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Symposium Article

# Does Administrative Burden Influence Public Support for Government Programs? Evidence from a Survey Experiment

**Abstract:** *Research indicates that administrative burden influences the behaviors and views of clients and potential clients of government programs. However, administrative burden may also shape mass attitudes toward government programs. Taking a behavioral public administration approach, the authors consider whether and how exposure to information about administrative burden embedded within eligibility-based programs influences citizen favorability toward those programs. It is hypothesized that if information about the existing screening mechanisms is highlighted and made salient, this will lead to greater approval of eligibility-based programs. This expectation is evaluated using a survey experiment that explores administrative burden in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The evidence shows that being exposed to information about administrative burden increases favorability toward TANF and its recipients, though these effects are conditional on party identification. The results provide insight into a potential consequence of administrative burden, showing the way in which information regarding burden can shape citizens' support for eligibility-based programs.*

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## Evidence for Practice

- Public managers in social welfare programs face challenges in gaining public support because of the stigma associated with these programs.
- The evidence suggests that giving the public information about program screening improves views toward welfare programs.
- Increasing awareness about program screening processes may be beneficial. However, public officials should consider potential trade-offs, such as discouraging applications.

Research on administrative burden and policy feedback indicates that administrative burden shapes target populations' understanding of their role as citizens, influences their political participation, and affects the likelihood that they apply for benefits. However, administrative burden may also affect policy and politics by shaping mass attitudes toward government programs. Taking a behavioral public administration approach (see Battaglio et al. 2019; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017), we combine insights from psychology and public administration to develop expectations regarding the effect of information about administrative burden on attitudes toward government programs, specifically eligibility-based programs. We hypothesize that bringing attention to the level of burden embedded in eligibility determination processes for programs will influence how members of the general public view these programs and their clients. There is a narrative surrounding some government benefit programs, particularly those considered welfare, that the benefits from these programs are easy to obtain and go to those who are undeserving or who cheat the system. We suggest that information about the level

of administrative burden associated with obtaining government benefits might increase support for these programs and their recipients by countering this negative perception with a signal regarding recipient deservingness and program integrity. We hypothesize that this effect will be the largest for those who identify as Republican, who, on average, may be more likely to view cash assistance programs and their recipients in a negative light (see Jensen and Petersen 2017; Pew Research Center 2017; Smith 2017).

We test and find support for these expectations using a survey experiment on attitudes toward Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program for low-income families. Our results suggest that highlighting information about administrative burden in the TANF program, both relatively high and low levels, increases support for the program and improves attitudes toward beneficiaries. These effects are largely driven by those self-identifying as Republican. These results do not point toward increasing the level of administrative burden as a means of increasing support, but rather toward informing citizens of the

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burdens *already in place*. Two interconnected points are related to this. First, our survey experiment reflects real burdens that TANF applicants might face. Second, we find that even information about low levels of burden, involving only an application and an eligibility interview, leads to greater program support. In fact, these results suggest that burden could be potentially reduced in many programs and still increase favorability, if attention were called to it. While several other articles in this symposium highlight the importance of burdens for the attitudes and behaviors of clients and public sector applicants (see Christensen et al. 2019; Fox, Feng, and Stazyk 2019; Hattke, Hensel, and Kaluza 2019; Linos and Riesch 2019), our study highlights the importance of understanding the way in which administrative burden shapes citizen attitudes toward programs. This is important for the politics of program reform and funding.

### Administrative Burden

Program design can create administrative burden for citizens interacting with the government. Scholars have defined administrative burden as onerous experiences during policy implementation, or more specifically, the “learning, psychological, and compliance costs that citizens experience in their interactions with the government” (Herd and Moynihan 2018, 22). Examples include immigration policy, with complex documentation and high application fees, and higher education policy, with applications for financial aid that require high levels of knowledge (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Unlike red tape, which is defined as rules that do not advance a legitimate purpose (Bozeman 2000), administrative burden can “serve legitimate public values” (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015, 44). Research on administrative burden indicates that it influences access to government programs (Brodtkin and Majmundar 2010; Keiser and Soss 1998; Lipsky 1980; Wolfe and Scrivner 2005) and that human capital characteristics, such as reduced executive functioning, interact with administrative burden, exacerbating the effect of this type of participation barrier (see Christensen et al. 2019).

Administrative burden varies across programs and locations, with some programs placing very high demands on the public before they can access public resources and others placing very low demands (Moynihan and Herd 2010; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Not all social welfare programs impose the same level of administrative burden on citizens. High levels of burden are particularly common for social welfare programs where eligibility is not universal and the state seeks to ensure that only those who are eligible receive benefits (e.g., Medicaid) (Herd et al. 2013). Differences in administrative burdens have important consequences for legal justice, social equity, rights to political participation, and a minimum standard of living (Moynihan and Herd 2010).

The differences in administrative burden across programs, or within the same program across different locations or time, reflect political processes (Herd and Moynihan 2018; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; Moynihan, Herd, and Ribgy 2016; Schneider and Ingram 1993). In their discussion of the social construction of target populations, Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that program designs will create more burden and provide fewer benefits for participants when those participants lack political power and/or when they are plagued by negative stereotypes.

### Policy Feedback and Administrative Burden

The literature on policy feedback adds to the work on administrative burden by highlighting not only the extent to which program design shapes how and whether individuals participate in programs but also the extent to which it impacts the political landscape and policy debates by creating and mobilizing participants and interest groups for policy change (Gusmano, Schlesinger, and Thomas 2002; Mettler 2011; Pierson 1993). Policy feedback theory turns traditional models of policy change on their head by focusing not on how politics creates policy, but instead on how policy creates politics (Mettler and Soss 2004).

An important component of the policy feedback literature is the recognition that public programs have symbolic impacts by communicating societal values about who has standing and power (Edelman 1971; Mettler and Soss 2004). Policies communicate to clients whether they should expect fair treatment from government and whether they are worthy of it (Moynihan and Soss 2014). Scholars have recognized the significant effects that administrative burden may have on the political experiences and attitudes of clients (Moynihan and Soss 2014). Policies that are viewed as fair and that have participatory administration foster higher levels of engagement and political efficacy (Bruch, Fernee, and Soss 2010). In contrast, policies that are intrusive reduce civic and political trust (Kumlin 2004). Soss (2000) finds that the administration of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program delivered much more positive messages about the worthiness of clients than did the administration of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC was much more intrusive than SSI in its regulation of client behavior. Those participating in AFDC had lower levels of political efficacy than those participating in SSI (Soss 2000).

