

Lessons learned: how parents respond to school mandates and sanctions

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Abstract: Over the past three decades, a reform movement bent on improving schools and educational outcomes through standards-based accountability systems and market-like competitive pressures has dominated policy debates. Many have examined reform policies' effects on academic outcomes, but few have explored these policies' influence on citizens' political orientations. In this study, using data from an original survey, I examine whether and how No Child Left Behind's accountability-based architecture influences parents' attitudes towards the government and federal involvement in education. I find little evidence that diversity in parents' lived policy experiences shapes their political orientations. However, the results of a survey experiment suggest that information linking school experience to policy and government action may increase parents' confidence in their ability to contribute to the political process. Understanding whether and under what conditions parents use public school experiences to inform orientations towards the government can improve the design of future reforms.

Key words: accountability, education, policy feedback, political learning, social welfare

Introduction

Over the past three decades, United States federal, state and district education policy change has been driven by a reform movement bent on improving schools and educational outcomes through standards-based accountability systems [No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Common Core Standards] and market-like competitive pressures (Race to the Top, charter, voucher and open-enrollment programmes, evaluation-driven pay for performance systems). Although many have examined reform policies' effects on academic outcomes (Howell et al. 2002; Hanushek and Raymond 2005; Dee and Jacob 2011), few have explored these policies' democratic effects (Schneider et al. 2000; Abernathy 2005; Fleming 2014).

A growing body of work on political learning and policy feedback tells us that policies can build or undermine civic capacity, frame the meanings and origins of social problems, and ultimately structure and stimulate or stall citizens' future participation in the political system (Mettler and Soss 2004). Most existing scholarship on the civic and political influence of policies and institutions relies on the examination of citizen experience with social welfare policies that provide beneficiaries with direct cash benefits (Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Social Security, the G.I. Bill) or tax exemptions and credits (mortgage tax credits, employer-provided healthcare subsidies) that shift the balance of resources available to individual policy recipients.

We know little about how welfare policies that instead provide or structure the provision of services in kind might likewise transform public consciousness and motivate or deter democratic participation (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981). Many of today's government programmes operate as vouchers, allowing citizens to utilise government funds to purchase goods and services in the private market (Section 8 Housing, SNAP and Medicaid). Research on programmes with direct benefit transfers and scholars' arguments regarding differential expectations for targeted and universal programmes aid predictions about the democratic consequences of these policies. However, the government also provides, maintains and regulates services and common goods that many citizens benefit from and relate to without applying or accounting for, such as parks and schools. The expected relationship between programmes and services with (a) less direct or clear links to government actors and (b) less tangible or explicit economic value is not as clear.

The standards-based education reform policies of the past three decades "impose new regulations in an effort to induce greater performance among schools serving parents and children" (Rhodes 2014, 182). Do these policies' rules, regulations and sanctions affect citizens' confidence in their ability to participate in the political system or their evaluations of government? If yes, do modern education reform policies invite parents to participate in the political process or discourage interactions with schools and government, and how might policy signals differ with varying policy exposure? Understanding how individual parents interpret and translate their interactions with public schools shaped by standards-based reforms and exploring potential differences in the political attitudes of parents housed in institutions subject to different rules, regulations and sanctions can inform our understanding of the democratic consequences of policy design and influence the architecture of future reforms.

In this study, using data from an original survey and survey experiment conducted with parents in Seattle public schools, I examine how NCLB's

standards, assessments, performance-based communication and – for high-poverty schools that miss achievement targets – sanctions influence parents’ attitudes towards government and federal involvement in education. In addition to assessing the policy’s influence on outcomes of democratic import, I also explore the potential for greater policy impact by randomly privileging parents housed in sanctioned schools with access to contextualised policy information. I report two main findings. First, there is little evidence that diversity in parents’ lived experiences with NCLB differentially shapes their political orientations. Second, experimental survey results suggest that information linking school experience to policy and government action may increase socioeconomically disadvantaged parents’ confidence in raising their political voices.

In the next section, I review the literature on policy feedback and political learning. I then provide a primer on NCLB and the channels through which the policy might structure experiences and invite or deter a political response. Next, I introduce the survey and experiment designed to isolate the influence of policy sanctions. I then present the results of my examination and place my findings in conversation with existing scholarship and public debate.

Background

Political learning and policy feedback

Since Schattschneider’s (1963) assertion that “new policies create a new politics”, a growing body of work has demonstrated that policies shape public wants, citizens’ self-perceptions, how citizens view one another and how individuals understand and act towards the political system. As scholarship on policies’ political effects has matured, so has our understanding of *how* policies influence behaviour and attitudes. Work on policy mechanisms suggests three channels of influence (Campbell 2012). First, policies may provide direct, tangible benefits that “enhance individuals’ well-being and life opportunities” (Rhodes 2014, 184), and might therefore strengthen citizens’ capacity to participate in politics, although the size and duration of the benefits may temper attitudes associated with these *resource* effects (Soss 2002; Campbell 2003; Howard 2007). For example, Campbell’s work suggests that Social Security payments to retirees subsidise “income-driven acts such as contribution to campaigns”, and – by ensuring many Americans the supplementary income necessary for retirement – such a payment also “enhances participation in time-dependent acts such as campaign work” (Campbell 2003; Campbell 2012, 339). On the other end of the spectrum, programmes such as TANF, which also provide recipients with direct cash transfers, make such meager payments that

families are left below the poverty line without the resources necessary to contribute to income or time-dependent activities.

Policy design and administration may also have *interpretive* effects. Generous social programmes administered in a transparent and professional manner may send positive signals to beneficiaries, inviting them to register political concerns and share political views and desires, whereas meager benefits subject to means-testing and delivered in a punitive or paternalistic manner may lead recipients to assume that they are incapable of or not welcome to participate in politics (Soss 2002; Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005; Bruch et al. 2010; Weaver and Lerman 2010). Here again, comparing Social Security and TANF is instructive. Social Security is understood by both beneficiaries and the public as an earned benefit. Once recipients' benefits are initiated, they flow almost automatically to "deserving" elders, who react to this positive experience with the government by engaging in the political system (Campbell 2003). In contrast, TANF recipients must initially pass work and asset tests and are then subject to repetitive check-ins with caseworkers who hold the authority to make major benefit-related decisions in a way that some recipients view as opaque or arbitrary (Soss 2002; Bruch et al. 2010). Participation in the political process is depressed by these negative interactions.

