4-28-2023

Policy Design and the Lived Experience of the Poor: A Test of Policy Feedback Effects and Efficacy

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Recommended Citation

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by

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Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

Department of Political Science
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA

April 28, 2023

Advised by Dr. Jennifer Erkulwater

Abstract

As American political actors have framed poverty as a choice made by the unambitious, it has become clear that our society has a pervasive misunderstanding of poverty. Policy Feedback Theorists assert that the design of our welfare policies contributes to this fallacy, raising the question of whether there is a relationship between policy design and the way citizens act and feel. This thesis uses quantitative data from the American Citizen Participation Study and qualitative data from two original interviews to test the existence of "policy feedback effects" on program participants' feelings of efficacy. Quantitative evidence suggests limited evidence of policy feedback effects among a homogenous sample, but I am unable to generalize these results for the broader population. Qualitative evidence corroborates the existence of feedback, but the data fail to make specific connections to program design. Overall, this inquiry highlights the need for methodological advancement within policy feedback theory in order to manage the democratic and human implications of policy feedback effects.

Introduction

"There's no work requirements whatsoever. There's no education requirements whatsoever for a better skillset. Don't you think, if we're going to help the children, that the people should make some effort?" (Perrett and Zeballos-Roig 2021)

These words are from Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV), a current United States Senator and an opponent of expanding the Child Tax Credit (CTC), a federal cash-assistance program for poor and middle-class families with children. In an interview for CNN's program "State of the

Union," Manchin condemned the CTC for its inclusive eligibility - parents with dependent children may collect federal aid by simply meeting an income test. Though this statement was given in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (when the CTC kept three-million kids out of poverty in the first-month post-expansion), it's reminiscent of political rhetoric from the 1980s. As Ronald Reagan lambasted welfare for being an enabler of "Welfare Queens" - a racialized term for a free-loading, sleazy mother crying poverty from the front seat of her Cadillac - he encouraged a perception of the poor in American politics that was characterized by a fundamental misunderstanding of reality. But unlike crimped hair and Cabbage Patch Kids, the misguided idea that the poor aren't really poor didn't die at the end of the 20th century. This idea still pervades contemporary political discourse - evidenced by Senator Manchin's comments questioning whether parents raising their children through a global pandemic and a deep economic recession were really putting in any "effort."

In fact, according to a 2019 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 47% percent of Americans agreed that their opinion on welfare most closely aligned with the statement "Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return." Of course, political scientists and others familiar with the welfare state know that since the height of the movement to end welfare in the 1990s, many welfare programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have been reformed to require employment and reduce dependency. Many would also recognize that despite the inaccuracy of the above statement concerning program requirements, the bigger inaccuracy still is the idea that anybody in poverty "has it easy." As economic mobility declines and wealth inequality expands, millions of families remain trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, and nearly half the American public seems unsympathetic to their plight.

The discontinuity between the public perception of poverty and the lived experience of the poor has been emphasized through ethnographic research on the poor and political science research on politicians' rhetoric and public opinion. In seeking to understand why this discontinuity exists, public policy experts have joined the conversation, questioning how particular aspects of policy design might determine the broader effects of policy in citizens' lives - how does policy design influence how the public views recipients of a certain policy? How does policy design influence how recipients view themselves? Largely, these questions have been answered by using the most prominent welfare policies in the public consciousness - TANF, and, formerly, Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), contrasting this program with the most popular of the middle-class programs, Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI), more popularly known just Social Security. However, because of the welfare-slashing policies seen throughout the past two decades, especially the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (PRWORA), TANF is now a fraction of the policy it used to be, and most of the American welfare state is administered via other programs. Scholars also suggest that TANF is unusually controversial and might not be representative of other programs for the poor. Resultantly, to understand the implications of welfare policy on policy recipients *today*, it's crucial to include other policies in the dialogue.

This paper will examine the question: How does public policy socially construct citizens' feelings of efficacy? The answer to this question has crucial implications for the average American citizen. In particular, policy feedback could have consequences on the basic functioning of democracy. Policy, especially policy that confers government aid, has a demonstrated ability to shape citizens' perceptions of identity, value, and of the government; is it aidful or harmful, accessible or impenetrable, benevolent or ill-intentioned? Together, these

perceptions determine our feelings of belonging in our communities and our feeling of agency in deciding our fates. In other words, they determine our sense of political efficacy. Thus, if policy can shape a citizen's belief in the most basic, foundational idea of democracy - that every person has indispensable political influence - then policy feedback can shape the health of our democracy as a whole.

Put simply, policy can stimulate or suppress efficacy and thereby votes. Resultantly, there are practical concerns regarding how policy feedback effects can promote uneven political development by discouraging civic participation from certain groups. This is a pressing reality when considering that eligibility to receive welfare benefits is largely determined by means tests, resulting in policy recipient groups that are determined along socioeconomic and, accordingly, racial lines. Thus, if the strength or character of efficacy-related feedback effects differs based on policy design, then policy might manipulate voting behavior to the extent that the interests of marginalized groups are further underrepresented in the democratic process. By examining programs for the poor other than TANF, this paper will expand our understanding of the American welfare system in the aggregate, the relationship between policy design and the political identities of low-income residents, and the subsequent risks of skewed political development.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section presents a detailed literature review of previous scholarship related to the topic, followed by a section discussing the methodological approach of this study. The following section will present my quantitative approach to studying policy feedback theory, using regression analysis to determine the relationship between program participation and efficacy. Subsequently, I will show my qualitative approach to studying policy feedback theory, presenting data from direct interviews with professionals in the non-profit

sector. Both approaches offer a cautionary tale for how scholars consider policy feedback theory, which will be discussed in the concluding section of this thesis alongside a recommendation for next steps within the field.

Literature Review

The relationship between citizen preferences and attitudes, on the one hand, and political outcomes, on the other, is one of the earliest questions to dominate the discipline of political science. As political scientists seek to determine why citizens have different orientations to politics, it is strongly agreed upon that there is a diverse swath of policy preferences and ideological beliefs throughout the country. However, the point of departure in this dialogue regards the mechanisms by which these preferences translate into political action, as well as the mechanisms through which these preferences are formed at the outset.

Behavioralism

One of the earliest schools of thought in political science, behavioralism (or pluralism) championed the idea that individual citizens had unique political preferences, and each unique preference was easily translated into observable political action. Largely, pluralists claimed that these preferences were partly inherent and partly socialized - while everyone has their own inherent interests, people form social groups according to their common values or hobbies and act in pursuit of the group's shared goals. When applied to the political sphere, this trend would present as people forming interest groups, as forming interest groups is a primary way of translating internal political beliefs into external political action. So too is voting, and pluralists

thus believed that every citizen's preferences would be easily expressed through democratic avenues. If someone does not vote, for example, the behavioralist will conclude it is because they did not want to.

In a system where votes and interest groups reflect citizen preferences, policy outcomes are necessarily democratic. David Easton, a late political scientist at the University of Chicago credited with popularizing behavioralism, sought to represent the policy process in a systematic framework known as Systems Theory (Figure 1). As the figure demonstrates, Systems Theory holds that citizens express their policy preferences democratically, either through support for or demands from their representative. These representatives would then output policy, which would accordingly be judged by the citizens based on how well such policy satisfies their original demands. This judgment would then be reflected in a subsequent action, such as continuing to vote for a representative or voting, instead, for their opponent.

FIGURE 1: David Easton's Systems Theory
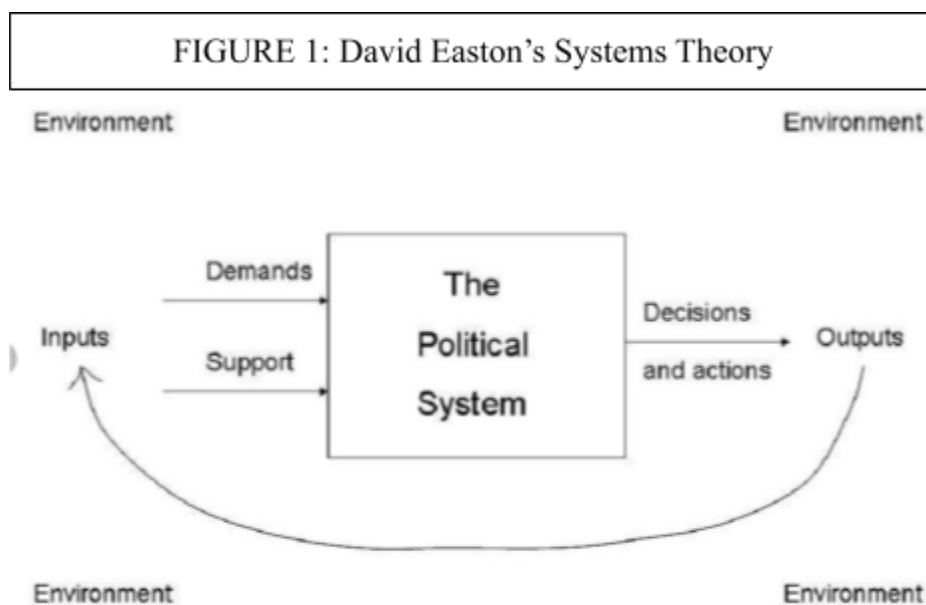
By the 1960s, however, many political scientists who eventually came to be known as anti-pluralists challenged the pluralist assumption that our political system was inherently democratic. Undoubtedly, System Theory captures how democracy should work; every citizen

has the ability to impress their demands on their political representatives; the government

correctly interprets these demands and translates them into actionable policy; and citizens have

the wherewithal to evaluate the results of such policy and hold their representatives accountable.

However, the premise of pluralism - that citizen preferences are easily and always converted into

democratic action - is too idealistic. Barriers to action, whether structural, psychological, or

physical, do not exist in Systems Theory. In addition, anti-pluralists later suggested that citizens

do not consistently provide policy feedback to their representatives, and, instead, the decision to

do so depended on how the policy in question distributed costs and benefits (Wilson 1973; Lowi

1972). Later scholars even found that elected officials could manipulate group mobilization by

structuring policies to hide costs or over-emphasize benefits (Pierson 1994). Finally, though

accounting for some element of feedback, Systems Theory assumes that through the

policymaking process, citizens maintain the same preferences both at the time of policy creation

and after policy enactment. As a result, pluralism promotes an over-simplified relationship

between public policy and political beliefs that ignores three undeniable realities: that human

preferences are malleable and change over time, that policy design influences people's

understanding of the very policy, and that there are legitimate barriers to democratic action.

Institutionalism

As political scientists came to understand that the relationship between citizen

preferences and democratic action was not so straightforward, institutionalists began exploring

how the formal rules and informal norms of politics shape such preferences and thereby

influence policy outcomes. Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s with the larger conviction that

human preferences are influenced by external environmental factors, institutionalists asserted

that political institutions structure political life. Two forms of institutionalist theory emerged in political science. The first is Rational Choice Institutionalism, which argues that people shape their preferences according to a simple, unemotional calculation of personal utility, though it is nevertheless our institutions that define what is logical. This occurs through multiple processes: institutions set social norms both through direct speech (such as public statements by political leaders or public offices) and through the structure and rules of the institutions themselves. A relevant example relates to the outsized power of the Child Tax Credit's number one critic, Senator Joe Manchin. As the Democratic majority in the 117th Senate relied on all 50 Democratic Senators to vote for the party agenda, Senators on the ideological fringe of the party like Joe Manchin held almost unilateral power over whether or not legislation got passed. This dynamic is inherently irrational - the consolidation of power in one or two representatives is contrary to the fundamental principle of democracy. But the rules of the institution allow this to happen, so not only does it happen, but it is accepted as an inevitable political circumstance. Another example is strategic voting. Consider a voter from a solidly red or blue state who maintains a second residence in another, more competitive state. Should that person's vote be more valuable in the competitive state than in the partisan state? No, but the structure of the Electoral College allows it to be, and so the person votes in the competitive state, and is considered rational - even savvy - for doing so. The voter's political behavior is shaped by the rules of an institution.

Rationalism Choice Institutionalism, with heavy influence from Economics and the principles of Game Theory, progresses the dialogue to a perspective that acknowledges the ability of institutions to condition behavior, regardless of whether such behavior is perfectly self-interested. However, this analysis largely examines behavior at specific points in time,

encouraged by the belief that institutions are unchanging behemoths of political life, and thus citizen preferences, as determined by these institutions, must be unchanged as well.

The analysis of time is a crucial distinction between Rational Choice Institutionalism and the second form of institutionalist theory, Historical Institutionalism. To be sure, this distinction is not a matter of disagreement, but of emphasis; historical institutionalists hold that while citizens' behavior is shaped by the processes of institutions, these processes are determined by the behavior of multiple actors, which combine and evolve in an ongoing arc of development and change (Farrell 2018). Historical Institutionalists also have a more subjective view of the relationship between preferences and action. While Rational Choice Theorists studied the structure of institutions in relation to the rationality of citizens, Historical Institutionalists examined the intangible norms communicated by political institutions in relation to the identities of citizens; how does one's identity determine how they respond to institutional norms? How do institutional norms influence the formation of such an identity in the first place? Largely, these questions have been examined with a focus on interest groups, analyzing how interest groups as institutions have influenced political outcomes like voting and policy design (Skocpol 1992). The AARP, for example, has been documented to promote feelings of efficacy and value among senior citizens (Campbell 2002). Concerning policy, Weir (1993) discusses the interaction between interest groups and legislators as it relates to crafting policy, suggesting that final policy design may be more heavily influenced by contextual scenarios as opposed to an impartial evaluation of best practices. Hacker (2002) suggests something similar about subsidized health insurance: while Social Security's Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) was enabled to expand due to the absence of opposing interest groups, the creation of national health insurance has been prevented by the private health insurance lobby, which grew due to the subsidization of

employer-sponsored health care in the 1940s. In other words, the behavior of these political insiders (interest groups and legislators) who have excised power due to the structure and rules of our institutions has largely determined the policy outputs experienced by everyday citizens.

Critics of historical institutionalism agree on a few main shortcomings of the school. Firstly, much of the historical institutionalist literature tends to focus on large and bureaucratized institutions such as Congress or constitutional structures that, despite evolving over time, are mostly resistant to sudden and revolutionary change (Carpenter 2001; Pierson 2000). As a result, historical institutionalists struggle to explain why sudden changes like policy reforms or realigning elections do occur. For example, Hacker's account of how the private health insurance lobby and their allies in Congress have effectively prevented nationalized healthcare provides no template to explain why a radical change in the field might occur, such as the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010. Lieberman (2002) notes that historical institutionalists who see politics as occurring in ordered regularity also fail to account for American civil rights policy in the 1960s and 1970s. Resultantly, due to an overemphasis on the ordered process of institutions, historical institutionalists can only weakly account for important episodes of political or cultural realignment. In addition, some scholars argue that given the overstated focus on the most established and convoluted political institutions, historical institutionalists do not give adequate attention to the role of the mass public in American politics. This is mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the focus on institutional behemoths prevents historical institutionalists from focusing on the institutional structure that has the most direct impact on the lived experience of citizens: policy. To extend Hacker's example, though there are undoubtedly important actions being taken inside Congress to continue Social Security OASI benefits, it is not Congress that has a direct presence in the life of the everyday OASI recipient. Instead, it is the administration and

implementation of the program - facets of policy design - that defines the recipient's experience. Secondly, to focus on the behavior of those inside big political institutions (also known as the political elite) as the most influential driver of political outcomes is to relegate the mass public to the background of political life (Pierson 1993). This approach is in line with decades of tradition in political science that structured the policy process according to theories of representative democracy, in which public opinion is merely an input into the decisive behavior of the political elite and the power of the individual citizen is diluted (Mettler and Soss 2004). Importantly, this is not to say that historical institutionalists do not account for feedback in the policy process. Rather, the policy process beyond policy creation is understudied, and when it is, historical institutionalists tend to analyze the economic and social outcomes of policy and the subsequent effects on the behavior of those in power. The feedback of policy on the public, however, is ignored.

