

# Public Opinion, Policy Tools, and the Status Quo: Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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## Abstract

The method in which a government policy is delivered—for example, as a tax break rather than a direct payment—could potentially have significant implications for how the public views that policy. This is an especially important consideration given the importance of indirect policy approaches like tax breaks to modern American governance. We employ a series of survey experiments to test whether citizens react more favorably to tax breaks than to equivalent spending programs. We find that citizens prefer tax breaks, particularly when they are the established means of intervention. When direct intervention is the status quo, or when any government involvement on the issue is unfamiliar, the preference is reduced. We also find an interactive effect for ideology, with conservatives strongly preferring tax breaks to direct intervention, though the effect is still present among liberals. This study establishes the importance of delivery mechanism to citizens' policy preferences and suggests that the policy status quo structures citizens' perceptions of policy proposals.

## Keywords

submerged state, public opinion, public policy, tax expenditures, policy tools

In recent decades, public policy benefits in the United States have often been delivered indirectly (Faricy 2011; Hacker 2002; Howard 1997, 2007, 2009; Kettl 1988; Mettler 2010, 2011; Milward and Provan 2000; Morgan and Campbell 2011; Salamon and Elliott 2002). Most notably, the tax code has become a preferred mechanism of delivery for policymakers across the political spectrum: Tax breaks (or tax expenditures), which are functionally equivalent to federal spending, have often replaced more traditional policy tools such as direct cash assistance. This trend has important and far-reaching implications for the distribution of benefits (Faricy 2011; Hacker 2002; Howard 1997; Mettler 2011; Surrey 1970), the effectiveness and accountability of government (Kettl 1988; Kleinbard 2010; Surrey 1970), and for citizens' ability to understand what government is doing (Mettler 2010, 2011; Toder 2000). Despite the magnitude and importance of this trend, political scientists and other scholars are just beginning to explore underlying political dynamics. Why do policymakers choose indirect over direct transmission of public policy benefits? And what are the consequences of such choices for subsequent politics and policymaking?

In this study, we use survey experiments to assess the impact of policy delivery mechanism on public opinion. We find that Americans prefer indirect policy interventions

(specifically tax expenditures) to direct ones across three different policy areas, suggesting that the public's greater receptivity to such interventions helps to drive their growth. This pattern is especially pronounced among conservatives, but extends to liberals in two of the three policy areas. In addition, we demonstrate that the design of existing policies helps to shape public support for indirect policymaking. Citizens show the greatest preference for delivery of benefits through the tax code in cases where such programs are well established and accepted as a policy tool. In situations in which direct government delivery of benefits is common, the public is less enthused about delivery of benefits through the tax code, while preferences over policy design fall in between the two extremes for novel or unfamiliar programs. These patterns are more pronounced for individuals more likely to be familiar

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with the policy status quo, bolstering confidence in our findings. The results offer insight into both the causes and consequences of the growth of indirect policymaking, and contribute to the literature on policy feedbacks. They also have important implications for the literature on framing, legislative strategy, values, ambivalence, and ideology.

## Public Opinion and Indirect Governance

Many scholars have observed that economic and social policy in the United States has undergone a marked shift away from direct governance in the last several decades. By direct governance, we mean the provision of services directly to citizens by government employees or direct cash payments from the government to citizens. Lowi (1969), Kettl (1988), Salamon and Elliott (2002), Hacker (2002), and Morgan and Campbell (2011) all note the extent to which the American state has grown to rely on private entities to provide services, with the result that the line between the state and organized interests has blurred. Lowi famously calls this phenomenon “interest group liberalism.” The work of Howard (1997, 2007, 2009) focused on a related trend: the shift toward making policy, particularly social welfare policy, through the tax code. U.S. income tax law is positively riddled with so-called tax expenditures—credits, deductions, and other exceptions to the general income tax rates that subsidize certain behaviors, investments, individuals, and entities. Taken together, they represent a huge portion of the federal budget (\$1.1 trillion in fiscal year 2014, according to an estimate by Gravelle and Hungerford 2012), and, as Howard argues, a significant part of the American welfare state.

Howard (1997, 2007, 2009), Hacker (2002), and Mettler (2010, 2011) all offer explanations for the growth of the “hidden” or “submerged” welfare state that rely on arguments about public opinion. Howard (2009, 96–97) argues that tax expenditures offered both Republicans and Democrats a means of addressing social and economic problems that was more acceptable to key constituencies (conservatives and moderates) than traditional welfare state spending, which has generally been associated with New Deal and Great Society liberalism.<sup>1</sup> Hacker (2002, 43) and Mettler (2011, 27) argue that indirect interventions have been politically successful because their opaque design obscures from the public “what is at stake,” in Mettler’s words. This argument draws on Arnold’s (1990, 17) insight that the public’s ability to “link policy instruments with policy effects” is contingent on the design of the policy itself, a factor that Arnold refers to as “traceability.” The low traceability of indirect interventions like tax expenditures appears to obscure for many Americans the consequences of these programs

(such as their distributive effects; see Mettler and Guardino 2011), making them more popular than they would be if citizens had more complete information.

Some extant experimental work has begun to explore citizens’ responses to different policy delivery mechanisms. Zelinsky (2005) uses a survey experiment on a sample of law students to test whether first-year law students perceive a benefit “framed” as a tax break for so-called volunteer firefighters as more appropriate than an equivalent cash payment. He finds that respondents are significantly more favorable toward the tax benefit, particularly at higher dollar amounts, and concludes that a “framing effect” is at work. In a second study, Zelinsky presents the tax break and direct benefit side by side, thus providing fuller information to respondents on the options, but still finds a significant and persistent framing effect.

Faricy and Ellis (2014) conduct a series of three survey experiments on a sample of undergraduates to determine whether respondents’ reaction to three government social welfare interventions (aid for home mortgage payments, retirement savings, and food) varies based on delivery mechanism (normal spending vs. tax expenditure) and the inclusion of information about distributive effects (regressive for the first two programs but progressive for food aid). The results show increased support for the retirement savings program when it was described as a tax break rather than a direct payment, while a similar effect for the home mortgage interest subsidy fell short of statistical significance, and there was little evidence of any effect for food aid. Faricy and Ellis suggest that the latter result is due to the fact that food stamps are already well established as a regular spending program, suggesting the importance of policy feedback as noted above. Their findings also echo those of Mettler and Guardino (2011) in that the upwardly redistributive programs were less popular when their distributive effects were revealed. Faricy and Ellis also document partisan differences in responsiveness to the frames, with Republican respondents exhibiting a greater jump in support when exposed to the tax expenditure (as opposed to spending) frame than did Democrats. Although these works suggest that the tax expenditure mechanism boosts the appeal of at least some proposed policies relative to a traditional spending program, they do not fully address variability across different policy areas.

The findings of past experiments with respect to the moderating role of information raise another important question. Given that the costs of tax expenditures to the Treasury are less traceable than those of spending programs (Arnold 1990, 17), would we observe reduced support if respondents were given additional information about program costs? Stanley Surrey (1970, 1973), the tax scholar and assistant treasury secretary who pioneered

the concept of the “tax expenditure,” argued that tax breaks should be cataloged and budgeted for exactly this reason: he believed that policymakers and citizens would scrutinize these policies more closely if they understood their costs. Past work on citizen attitudes on public finance suggests conflicting expectations for whether Surrey’s expectation is realistic. Zelinsky (2005) finds that the pro-tax-break framing effect is even *stronger* when the program is more costly, suggesting that additional information about costs is unlikely to mitigate such an effect. Similarly, Mueller (1963, 222–23) finds a lack of “congruence” in citizens’ fiscal preferences, while Sears and Citrin (1985, 70), in their landmark study of the late-1970s tax revolt in California, find that Californians (and Americans) “seem to want ‘something for nothing’ where government is concerned.” In contrast, Welch (1985) and Hansen (1998) find more evidence for optimism about the public’s ability to make trade-offs on fiscal policy. If Welch and Hansen are correct, making cost (i.e., constraint) more salient to citizens should reduce their likelihood of supporting a program.