Finally, in defining target recipients, policies create politically relevant groups, which might affect recipients' likelihood of *mobilisation* by organised interest leaders and entrepreneurs (Campbell 2003). Many American seniors belong to the American Association of Retired People (AARP), one of the nation's most successful interest groups. When changes to Social Security are debated, or even discussed, AARP is quick to turn seniors out in favour of benefit boosts or in protest of proposed cuts. TANF recipients who lack resources, social status and a formal connection to professional associations are just as purposely avoided or overlooked in the political arena (Verba et al. 1995; Soss 2002).

Although policies *can* shape individuals' views towards the government and interactions with the political system, not all policies *do*. For individuals to learn from and respond to policies in meaningful ways, they must understand how the policies they contend with shape their lived experiences (Carpini and Keeter 1997; Lavery 2015). Policies that citizens see or encounter regularly through their own experience or as community observers (Social Security, the G.I. Bill, Head Start, Medicare, TANF) can teach them important lessons about their place in politics (Soss 2002; Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005; Karch 2010). However, more obscured policies such as those distributed indirectly via the tax code (mortgage tax credits, employer-provided healthcare subsidies) appear less likely to change attitudes and drive behavioural responses (Arnold 1992; Mettler 2011). Whether intentionally or as a result of government compromise or capacity "weak policy design, inadequate or

conflicting institutional supports, and poor timing” may diminish the potential for positive or negative feedback (Patashnik and Zelizer 2009).¹

The majority of work on policy learning and feedback relies on welfare state policies that confer direct, tangible monetary benefits. Although scholars have begun to assess the democratic consequences associated with less visible policies (Mettler 2011) and those that lack material incentives (Weaver and Lerman 2010), we still know little about how policies that “structure” and “inform” rather than distribute and redistribute might influence citizens’ political attitudes or behaviours. In recent studies in the education policy realm, Rhodes (2014) and Holbein (2015) explore how policies that “create a regime of information, incentives and accountability” (Rhodes 2014, 185) might induce changes in citizens’ orientations towards government. Rhodes demonstrates that the scale and scope of states’ assessment systems influence parents’ attitudes towards the government (internal and external political efficacy, trust in government and views regarding efficiency in government), participation in politics and involvement in their children’s education. He finds that Parents who live in states with more developed testing regimes express less trust in the government and are less likely to become engaged in some forms of school involvement than parents who live in states with less buy-in to NCLB accountability systems. Holbein (2015) examines how public school performance information influences the turnout and competitiveness of school board races and presents evidence that information on school progress leads some parents, primarily those who are socioeconomically advantaged, to exit failing schools.

Although both Rhodes (2014) and Holbein (2015) render evidence of NCLB’s negative influence on parents’ perceptions of the government and interactions with public institutions, neither examines how variation in policy exposure through the institutions charged with the policy’s implementation might shape parents’ views. As we know that an “enlightened” understanding of how policies influence individuals is critical if individuals are to demand changes in policy and the political system,

¹ Recent work demonstrates that policy design or distribution can be altered to increase the probability of feedback. In a carefully engineered survey experiment, Mettler (2011) randomly assigns treatment participants access to information on the government’s role in the provision of tax code benefits. She finds that explicitly highlighting the link between government and material provisions of the tax code alters attitudinal responses to policy questions. Fleming (2014) introduces an alternative method for increasing the public’s understanding of the role the government plays in the provision of services. He examines and compares the political attitudes and evaluations of Milwaukee public school and voucher school families, and finds that the link between government and public education experience is drawn out when education experiences are “privatised” through vouchers. He notes that the choosing effect swamps an experiential or learning effect from programme participation.

a clearer understanding of exposure to policy through the schools that house parent respondents is key. In this piece, I investigate sanctions' influence on school context and parents' political incorporation and orientation. Next, I further clarify NCLB's potential mechanisms.

NCLB basics: policy logic and operation

NCLB is the most recent iteration of the federal government's 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which authorises spending on programmes to support K-12 schooling. The act lays out teacher certification and quality requirements and puts into place an outcome-based accountability system by mandating that states develop academic proficiency *standards* and *test* all students in all schools to monitor whether these public institutions and the districts they report to are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards these goals. All schools must publicly *communicate performance information*. Title I schools (designated as such because of their high concentration of "disadvantaged" students and their receipt of federal Title I funds) continually failing to make expected academic progress may be "identified for improvement". Schools identified for improvement (SIFIs) are subjected to a series of increasingly harsh policy *sanctions* designed to spur greater achievement through increased attention to individual student needs, curricular and staffing innovations and competition. After two consecutive years of failing to meet proficiency targets, schools must offer families an opportunity to transfer their children to a more successful public institution (school choice).² After a third consecutive year of failure, families must be offered the opportunity to pursue free supplemental education services (tutoring). Continued failure in subsequent years leads to the imposition of a series of school-level reforms designed to completely restructure a school (restructuring).^{3,4}

² Under the Act's Title I programme, local schools serving a significant population of "disadvantaged" students receive funding to improve educational outcomes for these populations. School districts receive funds according to a set of four separate formulae: the Basic Grant, Concentration Grant, Targeted Assistance Grant and the Education Finance Incentive Grant. School districts exercise some discretion in the distribution of these funds to schools within their bounds, although the law requires that the highest-poverty schools be prioritised (New America Foundation 2012).

³ NCLB has evolved over time. In 2009, the Obama administration announced Race to the Top, a competitive grant programme designed to spur innovation in state education policy. Since 2011, the US Department of Education has been granting states NCLB waivers, which allow greater flexibility in implementing reforms and sanctions. Although these policy changes complicate any evaluation of NCLB's effects, the conditions outlined above applied to the school populations surveyed for this study during the 2010–2011 school year. Furthermore, throughout these policy changes, the federal government has remained steadfast in its commitment to "deepening and aligning standards, assessment, and accountability policies" (Rhodes 2014, 186).

⁴ Policy mechanisms are highlighted in this paragraph.

Table 1. No Child Left Behind: mechanisms and targets

Mechanism	Target
Standards	All schools
Testing	All schools
Performance-based information	All schools
Sanctions	Title I schools that fail to make AYP

Note: AYP = adequate yearly progress.

Testing systems and performance-based communications shape parents' public school experiences in *all* states, districts and schools, but sanctions apply *only in Title I schools that continually fail to meet achievement targets – SIFIs*. In Title I schools, the mere threat of sanctions may drive teachers to focus instruction exclusively on tested subjects (reading, math and science) and hold test preparation sessions months in advance of testing for hours each day. Moreover, administrators in Title I schools may emphasise testing and accountability in on-site professional development (Moses and Nanna 2007). If Title I schools fail to meet proficiency goals, these activities may go into overdrive as the adults held responsible for SIFIs work to avoid major restructuring or closure⁵ (Table 1).