The way in which a program is designed also sends signals to those outside the program (Douglas 1987; Raven et al. 2011). Program rules and processes affect whether citizens view the program as furthering a morally just outcome such as providing benefits to those who deserve them (Rothstein 1998). In other words, public programs, through their design, provide symbols of morality. The audience for these symbols is not just the target population but also the public as a whole (Mettler and Soss 2004). Therefore, the design of a program, including the administrative burden, might influence the attitudes of the mass public as well as clients of the program.

Recent scholarship provides evidence of a relationship between program design and public opinion (see Jacobs and Mettler 2018). For example, in a survey experiment, subjects responded differently to policies depending on whether the same benefits were distributed indirectly through tax expenditures or more directly through a cash benefit (Haselswerdt and Bartels 2015). Similarly, research indicates that individuals in states with restaurant smoking bans have more negative views of smokers after the enactment of the ban (Pacheco 2013).

As symbols, the burdens that program design creates for the poor are particularly important. Historically, policies for the poor have been shaped by the desire to classify “poor people by merit” and separate the “deserving” from the “undeserving” poor (Katz 1989). Views of deservingness often reflect whether individuals are viewed as victims of circumstances beyond their control (see Aarøe and Petersen 2014; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Thomann and Rapp 2017).

Importantly, whether clients are seen as deserving is a significant determinant of public support for programs (Gilens 1999). Attitudes toward welfare programs can be shaped by providing citizens with cues regarding client deservingness (see Petersen et al. 2010; Slothuus 2007).<sup>1</sup> For example, opinion polls show different levels of support for government spending on social services when questions use “welfare” versus “assistance to the poor” (Rasinski 1989); the use of the word “welfare” may call to mind more negative views of welfare clients versus the needy more broadly (see Smith 1987).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, using survey experiments, Petersen et al. (2010) find that respondents’ attitudes toward welfare depend on whether they are exposed to contextual information about the beneficiaries of the program. They argue that contextual information allows individuals to use a psychological deservingness heuristic to make quick assessments about programs.<sup>3</sup> This research suggests that policy makers and the media can shape public opinion of programs by how they talk about the program and the features that they emphasize (see also Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Matsubayashi 2013; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997).

Many programs for the poor create burdens for applicants to overcome before receiving benefits. Burdens often reflect societal views of target populations as either deserving or undeserving of intervention (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Skocpol 1993). Highlighting the existence of these burdens should influence attitudes toward programs. For citizens concerned that the “undeserving” are receiving benefits, knowing about the strict screening processes that are in place for antipoverty programs may help to counteract negative perceptions of these programs. These burdens may be viewed by the public as helping to maintain program integrity. Such an argument motivated several Democratic policy makers to support the 1996 welfare reform bill (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) (Soss and Schram 2007). Eligibility rules and application requirements in TANF reflect an understanding of poverty as due to individual failings and seek to ensure that only people who have a strong work ethic, are not drug addicts, lack assets, and can transition off benefits quickly have access to benefits (Soss and Schram 2007).

Some Democrats hoped that TANF would reduce the overall animus toward antipoverty programs, which has been consistent since the late 1960s. Some scholars found that in the short run, mass attitudes shifted (see Shaw and Shapiro 2002). However, as Soss and Schram (2007) find, these changes were not long-lasting; the negative attitudes toward the poor returned to their base levels in years when welfare reform was not at the top of the political agenda. Soss and Schram (2007) suggest that this is partly because most people are not TANF recipients and lack knowledge about the program. In fact, they note the possibility that liberals may have lost a political opportunity to highlight these severe new aspects of TANF as a mechanism to increase political support.

As a whole, this work suggests that knowledge about the high levels of administrative burden built into the eligibility criteria and processes of TANF should increase support for the program and its participants. Specifically, we expect that exposure to information about relatively high levels of administrative burden in the TANF application process will be associated with more positive views of TANF and its recipients.<sup>4</sup> We expect that by providing information

about high levels of administrative burden in the application process, people will focus on the vetting that takes place, which should, in turn, make them more likely to see the program as legitimate and its recipients as deserving. In line with much of the work on priming, this research considers the “activation of social representations (e.g., traits, stereotypes, or goals) by exposure to different types of information, and the application of these activated representations in social judgments and behaviors” (Molden 2014, 3).

In contrast to the expectation for information about high levels of administrative burden, we also expect that exposure to information about low levels of burden will lead to less support for TANF and its participants. The rationale underlying this expectation is the reverse of the logic for high levels of administrative burden. If high levels of burden help convey a positive signal regarding deservingness and program integrity, then low levels might signal that government benefits are easily obtained, possibly going to the “undeserving.” Thus, our expectations are as follows.

**Hypothesis 1:** Information about a high level of administrative burden in the application process leads to greater support for TANF and its recipients compared with no information about the application process.

**Hypothesis 2:** Information about a low level of administrative burden in the application process leads to less support for TANF and its recipients compared with no information about the application process.

Additionally, exposure to information about administrative burden might have the greatest effect for individuals predisposed to think that the program serves individuals who are only in need because of lack of effort or who think program benefits are too easily obtained. Party identification, among other factors, has been a stable predictor of views toward welfare and welfare spending for a while (see Garand, Xu, and Davis 2017; Gilens 1996; Jacoby 1994; Kam and Nam 2008), with Republicans generally showing less support.<sup>5</sup> On average, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to view poverty as a consequence of lack of effort as opposed to circumstances beyond one’s control; in a recent poll, 56 percent of Republicans link poverty to lack of effort (32 percent note uncontrollable circumstances) compared with 19 percent of Democrats (71 percent cite circumstances) (Smith 2017).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, recent evidence indicates that those who identify as conservative, an ideological perspective held by many who identify as Republican (Saad 2018), are more likely than liberals to view the need of the unemployed as controllable (Jensen and Petersen 2017).<sup>7</sup> In a related vein, when asked whether most people who receive welfare are genuinely in need of help or taking advantage of the system, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to respond that welfare recipients are taking advantage of the system (63 percent of Republicans compared with 29 percent of Democrats) (PRRI/The Atlantic 2016). Republicans are also less likely to agree that the poor have hard lives because government benefits do not go far enough (25 percent of Republicans agree compared with 76 percent of Democrats) (Pew Research Center 2017).

These views about the causes of poverty, welfare recipients, and the government’s role in providing assistance suggest that information

about the requirements associated with obtaining government benefits might, to a degree, work to counter some of the negative perceptions of TANF and its recipients, indicating that these benefits are not simply handed-out but instead require navigating a rule-laden process. This may increase confidence in program integrity and recipient deservingness. As such, we suggest that increases in support for TANF and its participants associated with high levels of administrative burden and decreases associated with low levels of administrative burden will be most pronounced among those who identify as Republican.

**Hypothesis 3:** The effects of high or low levels of administrative burden on attitudes toward TANF and its recipients will be greater for Republican respondents than for their Democratic counterparts.

