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Do highly exclusive social welfare programs increase political inequality? A comparative analysis of the 50 US states

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Do Highly Exclusive Social Welfare Programs Increase Political Inequality? A Comparative Analysis of the 50 US States

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Abstract

In this paper, I empirically test the notion that the degree of inclusion/exclusion of social welfare policies can have important feedback effects on political participation of poor citizens. I conduct a comparative analysis of the 50 US states, using the uptake (or coverage rate) of the Food Stamp program as an indicator of relative inclusiveness. If the inclusiveness of the program "sends a message" to potential recipients about their worth in the community, these messages may encourage or discourage participation. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey, 1988-2000, I show that the turnout of young citizens raised in poor families is dramatically influenced by the inclusiveness of the state's Food Stamp program. High inclusive states displayed much lower rates of political inequality. The mechanisms underlying this effect remain to be specified. However, in the context of previous individual-level studies, the results bolster the idea of policy feedback generally, and its impact on political inequality in particular.

Contents

Introduction 7

Political Feedback 8

Measuring Policy Inclusiveness 10

Micro-Data Employed in the Analysis 13

Dependent Variable 14

Individual Level Variables 14

State Level Control Variables 16

Estimation and Results 16

Discussion 19

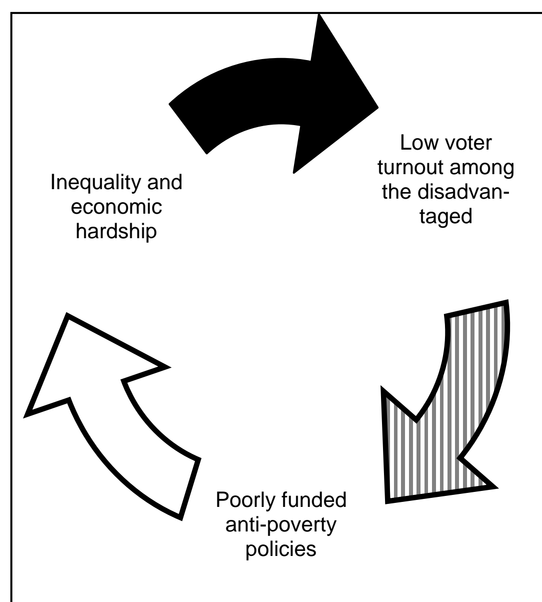
References 21

Introduction

Inequality tends to reproduce itself, year after year and generation after generation. Of the many factors that contribute to this, the political system has received considerable attention because unlike "cultures" of poverty, for example, the political system is viewed as a way to break cycles of poverty. Indeed, the low levels of inequality and absolute deprivation in the European welfare states, in comparison to the US and the UK for example, show the possibility that policy can mitigate – if not break – cycles of poverty. Nevertheless, even in the most egalitarian societies, inequality not only remains but is transmitted over time to similar groups of people – whether that similarity is defined by class, nationality, or region.

In a recent paper, Pacheco and Plutzer (2008) described a political and social cycle that could contribute to cumulative advantage and disadvantage. The cycle is illustrated in Figure 1. According to this view, participation influences policies, policies influence economic status, and economic status influences participation. In this paper, we suggest that this perspective ignores an additional mechanism for the reproduction of inequality – policy feedback that directly influences the political participation of the poor in addition to any indirect effects it may have via socioeconomic status. Using the same individual-level data set as Pacheco and Plutzer, we show that feedback is a potentially major factor influencing the electoral participation of less well off Americans.

Figure 1. The Civic/Political Cycle of Poverty



Source: Pacheco and Plutzer (2008), copied by permission.

Political Feedback

The idea of political feedback on individual political participation grows out of a number of different research traditions, but is perhaps most succinctly stated by Alber and Kohler (2010). They argue that welfare policies themselves can contribute to lower participation by the poor and, further, that the lesser degree of political inequality in Europe can be partly explained "as a result of the higher degree of political integration of the masses which is linked to a more inclusive character of the European state"(p. 63).

