Does Receiving Government Assistance Shape Political Attitudes? Evidence from Agricultural Producers

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Abstract
How does participation in government programs shape political attitudes? Evaluating this relationship is crucial to assessing theories of policy feedback. Many studies investigate how public policies affect political participation, but fewer examine effects on attitudes. In this paper, we explore the relationship between participation in USDA farm aid programs and political attitudes ranging from program support to views of government. We contribute to the literature by: (1) tying administrative records on program participation to an original, first-of-its-kind survey; and (2) studying a policy area that is not a social welfare policy and where most recipients are conservative. We find that participation is related to views of the particular program but not more general attitudes toward government. Moreover, there is sometimes heterogeneity by political predispositions. When a program is closely associated with a political party, policy feedback operates for out-party individuals whose predispositions would otherwise lead them to be less supportive.

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The fates of government programs and public policies depend on the amount of support they have in the public, whether citizens are activated and organized to defend them, and the extent to which policymakers hear from those constituencies when considering policy options. As the literature on policy feedback emphasizes, these political factors can themselves be shaped by the policies already in place. When government makes policies, the benefits those policies confer can activate constituencies that then mobilize and protect the policies (Pierson, 1992). In studies of cases ranging from Social Security to Medicaid to the GI Bill, numerous scholars have shown just how important these processes have been in shaping American politics (Campbell, 2003; Hacker, 2002; Mettler, 2005; Michener, 2018).

As it stands, however, research on policy feedback has been limited in three important respects. First, it has provided a more thorough account of how policies affect political participation than how they shape political attitudes, even though the literature is fairly clear in its theoretical expectations about attitudes: those receiving benefits should be more supportive of the programs delivering those benefits. Moreover, the few studies that have actually tested this expectation about attitudes have produced weak and inconsistent results. Not only is this a key pillar of policy feedback theory that still finds little empirical support, but it is also relevant to a broader puzzle of American politics: as Mettler (2018, p. 18) puts it, “How can we explain why Americans and U.S. politics have been veering in an antigovernment direction at a time when more people than ever are personally benefiting from government?”

Second, this literature puts heavy emphasis on policy design—that is, how certain features of policies shape their political effects—and yet the overwhelming majority of its empirical

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1A related literature on distributive politics examines the effect of receiving government benefits on vote choice (e.g., Kriner and Reeves 2015).
research focuses on social insurance policies like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. These are important policies, but they are not all that government does. If the particulars of policy affect the nature of policy feedback effects, then researchers should be studying a wide variety of different policies with different features of theoretical relevance. Relatedly, even though policy feedback theory implies that these effects should also vary at the individual level depending on people’s experiences with policy, empirical research gives pride of place to policy-level variables—for example, looking for the effects of major policy reforms—perhaps because of the difficulty of measuring individual-level benefit receipts. Notably, the few studies that do measure individuals’ experiences with policies mainly rely on survey self-reports of program participation—which raises questions about whether respondents with certain experiences and views are more likely to report having used government programs.

A third limitation of the policy feedback literature is that it has so far been insufficiently attentive to the possible conditioning effects of ideology and partisanship. Very recently, research on the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has suggested that the partisan nature of its enactment could explain its weaker-than-expected feedback effects (Clinton and Sances, 2018; Patashnik and Zelizer, 2013), and has also raised questions about whether its feedback effects might vary with individuals’ party identification (Lerman and McCabe, 2017; McCabe, 2016; Sances and Clinton, Forthcoming). But this potential for differential policy feedback effects by party and ideology remains underexplored. And here, too, the literature’s focus on social safety net programs has limited its ability to explore such heterogeneity, because these policies either deliver benefits to large swaths of the population or to constituents who are more likely to be liberal and Democratic (Lerman, Sadin, and Trachtman, 2017; Morin, Taylor, and Patten, 2012; Sances and Clinton, 2019). To test the entire scope of theoretical claims about.
heterogeneity by political predispositions, one should also study policies that primarily benefit conservative constituencies.

In this paper, we advance and broaden the study of policy feedback in two important ways. The first is through the substantive focus of our study: we explore agricultural assistance programs, asking whether receiving payments from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is associated with recipients’ political attitudes. An advantage of this focus is that recipients of agricultural payments are a predominantly white, rural, conservative, and Republican group of Americans—and thus a distinctive and important population to assess the scope of policy feedback theories. In addition, the USDA has a variety of agricultural assistance programs, allowing us to compare programs with different features. Even beyond these theoretical advantages, USDA programs are important to study in their own right. They distribute billions of dollars to American farmers every year, and they recently increased in salience as the Trump administration ramped up farm program spending to offset damage dealt by retaliatory tariffs (Rappeport, 2020). As former USDA chief economist Joseph Glauber said of the recent surge, “You almost lose track of how much money is going out” (Charles, 2020). Thus, there is much to be learned from broadening the empirical policy feedback literature to include such programs.

Our second major advance is our use of administrative data to overcome the most significant hurdle involved in carrying out a study of policy feedback on political attitudes: the difficulty of determining which individuals received which benefits. Not only do we have rich, individual-level data on people’s experiences with policies—which, by itself, is rare—but by using administrative data, we also eliminate concerns that individuals with certain characteristics are more likely to report to interviewers that they have used particular programs. We pair
these administrative data on individuals’ receipts of agricultural assistance with an original, first-of-its-kind survey of producers designed to measure their attitudes toward the programs. In addition, we build in an experiment in which a group of respondents is reminded of the amounts of assistance they have received in past years to assess whether making payments salient in producers’ minds affects their attitudes. While the actual amounts of money farmers receive are not randomly allocated by the government, of course, we can assess whether the associations between program participation and program support are consistent with theories of policy feedback.

The results of our analysis suggest that benefit receipt is sometimes but not always associated with political attitudes. For the Market Facilitation Program (MFP), a relatively new assistance program that is strongly associated with the Trump administration, those who receive benefits—and those who receive larger benefits—do tend to be more supportive of the program. However, there is heterogeneity by political ideology. Politically conservative farmers, whose predispositions make them more supportive of Trump to begin with, support the program regardless of whether they personally benefit. However, for liberal and moderate farmers, program support increases sharply in the level of benefits, overcoming predispositions to be less supportive of a Trump-associated policy. In contrast, receiving larger benefits from the more longstanding, less-partisan safety net programs for farmers is not associated with greater support for the programs. And for a very different type of program—a decades-old policy that provides payments to farmers to incentivize conservation—larger benefits are clearly associated with greater support for the program, regardless of recipient ideology. Hence, even when the focus is on support for the policy delivering the benefits, policy feedback appears to be conditional on both program and recipient characteristics. And when we turn to analysis of
support for government more generally, we find no evidence that receiving agricultural assistance from any of the programs is related to positivity toward government. Thus, while some scholars find that citizens’ misperceptions about their connection to government contributes to anti-government sentiment (Lerman, 2019; Mettler, 2018), our findings show that even when citizens get checks directly from the federal government—and in some cases are reminded of those benefits—it still has no association with their attitudes toward government. Therefore, even in a case where government assistance is highly salient and not “submerged,” we find no relationship between payment receipt and broader support for the role of government in society.

