

## Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action

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*This article explores the links between welfare participation and broader forms of political involvement. Adopting a political learning perspective, I present evidence that policy designs structure clients' program experiences in ways that teach alternative lessons about the nature of government. Through their experiences under a given policy design, welfare clients develop program-specific beliefs about the wisdom and efficacy of asserting themselves. Because clients interpret their experiences with welfare bureaucracies as evidence of how government works more generally, beliefs about the welfare agency and client involvement become the basis for broader political orientations. I conclude that the views of government that citizens develop through program participation help explain broader patterns of political action and quiescence.*

Welfare recipients have an unusually visible material stake in government policies. Their immediate fates depend on the actions of public officials, and this fact is routinely underscored by speeches delivered in electoral campaigns and legislative debates. As one client interviewed for this study put it, "whether we get that welfare that keeps us alive depends on who's in office." In light of such strong personal incentives, one might expect welfare recipients to be more politically active than other citizens (Olson 1965). This article offers an analysis of why this is not the case—of why, in fact, public assistance recipients are an especially quiescent group (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

The most widely accepted reason for this quiescence, which I will call the preexisting characteristics explanation, is simply that welfare recipients tend to come from segments of the population with less abundant political resources and skills (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 411) explain, "recipients of means-tested benefits are, not unexpectedly, less well educated and less well off financially . . . . The lift given to their participation by their [greater] interest in issues of basic human needs is insufficient to overcome their other resource deficits."

A second proposition, which I will call the passivity explanation, is suggested by conservative critics, who argue that welfare benefits discourage political involvement by cultivating personal traits of dependence. Few themes in welfare politics have endured as well as the idea that poor relief undermines the motivation to work (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991). Over the past two decades, critics have extended this image of dependent passivity to the realm of politics. For example, as part of his argument for a "new paternalism" in welfare policy, Mead (1992, 1997) suggests that welfare recipients are not competent or functioning citizens. "Most

of them are too withdrawn and dependent to shoulder the burdens of political activism. Elites must then take the lead" (Mead 1992, 227).

A third possible explanation can be gleaned from arguments that social provision can divert or temper political demand-making. For example, Piven and Cloward (1971) argue that even though welfare benefits empower workers, expansion of poor relief also serves to blunt popular demands during times of unrest. Edelman offers related arguments, pointing out that extensions of relief supply a pacifying reassurance to poor people (1964) and that "helping" images of public assistance can obscure the need for political demand-making (1977). By extending these analyses to the individual level, one might suggest a cooptation explanation, that is, benefit provision itself produces demobilizing effects.

In one way or another, each explanation bypasses the experience of welfare participation itself.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, a fourth possibility is suggested by participatory democratic theories that highlight the educative effects of participation and the ways in which institutional arrangements leave their imprints on citizens (Pateman 1970). This political learning explanation can also be derived from social control arguments asserting that welfare programs are designed to shape poor people's behaviors both inside and outside the welfare agency (Piven and Cloward 1971). Recently, this argument has been articulated in work by Schneider and Ingram (1993, 1995, 1997) on the social construction of target populations.

In our theory of causation, motivations of elected officials are linked to the types of policy designs they construct, which affect people's experiences with the policy and the lessons and messages they take from it. These, in turn, influence people's values and attitudes (including their group identities), their orientations toward government, and their political participation patterns (Schneider and Ingram 1995, 442).

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<sup>1</sup> Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 220) make this explicit: "Our point is not . . . to argue that receipt of means-tested benefits causes low levels of activity, but rather to demonstrate that a group that is dependent on the government is, by virtue of its lack of education or any other factors, less active in expressing its concerns, and therefore, less visible to public officials."

This article presents empirical evidence for this line of theorizing by studying welfare programs as sites of adult political learning (Sapiro 1994). I argue that as clients participate in welfare programs they learn lessons about how citizens and governments relate, and these lessons have political consequences beyond the domain of welfare agencies. Program designs structure clients' experiences in ways that shape their beliefs about the effectiveness of asserting themselves at the welfare agency. Because clients associate the agency with government as a whole, these program-specific beliefs, in turn, become the basis for broader orientations toward government and political action.

It is important to point out that the four explanations outlined above are not mutually exclusive. While I do not find much support for the passivity explanation, the political learning argument should be seen as a complement to the other two. For recipients of means-tested welfare benefits, the demobilizing effects of resource scarcity are exacerbated by lessons learned through welfare participation. These influences reinforce rather than displace one another. Similarly, an emphasis on the educative effects of welfare participation does not deny that the material or symbolic value of poor relief can serve to divert political demand-making. To the contrary, the individual-level political learning approach taken here should be viewed as an elaboration of social control theories that explore the political implications of both the fact and the form of welfare provision (Piven and Cloward 1971).

## RESEARCH METHODS AND EXPECTATIONS

This article presents a comparative study of the political effects of participation in a public assistance program (Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC]) and a social insurance program (Social Security Disability Insurance [SSDI]). The empirical evidence comes primarily from fifty in-depth interviews conducted between August 1994 and August 1995 in a mid-sized midwestern city. This interview sample was evenly divided between AFDC clients and SSDI clients (this sample is described in Appendix A; methods of data collection and analysis are described in Appendix B). To allow for "triangulation" of the findings (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994), three additional sources of data were employed. During 1994 and 1995, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, principally at a shelter serving homeless AFDC families but also with disability support groups serving recipients of SSDI. To obtain independent evidence regarding client experiences in welfare programs, I also made direct observations at the agencies. Finally, to corroborate findings from the interviews and allow for stronger generalizations, I analyzed survey data from the 1992 NES (Miller et al. 1993).

The political learning explanation leads to expectations regarding these data that distinguish it from the other accounts described above. First, unlike the passivity and cooptation explanations, it suggests that welfare receipt should not, by itself, dampen political

engagement. Rather, I expect the relationship between welfare receipt and political engagement to vary across policy designs. Based on Schneider and Ingram's (1995, 445) argument that AFDC disempowers its "targets", and for reasons elaborated in the second empirical section below, I expect only experiences in AFDC to foster lower levels of participation. Second, the political learning explanation predicts that participation differences between AFDC and SSDI will exist even after one accounts for the influence of preexisting characteristics. Third, it suggests that AFDC and SSDI recipients should express views of government and political action that closely follow their views of the welfare agency and client demand-making in welfare programs.

This article is organized to present a chain of evidence that links welfare program designs to patterns of political action. I begin with evidence that AFDC clients are less politically active than SSDI recipients and that this disparity remains after accounting for other characteristics that distinguish the two groups. I then reconstruct the links that connect this outcome to program experiences. First, I show how the designs of SSDI and AFDC lead clients to develop different beliefs about the efficacy of making demands in their programs. Second, I explain why beliefs developed in welfare programs have a spill-over effect on broader orientations toward politics. Third, I provide a detailed analysis of how SSDI and AFDC clients view government and political action, paying particular attention to how these descriptions fit with their earlier accounts of welfare programs. Fourth, I show how program experiences also help explain what, at first, appear to be exceptions to the dominant patterns in the data. Finally, I explore the link between program experiences and internal political efficacy, arguing that low participation rates among AFDC recipients do not flow from a sense of political incapacity.

## PATTERNS OF POLITICAL ACTION

Do clients of the U.S. welfare system engage in political action as often as other citizens? If lessons learned through welfare participation influence political involvement, then the answer to this question should vary across programs. This is precisely the pattern reported by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 210) in their comprehensive study of political action, *Voice and Equality*.

The receipt of benefits per se does not imply a low level of activity. Those who receive non-means-tested benefits such as . . . Social Security are at least as active as the public as a whole. In contrast, those who receive means-tested benefits such as AFDC . . . are substantially less active than the public as a whole.

Unlike social insurance recipients, public assistance clients were underrepresented in every political activity measured by Verba and his colleagues. The greater participation of social insurance recipients belies the charge that government assistance, by itself, undermines political involvement. The overall pattern, how-

ever, may be explained by differences in the prior characteristics of program populations. Although Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 219–20) do not identify a specific trait that can account for participation differences across programs, they conclude that the gap probably results from background characteristics rather than program participation itself.