NCLB “reshapes the practice of education in schools throughout the nation” via standards, testing, performance-based communication and sanctions (Rhodes 2014). Public school parents encounter the policy everyday through their children’s educational experiences, and these encounters may mold parents’ interactions with and orientations towards school leaders and spillover into their understanding and evaluations of the government (Soss 2002). That is, given that NCLB “structures” experience, we might also expect the policy to shape or “structure” parents’ political attitudes and behaviours on school grounds and beyond. Further, because NCLB sanctions apply only in Title I schools failing to make adequate progress towards achievement goals, a comparison of the political attitudes of parents whose exposure to NCLB *should* differ based on their child’s school’s policy designation (SIFI versus non-SIFI) might enhance our understanding of the total and differential influence of NCLB’s rules and regulations.

⁵ Funding does not directly drive these effects; under NCLB, school budgets vary no more than they would in the policy’s absence (although to some extent schools in improvement are constrained, as they must begin to shift funds towards supporting supplemental education services).

However, debates in the field and NCLB's variety of policy mechanisms lead to unclear expectations regarding the strength and tenor of the policy's political effects. It is possible, given what we know from academic studies of citizens' policy awareness (Carpini and Keeter 1997; Howell 2006; Lavery 2015) and public opinion polling on NCLB over the past decade (Bushaw and McNee 2009), that most parents *lack the policy understanding necessary to connect their school-based experience with evaluations of and orientations towards government*. SIFI parents should have more aggressive exposure to a culture of testing and policy information (the federal government requires SIFIs to communicate school status), which may increase SIFI parents' policy awareness in comparison with nonsanctioned peers.⁶ However, because only low-resource schools are subject to policy sanctions and the incentive structure in the policy gives SIFI school leaders little motivation to reach out to parents beyond the letter of the law, SIFI parents may not notice or understand how they might interpret or react to policy cues.⁷ Therefore, although NCLB is a visible mandate with the potential to influence the democratic views of millions of Americans, certain design and delivery features may mute this effect (for all or some parents) and parents may not feel (or differentially experience) or act on the policy's interpretive influence (*Feedback Failure*) (Patashnik and Zelizer 2009).⁸

It is also possible that specific features of the policy – particularly direct communication regarding school performance and the opportunity for parents to move their children out of chronically low-performing schools or access free supplemental tutoring services as well as invitations to take part in school improvement plans – suggest to parents that the government knows and cares about addressing chronic achievement gaps and academic stagnation. In this case, *Sanctions* might *Invite Participation*, leading parents of kids in SIFIs to report higher levels of political efficacy and more favourable views towards the government than their nonsanctioned peers.

Recent work suggests that NCLB's top-down reform structure is likely to generate negative feedback (Rhodes 2014). When schools *fail* to meet standards, a *need for improvement* is highlighted, and *sanctions* ensue; it is hard not to imagine a negative reaction from the individuals subject to these labels and consequences. Over a decade of study on the civic and political

⁶ It is worth noting that there is high variability in the quality of states' and districts' policy communication with parents (Manna 2007, 2010).

⁷ Leaders may be hesitant to advertise opportunities for supplemental tutoring and transfer, as sponsoring these behaviours may further drain limited school budgets (Hess and Finn 2004).

⁸ Italicised words and phrases in this paragraph and those that follow draw attention to the empirical hypotheses communicated in Table 3.

consequences of welfare and carceral programmes suggests that programmes that structure authority in a “strongly paternalistic” (Bruch et al. 2010) manner and treat recipients as subjects of rather than partners in decisionmaking depress, demobilise and diminish political engagement (Weaver and Lerman 2010). Although NCLB standards vary by state and might therefore, at least in theory, be influenced by input from parents or teachers, NCLB’s sanctions (at least until the first wave of NCLB waivers were granted in 2011) are better read as “one-way transactions” (Weaver and Lerman 2010). Neither parents and teachers nor school and district leaders control or contribute to a true dialogue on the broader consequences of school improvement. A lack of authority may induce feelings of powerlessness. Further, because parents with kids in institutions most likely to be the targets of sanctions (diverse, high poverty, Title I schools) are also more likely than their non-SIFI peers to have close encounters with other paternalistic government programmes, rigid assessment systems and their *Sanctions* are likely to *Discourage Participation* in the political process (Bruch et al. 2010; Weaver and Lerman 2010). Indeed, Holbein’s (2015) study on performance-based information hints that low-income families – those most likely to be subject to the policy sanctions this work is designed to assess – are least likely to take action on this information. In the next section, I describe the survey and survey experiment designed to explore the influence (and potential influence) of policy exposure on parents’ political orientations and further operationalise these hypotheses.

Data and methods

Survey and survey experiment

During the 2010–2011 school year, all 56 public elementary schools in Seattle, Washington, were invited to participate in a study of “parents’ attitudes towards schools, education policy, and government”.⁹ The principals of 13 elementary schools across the district agreed to take part – four SIFIs subject to direct, concentrated policy exposure via sanctions and nine schools in which sanctions did not apply at the time the survey was conducted (non-SIFIs).¹⁰ In total,

⁹ This study began with district-level permission to contact all Seattle elementary schools (K-5 only, K-8 not included) and encourage their principals’ participation. Principals at every Seattle elementary school were contacted by email and phone 10 times between October 2010 and March of 2011. Principals from 13 elementary schools signed on to the study and invited researchers to designate all-school evening events.

¹⁰ The nine schools in the sample not subject to sanctions actually served quite diverse student bodies. Two of the schools were Title I schools on track with achievement goals, and thus not subject to sanctions. Four of the schools failed repeatedly to meet AYP goals, but were exempt from policy consequences given a lack of reliance on Title I federal funding. The three remaining

Table 2. Participating schools

SIFI		Non-SIFI
4 schools, 129 parents		9 schools, 345 parents
Treatment	Control	
73 parents	66 parents	

Note: SIFI = schools identified for improvement.

484 parents from these elementary schools were surveyed in-person at existing, evening, all-school events such as math nights, literacy nights, art fairs and holiday concerts between October 2010 and April 2011 (139 parents from SIFIs and 345 parents from non-SIFI schools)^{11,12} (Table 2).

Parents participating in the study were surveyed about their knowledge of NCLB and their views towards their children's schools, the nation's schools and the policy. [See Lavery (2015) for an overview of differences in policy knowledge and attitudes towards schools.] They were then asked several questions designed to ascertain the policy's potential to influence attitudes towards the government and the political system. Surveys also solicit information about parents' civic behaviours and demographic characteristics, as such factors may likewise influence responses to attitudinal items.