Our characterization of burden assumes that a high level of burden leads individuals to think that program eligibility is being rigorously (if not overly) assessed and that a low level of burden leads individuals to think that little screening is taking place, possibly endangering program integrity. This assumption is based, in part, on the evidence that the public is often in support of additional requirements for government programs.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, however, that if respondents have never thought about the TANF application process or assume it is very easy, even automatic at certain income levels, then even information that suggests minimal vetting, such as our low burden case, may have a positive effect on attitudes toward TANF, given this baseline. With the public's lack of knowledge of the TANF program (see Hetling, McDermott, and Mapps 2008), this may be the case.

### Survey Experiment

To test our expectations regarding the effect of information about administrative burden on attitudes toward TANF, we administered a survey experiment in April 2018. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, and we recruited respondents through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The compensation was \$0.85. We had approximately 1,234

respondents.<sup>9</sup> Individuals were eligible to participate if they were U.S. residents and had at least a 90 percent approval rating on all prior MTurk work. MTurk workers are required to be 18 years of age or older, which they were asked to confirm at the start of the survey.

For our experiment, we developed three vignettes, one of which was shown to respondents at random. The control did not provide respondents with any information about the application process. It simply provided respondents with some information about the TANF program (which was quoted from Falk 2016). The text is presented in figure 1. The first treatment vignette provided respondents with the same information about the TANF program as well as information about an application process with relatively low levels of administrative burden (see figure 2). Finally, the second treatment vignette provided respondents with information about the TANF program, as well as information about an application process with relatively high levels of administrative burden (see figure 3).

The application process for TANF varies across time and locations. We wanted the application processes described in the vignettes to represent reality as much as possible. To that end, for the application information in our vignettes, we used a report prepared by staff of the Urban Institute for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Holcomb et al. 2003). This report describes the TANF application process at six locations across the United States in 2001. We looked for examples of program features that increased learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs, as described by Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015). The vignette for the low burden application process largely reflects the application process in an office in Seattle, Washington in 2001, which had the least demanding process of those described in the report, and the high burden process largely reflects the application process in New York City at this time, which had the most demanding process of those described. For the high burden vignette, the specific mention of a drug test was added; the original text from the report stated "additional medical and substance abuse reviews at other locations." The drug test statement comes from

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant provides federal grants to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Indian tribes, and the territories for a wide range of benefits, services, and activities. It is best known for helping states pay for cash welfare for needy families with children, but it funds a wide array of additional activities.

Figure 1 Text of Control Vignette

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant provides federal grants to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Indian tribes, and the territories for a wide range of benefits, services, and activities. It is best known for helping states pay for cash welfare for needy families with children, but it funds a wide array of additional activities.

To apply for TANF,

- Applicants submit an application for benefits and
- Complete an eligibility interview

Figure 2 Text of Low Administrative Burden Vignette



The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant provides federal grants to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Indian tribes, and the territories for a wide range of benefits, services, and activities. It is best known for helping states pay for cash welfare for needy families with children, but it funds a wide array of additional activities.

To apply for TANF,

- Individuals give the completed application to the Job Center receptionist who asks preliminary questions. A number of documents, including driver's license, birth certificate, current rent receipt or lease, school records, pay stubs, tax returns, current bank records, etc., may be required to verify information.
- A Job Opportunity Specialist (i.e., eligibility worker) screens applicants, explains the program, and offers alternative services to cash assistance.
- If the applicant would still like to apply for cash assistance, the Job Opportunity Specialist conducts an eligibility interview, prepares an initial assessment and work plan, and refers the applicant to:
  - An eligibility verification review performed at a different office location, which may require additional documentation that was not requested during the initial eligibility interview, and
  - A subsequent home visit,
  - A workforce orientation,
  - Finger imaging and photographing,
  - Mandatory daily job search classes for the duration of the 30-day eligibility determination period, and if necessary,
  - Alcohol/drug screening and assessment which may include a drug test.

### Figure 3 Text of High Administrative Burden Vignette

New York State's temporary assistance website.<sup>10</sup> Also, the list of documents, which comes from New York City's cash assistance website, was added to the high burden vignette, as well as the mention of additional documentation, which was noted for New York City earlier in the Holcomb et al. (2003) report.<sup>11</sup> More recent documentation suggests that New York City's application process has most of the same elements that it did in 2001.<sup>12</sup> While the low burden treatment simply lists an application and an interview (two program elements that could contribute to burden), the high burden treatment exposes the respondent to many additional items that create application burdens, such as a home visit, a workforce orientation, and mandatory daily job searches (approximately eight burdens). Our control vignette does not include any information about burden.

After reading one of the three vignettes, we asked respondents to answer five questions gauging either support for the TANF program or attitudes toward TANF recipients.<sup>13</sup> The five questions were as follows:

1. Support for the TANF program
  - Do you approve or disapprove of the TANF program?
  - Do you think that the federal government should spend more, less, or the same on the TANF program?
2. Views of TANF recipients
  - TANF benefits help people care for their family.
  - People who apply for TANF benefits just do not try hard enough to find a job.
  - Many TANF recipients manage to obtain benefits they are not entitled to.

The first question had a five-category response, ranging from "strongly approve" to "strongly disapprove." For the second

question, respondents could select more, the same, or less. The five-category responses for the last three questions were "strongly agree," "somewhat agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "somewhat disagree," and "strongly disagree." The questions were randomized to account for order effects.<sup>14</sup> The first two questions, or versions of them, are often used to gauge support for welfare or other policies.<sup>15</sup> The three questions about views toward TANF recipients are based on comparable questions asked in the European Social Survey (2008, 2016); these questions have been used in other work (see Cavaillé and Trump 2015; Daniele and Geys 2015; Mischke 2014).<sup>16</sup>

