

**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.

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

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 programs<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup>For 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).

illuminate the contextual forces that determine aggregate demand for disability benefits. Specifically, we use a multivariate analysis of pooled cross-sectional data to investigate why demand making in the DI and SSI programs varied across the states during a three year period, 1991–93.

Taking a political perspective on claiming behavior, our central thesis is that state environments systematically shape aggregate rates of welfare demand, even in federally administered programs. In generic form, such a perspective “explains mass opinion and behavior as products constructed through the interplay of state structures and institutions, political actions and communication flows, mobilization and demobilization, and the density and patterning of political organizations” (Mettler and Soss 2004: 58). Thus, in the case of welfare claiming, this perspective shifts our attention from the individual characteristics of potential claimants to the ways claiming decisions may be shaped by the political, social, and economic environments in which they are embedded. Citizens make decisions to apply for benefits within particular social, political, and economic contexts; such contexts vary across the U.S. states; and some, we suggest, will tend to generate more demands than others. In what follows, we advance this thesis by presenting a general model of aggregate demand in the DI and SSI programs. In so doing, we emphasize how the U.S. welfare state constitutes an integrated system of channels for citizens’ demands, and how the determinants of demand making vary across both programs (DI and SSI) and stages of the claiming process (application and appeal).

Our general model emphasizes the political underpinnings of social welfare claims—the ways state institutions structure citizen demands; the ways policies in one program may “feed back” to influence claims in another; the ways civic organizations may inform and recruit potential claimants; the ways political ideologies may legitimate and facilitate, or stigmatize and suppress, demands on the welfare state; and the ways disparities in civic skills, related to educational differences, may influence the articulation of demands. In addition, we emphasize that welfare claiming takes place in particular socioeconomic contexts. State environments vary in ethnic composition, in the employment opportunities they provide, and in the extent to which their populations are impoverished—all of which may influence

the generation of demands. To develop this model, we begin with a brief description of Social Security Disability programs and then turn to our specific hypotheses.

## SOCIAL POLICIES FOR DISABILITY

The SSA oversees two programs that offer benefits to individuals who experience an inability to work due to physical or mental disability: DI, a social insurance program tied to individuals' wage contributions, and SSI, a means-tested program tied to individuals' financial need. The medical criteria used to establish benefit eligibility in the DI and SSI programs are identical. In each case, claimants must offer clinical proof of an impairment so severe that it prevents them from performing the types of "substantial gainful work" that exist in the national economy for people with their age, education, and work experience profile (Roth 1987). In addition, benefits are payable only if the claimant's impairment is expected to last twelve months or result in death within a year (Mashaw 1997).

Although eligibility for SSI and DI benefits depends on a single medical standard, the programs apply different financial criteria to applicants. Like other social insurance programs, the DI program determines eligibility based on prior tax contributions made by individuals in the labor force. By contrast, SSI is a means-tested program; it bases eligibility on the cash value of a claimant's monthly income (including in-kind acquisitions) and total assets (exempting some items such as the value of the claimant's home). Because of this difference in financial criteria, DI and SSI serve clienteles that differ in important ways.<sup>2</sup> Most obviously, SSI serves a target group that is much poorer than the clientele of the DI program. Partly for this reason, and partly because of disparities in work force attachment, the SSI program also serves a higher proportion of women and people of color (U.S. House of Representatives 2004).

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<sup>2</sup>The client bases for the two programs do have some degree of overlap: individuals whose work histories qualify them for DI benefits but who remain poor enough to receive additional SSI benefits. Such individuals make up a minority of beneficiaries in each program.

To apply for benefits in either program, a claimant must fill out an application over the phone or at a local SSA office. At this initial stage of the process, state-specific Disability Examiners decide whether the claimant meets the program's financial and medical criteria for eligibility. If a Disability Examiner denies an application, claimants are free to request "reconsideration" by a second Examiner. If the denial is supported at this second stage, claimants must decide whether to accept their denial or press ahead with the more demanding process of filing an appeal with an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ). In making this decision, claimants are aided by instructions for the appellate process provided by the SSA (U.S. Social Security Administration 2001).

In this paper, we analyze variation in the rates at which states generate initial applications and ALJ appeals in the SSI and DI programs. In comparison to other stages of the claiming process, these two activities require claimants to make relatively substantial resource investments.<sup>3</sup> To put together a successful application or appeal, claimants must collect documentation regarding their work history and obtain a clinical diagnosis of a disabling condition recognized by SSA regulations (Kritzer 1998: chap. 4). In addition, claimants must successfully negotiate a series of bureaucratic procedures and forms. There are also psychological costs to contend with: applying for disability benefits forces individuals to accept the label "long-term disabled" and confront the possibility that others will view them as a "failure" or a "welfare cheat" (Soss 2000: chap. 3). At each stage of the process, applicants may also have to invest energy in obtaining assistance from an attorney or advocate (Kritzer 1998: chap. 4).

The multiple costs associated with this process suggest that there is considerable potential for "non-take-up" in American disability programs. The precise gap between aggregate demand for disability

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<sup>3</sup>At the reconsideration stage, for example, claimants need only ask the Disability Determination Service to take a second look at their file. Because this first appeal is a relatively "low cost" endeavor for the claimant, it does not offer a very strong contrast with the initial application process. For this reason, we focus here on the more demanding process of appealing to an ALJ.

benefits and aggregate supply of eligible individuals remains, at this point, unknown.<sup>4</sup> What is known about aggregate demand, however, is that it is far from static: rates of application and appeal in the SSI and DI programs vary considerably over time and across states. Table 1 presents descriptive data on the rates at which SSI and DI applications were filed, denied, and appealed in the American states, 1991–93. Annual rates of initial application in the DI program, for example, ranged from a low of about 132.4 cases per 10,000 residents in Utah (1992) to a high of about 374.7 cases per 10,000 in West Virginia (1991). In the SSI program, application rates ranged from 105.5 cases per 10,000 residents in New Hampshire (1991) to 1398.7 cases per 10,000 in Louisiana (1993). Similarly, annual rates of appeal in the DI program ranged from about 26.3 percent of denials in California (1991) to approximately 85.6 percent of denials in West Virginia (1992). In the SSI program, annual rates of appeal ranged from about 31.2 percent of denials in Delaware (1991) to approximately 70.3 percent of denials in Kentucky (1992). Because many citizens gain access to the SSI and DI program only after pursuing an appeal, the number of people who appeal denied decisions has important consequences for who benefits from these programs. In 1993, ALJs in the average state awarded 41 percent of claims appealed in the DI program and 33 percent in the SSI program. At the highest award rate, ALJs in Maine awarded 70 percent of DI claims and 66 percent of SSI claims (authors' analysis of unpublished data from the U.S. Social Security Administration).