## Theory and Hypotheses

We propose a theory of attitudes toward government involvement that draws on multiple literatures. We argue that citizens generally prefer indirect to direct government intervention because the role of government is less traceable for the former. This tendency is magnified among those with the greatest antipathy toward government (i.e., conservatives). These expectations are in keeping with the existing literature on indirect governance, but the existing literature does not offer a framework for understanding why these preferences might vary for different policy areas or problems.

To address these questions, we incorporate insights from the literature on policy feedbacks and path dependence. In their discussions of policy feedbacks and mass publics, Pierson (1993, 619) and Mettler and Soss (2004, 62) suggest that the status quo may have a powerful effect on citizens’ preferences for different policy approaches. In the complex worlds of public policy and politics, citizens, who lack detailed understanding of most issues, seek to apply what lessons they can from past experiences in deciding which policies are appropriate for solving a given problem. As such, the public’s evaluations of policy proposals do not take place in a vacuum, but in a political environment that is substantially shaped by the policy decisions of the past. As Mettler and Soss (2004, 62) argue,

By pursuing particular types of solutions, policies convey messages about the underlying nature of a problem and shape citizens’ perception of an issue—as a matter of individual or

societal responsibility, for example, or as a public or private problem. Policy choices may thereby structure the public’s expectations in ways that make it increasingly difficult, over time, to promote fundamental change.

One of the important effects of indirect policy delivery mechanisms like tax expenditures is that they frame the policy problems they seek to address as matters best handled by private actors (such as employers, see Gusmano, Schlesinger, and Thomas 2002). Conversely, policy problems for which direct government intervention is more commonplace are socially constructed as situations where government action is *appropriate*. Thus, the preference for government intervention via tax expenditure should be greatest in areas where tax expenditures are established as the preferred policy delivery method, and least in areas where direct government intervention is common. On new or unfamiliar policy problems, the importance of delivery mechanism should fall somewhere in between the two, as the public has no existing guidepost for what constitutes an appropriate intervention.

From this theoretical framework, we draw a number of testable hypotheses for our study. We begin with the basic expectation that indirect government interventions will prove more popular than direct ones as a general rule.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Respondents will be more supportive of a tax expenditure program than an otherwise identical (i.e., same benefits, same cost) regular spending program.

Second, this effect is likely conditioned by the status quo in the policy area in question. The federal government has adopted different approaches to different policy problems, and these existing policy interventions (or lack thereof) structure the political environment by communicating to the public how different problems should be viewed and solved. Overt government action in certain policy areas communicates to the public that those areas are legitimate realms for public involvement. Conversely, indirect action (e.g., tax incentives for private actors) communicates that the policy problem in question is best addressed through private action. This argument is consistent with those made by policy feedback scholars on the ability of policies to reshape citizens’ understandings of the appropriateness of government activity through a process of learning.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** The preference for the tax expenditure version of a program (H1) should be greatest when the tax expenditure is established as the primary means of government intervention in a policy area, lowest when direct intervention is established, and somewhere in the middle when there is no established mode of intervention.

Third, we should not expect this status quo effect to apply evenly to all members of the public. The effect should vary with citizens' familiarity with the policy status quo. Furthermore, we expect this familiarity to be greater for citizens who are or would be eligible for benefits or potential benefits. As an example, homeowners should be more familiar than others with the government's established approach to aiding homeowners by allowing them to deduct their mortgage interest. In addition, the federalized nature of social policy in the United States creates regional variation in the types of government intervention with which citizens are likely to be familiar. We expect policy familiarity to intensify the pattern described in H2.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** The preference for the tax expenditure version of the program (H1) should be more pronounced for individuals that are familiar with tax expenditures as the established means of government intervention, and reduced for individuals that are familiar with direct government intervention in the given policy area.

Fourth, we also expect ideological differences in how individuals respond to policy delivery mechanism. The findings of Howard (1997, 2009) and Ellis and Faricy (2011) suggest that tax expenditures have been particularly effective at winning over conservative and moderate citizens, and Faricy and Ellis' (2014) experiment substantiates this claim. Whereas liberals should be relatively supportive of a proposed social welfare program in any form, conservatives and some moderates will oppose regular spending programs because of an aversion to government "spending." Because they are unlikely to recognize that tax breaks are functionally the same as spending, the tax expenditure mechanism should affect their support for the program to a greater degree than for liberals.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** The positive effect of the tax expenditure delivery mechanism (relative to spending) on program favorability will be stronger among conservatives and weaker among liberals.

Fifth, we expect that more information about the costs of a program (e.g., its likely contribution to the national debt) should reduce respondents' favorability toward it. To make costs more salient to respondents is to remind them that fiscal policy is constrained (see Hansen 1998), and to help them trace a negative policy impact (Arnold 1990). Thus, a respondent may support a new program in the abstract when she feels unconstrained, but not when she is reminded that the program comes at a cost.

**Hypothesis 5 (H5):** Respondents will be less supportive of a program when information on the program's impact on the national debt is provided.

Last, the fact that a program comes at a cost should come as more of a revelation in some circumstances than in others. Although the national debt may not be the first thing on a citizen's mind when she considers a regular spending proposal such as a grant program, almost all citizens understand that "spending" can contribute to the fiscal woes of government. By contrast, not all citizens necessarily grasp the fact that a tax break is functionally equivalent to spending, and that it must be "paid for" sooner or later through either reduced spending on other priorities, increased taxes, or more government borrowing. This low "traceability" may in fact be a large part of tax expenditures' appeal to policymakers. Thus, providing additional information on the debt impact of a tax expenditure should have a larger effect on respondent support than providing such information for a grant program, even if that information (i.e., the dollar amount) is the same. This expectation is informed by the findings of Mettler and Guardino (2011) that revealing information about "submerged state" policies (in their case, the distributive impact) can have a profound effect on individuals' support for those policies. This suggests that citizens are uninformed about these policies in ways that are consequential to support, and that revealing relevant information can have a real impact on preferences.

**Hypothesis 6 (H6):** The negative effect of debt information on program favorability (H5) will be greater for a tax expenditure than for an equivalent spending program.

## Experimental Design and Data

To test our hypotheses, we implement three experiments, each using a  $2 \times 2$  full factorial experimental design in which the experimental factors are (1) the delivery mechanism of a described program (grant or tax expenditure) and (2) the presence or absence of information about the program's contribution to the national debt. Our sample is comprised of 1,000 American adults participating in the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Given our expectations about policy familiarity (H3) and ideology (H4), this national stratified sample is preferable to the student samples used in previous experiments (Faricy and Ellis 2014; Zelinsky 2005).<sup>2</sup> Such student samples tend to be overwhelmingly liberal, and few college students have direct experience with government programs beyond student aid. By contrast, our sample ranges in age from eighteen to ninety-one, with a median age of fifty-four, and offers good variation in ideology, with 44 percent of respondents describing themselves as at least somewhat conservative, 34 percent as at least somewhat liberal, and 22 percent as "middle of the road."<sup>3</sup> Each respondent participated in all three experiments, and each was assigned into the same treatment for all three. The order of the issues was randomly varied for each respondent.