**Existing Literature and Contributions**

A central theoretical idea of the policy feedback literature is that public policies can help to generate their own supportive constituencies (Pierson, 1994), both by enhancing individuals’ and groups’ resources and by shaping the way they view the government programs (Pierson, 1992). The expansion of Social Security during the mid-20th century, for example, gave rise to a politically active, engaged, and well-organized constituency of senior citizens—and a constituency highly supportive and protective of Social Security benefits (Campbell, 2003). Similarly, the GI Bill conferred resources (education) and conveyed to veterans that government worked for people like them, which helped to transform veterans into an effective, supportive constituency (Mettler, 2005). Thus, at the heart of the policy feedback literature is the notion that public policies affect politics both by increasing (or decreasing) political participation and by shaping individuals’ political attitudes.

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2See Mettler (2011).
As the policy feedback literature has evolved over the last few decades, it has come to emphasize the importance of policy design and other policy-level variables. A key hypothesis, for example, is that government programs that deliver large benefits generate stronger feedback effects than those that confer small benefits (Campbell, 2003, 2012; Howard, 2007; Patashnik and Zelizer, 2013). Another insight is that feedback effects can be muted or nonexistent for programs whose benefits are “submerged”—or, not easy for recipients to attribute to government (Mettler, 2011). In addition, when a program signals that beneficiaries are undeserving, or when eligibility criteria are arbitrary or unfair, or when it imposes costs rather than benefits on individuals and communities, policy feedback effects can even be negative (Soss, 1999, 2000; Lerman and Weaver, 2014). A key insight from this literature, therefore, is that much of the variation in policy feedback effects arises from particular features of the policies.

Another pattern in this literature is that scholars have done more to study the effects of policies on political behavior than on political attitudes (Campbell, 2012). For instance, there are a number of recent studies that examine how Medicaid and features of the ACA affect turnout (Chattopadhyay, 2017; Clinton and Sances, 2018; Courtemanche, Marton, and Yelowitz, 2020; Haselswerdt, 2017; Jacobs, Mettler, and Zhu, Forthcoming; Michener, 2018), but fewer that investigate how these healthcare policies affect people’s views toward those programs.

In the studies of political attitudes that exist, moreover, the findings are mixed. Mettler and Stonecash (2008) find that individuals who report having used social policies are more likely to say that those policies are effective, and a few studies find positive effects of Medicaid expansion or gaining public health insurance on individuals’ favorability toward the ACA (Hopkins and Parish, 2019; Hosek, 2019; Jacobs and Mettler, 2018; Lerman and McCabe, 2009).
2017; McCabe, 2016; Sances and Clinton, Forthcoming). The effects, however, are modest (Campbell, 2020). Still other work finds that major policy changes to welfare and Medicare did not affect attitudes toward those programs (Morgan and Campbell, 2011; Soss and Schram, 2007). And in general, Mettler (2018) finds little evidence that receiving social benefits makes people more supportive of government. Thus, the research literature on how policies shape attitudes is still in its infancy and has so far found weaker-than-expected results.

Given this literature’s emphasis on policy design, it is unsurprising that scholars have turned to policy-level variables in seeking to explain those weak results. Some suggest that perhaps ACA benefits are too small, or that they have hidden elements, or that the beneficiaries are too scattered and do not share a common group identity (Campbell, 2020; Chattopadhyay, 2018). Pacheco and Maltby (2019) propose that the effects have been weakened by federalism. Still others point to the ACA’s partisan enactment as a possible reason for its small feedback effects (Clinton and Sances, 2018; Hopkins and Parish, 2019; Patashnik and Zelizer, 2013). And studies of the effects of other policies on political attitudes have also focused on policy-level variation. Mettler (2018), for example, compares the effects of means-tested and non-means-tested programs, while Soss and Schram (2007) and Morgan and Campbell (2011) examine whether political attitudes changed after major reforms to welfare and healthcare.

Yet despite the fact that policy feedback research concentrates on policy variables, theory implies that feedback effects should also vary at the individual level. For example, feedback effects should be larger for individuals receiving larger benefits, and for benefits they are aware of, compared to those receiving smaller benefits, and those they are less aware of (Arnold, 1990; Moe, 2015). Moreover, as an empirical matter, policy-level variables may be too blunt
an instrument for detecting feedback effects in some cases, especially considering that there can be significant individual-level variation in people’s experiences with a single government program (Hobbs and Hopkins, 2019).

As fruitful as individual-level studies could be, however, there is a major challenge involved in carrying them out: the difficulty of measuring which individuals received which benefits. The literature on the ACA has made some strides on this front, but with researchers using proxies for who received benefits (based on program eligibility criteria), aggregate-level comparisons of places affected and unaffected by reforms, and surveys in which respondents self-report which benefits they have received. Hopkins and Parish (2019), for example, focus on low-income respondents under 65 to evaluate whether Medicaid expansion increased favorability toward the ACA. Clinton and Sances (2018) compare aggregate data on uninsured rates in counties whose parent states did and did not expand Medicaid. Other studies rely on surveys that ask respondents where they get their health insurance (Hosek, 2019; Lerman and McCabe, 2017), whether their insurance status changed (McCabe, 2016), or about their usage of social programs (Mettler and Stonecash, 2008; Mettler, 2018). That these studies leverage data on benefit receipts is a significant advance, but their approaches are not without problems. At best, they capture whether or not individuals received benefits—not more nuanced measures of the size of the benefits or recipients’ awareness of the benefits received. More critically, survey respondents who remember or are willing to report having received a benefit may be those more supportive of the policy.

Scholars have also recently moved in another promising direction by connecting policy feedback research on the ACA to theories of party and ideology (Jacobs and Mettler, 2018). As we discussed earlier, recent work has pointed to the partisan nature of the ACA as some-
thing that may matter for the size of feedback effects (Clinton and Sances, 2018; Patashnik and Zelizer, 2013), and Lerman and McCabe (2017) find that the effect of receiving public health insurance on support for Medicare spending is positive and significant for Republicans but not for Democrats. In another study of the ACA, however, Sances and Clinton (Forthcoming) find that the effect of Medicaid expansion on support for the ACA does not vary by respondent party identification. Thus, research connecting policy feedback to theories of party and ideology is still underdeveloped and inconclusive.