In order to isolate the influence of policy on political outcomes and highlight the role sanctions might play in shaping parents' attitudes, I also follow the example of recent work on the hidden welfare state and explore the policy's *potential* interpretive influence. That is, rather than rely exclusively on a comparison between those subject to increased policy sanctions/information/exposure (SIFI families) and their peers whose children attend non-SIFI institutions, a comparison which may be subject to bias given the correlation between a variety of underlying personal and

schools were on-track schools subject only to the policy's assessment and reporting requirements given success in meeting performance goals and a lack of reliance on federal funds.

¹¹ At each event, the researcher asked parents to participate in a study of parents' attitudes towards schools, education policy and the government. A typical response rate is not available, as the total number of parents attending each event could not accurately be determined. Across the sample, 77% of distributed surveys were returned to the researcher with consistent rates of return across schools. The number collected at each event ranged from 15 to 75 with an average of 32 completed surveys per institution.

¹² To determine which language to use to survey parents at each school site, I consulted the principals before each event. Surveys were first offered in English, and if it appeared that parents did not understand my request, I offered a translated version. Students sometimes asked about alternate language availability on their parents' behalf.

community demographic characteristics (income, education background, ethnicity) and policy consequences, I also conducted a survey experiment in which I purposely manipulated school improvement and parents' exposure to policy-relevant information. This allows a more direct isolation of the influence of policy cues.¹³

Under NCLB, all parents *should* receive formal policy information and school performance metrics through school district reports and websites. In addition, SIFI families *should* receive a letter detailing school improvement status and the opportunities and responsibilities that accompany that status. Research, public opinion surveys and parental behaviours (low school exit rates and enrollment in supplemental education services among school improvement families) suggest that this information is not well understood or received; the experimental component of my research allows me to take advantage of that possibility (Manna 2007; Bushaw and McNee 2009; Lavery 2015). All parents in the four SIFI schools in the sample were automatically enrolled in a survey experiment and assigned a treatment status on an alternating basis when they agreed to participate in the study. The resulting experimental subsample consists of 73 treatment parents and 66 control parents.¹⁴

All parents participating in the survey experiment received the survey on attitudes towards schools and the government fielded to parents in the non-SIFI sample. Treatment parents received this survey with one key addition: the front page of treatment parents' survey provided a short, pointed description of NCLB and school improvement status and detailed the three primary opportunities accompanying failure, that is, families may seek supplemental educational services, exercise school choice and participate in designing a plan for improvement. The full treatment, modelled after the letter Seattle district leaders *should* send to SIFI families, is presented in the Appendix.

This information-based treatment is quite conservative. As documented above, Title I schools are required to notify parents if they are failing to make AYP and inform them of their choices and obligations when they are

¹³ Ideally, as a correction, we would randomly assign parents to sanctioned and nonsanctioned schools to see how sanctions/policies drive political attitudes (if policy generates feedback). Given the costs and real-world constraints – both ethical and logistical – associated with such an approach, randomisation at the individual level within existing contexts offers a next-best alternative.

¹⁴ Parents in SIFI schools were assigned to the treatment condition on an alternating basis when they agreed to complete a study survey. There was one exception to this rule. If two members of the same family agreed to participate in the study, they were given identical surveys (both treatment or both control) to guard against spillover during survey completion. This is not pure random assignment; however, I have no reason to expect that clustering by family influences response to targeted outcomes. Rather, alternate assignment is more likely to ensure greater balance in a population of this size.

identified for improvement under NCLB. Therefore, parents in failing schools *should* already know about their child's school's performance and the opportunities and responsibilities that accompany school failure. If parents in failing schools do already receive this information and it shapes or drives attitudes towards the government, policy exposure's varying influence should be apparent in a comparison between SIFI and non-SIFI parents, and an experimental treatment designed to relay basic policy information will be of little consequence. However, because existing scholarship suggests that citizens often lack the depth of policy understanding necessary to express enlightened attitudes – people do not see their own interests in policy (Carpini and Keeter 1997; Lavery 2014) – it is possible that exposure to information about a school's failing status and the accompanying obligations and opportunities will inform parents and/or shape their opinions of schools, the government and policy. If this is the case, the experimental component of this study stands to further clarify the potential influence of a regulatory or “structuring” policy on political attitudes. Below, I operationalise the hypotheses described in the previous section in order to subject them to empirical analysis with this parent sample¹⁵ (Table 3).

Political outcomes

In this article, informed by the political learning literature, I focus on three attitudinal dependent variables: internal political efficacy, external political efficacy and views on the scope and scale of federal involvement in education.¹⁶ Survey respondents are first asked to report their views on the nation's schools and the actors and resources that contribute to these institutions, and are then surveyed about attitudes towards their child's school. The influence of policy context on these attitudes is examined in Lavery (2014, 2015). This sets the stage for the survey items designed to tap into NCLB's potential to fuel a political response.

Previous work suggests that, in structuring experiences, grouping individuals and administering or delivering services, policies provide recipients cues about their skills and capabilities and the regard with which they are

¹⁵ Parents of children in non-SIFI schools, those that are at the very least making adequate progress towards policy goals and may, in fact, be strong academic institutions, may value the achievement they see in the children's schools, and as a result develop strong, positive attitudes towards the government. If this is the case, the positive policy attitudes fostered through these families' school experiences may dwarf any positive information/policy effects in SIFI schools, even if a true policy effect does exist (see HA1).

¹⁶ Behavioural outcomes are not considered given the added costs associated with a longitudinal study and the likelihood of differential rates of residential mobility throughout the sample.

