

Government Program Usage and Political Voice*

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Objectives. Despite the scope of U.S. social spending, we know little about cumulative program usage among individuals or how it may influence their political attitudes or behavior. This article examines program usage among citizens and probes the association of usage with program assessment and the likelihood of voting. *Methods.* We examine these issues using the 2005 Maxwell Poll, which uniquely asked respondents about both usage of 18 social programs as well as attitudes about such programs and rates of political involvement. *Results.* The data indicate that direct experience of social programs is fairly common and widespread across the population, but beneficiaries of programs differ in their assessments compared to nonbeneficiaries. Most significant, after controlling for various demographic factors, we find that the greater the number of universal programs citizens have used, the greater the likelihood that they vote; conversely, the greater the number of means-tested programs they have used, the lower their likelihood of voting. *Conclusion.* Experiences of social programs may influence voter turnout and may help explain why young and less advantaged citizens vote less than older citizens. Trends in social provision may be fostering inequality of political voice, particularly among younger generations.

The welfare state has come to occupy a clearly discernable presence in American life. Government social spending constituted more than half the \$2.47 trillion federal budget for 2005. Funds spent on direct, visible social programs and tax expenditures amount to 17.1 percent of gross domestic product (Hacker, 2002:14–15). The majority of Americans have used some form of social provision by the time they have reached 65 (Rank and Hirschl, 2002).

Surprisingly, however, despite the abundance of aggregate data about government social spending and plentiful information about beneficiaries of specific programs, we do not have much sense of individuals' cumulative patterns of program usage. Neither do we know how program users differ

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from nonusers in their assessment of programs. Perhaps most important, despite ample scholarly attention to how other forms of socialization influence rates of political participation, we lack understanding of how the sum of individuals' first-hand experiences of social programs may affect such involvement. Despite considerable speculation about the differences between targeted and universal programs, for example, we do not know how citizens' repeated usage of one type or the other may influence their subsequent participation in the basic political act of voting.

To date, the absence of appropriate data has limited social scientists' ability to examine these issues. We are able to investigate them by using the results of a poll conducted by the Maxwell School in October 2005.¹ This poll asked a nationwide sample of those over 18 whether they have ever used various programs, how they assess them, how frequently they vote, and a variety of other questions, including some about inequality and demographics. This provides us a rare opportunity to consider how policy receipt influences attitudes about programs and political involvement.

We find that individuals who have benefited from social programs are significantly more convinced of their effectiveness than are nonbeneficiaries. Yet citizens' different patterns of program usage influence their rates of voter participation. Controlling for age, education, income, and other factors, the greater the number of programs that individuals have benefited from over time that are designed according to universal principles (meaning that they are not subject to income limits), the more likely they are to vote. Conversely, the greater the number of income-limited or means-tested programs that individuals have benefited from, the less likely they are to vote. These findings suggest that citizens' experiences of public programs across their lifetimes may yield socializing effects that in turn influence the extent to which they exercise their political voice.

¹The survey was conducted over the time period of October 2–23, 2005. A sample of telephone numbers, representative of households within the continental United States, was obtained from Survey Sampling, Inc. To reduce any bias involving those working in the evenings during the week, calls were made on the weekends of October 8–9, October 15–16, and October 22–23 during daytime hours. Otherwise, calls were made during the week within the hours of 5:30–9:00 P.M. within each time zone. Some numbers never connected with a household; some also yielded refusals and households where no adult was present each time calls were made. Each potential number (no refusal and not a bad number) was called at least three times. Overall, 10 percent of the initial sample numbers resulted in a completion. Women are more likely to answer the phone at home, so the “last birthday” method was used to randomize who was interviewed within each household. This involves asking for the individual within the household that most recently had a birthday. This approach also helps distribute contacts among different age groups. Six-hundred-seven respondents completed the survey. The sample of those contacted yielded some differences by age, sex, and race from the population over 18 within the continental United States. To adjust the sample, the results are weighted so the presence of age, sex, and race groups within the overall results is equivalent to that of the continental U.S. population. The survey script and data are available at (<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/campbell/Poll/CitizenshipPoll.htm>).

The Relationship Between Policy and Participation

Despite the vast amount of research on both public policy and mass political behavior in U.S. politics, only recently have scholars begun to consider how policies, once enacted, may influence citizens' political attitudes and behavior (Mettler and Soss, 2004). Through the resources they offer, policies affect citizens' capacity to participate in politics and their level of interest in doing so (Campbell, 2003; Pierson, 1993). In addition, the messages conveyed by program design and delivery influence individuals' political efficacy and inclination to participate, fostering or discouraging involvement (e.g., Schneider and Ingram, 1993, 1997; Mettler, 2005; Soss, 1999a). Program receipt can also affect the extent to which individuals are mobilized by political groups and leaders (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Such dynamics raise the question of how programs with different types of features may vary in their effects on beneficiaries' political participation.

Scholars have long surmised that means-tested programs convey very different messages to citizens than non-means-tested programs. Universal eligibility criteria may help incorporate beneficiaries as full members of society, bestowing dignity and respect on them. Conversely, means-tested programs may convey stigma and thus reinforce or expand beneficiaries' isolation (e.g., Skocpol, 1991; Wilson, 1987:154–55; Meyer, 1996; Orloff, 1993).

