The Paradox of the Earned Income Tax Credit:
Appreciating Benefits but not Their Source

Delphia Shanks-Booth and Suzanne Mettler

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is widely recognized as the United States’ most effective contemporary policy for reducing poverty, and scholars have found that it elevates recipients’ sense of social inclusion. This raises the question of how it influences recipients’ civic engagement, namely their attitudes about government and political participation. We draw on policy feedback scholarship to consider expectations. Then we use a unique dataset to compare recipients of the EITC, Aid to Families With Dependent Children/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and nonrecipients of either policy in order to identify how policy features are related to political attitudes and behaviors. We find that despite the benefits they receive, EITC recipients experience low external political efficacy, but are more likely to be politically active than their peers.

KEY WORDS: public policy, EITC, policy feedback

Social welfare policies for the poor have endured harsh criticism over the past 40 years in the United States, but the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which supplements the wages of low-wage workers, stands apart as an exception to the rule. In an age of growing partisan polarization, particularly over social spending, the EITC enjoys bipartisan backing. The American public offers strong support for it, with majorities of conservatives and Republicans among those who favor expanded coverage (Page & Jacobs, 2009, p. 63). Lawmakers have worked across the aisle to make it more generous and inclusive over time, with presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama signing expansions into law. Beneficiaries themselves appreciate the EITC, valuing both the resources it bestows and its style of delivery (Halpern-Meekin, Tach, & Sykes, 2015). Advocates for the poor regard it as by far the most effective anti-poverty policy existing today. Scholars praise it for treating recipients...
in a manner that fosters social inclusion, a striking contrast from the stigmatizing character of public assistance. The question remains, however, how does the receipt of the EITC relate to beneficiaries’ civic engagement, namely their attitudes about government and participation in politics?

Understanding the relationship between the EITC and its recipients’ civic engagement is timely and important for American politics. The 2016 election brought to the fore concerns about the plight of working class Americans, who have suffered from stagnating wages and rising job insecurity since the 1970s. The EITC is a policy solution that aims to mitigate those problems, but do recipients recognize it as government working on their behalf, providing a social benefit? In an era of growing distrust in government, does the generosity of the EITC foster political inclusion among those whom journalists have begun to portray as an alienated and angry working class? Finally, we might wonder whether this policy, which enjoys such widespread support for its attributes, might engender a positive impact on political participation among low-income people, who are generally less likely to raise their voices in the public sphere. Might the EITC lessen the tilt of political participation toward the most advantaged?

These questions raise theoretical issues pertaining to policy design and policy feedback effects. Scholars have found that features of policy design influence whether and how a policy affects political behavior, but the EITC’s unusual characteristics defy standard categorizations. It is a means-tested policy, but whereas several of these are associated with marginalizing beneficiaries, EITC beneficiaries report that they are treated respectfully, and while some such policies have faced waning support that threatens their sustainability, the EITC has enjoyed wide public support. Moreover, it belongs to the large grouping of social welfare policies that are termed “tax expenditures,” because of their placement in the tax code. Such policies, generally, have been called “hidden” or “submerged” forms of social provision because their design makes government’s role as the provider of benefits less visible; recipients are more likely to perceive the resources they gain as rightfully their own or as provided by the private sector. Most people appreciate the home mortgage interest deduction and the nontaxable status of employer-provided health benefits, for example, but they are not likely to perceive them as social benefits provided by government; if the same dollar amounts were administered in the form of a government-provided check to aid them with housing or health care costs, they would likely perceive it differently. Unlike the EITC, however, most tax expenditures are targeted to affluent citizens; possibly the low-income recipients of the EITC, many of whom have no tax liability, might respond differently and perceive government’s role in bestowing benefits to them. This makes the EITC an important test case.

In order to explore the relationship of the EITC to civic engagement, we proceed as follows. We begin with a brief overview of the historical development of the EITC. Then we consider how its design might influence policy feedback effects, and what we might expect of its relationship to attitudes about government, political efficacy, and political participation. For purposes of comparison, we do the same for another type of means-tested program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and its predecessor, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC),
which we group together. In the case of AFDC and TANF, their policy design differs from EITC in that benefits are delivered directly by government, most likely making its role and their character as social benefits more highly visible. We introduce a unique dataset that enables us to probe these questions. Then we proceed to examine them, first through descriptive statistics and then through regression analysis. We discuss our findings, showing that the submerged policy design of the EITC gives it a paradoxical quality: even though it is means-tested, the fact that the benefits it offers come from government remains obscured and unappreciated. Beneficiaries of the EITC do not demonstrate more positive attitudes about government than those with comparable socioeconomic circumstances who are not beneficiaries; in fact, as a group they possess particularly low assessments of government and political efficacy, and the EITC appears not to mitigate these attitudes. Yet, EITC beneficiaries are significantly more likely to participate in politics than similar peers. This study raises fundamental questions about how social programs can aid the disadvantaged in ways that foster both social and political inclusion.

The Rise of the EITC and the Demise of Cash Public Assistance

The EITC, first enacted in 1975, originally aimed to encourage low-income people with children to work by supplementing their wages with a refundable tax credit. Republicans and conservative Democrats favored the approach as a means to avoid “taxing people onto the welfare rolls,” as Senator Russell Long (D-LA) put it. Liberal Democrats favored it for boosting the wages of the working poor (Gitterman, 2015, p. 384). During the 1980s, while President Ronald Reagan pilloried the “welfare queen,” he championed the EITC.

As partisan polarization increased, spending through the tax code became the primary means for building majority support for new or expanded policies, and the EITC epitomized this trend (Howard, 1997, chaps. 5, 7; Howard, 2007). The policy grew more expansive in both coverage and benefit rates under presidents from George H. W. Bush through Barack Obama. It was transformed particularly during the Clinton Administration, when it shifted from being tax relief for the working poor to a genuine anti-poverty program. As a refundable tax credit, the EITC offers many people benefits that outstrip their tax liability; in other words, the EITC does not only erase the taxes a family might owe, it also provides additional funds beyond that amount (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016). Its reach was also expanded to include single adults without children so that low-income workers, regardless of their family status, would be eligible.