A key premise to the idea that a public policy can have an "inclusive character" is that public policies, and the processes that produce them, can convey a *message* of inclusiveness or exclusiveness. This is central to scholarship that emphasizes the concept of "policy feedback." Mettler and Soss (2004) trace the idea of feedback back to Schattschneider's (1935) quite general observation that "new policies create new politics." From this seminal idea, several different research traditions have developed. For example Lowi (1964, 1972) and James Q. Wilson (1973) have suggested that new policies can scramble the landscape of interest groups and differentially influence the participation of members of those groups.

Taking a different tack Murray Edelman (1967) argued that polices carried symbolic import for ordinary citizens (see also Piven and Cloward 1971, 1977). Others have examined how the broad contours of policies influence the inclusiveness of citizenship and the degree to which a polity shares certain fundamental commitments (e.g., Marshall 1965, Skocpol 1992). In summarizing the general conclusions from these studies, Mettler and Stonecash (2008, 275) conclude that programs based on "universal principles help to incorporate beneficiaries as full members of society, bestowing dignity and respect on them. Conversely, they suggest that means-tested programs convey stigma and thus reinforce or expand beneficiaries' isolation."

The impact of policy feedback on citizenship, participation and political inclusiveness has been examined empirically in several recent works in the US context. These have examined the individual-level impacts of participation in specific government programs. Mettler (2002) has examined the impact of the GI bill. Soss (1999) examined the impacts of different kinds of anti-poverty programs in the United States. He shows, for example, that recipients of Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) were two and half times more likely to view the government as both open and responsive to ordinary citizens (1999, 369) and seven times more likely to believe that "government listens to people like me" than welfare (AFDC) recipients. These feelings corresponded with significantly lower rates of voter turnout (Soss 1999, Table 1). Andrea Campbell (2003) has compared US citizens receiving the largely universal Social Security with those receiving means-tested welfare programs. Mettler and Stonecash estimated the effects of cumulative life experiences with both means-tested and universal transfer programs and found that the latter increased turnout among a representative sample of US citizens, while participation in means-tested programs was associated with lower turnout.

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, 208-211) find a similar effect on an index composed of several different forms of political participation.

One limitation of such studies is that even with statistical controls, selection effects and unobserved heterogeneity cannot be ruled out as alternative explanations. For example, in any cross-sectional analysis recipients of Social Security are not simply older than those receiving welfare. They may differ in countless ways related to employment history, generational differences (i.e., cohort effects), aging effects, general health (because of differential life expectancy, former welfare recipients may be underrepresented among Social Security participants), and so on. These differences may be only partially captured by an array of control variables. Indeed, regression analyses examining these kinds of comparisons can imply logically untenable premises. For example, controlling for age requires us to say something like "if Social Security recipients did not differ from non-participants in terms of age, they would still have higher turnout." In this sense, statistical control is always suspect when key groups do not overlap substantially on the control variables. This does not mean that the interpretations from these studies are wrong, of course. But it does mean that we can have more confidence in them if we obtain confirming evidence from research that employs a different type of research design. We do precisely this in the present paper.

Indeed, what Alber and Kohler are suggesting is not that individual experiences with the particular policy have individual outcomes (although this is certainly possible). Rather, they are arguing that the way governments craft and implement the same policies, can send different messages regarding inclusiveness and that these implicit messages can be reflected in class differences in participation. These messages may even influence those with no direct experience with the particular social programs. That is the idea we shall explore in this paper.

The extant literature contains several lines of research that can serve as a theoretical foundation for such a claim. Building on both the "social construction of social problems" literature and Murray Edelman's concept of "symbolic politics," Ingram and Schneider (1993) have argued that policies "carry messages" about the value of the individuals who are targets of policy (see also Schneider and Ingram 1993, 2007). Farmers receiving subsidies understand that they are irreplaceable contributors to national economic security and independence, for example. The fact that they require government assistance carries no stigma and, quite the contrary, may engender feelings of solidarity, efficacy and integration. In contrast, Ingram and Schneider argue that recipients of anti-poverty assistance in the United States receive quite different messages – messages that diminish their self worth and alienate these individuals from the American mainstream.

