



Design Welfare Programs with Young People's Civic Futures in Mind

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Millions of American children grow up in families that receive government assistance. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), 44% of households with at least one child were covered by Medicaid, nearly 20% received food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and 42% participated in the free or reduced-price school lunch program, as of 2022. For children raised in these households, government assistance programs are often their first real encounter with government. How they experience these programs matters for their families' well-being, but it also affects whether these children grow up to be engaged citizens.

[My research](#) finds that young Americans who grow up receiving means-tested welfare benefits are significantly less likely to vote in their first election, and this early disengagement tends to last. [Voting is a habit](#). People who sit out their first election are less likely to become consistent voters as they age. That means how young people experience government assistance today shapes not just whether they vote in the upcoming election, but whether they become lifelong participants in American democracy. While economic hardship plays a role, the evidence suggests that bad experiences with welfare programs also drive this voting gap. Improving program design can increase democratic buy-in and future voting.

When Government Leaves a Bad Impression

Adolescence is when most people form their basic views about politics and government. For young people whose families rely on public assistance, the welfare office rather than the classroom is often where people's initial political lessons are learned. [Qualitative evidence](#) from young adults who grew up on welfare suggests that many individuals remember poor interactions with caseworkers, believe programs were insufficient to their needs, and see government as an institution that took more than it gave. This research reveals that how individuals experience public policies while growing up shapes their political attitudes and civic engagement as adults.

Three pathways connect these early welfare experiences to lower civic participation in adulthood. First, participating in means-tested programs is a stigmatizing experience for adolescents. Young people report feeling embarrassed using food stamps at the grocery store, being called "welfare babies" by peers, and changing their behavior to avoid being seen as program recipients. Research finds that welfare stigma undermines people's [connection to the political system](#). Second, parents who rely on welfare are themselves less likely to vote and engage in civic activities. Young people in these households grow up without pro-civics role models to demonstrate what political engagement looks like. Finally, when government programs fail to deliver sufficient help to families, adolescents learn that government cannot be counted on. When benefits fall short of what families need, young people develop stronger skepticism toward the political system that

persists into adulthood.

These are not abstract mechanisms. My research finds that non-Hispanic white adolescents who grow up on welfare are 6 to 17 percentage points less likely to vote in their first election compared to otherwise similar peers. The more programs a household uses, the larger the gap in voting in the first election. Importantly, this gap in participation persists in subsequent elections. Young adults who grow up relying on multiple programs never fully recover from the negative impact of their adolescent program experiences, even as they age and reduce their own program use as adults. Thus, early civic disengagement becomes a political habit.

What Policymakers Can Do

Luckily, it is not inevitable that receiving welfare benefits will cause civic disengagement. The negative relationship between adolescent program participation and voting in adulthood is a product of how programs are designed and administered, which means they can be improved. State legislators and agency administrators can act to:

- **Reduce the stigma built into program delivery.** The most stigmatizing aspects of means-tested programs tend to be those that are visible, such as using a benefit card in a checkout line or being singled out for the free lunch line at school. Program changes like universal EBT-style cards that resemble ordinary debit cards and universal free school lunch for all students—not just those who qualify—can reduce this visibility. States should streamline recertification to minimize hassle, train caseworkers in dignity-centered approaches, and pilot anti-stigma messaging. Small changes to how we administer these programs can have large civic impacts.
- **Invest in program adequacy.** There is not a single state where cash welfare benefits are sufficient to **raise a family above the poverty line**. Young people who watch their families struggle even while receiving benefits come away believing the government cannot really be relied on to help. Benefit levels that fall short of household needs therefore fail on both economic and political terms. States should regularly evaluate whether benefit levels keep pace with the actual cost of living for families.
- **Connect program participation to civic life.** Agencies administering means-tested programs have regular contact with families who are underrepresented in the electorate. States can take advantage of this contact by more proactively offering voter registration opportunities at benefit offices, making voter registration in program offices opt-out rather than opt-in, and creating more family-centered touchpoints for civic learning opportunities. For example, pairing voter registration drives with benefit recertification appointments in SNAP or Medicaid offices would allow families to complete both in a single visit rather than treating civic participation as separate from program participation.

Governance choices have intergenerational implications. The children growing up in households that rely on public assistance today will be voters (or non-voters) for decades to come. Policy design choices made now will shape both their immediate well-being and the long-term health of American democracy.

Read more in Micatka's "Learning to Avoid: The Long-Term Effects of Adolescent Welfare Participation on Voting Habits in Adulthood" *Policy Studies Journal* 53, no. 4 (2025): 1065–1087.