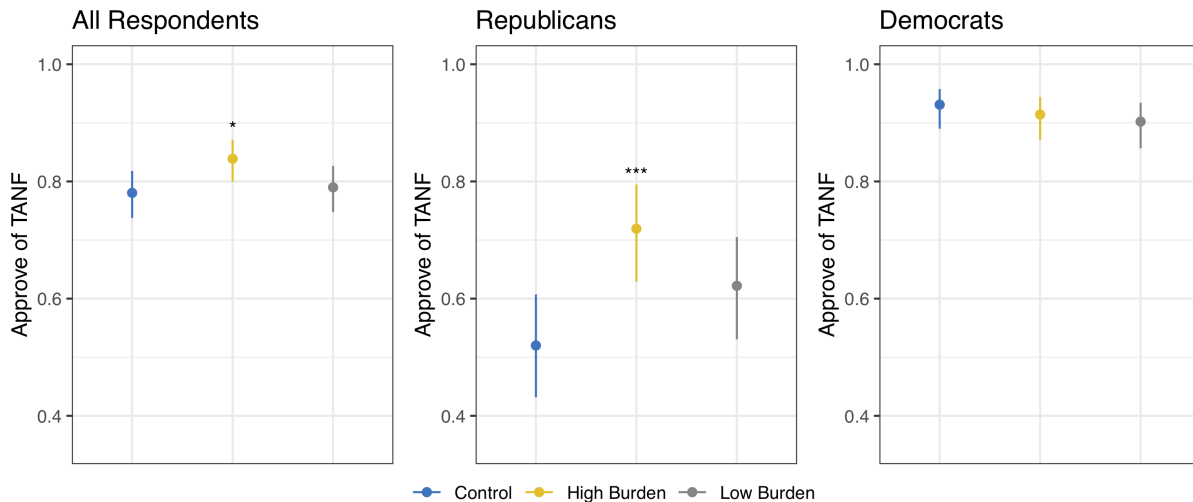
Overall, there are a little over 400 respondents in each experimental condition.<sup>17</sup> Table 1 reports demographic and other background characteristics for the survey as a whole and for the experimental groups; most characteristics are reported as percentages of the group, while the median is reported for age. For comparison, we have also included these statistics for the U.S. adult population. Similar to other MTurk samples, the respondents are younger, more educated, and more likely to affiliate with the Democratic Party than the U.S. adult population.<sup>18</sup>

Because the use of convenience samples, such as MTurk, can raise questions about generalizability, recent research has investigated the correspondence between experimental results obtained from MTurk and other samples (see Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). Research comparing treatment effects from experiments conducted with population-based samples to those from experiments conducted in MTurk generally shows high levels of correspondence (see Coppock 2018; Coppock, Leeper, and Mullinix 2018b; Jeong et al. 2018; Mullinix et al. 2015). There is also evidence that liberals and conservatives on MTurk share the views of their

**Table 1** Demographic and Other Background Characteristics

	All	High Burden Group	Low Burden Group	Control Group	U.S. Adult Population*
Democrats+leaners	56.7%	57%	56.8%	56.4%	47%
Republicans+leaners	29.1%	27.9%	28.7%	30.7%	42%
Age	36	36	36	35	47
Female	50.3%	51%	48.6%	51.3%	51%
Hispanic or Latino	10.3%	9.8%	10.2%	10.8%	15%
African American	8.7%	7.8%	9.4%	8.8%	12%
College degree or higher	55.8%	55.1%	52.9%	59.5%	28%

\*U.S. adult population data sources: partisanship: Jones (2018); median age: U.S. Census Bureau (2017b); gender, Hispanic origin, race, and education: U.S. Census Bureau (2017a).



Note: Statistical significance is relative to the control group. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Figure 4** Percentage Approving of TANF (95% Confidence Interval)

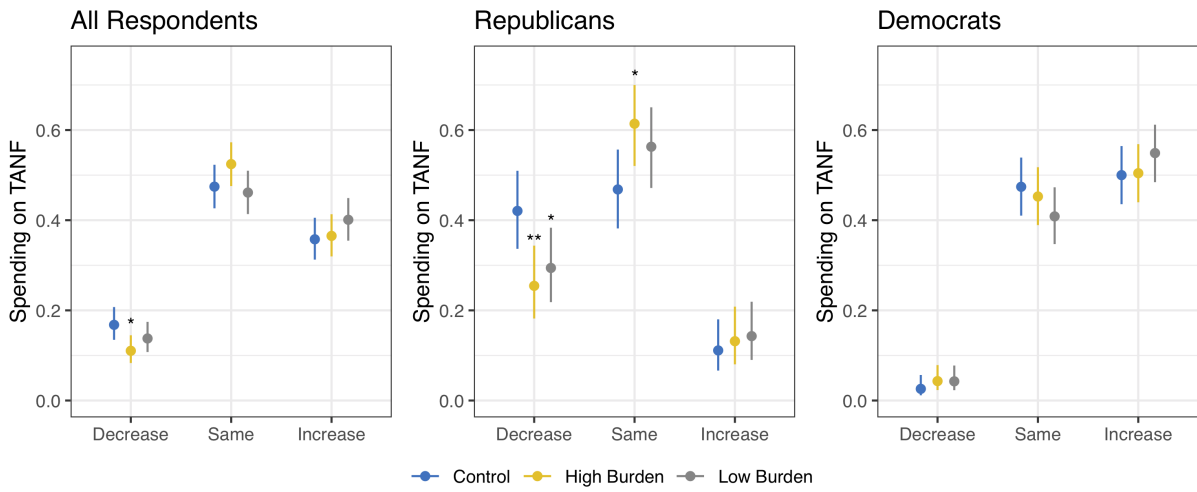
ideological counterparts in the U.S. population (Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner 2015).

## Results

The results are presented in a series of figures showing the proportions of respondents who respond positively to the TANF program questions or the questions about TANF recipients across the three experimental conditions. We present this information for all respondents, Republican respondents, and Democratic respondents.<sup>19</sup> Generally, the results provide evidence in support of the hypotheses for high burden; respondents in the high burden condition are generally more supportive of the TANF program and its recipients.<sup>20</sup> As expected, this is particularly the case for Republican respondents. The differences across treatment groups for all respondents appear to reflect the differences for Republican respondents primarily. Interestingly, the results suggest that information about low administrative burden in the application process also has a positive effect on views toward TANF and its recipients relative to the control group, which included no information about the application process. While the positive effects associated with low burden are not as large as those associated with high levels of administrative burden, they are fairly consistent across the different dependent variables. This finding suggests that even information about minimal screening processes increases support, which is discussed more later.