It would not be feasible in a study like this to examine all possible policy areas, or to select a perfectly representative sample. There is no guarantee that our findings will generalize perfectly from our selected policy areas to all possible areas. Instead, we select a set of issue areas that gives us leverage over what we consider to be the theoretically relevant dimension: respondent familiarity and the shape of the policy status quo. We conduct experiments focused on three different social policy areas: homeownership, job training for the unemployed, and paid parental leave. In the area of homeownership, a well-known existing tax expenditure (the home mortgage interest deduction [HMID]) forms the basis of our experiment. Support for the unemployed, including job training, is an area in which direct government intervention through such programs as unemployment insurance and Department of Labor funded training programs is more typical and familiar. Last, paid parental leave, though quite common around the world, is a largely unfamiliar concept in the United States outside of nascent and modest state programs in California and New Jersey.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the three studies encompass policy areas in which the status quo is characterized by intervention via tax break (homeownership), one in which it is characterized by direct government intervention (job training for the unemployed), and one in which any sort of government intervention is largely absent (paid parental leave). Based on our theoretical expectations, home mortgage interest is the case where we should be most likely to observe a strong preference for a tax expenditure, job training for the unemployed is the least likely, and paid parental leave falls in between the extremes. In addition, these policy areas give us the opportunity for more leverage in terms of respondent familiarity at the individual level. Eligible or potentially eligible groups are more likely to be familiar with the shape of the policy status quo in each area, and the state-level variation in parental leave policy offers a further opportunity to examine familiarity with government intervention at the level of the individual respondent.

A description of the study based on the HMID will serve to illustrate the design for all three studies. In reality, the HMID allows homeowners to deduct mortgage interest from their taxable income. Because this is equivalent to an outlay by the government, it is relatively easy to imagine a version of this benefit that is delivered to recipients through a direct cash payment (e.g., a check) rather than through the tax return. Our first experimental manipulation is based on this alternative reality. Roughly half of respondents (by random assignment) received a description of the actual HMID, which read as follows:

We're going to ask you your opinion about a government policy intended to help Americans afford to own homes. Under this policy, individuals who take out a mortgage to

buy a home are eligible to deduct the monthly mortgage interest from their taxable income, thereby reducing their tax burden. Do you approve or disapprove of this policy?

The other half of the respondents were shown a description that differed in one respect: the words "eligible to deduct the monthly mortgage interest from their taxable income, thereby reducing their tax burden" are replaced with "eligible for a cash payment from the government."<sup>5</sup>

The second experimental manipulation varied whether or not additional information on the cost of the program was provided. About half of respondents viewed the tax expenditure and grant treatments as worded above, while the other half viewed them with the following sentence appended to the end: "It is estimated that this program will add around \$390 billion to the national debt over the next four years."<sup>6</sup> The end result is four experimental conditions: Cash, No Debt; Cash, Debt; Tax Expenditure, No Debt; and Tax Expenditure, Debt.

## Variables

Immediately below the program description for all respondents was a question asking if the respondent approves or disapproves of the program, with possible responses ranging on a 7-point scale from *strongly approve* to *strongly disapprove*.<sup>7</sup> This 7-point scale forms our dependent variable. Dummy variables for the experimental treatments form our two key independent variables: Tax Expenditure (=1) versus Cash (=0) Treatment (which we expect to be positively signed as per H1) and Debt Treatment (which we expect to be negatively signed as per H5). The interaction between these two factors forms another key independent variable, which we expect to be negative as per H6.

Testing H4 requires a measure of respondent ideology. We use the CCES common content question asking respondents to estimate their own ideology on a 7-point scale from *very liberal* to *very conservative*, with higher values representing more liberal ideology. We rescale this variable to range from 0 to 1.<sup>8</sup> As liberals are more favorable to government intervention in the economy than conservatives, we expect the constituent term for ideology to be positively signed. As per H4, we expect the two-way interaction between this variable and the *Tax Expenditure* treatment to be negatively signed.

We include a demographic variable in each experiment intended to capture the respondent's personal stake in the policy area. In the housing experiment, we include a dummy variable for homeownership; in the job training experiment, a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent is unemployed; and in the parental leave experiment, a dummy variable indicating whether or not

the respondent is the parent or guardian of any children under the age of eighteen. These variables serve as proxies for the respondent's familiarity with the policy status quo. We interact each of these variables with the Tax Expenditure treatment in the relevant experiment. As per H3, we expect the interaction of homeownership and the Tax Expenditure treatment in the home mortgage interest experiment to be positively signed, while in the job training experiment, we expect the interaction of unemployment status with the Tax Expenditure treatment to be negatively signed. In the parental leave experiment, we do not expect the interaction of the "children under eighteen" variable with the Tax Expenditure treatment to have a significant effect, because there is no government intervention, direct or indirect, with which respondents could be familiar. It is important to keep in mind that these demographic indicators are imperfect proxies for a respondent's familiarity with the policy status quo in a given area, and as such there is likely some measurement error. Given our expectations, this is a relatively minor concern for the housing and training policies; as measurement error in an independent variable should bias effects toward zero, these are effectively conservative tests of our hypothesis. For parental leave, however, some caution is in order, as in this case the measurement error may bias the estimate in favor of our hypothesis of no effect.

We also include a number of control variables based on other questions from our survey. Although control variables are not necessary in a randomized experiment (as random assignment assures that the treatment variables will not be correlated with any omitted variables), including them can help improve overall efficiency (Franklin 1991). We include controls for age, gender, race (a dummy variable coded 1 for respondents who identify as white/Caucasian [non-Latino]), education (ordinal scale), and income (ordinal scale). As with the ideology variable, we rescale all nondichotomous variables to range from 0 to 1.

## Results

Figures 1 to 3 display the percentages of respondents expressing at least some approval for the described policy (5 and up on the 7-point scale) broken down by the experimental manipulations.<sup>9</sup> Support for H1 (the effect of delivery mechanism) is apparent across all three experiments. As Figures 1A, 2A, and 3A make clear, respondents were significantly more likely to support policies to increase homeownership, provide job training for the unemployed, and support paid parental leave when the policies were described as tax breaks rather than direct payments ( $p < .01$  in all three studies, from a difference of proportions test). Furthermore, the relative size of the effects across the different studies provides support for