The claim of Alber and Kohler implies that the degree to which policies send inclusive or alienating messages varies across nations. In federal systems, policy inclusiveness may vary within nations as well. I take advantage of that variation among the US states to put the Alber-Kohler argument to empirical test (for a similar formulation, see

Lister, 2007; to see that Lister, however, overestimates crossnational effects, see Arzheimer 2008).[1]

Specifically, I examine how the electoral participation of young adults differs across the fifty states based on the inclusiveness of the United States Food Stamp program. I focus on the implementation of the Food Stamp program for several reasons. The first is that the core elements of the policy – the eligibility criteria and the amount of benefits – are common across states. The US federal government picks up the entire cost of the benefits and reimburses states for 50% of their administrative costs. The rate of "uptake" – the percentage of eligible citizens who actually are enrolled in the program – is therefore entirely a function of state implementation and state culture. This can have two components, which we are unable to disentangle: the broader political culture that may lead an eligible citizen to choose to apply or not apply for benefits, and the degree of inclusiveness that may make citizens feel welcome to apply and receive the benefit or might discourage or stigmatize benefits. The inability to disentangle is not crucial for this initial study, as both sources are expected to have consistent effects of making people feel integrated into the society.

If the diffusion hypothesis is correct, the political participation rate of poor citizens will be higher in states with the most inclusive implementation of the Food Stamp program. Further, this will be the case even for citizens without the direct experience of having to apply for assistance at a government office. For that reason, I examine a sample of young adults comparing those raised in poor families as adolescents with those who were in non-poor families. I examine the effect of government policies that were in effect when they were 14 or 15 years old on their electoral participation many years later. If poor living in more inclusive states have higher rates of political participation many years later, that would provide strong evidence for the diffusion argument.

Measuring Policy Inclusiveness

To measure Food Stamp uptake, I use data from the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research. I calculate a simple ratio of the number of Food Stamp recipients in 1988 (average monthly participation rate) to the number of individuals under the poverty line in that same year. Since Food Stamp eligibility is pegged to 130% of the pov-

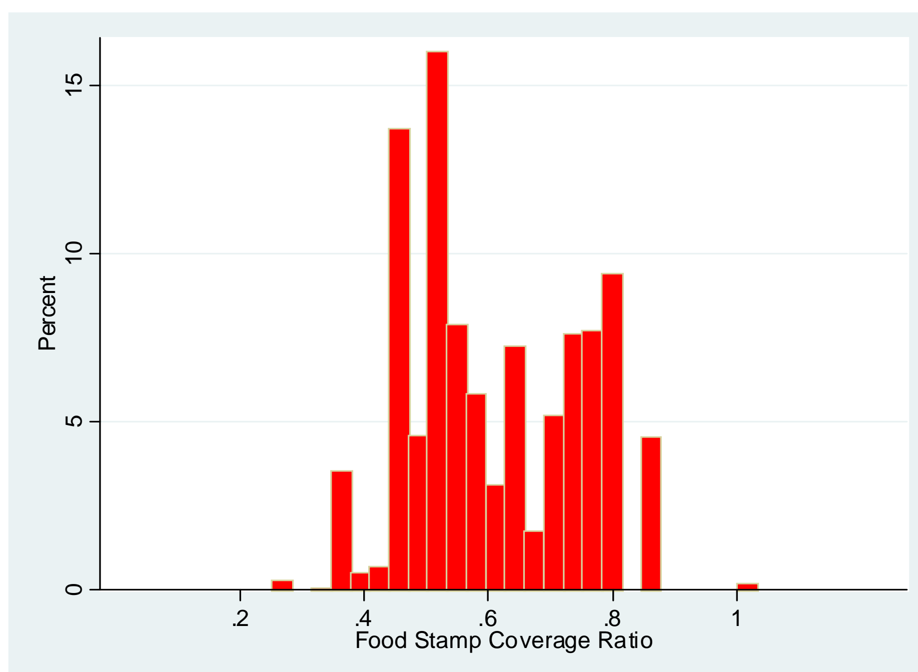
[1] The Alber-Kohler argument raises the question of whether social welfare policies in a highly exclusive state – the US – can be said to display degrees of inclusiveness at all. In most of Western Europe, the very notion of citizenship carries with a right to have sufficient economic security so as to allow full participation in society. This creates the possibility of making a knife-edge distinction between "inclusive" nation states and all others and thus making it nonsensical to refer to "inclusive" programs in non-inclusive states. In this paper, we take a different tack, following the use of the term "inclusive" in scholarship in the North American tradition. In this sense, any particular social program can be located on a continuum running from the most inclusive to the least inclusive.