Table 3. Empirical hypotheses

H0: Feedback Failure

Increased exposure to NCLB via sanctions does not appear to differentially shape parents' attitudes towards the government

- There are no significant differences in the attitudinal responses of parents whose children attend schools identified for improvement and subject to policy sanctions and parents whose children attend nonsanctioned institutions (SIFI = non-SIFI)
- There are no significant differences in the attitudinal responses of SIFI parents privy to increased information on sanctions via treatment and their control group peers (treatment = control)

HA1: Sanctions Invite Participation

Increased exposure to NCLB via sanctions appears to prime increased democratic participation

- Parents whose children attend schools identified for improvement under NCLB express different, and more positive, attitudes towards the government than their peers whose children attend nonsanctioned institutions (SIFI > non-SIFI)
- Increased information about the opportunities and obligations attached to school improvement status leads treatment parents to register more positive attitudes towards the government than their control group peers (treatment > control)

HA2: Sanctions Discourage Participation

Increased exposure to NCLB via sanctions appears to discourage parents' political participation

- Parents whose children attend schools identified for improvement under NCLB express different, and more negative, attitudes towards the government than their peers whose children attend nonsanctioned institutions (SIFI < non-SIFI)
 - Increased information about the opportunities and obligations attached to School Improvement Status leads treatment parents to register more negative attitudes towards the government than their control group peers (treatment > control)
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Note: NCLB = No Child Left Behind; SIFI = schools identified for improvement.

held by political actors. Three survey questions allowed me to assess participating parents' confidence in their capacity to participate in politics and influence political leaders. I asked parents to register their level of agreement with the following statements – "Government cares about people like me", "My elected officials have my best interest in mind" and "I can influence the actions of elected officials" – to gauge levels of external and internal political efficacy (Soss 1999).¹⁷ Respondents indicated agreement on a five-point Likert scale with higher values indicating stronger agreement. Responses to the first two statements, both designed to assess external efficacy, are combined to form a 10-point scale. Higher values of internal and external political efficacy have been shown to correlate with increased participation in the political process, and thus assessments of

¹⁷ These measures of political efficacy are informed by Soss's (1999) work with welfare participants.

parents' opinions on their incorporation within the political process may hint at their willingness to further participate (Soss 2002).

My final attitudinal variable was designed to gauge whether parents utilised educational experience gained via exposure to NCLB through their children's schools to inform their views on the scope and scale of federal involvement in education. I asked, "In your opinion how involved should the federal government be in education policy?". Parents registered their response on a five-point Likert scale; higher values indicate that respondents favour greater federal involvement. If parents connect school-based experiences to government action, they may be more likely to participate in politics to structure future experiences.¹⁸

Policy and demographic indicators

Two primary independent variables were designed to isolate the influence of NCLB exposure on the political outcomes described above. The first – "In Improvement" – is a dichotomous indicator of school status. This variable is used in the analyses below to compare SIFI and non-SIFI parents. The second is an indicator of treatment status. The treatment effect allows a comparison between SIFI parents who receive additional information about NCLB and school sanctions through the treatment condition and other SIFI parents not privy to this additional source of policy information.^{19,20}

To evaluate whether NCLB sanctions independently influence parents' orientations towards the government, I also control for a range of individual-level demographic, economic and political factors that are known to influence individuals' political attitudes and behaviours: *Race* (dichotomous indicators for *White*, *Black*, *Hispanic* and *Asian*), *English*

¹⁸ In Table 3, I reference attitudes towards the government. The political efficacy variables I use asked parents to reflect on their role/confidence in the government. I did not specify that parents reflect on a particular level of government here based on scholarship that suggests experiences with local government officials such as teachers or principals may "spillover" and inform evaluations of the government more broadly (Soss 1999). However, I targeted parents' views on the extent of *federal* involvement in education policy in my final attitudinal outcome measure, because NCLB is a federal policy and is described as such throughout the survey (e.g. "Are you familiar with the federal No Child Left Behind Act?" and "The items below ask for your opinions on the federal No Child Left Behind Act"). Further, many critiques of the NCLB rest on debates over the appropriate extent of federal involvement in public schools' management and operations.

¹⁹ Recall that the treatment provides an opportunity to assess the influence of policy information without concerns about how policy context might shape responses, as random assignment ensures that demographic characteristics balance across treatment and control conditions for parents in the SIFI sample.

²⁰ In an alternative model, work status, gender and age are removed given clearer expectations for the remaining variables. The results are qualitatively similar for all outcomes.

Language Learner Status (ELL) (0 = native English speaker, 1 = nonnative English speaker), *Education* (0 = no college degree, 1 = college or advanced degree), *Employment Status* (0 = unemployed, 1 = employed full or part-time), *Income* (with Table 1 indicating the percentage of respondents who earn less than \$20,000/year, so that parent characteristics might be compared with underlying student bodies), *Gender* (0 = female, 1 = male), *Age* (in years), *Party Identification* (measured on a seven-point scale with higher values indicating greater Republicanism), *National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Membership status* (0 = nonmember, 1 = member), *Religious Community Membership status* (0 = nonmember, 1 = member) and *Political Activity* (four-point scale; one point each for contacting a political official, working on a campaign, contributing money to a campaign and registering to vote).²¹

In the models presented in the next section, policy and treatment status are regressed on parents' attitudes towards the government. To account for the clustered nature of my data – parents' children attend 13 separate elementary schools in this sample – I employ clustered robust standard errors through the *vce cluster* function in STATA in both survey and experimental models clustering on school.²²

Results

Descriptive analyses

Parents were recruited to this study in-person at existing schoolwide events in order to increase response rates and ensure an engaged and informed sample. Parents who attend school events and take part in the survey on a voluntary basis are likely to be more engaged and involved than their nonparticipating peers. In Table 4, I present summary statistics for several relevant student and parent populations, which allows for comparison and sheds light on the ways in which sample selection may bias the results.²³

²¹ In all regression models, a seven-point income scale was used, and higher values indicate higher income ranges.

²² In experimental models, I use robust standard errors through the *vce cluster* function in STATA, but here only the four SIFI schools in the sample contribute to my results.

²³ The location of the study and focus on elementary school families may also limit confidence in the generalisability of the results. Seattle was chosen for its urban context, diversity and the availability of schools across the income and improvement spectrum, and is unremarkable in terms of both school performance and district efforts to communicate with parents (The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation 2008; US Department of Education 2009). However, the city's ethnic composition and residents' relatively high income levels and liberal political leanings may make it hard to generalise to other contexts. Elementary school parents were purposely recruited for several reasons: first, NCLB requires that schools assess student learning in reading and math every year from grades 3 through 8 and once in grades 10 through 12. These testing requirements

Table 4. Descriptive statistics

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	Sample School (Students)	SPS (Students)	SPS SIFI (Students)	Sample School (Parents)	SIFI (Parents)	Sample SIFI (Students)	Non-SIFI (Parents)	Sample Non-SIFI (Students)
% White	45	44	14	67.63	57.27	11	80	60
% Black	18	21	33	9.83	15.42	33.5	3.16	11
% Hispanic	16	12	23	5.04	7.93	20.5	1.58	14
% Asian	19	22	29	12.94	17.18	33	13.16	13
% ELL	17	12	35	7.18	11.22	34	2.34	9
% FARL	43	40	76			76		28
% College education				70.15	56.02		86.56	
% Employed full- or part-time				82.13	79		85.87	
% Less than \$20k/year				8.67	13.82		2.29	
% Male				37.14	31.84		43.39	
Age				41.22	40.34		42.28	
Republican				2.73	2.83		2.61	
% PTA member				61.22	57.4		65.78	
% Religious member				42.2	45.74		37.97	
Politically active				2.1	1.89		2.35	
<i>n</i>	392 students per school	45,944 students	380 students per school	417 parents in sample	227 parents in sample	374 students per school	190 parents in sample	400 students per school

Note: SPS = Seattle public schools; SIFI = schools identified for improvement; non-SIFI = schools not subject to No Child Left Behind sanctions; ELL = English language learner; FARL = Free and Reduced Lunch; PTA = National Parent Teacher Association.