Table 1, which presents a logistic regression analysis of turnout in the 1992 national elections, helps distinguish program effects from demographic differences (on logistic regression, see Aldrich and Nelson 1986, 115–55; for variable descriptions, see Appendix C).<sup>2</sup> Relative to SSDI recipients, AFDC recipients are more likely to have a low level of education and low family income; they are more likely to be women, younger, and people of color; they are also more likely to live in the South or, outside the South, in central cities (U.S. House of Representatives 1998). To control for these demographic differences, the model includes the following variables: *Woman*, *Black*, *South*, *Education*, *Age*, *Income*, and *Urban*. The model also controls for respondents' strength of *Partisanship*. The results suggest that the odds of going to the polls are significantly higher for women, older people, people who feel stronger partisan ties, people who have more income and education, and people who live outside the South. By contrast, all else equal, African Americans and people who live in central cities appear no less likely to vote than other citizens.<sup>3</sup>

The first two lines in Table 1 address the relationship between program participation and voting. The first line indicates that the odds of an SSDI recipient voting are not statistically different from those of a nonrecipient who shares similar background traits. By contrast, all else equal, participation in AFDC has a significant negative effect on the likelihood that an individual will vote ( $b = -.831, p < .001$ ). By exponentiating this coefficient ( $e^b = .435$ ), it is possible to estimate that, even after controlling for demographic variables, being an AFDC recipient reduces the odds that a person will vote to slightly less than half of what it would have been otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

When combined with the broader study by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), this analysis suggests the following starting points for investigation. (1) AFDC clients are less likely to engage in political action than are SSDI recipients. (2) This disparity partly reflects

**TABLE 1. Electoral Participation by Program Participation and Control Variables (Logistic Regression)**

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	Probability Level
<b>Program Participation</b>			
SSDI	-.328	.247	.184
AFDC	-.831	.267	.001
<b>Demographics and Partisanship</b>			
Woman	.271	.131	.039
Black	.191	.185	.301
South	-.619	.131	.001
Education	.573	.051	.001
Age	.026	.004	.001
Income	.037	.011	.001
Urban	-.022	.144	.878
Partisanship	.409	.061	.001
Constant	-3.330	.318	.001
Overall model	LR $\chi^2 = 414.86, 10$ df, $p < .001$ $N = 1998$ $N_{AFDC} = 82$ $N_{SSDI} = 101$		

Note: Coefficients are from the logistic regression procedure in SPSS; one-tailed test for AFDC, two-tailed tests otherwise. Data are from the 1992 NES (Miller et al. 1993).

differences in such traits as education level. (3) The disparity remains even after controlling for key demographic differences and, hence, cannot be dismissed on the basis of prior characteristics. (4) AFDC clients are less likely to be politically active than nonrecipients who share salient demographic characteristics, which suggests that their quiescence may be traceable to some factor associated with welfare participation itself. (5) SSDI clients are just as politically active as the rest of the citizenry, which suggests that whatever this welfare-related factor may be, it is not simply the receipt of cash benefits. In what follows, I argue that AFDC recipients are less active than SSDI recipients and less active than others who share salient demographics, at least in part because of the lessons they learn about government and demand-making as they participate in AFDC.

**PROGRAM DESIGN AND CLIENT DEMAND-MAKING**

The two tiers of the U.S. welfare system provide very different institutional settings for program participation. Unlike SSDI recipients, AFDC clients experience casework relationships, regular case reviews, and an ongoing need to prove their means-tested eligibility (Gordon 1994, chap. 10). In addition, street-level bureaucrats in AFDC tend to hold more power over clients and possess greater discretion to use it (Handler 1992; Lipsky 1980, 6). Thus, relative to SSDI, the design of the AFDC program includes more frequent interaction and decision making, and it places clients

<sup>2</sup> The measures of AFDC and SSDI participation were not included in the 1996 NES Survey.

<sup>3</sup> Interpretation of these results is complicated by overreporting of turnout in the NES surveys. Validation studies suggest that false reports of voting are especially common among nonvoters who are African American or who have a higher level of education (Abramson and Claggett 1992; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). Thus, the positive relationship with education reported here may be artificially inflated, and a real relationship between race and electoral participation may be obscured by overreporting among black respondents. After including these variables in the model, however, the key estimates for AFDC and SSDI should be unbiased.

<sup>4</sup> Consistent results are presented by McMiller (1995), using a different national sample and a different set of control variables. McMiller (p. 19) concludes that "means-tested welfare dependency significantly reduces participation" in both traditional and nontraditional forms of political activity.

more directly under the supervision of individual caseworkers.

These design features serve to define the nature of program experiences. Because the AFDC clients in this study had ongoing casework relationships, they routinely received a summons to the agency backed up by the threat of termination if they did not appear. In responding to these requests, they rarely acted as initiators or saw the agency act responsively. Because of means-testing and mandatory child support enforcement, AFDC clients also were forced to divulge information about subjects they considered private, such as their sexual history and domestic practices. When they went to the agency, they often waited a long time before meeting with the caseworker who determined the disposition of their case.

Through these experiences, AFDC clients developed a characteristic set of beliefs about the agency and its power in relation to them. First, they came to see the agency as a pervasive threat in their life, as a potent force whose limits were unclear. Second, they perceived their welfare relationships as one-way transactions in which the agency had the authority to issue directives, and client status limited their options to either compliance or exit. Third, their view of agency decision making emphasized the personal discretion of individual workers rather than the rules of the institution. Fourth, they came to understand the agency's capacities for action as an autonomous power over them, rather than as the power to act on their behalf.

Client accounts strongly suggest that these beliefs originated in participation experiences and point to their chilling effects on demand-making. As Nancy explained,

I think it's that you learn not to [say anything]. Because you learn that if you upset this woman or make her angry (or this man, but it's mostly women that work there) that if you upset this person in any way, you're going to pay for it. And so, you don't do that. You learn to be quiet, and just take whatever is dished out.

To AFDC clients, silence in the face of consequential decision-making processes appears rational because they come to believe that speaking out is both ineffective and risky. Alicia offered clear statements of both these themes when she explained why she did not raise questions or grievances at the agency.

Futility: You just have to wait and see what they do to you. That's how I feel. Sometimes I do want to say something. But I just leave it at that. Because I feel like I'll get treated the way I've been getting treated anyway. So it wouldn't matter if I said something or not. Whatever they want to do, they're going to do regardless, whether I say something or not. They've got the power, so you have to listen to what they say.

Vulnerability: I figure if I say something back, they know a way of getting me cut off of AFDC. And then I wouldn't have anything for me and my kids, just because I said something. That's their power, right there. That's the power. That's why nobody complains.

Interviews with SSDI recipients yielded very different images of agency power and client expression. Because the design of SSDI does not include manda-

tory reviews, SSDI clients initiate most of their dealings with the agency instead of responding to directives. And because they do not have caseworkers, they typically fend for themselves when they need agency actions. For both these reasons, SSDI clients develop a stronger sense that they play an active role in the program. In their own experiences, they see evidence that they can be effective initiators and that the Social Security Administration (SSA) can be a responsive institution. In addition, while the design of AFDC leads clients to focus on the caseworkers who mediate their relationships to the agency, the design of SSDI leads clients to pay greater attention to institutional features of the SSA, specifically, its size and complexity and its elaborate system of binding rules. The need to decipher agency procedures without the aid of a caseworker makes the SSA seem less comprehensible and, hence, harder to negotiate. Starr commented:

I wish I had someone to talk with about it [the program]. I don't know how it works. And I personally would like to know how things work. When I go on an airplane, I can't believe there are 200 people in this big piece of metal gliding through the air. How does it work? Well, Social Security is not unlike that. How do all these people get in this one program, and have it work? How does it work?

A heightened awareness of rules leads many clients to view the SSA as complex. Yet, it also makes clients less fearful of arbitrary uses of authority and more confident that they can gain responses to legitimate requests. As Donna put it, "they have to follow the rules, and so do I." SSDI clients generally expect their input to be effective. Darryl asserted: "If I ever need anything, I know that's their job. They'll be there. I believe they will." SSDI clients do not think they can get whatever they want, but they believe they are active contributors to agency decisions. Sarah captured this view: "Well, if there is any power, I guess they have more than I do. But I haven't come into a situation where I've seen it . . . I always feel like I have some say-so in the process." Unlike AFDC clients, most SSDI clients find it hard to imagine how raising a grievance could open them up to retribution. Bridget commented: "I would feel comfortable bringing anything up with them. Why not? What could the problem be?"

The sharp differences in beliefs expressed by clients in the two programs are accompanied, not surprisingly, by strong differences in their willingness to raise grievances in their welfare programs.<sup>5</sup> Only one of twenty-five SSDI clients (4%) reported she would not speak up if she had a major problem. By contrast, seventeen of twenty-five AFDC clients (68%) said they would be unwilling to raise a grievance under almost any condition. Eight AFDC participants were more willing to speak up (32%), but even this group said it would do so only in relatively extreme situations.

<sup>5</sup> Measured by responses to the following questions: "Have you ever raised a complaint or grievance in your dealings with the agency? If you ever had a grievance or a complaint in dealing with the agency, would you be willing to bring it up? Would it matter if it was an especially important problem?"

The higher level of reticence expressed by AFDC informants was strongly corroborated by my observations at the shelter, where homeless residents routinely resisted the idea of contacting caseworkers about problems, even under crisis conditions. Circumstantial evidence of this dynamic also can be found in previous research. For example, in an exit poll of AFDC clients, Goodsell (1980) found that only 6.7% reported arguing with agency personnel. Handler and Hollingsworth (1971) found that the rate of client-initiated contacts with AFDC workers decreased over time, with more experienced clients less likely to make themselves visible than were people new to the program.

In summary, through their program experiences, AFDC clients come to see agency decision making as an autonomous process, unconstrained by rules and unresponsive to client demands. They believe that, as clients, their low status makes the assertion of grievances both futile and unwise. These beliefs are held consistently across demographic subgroups, and they are strong enough to make clients retreat from decision-making processes that have the most profound and immediate consequences for their family. SSDI clients are more willing to voice complaints because they believe it will be effective and will not put them in jeopardy. Left to navigate the SSA on their own, many clients learn that it is hard to get results from a large, complex bureaucracy, but they also believe they have some control in the relationship and infer that agency responses have to conform to official rules. As a result, SSDI clients expect to be effective if they persevere in advancing legitimate claims.