erty line, it is possible for the ratio to exceed 1.0. Low ratios could result from eligible citizens self-selecting out because of stigma and an ideology of individualism, and can also be due to barriers to participation erected by the state (e.g., the kinds of documents required to verify income, family composition and material assets; convenience of office locations and office hours, etc.). Disentangling these two factors is beyond the scope of this study but can be conflated into a broader concept of policy inclusiveness that includes the broader culture.

The use of food stamps has an additional advantage. At the individual level, Food Stamp participation has the single greatest *negative* effect on voter turnout of any means-tested program (Mettler and Stonecash 2008, Table 5). Similarly, Food Stamp participation has been shown to have negative mental health impacts at the individual level as well (Heflin and Ziliak 2008). Thus, the expansion of Food Stamp benefits should lower the expected participation of program participants and work against the Alber-Kohler hypothesis at the individual level. Thus any positive impact at the aggregate level is likely to be due to cultural/contextual effects rather than compositional effects.

In fact, we see wide variation in Food Stamp coverage across the fifty states. The median uptake rate is 56%, with ten states falling below 50% and ten states with coverage of 75% or more (Delaware having the highest ratio of 1.03). The distribution is illustrated in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2. Distribution (Population Weighted) of Food Stamp Coverage in the Fifty US States



Validity Check

I have argued that the Food Stamp coverage ratio is an indicator of inclusiveness. Moreover, I have suggested that the coverage ratio “sends a message” of inclusion to program participants, potential participants and those who identify with recipients. This message reflects the worth of recipients in the eyes of the larger culture. If this is so, quite a few consequences ought to follow. One important consequence is that policy participants should feel less stigma in states with high coverage ratios.

Thus, I undertook an exercise in construct validity by examining the mental health consequences of Food Stamp receipt across different levels of coverage. If coverage ratios convey messages of inclusion or stigma, Food Stamp recipients should experience less mental distress in states with high uptake. I utilize the replication data set from a recent analysis of Food Stamp participation and food insecurity on mental health (Heflin and Ziliak 2008; I thank the authors for making these data available to me). The data are a subset of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and, in particular are from the 2003 cross section. The dependent variable is Kessler’s *30 Day Emotional Distress Scale*. In this scale six symptoms could receive scores of zero to four, based on the frequency/severity of the symptom – yielding a scale that can range from zero to 24. Because the raw score is somewhat skewed, I examine the natural log of the scale (after adding 1, to eliminate a log of zero).

The key independent variables are receipt of food stamps (about 8% of the sample), the state coverage ratio, and their interaction. Controls for age, number of children in the household, age of youngest child, marital status and education are included.

My analysis, reported in Table 1, shows that in all states, those receiving food stamps have significantly higher emotional distress than others, scoring about 2 points higher on the emotional distress scale (about half a SD higher). When we consider the interaction with a state’s Food Stamp coverage, we see that the number of reported symptoms declines significantly and dramatically as coverage ratio increases. The effect of Food Stamp receipt on emotional distress in the tenth worst state is six times greater than the effect in the state with the tenth highest rate of uptake. This analysis, limited as it is, provides some additional confidence in my interpretation of the mechanism by which the coverage ratio may influence participation.