For research along these lines to be pursued in a meaningful way, researchers need to broaden the range of policies they analyze. As it stands, the policy feedback literature focuses almost exclusively on social insurance policies such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare, and food stamps (Campbell, 2003; Hacker, 2002; Michener, 2018; Soss, 1999, 2000; Soss and Schram, 2007). This social policy focus has intensified in recent years as the passage of the ACA has inspired an explosion of research on its effects (Campbell, 2020). These are no doubt important policies, but they are not the sum total of what government does. And because many of them deliver benefits to Americans who may be predisposed toward supporting government programs, the conclusions that can be drawn from this literature may be limited. To fully evaluate policy feedback effects on attitudes, it is important to also study the effects of programs whose beneficiaries are predominantly conservative—those individuals who are most hostile to government.

**Research Design and Expectations**

In order to broaden and advance the study of policy feedback effects on political attitudes, we conducted a survey of 1,072 participants in USDA farm aid programs. The USDA’s myriad
farm payment programs provide a useful testing ground for policy feedback effects for several reasons. They deliver large, direct benefits: every year, American farmers receive billions of dollars in agricultural subsidies from USDA programs, and in recent years, the Trump administration dramatically increased farm program spending to offset some of the harmful effects of trade disputes with China. Benefits are also delivered to farmers from a variety of programs with different features—features that might affect the nature of feedback effects. Moreover, the program beneficiaries are considerably more conservative than the beneficiaries of social welfare programs (and the U.S. population at large). Finally, by examining USDA programs, we are able to combine administrative data on benefit receipts with an original survey of political attitudes. Our unique dataset therefore allows us to see clearly how individuals vary substantially in both the degree to which they benefit from these programs as well as their political dispositions.

Background on USDA Farm Aid Programs

Before describing our study’s design, we provide a brief background on the USDA’s modern farm aid spending. Throughout its recent history, USDA subsidy programs have fallen into three main buckets: (1) commodity programs, in which farmers are given financial support to grow crops or raise livestock; (2) conservation programs, in which farmers are paid to leave farmland fallow to preserve environmental health, and (3) disaster programs, in which the USDA provides relief to farmers who fall victim to hurricanes, wildfires, frost, drought, and other natural disasters.

Commodity programs are what is traditionally meant by “farm subsidies”—payments provided to farmers as part of the normal course of business—and historically, spending on these
programs has been largely governed by the bidecennial farm bill. When the 2008 Farm Bill was implemented, the USDA distributed most of its commodity payments through the Direct and Counter-Cyclical Program (DCP), which—among other things—paid out large subsidies to farmers regardless of market conditions or current production choices. The 2014 Farm Bill marked a major structural shift in how commodity subsidies are provided, conditioning the vast majority of farm payments on challenging market conditions. At that time, the DCP program was eliminated and replaced with a combination of the Agricultural Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) programs. The ARC and PLC programs are quite similar in that they both protect against market downturns for covered commodities, and farmers must periodically choose which of the two programs to enroll in. Together, the ARC/PLC programs have constituted the dominant channel for commodity subsidies since 2015, and while the 2018 Farm Bill made a few tweaks, it left this funding paradigm largely intact (FSA 2019a).

As Figure 1 illustrates, the ARC and PLC programs made up the majority of farm subsidy spending from the implementation of the 2014 Farm Bill through 2017. Very recently, however, billions of dollars in USDA payments have also been issued through another commodity program—one that operates outside of the Farm Bill: the Market Facilitation Program (MFP). In 2018, trade conflict between the U.S. and China quickly led to Chinese retaliatory tariffs being placed on U.S. agriculture. The Trump administration responded with the MFP, authorizing billions of dollars in direct payments to affected farmers, with a renewed tranche

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3See the online appendix for further details on major USDA farm programs.
4As shown in Figure 1, commodity program spending dropped significantly in calendar year 2014 after the proposed farm bill was defeated in the House of Representatives in June 2013. A new farm bill was signed into law on February 7, 2014, but commodity payments for program year 2014 weren’t released until calendar year 2015.
of payments issued in 2019. Importantly, the MFP is not only a very recent development but also a massive outlier in the history of USDA farm aid, as well as one of the largest unilateral presidential fiscal actions in American history.

The USDA has also distributed billions of dollars through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)—its hallmark conservation program (FSA 2019b). The CRP is different from both the ARC/PLC programs and the MFP in that it does not provide subsidies for growing certain crops. Instead, it offers payments to incentivize conservation: farmers who enroll are paid annual CRP rental payments to leave cropland fallow and/or plant cover crops, with the goals of controlling soil erosion, protecting water quality, and redeveloping natural habitats.\(^5\)

\(^5\)We do not analyze disaster programs because as we describe below, we focus on payments made from 2015 to 2019, and disaster payments were negligible during that period.
Data and Survey Methodology

To measure the political attitudes of USDA program beneficiaries, we mailed survey invitations to nearly 44,000 farm subsidy recipients for whom we had detailed USDA payment records for the period 1995–2019.\textsuperscript{6} We started by filing a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to obtain records for the universe of farm subsidy payments issued by the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) between the 2012 and 2019 calendar years.\textsuperscript{7} These records feature 26.8 million payments made to approximately 1.8 million distinct individuals and businesses, with around 1 million distinct recipients each year. Each payment record includes the name and address of the recipient, as well as the program name, amount, and disbursement date for the payment.

We selected a sampling frame of USDA farm aid recipients that reflects the prominence of ARC/PLC and CRP spending since the implementation of the 2014 Farm Bill. Specifically, we considered individuals and businesses who, in the last five years, were in the top 50\% of recipients of both ARC/PLC payments and CRP payments. Defining our sampling frame in this manner ensured that potential respondents received significant income from USDA subsidies over a substantial period of time. The median 2015–2019 CRP total among program participants was $6,250, and the median ARC/PLC beneficiary received $4,753. As we explain below, this sampling frame also allowed us to manipulate the salience of payments without

\textsuperscript{6}The survey invitation letter as well as a discussion of ethical considerations can be found in the online appendix.

\textsuperscript{7}The USDA often reports farm payments in terms of crop years instead of calendar years. Crop years correspond to the growing cycle of a particular crop, and thus are usually distinct from the calendar year. All farm subsidy program years described in this paper are based on the calendar year of payment disbursement dates.
As of late 2019, USDA payment files obtainable via FOIA request no longer contain unique customer identifiers, and so we used a combination of recipient name and state to denote an individual within our 2012-2019 dataset. However, the FSA has historically attached “customer numbers” to distinct recipient profiles, and the Environmental Working Group (EWG) maintains a farm subsidy database that links this identifier to recipient names and annual payment histories. For all recipients in the top half of the ARC/PLC programs and the CRP, we looked up the individual’s yearly payment history in the EWG Farm Subsidy Database and constructed a sampling frame from the individuals for whom we could match annual payment totals for 2015-2018. This process yielded 43,941 distinct payment recipients. The merge with the EWG database allowed us to validate our data build and assign a unique identifier to each payment profile in our sampling frame.