Over time, the EITC has emerged as the nation’s major income maintenance program for low-income households, lifting several million Americans above the poverty line annually. In the depths of the Great Recession, one in five U.S. households filing tax returns received EITC benefits. The average annual benefit in 2016 reached $3,176 for families with children, a significant lump sum amount for working poor households. That year, the policy lifted 5.8 million people out of poverty, including 3 million children, and it reduced the extent of poverty for 18.7 million more people (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018). The level of benefits is
tied to income and the number of children and adults in the family unit: at the low end, single people with no children and incomes up to $15,101 receive up to $510, and at the high end, married couples with three or more children and incomes up to $53,930 can claim the maximum benefit of $6,318 (Internal Revenue Service [IRS] 2018). The EITC has replaced TANF as the predominant source of income security for low-income people, though it targets a somewhat different group, with fewer of the poorest being eligible for it because of the earned income requirement, and more qualifying who are at a slightly higher income level.

The EITC’s ascendance over the past 40 years accompanied the demise of cash public assistance programs. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), as the public assistance program for low-income single parents and children was called, endured rising criticism from the 1960s onward. In 1988, lawmakers passed legislation permitting states to experiment with work requirements for the program. In 1996, they terminated AFDC and replaced it with TANF, a much more restrictive program with federally mandated work rules and time limits, and other eligibility restrictions set by the states, which regained more authority over it than they had since 1935. Owing initially to the strong economy of the era, and later to the TANF restrictions, coverage fell from its high point under AFDC in 1993, when it covered 5.5 percent of the population (Mettler & Milstein, 2007). It continued to plummet and by 2015 TANF covered only 0.94 percent of the population as low-income people reported that they sought to avoid using the stigmatized program unless they had no other options (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015), and Congress and state legislatures also did little to make more TANF funds available during the worst years of the recession (Moffitt, 2014, pp. 62–63).

Considering the Relationship between Policies and Civic Engagement

To assess the relationships between the EITC and civic engagement, we aim to build on the existing policy feedback literature, which examines how policies shape beneficiaries’ sense of political inclusion and their participation in politics. Scholars of policy feedback have proposed that policy resources may heighten political interest and participation by raising socioeconomic status (Campbell, 2003; Pierson, 1993; Rose, 2012). Policy design and delivery may also have interpretive effects, by conveying cognitive messages to citizens about how government regards people like them, potentially enhancing their sense of political efficacy or promoting learning among beneficiaries, and that may elevate (or depress) their participation (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Soss, 1999). In addition, policies that make government’s role as a provider of benefits clear and explicit may make citizens more aware of government’s role in their lives, and that may spur inclusion that facilitates civic and political participation. Policies with more hidden delivery methods, such as tax expenditures, may fail to engender such outcomes, instead producing null effects (Mettler, 2005, 2011; Pierson, 1993).

One particular element of policy design, income ceilings or “means-testing,” has been associated with less impressive or negative effects on political engagement and inclusion than universal policies (Campbell, 2003, chap. 7; Greenstein, 1991; Skocpol, 1991, Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, pp. 217–219; Wilson, 1987, chap. 7). In the case
of public assistance, prior research has shown that obtaining it has, at best, failed to incorporate the poor as citizens, and at worst, has discouraged their civic engagement (Campbell, 2003, chap. 7; Soss, 1999, Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). Joe Soss (1999) demonstrated that AFDC lowered beneficiaries’ sense of external efficacy or governmental responsiveness, because they found welfare offices to be unresponsive to their claims, and extrapolated from that to draw similar conclusions about government generally. Scholars have argued that these eligibility rules are demeaning and stigmatizing, and therefore, are likely to foster social stratification or “second-class citizenship” (Mettler, 1998). By contrast, policies that encompass broad swaths of the population through more universalistic eligibility criteria may bestow dignity and respect on low-income beneficiaries, incorporating them as honored members of the political community (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gordon, 1998; Mettler, 1998; Mink, 1996; Skocpol, 1992).

Yet, although means-tested policies generally tend to be more stigmatizing than non–means-tested policies, variation exists based on the specifics of policy design. Other features of a policy can outweigh the stigmatizing effects of income limits. One means-tested policy, Head Start, includes mechanisms that foster democratic inclusion, as Joe Soss (1999) demonstrated. Pell grants and the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) are also highly respected programs.

The EITC, although means-tested, does appear to deviate from the expected pattern associated with some means-tested policies, as indicated by an excellent book-length study of the policy, *It's Not Like I'm Poor* (2015). The authors, Sarah Halpern-Meekin, Kathryn Edin, Laura Tach, and Jennifer Sykes, argue that the EITC, by sharp contrast to cash welfare, promotes social inclusion.

Through the EITC and the other refundable credits that have followed in its path, America has brought at least a portion of the poor into mainstream society in a way that has seldom been done before by an antipoverty policy. No welfare bureaucrats are controlling their lives. The working poor can exercise autonomy and spend that gloriously large lump sum however they please. When they arrive at that H&R Block office to collect their refund check … they are there because they filed their taxes just like every other hardworking American. (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015)

These findings lead Halpern-Meekin et al. to question whether the EITC might also facilitate active citizenship: “Some evidence suggests that an enhanced sense of social inclusion might lead to other forms of prosocial behavior, such as political and civic engagement” (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015, p. 20). It is our aim to investigate that question.

Our expectations of such salutary outcomes are tempered by the fact that EITC’s design, its placement in the tax code, would suggest that it might operate differently than other means-tested policies. It is a member of the growing number of policies that make up the “hidden welfare state” or “submerged state,” which has increased
from 81 when Reagan took office to 151 in 2010. The cost of tax expenditures hovers around $1.5 trillion in recent years, more than the total raised through the individual income tax, and amounting to 7.4 percent of GDP in 2016 (Mettler, 2011, pp. 20–21; Rogers & Toder, 2011, p. 3). Once established, tax expenditures persist, not requiring annual decisions by lawmakers to raise spending as do most of the direct policies geared to working-age adults and their families.

