85%*** of their net worth. . . . Meanwhile, those near the top of the wealth distribution have been held harmless. . . . Against that background, it seems more than a little bit obtuse to celebrate the “often overlooked” power of “the people, and the political party, most concerned with directly improving the lot of the poor.”