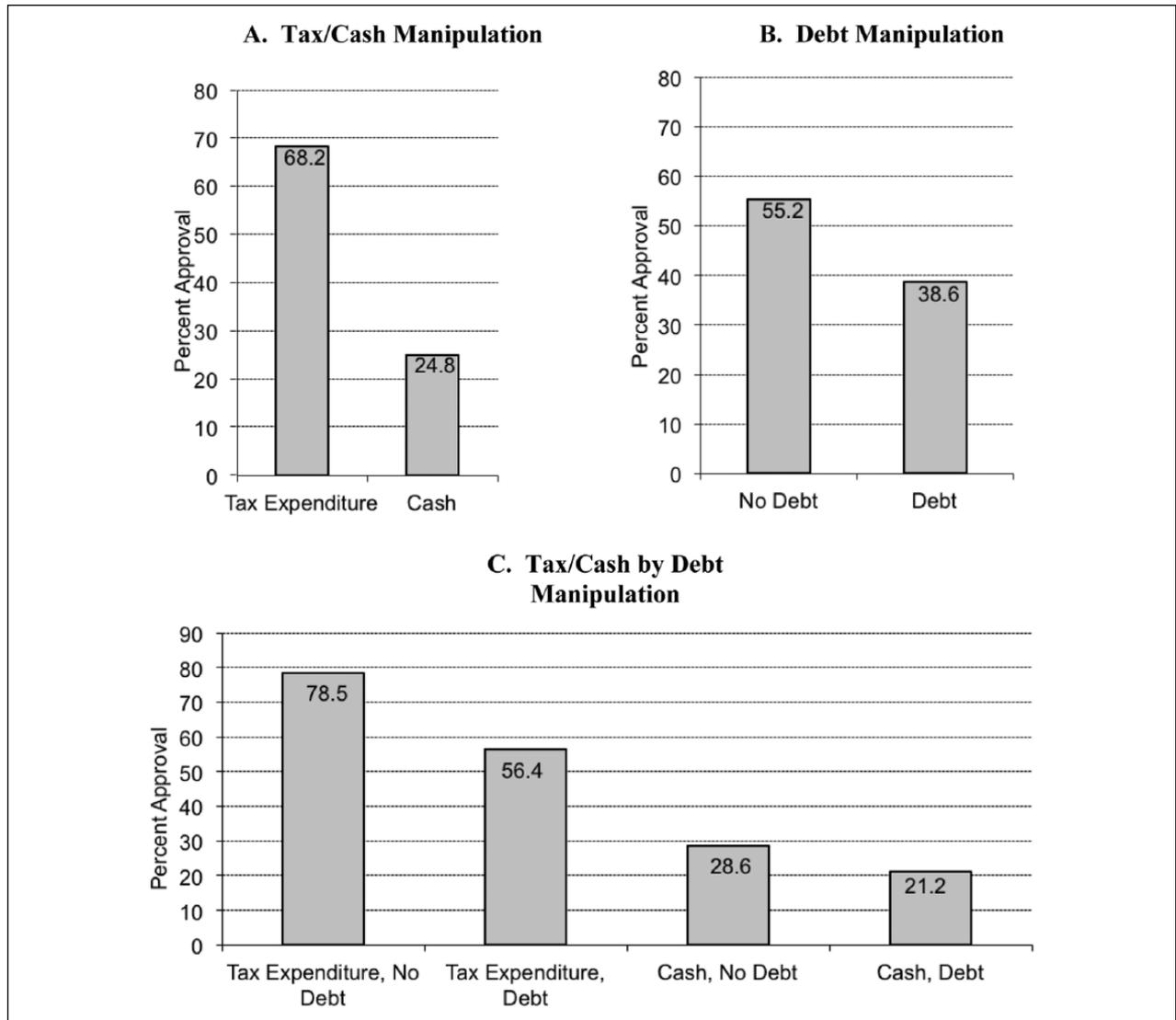
H2 (the conditioning effect of familiarity). The effect of delivery mechanism is the largest for housing (43.4% difference), the area in which there is an established tax expenditure intervention, and the smallest for job training for the unemployed (8.6%), the area in which direct government intervention is familiar. For paid parental leave, an area where any policy intervention is unfamiliar to most Americans, the effect falls between the two extremes (16.3%).

Figures 1B, 2B, and 3B show support for H5: respondents were significantly less likely to respond positively to a policy when an estimate of the program's contribution to the national debt was included ( $p < .01$  for all three studies). There is also evidence for H5 (the interaction of the delivery mechanism and debt information treatments), as Figures 1C, 2C, and 3C display. For all three experiments, the negative effect of the debt information treatment is larger for respondents in the tax expenditure condition than for those in the direct payment condition, as H6 predicts.

To test for the significance of the treatment effects, Table 1 displays the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) models for each experiment, with the 7-point support scale as the dependent variable and control variables included to improve efficiency.<sup>10</sup> The results of these models support the findings of the descriptive analysis, with positive and statistically significant coefficients for the tax expenditure treatment in all three experiments, supporting H1. The relative size of these effects across the experiments also shows evidence for H2. In the housing experiment, the tax expenditure treatment caused an average jump of 2 full points on the 7-point support scale. For parental leave, the effect was much more modest (.82 points), while for job training, it was smaller still (0.50 points). The effect of the debt information treatment is negative and significant for all three experiments, as predicted by H5, though this effect is smaller in magnitude than that of the tax expenditure treatment in each case.

In terms of the control variables, liberalism was correlated with program support in all three experiments. Demographic factors had little impact on support for the housing or job training programs, though women expressed slightly lower levels of support for the housing policy than men. For paid parental leave, older and wealthier respondents were significantly less supportive, while parents of young children were more supportive than nonparents. Notably, we found no evidence of a self-interest effect among homeowners in the housing policy experiment or unemployed people in the job training experiment.

The models in Table 2 incorporate interaction terms between the delivery mechanism and debt information treatments and respondent ideology. There is some support for H4, as the interaction term for respondent