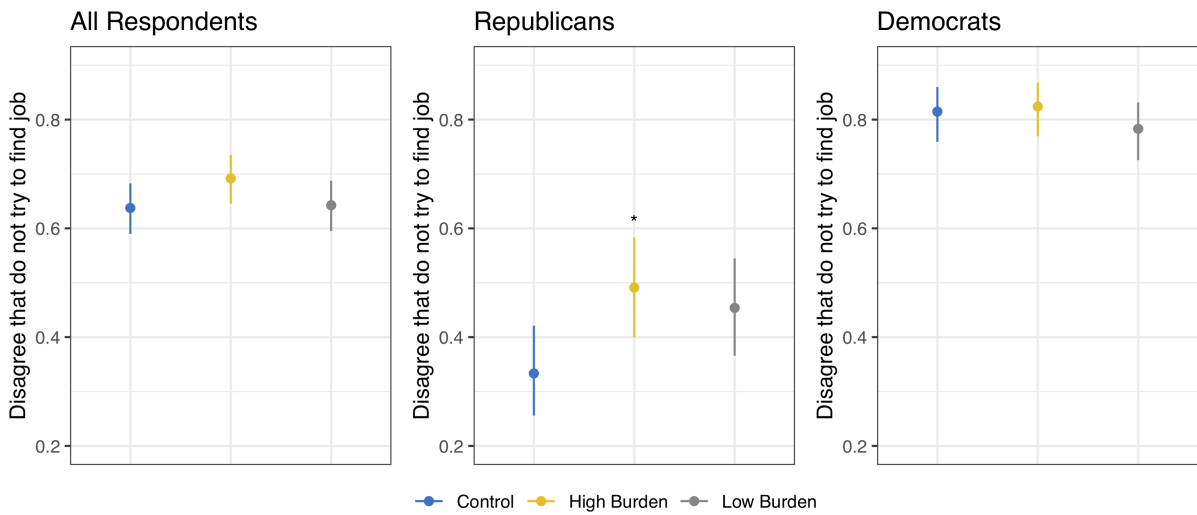
The first two figures (figures 4 and 5) present the results for the questions regarding support for the TANF program. Figure 4 presents the results for approval of TANF. The responses to this question are measured on a five-point scale from “strongly approve” to “strongly disapprove”; this figure presents the results for the percentage of respondents who strongly/somewhat approved of the TANF program. Looking at all respondents, there is a 6 percentage point increase ( $p \leq .05$ ) when comparing the high burden group to the control group. Similar patterns are revealed when looking at Republican respondents only, although the differences are larger. Approval increases by 20 percentage points ( $p \leq .001$ ) between the control and the high burden group, which is a meaningful increase. For Democratic respondents, the story is quite different. The differences between groups are not statistically significant.

The results for spending on TANF reveal a comparable pattern, as seen in figure 5. Figure 5 presents the results for the percentage of respondents who think the federal government should spend more, the same, or less on TANF. Among all respondents, we see a difference among those responding that the government should spend less on TANF; when compared with the control group, there is a 6 percentage point decrease ( $p \leq .05$ ) in the percentage who want to spend less in the high burden group. For Republican respondents, these differences are much more pronounced. The percentage in favor of spending less on TANF is 17 percentage points ( $p \leq .01$ )



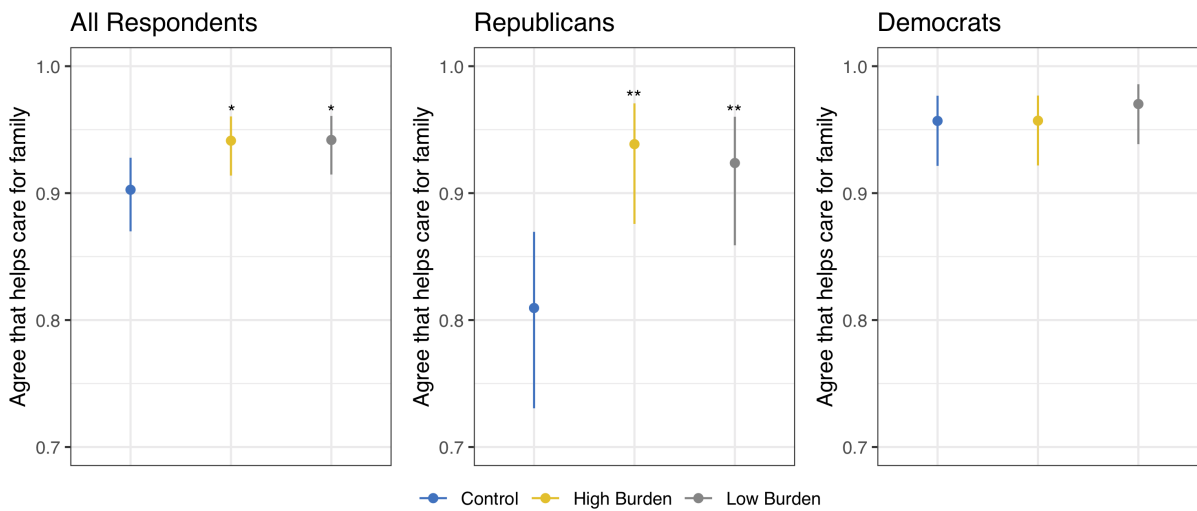
Note: Statistical significance is relative to the control group. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Figure 5 Spending on TANF (95% Confidence Interval)**



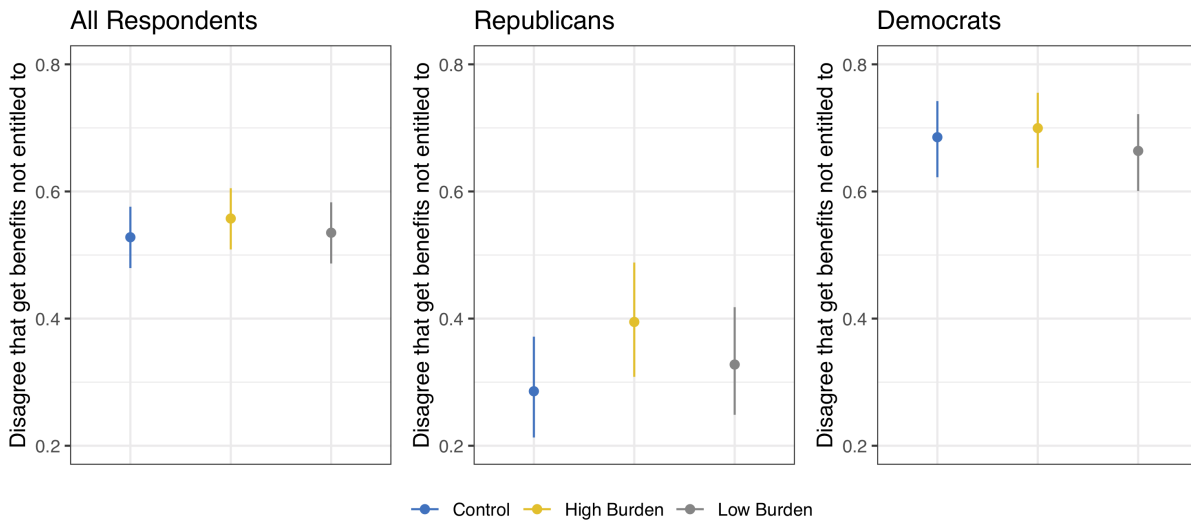
Note: Statistical significance is relative to the control group. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Figure 6 Percentage Disagreeing That "People who apply for TANF benefits just do not try hard enough to find a job" (95% Confidence Interval)**



Note: Statistical significance is relative to the control group. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Figure 7 Percentage Agreeing That "TANF benefits help people care for their family" (95% Confidence Interval)**



Note: Statistical significance is relative to the control group. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Figure 8 Percentage Disagreeing That “Many TANF recipients manage to obtain benefits they are not entitled to” (95% Confidence Interval)**

lower in the high burden group compared with the control group and 13 percentage points ( $p \leq .05$ ) lower in the low burden group. Also, a significantly larger proportion of Republican respondents in the high burden group favor spending the same amount compared with the control group (difference = 15 percentage points,  $p \leq .05$ ). As before, for Democratic respondents, there are no statistically significant differences across groups.

