Voter participation is among the most widely studied components of political behavior. Scholars have long considered the individual, social, and systemic factors that influence the decision to show up to the polls on election day. It is well-established and generally accepted that voters with higher education and income turnout more often than their lower-resourced counterparts (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Despite its ubiquity, however, few scholars have tried to reconcile the established reality that aid-receiving voters turnout in relatively low numbers with dominant theories of voter behavior.

Seymour Lipset (1960) argued that one's decision to vote depends upon the perceived “relevance of government policies to the individual.” Modern theories of voting behavior—prospective voting (Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1987), retrospective voting (Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986), sociotropic voting (Hansford and Gomez 2015), and others (Dowding 2005; Fedderson and Sandroni 2006)—still rely on Lipset’s (1960) summation of the boundedly rational political actor: voters turnout based on the perceived relevance of policies to their lives. Thus, what matters is not simply the objective relevance of government to the voter, but the extent to which government agents can effectively claim credit (or avoid blame) for governmental action that citizens perceive to affect them. ***Presumably, then, those who stand to benefit the most from generous government policies (and, conversely, be most harmed by social spending cuts) should be likely to vote, particularly if they participate in aid programs that assist in feeding their families, provide health insurance, and meet other immediate, tangible needs.***

Welfare recipients have an unusually visible stake in elections and policy outcomes. Given such strong personal incentives, one might expect welfare recipients to be more politically active than other citizens (Lipset 1960; Olson 1965); however, this does not appear to be the case in the United States. In fact, public assistance recipients are an especially quiescent voting bloc (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). 47% of eligible adults with family incomes of less than $20,000 a year voted in 2012 and just 25% voted in the 2010 midterm elections. Additionally, participants in means-tested federal aid programs—those for whom the actions of those in office are most relevant to their day to day lives—are less likely to vote than those who participate in universal, or non-means-tested, aid programs (Mettler and Stonecash 2008).

As political scientists, how can we reconcile our theoretical predictions with this counterintuitive behavior? I build on existing theories of attribution and voter behavior to model a novel theoretical explanation for the voting behavior of American welfare recipients. I empirically evaluate the implications of my model using data from the Maxwell Poll from 2004-2007. Using a novel measurement technique to classify aid-types, I find that entitlements are associated with an increase in self-reported turnout in elections while government subsidized loans are associated with a decrease in self-reported turnout. Importantly, the effect of means-tested aid on government turnout appears to be less straightforward than previous work suggests.

[EXPLANATION OF THE FLOW OF THE PAPER – WRITE LAST]

**The Political Quiescence of Aid Recipients**

There are two widely accepted reasons for the quiescence of aid-receiving voters in the United States. First, because aid recipients are often less well educated and less well off financially, the boost to their participation by their larger interest in government activity is insufficient to overcome their other resource deficits (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995, 411). However, the ability of voters, regardless of their income, to make these cost and benefit assessments relies on the assumption of perfect information. While it is unlikely that anyone has perfect information, cost-benefit assessments may differ dramatically with the quality of information.

Conover, Feldman, and Knight[[1]](#footnote-1) (1986) find that voters differ in the *quantity* and *quality* of information they have on the national economy and how they apply it. CFK find that the public is fairly accurate in its evaluations of issues such that affected their daily lives, like unemployment, but highly inaccurate when evaluating less tangible issues, like inflation. The authors argue that these data reflect a broader trend, in which the accuracy of retrospective assessments depends jointly on the availability of information about the issue, the saliency of the issue, and the sensitivity of the issue to specific knowledge. Similarly, Hansford and Gomez (2015) find that economic evaluations are colored by appraisals of the incumbent and thus do not operate as an exogenous influence on votes. Thus, the decision to vote and for whom to vote as the joint product of the information about the costs and benefits of voting and how that information is processed. Differences in “processing” most often manifest through partisanship, education, or political sophistication (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Arceneaux 2006; Chen 2013).