Some have speculated that such policies may also differ in terms of their effects on beneficiaries' political participation. Ingram and Schneider theorize that policies geared toward target populations with "advantaged" social constructions—such as social programs based on universal principles—bestow high levels of benefits and few burdens, whereas those intended for "dependents"—such as means-tested programs—do the reverse. As a result, the "advantaged" may be more likely to gain the message that they are valued citizens, to adopt an orientation to government that the political game is open, fair, and winnable, and thus to participate in conventional forms of participation at high levels. Conversely, "dependents" may be more likely to receive a message that they are helpless and needy, to adopt a disinterested and passive orientation to government, and thus to participate at low levels (Schneider and Ingram, 1993, 1997).

Over the past quarter-century, empirical research has lent support to these expectations, highlighting relationships between program benefits and civic participation or attitudes. Universal policies engender more widespread political support among citizens than means-tested ones (e.g., Meyer, 1996; Korpi and Palme, 1998; Rosenberg, 1982). At the individual level, beneficiaries of means-tested programs participate in fewer political acts overall than those receiving benefits based on universal principles (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995:208–11). Americans generally are less supportive of means-tested programs, particularly if they appear to foster dependence

rather than self-reliance, a trait that has been associated with welfare (Gilens, 1999:43–49, 53–55; Bobo and Smith, 1994:372, 394). Beneficiaries themselves receive the message that program receipt is stigmatizing (Goodban, 1985; Rogers-Dillon, 1995).

Recent research based on policy case studies has specified mechanisms that link program receipt with such attitudinal and participatory outcomes. Comparing beneficiaries of means-tested Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and non-means-tested Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Joe Soss found that AFDC users avoided embracing the identity of “welfare recipient,” preferring to think of themselves as “atypical,” whereas SSDI recipients did not feel compelled to hide their status (Soss, 1999b.). Among welfare beneficiaries, program benefits weakened external political efficacy, leading to lower voter turnout rates. By contrast, SSDI beneficiaries’ efficacy and voting rates were not significantly affected by program experiences (Soss, 1999a). Beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill’s education and training benefits—particularly those from low to moderate socioeconomic backgrounds—experienced a universal program characterized by generosity, fairness, and inclusivity, one that incorporated them more fully as citizens; their subsequent rates of political participation increased as a result (Mettler, 2005:ch. 4). Similarly, Social Security retirement benefits—also based on universal principles—boosted participation, especially among low-income seniors, largely by elevating their interest in politics (Campbell, 2003).

Scholars have yet to consider, however, how individuals’ *cumulative* experiences of several means-tested or non-means-tested programs might influence their political participation. Extensive scholarship explains how other types of socialization experiences affect political activity. For instance, individuals’ socioeconomic background—including such factors as education and parents’ rates of participation—influences their likelihood of involvement once they are adults (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980:ch. 3; Jennings and Niemi, 1981:ch. 4). Subsequent experiences—such as participation in the workforce or membership in civic organizations—offer skills and resources that boost individuals’ participation later in life (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba, 2001; Strate et al., 1989; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995:ch. 13). How might the accumulation of policy experiences affect individuals’ political participation?

As an initial step in addressing this question, in this article we consider how individuals’ cumulative usage of non-means-tested and means-tested programs affects the rate at which they vote. Although voting is only one of several forms of political participation that are worthy of consideration, we focus on it here for two reasons. First, voting is the most widespread act of participation among citizens generally and by less advantaged citizens in particular; thus it is critical to understand its determinants. Second, voter participation rates have declined sharply in recent decades among the young and less advantaged, and we wonder whether shifts in policy experiences

might be related to those trends (e.g., Freeman, 2004; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; though also see Leighley and Nagler, 1992; Zukin et al., 2006).

Overcoming Data Obstacles: The Maxwell Poll

The shortage of research examining how policies influence recipients' political behavior and attitudes emanates, in part, from lack of available data. Although numerous surveys conducted by government agencies inquire about program usage, they do not ask about political participation and attitudes. Conversely, while surveys like the National Election Studies and General Social Survey ask myriad questions about political behavior and views of government and policy, they almost never ask about policy experiences. Exceptions include the Citizen Participation Study of 1990, which asked only about current usage of eight individual programs, and three years in which the National Election Studies included a few questions about program usage, though with little continuity in wording across surveys.

In addition, surprisingly little knowledge exists regarding the scope and frequency of program receipt among the general population and how it varies among groups. Most assessments of public policies adopt a governmental perspective rather than a citizen's perspective: they present the total enrollment per program rather than, at the individual level, the sum of programs from which citizens have benefited (e.g., Congressional Budget Office, 2005; Moffitt, 2002). Moreover, the data tend to depict the number of citizens benefiting from particular programs at a moment in time but not to reveal the extent to which citizens may, over the course of their lifetimes, accumulate such experiences. One exception is a study by Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, which used the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to assess the likelihood that individuals, by various ages in their lives, had benefited from various social programs. As illuminating as this study is, it assesses usage only in means-tested programs and does not distinguish between individual and household usage (Rank and Hirschl, 2002).²