Just as the EITC is exceptional among means-tested policies, it differs from most tax expenditures as well, because they generally bestow their largest benefits on the wealthiest Americans. In 2013, the most affluent fifth of all households accrued 51 percent of the dollar value of the 10 largest tax expenditures. Within that top fifth, the largest benefits were bestowed on the super-rich: those in the top 1 percent accrued 17 percent of all benefits, compared to 12 percent to those in the 81st to 90th percentile, 9 percent to the 91st to 95th, and 13 percent to the 96th through the 99th (U.S. Congressional Budget Office [U.S. CBO], 2013, p. 15). By contrast, more than half of the EITC benefits, 51 percent, are bestowed on households in the bottom quintile, for whom they make up 5.8 percent of income, and another 29 percent goes to the second quintile, as 1.7 percent of their income (U.S. CBO, 2013, pp. 20, 36).

The placement of the policy in the tax code raises the question about whether beneficiaries associate the extra income with government social provision, and how their perceptions of it affect their views about government and political participation. Scholars have suggested that policies that make government’s role more traceable will generate a greater impact on beneficiaries’ attitudes than those that obscure government’s role (Arnold, 1992; Pierson, 1993). Some policies issue resources in a form or delivery style that makes government’s role explicit, as in the case of Social Security checks or the GI Bill’s education and training benefits (Campbell, 2003; Mettler, 2005). By contrast, those that simply reduce what individuals owe in taxes or channel benefits through private actors may make the actual value of resources and government’s role as a provider of benefits less explicit (Hacker, 2002; Howard, 1997; Morgan & Campbell, 2011). Previous scholarship suggests that tax expenditures generally appear to fail to make government’s role obvious and do not engender greater participation, at least with respect to activism on those particular policies (Mettler, 2011, chap. 2). We have yet to analyze, however, whether specific individual policies operate in a manner consistent with these expectations, and the EITC’s hybrid features make it a particularly interesting case to examine.

On the one hand, the EITC’s design as a refundable tax credit may help to highlight its status as government social provision. This is because eligibility is determined as part of the annual rite of federal tax preparation and submission, and many of those who claim it actually gain more through the tax system than they owe. As a result, a large lump-sum tax refund might actually showcase government’s role, and do so in a favorable light. Furthermore, it might also provide a positive experience with government, rather than the negative experiences of public assistance many Americans have faced as states have become more punitive in the way in which they administer welfare. Soss and colleagues (2011) explain that after 1996 a new “poverty governance” emerged that is characterized by “paternalistic” supervision of the poor, as caseworkers use their discretion to decide when to impose sanctions and
their level of severity. Although TANF was promoted as a means to advance civic incorporation of the poor, individuals’ experiences of it have either had no impact or reduced their civic engagement (Soss et al., 2011, p. 288). As Halpern-Meekin et al. (2015) report, individuals who experienced public assistance recall being treated “like an animal,” with service that was impersonal at best and often rude. They reported that they resorted to it only out of dire necessity, and that it bestowed on them an intense sense of shame (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015, pp. 8, 107, 121). Therefore, while welfare beneficiaries likely understand clearly that government is the source of their benefit and the association is unlikely to be positive, recipients of the EITC may see their large tax refund and make a positive association with government.

On the other hand, the EITC’s manner of delivery appears to camouflage government’s role. Halpern-Meekin et al. (2015) report that interview subjects stressed how impressed they were by the private-sector organizations that typically administer the EITC, and explicitly contrasted those interactions with their prior experiences in public aid offices. Many of them recalled going to a decaying government office building to apply for other benefits, such as TANF. By contrast, to claim the EITC, they typically went to the bright offices of the for-profit firm H&R Block, which actively seeks their business, and which they described as “neat as a pin” (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015, p. 83). There, friendly and professional staff members treated them as valued customers. Rather than asking intrusive personal questions that threatened to disqualify them from benefits, the H&R Block personnel gathered the basic information about their earnings and entered it on the computer with the aim of getting them as high a credit as possible (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2015, p. 125). Like other taxpayers, EITC claimants paid H&R Block to process their forms, and once they were informed of the amount of their return, they were offered the opportunity to receive it on the spot, for an extra fee. Interview subjects conveyed that whereas TANF imposed a sense of stigma, claiming the EITC amounted to what Halpern-Meekin et al. term a “veritable certificate of deservedness” (2015, p. 114). Certainly this may have emanated in part from their view that they had earned their way into the program through their work effort. But beneficiaries’ positive reactions to EITC policy delivery also appeared to emanate from the fact that they did not associate it with public social provision but rather in contrast to it. This casts doubt on the impact the EITC may have on recipients’ views about government.

**Expectations**

Generally speaking, then, policies with designs that make visible government’s role and the delivery of social benefits are expected to heighten individuals’ perception that government has come to their aid or provided them with opportunities, whereas those with more submerged designs and delivery may fail to engender such effects. Although we anticipate that EITC beneficiaries will have better experiences of policy receipt than AFDC/TANF beneficiaries, the effects on their sense of government responsiveness to them may be muted due to the policy’s design. The placement of the EITC in the tax code is likely to obscure government’s role, thus blunting interpretive effects of the policy. If so, this would interfere with the process of deriving more salutary views of government and heightened political efficacy,
which might otherwise take place for beneficiaries. Conversely, we expect that the experience of receiving public assistance benefits might leave recipients with an impression that government played a role in their lives, but it may yield a negative impact on their political efficacy.

At the same time, EITC benefits do amount to significant resources for beneficiaries, and these may foster greater political participation. Resources generally are associated with enabling higher participation (Campbell, 2003; Verba et al., 1995). AFDC and TANF, on the other hand, have offered benefits that are so low that they may fail to engender such outcomes.

We expect other factors to influence civic engagement as well, adhering to patterns that are established in existing literature. Higher income people are likely to experience government being responsive to them (Gilens, 2012). Highly educated people are likely to participate more in politics than others (Verba et al., 1995). Women are now more likely than men to vote, but men are more likely than women to take part in other political activities (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001). The past 40 years in the United States are associated with a dramatic increase in incarceration rates, and scholars find that direct interactions with the criminal justice system, ranging from arrest through long-term incarceration, deter civic engagement (Lerman & Weaver, 2014).