Table 1. Regression of Emotional Distress (Logged) on Food Stamp Participation and State Coverage Rate, 2003 (N=4,847)

ln_emote	Estimate	Robust SE	t	p
Received food stamps	**0.60**	**0.14**	**4.24**	**0.00**
State food coverage	0.00	0.10	0.00	1.00
Received x coverage	**-0.41**	**0.21**	**-1.92**	**0.06**
Number of children	-0.03	0.01	-2.84	0.01
Age of youngest child	0.00	0.00	-0.02	0.98
Respondent age	-0.01	0.00	-5.18	0.00
Married	-0.17	0.04	-3.99	0.00
Never married	0.01	0.05	0.13	0.90
Less than high school	0.09	0.05	2.03	0.05
High school graduate	0.01	0.03	0.22	0.82
Intercept	1.48	0.09	16.42	0.00
R^2	0.04			

Sources: Micro-data are from the Heflin-Ziliak replication data, originally from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Food Stamp coverage rate is from the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research.

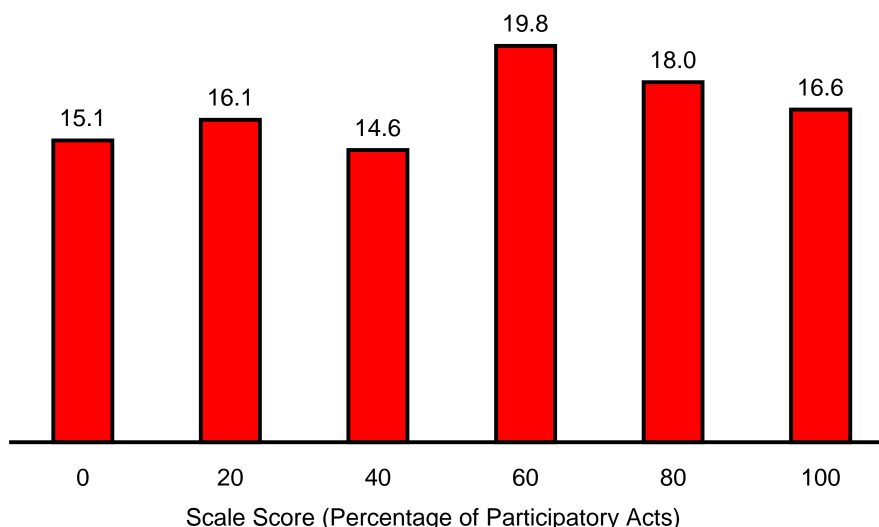
Micro-Data Employed in the Analysis

To examine political participation among poor and non-poor citizens, I use the National Education Longitudinal Survey, 1988-2000 (NELS). The NELS is produced and distributed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The spring 1988 NELS baseline survey is a nationally representative sample of eighth-graders attending 1,052 schools, both public and private, across the fifty states and the District of Columbia. The completion rate for the initial wave was 93%, yielding a sample of 25,988 (Curtin et al. 2002, 49 and 195). A random subset of roughly 80% of the respondents was selected for follow-up interviews in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000 and 50% of those students (N=10,827) selected for follow-up actually completed the entire panel (Curtin et al. 2002, 96 and 205). Students were asked about numerous topics including family situation, family relations, and political participation. In addition to surveying the students, NCES also surveyed one of the child's parents in 1988 (87% response rate) and again in 1992 (with a 92% retention rate). Like the students, parents were asked about family situation, family relations, school characteristics, and socio-economic status.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is based on questions during the third and fourth follow-ups in the spring of 1994 and 2000. Respondents were asked about their voter participation in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections, 1993 local/state elections, any elections during 1998/1999, and their voter registration in 2000. Each respondent could report participation in up to four elections plus being registered in the spring of 2000, yielding a zero to five index. We multiplied the index by 20 in order to get a dependent variable that ranges from zero to 100 and reflects the percentage of the five acts with an affirmative report. Figure 3 describes the distribution of the outcome variable.