The Maxwell Poll permits us to examine similar questions, but with respect to a full array of 18 means-tested and non-means-tested programs, and—uniquely—it allows us to consider how policy receipt may be related to political participation and attitudes. The poll inquired about citizens' utilization of numerous programs that provide direct, visible benefits, such as Social Security and food stamps. It also asked about citizens' usage of the

²Rank and Hirschl excuse this latter shortcoming by noting that all household members may share in the resources derived from such benefits (2002:241). Although this may be the case, for our purposes it is insufficient information because the participatory effects we wish to study may emanate particularly from the interpretive messages experienced directly by the actual beneficiary.

home mortgage interest deduction, a key component of the growing “hidden welfare state” of tax expenditures (Howard, 1997).³

The specific question in the Maxwell Poll that asked about policy usage is:

Speaking of government programs, I'd like to ask you about your experience with several programs. Could you tell me for each of the following if you or anyone in your immediate household/family (such as your brothers and sisters, your children, or your parents), have *ever* received some benefit/payment from the program?

Respondents who said someone had used a program were then asked to specify whether they themselves had done so. Because our interest is in how individuals' experiences of policies affect participation, we coded only those responses as usage.⁴

The Use of Government Programs

We begin by considering overall usage of specific government programs and variation in usage by income, as shown in Table 1.⁵ Many federal social

³The survey also asked if respondents ever used the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program. The percentage indicating usage was relatively high, but after considering the characteristics of such individuals—which included many high-income individuals—we have doubts about the validity of the responses. We suspect that many individuals may have assumed that EITC referred to some general tax credit for which they qualified, or simply their refund on their tax return. Thus, we have chosen to exclude these responses. We urge that in future research scholars find ways to more clearly identify EITC recipients. We would note that we conducted the statistical analyses in this article both with and without the inclusion of EITC among means-tested programs and its presence did not change the results.

⁴Our concerns about recall in posing such questions are lessened by considering the findings of other scholars, which show that inaccuracies in reporting program usage do not grow with time. See Marquis and Moore (2002:14–15).

⁵It should be noted that self-reported use of government programs is subject to error, though researchers who have checked such reports against administrative data find the error rate to be low and to involve underreporting as much or more than overreporting. See Marquis and Moore (2002) and Mathiowetz, Brown, and Bound (2001:171–73). Our aim, however, is not to reach estimates of program usage (our survey sample is too small to do this with confidence), but to consider, more broadly, the variation and relationships between beneficiaries of different types of programs. Although the Rank and Hirschl study (2002) undertakes a similar task, the differences between their approach and ours thwart the possibilities for direct comparisons in usage rates for programs. First, as mentioned briefly above, their study does not focus on individual usage but on usage within households. As they note: “Our measure of welfare use was constructed from a series of questions asked by the PSID interviewers as to whether the household has received any cash or in-kind assistance at some point” (2002:241). For example, they report one question as follows: “With regard to food stamps, respondents were asked, ‘Did you (or anyone else in your family) use government food stamps at any time?’” (2002:241). The Maxwell Poll, by contrast, asked respondents to specify whether they or only other members of their family benefited from a program. Second, the programs investigated by the Maxwell Poll overlap only partially with those Rank and Hirschl examined. For example, they included SSI, while the Maxwell Poll did not; conversely, the Maxwell Poll probed usage of several non-means-tested programs. Acknowledging those differences in the data, we note that the Maxwell Poll response rates are fairly similar to those obtained by Rank and Hirschl: 55 percent of Maxwell Poll respondents

TABLE 1
Usage of Government Programs: All and by Income Levels

Program	Income Levels					
	All	<25,000	25-49,999	50-99,999	100,000+	<50,000
Student loan	39.2	38.6	35.8	47.4	41.8	36.6
Mortgage deduction	38.1	11.2	26.2	48.8	62.9	21.6
Unemployment comp	32.5	38.4	40.0	35.1	15.0	39.5
Social Security	30.4	51.6	39.9	18.9	17.2	43.5
College grant	28.7	38.6	31.2	25.3	28.2	33.5
Medicare	21.9	32.4	28.2	14.0	18.2	29.5
Worker's comp	12.9	12.8	17.9	12.5	6.3	16.3
Veteran's benefits	13.0	5.5	10.3	19.8	9.1	8.8
Food stamps	12.5	35.9	15.4	5.1	4.9	21.7
GI Bill	10.0	.7	6.9	18.9	10.2	5.0
Disability	9.9	25.9	13.3	3.7	5.0	17.2
Medicaid	9.5	22.4	15.7	3.4	1.4	17.8
WIC	9.5	7.4	19.7	3.6	6.8	15.8
Welfare/public assistance	9.1	9.1	19.4	3.6	1.5	16.2
Public housing	6.5	23.4	8.4	1.4	0	13.0
Government pension	6.1	5.7	7.2	4.1	5.2	6.7
Head Start	6.3	5.2	14.6	.5	5.4	11.7
Small business loan	1.8	0	2.6	.7	4.5	1.8