While conventional models of voter behavior and motivation speak to the processes which undergird all voter decisions, social welfare (1) can impose a unique set of costs on participants through means-testing, (2) can confer a uniquely salient set of benefits through cash transfers or subsidization, (3) and can mitigate the type and saliency of economic information recipients process. Standard models of voter information processing, therefore, may not accurately predict the voting behavior of social welfare-receiving voters, since this group has access to a unique set of information. My novel theory of aid-related voting behavior addresses these seemingly conflicted literatures, by incorporating the heterogeneous effects for partisanship into the model, as well as allowing the cost of voting to vary across voters. Furthermore, the very act of receiving federal aid my affect the type of information voters receive and how they process it.

The second dominant explanation for the quiescence of aid-receiving voters argues that the aid institutions in the United States diminish the perceived self-efficacy of aid-recipients, making them less likely to turnout to vote. Pateman (1970) and Piven and Cloward (1971) highlight the educative effects of institutions, which shape the behavior of aid participants. Soss (1999) applies these social control arguments to the social welfare context, conducting 50 in-depth interviews with individuals participating in either Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) between August 1994 and August 1995 in the Midwest. AFDC is a means-tested program; SSDI is not. In the interviews, AFDC participants report embarrassment about their program participation and a desire to hide the fact that they receive social welfare from others. SSDI participants did not report this kind of shame. Both groups, however, recognized that their benefits were contingent upon who holds office.

Soss (1999) and others (Madsen 1986; Mettler and Stonecash 2008) argue that means-testing teaches participants that government is not responsive to them and that participants develop low self-efficacy. Participants carry over this sense of low efficacy to other political processes, including as voting. Because those participating in universal aid programs do not participate in the means-testing feedback loop, it follows that ***we should not expect this type of aid to decrease the likelihood of voting.*** Indeed, Mettler and Stonecash (2008) argue that some universal aid programs can actually increase the probability of turning out to vote.

**A Formal Model of Aid and Attribution**

I use an attribution model to describe the relationship between government aid and voter behavior. Attribution models may offer unique insights into the voting behaviors of those participating in social welfare programs. Attribution models explicitly model, and generate predictions based on, the nature and direction of the attribution process. Rather than relying on the presence or absence of the means-testing institution as an indicator for diminished self-efficacy, an attribution model of voting behavior allows us to explicitly model when, how, and why we expect attribution to occur because “individuals tend to simplify political issues by reducing them to questions of responsibility and their issue opinions flow from their answers to these questions,” (Iyengar 1994). We can therefore increase the specificity of our hypotheses to better understand if, and how, self-efficacy affects voter behavior.

Some models (Fiorina 1981, 5; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981) suggest that voters choose presidential candidates based on their own financial circumstances, via “pocketbook voting.” In these attributive models, voters take stock of factors such as their personal employment, their health benefits, their income, and other changes to their personal financial situation. Based on these, voters either blame the incumbent for their bad circumstances or credit him with their good circumstances. Other models (Goren 1997; Gomez and Wilson 2001) suggest that voters are sociotropic, or base their economic attributions on national economic factors, such as the GDP, the stock market, inflation, and the unemployment rate. In these models, voters retrospectively blame the incumbent president for rising unemployment and inflation, a falling GDP, and rising taxes. However, economic voters may be heterogeneous in their response to information. Weatherford (1978) finds that pocketbook responses vary by social class. Some argue that sophisticated voters are more sociotropic, while less sophisticated voters follow the pocketbook response (Goren 1997). Gomez and Wilson (2001) find the opposite—more sophisticated voters recognize the complicated series of institutions and actors that influence the national economy, they argue, and these voters do not attribute national economic data to the incumbent. Godbout and Belanger (2007), replicating Gomez and Wilson’s (2001) analysis with survey data from the past five American presidential elections (1988-2004), argue that low political sophisticates depend exclusively on sociotropic judgements, while high political sophisticates rely on a combination of sociotropic and pocketbook judgements. These literatures clearly articulate when the attributive process occurs: just before an election.

In summation, we should expect turnout-affecting attribution to be more likely to occur in circumstances that conform to Bucher’s (1957) expectations for blame. Moreover, unless we have compelling theoretical priors, we should only expect aid to alter expected voter behavior directly leading up to an election (Baiker and Finkelstein 2020). Furthermore, we should expect the attributive process to occur before the election but after aid is delivered (or declined.)