**Embedded Survey Experiment**

Our main goal for the survey was to measure respondents’ support for agricultural assistance programs and government more generally, but constructing the sampling frame in this manner also enabled us to embed an experimental intervention aimed at increasing the salience of particular program benefits and reminding respondents of the benefits they received. We randomly assigned each respondent to one of three treatment categories: a control group, an “ARC/PLC treatment” group, and a “CRP treatment” group. Respondents in the control group were first asked an opening block of questions about their farming activities, party identification, and liberal-conservative ideological disposition. They then answered a battery

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8https://farm.ewg.org
9At the time of our survey, the EWG database did not have complete information for 2019.
of questions about their views on government and particular policies. Respondents in the ARC/PLC treatment answered the same questions as the control group, but we inserted an informational screen directly after the opening block of questions with the following prompt:

As an agricultural producer, public records show that you have received assistance from several U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs over the last 5 years. For instance, you are in the top half of recipients for the Agricultural Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) programs for this period. The ARC and PLC programs provide income support payments when crop revenues and prices drop below certain levels. The table below lists the amount of money you have received from these programs in each year.

[Table displaying respondent’s yearly ARC/PLC payments for 2015-2019, as well as the five-year total]

Respondents in the CRP treatment group similarly viewed a prompt regarding their CRP payments after answering the opening block of questions:

As an agricultural producer, public records show that you have received assistance from several U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs over the last 5 years. For instance, you are in the top half of recipients for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for this period. The CRP program provides financial and technical assistance to farmers to protect natural resources. The table below lists the amount of money you have received from this program in each year.

[Table displaying respondent’s yearly CRP payments for 2015-2019, as well as the five-year total]

We anticipated the ARC/PLC and CRP treatments to have both a priming effect (by reminding respondents of their recent benefit amounts) as well as an informational effect (by informing them of their relative position in the program). Balance statistics for the experiment are reported in the online appendix.
Respondent Characteristics

For each individual in the sampling frame, we mailed an invitation letter that included a link to an online Qualtrics survey and a unique access code for each respondent. We also included a phone number on the invitation letter; this allowed us to administer surveys by mail if requested by the agricultural producer. Approximately 20 respondents completed the survey via a physical questionnaire and returned it by mail.

In total, we received 1,072 complete survey responses, yielding a response rate of 2.4%.

While this response rate may seem low, it is actually comparable to many political surveys. Respondents nonetheless resembled the overall sampling frame fairly well on a number of geographic and individual covariates, mitigating issues of non-response bias. As shown in Table 1, the average respondent’s payment totals in the last five years were similar to those of the average sampling frame member. Moreover, respondents live in counties with similar demographic and political characteristics to those in the full sampling frame. Hence, based on observable characteristics, the respondent population was representative of the sampling frame on several dimensions.

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10 We define a “complete” survey response as one that includes the participant’s highest level of education achieved, which is the last substantive question in the survey order to be included in our regression analyses. As shown in the online appendix, we did not find evidence that experimental treatment assignment affected survey completion.

11 For example, Pew’s response rates to their phone surveys are 9%; see “What Low Response Rates Mean for Telephone Surveys,” Pew, http://www.pewresearch.org/2017/05/15/what-low-response-rates-mean-for-telephone-surveys/fn-291178-1. Other response rates, such as to the Washington Post’s telephone polls, are even lower. And cumulative response rates—taking into account all stages of the sampling process—of high-quality Internet panels such as the GfK Knowledge Panel can be below 1% (Callegaro and DiSogra, 2008). Our mail survey’s response rate compares favorably to response rates of mass public surveys conducted by mail (Broockman, Kalla, and Sekhon, 2017).
## Table 1: Sampling Frame and Respondent Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Sampling Frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 1,072</td>
<td>N = 43,941</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Individual Payments

- Total FSA Payments (2015–2019) $147,186 $143,358
- Commodity Programs (2015–2019) $105,126 $100,725
- Conservation Programs (2015–2019) $41,212 $41,074
- Disaster Programs (2015–2019) $848 $1,559
- MFP Payments (2018–2019) $46,574 $44,869

### Farm Characteristics

- Farmland Value ($ per acre) $6,223 $5,676
- Acres Devoted to Crops 1,180 —
- Acres Devoted to Livestock 387 —
- Total Farmland Value $7,827,681 —

### ZIP Code Demographics

- Median Household Income $59,238 $56,660
- Per Capita Income $30,788 $29,308
- Age 60 or Older 34% 34%
- White Not Hispanic 89% 90%
- Bachelor’s Degree or Higher 24% 21%

### County Voting History

- GOP Presidential 2PVS in 2000 59% 59%
- GOP Presidential 2PVS in 2004 60% 61%
- GOP Presidential 2PVS in 2008 55% 55%
- GOP Presidential 2PVS in 2012 58% 59%
- GOP Presidential 2PVS in 2016 66% 68%
- GOP Presidential 2PVS in 2020 65% 67%

Notes: All stated figures are sample means. Farmland prices per acre are county-level estimates from the 2017 Census of Agriculture converted to 2019 dollars. Total farmland value is given by (Crop Acres + Livestock Acres) × Price Per Acre. ZIP code demographics are sourced from 2014–2018 ACS estimates. Age and race/ethnicity figures are % of the population age 18+; education % is out of population age 25+. 
Table 2: Respondent Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Respondent ZIP Codes</th>
<th>Nationwide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White, Not Hispanic</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 18-34</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 35-59</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 60+</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s or Higher</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Service</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly Rural County</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Individual demographic frequencies were calculated only for populated responses. See the online appendix for a discussion of survey non-response and attrition. Statistics cited in the second and third column are sourced from 2014-2018 ACS estimates for the population aged 18+ (25+ for the education question). The second column depicts the average proportion for each measure corresponding to respondents’ ZIP code tabulation area. We say a county is “highly rural” if it scores six or more on the USDA’s nine-point rural-urban continuum code scale. This means that the county is not contained in a metropolitan area and has an urban population below 20,000.
Table 2 summarizes the key demographic and political characteristics of the individuals in our sample. The respondents are overwhelmingly white and male, and 70% are age 60 and older. They hold bachelor’s degrees (or higher) at a rate nearly twice the national average (58% vs. 31%), and they are many times more likely to have a history of military service (20% vs. 1%). Our sample is also much more rural than the national voting-age population, and most respondents are from the Midwest and Great Plains (see the online appendix). Agricultural producers are unique even within the geographic areas in which they reside. As shown in Table 2, respondents are more likely to be white, male, 60 and older, and well-educated than the average denizen of their ZIP code—and six times more likely to have served in the military.

Notably, moreover, majorities of respondents identify as Republican and conservative. 53% are Republican—more than three times the number who identify as Democrats. 66% are conservative, compared to 16% who describe their ideology as liberal. This makes our population of interest politically distinct from the populations that have received most of the attention in the policy feedback literature.