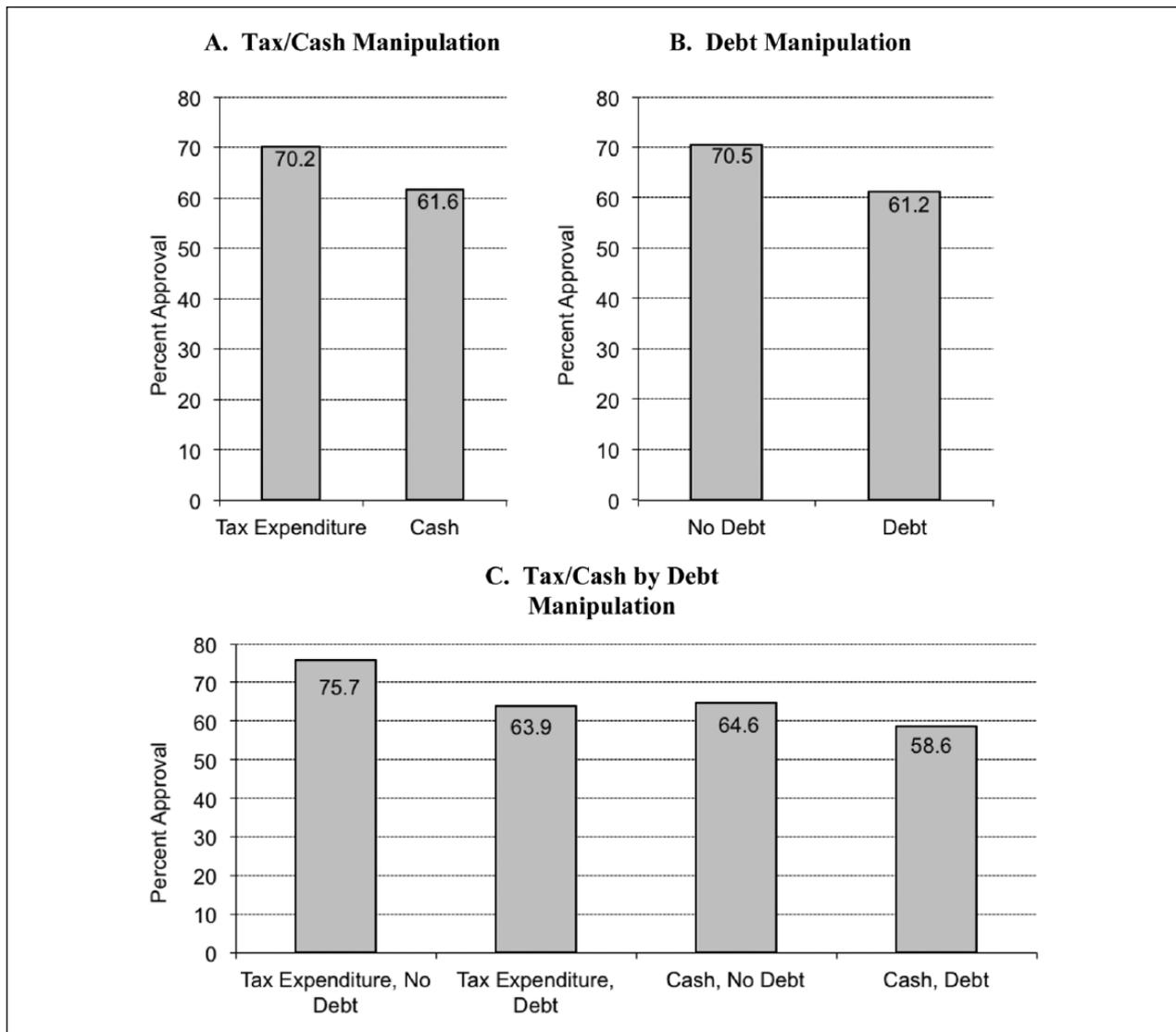


**Figure 1.** Program approval by experimental condition, home mortgage interest.

liberalism and the tax expenditure treatment is negatively signed for all three experiments and statistically significant for housing and job training. Put another way, the tax expenditure treatment had a larger positive effect on conservative respondents' support for the described policy than on that of liberal respondents, at least for two of the three experiments. To explore this dynamic further, we reran these models treating ideology as a seven-category factor variable rather than a continuous variable and plotted the predicted levels of support for each ideological category for the cash and tax expenditure conditions. These predictions, with 95 percent confidence intervals, are displayed in Figure 4.<sup>11</sup> For all three experiments, including parental leave, the jump in support for the tax expenditure version of the program is the most pronounced among the most conservative respondents, and

narrows among more liberal respondents, though not always in a strictly linear fashion. It should be noted that the tax break treatment still has a positive effect for even the most liberal respondents in the housing and parental leave experiments,<sup>12</sup> indicating that the effect is not limited to conservatives alone, even though it is stronger among them.

The results for H6 are more ambiguous. Although the interaction of the tax expenditure and debt information treatments is negatively signed for all experiments, it is only statistically significant for the housing experiment, in which the estimated cost was much larger than that in the other two. Providing information about a policy's cost may mitigate the positive effect of the tax expenditure frame in some cases, but we cannot fully confirm H6 across all issue areas.

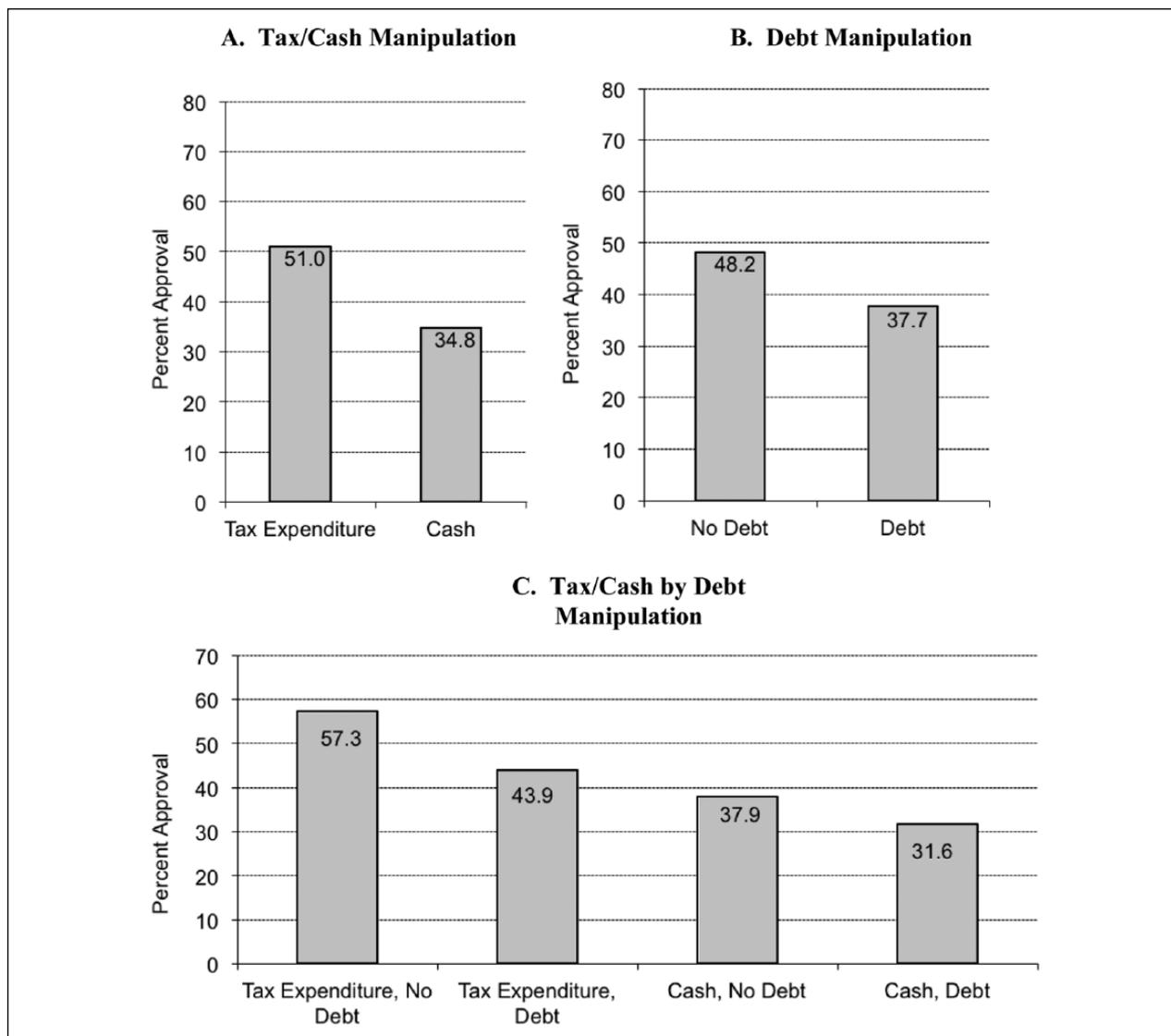


**Figure 2.** Program approval by experimental condition, job training.

To test H3, we add an interaction term of the key demographic variable with the tax expenditure treatment in each experiment. The results of these models, displayed in Table 3 and Figure 5, provide support for our hypothesis. In the housing experiment, the interaction term of the homeownership variable with the tax expenditure treatment is positively signed (0.88) and strongly statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ), indicating that homeowners reacted even more positively to the tax expenditure treatment than other respondents. In the job training experiment, the interaction of the treatment with unemployment status is negative ( $-.66$ ) and significant at the .10 level ( $p = .08$ ), indicating that the positive effect of the tax expenditure treatment is weaker for the unemployed. Finally, in the paid parental leave experiment, the coefficient for the interaction of children under eighteen

with the treatment is substantively tiny (0.06) and statistically insignificant ( $p = .83$ ), though we must note that the measurement error inherent in using parenthood as a proxy for familiarity may have biased this estimate toward zero.