Policy Feedback Theory

Policy feedback theory - a subset of historical institutionalism - arose to study this feedback loop. In contrast to more established political traditions of scholarship like System's Theory and theories of representative democracy, policy feedback theory views mass opinion and behavior as malleable constructions of the political system. As seen in Figure 2, while mass opinion is influential in the shaping of public policy, public policy is also influential in the shaping of mass opinion, and thus has important consequences on democratic functioning and political development (Béland 2010; Pierson 1993; Mettler and Soss 2004). According to Mettler and Soss, these implications include "defining membership; forging political cohesion and group divisions; building or undermining civic capacities; framing policy agendas, problems, and

FIGURE 2: Mettler's Policy Feedback Theory
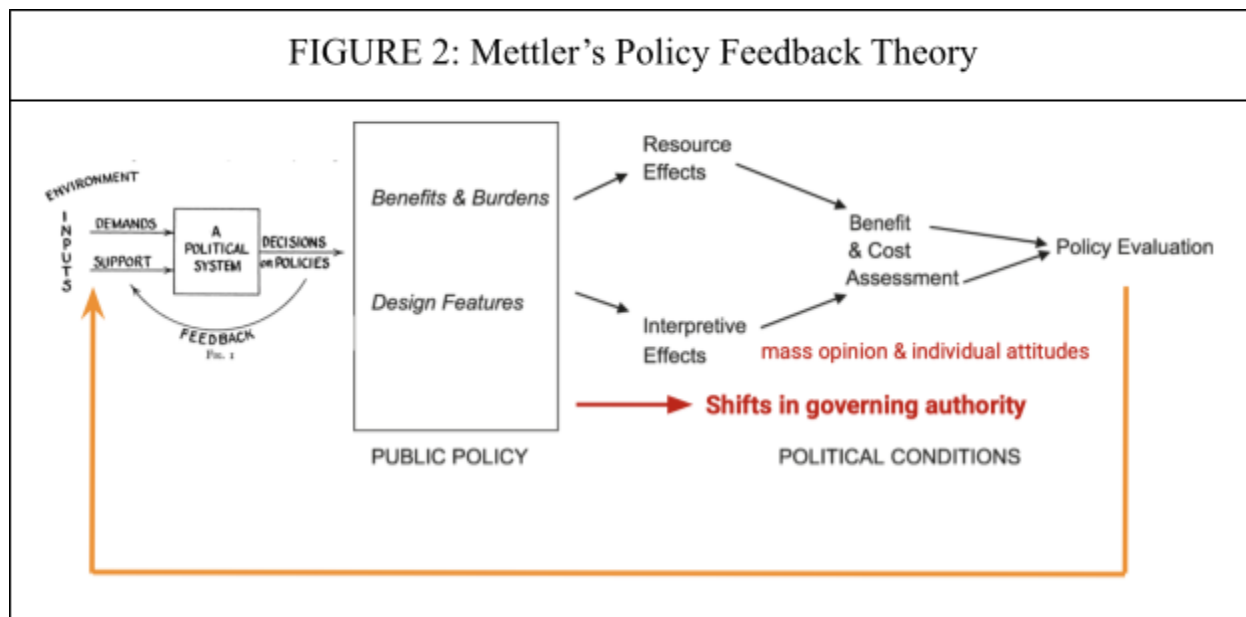
evaluations, and structuring, stimulating, and stalling political participation," (2004, 55). In other words, citizens' opinions, preferences, and political behavior are now understood to exist as both an input and *output* of policy.

While scholars have been touching upon this idea for some time, policy feedback theory has only recently come to be understood as a distinctive scholarly approach. In fact, while E.E. Schattschneider's famous dictum that "a new policy creates a new politics" was published in 1935, efforts to structure policy feedback theory as a cohesive line of analysis mostly began in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Pierson 1993; Skocpol 1992; Béland and Schlager 2019; Mettler and Soss 2004; Larsen 2019). The scholars of this literature propose different ways of conceptualizing policy feedback theory: some focus on differentiating the outcome variables influenced by policy feedback; some on the mechanisms through which feedback effects occur; and others on the general questions that policy feedback theorists confront. Larsen (2019) articulates four of these questions. The first asks whether policy feedback effects exist at all. Though questions remain about the strength, consistency, and longevity of policy feedback

effects, and though some scholars within the field question the presence of selection bias and

methodological diversity within published literature, the existence of feedback effects has

nonetheless been well documented (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Larsen 2018; Jacobs and

Mettler 2018). The second question regards the quality of feedback effects, questioning whether,

when a feedback effect occurs, it is positive or negative. Within this group are scholars seeking

to define positive and negative feedback effects (Jacobs and Weaver 2015), as well as scholars

seeking to understand the mechanisms through which these feedback effects occur. Here there is

overlap with those seeking to conceptualize policy feedback theory in the aggregate according to

these mechanisms. An early work in this group is that of Pierson (1993), who proposed that the

nature of feedback effects is determined by resource and interpretive effects. Resource effects are

created by how a policy distributes material resources; they encompass who benefits from a

policy and who absorbs the costs of the policy, as well as how these benefits and costs are

delivered. Interpretive effects, on the other hand, refer to how a policy affects public sentiment or

identity. Examples might include the language politicians use when discussing a certain policy,

or the ways in which a policy defines racial groups. Often, these two types of effects are

intertwined, such as how direct welfare programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

garner mass public controversy, while hidden programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit are

largely ignored and even misunderstood to be welfare programs in the first place (Howard 2007).

Theda Skocpol (1992) proposes a slightly varied framework, claiming that the two types of

feedback effects are those that alter state capacities by impacting the administration of a policy,

or alter the identities, political goals, and capabilities of groups. The reference to administrative

capacity is also made by Patashnik and Zelizer (2013), who propose a third typology of feedback

effects that posits that institutional supports cause feedback in addition to Pierson's resource and

interpretive effects. Patashnik and Zelizer further this framework, claiming that feedback effects also occur in two distinct periods of the policymaking process: the enactment phase and the post-enactment phase. In the enactment phase, the main determinants of feedback mostly regard how a policy is introduced, championed, and passed, while feedback created in the post-enactment phase is generally related to policy implementation and administration. In other words, the structure, design, and framing of policy offer significant opportunities for feedback effects on the mass public.

The third and fourth questions proposed by Larsen (2019) ask whether the proximity of a person to a policy plays a deterministic role in creating feedback effects and whether other contextual factors might be involved. An important work examining these questions is that of Soss and Schram (2007), who analyze whether the passage of PRWORA in 1996 led to changes in mass opinion related to welfare and the Democratic party. As Soss and Schram note, one of the primary motivations behind PRWORA was the desire of the Democratic party to escape criticism for supporting AFDC by reframing welfare recipients as workers instead of freeloaders, and thus the Democrats explicitly sought to use policy design to influence mass public opinion. However, Soss and Schram find that while welfare became less salient in public discourse, Democrats did not experience substantial gains and negative opinions of welfare recipients persisted. To explain this, Soss and Schram argue that feedback effects are determined by the interaction of two continuums: proximity, and visibility. Visibility concerns the degree to which a policy is noteworthy in the mass public, and more salient policies are more likely to cause feedback effects than those removed from the public's consciousness. Proximity, on the other hand, refers to the extent that a policy has a tangible presence in people's lives, and as a policy becomes more proximate to citizens, the greater opportunity there is for feedback effects related

to the material design of the policy since these resource effects are being directly experienced by the public. Soss and Schram propose that welfare reform was visible-distant - a political spectacle with material effects on an isolated population only - and thus the opportunity for significant effects on the mass public was limited. A more recent example includes government stimulus - the mere mention of which likely evokes thoughts of the stimulus checks administered by President Donald Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Trump offered aid via physical checks with his name on them, he opted for visible-proximate benefits, which pose a stark contrast to the $116 billion of relief offered by President Barack Obama during the Great Recession in the form of tax cuts. While Trump received much praise for his relief, few voters even noticed Obama's, as the invisible-proximate nature of Obama's relief caused benefits to stay buried in the tax code (Cooper 2010). Ultimately, while other scholars have also examined the questions of proximity and context (Larsen 2018; Lerman and McCabe 2017), Soss and Schram (2007) fill a substantial gap in policy feedback literature by providing a systematic framework explaining when and why feedback effects occur. In accordance with Pierson (1993), Skocpol (1992), and Patashnik and Zelizer (2013), the authors propose it is policy design that most deserves attention.

As an alternative to partitioning policy feedback literature into four central questions, many scholars also propose that the literature can be divided into groups concerned with three separate outcomes, though many works overlap these lines. The first group is concerned with how policy influences the mobilization of organized interests; scholars in this group assert that policy can exert feedback effects that mobilize or stall political groups, such as formal and informal interest groups or political parties. Lowi (1972) proposes four types of policy that determine the government's influence on public opinion according to different mechanisms of

resource allocation, ultimately arguing that how a policy allocates resources is deterministic of later constituent building. This is done both through resource effects, but also by creating incentives - policies that confer benefits to a group, for example, provide an incentive for that group to mobilize in defense of their benefits. Campbell (2002) demonstrates this concerning Social Security, noting that the political participation of senior citizens as it relates to Social Security breaks the well-documented pattern that political activity increases with income - instead, among seniors, there is a negative income-participation gradient related to Social Security. In fact, the invention of Social Security at the outset and the allocation of monetary benefits to the senior population created a new constituency of seniors where one did not exist before. Resultantly, Campbell demonstrates that through resource allocation, policy can stimulate the formation of political groups, and through incentive-setting, policy can provoke these groups to mobilize. Individual citizens, who might not otherwise participate in politics, can get recruited into political activity by the groups formed in the wake of a policy. In other words, programs like Social Security create their own vested interests.

The second body of literature in this model concerns policy feedback and the mass public, focusing on how public policy influences the beliefs, preferences, and identities of the populace. Mettler (2002) provides a lauded account of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the GI Bill), noting that offering subsidized education, loans, and job training to veterans resulted in increased feelings of efficacy and value among program recipients. Mettler notes that this is partly due to the perception of these benefits as respectable offerings (as opposed to cash handouts), as well as the perception of the program as a privilege - only a small share of respondents described GI benefits as a right, likely because military service was a requirement of all able men as opposed to a choice. As a result, GI recipients internalized

their benefits as a sign of value and agency, and Mettler finds increased levels of future civic

engagement among this group. Importantly, though the GI Bill did not explicitly deny Black

veterans' benefits, Katznelson (2005) notes that the bill was intentionally decentralized to allow

administrative offices to deny Black beneficiaries. As a result, not only did the resource effects

of the GI Bill largely lock Black veterans out of suburbia and the nascent middle class, but the

interpretive effects labeled Black veterans as less valued members of society. Additionally,

Erkulwater (2019) studies the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the 1940s, noting how

the NFB fiercely fought public assistance from the Social Security Administration (SSA) in

favor of benefits that encouraged blind Americans to maintain productive employment.

Erkulwater notes that NFB activists feared how the administration of aid from the SSA would

impact how blind Americans interpreted their own identity, as public assistance promoted an idea

of feminized dependency while benefits tied to labor would advance the breadwinner identity -

the white, heterosexual male worker that is valuable to society regardless of disability status. In

doing so, Erkulwater highlights how the NFB contributed to their own liberal marginalization by

using pro-work policy design to define the bounds of blind identity. Soss, Fording, and Schram

(2011) discuss something similar concerning TANF, noting how the introduction of work

requirements and sanctioning in the program's creation has promoted negative opinions of the

poor. In requiring recipients to work in exchange for benefits, the government promotes the

neoliberal idea that participation in the labor market is what determines a deserving citizen (as

opposed to things like civic engagement or service), just as sanctioning promotes the

paternalistic idea that welfare recipients must be guided by the government or risk being

punished. According to Soss and his colleagues, these aspects of TANF promote the idea that the

poor are incapable of making productive choices, and thus the design of TANF has strengthened

a negative view of welfare recipients in mass public opinion. Finally, in a study of Social Security Disability cases, Newman (2015) even finds that the extensive efforts SSDI applicants must go through to prove their disability status to the SSA alter their own beliefs about the severity of their disabilities. So, as noted by scholars studying feedback effects and mass publics, policy design plays a pervasive role in our culture, public opinion, and personal identities.

Finally, the third sect of policy feedback theory focuses on the relationship between policy design and democracy, questioning how the feedback effects generated by policy might determine personal efficacy, the inclusiveness of citizenship, and perceptions of the government. One of the mechanisms through which this happens is by shifting governing authority - when policy is explicitly designed to be decentralized (like the GI Bill) or administered through the private sector (like employer-sponsored healthcare), it shifts the public's perception of governance. Mettler (2011) in her analysis of the 'submerged state,' or welfare programs that aren't administered directly and obviously by the federal government, notes how many citizens on government programs are unaware of how these programs work. Mettler references the infamous phrase, "Get your government hands off my Medicare!" to show the divide between common understanding and reality, and notes how this confusion enables anti-government and anti-welfare sentiment to persist. Examining democratic function also requires analysis of the resource and interpretive effects of policy, as personal conceptions of efficacy and value certainly influence civic participation, and the unfortunate reality of the political system is that there is a positive association between wealth and political influence. Social constructivists discuss the idea of 'target populations,' arguing that policy design is wielded as a tool to construct distinct political groups with varying amounts of power and influence in the democratic process. Scholars in this group, then, expand upon the work of those arguing that policy feedback is an

input in group mobilization and public opinion/identity to argue that policy is directly influential on the functioning of democracy as a whole. With the rise of policy feedback theory, policies are now understood as meaningful political institutions, capable of communicating complicated and dynamic messages to everyday citizens that become important determinants of the broader political process. Seeking to answer the age-old question of why citizens form differing orientations to politics, it is clear that policy is an inextricable part of the conversation.

Policy feedback theory, as a school of thought, has progressed immensely. Yet, there are outstanding topics that are overlooked in the current literature. Firstly, analysis of the direct relationship between the design of welfare programs and the identity of recipients has focused too heavily on programs that have declined in significance. Studies of TANF have provided crucial insights into policy feedback and the identity of the poor, but TANF has fallen in value as the United States now administers most of the aid for the poor through other programs. In addition, when analyzing the relationship between feedback effects and participation, much of the literature assumes that there is a strong positive relationship between constructive feelings of efficacy and participation. While increased political participation is certainly positive for the representativeness of democracy, increased participation may not be caused by positive feelings of value and efficacy. Instead, people might be pushed to political activity because of just the opposite, or people may be participating in ways that aren't typically understood to be political at all (Soss and Weaver 2017). To reach a more thorough understanding of how policy design impacts different communities, assumptions like these need to be replaced with comprehensive and interdisciplinary efforts to understand the lived experience of individuals. In other words, more attention needs to be directed to understanding the nuance of personal efficacy. This thesis seeks to fill these gaps in the policy feedback literature and uncover more evidence of policy
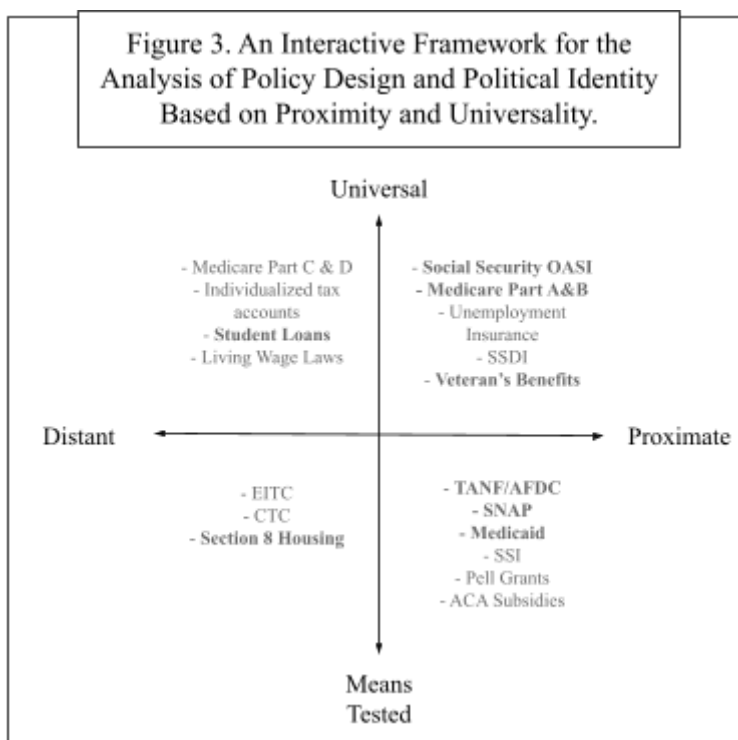
feedback. In studying policies for the poor other than TANF, and by adopting a sweeping approach to studying personal feelings of efficacy, this thesis will add currency and depth to a growing field of study.

Methodology

To understand the relationship between program design and efficacy, this thesis adopts a multimethodological approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Eight programs are discussed: Social Security Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI), Medicare, Medicaid, Veteran's Benefits, Subsidized Housing, AFDC, Student Loans, and SNAP. Motivated by the understudied nature of these programs in policy feedback theory, I test the presence of efficacy-related feedback effects among a diverse group of recipients.

Policy Background and Theoretical Framework

To conceptualize the eight policies included in this thesis, it is useful to propose an interactive framework for the analysis of program design and political identity. Figure 3 presents two characteristics of policy design, inspired by Soss and Schram (2007), that previous literature has shown to be deterministic in policy feedback: the proximity and universality of a policy. The vertical dimension characterizes universality: a universal policy is available to all socioeconomic groups, while a means-tested policy is targeted towards certain groups, usually of lower socioeconomic status. While there may be other factors that determine eligibility for a universal policy, the key distinction is that such eligibility is not based on income or wealth - Veteran's benefits, for example, are only available to veterans, but are available to veterans of all

Figure 3. An Interactive Framework for the Analysis of Policy Design and Political Identity Based on Proximity and Universality.

socioeconomic classes. In the published literature, universal policies are shown to generally have positive feedback effects: as mentioned, Campbell (2002) and Mettler (2002) respectively study OASI and the GI Bill and find that recipients of the programs were left feeling more efficacious and valued by society.

Alternatively, the horizontal dimension of the framework measures proximity, with proximity characterized by the frequency with which the recipient encounters the policy in everyday life, and whether the policy is directly administered by the government as opposed to being administered through a third party or hidden authority (Mettler 2011). When discussing proximity, Soss and Schram (2007) note that policies that are more proximate in recipients' lives have an increased opportunity for feedback effects, as the implications of the policy's design are felt more directly than if the policy has only a distant presence in the recipient's consciousness, and the recipients are more frequently aware of their program status. In addition, Mettler (2011) notes the importance of how a policy is administered in determining feedback effects - in a

nationwide survey of 1400 Americans, Mettler found a widespread misperception that some indirectly administered (or hidden) programs are not government programs at all. Thus, if the administration of a program can directly impact whether it is understood to be a government program at all, it evidently might affect one's perception of the government or feelings of efficacy. While universality is so far understood to have positive effects on recipients' sense of efficacy, proximity is less clear.

