



Book Review

Take a Number: How Citizens' Encounters with Government Shape Political Engagement. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. 235 pp., with index

By Elisabeth Gidengil

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Elisabeth Gidengil, a professor of political science at McGill University, has provided a rich and innovative account of how participation in public programs and people's experiences with bureaucratic encounters shape political engagement. We know surprisingly little about this phenomenon, especially in Canada. The literature on the relationship between program participation and political engagement focuses almost exclusively on the United States — a clear outlier with

respect to its welfare state regime and fragmented political institutions. In this first comprehensive study centred on Canada, Gidengil argues that Canada has more in common with European countries than with its less generous and more stigmatizing neighbour (see also Daigneault et al. 2021: 243-4), which leads to different and more optimistic expectations about the feedback effect of Canadian social programs.

Gidengil's theoretical framework incorporates influential contributions on policy feedback, policy design and political learning of leading scholars such as Paul Pierson, Ann Schneider, Helen Ingram and Joe Soss. She argues that program participation influences political participation through material, interpretive and learning effects. First, social programs provide resources to citizens that enhance incentives and their capability to engage in political activities. Second, social programs convey cues and messages as to the value, legitimacy and deservingness (or lack thereof) of certain groups. Individuals internalise these cues and messages, which affects feelings of political agency, in particular if programs are visible and traceable to public authorities' actions. Third, individuals use their experience with social programs and street-level bureaucrats to evaluate government and politics in general. Citizens' experience, which varies by

program design and level of bureaucratic discretion, may increase or decrease the relevance of politics in their life and their sense of political efficacy.

Gidengil's study is based on the results of an online survey of 1,692 Ontario respondents (including a large oversample of respondents who are poor or who have received means-tested benefits). She examines eleven social programs offered either by the Ontario or federal government. Programs have various designs (means-tested or contribution-based); modes of delivery (tax credits vs. traditional benefits); target groups (students, seniors, mothers, etc.); and level of authority, paternalism and administrative discretion, which allows hypotheses about the mechanisms at play to be tested. She first measures program knowledge, a "potentially important missing link in the relationship between public policy and political behaviour" (33). Indeed, awareness is an important driver of the non-take-up of social benefits — a crucial policy problem in and of itself (see Daigneault and Macé 2019). While knowledge about social programs and services was generally fair among respondents, important independent effects were identified for certain social background characteristics, namely gender, age, university education, and belonging to a visible minority. Gidengil then examines individuals' experience in accessing social programs and dealing with public servants. As expected, she finds sharp differences in access to information about programs and accessing the programs themselves, in citizens' overall experience when they contacted programs (courtesy, helpfulness, etc.) and in their comfort with complaining to a manager. People's experience with social assistance is the least positive, which is unsurprising given Ontario Works' burdensome application process (see Herd et al. 2005; Graefe 2015).

Does program participation influence psychological engagement (internal and external efficacy, interest and knowledge) with politics? The answer is "It depends." On one hand, after controlling for social background characteristics, Gidengil found that the number and type of programs individuals use had no impact on their psychological engagement with politics (receiving Unemployment Insurance does increase political interest, however). On the other, negative program experiences reinforce the perception that the government is unresponsive. At the same time, these increase interest in politics, suggesting that bureaucratic encounters can be politicizing.

Does program participation influence political participation? Yes, it does. The number of programs one uses increases informal political participation (signing a petition, etc.) and civic participation (volunteering, etc.). Even when controlling for social background characteristics, program type (design) does matter. Receiving contributory and means-tested benefits increases informal participation. Moreover, program participation influences political support and attitudes towards politics. I was particularly concerned by the fact that negative experiences with bureaucracies increased dissatisfaction with the provincial government's performance and the way democracy works, although these effects were mitigated by program use. Feedback effects are not limited to social benefits; Gidengil finds that citizens' experiences with the healthcare system affect their confidence in, and evaluation of, its performance.

Social background characteristics do matter for program participation and political engagement. For instance, young adults are more likely to participate in formal political activities if they have used multiple programs or if they have had negative experiences when contacting bureaucrats.

Because women display a greater reliance on social programs than men, gendered policy feedback effects are expected. Indeed, negative experiences with government programs boosted women's interest in politics, political participation and affected their party preference in favour of the New Democratic Party. To explain the positive feedback effects found in Ontario, Gidengil suggests that two factors matter: the presence of 1) a left-wing political party and 2) a relatively more generous/less stigmatizing social assistance regime. I would suggest, moreover, that program participation could be empowering in Canada rather than disempowering because it is a more equal society than the United States. Indeed, the level of inequality, in addition to directly influencing the generosity of social assistance programs (Scruggs and Hayes 2017) and social trust (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010), could contribute to explaining stigmatization levels and hence different interpretive effects in Canada.

Take a Number is a compelling book that provides an in-depth analysis of the feedback effects of program participation. Gidengil theorizes, analyzes and interprets data in the clear, step-by-step, detailed and rigorous fashion that is characteristic of all of her research. Each chapter provides a useful recap of theoretical expectations, previous findings and what we still need to know. Gidengil does not take any short-cuts when discussing data, methods or limitations. That said, I found the book cognitively taxing at times. I suspect that some readers may momentarily feel overwhelmed by the richness of Gidengil's data and findings (standardized vs. unstandardized results, results with and without controls, etc.) and may lose sight of the big picture. In my opinion, the book would have been more engaging and effective with fewer or shorter chapters. Even so, *Take a Number* is an excellent book and makes an outstanding contribution to the literature.

In her conclusion, Gidengil proposes a highly relevant research agenda on feedback effects that includes disentangling the effect of conflicting experiences, attending to vicarious effects, exploring the timing of experiences and how they are constructed, and exploring other sites of political learning, such as the criminal justice system. I suggest three other avenues for research that will interest public policy and administration scholars. First, we need to know whether Gidengil's Ontario results hold in other provinces. Indeed, significant differences in social protection exist between provinces, in particular between Quebec and the rest of Canada (Van den Berg et al. 2017; Daigneault et al 2021). Second, *Take a Number* contributes to a growing body of literature on tax credits as an increasingly widespread policy instrument (Provencher et al. 2021). In a context where 10-12% of Canadians do not file an income tax return (Robson and Schwartz 2020), we definitely need to know more about citizens' awareness of tax credits, non-take-up levels and tax credits' effectiveness in achieving social policy objectives (Daigneault and Macé 2019, 2020). Finally, parallels can be made between Gidengil's ground-breaking study and the literature examining the administrative burden citizens bear when interacting with the state and, in particular, the affective and psychological impacts of these interactions in terms of stress, sense of autonomy, shame and attitudes of passivity/resistance (see Baekgaard et al. 2021; Bell et al. August 2021).

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