Figure 3. Distribution of Cumulative Scale of Electoral Participation



Individual Level Variables

To classify the economic status of each respondent's family, we use the parent's report of total family income in 1987, when the respondents were in 7th grade (roughly 13-14 years old). This is dichotomized at the level of $15,000, approximately 150% of the poverty line in 1987. By this measure, 19% of the adolescents were in poor families at the time of their initial interview (results were essentially the same when we used a threshold of $10,000).

To account for potential compositional differences across states and properly specify models, I include a number of additional variables at the individual level. Parental education is the educational attainment of the parent (usually the mother) completing the parent questionnaire. This is a six-category ordinal variable. Race is measured by a dummy variable denoting non-Hispanic blacks and one denoting Hispanics (of any race), and we include an indicator of respondent sex. We also include measures of two adverse life events that Pacheco and Plutzer (2007, 2008) have shown to be related to both economic hardship and turnout: dropping out of high school and teen pregnancy. Our dropout measure is a dummy variable indicating dropouts who left before what would be their senior year (1992) and who do not report earning a degree at some later point (about 7% of the sample). Teens who indicated that they were a parent, pregnant, or expecting to become a parent during the spring of their senior year (or what would have been their senior year had they matriculated without interruption) are classified as early parents.

We also measure residential stability because frequent mobility has been shown to lower both adult (parental) turnout (see Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987) and the turnout of young voters (Sandell and Plutzer 2005). Our measure is a count of the number of residential moves reported between 1988 and 1992. If residential mobility was missing, we substituted race specific means (.48 for whites, .53 for African-Americans, and .62 for Hispanics).

Crime Victimization and Arrests. Whether respondents were arrested during adolescence is based on self reports during the 1990 (tenth grade) and 1992 (twelfth grade) surveys. We create a dummy variable where one indicates that a respondent reported being arrested in either survey. Over 600 of the adolescents reported being arrested prior to their scheduled high school graduation, representing 6.3% of the sample. Victimization is also measured by self reports, but the question refers to the adolescent or a family member. Overall, 11.6% reported that they or a family member had been victim of a crime in the two years prior to the 1992 (12th grade) interview.

Higher Education. Students who completed four years of higher education in four years plus a summer would have attained their degree a few months before the 1996 presidential election. We can calculate whether or not each respondent earned a college degree but, instead, we use an alternative measure developed by Sandell and Plutzer (2005; see also Pacheco and Plutzer 2007). This measure uses a detailed set of monthly status questions from the 1994 interview to measure educational attendance during the 1993-1994 academic year – what would be the sophomore year of college if a student enrolled in college directly after high school. A student who reported full-time attendance at a four-year college or university during all six months received a score of 100%. A student, who reported half time attendance during all six months or full time attendance for three months, would receive a score of 50%. Students attending less than half time

are scored as 25% for that particular month. Thus the scale ranges from 0% to 100%. The scale has a high correlation with parents' education (r = .42). We created a similar score for attendance at two-year colleges. This is negatively correlated with parent's education indicating that if a parent completed college, children tend to score zero on this measure. On the other hand, the attendance at a two-year college is positively correlated with parental education among Hispanics. We believe these measures are better than traditional indicators of degrees earned because they capture educational experiences *before* three of the five components of our turnout scale and are roughly coterminous with a fourth component.

State Level Control Variables

Because Food Stamp policy may reflect broader political characteristics, it is important to account for other state-level variables that have been shown to be linked to voter turnout. We therefore include the percentage of the state population that is black in 1988 (source is State Politics & Policy Quarterly (SPPQ) data archive), a measure of state partisan competition (the Holbrook/Van Dunk index), the percentage of votes received by the Democratic presidential candidate in 1988 (see Pacheco 2008), and two measures reflecting the ease of voting. The first is an ease of voting index calculated by Hill and Leighley (1992), which ranges from 0 to 200 with higher scores representing greater restrictions. The second is an index of the degree to which the state limits the voting rights of individuals convicted of crimes – the scale is based on data originally collected by Manza and Uggen (e.g., 2004) and has been combined into a composite that is standardized (high scores represent states with the fewest restrictions).