Unlike government redistribution in the form of roads, fire and police protection, social welfare benefits are often targeted, direct money-transfers from a federal or state office to an individual or household in need. This has two implications for our application of attribution models. First, insofar as aid-receiving individuals are voting based on their experience with aid—a version of pocketbook voting—we should not expect information quality to affect their attributive processes as CFK (1986) predict. This is because these voters have immediate access to how aid affects their lives and this process is necessarily subjective. However, aid receiving voters have a unique wrinkle in their attributive process. Unlike other voters, who appear to attribute most economic and government actions to the President (Gomez and Wilson 2003), social welfare recipients often receive federally-funded aid from state-level bureaucrats. To which level of government do aid-recipients credit with aid benefits and blame for aid-related costs, if they attribute them to government at all?

In his seminal work on self-efficacy and voter behavior, Douglas Madsen (1987) finds (1) successful petitioners see a slight increase in their sense of self-efficacy as compared to unsuccessful petitioners, but do not consider the government to be particularly responsive and (2) unsuccessful petitioners do not see themselves as inefficacious, but rather severely doubt government responsiveness. This implies that the factors that sustain a sense of self-efficacy do not necessarily likewise sustain a sense of government responsiveness. Madsen’s work does not allow us to draw inferences on how aid-receiving voters divide blame and credit attribution in federalist systems, as his work draws on a survey of Indian men in 1967. Moreover, social identity theory suggests that if someone is “guilty,” (s)he must be among the out-group (Simon and Klandermans 2001; Bartels 2002). Indeed, Oz, Havens, and Bisgin (2018) find suggestive evidence that individuals who blamed Republicans for the Flint water crisis have more negative sentiment for the governor of Michigan than those blaming Democrats.

To review, successful petitioners tend to internalize their success and credit themselves for their successes. Unsuccessful petitioners tend to blame the government for their disappointments. This suggests two possible attributive processes. The first is internalization, in which voters attribute political outcomes to themselves and, perhaps, people like them (i.e. co-partisans). Broadly, this fits with the self-efficacy paradigm (Soss 1999; Mettler and Stonecash 2008), in which voters, rather than blame the government for the shame they endure during means testing, attribute the negative experience to themselves. The second is projection, in which voters attribute their aid-related outcomes to the federal government, most likely the sitting president (Gomez and Wilson 2003).

If the first process drives voter behavior, we should expect aid-receiving voters to attribute the benefits they receive to themselves and to co-partisan government actors. In the American context, this means that we should expect aid-receiving voters to be more likely to turnout to vote when they receive aid from a President who is a member of their party than voters receiving aid from a President of the opposite party. Voters who do not have a co-partisan President to whom they can credit aid may instead fully credit themselves or may credit a President from the other party, but, rather than crossover vote, simply not turnout to vote for the challenger (Chen 2013).

If the second process drives voter behavior, we should expect the type of aid a voter receives to predict their likelihood of turnout. Voters engaging in aid processes that impose costs on them, where their attempts at self-advocacy are ignored or ineffective, should be less likely to turnout to vote than voters engaging in aid processes where their attempts at self-advocacy are effective. In the United States context, this means voters receiving means-tested aid and government loans should be less likely to turnout to vote than voters receiving universal or entitlement benefits.

**Theoretical Model**

***Players:*** Two politicians, an incumbent (I) and a challenger (C), who have different ideal points ( and ).[[2]](#footnote-2) A voter (V) whose ideal point 0,1] lies somewhere between *xI* and *xc*.

***Types:*** Nature selects the politicians’ types, with probabilities: . Nature privately reveals to *I* and *C*, respectively. Type prefers not to deliver aid the voter though delivers aid with some positive probability. Type  prefers to deliver aid though fails to deliver aid with some positive probability. The probability that the politician delivers aid in accordance with his type is *p* > 1 – p or *p >* ½.[[3]](#footnote-3)

***Sequence of Play:***

1. Nature determines each politician’s type, with probabilities and reveals types privately to *I* and *C*, respectively.

2. Nature then draws from the incumbent’s urn to pick the first period aid amount, . The incumbent responds according to his type with greater likelihood than not. First period aid is administered.

3. Nature determines the cost of voting, and reveals this cost to voter *V.*

4. The voter *V* chooses whether to vote, .

5(a). If *V* votes , then he decides the election winner, .