The federalized nature of social policy in the United States offers an opportunity for another test of the familiarity hypothesis (H3) with respect to paid parental leave. Because two states (California and New Jersey) had implemented paid parental leave policies at the time of this study, direct government provision of this service is more likely to be familiar to respondents from those states than others. If H3 is true, the positive effect of the tax expenditure treatment on the support levels of respondents from those states should be reduced compared to the effect on other respondents. To test for such a pattern,



**Figure 3.** Program approval by experimental condition, parental leave.

we reran the parental leave model with a dummy variable identifying the ninety-eight respondents from California and New Jersey and an interaction term of this dummy variable with the tax expenditure treatment. The results of this model are displayed in Table 4. The coefficient for the interaction term (the variable of interest) is negatively signed ( $-.58$ ), as expected, and approaches statistical significance at a marginal level, though it does fall short ( $p = .114$ ).<sup>13</sup> In addition, although the sample size is too small to draw solid conclusions, it is noteworthy that out of the twenty respondents from California and New Jersey with children under the age of eighteen, the mean level of support for the proposed program was identical (4.5 on the 7-point scale) across the tax expenditure and spending treatments, indicating a possible mitigating effect for these respondents similar to the unemployed

respondents in the job training experiment, as we would expect. Although not definitive, these results do militate in favor of the hypothesis that the relative attractiveness of the tax expenditure delivery mechanism is lessened for citizens who are familiar with direct government intervention.

### Discussion

This experimental study makes an important contribution to our understanding of citizen preferences regarding government programs. In this section, we discuss the findings and suggest directions for future research.

First, it is clear that the delivery mechanism of a government program can have a dramatic effect on citizens' likelihood of supporting that program. In general, Americans are

**Table 1.** Model Results Explaining Program Approval, No Interactions.

	Housing		Job training		Parental leave	
	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>
Tax Expenditure (= 1) vs. Cash (= 0) Treatment	2.01*** (0.11)	.00	0.50*** (0.11)	.00	0.82*** (0.11)	.00
Debt Treatment	-0.72*** (0.11)	.00	-0.41*** (0.11)	.00	-0.50*** (0.11)	.00
Ideology	1.64*** (0.19)	.00	2.10*** (0.17)	.00	2.30*** (0.19)	.00
Age	-0.03 (0.29)	.92	0.39 (0.26)	.13	-1.18*** (0.29)	.00
Female	-0.22* (0.12)	.06	-0.01 (0.11)	.95	-0.10 (0.12)	.41
White	-0.17 (0.14)	.22	-0.15 (0.13)	.23	-0.12 (0.14)	.36
Education	-0.01 (0.21)	.95	0.13 (0.20)	.52	0.19 (0.21)	.35
Income	-0.04 (0.32)	.91	-0.18 (0.28)	.52	-0.70** (0.30)	.02
Homeowner	0.01 (0.14)	.96	—	—	—	—
Unemployed	—	—	0.01 (0.19)	.94	—	—
Children (0/1)	—	—	—	—	0.35** (0.15)	.02
Intercept	2.92*** (0.24)	.00	3.70*** (0.23)	.00	3.45 (0.25)	.00
	N = 892; F = 50.26, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .332		N = 916; F = 21.30, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .166		N = 919; F = 33.35, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .241	

\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

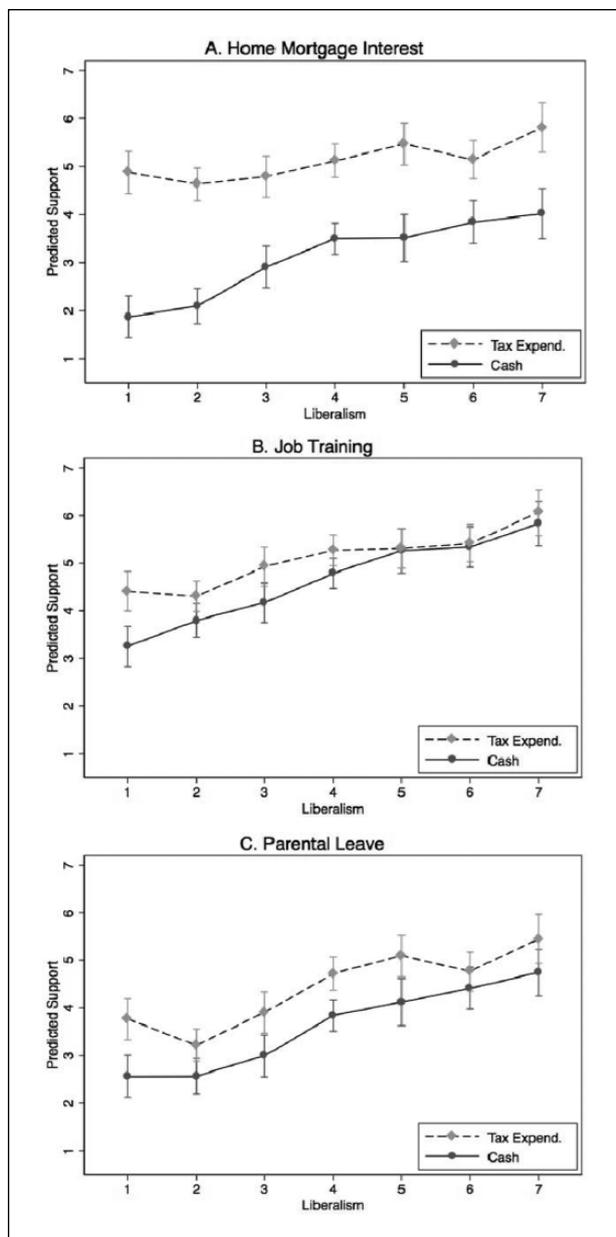
**Table 2.** Model Results Explaining Program Approval, Interactions Included.

	Housing		Job training		Parental leave	
	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>
Tax Expenditure (= 1) vs. Cash (= 0) Treatment	3.00*** (0.23)	.00	1.06*** (0.21)	.00	1.08*** (0.23)	.00
Debt Treatment	-0.60*** (0.23)	.01	-0.50*** (0.22)	.02	-0.79*** (0.23)	.00
Ideology	2.18*** (0.33)	.00	2.31*** (0.30)	.00	2.09*** (0.32)	.00
Tax/Cash × Debt Treatment	-0.63*** (0.22)	.01	-0.29 (0.21)	.17	-0.18 (0.22)	.44
Tax/Cash × Ideology	-1.48*** (0.36)	.00	-0.91*** (0.34)	.01	-0.38 (0.36)	.30
Debt Treatment × Ideology	0.45 (0.36)	.21	0.52 (0.34)	.12	0.81** (0.36)	.02
Age	-0.04 (0.29)	.90	0.39 (0.26)	.13	-1.20*** (0.29)	.00
Female	-0.23** (0.12)	.05	-0.01 (0.11)	.94	-0.09 (0.12)	.42
White	-0.14 (0.13)	.31	-0.15 (0.13)	.25	-0.12 (0.14)	.38
Education	-0.04 (0.20)	.83	0.10 (0.19)	.60	0.17 (0.21)	.40
Income	0.03 (0.32)	.93	-0.14 (0.28)	.63	-0.66** (0.30)	.03
Homeowner	-0.01 (0.14)	.92	—	—	—	—
Unemployed	—	—	0.02 (0.19)	.92	—	—
Children (0/1)	—	—	—	—	0.34** (0.15)	.02
Intercept	2.50*** (0.28)	.00	3.51*** (0.27)	.00	3.51*** (0.29)	.00
	N = 892; F = 41.05, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .350		N = 916; F = 17.16, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .175		N = 919; F = 25.72, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .244	

\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

more favorably disposed toward government interventions through the tax code than through more direct channels. This is true across all three of the policy areas that we examined.<sup>14</sup> These findings confirm a central contention of the “submerged state” literature: that indirect government benefits are fundamentally different from traditional welfare state programs in terms of how

citizens view and understand them (Faricy 2011; Hacker 2002; Howard 1997; Mettler 2011). They also offer an explanation for the growth of submerged state programs over the course of the late twentieth century, even as traditional welfare state programs were under attack: such policies offer a way for politicians to deliver benefits to citizens without drawing the same sort of opposition that



**Figure 4.** Impact of tax/cash manipulation by ideology.

direct government intervention sometimes engenders. To the extent that elected officials and politicians seek public support for their policy proposals, they have a clear incentive to offer proposals in which the hand of government seems less intrusive, whatever the shortcomings of such an approach may be from the standpoint of equity or efficiency.