Column 1 in the top portion of Table 4 shows the sample schools' characteristics. Column 2 presents demographic background information for all Seattle public school students from the 2010–2011 school year. Column 3 displays summary statistics for all district SIFIs under NCLB.²⁴ Comparing columns 1 and 2, it is clear that participating school populations are fairly representative of district school populations. ELLs, Hispanics, those who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and White students are slightly overrepresented in the sample, whereas Black and Asian populations are slightly underrepresented.

Columns 4–8 are designed to allow comparison of the parent sample with several relevant groups. Column 4 displays summary statistics for all study participants.²⁵ Parents are not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and therefore I use college education, employment status and income as indicators of adult socioeconomic status.²⁶ A comparison of columns 1 and 4 highlights the socioeconomic advantage and somewhat limited diversity in the sample. Columns 5 and 7 demonstrate that parents sampled at SIFIs (column 5) are more racially diverse and economically disadvantaged than parents sampled at non-SIFI schools (column 7), as we might expect given the Title I status of these institutions. Comparing respondents with underlying student populations at sample schools of each type further demonstrates the sample population's relative advantage; column 6 isolates the student population from SIFIs, whereas column 8 presents student averages for nonsanctioned schools. Respondent parents across institution type are more likely to be White, less likely to speak English as a second language, more likely to hold a college degree or have full- or part-time employment and less likely to earn less than \$20,000/year

interact with grade span to encourage greater policy exposure at the elementary than at the middle or high school level. In addition, Seattle, like most districts in the country, has more elementary schools than middle or high schools, and thus provides me with access to a larger overall population from which to sample. Finally, research suggests that parents of elementary school children are more likely than parents of older children to be intimately involved in the day-to-day schooling decisions of young children and participate in on-campus evening events (Jeynes 2005, 2007; Stewart 2008). It is possible that parents of middle or high school students would have different reactions to the policy.

²⁴ To calculate this imperfect average, I collected school-level statistics for all relevant characteristics for all SIFIs and divided by the total number of schools in improvement status. Disaggregated demographic data are not available from the district.

²⁵ In the models that follow, I incorporate four indicators for race – percent White, Black, Hispanic and Asian. Percent Asian serves as the omitted category in subsequent analyses.

²⁶ Income was measured on a seven-point scale with 1 indicating a household income of less than \$20,000/year and 7 indicating a take home pay above \$150,000. This table presents information on the lowest-income respondents for the sake of comparison, although the full seven-point scale is used in regression analyses.

than we might expect if parents share background characteristics with the students at these schools.

The lower portion of Table 4 displays information on parents' gender, age and partisan affiliation, as well as the three indicators of civic activity mentioned in the previous section – PTA membership status, religious membership status and an indicator of individual political activity. Several distinctions between sample populations are apparent with regard to these factors. The non-SIFI sample contains more men and is slightly more likely to take part in the PTA and other political activities than their SIFI peers. SIFI parents are, on average, a bit younger and more likely to be members of religious communities.

In concert, the statistics documented in Table 4 suggest that the parent sample used in this study is indeed likely to differ from the underlying population of interest in predictable ways. Inferences based on a parent sample that is more socioeconomically advantaged and less racially diverse than the underlying population are made with caution and should be interpreted only in context.

I present a final set of statistics that allow basic comparisons between sample groups on the political outcomes of interest in Table 5. Cross-column comparisons suggest that a variation in natural exposure to NCLB sanctions results in little difference in parents' expressions of internal efficacy; SIFI and non-SIFI parents report similar levels of internal efficacy. Parents privileged with additional policy information via the treatment condition express levels of external efficacy more similar to parents whose children attend nonsanctioned schools than their control group peers. Finally, SIFI parents appear to favour greater federal involvement in education than their nonsanctioned peers, although those granted greater exposure to policy information have more tempered responses than the control group. Does policy exposure/information exert an independent influence on these outcomes?

Regression analyses

To ascertain NCLB's potential influence on the attitudinal outcomes of interest, I regressed policy and treatment status on each dependent variable, in the first case also employing a host of demographic controls. In columns 1 and 2 of Table 6, I isolate NCLB's potential to influence parents' expression of internal and external political efficacy. If individuals report high levels of internal efficacy, they believe they have the requisite skills and capabilities to influence political outcomes. Individuals who report high levels of external efficacy believe that elected officials care about representing their views and responding to their opinions and concerns. School status appears to have a negligible impact on both forms of efficacy.

Table 5. Outcomes by school status

	Non-SIFI	SIFI – Control	SIFI – Treatment
Internal efficacy*			
Mean	4.97	4.95	5.42
SD	1.56	2.01	1.93
<i>n</i>	322	75	66
External efficacy†			
Mean	2.4	2.28	2.48
SD	0.98	1.08	1.03
<i>n</i>	324	74	66
Federal involvement in education†			
Mean	3.89	4.21	4
SD	1.06	1.06	1.08
<i>n</i>	333	78	68

Note: SIFI = schools identified for improvement.

*Values range from 2 to 10.

†Values range from 1 to 5.

The model suggests that school sanctions are no more or less likely to inform expressions of efficacy than the standards, testing and performance-based information provided to parents in unsanctioned schools. That is, the results support H1, the *Feedback Failure* hypothesis. Partisanship, religious membership and age drive internal effects, whereas race and one's level of political activity influence parents' expressions of external efficacy.

In column 3 of Table 6, I consider whether and how variation in policy exposure shapes attitudes towards the government. Given that NCLB is a federal act, we might expect differences in experience with the policy to spur differences in opinions on federal involvement in education. If families in SIFIs view sanctions as government overreach, they might express a desire for reduced federal involvement. Alternatively, if these families believe that the policy shaping their school experience provides positive opportunities and experiences, they might view federal involvement in education policy more positively than their nonsanctioned peers. The school improvement coefficient in column 3 suggests that if parents' school experiences do differ based on policy exposure, these differences do not translate to variation in views on federal involvement in education policy. Instead, as classic political behaviour models might predict, gender and partisanship drive parents' opinions on federal involvement in this policy realm; men are less likely than their female counterparts to approve of NCLB's interventions, and Republicans, classic defenders of local control, are more resentful than their Democratic peers of the federal intervention NCLB sanctions reflect.