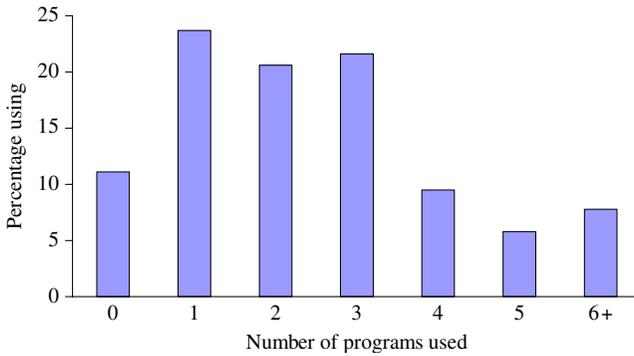
programs have been used by substantial percentages of the population. Three programs—the mortgage deduction, student loans to attend college, and unemployment compensation—have been used at some time by more than one-third of those over 18. Although some may think of social programs as existing primarily for the poor, substantial percentages of Americans with current incomes between \$50,000 (roughly the median family income) and \$99,999, as well as those with current incomes over \$100,000 have used many of these programs.

Program use varies considerably, however, in the extent of coverage across income groups.⁶ The mortgage deduction has been used at some time by

reported usage of one of the means-tested programs within their *families*, while Rank and Hirschl found that 65 percent by age 65 reported usage of such programs *plus SSI* and within their *households*, this latter category likely being somewhat broader than that of families. It is likely that the slight difference in the figures owes to these differences in the question wording and programs included.

⁶Respondents were also asked about their demographic circumstances, such as income, which figure prominently in our analysis. It should be noted that whereas respondents to the survey reported their *current* income, the questions about program receipt asked about experiences in their lives to date, which might have included points when they belonged to different income groups. This would explain why some small percentages of high-income individuals reported having used means-tested programs—programs for which they would not currently qualify but may have in the past.

FIGURE 1
Frequency of Program Usage



62.9 percent of those with \$100,000 or more in family income, but by only 11.2 percent of those making less than \$25,000. Unemployment compensation has been used by over one-third of those with incomes below \$100,000, while student loans have been used with similar frequency across income groups.

Not only is participation in individual public programs relatively high, but many people have used multiple programs. As shown by Figure 1, only 11.1 percent of respondents have never used any of the 18 programs asked about in the survey. The percentage that has used one program is 23.7, while 20.6 percent have used two, 21.6 percent have used three, and 7.8 percent have used six or more programs.

Individuals in different income groups vary in terms of the total number of social programs they have used, as seen in Table 2. Overall, the average number of all programs used is greater among those with lower incomes, yet those differences may be less than expected. The average ranges from a low of 1.9 among those with family incomes of \$100,000 and above to 3.0 among those with incomes below \$25,000.

Next, we considered whether this pattern differs depending on whether program eligibility is determined by income qualifications or not. Non-means-tested programs include Social Security,⁷ Medicare, student loans, veterans' benefits, unemployment insurance, government pensions, workers' compensation, the G.I. Bill, and the mortgage interest deduction. Means-tested programs include Medicaid, welfare, food stamps, public housing, and WIC.⁸ We added the programs in each grouping together to create

⁷Social Security has greater usage among those with lower incomes because the majority of beneficiaries are retired individuals with fixed incomes. Overall, however, the non-means-tested programs are used at similar rates by individuals across income levels.

⁸We have omitted responses indicating "college grant" usage because we were unsure whether respondents were thinking of publicly or privately funded monies. We left out

TABLE 2

Program Usage by Income: All, Non-Means-Tested and Means-Tested Programs

	Average	Distribution for Number of Programs Used			
		0	1–2	3–4	5 Plus
<i>All Programs</i>					
< \$25,000	3.0	5.4	37.5	37.8	19.3
\$25–49,999	3.0	9.7	38.0	31.3	21.0
\$50–99,999	2.4	7.9	47.5	35.4	9.2
\$100,000+	1.9	18.5	52.0	22.8	6.8
<i>Non-Means-Tested Programs</i>					
< \$25,000	1.9	11.6	55.5	30.6	2.2
\$25–49,999	2.1	20.0	47.2	27.4	5.4
\$50–99,999	2.2	7.6	52.1	35.1	5.3
\$100,000+	1.7	22.1	51.7	21.7	4.5
<i>Means-Tested Programs</i>					
< \$25,000	1.0	42.0	40.9	15.2	1.9
\$25–49,999	1.0	50.2	36.1	13.7	0
\$50–99,999	0.2	87.4	12.1	0.6	0
\$100,000+	0.2	82.8	15.5	1.7	0

NOTE: The programs included in “All” are Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare, student loans for college, veterans’ benefits, unemployment compensation, government pensions, workers’ compensation, food stamps, public housing or subsidized housing, G.I. Bill, mortgage deduction, Head Start, and WIC. The means-tested programs are Medicaid, welfare, food stamps, public housing, Head Start, and WIC. The others are non-means-tested programs. The averages for non-means-tested and means-tested usage do not always add to the average for all programs by income group because of variations in *N*s.