## BRIDGES TO BROADER POLITICS

I haven't been to most of the government. But I'll bet they just treat you the way the welfare office does. That's my fear. They'll treat you the same way. (Hope, an AFDC client).<sup>6</sup>

When they start talking about voting, I turn the TV [off]. I do. It's no guarantee. This person can make all these promises, but that don't mean they're going to do it. The rest of the government mostly works like the AFDC office. I mean, I don't deal with the government when I can (Vanessa, an AFDC client).<sup>7</sup>

By shaping participation experiences, program designs influence welfare recipients' views of client status and institutional decision making. But why would these program-specific perceptions spill over into broader beliefs about government and political action? An important clue to this puzzle was suggested by a group discussion I observed in November 1994 at the shelter for homeless families.

Twice each week, the shelter held support group meetings in which residents, more than 80% of whom were in AFDC, could talk with one another about personal problems. Although the subject of AFDC came up frequently at these meetings, broader political

issues usually did not. On the night after the 1994 midterm elections, however, there was a welfare rights activist staying in the shelter, whom I will call Carol. At the meeting, Carol chastised the other women for not voting in the election and for (in her opinion) allowing the Republican victory to happen. In the ensuing argument, the almost unanimous response was that voting would have made no difference. Moreover, residents defended their response by arguing that Carol was naive if she did not realize that the rest of government "does what it wants, just like the welfare."

There may be many reasons residents did not vote that day. For example, most were busy trying to find housing, since they soon would have to leave the temporary shelter. But the repeated claim in the meeting was that government, like the welfare agency, was going to do whatever it wanted, and it was useless to get in the way. Over the following year, I found this same theme articulated on many occasions when residents discussed the subject of politics or welfare reform. In a number of cases, the phrase "just like the welfare" was also used by residents as a shorthand for decisions that were made on their behalf but without their input. Sometimes they referred to decisions made by shelter staff, but the comparison to welfare was particularly likely on occasions when the discussion turned to government.

Perceptions of specific welfare bureaucracies persist and are applied to other government institutions because, in the eyes of clients, government is a single system. In interviews, clients from both programs regularly identified welfare bureaucracies as institutions of government. They rarely sorted these institutions into neat administrative and political categories. For example, when I asked Dizzy about the SSDI application process, he said: "Well, it's political. Isn't anything with the government political? Everything with the government is political." Clients did not simply view the welfare agency as a part of government; they saw it as a microcosm of government. Like others, Mary felt confident that "in politics, welfare, SSI, it's all the same." Another AFDC client, Nancy, stated this view in greater detail.

I don't know if people in the government would be responsive to me. If it's anything like trying to deal with the AFDC system, I don't see how. And to me, AFDC, the Department of Social Services, Department of Child Protection, Juvenile Court, those are all the same system. They're just different departments in the same system. And I have not had luck with any of those systems . . . I would expect the same sorts of treatment in Congress or wherever . . . That's why I say the government is all just one and the same program with different departments.

These statements bear a striking resemblance to those recorded by Sarat (1990) when he interviewed welfare clients about their attempts to obtain legal services. "Just as Spencer portrayed himself as 'caught' in the web of legal rules, he saw the legal services office caught within the welfare bureaucracy . . . Legal services . . . was not only inseparable from but was identical with welfare" (Sarat 1990, 352). One client told Sarat (p. 352) that lawyers and caseworkers "are both

<sup>6</sup> Stated in response to the question: "Do you feel like public officials care much what you think?"

<sup>7</sup> Stated in response to the question: "Do you think it makes a difference whether you vote or not?"

part of government"; another said: "Doesn't matter whether they call it welfare or legal services. It's the same s... (p. 352). In this unified view, images of the welfare bureaucracy become, in effect, images of government, and lessons learned about speaking up at the agency spill over into other forms of political demand-making.

There are many reasons clients may see welfare institutions as part of "one big system" of government. For example, when elected officials help applicants gain program benefits or solve problems with the agency, their actions (and credit claiming) suggest that agency responses are influenced by actors in other branches of government. Also, many clients are aware that agency workers consult with, and occasionally influence, personnel in other parts of government, such as Child Protective Services or the courts.

The primary reason for the spill-over effect, however, is simply that welfare participation provides so many clients with their most direct connection to a government institution. In these cases, the welfare agency serves as clients' most proximate and reliable source of information about how government works. To most of my informants, welfare bureaucracies offer a salient representation of government as a whole. The spill-over effect occurs not because they think their perceptions of the agency transfer to government but because they recognize that they have been dealing with the government all along.

For many clients, this unified view of government is reinforced by media stories about welfare policy debates or electoral campaigns. Not surprisingly, news stories that refer to welfare programs have a special salience for people who depend on them for benefits. These stories frequently present elected officials as policymakers who are responsible for the current or future shape of welfare programs. As these officials outline their plans for Medicare, Social Security, or AFDC, they appear as a group to be the "executive directors" of welfare agencies. At a minimum, clients tend to infer that program conditions reflect the desires of elected representatives, and in some cases they perceive welfare bureaucrats and legislators as occupants of a single institution. Holly complained: "They don't seem to care at Social Security, and they don't seem to care nowhere else in the Congress. That's the way the government is."

For AFDC recipients, news stories dealing with welfare also tend to have a second effect. When public officials give speeches about welfare reform, they frequently make generalizations about "welfare mothers." To clients, these descriptions often seem degrading and unfair. On several occasions, women recalled turning off the television because they did not want their children to hear what was being said about them. To many clients, news stories on welfare suggest that the degraded position they occupy in the program carries over to the rest of the polity. The stigmatizing discourse on welfare creates a bridge between their status as

clients and their status as citizens.<sup>8</sup> Celina described this bridge in the following way.

You hear about yourself on TV. They're stereotyping you all the time. And I'm tired of it... The rest of the government is just like AFDC: You're a number to both, and neither of them care. The government looks at me as someone on AFDC, one of the statistics. I had my kids when I was young. So, that's all they figure they need to know about me. So, the whole government sees me the way the AFDC office does, except for they don't get to swear at me.

Thus, a variety of factors combine to forge a connection between welfare experiences and beliefs about other political institutions. This connection is stronger for some participants than for others. As research on adult political learning leads one to expect (Sapiro 1994), clients assimilate the lessons of welfare participation into what their life history has already taught them about politics. Consequently, beliefs about the agencies do not always extend to the rest of government. This point is well illustrated by a focused comparison of two SSDI clients.

Darryl is a 44-year-old African American with a high school diploma. He has been homeless many times and has been in prison. Mark is a 36-year-old Native American with a 9th grade education. Like Darryl, he has experienced periods of homelessness and incarceration. One might expect these two men to share uniformly pessimistic views of public institutions, but their attitudes toward government diverge in significant respects. When I asked Mark about government, he referred to experiences in SSDI that he considered to be evidence of government responsiveness, and he emphasized themes that were familiar from his description of the SSA. By contrast, although Darryl similarly considered the SSA to be very helpful and responsive, when it came time to discuss government as a whole his program experiences were eclipsed by his lifetime of marginality. He never mentioned SSDI as he told me about government, and his description of politics emphasized his own powerlessness.

*Darryl:* They [public officials] make decisions that influence or govern the smaller people in the world, people who don't have no say-so or nothing... I'm what you call the "little man." I'll always be the small man. I don't have any power. I don't have any say-so... Power is... I don't know what word I'm looking for. It's a dominating type of thing. You can move people around like puppets just by making laws and having the police enforce those laws. If you do something that the people with power don't like, they'll have you arrested, and there's nothing you can do about it.

*Mark:* The government is so big, they probably wouldn't have time to listen to our particular stories about what the government ought to do... When you talk about government, I keep thinking about my dad. He's complaining about the government, that it's corrupt. But yes, I think

<sup>8</sup> On this point, my findings are consistent with those of Sarat (1990, 352): "Unable to transcend the welfare bureaucracy by going to legal services, he [the client] is unable to transcend or leave behind the self constituted by being on welfare. Whether talking to a caseworker or a lawyer he is caught yet again, only this time he is, and can be, no more than 'just a welfare recipient.'"

they're listening to me. I mean, I got SSD[I]. They knew I needed some kind of income, and they were there to listen and do something. So, I figure if they're doing right by me in SSD[I], they must care about me in the rest of government.

Mark and Darryl's divergent responses serve as an important reminder that the spill-over effects of program experiences vary across individuals. For most recipients, however, there seems to be at least some connection between program experiences and general political orientation.

To summarize, clients draw political lessons from their program experiences because welfare agencies are usually the most accessible and consequential government institution in their life. Welfare agencies are easily recognized as a part of government and have clear links to its other branches. For many clients, they serve as the most direct source of information about how government works. For people in AFDC, program experiences also are linked to the rest of political life by news stories that seem to imply the status of "welfare recipient" is as relevant in other government institutions as it is at the agency.

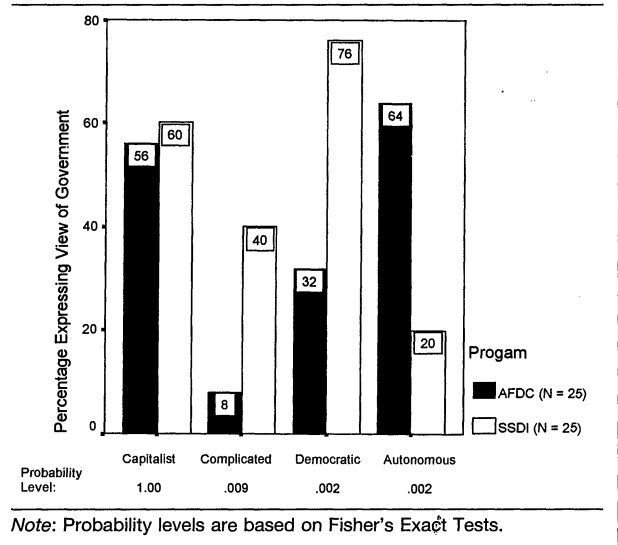
All this suggests that the same experiences that make AFDC clients less willing to challenge the agency may also contribute to their lower level of political involvement. To make this explanation compelling, however, we must consider the content of clients' views of political action and its relation to their views of demand-making in welfare programs.