The policies included in this study fall under different categories in the framework and differ substantially in their design. Figure 1A categorizes these policies, along with additional examples. Included in the upper-left quadrant are student loans, which are universal given the program's availability to people of all income levels, and distant given its administration by external vendors who contract with the government. The upper-right quadrant, classifying universal-proximate programs, includes OASI and Medicare, two programs available to all residents over age 65 that are administered directly by the government, and Veterans benefits, which are available to all Veterans and are administered directly by the Veterans Administration. The bottom-left quadrant - means tested-distant - includes subsidized housing, which is administered by local housing agencies and contracting landlords to residents that meet an income requirement. Policies in the bottom-right quadrant, indicating proximate-means-tested policies, include AFDC (now TANF), SNAP, and Medicaid, which are all programs administered directly by the government to populations under a certain income threshold. Overall, these eight policies present substantial variations of proximity and universality and provide an opportunity to study whether a relationship between proximity, universality, and feedback effects indeed exists.

Political Efficacy

As this thesis particularly seeks to understand the impact of policy design on recipients' sense of efficacy, it is necessary to define the outcome variable. Broadly, efficacy is a feeling of ability - efficacious individuals feel that they have some capacity to achieve a desired outcome as a result of their actions. When applied to the political sphere, efficacy is often divided into two distinct parts: internal efficacy and external efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to one's belief that they, as an individual, have the capability to participate in and understand political life. Thus, internal efficacy includes one's feelings of intellectual ability, knowledge and familiarity with political processes, and feelings of agency over their political actions. By contrast, external efficacy refers to one's belief that they can actually influence change at the government level. External efficacy is accordingly composed of multiple factors, including one's belief in the responsiveness of government in general, as well as one's belief that the government will respond to them *personally*. In other words, one might believe that citizens have the ability to influence the government but may not believe that they are included in that group. Efficacy - now understood to reference both internal and external efficacy - has been shown to have an important influence on political participation. Still, while related, internal and external efficacy are distinct, and other studies have shown that strong feelings about one type of efficacy do not necessarily require a strong sense of the other. Multiple scholars, for example, have found that low levels of external efficacy among Black Americans have negatively impacted political participation despite high levels of internal efficacy (Shingles 1981; Ennis and Schreiner 1987; Harris 1999), and these levels of external efficacy are lower among African Americans and Latinos than among whites (Niemi 1998; Abramson 1983). Accordingly, this thesis will devote distinct analyses to internal and external efficacy.

Research Design

To understand policy design and efficacy, this thesis adopts a multimethodological research design consisting of both quantitative and qualitative research. Chapter One reviews the quantitative component, in which I use multivariate regression analysis to determine the significance of regressor variables on the outcome variables: internal efficacy and external efficacy. This data is sourced from the American Citizen Participation Study (CPS), a 1990 survey of 2517 residents across the United States. The survey asks respondents questions related to their political and non-political civic participation, including questions about their voting and campaign activity, civic organization membership, as well as ideological beliefs, and personal experience with government. The raw dataset is publicly available on the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), and it was selected because it is one of few large political science surveys that collects data on both the respondent's feelings of efficacy and program participation. The drawback of using this dataset is that it was conducted in 1990, and thus the data is from a time when the general political sphere was vastly different than that seen today. However, 1990 falls within a political era characterized by a heightened focus on public assistance and welfare reform and thus resembles contemporary politics given the recent changes to welfare programs in response to COVID-19, and the heightened political rhetoric (such as Senator Manchin's) that has followed. The variables that are taken from this dataset include those collecting demographic information (which are used as control variables in the conducted regressions), those on program membership (which are the independent variables), and those used to construct the dependent variables measuring efficacy.[1]

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[1] Appendix A defines each variable used in this thesis, and Appendix B provides information on the creation of the outcome variables measuring efficacy.

Chapter Two reviews the qualitative component of this thesis, which triangulates interview data on program membership and lived experience against insights from scholarly literature. This data comes from two interviews, each with staff members from local non-profits in the greater Richmond area. The first interview was conducted in November 2022 with a program director from the Greater Richmond and Petersburg chapter of United Way, a large non-profit organization that offers tax assistance to individuals and families with incomes less than $60,000 a year. United Way was chosen as an interview subject for this thesis because of their work helping families receive tax credits, which fall as distant programs on the theoretical framework. The second interview took place in December 2022, with staff members from GoochlandCares, an organization located in a rural county outside Richmond that offers services to individuals and families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level, or around $54,360 according to 2022 levels. GoochlandCares offers a wide range of services to their clients, including a subsidized food pantry and thrift store, access to comprehensive medical and dental care, and, of most interest, professional help enrolling in proximate public assistance programs such as TANF and SNAP. Interviewing the staff at each organization was valuable for numerous reasons. Firstly, as both organizations provide aid in the enrollment process of benefits programs, these staffs have special expertise in the application and administration of many welfare programs that offers insight into the proximity of these policies in beneficiaries' lives. Likewise, given that these staffs have direct interactions with the individuals they help, they bear witness to both the personal impact of these benefits on their client's lives, as well as their clients' emotional journeys of registering for and receiving benefits. Finally, as dedicated professionals with years of experience, the staff at each organization can provide information nuanced by a blend of objective, third-party perspectives, and human accounts of personal

interaction.[2] When seeking a more robust and human-centered measure of efficacy, the incorporation of qualitative data is vital.

Ultimately, the findings of this thesis motivate several questions related to policy feedback theory. Firstly, in contrast to previously published quantitative data, I find limited quantitative evidence of the existence of policy feedback effects when considering efficacy and the eight included programs. While initial data suggests program participation may be related to efficacy, the inclusion of additional control variables indicates that the variations in internal and external efficacy are predominantly driven by measures of gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status. In addition, qualitative interview data implies a similar conclusion - though interview subjects did not negate the existence of policy feedback, it was impossible to collect data about individual programs and discern whether specific facets of policy design influence efficacy. In addition, the interview subjects made extensive efforts not to generalize their clientele, and thus neither interview provided any information that decisively points to the existence - or the non-existence - of policy feedback. Overall, this thesis raises questions about the existence of policy feedback as a whole, as well as the appropriate methodological techniques to use when studying such effects.

Looking forward, policy feedback theorists should focus attention on methodological development, as determining how to best capture policy feedback effects, as well as how to better operationalize efficacy, could lead to crucial teachings about poverty and democracy (Ingram and Schneider 1993). While scholars wonder why a misconception of poverty has become widespread and dominant in American culture, policy feedback theorists might have an answer. If policy - particularly welfare policy - has become powerful enough of a tool to shape

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[2] Appendix C contains the transcript of the interview with United Way, and Appendix D contains the transcript of the interview with GoochlandCares. Both are minimally edited for clarity and grammar.

the preferences and behavior of recipients and non-recipients alike, then the design of welfare

policy structures the presence of poverty in our society. Accordingly, improved information

about policy feedback effects could offer insight into crafting more efficient welfare policies,

with the ultimate goal of poverty alleviation.

Chapter One: The Quantitative Relationship Between Efficacy and Program Participation

This chapter will focus on quantitative analysis, questioning whether there is quantitative

evidence that program participation affects a recipient's sense of efficacy. To do so, I run

multiple linear regressions that seek to isolate the effect of program participation on internal and

external efficacy, respectively. Initial results provide some evidence of the existence of feedback

effects, demonstrated by significant relationships between participation in OASI, SNAP,

Medicaid, Subsidized Housing, and Medicare on at least one type of efficacy. In particular, these

preliminary results indicate a negative relationship between universal programs and internal

efficacy but a positive relationship between universal programs and external efficacy, contrasting

with published literature suggesting that universal programs have consistent positive feedback

effects. In addition, these results indicate a negative relationship between means-tested programs

and all types of efficacy, though not all means-tested programs yielded statistically significant

results. However, the prevailing finding of this analysis is that all programs lose statistical

significance when including two additional regressors - age and income - suggesting that

previous models were accounting for variations in efficacy that are actually explained by the new

regressors. While significant program effects are found for Social Security and Medicare when

analyzing only older, white participants, final models indicate that race, gender, education,

income, and age are the most influential determinants of internal and external efficacy, adding

doubt to the existence, or at least importance, of policy feedback effects on efficacy. Though

feedback effects might exist, we should be careful not to overstate significance relative to

indicators of social status.

To quantitatively measure efficacy, I create two unique scales for internal and external

efficacy constructed from available data in the American Citizen Participation Study (CPS).

Internal efficacy, referring to one's sense that they as an individual have the capability to

participate in political life, consists of 13 variables that demonstrate intellectual self-confidence,

leadership, and overt feelings about participating in government.[3] They include questions about

one's perception of their ability to make public statements or write letters to the government,

one's feelings about themselves as a possible leader or mentor, and whether they have

undertaken some form of civic action because of personal aspirations to run for public office.

These variables are re-coded as needed so that higher values on the internal efficacy scale

correspond to high values of internal efficacy felt by respondents. Descriptive statistics for the

internal efficacy scale are reported below.

TABLE 1

Internal Efficacy Scale Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Inteff@@	1871	13	38	25.4	3.46

Similarly, external efficacy is operationalized by a scale of seven variables that measure

one's sense that the government will be responsive to them personally.[4] This scale includes

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[3] Appendix B contains a list of these variables.
[4] See Appendix B

questions asking whether respondents believe they are influential in local and federal government decision-making, how much attention they receive when making statements, and whether they undertook a civic action due to desires to influence the government, to get official help, to make the nation better, or to further party goals. Positive answers to these questions indicate higher levels of external efficacy, which accordingly correspond to higher values on the scale. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for these variables. As seen, scores for external efficacy skew lower than those for internal efficacy, indicating that to some extent, respondents perceived government as inaccessible despite personal ability or effort.

TABLE 2

External Efficacy Scale Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Exteff@@	2443	3	21	9	2.95

In addition to the variables used to create the internal and external efficacy scales, I use additional demographic data to control for factors that possibly affect the relationship between program participation and efficacy. Firstly, I recode original data on race to create a dichotomous measure of race (coded as race@), in which a value of one indicates a person of color and a value of two indicates a white respondent. While it would be preferable to include more specific racial and ethnic categories - as previous literature shows that different racial and ethnic groups have different orientations to politics and political participation - including a non-dichotomous race variable necessitates additional analysis that is beyond the scope of this thesis. As previously noted, race has a well-demonstrated connection with efficacy and is thus included as a

control variable to help isolate the effects of program participation on efficacy. Secondly, I

recode original data to include a dichotomous variable for gender (coded as gender@), in which

a value of one indicates someone identifying as female, and a value of two indicates someone

identifying as male. While it would also be preferable to include additional categories for gender

identity, CPS only includes binary categories, and the recoding is done to exclude missing values

rather than additional gender identities. This echoes previous literature, which demonstrates

heightened efficacy and participation among men (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Another

included variable is a dichotomous variable measuring whether the respondent is a U.S. native

(coded as rus), in which values of one indicate the respondent was born abroad and values of two

indicate native-born status. Though the subject of interest in this circumstance was the

citizenship status of the respondent, as citizenship by nature structures one's relationship with the

government, citizenship data was only collected from respondents reporting being born outside

of the U.S. and thus had a low number of observations compared to data on birthplace. A

variable on the immigration status of the respondent's parents is also included (coded as folksus),

in which a value of one indicates a respondent with two native-born parents, a value of two

indicates a respondent with one native-born parent and one immigrant parent, and a value of

three indicates a respondent with two immigrant parents. Given that political activity and

perceptions of government are often socialized by one's family, it is plausible that the

immigration status of one's parents would be influential in determining their child's sense of

efficacy, and thus this variable should be controlled for. In addition, I include a recoded variable

on the respondent's native language (coded as lang1@), which is a dichotomous variable with

values of one indicating that the respondent's primary language is not English, and a value of

two indicating the opposite. This variable is included given the likelihood that a language barrier

would influence one's ability to participate in and understand political life. While not used in all models, I also include a variable for age (coded as age@@), which is determined by subtracting the respondent's birth year from the year of data collection, which was 1989. Finally, I include two measures of socioeconomic status: education and income. Education (coded as edgrade) is measured as the highest grade of regular school completed by the respondent (and thus higher values indicate higher levels of education), and is included given that education surely influences one's self-perception of political ability, as well as one's understanding of the political process and the reality of a citizen's bargaining power. Similarly, income (coded as faminc) indicates the respondent's total household income in 1989 and is included given the well-demonstrated link between income and political activity.

Scores for both internal and external efficacy are disproportionate when disaggregating by some demographic variables, such as race and gender. Cross-tabulations of internal efficacy and race yield a Pearson correlation coefficient of .057, indicating a weak but positive correlation between whiteness and internal efficacy. External efficacy and race yielded a similar coefficient of .120, indicating another weak but positive correlation between whiteness and external efficacy. Notably, the correlation is stronger for external efficacy, echoing published literature that shows a stronger relationship between race and external efficacy compared to internal efficacy. Cross-tabulations of gender and internal efficacy yield a correlation coefficient of .149, indicating a positive correlation between efficacy and being male. Similarly, gender and external efficacy gave a weak positive correlation of .087. Interestingly, while race and external efficacy were more strongly correlated than race and internal efficacy, the opposite is true for gender and efficacy. While women perceive the government's responsiveness at similar levels to men, they see their own ability to participate in politics with a handicap. Finally, when cross-tabulating the

internal and external efficacy scales with age, an interesting result is found: while there is a negative correlation between age and internal efficacy (r = -.075), there is a positive correlation between age and external efficacy (r = .120), indicating that while feelings of personal ability to participate in politics tend to decline with age, feelings of validation and recognition by the government increase. While correlation does not indicate causation, it gives cause for further analysis.

As mentioned, CPS collects data on participation in eight programs: Social Security Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI), SNAP, student loans, subsidized housing, Medicare, Medicaid, Veteran's Benefits, and Public Assistance (defined by participation in AFDC, General Assistance, General Relief, or Supplemental Security Income (SSI)). In the survey, participation in a program is defined as either the respondent or someone in the respondent's family unit participating in the program, with values of two indicating participation and values of one indicating no participation. In the following quantitative analysis, I use each of these eight programs as independent variables in separate regressions, with controls for the aforementioned demographic data. I present four initial models for each program. Models 1 and 2 show the output of regressions run on internal efficacy, while models 3 and 4 show external efficacy. Models 1 and 3 show the preliminary results, prior to including age and income into the analysis, which are instead included in models 2 and 4.[5] Results are presented in Tables 3 - 10.

TABLE 3

Social Security

Internal Efficacy	External Efficacy

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[5] Estimating equations for each model are presented in Appendix E.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	17.495	(1.123)	18.251	(1.150)	2.044	(.830)	2.380	(.861)
Ssget	-.590	(.195)**	-.260	(.237)	.548	(.149)***	.158	(.186)
Race@	-.490	(.169)**	-.611	(.172)***	-.120	(.130)	-.402	(.134)**
Folksus	-.142	(.159)	-.129	(.163)	-.262	(.121)	-.273	(.127)*
Rus	-.220	(.417)	-.345	(.430)	.566	(.325)	.391	(.342)
Lang1@	1.119	(.455)*	1.034	(.475)*	.190	(.342)	.167	(.359)
Edgrade	.501	(.029)***	.380	(.032)***	.376	(.022)***	.291	(.024)***
Gender@	-.849	(.149)***	.732	(.151)***	.290	(.115)*	.179	(.117)
Age@@			-.005	(.006)			.027	(.005)***
Faminc			.204	(.023)***			.162	(.018)***
adjR²	.198		.226		.145		.185	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 4 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 4

SNAP

	Internal Efficacy				External Efficacy			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	18.178	(1.233)	18.258	(1.237)	3.286	(.921)	2.332	(.957)
Foodget	-.699	(.349)*	-.140	(.360)	-.562	(R.260)*	.079	(.267)
Race@	-.571	(.170)***	-.617	(.174)***	-.132	(.132)	-.393	(.135)**
Folksus	-.239	(.157)	-.148	(.163)	-.203	(.120)	-.263	(.126)*
Rus	-.376	(.414)	-.385	(.430)	.727	(.323)*	.413	(.341)
Lang1@	1.047	(.456)*	1.020	(.476)*	.214	(.342)	.181	(.360)
Edgrade	.511	(.028)***	.384	(.032)***	.350	(.022)***	.289	(.024)***
Gender@	.785	(.151)***	.692	(.152)***	.252	(.116)*	.185	(.118)
Age@@			-.008	(.005)			.029	(.004)***
Faminc			.204	(.024)***			.160	(.019)***
adjR²	.193		.222		.141		.184	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 4 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 5

Student Loans

	Internal Efficacy				External Efficacy			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	17.010	(1.161)	17.869	(1.188)	2.499	(.861)	2.085	(.889)
Loansget	.130	(.319)	.259	(.314)	-.111	(.245)	.357	(.245)
Race@	-.531	(.169)**	-.623	(.172)***	-.076	(.130)	-.393	(.134)**
Folksus	-.230	(.157)	-.156	(.162)	-.192	(.120)	-.268	(.126)*
Rus	-.407	(.414)	-.429	(.430)	.717	(.323)*	.381	(.340)
Lang1@	1.090	(.456)*	1.050	(.475)*	.233	(.342)	.195	(.358)
Edgrade	.520	(.028)***	.384	(.032)***	.360	(.021)***	.285	(.024)***
Gender@	.839	(.150)***	.716	(.151)***	.288	(.115)*	.187	(.117)
Age@@			-.006	(.005)			.030	(.004)***
Faminc			.207	(.024)***			.161	(.018)***
adjR²	.193		.224		.140		.187	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 4 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 6