How can we explain the wide variation across states in the demands citizens make on federal disability programs? We begin from the premise that welfare demands arise from interactions between the characteristics of individuals and the characteristics of social, political, and economic environments. The contextual forces that affect claiming behavior are likely to vary across the U.S. states, and *how* these forces affect claiming behavior is likely to depend on the characteristics of individuals who make up a

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<sup>4</sup>We know of no precise estimates of non-take-up in SSI and DI, but Mashaw (1997) provides some suggestive evidence on this point: in 1994 nearly 17 million working-age Americans reported a work disability, yet only about 7 million received DI or SSI benefits.

**TABLE 1**  
**State Rates for DI and SSI Applications Filed, Denied, and Appealed, 1991–1993**

	Applications Filed per 10,000 Population		Percentage of Applications Denied		Percentage of Denials Appealed	
	DI	SSI	DI	SSI	DI	SSI
Mean	245.8	375.0	51.7	41.1	64.0	51.2
Standard Deviation	46.9	211.6	7.4	7.9	9.3	7.2
Minimum	132.2	105.5	35.5	25.2	26.3	31.2
Maximum	374.7	1398.7	69.3	62.9	85.6	70.3
Number of Cases	144	144	144	144	144	144

program's target population. As noted earlier, SSI and DI serve populations with similar medical needs, but these populations have different social and economic profiles. Such differences raise the possibility that contextual forces may affect demand making differently in the DI and SSI programs—an expectation that is reinforced by additional factors that distinguish the two programs. Relative to social insurance programs, means-tested programs tend to carry greater social stigma and stronger associations with minority populations; they enjoy less public support and are subject to more frequent attacks by government officials; they offer less generous benefits and implement more restrictive rules (Gordon 1994: chap. 10; Katz 2001).

In sum, then, to develop a general model of demand making in federal disability programs, we must (a) account for relevant contextual forces that distinguish state environments, (b) allow for the possibility that different factors matter at different stages of the claiming process, (c) consider the ways demand making processes may vary across programs and their target populations, and (d) acknowledge that benefits in one program may influence claiming in another. In the following section, we outline the factors that we expect to matter most in the claiming process, paying some attention to how their impact might vary across programs and stages of the claiming process.

## THEORY AND EXPECTATIONS

Our empirical analysis tests five general hypotheses regarding applications and appeals in the DI and SSI programs. First, we expect aggregate demand to be influenced by three characteristics of a state's applicant pool: the number of residents with impairments that make work difficult, ethnic composition, and education levels. Second, although SSI and DI benefits are nominally reserved for people who cannot work, we expect aggregate demand to be a function of two features of economic context: labor market conditions and poverty rates. Third, we expect aggregate demand to rise and fall depending on the liberal or conservative ideological orientation that prevails in state government. Fourth, we expect the level of demand making to depend on the density of civic organizations in each state. Fifth, we hypothesize that

aggregate demand in federal disability programs will vary depending on the level of cash benefits offered in the primary state-run welfare program for poor families with children. (For all measures used in this paper and their sources, see Appendix A.)

### The Applicant Pool

Perhaps the simplest explanation for interstate differences in claiming rates is that state populations vary in ways that affect the quality of applicant pools. All else equal, states with more residents who perceive themselves to have a disabling impairment should have larger numbers of people who need and contemplate applying for SSI or DI benefits. Such locales may also facilitate demands by providing social environments in which program information is more abundant and benefit claiming is less stigmatized.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, administrators who confront more pervasive need may reinforce these patterns by developing more effective procedures for handling claims or doing more to encourage applications and appeals. For all these reasons, we expect aggregate demand for SSI and DI benefits, at both the application and appellate stage, to be higher in states that have higher levels of impairment-based need. To measure such need, we employ the percentage of each state's population reporting in the 2000 Census that they had a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting 6 months or more that made it difficult to work at a job or business.

In addition to the prevalence of impairment, our analysis also addresses the ethnic composition of each state's population. Specifically, we include a measure of the proportion of state residents classified as Hispanic. Although Latinos and Latinas experience a relatively high incidence of health problems (Patel and Rushefsky 1995: 121–25), interviews with SSA administrators indicate several reasons why

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<sup>5</sup>Although social insurance programs tend to be less stigmatized than public assistance programs, concerns about stigma still function as a deterrent for some potential claimants. Environments where disabilities are more common can provide individuals with a supportive social context, encouraging them to see their claims as necessary and legitimate actions (Soss 2000).

states with larger numbers of Hispanics should produce lower rates of demand for disability benefits (Keiser, personal interview: October 16, 2000). Language barriers may limit knowledge of available program benefits; Hispanic workers may be more likely to work domestic or day jobs that do not qualify them for DI benefits; and recent immigration experiences or changes in citizenship status can create uncertainty about eligibility. Consequently, we expect rates of demand making in SSI and DI to be significantly lower in states with larger Hispanic populations. Moreover, there is little reason to expect this relationship to vary across application and appeal behaviors.

State demand rates may also depend on a third feature of the applicant pool: the level of formal education among state residents.<sup>6</sup> However, the effects could work in one of two directions. Human capital theory predicts that people with more formal education will enjoy a greater range of options in the labor market (Becker 1993). Accordingly, if two individuals have the same impairment, we would expect the one with more formal education to have greater access to accommodating jobs; the less-educated individual should have fewer workable options and, hence, greater need for assistance. Following this logic, we would expect demand for disability benefits to be lower in states with larger numbers of high school graduates. Formal education, however, does more than just bestow advantages in the job market; it also imparts skills, knowledge, and beliefs that promote effective engagement with government (Verba et al. 1995; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). All else equal, such advantages should enhance citizens' abilities to negotiate the claiming process—especially the complex procedures that make up the appellate process. Accordingly, we hypothesize that application and appeal rates in disability programs will be significantly related to the proportion of a state's residents who are high school graduates, with the effect of education more likely to be positive at the appellate stage.

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<sup>6</sup>Because we emphasize a political perspective on welfare claiming, it is worth underscoring here that education levels are not “just” attributes of state residents; they are also products of state policy choices. Thus, in welfare claiming, as in other modes of political participation, the influences that educational disparities exert on demand-making patterns may be viewed, at least in part, as instances of policy feedback (Mettler and Soss 2004: 56).

Finally, in our analysis of appeal rates, we employ an alternative indicator of impairment-based need that is not included in our analysis of application rates: the rate at which initial applications are awarded in each state. The pool of claimants eligible to file an appeal is shaped directly by bureaucratic decisions to grant or deny initial applications. By granting a smaller percentage of initial applications, states may push a larger number of meritorious cases into the pool of potential appellants (i.e., borderline cases that might have been accepted in a state that granted a larger percentage of applications). All else equal, then, we expect the pool of potential appellants to include more people with significant impairments in states with low rates of initial acceptance. Accordingly, we hypothesize that such states will produce higher appeal rates in the SSI and DI programs.