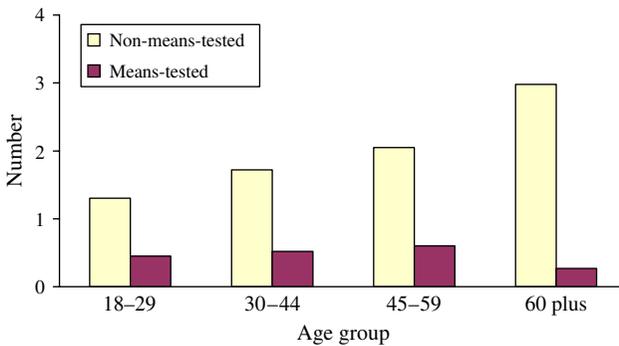
measures of program usage by individuals, as reported in Table 2. Usage rates of the non-means-tested programs are fairly uniform across income groups, varying only from 1.7 on average among the most affluent to 1.9 on average among those with the lowest incomes. By contrast, and as we would expect, usage of the means-tested programs decreases significantly as income increases: 17 percent of those with incomes less than \$25,000 have used three or more such programs, while only 2 percent of those making \$100,000 or more have used three or more of these programs.

Individuals’ experience with means- and non-means-tested programs varies considerably with age, reflecting the interaction of when programs were established and expanded and when people were born. As Figure 2 shows, older individuals are much more likely to have used non-means than means-tested programs. Longevity enables individuals to qualify for the major universal programs—Social Security and Medicare. The current generation

“disability” because it might have included both SSDI and SSI, the former being non-means-tested and the latter being means-tested. Finally, we left out “small business loan” because we were uncertain about qualification procedures and the number of cases was very small in any case.

FIGURE 2

Average Number Programs Used, by Age and Type of Program



of older Americans are also more likely to have served in the military and therefore to have qualified for the G.I. Bill and veterans' benefits than members of younger generations. Indeed, among those who are currently age 60 and above, 37 percent have used the G.I. Bill compared to 13 percent of those in the 18-29-year-old group. Thirty-two percent of those over 60 have used veterans' benefits compared to 9 percent of those in the youngest group.

Those in the oldest age group have actually utilized *fewer* means-tested programs across their lifetimes than members of any of the younger age groups, even the very youngest. This disparity may exist in part because some of the means-tested programs did not exist or were less extensive in coverage when these people were very young. In addition, the older generation spent their working years at a time when income volatility was less and when generous employee benefits were more widespread than has been the case in recent decades (Hacker, 2004). Interestingly, this means that members of each age group have experienced very different ratios of non-means-tested to means-tested programs.

Citizens' Perceptions of Social Programs

Government programs are often embroiled in public controversies about their worth but, in fact, we know little about how users themselves perceive programs compared to nonusers. Maxwell Poll respondents were asked, for six specific programs, if they regard each as "generally effective" in responding to "specific social problems or needs." It was then possible to sort responses by whether individuals reported having ever used the program. Table 3 indicates the percentages rating programs "generally effective" by usage status. Rates of approval vary by program, with 100 percent of Head Start beneficiaries considering that program to be "generally effective"

TABLE 3
 Percentage Viewing Government Programs as “Generally Effective” Among
 Recipients and Nonrecipients

Program	Recipients	Nonrecipients	Difference
Welfare/public assistance	61.2	27.9	33.3*
Head Start	98.5	67.3	31.2*
Public housing	72.2	42.2	30.0*
Medicaid	78.4	55.3	23.1*
Food stamps	67.6	48.1	19.5*
College grants & loans	76.7	72.1	4.6

*Significant at 0.05 or less.

NOTE: These are responses to the following question: “I’d like to ask you about some specific programs that are intended to respond to specific social problems or needs. For each could you indicate if you think the program is generally effective, only somewhat effective, or not very effective?” The question was followed by the names and descriptions of several programs. The tests of significance are derived by grouping all other responses (only somewhat, not very effective, and no opinion together as 0).

compared to only 60.9 percent of welfare or public assistance beneficiaries. In each case, however, beneficiaries are far more convinced of program effectiveness than nonrecipients, with gaps in opinion between the two groups as large as 33.8 percent for welfare, 30.0 percent for Head Start, and 23.6 percent for Medicaid. Clearly, beneficiaries themselves are much more likely to value the programs that benefit them. This disparity between beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries underscores the need to examine whether beneficiaries are as likely as nonbeneficiaries to make their preferences known through political action.

Assessment of *specific* government programs varies with usage; however, how do individuals’ views about the *general* efficacy of such programs vary in relationship to their cumulative experiences of policies? As an indicator of general assessments, respondents were asked:

There are lots of government programs (Head Start for young children, loans to go to college, job training) to try to create more equality of opportunity. Generally speaking, do you think these programs help a lot or do you think the most important matter is individual motivation?

To create a scale of responses, those who said “programs help a lot” were coded as 3, while those who chose “individual motivation most important” were coded as 1. Those who said “both are important” were recorded as a 2. Overall, 37.0 percent chose “programs help a lot,” 45.6 percent chose “individual motivation most important,” and 17.4 percent chose “both.” Opinion is clearly divided about the value of social programs.