**EXTERNAL EFFICACY: VIEWS OF GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL ACTION**

Views of political action flow partly from one's perceptions of government. Political participation seems less worthwhile if policymaking appears to be a directive rather than responsive activity. Even if government officials seem to pay attention to the preferences of some citizens, specific individuals or groups may not expect to receive equal treatment. These sorts of beliefs are a critical element of political efficacy, the feeling that one's activities can influence the political process and that it is worth making the effort to get involved (see Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954, 181-94). Students of political behavior usually distinguish between external efficacy, or beliefs about governmental responsiveness, and internal efficacy, or perceptions of one's own ability to understand and participate in political life (Niemi, Craig, and Mattai 1991). Both forms of efficacy have been shown to be strong predictors of political participation (Abramson 1983, chap. 8), and I will argue that the internal/external distinction is critical for understanding how welfare participation relates to political involvement. In this section, I analyze the effects of program experiences on external efficacy. In a later section, I will suggest that these same experiences have very different effects on feelings of internal efficacy.

To understand clients' beliefs about political action, it is necessary to begin with their more general conceptions of the political system. In interviews, I asked

**FIGURE 1. Views of Government by Program**



clients to tell me about politics and government—who and what can influence policy decisions, why political outcomes turn out the way they do, and whether government does what citizens want. From their responses, I derived a large number of common themes, which I then reduced to four broad views of government. I allowed for ambivalence by treating these views as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. In prototypical form, the four views are as follows.

**Democratic:** Government is open and responsive to the preferences of citizens, who are in meaningful respects politically equal. An established political process governed by laws allows citizens to have influence and hold public officials accountable.

**Capitalist:** Government exists to serve rich people and corporations. While it may not literally be the "Executive Committee of the Ruling Class," government is primarily influenced by economic inequalities. The political process is governed by money and the people who have it.

**Complicated:** Government is too large and has too many complicated systems and laws. As a result, one public official does not know what another is doing. Officials cannot pay attention to citizens' real needs, do not respond in a timely manner, and are difficult to influence.

**Autonomous:** Government officials do whatever they want, whenever they want. They can evade or change laws if their goals require it. They have to confront one another when they disagree, but important decisions are not swayed by popular actions.

Figure 1 shows how frequently clients in each program expressed each of these views. Virtually equal majorities from both programs raised the "capitalist" theme (56% in AFDC, 60% in SSDI, not significant). Francis, an SSDI client, said: "In the big scheme, it's the haves and the have-nots. It's who has the money and the power and who doesn't. That's all it boils down

to.” As did a majority of AFDC participants, Debber concurred:

The rich have greater influence. If you have no money, you're nobody. You're nothing. That's the way it is in the United States. The hard-working man, the blue-collar man . . . if you ask me, their opinions and their beliefs don't mean nothing. If you've got money, then you can talk . . . If you have money, then you can do something to change the system, the government. But the poor can't. What can the poor do?

Because clients in AFDC and SSDI emphasized the political importance of material inequality to a virtually equal degree, this belief cannot, by itself, account for differences in political engagement across the programs. Instead, the two groups must be distinguished by the additional themes.

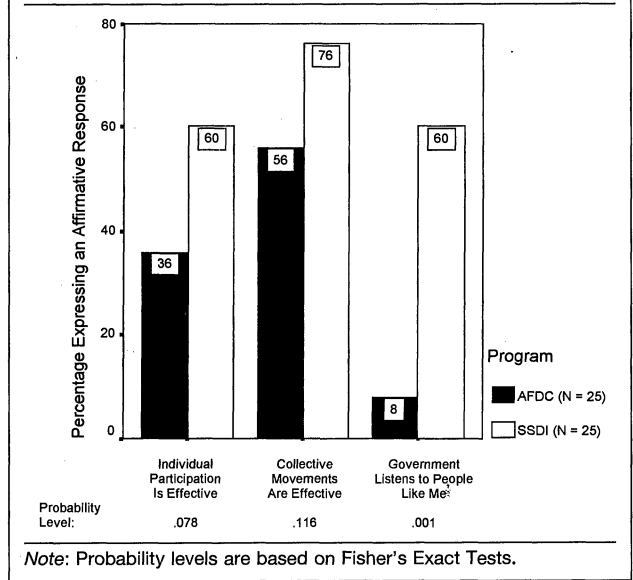
An autonomous view of government was significantly more common among AFDC recipients (64% vs. 20% in SSDI,  $p = .002$ ). As I noted earlier, case-worker autonomy is a prevailing theme in clients' descriptions of AFDC decision making. Alissa gave a typical description: “Whatever they [agency workers] want to do, they're going to do regardless, whether I say something or not.” Likewise, after noting the influence of wealth in politics, Debber asserted: “There's nothing I can do because the government is going to do what they want to do regardless of what us people say.” Thus, most AFDC recipients see government decision making as a directive rather than responsive process. They expect that if public officials do listen to citizen preferences, these preferences will be the opinions of rich people.

SSDI recipients are significantly more likely to emphasize the two themes that distinguish their descriptions of the SSA. While only 8% of AFDC recipients mentioned government's size and complexity, this theme cropped up in 40% of SSDI clients' accounts ( $p = .009$ ). Betty commented: “Government has gotten so big, and has so many rules, that it can't be influenced.” Patty was even more explicit in linking this inference about government to her SSDI experience.

Social Security is no different from the rest of government . . . . When you're in something like Social Security, you learn a lot about the way the government does things. There's a lot of paper, and nothing moves very fast. Everything goes slowly . . . . Government has just gotten so big and so removed from the individual. They don't see it. They don't see the problems we have all the time.

SSDI recipients are also significantly more likely than AFDC recipients to view the government as open and democratic (76% vs. 32%,  $p = .002$ ). Like the SSA, government as a whole appears to be responsive to persistent efforts to obtain action, and this responsiveness is guaranteed by a system of laws. Bridget, for example, believes that “in politics, the squeaky wheels get what they want.” Phil thinks that citizens can “initiate change” if they “use the process” and that “it comes down to the old thing of one person, one vote. You want to vote out an incumbent, you get to do that. You get to vote against an incumbent.” By a three-quarter majority, SSDI clients believe that citizens can bring about change, as Starr put it, “within the letter of

**FIGURE 2. Feelings of External Political Efficacy by Program**



the law.” Starr observed: “I know it's a very grueling process. But yes, I think locally we are heard.”

For most people in SSDI, then, the government appears to be open and responsive to citizens. This point should not be overstated. Few people in SSDI consider government officials as responsive as they should be, and they are more likely than AFDC recipients to believe that the government's ability to act on popular desires is limited by its size and its complicated system of laws. People in SSDI also share the expectation that public officials are more responsive to people with money, but these doubts do not alter their fundamental expectation that, even if the government is slow to act, it eventually will respond to citizens who vote, organize, and lobby public officials.

In addition to soliciting clients' general images of the political system, I asked them several direct questions related to political efficacy. As Figure 2 shows, their answers were consistent with what one would expect based on their views of government. SSDI recipients are more likely to believe that their individual actions can affect government decisions (60% vs. 36% in AFDC,  $p = .078$ ) and that a collective movement of people in the program can influence government actions (76% vs. 56% in AFDC,  $p = .116$ ). The most dramatic differences emerged when I asked whether government officials listen to people like them. While 60% of SSDI clients believe that they do, only 8% of the AFDC clients agree ( $p = .001$ ). In sum, the disparity in political efficacy suggested by clients' general views of government shows up consistently across these three more specific questions.

Looking beneath these numbers, it becomes clear that even responses that were coded the same way across the two programs often had different rationales, and these differences echoed program experiences. For example, most SSDI clients expect that an organized political effort will be effective because the system is



open to interest groups. Bridget explained: “I would favor some sort of political organization with all of us in it. That kind of organization could make a real difference. We wouldn’t have the money to be as effective as the cigarette companies or anything. But they would still have to listen to us because that’s the way it works.” A majority of AFDC clients also believe that collective action can be effective, but often because they view a mass movement as the only way to force action from an essentially unresponsive government. According to Renee, “they haven’t been listening; they never had to; so why would they listen now? What’s going to make them listen now?” A typical answer was given by Vanessa, who surmised that if all AFDC recipients joined together, “it would be too many people not to listen.”

Similar differences in meaning occurred when clients talked about whether government officials listen to people like them. The minority of SSDI clients who gave negative responses to this question usually explained their answer by saying that government officials simply do not listen or are out of touch. By contrast, the large majority of AFDC recipients who gave negative responses tended to link their answer to their own client status. In some cases, they used welfare politics itself as an example. Penny complained: “They listen to welfare advocates but not [clients].” In most cases, AFDC clients feel that they will not be heard because, as welfare recipients, they occupy a degraded status. Alissa explained:

I feel like they [public officials] would listen even less because I’m in this group of people that they’re trying to . . . that they have these stereotypes against. They [public officials] say, “she’s lazy, she’s black, she’s sitting there, she’s received AFDC for all these years. Why can’t she work, what’s wrong with her? . . . I’m looked at totally differently because of the fact that I am a recipient. Everyone in that category is a lazy person who doesn’t know what she’s talking about. [imitating a public official] “So, shut up, I’m trying to hear this man here who went to Harvard. He knows what he’s talking about. I’m going to listen to him.” That’s how I feel it is, based on what’s been said.