The second group of figures (figures 6, 7, and 8) present the results for the questions regarding views of TANF recipients. The results largely follow the same patterns as the questions regarding support for the program, with a few exceptions. The first figure in this group (figure 6) looks at the percentage of respondents who disagree (strongly or somewhat) that individuals who apply for TANF do not try hard enough to find a job. Looking at all respondents, while the pattern is in the expected direction for hypothesis 1, the differences between the experimental groups are not statistically significant. For Republican respondents, the differences between groups increase, with a 16 percentage point difference between the high-burden group and the control group ( $p \leq .05$ ) and a 12 percentage point difference between the low-burden group and the control group ( $p \leq .054$ ). For Democratic respondents, the differences between groups are statistically indistinguishable.

The results for the question of whether respondents agree that TANF benefits help people care for their families are presented in figure 7. These results tell a familiar story. When considering all respondents, there is a 4 percentage point difference ( $p \leq .05$ ) between the control group and both the high- and low-burden groups. When looking at only Republicans, this difference jumps to 13 (11) percentage points ( $p \leq .01$ ) for the high- (low-) burden group compared with the control group. As with the other outcome variables, there are no statistically significant differences across the experimental groups among Democratic respondents.

The results for the final dependent variable are presented in figure 8. This figure presents the percentage of respondents who disagree (strongly or somewhat) with the statement that “Many

TANF recipients manage to obtain benefits they are not entitled to.” While the results across the other four measures of support for TANF and its recipients are largely consistent, this outcome variable is the exception. The differences across the experimental groups are not statistically distinct—not for all respondents, Republicans, or Democrats. This result may suggest that perhaps respondents interpreted the word “entitled” in different ways. For some, increased burdens may make respondents think it less likely that those who are eligible (or entitled) receive benefits because the burdens make it more difficult for eligible people to apply. For other respondents, increased burdens may make respondents more likely to think more beneficiaries are entitled because the burdens screen out fraud. Furthermore, for some respondents, the word “entitled” may have evoked the thought that access to TANF could be viewed as a right and encouraged respondents to question whether anyone is entitled to benefits. These different interpretations may have made responses less likely to reflect exposure to information about burden in the way we hypothesized. It is important to note that the results for this outcome variable are in the expected direction but are not statistically significant. This is consistent with the argument that respondents may have interpreted the question in different ways.

### Conclusion and Implications

As Soss and Schram (2007) note, liberal advocates struck a devil’s bargain by supporting welfare reform in 1996 because they hoped that doing so would increase public support for helping the poor by ridding the program of the stigma often attached to welfare programs. While they did not find much evidence that this occurred, they left open the possibility of such policy feedback effects. We find that information about high levels of administrative burden leads to greater favorability toward TANF and its recipients. These results are primarily driven by Republicans, who are generally less supportive of welfare. The results also indicate that the low burden treatment is often associated with greater favorability toward the program and its recipients as well. This is an interesting result, which may reflect how little the public knows about the TANF application process. Individuals may have little information



about what it takes for applicants to receive government benefits, and some may even assume that these benefits are automatic in some way (e.g., based on reported income, etc.); thus, by simply informing respondents that TANF applicants need to submit an application and complete an eligibility interview, which was the least burdensome application process described in the report we used (Holcomb et al. 2003), respondents' attitudes toward TANF and its recipients shift. This explanation is ad hoc, however; additional research exploring this finding is needed.

It is essential to emphasize that our results do not suggest that policy makers should increase the administrative burdens faced by clients to improve support. There are two interconnected points related to this. First, the application processes described in our vignettes, both high and low burden, capture some of the real application burdens applicants might face. Second, it is not only information about high levels of burden that leads to increased support; we find increased favorability toward TANF and its recipients when information about low levels of administrative burden is provided as well. Moreover, because we look at only one example of low burden, relatively lower levels of burden could also potentially produce a positive effect. Given this, our results suggest that increasing the public's understanding of the barriers to government benefits *already in place* may be an important step to overcoming some of the negative views of the program and its applicants. Because many antipoverty programs and other eligibility-based programs have extensive rules for establishing and maintaining eligibility, the low burden finding suggests that the positive shift in attitude could be potentially achieved even if existing burdens were reduced (or, in new programs, low levels of burden were established from the start) as long as the existing screening mechanisms are known.

Our study contributes to the literature on policy feedback and mass attitudes by demonstrating that information about the administrative burden in eligibility determination processes influences general attitudes. This research provides further insight into the way in which policy design affects not only those immediately experiencing the program but also the broader public. Given all that is considered in the voting calculus, any attitude shifts in favor of social welfare programs are unlikely to translate to changes in citizens' voting behavior. However, research suggests that for government agencies, citizen approval is a valuable resource (see Carpenter 2001; Meier 1993; Rourke 1984). It can help shield agency programs from budget cuts and help them gain greater policy responsibility and influence. Therefore, this type of policy feedback could be significant beyond public attitudes.

There are important limitations of our study. One of the most significant is that while a survey experiment allows for internal validity, external validity may be difficult to achieve. Given the challenges associated with changing attitudes toward welfare, as outlined by Soss and Schram (2007), there are concerns about whether this type of information would have the same effect if presented in the real world, with all its distractions and competing messages. In general, individuals form attitudes about public programs while being exposed to different, sometimes conflicting, information; moreover, spending preferences in particular may be developed while considering trade-offs with other programs and preferences for taxes. To this end, a field experiment would be a

useful next step. More research is needed before we draw definitive conclusions for practice.

Additionally, even if the increased support for TANF was replicated outside of a survey experiment, this would not tell us whether these changes would be long-lasting. While the durability of some treatment effects in experiments is found to be limited (see Druckman and Nelson 2003; Mutz and Reeves 2005), some studies, particularly those with informational treatments, may have more enduring effects. Coppock, Ekins, and Kirby (2018a), for example, find that informational treatments, in their case op-ed pieces, have effects that last at least 30 days, though at approximately half the magnitude, which they argue may indicate underlying attitude changes. While less detailed, our treatments are informational. As Baden and Lecheler (2012) argue, effects are more likely to endure if some type of learning occurs. Importantly, there is also evidence that priming effects from news stories can accumulate over time from frequency of exposure (Althaus and Kim 2006). This is significant for our study because it may suggest that if informational campaigns about administrative burden in welfare programs occur more than once, then the effect of this information could be more long-term in nature. More research is needed to understand the durability of the effects we find.