### Economic Context

In public perception and under the eligibility rules used by the SSA, the SSI and DI programs offer benefits to individuals who are *unable* to engage in “substantial gainful work.” This image suggests that prevailing economic conditions play little role in the generation of disability demands. In reality, however, the connections between disability and economy are far more complex. As Stone (1984: 161–68) explains, high rates of poverty and unemployment can create contextual pressures that expand disability claiming in a variety of ways.

First, there are effects on the individual. During economic downturns, employed individuals with impairments run a greater risk of getting laid off or having their hours cut back. In areas with weak labor markets, accommodating jobs should also be harder to find and subject to more intense competition. Likewise, areas with high rates of poverty can be expected to offer less adequate informal support: social networks of family and friends will be less likely to contain resources robust enough to meet an individual’s needs. Thus, in the context of high unemployment and poverty, more people should perceive

their impairments as disabling, and fewer people should have income alternatives that allow them to forgo a disability claim.<sup>7</sup>

Second, economic hard times may also affect the behaviors of other crucial actors in the claiming process. Physicians may feel greater sympathy for moderately impaired individuals when there appear to be no real economic alternatives and, as a result, may become more willing to label them incapacitated. Similarly, administrators may loosen their interpretations of disability categories and program rules or may become more willing to offer advice and encouragement to potential claimants. For all these reasons, Stone (1984: 164) predicts that “more people will apply to [disability] programs during economic recessions, and the determination process is more likely to let them through at each of several points.”

In line with these predictions, we expect to find higher rates of aggregate demand for disability benefits in states that have higher rates of poverty or higher rates of unemployment. To measure these factors we employ the percentage of each state’s residents living below the federal poverty line<sup>8</sup> and the percentage of each state’s noninstitutionalized civilian population who are unemployed. Past research provides some support for the link between labor markets and disability participation rates (Howards, Brehm, and Nagi 1980; Stone 1984; Keiser 1999). No study that we know of, however, has tested for independent effects associated with poverty and unemployment. The inclusion of both measures is especially important for our comparison of demand patterns in the SSI and DI programs. We expect consistent results across stages of the claiming process. But because only the former is a means-tested program, we expect poverty to have a greater impact on SSI demands than on DI demands.

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<sup>7</sup>In addition, high poverty rates may signify a larger pool of people with significant impairments. Poverty has the effect of limiting access to adequate health care, nutritious food, and quality housing; as a result, poor people are disproportionately likely to suffer from serious diseases and other debilitating conditions (DiNitto 2005).

<sup>8</sup>Diagnostic tests indicated that our poverty measure had a high degree of collinearity with other independent variables in our models. To solve this problem, we applied a purging regression (or “residualization”) technique developed by Goldberger (1964) and applied by Kau and Rubin (1979). The regression analyses reported in this paper employ the “purged” poverty measure, which does not suffer collinearity problems.

## Government Ideology

SSI and DI claims share an essential feature of all benefit claims in the U.S. welfare system: they ask government to suspend the “normal” rules of market distribution in favor of provision based on need (Stone 1984: 13). Decisions to partially exempt individuals from the labor market have major consequences for employers and raise core value conflicts regarding individual and governmental responsibility (Piven and Cloward 1993; McClosky and Zaller 1984). As a result, public welfare programs, including disability programs, have long been objects of ideological conflict in the United States (Stone 1984; Berkowitz 1987).

Historically, liberals have been very supportive of the SSI and DI programs. Conservatives have been more likely to criticize the SSA as an example of a bloated government bureaucracy and to charge that claimants and their doctors might collude to advance fraudulent claims (Stone 1984).<sup>9</sup> Although SSI and DI are federal programs, the SSA processes many applications through local offices. As a result, there are significant openings for the ideology of state-level officials to affect aggregate demand for disability benefits. The ideology of elected officials may influence rates of demand making in two ways.

First, the ideology of government officials can influence the organizational culture of offices that process disability claims. Conservative local officials may be more likely to act in ways that dissuade individuals who are unsure about whether to move forward in the formal claiming process (Lipsky 1980). Such effects may occur at either the application or appellate stage of the process; but all else equal, one would expect the opportunities for administrative influence to grow as claimants have more extensive interactions with the bureaucracy.

Second, the ideology of government officials can directly influence the attitudes and behavior of potential claimants by legitimating or denigrating public agencies and programs. Political rhetoric can

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<sup>9</sup>In the early 1980s, for example, the Reagan administration became so convinced that widespread fraud was draining the public coffers that it initiated a massive review of DI cases and conducted what Derthick (1990: 36) refers to as a “purge” of the system (Weatherford 1984).

decrease the legitimacy of government agencies and programs and in doing so influences the nature of the interactions between citizens and agencies. As a people-processing agency (Prottas 1979), the SSA is especially vulnerable to attacks on its legitimacy. The antigovernment/antiwelfare rhetoric of conservative state officials may decrease the legitimacy of social welfare programs and, in so doing, decrease demand.

Accordingly, we hypothesize, first, that relatively conservative states will produce lower demand rates in the DI and SSI programs. Second, because the SSI program is means tested and more frequently targeted for political attack, the effect of ideology should be greater in SSI than in the DI program. Third, we expect the effects of government ideology to be more pronounced at the later (appellate) stage of the claiming process, as individuals have more extensive interaction with bureaucratic agents. We use Berry et al.'s 1998 measure of government ideology. This measure is a function of the Democratic and Republican shares of power within a state's lower and upper chambers, the average ideology scores of Democrats and Republicans in a state's lower and upper chambers measured by the average ideology of the corresponding state Democratic or Republican congressional delegation, and the governor's ideology measured by the average ideology score of all members of the state legislature in the governor's party. According to this measure, during the period of our study Utah is the most conservative state and Maryland is the most liberal. The specific formula is described in Appendix A.

### Civic Organizations as Claiming Context

Contemporary studies of political participation emphasize a variety of ways in which civic organizations facilitate demands on government. Such organizations supply political information, bring individuals into contact with other potential claimants, build political skills, and provide opportunities for recruitment into the political process (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). From this perspective, one might easily derive the expectation that a higher density of civic organizations will make citizens more informed and effective in their efforts to gain responsiveness from the welfare state. Unfortunately, this

possibility has received little attention: most research on civil society and political participation has tended to ignore citizen demands aimed at governments' administrative institutions (Anechiarico 1998).<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, field research on claiming in the DI program suggests that local organizations—such as disability associations, labor unions, welfare rights groups, community development organizations, homeless shelters, and a variety of other nonprofits—encourage and assist claims on social welfare programs in ways comparable to other modes of political participation (Soss 2000: chap. 4). As such organizations deal with the needs of community members, they often accumulate ready stores of information about government programs. Nonprofits provide sites for current and potential welfare clients to interact with one another and, in some cases, even employ individuals whose primary responsibility is to advise and assist people in the claiming process.<sup>11</sup> As a result, they can function as pivotal actors helping potential claimants overcome information deficits, transaction costs, and stigma-related anxieties that might otherwise deflect eligible claims (for a review of claiming barriers in these terms, see Currie 2003). These field-research findings for DI (Soss 2000) are bolstered by recent research indicating that attachments to labor unions greatly enhance the likelihood that workers laid off from blue-collar jobs will apply for Unemployment Insurance benefits (Budd and McCall 2004).