**Political Attitudes on Policies**

We first examine whether receiving benefits from major USDA programs is associated with support for the specific programs delivering the benefits, a key implication of policy feedback theory. To that end, our survey asked respondents to indicate their support for the MFP, the ARC/PLC programs, and the CRP, with responses given on a four-point scale (ranging from “strongly oppose” to “strongly support”), with higher values indicating greater support for the program. The survey questionnaire can be found in the online appendix. We rescaled each of these items—and all other survey variables—to lie between 0 and 1. This allows us
to interpret an OLS regression coefficient as the percentage point effect on the dependent variable of moving from the lowest to highest point on the independent variable.

We also assess whether receiving agricultural assistance increases support for government more generally. To do so, we analyze an index measuring a general positive view towards government, and support for government’s role in assisting citizens outside of the domain of agriculture. To construct the “government positivity” index, we asked respondents a series of questions, scaled them to lie between 0 and 1 so that a value of 0 corresponds to the most anti-government response and 1 corresponds to the most pro-government response, and averaged all of the items. The items, some of which are drawn from the American National Election Study and Mettler (2018), were: (1) “Government programs have helped me in times of need.”; (2) “Government has given me opportunities to improve my standard of living.”; (3) “Government should support investments and activities that are important to society but that individuals and businesses might not provide on their own, such as scientific research and national defense.”; (4) “Government should step in to provide relief to individuals and businesses after natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes.”; (5) “Government should step in and support individual industries in times of economic distress.”; (6) “Government should be active in efforts to conserve the natural environment and protect wildlife populations.”; (7) “Government should ensure that every citizen receives adequate medical care.”; (8) “Government should ensure that every citizen has adequate income in retirement.”; (9) “Government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep.”; (10) “When government supports particular investments and economic activities, special interests usually benefit at the expense of society as a whole.”; (11) “How often can you trust the government to do what is right?”; (12) “Do you think that government wastes a lot of the
money we pay in taxes, wastes some of it, or doesn’t waste very much of it?”; (13) “What do
you think is the best way to deal with the federal budget deficit?”; (14) “When it comes to
paying federal income taxes, do you feel you are asked to pay your fair share, more than your
fair share, or less than your fair share?” The first ten items were agree-disagree scales.

The Cronbach’s alpha of these 14 items is 0.81, suggesting that they scale well and tap an
underlying dimension of pro-government attitudes. As described below, we also investigate
the items individually.

The most straightforward expectation that flows from the policy feedback literature is that
individuals who receive benefits from a particular program will be more supportive of that
program than individuals who did not. To test this, we focus on the MFP. Because all of
our respondents have received either ARC/PLC or CRP payments, there is little variation in
whether respondents participated in those programs in a given year. For the MFP, however,
there is substantial variation in whether a producer was eligible to participate in 2018 and
2019 based on the types of crops grown. Hence, we operationalize this variable as a binary
indicator of whether the producer received MFP funds in either 2018 or 2019. We also test
an alternative operationalization: the number of years the producer participated in the MFP.

A second hypothesis that stems from policy feedback theory is that the size of the benefit
should matter: individuals who receive larger benefits from a government program should
express greater support for that program than individuals who receive smaller benefits. We
test this for all three programs, operationalizing the independent variable of payment receipt
for these programs in terms of quintiles. We use quintiles because there are massive outliers
in terms of the amount of payments received.

Data from our survey experiment allow us to test a third hypothesis related to the visibility
or salience of benefits: the policy feedback literature suggests that individuals who are more aware of having received benefits from a government program, or for whom the benefits are salient, should be more supportive of that program than individuals who are less aware or for whom the benefits are less salient. We test whether respondents who were reminded of their past ARC/PLC or CRP benefits—and informed that they were in the top half of recipients—express greater support for that program than those in the control group.

We also evaluate whether the relationship between receiving government benefits and political attitudes is conditioned by political ideology—and whether any such heterogeneity depends on the particulars of the program. A number of possibilities are plausible. It could be that receiving benefits has a stronger relationship with attitudes for conservatives than liberals—making conservatives more supportive of those programs or government given their a priori low evaluations of government. Alternatively, any positive associations could be greater for liberals than conservatives, because someone generally favorable toward government might be more willing to give government credit for providing a benefit than someone with more negative views. Backlash effects may also be present among conservatives; when confronted with a positive experience with government, conservatives may engage in motivated reasoning to address cognitive dissonance. Further, when programs are politicized (i.e., associated with a specific political leader or party), then feedback may be stronger among counter-partisans. This is because co-partisan recipients are supportive of the policies due to their partisan or ideological predispositions. While it is not theoretically clear from the outset how benefits would interact with ideology and partisanship, it is an important avenue to explore.

In our OLS regressions where we explore heterogeneity by political ideology, we bifurcate respondents into conservatives (65.8% of sample) and moderates/liberals (34.2% of sample)
rather than using the standard seven-point political ideology scale. Given the small number of liberals in the data (only 8.7% of respondents identify as “extremely liberal” or “liberal” vs. 48.7% who identify as “extremely conservative” or “conservative.”), this approach is preferable to including ideology as a seven-point linear predictor. As discussed below, we examine various operationalizations of political ideology and demonstrate robustness across all of them. Descriptive statistics of these variables are in the online appendix. In all of our models, we also control for as many demographic variables as possible that were included in the survey. In addition to political ideology, we include veteran status, gender, age, education, total acres farmed (in tens of thousands of acres), and total farm value as of 2019 (in tens of millions of dollars).\footnote{Given that 97.2% of respondents identify as “white,” and that many who selected “other” provided a response such as “Caucasian,” we do not control for it in the regressions. Results are unchanged if race is included.}

**Results**

**Market Facilitation Program (MFP)**

We first examine whether program participation is associated with support for the MFP, using the binary indicator for whether the respondent has received any MFP payments.\footnote{To leverage the full statistical power of the analysis, we include all respondents in these analyses. In the online appendix, we replicate the model specifications by including interaction terms between payment receipt and the experimental treatment indicators to assess whether the information conditioned the effects of program participation. As shown in the appendix, this was not the case as all interaction terms are substantively small and statistically insignificant.} As shown in the online appendix, overall 37.0% of producers “strongly approve” of the program, 43.3% “somewhat approve,” 14.0% “somewhat oppose,” and 5.6% “strongly oppose.”
observe a positive association between payment receipt and program support. As shown in column (1) of Table 3, producers who received MFP payments in 2018 or 2019 were about 7.0 percentage points more supportive of the MFP ($p = .005$). One way of assessing the substantive size of this relationship is to compare it to the average difference in MFP support between conservative and moderate/liberal farmers. The MFP is closely associated with President Trump, so it is not surprising that conservative farmers were 3.3 percentage points more supportive of the MFP than moderate/liberal farmers. But the coefficient estimate on MFP participation is more than twice as large as the coefficient on political ideology.