Medicaid

	Internal Efficacy				External Efficacy			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	17.862	(1.221)	18.155	(1.250)	2.848	(.897)	2.357	(.926)
Mcaidget	-.459	(.320)***	-.013	(.329)	-.326	(.244)	.056	(.252)
Race@	-.570	(.170)	-.627	(.174)***	-.096	(.131)	-.387	(.135)**
Folksus	-.229	(.157)	-.154	(.162)	-.189	(.120)	-.265	(.126)*
Rus	-.379	(.414)	-.402	(.429)	.724	(.323)*	.410	(.340)
Lang1@	1.053	(.456)*	1.026	(.476)*	.230	(.342)	.169	(.358)
Edgrade	.512	(.029)***	.387	(.032)***	.354	(.022)***	.289	(.024)***

Gender@	-.815	(.150) ***	.710	(.151)***	.277	(.116) *	.191	(.117)**
Age@@@			-.007	(.005)			.030	(.004)***
Faminc			.205	(.024)***			.160	(.018)***
adjR²	.193		.223		.141		.186	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 2 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 7

Subsidized Housing

	Internal Efficacy				External Efficacy			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	18.766	(1.229)	19.278	(1.259)	3.073	(.912)	2.642	(.942)
Houseget	-1.558	(.484)***	-1.096	(.487)*	-.641	(.352)	-.206	(.354)
Race@	-.555	(.168)***	-.630	(.172)***	-.086	(.130)	-.390	(.134)**
Folksus	-.209	(.156)	-.144	(.162)	-.182	(.120)	-.260	(.126)*
Rus	-.358	(.413)	-.384	(.428)	.731	(.322)*	.419	(.340)
Lang1@	1.106	(.454)*	1.043	(.474)*	.240	(.341)	.162	(.358)
Edgrade	.511	(.028)***	.384	(.032)***	.356	(.021)***	.289	(.024)***
Gender@	.827	(.149)***	.713	(.151)***	.278	(.115)*	.185	(.117)
Age@@@			-.007	(.005)			.029	(.004)***
Faminc			.198	(.024)***			.159	(.018)***
adjR²	.199		.227		.142		.187	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 4 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 8

Medicare

	Internal Efficacy		External Efficacy	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	17.544	(1.130)	18.261	(1.159)	2.026	(.834)	2.443	(.866)
Mcareget	-.598	(.212)**	-.303	(.262)	.605	(.163)***	.086	(.206)
Race@	-.500	(.169)**	-.627	(.172)***	-.119	(.130)	-.402	(.134)**
Folksus	-.157	(.158)	-.141	(.162)	-.257	(.121)*	-.268	(.126)*
Rus	-.258	(.416)	-.372	(.430)	.568	(.324)	.400	(.341)
Lang1@	1.116	(.456)*	1.040	(.476)*	.183	(.342)	.158	(.360)
Edgrade	.507	(.028)***	.386	(.032)***	.374	(.022)***	.290	(.024)***
Gender@	.830	(.149)***	.723	(.151)***	.295	(.115)**	.181	(.117)
Age@@			-.003	(.006)			.029	(.005)***
Faminc			.200	(.024)***			.160	(.018)***
adjR²	.198		.225		.144		.184	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 4 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 9

Veteran's Benefits

	Internal Efficacy				External Efficacy			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	16.953	(1.175)	17.879	(1.196)	2.352	(.864)	2.689	(.890)
Vetsget	.133	(.339)	.221	(.337)	.010	(.266)	-.295	(.268)
Race@	-.505	(.169)**	-.589	(.173)***	-.067	(.130)	-.387	(.133)**
Folksus	-.222	(.157)	-.138	(.162)	-.188	(.120)	-.264	(.126)*
Rus	-.397	(.415)	-.389	(.430)	.709	(.322)*	.417	(.339)
Lang1@	1.059	(.457)*	1.011	(.476)*	.234	(.341)	.167	(.358)
Edgrade	.524	(.028)***	.387	(.032)***	.360	(.021)***	.290	(.024)***
Gender@	.826	(.150)***	.701	(.151)***	.289	(.115)**	.194	(.117)
Age@@			-.008	(.005)			.030	(.004)***
Faminc			.208	(.024)***			.161	(.268)***
adjR²	.193		.225		.141		.188	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 4 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 10

Public Assistance

	Internal Efficacy				External Efficacy			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Intercept	17.930	(1.211)	18.602	(1.238)	2.672	(.893)	2.145	(.922)
Afdcget	-.598	(.348)	-.361	(.350)	-.242	(.262)	.197	(.266)
Race@	-.573	(.171)***	-.636	(.174)***	-.080	(.132)	-.360	(.135)***
Folksus	-.232	(.157)	-.150	(.162)	-.188	(.120)	-.259	(.126)*
Rus	-.377	(.414)	-.380	(.429)	.720	(.323)*	.405	(.340)
Lang1@	1.096	(.456)*	1.037	(.475)*	.242	(.342)	.148	(.358)
Edgrade	.512	(.029)***	.383	(.032)***	.356	(.022)***	.292	(.024)***
Gender@	.811	(.150)***	.700	(.152)***	.280	(.115)*	.198	(.117)
Age@@			-.008	(.005)			.029	(.004)***
Faminc			.201	(.024)***			.163	(.018)***
adjR²	.195		.224		.141		.187	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 1 and 2 is the internal efficacy scale. The dependent variable for Models 3 and 4 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

Considered alone, models 1 and 3 present some evidence of the existence of policy feedback effects. Among universal programs, which include OASI, Medicare, and Veteran's Benefits, there are statistically significant negative effects of participation in OASI and Medicare on internal efficacy. In particular, participation in OASI causes an average decline of .590 points on the internal efficacy scale, all else being equal, while participation in Medicare causes an average decline of .598 points on the internal efficacy scale, all else equal. On the 25-point internal efficacy scale, each of these represents a decline of about 2%, meaning that program status alone is causing this decline, although the decline is weak. Interestingly, when considering external efficacy, OASI, and Medicare have statistically significant positive effects. All else equal, participation in OASI causes an average increase of .548 points on the external efficacy scale, while participation in Medicare causes an average increase of .605 points. With an

18-point external efficacy scale, each of these represents an average increase of 3%, meaning that when considering overall efficacy, participation in OASI and Medicare appears to have a net positive effect. Still, the different effects on internal and external efficacy should not be overlooked; while participation in OASI and Medicare causes recipients to view their own ability to participate in politics at lower levels, they simultaneously experience an increased belief that they have an influential voice in government. Though the receipt of veterans benefits and student loans does not appear to have statistically significant feedback effects, Models 1 and 3 demonstrate that two of four universal programs included in this study have feedback effects.

Among means-tested programs, Models 1 and 3 offer additional evidence of feedback effects. Specifically, the majority of means-tested programs show a negative effect on internal efficacy: all else equal, participation in SNAP causes an average decline of .699 points on the internal efficacy scale, participation in Medicaid causes an average decline of .459 points, and participation in subsidized housing causes an average decline of 1.56 points. Respectively, these account for declines of about 3%, 2%, and 6% on the internal efficacy scale. The relationship between means-tested programs and external efficacy is less clear. The results show that SNAP has a statistically significant negative relationship with external efficacy, causing an average decline of .562 points on the scale (or 3%), all else equal. However, neither participation in Medicaid nor subsidized housing appear to have effects on external efficacy. Additionally, participation in Public Assistance is never statistically significant. This is unexpected, as Public Assistance programs like AFDC were particularly controversial programs that conferred visible benefits at the time of the study, leading me to believe (based on previous literature) that there would be profound negative feedback effects from participation in the program. Overall, Models

1 and 3 indicate that three of four means-tested programs in this study have negative effects on internal efficacy, while one of four has negative effects on external efficacy.

The results from Models 1 and 3 provide mixed insights about whether the proximity of a policy is influential in determining feedback effects. The distant policies included in this study - student loans and subsidized housing - present opposing results. For both internal and external efficacy, participation in student loan programs is never statistically significant. However, subsidized housing programs have a clear negative impact on internal efficacy (even after additional controls), and this effect is of a larger magnitude than that of other significant programs in Models 1 and 3. In addition, the proximate policies included in this study - OASI, Medicare, Veteran's Benefits, AFDC, SNAP, and Medicaid - all have unique results that do not indicate a clear effect of proximity on efficacy-related feedback effects. Instead, the relatively high coefficient on subsidized housing may indicate that while the proximity of a policy is not influential in feedback effects alone, it may exacerbate the negative feedback effects caused by means-tested policies. Still, Models 1 and 3 do not provide evidence that either the universality or proximity of a policy is decisive in determining the nature or existence of policy feedback effects.

In fact, the effects of program participation on internal and external efficacy are insignificant for all but one model when including two additional regressors: age and income. Model 2 presents the regression results on internal efficacy, and model 4 presents the results on external efficacy. As demonstrated, all programs lose statistically significant effects on external efficacy, and only one (subsidized housing) remains significant on internal efficacy. Model 2 shows that participation in subsidized housing causes a decline of 1.096 points on the internal efficacy scale (or 4%), all else equal. Otherwise, the inclusion of age and income as additional

regressors contradicts the evidence of policy feedback effects and mainly serves to clarify the relationship between the control variables and efficacy instead. Firstly, when considering internal efficacy, whether the respondent's first language is English is significant for every regression and has a consistently positive relationship with speaking English as a first language. All else being equal, speaking English as a first language causes an average 1.03-point increase (4%) on the internal efficacy scale, though it has no significance on the external efficacy scale. This is expected, as speaking another language understandably poses a barrier to understanding a political world primarily occurring in English, though does not seem as directly related to government responsiveness. Interestingly, being a native-born American is not significant in any Model 2 or 4 regressions, but being a first-generation American is significant in every regression on external efficacy. On average, there is a decrease of .265 points (1.4%) on the external efficacy scale caused by being a first-generation American alone. This is expected, as respondents whose parents are immigrants likely witnessed low government responsiveness to their families.

In each Model 2 regression on internal efficacy, race is significant at the highest level in every regression, and being non-white has a consistent negative relationship with internal efficacy. On average, each regression demonstrates a decline of .6 points (2.4%) on the internal efficacy scale that is solely caused by identifying as a person of color. Similarly, race is significant in the final regressions on external efficacy, and, on average, being non-white causes a decline of .4 points (2.2%) on the external efficacy scale. While the result on external efficacy is expected and is consistent with previous literature, the result on internal efficacy is not, as previous studies show that the weaker sense of efficacy felt by Black Americans compared to whites is driven by external efficacy instead of internal efficacy. Additionally, gender is

significant in all Model 2 and 4 regressions except one (OASI) and shows a consistent positive relationship between efficacy and being male. For internal efficacy, identifying as male results in an average increase of .71 points (2.8%), while identifying as male results in an average increase of .19 points (1%) for external efficacy. This result is also expected, though it again gives cause for future research to determine why women largely believe in an egalitarian democracy but doubt their own ability to participate in it. Education is significant in every model and has a clear positive relationship with both types of efficacy. For internal efficacy, each additional year of education completed by the respondent causes an average increase of .384 points (1.5%) on the internal efficacy scale and .290 points (2.6%) on the external efficacy scale, all else equal. A positive relationship with internal efficacy is expected, as education undoubtedly increases one's ability to participate in and understand politics. Interestingly, the positive relationship with external efficacy indicates a belief that the government responds more favorably to those with higher educational attainment. When considering educational attainment as a measure of socioeconomic status, this is expected.

Finally, the inclusion of age and income - the two factors that eliminate the significance of program participation seen in Models 1 and 3 - provides more important results. Firstly, age is not significant in any regressions on internal efficacy, but it has the highest level of significance in every regression on external efficacy. There is a clear positive relationship between age and external efficacy, though it is weak: an increase of one year of age results in an average increase of .05 points on the external efficacy scale, all else equal. Interestingly, this positive relationship indicates that older Americans believe the government is more responsive to them than younger Americans, though not because of any increased personal ability or political expertise (as such would be demonstrated in internal efficacy). Instead, some literature suggests that the reasoning

behind this positive relationship is policy feedback effects, despite the lack of significance in these regressions. Howard (2007), for example, suggests that instead of a two-tiered welfare state, the United States actually has an age-based welfare state, in which benefits and attention are funneled toward the oldest Americans. Along these lines, it makes sense that older Americans would feel stronger senses of external efficacy than younger Americans, as the age-based welfare state socializes feelings of value and responsiveness among older Americans. Finally, the control for income also reaches the highest levels of statistical significance in all regressions, and there is a clear positive relationship between income and both internal and external efficacy. On average, an increase of one level on CPS' income gradient causes an increase of .203 points on the internal efficacy scale and .160 points on the external efficacy scale, all else equal.[6] This is expected, as there is a significant body of literature that demonstrates a relationship between income, efficacy, and political participation. The inclusion of income into the regression, in addition to education, added another measure of socioeconomic status to the model. Interestingly, both measures are significant on their own, indicating an overwhelmingly strong relationship between socioeconomic status, in general, and efficacy.

Knowing the dominance of demographic factors in determining program participants' sense of efficacy, I ran a final regression model among a homogeneous sample of participants. Tables 11 and 12 present the regression results, in which I use the same variables as previous models but select only men and women who are at least 60 years of age and identify as white (N=298). Only models for OASI and external efficacy and SNAP and internal efficacy are included, as all other programs remained insignificant.

TABLE 11

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[6]Appendix F outlines the income gradients used in CPS.

Social Security

	External Efficacy			
	Model 5		Model 6	
Intercept	2.565	(2.913)	2.602	(.769)
Ssget	.621	(.306)*	.769	(.334)*
Folksus	-.131	(.151)	-.226	(.162)
Rus	-2.00	(1.162)	-1.908	(1.437)
Lang1@	.449	(.808)	.655	(.875)
Edgrade	.192	(.039)***	.124	(.049)**
Gender@	-.419	(.229)	-.371	(.251)
Age@@			-.005	(.019)
Faminc			.096	(.042)**
adjR²	.094		.112	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 5 and 6 is the external efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 12

SNAP

	Internal Efficacy			
	Model 7		Model 8	
Intercept	21.259	(4.990)	16.833	(6.705)
Foodget	1.821	(.408)	2.580	(1.551)+
Folksus	.203	(.260)	.188	(.272)
Rus	-2.259	(1.927)	-.156	(2.409)
Lang1@	-.923	(1.419)	.139	(1.560)
Edgrade	.425	(.069)***	.301	(.086)***
Gender@	-1.026	(.408)**	-.910	(.439)**
Age@@			-.019	(.033)
Faminc			.172	(.070)**
adjR²	.157		.180	

Note: The dependent variable for Models 7 and 8 is the internal efficacy scale. Standard errors are in parentheses. * indicates statistical significance at the 5% level, + indicates significance at the 10% level.

As shown in the tables, participation in OASI has significant positive effects on external efficacy among older, white respondents, even after controlling for age and income. Specifically, all else equal, participating in OASI causes an increase of .621 points (3.6%) on the internal efficacy scale in Model 5, and an increase of .769 points (4.3%) in Model 6. This result is consistent with previous literature, specifically Campbell (2002), suggesting that participation in OASI causes heightened feelings of efficacy and spurs participation among seniors of all income levels. In addition, if considering significance at the 90% level, Table 12 shows a significant program effect from SNAP on internal efficacy, only after controlling for income. All else equal, Model 8 demonstrates that participating in SNAP results in an average increase of 2.58 points on the internal efficacy scale. This increase is substantial (10%), though this result contradicts previous literature suggesting that proximate, means-tested programs such as SNAP and TANF have negative effects on the recipient's sense of efficacy. Notably, this significance is only present after controlling for income, meaning any variation in internal efficacy caused by program status in Model 7 was washed out by variation caused by income. Additionally, Table 11 shows that in the sample of older, white Americans, neither gender nor age remain significant in determining external efficacy. The result for age is striking, indicating that at least among white Americans, age is only related to external efficacy when younger than 60 years old. In other words, it seems that it is reaching senior status that is truly influential in determining external efficacy, echoing previous literature (Howard 2007). Overall, the results in Tables 11 and 12 offer some evidence of feedback effects. However, these effects are only able to be found among a homogeneous, white population. When conducting the same analysis among seniors who identify as persons of color, no significant program results were present, likely because of a

small sample size (N=104) and the real differences between distinct racial groups. Regardless, the presence of significant feedback effects only in a homogenous sample adds validity to the outsized influence of race and age in determining efficacy and gives cause to question the existence of feedback effects in the general population. In fact, Mettler's 2002 study of the GI Bill - in which she finds statistically significant effects - is also only for a population of white males.

Ultimately, while the regression models demonstrate important relationships between many of the control variables and efficacy, the most notable takeaway from this quantitative analysis is the failure to find comprehensive evidence of policy feedback effects. While it is impossible to identify the exact cause for this, it is worth exploring the utility of CPS as a data source. As mentioned, CPS was used in this study because it is one of few robust datasets that includes information on both feelings of efficacy and program membership. Likewise, CPS uses individual-level data, making it possible to analyze the effects of policy feedback on individuals rather than groups. However, CPS has limitations. Most notably, the data in CPS precedes major policy reforms that have come to define the welfare state today. Not only has PRWORA restructured AFDC (now TANF), but the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) saw a major expansion in 1993 that has now rendered it one of the most prominent welfare programs directed towards working-aged adults. Likewise, while the Child Tax Credit was created in 1997, it has grown in prominence as the real value of TANF and SNAP dollars has declined. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) is also of note, as is the gradual privatization of the administration of Medicare and Medicaid. So, with much of the welfare state now administered through hidden programs like tax credits, or hidden authorities like private health providers, it would be inconceivable to collect data on welfare program participation and not include the EITC, CTC, ACA, and others.