Accordingly, we expect rates of application and appeal in the DI and SSI programs to be higher in states that have a higher density of civic organizations. Here, however, it is not clear that applicants to all programs should benefit from the assistance of community organizations equally. Empirical research on recruitment and political participation clearly suggests that citizens with low socioeconomic status tend to

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<sup>10</sup>Putnam's study of Italy offers a partial exception to this pattern. His index of institutional performance incorporates one indicator of bureaucratic responsiveness—the ways in which health, vocational, and agricultural agencies responded to inquiries requesting information (Putnam with Leonardi and Nanetti 1993: 73).

<sup>11</sup>In extreme cases, community organizations may serve as a more or less essential conduit for program information published by government agencies. For example, the SSA currently distributes a fact sheet for volunteer and nonprofit agencies to help homeless individuals gain access to benefits (U.S. Social Security Administration 2004). We know of no research on the extent to which the SSA distributes this fact sheet directly to clients versus doing so via nonprofit organizations. However, it seems highly unlikely that this publication is frequently distributed to the homeless directly.

have weaker attachments to (and hence, benefit less from) civic organizations (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Following this literature, we hypothesize that the impact of organization density will be significantly stronger in the DI program than in the means-tested SSI program. Based on field research suggesting that welfare claims are facilitated by a broad range of organizations, not just self-identified “disability” groups (Soss 2000), we measure the strength of civic organizations with the number of reporting public charities per 10,000 residents in each state (Stevenson et al. 1997).<sup>12</sup>

### Policy Feedback in a Categorical Welfare System

Social welfare policies are typically analyzed as outcomes of political processes. As a growing number of scholars have recently emphasized, however, policy can also function as a causal force in politics (Skocpol 1992; Pierson 1993; Schneider and Ingram 1997). Policy designs, in this view, produce “feedback” that can influence citizen demand making in a variety of ways (Mettler and Soss 2004). Many aspects of policy design can produce feedback, but in the welfare context, the policy feature most often linked to claiming behavior has been benefit levels (Currie 2003).

Previous research on how benefit size affects claiming behavior has focused primarily on the largest state-run program for poor families, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, replaced in 1996 by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF). Early studies of AFDC entry suggested that benefit levels exert some influence on take-up (Hutchens 1981; Plotnick 1983), but recent work suggests that this result drops out in model specifications that include appropriate controls (Klawitter, Plotnick, and Edwards 2000). For our purposes, the key feature of this literature is that it usually investigates policy feedback effects in a highly segmented fashion. On one side, analyses of AFDC take-up focus narrowly on AFDC benefits and a handful of relevant benefit supplements (e.g., Food Stamps).

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<sup>12</sup>Because tests based on a system of dummy variables indicated a nonlinear relationship between organizational density and aggregate demand, our regression analyses employ the natural log of this measure.

On the other side, research on disability claiming has tended to ignore benefit effects altogether: federal disability payments do not vary across the states, and researchers have not considered the possibility that disability claims might be influenced by AFDC benefit levels (Howards, Brehm, and Nagi 1980).

The problem with taking such a segmented approach to the study of welfare claiming is that it fails to account for the substantial overlap in the DI, SSI, and AFDC applicant pools. The categorical architecture of the U.S. welfare system creates the appearance that different welfare programs serve objectively distinct groups (Schneider and Ingram 1997; Stone 1984). Because programs in this system are administratively separate and employ distinctive eligibility criteria, it is tempting to analyze claiming rates in a way that isolates a single program and its target population. In this conventional view, AFDC is a welfare channel for “able-bodied parents and their children” while SSI and DI are distinct welfare channels for “disabled people who cannot work.” For a large chunk of each program’s applicant pool, this broad-brush distinction may be reasonably close to accurate. In a significant number of cases, however, potential applicants are likely to have some latitude in deciding which program to target for demand making. In these instances, the likelihood that a particular program will be targeted for demand making is likely to depend on how it compares to other programs in the welfare system. To the extent that some citizens are free to choose among programs, benefits offered in one welfare program may have an impact on aggregate demand for benefits in other welfare programs.

No one knows for sure how much overlap there is between the target population of AFDC and the target populations of SSI and DI. Recent studies of disability among AFDC/TANF recipients, however, suggest that the overlap could be considerable. Relying on national surveys with a partial battery of disability questions, Loprest and Acs (1995) estimate that 17 to 20 percent of women in AFDC have a work-limiting disability. Based on a national survey with more targeted questions, Danziger, Kalil, and Anderson (2000) report that 34.7 percent of AFDC clients meet the diagnostic criteria for at least one of several mental disorders; 18.7 percent report significant physical health problems. According to the Survey of Income and Program Participation, 38 percent of TANF recipients reported that they had

impairments severe enough that they were either unable to or needed help with such activities as walking up stairs and filing bills (U.S. General Accounting Office 2001). In addition, recent studies estimate that the lifetime rate of domestic violence among welfare recipients is between 50 and 70 percent and demonstrate that such experiences of abuse increase the odds that a woman will have psychiatric disorders (Tolman and Raphael 2000).

The upshot of this evidence is that the AFDC, SSI, and DI programs are likely to have applicant pools that overlap in significant respects. An unknown but considerable number of AFDC applicants have mental or physical conditions that could underwrite an application to SSI or DI. Likewise, because SSI is a means-tested program, most SSI applicants meet the poverty threshold for AFDC participation; many also have children.<sup>13</sup> The DI program is not means-tested but nevertheless receives applications from large numbers of poor families: in the 1990s, approximately one-quarter of DI recipients met the poverty threshold needed to receive SSI benefits (Mashaw 1997: 21–22). Although we lack precise numbers, there apparently exist a considerable number of applicants to each program who could conceivably apply to one of the other two programs. Indeed, some previous research suggests a connection between disability programs and means-tested income support programs. Marvel and Marvel (1984), for example, report that states that denied benefits to higher percentages of applicants had larger AFDC-U programs in the late 1970s and early 80s.<sup>14</sup> Bound, Kossoudji, and Ricart-Moess (1998) find that when the state of Michigan eliminated its General Assistance (GA) program, former GA recipients began to account for larger numbers of people applying for SSI. Garrett and Glied (2000) find that AFDC benefit levels were a significant factor mediating the effects that administrative rule changes had on SSI child participation

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<sup>13</sup>Although we know of no data on percentage of SSI applicants with children, individuals under the age of 18 made up 19 percent of people receiving SSI for disability-related reasons in 1996 (U.S. House of Representatives 1998: Table 3-12).