5(b). If *V* does not vote , Nature decides the election winner, .

6. The winner (*I* or *C*) picks the second period aid amount, . The winner responds according to his type with greater likelihood than not. Second period aid is administered.

***Politicians’ Utility:*** In each period , each politician receives:

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| --- | --- |
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where is the executive’s choice of distributive aid policy. denotes the politician’s type, which represents her preferred distributive policy. Hence, a politician of type prefers to deliver aid while a politician of type always prefers no aid .

***Voter’s Utility:*** *V*’s utility function is constant across periods:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
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where represents the amount of distributive aid awarded to the voter in period *t* {1,2}, represents the voter’s ideal point, and *x*o is the ideal point of the office-holding politician, who is either the Incumbent *I* or the Challenger *C*  Hence, the voter’s utility depends on his ideological proximity to the office holder as well as his benefit from any distributive aid.

In between the two periods, the voter may choose to vote in the election by incurring a turnout cost, *c*,which is randomly drawn by Nature from the uniform distribution and revealed to *V* prior to the election. *V*’s payoff for the entire game is therefore given by:

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| --- | --- |
| , |  |

where is *V*’s choice of whether to turn out in the election, and and are *V’s* payoffs from the first and second periods, respectively.

***Voter Beliefs:*** The Voter *V* does not observe the politician types, and that Nature randomly chooses. Instead, *V* can only observe the Incumbent's first-period distributive policy, and form updated beliefs about *I*’s type. Let denote the V’s posterior beliefs about the probability that after observing

***Equilibrium Results:[[4]](#footnote-4)***

For simplicity, I assume that Voter *V* resolves indifference in favor of abstaining.

***Lemma A******(Executive’s Distributive Policy):*** In each period the office-holding executive, , chooses the distributive policy: , where is the opposite of the office holder’s type. Incumbent types are therefore not fully separating.

***Lemma B*** ***(Voter’s updated beliefs about Incumbent’s type):*** After observing the Incumbent’s choice of during the first period, the Voter *V*’s updated belief about the Incumbent’s type is:

Via *Lemma A*, Incumbent types are probabilistically separating in equilibrium, so after observing *y*1, *V*’s updated belief about *I*’s type is:

Given Lemma B, *V* expects to receive units of aid in *t=*2 if *I* is reelected and units of aid if *C* wins the election. V’s expected second period payoff from *I*’s reelection would be: whereas his expected second period payoff from *C*’s election would be: Therefore, conditional on turning out, *V* votes for *I* iff:

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| --- | --- |
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When is above this threshold, *V* prefers that the Incumbent win the election, so V’s total expected payoff from voting would be:

When is below the threshold, *V* prefers that the Challenger win the election, so V’s total expected payoff from voting would be:

In both cases, *V*’s total combined expected payoff from not voting is:

Hence, in equilibrium, *V* turns out to vote iff: where:

***Lemma C: (V’s Turnout and Vote Choice):*** *V*’s turnout choice in the election is:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| where: |  |
|  |  |

Therefore, given turning out, *V*’s vote in the election is:

where y-1 is the aid amount not delivered in the period (i.e. if one unit of aid was delivered, y-1 = 0.)

The Voter turns out iff *c*, which is drawn from , is sufficiently low. Let denote the probability of turnout for a voter with ideal point and who receives of aid during Period 1.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |

Hence, the change in *turnout probability* caused by the delivery of aid in period 1 is:

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| --- | --- |
|  |  |

Chart, line chart

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**Figure 1**

In other words, delivering aid to ideologically distant voters () *strictly decreases* their probability of turning out, while delivering aid to ideologically proximate voters () *strictly increases* their probability of turning out. Additionally, conditional upon turnout, delivering aid *strictly increases* the likelihood of voting for the incumbent.

*Lemmas A* and *B* state that the equilibrium is probabilistically separating. An Incumbent of type most often provides aid but fails to do so with some positive probability (the inverse holds for ). The delivery of aid during period one thus increases *V*’s expected payoff from having the incumbent reelected relative to the probability that the aid distribution was an informative signal. The increased expected payoff drives my main prediction that the delivery of aid in period one increases a right-wing voter's probability of turnout.