The questions of how public policy can both improve the economic security of low-income Americans and facilitate their civic engagement are crucial to contemporary politics. We now turn to empirical analysis to explore these questions.

Data

To date, lack of appropriate data has prevented scholars from examining how experiences of EITC usage influence attitudes about government and political participation. Policy feedback research generally is hindered by the fact that few surveys ask about both policy receipt and political attitudes and participation, and fewer still include questions about tax expenditures. Ideally, we would have panel data on such matters collected from a random sample of Americans at regular intervals over long periods of time, with additional cohorts incorporated as they entered adulthood, but few ask the questions that are central to this research. Even cross-sectional data on current usage is rarely collected, limited to a few questions on a few surveys of the American National Election Study.

This paper draws on a unique survey dataset from the Social and Governmental Issues and Participation Study of 2008 (SGIP), which was designed for the study of both Americans’ experiences with social programs and their political behavior. The SGIP asked respondents, in a randomized fashion, whether they had ever used any of 21 different federal social policies over the course of their lifetimes, and probed further about their experiences of those policies they had utilized. Thus, though collected at a moment in time, the survey aimed to gather over-time indicators about individuals’ accumulated policy experiences. Because the SGIP asked about usage of both the EITC and AFDC or TANF, we can examine how different policy design and delivery characteristics are associated with political attitudes and participation.
The SGIP study includes a random national sample ($N = 1,000$). In addition, because young people and low-income people are particularly important to this study and tend to be underrepresented in surveys because they are harder to reach, we included an oversample of 200 18–34-year-olds and an oversample of 200 individuals from households with annual incomes below $35,000$. The data are cross-sectional, and have limitations: estimates of usage may be prone to error due to memory constraints and perceived stigma that may inhibit affirmative responses. Reported take-up rates cannot be viewed as precise estimates and may tend to be conservative. Nonetheless, the data provide a useful means of assessing general patterns of lifetime policy usage.

The limitations of the data must be acknowledged and guide our interpretation of results. Because they are not panel data but collected at a moment in time, we must be cautious in interpreting the relationships we examine. Regarding attitudes about government, the survey asked standard questions that inquire about currently held views only, given that individuals would have difficulty disentangling their past and present views. Because the policy usage questions, by contrast, probed lifetime histories of usage, we can explore the relationship between past policy experiences and subsequent attitudes, considering potential causal relationships while mindful of other limitations of the data, to be noted below. With respect to political participation, however, the survey investigated which activities respondents had *ever* taken part in, just as it explored which policies they had *ever* utilized. Therefore, we will probe only associations between policy usage and participation, not inferring causal claims.

Our comparison of EITC beneficiaries with those who have used AFDC or TANF is also limited, both by the data and by differences in the targeted recipients of these policies. Ideally, we would have more precise data about the policy beneficiaries, for instance, in terms of their specific income and the value of the benefits they received. It is also the case that EITC beneficiaries generally, as a group, tend to differ from TANF beneficiaries because they have earned income, and are likely to be somewhat better off financially. That said, our data examine lifetime policy experiences, and many individuals in the dataset had different incomes at the time the survey was administered than they would have when they qualified for either or both policies. Our goal, given the nature of our data, is to identify general patterns and associations; we will also note ways in which differences in the policy beneficiaries (rather than in the policies they utilize) may shape attitudes and participation.

Given these limitations, more rigorous testing of the theoretical claims discussed earlier in this paper awaits the availability of data that permit such analysis. Here, we identify relationships and speculate about them; claims of causal inference lie beyond our scope.

### Policy Delivery Experiences

We begin our empirical analysis by considering policy experiences of the EITC and AFDC/TANF relative to each other and also in the context of the full array of policies investigated in the survey. Respondents who indicated that they themselves
had ever used a particular policy were asked follow-up questions about their policy experiences. One question asked whether the process of applying for benefits was easy or complicated, with answers ranging from 1, “very complicated,” to 4, “very easy,” indicated by the black bars in Figure 1. Generally, the policies in the tax code received some of the highest scores for ease of claiming them, and several of the direct means-tested policies received the lowest scores, indicating that they were more complicated. Put differently, policies that require applicants to undergo the most interaction with government agencies and greater efforts to indicate eligibility received lower scores. Interestingly, the means-tested EITC earned a high score: consistent with observations by Halpern-Meekin et al. (2015), respondents noted the ease with which they claimed it. As Patricia Strach (2007, chap. 5) has observed, tax benefits are typically claimed by individuals themselves or with the help of accountants. The EITC performed more like other policies in the tax code rather than like means-tested public assistance policies. Welfare (short-hand here for AFDC or TANF), by contrast, earned among the lowest scores, not surprising given the requirements and scrutiny beneficiaries encounter in gaining access to it.

Another survey question asked respondents to what extent the particular policy had helped them, on a score ranging from 1, “not at all” to 4, “a great deal.” Interestingly, here the results, shown in the gray bars in Figure 1, differ from those assessing ease of application. Overall, the tax expenditures received the lowest scores for their value in assisting individuals. Direct, visible policies, particularly those extending education or health care, scored high. Consistent with this observation, EITC claimants did not give the policy particularly high scores; it lagged behind housing vouchers, Head Start, food stamps, welfare, and other direct visible policies in its rankings for helpfulness. Welfare was one of a few policies characterized by a gap between its relatively high rankings of helpfulness, which were similar to those for EITC, compared to its low rankings for ease of applying.

![Figure 1. Beneficiaries’ Assessments of Policy Experiences.](image-url)

These results are intriguing, indicating that beneficiaries’ reactions to public policies emanate not just from the amount of resources received but also from the experiences associated with applying for benefits and receiving them. The EITC was fairly easy to obtain, more so than most policies, and also fairly helpful, though less so than many other policies. Welfare, by contrast, was an outlier for the complications imposed on applicants, yet those who received found it very helpful, likely assisting them in the midst of a particularly difficult point in life.