Likewise, CPS has some variable-specific issues that likely bias the results of this study. In particular, when asking whether respondents participate in "subsidized housing," CPS administrators make no clarification as to whether they are referring to Section 8 Housing or public housing - two programs with different means of conferring benefits, and accordingly, different feedback effects. Given that subsidized housing is the only program that remains significant after the inclusion of age and income, and given that the effect sizes for subsidized housing are notably larger than others, it is problematic to be unable to identify the corresponding program. Similarly, when collecting data on "public assistance," CPS administrators included participation in AFDC, General Assistance, or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as applicable programs. While AFDC and General Assistance are comparable programs that confer visible benefits and are particularly controversial, SSI is an entirely different program. In fact, SSI was created with the intention of not being controversial, and thus the possible feedback effects caused by SSI and AFDC would likely move in opposite directions (Erkulwater 2006). So, it is no surprise that the Public Assistance did not show statistically significant effects in any model, as the definition of the variable alone likely washed out any possible effects from occurring. In sum, the use of CPS might explain the failure to find quantitative evidence of policy feedback effects, as the dataset doesn't include crucial programs in the modern welfare state and does not have sufficiently refined categories for program participation.

Alternatively, other explanations for this study's failure to find quantitative evidence of feedback effects could be that quantitative methods are not suitable for studying feedback effects, or that these feedback effects simply do not exist. As policy feedback theory has developed in the last few decades, a rich body of literature has been published that asserts that

policy feedback effects play an outsized role in structuring political life. This literature is diverse, and policy feedback theory has received significant attention within the political science field. However, despite this multitude of studies, the quantitative evidence behind policy feedback theory as a whole is weak. In a review of 65 published studies in the policy feedback field, Larsen (2019) finds that in a distribution of test statistics used in published studies, the median value is 1.62, indicating that the majority of quantitative effects shown in policy feedback literature are insignificant at both the .05 level and the .1 level. Likewise, Larsen computes 94 effect size measures from published works, finding an average standardized effect size of .013. This coefficient is small (and similar to those found in the quantitative results from this study), indicating the limited, if not insignificant, effects of policy on the mass public. Mettler's 2002 study of the GI Bill - which is a lauded study within policy feedback theory - also raises questions about the existence of policy feedback effects when considering that none of her regressions yielded an adjusted R-squared value higher than .013. In other words, the regression with the highest explanatory power in Mettler's study explained just 1.3% of the variation in the outcome variable (in this case, civic memberships). So, while this study was unable to find quantitative evidence of policy feedback effects, it seems that most other studies are unable to as well. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that either policy feedback effects are insignificant, or that it is not appropriate to use quantitative methods to study them. To test whether the second conclusion is true, I turn to qualitative research and present data from two interviews in the following section.

Chapter Two: The Qualitative Relationship Between Efficacy and Program Participation

This chapter focuses on the qualitative portion of this thesis, which consists of material from two interviews with local non-profit leaders. The motivation behind these interviews is multifaceted: firstly, these interviews were conducted to gain additional insight into the central question of this thesis and uncover more information about the relationship between policy design and efficacy. Secondly, these interviews serve to corroborate the quantitative results. Thirdly, these interviews are an attempt to grasp the lived experiences of program recipients. While the internal and external efficacy scales used in the previous section of this study do measure important components of efficacy, efficacy is a subjective feeling that is difficult to measure at all, let alone in numbers. Likewise, a disproportionate focus on quantitative data easily results in the loss of some element of the human condition, as there may be variables that interact with efficacy or program participation that are unknown to the researcher or are overlooked in research design. So, the inclusion of qualitative data is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subjective relationship between efficacy and program participation. The main findings from both interviews indicate a few specific areas of the design and internal processes of programs that were most salient in the eyes of the interview subjects: means-tests, requirements for the maintenance of benefits, and the documents needed to prove eligibility. However, when considering the effects of program design and participation on efficacy, the interviews yielded inconclusive and unspecific results that largely fail to provide additional insight into the central question of this thesis.

As mentioned previously, I conducted two interviews in late 2022 with staff at two non-profit organizations, United Way and GoochlandCares. Before conducting these interviews,

I completed training and received approval from the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board to ensure that these interviews were conducted ethically and in a non-harmful manner. While each of these interviews was unique in their exact content, both followed a similar structure of questioning intended to probe the interviewers to discuss policy design and efficacy while still providing room for the interview subject to discuss any topic they found relevant. Each interview subject was aware of the topic of this thesis, as well as the intention behind conducting interviews. To grasp recipients' experiences with program design, the staff members were asked questions about their clients' pathways to enrolling in programs, receiving benefits, and their general emotional experiences. This included questions about their client's general knowledge of program requirements, the common reasons behind terminations of benefits, and whether clients seem generally satisfied with their experiences, among other questions. To grasp efficacy, the staff members were asked about the political participation and civic engagement of their clients, as well as the frequency with which clients discuss political issues. This included questions about clients' voting and community organizing habits, as well as questions about their feelings of value within the local and national community. Notably, though this line of questioning targets the overall experience of program participants, it does not make connections between experience and specific programs. Resultantly, some general insight provided by the interview subjects is unable to be attributed to particular aspects of program design and instead serves only to touch on lived experience. However, specific aspects of program design that correspond to the proximity and universality of a program - particularly enrollment or administration processes - are explicitly mentioned in the interviews, meaning that some information on program design is still useful for the general purpose of this thesis. In addition, the selection of United Way and GoochlandCares as organizations of interest was

strategic - United Way is an organization that provides help with taxes and thus helps clients enroll in tax credits (which are predominantly means-tested distant programs), while GoochlandCares helps clients with an array of programs including TANF, SNAP, and SSDI (predominantly means-tested proximate programs). So, while unable to directly connect certain material with specific programs, the interviewed staff have familiarity with different types of welfare policy and provide insight accordingly.

When discussing the important aspects of program design and recipient experience, the subjects in both interviews frequently mentioned surface-level aspects of policy design. Specifically, these surface-level aspects consist of a policy's core design - whether the policy is universal or means-tested, and whether it is administered federally, locally, or through semi-private organizations. In both interviews, one specific feature that was mentioned was income cutoffs - a core element of policy that puts means tests into practice. In scholarly literature, means-tested policies are understood to have generally negative feedback effects on program recipients; scholars cite how means-tested programs frequently have paternalistic behavioral requirements that depress recipient's feelings of efficacy and value, or note that means-tested programs garner unusual amounts of public controversy that often also intertwines with racial resentments (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Metzl, 2019). Yet, the interviews with United Way and GoochlandCares suggested another source of negative feedback from means-tested policies: the arbitrary nature of income cutoffs, which are also referred to as "notches" in policymaking circles when these cutoffs deter recipients from additional earnings. As noted in scholarly literature, income cutoffs and asset tests for many means-tested programs leave a substantial segment of the poor population without help. Newman and Tan Chen (2007) refer to this population as the "missing class" - people who *just*

over-qualify for benefits but still profoundly struggle without government help. Newman and Tan Chen find that this population is shut out from economic mobility and their stagnant position of near poverty continues generationally, adding weight to complaints that many income cutoffs are not based on an accurate calculation of economic well-being. In fact, income cutoffs for receiving help at both United Way and GoochlandCares are nearly 200% of the federal poverty line - demonstrating an understanding from both organizations that the federal poverty line is not an accurate measure of suffering. The ambiguity around means tests has significant implications for the experiences of the poor, noted both by scholars and the interviewees. Schneider (1999) conducted an Ethnographic study on the poor and near-poor's opinions on welfare reform, finding that negative views towards welfare did not stem from feelings that the poor are freeloading, but stemmed instead from feelings of unfairness and neglect from the near-poor. Similarly, in 2018 the *New York Times* interviewed several people living on the notch of healthcare coverage - those who overqualified for Medicaid but are still burdened by coverage costs even after ACA subsidies - and notes that these individuals experienced heightened resentment towards both the government for failing to help them, but also towards low-income individuals who receive more favorable benefit plans than themselves (Goodnough 2018). In addition, staff at GoochlandCares echoed a similar insight about income cutoffs, telling the story of clients who are forced to reject working overtime shifts because accepting these shifts would push them over the income limit and leave them in a worse financial position than before. The staff calls this experience "discouraging" for their clients, noting that accepting overtime and working harder is framed as a mechanism for self-improvement, yet it feels more like a "punishment" when it results in the loss of benefits. In other words, program participants are forced to forgo the choices that are framed as productive and empowering and instead choose to

continue receiving stigmatized aid from the government, simply because accepting aid will leave them in a better economic position than the alternative. Though the interviewees do not explicitly mention an effect on efficacy, it seems plausible that this false choice would have profound implications on internal efficacy especially. As such, insight from United Way and GoochlandCares largely corroborates published literature in academic and mass media, highlighting the profound negative feedback effects of means-tested programs.

In addition to income cutoffs, another component of policy design that was mentioned by the interviewees is the process of maintaining benefits. In particular, the staff at both organizations highlighted how different programs demand unequal amounts of time and effort from participants in order to receive benefits. For example, these requirements often involve reapplying for benefits, which in some cases can require in-person visits to caseworkers or administrative offices. These requirements are largely determined by a program's design; for example, indirect programs like the EITC or CTC require participants to file for the program just once a year when filing taxes, while direct programs like SNAP require recipients to reapply for benefits after a certain period (generally within 3-12 months, depending on the state). The effect of strenuous administrative requirements on the experience of program participants has been well-studied in scholarly literature. Soss (2005) discusses the role of program administration in policy feedback loops, asserting that administration is an influential part of the feedback process because it structures citizen-state interactions on the ground. In addition, Moynihan and Herd (2010) study "red tape," or administrative requirements that are strenuous on participants but do not advance a legitimate purpose of the program, and find that red tape causes undue burden on program participants that is disproportionately concentrated among disadvantaged groups. The scholars note how at the time of publication in 2010, applicants for SSI benefits had to appear in

a local office and provide extensive documentation to local administrators, while OASI

applicants (who are generally of higher income) could submit an online application that took

around 10 minutes to complete. Bound, Kossoudji, and Ricart-Mous (1998) even found that

many Michigan residents took lower-value General Assistance benefits instead of SSI benefits to

avoid the administrative burden of SSI. Resultantly, scholarly literature demonstrates that red

tape causes feedback effects, and the nature of these administrative requirements (and

accordingly, the nature of their subsequent feedback effects) is closely tied to whether a program

is means-tested or universal, and proximate or distant. These results are consistent with insight

from both interviews, as well as publications from the media. When asked what the most

frustrating part of program participation seems to be among clients, staff at GoochlandCares

highlighted the necessity to reapply for benefits, noting how frequent changes in administrative

policy for programs like SNAP create intense confusion for recipients. A 2015 piece in the *New

York Times* detailed this through specific anecdotes as well, telling the story of a 68-year-old man

who attended four appointments and waited on hold for 16 hours just to determine why his

benefits were cut off without notice (Hu 2015). While the interviewees did not explicitly discuss

how administrative practices impact efficacy, they assert that administrative details - as a facet of

policy design - have profound implications for participants' experience. Thus, as scholarly

literature asserts that the universality and proximity of a policy are crucial in determining policy

feedback, it seems likely that administrative requirements are one of the mechanisms through

which this feedback takes shape.

  In addition to core facets of a policy's design, data from both interviews indicate that

certain internal processes of welfare programs are a primary source of policy feedback. A

particular design aspect was highlighted: the process of supplying documentation that is needed

to prove program eligibility. In fact, staff in both interviews cited documentation as a primary barrier to their clients receiving program benefits. Largely, this is due to the difficulty of keeping track of physical paperwork, and staff noted how this is especially challenging for the elderly and for those who frequently move addresses (who are more likely to be families of lower incomes) (Phinney 2013). Interestingly, this is a problem that appears to be consistent across programs, as requirements to show personal identification, social security cards, pay stubs, and proof of address are standard requirements. In fact, while proximate means-tested programs are more likely to include burdensome administrative requirements, staff at United Way specifically mentioned the challenge of providing physical tax documentation, which is traditionally mailed to an employee's listed address. Ultimately, while the burden of providing documentation is felt by participants across programs, both scholars, the GoochlandCares staff, and the United Way staff noted that this burden is exacerbated when the nature of required documentation is particularly personal or particularly strenuous. This is well-cited in scholarly literature. In Newman's 2015 piece, she notes how the application process for SSDI has profound effects on participants; to increase the likelihood of a successful SSDI claim, applicants are encouraged to embrace narratives of "stereotypic victimization and helplessness" and prove they are entirely unable to contribute to the economy. As a result, Newman notes that applicants feel re-victimized and humiliated by the process, as they are forced to provide personal health information and degrading narratives of incompetence that are profoundly emotional. In other words, Newman finds that the program process shapes how individuals think about themselves, showing that SSDI applicants experience damage to their senses of internal efficacy due to the design of the application process. This is corroborated by Erkulwater (2019), who asserts that policymakers and political activists are aware of the ability of program processes to do this, evidenced by the

efforts of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) to reject aid programs that framed the blind

as feminine and dependent in favor of programs that encouraged labor and self-sufficiency. So,

as scholarly literature asserts that the information required of program applicants has feedback

effects on applicants' self-image, it is understandable why the interviewees at United Way and

GoochlandCares explicitly mentioned application materials as a barrier to program participation.

In fact, staff at United Way highlighted this in an anecdote; after United Way introduced an

online tax aid intended to reach rural clients and those with physical disabilities, the staff found

that the completion rates for the online help requests were extremely low, as applicants were

afraid to submit sensitive personal information over the internet in case of a scam. Ultimately,

data from published literature and interviews assert that programs' internal processes create

feedback effects. In the case of application documents, these feedback effects seem to be

generated by programs across the design spectrum, as most programs demand information that

can be physically burdensome to locate and emotionally burdensome to provide.

 Ultimately, data collected from these two interviews largely corroborates published

literature asserting the presence of policy feedback effects. Interviewees from both United Way

and GoochlandCares emphasized the role of policy design in determining participant

experiences, and from the anecdotes shared about particular aspects of policy design, it is

possible to make some inferences about the universality and proximity of a policy in relation to

the policy's feedback effects. Income cutoffs, re-application provisions, and required

documentation are just a few areas of a policy's broader design that stood out in interview data;

the negative feedback effects of income cutoffs can be directly understood as negative feedback

effects from means-tested policy design, while the impact of re-application requirements can be

associated with means-tested policies given the connection between means-tested policies and

red tape. Conversely, the stress of providing sensitive information seems to be broadly experienced by recipients of most programs. Overall, the information about these aspects of policy design adds specificity to an otherwise broad inquiry into the relationship between policy design and policy feedback. However, the standout limitation of this interview data is the inability to individuate clients' experiences and make direct connections to efficacy. As the interviews were conducted, staff at both organizations were hesitant to make generalizations about their clients' experiences; when asked how clients seem to feel about certain experiences or concerning certain policies, the interviewees commonly provided some version of 'every person has a different experience.' In general, this is positive - professionals who provide help to low-income clients should make every effort not to generalize or stereotype their clients, just as professional caseworkers should treat each case individually. However, when seeking to answer the central question of this thesis, the resistance of the interviewees in generalizing their clients' experiences resulted in non-answers that ultimately fail to provide new data. While disappointing, this takeaway highlights the importance of using individual-level data in studying the relationship between policy design and efficacy, and it also asserts that interviewing participants directly is a materially better methodological approach than interviewing third-party professionals.

Conclusion

In sum, this thesis conducts a multi-method inquiry into the existence of policy feedback effects and the relationship between policy design and political efficacy. While I uncover limited quantitative evidence of policy feedback effects among the general population, I find effects

among a racially homogeneous group over the age of 60, suggesting that demographic factors such as race and age, as well as income and education, are the most important determinants of political efficacy. While some programs have modest effects in some circumstances, I am unable to generalize about the relationship between program design and efficacy at this stage. From qualitative data collected from published literature, mass media, and personal interviews, I find stronger evidence of the existence of policy feedback effects that highlights specific features of policy design. However, I am unable to connect individuals' distinct experiences with participation in singular programs, and thus my qualitative data is not of much use in examining the relationship between program design and efficacy. Overall, the findings of this thesis should encourage researchers to be cautious when considering policy feedback effects - while my findings do not negate the presence of policy feedback effects, they also do not decisively confirm their presence. However, given the depth of published literature on policy feedback theory that asserts the existence of strong and nuanced policy feedback effects, I believe the weak findings of this thesis are largely driven by methodological flaws. Namely, the quantitative data used in regression analysis contains imprecise variable definitions, and the data is outdated given that several major policy reforms have changed the welfare state since 1989. Likewise, collecting qualitative interview data from third-party professionals has proved to not be a suitable substitute for interviewing program recipients directly, as these external stakeholders are either unable or unwilling to provide specific enough data to connect individual experience with program participation.