These relationships are robust to various operationalizations of program participation. As shown in column (2) of Table 3, when we measure participation as the number of years in which MFP was received (zero, one, or two), the coefficient estimate is 2.9 percentage points per year ($p = .017$), which is 5.7 percentage points across the range of the data. Finally, in column (3), we divide the sample into quintiles of the amount of MFP money received. Going up one quintile is associated with a 1.3 percentage point increase in program support ($p = .058$). Over the range of the independent variable, the effect size is 5.1 percentage points.

Despite increasing support for the MFP itself, MFP participation is not associated with more positive views of government generally. As shown in column (4) of Table 3, there is no relationship between program participation and the pro-government index. The estimated coefficient is both substantively small and statistically insignificant. As shown in the online appendix, this null result is consistent across the items that constitute the index, and there is no discernible pattern of what emerges as statistically significant. For only two of the 14 survey items that constitute the index do we observe a significant relationship, which is about

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14All reported $p$-values are two-tailed.
what we would expect by chance alone.

We next examine whether these relationships are conditioned by ideology. For the MFP, we find that the positive association between program receipt and program support is concentrated entirely among liberal and moderate agricultural producers. As shown in column (1) of Table 4, among liberals/moderates the magnitude of the relationship is 15.2 percentage points ($p = .001$). Conversely, among conservatives it is 2.7 percentage points ($p = .34$).
The interaction term in column (1) represents the difference between these estimates (12.5 percentage points), which is also statistically significant ($p = .021$). Hence, for the MFP, we find that conservatives do not have higher support for the government program when they participate, in contrast to ideological groups whose political predispositions made them less initially supportive of a Trump-led policy. Among non-recipients, conservatives were 14.1 percentage points more likely to support the program than liberals/moderates ($p = .005$).

These relationships from the model estimated in column (1) are illustrated in Figure 2. Among moderate and liberal producers who did not receive MFP assistance, support for the program is middling (.55 on the 0-1 scale). In contrast, support for the program is much higher among conservative producers who did not receive assistance (.69). However, among moderate and liberal producers who participated in the MFP, support is much closer to their counterpart conservative producers (.70 vs. .72). Hence, the expected policy feedback relationship is present for moderate/liberal farmers but not for conservative farmers. This suggests that participation in the MFP leads moderate/liberal farmers to “catch up” with respect to their policy support to conservatives, who have positive views of the program regardless of their participation because their political predispositions lead them to support a policy associated with President Trump.\footnote{The null effect among conservatives is not due to a mechanical ceiling effect that is an artifact of survey measurement. First, a minority of respondents (37.0\% of the overall sample and 37.1\% of conservatives) selected the top response category, meaning that most respondents could have moved upward on the scale. Additionally, as explained below, support for the CRP was even higher (57.9\% of respondents strongly approved) yet we found effects of key variables for that program.}

This conditional relationship with ideology is robust to various operationalizations of MFP receipt. As shown in columns (2) and (3) of Table 4, regardless of whether program partic-
Table 4: Political Ideology Conditions the Relationship between MFP Participation and MFP Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>MFP Receipt (binary)</td>
<td>0.152***</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>0.011</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>MFP Receipt (years)</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative x MFP (years)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.062**</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFP Receipt (quintile)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.029**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative x MFP (quintile)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.025*</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
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<td>0.122***</td>
<td>0.106**</td>
<td>-0.118***</td>
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<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
</tr>
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<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>0.077***</td>
<td>0.085***</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.168***</td>
<td>0.170***</td>
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<td>(0.061)</td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
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<td>-0.160***</td>
<td>-0.158***</td>
<td>0.033**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
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<td>(0.014)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Total Acres Farmed</td>
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<td>0.017</td>
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<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Value</td>
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<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.004*</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.568***</td>
<td>0.596***</td>
<td>0.605***</td>
<td>0.465***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.059)</td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(0.059)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations: 1,037 1,037 1,037 1,045  
R-squared: 0.051 0.050 0.046 0.270  

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable for columns (1)-(3) is support for the MFP. Dependent variable for column (4) is the pro-government index.  
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 (two-tailed)
Figure 2: Relationship between MFP Receipt and MFP Support, by Ideology

Participation is operationalized as number of years or in terms of quintiles of payment amounts, the interaction term between political ideology and program participation is negative and statistically significant. Among moderate and liberal producers, there is a positive association between participation and support. This relationship is close to zero among conservative producers. Finally, in column (4), we show that the null relationship between program participation and the pro-government index is not conditioned by political ideology.

These results are robust to various operationalizations of political predispositions. In the online appendix, we report results conditioning payment receipt by party identification instead of political ideology, as well as a continuous measure of ideology. In all cases, the interaction
between political predispositions and payment receipt is statistically significant.

These findings are especially notable given that 1) the MFP and the better-studied ACA share a great deal in common and 2) studies of the ACA have so far produced mixed findings on this score. Both the ACA and the MFP are products of the modern, hyper-partisan era. The ACA was strongly associated with President Obama, and the MFP was strongly associated with President Trump. Yet while Lerman and McCabe (2017) find that the effect of receiving public health insurance on support for Medicare spending is significant among Republicans but not Democrats, they do not find clear effects for Republicans on support for the ACA, nor do Sances and Clinton (Forthcoming). By looking at this very different population of program recipients, we find clearer differences by ideology and party: receiving MFP benefits is only associated with greater support for the MFP among liberals/moderates/Democrats—not conservatives/Republicans. This adds to the evidence suggesting that for highly partisan programs like these, policy feedback effects on attitudes may be more pronounced for those who are otherwise disinclined to support the programs because of the president and party responsible for them. Our findings also point to the limits of policy feedback: in the case of MFP—a program delivering many billions of dollars to farmers in 2018 and 2019—receiving benefits has little to no association with attitudes toward government generally.

**Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) Programs**

We turn next to analysis of some of the older assistance programs—programs that existed well before the Trump administration. We begin with the ARC/PLC programs. Like the MFP, these are commodity programs that deliver payments to farmers for growing certain crops, but they are largely governed by the traditionally bipartisan Farm Bill and are not
strongly associated with any president or political party. We first examine whether farmers who have received greater benefits from ARC/PLC express attitudes more supportive of those programs.

The model estimates are shown in column (1) of Table 5. For these programs, we do not find an overall relationship between receiving benefits and program support: the coefficient associated with “ARC/PLC Receipt (quintile)” is both substantively small and statistically insignificant. As with the MFP, there is some suggestive evidence that any positive relationship is concentrated among moderates/liberals, but the interaction term between program participation and political ideology does not achieve standard levels of statistical significance (see column (2)). Note, however, that conservatives are significantly less likely to support the program than moderates/liberals. This is in stark contrast to the MFP, where conservatives actually exhibited greater latent support due to the program’s association with President Trump. The ARC/PLC programs are therefore more similar to other types of government support and intervention. Overall, then, for these traditional farm subsidy programs, there is little evidence that receiving larger payments is associated with greater support for the programs.