From Lemmas A, B, and C, we can derive the simple prediction that those who favor the incumbent *a priori* should be more likely to credit the incumbent with the positive experience of aid and, therefore, turnout to vote for him or her. Those who do not favor the incumbent *a priori* may credit the incumbent with the positive experience of aid, but be unwilling to vote for a candidate from a party they do not prefer. Voters engaging in this attributive process, therefore, should be less likely to turnout to vote at all. Put differently, receiving aid in period one causes a relatively larger *increase* in a right-wing voter’s turnout probability but a relatively smaller *decrease* in a left-wing voter’s turnout probability, given *p* > ½. Aid delivered in period one increases a right-wing voter’s preference for the incumbent over the challenger, while decreasing a left-wing voter’s motivation to vote out the incumbent (i.e. ). Hence, the right-wing voter is more likely to vote (and reelect the incumbent), while the left-wing voter is less likely to vote (and vote for the challenger).

H1(a): For a left-wing voter (), receiving distributive aid in period 1 causes a strict decrease in the probability of voter turnout.

H1(b): For a right-wing voter (), receiving distributive aid in period 1 causes a strict increase in the probability of voter turnout.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Research Design**

To test these hypotheses, I would ideally exploit a natural experiment design using data on Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) from Florida in 2004 following Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne. Every county in the state of Florida declared a state of emergency and were, therefore, eligible for disaster aid, including D-SNAP. Chen (2013) has already shown that Republicans who received universal FEMA aid in Florida were more likely to turnout in 2004 than 2002 as compared to Democrats who received FEMA aid.[[6]](#footnote-6) SNAP is a federally funded, means-tested aid program. With D-SNAP application and receipt data from the USDA, I can isolate to the day the proportion of applicants who received their aid prior to the 2004 Presidential Election.[[7]](#footnote-7) I can then aggregate aid-recipiency at the county level[[8]](#footnote-8) and match it to county-level voter registrations and turnout in the 2004 Presidential elections. This test allows us to directly compare the means-testing and attribution hypotheses.

**Model 1:** Logit[Pr(Voted 2004) = α + DRegistered Republican

+ βAid Application Accepted x Registered Republican

+ DAid Application Accepted +βEducation

+ βLocal Office Code + DFemale Head of Household

+ DVoted in 2002 + DVoted in 2000 + βIncome

+DState Governor Republican +βRace

+βNumber of Dependents +βYear-Month+ε]

If H1(a) holds, we should expect that Republicans who received D-SNAP should be more likely to turnout in 2004 than Republicans who did not receive D-SNAP, holding other relevant factors constant. If H2 holds, we should expect that Democrats who received D-SNAP to be more likely to turnout to vote for the challenger (John Kerry (D)) than Democrats who did not receive D-SNAP, holding other relevant factors constant. If H1(b) holds, we should expect Democrats who received D-SNAP to be less likely to turnout to vote for president than those who did not receive D-SNAP, holding other relevant factors constant.

However, D-SNAP data is not public use and may only be obtained by Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. My request for this data remains pending. Therefore, to test the implications of my model, I utilize data from the Maxwell Poll from Syracuse University. The poll includes data on federal aid status, voter behavior, and party identification from a nationally representative sample from 2004-2007. The survey also includes detailed information on the type of aid the respondent receives and whether the respondent, someone in the household, or both receive aid from a given program.

**Analysis**

I conduct my analysis using OLS regression. My dependent variable is *turnout*. The Maxwell Poll asks respondents whether they turnout Always (1), Often (2), Sometimes (3), or Not at all (4). Importantly, this means that when model coefficients are negative, they correspond to a *higher* self-reported voting frequency.

My primary independent variable is *receiving government aid*. I employ several measures of aid to account for heterogeneity within aid programs and account for the cumulative effect of aid on voter behavior. First, I use binary variables for each of the nineteen aid programs contained in the Maxwell Poll dataset in which a 1 means the respondent or a member of the respondent’s household receives the benefit and a 0 means no one in the household receives that benefit. Second, I create a binary variable in which 1 means the respondent or a member of the respondent’s household receives any form of government assistance and a 0 means no one in the household receives government aid. Finally, I use the total number of entitlement, means-tested, universal, and subsidized loan aid the household receives to create an aid-category participation measure. A 0 in all four categories would mean the respondent’s household receives no aid, while a 1 in entitlements and a 0 in the other three categories would mean the respondent’s household receives one kind of entitlement benefit, but no other government aid.