As such, a chief takeaway from this thesis is that scholars studying policy feedback theory should invest in the methodological advancement of the school. This is not a novel suggestion; as policy feedback theory has gained popularity within Political Science scholarship

in recent years, many scholars have critiqued published work for lacking methodological rigor. Four areas of policy feedback methods are frequently critiqued. Firstly, as mentioned in Chapter One, most published quantitative studies have extremely limited results, consisting of either low effect sizes, statistically insignificant results, or negligible R-squared values. Secondly, there is substantial criticism about the presence of selection bias in policy feedback theory literature - many studies, including this one, focus on interpretations of client statements, multivariate analyses that compare participants across programs while controlling for all demographic characteristics, or multivariate analyses that compare participants only to those that share characteristics like age or income - all designs that have substantial restrictions to showing causality. In part, this is due to a problem that I also encountered: a lack of up-to-date, comprehensive surveys that ask questions about both program participation and political activity and identity. Additionally, there is an issue with design variation within policy feedback theory - many studies, again including this one, compare the feedback effects of universal and means-tested programs, finding that universal programs have favorable program designs that encourage democratic participation and heightened feelings of value and efficacy. Accordingly, policy feedback scholars often divide the welfare state into two tiers (universal and means-tested), and many scholars connect these program designs with the well-demonstrated divide between the "deserving" and the "undeserving poor." However, this divide does not apply to every circumstance, and many policy feedback studies overlook differences between programs within the same tier, as well as singular programs across jurisdictions. While this thesis tries to add another element of comparison for same-tier programs (proximity), it does not adequately account for the fact that there are very few published studies that break apart from this rigid design structure. And finally, there is a lack of effort among policy feedback theorists to

incorporate the work of other disciplines. While studying the feedback effects of welfare policy necessitates a close study of policy design, it is also a study of poverty, and incorporating ethnographic and sociological scholarship into the policy feedback conversation will result in a more complete and nuanced understanding of policy and lived experience.

These methodological advancements are crucial to policy feedback theory because policy feedback theory is crucial to our democracy. With public policy as the tool that shapes citizens' interactions with government at the ground level, understanding the relationship between policy and citizens is inextricable from understanding our democratic system as a whole. Policy can push us to (or prevent us from) taking political action, it can alter the way that we feel about ourselves and our neighbors, and it can structure the way we view our system of government. Given how many citizens most programs touch, even an effect of small magnitude can have significant implications for our political system. At a time in which heightened polarization poses a real threat to our democracy, it is vital to understand all of the mechanisms that shape our political identities. Of equal importance to this political concern, though, is a human one. As of January 2021, 12.8% of Americans live in poverty - 42.5 million people. Of those 42.5 million people, 16.9% of them - 7.1 million people - are children (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). A tremendous portion of our population is suffering, and not only have our welfare policies largely failed to eradicate poverty, but scholarship has shown that our welfare policies have created profoundly negative experiences for fellow citizens. Policy provisions (whether core means-tests or additive behavioral guidelines) have institutionalized the idea that some people do not deserve the same amount of help and security as others. Our policies have altered people's perceptions of their own worth and have made people feel unwelcome in a community that was founded to welcome everybody. We have a human duty to remedy this, and the advancement of policy

feedback theory is crucial to creating policy that empowers our citizens rather than devalues them.

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Appendix

Appendix A - Definitions of Regressors

- *Folksus:* indicates whether one, both, or none of the respondent's parents were born in the United States.
- *Rus:* indicates whether the respondent was born in the United States.
- *Lang1:* indicates whether the respondent's first language is English, English and something else, or something other than English.
- *Gender:* indicates the respondent's gender identity, with options for male or female.
- *Race:* represents the respondent's racial identity, including categories for White, Black, Asian, Alaskan/Native, Hispanic/Latino, and other.
- *Edgrade:* measures the highest level of education completed by the respondent.
- *Age@:* indicates the respondent's age. It is calculated by subtracting the variable *Yearborn* (indicating the respondent's birth year) from 1989, which was the year of the study.
- *Faminc:* measures the respondent's total family income in 1989
- *Ssget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received Social Security benefits within the study's timeframe.
- *Vetsget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received Veteran's benefits within the study's timeframe.
- *Foodget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received Food Stamps (SNAP) within the study's timeframe.
- *Houseget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received Subsidized Housing within the study's timeframe.
- *Mcareget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received Medicare benefits within the study's timeframe.
- *Mcaidget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received Medicaid benefits within the study's timeframe.

- *Loansget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received Guaranteed Student Loans within the study's timeframe.
- *Afdcget:* measures whether the respondent or someone in the respondent's household received AFDC benefits within the study's timeframe.
- *Discpals:* measures how free the respondent feels to discuss political issues with friends. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Discfear:* measures the respondent's level of worry when taking a public stand. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Talkwell:* measures whether the respondent feels they can speak well enough to make a public statement. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead1:* indicates whether the respondent counts on being successful at everything. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead2:* indicates whether the respondent likes to assume responsibility. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead3:* indicates whether the respondent enjoys taking the lead in groups. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead4:* indicates whether the respondent enjoys convincing others of their opinions. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead5:* indicates whether the respondent feels they often serve as a model for others. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead6:* indicates whether the respondent feels they are good at getting what they want. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead7:* indicates whether the respondent feels they are often a step ahead of others. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Lead8:* indicates whether the respondent often gives others advice. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Writeok*: indicates whether the respondent feels they could write a convincing letter to the government. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.
- *Cwrun:* among respondents that have been active in campaigns, measures how important the respondent's possible desire to run for office was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.

- *Mcrun:* among respondents that have contributed to campaigns, measures how important the respondent's possible desire to run for office was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.

- *Ogrun:* among respondents that are members of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's possible desire to run for office was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.

- *Bdrun:* among respondents that are on boards of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's possible desire to run for office was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of internal efficacy.

- *Voiceloc:* measures the extent to which the respondent feels they have influence over the decisions of local government. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Voicenat:* measures the extent to which the respondent feels they have influence over the decisions of the national government. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Attnmtg:* measures the extent to which the respondent feels that they would be given attention if making a public statement.   It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Cwpolicy:* among respondents that have been active in campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to influence the government was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Mcpolicy:* among respondents that have contributed to campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to influence the government was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Vtpolicy:* among respondents that voted in elections, measures how important the respondent's desire to influence the government was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Ptpolicy:* among respondents that have attended a protest, measures how important the respondent's desire to influence the government was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Ogpolicy:* among respondents that are members of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's desire to influence the government was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Bdpolicy:* among respondents that are on the boards of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's desire to influence the government was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Cwbetter:* among respondents that have been active in campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to make the nation better was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Mcbetter:* among respondents that have contributed to campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to make the nation better was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Vtbetter:* among respondents that have voted in elections, measures how important the respondent's desire to make the nation better was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Ctbetter:* among respondents that contacted public officials, measures how important the respondent's desire to make the nation better was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Ogbetter:* among respondents that are members of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's desire to make the community better was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Bdbetter:* among respondents that are on the boards of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's desire to make the community better was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Cwgethlp:* among respondents that have been active in campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to get help from an official was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Mcgethlp:* among respondents that have voted in elections, measures how important the respondent's desire to get help from an official was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Vtgethlp:* among respondents that have contributed to campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to get help from an official was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Oggethlp:* among respondents that are members of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's desire to get help for a problem was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Bdgethlp:* among respondents that are on the boards of civic organizations, measures how important the respondent's desire to get help for a problem was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Cwpgoals:* among respondents that have been active in campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to further party goals was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Mcpgoals:* among respondents that have contributed to campaigns, measures how important the respondent's desire to further party goals was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

- *Vtpgoals:* among respondents that have voted in elections, measures how important the respondent's desire to further party goals was in motivating their activity. It is used to create the scale of external efficacy.

Appendix B - Outcome Variables

Internal Efficacy Scale: the internal efficacy scale is created by adding the following variables (which have been re-coded as necessary to have higher values indicate higher levels of internal efficacy):

- *Discpals, Discfear, Talkwell, Lead1, Lead2, Lead3, Lead4, Lead5, Lead6, Lead7, Lead8, Writeok, Cwrun, Mcrun, Ogrun, Bdrun*

External Efficacy Scale: the external efficacy scale is created by adding the following variables (which have been re-coded as necessary to have higher values indicate higher levels of external efficacy):

- *Voiceloc, Voicenat, Attnmtg, Cwpolicy, Mcpolicy, Vtpolicy, Ptpolicy, Ogpolicy, Bdpolicy, Cwbetter, Mcbetter, Vtbetter, Ctbetter, Ogbetter, Bdbetter, Cwgethlp, Mcgethlp, Vtgethlp, Oggethlp, Bdgethlp, Cwpgoals, Mcpgoals, Vtpgoals*

Appendix C - Transcript of Interview with United Way

Q: So to begin, can you tell me a little bit about your organization here? What are your largest focuses and your largest concerns?

A: I specifically work in our community impact department here at United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg. I can share a little bit more about our organization, our footprint, and some of our larger things. That may, may or may not be helpful in the larger kind of scheme of things, but I think it'll give you a little bit more context. And so United Way does work in 11 localities within this region, so it's not just the Richmond area or the Petersburg area, but we have other localities that we focus on and support. So our overall mission is to empower individuals and drive systemic change, to provide everyone with a clear path to success. And our work focuses on key milestone areas, from kind of a continuum from born healthy, all the way over to connected and healthy older adults, and the spectrum in between there. And we really work within our region to support programs within other organizations in our footprint that are doing work in that space. With that comes some key target areas: families should have access to safe housing, and food to eat, they should be born healthy, have the opportunities to succeed in school, everybody should be able to obtain a stable job at a living wage, and adults deserve to be connected and healthy. Yeah. So there's that's kind of like our larger footprint…

My focus is on our Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program, which is a locally implemented program in our region. But it's part of a national program that's connected to and monitored by the Internal Revenue Service. And my large focus area is to oversee the tax sites that we have within our program. We have anywhere from 13 to 15 tax sites that open up in the heart of the tax season, which is late January to mid-April. And we work with community partners from

several different avenues to make that happen. That's how I'm connected to the University of Richmond, with Sasha Hollister. She supports our site that is connected to the University of Richmond which has historically been based in downtown Richmond. But we have about 13 to 15 sites that are supported by our community partners, which come from higher education, nonprofits, and financial institutions; we've partnered with credit unions, and we have sites that are co-located within library spaces, other nonprofits, and local government. So we have historically had a site that's been either co-located at a local Department of Social Service, or another government organization… And I don't know how much you want me to kind of go into like, detail on kind of specifically what we target, but I don't want to be repetitive.

Q: I think anything that you think is relevant or important to know, regardless of how detailed that information is, I'd love to hear.

A: So our focus area for our tax assistance program and this kind of changes every year based on eligibility, but for 2023 we'll work with individuals and families that have income less than $60,000. And that income guideline is set by the Internal Revenue Service, and it mirrors the maximum eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit. And so we provide free tax assistance, and everything that we do is both at no cost to the community, and it's highly structured in our requirements and things that we have to do, and the steps that we have to follow in terms of being able to offer this service. So it's high-quality service. And for us, before COVID, we traditionally offered what we would call traditional tax assistance at community partners that were face to face, either mostly or at the time, like walk-in service. And with COVID, things changed considerably. We thankfully have still been able to offer the service over the last few years, it's just changed in the way that we've structured our service: we've gone to more of an appointment based, we've had some limitations, obviously, with some of our partners because of spacing concern and social distancing and things like that. But we've still been able to offer the service, we've just done it a little differently. And we've also expanded in that we've been able to partner with another organization that you may be interested in, Code for America. They're a nonprofit, based out of San Francisco. They've been in the space, doing great work simplifying access to benefits. They've done work in the SNAP space and simplified the way that just people access applying for benefits, streamlining that and making that process easier. They're kind of a

tech nonprofit. Their work has centered around the earned income credit. And pre-COVID, they started a small pilot that turned into a very large pilot pretty quickly because COVID happened at that same time, but they started the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program or VITA. Thankfully, right as the pandemic was hitting they took our normal in-person service and made it digital by taking our procedure and kind of replicating it online through an online intake and creating a secure portal for us to be able to offer what we refer to as a virtual service, where a customer wanting to have their taxes done and work with our team no longer has to necessarily visit one of our in-person sites. So that's been pretty cool. Because really, the service program itself has been around for 50 years, and it's gone through a lot of different iterations. But until COVID, most everything was done in person, and people were just starting to look at different avenues to be able to help people. And we were doing some of that work, but not in the virtual space until this.

So we've created a separate virtual team that is essentially a site that manages our online customers through this portal. One of the other things that we've been focused on is giving people access to the stimulus payments, and economic impact payments, which has now been done through the tax filing process. So over the last couple of years, we've seen people needing our services that don't typically have a filing requirement for one reason or another, they have income that's not taxable or they're not receiving income that requires them to file a tax return, for example, and now are finding that they need to file a return to claim either the expanded Child Tax Credit, which now for 2021, obviously didn't have an income requirement attached to it, or just with the stimulus payments, overall.

So I don't think I answered your question at all. So I would say overall, my focus area would be more so in our financial stability and well-being space. This program itself is the main thing that I work on here, though it is certainly not the only thing that we work on at United Way. We do a lot of work in other areas as well. We have a lot of other initiatives, kindergarten, countdown camp, women's rise, all that's kind of highlighted also on our website. Yeah, so I'm sure you've seen a little bit of that. But we really work together to kind of hold up certain initiatives that are really important to overall work at United Way, but my main area is our tax program.

Q: Shifting to the people that you work with and you serve: you mentioned you have an income cut-off of $60,000. Can you tell me a little bit about the living circumstances of your clients and the main challenges they face as a community? What is your impression of it?

A: So I can talk more in general base terms, because I don't do ongoing case management or even like, customer service unless I'm also connected to our tax site. In fact, I can certainly point you to one of our community partners that may be able to talk more specifically about some of their customers. I can certainly kind of talk just in general. So we do have this 60,000 income limit, and so we look at adjusted gross income, kind of as that cap just to make it as high as we can. So we see a large number of folks that are coming to us that either have earned income from wages from employment, w-2s, or they're self-employed or contract workers. Our main focus is on basic tax preparation, which in terms of tax law covers wages from employment, Social Security income (which may or may not be taxable), a lot of retirement income from folks that are receiving a pension that have reached retirement age and are either taking from their retirement monthly or they are receiving required minimum distributions. But we also do help with more advanced situations that the IRS classifies as self-employed workers. Those ones are contract workers that receive 1099 forms. And they would be most commonly known as gig economy workers, Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, those that are setting their own schedules, their income stream is a little different, and a little bit more complex, and they are considered to be in business for themselves. So we do handle those types of returns as well. We've seen more customers coming in that have that type of income and complexity. And we are in most cases able to assist those customers with those different scenarios. But the average adjusted gross income across the board of all of our sites is roughly $24,000-25,000. In income, some of our sites are higher, their average adjusted gross income is a little bit higher. And some sites are lower than that average, depending on where our sites are located. So we do kind of see a wide spectrum, we roughly see about 33% of customers that are qualified for the Earned Income Tax Credit. And really one of our main target areas is working to help people file their returns to claim not only the Earned Income Tax Credit but the Child Tax Credit as well, trying to make sure that folks know that they're eligible, potentially for this credit, that they should be filing a return, even though they may not be required to file they don't meet the IRS definition of being required to file a return. But they could get extra money as part of their tax filing process. And especially this has been

really important this particular tax year that we're finishing up now because of the expanded child tax credit.

And so we really have been doing a lot of outreach with partners, to be able to target potential customers to let them know that they're eligible, even if they don't have a filing requirement, even if their income is not one that's normally found on a tax return. That's maybe they're just on some type of SSI benefit or social security, but they have children under the age of 18. So we've been doing some partnered work in the community and other nonprofits, just spreading the word about doing outreach in different ways letting people know. And I think part of that is confusing because they haven't been in the mindset to be filing a tax return annually. But because part of the payments were eligible in advance, to make sure people knew that they had to come to do a 2021 tax return, specifically for the Child Tax Credit to get the remainder of the credit. So it's really been kind of interesting to see. It's just been a really challenging couple of years just because of everything that's been kind of handled through the tax filing process.

Q: How aware would you say the clients you serve are about these programs at the outset prior to interacting with your organization?

A: I would say they are if they have been in the routine of filing because they have some type of income, or they would be qualified to receive the Earned Income Credit. The Child Tax Credit isn't something that's new, just the eligibility rules have changed. So it's the folks that are already kind of associated with one of our tax sites or partners [are aware of the programs]. That happened naturally because they were already kind of part of that process. What's been challenging is trying to identify those that are not already in the tax filing system, and getting them connected to good, quality resources. And so in our physical sites, we see a lot of returning customers that come back year after year, which is great. But, we've been trying to extend that out to new filers to let them know about this free service, and that they're able to claim all of their refunds without paying anything for filing. And that we are a valid, reputable service. So we do that continually. But it's definitely new. And then with our virtual service, that's been something different because we're reaching a whole new audience of people. While they are in part connected to our localities, we also serve people outside of our 11 localities that I threw out

there in other parts of the state of Virginia that have found out about the Get Your Refund. But so those that have found the Get Your Refund website, from several different places, whether they've done just a regular Google ad, or they're connected to another potentially like a national partner to learn more about, you know, the earned income credit or the child tax credit, or they found out about it on our website, or through one of our local partners. And so we will have been assisting people that lived in the state of Virginia, but not necessarily like in our community.

Q: I know that your direct interface with clients is limited, but are other programs outside of taxes ever kind of brought up in interactions with clients?