Second, we make a novel contribution by uncovering evidence that this preference varies with the shape of the policy status quo. Support for government aid to homebuyers jumps considerably when the policy is described

as the familiar HMID. When the benefit in question is job training for the unemployed, the jump in support for a tax break relative to a direct payment is much smaller; citizens are used to government stepping in to directly aid the unemployed. In the case of paid parental leave, a benefit that is alien to most Americans, the effect falls somewhere in between, reflecting general uncertainty about the appropriate role of government.

Some of this variation may be due to the inherent appeal of some interventions in some situations; perhaps a tax break just seems like the best way to target middle-class homebuyers, for example. In each case, however, the patterns are especially pronounced among the demographic groups most likely to be familiar with the policy status quo. Our results also suggest that the effect of delivery mechanism on support for parental leave is probably smaller in California and New Jersey, where paid parental leave benefits do exist, though these results fall short of statistical significance. These individual-level variations give us more confidence that the difference in effects that we observe across policy areas is due in part to differences in the familiarity of direct government intervention. Taken together, our findings on familiarity and the policy status quo attest to the power of established patterns of *policy* to affect *politics*—citizens’ attitudes about what government should or should not do are structured in part by what government is already doing, as policy feedback scholars argue (e.g., Campbell 2003; Pierson 1993; Mettler and Soss 2004). While previous work has shown a status quo bias in policy attitudes (e.g., Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Fernandez and Rodrik 1991; Hansen 1998), our study makes an original contribution by establishing the role of status quo bias in public preferences over specific policy tools and approaches. In this instance, status quo bias does not necessarily manifest itself as opposition to any policy change, but as a preference for familiar forms of government intervention with respect to certain policy problems or target populations. Rather than preventing change, this dynamic has aided and abetted the development and growth of what Hacker (2002) has labeled a “divided welfare state,” with different forms of social provision for different populations.

Third, citizens’ responsiveness to different delivery mechanisms varies with ideology, at least in two of the policy areas we examined. Conservative support for tax breaks was much higher than for otherwise identical cash payment programs across the board. This effect was relatively muted for liberals. These findings are consistent with the arguments of Howard (1997, 2009) and Faricy (2011; see also Ellis and Faricy 2011; Faricy and Ellis 2014) that social welfare tax expenditures have grown in popularity because they offer policymakers a way to

**Table 3.** Model Results Explaining Program Approval with Demographic Interactions.

	Housing		Job training		Parental leave	
	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>	Coefficient (SE)	<i>p</i>
Tax Expenditure (= 1) vs. Cash (= 0) Treatment	2.30*** (0.30)	.00	1.11*** (0.22)	.00	1.06*** (0.24)	.00
Debt Treatment	-0.58** (0.23)	.01	-0.49** (0.22)	.03	-0.79*** (0.23)	.00
Ideology	2.09*** (0.33)	.00	2.30*** (0.30)	.00	2.09*** (0.32)	.00
Tax/Cash × Debt Treatment	-0.64*** (0.22)	.00	-0.30 (0.21)	.16	-0.18 (0.23)	.43
Tax/Cash × Ideology	-1.27*** (0.36)	.00	-0.90*** (0.34)	.01	-0.37 (0.36)	.30
Debt Treatment × Ideology	0.43 (0.36)	.23	0.52 (0.34)	.13	0.81** (0.36)	.02
Age	0.02 (0.29)	.95	0.40 (0.26)	.12	-1.2*** (0.29)	.00
Female	-0.22* (0.11)	.05	-0.01 (0.11)	.94	-0.09 (0.12)	.42
White	-0.14 (0.13)	.29	-0.14 (0.13)	.27	-0.12 (0.14)	.39
Education	-0.08 (0.20)	.71	0.09 (0.19)	.63	0.17 (0.21)	.40
Income	-0.02 (0.31)	.95	-0.13 (0.28)	.64	-0.66** (0.30)	.03
Homeowner	-0.47** (0.19)	.01				
Tax/Cash × Homeowner	0.88*** (0.24)	.00				
Unemployed			0.40 (0.28)	.16		
Tax/Cash × Unemployed			-0.66* (0.37)	.08		
Children (0/1)					0.31 (0.20)	.12
Tax/Cash × Children					0.06 (0.28)	.83
Intercept	2.86*** (0.30)	.00	3.48*** (0.27)	.00	3.51*** (0.29)	.00
	<i>N</i> = 892; <i>F</i> = 39.43, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .359		<i>N</i> = 916; <i>F</i> = 16.12, <i>p</i> < .001; Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .177		<i>N</i> = 919; <i>F</i> = 23.72, <i>p</i> < .001 Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .244	

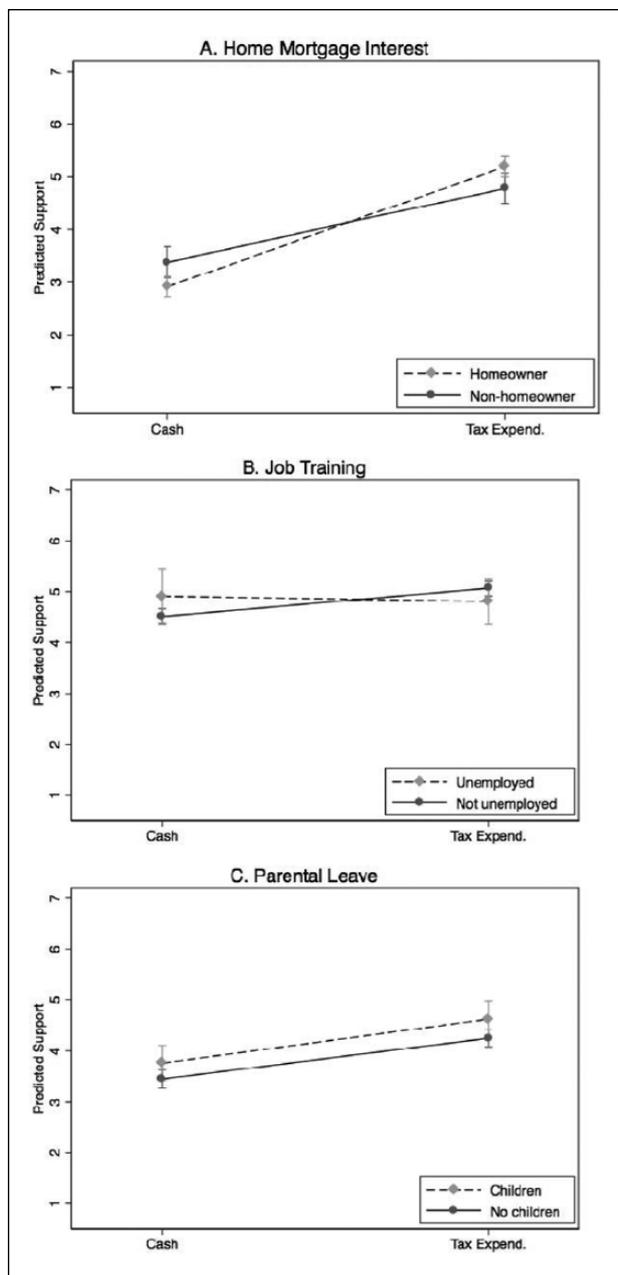
\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

address social problems without offending the sensibilities of conservative or moderate constituents.