In sum, clients in both programs made explicit statements indicating that they draw inferences about government from their experiences with welfare institutions. In addition, they tend to have views of government that mirror the perceptions they developed in their respective programs. Finally, just as AFDC participants are more likely to believe that challenging the agency will be futile, they are also more likely to expect other forms of political action to be ineffective. All these pieces of evidence point toward the conclusion that program experiences affect beliefs about the efficacy of political action.

Again, however, these differences across programs may simply reflect differences in preexisting characteristics. To address this possibility, I first looked for patterns within each program. I did not find systematic relationships for some group differences (e.g., sex and race), but exposure to college education was strongly associated with more efficacious views in both pro-

**TABLE 2. External Political Efficacy by Program Participation and Control Variables (OLS Regression)**

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	Probability Level
<b>Program Participation</b>			
SSDI	-.330	.235	.160
AFDC	-.525	.265	.024
<b>Demographics and Partisanship</b>			
Woman	.167	.111	.132
Black	-.076	.164	.642
South	.006	.117	.957
Education	.297	.035	.001
Age	-.004	.003	.155
Income	.022	.010	.019
Urban	.214	.121	.077
Partisanship	.188	.053	.001
Constant	-7.628	.253	.001
<b>Overall model</b>			
	$F = 17.39; p < .0001$		
	$R^2 = 0.81$		
	$N = 1981$		
	$N_{AFDC} = 85$		
	$N_{SSDI} = 110$		

Note: Coefficients are from the OLS regression procedure in SPSS; one-tailed test for AFDC, two-tailed tests otherwise. Data are from the 1992 NES (Miller et al. 1993).

grams. This suggests that one reason SSDI recipients have more optimistic expectations is that they are more likely to have had experience with college (60% vs. 20% in AFDC).

A multivariate analysis of NES data offers an opportunity to control for a wider range of background factors and to test the interview findings with a larger sample. Table 2 presents an OLS regression analysis in which the dependent variable is a scale measuring external political efficacy (see Appendix C). Like the interview data, the results of this analysis indicate that education level has a significant positive influence on levels of external efficacy. Higher income and stronger feelings of partisanship are also associated with significant positive effects. In accord with the interview data, this analysis of NES data also shows no significant relationship associated with race or sex. Most important, the estimates indicating how program participants differ from the rest of the population show the expected relationships. The responses given by SSDI clients are indistinguishable from those given by the rest of the population. By contrast, after controlling for demographic characteristics, AFDC participation is associated with a significantly lower levels of external efficacy ( $b = -.525, p < .024$ ). Interestingly, tests for interaction with the other variables in the model turned out negative, which suggests that the effects of AFDC participation on external efficacy are relatively constant across these demographic groups.

The NES evidence corroborates my analysis of in-depth interviews. Background differences in the client populations, particularly education level, do contribute to the disparity in feelings about political efficacy. Still,

the political views of people in welfare programs differ from those expressed by people with a similar background. The same themes of size, complexity, and responsiveness that filled SSDI clients' descriptions of the SSA can also be found in their views of government and the political process. Likewise, AFDC participants believe that government institutions will behave like the welfare agency, in an autonomous and directive (rather than open and responsive) manner. Furthermore, some AFDC participants think that other citizens may have opportunities to influence government, but most do not expect this privilege to be extended to people who occupy the degraded status of "welfare recipient."

To connect welfare program experiences to political action, there is still one link that needs to be added to this chain. In order to play the mediating role I have assigned it, feelings of external political efficacy not only must be influenced by program experiences but also must affect political actions. The evidence so far shows a disparity in external efficacy that is consistent with the disparity in political participation. But is there a connection between the two? There are good reasons to question this linkage. Many observers have pointed out that attitudes can be very poor predictors of political behavior (Luttbeg 1991). Because political actions always occur under concrete circumstances, the influence of any general attitude can be blunted by a variety of situational factors and contextual cues (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, 351–81).

Nevertheless, three observations suggest that clients' feelings of external efficacy affect levels of political involvement. First, the link between external efficacy and political participation has been demonstrated repeatedly in political behavior research. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 141–5) are typical in making the confident assertion that this connection is supported by "a mountain of empirical evidence." Second, as the women in the shelter demonstrated when they responded to Carol's charge that they had stood by and "let the Republicans win," clients themselves tend to offer these sentiments as explanations for their actions. Third, research in social psychology indicates that attitudes predict behaviors more accurately when they have been developed through direct experience with an "attitude object" (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, 193–202). Attitudes arising from direct experience tend to have greater clarity and are held with greater confidence. They also tend to be more stable, more readily accessible from memory, and more likely to be activated without conscious effort. Thus, if clients' attitudes toward government come from their direct experiences with government (and clients believe they do), there is little reason to expect the normal relationship between external efficacy and political action to be attenuated for welfare recipients.

### **EXPLAINING EXCEPTIONS IN AFDC: THE EFFECTS OF HEAD START**

If experiences in AFDC appear to discourage political involvement, then it is worth taking a closer look at this

group. Two patterns in the evidence suggest important questions. First, what accounts for the subgroup of AFDC clients (8 of 25) who expressed greater willingness to speak up for themselves when dealing with the agency and its caseworkers? Second, does this same factor also allow us to identify a subgroup of AFDC recipients with a higher level of political efficacy and a stronger commitment to participation? In this section, I show that these questions can be answered in a way consistent with my general claim that participation experiences teach lessons that influence the odds of participation in other political domains.

The AFDC sample was not a homogeneous group. Thirteen clients were enrolled only in the AFDC program, but another twelve had additional experience with organizations that explicitly encourage involvement. In this latter group, eight had children enrolled in Head Start, three were involved in activist organizations, and one participated in both. These twelve were significantly more willing to voice grievances in AFDC than were the thirteen clients who had no outside organizational involvement (67% vs. none,  $p = .001$ ). Of the four activists in this group of twelve, three were among the minority who were more willing to speak up at the welfare agency. This pattern is consistent with historical evidence that the level of client assertiveness is influenced by social activism (Gordon 1994, 241–51; Piven and Cloward 1979). As Handler (1992, 360) explains, "groups provide solidarity, encouragement and information. They show clients that they are not alone, that others share their burdens; they can collectivize grievances. Groups can provide training and experts. Clients need groups in order to be able to participate."

Involvement with Head Start appears to have similar effects. Head Start parents are required to participate in policy councils and local decision-making processes (see Head Start Bureau 1992: §1304.5-1 to §1304.5-5, Appendix B). These requirements reflect the goal of "maximum feasible participation" that served as a cornerstone of programs initiated during the Johnson administration's War on Poverty in the 1960s (Katz 1989, 95–101). Many critics have deemed this effort an unmitigated failure: Maximum feasible participation did not reduce poverty and did not lead to greater political involvement by poor people (Banfield 1974; Moynihan 1969). In some respects, this conclusion is warranted. The initiative certainly failed to overcome a variety of factors that contribute to poverty and powerlessness. Nevertheless, some case studies suggest that this program bolstered the involvement of poor people in some arenas of local politics by giving "the participatory ideal . . . widespread currency" (Marston 1993, 126, 132).

Of the eight AFDC clients who participated in Head Start, five were among the group willing to voice grievances at the welfare agency. The origins of this pattern are readily apparent in clients' accounts. Consider, for example, Karla's description of how Head Start differed from AFDC and how opportunities provided by the Head Start design had encouraged her commitment to speaking up.

AFDC makes you want to shy away and hold back. Head Start, they work with you. You can see the progress you're making. Me myself, I've made a lot of improvement in the last two or three years. I went into the citywide policy meetings as a shy quiet person. And now I've begun to open up a lot more. I talk a lot. I participate in everything they have available.

For two reasons, it is also instructive to consider the responses of the three clients who were active in Head Start yet remained reluctant to assert themselves in AFDC. First, like the comparison of Mark and Darryl presented earlier, these clients serve as a reminder that spill-over effects are probabilistic rather than automatic outcomes. Second, the contrast between AFDC and Head Start described by these three clients brings the importance of policy design into sharper focus. If client orientation toward involvement flows solely from preexisting characteristics (in other words, if policy design has no effect), then one would expect clients to hold a single orientation toward involvement across different program contexts (AFDC vs. Head Start). These three clients shared their fellow recipients' fears and doubts about speaking up in AFDC, but they felt quite opposite sentiments in Head Start. The excerpts that follow offer a powerful illustration of how a more participatory program design (Head Start) can foster engagement for individuals who are quiescent in the context of a more directive design (AFDC).

*Cheryl:* It would be great if I could have a say in AFDC like I can in Head Start . . . I get to go to the meetings. And I know the laws of Head Start. And [at Head Start] it's different. You have to have parents' say-so. You have to have a majority of parents present to vote for certain things and certain people. AFDC is not like that at all. I've never seen or heard about it being that I could have a say-so. So, why even think about it? But [at Head Start], I know it. I know I can have input. So, why not get involved? Now, if there was some place in AFDC where I could go say how I feel and what welfare mothers need, then I'm sure I would have done it by now. But that's not the way it is.