My theory predicts that *Party ID* directly influences voting behavior after aid. I use a binary measure in which a 1 is Republican and a 0 is Democrat. I also include a battery of controls, including race, income, education, sex, how closely the person follows public events, their trust in public officials, and their sense of their political self-efficacy. Survey questions and a detailed description of each of these controls can be found in Appendix [].

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 1 shows the results of the first measure of aid with and without controls, and the binary aid measure interacted with Party ID. Most forms of aid do not produce a statistically significant effect on turnout in Models 1 and 2. Controls behave largely as expected, except for following public affairs, which has a significant negative effect on self-reported turnout frequency. In Model 1, Social Security has a positive effect on voting frequency, but the effect is not statistically significant when controls are included. In both models, public housing and mortgage deduction benefits yield positive effects on turnout frequency. Participating in Head Start yields negative effects on turnout frequency in the basic and controlled model.

Model 3 interacts a dummy variable for receiving aid with Party ID. My model predicts that those who receive aid from a co-partisan President should be *more likely* to turnout to vote while those who receive aid from a opposite partisan President should be *less likely* to turnout. Because the Maxwell Poll was administered during 2004-2007, under President George W. Bush, my prediction is that aid receiving Republicans should be more likely to turnout than aid receiving Democrats, holding all other variables fixed at 0. The coefficients on the aid dummy and party ID are significant and negative, as predicted. When all else is held constant at zero, aid recipients report higher turnout than those not receiving aid. Further, holding all else fixed at zero, Republicans are more likely to turnout than Democrats from 2004-2007. The interaction term is significant and positive, indicating that, among aid-receiving people, Republicans are the least likely to turnout. Thus, Model 3 does not support my prediction that aid has a strictly positive benefit on Republican turnout and a strictly negative effect on Democratic turnout.

However, preexisting studies find that different types of aid may convey different benefits to recipients. Indeed, we see in Models 1 and 2 that individual programs are associated with both increased and decreased turnout. Previous work dichotomizes aid as either means-tested or universal to account for differences in benefits across aid programs. Means-tested aid is thought to diminish turnout while universal aid is often thought to mobilize voters (Soss 1999; Mettler and Stonecash 2009). However, I argue that this conceptualization of aid is lacking in two important ways. Firstly, entitlements are meaningfully distinct from other forms of universal aid, such as FEMA or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Beneficiaries are *entitled* to their benefits because they made a costly effort to obtain them. To be eligible for entitlements, one must put forward a costly effort, either by serving in the United States military (GI Bill) or paying into the program until age 65 (Social Security). Secondly, federally subsidized loans to students and businesses are often categorized as means tested aid, but differ importantly from other forms of means-tested aid because recipients must pay back the loan in the future. Importantly, this kind of government assistance comes at a future cost to the recipient – a cost equal to or greater than the value of the aid. To account for this heterogeneity, I divide aid into four types: universal aid, entitlements, loans, and means-tested aid.

I estimate models that include count variables for the total number of entitlements, universal aid, means tested aid, and government loans an individual receives. If all government aid does not convey the same benefits—or the same salience of benefits—it is entirely possible that we should expect certain types of aid to effect voter behavior differently.

[TABLE 2]

Table 2 shows the results of these models. Model 4 regresses the count of each aid category on self-reported voting frequency. Neither the counts nor party ID are statistically significant. However, they are appropriately signed—means-tested aid and government loans have a negative, but insignificant, effect on turnout while entitlements and universal aid have a positive, but insignificant, effect on turnout. Models 5-7 test the effect of each type of aid interacted with Party ID. None of the interaction terms are statistically significant.

**Discussion**

The results from my models and the Maxwell Poll do not support my theoretical prediction that aid has a strictly positive effect on Republican turnout and a strictly negative effect on Democratic turnout. This could be for several reasons, which I discuss in detail below.