Models and Variables

How do individuals’ attitudes about government compare if they have similar socioeconomic status but have benefitted from policies with different types of designs and delivery? Now we proceed to examine how prior experiences of the EITC are related to attitudes about government and political efficacy at the time of the survey. We consider several manifestations of such attitudes. The first two are drawn from questions that directly relate to social welfare policies: the level of agreement (on a 4-point scale from disagree strongly, 1, to agree strongly, 4) with the statement “Government programs have helped me in times of need,” and “Government has given me opportunities to improve my standard of living.” The next two are standard measures of what political scientists call “external political efficacy,” or individuals’ sense of government responsiveness to them: “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think,” and “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.” These questions use the same scale, but it should be noted that strong agreement in these particular instances indicates negative views about government, whereas in each of the others it indicates positive views. Finally, as a measure of civic obligation and given the saliency of taxation to views about government in recent decades, we probe answers to the question, “When it comes to paying federal income taxes, do you feel you are asked to pay your fair share, more than your fair share, or less than your fair share?”, with “less than” as the highest value.

To probe further, we then conduct a second set of analyses to consider how policy experiences are related to political involvement of four types. In the first model, we consider the determinants of being registered to vote currently. In the next two models, we can consider the determinants of voting in presidential elections since one became old enough to vote and, separately, voting in all other (nonpresidential) elections, on a self-reported rate from “never voted” (1) to “voted in all” (5). In a fourth model, we examine the determinants of the sum of five political activities, using an index that includes having volunteered for a candidate running for office; made a financial political contribution; served on a board, committee, or other group that deals with community problems and issues; contacted an elected official about problems or issues; or participated in a protest, march, or demonstration (scale of 0–5).

Each model includes our chief independent policy variable, ever having used the EITC, along with ever having used AFDC or TANF (“welfare”), or ever having used both; the missing or reference variable is having used neither. We also control for
several factors associated with civic engagement, including gender, race, ethnicity, age, education, income, partisanship, and having been convicted of a felony. Gender is indicated by those who identify as male compared to female. Race is indicated by “nonwhite,” a category including those who identified as black/African American, American Indian, Aleut, or Eskimo, or Asian or Pacific Islander or some other ethnicity, as compared with those who identified as white or Caucasian. Ethnicity is indicated by “Hispanic origin or descent,” with others as the missing or reference category. Age is measured on a scale from 18 to 92, with older individuals receiving higher values. Three educational levels are assessed, including a high school degree or less (which is the missing reference category), some post-high school education or training (which includes associates’ degrees, attendance at trade schools and coursework), and a four-year college degree (B.A. or B.S.) or more education, including graduate school or advanced degree. Total household income is measured on a 5-point ascending scale, from under $20,000 (0) to $100,000 or more (4). Partisanship is measured on a 5-point scale from “Republican” (1) to “Democrat” (5). Those who replied affirmatively to a question asking, “have you ever been convicted of a felony?” received a code of 1, and those who said no, 0.

Our first set of models focuses on attitudes about government, and the first four analyses are conducted using logistic regression, while the fifth uses ordered logistic regression because of the scaled dependent variable. In the second set of models, which focus on political behavior, the results reflect the following statistical analyses (in order): logistic regression, linear regression (2), and Poisson regression. Results of the analysis are presented as marginal effects or odds-ratios, allowing us to assess the statistical and empirical significance of each variable. We also present the predicted probabilities or estimated values of the results graphically below.

### From Policy Experiences to Attitudes about Government

The relationship between policy usage and political attitudes is complex, but controlling for other factors, beneficiaries of some policies differ from nonrecipients in their attitudes about government, as seen in Table 1. Given our expectations about the relationship between policy design and political attitudes, the most striking finding in the first column of Table 1 is a null result: EITC-only beneficiaries are no more likely than nonbeneficiaries of the EITC or welfare to feel that government has helped them in a time of need. On the other hand, welfare-only and welfare and EITC beneficiaries were both significantly more likely than those who had used neither to agree that government had helped them in times of need. These differences are both significant and substantive, with welfare-only recipients being approximately 23 percent more likely to agree, and recipients of both the EITC and welfare being 38 percent more likely to agree than nonrecipients. By contrast, when asked whether government has provided opportunities to improve one’s standard of living (column 2), it is those who have ever used only the EITC who are significantly less likely, by about 8 percent, to agree with the statement than nonrecipients. Neither of the groups including welfare beneficiaries differed from nonusers in their views. Those with lower incomes and Democrats were significantly more likely to think
Table 1. Relationship between Policy Receipt and Political Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Receipt</th>
<th>Govt. Has Helped</th>
<th>Govt. Given Opportunities</th>
<th>Public Officials Don't Care</th>
<th>Have No Say</th>
<th>Pay Fair Share in Taxes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EITC only</td>
<td>0.0531 (0.040)</td>
<td>-0.0799* (0.039)</td>
<td>0.0693* (0.034)</td>
<td>0.0855* (0.038)</td>
<td>1.522** [1.1084−2.0894]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare (AFDC/TANF) only</td>
<td>0.228** (0.080)</td>
<td>0.064 (0.076)</td>
<td>-0.0751 (0.078)</td>
<td>-0.0158 (0.080)</td>
<td>1.565 [0.8297−2.9533]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both EITC and Welfare</td>
<td>0.382*** (0.048)</td>
<td>-0.00635 (0.063)</td>
<td>-0.0602 (0.069)</td>
<td>0.0291 (0.065)</td>
<td>1.669 [0.9878−2.8188]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (5 categories)</td>
<td>-0.0470** (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.00616 (0.014)</td>
<td>-0.0355* (0.014)</td>
<td>-0.0348* (0.014)</td>
<td>0.866* [0.7691−0.9745]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship (5 pt, 1 = Rep)</td>
<td>0.0340*** (0.010)</td>
<td>-0.0200* (0.010)</td>
<td>0.0214* (0.009)</td>
<td>0.0233* (0.010)</td>
<td>0.993 [0.9138−1.0782]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current age</td>
<td>0.00076 (0.001)</td>
<td>0.000548 (0.001)</td>
<td>0.0015 (0.001)</td>
<td>0.000882 (0.001)</td>
<td>0.945* [0.8997−0.9928]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age squared</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.001* [1.0001−1.0011]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>-0.073 (0.040)</td>
<td>0.0357 (0.040)</td>
<td>-0.0388 (0.041)</td>
<td>-0.0733 (0.040)</td>
<td>0.486*** [0.3428−0.6886]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.0262 (0.060)</td>
<td>0.00112 (0.061)</td>
<td>-0.036 (0.060)</td>
<td>-0.0133 (0.061)</td>
<td>1.206 [0.7034−2.0670]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.0376 (0.033)</td>
<td>0.0409 (0.032)</td>
<td>0.0419 (0.030)</td>
<td>0.0402 (0.032)</td>
<td>1.795*** [1.3756−2.3411]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>0.00329 (0.043)</td>
<td>-0.0198 (0.042)</td>
<td>0.0166 (0.039)</td>
<td>-0.132** (0.042)</td>
<td>1.209 [0.8607−1.6975]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA+</td>
<td>0.0438 (0.044)</td>
<td>0.0744 (0.043)</td>
<td>-0.108* (0.042)</td>
<td>-0.211*** (0.044)</td>
<td>1.873*** [1.2964−2.7056]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Felony</td>
<td>0.135 (0.077)</td>
<td>0.124 (0.072)</td>
<td>0.132 (0.073)</td>
<td>0.187* (0.085)</td>
<td>1.021 [0.4734−2.2015]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1033</td>
<td>1110</td>
<td>1116</td>
<td>1132</td>
<td>1135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5.345</td>
<td>2.992</td>
<td>3.742</td>
<td>5.104</td>
<td>5.059</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Models 1–4 are weighted logistic regressions; average marginal effects presented, standard errors in parentheses. Model 5 is weighted ordered logistic regression; odds ratios presented, confidence intervals in brackets. All models include age-squared term, although marginal effects for age include the effect of the age-squared term and it is not reported separately.