*Lisa:* Being involved with Head Start now, they give me a lot of options. It's helpful for giving you some insight into AFDC and your caseworker. Like they have a lot of parent involvement, and right now I'm on the policy council. And on the policy council they have components set up on health care, social work, disability plans, and all that . . . You get to be more involved with Head Start. They don't tell you that you have to do it. They just give you the opportunity to get involved. So, I feel like I'm wanted, like I'm needed to do something. A lot of people are depending on me to do this, and that's great . . . With Head Start, they'll say, "Just bring [your kids] to the meeting, and let them play off to the side." And then I can still get my business taken care of, even with my kids. That's how you know they want you there. And then afterward, you feel like you accomplished something.

*Nancy:* I have watched parents blossom in Head Start. Parents who never said a word. They never talked because they had just been beaten down. They don't feel like they have anything to contribute. I've watched them get some empowerment from Head Start, and in two years become leaders of this whole citywide group of people. Two years ago, they wouldn't even open their mouths at meet-

ings . . . [The people at Head Start] value your opinion. I guess that's the first thing is when someone all of the sudden starts valuing what you have to say. That right there is the start. And that's probably the first thing that happened to me. I was impressed that when you go to orientation, they say, "We need you to help." And then they give you an opportunity to help. They not only give you the opportunity to help with little stuff in the classroom, they give you the opportunity to go to a meeting where *you* are making decisions. You are actually involved in the hiring. No one can get hired for this program unless they're interviewed by a group of parents. And that in itself is like, "Wow, really? I can do that?" It gives you control over the education your child is getting, the kind of food your child is getting to eat, the kind of curriculum in the classroom, the people that are actually working with your child. That sense of empowerment starts there. But if you get involved in the program, it just keeps growing more and more. Now, not everyone is going to take advantage of it. And I understand that. But if people want to, they can do it.

Did Head Start's "maximum feasible participation" affect broader orientations toward political action? This question can be addressed by comparing the eight AFDC clients who participated in Head Start to the thirteen AFDC clients with no other group participation.<sup>9</sup> Such a comparison is aided by an accident of sampling that makes it possible to distinguish the effects of education and program experience. The eight Head Start participants in this study had relatively little formal education: Only one of the eight obtained a high school diploma. By contrast, although the comparison group of thirteen clients with no additional group involvement included five who did not complete high school, it had eight with a high school diploma. Thus, the latter group has more formal education overall than those who participated in Head Start.

Excluding the four political activists, a comparison of the eight AFDC clients in Head Start to the thirteen in AFDC alone yields the following contrasts.<sup>10</sup> Whereas 63% of Head Start participants consider the political system open and democratic, only 8% of those in AFDC alone hold this view ( $p = .014$ ). Also, whereas 77% of clients participating in AFDC alone see government as autonomous, this view is held by only 50% of the Head Start participants ( $p = .213$ ).

Similar patterns emerge in responses to the three political efficacy questions. Despite a higher average level of education, clients in AFDC alone are far more likely to believe their participation would be ineffective (92% vs. 50% of the Head Start group,  $p = .047$ ), that government does not listen to people like them (100% vs. 50% of the Head Start group,  $p = .012$ ), and that a movement of people in the program would be ineffective (39%, vs. none of the Head Start group,  $p = .063$ ). Regarding all three questions, Head Start par-

<sup>9</sup> The four activists in AFDC are less helpful for addressing this question because we cannot know whether their feelings of efficacy or their activism came first. As a result, evidence of a relationship could only point toward a trivial conclusion: People who are politically involved are more likely to believe it is "worth it" to be involved.

<sup>10</sup> Probability levels in this and the next paragraph are based on Fisher's Exact Tests.

ticipants were more likely to have the sorts of expectations that support political involvement. The reasons for this pattern were not hard to discern from the transcripts. Just as clients made inferences from their experiences in SSDI and AFDC, they drew lessons from Head Start.

The existence of (and the term) "policy councils" facilitates a connection between Head Start experiences and broader beliefs about politics. Lisa volunteered this explanation of what happens at a Head Start meeting. "Well, how can I say it. It's like politics. We have different views, say, about a disability plan for Head Start. We're like a decision-making body. And it feels good because it's like you're deciding Head Start's policies throughout the city and in our own centers." These experiences leave an imprint on general beliefs about political involvement.

In sum, the evidence indicates that Head Start experiences consistently mitigate or supersede the demobilizing effects of AFDC. This finding suggests a revised view of maximum feasible participation. Like many programs in the War on Poverty, this initiative was judged a failure because it did not live up to the unrealistic standard of "total victory" promised by an "unconditional declaration of war" (Katz 1989, 88). Indeed, it remains important to recognize the limitations of this policy. Insofar as consensus may often result from the exclusion of difficult issues or competing views (Bachrach and Baratz 1962), we should not be surprised if the addition of clients' perspectives produces misunderstanding, conflict, and a less coherent policy process (Moynihan 1969). Likewise, it seems unrealistic to expect participatory designs to erase systemic inequalities or unilaterally "empower" people who are disadvantaged in a variety of ways.

These limitations, however, should not overshadow the importance of meaningful collective decision making for individuals who are often denied effective control over their own life (Handler 1996). The findings presented here suggest that a more participatory program design encourages more positive orientations toward political involvement. Head Start provides clients with evidence that participation can be effective and fulfilling. From the perspective of participatory theory, it is not surprising that these experiences have spill-over effects. "The taste for participation . . . a little experience with self-government and political action inspire[s] a desire for a great deal more" (Barber 1984, 265-6).

### **INTERNAL EFFICACY: BELIEFS ABOUT ONE'S POLITICAL ABILITIES**

I have argued that participation experiences in AFDC undermine feelings of *external* efficacy. In this section, I address the additional possibility that clients retreat from politics because they lack internal efficacy, or confidence in their political abilities.

According to the passivity explanation, government assistance leads recipients to become dependent and, hence, politically passive. As noted earlier, this claim founders on the evidence that SSDI recipients partici-

pate at the same rate as other citizens. For two other reasons, however, internal efficacy may still help account for the political quiescence of AFDC recipients. First, some observers argue that passivity and self-doubt explain why a subset of poor people apply to AFDC in the first place (Gilder 1981). This suggests that, even before they enter the program, AFDC recipients may feel less efficacious than other people with a similar background. Second, people who see repeated evidence that important outcomes are beyond their control sometimes develop doubts about their personal efficacy. This insight provides the foundation for expectancy theories of learned helplessness (Gurin and Gurin 1970). From this perspective, a welfare program designed to be directive rather than open to client choices may foster a sense of political incapacity (Kane 1987, 416).

The evidence does not support either proposition. With only a few exceptions, AFDC recipients do not doubt their political capacities. To see how this may be possible, it is necessary to be precise about how internal political efficacy relates to two other concepts. First, internal political efficacy should not be confused with a global evaluation of the self. It is a specific dimension among the many that contribute to an individual's self-concept (Turner et al. 1987). Thus, a recipient who classifies herself as a "failure" in relation to employment may nevertheless place herself among the highly competent when it comes to rearing children or negotiating the maze of bureaucracy at the welfare agency.

Second, a single experience can have very different implications for feelings of internal and external political efficacy. For example, if I manage to get what I need from an agency that appears intransigent or even hostile, I may become increasingly impressed with my own abilities precisely because I am getting responses from an unresponsive institution. As each interaction with the agency leads me to a more pessimistic view of its responsiveness (external efficacy), I may experience a corresponding rise in my perception that I am capable of accomplishing a difficult task (internal efficacy).

Thus, while AFDC clients frequently complain of low self-esteem related to receipt of welfare, neither this sentiment nor their low level of external political efficacy should be seen as requiring a correspondingly low level of internal political efficacy. AFDC recipients tend to doubt that the government will respond to "people like them" because of their poverty, client status, and/or race and because "that's just the way government is." But while recipients gave many reasons to be pessimistic about political action, these reasons typically did not include a low estimation of their own political ability. Lashell, for example, said that public officials would not listen to her "because I don't have any money and because I'm black." When asked if a lack of political knowledge or skills might make it harder for her to gain a response, she smiled at the suggestion and confidently replied: "Oh, I can talk all day long." Cheryl echoed these sentiments: "I could speak up as much as anybody."

The faith that these recipients have in their own

political ability can be traced to their experiences in AFDC. Clients perceive themselves as successfully meeting the challenges of a government institution and almost always emphasize that AFDC participation is a particularly demanding relationship with government. To maintain this relationship, a client must pay diligent attention to fluctuating requirements, keep up with necessary documents, and anticipate the expectations of the caseworker. Celina was one of many who pointed out that AFDC participation requires planning and organization. "Me, I have everything in a folder. So, when they ask you for birth certificates, Social Security numbers, whatever . . . you have to be able to pull that stuff out on demand." The general consensus was that if a client does not know what she is doing, she and her children will quickly find themselves in desperate circumstances. Alissa said: "I'm maybe a little more educated than some . . . . If someone doesn't have the means and know how, they're just railroaded through."