We use these responses to consider whether individuals who have had more experiences of means-tested programs over time may differ in their assessment from those who have had more experiences of non-means tested

TABLE 4

The Effects of Demographics, Political Traits, and Program Usage on Opinion About Government Programs

Variables	b	t Value	Sig. Level	B
Education	0.14	2.98	0.00	0.15
Female	0.21	2.43	0.02	0.12
Age	0.02	5.03	0.00	0.27
Income	-0.03	-0.83	0.41	-0.04
White	-0.22	-2.32	0.02	-0.11
Self-defined ideology	-0.20	-3.21	0.00	-0.15
Party identification	-0.08	-2.12	0.04	-0.10
Number non-means-tested programs	-0.01	-0.34	0.73	-0.02
Number means-tested programs	0.13	2.88	0.00	0.15

NOTE: $R^2 = 0.15$; $N = 420$. Means-tested programs consist of Medicaid, welfare, food stamps, public housing, Head Start, and WIC. Non-means-tested programs consist of Social Security, Medicare, student loan, veteran benefits, unemployment insurance, government pension, workers' compensation, G.I. Bill, mortgage deduction of interest.

programs. We categorize programs as shown at the bottom of Table 4 and then add together individuals' number of experiences with each type of program. We control for age, sex, income (on a seven-point scale ranging from "under \$25,000" to "150,000 or more"), education (on a four-point scale for "high school or less" to "graduate work/degree"), and race (1 = white, 0 = all other). Since reactions to government are increasingly polarized along partisan lines (Jacobson, 2007), we also included self-defined ideology (1 = liberal, 2 = moderate, 3 = conservative), and party identification (1 = Democrat, 2 = other, 3 = Republican).⁹

The most interesting finding in this analysis is that despite the stigmatizing qualities that means-tested programs may have, they appear to exert a salutary impact on individuals' views that government can help ameliorate inequality. Individuals who have benefited from a greater number of such programs are more convinced of the value of government programs generally in fostering equal opportunity. The results also revealed that females and older individuals assess government programs in a more positive light than do males and the young. In addition, whites, conservatives, and those who identify with the Republican Party have negative attitudes regarding the value of programs.

Policy Receipt and Voting

We have seen, then, that a considerable percentage of Americans have had direct experiences of government programs; those who have used particular

⁹We ran the results using OLS regression and logistic analyses. The relative impacts of variables and the significance of the specific variables are virtually identical.

TABLE 5
Percentage Voting "Always" by Government Program Used

Program	Recipients	Nonrecipients	Difference
Food stamps	46.6	73.9	- 27.3*
Medicaid	56.4	72.4	- 16.6*
Welfare/public assistance	58.5	72.0	- 13.2*
WIC	70.5	70.6	- 0.1
Student loans	71.4	70.5	0.9
Unemployment benefits	72.0	70.5	1.5
Workers' compensation	74.0	70.1	3.9
Public housing	74.9	70.2	4.7
Head Start	76.5	70.4	6.1
Mortgage deduction	78.3	67.8	10.5*
Social Security	78.5	67.6	10.9*
Medicare	79.8	68.3	11.5*
Government pension	82.0	70.4	11.6
Veteran benefits	87.1	68.3	18.8*
G.I. Bill	92.4	68.3	24.1*

*Less than 0.05 level of significance.

NOTE: Percentages are those saying they always vote. The tests of significance are derived by grouping all other voting frequencies (usually, sometimes, or not at all as 0). Although "usually" may seem as if it involves fairly regular voting, there is clear overreporting of voting, so only "always" is used as an indicator of voting. Over 70 percent say they always vote and 19 percent say they usually vote. Given that presidential elections draw only 50–60 percent, even the "always" rate overstates actual voting. Then, usage of a program is cross-tabbed with the voting dummy variable, and the chi-square probability is reported.

programs assess those programs more positively than nonusers; and those who have used more means-tested programs have significantly more positive attitudes about the general value of programs. Our central question is whether those who have used more programs are more or less inclined to register their views through voting. Do citizens who place greater value on social programs participate in politics as much or more than other citizens, such that their reactions register with elected representatives and the programs they value receive more support?

We examine this question first by comparing voter participation between users and nonusers of specific programs, as shown in Table 5. We find considerable variation by program. In the case of each of the means-tested programs with the exception of WIC, beneficiaries are less likely to vote than are nonbeneficiaries. The difference is particularly large in the case of food stamps, where the gap between beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries is 27.3 percentage points, followed by Medicaid (a gap of 16.6 points) and welfare/public assistance, for which the gap is 13.2 percentage points.

Conversely, beneficiaries of non-means-tested social programs typically vote at higher levels than do nonbeneficiaries. For instance, 78.5 percent of Social Security beneficiaries report that they vote "always" and 79.8 percent

of Medicare beneficiaries vote “always,” compared to 67.6 percent and 68.3 percent of nonbeneficiaries, respectively. This coheres with Campbell’s findings that both programs prompt high levels of political involvement (2003). G.I. Bill beneficiaries have the highest turnout rates, with 92.4 percent reporting that they vote “always”; they vote at a rate that is 24.1 percent higher than that of nonbeneficiaries. This is consistent with research finding that the program yielded positive effects on participation among World War II veterans (Mettler, 2005).

These findings show that beneficiaries of different programs do not exercise their voices equally at the ballot booth. Recipients of non-means-tested policies are far more likely to vote than are recipients of means-tested policies. It is worth noting that two of the programs whose beneficiaries are least likely to vote—food stamps and welfare—have both seen deterioration in benefits in recent decades (Mettler and Milstein, 2007). To the extent that beneficiaries of such programs are less vocal in elections, their needs may be underrepresented by elected officials.