<sup>14</sup>The AFDC-U program existed until 1996 and allowed states to offer benefits to two-parent families if both parents were unemployed.

rates between 1987 and 1994. And Schmidt (2004) finds that replacement of the AFDC program with the TANF program in 1996 had a variety of effects on the size and composition of SSI caseloads.

Accordingly, we explore two hypotheses. First, all else equal, we expect aggregate applications and appeals in federal disability programs to be higher in states that offer lower AFDC benefits. As the gap between AFDC benefits and disability benefits grows, so too does the incentive for a poor person with an impairment to go through the difficult process of establishing a disability and documenting a work history. Thus, we expect more claimants to bypass AFDC in favor of DI and SSI claims in states that offer relatively meager aid to poor families. Second, the relationship between AFDC benefit levels and aggregate demand for disability benefits should be stronger in the SSI program than in the DI program. The rationale for this hypothesis is simply that the AFDC and SSI programs are both means tested and, hence, should share a more significant portion of their applicant pools. Following this logic, we expect to find stronger AFDC benefit effects in the SSI program and weaker effects in DI program. Our measure of AFDC benefits is each state's average benefit for a family of three, adjusted for interstate cost-of-living differences.<sup>15,16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Although the federal government provides the same SSI benefit to claimants across the fifty states, some states do provide a supplement. We should expect that states with larger SSI supplements would have more applications. We included a measure of the average SSI supplement for each state but it was not statistically significant and did not alter the findings. For parsimony, we removed it from the analysis.

<sup>16</sup>In addition to feedback from other social welfare programs, feedback from the disability determination process itself should influence application rates (Marvel 1982). States that award a large number of applications should generate more applications insofar as potential applicants discover through social networks and media outlets about the ease or difficulty of getting a positive award. Testing this hypothesis is problematic, however, because of the nonrecursive relationship between application rates and denial rates. Denial rates influence application rates, and applications also influence denial rates because Disability Determination Services offices with large caseloads per population have more marginal cases than DDS offices with smaller caseloads per population (Keiser 2001; Marvel 1982; Marvel and Marvel 1984). Scholars have used instrumental variables to measure the impact of applications on denial rates and the impact of denial rates on applications using simultaneous equations (Marvel 1982; Marvel and Marvel 1984). State ideology and generosity of unemployment benefits have been used as instruments for the state denial rates and health status of the population, market opportunities, total amount of benefits available, and nondisability contingent transfers have been used as instruments for the application rate. As we argue above, however, these instrumental variables theoretically should have impacts on both the application rate and the denial rate, and therefore we argue they are not good instrumental variables (Kennedy 1993: 159). Available data do not offer instrumental variables that have an impact only on the application rate or denial rate. To control for the impact of past denials, we included the lagged DDS denial rate in the application models and the ALJ denial rate in the

## METHODOLOGY

To test the hypotheses discussed above, we use a pooled cross-sectional analysis of application and appeal rates in forty-eight of the fifty U.S. states for the period 1991 through 1993.<sup>17</sup> Our analysis is based on seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) models for each of the two stages of the claiming process. SUR models improve the efficiency of parameter estimation when error terms for two regression equations are correlated (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1991: 308). Such correlated residuals occur when two outcomes of interest are produced by a set of common factors that are imperfectly incorporated in the regression equation (either because of omitted variables or measurement error). In this case, we use SUR because the shared criterion for eligibility in the SSI and DI programs (disability) suggests a high likelihood that the residuals from separate regression equations would be correlated. In addition, we use SUR to obtain efficient tests for the equality of coefficients across equations, that is, to test whether the effect of a particular variable differs significantly across the SSI and DI programs.<sup>18</sup>

The section that follows presents two SUR analyses. The first explains interstate variation in the rate at which state residents apply for SSI and DI benefits. The dependent variable for each program is the number of applications filed per 10,000 state residents. The second model explains interstate variation in the rate at which denied SSI and DI applicants pursued the ALJ appellate procedure. The dependent variable is the percentage of denied applicants (number per 100) who filed formal requests for an ALJ review of the agency's earlier decision.

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appeals models. This variable only reached statistical significance in the appeals model for DI. It was insignificant in all other models. Higher past awards increase appeals in DI. Including this variable in any of the models did not alter our findings for the other variables in our model. We excluded it from all models for consistency and because the endogeneity makes it difficult to interpret in any meaningful way. We leave to future research the question of whether applications are influenced by past stringency in eligibility.

<sup>17</sup>Data from Alaska and Hawaii were excluded from the model due to missing data for the state cost-of-living index.

<sup>18</sup>All regression analyses were performed using the "sureg" command in the statistical package STATA. All *F* tests for the equality of coefficients were obtained by applying STATA's "test" command to results obtained with standardized dependent variables. Regression diagnostics performed on our application and appeal models are described below.

## FINDINGS

### Initial Applications

Table 2 presents the results for our SUR models predicting the rate at which citizens applied for SSI and DI benefits in forty-eight of the fifty states. The two models perform quite well, accounting for approximately 59 percent of the variation in DI application rates and roughly 75 percent of the variation in SSI application rates.<sup>19</sup> Both models offer a significant improvement in fit over a null model in which these variables are assumed to have no explanatory power. Results for the Breusch-Pagan test indicate that the correlation between error terms from the DI and SSI equations falls short of statistical significance ( $\chi^2_{1df} = 0.004, p=.94$ ). In such a case, the results produced by SUR models and OLS models are expected to be roughly equivalent (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1991).<sup>20</sup>

Turning to the results for specific coefficients, we find considerable support for the hypothesis that claiming rates in DI and SSI are driven by interstate differences in the characteristics of applicant pools. As expected, our measure of self-reported disability achieves statistical significance in both models. Also as we hypothesized, states with larger Hispanic populations produce significantly fewer claims on the DI program, a result consistent with arguments that Hispanics are a “hard-to-reach”

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<sup>19</sup>The proportions reported in this sentence are based on the “*R*-squared” statistics reported for the SUR models. These statistics are asymptotically consistent estimators of the true percentage of variance explained. However, readers should note that *R*-squared lacks precise definition in this or any other generalized least squares context.