Because they deal with the system regularly, clients tend to have considerable faith in their understanding of how it works. In fact, they expressed far more doubts about my ability to understand it, as a nonparticipant, than about their own. Similar comments asserting the superior "insider knowledge" of clients were recorded by Sarat (1990, 350-1) when he interviewed welfare recipients seeking legal services. A more recent study of legal service usage by Young (1995) offers additional evidence that welfare participation leads to a sense of institutional competence and that this perception is generalized to government as a whole. Young asked whether clients valued lawyers as "spokespersons" who could express their views in appropriate language, as "legal experts" who knew existing laws, or as "system insiders" who were familiar with government officials and procedures. She found that other poor people valued lawyers in all three roles, but welfare clients were far less likely to see insider knowledge as something they needed from a lawyer. One client told Young (1995, 18): "I just know how they are, because I've been dealing with them so long, you know." Young concludes (p. 11):

In contrast with wealthier informants, the welfare poor rarely suggested that insider knowledge was an important advantage gained from legal representation . . . . The welfare poor often described how experience with "the system" increased their ability to handle their own public benefit issues.

Regardless of whether recipients' high estimates of their own understanding are correct, the interviews conducted by Young (1995) and Sarat (1990) as well as those from the present study suggest that, all else equal, AFDC participation may lead individuals to develop higher evaluations of their own ability to deal with government. This claim can be tested by returning to the NES data and constructing a multivariate model of internal political efficacy. Table 3 shows an OLS regression analysis that predicts placement on a scale created by adding together four newer items that researchers have found to be the clearest and most satisfactory measures of internal political efficacy (on

**TABLE 3. Internal Political Efficacy by Program Participation and Control Variables (OLS Regression)**

Independent Variables	Coefficient	Standard Error	Probability Level
<b>Program Participation</b>			
SSDI	.241	.359	.503
AFDC	3.190	1.023	.001
<b>Demographics and Partisanship</b>			
Woman	-1.685	.171	.001
Black	.477	.252	.059
South	.135	.180	.452
Education	.666	.054	.001
Age	.002	.005	.697
Income	.012	.015	.422
Urban	.548	.190	.004
Partisanship	.370	.081	.001
<b>Interactions</b>			
AFDC X Education	-.762	.313	.008
AFDC X Urban	1.395	.859	.052
Constant	9.122	.392	.001
Overall model	$F = 33.91; p < .001$		
	$R^2 = .172$		
	$N = 1976$		
	$N_{AFDC} = 85$		
	$N_{SSDI} = 110$		

Note: Coefficients are from the OLS regression procedure in SPSS; one-tailed test for AFDC and interactions, two-tailed tests otherwise. Data are from the 1992 NES (Miller et al. 1993).

the four-item scale, see Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991).

The results of this analysis indicate a significantly higher level of internal political efficacy among men, people with a higher level of education, stronger partisans, those who live in more urban areas, and (although the estimate does not quite reach conventional levels of significance) possibly African Americans. After controlling for these factors as well as for age, income, and region, it appears that SSDI clients' beliefs in their own political capacity are indistinguishable from the rest of the population. By contrast, the estimated coefficient for AFDC participation offers support for the hypothesis suggested by the interviews. Relative to people who resemble them in terms of other characteristics included in the model, AFDC recipients express significantly *higher* evaluations of their own political capacity ( $b = 3.19, p < .001$ ).

In addition, tests for interactions with other variables in the model suggest that the effects of AFDC participation vary for two groups. First, the significant negative coefficient for the interaction with education suggests that AFDC makes a smaller marginal contribution to internal efficacy among those who have a higher level of education, a finding which makes considerable sense in view of the high level of efficacy already associated with this group. Second, the coefficient for the interaction of AFDC and urban suggests that AFDC participation may boost the internal political efficacy of central-city welfare recipients to a

degree that is even greater than the effects found among other AFDC recipients.

These regression results corroborate the statements made in the interviews and urge the conclusion that, on average, program participation makes a positive contribution to the belief of AFDC recipients that they have the specific skills and knowledge needed to deal with government. Thus, for evaluating the political consequences of welfare participation, the distinction between internal and external efficacy turns out to be crucial. In their program experiences, AFDC clients see evidence that government institutions are hostile places and that officials do not understand, care about, or respond to "people like them." Yet, these very same experiences also lead clients to infer that they have developed the knowledge and skills needed to deal with government. Women in AFDC tend to believe that they are capable of participating in politics; they simply do not think that anyone in a position of power will listen to them.

### **CONCLUSION: PUBLIC POLICY AND DEMOCRACY**

Few concerns are more fundamental to students of politics than the relationship between public policy and democracy. In most liberal traditions of political theory, citizen participation is cast as a creative force that precedes and determines public policies. This view lies at the heart of systems theories that identify public demands as "inputs" that determine government policy "outputs" (Easton 1965, 1971). In varying degrees of formality, this view also can be found at the core of economic theories of democracy (Downs 1957) and pluralist theories of politics (Dahl 1967). In these accounts, public policies are the ultimate results of the political process.

From another perspective, however, the vigor of democracy itself appears to be an uncertain outcome that depends on public policies. Various scholars have argued that public policies engender characteristic forms of politics depending on their goals (Lowi 1964), the way they distribute costs and benefits (Wilson 1980), the symbolic cues they express to the citizenry (Edelman 1964), and the way in which they structure political interaction (Pierson 1993). These theories all serve as reminders that citizen involvement is fragile and malleable and that public policies can either support or discourage an engaged citizenry (Schneider and Ingram 1997). As Smith and Ingram (1993, 15) point out, "it is usually believed that in a democracy citizens shape policies. It is less commonly realized that the far-reaching policies of modern governments shape citizens and may do so in directions harmful to democracy."

In the case of welfare programs, both images of this relationship have considerable merit. As the most recent round of reforms has underscored, program designs are outcomes shaped by the fears, hopes, and discontents of policymakers and citizens. Indeed, the responsiveness of public policy to shifting sentiments may be considered a major source of volatility in

welfare provision (Heclo 1994). At the same time, however, welfare policy designs are more than just government outputs. They are political forces that have important effects on the beliefs and actions of citizens. From this perspective, the most significant political outcomes of welfare reform may not be new program requirements or initiatives per se. The more decisive outcomes may be found in the way these design elements affect democracy itself.

Recently, a number of observers have called on scholars and practitioners to "envision a democracy in which policy plays a new role: to empower, enlighten, and engage citizens in the process of self-government" (Smith and Ingram 1993, 1). To the extent that one values democratic participation, the findings presented here suggest that this value is relevant for assessing the success or failure of welfare policies. Political debates over how welfare programs affect incorporation in the market (i.e., employment) should be joined by discussions of how they affect incorporation in the polity.

This article provides an empirical starting point for such a discussion by illuminating how welfare program designs affect political learning. The heart of the matter is that welfare programs provide many people with their most direct exposure to a government institution. When clients think about government, their program experiences provide the handiest and most reliable points of reference. When they think about whether their own political demands can be effective, civics-book images of democracy pale next to vivid impressions of how welfare agencies respond to clients. Program designs not only communicate information about client status and agency decision making but also teach lessons about citizenship status and government.

More generally, the findings presented here suggest the potential for a political learning perspective that links the study of policy design and implementation to the study of political thought and action in mass publics. In a society in which the policymaking process is so often relegated to the status of a distant spectacle (Edelman 1964), public bureaucracies provide relatively immediate experiences with government. Legislatures may host more dramatic political activities, but the police station, the motor vehicles office, and the Internal Revenue Service are more likely to supply citizens with lessons about government that ring with the truth of first-hand experience. From mundane encounters at the post office to the more total experience of prison life, public bureaucracies should be studied as sites of political learning.

Direct experiences with policy design provide citizens with "scripts" that indicate how they can expect government to act. Under the AFDC program (now Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), clients are given little opportunity to make consequential choices about their own life; they deal with the agency when they are summoned, and they must respond to the detailed questions and directives of their caseworker. What image of government does this convey to a group that already tends to be disadvantaged in political life? The answer seems clear from the evidence presented here. It also seems clear that nothing essential to

welfare provision requires these particular lessons. Very different scripts are written for participants in SSDI. In that program, clients are allowed greater privacy and initiative, and it appears that officials have both authority over clients and obligations to respond to their requests. Experiences in both AFDC and SSDI shape clients' views of government. The process of political learning is constant across the programs, but the lessons taught differ sharply.

Head Start provides a third model of how public policy may affect democracy. In that program, poor parents are brought together with one another to deliberate and make policy. Policy councils formalize the expectation that participants will speak out. They demonstrate that the agency serves the clients, not the other way around. Each month, the parents on the councils see their decisions recorded and (at least some of the time) implemented. The evidence suggests that these experiences matter for democracy. Despite sharing similar backgrounds and program experiences with other AFDC clients, and despite

their lower level of education, women in Head Start interviewed here had dramatically different views of government and whether it is worthwhile to become politically involved.

In *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Esping-Andersen (1990, 23) writes: "The welfare state is not just a mechanism that intervenes in, and possibly corrects, the structure of inequality; it is, in its own right, a system of stratification. It is an active force in the ordering of social relations." This comment and the title of the book refer to variation in welfare provision across different political economies. Yet, they also can be appropriated as a fitting end to this analysis of welfare programs as sites of political learning. Through their different designs, AFDC, SSDI, and Head Start construct "three worlds" of welfare participation. Welfare programs not only respond to needs created by a stratified society but also are an active force in the ordering of political relations. The same political process that assembles welfare programs is, in turn, reshaped by its own products.