Cara: So I would say specifically at our tax sites, it happens naturally at some partners, rather than others. For example, in our local region, we have what's called Financial Opportunity Centers and they're referred to as FFCs. And they are essentially nonprofits that do almost like a bundled service delivery. So it's almost like a one-stop shop. So they work with customers on three different facets. On the financial side: applying for benefits so they can handle helping customers access SNAP benefits, TANF benefits, Medicaid, and then that's kind of a bridge to some temporary assistance or employment opportunities, helping them either find employment or look for better employment or ways to improve their employment. And then there's almost like financial assistance, related to budgeting and how to create a budget, how to do personal financial management. And they do that all in one place. We're lucky to have multiple Financial Opportunity Centers in our region, but they also have been partners with our VITA program as well. So they would naturally be having those conversations with customers that are coming through their doors. We've had sites that have been co-located at local departments of social services. That's how I got connected to this role. I was previously at a local Department of Social Service and worked in the employment program called the VIEW program (Virginia Initiative for Employment, not Welfare). So, folks that are on public assistance in Virginia, TANF, most of them have a requirement to participate in the new program. So I was a case manager in that program and worked with customers. I had a caseload, and I worked with customers that were all on TANF benefits, and for a period of time that the clock eligibility in Virginia is about 24 months. And so I worked with customers that at the same time, we were working with them to help them find employment, obtain better employment, and then provide other supportive

services that went along with that. And that does include childcare, and we also worked at a place that had a VITA site. And I managed that VITA site for a short amount of time. And if I wasn't managing it, I was also helping and volunteering. So that's how I got my start in the tax program in the first place. And so naturally, those conversations were already going on. But, we have in previous years (before the pandemic) kind of changed a lot of things. We've had kind of an information and referral, a volunteer role that we've used sporadically, not consistently at other places, or other sites that didn't naturally have that, you know, cohesiveness kind of happening. We call that role the cash coach volunteer. We're a part of our organizations, our writer program is part of Virginia, Coalition of BIDA partners that come together from across the state. And we're part of what's called the CASH campaign, Creating Assets, Savings, and Hope. We really work to try to have information available to customers connecting them to other community resources. I mean, that's the cool thing about the VITA program is that the potential is there to connect customers to other things. I will also say that sometimes that's a challenge because the process to file a tax return is extensive. Even though we try to streamline it as much as possible, there are clear steps that we have to take. We're regulated by the IRS to do certain things. One of those is a pretty long intake form that we complete with each customer. It's three pages worth of content, and then there's a release on the back. So of course, that does lengthen the process, but it is designed to make sure that we have all the information that we need to be able to prepare sure tax returns; we do an intake interview and then we prepare the tax return. But we also are required to do a quality review of every tax return. So there's a minimum of two people that work with each customer. So we have different volunteer roles that we have our volunteers do, but those that get certified in tax law are the most versatile volunteers because they can serve in a couple of different roles. But someone that only has, for instance, our screener certification can't do the tax return for the customer. But every return has to be essentially double-checked for accuracy. Yeah, I would say on average, if we do the whole process in one sitting, it takes about an hour. So while we tried to do different things, traditional tax preparation where the customer stays with us from start to finish was 98% of the time before COVID. That's how our sites operated. During COVID, we took the time and broke it up into pieces, so we had a drop-off service. And we did part of the process with the customer face-to-face, and then we might have done tax preparation remotely, and then they may or may not have come back to the tax site. Now with the virtual service, we can interact with customers

without having them come in at all. They can be at home, as long as they have access to their phone, a smartphone, or a tablet that has photo-taking ability. I think that's really been very valuable, especially because all of the work that we do is dependent on volunteers that we recruit and train and get placed at our physical sites to work with customers. And so that drives especially with COVID the need to do things differently, and that drives the number of people that we're able to offer the service to. Yeah, so having the virtual service really does open up the potential to target areas where we don't have physical brick-and-mortar tax sites.

Q: How is the process of doing those tax filings - specifically for the Child Tax Credit, or even from your previous experience in enrolling for other programs like SNAP - how does that process seem to be internalized by the clients that you're serving? Is this something that they are viewing negatively? Positively? Is it something that is seeming overly strenuous or kind of intrusive, as opposed to good?

A: I mean, I would say from experience in my previous role, working with folks that were on public assistance, who were required to come in and to work within this program. And the need to have an interview that asks a lot of personal questions and this goes for the tax program as well; it can be pretty intense. Yeah. Because we're asking for very sensitive information within the tax program. And within the other role that I served in, it was very important to just cultivate a good experience with the customer, and that customer service was really important to developing a good relationship. Now in one role, more in the case management role, it was more ongoing working with them potentially for a number of months. It could have only been for a short amount of time, but it could have been up to 24 months. So it was added on a regular basis, you know, monthly contact and checking in, while with the tax experience, it only happened once every year. It could have happened a couple of times within one year because of the way that we do our service, but traditionally it just happened in one session, so I definitely feel it could be very overwhelming. I just mentioned that we have a three-page intake form. Or there's a lot of questions online. We also have a requirement to verify identity, seeing driver's licenses, ID cards, and social security cards for tax customers and dependents if they're being claimed on a return. And so that in itself could be a challenge or a barrier. I would say we see that a lot on our virtual site. At our physical sites, I would say the completion rate was pretty high. In terms of

completing returns successfully, I would say it was more than 95% of the people we saw in person finished their returns. But in our virtual service, the completion rate was much lower. So with the virtual service, when the customer comes in and enters through the website, when they get started, they see some information about the service and they have to consent to have their information shared with a local partner. And they're either routed to us because they come to our website, and they've accessed through that, or they've come from another referral source. They have to agree to have their name, email, or phone shared with the partner, and there's a consent form. And then if they go further along in the process, they're prompted with the need to provide us with additional information. They need their driver's licenses or security cards. And then having to answer the questions will prompt them for the tax documents that we need. And they use their phone to take pictures of their information. And then that gets securely uploaded into a ticketing system. And so if they don't answer any more questions, then it only gives us enough information to reach out to them at an initial time, or they could do all of it in one sitting. And they have given us everything that we need to then move on to the next VITA-related stuff. So the completion rate is not as high. We get people that start the process with us and then never correspond with us.

Q: Do you feel like the relationship when they're offering or agreeing to share personal information is trusting? Wary?

A: I think it's equal parts; if they're coming to us because they know that we are a trusted site, I feel like there's more trust there. A lot of times when we're doing work, especially with outreach, or if we're working with partners, we don't do direct service. A lot of times we run a tax site here, and we see customers weekly. So I can talk a little bit more about dynamics and things. And it's kind of all across the board. But so we use trusted messengers a lot to let people know about this service. And they're getting that information from someone that they may have an ongoing relationship with. Yeah, so "go here, this is a place that you can trust and it's okay to share your information." But we've gotten things all across the board, though; even with people consenting, they give their information to us and we then reach out to them, and they hesitate like, "Oh, I thought this was a scam," but they still gave their information. And then, you know, we have people successfully complete these that we can move forward. The other challenges I would say

definitely with the online service is people not having valid IDs; they're expired, they've lost them, they no longer have them, they've recently come back from being incarcerated. So we worked frequently with folks that were recently coming back from being incarcerated, especially because of the stimulus payments that were available, missing out on stimulus payments. So we worked a lot with folks that were recently released, getting them stimulus payments, and that's happening a lot. And that was really cool. It was just a cool way for us to be able to connect with people all across the state, and successfully help them without having them come in. And so it's been really neat to see a different lens on a service we've been providing. So our program has been around since 2002 in some form or fashion. A lot of times, we originated at local departments of social services, because a natural audience is folks that are on benefits because they meet the income guidelines. And a good target area is definitely folks that have income but are not that filing because they're under the threshold for being required to file. I think the tricky part of that is just making sure people know about these credits, especially with the Child Tax Credit, and the expanded Child Tax Credit, because there is no income minimum but previously was set at $2500. Because that was gone for 2021. It really just was like making sure we were letting everyone know, like, "Okay, you got the first part, come back and do the second part," so we're still kind of going along with trying to connect with trusted messengers to let people know. And we have greatly expanded the amount of time that we do offer our service, especially over the last couple of years, but we do have a natural ending point because we work to plan for the next season. So we're not quite year-round and things kind of shut down. But we still work around some of the online tools that are available through Code for America, they also created an app that may be made, you may already know about this stuff. Code for America created Get your Refund, which is the full-service equivalent of our VITA service. They created Get CTC. Okay, so get ctc.org is something that's still open now for a couple more weeks until November 15, or 17th. And so they also created a simplified filing tool for people that don't normally file but need to file to get the Child Tax Credit, whether they were filing to get all of it or the second half. And if they just needed to file to get their third stimulus payment, which is done in 2020, also known as a 2021 return. So this non-filier tool is something they manage. It's essentially like a DIY option for people. That's something that's still available. So in addition to our regular VITA services, we've started doing outreach, letting people know that this service is available.

It's not too late. And again, it's not going to be too late when we reopen in late January 2023. Because it's attached to a tax return, it just becomes the need to file a prior year tax.

Q: Among recipients, how do they seem to feel about receiving the credit or previously for SNAP or TANF? Is it a feeling that appears to be somewhat like "I deserve this from the government and their help because I'm struggling?" Or is it more like, "I'm so grateful that this is being extended to me?" Is it neutral?

A: I definitely feel in terms of us offering our service in the community, folks are very much appreciative because they view tax filing as difficult. And meeting that requirement for some can be challenging. And it's always great to be able to tell someone, especially if it's a mother with young children or a grandparent that's taking care of grandchildren, just the amount of their refund, and they qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit the Child Tax Credit, we were really potentially talking about thousands of dollars. And really the Earned Income Credit and the Child Tax Credit have been one of the single indicators of pulling people out of poverty. And so I feel that that's really powerful. Naturally. And, I think there's frustration too, in terms of, especially like with the stimulus payments and those COVID-related payments, people not receiving all of them when they were supposed to, or just the uncertainty about how they go about applying for a missing payment, or they don't have a record that they received the payment or that the IRS has a record that they have received it. And so just the hoops that you have to jump through to make those things come together is challenging.

Q: When you worked at Social Services, and with clients who are receiving either TANF or SNAP, which often go together, would you say that there is a feeling of wanting to be on the program? Was it, "I want to receive this aid?" Or was it "I hope to eventually be able to come off?"

A: I think folks wanted to be able to come off successfully. Yeah, I really feel that happened a lot. Being able to offer supportive services that can help someone get that job or those supportive services may include transportation assistance or assistance with interview clothing, or, one that obviously happens frequently is child care assistance, helping folks receive childcare assistance.

So I think that was just really key. And great to be able to offer so much support to help an individual in their journey. And just really, that's what I really like about not only the program that I came from, but this program is just being able to communicate with folks and talk about things that are going on things that maybe we can't help with directly, but we know a community organization that can So, you know, referring people to the right place is always helpful. Yeah. And that's what's so valuable just in general.

Q: Have you noticed differences in people's impressions or feelings towards either program, differences between programs like SNAP or TANF versus tax credit programs?

A: I definitely think so. So in my role currently, I think it's just important to make sure that we are doing outreach with as many community partners, especially at local departments of social services to let people know that our services are available, especially because there are no costs and tax preparation can be very costly. The figure that we use when we're looking at the projected amount of money that we're saving folks, this is on the low end, is $250 per return. And so making sure that people know that a free service is available, that they can take advantage of all of their refunds. And we're preparing accurate returns and we've got over a 95% accuracy rate. That rating is really something that we're proud of, and even though the service is free, it's still very high quality. We really strive to make that happen. It's just important because we want to make sure we're really reaching those most in need; we also work with a lot of seniors, especially at some of our tax sites. It's kind of similar in terms of those that we're seeing are eligible for, like the Child Tax Credit or the Earned Income Tax Credit. Some of our sites work with a lot of seniors that really prefer to have that face-to-face interaction, they need it because they're not so tech-savvy. And we really have seen a high number of our customers who aren't seniors this year, for 2021, since the Earned Income Tax Credit was also expanded. So we were seeing folks that were younger than normal because the age limit was lowered without children to 18. And there was no age maximum for people that did not have children who could still qualify for the net income guideline to receive the credit, even if they were over 65.

Q: Do you think that people are satisfied? Not with your service, but with their benefits?

A: I feel like it would be great if the eligibility for the expanded EITC and the CTC would be continued. It'll be interesting to see the reactions for this year. I think that's it's just tricky all the way around in terms of eligibility. And yeah, like taking advantage of it. Yeah. Just in general. And then you know, how it all works; how, what makes up your refund, and what comes from the credits, what comes from your withholdings can be confusing, and especially if you're in a tax scenario where you have children that may age out of eligibility, as well.

Q: Do you think the tricky enrollment process is internalized in a way, by clients, that seems to be more burdensome than an opportunity? I'm hoping to give context on how the hoops that people have to jump through to receive these benefits makes them feel. Is it a situation where it's "I have to provide all of this extensive identification - why do I have to do that?" Or is it "Oh, I'll do everything that I need to do, because this is available to me and I want it."

A: Well, I do feel that the hoops that folks have to jump through to access our service are important, because we want to make sure that we're preparing accurate returns for people that we have verified their identity. So it's very important that we're looking at their identification, we're looking at their tax documents, we feel that we're assisting someone prepare an accurate return. That's one of our main tenants of how we do the work that we do. And it's just something that all of the programs across the country are following our intake process, interview process, and just all of those steps to prepare a quality return. And that's what makes the program so strong, but I can see that it can be very much of a burden to provide that information. However, there are self filing options that are available for people to access in terms of filing on their own, using a free service. So we offer kind of a DIY service, full service available access to free software that people can file their own return. So our traditional VITA services, whether it's in person or through a virtual service, are where we are the driver of the data entry. But we can provide access to customers where they are the driver of the data entry, and they are preparing their own tax records. So the need for them to obviously have the IDs and social security cards are not part of that process, the intake form is not part of that process. So there are alternatives available. And so I do feel that it's important. The steps that we have are important. Yeah, for a number of different reasons, I do feel that it can be pretty challenging, especially, because there are so many barriers to people filing,

Q: What are some of them?

A: Access to a site, like a physical location, where there may not be one available in their service area, they may be in a rural area and we don't have coverage there. That's why the virtual service is so important. Except that also requires that you have access to internet technology. So one of the ways that we're trying to help with that is to work with community partners, and those trusted messengers, to serve as navigators to help with the document upload into our ticketing system. So they work with the customer, to show them how to access the website, answer the questions, and then from that, help with the document upload into their ticket. So we have started offering those navigator roles in different places to help bridge that digital divide a little bit. But there are challenges. And I think I mentioned earlier, like people don't have their IDs, they don't have their social security cards. So they have to jump through hoops to get them: even though they're at no cost from the Social Security Administration, there's a time wait for that. And people don't have their tax documents for one reason or another, they've moved, they've relocated, they no longer get the mail at their address, they're not out there at that address, they never got the tax documents. Getting the tax documents is a challenge. Getting access to your transcript is a challenge. And so it is a real struggle. So I think that those barriers exist.

Q: Do you think there's any parts of the enrollment process, either for programs you've worked with previously, like TANF and SNAP or for the CTC and EITC, that you think aren't necessary? That are applying a greater burden on either your services or the clients themselves? That don't seem to be for a good reason?

A: I don't know if I would go out right to say that they aren't necessary. Some of the things that we've just started to do, for instance, we've got an upcoming partnership with a program connected to the State Council of Higher Education called GEAR UP, and they work with high school students to get them connected to the FAFSA application, which also has a component to provide income tax returns for the parents that are claiming the children to verify the income. Sure. So there's a lot of overlap there in terms of providing some of the same pieces of information. Yeah. So we're doing some pilot events where we're carrying the two together. So

we're offering tax assistance to the family, and having staff to help do the FAFSA application. So it's a pilot for us. So it's something that we're going to be working on in 2023 to see if that can certainly help. I know, Code for America has been doing work around just looking at assets to make sure that everybody can access their services. So that's something they're really interested in.

Appendix D - Transcript of Interview with GoochlandCares

*Two staff members were involved in this interview. They are referred to as A1 and A2.

Q: To kick it off. Can you tell me a little bit about your organization? What are your largest focuses? What are your largest concerns? How do both of you spend the majority of your time?

A1: I supervise the front desk and transportation program. And then I support A2's program (registration) and the clothes closet and food pantry. And sometimes that looks like covering when she's out or when she has questions and stuff or with clothes closet. Their whole credit system is like, at a certain time in a month, a certain number of clients like A through L last names get their credit. So with that program, they get like 30 credits per person to spend there, essentially like money. It is going to start over every month. So every month, they have to go through this and we have to upload it to an Excel spreadsheet and upload it to the system. So we do that, and we've done it successfully three times already. So I'm very excited about that. But um, those are what the supporting things look like when I support them and stuff. I'm also the facilities manager. I take care of the building, and pretty much everybody who comes through it. So I'm never bored. You can see I've been pulled like three times from this. So I seem to be very in demand today. So yeah. I forgot the question.

A2: Our organization, basically, is a safety net for those who are on government programs, but they aren't supplemented enough. Like if you're a senior and you're on your Social Security

benefits, but you might qualify for $20 food stamps. Yeah. Or you're a large family and you don't really get enough money from food stamps. So we're here to supplement and support.

And those who just over-qualify for government programs, but are still paycheck to paycheck or still struggling. So we're like a safety net. And we focus on all of a client, so not just making sure they have enough food or clothing, but they're in their house, and they stay in their house.