<sup>20</sup>All models were run using OLS to confirm their equivalence with the SUR results. We present the SUR models in this case because they are suggested by theory and allow for joint F-tests. Regression diagnostics performed on the separate OLS models were used to test for problems associated with heteroskedasticity, autocorrelation, multicollinearity and outliers. White’s test (Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1991) revealed that the models reported here do not suffer from heteroskedasticity ( $White_{DI(11df)} = 12, p>.10$ ;  $White_{SSI(11df)} = 13.92, p>.10$ ). The Woodridge test for autocorrelation using STATA’s ‘xtserial’ command revealed that both the DI and SSI models suffered from autocorrelation despite the inclusion of dummy variables for 1992 and 1993 (Woodridge test  $DI(1df) = 11.28, p<.05$ ; Woodridge test  $SSI(1df) = 54.41, p<.05$ ). As Stimson (1985) has noted, however, autocorrelation of this magnitude tends not to pose serious problems in “shallow” pooled time-series analyses—i.e., those that pool data for a relatively small number of years. The estimated autocorrelation coefficient is substantively small ranging from -.001 in the DI model and .35 in the SSI model. Tolerance results indicated that neither application model had problems with collinearity after the purging regression performed on the poverty variable (see footnote 8).

**TABLE 2**  
**The Applications Model: Number of DI and SSI Applications Filed**  
**per 10,000 State Residents (Seemingly Unrelated Regressions)**

Variables	DI		SSI	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Disability Need	15.40**	5.64	38.35**	19.56
Hispanic Population	-1.08**	0.40	-0.47	1.38
High School Graduation Rate	-1.80**	0.91	-6.40**	3.15
Unemployment Rate	3.34**	1.42	12.34**	4.92
Poverty Rate	-1.33	1.27	18.45***	3.25
Government Ideology	-0.08	0.15	-0.58	0.52
Civic Organizations	48.10**	12.17	-35.06	42.18
AFDC Benefits	0.17	0.21	-1.50*	-1.22
1991	15.59**	6.68	180.65**	23.17
1992	3.39**	6.39	50.58**	22.15
Constant	114.80**	94.39	518.81	327.14

Overall Model:

$R^2 = .59$

$F = 19.37, p = .000$

$N = 144$

$R^2 = .75$

$F = 41.94, p = .001$

$N = 144$

Breusch-Pagan Test:  $\chi^2_{1df} = 0.004, p = .94$

\* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p \leq .05$

clienteles who may confront special barriers to demand making. This relationship does not appear, however, for the SSI program.

The effect of education on claiming rates is a bit more consistent across programs. In line with the predictions of human capital theory, states with smaller high school graduation rates produce significantly higher rates of applications in the SSI and DI programs. On average, a 1 percent decrease in the proportion of citizens graduating from high school produces 1.8 additional DI applications and 6.4 additional SSI applications per 10,000 residents. If residents in Tennessee graduated from high school at the national average (80 percent) rather than at their current rate (67 percent), 25 fewer residents per 10,000 would file for DI benefits and 84 per 10,000 fewer would file for SSI, about a 20 percent and 19 percent reduction respectively. This suggests that increasing education in the U.S. states would reduce demands on the disability programs. Although the impact appears greatest in the SSI equation, a joint F-test reveals that no statistical difference exists ( $F_{df=1}=1.97$ ,  $p=.16$ ).

Economic context appears to have a strong impact on claiming behavior in the states, with negative conditions boosting the number of people who seek help from the government. A 1 percent increase in the unemployment rate produces about 3.3 more DI applications and about 12.3 more SSI applications per 10,000 residents. The effect of unemployment appears to be slightly larger in the SSI program, and a joint F test reveals that this difference is statistically significant at the .08 level ( $F_{1df}=3.10$ ,  $p=.08$ ). Our model predicts that if West Virginia, a state with chronic unemployment problems, were to reduce its unemployment rate to the nation's average and all other variables remained constant, 45 per 10,000 fewer people would apply for DI and 163 per 10,000 fewer people would apply for SSI, for both programs about a 35 percent decrease.

In addition to labor market conditions, the density of poverty in a state influences the application rate in SSI. States in which poor people make up a higher proportion of the population generate significantly more SSI applications than do states with lower poverty rates. Although the coefficient for

poverty is also positive in the DI model, it is not discernible from zero, and a joint F test reveals that its impact is significantly smaller than the impact in the SSI program ( $F_{1df} = 40.91$ ,  $p = .00$ ).

We find no evidence here that state-government ideology affects claiming rates in federal disability programs. By contrast, the strength of civic organizations does appear to matter in the way we expected, with differential effects across programs. Specifically, we find that civic organizations have no discernible impact on SSI application rates, but states with more civic organizations generate significantly larger numbers of DI claims than do states with fewer such organizations. According to our model, increasing the number of civic organizations in a state will increase the numbers of applications filed. In the state with the lowest density of civic organizations (Utah), increasing the number of such organizations one standard deviation would increase the number of applications by 15 per 10,000, a 53 percent increase. Furthermore, in support of our policy feedback hypothesis, states that offer more generous AFDC benefits produce significantly fewer applications in the SSI program, all else equal. A one unit increase in the AFDC benefit leads to a reduction of 1.5 applications per 10,000 in SSI. If the state with the lowest AFDC benefit, Alabama, were to increase the value of the benefit one standard deviation, holding all other variables constant, applications would rise by 29 per 10,000, a 77 percent increase. As expected, however, the relationship between AFDC benefits and applications is stronger in the SSI program than in the DI program ( $F_{1df} = 3.25$ ,  $p = .07$ ) and, in fact, fails to have any significant impact on DI application rates.

**TABLE 3**  
**The Appeals Model: Number of DI and SSI Appeals Filed**  
**per 100 Denied Applications (Seemingly Unrelated Regressions)**

Variables	DI		SSI	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Hispanic Population	-0.21**	0.07	-0.09	0.06
High School Graduation Rate	0.34**	0.17	0.09	0.16
Award Rate	-0.55**	0.10	-0.47**	0.08
Unemployment Rate	0.50**	0.20	0.17	0.17
Poverty Rate	0.15	0.24	0.05	0.22
Government Ideology	0.08**	0.03	0.08**	0.03
Civic Organizations	-2.49	2.41	-1.99	2.22
AFDC Benefits	-0.05	0.04	0.06	0.04
1991*	-7.91**	1.33	4.63**	1.21
1992	0.54**	1.32	2.34**	1.26
Constant	53.70**	19.15	53.20**	16.70
Overall Model:	R <sup>2</sup> = .59 F = 19.08, p = .000 N = 144		R <sup>2</sup> = .44 F = 10.8, p = .000 N = 144	
Breusch-Pagan Test: $\chi^2_{1df} = 29.5, p=.000$				

\*p ≤ .10, \*\*p ≤ .05

## Appeals

Table 3 presents the results of our SUR models predicting ALJ appeal rates in the states, measured as a percentage of DI and SSI denials.<sup>21</sup> The models account for approximately 59 percent of the variation in DI appellate rates and about 44 percent of the variation in SSI appellate rates. Both models offer a significant improvement in fit over a null model in which this block of variables is assumed to have no effect. Results for the Breusch-Pagan test show a significant correlation between the error terms for the DI and SSI equations ( $\chi^2_{1df} = 29.5, p = .00$ ) and, hence, indicate that SUR estimation should be employed.