Finally, it is important to note that our goal in this article is not to create a typology of welfare programs based on different levels of burden. Whether a program is considered to have high or low levels of burden is subjective. Instead, we examine whether exposure to information about a varying number of program attributes that arguably impose burden in the application process affects attitudes. This is a limitation of our article, in that the distinction between high and low levels of burden was based on our subjective judgment using examples of application processes that were more or less elaborate.

Further exploration of the ways in which administrative burden shapes the behavior and attitudes of program clients, public employees, and the mass public offers one direction for future work in behavioral public administration. There are a number of possibilities for future research in this area. First, given the way in which client characteristics shape views of deservingness and attitudes toward government programs, providing information about client characteristics might condition the effect of administrative burden information on citizens' views of a program. For example, numerous studies point to the racialized nature of attitudes toward social welfare programs (see Cooley, Brown-Iannuzzi, and Boudreau 2019; DeSante 2013; Gilens 1999). Individuals might respond differently to prompts about administrative burden depending on the race of the client.

Moreover, integrating the findings of other articles in the symposium provides some interesting avenues for future research looking at how administrative burden influences public employees. For example, Linos and Riesch (2019) find that administrative burden embedded in the selection process affects the recruitment of public employees and leads to lower levels of applicant retention. Building from this, our study provides reason to think that information about the burdens embedded in a program may affect recruitment and retention by influencing how those at the front

lines view a program and the clients it serves. Knowledge of the administrative burdens faced by program participants might alter applicants' desire to continue the recruitment process. In a similar vein, Hollibaugh, Miles and Newswander (2019) highlight the importance of understanding public employees' motivations for taking on guerrilla government activities. Our study suggests that the level of administrative burden embedded in a program might affect employees' attitudes toward the program, which could lead them to work against the wishes of their superiors if they, for example, disagree with a new policy related to burden or view it as potentially causing harm to clients or other stakeholders.

Finally, it would also be informative to conduct studies to see whether potential TANF recipients who are not currently participating are less likely to apply if presented with information about the application burdens, perhaps as well as resources for assistance. This would provide insight into the effect of advertising administrative burdens on application rates, which could tell us whether this potential trade-off is a relevant consideration.

### Implications for Practice

As noted, there are important limitations of our study. Thus, we do not recommend changes to practice at this point. However, despite the shortcomings, our findings point to some practical considerations that may be of interest to practitioners after additional research is conducted. Our study is suggestive that providing information about administrative burden has the potential to influence public support for social welfare programs and their clients. Public discussion about welfare often centers on the deservingness of recipients (see Gilens 1999). However, citizens may have little information about the process for actually obtaining benefits. As evidenced in behavioral research, people do not pay attention to all aspects of a particular object or situation (see Gennaioli and Shleifer 2010; Jones 2001). By drawing the public's attention to existing administrative burdens, public managers might be able to reduce the likelihood that unnecessary burdens are added to their programs and perhaps sustain public support.

There are several ways in which public managers could share information about existing administrative burdens. While some avenues, such as placing this information in agency publications, may be less effective for reaching the mass public, other methods, such as embarking on public information campaigns or sharing this information with elected officials, who, in turn, discuss the issue publicly, may be more effective. Moreover, advocacy coalitions made up of, *inter alia*, nonprofit organizations, interest groups, elected officials, and public managers are important for policy implementation and reform (Meier 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). While public managers may be limited in their ability to launch information campaigns on their own, the larger advocacy coalition expands the ability to do so.

As with any information campaign associated with government agencies, it is important to make a distinction between informing and politicking. Most public managers recognize the importance of media outreach and information sharing, as public support is a key resource for agencies. Successful public managers engage in external networking to bring resources, including support, to the agencies they run (Meier 1993; Radin 2002; Rourke 1984; Wilson

1989). As Graber (2003, 245) notes, a study of upper-level agency officials across a number of different presidential administrations by Linsky and colleagues (1986) revealed that "[t]hree out of four of these officials reported that they had tried to get media coverage for their agency and its activities," and "[c]lose to half of the officials had spent five hours or more weekly dealing with press matters." However, it is important to ensure that the focus remains on education, and does not veer toward manipulation. As Yarwood and Enis (1982, 39) note, "communication necessary to keep a free people informed and to help implement policies in a free society can also be a source of unsavory manipulation." To this end, it is critical to point out that we are not advocating the use information in a manipulative way. The information provided should not rely on language that is strategically value-laden, for example.

Providing information about administrative burden can "nudge" the public to pay attention to the fact that most social welfare programs already have strong screening processes. Nudges may be a useful tool for public managers (see Battaglio et al. 2019; Kasdan 2019; Thaler and Sunstein 2009), though their impacts need to be assessed like other policy alternatives (see Weimer 2019). The existing marketplace of ideas surrounding social policy is full of anecdotal stories of fraud or individuals that fit negative stereotypes and highlight potential problems with "undeserving" recipients (Gilens 1999; Henry, Renaya, and Weiner 2004). Exposure to these stereotypes likely reduces support due to the cognitive limitations of humans. People overgeneralize about the risk of fraud due to the "availability bias," which causes people's risk assessment to be affected by the examples that immediately come to mind (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). Providing accurate information on burdens makes the fact that demonstrating eligibility is not easy more salient, which should affect how people view the risk of fraud. As Sunstein (2015) argues, strategies to provide information to the public to overcome cognitive limitations are legitimate.

A significant concern with using information about existing burdens to increase support for programs is that advertising that a program has burdens may reduce take-up rates. There are ways that public managers can mitigate this potential issue. First, they should make sure the description of burden is accurate. As long as the description of the eligibility determination process is accurate and not exaggerated, then learning about the burden could help potential applicants better manage the application process. Second, public managers can develop programs or relationships with nonprofits to help encourage take-up (Aizer 2003; Keiser and Miller 2010; Miller and Keiser 2013). The availability of application assistance can be advertised in conjunction with accurate information about the application process. There is evidence that offering assistance with application forms can increase take-up (Schanzenbach 2009). Moreover, a study of TANF participation among potential and actual participants finds that concerns about being labeled by welfare stereotypes has a negative effect on TANF participation (Stuber and Kronebusch 2004). If increasing awareness about the screening processes helps to lessen the stigma attached to recipients, it could help facilitate take-up. Additional research is needed to ensure that potential applicants would not be adversely affected by increasing public awareness of the burden embedded in many eligibility-based programs.