To provide a more rigorous assessment of the impact of different programs, we conduct a multivariate logistic analysis of the association between program use and voting. We include the same demographic variables as used in Table 4. In addition, we assess whether an individual is a member of a union, married, white, or currently working, all factors that have been demonstrated to have a positive bivariate association with inclination to vote (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995:187–91; Flanigan and Zingale, 2005). We include length of residency in the community because this captures individuals’ degree of integration in the area in which they live.¹⁰ We also include whether someone is partisan (identifies as a Democrat or Republican) or ideological (identifies as a liberal or conservative) because those with stronger views about politics tend to be more engaged.

As shown in Table 6, the outcomes for the demographic variables and controls reflect what we would expect. Age and income are significant and positively associated with voting, and partisans are more likely to vote. Married individuals are significantly less likely to vote. The relationships of some traits, such as education and length of time in the community, are not significant, but that may be because we have included so many variables to ensure that we have as many controls as possible.

The key question for this analysis is how individuals’ cumulative experiences with different types of government programs are associated with voting frequency. The results are intriguing. Those who have used more non-means-tested programs are more likely to report that they vote. That relationship is significant and has a relatively large standardized coefficient.

¹⁰We would have liked to use even more demographic variables, such as homeownership, but the survey did not ask about that. Homeownership is, however, highly correlated with income, education, and length of time in the community, so we are fairly confident that the presence of these controls indirectly captures the impact of homeownership.

TABLE 6
Demographics, Political Traits, Program Usage, and Voting Always

Variables	b	Wald chi-sq.	Sig. Level	B
Education	-0.08	0.30	0.59	-0.04
Female	0.16	0.37	0.54	0.04
Age	0.03	10.42	0.00	0.31
Income	0.28	8.87	0.00	0.25
Length of time in community	0.01	1.30	0.25	0.10
Currently working	0.28	1.23	0.27	0.08
Union member	0.01	0.00	0.98	0.00
White	-0.39	1.80	0.18	-0.10
Married	-0.79	6.76	0.01	-0.22
Partisan	0.63	5.96	0.01	0.16
Ideological	0.27	1.22	0.27	0.08
Number non-means-tested programs	0.28	8.68	0.01	0.23
Number means-tested programs	-0.35	7.54	0.01	-0.21

NOTE: All respondents, pseudo $R^2 = 0.17$; $N = 398$. Means-tested programs consist of Medicaid, welfare, food stamps, public housing, Head Start, and WIC. Non-means-tested programs consist of Social Security, Medicare, student loan, veteran benefits, unemployment insurance, government pension, workers' compensation, G.I. Bill, and mortgage deduction of interest.

In contrast, those who have more experiences with means-tested programs, even after controlling for numerous predictors of voting frequency, are significantly less likely to vote. The evidence supports the hypothesis that experience with such programs discourages participation in this basic activity of civic engagement.

Age and Varying Experiences with Government Programs

Finally, we consider whether an individual's age, in as much as it is related to differences in cumulative experiences of public programs over time, might affect voting participation. Both the actual characteristics of programs and the nature of discourses relating to them have been in transition in recent decades. These changes may have exacerbated the differences in the effects of means-tested and non-means-tested programs, with impacts that vary between older and younger individuals.

First, the disparity in resource effects between such programs has likely grown over time. The real value of average benefits in several prominent non-means-tested programs—such as the home mortgage interest deduction, Social Security, and Medicare—has increased or remained constant since the 1970s. By contrast, the real value of benefits in various means-tested programs—including Pell Grants, welfare, and food stamps—has deteriorated as policymakers have neglected to legislate increases to keep

pace with inflation (Mettler and Milstein, 2007; Toder, 1999).¹¹ Importantly, these changes have occurred in the context of rising economic inequality, such that the decline in the value of programs for the poor may have been especially consequential among younger citizens.

Second, the differences in interpretive effects have likely increased as well. Beginning in the early 1980s, recipients of some non-means-tested programs, such as Social Security, became emboldened in the exercise of political voice as they managed successfully to protect their programs from proposed cutbacks (Campbell, 2003). Conversely, some means-tested social programs endured intense criticism during the 1980s and 1990s as conservatives identified them with the demise of personal responsibility (e.g., Murray, 1984). In the case of welfare, negative messages emanating from the media and public officials fostered a shift in the program's public image (Bobo and Smith, 1994; Gilens, 1999; Hancock, 2004). This may have in turn heightened its stigma, making recipients even less disposed toward political action (Soss, 1999b). The more restrictive rules that were enacted as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 may also have increased the program's negative impact on recipients' sense of political efficacy. Considering such effects cumulatively, the disparity in the effects of usage of means-tested and non-means-tested programs may be particularly pronounced among younger recipients.

To assess whether the effects of program usage have changed over time, we divided the sample between individuals under 50 and 50 and over, as of 2005. This division is somewhat arbitrary but it roughly divides the sample into those born before the 1960s and after, thus distinguishing between those who first became eligible to vote for president when Jimmy Carter faced Ronald Reagan in 1980, compared to those who could vote in earlier elections. Those under age 50 have grown up during a period of conservative ascendance, exposed more regularly to negative commentary about means-tested social programs. This age division creates roughly equal sample sizes for the two groups.