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
government had helped them in times of need, while older respondents were more cognizant that government had provided opportunities.

The individual relationship of policy receipt to attitudes about government is significant on average, but when considered in combination with other characteristics, the relationship remains striking. Figure 2 shows the predicted probability, by policy receipt and across income levels, that a respondent is likely to express awareness of government as a provider of social benefits, whether by helping in times of need or by giving opportunities to improve one’s standard of living. As income increases, the likelihood of agreeing that government has helped declines, but receipt of welfare alone and both welfare and the EITC is associated with higher levels of agreement across incomes. Nonbeneficiaries of either policy are a full 20 percent less likely to say government has provided help at high incomes as they are at low incomes. Strikingly, those who have ever used only the EITC look very similar to nonrecipients. The second graph in Figure 2 demonstrates that these same EITC-only recipients are, no matter the income level, also less likely than nonrecipients to agree that government has provided opportunities.10

It makes sense that AFDC/TANF beneficiaries viewed the programs they used as a necessary and valued form of income maintenance when they fell upon hard times, and yet did not see it as capable of transforming their circumstances. It is striking however, that EITC beneficiaries were left less convinced than nonbeneficiaries that government had given them opportunities to improve their standard of living. The EITC is a cash credit that is more generous than other income support policies for low-income people, it has been explicitly rationalized by policymakers as a means for recipients to gain opportunities to improve their standard of living.

![Figure 2](image-url)

**Figure 2.** Awareness of Government as a Provider, by Program Receipt, Across Income. Source: Social and Governmental Issues and Participation Study, 2008.
and scholars have documented that it does indeed lift people about the poverty line. But the EITC’s design, making it embedded in the tax code, combined with its delivery mechanism, being administered privately rather than by government, likely obscures government’s role in actively enhancing beneficiaries’ lives.

We do not interpret this finding to mean that the EITC caused recipients to become more resentful of government; neither our theoretical expectations nor our empirical research indicate that. The cross-sectional nature of the data requires, moreover, that we consider the possibility of endogeneity, of particular pre-existing characteristics shared by program recipients for which we have been unable to control. To this point, we expect that the particular group of people who were eligible for the EITC—the working poor—already felt that government had done little to provide them with opportunities, and EITC receipt failed to mitigate those attitudes. This would be a reasonable attitude among this group, given the decades of slow or stagnant income group they have experienced despite high rates of productivity, and the extremely low increases in the rates of four-year college degrees among children born to such groups over the past 40 years (Mettler, 2014).

Turning to political efficacy, EITC recipients voice significantly more negative assessments than nonbeneficiaries, as seen in Table 1, columns 3 and 4. The likelihood they agree that public officials don’t care about people like them increases by 7 percent and the likelihood they agree that they have no say in what government does increases by 8 percent over nonbeneficiaries. Figure 3 presents the predicted likelihood that respondents agree that government is responsive to them. It shows that the EITC recipients are the most likely to agree that government is not responsive, no matter their current income. Here again, we do not consider these results to indicate that the EITC caused lower political efficacy, but that it failed to elevate low efficacy.

At first blush these results may appear to be ironic given that over the past quarter-century public officials have purposefully directed very large sums of money to EITC recipients through the policy. Yet as a general assessment of government, such a reaction on the part of the working poor would be reasonable given the results of Martin Gilens’ (2012) research, showing how little representation the poor and even the middle class receive. Indeed income is a highly significant result in both models, with lower-income people more likely to agree that public officials don’t care about them. Here again, however, the delivery mechanism likely clouds beneficiaries’ sense that it is government that is responsive to them; rather, they are likely more inclined to feel that whomever helped them to file their taxes, such as H&R Block, is responsive. AFDC/TANF beneficiaries, by contrast, are not significantly different from nonbeneficiaries in these respects.