Table 6. Policy exposure and attitudes towards the government

Variable	Internal Efficacy	External Efficacy	Federal Involvement
<i>In improvement</i>	-0.194 (0.162)	-0.005 (0.103)	-0.082 (0.167)
<i>White</i>	-0.221 (0.303)	-0.486 (0.170)	0.141 (0.125)
<i>Black</i>	0.303 (0.374)	-0.149 (0.264)	0.118 (0.239)
<i>Hispanic</i>	-0.758 (1.034)	-0.172 (0.363)	0.280 (0.263)
<i>ELL</i>	1.160 (0.919)	-0.063 (0.548)	0.377 (0.242)
<i>Education</i>	0.005 (0.144)	-0.023 (0.104)	0.022 (0.054)
<i>Employment</i>	-0.535 (0.306)	-0.223 (0.194)	0.225 (0.166)
<i>Income</i>	0.062 (0.073)	0.018 (0.027)	-0.023 (0.032)
<i>Gender</i>	-0.406 (0.208)	-0.147 (0.118)	-0.202 (0.089)
<i>Age</i>	0.033 (0.014)	0.011 (0.006)	-0.016 (0.007)
<i>PID</i>	-0.311 (0.097)	-0.056 (0.041)	-0.254 (0.041)
<i>PTA member</i>	-0.247 (0.271)	-0.058 (0.175)	0.024 (0.159)
<i>Religious member</i>	0.361 (0.135)	0.242 (0.118)	0.109 (0.078)
<i>Politically active</i>	-0.021 (0.073)	0.153 (0.049)	-0.064 (0.071)
Total observations	332	332	340
Clusters	13	13	13
R ²	0.163	0.096	0.168
<i>Treatment</i>	0.478 (0.333)	0.201 (0.179)	-0.205 (0.085)
Total observations	141	140	146
Clusters	4	4	4
Pseudo R ²	0.015	0.009	0.009

Note: ELL = English language learner; PID = Party Identification.
Significance levels: **bold 5%**; **bold italic 10%**.

Age is also negatively correlated with views towards federal involvement in education.

Taken together, the attitudinal models displayed in the top portion of Table 6 suggest that NCLB sanctions are unlikely to push SIFI parents towards political action. However, the policy experiment, which highlights the specific features of the mandate that structures school experience, permits further examination of the potential for sanctions to shape that experience. Treatment effects are reported in the bottom panel of Table 6.

An examination of the first column of the lower panel of Table 6 shows that parents being told that NCLB grants them the power to transfer their child to a better performing school, obtain free additional academic support or get involved in the school improvement process express greater confidence in their ability to influence the actions of elected officials. In other words, parents in the treatment condition register higher levels of internal political efficacy than their control group peers. Although the outcome variables are attitudinal and there is no intuitive metric to gauge the magnitude of the treatment effect, it is possible to compare treatment

coefficients with the coefficients of similarly coded independent variables used in observational models. Such comparisons suggest that the treatment's effect on internal efficacy is similar in magnitude to the influence of gender or employment status and larger than the influence of religious membership – a key driver in the observational model. This suggests that, at least in the moments after policy information is delivered, its influence may be quite strong. Interestingly, however, the next column suggests that treatment parents are no more likely than their control group peers to believe that government officials are naturally inclined to act in their best interests.

The third column of experimental results in Table 6, however, again suggests a relatively powerful treatment effect. Treatment parents, perhaps more cognizant of policy agents and mechanisms in their evaluations of the government than their control group peers, appear to favour less federal involvement in education policy, and again the magnitude of this effect compares with that of the gender coefficient – a key driver of views towards the federal government in my observational model.

It is difficult to know exactly how to interpret the overall influence of the treatment, given the potential for information to *increase* internal efficacy but also *negatively* colour views towards the government body responsible for providing the opportunities that increase parents' sense of agency. Although the survey does not allow a closer examination of the logic behind parents' government-oriented responses, given what we know about public opinions towards sanctions and overall public disenchantment with NCLB, the scepticism towards federal involvement in education policy is not particularly surprising (Bushaw and McNee 2009). What is interesting here is that, in spite of their negative views towards NCLB as a policy system, parents appear to appreciate particular opportunities granted by NCLB relative to the previous state of affairs. Highly regarded public opinion scholarship helps make sense of this. From this work, we know that rational individuals can and do hold potentially conflicting views and may express opinions or take action based on the weight or saliency of particular views at a particular moment in time (Zaller 1992). Perhaps this relatively conservative treatment heightens parents' awareness of policy-related opportunities or their own political agency but does not overshadow or erase long-held prejudices towards the policy system or federal actors. This interpretation and excerpts from a follow-up interview with a SIFI parent might also explain the treatment's lack of detectable influence on parents' external efficacy. A belief in one's ability to pursue change need not increase faith in a system or the actors who drive the system:

The fact that all of my efforts are futile does not absolve me from the obligation to make those efforts. I will keep trying and I fully expect to

have no influence at all. Government is influenced by people with a lot of money to throw at issues. I don't have enough dollars to have enough votes. Even if I banded together all of my friends and all of their money, we can't speak loudly enough to be heard (SIFI Father 2010).

Discussion and conclusions

For decades, policy feedback scholars have focussed attention on federal policies and programmes that shape citizens' everyday experiences and orientations towards the government. However, until recently, scholars have examined policies and programmes with direct, tangible, monetary benefits (Soss 2002; Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005). A new wave of scholarship pushes us to think through the democratic consequences of policies less clearly linked to the government (Mettler 2011). However, few have examined the political consequences of government policies that structure, regulate or direct the provision of public services and guide practices in public institutions.

Between 2002 and 2012, after NCLB's passage and before NCLB waivers became policy, the law shaped the everyday experiences of over 50 million public school students. Although we now know much about the policy's influence on achievement, my work allows a closer examination of the ways in which the policy shapes democratic outcomes, particularly politics and political efficacy at the mass level. I take two lessons from this investigation. First, a "structuring" policy such as NCLB is unlikely to alter attitudes towards the government or push parents to political action. However, second, and perhaps more importantly, if policymakers purposely engineer policies to encourage parental voice and participation, we may move towards a process and outcomes much closer to all parties' ideals.