In column (3), moreover, we find that the experimental treatment—a reminder to make the ARC/PLC programs more salient in producers’ minds—also did not affect support. Nor was there a conditional effect of the treatment information on political attitudes by ideology. It is important to note that this is not because the treatment was weak or not noticed by respondents. As shown in column (5), reminding people of the government support they received did improve evaluations of the incumbent president: the treatment information in-
creased Trump approval by 6.6 percentage points ($p = .006$). But perhaps it is not surprising that our reminder of the benefits received did not affect support for the program given that the payments themselves are likely more impactful than a psychological “nudge.” Finally, as shown in columns (6) and (7), receiving larger payments from the ARC/PLC programs is also not associated with more positive views of government.  

Thus, receiving ARC/PLC benefits appears to have little association with either support for those programs or government more generally. Why is this, especially considering that these are such large, direct payments made by the federal government to farmers? Our quantitative data do not allow for a thorough exploration of the mechanism, but analysis of the open-ended comments producers offered on our survey point toward a possible explanation.

While some producers explained why they support traditional subsidies, there is no shortage of critiques of commodity programs like ARC/PLC. Some refer to traditional subsidies as “safety-net programs” or “welfare” for farmers, many express disdain for “government handouts,” and several express preferences for relying on free markets. One farmer wrote, “I wish the government would get out of all farm programs...The American farm program has become nothing more than a welfare program.” Another wrote, “Farmer welfare programs are a joke.” Similar to the comments of many others, one remarked, “No rancher/farmer wants ‘hand outs’, We want fair markets, private property rights protected, and less regulation.” Several farmers expressed that they do not like taking farm subsidies but have to in order to survive, even though they are philosophically opposed to them. Other beneficiaries put it

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16There was no significant difference between conservatives and liberals/moderates with respect to this treatment effect ($p = .77$).

17As shown in the online appendix, these null effects were consistent across the components of the government positivity scale.
more bluntly. As one said, “While I am not in favor of some programs, if they are offered to me, I take them.” Moreover, when we ask respondents whether they think agricultural subsidies to farmers should be increased, decreased, or kept the same, twice as many support decreasing subsidies (32%) as do increasing subsidies (16%).

Another theme from the open-ended comments is that many respondents view these commodity programs as unfair, distortionary, and arbitrary. Many lamented the perceived unfairness of the commodity programs disproportionately helping large corporate farms at the expense of small family farms. Others remarked that the programs prop up “farmers that have made poor decisions.” As one farmer wrote, “I am a strong proponent of farm assistance programs. My problem though, is that there are too many special interest groups with their hands in the pie. The majority of the money is not actually used to help the farmers/ranchers.” Viewed altogether, this suggests that for traditional commodity programs like ARC/PLC, even farmers who get large payments can muster objections to either the principle of the programs or certain aspects of how they are administered. This may be a reason why larger benefits are not associated with more support.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Safety net programs are a large part of what government does, but of course government engages in other types of activities as well, such as what the USDA does through the CRP: offering payments to incentivize conservation. It is important to explore programs like these as well, especially for this population, because as we described above, many farmers view traditional commodity subsidies as “welfare” and “government handouts”—which perhaps mitigates policy feedback effects on attitudes. In contrast, the CRP benefits are perceived
Table 5: Receiving ARC/PLC Program Support is Unrelated to Policy Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
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<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>(7)</th>
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<td>ARC/PLC Receipt (quintile)</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.019*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(quintile)</td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative x</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARC/PLC Receipt</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.066***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARC/PLC Treatment</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative x</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARC/PLC Treatment</td>
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<td>0.020</td>
<td>-0.043**</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>0.524***</td>
<td>-0.138***</td>
<td>-0.122***</td>
</tr>
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<td>(0.018)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>-0.007</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
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<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.064**</td>
<td>0.067**</td>
<td>0.067**</td>
<td>0.065*</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
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<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.254***</td>
<td>0.283***</td>
<td>0.283***</td>
<td>-0.255***</td>
<td>0.170***</td>
<td>0.169***</td>
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<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>(0.080)</td>
<td>(0.080)</td>
<td>(0.083)</td>
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<td>(0.028)</td>
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<td>-0.100***</td>
<td>-0.099***</td>
<td>-0.200***</td>
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<td>(0.032)</td>
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<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Acres Farmed</td>
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<td>0.068**</td>
<td>0.071*</td>
<td>0.071*</td>
<td>0.105**</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farm Value</td>
<td>-0.018**</td>
<td>-0.017**</td>
<td>-0.014*</td>
<td>-0.014*</td>
<td>-0.017*</td>
<td>-0.004*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.645***</td>
<td>0.612***</td>
<td>0.659***</td>
<td>0.651***</td>
<td>0.408***</td>
<td>0.481***</td>
<td>0.470***</td>
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<td>(0.055)</td>
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<td>1,040</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>1,045</td>
<td>1,045</td>
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<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.439</td>
<td>0.269</td>
<td>0.270</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable for columns (1)-(4) is support for ARC/PLC program. Dependent variable for column (5) is approval of President Trump. Dependent variable for columns (6)-(7) is the pro-government index. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 (two-tailed)
more as the government renting the private property of farmers. Moreover, like the ARC/PLC programs (but unlike the MFP), the CRP is a longstanding program and one that is not strongly associated with either party or a particular president. Patterns of policy feedback from CRP might therefore be different from the MFP because of its less-partisan nature and different from the ARC/PLC programs because it is not akin to a safety-net program.

We begin in column (1) of Table 6 with a test of whether receiving greater funding from the CRP is associated with greater support for that program. We find that it is: moving up one quintile in payment levels is associated with a 1.6 percentage point increase in support for the program \( (p = .001) \). Across the range of the independent variable, this translates into a 6.5 percentage point relationship.

Again, the qualitative data from the survey help to explain why we find positive relationships here but not for ARC/PLC in the previous section. Comparatively, the farmers’ critiques of the CRP are more limited in number and scope. Farmers report that the program works well (“conservation payments are a good thing”), and several propose that it should be expanded. One producer wrote, “They need to increase the CRP 10-fold and take 20% of the acres in the USA out of production.” Another said, “Government payments to farmers should continue but be directed more towards incentive payments for conservation practices.” Similarly, one respondent wrote, “My issues with government payments to farmers is that too many dollars go to large farms. The payments need to be limited and tied to more conservation practices.” This is consistent with the survey responses that showed that overall 57.9% of respondents “strongly supported” the CRP and 34.2% “somewhat supported” it. Thus, the CRP is viewed by many farmers as one that works well—and that may be a reason why farmers who receive larger payments are more supportive of the program.
Unlike with the MFP, moreover, there is no conditional relationship between CRP receipt and political ideology (see the insignificant interaction term in column (2)). This is likely because the CRP is a longstanding program that stretches back decades, and is not associated with a single party or political leader like the MFP was with President Trump and the Republicans. What this suggests, then, is that the extent to which policy feedback is conditioned by ideology (or partisanship) may depend on the degree to which the policy itself is partisan.