Examining other characteristics associated with external political efficacy in Table 1, those with less education had lower political efficacy as well, being 10–20 percent more likely to agree that public officials are not responsive and that they have no say, while older and younger Americans don’t differ substantively from each other. Those who had been charged with a felony expressed low political efficacy, particularly when asked if people like them have a say, where they are 18 percent less likely to agree, consistent with findings by Lerman and Weaver (2014). All
else equal, strong Democrats were 10 percent more likely to express low political efficacy than strong Republicans; possibly as polarization grows, such attitudes, like individuals’ trust in government, relate increasingly to whether one belongs to the same party as the president (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Overall, EITC recipients’ low sense of political efficacy is consistent with evidence from policies with “submerged” designs, indicating that recipients can use them and benefit from government without being aware that they did.

In a final model, the fifth column in Table 1, the results are presented as odds ratios, which can be interpreted as the likelihood that a respondent feels they pay their fair share, or less than their fair share, of taxes. In this case, EITC beneficiaries are 50 percent more likely than nonbeneficiaries to feel that they pay the right amount or less than their fair share in taxes, implying some awareness of their special tax status. Many EITC beneficiaries have no tax liability, so the fact that they do well by the tax system may be more evident. This attitude was significantly more prevalent also among low-income people, older individuals, whites, males, and those with higher degrees of education.

In sum, while EITC usage may result in a greater sense of social inclusion, it does not appear to do much to convince recipients that it is government that is enabling them to improve their lives or that it is responsive to them. This is an ironic result that highlights the invisibility of benefits, or at least their failure to engender much appreciation of government’s role in individuals’ lives. In the next section, we will probe their relationship to political participation.

**Figure 3.** Predicted Probabilities of External Efficacy, by Program Receipt, Across Income. Source: Social and Governmental Issues and Participation Study, 2008.
Now we consider how individuals’ political participation compares depending on whether they have experienced the EITC, welfare, both, or neither. Among EITC beneficiaries, 44 percent report both that they are registered to vote and that they typically vote in presidential elections, compared to just 29 percent of AFDC or TANF beneficiaries; in nonpresidential elections, the rates are 20 percent and 15 percent, respectively. Although both the EITC and AFDC/TANF are directed to low-income people, however, the beneficiaries may differ in some important respects—apart from policy experiences—that also affect their political participation. For example, the EITC beneficiaries likely have higher incomes and less dire personal circumstances and greater stability in their lives, making the barriers to political participation less formidable to them. Of course, the EITC adds to their resources, which may foster resource effects.

Table 2 presents the results of the analyses. In three out of four indicators, EITC beneficiaries are significantly more likely on average than nonbeneficiaries of EITC or welfare to participate. They are more likely to be registered to vote, to vote in nonpresidential elections, and to participate in a greater number of political activities. Only in presidential elections is their voter turnout indistinguishable from that of others with similar characteristics. Neither those who have used only AFDC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Relationship between Policy Receipt and Political Behavior</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Registered to Vote</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EITC only</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welfare only</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Both EITC and Welfare</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income (5 categories)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partisanship (5 pt, 1 = Rep)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current age</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age squared</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nonwhite</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Some college</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BA+</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Has felony</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Model 1 is weighted logistic regressions; average marginal effects presented, standard errors in parentheses. Models 2 & 3 are weighted OLS; average marginal effects presented, standard errors in parentheses. Model 4 is weighted Poisson regression; incidence rate ratios presented, confidence intervals in brackets. *p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
or TANF nor those who have benefitted from both welfare and the EITC differ significantly in participation from those who have used neither. In other respects, the determinants of political participation resemble well-established findings, showing that those who are older, have higher incomes, have more education, and are not Hispanic generally take part at higher rates. All else equal, women are significantly more likely to be registered and to vote in presidential elections, and men to participate in other political activities besides voting. Those who have been charged with a felony are significantly less likely to be registered to vote or to vote in elections, consistent with findings by Lerman and Weaver (2014).

Figure 4 presents the predicted values for being registered to vote and Figure 5, for voting in nonpresidential elections. As expected, the likelihood of being registered and voting in nonpresidential elections increases significantly as income rises. Recipients of the EITC are most likely to be registered to vote, with a likelihood of being registered to vote that starts at nearly 90 percent and rises to nearly full likelihood. They are also most likely to claim that they vote in nonpresidential elections, with higher expected levels of voting frequency than nonrecipients, and approaching “most of the time” at higher levels of current income.

We are left with paradoxical findings. EITC beneficiaries, relative to others with comparable socioeconomic status, are significantly more engaged in politics. Ironically, however, they are more likely to enter the political sphere carrying more
negative views of government. Although they are the beneficiaries of an expansive social policy, they largely view government as unresponsive to them and are more certain than others that it has not provided them with opportunities to improve their standard of living. Conversely, welfare recipients tend to be more cognizant and appreciative of government’s role, but that awareness fails to spur their civic engagement, and they are barely making their voices heard in the political process. Put differently, even a heightened sense that government is responsive fails to overcome the other hurdles they encounter to political participation.

In short, it does not appear to be an enhanced sense of political efficacy that is motivating EITC beneficiaries to participate in politics at higher rates; they may be mobilized instead by the sense of “social inclusion” that Halpern-Meekin and her collaborators (2015) identify, their increased financial resources emanating from the EITC or their greater earnings, or their pre-existing antipathy to government. Once again, use of policies with submerged designs fails to direct beneficiaries’ attention to the role government plays in their lives through the policy, leaving them to harbor antigovernment views. Yet these same individuals seem particularly inclined to make their voices known, loud and clear, in American politics.

We are left with findings regarding the EITC that are paradoxical at first blush, though on closer examination they do cohere with expectations implied by earlier scholarship on policy feedback. On the one hand, EITC beneficiaries are significantly

Figure 5. Predicted Probability of Voting in Nonpresidential Elections by Program Receipt, Across Income.
more negative than nonbeneficiaries in their assessments of government’s role in aiding them or public officials’ concern about them. The design of the policy in the tax code appears to leave them without a sense that government aided them. This implies that these individuals had particularly negative view of governments’ role in their lives, and EITC usage did little or nothing to abate it. On the other hand, consistent with Halpern-Meekin et al.’s (2015) expectations, EITC receipt is associated with higher rates of political participation than among nonbeneficiaries with comparable circumstances. Welfare recipients, by contrast, appear to be more cognizant and appreciative of government’s role than nonbeneficiaries, but consistent with existing literature, that awareness is not associated with higher political efficacy or political participation.