**APPENDIX A: THE INTERVIEW SAMPLE**

AFDC				SSDI			
Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education
Lynn	29	White	College diploma	Marie	29	White	Some college
Debber	31	Latina	High school diploma	Phil	38	White	Some college
Elizabeth	35	African Am.	Some college	Bridget	61	White	College diploma
Nona Mae	26	African Am.	Some college	Kitty	51	White	College diploma
Josephine	21	African Am.	Some high school	Dizzy	44	White	High school diploma
Mary	34	White	No high school	Molly	38	White	High school diploma
Nancy	37	Native Am.	Some college	Sarah	39	White	College diploma
Tina	20	White	Some high school	Lee-Ann	34	White	High school diploma
Kisha	22	African Am.	Some high school	Starr	30	White	Some college
Karla	37	African Am.	Some high school	Katrina	45	White	College diploma
Renee	20	African Am.	High school diploma	Emerald	47	White	College diploma
Lisa	22	African Am.	Some high school	Donna	51	White	College diploma
Sandra	31	Latina	Some high school	J.	33	White	College diploma
Celina	19	*	High school diploma	Holly	37	White	High school diploma
Cheryl	30	White	Some high school	Patty	53	White	College diploma
Anna	26	Latina	Some high school	Mark	36	Native Am.	Some high school
Sarah	27	African Am.	High school diploma	Darryl	44	African Am.	Some college
Julie	30	White	High school diploma	Frank	43	White	High school diploma
Alicia	18	African Am.	Some high school	Francis	35	White	College diploma
Alissa	21	African Am.	High school diploma	Michael	43	African Am.	High school diploma
Shelly	48	White	Some college	Joe	65	White	Some high school
Penny	23	African Am.	High school diploma	Mike	50	White	High school diploma
Vanessa	20	African Am.	High school diploma	Joy	53	African Am.	High school diploma
Lashell	20	African Am.	Some high school	Betty	55	White	College diploma
Hope	27	White	Some high school	Merton	53	White	College diploma

\* All informants gave their own preferred label for race or ethnicity. These are summary categories. Celina preferred to have no listing or to be listed as "other." In her words: "My mother is half Jewish Russian and half Puerto Rican. My father is half African American and half Cherokee Indian. You can say that if you want."

## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH METHODS

This appendix provides details regarding research design, data collection, and data analysis, with a focus on the in-depth interviews that were the primary source of qualitative evidence. The research design can be classified as a multiple case study (Yin 1989, chap. 2). The two cases, AFDC and SSDI, were selected based on three key independent variables (King et al. 1994). First, they provide enough variation in policy design to produce different program experiences. Second, because AFDC and SSDI are cash transfer programs, the provision of material benefits can be held constant and, hence, ruled out as an explanation for differences in efficacy and participation across the two halves of the sample. Third, the demographic characteristics of the two program populations vary but overlap enough to allow for comparisons of similar subgroups, which comparisons are needed to distinguish program effects from preexisting differences.

The program samples differ considerably along lines of sex, race, education, and age (see Appendix A). Nevertheless, the sample includes eight people in each program (32%) who have a high school diploma but no college experience. Similarly, the eight AFDC clients (32%) who were between age 30 and 39 can be compared with the nine SSDI clients in this same age group (36%). The seven white AFDC clients (28%) allow for comparisons with the larger group of white SSDI clients (84%). Finally, gender differences are controlled by comparing the fifteen women in SSDI (60%) to the twenty-five women in AFDC (100%). All program differences reported here withstood these subgroup comparisons.

In-depth interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection for several reasons. First, because this method maximizes the depth of one-on-one interaction, I hoped that it would produce familiarity and trust, which in turn would enhance the validity of the findings (Berg 1998, chap. 4; Kirk and Miller 1986). Second, this relatively open-ended approach allows clients to emphasize the aspects of the agency and of government that they perceive to be most important and to describe them in their own words (Spradley 1979). In addition to ensuring that informants were not limited by my preconceptions about what issues would be important, this approach also offers greater opportunity to explore the ambivalence that often accompanies beliefs and opinions. Finally, the flexibility of in-depth interviews provides opportunities to probe initial answers, rephrase complicated questions, and explore underlying assumptions and reasoning processes.

The clients interviewed were identified through purposive rather than probability sampling. I began by selecting a small group who seemed likely to be especially informative and easy to interview ("judgmental sampling," Fetterman 1979, 43). I then pursued a stop-and-start "snowball" strategy aimed at locating a diverse sample. When recipients with links to local organizations proved especially easy to find, I stopped conducting interviews until I could meet more participants who did not have organizational ties. I did the same at other times, when movement through existing social networks threatened to make my "snowball sample" too homogeneous (e.g., with regard to race, age, or type of disability). The final sample offers a diverse group that does not appear to distort seriously the demographic makeup of the broader program populations (U.S. House of Representatives 1998).

The vast majority of the interviews were conducted in clients' homes. It was common for the visit to include casual

conversation both before and after the interview, sometimes lasting most of the day, but the semi-structured interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two and one-half hours. Forty-nine of the interviews were taped using a microcassette recorder; one client preferred to have notes taken by hand. All informants were promised confidentiality in published materials; they were asked to choose their own pseudonym; they were informed that this project had no connection to any government agency; and they were assured that they would not be adversely affected if they declined the interview.

Each interview was transcribed, in its entirety and verbatim, and then printed out for later use in checking the context of individual quotations. I began by analyzing the fifty separate transcripts as coherent wholes. I then extracted quotations from the larger transcripts (up to twenty lines) and printed them on 5" × 8" cards. Although a spreadsheet was used on a few occasions, the vast majority of the data analysis was done by hand-sorting these cards into piles and keeping written lists of the results.

Three major strategies were used to analyze the transcripts. The first, which can be seen in the analysis of recipients' views of government, emphasizes induction with the goal of creating a general typology. Building up from an "open" coding approach, I labeled the cards with descriptive themes (Strauss 1987, 59–68) and then grouped seemingly related cards into "clusters" (Miles and Huberman 1984, 218–21). The final stage of data reduction involved what Miles and Huberman (1984, 223–25) call "factoring" because it resembles the statistical technique of factor analysis. I combined these clusters into the smallest number of underlying dimensions that could remain internally coherent and distinctive from one another. As in the statistical technique, the labels for these "factors" were derived and applied after the analysis. In the text, I provide prototypical statements for each of the four views of government so that they can be used (and so that their reliability can be tested) in future research.

The second strategy, often termed "pattern matching" (Yin 1989, 109–13), places greater emphasis on hypothesis testing. Using theory-based expectations as a template, I sorted the evidence to see if it matched the patterns I expected to find. For example, I sorted responses to my questions regarding external efficacy and then compared the resulting patterns to my expectation that there would be differences across programs. I then checked to see whether additional, unexpected patterns could be found and whether the hypothesized differences across programs disappeared after isolating subgroups of clients with similar demographics.

The third analytic strategy involved "explanation building" (Yin 1989, 113–5), that is, stipulating and investigating a set of causal links between policy design and political action. Based on a pattern-matching analysis for each "link," I tried to establish a logical chain of evidence that moved from (1) program designs, to (2) welfare participation experiences, to (3) beliefs about the nature of welfare relationships, to (4) clients' willingness to voice grievances in welfare programs. Finally, moving through (5) clients' tendencies to identify welfare agencies with government as a whole, the chain ends with (6) differences in levels of political efficacy and (7) differences in rates of political action. The empirical findings regarding internal efficacy were an unexpected pattern, an example of political learning that was not originally stipulated as part of the "chain of evidence."



## APPENDIX C: VARIABLE CONSTRUCTION AND DESCRIPTION

The information in brackets refers to variable numbers in Miller et al. (1993).

**Electoral Participation** (0, 1) indicates a “yes” (1) or “no” (0) response: “In talking to people about the elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren’t registered, they were sick, or they just didn’t have time. How about you—did you vote in the election this November?” [v5601].

**Internal Political Efficacy** (1 to 20) is a scale constructed from the following items: “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country” [v6105], “I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics” [v6106], “I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people” [v6107], and “I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people” [v6108]. Higher values indicate higher internal efficacy.

**External Political Efficacy** (1 to 10) is a scale constructed from the following items: “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” [v6102], and “I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think” [v6103]. The scale is reversed, so that higher values indicate higher external efficacy.

**Woman** (0, 1) indicates whether the respondent is male (0) or female (1) [v4201].

**Black** (0, 1) indicates whether the respondent self-identifies as African American (1) or does not (0) [v4202].

**Strength of Partisanship** (1 to 4) indicates self-placement on a dimension marked at the low end (1) by “Independent” and at the high end (4) by either “Strong Republican” or “Strong Democrat” [v3634].

**South** (0, 1) indicates whether the respondent is from one of the ten solid South states (1) or from elsewhere in the United States (0) [v3017].

**Income** (1 to 24) indicates the respondent’s family income before taxes in 1991. It ranges from a low of “none or less than \$2,999” (1) to a high of “\$105,000 and over” (24) [v4104].

**Education** (1 to 7) indicates the highest level of formal education reported by the respondent. It ranges from “8th grades or less” (1) to “Advanced Degree” (7) [v3908].

**Age** (17 to 91) indicates the age of the respondent [v3903].

**AFDC** (0, 1) indicates that the respondent received benefits from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (1) or did not (0). The data set includes 94 AFDC recipients [v3445].

**SSDI** (0, 1) indicates that the respondent received benefits from Social Security Disability Insurance (1) or did not (0). The data set includes 129 SSDI recipients [v3448].

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