Table 7 reports the results of separate analyses of the determinants of voting among each age group. Among those 50 and over, neither an increase in the number of non-means-tested nor of means-tested programs yielded a significant effect. Increases in both have a negative relationship with voting, but neither was large in effect or significance. For those under age 50, by contrast, the impact of program usage is highly significant. As usage of non-means-tested programs increases, the tendency to vote increases. As usage of means-tested programs increases, there is a substantial and significant decline in voter participation. Thus, after controlling for numerous demographic and political traits, it appears that policy experiences have a stronger impact on turnout among younger Americans, and that effect

¹¹There are some exceptions to the rule, such as Medicaid, which has been expanded to children over this period. See Howard (2006:95–98).

TABLE 7

Demographics, Political Traits, Program Usage, and Voting Frequency, for Those Over and Under 50

Variables	b	t Value	Sig. Level	B
<i>Respondents Over 50 (pseudo R² = 0.13)</i>				
Education	0.28	0.94	0.33	0.15
Female	-0.66	1.16	0.28	-0.16
Income	0.39	2.41	0.12	0.31
Length of time in community	-0.00	0.11	0.74	-0.04
Currently working	-0.09	0.02	0.88	-0.02
Union member	0.35	0.11	0.74	0.05
White	-17.08	0.00	0.99	-3.19
Married	-0.83	1.62	0.20	-0.19
Partisan	-1.17	4.63	0.03	0.24
Ideological	-0.02	0.00	0.96	-0.01
Number non-means-tested programs	-0.06	0.09	0.77	-0.04
Number means-tested programs	-0.13	0.24	0.63	-0.06
<i>Respondents Under 50 (pseudo R² = 0.22)</i>				
Education	-0.27	2.43	0.12	-0.16
Female	0.25	0.62	0.43	0.08
Income	0.31	8.20	0.00	0.31
Length of time in community	0.03	4.94	0.03	0.24
Currently working	0.39	1.51	0.22	0.12
Union member	0.43	0.99	0.32	0.10
White	-0.00	0.00	0.14	-0.07
Married	-0.58	2.61	0.11	-0.19
Partisan	0.32	1.00	0.32	0.10
Ideological	0.58	3.85	0.05	0.19
Number non-means-tested programs	0.62	17.41	0.00	0.55
Number means-tested programs	-0.57	11.53	0.00	-0.40

NOTE: $N = 398$. Means-tested programs consist of Medicaid, welfare, food stamps, public housing, Head Start, and WIC. Non-means-tested programs consist of Social Security, Medicare, student loan, veteran benefits, unemployment insurance, government pension, workers' compensation, G.I. Bill, and mortgage deduction of interest.

diverges sharply depending on the type of programs from which individuals have benefited.

Conclusion

These data do not allow us to specify the underlying mechanism through which policy experiences may be influencing rates of voting, but we can speculate about the reasons for these outcomes in light of findings of the existing literature discussed earlier.¹² Those who have accumulated many

¹²Previous scholars have found political efficacy to serve as the pathway through which policies influence participation rates. See Soss (1999a). Unfortunately, the Maxwell Poll lacked political efficacy questions.

experiences of inclusive programs that treat them with dignity and respect have likely gained a stronger sense of membership as citizens and greater confidence that the political system is responsive to people like them. These factors, in turn, likely make them more likely to vote. Conversely, those who have time and again experienced treatment in a program administered in a stigmatizing manner may have become conditioned to believe that their voices do not matter (Soss, 1999b).

These findings suggest that older citizens may vote at higher levels in part because of their lifetime of positive experiences of government. Seniors today are likely to have benefited from numerous programs that treated them as first-class citizens, full members of the polity, and to have gained valuable resources as a result, thus boosting both their inclination and capacity for political involvement. Younger cohorts of citizens, by contrast, are more likely to have the few positive messages they have gleaned about their role as citizens offset by the contradictory message attained through their higher rates of usage of stigmatizing means-tested programs. In short, the accumulation of messages that members of different cohort groups have received from policies across their lifetimes may encourage them to have different levels of political efficacy and thus different rates of voter participation.

Viewed in tandem, the results we have seen regarding citizens' attitudes about government programs, on the one hand, and their voter turnout, on the other, present a paradox: the same individuals whose experiences of means-tested programs appears to have given them more confidence in government programs are also *less* likely to vote. Thus, the political voices of those who have a positive message to convey about government are less likely to be heard. This may leave the programs from which such individuals benefit less well represented in the political process, such that they are less likely to have their benefits increased to maintain their value in light of inflation and more likely to become subject, over time, to more punitive and restrictive rules and procedures. Although the process of democratic representation is by no means straightforward and linear in U.S. political institutions, nonetheless to the extent that the composition of the electorate influences the actions of elected officials, recipients of means-tested programs likely have their preferences represented less fully than those of other citizens (Hill and Leighley, 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson, 1995; Hicks and Swank, 1992). Such dynamics may thus imperil the functioning of U.S. democracy, exacerbating political inequality.

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