In the future, scholars should seek to collect panel data or at least to devise experiments that might permit more rigorous testing of the relationships between policy experiences and civic engagement than we have been able to consider. Such research designs could better examine over-time dynamics and control of endogeneity. In addition, qualitative studies of EITC beneficiaries, like that conducted by Halpern-Meekin et al. (2015), could enhance our understanding of how they experience, perceive, and respond to the policy, and the extent to which their view that they earned it influences their response to it.

Conclusion

The United States today is beset by a paradox: on the one hand, more Americans benefit from more social welfare policies than ever before, but on the other, Americans express rising anger toward government. In the wake of the 2016 election results, journalists focused attention on members of the white working class who supported presidential candidate Donald Trump in an effort to repudiate “politics-as-usual.” It is many of these same individuals who have benefitted from the increasingly generous EITC benefits extended over recent decades (Murray & Kneebone, 2017). The analysis in this paper helps illuminate why the EITC fails to mitigate recipients’ frustration with government.

The design and delivery of the EITC, embedded in the tax code, shrouds government’s role in aiding people. It does not convey messages to them about government responsiveness, and therefore, fails to mitigate their strongly negative attitudes. Welfare beneficiaries, by contrast, gained some modest positive messages about government’s role in helping them. Yet, the EITC beneficiaries do participate at higher rates than nonbeneficiaries, whereas welfare beneficiaries are indistinguishable from the latter. The greater social inclusion associated with EITC receipt may help prompt this form of greater civic engagement. Ironically, this means that those who benefit from government but are not aware of it are most likely to raise their voices in politics, whereas those who appreciate what government has done for them are not.

Over the past 45 years, Americans have been buffeted by substantial changes in labor markets and social welfare policy. Transformations in the economy, owing to globalization and technological development, paired with the demise of labor
unions and the minimum wage, have depressed wage growth for most American workers, particularly those in the lower rungs of the earnings distribution. Although lawmakers did scale back welfare, they proved responsive to low-wage workers by expanding upon the EITC. Yet, this seems to have won government little gratitude from recipients, who largely perceive government to be unresponsive to their needs.

In some follow-up interviews to our survey, we asked those who had used EITC to discuss their views about it. Several commented that they had appreciated the resources it provided, but resented it when their incomes surpassed the eligibility cap, such that they no longer qualified for it. Generally speaking, several respondents complained about how government seemed not to regard them as poor enough to be deserving of aid. These findings reveal that policymakers have yet to respond effectively to those struggling to reach or to remain within the middle class.

Many such Americans may feel, furthermore, that help from government in the form of social policies pales compared to the dignity and economic security associated with jobs with good pay, benefits, and opportunities for advancement. At the same time, the action that public officials have taken to help mitigate rising economic insecurity may be too hidden by its design for recipients to recognize them for what they are, social benefits provided by government.

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Notes

1. The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which many consider the gold standard of panel data that tracks program usage, is silent on issues of political attitudes and participation. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) permits assessment of life course usage of a limited set of direct spending programs, but not tax expenditures (Hirschl & Rank, 2002). The Fragile Families Child and Wellbeing Study does ask questions about welfare usage and incarceration, but not the EITC.

2. The study was conducted by the Cornell Survey Research Institute in September and October of 2008.

3. If respondents hesitated, interviewers provided descriptions of each policy in order to improve recall and accuracy of responses; respondents were also given a “don’t know” option.

4. Among the sample, 34.4 percent reported that they had ever used the EITC, and 13.9 percent reported that they had ever used AFDC or TANF.

5. The data were weighted through two adjustments: first, a weighting for nonresponse, relative to U.S. Census regions and Metropolitan Statistical Areas; and second, because of the oversamples, a weighting to calibrate the sample to population totals, using the following poststratification variables: age, gender, education, and ethnicity (Hispanic).

6. In the survey, those who volunteered the answer “neutral” were given a 3 and a 5-point scale was used, but fewer than 2 percent of respondents offered this voluntary answer, and we omitted those in this analysis, using a 4-point scale to reflect the options actually given to respondents.

7. As self-reported measures, these measures may be vulnerable to inflation among those for whom norms of participation run high. That said, we are relying on well-tested questions to assess it, drawn from the American National Election Study and the Civic Participation Study utilized by Verba et al. (1995). The wording for the question about voting in presidential elections, for example, is phrased to provide respondents greater ease in admitting they had not voted: “In talking to people about
elections, we find that they are sometimes not able to vote because they’re not registered, they don’t have time, or they have difficulty getting to the polls. Think about the presidential elections since you were old enough to vote. Have you voted in all of them, in most of them, in some of them, rarely voted in them, or have you never voted in a presidential election?” We find sufficient variation in responses to different types of participation questions, moreover, to indicate reliability.

8. The scale is “Republican” (1), “leaning Republican” (2), “independent” (3), “leaning Democrat” (4), and “Democrat” (5).

9. EITC recipients use a variety of other social policies, but compared to non-EITC recipients, their overall usage is relatively similar. Obviously they receive one more submerged-means tested policy than nonrecipients on average, and they receive slightly more visible and means-tested programs, but on average it is less than one program more than nonrecipients. Examining individual policies, we find that they have used unemployment insurance, disability, and food stamps at somewhat higher rates than others, indicative of their status as “the working poor,” yet using these programs does not set them apart; we also find that unemployment insurance, for example, is a commonly used policy across income groups. Overall, EITC-recipient program usage looks very similar to nonrecipient program usage.

10. Results for the highest income levels for individuals who have benefited from both EITC and TANF should be interpreted cautiously, as there are relatively few respondents who earn more than $50,000 per year (n = 12).

11. This null finding for AFDC/TANF varies with a negative finding by Soss (1999), but that study was based on the 1992 ANES, which asked about current program usage, whereas our study was based on a 2008 survey that asked about lifetime usage. Future research should probe these results further.

References