## Notes

1. There is also an extensive literature on the connection between race and support for welfare. Many scholars argue that the low level of public support for welfare is explained by the connection between race and welfare among elites and the mass public (see Gilens 1996, 1999; Quadagno 1996; Soss et al. 2001). Antagonism toward African Americans has shaped the development of welfare programs in the United States (Quadagno 1996). And the media's common portrayal of welfare recipients as African American makes it likely that the public associates welfare with African Americans (Gilens 1999). Moreover, states in which African Americans make up a larger share of the TANF population have more restrictive and punitive aspects to their TANF programs (Soss et al. 2001). African Americans are also more likely to face TANF sanctions for deviant behavior than white clients (Schram et al. 2009); moreover, considering public views of deservingness, African Americans are punished more for the same level of perceived "laziness" as whites and are rewarded less for hard work (DeSante 2013).
2. Recent research has questioned whether this difference is caused by the cues sent by the question wording or the programs that citizens associate with "welfare" and "assistance to the poor" (see Huber and Paris 2013).
3. While not specific to perceptions of deservingness, Jacoby (2000) finds evidence of the importance of program description for attitudes, showing that respondents are more supportive of programs when they are described in specific terms that identify the beneficiaries than when they are described in generic terms that do not.
4. While the level of burden that constitutes high and low is ultimately subjective, some interactions with governments will likely be more onerous for a citizen, in quantity of steps and time and resources required, and some will be less so. We make a simple distinction between an application process with few factors that arguably contribute to burden (low burden) and one with significantly more (high burden). Our logic follows that of Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015), who identify burdens as falling into three different types: learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs. They examine policy changes that arguably increased or reduced burden in Medicaid in Wisconsin. Similarly, looking at Medicaid processes across the U.S. states, Moynihan, Herd, and Ribgy (2016) create a composite measure of burden, accounting for factors such as the number of words in the state Medicaid application, whether applicants must document income sources, and whether the process requires an in-person interview. Our vignettes follow the logic that the more learning, compliance, and psychological costs described, the more likely the respondent is to think that the program places a high level of burden on applicants.
5. Ideology is another factor that influences opinions toward welfare. In this experiment, the results for self-identified conservatives and liberals are similar to those for Republicans and Democrats, respectively, though, some of the results are weaker. While 361 respondents identify as moderate in ideology, only 174 identify as party independents (including only those who do not lean toward a party).
6. Research indicates that the deservingness stereotype is a greater determinant of policy views for conservatives than for liberals (see Mitchell et al. 2003; Ragusa 2015; Reyna et al. 2006).
7. Jensen and Petersen (2017) also replicate their results for ideology using measures of partisanship, though not specifically in the United States.
8. For example, a recent survey shows that more than 60 percent of the public supports allowing drug tests for Medicaid, and 70 percent support allowing work requirements for Medicaid (Kaiser Family Foundation 2017).
9. We requested 1,200 respondents in MTurk, giving us 34 respondents beyond this who completed the survey.
10. New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, "Temporary Assistance, <https://otda.ny.gov/programs/temporary-assistance/> [accessed November 18, 2019].
11. New York City Human Resources Administration, "Cash Assistance," <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hra/help/cash-assistance.page> [accessed November 18, 2019].
12. A guide to welfare in New York City developed by the Center for Urban Pedagogy, the Safety Net Project of the Urban Justice Center, and All Other Services in 2014 outlines a process with many of the same features; see <http://welcometocup.org/Projects/MakingPolicyPublic/YourGuideToWelfareInNYC>.
13. We included a factual manipulation check. We asked respondents whether the application process for TANF involves an eligibility verification review. Both treatments mention a procedure related to eligibility screening, while the control does not. There are statistically significant differences ( $p \leq .01$ ) in responses between the treatment and control groups (99 percent respond that this is true in the high-burden group, 97 percent in the low-burden group, and 80 percent in the control group). We included this check immediately after the treatment before the outcome questions. Research indicates that the placement of factual manipulation checks before outcome measures is of little consequence for treatment effects (Kane and Barabas 2019).
14. Our outcome measures were chosen because they capture related facets of attitudes toward welfare that we think should be influenced by exposure to information about burden. Our questions mimic those found in prior research on welfare attitudes. We wanted questions that capture views of the program as a whole, without specifically mentioning recipients; these types of questions, typically spending or approval questions, are fairly standard in the policy preference literature. We also wanted a few questions that mention the program but were more focused on its recipients. Although we did not expect different effects across these questions, we wanted to see whether the effects were consistent. As noted, we randomize the ordering of the five outcome questions.
15. Numerous studies and reports use versions of these questions (see Brennan 2018; Dyck and Hussey 2008; Feldman and Steenberg 2001; Garand, Xu, and Davis 2017; Jacoby 2000; Kam and Nam 2008; Nelson and Oxley 1999; Shaw and Shapiro 2002). However, rather than specify TANF, typically these questions reference "welfare programs" or "assistance to the poor."
16. The exact language in the European Social Survey is: (1) "Many people manage to obtain benefits and services to which they are not entitled." (2) "Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job." (3) "And to what extent do you agree or disagree that social benefits and services in [country] make people less willing to look after themselves and their family?" The source questionnaires for 2008 and 2016 are available at [https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess\\_methodology/source\\_questionnaire/](https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess_methodology/source_questionnaire/) [accessed November 18, 2019].
17. There are approximately 411 respondents in the control group, 409 in the high-burden group, and 414 in the low-burden group. The totals vary slightly when respondents skipped questions. The lowest number of total respondents for our outcome variables is 1,233.
18. In addition to the analysis presented, we also constructed a survey weight so that our data might better reflect the national adult population. When analyzing the weighted data, the results are largely consistent with those presented (see figures S2–6 in the Supporting Information). We see a significant treatment effect for TANF approval, spending, and the care for family statement, for all respondents and Republican respondents; however, we do not find a significant effect for the job or entitlement statements.
19. The ggplot2 (Wickham 2016) and survey (Lumley 2019; 2004) packages in R were used in the analysis (including the Supporting Information). The party categories include leaners; the results are consistent if we exclude leaners. We present the results for independent respondents (i.e., those who do not lean toward either party) in the Supporting Information (figure S1). Similar to Democrats, there are no significant differences among independents. However, these results should be interpreted with caution, given that there are only a total of 174 independents in our sample.



20. In table S1 in the Supporting Information, we present logistic and ordered logistic regression models, with an interaction between Republican respondents and the experimental groups. These models echo the results of the difference-in-proportions tests.

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## Supporting Information

A supplementary appendix may be found in the online version of this article at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/puar.13133/full>.