As with the ARC/PLC experiment, we do not find that increasing the salience of the CRP affected support for the policy (see columns (3) and (4)). Again, this is not because the experimental treatment was weak. As shown in column (5), reminding people of the government payments they received increased approval of President Trump by about 5.7 percentage points ($p = .016$). Finally, as shown in columns (6) and (7), we again find that receiving larger agricultural program payments is not associated with greater support for government more generally.$^{18}$

**Conclusion**

Central to policy feedback theory is the idea that receiving government benefits can shape political attitudes, potentially making them more supportive of the policies delivering those benefits. Further, it has been argued that benefiting from government programs could make people more supportive of government generally, but that the hidden nature of much government assistance prevents this from happening. Up to this point, however, empirical research on this question has been limited both by the types of policies explored—mostly social safety-net policies, and those enacted when polarization was low—and the difficulty of determining

$^{18}$Results for the individual components of the government positivity index can be found in the online appendix.
### Table 6: Receiving CRP Support Increases Policy Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>(7)</th>
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<td>CRP Receipt</td>
<td>0.016***</td>
<td>0.019***</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<tr>
<td>(quintile)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservative x</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRP Receipt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRP Treatment</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>-0.026</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
<td>0.057**</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative x</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRP Treatment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>-0.108***</td>
<td>-0.097***</td>
<td>-0.100***</td>
<td>-0.097***</td>
<td>0.541***</td>
<td>-0.138***</td>
<td>-0.121***</td>
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<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
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<td>Veteran</td>
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<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.015</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
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<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
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<td>(0.022)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.164***</td>
<td>0.138**</td>
<td>0.139**</td>
<td>-0.266***</td>
<td>0.173***</td>
<td>0.173***</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.051)</td>
<td>(0.051)</td>
<td>(0.067)</td>
<td>(0.066)</td>
<td>(0.082)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>-0.023</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
<td>-0.175***</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
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<td>(0.014)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Acres Farmed</td>
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<td>-0.102**</td>
<td>-0.082*</td>
<td>-0.082*</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.014</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
<td>(0.048)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Value</td>
<td>0.009*</td>
<td>0.009*</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.004*</td>
<td>-0.004*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>0.781***</td>
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<td>0.863***</td>
<td>0.387***</td>
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<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,042</td>
<td>1,042</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>1,045</td>
<td>1,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.448</td>
<td>0.269</td>
<td>0.270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable for columns (1)-(4) is support for the CRP. Dependent variable for column (5) is approval of President Trump. Dependent variable for columns (6)-(7) is pro-government index. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 (two-tailed)
which individuals received which benefits. In this paper, we make progress along both of these lines. We turn our focus to a set of large federal government programs that support farmers—a more conservative, rural population than those usually studied in the policy feedback literature. We analyze both newer and older programs. And we draw on administrative data on actual benefit receipts, pairing them with an original survey of political attitudes.

The results vary across the three programs we analyze. Strikingly, for the longstanding commodity programs governed by the Farm Bill—the programs that are typically meant by “farm subsidies”—we find little to no evidence that receiving greater benefits is associated with more positive attitudes of the programs. In contrast, getting assistance from a very new and large commodity program initiated by President Trump is associated with more support for that program, but in ways that vary by recipient ideology. Conservative farmers generally support the program regardless of whether they receive benefits. It is instead moderate and liberal farmers who are more supportive of the program when they receive (larger) benefits. And the one program we studied that has greater support among those who benefit more, regardless of their ideology, is one that has been around for decades and does something quite different: providing payments to farmers to incentivize conservation.

On the whole, then, when we focus on farmers’ views toward these agricultural policies, we find that the feedback relationships are conditional. They are conditional on recipient party/ideology, but only for the newer, more partisan program enacted during the polarized era. For that program—the MFP—the relationship is concentrated among individuals who are not aligned with the policy’s enacting coalition. In contrast, for the older programs with relatively non-partisan origins (the CRP and ARC/PLC programs), we find no such heterogeneity by partisanship or ideology. This suggests that the dynamics of policy feedback
may have changed over time—and were perhaps different before the rise in polarization.

In addition, our study provides suggestive evidence that stigmatizing programs, or programs perceived as administered unfairly or arbitrarily, have weaker feedback effects, consistent with what others have found in analyses of very different policies and recipients (Mettler and Stonecash, 2008; Campbell, 2012). While we cannot say for sure why we find a positive relationship for the CRP but not for the ARC/PLC programs, our qualitative data suggest that perceptions of traditional farm subsidies as unfair—and “welfare” for farmers—dampen the degree to which receiving benefits affects support.

It is also worth underscoring that the clearest policy feedback relationships we find are for a program that—in terms of what it does—is somewhat different than the policies that get most of the attention in the policy feedback literature. Much of that literature focuses on social safety-net policies, but government does more than provide safety nets. For example, it provides policing (Lerman and Weaver, 2014), it regulates labor-management relations (Anzia and Moe, 2016; Hertel-Fernandez, 2018), and, just as importantly, in a variety of ways it encourages certain forms of economic activity like cancer research and developing renewable energy. Our findings for CRP suggest that policy feedback effects on attitudes might be quite strong for these latter types of government initiatives.

Perhaps most provocative and most worth further investigation, however, are our findings related to the puzzle raised at the outset: how it is that anti-government sentiment can be so strong in the United States when so many citizens receive so much from government (Mettler, 2018). There is no nuance or conditionality to our findings here; there is simply no clear association between receiving more agricultural assistance and support for government generally, regardless of whether the assistance is coming from a longstanding program or
a newer program associated with President Trump. Existing scholarship argues that many beneficiaries of government programs do not know what they are getting from government—and that that explains why they aren’t more supportive of government (Cramer, 2016; Lerman, 2019; Mettler, 2018)—but our findings suggest that the “submerged” nature of benefits can’t be the only explanation for this phenomenon. All of our respondents get checks from the federal government. Presumably they know that the agricultural assistance they receive comes from government. Some of them were even reminded of the benefits they received. It did not make a difference. Respondents receiving larger agricultural benefits do not express more supportive views of government.

Finally, going forward, policy feedback researchers should continue to do more to study the effects of policies whose beneficiaries (or intended beneficiaries) identify as conservative, affiliate with the Republican Party, or live in rural areas. Questions of importance abound. For example, how did the Trump tax cut influence political attitudes? When politicians pursue economic investment programs in rural areas or regions of economic decline, what are the effects on residents’ political attitudes and political engagement? Especially given the importance of rural America to electoral and policy outcomes in the United States, it is critical that we do more to understand how citizens view such policies—and how different people’s interactions with government affect their political views.

References


Lerman, Amy E, Meredith L Sadin, and Samuel Trachtman. 2017. “Policy Uptake as Political


