

**The Political Roots of Disability Claims:
How State Environments and Policies Shape Citizen Demands**

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Abstract

Who gets what from government is partly determined by who applies for government programs. Despite the importance of the claiming process, political scientists have said little about the factors that influence citizen demands on government programs. We test the hypothesis that state environments systematically shape aggregate rates of welfare demand making by testing a model of welfare claiming in the Social Security Disability Insurance and the Supplemental Security Income programs. Our findings show that in addition to economic need for benefits, the density of civil society organizations, the political ideology of state officials, and the generosity of state-run public assistance programs shape the amount and direction of citizen demands on the welfare system. Although commonalities exist in which variables explain welfare claiming, relationships vary in interesting ways across programs and stages of the claiming process, highlighting the need for a theoretical model of claiming behavior that takes into account such differences.

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Modern democratic states offer citizens a variety of channels for influencing governmental action. In addition to mechanisms for selecting and pressuring elected officials, there are legal and administrative institutions that allow individuals to seek more personalized responses from government. Political analysis has focused most often and most successfully on the public's efforts to influence representation and policy formation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972). Who gets what from government, however, depends equally on activities that shape policy implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984; Zemans 1983). One such activity, common in practice but poorly addressed by political scientists, consists of citizens' efforts to gain desired responses from street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky 1980).

This paper offers an analysis of mass demand making aimed at social welfare agencies. We analyze variation in aggregate welfare demand across states, programs, and stages of the claiming process. Welfare claims provide citizens with a relatively accessible and targeted mechanism for influencing the allocation of public resources. Such claims have obvious importance for the applicant's personal security and well-being; they also have considerable significance for the broader polity. Although welfare claims generally lack coordination and explicit political intent, they add up to a potent form of mass action that shapes the societal distribution of resources, capacities, and rights (Marshall 1964; Esping-Andersen 1990). Individual struggles to win aid and to contest bureaucratic actions accumulate in ways that erode and reconstitute the rules and practices that decide policy outcomes (Brodkin 1992; Gutek 1992). When sufficient numbers of citizens engage in welfare demand making, their claims can threaten governments with budgetary crises or pressure officials to redesign public policies and institutions (Piven and Cloward 1977: chap. 5; Stone 1984: chap. 5).

For all these reasons, welfare claiming has become an important tool in the action repertoire of modern political citizenship (Nelson 1984). Although some social welfare agencies engage in limited

outreach, the U.S. welfare system generally is not designed to locate people in need or to ensure they receive aid. Like voters, potential welfare applicants must identify their own eligibility and take whatever steps are needed to exercise their formal rights. Not surprisingly, many citizens who qualify for welfare benefits do not gain access to public resources (Currie 2003; Blank and Ruggles 1996; Wathana 1994; Dion and Pavetti 2000). Such “non-take-up” is most prevalent in means-tested programs¹ but constitutes a significant influence on provision in all state welfare institutions (van Oorschot 1991).

Despite the social and political importance of welfare claiming, the forces that shape aggregate demand remain, at present, poorly understood. Some studies link caseload trends to changes in economic conditions and program rules (e.g., Dion and Pavetti 2000; Rector and Youssef 1999), but these studies only address successful applicants (i.e., clients); they shed little light on the forces that determine overall rates of public demand making. Similarly, the roots of aggregate demand are only dimly suggested by individual-level studies of applicants’ social characteristics (Klawitter, Plotnick, and Edwards 2000; Plotnick 1983; Hutchens 1981) and decision-making processes (Soss 2000; Nelson 1980). Despite a large literature on program usage (Bane and Ellwood 1994), we know remarkably little about the forces that explain variation in the level of public demand confronted by state welfare agencies over time, across locales, and across programs (see Wathana 1994).

This paper presents an analysis of the rates at which citizens file applications and appeal denied claims in two welfare programs that offer benefits to people with disabilities: Social Security Disability Insurance (DI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). DI and SSI are both administered on a federal basis by the Social Security Administration (SSA) yet, as we describe below, demands on these programs vary considerably across states. By linking demand patterns to state characteristics, it is possible to

¹For example, a study of the U.S. Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC, now Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) in the early 1990s suggested that approximately 72 percent of eligibility spells were not producing benefit claims (Blank and Ruggles 1996). In addition to the lack of outreach in public assistance programs, such low claiming rates can also be traced to the effects of social stigma (Nelson 1980; Stuber and Kronebusch 2004) and administrative efforts to ration benefits and divert claimants (Lipsky 1984; Bennett 1995).

Appendix A**Measures and Sources**

Applications: Social Security Disability Insurance applications and Supplementary Security Income applications filed per 10,000 in population, 1991–1993. Concurrent applications for SSI and DI were excluded from analysis. SSI applications include only applications for disability-related claims. Source: unpublished material from the Social Security Administration.

Appeals: Percentage of Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplementary Security Income denials appealed to an Administrative Law Judge, 1991–1993. Source: unpublished material from the Social Security Administration.

Disability Need: Number of civilians with a work disability, ages 16–64, prevented from working)/number of civilian non-institutional persons 16–64 for the year 1990. Source: 1990 Census. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disability.html>

High School Graduation Rate: Percentage of population graduating from high school, 1991–1993. Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

Hispanic Population: Percentage of state population that is Hispanic, 1991–1993. Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

Civilian Unemployment Rate: Persons not engaged in wage work as a percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population, 1991–1993. Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

Poverty Rate: Percentage of population living below the poverty line, 1991–1993. Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

Government Ideology: Government ideology scores for 1991–1993; higher values indicate more liberal state governments.

Government ideology =

(.25) (Democrats' share of power within a state's lower chamber) (ideology of Democratic lower house legislators = average ideology of the Democratic congressional delegation)
 + (Republicans' share of power within a state's lower chamber) (ideology of Republican lower house legislators = average ideology of the Republican congressional delegation)
 +(.25) (Democrats' share of power within a state's upper chamber)(ideology of upper house Democratic legislators= average ideology of the Democratic congressional delegation)
 +(Republicans' share of power within a state's upper chamber) (ideology of upper house Republican legislators = average ideology of the Republican congressional delegation)
 + (.50) (governor's ideology = average ideology score of all members of the state legislature in the governor's party).

Ideology scores of congressional delegations are a function of interest group ratings (COPE and ADA).

Source: William Berry, Evan Ringquist, Richard C. Fording, and Russell Hanson. 1998.

"Measuring Citizen Government Ideology." *American Journal of Political Science* 42(1): 327–348.

Civic Organizations: The natural log of the number of reporting public charities per 10,000 state residents. These include all organizations required to file IRS form 990, 1991–1993. Source: *State Nonprofit Almanac: Profiles of Charitable Organization*, Urban Institute, Washington, DC.

Award Rate: Percentage of DI and SSI applications awarded at initial and reconsideration stage of the application process. Source: unpublished material from the Social Security Administration.

AFDC Benefits: The average Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefit for a family of 3, converted into constant dollars using the state cost-of-living index developed in William D. Berry, Richard C. Fording, and Russell L. Hanson. 2000. "An Annual Cost of Living Index for

the American States, 1960–1995.” *Journal of Politics* 62(2): 550–67. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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