Still, liberals were not immune to the delivery mechanism effect in the housing or paid parental leave studies. We suspect that this is because packaging a policy as a tax break rather than a traditional spending program changes the salience of key values, such as limited government. This value is a cornerstone of conservative ideology, but is also important to many liberals, leading some to feel ambivalence about supporting social welfare policies (see Feldman and Zaller 1992, 285). Policies delivered as tax breaks, therefore, may have increased appeal for some liberals as well as conservatives, relative to direct government interventions. Future research on this topic should move beyond general measures of liberalism or conservatism to explore how the relevance of particular values is influenced by policy characteristics. By the same token, studies of ideology, political values, and ambivalence (e.g., Feldman and Zaller 1992; Jacoby 2006; Tetlock 1986) should consider the ways in which policy design can affect the salience of particular values and either mitigate or intensify ambivalence in attitudes.

Fourth, as expected, providing respondents with information about the fiscal costs of a policy dampened support across the board. This indicates that fiscal considerations do temper citizens' enthusiasm for government policies (also see Hansen 1998). We hypothesized that this effect

would be stronger for respondents in the tax break condition. In other words, per the influential and important arguments of Surrey (1970, 1973), we expected that the preference for tax breaks as a policy tool would be dampened when it was made clear to respondents that such policies have costs. This expectation was borne out in terms of the sign of the interactive effect, but the effect only attained statistical significance in the housing experiment. Moreover, the tax expenditure treatment still had a positive and significant effect in all three experiments even if we limit the analysis to respondents in the debt information condition (see Figures 1C, 2C, and 3C). Thus, a lack of awareness about the fiscal costs of tax breaks is not a sufficient explanation for why Americans prefer tax breaks over direct interventions. Although this is not the finding we expected, we believe it represents a valuable contribution, given that Surrey's arguments have been so influential. While tax expenditure budgeting may be laudable for a variety of reasons, and Surrey appears correct that the availability of budgetary information prompts more scrutiny than no information at all, our study suggests that we should not expect such information to consistently reduce the appeal of tax breaks relative to direct spending. Still, Mettler and Guardino's (2011) findings make a compelling case that some types of information (or the lack thereof) play an important role in Americans' views of submerged state policies. Our findings underscore the importance of



**Figure 5.** Impact of tax/cash manipulation by selected demographic factors.

information to policy support (H5), but we only found it to be *especially* important to “submerged” policies in one of the three experiments.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, these findings stress the importance of policy design and policy feedbacks to public opinion. More work is needed to uncover the cognitive processes that lead Americans to favor certain types of policy delivery mechanism over others, but our study offers some important insights on the conditioning effects of the status quo and ideology. Our results paint a complex picture

**Table 4.** Model Results Explaining Approval of Parental Leave Policy with Geographic Interaction.

	Coefficient (SE)	p
Tax Expenditure (= 1) vs. Cash (=0) Treatment	1.13*** (0.23)	.00
Debt Treatment	-0.78*** (0.23)	.00
Ideology	2.08*** (0.32)	.00
Tax/Cash × Debt Treatment	-0.19 (0.22)	.41
Tax/Cash × Ideology	-0.35 (0.36)	.33
Debt Treatment × Ideology	0.79** (0.36)	.03
Age	-1.23*** (0.29)	.00
Female	-0.09 (0.12)	.46
White	-0.12 (0.14)	.37
Education	0.18 (0.21)	.39
Income	-0.64** (0.30)	.03
Children (0/1)	0.34** (0.15)	.02
CA or NJ	0.22 (0.26)	.40
Tax/Cash × CA or NJ	-0.58 (0.36)	.11
Intercept	3.49*** (0.29)	.00

N = 919; F = 22.26, p < .001; Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .245

\*p < .10. \*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01.

of the relationship between public opinion and public policy; the growth of indirectly delivered government benefits and Americans’ preference for delivering benefits in this manner seem to be mutually reinforcing.

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**Notes**

1. The findings of Faricy (2011) support Howard’s contention that partisan politics have been the driving force in the expansion of indirect social benefits. Faricy finds that Republican control of Congress is associated not with lower social spending in the aggregate, but with a higher ratio of indirect to direct social benefits.
2. The 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) is an online survey of 54,535 adults recruited through targeted online advertisements and stratified by state and type of congressional district. The within-panel response rate for the study (RR3) is 35.6 percent. The CCES is broken into nationally representative modules of 1,000 respondents each for participating research teams to add their own questions. The experiment in the present

study was embedded in a module in the preelection wave, which was conducted in October 2012. More information on the CCES can be found here: <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/>.

3. Unlike student samples, our sample also offers variation in educational levels, with 28 percent of respondents reporting that they have not attended college. In terms of race and ethnicity, 73 percent of respondents identified as white, 13 percent as black, 8 percent as Hispanic, and 2 percent as Asian. Respondents reported annual family incomes ranging from under \$10,000 to over \$500,000, with the median respondent choosing the \$60,000 to \$69,000 category. The sample is somewhat tilted toward female respondents (54% of the sample).
4. A paid parental leave program went into effect in Rhode Island in January 2014, after our experiments were conducted. A paid parental leave law has also been on the books in Washington State since 2007, but has not been implemented due to a lack of funding. See Earle, Mokomane, and Heymann (2011) for a discussion of the United States's work-family policies in international context.
5. The experimental treatment questions for all three studies can be read in their entirety in the supplemental materials in the electronic version of this article at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>.
6. The home mortgage interest deduction (HMID) cost estimate is based on Joint Committee on Taxation data. We created fictional cost estimates for the hypothetical job training and parental leave programs. The job training program is described as adding \$4 billion to the debt over four years, while the parental leave program is described as adding \$128 billion. Both reflect our calculations of what such programs could reasonably be expected to cost. As such, the cost estimates do vary considerably across the experiments.
7. The order of the scale was randomly reversed for half of all respondents.
8. We have also run the same models using party identification in place of ideology. The results are very similar to what we report here. In our pilot studies using Mechanical Turk, we used an ideology measure more narrowly focused on economic policy, and again, our results were similar.
9. Due to nonresponse, the number of observations used for these comparisons varies. The *N* is 936 for the housing policy, 954 for the job training policy, and 953 for the parental leave policy. Our Stata file and replication do file are available at <http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/>.
10. As expected given the random assignment of the treatments, our key results are not sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of these control variables. Changing the mix of control variables (e.g., adding more controls for racial or ethnic categories) also had no appreciable effect on the magnitude or significance of our results. Note that the *N*s for these models are somewhat reduced due to nonresponse on some of these items (also see note 9).
11. These predictions were obtained using Stata's "margins" command.
12. We explored this further by running additional regression models using only the 310 liberal respondents in the sample. These models returned positive and statistically significant coefficients for the tax break treatment in the housing and parental leave studies, but not in the job training study.
13. As the ideology variable and interaction terms are also included, we can be confident that this correlation is not an artifact of ideological differences across states.
14. The strong results for the housing experiment in particular stand in contrast to Faricy and Ellis' (2014) null finding for their own, similar study of home mortgage interest assistance. This underscores the advantage of using a national probability sample, as we do in this study, rather than a student sample.
15. Our choice to base two of the three experiments on fictional policies makes our study fundamentally different from Mettler and Guardino's, which examined the impact of real factual information on citizens' support for real policies. As such, our null findings for H6 in the two "fictional" experiments do not contradict Mettler and Guardino's findings. Our findings speak more to the assumptions that individuals make or do not make about these policies rather than real deficits of information in the public.

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