Estimation and Results

With cumulative electoral participation (roughly over the period age 18-26) as the dependent variable, we estimate regression models that account for clustering by US state. The estimates I report are estimated by least squares and are accompanied by Huber-White robust standard errors. Nearly identical results are achieved using mixed effects, random intercept regression estimated by maximum likelihood. However, because the conditional intraclass correlation was quite small, the intercept variance could not always be calculated. As a robustness check, models were also estimated using the middle school as a clustering variable and, again, the results were essentially identical to those reported here.

I estimate models for poor and non-poor separately. In comparison to the estimation of a model with a poor × inclusiveness interaction, this is a more conservative test of the hypothesis as it allows all other coefficients to fit the data in the subsample, rather than assuming a common slope for rich and poor (however, an interaction model produces virtually identical results).

The results of the estimation are reported in Table 2, below. Among the young adults raised in poor families, the impact of policy inclusiveness is extremely large. Indeed, the impact of Food Stamp coverage is five times as large among the poor and this variable has a larger effect than every other state-level variable in the model (based on the t-ratio and standardized coefficients, not reported here).

Table 2. The Effect of Food Stamp Coverage on Cumulative Electoral Participation

	Poor (N=1431)				***Non-poor (N=6890)***			
	Estimate	SE	t	p	Estimate	SE	t	p
State: Food Stamp coverage	24.78	9.54	2.60	0.01	5.06	3.94	1.28	0.21
Parent education	1.75	1.25	1.40	0.17	1.94	0.55	3.55	0.00
Black	5.95	2.38	2.50	0.02	3.09	1.43	2.16	0.04
Hispanic	0.28	2.51	0.11	0.91	-1.06	1.76	-0.60	0.55
Dropped out of HS	-13.03	2.19	-5.95	0.00	-11.38	1.90	-6.00	0.00
2 yr college enrollment	0.12	0.04	3.18	0.00	0.13	0.02	7.93	0.00
4 yr college enrollment	0.13	0.02	5.56	0.00	0.11	0.01	7.78	0.00
Female	1.52	1.49	1.02	0.31	1.02	0.92	1.11	0.27
Teen parent	0.38	2.40	0.16	0.88	-3.46	2.25	-1.54	0.13
Number of residential moves	-2.34	0.79	-2.95	0.01	-2.72	0.53	-5.15	0.00
Ever arrested	-1.70	4.71	-0,36	0.72	-5.40	2.62	-2.06	0.05
Crime victim	0.58	2.30	0.25	0.80	0.34	1.23	0.28	0.78
State: Black pct	-0.21	0.16	-1.36	0.18	0.01	0.07	0.15	0.89
State: Party competition	-0.03	0.12	-0.22	0.82	0.07	0.07	1.07	0.29
State: Dem vote in 88	-0.34	0.21	-1.60	0.12	-0.14	0.11	-1.18	0.24
State: Ease of voting	-0.05	0.02	-2.17	0.04	-0.07	0.01	-6.34	0.00
State: Felon disenfranchisement	-3.32	1.42	2.34	0.02	-1.10	0.92	1.20	0.24
Intercept	49.12	11.59	4.24	0.00	52.82	5.24	10.08	0.00
R^2	0.11				0.08			

Note: Variables denoted as “State” are contextual measures.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the magnitude of these effects is to calculate the estimate electoral participation rates of poor and non-poor youth in different states. Table 3 does this, reporting turnout rates for poor youth who have mean values on all other variables assuming they were living in the state with the 10th highest Food Stamp coverage rate (75%) compared to living in the state with the 10th lowest coverage rate (49%).[2]

Table 3. Predicted Rate of Electoral Participation, by Childhood, Economic Status and State Food Stamp Takeup