Some results in this table suggest important connections across stages of the claiming process. Appellate rates, for example, appear to be partly a function of SSA officials' earlier decisions to grant or deny applications. All else equal, states with higher award rates produce fewer ALJ appeals than do states with lower award rates. This relationship holds in both SSI and DI, and we find no discernible difference across programs in the size of the effect ( $F_{1df} = .50, p = .48$ ). The presence of a larger Hispanic population has an effect on appeals rates in the DI but not the SSI program.

State labor markets continue to have an impact on demand making at the appellate stage. States with higher unemployment rates generate significantly higher rates of DI request for ALJ review than do states with lower unemployment rates. On average, a 1 percent increase in the unemployment rate is associated with a .50 percent increase in SSI appeals. Holding all else constant, if West Virginia decreased unemployment by one standard deviation, 1.4 percent fewer residents would appeal their decisions in the DI program. This relationship does not achieve statistical significance in the DI model.

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<sup>21</sup>Once again, regression diagnostics were performed on separate OLS models for the DI and SSI programs. No problems of heteroskedasticity, multicollinearity, or outliers were detected (White  $_{DI(11df)} = 5.76, p > .10$  and White  $_{SSI(11df)} = 3.36, p > .10$ ) As in the application model, the Woodridge test for autocorrelation revealed that both models suffered from some autocorrelation (Woodridge test  $_{DI(1df)} = 4.97, p = .04$  and Woodridge test  $_{SSI(1df)} = 6.82, p = .01$ ). The estimated autocorrelation coefficient is small, however, ranging from -.03 in the SSI model and .02 in the DI model.

Beyond this point, we find a number of results suggesting that the application and appellate stages of the claiming process follow a somewhat different logic. Despite their effects on application rates in at least one of the two programs, we find no evidence that poverty rates or civic organizations have any impact on appeal rates for either DI or SSI. Perhaps more striking, high school graduation rates (which tended to depress application rates), show up here as a factor that promotes higher ALJ appeal rates in the DI program. A 1 percent increase in the high school graduation rate is associated with a .34 percent increase in the DI appeal rate. Likewise, although higher AFDC benefits dampened SSI claiming at the application stage, we do not find this relationship at the appellate stage (in fact, the coefficient is in the opposite direction). Finally, the findings for government ideology also signal some discontinuity across stages of the claiming process. Holding all else constant, if state elected officials in Maryland, the most liberal state in our data set, became more like the national average on the ideology scale, about 3 percent fewer residents would apply for DI and SSI benefits. Government ideology had no effect on application rates, but here we find that states with more liberal governments produce higher rates of appeal in both the SSI and the DI programs. Indeed, the impact of government ideology on appellate rates does not vary significantly across programs ( $F_{1df} = .01$ ,  $p = .92$ ).

In sum, then, welfare claiming in federal disability programs appears to be systematically related to a variety of state characteristics. At the application stage, the factors that rise to importance in one program or other include disability-based need, economic contexts related to poverty and unemployment, the ethnic composition and educational attainment of citizens, the density of civic organizations, and the generosity of state-run programs for poor families. At the appellate stage, demand rates in these programs appear to depend on bureaucratic “gate-keeping” at earlier stages of the process, disability-based need, educational attainment of state residents, labor market conditions, and state government ideology. What seems most apparent from the results reported in Table 2 is that the factors that influence aggregate demands on disability programs do so in complex and multifaceted ways. Factors that have a significant

impact in one program often do not in another, and factors that have an impact at one stage of the claiming process are often of little consequence at a different stage.

## DISCUSSION

The preceding analysis offers a number of important insights into the nature and dynamics of citizen demand making in the U.S. welfare system. Like other federal social policies, DI and SSI have uniform national rules governing eligibility, application, appeal, and benefit distribution. Yet, as we have seen, demands on these two programs vary systematically across the states. By investigating the sources of this variation, we believe it is possible to improve the ways we conceptualize welfare claiming and explain the ebb and flow of mass demands on the welfare state.

To begin with, our analysis reveals that disability benefits are an outgrowth of impairment-based need. Such an emphasis on impairments can be traced to the very real mental and physical conditions experienced by DI and SSI clients; it is faithful to the rules of eligibility employed by the SSA; and it is politically useful for advocates who work to defend and expand disability programs. Even after controlling for how many state residents feel they have an impairment that prevents them from working, however, other contextual variables affect how many residents actually make a claim for disability benefits.

Turning to these other factors, we find several patterns that underscore the value of thinking about welfare claiming as a mode of political demand making. Because U.S. welfare programs are not designed to seek out potential clients, they resemble other channels in the American political system that rely on citizens to step forward and make themselves heard by government. The rate of citizen demand making in welfare programs depends, at least in part, on factors that are familiar to students of more “conventional” modes of political action. Formal education (the distribution of which may be viewed as a political outcome in its own right) is a crucial source of skills and beliefs that boost the frequency and effectiveness of many forms of political demand making (Nie et al. 1996; Verba et al. 1995). Our findings suggest that education may similarly bestow advantages to citizens who try to negotiate the welfare

claiming process: states that have more educated residents generate significantly higher appeal rates in the DI program. Similarly, just as civic organizations help mobilize other forms of citizen demand making (Putnam et al. 1993; Verba et al. 1995), we find that states with a greater density of civic organizations produce higher rates of application for DI benefits. Equally important, our results suggest an important consequence of the class skew in civic attachment; we find that strong civic sectors boost claiming among the DI applicant pool, but not among the more disadvantaged SSI applicant pool. Finally, our finding that states with larger Hispanic populations generate fewer demands on the DI program is wholly consistent with a long tradition of studies showing that social marginality translates into disadvantages in political demand making (Verba and Nie 1972; Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989).

Our findings similarly underscore the need to analyze welfare demand making as a function of economic context. Welfare applications and appeals are, at root, claims that government should partially exempt individuals from the pressures of market distribution (Stone 1984). As such, demands on disability programs are likely to depend on the extent to which individuals can access nongovernmental sources of income. States with more pervasive poverty, for example, generate a significantly greater number of applications for SSI benefits.<sup>22</sup> More generally, we find consistent effects associated with labor market conditions and education rates. It is a commonplace in writing on disability that impairments are not by themselves disabling; rather impairments combine with environments and other characteristics of the individual to shape activity-specific capacities (Stone 1984; Mashaw 1997). Our findings highlight the importance of this insight for understanding the conversion of impairments into claims on federal disability programs. States that have larger numbers of educated residents (who should have greater access to accommodating jobs) generate significantly fewer applications for SSI and DI benefits.