My work suggests that NCLB did not prompt attitudinal differences between parents in different institutional contexts (SIFI versus non-SIFI) in Seattle public schools. The lack of variation in attitudes across contexts may be driven by superficial policy awareness (Bushaw and McNee 2009; Lavery 2015). Although SIFI parents are theoretically in a position to learn more from policy, given their increased exposure to information and sanctions, a flawed incentive structure may prevent school leaders from further engaging them in the school improvement process. NCLB structures testing routines and reporting for all schools but policy administration may vary significantly across school sites. There is little reason for successful schools that will never face policy sanctions to avoid reporting school progress and inviting parents to participate in school activities. Rather, reaching out to welcome parental involvement is likely to encourage staff

and students and lead to further gains in achievement. However, in SIFI schools, leaders' incentives to inform and engage parents may differ. When Title I schools fail to make AYP, they must admit to families their role in this failure. They must then offer parents a choice to leave their institutions. This option may confuse and depress parents and, if parents do leave and enrollments decline, school budgets will be stretched thin. Likewise, when schools are required to offer supplemental education services, unless these services are delivered on-site by school staff, resource transfers may drain a school's discretionary funds and its staff's morale. Finally, when leaders and teachers at SIFI schools invite parental participation, they may fear inadvertently increasing obstacles to improvement; with more cooks in the kitchen, it may become even more difficult to agree on a recipe for success.

NCLB requires schools to keep parents informed about progress towards state goals but says little about how this communication should be facilitated. The US Department of Education and many of its counterparts at the state level provide templates for informing parents about failures to make AYP and the associated consequences. However, my work supports existing contentions that it is unlikely that districts and schools that follow the letter of the law and send home a single letter along with the variety of other fliers and pamphlets in the typical elementary school student's backpack are providing parents with the acumen necessary to engage in the work required to improve schools. If the letter schools send is not written in a parent's native language or at an appropriate reading level, or its delivery is delayed, parents are even less likely to play a role in school improvement (Manna 2007).

Although flawed incentive structures and unclear or inaccessible communication may contribute to lower levels of knowledge than we might expect from SIFI parents' increased exposure to NCLB, the documented lack of variation in orientation towards the government across school types may also stem from the relative socioeconomic advantage of my sample. SIFI parents who show up at school events and agree to participate in a research study may have a similar socioeconomic status to their non-SIFI study participant peers, and therefore hold similar government-related views compared with more disadvantaged families in struggling institutions.

The experimental component of this study provides greater insight into a "structuring" policy's potential influence. Experimental results suggest that simple information may begin the difficult work of linking government action and school experience. Although my research design does not allow me to test whether or not information effects might endure, a weakness seen in other recent policy-oriented scholarship, my results hint that policy

information might increase the salience of policy opportunities and responsibilities (Sides 2010; Mettler 2011).^{27,28,29}

At the end of 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law with bipartisan support. Pre-implementation reviews of the law suggest that ESSA's approach to school improvement may alter the potential for policy feedback. ESSA grants states considerable leeway in setting standards and goals and designing systems and supports best-suited to the needs of their constituents, whereas the federal government's primary responsibility is to support state standards and accountability systems. If parents know that ESSA is the federal replacement of NCLB, but do not understand that through ESSA federal authorities have given up a large degree of power over process and outcomes, they may find it difficult to register their policy concerns. However, if states take ownership of accountability plans and indicators and make clear their role and responsibility, the policy might encourage parents to become more involved in the improvement process.

ESSA appears to address states' previous lack of compliance with the spirit of NCLB in relation to parent involvement. Under the policy, districts must reserve funds to staff training on family engagement, support home visit initiatives and collaborative relationships between schools and community-based organisations and businesses successful in engaging disadvantaged families, and operate statewide family engagement centres. ESSA further explicitly requires districts to reach out to parents and family members "in a language they can understand" and convene "a flexible number of engagement meetings at convenient times for families" (for which the school may provide transportation, child care

²⁷ It is also possible that SIFI parents' attitudes are shaped, at least temporarily, by information provided by these schools, but the influence of this information fades over time.

²⁸ As noted in the Data and methods section, all SIFI parents should have received policy information as part of the school improvement process. Although I did not attempt to assess the degree to which parents actually received information about their child's school's performance (if parents were notified just once about improvement status, they may not recall this notification two to five months later) before administering my survey, several survey items are designed to gauge parents' policy knowledge and awareness. See Lavery (2015) for more information about parents' policy comprehension.

²⁹ In an often-cited field experiment, Gerber and Green (2000) isolated the influence of a variety of voter-turnout appeals on voting. For my own work, their findings suggest that a written, informational treatment might have enduring effects (although here the length of time between treatment and voting is less than two months), although personal appeals are more likely to influence behaviour (Gerber and Green 2000). These findings contribute to my intuition that minimum compliance with NCLB performance and improvement reporting is unlikely to encourage parent engagement. If policymakers truly believe that parents are key players in school improvement, increased contact with parents via multiple channels on multiple occasions may be necessary.

or home visits using Title I funds) (The Leadership Conference Education Fund 2016).

One thing is clear regardless of how ESSA eventually unfolds: policies that lack material incentives can and very well may shape the political orientations and actions of citizens. The federal government spends nearly \$80 billion on elementary and secondary education each year. Highlighting the government's role in the provision of these *public* services may better engage families in conversations about what works in schools and bring us closer to the levels of knowledge and equity we crave.

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Appendix

Treatment text:

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is an education law that was passed in 2001. NCLB's main goal is a high-quality education for ALL students. The law requires states to test students to determine schools' progress towards state academic standards and then offers more information, choices and participation opportunities to parents of children in schools that fail to meet these standards.

The school your child attends has failed to make adequate progress towards the academic standards set by the state of Washington

As your school has been identified as “in need of improvement”, several options are available to you and your child:

School choice with transportation: As a result of your school's failure to make adequate progress, you have the option to transfer your child to another school that has not been identified for improvement. Transportation will be provided or paid for by the district.

Supplemental education services (SES): If you choose to keep your child in this school, your child may be eligible to receive FREE tutoring through SES.

This extra help is provided to your child in reading, language arts and/or math. This extra help can be provided before or after school, on weekends, during school vacations or during summer at no cost to you. A list of approved SES providers is available through your school.

Increased Parental Involvement: As a parent you have the right to know whether or not your school is meeting academic standards and what your school is doing to ensure improvement. As it has been determined that your school is not making adequate progress, you have the right to actively participate in developing school parental involvement policies, contribute to the development of a school-parent compact – a plan that outlines how teachers and parents will work together to increase student achievement – and take part in the planning, review and improvement of parental involvement programmes at your school.