*Question Wording*

My model predicts that receiving aid prior to voting has an effect on voter turnout. The Maxwell Poll does not ask about turnout in the most recent election or when the respondent began receiving aid. Rather, it asks about their usual turnout and whether they or a member of their household receives aid. It is possible that measuring turnout on a five-point scale, rather than a dichotomous measure of turnout in the last election, is a noisy measure that muddies any affect aid may have on turnout. For a household that recently began receiving aid and previously turned out to vote in every election, would a failure to turnout after receiving aid cause them to describe their turnout as anything other than “always” or “often” turning out? Are respondents considering turnout at the state and local level, or thinking exclusively about federal election turnout? The question does not specify. This inhibits my ability to explore the temporal component of my predictions about aid. Baiker and Finkelstein (2020) finds that the administration of aid has a one-time effect, most likely within six-months of the election. Chen’s (2013) results are consistent with this prediction using FEMA aid in 2004.

However, at the individual level, the Maxwell Poll offers the most comprehensive information on multiple aid programs at the individual level. While the effects of aid on voter behavior is often studied in isolation—that is, the effect of a single program on voting behavior—it is an unfortunate reality that many aid recipients participate in multiple aid programs. If one program yields a certain effect on voter behavior, another program may counteract that effect (Mettler and Stonecash 2008).

*Incorrect Prediction*

It is also possible that my theoretical and empirical predictions are incorrect. Perhaps aid has no effect on voter behavior and the observational evidence suggestive of this is simply due to other factors, like age, wealth, and education. Perhaps aid simply covaries with these other, important factors. Alternatively, aid might have a strictly negative affect on voter turnout and this effect is muddied by an imprecise measure of turnout and aid in the Maxwell Poll.

I tend away from this explanation, not only because it implies my theoretical predictions are entirely wrong, but because it contradicts evidence from a host of other works in political science and economics (SOURCES). While these works mostly study a single aid program in isolation – they tend to point toward aid affecting voter behavior and suggest that this effect varies by party. The effects of means-testing remain unclear, with some work (Soss 1999) suggesting it deters turnout while others (Baiker and Finkelstein 2020) suggesting it has no effect. Generally, the American *and* global literature on aid points to its generally positive effect on turnout (De La O 2013; Manacorda et al. 2011; Labonne 2013; Pop-Eleches and Pop-Eleches 2012), absent administrative barriers like means testing imposing additional costs that offset the positive benefits of aid.

*Administrative Barriers*

Means-testing is not the only administrative barrier that aid recipients encounter, but it is traditionally used to separate aid that comes with associated costs from so-called “universal aid.” It may be that this dichotomy—or even breaking aid into four categories, as I do—misses key administrative costs associated with specific programs that are not related, per se, to the financial qualifications of the program. For example, though Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) is not means tested, it still requires a great deal of financial documentation, work history, medical records, and an interview as part of the application process. Meanwhile, other universal aid programs such as FEMA aid require a minimal application process—most of the arduous activity is handled by a bureaucratic agency. Under traditional measurement standards, however, these programs are lumped into a single category—universal aid.

It may be more appropriate to create a theoretical model that allows the value of aid to fluctuate based on the administrative costs the program imposes on voters. Rather than examining programs in broad categories or in isolation, this would allow scholars to group programs based on the administrative burden they place on their recipients.

**Conclusion**

[ALSO WRITE LAST]

1. Hereafter denoted CFK. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It could be that xI=0 and xc=1. I have assigned these ideal points to mimic the 2004 Bush-Kerry race, an ideal case for testing this model, but the ideal points of the incumbent and challenger could easily be reversed to mimic other races. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In other words, type θ=1, the generous type, delivers aid with probability *p* > ½ while type θ=0, the ungenerous type, does *not* deliver aid with probability *p* > ½. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Proofs for Lemmas A, B, and C may be found in Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Proofs in Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Chen compares his results to 2002 turnout during the midterm election. District lines were redrawn after 2000, which makes county-level comparisons for 2000-2004 impossible. Because midterm turnout is historically lower than turnout for Presidential elections, this may exaggerate the observed effect. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I have already submitted the FOIA request for these data to the USDA and they are gathering materials. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Contingent on pending external funding requests and the quality of the D-SNAP data from USDA, I may be able to aggregate at the district level. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)