	Economic Status in 7th grade		
	Family income under $15,000	Family income over $15,00	***Political Inequality (rich/poor gap)***
Raised in state with the 10th highest rate of Food Stamp coverage	47,7	56,0	*8,4*
Raised in state with the 10th lowest rate of Food Stamp coverage	41,1	54,7	*13,6*
Effect of moving from the 10th worst to 10th best state	6,5	1,3	

The estimated outcomes show the dramatic impact of state Food Stamp coverage on both the absolute turnout level of the poor and the resulting decrease in political inequality. For adolescents raised in poor families, their prospects of fully participating in the political process as young adults are substantially enhanced if they live in a state with high Food Stamp uptake increasing their turnout by 6½ percentage points. Likewise, the rich-poor gap in turnout is nearly halved in the most inclusive states in comparison to the least inclusive ones.

[2] These estimates are based on group-specific means. That is, the mean values for all variables for all poor youth are applied to their calculation and the mean values for non-poor are used for theirs. This means that comparisons across rows are not "net effects" but the observed differences between the "average" poor youth and the average non-poor youth.

Discussion

The analysis reported here provides additional empirical support to the general notion that social policy inclusiveness generates feedback into the political process, and specifically into the political participation of the less well off. Unlike previous studies in the US context that compared individuals who participated in different programs, this analysis compared similar individuals who were socialized under different policy regimes. Poor adolescents who grew up in states with more inclusive Food Stamp programs were far more likely to vote than otherwise similar poor youth in states with lower rates of political participation.

Of course, this analysis is limited in important ways and it raises a number of unanswered questions. At the front end of the process, this analysis does not identify the mechanisms that explain differential uptake across the states. The wide variation may be due to how the programs are administered and relevant factors may include the location and hours of social service offices, the training and attitudes of case-workers, and other factors under control of the state (e.g., Wiessert 1994). However, differences could be cultural – with uptake higher in states with greater social cohesiveness, a more collectivist ideology, and so on. Both elements – the formal policies and the political culture help to define the character of a welfare state and efforts to disentangle these in the US context may prove rewarding. But in this analysis we only can see the end results.

Further down the causal chain, we also do not know if the key mechanisms lie within the world views of the poor themselves or in their larger political environment. I have suggested that states with more inclusive Food Stamp programs engender less stigma and this would be reflected in greater social integration and less stress. Our out-of-sample analysis of how coverage rates influence mental health is consistent with this claim. However, we also know that political participation is highly contingent on mobilization by parties and other collective actors (Zipp and Smith 1979; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993) and by informal contacts (Smith and Zipp 1983). Thus, a culture of inclusiveness might very well produce both inclusive administration of anti-poverty programs and produce a culture that encourages and nurtures the full inclusion of the economically less well off into civic affairs.

It is possible that the key lies not in program administration but in program creation. The debates surrounding the creation and modification of social programs could play an important role in generating the "message" conveyed by that program. Food stamps have been less vigorously debated at the state level than AFDC and its successor program, TANF. Federal law required AFDC to be revised every three years creating an arena not only for defenders of the program but also critics, who could use the reauthorization process as a platform for painting the recipients as undeserving – thereby contributing to stigma. In contrast, Food Stamp politics was, and continues to be, less salient as a political issue. Yet in either case, the elite discourse accompanying legislative debate could play a role as well.

Finally, like the individual studies I described earlier, a wide array of control variables – in this case at the state level – may be inadequate to capture alternative mechanisms that might render my interpretations spurious. That said, I have included a wide range of state level variables that have figured in prior research on electoral participation and the effect of Food Stamp uptake was larger than all of them, its effects rivaling the impacts of every individual level variable other than education. Most important, this effort contributes to triangulation and is consistent with the conclusions from individual-level analyses conducted by Soss, Mettler, Stonecash and Campbell. The feedback explanation is thereby strengthened, even as this study raises questions about the precise state-level mechanisms that may account for the strong effects. Unraveling these effects, and seeing if similar patterns arise in cross-national research would be logical extensions of these findings.

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