We can help with the repair or help with the well or help with a mortgage payment or rent, just something to keep stabilized. Because if one thing goes, it affects everything else. So we're constantly adjusting and looking at what we can do and what's going on now. What's needed? I mean, Goochland and Richmond have a huge housing issue. Affordable housing is huge. So we've expanded and are trying more programs to help stabilize housing for clients. And that's the nice thing: we're a non-government agent, so we have that flexibility to meet our clients' or society's needs. And change. So I think that's what's probably remarkable about this organization.

Q: Can you tell me about the types of people that you're serving? How would you describe their income levels, and the biggest challenges that they face?

A2: Most of our programs are 200% of the poverty level or below. That qualifies pretty much for most of our programs. And there's a standard that we go by, and that puts us, you know, in a variety of society; it could be a senior living on widow's benefits. It could be a family of six with two parents. It could be a single mother, with two children. It could be anybody on disability, any level whether, you know, self-reported or recognized that they are on disability. So it's a range. Demographic-wise, it's probably 40% white, 40% African American, pretty split. And then the Hispanic program, maybe about 20% now and increasing.

A1: I think our Hispanic population is a little… I would think I could use the word nervous. They still, even though we've tried to reach some and stuff like that, I think they still see us as a government organization. So I think that kind of still gives them some apprehension about coming to us and stuff.

Q: For what reason?

A1: If they're not documented. Or working on a visa, aren't citizens, or probably some DACA, and are undocumented. So I would say right now, the clinic is a majority of Hispanics because they're not on Medicaid or not on SNAP.

Q: If you had to identify the main issue areas, the main challenges that your client base is facing, what are they?

A1: I would say finding housing and being able to afford stuff, because Goochland is a rich county, for what it makes up in the richness, there's, obviously, a need for us, or otherwise, we wouldn't be here. And that's telling you something.

A2: Yeah, I mean, there's still housing on the western part, which is a food desert, except now they just got a Dollar General. Does that count? But, there's no indoor plumbing. I mean, we're a part of a state indoor plumbing program until they disbanded it a couple of years ago.

A1: Well, we were in charge of it. And I think each county had its own certain amount of funds, but then it became where all of you in the region are going to get this funding, same amount of money, no funding for anybody, basically. So it just kind of dissolved from there. So yeah, but we were doing that up until a couple of years ago.

Q: Right. And so among your clients, what are the main programs or most frequent programs that your clients are members of government programs? Like SNAP or programs like that?

A2: I would say SNAP, Medicaid.

Q: Do you have a lot of TANF?

A2: No, I don't see them often. Not too often. I don't know if the qualifications are different. But Medicare. And also WIC.

Q: Do you do anything to aid registration in those programs? Or do people normally find you after they've registered?

A2: Well, that's the Department of Social Services. But when they did the Medicaid expansion a couple of years ago, at the state level, we did set up for about six, eight months, we had a couple of volunteers that would help our clients who qualified Yeah, because a lot of our clients did it so. But once that happened, the initial rollout is now through various state agencies that handle that.

A1: Sometimes our case managers will help. Sometimes if there's a lot needed with a SNAP application and stuff like that. It's a little harder with like Medicaid and Medicare; there's no training for that.

A2: Yeah. And they've simplified it, apparently. They don't count assets like they did before or something.

A1: I think through registration with some of our clients - I think we've noticed the SNAP benefits are just…I don't understand them. Because you have somebody on Social Security that's maybe getting like $700 a month and you're only given them like 10 bucks? It's not really worth it. And then now like I said, A2's been streamlining our registration process and making it easier on the client. Because that's just one more, you know, that's one more process you have to go through to get services and stuff. And we want to make it as simple as possible. Because we know, if you go apply for SNAP, you have to provide all this documentation, you have to like, provide everybody's in your household and all that stuff like that. But I mean, if you're only getting this tiny little amount, is it really even worth what you have to go through to get it?

Me: So do you have an impression of how aware your clients are about how the program works?
A1: I think it depends on the client. Some of them will be more; they are on it and know it. And then some of them probably just apply because somebody told them. So I think it just depends on the client. And we have the spectrum.

Q: Are there any differences in the awareness based on the program? Like, are there more simple ones that people seem to know more about? Or is it just really dependent on the person?

A2: I don't think there are any simple ones. Actually, it's a challenge for us to get the word out about our programs and who's qualified. It's a challenge for us. You're reaching out to a population that has no transportation, and no broadband, or aren't computer savvy, or don't have a computer, or have a computer but don't have internet or aren't phone savvy, you know, they have a flip phone or home phone. And the papers aren't delivered anymore to every mailbox like it used to be. So it's a challenge to get any kind of word out. It's very grassroots. I was at Parks and Rec and just for events literally went to every gas station and put up a flier next to the bathroom. It's pretty grassroots. So word of mouth is probably our thing or they see a sign on the road.

Q: Do clients discuss their membership in these programs with you?

A2: Well, they have to for registration. So yes, indirectly. And it depends. It depends on the client. Some will be very vocal. "Oh, yeah, I'm on SNAP, and this and that." And some of them won't say anything beyond registering. Yeah. Because often clients, especially those who come to us for the first time, are put in situations that have never been before, so often, they're very embarrassed. And pride. And it's hard. If you've been working hard all your life and just one whatever, and now they're asking for help. We'll see a lot of that registration. And then as we get to know our clients, through the programs they use, like the food pantry and the clothes closet - our clothes closet staff is very close with a lot of clients. So, we do hear their stories.

Q: Would you say that feeling embarrassed about being on the program is kind of the vast majority of people's experience? Or are people happy that they're on the programs?

A2: Well, I think it's a mix.

A1: It's a mix.

A2: The newer people that come in yes, initially. But depending on the services, if they have access to it can be life-saving. They get to stay in their home, or they're able to get clothes for their kids. So it's grateful. I mean, definitely, we do have a lot of clients that are grateful. We have a lot of clients, they'll come in and go to the food pantry, and that's a client choice. They take what they need or what they want; they're not given the bag and can't eat half of it because of their diet restrictions. Quite often they're like, "I'm only going to take what we need." Let somebody else have it. That's the majority of them.

Q: Do clients discuss their feelings about their membership on programs possibly coming to an end? Is it a situation of "I want to get off this program and not have to receive this aid?" Or is it, "I'm terrified of losing these programs?"

A2: I think it's per client. And what they're going through. I mean, we don't know, necessarily. Like for SNAP, I mean, because I see SNAP files, I'll know when it's coming up, but I'm not privy to how they're feeling. But that's one of our goals. One of our values is to empower. We're here if you need us.. Great if you don't. Great if you got that job, where you're earning enough income. But we were here to get you there.

Q: As you've worked with your clients, what are some of the kinds of emotional experiences you've witnessed related to the programs?

A2: When you say program, are you thinking of government programs or our programs?

Q: Government programs, mostly. If there's overlap, like most of the people on program X are also on government program x, then sure.

A2: I mean, I can only speak to how they react to our programs, which is when they come there. It's the range, gratefulness or embarrassment, pride, and sometimes anger.

Q: Have you noticed differences between different types of clients, like men and women, tend to feel differently? Or older versus younger?

A2: No, I think it just depends on what the person went through to get to us. I mean, we do deal with generational poverty. So that's in the mix too. So as soon as somebody who's a client and may have a family of three, as soon as one of the children turns 18, they may become a client of ours as well.

Q: Are there main areas or aspects of the government programs that seem to frustrate your clients the most?

A1: I think when they have to apply. Yeah. Or reapply, or try to get a hold of their caseworker. Yeah, like when their caseworker leaves and they don't tell them or nobody tells them and, you know, there's somebody here, there's a very strong gatekeeper.

A2: And SNAP's all over the place. You could qualify for one month, and then you have to qualify again so quickly. Or I've seen where it's been two years out. There's no consistency that I'm aware of in how they calculate. Some of them are six months or a year. And then trying to, you know, not just on the administrative part, trying to keep track of that, but as a client, trying to keep track of that. Keeping track of all the paperwork that you needed. You're a Senior Citizen and you're eighty years old, and you're not necessarily going to remember where you put your letter from Social Security that you got at the beginning of every year, or somebody did your taxes for you and you may not necessarily get a hard copy. I mean, we run into those challenges all the time. That's one reason why it's actually a positive to rely on SNAP because it's easy to access. The client can just call DSS by state and hopefully, depending on their case manager, get it within a day or two. And if the address matches, it's also proof of residency, because they've already gone through all that they already prove your own county, and they already know who's counted in a household and as household income. So if they're going to use our clinic, that's all the same information we need. That's one of our goals this year.. to focus on that.

Q: It seems like there's a need. Are there any parts of the process that seem to make people feel hopeful? Rewarded?

A2: Again, I think it depends on why. What brought you to that point? And if it was, if it's a temporary situation, because like you're going through a divorce and you're a homemaker and suddenly you don't have a job? So it is just a transition point.

Q: Yeah. Are there types of routes to get here that you think influence the way that people then feel about the recipient process? Like, what seems to lead to what feeling or emotion?
For clients who are going to be here temporarily, does that make them seem to feel more grateful or upset? Or if you're going to be here for a long time, does that influence it in any way?

A2: Well, I think yeah. That has an influence on their outlook. If generational poverty, and that's all you know, and for some reason, whatever reason, like you don't have a car…If you don't have a car, you're not going to get a job here. But if a grandmother suddenly took custody of the grandchildren, it's great assistance. Especially, since all the kids are in the school system here. It's a pretty, pretty good school system here. So a lot of parents are already really paying to give the kids in the county and of course, you know, keep their world as stabilized as possible. Some see it as a long-term thing, and some clients see it as a transition, especially those who go through our sexual and domestic violence program.

Q: That makes sense. Would you say people seem satisfied with their benefit levels?

A2: Again, it depends on who you are and what you want from us. I mean, if you want us to redo your bathroom in marble, no, we're not going to do that. But if you have a floor that has a big hole in it because of a leaking pipe, yeah, we will fix that. Yeah.

Q: And in terms of government programs, satisfied with those benefit levels?

A2: I couldn't tell you. I don't know. I mean, I would say not or they wouldn't be using our program.. But you know you get $10? I mean, you have, you get $700 for your Social Security, and you don't own outright or you have a mortgage payment or rent? Yeah, there's probably $600 there and then give you $20? What can you do with it? Or you own your home, but you don't have money to fix the roof? Or put a well pump in because they went out? Yeah, I mean, all those expenses put you under really quick.

Q: I don't know if this is something that even comes up, but the government… is there ever a discussion of government with your clients? Do they seem to be engaged, like registered to vote?

A2: This is a politics-free zone [laughter].

A1: Yeah, because if you drive through Goochland, you're going to see, you know, the signs or the flags and stuff like that [talking about Trump flags]. So we try not to engage as much as possible, but you can tell people have their opinions. Yeah, it's very mixed.

A2: I mean, this county is very high in voting. I mean, I think it's consistently like in the top 10 counties, with the highest percentage of voting. Unfortunately, it leans toward one side, more than others. But yeah, voting is pretty high. I mean, from what I've seen, it's pretty serious. And I mean, for those that can't make it, they're really good about absentee voting, you know? Yeah. Our register's office is right here. It's been open for a month now. They're open on Sunday. And you can drop off your mail-in ballot at the office or during office time. Yeah. I mean, I think across the board, including our County, there's a lot more you can do to be more inclusive; provide transportation, for sure. Or a way to have to give somebody permission to drop it off for you because you're shut in and you can't get out.

Q: Would you say that there's a general positive or negative mindset towards the idea of government, and especially government as a form of aid? As a provider of help?

A1: I think it varies because you hear some people talk very favorably about the government. You're some talk about what they're not doing and especially to help the client. So there's a range. Yeah. Like that.

A2: And if you're a non-client you think people shouldn't be getting anything. Unfortunately.

A1: And I think with their cut-offs and their guidelines, I think they're missing a lot of people. Especially some of the ones we see, you know, just because they got that $2 raise and stuff like that. Yeah.

A2: Exactly. We've had one who, for one paycheck she worked overtime. Which is great. But it kicked her over. So we're like, Hey, don't worry. So bring us the next paycheck. Because but that ones off. Well, so in this scenario, that would discourage me, if I knew that, that would discourage me from doing it, then you have that choice? Yeah. Do I work over time and lose the benefits? Or do I take the benefits? Because, you know, you do that one little step to do better and to improve yourself, but then what you're doing feels punished, and it's just like, you lost this protective net that you had.

Q: Yeah, and so in a situation like that, from the clients perspective, does it seem like this is such an arbitrary cut-off, and it's just hurting me? Or is it like a situation of acceptance, like, this is just the cut off and I'm going to have to deal with it?

A2: I can't speak for a client, I don't know.

Q: From what you've heard or experienced?

A2: I mean, it forces a different choice. And of course, you know, we see and we try to figure out, you know, what we can do to, you know, I guess that you know, okay, maybe it is a off paycheck, you know, so we don't use that paycheck. Yeah. The other ones are consistent. Yeah. And so that's why we usually will ask for pay stubs, so we have a feeling that consistency is true.

Q: If you think about your impression from the experiences you've had listening to clients or directly talking with them, does it seem that there is a feeling of being deserving of help? Or undeserving? Like 'I got put in this position because of XYZ factors, and hey should help me?' Or is it the opposite?

A1: I think that's a very small percentage of some of them feel that way [deserving]. Most of them are just, like A2 said, grateful to get any help. Or they're just frustrated. Because it's not just you on your account and so you have somebody else counting on you. You're like, what are you going to do? So I think it's more feelings of, 'Oh, crap, I'm in a situation, what do I do? Or what's going to happen?'

A2: And they've exhausted their own resources. I think most people seem to go to their families and they've exhausted their own resources before coming to government. As kind of a last resort.

Q: Are most of your client base citizens?

A1: Oh yeah. We just know that there are some that probably aren't…we still have a lot of people sometimes confuse this with a government agency and stuff like that. We work really hard to explain to them, we're not a government agency. So, you know, we're not going to like report them or something like that if they're not documented. I think there's that fear of reaching out for help, even if you really need it. As far as the Hispanic population, and I think that's also cultural. I'm sure I'm not aware of it, but that probably plays a factor. Yeah. But I mean, we don't I mean, we ask if you're on a temporary VISA, but that's about it. We don't ask for your documents.

A2: Yeah. If you don't have the right proof of residency that we asked you for, we have ways around that. We have a support letter, like if you're working on a farm, that's okay. Or you just moved in with the family, your brother's family that has been here. They can under have a notarized letter saying that 'Yes, they are living here'.

Q: Among the clients that aren't citizens, have you heard any desire to become a citizen?

A2: No, no, because we don't ask. We don't inquire.

Q: Given the high voting rates in the county, can you describe how civically engaged your clients seem to be? Have you heard conversations, you know about issues facing the community that they seem to track or care about or be involved in?

A2: It will mostly be like clients having conversations among themselves or their friends. That happens in the food pantry, or the clothes closet. So that's a hard one to answer.

Q: Do your clients seem to follow the issues facing the community?

A2: If the issues affect them, personally, yeah.

Q: Do your clients seem to feel like valued community members?

A2: Yes. Yes. This is a community where families grow up together, generations of family have grown up together. And people stay or they come back. So a great example is we have a high school that when the county education system was segregated, that school is where the African Americans went. And then after that, it kind of changed purposes and all that. The community rallied a few years ago to save it and Parks and Rec took it over into a community center.

Q: What normally defines the community? Is it the geographic neighborhood? Is it church membership?

A2: It's all of that. It's family. It's your church family. It could be your work family. It could be neighborhoods, we have streets where families live up and down the same street and the street is named for the family.

Q: How about being part of a national community? Do you think your clients feel like a valued member of the United States?

A2: Mhm. I think so.

Q: Do you think that that feeling is reflected in the actions they take to be civically engaged? In terms of either voting or maybe attending rallies?

A2: Mhm. We have a very active NAACP.

Appendix E - Estimating Equation

(1)

$$y = \beta(p_i) + \beta(r_i) + \beta(f_i) + \beta(n_i) + \beta(l_i) + \beta(e_i) + \beta(g_i) + E_i$$

(2)

$$y = \beta(p_i) + \beta(r_i) + \beta(f_i) + \beta(n_i) + \beta(l_i) + \beta(e_i) + \beta(g_i) + \beta(a_i) + \beta(i_i) + E_i$$

(3)

$$x = \beta(p_i) + \beta(r_i) + \beta(f_i) + \beta(n_i) + \beta(l_i) + \beta(e_i) + \beta(g_i) + E_i$$

(4)

$$x = \beta(p_i) + \beta(r_i) + \beta(f_i) + \beta(n_i) + \beta(l_i) + \beta(e_i) + \beta(g_i) + \beta(a_i) + \beta(i_i) + E_i$$

In which the outcome variable y is the internal efficacy scale, and the outcome variable z is the external efficacy scale. β represents the weight of each explanatory variable, the subscript i is the individual respondent, p is the program being considered, r is the respondent's race, f is their status as a first-generation American, n is their status as a native-born American, l is their status

as a primary English speaker, e is their highest level of education completed, g is their gender, a is their age, i is their family income, and E is an error term.

Appendix F - Income Gradients in CPS

Value	Income Range
1	$\leq$ $5,000
2	$5,000 - $9,999
3	$10,000 - $14,999
4	$15,000-19,999
5	$20,000-24,999
6	$25,000-29,999
7	$30,000-34,999
8	$35,000-39,999
9	$40,000-49,999
10	$50,000-59,999
11	$60,000-74,999

12	$75,000-99,999
13	$100,000-124,999
14	$125,000-149,999
15	$150,000-199,999
16	$\geq$ $200,000