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<sup>22</sup>Here, we hasten to note that, if anything, our models understate the impact of poverty. The purging procedure applied to the poverty variable imposes an assumption that any shared variance in the dependent variable is attributable, not to poverty, but to other independent variables in the equation. As a result, some portion of the variance that would otherwise appear to be explained by poverty does not show up in our models as a poverty effect. This measurement issue should be borne in mind especially in comparing the limited effects of poverty context (significant in only one model) to the stronger effects of unemployment context (significant in three models).

Likewise, states with tougher employment conditions produce higher rates of demand making in both federal disability programs.

A final set of findings in this analysis underscores the capacity for state officials to shape the amount and direction of citizen demands on the welfare system. Three results are particularly noteworthy in this regard. First, in both SSI and DI, states with more liberal officials tend to produce higher appellate rates than do states with more conservative officials. Second, state administrators exercise gate-keeping discretion in ways that shape the pool of potential appellants; the result is that states that deny applications in larger numbers produce significantly greater demands on the ALJ appellate system. Third, the decisions state officials make in setting AFDC benefit levels appear to have a significant impact on demand making in the SSI program. Although categorical welfare programs appear to serve distinct target populations, the reality is that applicant pools for social welfare programs overlap in significant ways. Citizens' decisions to assert a claim through one channel of the welfare system rather than another may hinge on a variety of factors: advice obtained through social networks, direction from administrators, social stigma, the institutional terms of program participation, and so on. Our finding for the SSI program underscores the potential for low benefit levels in a state-run poverty program to produce a form of policy feedback that enhances demand making in a federal disability program. Among other things, this finding raises significant questions about how claims on federal disability programs might be affected by the proliferation of new welfare rules that states have adopted since 1996 under the TANF system (Soss et al. 2001). If state governments reduce the value of their cash benefits to poor single parents in response to the devolution of welfare policy from the federal government to the states, demands on federal antipoverty programs may increase.

#### CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POLITICAL MODEL OF WELFARE CLAIMING

Stepping back to look at the broader implications of this analysis, we see several important lessons for research on welfare demand making. To begin with, there are clear signals here that researchers should aim for greater precision regarding stages of the welfare claiming process. The factors

that shape application rates can differ considerably from those that shape appellate rates. Because most studies of program take-up do not isolate stages of the claiming process, they identify only the *net effects* independent variables have on claiming rates. In such an approach, a factor that has a major impact on claiming at one stage of the process may be obscured—diluted through combination with stages where it has no impact. For scholars and practitioners alike, it is important to understand not only which factors affect demand making but also how these factors operate at specific stages of the claiming process.

The effects of education, for example, vary between the application and appellate stage, with education reducing the initial demand for benefits in both programs but then increasing appellate rates in the DI program. This finding highlights both the importance and complexity of education as a force shaping citizen demands on government. Education both reduces the need that citizens have for government assistance and increases their ability to challenge the government when agencies fail to meet citizen needs. Neglect of either stage of the application process would leave researchers with a misleading view of how education affects claiming behavior.

Beyond the effects of education, we see consistent evidence that initial claims and subsequent appeals constitute different types of demands on government. Our findings suggest that initial requests are driven more by medical and economic need for benefits, the value of benefits in one program compared to benefits in others, contexts of unemployment, poverty, and educational attainment, as well as the strength of civic organizations. Like initial applications, challenges to government denials are, to some extent, driven by economic need (as indicated by the association with award rates). But unlike preliminary claims, appeal rates are not affected by the poverty rate or by the density of civic organizations; instead, they are positively influenced by government liberalism and higher levels of education. Compared to initial applications, efforts to challenge a government denial require a higher level of resources, skills, and commitment to the legitimacy of one's claim. A denied application signals to the applicant that government experts believe she or he can and should work. Confronted with such a denial, individual

responses are likely to depend on complex assessments of their own conditions and needs, their abilities to contest government action, and the extent to which officials view social policy claims as legitimate.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to distinguishing among different stages of the claiming process, it is also important for researchers to take a comparative approach to claiming patterns across different programs. Our findings underscore the need to confront integration and continuity in the U.S. welfare system. Our SUR results strongly suggest that appeals in the DI and SSI programs should be analyzed as related processes. We also find a number of factors that have consistent effects across programs, such as unemployment and education in our models of application rates. On a second level, however, our results highlight the need to examine how claiming patterns vary across program domains. Even in closely related disability programs, the forces that shape claiming rates are likely to differ in important ways. Consider, for example, the greater impact of poverty rates and AFDC benefits in the SSI program or the greater effects of Hispanic population and civic organizations in the DI program. Such findings suggest that the political logic of welfare demand making is likely to take on a slightly different form in each channel of the welfare state.

The upshot of all this is that if researchers are to develop an adequate understanding of demand making in the U.S. welfare system, they will need a general theoretical model that confronts variation along several dimensions. Citizen demands on federal disability programs vary systematically across states and over time. The factors that account for this variation shift in important ways as we look across programs and stages of the claiming process. Demand patterns in seemingly distinct programs (DI and SSI) may be related; benefit levels in one program (AFDC) can affect claiming patterns in another (SSI); official decisions at earlier stages of the process (award rates) can influence demand making at a later stage (appeals). To deal with all these sources of variation, we will need to develop stronger theoretical

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<sup>23</sup>Our evidence that civic organizations matter more for DI application rates than for DI appellate rates is particularly intriguing. Any attempt to interpret this pattern must, for now, remain speculative. But a plausible explanation might be found in the tendency for DI claimants to seek out formal legal representation after an initial application has been denied (Kritzer 1998: chap. 4). Although some civic organizations provide referrals to disability-insurance lawyers, direct advertising is so prevalent in this contingency-fee market that the density of civic organizations becomes less consequential at the appellate stage.

accounts of welfare claiming *as a political process organized by a system that is both categorical and integrated*. Future empirical studies must identify not only which factors matter, but specifically where and how they matter for political outcomes that vary across time, program, and claiming stage.

Finally, we end by underscoring the importance of a dialogue between general theories of political participation and empirical studies of social welfare demand making. As Verba et al. (1995) have emphasized, modes of political participation vary greatly in the messages they express to government and in the factors that drive their usage, but this diversity does not make general theorizing a fool's errand. To the contrary, general theories allow us to specify the similarities and differences across modes of participation and to use a comparative framework to make sense of each. Indeed, important advances in the study of participation have been achieved as researchers have gradually sought to incorporate more diverse forms of demand making in their analyses. To date, however, the study of welfare claiming and the study of political participation have remained largely separate enterprises. Thus, students of participation have ignored a crucial way in which citizens seek government responsiveness and have squandered a potentially fruitful basis for refining and specifying their theories. Likewise, students of "program take-up" have paid little attention to factors that participation scholars have long recognized as important sources for demands on government. The analysis presented here underscores the potential for a more fruitful dialogue in the future.



**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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